

# Background to Buddhist Resurgence : India and Ceylon

ROBERT J. MILLER

*University of Wisconsin*

So it befell that . . . the Teaching He had bequeathed to all the world was . . . spread far and wide, till well-nigh all of Asia's myriads rendered their hearts' allegiance to the Triple Gem. . . .

And then— . . . then this world-conquering Faith, that had itself done so much for the progress of Humanity, came, for the time, to the end of its first great period of activity. . . . Buddhism, in brief . . . became the Religion of the civilized third of the human race; and thereafter, entered upon a period of cessation from all outward activity; a period which has continued unbroken almost to this day.

Yet today, despite those twenty centuries of inactivity. . . . Buddhism still owns the allegiance of five hundred millions of men . . . the long night of Buddhist inactivity is drawing near its end; and the sleeping Faith is waking to new hopes, new light, new life.<sup>1</sup>

One tends to doubt that the English convert to Buddhism, writing these words in 1908, was prophesying the conversion of more than three million Indian Untouchables in 1956, the abortive 1961 establishment of a Buddhist state in Burma, the growth of a lay Buddhist political movement, the Soka Gakkai, in Japan, or the role of Vietnamese Buddhist organizations in 1966. His vision was that of the restoration of Buddhist "purity" within the Sangha (the community of monks), of doctrinal understanding to the Asian Buddhist masses, of the missionary fervor of early Buddhism, and of expansion to the West. The basis for this vision, perhaps even an insight into the present-day Buddhist activity, may be found in Indian and Ceylonese events of the nineteenth century.

## I.

The nineteenth century was an era of intense European scholarly interest in Buddhism and Hinduism, marked by translation, comparison, evaluation, and criticism of newly discovered or reinterpreted Sanskrit and Pali materials. Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist history became significant in European attempts to understand the Eastern mind. From the standpoint of the West, the problems of Buddhist origins, doctrinal similarities to Christian thought, the tenacity of doctrine and organization in Asia all demanded clarification. The British presence in India forced a need to comprehend the nature of Indian culture, and this need, in turn, promoted investigation into the Indian past. That past was vivid to British officers in India in the social practices of caste, in the multiplicity of religious sects, in the architectural remnants visible at almost every turn. In the eighteenth century, the collection of information on these and related problems had been the province of the linguistically, literarily, and artistically inclined; the results of their unsystematic inquiries and antiquarian enthusiasm gradually were translated into official support. An archeological survey of North India was officially instituted by the Indian Government in 1861, with major responsibility for its operation delegated to Sir Alexander Cunningham. From such unexpected quarters in the nineteenth century emerged a stimulus to Buddhist resurgence.

Cunningham began his task under the influence of the recently published records of Fa Hsien and Hsuan Tsang. He was dominated by the idea of locating the holy places of Buddhism described by these Chinese pilgrims:

*The Elder Pliay, for the sake of clearness follows the footsteps of Alexander the Great. For a similar reason I would follow the footsteps of the Chinese Pilgrim Hwen-tsang, who in the 7th century of our era, traversed India from West to East and back again for the purpose of visiting all the famous sites of Buddhist History and tradition.<sup>2</sup>*

In these footsteps, Cunningham proceeded from Bihar to Afghanistan, locating, excavating, and verifying sites. By 1865 he had produced a vast collection of data on northern Buddhist locales. It was not until 1880-1881, however, that work at the key site of Buddhgaya was completed. At the same time, another "excavation"

was begun in Ceylon—the “excavation” of Buddhism under the auspices of the Theosophical Society, led by Colonel H. Olcott and Madame Helen Blavatsky.

Factually, Buddhism was not buried in Ceylon before the visit of the Theosophical Society leaders. It was, however, disorganized, submerged by centuries of Christian political domination under the Portuguese, Dutch, and British.

The majority of them [the Ceylonese] were ashamed or afraid to declare themselves Buddhists, and only in the villages of the interior did the Dharma of the Blessed One retain some vestige of its former power and popularity, though even here it was not free from the attacks of the thousands of catechists who, for twenty rupees a month, were prepared to go about slandering and insulting the religion of their fathers. . . .<sup>3</sup>

By the 1870's, such attacks had brought occasional response, in particular from the monk Megettuvatte Gnananda. His slashing criticisms aroused indignation amongst Christians, and in 1873 Megettuvatte confronted Christian adversaries in an open debate. Intended, by the Christian organizers of the debate, to discredit Buddhism doctrinally and intellectually, the debate “. . . sounded instead the death-knell of Christian influence in Ceylon, so that never again did Catholic or Protestant dogmatism venture to cross swords with Buddhist wisdom.”<sup>4</sup> From Ceylon the persistent sound of this battle traveled slowly to New York, whence it stirred the minds of Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky, who had founded the Theosophical Society in 1875.<sup>5</sup> The two entered into correspondence with Megettuvatte, and by the time they traveled to Bombay in 1879, his translations of their letters and extracts from Madame Blavatsky's work *Isis Unveiled* had made their names known in Ceylonese Buddhist circles. Their visit to Ceylon, for the express purpose of helping to revitalize Buddhism, was inevitable, and in 1880 the two arrived in Galle.

