

UNDERSTANDING BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES FROM EAST TO WEST IN THE CONTEXT OF ITALIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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Abstract: In geographical point of view East and West are the two sides of the globe. Historically, culturally, traditionally and politically both are two different entities. When it is the matter of spirituality, mental peace, meditation and religion etc. it is noticeable that West tends to follow the East. But unfortunately due to false believes the eastern and western academia have ignored the influence of the East on the West and it has been made to notice that only the East has always learnt from the West. Orient and Occident are two sides of the same coin and Buddhism plays a key role to bring them together for the development of the modern world. This article attempts to study and understand direct or indirect cultural and spiritual influences of the East on the West especially in the light of Buddhism particularly with reference to Italy, Italian culture and literature.

Keywords - East; West; Buddhism; Dante; Italian culture and literature

Introduction

Today as a pragmatic and anti-metaphysical religion, Buddhism is considered as one of the important religion apart from Hinduism, Christianity and Islam which are said to be major religion in the world. In the words of Ajahn Sumedho¹ “It offered a practical way of finding out the Truth through one’s own experience rather than through accepting the teaching of other people” (Abeysekera, 2003). The lord Buddha is the most influential figure in Buddhism who attained full enlightenment and shared his insights with everyone. His teachings have affected everything from a variety of other faiths to literature to philosophy, both within India and to the farthest reaches of the Western world. His preaching is not only limited to the 6th century B.C., but it is an eternal and infinite teaching which is practiced even today in 21st century and will be followed also in many centuries and millennia to come. Buddhism plays a key role in the development of the modern world and it has a productive influence on the fundamental notions of modern science. In this regard Einstein says “If there is any religion that could cope with modern scientific needs it would be Buddhism because Buddhism, like science, is entirely concerned with understanding the world around us” (Abeysekera, 2003).

Today Buddhism is seen as a very diverse religion. Around the world there are many forms of Buddhism which are actually practiced. “Buddhism today is very diverse; this diversity contributes to its richness” ... (Erricker, 2001, p 01). Moreover, Alexander Berzin, a well-known British scholar on Buddhism affirms: “To each new culture it reached, the Buddhist methods and styles were modified to fit the local mentality, without compromising the essential points of wisdom and compassion. ... Each country to which it spread developed its own forms, its own religious structure and its own spiritual head” (Saiyasak, 2011, p 03). It is not confined to any limitations, differences, boundaries, borders, status, cultures, class, caste and creed, religious and regional differences: “Buddhism has from the very beginning been a religion without borders” (Pommaret, 2012, p 89). Moreover, it offers teaching and practices to anyone who has a little curiosity, goodwill, determination and willingness to follow its steps towards freedom of heart and mind and to accept that the modern world can be benefited from ancient and timeless wisdom. It can be practiced by anybody who can be man, woman, even a child. The path of Buddhism is made for every ordinary people. Generally, it is seen that all Buddhists don’t follow the same teaching and texts but for all the core principles of Buddhism are the same.

Transmission of Buddhism in Asia

The history of Buddhism spans from the 5th century B.C., to the present. It arose in the eastern part of Ancient India and in around the ancient kingdom of Magadha (now known as Bihar). “From the outset Buddhism was a missionary religion” (Keown, 1996, p 69). Missionaries went out from Sanchi² to spread Buddhism throughout India and with the time they transmitted it into Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, China, Indonesia, Tibet, Korea and Japan. It has spread throughout Asia neither by any accident, magic, nor by sheer dint of the attractiveness or manifest truth of the Buddhism, but through deliberate missionary activity. During its course of expansion in Asia, it encountered different geographical, cultural and historical diversities, but due to its flexibility it is easily amalgamated with the teaching of that culture and received new perspectives, texts and practices from that culture and made itself more rich and prosperous.

In comparison to the West, the transmission of Buddhism in Asia was very much one – way street: “In Asia, while Buddhism was transmitted from India to other cultures, there was a very little or no back – influence from those cultures on Indian Buddhism or, for that matter, any such back – influence anywhere along the chain of transmission” (Garfield, p 06). In Asia, there

¹ The Chief Monk of the Amaravati Forest Monastery in the United Kingdom.

