

TOWARDS WORLD BUDDHISM

By: Dr. Ananda Guruge

At a time when the world is being torn apart by sectarianism and narrow-mindedness, a growing number of Buddhists everywhere are beginning to break down the barriers which exist between the so-called Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist schools. This article clearly explains that the division in Buddhism is by no means similar to that which occurs in other religions. The writer explains that the differences are merely cultural and it is quite conceivable that both groups can come together because they agree on almost all the important tenets of the religion. In fact, the formation of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in 1950 and the World Sangha Council later have already shown that Buddhists can live together amicably, in the spirit of the gentle message taught by the Compassionate One. Dr. Ananda Guruge, an eminent Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar has contributed much to the cause of Buddhist Unity. His latest book "From the Living Fountains of Buddhism" is reviewed elsewhere in this magazine.

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When I was editing the **Buddha Jayanthi Souvenir** of the Lanka Buddha Mandalaya in 1956, I had a series of articles specially written for it by distinguished writers from each of the Buddhist countries of Asia. All the articles were on a set plan and outlined the position which Buddhism held in each country. A point which attracted my attention was the reference to sects and schools which were said to exist in each country. Though, as a statement of fact, this should not surprise a student of Buddhist history my reaction was rather different. To me the mention of numerous sects and schools of thought appeared to be alien to the very spirit of Buddhism. Perhaps, the reason for this is that I have always looked upon Buddhism, in whatever form it is found or by whatever name it is known, as a mighty river which springs from one source – the Buddha.

The Buddha was a historical personage. He spent forty-five years of his life teaching a way of life and training a multitude of monks to follow it and to win others over to it. In his life-time itself he organized an efficient system of missionary activity and, when he died at the age of eighty, his influence had spread to several states of India. The teachings of this personage are what is

known as **Buddhism**. Presuming that the disciples recorded, first in their unflinching memory and later in books, these teachings as faithfully as they could, what passes in each of the Buddhist countries of Asia as Buddhism will have to be regarded as the Buddha's own teachings. But only few would subscribe to a view such as this even out of sheer generosity.

To clarify this point, let me examine the view generally held by the Buddhists of Sri Lanka. With legitimate pride we hold it that Buddhism was preserved mainly due to the efforts of the monks of Sri Lanka. This is true. The Tripitaka, its commentaries and subcommentaries would not have been available to the world today if not for their initiative and indefatigable labour. But we do not claim to have merely preserved Buddhism. We are very emphatic that we preserved it **"in its pristine purity"** and thus our land had become **"the home of pure Buddhism"**. The moment we qualify the Buddhism we have preserved as 'pure', a question can be and is asked: "Where else does one find pure Buddhism?" We certainly have a ready answer. We consider the school of Buddhism known as the *Theravada* to be the pure and orthodox form of Buddhism and hence our answer is that Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, too, have what we term **"the pure form of Buddhism"**. We all agree on this. But what comes inevitably as a corollary to this view is that the doctrines preserved in other Buddhist countries of the world are **"impure"** or at least, unorthodox. This, however, is at variance with what each country thinks about its form of Buddhism. To a careful student of the situation, the difficulties created by it are evident. The Buddhist world is automatically split into two camps and the gap between them appears too vast to be bridged with any degree of facility.

Let us as promoters of a united Buddhist world review the position. Let us for a moment forget the differences which are said to exist between the so-called *Hinayana* (or, more correctly, *Theravada*) and *Mahayana* schools of Buddhism. Our approach should be one of investigation with a view to unravel what underlies these differences and to establish points of similarity. This is, indeed, very easy provided we start with an open mind. First and foremost, the personality of the Buddha is the strongest point of similarity. Whatever form the ideal of Buddhahood takes and whatever symbolism to which it is subjected, the historical Buddha is, to all Buddhists in the world, a reality and he is the one to whom they all pay their homage. Secondly, the goal which every Buddhist aims at is Nirvana whether it be as a Buddha, a Pratyeka (Pacceka) Buddha or an Arahant. Perhaps, the Mahayanist teachings emphasize the ideal of attaining Nirvana through Bodhisattvahood to Buddhahood for the benefit of the multitudes. Yet, the goal is the same. Thirdly, the fundamental doctrines are identical. The Four Noble Truths which are the pivot round which Buddhism rotates, the doctrines of *Karma*, rebirth, *Anatma*, dependant causation and the Path are common to both schools. Besides, many texts are identical in

both form and content. Both schools had the same scriptures to begin with. They depended entirely on their traditional records of the sayings of the Buddha and were anxious to preserve them in as authentic a form as possible. As far as the canonical teachings are concerned, neither the Mahayanists nor the Theravadins ever attempted to vary, amend, add or delete what was traditionally handed over to them. Such a course of action was repugnant to the spirit in which the doctrines were learnt and disseminated.

