

Early Christianity's Influence on Buddhism

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EARLY ASIAN CHRISTIANITY AND BUDDHISM

Dr. Samuel Larsen

Reformed Theological Seminary

The encounter between Christianity and the great religions of Asia is ancient and complex, especially the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism.

The article which follows outlines the case for an early encounter between two religious systems which, in turn, may have helped to precipitate the great division in Buddhism between what is generally considered to be the older form of Buddhism, Theravada, and the newer Mahayana branch, which today claims upwards of eighty per cent of the world's Buddhists.

For evangelical Christian missions, particularly in Japan, the ramifications could be profound: Christianity need not be presented as a recent, European cultural import but rather may legitimately be presented as Asian, having entered Japan contemporaneously with Buddhism from Asia, nearly a millenium before the arrival of Francis Xavier.

Furthermore, Japanese Buddhism itself arguably reflects the influence of early Asian Christianity.

Finally, additional interdisciplinary collaborative research on the topic is urged. Early Buddhism Buddhism's Noble Eightfold Path (right belief, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right occupation, right effort, right contemplation, and right concentration) has similarities to the last six of the Hebrew Ten Commandments. It originated in the time of Nehemiah, when Jews were prominent travelers in the Persian Empire along what later became known as the Silk Road.^[1]

Introduction

The Persian Empire stretched from Egypt and Asia Minor to the Indus Valley. Whether and to what degree the founder of Buddhism, Siddharta Gautama, also known as Sakyamuni, may have been influenced by the Mosaic decalogue through exilic Jews is difficult to demonstrate. Sakyamuni's fundamental worldview, as traditionally passed down and as largely continued in Theravada Buddhism, differs radically from the biblical worldview.

Sakyamuni's worldview was a form of a Gnostic, if not atheistic, monism. Buddhism's worldview built heavily upon its antecedent Brahmanic Hinduism, but introduced important deviations. Monism and karma continued to dominate Buddhist thought, as in Hinduism.

Sakyamuni, however, denied all permanence short of nirvana (the principle of *anicca*) and denied the continuation beyond death of a personal soul or "self" (the principle of *anatta*). Rather, the aggregates that comprise a person were thought, at death, to scatter and to recombine with other aggregates into new individuals who were then born into the world. The individual's karma, the accumulated debt to cosmic justice, came from those aggregates and was then added to by the individual's own choices and actions. Salvation from existence in suffering was found by entering nirvana (extinction of the individual consciousness through absorption into oneness with the All) through achieving enlightenment.

The Great Change

The Buddha's Four Noble Truths posited the existence of suffering, the cause of suffering (desire), the solution to suffering (extinction of desire), and the path necessary to end suffering (achievement of enlightenment through the Noble Eightfold Path). Enlightenment, in turn, depended not upon any other human or divine being, but upon one's own attainment. Priestly rituals and sacrifices to gods were vain.

Sakyamuni's thought was remarkably revolutionary in his culture. He taught that any male could reach nirvana apart from Brahmanic ritual and without first being reborn through higher castes. However, he taught that a woman, before achieving nirvana, still had to be reborn as a man.

Renunciation of all business, family, and social ties and commitments was the required first step for becoming a Buddhist monk on the road to individual enlightenment. In the quest to extinguish desire, the Buddhist seeker of enlightenment cultivated a sense of detachment from the concerns of the world,

including family, business, and society. Not surprisingly, Buddhism was opposed by more than one ruler because it was thought to be individualistic^[2] and antisocial.

Among the great early divisions in Buddhist thought was the dispute over the role of the Arhant, or forest-dwelling holy man, relative to the role of the scholar, or tradition-continuing authority of the monastic-community. The former looked primarily within for enlightenment, while the latter looked primarily to the Buddhist scriptures as sources for enlightenment^[3].

The Great Change in Buddhism Buddhism spread, reaching dominance in India under the Mauryan Empire during the reign of King Ashoka (c. 250 B.C.E.). Thereafter, it began to lose its appeal in India, giving rise to internal tensions, with many contending schools of thought. By the first century C.E., Buddhism was already losing ground in India, where it would eventually be nearly completely absorbed back into Hinduism.

