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The Buddhist Tradition of Sri Lanka : the Dhamma and the Saṅgha A Historical Survey

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In which sense can we speak of a characteristically Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition? In answering this question we invariably take into consideration how Buddhism influenced the life and thought of the people of Sri Lanka in their material and spiritual progress and the impetus it gave to creative works in arts and literature. There is, however, an equally important aspect which we tend to ignore. It refers to what this Island nation contributed to the further development and enrichment of Buddhist thought in a literature which began almost with the advent of Buddhism to the Island in the third century B.C. E. In point of fact, it was mainly due to Sri Lanka's early Buddhist literary tradition that Theravāda Buddhism established its identity in relation to other schools of Buddhist thought.

What we know as Theravāda is the Buddhism that prevails today in Sri Lanka and in the countries of South East Asia – Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. Its prevalence in this part of Asia has given rise to the expression 'Southern Buddhism', which is used to distinguish Theravāda from the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna schools of Buddhist thought prevailing in the countries of East Asia and the Himalayan Region. Theravāda is the only Buddhist school which has preserved both its canonical and exegetical literature in Pāli, a Middle Indian dialect which is akin to the vernacular of ancient Magadha. This has given rise to another expression for Theravāda, which is 'Pāli Buddhism'. What sets apart Theravāda from other Buddhist traditions is that it seeks to interpret the Word of the Buddha in the

light of its own *Abhidhamma*, a doctrinal systematization which emerged in the two centuries after the *Parinibbāna* of the Buddha.

As we all know it was in the third century B.C.E. that Theravāda Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka by the Indian Buddhist Mission led by the Venerable Mahinda Thera. The success of the mission is best illustrated by the circumstance that within few centuries after the event Sri Lanka was able to achieve the unique position as the stronghold of the Theravāda Buddhist Literary tradition. It was particularly because of this position that Sri Lanka was able to play a multifaceted role as a Buddhist country. It was also the main reason why Sri Lanka came to be considered by other Buddhist countries in Asia as the fountain-head of Theravāda Buddhism.

The necessary background for Sri Lanka to assume this position was in fact created almost simultaneously with the arrival of Buddhism to the Island. It is recorded in the Island's chronicles that the Venerable Mahinda Thera who led the Buddhist Mission brought with him to the Island, not only the *Pāli Tipiṭaka* which enshrines the Word of the Buddha, but also its expository exegesis known as the *Aṭṭhakathā*. This was a very propitious circumstance for Sri Lanka to begin its literary history as a Buddhist country. In the centuries that followed if Sri Lanka became the stronghold of the Theravāda Buddhist literary tradition it was the introduction of both the Canon and its Exegesis at the very inception of the sasana that ensured its success.

The *Pāli Tipiṭaka* which the Buddhist Mission introduced to Sri Lanka is the canonical literature of Theravāda Buddhism. It consists of three main divisions. The first is the *Sutta Piṭaka* which gathers together the discourses delivered by the Buddha. The second is the *Vinaya Piṭaka* which embodies the corpus of disciplinary laws governing and regulating the Buddhist Monastic Order. The third is the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* containing the 'Higher Doctrine'. It is an abstract essence of the Buddha's Teachings divorced from their historical background and presented in a purely impersonal and technical terminology. Its main purpose is to clarify the Buddhist view of existence which serves as a basis for the theory and the practice of the Buddhist spiritual life.

The whole of the Pāli Canon is said to have been redacted at three Buddhist Convocations held in India after the *Parinibbāna* of the Buddha. We need not agree with the tradition in all its details. But it is fairly certain that at the third Buddhist Convocation held during the reign of King Aśoka (3rd century B.C.E.) the Pāli Buddhist Canon assumed its present form. It was

through a process of oral transmission that the Pāli Canon was handed down from generation to generation and it was in this same form that it was introduced to Sri Lanka as well.

However, the oral transmission of the canon could not be continued for long. In the first century B.C.E. when the country was ravaged by an unprecedented famine and civil war it appeared no longer possible under the prevailing adverse circumstances to continue the Pāli Canon. Therefore, the far-seeing members of the Buddhist Saṅgha at a place called Aluvihāra in Matale committed to writing the whole of the Pāli Canon, in order, as the Island's chronicles say, that 'the True Doctrine might endure'. As far as we know this was the first ever reduction of the Pāli Canon into writing. It was indeed a step in the right direction even if it were taken under normal circumstances. It is to make accessible to many what was known only to a few. The far reaching effect of this historic event is that while almost all other recensions of the original Buddhist Canon remain in fragmentary versions and disarray, it is only the Pāli version that has survived to this day in its entirety.

