

DOCUMENTS

Burmese Buddhism in Colonial Burma

Editor's note:

The following pieces found publication in 1895 and 1896.

M.W.C.

“Burmese Buddhists and Mission Work”

Rangoon Gazette and Weekly Budget 23rd August 1895

The following is the reply from the joint secretaries to the Babuthutta Society Rangoon, to Mr. H. Dharmapala, General Secretary to the Mahabodhi Society.

At the meeting held on the Sule Pagoda Platform on the 2nd June 1895 the members of the Babuthutta Society promised you a further communication within three months of the subject of the support to be accorded to the movement inaugurated by the Mahabodhi Society. Our Society has most anxiously considered the questions in all its bearings and has been constrained to come to the conclusion that for the present, at least, it does not see its way to render that support and assistance which the movement to spread the propaganda of the Lord Buddha fully deserves. Repeated and urgent demands have been made upon its energies in connection with such local questions as the constitution and working of the Shwedagon Pagoda Trust, ecclesiastical matters arising out of the lamented decease of our late Sangharaga and the encouragement and fostering of the study of the Tripitika by assisting the Educational Department in holding periodical examinations. By attending such matters the Society is convinced that many important reforms will be carried out to the advantage of the Buddhist religion in this Province. The Society firmly holds that its duty to Burma as regards religious, educational and social reforms should occupy the foremost place in its programme of work, and that the question of foreign missions had better be held in abeyance for the present. At the same time it cannot withhold its esteem and admiration for the zeal and devotion you have displayed during the past four years in the cause of Buddhism and its heartfelt sympathy for the efforts of the branch societies which have been established in Ceylon, Arrakan and Upper Burma.

In conclusion, the Society expresses a hope that the solidity thus achieved in the various sections of the Buddhists will be conducive to the realization of that great Buddhistic revival, which is the wish and the prayer of every true Buddhist all over the world.

[Buddhagaya Temple Controversy]

Rangoon Gazette and Weekly Budget 2 May 1896

The Burmese Buddhists of Rangoon have engaged the services of two well-known advocates to present a petition for them to the Government of India through the Local Government asking that the orders of the Collector of Buddha Gaya regarding the removal of one of the images at the Buddhist temple at that place may be stayed. The image in question was forwarded to Buddha Gaya by the Japanese Buddhists to be placed—in a zayat which was built by the late Burmese king Mindoon Min, and the Collector has ordered the removal of its image threatening in the event of [ed. Note: typesetter missed one word/line in original, M.W.C.] not being moved to send the image to the Calcutta Museum.

“The Buddha Gaya Temple” [I]

Rangoon Gazette and Weekly Budget 9 May 1896

The following memorial has been sent through the Local Government, to the Government of India by the leading Buddhists of Rangoon:

All Buddhists in Burma are very much interested and concerned in the preservation of the Temple and the Mahayana or sacred enclosures of the Maha Bodhi Tree. The spot on which the Maha Bodhi Tree of India stands is sacred to all Buddhists as being the original spot where the Omniscient and most excellent Lord on his blossoming to the dignity of Buddhahood came to understand the four great truths. It is considered a very pious act among the Buddhists that extraordinary reverence and homage should be paid to the sacred spot.

For nearly 25 centuries the hallowed spot has remained as the central shrine of all Buddhists. Buddhist pilgrims from all quarters of the Buddhist world have visited and do visit this sacred spot. During the 15 centuries of Buddhist supremacy in India the hallowed place was under the custody of Buddhist monks. Owing to the obliteration of Buddhism by the Mahomedans all places sacred to Buddhists were for a period of 600 years allowed to fall into decay. But in consequence of the labours of antiquarians these vestiges of a bygone past were brought to light. In 1875 the great Temple at Buddha Gaya was visited by a Burmese Embassy sent by King Mindon Min. They found the Temple in a state of complete decay and King Mindon Min, through the Government of India, secured from the Mahant the right to restore the Temple. Permission was also given to the King Mindon Min to build a monastery and keep Buddhist Bhikabus at Buddha Gaya for the performance of religious worship in the Temple. This can be proved by the correspondence that took place at the time.

The Buddhists who visit Buddha Gaya have been put to great inconvenience or want of proper accommodation. To provide this accommodation the Buddhists of Siam raised a lakh of rupees in order to purchase from Mr. Ryves and the executors of the Tikari Raj, the permanent lease of the village of Boda Gaya or Maha Bodhi. Negotiations for the sale of the permanent lease of the village were almost complete; but for some

unaccountable reason the Government of Bengal stepped in and used their authority to stop the sale.

