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ACADEMIC STUDIES IN BUDDHISM AND THE UNIVERSITIES IN SRI LANKA

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As you are perhaps aware, today the age-old traditional approach to religious studies has been supplemented with another. This is what is known as the academic approach to religious studies. According to the traditional approach a religion is usually (but not necessarily) studied in order to follow it as one's own personal faith. Whereas according to the modern academic approach a religion can also be studied without any commitment either to accept or reject its doctrinal tenets, but purely as part of a liberal education. This has enabled Buddhist studies to transcend its traditional boundaries and to establish itself as an academic discipline attracting the attention of scholars, both of the East and of the West, Buddhist as well as non-Buddhist. The net result of all this is that today Buddhist studies is no more the monopoly and concern of the Buddhists only. In point of fact, with the possible exception of Japan the west now leads the world in Buddhist scholarship.

What was the historical background to this situation? As you are aware, in the continent of Asia today there are three major Buddhist traditions which coincide with three major geographical regions. The first is the region which includes Sri Lanka and four countries in South East Asia: Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. The Buddhism that prevails in all these countries is called Theravada or southern Buddhism. It is also called Pali Buddhism because both its canonical and exegetical scriptures are written in Pali, which is a Middle Indian dialect. What makes Theravada Buddhism different from all other schools of Buddhist thought is that it seeks to interpret the word of the Buddha in the light of its own Abhidhamma. In passing it may be noted that both in preserving and disseminating the Theravada version of Buddhism it was our country that played the leading role. For as you all know, it was in Sri Lanka that the oral transmission of the Theravada Buddhist Canon was committed to writing and it was also here in Sri Lanka that all the Commentaries, Sub-commentaries, compendiums, and other expository works related to

the Pali Canon were compiled before they found their way to the neighboring Buddhist countries in South East Asia.

The second geographical zone which corresponds to another major Buddhist tradition is the Himalayan Region (Tibet, Bhutan, and Sikkim) and Mongolia. The Buddhism that developed in this region could be called Tibetan Buddhism because it is mainly based on the teachings embodied in the Tibetan Tripitaka, the Mongolian version of the Tripitaka being a rendering from the Tibetan. The Tibetan Buddhism is much different from the Buddhism that prevails in Sri Lanka and South East Asia. Though some what eclectic it is more oriented towards Yogacara, the Idealistic School of Buddhism and also to Tantrayana or Esoteric Buddhism, which is a further extension of the Mahayana. The Tibetan Tripitaka too is very much unlike ours, for it contains the teachings of more than one School of Buddhist thought. It is true that much of it is a rendition from Sanskrit and Middle Indian vernaculars. However, the indigenous Buddhist literature that developed in the wake of translations is equally considerable. What is unique about the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is that more than any other it has preserved to us the full richness of esoteric (Tantric) doctrines and practices, when in most other Asian countries Esoteric Buddhism (Tantrayana) declined in the past.

The third geographical region which corresponds to yet another great Buddhist tradition is East Asia. China, Korea and Japan. Buddhism in East Asia is not a uniform phenomenon as Buddhism in South East Asia. It represents a wide spectrum of Buddhist doctrines and practices, mostly coming under Mahayana. However, the primary literary basis of all East Asian Buddhism is the Chinese Tripitaka. Unlike the Pali Tripitaka with which we are familiar, the Chinese Tripitaka embraces all ages and schools where in translations of the most diverse Indian Buddhist works are supplemented by original compositions in Chinese. According to the well known catalogue prepared by Bunyui Nanjio (Oxford 1883) the collection contains some 1662 works classified into four main divisions; Sutra, Vinaya, Abhidharma and the Miscellaneous. What is unique about the Chinese Tripitaka is that while embodying the doctrines of almost all schools of Buddhist thought, its compilers represent a large number of ethnic groups in the continent of Asia. For, among those who translated Buddhist works into Chinese were not only Indians and Chinese but Buddhist savants and celebrities from a number of countries in Central Asia, such as Parthia, Kucha, Khotan, Kucha, Tokharistan, Sogdiana, Kashgar, Turfan, and Karasahr. Nor is Sri Lanka unrepresented. According to Nanjio's Catalogue of the Chinese Tripitaka among those

