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Ideological Convergence and Rupture: Anagarika Dharmapala and Swami Vivekananda from Chicago (1893) to India (1897)

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Abstract

This research paper examines in detail the ideological relationship between Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) and Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), beginning with their historic meeting at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and culminating in their sharp ideological rupture after Vivekananda's return to India in 1897. While both figures initially expressed deep admiration for each other and shared a global platform that promoted the universality of Indian spiritual traditions, their later paths diverged fundamentally. Dharmapala dedicated his life to the revival of Buddhism as an autonomous, rational, ethical, and anti-caste tradition rooted in the Buddha's teachings, whereas Vivekananda gradually committed himself to the revival of Vedanta and Brahmanical Hinduism as the spiritual core of Indian nationalism. By synchronizing speeches, letters, memoirs, and scholarly interpretations, this paper argues that the deterioration of their relationship was neither accidental nor personal, but ideological—arising from irreconcilable views on Buddhism's historical role, its relationship with Hinduism, and the future spiritual identity of India.

Keywords: Anagarika Dharmpala, Swami Vivekananda, Buddhist Revivalism, Ideological Divergence, Parliament of Religion

Introduction

The late nineteenth century was a period of intense religious, intellectual, and political ferment in colonial South Asia. Under British rule, Indian and Sri Lankan thinkers sought to reinterpret their traditions in response to Western modernity,

Christian missionary critique, Orientalist scholarship, and internal social crises such as caste oppression and ritualism. Two towering figures of this era—Anagarika Dharmapala of Sri Lanka and Swami Vivekananda of India—emerged as global representatives of Asian spirituality at the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893.

At Chicago, Dharmapala and Vivekananda appeared as complementary voices.Both visionaries and contemporaries, who together participated in the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 – 'shared many similarities' (Y. K. Sinha, 2014). 'Dharmapala spoke on behalf of 475 million Buddhists around the world, however Vivekananda spoke on behalf of millions of Hindus in India' (Surendran Gitanjali, 2014). Vivekananda articulated a universalist vision of Hinduism grounded in Vedanta. Vivekananda himself told in one of his conversations with his followers in India that, 'it was proved that Hinduism was the greatest religion of the world' (Ganguli M.N., 1960), while Dharmapala attended the World Parliament of Religions, as a spokesman of Buddhism. His speech, made with eloquence and elegance, made such an impact on the non-Buddhist audience. Disanayaka J. B an emeritus professor and one of the leading authorities of the Sinhala language mentioned in his keynote speech that, 'Prof.Barrows who chaired the sessions is reported to have said that Dharmapala looked "like Christ in a saffron robe"! (Disanayaka, 2024). Both were celebrated in the Western press, both attracted large audiences, and both were seen as symbols of Asia's spiritual contribution to the modern world. Contemporary accounts and later scholarship suggest that they were deeply impressed by each other's intellectual depth, moral seriousness, and rhetorical power.

However, this early convergence soon dissolved. After Vivekananda's triumphant return to India in January 1897, his discourse on Buddhism changed significantly. Vivekananda was of the opinion that 'religion was not placed at the centre of Buddhism, and that despite its strong secular, ethical, and humanistic values, Buddhism partially failed in India (Vivekananda February 1897). He increasingly portrayed Buddhism as a historical failure in India, criticized contemporary Buddhist revival movements and the Theosophical Society, and asserted the supremacy of Vedanta and Brahmanical philosophy of Vedas as India's true and enduring spiritual foundation. According to him '…Vedanta, and this alone, and none else, can be the only scientific religion' (Vivekananda, 1897). These shifts deeply alienated Dharmapala, who had earlier defended Vivekananda publicly and regarded him as a fellow reformer. This paper seeks to trace, document, and critically analyse how and why this relationship deteriorated, emphasizing ideology rather than personality.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Anagarika Dharmapala and Swami Vivekananda has been substantial, particularly in studies of late nineteenth-century religious reform, nationalism, and the global transmission of Asian philosophies. However, a close review of the existing literature reveals that while both figures have been widely studied individually, their relationship, ideological interaction, and subsequent divergence have received limited and uneven attention. Most scholars have either emphasised cooperation and shared objectives or confined their analysis to the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, leaving the later phase of ideological disagreement largely unexplored.One of the important contributions in this area comes from SandagomiCoperahewa[1], who examined the interactions between Anagarika Dharmapala and Swami Vivekananda within the broader framework of Asian religious reform and anti-colonial resistance. Coperahewa's approach highlights the cooperative dimension of their relationship, particularly during the Chicago Parliament of

