

Buddhism and Society: Reinforcement of Humanistic Buddhism through Social Involvement

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to treat phenomenologically the beliefs and practices of traditionally Buddhist countries where Southern Buddhism or the so-called Theravāda Tradition prevails. Material is drawn from personal experience and observation and an attempt is made to understand how Buddhism as practiced in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos conform to the ideals of Humanistic Buddhism. Humanistic Buddhism is defined as Buddhism in the service of humanity here and now. The impact of Buddhism is traced from the time a child is introduced to his religious heritage and acquires a Buddhist identity. Equal emphasis is laid on the place of the Temple and the Sangha in Buddhist societies. Systematically explored are the ways and means by which Buddhism fulfills the intellectual, social and emotional functions which these societies expect from a religion. The data presented in this paper show why Master Tai Xu described the religious practices of South and Southeast Asia as 'humanistic Buddhism' and a host of modern scholars call them 'Socially engaged Buddhism'. The conclusion drawn is that the Buddhist societies of the region reinforce the concept and the practice of Humanistic Buddhism as interpreted by Grand Master Hsing Yun.

Introduction

The study of contemporary Buddhism and society in traditionally Buddhist countries of Asia has primarily been the domain of anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists, most of whom are from the West. They adopt instruments of research applicable to the respective discipline and concentrate on pre-conceived hypotheses for which evidence is drawn from both personal observation in the field and opinions of a random or selected population of interviewees and respondents. The researchers come with varying backgrounds. Some have the requisite linguistic skills and historical training. Some have nothing more than methodological skills and need the assistance of local translators and interpreters.

This latter group is often at the mercy of their collaborators and the quality of their research is seriously compromised when these partners do not come up to expected levels of competence. Instances are not rare when questions and responses are incorrectly translated. Worse, still, are situations when these national partners assume that the respondents would not understand the questions and, therefore, pose their own versions and repeat to the researcher what he would like to hear. Even national researchers have been subject to this experience when their linguistic abilities are inadequate. (see Guruge 1989, p. 410)

There is also the question of researchers' expectations. Whether by accident or by some form of covert consensus, most researchers seem to feel obliged to be overly

critical of Buddhism in practice. They seem to be surprised that Buddhism today does not resemble *in toto* the Buddhism they assume the Buddha taught.¹ They would unhesitatingly concede that change, evolution and adjustment to social needs of times and climes apply to all human institutions. But quite often, they are not prepared to extend this concession to the historical development of Buddhism. Their explicit or implicit assumption is that the Buddhist Sangha deliberately and mischievously exploited the Buddha's teachings to their own personal gain or advancement. Some of the early proponents of this theory displayed their lack of objectivity by calling the Sangha such names as: "shadowy." (E.F.C. Ludowyck, 1962, p. 32) What Stanley Thambiah did not say in words his publisher apparently stressed through pictures of "militant" monks in his "Betrayal of Buddhism."

Richard Gombrich explains the reaction of religious people to such research and his position as an empirical investigator:

When religious people encounter an attempt to explain their beliefs or customs in social terms they often suspect that this is but a cover for an attempt either to prove them wrong (as may be done by a missionary from another religion) or to relativize all religious beliefs and values. Moreover, their suspicions are often justified. But they need not be so. To show the circumstances under which a belief or value comes to be held is not to invalidate it. Of this the history of science furnishes innumerable examples. We now know the speed of light. It could be discovered only after certain other advances had been made, advances both conceptual (most basically, that light is a thing which travels) and technical (so that its speed could be measured). What has been discovered is an objective fact: it was true even before anyone knew it and will still be true even if no one alive knows it. But that does not mean that we cannot write a history of how it came to be discovered or ask, for instance, who now knows it or does not know it or refuses to believe in it, and why.

Not all truth claims made by religions can be correct, because some of them conflict; but beyond that the empirical investigator has nothing to say and need pose no threat. My view is that, like ethical propositions, metaphysical propositions cannot be refuted (let alone confirmed) by empirical evidence, but that does not mean that they are meaningless or valueless.

(Gombrich, 1988, pp.7-8)

The reaction of Buddhists to the growing body of such "research findings" of modern scholars is one of equanimity and compassion. They accept that change and evolution which the Buddha taught as a foundational concept of his teachings should apply to Buddhism as well. They see no special virtue in going back to the letter of the original teachings of the Buddha. They know that Buddhism is not a religion of the book. Tripitaka is hardly accessible to most of them, even if they are aware of it. Even the most learned members of the Sangha are not conversant with all its forty-five volumes. Nor are they expected to be. The Buddha is on record as discouraging book learning. He encouraged his disciples to know only the essentials of his teaching but insisted that practicing the little which is learnt is very important. (Dhammapada, -Dp. -19 and 20) He decried learning without practice. As such, Buddhists do not expect to see all that is in books – whether canonical or commentarial – to be found in practice. They even wonder what all the shooting is about when researchers enter into long

debates, controversies and vituperative confrontations over their findings.

The purpose of this paper is to treat phenomenologically the beliefs and the practices in societies of traditionally Buddhist countries where Southern Buddhism or the so-called Theravāda Tradition flourishes (For reasons for preferring the term Southern Buddhism to Theravada, see Guruge, 2000, pp. 88-92). I draw on personal experience and observation rather than on data provided by random or selected respondents to a structured questionnaire to prove or disprove a hypothesis. If at all, I will have one overriding question in mind: namely, Does Buddhism in Buddhist societies reinforce in any way the concept and the practice of Humanistic Buddhism? Here my working definition of Humanistic Buddhism is **Buddhism in the service of humanity here and now**.

As a secondary objective, it is my wish that similar examinations of Buddhist societies in East and Central Asia will be attempted by competent scholars so as to provide us with a comprehensive understanding of the interaction between Buddhism and society.

The Buddhist Child: Introduction to Buddhism and Assumption of a Buddhist Identity

In any society, a child's original religion is a sheer accident of birth. If it is a pluralistic society as mine was in Sri Lanka, my being a Buddhist was conditioned by the fact that I was born to this particular family and not to one in front, left or right to its home. In any other location I could have been a Hindu, a Christian or a Muslim.

