

Swami Vivekananda's Views on Buddhist Monasticism

SWAMI PRASANNATMANANDA

Swami Vivekananda loved Buddha so much that he used to say that he was the servant of the servants of Buddha. Indeed, he used to go into raptures when he had any occasion to talk about Buddha. Buddha's heart, his great compassion for all beings, the adamant strength of his character, his unselfishness and burning spirit of renunciation, his egalitarian approach, his practicality and gigantic will always inspired Swamiji. And this inspiration presumably fuelled his youthful imagination when he was deeply thinking about the pros and cons of starting an organization so that Sri Ramakrishna's hard-earned jewels of spirituality could be given to humanity. But Swamiji was no less a practical man than Buddha. That is why we find, before formally setting up the Ramakrishna Order of monks and framing rules for them, he had taken full cognizance of both the positive and negative sides of Buddhist monasticism. As a result, although the pattern and discipline of Buddhist monasticism have some interesting similarities with the organizational structure and behaviour of the Ramakrishna Order, there are some differences as well because the Ramakrishna Order 'is virtually an offshoot' of Shankarāchārya's Vedantic order of sannyasins.¹ Behind these similarities and dissimilarities lie Swamiji's aspiration to bring about a revolution by 'combining Shankara's intellect with Buddha's heart',² or as Swami

Satprakashananda expresses it, by uniting 'the spiritual idealism of Shankara with the dynamic spirit of the Buddha.'³

Therefore, on 1 May 1897, when the Ramakrishna Mission was founded, Swamiji reminded the assembly at Balaram Basu's house how Buddhism had once spread both in India and abroad through its organizations. Then he proposed: 'Let this Association be named after him, in whose name, indeed, we have embraced the monastic life.'⁴

Please note that in the history of world religion, it was for the first time that a religious order, ie Buddhist Sangha, had been founded by an Avatara—Buddha. Swamiji said elsewhere that '...it seems to be the consensus of opinion amongst savants that this world-wide monastic institution [ie Buddhism] had its first inception in this curious land of ours...'⁵ The Sangha was essentially based on Buddha's life and teachings. And after almost 2,500 years history repeated itself when a monastic order had been silently founded by another Avatara—Sri Ramakrishna—again, in India. It is his incomparable life and teachings that have nourished and continue to sustain this new Order.

It was the genius of the Buddha to organize individual monks into a systematic order under a set of written common rules and regulations of conduct. These canonical codes of conduct are in one book called the

Vinaya Pitaka. This is the oldest text of Indian legal code. Before that India could not develop any such legal code of conduct. Even the nature of punishment is specified there in terms of the intensity of misconduct. During the long history of Buddhism many schools had sprung up subsequently giving rise to many sects and sub-sects scattered throughout the globe. Many of them have (or had) their own 'Vinaya' tradition.

Thus the Buddhist monastic organization came into being and monasteries were founded for the dwelling of the monks. Another very important feature of early Buddhism was the inclusion of the nuns in the order. Swamiji observed that the 'monk and nun both existed in pre-Buddhistic Hinduism'.⁶ Nevertheless, he admitted that nuns were rarely seen before the advent of Buddha. It was Buddha who put woman in an equal position with man. He, 'recognized woman's right to an equal place in religion. . .'.⁷

Buddha's message points to ethical idealism. His is ethico-humanistic spiritualism. That is why Swamiji said that 'By Buddha the moral side of the [Vedanta] philosophy was stressed upon'.⁸ Indeed, Buddha's ethical teachings had also a metaphysical foundation. He adopted in his scheme of life the ethical principles of the Upanishads and took up their ideal of renunciation as the nucleus of monastic life. Swamiji observed, 'The Advaita, as applied in its yoga-perception form is Buddhism. . .'.⁹

While discussing renunciation with his disciple, one day Swamiji said, 'My belief. . . is that it was since the time of Buddha that the monastic vow was preached more thoroughly all over India, and renunciation, the giving up of sense enjoyment, was recognized as the highest aim of religious life. And Hinduism has absorbed into itself this Buddhist spirit of renunciation.

Never was a great man of such renunciation born in this world as Buddha.'¹⁰

The disciple asked: Do you then mean, sir, that before Buddha's advent there was very little of the spirit of renunciation in the country, and there were hardly any sannyasins at all?

