LAFCADIO HEARN AND BUDDHISM

By Dr. XXXXXXXXX

University of XXXXXX

Hellenic Impact on Indian and Japanese Buddhism

The profound study of Japanese Buddhism undertaken by Lafcadio Hearn will add one more page to the long history of this world religion, which was born in India, took seeds from Greece and flourished in Japan.

Relations between Greeks and Buddhism run deep, their roots going back to Buddha Himself. In *Assalāyana Sūtta,* Buddha talks to a young Brahmin, Assalāyana, and for the first time in Indian history he mentions Greeks, or Yonas, as well as the social structure of their country, which does not divide its citizens into castes; thus makes us understand that there was a kind of democracy upon whose standards he himself tried to organize the first monastic communities.

The systematic study of Indian religions by Greeks starts with the arrival of Alexander the Great in India in 326 AD. The Macedonian king was a devotee of philosophy and in his campaign to India he was accompanied by several philosophers. One of them was the skeptic philosopher Pyrrho, the only one who managed to return to his Motherland and who founded his own philosophical school. The epistemology of that school and its practice look much like the Buddhist ones; this attracted the interest of comparative philosophy and made Hellenist German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche call him ‘the Greek Buddha’.

King Seleucus, who succeeded Alexander in Central Asia and India, proceeded with further strengthening of the relations with Indians, by letting his daughter Helen marry, most likely, the son of Chandragupta Maurya, Bindusara. As a result, British historian Sir William Woodthorpe Tarn justifiably assumed that the son of Bindusara, Ashoka, who established Buddhism as the official religion in the Maurya Empire, could have been half Greek.

The influence of Greeks and Hellenic culture on the new religion was very strong. This is proved by Ashoka’s Rock Edicts, some of which are written in Greek as well. Besides those, there is a plethora of reports about Greek Buddhist teachers and monks appearing within the sacred texts of *Dīpavaṁsa* and *Māhavaṁsa* of Theravāda Buddhism.

In another sacred text of ancient Buddhism, *Milindapañha*, it is written that Greek king Menander adopted the Indian religion; he is known to have extended his kingdom all the way to Central India. Lafcadio Hearn quotes this book to consolidate the Buddhist theory of re-individualization and absence of soul that was expounded in the platonic dialogue between Buddhist monk Nāgasena and King Milinda.

Dialectics and metaphysics of Greeks enter the Buddhist thought, literally transforming the initially simple Buddhism into a colorful and polytheistic religion and profound philosophy, as seen in the subsequent schools of Mahāyāna.

Hellenic sculpture is employed and for the first time gives the Apollonian form to Buddha in the sculptures in Gandara and Mathura. The well-known image of Buddha in a Greek chiton and with curly hair is found on the coins of Kushan king Kanishka together with his name – ΒΟΔΔΟ - written in Greek. The influence continues and examples are numerous, as is evidenced by the inscriptions with the names of Greek donors, found in the Buddhist caves of Karle, Nasik and Junnar in Maharashtra, in Hephthalite inscriptions, and in the illustration of Greek symbols and scenes from Greek mythology found in numerous Buddhist monuments in central and northern India.

In Greece we come across the first mentioning of Buddha in the extant manuscripts of early Christian philosophers, such as Clement of Alexandria, Saint Jerome and John Damascenes. The life of Siddhartha Gautama is also converted into a Christian story in the well-known hagiographic novel, *Barlaam and Josafat,* traditionally attributed to John Damascenes.

With the Arabs and Islam prevailing in central Asia, contacts between Greece and India are interrupted. Meanwhile Buddhism is under a lot of pressure in India and central Asia, and is searching for a new vent to eastern Asia and the Far East. Greek artistic elements and philosophical ideas travel together with Buddhism crossing China and Korea, until in 552 AD they reach the country located in the East beyond the sea.

A number of Hellenic artifacts are still saved in the Buddhist monuments of Japan. Some tiles from the Asuka period display artistic inspiration from Greek floral scrolls (depicting vines and grapes) in the decoration of Japanese roofs. Many elements of Greco‐Buddhist art in dress, hair and body shape can be seen on Buddha’s statues, like the famous one in Kamakura, while the Hercules and Zeus (Vajrapani) inspirations as guardian deities are seen in front of Japanese Buddhist temples. The style of some Buddhist paintings also shows close similarities with Byzantine iconography.

