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“The Doctor’s Original Face: Watching *Doctor Who* Episodes as Buddhist Koans”

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Abstract:

This essay discusses the portrayal and usage of Buddhist themes in the classic era *Doctor Who* television series (1963-1996). Here we map out specific influences of Buddhism on the construction of *Doctor Who*'s characters, illustrating how popular culture participates in the religious dialogue contained within everyday life. We will argue that an interpretive lens informed by an understanding of the interplay of different religious and philosophical influences contributes to a more productive conversation about the nature of the Doctor. A survey of serials that explicitly involve Buddhist settings and thematic elements such as the still lost Patrick Troughton-era “The Abominable Snowmen” and many of the Jon Pertwee era, particularly “Planet of the Spiders” is provided. One section of this essay will focus on how writer Christopher Bailey utilized his personal Buddhist beliefs to inform story elements of the Peter Davison-era serials “Kinda” and its sequel, “Snakedance.” We will then proceed to investigate particular Buddhist conceptions of impermanence, change and temporality and relate these to the characterization of the Doctor and how his transformations illustrate the instability of identity, serving as a potential contrast to messianic readings of this science fiction tv show.

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CHO-JE: We can but point a finger along the way. A man must go inside and face his fears and hopes, his hates and his loves, and watch them wither away. Then he will find his true self, which is no self. He will see his true mind, which is no mind.

SARAH: And that's what meditation's all about?

CHO-JE: Yes! The old man must die and the new man will discover to his inexpressible joy that he has never existed. (*Doctor Who*, “Planet of the Spiders” 1974)

The Fourth Doctor: "One good solid hope's worth a cart-load of certainties." (*Doctor Who*, “Warrior’s Gate” 1981)

The central protagonist of the television show *Doctor Who* is unique in that he functions as an outsider in so many different locations - in time, in space and in the many cultures he pops up in. In his interactions with human and alien beings, the Doctor is more than an observer, becoming entangled in the mysterious systems and beliefs that govern the lives of the peoples he visits. Science fiction has been popularly understood as naturally positing an opposition between science and religion, with themes centered on binaries of progress and obsolescence or human and machine. Yet, as James McGrath has pointed out in *Religion and Science Fiction*, there is a need for an interdisciplinary approach towards better understanding the intersection of religion, everyday life and popular genres like science fiction (8). In this essay, we would like to discuss the portrayal and usage of Buddhist themes in the classic era *Doctor Who* television series, with an emphasis on how the thematic construction of koans (or parables) are mirrored in particular storylines in the show. However, this approach does not mean to imply that the series as a whole can be characterized as being Buddhist, nor as promoting any specific religious tradition. We do not mean to suggest that Buddhist themes are predominant, but rather that Buddhist religious concepts have been in dialogue with a variety of other traditions and mythologies in informing story and character development throughout the series. The intent here is rather to map out specific influences of Buddhism on the construction of *Doctor Who*’s stories and characters, and demonstrate how popular culture participates in the reinterpretation of religious experience. The show has never been

entirely the product of a singular vision, even during the regimes of dominant producers, and as such will

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necessarily be heterogeneous. Even within an individual episode the presence of multiple, contrary voices can be documented. We will argue that an interpretive lens, informed by an understanding of the interplay of different religious and philosophical influences, contributes to a more nuanced conversation about the nature of the Doctor. These themes will be explored by looking at selected serials as kinds of secularized Buddhist koans.

To some viewers, the Doctor's regeneration might seem from the outset to suggest a kind of Buddhist reincarnation, although ascribing this intent might be contested. The show's writers and producers did not plan out the strategy used for continuing the series after William Hartnell's departure, so story for the first transformation did not use language to clearly define the parameters of transitioning (Wood and Miles 2006, 131). The Doctor's "renewal" did not necessarily imply a static, unchanging identity or "mind," travelling from one body to another. The details of this transformation varied from Doctor to Doctor, with other external factors and conditions coming into play.

