

The Influence of Ancient Greece on Buddhism - A Cultural Exchange

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Taxila, Pakistan -- The seemingly unrelated realms of Ancient Greece and Buddhism shared a surprising connection, with Greek thought and aesthetics exerting a significant influence on the Eastern religion.



Left: One of the earliest representations of the Buddha, Kushan period, 1st–2nd century AD, Gandhara, Pakistan. Middle: Head of Buddha (circa 4th - 5th CE, Gandhara, Pakistan; Right: Statue of Dionysos, found at Eleusis, from 4thC BCE

This reciprocal exchange of ideas influenced the development of a unique blend of Greek and Buddhist elements known as Greco-Buddhism. This special feature explores the historical context and the profound impact of Ancient Greece on Buddhism, highlighting the cultural and philosophical links between these two diverse worlds.

Ancient Greece and Buddhism - Historical Connections

Buddhism, originating in ancient India between the fifth and fourth centuries BC, is based on the teachings and life of Gautama Buddha. While it spread across Asia during antiquity, the political bonds between Greece and India, particularly after Alexander the Great's invasion of the Indus Valley in 357 BC, facilitated interactions between Greek thought and Buddhism.

The historical ties between Ancient Greece and Asia can be traced back to Darius the Great and the Achaemenid, or Persian Empire, which expanded its territory from Anatolia to India during the fifth century BC. These extended borders brought Greeks into contact with West Asian people and ideas. Darius, known for sending Greeks from Anatolia into his domain, including Afghanistan and India, further strengthened the connections between the two regions.

Alexander the Great and Ashoka

Alexander's conquests in Asia, over a century after Darius, encountered many Greeks living in those distant lands. Founding numerous Greek cities in Central and West Asia, he established lasting links between the Greeks and the indigenous populations.

Following Alexander's death, his empire was divided, and Seleucus I Nicator, one of his generals, took control of Mesopotamia and founded Antioch. The Seleucid Empire expanded across Anatolia, Persia, the Levant, Mesopotamia, and parts of Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan.

Despite conflicts with Chandragupta, ruler of the Maurya Empire, the territories under Alexander's and Seleucus's influence maintained strong connections to Greek thought and aesthetics.

Ashoka, the grandson of Chandragupta and ruler of the Mauryan Empire, converted to Buddhism. He actively propagated the religion throughout his empire, resulting in a unique fusion of Greek and Buddhist thought. Notably, it was during Ashoka's reign that the first statues of Buddha emerged, likely influenced by the significance of statuary in Greek culture.

Greco-Buddhism's Flourishing

Even after the decline of the Mauryan Empire in 185 BC, Greco-Buddhism thrived. Two important societies, the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom and the Indo-Greek Kingdom, emerged.

The Greco-Bactrian Kingdom encompassed vast territories in Western Asia, including Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Pakistan. In the famous compilation of the Milindapañha ('Questions of Milinda' - a Buddhist text which dates from sometime between 100 BC and 200 AD), it records the dialogue between the Indian Buddhist sage Nāgasena, and the 2nd century BC Indo-Greek king Menander I of Bactria, in Sāgalā, present-day Sialkot.

Subsequently, the Indo-Greek Kingdom, noted for its Hellenistic language, culture, coins, and aesthetics, rose to prominence from 200 BC to 10 AD. It was during this era that Greco-Buddhist thought and style flourished.



Silver drachm of Menander I (155-130 BC). Coin on the right - "Maharajasa dharmikasa Minamdrasa" (King Menander follower of the Dharma)"

The strong links between ancient Greece and the East facilitated the exchange of ideas. Greek philosophers, such as Pyrrho, Anaxarchus, and Onesicritus, traveled with Alexander the Great to the eastern regions, encountering Indian ascetics who lived austere lifestyles.

Pyrrho, influenced by the Indian ascetics, developed the philosophical school of Pyrrhonism, emphasizing doubt and skepticism. References to Buddhism can be found in Pyrrho's works, including his interpretation of the three marks of existence, a fundamental Buddhist tenet. Hegesias of Cyrene, influenced by Buddhist missionaries sent by Ashoka, believed in the impossibility of true happiness and advocated focusing on the avoidance of suffering.

Artistic Influence

The impact of Ancient Greece on Buddhism is most apparent in the realm of Buddhist statuary. Hellenized regions, drawn to sculpture due to Greece's strong sculptural tradition, produced the first statues of the Buddha.

Prior to this, Buddha was represented only symbolically. Gandharan artworks, created in a Hellenistic style in northwest India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan during the Hellenistic period, blend Buddhist and Eastern elements with Greek and Western styles.

The depictions of the Buddha in the Gandhara style resemble Greek gods, featuring draped ancient Greek himation, or cloak, and adopting the contrapposto stance typical of ancient Greek sculptures. The curly hairstyle often seen in Buddha depictions is believed to have been inspired by ancient Greek art. The Bodhisattvas are depicted as bare-chested and jewelled Indian princes. The buildings in which they are depicted incorporate Greek style, with the ubiquitous Indo-Corinthian capitals and Greek decorative scrolls.

Conclusion

The interaction between Ancient Greece and Buddhism brought about a profound cultural exchange, resulting in Greco-Buddhism and the fusion of Greek thought and aesthetics with Buddhist philosophy.

This exchange influenced art, philosophy, and the spread of Buddhism itself. While Greco-Buddhism eventually declined with the resurgence of Hinduism in India and the Muslim conquest of Central Asia, its impact remains significant, demonstrating the transformative power of cultural interconnections.

Courtesy of Buddhist Channel