Another event of equal importance concerns the *Aṭṭhakathā*, the expository exegesis to the canon. As we have already noted it was also introduced to the Island together with the canon. We are told that this *Aṭṭhakathā*, perhaps in its rudimentary form, was the work of the Elders who redacted the Buddhist scripture at the three Buddhist Convocations held in India. We cannot rule out such a possibility altogether, because certain parts of the canonical texts, particularly the versified sections, presuppose the existence of an exegesis which was transmitted together with the canon. What interests us more here is the fact that while the canon was introduced to Sri Lanka in its original Pāli version, its exegesis was rendered into Sinhala, the indigenous language of the country. What was intended by the latter act is fairly obvious and is of great significance. It was to ensure the continuous growth of the Buddhist exegetical tradition after its introduction to the Island. As an intellectually oriented religion Buddhism always allowed much latitude to the interpretation of its doctrines in order to encourage their further elaboration. It is in this wider context that the act of rendering into Sinhala of the original Buddhist exegesis assumes its full significance.

Fulfilling the intention of their original translators the Sinhala exegetical works did not remain static in the same form but kept on growing and accumulating new material as they passed through the centuries. By the 5th century C.E. they had grown into a multifaceted commentarial literature embodying doctrinal interpretations on all aspects of Theravāda

Buddhism. They also embraced various shades of opinion and different schools of thought and yet their authenticity as representing the Theravāda orthodoxy was acknowledged by all.

Despite this all-important position the Sinhala commentaries came to assume they remained in comparative isolation because the language in which they were written was one that was confined to the Island of Sri Lanka. This was the period when Sanskrit had displaced Pāli and other Prakrits as the medium of study in all other Buddhist schools on the Indian mainland. Therefore the best way to internationalize the exegetical tradition of the Theravādins could have been to translate the Sinhala commentaries into Sanskrit. If this option did not materialize it was because from the Theravādins' point of view Pāli was a better candidate for this purpose. Most importantly it was the language in which their canonical literature was preserved. It was also the language which the Buddha himself is said to have used in his discourses. Another important factor is that during this period there were several centres of Theravāda Buddhism in South India where Pāli learning was assiduously cultivated. There are clear indications to suggest that these Theravāda centres in South India were keenly interested in the Buddhist exegetical tradition of Sri Lanka but what prevented them from having access to it was the language in which it was preserved. All these factors seem to have had an impact on the decision made by the Theravādins of Sri Lanka to have the Sinhala commentaries rendered into Pāli. The task was accomplished in the 5th century C. E. by a band of erudite Buddhist monks from Northern and Southern India. Among them the Venerable Buddhaghosa was the pioneer and the most prolific commentator. To him is ascribed the authorship of the largest number of commentaries which cover all the three divisions of the Pāli Canon. It has been observed that his works "fill more than thirty volumes in the Pāli Text Society's Latin-script edition". His greatest contribution to the progress of Buddhist knowledge is his *Visuddhimagga*, 'The Path of Purification', and encyclopaedic compendium embracing all the multiplex dimensions of Theravāda Buddhism.

The rendering into Pāli of the Buddhist exegesis is an event no less important than the reduction of the Pāli Canon into writing some six hundred years earlier. Its salutary and far-reaching effect was that what had hitherto been confined to Sri Lanka became the common property of all Theravāda Buddhist countries. Equally importantly it led to the founding of a school of Pāli literary composition in Sri Lanka and paved the way to the revival of Pāli as the literary language of Theravāda Buddhism. Just as Buddhist schools on the Indian mainland adopted Sanskrit as their medium of study even so the Theravādins in South and South East Asia adopted Pāli as their language of study. It has also been suggested that the revival of Pāli during this period was due to a drive launched by the Theravādins of Sri Lanka and

South India in order to have a language which could compete with Sanskrit which was fast becoming the medium of international Buddhist culture.

