

**Parallels in the Philosophies of Advaita Vedanta,
Madhyamika Buddhism, and Kabbalah**

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Preface

Before beginning I would like to discuss what will and will not fall within the scope of this paper, and I would like to confess my personal prejudices: firstly, the scope of this paper will be limited to philosophy concerning the nature of ultimate reality, the nature of phenomenal reality, and the means of transforming the latter to the former in the traditions of Madhyamika Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, and Kabbalah. Secondly, I am specifically looking for philosophical and practical parallels between these three traditions, not discrepancies. I am struck by similarities in conceptions of ultimate reality - the Absolute - in Madhyamika Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, and Kabbalah and shall attempt to demonstrate that putative differences between them are largely semantic. Thus, I will focus on comparing models of reality and facets of those models that I believe are similar, namely Sankara's conception of Brahman, Nagarjuna's conceptions of *Sunyata*, and the conception of *Ein Sof* found in the Zohar. Creation myths and speculation on the origins of the universe will not fall within the scope of this paper for two reasons: 1. because

Buddhists believe that the universe is beginningless, which is in direct contrast to Kabbalists who place great emphasis on why and how God created the universe and man; and 2. because in the West, we tend to give more credence to a (or “the”) scientific understanding of creation, thus relegating creation myths to the realm of stories, fables, or at best, metaphors. So the emanation of *Ein Sof* into the *Sefirot* will be discussed, and both Nirguna and Saguna Brahman will be discussed, but the creation myths of the three traditions will not be compared. Likewise, although it is impossible to discuss the behavior conducive to attaining or realizing ultimate reality without mentioning personal morality, moralities and ethics of the three traditions will not be directly compared. And although sexuality and cosmic bodies play important roles in the *Sefirot*, I think that it would be more appropriate and interesting to compare *Sefirot* to the cosmic body of *Purusa* in Samkya-Yoga than it would be to compare it to anything I have encountered in Advaita Vedanta and/or Madhyamika Buddhism. So discussions of sexuality and cosmic bodies in this paper will be limited. Finally, although there is some speculation as to the influences of Early Hinduism on Buddhism and Buddhism on Advaita Vedanta, because of the comparison to Kabbalah, which is a tradition from the other side of the globe, speculation regarding possible cross-cultural influences amongst the traditions will not fall within the scope of this paper.

Introduction

At first glance there appear to be profound differences between the philosophies of Madhyamika Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, and Kabbalah: Buddhists do not believe in a

Self, whereas Advaita Vedantins believe that the Self is of supreme importance, and Kabbalists believe that the self is means to an end. Madhyamika Buddhists do not believe in a God, an omnipotent omniscient creator God, whereas Advaita Vedantins and Kabbalists place great stake in the reasons why such a God created the universe. The philosophies of the phenomenal reality of Madhyamika Buddhists and Advaita Vedantins rest on the assumption of *samsara* and karma, while the Kabbalists do not appear to have a term corresponding to *samsara*. However, some interpretations of '*Tikkun*' may place it close to the notion of karma. Madhyamika Buddhists believe in the possibility of realizing the blissful state of Nirvana while still partaking in phenomenal reality; Advaita Vedantins believe in *moksa*, being released from the cycle of suffering at death by recognizing and realizing the essential oneness of Atman and Brahman; and Kabbalists believe in attaining bliss by restoring the original harmonic oneness of the Godhead.

Nevertheless, by analyzing conceptions and definitions of *Sunyata*, Brahman, and *Ein Sof* we will find conspicuous and remarkable parallels. The first parallel to note is a dual Absolute or ultimate reality, a distinction between a transcendental God or Godhead and an imminent God or Godhead. Since Buddhism does not have such a God we will use the Void, *Sunyata* as its Absolute. For all three traditions, highest reality is without attributes, ineffable, only describable negationally. However, although ultimate reality for the three traditions is similar, there remain differences between how each tradition conceives of phenomenal existence and the qualitative state of phenomenal reality. Finally, we will note parallels between the three traditions in their means of transcending

phenomenal reality and realizing a higher reality.^{1*}

Madhyamika Buddhism

History

Buddhism can be traced back to Siddhartha Gautama who lived in northeast India around the 5th century B.C.E. In accordance with the advice of astrologers, Siddhartha's father sheltered him from seeing worldly suffering. Eventually Siddhartha left his father's palace to pursue enlightenment. His life took a turn when he met Arada Kalama who instructed Siddhartha in his system of meditation, which culminated in the experience of an indescribably blissful state of consciousness. But Siddhartha realized that this blissful state was ephemeral so he decided to become a renouncer and an ascetic; he experimented with the practices of renunciants - begging, wandering, and celibacy, - and organized a community in which the central role was discipline. Finally "he acquired the three 'knowledges' (rig pa, vidya): he was able to know all of his previous births, he understood how beings transmigrate in accordance with their karma, and he comprehended the 'four noble truths' which became the cornerstone of Buddhist thought and practice."¹ The Dalai

^{1*}There appears to be a trend in the literature comparing Advaita Vedanta and Madhyamika from Radhakrishnan and Dasgupta through Smart, Iyer, and several dissertations published in India . However, literature comparing the philosophies of Advaita Vedanta and Madhyamika Buddhism with Kabbalism is sparse.

Lama interprets the four noble truths as follows:

**All composite phenomena are impermanent.
All contaminated things and events are unsatisfactory
All phenomena are empty and selfless.
Nirvana is true peace.²**

The Buddha found all phenomena and entities to be essentially empty, void; the reality we perceive is transient at best, unreal at worst. There is a qualitative state affiliated with perceptual reality and that is suffering. Individual consciousnesses reincarnate but that does not imply a Self; humans are innately burdened by the fiction of Self. Until one realizes Nirvana one must suffer through the cycles of delusion, anger, jealousy, craving, and pride. The principal means of realizing Nirvana is the Eightfold path: correct view, correct intention, correct speech, correct action, correct livelihood, correct effort, correct mindfulness, and correct meditative absorption.

The above constitutes the base of Buddhism in general. Here we are only concerned with the philosophy of Nagarjuna (c 150-250 ce), the founder of Madhyamika, the Middle Path: “Nagarjuna advocated a practice of virtue and insight based upon the Buddha’s teaching of the Middle way, a path that lies in between extreme asceticism and hedonism and between the teachings of absolute reality and nonreality.”³ His philosophy helps free one from attachment to concepts by demonstrating the inherent emptiness of all phenomena. For him,

the perfection of wisdom is said to consist of the recognition that all things are empty, that there are no self-existing entities and no essential characteristics in either a person or the factors of existence, that liberating wisdom is a continual avoidance of attachment even to spiritual ideas and that perfection of wisdom is intrinsically related to “skillful means” for aiding the enlightenment of all beings.⁴

The recognition that all phenomena are essentially void is Nagarjuna's philosophy of *Sunyata*.

