



# The Differences Paths between Hinduism and Buddhism from a Nepalese Perspective

Dhaniram Ghimire  
Santi Sukhprasert  
Nepal

## Abstract

This article explores the fundamental differences between Hinduism and Buddhism through the unique lens of Nepalese culture and society. Given Nepal's historical significance as the birthplace of the Buddha and its deep-rooted Hindu traditions, the Nepalese perspective offers a rich and nuanced understanding of how these two religions coexist and influence each other. By delving into their origins, core beliefs, practices, and their impact on Nepalese identity, daily life, and social structures, the article illuminates the dynamic interplay between these two spiritual traditions.

Hinduism, with its origins in the Vedic traditions of ancient India, presents a complex tapestry of gods, rituals, and philosophies. It emphasizes the pursuit of dharma (duty), artha (prosperity), kama (pleasure), and moksha (liberation). Buddhism, founded by Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) in the 6th century BCE, offers a path to enlightenment through the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, focusing on the cessation of suffering and the attainment of Nirvana.

In Nepal, these religious traditions are not only historical and spiritual pillars but also integral to the socio-cultural fabric. The article examines how Hinduism and Buddhism shape Nepalese festivals, rituals, and daily practices, highlighting their distinct yet complementary roles. It also explores how Nepalese society navigates the theological and philosophical differences, such as Hinduism's caste system versus Buddhism's egalitarian ethos, and the differing views on karma and rebirth.



Furthermore, the article addresses the contemporary relevance of these religions in Nepal, considering the challenges and opportunities posed by modernity and globalization. Through documentary research and case studies, it presents personal narratives that reflect the lived experiences of Nepalese people, illustrating how they harmonize the teachings of both Hinduism and Buddhism in their quest for spiritual and social fulfillment.

**Keywords:** Nepalese culture, Hinduism, Buddhism

## Introduction

Nepal is a remarkable confluence of religious traditions, predominantly characterized by Hinduism and Buddhism, which have coexisted for centuries within its diverse cultural landscape. Lumbini is the birthplace of Lord Buddha, which is now in the Nepal region. Buddhism was quickly spread across the region and integrated with existing Hindu traditions. Lumbini holds a unique position in the history of both religions. The reverberations of this historical significance are deeply woven into the fabric of Nepalese society, influencing cultural practices, social norms, and communal life.

Hinduism, with its vast pantheon of deities and rich philosophical texts, has shaped Nepalese spiritual life for millennia. It permeates daily practices, from rituals and festivals to the moral and ethical frameworks guiding individual behavior. Conversely, Buddhism, introduced in the 5th century BCE, has fostered a unique spiritual ethos characterized by compassion and mindfulness, leaving an indelible mark on Nepalese art, architecture, and meditation practices. (Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal. 1974)

Throughout the centuries, Nepal has been a crucible where Hindu and Buddhist ideas and practices have mingled and coexisted. The Licchavi dynasty (circa 400–750 CE), known for its patronage of both religions, played a crucial role in this synthesis. Many Hindu temples built during this period often included



Buddhist shrines, reflecting a harmonious blend of religious traditions. The Malla period (12th–18th centuries) further exemplified this interweaving, as rulers and subjects alike practiced both religions simultaneously, fostering a unique cultural symbiosis. (Ancient and Medieval Nepal. 1992)

This article delves into the fundamental differences between Hinduism and Buddhism through the lens of Nepalese culture, exploring their historical interactions, philosophical underpinnings, and the role they play in shaping Nepalese identity. It is essential to understand these differences, not only for academic inquiry in a nation where both religions influence daily life. By examining their origins, core beliefs, rituals, and social implications, we aim to illuminate the unique ways in which these two great traditions coexist, interact, and enrich the spiritual landscape of Nepal. Through this exploration, we can better appreciate the complexities and nuances that define the Nepalese experience of religion.