This "renewal" could be interpreted as simply a physical replacement, but common conceptions of Buddhist reincarnation would not necessarily exclude this interpretation. However, strictly speaking reincarnation or rebirth does not imply a fixed identity travelling through bodies, over time. This understanding is complicated by the relationship of *karma* to these linked existences, with an implication of a relationship between one life and the next. Like most Buddhist concepts, this requires acceptance of theological ambiguity, the lives are neither identical and fixed, nor isolated and different. Despite the role of *karma* in governing transition from life to life, it should not be mistaken as a hierarchical leveling up. Ending the cycle of rebirth and suffering is the end goal.

The relationship between *Doctor Who* and Buddhism is not well covered outside of fanzines and discussion boards. According to Tat Wood and Lawrence Miles (2006, 131), many viewers have watched classic *Who* "...as if the entire show was conceived as a series of *koans* and homilies on the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths." Wood and Miles provide a short but useful overview of the factors behind

this assessment, and are careful in defining the ways in which it might be fair to call aspects of the show Buddhist. Resisting grand pronouncements, they warn how easily Buddhist concepts could be read as primary, even when informed and mixed up with a host of other similar sounding and broad philosophical concepts stemming from “Platonism, gothic-romanticism, or spiritualism” (2006, 131). Much of what is taken as clear evidence, such as the use of Sanskrit, Pali, and Buddhist terms and symbols in the scripts and such (unspoken) character names in stories as “Kinda,” is overstated.

“Kinda” (*Doctor Who*, 1982) and “Snakedance,” (*Doctor Who*, 1983) written by Christopher Bailey, are frequently cited as examples of Buddhist-themed stories, mainly because of their usage of Buddhist terms in the naming of characters and in their loose but visible allusions to Buddhist concepts such as *dharma*. Fan magazine accounts, like blog postings, have been quick to call episodes such as “Kinda” definitively Buddhist, or, arguing against this characterization, to say that really it is a Christian mythological parable. Although the presence of these terms and symbols are present in the script, it would be difficult to categorically define them as religious messages, coded or explicit. Many of the characters or referential names of items such as the magical box are never used in the spoken dialogue itself. Writers of television scripts have a task to perform, and utilizing the words and ideas that interest them is unsurprising: these are simply the tools that will inevitably be picked up when it is time to construct a story.

In *The Humanism of Doctor Who*, David Layton (2012, 114) points out the centrality of language in “Kinda’s” plot, in which the idyllic matriarchal society of the Kinda has moved beyond the need for spoken and written language, referencing a rejection seen in some Buddhist schools of thought. The Kinda display a culture where all members share one mind, and the discovery of a “voice” by a male character named Aris represents disharmony and imbalance (Layton 2012, 114). The Kinda’s magical box of *jhana* (a Pali word, referring to a form of meditation) immediately enlightens the people that open it, or else drives them insane. The villainous force is identified as the Mara (a Buddhist term that refers to a

personification of death or individual desire; an oppositional force to the Buddha) by Panna (a Pali term meaning wisdom or consciousness) who is the Kinda's matriarchal religious leader.

In "Snakedance" (*Doctor Who*, 1983) the Buddhist references are less explicit, but key concepts remain in the names of its characters. The Mara returns in a new form in Tegan's (one of the Doctor's travelling companions) mind, in order to take over its original homeworld. The mother and son of this planet's ruling family are named Tanha (meaning a thirst or desire for material possessions) and Lon (air or *chi/ki*) (Layton 2012, 116). A mysterious hermit who found out the truth of the ancient religious texts that he studied is named Dojjen, another reference to a famous Buddhist monk named Dogen (Layton 2012, 116). Again, the use of language is presented problematically. Having transcended the plane of ordinary life, Dogen now communicates with the Doctor only via mental connection.

