

Communication, Culture and Buddhism in Asia: Structural Adaptation and Integration of Digital Media

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Introduction

Radhakrishnan (1969:353) observes that the “Sixth Century B.C. was remarkable for the spiritual unrest and intellectual ferment in many countries. In China we had Lao Tzu and Confucius, in Greece Parmenides and Empedocles, in Iran Zarathustra, in India Mahavira and the Buddha. In that period many remarkable teachers worked upon their inheritance and developed new points of view.”

Scholars of Buddhism have agreed without any reservation that the Buddha was the founder of the religion who attended transcendental wisdom under the *Bodhi* tree. The Buddha himself did not announce the birth of new religion and remained a Hindu in which he was born until his death. He remained closely wedded to the idea of *Vaidic* religion though he opposed associated rituals and sacrifices of *Vaidic* religion. The Buddha remained firm in negating the ritualism and sacrifices as a part of religion (Radhakrishnan 1969). The Buddha believed in the conception of *dharma* considered as imminent order denoting the laws of nature. “For the Buddha, *dharma* or righteousness is the driving principle of the Universe” (Radhakrishnan 1969:341).

“The quest of religious India has been for the incomparable safety, fearlessness, *abhaya*, *moksa*, *nirvana*. It is natural for humans to strive to elevate themselves above earthly things, to go out from the world of sense, to free their souls from the trammels of existence and gross materiality, to

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break through the outer darkness into world of light and spirit. The Buddha aims at a new spiritual existence attained through *jnana* or *bodhi*, absolute illumination” (Radhakrishnan 1969:357). “The Buddha did not concede the reality of an unchangeable self for the self is something that can be built up by good thoughts and deeds, but yet he has to assume it” (Radhakrishnan 1969:359).

“Buddhism did not start as a new and independent religion. It was an offshoot of the more ancient faith of the Hindus, perhaps a schism or a heresy. While the Buddha agreed with the faith he inherited on the fundamentals of metaphysics and ethics, he protested against certain practices which were in vogue at the time. He refused to acquiesce in the Vedic ceremonialism” (Radhakrishnan 1969:361). Buddha’s humanism crossed racial and national barriers. Yet the chaotic condition of the world affairs reflects the chaos in men’s soul. History has become universal in spirit. Its subject matter is neither Europe nor Asia, neither East nor West, but humanity in all lands and ages (Radhakrishnan 1969).

I have paraphrased the essence of Buddhism and Buddha to raise a fundamental question as to how in spite of geo-physical obstacles, lack of means of transportation, political ideological differences, religious and linguistic barriers, three major religions namely Buddhism, Christianity and Islam spread across length and breadth of the globe. It should be clearly recognized that where Buddhism moved east ward from its place of origin in India, all the way to Japan. Christianity moved largely west ward from Jerusalem and Islam to all directions through largely in Western Asia and Northern Africa.

At a later date ambition and quest for territorial and political domination with power of sword, Islam moved across Asia and part of Europe. Christianity reached across the world both by persuasion and brutal force.

Buddhism remains an exception while propagating Buddhism. An article by poetess Kim Yang-shik observed that “Ancient sources reveal interesting stories about Korea and India. During first century A.D. a king named Kim-Suro of Kaya Kingdom married a Princess of Ayodhya, India... the religion, Buddhism has played an influential role in bringing the two countries closer. Old record suggests there had been a few exchanges in relation to propagating

Buddhist religion” (internet communication from Su-Kyung Han, Korea). However, Korean official records, museums and other sources are silent and explicitly recognize that Buddhism arrived from India instead China remains the major source of Buddhism for Korea.

Su-Kyung Han (2011) in a recent paper maintains that Korea is home of all major religions from Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity and Islam as major representative world religions with various cultural values. The diversity of religions is a major part of Korean cultural tradition. Buddhism was not seen to have any conflict with indigenous religions or Korean ‘nature worship’, because Korea accepted to blend Buddhism with Korean Shamanism. With wide acceptance of Buddhist followers and with the state support Buddhism during Goryeo period (918-1392) flowered while Confucianism played a subordinate role during this period in Korea.

Communication Perspective of Religious Spread

One of the major dimensions in the foregoing description is as to how Buddhism spread accepted and integrated diverse cultures of Asia and what were the modes of communication to reach in ancient and surviving civilization? It raises some very serious questions about the process of religious communication, spread, and acceptance of a new religion on an already existing canvas of religious beliefs as a fresh layer of alien religious philosophy without major socio-political, cultural and ideological conflicts. It will remain an enigma as to through what process Buddhism in the existing culture got integrated within the culture and society of Korea, several thousand kilometers away from its origin. Same holds true for many countries of Asia like Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Autonomous Region of Tibet and China.

These religious dimensions are important areas of future research though there are glimpse and historical evidence to advance the view that cultural adaptation as a continuous process of change that allows over a period of time changes both in the original religious philosophy by absorbing local cultural traditions within the religious fold and in the process bring about cultural change by integrating religious doctrine for shaping day to day life and institutions that governs the social structure given society as a dynamic source of energy to be in continuous flux for change.

The communication revolution has invaded South Korea. Su-Kyung Han observed, “Today, young people obsessively use new modern means of media and communication technologies such as Internet and mobile phones with Internet access. Gaming or watching TV is possible anywhere you are, home or in the metro, in South Korea.... which is an essential part of their daily lives. The question is, however, how essential is religion for young people in their daily lives?”. At the same time religious media also attract young people to link their interests to spiritual world...who live in stressful Can consumerist society to master their problems? Can religion media give South Korean youth a peace of mind in such a society? Su-Kyung Han (2011:10) has the question: can religious media play any important role as adviser for personal and social issues in a society where there is a growing gap between the rich and the poor?” There is no definitive answer offered by Su-Kyung Han in her analysis since it is difficult to discern how digital media is getting integrated into the cultural ethos of South Korean society and also what is the actual adaptive mechanism for media mediated religion? I have raised three research issues for digital media propagating religion especially of Buddhism in several countries of Asia including South Korea, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

1. What kind of research paradigm will help discern the contribution of media in integrating religion into changing technological world of capitalism?
2. What is the process of communication keen to propagate persuasive, non-violent Buddhist method of spreading religion in fast changing digital world?
3. Will technological changes reduce religious beliefs and practices as fast moving consumer products which consumers can pickup from the media market as and when required?

On these three issues Su-Kyung Han has hinted in her research study that requires a great deal of in-depth analysis and contemplation for future.

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