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Buddhism and Society

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Buddhism and Society

If we consider the contribution of India to world culture and to the civilization of mankind, Buddhism holds a key position indeed. On the one hand, Buddhism as a philosophy is one of the greatest achievements of human thought. On the other hand, the Buddhist religion has also served as a vehicle for spreading Indian culture far beyond the limits of the subcontinent, to Sri Lanka, to the whole of Central Asia, to Southeast Asia and to East Asia. It was mainly as a Buddhist culture that Indian culture has been accepted and assimilated in countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand etc., and that it has become the basis for the national cultures of these peoples. India and Buddhism seem so much interrelated to most western observers that many Europeans tend to overlook the fact that Buddhism had almost completely disappeared from India after the Muslim conquest of the northern plains and of Bengal. In recent times, however, we have witnessed a renaissance of interest in Buddhist thought not only in the Buddhist countries of South and Southeast Asia but also in the country of its origin.

In my studies of the interrelation of Buddhism and society as published in three volumes on *Buddhism, State and Society* (1966–73). I have proposed to distinguish three different forms of Buddhism to be dealt with, viz. early Buddhism, traditional Buddhism and modernistic Buddhism. I may

add here that I shall confine myself to the discussion of the relation of Buddhism and society in the so-called Hīnayāna Buddhism. Therefore I shall not enter into a discussion of the changes that have taken place in the other schools of Buddhist thought such as in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna. Hīnayāna Buddhism may be characterised as the earlier school of Buddhism, and it has survived to the present day in one particular form only, viz. in the form of Theravada Buddhism. The sacred scriptures of the Theravada Buddhists are written in the Pali language.

Thus, we can derive information on the relation of Buddhism and society in the earliest period of the Buddhist Dharma from the Pali scriptures of Theravada Buddhism which may be described as the conservative form of the Buddha's religion. There can be no doubt that originally it was the only objective of the Buddha's Dharma to show the way to final salvation to mankind, i.e. the way to Nibbāna. The doctrine of saṃsāra and rebirth as well as the doctrine of the law of karma were already known in India at that time. The way to Nibbāna as taught by the Buddha is, however, different from the early Upanishadic teachings which had spread at that time, as well as from the way to salvation which was taught by other contemporary ascetic schools like by the Jains and the Ājīvakas. The Buddha did not accept the concept of an eternal soul or an ātman nor did he approve of the extreme ascetic practices as prescribed by Mahāvīra, the founder of the Jain religion. The Buddhist concept of the universe may best be described as the

concept of a constant and continuous “process” which is being governed by eternal and unchangeable laws, in short by Dharma. This is the Dharma which is fully known to the Buddha and which was taught by the Buddha.

There exists, however, no permanent substance nor an eternal soul nor an almighty god nor anything else which could escape from the law of impermanence. Again, from this impermanence, it follows that everything is subject to the law of suffering. And because there is no eternal “self” which could escape from impermanence and suffering, we must realise that there are three *lakḥaṇas*, i.e. the three basic characteristics of everything that exists, viz. suffering (*dukkhatā*), impermanence (*aniccatā*) and being not the self (*anattatā*). It is only with the realisation of this true nature of the universe that we may escape from the endless cycle of rebirth or *saṃsāra* and may attain to *Nibbāna*. *Nibbāna*, however, cannot be described simply as “nothingness.” *Nibbāna* is totally different from anything that we could describe as extant or by any other categories accessible to our ways of thinking.

I shall not deal with more details of Buddhist philosophy here, but I should like to draw your attention to the consequences of this particular way of thinking. If salvation can be reached only by non-involvement in worldly affairs and by deep meditation, it is obvious that the early Buddhist community tended to be an elitist movement, oriented towards nothing else than salvation. It was, elitist in the sense of being accepted by a spiritual elite, not elitist

in the sense of being open only to particular sections of the people as the Vedic tradition has been. On the contrary, the Buddhist Sangha or monastic order was open to anybody irrespectively of his caste, and all members of the Sangha had equal rights and obligations. In this sense, the early Buddhist Sangha can be characterised as egalitarian. Some modern authors have even described it as democratic, but the term “democracy” means the “rule of the people.” In the early Buddhist Sangha, however, there was no question of anybody ruling over anybody. The laws for the Sangha were issued by the Buddha, and the Buddha declined to appoint any successor. Only Dharma, i.e. the Buddhist law as taught by the Enlightened One, was to govern the Sangha, and all bhikkhus were expected to follow the Dharma.

