

MAKE PEACE NOT WAR

Stanely J. Tambiah

The *Dhammapada* admonishes us thus: "Hatred never ceases by hatred in this world. Through loving-kindness it comes to an end. This is an ancient law" I am writing this letter advocating the pursuit of peace and amity and not the continuation of war and hatred in Sri Lanka.

I am the author of a book recently published, entitled *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka*. Please note that the words "Buddhism Betrayed" are followed by a question mark, signifying that I am asking an open-ended question, "Has Buddhism been Betrayed?" and not making the assertion that "Buddhism has been betrayed". Moreover, the caption "Buddhism Betrayed?" takes its **primary** reference from the document published in English with the title 'The Betrayal of Buddhism'. This document is an abridged version of the report first written in Sinhalese by the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry in 1956 on the eve of the Buddha Jayanthi celebrations. Written by some eminent monks and lay Buddhist leaders, it figures as a major point of reference in my book. Among other things, this report discussed the disabilities suffered by Buddhism (and the Sangha) during the period of British rule and offers remedies. I describe these submissions and assess their validity. (Incidentally, I should like to go on record here that after reviewing the evidence I upheld the allegation that the colonial government's policy did favour the Christian missions' grant aided schools, and did place obstacles to the founding of Buddhist and Hindu schools.

The main stimulus for my writing the book is that many persons in the United States and in Europe who have earnestly studied and for the right reasons been impressed and influenced by the teachings of the Buddha have again and again asked me this question which perplexes them: If Buddhism preaches non violence, why is there so much political violence in Sri Lanka today, in which many persons who identify themselves as Buddhists are participating? I set out to outline and provide a sequential account of how certain actors, both monks and laity, who have espoused causes which **they themselves have defined as Buddhist issues** have contributed to those processes that led to the ethnic conflict which now has degenerated into collective violence and the present warfare.

The sources from which I gleaned information to write my book include the writings of Anagarika Dharmapala,

Walpola Rahula, Kingsley de Silva, Lorna Dewaraja, Kumari Jayawardena, Gananath Obeyesekera, Sarath Amunagama, K.N.O. Dharmadasa, Leslie Gunawardena, Kithsiri Malalgoda, H.L. Seneviratne, and Sunil Bastian. Other sources are academic journals, government reports, local newspapers and publications including the *Lanka Guardian*.

None of these sources obviously were or are pro-Eelam and condone secession! It is of course true that I have used materials from these and other sources to construct my narrative account in which I make certain interpretations. Since it is an accepted principle in academic discourse that scholars can genuinely disagree about relevant evidence, the selection and arrangement of "facts" and the plausibility of alternate interpretations, I am perfectly willing to and positively look forward to such discussion, for this will contribute to our understanding of Sri Lanka's present condition and future prospects. All authors I have referred to above (except the first who has passed away) will no doubt engage, if they are so disposed, in a courteous dialogue with me.

In recent weeks some Sri Lankan newspapers have carried comments by certain persons on the book. They all get the title of the book wrong. Dr. Piyasena Dissanayake, apparently ignorant of the law of defamation has said that Tambiah is "a leader of the Eelam movement in the United States; it is also reported that he is a leading speaker at their propaganda meetings". In recent years, outside of university academic settings, the only public occasion at which I have spoken about Sri Lanka was in June 1993 at a meeting organised in New York Committee by American Friends Service Committee (a Quaker organisation) at which the principal speaker was Mr. Mangala Moonesinghe of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the chairman of the Parliamentary Select Committee, and which was also attended by, among others, Dr. Stanley Kalpage, Sri Lanka's Ambassador to the United Nations. These gentlemen will be surprised, as I am too, to learn that they and I were attending an Eelamist propaganda meeting.

Dr. Piyasena Dissanayake, has further pronounced that my book is a "deliberate distortion" and that I represent the Sinhalese as a "barbarous people". W. P. Senerath from Moratuwa, who certainly gives no evidence of having read the book at all, labels it "crude propaganda for the LTTE", "a racist publication" and a "highly vituperative anti-Sri Lankan monograph". There are



many other such invectives decorating the prose of other columnists, most of whom could not have read my book.

