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BUDDHA: THE GOD-HEAD IN SRI LANKAN BUDDHISM

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BUDDHA: THE “GODHEAD” IN SRI LANKAN BUDDHIST TRADITION

Abstract

This paper proposes to focus on the adaptation of the concept of “Buddha” within the popular religious tradition¹ of Sri Lanka. In popular belief, he is considered as a sort of “*Godhead*” who controls a vast pantheon of gods, demons, and other deities. This understanding is opposed to the notion of the Buddha as conceived within the orthodox tradition of *Theravāda* Buddhism, which does not encourage the worship of gods by means of worldly aspects. Orthodox Buddhists see the Buddha as a mortal being who attained Supreme Enlightenment during his lifetime.

Contrary to this ideology, within the popular religious practices, i.e. rituals such as *madu* and *yakum*, the Buddha is seen as a sort of supreme deity with unlimited powers through which he can control malevolent deities and eliminate the negative effects caused by them, so as to preserve the stability of society. Thus, the popular belief of the village folk is in the abilities of the Buddha to obtain social harmony and worldly benefits. The Buddhist monk (*sangha*) and the village priest² (*kapu rāla* or *Kattadi rāla*) are thus the mediators between the Buddha and evil beings, and they embody the Buddhist doctrine and its supernatural abilities to heal society through particular ritual acts.

This particular example of acculturation reveals that traditional Sri Lankan Buddhist practice has been adapted to fit the highly motivated religious prototypes of society. I will examine the ways in which Sri Lankan Buddhists attempt to reconcile the “orthodox” notion of the historical Buddha as a human with the “popular” conception of Buddha as a kind of Godhead. Hence, this paper aims to identify the modern understanding of the “Buddha” in popular Sri Lankan religion as a product of acculturation, which has influenced the orthodox Buddhist ideology.

1. Introduction

The history and evolution of every religion has proved that whenever it was introduced to a certain culture, its followers assimilated the existing religious practices into the main stream and adapted accordingly. There is no exception for Buddhism: the continents that accepted Buddhism harmonized it to fit into its own culture. Whereas each tradition agrees with the central doctrinal aspects: the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Co-Origination and others, its later developments distinguish three main schools depending on specific institutional characteristics: 1) *Theravāda* or early Buddhist tradition where the Buddha’s teaching is considered the central doctrine. 2) *Mahāyāna*, where the divine aspects of the Buddha is mainly concerned and 3) *Vajrayāna*, which accumulated the Tantric characteristics

¹ *Popular religious tradition* in this paper is defined as the folk beliefs and ritual performances other than the main stream Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

² In Sri Lankan Buddhist practice, the tradition of the village priest is different from the priests/monks who live in temples or monasteries. Monks in the temple never take part in ritual performances, though the Buddhist affinity is obvious.

as its major concern.³

Sri Lanka apprehends the orthodox tradition (*Staviravāda* or later on known as *Theravāda*)⁴ introduced by Great Mahinda Thero during the period of king Devanampiya tissa in the Third Century BCE.⁵ Its main emphasis is the *Buddha dharma*, which states the Gautama Buddha as a mortal being who attained the highest state of life, and attained *nirvāna* as a result of his career. Sri Lankan Buddhists, hence, “do not believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, Self-Existent and Eternal, the Creator and Preserver of the universe.”⁶ Thus, the prime persuasion is the manifestation of *dharma* in one’s mind to realize the salvific truth.⁷

However, as the history reveals, Sri Lankan Buddhism, too, welcomed certain transformations, while still considering the central doctrine as the nucleus. The most inspiring of such transforms is the merging of numerous deities who are controlled or appeased by the supremacy of *Buddha dharma* as part of the orthodox Buddhist practice, beside the non-belief of gods or demons in the central doctrine.⁸ The merging is twofold: deities from pre-Buddhist beliefs,⁹ and those incorporated from foreign cultural basis. The acculturation of these divinities as Buddhist deities, and the elevation into a higher plane¹⁰ as warrant gods (*varam devi*) of the main religion, or the guardians of the land (*bhūma devi*) to express the ideal is significant.¹¹ Consequently, the laity treats them by performing such enchantments, and expects the grants and benevolence.¹² This ideology cannot be compared to the goal of other Buddhist schools, which concern the Buddha as a divine being or a concept (*svayam*