Not content with stopping the sale, the Government of Bengal through the Commissioner of the Patna Division is about to perpetuate another act of injustice to the Buddhists. Mr. H. Dharma-pala received a letter dated the 9th April 1896, from the district Magistrate of Gaya requiring him to remove the Japanese image of Buddha now in the Burmese rest house in Buddha Gaya out of that place and away from the precincts of the Buddha Gaya Temple. On failure to comply with the request the District Magistrate states that Government will take possession of the image and will deposit it in the Indian Museum in Calcutta. This image is regarded as the holiest shrine in Buddha Gaya. The removal of this image by any individual would be regarded as an act of sacrilege, punishable under the penal laws of India.

Notwithstanding this the Government of Bengal are wilfully determined to override all traditions and to violate the law by removing this image. If the Government persist in carrying out their intention to remove this image they are by the very fact of the threat contained in the letter of the District Magistrate committing an act which can only be termed a sacrilege.

We humbly submit that this act if carried out would be quite contrary to the traditions and policy of the Government of India. The strictest toleration and regard for the various religions of the inhabitants have always been pursued by the Government in dealing with religious questions and questions of caste. Lord Elgin when replying to the address presented to him on the questions of Gaya on the 30th of March 1895, uttered the following words, which show clearly what the policy of Government has always been and still is in reference to religious matters. "Government as you are aware must preserve a strict, perhaps stern impartiality of which you have indicated your appreciation, but it seemed to me that whom we approach or deal with institutions which others hold in veneration and affection our first object should be to do our best to appreciate the feelings inspired by them and our second to see that we do nothing by word or deed to injure these feelings."

We feel sure that His Excellency will see that the order requiring the sacred Image of Buddha to be removed is a most unjust one and an order which is calculated to most seriously outrage the religious feelings of all Buddhists from every quarter of the world.

We have also learnt on good authority that the Buddhist priests residing in the Burmese Monastery have been turned out of it, keys have been forcibly taken out of their hands, and they are now in a desperate condition.

Wherefore your Memorialists humbly pray that the order of the District Magistrate of Gaya be set aside, the sacred Japanese Image of Buddha be allowed to rest where it now is, and that the priests be allowed to remain in the Burmese Monastery undisturbed.

"The Buddhagaya Temple" [II]

Rangoon Gazette and Weekly Budget 23rd May 1896, p. 9.

A large number of influential Buddhists of Rangoon, including their Gaing Oat Tsadaw (Bishop) and several high priests waited on the Chief Commissioner at 8 a.m. on the 16th instant at Government House, to present for submission to the Government of India, a memorial praying that the order of the Government of Bengal for the removal of the Japanese image of Buddha from the monastery of the late king Mindon at Gaya and from the precincts of the Mahabodhi Temple, be set aside and that the sacred image be allowed to rest where it is now.

Maung Ohn Ghine, Honorary Magistrate, read the address which was as follows:

We the leading Buddhist priests and the principal Buddhist residents of Rangoon beg to approach your Honour with this memorial for favour of transmission to the Government of India with such remarks as may be considered necessary. The effect of the order of the Bengal Government for the removal of the sacred image of Our Lord on our feelings can be better imagined than expressed. The order is not only the most unjust, but one which if carried out will most seriously outrage the feelings of all Buddhists in the world. The facts of the case are more fully explained in the memorial. The Government of Bengal gave no reasons for their illegal acts, but a certain leading English paper in India tries to show that these irregular and extraordinary steps have been taken by Government to preserve the status quo at Buddha Gaya. Admitting for the sake of argument that the end justifies the means, and in this particular case the end itself was an urgent one, we come face to face with the fact that the *status quo* at Buddha Gaya never amounted to an exclusion of the Buddhists either from the Mahabodhi Temple or the village of Buddha Gaya. In 1875, the late Mahant entered into an agreement with the late king Mindon of Burma as regards the Buddhist worship of the temple, and gave or sold to his Majesty a piece of land for building a monastery, while the present Mahant also gave some more land for the purpose of extensions to the building. Under such circumstances it is absurd to suggest that the *status quo* at Buddha Gaya would be disturbed if some Buddhist priests were permanently stationed in the village, and there were more rest-houses for the accommodation of the pilgrims. The apprehension of constantly recurring disturbances of peace has no foundation whatever. It would not be a wise thing to suppose that pilgrims and priests belonging to a religion of which peace is the corner stone, and travelling hundreds of miles on an errand of piety, would be willing to be the aggressors, or breachers of peace, while on the other hand, the Mahant has learnt a sharp lesson in the late criminal case, and he would think twice before he becomes an aggressor.

