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Response to Venerable Professor Dhammavihari's “Sri Lankan Chronicle Data”

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Professor Heinz Bechert

We appreciate the Venerable Professor Dhammavihari's very personal and rather emotional confession of his understanding of Buddhism as a member of the Sinhala-Buddhist community. This aspect of his contribution can hardly be discussed in my response nor should I discuss here his personal understanding of the “healthy growth of the Sinhala nation” (p. 5), which he contrasts with the assumed 'menacing hostile neighbours in action' (p. 7). I should also avoid here discussing the rather emotional accusation that 'Western scholars’ would have purposely distorted historical facts by “criminal errors in the hands of translators” (p. 12). Here a very minor point, viz, the interpretation of one particular word, *kunta* in *Mahavamsa* 25.1 is concerned, but I shall return to this particular passage later on.

At this point, it is necessary to make some remarks on the sources under discussion here. The earliest chronicle from Sri Lanka that has been handed down to us is the *Dipavamsa*, compiled in the 4th century C.E. from earlier sources that are lost to us. Here, no reference to the “relic in the spear” is found. However, it is explicitly said that Elara, the adversary of Dutthagamani, acted as a just ruler, “avoiding the four evil paths of lust, hatred, fear and ignorance” (Di 18.50). Thus, the

Dipavamsa provides no evidence of hostile actions of king Elara against Buddhism. Dutthagamani Abhaya thereafter, dethroned Elara and, “killing 32 princes he ruled for 24 years” (*Dipavamsa* 18.54).

The later classical chronicle of ancient Sri Lanka, viz, the *Mahavamsa*, is a rather elaborated work. It is necessary to analyze its composition in order to evaluate its contents. It is a combination of (1) a Buddhist work that was written down for the edification of its readers, (2) a work of artificial poetry (kavya) in the Indian tradition, and (3) a work of national Sinhala historiography written and handed down by Buddhist monks, incorporating historical facts as well as mythological elements. In certain parts of the *Mahavamsa*, and particularly in the Dutthagamani saga, various folk tales were included to form what is called the 'Dutthagamani epic.'⁽¹⁾ Whereas many other periods of the history of Sri Lanka are dealt with very shortly, the Dutthagamani story comprises more than half of the *Mahavamsa*. viz. 863 verses. In the *Dipavamsa*, only 13 stanzas in all are devoted to this king.

Thus the *Mahavamsa* represents in these chapters - and partly in other chapters as well - a fourth element, viz, it incorporates the national epic of the Sinhala people which may be compared with the Iliad of the ancient Greeks, the Nibelung epic of mediaeval Germany, etc. All these poems combine historical reflections with mythology in one text.

Therefore, it makes no sense to discuss the question of the historicity of the motive of the “relic in the spear”, which is the main argument of the learned speaker. Motives of this type are rather common. Let me quote from the learned commentary in the new translation of the *Mahavamsa* by Ananda W.P. Guruge:⁽²⁾

Dutthagamani's career as a national liberator has recently received the closest attention of historians, sociologists and political

scientists who have not failed to observe the contradiction between the non-violence, which Buddhism expounds, and the association of Buddhist symbols and bhikkhus in a war. For an analysis, see: Alice Greenwald, "The Relic in the Spear: Historiography and the Saga of Dutthagamani," *Religion and the Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (1978), pp. 13-35.

Unfortunately this was not mentioned by our learned speaker. We must not understand these chapters of the *Mahavamsa* as historical records in the modern sense of the word, particularly because this work was composed by the end of the 5th century C.E., i.e. more than 600 years after Dutthagamani who ruled from 161-137 B.C.E. It is fanciful to use the *Rasavahin* for additional historical evidence, a collection of popular tales compiled in the 13th century C.E., i.e. ca. 1300 years after the events described. By the way, the relevant chapters of this work together with its source work *Sahassavatthupparakana* have been critically edited now by Sven Bretfeld,⁽³⁾ a work that seems to have escaped the notice of the learned speaker.

