# Buddhist and Hindu Philosophical Systems: Conceptual Transformation and Models of Civilizational Interaction

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**Abstract**

Buddhism and the traditions now grouped under Hinduism developed within a similar South Asian intellectual environment and have addressed similar problems, such as how actions produce consequences, why beings remain subject to rebirth, and whether disciplined practice can eliminate suffering. Their common questions, however, do not yield the same answers. This article combines philosophical comparison with an analysis of civilizational interaction. It argues that fundamental doctrinal differences shaped how shared concepts were interpreted, and that long-term contact did not eliminate these differences. Karma, meditation, pramāṇa, and other common concepts were reinterpreted after entering different systems; debate prompted both sides to sharpen their positions, while rituals and practices were selectively absorbed and adjusted through interaction. The relationship is therefore better understood as a process of selective borrowing, reinterpretation, and response than as one-way influence or simple integration.

***Keywords:*** *Buddhism, Hinduism, Views of the Self, Practice and liberation, Conceptual exchange, Civilizational interaction.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Both Buddhism and the traditions now grouped under Hinduism [1] developed within the same South Asian intellectual world. Philosophers in both traditions often worked with the same vocabulary when addressing similar problems, even when they disagreed over what those terms named. Karma and liberation are obvious examples; meditation and pramāṇa also became subjects of sustained argument [2]. Similarity at the level of vocabulary can therefore be misleading. The placement of a concept within an account of selfhood, reality, or liberation changes what the concept is being asked to explain.

Accounts of this relationship often begin with Brahmanical precedents for early Buddhism. A different emphasis appears in studies of Buddhist criticism of Vedic authority and theories of the self. Both lines of inquiry are useful, but neither by itself describes what happens after long contact. Ideas can be borrowed and recast. Criticism can also force a school to state a position more precisely than it had before [2].

This article compares representative Buddhist and Hindu positions before turning to the historical exchange between them. The comparison is intentionally selective: it focuses on differences that affected the use of shared concepts and practices, and then it asks how those differences shaped borrowing, debate, and ritual contact.

## 2. WORLD, SELF, AND BEHAVIORAL CONSEQUENCES

### *2.1 The Foundation of the World*

Hindu traditions do not offer a single account of what persists through change. To offer a narrower yet substantial overview of Hindu traditions, this paper draws its comparison mainly on Advaita Vedānta and, where relevant, classical Yoga. In Advaita Vedānta, Brahman is the ultimate reality and Ātman is the self whose identity with Brahman is obscured in ordinary experience [3]. In classical

Yoga, by contrast, puruṣa is distinguished from prakṛti [4]. The two traditions disagree substantially on the reality of the self, yet despite that difference, both traditions describe liberation in relation to something that is not exhausted simply by ordinary psychological change, such as a change in mood, a shift in attention, or even entering a distinct mental state.

Buddhist analysis begins somewhere completely different. Phenomena arise when the relevant conditions are present and change as those conditions change. This account does not require an unchanging foundation for the world. Madhyamaka develops this through emptiness: things lack an independent nature because they arise dependently [5]. Emptiness does not name another substance beneath appearances.

The difference affects the problem that practice is meant to address. Advaita Vedānta can describe ordinary experience as ignorance of Brahman and Ātman [3]. Buddhist analysis follows the conditions through which attachment and suffering arise [5]. The two traditions may therefore use similar language about transcending ordinary experience while locating the error in different places.

### *2.2 The Self*

The nature of the self is one of the clearest differences between the two traditions. In Advaita Vedānta, Ātman is treated as distinct from a person's changing psychological condition. One's body and mental states are subject to change; Ātman is held to remain unaffected. Under ignorance, the empirical individual remains subject to saṃsāra; liberation consists in recognizing Ātman as non-different from Brahman [3].

Buddhist theories of non-self reject a permanent and independent subject. A person is analyzed through the aggregates of form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. Ordinary reference to a person remains possible, but none of these processes supplies an unchanging owner of experience [6]. Moreover, continuity is explained causally. That is, later states depend on earlier ones even though no permanent entity passes unchanged through the sequence [7].

The disagreement also changes the diagnosis of suffering. Advaita Vedānta connects bondage to ignorance of the self's real nature [3]. Buddhist accounts connect suffering to craving and to treating changing processes as "I" or "mine" [6]. Both accounts make mistaken self-understanding a practical problem, but the mistake itself is defined differently.