. . . the two visitors were received amidst scenes of religious fervor such as had not been witnessed within living memory. . . . when, on that memorable May 21st, the Buddhist devotees flocked in their thousands from the surrounding villages to Galle, and saw that strange pair on their knees in front of the High Priest, and actually heard them repeat the familiar words of the Three Refuges and Five Precepts. . . . all

their suspicions were allayed, and it seemed as though their wildest dreams had come true.<sup>6</sup>

This evidence of European support for Buddhism (or so it was interpreted) resulted in the formation of village and city chapters of the Theosophical Society as the tour proceeded. With creation of these organizational centers, the foundation for a lay Buddhist movement was laid. Later developments were to split Theosophy along doctrinal lines, and to temper the nature of its "Buddhism," but from 1880 to 1890 the mixture of mysticism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and occultism characteristic of early Theosophy allowed wide scope for recruitment. Organizationally, the Theosophical Society in Ceylon aided consolidation of Buddhist forces; in Colombo, Colonel Olcott presented a plan:

... for the creation of a Buddhist Section, to be composed of two sub-divisions, one exclusively laymen and lay branches, and another, not itself subdivided, exclusively of priests. This was to meet the difficulty that the ordination rules of the Vinaya forbid a monk to be associated on equal terms with laymen in worldly affairs. The scheme was approved by all and carried out in due course; Sumanigala [a Maha Nayaka Thera] being made Chairman of the priests' association, as well as one of the Honorary Vice-Presidents of the Society.<sup>7</sup>

The progress of the Society was impressive over the course of the next few years. Under its auspices, Buddhist schools were organized, publication begun, lectures regularly given. Funds for such activities were established, and regular contact with the Madras branch of the Society (with Madame Blavatsky in residence at Adyar, Madras) was maintained. It is not our purpose to follow the history of the Society, fascinating though it can be. Of most importance here is the fact that in 1884, one Anagarika Dharmapala (David Hewavitarne), grandson of the then president of the Colombo branch, joined the Society.

## II.

The symbolic source of Buddhism had been cleared by the hands of a British archeologist, following the footsteps of Chinese pilgrims; the center considered by many Europeans and Asians to be the preserver of Buddhism had been cleared by the travels of an American colonel and a Russian emigré mystic. Bodhgaya and

Ceylonese Buddhism had once more emerged from decades of obscurity. Through the person of Anagarika Dharmapala, the two were again to be linked to the rest of the Buddhist world.

Dharmapala, strongly drawn to mysticism, requested admission to the occult group which Madame Blavatsky had established in Adyar. Soon after joining Theosophy, Dharmapala moved to Madras to continue association with Madame Blavatsky, and through her, with the "Brotherhood of Adepts" whom he understood to be thoroughly devoted to the fortunes of Buddhism.<sup>8</sup> After his arrival in Madras, however, Dharmapala was directed to study Pali and devote himself to the good of humanity. Before the year was out, he returned to Ceylon to carry out his pledge. He plunged into work for the Colombo Buddhist Theosophical Society, whose interests he considered to be identical with those of Buddhism.

Association with the Society gave Dharmapala the opportunity to tour the island with Colonel Olcott, speaking in villages, observing the state of Buddhism, stimulating the growth of latent faith. For four more years he was to devote his energies to building the Society, publishing, acquiring a press, establishing an English-language weekly, *The Buddhist* (1888), and continuing tours for the collection of funds and educational work, such as the Buddhist Sunday Schools and an English-language college. In 1889, Dharmapala accompanied Colonel Olcott to Japan, where, though startled by the presence of married priests, he encouraged the continuation of contact and cooperation between Japanese and Ceylonese Buddhists in the revitalization of the religion. As a result of this tour, three Japanese priests accompanied Colonel Olcott on his return to Ceylon, to study Pali and the Theravada traditions.

It is sufficiently clear, at this point, that the resurgence of Buddhism in Ceylon was well under way by 1889. The Theosophical Society provided an organizational network which brought Dharmapala in contact with Europeans, Japanese, and (in 1890) Burmese interested in the revitalization of Buddhism. It is probable that such contacts through the Society created in Dharmapala the concept of a resurgent world Buddhism organizationally linked in the task of revitalization and extension to the West. If not consciously developed at this time, it was an ideal which soon blossomed.

