Dhammacakka
Journal of Buddhism and Applied Buddhism 15-19
Vol.1 Issue : I
ISSN Print: 3059-944X
ISSN Online: 3059-944X
URL.research.lbu.edu.np

Buddhism and South Asian Folklore

Prof. Todd T. Lewis, Ph.D.
College of the Holy Cross
Worcester, Massachusetts, USA
tlewis@holycross.edu

Date of Call for Article:
27 May, 2024
Article Received Date:
12 June, 2024
Date of sending for peer review:
8 August, 2024
Date of receiving from peer review:
1 September, 2024
Date of Revision:
8 September, 2024
Date of Acceptance:
29 November, 2024
Date of Publication:
26 January, 2025

Abstract

Background: This article examines interaction between Buddhism and South Asian folklore exploring the influences of Buddhist traditions over culture, traditions, beliefs and practices of the local people specifically in northern India since the origin of Buddhism in the region.

Objective: The objective of the paper is to focus the impacts of the Buddhist principles in various culture, custom and folklore in the South Asian region as the Dhamma gets expanded across South Asia and beyond.

Methodology: Interdisciplinary methodology is employed while going through the research work, drawing from historical, textual, ethnographic, and sociological approaches to analyze the relationships between Buddhism, folklore, and contemporary South Asian society.

Result: The paper depicts how the states were formed adopting the values of the *Dhamma* and how it brought a cultural integration becoming a popular religious practice in the region. There were people who preferred monastic life with Spiritual Practices and Meditations under the guidance of core Buddhist Philosophy whereas there were others, the householders, who were much more influenced by Buddhist rituals and local folklore. The role of Buddhist Monks and Nuns in facilitating the laities with ritual practices and Buddhist teachings is highlighted in the article. The article reflects the role of monastic folklorists in transforming folk traditions into an important part of Buddhist Practices by mixing up local deities, spirits and rituals into Buddhist cosmology. *Jatakas* and *Avadanas* stories of the Buddha's past lives are highlighted in the paper as the key sources of Teaching Buddhist ethics and doctrines to the common people.

Conclusion: The paper investigates how Buddhism, in South Asia, got flourished with its modest engagement with various cultures and traditions in the region with significant influences over the folklore of the contemporary societies.

Keywords: Buddhism, Folklore, *jātakas, avadānas, karma*

Paper Type: Research Paper

Introduction

Buddhism is a religious and civilization-wide movement that originated on the Gangetic plain in northern India about twenty-five centuries ago. The world's first missionary tradition, Buddhism – particularly its monastic elements – was visible in many of the court cultures of South Asian polities; its practices and institutions became embedded in the life of worldly power as that was known and practiced in the emerging regional states and cities of ancient South Asia. For reasons that are still not fully known, Buddhism disappeared entirely from most areas of the Indian subcontinent just after the turn of the second millennium of the Common Era, although it continued a vibrant cultural force in certain periphery regions of South Asia, notably Sri Lanka, Burma, Nepal, Ladakh, Sikkim, and Bhutan. Buddhism also has been reintroduced to India in the twentieth century, particularly among nominally Hindu and Muslim intellectuals, for whom it is conducive for thinking about "Indian identity" in a post-colonial context, and among Dalit communities, for whom it has been a powerful, inspirational counterculture for defending a social identity alternative to that given by upper-caste Hindu norms.

Popularity of Buddhism

As a religious movement, Buddhism was trans-local and Universalist in its vision, and generally Buddhist ideas, practices, and institutions were supported and promoted in particular regions by rulers and merchants who had worldly aspirations that went beyond the merely local. Institutional Buddhism evolved as a tradition abetting the expansion of Indic civilization. This was so in ancient South Asia proper in the early centuries as tribal peoples were integrated into the first expanding states. This same phenomenon continued somewhat later over the Southeast Asia frontier where Buddhism coexisted with brahmanical Hinduism, but was the dominant religion in most times and places there (and unlike its destiny of decline on the Indian subcontinent). Buddhism's alliance with state formation and expansion is one recurring trajectory in the faith's history (and it continues in the tribal areas of Thailand and Burma today). This was an interlocking socio-cultural process that integrated expansive monastic institutions, the charisma of forest monk saints, the power of rituals performed by monks, the tradition's missionary ethos, the appeal of karma and compassion doctrines for rulers and ruled, alliances between monastery and merchants, and the legitimacy the tradition offered kings. It was vernacular folklore that communicated these basic teachings and legitimated the popular Buddhist practices that won the loyalty of the masses.