who translated Sanskrit Buddhist texts into Chinese during the period from 420-550 were from Sri Lanka. In this regard the best known Sri Lankan was Amoghavajra who came to China in 724 and translated a large number of Buddhist texts into Chinese, to one of which a preface was written by the Emperor T'ai-tsung. It must also be recorded here that two Buddhist works compiled in Sri Lanka during the Anuradhapura period, namely, Samantapasadika which is the commentary to the Vinaya, and Vimuttimaggā, a work belonging to the Abhayagiri Fraternity, are also included in the Chinese tripitaka.

What I have said so far amounts to a brief introduction to the three major Buddhist traditions which developed in three major regions in the continent of Asia, namely (i) Sri Lanka and South East Asia (2) the Himalayan region together with Mongolia, and (3) East Asia comprising China, Korea and Japan. Each tradition, as we saw, had its own literary basis in a classical language such as Pali, Tibetan, and Chinese. Interaction and mutual influence between these BUDDHIST TRADITIONS, One cannot completely rule out. However, it would not be incorrect to say that until modern times they developed in comparative isolation.

What we call modern academic studies in Buddhism can be said to begin when this isolationism broke down and the literary sources belonging to the major Buddhist traditions in Asia came to the attention of modern scholars. The process began in the first quarter of the 19th century when literary works of each tradition came to be discovered one after the other.

Sanskrit Buddhist Literature

Among those literary sources the first that came to the attention of modern scholars were Sanskrit works belonging to the Mahayana. This was made possible by the distribution in the libraries of Calcutta, London and Paris of a large number of manuscripts which were collected from Nepal by B.H. Hodgson, the British resident of the country, during the years of 1821-1841. Among these manuscripts were some of the most important Mahayana Sutras, Such as Karandavyuha, Vajrasuci, Lankavatara, Saddharmapundarika and many versions of the Prajnaparamita Sutras. One of the earliest to do research on these materials was Eugene Burnoff from France. His "Lotus de la Bonne Loi", the French translation of the Saddharmapundarika published in 1852 was the first rendering into a European language of a Buddhist literary work. It was some seven years earlier that Eugene Burnoff wrote his well-known History of Indian Buddhism, which

secured his place as the founder of modern Buddhist scholarship in the West.

The Nepalese manuscripts which thus led to the beginning of modern studies in Buddhism came to the attention of the Indian scholars as well. In the 1870's Rajendra Lal Mitra and Hara Prasad Sastri made a catalogue of the Buddhist manuscripts in the libraries in Nepal and this helped to bring out critical editions and annotated of a large number of Mahayana works. The field of Sanskrit Buddhist studies became further enlarged by the discovery in Central Asia of no less than twenty six texts of the Central Asian Sanskrit Buddhist Canon and manuscripts remains of many other Buddhist works. Along with this must be mentioned the Gilgit Manuscripts discovered by Nalinaksha Dutt and which he published in eight volumes. Two of the most important works in this collection are the Samadhiraja sutra and the Vinayavastu of the Mulasarvastivada School of Buddhism, Which has a close correspondence to the Pali Vinaya Pitaka.

