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The Mahindian Buddhist mission in Sri Lanka- Conversion symbolism becoming part of the message

Professor M.M.J. Marasinghe

According to available historical records, Buddhism was introduced into Sri Lanka during the reign of king Devanampiyatissa in the third century B.C. Either because Buddhism was not known in the island before this time or because, even if known in some form, its presence made no notable impact here, these records draw a complete blank on evidence of knowledge of Buddhism in the island before the time of Mahinda.

Venerable Mahinda was selected to head the Buddhist mission to Sri Lanka by Moggaliputtatissa Thera after the conclusion of the third Buddhist Council at Pataliputra held under the patronage of Emperor Asoka. This mission to Sri Lanka was one of nine such missions sent out to different parts of the then known world after this Council.¹

It is also accepted by the Sri Lankan traditions that the Mahindian mission which included five other *bhikkhus* and a layman brought with them the Pali canonical texts which were approved and accepted as authentic and representative of the Theravada Buddhist tradition at the Pataliputra Council. It is quite likely that the selection of the personnel of the mission was made on their expertise on the *Dhamma* and the *Vinaya* texts, rather than on any other grounds (Rahula, 49), in view of the important task they were to perform in the new land.

Although it is not clear how and when the texts of the Pali canon were brought over by the mission, it was the texts of the Pali canon which were held and used as sources of authority of the Sri Lankan tradition of Buddhism.

Whether all the texts of the Pataliputra Council acceptance were brought by the Mahindian mission on its first arrival itself or whether any such first consignments were added on to later on as required, the Mahavihāra tradition which became the repository of the Mahindian tradition seems to have possessed a complete collection of these texts.

These have been the source of authority for all matters of doctrine and its transmission into practice throughout the long history of the religion in the island. Therefore, all matters of doctrinal interpretations as well as practices derived from the contents of the texts were always accepted as referable to these original texts for certification.

Although there is hardly any evidence that the Sri Lankan tradition of Buddhism did at any stage face any difficulty with regard to the practices which it has apparently derived from these texts and what are actually admissible under these texts, the evolution of Ritual Buddhism shows important and even substantial deviations from the expectations of these original texts.

The existence of this difference makes it impossible to regard the entirety of the Pali texts as faithful records of the Buddha's teachings. As the first four *Nikaya* texts of the Pali canon show a greater degree of consistency in the elucidation of the central teachings of the Buddha (despite the existence of a few intrusions of late material), these have to be regarded as containing the closest existing records of the original teachings of the Buddha.

It is not possible to accept the post-Nikaya Pali texts, as faithful records of the Buddha's teachings on the same level. This applies to many of the texts comprising the fifth *Nikaya* (the *Khuddaka Nikaya*) and the vast commentarial literature where the compilers or the writers of the texts seems to have had no need felt to conform to any evaluative requirements as the Four Great Guidelines (Cattaro Mahapadesa²) which were required to be followed in the introduction of new practices. On the contrary, many new practices seem to have found their way into the corpus of acceptances and received sanction and legitimacy thereby. In view of this, whenever an acceptance differs from the central teachings of the Pali canon or their implications, such acceptances must be regarded as late and as unauthorized.

While the formulation and the structuring of the entire Ritual Buddhism consisting of rites and rituals to be performed in the offerings (*pèja*) and worship (*vandana*) has to be regarded as non-canonical, it does not seem justifiable to think that the entire Ritual Buddhism is unacceptable and therefore goes against the central teachings of the Pali canonical texts.

A few instances where the acceptances in the Ritual Buddhism are at variance with the central teachings of the canonical texts may be examined here. The Buddha, according to the acceptances in the Pali canonical texts was the human teacher who lived in the sixth century B.C in India. He is respected and revered by his followers as the discoverer of the path to man's liberation from suffering. He is not a god, but a human teacher who, solely on account of his being a human being became far superior to the gods by means of his attainment of spiritual perfection. It is also clearly stated in the canonical texts that such supreme attainment can be achieved only by man and only by being born as man in the human world. According to the teachings of the Pali canonical texts no god is an object of worship or prayer. Neither is the Buddha according to these texts an object of worship or prayer. *Nirvāna* is to be attained by following the path of spiritual development laid down by him, not by means of winning the favour or assistance of a god or other superhuman being(s) by means of prayer or offering.

