

SILK ROADS' SPIRITUAL IDENTITY
A Historical Overview on Buddhism and Islam

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Sections of a frieze from Gandhara 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution,
Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Chakravartin, from the Jaggayyapeta Stupa,
Andra, 1st C. BC. Government Museum, Madras

Silk Roads' Spiritual Identity

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The two religious traditions i.e. Buddhism and Islam emerged in two epochs and different geographical locations amongst peoples of different cultures, backgrounds and history. But at the same time in the course of comparing the socio-cultural aspect of the societies in which Buddhism and Islam were going to come into life, we find outstanding similarities.

Generally speaking, study of the particulars of a society which is pregnant with a new religion can explain the social need for the emergence of the new spiritual system to be born. When two societies share identical conditions and face similar social problems, one may expect to detect a strong analogy between the systems of thought that would manifest to solve these problems.

The pre-Buddhist Indian society and the pre-Islamic Arab culture share many aspects from which the following three are prominent.

- a. Polytheism
- b. Idol Worshipping
- c. Slash between Social Classes

a. Polytheism:

India's long polytheistic tradition goes back to the Vedic Age. This tradition continued to live as the dominant religious doctrine during the post Vedic era when the Brahmanic religion was widely in practice. Though the Brahmanic view differed from the Vedic ones, we still find many pre-Vedic deities, mostly manifestations of natural forces, such as Indira (the thunder god), Surya (the sun god), Us has (the dawn god) and others, present and in power in the post-Vedic Brahmanic era. Vishnu (the sustainer) was originally a Vedic god who successfully lived his celestial life and occupied the highest position among hundreds of Hindu deities.

People worshiped these gods and goddesses both out of fear from their anger and hope for their rewards. They feared them because their anger troubled their living through natural disasters such as floods, droughts, diseases, etc. and they praised them devotedly because the same celestial creatures could grant them health, wealth, dignity and prosperity. Worshipers prayed to the deities, sacrificed animals and presented offerings to them, and a wide range of ceremonial acts were formulated around them.

The Buddha did not approve of such system. He totally denied the existence of gods and became a serious threat to their Imperial throne in the realm of heavens. He declared that religious ceremonies, sacrifices and other rites were meaningless and that such acts would not do man any good.

Though Buddha's revolutionary ideas were offensive to religious values of his time and the Brahmans took this offense quite seriously, but as his teachings gave chance to everyone to elevate his social and religious status by devotion to truth and doing good deeds, he was considered a savior and his ideas were welcomed by a wide range of people.

Over a millennium after Buddha's death, in the Arabian Peninsula – far from the Buddha's region - a somewhat similar situation could be witnessed. Right before the advent of Islam the Bedouin Arabs worshiped variety of gods and goddesses. Islam's very first principle "*Tawhid*" was in direct contradiction with their polytheism.

The word "*Tawhid*" is derived from the root "*ahad*" (one or oneness) and it is referred to God's unity. The God of Quran is a transcendent infinitude over and against all other creatures, which are necessarily characterized by finitude of being. Hence, God is one and no creature may share in His divinity. Belief in such sharing is called "Shirk" and is condemned in the Quran as the most heinous and unforgivable sin. This new idea was disliked by some well-to-do people but, just like Buddhism which denied the existence of all gods, many people found the idea of "*Tawhid*" (unity) truer and more just, therefore embraced the new religion.

b. Idol Worshiping:

The second aspect common to the pre-Buddhist and pre-Islamic society was the worshiping of Idols. As mentioned above, the Buddha did not believe in gods. It was therefore natural that he did not approve of worshipping idols. The Buddha did not revolt against gods to occupy their position. He clearly declared that he was not a god, that he was a teacher and a

guide to lead people towards salvation. He preached that idol worshiping is no solution for the pains and sufferings of life and that eternal bliss, enlightenment and salvation may be achieved through one's effort in the context of the Eight-Fold Path.

Idols played a central role in the religious life and the social structure of the Arab nomads. The multitude of deities worshiped in Hejaz was tribal deities. Each tribe had its own god or goddess, represented generally in the form of baetyl, a sacred stone. The nobility of nomadic life was linked with and depended on these idols.

Three tribal deities were prominent in Central Arabia. These goddesses were *Uzza* (عزى), *Lat* (لات) and *Manat* (منات) (Quran 53: 19-22). The latter (*Manat*) was once stolen and taken to India. There a temple was built to accommodate the idol. The temple was then named Sumanat.¹

As mentioned earlier Arabian idolatry was not only a religious act. Idols played a key role in their trade and economic life as well.

