

IDEAS OF RENUNCIATION FOUND IN A BUDDHIST MANUAL AND A SUFI TEXT²

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ABSTRACT

Significant parallels in approaches to spiritual life can be found through a close reading of the 11th century CE Persian Sufi text, the *Kashf al-Mahjub* by the Ghazni-born al-Hujwiri, and the third century CE Mula Sarvastivadin *Rules for a Novice Monk*, based on the Buddhist code of monastic discipline, the *Vinaya*. While the injunctions and rules are presented very differently, both emphasize a spirit of renunciation. Buddhist monastics follow a very clear set of rules which are documented and are binding, whereas al-Hujwiri describes characteristics of a spiritual path using an oral tradition and anecdotes. However, in both traditions we find small communities of followers living with teachers, observing codes of discipline, wearing an identifiable robe, travelling with limited possessions and undertaking different kinds of austerities such as fasting. While there are significant differences in theology between Sufism and Buddhism, there is common ground in their attitude to renunciation.

Keywords: Al-Hujwiri, sufism, buddhism, renunciation, interfaith dialogue, comparative theology

INTRODUCTION

This study compares the theme of renunciation in two texts, the 11th century CE Persian Sufi text, the *Kashf al-Mahjub*³ by the Ghazni-born al-Hujwiri, and the Buddhist *Rules for a Novice Monk*,⁴ from the Mula Sarvastivadin tradition, which is

² A draft version of this paper was presented on Monday, 5 December 2022 at the NZASR Conference, Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington

³ Ali B. Uthman al-Jullabi al-Hujwiri, *The Kashf Al-Mahjub, The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, translated from the text of the Lahore edition, compared with MSS in the India

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attributed to the scholar Nagarjuna, who is thought to have lived in the third century CE. The intention of this paper is to promote discussion and reflection, not to put forward definitive findings. There are many obvious differences between Islam and its Sufi tradition and monastic Buddhism, but by focusing on a spirit of renunciation it is possible to find common ground. Therefore, the search is for a particular attitude, not for a doctrinal equivalent, and a close reading of the texts finds many parallels.

The spirit of renunciation is focused on the spiritual path as the most important thing in life as opposed to, for example, acquiring money and fame for its own sake. The Sanskrit word *vairagya* captures this meaning, the Tibetan equivalent is *sPang-ba*. Themes of renunciation are demonstrated in the Sufi text and in Buddhist monasticism through things such as limits on possessions, the value of fasting, the reverence for spiritual teachers, adherence to particular disciplines and so on, which I will describe.⁵

THE SUFI TRADITION - THE *KASHF AL-MAHJUB*

I first encountered the text, the *Kashf al-Mahjub*, while staying in Swat in Pakistan in 1982 and found it highly instructive in the practice of the Sufi path. It was in the library of a modern Sufi, Durrani Sahib, who was originally born in Andhra Pradesh and migrated to Pakistan after the partition of India. The text is by Ali B. 'Uthman al-Jullabi al-Hujwiri, who was born in Ghazni in Afghanistan. It is related in the book that he studied Sufism under Abu 'l-Fadl Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-Khuttali and also received instruction from Abu 'l-Qasim Gurgani and Khwaja Muzaffar. In addition, in the text he mentions other Shaykhs whom he met in his travels. His travels were extensive and include countries from Syria to Turkestan including Iraq.

Office and British Museum by Reynold A. Nicholson, Litt.D, Vol.XVIII, Leyden: E.J. Brill, London, Luzac & Co., 1911.

⁴ Mipam, Lama, *A String of Gems, Lama Mipam's Commentary to Nagarjuna's Stanzas For a Novice Monk*, translated into English from Tibetan by Glenn H Mullin and Lobsang Rapgay, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1978. Lama Mipam's Tibetan language commentary was written in the nineteenth century and the root text is attributed to Nagarjuna, c. 3rd century CE. The Tibetan name of the text is *dge-tshul-gyi-tshig-leur-byas-pa* and the Sanskrit original of the root text is no longer extant.

⁵ I would like to thank Ismail Albayrak for inspiring this reflection after he asked about parallels between Sufism and Buddhism at a function some years ago. He has also kindly reviewed the text.

