

A Marketing Exigesis in the 6th Century BCE and the Emergence of the Buddha as a Pre-Eminent Marketer

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The world in the sixth century BCE was experiencing a tumultuous period of social and religious upheavals. China was becoming enraptured by the philosophy of Confucius and the sweeping reforms of Zoroaster were underway in Iran (Basham 1963; Kosambi 1965). In India, several strands of religious and materialistic philosophies were challenging the dominant Brahmanical orthodoxy, including Jainism and the unconventional materialistic philosophy of the Lokāyatas (Mittal 1974). It was in this socio-cultural and religious milieu that Buddha sought to establish the foundations of a religious philosophy that was between the two extremes of strict asceticism and materialistic self-indulgence (Bhagat 1976; Thapar 1966). The purpose of this paper is to shed light on how Buddhism was transformed from ideas serving merely a niche market of Buddha's followers to its eventual embrace by a vast population in South and East Asia.

Buddha's peripatetic disseminations of his discovery of the "middle way" could not by itself have had the impact that is now observed in the prevalence of Buddhism throughout Asia. Moreover, sixth century BCE in India witnessed many new challenges to the dominant Brahmanical orthodoxy and among the many new teachers, the Buddha himself was not the most popular one (Kosambi 1965). These new religious challenges and the new teachings influenced the Brahmanical ideology only so that the now reformed Brahmin was elevated once again to the helm of religious and social life in India. Buddhism itself survived only in fragments throughout India. It was spread in Ceylon in the third century BCE through the emissaries of the Indian King Asoka and found a home in China as well through the books and other scholarly materials brought back from India by the Chinese traveler Hsiuan-Tsang in the seventh century CE (Liu 1994). However, with the ascension of Muslim rulers in the North and Northeast India in the twelfth century CE, practically all the Buddhist monasteries were looted and destroyed and Buddhism itself slowly disappeared from the land of its founder.

One explanation for the endurance of Buddhism from a period whence practically all other new religious teachings and philosophies were effaced could be the strength of its fundamental precepts that made the religion appealing to

the laity. Thus, the sociological evolution of the religion can be attributed to the superiority of its ideas, especially since Buddhism was spread throughout Asia without the influence of the sword or the fiat of a king. While this explanation may be preferred by believers, there is still the question of how Buddhism withstood the challenges of the more predominant Hinduism long enough for it to be exported safely across the Indian shores to Ceylon and elsewhere several centuries later.

I examine the basic canons of Theravada Buddhism, especially the three pitakas or literally, baskets – Vinaya-pitaka (the Monastic Rules), Sutta-pitaka (Buddha's Discourses), and the Abhidhamma-pitaka (Further Doctrines) – and reveal a systematic and planned approach undertaken by the Buddha and his disciples to spread Buddhism across India. These codes were initially transmitted orally and were formally written down only around the first century BCE (Wijayaratna 1990). These codes provided the elements needed for the spread of Buddhism, thereby preserving not only the basic religious tenets, but also the monastic practices that were an integral part of the Buddhist eremitical life (Radhakrishnan 1950; Wijayaratna 1990).

I find support for several assertions that lead to the conclusion that Buddhism was "marketed" in a way similar to the current scholarship and practice of the discipline of marketing. First, the product itself, or the core elements of Buddhist teachings were consonant with the general principles accorded to products for their successful diffusion. While there was a clear attempt to identify the relative advantage of Buddhism over other competing religions of the time, the practice of Buddhism for both the monks and the lay people were compatible with the existing patterns of renunciation and material lifestyles, respectively. At the same time, the "middle path" advocated by the Buddha navigated deftly between the austerity of the wandering Hindu ascetic of the time and the self-indulgence enjoyed by the lay people. Unlike the core Hindu texts - the Vedas and the Upanishads – the transmission of the teachings were in Pali language rather than the more esoteric Sanskrit that was used primarily by the brahmin pundits. Thus, the teachings were made more

amenable to the masses, thereby ensuring communicability, understanding, and ready embrace of the religion.

Second, in an era of extreme competition between religions and teachers, Buddha and his disciplines sought to differentiate the religious precepts of Buddhism by appropriately "positioning," "packaging," and "promoting" it. While Buddhism challenged some of the tenets of Hindu Brahmanism as well as the Brahmins themselves, it was primarily derived from the Upanishads, and was consonant with the orthodoxy especially on views regarding the world of experience or *samsāra*. Both the Upanishads and Buddhism were similar in terms of their core approach towards salvation – the realization of one's unity with the Supreme Being through rapt attention or *vidyā* accompanied by a control of material desires and a detachment from earthly ties and interests. The challenge to the orthodoxy was primarily in its conception of reality or *nirvāna* and was neither rebellious nor confrontational. And, the seductive logic and humanistic reasoning of Buddha's teachings was appealing both to the intellectuals as well as to the masses. Moreover, a distinct identity for the teachings was also sought in terms of the clear codes and practices for monks and the laity. Monks wore distinct clothing and engaged in actively teaching the laity, rather than leading the hermetically sealed forest life of the wandering Hindu ascetics.

This analysis of the spread of Buddhism has several implications for marketing and marketing history. First, it points to the fact that the appropriate search for the historical origins for what is now recognized as "marketing" must not be restricted merely to trade in commodities. The analysis herein would show that ideas similar to current marketing thought and practice were in vogue in the realm of ideas, if not in the realm of tradable commodities. Second, the analysis reveals that some of core principles in the successful transmission of ideas and diffusion of products as in current theories only serve to validate their eternal theoretical essence. Finally, any objections to the fitting of a twentieth century disciplinary garment to the historical corpus of over two millennia prior to the formal origins of a discipline must contend with the realization that the problem may not be one of anachronistic transfer of disciplinary ideas. Instead, the problem may be one of defining the disciplinary boundaries too broadly, such that a "one-size-fits-all" discipline is as all embracing as the Buddhist ideas to which they are applied here.

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