
On the Buddha as an *Avatāra* of *Viṣṇu*

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Abstract

It is true that the concept of avatāra played a major role in mitigating regional and tribal separatism and extending brāhmanism to semi-civilized indigenous tribes. However, the Hindu doctrine of the Buddha as an avatāra of Viṣṇu was a mere result of arguing from a self-centered perspective of Hindu philosophers. In other words, the great success of Buddha as a religious teacher induced them to adopt him as their own, rather than to recognize him as an adversary. Also, the Buddha avatāra concept betrays an attempt by orthodox Hinduism to slander Buddhists by identifying them with demons.

I. Introductory Remarks

According to a traditional principle of classification, most likely adopted by orthodox Hindu thinkers, the systems of thoughts or darśanas of Indian philosophy are divided into two broad classes, namely, orthodox (āstika) and heterodox (nāstika). The six chief philosophical systems, namely, *Mīmāṃsā*, *Vedānta*, *Sāṅkhya*, *Yoga*, *Nyāya* and *Vaiśeṣika* belong to the first group.¹ These are regarded as orthodox because they accept the authority of the Vedas.²

Under the other class of heterodox systems, the chief three are the

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¹ The six systems mentioned here are not the only orthodox systems. They are the major ones, such as the Grammarian school, the Medical school, etc., also noticed by Mādhavācārya.

² In modern Indian languages, 'āstika' and 'nāstika' generally mean theist and atheist respectively. In a sense, among six systems only two, *Mīmāṃsā*, and *Vedānta*, are

schools of the Cārvakas, the Bauddhas and the Jainas. They are called heterodox because they do not believe in the authority of the Vedas. In other words, the systems of thought which admit the validity of the Vedas are called āstika, and those which repudiate it *nāstika*. In a sense, however, the distinctions mentioned above are merely nominal because the Yoga, classified as āstika, is practically independent of the Vedas. Of the six, *Mīmāṃsā* and Vedānta are more directly dependent on the Vedas.

Of heterodox systems, Buddhism is regarded as one of the most original which the history of Indian philosophy presents (S. Radhakrishnan, vol. i : 342). Nevertheless, the advent of Buddhism in India does not mean that Buddhism came into being without any relation to the religious traditions of India. The history of Indian Buddhism, from the beginning to end, lasted in connection with Hinduism. In reality, the history of Indian philosophy is a dialectical development between Hinduism and Buddhism.

It is a well-known fact that the rise of Buddhism served as the stimulus for the philosophical quest of the orthodox systems of Hinduism. Buddhism “exploded the method of dogmatism and helped to bring about a critical point of view” (S. Radhakrishnan, vol. ii : 17). It “served as a cathartic in clearing the mind of the cramping effects of ancient obstructions” (S. Radhakrishnan, vol. ii : 170). In a sense, if there had not been Buddhism, there also could not be the profound depth of Hinduism. As a systematic speculation of *ātman*, which forms the basis of Indian philosophy, is caused by *anātmavāda* (the theory of not-self) of Buddhism, so the latter became profound more and more by the former.

While check and balance maintained by the interaction between Buddhism and Hinduism contributed to the philosophical development of the two religious traditions, sometimes they criticized each other for the sake of criticism. Such a tendency became prominent especially when check and balance between the two collapsed, and a typical example raised by the Hindu side is the misconception of the Buddha as an *avatāra* (incarnation) of *Viṣṇu*.

The present paper is mainly concerned with how the Buddha, whose teaching is regarded as a typical *nāstika* system of thought by orthodox Hindus, came to be assimilated into *Vaiṣṇavism* as an *avatāra* of *Viṣṇu*. And I will make it clear that the doctrine of the Buddha as an *avatāra* of *Viṣṇu* was a mere result of arguing from a self-centered angle of Hindu philosophers. In other words, the great success of Buddha as a religious teacher induced

directly connected with the Vedas.

them to adopt him as their own, rather than to recognize him as an adversary. Also, the Buddha *avatāra* concept betrays an attempt by orthodox Hinduism to slander Buddhists by identifying them with demons.

