Self, No-self, and *Māyā*: How Medieval Advaita Vedānta Theologized Mahāyāna Buddhism

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0. INTRODUCTION

Upaniṣadic literature marks a shift of focus away from external rituals and deities and toward the internal experiences and psychological states of the individual human subject.[1] This does not mean, however, that internal and external experiences were considered mutually exclusive. But it does mean that as examinations into the nature of the self were being conducted and were in dialog with Buddhism, changes in cosmological view and the place of the person in relationship to divine topography concomitantly developed. These changes in Brahmanic cosmology, in turn, affected Māhāyāna Buddhism in ways that are still evident today.

I. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

By as early as the fifth century BCE, Vedic orthodoxy became increasingly challenged by alternative philosophical views of the self (*ātman*). One of these early heterodox (*nāstika*) positions was articulated by Makkhali Gosāla, in whose Ajīvika school a strict form of fatalism (*niyati*) was proposed along with a denial of all notions of free will and divine intervention. For the Ajīvakas, karma "lost most of its moral implications and became closely identified with the impersonal operation

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1. Richard King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism: The Mahāyāna Context of the Guaḍapādīya-kārikā* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 30–31, 54ff., & passim.

of *niyati*."[2] Heterodox positions like that of Gosāla were posited mainly by mendicants (*parivrājaka*) and ascetics (*śramaṇa*).

Śramanic challenges to Brahmanic orthodoxy were influenced not only by the internalizing trends found in the Upaniṣads but also by the ascendency of Buddhism. The egalitarian Buddhist sangha posed a threat to the Vedic caste system (*varna*). Nevertheless, as an intellectual force in India, Buddhism enjoyed the support of various rulers such as Kaniṣka in the late first and early second century CE, Aśoka in the late third century CE,[3] and the Gupta dynasty, which built the Buddhist University of Nālandā in the early fifth century CE.[4] The Guptas, however, also supported Brahmanism. Orthodox Brahmans could not ignore the force of Buddhist thought, and used a combination of tactics ranging from philosophical appropriation and domestication to straightforward polemics. As one of Viṣṇu's manifestations (*avatars*) in the sixth century CE *Matsya-purāṇa*, Buddha's virtue lay in his ability to confound the enemies of Vedic orthodoxy with his false teachings.[5] Early Vedānta specialist Natalia Isayeva notes:

> Up to the reign of a later Gupta King, Harṣa, (c. 606-48) who was personally rather close to Buddhism but tried to encourage equally all religious cults, Buddhism in India was still quite viable. But already, according to the notes of a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim I-Ching, who visited the country between 671 and 695, "the teaching of the Buddha is becoming less prevalent in the world from day to day."[6]

Brahmanism benefited from the general tendency of the Gupta dynasty to consolidate power and strengthen the social fabric. Śaṅkara and later Advaitists took what they wanted from Buddhist methodology and hypostatized the Mahāyāna doctrine of non-origination (*ajātivāda*) in order to make it conform to Vedic precedence.[7] We turn now to a seminal Advaitist text to examine how that process began.

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2. Natalia Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 21.

3. Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy*, 24.

4. King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism,* 43.

5. Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy,* 29.

6. Ibid., 25.

7. That is, conform to non-negotiable notions such as *ātman*, Brahman, and Īśvara, as codified in non-human revelation (*śruti*).

II. THE *GAUḌAPĀDĪYA-KĀRIKĀ* AS KEY RECORD OF MUTUAL INFLUENCES BETWEEN BRAHMANISM AND BUDDHISM

The sequence of Gauḍapāda's reception and Śaṅkara's assimilation of Nāgārjuna, Bhāvaviveka, and other Mahāyāna writers represents the early Advaita interaction with and ultimate rejection of Buddhism. Renowned religious studies theorist Richard E. King has scrutinized this sequence. One of King's key interests in *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism* is gauging the periods in which the four *prakaraṇas* of the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā* were most likely written. Gauḍapāda was probably not a single author, and the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā* was most likely written, compiled, and edited by an Advaitist sect over a period of time. A summary of King's detailed analyses of the form and content of the text is beyond the scope of this study,[8] but a brief synopsis of the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā*,[9] which reveals many examples of Mahāyāna influence on Advaita, is here highlighted:

1. The themes of the first *prakaraṇa* (GK I, *The Āgama-Prakaraṇa*) deal with (a) a critique of various creation theories; (b) an analysis of the dreaming, sleeping, and awake states, as well as a fourth higher (or substrate) non-dual state, called *turiya*; and (c) a recommendation to meditate upon the syllable *Om* and the relationship of this syllable to the four mental states. The date of this first *prakaraṇa* is evidentially different from the other three. Furthermore, GK I has a close affinity to the content of the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, but it is not clear which text was written first. Because of this affinity, the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā* is also known as the *Māṇḍūkya-kārikā*.

2. The themes of the second *prakaraṇa* (GK II, *The Vaitathya-Prakaraṇa*) deal with (a) *māyā* and the illusiveness found in the common dual (subject-object) experiences of the sleeping, dreaming, and awake states. In these states the "effulgent (*deva*) *Ātman* imagines itself through itself by its own *māyā*";[10] (b) *ātman* taking on the various forms of experience;

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8. Although details are scattered throughout King's *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism*, a summary of important points begins on p. 45.

9. King's translation of the entire *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā* is appended to his *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism*.

10. King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism,* 246.

(c) the nature of non-dual attainment, which includes the Madhyamaka-influenced statement: "Nothing whatsoever is separate or non-separate—this the knowers of reality know … [and so] one should become an ascetic acting according to circumstance."[11]

3. The themes of the third *prakaraṇa* (GK III, *The Advaita-Prakaraṇa*) deal with (a) introduction of the concept, *ajātisamatā* (self-identity of the non-originated), "which [though appearing] born everywhere is [in fact] not born in any manner;"[12] (b) comparing the *ātman*'s formation of *jīvas* (individual souls) to spaces captured in earthenware; (c) assertion that composite things arise in *māyā*, and a further critique of creation theories; (d) no change in *ātman* actually takes place outside of *māyā* ("If indeed it was differentiated in reality the immortal would undergo death"[13]), and this (per King, absolutist) view of non-duality does not contradict other views;[14] (e) a further analysis of the three dual and fourth non-dual states and further discussion of the self-identity of non-originated *ātman*: "[T]he gnosis established in itself (*ātmasaṃstha*) attains the self-identity of the unoriginated (*ajāti-samatā*);"[15] (f) *asparśa-yoga* ("non-contact" yoga[16]) in the attainment of *turiya*; and (g) imageless, motionless, in unsurpassed bliss, the equilibrated mind becomes Brahman (*turiya*).

4. The themes of the fourth *prakaraṇa* (GK IV, *The Alātaśānti-Prakaraṇa*) deal with (a) an opening salutation to "that greatest of bipeds" (possibly a reference to Buddha and, in any

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11. Ibid., 248, brackets added.

12. Ibid., 248, brackets in original.

13. Ibid., 249.

14. King (ibid., 13) argues that the "Gauḍapādian belief that its own absolutism does not conflict with any other views (*avirodhavāda*) is shown to be dependent upon the implications of Nāgārjuna's critique of all views (*dṛṣṭi*). This is exposed via a comparison of Nāgārjuna's *Mūla-Madhyamaka-kārikā* and the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā.*"

15. King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism*, 251.

16. Cf. Isayeva's translation (*Shankara and Indian Philosophy,* 57): "intangible yoga (*asparśa-yoga*), or, yoga, free of touches and bounds."