It seems an irony of history that the Buddha, the human teacher who taught that the gods are just another category of sentient beings and are not by any means capable of responding to prayer or offerings became the object not only of offerings but also of prayer. Taking this wrong adoption to its silliest extreme in the Ritual Buddhism, the Buddha becomes the object of a confession where the worshipper requests for forgiveness in case of an inadvertence with regard to physical, verbal or mental actions. This shows the extent of deviation from the implications of the teachings of the original texts.

It is true that Buddhism accepts the existence of gods, but at the same time it must be remembered that the gods who Buddhism accepts are not at all the gods of common belief, whether it is of

the mono-theistic or of the poly-theistic conceptions. The gods in the Buddhist acceptance are those who voluntarily come and attend on the follower of the path of spiritual training. They are not available on request, prayer or sacrifice and are not capable of helping or harming man therefore, either on request or upon other compulsion. They are a class of beings whose existence has no relevance to man, whether it is with regard to his worldly welfare or his spiritual advancement.

These gods who thus according to the Pali canonical texts cannot accept prayer or offerings, are given the merit (*punya*) generated from the performance of the ritual activities. It must be pointed out here that according to the Buddhist teachings on *kamma*, the result generated from an action cannot be alienated whether it is a meritorious or a non-meritorious action. It would be seen that it is by over stretching certain implications of the contents of the original Pali texts that the idea of merit donation can be accepted as admissible under the Buddhist teachings. But, it must be pointed out here that even such difficult maneuvering does not remove its incompatibility with the original teaching on *kamma* contained in the Pali texts.

There seems to be another important shift of emphasis in the post-Mahindian Buddhism in the elucidation of the Buddhist teaching on *Kamma*. According to the Pali *Nikaya* texts there is a two-fold criteria to judge whether an action is good or bad. An action acceptable according to Buddhism has to meet both these criteria. The first is the *vipaka* (result) criterion which is explained in the *Ambala--hika Rahulovada Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya*³ and the second is the *cetana* (intention) criterion explained in the *Nibbedhikapariyaya Sutta* of the *Aḡuttara Nikaya*.⁴ Of these two there seems to be an almost strange under voicing of the first and very important *vipaka* criterion on discussions on *Kamma* in the Theravada Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka. The resultant doctrinal position is that, if the volition which generates an action is wholesome, the *kamma* generated there from should generate wholesome results for the doer and should therefore be acceptable according to the Buddhist teachings.

In spite of the fact that the Sri Lankan tradition may have had its own reasons for being almost completely silent on the *vipāka* (result) criterion so very clearly spelt out in an important text of the Pali canon, it is gross mis-reading of the text to dis-regard this important criterion in the evaluation of *kammic* actions.

The Ritual Buddhism which was introduced by Venerable Mahinda had many features which very clearly showed that it veered away in its application from the expectations of the Pali canonical Buddhism which his tradition claimed to follow and was therefore based upon.

There should have been very good reasons for the Venerable *Thera* Mahinda to have adopted new acceptances in the presentation of the new teaching to the Sri Lankans of his day despite the fact that such adoptions were not in compliance with the expectations of the Pali canonical texts which were the sources of authority which they depended upon.

