

Liberation from *Samsāra*: Soteriological Parallels between Buddhism and Sikhism

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Abstract

Buddhism and Sikhism, both religions of India purportedly share common tenets that lead to liberation from the cycle of births and deaths (Skt: *samsāra*). This comparative study, based on textual analysis of the Sikh Scripture, *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* and the Pali Canon, attempts to draw parallels between both Sikh dharma and Buddha dharma by scrutinizing the very definition of liberation from the perspectives of both religious traditions. The basic premise of this paper is that the Buddha and Guru Nanak's teachings contain soteriological parallels—that the theories of salvation of both religious traditions are analogous.

This study found that Buddhism and Sikhism contain remarkably similar teachings which have the potential to lead sentient beings across the ocean of *samsāra* to the shore of liberation. Both religious traditions concur that suffering and liberation are states of mind and through mind-training, suffering can be transcended. This paper argues that it is possible for both spiritual paths to converge because true religious insights are experiential, universal and transcend the externalities of religion.

Introduction

Buddhism and Sikhism are religions of India, the former, a legacy of the historical Buddha founded 2,600 years ago in north India and the latter, founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539) some two thousand years later in northwest India. Both religions have striking parallels—from in the life stories of the founding fathers to the resemblances in doctrines. This paper is particularly focused on the similarities in the concept of liberation as found in Sikhism and Buddhism.

Both Buddhism and Sikhism are closely knit, in terms of geography and history. Punjab, the Sikh homeland, is located in the ancient territory of Gandhāra, the home of Mahāyāna

Buddhism which flourished under Emperor Kaniška¹ in the first century CE. Hence, alongside the Pali Canon, elements of Mahāyāna sutras are also adopted in this study as the Mahāyāna influence in Punjab cannot be denied.

In contrast with Buddhism which is centred on monasticism, Sikhism is commonly known as ‘The Religion of the Householder’. The teachings of the ten Sikh Gurus² can be summarized as meditation on God, honest living and sharing with the needy and have *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* (SGGS) as its source of religious instruction.

A comparative study between Sikhism and Buddhism seems far-fetched as Buddhism is a non-theistic religion whereas Sikhism is monotheistic. However, Guru Nanak’s conception of ‘God’ is remarkably analogous to the Buddhist ‘*nirvāṇa*’ and buddha-nature (Skt: *tathāgathagarbha*). Any apprehension to a comparison between *nirvāṇa* or *tathāgathagarbha* and God is valid because of the tendency of theists to use the term ‘God’ in a limited way, with God having a human-like personality replete with human weaknesses. Nonetheless, the Buddha’s refusal to define what *nirvāṇa* was or wasn’t, in a way, legitimizes discussion on comparison between *nirvāṇa/ tathāgathagarbha* and ‘God’ as the taste of *nirvāṇa* cannot be described, but only experienced³.

Moreover, the Buddha was asked by his disciples who were worried that after his Mahāparinirvāṇa, people might distort the dharma under the guise of Buddhavacana. The Buddha then assured them thus, “Whatever is well-spoken is the word of the Buddha”⁴. Bond interprets this in the following way, “if a particular teaching results in greater peace, compassion, and happiness, and if it leads to a lessening of negative emotions, then it can safely be adopted and practiced as dharma, no matter who originally propounded it.”(30). Therefore, any teaching outside of institutionalised Buddhism which fits the above-mentioned criterion can be a valid

¹ *kaniška*, m. N. of a celebrated king of Northern India (whose reign began in the first century of our era and who, next to Aśoka, was the greatest supporter of Buddhism • his empire seems to have comprised Afghānistān, the Panjāb, Yarkand, Kashmīr, Ladakh, Agra, Rājputāna, Gujārāt, and Sindh) Rājāt.

