

THE BUDDHIST MONASTIC LIFE AND SOCIETY

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(An extract from a talk delivered in England)

The Buddha was a social reformer too.

Seven weeks after his Enlightenment at Buddhagaya in Bihar, the Buddha came to the Deer Park near Benares. There he gave his first sermon to five ascetics who were his associates when struggling to attain the Enlightenment. They were the first to receive his teaching. Then the nucleus of the Order of the community was constituted. Later fifty five more people heard his teaching and entered the Order. After the rainy season the Buddha sent them out in different directions to teach the Doctrine to others. The Buddha set out from Benares eastwards – in the direction of the great cities of the time, first being the Magadhan capital, Rajagaha. In the course of his travel the Buddha accepted a great number of followers and they were ordained into the Order by his senior disciples.

Besides preaching, no social activities were formulated by the Buddha for the monks. But then according to many of the sermons of the Buddha it is possible to suggest that the Buddha and his early disciples were also doing a kind of social work needed for that period.

There are two vital aspects of the Buddha's life; great wisdom and compassion. Out of his great wisdom he showed the Middle Path to liberation from the sorrowful mundane world, and out of compassion he preached social development. He sent out his disciples also for the same purpose. It is a well known fact to the historians that there were evil practices in his time, i.e. in sixth century B.C. either in the name of God, gods or religion: such as animal sacrifices, caste, prejudices, slavery of women and wars between petty kingdoms. The Buddha, and his disciples, wandering far and wide in India, admonished against those evils and did his best to reform the society.

During the later centuries scholar monks were teaching to both lay and monk students. Then these monastic institutions developed as universities like Taxila, Nalanda, Vikramasila, Odantapuri, Jagadala, Dhanyakataka, etc.

It is an interesting subject to learn how the Buddhist monkhood has existed for twenty-five centuries; how it has gained the support, respect and admiration of the people of many countries; how it has always held in its hands the education of the people. This brotherhood of monks is today as it was twenty-five centuries ago – a community of men seeking truth. First of all, we must dismiss

from our mind any idea of priesthood or any idea of extra-human sanctity. I use “monk”, because it is the most appropriate English word I can find, but even that is not quite correct. I have often found this difficulty. They are trying to lift the people into another world – a world of people differing from ordinary man, not in habits alone, but in mind culture.

Besides being the ideal of the Buddhists, the monk is more: he is the teacher of all including devotees and their children. It must be remembered that it is a service apart from his meditative life. A monk need not necessarily teach secular subjects to children; the aim and object of the monkhood is to lead a life of purity and detachment from the world. If the monk acts as such a teacher that is a thing apart. And yet before the Western domination in Asia all monasteries were Temple schools. All the monasteries were and are full of scholar monks and many monks taught and teach. Much the same reason has had influence in Buddhist Asia as in the Western nations: the desire of parents that their children should learn religion in their childhood. The fact that the wisest and most honoured men entered the Order, paved the way for the laity to benefit in this manner. The faithful veneration pervades the mass of Buddhists. The laity admires and venerates the monks and voluntarily and cheerfully contributes to their maintenance and welfare. From its ranks the community is recruited. The members of the Order preserve the decorum of their life and the monastic rules. The life of the religious is one of restraint and perpetual control of the senses.

He has forgone all sense, pleasures and diversions. Such a system of self-denial is always maintained. It cannot be denied that human motives often influence both the laity and the religious.

This Monks’ life is the example and the proof of how the people live and believe. Every man in Burma and Thailand goes through a monastic life at least for some time and learns from the monk of his religion. During that period they learn a great deal of Buddhism and its practice. They have to learn by heart certain portions of the sacred books. It is one of the most beautiful sights to see monks and children kneeling on the bare ground reciting while the dawn comes. The Buddhist education in the monasteries is very useful, very thorough, not only in precept but in practice; for in the monastery you must live a pure and happy life, as monks live, even if they are but young boys.

The Buddhist monks are supported by the laity. Therefore, it is a duty of the monks to see to their mundane welfare too. They are a source of inspiration to various social reformation works among the people. Many monks are dedicated to the social services in urban areas. If such a monk lives in a village monastery the people of the village are well disciplined. There are less quarrels or crimes in that village.

The monks conduct meditation courses for the people who are in need of such retreats from time to time. During such courses they get opportunity to renew their studies on the teaching of the Buddha. Monks give counsel and advice to the people for their household life whenever necessary. The monks are the people who reconcile rival groups in a town or a village.

On the occasion of sorrowful as well as happy events, the good Buddhist expects monks to come and chant Sutras and invoke the blessings of the Triple Gem – the Buddha, His Doctrine and His Holy Order. Often they come to the temple too to receive blessings from the monks. Monks are conducting services specially on Buddhist Sabbath days, i.e. full-moon day, new-moon day and half-moon day. Always Buddhist services are followed by sermons given by the monks. Monks are the people who are leading their devotees to righteous and religious lives.

Between lay Buddhists and the members of the Order there is an important relationship. This relationship is set out formally in a discourse of the Buddha called Sigalovada Sutra. In this discourse nothing of the duties of the householder is left unmentioned. Among other duties, the reciprocal duties of householders and members of the Order are set out. The good householder ministers to the monks by showing reverential affection for them in his actions, in his speech and in his thoughts, by giving them a warm welcome and ample hospitality and by providing generally for their material needs. In return the members of the Order are to show their affection for householders by restraining them from evil courses of action, by exhorting them to do what is honourable, by entertaining kindly feelings towards them, by imparting knowledge to them, by dealing with their difficulties and doubts, and revealing to them the spiritual way. Those who have been acquainted with countries, where Buddhist culture is still a living force, will know how true these reciprocal duties are among the householders and the monks.

The duties that envisaged for the monk in relation with the householder require constant, day-to-day contacts between the two. That is why at the outset in my talk I mentioned that the word “monk”, if it means a person who lives apart from the world, is in the strict sense inappropriate as a translation of *Bhikkhu*. He has to exhort the householder, restrain him when necessary, instruct him, clear up his doubts, and constantly direct his attention, to the right path. This is followed by him most effectively and he is providing an example and an inspiration to the householder.

The life of the Buddhist monk who has given up the comforts of household life has an important social function.

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