

## POSON BEAMS OF JUNE AND THE MESSAGE OF MAHINDA TO SRI LANKA

- FOR US TO THINK OF AND ACT UPON IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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The message of Mahinda turns out to be the most fortunate we Sri Lankans have ever received, and that a little over two thousand three hundred years ago. At that time, during the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa, we apparently had reached a high level of culture. Our pre-Buddhist king of Anuradhapura at that time had taken to deer hunting as a royal sport. The arrival of Thera Mahinda in Sri Lanka marked a turning point in our history. Within a couple of centuries we were turned away from hunting, both as a sport as well as an avenue for gluttonous eating. Forget not that pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka even had a God-of-the-Hunt or *Vyādha - deva* whose abode was a palm tree or *Tāla - rukkha*. Let an honest study of history enlighten us Sri Lankans.

It was by royal decree, a few centuries later, that security to animal life - bird and beast and fish - via the injunction of *mā ghāta* or **No Slaughter of Animals** was introduced. Sri Lankan kings like Amandagamini, Silakala, Aggabodhi IV and Mahinda III, who had by then taken to Buddhist life in earnest, imposed a ban on the slaughter of animals [ *mā ghātam kārayi dīpe sabbesaṃ yeva pāṇinaṃ*. Mhv. 41.v.30 ]. Our indebtedness as a country or nation to the source of this inspiration has to remain incalculable for all times. But behold the world today. After more than twenty-three centuries, re-writing of history to serve contemporary needs of religion, politics and ethnicity is seen to be having its disastrous consequences on human life, both here in our native land and elsewhere.

This is indeed the message the whole world today is looking up to, conscious or unconscious in the process of doing so. It is the message of Shakyamuni the Buddha, given to mankind as a whole, with no thoughts of chosen or selected people. His dhamma was more than mere good news to the poor and the oppressed. This is what earns for Buddhism its honoured title of **Fastest Spreading Religion** in many parts of the world today. At the time it was delivered, it was not meant to be Indo-centric. Within a very short time, overriding barriers of ethnicity and physical terrain, it reached as far west as the Caspian Sea, over today's Middle East regions of Afghanistan, Iran etc. In the north, it traversed over deserts along oases of the ancient Silk Route, reaching China as early as 50 A.D. during the reign of Emperor Ming Ti. China, Korea and Japan came under its benign influence, reflecting to the world even today their cultural enrichment under the guidance and inspiration of Buddhism. Think of Japan's *ike bana* or the art of flower arrangement or its rich heritage of landscape gardening.

In the message of Buddhism, the world shall find comfort today in the face of threats of violence both at social and domestic levels, of rape and brutal murders prompted by sex excitement and evils of drug addiction, of pathetic devastation of mankind, at all ages, resulting from Aids, HIV, STD or sexually transmitted diseases. The much debated problems of abortion, fatherless homes and unmarried mothers, witnessed all around us and everywhere, could very well be kept at a low ebb, only if sanity prevailed and the words of the Buddha were adequately heeded. The Buddha clearly stated that the world would be saved through an understanding of and living up to the ideals of the Dhamma. ' He who sees the Dhamma sees me ', he said [ *Yo dammaṃ passati so maṃ passati* ]. As a redeemer, he does not need to be reborn.

Delivered to the world more than two and a half millennia ago, and to Sri Lanka via Thera Mahinda a few centuries later, the primary concern of Buddhism is the regulation and revitalizing of interpersonal relationships within the human community. That is where Buddhist religious living well and truly begins. This is why all Buddhist activities, not merely the rituals and ceremonies within and without the temples, begin with the voluntary acceptance and the pledge to keep and fulfill the basic code of *pancasila*. They embody some of the fundamental human rights of respect for life and respect for property and a great deal more. Read no more and no less than verses 246 and 247 of the Dhammapada to discover the dynamism of this Buddhist approach to social problems. Answers to these lie not in prayer and supplication to forces outside man but in the total correction of human attitudes and approaches.

