



a new vihara means a new life
by venerable sangharakshita

Lecture by Venerable Sangharkshita at Chikhalwadi on 6th February 1982

Brothers and Sisters in the Dhamma.

Maharashtra is quite a familiar place to me, as is Poona. In the course of the last twenty-five or thirty years I have paid a number of visits to Poona, and to the different localities of Poona. But so far as I know this is the first time I have been to Chikhalwadi. The nearest I have got is Kirkee, which I have visited a number of times, and where I have given several lectures. I am therefore all the more glad to be here tonight. I am very glad to see you all and to be speaking to you.

Though I have not been here before, I have been hearing quite a lot about Chikhalwadi from Anagarika Lokamitra. He tells me that there are quite a lot of active young men here, and tonight I have seen this for myself. He also tells me that there are a lot of devoted women, a lot of bright young children, and lot of experienced old people; and this too I can see. Everybody in Chikhalwadi, in fact, seems to be active, or devoted, and so on, and I am therefore very glad to see this place.

I am particularly glad to have had the opportunity of dedicating your vihara and shrine. Though the vihara is not very big, so that not everybody was able to get inside, nonetheless we had a very fine dedication ceremony. I was very glad to see how beautiful the interior of the vihara was, and how beautiful the Buddha-image was. Some of the young men, I understand, actually built the shrine with their own hands quite recently. This I was very glad to hear. It is good that we do things ourselves with our own two hands.

Now I understand that the vihara, though it is new as a vihara, is not new as a building. It was, I understand, your old community meeting-house. This is very interesting. In a way, it is symbolical. It represents the change that has taken place in your whole life. It is not just a question of changing the community-house into a vihara. It is a question of changing your whole life. This is in fact what the Dhamma diksha means.

Twenty-five years ago Dr Ambedkar took the Dhamma diksha himself, and lakhs of people took it with him - either at the same time or shortly afterwards. That Dhamma diksha did not represent just a change of religion in the narrow sense. It did not represent just a change of religious beliefs. It did not mean that one day you believed in Atmavada and the next day you believed in Anatmavada. It was not anything like that. It was much more than that. This Dhamma diksha represented the beginning of a change in your whole life. This was not just a religious change. It was also a social, economic,

and educational change. In fact, it was a change in every aspect of your lives. This is what Dhamma diksha, or conversion, really represents.

Now change is not easy, on any level of existence. Even to change the old community meeting-house into the new vihara is not easy. I remember an experience of my own, twenty and more years ago. In those days I visited many parts of Maharashtra, penetrating even into the villages. Sometimes I went by bullock cart, sometimes on foot. Lots of people used to accompany me. We used to walk to the villages through the fields. In those days I was still comparatively young, so I would walk on ahead and everybody used to follow behind. Sometimes they would complain that I walked too fast. Nowadays there are no such complaints, because now I can't walk so very fast. But in those days I could. So we used to go through the field to the vihara to meet the Buddhists there.

As you know, the Buddhists live quite apart from the rest of the village. They have their own separate quarters, usually in the worst (i.e. the dirtiest) part of the whole locality. I don't know how things are now, but in those days the conditions under which the Buddhist's lived were very bad indeed. I remember one village in particular that I visited. This village was surrounded by a thick mud wall, and the Buddhists lived just outside this wall. They lived in the very place where the pipes of the villages sewage system came through the wall, and out of the pipes there came not only dirty water but a lot of other nasty things which I won't mention. That was where the Buddhists had to live.

