

The Baha'i Writings and the Buddhist Doctrine of Emptiness: An Initial Survey

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1. Preface

This paper is an expansion of the section on emptiness in a previous paper, "Buddhism and the Bahá'í Writings: An Ontological Rapprochement" (*Lights of Irfan*, Vol. 8, 2007). The purpose of the 2007 paper was to show that the Bahá'í Writings and key Buddhist teachings were either in agreement or on a convergent path in regards to key ontological issues. The current paper carries that project further by focusing specifically on the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness and exploring the extent of the agreements and convergences with the Bahá'í Writings.

For Bahá'ís, there are at least four major reasons to study the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness. In the first place, emptiness is the signature teaching of Buddhism, the culmination of its teachings about impermanence, dependent origination and 'no-self' however these may be interpreted by the various schools. Thus, an understanding of Buddhism requires acquaintance with the doctrine of emptiness. Since the Bahá'í Faith recognizes Buddhism as a revelation from God, such understanding is also important because Buddhism is part of the history of God's unfolding revelation to humankind and, as such, offers knowledge about our relationship to the transcendent. However, it should be noted that we can only be

sure of the Four Noble Truths – from which the doctrine of emptiness is derived – and the Eight-fold Noble Path as originating with the Buddha Himself; these two doctrines on which the diverse interpretations of the Buddha’s Teachings are based, are common to all the schools and sects of Buddhism.

Second, if we wish to live peacefully with our neighbors, we must know what they believe in order to understand and appreciate them as human beings. There are over 379 million Buddhists in Asia, and countless more living in cultures influenced by its teachings.¹ Third, knowledge of Buddhism and its key doctrines is necessary for understanding intellectual and spiritual developments in the modern world. Buddhism is making significant and well-publicized in-roads into the intellectual and religious life of North America and Europe. The Dalai Lama, the charismatic leader of Tibetan Gelugpa Buddhism, is now a universally recognized figure who speaks to packed sports stadiums about Buddhist philosophy and living, as well as about the independence of Tibet. His books are best-sellers. Obviously what he says meets some spiritual needs in large numbers of people. Fourth, a better understanding of Buddhism in general and its signature doctrine of emptiness allows Bahá’ís to engage in intelligent and in-depth inter-faith dialogue with Buddhists and those with Buddhist sympathies. Such dialogue can also help deepen our understanding of the Bahá’í Writings from new perspectives.

This paper will provide further evidence that despite differences of expression, the Bahá’í Writings and Buddhist sutras show agreements and strong convergences on the subject of emptiness and its associated doctrines. The author interprets this as additional support for Bahá’u’lláh’s teaching of the essential unity of all religions.

2. Introduction to Emptiness

The Buddhist doctrine of emptiness is the logical culmination of the Buddha’s teachings on suffering, impermanence, dependent origination and ‘no-self.’ The reasoning process begins with the Buddha’s First Noble Truth, viz. “life is suffering,” i.e. that being alive is inherently unsatisfactory insofar as frustration, disappointment or unsatisfactoriness are inevitable and apparently

inescapable. The root cause of this suffering is the impermanent or transitory nature of all things and mental states and, consequently, our inability to ‘hang on’ to them or to find rest and peace. The Buddha says,

Impermanent are all component things,
They arise and cease, that is their nature,
They come into being and pass away ²

When all things are in perpetual flux, rest, peace, satisfaction and happiness are impossible because none of these conditions can be more than momentary. We are constantly being tossed about by the storms of change. This, of course, means that all things and mental states have only a momentary existence. However, we need not be ‘tempest-tossed’ if we analyze our situation and discover the fact of dependent origination according to which all things come into existence in dependence on other things. Things always change because everything is influenced by everything else, indeed, depends on everything else for its temporary existence. Nothing is ontologically independent or stands by itself. According to the Buddha,

When there is this, that is.
With the arising of this, that arises.
When this is not, neither is that.
With the cessation of this, that ceases.³

In other words, everything arises or falls in dependence on previous conditions or causes, and nothing arises without such conditions or causes. Things do not exist in and of themselves but only in relation to other things; consequently, their existence is relative and provisional, not absolute. In Buddhist terms, they have no essence, i.e. they have no substantial and no unchanging or ‘eternal’ nature. Furthermore, they lack an independent self-nature or self which is to say they are ‘empty.’ This does not mean that things do not exist but that they do not exist as we tend to think they do: “emptiness defines how things exist – relationally and impermanently – and is not, therefore, the assertion that things somehow do not exist at all.”⁴

Things have a provisional or conventional existence that we may agree on for the sake of convenience but, if we analyze them, they have no ultimately real nature. There is no enduring substance 'behind' or 'within' them; nothing is immune from change.

This leads to what is perhaps the most debated feature of Buddhist thought: the concept of 'no-self.' If we analyze a human being – the way Nagasena analyzed King Milinda's chariot – we would find no part that is the 'self' just as King Milinda found no part that is the 'chariot.'⁵ Simple and straightforward as this sounds, there is no agreement among the major Buddhist schools about what the 'no-self' teaching actually means. For example, the Tathagatagarba tradition (which includes Zen and the Pure Land) asserts that the 'no-self' teaching refers to the ego and personality which has been deluded, misled and defiled by the world and that beneath this ego lies a pure Buddha-nature. 'No-self' simply means that disappearance of the defilements and the appearance of the Buddha-nature. In the Theravada, the Nikayas view the 'no-self' teaching not as a metaphysical doctrine about what does or does not exist but rather as a soteriological doctrines meant to gain release from enslavement to the ego or sense of self. Its orientation is purely practical as illustrated in the Buddha's story about a man shot with an arrow. His only interest is in having the arrow removed, not in the nature of the arrow, the personality of the enemy archer or the reason he was shot.⁶

The Anatta teaching is not a doctrine of no-self, but a not-self *strategy* for shedding suffering by letting go of its cause, leading to the highest, undying happiness. *At that point, questions of self, no-self, and not-self fall aside.* Once there's the experience of such total freedom, *where would there be any concern about what's experiencing it, or whether or not it's a self?*⁷

On the other hand, the Madhyamika School in the Mahayana tradition rigorously insists that from the ultimate perspective of dependent origination no self exists at all insofar as a permanent and autonomous 'self' or ego or personality have only has a conventional or provisional existence. Even here, the exact meaning of the Madhyamika claim is subject to debate. Moreover, as we shall see

below, still other versions of the ‘no-self’ teaching exist, notably the Yogacara version.

Before we explore these ideas in greater detail, let us briefly review what the Bahá’í Writings have to say about these issues. Regarding the Buddha’s First Noble Truth that ‘life is suffering’ or unsatisfactory we recall ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement about the San Francisco earthquake: “*Such events ought to awaken people and they should attach themselves less to the mortal world; for the earthly world hath such painful experiences and offers such cups from the bitter wine*” [TAB1 509]. In a similar vein, he says, “*This mortal world is fickle and unstable like unto a shifting shadow, and the human life is like unto a mirage and a reflection on the water*” [TAB1 202]. Elsewhere, he states, “*man . . . in this world of being toileth and suffereth for a time, with divers ills and pains, and ultimately disintegrates, leaving no trace and no fruit after him*” [TAF 13]. The agreement with the First Noble Truth is obvious and requires no further elaboration.

The Bahá’í Writings also agree with the doctrine of impermanence. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from nonexistence into being, or going from existence into nonexistence . . . This state of motion is said to be essential – that is, natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement, as it is the essential requirement of fire to burn.

Thus it is established that this movement is necessary to existence, which is either growing or declining. [SAQ 233]⁸

It is important to notice the categorical nature of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements: “*nothing*” is in repose, “*all things are in motion*” and movement is “*necessary to existence.*” This universal language implies that not just material things or beings are subject to constant change, but also thoughts, feelings, personal identities and the whole gamut of events in our psycho-spiritual existence. As Bahá’u’lláh says we

should regard all else beside God as transient, and count all things save Him, Who is the Object of all adoration, as utter nothingness. [GWB 266, emphasis added]

Here, too, the categorical language is essential: everything except God is impermanent and all other beings are contingent. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “*Transformation from condition to condition is the attribute of contingent realities*” [PUP 173]. Thus, it is clear that both the Bahá’í Writings and Buddhism agree that impermanence is the fundamental nature of all phenomenal existence. From this it logically follows that we are self-condemned to suffering and dissatisfaction if we allow ourselves to become too attached to the things of this world and try to hold on to them. What else but frustration and suffering can follow from trying to do the impossible? Speaking in terms of the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states,

For attachment to the world has become the cause of the bondage of spirits, and this bondage is identical with sin, which has been transmitted from Adam to His posterity. It is because of this attachment that men have been deprived of essential spirituality and exalted position. [SAQ 124-125]

These attachments cause us, and others, a great deal of suffering insofar as they force us to live in “bondage,” i.e. as a slave to the things of this world. Moreover, these attachments degrade us from our “exalted position” and deprive us of our “essential spirituality” (cf. Buddha-nature). The only escape from this oppression is detachment which the Writings and the Buddhist Scriptures praise as the necessary condition for freedom: “*Cast away that which ye possess, and, on the wings of detachment, soar beyond all created things*” [GWB 139]. Elsewhere, Bahá’u’lláh says that His

sole purpose in revealing to thee these words is to sanctify thee from the transitory things of the earth, and aid thee to enter the realm of everlasting glory, that thou mayest, by the leave of God, be of them that abide and rule therein.... [GWB 237]

For Buddhists, this “realm of everlasting glory” is nirvana which can only be attained when the struggle against impermanence ends.

