

In the Theravada school of Buddhism the highest ranking layman has always been considered of lower status than the youngest religious novice; the scriptures on which Ceylon's predominant religion is based were brought to the island in the 3rd century BC

SINHALESE BUDDHISM

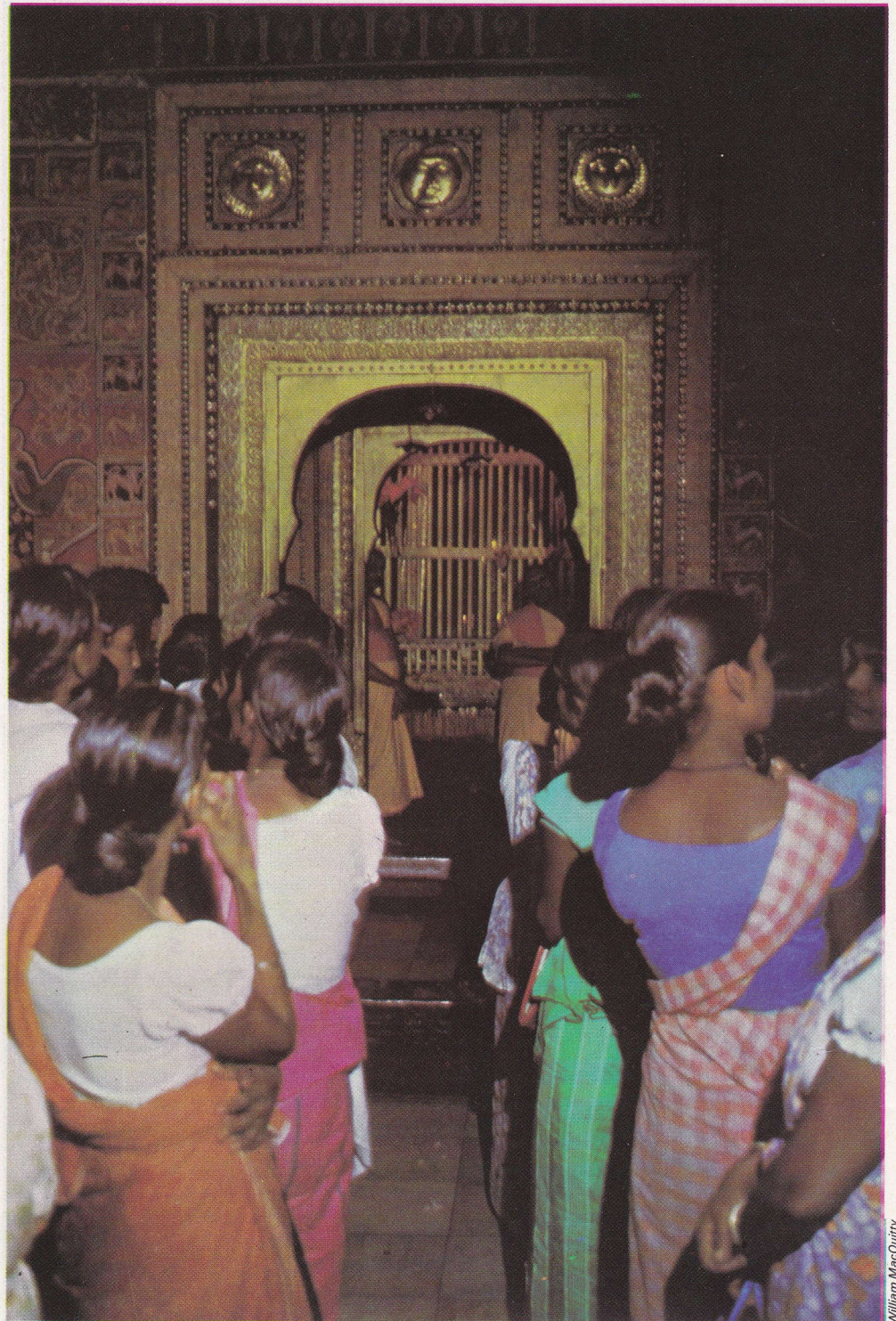
THE MAIN INTEREST which Buddhism in Ceylon holds for the outsider is its long and continuous tradition. Introduced into Ceylon from India soon after 250 BC, less than 250 years after the Buddha's death, Buddhism has been the religion of most Sinhalese, who are the principal inhabitants of Ceylon.