² Guru Nanak (Guruship: 1499-1539), Guru Angad Dev (Guruship: 1539-1552), Guru Amar Das (Guruship: 1552-1574), Guru Ram Das (Guruship: 1574-1581), Guru Arjan Dev (Guruship: 1581-1606), Guru Hargobind (Guruship: 1606-1644), Guru Har Rai (Guruship: 1644-1661), Guru Har Kishen (Guruship: 1661-1664), Guru Tegh Bahadur (Guruship: 1664-1675) and Guru Gobind Singh (Guruship: 1675-1708)

³ Armstrong, p.33.

⁴ Anguttara-nikaya IV.163, quoted in George Bond, *The Word of the Buddha*. (Colombo: M.D. Gunasena, 1982), p. 30 and Powers, p. 26.

dharma. It is from this assertion that I build up my argument that Sikhism does contain teachings which fit the criterion above and which serve as a path to liberation from *samsāra*.

This study is significant as it attempts to bridge religious divides, transcending religious labels in order to bring forth pure spirituality, free from compulsive fixation on religious externalities.

Liberation from *samsāra*: A Buddhist perspective

The historical Buddha, through his own meditative experience, realized the reality of the world and attained complete liberation (Skt: *nirvāṇa*; Pāli: *nibbāna*) from the cycle of *samsāra*. The Buddha's mission to end birth, old age, sickness and death was accomplished when he attained complete enlightenment under the *bodhi* tree at Bodhgaya⁵.

Buddha's realization of reality is known as the theory of dependent⁶ origination (Skt: *prāṭīyasamutpāda*; Pāli: *paṭicca samuppāda*)⁷. The Buddha's prescription for emancipation from cyclic existence is the four-fold formula known as the Four Noble Truths⁸ (Pāli: *ariyasacca*). This four-fold formula conjoined with the doctrine of *Prāṭīyasamutpāda* explains the nature of reality which is essentially the arising and ceasing of beings/phenomena. These two doctrines⁹ are the very heart of the Buddha's teachings.

The Buddha asserted that all suffering in this world stems from the mind. Therefore, its corresponding solution should be tackled at the mental level. The Buddha taught that beings are trapped and suffer in the cycle of births and deaths because of sheer ignorance of the reality of the world, i.e. failing to see things as they really are. The Buddha revealed the nature of reality through his teaching on the three characteristics of existence (Skt: *tri-lakṣaṇa*; Pāli: *tilakkhaṇa*): impermanence (Skt: *anitya*; Pāli: *anicca*), suffering (Skt: *duḥkha*; Pāli: *dukkha*) and non-ego/self (Skt: *anātman*; Pāli: *anattā*)—all conditioned phenomena (Skt: *saṃskāra*; Pāli: *sankhāra*) are

⁵ in present-day Bihar, India

⁶ Sometimes referred to also as 'interdependent origination'

⁷ Paṭiccasamuppāda Sutta & Vibhaṅga Sutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, Nidāna Vagga Saṃyutta Pāli, Nidāna Saṃyutta

⁸ The Buddha expounded the Four Noble Truths or the teaching of the Middle Way (Pāli: *majjhimā paṭipadā*) during his first discourse, the *Dhammacakkapavātana Sutta* delivered to his five companions at Isipatana, Varanasi.

⁹ The Four Noble Truths and Interdependent Origination

suffering, impermanent and devoid of inherent existence (self) as explained in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*¹⁰:

“Whether a Tathāgata appears in the world or not, the fact remains as a firm and inevitable condition of existence that all conditioned formations are impermanent, that all conditioned formations are subject to suffering that all things are devoid of self.”

