

The Buddhist Faith of the Nobility in the Eastern Jin Dynasty

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At the beginning, the Buddhism did not spread to China in the same way as it did in India. It was met with criticism and opposition in China at first. It was the Chinese who made an effort to assimilate Buddhism into Chinese society. To be specific, the effort was mainly made by Confucian aristocrats who patronized the religion.

In that regard, understanding the Buddhist faith revolving around aristocrats plays a significant role in figuring out the nature of Buddhism in the Eastern Jin (東晉) Dynasty (317-420).

The culture in the Eastern Jin was dominated by the upper classes who devoted their lives to academics and literature and was based on their social and economic foundation. Therefore, Buddhist monks had to approach the nobility in many aspects, assimilate them and encourage them to follow Buddhism's moral precepts.

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Buddhism finally established its critical position as a religion in Chinese society with the help of the nobility's perception, trust and financial support. Buddhism, once a culture of the nobility, laid the foundation for spiritual culture in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, together with the Taoist schools of Laotzu and Chuangtzu.

Likewise, as for Xichao (郗超), both Buddhism and Confucianism can be understood based on the common practical moral principles of daily life. This trend is more protrusive in Northern Buddhism than in Southern Buddhism, which seems to have something to do with his realistic perception about Buddhism and his military service in Jing-zhou (荊州).

Therefore, the way to get away from retribution is to set a goal and practice step by step, which is to reach nirvana. And any practice to control the mind and will should serve as a means to enlightenment, not as an end itself. Xichao's practical and realistic approach in the Feng-fa-yao (奉法要) can be indicated by his emphasis on the Five Precepts and the Ten Good Deeds and human beings' retribution for their sin.

And yet, the nature of the book is more outstanding in his comments on bliss, citing that one should not only have the good mind but make the effect of it appear without others' noticing. The practical aspect of Buddhism shown in his book, Feng-fa-yao, did not appear in Jian-kang (建康) and Hui-ji (會稽) where he spent his youth and learned Buddhism. Rather, the realistic feature can be traced to his experience in the army.

As a conclusion, the Feng-fa-yao illustrates such a phenomenon based on his experience in Jing-zhou and his knowledge of Buddhism, which shows a new trend in the development process of Buddhism in the Eastern Jin era.

Key Words: Aristocratic Buddhism, Xichao, Feng-fa-yao,
Five Precepts, Ten Good Precepts.

I. Preface

Buddhism in China was a significant transversal of original Indian

Buddhism. When Buddhism was first introduced to China it was met with opposition and criticism and compelled to adapt itself to the Chinese way of life. And although the Chinese did make significant efforts to assimilate Buddhism into Chinese society, it was initially the Confucian aristocrats who patronized the religion.

The character of emerging Buddhism in China was strongly colored by China's geographical and historical context at that time, but the main reason it took root in the nation was because of a powerful link between Buddhism and the Chinese nobility. In this regard, it is of interest to understand something of the significant role these aristocrats played in promoting and developing Buddhist faith in the Eastern Jin Dynasty (東晉, 317-420).

To begin with, I will take a look at the nature of this relationship between Buddhism and a circle of the nobility in the Eastern Jin era and, by extension, the background of Xichao (郗超) and his *Feng-fa-yao* philosophy (奉法要).

I will then take a closer look at Xichao's own faith in the *Feng-fa-yao* and the influence he had on aristocratic society due to his insight into Buddhist doctrines such as, principles of cause and effect (karma) which is of special interest to me. In examining how the Chinese nobility embraced the new religion I hope to shed some light on the aristocrats' Buddhist faith in the Eastern Jin Dynasty.

II. Buddhism and Eastern Jin Aristocratic society

From its very beginnings, Buddhism was prominent in the lives of Confucian aristocrats and the broader society, and exerted a significant influence on Chinese culture. Yet even as people were embracing it, the religion was under attack as it conflicted with traditional cultural beliefs

(Nishi: 166).

