

Editorial

# Continuity and Change according to Hindu and Buddhist Religious Philosophies

David Peter Lawrence

Department of Philosophy and Ethics, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND 58202, USA;  
david.lawrence@und.edu

I am happy to present to the scholarly audience this Special Issue of *Religions* on the theme of “Continuity and Change according to Hindu and Buddhist Religious Philosophies”. Continuity and change are basic issues of all life and, therefore, of religion and philosophy. It is obvious that our experiences of the world comprise at least apparent, larger, and smaller changes and various kinds of continuity. There are some things that we would like to continue notably our own lives and the lives of our loved ones, possessions, relations and statuses, cultural and political traditions, and so on. There are also some things that we would like to see or make change in one way or another (people, and even many nonhuman animals, acknowledge local linear change, regardless of whether, as Eliade would say, some view time itself as ultimately linear or cyclical). Basic human interests are affected by a philosophical or religious understanding of what things may change or continue.

Religion and philosophy have often viewed temporal finitude—culminating in death—as the central human predicament. Heidegger (1962) described our limited temporal situation as being-towards-death. Psychological Terror Management Theory argues that the denial (or we may say alleged vanquishment) of death is the foundational human motivation (Solomon et al. 2015).

The major Hindu and Buddhist soteriologies contain an originary South Asian problematic (shared with Jainism and others) of a cycle of suffering from the temporal finitude of worldly life, understood as the *repetition* of losses in lifetime after lifetime (*samsāra* propelled by *karma*). Hindu and Buddhist soteriologies have also pursued a variety of liberations, or a “blowing out” of this cycle of chronic suffering (*mokṣa*, *nirvāṇa* and so on). Although ideas of the conquest of temporariness vary greatly, as described below, an awakening to the *transtemporal* is common in more immediate or “mystical” encounters with an Ultimate throughout the world (Underhill 1961; Huxley 1945, 2006; Stace 1952).

The more “skeptical” varieties of South and East Asian, pre-Mahāyāna and Mahāyāna Buddhist religion and philosophy, emphasize the impermanence and often the nonsubstantiality of people and things, as well as the incomprehensibility of *nirvāṇa*, *śūnyatā*, and so on. Pragmatic considerations in much of Indian philosophy are brought to the center in Buddhist philosophies. Worldly success, and even the termination of *samsāra* in *nirvāṇa*, depend upon the mastery or elimination of patterns of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

Insofar as they refute various metaphysical claims of enduring foundations, the skeptical forms Buddhism should also be understood as building upon South Asian historical traditions of “apophasis”. Conceptual apprehensions share with ritual practices the problem of the efficacy human efforts to achieve or comprehend an Ultimate. *As such, subitism—whether based on unworldly luminosity and/or grace—has an apophatic dimension.* Diverse examples of apophasis are found in the Nāsadiya Sūkta (Rg Veda 10.129); Upaniṣadic negations of language and intentionality such as in *neti neti*, Abhidharma, Vijñānavāda and Mādhyamika deconstructions; and diverse Vedāntin, tantric and bhakti notions of *nir-guṇatva*, Abhinavagupta’s *anupāya* and, beyond the subcontinent, in Dzogchen and sudden Ch’an/Zen.



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Hindu traditions—like their counterparts with Abrahamic and other candidly or implicitly metaphysical doctrines—have tended to view negations as what I would describe as “dialectically” complimenting more “cataphatic” religious and philosophical affirmations of truth and reality. Buddhists have relied chiefly on various denials, rather than affirmations of claims of substantive continuity. We are not considering here some of the more metaphysically substantive Buddhist doctrines, such as the affirmation of the reality of the self (*pudgalavāda*), or the pursuit of an eternal pure land (*sukavati*).

A great deal of the philosophical debates between the various schools of Hindu and Buddhist scholastic philosophy in South Asia have centered on whether there exist enduring objects, selves, actions, conditions, and relations. Both sides of these debates stimulated each other, and over millennia, they became quite sophisticated. Hindu direct realists such as Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Pūrva Mīmāṃsā have argued that continuous things do, in fact, exist. They are perceived directly, and further ascertained in inference or oral and written testimony.

Much Abhidharma is empirically oriented though largely agnostic metaphysically. It thus interprets the early Buddhist teachings as affirming only shifting patterns of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) in impermanent elemental entities (*dharma*). Vijñānavāda or Yogācāra phenomenalism—particularly of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti (somewhat like David Hume)—argues that apparent continuities are false recognitions amidst a flux of phenomenal “unique particulars” (*svalakṣaṇa*) generated within instantaneously beginning and ceasing moments of consciousness (*viññāna*). The Mādhyamika of Nāgārjuna and his followers propounds a distinctive philosophical “aporetics” or “deconstructionism” refuting a self (*nairātmya*) or essential nature (*nirsvabhāvata*) of all apparent entities. For the Mahāyāna traditions of Mādhyamika, as well as Vijñānavāda, all affirmations of continua in the patterns of dependent origination are also logically *incoherent*.

