

## **Impact of Buddhist Culture on Sri Lanka: Past and Present**

Ven: Dr. M. Dhammajothi (法光)

Senior Lecturer, Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies,  
University of Colombo, Sri-Lanka

### **Background Information**

Though Sri Lanka is now usually described as a multi-religious and multi-national country, for over two millenniums it has been predominantly a uni-religious, uni-national country. The national identity of the people has been designated as Sinhala, and the civilization as founded on Buddhist Culture.

Though there is reference to pre-historic times that the traditional scholars consider as reflecting the existence of a very developed civilization, the real historical times begins with the crowning of King Vijaya, a young adventurer from India, perhaps, from Gujarat region. This was around 6th or 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. from thence the country got stabilized and by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century B.C. Anuradhapura came to be capital.

### **Introduction of Buddhism**

It was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. that Buddhism was officially introduced by the mission led by Ven. Mahinda. He was sent purposely by the Indian authorities, and it appears, with the consent of the local ruler, King Devanampiya-tissa (250-210 B.C.). This is a very crucial juncture in the history of Sri Lanka, for it is from this point that the country begins to develop with an identity of its own.

Due to the proper planning of the mission by its leader, Ven Mahinda, and also due to the unstinted support and patronage extended by King Devanampiya-tissa, who had his own motives for acting so, it did not take

long for Buddhism to take root and grow to become the state religion. Buddhism was very effectively put into use by the ruler as a force of unification of the country that was inclining towards divisionalism. This unification provided stability necessary for economic and cultural progress.

Introduction of Buddhism marks also the commencement of a new civilization. Ven. Walpola Rahula in his *History of Buddhism in Ceylon* (p59). Makes the following observation on this point:

*“Mahinda’s arrival can be regarded as the beginning of Sinhalese Culture. He brought to Lanka not only a new religion, but also a whole civilization then at the height of its glory. He introduced art and architecture into the Island along with sa ghārāmas and cetiyas. He can be regarded as the father of the Sinhalese Literature. . .”*

### **Bringing of the Bodhi Sapling**

The most remarkable event that followed the advent of Ven. Mahinda is the coming of Ven. Nanda, bringing along with her a sapling of the Bodhi-tree from Gaya, in India. The real purpose of her mission was to confer admission and ordination on women. But, on the request of farsighted Ven. Mahinda, she brought along with her this Bodhi-tree sapling which ever since has been functioning as the symbol of Buddhist identity.

What is still more remarkable about the bringing of this Bodhi-tree sapling is the large retinue of people that accompanied Ven. Nanda. Our chronicles and other ancient literary sources say that this retinue consisted of members belonging to 18 Kulas or Guilds, which means associations of experts in various arts, crafts, skills and all kinds of administration and management. It is these guild-members that functioned as agents of change from the local civilization whatever, it was to the now system of Buddhist civilization.

### **New Ethical Philosophy**

Ven Mahinda very clearly affected these changes at two levels: Spiritual (theoretical) level, and secular (organizational) and practical level. This whole change was founded on the key concept of for the good and well being of many, the motto as it were of the Buddhist missionary activity. This good and well being of many (Bahujana-hita bahujana-sukha) means for the good and well being of all those who are affected by the change producing activities.

With this new ethical philosophy the people developed a new dimension with regard to all their activities. They understood that all activities bodily, verbal and mental should be wholesome, should be for the good oneself and for the good of others. While working for the good and well being of oneself as well as others became the motivating principle its natural result was unity, harmony, mutual trust and cooperation. This humanitarian attitude gave a new vigour to the social life of the people.

### **Its Contribution to Progress**

The beneficial effects of this change is amply demonstrated by the rapid development and progress that followed in all spheres affecting the life of the people. Huge, ocean-like tanks were dug out; vast areas were brought under agriculture, with the soil obtained by digging tanks, bricks were made, and with these massive cetiyas or pagodas were constructed. Thus, before long the tank and pagoda, became the symbols of Buddhism and symbol of progress, too. They symbolized the new civilization that was taking place.

None of these building of tanks and pagodas were undertakings of small magnitude. Before the Christian era dawned Sri Lanka was in possession of massive architectural constructions. The cetiyas were scraping the clouds; the monasteries were expansive. There was a special monastic building built by king Du hagāmini (161-137 B.C.), the most sung hero of Sri Lanka. It was

called Lohapāsāda, the Brazen Palace, perhaps because it was bronze plated. The chronicles record that it contained nine-storeys and nine-hundred chambers for monastic use. The most revealing aspect of this is that, over the greatest chronicle the Mahāvamsa (chp. 27, stanza 9-20) says the plans of this massive construction, perhaps the largest in the world at that time, was drawn by eight Arahants at the request of the King himself. The skill of the monks of the time in these specific areas is evidenced also by the chronicle record which says that the relic chamber of the Mahāthūpa, more popularly called Ruvanvelisaya, was constructed under the supervision of another Arahant named Indagutta.