In the expansive state of Gandhara, which included much of modern Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Kashmir, King Kanishka reigned as the third ruler of the Kushan dynasty in the last quarter of the first century C.E.^[4] His reign has been dated c. 78-123 C.E.^[5] Kanishka is thought by many scholars to have come under the influence of Buddhist reformers and to have convened the Fourth Great Council (c. 90 C.E.), which gave his sanction to the new and revisionist form of Buddhism, Mahayana, as distinguished from the older Theravada form. The philosopher-poet Ashvaghosha also participated in the Fourth Great Council.^[6]

Three Changes Introduced by Mahayana

Two works attributed to him are particularly influential: the Awakening of Faith and the Buddhacarita, or Life of Buddha. Theravada Buddhism continues to be dominant in Sri Lanka and parts of Southeast Asia, although Buddhism would virtually disappear from India. Mahayana Buddhism, however, which marked a momentous departure from the older Theravada Buddhism, spread dramatically across the rest of Asia, including China, Korea, and Japan.^[7]

Three of the changes that the Mahayana school introduced into Buddhism are quite profound:

1. Recognition of laity as potential candidates for enlightenment without their having to become renunciants.

This innovation made the faith much more congenial to community- and family-oriented societies. To many, Theravada Buddhism had seemed selfish and individualistic, concerned for nothing but one's own achievement of nirvana.^[8]

2. Revision of the principles of *anicca* and *anatta*, thus allowing the continuation of personal individual consciousness beyond one's present life.

3. Development of, and emphasis upon, the concept of the *bodhisattva*, that is, one who achieves buddhahood but delays entering it in order to assist others along the path to enlightenment.

Here the new form of the faith turned from self-salvation (Japanese, *jiriki*) to salvation-for-others (Japanese, *tariki*). The concept of transfer of merit ran directly counter to the older Buddhist and Hindu concept of karma. There is no evidence of this phenomenon within Buddhism in the Pali literature, so that the literary evidence dates back only as far as about the beginning of the Christian era.^[9]

[If you consider the arts, there would be a fourth profound change Mahayana introduced into Theravada Buddhism.*]

[4.] The great change appears to have been accompanied by a major development in art and sculpture. The Buddha, who previously had only been represented by a symbol of his presence, such as footprints or the wheel, now became pictured in human form in art, statuary, and coins.^[10]

Amitabha Buddhism

Amitabha Buddhism, called Amida Buddhism in Japan, is embraced today by many Japanese. An early form of the bodhisattva ideal came to be expressed in Amitabha, the Lord of Light, who came to earth for the express purpose of being born into the human race in order to live so perfectly that his merit would save the world.

In one major branch of Amitabha's devotees, salvation is unattainable by any works at all, but only on the merits of Amitabha alone, received by his grace through faith in him. Even on one's death bed, it is sufficient to call upon the name of the lord Amitabha to be saved and at death to be reborn in a Pure Land in the West. In that land the believer may enjoy personal conscious fellowship for a new eon with the lord Amitabha himself and with others who have also trusted him. From the Pure Land, the believer may enter nirvana directly, without having to go through subsequent reincarnations.

Origins of the Great Change in Buddhism

What brought about the Great Change in Buddhism? The question arises: How did the dramatic changes in Buddhism come about? There are at least four

possibilities.

