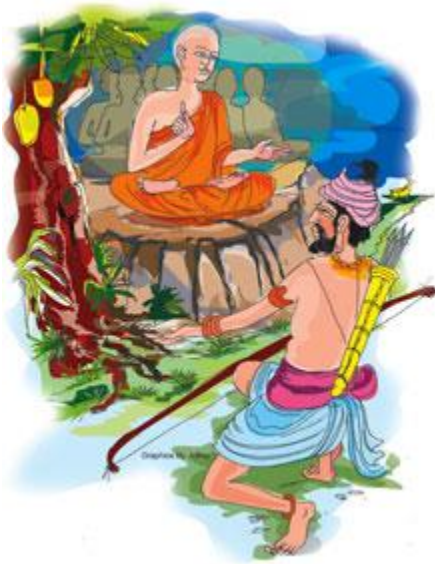


## The great betrayal of Theravada Buddhism?

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Buddhism was introduced into this Island during the reign of King Devanampiya tissa in the third century B.C. by the mission of Venerable Thera Mahinda. The Mahindian mission brought the Theravada form of the teaching as approved by the Third Buddhist Council which was held at Pataliputra

under the patronage of Emperor Asoka. This meant that the Pali canonical texts served both as the source material and the reference books of the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition. It, in other words, meant that the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition derived its authority to act and to understand the teaching of the Buddha in accordance with the declaration of the authority of the Dhamma and the Vinaya as explained in the Maháparinibbána Sutta of the Dìgha Nikáya(D.11.123). Any transgression of the authority of the Dhamma and Vinaya makes the relevant action, interpretation or adoption of ritual, wrong and illegal.

After introducing Buddhism to Sri Lanka, Venerable Mahinda took meaningful steps to see that the study of the Pali canonical texts and the practice of the Dhamma were given equal emphasis. The historical remains of infra-structure facilities provided for both types of disciples go to prove that the demand for both types of training did exist even through difficult social and political conditions faced by the country down to about the early part of the tenth century of the Christian era.

Another important observation which must be made here is the absence up to this time of any evidence of ritual activities of worship and offering (pújá) in connection with Buddhism. The construction of Pagodas enshrining the relics of the Buddha and the planting of the Bodhi did not generate the adoption of Hindu theistic type of worship and prayer. According to historical evidence, it is the adoption of offering food and garments to statues of the Buddha by King Sena 111 which opened the sluice gates for capitulation into Hindu theistic worship with all its attendant ritualism uncontrolled.

Up to this point in Sri Lankan history, the Buddha to the Theravadins was a human being, born into this world as other humans. He left household life, early in his life and attained Buddhahood after six long years of severe ascetic practices. He lived an extremely simple life, walked bare-footed and followed the age old ascetic practice of going round for his only meal of the day, if he did not have an invitation. He passed away at eighty years under a sála tree in a park at Kusinara, lying on his folded upper robe which normally served as his bed and seat throughout his life as the Buddha. This, very briefly, is a mere glance at the wonderful genius who had been glorified by the later writers who had neither deep nor clear understanding of the great man or of the unique Dhamma he gave to the world.

This Theravada Buddha, still preserved in the Pali canonical texts, is vastly different from the glorified Buddhas of the Pali commentaries of Buddhaghosa. It was as the result of the fruition of his merit, accumulated through innumerable eons of life in saísára that the Buddha attained Enlightenment in this life. In spite of Buddhaghosa's insistence on the indispensability of merit, the Buddha has never referred to, either accumulation of merit or past merit as a factor for Buddhahood or the attainment of nibbana. It must be noted here that the theory of accumulation of merit and the theory that merit can be donated to other parties are both alien to the Buddha's teaching.

It may be noted here that the Rájagiriya and the Siddhatthika ( two Indian Schools of Buddhism) proposed that merit can be donated at the Third Buddhist Council ,but it was rejected by the Council as unacceptable according to the Buddha's teachings. It is not clear how and on what grounds that it came to be accepted by post canonical Sri Lankan Buddhism again, going against this decision of the third Buddhist Council . Statues of the Buddha came to be made, according to tradition by the first century B.C., under the influence of the Gandhara School of art. Thuparama was the first Cetiya built to enshrine the relics of the Buddha received from the Emperor Asoka. When the MaháCetiya was completed, it too enshrined a second receipt of the Buddha's relics. The Bodhi was planted at Anuradhapura when it was brought by Theri Saqngamitta. All these did not mean to the Sri Lankan Theravadins of the period, the growth of ritual worship of the theistic type, covering each and every item. Instead, these objects of veneration served as objects of recollection of the Buddha and his attainments.

