

Living Buddhism, living Dhamma

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One thing is certain: we will change our views. Since my interest is Buddhism, let's limit this to our Buddhist views. In no time, maybe even just after reading this we will change a view we have about Buddhism. If we don't, then, either we are awakened or we are deluded. By the way, even streamwinners change their view. Only the arhats have no views to change. Anyway, even the deluded will change their minds, only slower perhaps.

Buddhism—early Buddhism to be more specific—is a “living” religion or system. Buddhism may change, but Buddha Dhamma does not: the Buddha has given us 45 years of life-changing teachings, none of which will change, just as impermanence is always true. Buddha Dhamma is a living religion in the sense that we will only benefit from it when we rightly **live** it. Our speech, actions and thinking are inspired and guided by the Buddha Dhamma.

Social phenomenon

Buddhism as a social phenomenon has gone through a lot of changes, but this is not because the changers or those who accept these changes want to awaken to nirvana. They think or hope that their Buddhism will help them in this world in some way. This has happened throughout Asia. Even the Indian kings and leaders of the Buddha's time followed Buddhism, often for this reason.

After that, **Asoka** (c268-c232 BCE), it is said, used Buddhism as an effective peace-keeping tool for his empire, the greatest that India has ever seen. Since Asoka used Buddhism, the great rulers after him, for reasons we have to ask the historians, chose to support other religions, especially Hinduism. All this, of course, depended on how useful the kings and rulers saw religion. They are certainly not interested in nirvana but want a belief system that will help them control their people.

Greek influence

Even before Asoka's time, just after **Alexander The Great** (356-323 BCE) had died, the empire he left behind just beyond India was called **Bactria** (modern-day Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and parts of northern Pakistan; 3rd-2nd century BCE). The Greek rulers came with their own rich culture and mythology, which, in many ways, are very similar to those of the Indians—especially the Buddhists. Both mythologies, for example, have gods (devas) and titans (asuras).

Up to that time, the Buddhists followed the Buddha's instruction not to have any human images of him. He is not to be worshipped—the highest worship is our practice of the Dhamma. The Greeks were very impressed with the profundity of Buddhism and its mythology, and the locals were influenced by the religion of the ruling Greeks and their beautiful statues of their gods and heroes.

They could now, as it were, “see” the Buddha! But failing to see the clay feet of the Greek Buddha, they lose sight of the true Dhamma. Today, we have the Buddha amulet cult, the Buddha as a fetish—the ultimate thingification of the Buddha—for which some blur rich are willing to exchange their BMW for!

Buddha images

Anyway, once the Greeks or the locals—perhaps both—started making images of the Buddha looking like Apollo, both sides found something common they could worship or at least adore. This was clearly good in encouraging some kind of common faith and unity that helped unify the country. If Singapore declared that the Merlion is a God which we should worship, a significant number would do just that. But unlike the ancient Buddhists, most of us today would know better about how the Merlion works, perhaps.

An aniconic (non-human form) representation of Māra’s assault on the Buddha, 2nd century CE, Amaravati, Guntur district, India.



Again, we see the powerful shanghaiing Buddhism into the service of empires and the powerful. Buddhist monastics and leaders, characteristically obedient of authority, seemed to show no objection to this sea-change. Anyway, we are often impressed or flabbergasted when the authorities show an interest in our religion. The Buddha, after all, had become but a silent statue. In due course, a more Indian form of Buddha arose in Mathura, and by Gupta times (320-550 CE), we have a kind of Indo-Greek Buddha image.

Kushan Empire

Then, came the Kushan empire (30-375 CE). Its cultural centre was Gandhara (1st-5th century) with its own tradition of Gandhara or Graeco-Buddhist art. The Kushans, one of the 5 nomadic Yuezhi confederation of tribes, were conquerors and crafty rulers. They were impressed by the ancient religions of Persia (especially Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism) and India (Buddhism and Brahmanism).