## Religion in Nepal

Religion in Nepal is characterized by a remarkable diversity and syncretism, with Hinduism and Buddhism being the two most prominent faiths. Hinduism is the predominant religion, with about 81% of the population identifying as Hindus, influencing many aspects of daily life, from rituals and festivals to social structures and laws. Major Hindu festivals such as Dashain and Tihar are celebrated nationwide, and significant pilgrimage sites like the Pashupatinath Temple attract devotees globally. Buddhism, practiced by around 9% of the population, has a profound historical and cultural presence, with Nepal being the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. The three main Buddhist traditions—Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana—are represented in the country, and sites like Swayambhunath and Boudhanath stupas are major religious landmarks. A unique feature of Nepalese religious life is the syncretism between Hinduism and Buddhism, with shared sacred sites and festivals, and the blending of religious practices and deities. Beyond these two major religions, Nepal is home to smaller communities of Muslims, Christians, Jains, Sikhs, and practitioners of indigenous



animist traditions, each contributing to the country's rich cultural tapestry. Nepal is celebrated for its religious tolerance and harmony, with its 2015 constitution declaring the country a secular state, underscoring the importance of religious freedom and equality. Despite occasional inter-religious tensions, efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and education aim to reinforce the values of tolerance and coexistence. Overall, religion in Nepal is a dynamic and integral part of the nation's identity, creating a unique and harmonious spiritual environment. (Hindu-Buddhist Synthesis in Nepal." History of Religions, 1993).

## **Philosophical Foundations between Hinduism and Buddhism**

In Hinduism Atman and Brahman is the major concept of Hinduism. Atman (the individual soul) and Brahman (the universal consciousness or absolute reality). The realization of the unity between Atman and Brahman is seen as the ultimate goal of life, leading to Moksha (liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth). Four Vedas are the sacred texts form the foundation of Hindu philosophy, containing hymns, rituals, and spiritual guidance. They emphasize the importance of Dharma (moral duty) and the pursuit of knowledge. And Moksha is the ultimate goal of Hinduism. Which is the liberation from samsara (the cycle of rebirth) is achieved through various paths, including Jnana (knowledge), Bhakti (devotion), Karma (action), and Raja Yoga (meditative practices).

In Buddhism the Four Noble Truths (truth of the nature) Central to Buddhist philosophy, these truths outline the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering. Middle Way, in Buddhism, complement of general and specific ethical practices and philosophical views that are said to facilitate enlightenment by avoiding the extremes of self-gratification on one hand and self-mortification on the other view of life. Sanskrit: Madhyama-pratipadā Pāli: Majjhima-patipadā the path comprises Right Understanding, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. It guides adherents toward ethical living and mental discipline.



One of the major different concepts from Hinduism is Anatta (Non-self) Buddhism challenges the notion of a permanent self, asserting that all phenomena, including the self, are impermanent and interdependent. This realization is essential for overcoming suffering.

## **Navigating Theological and Philosophical Differences: Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepalese Society**

Nepalese society demonstrates a remarkable ability to navigate the theological and philosophical differences between Hinduism and Buddhism, particularly concerning Hinduism's caste system and Buddhism's egalitarian ethos, as well as their differing views on karma and rebirth. Hinduism's caste system, which categorizes individuals based on their karma and dharma from past lives, significantly influences social status, occupation, and community roles. In contrast, Buddhism rejects the caste system, promoting the idea that all individuals have the potential for enlightenment, regardless of their social status. This egalitarian ethos is particularly evident among Nepal's Buddhist communities, such as the Newar Buddhists and Tibetan Buddhists, where social practices are more inclusive and merit-based (Muni, 1987). Nepalese society reconciles these differences through various means, including interfaith marriages, shared religious festivals, and community events that transcend caste boundaries, fostering mutual respect and social integration (Pye, 2002). Philosophically, while Hinduism views karma as reinforcing the caste system by determining one's future births, Buddhism emphasizes ethical conduct and mental cultivation as paths to liberation, irrespective of birth status (Fisher, 1987). Syncretic practices are common, with many Nepalese incorporating elements from both traditions in their daily lives, such as visiting both Hindu temples and Buddhist stupas. Educational systems in Nepal often include teachings from both religions, promoting a balanced and inclusive worldview (Hutt, 1994). These practices and institutional efforts exemplify Nepal's cultural adaptability and commitment to religious harmony,



creating a unique environment where the hierarchical and egalitarian elements of Hinduism and Buddhism coexist, enriching the spiritual and social fabric of the nation. (Nepalese Buddhists' View of Hinduism, 1987)