The relevant ideological statements in the chronicle must be understood in the context of the close connection of national and religious observances in the so-called traditional Buddhism. In her paper mentioned before, Alice Greenwald points out that in the Sinhala tradition, "One was to gain sense of national heritage, one's ecclesiastic and imperial, spiritual and national, racial, in fact, line of descent from the most exalted Buddhist figures" (p. 20), and, thereby, "From the viewpoint of historiography ... only a Buddhist king, and ... only one descended from the Buddhologically authenticated Sinhalese, had the legitimate right to rule ... Ceylon" (p. 23). It is in this context, that we understand the myth of the "relic in the spear". At the same time, we now understand the background of the so-called Moladanda rebellion of 1760 when members of the Sinhala nobility and of the ecclesiastic

establishment including a *Mahanayakathera* attempted to murder King Kirtisirirajasimha. This event was purposely not recorded in the so-called *Culavamsa*, the later continuation of the *Mahavamsa*, but it is testified by the *Sasanavatirnavarnana* and by some historical documents.⁽⁴⁾

In the same volume in which Greenwald's paper is found, I argue that it was from the conflict with Tamil invaders from South India that Sinhala nationalism, and, at the same time, Sinhala historiography originated at a rather early date.

Our conference in Bath Spa University College was organized with the aim to find ways to promote peace in Sri Lanka and to contribute to a solution of the traditional ethnic conflict. There have been periods of peace and of integration of South Indian immigrants in the history of Sri Lanka indeed, but there is no time to deal with these periods now. At the present time, peace can only be promoted if all sections of society in the Island accept modernization, and if they understand national myths as what they really are, and not as guidelines for the perpetuation of their inherited hatred.

As far as Buddhist tradition is concerned, modernization requires the liberation from the traditional interrelation of religions and secular power and from the so-called monastic landlordism which originated in the mediaeval society of the Island. For the Buddhists, it is necessary to return to the values as taught by the Buddha himself and found in the ancient canonical texts, and not in the later works like the chronicles and the commentaries or sub-commentaries.

Original Buddhism was rightly characterized by Max Weber in his famous work on the sociology of religion as: "a quite specific, refined soteriology for intellectuals" "... a specifically unpolitical and antipolitical class religion, or, more accurately, a religious learned

teaching of an itinerant, intellectually schooled mendicant order of monks.”⁽⁵⁾

By the way, I may recall here Professor P.D. Premasiri's excellent comments on the question if there is the concept of a righteous war in canonical Buddhism. He has clearly described the relevant statements in the Tripitaka.

It is necessary to understand that original Buddhism was not conceived as a religion of the masses, but early Buddhists were one religious community amongst a considerable number of religious movements including the followers of Vedic tradition, Ajivikas, Jains etc.

It was only as a result of a rather fundamental transformation that Buddhism emerged as a religion of the masses. With transformation, the close relation of Buddhism and state, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism as well as religiously motivated political activities of the Buddhist clergy and lay followers originated. A main feature of a modern society is the strict separation of religious and secular institutions by all parties involved. For Buddhists, this would mean, at the same time, to get rid of traditional national mythology and to return to the principles of the original teachings of the Buddha. Unfortunately, the paper of the Venerable Dhammavihari does not seem to be helpful in this respect.

Endnotes

(1) See Wilhelm Geiger, *Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa*, pp. 19-22. [Return to text.](#)

(2) Ananda W.P. Guruge, *Mahavamsa* (Colombo 1989), p. 895. [Return to text.](#)

(3) Sven Bretfeld (ed.), *Das singhalesische Nationalepos von König Dutthagamani*, 2001. [Return to text.](#)

(4) See L. S. Dewaraja, *The Kandyan Kingdom* (Colombo 1972), pp. 108-118. [Return to text.](#)

(5) Quoted in Heinz Bechert, *Internationales Asienforum* 22 (1991):181f. [Return to text.](#)

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