

The Historical Development of Buddhism in Sri Lanka: Origins, Growth, and Transformation

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Abstract: This paper examines the long history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka across three broad phases that may be described as origins, growth, and transformation. It asks how a tradition carried to the island in the third century before the common era took institutional root, how it matured into a distinctive scholastic and monastic culture, and how it was repeatedly reshaped by political change, colonial intrusion, and the pressures of modernity. The study treats the Pali chronicles, principally the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvamsa*, not as transparent records but as theologically motivated narratives whose claims must be read alongside epigraphic and archaeological evidence and the findings of modern historiography. It argues that the persistence of Sri Lankan Buddhism owes much to the early fusion of *saṅgha* and kingship, to the commitment of the island's monks to the preservation and exegesis of the Pali canon, and to a recurring capacity for institutional renewal in moments of apparent collapse. At the same time the paper resists any picture of an unbroken or static "pure" tradition, showing instead that Theravāda identity on the island was forged through internal contestation among monastic fraternities, through exchange with South India and Southeast Asia, and through confrontation with colonial knowledge and missionary religion. The modern revival, far from being a simple restoration, fashioned a reformed and partly lay Buddhism that continues to shape the religious and political life of contemporary Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Theravāda Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Mahāvihāra, Pali chronicles, monasticism, Buddhist revival, Sinhala identity.

1. Introduction

The history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka has often been told as a story of remarkable continuity, of an island that received the teaching from the missionaries of Aśoka and preserved it faithfully across more than two millennia while it weakened or vanished elsewhere on the South Asian mainland. There is something to this picture, yet it conceals as much as it reveals. The tradition that the island's chroniclers proudly called the *dhamma* of the elders was not a fixed inheritance but a living formation, continually reproduced, defended, and altered by monks, kings, and laity responding to circumstances that no founder could have foreseen. The central problem of this paper is therefore not whether Buddhism survived in Sri Lanka but how it did so, and at what cost to any notion of changelessness.

Three questions organize the discussion. How did Buddhism establish itself institutionally, doctrinally, and socially in the early centuries after its introduction? How did it consolidate into the scholastic Theravāda that would later be exported across the Bay of Bengal? And how did it transform under the successive pressures of medieval political fragmentation, European colonialism, and modern nationalism? Answering these questions requires situating the island within the wider Theravāda world that stretched from Anurādhapura to Pagan, Ayutthaya, and beyond, and within a South Asian history in which Sri Lanka was never isolated but constantly entangled with the politics and religions of the subcontinent. The argument advanced here is that Sri Lankan Buddhism is best understood as a tradition of disciplined adaptation. Its durability rested less on resistance to change

than on a set of resources, the close alliance of monastery and throne, an exceptional investment in textual scholarship, and a willingness to repair broken ordination lineages, that allowed it to absorb shocks and reconstitute itself. The sources for such a history are uneven. The Pali chronicles supply a chronological frame and a powerful interpretive lens, but they were composed within the Mahāvihāra and reflect its interests. Inscriptions, the remains of monastic complexes, commentarial literature, and the documents of the colonial archive must be set against them, and read critically, if the development of the tradition is to be reconstructed with any confidence (Geiger 1912; Walpola Rahula 1956; Gombrich 1988).

2. Historical Origins of Buddhism in Sri Lanka

Before the arrival of Buddhism the island was not a religious vacuum. The evidence, though fragmentary, points to cults of yakṣas and nāgas, to forms of ancestor veneration, and to the presence of brahmanical practice among an elite already in contact with the mainland. Megalithic burials and early Tamil-Brāhmī and Sinhala-Prakrit inscriptions suggest a society organized into chieftaincies that were coalescing, by the third century before the common era, into something like a kingdom centered on the dry-zone city of Anurādhapura. It is into this setting that the chronicles place the decisive event.

According to the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the more elaborate *Mahāvaṃsa*, the teaching was brought to the island by the elder Mahinda, presented as a son of the emperor Aśoka, who arrived during the reign of King Devānaṃpiya Tissa. The famous encounter on the hill of Mihintale, where Mahinda is said to have tested the king's powers of reasoning before expounding the *dhamma*, became the founding scene of Sinhala Buddhism. The king's conversion was swiftly followed by the conversion of his court and the granting of the royal pleasure garden, the Mahāmegha, to the *saṅgha*. The narrative then records the arrival of Mahinda's sister, the *bhikkhunī* Saṅghamittā, who established the order of nuns and brought a cutting of the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha had attained awakening, planted at Anurādhapura where its descendant still grows (Geiger 1912; Walpola Rahula 1956).

