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BUDDHISM IN CEYLON AND SWEDEN

A comparison

When a religion is spread to different countries and cultures the question always arises how much the forms should be adapted to local needs. There are often different opinions about what is changeable and what is so essential to the identity of the religion that it may not be changed.

Of the three world religions, Islam has the most rigid attitude in this respect, since it makes exclusive use of classical Arabic for the liturgical language and since it sticks to the same forms of worship wherever it appears. The two remaining world religions, Christianity and Buddhism, have proved to be more flexible and can present quite a multitude of different religious schools.

The research I am making at present, as far as time allows, at the Institute of Comparative Religion (Religionshistoriska institutionen) of the University of Upsala, deals with these indigenization problems, i.e. the difficulties and discussions in connection with how a religion should avoid being perceived as a foreign body in the culture where it is active. I deal primarily with the Christians of Ceylon and the Buddhists of Sweden. I have collected material partly through twelve years' commitment to the Swedish Buddhist movement, partly through a trip to Ceylon last winter, together with Thomas Hultberg of the same Institute, I have also made three private trips to South Asia on earlier occasions.

In this paper I will deal primarily with the Buddhist complex of problems.

In the environment where Buddhism arose, there was practically only one way for anyone who launched new or controversial thoughts to be tolerated by society: apparently to leave it, to renounce property and family life and become a *samāṇa*.

I say *apparently* to leave society, since the *samāṇa* movement was not unimportant to social life. Round a group of *samāṇas* laity could assemble,

support it and receive its teaching, thereby forming a silent opposition against the establishment.

When prince Siddhattha joined the *samaṇa* movement, this certainly was a scandal in the eyes of the establishment, approximately as if among us the son of a leading Tory should become a Socialist agitator; but it was a scandal within the limits of the local cultural pattern. It deserves to be mentioned that Individualism, in the Western sense of this word, has never been characteristic of Oriental cultures, so it is ethnocentric and misleading to regard the Great Renunciation exclusively as an attempt of prince Siddhattha to search for truth for himself alone. It was also an expression of solidarity with the exploited masses.

The Buddhist community of monks arose within the framework of the *samaṇa* movement and was shaped by this. The relationship and interaction between monks and laity was also a pattern taken from the culture already existing locally. On the other hand, the original Buddhist community differed from the majority of competing schools by its organization, which was very strict and democratic for those times. It is significant that the Buddha did not designate a personal successor. Instead he left it to the Buddhists themselves to decide together about their collective concerns.

The organizational forms of Buddhism in Ceylon today are built upon this historical foundation, but to a certain degree they have changed with the times. When the Sinhalese kings began confessing to Buddhism, it was tempting for the monks to rely more on state and capital for their support than on the people.

Certain aspects of Buddhist ethics have not managed to assert themselves in Ceylon. In spite of the fact that a Buddhist monk should by definition be propertyless and economically entirely dependent on the confidence of the people, there are today many monasteries owning land. The resistance to castism quite naturally became rather hollow when one became dependent on kings and high people who had inherited their positions, since hereditary monarchy and hereditary nobility are in themselves a kind of caste system. The largest of the present three orders of monks in Ceylon, the Siam Nikaya, according to a royal order from the 18th century, still ordains only members of the highest castes.

In spite of the fact that the present government of Ceylon claims to be Buddhist, its policy does not fulfil the most elementary demands of Buddhist ethics. Capital punishment has not been abolished, and no attempts are being made to replace the armed forces with a non-violent defence; nor are any vigorous efforts being made against the enormous economic inequalities which cause the practical serfhood of a large part of the people of Ceylon.

A typical feature of popular Buddhism in Ceylon is its strong dilution by Hindu elements. In spite of the fact that all official Hindus of the island are Śaivas, Viṣṇu is regarded as the guardian patron of the country. The cult of Viṣṇu is not practised in the Hindu temples, but in the Buddhist ones.

