Swami Vivekananda’s Unique Relationship with Buddha

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In a lecture given in San Francisco on March 18, 1900, Vivekananda defined his unique relationship with Buddha in the following words:

All my life I have been very fond of Buddha . . . I have more veneration for that character than for any other—that boldness, that fearlessness, and that tremendous love!

He went on to call Buddha “the greatest man who ever lived”—and this is only one of the many occasions on which Vivekananda waxed enthusiastic about Buddha, publicly and privately. Sister Nivedita was later to refer to what she called “his passionate personal adoration of Buddha.”

However, Vivekananda’s enthusiasm for Buddha does not seem to have been widely shared at first among his brother monks or among the devotees of Ramakrishna. Of course, at that time in Calcutta there was only limited information available concerning Buddha’s life and teachings, with the signal exception of what was contained in Sir Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* (1879) and the play *Buddhadev-Charit* that Girish Chandra Ghosh had partially based on it—a play we know that both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda saw and enjoyed.

And there was also Rajendralal Mitra’s book *Buddha Gaya: The Hermitage of Sakya Muni* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1878), whose second chapter (“The Penance of Buddha”) contained much information about Buddha’s early life. This is the book that the young Akhandananda discovered Narendra studying on his first visit to him in the summer of 1883.

Ramakrishna himself is not known to have practiced Buddhism as a path to enlightenment, although he explored various Hindu paths as well as Islam and Christianity. Of course, Buddhism had almost completely disappeared from India centuries before, and this meant that Ramakrishna would not have had the opportunity of meeting a living Buddhist teacher in Calcutta or elsewhere; consequently, both the catalyst and the guidance would have been lacking for him to practice Buddhist sadhana. Nevertheless, we know that in the autumn of 1881 Ramakrishna asked Aswini Kumar Dutta to get him a picture of Buddha so he could add it to the pictures of avatars and divinities he displayed on the walls of his room at Dakshineswar; unfortunately, this request was never fulfilled, and no picture of Buddha is mentioned by M in his description of the pictures in Ramakrishna’s room for October 11, 1884.

However, precious indications concerning the relationship with Buddha on the part of both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda are to be found in M’s entries for April 9, 1886 at Cossipore. It is in many ways a mysterious and puzzling scene. Ramakrishna had mentioned that Narendra had just returned from a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya, and M. began the conversation by asking Narendra about the “doctrines of Buddha.” Narendra replied that Buddha “could not express in words what he had realized by his tapasya. So people say he was an atheist.” Ramakrishna argued against this allegation, basing his argument on the general idea that a fully realized soul cannot be called an atheist;
otherwise, he seemed to manifest no particular knowledge of the actual teachings associated with Buddha. This seems to tally with his then asking Narendra “What did Buddha preach?” To this Narendra replied briefly, that “he did not discuss the existence or non-existence of God.” He then added—and we shall see later how central this was for what Nivedita called Vivekananda’s “passionate personal adoration of Buddha”—“but he showed compassion for others all his life.” Narendra illustrated this point by citing an example taken not from the life of the historical Buddha, but rather from one of his past lives as recounted in the *Jataka Stories* (in this case, the *Sibi Jataka*): “a hawk pounced upon a bird and was about to devour it. In order to save the bird, Buddha gave the hawk his own flesh.” (948) According to M, “Narendra became more and more enthusiastic about Buddha,” going so far as to compare Vyasa unfavorably with Buddha. The mystery of the scene deepened as Ramakrishna, after a long silence, asked Narendra by signs “whether he had seen a tuft of hair on Buddha’s head.” (948) To this strange query Narendra replied that Buddha “seems to have a sort of crown; his head seems to be covered by strings of rudraksha beads placed on top of one another.” In reply to Ramakrishna’s next question (“And his eyes?”), Narendra simply said that “they show he is in samadhi.”