In order for a foreign philosophy or culture to be accepted, it needed to demonstrate familiar or similar aspects to existing Chinese traditions. In this sense, it is remarkable that Buddhism was able to survive and flourish in China despite widespread criticism, and this is a mark of its fundamental universal truth and legitimacy.

At that time, the culture in Eastern Jin was dominated by the upper classes who were the wealthy and the literati of the society. Even Buddhist monks had to approach the nobility for approval, encouraging them to follow Buddhism's moral precepts.

These nobles, in turn, no doubt, provided Buddhist monks with financial support and other material assistance one example is the construction of pagodas and temples, where there are numerous accounts of nobles exerting their economic and social influence by making donations for the construction of temples on behalf of monks they particularly respected (Miyagawa: 210).

This is the manner in which Buddhism was able to initially establish its critical position as a religion in Chinese society, largely aided by the nobility's perception, trust and financial support. However, it would be wrong to overlook the massive contribution made by the general populace, as people were forced to serve the religion and make contributions by way of taxes and engaging in labor.

The nobility who were familiar with the methods of the early Taoist scholars, Laotzu (老子) and Chuangtzu (莊子), became familiar with the concept of emptiness in conversations with Buddhist monks, (see *Shi-shuo-xin-yu* 世說新語 and *Jin-shu* 晉書) although the idea had been known to previous scholars (Fukunaga: 631). As a matter of fact, the Luo-yang (洛陽) Province schools of metaphysics (玄學) and pure conversation (清談) had been attracted to Buddhism at the dawning of

the Western Jin Dynasty (265-316).

And in the meantime, Chinese versions of Buddhist scriptures such as the *Vimalakīrti sūtra* (維摩經) and the *Prajña sūtra* (般若經) - which embodied aspects of Laotzu and Chuangtzu thought - now became available to all who could read. This assured a gradual but consistent increase in numbers of Buddhist followers, largely as a result of these translations into Chinese, and the opportunity to study them in the context of Chinese culture. Some even became Buddhist monks and dedicated their lives to teaching Buddhism to commoners. Some Luo-yang Province Buddhist scholars also went south to Jian-kang.

So we see here a flourishing of unique Buddhism, mixed with metaphysical elements and pure conversation, as Buddhist monks with expertise in Laotzu and Chuangtzu thought went out to meet the aristocratic societies of Jian-kang and Hui-ji. Thus Buddhism, once a culture exclusive to the nobility, was beginning to lay its foundation as the dominant spiritual culture in Eastern Jin, along with the influential Taoist schools of Laotzu and Chunangtzu.

III. Understanding the *Feng-fa-yao* (奉法要) Buddhism

As we noted earlier, the *Feng-fa-yao*, written by Chinese Xichao, played a unique role in Chinese Buddhist history, as it is the oldest and best-known manuscript concerning Buddhism's introduction to China. This manuscript describes the virtues and disciplines prescribed for lay Buddhists: the Three Treasures (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha) and the proper attitudes followers should adopt in respect of their daily lives.

Specifically, the *Feng-fa-yao* introduces Buddhist basic doctrines, such as Five precepts (五戒), Ten Good Precepts (十善) and Four Immeasurable Minds (四無量心), before proceeding to karma, Four *Anityas* (四無常), Six *Paramitās*, (六波羅密), and finally, nirvana, being

the ultimate mind state in Buddhism. These writings are an excellent record of how the nobility embraced Buddhism at that time.

So let's take a closer look at the *Feng-fa-yao's* moral principles for lay Buddhists, and the understanding of the principle of cause and effect in relation to the Fa-xiang (法相) School of Chinese Buddhism, which originated from the Indian Yogacāra School (Makida: 699-724; Chang: 416-433).

1. View on Buddhist Precepts (戒律觀)

Most noticeable in the *Feng-fa-yao* is the lack of a sophisticated logical analysis of metaphysical speculation or salvation of the transcendental world here we find the main focus is on human life in an everyday and social context with special reference to practical discipline.

