

Abhidhamma Day

4th week after Vesak

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Sri Lanka was once filled with great Dhamma teachers who were good meditators and wrote classics in Dhamma, prosody and sannes. Now more robed priests are becoming businessmen, scholars, wage earners, and preaching about being close to women. Just the opposite to the teachings of the Kasi Bharadvaja Sutta (S 1.4), SD 15.10a(2).

Some decades back, one priest wrote a book called “The Bhikkhu’s Heritage.” Now, effectively, there is no more bhikkhu nor heritage of Dhamma in the Sri Lanka priest. No more Vinaya, no more Dhamma; only BA, MA, PhD, and House Viharas.

We are easily impressed by looks, titles, wealth, buildings, reputation. We are devoted to Chief High Priests, but are unable to sit long and wise in peace with local Dhamma meditators or listen to suttas; not even to read happily a sutta with all the notes.

Seeking Dhamma

Yet, when we look deep enough, and seek for Dhamma Vinaya, we can still find it. I posted a photo (not a very clear one at that) of a sculpture of the Buddha meditating in a cave in India approached by the divine musician Pañcasikha. A young Myanmar monk messaged me telling me how he was inspired by the picture. He at once recognized the significance of the sculpture, and said that he would like to one day visit that cave (which he named and located).

I am told that Myanmar monks who study in Sri Lanka meet regularly, weekly, on special days to study the suttas. I am told that TODAY (16 June 2021), the Myanmar Buddhists celebrate the Buddha preaching Abhidhamma in the Jewelled Chamber (ratana,ghara) to the devas during the 4th week after the awakening (Vesak) [SD 26.1 (5.6)].

Abhidhamma is about Dhamma

Although I neither see the Abhidhamma as canonical nor am I a scholastic, I deeply respect the Abhidhamma. When we have mastered the suttas and go on to master the Abhidhamma, and present them in terms of modern psychology and aesthetics, we speak the language of poets, mystics, philosophers, scholars: we speak the language of the arhats, the Buddha. But we need to master both, and the suttas first.

I get the impression that Myanmarese (or Burmese) are born chanting Pali. Their habit of reciting the Paṭṭhāna (kusalā dhammā, akusalā dhammā abyakatā dhamma ...) continues to this day, wherever there are Myanmar monks.

One of the advantages of having been an ex-monk who loves Dhamma is that we know what it’s like to feel inner peace and sangha fellowship. Now we feel this fellowship with those who love Dhamma, too.

Old friends

Sadly, a Sinhala monk is more likely to give me the silent treatment because I am not a wealthy local lay Buddhist who can sponsor or support them in their quest for success. What's worse, I know too much Dhamma (a threat to the business)! Yet, when I speak Dhamma with a Myanmar monk, it's like old family members and friends meeting again after a long parting.

Whenever I converse with a Myanmar monk or read their publications in English, I imagine they still have an encyclopedic mind of Dhamma that a Sinhala himi is rapidly losing, and in most cases, have lost, especially when they leave Sri Lanka. We see them treating the University halls like some retirement home. Indeed, some of those who follow the scholarly tradition have produced very good books on Pali and Sutta guides (like those on numerical dhammas).

But it all seems to end there: we don't really know them as human teachers. We are like peasants tilling our sutta fields, and they are royalty and the Church in their comfortable residences and Covid distance.

The Buddha was and is always available to us.

Encyclopedic mind, big heart

The Myanmar Buddhist mind is encyclopedic, and this seems fine in Burmese. But when it is put into English, that mind's reputation is thrown into the open and fertile field global critical learning. Take the English translation of the Yamaka and Commentary: western scholars who worked on them to publish them could not use a translation by Burmese monks in Malaysia, because, quote, they do not want "to be influenced by its uncomfortable English"!

Another monumental publication is "The Great Chronicles of Buddha," a remarkable effort in translating the Buddhavaṃsa and its commentary. However, the editing and English could have been much better. Locals don't notice all this: we rejoice in being able to publish this Volume of Merit: the good is in the act of collecting money and making the book. But not reading it. The wisdom aspect is not there. Hence, we will always be looking up to the white teacher speaking good English. (Don't take me seriously here: it's actually worse.)

Master English

Anyway, my point is that every young Myanmar monk who is eager to become true and good Dhamma workers to the world should master English. Not just be good in it, but master it, ideally. Otherwise, we will only attract the silly piety of local Buddhists and their merit-transfer mentality, but miss out on the thinking and wise Buddhists who can raise our Buddhist community into a caring wholesome productive society, a bit like how western Buddhists tend to gather and work together.

Myanmar monks and nuns are a deep and rich mine of Dhamma gems. The mine workers should be good in what they do (master Dhamma, meditation, and language); gems should be properly mined (high standard of editing and publishing), the workers' health well protected (meditation and mindfulness), and workers' welfare is paramount (be kind to one another and others).

Kind, good and right

The world is waiting for the Dhamma. To give the world the best of Dhamma, we must master the best of Dhamma. Being kind alone is not enough: this may work for those whose Dhamma is shaky. We must be kind, good and right in our Dhamma practice and human conduct.

To be Buddhist is to be human in a divine way, looking beyond the stars to the divine path heading for nirvana's radiant joyful peace. It starts now and here, with you.

Happy Abhidhamma Day: the day we put Dhamma "above" (ABHI) everything else. Sadhu.

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

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