In Sweden, Buddhism has a quite different historical background. This religion reached the country in the 20th century, not through missionaries sent out from other countries but entirely through local initiative. By that time, this country had been exposed to four hundred years of Lutheran propaganda against all kinds of monasticism. The number of Swedes having sided wholeheartedly with Buddhism is limited, and no indigenous monastic community yet exists. On the other hand, we are not exposed to the pressure of a Hindu environment.

From the middle of the fifties, Buddhist activities in Sweden came to be dominated by two persons: Ingrid Wagner, *alias* Amitā Nisatta, in Stockholm, and in the Gothenburg area Marcel Sirander, *alias* Tao Wei, *alias* Kuang Wu, *alias* Acarya Sunyata.

My knowledge about Sirander's activities is extremely limited, whereas I got in touch with Ingrid Wagner in 1968. At that time she said that she had been ordained a Theravādin *bhikkhunī* of Burmese succession, and that she had been sent to Sweden by the Buddhists of Burma. After my stay in Ceylon last winter I spent one week in Burma, and had the opportunity of meeting several people who knew her when she was staying there, i.e. her old teacher, Sayadaw U Thittila, and Burma's former Attorney General, U Chan Htoon. Then it became evident that no Burmese organization was behind her activities in Sweden, and that no *bhikkhunī* ordination according to Burmese tradition has taken place during the last eight hundred years.

Wagner tried to build her activities - which she gave the name "Buddhismens vänner" (Friends of Buddhism), after the Finnish group "Buddhismin ystävät" already existing in Helsinki - entirely according to Asian standards. This was carried so far that the group never got any statutes, committee, minutes or list of members. A deviation from the original Asian pattern was the fact that Wagner had full economic responsibility, in spite of her simultaneously expressed wish to live as a nun.

In 1974, a number of Buddhist laymen in the Stockholm area started a regular Buddhist organization in accordance with Swedish organizational custom - Föbundet Buddhistisk Gemenskap (the Buddhist Communion Association), or FBG. I myself was a member of this group. We assumed that Wagner honestly wanted to live without property, and that she would be glad to see that the economic responsibility was taken over by the laity, in an orderly fashion and with open accounting. Wagner, however, saw the forming of the organization as a vote of no confidence and severed all contacts with those of her followers who had joined it.

The FBG intends to organize all Buddhists and all those interested in Buddhism in Sweden, and it has been continuously active since its beginning. We consider original Buddhism to be, in the environment where it arose, the most democratic movement, and so we think that a Buddhist society would betray the oldest Buddhist ideals if it were less democratic than any other organization in the same place. In order to prevent personality cults and oligarchy arising, therefore, we do not permit anyone to have the same board appointment for two successive years. The statutes and the decisions made by the annual meetings also contain other guarantees for the members' right of decision.

In 1978 a committee was appointed within the FBG, the Kumarajiva Committee, with the purpose of dealing with linguistic problems. This committee has i.a. been assigned the task of initiating the translation into Swedish of the Buddhist Pali texts, and to compile a Buddhist book of devotions and ceremonies. In order to get competent aid in matters of interpretation, the Kumarajiva Committee has established contacts with, i.a., the Paramadhamma Buddhist Institute in Mount Lavinia and with the Pali department of the University of Kelaniya.

The FBG is working hard to give roots to Buddhism as an indigenous religion of Northern Europe. We are aware of the mistakes made by the Christian missions in South Asia, and we do not feel any need to repeat them.

Unfortunately, however, we have as yet not been able to convince all Swedish Buddhists either of this or of the need for organizing. Outside the FBG, therefore, there are several unorganized or semi-organized enclaves of Asian culture. Wagner's circle, the Friends of Buddhism, has continued as one of these. A more important one is the Karma Shedrup Dargye Ling, following the Tibetan Kargyupa school.

In 1979, the new Sri Lankan ambassador to Sweden, Mr. Bhadrapala Wickramatunga, made a paradoxical effort to form an umbrella organization for the non-organized groups. In that connection, he did not care about the only functioning, strict organization for Buddhists already existing in the country. His group met a few times last autumn. It has given itself the misleading name "the Swedish Buddhist union". The ambassador himself became the chairman, in spite of the fact that a chairman, according to Swedish law, is ultimately responsible for the actions of his society, and that an ambassador, according to international custom, cannot be responsible to the authorities in the country he has been sent to. The meetings were held in his residence, i.e. in an extra-territorial area, and the minutes were written in English.

