

The Revival of Buddhism in the Asian Region: Issues and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

Once Buddhism flourished in and around the Asian continent and gradually its area of influence diminished. The paper begins with a brief glimpse of the splendour and grandeur that Buddhism was and discusses reasons for its decline and virtual disappearance. The significance of the Buddhist renaissance which took place in Sri Lanka in 1753 is examined in relation to the progressive chain reaction of rediscovery and regeneration of Buddhism in modern times. The paper proceeds to examine the Buddhist revival in traditionally Buddhist countries today. Issues and prospects pertaining to revival of Buddhism in the world are dealt with in detail. The emphasis is on tasks for decades to come.

The Splendour and Grandeur that was Buddhism

The discovery of Buddhist artifacts in such far-flung places as Bulgaria, Central Asia, the Philippines, Indonesia and the Maldives testify to the extent to which Buddhism had spread in the Euro-Asian Continents.

According to Rock Edict XIII, Asoka, in pursuit of his policy of *Dharmavijaya* (Conquest by Righteousness), had sent his *Dūtas* to Hellenic kingdoms of Macedonia, Egypt and Syria in the third century BCE. His inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic were addressed to foreign subjects in the frontiers of Mauryan Empire. One of the missions fielded by Thera Moggaliputtatissa after the Third Buddhist Council was to Greek Realms (*Yonaloka*). A Greek Thera, Yonaka Dhammarakkhita, led another to Aparanta, the Western Region of the Indian subcontinent. The dialogues of King Menander and Thera Nagasena, as preserved in the *Milindapañha*, reflect the presence of Buddhism in the Bactrian Empire.

By the third century CE, St. Clement of Alexandria knew enough of Buddhism to write of "Indians that obey the precepts of Boudda, whom, through exaggeration of his dignity, they honour as God."

That Buddhism was the fountainhead of a multifaceted culture in the Asian Region is evident from the vast treasures of its architectural, artistic, literary, and philosophical heritage of over two millennia. The following speak of the grandeur and glory of this culture:

- the ancient stupas of India of Bharhut, Sanchi, Amaravati, and Nagarjunikonda, with their rich sculptural embellishments,
- the gigantic and innovative Dagabas of Sri Lanka, e.g. Tissamaharama, Seruwila, Ruvanveliseya, Abhayagiriya, Jetavana, Kelaniya, Satmahalprasada, Demalamahaseya and Kota Vihara,
- the spectacular stupas and monasteries of Taxila and Takht-i-Bahi in Pakistan,

- the exquisite cave sculptures of Ellora in India and Yun-kang and Lun-men in China,
- the fascinating cave architecture, stone carvings, and paintings of Ajanta, Bhaja, Karle, Nasik, Junnar and Kanheri of India, Kakrak of Afghanistan, Dunhuang, T'rin-lun-shan and Kuang-sheng of China, and Dambulla of Sri Lanka,
- the magnificent murals of Situlpahuva, Tivanka-pilimage, Yapahuwa, Dimbulagala and Degaldoruwa of Sri Lanka, Tepe Maredjan, Bamiyan, and Begram of Afghanistan, Fundikistan of Central Asia, Yarkand, Khotan in Kashgaria, Aksu, Kizil and Kucha in Kumtura, Sorchuk, Miran, Kocho and Turkan of Eastern Turkestan,
- the exquisite miniature stone carvings of the Gandhara school of Buddhist art and its Indian counterpart in Mathura,
- the stupendous Buddha statues of Bamiyan in Afghanistan, Lashen in China, Sokkurgam in Korea, Galvihara, Aukana, Maligawela, Buduruvagala and Sesseruva of Sri Lanka, and Nara and Kamakura of Japan,
- the breathtaking monuments of Angkor Wat and Bayone of Cambodia, Borobudur of Indonesia, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy of Sri Lanka, Paharpur of Bangladesh, Shwedagon, Mandalay, Pegu and Pagan of Myanmar, Sukhothai, Chienmai, and Ayutthiya of Thailand, and Potala of Tibet,
- the impressive university complexes of Nalanda, Vikramsila, Odantadapuri, and Valabhi of India, Mahavihara and Abhayagiriya of Sri Lanka, and Drepung, Sera and Shigatse of Tibet,
- many thousands of Buddhist objects of art in the most prestigious museums of the world, and
- ever-increasing architectural and artistic creations of the highest aesthetic and technical quality by the expanding Buddhist community of the world today.

Its intellectual underpinnings are equally impressive as reflected in thousands of Buddhist manuscripts in a dozen languages preserved in ancient libraries of India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, China, Tibet, Korea and Japan. All these reflect the heyday of Buddhism, when its intellectual, spiritual, artistic, and literary influence was widespread in the Asian Region.

Decline and Virtual Disappearance

Centuries passed. The area of impact of Buddhism diminished. Buddhism yielded to Islam in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, the Maldives and many parts of Central Asia. Hinduism replaced Buddhism in India as Muslim incursions destroyed the Buddhist institutional base. Buddhism as a living religion disappeared from this vast region, leaving behind for the most part only flimsy traces of its one-time glory. In India, the destruction of institutions and consequentially the Sangha was further aggravated by the belief that the Buddha was an Avatāra of the Hindu God of Sustenance, Vishnu. The Buddha was thus admitted to the Hindu Pantheon and Buddhism ceased to be an independent religion.

