

ORIGIN SPREAD AND CAUSES OF DECLINE OF BUDDHISM DR. TAHIRA'

The study on buddha and his teachings would not be complete without a study of the main differences between the prevailing religion at that time and Buddhism which was born as an offshoot.

Hinduism was not the name of the religion which was current at the time of Buddha. This name came later after some centuries and owes its origin, as scholars point out, to 'Sindhu' being pronounced by foreigners as 'Hindhu'. At that time it was referred to variously as Aryan, Vodie, Brahman, Trayi, Sanatan and son on. the other religions or faiths, which were distinct from this religion, were many but they were neither very influential nor had a large following. Among them were mainly the shramana, the Vratye, the Nirgranthan, the Ajivika and other groups. buddha was attracted to the Shramana way of life the essential discipline in which consisted in renunciation and austerities. After experiments and experience he veered round to what he called the Middle Path and Yoga. These led him to self-realisation and enlightenment. 1

Buddha taught the new Dhamma, and the Sangha developed in a predominantly Vedic environment in which the orthodox religious community naturally opposed the cult of buddhism. 2

The following five points show how Buddha differed from the Hinduism of those days:

(1) Budhism, in contrast to Hinduism, discards the acceptance of the authority of the Vedas as divine revelation. From the earliest times in India, the Vedas, the basic scriptures of the Hindus, have been the source of religious authority and inspiration, and have been also looked upon as divine and infallible revelation. Buddha preached against the acceptance of the authority of the Vedas, or for the matter of that, of any books, or persons, or even of the Buddha himself, as being harmful to spiritual progress.

(2) Buddhism differs from Hinduism concerning its belief in a Creator-God. Buddhism, which is based on the principles of

'dependent origination' of all existence, cannot accept a first cause, a Creator. Some Hindus believe that God dwells in heaven, a deistic conception; others believe that God pervades each atom of existence, a pantheistic conception; still other have faith in a personal God, such as Rama, Krishna or Shiva. These different conceptions of God are unacceptable to the Buddhist. In Buddhism, there is no god but gods. Buddha taught his disciples to preach the Dhamma to men and gods alike.

(3) Buddhism also rejects the spiritual efficacy of external rites and rituals, performed very devoutly by most Hindus, such as taking dips in the river Ganga and other waters to wash off all sins. Buddhism believes in the possibility of self-purification, attainment of desirelessness, only through self-control, self-culture, self-discipline and self-realization; no external rites will help the attainment of inner purity.

(4) Buddhism differs from Hinduism in that it rejects the caste system and untouchability which were current even in those days. Twenty five centuries ago Buddha raised his first voice of protest against this demoralizing practice when he said, "It is not by birth that one becomes a Brahman or an untouchable, but it is through one's acts that one becomes a Brahman or an un-touchable."

(5) Finally, Buddhism opposes self-mortification and the practice of severe austerities, as commonly accepted in Buddha's time by various sects and by the Hindus and Jains today. For Buddhism, the main austerity is the burning up of one's own mental defilements and not inflicting pain on the body.³

The age of Buddha was one of philosophical renaissance in India with different leaders offering varying interpretations of the universe, of man and of ethical values. There were six distinct philosophies in those days, in addition to the orthodox Vedic schools, which argued in one way or another for ethical nihilism, accidentalism or chance, determinism, materialism and moralism. Buddha had to combat all these arguments and propound his own doctrines of non-substance, impermanence and dependent origination, - doctrines which brought a new rational realism of

outlook, a fresh profundity in thought, a new discipline in practice and a renaissance of the inner spirit and psyche in man.4

In considering the relation between Hinduism and Buddhism, it should be remembered that there were a number of similarities as well as differences. Both Hinduism and Buddhism flourished against the background of a common culture for many centuries; there never was a distinctly separate Buddhist society isolated from the rest of the community.

Buddha also taught that all existence is subject to the law of Kamma or Karma, that rebirth is the lot of man, and that suffering is due to attachment-beliefs which were commonly held in his time by followers of the Vedas as well. 5

After two centuries, when Asoka came on the scene, Buddha and Buddhism had already caught the imagination of the people in that part of the country. After his own conversion, he applied his mind to the organisation and propagation of Buddhism on a scale unknown to the world of those days. This process went on for centuries and in addition to monasteries, big educational institutions for training monks, came into existence.

