

The March/April issue of *Pravada* carried an essay by Professor H. L. Seneviratne, entitled, "The Heritage and the Dawn: Rahula's Two Revolutionary Classics". Seneviratne's is a particularly laudatory reading of Rev. Walpola Rahula's contribution to the modern Buddhist intellectual tradition in Sri Lanka. We publish below an excerpted version of another assessment of Rev. Rahula. Ven. Sangharakshita's essay was first published in 1975. The author was the founder of the Western Buddhist Order (*Trailokya Buddha Mahasangha*).

RELIGIO-NATIONALISM IN SRI LANKA

Ven. Sangharakshita

When I met Walpola Rahula in 1945, in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), he was probably the best known—certainly the most notorious—monk in the whole island. His thesis that the Buddhist monk had the right to take an active part in politics had split the entire Sangha into two factions, one enthusiastically supporting, the other violently condemning the stand he had taken. It was not until some years later, however, when I was myself a monk, that I really came to know anything about him. Sinhalese bhikkhus whom I met in Calcutta in the fifties, on my periodic visits to the Maha Bodhi Society's headquarters, gave me a vivid account of the disturbing effect he had on the socio-religious life of Buddhist Ceylon. (By that time he was living in virtual exile in Paris.) One of them, with whom I was on particularly friendly terms, took the trouble of giving me a general idea of Rahula's famous book *Bhikṣuvage Urumaya, or The heritage of the Bhikkhu* published in 1946. These matters rested for a number of years. I met Walpola Rahula for the second time in 1965 or 66, when he was on a visit to London, and in the course of a conversation we had at the Ceylon Vihara it became evident that despite a scholarly preoccupation with Mahayana thought his ideas were as 'radical' as ever. Now, twenty-nine years after the publication of the original Sinhalese edition, comes an English translation of *Bhikṣuvage Urumaya*, so that we are at last able to see for ourselves what the fuss was all about.

Chapter 1. Buddhism And Social Service

On the whole this chapter draws attention to an aspect of Buddhism which is often overlooked, i.e. its concern for the material as well as for the spiritual well being of man, and the author rightly draws attention to passages in the Pali canonical texts which represent the Buddha as advising people on their economic, social, and political affairs. Unfortunately, the chapter opens with the sentence "Buddhism is based on service to others". **Such ambiguity as this can spring only from extreme confusion of thought** and we are therefore not surprised when after referring to the Buddha's renunciation of Nirvana in his previous life as Sumedha the hermit, the author goes on to conclude the first paragraph of this chapter with the statement: "A true Buddhist should have the strength to sacrifice his own *nirvana* for the sake of others"—it being assumed apparently that to such a true Buddhist, 'Nirvana'

is as 'accessible' as it was to Sumedha. With the help of a truncated reference to the Buddha's well known exhortation to His first sixty enlightened disciples to wander from village to village preaching to people for their good and well-being (nothing is said about him exhorting them to proclaim the Dharma, and to make clear the perfectly pure *brahmacarya* or holy life), as well as by means of the plethora of references to the Buddha's advice on purely secular subjects already referred to, the impression is created that a true Buddhist is concerned with the promotion exclusively of the material well-being of humanity. In other words, having in effect dismissed Nirvana as a sort of anti-social selfishness, the Bodhisattva ideal is equated with the secular concept of social service.

Could the degradation of a sublime spiritual ideal be carried further than this? Despite his extensive scholarship, the author seems totally unaware of the true significance either of 'the transcendental' state of Nirvana, the goal of the Theravada, or of the transcendental 'career' of the Bodhisattva, the ideal of the Mahayana schools.

Chapter 4. Introduction of Buddhism to Ceylon: The National Religion of The Sinhala People.

According to Sinhalese tradition, Buddhism was introduced into Ceylon in the 3rd century BCE by the Arahant Mahinda, son of the Emperor Asoka. In reply to a query by the king of Ceylon, Mahinda is said to have declared that Buddhism could not be considered to have taken firm root in Ceylon unless and until a Ceylonese, born in Ceylon and of Ceylonese parents, ordained in Ceylon, learned and recited the Vinaya in Ceylon. In other words, Buddhism would not be established in Ceylon unless the Sangha there was completely autonomous, i.e. not dependent on the parent body in India—an attitude fully in accordance with the spirit of Buddhism.

