

## A BRIEF SURVEY OF BUDDHIST ASCETIC PRACTICES

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### SINOPSIS

*Tujuan tulisan ini ialah untuk menghuraikan ciri-ciri utama amalan-amalan semadian (ascetic) agama Buddha yang menurut kepercayaannya dianggap sebagai suatu cara hidup yang penting yang didasarkan pada cara hidup Gotama Buddha. Perlakuan orang-orang yang mengikut aturan-aturan cara hidup itu dianggap sebagai '...murni semurni-murninya, tujuannya tercapai sepenuhnya, anggota serta tutur-kata terkawal dengan baiknya, cara berfikir telah dibersihkan seluruhnya, tenaga digunakan dengan bijaksana, rasa takut telah dihindarkan, pandangan diri yang palsu telah dimusnahkan... terdapat rasa benci akan sesuatu yang mungkar, rasa gemar akan pengasingan dan sifat rajin berusaha yang berterusan.'*

*Kajian ini memperlihatkan—dengan cara yang tiada disengajakan—beberapa persamaan yang terdapat dalam sistem-sistem semadian sejagat lainnya—yakni persamaan-persamaan yang perlu dikaji secara objektif untuk membuktikan sah tidaknya amalan-amalan semadian yang dianggap sebagai bahagian yang organik bagi sesuatu agama itu.*

### SYNOPSIS

*The aim of this paper is to isolate the salient features of Buddhist ascetic practices which are regarded by orthodoxy as an essential mode of existence modelled on the life-style of Gotama Buddha. The behaviour of those who subscribe to the regimen is supposed to be "... thoroughly purified, the course well fulfilled, body and speech well guarded, the conduct of the mind thoroughly purified, energy well exerted, fear allayed, false view of self gone to destruction ... there is abhorrence of evil, delight in aloofness and constant diligence."*

*This survey brings out—rather unintentionally—some of the similarities that exist in other universal ascetic systems—similarities that need to be investigated objectively for the purpose of establishing the authenticity or otherwise of certain ascetic practices believed to be organic to any given religion.*

Buddhist ascetic practices, in the sense of intensive moral culture as opposed to various forms of self-mortification that go under the name of

*tapas* (Pali: *tapo*),<sup>1</sup> presuppose, in so far as the body is concerned, that the human physical frame has to be analytically studied and kept in cleanliness and good health as an instrument for the attainment of spiritual progress.<sup>2</sup> However, it remains, despite the prescriptions for clothing, shelter, rest and regular food, as a foul thing (*putikayo*) from the religious point of view<sup>3</sup>. The senses are to be considered as channels and opportunities through which malefic impulses and impressions are carried<sup>4</sup>. For this reason elaborate rules are given in the code on ascetic life regarding the proper use of the senses<sup>5</sup>. As far as the basic needs of the body are concerned, they are to be satisfied only for the sake of withholding the desire for extra needs. Typical of the kind of moderation that Buddhist teachings require may be seen in the following quotation:-

‘When any one takes food with reflexion and judgement, not for purposes of sport, excess, personal, charm and attraction, but so as to suffice for the sustenance and preservation of the body, for allaying hunger *and for aiding the practice of religious life* (sic); and thinking, “While I shall subdue that which I have been feeling, and shall cause no new feeling to arise, and maintenance shall be mine, blamelessness also and comfort”—this content, temperance, judgment in diet, is what is called “moderation in diet” (*Dhamma-sangani*, 1348)<sup>6</sup>.

In so far as it is possible to trace, by internal evidence, the development of ascetic practices in Buddhist history, it is ascertainable that the earliest form of Buddhist ascetic practices is demonstrated by the life of the homeless recluse, the *samana*<sup>7</sup>. In the *Milindapanho* (The Questions of King Milinda) Nagasena describes the recluse thus:-

The recluse, O King, is content with little, joyful in heart, detached from the world, apart from society, earnest in zeal, without a home,

1 See art. ‘Asceticism (Buddhist)’ by C.A.F. Rhys Davids, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, (New York, 1913), vol. 1. On how Gotama first practised *Yoga*, then *Tapas* and later abandoned both, see S. Dutt, *The Buddha and five After-Centuries* (London: Luzac and Company Ltd., 1957), pp. 36–39.

