

Catholicism / Protestantism versus Hinduism /Buddhism On Hesse's Transcultural Reception

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When we conduct an analysis on transcultural reception, we must be aware that at least three perspectives are involved. The focus of this paper is, of course, on Hermann Hesse (1877-1962). Of secondary importance is the German reaction to non-theistic thoughts during Hesse's lifetime. Last, but not least, we should not ignore the scope of the analyzer. We shall first trace the development of his reception of Indian thoughts, his journey to the East and the feeling of European superiority because of its rationalism. Then a shift took place. He felt increasingly attracted to the spirituality of Catholicism and Hinduism. Consequently, he also rejected Protestantism as well as Buddhism as being too rationalistic. Then we shall analyze Hesse's belief as expression in the novel *Siddhartha*. In his old age, Hesse became acquainted with Chinese Buddhism in the form of Zen. The paper will then examine in what way he became reconciled with Buddhism.

We know that Hesse grew up in a devout missionary family of pietistic tradition. Both his parents were missionaries in India: his maternal grandfather was even a renowned indologist. Culturally, the family was open to the world. Hermann grew up surrounded by Indian souvenirs of two generations. However, in religious matters, they were uncompromisingly protestant. Tenets of traditional pietism prescribe that literature must be edifying and serve to propagate the faith. When her son published his first volume of prose writings titled *Eine Stunde hinter Mitternacht* (1899), Marie Hesse (1842-1902) became very agitated. She called the booklet pure poison and admonished her son to leave the world of lies, i.e. of literature, in which the impure is represented as beautiful. She asked God to rescue her son and returned him to the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace.¹ About the contradictory situation regarding culture and faith, Hesse described it in a short essay titled "Über mein Verhältnis zum geistigen Indien und China" (On the relation to spiritual India and China), written in 1922:

My parents and grandfather had a lot of love for India and were ready to make allowance

¹ Cf. Ninon Hesse/Gerhard Kirchhoff (eds.), *Kindheit und Jugend vor Neunzehnjahrhundert. Hermann Hesse in Briefen und Lebenszeugnissen*. 2 volumes. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984/5, vol. 2, p. 358. More on the interaction between Hermann Hesse and her parents, cf. Richard C. Helt, *A Poet or Nothing at all. The Tübingen and Basel Years of Hermann Hesse*. Oxford/New York: Berghahn Books, 1996.

for it. However, their Christianity stood in the way. They appreciated India and its ideas, but always with the reservation that alone the teachings of Jesus were divine and final. With the same reservation they also approached Goethe and other secular giants.²

The parental home gave Hermann Hesse a taste of India, without acquainting him with India thoughts. These he had to acquire himself. Around 1900, the second wave of the Indian vogue was wide spread in the form of Theosophy which also attracted Hesse. Beginning in 1904, he was also drawn to Schopenhauer's (1788-1860) Maya-philosophy. Three years later, he published "Legend of Indian King",³ which shows that he was familiar with meditation as well as with the theory of Atman and Brama. This may be a result of his reading of *Bhagava Gita* in the translation (1892) of Franz Hartmann, who founded the German Theosophical Society in 1896.

As far as Buddhism is concerned, he juxtaposed Buddha and Jesus in a letter of February 1903 to his parents. In another letter five years later, he wrote that he missed the idea of pre-existence in Christianity. Consequently, he turned to Buddha and the Vedic legends in order to construct a personal mythology. Nevertheless, he did not find the Indian notion of reincarnation entirely satisfactory, because it was not based on faith, but on cognition. He compared it with modern determinism, except that it left, on the way to Nirvana, a domestically constructed "hole" open for the freedom of the will.⁴ Obviously, for Hesse, Buddhism, despite its doctrine on reaching Nirvana, was more of an intellectual exercise than a religion based on faith. Even after his encounter with living Buddhism in Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon, he did not change his opinion.

