

Bringing Dhamma home

What does the future hold for Buddhism here?

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In the course of my sutta translation for nearly 20 years now, I have found some local Buddhists (Malaysian and Singaporeans) who are very good in Pali. At first, they seemed enthusiastic about helping in the proof-reading of the Sutta Discovery (SD) translations.

Editors and censors

However, after reading a few of my works, especially the essays (which are often exposes of what's wrong with Buddhism and their sutta-based remedies), these proof-readers strongly objected to some of my views because they seemed to clash with the sectarian stand of these editors and censors (that is what they have become).

I realize that they knew a lot academically about the suttas and Pali, but had the notion that their sectarian views and foreign teachers were right while I was wrong. This is still the pattern today. Successful professionals often look up to some titled foreign monastics or teachers who decide what is right or wrong about the Buddhism that we locals should know or practise. In other words, there is NO LOCAL VOICE that is really acceptable to these followers of the foreign missions and sectarian Buddhism.

Merit transfer, fund transfer

On the other hand, there are a handful of locals who show a great love for Sutta and Pali, respect for the Dhamma, and would like to see Buddhism as a living tradition of our own community, not as a tributary to some foreign mission, rooted in "merit transfer" and fund transfer, especially the Sinhala missions.

The Sinhala missions have been here for over a century, that is, they came in colonial times under the auspices of our foreign colonial masters. Our countries are now independent, but in these post-colonial times, we are still colonized by the Sinhala monks.

Salaried priests

They are either employed (they are "salaried") by our temples like purohits (priests) who sprinkle holy water and dispense blessed threads (like the brahmins did). Or they run their own House Temples, living little differently from the laity, since they do not gather fortnightly for Uposatha and Patimokkha conclave. In fact, as a rule, they are Vinaya-less monks.

The more qualified of these foreign Sinhala missionaries (PhD holders, etc) try to run some kind of Buddhist courses (Diploma, BA, etc) accredited to some University back in Sri Lanka. But the standards in these institutions are, as a rule, very much lower than even some of the best Dhamma-spirited temple's classes here! As a rule, these foreign mission-accredited courses often started with over a hundred applicants (with registration fees), but within weeks, the class dropped to just a handful! This has always been the case, so far.

Buddhism without spirit

The reasons, I think, are clear. The teachers themselves, though qualified, were not experienced in teaching the subject. They also lacked actual Dhamma practice except for their Sinhala-*philia* (familiarity and bias for Sinhala Theravada). Secondly, their teachings are neither inspiring nor interesting, since Buddhism had become a classroom subject, not a living spiritual tradition. An ethnically sectarian Buddhism can never be a spiritual teaching.

Lately, these ethnic-based classes seemed to be focusing more on Sinhala history and culture. Hence, we were learning more about Sinhala history and culture. Buddhism has been relegated to a servant of ethnic culture: this, then, is a race-based Buddhism.

Beyond “transfer” Buddhism

On the positive side, locals who are serious about Buddha Dhamma have tried to look beyond “merit-transfer” and fund-transfer Buddhism, into what the Buddha really taught, as recorded in the suttas. Ironically, almost none of these efforts have been initiated by the foreign missionaries. They are, as a rule, a local effort since the start.

However, sadly, some locals have become accomplished Buddhist or Pali scholars, but we never see them working here. I’m not sure of the real reasons, but I sense they do not think locals are up to such a learned level. They basically perceived us as being obsequious of foreign monks, we look up to quick-answers rituals and priestcraft from the monks and will donate (pay) any amount for this. It’s just like a business transaction.

Perhaps, these local accomplished scholars had some inferiority complex that they would never be accepted by locals: it is difficult to know. Anyway, a generation has passed, and such scholars have mostly retired in their sunset dusk. They were some of our most brilliant minds, but they chose to become salaried professional monks away from us.

The future

Yet amongst us who remain local Buddhists, there are a handful, but growing number of those who know Pali, even good in it. Most of them are self-taught: they are what academic scholars mock as “insight scholars.” In other words, we lack academic qualifications and are not part of academia (unless we are able to sponsor some of their researches and ventures). No money, no talk, seems to be the maxim.

If the foreign missionaries had really loved the Dhamma and cared about us, they would have diligently taught us Pali. It will take at least a generation for us to get out of the colonized mind and monk-dependent mode. If we do not outgrow this dependence, but continue to condition our children to look up to these foreign missionaries, we will always remain their slaves as we must have been in mediaeval Sri Lanka monasteries.

Building our dhamma future

The choice is ours. Only we can sort out our own local Buddhist problems and work beyond the confines of walls and wallets. We must truly love the Dhamma and respect other locals to be able to work together, not against one another, and serving foreign masters. We must overcome the divisiveness and group loyalties on account of the foreign missions, to work for our common good.

We have only one true teacher, the historical Buddha; we follow his teachings, the Buddha Dhamma; and we should aspire to study, practise and realize the path, as the Buddha exhorts us. This is the kind of Buddhism, Buddha Dhamma, we want and need for our local communities.

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

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