SYNCRETISM: MEANS TO OVERCOME THE BUDDHIST MENTALITY OF SECTARIANISM

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ABSTRACT
This paper highlights the complexities, common people are facing in terms of the diverse phase of Buddhist sectarianism. The teaching of the Buddha has been though simple yet, so abstruse and hard to actualize. The root of the Teachings has been simple indeed, yet, the manifestation (in the forms of schools and sub-schools) is highly vexed and hard to comprehend. Though, the aim of every Buddhist follower is to make the teachings clear and simple for the seekers of Truth, yet the variations of insights make a lot difference. Owing to this variation, it is natural to have complexity in every term; as faith, philosophy and culture or traditions. In the Buddhist context, till date lot of work has been carried out by scholars and thinkers to propagate and interpret the real essence of the Buddha’s teachings with their own levels of insight, yet the result of such action had taken an extensive form (i.e. In the form of different sects or tradition) somehow weigh harder on the back of budding practitioners to imbibe the true essence of the Buddha’s teaching. If we went through Buddhist contexts, we could find so many ideals which were found established into many different abodes of sectarianism. The ideal in general is the fragmented ideas or a thought which holds a genuine validation for applying in one’s life. However, most of the time we failed to scan the true vision or essence of these traditions which make us caught under the grip of various inter as well as intra-traditional conflicts. Such kinds of conflict make the pure teaching at stake and a practitioner handicapped and vulnerable to certain diseases of self created doubt, hatred and blind judgments.

Hence, in order to maintain the pure flow of Dhamma within all those traditions as well as to prevent oneself from such biased or conflicted waves of sectarianism, I tried here to recommend the concept of Syncretism and its different modes of application as it seems one of the sensible approach or possibility, to save oneself as well as the pure Dhamma from those extreme fights of Sectarianism.
I. WHAT IS SYNCRETISM

The term ‘Syncretism’ is the combining of different, often seemingly contradictory beliefs, while melding or merging practice of various schools of thoughts. It also involves the merging of several discrete ideas or thoughts to create unity and provide new way or practical approach to achieve the particular goal. The term Syncretism was probably coined by Plutarch to investigate the synchronization of Roman and Hellenistic elements in the Church in the early days and it is mostly employed in the religious or Anthropological studies to combine different religious or spiritual practices without affecting the root of their traditions.

A through case study was made by the group of different authors (in the CRESC working paper no. 119) in which they try to highlight the concept of Syncretism and its different modes of application through different fields or profession. As far as the religious studies are concerned, two methods have been mentioned in their paper i.e. normative or descriptive modes. The normative is used for maintaining certain boundaries or to prevent the purity of doctrine, while descriptive is used to define the messy process of different religious background for temporarily coexistence.

Here, in this field of Buddhist philosophy, both methods are applicable because the ground, which I have taken up here, is the Mind of every individual to operate these different modes of Syncretism so that one can counter those negative impacts of severe sectarianism as well as philosophical diversions in an easy manner. Moreover, the idea of Syncretism works well when it applies mentally rather than physically because what we could operate here in this particular field is— the mind. Therefore, the idea of Syncretism is moreover an option for a mind to coordinate all those ideals rationally or in other words, to create a unanimous attitude towards everything apart from traditional differences. So that it could broaden the narrow attitude of mind and provide a mental space or capacity to see vividly, the differences and accept it unanimously.

Today, the problem is not because of lack in terms of the propagation of Dhamma or particular institution, but due to lack in showing the proper pathway of application. People knew everything, however, failed to discern things when it
comes for self application. They went on stuffing the outside wisdom that they overlook the wisdom that is sparkling within. In the search of proper wisdom they reached up to the supreme of Buddha wisdom, unfortunately the wisdom of the Buddha even failed to provide the true wisdom for those who did not know how to look within or how to generate one’s own wisdom. Because, at the very end, we would come to know that it is not the Buddha’s wisdom, but our own wisdom which is the truest board of liberation. Unfortunately, even after the thousand command of the Buddha, we mistook his command and that way we make ourselves caught under this messy web of Samsara. Therefore, the problems of present days is not because of lack of knowledge or lack of having a proper institution or person to institutionalized, but because of lack in our mind; a lacuna in terms of proper awareness, skill and more importantly the lack of proper mental space and flexibility. We could understand this very easily by seeing the young minds of today’s generation. What they need is not knowledge; they are already stuffed up by so many fields of different knowledge, but something which shows them how to generate practically those essences of ancient wisdom. From where do they get the true method or skill to incorporate those pure teachings of the Buddha so that he/she could also at once, without any further deviation embark upon those true wisdom to generate the very first light of his own self experienced wisdom or Bhavanamayi Panna. These are the challenge for true Dhamma seekers, but the task gets more challenging when he comes in contact with the waves of different sectarianism.