With the displacement of Sinhala as the medium for the study of Buddhist teachings a propitious background was created for a great outpouring of literary activity in Pāli. It embraced a wide spectrum of both religious and secular topics and among its major works were commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*) and sub-commentaries (*ṭīkā*) on canonical texts, compendiums (*saṅgaha*) on the psychology and philosophy of the *Abhidhamma*, chronicles on the history of the *sasana* and the Island, lexicons and treatises on poetics, prosody and grammar.

Among these Pāli works it is on those relating to Theravāda *Abhidhamma* that we can see Sri Lanka's major contribution to the development of Buddhist thought. The *Abhidhamma*, as we have already noted, is a comprehensive and precise systematization of the teachings disclosed by the Master in his discourses. Its primary aim is to present a theory of reality which is intended to serve as a rational basis for the practice of the Buddhist religious life. The theory is based on the analysis of our world of sensory experience into a number of elemental constituents which the *Abhidhamma* introduces as dhamma. These dhammas may be understood as the last principles of reality or as the building blocks of our experience. They are either mental or material and in their combination they make up the whole of sentient existence. Besides the dhammas the *Abhidhamma* does not recognize any other reality in explaining the nature of empirical existence. Nor does it recognize some kind of transcendental reality as a background to the dhammas. If the dhammas are presented as if they were discrete and independent entities, it was only for the purpose of their definition and description. In actually they exist in inseparable association, exhibiting a vast network of relational categories. The dhamma theory, of which we have given here a very bare outline, is not merely one principle among others in the *Abhidhamma*, but the base upon which the entire system rests. It would therefore be fitting to call it the cornerstone of the *Abhidhamma*.

The early version of the dhamma theory is found in the canonical *Abhidhamma* which emerged in the two centuries preceding the Asokan era. At this stage the theory was not yet precisely articulated but remained in the background as the unspoken premise of the *Abhidhamma* analysis. It was in the Buddhist literature of Sri Lanka that this theory came to be fully developed as Buddhist thinkers sought to draw out the implications of the theory and to respond to problems it posed for the critical intellect. Thus the dhamma theory was

repeatedly enriched first by the *Abhidhamma* commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*) and then by the later exegetical literature (*ṭīkā*) and finally by the medieval compendia (*saṅgaha*) of the *Abhidhamma* which in turn gave rise to their own commentaries.

At this juncture it is important to remember that Theravāda *Abhidhamma* did not develop in Sri Lanka in isolation from the currents and cross-currents of Buddhist thought in the mainland of India. There is ample evidence to show that since the advent of Buddhism to Sri Lanka its learned monks had throughout been well acquainted with the new trends and doctrinal refinements that were taking place among the Buddhist schools in the mainland, both of the so called Hinayana and Mahāyāna persuasions. In the commentary to the *Kathāvatthu* which was compiled in the Anuradhapura period, for instance, we find names of some eighteen schools of Buddhist thought with an identification of the specific doctrines for which each of them became well known. Both Pāli commentaries and *Abhidhamma* compendiums show that their authors took into consideration the parallel data in other Buddhist traditions in their own interpretation of the Dhamma. Two of the Indian Buddhist schools with whose doctrines the Theravādins in Sri Lanka were quite familiar were known as Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas. The former had their own version of the *Abhidharma* through which they sought to interpret the Word of the Buddha. The latter rejected the authenticity of the *Abhidharma* and accepted only the authority of the Buddha's own discourses. The doctrinal controversies between these two schools did in fact serve as a background to the evolution of Buddhist thought in Sri Lanka. We can see in certain quarters an attempt to transcend sectarianism and to follow a somewhat eclectic approach to the interpretation of the *Abhidhamma*. The best example in this regard is the Sinhala Exegesis of the *Visuddhimagga*, a work attributed to King Parakramabahu II of Dambadeniya. In this work we find allusions made to several non-Theravāda literary sources, not as might be expected to criticize them but to draw corroborative evidence for the Theravādins' own interpretation of the Dhamma.

There is also evidence to show that Sri Lanka's Theravāda literary tradition was not unknown to the Buddhist schools in the mainland of India. Thus, for instance, in the *Abhidharmakośavyākhyā*, a well known exegetical work in Sanskrit, we find the interesting observation that among all Buddhists only those in Sri Lanka recognize a physical basis as the seat of consciousness. Again we find Acarya Vasubandhu, one of the founders of the Idealistic School of Buddhism, drawing attention to the theory of the sub-conscious (*bhavāṅga-citta*) as recognized in Sri Lanka's Theravāda tradition. The purpose of this reference by Acarya Vasubandhu is to justify a similar theory in his own system of thought.