According to available historical evidence, the pre-Buddhist religious beliefs in Sri Lanka consisted of what can be described as spirit or ancestor worship and tree-worship. What are described as *Yak-a* and *Nāga* worship could only have been the tribal forms of worship prevalent among the tribes designated by these names. It is not strange that by the time of the *Mahāvamsa*, *Dīpavamsa* or the *Samantapāsādikā* there were no tribal peoples known by these names as they had by that time got completely merged with the cultured main-stream people of the country, leaving only the myths and legends about them afloat in society. The process is similar to what happened to the *Yakkhas* and the *Nāgas* of the Buddha's day. It may be noted here in passing that the Sri Lankan commentators of the texts, quite unaware of the existence of the *Nāga* tribes during the time of the Buddha and quite ignorant of the fact that *Nāga* tribes do exist in modern India too, underwent great difficulty to explain how the relics of the Buddha which were enshrined in a *stūpa* at Rāmagrāma by the Koliyas and were worshipped by the *Nāgas* was brought to Sri Lanka to be enshrined in the Great *Stūpa* at Anuradhapura. This was because according to the legends about the *Nāgas* only which they seem to have known, they were a species of non-human creatures living in a world under the great ocean.

Apart from the above, the worship of patron deities of certain professions too seems to have been in vogue at the time.

It must be noted here that it is not the mere fact of the existence of these animistic beliefs which is important to us, but the more relevant fact of the existence of rites and ritual performed in the propitiation of these supernatural or ancestral beings, believed to be patronizing the cultic sites whether it was a tree or other place regarded as sacred.

This pattern of religious beliefs, rites and rituals seems to have been similar in many respects to the pattern of religious beliefs and practices of the tribal peoples of the peripheral regions of the contemporary Mauryan Empire where a massive process of peaceful incorporation of the tribal groups was operating. The process which had started as a result of the gradual expansion of the physical boundaries of the central state, gathered momentum after Asoka's Kalinga conquest which gave the final blow and the last warning to the still independent smaller tribes not to resist the central state power.

But, what is important and is relevant to us here is not the mere fact of the similarity of the pre-Buddhist religious beliefs and practices to those of the tribal peoples of their neighbouring country, but the massive process of religio-ritualistic syncretism that was going on in these regions at the time. We may take a closer look at the process for its great relevance to the process which was set in motion here by the Mahindian mission.

When a tribe or a guild caste was discovered in a peripheral area, it was the Brahmin priest who first made meaningful contact with them. The Brahmin priest of this era was thus quite different from his rich and pompous counterpart of the sixth century B.C Gangetic regions. When he came across a new tribe or guild caste, he would study their religious rites and ritual practices and 'sometimes take over and supplement with his own ritual the priestly tasks of the tribe always excluding or softening the worst features of the primitive rite'⁵.

It was through this process that, "The brahmins gradually penetrated whatever tribes and guild castes remained; a process that continues to this day. This meant the worship of new gods,

including the Krishna who had driven Indra worship out of the Panjab plains before Alexander's invasion. But the exclusive nature of tribal ritual and tribal cults was modified, the tribal deities being equated to standard Brahmin gods, or new brahmin scriptures written for making inassimilable gods respectable. With these new deities or fresh identifications came new ritual as well and special dates of the lunar calendar for particular observances. New places of pilgrimage were also introduced with suitable myths to make them respectable, though they could only have been savage, pre-brahmin cult spots. The *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and especially the *Puranas* are full of such material. The mechanism of the assimilation is particularly interesting. Not only Krishna, but the Buddha himself and some totemic deities including the primeval Fish, Tortoise, and Boar were made into incarnations of Vishnu-Narayana. The monkey-faced Hanuman, so popular with the cultivators to be a peculiar god of the peasantry with an independent cult of his own, becomes the faithful companion-servant of Rama another incarnation of Vishnu. This conglomeration goes on forever, while all the tales put together form a senseless inconsistent chaotic mass. The importance of the process, however, should not be underestimated. The worship of these newly absorbed primitive deities was part of the mechanism of acculturation, a clear give-and-take⁷⁶.

It was thus, during this period that a wide variety of forms of worship, rites to be observed with rituals to be performed to honour hitherto non-acceptable deities came to be accepted into the Hindu religion. The importance of the process can be understood when it is remembered that they had even to write new sacred literature to accept non-Vedic gods and forms of worship into Hinduism as in the case of the *Naga Nilamata* of Kashmir to accommodate which they wrote the *Nilamata Purana*. The most important contribution which this massive process made to Hinduism was the idea of rites and rituals to be performed in connection with objects and places of religious importance.

