

History of Socially Engaged Buddhism:

Part I: Sri Lanka

- **“Engaged” Buddhism:** is a response to the way Buddhism was forced to be “dis-engaged” in the colonial and modern periods. First, it was removed from its connection to state/king by colonial powers and then marginalized and privatized by secular modern culture (page 2)
- **Re-Engagement of Buddhism:** In most Asian countries, Buddhism appealed to people as part of indigenous culture and tried to re-enter society and develop social roles in response to colonial and modern culture. (page 2 bottom)
- **“Protestant” Buddhism:** In many places, Buddhism tried to re-engage by proving it was modern and scientific, while criticizing its own ritualism. (page 3)
- **“Over Engaged” Buddhism:** Ven. Walpola Rahula argued that a fundamental duty of a monk is get involved in social service, which includes politics. Some Sri Lankan monks became engaged by getting involved in national politics, which connected them to nationalism, racism, violence, and Buddhism with a big “B”. This led them become cut off from the people. Many modern, urban Sinhala monks have become loose in their maintenance of the *sila* 戒律 (page 4-5)
- **“Right” *sama*/正 Engaged” Buddhism:** Some lay people like Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne and some monks developed the role of social service for the monk in a different way by getting involved in grassroots issues. The values were based on Buddhism with a small “b” or dharma, which included ecumenism, tolerance, non-violence, etc (true *sila*), instead of Buddh-ism (page 6) →
- **Dharmic Civilization:** of King Ashoka who used the values of dharma, not Buddhism, to unite a wide variety of peoples throughout the Indian continent in a peaceful and non-violent, tolerant and pluralistic, welfare state. As opposed to Nationalistic Buddhism which has as its Three Jewels: State/King, Buddhism, Ethnic Group (page 1,6)
- **Urban Engaged Buddhism:** Most of the successful cases of Engaged Buddhism in Asia come from rural environments. Urban Buddhism has been much more prone to secularism and consumerism. (page 7)

The “Positive Disintegration” of Buddhism: Reformation and Deformation in the Sri Lankan Sangha

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Introduction

Buddhists often pride themselves and attempt to distinguish themselves from the monotheistic Abrahamic traditions of the west for not having a history of religious holy wars based in fundamentalist understandings of doctrine. However, it is hard to ignore the political violence and ethnic war in Sri Lanka of which Sinhala bhikkhus have been a driving ideological and cultural force. Apart from Sri Lanka, we can find numerous examples in Buddhism of the Sangha, the state, and the dominant ethnicity being fused into a force for power and control over diverse populations. The following chapter attempts to make sense of the complex trajectories of Buddhist history in India and Sri Lanka so that we can come to understand how Buddhism in Sri Lanka has become a force of violent ethno-nationalism as well as to decipher alternative movements that are trying to rebuild the Buddha’s and the Ashokan ideal of a civilizational dharma.

Paradigm Shift in the Pali Chronicles

The legacy of Ashoka’s model of statecraft and dharmic civilization continued on foremost in the Pali writings of the Theravadin school, principally in the three Sinhala chronicles written by monks (the *Dīpavaṃsa*, the *Mahāvamsa*, and the *Cūlavamsa*) as well as Buddhaghosa’s *Samantapāsādikā*, written during his lengthy stay in Sri Lanka. The three chronicles are a form of religious quasi-history recounting: 1) the mythical visits of Shakyamuni to Sri Lanka and his quelling of the aboriginal peoples or in some accounts wrathful spirits called the Yakkhas, 2) the establishment of Buddhism on the island by Ashoka’s monastic son Mahinda, 3) the first Buddhist king Devanampiyatissa, and 4) the exploits of various Sinhala Buddhist kings, specifically Dutthagamani, who is said to have united Sri Lanka under Sinhala rule after an Ashokan-like military campaign over the Tamils in the north.

