



Buddhism, Untouchability, and Non-violence Towards Animals in India

Dhammachari Lokamitra *

ABSTRACT:

Most of today's Buddhists in India were formerly from communities and castes traditionally called untouchable. Various scholars have gathered evidence to show that many untouchables were originally Buddhists, who were broken and degraded by a resurgent Brahminism. There are many factors that link traditional untouchable life styles with Buddhism. One of them is the attitude many untouchables had towards killing animals; they would not kill animals for meat or other purposes and would only eat the meat and use the skins of naturally died animals.

While many of the today's new Buddhists (converted from so-called Untouchables) eat meat purchased from the shops, Dr. Ambedkar interpreted the precepts not only as not killing but also developing love for all beings, all that breathe. As yet this had not translated into wide spread vegetarianism, or pro-active care for animals, although as more and more people take Buddhism seriously we expect them to become more inclined towards vegetarianism.

In the Triratna Community, both in the West and in India, we interpret the first precept as not creating a demand for animals to be bred for slaughter, or to be exploited in any way; those who become members of the non-monastic Triratna Buddhist Order are expected to follow this principle. In the west many of the members of the Triratna Community go further and are vegan, wanting nothing to do with any animal products or derivatives, which could possibly involve their exploitation.

Keywords: Dr. Ambedkar, Untouchability, vegetarianism, Buddhism, Brahminism

* Founder and President of Nagarjuna Training Institute, India.

佛教、賤民與非暴力對待動物 ——三者於印度社會中的關連

Dhammachari Lokamitra *

摘要

當今，大多數的印度佛教徒來自過去種姓制度下所謂的「賤民階級」。然而從學者們蒐集到的證據足以顯示，許多賤民的祖先其實曾是佛教徒，並遭受隨後興盛的婆羅門教迫害與打壓。諸多跡象證明，賤民的傳統生活方式源自佛教，例如對於「殺害動物」的態度，他們不願為了肉食或其他用途而殺生，只肯食用自然死去的動物或利用牠們製成皮革。

於當前許多從賤民改信佛教的新佛教徒自商店購買肉品食用之時，安貝卡博士為此解釋戒律的精神：不僅是自己不殺生而已，更應擴大成為對一切有情眾生的慈悲關愛之心。然而，儘管有愈來愈多人歸信佛教，而且也被期望成為素食主義者，但截至

* 印度龍樹學院創辦人及院長

目前，安貝卡博士的理念仍未完全付諸實現，素食主義或積極的動保運動並未能在印度普及。

無論是位於西方或印度隸屬於三寶佛教會 (Triratna Buddhist Order ，前身為西方佛教會) 的三寶會社 (Triratna Community) ，其「不殺生戒」的精神在於：不可因慾望之需求，為殺害或任何形式之剝削而飼養動物，此一精神不只限於出家者，舉凡加入三寶佛教會皈依三寶的俗家弟子也應持守。西方國家裡許多這個會社的成員早已成為素食主義者，甚至更進一步拒絕使用任何涉及到動物生存權益被剝削的動物商品，或任何從動物衍生出來的商品。

關鍵字：安貝卡博士、賤民、素食、佛教、婆羅門教

India is known throughout the world for its large number of vegetarians and for the veneration of the cow. Although a large number of Hindus from the so-called Sudra and Kshatriya communities as well as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes eat meat, at least occasionally, vegetarianism is a significant factor in the social consciousness of India, with right wing Hindu political parties wanting to ban the slaughter of the cow throughout India, as well as stop the eating meat, fish and eggs altogether in certain Hindu pilgrimage centres. This attitude towards the killing of animals has not always been the case in India. Before the Buddha, the core of Brahmanism (the precursor of modern Hinduism) was animal sacrifice. After the Buddha, Brahmanism eventually changed radically and became even more extreme than Buddhism in terms of non-violence towards animals. As Brahmanism reasserted itself with regard to Buddhism, those who stayed with Buddhist practices were condemned to lives as “Broken Men”, suggested Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. These eventually became the Untouchables castes of modern Hinduism. Today it is people from these very Untouchable castes (or Scheduled Castes to use the official term today) who are taking the lead in reviving Buddhism in India.

Before and at the time of the Buddha, meat eating and animal sacrifice, especially of cows and horses, were very common. Dr. Ambedkar, in “Who Were the Untouchables” makes the following points:

1. Cows and other animals were killed for the purpose of eating.¹
2. The only prohibition against the killing of cows in the early Hindu texts was in the Rig Veda, and this was only against the killing of those cows that were yielding milk.²
3. Cows were eaten precisely because they were considered sacred.³
4. Cows were specially killed for guests, who came to be known as “Go-ghna”, meaning the killer of the cow.⁴

¹ Moon Vasant (Compiler), Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 7, p. 324, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1990, Bombay.