That these monks inherited such skills from the tradition of the guild-masters who accompanied ven. Nun Saṅghamittā is undisputed. Perhaps, they mastered these skills while being lay, and made use of such skills to serve the cause of Buddhism. Thus, it is possible to presume that all kinds of fine art that are connected with monastic institutions were the creation of such artistic monks, and such artistic creations were effected under their supervision.

It is well known that ancient monastic institutions served multiple purposes. Those institutions functioned as both educational and cultural centers. It is at these centers, at ancient times the laity found the opportunity to learn these skills. The monks not only imparted these skills but also trained the laity in working in unity and cooperation. At a time when science and technology was yet at a primitive stage of development, it is this sense of unity and harmony coupled with the voluntary offering of labour that made it possible to successfully complete undertaking of immense magnitude.

This voluntary offering and sharing of labour is a feature that is very commonly seen in the community life, specially in village life of Sri Lanka. Mutual help is the key factor in all their undertakings, whether big or small. In

this community-living where offering and sharing of labour is dynamically operating, none felt isolated or helpless, in any circumstances. In adversity and prosperity all were well united, though in private life they may have entertained different views and opinions.

### **Monk-laity Relationship**

Almost within days after the advent of Ven. Mahinda the monks' order was established with the coming of Ven. Nun Sa ghamittā, the nuns' order, too, was established. Though this nuns' order was very dynamic in the ancient times, due to various circumstances, it disappeared and it has never been revived. The monks' order has been and currently is quite active.

The relationship between the monks and the lay people has always, been very cordial. The two parties perfectly understood the roles they are to play and also fully well realized that their relationship was one of inter dependence, of course, monks on a higher pedestal than the lay people. The laity looked up to monks as their spiritual guides who have to be listened to, obeyed, respected and sustained. The monks, knowing well their responsibility as teachers, spiritual guides, cultural agents selflessly served to fulfill the needs of the lay people.

Unlike at the present time the monks, except on very rare occasions, did not directly dabble with politics. Till fairly recent times they only functioned as advisors, in fact more like spiritual advisors, often tempering excesses on the parts of both rulers and subjects and doing everything within their power to diffuse tension, and spread sobriety and balanced way of thinking. Often the monks in village temples were high respect and veneration and wielded power because of their honesty and disciplined ways of life.

Though the life styles of both the monks and the lay people have undergone rapid changes during the last few centuries, specially since the

been weakened due to erosions caused by alien religious belief and cultural norms. They opened up Dhamma schools, thus once again making the temple the religious resort of the Buddhists. Besides, a new Buddhist education institutes were established to complete with the non Buddhist institution, thus leveling the ground, and giving also the Buddhist a fair chance to achieve progress.

The Buddhists, though they were greatly handicapped as they neither had much financial backing nor the governmental support, were morally strong enough to face all odds that lay against them, and strived to achieve success. This ability to strive against odds and strive for success employing righteous means is a characteristic instilled on the Buddhists through the influence of Buddhist Culture.

The revival of Buddhism and Buddhist culture gradually gained momentums. It greatly contributed in the peaceful struggle for independence from British domination. As it as had functioned before, Buddhism and Buddhist culture operated as a strong unifying force, bringing peoples of different social strata and different walks of life, bonding them in their commitment to achieve a common goal. It is this very same force that operated to bring about a new political ideology, primarily based on Buddhist principles and Buddhist culture.

### **The Present Scenario**

The question often asked by some who are rather skeptical about the social relevance of Buddhism and Buddhist culture is as to, how one could justify the prevailing armed conflict in Sri Lanka is a background where humanistic principles of Buddhism and Buddhist culture is and has been the dominant feature. Such a question can be raised only when one narrows down this 'conflict' to a mere 'ethical' issue. This issue is very complex, primarily

advent of Western colonial powers, and consequent corruptive influences, yet cordiality of monk-laity relationship continues, and it remains and functions as a protective force at times of imminent dangers of social unrest.

### **Adverse Influence of Western Colonization**

Foreign invasions are a common feature in the ancient history of Sri Lanka. In spite of island's smallness, the unity of the people enabled Sri Lanka to withstand all those invasions, coming mainly from the Indian sub-continent. Because of the close cultural and religious affinity between the invaders and the Sri Lankans the cultural damage and the spiritual declining caused by those invasions were rather minimal. But the advent of western colonial powers marked the beginning of a totally alien cultural and religious influence.

For nearly five centuries those western colonial powers, beginning with Portuguese and followed by Dutch and the British continued. The Britishers are the only people who managed to completely capture the powers of the Island. Sri Lanka was under the British rule from 1815-1948.

During the colonial rule a lot of adverse effects took place. Sri Lankan culture was eroded by alien western culture. Buddhism was severely affected by the introduction of Christianity. These colonial powers, knowing well that the strength of the nation lay in the close bond between the monks and the laity and in the Buddhist cultural values that nurtured the Sri Lankan cultural ethos, spared no pains in gradually destroying this age old mutual relationship and solid foundation. All three powers used force and cunning to achieve their ends. The Britishers, though pretending to be benefactors were, perhaps, the most harmful in the long run, for even at present vestiges of adverse effects, of their colonial policies are haunting the Sri Lankan culture and Buddhism.