II . *Avatāras* as Incarnations of *Viṣṇu*

When the Buddha is said to be an *avatāra* of *Viṣṇu*, the word '*avatāra*' means 'descent', especially of a god from heaven to earth (*Die Religionen Indiens*, i :269). Jan Gonda mentions that an *avatāra* is an 'appearance' (*Erscheinung*) of the deity (*Die Religionen Indiens*, i :269). However, the well-known term '*avatāra*' is not used in early works of Hinduism. The *Bhagavadgītā* takes recourse to such words as *jamman* (birth, iv.5), *sambhava* (coming into being, v.6) and *sānjana* (creation) for expressing the idea of incarnation. The *avatāra* concept becomes obvious in the *Purāṇas* and the Epics. The *Bhagavadgītā* said that the Supreme Being (*Puruṣottama*) 'assumed a form' or 'entered into a human body', which occurs from age to age in response to a particular need or crisis. In the *Purāṇas* and the *Mahābhārata* an *avatāra* is an incarnation, and is distinguished from a divine emanation (*vyuha*). Both concepts, *avatāra* and *vyuha* are associated with *Viṣṇu* and *Śiva*, but particularly with the former, for *Viṣṇu* is regarded as the preserver of the universe. Thus, the term *avatāra* has special relevance to the legends concerning *Viṣṇu*.

While it is true that the *avatāra* concept becomes salient in the *Purāṇas* and the Epics, its embryo is founded in the hymns of the *Ṛig-veda*, which refer to *Viṣṇu*'s having assumed another form in battle (*Ṛig-veda*, vii.100.6). It is also pointed out that Indra, regarded as the chief of the Vedic gods, is depicted as a god to be able to assume any form by the creative power of his *māyā* and to roam about in several forms (*Ṛig-veda*, 3.53.8; 4.47.18).

According to the *Bhagavadgītā*, each *avatāra* of *Viṣṇu* descends in order to destroy evil (*adharmā*) and establish the reign of righteousness (*dharma*).³ The god *Viṣṇu* became incarnate in order to conquer an evil being, to stem the growth of wickedness, and to cause men to turn to righteous paths. "Whenever the law fails and the lawlessness uprises," says *Kṛṣṇa* (an *avatāra* of *Viṣṇu*) to Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgītā*, " O thou of Bhārata race, then do I

³ On the purpose of an *avatāra*, see S.L. Katre, *The Allahabad University Studies*, x, p. 48f.

bring myself to bodied birth. To guard the righteous, to destroy evil-doers, to establish the law, I come into birth age after age" (*Bhagavadgītā*, 4.7-8). In other words, the god incarnates himself with a purpose, to destroy the wicked and protect the righteous.

For this reason, as mentioned above, the *avatāra* concept is closely related to *Viṣṇu* among Hindu *trimūrti*. As is well known, *Viṣṇu* is a god who preserves the universe, and therefore descends from heaven to earth. "Whenever truth is forgotten in the world, and wickedness prevails, the Lord of Love becomes flesh to show the way, the truth, and the life to humanity. Such an incarnation is an *avatāra*, an embodiment of deity on earth" (*Srimad Bhagavatam*, 1.1). In other words, *avatāra* is the periodic invasion of *Viṣṇu* into the history of humanity, when evil triumphs over goodness and creates a crisis in moral life. The god *Viṣṇu* has taken numerous such births. In this form the doctrine seems to have been influenced by the Buddhist concept of the former Buddhas whose prime attribute is compassion (A.L. Basham, p. 304). The Buddhist doctrine is certainly attested to earlier. Some of the former Buddhas are known to have been worshipped as early as the 3rd century B.C. However, an important difference is that the former Buddhas are not regarded as incarnations of a divine being, as are the Hindu *avatāras* (Margaret and James Stutley:33).

Avatāras are the embodiments of the redemptive working of *Viṣṇu* in the moral will of humanity with a view to recover it from its sinfulness. *Viṣṇu* takes not only the form of a full human life but also those of animals, such as fish, tortoise, and boar, etc. As we shall see later, many other figures, such as Nāyagrīva, Dattātreya, and the Haṇṣa (Goose), were regionally, or at times envisaged as *avatāra* of *Viṣṇu*.

