BUDDHISM AND EDUCATION IN TANG TIMES

The Buddhist Ideal of Moral Training

In the Confucian perspective, education has always meant much more than purely intellectual training and the transfer of certain skills. True education, as defined by Confucian thinkers, cannot be separated from the moral improvement of the individual as a social being; from the earliest times, the terms \textit{xue} 學 “study” and \textit{jiao} 教 “teaching” always have had strong ethical implications. They refer to a total process of acquisition and interiorization of the norms of “the right way of life,” to the study and memorization of texts that exemplify those norms, and, at the higher levels of “study,” to the creation of an elite whose members—either as local leaders or as administrators—will be qualified to further their application. The nearest Western approximation would be the French \textit{formation}, which, unfortunately, also is untranslatable. I shall not go further into this because Confucian education is not my theme. It is, however, important to note that the Confucian concept of education (in the broad sense of the word) was not exclusively directed toward the formation and selection of an administrative elite. From the beginning that elitist aim was combined with the much more comprehensive ideal of moral training and ideological manipulation of the mass of the people. Thus, Confucianism naturally tended and overtly claimed to monopolize “education” at all levels, and this obviously had important consequences for the extent to which Buddhism was able to realize its own educational ideals and potentialities.

At first sight, the Buddhist claims in this field were as far-reaching as the Confucian ones, in spite of its different orientation. Buddhism not only brought a religious message but also implied a “Buddhist way of life.” However, a basic difference lies in the fact that in Buddhism such a basic reorientation of life was, first and foremost, applied to the nuclear group within the system: the \textit{saṅgha}, the community of monks and nuns, novices and postulants, those “who have left the household” (\textit{chujia} 出家) and thereby have placed themselves outside the world of temporal Social relations and obligations. By doing so, they chose another way of life, subject
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To a very detailed internal code of behavior, the vinaya (律), The education received within the saṅgha was extensive and exacting; ideally, it implied years of hard learning, total dedication, and strenuous effort. But, here again, what we would call “education” is part of a total formation: religious study under a clerical teacher; the acquisition of the countless rules of conduct to be observed toward one’s masters, one’s fellow monks, other religious persons (such as novices or nuns), and the laity; training in ritual, liturgy, and the techniques of meditation. And all this had a moral dimension, for it had to be combined with a constant struggle to free oneself from sin, desire, and attachment. “Education”—in the narrow sense of literacy, scriptural studies, and intellectual training—merely is one component in this complex.

Apart from what took place within the saṅgha, the activities of the Order vis-à-vis the laity also had an educational dimension. The pious layman always has played a double role, as both donor and receiver. As a donor, he creates the material conditions for the existence of the saṅgha and thereby forms the support of spiritual life; in return he is entitled to receive religious doctrinal instruction, ritual expertise, and karmic retribution for his good works. The laity may also organize saṅgha activities serving a communal cause, such as rituals to pray for rain or the foundation of temples for the salvation of soldiers who died on the battle field. The social stratification of such lay-sponsored activities reaches from grassroots level to nationwide imperial patronage, but in all cases the saṅgha’s response—is, in principle, threefold: religious instruction, moral guidance, and the production of “good luck.”

Religious instruction directed toward the laity basically consisted of preaching. In medieval times the doctrine was no doubt already spread in writing (scriptures and popular treatises), but this was limited by the low level of literacy and, before the generalization of printing that took place only under the Song, the rarity and high price of handwritten texts. Preaching took place at all levels, from doctrinal expositions and debates at the court to the popular explication of texts for the common people. Icons and wall paintings in temples no doubt also had a didactic purpose, as they acquainted the public with the enormous Buddhist repertory of themes and forms and thereby enriched their world of religious imagination.

Becoming a Buddhist layman was more than a simple act of faith, in which the believer “takes refuge in the Buddha, the Doctrine and the Order.” The practicant solemnly promised to observe “for the rest of his/her lifetime” the Five Rules (abstaining from killing, stealing, illicit sex,