"Buddhism came to me with the milk of my mother," I could have said as most others in South or Southeast Asia would affirm. The Buddha himself has called parents the first teachers (*pubbācariya*). With thousands of stories to narrate and many poems and songs to recite and sing, the mother imbues her children with the spirit of Buddhism in the most lasting manner.

The earliest recollection of a child is that he or she could recognize a Buddhist monk and knew what to do when one was met. Wherever one was seen, I and my age-cohorts would go on our knees, touch their feet and pay obeisance to them. It is done in emulation of elders and even a casual observer would notice a child from a devout home. The monk responded by wishing us good health. We stood apart in our society, because children of other faiths did not do so to Buddhist monks. An identity as a Buddhist, therefore, did not take too long to take shape.

Visits to the temple begin very early in a child's life. Every village has at least one temple with a minimum of one monk. The Southern Buddhist Sangha constitutes several traditional divisions which are loosely called "sects". These are usually named after the country or city from which the higher ordination was introduced at a certain point in history. Thus Myanmar and Thailand have sects named after Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka has sects named after Myanmar and Thailand. In larger villages and urban areas, there could be a multiplicity of temples according to the number of sects. As no

doctrinal issues are involved and divergences in worship and ritual are hardly noticeable, the laity would go to any temple for worship. Some even support temples of different “sects,” even though a tendency exists to identify a particular temple as “our temple.”

A child develops closer relations with “our temple” and its monks play a direct role in the life of the family. They are the ones who are invited for a variety of domestic ceremonies. Where a family chooses for its children supplementary literacy training on traditional lines, these monks become their teachers. Invariably there is a Dhamma school on Sundays and/or on days marked by the phases of the moon. If there are novices, they become a kind of peer group whose influence on boys of the same age group could be significant. Thus the temple gives a child an institutional identity as well.

A third identity evolves as a child is introduced to basic doctrines and practices of Buddhism. Even as a child begins to speak, he or she is made aware of the basic Pali texts of worship. The formula to worship the Buddha “*Namo Buddhāya*” could be the first, to be followed with the longer formula: “*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*”. The thrice-repeated text of taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha (i.e. *Buddham saraṇam gacchāmi; Dhammam saraṇam gacchāmi; Sangham saraṇam gacchāmi*) follows. By the age of six or seven, an average Buddhist child knows the five precepts in Pali (i.e. I take upon myself the discipline of abstaining from (i) killing, (ii) stealing, (iii) sexual misconduct, (iv) lying and (v) situations of negligence caused by liquor and drugs). Some might even know the three basic texts, in praise of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha: (1) *Iti pi so bhagavā...* (2) *svākkhāto bhagavatā dhammo...* (3) *supatipanno bhagavato sāvakasangho...* Before a child reaches his tenth birthday, he or she would have normally assumed this triple identity as an adherent to Buddhism.

The Place of the Temple and the Sangha in Society

When and how Buddhist societies began to evolve around a temple is not clear, as the Sangha, when established by the Buddha, appears to have been a mobile missionary organization without fixed abodes. The traditional query about one’s religion was phrased in the Buddha’s time as “who is your teacher or by whose teachings do you abide” rather than “To what temple (church) do you belong?” Monasteries of varying sizes came into existence because the Buddha’s mission attracted wealthy donors. As the Buddha in the *Vinaya* enjoined the establishment of monasteries, the transformation of the Sangha to at least a partially sedentary institution started while the Buddha was alive. It is recorded as a historical fact that, within decades of the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, a temple was constructed within six to seven miles from one another; that is, roughly 600 temples in an island of 25,000 square miles (Guruge, 1989, P. 603). Another development, recorded in Sri Lanka and consequently introduced to Southeast Asia with the reformed and unified Sri Lankan Buddhism of the twelfth century, is the categorization of the Sangha as village-dwellers and forest-dwellers. During the days of the Buddha, too, the Sangha consisted of two vocations: those who pursued insight

meditation and strove for their deliverance (*vipassanādhura*) and those who pursued textual study and promoted education and religious propagation (*ganthadhura*).

The vocation of textual study had expanded over centuries and the class of village-dwelling monks progressively took over the mundane functions of an organized religion. These included managing temporalities, recruiting and training novices, educating children, counseling families and the youth, organizing social services and interacting with authorities. They also catered for the spiritual needs of the people: conducting benedictory and funeral ceremonies, promoting merit-making in diverse forms, conducting group and individual worship, propagating the Dharma among the laity, and functioning as spiritual advisers in times of adversity.

In the traditions of Southern Buddhism, the position of monks in society is pre-eminent. They have precedence over all laity irrespective of rank, wealth or influence. Kings and heads of states defer to them. Symbolically, the Sangha is the third of the three Refuges or Gems of Buddhism and every monk, whatever be his level of education or piety, is regarded as worthy of honor. People, invariably, kneel before them in veneration to receive their benediction. The Sangha is considered to be an “incomparable merit-producing field” (*anuttaram puññakkhettaṁ*) and what is given to the Sangha is said to produce the highest merit (*etesu dinnāni mahapphalāni*). There appears to be an unwritten tacit contract between the Sangha and the society. The society extends to the Sangha the highest consideration, veneration, and charity, and the Sangha makes it a point to deserve such eminence through education, pious conduct, and dedicated service to society. This spiritual-cum-social contract between the Sangha and the laity is the foundation of a Buddhist society in Southern Buddhism.

Here, the temple becomes a multifaceted educational, cultural, and social center and the monk the pre-eminent agent of stability and progress. In rural areas, in general, the monk is the most knowledgeable person and hence his advice is sought in all matters. Even in urban areas, he could still be the most knowledgeable as regards the Buddha’s teachings and practice. Thus his position in society as an adviser is most significant.

The Southern Buddhist society has long been deprived of the female counterpart of the monk as the *Bhikkhunī-sāsana* (the Order of Nuns) disappeared centuries ago. But this has not prevented the more motivated women to observe the ten precepts and assume an influential role in society, catering in particular to spiritual needs of women and families. But their numbers are minimal and facilities available to them are restricted. Recent initiatives to restore the *Bhikkhunī-sāsana* in Southern Buddhism, in which Grand Master Hsing Yun’s initiative has been significant, promises a greater role for fully ordained nuns. (see Mary Pat Fisher, 1997, pp. 140-141)

Despite the importance and the influence which the Sangha has gained in society, substantial numbers of monks and a few female observers of ten precepts retire to forest hermitages and fulfill the vocation of insight meditation. They are held in much greater veneration than those engaged in society. They are admired for the renunciation of worldly comforts and for the devotion to seeking their own deliverance,

in strict adherence to the Buddha's admonition. Their hermitages, as a result, are well-provided for, even though they are not active in serving society as a local temple is.

