

(De)ethnicizing Buddhism for a Globalized World Order

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Abstract

Some years ago, Buddhism was growing and attracting many people across the world for the philosophy it had to offer. But such interest has been tarnished by the protracted ethnonational violence seen in many prominent Buddhist states. This short paper argues that Buddhist societies have fallen victim of the global trend of consumption and ownership. Such attachments are primarily expressed in Buddhist nationalism and ethnic protectionism. Paper urges for a transethnic identity amongst Buddhists that would enable Buddhism as an alternative worldview and working model for some of the urgent global issues beyond a given national or ethnic boundary.

Introduction

THE Social and Political dimension of modern Buddhism has come under renewed attention and serious discussion (Brekke 2013, Harris 2007, Hershock 2006, Juergensmeyer and Jerryson 2010, Jerryson 2010, Wijeyeratne 2013). Such discussions are a common concern among both Buddhists and non-Buddhists who are either living close to Buddhists or have an interest in Buddhism and its communities. There are at least two key themes surfacing from this new literature. Firstly, it questions the reasons for the paradoxical violent conflicts generated or supported by Buddhist activists and how they can be addressed. Secondly, it asks if Buddhism is interested in and able to answer some of the urgent global questions such as religious violence, democratic stability and economic and human rights for all? In short, can Buddhism be the answer, at least in part, to the many fundamental challenges faced by modern humanity?

While theoretically and textually—irrespective of Nikāya differences—scholars agree that the Buddha and his teachings are universal, and provide answers for present and future lives, however, on a closer look

at the present majority Buddhist societies, that belief is challenged by the empirical evidence. The above—mostly Western—scholars raise questions about the simple reason for direct violence, corruption, lack of democracy and breakdown of moral/ethical structure seen in some Buddhist societies. This is not to say that Buddhism as a belief and practice has not produced any positive impact on individual societies or on humanity in general. In contrast, they inquire how it is possible that even Buddhism, a philosophy founded on the idea of *Ahimsā*, has become the reason for some of the most violent conflicts we have witnessed in Asia? Is Buddhism failing to be a universal force for non-violence, justice and fairness?

Indian scholar Uma Chakravarti asked a similar question in 2005. She argued that Gautama Siddhartha was born at a time and in a context of much anxiety and hopelessness, with more questions than answers. We are told that ontological insecurity that prevailed in the Indian world in the 5th century BC produced a similar transformation in life with rapid speed. Proponents of the 'Axial Age' thesis have argued that at times of such deep anxieties, society produce their own meaning out of the intrinsically interwoven complexities (Voegelin 2001). It is then possible that Buddhism was preached by Buddha during a similar time to provide hope and answers. If Buddhism is to be relevant as a hopeful philosophy, the practitioner of such faith needs to be able to first struggle to find answers and then apply those solutions to the society at large.

I will take a few global themes to expand on this.

Economic Disparity

World Bank reports suggest that 70% of the world population shares only 3% of the gross global wealth and an estimated 10% of the world owns some 83% of the wealth. Agriculturalists and economists have repeatedly shown that the problem of the world is not having enough but simply not sharing enough. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, nearly 20 million people die annually due to hunger-related diseases; of these 11 million are children below 12 years of age. Even in the 21st century, when we have the knowledge to land on Mars, our sense of common humanity does not burden us enough to prevent this. Current global and Asian economic philosophy seems to be anchored on maximizing profit through efficient productivity with minimum cost. This is to satisfy a section of the world which demands maximum consumption of everything from crude oil to fresh water at the cost of the basic needs of a majority. In this process maximum consumption is

promoted as a way of life, human labour is bargained for at minimal cost, and a global completion across borders is promoted as free trade, market adjustment or economic liberation. By contrast Buddha's teaching on work and labour is not focused on consumption, but is, as Schumacher argued:

First, to provide necessary and useful goods and services. Second, to enable every one of us to use and thereby perfect our gifts like good stewards. Third, to do so in service to, and in cooperation with, others, so as to liberate ourselves from our inborn egocentricity. (1979:3)

Such an understanding of the world and struggle to provide an answer concordant with the Buddhist worldview have seen movements such as the International Network of Engaged Buddhists led by Thai Buddhist activist Sulak Sivaraksa. David R Loy, teaching at Bunkyo University, for a long time argued for such an alternative vision and showed how Buddhism waits to be deployed in that way. Western scholars have agreed that the success of Japan immediately after WW II was largely contributed by companies whose practices were based on Buddhist traditions. Researchers such as Shunji Hosaka and Yukimasa Nagayasu have shown that Japanese companies that produce over 100 world brands were successful because they practised principles based on Buddhist ethics on customer satisfaction, waste management and employee relationships.