The European expansion into Asia, which commenced in the sixteenth century, brought Christianity and the modernization influences of metropolitan powers into conflict with Buddhist interests. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, only Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, China, Korea and Japan had viable Buddhist institutions with a capacity to perpetuate Buddhism against the odds of massive global change. Elsewhere, too, in the Hill Tracts of Chittagong, Valley of Kathmandu, and the environs of Borobudur, small but resilient communities of Buddhists eked out a precarious existence.

Whether Buddhism would survive into the twentieth century was deemed doubtful in many an informed circle. Even in Sri Lanka, where a revival had taken place, scholars and journalists predicted the disappearance of Buddhism by the end of the nineteenth century.

Significance of the Buddhist Renaissance of Velivita Saranankara Sangharaja Thera of Sri Lanka

The course of history, however, was changed due to a series of unexpected events. In Sri Lanka both external and internal forces determined the fate of Buddhism. The political upheavals and the military havoc of the Portuguese undermined the Buddhist base in the Maritime Provinces. They not only destroyed Buddhist institutions but also sought to convert people to Roman Catholicism. Around the same time the conversion of Rajasingha I of Sitawaka to Hinduism led to policies and actions detrimental to Buddhism. His persecution of bhikkhus and the burning of Buddhist texts harmed Buddhism.

Fortunately, the independent Kandyan Kingdom in up-country provided a safe haven for monks who fled there with whatever literature they could carry with them. But there, too, the situation became precarious mainly due to frequent Portuguese incursions. The Sangha deteriorated to a point that it had no quorum to give higher ordination to new recruits. A semblance of Buddhism did exist with un-ordained monks, called somewhat pejoratively as "*Ganinanse*."

It was then that the young and forward-looking novice **Velivita Saranankara** saw the need for prompt rescue. He had a clear view of what needed to be done. The first was to reestablish the Buddhist tradition of education and literary pursuit. He accomplished it with a remarkable degree of ingenuity. He searched for manuscripts in all temples and laid the foundation for a literary revival.

The next was to revitalize the Sangha. For the reform and renovation of the Sangha, the young novice needed external help. He had the ear of King Kirti Sri Rajasingha, the second of the Nayakkar kings of the Kandyan Kingdom. The king could obtain the help of the Dutch who controlled the Maritime Provinces. Thus was it possible for a team of monks, led by **Thera Upali of Ayuthia, Thailand** (then known as Siam), to arrive in Kandy and revive higher ordination in the historic Poyage of Malwatte Monastery in 1753.

With this ordination was established the Syāmapāli Nikāya, whose 250th anniversary falls in 2003. The author of the movement, without whose ingenuity and perseverance this event would not have taken place, was duly honored with his appointment as the Sangharaja (King of the Sangha).

Rediscovery and Regeneration

The chain reaction of the regeneration of the Sangha was incredible. A strong and well-directed Sri Lankan Sangha exerted a tremendous influence on the revival of literature and education. Distinguished Kandyan scholars spearheaded the literary revival of the entire Island. Manuscripts of Sri Lankan Pali literature had been safeguarded in Thailand and it was now possible to copy them in Sinhala script. Velivita Sangharaja Thera, himself, produced several important works. Even the Nayakkar King Rajadhi Rajasingha wrote a major poetic work, *Asadisajātaka*, based on a Buddhist Jataka.

Buddhism was studied in earnest and all Buddhists of the Island recognized Kandy as the spiritual center. Monks from the Maritime Provinces sought higher ordination in the Syāmapāli Nikāya. The impact of the literary revival of Kandy was felt in Matara in south Sri Lanka where a new school of poetry gave a fillip to the development of Sinhala literature.

This growing influence of the Kandyan Kingdom in the Island's religious and cultural domain irked the British who had replaced the Dutch in the coastal area. Encouraged by them, the communities who could not obtain higher ordination from the Syāmapāli Nikāya went to Burma. Thus arose the Amarapura and the Rāmañña Nikāyas at the beginning of the nineteenth century. With the inevitable need for cooperation among them after the unification of the country under British rule, the Sangha became stronger and the resulting religious and cultural revival was unprecedented.

The literary and educational revival had repercussions in other circles as well. Western missionaries, diplomats and administrators had taken an interest in the religious and the cultural heritage of the countries to which they were sent. These men of letters were impressed by the richness of the Buddhist literature in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan and were anxious to share with their peers in Europe the newfound knowledge of a religion with a profound philosophy and a significant system of ethical values.

The archaeologists and epigraphists likewise unearthed vestiges of Buddhist culture and reconstructed the history of Buddhism. Sri Lanka received special attention especially when *Devanapiya* in rock and pillar inscriptions of India could be identified with Asoka in 1836 only with the help of the *Mahāvamsa*. For Western scholars it was a remarkable age of discovery. Hundreds participated in research and study and many were their publications.

