



The Buddhist Implications in Su Shi's Poems

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Abstract. Su Shi composed many remarkable poems and lyrics throughout his life. Buddhism, a major theme of his poetry, had a profound influence on his life and poetry. This article discusses the research treatise on Su Shi and Buddhism on four levels: Su Shi's karmic relationship with Buddhism, the Buddhist implications, prakrti-parisuddhatva, and epiphany, which are contained in Su Shi's poetry, revealing the influence of Buddhism on Su Shi's life consciousness and literary creation.

Keywords: Su Shi · Poetry · Buddhist implication · prakrti-parisuddhatva · epiphany

1 Introduction

Su Shi, the Chinese literator and poet, lived from AD 1037 to 1101. During his life, he created many famous works, and Su Shi called himself “Dongpo Jushi”, which demonstrates how deeply he was influenced by Buddhism. Su Shi's poetic works incorporate many Buddhist scriptures and texts, and through these poems, the reader can have a taste of the Buddhist implication behind the verses. Su Shi's poetry also contains many poems on the theme of the nature and purity of Buddhism, enlightenment and epiphany, which also reveal the strong Buddhist connotations of his poetry. This essay will take Su Shi's poems as an example and analyze their Buddhist connotations in depth, to get a glimpse of Su Shi's Buddhist ideology behind the poems.

2 Su Shi's Poetry Reflects His Affinity with Buddhism

The writings of Wang Shipeng stated “Dongpo's brilliant knowledge was the best in the world, and he had spent his life deliberating on the scriptures and biographies, from the scriptures and histories to novels, miscellany, Buddhist scriptures, Taoist books, ancient poems, and dialects [1].” Su Shi's poetry and prose are all rich in talent, and there is an intense Buddhist ideology implied in all of Su's writings, including the ideas of “the mind as Buddha”, “prakrti-parisuddhatva”, and “epiphany”. Su's poems are most unique in their depiction of Zen theory, with an emphasis on life perception and a realm of openness. One of the reasons is Su Shi's tumultuous life and career as an official. The different stages of Su Shi's life broadened his insights into the world, even in times of

loss, he healed the suffering, and found reconciliation through the purity of his nature. An additional reason is Su Shi's Buddhist connection. As Su Shi's family lived in Shu where Buddhism was prevalent and his family believed in Buddhism when he was a teenager. This reason influenced his attitude towards Buddhism. Dong Xueming and Wen Shihua pointed out that Su Shi mainly drew on Huayan Buddhism's cosmic view of the natural and smooth of all dharmas, Buddhism's doctrine of "the purity of the mind", and the attainment of enlightenment by seeing the Buddha's nature, forming an empty, still and rounded view of the universe and life [2].

Shi Buhua's said: "Where no one can speak metaphorically, Dongpo can metaphor; where no one can describe, Dongpo can describe. The metaphor is followed by the simile; the description is not exhaustive, so the description is added again. This method is derived from the 'Avatamsaka' and the 'Chuang-Tzu' [3]." This statement indicated that Su Shi was skilled in the use of appropriate and abundant metaphors. Shi Buhua believed that Su Shi's metaphors for the truths of life and the world exactly came from his penetration of the Buddhist teachings, which made the metaphors so thorough. Metaphors and truths from Buddhist scriptures are commonly found in Su Shi's poems. For example, in the second part of the poem "Three Strokes Of The Pen", he said, "The fathers clamored to see my black turban for I was a commoner who had held an official position. And now, the man stands alone at the stream crossing, watching the sunset in the west and counting the passers-by." In this poem, Su Shi used "black turban" to represent himself alluding to the days when he was deported to Hainan and settled there, while "For I was a commoner who had held an official position" is from the "Lotus Sutra". With endless rhymes, the metaphor expresses the Buddhist ideas that everything in the world are impermanent and the dharma is indefinite.

