

Learning from history

The future of Buddhism in Singapore and Malaysia

[Previously published as fb200515 Piya Tan]

We must learn from history, or we will repeat its disasters. When we repeat the mistakes of history, it becomes a double-sided sword with which we cut ourselves and our fellowmen. We then sink into the rut of perpetual childhood, playing the same games over and over, raised by the same parents who will abuse us again.

Or, we can burn and beat that very same sword into plough-shares of goodness and wheel-rims of freedom. If we learn from history, we will rise like the sun and shine on the world: we will see, and others will see with us the vision of the path of awakening.

Mental slavery

When we repeat history's mistakes, we fall into the abyss of sweet slavery. Our erstwhile slave-masters are dead, but we still worship them. This is mental slavery.

Mental slavery is the worst form of slavery. It gives you the illusion of freedom, makes you trust, love and shield your oppressor while making an enemy of those who are moved by boundless love, trying to free you, to open your eyes!

What rises must fall, too

By the time **Singapore** was "founded" by British colonial administrator Stamford Raffles (1819), Buddhism had effectively died out or a mere weak echo of its past in almost all of East Asia: Mongolia, China and Japan. Buddhism was the state religion under the mighty Khans, the dragon Emperors, and the warring Shoguns. When they fell, Buddhism fell suit, like the concubines of the powerful.

In **Korean**, the Chosŏn period of the Yi dynasty (1392-1910), strongly Confucianist, banished Buddhism from the cities (urban areas). When **the Japanese** occupied Korea (1910-1945), they brought Japanese Buddhisms there: the Koreans hated them and Buddhism, too.

Since 1945, **Christianity** (Catholicism and Protestantism) have been widely seen by Koreans as the religion of the middle class, youth, intellectuals, urbanites and modernizers. It has been a powerful force supporting South Korea's pursuit of modernity and westernization, and opposition to the old Japanese colonialism, imported Buddhisms, and the Communism of North Korea. One key element for the phenomenal success of Christianity in Korea was its vibrant lay ministries.¹

History: chains or change?

Buddhism in Malaysia and Singapore amongst the English-speaking arose in **the British period** and its Anglican Christianity. **Penang** (Pulau Pinang) was "founded" by British

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Korea

explorer, Francis Light (1740), and **Malacca** (Melaka) was ceded to the British in the Anglo-Dutch Treaty (1824) in exchange for Bencoolen, Sumatra (1824).

In due course, Penang, Malacca and Singapore became the Straits Settlements under the British. In 1888, **North Borneo** (Sabah) became a British Protectorate. By 1946, the whole of Peninsula Malaya, and **Sarawak**, were ruled by the British and their mission schools which still shape our minds and manners today as Malaysia and Singapore.

The birth of our nations

After the Pangkor Treaty (1874), between the British (represented by Andrew Clarke, the governor of the Straits Settlements) and the Sultan of Perak state, the British takeover of the Peninsula led up to the formation of **The Federated Malay States** (FMS), which were then mostly thick equatorial jungle.

The British embarked upon the construction of roads, railways, schools, hospitals and government offices in the Malay Peninsula (as it was called then). This development of the country was to help the British exploit local resources (especially tin and rubber) to the maximum, and to increase revenue for their own good. We see similar patterns of development in imported Buddhism today.

This was when the Ceylonese (Tamil and Sinhala), also under British rule (since 1815, with the fall of Napoleon in Europe), were brought in the 1870s to survey the railways and to build and man them, to be apothecaries in the hospitals, to be technical assistants to qualified engineers and to staff the clerical services on which an expanding colonial government was bound increasingly to depend. Along with them came Sri Lankan traders and businessmen to this “Land of Gold” (*suvarṇa, bhūmi*), the SE Asian El Dorado.

The Brahmins of Buddhism

With the establishment of the FMS, a large number of clerks, surveyors, technical assistants, hospital assistants and teachers from Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka) began to arrive. In the Malayan capital, **Kuala Lumpur**, the Ceylonese were mainly concentrated in the Brickfields and Sentul areas because of their proximity to the Administrative Centre of the Malayan Railway (opposite the railway station) and the Sentul Workshop.

For this reason, we have the **Brickfields** Buddhist Vihara (later renamed as the Buddhist Mahā Vihāra, after the “Great Monastery” founded in Anuradhapura during Asoka’s time), and the **Sentul** Buddhist Vihara: they were built by and for the Sri Lankans. The two temples were (and still are) separated by **caste**.