Elite Buddhism and Popular Buddhism

For many in South Asia's socio-cultural elite, the grammar of cosmopolitan languages like Sanskrit and Pali was more important than knowledge of local lore about what was indicated, for example, by a gecko falling on one's head. Derived from a religious movement originating among ascetics, one stream of Buddhist philosophy was directed to a soteriology which Buddhists broadly understood as a transformation of the individual person through practices like meditation that ended in a freedom from suffering and ignorance for oneself and unbounded compassion for others. But elite-defined Buddhism, while it commanded patronage and prestige and so shaped a polity's identity, was the actual concern of only very, very few individuals. Only a small sample of men and women were ordained into the monastic order: since few among them could read the philosophical treatises, and even fewer still were thought to be in a position to pursue the strict practices that culminated in enlightenment, what we might call elite canonical Buddhism, was undertaken by a small minority. Thus, the splendors of Buddhist philosophy remained distant to even most monks and nuns, and further still from the pragmatic concerns of farmers concerned about crops, the health of loved ones, or ghosts disturbing their homes at night. Civilizationally, then, the folklore stories and pragmatic rituals done by Buddhists was more important than meditation or philosophical discourse.

As centrally-visible as the great Buddhist monastics were in the elite cultures of South Asia, many also participated in South Asia's folk traditions. In fact, an early text identifies "the folklorist" (*tirascakathika*) as one of six monastic specializations (Lewis 2000: 3). Indeed, their participation was key to the success of Buddhism as a distinctive religious movement. Buddhist folklorists, like Jains and others, adopted and adapted elements of the folk religion around them and connected them to their own system of religious reflection and meaning. This folk religion was only marginally different from the religious practices derived from later Vedic literature and its brahman-mediated practices. These rituals focused on local deities known as *yakṣas* and *nāgas* and included notably an emphasis on a sense of the 'divine' in a particular place and the approach to the 'divine' through directly-emotional and sensual forms of worship. Buddhist monastic discipline forbade direct involvement in such rituals, but householders were counseled in the Buddhist canons to respect all divinities in their midst, and make offerings to win their favors. Newar Buddhist traditions are emphatic on this norm.

Jātakas and Avadānas as the source of Buddhist Folklore

What made individuals distinctly Buddhist was their revering the Buddha above all beings in the universe, and holding that his path was the only true means to final salvation. The popular narratives recounting the life of Shākyamuni the Buddha, perhaps the most widely-spread Buddhist story, make these views plain through a wealth of incidents. Not only did Buddhists recognize the Indic deities, spirits, and ghosts and make offerings to them to seek local protection and aid from these resident supernaturals, they also incorporated these procedures to worship Buddha images and their distinctive memorial monuments, *stūpa*s (Hardy, 29-36).

Central to a consideration of Buddhist folklore is the tradition of *jātaka* and *avadāna* stories about the Buddha's previous lives. In the canons, also appended to commentaries and ritual guides, and often redacted into individual anthologies, they are the form of Buddhist literature for which we have the earliest datable evidence: these stories are represented visually at the earliest stupas such as Bharhut and Sanchi from about the third century before the Common Era. *Jātaka*s and *avadāna*s provide the most popular media in Buddhist culture, having been used over the centuries for didactic purposes, especially for the teaching of Buddhist doctrines and ethics to novice monastics and householders.

It is important to note that most of the stories preserved in the canonical languages had to be redacted for local audiences into a vernacular *lingua franca*. Most Buddhists until modern times were illiterate and so encountered *jātakas* and *avadāna*s from the lips of monks or nuns, pondered them depicted as frescoes on monastery walls, or viewed them dramatically enacted by dancers or puppet performers. Students can miss the dynamism of this folklore by not having access to the vernacular context to note how artists can veer into modern political issues to re-contextualize old disputes, elaborate on some themes while foreshortening others in a particular recitation, and even invert the classical norms. Though some of the vernacular translations from the various South Asian regions have been written down, few have been translated into English.

Modern scholars, noting that among the jātakas are various tales, riddles, and anecdotes that are known from elsewhere in South Asian cultures, have generally read this literature more as sources about South Asian folklore than about the socio-cultural realities of living Buddhism. But as T.W. Rhys Davids, one of the founding fathers of Buddhist Studies, observed, "*Jātakas* are the most complete, the most authentic, and the most ancient collection of folklore in the world – a collection entirely unadulterated, as modern folklore stories so often are, by the inevitable process of passing through a Western mind." (1896: 78). The size and scope of this narrative literature conveys much about popular living Buddhism, sometimes conflicting with the views conveyed by modern reformers or Western exponents.

Practices of Buddhist Rituals

Creative engagement with and the local adaptation of South Asian folk traditions contributed strongly to the success of Buddhism as a religious movement that expanded outward to the ends of Asia. Monastic folklorists drew upon their rich story narratives to demonstrate how spirits can be integrated into a Buddhist world view, how tribal norms need to be reshaped to be compatible with karma doctrine, and how a seemingly remote territory might indeed have been already sanctified by a long-ago visit by a future Buddha or a more recent visit by a renowned saint (e.g. Brereton 1995; Strong 1992). It is indeed useful to look at the collection of popular narratives from early Buddhism as a vast resource suitable for redactors to adapt the tradition to new places and changing times. Such "domestications" were especially common across the Buddhist world throughout the faith's pan-Asian history; this flexibility was due to the fact that no central ecclesiastic authority or institution ever controlled the regional expressions of the faith's engagement with its householder communities. (This pluralism is evident in Newar Buddhism today as its leaders in different parts of the Valley adapt to modern circumstances with diverse, unconnected initiatives.)