3 Buddhist Concepts in the Poetry of Su Shi

The difference between Su Shi and other poets is reflected in the Buddhist connotations which embedded in his poetry. Many Buddhist-influenced verses and Zen poems with a Buddhist character can be found in Su Shi's poetry, from which one can get a glimpse of Su Shi's "Buddha nature" [4]. Su Shi's famous poem "Inscription On The West Forest Wall" said: "it's a range viewed in the face, and peaks viewed from the side. All altitudes and distances would change mountains shape and image. I can never see the real face of Mountain Lu for I stand in the deep location of the mountains! I'm involved utterly." It not only contains the philosophy of life: when you want to understand the essence of a matter, you must maintain an comprehensive and objective attitude throughout the process, and analyze it calmly so that you will not be confused by external and one-sided individual phenomena. The poem also reflects that Su Shi was inspired by Buddhist philosophy. People are often limited by their specific situation and draw incomplete conclusions with a partial understanding of things. This view is an expression of Su Shi's Buddhist implications that "Everyone has a Buddha's heart." It has been searched for the Buddha's heart from near and far, low and high, and eventually we find that it is only in ourselves. Su Shi's poems contain the ideas of "Prajna is all empty" and "Brain Empty", both of which have their origins in the Buddha nature of the individual. In his poem "In Response To Ziyou", he said: "What is it like to go around in life? It should

be like a wild goose alights on the thawing snow. The slush perchance have kept the claw prints, but wherever the flying bird may go [5].” What does life look like in terms of the things it has gone through? It should be like a wild goose soaring through the air suddenly stepping on the snow-covered ground with the traces of paws leaving by chance on the snow. The goose has to continue on its way, while it can’t even know about the location where it should go. The goose can’t be found in anywhere, just as life is changeless. Su Shi’s Buddhist thought of “life as a dream” and “Prajna is all empty” is evident in this poem through the impermanent chance and separation of the wild goose. Su Shi’s understanding and perception of the impermanent world is a reflection of the fact that “Prajna is all empty”. “The Zen master has seen all the world with the theory of the Tao, while there is nothing in the world, even though the luminous ruler and the rubble are the same, not to mention this stone [6].” In the opinion of Su Shi, there is no difference between beautiful jade and stone, for no matter how vast the variation is in value and how diverse the aesthetic has experienced, so they both are spiritless and hollow things. Su Shi absorbed the Buddhist idea of “emptiness”, and thus his view of the world was to grasp the essence behind it, which was emptiness.

In Su Shi’s poems, it is also commonly to find his open-minded Buddhist thought of having nothing to think about and nothing to go. In “The Observatory”, Su Shi wrote: “There is nothing to live in the three realms. Take a moment to feel the tranquillity on an observatory. All worries disappear after death. Therefore, I go to the hut after calming-illuminating.” “Nothing lives in the three realms” is also a true reflection of the “emptiness” in Su Shi’s heart. Because of “Prajna is all empty”, no matter what you go after, it’s nothingness. In Su Shi’s poetry, the Buddhist doctrine can be seen everywhere, mirroring his Buddhist heart. Because of “everyone has a Buddha’s heart”, Su Shi’s pursuit and understanding of Buddhism were conveyed in his poetry evidenced by the Buddhist implications of “Prajna is all empty” and “Brain Empty”.

4 The Buddhist Implications of “Prakrti-Parisuddhatva” in the Poetry of Su Shi

Su Shi said, “For having an empty heart, I don’t know what is the point of writing?” This quote comes from the “Tanjing”, “There is no bodhi tree or mirror. There is nothing to cause trouble [7].” The mind is free from distractions and disturbances so that it can become “prakrti-parisuddhatva”, and it also is originally pure. After being tainted by worldly worries and earthly desires, it turn into impure. Earthly worries and mundane desires are all external impacts of the material world, rather than being self-contained and internally generated by self. This reveals the Buddhist idea of “prakrti-parisuddhatva” that Su Shi himself had. In Su Shi’s poetry, he conveyed his enlightenment with philosophical verses which was one of the roots of his poetry’s full of Buddhist connotations, reflecting the idea of “prakrti-parisuddhatva”, “Brain Empty”, and “emptiness”. Su Shi borrowed the Buddhist theory to express his inner purity as he commonly used the word “dust” that referred to the “Six Gunas” in Buddhism, which are the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. The six specific perceptions of color, sound, fragrance, taste, touch, and dharma are perceived by these “six roots”. Buddhism advocates breaking away from self-obsession and mundane thoughts, while Su Shi said he did not need to “cleanse

his ears”, because he could achieve the ideal state of “*prakṛti-parisuddhatva*” by focusing on his inner world. From Su Shi’s own experience, after his deportation to Hangzhou, he paid more attention to inner world than external disturbances so that he gained inner peace. This is one of reasons why the Buddhist meaning of “*prakṛti-parisuddhatva*” can be seen in his poetry everywhere.