Personally, I regard the initiative of Mr. Wickramatunga as an expression of unconscious Sinhalese chauvinism and cultural imperialism. He does not have as much power in Sweden as did the British missionaries and empire builders in Ceylon at an earlier time, but his way of acting does not indicate any difference in fundamental attitude.

The Swedish Buddhists are a negligibly small group when compared to their Sinhalese co-religionists. Western groups of Buddhists are generally small, so one would believe that Ceylon were exclusively playing the part of the donor in relation to the Buddhists of the Occident.

Such is absolutely not the case. Ceylon's present contribution to world Buddhism is in no way proportional to the number of Buddhists in that country. The Sinhalese Buddhists themselves confess that it is uncertain whether Buddhism would still exist in Ceylon today without Western contributions.

Foremost among the Occidental cultural heroes in Ceylon stands, according to the view of the Sinhalese, Colonel Olcott, who has got a statue with his image and an avenue with his name in the central parts of Colombo. His most important contribution was to give new life to the barely surviving Buddhist educational system of the island.

An important part is also played by the late monk of German descent, Nyanatiloka Maha Thera, and his disciples, especially his compatriot Nyanaponika Maha Thera, who has built, in collaboration with local laymen, the publishing house Buddhist Publication Society, functioning remarkably well for that country.

Even if the contribution of the Sinhalese of today to Western Buddhists is comparatively limited, a few names may be mentioned. Anagarika Dharmapala, who lived at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, did not only have a great importance for Buddhist vitality in his home country and for the restoration of the Buddhist places of pilgrimage in North-East India; he is also the first Sinhalese known to have travelled around the earth, and during his travels in Europe and North America he lectured about Buddhism and taught Buddhist meditation. The British Maha Bodhi Society, with its seat in London, is a lasting mark of his activities in the West.

The present chairman of the British Maha Bodhi Society, H. Saddhatissa Maha Thera, is another Sinhalese who has made an important contribution to the Occident as an organizer and as a writer. His compatriot and colleague, Walpola Rahula, has been active mainly as a scholar. Piyadassi Maha Thera, who has visited Sweden several times and who got some publicity there in connection with the controversial conversion to Buddhism of the lawyer Henning Sjöström, is a controversial person himself. Buddhist and Ceylonese magazines often and willingly write about his trips to propagate the Teaching, but I have also heard critical voices claiming that his travels are mainly devoted to sightseeing, that he never stays in one place for a sufficient time to get anything worthwhile done, and that it is difficult for him to suit his way of teaching to the conditions of his pupils.

In Colombo, there are several organizations with the purpose of propagating Buddhism abroad. They often have imposing façades, but organizational incompetence and lack of knowledge about the conditions of other countries generally make their contributions insignificant. A typical example is

the Buddhist Information Centre in the Ananda Coomaraswamy Mawatha.

Buddhism in Ceylon and in Sweden has to work in widely different environments with completely dissimilar historical backgrounds. In Ceylon, Buddhism has a long history and many who confess the religion officially, but also a long and insidious infiltration of Hindu thoughts and ideas which have hollowed out Buddhist activities from the inside.

Swedish Buddhists are few, and have not been able to work openly for more than 28 years, since the grossest forms of official Christian oppression were abolished in 1952. On the other hand, their religious activities have not as yet had time to become a routine, and it is easier for them than for their Sinhalese co-religionists to dissociate themselves clearly and unequivocally from Hindu God-worship and inequality.

Ceylon today has a relatively large amount of quiet and freedom of expression, but the economic situation is unstable, and no one knows when an upheaval might come. The countries of Further India are today entirely governed by dictatorships, and Buddhists there cannot speak freely. Therefore, it is important that vital and stable Buddhist institutions on an indigenous basis are active in Europe, not only for the sake of European culture and religious freedom, but also for the sake of the whole Buddhist world.