

# **Was Moral and Ethical Degeneracy in the Saṃgha responsible for the Decline of Buddhism in India?**

**Or**

**Can corruption in a religion cause its decline? Discuss with special reference to Indian Buddhism.**

Saṃgha/Saṃgha= Order

Tipiṭaka: Three piṭakas= three baskets or collections

Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka and Abhidhamma Piṭaka = 2500 pages

Expulsion= parājika= defeatments

R.C. Mitra fickle-minded

The saṃgha is said to have abounded with people who were perversely self-willed and unbearably quarrelsome. Many among these were disgruntled and frustrated persons who had left the world in disgust. Quite a few desperate characters including vagrants, thieves, and idlers of all sorts existed in the saṃgha who could not cope with the responsibilities of running a household and thus chose saṃgha-life *faute de mieux*. Such undesirable and irresponsible elements were clearly not expected to live up to the ideals set by the Buddha.

The *Theragāthā*/*Therīgāthā* speaks of monks who were cheats, frauds, false witnesses, and unscrupulous.

547 Jātaka tales of the Buddha's previous births

Bodhisatta/bodhisattva

Prajñā

The *Jātakas* acknowledge that many undesirable characters put on the robes of a monk because they found living easier inside the saṃgha than on the outside.

Monks in large numbers were pocketing individual or community wealth and engaging in several other indiscretions.

Voluntary poverty

Schopen: Monks and business matters

It was perhaps in response to the presence of such undesirable elements in the saṃgha that the Buddha was compelled to enact rules banning their entry. As a result, those who had been highway robbers, jail-breakers, and thieves were declared ineligible for entry into the saṃgha. Deserters from the army, debtors, slaves

One of the *Jātakas* relates the story of a young man who fervidly declared: “Day and night I am labouring with my own hands at all sorts of tasks, yet never do I taste food so sweet. I must become a Bhikkhu myself.”

The *Rāṣṭrapālāparipṛcchāsūtra* talks about gallivanting monks who “without shame and without virtue, haughty, puffed up and wrathful... intoxicating themselves with alcoholic drinks... possessed of wives, sons and daughters... indisciplined and uncontrolled in eating and sex-play... as unrestrained as elephants without elephant-goat.”

The *Caturbhāṇī* mentions Buddhist monks frequenting sex-workers and being caught in *flagrante delicto*, nuns acting as

procuresses, and both monks and nuns playing the roles as go-betweens (*pīṭhamarda* and *pīṭhamardikā*).

### The *Matta-Vilāsa*

“Ha! Our supremely gracious Lord the Tathāgata has favoured the congregation of us friars with his instructions ordaining for us lodging in fine buildings, lying on bedsteads with well-made beds, eating in the forenoon, savouring drinks in the afternoon, chewing betel flavoured with the fine kinds of fragrance, and wearing soft robes; but why did he not think of sanctioning possession of women and use of strong drink? No, as he knew everything, how could he fail to see that? It is certain, I think, that those poor-spirited and spiteful-minded Elders from envy of us young men have blotted out sanctions of women and use of strong drink in the books of Scripture.”

There were obviously many monks whose moral standards must have been lower than Bhartṛhari’s who “Having desired *to embrace* the excellent Law he became a homeless priest, but overcome by worldly desires he returned again to the laity. In the same manner he became seven times a priest, and seven times returned to the laity.”

It cannot be denied that laxity in the saṃgha grew to the point where monks in large numbers were pocketing individual or community wealth and engaging in several other indiscretions.

**Faxian, Xuanzang, and Yijing:** the Buddhist saṃgha owned movable and immovable property in substantial quantities including servants, cattle, land, granaries, and villages for the purpose of maintaining their residents.

Some of the prominent vihāras in early medieval period even began to issue their own seals and coins.

At the same time it must be said that not all practices could really be called corrupt as such, much less harmful to the health of the saṃgha. For instance, it would be difficult to understand the logic behind ownership of land, servants, granaries, and precious metals by vihāras being the cause of the decline of a religion even if its founder had advocated otherwise.

However, it is highly unlikely that moral laxity and unethical practices led to its decline. There is no well-documented evidence to prove that Buddhism was abandoned by its followers just because it had become a corrupt religion.

It would be difficult to explain as to how the ownership of land, servants, granaries, and precious metals by monasteries could have caused the decline of Buddhism even if the Buddha had advocated otherwise.

Besides, it would be manifestly wrong to say that corruption had assumed a universal character. One must differentiate between instances of corruption as individual and stray instances on the one hand and rampant corruption in an institution affecting it as a whole on the other. Alongside the corrupt monks and nuns, we are reminded of the existence of others who lived exemplary lives. The saṃgha had never turned into an institution in disgrace.

Moral and ethical degeneracy cannot be considered as the *causa sine qua non* of the decline of Indian Buddhism.