

SRI LANKA'S CONTRIBUTION TO BUDDHISM

By
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Sri Lanka is a small island in South Asia with an unbroken, well-recorded and long history or culture and religion. It is known that the Buddha had on three occasions visited and blessed this beautiful country. It was during the reign of Emperor Asoka in India that Buddhism was officially introduced to Sri Lanka by the Venerable Arahant Mahinda 236 years after the Buddha. Emperor Asoka who had sent several Buddhist missionaries to various countries, chose his own son Mahinda to be sent to Sri Lanka, probably knowing that this island would one day be the centre of Theravada Buddhism.

Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka at a time when the country was under the rule of King Devanam Piyatissa. There was then no other well-established religion in the island to oppose Buddhism. Hence the King and his subjects embraced this new faith wholeheartedly and with the full realization that this was after all a most rational and genuine religion to follow. Ever since the people endeavoured by all means at their disposal to follow and to preserve this noble religion without polluting it in any way with other existing forms of faith or traditional beliefs.

With the establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka a close link was maintained between the island and Northern India. The culture and the civilization of Sri Lanka were then very much influenced by the Northern Indian way of life. Several kings of Sri Lanka in fact married Indian princesses who were descendants of the Sakya clan to which Lord Buddha belonged. No other Buddhist country had so many opportunities as Sri Lanka had for the establishment of close links with India.

The history of Sri Lanka tells us how devout monks and devotees struggled very hard from time to time, sometimes even sacrificing their own lives, to preserve and uphold the original teachings of the Buddha in order that no new cult or creed adulterated the pure teaching of the Master. It follows therefore the teaching of the Buddha as it exists in Sri Lanka today can be said to be most authentic and original form of the teaching of the Buddha or at least more closer to the original teaching than any other form or school of Buddhism in any part of the world. Historically this can be proved.

A European writer and the author of "Buddhism For Today", Maurice O'C. Walshe says: "I am of the opinion that for me at least the best way of trying to put Buddhism into practice is by following the teaching to be found in the Pali canon, on the assumption, which to me seems overwhelmingly probable, that here we have at least the nearest approach to the authentic doctrine taught by Enlightened One. In other words, if I must have a label, I accept the label "Theravada".

It was in Sri Lanka that the original teachings of the Buddha in the Pali language were properly recorded for the first time in history in 84 B.C. and it was also from this country that the Pali Tripitaka – teachings of the Buddha in three categories – were later introduced to other countries – were later introduced to other countries like Myanmar, Thailand and even back to India, the birth place of Buddhism. There is nothing in recorded history to prove that the Pali Canon of Tripitaka, which contains a record of the forty five years' teachings of the Buddha, were written down even in India. Pali was the language chosen by the Buddha to preach his doctrine since it was the local dialect in

Magadha Province, Northern India at that time and widely used in the provinces where Buddha lived.

The fourth Buddhist Council which was held in Sri Lanka in the year 453 after the passing away of the Buddha, is an established historical fact and it was in this Council that five hundred monks, all well-versed in the Dhamma, decided to write down the Pali Canon to preserve it for posterity and prevent changes being made. It has to be remembered that all those who took part in the Council were not mere ordinary monks but were believed to be Arahantas or Holy ones. There should therefore be no reason whatsoever to believe that they could have added their own ideas or any other beliefs into the Pali Texts. The religious practice in the form that exists in Sri Lanka today is not Sri Lanka Buddhism, if it may be so called nor could it be an admixture of Buddhism and Sri Lankan customs but the Buddhist way of life which was originally introduced by Venerable Mahinda from India.

It was also in Sri Lanka that commentaries to the Pali texts translated into Pali language were originally written in the Sinhalese language. Venerable Buddhaghosa and some other well-known scholarly monks specially went to Sri Lanka from India to translate these commentaries.

According to Dr. Le May, "From the time up to the sixteenth century Sri Lanka was regarded by its sister Buddhist countries, Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia, with almost as much veneration as the holy places of Buddhism in India, as the fountain – of the pure Theravada doctrine."

Buddhism in Other Countries

In so far as other Buddhist countries were concerned there were already other strong religions in existence in those countries when Buddhism was first introduced. Hence whatever might have been their traditional beliefs, they did not readily agree to accept Buddhism, but only gradually did they adopt certain aspects of Buddhist philosophy and ethics into their form of faith which appealed to them most according to their way of life, and this paved the way to the establishment of what is known today as Buddhism in those countries. Rightly or wrongly, they did not however surrender their former views and customs notwithstanding the fact that they embraced the Buddhist faith. This is the main reason why Buddhists have so many different practices in many countries today which are in fact not known or found in the original teachings of the Buddha.