It is easy to understand why the early Buddhist community was conceived as a strictly non-political religious movement. Any entanglement of the Sangha in worldly affairs would have contravened the main goal of the religious life itself, viz. reaching Nibbāna. At the same time, the then prevailing political order in Northern India made it advisable for all ascetic groups to avoid any misunderstandings as to their political neutrality, because there existed no continuous political authority, but various rather small and often instable states only at that time. The Buddha gave, of course, instructions to kings that they should practise righteousness and observe peace. He also commented upon a given situation in political life in his

famous remarks concerning the Vajjis as handed down in the Sutras, but this was not meant to be an instruction on political matters, but it was the background for advice given to the Sangha as we learn from the textual evidence. We would be wrong to say that there is no teaching of early Buddhism on state and politics, but we may describe this as nothing else than an application of the *gihivinaya*, i.e. the layman's code of ethical conduct as taught by the Buddha, to public life. The principle of non-violation of all beings (ahimsa) must be recognised as the superior principle of Buddhist ethics in all spheres of life inclusive of political and communal life.

A new situation arose after the Mauryan empire had been created. Emperor Asoka was the first Indian ruler to elaborate a well-defined religious policy in an great Indian Empire. And it was during his reign that Buddhism has emerged as a leading spiritual force under the protection of a great political authority all over India and even beyond the borders of the Mauryan empire. Asoka, though personally a follower of the Buddhist religion, did not yet make Buddhism the religion of the state. The state was to further all great religious movements, as we can see from Asoka's famous rock edicts and other inscriptions which he ordered to be engraved in all parts of his empire. Incidentally, these inscriptions are still the earliest exactly dated written records from India. Asoka did not explicitly propagate Buddhism in his edicts, but he propagated an understanding of Dharma which was based on Buddhist

thought, but remained equally acceptable by other important religious communities of India. Non-violation of living beings, i.e. ahimsa, is being declared to be an ethical principle binding for the individual citizen as well as for the political power. The king no longer strives to achieve the *digvijaya*, i.e. the rule over the world by force of his army, but he aims at the *digvijaya* of the Dharma, the principle of morality which is to replace the power struggle as it was provided for by secular political theory. The king also decided to send out missionaries to all neighbouring countries to spread Dharma all over the world. Within his empire, he accepted full responsibility of ruler and state for the well-being of all his subjects. Asoka's rule as described in his inscriptions may be characterised as the first welfare state in history. Building hospitals and many other forms of social responsibility for welfare and relief of the people were declared to be the main task of the ruler.

At the same time, Asoka also developed a new religious policy which is designed to protect the religious institutions of Buddhism. In this context, his reform of the Buddhist Sangha by excluding unworthy elements from the monastic order must be mentioned. This reform is recorded by inscriptions as well as by the chroniclers of Sri Lanka. Until then, the institutions of the Buddhist order had no formal relation with the state or with the ruler. Pious kings would offer donations to the monks and they would provide land for the establishment of monasteries, but questions of the administration of the internal affairs of the Sangha until

then had remained outside the scope of interest of the state. Now, Asoka appointed particular state officers to look after the religious institutions and to provide for public protection of these institutions. Unworthy elements were to be excluded from the Sangha and the king's religious officers were ordered to ensure the observation of the monastic laws in accordance with the regulations of Vinaya (Buddhist ecclesiastical law).

If we compare Asokan Buddhism with original Buddhism, we do not find any contradiction, but we observe the introduction of a new goal, viz. the aim to build up a society which is modelled on Buddhist ideals. As we have seen before, the Buddha had already given instructions to rulers to follow the code of Buddhist ethics for laymen, but we cannot trace a separate Buddhist political theory in the earliest period. From Asoka's times onwards, however, Buddhist states were established, i.e. states where Buddhism had become the national and the state religion. The first country to accept Buddhism as a result of Asoka's missions was Sri Lanka or Ceylon. Almost simultaneously, the Dharma was also introduced to the people of Suvaṇṇabhūmi i.e. the Mon people of Lower Burma. Since then, Theravada Buddhism has become the national religion of the Sinhala people in Lanka, and in the course of time it has spread over most parts of mainland Southeast Asia. In all these countries, the Buddhist Sangha has played an essential role as a vehicle for the spread of advanced cultural achievements from India to these then still

underdeveloped regions.

As mentioned before, Theravada Buddhists made a continuous effort to preserve the ancient interpretation of Lord Buddha's teachings. We may add, however, that some of the most noteworthy innovations or supplementary traditions observed in Theravada of Ceylon and Southeast Asia may be identified as the particular ways in which Buddhist thought has influenced society in these countries. In the course of time, a rather complex political theory based on the acceptance of Buddhism was worked out. We may term this system of traditions and beliefs as "traditional Buddhism."