The doctrine of impermanence is the basis of the concept of dependent origination or dependent arising. The importance of this teaching is made clear by the Buddha’s statement that “Whoso understands dependent origination, understands the Law [*Dhamma* or *Dharma*], and who understands the Law understands dependent origination.”⁹ The “Law” in this case is that everything arises as a result of causes or conditions beyond itself and that everything declines as a result of causes and conditions itself. As noted above, the usual Buddhist formula for causality is

When there is this, that is.

With the arising of this, that arises.

When this is not, neither is that.

With the cessation of this, that ceases.¹⁰

It should be noted that the views on what constitutes causality differ among various traditions such as the Theravada and the Madhyamika, but there is no argument about dependent origination itself. Nothing is fully independent or uncaused and/or unconditioned by anything else; we exist as long as the appropriate causes and/or conditions are present. Therefore, things do not exist in and of themselves which in effect is to say that their being is relative and not absolute. In other words, all things are inter-dependent. The following statement by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá conveys the same idea:

For all beings are connected together like a chain; and reciprocal help, assistance and interaction belonging to the properties of things are the causes of the existence, development and growth of created beings. It is confirmed through evidences and proofs that every being universally acts upon other beings, either absolutely or through association. Finally, the perfection of each individual being – is due to the composition of the elements, to their measure, to their balance, to the mode of their combination, and to mutual influence. When all these are gathered together, then man exists. [SAQ 178]

Clearly, our existence is not independent; indeed, “man exists” only when the right conditions are “gathered together” which is another way of saying that we are contingent, dependent beings. Only God is absolute, i.e. not dependent on conditions and, therefore, transcends the processes of the phenomenal world. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement emphasizes that all created beings are radically contingent, i.e. their existence and their attributes depend not only ultimately on God but also immediately on their interactions with the other elements of creation. Here, too, there is basic agreement between the Writings and the Buddha’s teachings.

Provisional existence — Buddhists often refer to it as ‘conventional’ existence — does not mean that things are unreal but that they do not have absolute, eternal reality in-and-of themselves. For that reason, they are called ‘empty’ and the fact of their absolute contingency i.e. inter-dependence is described as ‘emptiness.’ However, there is something else to remember: the provisional or conventional reality has self-sufficient existence or is ‘real’ from its own standpoint but lacks self-sufficient existence and is ‘unreal’ from the standpoint of dependent origination itself. In other words, the existence or reality things possess is relative and one of our tasks to is see through this to the “ultimate truth”¹¹ of their emptiness. We shall say more about this subject below.

3. Emptiness in the Madhyamika School

With this background in mind, it is time to examine the concept of emptiness in several Buddhist schools and in the Bahá’í Writings. We shall start with the Madhyamika tradition because the Madhyamika school represents the most radical interpretation of ‘emptiness.’ It says not only that things are empty but also that emptiness itself is empty.¹² From this position numerous radical consequences follow.

The Madhyamika school of Mahayana Buddhism began in the 2nd Century C.E. with the work of Nagarjuna, an Indian philosopher. His principle work is the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* (*Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*; usually abbreviated as MMK) is a philosophical explication of the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras¹³ which appeared in the 1st century BCE and include the famous *Heart Sutra* with its

eloquent emphasis on the emptiness of all things, thoughts and conditions.¹⁴ In the MMK, Nagarjuna presents his philosophical/logical explications of the Buddha's doctrine of emptiness in a series of four-line verses based on a four-value logic called *tetralemmas*. By means of these tetralemmas, Nagarjuna and the Madhyamikas who followed him attempted to show how any positive philosophical statement about reality leads to contradictions and even absurd conclusions.¹⁵ Our goal is to free ourselves from any kind of conceptual thinking and, therefore, from all purely intellectual viewpoints.¹⁶

Here is an example in which Nagarjuna discusses the relationship between past, present and future.

If the present and the future
 Depend on the past,
 Then the present and future
 Would have existed in the past.

If the present and future
 Did not exist there,
 How could the present and future
 Depend upon it?¹⁷

The goal of these verses is to make us doubt our concepts of time by showing how they lead to contradictions. In this example, he demonstrates how the common belief that the present and the future are based on the past leads to a problem: if that is so, the present and future must somehow have existed in the past. But that is counter-intuitive – obviously if they already existed in the past, they would not be the present and the future. However, if they did not exist in the past, how could they eventually depend on it? Where did they come from? How are they related to the past? The purpose of the exercise is to make us realize that our concepts or conventions do not really apply to time at all. The puzzles exist only because we are 'trapped' within certain concepts or conventions for which all philosophical statements about its nature are untenable. As Nagarjuna writes in the dedicatory verses at the start of the MMK,

Whatever is dependently arisen is
 Unceasing, unborn,
 Unannihilated, not permanent,
 Not coming, not going,
 Without distinction, without identity,
 And free from conceptual construction.¹⁸

According to Nagarjuna, all descriptions or statements about reality are imputations or constructions. They are our own conceptions or constructions and do not provide any information about reality. This is because whatever we say about any aspect of reality consists of nothing but our imputations and attributions, and, therefore, our statements are purely conventional: “the criteria for identity we posit will end up being purely conventional.”¹⁹ For example, we call an arrangement in which a flat surface is mounted on four vertical sticks a ‘table’ – but that is simply a matter of our agreement. What a table is – or a flower or river or clothes – are all mere matters of convention, i.e. constructions. Of course, as conventions, they are quite real; their mode of existing is as a convention and the Madhyamika do not deny this. What they deny is the idea that there is an unchanging essence, a ‘tableness’ that is not subject to dependent origination and that lasts through the destruction of the table itself. Similarly, they – and all Buddhists – deny that there is a human essence or self apart from the combination of components that compose us. Ultimately, all things are conventions or human constructions, and, therefore, empty, i.e. have no ultimate reality.

Is there anything in the Bahá’í Writings that converges with or even accommodates the Madhyamika outlook? There are, indeed, various passages in the Bahá’í Writings conveying a convergent viewpoint. For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes,

The second proposition is that existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness . . . Man, like the

mineral, is existing; but the existence of the mineral in relation to that of man is nothingness, for when the body of man is annihilated it becomes dust and mineral. . . . Though the dust – that is to say, the mineral – has existence in its own condition, in relation to man it is nothingness. Both exist, but the existence of dust and mineral, in relation to man, is nonexistence and nothingness . . .

Therefore, though the world of contingency exists, in relation to the existence of God it is nonexistent and nothingness. . . . In the same way, the existence of creation in relation to the existence of God is nonexistence. [SAQ 280]

The theme of these statements is the relativity of existence – and it converges with the Madhyamika position. This becomes clear once we realize that the Madhyamika term ‘emptiness’ and the Bahá’í terms ‘nothingness’ and ‘contingent’ convey similar, if not identical meanings. Let us recall that ‘emptiness’ refers to an object’s dependence on the process of dependent origination; it has no existence on its own and certainly no permanent existence. In Bahá’í language, it is absolutely ‘contingent.’ From the ultimate viewpoint of dependent origination, it does not exist inherently, intrinsically from “its own side,”²⁰ although from its own, conventional viewpoint it does. In the same way, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that a thing “has existence in its own condition,” that the “world of contingency exists,” but in relationship to God’s existence, their existence is “nonexistent and nothingness.” In short, they are ‘empty’ to use the Buddhist term. ‘Emptiness,’ provisionality and conventionality are their mode of existence whether in relation to God or dependent origination. The Writings describe this situation as “nothingness.” However, it is a relative “nothingness” not the absolute “nothingness” which the Writings – and the Madhyamika – categorically reject.²¹ It should also be noted that in addition to relative nothingness or emptiness vis-à-vis God, the Writings support the idea of ‘emptiness’ from the perspective of the processes of phenomenal reality, i.e. the interactions and influences among the cosmic elements. Everything that exists depends on those universal cosmic process.