[1]*CoperahewaSandagomi, Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies (CCIS) University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2014.*

Religions. He presents both figures as representatives of a common Asian spiritual front responding to Western Christian dominance. While this perspective is valuable in understanding their early convergence, Coperahewa does not critically examine the later ideological tensions, especially after Vivekananda's return to India. As a result, the deeper conflict between Buddhist revivalism and Vedantic nationalism remains underdeveloped in his analysis.

Similarly, Y. K. Sinha[2] situates both Dharmapala and Vivekananda among a group of late nineteenth-century thinkers who contributed significantly to the philosophical foundations of modern India. Sinha treats them as parallel reformers engaged in spiritual reconstruction and cultural renaissance. His work emphasises their shared historical importance rather than their ideological differences. Like Coperahewa, Sinha's analysis tends to assume a harmonious relationship between the two figures and does not sufficiently address the structural and doctrinal contradictions between Dharmapala's Buddhist revival project and Vivekananda's Vedantic consolidation.

In contrast, Gitanjali Surendran[3] shifts the focus primarily toward Anagarika Dharmapala's later career. Her work offers a more detailed account of how Buddhism flourished in India and internationally under Dharmapala's leadership. She also highlights Dharmapala's growing influence in colonial Bengal, where he emerged as an important public intellectual and organiser. However, Surendran does not substantially engage with Dharmapala's relationship with Swami Vivekananda. The question of how Vivekananda's ideological shift affected or resisted Buddhist revival in India remains largely outside the scope of her study.

K. D. G. Wimalaratne[4] examines Swami Vivekananda's critique of Theosophical universalism and his efforts to assert a distinct Vedantic vision of Indian spirituality. Wimalaratne's analysis is useful in understanding Vivekananda's intellectual positioning against Theosophy and Western esotericism. However, his work does not address how this critique intersected with Dharmapala's Buddhist activities or how Vivekananda's evolving ideology influenced his stance toward the Buddhist revival movement in India. The relationship between Vivekananda's Vedantic turn and his response to Buddhism remains unexplored.

Sangharakshita[5], in his writings on modern Buddhist history, provides only a brief and limited account of the interaction between Dharmapala and Vivekananda. His references are largely confined to their meeting at the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893, without extending the analysis to their subsequent ideological divergence. As a result, the broader implications of their encounter for the future of Buddhism in India are not fully examined.

Overall, the existing scholarship reveals a significant research gap. While a few scholars acknowledge the interaction between Anagarika Dharmapala and Swami Vivekananda, most accounts remain limited to their initial convergence in Chicago and portray their relationship as broadly cooperative. Very few studies critically examine the post-1897 period, when Vivekananda returned to India and increasingly aligned himself with Vedanta, Brahmanism, and Hindu consolidation, while Dharmapala remained firmly committed to the revival of Buddhism as an independent and socially transformative tradition.

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[2]Sinha Y. K., Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies (CCIS) University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2014.

[3]Surendran Gitanjali,Anagarika Dharmapala and India: Efforts at Forging a Buddhist World, Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies (CCIS) University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2014.

[4]Wimalaratne K. D. G., Anagarika Dharmapala: His Contribution towards the 80 Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka and India, Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies (CCIS) University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2014.

[5]Sangharakshita, Anāgārika Dharmapāla a Biographical Sketch, Buddhist Publication Society Kandy, Ceylon, BPS Online Edition © (2008)

This paper seeks to address this gap by offering a historically grounded and ideologically critical analysis of the Dharmapala–Vivekananda relationship from Chicago (1893) to India (1897). By situating their interaction within the context of colonial knowledge production, Buddhist archaeological rediscovery, and nationalist religious politics, the study moves beyond celebratory or harmonising narratives. It argues that their divergence was neither accidental nor personal, but the result of fundamentally incompatible visions of Indian civilization—one rooted in Buddhist ethics and historical revival, and the other in Vedantic–Brahmanical consolidation.