The key, paradigm-changing point is found in the *Mahāvamsa* when Dutthagamani is struck with remorse in the same way as Ashoka at the end of his conquest. However, instead of having a spiritual awakening to dharma that leads to creating a society of pluralism and non-violence as with Ashoka, Dutthagamani, already an ardent Buddhist, is counseled by eight *arhants* (fully enlightened monks) that his sins are minor. They tell him that he has killed only one and a half human beings, for the rest were non Buddhist and therefore “not more esteemed than beasts” (Clifford 1978, 43). Even the well-known Sinhala Buddhist nationalist, Ven. Walpola Rahula, acknowledges that the *Mahāvamsa*’s recounting of the eight *arahants*’ forgiveness of Dutthagamani’s bloodshed is “diametrically opposed the

teaching of the Buddha” (Rahula 1974, 22). Elsewhere, Rahula recounts that, “This was the beginning of nationalism among the Sinhalese ... organized under the new order of Buddhism. A kind of religio-nationalism, which almost amounted to fanaticism, roused the whole Sinhala people. A non-Buddhist was not regarded as a human being. Evidentially, all Sinhalese without exception were Buddhist” (Rahula 1956, 79).

The Shift from the Pre-Modern Kingdom to the Modern Nation-State

The Sinhala Pali chronicles made explicit efforts to combine the Sinhala people, the Buddhist religion, and the island state of Sri Lanka into one indivisible unit. Contemporary interpretations of these chronicles have deepened this conflation on the basis of our own modern conceptualization of the nation-state that do not fit with the reality of the nature of states in those eras. The original, pre-colonial political systems of Sri Lanka and the other Theravada Buddhist kingdoms were not like the bounded nation-states we use as reference today. They were rather “galactic polities” with center-oriented societies that had shifting boundaries. The technical inability to regulate vast areas and large populations engendered a “devolutionary process of power parcelization” with checks and balances on patrons and clients (Tambiah 1992, 173–174). This lack of strong centralization allowed for diversity and differentiation throughout a system in which minority populations found their places in multi-ethnic areas on the edges of such kingdoms.

This system of governance in Sri Lanka changed greatly under the period of colonialization (1517–1948), especially under the British beginning in 1802. The centralized nature of British administration created a state with no space for the regional autonomy of local people, as evidenced in Colombo becoming the only major mercantile center (Tambiah 1992, 180). The consequent effect of the system on the monastic Sangha was palpable and traumatic to say the least. Over the first forty years of colonial rule, the British took away Buddhism’s special status as national religion and established a new administrative and self-governing structure for it. As the general population began to be increasingly educated in Christian colonial schools, the bond between lay people, especially upper class lay, and the Sangha declined, as did the role and status of the monk in society. The result for the Sangha was a deep alienation from its previous roles in politics, education, and culture. The Buddhist monk’s role was reduced to a local ritualist while falling into lay lifestyles such as even maintaining families (Rahula 1974, 90).

The Buddhist Revival towards Re-Integration

Cultural identity was a key issue and focal point for the modern Sinhala Buddhist reform movement that began in the late nineteenth century. This period marked the creation of Buddhist educational activities in an attempt to reassert Sinhala Buddhist identity among the masses, to raise the educational level of Buddhist monks, and to empower them to once again become relevant actors in society. Two major monastic colleges, which would be at the forefront of the Buddhist nationalist movement a century later, were established at this time:

Vidyodaya Monastic College founded by Ven. Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala in 1873 and Vidyalanka Monastic College founded by Ven. Ratmalane Sri Dharmaloka in 1875. Shortly afterwards in 1880, the American Colonel Henry Steel Olcott arrived in Sri Lanka and with Sumangala and others started the Buddhist Theosophical Society. Together, they began opening Buddhist schools in several districts in the country, such as Ananda College in Colombo in 1886, which became the leading, English Buddhist school (Rahula 1974, 93–94). These Buddhist schools established a tradition of Sinhala Buddhist education and played an important role in linking education, religion, and ethnicity.