What has been observed so far should show that Sri Lanka's Theravāda tradition did not develop in isolation but by responding to the currents and cross currents of Buddhist thought in the Indian mainland. However, what enabled Sri Lanka's Theravāda school to maintain its identity was that unlike many others on the Indian mainland it conformed to a great extent to the early Buddhist empiricist tradition. As noted by many scholars, in contrast to other Indian religions, early Buddhism had a strong empiricist predilection: It recognized only the reality of the empirical world and saw no valid reason for positing a transcendental reality as its ultimate ground. It was also the position adopted by Buddhism that preoccupation with metaphysical questions and cosmological problems as to the origin of the world, etc. is utterly unnecessary in understanding man's present predicament, with which problem Buddhism is solely concerned. As the Buddha himself says in addressing one of his disciples called Malunkyaputta:

"The religious life, Malunkyaputta, does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal, nor does the religious life depend on the dogma that the world is not eternal. Whether the dogma obtains that the world is eternal or that the world is not eternal, there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief and despair, for the extinctions of which in the present life I am prescribing." (*Majjhimanikāya*, PTS II, p. 122).

It was this position which Buddhism adopted in relation to metaphysics and its concentration on the here and now that led to its radically empiricist predilection which, as several scholars have noted, is particularly discernible in the Buddhist teachings relating to psychology and epistemology.

However, some three hundred years after the birth of Buddhism, particularly in the post-Asokan era, the early Buddhist empiricist tradition got marginalized and sometimes submerged in a mass of metaphysical speculations and cosmological theories. It is to the credit of the Theravāda tradition in Sri Lanka that it was able to resist this trend to a great extent and conform to the empiricist tradition which early Buddhism initiated. It was in consonance with this situation that when a large number of Buddhist schools considered the Buddha as an earthly manifestation of a transcendental reality, the Theravadins never denied the historicity of the Buddha and his birth as a human being.

It was perhaps this Buddhist empiricist tradition that has also led to the emergence of a Buddhist historiography within Theravāda Buddhism. Although we find its antecedents in the Pāli Canon, particularly in its *Vinaya* texts, it was in Sri Lanka that it developed into a

national tradition. The tradition had its beginning in the Buddhist commentaries which were in Sinhala. These commentaries contained, besides the Buddhist exegetical expositions, valuable data on the history of the *sasana* and the Island and the section that carried such historical information was known as the *Sihalatṭhakathā Mahāvamsa*, i.e. the Great Chronicle of the Sinhala Commentary. The first attempt at presenting it in a chronicle entirely in Pāli is the *Dīpavamsa* (Chronicle of the Island), which is of unknown authorship and is the earliest of the chronicles now extant. Because of its major imperfections such as faulty grammar and linguistic inelegance it was superseded in the 5th century C.E. by the *Mahāvamsa* (Great Chronicle) whose compiler was the Venerable Mahānāma.

The *Mahāvamsa* is more than a history book. It represents a continuing national historical tradition. Over the centuries after its appearance in the 5th century C.E. the original text came to be extended in order to cover the ensuing history of the Island. Its latest prolongation was published in 1992, thus bringing the narrative to the twentieth century. It is not without significance that the *Mahāvamsa* is called the non-stop epic of Sri Lanka.

In assessing the importance of the *Mahāvamsa* there is another aspect that must be taken into consideration here. Although it is intended to record the history of Sri Lanka it has attracted an audience in the countries of South East Asia as well. Among the several manuscripts collected by Wilhelm Geiger in preparing his critical edition of the Pāli text some came from Mianmar and Cambodia written in their own characters. The Burmese manuscripts were found to be more accurate and better preserved than those from Sri Lanka. Much more interesting were the manuscripts from Cambodia. They revealed that the original text of the *Mahāvamsa* had been extended to contain double the number of verses. The additional material for the augmentation of the text has been derived from the commentary to the *Mahāvamsa* which was composed in Sri Lanka in the 10th century C.E. This Cambodian Edition of the Extended *Mahāvamsa* is the work of a scholar monk from Thailand or Cambodia.