If we scanned the time of the Buddhist Sangha before 2500 years we could see the continual process or succession of various insights in the form various sects or sub sects at that particular time also. The text Kathavatthu, reflects the history of the formation of eighteen different sects or schools during the mid- phase of 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} Buddhist Councils.\textsuperscript{3}


If we scanned the scenario of present Buddhist Sangha, we could receive the same process of succession, but different in the form of maturity or levels of knowledge. At present we have following major different schools;


These are the major traditions of the Buddhism; however, there are several other sects or tradition which holds the same seed of Buddha’s teachings but differ very much in terms of practices. So now the one of the most common questions put up by a beginner or common practitioner is like;

1. What is the true or the pure teaching of the Buddha?

2. Which sect holds the true essence of Buddhism?

3. How to practice all those traditions in one single lifetime simultaneously?

4. What is the core of Buddhist teachings for self liberation?

These are the most common questions asked by the common or young novices. And I think these are very important questions which need to be resolved for them on time. Now here the point is people tend to get deviate by these different waves of Sectarianism as each sect enveloped some aspects or seeds of the Dhamma. Here, we could trace the two most common or possible ways to fall under this web of sectarian mode. Firstly, a person’s birth, rooted tradition, i.e. the tradition in which he/she borne and the second is a matter of choice, i.e. according to his choice of perception or perceptual take up regarding these traditions. Practitioner most of the time overlook the matter of choice and remained confined within the space of his birth tradition. So, here the problem arises when he encounters other traditional practices and the real problem begins when he started making judgments without proper analyze or investigation. However, sadly, but truly even after thousand trials of investigation, they still get involved in the fight for
traditional supremacy which is totally absurd and irrelevant. Therefore, the time has come for us to make our mind more aware and flexible with this new app or option available in the form of Syncretism, for self help as well as for the proper prevention of the pure Dharma from the discrepancies created by these deluded walls of Sectarianism.

II. MODES OF SYNCRETISM:

Generally, there are six modes of Syncretism such as; denial, domestication, separation, care, conflict and collapse. So in this case of the mind field all seems applicable. Generally, in Buddhism, there are two major idols; the idols of the Arahats and the Bodhisattvas. These idols, better to say ideals are actually the states of attainment in the course of enlightenment. However, unfortunately most of the time we come up by discussing them as the idols of particular traditions which is the root cause of Sectarianism. Having a sect or sectarian thought is good but idolizing them out of blind devotions lead to an inner or outer disharmony. There is the status of Arahathood, Bodhisattvas hood, and Thathgathood or Buddhahood. All are different stages of transformation (enlightenment) just as the life cycle of larva up to the full grown state of the butterfly. However, the followers of Buddhism deny this normal or single route of enlightenment. They attached to certain states or status and claim it as their only status and ultimately labeled them into a certain kind of traditions such as, Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana and so on. So, within these traditions, there are thousand different classes based on different views which are so abstruse and hard to comprehend. So here, most of the time, practitioners enter into the denial state of mind. They just deny other classes and accept what it seems to be true for him or his class only. Such state comes under the mode of denial zone because the practitioner just denies certain class or concepts without figuring out the exact cause of such denial state. For example, the Theravadins deny or non-acceptance of the concept of Bodhisattvayana also, the Mahayana exclusion of Theravadins opinion regarding the matter of self liberation.