³ *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, edited by William H. Swatos, Jr., & Kiwisto, Peter (USA: Sage Publications, 1998), 65-8

⁴ Andrew Skilton, *A Concise History of Buddhism*, (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 2001), 149

⁵ *Mahāvamsa*. Ch. XIIIV, 22-41

⁶ John Davy, *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon and Its Inhabitants with Travels In that Island*, (Dehiwala, Sri Lanka, Tisara Prakaskayo, 1969), 160

⁷ John Ross Carter, *On Understanding Buddhists: Essays on the Theravada Tradition in Sri Lanka*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 130-131

⁸ Swarna Wickremerathne, *Buddha in Sri Lanka, Remembered Yesterdays: With a Forward by George Bond*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 222

⁹ According to *mahāvamsa*, king Pandukabhaya has erected dwellings for *yakṣa* Cittarāja and Kāvela who supported him until he consecrated as the king, and celebrated the festivals along with the cultic spirits. Similarly, he has adorned the female deities named Valavāmukhi, Maheja for their benevolent acts. See *Mahāvamsa*.. Ch. X. 84-90

¹⁰ Walpola Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, (Colombo, M.D. Gunasena, 1956), 41

¹¹ Davy, 147

¹² Wikremerathne, 225

bhū) with certain celestial powers¹³ to reconcile the matters of daily life.

Particular integration, thus accumulates certain celestial powers over the Buddha to control all non-human beings, while providing the means of unique soteriology through its central doctrine.¹⁴ What is highlighted is the penetration of some virtual aspects of life through religion while considering the Buddha as the leader of a pantheon who controls them by the supernal power of his teaching. Therefore, I propose that the particular acculturation is unique to the orthodox Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka, and attention is paid to examine how the Sri Lankan Buddhist community accumulates an autonomy and leadership into the Buddha's personality, through which he is exposed as "Godhead" to meet their practical needs.

2. Pantheon of Deities in Sri Lankan Buddhism

It is evident that the Sri Lankan Buddhist society has developed a pantheon of Buddhist deities who are faithful to Buddhism, and help to resolve the problems of life; both present and after death, through the supremacy of the Buddha. However, it is not possible to examine and identify the amalgamation of the entire pantheon into the main system at this stage, due to their geographical and thematic expansion. Yet, certain characteristics in common are worth mentioning: 1) They are below the status of the Buddha and earthly beings, 2) non-humans, 3) acquire merits that are offered by the laity, and became gods (*deva*).¹⁵ In order to attain *nirvāna*, they must be re-born in the human world, and acquire merits. For the purpose of this paper, I will examine the acculturation of certain deities who are centrally accepted by the Sri Lankan Buddhist community.

Accordingly, the highest status is received by the four warrant gods: Viśnu, Vibhīśana, Kataragama, Saman,¹⁶ incorporating the concept of protective deities, which is common to many societies.¹⁷ They have their own residing temples (*devālaya*) from where they uphold

¹³ Aśvaghōśa, and Edward Hamilton Johnson, *Aśvaghōśa's Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1936; reprint, (2004), 30 (verse 53); Arthur Lillie, *Buddha and Buddhism*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1900), 3

¹⁴ Steven Picker, *Psychological Study of the Theravada Societies*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), 62

¹⁵ Wickramaratne, 225

¹⁶ Kevin Trainor, *Buddhism: Illustrated Guide*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 123

¹⁷ In India the concept is regarded as the *virūha virūpākha dtharāha vaiśrava*, and accordingly adapted to Japanese Buddhism as well. see Saroj Kumar Chaudhuri, *Hindu Gods and Goddesses in Japan*, (Delhi: Vedhams eBooks, 2003), 22

Buddhism in the country.¹⁸ Viṣṇu obtains an important position from two perspectives:

- 1) According to *Mahāvamsa*, Sakra granted the responsibility of protecting Buddhism in Sri Lanka, which the Buddha offered to him.¹⁹ Sri Lankan Buddhists localized him as the god Uppalavanna (of the color like lotus), who resides in the southern coastal tip, Dondra (Devinuvara).²⁰
- 2) According to Hindu mythology, he is the creator of the universe,²¹ and the survivor of the human kind from calamities with his ten forms; one of which is the Buddha (*Buddha Natha*).²²

Both these aspects have been accumulated into his divine personality when it was adapted into Sri Lankan Buddhism.

