

THE BUDDHIST CONTRIBUTIONS TO NEO-CONFUCIANISM AND TAOISM

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Buddhist Influence on Neo-Confucianism

As an intellectual movement Neo-Confucianism drew the attention of the educated Chinese away from Buddhism back to the Confucian classics. However, this Neo-Confucianism was influenced by Buddhism in more ways than one. The Indian religion had become so intimate a part of the intellectual make-up of the Chinese that it was impossible for the Sung thinkers to give up Buddhism entirely. While the Neo-Confucianists used terms found in the Confucian classics, they interpreted those terms in the light of the dominant Buddhist atmosphere, and the Neo-Confucian system would be incomprehensible to one not familiar with the prevailing Buddhist ideas of the age.

An example of this may be seen in Chang Tsai's extension of the meaning of Zen to embrace all under heaven. It is more than likely that in this extension the Buddhist conceptions of the universality of life and the all-compassionate bodhisattva, ever ready to save all sentient beings, played a role.

Although the Neo-Confucian idealist Lu Hsiang-shan based his emphasis on the mind on the Book of Mencius and the Great Learning, one cannot escape the suspicion that he was influenced by Buddhism especially Ch'an, tenets. Indeed Lu and his chief disciple, Wang Yang Ming (1472-1529), of the Ming Dynasty, were accused by their opponents of being Buddhists in disguise, this in spite of the fact that in a letter to a friend Lu criticized Buddhism severely for its selfishness and negation of life. The Ch'an School, with its cardinal tenet that this mind is the Buddha and that this mind intuitively and instantly knows what is right and wrong without depending upon external sources, very likely influenced the thinking of Lu and Wang. It is interesting to note that the controversy which raged within Buddhist circles – that of gradual versus instantaneous enlightenment – found its counterpart in the discussions of the Neo-Confucians, with Chu Hsi

representing the gradual rational approach and Lu Hsiang-shan the intuitive instantaneous approach.

In their advocacy of concentration of mind the Neo-Confucianists also appear to have been influenced by the Buddhists. Buddhist mental discipline emphasizes, among other things, mindfulness, meditation and equanimity. Ch'eng Hao stressed these very things in his essay "Tranquility in Human Nature". He wrote that tranquility means quietness in time of activity and inactivity, and that when the mind is excited, it becomes overactive and falls into uncertainty. He advocated concentrating the mind on one subject; when one does this, he said, the mind is its own master, will not fall prey to external influences, and cannot be harmed by any enemy.

From Li Ao to Ch'eng brothers the Neo-Confucianists all had their say about what constituted sagehood. Li Ao wrote that a sage is enlightened when he is master of his emotions. Ch'eng Yi also wrote that the sage is one who controls his emotions of joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, dislike, and greed, and adjusts his expression to the principle of the golden mean. This Confucian preoccupation with sagehood was probably a response to the Buddhist emphasis on the attainment of bodhisattvahood.

There were also particular views held by the Sung philosophers that might point to Buddhist influence. For instance, Chu Hsi held that any object contains within it the supreme undivided ultimate as well as the particularizing principle which gives the object its individual character. Such an idea is close to the Hua-Yen doctrine of interpenetration and intermutuality, the all in one and one in all. Shao Yung (1011 – 1077) in his cosmological speculations had a theory that at the end of an epoch, which he said spanned 129,600 years, the present world system would come to an end, to be replaced by another. Chu Hsi also shared in this view. Such an idea was alien to the Chinese and was undoubtedly influenced by the well-known Indian concept of aeons and recurring world systems.

While pointing out these influences of Buddhism upon Neo-Confucianism, we must not make the mistake of overestimating the extent of such influences. Though the Neo-Confucianists studied Buddhism and appropriated Buddhist ideas, the system which they constructed was distinctly Chinese in its emphasis on the reality of the individual, and the value of social relations and responsibilities. A fair verdict of history would

therefore be that in this movement the Sung philosophers returned to their native Confucian traditions via some excursions into the path of the Buddha.

Buddhist Influence on Taoism

Neo-Confucianism was not the only system affected by Buddhism; Taoism was also subjected to its all-pervading influence. During the Han Dynasty, Buddhism was able to gain a foothold on Chinese soil by allying itself closely with Taoism and borrowing from it, but in later centuries it was the Taoist turn to borrow from Buddhism.

To begin with, the Taoists never had any idea of their system as religion consisting of a body of doctrines and beliefs left behind by a master and preserved in a corpus of literature. It was only after Buddhism had come in and gained widespread acceptance that the Taoists took over from the Buddhists the idea of a religion. Once having made this initial appropriation, the Taoists decided that they might just as well go all the way in imitating the foreign model.