The temple and the Sangha, together, fulfill the three main expectations which people have from religion: namely, intellectual, social and emotional (see Roger Schmidt, 1988, pp. 12-13). Southern Buddhism has evolved over centuries to cater for these expectations. Its effectiveness in this respect ensures the primacy which Buddhism has sustained in South and Southeast Asia, despite onslaughts from colonial regimes, rival religious movements, political upheavals including ideological pressures, the challenges of mass media, and economic realities², and the like.

Buddhism and the Intellectual Function

Southern Buddhism generally is less of a religion of ritual and metaphysics, and more of a religion of intellectual quest. It is the legacy of the scholastic movements of Early Buddhism and the priority given to the temple as an educational institution and to the Sangha as a learning society. It has a world-view which is basic to practice. One picks up elements of this world-view from childhood from how adults react to situations in life. When the death of a neighbor or any other catastrophe is reported, they would use expressions like "*Aniccam dukkham anattam*" (Impermanence, Suffering, Selflessness) or "*Karma*" or "Dissolution of five aggregates" or "inevitable *samsara*". These expressions, so pregnant with fundamental teachings of the Buddha, have little meaning at first. But as time goes on, they do create a sense of curiosity. Thus begins a serious understanding of Buddhist philosophy. The process of learning is expedited by the frequency with which one comes to hear sermons delivered by monks, even if no formal study is pursued.

In Southern Buddhism, *dhamma-desanā* (instruction in Dharma) is an integral part of every ceremony. Two domestic ceremonies are particularly important: the funeral ceremony and the feeding of monks or *dāna* (almsgiving). Often both are related as *dāna* is offered on the seventh day and the third month following death and afterwards on each death anniversary. At these events, the sermon concentrates on death and elaborates the teachings on the Three Signs or Marks (*Tilakkhaṇa* – *Anicca*, *Dukkha*, *Anatta*); the five aggregates (*Paṭicakkhandha* – *Rūpa*, *Saññā*, *Vedanā*, *Sankhāra*, *Viññāna*) which are analyzed to establish *Anatta* or Selfness, the unwholesome aspects of life; and the futility of attachment. According to the competence of the preacher, these themes could be dealt with in lucid language with interesting anecdotes and similes or elaborated in philosophical details. As ceremonies connected with loved ones have to be attended as a social/family obligation, one is bound to be exposed to these sermons several times a year. Thus, progressively, the central teachings of the Buddha are learned with little effort.

The feeding of monks could be connected with other domestic ceremonies pertaining to child-birth, house-warming, weddings, opening of businesses, reading the first letters (an elaborate ceremony marking the beginning of a child's education), onset of long travel or any other auspicious event. On these occasions, it is customary to have, in the night before the almsgiving, the chanting of the Book of Protection

(*Paritta*) usually right through the night as a benediction to the party or parties concerned. The chanting consists of two dozen discourses with important ethical and moral teachings. The majority of the people would not know the meaning and to them the chanting has only a magical connotation. But once the meanings are known, these frequently chanted texts provide an informative anthology of canonical discourses which serves an intellectual purpose. Southern Buddhism hardly uses any purely magical or mystical formulae and repetitive spells or charms. But the appendices to the Book of Protection contain such texts, which show familiarity with *dhāriṇis*, (Cf. *Ginipirita*) and *mantras* similar to those in Indian *A tharvaveda* are used in certain ceremonies.

The sermons on such occasions enable monks to dip into the vast ethical content of the Buddha's teachings. A bride will be reminded of the example of the female devotee Visākhā and invariably the ten admonitions in riddle form given to her on her wedding day by her father will be included; namely, not to give fire from the house outside, not to take into the house fire from without (in both cases 'fire' is meant to be 'trouble, worries, gossip etc.'); to give only to those who give in return; not to give those who do not give in return; to give to him that gives and to him that gives not; to sit, eat and sleep happily; to tend the fire, and to honor the household deities (Dhammapada Commentary I, pp. 403 f). Young people, in general, would be told about Sigāla and Dīghajānu and the Buddha's advice on friends, wealth and interpersonal relations in society (i.e. *Sigāla* and *Vyagghapajja suttas*). If the occasion relates to education, the subject-matter will be drawn not only from Buddhist texts but also the wide-ranging gnomic literature in Sanskrit and national languages on the value of learning. On happy occasions, the blessings recounted by the Buddha in the *Mahāmangalasutta* (Suttanipāta, II 4) will be appropriately underscored. In all cases, the preacher would delve into the enormous narrative literature in the form of the 547 stories of the *Jātaka* and the 400-odd stories of the *Dhammapada* Commentary, besides tales drawn from *Vimānavatthu*, *Petavatthu*, and *Apadāna* -- all books of the *Khuddakanikāya*. Particularly emphasized in these stories are the theory of karma and rebirth, the recurring impact of good and bad action on one's present and future lives, and the importance of accumulating merit (*pūñña*).

This intellectual function is further carried out in temple ceremonies. The *uposatha* day (full-moon, new moon and the two quarter moons) is the Buddhist equivalent of Sabbath. Of these, the full-moon is considered the most important and most people would observe the eight precepts (that is, three more than the regularly observed five precepts). These three which encourage the laity to emulate even for just a day the abstemious life of the monastery relates to abstaining (6) from solid food after noon until next morning, (7) from ornaments, perfumes, garlands and other adornments as well as music, dance, and entertainment and (8) from large and comfortable beds and seats. The third precept is transformed from "abstaining from sexual misconduct" to "abstaining from sexual activity".³ The day's program is structured around meditation, religious discourses and discussions (*dhammasākacchā*). *Dhammassavaya* and *Dhammasākacchā* (i.e. listening to and discussing Dhamma) are listed as blessings of the highest order in the *Mahāmangalasutta*.