It must have been because of the possibilities which this religio-ritualistic environment offered for the efficient execution of the mission that he was to undertake that the Venerable Thera

Mahinda decided to spend sometime in the provincial town of Ujjaini before his departure to Sri Lanka. Therefore, being acquainted with the process of assimilation and re-interpretation of tribal religious beliefs and practices in terms of the major religions of the day the Venerable Mahinda was well equipped to propagate his message to the Sri Lankans of the day.

A close study of the Pali Nikaya evidence shows that the practice of the Buddha's teaching at the time was not tied down to ritual compliance. We do not have evidence of the Buddhist monasteries being centres of ritual performance as the practice of the teaching at the time meant the following of the path of spiritual perfection. The acceptance of residential accommodation for the Order facilitated the attainment of the spiritual goal. It helped the lay followers by making their assistance readily available for the same purpose. The Vinaya account of the Buddha's acceptance of the VeÅuvana for the Order makes it clear that one of the assets of VeÅuvana was its easy accessibility to the people.

Passing almost a little over two and a quarter centuries when we come to the time of Emperor Asoka, we find evidence of acceptance by Buddhists of rites and rituals of some form as Asoka is recorded to have distributed the relics of the Buddha to be enshrined in the *stēpas* built throughout India., It was during his reign that a sapling of the sacred *Bodhi was* brought to Sri Lanka. But it is not possible to think that Indian Buddhism did possess a well-defined ritual structure as the Buddhists seems to have started on the assimilation process only after the success of Hinduism.

This is why it was felt necessary by the Venerable Thera Mahinda to gain first hand acquaintance of the process before coming over to Sri Lanka, hence his leaving for Ujjeini soon after his selection for the mission.

Thus, the presence of some forms of ritual observances in Indian Buddhism and the gains from his knowledge of the religio-ritualistic syncretism of the time would have helped the Venerable Thera in the evolution of a conversion pattern for the Sri Lankan religious practices of the time. While the conversion of the worship of trees like the banyan tree and the Palmyra tree was achieved by the introduction of the sacred Bodhi, the conversion of cultic

centres like Samantakēpa (modern Adam's Peak), the seat of the deity Saman was accomplished by the institution or the discovery of the sacred foot-print of the Buddha, thereby making it a centre of veneration for the Buddhists.

This process of conversion of the existing religious and ritual practices resulted in the evolution of a complete set of forms of worship with associated ritual procedures. The entire system of *pēja* and *vandana* thus evolved, added a new popular dimension to Buddhism though the majority of its components far exceeded the expectations of the teachings of the Pali canonical texts.

One such major deviation is the change in the aim and purpose of the religious life. Instead of concentration of effort to attain spiritual perfection by treading the path of gradual training, gradual practice and gradual progress (*anupubba sikkha, anupubba kiriya, anupubba paṭipada*,⁷ it is accepted as possible by the mere accumulation of merit. Here, while the attainment Nibbana according to this view is considered as possible in some distant future birth in *samsara*, life up to such automatic fruition is believed to be more than richly supported by the vast store of merit accumulated. And now, this is in spite of the very clear statement in the Pali text which says, Bhikkhus, I do not say that final knowledge is achieved all at once. On the contrary, final knowledge is achieved by gradual training, gradual practice, by gradual progress (*Nhaṃ bhikkhave adikeneva aññaradhanaṃ vadami, apica bhikkhave anupubbassikkha anupubbakiriya anupubbapaṭipada aññaradhana hoti*.⁸ Therefore, the attainment of Nibbanic realization cannot be the product of an automatic fruition, it must be the product of systematic training according to the procedure laid down in the texts quite clearly.