The Manichees (followers of Manichaeism), for example, were not significant in their numbers, but their teachers had many powerful believers amongst the rulers and their officials (similar to the growing Christian influence in Singapore). Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, knew the teachings of the Buddha, Zoroaster and Jesus, but regarded them as incomplete. In other words, Mani was influenced by their teachings.

Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity, in turn, influenced Buddhism and brought about the rise of Mahāyāna, which was promoted by the Kushan emperor, especially Kanishka, the greatest of them. Mahāyāna, in other words, was useful to the imperial rulers in unifying their empire. In doing so, the Kushans modified Buddhism to fit their needs.

Silk and Sanskrit

This was a time when religion followed the Silk Road and Buddhism was transmitted by merchants and monks to Central Asia and China. The Buddhism they disseminated was the new imperial religion, deeply influenced by symbolism of light from Manichaeism, seen in, for example, the worship of Amitabha (the Buddha of Boundless Light). Apparently, early Christianity also influenced Kushan Buddhism, in, for example, the worship of Amitayus (the Buddha of Eternal Life).

In India itself, around the beginning of the Christian Era, powerful Buddhists and scholars, especially those in the royal courts, started using **Sanskrit** to make Buddhism more attractive to the Indians. What the Greeks did with the Buddha image, the Indian Buddhists did with Sanskrit—this opened the doors to influences and corruptions from Brahmanism.

Again, we disobeyed the Buddha’s instruction – **not** to use Sanskrit in teaching the Dhamma.

Buddhisms of power

Such deep changes to Buddhism were accepted, even encouraged, by the ruling powers. Understandably (as in Song-dynasty China) the more ambitious and imaginative Kushan Buddhists worked to introduce new aspects of Buddhism to attract the courts of power. This may well explain why the Lotus Sutra, for example, is oddly unbuddhistic in its intolerance of the old Indian Buddhism or any other rival forms. It is also very likely that the Lotus Sutra was influenced by early Christianity (eg, in its parables and ideas of eternal life).

Buddhism became Chinese

When Buddhism arrived in China, it took many centuries before the Chinese actually understood it (mostly the “new” imperial Buddhism, that is) well enough to properly translate the Buddhist texts into Chinese—that is, beginning from the 7th century. And it was the patronage of the emperors that expedited the compilation of the Chinese Tripitaka. The best known of these Chinese Tripitaka is the **Taisho Tripitaka**.

Of its 100 volumes, only volumes 1 and 2 contain the **Agamas**, the Chinese translations of the early Buddhist texts. The other volumes include later works, not all of which are related to Buddhism. The **Tibetan** Buddhist Canon is even larger: its Tengyur (shastras) has 224 volumes. Apparently, since Tibetan literature began with Buddhism, they regarded whatever is written as being sacred and included them in their Buddhist Canon, including non-Buddhist and secular works.

Revised Buddhisms

Such wildly powerful changes to Buddhism—the Buddhism of power and the powerful—explain why we often see contradictory teachings in Buddhism. Early Buddhism teaches **self-reliance**, later Buddhisms teach, for example, the reciting of a sacred name or mantra (like the brahmins) for salvation. Early Buddhism teaches attaining the path in this life through **streamwinning**, now we are more familiar with Western Paradise (and those of other

directions), none of which were ever taught by the Buddha. Some Japanese Zen masters even invoked “Buddhism” to justify their invasion of other countries and killing others during World War 2! Today, we see the rising trend of the Buddhism of money, intoxicating the monastics, trapping them like flies.

These are all cultural forms of Buddhism, that is, Buddhism used as a means of social control. Buddhism burdens us with views and fetters us with rituals. Religion puppets us to the powerful who have no love for us, except to use it for their glory.

Cultivation and freedom

Fascinating and valuable as culture may be, **none** of them, nor all of them together, will bring us awakening. Culture limits us to our tribe; spirituality sees the good in us and others.

Despite the age and brevity of the suttas, even because of them, they are sufficient, indeed necessary, for our spirituality, that we understand how to practise the Dhamma and reach the path in this life itself, so that we are free from suffering and able to truly help others.

Buddhism holds us; Dhamma frees us.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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