

# Buddhism: Traditional Continuity or a New Beginning?

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## Abstract

*The discussion demonstrates how Śākyamuni Buddha's teachings can be portrayed either as an extension of traditional norms or as the formation of a 'paradigm shifting philosophical view'. It explores how Śākyamuni engages with the construction of a new philosophical paradigm. The study examines both secondary and primary sources in an attempt to situate the Buddhist views within ancient philosophical contexts. The findings affirm that the Gautama Buddha proposed a new philosophical beginning by avoiding metaphysical speculations and focusing on the cessation of suffering. Thus, the work highlights the dynamic engagement of tradition and innovation in early Buddhism giving insight into enduring significance.*

**Keywords:** Śākyamuni Buddha, Intellectual Interplay, Tradition and Innovation, New Beginning

## Introduction

'*Samśkr̥ta* and *Pāli*-based philosophies' significantly highlighted the conception of reality, self, and cosmos. *Vedic* branches started concentrating on metaphysical notions such as *brahman* and *ātman* with the origin of the *Upaniṣads*. *Sāṅkhya* formed a dualistic model of the universe, and *Yoga* focused on practical methods of uniting body, mind, and spirit. *Nyāya* and *Vaiśeṣika* focused on logic and epistemology. Materialistic *Cārvāka*, likely co-existed with these philosophies, promoting empirical reasoning and eschewing metaphysical interpretation. Buddhism and Jainism have traditionally been characterized as opposing *Vedic* culture, emphasizing more the validity of individual experience and ethics. *Mīmāṃsā* focuses on the soteriological

center of the individual soul. *Advaita-Vedānta* puts forward the theory of non-dualism that argues the oneness of the individual soul with the universal soul. *Bhakti* movement made spirituality democratic by advocating personal devotion. The colonial era saw a syncretism of traditional wisdom and diverse ideologies, thereby rendering it relevant to modern problems.

In this article, we primarily focus on Śākyamuni. Numerous perspectives exist concerning the interpretation of his ideas. While scholars have undertaken systematic studies of the Buddha- whether as a historical figure or as a philosophical and cultural reformer, these efforts fall short of capturing the richness of his thoughts. This raises a crucial question: how can the Buddha be presented in a manner that does justice to his philosophical depth of his teachings from an academic standpoint? This study aims to initiate a dialogue around this question.

Whether an ideology represents a new intellectual paradigm or rather a situational re-articulation and extension of existing traditions is an ongoing concern of intellectual debate. It is also doubtful that a new intellectual movement can develop in isolation, independent of intertextual or interdisciplinary interaction. Hence, the question of whether a philosophical system is a completely new contribution or a mere elaboration of previous thought is inextricably linked to the theoretical frameworks it propounds, more so with respect to metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology, to the preceding and current intellectual developments. This requires a critical probing of phenomenological issues, which require careful and painstaking analysis. This analytical requirement is equally relevant to Buddhist philosophy, as it demands a close and systematic examination of its theoretical underpinnings.

This work, however, does not claim to address on all the nuances of the various philosophical domains relevant to this discussion. Instead, it directs the reader to the Buddha's introspection a foundational point of departure. While references to multiple canons are acknowledged, the primary textual focus remains on selected *suttas* from the *Pāli* canon, particularly those that highlight the self-reflection of Śākyamuni. In doing so, this study seeks to establish a solid basis for future scholarly engagement with the topic.

## **Textual Analysis**

### **a. Representative Modern Interpretations**

Eugenio Burnouf's scholarship, particularly his seminal work titled *Introduction*

à l'histoire du Bouddhisme Indien (*Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism* 1844), introduced a critical methodology with respect to the textual and doctrinal basis of Buddhism. His research emphasized the significance of *Pāli* and *Saṃskṛta* literature in the reconstruction of the life and doctrine of the historical Buddha and hence established the groundwork for a scholarly tradition that endeavored to situate Buddhism in a broader historical and cultural context.

Based on Burnouf's research, Thomas William Rhys Davids took this historical research one step further with the establishment of the Pāli Text Society (1881). Davids portrayed the Buddha as a rationalist philosopher and reformer who taught an ethical system and a path of liberation, which was opposed to the ritualism and caste-based conventions of Brāhmanism. Scholarship by Davids helped scholars understand that the Buddha should be dealt with as a historical figure who was responding to the particular religious and social circumstances of his day, rather than considering him in the context of a person steeped in myths.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw further development in Buddhist studies with scholars such as Hermann Oldenberg. His book *Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order* (1881) continued the historicizing project. Oldenberg interpreted the Buddha as a social reformer who challenged both the *Brāhmanical* orthodoxy and its rigid caste system. His historically informed approach understood the Buddha's teaching as a reaction to the ritual and hierarchical socio-political reality of ancient India (Oldenberg 56).