However, Walpola Rahula takes Mahinda's statement to mean much more than that: "Mahinda's desire" he says, "was to make Buddhism the national religion of the Sinhalese

people. And so it happened... Buddhism became the state religion" (p.17). For 2,200 years legal possession of the throne was the right only of Buddhists. In the 10th century a king declared that only Bodhisattvas should become kings of Ceylon! (presumably those who became kings were Bodhisattvas.) In the 13th century the *Pujavaliya* declares that the Island of Lanka (Ceylon) belongs to the Buddha Himself. Religio-nationalism seems to have run wild.

As if that was not bad enough, however, we are told that "historical evidence clearly shows that Buddhism existed as an institution of the Sinhalese monarchy" (p.18). **In other words, Buddhism has been subordinated to the state** by the time we come to the end of the chapter therefore, we are not surprised to find the author concluding: "Thus, because of the unity of the religion, nation and state, *bhikkhus* began to participate in many ways in public affairs and in the freedom and protection of the nation". (p.19).

Chapter 5. Religio-Nationalism and The National Culture

From the time of King Dutugamunu...religious and national fervour of both the laity and the *Sangha* began to grow intensely" (p.20). The Sinhalese from the south, we are told, "mounted a crusade" to liberate the nation and the religion from the foreign yoke (the capital had been occupied by a South Indian king) and Dutugemunu, "the greatest of national hero", after proclaiming that he was warring not for the pleasures of kingship but the reestablishment of Buddhism, marched at the head of his advancing army carrying a spear with a sacred relic of the Buddha enshrined in it.

'In this decisive battle for the liberation of Buddhism and the Sinhalese,' Walpola Rahula relates, "the *bhikkhus*, headed by their great Elders, did not remain in their cells" (p. 20). One *bhikkhu* 'who was about to become an *arahant*,' disrobed and joined the army, a large number of the others accompanied the army into battle, and "blessed and inspired by the presence of *bhikkhus*, the warriors fought with great courage and determination' (p.21). In these circumstances we are not surprised to learn that: 'From this time the patriotism and the religion of the Sinhalese became inseparably linked. The religio-patriotism at that time assumed such overpowering proportions that both *bhikkhus* and laymen considered that even killing people in order to liberate the religion and the country was not a heinous crime"(p.21).

"It is evident", he says, "that the *bhikkhus* of that time considered it their sacred duty to engage themselves in the service of their country as much as in the service of their religion"(p.22).

Walpola Rahula is therefore able to conclude, very much to his own satisfaction, that" from the earliest period of Ceylon history to the recent past, it is abundantly clear that in addition to participating in numerous other responsibilities, the *bhikkhus* played a leading role even in the highly responsible political function of selecting a suitable king to rule the country" (p.23).

Chapter 6. Fundamental Innovations

The most important of these innovations was the writing down of the *Tripitaka*. Hitherto of course it had been preserved exclusively by oral means, but in the last century BCE- in the reign of king Valagamba (Vattagamani-Abhaya), an invasion from South India, internal dissensions, famine in Ceylon between them brought about such unsettled conditions in the country that the elder monks, fearful for the future of the religion, decided to commit the Buddha's Teaching to writing.

There was a lengthy debate between the *Pamsukulika* or ascetic 'rag-robed' *bhikkhus* and the *dhammakathika* or "Dharma expounding" *bhikkhus* but in the end the latter, who seem to have been in the majority, carried the day. As a result, a fundamental change took place in the character of Buddhism and the way of life of the monks. Scholarship came to be considered more important than spiritual practice. **Monks who were good scholars came to be more highly esteemed than those who devoted themselves to meditation.** As Rahula puts it: "The solitude-loving meditator lives in seclusion away from society, doing no service to society. The scholar is engaged in service which is necessary for society and valued by it" (p.27).