The next mode, which I have taken up is the mode of Separation. In this mode, it is very simple to get directly on the points. On seeing, the mode of denial, the practitioners try to separate their class, which is based on different logic and
arguments. So, in order to create a harmony within ones and society and also to maintain a purity of their class, they have created a division which comes under the mode of *Separation* for instance, the division of the *Theravada* and *Mahasanghika traditions*. The separation was accepted to prevent the situation from uprising conflict, however, conflicts do arise either with the comparison or by suppression of different traditional practices. In other words, even after the separation of class conflict seems to crop up due to human nature or lack of maturity of human knowledge. So, here comes the mode of *conflict* in which practitioner fights for their purity, status or supremacy of their traditions, i.e. either through suppression or by comparison with other traditions.

For example, the very simple example is that of the ideals of the Arahat and the Bodhisattva. People separated them according to their traditions, which prevent the masses to see the true essence of their status. So, whenever we think of the Arahata, we think of a liberated being full of wisdom with no traces of defilements, we pay due respect to them but we considered them as little lower than that of the Bodhisattvas. Although, it is true, the process of the Arahata state occurs before the state of Bodhisattvas, but erections of so many boundaries or walls of tradition seem rather illogical and quite confusing as it blocks the process, to have a continuous flow. The real problem is not in erecting walls or temples of different traditions, but rather the erection of mental or emotional rigidity with those traditions. The point is, our mind gets confined to only our own tradition which prevent the truth of another tradition to come across our mind. Even if it crossed, we mostly failed to see their tradition as such. We failed to create a unanimous outlook to take the whole process of enlightenment as such. We failed to see it as one process because of the vastness of outside traditions or sectarianism. We easily get lost in the mashup of different sectarianism that we failed to navigate our mind to the one single course or process of transformation. This is about the two major traditions; the Theravada and the Mahayana, but things get more abstruse when we dive into the core of their sub-sect or sub-traditions.

Hence, to come out of such state or situation, we need to take the help of the fourth modes of Syncretism i.e. *Care*. The mode of *Care* is all about tinkering or fixing the things which is not functioning properly. So, in this case, tinkering of different views or logic of traditions and I think it is one of the best or sensible approach to
save the pure Dharma from the clouds of sectarianism. So, instead of passing critical judgment we need to take care and fix those defects portion of schools or traditions. In order to taste the real essence of the Buddha Dharma, we need to either fixed those extracted portions without rooting out the base of sectarianism.

Sectarianism or having different sect is good as far as it does not overlap. With the help of different Sectarianism we get a fine, super fine pathways of liberation, but a proper Care must be required to prevent them from overlapping or exaggerating their elements of sectarianism. Hence, a sort of tinkering or fixation is highly required to save the Buddha Dharma as well as oneself from the different waves of sectarianism. So, these are the different means or possibilities in which we can secularize our mind and sync those necessary elements of sectarianism, without getting disturbed by the diversity of sectarianism.

III. BASIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE ORDINARY, ARAHAT AND THE BODHISATTVA’S MINDSETS:

The gross or distinguished characteristic of the ordinary practitioner, the Arahat and the Bodhisattvas’ are their mindsets. Generally, the mindset is a way of perspective or perceiving things.

- The first kind of mindset is fluctuating with causes and conditions or in other words feeble or weak minded.
- The second kind of mindset is same but this time, it is firm and permanent that no cause of mundane and supra mundane can falter or waver it. Such kind of mindset is possessed by the Arahat.
- The third kind of mindset is similar to that of Arahat but here out of compassion the perspective is so firm yet so widens that engulf the differences and weaknesses of all. Thus, a being of this category view one’s own self in another and vice –versa. In other words, he possesses no partial or distorted views; rather he views everything as one or whole. Such is the mindset of the Bodhisattvas undeterred yet incorrigible perspective.

Here we could see, all these mindsets are inter-related or interdependent on one another as each mindset is an example of the transformation of one individual from initial up to the final state. Each is the cause for other and a practitioner has to cross through all these mindsets to achieve the permanent state of Salvation.
However, most of the time we habitually take up the things on traditional level that prevent us to see the truth or reality of all these stages of transformation. So far as the mindsets are concerned, I think the mindsets of the Arahat and the Bodhisattva are far above this worldly concept. So they might have any problem or irritation about such diverse phase of sectarianism. So what is left is the ordinary mindset and it is very much the being of ordinary mind that are mostly engrossed in fight of traditional supremacy or propagation of their particular sect and traditions. For such kind of mind, it seems essential to get familiar with the true qualities of the Arahat and Bodhisattva. Because these are highly sacred beings and what they are fighting for is about these sacred ideals which somehow happens to be the root cause of the differentiation or Sectarianism. Ordinary beings used to claim the particular ideals without even knowing exactly the qualities or realities of these ideals.