But it is evident that instead of providing alternatives, Buddhist societies and popular Buddhist practices within them have embraced the consumerist lifestyle without question. Today Japan and China, two great civilizations, are not known for any Buddhist virtues but for consumption and extreme productivity.

Conflict Resolution

Experts in conflict resolution and peace building show that the world has moved from inter-state conflicts to intra-state conflicts. From 1950 to 2010 more people were killed by internal conflicts between states and non-state actors within them on the basis of ideology, ethnicity, language or religion. These intra-state conflicts, which often destroy centuries old bonds between cultures and communities are seen in every continent. Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Syria and Sri Lanka are sad examples. Such negative trends have not spared the states where Buddhism is the majority religion.

Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and the region of Tibet have been drawn into protracted conflicts of varying degrees. These ‘forgotten wars’ and the suffering of those caught up in them do not figure in the world headlines as there is no super power directly involved. The challenging question to ask is how it is possible that Buddhist societies with centuries old Buddhist philosophy and practices embedded in their cultural consciousness can pursue wars and, even worse, justify the idea that they do this to protect ‘Buddhism’? If so, what are the key differences that Buddhism offers to the world in comparison with the ‘Just war’, ‘Holy war’ or *Dharma Yuddha*? In the direct teaching of the Buddha one cannot find any justification for war. His responses to war situations are recorded in at least three incidents. 1) His Sakyan ethnic community declared war against the Koliyans over the waters of the river Rohini (Jayatilleke 1983). At this point the Buddha explained the importance of human life and dignity and the need to negotiate and avoid this war. 2) King Vidūḍabha’s attempt to revenge the Sakyans for an alleged cheat of his mother’s caste. At three times the Buddha stood in the way of the king to prevent his marching to fight his Sakya clan. But at the fourth time Buddha let the outcome be decided by the Karmic merits of the Sakyans (Deegalle 2009). 3) The Buddha’s advice was sought by king Ajātasattu in his plan to defeat the neighboring Vajjis’ rule. The Buddha points out the nature of the Vajjis’ rule, which cannot be defeated (Dīghanikāya , vol. 2, pp. 73–75).

On each of these occasions it is clear that Buddha was not engaging with the ‘ethics of war’. Instead he challenges the motivation, the inner condition of the mind and the forces that are urging to compete, own and consume, and to declare war if frustrated in these aims. So his concern was not with a *Dharma Yuddha* or a Jihād, but with a war one must undertake against the forces of Mārasenā (Māra’s army) within us. How far have the leading Buddhist societies managed to offer such an alternative based on moral vision? History records that almost all Buddhist countries have failed this test.

Detachment from Belonging

Nationalism

How did then we arrive here from an Ahiṃsā civilization to a civilization that is clashing within? One can give any number of reasons from any number of perspectives. I will provide two strong reasons why modern Buddhism has lost its global influence. Both these primordial historical, memorized and memorialized to the present day. They are 1)

Nationalism and 2) Ethnicity

Benedict Anderson proposed that nationalism is a modern construct of *Imagined Communities* fueled by print capitalism. To him, communities living under colonial oppression found solace in imagining that they belonged to a great ‘nation’ that belonged together and lived in one geographical locale which in imagination they transformed into a ‘state’. Late 18th and 19th century print media transported such ‘belonging’ to otherwise unconnected communities, who in return searched for more bonding under such identities as a way of uniting against the oppressors. The Asian history of identity mobilization challenges Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ thesis, which presents a ‘big bang’ genesis of ethno-nationalism that depended on the rise of print capitalism. Anderson’s account does not provide a valid framework for understanding the historic realities of ethnoreligious nationalism as it emerged in many parts of Asia. Texts such as the Mahabharata and Mahāvam̄sa were composed and venerated as focuses of ethnoreligious nationalism in their audiences. Sinhala ethnoreligious nationalism was constructed in the pages of the Mahāvam̄sa written in 6th century CE; it thus predates the modern concepts of nation and nationalism. Distinguished sociologist Eiko Ikegami has described Japanese state formation to analyze how samurai culture contended with the challenge and model of Western political structure not by attempting to superimpose them on Japanese society but by questioning the Western paradigm and providing an extraordinary new definition of disciplined citizenship. She demonstrates that collective benefit rather than individual satisfaction is at the heart of such differentiation in Japanese social-culture, which we can safely assume to come from the Buddhist influence.