In the commentary to the *Mahāvamsa* we have information of some five other historical works, none of which are extant now. Among them the most important seems to have been the *Uttaravihāra Mahāvamsa*, the Great Chronicle of the *Uttaravihāra* Fraternity. It shows that some Buddhist monasteries had different recensions of the *Mahāvamsa* or that they were in the habit of compiling their own chronicles. We have also chronicles which deal with more specific aspects of Buddhist history, as for example, *Thūpavamsa*, the History of the *Stūpa*, *Dathavamsa*, the History of the Tooth Relic, *Mahābodhivamsa*, the History of the

Great Bodhi Tree. All these chronicles including the ones which have been irretrievably lost shows how the Buddhist historiographic tradition which began in the Sinhala commentaries in the third century B.C.E. continued over the centuries as a further extension to Sri Lanka's Buddhist literary tradition.

The foregoing survey of Sri Lanka's Buddhist literary tradition cannot be properly understood without reference to the Buddhist Saṅgha for it was the members of the Buddhist Saṅgha who played the leading role both its creation and preservation. 'Saṅgha' which literally means 'community' is the Pāli term for the Buddhist Monastic Order which the Buddha himself established in the 6th century B.C.E. From the very beginning the Buddhist Saṅgha was expected to evolve as a fraternity without a rigid hierarchy being imposed upon it. It had no central authority or central control, the principle of hegemony been ruled out by the Buddha himself. The Buddha is reported to have said that he never thought of himself as "managing" the Saṅgha or of the Saṅgha as depending on him. "The dhamma and the Vinaya which I have set forth and laid down for all, let them, after I am gone, be the Teacher (Guide) to you". This was the Buddha's instruction to the Saṅgha on this matter. The Vinaya that is referred to here is the code of regulations for the monks' external conduct, a code agreed upon for the smooth functioning of the monk-community. This should explain why the Buddha is reported to have said that the Saṅgha could abolish or amend the minor rules of the Vinaya if they so desired. However, at the First Convocation held a few months after the Buddha's *Parinibbāna* the monks unanimously decided neither to lay down new rules nor to remove any of the existing ones. This was because of two reasons. One is that there was no unanimity of opinion on the part of the Saṅgha as to what the minor rules were. The second was that even if they knew what the minor rules were to abolish them was to invite public censure. There would be people who might say: "Well Samana Gotama's rules for his disciples seem to have lasted 'till his funeral pyre smoked' (*dhumakalikam*). Public opinion played an important role both in promulgating and amending Vinaya rules even during the time of the Buddha. The reason being that the Saṅgha lived not in isolation form but by interesting with lay society. In the earliest Buddhist texts and ideal Buddhist monastery is defined as one located neither too far (*natidure*) nor too near (*naccasanne*) human habitation but easily accessible to people (*gamanagamanasampanna*). Thus from the very beginning Buddhist monasticism did not encourage isolation of the monk from lay society. The monk-layman intercourse was in fact one of the most important factors that was taken into consideration in the promulgation of *Vinaya* rules.

It is against this background that the role played by the Buddhist Saṅgha in Sri Lanka has to be understood. The advent of Buddhism to Sri Lanka means the inception of the Buddhist Monastic Order as well. As recorded in a Pāli Commentary one of the first acts the King of Sri Lanka (Devanampiya Tissa) performed when the Buddhist Mission led by the Venerable Mahinda Thera came to Sri Lanka was to offer the park, Mahāmeghavana, to be used as the headquarters of the *Sasana*. After this generous gesture the king is said to have asked the Thera whether the *Sasana* was established in the Island of Sri Lanka. The Thera's answer that although the *Sasana* is established its roots are not yet gone deep. "When will the roots go deep?" "When a son born in Sri Lanka (*Tambapanni Dīpa*), of Sri Lanka parents, becomes a monk in Sri Lanka, studies the Vinaya in Sri Lanka and recites it in Sri Lanka, then the roots of the *Sasana* are deep set".

The Thera's answer is very significant. It shows that his was not an attitude of patronage or that he had any ulterior motive or any vested interest in his mission to Sri Lanka. His sole concern was that the seeds of the *Sasana* should germinate in the soil of Lanka. The local Saṅgha, the Saṅgha in Sri Lanka was, thus, not expected to develop as an appendage of the Indian Buddhist Saṅgha, with the latter having control and jurisdiction over the former. The Sri Lankan Saṅgha was to develop as an indigenous movement, responding to the needs of the country and adapting itself to suit the local conditions. This was how the Indian Buddhist missionaries made the spiritual conquest of Sri Lanka, a conquest not accompanied by any form of economic or political domination but one that was in complete harmony with King Asoka's policy of *Dharmavijaya*.