case, an indication that this was originally a separate work[17]);
(b) a further discussion about the unborn (*ajāti*) nature of all
things; (c) a critical analysis of causal theories which includes
the term "buddha" (enlightened ones), and the following in-
terpretation of Buddhist doctrine: "Incomplete knowledge
about the priority and posteriority [of cause and effect] is
the illuminator of non-origination";[18] (d) the non-contact
between mind and the objects of perception, owing to the
unborn nature of both; (e) the insubstantiality of the dual-
istic mind states; (f) a further critique of causal theories; (g)
the identification of "perception (*upalambha*) and common
consent (*samācāra*)"[19] as the basis of the dualistic notion that
things are born and exist in isolation. This could be consid-
ered a precursor to Śaṅkara's theory of *māyā*, but here per-
ception and common consent are not considered virtues,
indicating a probable Buddhist influence; (h) the analogy of
a streak of light from a moving firebrand having no real ex-
istence apart from the firebrand. King argues that this is an
absolutistic reversal of the Buddhist use of the same anal-
ogy. A fire wheel is produced by "a series of discrete 'flashes
of light.' "[20] in a swinging torch. Buddhist interpretation is
designed to show the unborn nature of both the streak of
light and the discreet flashes that produce it. But here in GK
IV attention is brought to the firebrand itself, symbolizing
the self-realized *ātman.* This crucial distinction will come
into play when we examine Śaṅkara's ontology, below; (i)
the ignorance about the true nature of, and subsequent at-
tachment to, cause and effect alone produces the (mistaken)
origination of cause and effect and the suffering that it en-
tails. This is an appropriation of the Buddhist doctrine of de-
pendent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*). This section states:
"As long as there is attachment to cause and effect, so long

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17. King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism*, 31, 45–46.
18. Ibid., 253, brackets in original.
19. Ibid., 254.
20. Ibid., 177. See also Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy*, chap. 5 (esp. p. 148ff.) for a detailed discussion of *kṣaṇika* (the momentariness of phenomena) in Śaṅkara's polemics with the Buddhists.

is *saṃsāra* spread out;"[21] (j) further reiteration that all things are unborn, and that the "duality of perceiver and perceived is merely a vibration of consciousness (*cittaspandita*). This consciousness is declared to be permanent and unrelated to any object (*nirviṣaya*);"[22] and (k) "non-separateness" and "unoriginated sameness" are identified as markers of liberation while "difference," "separateness," and "distinctions" are identified as markers of duality and suffering. "Buddha" in this section is translated as "the enlightened holy man" (for whom "gnosis ... does not proceed toward *dharmas*") and as "the Enlightened One."[23]

Dating the four *prakaraṇas* is extremely difficult. The first three *prakaraṇas* were of a piece by the eighth century CE, when they were known to Śaṅkara's followers. The fourth *prakaraṇa* seems to be a separate work. It shows no awareness of the subtleties regarding *māyā* developed by later Advaitists. Compared to the Vedic tenets and language evident in the other three *prakaraṇas*, GK IV is much more Buddhist in its terminology and understanding of non-origination. With this evidence and extensive comparison with medieval doctrinal issues associated with the Madhyamaka-Yogācāra debates, King conjectures that GK IV may have been the product of a Buddhist school and written sometime in the late sixth or early seventh century CE. He also suggests that a person corresponding to Gauḍapāda, the "great teacher" (or "teacher's teacher") of Śaṅkara, may have written the fourth *prakaraṇa* and edited the first three.[24]

III. DECONSTRUCTING ADVAITA VEDĀNTA APPROPRIATIONS OF BUDDHIST DOCTRINE

What intellectual trend in Buddhism so upset Brahmanic orthodoxy? A main sticking point appears to be Nāgārjuna's interpretation of non-origination (*ajāti*). Entailed in the notion of impermanence, *anātman* is understood as the Buddha's denial of a permanent self-substance behind the appearance of things. In his interpretation of this key

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21. King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism*, 255.
22. Ibid., 256.
23. Ibid., 257–258. Cf. Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy,* 57: Gauḍapāda "calls the liberated sages the awakened ones (*prabuddhāḥ, buddhāḥ*)."
24. King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism,* 46–47 & passim.

Buddhist tenet, Nāgārjuna crushed "all views" in his mind "including the absolutistic view that all things exist in some unoriginated form."[25] The either/or views of substance/no substance, intrinsic nature/lack of intrinsic nature, *ātman*/*anātman*, and other "extreme views" were completely unworkable in Nāgārjuna's demonstrations. "It is not so much the case that the Madhyamaka [Middle Path] school [of Nāgārjuna] endorses *ajātivāda* [doctrine of non-origination], but that it refutes origination (*jāti*) and non-origination (*ajāti*) as appropriate designations of 'things as they are' (*yathābhūta*)."[26] Nāgārjuna's was a thoroughgoing apophatic process applied to conceptual frameworks that left nothing in its wake other than the raw data of lived experience found just "as they are" (*yathābhūta*).[27] For Nāgārjuna the awakened state of the Buddha involved this kind of liberation from all mental constructions and linguistic fabrications.