Through his teaching on non-self and dependent origination, the Buddha denounced the concrete existence of a fixed and eternal entity such as a soul or a creator God¹¹. Ārya Nāgarjuna expanded on the Buddha’s concept of non-self through the doctrine of emptiness¹² (Skt: *śūnyatā*) which states that in the ultimate sense or absolute reality (Pāli: *paramattha-dhamma*), nothing exists without depending on causes and conditions, not even sentient beings¹³. There are only those dependent events which arise for a moment and pass away. Each of those events arise by reason of the Law of Causality/Conditionality (Pāli: *Idappacayata*)—that every phenomenon owes its origin to another phenomenon prior to it.¹⁴

The Buddha asserted that the reason why beings continue to circle in *saṃsāra* is because beings have a skewed and limited perception of the world—viewing impermanent things as permanent and positing a truly existing ‘self’ when there is none. The inherent tendency of sentient beings to grasp at the so-called ‘self’ and posit an ‘other’ is due to the mental obscuration of ignorance (Skt: *avidya*¹⁵; Pāli: *avijja*). Ignorance fabricates a duality in the mind (the sense of “I” versus “other”) and is the root of evil deeds (negative karma) and rebirth in *saṃsāra*.

¹⁰ Tika Nipāta Pāli (I): Para 137

¹¹ V.A. Gunasekara, “The Buddhist Attitude to God.” Vers. Second Edition: April 1997 . February 1993. *The Buddhist Society of Queensland Home Page*. (Statement made to a Multi-religious Seminar. 29 September 2015), p. 2.

¹² The doctrine of emptiness (Skt: *śūnyatā*) is a celebrated concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism and is central to the foundation of Mahāyāna thought and practice. The concept of *śūnyatā* or emptiness was propounded by Nāgārjuna who was the founder of the Mādhyamaka (Middle Way) School of Buddhism.

¹³ David J. Kalupahana, *Mulamadhymakakarika of Nagarjuna*. (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), pp. 10-16.

¹⁴ This makes the concept of Creator God as the first cause impossible to reconcile with since the Creator God would have to have been created by something prior to it, according to the Law of Causality. Tracing the origin of the world and sentient beings is all the more impossible as the chain of contributory causes are manifold and all intertwined. Hence, the Buddha refused to speculate on the origins of the universe since the first cause would be impossible to discern.

¹⁵ Ignorance, spiritual ignorance • (in Vedānta phil.) illusion (personified as Māyā)

Ignorance is the veil which obscures our true nature mind—the ultimate reality, free from any kind of defilement, primordially pure. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the true nature of mind or the primordial essence is called the buddha-nature¹⁶ (Skt: *tathāgatagarbha*). The teachings of *Prañīyasamutpāda*¹⁷ clearly demonstrate that ignorance *is* the root of our suffering in *samsāra*. It directs the mind to grasp at external sense pleasures to the point of craving and clinging, resulting in a cycle of birth and the whole works of suffering, culminating in death, over and over again.¹⁸ Therefore, as long as ignorance is not eradicated, one will continue to take birth in *samsāra* and experience the whole chain of dependent origination and its associated suffering which comes with birth.

The gist of the Buddha’s teaching is therefore, to break the cycle of dependent origination once and for all in this very lifetime so as to never again experience endless transmigrations in *samsāra*. Thus, the concept of liberation in the Buddhist path is the attainment of a state of mind which is free from ignorance in this very lifetime:

“When a noble disciple has thus understood ignorance, the origin of ignorance, the cessation of ignorance, and the way leading to the cessation of ignorance ... he here and now makes an end of suffering.”¹⁹

Ignorance or rather, delusion (Skt/Pāli: *moha*²⁰) is one of the three mental poisons (afflictive emotions/defilements), the other two being greed/desire (Skt/Pāli: *lobha*) and hatred/aversion (Skt: *dveṣa*; Pāli: *dosa*). Buddhist philosophy prescribes that liberation from *samsāra* is only possible once all the three mental poisons are eradicated from the mindstream. Since ignorance is the chief of the three mental poisons and the first in the cyclic chain of dependent origination, eliminating ignorance breaks the cycle of dependent origination and

¹⁶ It is the inherent potential or seed of enlightenment present in the minds of all sentient beings but obscured by ignorance.

¹⁷ Is a cyclic chain of twelve links beginning with ignorance (1) which gives rise to mental concocting/karma formations/mental formations (2); then to consciousness (3), mind and matter/materiality (4), six-sense bases (5), contact (6), feeling (7), craving (8), clinging (9), becoming (10), birth (11), suffering (12) i.e. decay and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.