In 1911, Hesse traveled to that part of Asia which was then generically known as East Indies. He visited the Malay Peninsula as well as Sumatra, a part of the Dutch East Indies at that time. On his way back, he also visited Ceylon. The travelogue of this journey was published in 1913 as *Aus Indien, out of India*. It is conspicuous that there was no description of Buddhist temples or worship when he was in Kuala Lumpur, which he characterized as a Chinese city, and Singapore. This fact suggests that he was not really aware of the sinized Buddhism, known as Mahayana Buddhism which was wide spread in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Only when

² Hermann Hesse, *Blick nach dem Fernen Osten*. Edited by Volker Michels. Frankfurt; Suhrmap, 2002, p. 394. The English translated is done by Adrian Hsia.

³ I.e. "Legende vom indischen König", in: *Die neue Rundschau*, September, 1907.

⁴ Cf. Adrian Hsia, *Hesse und China*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002, pp. 38-39.

he was in Kandy did he began to discuss Buddhism at some length. As a matter of fact, he was not impressed at all by the Theravada Buddhism practiced in Sri Lanka, Burma, Siam, and Indochina except Vietnam. He considered it degenerated. From a magnificent and pure doctrine, it had been distorted to grotesque idolatry in which the suffering humanity expressed their misery and lack of spirit and strength. The statues and shrines served no purpose, other than being photographed by tourists. Hesse had only contempt for the “miserable priests” who were, in his opinion, servants of money.⁵

The above Hesse wrote in 1912. In the same year, he also wrote the short story “Robert Aghion”. Originally, he wished to call the story “Der Missionar”, the missionary, but changed it to the proper name in consideration of his father. In this story, Aghion is a missionary in India. He becomes disillusioned of the way of the Empire in mistreating the Indian people. He also disagrees that Hindus, followers of a more ancient religion, should be converted to Christianity. When he falls in love with an Indian woman, he leaves the mission and becomes a foreman of a plantation. He coaches his fiancée in his way of life, baptizes her, and marries her in a Christian ceremony. Then they live happily ever after. This story shows Hesse at the crossroads. His protagonist accepts Hinduism and rejects the Christian mission, but at the same time, he wants his Indian wife to be Christian. Together they found a Christian family in India. For Hesse, it was still unthinkable for a European to follow an Asian religion. However, soon after the publication of his travelogue *Aus Indien* in 1913, he began to change fundamentally. One year later, he published the essay “Erinnerung an Asien”, remembering Asia, in which he re-evaluated his experience and reversed his former more or less arrogant judgment. He no longer considered the “clever and spiritual people of the West to be closer to the source of Buddha and of all knowledge”⁶ as he did in Kandy, but now he came to the new conclusion that the East was full of religion, a strength that the West lacked.⁷ In the letter to Romain Rolland dated April 6, 1923, he characterized his travelogue as “notes of my earlier journey to Malaya, Sumatra, and Ceylon [...] The book is shallow, and the trip itself is really a disappointment – that is at the time, because later it bore most beautiful fruit.”⁸ This fruit was his *Siddhartha* (1922).

⁵ “Tagebuchblatt aus Kandy”, in: Volker Michels (ed.), *Hermann Hesse. Bleick nach dem Fernen Osten*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002, pp. 351-354.

⁶ Michels, p. 353.

⁷ Cf. Michels, p. 379.

⁸ Hermann Hesse and Romain Rolland, *Correspondence, Diary Entries and Reflections, 1915-1940*. Translated from French and German by M. G. Hesse. London: Oswald Wolff; New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978, p. 83.

