

## THE ISSUE OF EXCLUSIVISM AND PAROCHIALISM IN BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*Inclusivism and broad-mindedness are basic principles of the Buddhist teachings. Nevertheless, one can witness nationality, ethnicity and culturalism often supersede Buddhist identity among many adherents of Buddhism. Many Buddhists are over-attached to own nationality or cultural values that give rise to exclusivism and parochialism. This is more observable among Asian Buddhists. As one of the phenomena we often find in the West is Asian Buddhists have their centres for their own nationality or ethnic group. In these centres, cultural aspects predominate than the practice of the Dhamma. Hence, these centres often isolate themselves from the local community and people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.*

*Another aspect of parochialism is the reluctance to engage in dialogue with either world major religious traditions or among different Buddhist sects. For instance, bilateral discussion between followers of Theravāda Buddhists and Mahāyāna is not very rare. This leads to many misunderstanding among the followers of the two traditions. The reluctance arises from the inability to see things from a wider viewpoint. This results in a lack of mutual co-operation between the two Buddhist traditions. Another aspect of parochialism is blindly following teachers and accepting everything a particular teacher says to be true and absolute. And building a community within the followers of that particular teacher and being isolated from others. The question is, does the exclusivism*

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*and parochialism of Buddhist community lead to sustainable Buddhist societies in the 21st century or lead to unsustainability? If it is the latter, what are the obstacles and what could be the solution? This paper discusses the issue of exclusivism and parochialism and some underlying causes which lead to exclusivism and parochialism.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When I visit non-traditional Buddhist countries, in particular in the West, I am struck by the observation that most of the Buddhist monasteries in the Western countries almost exclusively centres of Asian migrants. For instance, Sri Lankan Buddhist monasteries in the West, only Sri Lankan Buddhist devotees are present. Similar situation for the Thai and Chinese monasteries also. There is a conspicuous absence of local community people.

For Buddhism to continue to survive and to be able to have a greater impact in the world, it must reach out to a greater majority of the people. Buddhism will not sustain merely on its great ideals and lofty philosophical and psychological embodiment, but will depend on the followers who take refuge in the Triple Gems and are committed to Buddhism. Apparently, it looks like Buddhism is progressing very well in the West, as many Buddhist monasteries are built. However, a careful observation would reveal that these outer emblems are not indications of establishment of Buddhism in the West. The absence of the local community indicates that the *Dhamma* is not appealing to the local community. This may be our failure to translate the spirit of the *Dhamma* and over-emphasis on the cultural aspects of Buddhism rather than the spirit of Buddhism. We have to investigate the underlying causes for these problems and find a way to resolve this, otherwise the hope of Buddhism outside the traditional countries will be doomed. Not only in non-traditional Buddhist countries, as Bhikkhu Bodhi in his article “Sangha at the Crossroads” points out that Buddhism will face a lot challenges to survive in traditional Buddhist countries.<sup>(1)</sup> My stay over nine years in a traditional Buddhist country like Sri Lanka, and over eight years with Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition in Hong Kong, I observe that there are a lot

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1. Bhikkhu Bodhi (2002) 66.

of misconceptions and among the followers of the two major Buddhist traditions. Therefore, there is an absence of mutual co-operation and between the major Buddhist traditions - the Mahāyāna tradition and the Theravāda tradition.

## 2. EXCLUSIVISM

Exclusivism in the religious context is a form of religious fundamentalism. It is a rigid attitude that what one believes is the absolute truth. In Buddhist discourses, this is defined as “this only true, all else are false” (*idaṃ eva saccaṃ moghaṃ aññaṃ*)<sup>(2)</sup> or “over attached to one’s view” (*idaṃ saccābhinivesa*).<sup>(3)</sup> In this article, the term is used to refer to the traditional Buddhist rigid attitude towards the Buddhist rituals and the socio-cultural aspects and the non-accommodative view of new socio-cultural values.

I think, the major problem that traditional Buddhists face is to distinguish the spirit of the *Dhamma* from the cultural and the ritualistic dimensions which have grown over a long time in the traditional Buddhist countries. Although the spirit of the *Dhamma* resonates with the modern world and is relevant to all human beings irrespective of social, cultural and psychological differences in different geographical locations, but traditional Buddhism envisaged by Asian Buddhist traditions may clash with modern cultures and values in the West. Modern Western people, who are of different cultural and social and educational backgrounds may not feel the relevance of cultural and ritual dimensions of traditional Buddhism.