These smearings are so preposterous and uncontrolled, that on their own showing they will automatically strain the credibility of most Sri Lankans. The very notoriety they have given my book will automatically arouse the curiosity of many Sri Lankans who would want to read it themselves, and in the process increase its sales and its circulation. When I was in Sri Lanka in August 1993 not a single book shop in Colombo carried the book. The gratuitous publicity given will now I hope induce Sri Lankans to read it and make up their minds. I also sincerely hope the book will be translated into Sinhalese.

I cannot help but feel that it is a desperate “fringe group” who have used my book as a pawn in their “far out” political game. To go down their road is to whip up communal tensions and to prolong a war in which the youth of the island will be further decimated. Let us stop at the brink before all Sri Lankans mourn: “Here is a city built of bones coated with flesh and blood wherein are deposited decay, death, pride and jealousy” (*Dhammapada*).

The greatness and majesty of the teachings of the Buddha are their universalistic appeal that transcends differences of sex, caste, class and nationality. That is why they so widely diffused throughout the world, especially in Asia and the Far East, and why they appeal to many Westerners today. Thus my being born a Tamil does not automatically exclude me from studying, understanding, and appreciating the Buddha’s teachings. (Nor is it productive to suppress or forget the fact Buddhism had an important presence in South India until the fourteenth century.) I have marvelled at the Teacher’s discourses in the *Sutta Pitaka* and closely scrutinised the disciplinary rules set out for the Sangha in the *Vinaya Pitaka*. Who cannot be awed by the logic of the Four Noble Truths, and what ethicist can fault the exemplary eightfold path—right views, right intentions, right speech, right actions, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration—which Buddhaghosa (a monk of South Indian origins) grouped into the triad of *panna*, *sila* and *samadhi*? The cultivation of the mental attitudes of compassion, loving kindness, and detachment enabled by the reflexive and contemplative regime of meditation beckons many persons regardless of “race” as a way to cope with the existential worries that assault them in their daily life. The uplifting conceptions of universal ruler (*cakkavatti*) and *dhammaraja* who rule righteously by non-violence and by promoting the welfare of their people are a timeless charter for all rulers and politicians to aspire to. The interlocking of the two wheels of Buddhism, the higher one of the Buddha as world renouncer and the lesser wheel of the *cakkavatti* as world conqueror has been the axis on which great Buddhist civilisations have been raised. It is inevitable that the many who understand

and value these conceptions would want to see how they have been historically translated into practice, and to follow the trajectory of Buddhist polities and societies in regard to both their triumphs and their trials. I have myself studied in detail the manner in which religion, society, and politics have interrelated both in the past and present in Thailand and have written three books and many essays on this issue. I am also quite familiar with developments concerning the same phenomenon in Burma and in Sri Lanka, and am able to view matters from a comparative perspective.

As is well known, part of the trajectory of Buddhism in Sri Lanka amply documented in the *Mahavamsa* and other chronicles is the periodic reverses, stagnations and divisiveness suffered by the *sasana* which were remedied by subsequent revivals and revitalisations. Some of the spectacular well known instances were unification of the sanga by Parakrama Bahu I and the revival and efflorescence achieved by Kirthi Sri Rajasinha in collaboration with the *thera* Saranankara. A momentous development in the early decades of the nineteenth century was the formation of the Amarapura *Nikaya* as a reaction to the conservatism and exclusiveness of the Siyam *Nikaya*. Internal critique of the condition of the *sasana* and positive action taken “to purify” it (*sasanavisodhana*) have been a recurring self-correcting feature of historical Buddhism. It is a similar critique and revitalisation that is associated with the celebrated Anagarika Dharmapala who not only railed against the evils of colonialism but also the “indolence” and “ignorance” of some Bhikkus of his time (see *Return to Righteousness*, edited by Ananda Guruge, 1965: 520-21). Dharmapala is regarded widely as a heroic figure in twentieth century Buddhism.