² It stands in testimony to the golden Buddhist age of Emperor Ashoka. Today Sanchi is synonymous to the masterpieces of Buddhist art revealed in the age-old Stupas, monasteries, temples, and monolithic pillars.

are three main cultural regions (Southeast Asia, Eastern Asia and Tibet – Nepal area) where Buddhism has spread. The early form of Indian Buddhism is preserved in Southeast Asia, the middle form went into Eastern Asia and the later form of Indian Buddhism went into Tibet and Nepal.

In the 3rd century BCE, with the transmission of Buddhism beyond India, it took root in Sri Lanka and for the next thousand years or so it was a great center of Buddhist teaching. Today around seventy percent of the citizen of Sri Lanka are Theravada Buddhist. It is a branch of Buddhism that uses the Buddha's teaching preserved in Pali canon as its doctrinal core. This form of Buddhism is very conservative in nature about the matter of doctrine and monastic discipline. It is strongest in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Burma (Myanmar).

Along the Silk route³ and other trade routes Buddhism reached in China during the Han dynasty. From there it entered the Korean peninsula and thence Japan. The Buddhism of China, Korea and Japan constitutes a unity that can be referred to as East Asian or Eastern Buddhism because they practice a common form i.e., Mahayana Buddhism. It is a form of Buddhism which accepts canonical texts of Theravada tradition. It is also known as *Great Vehicle*⁴ and played a significant role in Chinese Buddhist tradition. It is the most widely accepted form which is ideally dedicated to the well – being of others rather than seeking one's salvation.

Another form of Buddhism is Vajrayana. In Sanskrit *Vajra* means diamond and *Yana* means vehicle. Thus it is known as *Diamond Vehicle*. Moreover it is also known as Tantric Buddhism due to its reliance on sacred texts known as *Tantras*⁵. It is a form of Buddhism that predominantly developed in the Himalayan region of Nepal, Bhutan, and Mongolia and especially in Tibet. It can be said that for the development of Buddhism, Tibet was a *tabula rasa*⁶ because when it came there, Tibetan had no written language, very little political unity, a religious tradition that was only practiced by a tiny minority, no written philosophical tradition. The tradition of Buddhism in Tibet was introduced by Shantarakshita who was an eminent scholar of the ancient Indian monastic university of Nalanda. The best known face of Tibetan Buddhism is the Dalai Lama, who lived in exile in India since he fled from his country due to Chinese occupation in 1959. As the Dalai Lama himself said "When we Tibetans decided that we needed a civilization, we decided we needed three things; we needed a religion, we needed clothes and we needed food. We looked East to China; they had the best food so we took that. We looked North to Mongolia; they had the best clothes, we took those; and we looked South to India; they had the best religion, so we took that." (Lama)

Transmission of Buddhism in the West

According to many historians, "The earliest European contact with Buddhism is likely to have been around the beginning of the third century BCE..." (Gethin, 1998, p 273) when Megasthenes, the Greek historian and the ambassador of Seleucus Nicator⁷, came at the Mauryan court of Chandragupta in Pataliputra (modern Patna). Megasthenes' Greek account of Indian life does not survive in full, but it was the main source of information about India in ancient Europe and is known from its frequent quotation by ancient authorities. Although, there is clear evidence of trade between Alexandria and Rome, and south India and Sri Lanka but the extent of cultural exchange between the European classical world and India is unclear. For the fifteen hundred years from the time of Megasthenes down to the thirteenth century there is no real record of direct contact between Europeans and Asian Buddhists; knowledge of Indian and Chinese culture was almost non – existent in Europe. But from the thirteenth century, with gradual increase in trade and missionary activities which culminated in full – blown European colonialism in Asia, Europeans travelled in different parts of Asia like Mongolia, China, India, Tibet etc. In this way they came in contact with Buddhism and knew its depth. They also left some written accounts of their travels which included some references and information on Buddhism. One of the earliest and perhaps the most celebrated account is that of Marco Polo, a Venetian merchant traveler who was supposedly in China from 1275 to 1291. But these early European traveler's interest in and knowledge of Buddhism remained limited. Possibly the earliest sustained attempt to understand Buddhist thought by an European is represented by Ippolito Desideri⁸, who spent five years in the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

After Ippolito Desideri, many other western scholars like William Jones (1746 – 1794), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 – 1860), Friedrich Max Müller (1823 – 1900), Hermann Oldenberg (1854 – 1920), Giuseppe Tucci (1894 – 1984) etc. have played a key role in bringing knowledge of Buddhism to the West. This has been expressed both in scholarly and popular works and in exhibition of Buddhist art and artifacts.