It appears he was briefly married. The translator is Reynold A. Nicholson and he proposes that al-Hujwiri has a birth date of around 990 CE and a death date between 1074 to 1078 CE and that the book was written in the last years of his life. He died in Lahore in present day Pakistan. He was a Sunni and a Hanafi and in the text proposes the mystical theology of 'annihilation' - or *fana*. Nicholson finds that al-Hujwiri advises his readers that everyone, even advanced mystics, are bound by religious laws. Nicholson also proposes that the bulk of the contents of the book probably derives from oral traditions and notes that al-Hujwiri only mentions by name one extant text on Sufi doctrine being the *Kitab Al-Luna*' by Abu Nasr al-Sarraj, who died in approximately 987 CE.⁶

In its emphasis on oral sources the text demonstrates ideas about the lived experience and practice of Sufism in the eleventh century. It is, therefore, an interesting time capsule. The text that I am using is a facsimile of an annotated English language copy. Original versions of the 1911 translation are rare.

The English translation of the title is *The Revelation of the Mystery*, and al-Hujwiri explains that this refers to the purpose of the book being 'an elucidation of the way of truth and an explanation of mystical sayings'.⁷ He notes two classes of individuals, one of whom has the 'veil of covering' and the other the 'veil of clouding'.⁸ Those with the first veil perceive truth and falsehood as the same and they will not find truth. Those with the veil of clouding can find truth as they possess the substance of truth and reading the book may assist them to 'find their way to spiritual reality'. The clouding has the quality of attributes whereas the veil has the quality of essence. Therefore, clouding is changeable and can be removed.

Al-Hujwiri provides an extensive explanation of the path towards knowledge of truth and terms related to renunciation appear intermittently. For example, he quotes Abu Bakr Warraq of Tirmidh who says:

Those who are satisfied with disputation (*kalam*) about knowledge and do not practise asceticism (*zuhd*) become *zindiqs* (heretics); and those who are

⁶ Al-Hujwiri is more widely known in Turkish as Dâtâ Gencbahsh, the great treasure-granting saint and one of his sources was the text, *Tabaqat al-Sufiya of al-Sulami*.

⁷ P.4-5

⁸ In mystic terminology the word 'cloud' and 'clouding' have inspired many sophisticated discussions. There is a prophetic tradition which says, 'Someone asked the Prophet: Where was your Lord before creating His visible Creation?' 'He was in a Cloud; there was no space either above or below'.

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satisfied with jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and do not practise abstinence (*wara'*) become wicked.⁹

A bit further down he cautions against heedless savants whose hearts are set on worldly gain and currying favour with powerful people, hypocritical Qur'an readers who apply praise and blame to whatever they like or dislike and ignorant pretenders to Sufism who have never associated with a spiritual director or *pir*, nor learned discipline from a *shaykh*, but just wear a blue cloak *kabudi* and 'have trodden the path of unrestraint'.¹⁰ These injunctions suggest a clear moral compass which is lacking in pretension, uninterested in worldly power and prestige and tied to the practice of discipline.

Al-Hujwiri also praises poverty and references Qur'anic verses and traditions which idealize it. He notes some of the refugees or *Muhajirin* in the prophet's time were men (*fuqara*) who stayed in the mosque, devoted themselves to worship, and trusted (*tawakkul*) that God would look after them and that God advised the Prophet to look after them. I have insufficient knowledge of Islam to elaborate on this particular example and so I may misinterpret what I am reading, but the idea of a group of people who are dedicated to their religious practice and who are supported in that practice without going out to work or engaging in trade suggests themes of renunciation to my mind.¹¹ The larger discussion of wealth and poverty in the book encompasses many fine points of theology which are beyond the scope of this paper. One of the parallels between Buddhist monastics and Sufis is in the practice of wearing patched robes (*muraqq'a*) and al-Hujwiri ascribes the origins of this to anecdotes from the life of Hassan of Basra and others.¹² He describes four motivations for joining the Sufi order in descending order of virtue and the two higher motivations include the expurgation of desire, the renunciation of self and self-mortification (*mujahadat*). The word *jihad* or struggle derives from this term. The highest aspiration is of one who perceives how near the Sufis are to God and who joins them in the 'hope of attaining the same degree'. The least spiritual

⁹ Ibid, p.17

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ It is known that there were some single men who lived in a shelter behind the mosque of the Prophet (PBUH). They had some simple tasks such as bringing water to the mosque, collecting wood and so on, but they devoted most of their time to learn from the Prophet, to worship and pray. Sometimes they would be hosted as guests and given dinner at the houses of local Muslims in Medina.

¹² Ibid., p.45-46

motivation is of a person who simply wishes to assume the dress and 'hide his deformity under their piety. He is like an ass laden with books (Qur'an 72, 5).¹³

One of the beauties of this book is in its capture of a particular oral tradition of this era. The characteristic colour of the robes of Sufis at this time was blue,¹⁴ and one of the reasons for this is that blue was the colour of mourning clothes worn by the bereaved. I will quote a longer paragraph.