If internal critique, reform and revitalisation are the processes that have ensured the continuation of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, why are some of the self-appointed distorters of my book so defensively clamouring that I have cast “aspersions...on the Maha Sangha” and that the Maha Sangha must be protected as if it is an entity too fragile as well as too sacred to be exposed to the public gaze? What I have done in my book is to describe utterances, and events, and developments that are public **knowledge** and are accessible in the **public domain**.

So I wish to pose this question to the newspaper columnists who have slandered me: are you suggesting that those Buddhist leaders who urged and defended the role of “political monks” (a phrase coined by the Venerable Walpola Rahula), and who, both prominent monks and lay Buddhists, formulated the objectives and causes that would “restore Buddhism to its rightful place” and thereafter participated in politics to achieve their objectives, do not want to have their thoughts and actions recorded in writing especially because this writing will become accessible to readers outside Sri Lanka—in Japan, United States and Canada, Europe and elsewhere? Are you sug-



gesting that the availability abroad of such information would be embarrassing to them and to you? Surely that would be doing injustice and questioning the good faith of these persons who must have believed in the rightness of their intentions and actions, and would want posterity to know them? Or worse still, are you being two-faced, and think that knowledge of certain things that happen in Sri Lanka, which you approve of should be kept confined in Sri Lanka, and that the world outside should not have the freedom to learn about them lest it sees them differently?

This double think coalesces with another pathological mental split. More than one correspondent has written that the United Nations, its agencies, the countries of the West, the non-governmental agencies operating in Sri Lanka, in fact, practically the whole world outside the island's shores, are against Sri Lanka. Worse still, it is Sri Lankan Tamils abroad all indiscriminately dubbed "Eelamists", "separatists" who according to a political correspondent who wrote a piece called "Let us unite and face this catastrophe" have successfully "misled" and "deceived" and brainwashed the governments of countries of the Western World into misperceiving the conflict in the island. We are even told that "English educated intellectuals, Tamil nationalists and representatives of international organisations are animals eating out of the same trough".

The pathology behind this world view is that these columnists by crediting the Tamils abroad with such **extraordinary** omnipotent powers to mislead Western countries (I wonder what the foreign embassies in Sri Lanka think of this characterisation of their gullibility) are also by the same token attributing to themselves, to the Sri Lankan government and its agencies, and to the Sinhala people, as a whole, a beleaguered incapacitating **weakness and impotence** to withstand the alleged Tamil propaganda and to exercise their own powers of persuasion to convey the truth as they see it. Are these writers claiming that the Sinhalese government and the Sinhalese living abroad are singularly inept and inarticulate in explaining events in Sri Lanka? What an insult! What we have before us is a conspiracy syndrome, which, in combining a hatred of the enemy with an attribution of great potency to it, at the same time, confesses to a sense of weakness about its own powers and its lack of confidence. It is this interweaving of fear, impotence, rage and hatred that can periodically explode into aggression on the part of those caught in this prison house of emotions.

I sincerely hope that Sri Lankans, Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims in particular, do not allow themselves to be influenced by these dangerous and mischievous attitudes which are a recipe for continued warfare and inimical to mutual understandings and a negotiated peace.

If I read the extremist columnists in question right, their rejection of the outside world and its influences as totally inimical (instead of critically sorting out the good from the bad) drives them towards a hermetically sealed inviolated view of Sri Lanka. They burrow deeper and deeper into an utopian past where they hope to find the kernel of authentic tradition. This romantic and isolationist quest for the holy grail actually crystallises into a populist conflation and essentialisation of language, race, religion, and land as an exclusive amalgam and cultural possession of an imagined community of people who feel they must either vanquish or expel the "other" peoples among them, who in their turn respond in a similar way and construct their own intolerant collective identities and animosities. The excesses of Nazi Germany and of present day horrifying "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia should warn all Sri Lankans where rival romanticised creeds of *bhumiputra* can lead them: into the degenerative spiralling processes of racial hatred and unstoppable violence. This is a warning sign that has to be posted at the gateways of **all ethno-nationalist movements** that compound exclusivist religious, linguistic, territorial, caste and ethnic claims—be they Hindu nationalism (*Hindutva*) of the Bharatiya Janatha Party, Sikh fundamentalism of the Bhindranwale variety, the nationalism of the Dravida Munetra Kazhagam and its breakaway groups, the fundamentalism of extremist Muslim groups in Pakistan, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism (especially of the *Jatika Chintanaya* variety), and the militant Tamil nationalism especially of the Tigers. (LTTE), to mention some examples of South Asia. Pluralist solutions of acceptable co-existence are far better objectives to work towards than campaigns to eliminate the imputed enemy within (the alleged traitors) and the enemy without (the foreigners).