These accounts cannot be read as straightforward history. They were composed centuries after the events they describe and serve to bind the legitimacy of the Sinhala monarchy to the fortunes of the order. Yet the broad outline, an introduction of Buddhism under royal patronage in the Mauryan period, is consistent with the epigraphic record, which shows a rapid proliferation of donative cave inscriptions recording gifts to the *saṅgha* by kings, nobles, and ordinary householders. What matters for the present argument is the pattern that crystallized at the outset. Royal patronage and monastic legitimacy were yoked together from the beginning; the king protected and endowed the order, and the order in turn sanctified the king's rule. The establishment of the Mahāvihāra, the great monastic complex at Anurādhapura, gave this arrangement an institutional anchor. Around it there developed a self-conscious community of monks who would come to regard themselves as the custodians of an unbroken transmission, and it is from within this community that the distinctive Theravāda identity of the island took shape.

3. Institutional Consolidation and Scholastic Developments

The centuries following the introduction of Buddhism witnessed the slow elaboration of a monastic landscape of extraordinary density. The Mahāvihāra did not long remain the sole center of authority. By the first century before the common era a second great fraternity, the Abhayagiri, had emerged under royal sponsorship, and it proved more open than its rival to currents of thought arriving from the mainland, including ideas associated with the Mahāyāna and with various non-Theravāda schools. Later still, in the fourth century, a third fraternity, the Jetavana, was established. The relations among these three *viḥāra* communities were marked by rivalry over patronage and doctrine, and the chronicles, written from the standpoint of the Mahāvihāra, present its competitors as deviationists who needed to be corrected or suppressed (Gombrich 1988; Holt 1991).

It was against the background of political insecurity that one of the most consequential events in the history of Theravāda occurred. The *Mahāvaṃsa* reports that during the first century before the common era, in a time of famine and foreign invasion that threatened the survival of the oral

transmission, the monks resolved to commit the Pali *Tipiṭaka* and its commentaries to writing. Whatever the precise circumstances, the fixing of the canon in written form on the island was an achievement of the first importance. It gave the Theravāda a stable textual foundation, it made possible the systematic study and comparison of doctrine, and it allowed the tradition to be transmitted across generations and regions with a fidelity that purely oral cultures could not guarantee. The *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the *Sutta Piṭaka*, and the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* thus acquired in Sri Lanka the canonical shape in which they would be carried elsewhere.

The scholastic achievement reached its apex with the work of the commentator Buddhaghosa in the fifth century. Arriving, by tradition, from the mainland, he worked within the Mahāvihāra and rendered into Pali the older Sinhala commentaries, producing a synthesis whose centerpiece, the *Visuddhimagga*, became the authoritative manual of Theravāda doctrine and meditation. The labors of Buddhaghosa and of other commentators such as Dhammapāla gave the tradition a coherent and defensible doctrinal architecture, and they entrenched the Mahāvihāra's interpretation as the orthodox standard against which other readings would be measured (Walpola Rahula 1956; Gombrich 1988). The consequences extended far beyond the island. Sri Lanka became the reservoir from which Theravāda Buddhism was drawn for transmission to South and Southeast Asia, and in later centuries monks and texts moving from Anurādhapura and its successors would help to shape the Buddhist cultures of Burma, the Mon and Thai lands, and Cambodia. The island had become, in a real sense, the heartland of a transregional tradition.

4. Medieval Transformations and Regional Interactions

The long supremacy of Anurādhapura did not endure. From roughly the eighth century onward the kingdom faced mounting pressure from South Indian powers, and in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries the Coḷa empire conquered the northern plain and ruled it from a base at Polonnaruwa. The dislocation was severe. Monastic institutions lost their endowments, the ordained community was scattered, and the continuity of the *saṅgha* was placed in jeopardy. When the Sinhala king Vijayabāhu I expelled the Coḷas and restored an independent monarchy in the eleventh century, he found the order so depleted that a valid quorum of monks could not be assembled for the conferral of ordination. He was obliged to send to Rāmañña in Lower Burma for monks capable of reconstituting the lineage, an episode that illustrates with unusual clarity the interdependence of the Theravāda regions and the fragility of the very continuity the chronicles celebrate (Geiger 1953; Gombrich 1988).

