malayan buddhism

a critical examination
FOREWORD
by
The Venerable Sumangalo Abbot of Poh Ern

It is often claimed that the writings of Dr. Teoh Eng Soon are controversial in nature. I have every reason to believe that this characterisation is a true one and, I may as well add, I am rather happy that such is the case. Why? Because the verdict of history is that any system, be it religious, political, philosophical or social, that no longer arouses sufficient public interest to bring about the existence of widely varying viewpoints, with attendant controversy, is in such a moribund state that an unobstructed road to death lies before it. The very fact that Dr. Teoh’s writings bring forth marked reactions bodes well for the healthy dynamic appeal of Buddhism as a well thought-out way of life. When all traces of disputatiousness depart from our religion, then and probably then only, will our religion be on its way out of the scheme of human life.

It would be nonsensical to maintain that a religion claiming the adherence of an enormous segment of the entire human race and being more than twenty-five centuries old would not inescapably accumulate a certain number of abuses both in theory and practice. It is pointless to claim that Buddhism, alone among all human organisations, is free from abuses of any nature whatever. Dr. Teoh sees this point with startling clarity and attacks
such abuses, not out of any joy in being a fault-finder, but out of a hope that the dark situation may be relieved by the simple expedient of bringing light to bear on dark corners. I believe I have every reason to hold that Dr. Teoh has presented his case well and with admirable succinctness. A careful reading of the present volume may anger some and delight others, but it seems altogether unlikely that it will leave any sincere Buddhist totally unmoved one way or another.

It is a fundamental point in all religions that all life is a struggle, a form of war. The Buddhist idea is that the only truly desirable form of warfare is a concerted struggle to overcome human ignorance, which we conceive of as being the parent of all "sins" and ills of whatever nature. Books roll off presses in ever increasing numbers but only a few examples of this flood of writing do anything of real value in changing people's thinking. Fewer still are those books that prompt people to act as well as think. If this slender volume will lead even a few to become active participants in the great play of life instead of remaining silent and immobile spectators, then its appearance on bookstalls will be more than justified. May the author's wisdom and courage never fail him! May his tribe increase!
WHEN Sinclair Lewis received the honour of being the first American to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, there was quite a storm over his election for the award. As Lewis himself put it in his Nobel Prize Address to the Swedish Academy, this was because “in America most of us—not readers alone but even writers—are still afraid of any literature which is not a glorification of everything American, a glorification of our faults as well as of our virtues... to be really beloved, a novelist must assert that all American men are tall, handsome, rich, honest, and powerful at golf; that all country towns are filled with neighbours who do nothing from day to day save go about being kind to one another; that although American girls may be wild, they change always into perfect wives and mothers...”.

This is the attitude that pervades almost all the literature written about Buddhism by respectable Buddhists. Articles and books have been written without any honest intention to present the truth; but only as declarations for the purpose of boosting one’s self esteem, or else as sugary, honeyed, immodest praise of Buddhism. It is considered rude to discuss our faults and shortcomings. Buddhism has no faults! It is a religion par excellence—spirit-worship, ceremonies for the dead, purchasing good merit for the next life, and a lot of rot and poppycock are all upaya (aids for the mentally retarded). Convenient term, this upaya.

And yet Buddhists often like to say, unnecessarily and
irrelevantly, that "the gift of truth excels all other gifts." (Sabba danam dhamma danam jinati.) How dare they!

What follows in this brief article is not intended as a denouncement of my beloved religion. Believe me, I wish to paint Buddhism with pride. All the same, I shall want to be perfectly honest so as not to insult my reader's intelligence. I shall write frankly about local Buddhism as I see it, as it would appear to anyone who does not shy from the truth. When I seem rash, impolite or indiscreet, it is due to the disgust I feel at the seeds of superstition, ignorance, foolishness and intolerance sown upon the fertile expanse of a tolerant, compromising religion. I wish to state here the bare, naked truth regarding the condition of popular Malayan Buddhism, with all its fineness and all its ugly sidelines; with its sublime teachings and its "give to priests; it's good Karma" sort of advice; with its dedicated missionaries and its avaricious priests and gullible followers (the ones for whom the upaya are intended). I presuppose that my Buddhist readers value truth, and therefore I may safely hope that not too many will be indignant over what I have to say.

But I believe that a lot of indignant Buddhists will prove my point.
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To my mother and Phaik Khuan
who have first, have always,
listened to me with patience
and understanding

A man who has learnt little
grows old like an ox;
his flesh grows,
but his mind does not grow.

Dhammapada

( viii )
THE PRINCIPLES OF BUDDHISM

ALL things change. Those which change rapidly exhibit noticeable transformation. Others like this piece of paper are apparently static, and to those un-educated in physics, seem always the same. In maritime Malaya it would perhaps seem best if we direct our thoughts of change to the sea, and then draw a true analogy to the nature of things as a whole.

The muddy coast of Singapore smells nastily of putrefying proteins. The coast of Penang is white and sparkling, where the beachcomber may inhale the pure freshness of a fine sea breeze; and rocks fill other places, Mersing for one. Though these differences are obvious to us we know that they are differences of the moment, for all things change, and in the stream of time, we see but a phase of this eternal change. As we stand by Queen Elizabeth Walk at low tide we see the black mud and several fishes dead among the rocks. We fail, sometimes, to remember that where we now stand, there was once perhaps a lovely stretch of sand, and those fishes were once, though more recently, eggs strewn among the diminutive forests of seaweed. In time the sea had risen and dashed against the sand to find a new shore-line. Spawn had hatched; fry had grown and matured and produced more of their kind, then inexorably reached their end of time. The river carrying down small particles of fragmented sand had laid down silt. Later, man had come and had covered the whole place with stone and cement.
to build an esplanade. Again, in some unknown future, the sea will return to where we stand. It will remove the stones and boulders, wash away the silt and lay down new sand so that the people who are yet to come after us may see a stretch of sand similar to that which wandering inhabitants might have noticed some thousands of years ago.

This is not only happening here in a few hundred yards of Singapore coastline. What we are witnessing here merges and blends with events taking place all over Malaya, along all the coasts of the world. There is no end, no finality, no fixity—as the tide rises and falls, the land itself will shift and change in shape as if it were like the ripples of the fluid sea. Just as all the shores are unified by the touch of the sea, so are all conditioned things linked up in such subjectiveness to birth and decay.

It is from this universal truth of change that Buddhism takes beginning.

The conclusion to be drawn from this Principle of Constant Flux (Anicca) is that all things in this world are substanceless (Anatta). This means that nothing can exist by itself. There is no fixed substratum for matter. Thus there is no being—there is only becoming. Furthermore, there is no becoming without, sooner or later, a passing away.

Buddhism extends this Principle of Substancelessness to cover the whole of existence. This is true of the mightiest god as it is of the lowly slug. It applies as much to the seemingly "eternal hills" as it does to the flaming meteorite which perishes in seconds. In every case, as soon as there is a beginning, there begins at that moment also the process which is the ending.