While the Buddhists have affirmed that one realizes the deathless in nirvāṇa, they have often eschewed characterizations of what is realized as eternal or everlasting (*nitya*). Such characterizations may be more frequent in some East Asian traditions. Hindu religious philosophies have argued that a Self, God(s), and so on, with which one realizes soterific identity or merger, are either enduring or, in some way, transtemporal. The Hindu–Buddhist conflicts became strongest about Hindu claims of identification or intimacy with soterific Ultimate(s), such as *brahman* or *ātman* in Advaita Vedāntin, Śiva with an integral Śakti in nondual Śaivism, other sorts of all-encompassing God in Hindu tantric and *bhakti* traditions, and eternal persons (*puruṣa*) isolated from eternal nature (*prakṛti*) in Sāṃkhya and Yoga.

In this regard, I would like to propose some clarifications of terminology (here following Ilijevski 2015): the term sempiternal, in my view, should be reserved to characterize what *permanently continues through time*. The term eternal should signify the *transtemporal*.

To make the issue a bit more complex, eternal or transtemporal Ultimates are inevitably described in temporal terms. As most *foundational philosophical-theological Ultimate Realities have comprised aspects that are both transcendent and immanent*<sup>1</sup>, these Ultimates are often viewed as manifested or reflected in *enduring* aspects or derivative principles.<sup>2</sup> An understanding of the Ultimate that again involves a “dialectic” of transcendence and immanence is evinced in the Sāṃkhya notion of an eternal *prakṛti* that, in a sense, is beyond and within its temporal transformations and qualities. Admittedly, however, it does not seem to occur in the *puruṣa*, which is reflected, but not metaphysically present, in the transformations of *prakṛti*. Transcendence–immanence dialectics are widespread throughout the world (e.g., Macquarrie 1987), and are emphasized in Hindu *bhakti* and tantric, theistic traditions, Neoplatonic–Abrahamic, and Daoist philosophies. Many tantric and *bhakti* theologians would agree with Augustine’s reflections on how the eternal God is above time yet, in various ways, generates it.

Whereas the Buddhists tend to refute ideas of an *ātman* or *svabhāva*—Hindu, Western and other traditions also often attempt to demonstrate that their substantial, eternal-cum-sempiternal Ultimate is *necessary* to ordinary experience—through what is described

(in classic-metaphysical and Kantian senses, not pertaining to transcendence versus immanence) as “transcendental”. On the basis of both epistemological and ontological necessity, the Ultimate is contended to be necessary to various features of worldly experience, as material essential nature or substratum, witness, agent, first mover, intelligent designer, or justificatory limit.

What may be called transcendental argument is strongly systematic and ambitious in the Pratyabhijñā philosophy of nondual Kashmiri Śaivism. This school interprets Śiva’s cosmic acts through his integral Śakti as his idealistically emanative and cosmocratic self-recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) and Supreme Speech (*parāvāk*) and, through an analogue of what the Neoplatonists also called “henological” arguments, conceives all kinds of recognized continuities in diversity and change (*bhedābheda*)—in homologous epistemic and metaphysical syntheses (*anusamdhāna*, *vimarśa*, *pratyavamarśa*, *pratyabhijñā*), relations (*sambandha*), universals (*sāmānya*), and so on—as the immanent manifestations of the nondual Ultimate.<sup>3</sup> Śiva’s self-recognition for the Pratyabhijñā constitutes the very stitches forming the fabric of immanent multiplistic experience. Embracing the pragmatic emphases of Buddhism, this school maintains that worldly as well as soteriological truth-claims should be tested by the realizations of practical value (*arthakriyā*) (Lawrence 2023).

Continuity and change also pertain, in various ways, to philosophical discourse itself. Contemporary Hindu and Buddhist thinkers value continuity in *lineages of exegesis*. However, recent Hindu and Buddhist philosophizing, like other cultural traditions of the world, also values *exegetical adaptation*. Reminding me of anthropologist Milton Singer (1972) on how civilizations adapt to change (and also certain maxims of Confucius), in these philosophies, there is a kind of synthesis of conservatism and progressivism. Innovation is evinced in the manners in which contemporary Hindu and Buddhist thinkers engage with various modern, postmodern, and anticolonial problematics, both following classic traditions and in novel ways.

The articles in this volume brilliantly illuminate many aspects of Hindu and Buddhist philosophies of continuity and change. The first of two contributions by Sthaneshwar Timalisina examines time and change according to the Advaita Vedānta of Gaudapāda, presented in the *Māṇḍūkya-Upaniṣad-Kārikā*. In Gaudapāda’s *ajātivāda*, a “philosophy of non-origination”, the thinker argues that brahman never deviates from its intrinsic nature or *svabhāva*, which he calls *prakṛti*. Timalisina demonstrates in his comparisons that the Hindu Yogavāsistha focuses on the manifest but agrees with Gaudapāda that there is an underlying *svabhāva*; however, the Buddhist philosopher, Nāgārjuna, does not accept that *svabhāva*.