² *ibid.*, p. 324.

³ *ibid.*, p. 325.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 326.

5. When a person died, an animal had to be killed, parts of which had to be placed on the appropriate parts of the dead person, before the dead body was cremated.⁵
6. Brahmins, who today are usually very strictly vegetarians, received for consumption the main share in the division of the animals that had been sacrificed.⁶

Besides these there are several Buddhist suttas in the Pali Canon, most famously the Kuttadanta Sutta of the Digha Nikaya,⁷ which show the prevalence of, and enormous importance attached to, the sacrifice of cows, horses and other animals at that time.

It was only really with the lives and teachings of Mahavira, the founder of the Jain religion and the Buddha, that non-violence towards animals became a prominent feature of Indian social life (although Jainism never had the popular influence that Buddhism developed). Swami Vivekananda, the leading disciple of the highly revered Hindu saint, Ramakrishna, and founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, is quoted as saying, “since Buddha’s teaching.... killing of animals has almost gone.”⁸ The Buddha's attitude with regard to violence towards animals can be well understood from his admonition to the Bhikshu and Bhikshuni Sangha concerning what they could accept as alms food. They could accept meat but only if they had not seen, heard or knew in other ways that it had been killed for them. In other words his criterion was entirely ethical, the principle being to avoid not only explicit but also implicit violence towards animals. Later on it seems two other criteria were developed regarding the ethical purity of the meat one consumed. One could eat meat if the animal had died a natural death or had been killed by another animal. While all Buddhists were encouraged to practice the first and most basic of the precepts, the Pali of which is *Panatipata Veramani Sikkhapadam Samadiyami* (undertaking to avoid killing other beings), this did not prevent them eating meat if it fulfilled the above criteria.

How did Hindu attitudes towards animals change so radically from violence to

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 326.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 334-40.

⁷ Walshe, Maurice (translator), *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 133-43, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2012.

⁸ Quoted in Lal Mani Joshi, *Discerning the Buddha*, p. 213, Munshiram Manoharlal Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1983.

non-violence? No doubt some Brahmins and other Hindus were genuinely inspired by the Buddha's ethical teachings. However Dr. Ambedkar and other scholars have seen the development of non-violence towards animals in Hinduism as part of a strategy of a resurgent Brahmanism trying to reassert itself vis-a-vis Buddhism, which had spread all over India. Sangharakshita says that Brahmins never forgave the Buddha for criticising some of their core practices and beliefs, which resulted in them suffering enormous loss in their prestige and influence. Dr. Ambedkar says,

*The strife between Buddhism and Brahmanism is a crucial fact in Indian history. Without the realisation of this fact, it is impossible to explain some of the features of Hinduism.*⁹

Brahmins tried various means to minimise the influence of Buddhism and reassert themselves. They reviled and disparaged Buddhism, Buddhist monks and Buddhist institutions, vandalising or taking over many Buddhist temples, and gradually eradicating Buddhism from the history books. On another tack they tried to absorb Buddhism by making the Buddha the ninth incarnation of the god, Vishnu. This was quite subtle. While on the one hand apologists for Hinduism will state this is as an example of the inclusiveness of Hinduism and the respect it gives to other religions, in fact the mission of the Buddha, as the ninth incarnation of Vishnu, was to mislead the asuras who were challenging the gods. In other words, his teachings were wrong. This is a very common view in India today, and one portrayed by Vivekananda - the Buddha was great, but his teachings were mistaken, and not to be followed.

The main way that Brahmins reasserted themselves, according to Dr. Ambedkar, was through taking on some of the Buddhist practices that had become successful in winning the hearts of the wider population. "Buddhism had made so deep an impression on the minds of the masses ...that it was impossible for the Brahmins to fight the Buddhists except by accepting their ways and means practicing the Buddhist creed in its extreme form."¹⁰ The use of temples, images of deities, bhakti or religious devotion, monasticism and

⁹ Moon Vasant (Compiler), Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 7, p. 345, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1990, Bombay.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 346.

monastic communities, logic and dialectics - all seem to have developed from or been directly inspired by Buddhism. None of these existed in India before the Buddha and all developed on a large scale in India as part of Buddhism. So much was the influence of Buddhism on Hinduism that Swami Vivekananda could say, "Please read history and you will find that Hinduism has only become great by absorbing the ideas of Buddha."¹¹