Like Layton, Wood and Miles read the series as generally critical of religion, a familiar science fiction trope:

Revealed truth and blind faith are the tools of the bad guys. Almost all gods or messiahs are the result of a scam ("The Daemons"), a mistake ("The Face of Evil"), a folk-memory of an alien visit ("Image of the Fendahl"), insanity ("The Parting of the Ways"), or all of the above ("Planet of Fire"). Creatures with the powers of gods are either lacking in imagination ("The Celestial Toymaker"; "The Mind Robber", "Enlightenment"; "The Greatest Show in the Galaxy"), or keep well away from mortals (The Time Monster"). (Wood and Miles 2006, 131)

Again, echoing Layton, Wood and Miles exempt Buddhism from other religious targets, referring to it flatteringly as more philosophy than religion, a description that nevertheless retains some pejorative implication:

Of all the major world religions, Buddhism is the one without divine revelation, without worship of a creator and without a real code of practice. There are things you're supposed to refrain from doing in order to avoid getting too caught up in the world, but the descriptions of these are strongly worded hints, more like government health warnings than actual prescriptions. (Wood and Miles 2006, 131, 133)

Buddhism is not bound by Western binaries of mind/body, sacred/profane, and self/other, allowing for a different encounter between science and religion. Religion is not an isolated part of human experience, and the ways it informs our understanding are not so clearly delineated.

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Wood and Miles acknowledge that an underlying layer of Buddhism in some of these stories would be partly attributable to the cultural milieu out of which they arose. In the post-beatnik era of the 1970s, fascination with Zen (via Alan Watts and D. T. Suzuki), as well as with Taoism and its emphasis on harmony with nature, themes that are seen in contemporaneous sf works like Ursula Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*. Wood and Miles (2006, 133) mention a quote that they attribute to Theodore Sturgeon about how in sf "...about 90% of all 'alien' cultures are actually Meiji Japan in drag. He said this before Star Trek and its ilk moved that figure to 97%." Of course, Sturgeon was part of this ilk, and it seems that he is associated with this aphorism due to its resemblance to Sturgeon's law:

So, to conclude. It was inevitable that a children's fantasy series made between 1963 and 1989 would soak up a lot of the half-baked Buddhism around in Britain at the time. Of course, if it had set out to enlighten the British Public then it probably would have garbled the message anyway. On the other hand, anyone who thinks that a BBC kid's adventure serial is a bad place to learn the way of Zen doesn't comprehend either of them. (Wood and Miles 135)

The location of these religious references does not mean that they are solely superficial, and real ideas might not be seriously engaged with as is possible in a popular medium.

The people involved in the show itself were also not immune to the Buddhist ideas that were floating around. Writer Christopher Bailey drew upon his personal Buddhist beliefs to construct an ambitious story, of a complexity that caused conflict with script editor Eric Saward. Barry Letts, producer of the show at this time, was also a practicing Buddhist. The Pertwee-era "Planet of the Spiders" was the final *Doctor Who* serial that Barry Letts worked on. Letts produced, directed and wrote this story (uncredited) and in the audio commentary he describes it as "basically a Buddhist parable." He goes on to discuss how he integrated these themes into the story:

At the time I was very, very keen on Buddhism. I had been for 10 years, and I still am. The crystal represents the power of looking into your own mind, and seeing what is it that causes your suffering - the cravings, and the aversions inside of you, which are represented by the spiders...which take you over...so that you can't live a free life. That's why K'anpo said to Sarah Jane Smith: "You are free, look into your mind, you will see that you are free" and then the doctor is having to face the actual core problem of going inside himself: into the blue mountain, facing the great spider - which is facing the fact that his core self is really a false self. As Cho-je says in the first episode "the old man must die, and the new man will discover to his inexpressible

joy that he never existed" and that's the core of Buddhism." (Commentary, 2:13:30, *Doctor Who*, "Planet of the Spiders" 2011)

Letts goes on to explain the motivations of the Great One, the villainous spider leader and the main point of the point of his parable: "You see, again, it's the Buddhist idea. She's trying to make the thinking mind all powerful, take over the world - which is what we try to do all the time, instead of experiencing the world as it is, and just letting life go on, life be as it is, we're all the time trying to make it 'our way.' She's trying to make the whole universe go her way" (Commentary, 2:19:40, *Doctor Who*, "Planet of the Spiders" 2011). Letts even distributed a glossary of Buddhist terms to the crew to help familiarize them with philosophical underpinnings of the story.