## **The Role of the Self (Atman) vs. Anatta (Non-Self)**

In Hinduism, the concept of Atman refers to the individual soul, which is considered eternal, unchanging, and fundamentally connected to Brahman, the supreme reality. According to Hindu philosophy, realizing the true nature of Atman and its unity with Brahman is the path to liberation (moksha). This realization brings an end to the cycle of birth and rebirth (samsara) and leads to ultimate freedom and bliss. The belief in Atman fosters a sense of spiritual continuity and a profound connection between the individual self and the cosmic order.

In contrast, Buddhism fundamentally rejects the concept of an eternal, unchanging self. Instead, it teaches the doctrine of anatta (non-self), which posits that what we consider the self is merely a collection of ever-changing physical and mental components (skandhas). According to Buddhist teachings, clinging to the notion of a permanent self leads to suffering. The realization of anatta, along with the understanding of impermanence (anicca), is crucial for achieving Nirvana, the liberation from suffering and the cycle of rebirth. This perspective encourages practitioners to let go of ego and attachment, fostering a path of personal transformation and liberation through mindfulness and insight into the true nature of reality. (Indian Philosophy: Volume I: with an Introduction :2009)

## **Nepalese Interpretations with both religion**

In Nepal, the philosophical foundations of Hinduism and Buddhism are deeply intertwined with local beliefs and practices, leading to unique interpretations that resonate throughout society. For instance, the Hindu concept of Dharma, which encompasses one's duties and responsibilities, manifests in



the social fabric through practices such as community service and familial obligations. This idea of Dharma not only guides individual actions but also shapes societal norms, fostering a sense duty and ethical conduct within various social contexts. Similarly, Buddhist teachings on compassion are pivotal in Nepalese social interactions, encouraging individuals to cultivate empathy and altruism. This is evident in community initiatives such as food distribution during festivals or support for those in need, reflecting the Buddhist principle of Karuna (compassion) as a guiding force in daily life. (Hindu-Buddhist Relations in Nepal, 2012)

The coexistence of these philosophies in Nepalese thought promotes an environment of discuss and mutual influence, enriching the cultural landscape. For example, the Hindu festival of Dashain, which celebrates victory and prosperity, is often infused with Buddhist themes of renewal and harmony, as families gather to honor ancestral spirits and reinforce communal bonds. This blending of traditions fosters a shared understanding of life, death, and the cosmos, allowing individuals to navigate existential questions through a composite lens. As a result, the philosophical teachings of both religions not only coexist but also evolve together, demonstrating their relevance in addressing contemporary social and ethical issues, and reinforcing a collective identity that is both diverse and unified.

Nepal is a unique country where Hinduism and Buddhism have co-existed harmoniously for centuries, resulting in a rich tapestry of cultural and religious practices. This syncretism is evident in various aspects of Nepalese life, where elements of both traditions are blended seamlessly. Historically, Nepal has seen periods, such as the Lichhavi and Malla eras, which fostered the integration of these religions. Many religious sites, like the Swayambhunath and Boudhanath stupas, are revered by both Hindus and Buddhists, and festivals such as Buddha Jayanti see participation from both communities. Philosophical concepts like karma, dharma, and moksha/nirvana are often interpreted in ways that reflect both Hindu and Buddhist influences. Deity worship also shows a blend, with figures like Avalokiteshvara being identified with Hindu deities such



as Lokeshvara. Socially, interfaith marriages and shared cultural practices further illustrate this syncretism. In art and architecture, symbols and motifs from both religions are commonly found, and the pagoda style is used in both Hindu temples and Buddhist stupas. This harmonious coexistence contributes to a unique national identity that emphasizes religious tolerance. However, there are challenges, and efforts are being made to promote interfaith discussion and religious education to strengthen mutual understanding and respect. Overall, the Nepalese interpretation of Hinduism and Buddhism not only enriches the spiritual lives of the people but also serves as a model of cultural and religious integration.