1. The first possibility is *that the changes were relatively late, many centuries after their traditionally ascribed innovators, but were attributed to Ashvagoshā and others by the accretion of legend over time.*

Because the original writings were on such materials as leaves rather than on clay tablets, and because the climate was not conducive to their preservation, the autographs have long been lost. Nevertheless, through the process of textual criticism, scholars have attempted to reconstruct and date the original works of Ashvagoshā, among others. The Chinese and Tibetan translations of the *Buddhacarita* are apparently complete, whereas the Sanskrit copies are not.[11]

Although some scholars still dispute the authorship and date of composition, most now recognize that Ashvagoshā wrote the *Buddhacarita* and accept a date near the end of the first century C.E. *The Awakening of Faith* is also probably the work of Ashvagoshā.[12] The *Lotus of the True Law*, while perhaps not written by Ashvagoshā, may nevertheless also date from about the same time.[13]

2. The second possibility is *that the changes were much earlier, at least in essential features, and simply became popular around the first century B.C.E.*[14] One of the difficulties with such a view is that of dating the evidence adduced.[15]

Sculpture, art, or other similar phenomena are often difficult to date with certainty unless they are directly incorporated into a clearly datable context or unless they include a dated inscription. Some scholars may date such artifacts one or two centuries later than would others. This view therefore remains unproven.

Some have attempted to find antecedents for the changes in the rising popularity of *bakhti* (devotion to a deity) as a development within surrounding Hinduism. Others have pointed to Greek or Persian antecedents as an explanation for the sources of the great sea change, as it were, toward Mahayana within Buddhism. Accounting for the sudden popularity of ideas supposedly long within the culture is still a problem for this view.

Early Buddhist literature contains references to the Buddha as an *arhant*, as a *Tathagata*, and as a *bodhisattva*. The *arhant* was esteemed to be a wise and holy teacher. The meaning of *Tathagata* is less clear, but it may refer to “thusness and suchness”[16] or to “one who has gone this way before.”[17] The frequency and usage of each term may be observed over time, making it possible to trace out important general trends.

For example, the first trend is that the term *arhant* as a title of respect tends gradually to give place (although not universally) to *Tathagata*, and the title *Tathagata* in turn tends to give place to *bodhisattva*.

The second trend is that the meaning of bodhisattva appears to undergo a shift. Early usage of the term refers simply to one who has completed the required steps to enlightenment and is awaiting entrance into nirvana, that is, buddhahood. Later uses of bodhisattva begin to refer to one who delays his own entrance into nirvana for the sake of others and who desires to save the world through gracious transfer of his own merit.

The latter usage of this term is difficult to date earlier than the beginning of the Christian era. T. O. Ling concludes that The worship of Amida in Mahayana appears to be traceable back to just before time of Nagarjuna, i.e., to about beginning of 2nd century C.E., since Nagarjuna is said to have derived his knowledge of cult of Amida from his teacher Saraha.

The *Greater Sukhavatīvyūha Sūtra*, which was translated into Chinese about beginning of second half of 2nd century C.E., relates story of Dharmakara, who is represented as having lived many aeons ago, and who, although he could have entered into Buddhahood, chose not to do so, but made vow that he would wait until he could achieve such Buddhahood as would make him lord of a paradise (*sukhavatī*), to which all who meditated upon this paradise ten times should be admitted. This he achieved as the Buddha Amitabha.^[18]

3. The third possibility is *that the changes were introduced by Ashvagoshā and his contemporaries, under the sponsorship of King Kanishka of Gandhara, c. 90 C.E. Innovations may, however, have been spontaneous and independent of outside influence.*^[19]

According to this view, the timing and striking ideational parallels between the new form of Buddhism and the external cultural influences are merely remarkable coincidences, all the more remarkable since the actual development of the ideas, and not simply their popular acceptance, took place so rapidly.

4. The fourth possibility is *that the changes were introduced as tradition holds, circa 90 C.E., in Gandhara, but that those innovations were prompted by contact with outside cultural and religious influences.*^[20] In light of the preceding discussion, the fourth of these possibilities is intriguing.