¹⁸ Although the second Noble Truth states that greed/desire (Skt/Pāli: *lobha*) is the cause of suffering in *samsara*, it is important to understand that greed/desire is a gross manifestation of the subtle underlying and fundamental cause of *samsara*, ignorance.

¹⁹ *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta* in Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The Middle Length Discourses Of The Buddha- A New Translation Of The Majjhima Nikaya*. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), p.143.

²⁰ darkness or delusion of mind (preventing the discernment of truth and leading men to believe in the reality of worldly objects) • (with Buddhists) ignorance (one of the three roots of vice)

liberates one from the shackles of *samsāra*. When ignorance is eradicated from the mind, all types of afflictive emotions/defilements (Skt: *kleśa*; Pāli: *sankilesa*) cease completely. Hence, the elimination of ignorance is synonymous with the cessation of negative or afflictive emotions, which is what the Buddha himself experienced—complete liberation from the samsaric cycle (Skt: *nirvāṇa*; Pāli: *nibbāna*) or (Skt/Pāli: *nirodha*).

The Buddha stressed that any being who wishes to be liberated from cyclic existence must tread the Noble Eightfold Path to *nirvāṇa* by oneself alone. Enlightened beings, according to the Buddha, can only point the way to liberation. Buddhism stresses that unless one strives to learn the path, cultivate one’s mind and develop all the necessary stages of concentration and insight, liberation from *samsāra* would be an elusive goal:

Following it,

you put an end to suffering and stress.

I have taught you this path for knowing

the extraction of arrows.

It’s for you to strive ardently.

Tathagatas²¹ simply point out the way.²²

In summary, Dependent Origination is the heart of Buddha’s teaching as it is the full measure of the Four Noble Truths. Understanding dependent origination deconstructs the false notion of a permanent, concrete ‘I’ which results in cessation of suffering. This in turn, is only possible when one has deeply penetrated into the three characteristics of suffering, impermanence and non-self of all conditioned phenomena:

When the noble disciple sees all the factors of being as stamped with these three marks, he no longer identifies with them, no longer appropriates them by taking them to be mine, I, or self. Seeing thus, he becomes disenchanted with all

²¹ Tathāgata is another name for the Buddha, meaning: “Thus Gone One”. Often used by the Buddha to refer to himself

²² Dhammapada 274-275, cited in Narada Thera, *The Dhammapada*. Taiwan: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 1993. p.n.a.

formations. When he becomes disenchanted, his lust and attachment fade away and his mind is liberated from the taints^{23 24}.

Through consistent practice of mindfulness, not allowing the stream of dependent origination to arise, one ceases to experience samsaric suffering. This is the essential message of salvation of the Buddha, summarised in its entirety as follows:

To avoid all evil

To do good.

To purify one's mind.

This is the teaching of all Buddhas.²⁵

Guru Nanak's Teachings on Emancipation

Guru Nanak's message of salvation is based on similar principles with Buddhism. Guru Nanak also expounded that suffering is caused by poor mental culture and therefore, in order to be liberated from suffering, it is essential for one to engage in mind-training:

The mortal's business is with his own mind;

one who disciplines his mind attains perfection.²⁶

The essence of the SGGS is the exhortation for one to be aware that there is a fundamental problem of sentient beings which keeps us enslaved in *saṃsāra* (Punjabi: *sansār*²⁷). This basic problem is self-grasping or egotistical pride (Punjabi: *haumai*). According to the SGGS, this happens when one is separated from 'God'. The idea of liberation (Punjabi: *mukti*, *mokh*, *nirbān(u)*; Skt: *mukti*, *mokṣa*, *nirvāṇa*) in Sikhism is to shift the focus from oneself to the ultimate reality, which the Sikh Gurus refer to as 'God', the all-pervasive, perfect, pure and

²³ 'Taints' are a group of three defilements, i.e. craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being and ignorance.

