

# Buddhism, Christianity and the Question of Creation

Karmic or Divine?

*Edited by*

PERRY SCHMIDT-LEUKEL  
*University of Glasgow, UK*

ASHGATE

© Perry Schmidt-Leukel 2006

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.

Perry Schmidt-Leukel has asserted his moral right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the Editor of this work.

Published by  
Ashgate Publishing Limited  
Gower House  
Croft Road  
Aldershot  
Hants GU11 3HR  
England

Ashgate Publishing Company  
Suite 420  
101 Cherry Street  
Burlington, VT 05401-4405  
USA

Ashgate website: <http://www.ashgate.com>

#### **British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Buddhism, Christianity and the question of creation :

karmic or divine?

1. Creation - Comparative studies 2. Buddhism - Doctrines  
3. Buddhism - Relations - Christianity 4. Christianity and  
other religions - Buddhism 5. Christianity and atheism

I. Schmidt-Leukel, Perry  
294.3'424

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Buddhism, Christianity, and the question of creation : karmic or divine? / edited by  
Perry Schmidt-Leukel.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-7546-5443-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Christianity—Relations—Buddhism. 2. Buddhism—Relations—Christianity. 3.  
Creation. 4. Karma. I. Title: Karmic or divine?. II. Schmidt-Leukel, Perry.

BR128.B8B814 2006  
202'.4—dc22

2005007948

ISBN-10: 0 7546 5443 5

Typeset by IML Typographers, Birkenhead, Merseyside  
and printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books, Bodmin, Cornwall

# Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
Introduction <i>Perry Schmidt-Leukel</i>	1

## **Part One: Buddhist and Christian Perspectives on the Issue of Creation**

1 Hindu Doctrines of Creation and Their Buddhist Critiques <i>Ernst Steinkellner</i>	15
2 Three Buddhist Views of the Doctrines of Creation and Creator <i>José Ignacio Cabezón</i>	33
3 Buddhist Forms of Belief in Creation <i>Eva K. Neumaier</i>	47
4 Creation and the Problem of Evil <i>Armin Kreiner</i>	61
5 Refuting Some Buddhist Arguments about Creation and Adopting Buddhist Philosophy about Salvation History <i>John P. Keenan</i>	69
6 Creation and Process Theology: A Question to Buddhism <i>Aasulv Lande</i>	81
7 Buddhists, Christians and Ecology <i>John D'Arcy May</i>	93

## **Part Two: The Unbridgeable Gulf? Towards a Buddhist-Christian Theology of Creation** *Perry Schmidt-Leukel*

8 Preparing the Ground	111
------------------------	-----

vi	<i>Contents</i>	
9	Buddhist Criticism and Its Motives	123
10	Bridging the Gulf	143
11	Conclusion	177
	<i>Index</i>	179

A Translation of the *Kun-byed rgyal-po'i mdo* (Albany, NY: SUNY 1992) and *Gender, Genre and Religion: Feminist Reflections* (The Calgary Institute for the Humanities 1995).

**Perry Schmidt-Leukel** is Professor of Systematic Theology and Religious Studies, University of Glasgow, and Founding-Director of the Centre for Inter-Faith Studies. He has published widely in the areas of philosophy/theology of religions and Buddhist–Christian dialogue, for example *'Den Löwen brüllen hören': Zur Hermeneutik eines christlichen Verständnisses der buddhistischen Heilsbotschaft* (Paderborn: Schöningh 1992), *Theologie der Religionen: Probleme, Optionen, Argumente* (Neuried: Ars Una 1997) and *Gott ohne Grenzen: Eine christliche und pluralistische Theologie der Religionen* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2005). Among his edited books are *Wer ist Buddha? Eine Gestalt und ihre Bedeutung für die Menschheit* (Munich: Diederichs Verlag 1998), *Buddhist Perceptions of Jesus* (St Ottilien: EOS 2001), *War and Peace in World Religions* (London: SCM 2004) and *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue* (London: SCM 2005).

**Ernst Steinkellner**, Member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, is Professor of Buddhist and Tibetan Studies at Vienna University and Director of the Institute for Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. His main scholarly aims are the philological improvement of the sources available for the study of Buddhist philosophical and spiritual traditions, context-orientated interpretations of Buddhist ideas and their developments, and the appreciation of original contributions of Tibetan philosophers to the Buddhist tradition. His present efforts are devoted to editing original Sanskrit texts of major importance from the Buddhist epistemological tradition. Among his translations and text editions are *Dharmakīrti's Pramāṇaviniścayaḥ, Zweites Kapitel: Svārthānumānam, Teil 1* (1973), *Teil 2* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1979); *Śāntideva: Der Eintritt in das Leben zur Erleuchtung (Bodhicaryāvatāra)* (Cologne: Diederichs Verlag 1981) and *Nachweis der Wiedergeburt. Prajñāśenas 'Jig rten pha rol sgrub pa, ein früher tibetischer Text aus Dunhuang* (two parts) (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1988).

## Chapter 1

# Hindu Doctrines of Creation and Their Buddhist Critiques

Ernst Steinkellner

### Some Preliminary Considerations

At the very beginning of this chapter, a short note of apology seems to be appropriate. When the editor confirmed my positive answer to the invitation to write this contribution, I felt flattered by his words 'I am glad that you approach the area of Buddhist philosophy not only with a philological and historical interest, but also with a philosophical one – this, after all, makes it really interesting.' I felt flattered, because in my youth philosophy appeared to me to be the peak of human activities. Throughout my working life, I nonetheless never even came near these high ranges, and while facing the task of preparing this paper I had to admit to myself that my philosophical interest is actually quite minimal by now, and more and more my hopes focus rather on philology strictly speaking, especially when the questions to be addressed are within the framework of 'Buddhist–Christian Dialogue'. For 'philology', as I would like to understand it, is an area of exercise in the never-ending social process of understanding information which originates from human sources with the intention to be understood by another human being, thus providing a basis for a dialogue which aims at mutual understanding rather than at preparing for non-verbal application of sticks or bombs.