The political teachings of traditional Buddhism were not handed down in a compendium which could be compared with the *Arthaśāstra*, the hand-book of secular Indian statecraft. The Buddhists choose another form of propagating their concepts of social and political thought which is known from India too, viz. that of giving examples. This type of literature is commonly known as *nīti* literature. There is, however, one basic difference between all other types of *nīti* literature and the literature which I have in mind now. This difference consists in the fact that the Buddhists of Ceylon and Southeast Asia decided to use the vehicle of history in order to teach the concepts of state and society that a Buddhist should follow. Thus, from the time of king Duṭṭhagāmaṇi in the 2nd century B.C., onwards, history was written in Sri Lanka with the particular aim to serve didactic purposes. Thereby the earliest historical

records known from South Asian tradition came into existence. Based on these early accounts, the *Dīpavaṃsa* or “Chronicle of the Island” of Ceylon was composed in the 4th or 5th century A.D. and Mahānāma wrote the *Mahāvāṃsa*, the “Great Chronicle” of the island, during the first part of the 6th century.

As early as in these works, we can trace the political theory of traditional Theravada Buddhism. The ideas known from Asoka’s inscriptions were further elaborated now: The political authority should fulfil the aim to build up a welfare-state where such abundance is to be produced that there is sufficient wealth not only for providing for the welfare of the poor and the disabled, but also for securing the opportunity of leading the religious life of a bhikkhu to as many people as possible. In addition, the king is required not only to make provision for the material welfare of the Sangha, but also to supervise the monastic institutions in order to ensure that they fulfil their duties and observe the monastic rules. During this so-called mediaeval period, regulations for the Sangha were formulated by Sangha assemblies and ceremonially promulgated by the king of Sri Lanka. Such documents are known as *katikāvattas*. Several of these texts have been preserved and translated into English recently.

In this way, the state was transformed into an institution with religious legitimation. The Buddhist religion now constituted the essential factor to build up the identity and the legitimation of political authority, and, at the same time,

it became a factor restricting the use and preventing the misuse of political power. Simultaneously the relation of Sangha and society radically changed as a consequence of the above-mentioned responsibility of the Sangha for spreading cultural achievements. In early Northern India, the Buddhist monk's role was restricted to practising and teaching the way to Nibbāna. It did not yet extend to the task of spreading or preserving traditional literary culture. True enough, beginning with the Maurya period, the Buddhists of India established their own particular literature including Buddhist kavyas, philosophical works etc., but the Buddhist monks of India have never assumed responsibility for preserving literature and science as such. They only contributed towards its development in competition with other groups. However, in Sri Lanka as well as in Buddhist Burma, the task of preserving the literary heritage of the national culture has been entrusted to the Buddhist Sangha.

In this context, we should not forget the role which the Sangha has played for nation-building. It is a widespread misunderstanding of modern historians to claim that "nationalism" was a new feature of 19th century. In fact, nationalism can be traced back many centuries, not only in European, but also in Asian history. This is also the case with Sri Lanka and Burma. Buddhism became the national religion of the Sinhala nation when it was introduced in the 3rd century B.C., whereas the Buddha's followers had coexisted side by side with several other religious

communities wherever the Dharma had spread in mainland India. Therefore, along with the language factor, Buddhism may be identified to have been the essential factor of nation building allowing the Sinhala nation to develop a marked and continuous sense of identity which lasts until today. Within these political and social structures of the Buddhist kingdoms of Ceylon and Southeast Asia, the Sangha guaranteed for the continuity of most cultural traditions and educational values as well as for the application of Buddhist ideals in communal life. The claims in this respect were clearly formulated in the ancient chronicles as well as by later Buddhist authors.

This traditional role of the Sangha in social and in political life was embedded in a firmly established system of state-Sangha relations and it formed part of a particular structure of political authority which derives its legitimation from religious values. The underlying ideas are formulated in inscriptions and in other documents from mediaeval Ceylon and Burma. Several concepts of different origin have merged together in this system of traditional Buddhist politics. Firstly, the ruler is described as a *cakravartin*, i.e. as the ideal world-ruler who governs the world without falling back upon the use of force. The *cakravartin* ideal is found in the early Buddhist scriptures as well as in many other religious traditions of India, and it is related to the belief that there was a golden age in the past and that, in the cyclic evolution of the world, there will be a golden age in the future again. *Cakravartin* has become an official title of