Another important feature, which developed, was the use of the plastic arts, for popularizing religion. Buddhism was a great pioneer in this field. The credit of conveying Indian religion, Indian thought and Indian art, beyond the confines of India, also belongs to Buddhism. 6

During the period of the active spread of Buddhism in India and abroad, Hinduism was obviously passive and was absorbing a number of features of Buddhism, Buddhism too, adopted much of Hinduism when it spread among the masses, and the line of demarcation, so far as popular Hinduism and popular Buddhism were concerned, became dimmer and dimmer.

DECLINE OF BUDDHISM IN INDIA.

1. Of the various reasons suggested, many of which have some truth in them, the most important may be said to be the decline of vigour in the Sangha, its gradual transformation while adopting itself to the way of the masses, the absorption of some of its main

principles such as renunciation and Ahimsa by Hinduism, the opposition of the vast majority of the Hindu community, and the Muslim invasion.

2. The decline of vigour in the Order or the Sangha was a major cause of the decline of Buddhism. The vitality of the Sangha lay in the spirit of renunciation, self-discipline, broadmindedness, liberality, service and sacrifice for the many. When those characteristics were almost lost, the influence of the Order disappeared. Buddha himself, right up to the last days of his life, went on from one place to another inspiring and arousing the people and leading them to the noble path of righteousness.

3. The monks in course of time became used to an easy life devoted primarily to academic pursuits and religious celebrations; they grew lax and accepted perverse and worldly practices and beliefs which were contrary to the earlier ideals, and which hardly differed from those of the masses. This led to the disintegration of the Order into diverse sects, to the weakening of the moral standard of the Sangha.

4. The Muslim invasion played an important part in the disappearance of Buddhism from India; for, just when the Sangha began to decline in vigour, the Muslim invaders invaded the country, indiscriminately massacring the people and burning and destroying the shrines, monasteries and schools in their path. The burning of the libraries continued for several months. This extermination of the monks gave a fatal blow to the organization of the Sangha. With the destruction of the Sangha, the Buddhists were left without leaders, and Buddhism did not recover.

5. Another important factor in the decline of Buddhism in India was the strong opposition from the orthodox Hindu traditionalists. The orthodox members of the community had in their hearts always been against Buddhism, chiefly because of the loosening of their own hold on the masses. 8

THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM IN SOUTH EAST AND FAR EAST ASIA

Though Buddhism declined and died as a creed in the land of its birth after some centuries, its spread abroad make severy interesting reading. nearly three hundred years before Christ, Asoka, at the instruction of the Arhat Moggaliputta Tissa, the president of the Third Buddhist Council, initiated a great spiritual movement in India. This he did, firstly, to counteract the evil effects of hatred, war and mutual antagonism and, secondly, to establish a true sense of goodwill and brotherhood among the people. The climax of this noble endeavour was reached when he, for the first time in the history of India and also perhaps of the world, sent able and wise missionaries abroad to various foreign countries, to preach the Dhamma, 'for the good and welfare of the many. 9

According to the early Buddhist records found in the Mahavamsa, the great chronicle of Ceylon, and Sasana Vamas, the chronicle of Sasana (dispensation of the Buddha) of burma, the great Buddhist Emperor had despatched, 'Dhammadutas', messengers of the Dhamma, to nine countries. These countries are named below with the names of the respective missionaries sent:-

1. Gandhara and Kashmir including modern Afghanistan and some Central Asian countries, under the leadership of Arhat Majjhantika with a group of monks.
2. Yonaka (Ionian), including the Greco-Bactrian States, i.e., Syria, Egypt, under Arhat Maharaskshita and a group of monks.
3. China, including the five Himalayan countries of Nepal, Tibet, Bhot, etc., under Arhat Majjhima and five other elders.
4. Suvana Bhumi, burma, under Arhat Sona and Uttara, The neighboring countries of Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, also hold a similar tradition.
5. Ceylon, under Arhat mahinda and five other monks.

6. Mahinsakamandala, Mysore and North Manara including the Deccan States of Hyderabad, under Arhat Mahadeva and some elders.
7. Maharattha, Maharashtra in Madhya Bharat and Bombay states, under Arhat Maha Dhammarakkhita and some elders.
8. Vanavasi, the southern part of India including the various Tamil, Telugu and Malabar states, under Arhat Rakhita and a group of monks.
9. Aprantaka, Western India including Sindh, Baluchistan and Saurashtra, under the Arhat Yona (Yayana i.e. Greek) Dhammarakki and some monks. 10

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