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Influence of Brahmanism on Pali literature: An Overview

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The influence of Brahmanism on Pali literature in ancient India is a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and religious dynamics. Pali literature, encapsulated within the Pali Canon or Tipitaka, is the sacred repository of Theravada Buddhist scriptures. The emergence of various religious and philosophical traditions, including Brahmanism, coexisted with ascetic traditions that eventually crystallized into distinct sects such as Buddhism and Jainism. Pali literature, rooted in the linguistic richness of the Pali language, exhibits linguistic and cultural elements that can be traced back to the broader Vedic tradition. This linguistic connection suggests a shared cultural background, even as Buddhism emerged as a distinctive tradition. Pali literature bears echoes of Brahmanical ideas, as the cultural cross-fertilization in ancient India led to a confluence of thought, incorporating shared ethical, cosmological, and philosophical elements into both Buddhist and Brahmanical traditions. However, Pali literature did not merely serve as a passive receptacle for Brahmanical influences. Buddhism actively engaged with and transformed these influences to suit its own doctrinal framework. The relationship between Brahmanism and Pali literature is evident in debates recorded within the texts, where the Buddha engages in dialogues with Brahmanical figures, revealing critiques of Brahmanical ideas and practices.

Historical Context:

Pali literature emerged during a period of cultural dynamism in ancient India, characterized by the convergence of Brahmanism, ascetic traditions, and the ascetic traditions that laid the foundation for Buddhism and Jainism. Brahmanism, rooted in Vedic rituals and sacrificial practices, was a dominant force shaping the religious landscape of ancient India. The Vedas, sacred texts of Brahmanism, laid the groundwork for intricate ritualistic ceremonies and established the hierarchical social order. The coexistence of these diverse traditions fostered a vibrant intellectual and religious milieu, leading to the formation of Pali literature as a repository of Buddhist scriptures. The Pali Canon, also known as the Tipitaka, became the authoritative collection of texts preserving the teachings of the Buddha and forming the cornerstone of Theravada Buddhism. As Buddhism emerged as a distinct tradition, it engaged in a dialectical relationship with Brahmanism, offering a new ethical and philosophical framework that challenged the orthodoxies of Brahmanical ritualism. The linguistic landscape of Pali literature reflects the historical interconnectedness of these traditions, with Pali exhibiting linguistic similarities to Sanskrit, the language of the Vedas and Brahmanical traditions.

Vedic Influence:

The early Brahmanical or Vedic traditions significantly influenced the socio-religious fabric of ancient India, rooted in ritualistic and sacrificial practices.

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The Vedas, including the Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda, laid the foundation for elaborate sacrificial rituals and hymns that characterized early Brahmanism. These rituals contributed to the establishment of a hierarchical social order and the codification of the caste system. The Pali Canon, a linguistic and cultural element of the Vedic tradition, shares similarities with Sanskrit, the liturgical language of the Vedas. The Pali Canon also reflects a dialogue with Vedic ideas, with Buddhism offering distinctive interpretations and modifications to Vedic concepts. The Buddha engaged in dialogues with Brahmanical figures, discussing topics such as the nature of the self and the ultimate goal of liberation. However, the Pali Canon also represents a departure from certain aspects of Brahmanical thought, with Buddhism emphasizing ethical conduct, meditation, and the Four Noble Truths. The interplay between Vedic ideas and Buddhist innovation within ancient India contributed to the richness and diversity of religious thought in the subcontinent.

Sanskrit and Pali Languages:

The linguistic landscape of ancient India was characterized by the coexistence of Sanskrit and Pali, two languages that played significant roles in religious and literary spheres. Sanskrit, the language of the Vedas and classical Hindu scriptures, was associated with Brahmanical rituals and scholarly discourse, while Pali, a Middle Indic language, was chosen for preserving and transmitting Theravada Buddhist scriptures. Sanskrit's association with Brahmanical rituals and religious texts was deeply entrenched in the Vedic tradition, serving as the language of hymns, rituals, and philosophical treatises. Pali, belonging to the same Indo-Aryan language family as Sanskrit, developed as a distinct linguistic form due to practical considerations, facilitating the accessibility and dissemination of Buddhist scriptures among diverse communities. The linguistic connection between Sanskrit and Pali reflects a shared cultural milieu in ancient India, with Pali carrying forward certain linguistic elements, allowing for a degree of intelligibility between the two languages. This linguistic departure aligns with the broader doctrinal distinctions between Buddhism and Brahmanism,

allowing for the propagation of Buddhist doctrines among diverse communities. The linguistic interplay between Sanskrit and Pali highlights the adaptability of languages to convey profound philosophical ideas and religious insights.

Cultural Synthesis:

Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, lived in a society influenced by Brahmanical ideas and practices. As Buddhism emerged as a distinct religious tradition, it engaged in a dialogue with the existing religious and philosophical landscape of ancient India. This cultural synthesis fostered a resonance between certain elements from Brahmanical traditions and Buddhist thought and expression.