Buddhist kings since many centuries. Secondly, we find the concept of the *devarāja*. The concept of divine kingships has originated in Hindu India, and it survived in Nepal until very recently. In the Khmer kingdom of mediaeval Cambodia, it reached its most powerful and magnificent representation. The Buddhist kings also adopted the *devarāja* concept, but in a more mitigated way. It was still valid in Thailand at the beginning of our century. For ceremonies at the royal court, therefore, brahmin priests were employed by the Buddhist kings. Still another element of legitimation was the identification of the king as a *bodhisattva*, i.e. as a future Buddha. It originated from an undercurrent of Mahayanistic influence in mediaeval Sri Lanka and in Southeast Asia which was finally superseded by Theravada orthodoxy. Another element of the legitimation of authority was the *Dharmarāja* concept. Here, Hindu and Buddhist thought have merged in a rather syncretistic way. The *rājadharmas* of Buddhist tradition are enumerated and described in the *Jātakas*, i.e., the Buddhist birth stories, whereas those of Hindu thought were elaborated in *Purāṇas* and related works.

In the purely Buddhist tradition as represented by the Buddhist chronicles, Asoka has remained the model king whom to follow as the highest aim of a ruler. The king is expected to support the *Sāsana*, i.e. the institutions of the Buddhist religion, not only by donations to the Sangha, but also by exercising his patronage over all religious institutions. Following the advice given by himself and by

the example of Asoka, not only but also non-Buddhist religious institutions are to be supported by the king. Patronising the Sangha implies that the king take the necessary steps for a reform of the Sangha if necessary. This is termed "Sāsana reform." Thus, there is an intimate interrelation of Sangha and state. Though the Sangha is entrusted with the goal of ensuring that the religious and ethical values should be upheld in the country, the bhikkhus were expected not to indulge in any activities which fall into the realm of the secular power, e.g. in political activities as such.

The relation between Sangha and laity was an equally close one on the lower level of village religion. Here, the main religious activities consisted of "merit-making" and participation in "merit-making" (*puñña* and *pattānumodanā*). This aim, of course, was far away from the original goal of Buddhism, because it was directed towards good karmic results like good rebirth etc. Performing meritorious deeds did not, however, in any way conflict with genuine Buddhist ideals, though it represented a much lower level of spiritual progress than that to be achieved by meditation as taught in the Buddhist scriptures. If considered as an end in itself, however, merit making could even be described as a diversion from the way to Nibbāna, but it was always accepted as a great value for those on the lower stages of the way to salvation. The Sangha is the "highest field of merit," and the participation of the bhikkhus in the traditional merit-producing ceremonies forms the most important

occasions of community life. At the same time, the monks, being the guardians of higher civilization in the villages, were the teachers in the rural areas where the village youth studied under their guidance. It is well known that the majority of the Buddhist population in Ceylon and in Southeast Asia were literate since an early period. As late as in early 19th century, the percentage of illiterates was higher in England than in Ceylon at the same time.

From these remarks, we may conclude in which manifold ways the Buddhist Sangha interacted with society in traditional Buddhism. Theoretically, Buddhism had remained rather unchanged in the Theravada tradition. Innovations as propagated by the adherents of Mahāyana were rejected; and the scriptures along with the ancient commentaries continued to be viewed as the only valid sources of the true Dharma. On the other hand, as we have seen, Buddhism had become part of a complicated system of traditions and beliefs which included elements of the so-called “Little Tradition” as well as of the “Great Tradition.” of the sophisticated elite. To sum up, Buddhism never has influenced political and social developments as a purely religious theory, but always as in its actual manifestation, i.e. as a part of the totality of a structured system of traditions including notions and beliefs of Buddhist as well as of non-Buddhist origin. In this way, Buddhism was accommodated to serve the needs of the times, and such accommodations were tacitly agreed, not discussed theoretically.

This system of state-Sangha relations which was built up in the mediaeval Buddhist kingdoms was destroyed during the colonial age. This break-down was effected by the strict separation of Sangha and state, which was termed the “disestablishment” of Buddhism. The institutions of Buddhism were now converted into private institutions, and state patronage as well as state supervision ceased to be exercised. There were predictions made in early 19th century that Buddhism would gradually disappear in Ceylon and in Burma because of its disestablishment. But the opposite happened to be the case. Buddhism was so deeply rooted in the culture of Ceylon and Burma that it became the starting-point for the resurgence of national identity. For the newly emerging urban and semi-urban population of the colonial period, Buddhism now served as the symbol of their own cultural heritage and thus it became an integral element in their struggle for freedom from foreign domination.