In 1891, Dharmapala first looked upon the sites excavated by Sir Alexander Cunningham and his crews ten years before. It was at

Buddhgaya, in the company of a Japanese priest, that he conceived the idea of reclaiming these sites for the Buddhist world. It was a propitious conception: Buddhism in all countries had traditionally focused on this spot in the past, and after centuries during which separate networks of relations had developed, it was this spot which could serve as the point of reconnection most dramatically. Though individual Buddhists had visited Buddhgaya from other countries in the recent past, few organized pilgrimages had been undertaken from abroad. Though Buddhist kings had formerly donated images, repairs, rest houses (the Burmese as recently as 1871), the site was in the hands of a Hindu priest and the British Indian Government. It became apparent that a long campaign was inevitable, particularly when the Government declared that "the temple, together with its revenues, belonged to the Mahant [Hindu guardian] adding that with the help of the Government it might be possible for the Buddhists to buy it from him."<sup>9</sup>

From Buddhgaya, Dharmapala moved to Calcutta, en route to Burma to collect funds for the purchase of the temple. In Calcutta, more contacts with Buddhists or friends of Buddhism were established, as well as with Theosophists. In Burma again, the Theosophical Society provided him contacts. Leaving Burma, he sailed to Adyar, intent on founding a society for the reclamation of Buddhgaya. Finally, on return to Colombo he founded the Buddha Gaya Maha Bodhi Society, May 31, 1891.

### III.

I have detailed Dharmapala's moves to stress the fact that he was still moving within the network established by the Theosophical Society. With the establishment of the new society, and with the Theosophists facing internal struggles due to the death of Madame Blavatsky, we must envision the gradual replacement of the Theosophical network, perhaps the absorption of parts of it, into the implicit Maha Bodhi net. At its beginning in Ceylon

The formation of one more society did not attract much attention in those days of widespread Buddhist revival, and Dharmapala not only experienced difficulties in rousing the interest of the laity, but also in finding monks willing to accompany him to Buddha Gaya.<sup>10</sup>

The trip was made, with four monks from two of the major sects in Ceylon—perhaps significantly, the sects which were historically most recent, and had been established through contacts with Siam and Burma. But the negotiations to purchase even a piece of land at Buddhgaya became difficult, and Dharmapala returned to Ceylon, having decided to organize an International Buddhist Conference. In October, 1891, the Conference was convened at Buddhgaya, with representatives from Ceylon, China, Japan and Chittagong in attendance, together with the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal.

In our brief "Background to Buddhist Resurgence," the importance of this event assumes major proportions. The Japanese delegates, authorized by the Nishi Honganji Temple, offered to purchase Buddhgaya Temple from the Hindu Mahant. Donations from all Buddhist countries were to be sought for construction of a monastery, for Buddhist propaganda activities, and for translation of Buddhist texts into Indian vernaculars. It represents the beginning of the consolidation, within India, of forces which were to produce, in 1956, the conversion to Buddhism of more than three million untouchables. It signifies the eclectic and international span of the infant Maha Bodhi Society. It symbolizes the intent, not yet realized today, stated at the founding meeting of the Society, to establish a Buddhist college at Buddhgaya, with a staff of monks from China, Japan, Siam, Cambodia, Burma, Ceylon, Chittagong, Nepal, Tibet, and Arakan. Finally, it suggests the spirit which, overriding national and historic differences, looked toward a united Buddhist world.

The intent of this paper is not to present, year by year, the story of the Maha Bodhi Society, the successful struggle for Buddhgaya, nor the truly herculean efforts of Dharmapala to promote Buddhist resurgence throughout the world. It is, rather, to sketch the mechanisms by which a resurgent Buddhism became the militant Buddhism of today, and to emphasize the tracks which would require following if one were to attempt an organizational history of contemporary Buddhism. In conclusion, I shall propose a theoretical model which I believe emerges from the brief material presented.

Buddhism, organizationally and perhaps doctrinally, must be treated as a single system from its inception. In all Buddhist countries (which may be treated as subsystems), individual developments

are the results of the interaction of the Buddhist system with local socio-political and ideological systems from the time of introduction of Buddhism to the present.<sup>11</sup> In the course of time, various networks between different areas have developed through the exchange of personnel, political vicissitudes, shared ecclesiastical languages and traditions. These traditional networks have been linked ideologically with India through the personage of Gautama the Buddha and the sites associated with him, if in no other way. Maintenance of this link through pilgrimage brought Buddhists of all schools in contact with one another in the past, reinforcing the strength of the bond. With the decline or submergence of Buddhism as an organized system in India, the intimacy of the bond between the various segments of the Buddhist world was broken; for centuries the networks of the subsystems carried the communications links in attenuated form.