### *2.3 Karma, Rebirth, and Responsibility*

Karma is an explanation of how an action now can produce a consequence later, which is a shared concept in Buddhism and Hinduism. In early Brahmanical contexts, karman was strongly associated with ritualistic traditions and their performances. Later, doctrines linking actions to rebirth and moral consequence were absorbed into Brahmanical thought [8]. As such, even though the Hindu traditions discussed in this paper hold disagreeing theories about a continuing individual subject, the traditions retain a shared account of continuity that is not reducible to changing psychological states [3, 4].

By contrast, Buddhist traditions retain the idea of karmic consequence while rejecting a permanent self. Intention is central to the Buddhist account; an action contributes to the formation of its consequent habits and conditions, from which later states arise [7]. The absence of an unchanging subject therefore does not remove responsibility for individuals, because later states still depend on what preceded them.

Ultimately, karma can function in both traditions while carrying different assumptions about the person who acts and the relation between one life and another as it is embedded into different metaphysical accounts [7, 8].

## 3. KNOWLEDGE, PRACTICE AND LIBERATION

### *3.1 Sources of Reliable Knowledge*

Buddhist and Hindu traditions disagree on how pramāṇa, a source or means of valid cognition, is established and classified. Indian philosophical schools developed detailed accounts of pramāṇa, with Nyāya offering one of the most elaborate classifications. Nyāya recognizes four distinct ways of acquiring valid knowledge: perception (pratyakṣa), inference (anumāna), comparison (upamāna), and testimony (śabda). Later Buddhist epistemologists such as Dignāga and Dharmakīrti usually only treat perception and inference as fundamental pramāṇas [9]. This disagreement points to Buddhism's understanding of what must occur before a cognition can count as knowledge, including the status of testimony and conceptual reasoning.

A concrete dispute is demonstrated in the Sāṃkhya Yuktidīpikā. Dignāga had identified a pramāṇa with its result, pramā. The Yuktidīpikā rejects that identity and explains the two through Sāṃkhya's distinction between buddhi and puruṣa [10]. Here, the same epistemological vocabulary is being used inside a different account of mind. "Figure 1" places these accounts of knowledge within their broader structures of liberation.

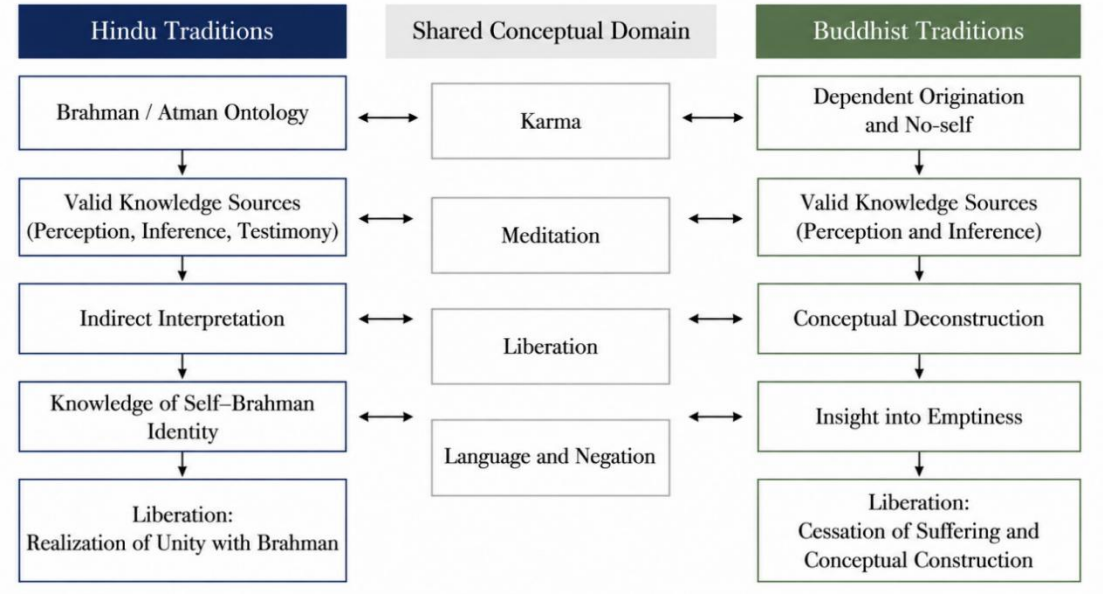



Figure 1 Comparison of liberation structure between Buddhism and Hinduism.