On our arrival at each village we used to meet the local Buddhists, and very often we would meet them in the old community meeting-house. Sometimes a lot of people would come, sometimes very few. Very often there would be talk about changing the old community meeting-house, but some said it was quite a difficult thing to do. Some people did not want to change. Even though they were followers of Dr Ambedkar, they still did not want to turn the old community meeting-house into a new vihara. Nor was that all. Sometimes there were difficulties with the Hindus in the village, because in some cases there would be the image of a Hindu god in the community meeting-house, and if they wanted to turn the old community-house into a new vihara this image would obviously have to be removed. Sometimes some of the Buddhists wanted to do this. They wanted to turn their old community meeting-house into the new Buddhist vihara, throwing out the old image or picture of a Hindu god. But they were not free to do that, because the Hindus of the village would not allow it. Indeed, they threatened the Buddhists with very serious consequences if they dared to do such a

thing. Thus the Buddhists were not free to turn their own community meeting-house into a vihara. Sometimes they compromised. They installed an image of the Buddha in one corner, so that the place was half old community meeting –house and half new Buddhist vihara. That is what things were like in the old days. Even change the old community meeting-house into a new Buddhist vihara was difficult - not to speak of other changes, like giving up old bad habits.

I remember that even in Poona there were difficulties of the kind I have mentioned. Somewhere in Poona - I don't remember exactly where because it was a long time ago - there was a Radha-Krishna temple belonging to the people who are now Buddhists. On their becoming Buddhists they wanted to turn this temple into a Buddhist temple, removing the Radha-Krishna images and installing an image of the Buddha in their place. But once again the Hindus would not allow them to do so, even though the temple actually belonged to the Buddhists. In the end the temple was closed down. The Buddhists would not go there because they didn't want to worship Radha-Krishna, while the Hindus did not go there because, though they worshipped Radha-Krishna, they would not worship in the same temple that was used by low-caste people. I don't know what the position is now. Maybe the temple has fallen down or maybe it has been turned into a Buddhist vihara. Perhaps someone can tell me.

These examples illustrate how difficult it is to change - how difficult it is to get rid of the old ways, and the old gods. This isn't the case only in India, or only with the followers of Dr. Ambedkar. In England the English Buddhists have this difficulty too. They have found it difficult to get rid of the Virgin Mary. Christmas, for instance, is the birthday of Jesus Christ, and everybody celebrates this. Some people go to church, but more people celebrate just by talking a holiday and indulging in a lot of eating and drinking. It is very difficult for Buddhists to escape all this. If you don't join in, you are being impolite. Consequently Buddhists experience a lot of difficulty in England at Christmas time. They have to run away from Christmas. Recently what they have done is to hold a Dhamma Shibeer over the Christmas holiday period. Now they can get away for Christmas, and don't have to eat and drink too much at that time.

The same sort of thing is now happening in Maharashtra. In Maharashtra you don't have Christmas, of course, but you have other things, like Diwali. I understand that last Diwali Anagarika Lokamitra was very clever and organized a Dhamma Shibir. Buddhists who didn't want to participate in the Diwali celebrations could attend the Dhamma Shibir. The Dhamma Shibir was held in Aurangabad, and a lot of people attended. But

some people whom Anagarika Lokmitra was hoping would attend did not do so. When he met them after the Dhamma Shibeer and asked them why they had not come they replied that they had not come because it was Diwali. Angarika Lokmitra was very surprised to hear this, and remarked, "I didn't know that Diwali was a Buddhist festival."

This also shows how difficult it is to change - how difficult it is to give up the old things, and start leading a new life. Often it seems that everybody wants to hold you back; everybody wants you to be the same person that you were before. They don't want you to be a new person; they don't want you to go forward. They don't want you to grow, don't want you to develop. This is the general rule. Nonetheless, changes are taking place; progress is being made; people are going forward. They are giving up old, bad habits, and the fact that you have changed your old community meeting-house into a new Buddhist vihara is a sign that this process is going on.

Now I don't know whether in your old community meeting-house you formerly kept the image or picture of any of the old Hindu gods. When I was in the vihara just now I certainly didn't see any sign of them. If they had been there before, they must have been sent away. There wasn't even a calendar with a picture of a Hindu god on it. I was very pleased to see this. You have only the Buddha in that vihara. You have a very beautiful image of shining brass, and this image, which is in the Bhumi-sparsha Mudra, is seated on a beautifully tiled plinth. On the wall behind the image there is painted a Bodhi tree. Thus you have the Buddha seated under the Bodhi tree here in your own vihara. It is hardly necessary for you to go on pilgrimage to Buddha Gaya. You have the Buddha seated here, in your own vihara.