As we have indicated, animal sacrifice, and especially cow sacrifice were originally at the very core of Brahmanism. This would have hurt a largely agricultural community and led to some antipathy towards the Brahmins whose lives and livelihoods depended on sacrifice. Dr. Ambedkar suggests:

*The Brahmins in all probability had come to be hated as the killer of cows in the same way as the guest had come to be hated as Goghna, the killer of the cow by the householder because whenever he came a cow had to be killed in his honour.*¹²

However Buddhists (at least Buddhist monks and nuns) were enjoined not to cause violence to animals, and this must have won the hearts of the agricultural population. A re-assertive Brahmanism not only took over the Buddhist non-violent approach towards animals, but went even further. Buddhists were not enjoined to be vegetarian; they could eat meat that they had no part in killing, explicitly or implicitly. Brahmins went much further. They made the killing of the cow a great sin, equal to that of killing a Brahmin, the greatest sin in Hinduism, and became, by and large, strict vegetarians. It was not enough for them not to be involved directly or indirectly in killing animals, as was the case with Buddhism; they would not touch meat, even if the animal concerned had died a natural death. Dr. Ambedkar suggests that Brahmins went from one extreme to another in order to regain the moral high ground and to displace the Buddhists from their place of honour and respect in society.

Buddhism eventually disappeared from India where once it had been the most

¹¹ Quoted in Lal Mani Joshi, *Discerning the Buddha*, p. xvi, Munshiram Manoharlal Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1983.

¹² Moon Vasant (Compiler), Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 7, p. 346, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1990, Bombay.

widespread and influential religion. Many of those who had been Buddhists became, according to Dr. Ambedkar, “Broken Men”, living outside the village, and having no recourse but to the most menial and degrading work. At the same time as this was happening, the cow was being made more and more sacred in a very aggressively resurgent Hinduism. It became a sin not only to kill cows but also to eat the flesh of a cow even if it had died a natural death. The Brahmins made the religious taboo on beef eating so strict that those who went against it were considered ritually polluted, even if they were never involved in killing a cow. This, suggests Dr. Ambedkar, was the origin of Untouchability in India. Many Broken Men, originally having been Buddhist, would have seen no harm in eating naturally died animals, including cows. Indeed one of the rights of many Untouchables, in return for their duties to the village of disposing of dead cows, was to eat the flesh of the dead cow - although in Hindu eyes that only confirmed their polluted and untouchable status.

Now Buddhism is returning to India very dramatically. Ironically it is people from the Scheduled Castes (Untouchables), many of whom come from families who would have been Buddhist in the past, who are becoming Buddhist today. This conversion movement was initiated by Dr. Ambedkar who was born in 1891 in an Untouchable family. He overcame enormous difficulties to get an education, becoming one of the first Untouchables in the whole of India to matriculate (Untouchables or Scheduled Castes constitute one sixth of the Indian population!). He completed his education in USA, UK, and Germany and then dedicated the rest of his life to eradicating Untouchability and the caste system in India and contributing to the creation of a truly democratic society imbued with the values of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Although he became the man most responsible for drafting the constitution of Independent India, he came to the conclusion that only a deep change in ethical attitudes could bring about lasting and peaceful social change. And this, he concluded, could best be brought about by conversion to and the practice of the Buddha-Dhamma. In October 1956, on the anniversary of King Asoka’s conversion to Buddhism (Ashoka did so much through his edicts to promote non-violence towards animals) he converted to Buddhism with 500,000 followers. Although Dr. Ambedkar died a few weeks later in December 1956, the movement of conversion is continually increasing, so that today there are many millions of newly converted Buddhists

in India, almost all of whom suffered enormously due to their Untouchable status in Hinduism.

Dr. Ambedkar did prepare guidance for his Buddhist followers before he died, most notably in the form of a compilation of teachings of the Buddha, “The Buddha and His Dhamma.”¹³ In this he emphasised that Dhamma and morality are essentially the same, and further that morality meant nothing less than the practice of universal love. In the 22 Vows, to be taken by his followers at the time of conversion as a form of initiation, he included the basic five precepts of Buddhism, but rephrased them. Instead of presenting the first precept in its usual negative form, he represented it as, “*I shall have compassion and loving kindness for all living beings and (nourish and) protect them.*”¹⁴ In his long essay, “Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India,” while talking about ethics, he says,

*Of these (the Buddhist precepts) the most important one was the precept not to kill. Buddha took care to make it clear that the precept did not merely mean abstention from taking life. He insisted that the precept must be understood to mean positive sympathy, good will, and love for everything that breathes...He gave the same positives and extended content to other precepts.*¹⁵

This goes far beyond mere abstention from killing other beings. Not only is there is no scope for harming animals in any way, but rather one is enjoined to proactively care for all life, animals included.