With the establishment of the Buddhist Monastic Order in the Island, naturally, there came into being Buddhist monasteries as well. Among them the earliest and the most famous was the Mahāvihāra in the capital city of Anuradhapura. It was this monastic establishment which for over a thousand years functioned as the citadel of Theravāda orthodoxy. It was here that the earliest Buddhist commentaries in Sinhala had been preserved and it was also here that in the 5th century C.E. they came to be translated into Pāli. Thus it is the Mahāvihāra school of scriptural interpretation that we find embodied in the extant Pāli commentaries and sub-commentaries whose authenticity is accepted by all Therāvādins. Another monastery that came into equal prominence was the Abhayagiri which arose some two hundred years later. It was less conservative and was not averse to exposing itself to new developments in Buddhist thought and practice. With its more open and liberal policy, it encouraged the study of Mahāyāna doctrines while maintaining its Theravāda identity. Both monasteries became the two great centres of Buddhist learning in the Island, attracting scholars and students

from other parts of Buddhist Asia besides producing eminent men of letters. Another Buddhist monastery which ranked high as a seat of learning was the Jetavana which came on the scene in the 4th century C.E. Although these three monasteries came within the pale of Theravāda Buddhism there were differences among them on matters pertaining to doctrinal interpretation and monastic practices. The three fraternities associated with the three monasteries continued to maintain their identity up to the 12th century C.E. when a unification of them was effected during the reign of King Vijayabahu I .

The role played by the Sri Lankan Buddhist Saṅgha in relation to the Dhamma can be considered under three main aspects. The first is the preservation of the Dhamma. By this we mean the preservation of the literature in which the Dhamma is enshrined. As we have already noted the most far-sighted step taken in this direction was the reduction of the Pāli Canon into writing in the 1st century B.C.E. The far-reaching effect of this historic event is that the Pāli Canon has survived to this day in its entirety, when other recensions of the Buddhist Canon in Sanskrit, Prakrit and in some Central Asian languages remain in disarray in fragmentary versions. Besides the canonical texts Sri Lanka has been able to preserve the entire literature relating to the Buddhist expository exegesis as well. It is only when we take into consideration the ravages of natural disaster civil wars and foreign invasions that the country had experienced during its long history that we can appreciate the Buddhist Saṅgha's contribution to the preservation of the Dhamma.

The second aspect of the Saṅgha's role in relation to the Dhamma can be seen in the contribution it made to the further elaboration and interpretation of the Dhamma. This, as we have noted, is seen in the multifaceted Buddhist exegetical literature the Island has produced. It includes not only commentaries and sub-commentaries on the canonical texts but sometimes commentaries upon sub-commentaries as well and the Abhidhammic compendiums which in turn gave rise to their commentaries. The net result of this literature is that it helped to establish the identity of Theravāda Buddhism by clearly demarcating its boundaries in relation to other schools of Buddhist thought. More important is the fact that the tradition of scriptural interpretation which this exegetical literature evolved is now universally accepted as representing the Theravāda orthodoxy.

The third aspect of the Saṅgha's role in relation to the Dhamma can be seen in the contribution it made to the further expansion and entrenchment of the Theravāda version of Buddhism. This aspect of the subject brings us to Sri Lanka's religious and cultural links with its neighbouring countries in South East Asia. A number of literary works, both in Pāli and in

indigenous languages of the region show that particularly after the 11th century the Buddhist countries in South East Asia developed strong cultural links with Sri Lanka. They looked upon Sri Lanka as the fountainhead of Theravāda Buddhism and sought its assistance in modeling their religious institutions on those of Sri Lanka. In the ensuing centuries the Sihala (Sri Lankan) Buddhist Saṅgha and Sihala Buddhism constituted a strong and vitalizing force in the religious history of south East Asia. The strong cultural links that bound the countries of this regions were all based on Buddhism and it was the members of the Buddhist Saṅgha of Sri Lanka and of the countries of South East Asia that played the vital role in the religious intercourse between them.