The remaining three deities can be either of following deities: Nātha, Saman, Vibhīśana, Kataragama, Pattini. Their acculturation is evident by the following examination;

1. The god Nātha has his history in Sri Lanka as the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara,²³ who according to *Sāadhanamālā*, is the protector of Buddhism until the time of Maitreya Buddha.²⁴ Occasionally he is identified as the future Buddha Maitreya.²⁵ Among many regional temples, in which he is revered in the country, the most prominent is located near the temple of Tooth Relic at Kandy.
2. Saman was a pre-Buddhist *yakṣa* or a demon with an aggressive behavior, and was converted as a stream-entrant (*sotāpanna*) of Buddhism, for he listened to the Buddha's preaching in Sri Lanka at Mahiyangana for the first time in order to drive away the *yakkas*.²⁶ Sri Lankan Buddhists also believe that he was the one who observed the arrival of the sacred Bodhi Tree at the Mahāmeghavannārāma.²⁷ His name appears in the

¹⁸ Davy, 147

¹⁹ *Mahāvamsa*. Ch. VII verse 1-7

²⁰ See Senarath Paranavitana, *The Shrine of Upulvan at Devundara*, (Colombo: Archaeological Department of Ceylon, 1953), 19-23

²¹ John Garret, *A Classical Dictionary of India: Illustrative of the Mythology, Philosophy, Literature, Antiquities, Art, Manners, Customs of the Hindus*, (Madras: Higginbotham and Co., 1871), 102

²² -ibid- 717-718

²³ Senarath Paranavitana, "Mahayanism in Ceylon," *Ceylon Journal of Science* Vol. II, No. 1 (1928): 35-71

²⁴ Benoytosh Bhattacharya, *Indian Buddhist Iconography: Mainly Based on Sāadhanamālā*, 2nd edition (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1968), 124

²⁵ John Clifford Holt, *Buddha in the Crown: Avalokitesvara in the Sri Lankan Buddhist Tradition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 72

²⁶ *Mahāvamsa*. Ch. I verses 33, 77,

²⁷ -ibid- Ch. XIX. 41-43

ātānātiya sutta, one of the popular Sri Lankan *suttas* recited in any *paritta/ pirith* chanting in order to repulse the evil powers.²⁸ Later on he was named as Samantabhadra, bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism.²⁹ His primordial abode is located at Ratnapura, belonging to the Sabaragamuwa Province in the country.

3. Vibhīšana is also believed to be the future Buddha Maitreya,³⁰ and is considered as having the authority to protect the doctrine in the country from the western region of the Island. Thus, his dwelling is located at Kelaniya where the Buddha visited Sri Lanka for the third time, and protects Buddhism and the country from the particular cardinal point. Buddhist as well as Hindu laity believe in him as the deity who reinforces prosperity and protection.
4. God Kataragama safeguards the country and protects Buddhism in the south-western province, and his adobe is the well known temple at Kataragama (*Kataragama Devālaya*). On the other hand, he is believed to have the powers of a bodhisattva to control the bad effects of individuals, *i.e.* avoid barrenness, gain fertility, and protect vehicular from unexpected accidents.³¹ At this point, his authority is relatively similar to those of Avalokitesvara described in *Saddharmapundarīka Sutta*.³²
5. Goddess Pattini is the only female deity, besides her Indian origin.³³ She embraces seven forms (*Sat Pattini*), with which she serves the human kind. One of her forms, Orumāla Pattini, resides in the Tusita heaven in order to become a future Buddha.³⁴ The ancient temple devoted for Pattini is situated at the suburb of the capital of the country, Nawagamuva, where people visit for various purposes *i.e.* female productivity, prosperity as well as protection from endemic and epidemic diseases such as Chickenpox and Measles. However, according to the early Buddhist tradition, she has to be reborn as a