The inter-linguistic and inter-cultural difficulties and impediments that are met with are well known.<sup>1</sup> Projects like the present one, however, testify to the fact that a possibility to overcome these difficulties in a meaningful way is still to be hoped for, and is certainly preferable to the alternatives of cultural solipsism and military monism which result from intellectual attitudes such as those of the recently fashionable hermeneutical despair.

Intra-culturally, we are confronted with similar difficulties. Debates between different strands of Indian societies, too, are held in the same language and use roughly the same logical forms, and yet they often tend to end in irreconcilable differences. Precise conceptual clarity and neatness is therefore required in order to

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the 'Concluding Remarks' in R. Jackson, 'Dharmakīrti's refutation of theism', *Philosophy East and West* 36/4, 1986, 315–48, pp. 338–42.

discover the – mostly – silent presuppositions brought into such debates based on backgrounds of different social conditions, motivations, and aims.

In my following attempt to fulfil the task requested in the title of my paper, I shall naturally stay within the borders of the Indian culture. And, in order not to be possibly misread in an inter-cultural discourse, I will try, as closely as possible, to identify the key concepts by their function in context. In addition, in order to do justice to those key concepts also within intra-cultural debates, we must take into account both the starting point and the direction of these debates. For, as a rule, a specific polemical argument tends to be selective and limitative from the beginning: it chooses targets and prepares them for easier destruction through weapons wielded in the owner's factory. Consequently, the theories and concepts of the party under polemical attack are always broader and more meaningful in their natural and homogeneous conceptual environment than when put up as isolated targets in polemics.

I shall therefore structure my paper in the following way: before looking at the various arguments developed by Buddhist traditions and philosophers, I will introduce some examples of 'creation' concepts from the early brahmanical and Hindu context which the Buddhists respond to in their critiques. This should reveal at least the more important reasons for their polemical efforts and identify the specific types of their targets. Since the Buddhists were quite selective, targeting not even all the main Indian doctrines of creation, this survey will really be no more than a typological one, with no comprehensiveness intended. Subsequently, I will summarize the historical development of the Buddhist arguments, attempt to identify the Buddhists' reasons for their critical enterprise, and finally, I shall present in more detail, but again only as an example, a particular argument which was elaborated by one of the most influential and differentiating Buddhist philosophers, Dharmakīrti.

It will remain to be seen whether any of these arguments can be transferred meaningfully to the Christian–Buddhist dialogue, and whether any objective can be seen in such an enterprise. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Buddhists tried to use their traditional polemical lore to confront Christian ideas in much the same way as it had been used against the concepts developed by Indian theistic traditions. This, however, is not my topic, and will be dealt with in a later chapter.<sup>2</sup>

### Creator and Creation in Traditional Hindu Thought

'Creation' together with its various explanations in India is an answer to the question of 'Why are we, here and now?' The question is searching for a first cause. By the time of the Buddha's appearance, many answers had already been given. Starting from the later parts of the *Ṛgveda* to the earlier *Upaniṣads*, mythic notions of beginnings within a pre-existing set-up of the Vedic gods prevailed.<sup>3</sup> Some

<sup>2</sup> Cf. José Cabézon's contribution in Chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Jackson, op. cit. (fn. 1), p. 317; H. von Stietencron, *Der Hinduismus* (Munich: C.H. Beck 2001), p. 21.

cosmogonic hymns of the *Ṛgveda* speak of a personal creator-god, Viśvakarman ('Whose acting is the universe'), who as a priest carries out creation as a sacrifice, and who works with pre-existing unformed material in the manner of a craftsman. In the hymn to *puruṣa* ('man') (*Ṛgveda* 10.90), we find the idea of an emanation of the universe, including the macro cosmos and our worldly surrounding with its social institutions, from a single entity, the *puruṣa*, as *causa materialis*. This is a clearly monistic tradition, identifying the cause as 'the One' (*tad ekam*), but naming it by the names of the great Vedic gods Indra, Varuṇa, or Agni.<sup>4</sup> The early *Upaniṣads* identified this Vedic 'One' with *brāhman*, the truth of the Vedic word and reality of everything existent, the source and substance of the world in matter and consciousness, and finally identified this impersonal principle with the conscious core in living beings, the 'Self' (*ātman*). Vedic polytheism thus gave way to Upaniṣadic monism, and the Vedic gods were relegated to the realm of the finite with their tasks. The absolute *brāhman* does not necessarily require a creator of the universe. The created world could be seen as being only phenomenal, an illusion, and a falsely imagined transformation of the ultimate reality. Such ideas do not, however, exclude the assumption of a temporarily active creator-god as long as the impersonality of the absolute *brāhman* is not associated with a function. Materialistic monism is known as well, in which creation is seen as an 'outflow' (*śṛṣṭi*), or in a dualistic garb, in which an active undifferentiated primal matter (*prakṛti*) creates by transforming itself for the purpose of inactive but observing units of consciousness (*puruṣa*).