So what is this Buddha that you have here? Who is it that is seated in your new vihara? This you have to understand. You shouldn't think that you have just got some new god. There is no use in just getting rid of the old god and taking a new one. The Buddha isn't a new god. He isn't a god at all. The Buddha is an enlightened human being. He is one who has attained the highest possible state of moral and spiritual perfection. The Buddha shows us what we can all become. That is why we keep an image or picture of the Buddha in the Buddhist vihara. We keep it there as a reminder - not just a reminder of what the Buddha himself achieved, but a reminder of what we too can achieve.

When we sit and look at the Buddha image, or when we recite the Buddha Puja, or the Vandana, we should think, "I can be like the Buddha, I can develop maitri, karuna and prajna, just like the Buddha did." That is why we keep the image of the Buddha in the

vihara - not to answer our prayers for promotion, or success in the examinations, or more money. We don't pray to the Buddha for any of these things. We don't pray to the Buddha at all. We keep the image there simply as a reminder of the meaning and purpose of our own life, and the meaning and purpose of our life is to become like the Buddha - to become a perfect human being. That is why we keep the Buddha image in the vihara. Keeping the Buddha image in the vihara we can feel that the Buddha himself is seated there. He is there as a guest, as it were, reminding us of what we can become.

Consequently it is very important that we keep the vihara beautiful. It is very important that we keep it clean and tidy. Today, tonight, the vihara is both beautiful and clean. But we must keep it like that. I remember that some years ago I was at Sarnath, where the Buddha gave his first discourse, where there is now a big center of the Maha Bodhi Society. I was staying at the Maha Bodhi Society's guest house. Now Sarnath, as you know, is only seven or eight miles from Benares (Varanasi) or Kasi, which is one of the holy places of the Hindus. In Benares there are many temples, many sadhus, many widows, and many pilgrims. While I was staying at Sarnath some of the Hindu pilgrims who had been to the Hindu temples of Benares came on a visit to Sarnath. When they entered the Sarnath Buddhist temple they had quite a surprise. Though they themselves were Hindu, they said, "This Buddhist temple is very different from the Hindu temples. It is so clean. There are no cow droppings on the floor, no coconut shells, no old newspapers, no old flower-garlands. It's absolutely clean." When I asked them whether the Hindu temples were not also clean, they replied that, on the contrary, they were usually quite dirty.

This is what we find in all Buddhist countries. The Buddhist temples are kept absolutely clean. Not only are they kept absolutely clean, but they are painted in beautiful, bright colours. Hindu temples are often small and dark. Buddhist temples are usually quite big, with big windows, and are full of light, full of sunshine. The reason for this is that Buddhists have nothing to hide. I don't know if the Hindus, particularly the Brahmins, have anything to hide. The Buddha says somewhere that there are four kinds of persons who love secrecy (I may not be quoting his exact words): the thief, the woman of loose character, the Brahmin, and the teacher of false doctrines. Perhaps it is for this sort of reason that Hindu temples are so often small and dark. But as I said, Buddhist temples and viharas are not like that, and your vihara is certainly not like that.

Nonetheless even Buddhists may fall back into bad habits because, as I have said, it is very difficult to change. An example of this sort of thing occurred during our recent tour of Marathwada. Everywhere we went in Marathwada big meetings were held at which I gave lectures on the Dhamma. Before I could give my lecture, of course, I had to accept a large number of flower-garlands - just as I did this evening. That is quite all right. I am not complaining about that. I am very happy to accept flower-garlands. At one meeting, however, a woman came with a very nice big flower-garland wrapped up in a big piece of newspaper, and dropped the newspaper down on the stage right in front of me. Then she offered me the flower-garland. I said to myself, "This woman is not one hundred percent Buddhist yet."

