

Theravāda Buddhism and Brahmanical Hinduism: Brahmanical Terms in a Buddhist Guise

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It is obvious that a teacher must be able to communicate, if his teaching is to be understood by his audience. This creates difficulties if he wishes to teach something new, for which terms do not yet exist. He has the choice of coining new terms or of using old terms in a new sense. Both categories must be clearly defined, or his listeners may not understand the first and may understand the second in their old sense. An investigation into the terminology used by the Buddha shows how he coped with this problem.

There have been those who thought that Buddhism was simply an offshoot of Hinduism, while there are others who maintain that there is no trace of Hinduism in Buddhism. The truth, as always, lies somewhere between these two extremes. What is certainly true is that Buddhism owes much, especially in terminology, to Brahmanical Hinduism and much of the Buddha's preaching would have been unintelligible to those who had no knowledge of Brahmanical teaching. Although some of the technical terms of Buddhism are exclusive to that religion, e.g. *paṭisaṃbhidā*, much Buddhist terminology is, in form, identical with that of brahmanism. At the same time it must be recognized that, although the Buddha took over some of the terminology of Brahmanical Hinduism, he gave it a new Buddhist sense. The change of meaning is almost always a result of the fact that the Brahmanical terms were used in a framework of ritualism, while the Buddha invested them with a moral and ethical sense.

I should start by making several points clear. First, for convenience I speak in this paper of the Buddha's usage, without, for the most part, distinguishing between his usage and that of his followers. Second, I quote Buddhist terms in their Pāli form. This implies nothing whatsoever about the form in which these words were first used in Buddhism. Third, I aim to do little more than list a few of these terms, some already well known, and point out briefly how the Buddha adapted them for his own purposes. The full consideration of some individual items would merit a whole paper to themselves, while the subject as a whole would merit an entire book.

I propose to deal with the Buddha's use of Brahmanical terms in three categories:

1. Terms and structures taken over by the Buddha:

devas: their existence was accepted by the Buddha but they were not allowed any causal role in the universe—they were merely super-human,¹ and like all others in *samsāra* were subject to death and rebirth. The Buddha, in fact, increased their number, since each of the world-systems of Buddhism had its complement of *devas*. He did, however, allow for three categories of *devas*—*sammuti-devas* “conventional *devas*”, i.e. kings, etc., since *deva* can mean both “god” and “king”, *upapattidevas* “rebirth *devas*”, i.e. the gods of Hinduism, and *visuddhi-devas* “purity *devas*”—the last of which one included Buddhas like himself.²

myths and fables: in the *Brahmajālasutta* the Buddha jokes about the way in which Brahmā thinks that he has created other beings, and he makes reference to the creation myth in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. In his comments in the *Aggaññasutta* on the way in which brahmins are born the Buddha satirizes the *Puruṣasūkta* of the *Rgveda*. I include these myths, etc., under my general heading of Brahmanical terms in a Buddhist guise because the Buddha is using them in a different way from the brahmins. His aim is not to present a cosmogony according to the brahmins, but to use the stories as a source of mockery and a means of attack upon the brahmins, as Richard Gombrich has shown.³

2. Terms taken over by the Buddha but used with new senses:

aggi: as part of the ritual prescription of the Vedic tradition the brahmin (*āhitāgni*) has to keep three fires burning. The Buddha stated that there were three fires which should not be served, but abandoned, viz. the fires of *rāga*, *dosa* and *moha*.⁴

āhāra: in Brahmanical thought we find the idea that food is required to sustain the existence of the inhabitants of other worlds or in the next life. The gods needed sacrifices as their food, the *pitṛs* needed offerings to continue their existence, and good deeds were seen as a sort of nourishment for the next life.⁵ The Buddha, however, speaks of four sorts of food,⁶ which are instruments of continuity, and imply the future process of rebirth.

amata: in Brahmanical thought *amṛta* is the world of immortality, heaven, eternity, or the nectar which confers immortality, produced at the churning of

¹ K.R. Norman, “The Buddha’s View of Devas”, *Beiträge zur Indieforschung: Ernst Waldschmidt zum 80. Geburtstag gewidmet*, Berlin, 197, 329.

² K.R. Norman, “Devas and Adhidevas in Buddhism”, *JPTS*, IX, 1981, 154.

³ R. Gombrich, “Recovering the Buddha’s Message”, T. Skorupski, *The Buddhist Forum*, vol. 1, 1990, 13 ff., and 14 n. 25.

⁴ R. Gombrich, *op. cit.*, 17

⁵ S. Collins, *Selfless Persons*, Cambridge, 1982, 208–10.