During the same period, he also changed his views on Catholicism. While in Kandy, he compared Theravada Buddhism to “Spanish Catholicism”, both being idolatrous.⁹ However, in a book review of 1920 on Hermann Graf Kaiserling’s *Reisetagebuch eines Philosophen*, he praised Indian meditation most highly and regrets that there was nothing comparable in Protestantism. Only the “genial exercises” introduced by Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) could match it. He extolled Kaiserling for distilling the essence of Indian piety from the pantheon of Hindu gods. This shows that Hesse had left exclusive Protestant precepts behind him and no longer considered Hinduism and Catholicism idolatrous. He valued their piety. His position now was that the unilateral development of the intellect in Europe led to the loss of the soul.¹⁰ What Europe needed was the spirituality of the East. Consequently, it could not, in his opinion, benefit much from the intellectual doctrine of Buddhism, which, through Schopenhauer and the theosophy, Europe was already acquainted with. Nevertheless, Buddha should be a roll model, along with “Jesus and the Christian saints” and the ancient Chinese, for Europeans to learn cultivation of the soul. Hesse also rehabilitated the Christian Middle Ages and the monk orders.¹¹ Apparently, he had now returned to the roots of German Romanticism. He recognized two “Protestant-Puritan” as well as two Catholic religions. They were Protestantism/Buddhism and Catholicism/Hinduism respectively. He found the first group too rigid. Because of their flexibility and adaptability, he felt drawn to the second group. Moreover, Hinduism was his favorite because it does not have a rigid dogma and can accommodate all forms of beliefs.¹²

In the essay titled “Geist der Romantik” (spirit of Romanticism), Hesse used literary terms to discuss his world view. This is a method he employed to assimilate non-European ideas by using familiar terms. He defined the classicism as recognizing the established law, order, and form. It focuses on permanence and tradition; it emphasizes defined borders and tries to freeze fleeting moments. It also wants all efforts to be concentrated on achieving the possible. The romanticism is the opposite. The focus is on transformation. Definitions and borders become vague; reality is only considered as passing appearance. It wishes to perceive the unity behind different phenomena and strives to return to the godhead. According to Hesse, the disadvantage

⁹ Michels, p. 351.

¹⁰ Cf. “Wir haben erfahren, dass der Mensch seinen Intellekt bis zu erstaunlichen Leistungen kultivieren kann, ohne dadurch der eigenen Seele Herr zu werden.“ Michels, p. 390.

¹¹ Cf. Michels, p. 392.

¹² Cf. “Indisches”, Michels, p. 396f.

of classicism is its tendency to mummify, while romanticism tends to be chaotic. These two opposites have to complement each other. Hesse considers Greece to be crystallization of classicism and India that of romanticism. Through a detour of the discovery of spiritual India, the German romanticists found their roots in Catholicism. There is no question that Hesse himself was inclined to romanticism, even though he also honors Goethe.

What I am trying to demonstrate here is the way or instinctive method of Hesse to approach non-European cultures. The borders become indistinct. Hinduism reminds him of Catholicism and Buddhism of Protestantism. There may have been a process of “Othering” (which I also call alteritization), but it is so short that it is negligible. India became an inalienable part of his cultural outlook. He even managed to assimilate Buddha. Because Hesse did not repudiate him, he would, in the end, accept a Buddhist doctrine of the Mahayana variation as we shall see later. We should also be aware that, though he felt increasingly uncomfortable with the brand of Protestantism of his parents, he never abandoned Jesus Christ. In true romantic tradition, he combined all opposing elements to form a unity which also includes Goethe of the German classicism. To make the picture more complete, we should not omit Confucianism and Taoism of China. Thus in this unity comprising of three human cultures, we have three pairs of opposites: Protestantism versus Catholicism, Hinduism versus Buddhism, and last, but not least, Confucianism and Taoism. At this point we can safely turn to his theology.

In the essay “Ein Stückchen Theologie”¹³, published in 1932, Hesse insisted that there is only one humankind, even though the humans are divided into races, colors, languages, and cultures. In addition, they all follow a triadic pattern of development which he called humanization. The first stage is that of innocence in which the subject has no knowledge of good and evil. Once this knowledge is awakened, the person enters the second stage of struggle between these two realms. It ends in despair. At this point the subject either perishes or transcends the struggle to enter the stage of grace which seems to be a synthesis of the first two stages. Hesse also used culturally specific terms to describe the same process. For Indians, the naïve person, held in sway by fear and greed, longs for deliverance. They then enter the stage of Yoga, either of the kind of penance or of the highest spiritual exercise, in order to become masters of their instincts and desires. The third stage is the awakening or enlightenment. Buddha, for example, achieved this

¹³ In: Michels, pp. 427-436.

stage and entered Nirvana. For Taoism, the second stage would be the strive for moral and just deeds which must be transcended to crystallize in “non-action”. In the realm of psychoanalysis, Hesse remarked, the same stage should be called “Das Unbehagen in [der] Kultur”¹⁴ or “Civilization and its Discontents”, the title of the book which Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) published two years ago. For Hesse, the triadic world of Christians, Indians, and Chinese constituted the humankind, the unity of humanity.

