
*Spread Of Buddhism In The Context Of
Shinto In Meiji Japan*

Upendra Kumar¹

In this paper, I have attempted to show how Buddhism and Shintoism influenced each other and during this influence, how the conflict arose. I would also like to prove that in spite of the ongoing conflict, there are still some traces of coexistence between these two. This means influence, conflict and coexistence have been discussed, but finely the agreement is with coexistence.

Buddhism influenced the Japanese Culture and in the same way, Shintoism also influenced Buddhism. The main characteristic of the Japanese Buddhism is that it accepts the 'things-as-they-are'. Japanese Buddhism emphasized the significance of human institutions and morality. Finally, it can be said that Japanese society opened for the development of Buddhism as a way of life. It considers all those, even though they are opposites.

According to Buddhism, there is not much difference between Shintoism and Buddhism about their world-view. On one side, Shintoism celebrates life while on the other, Buddhism sees suffering in it. It says that life is full of sorrow and the reason for it is its momentariness (kshanikavada). People try, up to their level best, to gain each and everything by their own efforts but it is impossible because nothing is permanent. Some critics have said that Buddhism is pessimistic, but this is not the exact interpretation. Buddhism does not leave people by saying that life is sorrowful, rather it teaches how to get relief from sufferings. Buddhism is pessimistic only in the sense that it works under a sense of discomfort and disquiet at the existing order of the things and it tries to take constructive efforts so as to overcome these apparent sufferings of life. Therefore, it can be clearly said that while the thoughts of Shinto are closely related with life, the thoughts of Buddhism are more related with

¹ Assistant Professor, Shyama Prasad Mukherji College, University of Delhi.

the moral aspect of life.

During the beginning of Meiji period, Japanese gave more importance to Shintoism rather than Buddhism. Hence Shinto became a prominent part of Japanese Culture. In this period, the Buddhists did not feel comfortable with the conditions surrounding them. There was a persecution of Buddhism during the Meiji period, but this is still remains a noticeable fact that Buddhism did well despite these persecutions.

However, several questions haunt us in context of the above-mentioned scenario. Did Buddhism react during the persecution which was going on? Did Buddhism survived because most of the Japanese follow Buddhism even today? It must have done something to save itself in front of the challenging socio-political circumstances. These are the vital points which I shall attempt to discuss and critically analyze in my paper.

I would start with the advent of Buddhism in Japan. During this period, there was no unanimity in various logical/religious faiths. Shintoism was popular among the Japanese before the arrival of Buddhism in Japan. The identity of Japanese Buddhist religion incorporates all its contrary elements. Human institutions and practical morality have been given prime importance in this religion. The most important characteristic of Japanese Buddhist tradition is that it has always tried to include/incorporate theoretical and practical aspect of Shintoism. Ultimately, we can say that Japanese society prepared a platform for the emergence of a new possible religion- the religion which could influence psyche of Japanese minds and this was reason of success of Buddhist in Japan.

During Meiji period, there was a destructive attempt to separate Buddhism from Shintoism and after that, there was a decline of popularity of Buddhist religion. National Shinto religion opposed Buddhism and Buddhist monks were ordered to quit from religious places of Shintoism. Various national movements against Buddhist religion at national level were started. The popularity of Shintoism doctrines were actualized in the form of various sects of it. Gradually, lacs of people became follower of this religion and it proved that Japanese Buddhist religion was no more a religion of common man. Blackening of Buddhist religion and all possible revival of Shintoism were initial tasks of Meiji leaders. The department of Shinto religion

affairs was made integral part of govt. Many thinkers believe that the aim of Meiji leaders was separation from Buddhism. But we have to keep in mind that in such process, any religion might face problem of destruction.

Buddhism as a religion and a philosophy, expanded in east and central Asia somewhere around 5th century A.D. This expansion has played a significant role in the promotion of Mahayana Buddhism. It is noticeable that the philosophical approach of Mahayana seems to be quite different from that of Hinayana Buddhism which spread around southern Asia.

Japanese culture has welcomed Mahayana Buddhism with open hands and heart. Their reception was inspired by the expectation that the local culture would be benefited and promoted under the influence of Buddhism.