The Brickfields Vihara is run by “the Chief High Priest” (“the Chief”) from the Gamage family of Kirinde in Matara (with a similar colonial history as Malacca). He belonged to the rich landed Goyigama-caste Siyam Nikaya (the Siam Order), who, to retain of perpetual control,

handed down their temples from uncle to nephew (The present Viharadhipati (chief abbot) is the unimpressively controversial nephew of the previous Chief.)² [2]

Other caste-based nikayas

The Sri Lanka Buddhist Temple, **Sentul**, on the other hand, is run by a lower-caste Salagama monk of the Amarapura Nikaya (the Amarapura Order). The 3rd Sinhala order is the still-lower fisher Karava caste Ramañña Nikāya, with house-temples in Singapore, the US and elsewhere.

The caste-based **discrimination** made many Karava, Salagama, Durava, Bathgama, Deva and other castes members considered as “low” by the Govigama caste to become Catholics and Anglicans.

As Sinhala Buddhists went into the world, they learned that **caste** is an embarrassment and not to their advantage. In August 2019, the 2 non-Goyigama-caste Nikayas combined to form the Amarapaura-Ramanna Samagri Maha Sangha Sabha, making it the largest Buddhist fraternity in Sri Lanka.

Power marriage

But this marriage is about neither renunciation nor awakening. It is about power and wealth, the seductive face of a dysfunctional family, where the family name is used for its own glory, spreading its own gospel, for the sake of gold. It is history repeating itself, a mere variation on the same theme.

It is a coven still driven in the darkness of its past ideology: that of the **burden of books**, of the study for gains and status. These are no renunciants but wealthy entrepreneurs who turn away from the Buddha for worldly learning, for the sake of titles and status—not for personal growth, mental change or the wisdom of awakening.

Sinhala Buddhism

The English-speaking Buddhists of Malaysia and Singapore were naturally drawn to such Sinhala missions whose monks spoke English well enough. The Chief High Priest of the Brickfield Temple, **Kirinde Sri Dhammananda**—a missionary with the vision and virtue of a Jesuit priest—saw great advantages in the support of the local Chinese Buddhists, who, as a rule, were raised with Daoist superstitions and Confucian ethics.

The local Chinese Buddhists were given sacred threads, listened to parittas (protective chants), “transferred” merits (as if they were negotiable), and received blessings from the monks (who thus became priests). In short, they were groomed to be dependent on the monks as priests, like in the Catholic Churches.

² <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2012/12/02/chief-monk-faces-ouster>

The local minority, the Tamil Buddhists, were few, and did not feel welcome for reasons too complicated to be detailed here.

Dhammananda

The charismatic Dhammananda famously wrote and published on popular subjects (like “Why Worry?”) in a “win friends and influence people” Dale Carnegie style. As local Buddhist writers arose, he would often incorporate—under his own name—what he saw as the best of their works and ideas.

The local **Integrated Syllabus** (Dharma Study Syllabus: Piyasīlo, Total Buddhist Work, 1983: 181-218), the first of its kind, was surreptitiously used for their Sunday Dhamma School, with their local author’s name cavalierly replaced by that of the Mission Vihara).

Familiar strangers

These are just a glimpse of Dhammananda’s single-minded ambition and to ensure that he was perceived to be the only pioneer who brought Buddhism to Malaya (later Malaysia). This was certainly the perception back in Sri Lanka. We should heed the Buddha's warning in Dhammapada verses 73-74.

With Dhammananda’s death, the in-house local Buddhist groups were asked to leave the Vihara, even though they had laboured for the same place and same faith. And despite the fact that these local Buddhists had worked and donated to raise millions for the huge buildings in the premises. It was to be purely a Sinhala temple, where locals may visit and pray but as familiar strangers. A community divided by the same faith.

The blind and the seeing

Ethnic temples are built to specially cater to the needs of the respective **races**. Even when we frequent their premises we will be on foreign land. It is only when local Buddhists work together, even from our separate and scattered premises, we are still one as local Buddhists. Together, we will be stronger and our voice will be louder, not merely as monks and nuns, but as a larger community.

The overzealous missionaries, the false teachers, are **blind**: dark and light are the same to them. They silently lurk like leeches in the shadows of the religious jungle. We, the seekers of Dhamma, cannot see in the dark; it is blinding. We need the light. We must move to the light. The Buddha is that light that still shines through the Dhamma. This is the light that gives us true sight: even with our eyes closed, we see more; we see life. We awaken to the deathfree.

But first we must turn to the light.

R809 Revisioning Buddhism 341

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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