The Possibility of Christian Influence on the Great Change

The following considerations summarize lines of reasoning in its support: First, the overland route, along what would become known as the Silk Road, was already well-traveled in the sixth century B.C.E. under the Persian Empire. Alexander the Great's empire, though divided soon after his death, left behind a Greek cultural corridor extending across South Central Asia to the Indus Valley. In the early first century C.E., Greco-Bactrian kings still held sway in Gandhara, athwart "the Bactrian bridge between east and west."^[21]

Second, the maritime route between the Persian Gulf and Northwest India was dominated by shore-hugging, light Arab vessels until c. 40 C.E. At that time, Romans learned to use the monsoons to permit large ocean-going vessels to sail from the Red Sea directly to West and Northwest India during July to September, returning during December and January, following the seasonal prevailing winds.^[22] Roman vessels were large, and as many as one hundred twenty made the voyage each year.^[23]

Third, although some have claimed that cultural dissonances prevented trade from becoming a significant carrier of culture,^[24] Edward Conze makes an intriguing observation:

The Mahayana developed in North-West India and South India, the two regions where Buddhism was most exposed to non-Indian influences, to the impact of Greek art in its Hellenistic and Romanized forms and to the influence of ideas from both the Mediterranean and the Iranian world.^[25]

Undeniably the means, the motive, and the opportunity were all manifestly available, by both overland and maritime routes, for lay and apostolic Christian missionary activity.

Fourth, the Acts of Thomas, a Gnostic work written c. 200 C.E., speaks of the encounter between Judas Thomas and a King Gundaphore. The Acts of Thomas may reflect an earlier tradition relating the ministry of the Apostle Thomas in India.

King Gundaphore's once-doubted historicity is now well established as one of the last of the Greco-Bactrian kings, governing Gandhara from his capital at Taxila. Coins with his image and inscription have been found scattered throughout the region, lending greater credibility, although not certitude, to the legendary accounts of the Apostle Thomas' missions, first to North India and later to the South of India, where the Church of Saint Thomas still exists today.^[26]

Conclusion

Some Buddhists counter by admitting major parallels between the teachings of Jesus and those of Mahayana Buddhists, and acknowledge that, *prima facie*, the evidence appears to support dependence of one upon the other. However, they suggest that the dependence is that of Christ upon the Buddhist teachings.^[27]

They postulate that Jesus, during the interval between his appearance in the Temple at Jerusalem at age twelve and his commencement of public teaching at age thirty, became a pilgrim and found his way to a Buddhist sage, under whose tutelage he learned before returning to his homeland.^[28]

The similarities, according to this line of reasoning, are to be explained as the result of Buddhism's direct influence upon the founder of Christianity, rather than the

reverse. There is, however, no firm historical evidence to establish such a theory, and it remains entirely speculative. ■

ENDNOTES

WOLF^{note}

ENDNOTES NOT from this article, but FROM original article: S. Larsen, “Early Christianity’s Encounter with Buddhism” a paper for Evangelical Theological Society. 2005.

At time of creation, ENDNOTES not available from web edition.

¹ John M. L. Young, “Christian Influence on Buddhism in the First Century” (Videotape lecture, Tokyo Christian Seminary, 1987).

² Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, “The Development of Pure Land Doctrine,” *Eastern Buddhist* 3 (n.d.) 1.

³ Reginald A. Ray, *Buddhist Saints in India: A Study in Buddhist Values and Orientations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 196.

⁴ Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism: An Introduction and Guide* (London: Penguin Books, 1961) 52. Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 75.

⁵ C. H. S. Ward, *Buddhism*, Vol. 2 (London: Epworth Press, 1952) 14.

⁶ Biswanath Bhattacharya, *Ashvagosa: A Critical Study* (West Bengal, India: Santiniketan Press, 1976) 413. F. Max Muller, *The Sacred Books of the East* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969) vi.

⁷ *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, available from [http://www.acmuller.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?56.xml+id\('b56db-5341-438c-7ae0-7d93'\)](http://www.acmuller.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?56.xml+id('b56db-5341-438c-7ae0-7d93')). Spread of Mahayana Buddhism may have come to China as early as 67 C.E. under the Emperor Ming (58-76 C.E.) of the East Han dynasty (25-220 C.E.). The Sanskrit versions of the *Beiye Scriptures*, which are Mahayana (in contrast to the Pali and Dai versions), are reported to have been deposited in the White Horse Temple east of what is now Luoyang City, Henan Province, PRC. The *Beiye* texts there reportedly included the Sutra in Forty-two Chapters. As yet unpublished research findings by Lijuan Meng, Ph.D., kindly provided to the author, concerning the origin and date of the *Beiye Scriptures* is gratefully acknowledged.