Among the countries in this region Myanmar had the closest relations with Sri Lanka. The most informative in this connection are the *Kalyāni* Inscriptions of Myanmar which were set up under the instructions of King Dhammaceti (1472-1492 C.E.). The record the re-establishment of Upasampadā Ordination throughout Myanmar with the help of Sinhala monks. The inscriptions trace the history of Buddhism from a more earlier period and refers to the close religious intercourse between the two countries from about the 11th century C.E. There are other sources which record the arrival in Sri Lanka of Buddhist missions and monks from Myanmar. Typical among them was the Venerable Chapata, the well known author of *Sankhepavannana*, an Abhidhammic exegesis. He was reordained in Sri Lanka and on his return he established what came to be popularly known as Sihala Saṅgha in Myanmar. Similar cultural and religious links existed between Sri Lanka and Thailand as well. The most informative source in this regard is the Jinakalamali of Venerable Ratnapanna who was a native of Northern Thailand. It presents us with information on the establishment of Sihala Buddhism in North Thailand and the subsequent cultural relations between the two countries. An equally important source in this regard is the *Camadevivamsa*, believed to have been written by a monk named Bodhiramsi in Nambipura during the 16th century C.E. It was from this period that Nambipura and other regions in Northern Thailand came into close contact with Sri Lanka. Under the royal patronage and with the help of Buddhist Saṅgha from Sri Lanka Nambipura became famous as an important centre of Theravāda Buddhism. Sri Lanka's Buddhist Saṅgha played a vital role in entrenching Theravāda Buddhism in Cambodia and Laos as well. The Jinakalamali, to which we have already referred, mentions that among some Buddhist monks who came to Sri Lanka for Higher Ordination at the first quarter of the fifteenth century C.E. eight were from Cambodia and that they were headed by one Mahānasiddhi from the same country. As for Laos it was in the 14th century C.E. that it came under the influence of Theravāda Buddhism and in this connection the Wat Keo Inscription (dated Sakaraj 964=1602C.E.) is considered to be the most informative. It refers

to a religious mission of four members which came from Cambodia to Laos during the 14th century C.E. of the four members of this mission three have been identified as Sri Lankan Buddhist monks who had earlier come to Cambodia for Buddhist missionary work. The three monks were called Mahādeva Lanka Cao (Chao), Phra Mahādeva Lanka, and Mahānandipanna Cao. This is a brief account of the religious intercourse between Sri Lanka and its neighbouring countries in South East Asia during the period from the 11th to the 15th century C.E. Its purpose is to highlight the international role the Buddhist Saṅgha in Sri Lanka played in disseminating the Dhamma which in this case means the Theravāda version of Buddhism.

What we have discussed so far relates to the threefold role the Buddhist Saṅgha played as custodian, interpreter, and disseminator of the Dhamma. Besides these functions there were many others which Saṅgha had to perform particularly in relation to the laity. In the course of time with Buddhism becoming the national faith of the country the members of the Saṅgha became the leaders of the lay community. In this capacity they had to guide and advise the laymen in their manifold activities, particularly in the sphere of their education. This resulted in the Buddhist monastery becoming a seat of learning for the monks as well as the laity. This in turn brought about a radical change in the tradition of monastic learning as well. It became no more confined to the learning and interpretation of the Dhamma. It outgrew its traditional bounds to include the study of secular subjects as well. It was not in the sphere of monastic learning alone that changes took place. With Buddhism becoming the national faith and State religion of the country the Buddhist Saṅgha had to respond to new situations which sometimes involved them in political activities as well. A purist might argue that some of these activities were not in consonance with the spirit of the earliest Buddhist monastic discipline. However, if the tradition of monastic learning outgrew its "cloistered character" and if new responsibilities devolved upon the Saṅgha this need not be lamented upon as "degeneration" and "corruption" of the Faith. It has to be understood in the context of an institutionalized religion changing its institutional framework to keep pace with changing times.

This brings us to the end of our historical survey of the Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka. The survey is not intended to be a continuous and connected history of Buddhism in the Island from its beginning in the third century B.C.E. to present time. Nor does it claim to be a research-oriented study on a subject on which much has been written by competent scholars. Rather this survey is heavily based on what has already been written on the subject and its main purpose is to identify those areas and events which seem to serve as defining

characteristics of a Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition. Among them the most important appears to be the position achieved by Sri Lanka, early in its Buddhist history, as the strong hold of the Theravāda Buddhist literary tradition. Therefore, our survey has tended to concentrate more on the role it played on the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and its impact on Sri Lanka's image as a Buddhist country in the past as well as now.