As the discipline evolved, it expanded through the work of scholars such as Émile Senart, Sylvain Lévi, and Louis de La Vallée-Poussin. Lamotte's work helped to envision Buddhism not only as a static entity but as a tradition highly conditioned by political and historical processes and thereby corroborating the figure of the Buddha as a human being firmly rooted in his socio-historical environment (Lamotte xxii).

In the past decades, Richard Gombrich has proposed that early Buddhism arose as a response to Brāhmanism. In his groundbreaking book, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (2002), Gombrich contended that the Buddha's doctrine was essentially a critique of the prevailing *Brāhmanical* system (27). He identifies the Buddha's rejection of ritual sacrifice, caste distinctions, and the metaphysical doctrine of the *ātman* (self) as fundamental breaks with Brahmanism. He further contends that the Buddha redefined *karma* as moral conduct instead of ritual observance, thereby demonstrating a radical departure from *Brāhmanical* religious

tradition. Gombrich's historical account emphasized the Buddha's revolutionary position against the prevailing religious authority and social norms of his day (Gombrich 37-46).

Building on this basic outlook, Johannes Bronkhorst, in his work *Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India* (2007), contended that the Buddha emerged from a religious and cultural milieu other than *Brāhmanical* orthodoxy. He opined that Buddhism, Jainism, and certain other *Śramaṇa* schools developed in this area, which denied important *Brāhmanical* doctrines like the ritual authority of the Vedas and caste. To Bronkhorst, Buddhism emerged from the non-*Brāhmanical* ascetic tradition that pervaded Greater Magadha, in which ethical living, renunciation, and individual liberation of the spirit were accorded great value. This perspective gives a better appreciation of how the teachings of the Buddha constituted a reaction not only against *Brāhmanism* but also against the particular religious environment of Magadha (Bronkhorst 15-72).

In synthesizing these contemporary approaches, we can understand that the historical Buddha has been more and more considered to be a person who appeared in contrast to religious orthodoxy and its ritualistic worldview. Certain scholars such as Gombrich and Bronkhorst do emphasize the Buddha's teachings as contextual and response-dependent, characterizing the Buddha as a radical reformer trying to provide an open path to spiritual liberation to everyone regardless of caste or adherence to ritual purity. This continued academic interest in the historical personality of the Buddha underlines the necessity of exploring the social, cultural, and intellectual contexts that facilitated the emergence of his thoughts. Furthermore, it emphasizes the interactive dynamics between Buddhist and *Brāhmanical* traditions in influencing the early religious history of the Indian subcontinent.

In his work *Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Hinduism: An Essay on Their Origins and Interactions* (1970), Lal Mani Joshi discusses a number of hypotheses for whether Buddhism was or was not a *Vedic* reform movement or an independent cultural phenomenon distinct from *Brāhmanism*. Rabindranath Tagore, for example, took it for granted that Buddhism and Jainism were expressions of *Kṣatriya* ideals contrary to the ritualistic practices of *Brāhmanas*, visualizing Indian history in terms of a struggle between *Kṣatriya* self-expansion and *Brāhmana* self-aggrandizement. Furthermore, Joshi brings up the arguments of Radhakrishnan, who maintained that the Buddha never thought of himself as the founder of a new religion but only as a reformer of ancient Indo-Aryan thought through opposition to the *Vedic* ceremonial traditions.

Joshi also deals with Professor G.C. Pande's scholarship, who rebutted the thesis that Buddhism originated as a reform of *Vedic* practices. Pande insisted that Buddhism and Jainism have their roots in *pre-vedic* ascetic traditions and are different from ritualistic traditions characteristic of Brāhmanism. He refuted the widespread perception that Buddhism arose as a dissident movement within the *Vedic* framework, but rather indicated that it was influenced by earlier non-Vedic traditions. This reading refutes scholars like P.V. Kane, who had claimed that the Buddha was merely reproducing Indo-Aryan values from the *Upaniṣads*, and introducing nothing really new.