The Use of Buddhist Koans or Parables

Buddhist parables or *koans* can serve as more than simply illustrative stories or entertaining folktales in religious practice. In the West, *koans* are popularly known to be headscratching puzzles or paradoxes of varying degrees of seriousness. Steven Heine (2013, 354) acknowledges their difficulty:

Zen discourse as found in the collections of koans and the sermons of masters is deliberately opaque and mysterious, sphinx-like and perplexing, elusive and enigmatic. Ambiguity, incongruity, and contradiction are blended with tautology and assertions of the obvious in order to throw the disciple/reader off guard or catch him by surprise so as to overturn idle assumptions and preoccupations. Who can say for sure what any of this really means, or if it means anything at all?

However, Heine (2013, 356) defends *koans* as a literary practice with discernable and effective techniques to communicate complex ideas, sometimes even with humor:

- 1- the extensive use of allusions, which create a feeling of disconnection with the main theme;
- 2- indirect references, such as tilting a poem with one topic and composing a verse that seems on the surface to be totally unrelated;
- 3- inventive wordplay based on the fact that kanji are homophonic and convey multiple, often complementary or contradictory meanings;
- 4- linking the verses in a sustained string based on hidden points of connection or continuity, such as seasonal imagery or references to myths and legends.

In the Zen tradition, koans generally involve a dialogue between master and student, and a “critical phrase” to prompt understanding, even enlightenment. This critical phrase is generally a statement, word or sounds, but it can also be a sudden shock, such as pointing at something or cutting off a finger (Flores 2008, 120). To enact these shocks, koans often feature qualities of iconoclasm and surprising irreverence. Ralph Flores distinguishes between “literary” and “non-literary” kinds of koans that have different emphases. Some utilize paradox, with few words, frequently in aphoristic form. Others are accompanied by commentary or poetry, and refer to or incorporate well-known folktales (2008, 129-130). The purpose of these parables is not just a psychological awakening, but, one that creates a state of overall action. The disciple is not meant to blindly imitate the master, but utilize this new awareness as a means of action, finding ways of communicating the lesson, bringing others along the same path (Flores 2008, 121). But this is not to say that these koans do not possess a literary or didactic value as well (Flores 2008, 129).

“The Daisiest Daisy I’d Ever Seen”

The setting of the “Planet of the Spiders” (*Doctor Who* 1974) - a Tibetan Buddhist meditation center where Mike Yates has gone to rediscover himself – is one that makes it a particularly explicit example of Buddhist themes in *Doctor Who*. The head monk, K’anpo, is discovered to be another timelord who manages to co-exist with a representation of his other self (in this case, his next regeneration, Cho-je). Rather like “The Watcher” in “Logopolis” (*Doctor Who* 1981), Cho-je works on behalf of K’anpo. At first, the Doctor does not recognize who K’anpo is. The abbot K’anpo reminds the Doctor of the last time they spoke and of the flaws that impede him on his travels, a greed or thirst for knowledge and experience. This comment suggests that the Doctor is being cast as a kind of galactic colonialist explorer, rather than a messianic protector of humanity.

In the documentary feature “*Mutt Mad: The Making of The Mutants*” (2011), script editor. Terrence Dicks complained that this idea seemed silly to him: that as a “perfect hero” he thought that the Doctor had no flaws. This characterization is problematic, however, if viewers consider the beginning of “Planet of the Spiders” (*Doctor Who* 1974), where the Doctor accidentally allows a helpful clairvoyant to die as his experimental subject. This story-writing philosophy seems in line with other criticisms Terrence Dicks has made (“*Mutt Mad: The Making of the Mutants*” 2011):

They wanted to do something about the evils of empire, which I think I didn't necessarily agree with, because I was rather pro the British empire. My view was, and I suppose is in [sic] some extent, it'd be a lot better if it was still there. If you have a look at Africa, Asia, and the rest of the world, if the Brits were in charge, you know, it'd all be running smoothly.

In any case, the introduction of these ideas made the stories much more ideologically challenging than Dicks and some fans would have preferred.

