

Mahāvihāra as a centre of higher buddhist education and moral ethics

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The emerging concern for providing a global education is apparent in many parts of the world. A global education may prepare students better to meet challenges of globalization. There is a growing interest now to transform traditional methods of education. The traditional education system that meant for inculcating values, habits and ethos required by citizens of a particular nation-state is often criticized today for its limitations in the curriculum. Increasingly critiques have shown ways of upgrading traditional education by lifting it into a new level of global outlook. The aspiration for a global outlook aims at enabling students to become more aware of challenges of global issues and concerns; they need to be equipped to meet new challenges successfully.¹

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1. 'When Buddhism meets Cosmopolitanism: an Education for Global Citizenship' by Mahinda Deegalle in *International Symposium on Education and Global Citizenship: A Buddhist Perspective*, 10th of International Celebration on

Education is a very effective mode of communication to transmit ethical norms towards an individual. It has been defined by the scholars and philosophers in different ways. According to Aristotle, 'Education is the supreme power that accompanies the whole of society'. Plato has a different approach to education. He says that education takes a person from mental development to physical development. This seems to equate with the Latin dictum, 'Healthy mind is a healthy body.' J. Rousseau comes out with the argument that, we derive education from the nature, people and from things. Explaining the concept of education Pestaloy stated the three H concept namely, development of Head (knowledge), Heart (attitude), and Hands (skills). There is similar notion within the Buddhist education such as *sonata, dhāreta, carata dhamme*, listen carefully, digest it and behave according to the teachings of the Buddha. This is quite close to the theory of Pestaloy's three H concept of education. Buddhism conveys this meaning by using three words, - Sikkhā (training), Vinaya (discipline) and Ñāṇa (Right Understanding). The aim of the education is to build a disciplined person and Vinaya cultivates one's education until its final goal eternal bliss. The practical side of education must be integrated with the potentialities of human nature. Buddhist education must aim to inculcate values as much as to impart information. It must be directed not merely toward developing social and commercial skills, but toward nurturing in the students the seed of spiritual mobility.

There are two aspects of Buddhist teachings that encouraged the development of scientific thinking. First was its rationality, which encouraged thinking and discourse, rather than the unquestioning acceptance of tradition. The second aspect was the emphasis on causality in Buddhism. The overall education provided in Buddhist societies was more open and less ritualized than Brahmanic teachings.

The earliest reference of Mahāvihāra is available in the introductory section of Pali *Pācittiya text*.² The Mahāvihāra word

the Occasion of United Day of Vesak 2013 21-22 May, 2013, p.13.

2. *Tena Samayena Buddho Bhagavā Sāvattiyaṃ Viharati Jetavane Anātha piṇḍikassa ārāme. Tena kho pana samayena sattarasavaggiyā bhikkhu aññataraṃ paccantimaṃ mahāviharaṃ paṭisankharonti-idha mayaṃ vassaṃṃ vassissāmā ti-Pācittiya Pāli* (Ed.) 1958 Bhikkhu J. Kashyap, Nalanda Edition, Nalanda, 1958. p. 67.

also occurs in *Cullavagga*.³ A further important reference is recorded in the *Nigamanakathā* of Buddhaghosa's *Samantapāsādikā*.⁴ According to *Tārānāth*, the Mahāvihāravāsīnah belonged to the Sthavira orientation.⁵ Ksemendra's *Avadānakalpalatā* also refers to Mahāvihāra in a verse.⁶ It is said that King Devanampiya Tissa of Sri Lanka, as advised by Mahinda Thera, ploughed a furrow to mark the boundaries of the area consecrated to the Sangha. The Mahamegha garden was the place where edifices necessary were to come up. Work was commenced to put the buildings which were required. This was the origin of Mahāvihāra. The Mahāvihāravāsīns was the term by which monks residing here were known. But as a result of later developments such as appearance of new sects like these of the Abhayagiri and Jetavana, the meaning was extended to embrace all the monks who owed allegiance to the Mahāvihāra, wherever they lived.⁷ The Mahāvihāra served as the centre of higher Buddhist education in India and the term Mahāvihāriya is generally used in the monastic sealings' of Northern India.⁸

The mahāvihāras chose the insignia of Wheel of the Law (Dharmacakra) with a deer on each side of its sealings. The wheel-and-deer device was taken to denote sermons of the Buddha in general and was considered as an appropriate device for monasteries of such localities where the Buddha had preached. Buddhist monasteries also sprang up in localities which the Buddha had not visited and

3. Aññataraṃ paccantimaṃ mahāvihāraṃ -Cullavagga (Ed.) Bhikkhu J. Kashyap, Nalanda, 1959, p. 261. Cf. 'Sanghassa mahāvihāro udiriyati'-Ibid., p.271.

4. Mahāvihāravāsīnaṃṃ vaṃsālamkāra-bhūtena vipulavisuddhi-buddhinā Buddhaghoso ti gahitanāmadheyyena therena kātā ayaṃ Samantapāsādkānāma Vinayasamvaṇṇanā"- Samantapāsādikā, Vol.III, (Ed.) Birbal Sharma Nalanda Edition, Nalanda, 1967, p. 1537.