The Burmese translation of the memorial was read by Maung San Nyoon, interpreter to the Chief Commissioner.

Mr. Smeaton questioned the leading members of the deputation on several points connected with the Japanese image and the Mahabodhi Temple and, after reading through some of the documents sent up with the memorial, promised to submit the

memorial to the Viceroy. He said he had already written on the subject, and had informed His Excellency that further particulars would be submitted when the memorial had been received, he could only tell them that they might rest assured they would get justice at the hands of Lord Elgin and that the Buddhist priests need not be afraid that any desecration to the sacred image or any other things which were held in reverence by them would be allowed.

An Examination of Mr. Tsaw Hla Phroo's Reasons for Embracing Christianity¹
by Maung Chan Htwan Oung (1896)

One of the reasons why Mr. Tsaw Hla Phroo embraced Christianity is that he considered the goal of Buddhism to be annihilation and that the Buddhist ideal of perfection is destruction.

There can be no doubt that the scholastic works of the Singalese Monks support this view; but it has been demonstrated by Shwe-Gyin Sayadaw, on the authority of Pali Tipitikan and of their commentaries, that the goal of Buddhism is not only an annihilation of sensual life, but also a perfect spiritual life (_ambodhi).

Another reason why Mr. Tsaw Hla Phroo embraced Christianity is that his view of Karma and man is founded not on any independent examination of the Buddhist Scriptures, but on what he learnt from the Burmans and on the current Burmese Buddhist Literature of the day. He consequently considers that Buddhism teaches that man is a mere automaton driven by what is termed Act Force (Karma).

The third reason why Mr. Tsaw Hla Phroo embraced Christianity is that he misunderstood Buddha's method as Salvation.

Buddha taught the doctrine of evolution and gradual perfection of life. His teachings have been made to appear inconsistent by the Singhalese and the Burmese monks of the Nihilistic School. In order to obtain a correct knowledge of Buddha's method of Salvation, one might study Parami or Buddhist Perfection side by side with Christian Perfection and Buddhist Meditation side by side with Christian Meditation as understood by Roman Catholics.

The fourth reason why Mr. Tsaw Hla Phroo embraced Christianity is that he had accepted the view of Buddha and Dharma as propounded by the Nihilistic Philosophers to be the correct view.

This matter ought to be re-considered by him by the light of works written upon the subject of the Oriental Scholars and by the light of the Buddhist Scriptures themselves. But Mr. Tsaw Hla Phroo should recollect that the same thing will appear differently to the same mind when considered from different stand points, and that he cannot, therefore, expect to obtain the correct view of Buddha and Dharma when they are considered from the stand point of a believer in Christianity. A Christian would obtain as much an erroneous view of Christianity by looking at it from the Buddhist stand point.

¹ Originally published Akyab: Akyab Orphan Press, 1896.

What ought to be borne in mind is that most religious controversies would end before they began if the controversialists should only learn to look at the doctrines of each religious system from different stand points.

The fifth and the last reason why Mr. Tsaw Hla Phroo embraced Christianity is that he had sought for a supreme lawgiver and Christianity had supplied him with such a Being.

There can be no doubt that the Christian doctrines of sin, Redemption, and Salvation would be unthinkable, without assuming the existence of a supreme Lawgiver. But it is also equally certain that the Buddhist doctrines of Karma, Meditation, and Salvation, would be unthinkable if we should not assume the existence of Nirvana and Natural Law. Where both the Christian controversialists and the Buddhist controversialists have equally erred is, that the former expect the latter to tell them the origin of Natural Law and the latter expect the former to tell them the origin of the supreme lawgiver.

In conclusion, I may observe that Mr. Tsaw Hla Phroo's criticism on Buddhism as understood by the Burmese Buddhists is fair when looked at from the stand point of a believer in Christianity; but the Buddhism of Pali Tipitakan is not the Buddhism as understood by the Burmese Buddhists; and I would suggest that Mr. Tsaw Hla Phroo should form a society to study Buddhism as propounded in Tipitakan for the good, for the gain, and for the welfare of his countrymen.

The End.