²⁴ Nanamoli and Bodhi, p.40.

²⁵ Narada Thera, p. 183.

²⁶ Shri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 341.

²⁷ Translated as 'world' in English.

inexpressible entity. The methodology adopted in Sikhism which enables a mental shift from self to ‘God’ is through the practice of Nām Simran, literally; remembrance of the ‘name’²⁸.

Like the Buddha, Guru Nanak taught that the world is full of suffering and that one’s suffering is because one is caught up in illusion (Punjabi: *māiā*, Skt: *māyā*²⁹), believing this world to be real when in actuality, everything in this world is *māiā*, a sheer deception of the mind caused by the ego (Punjabi: *haumai/abhimān*³⁰, Skt: *ahaṅkṛ/abhimān*³¹)—the conceit of individuality/self³². The ego, i.e. the inherent sense of ‘I’, according to the Sikh Gurus, is dangerous as it is the root of all suffering. The ego is generated by ignorance and causes one to remain “subject to the operation of maya”³³. It distorts reality, creating a false duality in the mind which is explained as seeing oneself as “a subject fundamentally separated from everything else which becomes an object for it”³⁴. The dichotomy of subject/object—‘I’ as opposed to ‘other’ (Punjabi: *duja*) is what Guru Nanak termed as duality (Punjabi: *dubhida*). It is this duality, according to the perspective of the Sikh Gurus that creates evil in the mind and entrenches the person in endless suffering.

The Gurus opined that the “mind is afflicted by a chronic sickness”—the disease of ego-clinging whereby the mind “plots, calculates, desires, manipulates, flares up in anger and indulges in waves of negative emotions” due to a concrete belief that ‘I’ exists³⁵. The ego is so deeply imbued in the mind that the “Divine spark within is veiled”³⁶. This divine essence (Punjabi: *nām ras*), according to the third Guru, Amar Das, is within every being and need not be searched outside of oneself:

Everything is within the home of your own self; there is nothing beyond it.

²⁸ Shackle and Mandair, p. xxxiii.

²⁹ Illusion, unreality, deception, fraud, trick, sorcery, witchcraft magic • an unreal or illusory image, phantom, apparition, false, unreal, illusory • duplicity (with Buddhists one of the 24 minor evil passions).

³⁰ Translated as ‘egotistical pride’ in the Shri Guru Granth Sahib.

³¹ *abhi-māna*, high opinion of one’s self, self-conceit, pride, haughtiness • conception (especially an erroneous one regarding one’s self).

³² grasping at the non-existent ‘I’

³³ Shackle and Mandair, p. xxiii.

³⁴ Ibid, p. xxvii.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 41.

³⁶ N.-G. K. Singh, p. 71.

By Guru's Grace, it is obtained, and the doors of the inner heart are opened wide.³⁷

Sikh scriptures clearly indicate that the divine essence within is what the Gurus refer to as 'God'. Although it is inside us, it is obscured because of the veil of ignorance (Punjabi: *avran*) manifested as the ego which causes the mind to focus outwardly on external sense pleasures instead of inward introspection³⁸. The habitual tendency of the mind to focus outwardly is deeply ingrained in the psyche due to countless lifetimes of conditioning that makes it seem almost natural to the human being to grasp at sensual pleasures and unnatural to rest in one's true nature mind, which is the divine essence. The divine essence, which is similar to the concept of buddha-nature (Skt: *tathāgatagarbha*) in Mahāyāna Buddhism is not a soul or a concretely existing being, but an all pervasive energy which permeates all of phenomena and is certainly not confined to the body. The duality of the mind generated by ego characterizes "the Absolute as having form or qualities as opposed to being formless or without qualities, a distinction that arises from the standpoint of ontological separation between man and divine"³⁹. Guru Nanak proclaimed no such boundary between humankind and the divine.