Joshi offers a critical analysis of Kane's oversight regarding the significant divergence Buddhism represents from Brahmanism, particularly in its repudiation of the Vedas' authority, the caste hierarchy, and the practice of ritual sacrifices. Furthermore, Kane's chronological assignment of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads* to the 6th century BCE has been challenged by scholars who assert that these texts probably emerged subsequent to or concurrently with Buddhist philosophies. Even while Joshi uses strict academic reasoning in dismissing competing perceptions, he appears to inadequately convey the philosophical character of the Buddha. While granting the status of the ancient *Śramaṇa* tradition as the origin of non-Brāhmanical schools, Joshi attempts to classify Buddhism together with Jainism, *Sāṃkhya*, and *Yoga* as a compound of atheistic, anti-ritualistic, ascetic, and pluralistic philosophies. Nevertheless, Joshi seems to ignore some significant references pertinent to the *Vedas*, Brāhmanism, and Buddhism. For example, scriptures like the *Brahmanadhammika-sutta* in the *Sutta Nipāta* and the *Doṇa-Brahmana sutta* in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* reveal that the Buddha did have respect for *Brāhmanas'* traditions and practices.

Consequently, though Joshi proves himself capable in his scholarly analysis of facts, there appears to be a subtle bias in his treatment of the topic, even as he implicates Kane's own culpability by demonstrating a similar lack of balance. It is evident that further scholarly discourse is needed to examine the philosophical significance of the Buddha, particularly in terms of his engagement with *Brāhmanical* traditions.

A great deal of scholarly energy has gone into depicting the Buddha as a historical figure, but contemporary discussions tend to describe him as a reactionary, reformist, or religious dissident. Such descriptions tend to position Buddhism as an extension or a modification of existing traditions instead of creating an entirely new

vision of reality. Our argument here is that the Buddha, as a historical figure, did more than simply react against the religious and philosophical theories of his day—he questioned, criticized, synthesized, and rejected prevailing ideas to lay the groundwork for a New Beginning that fundamentally transformed the intellectual landscape of his era.

## **b. Buddhism as a Traditional Continuity**

In the *Pāli* tradition, the past of Śākyamuni Buddha begins with Sumedha. He was well-versed in the *Vedas*. The literature also mentions that the Brāhmanas, who interpreted Māyādevī's dream, indicated the birth of a great individual like the Buddha. Additionally, among the five monks (*Pañcavaggiya Bhikkhus*), Koṇḍañña, the youngest, clearly mentioned the future Buddha, and he too, renounced the world. He was the first to become an *Arahat* under Śākyamuni's guidance. Similarly, Asita Kāla Devala, the guru of the royal family, was proficient in the eight attainments (*Astasamāpatti*). While meditating in the Himalayas, awaiting the Buddha's arrival, he is said to have wept after touching the feet of the young Siddhartha, knowing he was the one he had been awaiting.

Literature also indicates that *Brāhmanas* like Soṇadanda and Caṅkī were waiting for a great man endowed with the thirty-two marks (*Mahāpurisa Lakṣaṇa*). On the other hand, the Six Heretical Thinkers were striving to establish themselves as Buddhas. Meanwhile, Nepal holds archaeological evidence of earlier Buddhas—Kanakamuni and Krakucchanda. These accounts show that the Śramaṇa, Brāhmaṇa, and *Vedic* traditions complemented each other in the pursuit of spiritual knowledge.

In the *Nagara sutta* (SN 12.65), the Buddha employs the metaphor of an abandoned city to convey his understanding of existence, drawing a parallel between his spiritual search and the re-opening of a pathway long trodden by former Buddhas. In this *sutta*, there is a delicate balance between traditional rituals and innovation. By recognizing the antiquity of the city, the Buddha implies that he is speaking to a timelessness wisdom beyond temporalities. The heart of this paradox is in our interpretation of the Buddha's self-identification. The *Mahāpadāna sutta* (DN 14) presents an examination of the connection between past Buddhas and Siddhartha Gautama, echoing a sense of cosmic continuity in the repeated appearance of Buddhas over vast periods of time.