Along with these atheistic ideas of creation we also find personalistic-theistic concepts developing from late-Vedic monism. The Vedic 'One' was assumed to exist, have a wish to create and a consciousness to know what is to be created in all its details. Such a wishful and conscious 'One', however, can hardly be a neutral principle, but must be a personal one. The alternative to an unfathomable *brāhman* without form and qualities (*nirguṇa*) is thus a personal God with qualities (*saguṇa*), an agent of creation of the world, as well as its upkeep and destruction, the masculine god *brahmān* (nom. *brahmā*) with only a shift of the accent. He is not known in the Veda, but Vedic and early Upaniṣadic mythic notions, for example, the 'lord of creatures' (*prajāpati*) or the 'golden (that is, eternal) germ' (*hiranyagarbha*) were seen as 'the One' that has subsequently taken form as a personal God, the Lord of creation, Prajāpati or Puruṣa in the Veda, later Bhagavān and Īśvara, who designs the elements and laws of nature, and starts the process of creating all living beings beginning with the various gods. Theories of rebirth and a cyclic conception of the cosmos were also developed in this period and completed the notion of a highest personal God: at the end of a world-period, this God takes both the world and its creatures back into himself. Formless neuter *brāhman* before creation, that is, the

<sup>4</sup> Cf. K. Preisendanz, 'Die vedische Tradition als Hintergrund für den frühen Buddhismus: einige ausgewählte philosophische Aspekte', in *Buddhismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Band IV (Universität Hamburg 2000), pp. 37–54.

moment when the 'golden germ' is born, is god Brahman (*brahmān*) as long as the world, space, time and creatures exist. Therefore, a relationship between the eternal creator and creatures is possible, and no alternative is left to this monotheistic option: he creates and supports, he is omniscient, omnipotent and eternal. The Vedic gods have now become part of the circle of finite existences, even if long-lasting. This highest personal and eternal God is subsequently identified by historically and socially different groups, the representatives of the developing Hindu religions, under the various names praised, loved and feared, for example by Vaiṣṇava believers as Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, Rāma, or by Śaiva believers as Śiva.<sup>5</sup>

These early theistic tendencies, becoming monotheistic traditions and finally Hindu religions properly speaking, incorporate the inherited basic structure of identity or difference between transcendent and immanent aspects of the ultimate being in different ways. Roughly, it can be said that the Supreme Being *brāhman* is personalized in the sense that a creative aspect is attributed to it: it is assumed to be responsible for the origin and order of the cosmos. The idea of a transcendent, all-pervading, inactive and impersonal principle, the late-Vedic *brāhman*, remains alive, however, for in many of the mythic accounts of the creation that are available, for example, in the *Manu Smṛti* or in various *Purāṇas*, the actual creation of the world lies in the hands of a demiurge. Often, the god Brahman is given this special task, but the demiurge may also be seen as the creative power (*māyā*, *śakti*) or a manifestation (*vyūha*) of the ultimate reality. What these general myths and later theologies then present are elaborate variations on the answers to two main questions: How did God create the world? And why did God create the world?

The general scarcity of written sources for centuries of oral tradition allows only for a hypothetical history of these developments: they begin already in the last parts of the *Rgveda*, and become stronger around the time of the Buddha's activity, the fifth to fourth centuries BCE, during the first North Indian empire of the Nandas, and the time of the Maurya dynasty. With the development of the classical Indian philosophical traditions from the last centuries BCE onwards, we can assume that the theistic conceptions, which so far were only asserted in the form of mythic accounts, finally begin to receive theoretical justifications.

I cannot touch upon the question of why God created the world, and the direction of this chapter does not allow for a comprehensive survey of the variations in the manner of his creation.<sup>6</sup> I would offer, rather, a typology of concepts of creation, and exemplify the two types proposed respectively. Their main difference seems to consist in whether an all-pervading or only a limited function of God is assumed to be the cause of the world. For God may be seen as being both, the material and the instrumental or efficient cause of the world, or only its instrumental cause.

5 Cf. J. Gonda, *Die Religionen Indiens. I: Veda und älterer Hinduismus; II: Der jüngere Hinduismus* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1960, 1963).

6 Cf. M. Biardau, *Cosmogonies purāṇiques: Étude de mythologie hindoue, Tome I* (Paris: Ecole Française D'Extrême Orient 1981); M. Pfeiffer, *Indische Mythen vom Werden der Welt: Texte, Strukturen, Geschichte* (Berlin: Reimer 1994).

The first type of creation theory can perhaps be characterized as evolutionary. It aims at harmonizing a monotheistic position with the ancient idea of an original transcendent unity of impersonal being. An example is the creation theory of the viṣṇuic Pāñcarātra tradition.<sup>7</sup> Here, two main stages of creation are distinguished, a higher or pure one (*śuddhasarga*), and a lower or gross one. Viṣṇu, the ultimate being, wakens Lakṣmī, his Śakti ('Power'). Why remains a mystery, for even 'diversion' (*līlā*) given as an answer is not satisfying in the case of a perfect being. Viṣṇu's 'Power' is twofold as action and becoming, that is, as the instrumental and material cause of the world. This 'Power', which is nothing but Viṣṇu's will to create, is symbolized by God's discus-weapon (*Sudarśana*), and is understood to be the principle that supports and orders the world. 'Manifestations' (*vyūha*) and 'appearances' (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu as part of this pure creation enrich the possibilities of special kinds of divine support.

The second stage of creation includes categories such as *māyā* ('power of illusion'), the *guṇas* ('constituent qualities of primal matter'), the natural law of *karman* and its character of necessity, and *kāla* ('time'). In fact, the whole system of evolutionary products developed in the philosophical tradition of the Sāṅkhya is included as a distinct kind of creation called 'creation from primal matter' (*pradhānasarga*), to which the final step, 'creation by Brahman' (*brahmasarga*), is added in order to incorporate the traditional epic accounts. All this sets limitations for the evolving products and increasing estrangement of these products from their original perfection and purity. When the last essence (*tattva*), earth, is evolved, the activity of the Manus, the fathers of mankind, begins.