Pali Buddhist Literature

It was in the second quarter of the 19th century that the Pali literary works were brought to the notice of scholars outside the Theravada countries and in this connection Sri Lanka was able to make a notable contribution. For, those who pioneered Pali studies in Europe, India and Japan, such as Professor Rhys Davids, Satish Chandra Vidyabhusana, the Venerable Dhammanada Kosambi and Chizen Akanuma were closely associated with the scholar monks of Sri Lanka, Notable among them were Venerable Hikkaduve Sumangala Mahathera, Venerable Waskaduve Sri Subhuti Mahathera and Venerable Mahagoda Nanissra Mahathera. The translation of the Mahavamsa into English by George Turnour in 1837 and the translation, ten years later, of the Dhammapada into Latin by Fausboll were the first important attempts by European scholars to introduce Pali literature to the West. However, it was some ten years earlier that Eugene Burnoff and Christian Lassen published their famous introduction to Pali. "Un Essay sur le Palie", which paved the way for Pali studies in Europe and America. Particularly in the last quarter of the last century great stride were made in Pali studies. The establishment of the Pali Text Society in London in 1895 and the Buddhist Text Society in Calcutta in 1898 played a major role in this regard. Now both canonical and post-canonical Pali Buddhist texts have Romanized editions and translations into English, French and German. The Pali Canon, in its entirety, has also been translated into Japanese and it contains some sixty

five volumes. Together with this must be mentioned the Royal Thai Edition (Thailand), the Chattha Mahasangayana Edition (Myanmar) the Nava Nalanda Edition (India) and the Buddha Jayanti Edition (Sri Lanka) of the Pali Tripitaka.

Tibetan Buddhist Literature

The credit of pioneering modern studies in Tibetan Buddhism should go to Csoma de Koros, a native of Transylvania. For it was his Analysis of the Kanjur published in Asiatic Researches. Vol. 20, 1936 that drew the attention of modern scholars to Tibetan Buddhism. Two years earlier he published a Tibetan Grammar and a Tibetan Dictionary which greatly facilitated the study of Tibetan language. Another pioneer of Tibetan studies was Sarath Chandra Das from India. He Collected a great deal of material from the ancient libraries of Sakya and Samaya monasteries in Lhasa and prepared a Tibetan English Dictionary. Csoma's Analysis of the Kanjur was translated into French with numerous additions by Leon Feer in 1891 and this has helped to establish Tibetan studies on a firmer footing. This was followed by the Index to the Tanjur published by Laloir (Paris 1933). The Tibetan Tripitaka is now available in five editions, the latest being the Peking Edition prepared under the supervision of D. T. Suzuki.

Chinese Buddhist Literature

Modern studies in Chinese Buddhism could be said to begin with the publication in 1883 of Bunyin Nanjio's Catalogue of the Chinese Tripitaka. It was based on the Dragon Edition of the Tripitaka brought out during the reign of Emperor Chien-Lung (1735-96). Nanjio's catalogue opened up the biggest collection of Buddhist literary works presented in a single language but containing within it self the teachings of almost all schools of Buddhist thought. A new edition of the Chinese Tripitaka, Taisho-shin-shir-Daizokyo, running to some eighty five volumes, was made available during the years 1918-1925, with Junjiro Takakusu as the Chief Editor. Based upon this edition were published two Japanese translations. One is Kokuyaku Issaikyo in 150 volumes, and the other, Kokuyaku Daizokyo in 28 volumes. Among the catalogues of the Chinese Tripitaka published during the last hundred years the most famous is the one we referred to earlier, Bunyui Nanjio's Catalogue published in 1883. Among others are Table du Taisho-Issaikyo published in Tokyo in 1931, and G. Ono's Bussho Kaisetsu Daijiten, which is a Dictionary of the Buddhist Bibliography in twelve volumes (1933-35). Together with this

must be mentioned the Hobogirin, an encyclopedic dictionary of Buddhism after the Chinese and Japanese sources, which was started in 1929 under the direction of Sylvain Levi and Takakusu.