The interpretation that seems to me to make best sense of this mysterious scene is that, whereas Narendra was probably describing a detail of a statue of the Buddha he had just seen at Bodh Gaya, Ramakrishna was probably referring to an actual vision he had had of the Buddha. The odd detail of the “tuft of hair” reminds one of Saradananda’s account of how Ramakrishna once described Jesus Christ’s nose as “a little flat” (*The Great Master*, 339); his description of this precise detail was clearly the result of an actual vision, not of the viewing of an iconic image. (Buddha’s “tuft of hair” cannot be confused with the Buddhist iconic *ushnisha*, which represents a kind of cranial bump symbolizing wisdom.) By contrast, Narendra’s description of “a sort of crown,” with Buddha’s head covered, as it were, “by strings of rudraksha beads placed one on top of another,” seems best to correspond to the frequent iconic representation of Buddha as having short tightly curled hair, falling down over his head like strings of beads. Such an iconic representation could easily have been seen by Narendra at Bodh Gaya on one or several statues of Buddha. After this, Ramakrishna seemed uninterested in pursuing the conversation with Narendra about Buddha any further. Instead, he smiled and said humorously “Well, here you have everything—even ordinary red lentils and tamarind. Isn’t that so?” It was as though Ramakrishna were concerned with keeping his beloved disciple from becoming too enthused about Buddha, by whom Narendra was obviously quite attracted; rather, he wished to keep his heart and mind focused on his own teacher, who provided everything he needed in the way of spiritual inspiration and guidance.

Ramakrishna’s concern is all the more understandable because we know that Vivekananda, during his school years and sometime before his first pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya in early 1886, had had a vision that he later interpreted as a vision of Buddha.

While at school, one night I was meditating within closed doors and had a fairly deep concentration of mind. How long I meditated in that way, I cannot say. It was over, and I still kept my seat, when from the southern wall of that room a luminous figure stepped out and stood in front of me. There was a wonderful radiance on its visage, yet there seemed no play of emotion on it. It was the figure
of a Sannyasin absolutely calm, shaven-headed, and staff and Kamandalu in hand. He gazed at me for some time and seemed as if he would address me. I too gazed at him in speechless wonder. Then a kind of fright seized me; I opened the door, and hurried out of the room.\textsuperscript{xi}

If we juxtapose with this vision his first pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya in early 1886, his conversation with Ramakrishna cited above, and the many enthusiastic tributes to Buddha scattered throughout his works, we can conclude that Vivekananda’s relationship with Buddha was indeed unique. If one remembers that his last religious pilgrimage was to Bodh Gaya, and that he arrived there on the morning of his last birthday, then one may be ready to entertain seriously the idea that Buddha had been a powerful guiding force throughout his life. It is even possible that Vivekananda’s ideal of uniting spiritual struggle with service to the sick and the poor, which became the hallmark of the Ramakrishna Math as well as the inspiration for innumerable lay devotees, was an example of this. Although the inspiration of Ramakrishna certainly lay behind the ideal of the service of God in Man, it is not unreasonable to also see here at work the inspiration of Buddha, whose own boundless compassion for suffering humanity (“he showed compassion for others all his life,” as Vivekananda had emphasized to Ramakrishna) had found continuing expression notably in the tradition of Buddhist charitable social work. This ideal of active compassion was emphasized over and over again in the Buddhist scriptures, including the \textit{Lalita Vistara} (an early versified life of Buddha) that Vivekananda had had his brother monks read with him already in 1887.\textsuperscript{xii} As is well known, Vivekananda’s project of encouraging the young monks of the Ramakrishna Math to combine contemplative sadhana with active service to the poor and afflicted met with some degree of resistance from those who had known Ramakrishna well, and who could say with some justification that they had never heard the Master propose anything like it. But it could well have been Buddha who also provided Vivekananda with a long forgotten example of putting this novel ideal of service at the center of spiritual life and struggle. Thus Vivekananda once stated boldly that “the Lord once more came to you as Buddha and taught you how to feel, how to sympathize with the poor, the miserable, the sinner; but you [Hindus] heard him not.” \textsuperscript{xiii}