King identifies two interpretations of *ajātivāda*, the doctrine of non-origination, which he distills as follows:

1. "There is no birth." (Madhyamaka), and
2. "There is an Unborn." (Advaita Vedānta).[28]

The first approach, being "non-implicatory"[29] and which King argues is also non-absolutist, leads to the goal, as it were, of the cessation of mental activity (*acitta*).[30] As perhaps the most extreme example, Candrakīrti's school of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka sought "to establish *śūnyatā* on the basis of their refutations of all other points of view and not through the use of independent arguments,"[31] although Nāgārjuna himself claimed to have no thesis regarding *śūnyatā*.[32]

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25. Ibid., 128.
26. Ibid., 138, brackets added.
27. Other terms for what obtains in the non-implicatory view include *tathatā* ("thusness" or "suchness," root for the appellation of Buddha, *Tathāgata*, "Thus-Come-One") and *vastumātra* (the "functional given-ness" of an object or *dharma*). See King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism,* 104, 119.
28. Ibid., 138.
29. Ibid., 138. King credits Bhāvaviveka with introducing the distinction between non-implicatory (*prasajya-pratiṣeda*) and implicatory (*paryudāsa-pratiṣeda*) forms of negation.
30. Ibid., 230.
31. Ibid., 139. Here "establish" should be taken in a non-implicatory sense.
32. Ibid., 137.

The second approach to negation is "implicatory" and, King argues, absolutist. In this interpretation, largely adopted by the Advaitists, what is left over after dualistic obstructions are cleared is apprehended as *some*thing. In the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā* this ineffable something leftover after negation is described as *ajātisamatā*, the "self-identity of non-origination."[33] *Ajātisamatā* can be treated of cataphatically and thus fit in nicely with the notion of Brahmin and the Vedic mythological landscape in general. The rise of purāṇic literature in the last three quarters of the first millennium CE represents a "synthesis between the *varṇāśramadharma* which gave society its norms and the *śramaṇa*-derived values of the renouncer."[34] Brahmanism in the Gupta dynasty may have welcomed certain forms of Buddhist disputation as a breath of fresh air, but why was the Mahāyāna approach to life considered such a threat to social stability and Vedic cultural heritage? From a contemporary perspective we can surmise that Upaniṣadic literature and Buddhist sutras represented a radical democratization of embodied religious praxis. As a head of state representing the *varṇāśramadharma* establishment, Prince Siddhārtha Gautama voluntarily exiled himself to a life of seeking, awakened to an understanding of the human condition, and then endeavored to "liberate" all people by freely giving them a universalist form of "Law." Such brash egalitarianism, such flagrant disregard for the boundaries of the *varṇa* system, was undoubtedly anathema to Brahmanic sensibilities. Regarding the political dimensions associated with the mysterious origins of the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā*, King notes: "It would seem that in the period between the composition of the fourth *prakaraṇa* and the works of Śaṅkara (eighth century CE), the Vedānta tradition closed ranks, and entered into a more antagonistic and aggressive relationship with the Buddhist traditions of India."[35] Isayeva concurs: "It is Śaṅkara's preaching and philosophic activity that, in the eyes of orthodox tradition, accounts for the ultimate ousting of Buddhism from India in about the eighth century AD, and the revival of Brahmanism."[36]

33. Ibid., 42.

34. Freda Matchett, "The Purāṇas," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 131.

35. King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism*, 47.

36. Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy,* 2.

The advantage Vedāntists had in their struggle against Buddhism was precisely the *ātman* "left over" after the process of implicatory negation. This *ātman* had a whole–part structure between itself and the *dharmas* (phenomena) and *jīvas* (individual souls) that interdependently arose within it, a structure that was completely lacking for a Buddhist who strictly followed the non-abiding logic of Nāgārjuna. The mereological structure of *ajātisamatā* (self-identity of non-origination) could silently and seamlessly switch between philosophical (*ātman–jīva*), religious (divinity–devotee; or Krishna–*gopinis*), and political (Gupta state–citizen) iterations and thus contribute to social stability.[37] In other words, the Advaitist interpretation of *ātman* easily translated into allegiance. Feeling positive emotions toward a dutiful sense of belonging is encouraged by the language chosen for the last section of the fourth *prakaraṇa* of the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā*:

> All *dharmas* indeed are quiescent from the very beginning, unoriginated, and happy by nature itself, homogenous, and non-separate, [reality is] fearless and unoriginated sameness. But truly there is no fearlessness for the one who always moves in [the world of] difference. Those who hold the doctrine of separateness are inclined to make distinctions; therefore they are of limited understanding.[38]

In contrast, Buddhists could claim that by belonging to nothing they were free to actively engage with whatever is really happening in the moment. Since there is no colony–ant analogy to that paradigm, such a claim hardly lends itself to political instrumentality.

IV. ŚAṄKARA'S SECRET INTELLIGENCE

There is a hagiographic legend about Śaṅkara, "probably composed with Buddhist influence," which relates how the sage and one of his followers encountered a *cāṇḍāla* (offspring of a female *brahman* and male *śūdra*, regarded as unsurpassedly impure) on a narrow city street. Ordering the *cāṇḍāla* out of the way, Śaṅkara

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37. Alan Cole, *Text as Father: Paternal Seductions in Early Mahayana Buddhist Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), deconstructs the quid-pro-quo relationship between authority, texts, and readers in Buddhist traditions, and Cole's methodology informs the present analysis.
38. King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism,* 257. Brackets altered from original to read "…moves in [the world of] difference" rather than "…moves in [the world] of difference"; other brackets as in original.

> got quite an unexpected rebuke. Directly referring to Advaita tenets
> about the unity of *ātman*, the *cāṇḍāla* boldly defended the idea of the
> original equality of all living beings.... Śaṅkara bowed down to the
> *cāṇḍāla* and, having acknowledged his blunder, composed on the spot
> a poem about the higher *ātman* that shines forth equally both in a
> *dvija* Brahman and in an untouchable *cāṇḍāla*.[39]

This story captures the notion of non-discrimination, common to
Buddhists and Advaita Vedāntists, as well as the reason why a rigor-
ous practical application of it would make the latter group feel uneasy.
The Vedāntic interpretation of non-discrimination appropriated ad-
ditional Buddhist jargon and, contra this delightfully idealistic tale, ac-
tually contributed to maintaining the sway of *varṇāśramadharma* over
the populace.

Derived from the relationship between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, a doc-
trine of "two truths" developed in the Buddhist and Advaita Vedānta
traditions.[40] One analogy used to explain the two truths doctrine is a
rope (representing cessation of suffering in Buddhism and Brahma,
ātman, or ultimate reality in Advaita Vedānta) that is mistaken for
a snake (representing *avidyā* or ignorance leading to suffering in
Buddhism and *māyā*, *avidyā*, *śakti*, *prakṛti*, Saguṇa Brahma, or profane
reality in Advaita Vedānta). Another ancient analogy is a shell that at
a distance is mistaken for a piece of silver. A common feature in both
traditions is that what is true is mistaken for something else, and this
something else is an illusion, or *māyā*. But because early European re-
ceptions of cultural products from Buddhist and other Indian tradi-
tions tended to conflate distinct uses of notions such as two truths and
māyā,[41] we proceed with a word of caution:

> Of course, there is a sense in which "the world is unreal"[42] is a kind
> of shorthand for the Mahāyāna notion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and
> the Advaitic notion of *māyā*; however, given the importance of the
> two-truths doctrine in both the Mahāyāna and Advaita, it is never
> the case that the world is *simply* unreal. There is nothing simple or
> simplistic about the Advaitic denial of the ultimate reality of the du-
> alistic world. The matter is a highly complex issue involving the uti-
> lization of a number of different analogies to explain the (ultimately)

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39. Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy,* 81.
40. Ibid., 191 & passim.
41. Ibid., 5n7.
42. King is here citing Thomas E. Wood.

inexplicable (*anirvacanīya, acintya*) relationship that exists between Brahman and the universe.[43]