Other passages in the Writings point us out the ‘emptiness’ of the phenomenal world. For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

Know thou that the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out. A shadow hath no life of its own; its existence is only a fantasy, and nothing more; it is but images reflected in water, and seeming as pictures to the eye. [SWAB 178, emphasis added; cf. SWAB 177]

Words like “fantasy,” “shadow” and “pictures” clearly express the idea of a world that is less than absolutely real. However, these words are more than striking metaphors. Fantasies and pictures are things we make or construct in some way, i.e. images in the human mind. These are often rooted in our lower animal nature. How many of these conventions or constructs are based on greed, selfishness, hatred, lust, power-hunger etc.? Thus, if we take these images as ultimately real, then we are deceived, either because of a lack of thought, and/or our enslavement to imitations. Bahá’u’lláh says,

Verily I say, the world is like the vapor in a desert, which the thirsty dreameth to be water and striveth after it with all his might, until when he cometh unto it, he findeth it to be mere illusion. [GWB 328, emphasis added]

In examining this image, we note that the phrase the “thirsty [man] dreameth,” i.e. he imputes attributes to the vapors and thereby creates for himself a ‘world.’ What makes the dream illusory is that our concepts, beliefs and attitudes, i.e. our conventions create a world-picture that we confuse with reality. In truth, however, this world or, more accurately, this ‘world-picture’ is empty not only because of dependent origination but because it is no more than a human-made construct or set of conventions. In a similar vein, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “*If we suffer it is the outcome of material things, and all the trials and troubles come from this world of illusion.*” [PT 110] It is we who make this world-picture on the basis of our own imputations, and consequently suffer from it. Of course, the goal is to attain freedom: “*Release yourselves, O nightingales of God, from the thorns and brambles of wretchedness and misery, and wing your flight to the rosegarden of unfading splendor.*” [GWB 319]

The foregoing discussion has shown how the Writings and Madhyamika teachings are on a convergent path on the issue of dependent origination and some of its consequences. However, this only opens up a new issue: whether or not anything transcends or is exempt from dependent origination. These issues are not clear in Buddhism. As Jay Garfield says,

Exactly how this dependency [dependent origination] is spelled out and exactly what its status is, is a matter of considerable debate within Buddhist philosophy . . . Nagarjuna was very much concerned to stake out a radical and revealing position.²²

For example, nirvana itself has been suggested as one such exception to dependent origination. The Buddha describes nirvana in the following words:

There is, monks, an unborn, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded. If, monks, there were not this unborn, not-become, not-made, not-compounded, there would not here be an escape from the born, the become, the made, the compounded. But because there is an unborn, a not-become, the compounded.²³

Clearly, in this passage, nirvana – whether it be a condition or an ontological entity – is not subject to dependent origination and in that sense is an absolute. The Tathagatagarbha schools accept that the Tathagatagarbha itself transcends dependent origination and is eternal i.e. unchanging and also possesses positive and essential attributes purity, bliss (satisfactoriness) and even self.²⁴ The Yogacara philosophers, for example, pointed out that Nagarjuna had forgotten to take into account the consciousness to which his arguments appeared; no matter what turn his arguments took, no matter what one believed about dependent origination, consciousness of them remained. Thus, the Yogacara accept dependent origination but develop into a different direction in which mind transcends dependent origination. Consciousness endures; it is.

These different views are significant because from the perspective of the Writings, the minimal ontological requirement for God is

absolute or “pure independence”²⁵ which obviously transcends dependent origination. Thus, from the perspective of the Writings, any Buddhist philosophy which accepts the idea that something transcends dependent origination, and, therefore, transcends conventionality and emptiness has met the minimal ontological requirement for some version of theism. As we shall see in more detail later, the Writings converge more clearly in this respect with the Tathagatagarbha and Yogacara traditions about emptiness than they do with Nagarjuna’s MMK and its Madhyamika successors. If we accept Nagarjuna’s claims on this issue at face value, there is a clear divergence with the Writings on this issue.

The radical nature of Nagarjuna’s theory of emptiness is evident insofar as he holds that even emptiness itself is empty.²⁶ Indeed, Huntington suggests that “the Madhyamika be read as a radical attempt at abandoning the obsession with a metaphysical absolute.”²⁷ Although this view is highly influential, this is not a universal view for as already noted above, various Buddhist traditions disagree with this understanding of emptiness. However, if even emptiness is empty, i.e. is subject to dependent origination and is a mere convention, then it also follows that dependent origination itself is empty, subject to dependent origination and a convention. Obviously, there is no room for metaphysical absolutes in this version of the Madhyamika; moreover, no philosophical statements can lead to knowledge of the truth of emptiness. As Huntington points out, “The truth of emptiness must be realized in direct awareness of the paradox and mystery of mundane experience.”²⁸ It cannot be put into philosophic statements without causing serious difficulties.

This view accords somewhat with the Bahá’í teachings about the unknowability of God but not with the Bahá’í teachings about our knowledge of reality. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, proof that an absolute, God, exists can be known²⁹ but the nature of God “*is beyond our comprehension; for the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is above all comprehension*” [SAQ 148]. Whatever we say – in distinction to what the Manifestations say – about God is strictly conventional, a product of our time, place and culture, i.e. our knowledge of Him is conventional, and subject to dependent origination. Verbal

descriptions and philosophic statements cannot do more than provide conventional and/or intellectual understanding of God's nature. Indeed, this view is an integral part of progressive revelation in which the human knowledge of God from one dispensation is renewed and expanded in another.

However, in contrast to Nagarjuna and Madhyamika successors, the Bahá'í Writings do not teach that all statements about reality are doomed to self-contradiction or absurdity. Genuine knowledge about reality is certainly possible and, thereby, progress in knowledge and understanding. Otherwise, why would we need progressive revelation if humankind did not make progress, leaving behind untenable views and ultimately requiring a new revelation? Progress, of course, is one of the reasons the Writings put so much emphasis on science since without science genuine progress is impossible. Scientific progress is not only convention.

4. Emptiness, Essence and Self

One of the key features of the Madhyamika understanding of dependent origination is the concept of no essence. Because everything is constantly coming into and passing out of existence, there is no such thing as an essence, i.e. a stable and substantial aspect that remains the same throughout all the changes and which can be identified as such by us. Garfield says that for Nagarjuna everything is

empty of inherent existence or self-nature, or, in more Western terms essence. . . that [the table's] existence *as the object that it is – as a table* – depends not on it, nor on purely nonrelational characteristics but depends on us as well.³⁰

If a table – as table – has no inherent, i.e. independent existence apart from the components that compose it, then neither does anything have a self, including human beings. 'Self' is simply what happens when the right components interact in the right way. When the required inter-action ends, so does the 'self.' As Donald Lopez Jr. says, "The Madhyamika claim is that nothing is ultimately findable under analysis. Everything is empty, even emptiness."³¹ There is no

mysterious ‘self’ to be found within us. Neither things no people have essences; “Buddhism leaves no room for an essentialist conception.”³²

Only some Bahá’í teachings converge with Madhyamika Buddhism on these issues. As we have already seen, Bahá’í views about the phenomenal world converge with Madhyamika beliefs about dependent origination. Both accept that the phenomenal world is in perpetual flux, that “*all else beside God as transient*” [GWB 266], that things come into existence and exist by virtue of universal influence, and that the appearance of any being requires the correct combination of inter-actions.

Finally, the perfection of each individual being – is due to the composition of the elements, to their measure, to their balance, to the mode of their combination, and to mutual influence. When all these are gathered together, then man exists. [SAQ 178]

Consequently, the Bahá’í Writings can accept that all things in the phenomenal are “empty” insofar as their dependence on other things as well as God is concerned. Moreover, the emptiness forms the foundation for an ethical outlook based on detachment from the phenomenal world which because of its endless changing nature, inevitably disappoints.

The question arises as to how far the concept of emptiness goes in the Bahá’í teachings. Does it, for example, apply to the concept of ‘self’? The answer to this question is that in one aspect it does, and in another it does not. This is because there are two concepts of self or ego at work in the Bahá’í Writings. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. [PT 60]

The ‘lower ego’ or ‘self’ is based on our animal nature, i.e. it is purely physical; it is a product of evolution with all the necessary instincts, drives and psychological tendencies. Moreover, to some extent it is a

product of our time, place and historical circumstances because it is also through these we may be attached to the phenomenal world. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes, “*This lower nature in man is symbolized as Satan – the evil ego within us, not an evil personality outside*” [PUP 287]. However, in addition, we have a “*spiritual or higher nature*” [PT 60] of which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “*A man may converse with the ego within him saying: “May I do this? Would it be advisable for me to do this work?” Such as this is conversation with the higher self*” [PT 179]. From this distinction it follows that that “*[o]ur greatest efforts must be directed towards detachment from the things of the world; we must strive to become more spiritual, more luminous*” [PUP 60]. In other words, we must overcome the lower ego and eliminate its domination in our lives.