Koans also often involve dreams or dream-stories in which the sleeper is awakened in a sudden enlightening moment (Flores 2008, 130). In “Kinda” (*Doctor Who* 1982) it is via a dream that Tegan becomes trapped by the Mara, allowing her body to become its means of escape. The Kinda practice a kind of communal lucid dreaming, and young Panna warns of the danger of facing this dream alone, where one can easily be tricked by the Mara. In Tegan’s dream, Dukkha (a Buddhist term referring to suffering) confuses her with paradoxes of existence, splitting her into multiple versions of herself. Dukkha challenges them to determine which one of them is the “real” Tegan. This dream situation resembles one seen in koans that ask about a person’s true self or “original face,” an observation on the non-duality of subject and object (Heine 2002, 116).

In “The Time Monster” (*Doctor Who* 1972), the Third Doctor tells his companion Jo a rare anecdote about his past life on his home planet, providing a glimpse into his spiritual outlook. The Doctor describes being in a state of great sadness, prompting him to go up a mountain to speak to an enlightened hermit. He tells the hermit all his troubles and is met with silence. The hermit then points to a flower - the “critical phrase” (Heine 2006, 119) - and the Doctor immediately gains awareness:

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JO: ... Doctor, what are we going to do?

DOCTOR: Well, we'll just have to play it by ear, won't we.

JO: What happens if the Master wins?

DOCTOR: Well, the whole of creation is very delicately balanced in cosmic terms, Jo. If the Master opens the floodgates of Kronos' power, all order and all structure will be swept away, and nothing will be left but chaos.

JO: Makes it seem so pointless really, doesn't it.

DOCTOR: I felt like that once when I was young. It was the blackest day of my life.

JO: Why?

DOCTOR: Ah, well, that's another story. I'll tell you about it one day. The point is, that day was not only my blackest, it was also my best.

JO: Well, what do you mean?

DOCTOR: Well, when I was a little boy, we used to live in a house that was perched halfway up the top of a mountain. And behind our house, there sat under a tree an old man, a hermit, a monk. He'd lived under this tree for half his lifetime, so they said, and he'd learned the secret of life. So, when my black day came, I went and asked him to help me.

JO: And he told you the secret? Well, what was it?

DOCTOR: Well, I'm coming to that, Jo, in my own time. Ah, I'll never forget what it was like up there. All bleak and cold, it was. A few bare rocks with some weeds sprouting from them and some pathetic little patches of sludgy snow. It was just grey. Grey, grey, grey. Well, the tree the old man sat under, that was ancient and twisted and the old man himself was, he was as brittle and as dry as a leaf in the autumn.

JO: But what did he say?

DOCTOR: Nothing, not a word. He just sat there, silently, expressionless, and he listened whilst I poured out my troubles to him. I was too unhappy even for tears, I remember. And when I'd finished, he lifted a skeletal hand and he pointed. Do you know what he pointed at?

JO: No.

DOCTOR: A flower. One of those little weeds. Just like a daisy, it was. Well, I looked at it for a moment and suddenly I saw it through his eyes. It was simply glowing with life, like a perfectly cut jewel. And the colours? Well, the colours were deeper and richer than you could possibly imagine. Yes, that was the daisiest daisy I'd ever seen.

JO: And that was the secret of life? A daisy? Honestly, Doctor.

DOCTOR: Yes, I laughed too when I first heard it. So, later, I got up and I ran down that mountain and I found that the rocks weren't grey at all, but they were red, brown and purple and gold. And those pathetic little patches of sludgy snow, they were shining white. Shining white in the sunlight. You still frightened, Jo?

JO: No, not as much as I was.

DOCTOR: That's good. I'm sorry I brought you to Atlantis.

JO: I'm not.