Unfortunately because he died so early after the first conversions, Dr. Ambedkar did not have time to explore and communicate the practical implications of the basic principles and teachings. His newly converted Buddhist followers were amongst the most socially oppressed sections of society, most with little or no education at that time, and extremely poor. They were torn apart by their feuding political leaders, and received no help in learning the teachings of the Buddha from their Buddhist brothers and sisters in the East.

¹³ Moon Vasant (Compiler), Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 11., Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1992, Bombay.

¹⁴ for a list of the 22 Vows, see www.Dr.Ambedkar.org.

¹⁵ Moon Vasant (Compiler), Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 3. p. 187, Education Department Government of Maharashtra, 1987, Bombay.

As a result they had little chance to learn the Dhamma.

My teacher, Urgyen Sangharakshita, although British born, lived in India between 1944 and 1964 as a Buddhist monk. He was highly respected by Dr. Ambedkar, and after the latter's death spent a few months every year teaching in Maharashtra and other major centres, helping guide and stabilise the new Buddhist movement. Returning to Britain in 1964 he eventually established the Triratna Buddhist Order (then known as the Western Buddhist Order), a non-monastic Sangha, entry into which was based on what Sangharakshita called “effective Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha” and a commitment to follow the ten precepts of ethical action, concerning transformation of body, speech and mind.¹⁶

He said that the real meaning of the first precept is to be understood as, “*a cherishing, protecting, maturing love which has the same kind of effect on the spiritual being of others as the light and heat of the sun have on their physical being,*”¹⁷ and that the principle of non-violence or love brought out by the first precept runs through all the other precepts. This is very close to what Dr. Ambedkar said above. Sangharakshita drew out the implications of the first precept further. We should do our best “*to extend the Principle of Abstention from Killing Living Beings, or Principle of Love, into as many different areas of life as possible, both individual and collective. Observance of the First Precept will, in fact, naturally result in one’s being a vegetarian, in one’s refusing to have oneself, or to assist or encourage others in having, an abortion, in one’s feeling concern for the environment, and in one’s being opposed not only to the production and deployment of nuclear weapons but*

¹⁶ The Ten Precepts in English:

- i. I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from killing living beings.
- ii. I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from taking the not-given.
- iii. I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from sexual misconduct.
- iv. I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from false speech.
- v. I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from harsh speech.
- vi. I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from frivolous speech.
- vii. I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from slanderous speech.
- viii. I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from covetousness.
- ix. I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from hatred.
- x. I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from false views.

¹⁷ Sangharakshita, *The Ten Pillars of Buddhism*, p. 53. Windhorse Publications, Glasgow. 1984.

*to the manufacture of all armaments whatsoever...*¹⁸

Sangharakshita feels that too many Buddhists do not try and apply the principle of non-violence of the first precept sufficiently thoroughly today, especially with regard to vegetarianism. It is too easy to say that one can eat meat as one has not heard, seen or otherwise known that it has been killed for one. He emphasises that even by purchasing meat from a supermarket, one is adding to the demand for animals to be bred for slaughter and so becomes complicit in their suffering. This is why, in the Triratna Buddhist Order the first precept is interpreted as meaning vegetarianism. In fact in the West a number of members of the Triratna Order have gone further and become vegans as they feel in this way they can more fully practice this precept.

Although he stayed in Britain, Sangharakshita never forgot what he felt was his duty to help the new Indian Buddhists, and sent me out in the late 1970's to help continue his work. Since then, I along with other members of the Triratna Buddhist Order, have been working to develop Dhamma as well as socially engaged activities in India. Now there are well over 500 Indian members of the Triratna Order, and they are the core of a much wider movement, active now in many parts of India. All members of the Triratna Order in India, just as in the west, are expected to be vegetarian, as well as all those thousands who are closely associated with the Order. Although most come from backgrounds in which meat is eaten occasionally, they take the approaches of Sangharakshita and Dr. Ambedkar very seriously.

In the West and East today there is a growing movement toward vegetarianism, if not always for ethical reasons, at least for reasons of health and environment. In India the reverse is true. The fast increasing development of materialism, consumerism and wealth, seem to result in increasing numbers of people eating meat, even those from families that have until now been traditionally very strict vegetarians. More and more animals are bred for slaughter and India is gradually losing its vegetarian glow. With Buddhism growing so fast as it is in India, and set to grow faster and faster, with most new Buddhists being inspired and guided by Dr. Ambedkar, and with Sangharakshita's practical approach being much appreciated by those who take the Dhamma seriously, perhaps Buddhism will be

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 55.

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able to contribute to bringing back non-violence to animals to India once again.