Objectives of Research

1. To examine the historical and ideological relationship between Anagarika Dharmapala and Swami Vivekananda from the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago (1893) to Vivekananda's return to India (1897), with particular attention to the shift from early convergence to later ideological rupture.
2. To analyse how colonial knowledge production—especially the rediscovery of Buddhist India through archaeology, philology, and literature—shaped the Buddhist revival movement, and how Anagarika Dharmapala used this rediscovered past to promote Buddhism as an independent ethical and civilizational tradition in India.
3. To critically evaluate Swami Vivekananda's post-1897 Vedanticturn and its impact on the Buddhist revival in India.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and historical research methodology to analyse the ideological relationship between Anagarika Dharmapala and Swami Vivekananda within the broader context of colonial knowledge production and religious revival in late nineteenth-century India. The research is primarily interpretative in nature and is based on critical reading and analysis of both primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources include speeches, writings, and recorded statements of Anagarika Dharmapala and Swami Vivekananda, especially those related to the World's Parliament of Religions (1893) and Vivekananda's post-1897 writings after his return to India. Secondary sources consist of scholarly books, journal articles, biographies, and historical studies dealing with Buddhist revival, Vedantic nationalism, Theosophy, colonial archaeology, and Indian religious reform movements.

The study employs critical textual analysis and comparative ideological analysis to identify shifts in thought, points of convergence, and areas of ideological conflict between the two figures. All texts and ideas are examined within their historical context, taking into account British colonial rule, missionary activity, the archaeological rediscovery of Buddhist India, and the rise of nationalist religious politics.

This approach enables a systematic understanding of how competing civilizational visions shaped the Buddhist revival movement and the resistance it encountered in colonial India.

Significance of the Research

This research is important as it examines the largely understudied ideological relationship between Anagarika Dharmapala and Swami Vivekananda from their meeting in Chicago (1893) to Vivekananda's return to India (1897). While both initially shared mutual admiration and aimed to present Indian spiritual traditions globally, their later divergence reflects broader debates over religion, nationalism, and cultural revival under colonial rule.

By analysing Dharmapala's Buddhist revival efforts and Vivekananda's turn to Vedanta and Hinduism, the study highlights tensions between Buddhist reform movements and emerging Hindu nationalist ideologies. It also situates these developments within the colonial context, showing how archaeology, scholarly interventions, and global

networks shaped religious revival. This research fills a gap in scholarship by focusing on their evolving intellectual interactions, offering insights into modern Indian religious thought and inter-religious dynamics.

Scope and Limitation

This research focuses on the ideological relationship between Anagarika Dharmapala and Swami Vivekananda from their meeting at the Chicago Parliament (1893) to Vivekananda's return to India and turn toward Vedanta and Hindu revivalism (1897). It examines their interactions, speeches, writings, and correspondence, with a focus on Buddhist revival in India and Vivekananda's promotion of Hinduism, within the broader colonial context of rediscovered Buddhist heritage and global intellectual networks.

The study is limited by the scarcity of primary sources on their later interactions and relies mainly on published accounts, letters, and secondary scholarship. It is qualitative in nature, and some conclusions are drawn from interpretation rather than direct evidence of private dialogues or unpublished records.

Colonial Knowledge and the Return of a Forgotten Civilization

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, India's awakening under colonial rule was not limited to political resistance. It involved a profound civilizational rediscovery, catalysed by British scholarship that unintentionally destabilised Brahmanical historical dominance. Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist history became significant in European attempts to understand the Eastern mind[6]. The decipherment of Ashokan Brahmi inscriptions by James Prinsep (1836–1838)[7] revealed, for the first time, a historically verifiable Buddhist emperor King Asoka who ruled through dhamma, social welfare, moral governance, and religious tolerance. This discovery directly contradicted the Brahmanical narrative that positioned Vedic kingship and ritual authority as the sole foundations of Indian civilization.Amulyachandra Sen[8] propounded that, the discoveries of these inscriptions and their study have re-affirmed the glory and the esteem in which he has been held by the Buddhist world so as for many centuries.

