

### **Buddhist Ideology in T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays**

Raj Kishor Singh, PhD

Central Department of English  
Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Nepal

Madan Bhandari Memorial College  
Kathmandu, Nepal

#### **Abstract**

*The Hindu and Buddhist sources were the most significant contents to shape the mind and heart of T. S. Eliot. When Eliot was studying at Harvard University, a popular academic place for oriental studies, he had a close contact with his scholarly teachers Charles R. Lanman and James H. Woods. Herbert Howarth mentions that these teachers were at that time working on books on Hinduism and Buddhism. Their readings had a good influence on Eliot's writing. The thoughts of Irving Babbitt, an authority on Buddhism, must have affected Eliot with the Buddhist ideology. In company of the Oriental scholars, Eliot had a good influence for the study of Hindu and Buddhist ideology through the Oriental scriptures and philosophical books. He himself turned to be a philosopher poet and playwright. He had read a number of authors and books on Hinduism and Buddhism and got influenced by them and this study reflects in his own poetry and plays. The present paper explores and analyses particularly the Buddhist influence in Eliot's poetry and plays.*

**Keywords:** Oriental Philosophy, Buddhism, Noble Truths, Ten Commandments, Salvation

**Introduction**

Buddhism occupies an important place in the eastern and western religions and philosophy. Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama, who later became “The Buddha” after attaining “Enlightenment”. He is also known as “the Light of Asia”. He was the son of Shakya king Suddhodana and Maya Devi. He was born Kapilwastu, Nepal. Since his childhood, Siddhartha was a thoughtful and pensive child. Despite the best efforts of his father to bind Siddhartha's heart to the palace, to the interests of the kingdom and to the heart of the Shakya people, the young prince broke all the ties of worldly life after seeing the sights of old age, sickness and death. He renounced the world and left his home to seek the path of salvation. As an ascetic, he wanted to know the real source of suffering and a possible way of complete deliverance from it. At first, he sought the help of some eminent religious scholars of the day who failed to give proper satisfaction to the inquisitive and restless mind and heart of the young prince. Restless to attain perfect Enlightenment, he practised severe penance, gave himself up to meditative thought and rigorous mortification of the body. But he could not find the true wisdom. Therefore, he left that extreme path and followed the middle path of self-discipline. After thinking over the issue for a long time, he came to the conclusion that the physical mortification would not extinguish the fire of desire nor would afford *Enlightenment*. He directed his foot-steps to Gaya where he sat under the blessed Bodhi tree and eventually got *Enlightenment*. Since then, Sidhartha has been honoured with the title *The Buddha or the Enlightened One*.

Buddha discovered the *Four Noble Truths* which point out the path to Nirvana. This is the Dharma; this is the truth; this is the real religion. After being enlightened, Buddha returned to the world of suffering humanity to preach his Dharma. He said to his disciples, "Let the wheel of Dharma rotate." And, thus began the long and noble work of spreading the teachings of the Buddha which, in due course of time spread to Ceylon, Burma and Siam in the south and to Tibet, China, Japan and Korea in the north. Buddhism spread widely in Nepal, India and abroad and eventually grew into a world religion. It contains the teachings of Lord Buddha, "What is known as Buddhism is a part of the common heritage of wisdom by which men have succeeded in overcoming this world and in gaining immortality or a deathless life" (Conze 11). After devoting the last forty-five years of his life to this great task, Lord Buddha breathed his last at the age of eighty. At the moment of his death, *the Blessed One* addressed the priests in the following words:

“And now, O priests, I take my leave of you; all the constituents of being are transitory; work out your salvation with diligence.” (Warren 109)

The Buddha was always pragmatic and never aimed at discussing theoretical questions or metaphysical subtleties. He declared that such discussions were unprofitable and confusing and that they would not pave the path for cessation of suffering. Therefore, he always kept a mum whenever he was asked about God or life hereafter. Such questions therefore have come to be known as ‘avyakatani’ (Davids 187) (indeterminate questions) in Buddhist literature. Instead of wasting time in such

discussions, Lord Buddha always tried to enlighten the people on the most urgent and important problem of human life, i.e. suffering. Buddha who recognized the existence of suffering, its cause, its remedy, its cessation, has known the Four Noble Truths (arya-satya). These *Four Noble Truths* form the kernel of the teachings of Lord Buddha. They preach that his first three of these truths are theoretical and the last one is practical. The *First Noble Truth* of the Buddhism is that “All is suffering” (sarvam dukham). Suffering predominates human and animal life. Birth is attended with pain; decay is painful; disease is painful; death is painful; union, separation, sorrow, despair, wish and all bodily conditions which spring from attachment are painful. The text of the Buddha's first sermon given in Samyotta Nikaya reads as follows:

And this the Noble Truth of sorrow. Birth is sorrow, age is sorrow, disease is sorrow, death is sorrow, contact from the pleasant is sorrow every wish unfulfilled is sorrow-in short all the five components of individually are sorrow.

(Duiker & Spielvogel 55)

This kind of pessimism that life is full of suffering and that its pleasures are transitory and fraught with sorrow is fundamental not only to the teachings of Lord Buddha but to most of the Hindu thinkers. By emphasizing the dark side of life, Lord Buddha is not giving way to despair, but he points to the way leading to the destruction of sorrow. He teaches how, instead of being a victim of misery, man can become its victor.

The *Second Noble Truth* is the cause of suffering. According to the law of natural causation, every event is the effect or result of some cause. Therefore, the

sorrow which is prevailing everywhere and in everything has a cause. There is a chain of causes and effects that leads to suffering in the world. This chain of suffering has twelve connections which are : ignorance (avidya), action (samskara), consciousness (vijñana), name and form (name-rupa), the six fields viz. the five senses and mind together with their objects (sadayatana) contact between the senses and the object (sparsa), sensation (vedana), being (bhava), rebirth (jati), old age and death (jaramarana), desire (trishna), and clinging to existence (upadana) (Vipan Kumar 16).

This chain involves present life, previous life and future life. The present life is the effect of the past and the cause of the future life. Ignorance is the root cause of man's existence. All the other connections spring from this root-cause of the vicious cycle of the world, generally called 'the bhavachakra' or the wheel of existence. The Buddha says in his first sermon:

And this is the Noble Truth of the Arising of Sorrow. It arises from thirst, which leads to rebirth, which brings delight and passion, and seeks pleasure now here, now there – the thirst for sensual pleasure, the thirst for continued life, the thirst for power. (Mrs. Davids 166)

Lord Buddha, in his discourses, not only dwells upon the fact of evil, but also points the way out of it. He says, "Just this have I taught and do I teach, ill, and the ending of ill". The Noble Truth about the cessation of suffering follows from the second Truth. The removal of the cause removes the effect too. When ignorance, which is the root-cause of all sufferings, is removed by right knowledge, the other connections of the chain break

one after the other automatically. Thus, liberation from sorrow can be achieved in this very life if the right path is followed.

The fourth Noble Truth about the way to remove suffering is laid down by Lord Buddha:

And this is the noble truth of the way which leads to the stopping of Sorrow. It is the Noble Eightfold Path- Right Views, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Efforts, Right Recollection and Right Meditation. (Westmann 80)

This Path consists of eight steps which are called the eight fold paths (astangika-marga): Right Views (Samyak Dristi), Right Resolve (Samyak Sankalp), Right Speech (Samyak Vak), Right conduct (Samyak Karma), Right Living (Samyak Jevika), Right Effort (Samyak Dhyana), Right Recollection (Samyak Dharana), and Right Meditation (Samyak Samadhi).

The exposition of the Aryan eightfold path forms the basic theme of the celebrated first discourse of the Buddha. It is also widely known as the Middle path, the path between materialism and spiritualism and also the path between eternalism and nihilism. It avoids the two extremes and strikes a balanced approach to life, that is believing neither in Being nor in Non-Being, but in Becoming. This path does not preach its devotees a life of self-indulgence, which is the harbinger of pain, nor that of self-mortification, which is itself pain. It is only this middle path which can lead the spiritual aspirant to "Nirvana". "Having put an end forever" to 'dukkha', it enables him

to enjoy "peace, serenity and rapture". According to the Buddha, 'Nirvana' stops rebirth. So it means the extinction of all misery and of the conditions which cause rebirth. It is the relinquishment of all worldly ties, cessation of the effects of past actions, end of all desires and attachment to this world. The Nikayas sometimes describe it as the blissful reward of a long ascetic course – a heaven of peace and rest, eternal. This can be attained in this life itself.