The Buddha is remembered as saying that his teaching about suffering and the ending of suffering was key to understanding his career. Buddhists frequently turned to the materia and practices of folk traditions to extend the Buddha's intent to understand suffering, perceive its causes, and ultimately end it in the world. Although Buddhism holds that natural causality shapes human life, it is karma -- the causal mechanism that links intentional actions to this and future life consequences -- that must be reckoned with to live a moral life that leads to fruitful spiritual development. Most Buddhist popular narratives in fact are case studies in karmic retribution, giving the listener the chance to understand this foundational teaching through an almost endless variety of circumstances, from the animal world to the royal palace, from the ascetic's primitive hut to the materialism of trade route.

Quite often the intention of the Buddhist narrative was to convey how to end suffering in an immediate sense and what we see in canonical texts, such as those found in the sixth-century manuscript collection discovered at Gilgit in northwest Pakistan, is a sustained interest in how Buddhist rituals, particularly *bali* offerings to local gods and the copying of Buddhist texts themselves, can assist in warding off illness, natural disaster, poverty, untimely death, and human malevolence. In the same vein but at the opposite end of the South Asian Buddhist world in Sri Lanka is what is called *keṃ* in Sinhala; this includes such protective practices as the placing of written Buddhist verses in a kitchen to ward off flies. While one can say that there is nothing uniquely "Buddhist" about such practices, since they are generic versions of practices found in other folk traditions throughout South Asia, it is also crucial to note that passages from the canon find the Buddha asserting that his words can pacify and make auspicious any locality where they are chanted and ritually deployed. Indeed, it is in ritual manuals compiled by monks where additional didactic stories are found: these narratives that describe the proper Buddhist origins of these practices these are often recounted in the ritual itself. The stories associated with the *paritta* of the Pali Canon, and the *rakṣā* literature from the Sanskrit Canons, connect the Buddha's teachings with the pragmatic needs of the great majority of Buddhists.

Generalizing from evidence found in contemporary communities in Sri Lanka and Nepal, we can also surmise specific local functions of folklore among Buddhists: to critique the pretensions of more elite men and women in the community, including monks; to promote the practice of certain favorite rituals; to criticize men or women for common character faults; and to promote ethnic solidarity, as local redactions support group loyalty over the universal ethics found in the canon. In the cycle of stories about jester figures like Andare in Sri Lanka, there are examples of the first: they mock the "wisdom" of this pundit by showing the disastrous effects of the impracticality that can be traced to his learning. Folklore in modern Nepal found in story collections and ritual texts provides a number of insights:

that Buddhist merit-making "cheats death" by reuniting married couples after death and reuniting the rich with their wealth; that karma is not strictly individualistic, as actions by husbands and wives, patrons and shipmates, monks and kings may affect the destinies of others. Finally, heavenly rebirth was recognized in numerous passages as an exalted religious goal for good Buddhists to strive for.

By focusing on folklore and recognizing its centrality in Buddhist polities, we can understand that for householders, being Buddhist has meant been focused on the karma of merit-making (often collective in practice and effect) and seeking heaven; showing respect for elders, ascetics, and local deities; and with seeing one's own homeland as having been blessed by the Buddha's powers through ritual.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

Works Cited

Brereton, Bonnie Pacala. *Thai Retellings of Phra Malai: Texts and Rituals Concerning a Popular Buddhist Saint.* Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University Press, 1995

Cowell, E.B. *The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births.* Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1990

Dutt, Nalinaksha, editor. *Gilgit Manuscripts Vol. I.* Delhi: Satguru Publications, 1984

Hardy, Friedhelm. *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Krisna Devotion in South India.* Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1983

Lewis, Todd. *Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal: Narratives and Rituals of Newar Buddhism*. Albany: State University of New York, 2000

Avadānas and *Jātakas* in the Newar Tradition of the Kathmandu Valley: Ritual Performances of Mahāyāna Buddhist Narratives," *Religion Compass* 9/8 (2015a): 233–253. [Online journal]

Puṇya and *Pāp* in Public Health: Everyday Religion, Material Culture, and Avenues of Buddhist Activism in Urban Kathmandu," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 22, 2015b, 159-189. (http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/2015/04/17/everyday-religion-and-public-health-in-kathmandu/)

Premaratne Geetha. *Andare: Folktales from Sri Lanka*. Upper Ferntree Gully, Victoria: Papyrus Publishing, 1999

Rhys Davids, T.W. *Buddhism: Its History and Literature.* New York: G.P. Putnam, 1896.

Strong, John S. *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta: Sanskrit Buddhism in North India and Southeast Asia*, Princeton University Press, 1992.