This textual recovery was reinforced materially through the archaeological work of Alexander Cunningham, whose early Buddhist excavations from 1837, later institutionalised under the Archaeological Survey of India (1861), uncovered stupas, monasteries, universities, and inscriptions across the subcontinent. An archaeological survey of North India was officially instituted by the Indian Government in 1861, with major responsibility for its operation delegated to Sir Alexander Cunningham[9]. His work was essential in locating and interpreting important Buddhist sites, such as the well-known Sarnath and Bodh Gaya, which are essential to comprehending the historical progression of Buddhism (Smita Debnath, 2024). Sites such as Sarnath, Sanchi, Bodh Gaya, Nalanda, and Bharhut demonstrated that Buddhism had once been the dominant civilizational force in India, deeply embedded in social ethics, education, and governance. Cunningham's excavations and discoveries at sites like Sarnath and Sanchi were pivotal in revealing India's rich Buddhist heritage (Smita Debnath, 2024).

The global and Indian popularisation of this rediscovered past came through Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (1879). Arnold's portrayal of the Buddha as a rational, compassionate, and universal moral teacher transformed the Buddha into a civilizational symbol of India itself. Importantly, this

[6]*Miller Robert. J, Background to Buddhist Resurgence: India and Ceylon, Studies on Asia,1966, p.40*
[7]*SenAmulyachandra,Asoka's Edicts, Institute of Indology, 1956, pp. 1*
[8]*Ibid, pp. 2*
[9]*Miller Robert. J, Background to Buddhist Resurgence: India and Ceylon, Studies on Asia,1966, p.40*

image reached Indian readers, challenging centuries of Brahmanical erasure.This colonial rediscovery created a historical opening: Buddhism could now re-enter India not as a foreign religion but as an authentic indigenous tradition, ethically superior and socially emancipatory. It was within this context that Anagarika Dharmapala emerged as the most articulate and determined agent of Buddhist revival.

Chicago Encounter, 1893: Shared Platform and Mutual Admirationat the World's Parliament of Religions

In September 1893, Anagarika Dharmapala and Swami Vivekananda both addressed the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Dharmapala attended as the representative of "Southern Buddhism,"[10]the contemporary term for Theravāda Buddhism, sponsored by Colonel Henry Steel Olcott of the Theosophical Society. Vivekananda represented Hinduism and quickly became the most celebrated speaker of the Parliament.

Dharmapala delivered influential lectures such as *The World's Debt to Buddha* and *Buddhism and Christianity*[11], in which he presented Buddhism as a comprehensive ethical system and a sublime psychology, grounded in reason rather than revelation. He emphasized the Buddha's rejection of a creator-God and argued that modern science was preparing Western minds for Buddhist insight.Vivekanandaon the other hand, delivered lectures on the Buddha, including his famous address *Buddhism, the Fulfilment of Hinduism*, where he declared: "I am not a Buddhist, as you have heard, and yet I am." (Vivekananda, 1893). He portrayed the Buddha as the logical culmination of Hindu thought and praised his compassion for the poor and marginalized.

Dharmapala listened spellbound to Vivekananda's speeches and later offered his own speaking slot to him—an act widely cited as evidence of Dharmapala's humility and genuine admiration.Rev. H. R Haweis[12] mentioned that Anagarika, followed Vivekananda, and, speaking in the same sense, denounced the missionaries. After returning to Calcutta, Dharmapala delivered a lecture at the Minerva Theatre explicitly praising Vivekananda's success and impact in America. Bhante Sangharakshita[13] noted in this writing that, unlike some other religious leaders, Dharmapāla did not feel jealous or competitive. He did not try to put others down. Instead, he openly appreciated the good work done by other religious workers and even encouraged people to notice and respect their achievements.