Expansion of Buddhist Philosophy

Indian history tells us that a few hundred years after the passing away of the Buddha, there were certain monks who tried to change some of the teachings of the Buddha and wanted to adopt something else instead in their place. They also tried to give different interpretations to the Buddha's teachings according to their own individual beliefs. From time to time they succeeded in doing so whenever they had the backing from certain royal families. They expanded the Buddha's teachings in their own way by adding many other ideas and made Buddhism a great philosophy according to their way of thinking. There is no doubt that they were very brilliant and scholarly monks with excellent and lofty ideas. But it is certainly not fair to put all those ideas into the Buddha's mouth as it were. Amongst all the countries where devout Buddhists have tried not to allow Buddhism to be mixed up with other creeds and cults, Sri Lanka has played a prominent

part from the very beginning. When we go through the 2300 years of Sri Lanka's unbroken history we can find evidence of how devout monks tried to preserve and uphold this noble doctrine.

Translation of Pali Tripitaka into English

While it was in Sri Lanka that the Pali Tripitaka was committed to writing and thus preserved in its pristine purity for two thousand years it was Sri Lanka also that provided the means for these same sacred scriptures to be made available in the west during modern times. This was done through the Pali Text Society which was founded by Dr. Rhys Davids in 1881 in London. Dr. Rhys Davids entered the Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then known) Civil Service where he learnt Pali from Ven. Sumangala Thera. As a son of a Christian Minister, his main motive for studying Pali was so that he could learn Buddhism well enough to attack it convincingly and prove its weakness against Christianity. However, he himself admitted that the Truth of the Dhamma, was so powerful that he accepted it full and even become a very important force to introduce it in England. The Pali Text Society became a very active organization to translate the ancient Buddhist scriptures into English and hence make it available to the West for more than a century.

None of this would have been possible had it not been for the assistance of Ven. Sumangala Thero who passed on his great knowledge to this Englishman and who convinced him of the immense value of the Buddha's Teaching. Ever since that time Sinhala Buddhist monks have learnt English and other European languages and have been ceaselessly working to bring the Master's Sublime Message to people in many parts of Europe, America, Africa and Australia.

Hostile Attitude to Buddhists

Sri Lanka suffered from many foreign invasions from time to time and this resulted in the destruction of many magnificent Temples and Pagodas which represented the treasures and the glories of the country and the people. The kings and their subjects were indeed very religious and they devoted much of their time to the building up of the country according to the Buddhist way of life. A visit to Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, the ancient cities of the island will reveal the might, skill and intelligence of the Sinhalese people through the buildings, pagodas, statues, art and craft of nearly 2000 years ago, and which today lie in ruins as a result of the destruction by foreign invaders. Many such places were destroyed and laid waste by the invaders. However, as a self-dependent and determined race it is indeed wonderful that the Sinhalese people could do such things in those ancient times.

The great architectural monuments in the form of Pagodas, minasteries and shrines, though now mostly in ruins have still a message to the world of what could be done by men with very limited resources if only they become steady of purpose. To the credit of the Sinhala Buddhists, too, stand gigantic works or irrigation tanks like The Kalavewa, and Minneriya.

Since the 16th century Sri Lanka had been subjected to 450 years of successive foreign rule under the Portuguese, the Dutch and later the British. During this period, more particularly during Portuguese period, Buddhists had to undergo enormous sufferings and indignities because they did not accept the religion of their new rulers. Buddhists

were not given proper jobs, they were denied their rights in the land of their birth and even their marriages were not recognized unless they were married in a Church. Properties of the Temples were taken away, Buddhist education was neglected and replaced by Christian Missionary education and in place of the Sinhalese language a foreign language was introduced to the people. Buddhist monks were neglected and they were not given a proper place in society. Many people were massacred during the religious persecution of the Portuguese period. Infants were cut to pieces when their mothers did not accept the new faith. Buddhist Temples were destroyed and some of them were desecrated by the slaughtering of cows therein. All sorts of forceful methods were applied by those foreign rulers to destroy Buddhism.