The Kaba in the city of Mecca was the house of the idols, and Mecca was the most popular trade center of the region. The fact is that the holy city of Mecca achieved her credit through the famous idol house "Kaba". People of different tribes gathered in Mecca to pay homage to their idols. Merchants brought their goods and gradually a great market was formed. Having the socio-economic conditions of the Bedouin in mind, one can easily understand how much the idols meant to the conservative, wealthy merchants of Mecca. The monotheistic teachings of Prophet Mohammad endangered the interest of this rich ruling class. To reduce the pressure, they agreed to worship Mohammad's God if the Prophet accepted to praise theirs. What they wanted was a compromise from the side of the Prophet but not compromise on the very basic principle of the divine religion was possible. The one God was the only truth and worshipping idols, was nothing but ignorance. "*Allah is the light of heaven and earth ... and who is cognizant of all things*" (Holy Quran, 24:35). "*Then we placed you on the path of Divine Rule to follow it*" (Quran, 45:18). "*He indeed shall be successful who purifies himself, and invokes the name of his Lord and prays, Nay! You prefer the life of this world, while the hereafter is better and more lasting*" (Quran 87:14, 15, 16, 17).

¹ In Sultan Mahmood Ghaznavi's attack on India the Sumanat temple was demolished and all. Its gold, jewellery and valuable ornaments were plundered by his army.

c. Slash Between Social Classes:

The caste system was among social practices that Brahmanic religion enforced. According to this system of thought, people were divided into four classes depending on which family they were born in. Sons of a "*Brahman*" or a "*Kshatrya*" regardless of their potentials and talents would end up having a respectable social and economic status, and a "*Sudra*" no matter how bright and intelligent, was bound within the frameworks of his caste doing low class labour throughout his life with no better future for himself or his son. "*Dasas*" (slaves) lived an even worse life. They were considered untouchables and out of caste. Their position was such that one assumed that they were children of a lesser god.

The Buddha emerged in such a socio-religious condition. He did not believe in slashes and virgules separating humanity/nature, self/other, subject/object, and even Nirvana/Samsara. He taught that all men were equal and that high moral status may be achieved only through one's effort in living, earning, thinking, speaking, meditating and doing right. Nirvana is achieved by penetrating and dissolving the slashes. Nirvana entails recognition of the inherent harmony and equality of all things.² This very quality of equality elevated Buddhism to the status of civilizational religion, and invited widespread acceptance especially among ordinary working class people.

Studying the social condition of Arabia at the time of advent of Islam we find similar social injustice practiced among the tribes. It is said that the most valuable contribution of Islam to human society is its teaching of equality and brotherhood. This very quality in the course of time resulted in the elevation of Islam to the status of a cultural and a civilizational religion.

Out of all social descriptions recorded in the history of pre-Islamic Arabic, the two most outstanding are:

- a) Slavery.
- b) Killing of infant baby girls.

These two are more than enough to explain how unjust and inhuman the condition was.

² Thomas P. Kasulis, Ency of Religion vol. 16 p.453-54.

Prophet Mohammad was the man who stood against the unfair rules of his time with Islamic teachings of harmony, equality and justice. He preached that there is no difference between a slave and a nobleman and that only "*Taqwa*" (virtue) makes a man better than another.

انا خلقناكم من ذكر و اثنى و جعلناكم شعوبا و قبائلا لتعارفوا

انا اكرمكم عندالله اتقيكم (F٩:١٣)

"O you people, We have created (all of) you from a male and a female, and we have made you into different nations and tribes (only) for the purpose of identification - otherwise the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is the most righteous" (Quran 49: 13).

To wipe the shame of slavery and oppression off the face of human society a social legislation and doctrine was established. To seek salvation and forgiveness from their sins, people were asked to free slaves on freedom-purchasing contracts: *"and if they (the slaves) are poor, you give them freedom form the wealth God has bestowed upon you"* (Quran 24:33).

This law was practically supported by a bold act from the prophet's side, He appointed "*Bilal*" an African negro slave – and example of a good Moslem, a true believer and his trusty – to exclaim the first "*Azan*"³ from the roof of Kaba. This was considered as the first official announcement of Islam after victory over the nonbelievers. The teachings of equality and care for the welfare of people were very clear and promising. That is why during a twelve year struggle in Mecca (610-622 A. D.), the Prophet had gathered a devoted group of followers, largely among the poor but also among the well-to-do merchants.

