

Winks at wisdom

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Sometimes, I wonder if, since the Buddha's passing, we are still mourning his death so that we keep looking for a lost teacher, a power-figure or some kind of fetish to fill up our hollowness of not understanding the most basic of the Buddha's teaching: impermanence. Hence, we can see post-Buddha Buddhism as a gradual, sometimes sudden, degeneration of religion and spirituality. This retrograde seems dramatically real when we, for example, compare Buddhism with the evolution of western philosophy. Let's see, just for the fun of it.

Let's conveniently begin with **the Ancient Greeks** (some spell it without the R). They had so much time—small city-states, relaxed dress code, and slaves—hence, they have a lot of time for philosophy, the love for wisdom, but which is often also a lust for thinking. This reminds us of modern Buddhist monastic life: our own retreat centres, a status-stating uniform, assured of life's needs, including salaried slaves (*buddha, dāsa*).

Socrates, the greatest of the Greek philosophers, can be represented by his famous maxim: "The unexamined life is not worth living." This is a good place to start because for most of us, who dislike examinations or any kind of test. We may end up seeing life in 3-D (decay, disease and death): that's what happened to the Buddha!

Socrates' importance is noted by the term "Pre-Socratics," those Greek thinkers who came before him. They thought about the nature of existence (metaphysics). Are all things composed of "earth-like" matter (the Materialists), or of water (Thales), or air maybe (Anaximenes), or fire surely (Heraclitus), or even "space" (Anaximander)? The Buddha knew better: it's all these and more.

The Greek thinkers, especially Democritus, developed the idea that all reality is composed of tiny, indivisible, indestructible **atoms**. The brahmins thought this Atom was bigger—as big as existence itself—and called it **atman** (notice the close but false resemblance). The Buddha split the atom long before Rutherford: No atom, declares! The brahmin Ego was punctured.

Plato, who, in some ways, gave us the Socrates we know today, is the most studied of the Greek philosophers. This is like Nagarjuna, who many of us regard as the Creator of the Buddha, and who turned the Dharma Wheel the 2nd, 3rd or 4th times. His wheel must have been weak and wobbly to so often break down and need re-turning.

Almost as famous as Plato was his pupil, **Aristotle**, and Alexander's teacher. He came up with the binary idea: a thing is either good or bad, black or white: everything is A or not-A. This made possible our binary cybernetics and the computer that we are right now slaving at.

The Buddha accepted the Indian logical quadrilemma—a thing is or is not, or both is and is not, or neither is nor is not. (I need to read this again.) This is mind-boggling, and a mathematics friend told me this wordy idea would destroy all the modern mathematics we know today, and society as we know it. This is one of the most serious setbacks for Western civilization: it cannot go beyond yes and no: you are with me or against me.

Then, there were the **Sophists** (like Protagoras and Gorgias): there is no absolute truth, and two different views can coexist. They were probably the first Zen-like itinerant intellectuals who taught rhetoric and virtue for money. Sounds like our modern Vihara priesthood.

The **Neo-Platonists** influenced almost all that defined Western civilization, including its main religion. Augustine of Hippo (not the water-horse) was strongly influenced by the idea of an ineffable and transcendent One, from which the rest of the universe emanates: sounds like Buddhist docetism, which emanates all the Buddhas, except, it seems, Gotama, and no arhats allowed.

Then, came the **Dark Ages** (beginning around the 4th-5th centuries). This was a time when reading was understandably difficult. Whatever light there was seemed to be in the royal palaces and the Church. They read their Scripture in Latin (like Sanskrit). Peasants (those who lived outside palaces and monasteries) were not allowed to read Scripture, but only listen to it. We Buddhists have more freedom: we can choose not to read anything, especially if it is suttas.

The Renaissance brought back Greek wisdom which the westerners seemed to have forgotten about in their Dark Ages. Ironically, the great Muslim scholars had preserved these precious teachings which were translated into western languages. This is like the founding of the Pali Text Society (in the UK, not Singapore) and our (their) university Buddhist courses today. Our best monastics are schooled therein to become venerable doctors of Buddhism. Doctored Buddhism is in high demand in our urban society that measures everything.

“Buddhist Theology” appeared in 2000 and has prospered ever since. Every Dharma preacher is (must be) an accomplished Theologian. We are blessed that we can choose the best and canonize them as Arhats or Bodhisattvas.

Not all Theologians are bad, of course. There was **Roger Bacon**, who actually criticized the Scholastic system (what we here call Abhidharma), and rejected tradition and scriptural authority. Another Empiricist was the Elizabethan **Francis Bacon**. This was the start of **empiricism**: it’s good taste to think that the scientific method started with Bacon.

Bacon did not seem to go well with vegetarians, Buddhist or otherwise. Tradition and authority, with or without Scripture, is necessary for religion to prosper. Buddhist scholars and scholiasts (mostly) are amongst society’s most prosperous today; otherwise, we can always move to a more lucrative faculty. We don’t need to be Buddhist to teach Buddhism. Being Buddhist is such a biased profession.

Then, came the Age of Reason (17th century) and the Age of Enlightenment (18th century), but we will examine them another time, after we have recovered from our fits of laughter or fitful wrath at such impiety. But please remember, even this short note took millennia to prepare. Please do not dismiss it lightly, darkly or otherwise.

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

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