We have to be very careful about such things. We mustn't throw pieces of newspapers down in the vihara. Every day we must sweep the Vihara thoroughly. We mustn't leave bits of old candle lying on the image table, or allow the place to get dusty. And of course we should use the vihara properly, i.e. use it only for Dhamma activities. When we are in the vihara we should observe the silas very strictly. Some of the silas, of course, are easy to observe in the vihara. In fact, it would be difficult not to observe them there. But there is one sila that is very difficult to observe, even in the vihara. That is the sila concerning speech. Sometimes I think that Right Speech is the most difficult of all the silas to observe.

To do someone a real injury is quite difficult. You have to get quite angry first. To steal is difficult because you have to think about it. To commit adultery is also very difficult. But to indulge in wrong speech is very easy. As soon as people open their mouths, usually wrong speech in one form or another comes out. We may not actually tell a lie, but we may speak roughly and harshly.

I noticed this at some of our recent meetings. Sometimes the organisers would be arguing with one another in a corner, and talking very loudly and angrily, even though it was a Buddhist meeting. We should never do that sort of thing. There is also the danger that we may waste time indulging in idle, frivolous talk or gossip. Don't use the Vihara for that sort of purpose. Don't use it for talking about other people.

Unfortunately, when we talk about other people we usually say something bad about them.

In short, when you are in the vihara be very careful to observe the silas, and be especially careful not to indulge in any form of wrong speech. As I have said, you should use the vihara only for Dhamma activities. If you talk in the vihara at all, talk only

about the Dhamma. Or maybe don't talk at all. That might, in fact, be best. Just sit quietly and practice meditation. This is in any case one of the best things you can use the vihara for. You can also use the vihara for Dhamma study. Don't keep newspapers here, or worldly books and magazines. If you keep any books there at all, let them be Dhamma books. When you meet together in the vihara you can sometimes study these books. The vihara can also be used as a center for the organization of Buddhists activities, e.g. meetings and lectures, such as we are having tonight.

If you use the vihara in the right sort of way, i.e. simply for Dhamma activities, then the influence of the vihara will extend throughout the entire neighborhood. This, we may say, is the Bodhisattva Ideal, i.e. not just to change yourself, but also to change the society – the neighborhood - in the midst of which you live. Indeed, not just to change, but to change for the better. This is what Dr Ambedkar did. He wasn't just concerned for himself. He didn't want a better life just for himself. He wanted a better life for all the Depressed People of India. Thus in his life he gave an example of the Bodhisattva Ideal.

The Vihara too is an example of the Bodhisattva Ideal. It is not simply a place where people go and worship, but a place from which the entire neighborhood is helped and transformed. When you create a vihara in a particular neighborhood, and install a Buddha-image there, it means you want to change the neighborhood. We want to make it a Buddhist neighborhood – not just a locality where people call themselves Buddhists. We want to make it a neighborhood where real Buddhists live, i.e. people who practice the Dhamma, and who are developing as human beings. This is also the significance of the Dhamma Diksha -the significance of Dr Ambedkar's movement of mass conversion to Buddhism. It means that we should change for the better. It means we should grow as human beings.

Therefore I am very glad that you have this new vihara here, with such a beautiful Buddha image seated in it. I am very glad that the vihara is so beautifully decorated, glad it is so clean and tidy. I am also glad to have had the opportunity of dedicating the vihara and the Buddha-image. As I said at the beginning, this is my first visit to Chikhalwadi, but I already have a good impression of the place and the people. A lot of effort must have gone into it, and I congratulate everybody who was in any way involved. If you use the vihara properly, then this locality will surely develop into a real Buddhist neighborhood. Though I don't really know when I shall be coming to India again, I hope that next time I come I shall see that your Vihara here has made a very big difference to

the entire locality, and to all your lives. Thank you for inviting me here this evening. I hope we shall meet again.

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