²⁸ DN: 32 *Ātānātiya sutta*, 52 (Translated from Pali by Piyadassi Thero (www.cambodianbuddhist.org/) english/website/canon (February 12, 2011)

²⁹ Paranavitana, (1928), 64

³⁰ Edwin Arnold, *Buddhism: An Illustrated Review*, Vol. I (Canada: International Buddhist Society, 1903), 624

³¹ Trainor, 123

³² Kumarajiwa and Burton Watsin, *The Lotus Sutra*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993)Chap. 24-25

³³ See -ibid- 45

³⁴ ‘She guarded from ancient times her fidelity, virtue, and Morality- She went to the divine world and prayed for future Buddha-hood. With devotion we raised our hands above our heads in worship-To the beautiful goddess Orumala Pattini. See Gananath Obeysekara, *Cult of Goddess Pattini*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 89

male to become a Buddha.

The next group of the pantheon is the sorcery deities: Vessavana, Dādimunda, Huniyam (Suniyam), and Devol. Occasionally the cult of Kali and Kadavara become popular, yet only in limited geographical regions. Whereas the accumulation of Kali into Buddhism is found from the Hindu Goddess Bhadrakali who has been tamed by Pattini,³⁵ the belief of Kadavara has its roots in the pre-Buddhist primitive belief of *yakka* as one who converted into a trusted Buddhist deity with the ability of controlling the *bhutas*.³⁶ However, in general, all these sorcery deities encompass some aggressive qualities that turns out the society or individual to a difficult state.

The best example is the legend of Vessavana. He is one of the four guardian deities in Indian mythology that has converted into a Buddhist follower, and devoted to protect Buddhism.³⁷ The legend of Dādimunda, or Devata Bandara, though somewhat different, is regarded as a protector deity of *Buddha dhamma* in Sri Lanka.³⁸ The legend describes him as “the powerful god who stood by the Buddha during his battle against Mara.”³⁹ Similarly, Devol has the power to control fire, which he proved by defeating the fire that was created by Pattini to avoid his entrance to the country. From the point of Buddhist, *fire* means the *dukkha* or suffering, and god Devol has the power to eradicate such fires, which provides a therapeutic meaning: to ward off the burdens in the present life.⁴⁰

However, two salient factors with regard to the sorcery deities are highlighted;

- 1) They look over the country from their regional adobes, making those as guard points (Vessavana- Kataragama, Suniyam- Kabalawa, Devol-Sinigama, Dadimmunda-Aluthnuwara) around the central object of worship; the Tooth Relic.
- 2) Their co-relationship to the Principal gods of the Buddhist pantheon, Viśnu, Kataragama,

³⁵ Bruce Kapferer, *Beyond Rationalism: Rethinking Magic, Witch Craft, and Sorcery*, 2nd ed. (USA: Berghahn Books, 2003), 156

³⁶ Frank Reynolds & Carbine, Johnson A., ed., *Life of the Buddha*, (USA: University of California Press, 2000), 171

³⁷ Dictionary of Pali Proper Names. Vol. III (Y- Homagama), ed. G.P. Malalasekara, (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1937; reprint 1997), 948-949

³⁸ Reynolds & Carbine, 167

³⁹ Richard Gombrich & Gananath Obeysekara, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 115

⁴⁰ Obeysekara, (1984), 312

Natha, Pattini.⁴¹

What is apparent in this hierarchy is the prevalence of two groups with certain powers to address the needs of the existing society with the supremacy of the Buddha. They in turn govern a group of lower class deities, which is twofold; 1) gods 2) demons. Whereas the warrant gods are superior to the secondary gods, the sorcery deities sustain the power to control the demons. From this point of view, the lower class deities are solely regional and their powers are limited to certain areas. For instance, some of these deities assume the capacity of making people ill, while others propagate certain social disorders such as famines and epidemics. However, they are controlled by their respective superior deities, either by warrant gods or sorcery deities who in turn have the power to call their attention of the *Buddha dharma*. Accordingly, there are two groups: 1) twelve Bandara gods 2) Twelve demons.