### *3.2 Practice and Liberation*

Classical Yoga and Buddhist traditions both train conduct and attention, yet similar techniques of concentration do not by themselves entail a common goal. Advaita Vedānta describes liberation through knowledge of Brahman and Ātman [3], while classical Yoga describes kaivalya through the isolation of puruṣa from prakṛti [4]. Buddhist nirvāṇa is framed through the cessation of the causes that keep suffering in motion [11].

Meditation takes its function from these wider aims. In Advaita, contemplative practice can prepare the mind for self-knowledge [3], while classical Yoga directs concentration toward discriminating puruṣa from prakṛti [4]. Buddhist insight practice, by contrast, can be directed toward impermanence and non-self [11]. The same practice form can therefore be given a different account of what it reveals.

### *3.3 The Limits of Language*

Both Vedānta and Buddhism recognize the difficulties in speaking about what exceeds the ordinary experience. In Advaita, Brahman cannot be described as though it were one object among others because Brahman isn't one particular object among other objects; language, nevertheless, functions as a corrective tool, as scriptural language can still guide interpretation and practice by removing mistaken attributions [3].

Madhyamaka approaches the problem from another direction. Language for Madhyamaka is necessary for analysis and instruction, though language can both create and reinforce reification and also be used to dismantle it. It is important to note that emptiness itself must not be turned into an ultimate entity [5]. Negation therefore does different philosophical work here than it does in Advaita.

## 4. CONCEPT EXCHANGE AND CIVILIZATIONAL INTERACTION

### *4.1 Concept Borrowing and Semantic Transformation*

The preceding comparisons of linguistically identical terms in Buddhist and Hindu contexts make it possible to specify what conceptual borrowing means in this paper. It is shown that a term may move between traditions without having to carry its entire theoretical framework with it. Karma provides one example of such borrowing: its association with action remains recognizable, while

the account of the acting subject changes [7, 8]. Meditation demonstrates the same pattern, where comparable meditation techniques may support different accounts of liberation [3, 4, 11]. "Figure 2" illustrates the same pattern across the other cases discussed in this paper.

Reception, therefore, entails interpretation. When reception happens, the school that adopts the familiar term must still determine what that term can signify within its own theoretical and theological framework. Some meanings can be preserved, while incompatible ideas must be modified before the concept can fit the receiving system [2].

### *4.2 Debate and Doctrinal Adjustment*

Polemical texts preserve this process more clearly than broad claims about "influence." The Yuktidīpikā's response to Dignāga accepts the problem posed in Buddhist epistemology while reconstructing it through Sāṃkhya metaphysics [10]. The disagreement is visible in the argument itself.

Debates over personal continuity exerted a similar pressure. Śaṅkara criticized Buddhist accounts of memory on the ground that remembering presupposes continuity of a subject [12]. Buddhist accounts, by contrast, explained continuity without a permanent subject [6]. The dispute forced each side to state what connects one experience to another and what kind of continuity memory requires.

Criticism can therefore alter a tradition even when the opponent's conclusion is rejected. In such processes, a weak formulation may be abandoned, and another claim may become more precise because an objection has exposed where it is vulnerable. Doctrinal boundaries are partly articulated in that process [2].