The full-moon day of the month of May marks the triple events of the Buddha's life: birth, enlightenment and death. Sermons on this day would usually highlight the Buddha's exemplary life and mission. Each country has its special days. For instance, the full-moon day of June is the anniversary of the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka. It is a day when the sermons recall the history of Buddhism and the contributions made to it by great patrons like Asoka and national kings. Thailand celebrates *Makhabūjā* in February and the emphasis is on the Buddha and his immediate disciples. Thus with each occasion, the contents of sermons vary and the end-result is that an average Buddhist in South and Southeast Asia is quite knowledgeable on the life and career of the Buddha, the main teachings, and the history of Buddhism.

One's learning is further reinforced by the visual aids which each temple has developed in abundance. Walls and ceilings of shrines – usually image-houses – are covered with paintings on the life of the Buddha and Buddhist history. Sometimes, scenes are presented in sculpture and statuary in dioramas. In Myanmar is at least one theme park attached to a temple where bigger-than-life statues are used to depict scenes from the Buddha's life and the Jātakas. An enterprising artist in the second quarter of the twentieth century had his color paintings on Buddhist subjects lithographed in Germany and practically every Buddhist home in South and Southeast Asia had a few of them framed and displayed in their living rooms. Since then, more of such pictures have come into use in a variety of forms and their educational importance is substantial.

Equally important as regards the intellectual contribution of Buddhism is the prevalence of books. Buddhist societies have depended heavily on books. Every temple has a library and some are known for their wealth of ancient manuscripts. When literacy was less widespread, a practice among Buddhists was to get someone to read books to the community. Books in national languages were written specially for this purpose. It is significant that literacy rates of Buddhist societies in the region are high and each home has a few books not only in the national languages but also in Pali. Among them would be the Book of Protection (*Paritta*) used in frequent benedictory and protective chanting. Usually the text in Pali is followed by a translation into the relevant national language. The Pali Canon has been published in different scripts (i.e. Sinhala, Burmese, Thai and Cambodian) with translations. Books in national languages have been current and in use over centuries and some of the classics produced many centuries ago are still read. Scholarly treatises for the educated, and popularized pamphlets for the general readers are published in appreciable numbers and quantities. Thus the Buddhists have evolved themselves in the region to be both a society of oral transmission of knowledge, and a reading society.

Buddhism and the Social Function

The triple identity, which one acquires from childhood, as discussed above, namely through the monks, the temple, and worship and practices, entails belonging to a distinct social group. The concept or feeling of "us" and "the other" develops as one grows up in society, meeting the same people at functions, ceremonies and rites

whether at the temple or in a home and going through same practices using the same language and idiom. One acquires progressively those personal traits which enable the society to accept him or her as an “insider”: e.g. forms of address and conversation, (e.g. temple language), gestures and body language, customs and social graces, values and ethical behavior, and a body of common knowledge. The more deeply one imbues these traits, more readily is one accepted into the Buddhist society and more firmly is one’s social identity established.

To the individuals, such acceptance has many significant advantages. The sense of belonging fulfills a basic human need in guaranteeing security and easing tension. The African adage that “it takes a village to raise a child” becomes applicable in the Buddhist societies of South and Southeast Asia with the modification that “it takes the society as a whole to raise a Buddhist child.” Visible in the process is the minimizing of tensions caused by so many overwhelming choices. There is an acceptable way of life and conformity to it simplifies everything. Little chance or encouragement exists for drifting or unfocused experiments with alternative ways or styles of life.

The life in society is guided by a religious calendar and a set of socially enforced “dos” and “don’ts”. It has been baffling to researchers that the growth of urbanism along with the emphasis on modernity had not made too big a dent in traditional social demands on an individual. It is true that money market economy and technological sophistication have changed the collective cooperative involvement of social groups in agriculture. For example, I recall what happened in my father’s native village in South Sri Lanka over a mere half century. Men and women of the village worked together the entire tract of rice-fields, starting from the highest in elevation to the lowest. They took care of the fields of those who were temporarily prevented from work due to sickness or absence on travel. One could know whose field or fields the community was ploughing leveling, irrigating, transplanting or harvesting from only the host or hostess who provided the midday meal to the entire work-force. Such close social interaction is no longer evident and this observation applies to the entire region.

Yet Buddhist countries preserve a significantly high level of cohesion of social groups. One is governed by recognized social demands which can only be neglected at great personal peril. These include visiting and attending on the sick, presence at funerals and related ceremonies, participation in the preparatory stages of temple functions, festivals and ceremonies, and visiting the temple on special days to perform certain congregational rites. Monks usually identify the defaulters and take remedial action. In my youth, I have had to offer explanations to them for not being where my tacit obligations to society had wanted me to be. Their approach varied according to each situation and they resorted to folklore, proverbs and Buddhist narratives to illustrate the points they made.

Again in my personal experience, I was once chastised for not having found time to recite verses from a popular poem of consolation during the wake for a deceased friend. The monk narrated the story of a village chief who never attended anyone’s funeral. It seems that he sent his carved walking stick to represent him. Then he died and the time came for the family to take the body to the cremation ground.

There was none to go in the obligatory procession. But the entire compound of the house was full of walking sticks. "See what could happen to you?" was my monastic adviser's final line to a scared thirteen-year-old.

One is also taught that one has duties toward the less fortunate members of society. Involvement in charity, education, social services is encouraged from very young days. One has to serve others. Everyone has something to share with others. In my case it happened to be my skills in mathematics. I spent several hours each week helping those who needed help. Such are the norms which have made the monastics and the laity such active social workers in the region. The scope of their work has progressively expanded from schools and orphanages to direct action in preventing violence, conflict and environmental deterioration. The success of the Sarvodaya Movement of A.T. Ariyaratne in Sri Lanka is largely due to this traditional commitment to service.

Among the social "don'ts" in a Buddhist society is the one relating to embarrassing requests. A request for a loan or a service has to be made only after satisfying oneself that it could be granted by the related party without too much inconvenience. Similar norms exist on how the elderly and the women are treated. Very seldom is anyone called by name only. Even strangers are addressed as grandfather, grandmother, uncle, aunt, brother or sister according to age disparity. Women in general are called "mother" and treated with the utmost respect, especially in regard to physical contact.