Vivekananda's Pro-Buddhist Phase in America

Between 1893 and 1896, Vivekananda's American lectures consistently reflected a deep admiration for the Buddha and Buddhism. In Detroit, Baltimore, San Francisco, and Chicago, he described the Buddha as the greatest ethical teacher of humanity, one who opposed caste, priestcraft, and meaningless ritual. In Detroit, he stated that "Gautama Buddha became disgusted with the caste systemand he was against the tremendous priestcraft.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 (Vivekananda, 1894). Vivekananda further continued that, "Buddha preached a religion in which there was no motive power, and was perfectly agnostic about metaphysics or theories about God… rather he thrust on a simple principle "Do good and be good"[14]. In Baltimore, he famously remarked that the "Buddha seems to have

[10]CoperahewaSandagomi,Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies (CCIS) University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2014.
[11]GurugeAnanda, Return to righteousness, Govertment Press Colombo, 1965, pp.3
[12]Haweis H. R, Travel and Talk by Chatto Windus, London and Dodd, Mead, & Company New York. 1897
[13]Sangharakshita, Anāgārika Dharmapāla A Biographical Sketch, Buddhist Publication Society Kandy, Ceylon, BPS Online Edition © (2008), pp.31.
[14]The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Advaita Ashrama, 1947, p.62

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". (Vivekananda, 21 Oct.1984),

In this speech Swami Vivekananda 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.

Even during his second visit to America (1899–1900), Vivekananda gave his longest lecture on the Buddha in San Francisco on 18 March 1900. By that time, he was famous worldwide. This shows that when speaking in America, Vivekananda openly praised the Buddha and his teachings, reflecting a different approach from his speeches in India. He stated that "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" (Vivekananda, 1900).

Vivekananda in his speech at Chicago congress in 1893praised the Buddha's decision to teach in Pāli rather than Sanskrit, emphasizing that this act made the Dhamma accessible to ordinary people. Vivekananda endorsed that, "Buddha refused, saying that his mission was for the masses, not the elites. This decision helped Buddhism spread widely and quickly among common people" (Vivekanada,1893). He repeated in his deliverables in Chicago congress that "…Shākya Muni came not to destroy, but he was the fulfilment, the logical conclusion, the logical development of the religion of the Hindus" (Vivekanada,1893). He further praised, 'Thegreat glory of the Master lay in his wonderful sympathy for everybody, especially for the ignorant and the poor' (Vivekanada,1893).

Vivekananda, 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. He described Buddhism as the most powerful missionary movement the world had ever seen, spreading Indian wisdom across Asia and parts of Europe. These statements placed Vivekananda ideologically close to Dharmapala's own critique of Brahmanism and caste hierarchy.

Anagarika Dharmapala and the Buddhist Revival MovementRevival of Buddhism in India

Formerly known as David Hewavitharne, Anagarika Dharmapala emerged as one of the most influential Buddhist revivalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He played a decisive role in the revival and modernization of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka and became a central figure in the reintroduction of Buddhism to India, where it had largely disappeared as a living tradition.

In 1891, Dharmapala founded the Maha Bodhi Society of India, with the primary aim of reclaiming Buddhist sacred sites such as Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kusinara. His work coincided with a growing interest in Buddhism among the Bengali middle classes in Calcutta, decades before the mass conversion movement led by B. R. Ambedkar in 1956. Dharmapala's efforts also inspired early Dalit and Tamil Buddhist movements in South India.

Dharmapala's interpretation of Buddhism emphasized ethics, rationality, non-violence, and social equality. For Dharmapala, Buddhism was not merely a spiritual path but a moral and social alternative capable of addressing caste oppression and ethical decay in Indian society. Anagarika expressed, "Buddha's mission of love and wisdom with announcement of gift of immortality to those who were willing to listen to the noble doctrine of eternal freedom from sin and sorrow, from hearted and lust and from ignorance".[15]According to Anagarika Dharmapala[16], the idea of an immanent

[15]*Anagarika Dharmapala, The Arya Dharma of Shakyamuni Gautam Buddha, Mahabodhi society, 1917, p.50*
[16]*Anagarika Dharmapala, Life and teaching of Buddha 1912, pp. 37*

Absolute that Buddhism opposed was primarily a concept of Brahmanical theosophy. He rejected the Brahmanical assimilation of the Buddha as an avatar of Vishnu and insisted on Buddhism's autonomy as a distinct religious and philosophical system. In the speeches of other conteporarry nationalists view expressed that the root of Buddhism can also be traced in Vedas. According to Vivekananda Buddhism is one of our sects (Vivekananda, 1894). Vivekananda asserted that "The essence of Buddhism was all borrowed from the same Upanishads; even the ethics, the so-called great and wonderful ethics of Buddhism, were there word for word, in some one or other of the Upanishads" (Vivekananda, 1897). Anagarika outrightly rejected that, Buddha borrowed his teaching from Vedas and Upanishads'[17].

