

Liberation anthropology, liberation Buddhism

How to be free through learning and Dhamma spirit

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[SD vol 60.1c Handbook of Meditation in Society 3: The Rhetoric of Buddhist Experience](#) ©

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8.2.1 Race, culture, even politics are, as a rule, significant factors in the development of Buddhism in society. A scholar's insight is especially valuable and vital in highlighting Buddhism's imagination, beauty and insight that will benefit anyone who embraces it; or, in exposing its excesses and weaknesses so that the intelligent and honest amongst us will appreciate the lesson, and even assert ourselves to correct those failures. The scholar of Buddhism is at his best when his work helps Buddhists to understand Buddhism better; or when his work challenges Buddhists to see or show the true worth of their views and actions, so that Buddhists are inspired to seek and embrace the true meaning and purpose of the Buddha's teachings.

8.2.2 Scholars (anthropologists) like Gananath Obeyesekere, Stanley Tambiah and Valentine Daniel¹ have written significantly against the violence and modernism (read secularism) that have plagued Sri Lanka in the second half of the 20th century (which generally worsens to this day). No scholar before the Sinhala anthropologist **Heraliwala L Seneviratne** (1934-) has so convincingly argued, pointing to pertinent sources and realities that modernist developments in Sri Lanka's monkhood have directly contributed to the nation's failure to establish and enjoy prosperity and harmony.²

Seneviratne describes the contents of his book, *The Work of Kings*, as follows: "I content that the conception of the role of the monk as social activism, widely believed by contemporary elite monks and the Sinhala Buddhist middle class to go back to two millennia, is in fact more convincingly traceable to the written and spoken words of Anagarika Dharmapala in the early decades of the 20th century. Dharmapala's definition of the monastic role as dedication for national moral renewal during the dark era of imperial domination went through rapid goal displacement within a short period of about 3 decades. Giving birth to a **worldly individualism** in the monastery, unprecedented in the history of South and South-east Asian Buddhism." (1999:xi f; highlighted)

Seneviratne questioned the theory that Buddhist monks had political power in pre-colonial times, as generally believed and argued by Walpola Rahula in his *Heritage of the Bhikkhu* (1972),³ and implicitly in *History of Buddhism in Ceylon* (1956, 1966). Rahula's views and actions twisted Dharmapala's dreams about the monk's role in the growth of a peaceful, harmonious, democratic society into a nightmare of a self-aggrandizing, vociferous and aggressive priesthood whose activities are detrimental to Sri Lanka. Dharmapala's dream was a moral regeneration of monkhood, but it became instead a degeneration of the Sinhala priesthood.

¹ R Gombrich & G Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*, Princeton, 1988; S J Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed?*, Chicago, 1992; E V Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an anthropology of violence*, Princeton, 1996.

² See S C Berkwitz, review of Seneviratne's *The Work of Kings* (1999), *JAOS* 121,2 2001:281-283.

³ See SD 60.1ab (2.1.1.2).

8.2.3 Seneviratne gives us a revealing picture of **Sinhala Buddhist missionaries**, such as those who have set up their Viharas and Centres in Malaysia and Singapore. It was Anagarika Dharmapala's [1.2.2] idea that Sri Lankan monks should spread Buddhism to the world⁴ "and the first missionaries were monks who worked on shoestring budgets." These religious missions, as we know from their history, went out into the world for their own good: for "Gospel, glory and gold." They claimed to preach Buddhism but, in reality, they were spreading Sinhala Dharma. Their Sinhala culture came first and foremost; Buddhism was merely the wrapper. Their tacit purpose and priority were to embrace the wealthy for their patronage. The Vihara was a meme and trap for the rich.

Just a generation after Dharmapala, notes Seneviratne, we come across the phenomenon of monks, many of them pupils or in some other way connected to these pioneers, going overseas and establishing themselves in foreign lands, facilitated by both philanthropists of those lands and by expatriate [Sinhala] communities of Buddhists. A few of these monks control vast revenues and live the life of busy executives, replete with symbols like Mercedes Benzes, BMWs, and cellular phones.

The role advocated by W Rahula ostensibly to benefit society, worked in the end to benefit the individual monks who, rather than doing any "social service," used their liberation from traditional duties, and the education and travel opportunities in foreign lands to engage in various employment and enterprising activities that brought them wealth, status, even power and influence. This gave rise to an elite subclass of "super rich monks," most of whom use their foreign connections to tap sources of wealth.⁵ [9.2.2]

These monks have a foothold both in the country of their adoption and in Sri Lanka, and some hold immigrant status in several countries. At the lower end of this financially comfortable class are the salary-earning monks, mostly graduates, who, especially if they also have support from the laity as well as productive land, are able to invest money in businesses like repair shops, taxi services, rental properties, and tuition classes. Others amongst them resorted to astrology, medicine, and various occultisms, the "beastly arts" that are taboo for monks.⁶

Seneviratne observes, "Throughout history there were monks who practiced these, but now they do so with a new sense of legitimacy and commercialism.⁷ These come from the new definition of the monk's role as *social service*. I have argued that once this definition was accepted, monks were liberated from their traditional role, and the floodgates were opened for them to do anything they pleased. Many monks who say their work is 'social service' may not be engaging in this kind of activity for lack or [sic] resources, enterprise, or any other

⁴ For Dharmapala's works: *Return to Righteousness*, Colombo, 1965.