Like many other Sri Lankans, I daily deplore the political turmoil in which the country is plunged, and I offer these propositions as integral to the pursuit of peace and prosperity:

- 1) It has been demonstrated again and again throughout the world — recently in Northern Ireland, Palestine, Bosnia-Herzegovina and elsewhere—that there can be no permanent military solution to a political problem, and Sri Lanka cannot hope to be an exception.
- 2) The contours and assumptions of a political solution to the ethnic conflict on the basis of devolution of power, while at the same time widening the basis of democratic politics and local government **throughout the island**, have been public knowledge since the time of the scuttled Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact of 1957. Subsequent discussions have been abortive because the will to seek peace, and faith in its



possibility have been lacking on all sides. The nitty-gritty details of a mutually acceptable pattern of devolution, whether on a federal or consociational or some other basis, will realistically emerge only if as a prerequisite, all sides to the dispute genuinely commit themselves to the necessity and realisability of a negotiated peace that will simultaneously satisfy the national interest as well as the interests of the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities.

Such a self-fulfilling expectation will be strengthened by the obvious truth that the diversion of the resources, now used for destruction, into constructive economic growth and the advancement of political liberty, is the only long term path open to Sri Lanka.

- 3) I hold as inviolable these canons that should apply to all Sri Lankans: all persons born or naturalised in Sri Lanka are equally citizens of that country, and the state shall neither make nor enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of its citizens, nor deprive any person of life, liberty or property without due process of law, nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

- 4) Looking at the matter from the government's point of view, the current warfare imposes an enormous economic burden, directly or indirectly siphoning off millions of dollars worth of foreign aid and diverting energies from the economic development of the island.

- 5) Last, but not least, the basic and overwhelming problem is the low rate of economic growth, high unemployment, narrow industrial base and the inability of successive governments to fulfill the expectations and aspirations of the majority of the island's youth. (Some 20 or more percent of the labour force is unemployed.)

To conclude :

"My heart is moved
by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed.

I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world."

Adrienne Rich

COMMUNICATION

Sir,

I recently received from Mr. Arthur C. Clarke, through a common friend, a clipping from a Spanish newspaper with a request for a translation into English. The clipping contained a news report that Mr. Clark had refused an invitation from the Vatican to meet the Pope, because he considered the Pope one of the most dangerous men on the planet as a result of the latter's condemnation of artificial methods of contraception.

Spain is still predominantly a Roman Catholic country, but there has been no outcry against Mr. Clarke as a result of this statement, no public meetings to denounce him, no charges that he was a Sri Lankan agent trying to undermine Catholicism. It is true that in the 16th or 17th century Mr. Clarke might have run the danger of being burnt at the stake, but since then, the Roman Catholic Church seems to have matured enough to take these things in its stride.

How sad then that the spirit of Buddhism, originally the most anti-authoritarian of religions (witness the noble words of the Buddha in the *Kalama Sutta*), should in Sri Lanka have been eroded so much as to make possible the hullabaloo over Professor S.J. Tambiah's book. I note that in the title of that book Professor Tambiah left open the question he was discussing by inserting a question mark after the phrase 'Buddhism Betrayed'. I would like to suggest to him that in the next edition he removes the question mark. The whole episode makes it abundantly clear that Buddhism in Sri Lanka has been betrayed, and by some of its most vocal professed defenders.

Yours faithfully,
Regi Siriwardena