2 *Op. cit.*, p. 70

3 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

5 *Majjhima*, jj. 473ff quoted in ‘Asceticism (Buddhist).’ See also *Vibhanga* 244, quoted in *The path of Purity, a translation of Buddhaghosa’s Visuddhimagga* (London: The Pali Text Society, 1923), part I, p. 19.

6 Quoted by Rhys Davids, “Asceticism (Buddhist)” p. 71.

7 Other words which carry similar connotation; *Parivrajaka* (‘Goer-forth, one who has gone from home into homelessness), *Samyasin* (One who has cast off Worldly life), *Bhikkhu* (Mendicant). See Sukumar Dutt, *The Buddha and Five After—Centuries*, p. 30. Cf. Thomas Berry, *Buddhism* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1967) pp. 48–49. In the *Early Buddhist Monachism* (New York: Dutton and Co., 1924) Dutt traces in a convincing manner the change from mendicant ideal into monastic community. See pp. 39–136.

without a dwelling-place, righteous in conduct, in action without guile, skilled in duty and in the attainments...<sup>8</sup>

These qualities of self-control, virtuous conduct, calm manners, discipline of senses, perseverance, love of solitude, a meditative mind, modesty, zeal, earnestness, and profound dedication to the ideals of Buddhism may be regarded as the immediate goals of ascetic practices throughout the phases of their evolution in adjusting themselves to various pressures from within and from without. Their ultimate objective is the actualization of the Eightfold Path and the attainment of Nirvana.

With the development of the monastic community, governed by disciplinary codes, an elaborate structure for the attainment of Buddhist ideals in terms of well-graded stages of spiritual training grew up. Within this structure, those who had "gone forth into the life of homelessness" find a new condition in which ascetic practices are to be carried out. The existence of the settled community also meant that distinctive character of ascetic life is now circumscribed by the principles, rules and regulations of a cenobitical system<sup>9</sup>. It becomes apparent from the study of Buddhist history and the growth of canonical literature that there exist two patterns, side by side, of ascetic practices which are, however, not mutually exclusive, since at many points they blend and dove-tailed into one another, thus making it extremely difficult to ascertain their actual reference to chronological sequence—one, a rigorous ideal associated with the wandering mendicants, the other a modified and systematized form which reflects more the monastic framework. While recognizing the fact that modifications were made to original ideals through the vicissitudes of time, the aim here is not so much to differentiate the original and the modified ideals as to present both features of ascetic practices regardless of how and at what points actual practice departs from the canonized standards.<sup>10</sup>

Representative of the rigorous 'eremical' practices are what later were classified as the thirteen *Dhutangas*. The observation of these ascetic practices were supposed to result in special merits<sup>11</sup>. . . However, the Buddha said that these austerities might be observed but there were no hard and fast rules for performing them<sup>12</sup>. Buddhaghosa in his *Visuddhimagga*<sup>13</sup> gives

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8 *Milindapanho*. 244, quoted by Berry, *Buddhism*, p. 48.

9 Dutt, *Early Buddhist Monachism*, pp. 75-109, where he gives a perceptive account of the roles of the *Patimokkha*.

10 Discussions on these points of departure during the early and later periods are also found in Rhys Davids, *Buddhism*, (London: Macmillan Co., 1925), pp. 152-153; Dutt, *Early Buddhist Monachism*, pp. 39-139; Edward J. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha*, (New York : Barnes and Noble Inc., 1952), pp. 167-9; R. Spece Hardy, *Eastern Monachism*, (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1850), pp. 309-346.