Before the advent of Buddhism in Japan, the local culture was governed by the religion known as Shinto religion. This was the approach which believed that the emperor is the representative of God himself. This means that the idea of God which prevailed in pre-Buddhist Japan is quite resembling to “Kami” (as in Shinto religion). Quite obviously the emperor and Kami are bound together by some religious political-social chain. In this way the emperor took a significant role in the revitalization of the local tradition that is Shintoism against Buddha religion. It can be arguably said that while on one side, there was a dominance of authority, on the other side there was a domination of faith and belief. A constant struggle between the two was inevitable and such a phenomena is most clearly visible in the Meiji period of Japan.

The constant suppression of Buddhist religion was mainly to separate Shinto and Buddhism. Several deliberate attempts and efforts were made to reject Buddhism and reawaken the local culture of Shintoism. Several historical and cultural references may be given so as to support such incidences in Japan.

However, the basic question which arises in the light of above mention evidences in that:

Does Buddhism as a religion was disintegrated due to its friction with Shintoism and if this is true then how and why is Buddhism still prevalent and flourishing in Japan?

The above questions also through same light on the undeniable fact that several efforts must have been made to

maintain any possible form of coexistence and tolerance in between the two forms of religions. The thoughts prevailing in the country, state, politics, Shinto religion and public tried to influence Buddhism, so as to make it more flexible in nature and thereby giving it a more indigenous character.

To understand the relevance of Buddhism in the Meiji period, it becomes necessary to understand the significance of Buddhism in Japan culture. It is noticeable that since its expansion in Japan, Buddhism has been absorbed and intermingled in Japanese to be a Herculean task. It is also quite acceptable that the advent of Buddhism in Japan inculcated a sense of identity, recognition and reawakening of Shintoism itself. The influence of Buddhism has provided a systematic form to Shintoism. A lot of efforts have been made to alienate Buddhism in Meiji period, but even today both Buddhism and Shintoism co-exist at each level of Japanese society.

It has been even referred in the Encyclopedia of modern Asia that—“Buddhism has greatly influenced by Japanese tradition and culture. Tolerant by definition and having already peacefully absorbed many ideas and preaches through its long route through central Asia, China and Korea, Buddhism reacted a harmonious co-existence with Shinto.”

Since Buddhism has not ever directly opposed the native rules and regulations of Shintoism, rather accepted them, therefore influenced a majority of Shinto-followers.

In the mid of Meiji period, it was gradually realized that Buddhism can not ever be totally removed from Japan, as it has played a vital role in defining Japanese historical and cultural identity. It was not a simple co-incidence that the Meiji emperor awarded a lot of Buddhist monks posthumously. These people were selected as patriots and nation-loving leaders of the common man. In this way Buddhism became a part of Japanese culture.

In this period, the indigenous way of thought gradually started losing its acceptance and this phenomenon played a vital role in the reestablishment of Buddhist identity. Micava Martyrs sacrificed their lives not only to save Buddhism, but also to structure to modern Buddhist religion. By modern Buddhism, we intend to mean the advanced, industrial, urban and multifaceted society and to cater its needs. The Buddhism prevalent in 1871 when the Micava incidents took place and the

Buddhism during meiji constitution of 1889 seem to be different aspect and existences.

The Buddhism before the meiji government and during the meiji period had same stark. The Buddhism of meiji period (1889) has revived itself from the religion intertwined with ancient evils to a new religion representing the tree identity of Japanese culture. This beautiful but, complex change has actually the outcome of all the previous anti Buddhist rebels. It is believed that whoever can control death may also control the life. This way of thinking was based on the belief that whoever can control the past may also control the present. It was supported by Keteller “The successful renegotiation of the social identity of Buddhism during the mid-to-late Meiji era was carried out not merely as a refutation of Nativist claims to Buddhism’s decadent and defiling nature, though the fall in prestige of the Nativist clique was clearly a significant factor in the restoration of Buddhist prestige. The Mikava “Martyrs” did not die merely for Buddhism; they offered their lives for the sake of constructing a “modern Buddhism” a Buddhism enlightened to the demands of a modern, industrial, urban and cosmopolitan society. The Buddhism of the Mikava incident in 1871 and Buddhism at the time of the promulgation of the Meiji constitution in 1889 are, in many senses, two very different entities. Buddhism had managed to transform itself from being perceived as one of the plethora of “ancient evils” into one of the essential repositories of the true essence of “Japanese Culture”. Buddhism had succeeded in surviving itself in the form of its own martyrdom. This fascinating and complex transformation was driven forward by the battles fought initially over the right to control the national education system. As we saw in the case of the establishment of Shinto funerary rites, it was assumed that those who controlled the transition to death controlled life; a corollary of this assumption in effect during the mid Meiji era was that those who controlled the past controlled the living. The battle for religious and institutional autonomy is finally waged within the confines of the construction of history. By determining the origins, developmental patterns, and ruling strategies of historical change, Meiji era ideologues, Buddhist or otherwise, maneuvered to provide definitive guides for all

appropriate action.”¹

Buddhism has greatly influenced and, in turn, been influenced by Japanese tradition and culture. “Tolerant by definition, and having already peacefully absorbed many ideas and practices through its long route through Central Asia, China and Korea. Buddhism reached a harmonious coexistence with Shinto.”²