From the time of the third century introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, Hinduism as well as most other Indian religions known in India had their presence in this Island. Brahmins were held in high esteem in the Sinhala society. Pandukabhaya was educated by a Brahmin teacher The Brahmin advisor of King Devanampiyatissa was a member of the Royal delegation sent by Devanaqmpiyatissa to Emperor Asoka .

There is no evidence that either Hinduism or any other of the Indian religions present did have any serious impact to derail the Theravada Buddhist teaching from its two principal paths of training, the practice of the Dhamma by following the path of gradual training culminating in the attainment of nibbana producing many arahats and the study of the Pali canonical texts contributing to produce indigenous expertise of the Dhamma and the texts.

Not only did Venerable Mahinda establish the two principal paths of training for the firm foundation of the teaching in the Island, the meditative and the literary, he also provided Sinhala commentaries to explain the difficult Pali texts of the Dhamma and the Vinaya to help the native Sinhala readers of the texts. It is not at all clear why these Sinhala commentaries had to be translated into Pali.

An innocent explanation may be that it was intended to keep the interpretation of the texts in the hands of the bhikkhu Saígha who at the time were the only learners and the interpreters of the Pali texts. But even this explanation seems untenable when it is realized that the original Sinhala commentaries were burnt immediately after the Pali Commentaries were completed.

A careful examination of the contents of some commentaries of Buddhaghosa written in Pali shows that they have a rich content of stories and anecdotes not strictly falling within the function of a commentarial explanation of the original texts. For example, Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Kalinga Bodhi Jataka has an additional story of Venerable Ananda requesting the Buddha to leave some object to which his followers in Savatthi could pay their respects whenever he was away on his (dhamma cáriká) visits to other areas. Buddha accordingly, approves the planting of a seedling from the Sri Maha Bodhi of Buddhagaya at the entrance to the monastery at Savatthi.

The story raises several questions. First, the story of an Anandabodhi is out of context here as it is not found in the original Kalingabodhi Jataka Pali which Buddhaghosa was commenting on. Second, the statement that people went to see the Buddha carrying flowers and incense and being disappointed when they found that the Buddha was not there, is itself wrong because the Buddha as the human teacher was not an object of worship and offering when he was living. The word pújá, it must be noted, does not occur in the Pali canonical texts in the sense of a religious offering. The transition from veneration to worship and offering has taken several centuries after the time of the Buddha to be adopted by the Buddhists as the result of a theistic invasion, as it seems. The interpolation of stories like that of the Anandabodhi is evidence of the mechanism of introducing hitherto unaccepted rites and ritual into Buddhism. It also seems to tell us why they burned the original Sinhala commentaries of Venerable Mahinda, not to allow the secret leak out.

It is Buddhaghosa who claims in his commentary on the Ratana Sutta that it was first chanted by the Buddha to heal the city of Vesali of the devastating epidemic and affliction by non-humans. It must be noted here that Buddhaghosa's claim of an epidemic is not supported by any other literary or historical source. Further, the Vajjian tribal oligarchy was an exemplary tribal state, too strong for the neighbouring Magadhan Emperor to wage war as clearly stated in the Maháparinibbána Sutta of the Dìgha NBikáya. Thus, the story of an epidemic is another of Buddhaghosa's fairy tales used to make new rites and rituals acceptable by giving them religious sanction.

The acceptance that there are non-human beings ( amanussá) and that they are a threat to man are both most probably Sri Lankan in origin. It is during the age of post-canonical Buddhism that both these had been smuggled into the Buddhist texts and the new rites and ritual structure. Not only the word amanussá( non-human), but the different non-human types discussed in the lately tinkered ??áná?iya and the Mahásamaya discourses are not supported by the other canonical texts which deal with the composition of the world of beings. According to Buddhaghosa, the Ratana Sutta, which was the first blessing ritual approved by the Buddha goes against the Buddha's own teaching in the Sámaññaphala Sutta of the Dìgha Nikáya which declares all blessing rites and ritual as animal sciences (tiraccháana vijjá).The ritual has been smuggled into the Buddhist ritual structure through the commentarial story. An idea of the importance attached to the story and the importance of the function it was expected to serve can be gained when it is realized that it has been repeated in three commentaries.

