

THE POWER OF THE DHAMMA IN A DISCIPLINED LIFE

By Mr. R. Premadasa, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka

Some people think that we should not bring religion into politics. They say that politics is concerned with society, which is always in conflict with itself. What is society but the inter-relationship of human beings, and this relationship is based on ambition, frustration, envy, greed, power and, of course, corruption. Society, they affirm, knows no compassion for compassion is the act of a total and integrated individual.

To such people religion is not a matter of dogma, orthodoxy and ritual, nor is it organised belief. It is the feeling of sacredness, of compassion, of love.

So there is no such thing as 'spiritualised' politics. It does not work.

On the other hand, there are those who think that religion can help government in the wise administration of the country. Mr Premadasa, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, is of this school of thought. That is why he makes a special appeal to the Maha Sangha and to the clergy of all religions to teach the people the Dhamma. He knows full well that the Dhamma is a very much more efficient and successful instrument than political pressure and legislation for the maintenance of harmony, unity, peace, happiness and prosperity in the country and for the people. "It is only when the influence of the Dhamma increases to that level (the level where the power of the Dhamma overshadows the power of the state) in our country", he says, "that real development, peace and discipline can come to the country."

The following is the full text of his speech delivered on the occasion of the crowning of the pinnacle of the Chaitiya at the Bodhi Malu Vinaraya, Pilessa, Mawathagana, Sri Lanka in August last year. It makes interesting reading for politicians and religionists alike.

Ed

When Lord Buddha was living and preaching, people did not listen to Him silently out of respect as we do today when we listen to the members of the Maha Sangha. Many people asked questions of the Buddha and He had to answer them. A large part of the Dhamma constitutes answers given to questions so asked. Other teachers and philosophers of the time like Nigantanatha Putta caused questions to be asked of the Buddha through their

agents, with the intention of embarrassing Him. A great attempt was made to prove that the teaching of the Buddha was wrong.

The Lord Buddha answered all the questions asked of Him with much loving-kindness in mind. He never thought that because He had attained Buddhahood (supreme knowledge) nobody should ask questions of Him. The Buddha always encouraged inquiry and said that one should accept any idea only if one is convinced of it. He asked people not to believe things simply because He preached them. It is hard to find any other religious teacher who showed such great willingness to be questioned, as the Lord Buddha.

The Buddha never assumed an attitude of superiority over anybody who came to make any inquiry from Him. He did not treat any such person as a person of lesser intelligence than He. He did not think of the inquirer's race, caste or class. Neither was the Buddha interested in defeating or putting to shame the questioner through His great power of speech and argumentation. The Buddha always tried to convince the opponent through reasonable explanation and to bring him on to the path of virtue. He was not so much interested in defeating people as winning them over to His point of view. If we are following the Dhamma taught by the Buddha, we too must strive to do the same. The Buddha, lying on His deathbed, advised sorrowing followers that if they had any respect or love for Him they should conduct themselves according to the Dhamma preached by Him.

The Dhamma is not the teaching or the preaching solely of any one Buddha. From time to time Buddhas or Extraordinarily Intelligent Human Beings, appear in the world. They are the people who unearthed the Dhamma for the understanding of the people. Our Lord Buddha is also one such Extraordinary Human Being. Some of these great beings are aspirants to Buddhahood. It may be that during periods of time in history, various groups of followers or organisations, established to propagate their teachings, try to keep these noble beings confined to their own camps. That always happens. The Dhamma is One and indivisible. But people superficially divide up the Dhamma too and keep it under various labels. These groups develop their own rituals and customs and organisations as time goes on. These externalappings tend to grow to such proportions that ultimately the main objective of the teaching itself comes to be obscured from view.

Lord Buddha, Jesus Christ, Prophet Mohamed, Sri Krishna – all these religious teachers are great men who appeared in the world from time to time to rediscover the Dhamma and preach and teach it to the people. But as time passed by, institutions and organizations developed around these teachers. Let us for example consider the position of the Buddha Sasana. It has two main

schools, namely, the Hinayana and Mahayana schools. And each of these schools has its many sects. The sects have sub-divisions. All these have customs and practices peculiar to them. But all these are external things but the Dhamma is One. Where there is Ahimsa and Truth, there is Dhamma. Our Lord Buddha is the greatest religious Teacher who most clearly expounded this Dhamma, pointing out how necessary it is to people for their edification. But this teaching is applicable not only to human beings but also to all other beings in the world.