Concerning karma in the next life, Xichao says:

Taking the Five Precepts will keep up appearance practicing the Ten Good Deeds will lead to heaven and observing at least one of the Five Precepts will provide a chance to be reborn as a human being. One's status and lifespan in the next life will depend on how well one has abided by the moral precepts. Ten Evil Deeds are the opposite of Ten Good Deeds. Committing evil deeds will lead straight to hell. Acting aggressively and violently, ignoring others' advice and deceiving others with hatred and greed, will lead to an animal reincarnation, such as a snake. Making virtue out of self-interest and greed, yet complaining that it is not enough, will lead one into the hands of hungry ghosts. However trivial, if one tries to hide sin and does not have a pure mind, it will lead to the world of ghosts and bring about suffering.¹

According to the above passage, to be reborn as a human being it is necessary to keep at least one of the Ten Good Deeds and life span and social status are determined by how well a person observes the Buddhist commandments.

In addition, observing the Ten Good Deeds can help one's mind to turn away from evil and keep the mind active and healthy, while also concentrating on defeating evil and doing good.² But even more important is the practice of revealing evil thoughts instead of harboring and hiding them deeply in the mind. On the other hand, one should not make a fuss about good thoughts and deeds by bragging about them publicly, as this can easily connect one with evil forces.

Xichao introduces the Five Precepts:

Do not kill and you will lead a longer life. Do not steal and you will lead a comfortable/affluent life. Do not indulge in sexual misconducts, and you will lead a pure life. Do not make false speech, and you will get respect from others. Do not take intoxicants, and you will lead a sober life.³

According to Xichao, in observing the Five Precepts people will receive substantial benefits of a healthy life in body and mind. He defines theft as taking others' possessions, whether big or small, and includes the corruption of officials in government posts. Whereas the Five Precepts constitute the minimum moral obligation for a practicing lay Buddhist, the Ten Good Deeds contain more specific obligations

1 全五戒則人相備 具十善則生天堂 全一戒者則亦得為人 人有高卑 或壽夭不同 皆由戒有多少 反十善者謂之十惡 十惡畢犯則入地獄 抵[打-丁+突]強梁不受忠諫 及毒心內盛徇私欺殆 則或墮畜生 或生蛇虺 慳貪專利常苦不足 則墮餓鬼 其罪若轉少而多陰 私情不公亮 皆墮鬼神 雖受微福不免苦痛。(T.52.86c16-23)

2 異出十二門經云 人有善恒當掩之 有惡宜令彰露。(T.52.87a21-22)

3 不殺則長壽 不盜則常泰 不姪則清淨 不欺則人常 敬信不醉則神理明治。(T.52.86b6-8)

concerning moral behavior for lay Buddhists (Ren: 579). According to the *Feng-fa-yao*, the Five Precepts are useful for regulating the body and the Ten Good Deeds aid in controlling the mind.⁴

Xichao understood that both Buddhism and Confucianism could provide a basic moral foundation for practical moral principles to be understood and interwoven into daily life (Nakajima: 280). This trend is more evident in Northern Buddhism than in Southern Buddhism, which seems to have something to do with Xichao's more pragmatic perception of Buddhism and perhaps his military service in Jing-zhou.

2. View on Karma (應報觀)

The *Feng-fa-yao* gives some explanations on what and how to practice, for those who are determined to follow Buddhist teachings and so are seeking guidance about the reasons and results of practicing. In the first instance, it's about the lay Buddhist daily mind-set and results of practice:

Generally, a reversal of sin and bliss is inevitable. But if one is ignorant of this truth he will not have anything to depend on, and right and wrong will be out of sync. And, if one only acknowledges truth in the round of daily life, or in reference to reliability, déjà vu etc. in this everyday or occasional extraordinary perception, truth is weak and so cannot be fully revealed. Thus, it helps to look more broadly, in the context of past and future lives.⁵

The principle of retribution functions in present, past and future lives its only variance is how quickly it appears. In terms of concepts