The school of Buddhism preserved in Ceylon is the Theravada, which has since become dominant in Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and the southern part of South Vietnam. The scriptures of Theravada Buddhism, the *Tipitaka*, are preserved in an ancient language called Pali, a word which originally means 'text'. The Pali language and the Pali Canon (see GAUTAMA BUDDHA) were first introduced to Europeans in the middle and late 19th century from Ceylon; and the size and importance of these scriptures persuaded many scholars that Theravada represented the 'original' form of Buddhism.

This is now considered to be an exaggeration. When Buddhism was brought to Ceylon, traditionally by Mahinda, a son of the Indian Emperor Asoka, Theravada was but one of many schools with equal claims to authenticity. That it has so well preserved its scriptures, and the doctrines and practices which they embody, is mainly due to the historical accident that Mahinda converted the King of Ceylon, Devanampiya Tissa, who established Buddhism as the official religion of the Sinhalese.

Since then the fortunes of Buddhism have usually been identified with the fortunes of the Sinhalese nation; and Sinhalese literature, art and education have predominantly used Buddhist materials. The Sinhalese view of themselves as a kind of Buddhist 'chosen people' is exemplified in the *Mahavamsa*, a chronicle written in Pali by Buddhist monks through the centuries. The first part, written in the 5th century, is especially interesting. In the first chapter are alleged accounts of three visits to Ceylon made by the Buddha in his lifetime. Vijaya, the reputed founder of the Sinhalese nation, is said to have landed in Ceylon on the day of the Buddha's death, while the Buddha was prophesying to the king of the gods that his doctrine would be established in Ceylon.

After describing Mahinda's mission the chronicle is devoted mainly to the exploits of King Dutugamunu (101-77 BC), the greatest Sinhalese folk hero. When Dutugamunu ascended the throne, the Sinhalese capital, Anuradhapura, was held by Tamil invaders. In his successful campaign against them he fought with a relic of the Buddha in his spear and monks (who left their order for the purpose) in his army.



One of the best-known Buddhist celebrations is the annual festival in Kandy, during which the Buddha's tooth, which is said to have reached Ceylon in the 4th century, is paraded through the streets of the town every night for a week; at one time possession of the tooth was thought to confer the right to rule; worshippers outside the Temple of the Tooth, a celebrated Buddhist shrine

Mahinda is traditionally held to have brought the complete Pali Canon to Ceylon. This is substantially correct in spirit, as most of the texts must antedate his arrival. However, all teachings at the time were preserved orally, and it is very doubtful whether one man could memorize the whole Canon. The Pali Canon was written down in

Ceylon in the 1st century BC, probably the first time that the Buddhist scriptures had been committed to writing. Again, although it cannot be literally true that Mahinda brought with him the commentaries on the whole Canon, those composed in Ceylon certainly preserve Indian traditions. They were in Sinhalese, and were probably all completed by about 100 AD. These old commentaries have been lost.

In the early 5th century Buddhaghosa came to Anuradhapura from northern India, and wrote commentaries in Pali on most of the canonical texts, basing his work on the Sinhalese commentaries. His edition was regarded as definitive, and the Sinhalese originals were superseded. Buddhaghosa also composed a summary of Buddhist



The doctrine that an individual is responsible for his own salvation is explicit in Theravadin Buddhism; there are no millenarian movements, and the coming of Maitri, the only figure who could be regarded as a future Messiah, is thought to be immensely distant. Although Sinhalese Buddhists accept the concept of a Bodhisattva, one who is on his way to becoming a Buddha, this belief is not based on fact or demonstration: wall painting of a Bodhisattva in the Temple of the Tooth

doctrine, the *Visuddhi-magga*, 'the Path to Purity', which is still considered authoritative. His interpretation of the Canon is unquestioned in Ceylon and constitutes the touchstone of orthodoxy.

Buddhists traditionally believe that their religion is embodied in the *Sangha*, the community of monks and nuns, and for them their religious history is properly the history of the community, which depends for its continuation on the preservation of a valid ordination tradition: a monk must receive the full ordination, *upasampada*, from no fewer than five fully-ordained monks, and nuns must similarly be ordained by nuns. The community of nuns *bhikkhuni sangha*, died out in Ceylon in the 11th century, while the order of monks also died out during several periods of political turmoil, and was then re-established by contact with monks from abroad. However the discontinuity is of little importance, because succession has always been renewed by monks from Burma or Thailand, countries which themselves originally received their succession from Ceylon. The largest body of monks in Ceylon today, the Siam Nikaya, traces its ordination line back to the last such renewal, when monks came from Thailand to hold an ordination ceremony in 1753. It therefore has a strong claim to stand in the direct tradition of the *Mahavihara*, 'Great Monastery', of Anuradhapura, which was founded by Mahinda.

