

# **Swami Vivekananda's Addresses on Buddha in America: A Fillip to the Revival of Buddhism in India**

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**S**WAMI VIVEKANANDA WAS BORN in Calcutta at a time when the Buddha and Buddhism had been almost forgotten in the city, then capital of British India. He was born into a Kayastha family that had Shiva and Vishnu as its main deities. His parents received him as a blessing from Shiva as a result of his mother Bhuvanewari Devi's prayers to Lord Vishvanath. His pet name was Bile, short for Viswanath. It was strange that Narendranath, his pre-monastic name, had a vision of the Buddha when meditating in his teens. He later told Swami Saradananda: 'I have seen many monks, but never have I seen such an extraordinary expression on any other face. That face has been indelibly printed on my heart. ... very often I think that I had the good fortune of seeing Lord Buddha that day.'<sup>1</sup>

How did Swamiji recognise the Buddha when he had the vision in the early years of the last quarter of the nineteenth century? Pramatha Chaudhuri writes in his preface to the book *Buddha Dharma* by Satyendra Nath Thakur, first published in 1901:

'I take refuge in Buddha, I take refuge in Dhamma, I take refuge in Sangha'—in ancient India millions chanted these words while embracing Buddhism. But in time this great Indian religion vanished from India. About half-a-century ago, even one among a million Indians could not tell who Buddha was, what

his religion was, and what a Buddhist Sangha was, because even the memory of the *trisharanams* or the three refuges perished from this land where Buddhism originated.<sup>2</sup>

With no active preaching of Buddhism and no easy access to current or ancient scholarly works on Buddhism, it appears out of the ordinary that Swamiji had a spiritual vision of the Buddha. When his guru, Sri Ramakrishna was suffering from cancer at Kashipur, Narendranath organised his constant care and nursing by his young ascetic brother disciples, aged between sixteen and twenty-two. One day in April 1886, Narendranath along with a few brother disciples like Kali, later Swami Abhedananda, and Tarak, later Swami Shivananda, entered into an intense spiritual discussion about the Buddha. Narendranath became so ecstatic about Buddha that he decided to visit Bodh Gaya along with Kali and Tarak without informing anybody. They visited Bodh Gaya and meditated under the Bodhi tree. They spent three days and nights there and took bath in the Niranjana River. That Narendranath became obsessed with the Buddha was evident from many incidents that took place there.

Thereafter Narendranath became Swami Vivekananda and visited Chicago in 1893 to address the Parliament of Religions. On the penultimate day of the Parliament, Swamiji delivered a lecture exclusively on the Buddha. To

him, the Buddha and Buddhism were an integral part of Indian philosophy, religion, and culture. He chose a very significant title for the lecture: 'Buddhism, the Fulfilment of Hinduism'. And he began the lecture with great conviction: 'I am not a Buddhist, as you have heard and yet I am. If China, or Japan, or Ceylon follow the teachings of the Great Master, India worships him as God incarnate on earth.'<sup>3</sup>

Swamiji's observations in the lecture certainly contributed to Buddhism's revival and its spreading around the world. His assessment of the Buddha re-established the Buddha's eminence and message in the perspective of India's religious history: 'Again, I repeat, Shākya Muni came not to destroy, but he was the fulfilment, the logical conclusion, the logical development of the religion of the Hindus' (ibid.).

Swamiji rightly emphasised Buddha's humanitarian approach and extraordinary breadth of heart. He pointed out the Buddha's generosity to the poor and downtrodden and his special care for the suffering masses: 'The great glory of the Master lay in his wonderful sympathy for everybody, especially for the ignorant and the poor. ... Some of Buddha's Brahmin disciples wanted to translate his teachings into Sanskrit, but he distinctly told them, "I am for the poor, for the people; let me speak in the tongue of the people." And so to this day the great bulk of his teachings are in the vernacular of that day in India' (1.22).

Swamiji referred to Pali as the language of the Buddha's teachings. Swamiji was a sage extraordinary, combining the greatness of a scholar and an orator. That is why his utterances on the Buddha in the 1890s were so insightful, presenting the Buddha's greatness, though his sculptures and scriptures were buried in India. Swamiji unearthed the Buddha and his teachings and pioneered the revival of Buddhism in India and the West.

On 21 October 1894, Swamiji delivered

another lecture on Buddha at the Lyceum Theatre in Baltimore. The *Baltimore American* reported Swamiji having said, 'Buddha seems to have been the only prophet who did everything for others and absolutely nothing for himself. He gave up his home and all the enjoyments of life to spend his days in search of the medicine for the terrible disease of human misery' (2.496).