### **Religious Practices and Rituals through Nepalese Interpretations**

In Nepal, the religious practices and rituals of Hinduism and Buddhism present distinct differences, shaped by their unique philosophies yet intertwined within the cultural fabric of the country. (Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal: An Ethnographic, 2009) Hindu rituals, such as puja, are central to worship, involving offerings to deities through a variety of practices performed in homes and temples. Pilgrimages to sacred sites like Pashupatinath Temple play a significant role, drawing devotees for festivals that celebrate spiritual and community values.

Major festivals such as Dashain and Tihar feature elaborate rituals that underscore the themes of victory and light. In contrast, Buddhist practices focus heavily on meditation, which is seen as a vital pathway to enlightenment. Meditation techniques, alongside chanting sutras and mantras, are integral to Buddhist devotion, particularly during celebrations like Buddha Jayanti, which emphasizes teachings of compassion and non-attachment. While daily life for Hindus often includes morning prayers and community rituals influenced by the caste system, many Buddhists integrate the principles of non-violence and compassion into their interactions. The cultural significance of both religions is evident in their syncretism; Hindu deities may be revered alongside Buddhist figures, particularly in festivals that blend practices from both traditions. Tem-





ples and stupas not only serve as places of worship but also act as community hubs, fostering social cohesion and illustrating the coexistence of Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepalese society.

## **Social and community life people following two traditional**

In Nepal, the social and community life surrounding Hinduism and Buddhism reveals distinct structures and influences shaped by their respective teachings and practices. (Religions in Nepal: The Dynamics of Hindu and Buddhist Practices, 2009) Hindu temples play a vital role in community gatherings, serving as centers for religious ceremonies, festivals, and social interactions. The caste system, deeply embedded in Hindu society, often influences community organization and social relationships, dictating roles and responsibilities within both family and society. Festivals like Dashain and Tihar foster a sense of unity among Hindus, as they involve communal worship and shared rituals that strengthen family and social bonds.

In contrast, Buddhist stupas and monasteries serve as spaces for meditation, study, and communal worship, emphasizing community participation in the pursuit of enlightenment. Buddhist teachings promote ideals of compassion and interconnectedness, encouraging followers to engage in altruistic actions and community service. Unlike the hierarchical structure seen in Hinduism, Buddhist communities often emphasize egalitarian principles, where participation in rituals and decision-making is more inclusive.

Interfaith interactions in Nepal highlight the coexistence of these religions, with many communities celebrating festivals that draw from both traditions, creating a rich tapestry of cultural practices. The blending of rituals, such as joint celebrations during significant religious events, illustrates a mutual respect and recognition of shared values. Thus, while Hinduism and Buddhism offer distinct social frameworks, their interactions in Nepalese society reflect a harmonious coexistence, fostering a rich cultural environment that values both traditions.