The spirit of Buddhism is essentially a liberation from both physical and psychological sufferings. Subserving to it, Buddhism aims to establishing a moral society, where everyone is genuinely kind and loving to each other; freely generous and concern wellbeing and happiness of each other. Finally, where distinction between wellbeing of oneself and wellbeing others does not exist. However, these ideals cannot be presented in abstract manner. Rather Buddhism had to use fables, similes, cultural and social aspects people in the environment were familiar with.

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2. MN I 498.

3. *ibid.*

In the course of time, many different forms Buddhist rituals and ceremonies developed assimilating local cultural and psychological values with Buddhism. These were used as expedient devices to make the *Dhamma* understandable to the people. These similes, fables, rituals and cultural aspects of Buddhism do not have universal values which means they are applicable to everyone and everywhere. But, the *Dhamma* is universal and transcending time and space (*akālika*). The essential spirit of the *Dhamma* is effective and applicable to everyone irrespective of geographical locations and time differences. Therefore, we should be able to distinguish between essential spirit of the *Dhamma* from the external devices used in the Buddhist traditions to translate spirit of the *Dhamma* to the people. In other words, we have to change methodology of translating the spirit of the *Dhamma* to the audience of space and time. We have to understand that the young generations in the West are of social and cultural backgrounds, and have different psychological attitude. Therefore, cultural and ritualistic aspects of Buddhism which were developed in the East a long time ago will not appeal them. They will not feel *Dhamma* relevant to their lives. They have different psychological needs. If we choose to neglect their needs, and continue with same old methodology and take those traditional methodologies and cultural aspects as truth per se then the future of Buddhism is not very bright. For any religion to sustain, it should adapt to change in the new environment and time.

Buddhist discourses contain this accommodative attitude. For instance in the Sanskrit Buddhist literature, there is the list of the fourfold reliances (*catvāri pratiśaranāni*):

- i. Reliance on the spirit, not reliance on words (*artha-pratiśaraṇatā na vyañjana-pratiśaraṇatā*).
- ii. Reliance on the knowledge, not reliance on cognition (*jñāna-pratiśaraṇatā na vijñāna-pratiśaraṇatā*).
- iii. Reliance on the discourse whose meanings are explicit, not reliance on the discourses whose meanings are to be drawn out (*nīta-artha-pratiśaraṇatā na neya-artha-pratiśaraṇatā*).
- iv. Reliance on the *Dharma*, not reliance on the individuals

(*dharma-pratiśaraṇatā na pudgala-pratiśaraṇatā*).<sup>(4)</sup>

These fourfold reliances can serve as a remedy to the problems of exclusivism and Parochialism. Among the four, the first and last are extremely relevant to our present discussion. The first reliance, literary means reliance on the meaning (*artha*), not letter (*na vyañjana*). The term *artha* can include spirit. So the first reliance reminds us that we should rely on the spirit of the *Dhamma*, not the letters. This implies that we cannot blindly attach to the words literary as the absolute teachings of the Buddha even if they appear in the Buddhist discourses. We have to understand the spirit the discourses convey. Here, letters or words include fables, similes and other devices employed in the Buddhist teaching methodology. These stories, similes and fables or the words used to explain the *Dhamma* cannot be taken as absolute truth per se. They are like the fingers pointing at the moon. The moon signifies the spirit. If one pays too much attention to these, he may not find the essence of the *Dhamma*. The last factor reminds us that we have to rely on the *Dhamma*, not the persons (teachers). Although term 'pudgala' means an individual' in this context it has wider implication. It can include teachers, texts or even traditions. It means we should not rely merely on the traditions or the cultures or even the texts, rather we should examine these with the spirit of *Dhamma*. This implies we can change the devices as long as we can translate the spirit of the *Dhamma*.