According to the second type of creation theory, God is thought to be an eternal 'supreme soul' (*paramātman*) or even a special substance separate from other eternal elements of being. The idea of creation by a 'creator-god' (*īśvara*) as developed in the philosophical traditions of Vaiśeṣika and Nyāya may serve as an example in this case,<sup>8</sup> for their conceptions are the main targets of the later Buddhist polemics. These brahmanical philosophical traditions, which eventually merged to a certain extent, seem to have been conceived in their beginnings as atheistic systems for explaining the modes of bondage into an unsatisfying worldly existence and the means of liberation from the same. It is generally agreed that, considered as a whole, there was no need in these systems to consider an *īśvara* as a necessary component in the cycles of cosmic formation, existence and dissolution. Material atom-shaped elements as well as souls existed without beginning, that is, eternally, and thus were not created. The movements of the atomic elements, resulting in various combinations of matter and souls at the beginning and their dissolution at the end of world-periods, is caused

7 Cf. J. Gonda, op. cit. (fn. 5), Vol. II, pp. 121f.; for a new detailed explanation, cf. M. Rastelli, *Philosophisch-theologische Grundanschauungen der Jayākhyasamhitā: Mit einer Darstellung des täglichen Rituals* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1999), pp. 39–94.

8 Cf. G. Chemparathy, 'Aufkommen und Entwicklung der Lehre von einem höchsten Wesen im Nyāya und Vaiśeṣika' (unpublished dissertation, University of Vienna 1963).



by an impersonal, unconscious, omnipotent force, called 'the invisible' (*adr̥ṣṭa*). This force is the product of both the good and bad activities (*karman*) of living beings, and is responsible for all phenomena not explainable by natural causes.

At a certain stage, this explanation was no longer considered satisfactory. For how could an unconscious (*acetana*) 'Invisible' direct the process of building a universe and then even be responsible for keeping it in order?<sup>9</sup> In addition, pressure from the side of theistic movements – in this case from Śaiva circles (Pāśupata) – resulted in introducing the Īśvara into these systems.<sup>10</sup> Īśvara, that is, Śiva, now assumed the role of supervising (*adhiṣṭhātr̥*) the 'Invisible' in its activities of combining the elements and souls during the periods of creation and dissolution, as well as sustaining order during world-periods. Here, the concept of God is qualified by three main functions: God as creating (*karṭr̥*) the world, God as supervising (*adhiṣṭhātr̥*) the fate and order of both living beings and the world, and God as pronouncing the Vedic scriptures (*vedakarṭr̥*), the concept of God as creator being the basic idea of the theology developing in these traditions.

God, in this context, is understood, of course, only as being the instrumental cause (*nimittakāraṇa*) of the world, an aspect that is underlined by the introduction of an additional demiurge. I take as example a mythic account of creation that is found in the *Padārthadharmasaṅgraha*, a systematic commentary on the *Vaiśeṣikasūtras* from the sixth century CE, although this account is probably older:<sup>11</sup> The dissolution of the world is followed by a period of Śiva's repose of 'a hundred Brahman-years' (that is, 864 000 000 000 human years). Following this, Śiva desires to re-create the universe to provide a possibility for living beings to experience the fruits of their *karman*. Subsequently 'the Invisible' then starts its activity of combining the ultimate atoms into gross, that is, composite, elements. To quote:<sup>12</sup>

When in this way the four composite elements have come into existence, a great egg comes into being solely because of God's (Maheśvara's) meditation-volition (*abhidhyāna*) out of atoms of fire mixed with atoms of earth. In this (egg) (God) causes Brahmā to arise (*utpādyā*), with four faces ..., the grandfather of all the worlds, and with all the worlds. He then enjoins him with the duty of creating living beings (*prajāśarga*). That Brahmā, thus enjoined by God and endowed with eminent knowledge, detachment and power, knows the effects of the (previous) deeds of living beings. He creates the Prajāpatis, [etc.] ... and

9 Cf. Chemparathy, op. cit. (fn. 8), pp. 116f.

10 The recent discussion of this event in case of the Vaiśeṣika system is summarized in A. Meuth, 'Beobachtungen zur Komposition und Redaktionsgeschichte der Vaiśeṣikasūtras 1.1', *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 43, 1999, 109–37, pp. 109–14.

11 Cf. Chemparathy, op. cit. (fn. 8), pp. 8f.; J. Bronkhorst, 'God's Arrival in the Vaiśeṣika System', *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 24, 1996, pp. 286f.; J. Bronkhorst, 'Mīmāṃsā versus Vaiśeṣika: Pārthasārathi and Kumārila on the Creation and Dissolution of the World', in R. Torella (ed.), *Le parole e i marmi: Studi in onore di Raniero Gnoli nel suo 70° compleanno* (Roma: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente 2001), 171–81, pp. 176f.

12 From Bronkhorst, 'God's Arrival', op. cit. (fn. 11) p. 286 (with some deviations).

the other living beings, high and low. He then connects them with Dharma, knowledge, detachment and power in accordance with their residue of past deeds.

What is common to both types of creation theories is the assumption of an eternal, either impersonally or personally interpreted cause of the world, to which possibilities of considerable further variations are added by different conceptions of causality, such that the eternal cause may either be seen as transforming itself into its products, or as causing new ones.

'Creation' in this context, therefore, is either the beginning of an evolutionary process within an ultimate being, or the beginning of a generative process in which a sovereign consciousness combines independent elements of similar eternity. In all Indian traditions, 'creation' is also not a unique event, but an eternally repeated one. And this cyclic perception of world-periods is the reason for the fact that the concept of a creation 'without a cause' (*ahetuka*) or 'from nothing', although theoretically known, has never become part of an accepted creation theory.