The distinction of the twelve Bandara Gods or *Bandara devatas* is their relationship to the four warrant deities, and resemblance to some social hierarchy.⁴² They represent a common group of people in the existing society who were once the village chiefs of the Kandyan region, and particularly venerated by the Kandyans.⁴³ Thus, the particular designation appears as an assimilation of the social powers that they executed over the ordinary society. Although the names of the deities differ from region to region, or religious performances, the distribution of power does not have any distinction; all of them receive the same power and strength. However, they encompass the authority over lower level gods or demons under the bureaucracy of higher gods. Some of the popular *Bandara* gods are; *Gale Bandara, Devata Bandara, Rajjuruwo Bandara, Gange Bandara, Irugal Bandara, Kande Bandara, Vanni Bandara, Kalu Bandara, Aluthnuvara Bandra, and Menik Devi Bandara*. The folk community expects the eradication of evil effects (*vas dos*) to ensure future fertility and prosperity,⁴⁴ and believe that they will assist the consolidation of the society through the power of the Buddha.

Nonetheless, the eighteen demons are considered as agents of distinctive sicknesses or

⁴¹ Kapferer, 159

⁴² Gombrich and Obeyekara, 123

⁴³ Obeyekara, (1984), 287

⁴⁴ John Clifford Holt, *The Buddhist Viṣṇu: Religious Transformation, Politics, and Culture*, (USA: Columbia University Press, 2004), 228

ailments that are cured by performing particular rituals, through which the village priest (*kapurāla*) enforces the truth of the *Buddha dharma* on them. The most upsetting demons are *Riri yakā* (demon of blood), *Maha sohon yakā* (demon of cemetery), *Suniyam yakā* (demon of bareness), *Kalu kumāra* (black prince), *Vata kumāra* (demon of dizziness), *Kalu yakā* (demon of evil effects), *Abhimānā* (demon of ghosts), *Kola Sanni yakā* (demon of absurdness).⁴⁵ While *Kalu Kumāra* is accompanied by seven demonesses called *Riddi-biso*, *Kola Sanni yakā* dwells with eighteen demons (*sanni*) creating diseases and disorderliness in the society. However, the particular demons and demonesses are obedient servants to the Vessavana or the king of demons (*Vesamuni Rajjuruvo*).

The non-human spirits in the category of demonesses, along with their leader, *Kalu Kumāra*, have the capacity to turn women to the state of barrenness, and once they are invoked with gifts from barren women, they leave them to have healthy children. According to the legend, they were warranted by the Dipankara Buddha, and should be obedient to *Vesamuni Rajjuruvo*.⁴⁶ (We would not forget that the Gautama Buddha received the warrant from the same Dipankara Buddha in one of his previous births). Despite their origin as demonesses, their names call them as princesses, due to their birth as a result of the union of *Mahabrahma* and *Riddi Biso*, the queen brought forth from the fire created in Mahameru.⁴⁷ Thus, they are named as *Namal Kumari*, *Somal kumari*, *Iddamal kumari*, *Piccamal kumari*, *Sapumal kumari*, *Vadamal kumari*, and *Siddhamal kumari*.

The meaning of *Sanni*, on the other hand, is the madness or absurdness caused by certain ailments, thus those ailments have been personified as *Sanni*. Most popular ailments (*sanni*) are: *amukku* (vomiting and stomach pains), *abhūta* (insanity with mental disorder), *bhūta* (insanity caused by spirit beings), *bihiri* (deafness), *deva* (epidemics), *gedi* (skin diseases), *gini jala* (fever including Malaria), *golu* (dumbness), *gulma* (disease caused by worm), *jala* (diseases caused by water including cholera), *kana* (blindness), *kora* (paralysis), *maru* (delirium and death), *naga* (bad dreams of snakes), *pissu* (temporary insanity), *pith* (bilious diseases), *sleśma*, (phlegm and epilepsy), *vāta* (rheumatism). The legend describes that they came to Sri Lanka with *Kola Sanni yakā* under stress. They listened to the Buddha's

⁴⁵ Paul Wirz, *Exorcism and the Art of Healing in Ceylon*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954), 24-25

⁴⁶ -ibid- 66

⁴⁷ -ibid- 65

sermons, converted as trustworthy followers, and pledged to strengthen and protect Buddhism in the country.⁴⁸ In each *Sanni* dance, the dancers dramatize the particular illness and the priest orders the particular illness to depart from the body and mind of the patient (*āturayā*) by the order of Vessavana who is presiding over the righteousness with the power of Buddhist doctrine.