Not only the number but also the enumeration in the lists differs considerably. The *Mahābharata* even says that incarnations are uncountable (337.35).⁴ Although the tradition usually affirms ten *avatāras* of *Viṣṇu*, the number of them varies at different periods in Hindu tradition and in different scriptures. The *Nārāyaṇya* section of the *Mahābharata* contains two lists, one (xii.326.72) enumerating six, and the other (xii.337.36) only four incarnations of the deity. A verse mentioning the ten incarnations of the god is now proved to be a late interpolation. It seems that the four incarnations of the god, the Varāha (Boar), *Narasimha* (Man-Lion), Vāmana (Dwarf),

⁴ It seems that on the analogy of the Bodhisattvas of Buddhism the incarnations of *Viṣṇu* are said to be incalculable. See Suvira Jaiswal's *Origin and Development of Vaiṣṇavism* (Delhi; Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967), p. 119.

Mānusa (Human, *i.e.* *Kṛṣṇa*), represent the original nucleus, and is also found in the *Āraṇyāka* Parva of the *Mahābharata* (iii.100.9), and the *Markaṇḍeya Purāna* which, however, mentions Māthura, *i.e.*, *Kṛṣṇa*, in place of Mānusa. Gradually, the number was extended more and more in later works, so that the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, and the *Pañcarātra Sahita* enumerates as many as twenty-four and twenty-nine incarnations of the god. But by the close of the first millennium CE a set of ten had acquired the widest currency. Although the number of the primary *avatāras* of Viṣṇu appears to have been fixed somewhat early as ten, their names vary in the lists given in the early *Purānas*. According to the most popular classification, these ten *avatāras* of *Viṣṇu* are Matsya (fish), Kūrma (tortoise), Varāha (boar), *Narasimha* (man-lion), Vāmana (dwarf), Paraśurāma, Śrī Rāma, Balarāma, Buddha, and Kalkin. These ten chief incarnations are of a more special type, for in them the full essence of the god is believed to have taken flesh to save the world from imminent danger of total destruction. The arrangement shows an interesting ‘evolutionary sequence’. We move from pure sea animal (Matsya) to more amphibian creatures (Kūrma, Varāha); then from semi-human and deformed human (Vāmana) to fully human beings (*Kṛṣṇa*, Balarāma, Rāma, Paraśurāma, the Buddha) of the past, and of the future (Kalkin).

III. Assimilation of Indigenous gods into *Vaiṣṇavism* through the Concept of *Avatāra*

It is a historical fact that the different *avatāras* of Viṣṇu often appear to regional or tribal deities who have been subsumed by established Hinduism under the rubric of one of *Viṣṇu*’s many forms. A variety of animals and heroes are looked upon as prototypes of a benevolent deity, *Viṣṇu* and they are at last identified with the latter. Since “whatever is mighty or fortunate or strong springs from a portion of my glory” (*Bhagavadgītā*, x.49), every good or great man or thing could be regarded as a partial *avatāra* of *Viṣṇu*. An incarnation might be total or partial,⁵ and, with reference to the assimilation of indigenous religion and its gods into *Vaiṣṇavism*, the concept

⁵ The concept of an *aṃ śāvātāra*, ‘partial incarnation’, remained unproductive outside of the circles of the scholastics; in some areas *aṃṣa* is actually used as a synonym of *avatāra*.

of an *aṅṣāvātāra*, 'partial incarnation', played an important role.