Impact of "Orientalism"

In Sri Lanka the intensive study of Buddhism and Sinhala culture by Western students was the result of a bid made for national liberation from British domination.

The Rebellion of 1848 had convinced the British government of the Island that a good command of the local languages and a deep understanding of the native culture were *sine qua non* for every civil servant arriving from England to administer the country. The efficiency bar examinations demanded a thorough linguistic and cultural knowledge. James d'Alwis' translation of the *Sidatsaṅgarāva* and its extensive introduction on the literary history are indicative of the depth of knowledge required to

pass these examinations. Hence the young civil servants had to seek the help of some of the most learned scholar-monks of Sri Lanka to pass their examinations.

The resulting advantages were reciprocal. The Sangha learned how to work with the foreign administration to the advantage of Buddhist institutions. A solid block of British officials became sympathetic to Buddhism and became its voluntary publicity agents. A steady cooperation developed between the Sri Lankan scholar-monks and Western scholars as the hundreds of their letters, discussed in my "*From the Living Fountains of Buddhism*," reveal. The Government Press published Pali and Sinhala classics, often at the request and the motivation of British scholars.

The Christian missionaries from Britain and elsewhere, too, began to learn Buddhism and its history in order to criticize and undermine it. But involuntarily some of them became portent publicists for Buddhist wisdom and values. The Buddhist scholar-monks, on their part, studied Christianity in adequate detail.

Thus fortified, the Sangha could address the challenge of the Christian missionaries, who with the support of the British administration had by this time made significant inroads into spiritual and cultural life of the nation. To begin with, it was a battle waged through tracts and pamphlets. Gradually the Sangha gained confidence to challenge Christian missionaries to public debate. The first of these recorded debates was at Baddegama in 1863. Encouraged by its success, the Sangha, with **Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Thera** as the intellectual resource and **Migettuwatte (Mohottiwatte) Gunananda Thera** as the orator, continued the pressure on the missionaries.

In the meantime, the Syāmapali Nikāya in the Western and Southern Provinces continued to address the issue of the education of monks. Paramadhammacetiya Vihāra set the revival of the traditional system of education in motion. Its alumni started the Vidyodaya Pirivena of Maligakanda in 1873 and Vidyalankara Pirivena of Peliyagoda in 1875. A model suitable for the purpose was thus found and the Pirivena system of education came into existence.

Resulting from the enthusiasm of such eminent British civil servants in Sri Lanka like Robert C. Childers and T. W. Rhys Davids, Buddhist literature and art as well as religion and philosophy became subjects of serious research and study in Western seats of higher learning. Sri Lanka remained the focus of Pali and Southern Buddhist Studies. The more the Western intelligentsia valued the Buddhist heritage, the greater the interest of the Western educated nationals of traditionally Buddhist countries to take pride in their culture became.

"Orientalism," as this phenomenon is called in some scholarly circles, brought Buddhism and its culture to the attention of Western educated laity. This unintended consequence of colonialism remains by far the most important factor contributing to the modern renaissance of Buddhism in the world. But a more direct role was played by the public debates of the Sangha, which apprised the world of the challenges encountered by Buddhists in their own traditional homelands.

The Role of Sri Lanka in the Revival of Buddhism

The report of the great debate of Panadure in 1873 drew the attention of the pioneering Theosophists of USA, **Colonel Henry Steel Olcott** and **Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky**. They began to communicate with the leading scholar-monks of Sri Lanka and finally arrived in the Island in 1880 to cooperate with the Sangha to

regain the lost stature of Buddhism. Olcott's contribution was immense. He started the National Buddhist Education Project and set up prestigious English-medium high schools to be conducted by Buddhist organizations. His book, *Buddhist Catechism*, (Colombo 1881) received the approval of the Sangha of Sri Lanka and served as the first and the most influential publication in the propagation of Buddhism in the West. In fact, it is through this book and the poem *The Light of Asia* (London 1879) by **Sir Edwin Arnold** (a British journalist who had close connections with the scholar-monks of Sri Lanka) that most Westerners came to know of the Buddha and Buddhism.

Olcott sought in 1891 to unite the Buddhists of the world by getting various traditions and schools to agree to a Common Platform of fourteen points on which all Buddhists could agree. He crisscrossed Asia and sparked movements of Buddhist regeneration especially in India, Japan, Thailand and Myanmar. The most outstanding of his achievements was that he successfully mentored two great national leaders of Sri Lanka who in turn carried on his religious and educational missions most creditably. They were **Anagarika Dharmapala** and **Sir Don Baron Jayatilake**.

Anagarika Dharmapala spearheaded the revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and abroad while Sir Don Baron Jayatilake's mission was national and concentrated on crucial action in education and politics. They both were pioneers in the struggle for national freedom.

Anagarika Dharmapala's influence was global. In 1891 he began his campaign to have Buddha Gaya as well as other Buddhist shrines of India restituted to Buddhists. His movement was strongly supported by Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Nayaka Thera, the doyen of the Syāmapāli Nikāya in the low country.