⁵ The Mahavihara of the Siyam Nikaya (Goyigama caste) monks located in Brickfields, KL, was well known as the "rich man's temple" (J Samuels, "Forget not the old country," *South Asian Diaspora* 2012:124 +n11).

⁶ The first 15 suttas of the Dīgha Nikāya each contains a long stock passage on these "animal arts" (*tiracchāna vijjā*) that monks (and nuns) should avoid. See eg **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1,43-62) + SD 25.2 (3); **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2,43-63) + SD 8.10 (3); also **Tiracchāna, kathā S** (S 56.9), SD 65.13; **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9,3), SD 7.14.

⁷ In advertisements in national newspapers monks offer magical help in all spheres of activity—employment, examinations, court cases, family problems, love, interviews, and so forth. See for example the advertisement of the monk Telleke Dhammapala, *Divayina*, 7 January 1996. (Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings*, 1999:116 n2)

reason. Still, at the very least, the definition of the monk's work as social service has led to a greater secularization of the monks." (*The Work of Kings*, 1999:335 f, emphases added)

8.2.4 These **foreign missions** in recent times by Sinhala monks, Seneviratne reveals to us,

... in fact, are only the foreign arm of the same culture and subject to the same broad social forces. It is thus not surprising that it met with the same fate as the local project: the altruistic ideal was replaced by the desire of individual monks to gain status, influence, wealth, and, where possible, power.

An interesting development is the establishment of **chiefships**⁸ in various countries, paralleling those of the hierarchies of Malvatta and Asgiriya. Such hierarchies and titles were not anywhere within the scheme of planned [sic] by Dharmapala, and in fact they were mocked by him. Besides, these chiefships, like their prototypes in Sri Lanka, have absolutely no meaning beyond providing some purely vain psychological satisfaction to the bearer and to his and his [sic] domestic and local group's status pretensions at home in Sri Lanka.

There are chief Sanghanayakas for **England, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, and the USA**, and these are rapidly proliferating in all countries where there are missions. In this imaginary world conquest, there is a most peculiarly ironical consummation of Dharmapala's foreign missionary project."⁹

(Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings*, 1999:341)

Lesser monks keenly follow the ambitious dreams of their "enforeignized" (*videsagatavima*)¹⁰ superiors. Many young Sinhala monks apprenticed themselves as "missionaries" in Malaysia and Singapore, furtively scouting around for some wealthy pious sponsors to patronize for some university degree, or simply to set up their own Vihara locally or in some other country.

Tales of foreign Buddhists of obsequious faith and gullible generosity of wealthy Malaysians and Singaporeans reached the ears of these hopeful monks in impoverished Sri Lanka. A Singaporean Buddhist visiting Sri Lanka was once shocked and embarrassed when a Sinhala monk grabbed his arm and invited him to make "**angpow**" (red packet)¹¹ offerings to some local monks!

8.2.5 Significantly, throughout his book, Seneviratne stresses the ethical imperative of responsible anthropologists to introduce issues of value, make judgments, and contribute to the body of moral critiques regarding the culture that we are studying: it should contribute to

⁸ Esp as "chief high priest" (*mahā,nāyaka*), a neologism invented by such power-driven monks.

⁹ Seneviratne's adds that the foreign trips by the high-rank Sinhala monks was a strategy in "one-upmanship": even a short trip overseas is "prestigious and is consciously understood as potentially convertible to mobility locally." See details 1999:341 f.

¹⁰ Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings*, 1999:141.

¹¹ "Angpow" is local Hokkien or Fujianese (a southern Chinese dialect), 红包 *hóngbāo*, ie, traditional gifts of cash to the young and unmarried (for the latter as a hint that they should be married!), and to elders esp during Chinese New Year, weddings, birthdays or any auspicious or judicious occasion, and often given to religious people as merit-making or out of faith. The unwritten face-saving code is, however, simply that we should *never* ask for it. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_envelope.

the vision of a **liberation anthropology**. Indeed, any kind of good scholarship, especially Buddhist studies in its various aspects, should inspire a vision of **liberation studies**.¹² [8.3.1-3]

It should be noted that there is clearly some nobility in this gesture, whatever the real reason may be, but it is hard to imagine that the anthropologist was speaking up for Buddhism, or perhaps even as a Buddhist. Either way, this is clearly what an informed Buddhist who loves the Dharma would want to see, even work for. After all, it is often safer not to rock the boat, and to help paddle it along, which well describes an ethnic Buddhist. Power, in fact, does not always corrupt, but it often reveals the kind of person who exploits that power.

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¹² See Seneviratne, 1999:6.