Sunyata

Sunyata is translated as "emptiness," "openness," "nothingness," and "the inexhaustible." Nagarjuna analyzed philosophical arguments, syllogisms, and notions such as causality, space, time, motion, self, and Nirvana and concluded that none of them have self-sufficient existence or have been produced from themselves alone. He reasoned from this that all things are essentially empty of being: "Everything being void, there is in reality no process and no cessation, according to *Sunyata* Mahayana. The truth is neither eternal nor non-eternal, but pure void."⁵ However, emptiness cannot and should not simply be seen as something negative. To understand what Nagarjuna means by emptiness it is necessary to understand his definition of "Real." For Nagarjuna the only phenomena or entities that are Real have essences that are independent, eternal, and unchanging. Everything else is essentially empty, void. Radhakrishnan states that,

There is no doubt about Nagarjuna's conception of the world as unreal or sunya. We mean by real any entity which has a nature of its own (svabhava), which is not produced by causes (akrtaka), which is not dependent on anything else (paratra nirapeksa). Whatever is relative or dependent is unreal, sunya (svabhava-sunya). The real is the independent uncaused being.⁶

However, Radhakrishnan continues, "Nagarjuna, as the upholder of the middle path, does not dismiss the world as mere illusion. His attack is directed against the theory of the self-existence of things, but does not in any way impair the conditioned existence of things."⁷ Concurring, the Dalai Lama says,

the doctrine of emptiness in no way refutes the conventional existence of

phenomena: the reality of our conventional world, within the framework of which all functions of reality - such as causation, relation, negation, and so forth - validly operate, is left unscathed and intact. What is demolished is the reified fiction that has resulted from our habitual tendency to grasp at phenomena as self-existent.⁸

The philosophy of *Sunyata* does not deny empirical reality; it denies that the objects and subjects of phenomenal reality have eternal or fixed essences.

Further, as we will see in comparison to the Hebrew term *ayin* and the relation between *ayin* and *yesh*, it is possible for a positive to emerge from a negative, something from nothing. According to Mugdal, “Nagarjuna accepts an Absolute which he calls *Tattva*. The *Tattva* or the Real is described by him as transcendental to thought, as non-relative, non-determinate, non-discursive, quiescent, non-dual, free from all empirical predications and relations... beyond all discursive thought.”⁹ This will also become pertinent when we compare *Sunyata* to Brahman, which is ineffable and can only be described negationally. Like *Tattva*, Brahman is beyond thought and words: “It (*Tattva*) is the Absolute, which logically we can arrive at by a chain of eternal ‘nays’. We can say what it is not. It is what Nagarjuna describes as *Alamba Sunya*” or *Atyanta Sunya*.”¹⁰

Ultimate Reality, *Sunyata*

For Madhyamika Buddhism ultimate reality is realizing the state of Nirvana. Nirvana is normally translated in the West as ‘enlightenment’. The qualitative experience of Nirvana is ineffable and thus is not describable in positive terms: “In most cases *nirvana* is described in negative terms such as “cessation” (*nirodha*), “the absence of craving” (*trsnaksaya*), “detachment,” “the absence of delusion,” and “the unconditioned” (*asamskrta*).”¹¹ Since we are deluded by the ignorance that leads to craving and hatred,

Nirvana is understood as a means of release from *samsara*: “The Eightfold Path leading to *nirvana* is the only way to break free of this cycle and to eliminate the insatiable craving at its root.”¹² Thus, a basic Theravada understanding of Nirvana is that it is opposed to *samsara*; it is an escape from *samsara*.

In contrast to Theravada Buddhism, the “Indian Mahayana Buddhists minimized the opposition between Nirvana and *samsara*, renouncing the suggestion that Nirvana was an escape from the world of suffering. Instead, they thought of enlightenment as a wise and compassionate way of living in that world.”¹³ The basis for Nagarjuna’s ontological argument that Nirvana and Samsara are identical is simplistic and misleading. The logical argument is that since the essence of Nirvana is empty and the essence of Samsara is empty, they must be identical. Simply because they share the same ontological essence does not mean that the psychological or qualitative experiences of *samsara* and Nirvana are identical. Supposedly, when one realizes Buddha nature and becomes enlightened one recognizes the identity of *samsara* and Nirvana. However, the inverse is not true: when one experiences the suffering inherent in *samsara* one does not recognize the identity of *samsara* and Nirvana. Thus the realization of Nirvana changes the psychological experience of phenomenal reality. Phenomenal reality is no longer built on the cycles of delusion, anger, jealousy, craving, and pride. It becomes a blissful experience of interconnectedness. The logical result of this experience for Madhyamika Buddhists is compassion.

In Mahayana Buddhism the “attainment of liberation by the individual has ceased to be the ultimate aim; and the person that succeeds in acquiring enlightenment is expected to work for the good of his fellow men, instead of remaining satisfied with his own nirvana.

Such a person is called a *Bodhisattva*.”¹⁴ In Theravada a *Bodhisattva* was a Buddha-to-be, but in Mahayana a *Bodhisattva* is a living being who has realized enlightenment but who puts off salvation until everyone has realized Buddhahood: “It was the Mahayana, with its vastly altered understanding of Buddhahood and the path of spiritual sanctification, that transformed the notion from its very limited initial application to a vehicle of universal salvation.”¹⁵ The main distinction to note is between the *arhat* of the Theravada school who is concerned with himself realizing nirvana, and the *bodhisattva* of the Mahayana school who is concerned with universal enlightenment.

Conception of God(s)

Although Buddhists do not espouse an omnipotent and omniscient creator God, “Nagarjuna by his precept and practice taught that the Hindu gods of Brahma, Visnu, Siva and Kali had the attributes assigned to them in the Brahmanical scriptures, and were proper objects of propitiation. The traditional gods of the Hindus were fitted into a new system, where separate places were assigned to them.”¹⁶ However these gods have no power over the impersonal Absolute of *sunyata*. Referring to the creator God, “Like the Buddha, Nagarjuna does not believe in God. He neither affirms nor denies God, because, in his opinion there is no need to do so. It is all a waste of time and energy to think about something that is beyond thought.”¹⁷ Since the universe according to Buddhism is beginningless, there is no creator God. However, deities can be and are still employed in order to help one attempt to find ephemeral worldly happiness.

Phenomenal Reality: Samsara, Karma, and Maya

The bases of phenomenal reality for Buddhists lie in the assumptions of *samsara* and

karma in conjunction with *maya*. Garfield notes, “Delusion by which we are bound, from a Buddhist perspective leads us to grasp at things; that grasping perpetuates delusion and bondage. To the extent that we grasp onto external phenomena or onto the self as inherently existent, we are bound to the delusions that constitute and ground *samsara*.”¹⁸ Because of the essential emptiness of all phenomena, perceptual reality is thus an illusion. This illusion is called *maya*. “The world process and our experience of it are devices to hide the inexpressible total void or cosmic consciousness.”¹⁹ However, *maya* does not slide into nihilism for Nagarjuna who proposes two levels of reality: the ultimate, *paramarthika* and the practical, *vyavaharika*. *Maya* is an illusion in the sense that it veils ultimate reality. This does not deny the existence of phenomenal reality; it merely relegates it to a lesser stratum. For Buddhists phenomenal reality is comprised of *samsara*, the cycle of suffering that results from karma, the law of cause and effect. Suffering perpetuates due to actions caused by anger, jealousy, craving, and pride, which are the result of the delusions of *maya*. Hence, the cyclical nature of phenomenal existence.