Swamiji replied: 'The monastic institution was there, but the generality of people did not recognize it as the goal of life; there was no such staunch spirit for it, there was no such firmness in spiritual discrimination. So even when Buddha betook himself to so many Yogis and Sadhus, nowhere did he acquire the peace he wanted.' Swamiji then continued: 'The many monasteries that you now see in India occupied by monks were once in the possession of Buddhism. The Hindus have only made them their own by modifying them in their own fashion. Really speaking, the institution of Sannyasa originated with Buddha; it was he who breathed life into the dead bones of this institution.

The Buddhist community

The Buddhist community, in the broad sense of the term, consists of seven categories of people, namely monks, nuns, female probationers (*sikkhamana*), male novices (*samanera*), female novices (*samaneri*), male and female lay people (*upāsaka/upāsikā*). In a narrow sense, however, the Sangha designates the community of monks and nuns who received full ordination (*upsampada*) in a legally valid ceremony (*upasampadakamma*) executed by the order. Only those who are ordained as monks are subject to Buddhist monastic laws as codified in the *Vinaya*.

To be a member of the Buddhist monastic order, a male or a female who is at least 20 years of age, has a good health, is not indebted or persecuted and who has received permission of his/her parents can be

given ordination by the Buddhist order. In addition, female applicants have to fulfil one more condition. They must be fertile but not pregnant. They have two crosses yet one more hurdle. They must complete two years of studentship before they can get full ordination.

Another interesting feature in this context is that some portions of the *Vinaya* were proclaimed by Buddha himself just like Swami Vivekananda who dictated to Swami Shuddhanandaji Maharaj our monastic rules.

One dissimilarity, however, is that while we have spiritual lineage in our monastic order, Buddha did not appoint any successor as the leader of the monastic order he set up.

Moreover, Buddhist monks and nuns were not allowed to earn their livelihood. They had to depend entirely on the laity for their necessities and lodging.

The Buddha introduced the ordination ceremony where the candidates had to recite the formula of triple refuge (*tri-sharana*)—refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Later he introduced the stages of novice and the *pabbaja* (wandering) after which came ordination. Novices had to pay attention to 10 *sheelas*. As mentioned earlier, a novice was usually ordained when he was 20. So far as the ceremonies the monks observed, the most important were *Uposatha* or fasting twice a month, *Pavarana* or invitation after *chāturmāsya* and *Kathina*, that is, getting five privileges and the permission to use cotton clothes.

Buddhist monasticism

Just as Sri Ramakrishna, the *Avatara* of this age, called the pure-souled spiritual seekers from the roof of the 'Kuthibari' of Dakshineswar, 'Oh my children, come', similarly, more than 2,500 years ago Buddha welcomed everyone who were eager to join

him as *bhikkhu*. Swamiji said, Buddha was so large-hearted that he 'invited everyone to enter into that state of freedom which he called *Nirvāna*.'¹² Consequently, said Swamiji, '...Buddhism became the religion of a monastic order...'¹³ He pointed out that Buddhism exalts monasticism above all others as the path that must be taken by all souls to reach perfection. As a result, he said 'The Buddhist command could only be carried out through monasticism' where as 'the Hindu [command] might be fulfilled through any state of life.'¹⁴

Swamiji explained the three phases through which Buddhism had passed and said that the '...three cycles of Buddhism were five hundred years of the Law [ie when the Law was predominant], five hundred years of Images [ie when Image-worship was pre-eminent], and five hundred years of Tantras [ie when Tantras became prominent]. You must not imagine that there was ever a religion in India called Buddhism with temples and priests of its own order! Nothing of the sort. It was always with Hinduism. Only at one time the influence of Buddha was paramount, and this made the nation monastic.'¹⁵

Swamiji praised the missionary zeal of Buddha and the Buddhist monks. Buddha, Swamiji observed, 'was the first who brought the missionaries into existence.'¹⁶ But the credit must go to them that they had never taken up the sword to preach their religion. Swamiji even went so far as to say that except Buddhism, no other religion could get a hundred thousand converts just by brain alone. And 'within a few centuries of its birth, the barefooted, shaven-headed missionaries of Buddha had spread over all the then known civilized world',¹⁷ he added.

Swamiji pointed out that Buddha had both monastic and lay disciples. During Buddhist period the religious and moral

ideas permeated all strata of society and brought about transformation in the material conditions of the country. Education, art, literature and even commerce had developed immensely. The monasteries, in particular, turned out to be great centres of learning.

Degradation

Thus Swamiji took note of the great and good points of Buddhism, but all the same he did not hesitate to say that those good points fell into the hands which were unable to keep them safe. 'It was not through his [Buddha's] teachings that Buddhism came to degradation, it was the fault of his followers',¹⁸ observed Swamiji.