A careful survey of the history of Buddhism would point out that throughout the history this accommodative attitude is maintained. Buddhism, which was originally founded in India, is embodied in many Indian socio-cultural and religious dimensions. When it travelled to foreign countries, it did not carry these dimensions. For instance, when Buddhism travelled to China, it absorbed and assimilated many Chinese socio-cultural and religious dimensions to make *Dhamma* relevant and understandable to local people without losing the spirit of the *Dhamma*. Similarly when Buddhism was introduced to Tibet, it assimilated with many Tibetan socio-cultural and religious dimensions. Wherever Buddhism was

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4. These four reliance are recorded in Mahāyāna sūtra-s such as the *Akshayamati sūtra*.. Cited in Dhammajoti (2015) 40-41.

introduced, it assimilated with THE local culture and social aspects without losing the essential spirit of the *Dhamma*. Therefore, today we have different forms of Buddhism, such as Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism and Sri Lankan Buddhism. In other words to whichever country Buddhism was introduced, Buddhism has never rejected her cultural diversity to create a monoculture. Professor Karunadasa correctly remarks: “...*Buddhism promotes cultural pluralism, therefore Buddhism does not become a culture-bound religion. What this means is that just as a bird fly from place to place leaving behind its cage, even so Buddhism can fly from one place to another, say from Hong to America, leaving behind its cultural baggage*”.<sup>(5)</sup>

Buddhism is a very open-minded and inclusive religion. Buddhism does not even interfere in personal ways of living by imposing many restrictions insofar as one's personal living does not harm himself and does not harm others. Therefore, it does not prescribe dress and foods, marriage system etc. Because early Buddhists understood the cultural and social etiquettes change from location to location and time to time.

When introducing Buddhism to the Western world, we should properly understand cultural, social values and psychological needs of the people there. We have to present the *Dhamma* in the manner they feel the relevance of the *Dhamma*. We should adopt their social and cultural values without losing the original spirit of the *Dhamma*. The socio-cultural and psychological backgrounds of the people in the Western world are very different from the Eastern traditional Buddhists. We have to translate the spirit of the *Dhamma* in new ways that appeal to audience of different time and space. It is not just case of the audience in the West, but even *Dhamma* will not be appealing to modern generations of the Asian traditional Buddhists. We must acknowledge that with the passage of time and the change of socio-economic conditions, psychological needs of people also change. If we do not address these issues, young generation will feel the conflict between modern culture and Buddhism. Then the young generation would abandon or not pay any hit to the *Dhamma*,

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5. Karunadasa (2013) 162-63).

considering Buddhism as outdated, whose relevance is not felt in real life. This would not help the sustainability of the *Dhamma*.

Here, we have to remember that Buddhist rituals, cultural strands are only outer forms of Buddhism. If we attach to them as absolute truth and unamendable, this is not just demeritable for the propagation and survivability of the *Dhamma*, but also is an obstacle to realization of the liberation. For instance, in innumerable passages in the early Buddhist discourses, mention that one has to cut off three fetters (*saṃyojanāni*) to attain the stage of stream-entry which is considered as the first stage towards the attainment of *arahantship*. One of the three factors, is irrational attachment to rituals and vows (*silabbataparāmāsa*).<sup>(6)</sup> Some scholars argue that Buddhism originally rejects all forms of rituals and ceremonies. A careful reading of the early discourses preserved in the Pāli *Nikāya-s* shows that such arguments have no strong footing. Rather, we find Buddhism has always been accommodative of several rituals and ceremonies insofar as they are subservient to the essential goal of Buddhism. The term '*silabbataparāmāsa*' implies irrational attachments to rituals and cultural dimensions of Buddhism as absolute truth per se. In other words, infatuation with the rituals and cultural dimensions of Buddhism. It is a rigid attitude to the rituals and ceremonies. Rituals and ceremonies are accepted and are used in Buddhism as devices to translate the spirit of the *Dhamma*. The doctrine of dependent co-arising shows that any attachment leads to clinging (*taṅhā-paccayā upādānaṃ*). The clinging is classified as fourfold, viz. clinging to sensual pleasure (*kāmūpādāna*), clinging to rituals and ceremonies (*silabbatūpādāna*), clinging to views (*diṭṭhūpādāna*) and clinging to self-theory (*attavādūpādāna*).<sup>(7)</sup> Thus attachment to outer forms is not even helpful to realize essence of the *Dhamma*.

### 3. PAROCHIALISM

Parochialism is means "a narrow outlook, especially focused on a local area; narrow-mindedness." In this article, the term is used to refer to narrow-mindedness of Buddhist traditions towards one

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6. These three known as fetters (*saṃyojanāni*) may appear innumerable times in Pāli literature.