Both Jesse Berger and Sean Maccracken examine how Utpaladeva’s nondual Śaiva, Pratyabhijñā, *Sambandhasiddhi* ostensibly demonstrates the transcendental necessity of *sambandha*, “relation,” against Dharmakīrti’s effort to refute the category from the perspective of Vijñānavāda. The two scholars elucidate different ways in which Utpaladeva’s philosophy of *sambandha* builds upon initiatives of Bhartr̥hari, for example, Berger focusing more on *sambandha* as a Śakti, and Maccracken emphasizes it pertains to the connection between words in sentences. Both scholars compare the Pratyabhijñā–Buddhist debate on relations with the well-known dispute on the subject between Bertrand Russell and F.H. Bradley. In parallel with myself, both of them have also analogized this philosophy with that of C.S. Peirce for its combination of a pragmatic semiotics with a philosophy of transcendental cognitive synthesis.

Toshiu Horiuchi examines Vimalamitra’s commentary (*ṭīkā*) on the *Heart Sūtra* (*āryaprajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*), which now survives in Tibetan rather than Sanskrit. There has been some confusion about whether the *ṭīkā* is a Mādhyamika or Yogācāra text. Horiuchi argues that the former classification is entailed by the text’s criticisms of the Yogācāra and other schools of Buddhism.

In his second article, Sthaneshwar Timalisina examines the philosophy of time in the philosophy of Sāṃkhya. Sāṃkhya maintains that both the *puruṣas*, individual “selves or

persons”, and *prakṛti*, “nature”, are ultimately eternal. Time emerges through a later transformation of *prakṛti*.

Kisor Chakrabarti translates and expounds selected passages from the 11th century Naiyāyika, Udayana’s *Ātmataṭṭvavivēka*. Udayana propounds sophisticated arguments that qualify Buddhist understandings of causal efficacy as a criterion of reality. Chakrabarti persuades the reader that these arguments are one of the high points of Hindu–Buddhist philosophies on continuity and change.

Sijia Wang and Huanhuan He examine the concept of the Ultimate (*paramārtha*) in the *Jie jie Jing* 解節經 by the philosopher called Paramārtha (499–569), a partial translation of *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra*. The authors compare the *Jie jie Jing* with other Chinese and Tibetan translations of *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* and reflections of recent Chinese monks. This paper, thus, elucidates the history of teachings about the Ultimate in Chinese Buddhism during the Northern and Southern Dynasties.

Daniel Raveh investigates continuity and change within several examples of contemporary Indian philosophy, in Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya, Daya Krishna, Ramchandra Gandhi, Mukund Lath and Rajendra Swaroop Bhatnagar. He demonstrates the critical and creative reflection, philosophical allure, and persuasiveness of contemporary Indian philosophy.

Pradeep P. Gokhale overviews the complex history of pre-Mahāyāna and Mahāyāna schools Buddhist philosophy on continuity versus change. He demonstrates that early Buddhism was *empirically* oriented, rather than systematically skeptical, and maintained that it considered all things to be impermanent, but not to last only from a moment. Nāgārjuna extended the Buddha’s agnosticism about unanswerable questions to a critique of essential nature (*svabhāva*). Dharmakīrti elaborated various philosophical reflections that are supposed to show that continuity is logically impossible.

John Powers examines how various Tibetan philosophers, Daktsang Sherap Rinchen (1405–1477), Wangchuk Dorjé, the ninth Karmapa (1556–1603), and Purchok Ngawang Jampa (1682–1762), interpreted Candrakīrti’s understanding of the Mādhyamika Buddhism of Nāgārjuna themselves. These scholars evince the great variation that has occurred about the character of, and relations between, the ultimate perspectives of Buddhism, the world of ordinary experience, and Nāgārjuna’s philosophical arguments themselves. Some understand Nāgārjuna as emphasizing only that conditioned existence entails emptiness, while others view him as defending a pervasive skepticism which refutes all views whatsoever. Some acknowledge that he takes a philosophical position and some do not.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As John Mbiti’s theological phenomenology, *Concepts of God in Africa* states: “The transcendence of God is a difficult attribute to grasp, and one which must be balanced with God’s immanence. The two attributes are paradoxically complementary: God is “far” (transcendent), and men cannot reach him; but God is also “near” immanent, and he comes close to men” (Mbiti 1979, p. 12).
- <sup>2</sup> Diana Eck has explained that “the divine is visible not only in temples and shrines, but also in the whole continuum of life—in nature, in people, in birth and growth and death” (Eck 1985, p. 10).
- <sup>3</sup> Continuing the Neoplatonic legacy, Pseudo-Dionysius (1987) considers *unity* to be the highest of the Divine Names before the Mystical Theology. For Abhinavagupta, a more concrete ritual, contemplative and philosophical unification is succeeded by the *anupāya*.

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