Central Asian Buddhist Literature

The latest addition to the field of Buddhist studies was the discovery of the priceless Buddhist manuscripts and artifacts of the lost civilization of Central Asia. The vast region between Tien Shan in the North and Kunlun Ranges in the South was the scene of a cosmopolitan Buddhist civilization which lasted for over one thousand years. The diffusion of Buddhism in this part of Asia can be said to begin in the time of the Indo-Bactrians and in this connection the Kandahar bilingual edict of Emperor Asoka is considered very significant as it supplies evidence for the diffusion of Buddhism in the direction of Central Asia. In the centuries that followed Buddhism penetrated the whole of Central Asia embracing the Western Region consisting of Afghanistan, Bactria and Parthia the Central Region corresponding to the present Russian Turkestan and Eastern Region combining both Northern and Southern wings of Chinese Turkestan. Central Asia's greatest legacy to Buddhist studies is the vast collection of manuscripts which were discovered in different parts of the region through a series of international expeditions, explorations and excavations. The earliest was made in 1879 by A. Raqual, a German Botanist in the service of Russian Government. He was followed by Dutreuil de Rhines of the French Mission in 1892, Sir Aurel Stein, the great Hungarian explorer whose mission was funded by the Government of India, A Von Le Cog of the German expedition, Langdon Warner of the United States, and K. Otani who led a research expedition from Japan.

The manuscripts discovered in Central Asia are either of original Sanskrit texts or of their translations into indigenous languages into which Buddhist texts were translated were; (1) Kuchean, also called Tokharian A, an Indo-European language spoken in the Northern edge of the Tarin Basin, and its sister language (2) kara-shahrin or Torkharian B, which was the language of the ancient Agenidesa, (3) Nordarsh or Khotanese, also called Saka and North Aryan, which was another Indo-European language spoken in the Tarim Basin, (4) Sogdian, an Iranian language of the region around Samarikand, and (5) Uighur, an Old Turkish dialect derived from Syriac and written in an Aramaic alphabet.

Among the manuscript remains discovered in Central Asia the most important were the fragments of no less than 26 texts of the Buddhist

Canon in Sanskrit. Most of these were edited with parallel versions and published in the Manuscript Remains of Buddhist Literature by R. Hoernle (Oxford 1916). The other fragments of this Canon with parallel versions in Pail, Tibetan and Chinese were published by H. Hoffman (Bibliotheca 1939). Among other notable manuscript remains were the Udanavarge of Dhamatratā, the only available work belonging to the Sautrantika School of Buddhism, Satapancasataika and Sariputrakarana of Asvaghosa.

As for the Buddhist manuscripts in Central Asian indigenous languages the following merit special mention; Sylvain Levi's edition of Kuchean Buddhist Texts in 1993, the Fragments of Buddhist Manuscripts in Khotanese and Sogdian, edited by E. Leuman (1912), the Sogdian Buddhist Texts published in two volumes by H. Reichel (1928), E. Benveniste's edition of some twenty three Sogdian texts with translations into French (1940), the Uighurian Buddhist Texts published by W. Bang and Avon Gabain in the series called Uighurish Studies and Uighurica (1930-1931). Among the Central Asian manuscripts the most famous is the one containing a recension of the Prakrit Dhamapada in the Kharosthi script. It is said to be the oldest manuscript now extant of any Indian text and the only literary text which is written in North Western dialect of the Gandhara region.

What I have discussed so far amounts of a brief sketch of how the literary works of the various Buddhist traditions of Asia came to the attention of modern scholars. As we noted the process began in the first quarter of the 19th century and the latest Buddhist literary sources to be discovered were the manuscript remains from the laost civilization of Central Asia. What is of great significance in this situations is that it enabled modern scholars to focus their attention on a number of Buddhist traditions which had been developing in comparative isolation in the continent of Asia. It is particularly this situation that makes modern studies in Buddhism different from what they were in the past.

It is against this background that we have to consider the position of Buddhist studies in Sri Lanka today, particularly in its universities and other institutions of higher learning. As we all know in five of our national universities today there are departments of Pali and Buddhist Studies. We also have a postgraduate institute and two universities entirely devoted to Buddhist studies. The fact that they all have "Pali and Buddhist" as part of their designation shows that their Buddhist studies programmes are oriented towards Theravada Buddhism, for all literary works in Pali relate only to Theravada Buddhism. Therefore, the question that arises here is whether this

orientation of Sri Lankan Buddhist studies to one particular school of Buddhist thought and that too based on a single Buddhist scriptural language is justifiable.