The Sikh path to liberation, like Buddhism, is also a step-by-step process of mind-training. The basis of the training in Sikhism is to develop ethical discipline simultaneously with meditative absorption and spiritual wisdom. Guru Nanak's remedy for the illness of ego-clinging, the root of suffering is the practice of attaining "union with the Divine"⁴⁰ i.e. Nām Simran. The recurrent theme of the SGGS is "to unite the mind separated from its divine source through constant remembrance of the name"⁴¹:

O GurSikhs, chant the Naam, the name of the Lord, night and day;

through the True Guru,

the Creator Lord will come to dwell within the home of your inner being.⁴²

³⁷ Shri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 425.

³⁸ N. Singh, p.15.

³⁹ Shackle and Mandair, p. xxvii.

⁴⁰ Shackle and Mandair, p. 65.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 21.

⁴² Shri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 308.

Nām⁴³ “is not a particular word or *mantra*⁴⁴. Rather, “the term Nam [Nām] serves to replace what is named in other religious and philosophical traditions as the entity 'God'⁴⁵. It is inscribed within, yet comprises the vibration of the cosmos”. The references to a supreme being labelled ‘God’⁴⁶ in the SGGS was used as a skilful means by the Sikh Gurus to explain the divine essence since both major religious traditions of India; Hinduism and Islam subscribe to the idea of a Creator God. Through constant recollection of the Nām, which can be represented by any skilful means, for example, a recitation of “Har Har” as in Hindu practice or Waheguru which became the standard form of recitation in Sikhism, one’s mind is attuned to the divine essence within which eventually eliminates the ego and brings about the realization of ultimate truth. When one has achieved union with the divine entity within, one is said to be liberated from the cycle of births and deaths. This is the gist of the Sikh practice:

One who enshrines this rosary of the Lord's name within his heart,
is freed of the pains of birth and death.⁴⁷

In parallel with Verse 183 of the *Dhammapada* which summarises the path of liberation taught by all Buddhas, as asserted by the historical Buddha Śākyamuni; Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Sikh Guru summarises the entire teachings of the first five Sikh Gurus along the lines of doing good, avoiding evil and purifying the mind:

Act in accordance with the Shabad, the True Word of the True Guru.
Remain steady and stable within the home of your own self, and find God.
Do not harbor evil intentions against others in your mind,
and you shall not be troubled, O Siblings of Destiny, O friends.⁴⁸

⁴³ The Sikh Gurus speak of this principle in different ways and in different contexts. Consequently the terms nam, shabad and (True) guru are regarded as virtually synonymous as well as the mystical source of authority in Sikhism (Shackle & Mandair, p. xxxii).

⁴⁴ Shackle and Mandair, p. xxx.

⁴⁵ Shackle and Mandair, p. xxxii.

⁴⁶ Modern translators use the terminology ‘God’, ‘Lord’, rendering a Christian connotation to the idea of a Supreme Being in Sikhism, which is different from the Christian idea of God.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 387.

⁴⁸ Shri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 386.

Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated that both Sikhism and Buddhism—monotheistic and non-theistic religions respectively; have practices which lead to the liberation from the cycle of *saṃsāra*. Buddhism teaches that beings suffer in *saṃsāra* because of our ignorance of the reality of the world. Eliminating ignorance, which is the root of mental defilements; is the key to liberation from cyclic existence. Likewise, from the Sikh perspective, sentient beings suffer in *saṃsāra* because of egotistical pride rooted in ignorance. The ego which is deeply entrenched in the mind obscures the ‘divine essence within’ which the Sikh Gurus refer to as ‘God’. Therefore, the idea of liberation in Sikhism is to be free from all mental afflictions by shifting the focus from oneself to the ultimate reality—the divine essence within. The state of liberation from all afflictions in Sikhism essentially means that one is liberated from the cycle of births and deaths, which is similar to the Buddhist concept of liberation.

I have attempted to show that dharma transcends religious labels and while the paths to liberation are many, spiritual insights are universal. In the ultimate realm, even God and *nirvāṇa* are transcended—leaving only deep spiritual insights of emptiness, spaciousness, perfect bliss, and freedom from suffering.

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