Swamiji stressed that the Buddha's religion was meant not only for those who adopted Buddhism but for the entire world. He thus highlighted the universality of the Buddha's teachings, which led to people in the West taking keen interest in the message of the Buddha. In February-March 1894, Swamiji delivered another lecture on the Buddha in Detroit. Swamiji was very precise and succinct in his assessment of the Buddha and Buddhism:

It [Buddhism] was founded by a great man called Gautama, who became disgusted at the eternal metaphysical discussions of his day, and cumbrous rituals, and more especially with the caste system. Some people say that we are born to a certain state, and therefore we are superior to others who are not thus born. He was also against the tremendous priestcraft. He preached a religion in which there was no motive power, and was perfectly agnostic about metaphysics or theories about God. He was often asked if there was a God, and he answered, he did not know. When asked about right conduct, he would reply, 'Do good and be good' (4.135).

Swamiji's addresses on the Buddha delivered in several cities of America not only presented the essence of the Buddha's teachings, but also because of the depth of his understanding and admiration of the Buddha, Swamiji's addresses became not only informative and educative but also extremely evocative and incantatory. Undoubtedly Swamiji's words on the Buddha revived and spread the two-thousand-five-hundred-year-old message of the Buddha most effectively among thousands of listeners in the West:

He [the Buddha] was the only man who was bereft of all motive power. There were other great men who all said they were the Incarnations of God Himself, and that those who would believe in them would go to heaven. But what did Buddha say with his dying breath? 'None can help you; help yourself; work out your own salvation.' He said about himself, 'Buddha is the name of infinite knowledge, infinite as the sky; I, Gautama, have reached that state; you will all reach that too if you struggle for it.' Bereft of all motive power, he did not want to go to heaven, did not want money; he gave up his throne and everything else and went about begging his bread through the streets of India, preaching for the good of men and animals with heart as wide as the ocean (4.136).

Swamiji's keen interest in and deep devotion to the Buddha and his teachings never waned. During his second visit to America during 1899–1900, he delivered his longest lecture on the Buddha in San Francisco on 18 March 1900. By then he was well-known internationally and his statements received attention throughout the world. By 1900 Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) and Kripasaran Mahasthavir (1865–1926) had progressed considerably in their wholehearted endeavour to revive Buddhism, especially in and around Bengal.

In the beginning of his San Francisco speech on the Buddha, Swamiji proclaimed the overwhelming impact of Buddhism on the history of human civilisation: 'Buddhism is historically the most important religion ... because it was the most tremendous religious movement that the world ever saw, the most gigantic spiritual wave ever to burst upon human society. There is no civilisation on which its effect has not been felt in some way or other' (8.92).

Swamiji's impact on the world of ideas came mainly through his lectures. We may conclude that the revival of Buddhism in India is largely due to the revolutionary ideas Swamiji preached



*Swami Vivekananda and Anagarika Dharmapala in Chicago*

in the United States. He not only admired the Buddha and his teachings but also appreciated the missionary zeal of the Buddhists:

The followers of Buddha were most enthusiastic and very missionary in spirit. They were the first among the adherents of various religions not to remain content with the limited sphere of their Mother Church. They spread far and wide. They travelled east and west, north and south. They reached into darkest Tibet; they went into Persia, Asia Minor; they went into Russia, Poland, and many other countries of the Western world. They went into China, Korea, Japan, they went into Burma, Siam, the East Indies, and beyond. When Alexander the Great, through his military conquests, brought the Mediterranean world in contact with India, the wisdom of India at once found a channel



through which to spread over vast portions of Asia and Europe. Buddhist priests went out teaching among the different nations; and as they taught, superstition and priestcraft began to vanish like mist before the sun (*ibid.*).

Swamiji unambiguously assesses the Buddha's position in India: 'At the time Buddha was born, India was in need of a great spiritual leader, a prophet' (8.93). No portrait or assessment of the Buddha is more impressive and persuasive than that presented by Swamiji in the following address:

India was full of it [priestcraft] in Buddha's day. There were the masses of people, and they were debarred from all knowledge. If just a word of the Vedas entered the ears of a man, terrible punishment was visited upon him. The priests had made a secret of the Vedas—the Vedas that contained the spiritual truths discovered by the ancient Hindus!

At last one man could bear it no more. He had the brain, the power, and the heart—a heart as infinite as the broad sky. He felt how the masses were being led by the priests and how the priests were glorying in their power, and he wanted to do something about it. He did not want any power over any one, and he wanted to break the mental and spiritual bonds of men. His heart was large. The heart, many around us may have, and we also want to help others. But we do not have the brain; we do not know the ways and means by which help can be given. But this man had the brain to discover the means of breaking the bondages of souls. He learnt why men suffer, and he found the way out of suffering. He was a man of accomplishment, he worked everything out; he taught one and all without distinction and made them realise the peace of enlightenment. This was the man Buddha (8.96–7).