This situation has of course been determined by our own history. Ever since the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka our country has played the leading role not only in preserving and disseminating the Theravada version of Buddhism but also in the matter of developing its exegetical tradition which found its way to neighboring Buddhist countries. Among the Buddhist countries in the world what is unique to Sri Lanka is its pre-eminent position as the strowghold of the Theravada Buddhist literary tradition. Therefore, if our present Buddhist studies are oriented more towards Theravada Buddhism this has to be understood as a continuation of a well established historical tradition.

I am not suggesting that it should be otherwise. In point of fact, it is not only necessary but also desirable that we concentrate more on Theravada Buddhist Studies. The vision of our departments of Buddhist Studies in the Universities in Sri Lanka should be to develop as international to remember here is that we cannot achieve this goal by isolating ourselves from the many other parallel Buddhist traditions, Which evolved in other parts of Asia. For our claim to specialize in Theravada Buddhist Studies will have no credibility unless they are supplemented by studies in parallel Buddhist traditions. For it is against the background of such studies that the significance of Theravada Buddhist doctrines can be brought into relief. In this connection I would like to cite two instances.

The first relates to the Pali Nikayas of the Sutta Pitaka, which we make use of as the earliest extant literary sources of Buddhism. Four of these Nikayas, it may be noted here, have their corresponding versions in the Chinese Tripitaka where they are called Agamas. Again sections corresponding to Pali Nikayas have also been found in the manuscript remains of the Central Asian Buddhist Canon discovered in Eastern Turkestan. This circumstance should show that whatever textual and doctrinal studies we do on the Pali Nikayas remain incomplete unless we take into consideration their parallel versions mentioned here.

The same situation is true when it comes to studies in the Theravada Abhidhamma. It is a well-known fact that there had been other versions of the Abhidhamma particularly among pre-Mahayana schools of Buddhist Thought. While most of them have been irretrievably lost, at least four versions of the Abhidhamma are found preserved in the Chinese Tripitaka, the most famous being the one belonging to the Sarvastivada School of Buddhism. These different versions of the Abhidhamma have to be taken

into consideration if we are to understand the Theravada Abhidharma in its proper doctrinal and historical perspective. For we cannot overlook the obvious fact that the various schools of Abhidharma grew, not in comparative isolation, but in interesting and mutually influencing one another.

At least two instances I have cited above should show that if our universities are to serve as international centers of excellence for Theravada Buddhist Studies it is not only desirable but absolutely necessary to broad-base our study programmes to include parallel Buddhist traditions as well. The initial requirement for such a project would be to broaden the linguistic equipment of our students to include not only a knowledge of Pali but a knowledge of other Buddhist scriptural languages, such as Sanskrit (both Classical and Hybrid), Classical Tibetan, and "Buddhist" Chinese.

In concluding these observations on the academic study of Buddhism it is necessary to mention here that the subject of Buddhism occupies a very central place in relation to many other academic disciplines. This is particularly true of all Sri Lankan studies whether they relate to Humanities or Social Sciences. No university in Sri Lanka can afford to dispense with Buddhist Studies if it is to carry on successfully its academic programmes in historical, cultural and sociological studies. This situation is not confined to Sri Lanka but is true of many other Asian countries. For Asian culture is, as a whole, Buddhist culture. In this connection I can do no better than quote D.T. Suzuki, the celebrated Japanese scholar.

"If the East is one, and there is something that differentiates it from the West, the differentiation must be sought in the thought that is embodied in Buddhism. For it is in Buddhist thought and in no other that India, China and Japan representing the East could be united as one. Each nationality has its own characteristic modes of adapting the thought to its environmental needs, but when the East as a unity is made to confront the west, Buddhism supplies the bond"*

*"Japanese Buddhism", Essays in Zen Buddhism (Third Series), London, 1953, p. 348

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