Man in Islam is God's representative on earth and his duty is to establish heavenly laws on the earth *"who, when we give them power on the earth, shall establish prayers and welfare of poor and shall command good and forbid evil."* (Quran 22:40)

Material wealth was considered note-worthy only when it was directed towards well-being of the poor. In this discipline of thought people are criticized for their persistent moral failures which are due to their narrow mindedness, lack of vision, weakness and smallness of self. Quran describes all wrong done against any one as "wrong against oneself" (2:231, 11:101, 11:118).

³ Azan is a call for prayer and it comprises of phrases indicating that God is only one and that Prophet Mohammad is his messenger.

This pettiness is often represented by the Quran in economic terms as greed, fraud, and holding back from spending on the poor: *"If you were to possess all the treasures of the mercy of thy lord, you would still sit on them out of fear of spending (on the needy)"* (Quran 17:100). *"It is Satan who whispers into people's ears that they would be impoverished by spending while God promises prosperity for such investment"* (2: 268). Instead of establishing usurious accounts to exploit the poor, believers should establish *"credit with God"* (2:245, 57:11, 57:18).

The social structure of the Bedouin Arabs was male oriented, and females were looked down upon as inferior-secondary creatures. Infant girls were defective - embarrassing elements of families and signs of bad omen. Due to this mode of thinking many baby-girls were brutally slain or buried alive. Islam protested against this sinful inhuman act by declaring the male and the female from the same origin and that only righteousness and virtue could make one a better human in the sight of God (49: 13). *"They are lost indeed who kill their children foolishly without knowledge, and forbid what Allah has given to them, forging a lie against Allah: they have indeed gone astray, and they are not the followers of the right course"* (6:139).

Prophet Mohammad himself had no son but a daughter, *"Fatimah"* whom he loved and respected very much. In the Holy Quran Fatimah is referred to as *"Kauthar"* كوثر (the heavenly fountain of unbounded grace and benefits) (108:1).

The teachings of unity, and righteousness over came all the social, political and cultural obstacles and caused the spread of Islam to the remote corners of the world such as India, North Africa, Spain, Sub Saharan Africa, Central Asia, China, South and South-east Asia and even Europe. Buddhism too, relying on a somewhat similar concept conquered the spiritual realm of a large number of people in central Asia, Southeast Asia, China, Tibet, South Asian subcontinent far Eastern countries and some parts of the western world.

Silk Road and It's Spiritual Identity:

East and west are not merely geographical and external identities. Every man in the essence of his being has an eastern and a western side; each side representing one major aspect of his identity. The Eastern or the right dimension of human existence represents the concealed truth of the universe; it is related to man's spiritual power. The western side or the left dimension of the human existence, on the other hand, is the one that deals with the realm

of unconcealed reality. It represents man's ability to control his physical surrounding and to make best use of it to live a comfortable life.

The Eastern world has been the cradle of the right dimension throughout the history. Hinduism, for instance, is a religion that fully emphasizes the concealed dimension of the existence. Anything which satisfies the materialistic part of man or makes man dependent on this mortal life and its illusionary attractions is to be avoided as it is impermanent. True satisfaction and eternal bliss, according to this view, may not be achieved through the unconcealed tangible qualities of the material world. Hence, all efforts shall be directed towards a life away from matter. Moksha and earthly desires cannot unite, and for having one, man is bound to leave the other.

Opposite to this view is the western point of view, according to which man must develop his abilities in the realm of matter. Science, technology, and analytical view towards universe are the tools and means to reach the final goal. Spirituality and the realm of concealed truth may be a part of man but a person, who looks at his surroundings from the view point of the left dimension of his being, certainly does not and shall not give much value to that side. For him only those elements matter that can physically and directly affect his life. Other dimensions that are beyond the reach of science or physical knowledge are therefore considered secondary as they do not play any significant role in the process of development. And the ultimate goal according to western logic is development.

Here comes the issue of macrocosm and microcosm. In macrocosm we find sacred and profane both present, and in microcosm too, as explained earlier, both eastern and western dimensions exist. Today one of the hottest dialogues amongst thinkers of our planet is the issue of relation between the eastern and the western world. Man has recognized that he is not complete unless his two sides are united. (As stated above, these two sides though manifested in two geographical locations, are essentially two states of being, or two sides of human existence).