Then how did the differences come into existence? The reasons are many but here are what I consider to be two of the most important causes for the divergences in the teachings.

It is generally accepted that wherever Buddhism was established, it did not wipe out all traces of beliefs and practices upheld by the people prior to the introduction of Buddhism. Buddhism adapted itself to the rites and ceremonies, and even beliefs and superstitions, of each country and sought to exert its influence in the sphere of thought and philosophical outlook. A cursory analysis of Buddhism as found in Sri Lanka will help to explain this. A Buddhist in Sri Lanka pays homage to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha and observes the Five Precepts. He believes in rebirth, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path etc., and aims at attaining Nirvana. He performs what is enjoined by the Sangha as conducive to his progress towards the ultimate goal. As far as these are concerned, his association with Buddhism proper is undeniable. Then he has other convictions regarding his troubles and cares of life. He believes in a hoard of evil and benevolent spirits. He resorts to black magic to keep the evil spirits at bay. He performs *Exorcism, Charms & Black Magic*, with the motive of placating spirits and obtaining favours from them both in ensuring his personal welfare and his enemy's downfall. When in difficulty, he prays to the Devas whom he believes to be the guardians of the world and makes offerings to them ranging from eulogies to costly gifts. He invokes their assistance when commencing an important project or starting on a journey. These, it should be clear to anybody, have nothing to do with Buddhism. But they continue to exist and are also acquiring a Buddhist tinge on account of the masterly combination of these prehistoric rites with the Buddhist ritual. Thus, the "*yadinna*s" and incantations used in Sri Lanka by the Buddhists, are worked into a unified whole with what is specifically Buddhistic and the result is startling. If one still calls it Buddhism, it will be unique because the rites and beliefs of even the other Theravada countries will bear little resemblance to those of ours. In each country this has happened. The only difference is that in some countries where the religious and philosophical attainments had been remarkable prior to the introduction of Buddhism, the preponderance of native rites and beliefs had removed the Buddhist element from religious practices to a very great extent. (For an excellent account of how pre-Buddhistic rites and beliefs are still prevalent in the other Buddhist

countries of Southeast Asia, reference may be made to Kenneth Percy Landon: Southeast Asia-Crossroad of Religions, Chicago, 1948). The readiness with which the Buddhist missionaries of yore allowed the local religious beliefs to infiltrate into Buddhism has been the first cause for the creation of various schools and sects.

The second, and equally important, cause was the scholarly activity of the disciples of the Buddha. They began to interpret the teachings of the Buddha at a very early date. And their interpretations were bound to vary because the philosophical and educational background of each disciple played an important part in moulding his views on the words of the Buddha. The doctrines which are specifically Mahayanist can, in almost all cases, be traced to the Canon, which as I have already stated, had been common to all schools and sects. Occasionally the meaning given to a saying of the Buddha by a scholarly monk with a *Vedanta* training can be different from that given by one with a *Nyaya* training. Similarly, various schools of thought both in India and China had exerted their influence on the interpretations of the canonical statements. To illustrate how the interpretation of an apparently straight-forward statement of the Buddha could give rise to a new doctrine, I may mention the *Mahayana* teachings on *Trikaya*. Ven. Pelene Sri Vajiranana Thera, in an informative article in *The Buddhist-YMBA* (April, 1954), traced them to a number of canonical sayings. For instance, he established the origin of the doctrine of *Dhammakaya* to the following statement in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*: “Ananda, when I am dead, do not think you are deprived of a teacher, for the *Dhamma* I have taught is with you. Treat my *Dhamma* as your Teacher when I am gone.”

The differences which have come into existence among the forms of Buddhism followed in the Buddhist countries are altogether not so very serious as to enable any one country to claim for itself the most authentic or pure form of Buddhism or to embark on a campaign effecting religious segregation. The fear which some people in both groups entertain that the influence of *Mahayana* would taint *Theravada* or vice versa seems unfounded. Of course, there is a threat to the continuance of certain institutions which have become part and parcel of each school. For instance a Buddhist of a *Theravada* country will shudder at the idea of replacing its Sangha with a priesthood of the type which certain *Mahayana* countries have developed. The same aversion, though in a lesser degree, may be extended to changes in ritual. These are, certainly, justifiable. But what is unhealthy is the lack of understanding and gross misunderstanding which seem to mar the cordial relations that should exist between the countries professing these two forms of Buddhism. There is a strong prejudice whose removal, though not easy, is essential. How was this prejudice created? Who was responsible for it? These are relevant questions and they have been answered for us by one of the most erudite Buddhist

scholars of the West. In an interesting article under the caption “Buddhist Schools and Western Theories” to the Ceylon *Daily News Vesak Number* of 1947, Dr. E. J. Thomas has emphatically pointed an accusing finger at the Western scholars. He says, “It has been largely due to the fact that the so-called ‘modern experts’ have often been scholars who looked upon Buddhist differences as being of the same violent nature as the religious differences found in Europe.” To quote from another paragraph of this article, “There has never been anything like Protestantism in Buddhism, by which is meant the rise of conflicting sects fighting implacably against other sects that were originally part of the same community. Many varying views have arisen in Buddhism, but they have been additional, not contradictory and the fundamental doctrines have always remained.”