The Buddha's early development occurred within a socio-religious milieu dominated by Vedic traditions and Brahmanical rituals. He often employed familiar Brahmanical terms with new meanings to convey his distinctive insights. Buddhism's teachings on ethical conduct, meditation, and the pursuit of wisdom resonated with certain ascetic and philosophical currents present in Brahmanical traditions.

The cultural synthesis is reflected in the adaptation of certain rituals and practices, such as the monastic community (Sangha), which became a central institution in Buddhism. The influence of Brahmanism on Pali literature, particularly the Pali Canon, also reflects the broader cultural environment, including elements associated with Brahmanical traditions.

However, this cultural synthesis does not imply a wholesale acceptance or assimilation of Brahmanical doctrines into Buddhism. The cultural milieu of ancient India facilitated a nuanced interplay between these traditions, leading to a complex synthesis that defined the early development of Buddhism.

Common Concepts and Terminology:

Pali literature and Brahmanical texts reveal similarities in terms and terminology, suggesting a degree of shared cultural expression in ancient India. Both traditions grappled with ethical principles, moral precepts, and the pursuit of a righteous life. Terms like dharma in Brahmanism and dhamma in Buddhism reflect shared concerns about leading a morally upright life.

Cosmological ideas also show convergence, with themes like the cyclic nature of existence, realms, and time reflecting shared cultural narratives.

Philosophical ideas, such as the exploration of the self and ultimate reality, exhibit commonalities, but Buddhism rejects the Brahmanical notion of an eternal and unchanging self.

However, it is crucial to interpret these shared concepts judiciously, as they may arise from a shared cultural and linguistic milieu rather than direct influence or borrowing. Ancient India was a vibrant landscape of diverse philosophical and religious traditions, each contributing to the intellectual tapestry of the time. The interaction between Brahmanism and early Buddhism involved a complex exchange of ideas within this rich cultural environment. However, the distinct doctrinal differences between the two traditions, such as the rejection of the eternal self, critique of ritualistic practices, and emphasis on the Middle Way, distinguish Buddhism from certain Brahmanical doctrines.

Brahmanical Critiques in Pali Texts:

Pali literature, particularly in dialogues between the Buddha and Brahmanical figures, presents a complex relationship between Buddhism and Brahmanism. The Buddha engages in debates with Brahmanical scholars, challenging their ideas and practices. One theme is the critique of ritualistic practices and sacrificial rites in Brahmanism, emphasizing ethical conduct, mental purification, and wisdom over-elaborate rituals. The Buddha rejects the Brahmanical notion of the eternal and unchanging self, *atman*, asserting the doctrine of *anatta*, or non-self. The Buddha also challenges the caste-based hierarchies, asserting the equality of all individuals based on their ethical conduct and spiritual development. The Pali Canon also presents a distinctive perspective on karma and the path to liberation. These critiques do not mean a blanket condemnation of Brahmanical ideas but represent specific points of doctrinal difference where the Buddha seeks to articulate his unique insights. The dialogues reflect the intellectual milieu of ancient India, characterized by vibrant debates and discussions among diverse religious traditions. In conclusion, the presence of Brahmanical

critiques in Pali texts adds complexity to the relationship between Buddhism and Brahmanism, highlighting the distinctiveness of Buddhist teachings.

Adaptation and Transformation:

The Pali Canon, a repository of early Buddhist teachings, demonstrates a dynamic process of adaptation and transformation in the early Buddhist tradition. Its unique doctrinal perspectives, such as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the concept of *anatta* (non-self), reflect the innovative insights of the Buddha rather than mere reflections of Brahmanical thought. The Pali Canon also distances itself from certain Brahmanical rituals and practices, emphasizing the distinctiveness of Buddhist ethical and spiritual ideals. It introduces distinctive Buddhist perspectives on karma, rebirth, and the nature of existence, while engaging with prevalent Brahmanical cosmological concepts. The Pali Canon also reflects a conscious effort to democratize spiritual teachings, rejecting caste-based hierarchies and asserting the universality of moral principles irrespective of social status. This social dimension of transformation aligns with the Buddha's vision of a spiritual path accessible to all, regardless of background or caste. The adaptation and transformation of Brahmanical influences in Pali literature highlight the dynamic nature of the early Buddhist tradition.

Conclusion:

The influence of Brahmanism on Pali literature is significant, providing insights into the historical and cultural dynamics of ancient India. While Brahmanical elements have influenced certain aspects of Pali literature, Buddhism, particularly its Pali literary tradition, is seen as an independent and transformative force that emerged as a response to the religious milieu of its time. The coexistence and interaction of various religious and philosophical traditions during the period when Pali literature flourished created a fertile ground for cultural exchange and mutual influence. The Pali Canon, embodied in the Pali Canon, engages with prevailing Brahmanical ideas, contributing to the diverse fabric of Indian philosophical thought. The foundational teachings of Buddhism, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, reveal an innovative

and transformative approach to understanding human existence and alleviating suffering. The interplay between Brahmanism and Buddhism highlights the unique trajectory of each tradition, with Buddhism's emphasis on impermanence, non-self, and the path to liberation carving its own niche within ancient Indian thought.

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