

A Bid-adieu to the Buddhist Philosophy, Praxis and Preaching: Experiences at Rumtek

Jenia Mukherjee*

Abstract

This article tries to narrate the Buddhist encounter with the modernist-globalist trends. To depict this encounter it critically reflects that though Buddhism practiced in several monasteries of different parts of the world like: Malaysia, Thailand, Japan, etc. could adjust and adapt it with the current changes, making the doctrines more relevant and practical, but on the contrary, Rumtek monastery at Sikkim suffered the fate of decline. Why, when, and how did this occur? The study reveals these aspects based upon personal experiences of the site (Rumtek) and positioning the past and present of the monastery within the broader framework of the history of Buddhism from the ancient time through the medieval period to the modern age.

Introduction

‘The Cup’ by Khyentse Norbu, a Tibetan lama with the famous director Bernardo Bertolucci shows a group of young monks who, notwithstanding their monastic robes and shared heads are more eager to watch an important soccer match on television than to adhere to the strict training program that does not allow for secular distraction. Quite synonymous was the experience when Jimmy, a Tibetan monk of twenty years, studying and practising religion for seven years at the exinious Rumtek monastery, being unable to answer some of the important questions on the tenets of Buddhism, when listened that we were tourists from Kolkata on our educational tour in Sikkim, could quickly associate our residence with the land of Sourav Ganguly, the cricketer of international repute. Is not this a radical departure and the Buddhist encounter with the modernist-globalist trends?

Theoretical Framework

The architectural vigour, the isolationism surrounding Rumtek, the Karma Shri Nalanda Institute opposite to it, have all turned to but physical realities. The pure, archaic practice of Buddhism without

* Assistant Professor, Institute of Development Studies Kolkata, India.

contamination and fragmentation is not the order of the day. Why is this 'shift' or 'decline' from the original tenets of Buddhism? What could be a burning symbol of learning stands as a mere tourist spot of attraction today! This area needs to be explored with focus on the socio-political history of Rumtek from the early date of its foundation. This is the theoretical framework on which the study is based with an emphasis on the 'theory of decline' using comparative methodology.

A very interesting and comparative study between the political situation of Vietnam and Sikkim and its impact on Buddhism can be made. In Vietnam the 'theory of decline' owes more to the prejudices of court-based Confucian literati and state sponsored Zen fundamentalism. However, the 1930s saw a period of revitalization and we find modern attempts to organize Buddhism on a national basis. Contrarily enough, in Sikkim during the first decade of the foundation of Rumtek monastery local patronage was available to a large extent. But with Sikkim's annexation of India, the presence of huge military – weary of the Chinese government and the politics regarding the hold of power in the Karmapa Charitable Trust after the death of 16th Karmapa in 1980s as were major barriers for the monastery to grow into an important centre of culture.

Dr. Ananda W. P. Guruge's remark¹ that Buddhism has survived schism and reformation besides meeting the challenges of diverse religious and philosophical system is not the truest part of the story. In the history of Buddhism, the growth of 'Mahayana' and the concept of 'Bodhisatva' were gradual. The 'Mahayana' (owing its origin from the 'Mahasanghika' and the 'Sarvastivada' schools) with its own pantheon of Buddhas, Bodhisatvas and Taras, dogmas and sites was a far cry from the simple and straight-forward discipline of life, and self-renunciation which the Buddha originally preached.

Again royal patronage has always played a major role in the efflorescence and continuity of the Buddhist doctrine in a particular state. Ian Harris² opines that any presentation of Buddhism (or Buddhist monastic institution) as a tradition that focuses on its quietistic, meditation-oriented dimension alone will be one-sided and the idea that religion and politics are mutually exclusive categories do not hold ground today. Jerrold Schecter³ argues that the prevailing political culture and situation in some countries of Asia has prevented Buddhism from flourishing to any great extent. Royal or state patronage and favorable

¹ Ananda W. P. Guruge, *Buddhism: The Religion and Its Culture* (2nd ed. Colombo, Sri Lanka: World Fellowship of Buddhists, Dharmaduta Activities Committee, 1984)

² Ian Harris (edited) *Buddhism and Politics in 20th c. Asia* (Continuum, 1999)

³ Jerrold Schecter, *The New Face of Buddha: The Fusion of Religion And Politics in Contemporary Buddhism*, (New York: Coward-McCann, 1967)

political circumstances are directly proportional to the growing vigour of Buddhist advancement. Bruce Matthews shows how the U Nu Khit (era) made Buddhism a state religion and popularized its doctrines in Myanmar.⁴ In recent days Myanmar, the impact of some foreign NGOs, who regard Buddhism as the only effective non-government national network, has led to the rise in Buddhist social and environmental activism. Again, Hiroko Kawanami⁵ depicts how Buddhism has been patronized by the Japanese state and has played a major role as a legitimator of political power through much of its history.