## Ethical and Moral Perspectives

The ethical and moral frameworks of Hinduism and Buddhism differ significantly, influencing Nepalese attitudes and societal norms. In Hinduism, concepts such as Dharma (duty/righteousness) and Karma (the law of cause and effect) are fundamental. Hindus believe that adhering to one's dharma is essential for maintaining social order and achieving Moksha, or liberation from the cycle of rebirth. This pursuit often involves balancing personal desires (Kama) and material wealth (Artha) within ethical boundaries, shaping a holistic approach to life that encompasses duty to family and community. (Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction 2000)

Conversely, Buddhism emphasizes the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path as guidelines for ethical conduct and spiritual development. Central to Buddhist ethics are the precepts, which advocate for non-harming (Ahimsa) and the cultivation of compassion (Karuna) and loving-kindness (Metta). These principles encourage practitioners to transcend personal desires and attachments, fostering a mindset oriented toward reducing suffering for oneself and others. (Buddhism, Very Short Introductions, 2013)

In Nepal, these ethical perspectives manifest in various social contexts. Hindu ethical teachings often inform social norms regarding family obligations and community responsibilities, influencing practices such as caste interactions and gender roles. Meanwhile, Buddhist ethics encourage communal harmony and social justice, often advocating for environmental conservation and interfaith dialogue. The blending of these frameworks in Nepalese society fosters a rich tapestry of moral understanding, where compassion and duty coexist, reflecting the unique interplay between Hindu and Buddhist values in shaping Nepalese identity and social interactions.



## Modern Challenges and Interactions:

In contemporary Nepal, both Hinduism and Buddhism face a range of modern challenges that impact their practices and interactions within society. The effects of globalization have introduced new ideas and lifestyles, leading some younger generations to question traditional rituals and beliefs. For Hindu communities, the pressure to adapt has sometimes resulted in a dilution of age-old practices, while efforts to modernize festivals and rituals aim to engage the youth. Conversely, Buddhism, particularly its meditation practices, has gained popularity in urban areas, often attracting interest from those seeking spiritual alternatives outside traditional frameworks. (Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal, 1993)

Interfaith religion has emerged as an essential component in navigating these modern challenges, with both religions engaging in discussions aimed at fostering mutual respect and understanding. Initiatives promoting interfaith cooperation often highlight shared values such as compassion and ethical living, which are central to both traditions. However, the rise of secularism and increasing individualism can create tensions, particularly as younger individuals explore spiritual paths that may diverge from traditional norms.

Religious communities also face challenges related to social issues, such as poverty and inequality, prompting collective efforts to address these concerns. While both Hindu and Buddhist groups may collaborate on social justice initiatives, the underlying ethical frameworks differ, with Hinduism emphasizing concepts like Dharma and Karma, and Buddhism focusing on compassion and the alleviation of suffering. As both religions continue to evolve in response to modern influences, their interactions will play a crucial role in shaping the future of Nepalese society, highlighting the importance of coexistence and cultural belief.



## Knowledge from education

Educational discourse surrounding the contrasting paths of Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal provides valuable insights into the dynamics of cultural identity, interfaith relations, and social cohesion. First, incorporating these subjects into educational curricula can foster critical thinking and promote an understanding of the historical and philosophical foundations of both traditions. By examining key concepts such as karma, dharma, and the nature of reality, students can develop a nuanced perspective on how these beliefs shape individual and communal identities.

Second, education plays a crucial role in promoting interfaith dialogue. Schools and universities can encourage discussions that highlight both the shared values and distinct practices of Hinduism and Buddhism, fostering respect and understanding among students from diverse backgrounds. This can be further enhanced through collaborative projects, workshops, and events that bring together students from different faith communities.

Additionally, integrating local narratives and examples into the curriculum can make the study of these traditions more relevant and engaging for students. By exploring how Hindu and Buddhist practices manifest in daily life, festivals, and rituals within Nepal, learners can connect theoretical knowledge with lived experiences.

Moreover, fostering critical engagement with contemporary societal issues—such as caste discrimination, religious intolerance, and globalization—through the lens of these traditions can empower students to reflect on their roles in promoting social justice and harmony in their communities.

Lastly, encouraging academic research and projects that involve fieldwork can enrich students' understanding of the dynamic interactions between Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal, equipping them with practical skills and insights that extend beyond the classroom.