The Buddha’s mission—while a strong individual commitment and personal sacrifice are essential—was to find answers to perennial questions of human suffering. Such burdens come only when one is able to imagine beyond one’s immediate surroundings. In the life story of Siddhartha we read that he deliberately went out of his comfort zone in the palace, and once he had seen the real world, started to engage and find answers. Buddhism begins with the idea of voluntary detachment, renouncing what belongs to us to seek greater benefit. But modern Buddhism today is tied to the two strong pillars of belonging, nationalism and ethnicity, from which it struggles, ineffectively, to liberate itself. Nationalism has coloured the Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Burmese, Cambodian and now Thai civilizations in blood red. History records how these otherwise predominantly Buddhist societies struggled to detach themselves but remained tied to a territory. Nationalism per-

haps is one deep attachment from which humanity struggles to detach itself, though we know that no state is 100 percent innocent and in the postmodern sense there is no central ownership to a particular nation in the globalized order. Buddhism provides the most logical framework for human life in the face of eternal realities such Anicca (impermanence) and Duhkha (suffering).

Thanks to the forces of globalization, states are an invalid point of reference for our sense of belonging in the post Berlin wall era. Neo-liberalism has made it possible to move human and economic capital across borders in an unprecedented manner. In the European Union 'nations' who once fought centuries old wars are now considered as one zone with very little differentiation. This fragmentation of the nation state under the heavy demand of economic progress has meant that the nation can no longer serve as a resting place for 'ourness' or differentiating ourselves from others. However, just when our sense of attachment has been broken, we have found a triple refuge to guide our modern political lives. Even in deeply Buddhist states, unfortunately that triple refuge is not the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha but identification by religion, language and ethnicity.

Ethnicity

The combination of these three emotionally charged attachments has impinged on our Buddhist experience. There is a strong sense of 'Buddhistness' in countries like Sri Lanka; it is conveyed by more decorated temples, more grand ceremonies, more monks using modern technology. The public square is Buddhized with symbols such as huge Buddha statues at key intersections, nonstop chanting of *Pirith* and elaborate *Bodhi Pūjas*. All these are intended to construct a deeper attachment to what people consider as their community, society and country. Today ethnic identity has become the foremost energy that seems to mobilize many a Buddhist state. Japan is mostly a mono-ethnic state, but the rest of Asia is home for hundreds of ethnic groups who live side by side. The new identity construction and its political accentuation have generated even more bloody and bitter violence in many Buddhist states.

Even after decades of research still there is no universally accepted definition of ethnicity. Most who research in the field of ethnicity emphasize the importance of common mytho-history and some codified texts such the Mahāvamsa to support a particular identity. They follow Max Weber in presenting ethnicity to be a common ancestry, most often traced back to migration (*völkerwanderung*) and settlement, but also

referring to political survival and superiority, often measured against a nearby 'other' using religious criteria. Thus the story of the Buddha visiting Sri Lanka—the only foreign land he ever visited—using his divine powers, and consecrating the island as Dhammadīpa (Island of the Teaching) for his eternal message, making the Sinhala and their kings guardians of this dhamma and śāsana, has provided the majority Sinhala with a cosmic responsibility to protect their Sinhala ethnic race and, through it, Buddhism at large. Scholars have done detailed studies of this ethno-religious Buddhism (Gombrich 1988a, 1988b; Harris 2007, 2005, 1999; Tambiah 1996, 1984, 1973). They suggest that in the Theravāda states of Burma, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand, ethnicity qualifies the kind of Buddhism practised and recognized. Therefore instead of Buddhism, we have Thai Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism, Sinhala Buddhism, and other such identities. In Sri Lanka, in reality one's Buddhism is qualified by one's ethnicity. So to be a true Buddhist one quintessentially has to be a Sinhalese. A 'Tamil Buddhist' is a misnomer, even though just a few centuries ago Buddhism was a strong religion in South India, and many Tamil monks contributed to the growth of Buddhism. Under such conditions Buddhism has in-grown to become an inclusive identity symbol. Such ontological separation has the propensity to spiral downwards to further narrow the vision of Buddhism. In Sri Lankan public and political space, to be a true Buddhist one has to be a Sinhala, then has to be true Sinhala, then hail from the Kandy district—the last Sinhala kingdom¹. Within Kandy district preference is given to the Goyigama (farmer caste). So this Sinhala/Kandy/Goyigama triple identity defines the authenticity of a "real Buddhist". It is noteworthy that the powerful Temple of the Tooth is situated in Kandy and the two custodian branches of the Temple, namely Malwathu and Asgiriya of the Siam chapter, are exclusively Kandy and Goyigama.

Such exclusiveness has virtually cut off the possibility for non-Sinhala to become Buddhist or Buddhists to approach the non-Sinhala. In states where more than one ethnic group lives, when the state power, resources and opportunities are ethnicized, they construct majoritarian hegemony and minority agitations, resulting in violent conflicts as witnessed in Sri Lanka for the last 30 years. For this reason, in Sri Lanka the Buddhist presence amongst non-Sinhala is nonexistence. They may respect Buddhism for its philosophical stand, but since their socio-political experience with Sinhala Buddhists are so different, there is no opportunity for Buddhism amongst the non-Sinhala.