Hence, the 'theory of decline' is not to be lopsided and there can be multi-faceted interpretations drawing from the historical pages of the early rise and development of Buddhism.

Description and Analysis

Rumtek monastery was originally built by the 9th Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje in 1740. After the communist invasion of Tibet, the 16th Karmapa fled from Tibet in 1959 to Bhutan. The 16th Gyalwa Karmapa then received a formal invitation from the Choegyal Tashi Namgyal (Dharma King) of Sikkim. The Karmapa decided to rebuild Rumtek and had a vision to take full responsibility for the preservation and revitalization of Tibetan Buddhist teachings in general and Kagyu lineage in particular. On the Tibetan New Year's Day (Losar) in 1966, the 16th Karmapa officially inaugurated the new seat called the Dharmachakra Centre, a place of erudition and spiritual accomplishment, the seat of the glorious Karmapa.

Looking at the evolution of Buddhism from the historical perspective we find that around 8th century A.D. in the eastern part of India, namely Bihar and Bengal the 'Vajrayana' or 'Mantrayana' ('the Vehicle of Spells') form of Buddhism emerged. Known generally as 'Tantric Buddhism', it assigned much importance to sexual mysticism, magical cults and sacramental worship. The concept of Taras or female partners associated with Bodhisattvas gave rise to the sexual mysticism which sought to elevate sexual union to the level of an act of worship and a symbol of spiritual celebration. The Vajrayanism found its way to Nepal, Tibet and other Himalayan kingdoms (Sikkim) and Mongolia. Mingling with the popular beliefs and older religions of the region the Vajrayana passed through a series of reform especially pertaining to the sexual

⁴ Bruce Matthews, 'The Legacy of Tradition and Authority: Buddhism and the Nation in Myanmar' in Ian Harris (edited), *Buddhism and Politics in 20th c. Asia*, ibid, pp. 26-53

⁵ Hiroko Kawanami, 'Japanese Nationalism and the Universal Dharma' in Ian Harris (edited), *Buddhism and Politics in 20th c. Asia*, ibid, pp. 105 - 126

elements imported from Tantrism. It is the existing form of Buddhism today at the Rumtek monastery in Sikkim. Here, we find tremendous focus on the ritual art of Tantric Buddhism and monastic discipline. The monks memorize important sadhanas of the Vajrayana practice – 30 individual texts. Rumtek focuses on all the tantric practices with a strong emphasis on the mother tantra teachings such as: Vajrayogini, Chakrasamvara, etc. and Nyingma tantric practices: Guru Rinpoche practice, Vajrakilaya, etc.

The dilution of the original tenets and practices of Buddhism, as evident from the development of the Mahayanism and Vajrayanism, sapped the vigour, the freshness and strength of early Buddhism. As Buddhism adjusted itself to the beliefs and rites of different areas to which it spread, its identity and exclusiveness began to diminish. The personal interviews of Jimmy and Shering (18 years old), the two Tibetan lamas at Rumtek on their daily activities were shocking; it revealed a picture of complete departure from the ‘Sangha’ life instituted by the Lord Himself which emphasized on education and other productive enterprises. Whether in sermons or in expositions, dialogues and debates, the Buddha resorted to a series of standard educational practices. He emphasized on both knowledge and reality. The Buddha organized the Sangha to be a learning society in which the members spent their life in learning and practicing what they learnt, teaching others, engaging in debates and discussions to clarify concepts, memorizing sermons and utterances of the Buddha and transmitting them by word for preservation, developing commentaries and winning more and more members who would similarly continue a life long learning process. The Buddhist literature ascribes to Moggallana one of the earliest recorded incidents when diagrammatic representation was utilized to reinforce and enrich a lesson. This has been compared to the use of “visual aids” in imparting modern education.⁶