### **Buddhist Ideology**

The enlightened Buddha was a great thinker and philosopher. His contributions to the religious philosophy are unique and substantial. The fundamental concept of Buddhism is that all is non-eternal or is momentary. Every object in this world is in a state of 'flux'. In other words, whatever is real is momentary or 'dynamic', and whatever is not momentary is not real. According to Mrs. Rhys Davids:

Buddhists concentrated their attention not on a cause or mover of the other of things physical and moral, but on the order of things. They held that this order was one of constant universal changes, organically conceived i.e. as growth and decay and conceived as proceeding by cause and effect. Things become, as the sequels of certain assignable other things having become. (11)

For the concept of Buddhism (shunavada) or Dynamics, a very practical and simple approach is in Buddhism. The dynamism of Buddhist philosophy (i.e. *everything is in a state of flux*) inspired an entirely different outlook about the world. Even the believers in 'soul' or eternalists were willing to accept the external world as changeable, but they believed

in an eternal existence within it. They call it 'Atman' or 'Brahman'. The Buddhists deny the existence of such soul. They say that, if we look inside the trunk of banana tree, we will get layers within layers, one covering peeling off after the other but no substance inside it. Similarly, all the things in the universe do not contain any eternal substance. 'Ataman' or 'Brahman', or the world, is void of any eternal element. Another example which is often cited to explain this concept of Voidism is that of the clouds or the flame of the lamp. Just as the clouds go on changing each moment, so does this world. Even the most solid diamond or iron goes on changing every moment. There is no similarity or sameness in their previous and subsequent forms. The similarity, if any, is in their organisation. The effect is always similar to the cause, and, hence, there is an illusion of oneness. The flame of the lamp is changing every moment, but the new flame born out of the old one is similar to it. Therefore, we are in haste to conclude that it is the same flame. Similarly, the end-state of this life may cause the beginning of the next. Rebirth is, therefore, not transmigration of the same soul into another body. It is the causation of the next life by the present. (Warren 234)

Having accepted the entire inner and outer world as non-eternal, Buddhism propounds its theory of causality, which is generally known as “Dependent Origination”. It says that nothing exists by itself and that nothing is absolute. Everything depends on something else. Everything is the effect of some cause. As long as the cause exists, the effect also exists. When the cause ceases to be, the effect also vanishes.



Everything is relative, cause and effect are interrelated. One thing flows from the other.

Buddha called this theory 'Dhamma'. He said, in his very first discourse at Varanasi,:

Let us set aside such unprofitable and unsolvable questions (Avyaktani) as the questions of beginning and end. I will teach you Dharma. That being thus, this comes to be. From the coming to be of that, this arises. That being absent, this does not happen. From the cessation of that, this ceases. This is the Dharma.

Whoever accepts Dharma, accepts the law of patichha samuppada (dependent origination). (Davids 210)

His theory of "Karma" is connected with "dependent origination". Theory of "Karma" suggests that the present existence of an individual is the effect of his or her past, and his/her future will be the effect of his/her present. Thus, the law of Karma is only a special aspect of the law of causation. Lord Buddha held that this world is an endless process. Every minute we see thousands of causes and effects. The transformation of the cause into effect and vice-versa is an endless process.

Lord Buddha always laid emphasis on the right conduct. He prescribed *Ten Commandments* which were binding commands upon the 'Bhikshus' or the monks. They were emphatically asked to avoid the ten evils. These are: the three evils of the body (murder, theft, and adultery), the four evils of the tongue (lying, slander, abuse, and idle talk), and the three evils of the mind (covetousness, hatred and error). (Coomaraswamy 130)

**Buddhist Ideology in Eliot's Poetry and Plays**

Of all the sources that affected and shaped the mind and heart of T. S. Eliot, the Hindu and Buddhist sources are the most significant ones. When Eliot was a student at Harvard University, he had a close contact with his scholarly teachers Charles R. Lanman and James H. Woods. Herbert Howarth writes that these scholars were at that time studying and exploring the Hinduism. Irving Babbitt, a Buddhist scholar, also must have affected Eliot's mind and heart. Eliot was a scholar and a number of authors and books of Hinduism and Buddhism had a great influence on his poetry and plays. Some of the prominent influences were from different authors of different periods in history of literature. Some of them were: John Donne and other Metaphysical poets, the dramas of the Jacobean, the French Symbolists (Dante, Santayana Babbitt, Josiah Royce, Bradley, and Bergson), German philosophers (Ezra Pound, T. E. Hulme, Windham Lewis, Middleton Murry, Remy de Gourmont), primitive ritual anthropology, Christianity and the Hindu scriptures. William T. Harris, who had a fairly good knowledge of the Bhagwad-Gita, had also a good influence on him.