Conception of Self

In apparent contrast to other traditions and perceptual sensual reality, Buddhism denies the existence of the ‘self.’ Buddhism avers *anatta* or non-self. The non-self doctrine rests on the belief that all phenomena are impermanent. Rather than self, Buddhism affirms consciousness because “everything that we regard as ‘the self’ is conditioned or compounded; everything conditioned depends on causes and conditions; by understanding the causes of our idea of the self and the sorrow that this idea brings to us we can become free from suffering.”²⁰ Buddhism maintains that the idea of self is innately present in all

human beings and is a dangerous delusion because it leads to grasping and attachment, whereas consciousness does not. The reason for this delusion is because we mistake the sum to be greater than the parts, greater than the aggregate. Although Buddhism ascribes to *samsara* (the cycle of suffering inherent in phenomenal reality), it is not the self that reincarnates but consciousness; in the words of Radhakrishnan, “there is no self, but only an evolving consciousness which may be spread out in a series of states.”²¹ We will determine later whether the Madhyamika idea of consciousness is or is not reconcilable with the Vedantic or Kabbalistic idea of self.

Means of realizing Ultimate Reality

For Buddhists enlightenment can only be attained by following the Eightfold path of the Buddha, which is correct view, correct intention, correct speech, correct action, correct livelihood, correct effort, correct mindfulness, and correct meditative absorption.

However, as mentioned above, Madhyamika Buddhists do not only believe in individual enlightenment; they aspire to universal enlightenment and thus place great weight on compassion even before realizing Nirvana. So in theory, the path of the Bodhisattva begins by acknowledging and recognizing the essential emptiness of all phenomena: “Nagarjuna urges, in order to make such progress possible, one should reexamine one’s conception of the nature of phenomena in cyclic existence (both oneself and external phenomena) and nirvana itself. By coming to see their ultimate emptiness, he suggests, one can relinquish that grasping and attain that liberation.”²² The acknowledgment of the essential emptiness of all phenomena should logically lead to a renouncement of craving since one recognizes the objects of craving as essentially empty, *maya*. This relinquishing of craving and

grasping logically leads to living in accordance with the Eightfold path, which would hopefully lead to enlightenment. The result of enlightenment would be personal bliss; also due to the underlying ontological connectedness of all phenomena in emptiness, enlightenment results in compassion for other sentient beings who have not yet seen through the veil of *maya*.

For Madhyamika the focus of meditation becomes the emptiness which is beyond all things and the naming of all things. Although the means of meditation to achieve the supreme goal remains the same in Madhyamika and Theravada, the underlying philosophy and thus the ultimate aim is different: in Madhyamika the Absolute, *Sunyata*, is literally ‘nothing’ which must be juxtaposed with phenomenal reality: “Nirvana requires, according to Nagarjuna, a complete cessation of grasping, including that onto nirvana itself.”²³ So a distinction in the meditative practices of Madhyamika is the focus on essence, which through introspection becomes synonymous with the void.

In summary, Madhyamika Buddhists do not believe in a creator God nor an individual Self. The concept of Self has been supplanted by the belief in a continued individual consciousnesses that act over time and throughout lifetimes. The philosophy of Madhyamika Buddhism not only rests on the doctrines of *samsara* and karma, but also on *Sunyata*, that all phenomena are inherently empty of fixed eternal essences. Belief in *Sunyata* leads to an Absolute that lies beyond thought and word, known to some as *Tattva*. Phenomenal reality is constituted by a cycle of anger, jealousy, craving, and pride which result from the delusion of *maya*. The means for overcoming *maya* and realizing Nirvana is to follow the Buddha’s Eightfold Path.

Advaita Vedanta

History

Although ‘*vedanta*’ means “end of the vedas,” which refers to the Upanisads, the teachings of Vedanta are based on the Upanisads, Brahma Sutras, and Bhagavadgita and are “understood to represent the consummation or culmination (*anta*) of the entire Vedic speculation, or indeed of all knowledge (*veda*).”²⁴ Over two hundred texts call themselves Upanisads and most of them deal with questions regarding the nature of reality and ultimate reality. Most important for our discussion is that “the Upanisadic teachers have consistently emphasized the view that the essential or real Self (*atman*) has to be differentiated from the empirical or embodied self. Indeed, true philosophical knowledge consists in not confusing the one for the other.”²⁵ The Upanisads, Brahma Sutras, and Bhagavadgita were reformulated by Gaudapada to form the theory of Advaita Vedanta, or non-dualism.

Potter provides a summary of the philosophy of Advaita:

1. The purpose of philosophy is to point the way to liberation (*moksa*) from the bondage of rebirth.
2. Bondage is a product of our ignorance (*avidya*); the true Self (*atman*) is not bound, does not transmigrate, is eternally liberated.
3. Bondage is beginningless and operates with regularity as long as ignorance is not removed.
4. Since bondage depends on ignorance, liberation is manifested upon the removal of ignorance by acquiring its opposite, namely, knowledge (*vidya*).
5. The operation of ignorance consists in its creating apparent distinctions (*bheda*) where none actually exist.
6. Therefore, knowledge involves the awareness that all distinctions are false, especially the distinction between the knower and the known.
7. This awareness, which constitutes liberating knowledge, which is free from subject-object distinctions, is pure, immediate consciousness (*cit, anubhava*).
8. The true Self is itself just that pure consciousness, without which nothing can be

known in any way.

9. And that same true Self, pure consciousness, is not different from the ultimate world Principle, Brahman, because if Brahman were conceived as the object of Self-awareness it would involve subject-object distinction and, as said above, this is a product of ignorance.

10. The real is that which is not set aside as false, not sublated (*badha*), in contrast to products of ignorance, which are eventually sublated.

11. Assuming the above criterion of reality, it follows that Brahman is the only Reality (*sat*), since It is untinged by difference, the mark of ignorance, and since It is the one thing that is not sublatale, for sublation itself depends on there being consciousness.

12. Pure consciousness is experienced during deep sleep; since we awake refreshed, it is inferred that pure consciousness is also the ultimate bliss.²⁶

The most renowned and enlightening advocate of Vedanta in general and Advaita Vedanta in particular is Sankara, who lived around 700 C.E. He is “generally acknowledged as the most influential of all Hindu religious thinkers.”²⁷ “Sankara’s doctrine has been well summed up in the following verse which circulates among the Teachers of his school. ‘This universe of plurality is verily an illusion. The reality is the indifferentiated Absolute and I am that’.”²⁸ The goal of Sankara’s philosophy is *moksa*, release from *samsara*, which results from karma. The means to *moksa* is *jnana*, right knowledge, which leads to an instantaneous spiritual illumination that somehow dissolves all except the effects of past deeds. At death, liberation is complete and the individual is released from *samsara*. The practitioner must not be attached to the things of this world for they are illusory, *maya*; Advaita Vedanta avers that ultimate reality, *Brahman*, is non-dual, identical to *Atman*, the individual self or soul, and that our perceptual world is merely the result of ignorance, *avidya*. According to Zimmer,

basing his reasoning on the Vedic formula, *tat tvam asi*, “That art thou,” Sankara developed with unwavering consistency a systematic doctrine, taking the Self

(*atman*) as the sole reality and regarding all else as the phantasmagoric production on nescience (*avidya*). The cosmos is an effect of nescience, and so also is that interior ego (*ahankara*) which is everywhere mistaken for the Self. *Maya*, illusion, mocks the perceiving, cogitating, and intuitive faculties at every turn. The Self is hidden deep. But when the Self is known there is no nescience, no *maya*, no *avidya*; i.e., no macrocosm or microcosm - no world.²⁹

Although Nagarjuna denies the existence of the Self, we can already see similarities between Nagarjuna and Sankara's philosophies regarding *maya* and ignorance as the cause or causes of suffering.

