

**IF THE MAHĀVIHARA OF ANURADHAPURA HAS BEEN MORE TOLERANT  
TOWARDS OTHER SECTS, THE HISTORY OF SRI LANKA WOULD HAVE BEEN  
WRITTEN IN A DIFFERENT WAY: A CRITICAL ESSAY**

*Anuda Kanchana*

It is quite fair to name the arrival of Arhant Mahinda from India as the first major turning point in the civilization of the Island. The Sri Lankan Buddhist background up to today retains an inseparable relationship in the history of the Island. The Mahāvihāra of Anuradhapura, which has been accepted as the foremost cultural center in the history of Sri Lanka, and as the major the Theravada Buddhist country in South Asia, religious features in the history of island may have been the pivotal factors. Similarly, the credit for naming Sri Lanka as the center of the Theravada Buddhism for over a period of 2000 years also should go to the lineage of Theravada monks of the Mahāvihāra. If not, history of the Island may have depicted a mixed and distorted Buddhist philosophy mixed with elements borrowed from the Northern Buddhism. In this paper I will focus on the stability of the Mahāvihāra.

There is nothing wrong with referring to the tradition of Mahāvihāra Bhikkhu-s as Theravada or Vibhajjavada. In Buddhaghosa's view, it is the pure form of Buddha that is referred to by these terms. (*Vibhajjavādiseṭṭhānaṃ, theriyānaṃ yasassināṃ; Mahāvihāravāsīnaṃ, vaṃsajassa vibhāvino. Visuddhimaggo* ) The Mahāvihāra that was inaugurated at the time of Arhant Mahinda which had been developed as a fully fledged monastic complex by the time of King Duṭṭhagāmaṇī. It seems that the lineage of the Mahāvihāra monks had spread from the Jambukola Paṭṭhana and Nāga Vihāra in the north and up to Rohaṇa in the south. Evidence available in the Commentaries tell us that the monks of the Māvihāra upheld to ten-fold principles. At the beginning of the exposition of the *Patīccasamuppādaṇṇanā* of the *Vibhaṅga Aṭṭhakathā*, it has been stated that the commentary would be written according to the Theravada, without violating the views of the monks who participated in the Councils, in accordance with their own tradition, unmixed with heretic views, without removing ideas in the 'sutta' (sūtra), according to the *vinaya* and according to the 'mahāpadesa,' illuminating the dharma and causing their meanings to shine in diverse ways. [*Idāni tadanantare paṭīccasamuppādavibhaṅge yā "ayaṃ avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā" tiādinā nayena tanti nikkhittā,*

*tassā atthasaṃvaṇṇanaṃ karontena vibhajjavādimañḍalaṃ otarivā ācariye anabbhācikkhantena sakasamayaṃ avokkamantena parasamayaṃ anāyūhantena suttam appaṭibāhantena vinayaṃ anulomentena mahāpadese olokontena dhammaṃ dīpentena atthaṃ saṅghantena tamevatthaṃ puna āvattetvā aparehipi pariyāyehi niddisantena ca yasmā atthasaṃvaṇṇanā kātubbā hoti, pakatiyāpi ca dukkarāva paṭiccasamuppādassa atthasaṃvaṇṇanā, Sammohavinodanī (PTS) 129]. This shows that the Mahāvihāra tradition followed an exegetical and independent method standing on a firm ground. The seeds of this tradition were visible from the time of the living Buddha which continued from the first council up to the time of compiling the Kathāvatthu. Thus it seems that the role of the Mahāvihāra had been fostering the *vibhajjavāda*, the Mahāvihāra tradition in accordance with the *Mahāpadesa* following the *dhamma* and *vinaya*.*