Bishop Herber who could not understand the Buddhist way of life in Sri Lanka during the British period has composed this poem to condemn the people: -

What though the spicy breezes
Blow soft o'er Ceylon's isle,
Where every prospect please,
And only man is vile;
In vain with lavish kindness
The gifts of God are strewn
The heathen in his blindness
Bow down to wood and stone

A Bishop even is reputed to have said that although they were not able to convert the whole population of the country, they would not allow the rest to remain as good Buddhists. From this statement one can very clearly understand the evil motive of the missionaries who tried to introduce their religion in the name of social advancement and foreign education. The brave Sinhalese did not surrender their noble religion but continued to sacrifice their lives to protect it.

Buddhism is Our Heritage

The Buddhist religion has deeply penetrated into the Sinhalese race, their history, culture, language, art and almost into every aspect of their life and to such an extent that it is very difficult to separate anything which has not been influenced by the Buddhist way of life. To the Sinhalese Buddhists their religion is of paramount importance and they always think that it is their foremost duty to protect their religion. All those Sinhalese who have turned away from Buddhism would be ashamed should they come to know the tragic circumstances of how their forefathers had to give up Buddhism and how they were forced to embrace other religions by the foreign rulers. Many Buddhists had to adopt Christian names and surnames in order to safeguard themselves and to obtain special favours from the Portuguese rulers.

In the publication "2500 years of Buddhism", edited by Prof. Bapat, it is stated: "The achievement of Sri Lanka, considering that is only a tiny island with a few Buddhist inhabitants, has indeed been remarkable. Sri Lanka is the birth place of three great international Buddhist organizations, the Maha Bodhi Society, World Fellowship of Buddhists and the World Buddhist Sangha Council. Sri Lanka out of her scanty resources has sent abroad far more dharmadutas or messengers of the Dharma, than any other Buddhist country. her contribution to culture has been no less significant and far-reaching. Within the country itself, the indigenous arts and crafts, customs and traditions are being revived. Link by link the chains of various alien and anti-Buddhist

cultures, with which the Sinhalese people had for centuries been fettered, are being snapped.”

The Bodhi Tree

Sanghamitta, the daughter of Emperor Asoka, followed her brother Ven. Mahinda to Sri Lanka and after some time there established the order of nuns in the island. Later the Chinese introduced nunnery system in China from Sri Lanka. She brought with her a sapling from the sacred Bodhi tree under which Prince Gotama attained Enlightenment. The Bodhi sapling was received with great reverence by King Tissa himself and was planted with great pomp and ceremony at Anuradhapura. The Bodhi tree still flourishes there to this day and is considered to be the oldest, historical and sacred tree in the world today.

Foot Print of the Buddha

Another sacred place in Sri Lanka is the foot print of the Buddha which he left on the Samanala Giri hill as a mark of his visit to this island. Thousands of followers visit this sacred place every year to pay homage to this sacred foot print.

The Tooth Relic

It was during the reign of Kirti Sri Meghavanna (about 313 A.D.) that the tooth relic of the Buddha was brought to Sri Lanka from Kalinga, India and, according to history this was done to prevent it from falling into the hands of a certain hostile king. The tooth relic was brought to Sri Lanka by the king of Kalinga's daughter, Hema Mala. This relic which is the most precious and sacred treasure of the island today is housed in Kandy, the last capital of Sri Lanka, and is carried in grand procession once every year around the city.

Buddhist Missionary Activities

As far as Buddhist missionary activities are concerned Sri Lanka has in no small measure contributed to the introduction of the noble message of the Buddha throughout the world. It is difficult to believe that there is any other country today which has done so much to foster the spread of this great religion. Today there are Sinhalese monks devoting their full time and energy in the promotion of this great religion throughout the world. Wherever Sinhalese monks are to be found they are instrumental in organizing Sunday schools, study circles, Buddhist societies, schools, publication of Buddhist books and literature, lectures on Buddhism and indulging in many other religious activities. In certain countries Sinhalese monks were in fact the pioneers in such activities and in the performance of religious ceremonies in the manner as prescribed in the Dhamma. Where previously Buddhist activities had been limited only to an occasional visit to the Temple and offering of some joss-sticks, the Sinhalese monks have on their part done much to enlighten the people by revealing the Buddha's true teachings and by guiding them on how to practice this noble religion without resorting to any superstitious belief.