11 Bimala Charan Law, *The Life and Work of Buddhaghosa*, (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1923), p. 70; cf. Dutt, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

12 Law, *ibid.*, p. 70; see also Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

13 M. Nagai maintains in "The Vimutti-Magga" in the *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, (London: Humphrey Milford, 1919) pp. 69-80, that the *Visuddhimagga* is the Pali counterpart of the Chinese *Vimutti-Magga*.

a detailed account of how these austerities are to be observed. For those who have much enjoyed the worldly existence, thirteen *dhutangas* have been prescribed by the Buddha, namely—(1) putting on a robe made of rags collected from cemeteries, burning ghats or dust bins or garbages; (2) putting on only three robes; (3) living on alms only; (4) house-to-house begging; (5) eating food sitting once on one seat (6) eating food from the alms bowl (7) eating food once received (8) living in the forest; (9) living at the foot of trees; (10) living in an open space; (11) living in a cemetery; (12) being satisfied with whatever bedding one could get; (13) without lying down, passing one's days, sitting or walking, etc.

Although the *Dhutangas* are especially important in that they reflect the salient features of ascetic practices of the first order, they are by no means comprehensive. A comprehensive and complete picture of the range of ascetic practices has to be extracted mainly from the *Vinaya-pitaka*<sup>14</sup>, the *Sutta-pitaka*, the *Milindapanho*, and the *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa. From this mass of information and the scattered references to different aspects of ascetic practices, it is possible to regroup the essential observances of ascetic life which give it its distinctive character into the following categories, viz. a) those pertaining to the life of chastity; b) those pertaining to the life of medicancy and poverty, c) those pertaining to modes of residing; d) those pertaining to habit; e) those pertaining to diet; f) those pertaining to tonsure; g) those pertaining to sleep, and h) miscellaneous.

a) In the *Dasa-sila*, i.e. the Ten Moral Rules binding on the mendicants, the precept that enjoins the practice of chastity (celibacy) is the third in order. It goes without saying that the true ascetic is free from all forms of carnal indulgences. In other words there must be complete annihilation of sexual impulses. Among the practices forbidden in the 227 rules of the *Patimokkha*, the following are included: sexual intercourse with any being of whatever kind, or in whatever form; wilful pollution; contact with the person of a woman; impure conversation with a woman; sitting on the same seat as a woman in any private place; preaching more than five or six sentences to a woman except in the presence of a man who understands what is said.

14 The Disciplinary Section gives the basic rules for monastic life. This section contains first the *Sutta-Vibhanga*, which prescribe the basic regime of the Buddhist monastic community. Each of the 227 fundamental rules known as the *Patimokkha* is given in the *Sutta-Vibhanga* along with an account of how the rule came to be made and how it was sanctioned by Buddha himself. Although these are, strictly speaking, a system of discipline and organization regulating the personal and collective life of *Bhikkhus*, they are useful in so far as they also contain references to what we may call ascetic practices proper as distinct from monastic 'self government.' The relevant parts are also to be found in these sections in the *Mahavagga* which refer to the laws governing the residence of the monks during the rainy season; rules for the use of leather for shoes or dress and for furniture; rules for medicine, for making and distributing robes, etc. See the *Book of the Discipline*, (*Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, vols. x-xxv, London: O.U.P., 1940-1966), I.B. Horner (tr.).

In addition to the ordinances that refer to the out-ward conduct, the priests are directed to live in a state of entire abstraction from the world, so that when in the midst of temptations, all impurity may be avoided. The door of the eye is to be kept shut, for it is through the eye that impressions are obtained, so that even if all the ordinances are kept, evil desires will still be produced if the eye be permitted to wander. The advise given in the *Visuddhimagga* is worth noting. It says,

Let not the eye wander like forest-ape, or trembling wood-deer, or affrighted child. The eyes should be cast downward: they should look the distance of a yoke. Ye shall not serve the eye's dominion, like a restless ape<sup>15</sup>.