We can easily discern that most of *avatāras* of Viṣṇu originally had nothing to do with, and were even opposed to the god Viṣṇu. It is pointed out that the legend of the Boar *avatāra*, for example, which is enumerated as the third incarnation of *Viṣṇu*, developed through a primitive non-Āryan cult of a sacred pig. The *Ṛig -veda* speaks of a Boar, hostile to the Āryans, and killed by Indra, and the *Taittirīya Saṅhitā* mentions that a boar kept the wealth of the Asuras on the other side of the hills. From these, it is probable that the boar was a totem of some powerful non-Āryan tribe undergoing brhmanization in the age represented by the *Brahmaṇas*.⁶ The *Mahābharata* (iii.185) speaks of the Matsya who saved Manu, and the Kūrma who supported the earth on his back at the time of the churning of the ocean (i.16.10 - 11), but it does not connect them with *Viṣṇu*. It has also been suggested by some scholars that the animal forms, such as fish, tortoise, boar, etc., assumed by *Viṣṇu* may have originally been totems of some other tribes foreign to the belief in *Viṣṇu*. In a passage of the *Ṛig -veda* (viii.96.13-15), even *Kṛṣṇa* is spoken of as a non-Āryan chief waiting on the banks of *aṅsumati* to fight Indra.

By viewing these regional deities, heroes, and animals as so many varying forms of *Viṣṇu*, Hinduism tried to accommodate itself to a great variety of local traditions. Although not all traditions and philosophical schools accepted such a non-transcendental status for *Kṛṣṇa*, the pattern proved extremely productive in other areas, because it allowed for the inclusion of the popular heroes and figures of worship under the general belief of *Vaiṣṇavism*. Already at a relatively early stage, the Vedic figure of Trivikrama was included, now under the name of Vāmana. By widening the definition of the term, culture-figures like the Vāraha, Kūrma, Matsya, and Nṛsimha, could be included. Somewhat later also Rāma, Balarāma, and Paraśurāma were also included. Even the Buddha was appropriated by certain traditions.

The concept also began to appear in forms of Hinduism other than *Vaiṣṇavism*. For example, many figures of local goddesses became regarded as *avatāras* of Durgā, wife of Śiva. Regional deities like *Khandobā* are interpreted as *avatāras* of Śiva by way of their assimilation in Sanskrit. Another extension of the concept that proved particularly useful was the idea of an *arcāvatāra*, viz., the descent and permanent residence of a deity (particularly *Viṣṇu*) in the sculpture of a temple image (*arc*).

⁶ Traditionally the legend of the Boar reflects back to the *Brahmaṇas*.

Finally, various religious movements have tended to regard their founder or their sages as *avatāras* of their own specific deity. For example, in the case of Caitanya, some strands of the movement founded by him regarded him as the dual *avatāra* of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, embodied in one person. In recent times, the concept of *avatāra*, especially in relation to animal figures, has been challenged by reforming and rationalizing movements (e.g. Brahmo Samāj).⁷ At the same time, the belief put forward in the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, that humans can become *avatāras* by a divine infilling, has allowed the title to be extended to religious leaders, such as Gandhi and Satya Sai Baba, and to non-Hindus, such as Jesus and Muhamad.

In this course, however, it was inevitable that so many myths and even historical facts were modified and changed to be in harmony with the *avatāra* concepts. This aspect of the doctrine of *avatāra* is nowhere so well illustrated as in the case of the Buddha.

IV. Introduction of the Buddha into *Avatāras* of Viṣṇu

The Buddha *avatāra* concept seems to have formed during the period between the middle of the fifth century and the sixth century. This means that the Buddha *avatāra*, who is said to be the last historical incarnation of Viṣṇu, is closely connected with the period when the *Purānas* were founded in India. The Buddha *avatāra* is not mentioned in the *Mahābharata*⁸ and appears first in the *Viṣṇu Purāna*,⁹ where it is already established in full detail. However, it should be pointed out here that only a few *Purānas* mention the Buddha as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. For example, the *Vāyu Purāna* also enumerates the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, nevertheless the name of Buddha is not included in them.

The Buddha *avatāra* is also described on the Gupta *Daśavatāra* Temple at Deogarh(A.D. 600) and mentioned in a seventh-century Pallava inscription

⁷ A 9th century Hindu reform movement, it had its antecedent in the Brahmo Sbhā (1828) of Ram Moha Roy(1772-1833).