4 五戒檢形 十善防心. (T.52.86c13)

5 夫罪福之於逆順 固必應而無差者也 苟昧斯道 則邪正無位 寄心無准矣 至於考之當年 信漫而少微 理無愆 達而事不恆著 豈得不歸諸宿緣 推之來世耶. (T.52.87c5-8)

such as *samsara* or reincarnation, Xichao focuses on mind functions, quoting from the *Parinirvāna sūtra* (般泥洹經)⁶ which was translated by an anonymous author:

According to the *Parinirvāna sūtra*, mind can create sky, humans, hell and animals, and reveal the path to enlightenment. When mind is at work every thought is subject to retribution. Consequently, every thought determines retribution though it does not yet take shape in effect.⁷

Xichao teaches that retribution accords with mind function. When a thought is appearing for the first time, it is said that a new life is born. And conversely, when appearance and consciousness disappear, it is said that life dies. Given that people generally think that they receive retribution from their own karma, when anxiety appears in the mind, this mind as the foundation of consciousness, is thought to have already existed beyond life and death.

On the subject of retribution, Xichao says:

Even though a man commits evil deeds, his son will not receive retribution for these, and vice versa. If a man does good deeds then he will receive blessings. But if he commits evil deeds, he himself, will face the consequences.⁸

He comments on this, saying that it is appropriate and makes sense. In other words, he emphasizes that we ourselves are the subject of our own karma, which is no doubt, a main reason why people have tried to follow this teaching and act upon it. But in Xichao's era it might have been difficult for the general populace to accept this

6 心作天 心作人 心作鬼神畜生地獄 皆心所爲也. (T.1.181a25-27)

7 經云 心作天心作人心作地獄心作畜生 乃至得道者也亦心也 凡慮發乎心皆念念受報. (T.52.87a13-15)

8 父作不善子不代受 子作不善父亦不受 善自獲福惡自受殃. (T.52.87b25-27)

principle of cause and effect in the face of prevailing political and social realities. Put in another way, Xichao's keen interest in karma appears to be related to his own self-reflection on resorting to the Machiavellism under Huan-wen's (桓溫) auspices, which is no wonder that he strived in his soul-searching to avoid wrongdoings, as he witnessed everything altogether vanish.

3. View on Nirvana (涅槃觀)

Xichao took a serious view on practical and ethical aspects while acknowledging that the realm of cause and effect is relative and that true enlightenment can only be achieved in a state of non-arising (無生).

Thus, he sought to instruct on a way to be free of retribution by setting a goal and then practicing step-by-step, until eventually reaching nirvana. Everything is a result of mind; therefore the goal of nirvana can only be achieved with mind control.

To understand that everything is a result of mind function is very noteworthy, but to achieve quintessential mind control without a teacher or teachings is nigh impossible.

Xichao says:

As I mentioned earlier, if one sows the seeds of the Ten Good Precepts, he can receive good karma by cultivating higher virtues. If one sows the seeds of the Four Emptiness (四空) such as Zen (禪), he will be so exalted as to be born in heaven. His fortune and happiness will double, depending on his deeds, from the 1st to 28th heavens. One can reach nirvana of the Arhat or Buddhist disciples when he turns away from the world of substance and stays in the world of non-being.

One will have no attachment to mind, and truth will become clear, if he accepts the principle of cause and effect and does care for official posts. And if one does not count on anything he will not sow any further seeds thus, will not receive any further retribution. One can reach nirvana or Buddhahood if he enters this state of not-moving mind.⁹

While the practice of keeping Five Precepts and performing Ten Good Deeds can lead to a life in heaven, the ultimate practice objective is to attain nirvana, beyond life and death.

Therefore, any mind control practice should have enlightenment as its goal, rather than a view as an end in itself.