A dervish was asked why he wore blue. He replied: "The Apostle left three things: poverty, knowledge, and the sword. The sword was taken by potentates, who misused it; knowledge was chosen by savants, who were satisfied with merely teaching it; poverty was chosen by dervishes, who made it a means of enriching themselves. I wear blue as a sign of mourning for the calamity of these three classes of men."¹⁵

The spirit of renunciation is beautifully captured in this quote from the dervish.

Al-Hujwiri conveys a sense of the dervish communities in which he stayed where food is shared and where there is a tradition of pilgrimage to sacred places while travelling with limited possessions. He explains the obligation to share food.

It is an obligatory rule that they [the Sufis] should not eat alone, but should unselfishly share their food with one another; and when seated at table they should not be silent, and should begin by saying "In God's name"; and they should not put anything down or lift anything up in such a way as to offend their comrades, and they should dip the first mouthful in salt, and should deal fairly by their friends. ... My Shaykh used to say: "I am astonished at the impostor who declares that he has renounced the world, and is anxious about a morsel of food."¹⁶

Again, the spirit of renunciation is clearly described in these words. Another element in relationship to food is the practice of fasting. Obviously in Islam there is the fasting month of Ramadan, where no food or water is taken from dawn until dusk, but al-Hujwiri also describes other kinds of fasts, such as *Shaykhs* who fasted

¹³ Ibid., p.47

¹⁴ It is important to note that Sufi orders began to appear post the Hujwiri period. Each order has a distinctive colour and sometimes they were identified with the colour of their dresses or caps. The symbols and meaning of these colours are very rich in mystic traditions.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.53

¹⁶ Ibid., p.348

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without intermission or who only ate when food was put before them.¹⁷ Other fasts were on the 'white days', the 13th to the 15th of the month, on the ten last nights of Ramadan and also the fast of David, which was to fast one day and break the fast the next day.¹⁸ There is also another meaning given to fasting, to refrain from looking with lust and listening to calumny or speaking badly of others. He says;

One who acts in this manner is truly keeping his fast, for the Apostle said to a certain man, "When you fast, let your ear fast and your eye and your tongue and your hand and every limb", and he also said, "Many a one has no good of his fasting except hunger and thirst."¹⁹

Travelling Dervishes Are Advised to Have Limited Possessions.

When a dervish chooses to travel, not to reside, he ought to observe the following rules. In the first place, he must travel for God's sake, not for pleasure. ... And he cannot do without a patched frock and a prayer-rug and a bucket and a rope and a pair of shoes (*kafsh*) or clogs (*na'layn*) and a staff to protect him from attacks and for other purposes. Before stepping on the prayer-rug he must put on his shoes or clogs in a state of purity. If anyone carries other articles, for the sake of keeping the *Sunna* (Prophetic custom), such as a comb and nail-scissors and a needle and a little antimony (*mukhula*), he does right. If, however, anyone provides himself with more utensils than those which have been mentioned, we have to consider in what station he is: if he is a novice every article will be a shackle and a stumbling-block and a veil to him, and will afford him the means of showing self-conceit, but if he is a firmly grounded adept he may carry all these articles and more."²⁰

The emphasis on restraint, sharing food, fasting, limiting possessions to essentials, guarding the speech and the ears, all of these things convey the spirit of renunciation. At the same time there is flexibility - the adept may have more possessions than the novice because he is 'firmly grounded'. However, wearing blue

¹⁷ Ibid., p.320

¹⁸ There are other kinds of fasts, such as fasting on every Monday and Thursday (advised by the Prophet), fasting six days after Ramadan (in month of Shawwal), fasting in the month of Dhu al-Hijja (the month of pilgrimage). This may not be an exhaustive list.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.321

²⁰ Ibid., p.345-6

and being identifiable as a dervish should not be for the purpose of enriching oneself.²¹

THE BUDDHIST TRADITION: STANZAS FOR A NOVICE MONK

The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, who lived in India in approximately the sixth century before the Common Era established an order of monks and nuns which continues up to the present time. Buddhism became widespread over the centuries in countries and regions adjacent to India including Pakistan and Afghanistan, China, Central Asia and Tibet. Buddhism is still a significant feature of religious life in China, Tibet, India and elsewhere. There are two main divisions of Buddhism, the Mahayana tradition and the Theravada tradition, and countries to the north of India follow or followed the Mahayana tradition. The order of Buddhist monks has two classes, the novice and the fully ordained and there are some variations in the vows they follow between different lineages of vows, but the basic vows of a novice are common. The Sanskrit word for the vows of monks and nuns is *pratimoksha*, and I will not enumerate the vows of nuns which are the same as the vows for monks but with some additional rules.

