Buddhism and Swami Vivekananda's Thought for the West: A Realistic Approach

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Abstract

Buddhism is a religion that was founded by Siddhartha Gautama ("The Buddha") more than 2,560 years ago in India. With about 480 million followers, scholars consider Buddhism one of the major world religions. The religion has historically been most prominent in East and Southeast Asia, but its influence is growing in the West. Many Buddhist ideas and philosophies overlap with those of other faiths.

Keywords: Buddhism, Swami Vivekananda's Thought, Approach

Introduction

Buddhism in Southeast Asia includes a variety of traditions of Buddhism including two main traditions: *Mahāyāna* Buddhism and *Theravāda* Buddhism. Historically, *Mahāyāna* Buddhism had a prominent position in this region, but in modern times most countries follow the *Theravāda* tradition. Southeast Asian countries with a *Theravāda* Buddhist majority are Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Theravada Buddhism spread from India to Sri Lanka then into the region as outlined above, and primarily took hold in the modern states of Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Southern Vietnam. Mahayana Buddhism is thought to have spread from both China and India during the first and second century into Southeast Asia.

A wave of conversion began, and Buddhism spread not only through India, but

also internationally. Ceylon, Burma, Nepal, Tibet, central Asia, China, and Japan are just some of the regions where the Middle Path was widely accepted. A Northern route was established from the 1st century CE through Central Asia, Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam, in which Mahayana Buddhism prevailed. A Southern route, where Theravada Buddhism dominated, went through Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.

Currently, there are approximately 195-210 million Buddhists in Southeast Asia, making it the second largest religion in the region, after Islam. Approximately 36 to 38% of the global Buddhist population resides in Southeast Asia. The following is a list of Southeast Asian countries from most to least adherents of Buddhism as a percent of the population.

• **Thailand** has the largest number of Buddhists with approximately 95% of its population of 67 million adhering to Buddhism, placing it at around 63.75 million.

• **Myanmar** has around 48 million Buddhists, with 89% of its 54 million citizens practicing Theravada Buddhism. Around 1% of the population, mainly the Chinese, practices Mahayana Buddhism alongside Taoism, but is strongly influenced by Theravada Buddhism.

• **Vietnam** may have a large number of Buddhists, but the Communist government under-reports the religious adherence of its citizens. It has around 44 million Buddhists, around half its population. The majority of Vietnamese people practice Mahayana Buddhism due to the large amount of Chinese influence.

• **Cambodia** has 95% of its total population adheres to Theravada Buddhism, placing its Buddhist population at around 14 million, which mark as one of the World's highest Buddhist nations by percentage. By the end of 2018, there are 4,877 Buddhist temples (Wat) accommodating 69,700 Buddhist monks that play the important role to maintain the existence of Buddhism and preserve Buddhist culture in Cambodia.

• **Malaysia** has about 21% of its citizens, mainly ethnic Chinese, with significant numbers of ethnic Thais, Khmers, Sinhalese and migrant workers, practicing Buddhism. The Chinese mainly practice Mahayana Buddhism, but due to the efforts of Sinhalese monks as well as historical links with Thailand, Theravada also enjoys a significant following.

• **Laos** has around 5 million Buddhists, who form roughly 70% of its population.

• **Indonesia** has around 4.76 million Buddhists (2% of its population), mainly amongst its Chinese population. Most Indonesian Buddhists adhere to Theravada Buddhism, mainly of the Thai tradition.

• **Singapore** has around 2 million Buddhists, forming around 33% of their populations respectively. Singapore has the most vibrant Buddhist scene with all three major traditions having large followings. Mahayana Buddhism has the largest presence amongst the Chinese, while many immigrants from countries such as Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka practice Theravada Buddhism.

• **Philippines** have around less than 0.1% of the total population.

• **Brunei**, which has the smallest population in Southeast Asia, has around 14% of its citizens and a significant migrant worker population adhering to Buddhism, at around 65,500.

In the early centuries of the Common Era, the people in various parts of Southeast Asia came to know of Buddhism as a result of increased contact with the Indian merchants who had come to the region for trade and business. These merchants not only established trading stations in Southeast Asia, but also brought their religions and cultures with them. Under their influence, the local people began to practice a mixture of Buddhism and Hinduism, while retaining at the same time many of their different old beliefs and positive traditional customs.