5. Bhārata Mein Bauddha Dharma Kā Itihāsa by Lama Taranath (tr.) Rigtin Lundup Lama, K.P. Jaiswal Research Institute, Patna, 1971, p. 94.

6. Tatastatra Sambudbhūtāratnaprāsādāmandiram, Mahāvihāramdrāksītsa murtamiva kautikam' -Avadāna Kalpalatā Vol. II, (Ed.) P.L. Vaidya, published by the Mithila Institute, Darbhanga, 1989, Chapter 67, Verse No. 24, p.429.

7. Encyclopedia of Buddhism, Vol.VI, Fascicle 4, 2002, p.50.

8. 8 Cf. Buddhist Monuments, Devala Mitra, Calcutta, 1980, p.70.

which were not directly connected with his life in any way. These monastic establishments also showed preference for the wheel and deer device and it was then taken to symbolize Buddhist teachings in general. The device could very well be chosen for the seals of Buddhist monasteries at different localities, since these were seats of Buddhist learning. The seals, for example, of the monastic establishments at Nalanda, where hundreds of learned teachers imparted learning to thousand of students and which became a renowned higher Buddhist centre of international repute for teaching religion and philosophy, adopted this very device.⁹

The Buddha established his *Sangha* or the order of the monks in the thirty-sixth year of his life and allowed everybody to join it, irrespective of caste, creed and colour. In course of time, as the *Sangha* expanded in all its dimensions, the Buddha gave a clear sanction of five kinds of lenas as fit for monk's dwelling under the name of *vihāra*, *aḍḍhayoga pasāda*, *hammiya* and *guhā*.¹⁰ They proved to be a great asset to the development of the Buddhist order. It was because of this fact, probably, that the Buddha had often spoken very highly of the donation of *vihārās* to the *order*. The *Mahāvagga* makes an enumeration of a number of such constructions by the householders for the use of the sangha. Thus, the resting place for the Buddhist Sangha came to be known as viharas. Originally meant for rainy retreat, the viharas later on developed into big and highly organized monastic establishments. The development of the small viharas into great educational centres, has been described by D.K. Barua:

“With a beginning as resorts during the rains the Buddhist monasteries at the next stage turned into great centres of learning. The account of such a transition from residence to seats of learning is remarkable one in the history of Buddhism in India... The growth of viharas as educational centres may also be noticed in the following passage from the *Manorathpuranī*: ‘Even if there be a hundred or a thousand Bhikkhus practicing

9. Cf. Nalanda: Past and Present (Ed.) C.S. Upasak, Nalanda, 1977, p. 54.

10. Mahāvagga (Ed.) Bhikshu J. Kashyap, Nalanda, pp. 55, 100 Cullavagga (Nalanda), pp. 68-69, 239.

vipassana (meditation), there will be no realization of the noble path if there is no learning (doctrine, *pariyatti*).¹¹

Thus, the custom of staying at one particular place for specific period ultimately led to the foundation of *vihārās*, *saṅghārāmas*. In course of time, however, Buddha allowed the use of these dwelling during other seasons; and perhaps, some centuries must have elapsed before the *āvāsas* came to be organized and had a distinct existence. It can be said that within the periphery of the *āvāsa*, the lodging houses were known as *vihara* and in course of time, they developed from the single eremitical to a larger congregational type, from *viharas* into monasteries. The development of the Buddhist *viharas* all over India can be traced from the architectural remains.¹² The *viharas* turned to be most important institution as these were seeds out of which grew great academic institutions like Nalanda and Vikramaśīlā. As Sankalia remarks:

“The purpose of the *vihārās* and other dwelling places in the words of the Buddha was this: ‘to give *vihārās* to the *saṅgha* where in safety and in peace to meditate and think at ease, the Buddha calls the best of gifts. Let then the able men, regarding his own weal, have pleasant monasteries built and lodge there learned men.”¹³

Thus, the *vihārās* gradually became the abodes of learned men and higher academic studies were pursued there. The study of the students in the monasteries included besides the *Piṭakas*, the other *śāstras* and *Vidyās*, which comprised the four Vedas, Six *Aṅgas*, ten *Granthas*, fourteen *Vidyās*, eighteen *śilpas* and sixty four *kālas*.

With the widening of the academic activities of the *vihārās* they lost their insular character and the Buddhist monk-teachers endeavored to acquire profundity in other branches of learning. These *vihārās* naturally became the nuclei of later Buddhist Universities which in subsequent ages played such glorious roles in the intellectual life of

11. D. K. Barua, *Viharas in Ancient India*, 1969, pp. 13-15.

12. S. Dutt, *Early Buddhist Monachism*, London, 1924, p. 130.

13. *The University of Nalanda*, 1972, p. 29.

India and lands beyond India.