Puncturing of the age old close ties between the monks and laity opened the doors for alien western cultural features to seep into Sri Lankan culture.

Insidious and highly unethical means adapted to conquest Buddhists such schemes are yet being continued surreptitiously by interested parties undoubtedly dealt a blow to Buddhism. Yet, with all these unscrupulous means adopted, these colonial powers could only manage to convert roughly about 6% of the total Buddhist population. This resistance on the part of Buddhists speaks volumes for the sincerity and determination of the Buddhists, and also provide concrete proof to demonstrate how deeply Buddhism and culture founded on it is imbedded in the hearts of the average Buddhist.

### **Revival of Buddhism and Buddhist Culture**

While yet being under colonial influence, Buddhists were determined to face these set backs. Both the monks and the laity played a very dynamic role in this revival movement. Being spearheaded by the monks and ably supported by the laity this movement gathered momentum. Until the British imperial power completely subjugated Sri Lanka, the local rulers espoused the cause of Buddhism and Buddhist culture. The local rulers and chieftains extended their blessings and patronage to sustain and foster Buddhism and Buddhist culture, for they very rightly understood that it on these that the strength, identity and the prestige of the nation is founded. Art, architecture, Literature were all sustained, preserved, and fostered, in spite of the unsettled political condition that prevailed, and social unrest that existed.

On the part of the Buddhists they fought these rival force, without restring to violence, a feature that demonstrates the deep influence Buddhism and Buddhist culture has had on the people. They took very productive and constructive remedial measures. Without resorting to religious violence, both the monks and the laity began to revive their links. The monks selflessly devoted themselves to the task of rekindling in the hearts of the average Buddhist the long cherished Buddhist values and cultural sentiments that had



based on economic issues which are getting more and more complicated due to both avoidable and unavoidable circumstances, and also due to the very obvious fact that interested parties, both national and international are further adding fuel to this issue already in hot flames.

Besides, it is wrong to assume that Buddhism offers an instant remedy for all human problems. True that the Buddhist ideal is the complete resolution of all conflicts; however the successful attainment of this ideal depends on the striving and contribution made by each and every single individual. Hence, a totally peaceful world would never be an elusive target. Yet, what Buddhism has done to drive in sanity into the majority people in Sri Lanka, even under very trying circumstances assigned in the present, is highly commendable.

The consistence in all spheres of the life of Sri Lankans, in a world that is being gradually enmeshed by consumerism, spreading fast in the wake of much acclaimed globalization, is yet fairly stable. Buddhism and Buddhist culture have made people to be mindful and aware about the deep pitfalls they have to avoid in their striving towards secular progress. They are constantly warned about the possibility of mixing up their needs and wants. The younger generation is always urged to avoid evil ways, ways that harm their health and wealth. The people in general are encouraged to minimize their tendency to appropriate and possess, and instead urged to share, to be conscious and concerned of others.

Buddhism and Buddhist culture teaches all those good ways of living. This is why Sri Lanka, which is a small island, which now is multi-national and multi-religious country, is able to maintain peace and harmony among peoples of different denominations and different ethnic origins. If not for this sobering influence of Buddhism and Buddhist culture the conditions under these trying circumstances would have been far more devastating and dreadful.

## Buddhism's Maritime Route to China

Charles Willemen

Belgium Royal Academy of Sciences

**Abstract:** Important cultural roads for Buddhism and its Mathurā art were the Ganges (sarvāstivāda, mahāsāṃghika, pudgalavāda) and the Godāvarī (overwhelmingly mahāsāṃghika, but also mahīśāsaka). Amarāvati's art (second century) and also Nāgārjunakonda's art (third century), inspired not only Anurādhapura, but southeastern Asia as a whole. The maritime route went from southeastern India to the Malay Peninsula. After a circumpeninsular navigation the route went to Funan, Bnam, in southern Cambodia and Vietnam, extending along the Gulf of Thailand to Tenasserim, the northern part of the Isthmus of Kra. The historical period of this area was the third century till 627-649, when Zhenla took over. Buddhism on this route was mahāsāṃghika. Important was Avalokiteśvara, Nanhai Guanyin, who may have merged with Mazu along the southern Chinese coast.

**Key words:** Andhra Funan Nanhai Guanyin Mahāsāṃghika

Charles Willemen: Lifelong member Belgian Royal Academy of Sciences. Full Professor in Belgium since 1977. Presently Vice Rector (Academic Research) International Buddhist College, Thailand.

Buddhism entered China mainly through Central Asia, coming from the Gandhāran cultural area. The Prakrit (s) of that area explain(s) the ancient Chinese terminology. The ancient translations from the middle of the second century A.D. until about 400 A.D., are mainly based on Prakrit(s). During that period a Mahāyāna movement was developing in India. This is the period of the *Lotus Sūtra*, of developing *prajñāpāramitā* literature, of Amitābha, of the