The text also reaffirms the idea of continuity. The Gautama Buddha speaks of the coming of future Buddhas, like Vipassī, Sikhī, and Vessabhū, who are said to



have come many eons ago, each of whom followed the same path to enlightenment. The universal cycle of enlightenment, marked by the appearance of Buddhas who rediscover the ancient way prior to attaining *nirvāṇa*, implies Buddhahood is the continuation of an unchanging truth and not the beginning of something new. In describing his otherworldly journey through heavenly realms—from *avriha* to *akaniṣṭha*—the Buddha is endorsed by these gods for the continuity of Buddhahood. Yet one must observe that this dependence on celestial confirmation does not mean that the enlightenment of the Buddha relies on divine beings for verification. Rather, the appearance of Buddhas is a cyclical event within a grander cosmic order and not an individual, once-only occurrence. By employing the term “बुद्धानसासनं,” the Buddha is making it explicit that the moral and religious doctrine of avoiding evil, cultivating virtue, and cleansing the mind is not something peculiar to his own teaching, but is in fact the common doctrine of all the preceding masters. And yet, for all this consistency, there is also an implicit claim to novelty. Though other Buddhas may have had the same path ahead of them, Gautama Buddha’s enlightenment is a new event for this age and this world, and his disclosure of the *Dhamma* is an innovation for his time. This is reflected in the Buddha’s role in the *Nagara sutta*. And, of course, the invocation of deities here may be interpreted as a pedagogic tool. The story of Sumedha, as the former life of Gautama Buddha in the *Buddhavamsa*, is especially significant in this context.

In the story, Sumedha finds refuge in Dīpaṅkara Buddha, the Buddha of a previous era, and makes a vow to attain Buddhahood in a distant future. This concept introduces Buddhahood as a force in an immense cosmic cycle of awareness that recurs over multiple eras. The *Lalitavistara Sūtra* and the *Mahāvastu*, which provide details about the lives and deeds of past Buddhas, continue this narrative of traditional continuity, thereby enhancing the notion that every Buddha pursues the same course, realizing a universal aspiration beyond temporal and cultural boundaries. Further, in the *Mahāvagga* section of the Vinaya Piṭaka, when the Buddha’s father, King Sudhodana, was concerned with his son’s alms-seeking practice, the Buddha replied that he was adhering to the ancient tradition of all Buddhas (Vin. Mv. 1.6.38). The Buddha’s observance of such traditions lends credence to the argument that his deeds and words are not new innovations but rather a reintroduction of old tradition set by previous masters. From a critical perspective, the Buddha’s efforts to establish the legitimacy of his teachings by invoking earlier Buddhas and their common doctrine can be viewed as a strategy to assert legitimacy within a religious tradition that valued continuity and descent. By placing himself in a mythological and unbroken tradition,

Gautama Buddha validated the authenticity of his own enlightenment along with guaranteeing that his teachings would be considered part of an ancient path, and not a speculative or wild deviation.

This approach probably facilitated the acceptance of the Buddha's teaching more easily for the audience of the day, especially those who were deeply entrenched in what are referred to as 'erroneous points of view', where tradition and inheritance from ancestors were of great importance.

### **c. A New Beginning**

"If I am destined to attain enlightenment, may this golden bowl flow upstream, against the current of the water. But if I am not to become a Buddha, may it flow downstream, following the natural course of the river."

Siddhartha cast the golden bowl into the river. Miraculously, it floated upstream against the current, traveling a distance of eighty hands (Dayanidhi 102).

*Brahmajāla sutta* provides a critical survey of sixty-two theoretical views proposed by different thinkers during Buddha's period. The Buddha speaks of these worldviews as "thicket of views" (*diṭṭhigata*), suggesting they entangle people in endless speculation without leading to cessation of suffering (*DN 1*). To this end, the *Brahmajāla sutta* is the Buddha's philosophical departure from the prevailing religious doctrines of his time, thus becoming a fresh voice in the world of philosophy which, in the form of 'Middle Way', rejects both externalism and hedonism, and indicates a new approach towards comprehending suffering and its annihilation.

Gautama Buddha also vehemently refutes the ascetics of his contemporaries (*DN 2*). In the *Sāmaññaphala sutta*, the Gautama engages with the teachings of six heretical masters, the masters, each propounded a distinct worldview. They all claimed to be Buddhas. The possible reason for this is that they considered their teachings to be a new beginning, at least in the sense that it was a new discovery of theirs that could be universally acceptable. The Buddha, carefully reviews those views, and offers a completely new model for ethical living, mental discipline, and wisdom. His approach goes beyond simple refutation by 'intellectual interplay'; he makes right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*) the foundation of the path to reality, and in so doing, redefines the nature of the liberation.

