

THE HERITAGE AND THE DAWN: RAHULA'S TWO REVOLUTIONARY CLASSICS

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The Sinhala reading public owes a debt of gratitude to the Venerable Walpola Rahula for his thoughtful decision to make available again his *Bhiksuvaḡe Urumaya* and the *Satyodaya* essays. *Bhiksuvaḡe Urumaya*, first published in 1946 by the Svasthika Press was sold out within two weeks. A revised second edition, published in 1948 was also sold out within a short time. An English edition, titled *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*, was published by the Grove Press of New York in 1974, but is no longer available. The new Sinhala edition published in 1992 by S. Godage Brothers is thus a triumphant return; with the book's basic insights proven right, its reputation established and its message acted upon by the Sangha and accepted by the lay society. The *Satyodaya* (The Dawn of Truth) essays were published in 1933 and 1934 as separate pamphlets by the Granthaparakasa Press for free distribution, financed by a group of five donors. The present edition (1992) is the first time the essays are published together in book form, sixty years after their first publication. The issues discussed in the two works, especially in *Satyodaya*, are even more topical today than when first published which makes them truly welcome.

Gunadasa Liyanage has aptly described *The Heritage* as "a book that shook a country." It is a unique document because it launched the only successful grassroots revolution in the history of Sri Lanka. Palace revolutions of the past were led by military strategists driven by no motive other than political ambition. In contrast, the electorally achieved revolution of 1956 was based on an ideology, and it was *The Heritage* that proclaimed that ideology. Its eloquent and persuasive rhetoric gave a new dignity to the monks and recruited them to the cause of overthrowing a regime that was alienated from the vast majority of the people.

The Heritage was at once the flowering of the nationalist impulse whose origins go back to the mid-nineteenth century, and the inspiration behind the revolution of 1956. It was born of the finest synthesis imaginable at the time, perhaps at any time; that between Buddhism and Marxism, between the young monastic intellectuals of the Vidyalankara Pirivena and the young Trotskyite intellectuals trained in the West. It is Sri Lanka's tragedy that the full potential of this magnificent mutual empathy was not to be pursued to its logical end. D.S. Senanayake, an astute politician, knew how deadly the combination was, and launched a defensive campaign which tried to portray Marxism as the enemy of Bud-

dhism, and to argue that monks had no business to be involved in politics. It is the latter argument that got Mr. Senanayake into trouble and promoted Bhikku Rahula to formulate systematically a socially activist role of the monk. This was accomplished with a brilliance rarely associated with such ideologically charged situations.

The main argument of *The Heritage* is that, far from being contrary to be monastic ideals, nothing is more appropriate to the life of the monk than politics, which Bhikku Rahula equated with social service. The theory that monks should be confined to their monasteries was part of the missionary propaganda designed to keep the monks out of contact with the people. He connects this with the broader colonial strategy of separating the Buddhist leaders from each other, and from the Buddhist public. To pursue their proper activist function however, monks should give up their somnolent ritualism, come out of their cloisteral confinement and learn modern western languages and modern secular subjects. It is such modern qualifications alone that would make them meaningful, creditable providers of service to an educated and modernising laity. Thus, *The Heritage* set in motion a revolution for the Sangha as it did for the laity.

If *The Heritage* is a blueprint for a revolution in society and therefore of the external world, *Satyodaya* is a manifesto for the inner revolution. It might be argued that the inner revolution is the more important one, and that *Satyodaya* indeed contains the remedies for the ills that have been brought about by some of the bizarre forces that have resigned since 1956. This is no doubt the primary reason as to why the Venerable Rahula has decided to give afresh, to those who call themselves Buddhist, a piece of his rebellious and extraordinary mind.

Economic development which is on the lips of every planner and politician is generally understood as something to do with the economist and the factors of production. At one level it is so. But no amount of economic planning or resources can create a systemically self-generating economy, unless there is an inner revolution in the thought process of the members of the society, or at least that of its decisive strata. Thus true economic development is part of a large process of social and individual development which includes a mutual regard and enrichment between the individual and the society. It is the potential that the *Satyodaya* essays hold for making a contribution to that broad process that makes it a significant and timely social document.



The Venerable Rahula talks about only one dimension of this inner revolution, namely the religious, where his expertise lies. But he talks about religion in broad terms, and it is clear that his interest extends, far beyond the religious, to the broadly social. The poet G.H. Perera remarked thus at the first publication of the essays: "The Venerable Rahula has taught us how to think." If the Buddhist public, more importantly the Buddhist leaders and intellectuals, can also be persuaded to think, we would have launched ourselves on the path to a better society.

The essays focus on the practices of the Buddhists relating to the preaching of sermons, food offering to the Buddha images and merit making; and subjects such as caste among the monks and freedom of thought in Buddhism. The Venerable Rahula holds these practices against the truly Buddhist criteria of universalism, compassion, love and rationality. To give two examples, he questions the sanity of heaping food in front of clay images when thousands of people go hungry, and of lighting 84,000 lamps of offering when a worker is too poor to afford a kerosene light by which to eat his meagre meal. These "acts of merit," the author points out, are done out of greed for merit as a source of wealth and power in future births, which nullifies their morality. Since these essays were first published sixty years ago, ritualism has increased not only in scale but also in absurdity, as illustrated by the military *bodhi pujas*, Sai Baba *pujas*, *dasa sil mata* marches and mass ordinations, all of which, the

author has elsewhere called "pollution." In his defence The Venerable Rahula quotes the words of the greatest of all rationalists and rebels, the Buddha: "Do not accept something because it is canonical." And he attributes the "the spread of ritualism in the name of Buddhism in Lanka today" to the failure of the Buddhists to follow this marvelously irreverent advice. "Today" here refers to sixty years ago, but the statement is obviously apt for the grotesque ritualism that passes off as Buddhism today.

The critique involved here is not of the laity alone, but of the Sangha as well. Here we see the relation between the *Satyodaya* essays and *The Heritage* which exhorts the monks to give up ritualism, learn new secular subjects and do something useful to the people. The Venerable Rahula is not performing an idle academic exercise, but throwing a challenge to the Sangha and the laity alike to act and live like true Buddhists. His unmistakable message is, "we have the pearl of Buddhism with us. Will it behave to continue to be swine?"

The ideals of *The Heritage* are familiar to many young monks and now, with the new availability of the book, they will know where the ideas came from. It is hoped that they will grasp the message of the work more satisfactorily than some of their seniors have done. Even more importantly, it is hoped that the *Satyodaya* essays will inspire at least a section of the laity to think, as they did the poet G.H. Perera.

Correction

There were a few errors—unintended, of course—in the last two stanzas of A. M. Macan-Markar's poem, "**From a Country of Corpses**", published in the last issue (January/February) of *Pravada*.

The correct text of the two stanzas is as follows:

You will hear too
of days and days of mutilated men,
scattered headless near *bo* trees,
of streets where common birds inhaled
an infected air, thick, boasting smells
of burning bodies, bodies with beating hearts.

O yes, I can offer you more and more,
moments stored in the heart of this water,
moments that moved within the clammy palms
of that fetid season,
moments of dogs eating corpses,
pariah dogs.

We apologize to the writer and our readers.

- Editors.