### Presuppositions of the Buddhist Anti-theistic Critique

All this forms part of the background of ideas in front of which and – as I prefer to think – against which the Buddha shaped his analysis of worldly existence. The so-called 'three characteristics' (*trilakṣaṇa*) of existence, for example, which constitute the framework of all later Buddhist ontologies are clearly formulated as contradictory to those of the highest being in the monistic and early monotheistic traditions. These characteristics of existence (*bhāva*) are all negations: 'non-eternal' (*anitya*), 'non-self' (*anātman*) and 'suffering', or better: 'non-satisfactory, distressful'<sup>13</sup> (*duḥkha*), and negate the essential characteristics of the ultimate being, *brāhman*, as eternal, as personal, and as blissful. The Buddha's characteristics mutually support each other, but 'suffering' is, as a rule, directly derived from 'non-eternal'. 'Non-eternal' together with 'non-self', therefore, can be considered to be the core concepts of every Buddhist analysis of existence. It is because of this analysis as a fundamental condition of the Buddhist tradition that it was always strongly opposed to the idea of an eternal and personal god as creator (*karṭr̥*) and supervisor (*adhiṣṭhātr̥*) of the universe.

With the historical and religious transformations of the Buddha's tradition – from the origins and early Buddhism to the various developments within Mahāyāna Buddhism and Buddhist Tantrism up to the modern forms of Buddhism in our times – we encounter ideas, side by side, that seem to contradict these basic notions: e.g., the idea of an eternal Buddha in the second part of the Lotus Sūtra and with Nichiren in thirteenth-century Japan, or the theologies developed around the supreme sovereignty of the Buddha Amitābha.<sup>14</sup> A certain tension between the efforts to refute

13 The term *duḥkha* is to be taken as an adjective meaning 'that which causes suffering'.

14 Cf. T. Vetter, 'Atheistic and Theistic Tendencies in Buddhism', *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 6, 1996, pp. 76–85.

the existence of God as a perfect supreme being and the cause and holder of the universe on the one hand, and their own ideas about the nature of the ultimate, Nirvāṇa or Buddha, which often are expressed in terms appropriate to God as well on the other, seems to accompany later Buddhism, especially in its various Mahāyānist forms.<sup>15</sup> Occasionally, this tension seems to coagulate into a veritable self-contradiction.

In order to overcome this apparent contradiction, we best resort to the Mahāyānist notion of 'two realities' (*satyadvaya*): a relative or finite one, and an absolute or real one. If we may apply this distinction to interpret the early heritage, we can say that 'the Buddha', when he proposed an intellectual method for release from the eternal unsatisfying circle of existences, namely by analysing its different constituents – body, feeling, notions, dispositions, and perceptions – was referring conceptually to the Upaniṣadic idea of a truly existing, eternal, unchanging and therefore blissfully satisfying Self. But he does not mention such a Self. He states merely that what we normally consider to be a Self – that is, any of the named constituents or their combination – cannot be a Self, because such a Self could not be harmed or diminished. Admittedly, in general terms, this means that the Buddha, in his analysis, keeps to the realm of the finite, the world in which we find ourselves. The other realm is not of his immediate concern. Silence and occasional metaphors seem to have been his answers to insistent inquiries in this direction. There is, however, also no outright negation.<sup>16</sup>

Any discourse on 'creation' refers to the finite realm of existences here and now. Buddhist polemics against Hindu concepts of creation, but also against an eternal God in his function as creator, therefore refer to the same realm of reality. The Buddhists assume worldly existence to be caused by previous deeds (*karman*).<sup>17</sup> In order to explain this in detail, the Buddha proposed the concept of 'origination in dependence' (*pratīyasamutpāda*).<sup>18</sup> This 'sentence', which, in its classical form, distinguishes a causally connected series (*upanibandha*) of twelve members as the main causes and conditions of rebirth, offers, like a flashlight illuminating a certain section of the cycle of existence, an explanation of the cycle's origin (*samudaya*), and at the same time provides the structure of its possible ending (*nirodha*). It is not to be understood as the Buddha's 'theory of causality'. Since the members of this origination are causally connected, however, in the form 'when this is the case, that arises' (*asmin satīdam bhavati*), causality as such is an undisputed presupposition. Existence, then, is an interplay without beginning of the 'groups' or 'branches'

15 Cf. R. Jackson, 'Atheology and Buddhology in Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*', *Faith and Philosophy* 16/4, 1999, pp. 472–505.

16 Cf. E. Steinkellner, 'Lamotte and the Concept of *anupalabdhi*', *Asiatische Studien* 46,1, 1992, pp. 388–410.

17 Cf. *Abhidharmakośa* 4.1a: *karmajaṃ lokavaicitryam*.

18 Cf. L. Schmithausen, 'Zur zwölfgliedrigen Formel des Entstehens in Abhängigkeit', *Hörin* 7, 2000, pp. 41–76.

(*skandha*) – body/matter, feeling, and so on – perpetuated by the likewise beginningless main binding causes of 'misconception' or 'wrong orientations' (*avidyā*) and craving for life and lust (*trṣṇā*).

Because of the experience of change in everything existent, the reality at hand can only be impermanent, non-eternal. In discussing creation theories that involve an eternal principle in order to explain continuity and the order of the cosmos, the relationship between a permanent entity and impermanent entities, therefore, is a major point for developing Buddhist arguments. The other main point is the assumption of a conscious agent in causal processes, especially identified in acts of creation. The Buddha understands causal processes, material as well as emotional and mental ones, as taking place among the constituents of existence that are, as such, not a Self, that is, impersonal. This is because they do not last; or stated inversely: therefore, they do not last.

Such basic notions resulting from the Buddha's analysis of existence – to be equated roughly with the first and second of the four Noble Truths – have to be considered as silent presuppositions in all Buddhist refutations of concepts of creation that involve an eternal and conscious personal creator.<sup>19</sup> Buddhist critiques of Hindu doctrines of creation are focused on the impossibility of such a creation because of the impossibility of an eternal, omniscient and omnipotent Master of the universe.