Tied up with the idea of accumulation of merit is also the idea of sharing the merit earned as it is another means of increasing one's merit. According to this belief merit possesses the unique quality of increasing and not decreasing as it is given away or shared with. Another glaring error connected with the idea of merit sharing or donation is the placement of the gods within the ritual system through this rite. The concluding ritual of all *pēja* and *vandana* rites is the donation of merit to the gods which is tied up

with a request for their protection not only for the donor, but for the *dhamma* and the *sangha* as well. This certainly is not the teaching of the Buddha. It is strange how the gods who come and worship not only the Buddha, but members of the *Sangha* and even good laymen in the Pali texts have become powerful enough to give their protection to the *Sangha* and the *dhamma* as well.

It must be pointed out here that the gods described in the Pali canonical texts are not capable of accepting material or non-material offerings or donations. It is strange how such gods came to be included in the ritual system as recipients of merit and also as beings capable of heeding and therefore responding to requests for protection and welfare.

The Bodhi came to be accepted as an object of veneration because it provided shade and shelter to the Buddha on the day of his enlightenment, not because it possesses healing powers or because it is believed to be the abode of some powerful deity like the banyan tree or the Palmyra tree of pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka. But, it must be admitted that the adoption of certain rites including even certain healing rites centred on the *Bodhi* takes us far back into the time of the pre-Buddhist forms of worship.

Another religious rite which has undergone change is the *paritta*. It was originally intended to serve as a confidence builder and self-reliance booster, but has unfortunately descended to the level of a primitive healing rite as it is practiced in contemporary Sri Lanka. It may be mentioned here that the second half of the *īpanaṭṭiya Sutta*⁹ compares well with the modern use of underworld strength for protection in political life.

Though the first beginnings of ritual conformity in Buddhist practice seems to have started with the evolution of the *saṃghagata dakkhiṇa*, the initial framework of which had the Buddha's approval, there seems to have been little or no evaluative measures adopted in the acceptance of individual activities or procedures of ritual which came to be included in the Ritual Buddhism. Historical evidence does not show that the wide range of activities included in the Ritual Buddhism had ever undergone any evaluative measures as required compliance under the Four Great Guidelines (*cattaro mahapadesa*) promulgated in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*

of the *Digha Nikaya*¹⁰ It seems doubtful that the tradition has ever understood the importance of these guidelines and their relevance with regard to the acceptance of interpretations and practices derived from the *Dhamma* and the *Vinaya*.

This pathetic negligence seems to have granted an open license to any and all to include any item of offering or ritual formula for worship and claim acceptance thereof as well. This situation has by now resulted in making Ritual Buddhism fertile ground for the incorporation of a wide range of non-, as well as anti-, Buddhist acceptances. It may be recalled here that the first evidence of food and garments being offered to images of the Buddha occurs during the time of King Sena III of Sri Lanka (937-945 AD.), according to the *CêĀavaṃsa*¹¹. It was the adoption of such ritual practices which transformed the human teacher of the Pali canonical texts to a Hindu or tribal deity capable of accepting offerings and even acceding to prayer or request.

The nett outcome therefore, of the growth in the Ritual Buddhism in Sri Lanka has been the acceptance into the fold of Buddhist practices, rituals like deity worship and tree worship which go counter to the canonical acceptances. That the new rituals came to be presented under new designations and emotionally acceptable locations does not make these entitled for conceptual acceptance. As a result, pre-Buddhist religious beliefs and practices have found a new lease of life by becoming part of Buddhism thereby averting their natural demise with the disintegration of the primitive tribal social structure with social and economic advancement. Not only have such adoptions defiled the conceptual distinctiveness of Buddhism but have made Ritual Buddhism a poor carbon copy of the lowest form of Hinduism.

It is not possible to think that the Venerable Thera Mahinda and the members of his mission were not aware of the differences which existed between the Ritual practices which they adopted into Buddhist practice in order to replace the pre-Buddhist religious beliefs and practices and the implications of the teachings of the Pali canonical texts which they had with them. On the other hand, it is possible to think that this is possibly why they did write the commentaries to the Pali texts in the language of the people. This

made it easier to incorporate the changes which they made and the shifts of emphasis which had to be given in order to give canonical authenticity to the adoptions which they made. It is also important to note here that there is no evidence that the adoption of such ritual was consequent to an ecclesiastical or other organizational decision taken in compliance with the stipulations laid down in the canonical texts as was noted above.

