

Sri Lanka and Tibet



S. Dhammika

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Maradana Road is one of Colombo's main thoroughfares. Walking along it past the railway station, you soon come to the statue of a Buddhist monk standing on a tall pedestal. It is an unremarkable piece of work, one of many such statues of eminent prelates set up around the city which the crowds rush past and hardly seem to notice. Closer inspection of the name on statue's pedestal suggests, however, that there is an interesting story behind its monument. For it is a statue not of a Sri Lankan but a Tibetan monk, Venerable Tibetjatika Mahinda. What is a statue of a Tibetan monk doing in the capital of Sri Lanka, that stronghold of orthodox Theravada Buddhism?

It would be difficult to imagine two more different countries than Tibet and Sri Lanka. One is cold, bleak and hemmed in by snow-capped mountains while the other is tropical, lush and set in a turquoise sea. True, both countries have ancient Buddhist cultures, but the kind of Buddhism that prevails in them could hardly be more different from each other. The Dhamma first came to Sri Lanka only 237 years after the Buddha's final Nirvana, when it was still young and relatively uncomplicated. It did not become firmly established in Tibet until nearly a thousand years later, after being transformed by centuries of mystical insights, philosophical speculation and living side by side with Hinduism. However, despite the differences between the two cultures, the distance separating them and the obvious difficulties involved in getting from one to the other, the Buddhists of Tibet and Sri Lanka have had intermittent contact with each other for many centuries. Sometimes this contact has been direct – monks from one country have gone to the other; but more often it has been indirect – monks from both countries have met in India or Indian monks have visited both countries and acted as intermediates.

When Tibetans started going to India to learn Buddhism or to collect Buddhist texts they of course heard about Sri Lanka, a land where, unlike India, the king and all his subjects were fervent Buddhists. They found that even Indians looked upon Sri Lanka as a sacred land, a Buddhist paradise blessed with numerous sacred relics where the Sangha received unstinting state support. They also learned from the *Lankavatara Sutra* that the Buddha had sanctified the island by visiting it and from the *Karandavyuha Sutra* that Avalokitesvara had appeared there as well. What interested them most, however, was the reputation of Sri Lanka's great Mahayana and Tantric masters. That Mahayana and Tantra Buddhism flourished in what is now a Theravadin country may surprise the contemporary followers of those schools, but Buddhism in Sri Lanka has rarely conformed to the simplistic generalizations so often made of it.

The island's interest in Mahayana started at the very beginning of the new movement. Nagajuna's most brilliant disciple and successor, Ariyadeva, was a Sinhalese of royal birth. According to Tibetan sources, Nagajuna spent his last days in a monastery in Sripavata, a location now identified with a plateau just outside Nagajunakonda in Andhra Pradesh. Significantly, the ruins of a monastery called Simhala Vihara flourished at Sripavata from the first century CE onwards, and according to an inscription found on the site, this monastery was inhabited by Sri Lankan monks. It is not at all improbable that this was where Nagajuna and Ariyadeva first met and that from an early time Sri Lankans went there to study Mahayana. And the evidence shows that 800 years later Mahayana still had a strong following in the island. We read for example, that in the ninth century Ratnarasanta, the abbot of Somapura in India, came to the island accompanied by the envoy sent by the Sri Lankan king. He arrived with some 200 Mahayana texts and stayed for seven years; and when he finally returned to India to take up the position of 'gatekeeper scholar' at Vikramasila, he left behind 500 disciples. Mahayana flourished in Sri Lanka until it finally succumbed to Theravada at the beginning of the medieval period. Nonetheless, popular religious practices it left behind numerous traces of its presence in the island's literature and sculpture.

Tantra has left far less evidence of its presence. It seems to have arrived in Sri Lanka soon after it appeared in India in about the 7th century. The earliest evidence of Tantra in the island concerns the Sinhalese siddha Amoghavajira, senior disciple of the great Indian master Vajirabodhi, who introduced

Tantra to China. When Vajirabodhi was ailing just before his death in 733, he instructed his disciple to return to India via Sri Lanka to collect Tantric texts unavailable in China. Amoghavajira arrived back in his homeland and was welcomed by the king, who accommodated him in his palace for seven days. He met the famous Gabhadhatu Acariya and received both the Vajiradhatu and the Garbhadhatu initiation from him as well as several other secret empowerments. Later he collected 500 Tantric texts and detailed information on the mudras, images, colours and deities needed for making mandalas. He then left for India, returning to China in 746, when he presented the emperor with a letter and gifts from the Sri Lankan king.