Vivekananda's Return to India and Ideological Reorientation (1897) from Universalism to Vedantic Nationalism

When Vivekananda returned to India in early 1897, he was celebrated as a national hero. In lectures such as *My Plan of Campaign*[18], delivered in Madras in February 1897, he declared that India's regeneration must begin with religion, specifically Vedanta. Social and political reforms, he argued, would fail unless grounded in spiritual revival. He also mentioned categoriacally that, "the essence of Buddhism was all borrowed from the same Upanishads; even the ethics, the so-called great and wonderful ethics of Buddhism, were there word for word, in some one or other of the Upanishads" (Vivekananda, 1897).

In this phase, we observe through the study of his speeches that Vivekananda increasingly framed Buddhism as a historical failure in India. He claimed that, 'the Buddhist movement partly failed because it did not sufficiently combine spiritual religion with worldly life' (Vivekananda, 1897).While continuing to praise the Buddha as an individual, he criticized Buddhism for rejecting God and the soul, abandoning Sanskrit, and weakening India's cultural continuity. Vivekananda in the world congress of religion in Chicago 1893 appreciated decision of the Buddha that,'he did a great and noble thing by teaching in Pāli, the common language of the people, instead of Sanskrit, which only educated elites knew. Because of this, ordinary people could understand his message easily, and Buddhism spread very fast and far. Buthowever, when he was in India at the later period Vivekananda pointed out that in his address at Chennai that, "a mistake happened later when the study of Sanskrit was completely stopped. According to him, Sanskrit was not just a language but a carrier of culture, depth, and intellectual prestige. People received Buddhist ideas and moral teachings, but they did not inherit a strong cultural and educational foundation along with them" (Vivekananda, 1997). While explaining why Buddhism declined in India, he said that Buddhist followers failed to defeat the strong philosophical influence of the Vedas. At the same time, Buddhism removed the idea of an eternal God that people emotionally depended on. Because of this double failure—philosophical resistance from Vedic tradition and loss of a personal God for the masses—Buddhism gradually disappeared from India on its own.He argued that 'Buddhism deprived India of an "eternal God" to whom the masses cling, leading to its natural decline'.[19]

Anagarika Dharmapala strongly rejected the idea of a natural decline. He maintained adifferent view over the decline of Buddhism in India. According to him, "Buddhism in India did not fade away on its own but was forcefully destroyed during the medieval period. The decline of Buddhism was largely the result of foreign invasions, particularly

[17]*Ibid, pp. 63*
[18]*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,vol. 6, Advaita AshramaCalcutta,1989, p. 1401*
[19]*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,vol. 6, Advaita AshramaCalcutta,1989, p.36*

those originating from Arabia and partially Brahmanical resurgence in ancient India." [20]

Critique of Buddhism and Buddhist Institutions by Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda in his address at the Chicago Conference, Vivekananda claimed that Hinduism and Buddhism were mutually dependent. He portrayed Buddhism as lacking philosophical depth without Brahmanical thought, while depicting Brahmanism as morally incomplete without Buddhist compassion. Vivekananda criticized on Buddhist principle of non-killing- 'Buddhism tried to enforce non-killing as a universal rule through legislation, without considering the practical needs and capacities of all people. Buddhism has brought ruin upon India'[21]. According to him, this rigid approach harmed society and weakened India. He further argued that "the historical separation of Buddhists and Brahmins was responsible for India's decline. That is why India has been the slave of conquerors for the past 1000 years." (Vivekananda, 1895). Vivekakanada see Buddhism from the Vedic Brahmanical lenses. To him Buddhism is the product of Vedanta Brahmanism. According to him Buddhism was almost modern[22], however Dharmapala's broader intellectual project of presenting "Buddhism as the most ancient and rational religious tradition" (Dharmapala, 1917).

He also felt that Buddhism became corrupted by improper rituals, and because of this degeneration, its decline was unavoidable. While Vivekananda expressed personal reverence for the Buddha as a moral teacher and even accepts him as an incarnation within Hinduism, he simultaneously rejects Buddhism as an independent religious and ethical system (Vivekanand, 1897).