The five precepts, which the laity are expected to observe right through life, condition one's social behavior. A Buddhist would avoid killing in every possible way even when his or her diet consists of fish, fowl and flesh. The incongruity of getting someone else (e.g. a non-Buddhist butcher) to kill for your food, however, is hardly considered with the seriousness that one would expect. The third precept relates to sex offences ranging from premarital sex to adultery. Southern Buddhism plays no role in the marriage ceremony. It remains purely a social lay affair even when blessings of monks are invoked in related ceremonies (e.g. almsgiving). Buddhist societies, however, uphold the institution of marriage. The duties and obligations, specified by the Buddha in the *Sigālovādāsutta*, and many Buddhist narratives on the consequences of sexual misconduct are often repeated in sermons. The same applies to the fifth precept pertaining to stupefying liquor and drugs. Social drinking has been non-existent until very recent times and even those who are addicted to alcohol would make a special effort not to drink in the presence of one's elders and children. The observance of five precepts is reinforced by the fear of social disapproval more than by concerns about life hereafter.

In return for conformity, the Buddhist society assures group support in stress and adversity and overall social well-being. In this respect, the social function of Southern Buddhism is directly related to its emotional function.

Buddhism and the Emotional Function

According to Roger Schmidt, religions have resources for creative expression and mediation of human emotions. He elaborates the emotional function of religions as:

- (i) providing a source of hope, equanimity, solace and courage;
- (ii) veering people away from gluttony and lust, violence, greed, and excessive pride;
- (iii) helping the recognition of personal worth, self-expression and self-acceptance;
- (iv) providing guidance and strength for achieving goals, and love and consolation for overcoming loneliness and despair; and
- (v) preventing helplessness and normlessness.

(Schmidt, 1988, p.12)

The teachings of the Buddha, as are current in South and Southeast Asia, boost a person's self-image. They enhance self-esteem, reliance on critical acumen and self-expression. To be born as a human being is acclaimed as the ideal form of rebirth. One is constantly reminded of one's fortune to be born in such a rare state of existence in which, alone, is self-transformation toward perfection possible. Also reminded is the Buddha's confidence in the intellect and critical thinking as eloquently expressed in *Kālāmasutta*⁴. As often repeated in sermons is the dictum that "one is one's own master or refuge" (*attā hi attano nātho*) and that one's deliverance or salvation from suffering had to be by one's own effort and not by the grace of any supernatural power or being. Exposed to such teachings, a person begins life with a positive emotional base of personal worth and self-acceptance.

These teachings also prepare him or her for inevitable misfortunes and reverses in life. One accepts them philosophically as the result of one's own action in this or any number of previous lives. Some frustration is, no doubt, unavoidable especially in one's youth as to why one should be punished without disclosing one's "offences or transgressions". Progressively, however, one recognizes the Buddhist emphasis on *Karma* not as a fatalistic, pre-determined, ineluctable destiny but as a process in which remedy is available through self-transformation. The Sangha and the society ensure by vigil and support that anyone in temporary difficulty is rescued from self-pity and destructive lapse into guilt and disappointment. Techniques of self-restraint, inherent in Buddhist ethics, contribute to emotional adjustment as described by Padmal de Silva. (HLJHB, Vol. I, pp. 169-182)

To many people, such purely intellectual and psychological assistance is inadequate; they seek the support of some superior power capable of listening and responding to their plea for help. Buddhism has had no difficulty in providing it. The Buddha accepted the cosmology prevalent in India during his times, with its many abodes of existence (gods, deities, spirits, hungry ghosts, demons, animals, and denizens of hells). The Buddha's advocacy on rationality, particularly in working towards one's escape from suffering, was unequivocal. That had to be on one's own effort and self-reliance. But he recognized that humans under pressure would seek help (Dp. 118). It is significant that the Buddha continually reminded his disciples and

devotees that the protection of gods and deities was assured by their good conduct and ethical purity (Cf. *Mettānisamsasutta*. See Guruge, 2000, pp. 101-102). As a result, Buddhist societies of the region do believe in a host of such supernatural beings and invoke them for protection; e.g. the most popular benediction: *Bhavatu sabbamangalam, rakkhantu sabbadevatā* (let there be all blessings and may all deities protect you).

In Sri Lanka, the local deities of pre-Buddhistic times continue to be propitiated either in their original form or as equated to Hindu gods. (e.g. *Utpalavaṇṇa* or *Upulvan* or the “God of the color of a Blue Water Lily” is equated to Viṣṇu and Mahāsena or the Great Warrior of Kataragama has acquired the trappings of Skandha). Similarly *Nats* in Myanmar and *Phis* in Thailand cater for the need for a superior being to look up to in times of anxiety. Hindu gods Brahma and Viṣṇu (Rāma) figure in Thailand and its eastern neighbors. Shrines for them exist alongside or within Buddhist complexes. Also included in the process are either pre-Buddhist cults or ceremonies (e.g. devil dancing and exorcism in Sri Lanka) based on sympathetic or contagious magic. Their efficacy in cases of hysteria, phobias and depression is quite baffling. Similarly, the Mahāyāna Bodhisatvas like Avalokiteśvara and Samantabhadra have become popular gods under the names Nātha and Saman. In popular Buddhism, thus, provision exists for people to find sources of help and solace whenever they are not prepared to rely purely on equanimity and courage which the strict observance of the Buddha’s admonitions generate.

The dual or multiple resources which a Buddhist society provides to ensure emotional adjustment are reinforced by the role which the monks and the lay elders play as informal “counselors”. Though the term as used in psychotherapy is hardly known and never used, a lot of counseling does take place in Buddhist societies of the region with remarkable effectiveness. The monks and the lay elders as well as “nuns” where they are well-established are approached for advice and intervention. The subjects could range from educational guidance to marriage counseling.

The basis for counseling is the Buddha’s emphasis on the mind as the forerunner of all action. The mind, in Buddhist psychology, is the base where emotions arise on account of contact with external stimuli. As the mind itself is one of the six senses, according to the Buddha, thoughts, fears, forebodings are included in this definition. The approach is to appeal to rational thinking – to see things as they really are (Cf. The Buddha’s stress on *yathābhūtañāna* – knowledge of things as they really are). I have seen the monks of my village and my father as a community elder spending hours talking collectively and individually to members of families having such problems as rebellious youth, unfaithful, drunk and abusive husbands, and wasteful wives. Whether they succeeded in solving the problems or not, these interventions and even their mere availability functioned as a source of guidance and reconciliation which contributed to social cohesiveness. One was never alone in times of despair. One could go to sympathetic listeners who generally went far beyond lending an ear. Each community thus has a body of trusted guardians of ethical values, subscribing to unity and interdependence. Reforming the wayward, the violent and the irresponsible is an on-going community effort in which monastics in particular play a major role.