Ultimate Reality: Nirguna Brahman, Saguna Brahman

For Sankara and Advaita Vedantins ultimate reality is realizing *moksa*, which is breaking the cycle of *samsara*, by embodying the essential fact that Atman and Brahman are identical. To understand what *moksa* entails it is necessary to understand Sankara's metaphysics. For Sankara Brahman is ineffable: "no positive language is adequate to describe Brahman."³⁰ "It is non-conceptual and hence it is not known in the way in which other common objects are known... It is strictly beyond thought and word."³¹ Brahman is

non-empirical, unknowable as an object and yet knowledge itself, transcendental, non-relational, unspeakable, indescribable, inconceivable, beyond thought, beyond words, the realm of Silence, the eternal grand negation, a splendid isolation, a vacuum with no content, without language, and yet is the only light that shines by itself."³²

The above quotes refer specifically to Nirguna Brahman which is Brahman without attributes, unmanifest: "The Nirguna Brahman of Advaita Vedanta is the non-relational, transphenomenal ground which acts as the substrate for the appearance of the world. The world of difference is not a manifestation of Nirguna Brahman but only its appearance."³³ However, that does not mean that Brahman is inaccessible, for Brahman itself is divided

into Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman. According to Iyer, “it is Nirguna Brahman that appears as Saguna Brahman under the influence of Maya.”³⁴ Saguna Brahman is Brahman with attributes. Mugdal quoting the Taittiriya Upanisad 3.1. defines Saguna Brahman as “The Source from which the world proceeds, by which it maintained and ended” and “That from which these beings are born, that by which when born they live, that into which when departing they enter.”³⁵ Saguna Brahman is the conduit between human beings and the highest reality, Nirguna Brahman.

Since Nirguna Brahman is without attributes it would be impossible to attribute a qualitative state to it, even if that qualitative state is in relation to the suffering inherent in *samsara*. Thus, “Sankara argues that Brahman and Bliss are one and the same. It is not the possessor of Bliss; Bliss, therefore is not the nature of Brahman, nor an attribute, nor a predicate, nor a relation, nor a genus, nor a species of Brahman. The Brahman and Bliss are one and the same.”³⁶ Similarly, because *Sunyata* is also without attributes, the Nirvana of Madhyamika Buddhism cannot have bliss as an attribute; if bliss is the qualitative state accompanying Nirvana then it must be identical with it for Nagarjuna as it is for Sankara.

Conception of God

Unlike Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta places greater emphasis on the role of the creator God, *Isvara*. “Saguna Brahman, personified, becomes *Isvara*. There is not much difference between the two conceptions except that the former is impersonal and the latter is personal.”³⁷ “The Upanisads, the Bhagavadgita and the Brahma Sutras, on which the Vedanta is based, all affirm the existence of a supreme Lord (*isvara, paramesvara*) who projected the world, who entered it as the principle of life, and under whose control it

evolves.”³⁸ For Sankara *Isvara* is the creator of *maya* but not the creator of Nirguna Brahman and thus not above or equal to Nirguna Brahman. The role *Isvara* plays is to help guide practitioners towards *moksa*.

Nagarjuna. *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. Jay L. Garfield, trans. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Phenomenal Reality: Samsara, Karma, and Maya^{2*}

In direct contrast to the description of Nirguna Brahman, phenomenal reality “is an empirical, relational world of knowledge and its objects, spoken, thought about, conceived, described, an affirmation, a multiplicity, a world of hopes and aspirations, of happiness and frustration, subject and object, cause and effect, birth and death, struggle and achievement.”³⁹ The reason for our experience of the world as such is *maya*, which hides true reality from us:

What is essentially nameless and formless appears endowed with both owing to the operation of *Maya*. The Absolute appears as the world of diversity and change when it is viewed through the medium of the senses and the mind. These have a knack of presenting the real as if it existed in time and space and as if it were a substance possessing attributes. Reality is therefore distorted when it is presented through our knowing apparatus.⁴⁰

Even “time and space are creations of *Maya* and cannot claim prior existence.”⁴¹ Within the realm of *maya*, appearance conceals essential reality which is Brahman. We are limited and misled by our senses; we can only have provisional knowledge of the phenomenal

^{2*}Since the assumptions of phenomenal reality, namely *samsara* and karma, are similar for Madhyamika Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta, in an effort to avoid being redundant this section will be brief.

world. In other words, “the world is “false,” not in the sense of being a figment of our imagination, but in the sense that it is not real - the only real ultimately being nirguna Brahman.”⁴²

Conception of Self

The most profound distinction of Advaita Vedanta is the conception of the Self. *Atman*, essential self, is not only considered to be pure consciousness without any particular form but is also considered to be pure existence and pure bliss. From here the leap is made to equating the individual self, *Atman*, with the universal self or universal consciousness, *Brahman*. The deepest level of each subjective individual, the *Atman*, is identified with the ultimate basis of the objective universe, *Brahman*. Zimmer states it as follows: “So that when the individual makes contact with the Self that he holds within, he comes into possession of divine cosmic power and stands centered beyond all anxiety, strife, and change. The attainment of this goal is the one and only end of Vedic and Vedantic thought.”⁴³ For Sankara we are born ignorant of the fact that our essential Self is at one with ultimate reality. Throughout our lives we remain ignorant unless we are able to break through the veil that *maya* places over ultimate reality.

Means of realizing Ultimate Reality

The means of realizing ultimate reality, according to Advaita, is to recognize the identity of the essential self, *Atman*, and the universal self, *Brahman*. Hiriyanna states it as follows: “the individual self is Brahman itself, and its supposed distinction from it is entirely due to the illusory adjuncts with which it identifies itself. Man’s ultimate aim in life should accordingly be to know and realize this truth.”⁴⁴ The means of realizing this

truth and *moksa* is *jnana*, an experiential realization of the Self, Atman, which when recognized will be found to be identical with Brahman: “The knowledge of the Supreme Self can be attained by no other means than by the realization of one’s own self.”⁴⁵

The primary means of attaining *jnana* is meditation. Phenomenal reality being an illusion, *maya*, one must focus inward to find the Absolute. As Iyer says, “according to Samkara the essence of religion is meditation or *Upasana*. He defines it as the process of concentrating the mind on some resting place or support recognised by sastra and generating a series of like thoughts without the interruption of anything contrary to the series.”⁴⁶ Like Madhyamika Buddhism through an intricate process of meditation, individuals can realize ultimate reality. Finally, “when a man comes to know that highest brahman, he himself becomes that very brahman.”⁴⁷

Since the world is illusory, the supreme goal of *moksa* is somewhat ironic since the Atman has already been and will be eternally at one with Brahman. Thus, “final freedom does not therefore mean any actual change in the nature of the self.”⁴⁸ It is merely shedding the illusion of the phenomenal world: “*Moksa* is only another name for Brahman.”⁴⁹

In summary, Advaita Vedantins believe in a creator God, *Ishvara*, which is the manifest part of the unmanifested Absolute, Brahman. The concept of Self is of supreme importance as the essential Self, Atman, is actually identical with the Brahman. The philosophy of Advaita Vedanta rests on the doctrines of *samsara* and karma. Phenomenal reality is constituted by the illusion of *maya*, which veils ultimate reality. The means for attaining *moksa*, overcoming *maya*, and being released from the cycle of *samsara* is *jnana*,

which is an experiential knowledge of the essential truth that Atman and Brahman are identical.