However, presuppositions of this kind do not prevent the Buddhist tradition from occasionally transporting veritable accounts of creation as part of their own mythic lore. A striking example is the *Aggañña Sutta* (*Dīghanikāya* 27) which T.W. Rhys Davids, its first translator, called 'A Book of Genesis'. This account has always been taken by all Buddhists 'as being a more or less straight-faced account of how the universe, and in particular society, originated'.<sup>20</sup> The god Brahman, the creator-god in this story, seems to have been always acceptable to all Buddhists on the silent (!) assumption that he is presented here as a demiurge of impermanent nature. Thus, Brahman functions just like any of the other gods in the Indian pantheons who are considered useful for a specific task for the world and its beings which is assigned to them, and in the realization of which they are consuming the fruits of their own specific karmic heritage.

However, that this story came to be regarded as 'the Buddha's' account of creation in the canonical tradition and even later is evidently due to the fact that the real purpose and style of this Sutta and its various allusions were not properly understood from very early on in the formation of the canonical literature. Richard Gombrich recently and convincingly found that, in fact, it is to be read as a mockery of Brahmin conceptions,<sup>21</sup> and he was able to show that 'the Buddha' in this discourse was 'setting out both to deny the Brahmin view of the origin of society and to make fun of it'.<sup>22</sup>

19 Cf. Jackson, op. cit. (fn. 1), pp. 339f.

20 R. Gombrich, 'The Buddha's Book of Genesis?', *Indo-Iranian Journal* 35/2–3, 1992, 159–78, p. 161.

21 Cf. *ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

### An Outline of the Buddhist Arguments

The Buddhist refutations differ to some extent in their forms of expression according to the general development of the culture of debate and the formulation of arguments on the one hand, and, on the other, as conditioned by the specific aims of the types of literature conveying them. In terms of their contents, the arguments propounded are rather limited. They were developed in refutations coming from the early Madhyamaka school or, more importantly, from the dogmatic treatises of the Sarvāstivāda school, prominently represented in the writings of Vasubandhu, the author of the classical dogmatic treatise the *Abhidharmakośa* and its commentary. After the middle of the first millennium CE, the Buddhist philosopher Dignāga (c. 480–540 CE) finally succeeded in being broadly accepted by Indian intellectuals in the essential points of his logic. Subsequently, proof as well as refutation of God as creator of the world were now subject to more formal rules of logic, presented and discussed accordingly, and became the task of specialists. Simplified, it can be said of this period that on the side of the theistic traditions, the brahmanical Nyāya school, and on the side of the Buddhist, the tradition of Dignāga, and from the seventh century of Dharmakīrti and his followers, represented opposing parties on the battlefield. Up to the time of the disappearance of the Buddhist ‘atheists’ from Indian soil under the onslaught of the Muslims, the new and less tolerant theists in India, this contest flourished richly both philosophically and logically, in which the problem of God’s existence and activity was developed in all its logical perspectives.<sup>23</sup>

As an early stage in the development of Buddhist refutations, the *Nikāyas* of the Pāli canon seem to represent a period in which the idea of a creator-god was mainly mocked and ridiculed. As a rule, the god Brahmā – in fact, he is better known from such Buddhist travesties than from early Indian monotheistic circles – is the victim<sup>24</sup> as, for example, in the *Brahmajālasutta*:<sup>25</sup> Brahmā is the first being to arise at the beginning of a new cycle. Lonely, he wishes for companions. When they appear, he wrongly thinks they were created by his wish, instead of realizing that, in fact, they had arisen because of their own karmic causes.

Real arguments are still rare in this literature. Rejection on the grounds of theodicy, however, already occurs on various occasions:<sup>26</sup> If God created the universe and conducted its order, man would not be morally responsible and God would not be benevolent, since evils and suffering are his creation too. The argument of human morality’s depreciation is also repeated in the *Buddhacarita* of the poet Aśvaghōṣa

23 For a comprehensive survey of this dispute and its logical topics over roughly half a millennium, cf. H. Krasser, *Śāṅkaranandanās Īśvarāpakaraṇasāṅkṣepa mit einem anonymen Kommentar und weiteren Materialien zur buddhistischen Gottespolemik. Teil 2: Annotierte Übersetzungen mit einer Studie zur Auseinandersetzung über die Existenz Gottes* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 2002), pp. 15–142.

24 Cf. *Anguttaranikāya* I, p. 174; *Dīghanikāya* I, pp. 235ff.

25 Cf. *Dīghanikāya* I, pp. 17–19.

26 Cf. *Anguttaranikāya* I, p. 174; *Jātaka* V, p. 238.

(first century CE).<sup>27</sup> In general, however, the Suttas prefer rather to compare the certainty in the Buddha’s proposals for a goal of spiritual efforts with the aims of theistic devotees, for example, ‘companionship with God’ (*brahma-sahavyatā*), which are dismissed as being ridiculous (*hassaka*) and vain (*rittaka*), for these devotees are striving towards something of which no one has any evidence.<sup>28</sup>

The founder of the Madhyamaka philosophical school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Nāgārjuna (c. 200 CE), aimed at establishing the truth of ‘dependent origination’ on the level of relative reality. To this end, he used traditional lists of alternatives proposed as causes for worldly existence, God among them.<sup>29</sup> Such alternatives, or God alone, are also discussed in a number of works of questionable origin, but attributed to Nāgārjuna.<sup>30</sup> God as cause is also a target of Bhavya, a major polemic of this school,<sup>31</sup> as well as of the didactic poet Śāntideva.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, the arguments derived from theodicy are presented here in many variations, but also an argument from causality is elaborated which refutes God on the grounds that as he is only one – that is, single and permanent – it cannot be explained how he could be active at all. The historical origin and development of this argument is still unclear to me. It provides for the main argumentation in Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*,<sup>33</sup> and its essential parts are already found in the first great dogmatic summa of the Sarvāstivāda school, the *Mahāvibhāṣā*:<sup>34</sup> (a) If Īśvara is the cause of everything, then he must create everything at once (since efficiency implies immediate causation); (b) if he requires help, then he is not the sole cause; (c) if he is undifferentiated and eternal, so must be his effects (since effect must resemble cause); (d) since effects are known to be impermanent, their alleged permanent cause has no more ‘existence’ than other nonexistent entities.