Theosophists played a pivotal role in the late 19th and early 20th-century Buddhist revival movement, particularly in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), Japan, and in the popularization of Buddhism in the West. Founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, the Theosophical Society sought to revive ancient religions, advocating for a rationalized form of Buddhism free from "folk superstitions". The Theosophist, appeared in October, 1879; branches of the Society were established in many parts of India and Ceylon. and in general. In June 1880, the founders Madame Blavatsky and Olcott publically converted to Buddhism.[23]

Vivekananda dismissed contemporary Buddhists and Theosophists as irrelevant, stating bluntly that "in India Theosophists and Buddhists are nonentities" (Vivekananda, 1897). He also criticised that, "Modern Theosophy is Mrs. Besant. Blavatskism and Olcottism seem to have taken a back seat." (Vivekanand, 1897).He argued that Shankaracharya restored India's spiritual vitality by demonstrating the superiority of Vedanta over Buddhism.

The Ideological Rupture with Dharmapala

The decisive break between Dharmapala and Vivekananda is best documented in Vivekananda's letter to Mrs. Ole Bull dated 8 May 1897. In this letter, Vivekananda admitted: "I was one man in America and another here" (Vivekananda, 1897). He explained that he was now consciously working for Vedanta and Brahmanical philosophy, which he believed more suitable for Indian society. He openly criticized Buddhists, Theosophists, and Anagarika Dharmapala, describing them as overly Europeanized and culturally alien.

[20]This statement of Vincent Smith was quoted by Anagarika in his Arya Dharma and Shakyamuni Gautama Buddha, 1917, p. 191
[21]The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,vol. 6, Advaita AshramaCalcutta,1989, p.1741
[22]The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,vol. 6, Advaita AshramaCalcutta,1989, p.6
[23]Johnson K. P., The Masters Revealed, Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication,1953, p.189

Mrs. Ole Bull who has financially helped Swami Vivekaknada, wrote him informing about Anagarika Dharmapala's anger and dissatisfaction with Vivekananda's activities and speeches in India, particularly his controversial remarks on Buddhism. She pointed out that Vivekananda's post-1893 speeches appeared very different from the way he had spoken about Buddhism while in America. In response, Vivekananda wrote back to her on 8 May 1897, stating very clearly: "I was one man in America and another here. Here the whole nation is looking upon me as their authority; there I was a much-reviled preacher."[24] He explained that the difference was due to the different social and political contexts in which he was working. In the same correspondence, Vivekananda admitted that he had completely abandoned his earlier sympathetic ideas about Buddhism, stating that he now understood why Buddhism had disappeared from India. He expressed a distinctly negative and hostile view of contemporary Buddhist practices, describing them as involving "ugly idols" and "immoral rituals", and went so far as to say that he would be glad if whatever remained of this religion in India were removed to Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

This letter marks a decisive shift in Vivekananda's position, revealing a sharp contrast between his inclusive rhetoric in America and his assertive Vedantic–Brahmanical stance in India after 1897. Vivekananda later expressed his views in the Chennai speech in 1897 in sharply hostile terms that, if his health allowed, he would have "cleared India by this time of these upstart humbugs." He further asserted that "India is already Ramakrishna's," adding that his work was directed toward establishing what he described as a purified form of Hinduism (Vivekanada, 1897). Although he consistently professed deep personal reverence for the Buddha, Vivekananda also stated that he found little to admire in contemporary Ceylonese Buddhism. He criticised Anagarika Dharmapala and other Buddhists for what he perceived as excessive European influence, noting that "the Buddhists are all much Europeanised; even Mr. Dharmapala and his father had European names, which they have since changed"(Vivekananda, 1897).

He went so far as to state that, 'he would be glad if whatever remained of Buddhism in India were removed to Ceylon' (Vivekananda, 1897, Chennai). Although he maintained personal reverence for the Buddha, he dismissed contemporary Ceylonese Buddhism as degenerate and morally compromised.