Or again, writing on July 4, 1897 from Almora, he underlined the link between this new spiritual ideal and the antecedent provided by early Buddhism’s active compassion: “Just now I am very busy with the famine . . . The ‘feeding work’ is absorbing all my energy. Although we can work only on a very small scale as yet, the effect is marvelous. For the first time since the days of Buddha, Brahmin boys are found nursing by the bedsides of stricken Pariahs.\textsuperscript{xiv}

There is thus an important thread running through Vivekananda’s life that leads back directly to Buddha. Among many striking examples of this, it is good to remember that on August 7, 1895, the day before he left Thousand Island Park, Vivekananda went with two disciples for a walk in the woods and, according to Nikhilananda, sat under a low-branched tree. The Swami suddenly said to them: “Now we shall meditate. We shall be like Buddha under the Bo-
“He became as still as a bronze statue. A thunderstorm came up and it poured; but the Swami did not notice anything.”

Nikhilananda adds that “it is reported that one day at Thousand Island Park he experienced nirvikalpa samādhi.” It is possible that this happened on this very spot, where today devotees can visit the rock on which he and his disciples sat and meditated, and can even see what remains of the “Bo-tree.”

Much more could be said about Vivekananda’s admiration for Buddha’s utter selflessness and infinitely compassionate heart, not only as regards people’s spiritual misery but also their physical misery. Much more could be said about Vivekananda’s praise of Buddha’s clear-sighted analysis of the human condition, free of all sentimentality and superstition, and about his calling attention to Buddha’s great contribution to the spiritual heritage of India. And recently Swami Ranganathananda has boldly called attention to the evils that have resulted from “the banishment of the Buddha spirit, of the Buddha heart, from the thought and practice of our country”—another topic well worth developing.

But I would like to end this essay with a short discussion of another topic relating to Vivekananda’s life and his unique relationship with Buddha. Near the very end of his life, Vivekananda took care of a small menagerie of animals. It is heartwarming to imagine him at Belur Math, as Swami Nikhilananda has described him, happily surrounded by his pet animals:

the dog Bagha, the she-goat Hansi, an antelope, a stork, several cows and sheep and ducks and geese, and a kid named Matru who was adorned with a collar of little bells, and with whom the Swami ran and played like a child. The animals adored him, Matru, the little kid, who had been—so he pretended—a relation of his in a previous existence, slept in his room. When it died he grieved like a child and said to a disciple: “How strange! Whomsoever I love dies early.”

Now what is worthy of note in some of Vivekananda’s many references to Buddha is his joy in pointing out Buddha’s compassion for animals—an extreme compassion that in one case led him to offer himself as a substitute sacrifice in order to save the life of a sacrificial goat, or, as in the case of the Jataka story to which Narendra alluded in his conversation with Ramakrishna, to offer his own flesh to a hawk in order to save a bird. Vivekananda refers more than once to these stories; they really seem to have captured his imagination. For most modern people such stories might seem of slight importance for the understanding of Buddha and his teachings. They were clearly important for Vivekananda, however. His love for his animals offers an unexpected glimpse into the depths of his heart. Nothing is trivial in the life of a great soul. The picture we have of Swamiji surrounded by his pets at the very end of his life, charming though it is, can be also taken as potentially significant in two different ways. First of all, because it shows Vivekananda spontaneously practicing a particularly Buddhist form of compassion; like the Buddha himself (as Vivekananda had remarked on more than one occasion), he has clearly and openly extended his love to animals, not just to fellow human beings. Secondly, in so doing, Vivekananda may be seen as bringing his own spiritual life to a state of completion. Having “fallen in love with Man,” as he had said of himself earlier, he is now prompted, at this final stage of his life, to take a loving
interest in animals as well. This demonstrates once again how Vivekananda never ceases to provide us all with new insight and inspiration.

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6. Ibid., p. 606.
7. Ibid., p. 947.
8. Ibid., p. 948.
9. Ibid., 948-9.
10. Ibid., p. 949.
14. Ibid., p. 248