Let us now look at some of the faults that Vivekananda mentioned in many of his lectures, particularly those he delivered on Buddha and Buddhism. First, though Buddha did not avow God, ironically he himself was placed on the throne of God, so to say, within a few years of his demise. In less than three hundred years of his *mahānirvāna*, his followers installed his images in huge and gorgeous temples and carried on ceremonial worship. Subsequently other deities were also introduced and relic worship started in magnificent stupas. Swamiji said in this regard: 'The very Buddha who declared against the existence of a Personal God had not died fifty years before his disciples manufactured a Personal God out of him.'¹⁹

Thus, from a predominantly ethical course, Buddhism turned into a ritualistic religion evidently under the influence of Hinduism. The change came more upon the Mahāyāna school than upon Hinayāna. It was from Buddhism that image-worship entered into Hinduism. The Hindu Tantra also adopted the practice of image-worship. At the same time Hindu deities found access to Buddhism. It should be noted that in

many respects the Mahāyāna Buddhism resembled Hinduism. On metaphysical side, the Madhyamika school (ie also Mahāyāna) was tending towards monistic Vedanta. On this Swamiji remarked:

At first it [Buddhist monasticism] was so simple. When the Master died, before his death, they said: 'What shall we do with you?' 'Nothing'. 'What monuments shall we make over you?' He said: 'Just make a little heap if you want, or just do not do anything.' By and by, there arose huge temples and all the paraphernalia. The use of images was unknown before then. I say they [the Buddhists] were the first to use images. There are images of Buddha and all the saints, sitting about and praying. All this paraphernalia went on multiplying with this organization.²⁰

The second reason of the decline of Buddhism, Swamiji pointed out, is that '...Buddhas tried to make everyone in India a monk or a nun. We cannot expect that from everyone.'²¹ He continued:

Then these monasteries became rich. The real cause of the downfall is here. Monasticism is all very good for a few; but when you preach it in such a fashion that every man or every woman who has a mind immediately gives up social life, when you find over the whole of Indian monasteries—some containing a hundred thousand monks, sometimes 20,000 monks in one building—huge, gigantic buildings, these monasteries, scattered all over India and, of course, centres of learning, and all that—who were left to procreate progeny, to continue the race? Only the weaklings. All the strong and vigorous minds went out. And then came national decay by the sheer loss of vigour.²²

Thus Swami Vivekananda's view was that there should be a perfect balance between the monastics and the householders.

According to Swamiji, there had been other causes of the gradual decline of

Buddhism. One such reason was that Buddhism suffered incalculable loss of lives and property due to the barbarities of the warrior races such as the Huns. Swamiji mentions how the Buddhist missionaries 'were persecuted and thousands were massacred by two or three successive emperors.'²³

Another major cause of the degradation of Buddhism as pointed out by Swamiji was its indulgence in *Vāmāchāra*. When *Vāmāchāra* or unrestrained mixing between monks and nuns crept in, Buddhism got ruined.

Another reason was that, with the extension of Buddhism, many new elements were incorporated into its structure. As a result, its intensity decreased. Moreover, it accommodated many local customs which while strengthening it, increased its weakness. Swamiji therefore did not accept many views

of modern Buddhism. He observed: 'What Buddha taught, the Hindu believes, . . . what the Buddhists teach, we do not accept.'²¹ His conclusion was that 'Modern Buddhism. . .has made a travesty of monasticism.'²⁵

At Darjeeling, Swamiji once said to Swami Turiyananda that he will revolutionize the monastic order. And Swamiji has actually done that. He has given a new shape to the traditional order of *sannyasa* according to the need of the age and it may be called neo-monasticism. This monastic tradition has several unique features which distinguish it from other monastic traditions. This new tradition is an incredible creation of Swamiji's spiritual insight. Be sure that this monastic order of Sri Ramakrishna is not meant for a few years, but for centuries to come. ■

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- 3 Swami Satprakashananda, *S.V.C.P.A*, p. 70
- 4 Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works*, (hereafter *C.W.*), Vol. VI, p. 477
- 5 *C.W.*, Vol. IV, p. 304
- 6 *C.W.*, Vol. IX, p. 377, also Vol. VI, p. 507
- 7 *C.W.*, Vol. VII, p. 78
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- 9 *C.W.*, Vol. V, p. 82
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- 17 *C.W.*, Vol. III, p. 511
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- 22 *C.W.*, Vol. III, pp. 533-34
- 23 *C.W.*, Vol. I, p. 349
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- 25 *C.W.*, Vol. V, p. 180

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