The Bahá’í emphasis on overcoming our lower animal nature and our attachments to the phenomenal world converges with the Buddhist teachings about the unreality of the ‘ego’ or ‘self.’ On the basis of the Bahá’í descriptions of our lower nature, self, or ego, we may conclude that it is ultimately not real, a product of the interactive processes of the phenomenal world at both the material and socio-historical level, i.e. a product of what Buddhists call dependent origination. As Bahá’ís, we are to detach ourselves from this lower nature and the world, to let it go, to recognize it for the ephemerality it is. Bahá’u’lláh says, His

sole purpose in revealing to thee these words is to sanctify thee from the transitory things of the earth, and aid thee to enter the realm of everlasting glory, that thou mayest, by the leave of God, be of them that abide and rule therein.... [GWB 237]

This leads to the conclusion that there is no obstacle to accepting the Buddhist doctrine of ‘noself’ insofar as the lower self and its attachments to the phenomenal are concerned; these are not ultimately real and must be overcome, left behind or outgrown.

5. Emptiness and the Tathagatagarbha Tradition

The difficult debate begins when we ask what, if anything, remains once we achieve complete detachment from our lower nature or

lower self. The Madhyamika, of course, deny that anything remains: there simply is no self at all. It is an empty convention without more than temporary existence in the process of dependent origination. Such is not the view of the widespread Tathagatagarbha tradition which accepts the concept of an eternal and changeless ‘Buddha-Nature’ in all beings. Because the Buddha-Nature is eternal and changeless, it is not subject to dependent origination and, therefore, is not empty in the Madhyamika sense of the term. According to the Tathagatagarbha tradition, the Madhyamika have only taken account of part of the Buddha’s revelations about the ‘self.’ More precisely, the Madhyamika schools represent only the second turning of the Buddha’s wheel of revelation for which reason their understanding is incomplete, whereas the Tathagatagarbha tradition is the third and final turning of the wheel of revelation. In this final turning, ‘emptiness’ and related concepts receive their final form.

The Tathagatagarbha or Buddha-Nature lies hidden in all sentient beings. According to *The Tathatagatagarbha Sutra*

The Buddha sees that all kinds of beings Universally possess the tathagatagarbha. It is covered by countless klesas, [defilements] Just like a tangle of smelly, wilted petals. So I, on behalf of all beings,

Everywhere expound the true Dharma, In order to help them remove their klesas And quickly reach the Buddha way.

I see with my Buddha eye

That in the bodies of all beings

*There lies concealed the buddhagarbha.*³³

According to the *Tathagatagarbha Sutra*, “the tathagatagarbhas of all beings are eternal and unchanging”⁵⁷ which, as noted before, means they are unconditioned and exempt from dependent origination and, therefore, are not empty in the Madhyamika sense. In *The Srimala Devi Sutra*, one of the central Tathagatagarbha sutras, we read:

But, Lord, the Tathagatagarbha is not born, does not die, does not pass away to become reborn. The Tathagatagarbha *excludes the realm with the characteristic of the constructed.*

The Tathagatagarbha is permanent, steadfast, eternal. Therefore the Tathagatagarbha is the support, the holder, the base of constructed.³⁴

Of special significance here is the distinction between the eternal realm of the Tathagatagarbha and “the realm with the characteristic of the constructed” which refers to what the Madhyamika call the conventional world which we ‘construct’ by identifying things and giving them discrete names. This is the realm of phenomenal change. Such passages emphasize that unlike the Madhyamika, Tathagatagarbha Buddhism recognizes the real, independent existence, of something eternal, i.e. something that is an exception to the process of dependent origination, and, consequently, something not empty.

Lord, the Tathagatagarbha has *ultimate existence* without beginning or end, has an unborn and undying nature, and experiences suffering; hence it is worthy of the Tathagatagarbha to have aversion towards suffering as well as longing, eagerness, and aspiration towards Nirvana.³⁵

The last statement already suggests that it is the Tathagatagarbha within us that seeks to escape the suffering of the phenomenal world of dependent origination and aspires towards the Nirvana. This is the noble desire that dwells deep within all of us. In the *Srimala Devi Sutra*, the Buddha says,

‘Good sons, do not consider yourselves inferior or base. You all personally possess the Buddha nature.’ If you exert yourselves and destroy your past evils, then you will receive the *title of bodhisattvas or world-honored ones*, and convert and save countless sentient beings.³⁶

In passing, let us note that this statement has its counterpart in the Bahá’í Writings in which Bahá’u’lláh says, “*O SON OF SPIRIT! Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created*” [HW Ar. #22]. Being a bodhisattva or “world-honored one” is a noble and honored status and so, the Buddha’s and Bahá’u’lláh’s statements may be understood to express the same spirit and meaning. Moreover, if we possess the

Tathagatagarbha, then obviously, contrary to Madhyamika doctrine, there is something enduring within us not subject to dependent origination. This is the true self.

'Self' means 'tathagatagarbha.' Every being has the Buddha Nature. This is self. Such a self is, since the very beginning, under cover of innumerable illusions [defilements] . . . I now let persons see the Buddha Nature that they possess, which is overspread by illusion [defilements] . . . ³⁷

As evident here, the Tathagatagarbha tradition differs significantly from the Madhyamika, regarding the existence of an absolute, eternal exception to dependent origination and regarding the existence of a 'self.' Self is not necessarily empty as taught by the Madhyamika since this transcendent self is exempt from dependent origination. The self that is, indeed, empty, is the 'ego' or personality that is shaped by the processes of dependent origination but this must not be confused with — as the Madhyamika have done — with the Buddha-Nature within us. According to the Buddha, we do not seem to have a self because the Buddha-Nature or Tathagatagarbha is always covered with defilements so that we do not know what our real self is, and, therefore, do not possess it.³⁸ In other words, according to the Tathagatagarbha tradition, the Madhyamika possessed an earlier understanding of the Buddha's teachings. The Madhyamika teachings are not wrong but incomplete. Their doctrine that self is empty, is not the full teaching of the Buddha and must be re-thought in light of the revelations of the various Tathagatagarbha sutras.

There is a remarkable agreement between the Tathagatagarbha tradition and the Bahá'í Writings on the subject of a transcendent aspect within all individual beings. Bahá'u'lláh writes, "*No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it*" [GWB 178]. Both agree that all things are characterized by something that is not subject to dependent origination and, therefore, is not empty in the Madhyamika sense, i.e. is not conventional, and by contrast, has positive inherent qualities and existence. Our human task is to uncover and actualize that aspect within ourselves in order to overcome the conventional and worldly ego. As we shall see, in the Bahá'í system and the Tathagatagarbha tradition, emptiness means cleansing ourselves of defilements.

In general terms, we may say that the Buddha-Nature within us corresponds, in Bahá'í terms, to our spiritual nature.

This spiritual nature, which came into existence through the bounty of the Divine Reality, is the union of all perfections and appears through the breath of the Holy Spirit. It is the divine perfections; it is light, spirituality, guidance, exaltation, high aspiration, justice, love, grace, kindness to all, philanthropy, the essence of life. It is the reflection of the splendor of the Sun of Reality. [SAQ 118, emphasis added]

Our spiritual nature is a reflective presence of the divine in us, and, as expected, includes positive attributes that are “divine perfections,” i.e. they are not mere conventions as required by Madhyamika thinking. These are real virtues latent within us and they are the ‘real’ self inasmuch as it is more God-like and because it represents enduring values and attributes for which we are to strive. Our task is to follow the spiritual discipline laid down by Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá in order to overcome and transform the qualities of our lower nature and its ego and, thereby, to submerge or lose them in our higher spiritual nature. That way our lower qualities will no longer conceal and defile the spiritual nature within us. That way our spiritual nature will become visible in our lives. As we shall see in more detail below, this corresponds to the Tathagatagarbha concept of emptiness which requires making our higher nature – or Buddha-Nature – “empty of what is changing, afflicted and worldly”³⁹ to reveal the beauties of the Buddha-Nature.

The concept of the presence of the omnipresent Buddha-Nature is also evident in the teaching that the “names of God” are necessarily inherent in all things:

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light. Methinks, but for the potency of that revelation, no being could ever exist. How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a

drop! . . . For in him [man] are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. [GWB 177]

The names or attributes of God are eternal and, therefore, uncreated and not in any way susceptible to dependent origination because God Himself is ‘eternal’ and absolutely independent from anything except Himself. Just as the Buddha-Nature within all sentient beings is eternal and not empty, so the names of God in all things are not empty.