In this context, it is not possible to imagine that the Bhikkhu-s of the Mahāvihāra had been interested in paying any attention to accept the views of the non-Theravada sects. The test they gave Buddhaghosa alone shows how much they were concerned about conserving the Theravada tradition. By comparing Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* with Upatissa's *Vimuttimagga*, it becomes clear that it was designed to respond to the views of other sects. Had the Mahāvihāra been tolerant towards other sects, history of Sri Lanka may have taken an entirely different path. The Abhayagiri Stupa is a gigantic physical monument to the sectarian dissensions in Sri Lanka. However, the '*pariyatti*' and '*patipatti*' division started with the writing of the '*tipitaka*' on palm leaves has exerted a deep impact. The references in the commentaries show that the two traditions '*Araṇyavāsī*' and '*Gāmaṇvāsī*' arose within the first few centuries of introducing Buddhism to the Island. According to the Commentaries, there has been another division among the Theravada monks as '*Dīghabhāṇaka*, *Majjhimbhāṇaka* etc. The use of terms such as '*keci*,' '*apare*,' *aññe*;' '*ekacce*,' '*eko*,' '*yesaṃ*' helps us understand that Buddhism had been divided into various schools. Further, by the terms such as '*porāṇā*,' '*porāṇācariya*,' '*ācariya*,' '*bhāṇakā*' etc. also indicate different views. Then in the Commentaries, various views such as '*Vitaṇḍavādī*' and '*pubbaseliya*' together with the author's views as '*attanomati*' have been collated .

The development of the Buddhist philosophical tradition has inspired all the Buddhist philosophical schools including Theravada- Vibhajjavādī Buddhism. However, the prime

channel for flowing other sectarian views into Sri Lanka was the Abhayagiri monastery. Here, we must not forget the political issues. According to the Mahāvamsa sub commentary, cause of the emergence of sects has been the separation of the Khandhaka and Parivāra into texts. With the occupation of the Abhayagiri monastery by a group of Mahāvihāra monks led by Kupikkalattissa and Bahalamassu thera, doors of Buddhism in Sri Lanka came to be open to non-Theravada views. At the same time, the Dharmaruci monks of the Vajjiputta sect arrived in the Island who took up residence at Abhayagiri monastery. Available literary and archeological evidence show that there was an academic development of Buddhism at that time. The Nikāyasaṅgaha says that in addition to the Dharmaruci sect, monks of the Vaitulya and Sāgalika Nikayas also flourished at the Abahyagiri. The second monastery that opened doors for other sects was the Jetavana built by King Mahāsena. However, with this division of sects, there was a simultaneous decline as well as development of Buddhism in the Island. The emergence of sects and their respective independent activities may have been influential on the obvious decline of the community of monks by the time of King Vijayabāhu.

In the Saṅgha community of that time, there were also sects of the Mahiṃsāsaka, Vitandavāda, Lokuttaravāda and Gulhavāda in addition to Dharmaruci, Sāgalika and Vaitulyavāda sects in the Island. The monks of the Mahāvihāra, nevertheless, did not accept views of any other sect for the preservation of their orthodox tradition. The question how far this firm stand was conducive to the development of the Theravada (Vibhajjavāda) tradition should be examined separately. However, if the monks of the Mahāvihāra welcomed the views of other sects, it is possible that the monastery called Abhayagiri may not have become so dominant. And the entire society of Sri Lanka would have progressed with new cultural aspects. Further, Theravada Buddhism, which is strong even at present, may have disappeared. As Indian Buddhist philosophical traditions and other traditions like Mādhyamika and Yogācāra may have spread in Sri Lanka too. If the disputes among the Saṅgha did not aggravate, the foundation stone for the Jetavana stupa may not have been laid. Thousands of literary work would have been preserved if the disputes among the Saṅgha had not occurred. It was possible for a new form of Buddhism to emerge through the mixture of Theravada and Mahayana traditions. It would have been possible for the entire society of Sri Lanka to carry the latest cultural features. Similarly, it is also possible that Theravada Buddhism which is still strong in Sri Lanka could have been wiped of the Island.