In the beginning the administration made several concerned efforts to separate Buddhism and Shintoism. But Buddhism, during its development, has accepted the beliefs of Shintoism in such a way that to make them separate seemed a futile effort. For the common mob, there was no difference distribution or segregation between Buddhism and Shintoism. “Since it was common for the same priest to be both the local Buddhist and, after the separation edicts had been carried out, the local Shinto representative, the performance of similar ceremonies by the same person with similar intent under a different name often resulted in little noticeable or actual change. The great Shugendo centers of Yoshino and Dewa were consistent in their work throughout this period regardless of external trappings. The same disregard for maintenance of the “pure” shintoesque flavor of the new ceremonies can be seen in the numerous pure Land priests who taught the membutsu as the perfect norito, or the Nichiren Priests who would read the Lotus Sutra before the Kami for the Kami’s own edification. These are but a few examples of the innumerable ways in which the separation orders could be and were, foiled from within. The Buddhist is a Buddhist “disguised” as a “Shinto priest.”³

It was promised to the people of Japan even before the formation of meiji constitution that the public will be provided with absolute religious freedom. With this background when meiji constitution was created (1889). Then as per contribution, Japan was announced to a secular state. In this way with the notion of secularity, the socio-political situation become much better the coexistence and tolerance between the two religions.

¹ Katelaar, J.W., of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, p.86.

² Encyclopedia of Modern Asia. p. 344.

³ Katelaar, p. 75-76

The first manifestations of Buddhism in Japan consisted chiefly in adopting it to Shintoism, a native cult of Japan. For this purpose, Buddhist monks accepted ancestor worship and admitted, side by side with the Buddha's image, the gods of Shintoism on the ground that these represented the various incarnations of the Buddha. In this manner Buddhism was able gradually to establish itself among the common people without rejecting Shintoism outright. An important advantage was that when Buddhism first made its appearance in Japan, it was introduced along with the highly developed culture of China. "It was largely because of its cultural character that Buddhism was accepted by the aristocracy, which was the intellectual class of Japan in those days. Once it was patronized by the aristocracy, Buddhism rapidly spread throughout the country. Several emperors of ancient Japan adopted Buddhism and accepted its tenets as their guiding principles in life."¹

Shoji attempted to show finally, that Buddhism led only to disorder and anarchy, that it thrived in "tragic times" and that it owed its popularity entirely to its encouragement of indolence. Like most political economists of the period, Shoji saw Buddhism as parasitic and lacking any useful social function. In discussing the operation of economy Shoji highlights four pervasive social problems needing immediate attention, the first three – alcoholism, gambling, and lasciviousness – distract even the hard – working and sow discontent among all the classes of people. The fourth "problem" is actually a group: "Priest and other debauchers." Generically identified elsewhere under the term *yumin* (literally, the "people of play"), this group incorporates the above three evils and, moreover, flagrantly disregards and conception of Social order by both belonging to no particular class and by producing nothing the essential character of Buddhism Shoji summarizes as follows: "All they seek is to leave the dust of the world and concentrate on their own spiritual discipline. Since they think there is no profit in turning disorder into the true, or in ruling the nation and bringing order to the world, they are content thinking. If it stops

¹ P.V. Bapat *2500 years of Buddhism*, Publications Division, New Delhi, 1997, p. 62

it stops; If there is lack there is lack.”¹

In addition, it was also said against Buddhism that, “Samurai, skilled in the literary and military arts, serve their lord, and in the event of rebellion are ready to lose their life in service, peasants live to all by raising the five grains, artisans make tools each useful in its own way; merchants aid in the distribution of wealth and commodities... But priests! They contribute not one coin to the general good, they know nothing of effort, and are entirely selfish, ignorant of the tribulations of lords and peasants, they eat and speak as they desire: claiming the nature of their meditations to be difficult they manage to work little and pass through the world tranquilly. They have no sense of benevolence and righteousness and are insensitive to their shame.”²