There is yet another way in which the Tathagatagarbha doctrine converges with the Bahá’í Writings. The Writings state,

Souls are like unto mirrors, and the bounty of God is like unto the sun. When the mirrors pass beyond (the condition of) all coloring and attain purity and polish, and are confronted with the sun, they will reflect in full perfection its light and glory. In this condition one should not consider the mirror, but the power of the light of the sun, which hath penetrated the mirror, making it a reflector of the heavenly glory. [TAB1 19]

Here, too, we observe how the presence of the divine or Absolute appears in the soul, which in its purest state, is free of “coloring” or extraneous elements or defilements and simply reflects the perfection of the sun. The purity of the soul is, in fact, its original state: “*Know thou that every soul is fashioned after the nature of God, each being pure and holy at his birth*” [SWAB 190]. This original “pure and holy soul [that] is the tathagatagarbha or Buddha-Nature that exists in all things. It is continues when the soul is cleansed of defilements and when our ego and our lower nature are overcome. For this reason, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us,

The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world. [defilements] Although the same Sun is shining upon both, in the mirror which is polished, pure

and sanctified you may behold the Sun in all its fullness, glory and power revealing its majesty and effulgence, but in the mirror which is rusted and obscured there is no capacity for reflection. [PUP 14, emphasis added]

The deficient, defiled mirror, of course, is the one still facing or attached to the world instead of to the light of the sun, or, to view it from a Buddhist perspective, the ego is still visible and thus the divine, the Tathagatagarbha is obscured – not itself actually marred – by various defilements. In this view, emptiness is not so much something we understand intellectually as something we achieve by cleansing the “dross” from the mirror of the soul.

It is evident that the definition of ‘emptiness’ used in the Tathagatagarbha tradition is dramatically different from that used by the Madhyamikas who maintain nothing whatsoever has inherent existence: emptiness, the Buddha,⁴⁰ the teachings and the distinction between samsara, and nirvana are empty as are all intellectual and conceptualized understandings of them. According to Paul Williams, there is an

opposition between the Madhyamaka view of emptiness as an absence of inherent existence in the object under investigation and the tathagatagarbha perspective on emptiness . . . which sees emptiness as the radiant, pure mind empty of its conceptual accretions.⁷²

The “pure mind,” the Tathagatagarbha itself is found to be empty of all intellectual imputations, i.e. empty of all convention. It is “empty of all defilements, including the defilements of conceptuality.”⁴¹ As Tony Page writes,

So-called “Emptiness”, which is an absolutely key concept of Mahayana Buddhism, reveals itself here to be only *empty of what is changing, afflicted and worldly* – not of the changeless and positive attributes of total Bliss, Joy, Imperturbability and Eternity. The “Emptiness” of nirvanic Liberation is something that was never constructed or put together and so can never die. And it is integrally linked to a knowing being – the Buddha himself .⁴²

By removing these various defilements, we find our Buddha-Nature, our Tathagatagarbha, which is “never constructed,” i.e. is not a conventional imputation and which is connected to the Buddha. Emptiness is precisely this condition of lacking the defilements and imputations that cover the true Buddha-Nature within. Just as noteworthy is the fact that the Buddha-Nature has eternal, i.e. changeless positive attributes such as bliss and joy which are not mere conventions we have imputed to it. (In this sense, of course, the Tathagatagarbha tradition converges with Platonism and its eternal Ideas.)

The Bahá’í Writings present the same idea. When the mirror of the soul (or heart) is cleansed of all defilements, the radiance of the Sun becomes visible in its splendor and all our awareness of the lower ego is lost, at least for a time as we reflect “*the full glory of the Sun of Truth*” [PT 95]. This reflection is not, of course, an ontological unity between the mirror and the Sun, but rather an analogical unity in which the sun in the mirror is the analogue of the divine Sun, i.e. both different and similar. To be cleansed of defilements, we must seek to become detached “*from all else save God*” [SWAB 86] and to practice self-sacrifice and the “*evanescence*” [TAB2 460] and to “*to reflect the love of the Highest on all men*” [PT 87]. In doing so, we find what remains in our souls and hearts is our attachment to or love for God which is precisely what makes us spiritually noble beings. It is also that aspect of us which is more real than the ego or self. We might call this ‘the practice of emptiness.’

It is evident that in the Tathagatagarbha tradition and the Bahá’í Writings agree that ‘emptiness’ is the lack of defilements. The Buddha-Nature is empty not in itself – for it has inherent existence and positive qualities – but because it is clean of all emotional, intellectual and behavioral imperfections. Thus, emptiness does not mean a lack of inherent existence as it does in the Madhyamika schools but rather it means a lack of defilement. “In this sense the Buddha essence is indeed empty – it is empty of adventitious defilements which simply do not exist at all from the point of view of its own innate purity.”⁴³ In Tibet, the Jo nang pa school knows this as the “other-empty” view in contrast to Ge lug pas who espouse the “self-empty” view of the Madhyamikas.⁴⁴ (The Dalai Lama is a Ge lug pa.)

In the Bahá'í context, the Manifestation in “*the condition of divine appearance and heavenly splendor*” [SAQ 151] may also be described as ‘empty’ in the Tathagatagarbha sense:

The third station is that of the divine appearance and heavenly splendor: it is the Word of God, the Eternal Bounty, the Holy Spirit. It has neither beginning nor end, for these things are related to the world of contingencies and not to the divine world. For God the end is the same thing as the beginning. [SAQ 151]

If the Manifestation in the third station is free of time because time is related to the contingent world, then, by implication, He is also free of the other defilements associated with the contingent world. Consequently, in the Tathagatagarbha sense, the Manifestation may be described as ‘empty.’ The same is true of God Who is also empty in the Tathagatagarbha sense of the term.

However, we should not conflate the Bahá'í doctrine of the unknowability of God with any form of Buddhist emptiness teaching. The Bahá'í doctrine of the unknowability of God is a teaching about human capacity, or incapacity, in light of the ontological difference between God and humankind. In contrast, Buddhist emptiness teaching concerns either the Buddha-Nature's lack of defilement or the mere conventionality of any such supposed entity. From a Bahá'í viewpoint, saying that God lacks defilements is superfluous, and saying that the existence of God is a mere convention is contrary to the Writings since God does not depend on us.

We now arrive at the thorny issue of the ‘self’ in the Tathagatagarbha tradition and the Bahá'í Writings. In the Madhyamika tradition, the concept of ‘self’ is empty, i.e. a convention imputed by us on the process of dependent origination. However, in the Tathagatagarbha tradition, matters are not so straight-forward. On one hand, the Tathagatagarbha tradition makes it clear that the Buddha-Nature within us should not be understood as a personality, ego or self.⁴⁵ Yet, despite repeated emphasis on this point, it has often been said the Tathagatagarbha schools have – perhaps inadvertently – re-introduced the concept of self into Buddhism. Donald Lopez Jr. states that “another controversy [about the Tathagatagarbha doctrine] derives from the fact that the

tathagatagarbha is often described in such a way that it sounds like a self."⁴⁶ It is not difficult to see why as shown by the following quotation from the Buddha:

O Kasyapa!

Know well of the three refuges. The nature
Of the three refuges is that of self. If one knows
Clearly that the nature of self has the Buddha Nature,
Such a one well enters the undisclosed house.⁴⁷

Inevitably, such statements raise questions. How can "the nature of the self" have the Buddha-Nature without that "nature of the self" also having something essential or 'eternal' about it, something exempt from dependent origination, and, therefore, not empty? This suggestion seems reinforced by statements like "The nature of self is none but the undisclosed storehouse of the Tathagata."⁴⁸ Since the Tathagata (The Buddha) is exempt from dependent origination, the same appears to be true of the self.

Moreover, from a strictly philosophical point of view, one might also reason as follows. If the Buddha-Nature is present in all sentient beings, then it is present individually in all beings. In other words, every being is a particularized appearance of the Buddha-Nature and insofar as it is particular, it is difficult to avoid suggestions of individuality or self. Bare particularity is the minimal logical requirement for the existence of a self and each sentient being seems to meet that minimal requirement. The Buddha-Nature that appears in all things may be the same, but this 'sameness' makes individual appearances in all particular things. While this particularity is not a 'self' in the sense of a fully-developed ego or personality, it is, at least, something possessing the minimum logical foundation for individuality. This seems to be recognized by David Kalupahana who says the Tathagatagarbha view (among others) brings us "dangerously close to the theory of self . . . advocated by the heretics."⁴⁹ Rupert Gettin writes that the issue is difficult to resolve because "its [the self's] metaphysical and ontological status is, however, open to interpretation in terms of the different Mahayana philosophical schools."⁸⁸

While we are unable to resolve these tensions and ambiguities among Buddhist traditions, we are able to conclude the Tathagatagarbha tradition and the Bahá'í Writings seem to converge in regards to the subject of self. There is something transcendent in us – be it called the Buddha Nature or spiritual nature or names of God – that must be revealed by us. The definition of the self as the Tathagatagarbha also means that a different view of emptiness is at work – emptiness as the removal of defilements of the Buddha-Nature. In the Jo nang pa this is called being ‘other empty.’ The Bahá'í Writings do not share this language but they do share a similar view of emptiness.