The Buddha expected the happiness of not only human beings but of all beings. He always wished that all beings, and not only human beings, be well. When Lord Buddha preached, animals and birds also listened. Why did they listen? Because their hearts could feel the serenity of the Dhamma and the Dhamma was sweet to their ears. Of course, to understand the Dhamma properly you must know the language in which it is preached. But even the animals who do not know any language are impressed by it when they hear human beings preach it or chant it.

How can you bring about real peace and discipline in a country? For this purpose we enact laws and also establish organisations. But they have their limits, and their effect too, therefore, is limited. So, they are inadequate to the task. But, unlike laws and organisations, the Dhamma is not limited and, therefore, it can have a “total effect” on the man. Thus the best instrument available for building peace and discipline is the Dhamma. But the Dhamma can have its full effect when it is preached by people who really practise it and set an example themselves. Many people who came to hear the Dhamma preached by the Buddha were attracted by His exemplary life, discipline and good qualities.

When a virtuous man speaks and makes an appeal, there is compelling power in his words. But the words themselves do not have this power. Words get the power from the disciplined life of the person who speaks them. In every wire you do not find electricity. It is only if you feed electricity to it that it becomes a live wire. Similarly, in mere words there is no power. The words have to acquire power from the person from whom they emanate. The words have to be infused with the power of the Dhamma. But the power of the Dhamma will enter the words of the speaker, only if he leads a life in conformity with the Dhamma.

Just as a generator produces electricity, our body and mind can produce Dhamma power. The Lord Buddha said so. Just as the generator produces electricity through its activity the human mind and the body can generate the Dhamma power through the activity of life. It is when your personality is

charged with this power that your words begin to acquire it too. It is then that your words begin to develop their magnetism. Devoid of this Dhamma power, your words will be of no avail, however beautiful and well-spoken they may be.

It was a man who discovered electricity. It was through the power of the mind that it was discovered. There are forces such as electricity, magnetism, gravitation and light inside man himself. If he can make use of the power that is inside him to make discoveries externally, why cannot he develop the same power that is inside him to attain higher levels of spiritual power? Why cannot he generate Dhamma power? The religious teachers showed us that it could be done. Lord Buddha performed that feat. It was not by any magic that He did it, but by disciplining His mind. By development of qualities such as charity, kindness, loving-kindness, truthfulness and sympathy in Him the Buddha could generate immense Dhamma power in Him. When the Buddha preached He brought to bear this force. That is why there is such great magnetism in His words.

The power that Buddha had was Dhamma power. It greatly exceeded the power of kings. That is why He abandoned all the powers of kingship He could inherit from His father and went in search of the Dhamma. He realized that He could assist human beings to attain deliverance through Dhamma power only. That could not be done through kingly powers. Kingship He could very easily have got, but He abandoned that idea, went in search of the Dhamma because He was convinced that only the path of the Dhamma could lead one to deliverance. We too must realise this fact and act accordingly. Our Government headed by the President is, therefore, much concerned, while ensuring material prosperity for the people, with making available the blessings of the Dhamma to them. It is immaterial through what religion they advanced along the path of the Dhamma.

We must not allow anybody to disrupt the unity and the peace of this country. But we believe that any real unity, peace and discipline could be established only through a course of action in conformity with the Dhamma. I, therefore, thought of making a special appeal to the Maha Sangha. If you have a glance back at world history, you will see that at various times there have been disputes and conflicts between various races, nations and countries and their lasting settlement has always come through steps dictated by the Dhamma. Our Maha Sangha is dedicated to the propagation of the Dhamma. And if they are to make themselves understood by the people whom they want to teach, they must preach in the languages the people understand.

We know that members of the Maha Sangha have gone today to far-off countries – to countries in Asia, Europe, Africa and America – to propagate the Dhamma, and we know that such monks are rendering a valuable service. They

undergo very great hardships on this account, but seem to carry on somehow. Even in international conferences Buddha's teachings are made mention of. The effort of these missionary monks is reminiscent of the effort made at the propagation of the Dhamma by the great Buddhist King of ancient India, Dharmasoka. King Dharmasoka sent his own son and daughter as missionaries to our country. We became Buddhists because of this action of King Dharmasoka. He forged a great link of friendship with us through the Dhamma. Had Dharmasoka annexed this country to India through war, I do not think his name would have evoked so much of love and respect in our hearts as his name does today.

