

BUDDHISM IN NOH DRAMA

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Buddhism is believed to have arrived in Japan around the middle of the 6th Century. However Buddhist teachings and practices have prevailed throughout the country long before the arrival of Buddhism. The influence of Buddhism entered Japan from Korean peninsula for the first time. The ideas of Buddhism must have prevailed to Korea from China and from there to Japan. Buddhism was officially introduced to Japan in the 6th century. Buddhism flourished in the period of Shotoku Taishi. By Nara period Buddhism was well established in Japan. When taking a look at Japanese history, Kamakura period seems especially favorable to Buddhism. Teachings like *Jodo*, *Nichiren* and *Zen* were introduced and Buddhist teaching took a more methodical turn in *Kamakura* period. This can be considered as the golden era of Buddhism before its decadence.

Japanese priests have taken steps to modify the teachings of Buddhism according to the era. As a result of these modifications done by a Japanese priest *Amita* Buddhism emerged. *Nichiren* is another result of such an effort. According to golden ideas of Buddhism, the era after the Final Emancipation of Lord Buddha is divided into three periods. Accordingly the first 1000 years after the Final Emancipation is called the prevailing period of *Saddarama*, the second thousand years is considered as the prevailing period of *Prathirupa Dharma*. Ten thousand years after the second period is considered as the final period of prevailing of *Dhamma*. According to Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, Lord Buddha passed away in 949 B.C. There for the final period of *Dhamma* begins from 1052 A.D. The political as well as religious conflicts that occurred in this period support the original idea.

As a result of great efforts of intelligent Buddhist monks, Buddhism in Japan was divided into different subdivisions. These subsections can be classified as *Thendai*, *Shingon*, *Amitha*, *Zen* and *Nichiren*. Out of these sub categories, *Zen* Buddhism and *Amitabha* Buddhism have influenced a lot on the tradition of Noh drama.

According to the scholars, the belief of *Amitabha* Buddha has originated in early A.Ds. As this concept is not mentioned in early

Buddhist writings this is believed to be arrived from Iran. As the creation of Buddha's like *Avalokiteshwara* and *Samantabhadra*, *Amitabha* too is created by emphasizing a certain characteristic of Lord Buddha. Theravada Buddhism does not support the idea of Great Savior in *Amitabha* Buddha. Therefore this concept of *Amitabha* Buddha flourished with the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism. In the middle of 7th century *Sukhavatī Vyūha Sūtra* was introduced to Japan. A Buddhist monk called *Geashin* (924-1017) worked hard to popularize Buddhist philosophy in Japan. He believed that *Nirvana* could only be attained by being re-born in *Sukhavathie*, the paradise of *Amita* Buddha. *Senchakushu* written by *Honan* in A.D. 1198 gives an excellent explanation of the concept of *Amitabha* Buddha.

Honan has classified religious rituals into two sections. One section was known as *shodo* and the other as *jodo*. *Shodo* dealt with the religious practices that are needed to attain nirvana while *jodo* dealt with sacred land. *Jodo* believed in the way of salvation, believing on the power of *Amitabha* Buddha. *Honan* came up with the idea that one can attain Nirvana just by chanting *Amita Namaskara*. The only thing essential here will be the firm and true belief. He explained Buddhism in a simple way. According to him Nirvana is the rebirthing in the paradise of *Sukhavathie*.

The play *Sumida Gawa* (Sumida River) written by *Kanze Juro Motomase*, *Zeami's* eldest son emphasizes the concept of *Amitabha* Buddha. The writer has been clever enough to illustrate the eternal truth of Buddhism through his play.

A mad woman comes to the bank of Sumida River, looking for her son who has been kidnapped. She wants the boatman to take her to the opposite bank before the night. While crossing the river the boatman tells how a boy died a year earlier after having been left behind by slave traders. The woman realizes that the boy was her own son. The boatman takes her to the grave of the child. Then she begins to recite prayers to *Amitabha* Buddha for the soul of the lost child. As her prayers continue the ghost of the child appears in front of her and explains everything. By the morning she realizes that it is just a tomb and she overcomes of her sorrow and madness. She realizes the reality in human life.¹

The writer has illustrated the ideas of *Zen* and *Amitabha* Buddhism through plot of the play *Sumida Gawa* in a very creative manner. At the beginning of the drama, the boatman who plays *waki*, does the self introduction and says that *nembutsu* is to be held there on the same day because of some reason.

While the boatman takes the travelers across the river, the *wakitsure* asks why people are gathered around a *Yanagi* tree pointing to the other bank.

"There is going to be a recite of *Nembutsu*"². In the middle of the conversation the boatman tells how a boy was left to die. Asking the people to bury him by the road side, he recited Buddha's name and died. His grave is on the river bank.

"There could be people from the capital in this boat as well. Even though we have no direct relationship with this boy we should go and pray for him" says the boatman.³

Here *Nembutsu* means the prayers recited by worshippers for *Amitabha* Buddha. These prayers go as "*namu Amida Butsu*". This prayer is chanted sometimes with musical instruments and dancing and sometimes without them.

When the mother weeps for her child the boatman says "now it's no use in crying. Why don't you chant *Nembutsu* for his soul?"⁴

Life is a temporary matter. That is the reality. So there is no use in repenting over some temporary matter. The poem below illustrates this truth.

The moon has risen
The river breeze is blowing
The night is at its height
'tis time we began our night prayers⁵

Mother realizes this eternal truth about life and she consoles herself by chanting *Nembutsu*.

"O birds of Miyake
If you are worrying of your name
Tell me, does my love still live⁶

On her way across the river mother weeps about her child. Her feelings are wonderfully expressed in poetry. By hearing her excellent poetic language the wondering boatman questions her. She answers him in this way.