From the first century BCE, therefore, it is the scholar monk who dominates the scene in Ceylon. The 'rag-robed' monk disappears into the forest, where he exercises less and less influence, and at times even partially adapts himself to the new trends. **Eventually, though this the author does not tell us-perhaps because he does not consider the matter important enough, the practical knowledge of meditation virtually died out in Ceylon and had to be reintroduced from Burma and Thailand in the twentieth century.**

Chapter 7. Study and Meditation; Academic Developments

Scholarship having come to be considered more important than spiritual practice, two separate and mutually exclusive monastic vocations came into existence. A monk could be either a scholar or a meditator, but he could not be both.

By the time of King Mahinda IV, in the tenth century CE, the salary paid to the teacher of the *Abhidhamma Pitka*, was equal to that of the two teachers of the *Vinaya* and *Sutta Pitakas*, which were traditionally held to deal with monastic discipline and meditation respectively. With incentives of this sort being offered them, it is not astonishing that monks who took up the vocation of scholarship should have widened their scope to include the various branches of secular knowledge. In this way the whole field of secular education came into the hands of these monks, who enjoyed a comfortable and lucrative existence.

The scholarly monks had clearly become what Coleridge called a clerisy, and a Buddhist clerisy is no more the Sangha than a Christian clerisy is the Church.

Chapter 8. Monasteries: Their Administration and Maintenance

As a result of the educational and other services rendered by the monks to the nation, the monasteries became extremely wealthy. So much so, indeed, that special departments of state had to be created to administer the monasteries and their landed estates, which often included whole villages.

The monasteries also owned large numbers of slaves, both male and female. As Walpola Rahula frankly admits, all this constituted a radical departure from the way of life prescribed for the monks by the Buddha, so much so, indeed, that what he disingenuously calls "a new monastic way of life" developed in Ceylon. (p.39).

Chapter 9. National and Religious Degeneration

With the spread of Christianity and Western education, Sinhalese Buddhist culture came to be neglected and despised, even by the Sinhalese Buddhists themselves. The position of the *bhikkhus* deteriorated. As they "could not adapt themselves to suit the changed political, economic, and social situation, they were rendered useless to society" and "laymen had nothing to learn from them" (p.91). Worse still, the Buddhist monk was driven to limit activities to the recitation of Suttas (*pirit* chanting), preaching a sermon, attendance at funeral rites and almsgiving in memory of the departed, and to an idle, cloistered life in the temple" (p.91) some Buddhists would probably feel that such **activities as chanting and preaching were not altogether unworthy of a Buddhist monk, but Ven, Rahula seems to think that for someone who had been used to enthroning and deposing kings they represent a great come down in the world, and he speaks bitterly of the "melancholy and abject situation" of such a monk. More extraordinary still, he refers with approval to the ancient Sinhalese idea that a Sinhalese to be a Buddhist! This is surely a complete denial of the individual's freedom to follow the religion of his own choice, and as such a complete negation of both the spirit and the letter of the Buddha's teaching. One cannot be a Buddhist unless one is free not to be a Buddhist-unless one is free to be a Christian, or a tree-worshipper, or anything else one wants to be. What Walpola Rahula in effect does is to turn Buddhism from a universal religion into an ethnic religion, surely the worst of all betrayals, the worst of all perversions, of a teaching that stressed above all others the responsibility of the individual for his own development.**

It was undoubtedly right for the Ceylon Buddhists to resist the forces of Christian religio-imperialism, but what if a

Sinhalese wanted to adopt, of his own free will, "the religious teaching of Jesus of Nazareth?" According to Ven. Rahula, he is not free to do so. **He is a Sinhalese and he must be a Buddhist.** What really happened during the period of British rule, if it had not happened even earlier, was that the Christian clerisy as represented by the missionaries, to a large extent superseded the Buddhist clerisy as represented by the monks.

Buddhism as a living spiritual tradition had disappeared from Ceylon long before the British came. What collapsed under the combined impact of Christianity and Western education was the clerisy, and it is degeneration in this sense that Rahula is really lamenting in this chapter.