Buddhism in the context of Italy and Italian Culture

It has been seen that there is a very strong historical relationship between Buddhism and Italian culture. For Italy, in particular, the impact and importance of Buddhism lies in three main areas. Generally, it has been studied by those scholars who especially involved in Asian studies and psychology, Anthropological and philological research. The earliest contact between Italy and Buddhism is partially visible since the time of Marco polo, an Italian merchant who travelled from Europe to Asia between 1271 and 1295. The accounts of his travels provide a fascinating glimpse of Buddhist religion, their customs, ceremonies and way

³ It is a historical trade route commonly used for the trading of silk from Asia to Europe. It traversed China, India, Persia, Arabia, Greece and Italy.

⁴ In Sanskrit *Mahā* means 'great' and *Yāna* means 'vehicle'. Thus literally it means 'Great Vehicle'.

⁵ Tantras are texts setting out certain esoteric meditation practices which present themselves as a secret teaching deriving directly from the Buddha himself.

⁶ It is a Latin phrase. In English it literally means "Blank slate" or "erased/clean slate".

⁷ He was the most important and powerful general of Alexander the Great. After the death of Alexander, Seleucus Nicator founded the Seleucid Dynasty and started the Seleucid Empire.

⁸ Ippolito Desideri (1684 – 1733) was an Italian Jesuit missionary in Tibet and the first European who studied and understood Tibetan language and culture.

of life. His descriptions of Buddhism in Sri Lanka are particularly interesting for religious and cultural history. He was clearly fascinated by Buddhism and the life of Buddha. In his masterpiece 'The Travels of Marco Polo' (in Italian titled as *Il Milione*) he described the figure of Buddha as "... the first man to be idolized. According to legend he was the best man ever lived; for his followers he was the first idol who was worshiped as Saint, the first idol that they ever had had..." (... *Questo Sagamoni fu il primo uomo che sia stato fatto idolo. Perché, secondo la leggenda, è stato l'uomo migliore che abbia mai vissuto; e fu il primo che gli idolatori abbiano venerato come santo, e il primo idolo che abbiano avuto...*) (Polo).

Much later, in seventeenth century, Ippolito Desideri who was an Italian Jesuit arrived in Lhasa in motive to spread and convert Buddhists to Christianity there. But fortunately, by a group of Buddhists he was suggested to learn about Buddha. He took it very positively and spent five years in Buddhist monasteries and universities. After knowing and learning Tibetan language and culture, he was so captivated by the Buddhist thoughts that he wrote some books on it in which 'Mission to Tibet' is the most remarkable. In this way he brought back to Italy an accurate account of the customs and religion of Tibet. He is considered as the first Western scholar of Tibetan Buddhism.

Later Professor Giuseppe Tucci has investigated oriental culture especially Tibetan Buddhism and Eastern religious world. In 1925 he came to India and taught Italian language and literature at the Universities of Shantiniketan and Calcutta: "... in 1925 he went to India, where he taught Italian language and literature at the universities of Shantiniketan and Calcutta" (Peteck, p 137). His long stay in Orient gave him an intimate knowledge about Buddha and Buddhist culture. With his many skills as explorer, alpinist, philologist, he enlivened interest and enthusiasm for Buddhism in Italy.