The names of Dharmasoka, Mahinda and Sanghamitta evoke in the hearts of all Sinhala Buddhists sentiments of love, devotion and respect. But none of these three personages is either a Sinhala or Sri Lankan. All of them were Indians. Then why are we having the best of feelings towards them irrespective of their race or nationality? It is because of relationships which have been built on the basis of the Dhamma. Won't it be good, therefore, if our Ven. Members of the Maha Sangha go, in the same way as they have gone to other parts of the world, to different parts of this country itself, to teach the people the Dhamma?

In the matter of influencing people the approach of the Dhamma is very much more efficient and fruitful than that of political pressure and legislation. Buddhism was never spread with the power of the sword, not even in the Buddha's own country where His father ruled. The Buddha never sought to use His father's high position as a lever for influencing and winning the favour of the people. He totally abandoned the approach of coercion and adopted the approach of loving-kindness and sympathy. Lord Buddha preached the Dhamma adhering to this attitude throughout His Ministry.

None has been born into any race or community out of his or her own volition. When I was about to make my departure from my last existence no one came and inquired from me whether I would like to have rebirth as a human being in the world of human beings and if so, what community I wished to be born into. It was long after my birth that I came to know that I have been born a Sinhala. If by chance I was born to Tamil parents I too would have tasted the treatment meted out to Tamils at times of trouble. Or if I had been living in a predominantly Tamil area as a Sinhala I would have been subjected to similar treatment from that side. It is good to understand that none of us has been born Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim or Burgher by free and purposeful choice.

Suppose, just before your departure from your previous existence you were told that you were going to be born into the world of human beings, and you were asked to make a choice. Then what do you think you would, probably, have

done? Yes, if you had been shown the map of the world and asked to choose your country of preference, just think what you would probably have done.

Before making your choice what could have been the most probable question you would have asked? You would, most probably, have wanted to know what the richest country was. I don't think that anybody would have been interested to ask where the Sinhalayas and the Buddhists lived and to show a special preference to become a Sinhalaya. Instead, when you were told that the richest country was America, you would probably have asked to be born in that country. And you wouldn't have stopped at that. You would have shown your preference to be placed in the richest city and the richest family in it. The richest city in America is New York and the richest family is the Rockefellers, and you would have chosen them. If you could not be accommodated in the Rockefeller family you would have chosen some other rich family or would have asked to be made at least a nephew or a niece of Neil Armstrong, the first man to set foot on the moon! At that moment you wouldn't have been tempted to choose either the Sinhala race or the Buddhist religion. It is only after you have been born and capable of thinking that you became aware of your geographical, national, racial or religious background. I think this much is true of anybody.

Whether we be Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim or Burgher, it is good to bear in mind that it is only after we have been born that we come to know of our connections, and we belong to these communities merely as a result of chance. If, blinded by prejudice, each of these races thinks that it is the noblest, highest, purest and the most deserving, then such unreasonable thinking will inevitably result in conflicts.

In this country such conflicts take place from time to time. This manner of narrow thinking on the basis of race could get extended to other spheres, such as religion and caste and even sex. When you begin to divide up there would be no end to division and to conflict. This division and conflict has nothing to do with Dhamma. That is why the Lord Buddha advised us to regard all beings in the world with loving-kindness and to wish them all well.

Our aim must be to achieve happiness, unity and prosperity for all. It is not possible to achieve these objectives purely through political and administrative systems. That is why even before the last General Elections, His Excellency the President said that the aim of the United National Party was not only to build a free society but a just society as well. It was not to take any political advantage that we said that we wanted to create a society where sentiments of kindness, sympathy and tolerance ruled, and the noble values which the Buddha taught were upheld. We sincerely felt that such a society should be built. I think it is

not difficult to realise what conflict and bloodshed could result if the Government encouraged division on narrow considerations, and proceeded on communal lines for the solution of problems.

Recently communal clashes erupted in certain areas. When the conflict took the form of looting, destruction took place indiscriminately. Sinhalese set fire to the shops of Sinhalese themselves. The Tamils clashed with Tamils and killed their own people. Valuable property was destroyed with various aims. Where Adhamma begins to have sway, violence and destruction will take place indiscriminately. For looters, anybody's property is good enough. What becomes active in such situations is the craving of the people. The Buddha said that craving resulted in suffering and fear. The Buddha is quite correct. We all must learn to think in conformity with the Dhamma and to live a charitable life abandoning thinking on narrow lines.