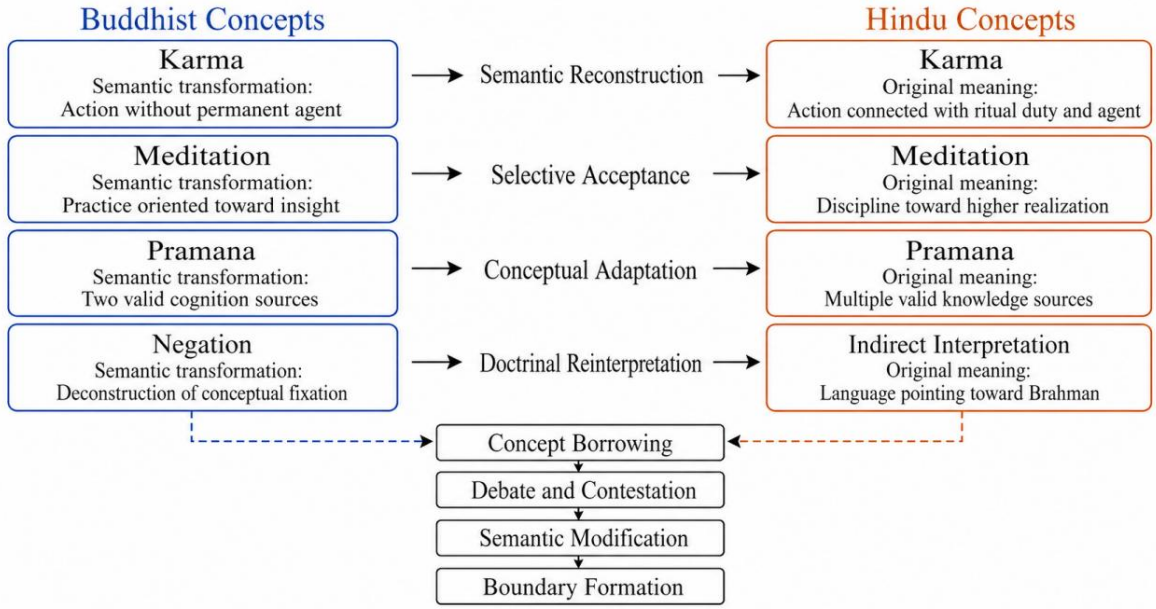



Figure 2 Borrowing and rewriting mechanism of Buddhist and Hindu concepts

### *4.3 The Intersection of Ritual and Practice*

The forms of rituals also crossed institutional boundaries. For instance, during the development of tantric traditions, Buddhist communities adopted and adapted material from Śaiva ritual systems into ritual forms and practices such as initiation and maṇḍala-based ritual, as documented by Sanderson [13]. The borrowing of ritual forms can be historically documented even when the doctrinal setting and its relevant interpretation change.

The occurrence of such borrowings, however, does not imply that the two traditions merged. A similar rite can be interpreted through different accounts of liberation, deity, or religious authority, and a rite cannot be fully understood when stripped of its religious context and meaning. Formal resemblance alone, therefore, is insufficient evidence of doctrinal merger. At the same time, a narrative of textual borrowing also does not exhaust the history of contact. Practices and rituals can circulate outside formal philosophical debate,

which makes such movement harder to reconstruct from doctrinal texts [13]. Therefore, doctrines in isolation cannot encapsulate the full history of contact.

### *4.4 The Main Characteristics of Civilizational Interaction*

It is misleading to characterize Buddhist-Hindu interaction as constant or unidirectional; rather, Buddhist–Hindu exchange was uneven across periods and settings. Furthermore, a complete reconstruction of the interaction in the first place is difficult. A polemical text may preserve interaction differently from a borrowed rite, and neither provides a complete account of everyday religious contact. The evidence for those exchanges therefore comes from different levels of religious life [14].

The pattern between Buddhist-Hindu interactions revealed in this paper is selective reception. To selectively receive for traditions is to adopt material that remained useful after reinterpretation while resisting claims that conflicted with their basic commitments. On some occasions, the interaction between Buddhism and Hindu traditions took the form of open criticism. “Civilizational interaction” here refers to this longer field of intellectual and ritual contact, rather than pointing to a unidirectional, constant influence [2].

## 5. CONCLUSION

Buddhist and Hindu traditions addressed many of the same problems in South Asia, but those shared problems were placed inside different accounts of reality and the self. Those differences affected how karma, the sources of knowledge, and the purpose assigned to contemplative practice are understood metaphysically and epistemologically. Shared, lexically identical terminology could survive across traditions even when its explanatory role changed across different doctrinal settings.

Historical contact made these differences visible. The Yuktidīpikā reworked a Buddhist epistemological problem through Sāṃkhya categories, while Śaṅkara’s criticism of Buddhist memory theory sharpened the question of personal continuity. Tantric ritual exchange shows the same process outside philosophical argument: recognizable forms could move between communities and acquire a different doctrinal setting. The same term or practice could remain in circulation even after the theory surrounding it had changed.

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