In order to suppress lust Ananda gives the following advice:-

Through wrong perception is thy mind aflame—pleasant appearances avoid, for they are full of lust, but cultivate the mind, in things unpleasant, that it may attain to concentration and a single aim<sup>16</sup>.

#### b) **Medicancy**

The practice of mendicancy, being a central feature of Buddhist ascetic life, is regulated in great detail. The priest of Buddha is not allowed to eat any food not given in alms, unless it be water, or some substance used for the purpose of cleaning the teeth; and when in health the food he eats must be procured by his own exertions in carrying the alms-bowl from house to house. When passing from place to place, the priest must not look to a greater distance before him than the length of yoke; nor must he look on one side, or upwards, nor bend his body to look at anything upon the ground; he is not to look at elephants, chariots, horses, soldiers, or women. When he approaches a house, he must remain as though unseen, and the proper mode is to take the alms-bowl in a becoming manner; if anything is given, he remains to receive it; if not, he passes on. By the fourth ordinance of the *Dhutanga*, the priest is forbidden to by-pass any house when going to receive alms, on account of its meanness or inferiority<sup>17</sup>. with the passage of time, the rigours of mendicancy became alleviated by such pious acts of the laity as 'perpetual alms', giving regular service of sweet food or the provision of the day's meals by some high court officials<sup>18</sup>.

#### b) ii. **Poverty.**

In his individual right no Buddhist priest is to possess more than the following eight articles:- three robes of different description; a girdle for

15 Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga* (trans.) (Pali Text Society No. 11, London, 1923), p. 45.

16 *Ibid.* p. 44.

17 R. Speance Hardy, *Eastern Monachism*, p. 73.

18 Dutt, *Early Buddhist Monachism*, p. 116; *The Buddha and Five After Centuries*, p. 69.

the loins; an alms-bowl; a razor for the shaving of the hair; a needle for repairing robes; and a water strainer to prevent impurities in his drinks and accidental destruction of any living creature. The Jaina priests, in addition to the strainer, carry a broom, in order that they may sweep the insects out of their way as they walk, as they fear to tread on the minutest being<sup>19</sup>. Among the later monks, however, every one had a table-book, knife, needle, and handkerchief<sup>20</sup>. They may also have, through the contributions made to the community, more valuable articles, like a carpet or a coverlet, but they must be previously disfigured in one form or another<sup>21</sup>.

### c) Residence

With regard to residence, the *Dhutanga* clearly outlines what must be considered as the original standards, while the *Patimokkha* and the *Dasa-sila* reflect a more lax situation. For instance, the 'forester's practice'<sup>22</sup> is not insisted upon as a necessary privation, which requires that the one who practices it must always be in the forest at dawn<sup>23</sup>. The advantages of this practice, according to Buddhaghosa is that it frees the mind from distractions, eliminates fear, suppresses craving for life, and it provides the bliss of solitude<sup>24</sup>. Gotama commends this practice when he said to Nagita that he was "pleased with the forest-life of that brother."<sup>25</sup> According to the 'tree-rootman's practice' the practitioner must live at the root of a tree (the root being defined to be the space within which the leaves fall on a calm day, or on which the shadow of the tree falls at noon)<sup>26</sup>. The main advantage of this practice is that it produces the perception of the impermanence of all things by seeing the constant change in tender leaves and also, as a side advantage, the opportunity of communication with tree-deities<sup>27</sup>. This practice was also much commended by Gotama, since it was at the root of a tree that he received his birth, became Buddha, preached his first sermon and died<sup>28</sup>.