Su Shi’s “*Drinking On The Lake, First Sunny, Then Rain*” elaborated on this idea, as he wrote, “Water is glistening with beautiful ripples on sunny days. There are mountains with spectacular and haunting mist in the rain. The West Lake may be compared to Beauty of Xi Shi, and whether she makes up or not is appropriate.” The West Lake is gorgeous on a sunny day with its rippling water and sparkling waves. On a rainy day, the mountains are hazy and hidden which also have a misty beauty. Whether it is lake or mountain, sunny or runny, the scenery is wonderful. Su Shi’s perception of “*prakṛti-parisuddhatva*” can be seen in the poem “It is good when it is sunny.” and “It is also fantastic when it is raining.” The West Lake is breathtaking in both types of weather because he comprehended that all beings have the nature of Buddhism and there is no diversity in everything. Su Shi understood the idea of “*prakṛti-parisuddhatva*” so that there was no difference in anythings and no distinction in his heart. Therefore, His literary works are rounded with Buddhist implications reflecting the style of open-mindedness.

5 The Buddhist Epiphany in the Poetry of Su Shi

To have an epiphany is to comprehend the truths of the world and the eternal truths of the universe in an instant. The poet’s epiphany is manifested in his poetic verses, which are wise and meaningful. Su Shi’s epiphany can be traced everywhere, in his awareness of an open and optimistic attitude towards life and in his inductive grasp of the inner truths of the world. Having an open-minded spirit, Su Shi expressed whether it was stormy or sunny, it made no difference to him, for he had the unrestrained attitude of “spending a straw-cloaked life in mist and rain” and no obsession with wealth or fame [8]. Therefore, he upheld the attitude of “neither storm nor sunshine” and was at peace in all circumstances. For Su Shi, life is a passing experience and a cloud of mist that means whichever path you choose, it is unpredictable. In the poem “*Suigetsuji Temple*”, he raised the question “Where is the most beautiful lake and hills?” In the end, the answer came in the form of “It is the shadows of laurels in the pond of the water and moon.” This was the answer of Su Shi to the question of living. He spent his time with a peaceful attitude so that after he was relegated to the south of the country, he was still able to take an optimistic view of what life was like, and wrote the line, “Eating three hundred lychees a day, I will never stop being a Lingnan Folk.” In Xuzhou, he said: “There is a lot of competition for the drunken dream. Is it true that thorns are buried in bronze camels? When I realize, I have crossed a thousand waves of hardship. When I turn back to look at the lake, I feel at ease. I look at the pale rocks on the shore, where the bamboo have been like honeycombs since ancient times. It should only be that the mind has no dwelling. So what do I regret if time flies and the world changes?” Su Shi saw that everything in the world are changeable, so in this poem, Su Shi used the idea of Zen which is “no dwelling” to broaden his horizons and ideology, as he had a dwelling-free mind to transcend the limitations of time and space gaining spiritual freedom [9].

Su Shi's epiphany of life was revealed in his philosophical sentences. His epiphanies encompassed all aspects of existence, and the Buddhist connotations were hidden in his meaningful poems as he commonly applied the Buddhist philosophy to express his realizations. In Su Shi's poems, he used to directly borrow from the witty words of Buddhists, punctuating them into aphorisms and wise sayings. "I was born to pass away in the day and night of incarnation. In a flash, I was in the distant land of Silla."; "I blame the clouds and the mountains for not changing their color, as I know that the river and the moon are not separated."; "There is never a foot that don't know how to slip, people believe the difficulty of walking on stones [10]." As his studies of Zen theory, he learned the philosophy of life permeated by Zen theory, and realized that "life is like a dream", "Brain Empty", and "let's go with the flow." This enabled him to achieve "prakṛti-parisuddhatva" and a Buddha's mind so that he can face up to difficult situations with leisureliness.

6 Conclusion

Buddhism had a far-reaching influence to the Su Shi's whole life and his works, and became a unique component of his thought. Su Shi's life strongly attached to Buddhism and adored Taoism. By Buddhist scriptures and communicating with monks, Su Shi was subliminally influenced by Buddhist thought. And it is precisely for this reason that Su Shi achieved combining natural scenery and philosophy of life. Su's lyrics are filled with the wisdom of Buddhism everywhere, and formed the thoughts that were detached from this world. Behind his works, there is a multitude of Buddhist thoughts, scriptures, and metaphors that full of Buddhist connotations connotations, due to the influence of Buddhism. In the midst of up and down of his life, Su Shi understood the truths of "life is like a dream", "Brain Empty" and "let's go with the flow". Therefore, he lived with a free and easy heart, resulted in the well-known "Dongpo Jushi".

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