Buddhaghosa, coming from south India was selected to translate the Sinhala Commentaries into Pali because of his expert knowledge of the Pali language. It is not clear how he managed to translate the Sinhala explanations of the texts without an equally deep knowledge of Sinhala. Nothing is said about how or whether he acquired such knowledge. On the other hand, if he was writing his own commentaries he could have done so, without bothering himself of the Sinhala commentaries because what was expected of him was the harmonization of the new ritual structure as sanctioned by the Buddha himself. And it is quite clear this exactly was what Buddhaghosa did and did so masterfully.

The hard work of Buddhaghosa and the Mahavihara fraternity culminated in the formulation of a new ritual structure with attractive advantages to keep

both the lay followers and the members of the Samgha happy and contented. As a result, when we pass from the canonical Pali texts to the post-canonical Pali texts and the Pali commentaries we come into a totally new teaching different from the original.

The most important of these changes are those effected in the concept of the gods. Instead of gods who are merely a class of worldly beings, in the new Buddhaghosa religion, they have many functions to perform. They accept merit (punya) donated by people and provide them protection. Later on, they become the protectors and guardians of the Buddha and his teaching. It is important to note here that all these gods who were assigned these responsibilities were the South Indian Hindu gods who were in active service as Hindu gods in India, as they are now.

Nibbana, which is the goal of religious endeavour in Buddhism is to be attained through the threefold scheme of training of siila (morality), Samádhi(concentration) and paññá(wisdom).But in the new Buddhism, nibbana cannot be attained as and when one wants to attain it. It is attainable only as the fruition of merit accumulated throughout the cycle of births in saísára.The Bodhisattva attained his Buddhahood in this life as the result of the fruition of his merit accumulated throughout the innumerable eons of life he spent in saísára( cycle of existences). It must be noted here that the Buddha has never referred to the need of the fruition of merit for one's nibbana.

Throughout the Pali canonical texts, giving is praised as the means to cleanse one of craving for worldly possessions because craving is one of the biggest obstacles to balanced mental development. This has undergone change in the new Buddhism to giving what one wishes to have back in abundance as his possessions in future lives in saísára. The bhikkhu who is recommended as the field of merit to receive the offerings as items of dána functions as the custodian who credits the giver's account.

Pagodas which enshrine the relics of the Buddha, statues of the Buddha constructed to remind the followers of the Buddha's attainments and the Bodhi planted to remind them of his attainment of Buddhahood after years of exertion are now converted into objects of sanctity, each possessing the power to respond to request and also generate merit each time an offering is made to or is worshipped .

The transition from respectful recollection to the acceptance that each of such objects did possess the power to answer requests and also generate merit which ultimately will result in nibbana upon accumulation to required level is in total disagreement with the Buddha's teaching. Merit is neither essential nor indispensable for the attainment of nibbana according to the canonical teachings. Merit becomes relevant as a stage of development prior to kusala and is replaced by kusala qualities upon progress on the path of spiritual development.

Merit (punya) according to Pali canonical Buddhism, is not a religious or a spiritual acquisition which is an end in itself. Living according to the dhamma and living righteously is described as following the path of merit. It leads to the next stage in the path of gradual training which is the development of kusala qualities. This in turn leads on to the development of concentration which leads on to the final attainment of nibbana .It may also be noted here that it is Buddhaghosa who has given a new importance to punya by introducing ten meritorious actions which are not found in the Pali canonical texts. The ten meritorious actions are for the first time found in Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Dhammasangani. It is Buddhaghosa who uses patti for merit for the first time and the concept of donation or transfer of merit also for the first time, not supported by canonical Buddhism It may also be recalled here that the idea of donation of merit was rejected by the Third Buddhist Council when it was raised by two Indian Schools of Buddhism.

Thus, all aspects of the new ritual Buddhism which changed the Theravada Buddhism into a system of worship, offering and prayer, like any other theistic religion, has been very carefully planned and smuggled into practice with several bonus packages for the operators. At the base of all rituals was the donation of merit to the gods with a request for their protection. It must be noted here that the gods whose protection was prayed for were not the gods like Sakka, but South Indian gods like Vishnu, Natha, Pattini,etc. who were entrusted with these duties in addition to their home duties of serving their Hindu followers .The composition of the offering for each god was so made to make the mediator between god and man enriched with sufficient economic and other benefits which they did not enjoy under the earlier form of canonical Buddhism.

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