One needs to read the notes of T.S Eliot appended to *The Waste Land* (1922) to understand his indebtedness to Buddhism. One of the poem's sections titled *The Fire Sermon* is based directly on the Buddha's teachings at Samath (Varanasi). The notes tell us that Eliot had read Henry Clarke Warren's *Buddhism in Translation*. He had also studied Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia*, a monumental work on Lord Buddha and his gospel. It is quite possible that Eliot had heard his teacher Irving Babbitt, repeating the

words of the dying Buddha to his disciples in the classroom... “work out your Salvation with diligence”. The echo of these words is clearly heard in *The Cocktail Party* (1950). On the testimony of William Chase Green, we can confidently say that, at the time of writing *The Waste Land*, Eliot seriously considered becoming a Buddhist. Eliot was then “able and witty.....aloof and silent. I used to tell him he reminded me of a smiling and quizzical figure of Buddha” (Howarth 95).

In 1913 Eliot withdrew himself from the Buddhist and Sanskrit sources. Speaking of his courtship with the Orient (while delivering the Barbour lectures in 1933 at the University of Virginia), Eliot writes as follows:

Two years spent in the study of Sanskrit under Charles Lanman and a year in the Mazes of Patanjali's metaphysics under the Guidance of James Woods left me in a state of enlightened mystification. (Eliot 40)

This confessional statement shows, in unequivocal terms, Eliot's close contact with and fondness for Hindu holy texts and philosophical system. At this juncture, a question arises as to why Eliot gave up the pursuit of Oriental studies. Eliot has very clearly indicated in *After Strange Gods* that he was not prepared to forget “how to think and feel as an American or a European”. Hence, for practical and sentimental reasons, he gave up his pursuit of Oriental studies.

Like Hinduism, Buddhism also exercised a deep influence on mind and heart of T.S. Eliot. It was so because Eliot was a sober student of philosophy and because he had a moral and spiritual bend of mind. His family background was that of a Unitarian

practicing a storm sum of Christianity. Temperamentally, Eliot was a reserved man. Such a perceptive man could hardly ignore the rich heritage of Hindu religions and philosophies. Eliot was deeply in love with Buddhistic and Hindu scriptures, and he made use of them when he came to writing his creative works. *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets*, and the small poem *To the Indians who Died in Africa*, and his poetic plays bear witness to the fact. We need to analyse some of the Buddhist ideas in Eliot's poetry and plays.

Right from his early poetic career, Eliot started giving room to pessimism and suffering in his writing, and this truth creates the impression that he was working under the inescapable impact of Buddhism. Eliot's poetry up to *Sweeney Agonistes* is unquestionably the poetry of pessimism and suffering. The general atmosphere pervading this kind of poetry is one of glooms and disgust.

Edmund Wilson thinks that it is due to the – “dark marking of provinces inhibits”. Not only Eliot's themes are pessimist and gloomy, but his characters are also pessimist and gloomy. They are usually middle aged persons, restless lovers, lost sailors, and haunted souls. Examples are: Prufrock, Gerontion, Phlebas, Tiresias, Harry, Cella, etc. This attitude of the poet-cum-playwright cannot be explained away as something sudden and accidental, it is rather due to his sober temper and well-conceived design. It seems Eliot deliberately adopted this stance in order to lodge his protest against the facile “cheerfulness, optimism, and hopefulness” (Eliot 223) of the nineteenth century. He adopted this stance to cope with the immediate situation– to

depict effectively the fallen condition of modern civilization which he found to be morally sterile and purposeless, chaotic and directionless. Modern civilization, as Eliot saw, has fallen upon evil days, and the overall picture of human life has been blurred with rampant corruption and lustfulness. This is what we find in many Eliot's poems and plays including *The Waste Land* and *The Cocktail party*.