With the introduction of Buddhism into the Island of Lanka all aspects of political, economic, educational and social spheres were nourished by Buddhism. Although the monks of the Mahāvihāra did not accommodate views of other sects, there is no evidence of the people of the country to have rejected new ideas. This is revealed from the available historical evidence. What can be seen from historical evidence is that most groups from kings to the ordinary people had adjusted their customs and habits under the influence of new religious teachings. We have to admit the fact that historical chronicles like the Mahāvamsa, Nikāyasaṅgaha etc. as not covering all aspects of the history of the country. All these chronicles have been compiled with partiality to the Mahāvihāra. From the day that Abhayagiri monastery broke away from the Mahāvihāra as a new sect, up to the time of King Parākrmbāhu the Great, the ‘purification’ of the Saṅgha, history of the island was full of various conflicts. The Polonnaruva ‘*katikāvata*’ (ecclesiastical code) bears proof to the fact that the ‘purification’ of Saṅgha conducted at the time of Parakramabāhu too was carried out in favor of the Mahāvihāra. However, the uniting of the three sects, Mahāvihāra, Abhayagiri and Jetavana as one sect, causing harmony in the Order of the Saṅgha, cannot be judged whether it was for betterment or decline of Buddhism.

There were some periods from King Vijayabāhu up to the Kandy period when the Order of Saṅgha or the ‘Sāsana’ was in decline. For which the political as well as ecclesiastical conflicts may have been the cause. Although the monks of the Mahāvihāra had taken a strict stand against the views of non-Theravada sects, we cannot think they had rejected all of them. This becomes clear from some references in the texts like the Milindapañha and Visuddhimagga. However, they may not have accepted directly any of those new concepts. Had the Mahāvihāra been tolerant of other views and concepts of the new sects, it would have been even more developed than the Indian universities like the Nālandā and Vickrmaṣīlā. However, the monks of the Mahāvihāra for safeguarding the identity of the *Therīya* tradition, other institutes such as the ‘Rohaṇa Vihāra’ and the Udumbaragiri Vihāra too may not have welcomed the newly developed views.

The monks of the Mahāvihāra may have believed that conservation of Tipiṭaka and commentaries alone would be sufficient for maintaining the ‘*pariyatti*’ principles. However, the defects in what was meant by ‘*pariyattisāsana*’ were realized by the Polonnaruva period from the new revival of the Pali literature during that time. The Holy Tooth Relic that was brought to

Anuradhapura at the time of King Kīrti Sri Megha was kept at the Abhayagiri monastery. The Abhayagiri accepted the new texts brought to this country from abroad. The Abhayagiri and Jetavana made themselves more attractive to the common man through such tolerant attitudes. At the time Chinese traveler monk Fa Hsien arrived in Anuradhapura in the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century, as he has reported, there lived about 3000 monks at the Mahāvihāra and 5000 at the Abhayagiri.

A number of conflicts arose between the Mahāvihāra and other monasteries supporting the new schools. The reigns of Kings Vattagamaṇī, Bhātiya, Voharikatissa, Goṭhābhaya and Mahasen are of special significance in regard to this. The main reason for all those conflicts was the firm stand taken by the Mahāvihāra. The obstinate attitude of the Mahāvihāra may have been the cause of a number of such chaotic developments in the history of the ‘Sāsana’. The conflicts and disagreements that arose among the disunited Saṅgha seem to have been of greater consequence than the results of foreign invasions affecting the progress of the ‘Sāsana’. It was no secret that both the Mahāvihāra and Abhayagiri were striving for winning the favors of the kings. The damage caused to the Mahāvihāra at the time of King Mahasen was much more disastrous than the damages caused during the time of the invasions and the reign of the Coḷa kings before the time of King Vijayabāhu. Accordingly, the monks for the purpose of competing with rival groups through conservation of their respective views, the monks had to seek political support.

The history of Buddhism in the Island shows that every sector from the administration down to the common people had felt the effects of this division. The incident of deporting a group of monks after subjecting them to physical torture and banding of their bodies resulted in serious consequences for the Mahāvihāra. With the arrival of the monk Saṅghamitra at the time of King Goṭhābhaya caused lasting devastation. The extent of damage to the Mahāvihāra can be imagined from the incident of burning books of the Mahāvihāra and sowing ‘*undu*’ (kind of seeds) in the terrace around the Great Stupa Ratnamālī. We can assume that had the Mahāvihāra been more welcoming and friendlier towards other schools, such drastic results could have been prevented. However, the Theravada Buddhists should be thankful to the monks of the Mahāvihāra for protecting and conserving orthodox Buddhism despite all the odds.