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Monasteries as the Centres of Pariyatti and Paṭipatti :

As a matter of fact, Buddhism is twofold; one is called *Pariyatti* and the other *Paṭipatti*. *Pariyatti* is that aspect of Buddhism which includes the theoretical knowledge of Buddhism, acquired by studying scriptures and understanding the philosophy and tenets by reading the s'astras. The experimental knowledge is gained only by treading upon the path as laid down in the texts, technically called *paṭipatti*. Practical knowledge or meditational practices, rising up to the acquisition of supernatural powers include strict observance of morality and other penances and practices (*dhutaṅgas*). Buddhism, like other studies of

14. Cf. Nalanda: Past and Present (Ed.) C.S. Upasak, Nalanda, 1977, p. 54.

15. "Sassamikabhāvena sayam. Yācīkakatito mahantabhāvā etassa atthiti mahallako. Yasmā vā vatthum desapetvā...pamanamahantattayapi mahallako"-Samantapāsādikā Vol.II, op. citt., p. 575

modern sciences, has laid stress on both, the theoretical and practical understanding and knowledge, and at time, the practical knowledge or *patipatti* is more stressed than mere understanding the theory or *pariyatti*. In ancient days Buddhist monasteries were the 'abodes' of many masters, eminent in both the fields, arrangements were available for both. Meditational cells were erected in the monasteries for practice, so also the libraries were there containing hundreds of manuscripts of scriptures and *śāstras* for studies. Nalanda Mahavihāras, though more renowned for *pariyatti* or theoretical studies also had the facilities for *patipatti* training. In one of the viharas (No. 2), a small meditational cell has been discovered which was meant for such training. As Nalanda Mahavihāra was renowned far and wide in ancient time for higher studies, so also, the Nava Vihara was an important Buddhist monastery in Balkh of Afghanistan for advance learning. It had become renowned because of a number of monk-scholars dwelling there who were the composer of different *s'astras* or religious texts.¹⁶ This Saṅghārāma, as a great centre of advance studies of Hīnayāna, specialized in the Abhidhammic group of study. The courses of study there included the three Piṭakas with its nine Aṅgas. According to Hiuen-tsang, the Nava Vihāra was the abode of only those learned monks who had at least composed some *s'astras*, while other were not allowed to reside there. It had gained great popularity as a centre for higher practical training in Buddhism, especially for Vipassanā or self Meditation. Probably this centre took a lead to inspire other monastic establishments in Afghanistan for constructing the meditational caves, so abundant throughout the country, particularly at Bamiyan, Dauranta, Baswal and other places. At Kapisa also such caves were made for the Chinese Prince Hostages by Kaniṣka for their meditational practices.¹⁷

Vihāras were also responsible for the introduction of art of painting into different countries. It is to be mentioned that decorating the Buddhist monasteries with paintings is an ancient tradition. In the *Cullavagga*, a story occurs when some unscrupulous monks are said to have decorated their vihāras with male and female figures of human beings contrary to the monastic precepts and norms. The Buddha,

16. cf. C.S. Upasak, History of Buddhism in Afghanistan, Varanasi, 1990, p. 226.

17. Ibid., p. 227.

thereupon laid down a rule prohibiting the monks to decorate their *vihāras* with such paintings of male and female (conjugal) figures for being perverse or undignified for the monastic life. But, at the same time, the Buddha sanctioned the monks to decorate their *vihāras* with paintings of other designs like creepers, flowers or in *Pañcapaṭṭika*.¹⁸ As usual the paintings or other decorations in the *vihāras* or in other monastic dwellings were related to the theological subjects, which usually included the *Jātaka* tales or the life scenes of the Master. They naturally demanded a thorough knowledge of the scriptures and traditions besides of course proficiency in the art of painting. Paintings in Ajanta or *Bāmiyān* or elsewhere in the Buddhist dwellings are mainly their products and to be evaluated in this perspective. An influence of Indian art can also be seen in the monasteries of other countries like Sri Lanka, Tibet, Afghanistan etc. In some countries, architectural pattern of *vihāras* and *mahāvihāras* were also followed in other countries like Sri Lanka, Afghanistan etc.

Vihāras were also responsible for the development of society, by imparting education to the large section of the society. They also played an important role in inculcation of moral and ethical values among the people. They made available the *Tipiṭaka* and the commentaries and their translations. They were also responsible for the composition of new texts. Writing of Buddhist texts are still continuing from the ancient period in different Buddhist countries like Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia etc. Dissemination of the Buddhist doctrinal system was also performed by the monasteries. Educational system of the *Vihāras* is still followed in different countries like Sri Lanka, Burma etc. Many *Vihāras* in Burma are having the same old pattern. Monastic system is still seen in the existence in some of the countries. Highlighting the importance of moral ethics in education system, the XIV Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso is of the opinion that Universities should undertake more research work and discussion for developing moral ethics in students. In Europe, the Church took care of moral ethics and family value. Now efforts were being made to introduce moral values in education system. Many Universities have introduced some projects as experiment like meditation that gave positive results. Dalai Lama says that "The ethics must be based on secularism, not on

18. *Cullavagga*, op. cit., p. 245

religion. Secularism meant respect to all religions.”

Thus, *mahāvihāras*, which were developed into complex as having several *vihāras* or residential buildings turned to be higher educational centre where erudite intelligent famous Buddhist scholars used to reside. Persons desirous for getting teaching and training used to join for higher education. The education system gains from the Buddhist education system in matters of objectives of real prosperity and achieving the ultimate goal of life.