The **Maha Bodhi Society**, which they set up for the purpose, was the first international forum of Buddhists. Its officials came from all Buddhist countries of Asia and included the Dalai Lama of Tibet, the Mikado of Japan, the King of Thailand and many eminent scholars and monastic leaders of Asia, Europe and the Americas. The **Maha Bodhi Journal** similarly linked Buddhists and friends of Buddhism. The Anagarika proceeded to USA to speak of the *World's Debt to the Buddha* at the Parliament of World's Religions in Chicago in 1893. Thus introduced to the widening circle of international Buddhist enthusiasts, Anagarika Dharmapala played a catalytic role in the worldwide Buddhist renaissance, which began in the last decade of the nineteenth century and continues to this date.

Anagarika Dharmapala is acknowledged as having reintroduced Buddhism in the land of its birth. The Maha Bodhi Society established the first ever Buddhist Viharas in many countries of the five continents and branches of the Society continue to be active in most of them. Supported by the Maha Bodhi Society, Sri Lankan monks pioneered as Buddhist missionaries and continue to be among the most influential even today especially in Europe, North America, Australia and Oceania and India. Sri Lanka also has the credit of taking the Sangha outside Asia in that the first Westerner to become a monk in 1899 was the Englishman Gordon Douglas. Sri Lankan innovations, similarly, had an impact on Buddhist education for both monastics and laity in Buddhist nations of Asia. Among the most eloquent expressions of indebtedness is a statement by Master Taixu who took a leadership role in reforming Buddhism in China in the 1930s.

The final and the most durable of Sri Lanka's contribution to the revival of Buddhism in the modern world is the establishment of the **World Fellowship of Buddhists** in Colombo in 1950 under the distinguished leadership of the eminent Buddhist and Pali scholar, **Gunapala Piyasena Malalasekera**. Fifty-two years of progress and development of this international Buddhist forum is a tribute to Sri Lanka and provides convincing evidence for the continuing impact of the regeneration of Buddhism, which resulted from the founding of the Syāmopali Nikāya in 1753.

Buddhist Revival in Traditionally Buddhist Countries Today

A century of dedicated efforts of many bhikkhus, bhikkhunīs and laity has resulted in a worldwide revival of Buddhism. A snapshot of the situation of Buddhism in the traditionally Buddhist countries of Asia at the dawn of the twenty-first century comes out in the brightest colors. It is indeed an optimistic picture.

India, the cradle of Buddhism, has given it a hearty welcome and takes pride in the Buddhist heritage. **Babasaheb B. R. Ambedkar's** Neo-Buddhist Movement expands numerically. **Mahopāsaka S. N. Goenka** takes Vipassanā Meditation to every nook and corner of the world. An indigenous Sangha is growing rapidly to serve the burgeoning Buddhist population.

Sri Lanka, the home of Buddhism, has a record of significant missionary and scholarly services, which it continues to maintain and improve. The Sri Lankan Sangha has established a network of temples even in far off places in every continent and serves communities in search of the message of the Buddha. Lay scholars likewise are active in research and education. **Kandy Buddhist Publications Society**, under the guidance of Bhikkhu Bodhi, provides Buddhist literature to thousands of seekers. Sri Lanka annually hosts hundreds of scholars and students who come to its shores for serious study and meditation.

Myanmar, despite its internal difficulties, has gained a reputation for advances in the practice of meditation. Thailand, with nearly 250,000 bhikkhus, has the most extensive infrastructure for the development of Buddhism and is home to both the **World Fellowship of Buddhists** and the **World Buddhist University**. Cambodia and Laos, after half a century of chaos in the Indo-Chinese Peninsula, are reverting to peace in which Buddhism has begun to play its traditional role.

Since World War II, Japan has revamped its Buddhist institutions. Monastics as well as the lay movements are active internationally in the spread of Buddhism. Research and study centers and publications have earned Japanese Buddhist scholars a reputation for prolific Buddhist Studies. **Rissho Kosekai** and **Soka Gakka International** have branch organizations in every continent. Korea likewise is a center of much activity especially in Buddhist education.

In the People's Republic of China, over a hundred million people are said to identify themselves as Buddhists and much has been done, especially through the **Chinese Buddhist Association**, to restore shrines and monasteries, in which religious activities are continued in earnest. One observes the same in the Autonomous Region of Tibet. The young lamas in Drepung conduct their debating sessions in public and the quality of the content of their discussions reflects serious study of Buddhist philosophy at this traditional Tibetan University. Taiwan has developed a diversified institutional base and spearheads numerous important international Buddhist activities.

The extensive network of educational and spiritual institutions of **Fo Guang Shan Order of Grand Master Hsing Yun** promotes **Humanistic Buddhism** as an umbrella concept under which all Buddhist traditions find a common mission in serving humanity for its well-being here and now in this world.

Buddhists in Nepal and Bangladesh, despite problems inherent in being national minorities, maintain their Buddhist heritage with immense devotion and contribute to the international Buddhist leadership. Bhutan, the Himalayan Buddhist nation, feels confident to hold the next General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in its capital Thimpu. Buriatsi in Siberia and Mongolia have redoubled their Buddhist activities since the fall of Communism and are increasingly represented in the international scene. Even the small Buddhist communities of Malaysia and Indonesia make steady progress. The recent General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists held most successfully in Malaysia is evidence of the status, which Buddhists enjoy in this predominantly Muslim nation.