The strength of the Buddhist societies of the region is further bolstered by the collective approach to personal and community disasters. As already discussed, sickness and death in a family become a matter of concern for the society as a whole. The emotional support to get over the feelings of loneliness, helplessness, fear and anxiety is significant. An orphaned child has a ready home and a widow finds solace and material support without the embarrassment of asking.

Temples play a significant role in handling grief of bereavement. The Buddha's rational, intellectual approach, demonstrated in the episode of Kisa Gotami and a mustard seed⁵, is further supplemented by ritual and the provision of support groups. In Thailand, for example, a funeral could be a prolonged event lasting several weeks, and months and, in special circumstances, years. During this period, monks perform ceremonies, meet and talk to relatives, and help them in coming to terms with the reality of death. The same, without the delayed disposal of the body, takes place elsewhere with the frequent counseling by monks. During the funeral itself, the community joins in the wake, chanting religious texts or reciting pathos-filled poems; all meals and refreshments to the household of the deceased and visitors are provided by neighbors; and elaborate arrangements are made for the funeral procession and the final ceremony (e.g. decorating the road; strewing white sand for the funeral procession, and organizing eulogies—oral and printed.). The monks conduct the ceremony with pomp and dignity. Regular visits to the family by monastics and neighbors continue for days. The community participation of such elaborate dimension is, in itself, an antidote to grief and despair. In special cases where bereavement is multiple or trauma-related, the support systems last for a longer time. I describe in my autobiographic poem my childhood memories of how the village as a whole helped a family, which lost both its children under tragic circumstances, to cope with grief. (Guruge, 1988)

A built-in intellectual approach in Buddhist societies of the region is to relate grief and anxiety to attachment (See Dp. 209-216)⁶. Repeatedly quoted and hence known by almost everybody is the definition of suffering in the first sermon: “Separation from the beloved is suffering and association with the unpleasant is suffering.”

The teachings of the Buddha, emphasized in the region, concentrate on the need to reduce, if not eliminate, all forms of attachment. The cause of suffering is *Taṇhā* or Craving. The first root of all evil thought and action is *Lobha* or Greed. The concept of greed and craving finds itself elaborated into a spectrum of related emotions for which the system of Buddhist ethics has specific terms: *Kāma* (sensual desire), *rāga* and *kāmacchanda* (lust), *abhijjhā* (covetousness), *upādāna* (grasping), etc. Each is analyzed with illustrative anecdotes and possible consequences.

From childhood, the message is dinned into the ears of Buddhists that *lobha* and all its concomitants are defilements of the mind and, hence, causes of evil. As the remedy is promoted the elimination of envy (*macchariya*) in the psychological plain and the practice of *dāna*, meaning charity, generosity or liberality, in the plain of action. Persons prone to lust and covetousness to the point of being potential violators

of decency and honesty are often approached by monastics and community elders for counseling. Prevention is better than punishment is the policy they would advocate.

Similarly dealt with are emotions relating to *dosa* (anger). The spectrum in this category includes *vyāpāda* (malice), *vera* (hatred), *paṭigha* (illwill), *krodha* (hostility). This is the second cause of evil thought and action and the root not only of violence and destructive behavior but also of jealousy (*issā*), deceit (*satha*, *sāthayya*), fraud (*vañcana*), quarrelsomeness (*kalaha*), rivalry (*sapatta*), etc. The third cause of evil is *moha* (delusion, ignorance, stupidity) and it is taught as the foundation of all emotional maladjustments reflected in evil thought, word and deed.

How each Buddhist society explains the root causes of evil or rather unskillful (*akusala*) action varies according to the doctrinal specialization of each country. In Myanmar and the neighboring Chittagong region of Bangladesh, where the study of Abhidhamma is the most prevalent, the people are better acquainted with the Buddhist psychological theories of *citta* (thought) and *cetasika* (mental factors or, literally, thought-characteristics), along with such finer points as wholesome and unwholesome thoughts with karmic resultants (*vipāka*) and those without (*kiriya*). The in-depth understanding of the complex teachings of Abhidhamma enables the people to delve deeper into how emotions arise and how they need to be adjusted to assure the well-being of society and individuals.

In Sri Lanka, the emphasis is on an intellectual approach to the study of the discourses of the Buddha. Doctrines are studied in depth with the word of the Buddha or *Buddhavacana* as the authority for his precept and practice. *Jātakas* (past lives of the Buddha) and *Nidānakathās* (introductions to suttas) provide illustration. As a result, the country provides the most extensive facilities for the study of Buddhism both formally and informally (e.g. dharma schools in temples, compulsory teaching of religion in all schools, Pirivenas or traditional monastic schools, Buddhist Universities, books, pamphlets and tracts, newspapers, and regular radio and television broadcasts). Southern Buddhist societies of India, Nepal and Vietnam adhere by and large to the Sri Lankan model.

In Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, rules of discipline (*Vinaya*) of the Sangha receive special attention. The tradition of temporary ordination encourages every young man to spend a few months as a monk in a monastery. This period in the Sangha is an intense period of training in discipline and Buddhist teachings which provides a life-long orientation. A society, where at least the males are fully conversant with the ethical, intellectual and emotional commitment of the Sangha and the inner working of the monastic system, has the requisite agents for change to be active at the grassroots level.