The tenth of the *Dhutanges* is the 'open-spacer's practice' which prescribes that the practitioner must only live in an open space beneath the sky. He is allowed, however, to stay temporarily in a sheltered place for certain religious purposes, like listening to the Law. Buddhaghosa outlines the advantages of this practice as, "The cutting off of the nuisance of

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19 *Op. cit.*, p. 65.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

22 This term is used by Pe Maung Tin (tr.), *Visuddhi-magga*, (London: Pali Text Society, 1923), No. 11, p. 81.

23 *Visuddhimagga*, p. 83

24 *Ibid.*, p. 84

25 *Anguttara Nikaya*, iii, 343; quoted in *ibid.*, p. 83.

26 Hardy, *Eastern Monachism*, p. 134.

27 *Visuddhimagga*, p. 85.

28 *Loc. cit.*

an abode, the dispelling of sloth and torpor,... 'Like the deer the brethren live untrammelled in their walks, homeless,' (*Samyutta-Nikaya*, i, 199) freedom of attachment, the going at will in the four directions...as free in mind as the antelope."<sup>29</sup> The last mode of residence, 'the burning-grounder's practice', is as Buddhaghosa himself admits, indeed a difficult practice. It results, however, in the attainment of mindfulness regarding death, a life free from negligence, dispelling of sensual lust, the perpetual realization of the intrinsic nature of the body, absence of pride in being healthy, overcoming of fear, respect paid by non-human beings and conduct in conformity with few wishes<sup>30</sup>.

With the evolution of settled life organized on a monastic basis, the mode of residence of the majority of the faithful followers of ascetic life assumed a more congregational form, such as living together in groves and gardens. But "very soon the piety of laymen provided for them suitable monasteries."<sup>31</sup> During the fine weather, they would often travel from place to place as their Teacher did; but during the rainy season they settled in one spot, in or near a village.

It is interesting to note that the original ideal of the unsocial, unsettled and wandering life of a recluse is compared to the Rhinoceros, the unherdable animal dwelling alone in the forest depths. In the *Culla-Niddesa*, an ancient commentary on the 'Rhinoceros' *sutta* (*Khaggavisana Sutta* in the *Sutta-Nipata*) is found the solemn refrain, "Let him roam alone like a rhinoceros", while a whole series of passages in which the ideal is upheld is found in the *Dhammapada*, the *Theragatha* and other canonical works<sup>32</sup>

#### d) The Habit.

In the question of habit or dress we also come across the same phenomenon, i.e. the blend of the rigorous and the modified norms. In the formula of the Four Resources (*Nissayas*) of a *Bhikkhu*, it is stipulated that clothing should be in cast-off rags (*pamsukula-civaram*).<sup>33</sup> However, the following exceptions are made: robes made of linen, of cotton, of silk, of wool, of hemp, or of these five materials together.

The idea of adopting a dress of mean appearance, coarse, rough and ragged is not only intended as a 'veil of shame' but also to prevent from falling into pride and passion. Besides, the wearing of robes is necessary for the "warding off of cold, of heat, of the touch of gadflies, mosquitoes,

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29 *Visuddhimagga*, pp. 86-87.

30 *Ibid.* p. 88.

31 Rhys Davids, *Buddhism*, p. 165. The picture in the *Vinaya-pitaka* of a mendicants' normal life is that of a member of a well-settled and well-organized cenobite society.

32 Dutt, *The Buddha and five after Centuries*, p. 68.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 69. See I.B. Horner (tr.), *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka)*, (London: Luzac and Company Ltd., 1951), *Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, vol. xiv, p. 75.

wind, heat, and reptiles.”<sup>34</sup> The robe is to be put on as if it were a handage to cover a sore, or a cloth to cover a skeleton as much as the alms-bowl is to be carried as though it were a vessel of medicine. The main advantages of putting on the refuse-rag attire are the establishment in the first order of Ariyans; the absence of the trouble of looking after robes, the absence of danger from thieves, and the absence of the lust of enjoyment<sup>35</sup>.