The greatest achievement of the traditionally Buddhist nations of Asia is that they have collectively and severally brought Buddhism to be a visible spiritual and cultural influence all over the world. Buddhism is no longer an unknown and exotic mysticism. A minimum knowledge of the Buddha and basic tenets of Buddhism is widely recognized as an essential criterion of cultural literacy. Ethnic Buddhists have taken their Sangha and Buddhist traditions to their host countries.

An ever-increasing number of intellectuals of these countries seeks answers to their problems of life in Buddhism. Buddhist chanting (as in Mahāyāna), rituals (as in Tibetan Buddhism or Vajrayāna) and Buddhist meditation (especially in Southern Buddhism) attract the young and the curious. They are avid readers and a rich literature is being produced in major Western languages. Because of the proximity in which all major Buddhist traditions and schools exist and collaborate in great cities of Europe, America and Australia, Buddhism – especially its unity in diversity – is better understood and appreciated.

The personal charm and popularity of **His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama** has an exceedingly favorable impact on the appreciation and study of Buddhism especially in the Western world. **Venerable Grand Master Hsing Yun's** Fo Guang Shan Order, **Venerable Thich Huyen-vi's Linh-Son Congregation** and **Mahopāsaka S. N. Goenka's Vipassana meditation centers**, among others, have developed into active international Buddhist networks. A form of Universal Buddhism is steadily developing and friends of Buddhism – those who admire and support Buddhism while retaining their own religious affiliations – are a source of immense encouragement to the promotion of Buddhism in every aspect.

With such a record, one may find ground for complacency. But it would be hardly justified. The room for improvement is immense. Matters to be reviewed and remedied are many. In any case, much effort has to be devoted even to maintain the current achievements of Buddhism. Hence the need for a vigorous program of action for the future.

Issues and Prospects: Tasks for Decades to Come

In 1982, Sri Lanka in collaboration with the World Fellowship of Buddhists convened the **World Conference of Buddhist Leaders and Scholars**. It was an

august assembly consisting of all traditions and schools of Buddhism. It identified ten areas of concern for immediate international action. (See Chapter II of my “*An Agenda for the International Buddhist Community*,” Colombo 1993).

These were the ten areas of concern identified:

- Peace, Human Rights, and Disarmament
- Preserving the integrity of Buddha Dhamma through the prevention of distortion and misinterpretation
- Studies and research and missionary services
- Inculcation of Buddhist values and practices in daily life
- Effectiveness of the Sangha
- Need to organize and mobilize Buddhist women
- Channeling of youth power
- Buddhist communities in disadvantaged positions
- Protection of Buddhist monuments and prevention of the desecration of sacred symbols and objects
- Improving the economic capacity of Buddhist communities.

Though twenty years had passed since these concerns were identified, much remains to be done. The growing international leadership of the Buddhist movements has a task cut out for decades to come.

Development of Buddha Sasana in the Asian Region

How can the Buddha Sāsana be developed in the Asian Region? The word Sāsana, derived from the Pali root *sās* -- to instruct, admonish or preach, means the **Dispensation of the Buddha** and signifies all aspects of Buddhism as an organized world religion. Traditionally the Sāsana consists of the following three aspects:

- **Pariyatti** – Literary and educational component (**Theory**)
- **Paṭipatti** - Observance and praxis (**Practice**)
- **Paṭivedha** – Penetration and Deliverance (**Realization**)

Pariyatti – the Literary or Textual Component (Theory)

Buddhism outranks all other religious systems of the world by the sheer volume of its scriptural literature, which has been developed over twenty-six centuries in over a dozen languages.

The Pali Canon, the **Tipiṭaka**, in its present printed form in Roman script is a five-foot library of 45 volumes. That it evolved from the initiatives of the Buddha and his immediate senior disciples is borne out by internal evidence. Equally well established by fragmentary manuscripts is that its contents and structure had been maintained in versions of the Canon in other languages such as Sanskrit, Prakrits, and Khotanese. The **Āgama Sūtras** of the **Chinese Tripiṭaka** in the Taisho version maintain a very close resemblance in content and structure with the Pali Tipiṭaka.

The extensive and intensive scholastic activity of the Sangha extended to the development of the Abhidhamma, the quasi-canonical works like *Milīṇḍapaṇḥa*, *Nettipakaraṇa* and *Peṭakopadesa*, whose authorship is unknown other than in the case of *Kathāvatthu* of the *Abhidhammapiṭaka*. The author of this work was *Thera Moggaliputtatissa*, the President of the Third Buddhist Council of the third century BCE. Pali literature continued to grow with the enormous exegetical literature of

- **How can Sri Lanka cope with its dwindling number of English-proficient Buddhist scholars to maintain a lead role in this sphere?**
- **How can the impressive resources of Thailand be devoted to serve the wider Buddhist world?**

Taken as a whole, the traditionally Buddhist countries of the whole of Asia need to revamp their Buddhist educational activities, both formal and nonformal. Japan and Taiwan have been reaching out to Buddhist societies beyond their shores and their contributions have been substantial. Others have problems to solve nationally.