Eliot's early poems are contained in *Prufrock and other Observations* (1917), which express, according to Eliot, the "boredom, the horror and the glory" (Smidt 135) of the modern world. J. Alfred Prufrock is a prematurely middle aged who is constantly assailed by doubts and distrust. Apparently he is ill-at-ease in the midst of beautiful women who 'come and go / talking of Michelangelo'. Prufrock is incapable of decision and action. He is acutely conscious of his being a misfit of his immediate surroundings, and in a mood of frustration and dejection he blurts out –

I grew old ..... I grow old .....

I shall bear the bottoms of my Trousers rolled.

It suggests about his approaching old age effects, his capacity of action and decision at a crucial moment.

Another poem, *Portrait of a Lady*, reverses the situation of *The Love Song*..... by portraying a middle aged woman in the presence of a young man. The woman is fully conscious of her futility and loneliness, and hence she declares: "I shall sit here, serving tea to friends ....."

*The Poems* published in 1920 are also of a serious nature: they are mainly pessimistic. In them, Eliot “stresses the ugliness and corruption of our age.....” (Nuhsa 133). One such poem is *Gerontion* (1919) which depicts an old man called Gerontion, who is afflicted with the memory of his past and who is in a vortex of moral and spiritual crisis. In utter desperation, he says:

Think  
 Neither fear nor courage saves us.  
 Unnatural vices  
 Are feathered by our heroism. Virtues  
 Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.

Clearly, Gerontion is a person from whom hope and grace are totally withdrawn. He is a soul groping in the dark and feeling the weakness of old age.

*The Waste Land* (1922) also points the picture of a devitalized and dehumanized society. The shadow of World War I looms over it. The very air and the seasons seem to have got rotten. Moral and spiritual values seem to have touched the rock bottom. The representative of entire humanity, Tiresias meets failure in his search for spiritual regeneration, and hence he has rightly been called “a mock–hero” (Smidt 224).

Getting disillusioned with the world around him, he looks to the east, for the moral and spiritual redemption of mankind.

*The Hollow Men* (1925), which continues the tone and the mood of *The Waste Land*, explores further miserable conditions of modern man. This poem portrays modern

men as 'hollow men' and as 'stuffed men' having 'head piece filled with straw'. These men are truly the denizens of Dante's *Inferno*; they suffer greatly under fear and illusion. They do not have 'eyes' to peep through the dark and to emerge on a sunny atmosphere. The poem ends on a note a complete sorrow and dejection:

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper

The prevailing mood does not offer a ray of hope to modern man. The poem *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926-27) effectively portrays sexual abuse of modern man in a 'burning' world. Sweeney is the man of gross nature, and for him life is only 'Birth and copulation and death'.

The poems written since 1927 are slightly different in mood and tone. The horrors of the 'unreal city', the note of dejection and suffering, to be found in the earliest poems now disappear. *Ash Wednesday* is a poem in point. For his moral anchorage and spiritual solace, the poet goes to Christianity- to Anglo-Catholicism, newly discovered religion of Eliot. Virgin Mary is involved here. She is the mother of Christ and giver of peace and harmony to the human world.

The tone of religious servitude is found in *The Rock* (1934) too, though it has echoes of religious pessimism. Mark the following passage in this regard:

The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries

Bring us farther from God and nearer

to the Dust.

The poet is speaking here of the suffering and destruction that man has to undergo in the present day world.

*Four Quartets* (1943), which is primarily a philosophical poem, is not entirely free from the pangs and tortures of man. In the poem, "Burnt Norton" mentions the wind blowing in and out of unwholesome lungs (section III); "East Coker" offers the following advice: "You must go by a way where in there is no ecstasy" (Section III). "The Dry Salvages" emphatically suggests that there is no end of 'soundless wailing' and 'withering of withered flowers' and 'movement of pain' (section III); and "Little Gidding" gives us 'Dust in the air suspended' (section II). These references create the impression that the atmosphere in which modern man is living is non-too-happy and non-too-healthy.