⁸ The *Mahābharata* lists them *Haṁsa*, *Kūrma*, *Matsya*, *Varāha*, *Narasimha*, *Vāmana*, *Rāma*(Bhārgava), *Rāma*(Dāśarathi), *Sātvata*(i.e., *Vāsudeva* or *Bakadeva*), and *Kalkin*. Apparently the Buddha had not yet been recognized as an *avatāra*.

⁹ The earliest that alluded to the Buddha incarnation may antedate the *Viṣṇu Purāna*, but this has yet to be proven.

and on an eighth-century Tamil inscription (Banerjea, Jitendra, pp. 420-425).

It seems that the Buddha *avatāra* is originally foreign to the cycle of *avatāras* of *Viṣṇu*. In fact, the Buddha is somewhat less rigidly included in such lists of ten in comparison with others. Before the appearance of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, the *Kṛṣṇa avatāra* is followed by the Kalkin *avatāra*. The *Mahābhārata* (3.188.14) and the *Vāyu Purāṇa* (2.36.96), which does not mention the Buddha *avatāra*, say that *Viṣṇu* will be born as Kalkin in order to destroy barbarians and heretics. In the *Vāyu Purāṇa* (2.36.103-155),

Kṛṣṇa is said to become incarnate to establish dharma and to destroy demons, deluding ill creatures with his *yoga-māyā*, he is then followed by Kalkin. When this list appears in the later *Matsya Purāṇa* (47.247). *Kṛṣṇa* disappears and it is said that *Viṣṇu* became the Buddha to establish dharma and to destroy demons. He was an ascetic with the form of a god or a demon. In other words, when the Buddha *avatāra* appears in the list of ten *avatāras*, it usually replaces the *Kṛṣṇa avatāra*. This means that the Buddha was included in the list of the *avatāras* of *Viṣṇu* some time later.

For this reason, we frequently see that the role and characteristics of the Buddha *avatāra* are overlapped and confused with those of *Kṛṣṇa* who immediately precedes the Buddha, or Kalkin who immediately succeeds the Buddha. This is also the reason why the Buddha and *Kṛṣṇa* coincide at the beginning of the Kali-yuga. Traditionally, the Kali-yuga starts at the death of *Kṛṣṇa*. That is, on the very day when *Kṛṣṇa* leaves the earth, Kalkin descends (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, v .38.8). However, as Huntington mentions, "From the later vantage point of the *Purāṇic* authors engaged in combating Buddhist teachings, the advent of the Buddha seemed to correspond more closely to the descriptions of what was to happen in the Kali age" (Huntington, Ronald, p. 29). And so the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and other texts simply assert that *Viṣṇu* will be born as Buddha at the beginning of the Kali-yuga. In other words, the genealogy of *avatāra* passes directly from *Kṛṣṇa* to the Buddha. When Buddhism posed a serious threat to the fast-burgeoning Hindu revival, the Buddha appears in the list of *avatāras* of *Viṣṇu*, immediately preceding Kalkin.

When the Buddha was woven in the list of the *avatāras* of *Viṣṇu*, the concept of the Buddha *avatāra* seems to have been inspired by that of the Kalkin *avatāra*. In most *Purāṇas* where the two *avatāras* appear, their tasks are explicitly related and even confused. In the *Agni Purāṇa* (16.5-10), for example, it is said that *Viṣṇu* became the Buddha and created Buddhists and other heretics, and that at the end of Kali-yuga, Kalkin will suppress the barbarians. The Buddha *avatāra* is asked to protect the worshipper from

heretics, and Kalkin *avatāra* is asked for protection from impurity (*Garuḍa Purāna*, 196.11). Here, the distinction between the role of the Buddha and that of Kalkin is blurred, since the heretics are identified with impure men. This confusion may well arise from an assimilation of the Buddha to the soteriological function of Kalkin, who follows immediately after. The two *avatāras* are almost never represented separately, but they appear on reliefs of the ten *avatāras* from the Gupta period onward.