The Mahavihara was always the bastion of Theravadin orthodoxy in Anuradhapura, but the main currents of Mahayana thought seem to have reached Ceylon from India. The first Ceylonese schism occurred shortly before the beginning of the Christian era and throughout the first millennium AD, until Anuradhapura finally fell to the Tamils, the monks were split into three *nikayas*, or fraternities. For more than a hundred years there have again been three *nikayas* in Ceylon. Monks from different *nikayas* will not co-operate in religious acts, generally live apart, and do not recognize each other's ecclesiastical seniority or authority. In ancient times the lines of division, whatever their origin, were generally given a doctrinal basis; but in modern times this is not so, and Sinhalese Buddhists stress that they all follow Theravadin orthodoxy.

The reason for the modern split is caste. The Siam Nikaya in the late 18th century would ordain only members of the *goyigama*, (farmer) caste, the top caste and by far the largest. Early in the 19th century members of other castes went to Burma for ordination and started independent lines, which are known jointly as the Amarapura Nikaya. A similar

Buddha's Footprint

Fa-hsien, a Chinese traveller, visits Ceylon in the 5th century AD

After fourteen days and nights he reached the Land of the Lion (Ceylon), said by the inhabitants to lie at a distance of seven *yōjanas* from India . . . This country was not originally inhabited by human beings, but only by devils and dragons, with whom the merchants of the neighbouring countries traded by barter . . .

When Buddha came to this country, he wished to convert the wicked dragons; and by his divine power he placed one foot to the north of the royal city and the other on top of Adam's Peak, the two

points being fifteen *yōjanas* apart. Over the footprint to the north of the city a great pagoda has been built, four hundred feet in height and decorated with gold and silver and with all kinds of precious substances combined. By the side of the pagoda a monastery has also been built, called No-Fear Mountain, where there are now five thousand priests. There is a Hall of Buddha of gold and silver carved work with all kinds of precious substances, in which stands his image in green jade, over twenty feet in height . . .

The Travels of Fa-hsien (399-414 AD)
trans by H. A. Giles

renewal from Burma in the mid-19th century is the Ramanna Nikaya; it has a fundamentalist tendency, mainly in its monastic regulations, which insist, for instance, that monks handle no money. There are in fact many different nikayas, and the fact that they are usually grouped together and spoken of as three must be mainly due to the ancient model.

The appearance of caste criteria in the Sangha is only one aspect of the intrusion of secular institutions into the Sinhalese monastery. Though monasteries in ancient Ceylon, as elsewhere, continually received valuable gifts, and even held slaves, monastic landlordism in its present form is probably only about 700 years old. Individual monasteries own land, which the incumbent has the right to use, and some own the estates of entire villages and command the services of the cultivators, as did the kings of Kandy and members of the lay nobility. These service tenures are now diminishing greatly.

In other respects, however, monastic organization in Ceylon is still archaic. Nikayas are autonomous, and though each has an acknowledged head, who is usually elected by a small council of elders, there is little centralization, even within the nikaya, except in holding ordination ceremonies. For most purposes the unit that counts is still the individual monastery. Though king and government have at times had, and even exercised, the power to intervene in monastic affairs, this has never been formally acknowledged; the highest layman has always been considered of lower status than the youngest novice, and until recently lay participation in controlling monks has been unthinkable.

In Ceylon alone among the Theravadin countries has been preserved the ancient custom by which it is normally assumed that someone entering the Sangha does so for life. It is always possible to leave without formal stigma, although there may be social disapproval. Novices usually enter young, at any age from seven onwards, and receive the higher ordination at the minimum age of 20, or soon after.

There are now about 7½ million Sinhalese Buddhists, about 17,000 monks and about 5500 monasteries. About two thirds of the monks and over half the monasteries belong to the Siam Nikaya.