Tantra finally gained official recognition and patronage during the reign of Sena I (833-853) who, we are told, had taken the bodhisattva vow. This monarch was interested enough in new trends in Buddhism to establish an ecumenical institute named Virankurarama, where 25 monks from each of the four major sects in Sri Lanka could study the new ideas coming from India. Special rules were made to prevent sectarian rivalries being excited. If the monks representing a particular sect dropped below the prescribed number, the shortfall could only be filled by monks from other sects with permission from the sect concerned. Sometime during Sena's reign an Indian Tantric siddha arrived in the island and won the king's favour. Although the facts are unclear, it is possible that this siddha was invited to the island to join Virankurarama, or it may be that the institute was established after his arrival in order to examine his ideas. However, as in Burma, Japan and elsewhere, accusations of sexual license persistently dogged Tantra, and eventually it disappeared from Sri Lanka. Despite this, archaeological evidence shows that it continued to exert an influence as late as the 12th century, and as we shall see, small groups of people continued to practice, probably in secret, well into the 15th century.

Tibetans initially came to know about Sri Lanka by reading Buddhist texts, but they had their first direct contact with Sri Lankans in India. Most of these encounters took place at Bodh Gaya, where a huge monastic university maintained by Sri Lankan monks flourished from the 4th to the 13th century. The most interesting and detailed account of such encounters is found in the biography of Chang lo tsa-ba Cos-rge-dpal, better known by his Sanskrit name Dharmasvamin. This Tibetan pilgrim spent the three months of the rains retreat of the year 1234 in Bodh Gaya, where he had much contact with the 300 Sri Lankan monks who resided there. One day one of them asked him what book he was carrying, and when he replied that it was a copy of the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* the monk told he should throw it in the river. Then he added: "The Buddha did not teach the Mahayana, it was enunciated by one called Nagajuna, a man of sharp intellect." Despite such sectarianism, Dharmasvamin commented that the Sri Lankans always greeted him courteously and treated him with more kindness than did some of his fellow monks in Tibet. The Sinhalese for their part could not believe that Dharmasvamin was a Tibetan. He spoke such excellent Sanskrit, and all the Tibetans they had met before were wild and uncouth. It was only when they saw corns on his feet, something found only on boot-wearing Tibetans, that they finally believed him.

An interesting example of co-operation between Tibetans and Sri Lankans at Bodh Gaya is recorded in the *Mkhas-pai-dga-ston*. According to this work, a yogi named Ugyen Sangge, on one of his frequent trips to India, made contact with the king of Sri Lanka and repaired the Mahabodhi Temple with his help. This is said to have happened around the year 1286. The *Mkhas-pai-dga-ston* also says that while the repairs were being carried out, Ugyen Sangge stayed at the north of the temple with 500 other yogis. The Sri Lankan monastery is known to have been located there, so this must be a reference to that establishment and its inmates. We cannot doubt that it was the Sri Lankan monks at Bodh Gaya who put Ugyen Sangge in contact with their king in the first place and that they had a major role in the repair work.

Towards the end of the 13th century a Sri Lankan scholar-monk named Anandasri was in Bodh Gaya, probably teaching at the university. We hear of him in Tibet early in the next century teaching and translating Pali texts into Tibetan with the help of Nima rgyal mtshan dpal bzon po, one of Buston Rimpoche's teachers. Buston himself is supposed to have been proficient in several languages, including Sinhalese, so perhaps he met Anandasri and studied the language from him. We do not know how or why

Anandasri came to be invited to Tibet but it seems likely that a mutual respect and friendship between him and some Tibetans at Bodh Gaya had something to do with it.

Around this same time the Sri Lankan Tantric Yogi Chandramala was also in Tibet translating texts with the help of Sakya Yeshe Brog-mi, although it is not known whether he arrived there from Bodh Gaya. The several works composed by Sri Lankans that were included in the Kangyur and Tengyur were probably brought to Tibet and translated by monks like Anandasri and Chandramala. These works include a selection from the *Vimuttimaggā*, a commentary on the *Saddharmapundarika Sūtra* by Prithibandhu and Jayabanda's *Cakrasamvara Tantra*. The most important of these works, Manjusrimitra's *Bodhicittabhavana*, is one of the seminal texts in Atiyoga (Tib, *rDzong chen*). This work lacks much characteristic Atiyoga terminology and this may represent a branch of that school which evolved in Sri Lanka independently of India and Tibet.

In the second half of the 15th century the Sri Lankan monk Dharmadivakara arrived in Bodh Gaya and then decided to go on from there to Wu Tau Shan, the Chinese mountain sacred to the Bodhisattva Manjusri, this place has long been popular with Tibetans, and while there Dharmadivakara met some who invited him to their country, where he taught widely. It seems, however, that the strain of several long years of travel, the strange food and the cold climate proved to be too much for him because we read that he died in India while on his homeward journey. A far more recent encounter between Tibetans and Sri Lankans took place at Bodh Gaya at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1929, when Rahula Sankrityayana was in Tibet, he found a palm leaf manuscript of the Pali Vinaya in Sinhala script, a discovery that greatly intrigued him. Later he found out that the manuscript had been given to the Panchen Lama by a Sri Lankan monk when the former had visited Bodh Gaya in 1905.