6. Emptiness in the Yogacara Tradition

The Yogacara tradition is generally regarded as being a form of philosophic idealism in which there is

an ultimate reality, real beyond anything which can be asserted of what comes within the range of [human] experience. This is thought (*citta*) or mind, not mind as existing in the variety in which it is experienced, but without any differentiation, and called store-consciousness (*alaya-vijnana*).⁵⁰

Self and all apparently external objects are empty insofar as they have no inherent or independent existence and no enduring essence. Moreover, all objects – whether they appear to exist outside us or whether they are thoughts, feelings and perceptions, are, in Vasubandhu's phrase “ideation only.”⁵¹ Even in regards to apparently external objects, all we can know are our own experiences and nothing more. If we kick a rock, as Dr. Johnson famously did to refute the idealist Bishop Berkeley, we still only have our sensory impression – an ‘idea’ – of the rock we just kicked. We experience ‘hardness’ or ‘resistance’ but those are still our experiences. This applies to the self as well. If we examine our inward life, all we find is a stream of changing perceptions and impressions, but we do not find a ‘self’ in that stream. The seemingly external world arises because “[d]ue to our beginningless ignorance we construct these perceptions into enduring subjects and objects.”⁵² In other words, as in the Madhyamika philosophy, all objects of perception and thought exist

‘conventionally’ and have no inherent existence or essence. In that sense they are ‘empty.’ However, the Yogacara position goes beyond the Madhyamika view which only tells us what things are ultimately not and says nothing about what they are and which does not explain how things come to appear in the way they do.⁵³ From this perspective, Madhyamika views are negative whereas the Yogacara tradition is positive insofar as it provides a positive explanation for the nature of existence and human perception.

While the Yogacarins agree that things that appear to us as the world or self are conventional and empty, it also asserts that consciousness itself is the real substratum that underlies all appearances. It alone has inherent existence and essence. Hence the Yogacara tradition is sometimes called the “mind-only” school, since consciousness or mind – though not the individual mind – is recognized as being ultimately real. “Highest knowledge yields the realization that reality is pure and undiscriminated consciousness.”⁵⁴ The apparently separate existence of all other things – including the ‘self’ – is explained as the result of the “store-consciousness.” The store-house consciousness

is the particular repository of all the seeds sown by the defilements of a being’s active consciousness’ it is the result of the being’s past karma . . . as such the store consciousness is also the condition for the perpetuation of these defilements in present and future active consciousness.⁹⁴

The ultimate reality or universal consciousness contains the “seeds” or potential future consequences or dispositions of all past actions and defilements by all entities. These seeds are a metaphor for karma. As the seeds ‘mature,’ or the potentials actualize through dependent origination, certain consequences arise and these lead to the appearance of self and world, subject and object, perceiver and perceived, experiencer and experienced. In the words of the Dalai Lama, the Yogacarins “argue that the perception of the external world arises as the result of the imprints [seeds] that exist within the consciousness.”⁵⁵ However, the ultimate truth is that none of these dualities are true – they are empty – and that all things are one in the universal consciousness. Even to say they are ‘one’ may already go

too far inasmuch as this universal consciousness exists beyond all human categorizations.

For Yogacarins, emptiness refers to lack of any distinction between subject and object, between perceiver and perceived, and between the 'experiencer' and the experience. They are all one and same – 'parts' of the universal consciousness on which we impose arbitrary constructions as a result of karmic seeds. None of these 'objects' have inherent existence or essence. This is exactly the emptiness revealed by enlightenment. Emptiness, therefore, may be characterized as the recognition that no ontological differences are real and that ontologically speaking, we are all one.

The relationship between the Bahá'í Writings and the Yogacara concept of emptiness has two aspects, one ontological and the other spiritual or moral. From a strictly ontological point of view, it is possible to argue that the Bahá'í Writings and Yogacara doctrine converge insofar as they both see all created things as ontologically equal. Unlike the universal consciousness which has the ontological marks of traditional concepts of divinity, i.e. absolute independence, eternity and exemption from change, every self, every subject and object is absolutely dependent – and thus, as the Writings indicate – relatively unreal or 'conventional.' Things also lack inherent existence and are inextricably subject to change. In a word, they are empty. In this sense a chair, a human being and a mountain are ontologically identical. From the ultimate ontological perspective of the universal consciousness, the differences we perceive are conventional 'add-ons' to our common ontological nature, and, therefore, not ultimate. Recognizing our ontological emptiness vis-à-vis the universal consciousness or God is the necessary first step to attaining freedom from the conventional delusions that imprison us.

The Bahá'í Writings agree with much of this analysis. For example, recognizing that much of what we purport to know is conventional in nature, i.e. human constructions based on time, place, circumstance and level of cultural development is a key element in the Bahá'í teachings. In Yogacara terminology, these individually or culturally determined constructs are empty, i.e. they are the delusions caused by individual and cultural factors or 'seeds' that we impose on them. (From the ultimate perspective of universal consciousness, we cannot even say we 'impose' these attributes, since

the subject/object division is not real.) Our task is to overcome our enslavement to these imitative delusions to attain true freedom, hence the Bahá'í emphasis on the independent investigation of truth.

Happy are those who spend their days in gaining knowledge, in discovering the secrets of nature, and in penetrating the subtleties of pure truth! Woe to those who are contented with ignorance, whose hearts are gladdened by thoughtless imitation, who have fallen into the lowest depths of ignorance and foolishness, and who have wasted their lives!
[SAQ 137]

Because the Bahá'í Writings mainly applies the task of recognizing and overcoming conventions in knowledge to religion and social issues, we should not be blinded to the fact that it applies equally to all other kinds of knowledge – including self-knowledge. Many of our difficulties originate in our responses not to things as they are but to our conventional or imitational understanding of them. The only way to overcome this problem is to free ourselves from entanglement in our conventions and to recognize the emptiness of things. Here, too, the Bahá'í Writings and Yogacara philosophy converge.

Of course, there remains the question of whether or not the subject/object dichotomy can also be overcome at least from an ontological perspective. As we recall, in the Yogacara view all differences between subject/object and indeed, between all things are known to be empty vis-à-vis the “pure and undiscriminated consciousness.”⁵⁶ From the ultimate perspective, the differences between them are empty. Is there any convergence with Bahá'í teachings on this matter? Perhaps. One could argue that all created things are simply appearances of the creative power of God's Will. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, “*Throughout the universe the divine power is effulgent in endless images and pictures*” [PUP 14]. Given this point of view, it seems to follow that all things and all distinctions between things are not ultimate insofar as they are dependent on the “divine power.” To this extent, at least, the Bahá'í Writings converge with the Yogacara view. However, while the Bahá'í Writings suggest that at least some distinctions and attributes are imposed on things, and, thereby, empty, they do not believe that all distinctions are necessary

empty. For example, the rational soul distinguishes humans from animals in a definitive, nonempty way [SAQ 208]. Only at the most fundamental ontological level is this distinction vitiated.

The Bahá'í Writings diverge from Yogacara teaching regarding the ontological difference between created things and God – or the universal consciousness.⁵⁷ This distinction is not empty, not conventional and not bridgeable. In the Yogacara teaching, when the self recognizes the emptiness of all distinctions between itself and the universal consciousness, it becomes indistinguishable from the universal consciousness, i.e. it overcomes the dualism of subject and object, and discovers emptiness. This discovery is “nonconceptual knowledge”⁵⁸ empty of both the experiencing subject and its object which are no longer distinguished. Thereby, a human “becomes one with the Ultimate Reality.”⁵⁹ This view may be interpreted ontologically or epistemologically.⁶⁰

If we adopt an ontological interpretation of this Yogacara teaching, there is an outright conflict with the Bahá'í Writings. The Writings are most emphatic that we, as contingent beings, are not God and can never hope to be, ontologically ‘one with Him’ i.e. can never “join partners with God” [ESW 101]. Mystics may feel as if they have achieved such unity, but in reality they have not and claims to the contrary are mistaken interpretations of their experience. There is an unbridgeable difference between absolute independence and absolute dependence that the latter can never cross. The difference between God and humankind is not empty. In a similar vein, the Writings are clear that except for our basic ontological attributes such as dependence and mutability, some differences between kinds of beings are not empty or conventional, and, therefore, real.