Looking into the history of the evolution of the Buddhist monastery we find that, through a gradual process, it became an educational institution and essentially a center of learning. In the growth of this monastic system of education, a number of significant principles appear to have operated. The monks and nuns were expected to have mastered a minimum quantum of the Buddha’s teaching. In the Bhabra Edict, Asoka recommended a set of seven texts for study. Even today in the Buddhist tradition of Srilanka, a monk is tested for his knowledge of basic text of Canon before ordination is granted. The senior monks and nuns were required to engage themselves regularly in scholarly discussions to

⁶ The Engaged Buddhists of the present day and especially Dalai Lama reach a bigger audience through networking and online conferences.

deepen their knowledge and understanding and to guide their practices and at the same time educating new recruits and novices. The monasteries were to be the center for formal and informal education of the laity, living in the vicinity.

In the current search to remedies to the widespread educational maladies, 25 centuries of Buddhist experience should certainly be examined for possible clues and guidelines. The monasteries should uphold those ideas. There is enough evidence of an effort in reviving the revival of the formal educational role of the monastery in different countries of Asia. Let us look into the three following representative examples:

- Srilanka saw the rise of the Pirivena system in 1873 and 1875. The Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara Pirivenas were established in those years by Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Nayaka Maha Thera. The system today takes care of over 10,000 pupils including both clergy and laity.
- In Thailand, the regeneration of the traditional system of monastic education began under King Mongkut (Rama IV). In 1893 his son Prince Vajirananavaroros established the counterpart of a Pirivena under the name Mahamakut Raja Vidyalaya. By 1946 it was elevated to the level of a university.
- In Japan, the Buddhists followed the path of Enryo Inouye, who besides writing the influential book 'Bukko-Katsu-Ron' in 1890 founded his own college of Buddhist philosophy. It served as a model in the re-organization of Buddhist schools and colleges.

But alas! Even a miniscule of that procedure does not exist at Rumtek where the lamas spend their whole life memorizing only 30 lines from an age old text handed over to them from generation to generation. In the monastic institutions there is space for a fair amount of woodwork, masonry and metal-work, handling of local materials for ornamental purposes. Skills pertaining to painting, paper and butter sculpture and other artistic creations have opportunities for development. The Buddhists had a rich history of employing sculpture and painting as a means of communication. This is borne out by the symbolism that evolved very early in Buddhist art. Particularly in Srilanka and Burma, one would be amazed to find out the continuing interest in creating more and more centers with attractive representations of Buddhist themes in both sculpture and painting along with 'calligraphy'. But the daily activities and the routine of the monks at Rumtek does not corroborate with these aesthetic and daily-life activities. This is evident when lama Lodu says,

“Mostly we memorized texts and practiced the rituals for upcoming events at the monastery, such as the 10 day Mahakala and 12 day Bardo rituals, etc. I would only go to classes for a couple of hours in the morning and evening, and now spent the greater part of the day helping the cook master in the big kitchen, cleaning the puja halls and shrines tending the vegetable garden, gathering wood from jungle, hauling water, and doing whatever else I was asked. Such things consume your time and leave little opportunity for study and develop.”

We all know that music is another important area that received much encouragement from the Buddhist monastic institutions. When we entered the palatial building of Rumtek we saw monks engaged in their traditional mode of playing flute and drums during their offering to the God and Goddesses. But that was not of much high standard, free from drudgery to subscribe to the development of professional artists, musicians, dancers and dramatists. So much emphasis on trivial matters and tantric ceremonies, lack of deployment of expertise ombudsmen, absence of curiosity and attraction towards material life among the lamas prevented culture to flourish in Rumtek.

Again, in today’s world of universal environmental degradation, we can proceed forward to find river-mouths in the eco-friendly doctrines of Buddhism. Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brown remark, “Buddhism can be described as ecological religion or religious ecology.”⁷ Several suttas from Pali canons show that early Buddhism believes in a close relationship between human morality and natural environment. This idea has systematized the theory of the five natural laws (‘panca niyamadhamma’) in the later commentaries. According to this theory, in the cosmos there are five natural laws of forces at work:

- Utuniyama – the season-law
- bijaniyama – the seed-law
- cittaniyama – the mind-law
- kammaniyama – the action-law
- dhammaniyama – the phenomenal universal law

At several corners of the earth the Buddhist monasteries and monks are still continuing their age-old, time-immemorial tradition of preserving nature contributing towards ‘sustainable development’ in the real sense of the term. In this context mention may be made of Ajahn Pongsak, a forest monk in northern Thailand who began working with the villagers of the Mae Soi Valley since 1980s and reforested and irrigated the rapidly

⁷ Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brown (edited), *Buddhism and Ecology*, (London: Cassell Publishers Limited, 1992) Introduction, p. viii

desertifying valley ringed with opium plantations. Ajahn's work has expanded to nation-wide environmental education for other monks and an association of 'green' monks who co-operate in their work to protect their local environments, has been established.