Buddhism was reintroduced to the region only in the nineteenth century, with the arrival of the Chinese, Sri Lankans and other immigrants who were Buddhists.

However, Lord Buddha's most important teachings, known as The Four Noble Truths, are essential to understanding the religion. Buddhists embrace the concepts of karma (the law of cause and effect) and reincarnation (the continuous cycle of rebirth). Buddhist monks, or bhikkhus, follow a strict code of conduct, which includes celibacy.

The vast Buddhist literature is full of Gautam Buddha's moral teachings. If the moral value of the people will not go up, then the society will not progress properly. The people will not exist in the society with peace, happiness and true prosperity. Hence, to uplift the moral value of the people, Lord Buddha rightly advised to follow the path of Ahimsā, Satya and Sat Karma. He always advised his disciples to follow the path of Ahimsā, i.e. non-violence. Hence, he says: "he is not an ascetic (Samana) who causes grief to others.

Na hi pravajjito paropaghaati samono
bhavati param vihedamaanah/

Lord Buddha always stressed to follow the path of Truth. Hence, he says: "*Satyam bhane kujjheyya*" -- One should speak the Truth and leave anger.

The Nirvana constitutes the highest and ultimate goal of all Buddhist aspirations. The word *Nirvāna* means 'blowing out'. It is the dissolution of the five skandhas. It is the cessation of all activities and of all becoming (*bhavanirodha*). It is said to be the Supreme and indestructible state, which gives happiness here and hereafter. So it is known as the 'highest bliss'. In the early Buddhism, however, there are passages, which indicated that Nirvana means eternal and exalted beatitude. The Dhammapada says:

ārogya parama laabhā santutthi paramam dhanam/
vissāāma paramā jāti nibbānam paramam sukham//

Buddhism always stressed on Peace, Non-violence & Happiness. So that one can leave peacefully in the World. Regarding true happiness Lord Buddha says:

Natthi āgasamo aggi, natthi dosasamo kali /
Natthi khandhā-samā dukkhā nathi santiparam sukham//

Thus, Buddhism has a major impact in Southeast Asian countries since last 1000 years. The people of Southeast countries really love and follow Buddha's teachings in a very positive way for seeking mental peace and universal brotherhood.

Swami Vivekananda was a great spiritual monk, a chief disciple of the 19th-century great spiritual mystic Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. He was a key figure in the introduction of the Indian philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga to the Western world and is credited with raising interfaith awareness.

Swami Vivekananda is an iconic figure in modern Indian history ranking with the greatest position. He has provided inspirations to the countless generations of Indian. His great messages delivered at the end of 19th Century are positive, universal and inspirational. He believed in India's ability to guide and lead. He said: "When the real history of India will be unearthed, it will be proved that, as in matters of religion, so in fine arts, India is the primal Guru of the whole world".

Swami Vivekananda emphasised the need to harmonise the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran. He said that practical Advaitism looks upon and behaves with all humankind as one's own soul. Swamiji wrote, "I see in my mind's eye the future-perfect India rising

out of this chaos and strife, glorious and invincible, with Vedanta brain and Islam body."

Swami Vivekananda was a great spiritual leader and was well versed in Sanskrit language. According to the authoritative biography published by the Ramakrishna Mission, Narendranath learned from his mother, before he began to attend school, the Bengali alphabet and the First Book of English by Pyari Charan Sarkar. But the most important part of his education in early childhood was being taught by a senior relative Nrisimha Datta. The teacher Nrisimha taught him to memorize the Sanskrit grammar Mugdhabodha, some passages from the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata as well as some Vedic hymns to gods in Sanskrit. Besides, Swamiji has authoritative knowledge in Advaita Vedānta Philosophy. The message of Swami Vivekananda was the message of Vedānta — a spiritual teaching that again and again saved India during periods of decline and crisis.

Swami Adi-swarananda summed up the great life and mission of Swamiji first explaining Vedānta: "Its four cardinal points are non-duality of the Godhead, divinity of the soul, oneness of existence, and harmony of religions. Religion, in the light of Vedānta, is the manifestation of the divinity already in man. This spiritual harmony is to be realized by deepening our spiritual consciousness. The message was timely and powerful.