Today there are 15-20 thousand members of the Maha Sangha in the country. It is a wonderful sacrifice that they have made. They have chosen to give up all the pleasures and comforts of a household life and go out into the world to work for the welfare of the many. They have dedicated themselves to the study and practice of the teaching of the Lord Buddha, the chief characteristic of which is loving-kindness. They are the best equipped persons to work for peace and unity among the various communities. I should say that the clergy of other religions too are in a similar position of ability and responsibility to work for the unity and prosperity of the nation. I appeal to the clergy of all religions to learn the languages of the various communities and teach them the Dhamma contained in their religions, so that they may live in conformity with the Dhamma. They are the only people who can bring about unity, discipline and prosperity in this country. Yes, it is through the path of the Dhamma that you have chosen to tread that real and lasting unity can be built. The Government can only help in that process. We, as a Government, are prepared to do everything possible in that direction. I do not think that there ever came into power in this country a Government which believed so strongly in and which understood the value of the Dhamma so deeply, as this Government.

We are a Government serving the people without showing the least consideration to distinctions of race, caste, creed or class. I appeal to you to go to any part of the country and see whether there is any evidence of discrimination against any section of the population. If you do so you will be quite convinced that no previous Government has done so much for the common welfare of all the people of the country, as this Government. I know that some people harbor much jealousy about it. Such forces, therefore, are now trying their best to whip up communal feelings and to let loose violence. You do not find one hundred percent of the people in a country good. But when we

speak of our country we can say that 90% of the people are good. The bad lot consists of only 10% of the population. This 10% are prepared to indulge in any sort of violence. And this segment mainly comprises political criminals and unscrupulous looters of property. This segment lies in wait till a breach of the peace occurs to benefit them.

I wish to bring to your notice that the maintenance of a State of Emergency for a single day now costs the Government at least one million rupees. Our Government does not like the Emergency Law at all. When the Emergency is on, it is not the people who have the upper hand, but the guns, batons and bayonets. We know very well how the people of this country suffered for 6 years under Emergency Rule. That is why we hesitate very much to declare a State of Emergency. We do it only when it becomes absolutely necessary for the security of the people. But these laws cannot establish genuine peace and discipline. Only the Dhamma is capable of it.

On this occasion when we have performed the meritorious act of crowning the pinnacle of this majestic Chaitya, and most noble thoughts are uppermost in our minds, standing under the benign shade of this Sacred Bodhi Tree, I would like to make a humble and an earnest appeal to the clergy of all the religions of this country. There is a great thirst for the Dhamma prevailing in the country today. But it is very essential that the people who thirst for knowledge about the Dhamma should be provided that knowledge in their own languages. It is only if the members of the Maha Sangha succeeded in doing that, that they would have acted in keeping with the Buddha's admonition, "Go forth O! Bikkhus, for the good and welfare of the many". I humbly appeal to the Maha Sangha and to the clergy of all other religions to teach the Dhamma on the basis of their respective religions to the people of all communities, in the languages they understand best.

If, as a Government, we are asked what model we try to emulate we will say that we are trying to emulate the rule of the great Asoka. In the history of the world he is, undoubtedly, the only ruler known to have adopted the power of the Dhamma for the performance of State functions of administration, and thus subjected State power to the power of the Dhamma. That is why we take this rule as a model to be followed.

There are various other political parties in this country. What they say is that this country cannot be ruled by the Dhamma and, instead, the country has to be ruled through the gun, the Emergency Law, the prison and the gallows. We reject that idea. We stopped hanging people not to encourage murder and other crimes, but because killing people is highly abhorrent to us. After we came to power not a single man has been hanged.

We like to see the power of the Dhamma prevail in this country; it should overshadow the power of the State. It is only when the influence of the Dhamma increases to that level in our country that real development, peace and discipline can come to the country. We harbour a great respect for Lord Buddha in our mind. If we really respect the Master it is our duty to make an effort to mould our lives according to His teaching. Temples like this are the centres which moulded the characters of our forefathers. Take any Golden Era in our history, and you would see that the intimate relationship between the clergy and the laity was a chief characteristic of it. We must restore that golden link that once existed.