The term *māyā* appears in the *Śvetāśvataropaniṣad*, signifying "a divine creative power ... more or less identified with *prakṛti*, or nature, as the origin of the universe."[44] In Nāgārjuna's treatment, however, *māyā* was worked into a comprehensive theory about the illusory nature of *saṃsāra*. For instance, in the *Mūla-Mādhyamika-kārikā* (Nāgārjuna's *Fundamentals of the Middle Path*) we read:

> Just like / illusive / *māyā*, just like a dream,
>   just like the city of the / heavenly musicians, /
>   the Gandharvas,
> Just like a beginning is this state, it is called
>   the momentary, / changing flux /[45]

There is nothing disturbing in this passage. *Māyā*, a dream, a beginning, heavenly court musicians: these are images Nāgārjuna chose to describe the flat ontology of things as they are, without the anxiety-causing mediation of mental constructions. According to Nāgārjuna, most of our suffering is the product of mental constructions, built up into narratives about oneself and others, which are clung to and reified out of habit and ignorance. To purify the mind and attain liberation from suffering is to crush these false views. Activity in the world still comes and goes, just like illusive *māyā*, but the *impurity of* activities caused by mental constructions is no longer there. Thus, later in the in the *Mūla-Mādhyamika-kārikā* we read:

> Liberation / emerges / from the destruction
>   of the impurity of action,
> And impurity of action / proceeds /
>   from mental construction.
> These / forms of mental construction start /
>   from worldly manifoldness;
> While worldly manifoldness
>   disappears in emptiness.[46]

Here "worldly manifoldness" corresponds to "illusive *māyā*" as discussed above. Although impenetrable to many of his readers, Nāgārjuna's

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43. King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism,* 25.

44. Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy,* 52n53.

45. Ibid., 52n53.

46. Ibid., 188, "form" in fourth line read here as "from."

message was simple: value judgments are necessarily pieced together from worn out experiential narratives that always get in the way of fully experiencing what is actually happening. To stop thinking "Oh, I know all about X" and to instead experience X freshly and anew in the moment is precisely what *purifying the mind* meant to Nāgārjuna. He had no metaphysical warrant for this argument, because such warrants were part of the problem he was trying to solve. From Buddhism, Advaita took this unusual theory and much of its attendant apophatic language, such as *ajāti* (non-origination, unborn), in a different direction. From Buddhist *acitta* (cessation of mental activity) the Advaitists developed *citta-viśuddhi-prakṛti* (the innate purity of mind).[47] In the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā* we have already noted how the supposed "something" left over from implicatory negation was hypostatized.

With Śaṅkara this process becomes more fully systematized and opened up to Vedic interpretation and praxis. Although Śaṅkara was a master of formal argumentation,[48] he, like almost all medieval scholastics, was known to sidestep an opponent, shifting from ontological to psychological to epistemological modes of discourse as suited his needs.[49] In his treatment of Buddhism, for example, Śaṅkara refused to acknowledge that all ontological arguments were subsumed under a soteriological program, viz., liberation from suffering. Realization (*prajñā*) of the emptiness of all *dharmas* was the precise limit to any Buddhist theory of knowledge. But Śaṅkara was resolutely unsympathetic. As if collecting intelligence on a new weapon possessed by an invading enemy and then using that same weapon to push that enemy out of the home territory, Śaṅkara used Nāgārjuna's theory of *māyā* against the Buddhists. Pushing *māyā* doctrine onto ontological terrain, Śaṅkara could easily reduce the entire Buddhist program to an acosmic nihilism.[50] Furthermore, the higher level of disputation (*pāramārthika*) within Vedānta relied upon "that which is heard" (*śruti*), those portions of Vedic literature understood as non-human revelation. Since such disputation is essentially argument from fiat, in his polemics

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47. King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism,* 230.
48. Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy,* discusses Advaitic disputation in detail; see esp. p. 101ff. for the "rules" and chaps. IV and V for an analysis of Śaṅkara's polemics.
49. For a good example, see Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy,* 186.
50. Ibid., 147.

Śaṅkara used weapons that, for various reasons, his adversaries could not match.

In Śaṅkara's interpretation of *māyā*, the differentiation of souls (*jīva*) constituting the substrate of the Saguṇa Brahman,[51] is "super-imposed" on the pristine, undifferentiated Brahman. We can think of this superimposition (*adhyāsa*) by analogy as the view of a human body wherein all of its anatomical, electrochemical, and subatomic activities are visible. This view is then superimposed on another view of the same body as a single person. In reality there is only one ontological layer to the body itself, even as it contains these two irreconcilable "truths."