If we adopt an epistemological interpretation of the Yogacara position, there are fewer complexities vis-à-vis the Bahá'í Writings. For example, we may under certain circumstances feel ourselves so much in harmony with the divine will, that all sense of being a self with a separate will is extinguished. The distinction between our will and God's will has been vitiated and is, therefore, empty. This condition is traditionally described by Christians as ‘kenosis.’ However, this ‘self-emptying’ is a psycho-spiritual condition and is not an ontological state. We are who we are and God is Who He is.⁶¹

The Bahá'í and Yogacara teachings also converge when we apply them to morals. Morally speaking, one of our tasks is precisely to recognize the emptiness of any imputed differences between ourselves and others. Indeed, we must realize that these differences insofar as they separate us and generate animosity, are empty, i.e. are, to use Yogacara terminology, the products of the seeds of our own 'karma' or personal history and, therefore, not real in comparison with our common spiritual nature.

For now have the rays of reality from the Sun of the world of existence, united in adoration all the worshippers of this light; and these rays have, through infinite grace, gathered all peoples together within this wide-spreading shelter; therefore must all souls become as one soul, and all hearts as one heart. Let all be set free from the multiple identities that were born of passion and desire, and in the oneness of their love for God find a new way of life. [SWAB 76]

The identities "born of passion and desire" may well be those identities which, in the Yogacara metaphor, 'sprout' from the karmic seeds. In the Yogacara view, these seeds originate in past lives, whereas in the Bahá'í view they may be the consequences of earlier good and bad actions. In either case, we are to recognize that the differences between ourselves and others, are empty, i.e. non-essential vis-à-vis our common spiritual nature and goals. What is most real about us is our spiritual nature. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "[m]an is, in reality, a spiritual being, and only when he lives in the spirit is he truly happy" [PT 72]. This implies that our moral goal is to achieve emptiness or non-duality between our empirical, 'every-day' self and our spiritual self, i.e. to overcome any difference between the two. Only thus can we become "as one soul."⁶²

Moreover, the Bahá'í Writings seek to apply this principle not only to individuals but also socially, to races, nationalities and social classes: "*The divine Manifestations since the day of Adam have striven to unite humanity so that all may be accounted as one soul*" [PUP 150]. It is not enough that individuals realize their emptiness vis-à-vis the universal consciousness or God – rather, we must recognize that, from spiritually speaking, racial and even cultural differences are empty conventions. This is not to say these differences are not

valuable, but we must never forget that they are not ultimate, i.e. empty and allow them to stand in the way of progress to a more peaceful and productive world. In this way the Bahá'í Faith tries to put the concept of emptiness into practice.

7. Emptiness in the Theravada Tradition

In the Theravada tradition which predominates in Southeast Asian nations such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, the concept of emptiness plays a very different role than it does in the various Mahayana schools. Edward Conze, one of the greatest Buddhologists, informs us that the Theravada thinkers “knew the term *empty*, but used it very sparingly. In the Pali Canon it occurs only in a few places.”⁶³ Not only are there fewer references to emptiness in the Theravada tradition than in the Mahayana, but the Theravada has emphasis is on practices that lead to the experience of ‘liberation’ or ‘*nibbana*’ (*nirvana* in Sanskrit), also known as ‘awakening.’ Liberation refers to the condition in which ignorance and the resulting desire, suffering and *kamma* (*karma* in Sanskrit) are left behind or transcended. This brings with it serenity and bliss. Liberation must be personally experienced to be understood. Unlike the Mahayana tradition which is rich in metaphysical reflections on emptiness as a lack of inherent existence, the Theravada tradition is more pragmatic than speculative in its approach to emptiness. It is concerned with how the practice of emptiness can help us overcome the unsatisfactoriness or suffering of life and to attain *nibbana*, i.e. awakening or liberation.

In the Theravada there was greater emphasis on self-discipline and individual achievement. The goal was *arhatship*, which symbolized the extinction of the fires of lust and craving in the individual brought about by his or her own efforts.⁶⁴

Theravadin monk and scholar Thanissaro Bhikkhu states,

This is where this sort of emptiness differs from the metaphysical definition of emptiness as “lack of inherent existence.” Whereas that view of emptiness doesn't necessarily involve integrity – it's an attempt to describe the ultimate truth of the nature of things, rather than to evaluate

actions – this approach to emptiness requires honestly evaluating your mental actions and their results. Integrity is thus integral to its mastery.¹¹²

Two *suttas* (the Pali term for ‘*sutras*’ or Buddha word) stand out in this regard, *The Greater Discourse on Emptiness* and *The Lesser Discourse on Emptiness*. According to Thanissaro Bhikkhu, the Pali Canon has three perspectives on emptiness. The first concerns acquiring and maintaining the mental state of emptiness, i.e. learning how to empty the mind of all distractions and keep it empty. Step by step the Buddha explains how to empty the mind of the perception of social distractions, of natural distractions and eventually the distractions of space, nothingness and consciousness and all the humanly-constructed concepts of “perception and nonperception.”¹¹³ This brings the seeker to “his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, pure – superior [and] unsurpassed.”⁶⁵ Here we observe emptiness as goal of meditation; ‘emptiness’ is freedom from disturbing intrusions. This first perspective on emptiness is the focal point of this discourse.

The second perspective on emptiness concerns the question, ‘What does it mean to say the world is empty?’ The answer is that the world is empty insofar as nothing has any ‘self.’

Insofar as it [the world] is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self: Thus it is said, Ananda, that the world is empty. And what is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self? The eye is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self. Forms... Eye-consciousness... Eye-contact is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self.⁶⁶

The intellect, ideas, consciousness are also empty of self and, therefore, any attributes we impute to objects of consciousness, i.e. the world, are empty of self as well. We create this illusion of self in our desire to be happy, and, consequently seek to control the world around us, engaging in “my-making” and “I-making”⁶⁷ which inevitably incites struggles with others trying to do the same. When we perceive without implicitly or unconsciously tainting our perceptions with notions of self, i.e. engage in self-centered

perception, they cease to cause us dissatisfaction and suffering. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, we are to become “*wearied of self*” [SWAB 76].

“Emptiness in its third meaning, as a type of awareness-release”⁶⁸ which is an application of the second meaning of emptiness in concrete situations. For example, in an empty house, we may consider how every room in the house is empty of self, which, according to the Theravada tradition is different from the first kind of emptiness as we eliminate distractions. The finer details of this kind of emptiness need not detain us here, except to say that this kind of emptiness may “lead to Awakening”⁶⁸ which is the end of ignorance, desiring, suffering and karma, and the attainment of supreme, unconditioned tranquility.

The Theravada teachings and the Bahá’í Writings are convergent about several issues in regards to emptiness. The first of these concerns the practical application of emptiness as freedom from intrusive distractions. According to the Writings, “*No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it*” [GWB 178]. As a guide to practicing emptiness vis-à-vis distractions, this statement can be the basis of training ourselves not to see anything but the signs of God in all things much as the aspiring Theravadin excludes a variety of intrusive perceptions and ideas. In other words, Bahá’ís will practice setting aside or emptying their vision of the ‘defilements,’ i.e. the short-coming of things and/or people, and strive to see only the presence of the divine names in them.

The chief of these distractions is the notion of ‘self’ – which, as in the Buddhist scriptures, must be transcended for any spiritual progress to occur. This message is conveyed in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s story of Christ and the dead dog. Whereas the disciples were repelled by the gross sights and smells, Christ, so to speak, emptied His perception of these negative distractions and saw only the positive [SWAB 169]. We might also say that the disciples were imprisoned by their self-centered perception of the decaying dog – they focussed exclusively on how the dog affected them personally, i.e. how it affected the self. Christ’s response, on the other hand, demonstrated that he had emptied His perception of self and was awakened to the presence of the divine. He was liberated from self and self-centered perception.⁶⁹ This emphasis on over-coming self-centered perception and living is,

of course, the main point of the second meaning of emptiness in the Theravada teachings. The Writings agree that what Thanissaro Bhikkhu calls “I-making” and “my-making”⁷⁰ are the source of conflicts as we perceive the world in terms of ‘I’ and ‘mine,’ i.e. self-centered perception. Consequently, this perceptual habit must be overcome.

Finally, Bahá’u’lláh commands us to become “one soul,” [GWB 169] a command which requires us to empty our minds of all the intrusive distractions of negative differences. As we can see, a similar emptying process is at work as distractions from our goal are repelled. On this score, the Bahá’í Writings and the Theravada teachings converge. However, the Writings practice emptying more in an ethical context than the Theravada teachings which also concern themselves with eliminating ‘metaphysical’ distractions such as time, space and the humanly-constructed concepts of “perception and non-perception.”⁷¹ The difference between the Bahá’í and Theravada teaching is largely a matter of emphasis.

