

Free Buddhism

How we can grow in Buddha Dhamma
[Previously published in fb191107 piya]

We live in such a comfortable prison that we do not even realize it is a prison. We are a conquered people from the start. We can begin with the arrivals of the Portuguese ships with their armoured soldiers, guns and cannons. Almost overnight, Malacca fell in 1511.

Malacca became a Portuguese colony. With that came Roman Catholicism. Around the same time, the Spaniards were violently and completely wiping out the Incas, Mayas and other South American tribes for their gold and land. They also conquered the Philippines. Both the Portuguese and the Spaniards conquered these lands, and us, in the name of their God. This is called colonialism.

God, glory, gold

In 1641, the Dutch “liberated” Malacca from the Portuguese. Being Protestants, the Dutch converted the Catholic Church on St Paul’s Hill, Malacca, into a Protestant Church. They came from the same God-based religion; they swore at each other by the same God.

The Protestant Europeans (Britain, Holland, Germany and northern Europe mostly) were sick of the inhuman excesses of Catholic Rome (such as those of the notorious Pope Alexander VI Borgia). In short, the Catholics and Protestants were at war with each other, fighting for the world, to conquer us: for God, Glory and Gold.

Then, came Napoleon who unified Europe for a while. But he believed in luck and his allies were not punctual. So, he fell at Waterloo against the British (1815). The Dutch ruled Malacca from 1641 to 1825, when the British took over Malacca by the Anglo-Dutch Treaty (1824). This was partly to settle British ownership of Singapore (“founded” by Raffles in 1819).

For the sake of sons

The Dutch claimed that Johor from which Raffles got Singapore was in the Dutch sphere of influence. (They were talking about us!) Basically, the British gave up Bencoolen (Bengkulu, Indonesia) in exchange for Malacca (with its Portuguese fort). For some reason, the British destroyed this fort, leaving only the Santiago Gate, which we can see, and feel its coldness to this day.

With British occupation, came Anglican Christianity. If you are wondering: it started with Henry VIII who began as a devout Catholic. He failed to sire sons with first wife, Catherine of Aragon (Catholic Spain). He wanted to marry again, but Rome (the Catholic Pope) refused to allow this. Henry was King, and decided to split from Rome, and started the Church of England. He married 5 times more (he had 2 of his wives beheaded), but still no male heir. The Church of England is still with us to this day.

Japanese insularity

All these Christian conquerors came with guns and the Bible in their hands. They kept the guns. We held the Bible in our hands; they now held our lands. On these lands, they built their Churches. Now we call them National Monuments!

The Japanese, on the other hand, were sagaciously determined to be as good as the West. Like Thailand's King then, the 16th-century Tokugawa shogunate, knew of the real plans of the Christian saints and ships that came to Nagasaki. The Japanese cleverly restricted the Christian influx. To this day, Thailand and Japan have insignificant Christian influence.

Ricci reaches Beijing

Matteo Ricci, "Servant of God" (from the Catholic Church), arrived in Portuguese Macau in 1582. He was a Jesuit (the cleverest and most cunning of missionaries). Ricci first dressed in Chinese monk's robes. Some Chinese admirers (we always have such people around) advised him that locals looked down on monks as worldly and living on the deaths of others (conducting funerals). They advised him to dress up as a Confucian scholar, which he did.

By 1601, he was the **first** European to enter the Forbidden City of Beijing, invited by Emperor Wanli himself. In Beijing, he taught the Chinese court astronomy and calendrical science. He succeeded in converting a number of court officials this way (notice, not by religion alone). The Emperor was, of course, impressed, but knew his place.

Papal Bull

Ricci mastered Chinese, and even introduced Catholic mass in Chinese and allowed ancestor worship. Fortunately (for us), the jealous Dominicans and Franciscans (some of whom were evangelizing the Philippines) were dead against Ricci's "distortions" of their religion. They complained to the Pope, who unwisely issued a Papal Bull (a decree), telling Ricci to keep in line. When the Emperor read the Bull, he was not amused. That was the end of Ricci's work in China.

Mission schools

The British were better colonizers. British Christians, especially the Methodists, started missionary schools. This worked well because locals were keen to have their children schooled in English and western learning for greater prosperity (no matter what the costs). The real learning was, of course, Christian indoctrination. Even today, we have locals who quip that we should be grateful to these missionary schools! The British missions did their work on us well.

With English schooling, we now have a convenient medium to communicate with Buddhists from other colonized Buddhist countries, especially Ceylon (British, 1815-1948; modern Sri Lanka) and Burma (British, 1824-1948; modern Myanmar). Now we have Buddhist Missionaries from Sri Lanka and Myanmar. The Thai Missionaries also came: they spoke English or

local dialects, or we learned Thai. We are so used to imported good and goods. The foreign Missions loved that.

Migrant Buddhism

As a predominantly **migrant community**, we do not really have deep roots in any kind of culture as strong as those of these foreign Missionaries (including the Buddhist). We also knew almost nothing about Buddhism when the Missionaries came. Just as the Sultanate Malaccans were amazed at the first Europeans (the Portuguese), the “white Bengalis,” we today admire the foreign Buddhist missionaries of all colours.

These Buddhist missionaries came from old Buddhist cultures, but these are “**prefixed**” Buddhisms: Sinhala Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism, Thai Buddhism, and so on. In other words, their culture or race comes first. Of course, each Mission claims they are teaching Pure Buddhism (complete with Transference of Merits and Blessing Chanting). Most of us do not know what all this mean (which suits them fine), but we love those Rituals and willing to pay for them.

Holding rituals

These rituals keep us going to the Mission Viharas and Foreign Temples. For generations and decades, we were spoon-fed with Merit Buddhism, Blessing Buddhism and Dale Carnegie Buddhism: we became dependent on them as Priests. These Priests were our idols; we are idol-worshippers to this day.

Those amongst us who made some effort to study the suttas (to know Buddhism directly) wondered about **self-reliance** that the Buddha stressed before he passed away. Then, we learned that the goal of Buddhism, the aim of being a true Buddhist, is to reach the path in this life itself (by becoming a streamwinner or beyond).

This reflection is a reminder to us that just as those Missionary Nations have deep roots in Buddhist culture, we do not want to remain colonized by them. Help us, free us, to grow our own Bodhi tree in Malaysia, in Singapore, so that we will grow like the Buddhist cultures of Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand.

Free and wise

We need this even very urgently because of the presence of other God-centered evangelists and colonizers who are growing in our midst.

As long as we depend on foreign priests and preachers, we are merely race-based Buddhists. We need to grow socially and mature culturally by making the Dhamma a natural part of our lives. We must grow the Bodhi tree in our own land.

The one thing that frees us

The Buddha's teaching is like the great open ocean, full of water, food, space and treasures. All the world's great rivers flow into the ocean, and, doing so, they all lose their names and come to be known simply as the "great ocean." Their waters mingle freely as the great ocean that connects continents, islands and lands.

The Buddha Dhamma is that great ocean that should unite us in the spirit of learning about ourselves, our cultures; working to bring Buddha Dhamma into our culture, enriching it without adulterating the Dhamma.

Let us be like islands alone and free standing above the ocean, yet connected by it. For, underneath all that water and depth, we are all a single land-mass call earth. We are thus unified by our Dhamma-spirited lives. This should be our vision when we work to live and spread the Dhamma.

R670 Revisioning Buddhism 265, rev 200819

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

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2020