In this context, Śaṅkara transformed *māyā* into nothing less than a divine virtue. "She" took on the full religious, social, and political force of the Goddess of the *Devī Mahātmya*. Here *māyā* was *jīva*, or *ātman* in disguise, making even *avidyā* (ignorance) into something positive; there she was a manifestation of the divine consort; here again she was *bhuktimuktipradāyanī* ("granter of both material joy and liberation"),[52] a Blazing Tower of Splendor,[53] sanctifying the profane and transcending dualism "from the ground up."[54] Fortified further by Śaṅkara's philosophy, the ecstatic dance of *Śākti* continued to evolve, transgressing various boundaries of religion, language, biology, and devotion, but not necessarily the boundaries of social order.

Let us take a closer look at the transgression of linguistic barriers to further understand Śaṅkara's accomplishment. Isayeva identifies a "semantic cluster of terms" that developed around Śaṅkara's notion of *māyā*.[55] Such semantic clusters abound in philosophical and reli-

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51. From the root, *saguṇa* (qualities), so qualified Brahman or Brahman with qualities, also referred to as Īśvara.

52. Kathleen M. Erndl, "*Śākta*," in *The Hindu World*, ed. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (New York & London: Routledge), 144.

53. Cornelia Dimmitt & J.A.B. van Buitenen, eds., trans., *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Purāṇas* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 227.

54. C. Mackenzie Brown, *The Triumph of the Goddess: The Canonical Models and Theological Visions of the Devī-Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 30–31.

55. Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy,* 161–162; these terms include *vivarta* (appearance), *avidyā* (ignorance), and *adhyāsa* (superimposition). Isayeva elucidates, "the core of the causality concept of Advaita is the notion that the

gious discourses, lending themselves to the generation of imbricated mindscapes containing the kind of boundary-transgressing potencies discussed in the previous paragraph. This takes us to the heart of Śaṅkara's system. Here effects, which are nothing other than *nāma-rūpa* (names and forms),[56] gestate in the Saguṇa Brahman by virtue of *māyā-avidyā* (*māyā*-ignorance, Śaṅkara's own term).

> "The name and the form," says Śaṅkara, "which constitute the seeds of all phenomenal existence and are formed by ignorance (*avidyā*), are as if indistinguishable from omniscient God; they cannot be defined either as real or unreal, and are mentioned in *śruti* and *smṛti* as Īśvara's potency (*śakti*), called *māyā*, or as *prakṛti*."[57]

Śaṅkara moved to outflank the Buddhists by pushing their doctrine of non-origination (*ajāti-vāda*) to *its* logical ontological conclusion, cinching his argument with the doctrine from the *Brahma-sūtra* known as difference-non-difference (*bhedābheda-vāda*, a key non-dual doctrine, discussed above as two views of one body). Here Nāgārjunian logic is maintained in an ontological argument asserting that differences in the series comprising the appearance of movement neither exist nor do not exist. That *nāma-rūpa* "cannot be defined either as real or unreal" (in the above quote) is part of the doctrine identifying *māyā*, like Brahman, as inscrutable and indeterminate, a kind of double mystery (*bhedābheda*) in a single Being. This double mystery was essential to the circumscription of Śaṅkara's ontological proof because the two inscrutables bracketed an empirical space in which the doctrine asserting that all effects reside in their cause (*satkāryavāda*)[58] could be maintained by a *reductio ad absurdum* argument (*prasaṅga*). It would therefore follow that something (the same sort of something "left

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effect, or the empirical world, is just an illusory appearance superimposed on the eternal *ātman*-Brahman as its cause … the effects … are essentially only new names for something already existing, and the change does not take place at all." For a further discussion of the roots *vṛ* and *vṛt*, see King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism,* 122.

56. The term, *nāma-rūpa*, is also the fourth of the twelve links of causation in the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*) which dates back to the Pāli cannon. Śaṅkara's school developed its own system accounting for the arising of phenomena and human life; see Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy,* 233.

57. Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy,* 165.