Kabbalah

History

The mystical branch of Judaism is called Kabbalah. “Since the 13th century it has become the main term for Jewish mystical traditions, which deal almost exclusively with 1. a theosophical understanding of God combined with a symbolic view of reality and the theurgical conception of religious life, and 2. the way to attain a mystical experience of God through invocation of divine names.”⁵⁰ For the Kabbalists, God is at once transcendent and immanent. The transcendent God is *Ein Sof* and the immanent God is the *Sefirot*. According to Kabbalists, Moses gained a direct visionary experience of the Godhead and the Kabbalists seek to realize that same level of higher consciousness as Moses. The part of the Godhead that Moses “saw” was not *Ein Sof* but the first few *Sefirot*. “The sefirot are emanated forces that originate and spread from a hidden source, called *Ein Sof*. And so the multiplicity of the divine sefirot on the one hand, and the duality of the sefirotic order and *Ein Sof* on the other, are the two basic factors in the mystery of the Godhead as presented by the kabbalah.”⁵¹

Ein Sof, as we will see, is unreachable. But through the *Sefirot* and the Torah, which is the embodiment of God, it is possible to gain insight into the mystery of *Ein Sof*:

The absolute concealment of *Ein Sof* demonstrates one of the differentiating characteristics of the kabbalistic approach to the mystery of the Godhead. Only a portion of this mystery, the part that concerns the self-revealing God, is susceptible

to knowledge and perception. But as far as *Ein Sof*, the hidden God, is concerned, the mystery is one of non-knowledge and non-perception.⁵²

However, like the Advaita Vedantic relationship between Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman, Kabbalah we will see “is not dualistic, although historically there exists a close connection between its way of thinking and that of the Gnostics, to whom the hidden God and the Creator are opposing principles. On the contrary, all of the energy of ‘orthodox’ Kabbalistic speculation is bent to the task of escaping from dualistic consequences.”⁵³

The central text of Kabbalah is the Zohar. There exist discrepancies regarding the author or authors of the Zohar: “It is attributed to Shim’on bar Yoh’ai, a second century tanna, but modern scholarship has concluded that it is a compilation dating from thirteenth century Spain.”⁵⁴ Academics have concluded that its author is Moses de Leon, who claimed only to compile the teachings of earlier Rabbis such as Rabbi Shim’on bar Yohai, who was taught by Rabbi Akiba. However, current literature is divided as to the true author or authors of the Zohar^{3*}. The Zohar was primarily written in Aramaic and imitated the form of a Midrash, which is a commentary on the Hebrew Bible. Its structure has been described as follows:

The Zohar encompasses a series of Kabbalistic works that can be divided into three main layers:

1. Midrash he-ne’elam (The Hidden Midrash) is considered to be the earliest stratum. Written partly in Hebrew, partly in Aramaic, it has overt affinities with Mosheh de Leon’s early Hebrew works and an obvious tendency toward allegorical exegesis of biblical verses.
2. The bulk of the Zohar consists mainly of a homiletical interpretation of the Pentateuch, written in Aramaic and using symbolic exegesis...
3. The latest stratum is formed by two large compositions: *Tiqqunei Zohar*, which

^{3*}An interesting study would be to compare the authors, authorship and the competing thoughts of the Upanisads with that of the Zohar.

is composed of seventy interpretations of the word bere'shit (the opening word of Genesis), and Ra'ya' meheimna' (The Faithful Shepherd), a Kabbalistic interpretation of the rationale for the commandments.⁵⁵

The author of the *Zohar* discusses the Hebrew Bible with respect to the Kabbalistic paradigm of ultimate reality, *Ein Sof* and the *Sefirot*.

Ultimate Reality: *Ein Sof*, *Sefirot*

Like Brahman, *Ein Sof* is without limit, without end, without attributes, impersonal, unmanifest, totally unknowable. “There is no letter, no name, no writing, and no word that can comprise it.”⁵⁶ Moreover, “*Ein Sof*, the Infinite - that is, the concealed Godhead - dwells unknowable in the depth of its own being, without form or shape. It is beyond all cognitive statements, and can only be described through negation - indeed, as the negation of all negations. No images can depict it, nor can it be named by any name.”⁵⁷ Thus, “it is absolutely beyond our intellectual capability to know or express in a positive way one single iota of the hidden nature of *Ein Sof*, but we can, and we must, strip it of any form or quality known to us, for any known thing that is attributed to it blemishes its unparalleled and unknowable perfection, and imposes a limit on its infinity.”⁵⁸ Again, similar to Brahman, there is much speculation about the ineffable unknowable mystery of *Ein Sof*.

On the other hand, like *Sunyata*, “As *Ein Sof* has no attributes, his first manifestation is necessarily as *Ayin* (“nothing”).⁵⁹ Bloom writes that, “God is at once *Ein Sof* and *Ayin*, total presence and total absence.”⁶⁰ Although it appears to be beyond our logical conception, *Ein Sof* embodies both everythingness and nothingness. Scholem writes that “theosophic Kabbalism frequently employs the bolder metaphor of Nothing.”⁶¹

According to Scholem, the theoretical creation process occurs as following: *Ein Sof*

transforms itself from “the inexpressible fullness, into nothingness. It is this mystical ‘nothingness’ from which all the other stages of God’s gradual unfolding in the *Sefirot* emanate and which the Kabbalists call the highest Sefirah, or the “supreme crown” of Divinity.”⁶² Nothingness is an essence (but not “the” essence) of *Ein Sof* from which something, *yesh*, arises. Later we will compare *ayin* to *sunyata* and *yesh* to *maya*.

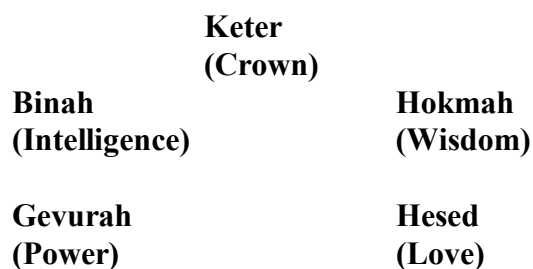
God manifests himself in ten spheres of divine emanation through which the hidden God becomes known: “In His active manifestations, the Godhead appears as the dynamic unity of the *Sefirot*, portrayed as the ‘tree of the *Sefirot*,’ or the mystical human form (*Adam Kadmon*), who is none other than the concealed shape of the Godhead itself.”⁶³ The ten aspects of *Sefirot* take form in an endless variety of shades and gradations. According to Tishby,

just as no use is made of the term kabbalah in the *Zohar*, so there is hardly any mention of sefirot, apart from in the later sections. Instead we have a whole string of names: “levels,” “powers,” “sides” or “areas” (*sitrin*), “worlds,” “firmaments,” “pillars,” “lights,” “colors,” “days,” “gates,” “streams,” “garments,” “crowns,” and others. Each term designates a particular facet of the nature or work of the sefirot.⁶⁴

The *Sefirot* are “like intermediate stages or intercessors between man and *Ein Sof*.”⁶⁵ However,

about *Ein Sof*, Tishby comments that “even the sefirot are unable to apprehend its nature.”⁶⁶

The model of the tree of sefirot is as follows:



	Tiferet (Beauty)	
Hod (Majesty)		Netzah (Lasting Endurance)
	Yesod (Foundation)	
	Malkut (Kingdom)	

Tishby states that the tree grows upside down: “Its root is located in the highest *Sefirot*; it’s trunk embraces the central and thereby conciliating forces; while the branches or limbs which grow out of it at various points encompass the contradictory forces of divine activity in Hesed and Din.”⁶⁷ The *Sefirot* “constitute a well-structured form, in which every part or limb operates upon each other, and not just the higher ones on the lower. The *Sefirot* are connected with one another by means of secret “channels,” *tsinoroth*, whereby each radiates into the other and in which the other is in turn reflected.”⁶⁸ As mentioned above, the *Sefirot* are not only shaped like a tree, but also like a mystical primal man (*Adam Kadmon*).