Buddhism was among the very first intellectual disciplines that made a serious attempt to give its purely eastern base some western touches. It was a step forward, and a sign pointing at a balanced life. Buddhist teaching combined philosophical and popular elements. From its early stages the Buddhist community included both a significant monastic and a

significant lay component.⁴ This historical fact conveys an important message inherent in Buddhism. It declared that the philosophical/popular and monastic/lay dichotomies should be seen as complements rather than oppositions.

In the Islamic tradition, there is a forceful advanced eagerness towards bringing together the left and the right dimension of the human existence - the east side and the west side. Islam preaches that salvation lays neither in the east nor in the west that only «Siratul Mustaqeem» (The right (straight) path leads to salvation and eternal life in the heaven. In the opening chapter of the Quran, Fatihah (opening), the idea of balance is expressed: *"Keep us in the right path. The path of those upon whom thou bestowed favours. Not (the path) of those upon whom thy wrath is brought down, nor of those who go astray"*. (1:5-7)

"Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth ... neither eastern nor western (though both east and west of the world receive brightness from His light). Allah guides to his light whom He pleases ... and Allah is cognizant of all beings". (24:35)

In the Quranic verses and "Ahadith"⁵ we run into many phrases that look contradictory at the first glance. See the following two for example.

١ "حب الدنيا رأس كل خطيئه"

"The love of worldly matters is the cause of all sins and errors".

٢ "من لامعاش له لا معادله"

"One who has no means of livelihood will have no resurrection".

The first tradition seems to encourage people to choose an ascetic life and to keep themselves away from any worldly means, in order to stay away from sins and errors. One can easily assume that such phrase be among the guidelines of a monastic religion. But Moslems believe that "لا رهبانيت في الاسلام". (There is no monasticism in Islam).

The second tradition, on the other hand, is a clear approval of earning livelihood, to the extent that the resurrection in the world hereafter and meeting the Lord becomes dependent on being successful in worldly affairs. It sounds like a statement by a thinker from a 20th century industrial western society.

⁴ Fank E. Reynoids and Charles Hallisey.

⁵ Traditions are sayings related to Prophet Mohammad and his successors.

The answer to this enigma is the word "balance", inherent in most of the teachings of Islam. A good man is the one who earns his livelihood by hard work, while he is aware that everything he does would be counted as a negative or positive point on the day of judgement. "So, he who has done an atom's weight of good shall see it. And he who has done an atom's weight of evil shall see it" (Quran 99:7-8). So in the "Siratul Mustaqeem" (right path), man has to make a correct selection. He should align his worldly deeds in the direction of the sacred destiny. He must sanctify matter through sacrifice. Among all God's creatures, it is only man who can select his state of existence, and this ability to choose makes him master of all creatures. His being having two dimensions is most meaningful. Man makes history. In other words history is the objectivisation of man's spiritual journey in various stages of Being. By dwelling in two realms (i.e. realm of sacred and realm of profane) man is the "Majma-ul Bahrayn" (The confluence of two oceans). His salvation depends on bringing the profane under the domain of the sacred. Man must sanctify his earthly dimension to reach a unity with God and live in harmony with nature.

In this cosmology, God is the ultimate truth and the totality of the universe: "*He is the last and the first, and the manifest and concealed*". (57:3)

Hence, through only one side of his being, man can only achieve a portion of the ultimate truth, not the totality. He should relate to physics and metaphysics both in order to unite with Him. Nature is considered a sign of God and every atom in nature is believed to be alive and conscious. Man may commune with nature through his consciousness and share its secrets. This whole idea is reflected masterly in the words of Rumi:

باتو ميکویند روزان و شبان	"جملة اعضاء عالم جر نهان
با شما نامحرمان ما خامشيم	ماسميعيم و بصيريم و هشيم

Every small bit of the world,

Tells you secretly, day and night.

We listen, we see, and we are conscious,

But, to you Na-Mahrams (strangers to the secret of existence) we are silent.

Obviously reaching such an exalted state is not simple. It may be achieved only through sacrifice, or the self-giving of human being for the divinity. "موتوا قبل ان تموتوا" i.e. let

your ego die, before you enter the realm of death. It is the combination of invocation (*Zikr*) and meditation (*Fikr*) that makes such cast of mind possible.