The time has now come to launch a campaign sufficiently effective and strong to bring about a *rapprochement*. Let each Buddhist country maintain its special rites and beliefs. But let there be a clear conception of what the fundamentals of Buddhism are. The ideal to be achieved sooner or later is a unified Buddhist world where sects will cease to be barriers in the way of attaining the highest good from the religion.

To expedite the process, the study of Buddhism as a whole, irrespective of the traditional system peculiar to each country, should be taken up by a large body of scholars. While every Theravada Buddhist should know his own texts, a good knowledge of Mahayana should be acquired.

In this connection, reference may be made to the reluctance shown by certain quarters in Sri Lanka to promote the study of Mahayana. Firstly, from the point of view of Buddhist scholarship and secondly from the point of view of international understanding, such a move is undesirable. If Mahayana is removed from the curriculum of Buddhist studies especially in the advanced level, there is very little to study besides the Pali texts. The work of Nagarjuna, Asvaghosha, Vasubandhu, Aryadeva, Dharmakirti and others contain the essence of Buddhist scholarship and these alone reflect the development of Buddhist Philosophy. Similarly, the comparative study of the Pali Tripitaka with the Canons in Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan can throw a flood of light on the life and teachings of the Buddha. No one who reads a work like *Suhrlekhā* (*sic*) of Nagarjuna, will fail to see the value of Mahayana literature which can, through its forceful style and sincerity of purpose, inspire faith and wisdom in the reader. It is idle to by-pass the rich Mahayana literature merely because of a prejudice; those who will lose by such a course of action are certainly not the Mahayanists.

More important than the study of Mahayana as an integral part of Buddhism is the necessity to consider those professing it as co-religionists and to work in close cooperation with them towards the achievement of those lofty ideals which the Master taught and which Buddhists of all sects and schools recognise as the fundamental features of the religion. Buddhists today have to perform a duty by humanity in general which should leave no room for them to debate over the points of ritual and religious practices. As long as the five hundred million people who follow in the footsteps of the Buddha agree that the underlying spirit of non-violence and loving compassion should be placed before warring mankind to save it from self-inflicted destruction, nothing should stand as obstacles and, least of all, the differences in practices and observances. The ideal way of life which the Buddha taught the world is what all Buddhists should uphold and the points of divergence which have arisen purely due to historical circumstances can certainly be relegated to the background.

“Does not one thereby commit an evil act?” one is bound to ask. The fear of promoting or assisting the growth of heretical teaching is inborn in all Buddhists. But what are heretical teachings? The Buddha himself had in the Brahmajala Sutta enumerated no less than sixty-two of them. The doctrines accepted by the Mahayanists may not come in within these. Perhaps one may argue that the development of these doctrines was not anticipated. In that case let us examine how the Buddha distinguished heretical and other teachings. Addressing Mahapajapati Gotami, the Buddha said, “of whatsoever teaching thou canst assure thyself thus, these doctrines conduce to passions, not to dispassion, to bondage, not to detachment, to increase of worldly gain, not to decrease of them, to covetousness, not to frugally, to discontent and not to content, to company, not to solitude, to sluggishness, not energy, to delight in evil, not delight in good, of such teachings thou mayest with certainty affirm, ‘this is not the Dhamma, this is not the Vinaya, this is not the Master’s message”.

If we apply this test to the teachings of the Mahayana schools, we will discover that there is little that is repugnant to the Buddha’s ideals. If so, why should we perpetuate the strong prejudice for the growth of which no person is more responsible than ill-informed scholars of the West whose religio-philosophical background has been altogether different from Buddhism. As Dr. Thomas urges in the article which I have already mentioned, the Buddhists have to re-examine their books and arrive at conclusions which are in accordance with the spirit of the religion which they profess. If undertaken in the proper spirit, the result will be the emergence of Buddhism as a world religion without sects and schools. To the Buddhist who is still reluctant to accept this position, let me repeat the words of the great Buddhist Philosopher, Aryadeva:

*Svapakse vidyate ragah,
Parapakse tu te'priyah
Nirvanam nadhigacchasi
Na sivam dvandvacarinah*

“If in you there is attachment to your doctrines and aversion to those of others, you will never attain Nirvana; for happiness is not for him who upholds opposites, i.e., attachment and aversion”.