Four *Sefirot* deal with the Torah: *Hokmah* (the father), *Binah* (the mother) unite to bring out *Tifereth* (the son) and *Malkuth* (the daughter). “The tenth and last of the *Sefirot* is properly the most fascinating, *Malkhut* of “kingdom,” where “kingdom” refers to God’s immanence in nature. From Tiferet, *Malkhut* inherits the *Shekhinah*, and manifests that glory of God in His world. So *Malkhut* is called the “descent,” meaning the descent of the *Shekhinah*.”⁶⁹ *Shekinah* is the immanent God that dwells in phenomenal reality. The *Shekhinah* “represents the divine hypostatized in feminine form.”⁷⁰

Phenomenal Reality

Phenomenal reality for Kabbalists does not appear to be questioned the way it is in Madhyamika Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. Kabbalists are more concerned with working towards restoring the essential perfection of the Godhead than questioning the ontology of the Yesh, the material world. There does not appear to be a Kabbalistic equivalent to the psychological or qualitative experience of *samsara*. Phenomenal reality appears to be accepted and not considered to be illusory.

In order to restore the essential perfection of the Godhead, Kabbalists turn towards the laws of the Torah which to them is God incarnate, a living organism animated by a secret life.

The Torah, in other words, does not consist merely of chapters, phrases and words; rather is it to be regarded as the living incarnation of the divine wisdom which eternally sends out new rays of light. It is not merely the historical law of the Chosen People, although it is that too; it is rather the cosmic law of the Universe, as God's wisdom conceived it.⁷¹

Like the Eightfold Path of Buddhism, the means to enlightenment for Kabbalists is to follow the laws of the Torah. "The study of the Torah is here regarded as a restoration of the original state of the human body through its purification, culmination in a mystical union with the Torah, which dwells upon the sanctified members; the mystical study of the Torah is instrumental in the achievement of the triune state."⁷² There are four levels of meaning in the Torah: peshat, the literal or face-value interpretation; derashah, the Rabbinic hermeneutical interpretation like the Midrash; remez, the allegorical meanings; and sod, the mystical meanings. The Kabbalists are more concerned with sod although they consider peshat and derashah to be conduits to Remez and Sod. The point of interpretation for Kabbalists is to peel away the layers; at the deepest layers of the mystery

of Kabbalah God and word, Torah, are one.^{4*}

The Halakhah are the laws of the Torah. There are 613 commandments of which 365 are negative and 248 positive. There are proscriptions for all aspects of daily activity and these proscriptions are further commented upon in the Midrash, Mishnah, and Talmud.^{5*} All of these laws are intended to help guide the practitioner towards the higher levels of consciousness of the Godhead.

The mystical goal of performing the 613 daily mitzvot is to restore the unrestricted flow from the upper Godhead to the lower. This restoration is known as *Tikkun*. However, the Lurianic school of Kabbalah has a slightly more individual interpretation of *Tikkun* that places *Tikkun* closer to the notion of karma. Isaac Luria (1534-1572) subjugated “all religious acts and events, both visible and invisible to the goal of *Tikkun*.”⁷³ For Luria there was not only *Tikkun* in the cosmic sense of restitution of the Godhead to its original state, but *Tikkun* pertaining to each individual. Each individual’s personal *Tikkun* became

^{4*}Although Torah as the architect and blueprint of creation are the Torah are interesting and comparable to the Vedas, because of my focus on similarities specifically with Madhyamika Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta, I will only discuss Torah here as it relates to the Absolute and the means of realizing the Absolute.

^{5*}An interesting study would be to compare the Eightfold Path of Buddhism as a means to enlightenment to the laws of the Torah as a means of enlightenment. However, such an undertaking is too large for the present paper.

instrumental to cosmic order. “The doctrine of *Tikkun* raised every Jew to the rank of a protagonist in the great process of restitution.”⁷⁴

To his formal disciples who numbered about thirty-five, Luria imparted esoteric wisdom, vouchsafing to each one mystical knowledge pertinent to his particular soul, such as its ancestry and the transmigrations through which it had gone. He also gave his disciples detailed instructions on the meditative techniques by which they could raise their souls up to the divine realm, commune with the souls of departed rabbis, and achieve revelatory experiences of their own.⁷⁵

Conception of Self

Although I will later argue that *Ein Sof* is comparable to Brahman, I do not think that Kabbalists have a notion of self that is comparable to Atman. Both the Kabbalists and Rabbinic scholars believe that man was created in the image of God (hence the mystical primal human form of the sefirot). “Since he believes that man is literally created in the image of God, the mystic works to polish himself until he becomes so brilliantly clear that he reflects nothing but God. ‘Union with the Absolute’ in this case is a matter of ‘like attracting like.’”⁷⁶ Unlike the identity of Atman and Brahman, the Kabbalists do not assert the identity of man and *Ein-Sof*.

The Kabbalists also differ from Rabbinic scholars regarding the role of intellect in helping the individual restore or correct his *Tikkun* and thus merge with the Godhead.

Tishby states that Rabbinic scholars

thought of the intellect as the means whereby one attained knowledge of divine matters - the same intellect which was at work in the acquisition of less important facts. This is because perception of divine intelligibles was no more than the highest stage in the logico-discursive knowledge process. The intellect progresses from one subject to another by a process of deduction and analogy until it comes to the acme of perception, the realm of the divine. This is not the case with kabbalah. In the Zohar the attainment of the mystery of the Godhead is confined to the holy soul, which is hewn from a divine source and is not identical with the rational intellect.⁷⁷

Means of realizing Ultimate Reality

“Entry into the gates of the sefirot is effected through the practice of prayer and the commandments with the correct devotion and intention.”⁷⁸ In addition to and in conjunction with the laws of Torah, the means of raising consciousness and purifying the soul is meditation. However unlike the deconstructive focus of meditation of *Sunyata*, the focus of meditation in Kabbalah is to reunite with the Godhead which is facilitated through his incarnation in Torah. “Trying to practice kabbalistic “meditation” without understanding its foundations in the Torah (the Pentateuch) would be like trying to fly without wings. One cannot even begin to live the mystical life as a Jew without a knowledge of Hebrew, for the very stuff of its contemplation is the language of the Torah.”⁷⁹ The very letters of the Hebrew alphabet are supposedly conduits to God. Thus, studying and meditating on the Torah and its symbols and laws, which is tantamount to worshipping God, is of supreme importance.

This inner process in the life of the Godhead goes by the name of *sod ha-yihud* (the mystery of unification), and it constitutes the principle aim and object of the mystical worship of God. Through devotion in prayer and the fulfillment of the commandments, man becomes an active participant in the renewal of the unity of divine forces. The “mystery of unification” has two components: the preservation of harmonious unity within the structure of the world of the sefirot, and the unification of the Emanator with the world of emanation through the return of the sefirot to their source.⁸⁰

Although the impersonal and removed *Ein Sof* remains a mystery, the exoteric practices of Rabbinic Judaism along with contemplation leads the individual up the tree of *Sefirot*.