⁶ *cattāro āhārā: kabalīnkāro āhāro oḷārīko vā sukhumo vā, phasso dutiyo, mano-sañcetanā tatiyā, viññāṇaṃ catuttham*, D III 228, 3–5 (“solid (physical) food, sense-impressions, mental volitions, consciousness”).

the ocean. The Buddha, however, uses the word as an epithet of *nibbāna*, which is described as the *amataṃ padaṃ*.⁷ This is not, however, the immortal place, but the place (or state) where there is no death. There is no death in that state, because there is no birth there, and therefore no old age leading to death.

ana, ina: in the Pāli commentaries we find the word *anaṇa* explained as “without defilement”.⁸ I would suggest that *ana* and *ina* are to be derived < *ṛṇa* “debt”, and that this was a Brahmanical term taken over by the Buddha, and interpreted in a Buddhist way when its Brahmanical meaning was forgotten. The brahman’s three debts were the study of the *Vedas*, the begetting of sons, and the offering of sacrifices. One who became an ascetic when he had paid his debts would be *anaṇa*, while an ascetic who had not fulfilled the proper conditions would be *sāṇa*. The requirements would be meaningless to a Buddhist, who would therefore interpret *ana* in a general sense as “defilement”.

brahman:⁹ there seems to be no occurrence in Pāli of the uncompounded neuter word *brahma* in the sense of the Upaniṣadic *brahman*, but the word *brahma* is used in compounds apparently in the sense of “excellent, perfect”.

brahma-cariyā: in its basic Brahmanical sense this means “the practice of a *brāhmaṇa*”, i.e. to live a celibate life, learning the *Vedas*. The Buddha used the phrase in the more general sense of “to live a holy, celibate (or in the case of married couples, a chaste and moral) life”.

brahma-patha: in the Upaniṣads this means “the way to *brahman* or Brahṃā”. The Buddha used in it the sense of the way to the best, i.e. *nibbāna*, and it is explained as being the same as *brahma-vihāra*.¹⁰

brahma-vihāra: It is possible that this was in origin a Brahmanical term.¹¹ It would literally mean “dwelling in or with brahman or Brahṃā”, and it perhaps shows a trace of its original meaning in the *Tevijja-sutta*¹² where the Buddha speaks to young brahmans who were disputing the correct way to obtain *brahma-sahavyatā*. In the context this would seem to mean union with *brahman*, but the

⁷ If *amataṃ padaṃ* is a split compound for *amata-padaṃ*, then it might well be analysed in a brahmanical sense as a *tatpuruṣa* compound “the place of the immortals”, i.e. of the immortal gods.

⁸ *nikkilesa-vasena*, Th-a III 41, 17 (ad Th 789); *sabba-kilesānaṃ khīṇattā*, Th-a III 62, 36 (ad Th 882); *kilesa-inaṃ pahāya anaṇā*, Thī-a 9, 2 (ad Thī 2); *anaṇā, niddosā apagata-kilesā*, Thī-a 107, 32–33 (ad Thī 110); *kāma-cchandādi-inaṃ pagamena anaṇo*, Thī-a 245, 2 (ad Thī 364).

⁹ For the occurrences of brahman in the Pāli canon, see K. Bhattacharya, “Brahman in the Pali Canon and in the Pali Commentaries”, *Amalā Prajñā: Aspects of Buddhist Studies, Delhi*, 1989, 91–102.

¹⁰ *iriyamānaṃ Brahma-pathe ti catubbidhe pi brahma-vihāra-pathe, brahme va seṭṭhe phala-samāpatti-pathe samāpajjana-vasena pavattamānaṃ*. Th-a, III 9, 9–11 (ad Thī 689).

¹¹ E.J. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha*, (third ed.), London, 1949, p. 126.

¹² D III 235–53.

Buddha, perhaps jokingly, interprets it as meaning a state of union with the god Brahmā. He explains that someone who practises the four types of concentration¹³ called *brahma-vihāra* is reborn as a Brahmā in the Brahma-world.¹⁴ It is to be noted that this means only being born in the same heaven as Mahā Brahmā, not union with the Upaniṣadic *brahman*. It is noteworthy that what we might suppose to be the ways to gain *brahma-vihāra* “dwelling in brahman” are in fact given the name *brahma-vihāra* by the Buddha, whereas the four means are appropriately called *brahma-patha*.