First, the Taoist themselves admitted that they borrowed the practice of making statues and images from the Buddhists. The first Taoist images of their deities appeared about the middle of the fifth century under the Northern Wei Dynasty, with the deities flanked on both sides by Taoist saints.

It is in the field of literature that the Buddhist contribution to Taoism is most obvious. In the early stages of Taoism as a religion it was a relatively simple matter for the Taoists to build up a body of literature of their own. All they had to do was to group together those works branded as heterodox by the Confucians – works on alchemy, divination, hygiene, breathing exercises, and so forth – and attribute these to the founder of their religion Lao-tzu. However, there was a limit to the supply of such literature and the Taoists would have faced a prolonged drought if no other sources had been forthcoming. Meanwhile, the Buddhist sutras were flowing into China in a never-ending stream, inciting the envy of the Taoists with their variety, scope and imagination. To the latter this was an inexhaustible supply from which they could borrow and copy – exactly what the Taoists did from the fifth century on. So hasty and slipshod was this wholesale copying that the Taoists left behind numerous traces of their unethical practice. In general it seemed that what the Taoist did was to take over a Buddhist sutra and then

substitute Lao-tzu for the word Buddha whenever it appeared, but very often the copyist was not attentive enough to make all the changes. Consequently, in some of the so-called Taoist works, we find such passages as the following:

Of all the teachings, in the world, the Buddha's teaching is foremost (Hsi-sheng ching, Sutra on the Western Ascent).

Our master is called the Buddha, who follows the incomparable teaching (Wen-shih-chuan, Biography of Wen-shih).

The host of saints and immortals have already realized the way of the Buddha (Tung-hsuan chen-i ching, Sutra on the True Unity which Penetrates Mystery).

The most obvious of such borrowings may be seen in the biographies of Lao-tzu that appeared during the Sung Dynasty. In one of these biographies, the Yu-lung-chuan (Biography of the One Who Resembles a Dragon), we read that Lao-tzu was born by issuing forth from the left rib of the Holy Mother, who was clinging to the branches of the plum tree at the time. As soon as he was born, he took nine steps and from each footprint lotus flowers sprang forth. At the time of his birth ten thousand cranes hovered above in the skies, while nine dragons spat forth water to bathe the newborn baby. After he was born, with his left hand pointing to heaven and his right hand to earth, he uttered the cry that in heaven and earth only the Tao was supreme. Nine days after birth his body became endowed with the seventy-two major and eighty-one minor characteristics. The Holy Mother, after giving birth to Lao-tzu, then mounted a jade chariot and in broad daylight ascended to heaven.

It is perfectly clear that such a biography of Lao-tzu was nothing more than a retouching of a Buddhist source, very likely the LALITAVISTARA, with some changes in proper names here and there.

Having built up their body of literature, the Taoists then organized it into a canon modeled as one would expect, after the Buddhist Tripitaka. Consequently, the Taoist canon now consists of three sections, with each section then divided into twelve categories.

Certain concepts of the Buddhist were also taken over by the Taoists. An example of this was the concept of the bodies of the Buddha. During the Period of Disunity the Taoists had already developed the idea that the supreme Tao, in order to instruct deities and men in the world, from time to time would assume a human form to perform this function. The historic Lao-tzu was but one of these incarnations. Such a Taoist idea was undoubtedly based on the Buddhist doctrine of the two bodies of the Buddha, the DHARMAKAYA or the body of essence, which is the only true and real body of the Lord, and the NIRMANKAYA or body of transformation, which is the manifestation of the DHARMAKAYA on earth. In imitation of the bodhisattva, the all-loving and compassionate being, the Taoists brought forth a class of transcendent beings called T'IENTSUN, venerable celestials, conceived of chiefly as instructors and saviors. One of these celestials was said to have been eternally teaching and converting people since the beginning of time. The Buddhist concepts of Karma and rebirth were likewise appropriated, as indicated in the following passage:

The Taoist saints since countless aeons in the past.....have all depended on the merits of their past lives to attain to the Tao of the present; they have without exception reached their present state through the accumulation of merits derived from their former careers.....

This is in contrast with the earlier Taoist doctrine of the transmission of burden, according to which the merits and demerits accrued by an individual were manifested not in his future lives but were passed on to descendants of later generations. Finally, the Buddhists concept of the three worlds – the world of desires, the world of forms, and the formless world – was taken over IN TOTO by the Taoists.

This brief summary will suffice to show how much the Taoists appropriated from the Buddhists in their views on cosmology, pantheon, literature, and doctrines. Instead of Taoism's swallowing up Buddhism, as was feared at the end of the Han Dynasty, the Taoists were themselves overwhelmed by the Buddhists.

Torch of Wisdom