In 1931, Hesse published an essay titled “Mein Glaube”¹⁵ (my faith), he professed that his novel *Siddhartha. Eine indische Dichtung* placed love above cognizance could be regarded as a return to his Protestant roots. The same is also true of the refusal of dogma and the insistence on experiencing the unity as the centerpiece of the novel. Certainly, the refusal of the protagonist to become a disciple of Buddha is a kind of protest against dogma, but this does not make him a Christian. We should also question if love can only be found in Christianity. Is Buddhist compassion not based on love? Of the Indian scholars, Vridhagiri Ganeshan¹⁶ interpreted Hesse’s protagonist as Hindi in all his outlook, which Kamakshi Murti¹⁷ disavowed. She herself seems to subscribe to a position somewhere between Christian and Indian religions, as the caption of the section “Siddhartha. Christian history of salvation or Buddhist path to redemption?” suggests. Let us check how the love is depicted in the novel. Siddhartha explains to his friend Govinda:

;-this stone is a stone, but it is also an animal, it is also God, it is also Buddha; I do not honour and love it because it could become this or that in the future, but because it always was and is everything - ... therefore I love it... everything is Brahman, but at the same time it is the more so a stone.

... dieser Stein ist Stein, er ist auch Tier, er ist auch Gott, er ist auch Buddha, ich verehere und liebe ihn nicht, weil er einstmals dies oder jenes werden könnte, sondern weil er alles längst und immer ist – ... gerade darum liebe ich ihn ... jeder

¹⁴ Michels, p. 437.

¹⁵ Michels, pp. 423-426.

¹⁶ Vridhagiri Ganeshan, *Das Indienbild deutscher Dichter um 1900*. Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1975.

¹⁷ Kamakshi P. Murti, *Die Reinkarnation des Lesers als Autor. Ein Rezeptionsgeschichtlicher Versuch über den Einfluß altindischer Literatur auf deutsche Schriftsteller um 1900*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990.

ist Brahman, zugleich aber und ebensosehr ist er Stein ...¹⁸

Does this quote read like a message of Christian love? If we had the Inquisition today, or if Luther was alive, would this message pass their scrutiny? I seriously doubt it. Elsewhere I have compared the quote with a passage in Chapter 5 of Book XXII of Chuangzi's *True Classic of the South Flower Country*"; Hesse read this read in Richard Wilhelm's translation, namely: *Das wahre Buch vom südlichen Blütenland* (1912). To be precise, I compared it with the parable with the caption "Where is Tao". The first answer is: it is omnipresent. Pressed for a more concrete detail, the second answer is: it is in the ant. Pressed further, the third answer is: it is in the weed. Pressed even further for a simpler example, the answer is: it is in the sounding tile. Pressed further, the last answer is: it is in the dung. The Taoist sage is more radical in his images; Hesse did not use dung to illustrate his point. But the stone image is certainly comparable to the weed or sounding tile. I cannot say that Tao and Brahman are interchangeable in every respect, but they are similar in some aspects. It is not the purpose of this paper to expound a Taoist inspired interpretation again. It is known that I argued decades ago that the river in the novel was the natural symbol and that Vasudeva was the human symbol of Tao. Today, I shall attempt a Buddhist interpretation of the central message of the novel. I think this is important because of two reasons. The first one is obvious. Siddhartha rejected the dogmatic teachings of Buddha. Reconciliation would be desirable. The second reason is, as Volker Michels¹⁹ pointed out in the postscript of the special edition of Hesse's relations to the East, that Hesse's last encounter with Zen Buddhism has been neglected so far. In my book on *Hermann Hesse und China*, published in 1974, I devoted a chapter on Hesse's knowledge of Zen Buddhism. Today, We shall further try to remedy the situation with an interpretation.