Both the Theravada tradition and the Bahá’í Writings share the idea that understanding and practicing emptiness is necessary to awakening. Theravadins practice emptiness in order to achieve liberation, *nibbana* or awakening to humankind’s true condition beyond ignorance, desire, suffering and *kamma* (*karma*). On the other hand, Bahá’ís practice emptiness to awaken to and experience the divine presence in all. From a Bahá’í perspective, this divine presence is also the true human condition and the defilements we add to our lives are the self-driven falsifications we need to overcome.

8. Conclusion

Our survey of the Bahá’í Writings and the Buddhist concept of emptiness leads to three major conclusions. First: there are a surprising number of agreements and convergences on this subject especially regarding the ontological basis for the concept of emptiness. This does not seem to change whether we discuss the Madhyamika, the Tathagatagarbha or the Yogacara traditions. The key elements of dependent origination, ubiquitous change as the basis of emptiness, as well as the role of conventions and the necessity for seeing through them remain constant. In the Theravada tradition we

observe similarities regarding the practice of emptiness. Second: the Buddhist tradition with which the Bahá'í Writings have the clearest convergences is the Tathagatagarbha tradition. The concept of the presence of the divine or Buddha-Nature in all things and the definition of emptiness as the removal of defilements are clearly in harmony with the Writings. Third: the study of the Buddhist concepts of emptiness and the Bahá'í Writings requires more study to work out the details of these convergences which have only been adumbrated here.

NOTES

- ¹ "Buddhism Rising," National Geographic, Vol. 208, No. 6, December 2005, p. 98.
- ² Buddha, The Theravada Mahaparinirvana Sutta, in Piyadassi, The Spectrum of Buddhism, p.104.
- ³ P.A. Payutto, Dependent Origination, p.4.
- ⁴ Dale S. Wright, The Six Perfections, p. 221.
- ⁵ The Questions of King Milinda, trans. by T.W. Rhys Davids, Bk II, chp. 1. <http://www.sacredtexts.com/bud/milinda.htm>
- ⁶ Majjhima-Nikaya, Sutta 63, trans by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.063.than.html>
- ⁷ Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "The Concept of No-Self in Buddhism;" emphasis added. <http://www.angelfire.com/electronic/awakening101/noself.html>
- ⁸ See also Foundations of World Unity, 83, 57; The Promulgation of Universal Peace 160, 284, 285;
- ⁹ Majjhima Nikaya 28 in The Path of the Buddha: Buddhism Interpreted by Buddhists, p. 81; see also Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition, p. 66.
- ¹⁰ P.A. Payutto, Dependent Origination, p.4.
- ¹¹ Gadjin M Nagao, Madhyamika and Yogacara, p. 178.
- ¹² C.W. Huntington with Geshe Wangchen, The Emptiness of Emptiness.
- ¹³ A sutra or sutta (in Pali) is a text that is considered to be a revelation of the Buddha.
- ¹⁴ The Heart Sutra, trans. by E. Conze. <http://kr.buddhism.org/zen/sutras/conze.htm>

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- ¹⁵ Hsueh-Li Cheng, *Empty Logic: Madhyamika Buddhism from Chinese Sources*, p. 50.
- ¹⁶ Hsueh-Li Cheng, *Empty Logic: Madhyamika Buddhism from Chinese Sources*, p. 51.
- ¹⁷ *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, trans. and commentary by Jay L. Garfield, p. 50.
- ¹⁸ *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, p. 100.
- ¹⁹ *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, p. 101.
- ²⁰ Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, p. 70.
- ²¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280.
- ²² *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, p. 91.
- ²³ *The Buddha, Udana 80 -81 in Buddhist Texts Through the Ages* ed. by Conze and Waley, p. 95.
- ²⁴ Heng-Ching Shih, “The Significance of Tathagatagarbha: A Positive Expression of Sunyata,” <http://www.viet.net/anson/ebud/ebdha191.htm>
- ²⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- ²⁶ C.W. Huntington and Geshe Namgayl Wangchen, *The Emptiness of Emptiness*. p. 26.
- ²⁷ *The Emptiness of Emptiness*. p. 29.
- ²⁸ *The Emptiness of Emptiness*. p. 37.
- ²⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 4.
- ³⁰ *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, p. 89.
- ³¹ Donald S Lopez Jr., *The Story of Buddhism*, p. 250.
- ³² David J Kalupahana, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy*, p. 51.
- ³³ *The Tathagatagarbha Sutra*, trans. by William H Grosnick; emphasis added. <http://www.webspawner.com/users/bodhisattva/index.html> ⁵⁷
The Tathagatagarbha Sutra, trans. by William H Grosnick.
- ³⁴ *The Srimala Devi Sutra*, trans. by Alex and Hideko Wayman; emphasis added <http://www.purifymind.com/SrimalaDeviSutra.htm>
- ³⁵ *The Srimala Devi Sutra*, trans. by Alex and Hideko Wayman.
- ³⁶ *The Tathagatagarbha Sutra*, trans. by William H Grosnick.
- ³⁷ *The Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, trans. by Kosho Yamamoto, Chapter 12. <http://nichirenscoffehouse.net/books/NirvanaSutra12.html>
- ³⁸ Tony Page, *Appreciation of the Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra.*” <http://www.nirvanasutra.org.uk/basic teachings.htm>
- ³⁹ Tony Page, *An Appreciation of the Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, Section 4.

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- ⁴⁰ Paul Williams, “Buddhist Concept of Emptiness.”
<http://www.texttribe.com/routledge/B/Buddhist%20concept%20of%20emptiness.html>
- ⁷² Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, p. 195.
- ⁴¹ Paul Williams, “Buddhist Concept of Emptiness.”
- ⁴² Tony Page, Appreciation of the “Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra.”
 Emphasis added.
- ⁴³ Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, p. 105.
- ⁴⁴ Taranatha, *The Essence of Other-Emptiness*, trans. and annotated by
 Jeffrey Hopkins, p. 12.
- ⁴⁵ Tony Page, Appreciation of the “Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra.”
 Section 2. <http://www.nirvanasutra.net/>
- ⁴⁶ Donald Lopez Jr., *The Story of Buddhism*, p. 99.
- ⁴⁷ *The Buddha, Mahayana Parinirvana Sutra*, trans. by Kosho Yamamoto, Ch.
 12.
- ⁴⁸ *The Buddha, Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, trans. by Kosho
 Yamamoto, Ch. 12.
- ⁴⁹ David J Kalupahana, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy*, p.182, ⁸⁸ Rupert
 Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 252.
- ⁵⁰ Edward J Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, p. 233-234.
- ⁵¹ David J Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*, p. 143.
- ⁵² Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Philosophical Foundation*, p. 84.
- ⁵³ Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 245.
- ⁵⁴ Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Philosophical Foundation*, p. 146.
- ⁵⁵ Dalai Lama, *The Spirit of Manjushri, Part Three, “Emptiness.”*
<http://www.lamayeshe.com/index.php?sect=article&id=253&chid=510>
- ⁵⁶ Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Philosophical Foundation*, p. 146.
- ⁵⁷ With the ontological concept of God, the Yogacara consciousness shares
 absolute independence, eternity, and an essential nature and real
 attributes. It functions much like God as a necessary ground-of-being.
- ⁵⁸ Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 246.
- ⁵⁹ David J. Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*, p. 149.
- ⁶⁰ Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 248.
- ⁶¹ The nature of the Manifestation is different and not to be confused with
 the nature of the rest of creation.
- ⁶² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 76; see
 Gleanings LXXXVI, CVII, CXXII.

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- ⁶³ Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, p. 132. See also Conze, *A Short History of Buddhism*, p. 52.
- ⁶⁴ John M Koller, *Oriental Philosophies*, p. 151. ¹¹² Thanissaro Bhikku, “The Integrity of Emptiness,” <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/integrityofemptiness.html>
- ⁶⁵ The Buddha, *The Lesser Discourse on Emptiness* (MN 121).
- ⁶⁶ “Suñña Sutta: Empty” (SN 35.85), trans. from Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight, 30 June 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn35/sn35.085.than.html>.
- ⁶⁷ Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *The Integrity of Emptiness*, www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/integrityofemptiness.html
- ⁶⁸ Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “Introduction” to *The Greater Discourse on Emptiness*, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.122.than.html>
- ⁶⁹ These statements, of course, refer to Christ in His human station.
- ⁷⁰ Thanissari Bhikkhu, *The Integrity of Emptiness*.
- ⁷¹ The Buddha, *The Lesser Discourse on Emptiness* (MN 121).