DOCTOR: Thank you. (*Doctor Who* 1972)

This is a straightforward borrowing of the well-known flower *koan*, referenced to again later on in “Planet of the Spiders” (*Doctor Who* 1974) where we meet the hermit in question. Nyogen Senzaki recounts this *koan* as Case 6:

When Buddha was on Grdhvakuta Mountain, he twirled a flower in his fingers and held it before the assembly. Everyone was silent. Only Mahakashypa smiled at this revelation, although he tried to control the expression on his face. Buddha said ‘I have the eye of the true teaching, the heart of Nirvana, the true aspect of non-form, and the ineffable gate of Dharma. It is not expressed in words, but is transmitted beyond the teachings. This teaching I give to Mahakashypa. (2008, 60)

The Third Doctor’s explanation to Jo also incorporates similar message from another *koan* (Parable 18) recounted by Senzaki:

A man walking across a field encounters a tiger. He fled, the tiger chasing after him. Coming to a cliff, he caught hold of a wild vine and swung himself over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Terrified, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger had come, waiting to eat him. Two mice, one white and one black, little by little began to gnaw away at the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine in one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted! (Reps 1957, 39)

Buddhist Ethics

To David Layton, “Planet of the Spiders” was notable not for its use of Buddhist settings and concepts such as the power of mind and meditative practice, but rather for its novel promotion of an Eastern idea of “ethical nonaction,” where the “constant seeking after power and goods, the constant need to be *doing something*, is both corrupting and self-destructive” (2012, 224). In the “Warrior’s Gate,” Layton details the use of Taoist symbolism (the tossing of the coin, robots being reduced to sticks (2012, 226-7), and again calls attention to the importance of inaction in resolution of a complex plot involving enslaved time & space travellers (2012, 229). Contrasted with the Doctor, the villainous Rorvik complains about the seemingly passive approach to immediate danger: “Run Doctor! Scurry off back to your blue box. You’re like all the rest. Lizards when there’s a man’s work to be done. I’m sick of your kind. Faint-hearted, do-

nothing, lily-livered deadweights. This is the end for all of you. I'm finally getting something done!"
(BBC "Warrior's Gate," n.d.)

The Doctor is frequently chided for his inaction by his companions or other characters in the classic era. In "The Aztecs" (*Doctor Who* 1964) travelling companion Barbara refuses to comply with the First Doctor's insistence that they are impartial observers. He states that any attempts to change their hosts' cultural practices would be futile and might result in dangerous consequences to existing timelines. The Doctor's non-interference policy reappears at various points in his future incarnations, but like *Star Trek's* Prime Directive, exists as a philosophical approach that is not strictly adhered to. In "Warrior's Gate" (*Doctor Who* 1981) the Fourth Doctor is told repeatedly by the time-sensitive Tharils that he must do nothing. Once he accepts that he cannot "save" others, a beneficial result occurs. The slaver captain serves as a contrast, obsessed with taking action that ultimately results in his ship's destruction. This kind of unconventional narrative made the story ambitious in its use of the Doctor as a different kind of hero.

To Layton, these observations do not weaken his contrast between religion and a philosophical secular humanism in *Doctor Who*:

It should be no surprise that Taoism and Buddhism should be the Eastern systems used in *Doctor Who*. If one sets aside the terminology of these systems of thought, and both are laden with terminology, one can see that at their heart they are fundamentally humanist concerns. Neither Taoism nor Buddhism is particularly religious in the Western sense in that neither has any sort of god-figure that created, runs, or guides the universe; both are essentially nontheistic" (2012, 231).

In short, Buddhism and Taoism do not conflict with his thesis because they are "not really" religions and thus do not conflict with the boundaries of the science fiction genre. This repeated and artificial antagonism between science (and science fiction) and religion stands in the way of re-contextualizing our understanding of how religion operates, not adjacent to, but within everyday life.

In closing, this discussion seeks to highlight a few instances of Buddhist themes in a television series with a still growing number of stories, writers and producers involved. More detailed investigation into how these religious ideas have been written into and interpreted by television audiences remains

undone. The Buddhist conception of time itself is not linear and teleological – might this suggest different interpretations of the Doctor and the story universe? Buddhism also involves a different use of language. Words themselves are meant to be used like a raft to reach a new level of understanding, then discarded. It is hoped that this discussion may more easily further inquiry into the relationship of *Doctor Who* stories how Buddhism is expressed in popular culture.

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