7. MN I 261.

another. In particular, narrow-mindedness of the Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions. It is truism that in order to flourish and to have greater impact in the world, mutual cooperation, respect and appreciation between the two traditions are necessary. Although apparently, it looks like the two traditions have good cooperation, but my stay in stronghold Theravāda Buddhist country like Sri Lanka, and with Mahāyāna tradition in Hong Kong, and my visits to Thailand, Taiwan, China, Vietnam, etc. I feel still there is lack of genuine appreciation and respect for each other. We have many superficial misunderstandings about each other. While still large number of Theravāda Buddhist monastics hold high esteem about their own tradition so-called 'pristine pure Buddhism' or 'original Buddhism' very often they have the parochialistic attitude towards Mahāyāna Buddhism. Although these are not openly discussed, the view that Mahāyāna Buddhism is not genuine or true Buddhism prevails in them. Few years back during a conversation with a Theravāda Buddhist scholar, I was struck to hear his definition of Mahāyāna Buddhism as 'distorted Buddhism'. When questioned about such assertion, he kept repeating minor cultural and ritualistic differences between the Theravāda tradition and the Mahāyāna tradition. This is not the view of one particular person, but many Theravāda monastics and non-monastics hold similar views. Theravāda Buddhist followers try to understand Mahāyāna Buddhism through their own lens, and they perceive only the shell, the outer forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, such as food, dressing, rituals and other cultural dimensions of Mahāyāna Buddhism. They see these rituals and cultural aspects are different from what they believe to be Buddhism. They are totally ignorant of inner vitality and spirit of Mahāyāna Buddhism as they are not aware of the socio-religious aspects of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

On the other hand, many Mahāyāna followers have gross misunderstanding about Theravāda Buddhism. They are of the view that Theravāda Buddhism is self-centric. It is not concerned about the welfare and liberation of others. They often define Theravāda Buddhism as 'inferior vehicle' (*Hīnayāna*). This is again because Mahāyāna Buddhist followers fail to comprehend the spirit

Theravāda Buddhism as well as its historical and social contexts. Such views are results blindly accepting words in few relatively Mahāyāna discourses without understanding their proper historical contexts. This is gross misunderstanding of Theravāda Buddhism. The essence of all forms of Buddhism is to transcend self-interest or self-centeredness. How can there be self-centric Buddhism?

Even if Mahāyāna followers read earliest Mahāyāna literatures, they would clearly show that early Mahāyānists had no prejudice against the traditional monastics *Śaṅgha*. Rather, they had great respect and admiration for the traditional (*Theravāda*) *Śaṅgha*. For instance, A.K Warder argued that Mahāyāna Buddhism started within the monastic *śaṅgha*, who were greatly inspired by spiritual spirit and previous life stories of the historical Buddha Gotama as recorded in the Pāli sources.<sup>(8)</sup> Edward Conze and Jan Nattier have pointed out that early *Mahāyānists* were very respectful towards the traditional monastic *śaṅgha*. The monastic *śaṅgha* was never condemned. The *Aṣṭasāhasrarika-prajñāpāmitā* described monastic *arahant-s* as: “outflows dried up, undefiled, fully controlled, quite freed in their hearts, well-freed, wise, thorough bred, great serpents, their work done, their task accomplished, their burden laid down, their own weal accomplished, with the fetters that are bound them to becoming extinguished, their hearts well freed by right understanding, in perfect control of their whole mind, etc.”<sup>(9)</sup>

In the *Ugraparipṛcchā*, another important Mahāyāna *sūtra*, monastic life is highly appreciated. The lay *bodhisattva-s* are advised to respect, not only monastic *arahant-s*, but even an ordinary monastic *śaṅgha* member. Lay-*bodhisattva-s* are even urged to leave household life as soon as possible. Thus, it is safe to conclude that the Mahāyāna started as a spiritual movement with the members of monastic *śaṅgha* and spiritual lay community who were greatly inspired by life stories of the Buddha Gotama and his *Bodhisattva* career. If the followers of Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism carefully investigate thus, they will discover that both traditions are similar in terms of essential teachings of Buddhism. In other words, all forms of

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8. Warder A.K. (2004) 338.