A Brave Sinhalese Buddhist Missionary

There is at the moment a great Buddhist revival in India, the land where Buddhism had been lost for almost seven hundred years due to foreign rule and influence. It was a brave Sinhalese who went to India more than a century ago to arouse the people of

India and to reveal to them the lost heritage of the Indian people. He showed them how the whole world respected India because of a great son that mother India produced and who was none other than Gotama the Buddha. All those who had ignored the name of the Buddha all those years have once again come to realize the true value of this great religious Teacher who had brought real credit to India. Almost all the Buddhist shrines which had escaped destruction by foreign invaders were at the time found neglected and many of the small Buddha images were found used in building walls and houses in place of bricks, the ignorant builders of course not knowing what those images were. Even today one can see such images still embedded in certain walls. That brave Sinhalese Buddhist missionary who went to India had to fight with those who had thus misused the Buddhist shrines and managed to get the lands in many parts of the country and eventually established the “Maha Bodhi Society” to promote Buddhism not only in India but also in other parts of the world was Anagarika Dharmapala.

It was only after his coming to India that many other learned people and the Indian government itself opened their eyes and gradually gave their support to this great man in the noble task of restoring the Buddhist shrines. After independence, the Indian Government gave its support and thanks are particularly due to the late Pandit Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, for his kind co-operation and for the assistance given to the Maha Bodhi Society. According to his instructions almost all the neglected Buddhist shrines were restored and modern facilities were provided for the benefit of pilgrims visiting the shrines. If this noble son of Sri Lanka had not gone to India the situation of the Buddhist shrines and Buddhism there would have deteriorated and would have by now become extinct.

The great man, Ven. Anagarika Dharmapala who was educated in a Missionary school in Colombo was once punished for observing the eight precepts in a temple on a full moon day while he was schooling. It was after this incident that he was determined to go forth as a Buddhist missionary to promote Buddhism in the world. He could not bear the injustices shown towards Buddhists in Sri Lanka by the foreign Missionaries at that time. His dream was fulfilled and today we can see Buddhism spreading from day to day not only in India but also in many parts of the world.

Vesak

Vesak, the birth day of the Buddha was first introduced to many countries for celebration on a grand scale by Sri Lanka. The word “Vesak” is itself a Sinhalese word and is derived from the Pali word “Vesakha”. We can recall that about 40 years ago certain Buddhist countries never even knew what was Vesak celebration nor the day when it should be celebrated. Through the influence of the Sinhalese Buddhists today the whole world celebrates this great day in a truly religious way and as a mark of respect to the founder of Buddhism.

The Buddhist Flag

The six-coloured flag originated in Sri Lanka in 1884 under the instruction of Col. Olcott, the well-known American Buddhist who came to Sri Lanka to study the Dhamma. Today this flag is being hoisted in every Buddhist country and is acknowledged as the international Buddhist flag. Incidentally it was also Col. Olcott who helped to establish Buddhist schools on that island which previously were suppressed by the foreign rulers and other Missionaries.

World Fellowship Of Buddhists

In 1950 the “World Fellowship of Buddhists Conference” was inaugurated in Sri Lanka to promote Buddhist solidarity, brotherhood and understanding amongst the various Buddhist countries. This idea was introduced by another brilliant son of Sri Lanka, Dr. Malalasekara, the founder President of the World Fellowship of Buddhists.

Hitherto Buddhists all over the world used to practice their religion in their own way by criticizing the beliefs and customs of others. They had no chance to get together to discuss their differences and to exchange their views pertaining to Buddhism. But today however almost all Buddhist countries have come very much closer together and have learnt to be more tolerant and to perform their religious activities very harmoniously.

We know of great Buddhist countries whose devotees are more religious and devout than the Sinhalese Buddhists themselves. But unfortunately most of their activities are confined only to their own countries and very seldom do they venture out to help the rest of the world. As far as Sinhalese Buddhists are concerned they are always very eager to help other countries in the promotion and propagation of Buddhism and to take a very active part in international religious affairs.

Whenever there is a religious calamity or any incident involving sacrilege, misuse or misinterpretation of the Buddhist religion or the name of the Buddha, the Sinhalese Buddhists would be the first to raise their voice against them and try to arouse the feelings of other Buddhist countries to take appropriate action against such incidents or malpractices. On many such occasions Sri Lanka has taken a leading part to champion the cause of this great religion.

According to Mr. Christmas Humphreys, President of London Buddhist Society, “With the end of foreign control, large-scale plans are in hand for the increase of Buddhist education and the restoration of Buddhist monuments. The condition of the Sangha is high. In brief, Buddhism in Sri Lanka today is extremely virile, as is shown by the fact among others that it has the surplus energy to send missions all over the world.”

It is not far beyond the truth to say that wherever a Sri Lanka monk stays, he very actively engages with Dharmaduta – missionary activities.