V. The Role of the Buddha *Avatāra* in the *Purāṇas*

In spite of the frequent confusion of the Buddha and Kalkin *avatāra*, in the *Purāṇas* it is said that the role of the Buddha *avatāra* is to delude the wicked, lead them to deny the Vedas, and thus ensure their damnation. In the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, for example, Viṣṇu is said to have been born as ‘the Deluder’ in the Śākya race in order to delude the demons with false doctrines and thus work for their undoing :

Then after full advent of the Kali Age, He will be born with Buddha as His name, and as son of Ajana in the Kikata country. . . . Seeing that asuras (enemies of gods) who follow the path of Veda, will harass the world, travelling in cities moving with invisible velocity constructed by Māyā, he will assume the disguise of heretics, deluding the mind and attracting the hearts of asuras, he will extensively explain to them heretic doctrines (*Bhāgavata Purāna*, i .3.24; ii .7.37).

In these passages, the purpose of the Buddha *avatāra* is quite clear. Although the demons come to know the sacrifice of the Vedas, they are not qualified to perform it. Their corruption and destruction are the necessary consequence of their moral defects. In the *Viṣṇu Purāna*, the role of the Buddha *avatāra* is described in a concrete way.

The demons, led by Prahlāda, had stolen the sacrificial portions of gods, but they were so full of *svadharmā*, Vedic worship, and asceticism that they could not be conquered. *Viṣṇu* created a man of delusion to lead the demons from the path of the Vedas; the man was naked, bald, carrying a peacock feather fan; he went where the demons were practicing asceticism at the banks of the Narmada and made them all into arhats, discouraging them from their asceticism and teaching them contradictory tenets about dharma . . . Then the man put on red garments and taught the rest of the demons that the sacrifice of animals was an evil act. He taught, “If the animal slaughtered in the sacrifice is assured of arrival in heaven, why does the

sacrificer not kill his own father?" Then the demons became heretics, abandoning the Vedas and reviling the gods and brahmins, discarding their armor of *svadharmā*. The gods attacked them and killed them (*Viṣṇu Purāna*, 3.17-18).

In the above quotation, the Buddha *avatāra* is a composite figure: he walks naked like a Jain, and he also teaches a second heresy recognizable as Materialism by its satire on the traditional rationalization for animal sacrifices. However, the main point is that the Buddha is an *avatāra* who teaches heresy in order to delude the demons. Thus, they accepted his teachings, gave up Vedic rites and practices, and as a consequence were defeated by the gods.

As mentioned before, although the *avatāras* of *Viṣṇu* appear according to the current of the times, they are same in both their roles to destroy evil (*adharmā*) and to establish the reign of righteousness. In this respect, the Buddha *avatāra*, referred to as the ninth *avatāra* of *Viṣṇu*, seems not to be an exception, in other words, there is no doubt that the Buddha is regarded as an *avatāra* of *Viṣṇu*. However, what should be pointed out in this connection is that the question is not Buddha himself, but his teaching, i.e., Buddhism; Buddha is honored as a savior against the demons while his teaching is condemned. In other words, Buddhism itself is deprecated as a malicious teaching to delude demons and heretics, and therefore those who follow this teaching, that is, Buddhists, are identified with demons and heretics.

In fact, the confusion around the Buddha and Kalkin *avatāras* suggests that the concept of the Buddha *avatāra* is a clever machination on the part of the *Brāhmaṇas* to promote hatred towards Buddhism and Buddhists. The fact that the Buddha is confused with Kalkin *avatāra* suggests that the Kali-yuga, the age of corruption, begins with the appearance of Buddhism. The *Siva Purāna*, thus, mentions;

Viṣṇu said to the man of delusion, "After spreading the dharma of darkness and destroying the Triple City, go to the wildness and maintain your *svadharmā* there until the beginning of the Kali Age. Then reveal your dharma and cause your disciples to spread it." . . . After the Triple City was burnt, the bald monks bowed to the gods and said, "Where shall we go? What shall we do? We have done a bad thing, to destroy the demon's devotion to Śiva, and now we will have to live in hell. But you wished us to do it, and you must tell us how to find peace." *Viṣṇu, Brāhmā*, and the other gods said, "Do not fear. Since Śiva commended this, nothing bad will happen to you. From today, this doctrine will be the ruin of men who adhere to it, in the Kali Age. You must hide in the desert until the Kali Age begins. Then you will establish your doctrine, and fools of the Kali age will be deluded and

accept it." And so the bald monks returned to their hermitage (*Śiva Purāna*, ii.5.4.19-21; ii.5.12.21-33).