27 *Buddhacarita* IX, 63 (IX, 53 according to the numeration of E.B. Cowell in *Sacred Books of the East* 49).

28 Cf. *Dīghanikāya* I, p. 240.

29 *Suhrillekha* 50. Cf. *Golden Zephyr*, transl. by L. Kawamura (Emeryville, CA: Dharma Publishing 1975), p. 46.

30 For example, the *Śālistambha(ka)ṭīkā* (cf. C. Lindtner, ‘Madhyamaka Causality’, *Hōrin* 6, 1999, pp. 55–63), the *Viṣṇorekakarīṭṭvanirākaraṇa* (cf. G. Chemparathy, ‘Two Early Buddhist Refutations of the Existence of Īśvara as the Creator of the Universe’, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 12–13, 1968–69, pp. 87ff.), or the *Bodhicittavivaraṇa* 7–9 (cf. C. Lindtner, *Nagarjuniana*, Copenhagen 1982, pp. 186–9).

31 *Madhyamakahr̥daya* III, vv. 215–23 and IX, vv. 95–119, translated in Lindtner, ‘Madhyamaka Causality’, op. cit. (fn. 30) pp. 65–74.

32 Cf. *Bodhicaryāvatāra* IX, 119–26 (transl. by K. Crosby and A. Skilton, *Śāntideva: The Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press 1995).

33 Cf. Lindtner, ‘Madhyamaka Causality’, op. cit. (fn. 30), pp. 63f; S. Katsura, ‘Some Cases of Doctrinal Proofs in the Abhidharma-Kośa-Bhāṣya’, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 31, 2003, 105–120, pp. 112–16.

34 Following the summary of Hajime Nakamura, *A History of Early Vedānta Philosophy*, translated into English by T. Leggett et al., Part 1, Delhi 1983, pp. 147–51, in Jackson, op. cit. (fn. 1) p. 321.



### Dharmakīrti's Argument from Ontology

In order to properly understand this Buddhist line of argumentation against a permanent being such as the omniscient God (*īśvara*), we have to look at the Buddhist concept of being, existence (*sattva*). The Buddhist concept of being is determined by the Buddha's assessment of all worldly existence as 'non-eternal' (*anitya*). This assessment is then further developed and sharpened into the concept of existence being only 'momentary' (*kṣaṇika*). The ontology of momentariness is supported by proofs,<sup>35</sup> and Dharmakīrti finally proposes a proof of momentariness from the logical reason of 'existence' (*sattva*).<sup>36</sup> The tautological character of such a proof is intentional, because its aim is to demonstrate that only where the concept of momentariness is applicable is the concept of existence also justified. In other words: only momentary, impermanent, non-eternal entities can be considered to be existing (*sat*).

A classical proof-formula of Dharmakīrti reads like this: 'Whatever is existent is exclusively momentary, since, if it were non-momentary, it would be excluded from being a real entity because of its contradiction to causal efficacy (*arthakriyā*), (for a real entity) is characterized by having this (causal efficacy).'<sup>37</sup> Here, the link to refutations of permanently existing entities becomes evident, if we further take into account that the concept of existence is defined by causal efficacy (*arthakriyā*), that is, by a capacity to produce an effect, for example in creating a universe. In fact, the negation of the existence of eternal entities becomes a logically necessary part of Dharmakīrti's proof of the momentariness of being.

In his second main work, the *Pramāṇaviniścaya*, this proof takes the following more explicit form by including a secondary proof to demonstrate that the proving property, 'existence', does not occur in a locus that lacks the property to be proven, 'momentariness':

Such a non-momentary (entity) is not in a position to produce an effect, since it contradicts graduality as well as simultaneity (implied by causal efficacy). Gradually it is not (efficacious), for, (if) it becomes an agent (as that which produces an effect) independently (of cooperative causes) on the strength of (its) mere existence, it is not possible for (it) to remain (inefficacious). For that which was not an agent earlier cannot be (an agent) later either, since no change occurs to its own nature. Also if it depends (on other cooperative causes), [it would not be efficacious, for as an eternal unchanging entity it would depend on such other causes that cannot causally influence this entity]. Nor is (this non-momentary entity efficacious) simultaneously, since it is not possible that its own nature (of being efficacious) remains inefficacious later. Therefore, that which is void of any capacity (for producing an effect) exceeds the characteristic of existence.<sup>38</sup>

35 Cf. A. von Rospatt, *The Buddhist Doctrine of Momentariness: A Survey of the Origin and Early Phase of this Doctrine up to Vasubandhu* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 1995).

36 Cf. E. Steinkellner, 'Die Entwicklung des kṣaṇikatvānumānam bei Dharmakīrti', *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 12/13, 1968, 361–77; C. Yoshimizu, 'The Development of *sattvānumāna* From the Refutation of a Permanent Existent in the Sautrāntika Tradition', *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 43, 1999, 231–54.

37 *Hetubindu* 4, 6f, as translated in Yoshimizu, op. cit. (fn. 36), p. 234.

38 *Pramāṇaviniścaya* 2. 29, 15–24, as translated in Yoshimizu, op. cit. (fn. 36), pp. 234f.

This proof contains all the ingredients used in the polemics against a creator-god brought forward by Dharmakīrti and his school against the proofs of the existence of God developed in the Nyāya school and in related Śivaitic circles.<sup>39</sup> These proofs of God as creator of the universe that were attacked by Dharmakīrti in the second chapter of his first work, the *Pramāṇavārttika*,<sup>40</sup> were formulated by different Nyāya philosophers of the sixth century CE, for example by Uddyotakara, who may have been a believer in Śiva.