The contact of modern Greeks with this religion of Japan continues vaguely and is transferred to Greece via the impressions of Greek travelers and sailors. Nikos Kavvadias describes it characteristically in his poem "The Prayers of Mariners" (*Marabu*, 1933):

"Before going to sleep, Japanese seamen find a secluded place on a bow and pray for a long time, silent and kneeled, in front of a yellow Buddha who bows his head."

More extensive and profound is the presentation by Greek scholars and authors, who lived and worked in Japan, like Lafcadio Hearn (Essays on Japanese Buddhism, Religion and Philosophy), Nikos Kazantzakis (Philosophical and Theatrical essays on Buddhism), Ambassador George Sioris (*Monastic Discipline Vinaya and Orthodox Monasticism*),  Professor Stylianos Papalexandropoulos (Japanese Buddhism, especially Dogen Zen), Professor Georgios Halkias (*Pure Land Buddhism*), Professor George Klonos (*Shugendo Buddhism*), Professor Marianna Benetatou (Essays on Buddhism and Comparative Philosophy) and others.

Introduction of Buddhism in Japan

And yet, how was Buddhism able to enter and become accepted in the Japanese society? The present study becomes particularly important if we take into consideration the fundamental dissimilarity between traditional ancestor worship, as seen in the Shinto religion, and the Buddhist doctrines of non-existence of the soul and of rebirth.

Answering this question, Lafcadio makes an observation that Buddhism was obliged to modify its metaphysical worldview accepting continuation of the presence of the spirits of the dead for a period of 100 years until their next incarnation, and recognizing the great gods of Shinto as Bodhisattvas or even incarnations of Buddha himself.

Introduction of the law of karma in combination with the doctrine of rebirth led to recognition of personal responsibility of every being for his present state. All states and conditions of a being are consequences of the past actions. Good acts lead to higher incarnations and to celestial worlds, while the bad ones lead to lower forms of life, even to animals. Similarly, the dead were neither happy nor unhappy due to the attention or lack thereof on the part of their descendants, but because of their past conduct while in the body.

The Buddhist teaching of the duty of kindness to all living creatures and of pity for all suffering had a powerful effect upon national habits and customs. Lafcadio quotes a decree issued by Emperor Temmu forbidding people to eat the flesh of a number of animals and use traps. Yet, he did not proceed to a complete ban of meat-eating, wishing to keep both religions, since a complete ban would be contrary to the habits and customs of Shintoism.

Even the Shinto doctrine of conscience - the god-given sense of right and wrong - was not denied, but Buddhism gave it a new interpretation as the essential nature of the Buddha, dormant in every human creature.  Buddhism, however, did more than tolerate the old rites, it cultivated and elaborated them. It taught that the spirits of the dead can find peace with the offerings and prayers of the descendants, and a new and beautiful form of the domestic cult came into existence. All touching poetry of ancestor worship in modern Japan can be traced to the teachings of Buddhist missionaries.

Lafcadio repeatedly stressed the great influence that Buddhist art had in Japan, with sculpture, painting, architecture and decoration transported from China. New temples erected by Buddhist priests should have evoked awe and admiration in people accustomed only to silent and void Shinto temples. "The Buddhist painter opened to simple fancy the palaces of heaven, and guided hope."

Yet, the greatest contribution of Buddhism to Japanese society was via education. Buddhist temples were gradually converted into schools offering education to all. That education was not limited only to religion but embraced the arts and letters of China which were patiently modified and reshaped to Japanese requirements. For the common people everywhere the Buddhist priest was the schoolmaster.

In the highest meaning of the term, Buddhism was a civilizing power that won the favour and acceptance of emperors not only with its invaluable contribution to the development of art and letters but also with its growing influence on the strengthening of morals and submission to authority, by its capacity to inspire larger hopes and fears than the more ancient religion could create. Its adaptation in metaphysics in conjunction with respect to local traditions finally led to its wide acceptance and somehow to a harmonious coexistence with Shintoism under the same roof.