In the above passages, the Buddha *avatāra*, called the man of delusion, is depicted as an agent who quickens corruption of the Kali-yuga and causes the results of corruption to be explicitly revealed. It is also evident that the Buddha himself is regarded as the founder of depraved doctrines of the Kali-yuga.

Compared with the general characteristics of the *avatāras* of *Viṣṇu*, the function of the Buddha *avatāra* is quite extraordinary. The *avatāras* as a whole take a positive attitude in fulfilling their soteriological function, whereas the Buddha *avatāra* resorts to negative measures to delude heretics. In this respect, the characteristic of the Buddha *avatāra* varies far from that of other *avatāras* of *Viṣṇu*. This is also the reason why the Buddha *avatāra* should be regarded as an interpolation added to the list of *avatāra* of *Viṣṇu* at a later period. Where this is done, the intention must have been to effect a depreciation of Buddhism. In fact, The Buddha *avatāra* is only briefly alluded to in some of the *Purāṇas*, since it is originally foreign to the lists of the *avatāras* of *Viṣṇu*. Jayadeva's *Gītā Govinda* (i .1.13), however, which contains one of the earliest lists of incarnations, states that *Viṣṇu* became the Buddha out of compassion for animals, in order to put an end to bloody sacrifice. This probably gives a clue to the background of the Buddha *avatāra*.

VI. Concluding Remarks

It is true that the concept of *avatāra* played a major role in mitigating regional and tribal separatism and extending *brāhmaṇism* to semi-civilized indigenous tribes. It is also true that it gave the country a kind of cultural unity and succeeded in establishing the same kind of social structure all over India.

However, as regards the concept of the Buddha *avatāra*, it should be said that its introduction was an attempt to distort the popular perception of the Buddha and Buddhism. The introduction of the Buddha in the list of the *avatāras* of *Viṣṇu* is no more than a result of arguing from a self-centered angle of the Hindus. This is evident from the *Purāṇas* in which the Buddha *avatāra* is first mentioned. At that time in history Hindus felt a need to promote the Buddha as an *avatāra* of *Viṣṇu*, because he exerted such immense influence and won so many disciples. But as his teaching was

opposed to their own, they skillfully say that it was to mislead the enemies of the gods that he proclaimed his doctrine. The result is an awkward paradox where the Buddha is honored as an *avatāra* of *Viṣṇu* while his teaching is condemned. Likewise, Rṣabha,¹⁰ the first Tīrtaṅkara of the Jaina tradition, is said to be an *avatāra* of *Viṣṇu* in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (ii .7.10).

The Buddha was included in the list, as were older deities, in order to assimilate heterodox elements into the *Vaiṣṇavite* fold. In other words, with an eye to the syncretic absorption of Buddhism, the Buddha was inserted in the Hindu system and regarded as the 9th *avatāra* of *Viṣṇu* under the pretext that *Viṣṇu* in this form enticed the heretics to apostatize from the Vedas for the purpose of destroying them. This was a peculiar way of acknowledging the greatness and sanctity of the heretical teacher and decrying the doctrines attributed to him.

Hinduism has indeed tried to absorb whatever is good in non-Vedic Indian religions, but this assimilation took place in the earlier, more tolerant period in which Buddhism and Hinduism grew up together and borrowed freely from one another, long before the texts in which *Viṣṇu* appears as the Buddha. In reality, the advent of the Buddha *avatāra* concept in the history of Hinduism points to the decline and decay of Hinduism itself.

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¹⁰ Not much is known about the early teachers of Jainism. It is said that the first twenty-two tīrtaṅkaras belong to mythological ages. *Rṣabha* who heads the list of teachers is mentioned even in the Vedic lore.

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