The message was powerful not because of its dialectical superiority or philosophical subtlety, but because of the personality of Swami Vivekananda. The message was an ancient one, but it bore a fire of conviction that was new. One familiar with the life of Swami Vivekananda will recall that his Master, Sri Ramakrishna, saw in him the power and potentiality of a great world teacher. Before the Master passed away, he prophesied: "Narendra (Swami Vivekananda) will teach others ..... Very soon he will shake the world by his intellectual and spiritual powers."

Swami Vivekananda pronounced that Vedānta is the future religion of mankind. With his prophetic vision, he predicted that modern science and technology and new education system would break down the barriers between nations and prepare the ground for the fulfilment of the age-old dream of one united World, a democratic world. But one world is possible only when there is one common Soul of humanity that transcends the limitations of race, culture, and religious denominations.

Swami Vivekananda presents before humanity the World-Soul of Vedānta, the

non-dual, nameless and formless all-pervading Pure Spirit that alone can make the dream of one world a reality. He foresaw a new World order in which science and religion would co-operate, mysticism would combine with humanism and spiritual harmony would replace religious dissension.

Swami Vivekananda's essential message is of unity of all religions:

Swami Vivekananda said, "After so much *tapasyā* and austerity, I've known that the highest truth is this: He is present in all beings. These are all the manifested forms of Him. There is no other God to seek for. He alone is worshipping God who serves all beings."

"Humankind ought to be taught that religions are but the varied expressions of the religion which is oneness, so that each may choose the path that suits him best."

"If you go below the surface, you find that unity between man and man, between races and races, high and low, rich and poor, gods and men, and men and animals. If you go deep enough, all will be seen as only variation of the one, and he who has attained to this conception of Oneness has no more delusion."

These are the basic values of unity of all human beings and equal concern for all forms of life which form the base of Vivekananda's message to the world. So how it is that religious fanatics and communal elements have been misusing the teachings of Swamiji? This is a question we must ask, because Swamiji's warning against religious fanaticism is very firm and clear.

Swami Vivekananda's other messages for the World are as follows:

Unity is strength

Avoid all kind of splitting people on belief, caste, etc. This is to be avoided at all cost. Unity that should be the only mantra. We cannot correct the past. Swami Vivekananda's message become perfectly suitable; this is to adopt our Vedic message:

Saha nāvavatu, saha nau bhunaktu,
saha vīryaṁ karavaavahai, tejasvi nāvadhītamastu mā vidviṣā vahai / /

May we be protected together,

May we be nourished together,

May we work together with great vigour,

May our study be filled with brilliance and light.

May there be no discord between us.

Sarve bhavanthu sukhina: .....existing together, working together, sharing the results and reward together..... by each of us.

Self-Belief: Have faith in yourselves. Great convictions are the mothers of great deeds". Thus, said Swami Vivekananda. Swamiji rightly said, this should be taught to all from the childhood.

Do not hate any one: Love ourselves as well others. I fully agree with Swamiji in this concept that one should love others, as it is told that: "Vayam sarve Amritasya putra". Let us not show any difference towards any one rich or poor, good looking or bad looking, black or white.

Be Strong Always: This is really very effective for all time quotes by Swamiji. As an Individual we need to be strong physically and mentally so that we can face any crisis.

Help others: If we accumulate all wealth and do not help the needy, what is the use of it? Help the needy whoever it may be. Sacrifice for others as a real friend. The Whole World is being governed by the GOD. So, we must leave something for others benefit. As it is rightly said in the *Īśa **Upaniṣad*** as:

Īśā vāsyaṁ idaṁ sarvaṁ yat kiñca jagatyāṁ jagat /
tena tyaktena bhuñjīthā mā gṛdhaḥ kasyasvid dhanam //

It means, everything animate or inanimate, that is within the universe is controlled and owned by the Lord. One should therefore accept only those things necessary for himself, which are set aside as his quota, and one should not accept other things, knowing well to whom they belong.

Let us bring back the gap between rich and poor. We have many persons in India with five or six houses in their name, whereas at the same time, we have people with no house.