Lafcadio Hearn and Buddhism - Sources and Influences

Lafcadio's pioneering writings on Japanese Buddhism are based on the study of the books and scripts translated into English, conversations with Japanese monks and devotees, pilgrimages to temples and holy places as well as personal experiences. His deeper understanding of Buddhist philosophy, however, became possible due to his previous extensive study of Western philosophers, psychologists, biologists and other scientists, like Herbert Spencer, Thomas Henry Huxley, Ernst Haeckel, Alfred Russel Wallace, Schneider and others often mentioned in his works. At one point, he even calls himself a student of Herbert Spencer, whom he regards as the greatest of all explorers in the domain of psychology. He also confesses that he found in Buddhist philosophy a more than romantic interest, because of his acquaintance with Spencer's Synthetic Philosophy.

Lafcadio presents the teachings of Japanese Buddhism in various books, such as *Japan: An Attempt of Interpretation*, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, *Kokoro*, *Exotics* and, of course, *Gleanings in Buddha Fields*, without ever systematizing it all in one volume. His script is pervaded by a purely enlightening disposition, while all catechism is skillfully shunned. His references to the highest Buddhist philosophy, and particularly to the concepts of Nirvāna and individual being, are often compared with modern Western thought. The similarities he comes upon often amaze him, since the Buddhist conclusions have been reached through mental processes unknown to Western thinking, and unaided by any knowledge of science.

Higher Buddhism is a kind of Monism; and it includes doctrines that accord, in the most surprising manner, with the scientific theories of the German and English monists. As a matter of fact, a class of Buddhist concepts can be fitted, or very nearly fitted, into Western Categories as they both recognize the same phenomena under different names. The similarity is clearly attributable to the influence of Oriental philosophy on the Western thought and religious beliefs, and for that reason they are well worth citing in this relation.

Buddhist Philosophy in the Light of Lafcadio Hearn

Lafcadio confessed that he undertook the study of the basic principles of Buddhist philosophy for three reasons: a) to eliminate the West's misunderstanding or ignorance, since it appears that Japan's intellectual elite was condemned as atheist, b) to differentiate popular beliefs from philosophical ones, as he regards that most Japanese people are not familiar with the deeper meaning of Nirvāna as a state of total extinction and nihilism, and c) because he considers that it is of extraordinary interest for students of modern philosophy.

He enumerates 12 principal sects of Buddhism in Japan, while he presents both popular beliefs and higher philosophical doctrines. He conveys a few glimpses of the fantastic world of Buddhist metaphysics, but at the same time he recognizes that this could have never been a religion of millions. The great majority of people do not trouble themselves with Nirvāna and abstract ideas, but expect to go to heaven after this life. The teaching is adapted accordingly, in order to be relevant to the level of the students, as the Japanese saying "Nin mite ho toke" (first see, then teach) indicates.

Highest Buddhism "is a religion of metaphysicians, a religion of scholars, a religion so difficult to be understood, even by persons of some philosophical training." To the difficulty of deep understanding, there is added a massive volume of seven thousand books of the Buddhist Canon, as well as a plethora of interpretations and comments. Theoretical and practical impediments make the scholastic study of Buddhist metaphysics far beyond popular comprehension, while at the same time proficiency in Chinese and a great degree of devotion is a prerequisite.

Describing the principles of higher Buddhist philosophy, Lafcadio starts with the monistic doctrine that there is but one Reality. This conception derives from the recognition of the transitory and therefore illusory nature of all the phenomena which are nothing but names and forms. There is no denial of the reality of phenomena as phenomena but since they can not pass the test of reality, which is persistence, they are considered as mere illusions. For Buddhism the sole reality is the Absolute Buddha as an unconditioned and infinite being which modern Japanese call the 'Essence of Mind'. The Absolute is above all relations, it has nothing of what we call pain or pleasure; it knows no difference between "I" and "Thou", no distinction of time and place. There is no division between subject and object and no other veritable existence, whether of Matter, or of Mind.

As Lafcadio notes in his essay "Nirvāna - A Study in Synthetic Buddhism," the non-dualistic state of Nirvāna does not differ from the synthetic position of Spencer that "it is one and the same Reality which is manifested to us both subjectively and objectively." The theory of the English philosopher further elaborates the need to transcend consciousness in order to know the non-dual Reality, because while consciousness lasts we cannot transcend the antithesis of Object and Subject. This thesis is consistent with the nihilistic philosophy of Śūnyavāda, that Japanese Zen has also accepted. It assumes that consciousness emanates from the contact of subject and object and does not constitute the deeper essence of Absolute Reality, as supported by the idealistic school of Vijñānavāda. Τhe destruction of consciousness signifies Nirvāna, the state where the individual being is dissolved and Buddha's true nature is realized. Nirvāna is "that state of mind in which the consciousness both of sensations and of ideas has wholly passed away."