The protagonists in Eliot's poems and plays are generally sufferers in life. They remind us of what is often said of the characters found in Hardy's novels – 'Happiness is but an occasional episode on the general drama of pain'. For Eliot's protagonists- Prufrock, Gerontion, Tiresias, Becket, Harry, Celia, Colby, and others, the very air that they breathe seems to be polluted. They are ill-at-ease in their given citations. They suffer inescapably because of Eliot's pessimistic outlook upon life. In this connection, Prof. Kristian Smidt has aptly remarked,

His (*Eliot's*) early pessimism, connected with the general disillusionment of our epoch, found support both in a certain aspect of Christianity and in the philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism. His later acceptance of suffering and



askesis as ways to blissful perfection is in agreement both with Protestant and Catholic Christianity and with the religions of the East.” (Smidt 224)

Eliot's sense of pervading sorrow in the human world is something born of his innate temperament. He was actually searching for love and light in a jealous and selfish world; he wanted the support of ethics and spirituality in a world 'burning' in desire and lust. So, he became a pessimist in his poetry and plays.

Of Eliot's plays, *Murder in the Cathedral* offers us Thomas-a-Becket who exemplifies the idea that 'action is suffering/And suffering is action'. Eliot equates here 'action' and 'suffering', and in this matter he echoes Milton's following lines in

*Paradise Lost*:

Fallen Cherub, to be weak is miserable,

Doing or suffering .....(Book I, II)

Like Buddha, Eliot believes that 'suffering' (or dukkha) is omnipresent and omnipotent. For its recurring, universal character, suffering has been symbolized by 'the wheel' in Eliot's poetry and plays.

This symbol is found in *Gerontion*, *The Waste Land*, *Ash Wednesday*, *Burnt Norton*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, and *The Family Reunion*, and it stands for "the temporal world of unending suffering" (Dwivedi 185). The noted English author, E. M. Forster remarks that Eliot belongs to the group of those who "continue to suffer". In this respect, he is not different from the Buddha. To both, desire (tanha, in Buddhist terminology) is the root cause of all sufferings.

Another doctrine of Buddhism which attracted Eliot was that of Nirvana (or Nibbana) and death-wish. Nirvana is a state of existence in which man is freed from all worldly desires and sense-perceptions. We have repeated references to this doctrine in the form of death-wish in Eliot's poetry and plays. Thus, the Sybil says in the epigraph to *The Waste Land*: 'I wish to die'. In "Journey of the Magi", the speaker declares; 'I should be glad of another death'. Sybil in a poem after him observes thus; 'My life is light, waiting for the death wind'. And Sweeney thinks that 'Life is death'. The Poem *Lines to a Persian Cat* beautifully expresses the idea of death-wish and Nirvana:

There is no relief but in grief.

O when will the creaking heart cease?

Being afflicted with grief, the speaker wants 'peace of mind, all passion spent' in death and Nirvana. The doctrine of Nirvana finds an excellent expression in the poem "Gerontion", where the person speaks of losing his passion and sense-perceptions:

I have lost my passion; why should I need to keep it.

Since what is kept must be adulterated?

I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:

How should I use them for your closer contact?

All the objects of sense-perception are being negated here. The passage lays great emphasis on the negation of the objects of sensual pleasure as well as on the cultivation of spiritual discipline. In doing so, the poet is deeply indebted to the teachings of Lord Buddha. Likewise, the speaker in the poem *Ash Wednesday* expresses his desire to be

fired from the endless cycle of birth and death (Dwivedi 172). He wishes to have peace in oblivion, as is evident in the following lines:

Because I do not hope to turn again  
Because I do not hope  
Because I do not hope to turn  
Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope  
I no longer strive to strive towards such things.

Here, the speaker certainly hints at 'dispossessing' himself from all gifts and scope, and thereby attaining Nirvana. In *Four Quartets*, the poem *The Dry Salvages* gives us striking image of the lines moving 'between the hither and the farther shore'. Through this image, the poet reminds us of the two 'shores' of desire and 'Nirvana' – the two 'shores' mentioned by the Buddha himself. Eliot tacitly suggests Nirvana in his play, *The Cocktail Party* (1950), where Sir Henry warns Edward of letting 'the genie out of the bottle'. For salvation of the soul (jiva) the burden of the body has to be thrown aside. This what Sir Henry suggests obliquely.