A careful examination of the contents of the commentaries to the Pali texts would show that all of them are not merely the explanations of the Pali texts, performing a purely exegetical function. Some of them abound in beautiful stories and anecdotes which have no relation to any exegetical function. It is through these that non-canonical ideas and ritual practices have been accommodated and woven into the fold of Buddhist Ritual conceptions and practices.

An important point which needs attention here is the extent of relevance of ritual practices to the training in the path of spiritual advancement in Buddhism. It must be pointed out here that ritual can form a helpful and supporting activity to one's entry into the path of spiritual training, but all the meaningless ritual which has by now gathered into Ritual Buddhism cannot be accepted as serving a helpful function in the individual's entry process to the path of spiritual training. Ritual can thus serve as entry facilitator activity to the path of spiritual training, but cannot form part of the path of training itself.

A close examination of the different elements which constitute Ritual Buddhism shows that many of these have been merely copied from the worship of contemporary Hindu or primitive local gods which in no way can be taken as acceptable according to the teachings of the Pali canon. It is therefore time that a careful study of the different elements which have accumulated under Ritual Buddhism is made in order to arrest, even at this late hour, the serious decline which Buddhism has suffered from getting mixed up with the basest elements of polytheistic Hinduism and of primitive tribal religion. It is time that a *Sangāyanā* was convened to make an evaluation of the component elements of the present day Ritual Buddhism in order to retain only those elements which lead on to the path of spiritual perfection.

The guidelines for such an evaluation is quite clearly laid down in the Mahâparinibbâna Sutta of the Dîgha Nikâya¹² as we have already pointed out above. According to this text whenever an individual member of the Order or a congregation of such members makes a claim that a certain interpretation or a practice is in keeping with the *Dhamma* and/ or the *Vinaya*, it should neither be accepted nor be rejected without being studied carefully. However, if it is found, after comparison, that it does not tally with the *Dhamma* and/ or the *Vinaya*, such interpretation or practice should be rejected forthwith as not in keeping with the *Dhamma* and / or the *Vinaya*. If, on the other hand, it is found that the interpretation or practice is in keeping *with the Dhamma and / or the Vinaya* it should be accepted as correct.

The *Cattâro Mahâpadesâ* (the Four Great Guidelines) have been explained in great detail by the Buddha to alert the members of the Order against individuals and/ or groups of such individuals introducing un-doctrinal interpretations and /or practices as acceptable. A perusal of the long history of Buddhism through the past centuries shows that the misinterpretations of the texts to accommodate un-doctrinal practices have been common in periods of decline of the *Sâsana*. A careful examination of the diverse components of what constitutes the Rites and Rituals associated with the practice of present day Ritual Buddhism shows that it has components of polytheistic Hinduism, tribal religion of the pre-Mahindian era, animism, sorcery, magic and many other superstitions. It is not possible at all to regard all these as acceptable under the teachings of the Pali canonical texts.

It is not possible to blame the Mahindian mission for the misinterpretation of the conversion symbolism by the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition when it is recalled that it was a king of ancient Sri Lanka who started the practice of offering food and garments to statues of the Buddha. As there is no evidence that the introduction of any practice and the ensuing rites and rituals have ever been evaluated as to their acceptability in terms of the four great Guidelines pointed out above, the distinction between the present day Ritual Buddhism and primitive animistic religion has become almost completely lost. It is time that remedial action is initiated before such action becomes irrelevant and inapplicable.

End Notes

1. Kosambi, D.D., Culture and Civilization of Ancient India, 1997, 160; Smith Vincent, Edicts of Asoka, XV.
2. D.11. 123 f.
3. M.1. 414
4. A.111. 415
5. Kosambi, CCAI, 168
6. Ibid. 170
7. M.1. 479; Bhikkhu Bodhi, Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, 582
8. Ibid.
9. D.111
10. D.11. 123f.
11. Marasinghe, M.M.J. Gods in Buddhism, 2009, 164
12. D.11. 123f.