The above verses emphatically assert that maladjusted relationships in society lead both to social disruption as well as to personal deterioration and disaster, literally digging out the very roots of one's existence -- *mūlaṃ khaṇati attano*. Why then not be morally good ? On this area of societal considerations or moral goodness in Buddhism, one only needs to be reminded of a very few basic sermons of the Buddha which he appears to have delivered at a very down-to earth congregational level. One is the Veludvareyya Sutta or the sermon at the Bamboo Gate, preached to the lay community of the Veludvara village [ S.V. 352-6 ]. The main theme here is moral goodness and consequent moral harmony [ *Sama-cariyā* and *dharmacariyā* ]. The main thrust of the Buddha's argument here is ' Why not treat society in the same way you would like society to treat you ? This is called *attūpanāyika dhammapariyāya* or the self-testing method of the worth of moral goodness.

The other is the Saleyyaka Sutta wherein the Buddha provides us with an almost perfect legal document with which any Buddhist who wishes to regulate and discipline his life on Buddhist lines could do so without any infringement of the Buddhist rules laid down [ M. I. 285-90 ]. This sutta discusses in detail the rules relating to the ten offenses through thought, word and deed - *dasa kamma patha*. We would call upon all those interested in the study of moral considerations in Buddhism as a religion to take a close and careful look into these two suttas and see their total implications. Morality or *sīla* implied therein does not imply a mere negative or exclusively personal purity, unrelated to the world one lives in. It is a morality which is integrated to one's community of all that lives which includes man and bird and beast. It is calculated to achieve, more or less, a cosmic harmony. This and this alone shall be the hope of a changing world today, whether it be the territories of less affluent Asia or the more affluent and equally more devastated areas elsewhere.

In the message delivered in Sri Lanka as far back as twenty-three centuries ago, Thera Mahinda did not lose track of his thesis. With the assistance of the text of the Cullahatthipadopama Sutta [ M. I. 175-84 ], Thera Mahinda placed the Buddha on the highest pedestal he deserves to be on, delineated his greatness as the teacher of gods and men and indicated that his path to salvation led one from the world of mundane pleasure of today's over-exaggerated women, wine and song. Within a few days or weeks, this was followed by yet another course of Buddhist instruction. We are told that the Petavatthu and Vimanavatthu provided much material for his sermons to his new converts. We are particularly interested in his choice of the Petavatthu. It is no indication, as far as we feel, of the lack of intellectual maturity of his Sri Lankan audiences. The Petavatthu is more eloquent and more vehement as a warning that the neglect and disregard of the moral instructions issued in Buddhism which could lead one in one's next life, to a total loss of the prestigious human position which one presently enjoys. This is the very realistic sense in which the Buddhist concepts of *apāya* and *niraya* are to be viewed.

It is our firm conviction that today, with the expansion of scientific knowledge and development of technology, Buddhism is coming to be more and more correctly understood by a vast majority of non-Buddhists. This is partly because of their own keen search for truth. Therefore it is a matter of paramount importance that Buddhists themselves make a keener in-depth study of their own religion. They could not possibly be lured by attractive offers of down to earth make believe material gains of better health, more wealth and greater success. Cultic attractions in the garb of religion are becoming extremely menacing all over the world. Wonder-workers are seen robbing spiritual considerations of their true worth. Religious amalgams and alliances are being made to look more attractive and enticing than cocktails served at the bar. They are amazingly hallucinogenic. The world is becoming aware of it, except a few who are deeply involved and heavily drugged, often having seen their disastrous ill effects.

The message of Mahinda has been good enough to outlive the lifetime of the world. The fountain from which it has been derived needs no revisionist updating. No authorized or unauthorized emissaries ever descend to earth to revise the original teachings of Buddhism which are declared as the teachings of all time : *esa dhammo sanantano*. No new bulletins ever need to be issued. Therefore on this day of the Posen full moon our very kind admonition to our readers is *Suṇātha dhāretha carātha dhamme* . Give attention to this teaching. Bear it well in your mind. Live your life in accordance with it.

**May all beings be well and happy. May there be peace on earth and goodwill among men.**

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