e) **Diet.**

The ascetic practices which pertain to food and dietary habits are numerous but the few example given below are selected to represent the essence of the practices. In Buddhaghosa’s exposition of these practices, five exemplary precepts are given:- 1. The ‘almsman’s practice’<sup>36</sup> reflects the ideal of contentment with whatever food one gets, the disdain for excessiveness in food, and the indiscriminate acceptance of food. 2. The ‘house-to-house-goer’s practice’<sup>37</sup> emphasizes the total absence of preference or discrimination with regard to the places where alms are given. The rule is “Whether he gets nothing or something from that village, he should go from one village to another in order”.<sup>38</sup> 3. The ‘one-sessioner’s practice’ is expressed in the vow of refusing to eat food at more than one sitting. 4. The ‘bowl-fooder’s practice’ embodies the virtues of contentment with one bowl of food only, while ‘the after food-refuser’s practice’ (1) is designed to eradicate undue attachment to fleshly needs. In all these practices, both the receiving and the eating of food have to be done meditatively, as eating only serves to ward off hunger, preserve the body and prevent untimely death.<sup>39</sup>

f) **Tonsure.**

The Buddha forbade the wearing of long hair, the maximum length being ‘two finger-breadths’.<sup>40</sup> The objection is due to the fifteen evils connected with the growth of hair, which may be summed up as the unnecessary care and trouble that the growth of hair results in.<sup>41</sup>

g) **Sleep**

Again, in the *Dhutanga* there is reference to a most rigorous ascetic standard, that is the practice of not lying down to sleep. The second last

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34 Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, p. 36.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 72

36 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

39 Hardy, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

40 I.B. Horner, (tr.), *Book of the Discipline*, p. 144.

41 Hardy, *op. cit.*, p. 112.



ordinance of the *Dhutanga* however, provides a less painful practice, that of accepting any kind of bed, even though of grass.<sup>42</sup> The *Cullavagga* has several references to sleeping and sleeping places, such as sleeping on the right side, or on a couch that has a support.<sup>43</sup> They all point to the fact that sleep, as a necessary evil, tends to encourage sloth and torpor, and must be curbed.

The results that are supposed to accrue from all these austerities may be summed up in a word—self-conquest. The *Samanna-phala Sutta*<sup>44</sup> gives a general and comprehensive survey of the results of the life of austerities exemplified by the recluse. Buddhaghosa stresses two main results of ascetic practices, namely, the suppression of lust and the removal of delusion. However, a more satisfying picture is projected by the following statement of Nagasena:

...an ascetic practice is a pure means of livelihood, its fruit is happy, it is blameless, it does not bring anguish to others, it has no fear, it is trouble-free, it is exclusively for growth, it is not for declining not a deception, it is a protection, it is a giver of what is longed for, it is a taming for all creatures, it is of benefit to self control... it is (for) the destruction of attachment, the destruction of aversion, the destruction of confusion, for the getting rid of pride, the cutting off of wrong thought, the crossing over of doubts, the suppression of idleness, the getting rid of discontent, it is long—suffering, beyond compare, immeasurable, leading to the destruction of all anguish...

The behaviour of those who observe these practices is

thoroughly purified, the course well fulfilled, body and speech well guarded, the conduct of the mind thoroughly purified, energy well exerted, fear allayed, false view of self gone to destruction... there is abhorrence of evil, delight in aloofness and constant diligence.<sup>45</sup>

In this systematic struggle of the faithful Buddhist, to gain complete mastery over his own self, the vast capacities of man's moral and physical potentials to create a higher and lofty mode of existence, albeit through much privation, are revealed. The key to such achievement is a vigorous moral effort coupled with steadfastness and determination. Self-sacrifice is, therefore, the *sine qua non* of Buddhist ascetic practices.

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43 I.B. Horner, *op.cit.*, pp. 170, 208, 281, 225.

44 Rhys Davis (tr.), *Dialogues of the Buddha*, (London: O.U.P., 1899), pp. 56-95.

45 I.B. Horner, (tr.), *Milinda's Questions*, (London: Luzac and Company Ltd., 1964), vol. ii. pp. 208-209.

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