People also criticized influence of Buddhism over Japanese culture by saying that, “The participation of monks (and nuns) in pleasures of the flesh clearly constituted a violation of the Buddhist law that was designed to promote the cessation of desire as a foundation for action. The engagement in economic and political transactions that imperial Law; Engagement in money lending, political machinations, and the pursuit of sensual pleasure were morally reprehensible only for those whose social position breaches of morally acceptable behavior, had unfortunately “fallen into realism” they sought to traverse the world in comfort rather than transcend it, and they had, literally, no legal right to do so.”³

The temple closing began with the largest, the shingon temple Dajo in and the several dozen branch temples that were also under its administrative control. The main temple structure itself was turned over to the military for offices while the branch temples were used to house soldiers in the local areas. The other main temples in the center of Kagoshima were each treated similarly. After “closing” (which often involved selling or destroying) all temples in the “castle town” (Kagoshima City), Ichiki and the surveyors turned their attention to the surrounding village until the entire domain had been “Surveyed”.

¹ Ketelaar, pp. 38-39.

² Katelaar, p. 28

³ Ketelaar, pp. 11-12.

Their labors proceeded apace. Buildings were razed and their lumber sold for scrap or fire wood, depending upon the material of their construction, statues were (generally after being decapitated) burned, thrown into nearby rivers, buried, used as building stone, or collected to be melted down for bullets or cannon; and the “useless priests” were, finally and forcefully, converted into productive community members.” “It was really quite a chore.” remembers Ichiki. “It took us three or four years, day in and day out, to close down all the temples.”¹

*“The early Meiji persecution of Buddhism depended upon a definition of Buddhism as an “ancient evil” associated with a decrepit bakufu. Buddhism institutions, ceremonials, and beliefs were reconstituted as aspects of a dangerous “other” by the Meiji state as it attempted to distance itself from policies of the previous political order.”*²

While Shinto was being elevated and represented at the very highest levels of government as part of the ideology of the new Meiji State, Buddhism was accorded only lowly representation through an office in the Department of Home Affairs. “Neither the opinions of Buddhist leaders nor those of the local population were solicited in the making of the early phases of religious policy. Thus, although Buddhism was critically affected by the religious reforms of the government, Buddhist leaders for several years had no say in the making of those policies and no effective political channel through which they could criticize them.”³

*“Temples were shut down: temple assets were confiscated and title to lands turned over to the government, the legal relations to lay supporters were rendered meaningless, statues and halls of worship were destroyed the precious jewels of Buddhism were cast away like so much dust.”*⁴

The principles of religion changes from time to time in politics and administrative concept but the public stayed away from this. But it is very difficult to change faith and trust religion. It takes lots of time to change mentality related with

¹ Ketelaar, p. 57.

² Ketelaar, p. 50.

³ Jansen and Rozman, p. 151

⁴ Ketelaar, p. 11.

religion. The above mention problems have been seen in Meiji period, most of the Japanese were close to Buddhism but the politics which was going on during Meiji period was against Buddhists.

The main objective of the persecution of the Buddhist was to separate Shinto from Buddhism or the consolidation and rise of Shinto and the attempt to alienate Buddhism. After this event, it was said that Buddhism had declined. But if the fact then why and how did it exist in Japan? It is clear and Shintoism while it seems that co-existence was already established in itself.

In the conclusion, I would say that Buddhism was useful in Japanese society. The separation of both religions was opportunist approach, in which people were selfish in themselves. But it can be clearly said there were a lot of similarities in both of them. And for the centuries both have been affecting each other.

At the end of this paper and on the basis of above discussion, I would assert that both Buddhism and Shintoism have influenced each-other for the centuries and still co-exist together. Their mutual dependence and co-existence have been accepted in Japanese Culture. In spite of all upheavals, both the religions are still present and have maintained their peaceful harmony. In this way, all the indications of practical co-existence may be found between Buddhism and Shintoism.

REFERENCES

- Anesaki, Masaharu, “Religious life of the Japanese people”, History of Japanese Religion, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Tokyo, 1963
- Katelaar, J.W., Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1993.
- Davis, Winston, Japanese Religion and Society, State University of Newyork Press, Newyork, 1992.
- Matsunage, Alicia and Matsunaya, Daigan, Foundation of Japanese Religion, Buddhist Books International Los Angeles- Tokyo, 1976.
- Morioka, Kiyomi, Religion in Changing Japanese Society, University of Tokyo Press, 1975.