The text that I have chosen to present is a summary of the discipline of monks, *Stanzas for a Novice Monk*, and is attributed to the Indian scholar Nagarjuna, the second or third century CE author - or, according to legend, the finder - of the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts. The text is identified in the title as coming from the Mula Sarvastivadin sub-sect of the Indian Theravada tradition. It includes a commentary by the nineteenth century Lama Mipham. The publication also includes a short text by the famous fourteenth century founder of the Gelugpa sect, Lama Tsong Khapa, *The Ocean of Vinaya*.

The first text begins with a verse:

One who, out of faith in the Doctrine
Of the Lion of the Shakya Clan,
Has taken ordination, should
With firm discipline, take care

²¹ Al-Hujwiri records an anecdote that Jesus was so detached from worldly things that he gave up his drinking bowl when he saw someone using his hands to drink water and he gave up his comb when he saw someone comb their hair with their fingers. Ibid., p.40

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And guard his training
As he would his own body.²²

Lama Mipham explains ordination as having shaved the head, taken on monk's robes and going from home to homelessness. He says these are also indicative of self-discipline and are excellent actions and there is an exhortation to guard the training. Advice includes dividing the night into five parts, the last part being the time between the crack of dawn and sunrise and reciting Buddhist texts or *sutras* during this time. It is assumed that the monk is living in a community with a teacher and so his next task in the morning is to bring a vase of water to the teacher after carefully checking that it contains no insects. They both have breakfast and, after cleaning up, the junior monk chants some verses of praise for the generosity of the donor who provided the food. Following this is meditation or study time. There are some exhortations to study and practice the vows and observances and Lama Mipham says:

Mere learning is not sufficient, however. One must actually live the teachings and strive zealously at purification and perfection of one's own being.²³

I will summarize in bullet points the main features of the monk's discipline. There are four root vows:

- Not to murder
- Not to take that which is not given (stealing)
- Celibacy
- Not to lie

The six branch vows are:

- Not to dance
- Not to wear jewellery
- Not to handle gold or silver
- Not to use high seats or sleep in luxurious beds
- Not to eat in the afternoon
- Not to use intoxicants²⁴

²² Mipam, Lama, op cit, p.11

²³ Ibid., p.18

To consider parallels with some of the elements of renunciation described by al-Hujwiri, we can begin with fasting. The branch vow, not to eat in the afternoon, is a form of fasting. One of the traditional practices of Buddhist monks is to fast from noon until the next morning every day. The main meal is, therefore, an early lunch, which was traditionally gathered by going out from a monastery and accepting donations from lay followers. There are also other kinds of fasts in the Tibetan tradition and the founder of the Gelugpa sect, Lama Tsong Khapa, famously lived on one juniper berry a day while in retreat for a long time. Other kinds of fasts include the *nyung nay* - a Tibetan practice whereby no solid food is taken after midday on the first day but drinking is allowed, and no food and no drink is allowed on the second day. Each day requires 12 hours of chanting, meditation and prostrations. I have done two *nyung nays*, one was in Bodhgaya in India in 1986. The taste of food when the fast is broken on the third day is extraordinary, even though it is ordinary food.²⁵ You have to be physically fit because each day requires many hundreds of prostrations. I have heard that whole villages in Tibet will sometimes do *nyung nays* together. It is considered to be a practice suitable for lay people and to enable significant purification of past bad *karma*.

Traditionally Buddhist monks and nuns had entered into a life of homelessness. They travelled from place to place and were only required to settle down during the three months of the rainy season as a retreat during the Indian monsoon. The traditional possessions of the monks and nuns were also itemized and limited, which was probably necessary when they were travelling around mostly on foot. They were allowed to own three kinds of robe being an outer garment, an under garment and a cloak. They were also allowed a begging bowl, a belt, a razor, a needle, a strainer, a staff and a tooth pick. These are known as the Eight Requisites allowed by the Buddha. There was some flexibility so that medicine and a cushion were also allowed, and there were different possessions allowed to the community which were

²⁴ I rely on both Nagarjuna and Lama Tsong Khapa for their explanation of the six branch vows, see also *ibid.* p.53

²⁵ 'One takes the precepts in combination with twelve or more hours of devotional practices including prostrations, meditation and chanting of mantra and long dharani of Avalokiteshvara. One also observes a fasting regime where one abstains from eating after lunchtime on the first day of practice, and on the second day one abstains from both eating and drinking. The dry fast is broken at breakfast on the third (final) morning.' Source: <https://www.sakya.com.au/nyung-ne-buddhist-fasting-retreat/> Accessed 14 July 2022.