A subsequent category of non-spirit beings is the *Gara yakun*, whose acts cause evil expressions (*kata vaha*), and make the society a place with dirt (*kili/killā*). Whereas the first effects are expected to ward off by performing a *Gara yakuma*, the latter is driven out by invoking a *Gara natima*. In each case, twelve *Gara yakkas* are invoked. They are: *Andun*, *Sandun*, *Deśa*, *Puśpa Sohon*, *Kana*, *Ūma*, *Launa*, *Vata*, *Toteya*, *Kīla*, *Killa*, who are accompanied by a similar number of females that are responsible to act under *Mahasohon yakā* and *Abhimānā* who appear in front of the Vesamuni Rajjuruvo (*Vessavana*) to inform the Buddha about their departure from the body of the patient.⁴⁹ Significance is their status as a group of *pretas*, despite their identification as *yakka*. Their responsibility is to remove various kinds of dirt and evil influences.

The lowest category of the particular Buddhist pantheon is the *pretas*, *bhūtas*, *kumbhānda* and many others who are countless in number. The broader understanding of these non-spirit beings is as the deceased who did not obtain a better life due to their *karmic* actions (*malayakā/ malapretayā*).⁵⁰ Thus, the tendency of the ordinary Sri Lankan Buddhist society is to please them through certain rituals such as death rituals, alms giving, and chanting of *pirith*, with the intervention of Buddhist monk to trans-communicate the merits to the desired relative or neighbor, seeking to fulfill two objectives: 1) Offer merits to the deceased, in order to attain a good re-birth. 2) Drive away the evil effects that may be caused due to the present status of the deceased person. At this point it appears to be a means of mental healing, which helps to treat each individual by expelling the affected *preta*, or *bhut*, as a result of the merits offered with the supremacy of the Buddha.

⁴⁸ -ibid- 45

⁴⁹ -ibid- 128-131

⁵⁰ Rita Langer, *Buddhist Rituals of Death and Re-birth: Contemporary Sri Lankan Practice and its Origins*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 17

1. **The Mediators: The Buddhist Monk (*Sangha*) and the Village Priest (*kapurāla*)**

That the Theravada tradition of Buddhism that encourages liberation through self-understanding is broadly accepted. Thus, it is important to follow the Buddha's path.

Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere describe:

Theravada Buddhism makes a sharp distinction between the worldly (*Laukika*), and the supramundane (*lokottara*). The supramundane, the truly 'religious' is what concerns and leads to release from worldly existence. Thus, what our monastic very reasonably equates with Western religion (translated into Sinhala as *āgama*) is soteriology, the teaching and practice that lead from the pains of cycle of rebirth to salvation. The quest for salvation cannot be conducted through intermediaries. Each of us can only save himself by following the path proclaimed by the Buddha. That path consists of morality, meditation, and wisdom."⁵¹

To obtain the particular wisdom, people seek the monastic life and develop their spiritual path which does not share the sexual and economic life, and solely observe the ascetic life providing the model for salvation. Apparently, it paves the path for a meaningful life, and a sense of purpose as soteriology.