The dearth of resources, mainly trained human resources for Buddhist education, is a problem in which international cooperation might provide some relief. Especially urgent is the insufficiency of effective teachers, suitably developed curricula, courses and course material, and modern textbooks and reference works. Here, again, the challenges and opportunities of the electronic digital age have to be heeded.

Pariyatti for Missionary Activities

Though Buddhism is not engaged in active proselytization, *Dharmadūta* activities to bring the knowledge and the practice of Buddhism within the reach of seekers remains a primary concern of Buddhists. It is true that several generations of Buddhist monastics of Asia have succeeded in taking Buddhism to far-flung places. They, however, face new problems and it does not appear that these problems are being seriously dealt with.

As far as *Dharmadūta* work in the West is concerned, the need for suitable literature in required languages to serve diverse categories of seekers is paramount. Good translations of the Word of the Buddha are vital, as these new seekers prefer original scriptures to interpretive manuals and treatises. In addition, they need books and articles, which are specially prepared for their level of interest and general knowledge.

Western readership looks for insightful writings by authorities that discuss Buddhism convincingly in relation to science, technology, philosophy and Western culture in general, and other religions in particular. The faith-evoking narratives on the wondrous and the miraculous do not impress them. What they want to know most is how Buddhism responds to current problems in day-to-day life such as abortion, euthanasia, suicide, asexual procreation, cloning and so forth. While the practice of meditation usually brings them to Buddhist institutions, these seekers do expect Buddhism to serve an intellectual function too. Hence the importance of a comprehensive literature to be prepared with special care.

Each Buddhist country also has the need for internal missionary services. As education expands, Buddhism gains in popularity and acceptance mainly due to its appeal to rationalism. The educated youth subject Buddhism to critical study and wish to experiment with Buddhist practices such as chanting and meditation for spiritual development. A literature to cater for them needs to be produced with special attention to the intellectual curiosity of young minds.

As regards the outreach to the seekers of new knowledge, there has been a satisfactory utilization of electronic media such as the radio and the television. The digital facilities remain to be used more widely and the initiatives of those like the

Buddha-net of Venerable Panyavaro of Australia are becoming quite popular. Here, again, the emphasis has to be in the sphere of doing more of what has proved to be relevant and effective.

Paṭipatti – Observance and Praxis (Practice)

Laity

Whatever be the value and the importance of the Pariyatti aspect of the Sāsana, the Buddha's own admonition was to know a little but practice diligently. He compared the bookish scholars to cowherds who protected other people's cows without themselves deriving the benefits of milk and milk products (Dhammapada 19-20). In short, Pariyatti is a stepping stone to Paṭipatti.

No objective statistical data are available on how Buddhism is practiced either in the traditionally Buddhist countries and societies or in new Buddhist communities elsewhere. All information available is in the form of anecdotal evidence, which by nature is highly subjective. Some would report extremely favorable conditions while others would say the opposite. Both could be correct as they assess the nature of practice according to their own criteria and experience. The absence of congregational worship and registration of temple membership adds a further difficulty.

The issues to be examined as far as the laity is concerned are as follows:

- **What constitutes Buddhist practice – frequent or regular visits to temple for worship, chanting of Paritta or Mahāyāna sūtras, and meditation? Regular observance of Eight Precepts on the Buddhist Sabbath? Attendance at the preaching of Dhamma? Providing requisites for monastics? And such other temple-centered activities?**
- **To what extent do home-based activities such as individual worship, meditation, family chanting, and the repetition of such formulas as *Namo Amito Fo*, *Namu Amida Budsu*, *Om mani padme hum* or *Namo myo horeng kyo* constitute Buddhist practice?**
- **Do the triple practices of *Dāna*, *Sīla* and *Bhāvanā* (giving, observance of precepts, and meditation) define a comprehensive set of Buddhist practices which can be universally accepted by all traditions and schools of Buddhism?**
- **What is the place of ritual, which vary from tradition to tradition (e.g. *Buddhapūjā* and *Bodhipūjā* of Southern Buddhism; Protective rites connected with Avalokiteśvara and other Bodhisattvas of Mahāyāna Buddhism; *Kālacakra* initiation and other elaborate ritual of Tibetan Buddhism)?**
- **What is the relative importance of *Pañcasīla* (five Precepts), *Aṭṭhangasīla* (Eight Precepts), *Dasasīla* (Ten Precepts) and the four *Bodhisattva Vows* as Buddhist practice?**
- **Is temporary ordination, as practised in Southeast Asia, an aspect of Buddhist practice worthy of universalization?**

Sangha

The whole issue of the Sangha also falls under the **Paṭipatti** aspect of the Sāsana. Renouncing the householder's life and becoming a bhikkhu or bhikkhuṇi is, undoubtedly, the highest ideal in the Buddha Sāsana. The space-like freedom of the monastic life has been extolled as the most desirable ambience for the practice of the

Buddha's teachings.