In his diary Entries and reflections, Romain Rolland recorded the following episode:

[Hesse] says India's spirit knocked three or four times at his door before he decided to open his heart to it. He was afraid of being overwhelmed – engulfed.

(At one point I told him the news from Bounine where one evening a European –

¹⁸ Michels, p. 105.

¹⁹ p. 478.

suddenly panic-stricken – could not stay for another night in India and flees. And I see how Hesse’s eyes shine. “Yes, that is so. In India there is a tiger hidden in the jungle.) Hesse became reassured only Chinese philosophy and could combine it, as an antidote, with Indian philosophy. Thus he created for himself a personal Asiaticism.²⁰

Hesse’s *Siddhartha* also does not want to be “engulfed” as his friend Govinda eventually does. That is also the reason why his Indian *persona* feels drawn to Vasudeva and the river. But at that time, Hesse himself was only aware of one manifestation of Buddhism as it was represented in Karl Neumann’s translation as *Reden Buddhas* which he reviewed in *Neue Rundschau* in October, 1921. In an essay published in 1925 titled “Aus Indien und über Indien“, he made the remark that, twenty years ago, Europeans were convinced that all the peoples of India were Buddhists.²¹ He did not exclude himself. When he was in Kandy, he did not seem to be aware of the fact that there are many schools of Buddhism. He was never tired to write that Hinduism was flexible and all encompassing and consequently characterized Buddhism as inflexible. When he dedicated the second part of *Siddhartha. Eine indische Dichtung* to his cousin Wilhelm Gundert, he did not seem aware of Zen Buddhism, which is in fact sinicized Buddhism. Hesse does not seem to be aware of it before the German translation of Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki’s *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1934), published in 1939.²² As the translation was prefaced by Carl Gustav Jung, we can be sure, given the close relation between them, that Hesse must have read it shortly after its publication. In addition, a copy of this book is kept in Hesse’s personal library which is preserved in Marbach, Germany. In this copy, we can see several quotes in Jung’s preface had been underlined by Hesse. The following two are the most instructive: “Buddha is nothing other than the mind or rather that of the perceiver of this mind”; and “gaining insight in one’s own nature with attainment of Buddhahood”.²³ These tenets correspond perfectly to Hesse’s own convictions. Until his cousin Wilhelm Gundert took up the translation of *Bi Yan Lu*,

²⁰ Hermann Hesse and Romain Rolland, *Correspondence...*, p. 72.

²¹ Michels, p. 400.

²² It translated by Hans Zimmer and published by Curt Weller & Co. in 1939.

²³ Cf. Hsia, p. 132.

a compendium of Zen Buddhism teachings and shared it with Hesse, there is no evidence that he made any efforts to study it. In a letter dated May 19, 1956, to his cousin, he wrote about these sessions. When the translation of one third of the original Chinese work was published in 1960, Hesse was so enthusiastic that he compared his cousin's achievement to that of Richard Wilhelm.