One of the most important figures who inherited the work of the Theosophical Society from Olcott was a young, upper class, Christian educated Sinhala boy named Don David Hewaviratne, who would go on to become the quasi-monk Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933). Like similar reform movements in Thailand and among untouchables in India that would follow in the 1930s, Dharmapala's new Buddhism emphasized quintessential modernist themes, such as rationalism, material development, and engaged public service, while heavily criticizing traditional ritualism and merit making. Although he strongly rejected his modern, Christian education, he was no doubt a product of the modern colonial era and his common themes of cleanliness, discipline, and morality have led some to dub his movement "Protestant Buddhism." The subsequent movements that followed Dharmapala's work picked up on: 1) his economic emphasis in the promotion of rural regeneration through a self-sufficient, largely agricultural economy (Seneviratne 1999), and 2) his critique of secular modernism and colonialism and the promotion of political independence and national integrity (for which economic independence was essential). We will look at these two movements in more detail below.

Movement towards the Center: The Over-Integration of the Monk

In the immediate post-war era of independent Sri Lanka, brothers F. R. Senanayake and D. B. Jayatilake became important leaders in the Buddhist movement. D. S. Senanayake, eventually became the first prime minister of independent Sri Lanka and became one of the most influential advocates of a Sri Lankan nationalism that emphasized the common interests of the island's several ethnic and religious groups. The result was that the immediate post-colonial order emphasized pluralism, ethnic harmony, and secularism (De Silva 1998, 21, 82).

This movement, however, was met with serious dissent by certain members of the Sangha, who had been strongly influenced by the socialist and nationalist movement of the Sangha in Burma. In the 1930s, a number of Burmese monks who had studied Marxism in India traveled to Sri Lanka where they radicalized certain parts of the Sinhala Sangha. These elements launched a campaign against Senanayake's secular constitution, emphasizing a closer association with the state and Buddhism (De Silva 1998, 81, 84). The All Ceylon Bhikkhu Congress was one organization that represented the opinions of many of these left

leaning monks, who also tended to be young. On January 26, 1946, a representative of the group, the aforementioned and oft quoted Ven. Walpola Rahula, held a public discussion with Prime Minister Senanayake on the question of the role of monks in politics (Bechert 1978, 203). From this discussion, Rahula wrote *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu* in which he argued that the monk's role in social service is an essential part of the development of the nation, and this included being active in political matters. *The Heritage* spawned a major ideological battle over the role of monks in politics, which took place in the highly politicized environment of post-independence Sri Lanka.

With the election of S. W. R. D Bandaranaike as prime minister in 1956, we see a reversal of pluralistic sentiments of the Senanayake period and the coming together of the elements of ethno-nationalist Buddhism. In 1951, Bandaranaike resigned from his Cabinet post in the first post-independence government and formed the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in order to exploit the rising Sinhala nationalist movement that championed its own language and religion as the foundation of the new Sri Lankan nation. Bhikkhu activists were welcomed and came to hold influential positions on the party's executive committee (De Silva 1998, 86). When Bandaranaike came into power, the link between religion and ethnicity cultivated in the Buddhist schools founded in the nineteenth century was extended to politics. People were not just Buddhists; they were Sinhala Buddhists. The youth who were educated in the Bandaranaike era were called "The Children of '56" (*panashaye daruwo*), and there was a growing sentiment that everyone in the state schools should be educated in the tradition set out by Olcott's Sinhala Buddhist colleges (Navaratne 2008).

In 1958, the two Buddhist monastic colleges, Vidyodaya and Vidyalandara, became fully accredited four year universities open to all students, lay and monastic alike. During this period, the distinction between Vidyodaya as progressive and non-political and Vidyalandara as reactionary and political was not so clear-cut. This was a time when being a Buddhist, especially a monk, and a political activist was an exciting and important role in creating the new post-colonial society. As monastic colleges, both schools contributed to Bandaranaike's landslide victory, while their monks campaigned on stage pushing for the "Sinhala only" policy of a single official language.

By this time, the growing spectacle of bhikkhu activists getting caught in political infighting and using their new found powers for financial gain and influence peddling started to turn the public against them. This counter reaction reached its zenith with the shocking assassination of Bandaranaike by one of his own bhikkhu activists in a confusing conspiracy of motives in 1959 (De Silva 1998, 89-93). While monks did return as early as 1966 to overtly political activities, the sense of trust, optimism, and positive leadership was difficult to rekindle amongst the larger Sinhala public, and the Sangha movement itself became victim to its own historical divisions, which were being exacerbated by new modern influences.