Arise and Awake

For the unity of the people, Swami ji emphasized that we have miles to go, as a Nation. Let us unite and focus on goal. India has achieved a lot in various fields, like, Science, technology, computer science, cleanliness, but let us unite and go ahead. Swami Vivekananda was highly inspired by the following Upanishadic Mantra. The

thought of the Upanishad is applicable even today for the benefit of the people of the whole World today.

Uttiṣṭhata Jāgrata Prāpya Varānnibodhata /
Kṣurasya Dhārā Niśitā Duratyayā durgaṁ
Pathaḥ tat kavayo Vadanti / /

It means, arise, awake, find out the great ones and learn of them; for sharp as a razor's edge, hard to traverse, difficult of going is that path, say the sages.

The inspirational verse was Swami Vivekananda's message to the people to get out of their hypnotized state of mind. The verse was meant as a call to his countrymen to awaken their "sleeping soul" and propagate the message of peace and blessings given by the "ancient Mother" to the world. "Awake" also denotes the awakening of one's real nature and the consequent ushering in of prosperity.

We are creators of our own destiny:

Now a day, people are afraid of taking responsibility or reluctant to do that. Stop this attitude. We always think that the power which may be in sky or somewhere else shall come and help us. Stop such believes, as all powers are within us. Sincerely work to get the success. We should perform our duty perfectly and always believe in pious act. Everything is possible through our positive effort. As said:

Udyamena hi siddhyanti kāryāṇi na manorathai /
Nahi śuptasya simhasya praviśati mukhe mṛgā //

It means, the work gets accomplished by putting positive effort, and certainly not by mere wishful thinking. Deer certainly do not enter a sleeping lion’s mouth. So, one has to put great effort for getting any good result.

Message to the youth:

• Swami ji said, I have faith in my country, and especially in the youth of my country. My hope is in you. With an immense amount of feeling and enthusiasm in the blood, will come heroes who will march from one corner of the earth to the other, preaching and

• The eternal spiritual truths of our forefathers. And this is the great work before you. Anything that makes you weak physically, intellectually and spiritually, reject as poison.

• It is character that cleaves its way through adamantine walls of difficulties.

• Character is repeated habits, and repeated habits alone can reform character.

• Purity, patience & perseverance are the three essentials of success and above all – Love.

• Even thinking of the least good of others gradually instils into the heart, the strength of a lion.

• Swami ji said: Who is Helping You, Don't Forget them.

Who is Loving you, Don't Hate them?

Who is believing you, Don't Cheat them?

Eliminate of Ego

Regarding Ego Swami ji said, we should identify it with our inner self. For achieving this, one will have to eliminate one's ego, ignorance and all other false identification, which stand in the way. Meditation, fortified by moral purity and passion for truth, helps man to leave behind the body, the senses, the ego which are perishable. He thus realizes his immortal divine self, which is of the nature of infinite existence, infinite knowledge and infinite bliss (*Aham karomi iti vṛthā abhimāna*).

Swami Vivekananda's messages delivered at the end of 19th Century are positive, universal and inspirational. He believed in India's ability to guide and lead. He said: "When the real history of India will be unearthed, it will be proved that, as in matters of religion, so in fine arts, India is the primal Guru of the whole world".

Swami Vivekananda talked about Gautam Buddha ---"I am the servant of the servants of the servants of Buddha. Who was there ever like him? — the Lord — who never performed one action for himself — with a heart that embraced the whole world! So full of pity that he — prince and monk — would give his life to save a little goat! so, loving that he sacrificed himself to the hunger of a tigress! — to the hospitality of a pariah and blessed him! And he came into my room when I was a boy, and I fell at his feet! For I knew it was the Lord Himself!".

Conclusion

This study will definitely enhance cooperation in the field of research and culture between India and its neighboring countries of Southeast Asian considering the impact

of Swami Vivekananda and Gautam Buddha in future.

Besides, it can be said that both Lord Buddha and Swami Vivekananda are known as the great Noble & spiritual teachers of the human mankind. These two great human personalities are considered as the true incarnations of God. Besides, both Lord Buddha and Swami Vivekananda were great Mahapurusas (Supreme Divine characters) of India. Their Noble and valuable advices are more relevant today for World peace and Universal brotherhood. Hence, we must follow their foot prints. As said: *Mahājano jena gatasya panthā.*

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