Yet, of most significance to the system as a whole was the internal shift in the role of the layman. Prior to the 1800's, most communication, most external stimulation of one subsystem by the other, had been carried on by and between monks. The active involvement of laymen devoting themselves to the reform, rehabilitation, and reconstruction of the system marked a rebirth for Buddhism. Such laymen could establish links outside traditional Buddhist networks. They could gain the support of non-Buddhists (Europeans, "reform" Hindus, eclectic Asian Theosophists, scholars) for Buddhist causes—education, publication of textual materials and tracts, travel—and relink segments of the Buddhist "world-system" which had become practically disengaged. Fired more with a desire to promote Buddhism rather than a single school of Buddhist thought, more with the desire to reinvigorate the Buddhist missionary spirit through organization and education rather than to attain personal enlightenment, laymen such as Dharmapala, and monks cognizant of the changing world, sought links to old and new contact points. Connections were made, ultimately, to Buddhagaya, to Sarnath, to all major Buddhist pilgrimage spots in India through the Maha Bodhi Society. Connections with European countries were brought into the new Buddhist network when a Maha Bodhi Society was established in England. Other Buddhist societies, in Europe, India, and Asian countries, were either made branches of the Maha Bodhi Society or were connected through individual members.



The resurgence of Buddhism, in sum, could be expressed as the reaction of a system which had, in many of its parts, been disrupted but not broken. The stimulus leading to the reaction was, in part, external, but the subsystem networks whereby the reaction could be channeled had long existed. Use of these networks by laymen was not unprecedented, though the vigor with which laymen organized, and their tendency toward reform (criticism of monks, eclecticism, etc.) was perhaps nontraditional. Of utmost importance, in the early stage of Buddhist resurgence, was the reinstatement of the Buddhist point of origin within the network, i.e., the acquisition of Buddhagaya under Buddhist control. In broad terms, Buddhagaya was neutral, representing a connection point for all subsystems, central to all but belonging to none in particular. In a sense, its organizational parallel (although never able to entirely disengage itself from the Ceylonese tie) was the Maha Bodhi Society, with its multiple connections and subsidies from adherents abroad.

I have touched on a minute part of the background to Buddhist resurgence. The full picture would involve exploration of events within and between the Buddhist subsystems I have previously mentioned. These subsystems—Tibet-Mongolia, China-Korea-Japan, Ceylon-Burma-Thailand-Laos-Cambodia, and Vietnam—were also experiencing the pressures ultimately to result in Buddhist revitalization. From the period of which I have been writing, to the present, the connections have been interrupted, disrupted, and, at times, eliminated under the impact of two World Wars and their aftermath. In the most recent past, however, the tendencies toward re-establishment of the total Buddhist system have again impressed the non-Buddhist world. Buddhism has most assuredly reappeared in India in the persons of Tibetans and "new Buddhists"; the role of the layman in organizational activity has increased, rather than diminished; and the increase of Western-educated monks has provided a base for reinterpretation of doctrine to meet the needs of the present lay devotee. Internal restructuring of the system continues. The Tibetan-Mongolian subsystem has been disrupted by persecution; the Buddhism of China appears in new doctrinal form; union has created a United Buddhist Church in Vietnam. In some areas, the Sangha (community of monks) seems to play little organizational role. Perhaps resurgent Buddhism in its local manifestations will substitute for the threefold formula of

refuge (the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha) a twofold formula ("I take refuge in the Buddha and the Dharma"). If we see the system in its totality, however, the presence of a community of monks anywhere in the system may be the source for a resurgence of Buddhist monasticism.

## NOTES

1. "Propaganda," editorial by Bhikkhu Ananda Mettaya, in *Buddhism, Journal of the Buddhadasana Sammagama (International Buddhist Society)*, 2-2: 169-192 (March 1968).
2. Sourindranath Roy, *The Story of Indian Archaeology, 1784-1947* (New Delhi, 1961), pp. 37-38.
3. Bhikkhu Sangarakshita, "Anagarika Dharmapala: A Biographical Sketch," in *Maha Bodhi Society of India Diamond Jubilee Souvenir, 1892-1952* (Calcutta, 1952), pp. 9-10.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
5. For a succinct account of the Theosophical Society, its development and conflicts, see J. N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), pp. 208-290.
6. Sangarakshita, "Anagarika Dharmapala," p. 20.
7. Colonel H. Olcott, "Old Diary Leaves: The Beginning of T.S. in Ceylon," *The Buddhist*, 7-31: 242 (August 23, 1895).
8. The "Brotherhood of Adepts" was the term which Madame Blavatsky used in reference to the mystics dwelling in the Himalayas who she claimed communicated with her, and who actually directed the activities of the Theosophical Society.
9. Sangarakshita, "Anagarika Dharmapala," p. 37.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Cf. Beatrice D. Miller, "The Web of Tibetan Monasticism," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 20.2: 197-203 (February 1961).

[Material for this study was derived in part from research conducted under NSF Grant GS-34.]