By the 1970s, a large number of monks from both Vidyalandara and Vidyodaya had joined the Marxist Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) party. They were attracted by the

promises of an egalitarian socialist society that seemed to mirror the earliest ideals of the Sangha, which were based in the republican principles of the Buddha's own Shakyan republic. These monks became an integral part of the JVP, criticizing the widening gap between rich and poor with the opening of up of the economy in 1977; campaigning for increased scholarships for students and salaries for teachers at university; and mobilizing youth for the cause. These monks also attacked the excesses of the establishment monks, accusing them of neglecting their patriotic duties because of corruption from rank, property, and temple building. In this way, they tacitly accepted the threats and violence against these establishment monks by the JVP leadership (Tambiah 1992, 97–99).

During this time, the secularization and modernization of the bhikkhu continued to grow. By the 1990s there were numerous examples of monks breaking basic lifestyle codes set forth in the monastic rules (*vinaya*), like living in private residences with their own form of economic support, creating popular art like nationalistic war songs, and establishing major entrepreneurial development projects through wealthy, overseas connections to countries like Japan. This last development continues to cause major problems because of the blind economic support by foreigners, especially foreign Buddhist groups, for bhikkhus with ethno-nationalist tendencies.

Movement Towards the Periphery: the Re-Integration of the Monk

The reformation of lay-monastic relations along these lines was more successfully realized by the other stream that came out of the early Buddhist revival movement of the nineteenth century. There was a mutual connection and influence between Dharmapala and Vidyodaya monastic college, which was established by Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala. Sumangala was the first patron of the Mahabodhi Society under which Dharmapala began his career. At Vidyodaya, the social activist and rural regeneration ideas of Dharmapala held greater influence as opposed to the political aspects of the socialist agenda that became the dominant influence at Vidyalandara, of which Walpola Rahula was to become a central figure. Dharmapala and the Mahabodhi Society gave land to the monks connected to Vidyodaya to help them start such rural development projects (Navaratne 2008). However, the movement did not really come to life until the 1930s when universal suffrage made politicians suddenly interested the fate of the rural peasant and the support that could be garnered from them through rural development. The monks that had been educated in the two large monastic schools in Colombo, particularly from Vidyodaya, were thus well placed to provide a bridge between the urban political elite and the rural masses, and thereby discover a different way of re-integrating themselves back into modern Sri Lankan society (Seneviratne 1999, 59).

In the divisive political situation that developed in post-independence Sri Lanka, this movement faced a crisis in that many of the monks newly educated at these monastic colleges were drawn to the political aspects of the Buddhist revival movement. In this way, the monks became increasingly cut off from the people. It was into this gap that lay Buddhists from the

original Buddhist schools stepped forward. Some of the lay teachers at the schools, most conspicuously A. T. Ariyaratne, felt that social service should be an important part of a lay Buddhist education. They also felt the need to close the growing gap between youth educated in the cities and their roots in the rural villages.

These lay Buddhists were able to capitalize on the national rhetoric of serving the people by initiating work camps (*shramadāna*) of these students with local villagers for some basic need in the village. These camps were based in the ancient tradition of *attam* in which the monks would ring the temple bell and everyone would show up to work together for the community, such as fixing a road or someone's damaged roof. This is the sharing (*dāna*) aspect of *shramadāna* that literally means "the gift of labor." From his simple roots as a teacher at the Nalanda Buddhist school, Ariyaratne created the Nalanda Social Service Movement in 1958 that eventually became the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, the largest and most conspicuous example of progressive Buddhist social development in the world. Ariyaratne was a product of the early Buddhist revival. He understood the progressive ideas presented by Dharmapala and these early monks like Silaratne. However, he went far beyond Dharmapala in being able to consolidate, systematize, present, and then manifest these ideas in concrete social, not political, action.