At this point, Lafcadio warns the Western scholars that inadequate understanding of the concept of Nirvāna may lead to its false identification with absolute nothingness or complete annihilation. Such an interpretation would be erroneous since it would entail half the truth. Nirvāna, indeed, signifies extinction but this extinction does not mean soul death or re-absorption of the finite into the infinite.  Nirvāna means extinction of individuality, disintegration of conscious personality and annihilation of everything that can be included under the term 'I'. All that we call self is ultimately false because it is a mere aggregate of sensations, impulses, ideas related to the perishable body, and all are doomed to dissolve with it.  Nirvāna is no cessation, but an emancipation, the highest state of mind in which the consciousness both of sensations and of ideas wholly passes into the light of formless omnipotence and omniscience.

Another topic in Japanese Buddhism that ignites Lafcadio's imagination is a concept of the soul completely different from the West's. Τhe Pythagorean and Platonic concept of 'psyche' finds no resemblance to the Buddhist concept. The profound difference in this regard is that for Buddhists the conventional soul does not exist. What we call 'soul' is simply an aggregate or the concentrated sum of previous experiences, which like dust, comes together and constantly creates our new state until it disperses again with death to be reassembled into a subsequent form of life.

The human brain is an organized register of infinitely numerous experiences received during the evolution of life, or rather during the evolution of that series of organisms through which the human organism has been reached. The new being does not necessary belong to the same kind as it is independent of the line of heredity. Animals and divine beings have reasoning powers, too, and as the Japanese say even the stones worship Buddha. The difference between unconscious matter and living beings is only a difference of degree, not of kind, both are but varying manifestations of one and the same unknown reality.

We are a composite of quintillions of forces, an infinite number of lives from this and other planets. There is no individual soul but Karma or the innumerable desires and tendencies that survive after the dissolution of the composite individuality seeking to combine again and form a new composite individuality in order to fulfill and accomplish their inevitable retribution. None is there to pass from one birth to another but only the movement of impressions and desires. The only birth and only death that actually exist are those of karma in some form or condition, as it is the form of the wave only, not the wave itself that travels.

The idea of man's multidimensional personality allures Lafcadio, who writes: "My mind and soul is not a kingdom but an anarchical republic.... I am not an individual but a population... I have souls that have faith in fetishes, polytheistic souls, souls proclaiming Islam, and souls medieval...cooperation among all these is not to be thought of; always there is trouble-revolt, confusion, civil war."

The term 're-individualization' that he so skillfully employs, rather than 'rebirth', 'reincarnation' and 'paligenesia', which are more familiar in the Hellenic and other Indian philosophies, describes with much greater accuracy the fundamental difference between Buddhism and the schools that accept the existence of an innumerable number of individual souls. To understand this doctrine one must get rid of the notion of individuality, and think, not of persons, but of successive states of feeling and consciousness. The one Reality penetrates everything and all objective and subjective existence is merely an aggregate of phenomena created by the force (karma) of acts and thoughts. Whatever is good in the universe is the result of meritorious acts or thoughts; and whatever is evil - of evil acts or thoughts.

The pilgrimage through death and birth continues and rises from this and inferior worlds to terrestrial conditions and other superior worlds. He, who can pass through, is freed from the bonds of self and enters the Infinite Bliss. The whole cosmos proceeds through a spiritual evolution, of which the final goal is Nirvāna. This process of spiritual evolution remains in deep accord with the ethical aspirations of mankind towards freedom and perfection and permeates the whole mental being of the Far East. It colors every emotion, it influences directly or indirectly almost every act.

In the doctrine of karma Lafcadio finds a partial agreement with the modern scientific teaching of the hereditary transmission of tendencies. He denounces those who cling to the theory of a permanent personality and to a single incarnation, saying, they can not find a moral meaning in the universe as it exists. Moreover, he stresses the positive impact of the notion of re-individualization onto man's consciousness and especially on that of children, who will not fear death because they will learn that they have died millions of times already and that the sweet summer will come back after the snow is gone.