The notable presence of the Buddhism in Italy begins during the second half of the sixties: "From the 1970s, Buddhism has increasingly become an established religious identity within European countries; firstly, with the arrival of substantial migrant groups from traditionally Buddhist countries and secondly as European converts struggle with how to bring up their children" (Cox). Many Italian scholars, psychologists, philosophers, writers, authors and even common people got attracted towards Buddha and Buddhist studies and culture. Italy as a strongly traditional Catholic country and the locus of the Holy See has been a fertile soil for the growing of Buddhist – Christian religious dialogue. This dialogue began with articles in specialized magazines in which Catholic and Buddhist monks share their experience of monastic setting in Asia as well as in Europe. The development of this new phase touched official positions within the Catholic hierarchy. As Marcello Zago, an archbishop of Catholic Church himself said "Christians and Buddhists can help each other to "grow together", because "the inter – religious dialogue suppose affection and deepening of one's own faith and sincere respect for the faith of others" (Heng Ru).

Today in Italy Buddhism is the third most spread religion, next to Christianity and Islam. The growing interest in Buddhism, involving approximately 0.3 percentage of the total population has spurred a desire for the various groups to meet, participate in dialogue and join in common initiatives. In 1960 the Buddhist Italian Association (*Associazione Buddhista Italiana*) is founded. Later in 1985 Italian Buddhist Union (*Unione Buddhista Italiana*) was founded in Milan and at the beginning of 2000 the Italian Parliament accepted an agreement between the Italian Buddhist Union and the government. Italian Buddhist Union is a legal body that serves in many areas related to Buddhism, including imparting Buddhist teachings available in schools and other institutions. *Paramita*, a reputable nationwide periodical gives voice and space to Buddhism. Moreover, *Fondazione Maitreya*, Buddhist Cultural Centre also actively spread Buddhist culture, teaching, message and thought in entire Italy. It seems that in future with the help of these unions, Buddhism will be transmitted and rooted in the Italian soil and will be fruitful for the benefit of the entire country.

Buddhism in the context of Italian Literature

The direct or indirect influence of Buddha and Buddhist philosophy can be observed on many Italian writer, poet, philosopher including Dante Alighieri. Dante Alighieri commonly known as Dante was a poet, writer, political thinker, philosopher, statesman and language theorist during the Late Middle Ages. He was born in 1265 at Florence in Italy. During Dante's period there was instability in the social and political situation of Florence. The city was totally under the control of Pope Boniface VIII and there were continuous clashes between White and Black Guelphs. The Blacks kept on supporting Papacy, while the Whites were against to Papal influence specially the influence of Pope Boniface VIII. Being the supporter of White Guelph, Dante was sent to exile in 1302 when Black Guelphs took control over Florence. During his exile he wrote The Divine Comedy. He died in exile in Ravenna in North Italy in 1321.

The Divine Comedy (*La Divina Commedia*) was originally entitled *La Commedia*. The adjective *Divina* was added by Giovanni Boccaccio who was an Italian poet, writer and Renaissance humanist. This epic poem is the masterpiece of Dante and considered as one of the greatest work in world literature. It is a long narrative poem written between 1308 and 1321. It is a visionary journey of Dante through three realms of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. It is framed by Dante's spiritual beliefs, the dogmatic theology of Christianity during mediaeval period. It is a classical piece of literature which is divided in three major sections – Hell (*Inferno*), Purgatory (*Purgatorio*) and Paradise (*Paradiso*). *Inferno* consists of thirty-four cantos while *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* consists of thirty-three cantos each, narrated in the form of journey where Dante was guided by the classical Roman poet, Virgil and Dante's ideal women, Beatrice. Throughout the poem, Dante depends upon the vivid description of each scene to express emotions that range from fear and isolation to wonder and awe of the spiritual world.

After his journey through Hell and Purgatory, Dante arrived to Paradise which is depicted as a series of concentric spheres surrounding the Earth, consisting of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the Fixed Stars, the Primum Mobile and the Empyrean. In the canto XIX which is the sixth sphere of heaven also known as the sphere of Jupiter, Dante makes an indirect reference of Buddha.