Many are the issues relating to the Sangha:

- **Why does a person become a monastic – For the pursuit of one's own spiritual development and deliverance? To serve the Sāsana as an educator, scholar, missionary, institutional builder or mobilizer of human and material resources? To safeguard the Buddhist heritage? To lead a life of relative comfort with minimum obligations? Or what else?**
- **Do the Sangha and the laity share a common understanding of each other's role and mutual obligations?**
- **Is the training of monastics systematic, adequate, and in keeping with the highest standards of the Vinaya?**
- **Is there a growing consensus on the recent efforts in Southern Buddhism to revive the Bhikkhūṇī Order? How else are the aspirations of the women to be satisfied?**
- **How can a steady growth in the Sangha be guaranteed with special attention to motivating the educated youth to become monastics?**
- **Are reform and innovation in Vinaya possible and desirable to make the Sangha cope with current social and economic conditions?**

All these are sensitive issues and have to be solved by the Sangha itself. Nevertheless, it is necessary to list them and draw attention because, as the Buddha says,

“The lay and the homeless alike
Each supporting the other
Accomplish the true doctrine
The peerless refuge from Bondage.” (Itivuttaka 107)

Pativedha – Penetration and Deliverance (Realization)

The ultimate goal of Buddhism is the cessation of suffering. It is a path of deliverance, salvation, redemption, release, liberation or emancipation. The diligent Buddhist aspires to attain Nibbāṇa, the *sumnum bonum* of Buddhism, which is described as a state of peace, tranquility, immortality and supreme happiness. Its attainment is signified as enlightenment, which one attains in this life itself. Parinibbāṇa (Complete or Perfect Nibbāṇa) is obtained at death.

All Buddhist traditions agree that enlightenment and Nibbāṇa are within reach of every sentient being. The Mahāyāna tradition, based on the concept of *Tathāgatagarbha*, stresses that each sentient being possesses the *Bodhicitta* (Enlightenment-mind), which in popular parlance is translated as “Buddha Nature.”

Not all Buddhists, however, agree on how and when to attain enlightenment. The Sri Lankan view has been that no one had attained this state of perfection since Thera Maliyadeva a thousand or so years ago. The usual aspiration of a Sri Lankan Buddhist, as couched in the traditional *Punyānumodanā* (merit-offering), is to await the arrival of the Buddha Metteyya (Maitreya). This belief, however, has not prevented a substantial number of earnest monks to take to lifelong meditation in forest hermitages. Other Buddhists of Southeast Asia believe that dedicated monks in forest hermitages have achieved and continue to achieve the state of an Arahant and attain Nibbāṇa in this very life. They also believe that some of these monks have developed

dhyāna practices to a point of achieving *Iddhipāda* or miraculous powers. The Chinese Chan tradition as developed in Korea as Son and Japan as Zen aspires to enlightenment through in-depth meditation and believes that it comes suddenly (Cf. Satori). Other traditions are less clear; an extremely devoted Tibetan monastic would have himself sealed in a cave for life in search of enlightenment.

Issues pertaining to this aspect of the Sāsana are as follows:

- **Should the Buddhists have a common understanding about the attainment of Nibbāna as a goal in current life?**
- **If so, what facilities need to be available for those who seek it?**
- **How can the pursuit of Vipassanā meditation be instituted into regular Buddhist practice?**
- **How can meditation centers and forest hermitages promote meditation for the purpose of developing *Dhyānas* and various stages of the Path and the Fruit (*maggaphala*), thus attaining the end of suffering?**
- **Or, is this aspect of the Sāsana to be left entirely to the interested individual without any societal involvement?**

Whatever be the conclusion, these issues need to be noted.

Unity in Diversity – The Goal of Universal Buddhism

An issue of great significance for the advancement of the Buddha Sāsana in the Asian Region is the multiplicity of traditions, schools, sects and other divisions. This diversity creates the impression that the Buddha Sāsana is a splintered organization with little hope for unity and cooperation. This impression is further strengthened by the writings of early Western scholars who assumed that the Buddhist traditions originated in cataclysmic rifts and struggles similar to those of the Christian Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. But the Buddhist situation has been totally different.

Divisions in Buddhism have been caused by isolation and independent development, and not by any confrontation. These diverse groups have existed without contact until recent times. In the traditionally Buddhist countries this isolation and mutual ignorance persist even today. It is in the big cities of Europe, America, and Australia that the various traditions, schools, sects and other divisions have come to co-exist as a result of the influx of ethnic Buddhists.

Every upheaval in the Asian Region has brought Buddhist immigrants to these continents in sufficiently large numbers to augment earlier waves of migration: e.g. the rise of Communism in China, the Korean War, the exile of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama from Tibet, the Vietnam War, and the political and economic situation in Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. Taiwan's and perhaps also Korea's presence in these continents stemmed from spectacular economic growth and its impact on the expansion of Buddhism.

As a result, Mahāyāna schools of Japan, China, Taiwan, Korea and Vietnam, the Vajrayāna tradition of Tibet, and the Southern Buddhism of Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar could establish contact, become familiar with one another, discover the unity and common base of the teachings and practices of each

tradition, collaborate on common projects and movements, and approach the goal of universal Buddhism. These experiences have brought about enormous benefits to all Buddhist societies thus unified.