The kabbalistic idea of the nature of *Ein Sof* removes it from the area of religious life by relegating its existence to impenetrable heights that the human soul cannot possibly reach. It is the sefirot that constitute the goal of religious devotion, but

even then not the system as a whole , but as individual objects of worship, varying with the intention of the worshiper, the nature of the result desired, and the circumstance of the act of devotion.”⁸¹

In summary, mystical Judaism, Kabbalah, is an intricate philosophical system with well defined practices and objectives. What the Zohar lacks in psychological analysis of individual phenomenal reality is overly compensated by such commentaries in the Mishnah, Midrash, and Talmud.

With Moses as his model, the Jewish mystic must concentrate on God in his every daily act, with his every breath; but he must always come down from the “high place” and live among the people as well. By “yoking” himself to God he develops a power of love so great that he brings the godly influx into this imperfect world of men.⁸²

Kabbalists strongly believe in a transcendental Godhead that includes a creator God. Phenomenal reality is not necessarily constituted by any quality or qualities, such as the Buddhists and Advaita Vedantans are by the doctrine of *samsara*. The Torah is the embodiment of God and also contains laws, proscriptions, and interdicts to guide Kabbalists to restore the original perfect state of the Godhead.

Comparison of Ultimate Realities of Madhyamika Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, and Kabbalah

Although scholars may run the risk of comparing apples to oranges, I think that parallels can be drawn from the ultimate realities of Madhyamika Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta and Kabbalah. The first parallel, which has already been drawn by scholars such as Radhakrishnan, Iyer, and Smart, is the comparison between *Sunyata* and Brahman. According to Radhakrishnan, Nagarjuna “describes his *sunyata* almost in the very words in

which the nirguna Brahman is characterised in the Upanisads:”⁸³

brahman is without a before and an after, without an inner and an outer. ⁸⁴

It has no sound or touch, no appearance, taste or smell; It is without beginning or end, undecaying and eternal; When a man perceives it, fixed and beyond the immense, He is freed from the jaws of death. ⁸⁵

What cannot be seen, what cannot be grasped, without color, without sight or hearing, without hands or feet; What is eternal and all pervading, extremely minute, present everywhere - That is the immutable, which the wise fully perceive. ⁸⁶

Neither absolute can be accurately described through words; both are beyond the way in which we think. “It is neither one nor multiple, neither existent nor non-existent. Sunya, the ultimate reality, cannot be comprehended by thought or described by words.”⁸⁷

Nagarjuna’s *Sunyata* and Sankara’s Brahman can only be described negationally:

“Samkara regarded the highest texts of the Upanisads, through which the truth is finally conveyed, as negative in character. The spoken word can give no idea of the Absolute, and would bring it down into the world of objects if it could.”⁸⁸

The *Tattva* of Nagarjuna and the Brahman of Sankara are both transcendental to thought. According to them this ultimate is non-dual, ineffable, trans-empirical, beyond thought, trans-relational; it is not an object of knowledge and, therefore is not knowable as an object; for all knowability is knowability as an object and, therefore, the ultimate cannot be conceived or determined in thought. It is indeterminate and beyond all predicates. It is, therefore, unspeakable or indescribable. According to Nagarjuna, it is *Catuskoti vinirmukta*, and according to Sankaracarya it is “*neti neti*”. ⁸⁹

The only viable positive remark about *Sunyata* and Brahman is that their essence is interconnectedness: “Both the *Sunyavada* or the theory of emptiness of Nagarjuna and the *Advaita-vada* or non-dualism of Samkara have one thing in common which is the oneness of the universe.”⁹⁰

Now let us see if either *Sunyata* or Brahman is comparable to *Ein Sof*: as previously stated, *Ein Sof* is without limit, without end, without attributes, impersonal, unmanifest, totally unknowable:

“There is no letter, no name, no writing, and no word that can comprise it.”⁹¹

“*Ein Sof*, the Infinite - that is, the concealed Godhead - dwells unknowable in the depth of its own being, without form or shape. It is beyond all cognitive statements, and can only be described through negation - indeed, as the negation of all negations. No images can depict it, nor can it be named by any name.”⁹²

“It is absolutely beyond our intellectual capability to know or express in a positive way one single iota of the hidden nature of *Ein Sof*.”⁹³

Although there are many difference between the three traditions, it appears as if the words used to describe the essentially ineffable Absolutes of Madhyamika Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, and Kabbalah are similar.

Next we will compare *ayin* to *sunyata* and *yesh* to *maya*: *ayin* (nothingness) is the logical initial emanation of *Ein Sof* and from *ayin* emanates *yesh* (somethingness), which begins with *Sefirot* emanating from *Ein Sof*. There appears to be a definite parallel between *ayin* and *sunyata*, but it seems to lead to a dead end seeing as Nagarjuna believes that *maya*, phenomenal reality, and obviously *Sunyata* are beginningless. On the other hand, a comparison of *ayin* to Brahman and *yesh* to the *maya* of Advaita Vedanta may prove fruitful. But instead of using the vague terms of *ayin* and *yesh*, it will be more propitious to compare the emanation of Saguna Brahman from Nirguna Brahman to the emanation of the *Sefirot* from *Ein Sof*. Luria’s interpretation of creation can be summarized as follows:

Luria taught that God had withdrawn into himself, so to speak, thereby creating an

“empty space.” This divine act of self-withdrawal, known in Hebrew as *tsimtsum*, made possible the existence of something other than God. The second part of the cosmic process, called the “breaking of the vessels” (*shevirat ha-kelim*), concerns the emanation or reemergence of divinity back into the primordial space produced by *tsimtsum*. During this process of emanation, some of the “vessels” containing the light of God were shattered. While most of the light succeeded in reascending to its divine source, the remainder fell and became attached to the now-broken “vessels” below... Since these sparks of divine light seek to be liberated and returned to their source, the human task, according to Isaac Luria, is to bring about such liberation through proper devotional means.⁹⁴

The creation myth in the Zohar is much more intricate. However, there still remains the question of “why” *Ein-Sof* emanated into *Sefirot*. The answers to this question are speculative. Similarly, there is speculation as to why Nirguna Brahman emanated into Saguna Brahman: “Creation is the outcome of a desire on the part of *Isvara* to go forth into the forms of finitude. The urge comes from within and is entirely spontaneous. It is mere sport and there is no ulterior motive.”⁹⁵

There is much room for scholarly work comparing how and why the *Sefirot* emanated from *Ein Sof* to how and why Saguna Brahman emanated from Nirguna Brahman. As previously mentioned, there is a definite parallel in the descriptions of *Ein Sof* and Nirguna Brahman and I believe there are also significant correlations between the *Sefirot* and Saguna Brahman: both *Sefirot* and Saguna Brahman function as intermediaries and intercessors between man and the highest level of ultimate reality and both are the “source” of phenomenal reality. However, due to the doctrine of *maya*, there is a difference between man’s goals in relation to Saguna Brahman and the *Sefirot*: Advaita Vedantins’ goal is to surpass *maya*, realize that their Atman is at one with the Universal Brahman, and attain *moksa*. Kabbalists’ goal is to restore the original perfect harmony of God. It

appears that the Kabbalists have more of a *bodhisattva* ideal of working towards universal enlightenment than a Advaita Vedantin ideal of working towards moksa for the individual. In addition, regarding the cosmic primal body of Sefirot (*Adam Kadmon*), I think that it would be more interesting to compare the Sefirot to the *Purusa* of Samkya-Yoga than to *Isvara*.