The Bodhisattvas are highly sacred being whose level of compassion has no limits or boundaries’ it is like an infinite sky, vast and huge like four oceans combined. Now compare to Bodhisattva only, the Arahat compassionate, qualities is equal to the space or hollowness inside mustard seed, but that is eligible only when it compares to Bodhisattvas. However, comparing to ordinary beings, the Arahat qualities are as equal as the Bodhisattvas compassionate qualities because the compassionate quality of ordinary being is not even the size of a small particles. So, these are the ideals of the Buddhist traditions, but we handicapped ourselves by integrating or labeling it into particular sect and tradition. There is one saying which elucidated, it more clearly;

‘He who takes Dhamma to be a sect
is a fool; not having found the core of Dhamma,
He clutches the outer rind’.

Hence, only fool involved in traditions, the wise one grasp the essence of all those traditions and move smoothly towards their final goal of Salvation.

Syncretism therefore, is a combination of various possibilities for a human mind to operate several modes or methods of practices in a parallel manner by expanding the surface area of the mind. Because many great scholars or practitioners did that and made a statement in front of all us, but we never make an effort to discern or practice that way. The great scholar Kamalshila (one of the leading exponent of Mahayana Buddhism) states that; ‘If someone maintaining both the individual liberation (Arahata) and Bodhisattva vows simultaneously, he/she will actualize
the result more quickly". Similarly, Atisha the great scholar of Vikramasila suggested the famous Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo to practice all traditions on a one single or same seat. Here, he introduced him the new level our consciousness or mind, where we can sync all those traditions without changing the terms and conditions of traditions outside. So here it is mind which comes into play. The color, number and the size of tradition do not matter as much as the size and colors of mind are concerned. Dr. Shohei Ichimura also highlighted these issues as an Inter- Buddhist Factors or Obstacles. He also detects some unequal sense of reverence prevailing in the inter-Buddhist traditions, i.e. disparage of Arahat in Mahayana texts and the Theravadins non- acceptance of some Mahayana clerical activities. Such kinds of statements could be traced easily in most of the text of later Buddhist commentaries, depicting the differences to soften those rigid walls of tradition, but unfortunately even after so much effort, blind comparison and conflict do arise, which push the pure Dhamma at stake.

Hence, the Mind only has the potential to operate or inculcate all those teachings without making it overlaps or exaggeration. Therefore, Syncretism is one such possibility for a practitioner to maintain one or thousand ideals in a very liberal manner. However, the sad thing is, we overlay thoughts after thoughts about these ideals without even employing their prescribed path. It is like imagining university and colleges without even laying the school foundation. As mentioned earlier, we could have the right to adopt the ideals as an inspirational idol to pass through the fundamental test, but sadly due to lack of proper appliances of the fundamental parts we mostly fail to discern the things or situations as such, which in turn creates the thought or perception of rigid Sectarianism.

IV. CONCLUSION:

Thus, we could not say it is due to the vast prevalence of Dhamma all round the corner, nor we could say it is due to the addition of later disciples’ statements. What is lacking here is a mind that fails to qualify a network of thoughts which may be due to lack of nourishment in the sense of proper knowledge and proper understanding as well as the proper practice of the Buddha Dhamma or the teachings which has been spoken by the Buddha. Therefore, Syncretism could be a positive approach to maintain or to qualify those rigid walls of sectarianism in a very rational manner. Moreover, it is an option for a mind to come out of the
narrow shell of vision and the law of traditional dominance so that, one could gain mastery over various thoughts and ideas and move swiftly towards the goal of permanent liberation and at the same time, it creates a suitable pathway to prevent the budding practitioner who gets easily distracted by the chaotic waves of sectarianism and also for highly advanced practitioner who also get derailed sometimes from metaphysical or philosophical diversion.

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