In spite of variations in approach, the thrust in the emotional function of Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia is in the cognitive and affective domains. The concept that all emotions – good, bad and indifferent – arise in the mind and are controlled by the mind confirms the mind to be where transformation has to take place. Mind can be pure (*pasanna*) or tainted (*paduttha*), as the opening verses of Dhammapada assert. Over a score of verses in this same anthology reiterate the

importance of taming the mind and in each instance the success in controlling one's mind is equated to wisdom (Cf. such terms as *dhīra*, *medhāvī*, *paññāta* used in many verses). The most widely known and quoted verse lists the quintessence of the teachings of all Buddhas:

Avoid all evil;
Do good;
Keep one's mind pure (Dp. 183)

The comprehensive system of Buddhist ethics in Southern Buddhism provides guidance on how to keep the mind pure. Sixteen or seventeen defilements of the mind are presented in oft-repeated texts in the Tripitaka: they are (i) covetousness, excessive greed; (ii) malice, ill-will, (iii) anger; (iv) hostility, hatred; (v) contempt, denigration; (vi) presumption, domineering; (vii) envy; (viii) jealousy, avarice, selfishness, (ix) deceit, hypocrisy, (x) fraud, (xi) obstinacy, (xii) impetuosity, quarrelsomeness, rivalry; (xiii) conceit; (xiv) haughtiness, superiority complex; (xv) vanity, pride; (xvi) negligence, heedlessness and (xvii - usually inserted between ii and iii) delusion, ignorance.

In much briefer enumerations are identified greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion or ignorance (*moha*) as the root-causes of evil and desire or partiality (*chanda*), enmity (*dosa*), fear (*bhaya*) and delusion (*moha*) as factors impelling one to do evil.

Further lists of mental impurities as Ten Fetters (*Samyojana*), Five Hindrances (*Nīvaraṇa*), Seven Proclivities (*Anusaya*), Four Influxes (*Āsava*) and Ten Defilements (*Kilesa*) spell out in detail the various psychological impediments to spiritual purification and final liberation. When the common items are counted once only, fifteen factors are identifiable in these lists: they are lust, malevolence, pride, unscrupulousness, immodesty, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, adherence to ritual and ceremonial observances, doubt or perplexity, craving for rebirth, craving for rebirth in worlds with form (*rūpa* = fine material), craving for rebirth in worlds without form (*arūpa* = immaterial), self-illusion (I-ness and my-ness), scepticism and ignorance.

Also presented in positive terms are the qualities of the mind to be developed. As seven treasures of a noble person are enumerated zeal or faith, virtuous conduct, modesty, conscience, learning, self-denial and wisdom. As five powers (*bala*) and controlling factors (*indriya*) appear faith, effort or energy, heedfulness or mindfulness, concentration of mind and wisdom. Again, in a list of seven factors conducive to enlightenment, (Pali: *Bojjhangas*; Skt: *Bodhyanga*) are given heedfulness or mindfulness, investigation of the dhamma, zeal, joy, tranquility of mind, concentration of mind and equanimity.

Thus the advice to keep the mind pure is expanded to mean not only the elimination of impurities but also the development of positive qualities. The training or taming of one's mind is considered the most difficult – and, hence, the most urgent and persistent task which an adherent to Buddhism is enjoined to undertake.

In the final analysis, Buddhism in practice is a process of gradual mental development. Avoiding evil and doing good are only preparatory and supportive steps leading towards this one principal effort. In the Buddha's most exhaustive analysis of mental development (i.e. *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*), the process of mental training is called the one and only path (*ekāyana-magga*) (Guruge, 1999, pp. 91-92). This discourse is about the most widely read and studied text in the region, especially by senior adults.

The reinforcement of emotional adjustment in a Buddhist society comes from the emphasis on wisdom for whose realization a process of mental transformation or development is advocated. In the most simplified form, the overarching worldview of Buddhism as regards its emotional function is as follows:

- I am what I am because of what I have been.
- What I will be is affected by what I am and what I do now.
- It is I who have to take the initiative to improve.
- To do so, the first step is to remove what causes the illusion of "This is mine. This is I. This is my self."
- My self-importance, arrogance, selfishness, and proneness to evil thought, word and deed arise from a mind tainted by greed, malice and delusion.
- Let me begin the purification of my mind through the process of triple training: Giving (*dāna* = generosity/liberality); Morally impeccable conduct (*sīla* = virtuous behavior), and Progressive development of the mind (*bhāvanā* = meditation).

Meditation

A Buddhist society engages in the triple training (*sikkhāttaya*) in diverse ways. Already discussed in earlier sections are acts of charity which extend from donations in money and kind to deep involvement in social services for community benefit. Merit-making for happiness here and hereafter takes a wide variety of forms. The ethical purity is attempted with a minimum goal of keeping the Five Precepts. Increasingly, people proceed to the ultimate and, by far the most important, stage which is meditation or, more precisely, the progressive development of the mind (*bhāvanā*).

Meditation is a gradual process of gaining mental refinement through mindfulness and concentration and using the refined mind to develop positive qualities. In Southern Buddhism, meditation begins in *pro forma* ritualistic worship (e.g. while offering flowers to meditate on death and impermanence). Four subjects of meditation are recommended especially to the laity:

- Contemplation on Loving kindness (*mettānussati*)
- Contemplation on the Buddha (*buddhānussati*)
- Contemplation on Death (*maraṇānussati*)
- Contemplation on Unwholesomeness/impurities of existence (*asubhānussati*)

More intensive meditation had been the domain of monastics and especially those who

had retired to secluded forest monasteries. But it is no more now.

A major change has taken place with the renaissance of Buddhism in the 1950s as a result of *Buddha Jayanti*, the celebration of the 2500th anniversary of the death of the Buddha in 1956. The hallmark of this revival is the increasing attention which meditation has received in Buddhist societies of the region. Meditation has become an organized lay activity with or without the involvement of monastics, and in and outside monasteries. Myanmar with the profound leadership of Venerable Ledi Sayadaw spearheaded the popularization of *Anāpānasati*. The lay devotee U Ba Khin set in motion a lay *Vipassanā* meditation movement, which has now assumed a global scale on account of the dedicated efforts of S.N. Goenka of India. Sri Lanka followed suite with the establishment of many meditation centers for the laity. Lay meditation masters have emerged as an influential group of mentors to guide seekers (See Bond, 2000). Thailand with its tradition of forest monasteries extended lay involvement rapidly and organizations like the Dharmakaya Foundation has the popularization of meditation as one of its major goals. Even war-torn Cambodia and Laos found in the promotion of meditation a means for the preservation of Buddhist institutions under difficult political conditions.

Meditation has emerged as the most visible activity of Buddhist societies of South and Southeast Asia. As meditation has to be founded on *Dāna* and *Sīla*, a veritable regeneration of Buddhism takes place in all fronts. The benefits are derived not only by individuals but by societies as a whole.