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shared.²⁶ However, the spirit of renunciation is clearly present and amplified by the prohibition on jewellery, luxurious beds and handling gold and silver. In practice, monks and nuns had and have the support of lay people to handle money for them where this rule is strictly applied but, like the Dervishes, the wearing of robes should not be for the purpose of enriching oneself.

Buddhist robes are patched so as to demonstrate renunciation, as a patched cloth has less value than a good quality uncut piece of cloth. Dyeing was and still is done inside the monastery using roots, stems/wood, bark, leaves, flowers, or fruits, and I came across monks in Mindroling in Tibet in 1987 dyeing white wool red for their robes. However, it is also possible these days that ready-made industrially dyed cloth is used for robes.

There are many detailed explanations of the root vows but perhaps the explanation that is less obvious is the implication in the vow against lying. In the root text and the commentary there are injunctions against a vow holder pretending to have magical powers or attainments that they do not have. Buddha is quoted as saying, 'One should leave the announcing of one's own attainments to those with nothing but delusions of grandeur'. Other categories of ignoble speech include slander, speaking in mobs and speaking harshly. A monk is also advised not to answer when insulted or scolded and not to strike back when hit.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE TWO TEXTS

Similarly, al-Hujwiri advises the seeker of God not to tell a lie, to speak ill of the absent or 'offend any Muslim with that tongue which has made the profession of faith and acknowledged the unity of God'.²⁷ Considering the Buddhist monks' root vows, another shared element is abstaining from alcohol - which is incumbent on all Muslims but is only required of Buddhist monastics. It has been my understanding that celibacy is not generally promoted in Islam, however it is one of the four root vows and is required of Buddhist monks and nuns. While it is recorded that al-Hujwiri was briefly married, he remarks that both marriage and celibacy are possible

²⁶ Paek, Do-su, A study on possessions allowed for Buddhist community(saṃgha) and a personal monk —focusing on the Pāli Vinaya-piṭaka, 승가와 비구 개인의 소유물에 대한 연구백도수, *Korea Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 2003 Vol.6, pp.246-7

²⁷ Al-Hujwiri, op cit, p.357

ways of life for the seeker and he also record the following words in praise of celibacy.²⁸

It is the unanimous opinion of the *Shaykhs* of this sect that the best and most excellent Sufis are the celibates, if their hearts are uncontaminated and if their natures are not inclined to sins and lusts.²⁹

I point out these equivalences so as to demonstrate parallels in ideas of renunciation, not to conflate two vastly different traditions. I have not touched on the complex theology of Sufism which is beyond my ability to analyse and which, as it depends on a belief in God and the Prophet Muhammad, is obviously completely different to Buddhism. However, finding common ground is always valuable, as it is very easy to see only the differences.

Lama Tsong Khapa highlights the mental quality of renunciation in the following stanza. This is the attitude of *vairagya*, of freedom from worldly desires.

Some schools assert that the vows are physical: that they concern the actions of body and speech, which oppose the basis of harming others. Others assert that they are mental: that their basis is the thought of abandonment, together with its seed. Both systems have renunciation as their cause. These are the two views that our two schools - respectively upper and lower - propound.

While there are many differences between Sufis and Buddhist monastics, parallels in the spirit of renunciation are demonstrated in these texts. This spirit has the purpose of focusing the mind on the spiritual path and of presenting a way of life which has fewer distractions and which has a clear discipline. In the quotation above, Lama Tsong Khapa points out that there is a mental basis to the vows which comes from what he describes as 'the thought of abandonment'. Underlying the lists of such things as permissible possessions is an attitude, a point of view, and a particular spirit. It is remarkable that the fourth century Buddhist text and the 11th century Sufi text have so many common features but perhaps this is the nature of a spiritual life.

²⁸ It is well recognised that the number of single Muslim scholars and mystics is quite high. Contemporary leading figures such as Fethullah Gulen and Said Nursi are also unmarried.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.363-5

CONCLUSION

I have emphasized the spirit of renunciation as the injunctions and rules are presented very differently. Buddhist monastics follow a very clear set of rules which are documented and are binding, whereas al-Hujwiri describes characteristics of a spiritual path using an oral tradition and anecdotes. However, in both traditions we find small communities of followers living with teachers, observing codes of discipline, wearing an identifiable robe, travelling with limited possessions and undertaking different kinds of austerities such as fasting. These are parallels ■

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