A word of clarification is perhaps in order here. The word "Zen", as it is known in the West, is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese ideogram "Chan", meaning meditation. The Chinese character is again derived from Sanskrit "dhyāna" (or Jhāna" in Pali). Bodhidharma, the founder of Shao Lin (Japanese pronunciation: Shorin) Temple, famous for its martial arts, was also the founder of Chan Buddhism. In the course of Tang Dynasty, it was introduced into Japan. Later on, five schools evolved in China; the school which produced *Bi Yan Lu* was the fourth, the school of "Yünmen". Without going into any details, we can safely say that Chan is an amalgam of Buddhism and Taoist philosophy. Or in the words of Hesse, as expressed by Josef Knecht in the fictive letter titled "Josef Knecht an Carlo Ferromonte", two characters in Hesse's last novel *The Glass Bead Game*: the essence of Buddha acquired a Chinese face.²⁴ The letter was written 1960 and published a year later. As he died in 1962, he did not have time to explore Chan Buddhism further. As a matter of fact, this school of Buddhism echoes Hesse doctrine without words and his emphasis on Christ or Tao or Buddha or Atman within us perfectly. We shall take the story "Innen und Aussen", written in 1919 and published a year later, as example. At that time, Hesse was yet to hear of Chan or Zen Buddhism. In the story, the character called Erwin is the mouthpiece of Hesse. He pronounces the maxim: nothing is external; nothing is internal; because what is external, is internal. We shall compare this passage with the teaching of Hui Neng (638-713), the sixth patriarch of Chan Buddhism, who established the southern branch of Chan, of which Yünmen school is derived. He said: "...to those whose hearts and words are good and for whom the internal and external are one, meditation and wisdom are identified. Self-enlightenment and practice do not consist in argument."²⁵ In other words, if one

²⁴ Cf. "Das Buddhawesen bekam ein neues, ein chinesisches Gesicht", Michels, p. 449.

²⁵ Quoted from Wm. Theodore de Bary, Wing-Tsit Chan, Burton Watson (eds.), *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1964, vol. I, p. 352f.

practices meditation, inside and outside are one and the same.

As a matter of fact, if we juxtapose Hesse's *Siddhartha* and Patriarch Hui Neng's teaching, we would gain the impression that they were paraphrasing each other. As we are familiar with Hesse's novel, I shall quote Hui Neng:

i- in my system ... absence of thought has been institute as the main doctrine, absence of phenomena as the substance, and nonattachment as the foundation.²⁶

From the samanas, Siddhartha learnt meditation by thinking. In the world of children he becomes attached to possessions, and in his final stage he has to overcome the attachment to his son. Only can he reach the stage which he calls awakening. What is this awakening other than self-enlightenment?

Patriarch Hui Neng even explains, indirectly of course, why Siddhartha has to learn from the river instead of following the way of Govinda. Hui Neng says:

[In its ordinary process], thought moves forward without a halt; past, present, and future thoughts continue as an unbroken stream. But if we can cut off this stream by an instant of thought, the Dharma-Body will be separated from the physical body, and at no time will a single thought be attached to any dharma. If one single instant of thought is attached to anything, then every thought will be attached. That will be bondage. But if in regard to all dharmas, not thought attached to anything, that means freedom.²⁷

Is it not the same lesson which Siddhartha learns from the river in order to gain the realm of unity?

In Hesse's encounter with the non-monotheism of Asia, i.e. India and China, he received Hinduism and Taoist philosophy without further ado. He did not seem to know that there is also a religious Taoism with a pantheon of divinities. But he was not a scholar or expert and did not have to know everything. He had problems with Christianity and Buddhism. But through the intermediary of Atman/Braman and Tao, he accepted both Jesus and Buddha as appropriate symbols and roll models for self-enlightenment. And he placed Catholicism alongside Hinduism. In the final years of his life, he was reconciled to the Buddhism with the Chinese face, i.e. Zen or Chan Buddhism. That he

²⁶ *Sources*, p. 353.

²⁷ *Sources*, p. 353.

did not know that it was only one of 10 branches of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism.²⁸ Of these, four remained influential and of these is the Meditation or Chan/Zen school. But the most wide spread is the Pure Land school which teaches a kind of Salvationism. But as we pointed out above, it is not our intention to measure the extent of his scholarship. What I find most impressive is his position of intercultural reception. His first reaction, at least after his journey to the British and Dutch colonies, was not to reject what we perceive as different, as most of us usually do. He singled out the acceptable parts and then tried to find a solution to iron out the differences. Thus he accepted both Buddha and Christ. Within this context, Zen Buddhism came as a consolation to him. He wanted unity rather than an exclusive religion or culture.

²⁸ Cf. *Sources*, p. 291.