For Lafcadio, metaphysical speculation seems not only justifiable but necessary, as different ideals call for different methods. The demotion of the empirical world as an illusion that cloaks the eternal and unchanging truth, leads inevitably to renunciation, since the truth can only shine with the extinction of this illusion. Inducements for renunciation of the world and its pleasures within the Buddhist texts are numerous and carry the spirit given by Lafcadio's phrase: "But he who truly wishes to know must not love this phantom nature, he must not find delight in contemplating the works and the deeds of men. Those things for which men miserably strive in this miserable world, brief love and fame and honor, are empty as passing foam."

Lafcadio notes the conflicting relationship between matter and spirit caused by insufficient understanding of renunciation. Stories, like that of the young monk who commits suicide to escape carnal desire and of the beautiful lady who burns her face in order to be admitted to the monastic order, are such examples. Transcending the world should take place through spiritual maturity and not as a result of a self-centered pursuit, no matter how noble that might be. From the absolute viewpoint, all desires, even the ones for heaven and spiritual emancipation, are restricting and must eventually be silenced: "One must not desire heaven as a state of pleasure...it is only after the wish for Nirvāna itself has ceased that Nirvāna can be attained."

Man's path is full of extreme practices, mistakes and misunderstandings, but all his actions, good or bad, belong to the world of illusion. For the clear sight, all feelings of self - all love and hate, joy and pain, hope and regret - are like shadows. The cycle of innumerable births and deaths has never really existed. This has been only in time; and time itself is illusion.

Realizing the Changeless Reality that abides beyond all change, Lafcadio, like a modern day Heraclitus, transcends all dualities and proclaims from the depth of his being, "Youth and age, beauty and horror, sweetness and foulness, are not different - death and life are one and the same." The word 'same' does not relate to phenomena as such, which, no doubt, have a different position and form within space-time, but their real essence, which is one, common and unchanging - the Buddha's absolute nature. The state of Nirvāna does not differ in essence from the phenomenal world, or samsāra, but constitutes the clear perception of its real existence.

In his short report about the Buddhist doctrine of emanation, the way in which Absolute Reality projects itself as space-time with infinite subjective and objective hypostases, he explains that the absolute is the source and the final end of all forms without elaborating further, "the evolution of all forms comes from the Formless, of all material phenomena from the immaterial Unity and ultimately all have to return into that original state in which the excitements of Individuality are known no more, and which is therefore designated THE VOID SUPREME."

The path to liberation constitutes the gradual realization of the Divine that pervades everything. He, who arises above all forms, realizes that he has always been a Buddha. The path towards self-realization is illuminated by the teachings of the enlightened teachers or Tathāgata-s, who are no other than incarnations of the one Absolute Buddha. Infinity exists potentially in every being and at the end all will have to realize it. There shall not remain even one particle of dust that does not enter into Buddhahood.

Concluding Remarks

Lafcadio's interest and writings on Japanese religion made several scholars question his religious beliefs and philosophical orientation. A cursory reading of his Buddhist writings could potentially lead us to presume that he became a Buddhist because he meticulously studied Buddhist philosophy, visited holy Buddhist sites, noted numerous Buddhist stories and because his family erected his grave according to the Buddhist customs at the Zōshigaya Cemetery in Toshima. But such interpretation is arbitrary and does not correspond to the facts since he himself never adopted the Buddhist religion formally and his personal desire instructed to his eldest son was to put his ashes in an ordinary jar and bury it, without any religious ceremony, on a forested hillside.

Hearn never was a fanatic follower of any religion. His study on Buddhism had two aspects: the practical and the philosophical. From the practical point of view, he studied the everyday life - the influence of religion on the rituals, art and habits of people. He loved the simplicity of Japanese art and literature and he tried to relate to his reader the feelings and prejudices of an ordinary Buddhist of Japan.

His disposition towards Buddhist philosophy was undeniably positive, because as he himself mentions, he found in it "a universal scientific creed nobler than any which has ever existed." He is not trapped in its dogmas, however, and always remains a stochastic observer. His study constitutes the effort of a multilayer approach to the Eternal Truth that stands beyond dogma and the shackles of the limited mind. Τhe absolute freedom that transcends the intellectual boundaries of the scientific West and the religious East comprises an inexhaustible source of attraction for his interest and quest.

His study does not aim to produce a dogmatic explanation of things through conceptual patterns but is a reflective awareness in itself. His objective is to broaden the horizons of his consciousness and the intellectual landscape of his readers.