Comparison of Phenomenal Realities of Madhyamika Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, and Kabbalah

Parallels between the phenomenal realities of Madhyamika Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta and Kabbalah are even more dubious. Firstly the underlying assumption of *samsara* does not appear to have an equivalent in Kabbalah. The best analogy would be with that of original sin and I do not believe that the Kabbalists are overly concerned with establishing a basic qualitative state of being for man. More interesting would be to compare the Kabbalistic notions of evil and Satan to the anger, jealousy, craving, and pride, which result from ignorance and maya in both Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. Kabbalists do not appear to be as self-critical as Buddhists or Advaita Vedantins: they tend to look outward for the origins of the evil that cause them to suffer, whereas Buddhists and Advaita Vedantins understand that personal suffering results from their individual karmas, and from ignorance which leads them away from proper conduct and subsequently exacerbates their karmas. On the other hand, Luria's notion of *Tikkun*, as mentioned above, appears similar to karma. For the individual, *Tikkun* comes to mean "correction"^{6*}

^{6*} As an aside I'll mention something that the Rabbi at the Kabbalah Center in Los

and crises provide the individual with the opportunity to overcome his or her *Tikkun*.

Firstly, however, it is necessary to establish a correlating belief in reincarnation. One of the proofs for the doctrine of karma is that the influences for any one phenomenon cannot be found in a single lifetime. Similarly, “lengthy discussions on various types of metempsychosis (*gilgul*), or the transmigration of souls, are found in Kabbalah from the very beginning. Metempsychosis was regarded mainly as a opportunity given to a sinner to amend his former sins and rarely as a purgative period.”⁹⁶ This sounds remarkably similar to the law of cause and effect of karma. In Kabbalah, from original sin onward man must struggle against evil to try to reunite the all-good Godhead. In Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta man must struggle against the illusion of *maya* which veils ultimate reality, causes afflictions, and hinders him from redressing his karma. In Madhyamika Buddhism, however, the *bodhisattva* ideal of universal compassion which stems from the essential interconnectedness of reality appears to have a correlate in the ultimate goal of Kabbalah to restore the perfect harmony and oneness of the Godhead.

Lastly, one essential apparent difference between the three traditions that requires further study is the conception of Self. Buddhists believe that the Self is a

Angeles said to me in a private conversation: the Kabbalists in the concentration camps during the Shoah, when they were taken out to be executed, danced. They danced to thank God for giving them the opportunity to overcome their personal Tikkuns which obviously included such deficiencies as hatred. This may also have an analogy in the Chinese word for “crisis” which is supposedly the same word for “opportunity.”

misunderstanding of what is really just a series of states of consciousness; Advaita Vedantins believe that the essential Self is at one with the Absolute; and Kabbalists do not appear to have a profound belief in Self other than man being created in the image of God. I am uncertain at present that it is worthwhile to attempt to compare the Kabbalist notion of self to either the Advaita Vedantin or Buddhist notion of self. However, the distinction that Buddhists make between consciousness and self may be a distinction without a difference, a function of diction rather than an essential irreconcilable difference: Advaita Vedantins believe that the essential Self, Atman, is really at one with the Universal Self. The Self referred to here is a translation of 'Atman;' I have also seen Atman translated into English as 'soul.' Irrespective of the translation, we have already established the parallel between that universal self or soul, Brahman, and *Tattva*, the Absolute of Nagarjuna's philosophy of *Sunyata*. The self of phenomenal reality is not merely influenced by *maya* but is a direct product of *maya* and thus a fiction and a hindrance that results from ignorance. Nagarjuna espouses the non-self doctrine due to the fact that all phenomena are impermanent. Everything that we regard as 'self' being conditioned or compounded, we should not mistake the sum to be greater than the parts and add the fiction or construct of 'self' to cover an array of ephemeral phenomena. Due to the fact that the term 'self' has acquired many psychological meanings in addition to its traditional philosophical meanings, I think that if we are able to conceive of Atman as individual soul rather than self, and we can establish the parallel between the Absolutes of Brahman and *Tattva*, then we can reconcile Sankara's understanding of the sum of phenomenal reality based on *maya* that we call self with the non-self doctrine espoused by Nagarjuna.

Comparison of Means of realizing Ultimate Reality in Madhyamika Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, and Kabbalah

All three traditions have intricate laws, proscriptions, and interdicts in order to guide practitioners towards the conduct conducive to realizing a higher reality. I think that the Eightfold Path of Buddhism and the laws governing monkhood should be compared to the rules governing daily activity found in the Torah. On the other hand, the Upanisads, Bhagavadgita, and Brahma Sutras are more metaphysical texts and I am uncertain of the relation of daily laws to the written texts of the tradition. In addition, like Socrates and Jesus, since the Buddha did not write anything, it is difficult to compare Buddhist literature to the Torah, which is revered as an incarnate God by Kabbalists. However, I do think that much scholarly work could be done comparing the contents of the Upanisads to that of the Zohar. An immediate result of such a study would be the primacy placed on sacred letters and sounds.

For Jewish mystics, the Hebrew language has always corresponded physically to the things it designated. Merely writing a Hebrew letter could produce a unifying effect on the mind and body, putting one in touch with the “higher” world. Imitating God, so to speak, the Kabbalist “created” himself anew by calling into being his deepest spiritual potential through manipulating letters - the ground, form, and sound of the physical universe, the tools with which God had created the world. Three primordial letters, the aleph (א), mem (מ), and shin (ש), contained all potential elements.⁹⁷

I think that an interesting parallel could be drawn between the three primordial Hebrew letters noted above and the three primordial Sanskrit letters that comprise the sacred syllable AUM, which is identified with the whole world in the Mandukya Upanisads: “OM

- this whole world is that syllable!”⁹⁸

Finally, on a psychological level, I think that a parallel can be drawn between the function of Kabbalah and Buddhism in phenomenal reality: Harold Bloom believes that “Kabbalah proposes to give suffering a meaning.”⁹⁹ Whereas on the purely psychological level, the same can be said for Buddhism:

The complexity of the concept expressed as “emptiness” derives from the recognition in Buddhism that teaching the truth about life is urgent for alleviating suffering, but that implicit in thinking and speaking resides a tendency to create an illusion (of self-sufficient realities) that is itself the cause of suffering. The teaching of “the emptiness of things” is a medicine for the spiritual illness seen wherever there is greed, hate, and self-delusion.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is obvious that there is much room for scholarship comparing the philosophies of these three traditions. Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism have been compared, most notably by Radhakrishnan, but little has been said regarding Jewish philosophy; it has been relegated to the realm of mysticism and not taken as seriously as it should be. One final observation that I would like to make is that it is conspicuous that there is no word for the English equivalent of ‘religion’ in Tibetan; for Tibetans, Madhyamika Buddhism is a way of life, not a part of life as we consider religion to be here in the West. I think that the same thing can be said for Kabbalists, that their metaphysical beliefs affect all of their actions and thoughts. And with Moses and Buddha as their models for attaining higher levels of consciousness, Kabbalists and Buddhists appear to have as much in common philosophically as Advaita Vedantins have in common with Madhyamika Buddhists and Kabbalists have in common with Advaita Vedantins.

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