Eliot was also fascinated with the doctrine of Karma which is referred to as 'Right Conduct' in the Eightfold path to be practiced by a Buddhist. The monks were commanded to abstain from the ten evils. Eliot also believes that "life must be an ascetic discipline akin to the mystic discipline of the East" (Smidt 199). Numerous instances can be cited from his poetry and plays:

- (a) The lot of man is careless labour (*The Rock*, I Chorus)

- (b) Of all that was done in the past, You eat the fruit, either rotten or ripe.  
For every ill deed in the past we suffer the consequences. (*The Rock*, II Chorus)
- (c) And do not think of the fruit of action, Fare forward. (*The Dry Salvages*)
- (d) And right action is freedom from past and future also. (*The Dry Salvages*)
- (e) .....neither you nor we know until the judgment after death, what is the fruit of action?

(*To the Indians who Died in Africa*)

In *The Waste Land*, “right action” is indicated by “What The Thunder Said”:  
“data” dayadhyam, damyata (*Give, Sympathises, Control*). “The significance of these words is that one should subdue oneself and give oneself to others, and to the Brahman, who is in all things: and this is how Eliot uses them in *The Waste Land*” (Smidt 188).

Also in his plays, there are preferences to the doctrine of ‘karma’. In *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), Becket’s struggle to avoid temptations without putting physical resistance to killers, and his final decision of martyrdom is an example of right action and conduct. Kristian Smidt says, “Right Action is an internal as well as an external affair; in fact, it is chiefly a matter of making ‘perfect the will’. It demands renunciation. Becket has to resist temptation of youth, popularity, temporal and spiritual power”.  
(Smidt 199)

In *The Family Reunion* (1930), Harry is also worried about his good conduct, and thereby to purge the sinuous action and evil deeds of his father. Ultimately the path

of redemption is shown to him by the Furies. This path of redemption is actually the path of right action or the path of good conduct.

Celia, in *The Cocktail Party* (1950), wants to disentangle herself from the coils of worldly serpent, the charms and comforts of physical life, and gladly accepts the path of renunciation. Her choice for the life of disinterested person detached from sensual pursuits actually makes her choose the life of a saint. She chooses this saintly life because of her disinterestedness in and detachment from the ensnaring world. In fact, her choice is the choice of good conduct.

Eliot's next play, *The Confidential Clerk* (1955) is concerned with the problem of self-identify. It is only by the Knowledge of the self that one can be truly happy and thereby put an end to one's pains and miseries. According to Buddhism, suffering can be removed by following the Eightfold Path of righteousness which includes Right views, Right resolve, and Right conduct, etc. In this play, Mr. Claude wants to make young Colby his confidential clerk after the retirement of Eggerson. Both Claude and his wife Elizabeth are suffering not only from the official desire of appointing a loyal clerk, but also from the wish of finding out their illegitimate lost son. Both of them claim Colby to be their son. But, ironically enough, Colby is proved by Mrs. Guzzard, to be the son of her dead husband- an obscure and disappointed musician called Herbert Guzzard. Thus, Colby gains self-knowledge through this revelation. So, he takes a Right Resolve not to follow Sir Claude, and finally decides to become an organist for which

he was having natural aptitude. He is helped by Eggerson, to the utter surprises of Claude. This choice is his Right Conduct.

Lord Buddha holds that man's present life is the effect of his past actions, and the future is the effect of the present. Eliot also believes that man must eat the fruits of his actions in this life only. His last play, *The Elder Statesman* (1959), presents the predicament of Lord Claverton who is ill-at-case with his present, and hence prematurely ageing. His mind is constantly haunted by the fearful memories of his evil action in the past. He is also reminded of his past by Gomez, who suddenly reappears in London after pursuing a career of forgery, crime and punishment in a foreign land. To escape his unpleasant past, he goes to Badgley Court to live in solitude, and gets mental peace and rest there. But instead of recovering, he is much and more preoccupied with the past and broods over the evil consequences springing from it. Here, he is faced with another agonizing visitor Mrs. Carghill, his forsaken beloved in his youth, and also with Gomez again who was an eye-witness to the incident of killing an old man by his van. Thus, he finds himself in a tight corner. Much against his will, he discloses his guilty past to his daughter Monica, who is carrying a love-affair with Charles, and to his son Michael who wants to go abroad to start life afresh under the patronage of Gomez. By confessing his mistakes openly, Claverton is relieved from the burden of the dead past. This confession is his 'Right Action', which enables him to tread the path of 'Good Conduct'. He becomes free from his guilty conscience and enjoys inward peace and

happiness. He reposes trust in Gomez and Mrs. Carghill and sets his son and daughter to lead a happy life independently.