One of Ariyaratne's greatest and most important skills has been his ability to understand Buddhism in civilizational terms, more as "dharma" than "Buddhism". It was this skill that enabled him to attract Sinhala Buddhists, Tamil Hindus and other minorities, and secular, western development experts to build the movement into a huge enterprise that by 1985 was said to be active in over 8,000 villages, one third of all the villages in Sri Lanka (Bond 1996, 136). In 1961, Ariyaratne spent time in India under Gandhi's heir, Vinoba Bhave. His grasp and subsequent use of Gandhi's pan Indian civilizational ethics—such as truth, non-violence, humility, and equanimity—enabled Ariyaratne to expand the appeal of his work to international circles, as well as draw in progressive Hindu Tamils within Sri Lanka. Ariyaratne was able to sell "dharmic development" (開発) to: 1) secular, international development experts as "participatory community development"; 2) Sri Lankan Hindu Tamils as Gandhianism; and 3) Sinhala Buddhists as a progressive new social order that would revive and re-invent the golden era of Sinhala Buddhist kingdoms. I use the term "re-invent" because the Sarvodayan vision is one more closely aligned with the welfare ethics of the Ashokan empire and the participatory and democratic ethics of the republican congresses of the Buddha's day rather than the nationalistic values of the ancient Sinhala monarchies.

In this way, Sarvodaya created a vital venue for the overly politicized monks to find a more progressive expression for their beliefs. After the incidents of 1956, many monks became disillusioned with party politics and wanted to get involved in development work. Further, large numbers of young monks who had joined the JVP in the early 1970s became disillusioned by their secular Marxist sentiments and violent methods. They got involved

with Sarvodaya. By the 1970s and 1980s, almost all of the Sarvodaya centers were located in temples, and meetings were usually full of monks who also acted as leaders (Navaratne 2008).

However, the “positive disintegration” (the balance between integration and diversification) between these three camps (Sinhala Buddhist, Tamil Hindu, secular western) proved increasingly hard to maintain. By the 1980s, increasing amounts of western academics and foreigner funders began to exert their agendas on the organizational structure of Sarvodaya, which had been a participatory, member built organization. With the influx of large amounts of foreign capital, western style strategic and planning methods became more important. This enabled Sarvodaya to grow exponentially, but it also decreased the space in which monks had acted as community leaders.

Further, in the 1970s when the ethnic conflict started boiling up, most of the northern Sarvodaya staff left and built an organization called Gandhian, which eventually morphed into a militant Tamil group called PLOT in the late 1980s. They felt that Sarvodaya was beginning to impose Sinhala Buddhist values and social structures on them. While it is clear that Sarvodaya began de-emphasizing its Gandhian roots in favor of its Buddhist ones, it appears there was a clash of values between Tamil Hindu social dynamics of caste and Sarvodayan values in which everyone was expected to cook, eat, and work together equally. Though Ariyaratne has tirelessly campaigned against the civil war and organized mass peace meditations of hundreds of thousands of people, once the war started it was difficult for the organization to remain active in the north and east. Eventually, it has come to function more as a rehabilitation NGO serving as a conduit for international organizations to channel funds to the region.

Conclusion

Although the work of Sarvodaya has been seminal and inspiring, the core problem that we have seen in Sri Lanka remains to be addressed: the role of the monk and lay-monastic relations in an *urban environment*. Indeed, Sarvodaya’s impact in urban areas has been muted. The movement has always been strongest in more traditional, rural areas, struggling to have impact in more urban communities. While examples of progressive Buddhist movements for social regeneration can be found easily in rural areas in Sri Lanka and Thailand as well, for the most part, nationalism, secularism, and consumerism have become the dominant themes of urban Buddhism. Looking outside of the Theravada tradition, we can see numerous attempts in Japan to develop new forms of urban Buddhism. However, rather than confront the monastic issue, they have done away with it by creating completely lay denominations. Meanwhile, the major traditional sects have come to resemble a modern form of Brahmanism with ancestor rituals and conspicuously wealthy and secularized priests. Taiwan appears to offer another possible solution with its vibrant monastic Sangha and large numbers of fully ordained bhikkhunis. Though not focused on structural change, the Taiwanese Sangha’s

commitment to social work has generally embraced civilizational attitudes and steered clear of the kind of nationalist and political engagement of the Sangha in Sri Lanka. This contrast is all the more striking within the context of the struggle of Taiwan to gain political legitimacy apart from main land China.

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