The Five Precepts and Four Sublime States (四等) should not be abandoned, and yet that hatred should be discarded in real practice. Those who are devoted to Buddha do not need to become Buddha. And those who follow the Five Precepts do not need to practice charity for good karma. Likewise, although Zen and the Five Skhandhas (five permanent constituents of body, feelings, perception, mental formations and consciousness), combined together, in the effects of Five Precepts and the practice of meditation these fundamentals alone will not lead to the realization of true emptiness, a state of nirvana, if one practices emptiness in emptiness.¹⁰

Even if one practices good deeds and accordingly attains good karma, it is limited. If one wants to receive pure unlimited blessings he will have to enter a state of nirvana, beyond retribution and dualistic

9 種十惡戒善則受生之報具於上章加種禪等四空 則貴極天道四空及禪 數經具載其義 從第一天至二十八天 隨其事行福轉倍增種非常禪 皆諦背有著無則得羅漢泥洹 不忌有為不係空觀 遇理而冥無執無寄為無所種 既無所種故不受報 廓然玄廢則佛之泥洹. (T.52.88c28-89a5)

10 然則五度四等未始可廢 但當即其事用而去其伎心 歸於佛則無解於佛 歸於戒則無功於戒 則禪諦與五陰 俱冥 未用與本觀同盡 雖復衆行兼陳 固是空中行空耳 或以為空則無行 行則非空. (T.52.89a16-a20)

notions of good and bad.

However, Xichao recognized that a basic premise of Buddhist morality is to rescue others, not only from the spiritual perspective but also from a physical perspective, by engaging in acts of charity. This goal is different from adopting a contemplative and secluded life in order to pursue nirvana or seek to become a Buddha in this instance it is about taking interest in individual nirvana, which is the Buddhism sought by Hui-ji.

Xichao's practical and realistic approach is evident in the *Feng-fa-yao* in his emphasis on the Five Precepts and Ten Good Deeds, and human retribution from sin. And yet, the manuscript is more outstanding in his comments on bliss, in that he says that one should not only have a good mind but should seek to be modest and not inform of its appearance.

It seems certain that Xichao's practical approach to Buddhism evidenced in the *Feng-fa-yao*, was not learnt in Jian-kang and Hui-ji where he spent his youth and initially learned about Buddhism. More likely, it can be traced to his experience in the army.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, due to a scarcity of academic publications on Buddhist faith among Eastern Jin nobles, Xichao's *Feng-fa-yao* became the main focus, mainly because the book was well organized and provided basic material. As long as Buddhist history is regarded as part of religious history, it's important to find records describing the religious lives of people, regardless of era or social status.

However, it is important to separate the Buddhism of the Chinese

aristocrats from that of Chinese Buddhist monks. Xichao, himself, did not comment on this kind of disparity. His own contradiction faith and daily life suggested problems in the nobility who believed in buddhism. on the other hand, Criticism and reflection on Laotzu and Chuangtzu thoughts that prevailed among Chinese confucian aristocrats emerged.

The *Feng-fa-yao* illustrates such a phenomenon, on the basis of Xichao's own knowledge of Buddhism and his experience in Jing-zhou, which indicates a new trend in the developmental process of Buddhism in the Eastern Jin period. It is questionable to what degree Buddhist morality, with its focus on mental attitudes, influenced the nobility in their preoccupation with Confucian ethics at the time nevertheless, a new kind of Buddhism, reflected in the *Feng-fa-yao*, was certainly taking shape at that time, as a fusion of Buddhist and Confucian ideas.

Glossary of Chinese Terms

(C=Chinese, S=Sanskrit)

- Dong-jin (C) 東晉
- Fa-xiang (C) 法相
- Feng-fa-yao (C) 奉法要
- Hui-ji (C) 會稽
- Jian-kang (C) 建康
- Jing-zhou (C) 荊州
- Luo-yang (C) 洛陽
- Xichao (C) 郗超

Abbreviation

- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (大正新修大藏經: Japanese Edition of the Buddhist Canon). Ed. by Takakasu-Junjirō (高楠順次郎) et al. Tokyo: Taishō-Issaikyō-Kankōkai, 1924-1935.

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