Swamiji brought alive the Buddha. He recaptured the greatness and uniqueness of the Buddha's contribution to the amelioration of humanity's suffering in the context of the social, political, economic, and spiritual situation in India that time:

Buddha cut through all these excrescences. He preached the most tremendous truths. ... one of his great messages was the equality of man. Men are all equal. No concession there to anybody! Buddha was the great preacher of equality. Every man and woman has the same right to attain spirituality—that was his teaching. The difference between the priests and other castes he abolished. Even the lowest were entitled to the highest attainments; he opened the door of Nirvāna to one and all. His teaching was bold even for India (97–8).

Swamiji considered Buddhism a universal religion and emphasised its universal aspects: 'Yet the religion of Buddha spread fast. It was because of the marvellous love which, for the first time in the history of humanity, overflowed a large heart and devoted itself to the service not only of all men but of all living things—a love which did not care for anything except to find a way of release from suffering for all beings' (8.99–100).

In 1900, at the turn of the century, Swamiji assessed the cause of the success of the Buddha's teachings that spread far and wide two thousand and five hundred years ago and highlighted their eternal appeal: 'It is a man that is to be loved. It was the first wave of intense love for all men—the first wave of true unadulterated wisdom—that, starting from India, inundated country after country, north, south, east, west' (8.100).

With his keen insight, Swamiji did not miss pointing out the boldness and novelty of the Buddha's teachings. Though forgotten in India for about six hundred years, the Buddha's teachings were revived through a clarion call by Swamiji:

This teacher wanted to make truth shine as truth. No softening, no compromise, no pandering to the priests, the powerful, the kings. No bowing before superstitious traditions, however hoary; no respect for forms and books just because they came down from the distant past. He rejected all scriptures, all forms of religious

practice. Even the very language, Sanskrit, in which religion had been traditionally taught in India, he rejected, so that his followers would not have any chance to imbibe the superstitions which were associated with it (8.100).

In his last address on the Buddha, Swamiji elaborated on all aspects of Buddhism, particularly the Buddha's legacy to mankind:

The life of Buddha has an especial appeal. All my life I have been very fond of Buddha. ... I have more veneration for that character than any other—that boldness, that fearlessness, and that tremendous love! He was born for the good of men. Others may seek God, others may seek truth for themselves; he did not even care to know truth for himself. He sought truth because people were in misery. How to help them, that was his only concern. Throughout his life, he never had a thought for himself. How can we ignorant, selfish, narrow-minded human beings ever understand the greatness of this man? (8.103-4).


Swamiji emphasised the spontaneous following that Buddha's teachings evoked year after year during his lifetime and after: 'Six hundred years before the birth of Christ, at the time when Buddha lived, the people of India must have had wonderful education. Extremely free-minded they must have been. Great masses followed him. Kings gave up their thrones; queens, gave up their thrones. People were able to appreciate and embrace his teachings, so revolutionary, so different from what they have been taught by the priests throughout the ages' (8.104).

Swamiji must have inspired Anagarika Dharmapala, a pioneer in the revival of Buddhism in India and abroad as is evident from Dharmapala's assessment of Swamiji's speeches in America. Dharmapala gave a lecture titled 'The World's Debt to Buddha' at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in September 1893 when he interacted with Swamiji after listening spellbound to his lectures. After returning to Calcutta, Dharmapala delivered

a lecture in the Minerva Theatre in appreciation and admiration of Swamiji's speeches in America.

We may conclude that Swamiji's speeches and writings continued to inspire people with patriotism and revolutionaries like Subhas Chandra Bose were motivated to sacrifice themselves for the freedom movement under the spell of these speeches and writings. Similarly, many Indians became worshippers of the Buddha after reading Swamiji's lectures on the Buddha. They exercised a profound influence on the minds of people for reviving the Buddha's teachings in India after an almost total blackout of about six centuries. The phenomenon of the revival of the Buddha's teachings and religion in India is mainly because of Swamiji's utterances.

Sister Nivedita under the influence of her guru, Swami Vivekananda, wrote at length on the Buddha. She observed: 'Chief of intellectual passions with the Swami, was his reverence for Buddha. ... Buddha was to him not only the greatest of the Aryans, but also "the one absolutely sane man" that the world had ever seen. ... "Buddha", he said, "was not a man, but a realisation"'<sup>4</sup>

Through Swamiji's speeches, numerous people have realised the greatness of the Buddha and the importance and magnificence of his teachings for the entire mankind. 

## References

1. His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 1.113.
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3. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 1.21.
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