The Polonnaruwa period that followed, especially under Parākramabāhu I in the twelfth century, brought a determined effort at reform. Confronted by the long-standing divisions among the fraternities, the king is credited with effecting a unification of the *saṅgha* that subordinated the once-independent Abhayagiri and Jetavana communities to the discipline of the Mahāvihāra. This consolidation, recorded in inscriptions as well as in the *Cullavaṃsa*, the continuation of the great chronicle, marked the decisive triumph of the Mahāvihāra's orthodoxy and the effective end of organized doctrinal pluralism on the island. Yet the achievement was less a return to a primordial purity than a fresh act of construction, an orthodoxy imposed by royal authority in the interest of order.

The medieval centuries were also a period of intensified interaction with South India, and not only of conflict. Tamil settlement, the patronage of Hindu shrines by Sinhala kings, and the circulation of deities and ritual forms across the Palk Strait produced a religious culture in which Buddhist and brahmanical elements coexisted and intermingled. The figure of the god Viṣṇu, absorbed into the Buddhist pantheon as a guardian of the island and its religion, exemplifies this layered accommodation (Holt 1991; 2004). After the decline of Polonnaruwa the political center drifted southward and westward, and the dry-zone civilization that had sustained the great monasteries gave way to a more fragmented landscape of smaller kingdoms. Through these upheavals the pattern observed earlier recurred. Periods of decline, in which discipline lapsed and ordination lineages faltered, were followed by episodes of renewal in which monks and kings looked to other Theravāda

lands to replenish what had been lost.

5. Colonial Encounters and the Decline of Traditional Structures

The arrival of European powers from the early sixteenth century opened a new and disruptive chapter. The Portuguese, who established themselves on the maritime littoral, were the first, and their rule in the coastal districts was marked by an aggressive Catholic missionary enterprise and by open hostility to Buddhist and Hindu institutions. Temples were destroyed, monastic lands were confiscated, and the public practice of Buddhism in the areas under Portuguese control was suppressed. The kingdom of Kandy in the central highlands remained independent and became a refuge for the tradition, but even there the institutional fabric of Buddhism was strained (de Silva 1981; Malalgoda 1976).

The Dutch, who supplanted the Portuguese in the maritime provinces in the seventeenth century, were less violent in their proselytism but no less corrosive in their effects. Their administration favored the Dutch Reformed Church, tied civil advantages to nominal Christian affiliation, and continued the erosion of Buddhist patronage networks along the coast. By the time the British displaced the Dutch at the close of the eighteenth century and conquered the Kandyan kingdom in 1815, the traditional structures that had sustained the *saṅgha*, royal endowment, royal protection, and the integration of monastic life into the political order, had been gravely weakened in the lowlands and were soon to be undermined in the interior as well. British rule brought a paradox that deserves emphasis. On one hand the colonial state withdrew the active royal patronage on which the order had depended, encouraged Protestant missionary education, and through the apparatus of governance and commerce reshaped the social world in which Buddhism had been embedded. The displacement of Buddhist learning by mission schools threatened to sever the transmission of religious knowledge to new generations. On the other hand, the same colonial era produced the Orientalist scholarship that recovered, edited, and translated the Pali texts, and that for the first time made the canonical literature of Theravāda available to a European and an English-reading audience. The work of scholars associated with the Pali Text Society, founded in 1881, both objectified Sri Lankan Buddhism as a "religion" to be studied and supplied the reformers of the following generation with a powerful instrument, a printed and textually authoritative canon they could wield against missionary critics and lax tradition alike (Malalgoda 1976; Gombrich 1988). Colonial knowledge thus threatened and documented the tradition at the same time.

6. Modern Revival and Reform Movements

The Buddhist revival of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was in part a reaction to the Christian missionary challenge that colonial rule had encouraged. From the middle of the century Buddhist monks began to contest the claims of the missionaries directly, and the series of public debates that culminated at Pānadurā in 1873 marked a turning point. There the monk Migetṭuwatte Guṇānanda, an orator of formidable skill, was widely held to have bested his Christian opponents before a large crowd, and accounts of the debate circulated well beyond the island. The episode demonstrated that Buddhism could meet the apologetic methods of Protestant Christianity on their own ground, in disputation, in print, and in the language of reasoned argument (Malalgoda 1976; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988).

The revival acquired international dimensions through the involvement of foreign sympathizers, most notably the American Henry Steel Olcott, who arrived in 1880, formally embraced Buddhism, and threw himself into the work of Buddhist education. Olcott helped to found schools modeled on the missionary institutions he sought to counter, composed a widely used Buddhist catechism, and lent organizational energy to the cause. The collaboration between local reformers and such outsiders produced new instruments of religious mobilization, lay associations, a Buddhist press, and a network of schools that trained a literate laity in a confident and reformed understanding of the *dhamma*.

