

BUDDHISM AS A POPULAR RELIGION

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Buddhism, as it is practised today in diverse cultures, is a veritable religion, with the inevitable trappings of beliefs, cults, rituals and, in a somewhat restricted sense, even priesthood. All these grew out of the way of life which the Buddha expounded as leading to the cessation of suffering – the goal to which he directed his disciples. But most of them may be quite inconsistent with the stress he laid on individual moral responsibility, intellectual liberalism, analytical pragmatism and the futility of cults and rituals. The socio-cultural movement, which gradually transformed the original teachings of the Buddha to popular Buddhism as practised by millions of people, needs to be given due consideration in a study of Buddhism as a religion.

An old Buddhist tradition records that, at the successful end to his quest for a Path of Deliverance, the Buddha was reluctant to announce it to the world. It is said that he embarked on his career as a religious teacher only after much persuasion. If the Buddha did actually hesitate, the most probable reason for it could have been his realization that his teachings, too, would inexorably result in an organized religion. But once he began to preach, he could hardly restrain the process. Even during his life-time, the makings of a popular religion became evident.

As a religious teacher of India of the sixth century B.C., the Buddha entered a highly competitive sphere of activity in which hundreds of Brahmans, (upholding the Vedic tradition) and recluses (representing diverse cults and practices, philosophies and spiritual messages) were vying with one another to expand the circle of adherents and admirers. They travelled from village to village preaching their doctrines and challenging their opponents to debate. Their primary objective was to gain and retain converts – a task of infinite difficulty as the masses were so malleable that they would change their teachers quite frequently. The means adopted by some of them in the ensuing competition were not always fair or pardonable, even though understandable in that the survival and the material quality of life of the teachers and their disciples depended on the numerical strength and the social position of their adherents. As a result, kings and the nobility, besides bankers and rich merchants, were among the most sought after. Each teacher concentrated his efforts to found a **Sasana** (literally, teaching), signifying a dispensation or order. A Sasana consisted of monks and nuns as well as lay devotees, a body of teachings and some rites and observances.

The Buddha's presence in this circle of rival teachers did, no doubt, cause them much consternation. His were approaches with an inherent potentiality to gain popularity: e.g. the Middle Path avoiding excesses of pleasure and self-mortification; the appeal to intellectual analysis and critical acumen; the stress on a pragmatic code of ethics – both simple and flexible; tolerance and non-aggression in his relations with competing religious systems; the equal emphasis on precept and example; the concern over the disadvantaged and the under-privileged; the positive attitude to change and growth as well as new ideas; the relaxation of central authority and the encouragement of peripheral development; non-interference with social and family customs and practices as were not at variance with his fundamental doctrines of non-violence and equality.

The impact of these approaches was further enhanced by a series of steps he took in founding the **Sangha**, comprising both monks and nuns – drawn from all strata of society; in developing a body of fundamental teachings recognizable as the **Dhamma**; and in launching a missionary campaign through which the members of the Sangha, led by the Buddha himself, propagated the Dhamma as widely as circumstances permitted them. The educational efforts followed suit and the great monasteries which rose in many cities became centres of learning and literary endeavours, engaged in backstopping the missionary activity as well as codifying, preserving and interpreting the word of the Buddha.

In this process the public image of the Buddha too underwent a significant change. Whether he desired it or not, he was progressively elevated in the minds of his followers from the position of a teacher or, more specifically, a pointer to a path of deliverance to that of a Great Man (**Mahapurisa**), who surpassed gods and deities (**devatideva, brahmatibrahma**),. Despite his discouragement – of which evidence is found in the Tripitaka – the Buddha was thus apotheosized during his life-time – a phenomenon which continues to manifest itself in India even today with reference to recognized religious personalities.

Such was the sanctity attached to him that his followers honoured him with offerings of flowers and incense and, in his absence, made similar offerings to objects with which he had come into contact (e.g. the Bodhi tree; the seat). Soon after his death, a cult of relic worship arose and the relics which were held in great veneration were not only his bodily remains but also the objects of daily use like the begging-bowl and the belt. For several centuries, no indigenous artist of India dared to represent the Buddha in his human form and used symbols when his presence had to be depicted in a picture.

The **Sasana**, which the Buddha founded, was thus centred on the three treasures (Pali: **Ratanattaya**; Skt: **Ratnatraya**) or refuges (Tisarana) namely, the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. To become an adherent was to take refuge in these three treasures and the formula for this purpose was developed very early in the Buddha's mission. At the earliest stages, this formula, which runs as **Buddham saranam gacchami, Dhamman saranam gacchami, Sangham saranam gacchami** (each repeated thrice), was all that was used in ordaining new members of the Sangha.

The gradual evolution of the Sangha characterizes the Buddha's purposeful pragmatism. The Buddha had no pre-conceived plan. The rules of discipline were formulated in response to situations as they arose. Institutional traditions and practices relating to admission, disciplinary control, collective decision-making and disposal of property were developed on sound democratic principles. All properties were held in common with no scope for individual inheritance. Precedence among the members of the Sangha was determined by a system of seniority counted from the date of higher ordination. The basic criterion for the conduct of a monk or a nun was that it should win over the unconverted and enhance the satisfaction of the converted (**appasadanam pasadaya pasadanam yebhuyyena pasadaya**). Though not a priesthood in the sense of mediators between a divinity and his worshippers, the Sangha acquired the role of teacher and spiritual leader of the lay adherents.

As stable populations of lay adherents arose specially around monasteries, the Sangha was obliged to extend their spiritual role to take over some of the rites and practices which either Brahmans or animistic priests performed to ward off danger and illness, to bring good luck and to safeguard the after-life of the departed dear ones. Benedictory and protective ceremonies as well as funeral rites were developed with formulae embodying Buddhist sentiments. The concept of acquiring and sharing merit (Pali: punna Skt: punya) for happiness both in this life and here-after, with life in heavenly states as an immediate goal, conditioned the conduct and religious activities of the laity. Thus came into existence the popular Buddhism – a simpler way of spiritual life for the laity as opposed to the ascetic ideals of renunciation and non-attachment on which the code of discipline for monks and nuns was based.