brāhmaṇa: in Brahmanical Hinduism a brahman (< *br̥mh-* “to be strong”) was a brahman by birth, and was a kinsman of Brahmā. This idea was known to the Buddha,¹⁵ but by adopting a different etymology (< *br̥mh-* “to destroy”), he was able to justify his view that a brahman was one who had destroyed evil.¹⁶ The Buddha points out that a brahman does not become a brahman by birth, but by his actions.¹⁷ He gave a revised version of the theory that a brahman was only a true brahman if seven generations before him were pure-born brahmans,¹⁸ if he knew the *Vedas*, if he was handsome and of brahma-colour and brahma-splendour, if he was virtuous and if he was wise. He was able to persuade the brahman Soṇadaṇḍa that only the last two of these five conditions really matter, and it is virtue and wisdom which make a true brahman.¹⁹

deva-yāna: in Brahmanical thought this is “the way leading to the gods”.²⁰ The Buddha uses *yāna* in the sense of *magga*, the way followed by the Buddhas, etc., which leads to *nibbāna*.²¹

jhāna: Sanskrit *dhyāna* is “religious thought, meditation”. For the Buddha, *jhāna* applies to a very specific type of “trance”, and it is only rarely employed with a

¹³ *mettā, karuṇā, muditā, and upekkhā*.

¹⁴ See the *Tevijja-sutta* (D I 235–53). Cf. *so cattāro brahma-vihāre bhāvetvā kāyassa bhedaṃ paraṃ maraṇā Brahmālokūpago ahoṣi*, D II 196, 7–8.

¹⁵ So it is said of *Aṅgaṇikabhāradvāja*: *ito pubbe jāti-mānena brāhmaṇa-bhāvato brāhmaṇānaṃ samaññāya brahma-bandhu nāma āsiṃ*, Th-a II 85, 4–5 (ad Th 221).

¹⁶ *bāhita-pāpattā pana idāni kho arahattādhigamena paramatthato brāhmaṇo amhi*, Th-a II 85, 5–6 (ad Th 221). See Dhṃ 383–423 (Brāhmaṇavagga).

¹⁷ Not *jātiyā* but *kammanā*. See Sn 142, etc.

¹⁸ *yato kho bho ubhato sujāto hoti mātito ca pitito ca saṃsuddhagahaṇiko yāva sattamā pitāmahayugā akkhitto anupakku ho jātivādena, ettāvataṃ kho brāhmaṇo hoti*, Sn 115, 13–16.

¹⁹ See the *Soṇadaṇḍa-sutta* (D I 111–26).

²⁰ E.M. Hare, *Woven Cadences of Early Buddhism*, London, 1945, 22 f.n., refers to the “way of the gods” of the Vedānta.

²¹ *mahantehi buddhādīhi pa ipannattā mahāpathaṃ, brahmalokasaṃkhātāṃ devalokaṃ yāpetuṃ samatthattā devalokayānasaṃkhātāṃ a hasamāpattiyānaṃ abhiruyha*, Pj II 184, 23–26 (ad Sn 139). Cf. *magga’-aṭṭhaṅgika-yāna-yāyiniṃ ti, aṭṭhaṅgika-magga-saṅkhātēna ariya-yāyena nibbāna-puraṃ yāyini upagatā*, Thī-a 257, 6–8 (ad Thī 389).

wider application. “Absorption”, rather than “meditation”, has been suggested as a more appropriate translation.²²

kamma: the word *karman* is used in a Brahmanical context to refer specifically to the ritual act enjoined by Brahmanical ideology. The Buddha stated that he would interpret “act” to refer to intention,²³ with the result that there is a shift from ritual to ethics. Whereas the performance of the ritual action of sacrifice gave an automatic result, this development in the interpretation of *kamma* meant that the quality of the next life is determined by the quality of the actions.²⁴

khetta-jina: this word occurs in *Suttanipāta* 523–24. The commentary on that text seems uncertain about its meaning, which on the face of it seems to mean “conqueror of the fields(s)”, and gives a double explanation based upon the verbs *ci-* and *ji-*, which doubtless goes back to a dialect where both *-c-* and *-j-* became *-y-*.²⁵ I have suggested elsewhere that the second element of the compound is from *-jñā*, not *-jina*. I see here a connection with the word *kṣetra-jñā* which occurs at *Manu* XII 12, where it is given various explanations by the commentators, including “the individual soul (*jīva*)”.²⁶ We find the negative *akkhettaññū*, with a different development of *-jñā*, at Ja IV 371,14*, where it is explained as “not knowing the (right) field for alms-giving (*dānassa*)”.