The figure who most fully embodied this new Buddhism was Anagārika Dharmapāla. Adopting a status that was neither fully monastic nor conventionally lay, he fashioned an activist, moralizing, and nationalist piety that addressed itself to the Sinhala middle class and to a global Buddhist audience.

Through the Mahā Bodhi Society, founded in 1891 with the aim of recovering the sacred sites of the Buddha's life in India, he gave the revival a transregional ambition, and through his tireless polemic he linked the restoration of Buddhism to the dignity and self-assertion of the Sinhala people (Kemper 2015; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). Scholars have described the resulting formation as "Protestant Buddhism", a phrase intended to capture both its protest against colonial Christianity and its absorption of Protestant features, an emphasis on the laity, on individual study of scripture, and on an interiorized and ethicized religion shorn of much ritual. The revival thus intertwined with anti-colonial nationalism and with the formation of a modern Sinhala identity, and the appeal to a recovered "pure" Theravāda became, in this context, as much a political as a doctrinal claim.

7. Contemporary Transformations

The achievement of independence in 1948 transferred to the new state the question of Buddhism's public status that the colonial period had left unresolved. The expectation among many revivalists that independence would restore Buddhism to a position of honor found expression in the report commissioned by Buddhist organizations on "The Betrayal of Buddhism", and in the political mobilization that brought a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist program to power in 1956, the year that coincided with the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's passing. Subsequent constitutional arrangements granted Buddhism a foremost place among the religions of the state while guaranteeing the rights of others, a formula that acknowledged the tradition's centrality without establishing a formal religious monopoly (Tambiah 1992; Seneviratne 1999). The entanglement of Buddhism with ethnic politics in the decades that followed is among the most studied and most painful aspects of the island's recent history. The construction of a Sinhala-Buddhist national identity, in which religion, language, and ethnicity were fused, contributed to the marginalization of the Tamil minority and formed part of the background to the protracted civil conflict that consumed the country from the early 1980s until 2009.

Alongside these developments the period has seen the proliferation of new forms of religious life. Urban lay meditation movements, the rise of charismatic preachers, the use of radio, television, and now digital media to disseminate the *dhmma*, and the growth of socially engaged Buddhist initiatives addressing development, welfare, and peace have all reshaped the texture of practice. Movements such as Sarvodaya, which married Buddhist ethical concepts to village-level development work, exemplify the engaged orientation, while the popularity of meditation among the laity reflects a globalizing current that connects Sri Lanka to a worldwide Buddhist modernism (Bond 1988; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). These trends have generated their own tensions, between the inherited authority of the ordained *saṅgha* and the initiative of an educated and assertive laity, and between interpretations of the *dhmma* that bind it to the Sinhala nation and those that present it as a universal teaching addressed to all. The contemporary tradition is thus pulled in several directions at once, and its future shape remains genuinely open.

8. Conclusion

Viewed across its full span, the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka resists reduction either to a tale of seamless continuity or to a narrative of decline and rupture. Certain features have indeed persisted with remarkable tenacity. The centrality of the Pali canon, fixed in writing on the island and expounded by its commentators, has remained a constant point of reference; the prestige of monastic scholarship and the ideal of textual fidelity have been transmitted across two thousand years; and the alliance of *saṅgha* and political authority, forged in the age of Devānampiya Tissa, has proved durable through every change of regime. These are the threads that justify, in part, the tradition's self-image as a faithful preservation of the *dhmma* of the elders. Yet the same history shows how much was made and remade. The orthodoxy of the Mahāvihāra was secured through the suppression of rival fraternities and the intervention of kings; ordination lineages broke and were repaired with assistance from Burma and Thailand; accommodation with brahmanical deities and South Indian forms left its mark on practice; and the modern tradition was reconstituted, under colonial and nationalist pressure, into a partly lay and self-consciously reformed Buddhism that its medieval forebears would scarcely have

recognized. The continuity of Sri Lankan Buddhism, in short, was an achievement of repeated reconstruction rather than a passive inheritance.

These findings carry implications for further inquiry. The comparison of Sri Lanka with the other Theravāda societies of Southeast Asia, with which it has been continuously entangled, promises to illuminate both what is distinctive about the island's experience and what belongs to the shared dynamics of the tradition. The relationship between textual orthodoxy and local practice, the recurrent politics of monastic reform, and the contemporary negotiation between nationalist and universalist readings of the *dhamma* all invite closer study. Sri Lankan Buddhism offers the historian of religions a rare case in which a tradition can be followed, with reasonable documentation, across the entire arc from ancient establishment to global modernity, and its study repays the effort with insight into how religious traditions endure precisely by changing.

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