Buddhism can be regarded as the principal cultural factor in Sri Lanka. The culture of Lanka developed around Vibhajjavādī Buddhism upholding the views of the Mahāvihāra. The cultural aspects of the countries where Northern Buddhism flourished seem to be much more different

than the culture of Sri Lanka. Such dichotomy occurred due to the difference in the religious principles of the two traditions. Had the monks of the Mahāvihāra been friendlier and more flexible towards the views of other sects, the form of Buddhism now prevailing in the island would have been different. Such a transformed Buddhism would have affected the entire social system of the Island.

Although the Mahāvihāra did not welcome the ‘other Nikāya-s,’ certain prominent monasteries affiliated to the Mahāvihāra welcomed monks of those Nikāya-s. Examples for this situation are the Cetiyaḡiri and the Dakkhiṇaḡiri monasteries. However, according to the Nikāyasaṅghaha, monks of the Mahavihara, Mirisaveti, Cetiyaḡiri and some other monasteries fled to Rohaṇa as a result of King Mahasen’s harassments. Further, from the time of King Saddhātissa, according to the episode of the Judgment of the monk Godha, some disagreement seems to have existed between the Mahāvihāra and the Ceityaḡirivihāra. Historical sources report that the monks of the Dakkhiṇaḡiri lived separately from the Mahāvihāra and the Abhayagirivihāra. Through that division arose the Sāḡalika sect.

It is not wrong to consider the strict principles adopted by the Mahāvihāra as the cause of all these conflicts and problems. Based on this situation all kind of disputes and conflicts arose in the ‘Sāsana’ and the same caused the decline of the Order. However, this attitude and inflexibility adopted by the Mahāvihāra helped teachings of Buddha to prevail in the same orthodox form. If that had not happened, Buddhism in Sri Lanka would have assumed same sort of features as the Northern Buddhism. It is a fact that various ritualistic elements came into the Sinhala culture with the development of the Abhayagirivihāra. But those novel features have not exerted considerable influence on Theravada Buddhism. The commentary says that Buddhadeva Thera, who invited Buddhaghosa to write the *Visuddhimagga* was a member of the Mahimsāsaka Sect. This shows that the Mahāvihāra was in association with some masters from other sects too.

If the Mahāvihāra had agreed with the concepts and views of the new sects, the division of sects, conflicts between the rulers and the Saṅgha, and reformation or purification of the Sāsana etc. may not have taken place. Further, with that the culture of the Island would have progressed along different avenues. Buddhist philosophy, rituals and certain ethical features, may also have developed in a different way. More than anything else, the *Mahāvamsa* which was written according to the Mahāvihāra tradition would have been written in an entirely different way.

However, the Theravada- Vibhajjavāda Buddhism so highly regarded at present would have been contaminated with new ideas and practices.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Adhikaram, E. W. *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*. Sri Lanka, 1946.

Ananda, Kongasthanne. *Nikaya Sangrahaya*. Colombo: Samaywardena, 2008.

Baruah, Bibhuti. *Buddhist Sects and Sectarianism*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2008.

Geiger, Wilhelm; Bode, Mabel Haynes (transl.), Frowde, H. (ed.): *The Mahavamsa or, the great chronicle of Ceylon*, London : Pali Text Society, 1912.

Gombrich, Richard. *Theravada Buddhism: a social history from ancient Benares to modern Colombo*. (2nd rev. ed.) London: Routledge, 2006.

Guruge, Ananda W. P. *Mahavamsa*. Calcutta: M. P. Birla Foundation 1990.

Rahula, Walpola. *History of Buddhism in Ceylon; the Anuradhapura period, 3d century BC-10th century-AC*. Colombo: M.D. Gunasena & Sons. 1956.

Rangama, Chandawimala. *The impact of the Abhayagiri practices on the development of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, 2007.