The situation in the traditionally Buddhist countries is very different. With no or little contact with forms of Buddhism other than what is indigenous to each country, ignorance, prejudice, and misunderstanding continue unabated. As a consequence, the Region as a whole is deprived of the benefits it can derive from unity and cooperation.

Why we should make a special effort to develop a common front is best illustrated by reference to the experience of **Venerable Master Taixu of China** in the 1920s. Disappointed with the isolation of the Buddhist Sangha and the relegation of Buddhism to mountains as a spent force in China, he visited Sri Lanka in 1928. What he saw there he described in the following terms: "Though Buddhism in Ceylon is generally considered to be Theravada Buddhism, it is indeed the practice of Mahayana Buddhism." It was a compliment in appreciation of the socially engaged Buddhism he witnessed in the Island: "[Sri Lankan Buddhists] have made great efforts to study the doctrines and observe the precepts. That is why many Buddhists, not only Buddhists from Burma and Thailand, but also scholars doing research on the Theravada Buddhism in the Pali Language all over the world come to study Buddhism in Ceylon. Buddhists in Ceylon are widely engaged in many causes, such as social welfare, culture, education and so forth, thus giving benefits to the state, society and even the broad masses in the world. This marks a great spirit of compassionate love in Buddhism." Needless to say, the reform of Buddhism, which Venerable Master Taixu spearheaded in China, was largely inspired by the knowledge and experience he gained in Sri Lanka and subsequently in Myanmar and Thailand. Today with greater facilities for travel and study abroad, the cross-pollination accruing from the exchange of knowledge and experience can be immense.

Buddhist communities of Asia have much to learn from one another for our common benefit and mutual reinforcement. But many issues need to be addressed:

- **How can centuries of prejudice, nurtured further through total isolation, be replaced by a better understanding and appreciation of the strong common base of the Buddha's teachings?**
- **How can the friendly and productive co-existence of different traditions, schools, sects and other divisions of Buddhism in Western countries be extended to the traditionally Buddhist countries of the Asian Region and emulated?**
- **How open will Southern Buddhist countries be to the establishment of Mahāyāna or Tibetan monasteries on their soil or to the popularization of teachings, practices and literature of other Buddhist traditions?** (In this regard, the Northern Buddhist countries have already demonstrated a significant openness: e. g. China which in Yunnan has a well-established Southern Buddhist tradition; Nepal and Vietnam which had been receptive to Sri Lankan missionary initiatives of especially Venerable Narada and continue to have the Sangha trained in Sri Lanka and Thailand; and Japan and Taiwan where important Southern Buddhist monastic institutions have come into existence in recent years).
- **How can the resources of the entire Buddhist world be pooled for the progress of Buddhism as a gift to humanity?**

The least that needs to be stressed is that unity and cooperation are indispensable to Buddhists to meet the challenges of the modern world. We cannot stay divided or remain ignorant of the strength which diversity confers on Buddhism.

In the first place, the more we learn of the specificities of each group of Buddhists, the more we become convinced of the underlying unity of the fundamental teachings of traditions, schools or sects. Henry Steel Olcott's Fourteen-point Common Platform of 1891, Christmas Humphrey's Twelve-point Statement of 1942 and Ratanasara-Guruge's Ten-point American Buddhist Congress Convention of 1997 have highlighted this unity. But their impact is restricted to scholars and intellectuals. An effort, which encompasses the whole Buddhist world, is a vital necessity.

My own experience since I urged for interdenominational understanding among Buddhists of the world through my writings which date back to 1954 is that I have personally benefited from my exposure to the rich and varied ethical, philosophical, literary, and cultural heritage of the Buddhist world as a whole. My final appeal, therefore, is that we all share this invaluable treasure for our own benefit.

Conclusion

Prospects for the future are indeed very bright for Buddhism to redouble its effectiveness in the traditionally Buddhist countries of the Asian Region and also to expand substantially its influence in the world. The issues we have identified for action are in no way insurmountable. We have, however, to act severally and collectively.

The more we meet and discuss the tasks at hand, the more we equip ourselves to accomplish them. "*Samavāyo sādhu* (coming together or cooperation or collaboration is excellent)" said Asoka the Righteous, the paragon of Buddhist practitioners. He urged for a collective search for the inner essence of all religions. In the context of our present efforts, we should begin by seeking the inner essence of our common faith.

To revamp the Buddha Sāsana, urgent steps need to be taken in all three aspects of Pariyatti (Theory), Paṭipatti (Practice) and Paṭivedha (Realization). No single group can address all the issues without collective action, because our resources are diverse. A group with abundant monetary resources may have a dearth of qualified human resources to teach, manage and write. Scholars capable of solving problems in the Pariyatti domain may lack access to publication. Or their need could be for specialists in the digital field to utilize electronic modalities to an optimum degree. It is urgent therefore to pool all available resources.

But far more important is the will to act. There is no time to waste. The present good times may pass before we can fully utilize its advantages. Hence the need for commitment. It is time for us to heed the Buddha's own final message: *mā nivatta abhikkama* (Do not turn back. Go forward).