An idealistic image of life as it was supposed to have been in the pre-colonial period was pictured by the writers of the independence movement, and these writings were widely read by the new middle-class.

In this modern period, the third of the forms of Buddhism mentioned in my introduction came into existence, viz. Buddhist modernism. Buddhist modernism has originated as a reaction against foreign cultural domination and as a revival of the heritage of the ancient national culture. We can draw parallels between Neo-Hinduism and Buddhist

modernism. The earliest Neo-Hindu movement was the Brahma-Samaj which was founded by Ram Mohan Roy in 1828, but the Brahma Samaj has remained a very small movement. It was only with the Arys Samaj that Neo-Hinduism became a really influential reform movement in India. It was established in 1875 by Dayanand Sarasvati.

Buddhist modernism was initiated about the same time. The public debates or *vādas* between Buddhist monks and Christian missionaries are considered as the turning-point at which the decline of Buddhism was arrested. The first of these public debates was held as early as in 1865, but the most successful defence of Buddhism was considered to have been produced by Mohotivattē Guṇānanda Thera in the *vāda* of Pānadura in 1873. The text of this debate was translated into English. It was then read by Colonel Olcott who came to Ceylon to help in the Buddhist revival. The most influential of the reformers was, of course, the Anāgārika Dharmapāla who lived from 1864 to 1933. He is well known in all Buddhist countries as the founder of the Mahā Bodhi movement.

This Buddhist resurgence was not simply a revival of traditional Buddhist ideals. It is characterised by the emergence of new concepts, by a response to the challenge presented by Western cultural influence. The modernists argue that Buddhism is by far superior to Christianity. Buddhism is the religion of reason, rejecting blind belief. The philosophy of Buddhism is in full accordance with modern science. "Buddhism and Science" has remained one

of the main arguments of Buddhist modernism until today.

To be able to present this argumentation, modern Buddhists began to look back to the original sources of Buddhism with the objective to distinguish between the essential teachings of Buddhism and mythological additions.

In their search for an exact understanding of the original teachings of the Buddha, Buddhist modernists from the East and Western scholars have closely cooperated. As is well known, until the middle of the 19th century, many Western scholars have doubted the historicity of the Buddha. The famous French scholar Emile Senart, e.g., has described the life of the Buddha as a sun myth. It was the German scholar Hermann Oldenberg who first gave a detailed reliable account of the Buddha, his life, his doctrine and his Sangha, for the Western world in 1881 in his famous work "Buddha."

Buddhist modernism was started as a movement of a small elite in the Buddhist countries as well as in mainland India. It was first accepted by the highly educated classes only. However, in the course of time, more and more sections of the Buddhist Sangha came to know about the new ideas and concepts, and these monks began to disseminate such concepts in the villages. In this way modernistic ideas reached the masses of the population in Buddhist Ceylon and in Burma. It was, of course, a popularised form of these ideas, but it was highly effective to bring about the awakening of a new religio-political consciousness. Thus,

the centuries-old intrinsic interrelation of Sangha and laity resulted in a sort of mass politicisation of the Buddhist population which helped in the necessary process of political and social modernization of the Buddhist countries.

By this development, the concepts of Buddhist modernism were, of course, changed. Traditional beliefs and myths combined with rationalistic elements. New literary traditions and new forms of a mythology which is quite different from the traditional one may be observed. Let me mention two examples only. The Anāgārika Dharmapāla and later Buddhist leaders including Dr. Ambedkar of India have proposed the claim that democracy is an essentially Buddhist concept. Their argument is based on the observation of the structure of the Buddhist Sangha. In the Sangha equal rights are given to all monks, and the resolutions of the Sangha must be passed unanimously for most matters. In some cases, resolutions by a majority of votes are allowable. In this way, basic rules of democracy are virtually identical with basic regulations of the Sangha. Therefore, the modernists could claim that the Sangha was a model for the democratic organisation of human society: though this may not be correct from an historical point of view, because the Buddha's Dharma was not concerned with the discussion of a political system, yet it proved a very valuable contribution towards political modernization indeed. Another example is the Buddhist justification of the teachings of modern socialism. In a justification of socialist policies in a Buddhist country, the Burmese politician U Ba

Swe in 1952 has described socialism as the “lower truth” which may be used to build up a society of affluence which gives opportunity to as many human beings as possible to live a religious life in order to realise the highest truth i.e. the Dharma of the Buddha. There is a vast literature of Buddhist socialism which is based on this and similar concepts of different levels of thinking. Buddhists, however, should always follow the middle Path and avoid any form of extremism.

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