## Conclusion

This exploration of Hinduism and Buddhism from a Nepalese perspective reveals key differences that are significant in shaping the cultural and social fabric of the nation. Hinduism emphasizes concepts like Dharma and Moksha, which guide individuals in their moral and spiritual pursuits, while Buddhism focuses on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, advocating a path of compassion and mindfulness. These differing philosophical foundations influence rituals, ethical practices, and community life, illustrating how both religions coexist and interact within Nepalese society.

The importance of these differences extends beyond theology; they play a crucial role in shaping Nepalese identity and promoting social harmony. The blending of religious practices in festivals and daily life highlights a unique cultural synthesis that fosters mutual respect and understanding among adherents of both faiths. As Nepal navigates the challenges of globalization and modernity, the continued coexistence and evolution of Hinduism and Buddhism offer a hopeful outlook for the future, encouraging dialogue and collaboration that can further enrich the nation's diverse heritage. This dynamic interplay of beliefs and practices not only enhances Nepal's cultural landscape but also serves as a model for peaceful coexistence in an increasingly interconnected world.

## Suggestions

To enhance the discourse on Hinduism and Buddhism from a Nepalese perspective, it is essential to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. This involves fostering collaboration among scholars from various fields such as history, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology, thereby enriching the academic conversation. Additionally, promoting field studies can provide empirical insights into how these two traditions coexist and influence each other within Nepalese communities. It is also crucial to contextualize cultural discussions within the unique socio-political landscape of Nepal, emphasizing local narratives and



practices. Making academic articles more accessible to a broader audience is vital; this can be achieved by translating key findings into local languages and creating simplified versions for the general public. Furthermore, there is a need for more comparative analyses that delve into specific themes—such as rituals, festivals, or philosophical concepts—to illuminate the contrasts and similarities between Hinduism and Buddhism.

In future academic writing, it is imperative to begin with a clear thesis statement that articulates the main argument or focus of the study, ensuring readers grasp the article’s intent from the outset. Methodological rigor must also be emphasized, with researchers adopting robust qualitative or quantitative methods to support their findings effectively. A comprehensive literature review should be included in each article, engaging with existing scholarship on both traditions to identify gaps and position new research within the broader academic discourse. Incorporating voices and perspectives from local practitioners, scholars, and communities will enhance the authenticity and relevance of the discussions presented. Addressing contemporary societal issues—such as interfaith relations, migration, and identity—can highlight the practical implications of the contrasting paths of Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal. Promoting interfaith dialogue through academic articles can foster mutual understanding and respect between the two communities. Scholars should also consider targeting a variety of publishing platforms, including academic journals, edited volumes, and online mediums, to increase the visibility and impact of their research. Finally, encouraging student involvement in research projects related to these themes will help cultivate a new generation of scholars dedicated to exploring the rich tapestry of Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal. By implementing these suggestions, scholars can significantly contribute to a deeper understanding of the contrasting paths of these two influential traditions and their broader implications for Nepalese society.



## References

- Bhattachan, K. B. (1987). *Nepalese Buddhists' view of Hinduism* [PDF].
- Gellner, D. N. (2009a). *Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal: An ethnographic study*. Oxford University Press.
- Gellner, D. N. (2009b). *Religions in Nepal: The dynamics of Hindu and Buddhist practices*. Oxford University Press.
- Keown, D. (2013). *Buddhism: A very short introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Knott, K. (2000). *Hinduism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, T. (1993). Hindu-Buddhist synthesis in Nepal. *History of Religions*, 33(1), 25-40.
- Lienhard, S. (1974). *Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal*. Ratna Pustak Bhandar.
- Radhakrishnan, S. (2009). *Indian philosophy: Volume I: With an introduction by J. N. Mohanty* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Shaha, R. (1992). *Ancient and medieval Nepal*. Manohar Publishers and Distributors.
- Sharma, P. R. (1993). *Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal: A historical perspective* (Vol. 10). Tribhuvan University Press.
- Sharma, P. (2012). Hindu-Buddhist relations in Nepal: Historical and contemporary perspectives. *Himalayan Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 5, 73-90.