*ché tu dicevi: "Un uom nasce a la riva
de l'Indo, e quivi non è chi ragioni
di Cristo né chi legga né chi scriva; (Alighieri, Par XIX 70 – 72)*
English Translation

“In fact you said: A man is born on the shores
of India, where nobody knows
about Christ, no one teaches and speaks about Jesus;”

Canto XIX of the *Paradiso* is dedicated to the mystery of divine justice in Christianity. Here Dante makes to understand poetically that Christianity before being a doctrine is a sentiment rather than a structured religion. The feeling of love is in fact the essence of Christianity like Buddhism. Being a Christian means essentially knowing how to love, respect and serve humanity. Therefore, all those who have love and respect for others can consider themselves Christians. In the opinion of Dante, Christians are not just the baptized who follow the formal doctrine of Christianity, but can be called Christians who are loving in nature and believe in humanity even though follow other faiths and religions. The holy Indian man of canto XIX is certainly Buddha who is a symbol of what Saint Thomas Aquinas defines as implicit faith that is a faith without any doctrinal knowledge.

Conceptualization of Buddhist Perspectives in Global Frame

Today, Buddhism is recognized as one of the greatest religion throughout the Western world. It left an indelible mark on every aspect like art, history, literature, music, film, medicine, religion, psychology, food, way of leading life etc. of western societies. In the course of its transmission it did not follow single lineage or a single tradition like the East. Many lineages, traditions, languages and cultures came together. This multiple simultaneous transmission gave a profound effect on the shaping of Buddhism in the West and on the shape of Asian Buddhism as consequences.

However, during its transmission in the West it encountered certain Christian ideology. Both are two different religions and share different faiths, believes, traditional prejudices, conceptions, people and culture but their core principles are the same and both have the same ultimate goal i.e. Peace: Peace for mind, body and spirit in personal, social and universal sense. As Aloysius Pieris wrote “Buddhism and Christianity. East and West. Worldviews developed worlds apart. Delve deeper to discover ways they overlap, complement and unite in their common goal: Peace.” (Bennett, p 2). Moreover, Dalai Lama says “... all of the major world religions, whether Christianity or Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, are directed to the achievement of permanent human happiness” (Lama, p 538).

Today in the 21st century Buddhism continues to gain wider acceptance in the Western world as the core teachings of Buddha are very relevant as they are broadly based on human himself. Humans are born and reborn and there is no end to this cycle unless one attains *Nirvana* (salvation). The Buddha always encouraged open discussion which included different viewpoints and gave freedom to analysis Buddhist ways of peace, humanitarian and responsibility on own ways.

Today we all are living in that era which is scientifically and technologically developed. We have all those facilities that make our life comfort and easy but still people are mentally unhappy, dissatisfied and insecure. According to Buddhism, both satisfaction and security are a state of mind which depends much on expectation. As Buddha himself said “Mind is the forerunner and mental states are mind made...” (Kumar Mishra & J Mishra, 2015, p10). It means that mind is the most important. One should have control over the state of mind, and meditation is the best means for transforming the mind. It encourages and develops concentration, clarity, mental strength and focus. Already from the 19th century, meditation is identified as a particular strength of Buddhist traditions and today many people from the West are tending towards Buddhism due to meditation: “Meditation also has a strong appeal, and offers practical techniques for dealing with stress and other psychosomatic problems” (Keown, 1996, p 119). Moreover “Meditation is a skillful means of letting go, of deliberately emptying out the mind so we can see the purity of the mind – cleaning it out so we can put the right things in it” (Erricker, 2001, p 118).

Conclusion

By shedding light on the origin of Buddhism in India; its spreading throughout Asia, its arrival in Italy and in Europe with the consequence of influence on Western culture and on contemporary world, it can be said that Western world learnt many things from the East. Orient and Occident are the two sides of the same coin with their own strength which plays a kudos role in the development of modern world. Today, in present situation, whole world (both developed and developing countries) became more complex due to suffering evolved through violence, mindless killing, unnecessary and wanton destruction of human values and heritage. None of the world’s part left free from the scourge of brutality. In this situation Buddha’s preaching for peace works as panacea as it gives solution to all kinds of conflict and violence which are menacing the humanity. As far as science is concerned, it is noticeable that there is a compatible relationship between Buddhism and modern science. Both are complementary to each other. In this regard Cabezon says “... Science is concerned with the exterior world, Buddhism with the interior one. Science deals with matter, Buddhism with mind. Science is the hardware, Buddhism the software...” (Sheth, p 10).

(Translations from Italian, unless otherwise mentioned, are by the present writer).

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