nhātaka: in its Brahmanical sense *snātaka* is used of a brahman who has carried out the ceremonial bathing at the end of the *brahma-cārin* stage of his life. The Buddha rejected the efficacy of ritual bathing, and uses the term metaphorically of washing away evil by means of the eight-fold path.²⁷ Carrying the theory of ritual washing to its logical conclusion, it is said that if water washed away sins, then fish, crocodiles, etc., would be the purest of creatures and would all go to heaven.²⁸

puñña: the earliest meanings of *puṇya* seem to be “auspicious, happy, beautiful, good”,²⁹ but as part of the replacement of ritual by ethics the Buddha gave a new

²² See L.S. Cousins, “Buddhist *jhāna*: its Nature and Attainment According to the Pāli Sources”, *Religion*, III, 2, 1973, 116.

²³ *cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi*, A III 415, 7. See R. Gombrich, “Notes on the Brahmanical Background to Buddhist Ethics”, *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Hammalava Saddhatissa*, Nugegoda, 1984, 91.

²⁴ S. Collins, *Selfless Persons*, 55–56.

²⁵ *tāni vijeyya jetvā abhibhavitvā viceyya vā aniccādibhāvena vicinitvā upaparikkhitvā* (Pj II 428, 27–29). The double explanation is repeated: *etesaṃ khettānaṃ vijitattā vicitattā vā khettaṃ* (Pj II 429, 6). See K.R. Norman, “Notes on the *Sutta-nipāta*”, 106 (ad Sn 523–24), referring to Monier-Williams, s.v. *kṣetra*, and comparing *Manu*, XII, 12 ff.

²⁶ See G. Bühler, *The Laws of Manu*, SBE XXV, 485, n. 12.

²⁷ *aṭṭhaṅgika-magga-jalena suvikkhālita-kilesa-malatāya paramatthato nahātako*, Th-a II 85, 12–13 (ad Th 221).

²⁸ See Thī 241–42.

²⁹ See M. Mayrhofer, *Kurzgefasstes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen*, II, s.v.

ethical content to the word,³⁰ and it could then be used in the context of kamma, in the sense that merit could be acquired which would bring a good rebirth.

sīla: in Sanskrit *śīla* means “custom, habit, conduct, good conduct, moral conduct”. The Buddha used the word to mean the rules of behaviour: the five great rules applicable to all Buddhists and also the rules of discipline of the monastic code. It has been described as the monk’s successful role performance, or something like character in Western society, which is built up by moral habit.³¹

sottiya: the Brahmanical sense of *śrotriya* is “acquainted with the *Vedas*”, “knowing *śruti*”. For the Buddha the connection with the verb “to hear” is retained,³² but the connection with Brahmanical *śruti* disappears. The fact that the word sometimes appears as *sotthiya* suggests that the Buddhist tradition believed that there was some connection with *sotthi* < *svasti*.³³

suddhi: in brahmanism, *śuddhi* refers primarily to a ritual condition. The Buddha made purity a strictly moral concept. The aim was purity of thought.³⁴

tevijja: although the phrase *tiṇṇaṃ vedānaṃ pāragu* (cf. Skt. *vedapāraga*) is used of a brahman and correctly understood by the Buddha,³⁵ *tisso vijjā*, originally the knowledge of the three *Vedas* as applicable to a brahman, is explained in Buddhist terms by the commentaries.³⁶ Just as in Sanskrit *trividya* means one possessing the *trividyā*, so one who possesses *tisso vijjā* is called *tevijja*.

uposatha: in Brahmanical terminology, *upavasatha* was a fast day, the day of preparation for the Soma sacrifice. In Buddhism the fast day itself became the day of reciting the *pātimokkha* (for monks and nuns) and listening to recitations (for laymen), i.e. it was no longer part of a ritual for purity, but became the occasion for a confession of moral and ethical transgressions.

veda: *veda* is used in Buddhism in its general sense of “knowledge”³⁷ rather than as the title of Brahmanical texts. The word *vedagu*, which in its Brahmanical sense meant one who had gained competence in the *Vedas*, was interpreted as one who had gained knowledge of release from *saṃsāra*.³⁸

³⁰ R. Gombrich, “Notes on the Brahmanical Background to Buddhist Ethics”, 101.

³¹ R. Gombrich, *op. cit.*, 100.

³² *sutvā sabbadhammaṃ abhiññāya loke... sottiyo*, Sn 534; *sutavattā sottiyo ti āhu*, Pj II 432, 27.

³³ *suvimutta-bhav’-assāda-dhamma-jjhānena paramatthato sotthiyo*, Th-a II 85 14–15 (ad Th 221).