But Rumtek was far away from these innovative practices. The presence of two or three monks at the hall-room during our visit to the premise and a melancholic isolationism was painstaking. From what they said to us we found their deep involvement in personal gains and experience of livelihood, distant from the society and community as a whole. They remained aloof from communitarian practices and development programmes quite in contrast to the Ceylonese 'Sarvodaya Movement' and 'Engaged Buddhism' being so much popularized by Dalai Lama and others significant figures like: Cheng Yen, Sulak Sivaraksa, Ahangamage T. Ariyaratana, Joanna Macy and Kenneth Kraft.⁸

In Buddhism, Sangha (monastery) is a community that practices harmony and awareness. It needs to survive its encounter against globalization and adapt itself to the globalist trends by re-envisioning its productive and positive philosophy as it not only has a spiritual orientation but also economic, environmental and social ethics in contradiction to Max Weber's thesis that Buddhism with its emphasis on the attainment of 'nirvana' lacks in normative specificity with regard to social and economic life.⁹ Rumtek as a center of Buddhist ideology should gear up to participate in the activities of the wider world coming out from the ram shackles of its narrowness. It has to learn much from 'Engaged Buddhism', a term coined by the Vietnamese monk and social activist Thich Nhat Hanh in 1963. 'Engaged Buddhism' centers on the concept of world engagement than world abandonment.¹⁰ By being engaged with the greater society the contemporary engaged Buddhists have adopted new methods and styles to fight against the current problems of environmental degradation, gender inequality, violence, etc. They often use internet, videos etc. and juxtapose their views in on-line conferences to reach out to the broader mass.¹¹ Thus, these engaged Buddhists work together to liberate society and they can do this easily as society has also liberated Buddhism from its past restrictions.¹² In this

⁸ Donald. K. Swearer, 'Buddhism and Ecology: Challenge and Promise' in 'Earth Ethics', Washington, vol. 10, no. 1, Fall 1998, p. 22

⁹ Max Weber, 'The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism', New York, 1958

¹⁰ Bharati Puri, 'Engaged Buddhism: The Dalai Lama's Worldview', Oxford, 2006, p. 1

¹¹ The preaching of Dalai Lama and his activities in Tibet is significant in this context.

¹² Bharati Puri, *ibid*, p. 9

way, Engaged Buddhism has become the mutual liberation of self and others, in a global and interactive context.¹³

Conclusion

Rumtek has to learn a lot from these examples. It has an ideal geographical location for the monks to get themselves engaged in productive enterprises. However government initiative is required to transform Rumtek into a proper Buddhist centre of learning and practice. Embracing such a religion which has every potentiality to stand back against aggressive culture and consider the alternatives of industrialization, environmental degradation and globalization, Rumtek also needs to cultivate its working space to ensure its vitality not as a mere spot of tourist attraction, but as a monastic institution in the truest sense of the term.

In 1753, the French philosopher Diderot wrote,

“Having strayed into an immense forest during the night, I have only a small light to guide me. I come across a stranger who says to me: ‘My friend, blow off your candle in order the better to find your way.’”

This way had already been shown by the ancestral monks and modified by the contemporary engaged Buddhists keeping in tune with the needs of the present; Rumtek needs to walk on its path instead of paving a bid-adieu to it.

¹³ David W. Chappell, ‘Engaged Buddhists in a Global Society: Who is Being Liberated?’ in Sulak Sivaraksa, Pipob Udomittipong and Chris Walker edited, ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism for the New Millenium: Essays in Honour of the Ven. Phra Dhammapitaka (Bhikku P.A. Payutto) On His 60th Birthday Anniversary’, Bangkok: Sathikoses-Nagapradipa Foundation and Foundation for Children, May 12, 2542, 1999, p. 76