The context and reason for Dharmakīrti's efforts to destroy these proofs of God must be indicated briefly: the second chapter is a 'religious treatise' written as an elaborate commentary on the benedictory stanza of Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccaya* which marks the spiritual and historical beginning of the Buddhist epistemological tradition as a cultural phenomenon. Dharmakīrti demonstrates that it is possible to rely on the Buddha as a 'person of authority' (*pramāṇapurūṣa*) in the sense that he 'has become a (means of) valid cognition'<sup>41</sup> (*pramāṇabhūta*), metaphorically speaking, because he shares with ordinary, everyday kinds of valid cognitions, perception and inference, the characteristic that he is non-belying, reliable, trustworthy (*avisamvādin*), and the characteristic that he makes hitherto unknown states of affairs known (*ajñātārthaprakāśa*). At the same time, Dharmakīrti explains that the Buddha has developed this double capacity during innumerable existences as is implied by the term 'become' (*bhūta*) used by Dignāga. This progress of becoming an authority is then accounted for in the rest of the chapter by explaining the necessary causes. After giving a definition of what can be considered to be this kind of 'valid cognition' (*Pramāṇavārttika* = PV 2:1–6), stanza 7 identifies the Buddha as sharing these defining characteristics because of his appropriate efforts.

This introduction, a rational foundation of Buddhism, is followed by a refutation of the idea that a permanent Īśvara could fulfil the requirements of this definition in the same way, a refutation that 'may be the most important single anti-theistic passage in all of Buddhist literature'.<sup>42</sup> It begins with the statement, 'A permanent authority does certainly not exist' (*nityam pramāṇam naivāsti*, PV 2:8a).

In the following stanzas (PV 2:8–28), Dharmakīrti first demonstrates the impossibility of a permanent kind of epistemic source (PV 2:8–9), following which he refutes the proofs of God propounded by the Nyāya school (PV 2:10–16), applies this refutation also to other schools' proofs (PV 2:17–20), and concludes by pointing out some contradictions in the Nyāya conception of God (PV 2:21–8).

39 Cf. G. Oberhammer, 'Zum Problem des Gottesbeweises in der indischen Philosophie', *Numen* 12, 1965, 1–34.

40 Cf. Jackson, op. cit. (fn. 15) and Krasser, op. cit. (fn. 23), pp. 19–55.

41 This translation I understand as conveying the same meaning as Krasser's literal rendering of the *karmadhāraya*-compound by 'one who has come into existence being a *pramāṇa*'. Cf. H. Krasser, 'On Dharmakīrti's Understanding of *pramāṇabhūta* and His Definition of *pramāṇa*', *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 45, 2001, 173–99, p. 184.

42 R. Jackson, 'Atheology and Buddhology ...', op. cit. (fn. 15), p. 477.



In other words, the logical concomitance between proving and problematic property cannot be ascertained by demonstrating examples, since the causal relationship between the properties 'having a particular shape' and 'having a conscious cause' is specific and cannot be generalized, and the proving property used is therefore not established in any example. Thus, we can infer the activity of a conscious potter from the shape of a pot, but not from the shape of a termite hill with its many makers, and not from the shape of mountains and oceans, which may also have a conscious cause, but that this cause is an Īśvara with all his specific qualities and attributes cannot be ascertained by inference.

Dharmakīrti's critique is followed by a centuries-long dispute in which all major figures of the two leading logical schools participate. On the side of the Nyāya, the problems indicated by Dharmakīrti provoked some special developments in their logic.<sup>45</sup> Their main focus also shifted from proposing new logical reasons beside the main ones, to wit that a conscious cause must be assumed because unconscious elements cannot organize themselves and because they are effects, to establishing, by additional methods, that the acceptance of a conscious cause implies a specificity consisting in God with his specific qualities. Most prominent among these methods is a proof proposed by Vācaspatiśīra (ninth century) through the exclusion of other possibilities (*pariśeṣāt*). He says, for example, that the specificity of God being this conscious cause can be derived from the fact that the generic proving property is a property of the subject (*pakṣadharmatā*), and that the specific characteristics of the problematic property must be present in the subject, because they are contained in the generic property, since there is no generic property without something specific. This specific entity is God or any of his qualities, such as omniscience and so on, which he demonstrates by excluding other alternatives.<sup>46</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

To summarize this highly elliptic and imperfect survey in the light of Christian-Buddhist dialogue: What can an acquaintance with Indian ideas on creation, a creating God, and the anti-theistic criticism of the Buddhists tell us in comparison with those of the Mesopotamian and Christian traditions? I think, mainly, that such ideas are referring to a finite realm of discourse within which they cannot be harmonized because of pre-dialogue decisions that have not been put at disposal in any of these discussions. All participating Indian positions share the acceptance of causality as a red thread in understanding the world and existence. Whereas the Hindu partners see the continuity in the flow of impermanent entities as the basis of cosmic order to be provided by a permanent factor, the Buddhists focus on the change of the same impermanent entities as only explicable by their essential impermanence

45 Cf. Krasser, op. cit. (fn. 23), pp. 56–142.

46 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 97–101.

in the form of momentariness.<sup>47</sup> They therefore argue against the possibility of any causal interaction between a permanent factor and impermanent entities: not only because it is impossible, but also because it is unnecessary, meaningless. Moreover, Hindu concepts of a permanent creating factor are modelled on an analogy to human activity: change in everything thus also presupposes a planning consciousness.<sup>48</sup>

Theologically speaking, it may then be worth considering the questions of whether the focus on continuity and the human analogy of causal activity – both referring to the finite realm – are necessary to a discourse on God.

47 Cf. Jackson, op. cit. (fn. 1), p. 339.

48 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 339f.