While in America, Vivekananda expressed admiration for the Buddhist principle of non-killing. However, his position in India differed significantly. Recalling his first meeting with Swami Vivekananda at Trivandrum in December 1892, K. Sundarama Iyer[25] records that Vivekananda argued that the ancient Brahmins of India consumed meat, including beef, and were even expected to kill cows and other animals in ritual contexts such as *yajñas* or in the offering of *madhuparka*[26] to guests (Sundarama Iyer, 1923).Vivekananda further contended that the spread of Buddhism gradually led to the decline of flesh-eating practices, despite the fact that Hindu *śāstras* had only expressed a theoretical preference for vegetarianism. He maintained that the growing disapproval of meat consumption weakened national vitality and ultimately contributed to the political decline and loss of independence of the ancient Hindu races and states of India (K. Sundarama Iyer, 1923).

[24]The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,vol. 6, Advaita AshramaCalcutta,1989, p.6. (Vivekananda's Letter to Mrs. Ole Bull, 8 May 1897)

[25]Iyar Sundarama, Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda, The Life of Swami Vivekananda, first edition, Volume IV, Appendix I, 1923.

[26]Madhuparka - The ceremony of madhuparka is notable in this context. The madhuparka ceremony seems to have been very old because the custom of entertaining a distinguished guest with beef is found both in the Satapatha Brahmanaand the Aitareya Brahmanaand it was in all likelihood known also in the Rgvedic period.https://vedkabhed.com/index.php/2018/01/01/meat-consumption-in-hinduism/, January 1, 2018

Here, Vivekananda appears to suggest that Buddhism was a cause of the weakening of the nation. On the one hand, he praises Buddhist principles, while on the other, he attributes India's political decline and subjugation to those very Buddhist values. This dual position makes Swami Vivekananda's statements on Buddhism appear contradictory and conceptually confusing.

Dharmapala's Disillusionment

Dharmapala, who had earlier defended Vivekananda during controversies in Calcutta, felt deeply betrayed. According to Sangharakshita, Dharmapala was straightforward, honest, and open in nature, and he strongly disliked dishonesty and manipulation. Vivekananda's post-1897 stance confirmed Dharmapala's fear that Hindu revivalism aimed not at coexistence but at assimilation and erasure of Buddhism.

Sangharakshita[27] noted that when serious allegations were made against Swami Vivekananda in Calcutta, it was Anagarika Dharmapāla who came forward and defended him publicly with such intensity that Vivekananda's popular reputation was swiftly restored. For Dharmapāla, loyalty during times of adversity was the true measure of friendship. Yet this same depth of commitment later became a source of deep disappointment, when he later realised that some of those he had defended, supported, and trusted were speaking against him in private and secretly working to undermine his efforts. Frank, honest, and outspoken by nature, Dharmapāla strongly detested all forms of deceit, manipulation, and intrigue.

Analysis: Ideological Conflict, Not Personal Rivalry

The rupture between Dharmapala and Vivekananda was fundamentally ideological. Dharmapala viewed Buddhism as an independent ethical tradition rooted in historical reality and social reform. Vivekananda increasingly viewed Buddhism as a subordinate or incomplete system whose historical role had ended. Where Dharmapala emphasized external historical factors—such as institutional destruction and political hostility—in explaining Buddhism's decline, Vivekananda focused almost exclusively on internal degeneration.

Vivekananda's assimilationist claim that Hinduism could absorb Buddhism while denying its autonomy reflected a deeply Brahmanical framework. His critique extended not only to ancient Buddhism but also to modern Buddhist revival movements, which he regarded as contradictory to his Vedantic nationalist project.

Conclusion

The relationship between Anagarika Dharmapala and Swami Vivekananda illustrates the tensions inherent in religious revival movements under colonial conditions. Their meeting at Chicago in 1893 symbolized a moment of unity and shared purpose in presenting Asian spirituality to the world. Yet their subsequent divergence reveals two fundamentally different visions for India's spiritual future.

Dharmapala sought the restoration of Buddhism as a living, autonomous, and socially transformative tradition in its land of origin. Vivekananda, especially after 1897, sought the consolidation of Indian identity around Vedanta and Brahmanical Hinduism. The spoiling of their relationship was therefore not personal but ideological, reflecting deeper conflicts over history, authority, and the meaning of India's spiritual heritage.

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