Beliefs and Rituals

Buddhists have always believed in gods and lesser spirits, all of whom they regard as subject to the law of karma (see KARMA) and therefore to finite knowledge, power and longevity. Gods and demons exist for the vast majority of Buddhists just as other humans do; they accept their existence much as we accept that of nuclear particles, and consider them equally irrelevant to genuinely religious concerns, by which they mean the Buddha's *Dharma*, 'doctrine'. The Sinhalese believe that when the Buddha on his deathbed prophesied that Ceylon would be a stronghold of his religion, the king of the gods put the country under the particular protection of the god Vishnu. Gods and other spirits all hold authority

under *varam*, 'warrants', which go back to this and similar events, so that ultimately they derive legitimacy from the Buddha. In granting material rewards and sending diseases and misfortunes, the gods and demons can only realize a man's karma: if by this moral law he is due for some good fortune, it may come to him from a god, but the god is only acting as a powerful man might act, and is likewise morally responsible in his turn. A demon who hurts a man will not go further than the man's bad karma will justify, for he is liable to have his warrant withdrawn by a higher, and therefore more just and more powerful spirit. Moreover, his malevolence creates more bad karma for himself. Relations with gods and demons are not considered religious matters.

Religion and mundane affairs do, however, meet occasionally. A ritual of very varied function and extent consists of monks chanting a collection of Pali texts called *pirit*, 'protection'. This occurs especially at set intervals after a death, when monks are also fed. Monks also officiate at funerals, but have nothing to do with any other life crises; birth and marriage are purely secular events. Monks serve the laity principally by enabling them to earn merit by listening to sermons and by giving food; the alms round is exceptional in Ceylon, as laymen usually take food to a temple.

Laymen also earn merit by observing the precepts. The Five Precepts (*pan sil*) must always be observed; the Eight Precepts (*ata sil*), which involve some abstention from normal indulgence, are taken on quarter days of the lunar calendar, especially full moon days, but traditionally only by elderly people. Those taking the Eight Precepts spend all, or most, of the day at the temple and wear white. More positive ways of earning merit include going on pilgrimages, especially to one of the 16 spots in Ceylon that were supposedly visited by the Buddha. However, the religious festival that is most widely known abroad concerns none of these. Once a year the Buddha's tooth, which reached Ceylon in the 4th century, is paraded through the streets of Kandy on the back of an elephant with huge tusks, preceded by dancers, drummers and many other elephants. This is repeated every night for a week.

Even a summary of ways of earning merit would be incomplete without mention of meditation, which is necessary to attain Nirvana, or even the highest (formless) heavens. It is conceived to be the supreme purpose of monasticism, but in neither theory nor practice is it confined to monks. However it seems likely that meditation has never been practised by more than a small minority of people. The recent propaganda for meditation, and its increased practice, is a result of modern developments, including rivalry with Christianity and lay Buddhist control over the state school system. This contrasts with the traditional belief that the last person to attain Nirvana in Ceylon lived 2000 years ago, and that no one on earth will do so again until the coming, aeons hence, of the next Buddha, Maitri. Most Buddhists are willing, even

content, to postpone the attainment of Nirvana to a future life, and make rebirth in one of the lower heavens, or even in a good station on earth, their immediate goal.

In theory Theravada Buddhism has no place for devotional religion; in practice this rigour is mitigated. The doctrine that each individual is wholly responsible for his own salvation is universally explicit. Sinhalese Buddhism completely lacks millenarian movements, and the coming of Maitri, the only figure who might be considered a future Messiah, is conceived of as being immensely distant. Bodhisattvas play a purely notional part in the religion. On the other hand Gautama, the historical Buddha, is venerated as supreme. Whether one can describe him as deified depends on the level of analysis. No Sinhalese Buddhist would accept the term, for they say that the Buddha was human, and is dead and gone, but they certainly derive emotional satisfaction from his veneration. Every house has an image of the Buddha, even if only a picture, and the image house, the most essential feature of a temple after the residence of a monk or monks, contains at least one Buddha statue. Images are venerated as 'reminders' of him.

The other main features of a temple, the bo-tree and the stupa, are also venerated for their association with him: the one because under such a tree did he attain enlightenment, the other because it contains relics. Offerings (*puja*), most commonly of flowers, incense sticks or lights, are made before images, bo-trees and stupas, and people often recite Pali verses, some of them definitely devotional in tone, before representations of the Buddha.

(See also BUDDHISM.)

RICHARD GOMBRICH

FURTHER READING: Nanamoli Evans, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhi-magga)* and W. Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon: the Anuradhapura Period*, both distributed by Luzac.

Gautama, the historical Buddha, is venerated as supreme by Sinhalese Buddhists; every house has an image of him, even if it is only a picture, and the image house of every temple contains at least one Buddha statue: feet of the giant reclining Buddha at the site of the ruined city of Polonnaruwa



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