During Tantra's period of ascendancy from the 8th to the 12th centuries, Indian Tantric masters were in demand in Tibet and Sri Lanka. A significant number visited both countries, thus acting as mediums for the transmission of literature, ideas and information. According to the *Blue Annals* a Kashmiri monk had heard about the wisdom of the Sri Lankan master Gunaratna and had gone to the island to meet him. When this Kashmiri was about to return home, Gunaratna gave him a letter to deliver to the famous Tibetan teachers Rin-chen-dpal and Buxton Rimpoche, both of whom he apparently had a deep admiration for. In the same work we read that rGyal-ba Rimpoche (1203-1267) was so renowned that the kind of Sri Lanka "sent numerous offerings to him". These and other similar fragments of information suggest that Buddhists in Kashmir and Tibet were well acquainted with the teachings of Sri Lankan masters and vice versa. The Tantric Siddha Vanaratna (1384-1468) was another Indian who visited both countries. He went to Sri Lanka in about 1404 and studied meditation for six years under Dharmakirti. As India was no longer a congenial place for a Buddhist by the time he left Sri Lanka, he went to Nepal, from where he made several trips to Tibet. The last of these intermediaries between the two countries until modern times was the Siddha Buddhagupta, who lived in the 16th century. He travelled very widely, spending considerable time in Sri Lanka, and made at least two visits to Tibet, where Taranatha (1575-1634) became his disciple. Taranatha's historical writings contain some information about Sri Lanka, some of which he must have got from Buddhagupta.

There are few references to Tibetans going to southern India in ancient times, Man-luns-po's journey to Kerala in the early 13th century being one of the few examples. However, no records exist of them going the short distance beyond the mainland needed to get to Sri Lanka. The first Tibetan we know to have visited Sri Lanka was Mahinda, the monk whose statue looks out across Maradana Road. Born in Sikkim Mahinda was not technically a Tibetan but a British Protected Person by nationality and a Lepcha by cultural background, the Lepchas being one of the groups that make up the Tibetan people. He was born Tashi Namgyal into a noble family in Gantok at the turn of the 20th century. One of his brothers became prime minister of Sikkim and another became professor of the Tibetan language at Calcutta University. A third brother later joined Mahinda in Sri Lanka and became a monk under the name Punjabi.

When the First World War broke out, the German monk Nyanatiloka, who had been living in Sri Lanka, was interned in Australia as an enemy national. On his release he was refused permission to return to Sri Lanka, and so he decided to go to Tibet. When he arrived in Sikkim he discovered to his great disappointment that Tibet's borders were closed to all foreigners, even to a lone Buddhist monk seeking refuge. However, Nyanatiloka did make contact with and received some help from the Sikkimese royal family. Some modernists in the government were unhappy with the state of Sikkim's Sangha, and their talks with Nyanatiloka convinced them that sending young monks to Sri Lanka might help to bring about the reforms they wanted to see. Consequently, the young Mahinda went to Sri Lanka and stayed at Nyanatiloka's Island Hermitage at Dodonduwa. Later he studied at both Mahabodhi College and Vidyodaya Pirivena. In 1930 Mahinda took his lower ordination under the great Venerable Lunupokune Dharmananda and in 1931 his higher ordination. He quickly mastered the Sinhalese language and later used his considerable facility in it to write a large amount of fine poetry. He is mainly remembered today for the religious poems and verses that he wrote for children, a genre virtually unknown before him. He also wrote rousing patriotic poetry urging Sri Lankans to be proud of their own culture and religion and to struggle for independence from Britain. Recently some erotic love poetry has come to light as well. Mahinda's other literary works include a translation from Pali into Sinhalese of the classical poem *Sadhammopayana* and a biography of King Prakambahu. He died in 1951 at the age of 50, but his children's poems continue to be widely read and appreciated. Recently the Chinese government sent a scholar to Sri Lanka to research into Mahinda's life and writings with the purpose of highlighting the supposed "Chinese" contribution to Sinhalese literature. When it was discovered that Mahinda was born in Sikkim, not Tibet, the scheme was quietly dropped.

Now that Buddhism is established in the West and many large cities there have both Tibetan and Sri Lankan temples or centres, the opportunity for the interchange of ideas between the two have never been better. However, this does not seem to have happened yet. When Tibetan and Sri Lankan monks join each other at inter-religious meetings or at celebrations, they always smile at each other and exchange pleasantries, but the contact goes little deeper than that. Most Sri Lankans still regard Tantra as a "later distortion" while the Tibetans look upon the Theravadins as weaker cousins who they hope will have the opportunity to practice the higher path in the next life. The truth is that neither group know very much about the teachings of the other. Mahayana has been studied with appreciation in Sri Lanka for years but Tantra remains virtually unknown. Tibetans study the text of long extinct "Hinayana" schools and assume that they know all that is worth knowing about living Theravada. Hopefully the time will soon come when the openness, respect and mutual sharing that existed in the past between the Buddhists of Tibet and Sri Lanka will return once again.