Conclusion

This survey of Buddhist societies of South and Southeast Asia is meant to be a case study on how Buddhism has been developed over centuries, and especially more recently, to serve the changing needs of society. To meet ever-renewing challenges, Buddhism has remained flexible, accommodating new ideas and practices. The greatest asset of Buddhism has been the built-in resilience of the teachings of the Buddha who had no place for dogma, bigotry or fanaticism in the life he advocated for all. Altruism has been the cornerstone of Buddhist practice whether one took to a missionary career or served humanity in need and distress. Early Buddhism established a balance between the pursuit of one's own deliverance from suffering and one's commitment to serve all sentient beings.

What has evolved in the region has been described by Master Tai Xu as “**humanistic Buddhism**” several decades ago. He wrote:

People generally consider Buddhism of China, Tibet and Japan as Mahāyāna Buddhism whereas Buddhism in Burma [Myanmar], Thailand and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) are considered to be Theravāda Buddhism. However, I obtained a different idea after my trip to these countries... Mahāyāna Buddhism in words and Theravāda Buddhism in deeds are universal in China... The Buddhism propagated in Ceylon, Burma and Thailand is based on Theravāda theory. However, the Buddhists there have been able to universalize Buddhism in their countries. The peoples in these countries are converted to Buddhism and

follow the teachings of the Buddha. Thus Buddhism there has become the people's religion... They have made great efforts to study the doctrines and observe the precepts. That is why many Buddhists, not only Buddhists from Burma and Thailand, but also scholars doing research on the Theravāda Buddhism in the Pali language all over the world have come to study the Buddhism in Ceylon. Buddhists in Ceylon are widely engaged in many causes, such as social welfare, culture, education, and so forth, thus giving benefits to the state, society and even the broad masses in the world. This marks a great spirit of compassionate love in Buddhism. Though Buddhism in Ceylon is generally considered to be Theravāda Buddhism, it is indeed the practice of Mahāyāna Buddhism. (Tai Xu Dasgi Quanshu, Vol. 56, pp. 26-30)

A growing band of scholars like Thich Nhat Hanh, Jack Kornfield, Joanna Macy and George Bond have coined the term "**Socially Engaged Buddhism**" to accentuate the social involvement of the Buddhist monastics and laity. Buddhism in the service of society to overcome problems of modern life has impressed both ethnic Buddhists and Western adherents/friends/admirers of Buddhism who seek real-world applications of compassion and wisdom. The more the transformation of Buddhism as an intense social movement is highlighted, the more is one convinced that Buddhist societies of the region have succeeded in reinforcing the concept and the practice of Humanistic Buddhism as eloquently interpreted by Grand Master Hsing Yun as **Buddhism in the service of humanity here and now**. What has happened and is happening in Buddhist societies of South and Southeast Asia is indicative of the wide-ranging benefits that would accrue to humanity as commitment to the concept and practice of Humanistic Buddhism becomes universal.

Notes

¹ A similar tendency is observed among Western Buddhists who are impressed by the clinical rigor of Early Buddhism and are perplexed by the cosmology connected with Buddhism in practice. This is a subject to be elaborated elsewhere in a study of Buddhism in practice vis-à-vis "rational" Buddhism.

² As regards possible future developments in the Sangha, Cf. Gombrich, 1988, p. 210: "The traditional Sinhalese system of 'village-dwelling' monks had its defects and dangers for the 'purity' of the Sangha. But it served to bring Buddhist values to village homes. Now that the village community is in irreversible decline, the traditional village incumbent may continue to provide some services as a ritual specialist or a rather amateurish social welfare worker, but he can no longer function as an effective focus of religious life or even, unless he is an exceptional individual, as a symbol of the highest values and spiritual goals. To hold its best-educated young members, the Sangha will have to offer them more interesting careers... The Sangha, as some of them realize, will have to learn the use of the mass media so that they can operate on a national rather than a local basis; at the same time, they may have to increase their effective presence in the towns, especially in the slums... Much will depend on whether monks of calibre will come forward to use new means of communications. But even if the Sangha recruits religious virtuosi who are also gifted communicators, and even if Sinhalese society somehow survives the tensions created by population

pressures, lay religiosity is here to say. The Sangha, being Buddhist, will never become ayatollahs, and the homogeneous Buddhist world of ancient Ceylon will never be recovered.” One may recall similar observations made 150 years or so ago and how they were belied by the regeneration of the Sangha in the nineteenth century. (Guruge, 1965/91 p. xxix and 1984 p. lxxxii)

³ *Kāmesu micchācārā veramapi*⁴ of Five Precepts is replaced by “*Abrahmacariyā veramapi*”.

⁴ Do not accept anything on mere hearsay or tradition, on account of rumors or because it accords with your scriptures, by mere supposition or inference, by merely considering the reasons or because it agrees with your preconceived notions and, therefore, seems acceptable or because the preacher is a respected person. (*Kālāmasutta – Anguttaranikāya* III, 65)

⁵ Kisa Gotami brought the body of her dead son to the Buddha requesting that he be brought back to life. The Buddha sent her in search of a mustard seed from a house that had not known death. She returned to the Buddha after a whole day’s search, empty-handed but fully convinced of the universality of death.

⁶ Cf. *Ganthā tesam na vijjanti yesam natthi piyāpiyam* (no bonds exist for those to whom nothing is dear or not dear); *Piyato/Pemato/Ratiyā/Kāmato/Taṇhāya jāyatī soko, Piyato/Pemato/Ratiyā/Kāmato/Taṇhāya jāyatī bhayam*, (Sorrow and fear arise from endearment/affection/attachment/lust/craving)

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When Shakyamuni Buddha became enlightened, he saw that the entire phenomenal universe functions in accord with the truth of dependent origination. When he decided to teach others what he had seen, the Buddha realized that if he explained dependent origination directly to them, it would be difficult for them to understand, and it might even cause them to become afraid. For this reason, in his first teachings, the Buddha taught the four Noble Truths instead of the truth of dependent origination. This first period of the Buddha's teachings is called the "First Turning of the Dharma Wheel."

The Four Noble Truths are not different from the truth of dependent origination and they certainly do not contradict it. The Four Noble Truths simply turn the focus of dependent origination directly onto human life. For this reason, they seem more relevant to human beings and easier to understand.

-Lotus In A Stream, by Hsing Yun, p.28