The chorus highlights her feelings with their singing.

This way of revealing the broken heart of the helpless mother to a bird, relates to *Zen* Buddhism. *Zen* Buddhism can be considered as *Dhyana* Buddhism. According to some scholars this comes from the sermons of Lord Buddha. Emphasizing the self and the soul is a concept of *Zen* Buddhism. This philosophy aims to gain Buddha hood by exploring self. According to *Huineng* the pioneer of *Zen* Buddhism, Wisdom and *Dhyana* refers to the same thing.

The writer shows the feelings of the mother using the concepts in *Zen* Buddhism.

At the end of the play dramatist worships *Amitabha* Buddha and says that it is the only way to salvation.

One purpose of *Noh* drama is to soothe the minds of the spectators, using the concepts of Buddhism.

As the belief of *Honen* according to *Jodo*, salvation will be gained by being re-born in the paradise of *Amitha Buddha*. He said that one can be re-born in *Sukhawathie* just by chanting the *Amitha Namaskara* ten times. According to *Amitha* Buddhism nirvana will be the rebirth in *Sukhawathie*.

Dodoji (*Dojo* Temple) of *Kanze Kojiro* Nobumitsu is a play based on Buddhism. It shows how desire complicates the endless journey of life. This play is based on a story appeared in a Japanese Buddhist Anthology in 12th century.

A young widow who is desirable for a young priest asks him to satisfy her needs. The priest, who was terrified by this strange request, flees from her, promising to come at a later time. The broken promise fills her heart with hatred. She runs after him. She comes to a flooding

river. The poison of hatred in her heart causes her to turn into a she-snake at the river bank. This she-snake crosses the river easily and comes to the temple where the priest is hiding. She looks for him all over the place. The terrified priest hides himself under the bell in the temple. The she-snake sees this fallen bell and she coils around it and strike it. Her fury causes it to burn with the priest inside.

However there is a clear difference between the story and the play. According to the story this woman was a desirable woman and the woman in the play is a dancer. This naïve girl is attracted to the priest because of the frivolous talking of her father. The woman in the story was burning from fury; however the woman in the play is a pathetic character.

Women are not allowed at the Ceremony of setting up the bell in the temple. Though this beautiful dancer thinks of attending the ceremony. Her wish is to gain merit.

"I heard that there is a bell setting up ceremony in the nearby *Dojo* temple. I too must attend the ceremony to gain merit to cross over this river of *Samsara*"

Says the dancer.

She enters the temple and attends the ceremony.

As the play unfolds the chief priest relates the original story to the other priests. The shaken priests after hearing the story think of setting the bell up again. They pray for it. Here the strength of Buddhism and the serenity it creates for man is beautifully demonstrated.

This drama shows how desire can lead to destruction, not only self destruction but the destruction of everybody and everything. Here the dramatist has taken the she-snake as a symbol of craving and desire. She-snake is tamed by the power of *Dhamma*.

The influence of *Amitabha* Buddhism and *Zen* Buddhism in *Noh* is clearly seen from the plays as well as from the books written by Zeami on the theories of drama. The short comedies that emerged in the middle of the 11th century deals with the themes such of misbehaved priests,

priestesses, also the village people who come to see the town for the first time. Buddhist priests in glamorous temples were considered as professional actors. These plays were staged in different occasions. As a result of this some scholars tend to categorize these humorous theater performances as classical drama. However the plays of later periods aimed the common people and dealt with the Buddhist themes.

Zen Buddhism is the religion of Artists. It helped to flourish the artists and poets in era of Sung dynasty. It was the religion the artistic ruler who ruled Japan in the 15th century. The language used for speech in Zen Buddhism was used for description of Art as well. *Zeami* used the Zen style of making things more colourful. However the religion revealed by Noh, is a middle path matter. It was the common Buddhism in Medieval Japan.

Zen Buddhism has influenced a lot to the creations of *Zeami*. In his book *Yugaku Fudo Fuken* he has provided with examples from Buddhism. In that book he has quoted the teachings of *Kendai* Buddhism to explain the poetic features of the poem on *Fujiwara Keike* rule.

In his book he explains the concepts of Existence and non-existence. He explicates the principles of Buddhism as follows.

Existence is something to do with the external revelation. It can be seen with eyes. Non-existence represents the hidden desire. It points up the container for all the arts. The container is empty from the very beginning. That is the basic non existence. It lifts the form of external revelation.

Zeami sees the plays of the third category (*rembo*) as maple leaves in autumn. His concept of love has been greatly influenced by Buddhism. He illustrates the concept of evil with relation to love, using it in a symbolic way. The protagonist is just a prisoner of love and bad deeds. It shows love is a cause for unhappiness and pain.

Plays in the second sub category of fourth main category deals with the theme of madness caused by frivolous love. When one falls deeply in love with somebody, that love itself is capable of making one miserable. This idea is emphasized in the play *Sumidagawa*.

According to *Zeami* it should never let the feelings to gain control over actions. *Noh* is a theatre form filled with ghosts and demons. However these ghosts and demons do not aim to scare the audience. They act just as vehicle to explore the spiritual truth. It gives a confirmation of greatest salvation.

Footnotes:

- 1 The Noh Drama (1982) Tr: The Japanese Classics Translation Committee.- Japan
- 2 ජපන් නාට්‍ය සංග්‍රහය (1981) පරි: ආර්ය රාජකරුණා, මල්කහවුස් ඉන්ටර්ජාතික සමාගම 3-15 පිටු
- 3 ජ.නා.ස 10 පිට
- 4 ජ.නා.ස 12,13 පිටු
- 5 T.N.D.P. p. 157
- 6 T.N.D.P. p. 152