Thus, the Sri Lankan Buddhist believes that the monk is the "means of extreme purity and profound contemplation, through which he has acquired extraordinary wisdom and knowledge... which is beyond the power of gods."⁵² Hence, the utmost means to control the non-human spirit beings is the Buddhist monk who has the capacity to pacify them through the supremacy of the *Buddha Dharma*, similar to what the Buddha exhibited during his career.⁵³ According to *mahāvamsa*, he drove out the *yakṣas* from the land of Lanka.⁵⁴ Therefore, the Buddhist monk, as the model of the doctrine, has the capacity to drive away the evil effects. Thus, the Buddhist monk performs certain rituals, most popular of them is the *pirit* chanting (*Ratana, Metta, Mangala, ātānātiya*), to invoke the non-spiritual beings, while

⁵¹ Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 16

⁵² Davy, 147

⁵³ According to *nidāna kathā*, he defeated the group of *Māra* who attempted to interrupt his Enlightenment. see Viggo Fausboll and T.W. Rhys Davids, trans. *Buddhist Birth Stories or Jataka Tales: the Commentarial Introduction entitled Nidāna-Kathā*, (London: Trubner & Ludgate Hill, 1880), 96-100

⁵⁴ *Mahāvamsa*. Ch. I. 19-20

practicing the monastic life. Despite it has been regarded as an abolition of the priesthood,⁵⁵ its involvements has created certain other religious aspects in Sri Lankan Buddhist practice, particularly healing the society by enacting some rituals.

The limited access that the Buddhist monk assumes in several other ritual acts, which the Sri Lankan Buddhist community has formulated, the service of the village priest (*kapurāla*)⁵⁶ (derives its meaning as “go-between”)⁵⁷ is expected by the society. In rituals such as *Bali* (invocation of solar deities), *Tovil* (devil Dancing such as *Ratayakuma*, *Garayakuma*, *Sanniyakuma*), *Madu* (propitiatory rituals such *Gammadu*, *Devolmadu*, *Punamadu*), he commands the mal spirits to leave the body of the individual or in other cases to depart from the particular region, by the order of the Buddha. The objective of the particular rituals are; 1) to control the magical powers of deities, demons, and other evil beings, and ascertain the benevolence for the worldly (*laukika*) life, and 2) to help find answers to the practical individual predicaments that have been caused due to the *karma* or actions of the past life, which each individual carries through *samsāra*. Even though we do not have a particular understanding about the volume of actions we have carried on with us from previous lives, each individual likes to lessen its forces by certain acts,⁵⁸ for which the Buddhist monk only can guide him to enter into the monastic life and follow the path leading to the wisdom. Contrary, the village priest helps them to control the mal-effects of the present life by pacifying them through the supremacy of the *Buddha dharma*, while maintaining the usual pattern of life.

Conclusion

The foregoing examination testifies to the state of Buddhism, and the assimilation of certain deities into mainstream Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The particular acculturation, though it has nothing to do with the main religion,⁵⁹ proves that beside the establishment as the main doctrine by providing the unique soteriology, it also acts as an assistance to answer the mystic

⁵⁵ Gombrich and Obeysekara, 12

⁵⁶ H. D. Evers, *Monks, Priests, and Peasants: A Study of Buddhism and Social Structure of Central Ceylon*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), 62

⁵⁷ Gombrich and Obeysekara, 19

⁵⁸ Peter H. Vrijhof & Jacques Waardenburg, *Official and Popular Religion: Analysis for a Theme for Religion Studies*, (The Hague, Mouton Publishers, 1979), 501-2

⁵⁹ Gombrich and Obeysekara, 15-16

questions that stir up in the daily life of the laity. What is highlighted is that it never creates a cosmology under the canopy of early Buddhism as we see it in other religions such as Hinduism, though the structure remains the same.

Thus, the Buddhist monk in Sri Lankan society has dual characters: as the pure model of the central doctrine, and the intermediary of Buddhist society to address the non-spiritual beings under the supremacy of the Buddha. The limited access of the Buddhist monk to the entire range of Buddhist rituals in society has raised the role of the village priest, who invokes the deities through the supremacy of the *Buddha dharma*, while the Buddha has the power to control the gods and demons. In either approach, the objective is to ward off the effects of malevolent non-human spirits, in which the Buddhist monk or the village priest empowers the doctrinal aspects of the Buddha and Dhamma. The final effects are transmitted to the patient (*āturayā*) or the society under the supreme guidance and command of the Buddha in order to constitute the actual status. Therefore, I prefer to conclude that the particular acculturation elevates the status of the Buddha from a mortal being, to that of “Godhead,” which by no means can compare to the ideology of the early Buddhist doctrine.

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