

## Buddhism and Western philosophy

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There is a long history of interaction between Western philosophy and Buddhism. The Silk Road facilitated this from ancient times, yet the first major documented interaction with lasting repercussions came with Alexander's attempt to conquer Bactria near what is now Eastern Afghanistan and Pakistan. He died (323 BCE), and his successors were defeated by Chandragupta, the first emperor of the Indian Maurya Dynasty. Chandragupta converted to Jainism and Ashoka—the third Maurya emperor—converted to Buddhism, facilitating its spread throughout India. The Greeks that came with Alexander settled the entire region and founded first the Greco-Bactrian and then the Indo-Greek Kingdoms during the Hellenistic period from Alexander to the first century CE.

It is hard to document what elements of Greek philosophy influenced Buddhism and how Buddhism influenced Greek and Roman philosophy in the following centuries. For example, since explicit images of the Buddha in human form were not found in India until the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2nd centuries BCE, it has been proposed that they were due to Greek influence. Similarly, the concept of zero was not explicitly represented in numbers in India until around 500 CE, yet the concept was represented around 200 BCE using the Sanskrit word *śūnya*. However, Zeno in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE examined the concept in his famous paradoxes: 'How can nothing be something?'; and 'The arrow never moves since at any one moment it is in only one location, and its full flight would be merely the sum of all its moments.' Did Nāgārjuna formalize Madhyamaka inspired by the interaction between Buddhism and Greek philosophy?

Greek culture and philosophy followed Alexander, who was a student of Aristotle. Pyrrho and several other philosophers came with Alexander, stayed in India for 18 months, and conversed with various Indian philosophers and religious figures. Pyrrho returned to Greece and founded the school known now as Pyrrhonian skepticism, documented by Sextus Empiricus. Pyrrhonian skepticism includes questioning whether the senses provide knowledge, whether any knowledge is possible altogether, and how reason is influenced by desire. These Greco-Roman-Indian philosophies were developed by Arabs during the European middle ages and rediscovered in Europe during the Renaissance in the 14<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. They strongly influenced development of empiricism—one of the two major streams of early modern Western philosophy in the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries at the hands of John Locke in England, David Hume in Scotland and Immanuel Kant in Germany. The other stream of early modern philosophy is idealism, similar to Cittamatra, mind-only Buddhist philosophy.

Empiricism is the idea that our knowledge must be based either entirely or at least foundationally on what is observed directly by our senses, yet we question whether our senses fool us. Descartes initiated modern Western philosophy by asking how we could determine whether we were dreaming, deceived by an evil demon, or in modern terms whether we are in *The Matrix*. Empiricism evolved into philosophy of science in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a view that science must be based on sense observations, while we must be quite skeptical about what was called metaphysical speculation. The latter was determined to be anathema to science. The question remains how to balance theoretical

concepts referring to things that we infer to exist in the world with direct observations of the world, and what 'direct' entails in this description. This question is as much of interest to Western philosophers, scientists and Buddhists.

The links between Buddhist and Western thought beginning in ancient times is difficult to document, since there are so many gaps, branches, influences, and evolutions. It is easier, however, to document how Hindu and Buddhist thought came into Europe in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and where it went thereafter. Sir William Jones was a royal pain in the butt to the court of King George III due to his opposition to Britain's conduct of the war with colonial America. He was shipped off to India 1783 as a judge in the British Raj that ruled there, which is where he wanted to go anyway. He began *The Asiatic Society* from like-minded Indiophiles, and with his successors proceeded to send back 15 large volumes of Indian ethnography, philosophy, literature, music, geography, etc. over the next 25 years. One of the society members reported on his trip to Tibet where he had his mind blown by the genuine presence of a 5 year old tulku.

These volumes were well received in Great Britain, and became popular objects of parlor discussions among the educated elite. They were also nearly immediately translated into German and devoured by several German Idealist philosophers, including Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer is explicit in how basic Buddhist ideas of the noble truths, prajnaparamita Mahayana Buddhism and śūnyatā influenced his thinking. Schopenhauer was very influential himself, through Nietzsche (who in my estimation formed his philosophy largely from a misunderstanding of Schopenhauer's references to śūnyatā) and to Kierkegaard and all of existentialism, which has serious similarities to some Buddhist thinking. Existentialism was and is a major ingredient of Western popular culture in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Next issue I will talk about the more recent interactions between science and Buddhism.