I take Lanka's condition as a microcosm of present day Buddhism in

many Buddhist states. Those who have engaged in detailed fieldwork in many Asian Buddhist states suggest that the national, regional, and even global potential of Buddhism as an alternative way to consider many of the world's burning challenges, such as the rich poor disparity, economic crisis, environmental degradation, abuse of human rights and promotion of world peace, is undermined, as these states have transformed Buddhism from its unattached middle path to an exclusive ethno-nationalist political project. Studying these states, Peter L. Daniels, an environmental economist who develops E. F. Schumacher's 1973 *Small is Beautiful* thesis, which was based on Buddhist worldviews on economic wealth, argues:

Unfortunately, the historical experience of many of these nations could be viewed as evidence of the dangers of the tolerant and submissive, perhaps overly-flexible, nature of Buddhism in dealing positively with marked internal or external changes and powerful self-interested motives—for example, the well-known national cases of political violence and strife, and the relentless pursuit of economic growth (at substantial social and environmental cost) in many nations with strong Buddhist backgrounds. There is also little evidence that the inculcation of Buddhism in these nations has produced greater levels of happiness. (Daniel 2005:253)

My argument is not to dismiss the unique beauties and cultural nuances that each ethnic community has to provide. That would in fact be unbuddhist, because even Gautama was born into an ethnically recognized clan and he was not shy to be part of it. Ethnicities contribute to the variety of human civilization by cross fertilizing our life experiences. However, it will be a historical mistake to cage Buddhism in an ethnic frame and, worse, declare war on others, especially the non-Buddhist. Many in the West ask me to explain how Buddhism can afford to be the basis of such violent conflicts often led by monks and supported, directly or indirectly, by the ruling elites? I don't have a neatly arranged answer. We need to face the reality that our ethnic affiliations have taken over the essence of Buddhist teaching. Modern media looking for sensation have found robed monks clashing with civilians as well as security forces. Conflicts based on ethnic identities in which Buddhists and their monks are directly involved in violence are reported from Burma, Cambodia, and Thailand.

In Sri Lanka, we were optimistically looking forward to a post-war era in which we would try to understand how to heal our collective and

reciprocal wounds as a divided nation. But then a range of new Saṅgha led organizations² have come forward with the political agenda to construct an even narrower version of Buddhism in which they demand the surrender of all other religious communities. Muslims and evangelical Christians have repeatedly come under violent physical attack while the police stand by. *You Tube* and other social media have enough visual evidence of such activism, which continues to erode the possibility of Buddhism ever being treated as a potential alternative solution to any modern global crisis. However, this dark situation should challenge us to seek more meaningful engagement across our ethnic identities.

The Jodo Shinshu Pure Land temple in Los Angeles has demonstrated the power of Buddhist compassion that can turn an entire community to adopt and re-calibrate their life philosophies on Buddhist teaching. The community did not become followers of Buddhism, but they adopted the Buddhist teaching on simplicity, compassion and generosity. The work of the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh is recognized more as Buddhist activism than as Tibetan or Vietnamese. It is because, while they recognize themselves as members of a particular ethnic community, their work and engagement is aimed at a greater humanity than their own ethnicity. But unfortunately we cannot say the same about Ven. Galagodaaththe Gñānasāra of Lanka or Ven Wirathu of Burma. Their activities may gain popularity and regime support for a short time. However, the deep structural damage they do is too costly to ignore. The key challenge of the 21st century is not finding the exact birthplace of Gautama or settling a textual *abidhammika* dispute. The urgent need of contemporary Buddhism is to be able to live above its immediate ethno-national identities and engage with issues concerning the whole of humanity. Failing to do so will amount to failing Buddhism and its unique offering to our world.

NOTES

¹ While Kandy was the last Sinhala kingdom, nevertheless it was ruled by Tamil kings for over two hundred years. These kings often restored fragmented and fading Buddhism on the island.

² Bodu Bala Sēnā, Sihala Rāvaya, Rāvana Balakāya, Hela Bodu Pawra are a few of the organizations that have taken to violent street demonstrations on many topics from the UN resolution to anti-Halal campaigning; see: Rāghavan, Suren, 'Buddhicizing or Ethnicizing the State: Do the Sinhala Saṅgha Fear Muslims in Sri Lanka?' *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* Volume 4, 2013, pp. 88–104. <http://www.ocbs.org/ojs/index.php/jocbs/article/view/45/73>

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