Eliot was drawn to Buddhism and Hinduism for their emphasis on rigorous spiritual practice. He was of the firm view that a man could “accomplish anything of value by discipline, ethical and political” (Eliot 381). Eliot thought that the ultimate aim of man’s life is the perfection of individually and the attainment of sainthood” (Eliot 78). In one of his commentaries published in *The Criterion* (1934), Eliot remarked as follows:

What ultimately matters is the Salvation of the individual soul. You may not like this principle; but if you abjure it, you will probably in the end get something that you like less. (Eliot 454)

It was the lack of the prospect of individual salvation that made Eliot despondent and pessimistic in his early poetry, such as in *The Love Song*, *Portrait of a Lady*, *Gerontion*, *The Waste Land* and *Hollow Men*. It was the absence of the spiritual practice that rendered the inhabitants of *The Waste Land* look to the some other land. That’s why, the fifth part of *The Waste Land*, “what the Thunder Said” assumes additional significance. Here, the teachings of Prajapati to his disciples- men, demons, and gods- are for the latter’s moral and spiritual edification. For the same reason, in *The Waste Land*, Eliot had earlier collocated the Buddha and St. Augustine. These two representatives of the East and the West were brought together in order to lay great stress on their exemplary asceticism, which is the need of the time. Asceticism alone can check the drive of desire

and the naked display of sex in humanity. It may be mentioned here that the collocation is not incidental but deliberate and intentional.

### **Conclusion**

Eliot's use of some of the thoughts or teachings of Buddhism strikes a reader as soon as he opens the pages of his poetry and plays. These thoughts or teachings are harnessed to a creative use in a systematic manner. In fact, there was a time when Eliot thought seriously to become a Buddhist; that was when he was writing *The Waste Land*. The systematic use of Buddhist thoughts or teachings by Eliot in his writings convinces us that he was a serious student of philosophy and had a deep love of the philosophical and religious treasures of Hinduism and Buddhism.

T. S. Eliot makes use of Buddhist ideas in his poetry and plays. Some of these ideas are: death-wish and nirvana, impermanence of the soul (anicca/doctrine of anatta), life and death as 'the two shores' of the world (Samsara), importance of the killing of 'desire' (Tanha), prevalence of passion (or, 'burning') in human life, etc. Eliot also applies certain Hindu ideas in his works. If *The Waste Land* is based on the Buddhist learning of the poet, *The Dry Salvages* (One of the four Quartets), *To the Indians who died in Africa* and fifth section of *The Waste Land* go to the Hindu scriptures and thoughts for their content. However, a consistent application of Buddhism in his writings prompts us to believe that he worked as a writer under the active influence of Buddhist religion.



**Works Cited**

Conze, Edward. *Buddhism*. Oxford. 1957.

Coomaraswamy, Anand. *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*. London: George G. Harrap & Co. 1916.

Davids, Mrs. Rhys Davids. *Buddhism*. Literary Licensing, LLC. 2014.

Davids, T. W. Rhys. *Dialogues of the Buddha*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Gardners Books. 1999.

Duiker, William J. & Jackson J. Spielvogel. *World History*. Cengage. 2019.

Dwivedi, Amar Nath. *Indian Thought and Tradition in T. S. Eliot's Poetry*. Prakash Book Depot. 1977.

Eliot, G. R. *T. S. Eliot and Irving Babbitt*. The American Review. Vol. VII. April – October, 1936. pp 442-454.

Eliot, T. S. *After Strange Gods*. London: Faber and Faber. 1934.

Howarth, Herbert. *Notes on Some Figures behind T. S. Eliot*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 1964.

Kumar, Vipin. *The Concept of Mind*. PhD Desertation, Guru Nayak Dev. University, Amritsar. 2009.

Nuhsa, Fenner. *T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique*. New York: Russel and Russel. 1966.

Smidt, Kristian. *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot*. Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1961.

Warren, Henry Clark. *Buddhism in Translations*. Forgotten Books. 2017.

Westmann, H. *Man in His Relationship*. Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1955.