The Silk Road may be counted as the most important route in the history of mankind. Being the first route joining eastern and western world, the Silk Road may be given a spiritual identity.

Through Silk Routes technology traveled, ideas were exchanged and the friendship and understanding between east and west was experimented for the first time in large scale. Easterners were exposed to western ideas and styles of life, and Westerners too, learned about the eastern culture and its spiritually oriented cosmology. Buddhism as an eastern religion received international attention through the Silk Roads.

Emperor Ashoka (c.273-232 B.C.) of the Mauryan dynasty was the first powerful supporter of Buddhism. He devoted his life and his political capacity to spread Dharma. He gave up fights and bloodsheds for "nonviolence" but "*ahimsa*" did not make him feel weak as an emperor. Ashoka considered non-violence a more powerful weapon than arms. He won such victories beyond his own empire. He felt himself to be the ruler of a spiritual empire which embraced all humanity.⁶

The famous Ashokan pillars are among the very first outstanding Buddhist Arts. Many of these pillars were produced in highly sophisticated imported techniques from Persia; the Sarnath capital being most famous of all was adopted as India's National emblem. These pillars have strong artistic and symbolic value. But it was not until 2nd and 3rd century A.D. during the Kushan period that the Buddhist art really flourished. At this very time, Roman trade with Asia was almost at its peak. The great Silk Road spanning a quarter of the globe brought silk and spices to the western world, and objects of gold, glass, and other prized Roman creations were eagerly imported by the elite of the orient. The Kushan dynasty reached the summit of its grandeur under King Kanishka (A.D. 78 to 144). This time also coincides with the fourth Buddhist council. Kanishka found himself maintaining control over vital section of the rich network of trade crossing Asia. The emperor's personality was in favour of such interactions. Kanishka's coins vividly display his desire to live harmoniously with the various peoples and religions within his domain and beyond it. The elaborate pantheon struck on the face of his coins illustrates particularly the various religions practiced

⁶ A.L. Basham study of Ashokan inscriptions, Ency of religion vol. 1 pp.460-468.

beyond Gandhara in related regions of foreign trade. The deities of Persia dominate; the gods of Rome, Alexandria, and the Hellenized orient include Herakles, Helios, Serapis and Victory; Shiva and Skandakumara represent Brahmanical India.⁷ One of these Kushan coins shows a standing Buddha image clearly by the legend "Boddo" in Greek letters.

The process of Cultural and technical give and take in the strategic location of the Silk Route, i.e. Gandhara, does not conclude within the realm of coins. Ancient Gandhara, comprising modern North-West Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan, was the center of great Kushan Empire, of which Mathura and the upper Ganges-Jamuna Valley represented the outlying.⁸ The Gandharan sculptures are the most fabulous examples of the east-west interaction along the Buddhist Routes. This very Harmonic mixture of art upgraded the anthropomorphic dimension of Buddhist sculptures quite considerably. In the evolution of Buddha's image one can easily trace the artistic traditions of the Silk Road countries. The Gandharan solution was merely one of practical adoption and elaboration. A remarkable example of Gandharan sculpture is an excellent schist relief from the 2nd century A.D. preserved in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington. D.C. It depicts the four major events of Buddha's life. In this beautiful relief, Persian, Indian and Graeco-Roman styles, elements and even costume designs were combined to create a sublime work of Art.

No doubt, the Silk Road was the junction of all the above mentioned elements. But we also shall not forget that the central pole holding together the multi components was Buddhism itself. In other words it is the sublime content that makes possible the growth and exaltation of form.

Every piece of art comprises two basic components, Form and Content. "Form" is the manifest and "Content" is the concealed part. Content without form will have no chance to reveal itself, and form too, without content would be a facade without a beyond. To have an elevated art both component ought to relate. It is the unity of the sublime content (concealed) and the capable mature form (manifest) that can create an original valuable art.

Tawhid (Unity) is the essential message. It is the very first principle of every divine religion. The Silk Route owes its importance and value to the unity it caused. Today the UNESCO has taken an important step forward in the path of reviving the identity of this famous road. I hope that such studies, and the get together- like the one we are having now

⁷ Roy c. Craven, Indian Art (London, 1986), pp.81-83.

⁸ David L. Snejgrove, The Image of Buddha (UNESCO 1978) p.59.

would serve the noble cause of declaration of the Silk Road's messages; the message of knowledge, harmony; and the beautiful message of unity in diversity.