Chapter 10. The Revival

Just as degeneration was the degeneration of the clerisy, so revival was the revival of the clerisy, From 1841 onwards *pirivenas* or Buddhist monastic institutes for the study of the traditional learning and culture were established, Buddhist schools were opened, and Buddhist societies founded. However, it is clear that 'revival' tended to mean two quite different things. In the first place it meant the revival of the traditional learning and culture. In the second it meant the teaching of Western arts and sciences under 'Buddhist' auspices. **Thus there were, in fact, now two clerisies, one consisting of those Buddhist monks who had been educated at the *pirivenas*, and one consisting of those laymen and monks too, eventually-who had received a Western education.** As a result of this, the conflict between the 'Christian' clerisy and the 'Buddhist' clerisy was reproduced within the Sinhalese Buddhist community itself. Many of the wealthy Western-educated Sinhalese Buddhists not only sent their children to Christian missionary schools but believed that *bhikkhus* "ought to confine themselves to purely religious activities and, in Rahula's own words, "live a life limited to the four walls of their temples" (p.95).

Rahula believes that such wealthy laymen wanted to keep the *bhikkhus* out of politics for purely selfish reasons, and with regard to some of them he is undoubtedly right. At the same time it ought to be considered that some laymen of this class, being themselves members of the dominant clerisy, looked to the members of the monastic order for something more than just learning and culture-for a higher, 'spiritual' something that neither the Christian missionaries nor the 'political' *bhikkhus* possessed. Where a need of this sort is concerned, however, Rahula seems quite unsympathetic, even uncomprehending. **Bhikkhus ignorant of the modern world and its problems he dismisses as "a set of meaningless ancients" (p.96).** His ideal is represented by the knowledgeable and energetic *bhikkhus* of the present generation who, he declares, have no wish to chant *pirit*, perform funeral rites, or deliver 'the usual sermons'.

To him it does not matter, apparently, if *bhikkhus* campaign for rival political parties. What matters is that they should take a prominent part in whatever happens to be going on. In other words, The *bhikkhu*-or rather the 'political' *bhikkhu*-like his 'socially' oriented counterpart in the modern 'Christian'

West-is in fact **looking for a role**. Two thousand years ago he lost faith in Buddhism as a path of individual spiritual development and gave up being a monk in the original, more 'spiritual' sense of the term to become a member of the Buddhist clerisy. This gave him both influence and for some centuries he was satisfied. **Now, however, the 'Buddhist' clerisy has been superseded by a secular, modern clerisy to whom he was forfeited much of his former position in society and with whom he is increasingly compelled to compete on equal terms.** The results of this are to be seen in the second decade after independence. Losing all contact with Buddhism as a path of individual development, the 'political' *bhikkhus* lose their separate identity and become submerged in the mainstream of secular political life.

There is no doubt, either, that Rahula himself is deeply committed to this trend. Indeed, **one of the most remarkable features of the whole book is his entire unconsciousness of the more spiritual, transcendental aspects of the Dharma. For Rahula these simply do not exist.** He knows about them as a scholar, of course, but it is clear that for him they are only ideas, only words, and mean nothing to him personally. With the spiritual life a closed book, and religio-nationalism in a state of collapse, he is

indeed in a strange position, being left with the purely scholarly work for which he is, of course, now best known.

Most Western Buddhists will put the book down with an overwhelming impression that the heritage of the bhikkhu, as described by Rahula, is a heritage of shame.

With its record of almost continuous betrayal of the spirit of the Buddha's teaching it provides us with a saddening and sickening example of what happens when ultimate spiritual objectives are replaced by secondary cultural and political ones-when a universal religion is transmogrified into an ethnic one and the spiritual community becomes a cultural elite.

What our real heritage is, in both East and West is for me sufficiently indicated by the Buddha, when he declared," O monks, ye are mine own true sons, born of my mouth, born of the Dharma. Therefore, O monks, be ye heirs of the Dharma, not heirs of worldly things".

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