³⁴ S. Collins, *op. cit.*, 112.

³⁵ e.g. *brāhmaṇānaṃ vijjāsu nipphattiṃ gato tiṇṇaṃ vedānaṃ pāragū*, Th-a III 169, 23–24 (ad Th 1171).

³⁶ *pubbe-nivāsa-ñānaṃ, dibba-cakkhu-ñānaṃ, āsava-kkhaya-ñānaṃ, tisso vijjā*, Th-a I 85, 20–21 (ad Th 24).

³⁷ e.g. *veda-sampanno ti, ñāna-sampanno*, Th-a III 169, 20 (ad Th 1170).

³⁸ *veda-saṅkhātena maggañānena saṃsāra-mahogghassa vedassa catu-saccassa ca pāraṃ gatattā adhiḡatattā ñātattā paramatthato vedagū*, Th-a II 85, 17–19 (ad Th 221).

yogakkhema: In the *R̥gveda* *yogakṣema* means the security or safe possession of what has been acquired, the safe keeping of property, welfare, prosperity, substance, livelihood. In the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* it is a *dvandva* compound, as can be seen from the fact that it appears in two forms (*yogakṣema* and *kṣemayoga*),³⁹ “rest and exertion”. The Buddha took it as a *tatpuruṣa* compound, used first in an agricultural context, of the ox moving on towards rest from work,⁴⁰ where the idea of “freedom, release from the yoke (of the plough)” was probably implied. The idea of welfare was then applied to *nibbāna*, of which the word is used as an epithet. This was then interpreted as “freedom from bondage”,⁴¹ i.e. the things which tie creatures to *saṃsāra*.

3. Terms referred to but rejected

There are ideas referred to by the Buddha but rejected, but in such a way that the grounds for his objection could only be understood by those who knew the Brahmanical terminology:

attā: The Buddha’s rejection of the existence of the *attā*, i.e. his view that everything was *anattā*, was based upon the Brahmanical belief that the *ātman* was *nitya* and *sukha*. Hence the Buddha could refute this by pointing out that the world was in fact *anicca* and *dukkha*.⁴²

Besides the convenience of taking over terms which were already known to his audience, albeit in a different sense, the Buddha possibly had other reasons for acting in this way. In part it may have been due to his desire to show that Brahmanical Hinduism was wrong in its basis tenets: a Brahmanical *brāhmaṇa* was not as good as a Buddhist *brāhmaṇa*, Brahmanical *śuddhi* was inferior to Buddhist *suddhi*, etc. If a teacher takes over his rivals’ terms and repeat them often enough in his own meaning, he gives the impression that he is using them in the correct sense, and the original owners are wrong in their usage.

It must be made clear that we cannot prove that the Buddha (or the Buddhists) was the first to make use of these Brahmanical terms in a new sense, since there is a possibility that such a use of some of these terms was also common to other contemporary religions. Some of the terminology of Buddhism is held in common with Jainism,⁴³ e.g. *buddha*, *pratyeka-buddha*, *jina*, *nirvāṇa*, *tathāgata*, *bhāvanā*, *dhuta*, *yoga*, *kevalin*, *āsrava*, *karman*, *gati*, *mokṣa*, *śramaṇa*, *pravrajyā*, *pravrajita*, *tapas*, *ṛṣi*, *tā(d)in*, *phāsu(ya)*, and also certain epithets of the Buddha and the

³⁹ See Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.vv.

⁴⁰ Sn 79, quoted by Collins, *op. cit.*, 221.

⁴¹ *ettha yogehi khemattā yogakkheman ti nibbānaṃ vuccati*, Pj II 150, 2–3 (ad Sn 79).

⁴² See K.R. Norman, “A Note on Attā in the Alagaddūpamasutta”, in *SIP*, Ahmedabad, 1981, 22, and R. Gombrich, “Recovering the Buddha’s Message”, 14.

⁴³ To overcome problems arising from dialect differences, I quote most of these in their Sanskrit form.

Jina.⁴⁴ It is possible therefore that the use of Brahmanical terms in a non-Brahmanical sense was taken from the general fund of vocabulary of *śramaṇical*⁴⁵ religions.

⁴⁴ e.g. *vāsī-candana-kalpa*, *sama-loṣ a-kañcana*, *vyāvṛtacchadman*.

⁴⁵ If the compound *brāhmaṇa-śramaṇa* covers the whole range of Indian religion, then it is appropriate to use the word *śramaṇa* for all those members of religious sects who were not brahmans.