9. Conze Edward (1975) 1.

Buddhism is the emanation from the early Buddhist teachings. So they are similar in terms of the essence of Buddhism. For instance

i. Both traditions commonly accept that the ultimate soteriological goal of Buddhist practice is to completely transcend all unsatisfactoriness and realize Nibbāna.

ii. Both traditions commonly hold that the fundamental teaching of early Buddhism is.

a. Four Noble Truths (*caturāriya saccāni*).

b. Eight-fold Noble paths (*ariya aṭṭaṅgika maggā*)

c. Conditioned co-origination (*paṭiccasamudpāda*)

d. Teaching of *karma*, all moral and immoral intentional actions produce consequence karmic retributions.

e. Three common characteristics of conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhata dhamma*), transitory nature (*aniccā*), nature of unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and devoid of permanent soul (*anattā*).

iii. Regarding the monastic code of disciple (*vinaya*), Mahāyānists have not developed their own version. They follow the *vinaya piṭaka* of the Dharmaguptaka, which was a sub-sect of the Sthaviravāda (*Theravāda*). So the monastic codes of disciple (*vinaya*) of the two sects are very similar, while Theravāda *vinaya piṭaka* contains 227 rules, the Mahāyāna has 250 rules, the difference is only in the number of *sekhiya*. Apart from 250, Mahāyānist introduced some disciplinary codes, such as 10 *bodhisattva* vows, mandatory vegetarianism. According to travel the diary of Chinese traveler I Ching (635-713), there was no significant difference in the lifestyle of Theravāda and Mahāyāna monks of that time. He records that the adherent of Mahāyāna and Hināyāna practice the same *vinaya*, recognize the same five categories of faults, are attached to same four Noble Truths. Those who worship the *bodhisattva*-s and read Mahāyāna *sūtra*-s are known as *Mahāyānists*, those do not are *Hināyānists*.<sup>(10)</sup>

Though there are some differences between the two traditions,

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10. Conze Edward and Waley Arthur (2007) 122.

yet we have much more commonness. Both traditions share the fundamental teachings of the Buddha. The different doctrinal interpretations do not necessarily imply that they have deviated from the original *Dhamma*. Rather, these should be understood the essence of *Dhamma* can be presented in many different ways. Many different ways of presenting the *Dhamma* is promotes in early Buddhist discourses. For example, the *Bahuvedanīya sutta* of *Majjhimanikāya* records many different ways of analyzing feelings.<sup>(11)</sup> In the essence of the *Dhamma* is not descriptions, in the *Alagaddūpama sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*, the descriptions of the *Dhamma* is compared to a raft (*kullūpama*), the teachings is not for grasping (*gahaṇatthāya*), but realizing the essence of *Dhamma* (*nittharaṇatthāya*).<sup>(12)</sup> Therefore, as long as the spirit of Buddhism is concerned, both traditions are united. The differences are only in its descriptions. It is unfortunate that there is so much misunderstanding between the followers of the two major traditions of Buddhism. This misunderstanding leads to parochialism and exclusivism. If this misunderstanding are clear up and build a good understanding and cooperation, Buddhism may not be able to play a significant role in the modern world.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The issue of exclusivism and parochialism arises because of the lack of education and communication. Buddhist monastic education system is outdated and the education curriculum does not properly train monastics member to translate the spirit of the *Dhamma* and the accommodative strands of the *Dhamma*. Rather too much focus on the outer forms of Buddhism is emphasized. Bhikkhu Bodhi rightly comments:

If one compares the system of instruction in the Buddhist monasteries with the curriculum of the Christian seminaries, the disparity is striking. In the seminaries, the future priests and nuns are trained, not only in Latin, theology and scripture but also in all the fields of modern knowledge they will need to play a leading role in the today's world, including the critical and comparative

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11. MN I 396; SN IV 424.

12. MN I 130.

study of religion. In the *pirivenas* or Buddhist monastic schools, so far as I can see, the young monks (never nuns) are trained to become village priests capable of preserving religious culture not very different from that of the sixteenth century.<sup>(13)</sup>

In order to resolve the issue of exclusivism and parochialism, we need to change the curriculum of monastic education system. It should include subjects as such as philosophy, psychology, comparative religion, history, literature and modern languages etc. It should give emphasis on the study of the early Buddhist discourses in proper contexts and historical and doctrinal development of different Buddhist traditions. Apart from educational curriculum more dialogue among the followers of Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism, such as through conferences on the historical and doctrinal development of the two traditions, can help to resolve this issue. If these issues are not resolved, they would pose a threat to the sustainability of the *Dhamma* in future.

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13. Bhikkhu Bodhi (2002) 78.

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