58. Ibid., 161. See also King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism,* 78 int. al.

over" after implicatory negation) must persist through all of the appearances of change, and it is precisely this something that Śaṅkara characterized as unborn *dharmas* (in the case of things in the world), *jīvas* (in the case of individual souls under the influence of *māyā*), and *ātman* (in the case of the whole of things, or *sarvām*). Śaṅkara's students further developed *satkāryavāda* into a theory of causation known as the doctrine of appearances (*vivarta-vāda*).

Further examining the term Śaṅkara introduced to Advaita, "*māyā-avidyā*" (*māyā*-ignorance), we can identify a theory of knowledge in Śaṅkara's system. As noted in the theory of two truths and the *bhedābheda* theory, the modifications (*vikāra*) that take place in Īśvara[59] as name and form (*nāma-rūpa*) do not occur at the level of *ātman*. King maintains:

> It has been suggested that the term "*māyā*" derives from the root *mā*, "to measure." *Māyā* is the construction of boundaries and distinctions (*vikalpa*) in that which has none (*nirvikalpa*); it is a measuring (*mā*) of the immeasurable (*amātra*).[60]

Māyā-avidyā, Isayeva explains, is the "coloring and obscuration" which makes the transparency of the true *sat* (reality) "perceptible."[61] In Śaṅkara's theory of knowledge, *māyā-avidyā* actually enables Brahman to be known, or, what is the same thing, to know itself.[62]

V. AFTERMATH

Here we have had but a small taste of systematic Advaita philosophy. How Śaṅkara interpreted divine speech (*śruti*, *vāc*) and concomitantly drew out theories of karma and creation from his ontology and gnoseology is beyond the scope of this investigation, but is also worth considering in a deconstructivist context.

We have already noted how, during the course of its medieval evolution, Buddhism lost much of the identity that kept it distinct as an alternative intellectual force. Under the influence of Śaktism and Tantra, Buddhists worshipped otherworldly beings, assimilating Vedic

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59. See Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy,* 164.
60. King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism,* 179.
61. Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy,* 163.
62. Here, in turn, is a springboard for Śaṅkara's theory of creation, drawn from *śruti* and built around the notion of *līlā* (divine play). See Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy,* 208.

practices, values, and aesthetics into their own esoteric rites. "The danger for Buddhism was not persecution but tolerance and obliteration of differences."[63] Undoubtedly due in no small part to the successes of Śaṅkara's polemics, crypto-Vedāntism crept into much medieval Buddhist literature, informing absolutist (or at least implicatory) notions such as buddha-nature, *dharmakāya* (the body of buddhahood); *tathāgatagarbha* (the seed-womb of buddhahood); and, remarkably, even *ātman* (self)![64] For many Buddhists unable to experience a non-implicatory "*nirvāṇa* of 'no fixed abode' (*aparatiṣṭhita nirvāṇa*),"[65] devotion to a hypostatized version of *śūnyatā*[66] along the lines of Advaitist understanding was, and evidently still is, appealing.[67] Intellectual and cultural capital spent, Buddhists in India had little new to offer an already image-rich and divinely inspired culture. Although the University of Nālandā appears to have thrived through the mid-twelfth century, combining Tantra with Perfection of Wisdom doctrines, its destruction by Islamic forces in the thirteenth century marks a decisive end to Buddhism as an influential alternative to Brahmanism in India.

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63. Ibid., 26.

64. On *ātman* in the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra*, see Nobuo Haneda, "The Development of the Concept of Pṛthagjana, Culminating in Shan-tao's Pure Land Thought: The Pure Land Theory of Salvation of the Inferior" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin – Madison, 1979), 191n55, 228n46.

65. King, *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism*, 168. King notes that in the state of *aparatiṣṭha* ("non-residing" or "unsupported") the mind knows "the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*)" (p. 114, 279n63).

66. Nāgārjuna apparently never used this term, traditionally translated as "emptiness," as a noun, but only as an adjective or as a predicate *of* something (See King, ibid., 283n37). To think of "emptiness" as a noun immediately reifies it. That, to Nāgārjuna, was an error.

67. For a discussion of later—and especially romanticized Western—theologizations of Buddhism, see David L. McMahan, "A Brief History of Interdependence," *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*, 3rd ser., no. 10 (2008): 131–176.