⁸ Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, *Buddhism: The Light of Asia* (Woodbury: Barron’s Educational Series, 1968) 61.

⁹ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, “The Development of Pure Land Doctrine,” *Eastern Buddhist* 3 (n.d.) 21-22, 27.

* Sentence of insertion by editor, Thom Wolf.

¹⁰ D. L. Snellgrave, ed. *The Image of the Buddha* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1978) 23.

¹¹ F. Max Muller, *The Sacred Books of the East* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969) vi-x.

¹² Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963).

¹³ C. H. S. Ward, *Buddhism*, Vol. 2 (London: Epworth Press, 1952) 54. Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, *Buddhism: The Light of Asia* (Woodbury: Barron's Educational Series, 1968) 64. Damien Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 62.

¹⁴ Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1932) 40-43. C. H. S. Ward, *Buddhism, Vol. 2: Mahayana* (London: Epworth Press, 1952) 15. Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959) 41-48. Geoffrey Parrinder, *A Dictionary of Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1971) 282. Ernest Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art, Vol I* (New York: ICG Muse, Inc., 2000) 32.

¹⁵ Peter A. Pardue, *Buddhism: A Historical Introduction* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1971) 33.

¹⁶ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, "The Development of Pure Land Doctrine," *Eastern Buddhist* 3 (n.d.).

¹⁷ Nancy Wilson Ross, *Buddhism: A Way of Life and Thought* (New York: Random House, 1980) 178.

¹⁸⁸ T. O. Ling, *A Dictionary of Buddhism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972).

¹⁹ Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 72.

²⁰ John M. L. Young, "The Great Change Within Buddhism," *From Frozen Rage to Inner Peace* (2nd ed.) (Columbus, Georgia: Brentwood Christian Press, 1989) 60-68.

²¹ Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 72.

²² Reginald A. Ray, *Buddhist Saints in India: A Study in Buddhist Values and Orientations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 85.

²³ Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. I* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998) 31.

²⁴ Reginald A. Ray, *Buddhist Saints in India: A Study in Buddhist Values and Orientations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 190.

²⁵ Edward Conze, *A Short History of Buddhism* (Oxford: Guernsey Press, 1993) 41.

²⁶ Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. I* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998) 28-30.

²⁷ Daisaku Ideda, *Buddhism: The First Millennium*, Trans. Burton Watson (Tokyo: Kodansha International, Ltd., 1977).

²⁸ Fida Hassnain, *A Search For the Historical Jesus: From Apocryphal, Buddhist, Islamic, and Sanskrit Sources* (The Hollies, Wellow, Bath, U.K.: Gateway Books, 1994).

²⁹ For this insight, the author is indebted to the late Dr. John M. L. Young, who in 1986 took the author to the National Museum in Seoul and pointed out the artifact, translating it and drawing attention to the character for “Christ.”

Dr. Young concluded that the date of the banner demonstrated, in his estimation, that Christianity likely reached Japan by the seventh century, since the movement of ideas between Japan and the mainland of Asia ordinarily flowed through the Korean peninsula. Other stone and metal artifacts on museum display, including crosses, have been dated to the same period or earlier.

³⁰ John M. L. Young, *By Foot To China* (Tokyo: Radiopress, 1984).

³¹ Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. I* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998) 25.

³² Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity, Vol. 1: The First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973) 108.

³³ Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. I* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998) 29-36.

³⁴ Stephen Neill, *The Story of the Christian Church in India and Pakistan* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 17.

³⁵ Richard Saloman, *Ancient Buddhist Scrolls from Gandhara* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999) 178.

³⁶ John Foster, *The Church in the T'ang Dynasty* (New York: MacMillan, 1950) 85.

³⁷ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, “The Development of Pure Land Doctrine,” *Eastern Buddhist* 3 (n.d.) 37.