The core of the thesis above is that the teachings of the Buddha were not



exclusively aimed at correcting or criticizing the *Vedic Brāhmanical* system or other philosophical schools. Rather, a defining characteristic of his approach was the rigorous critique and rejection of ascetic orders' practices and ideologies, which positioned his path an original and revolutionary finding to the spiritual discourses of his time.

There remains room to further refine the argument outlined in the above claim. We notice Gautama contrasting with the *Tīrthikas*', and charging that they are caught in wrong views of the self, purity, and asceticism (MN 12). The *Tīrthikas* typically justify the existence of the self and postulate some theory or other concerning the nature of the individual. The Buddha contradicts such theories on many different grounds, placing emphasis on the impermanence (*anicca*), the suffering (*dukkha*), and the non-self (*anattā*) of all things. This negation of the self-theory is a revolutionary break with many *Brāhmanical* and *Tīrthika* teachings, which typically asserted an enduring *ātman* (self). The Buddha's *anattā* (non-self) doctrine fundamentally transformed the direction of spiritual thought by challenging the very foundation of self-consciousness in 'Eastern Metaphysics.' This innovation gave rise to a new system of understanding suffering and its cessation, marking a fresh beginning in spiritual thought—one that is pragmatically oriented rather than rooted in metaphysical speculation.

*Pāli* texts are likely to portray him as definitive and exclusive, referring to his teachings as the pinnacle of something distinctive from the spiritual beliefs popular in his day. Declarations, on his behalf as authorized by the texts, such as "*Aggo' hamasmi Lokassa*" (*I am the chief in the world*) and "*ayam anthimā Jāti*" (*This is my last birth*), delineate him as an individual who is the pinnacle of philosophical growth (MN 123). These metaphorical assertions challenge scholars to strip the literal covers and establish his best conclusions for so-called self-assertions as "the chief" and "the noblest in the world" should not be a display of ego but introduce the unique and final figure of his enlightenment because his path branches off from earlier cosmologies and metaphysical constructs, offering a practical and ethical way to bring an end to suffering. By discarding ascetic radicalism, metaphysical flights of imagination, and rituals founded on caste, the Buddha is initiating a new direction of vision and response to the human condition that creates Buddhahood as an original and revolutionary experience in Philosophical history. He no longer will be speculating as an ascetic to discover the source of spiritual motivation and thus literature quote "*Naththi dani Punnabbhavo*" (*There is no more becoming of me*). For example,

his encounter with Dona *Brāhmaṇa*, in which he is unwilling to become a *deva*, *gandhabba*, *yakkha*, or indeed a human, is another case of his particularity (*AN* 4.36) transgresses above all cosmic and terrestrial categories means that the Buddha was talking of a new model of philosophy that is an entirely new state of knowledge—one untouched by the world, such as a blue water-lily pushing its way upwards through the waves. Blue lotus as a symbol means freedom from attachment and impurity, rather the belief that the way of the Buddha does not necessarily rely on one's present ideas. As the Buddha says, “*unsmeared am I by the world, and so, Brahman, I'm awake*” (*AN* 4.36), it indicates his state of awakening free from influence and intellectual reformations of existing traditions.

In one of the *suttas* (*MN* 26) the Buddha exclaims, “*Enough now with teaching what only with difficulty I reached. This Dhamma is not easily realized by those overcome with aversion & passion*” (Thanissaro 2005). Describing own teachings as “abstruse, subtle, deep, hard to see, going against the flow,” the Buddha concedes that his *Dhamma* goes against the worldly principles and notions that was dominating the human minds. His wisdom on the cause of suffering and the exit was not meant to be according to conventional norms but to revolutionize knowledge and bring an accurate sense of newness and awakening.

“...In regard to things never heard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light”(*SN* 56.11).

## **Conclusion**

While Śākyamuni's teachings continue certain ethical traditions from past, as evidenced in his affirmations of the *Suttas*, he emphasizes the need for individual experiential realization, moving beyond mere perpetuation of ritual or metaphysical doctrines. His focus on formulating the ultimate solution for suffering is an invitation to continual personal transformation and renewal—a newness that transcends the “narrow sectarian boundaries”. Even though his teachings are rooted in an ancient wisdom, they are dynamic, encouraging constant introspection and progress toward liberation, thus creating a bridge between tradition and the ever-renewing pursuit of enlightenment. And, this can be recognized as an actual emergence of a New Beginning.

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