MEMORIES OF CEYLON

By GEHEIMRATH DR. W. GEIGER

One of the excursions that we took, my wife and I, in Ceylon during the month of January, 1926, was along the south-east coast, the very line of march taken by the Kañcukināyaka Rakkha General of Parakkamabāhu (*Mahāvaṃsa*, 75, 20 *sqq.*) on the expedition against the rebels at Rohaṇa. Passing Wæligama (Valukagāma) and Matara, we got as far as Dondra-head (Devanagara), then turning north-east we penetrated inland to lonely Mulkirigala and its splendid rock-temples. On the return to Colombo we halted at Balapitiya to visit my old friend, Mudaliyar A. Mendis Gunasekara, at his home. Through the courteous arrangements made by our host we were enabled to see and hear much of Sinhalese folk-usages and customs and rites. One of these I should like to give in detail.

Not far from the Mudaliyar's family residence stands the monastery of Subhadrārāma. We paid a visit to this in his company, and there we passed an hour not easy to forget. In our honour, and for the happiness and success of our journey, the monk-fraternity held a Paritta-ceremony. As it is hardly likely that this falls within the experience of many Europeans, it will not be out of place to describe what took place.

The ceremony took place in a hall, to which only the priests, we two, and the Mudaliyar were given admission. Two low seats had been placed for us against the wall. Our friend knelt during the whole ceremony, a little to our right on a mat, in the position of a man praying, his head bowed, his hands clasped in front of his forehead (*katañjali*), facing the priests. The monks, twelve in number, sat down in regular order, evidently according to age, on seats arranged horseshoe-fashion round a table. The open end of the horseshoe was facing us and the Mudaliyar. The first place on the right

was occupied by the Mahāthera, the abbot of the monastery. On the middle of the table stood a carafe of water. From it there ran a string which was passed through the hand of each monk till it reached the Mahāthera, hereby bringing the partakers in the rite into a unity.

The Mahāthera began by saying in Pali some introductory words describing the object and meaning of the ceremony. This was repeated in English by a novice, an elderly man, who had till recently been a layman of the middle class and then left the world—*agārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajitvā*. But as he had not yet been given full orders, or *upasampadā*, he took no further part in the proceedings. We saw him again later, when he was attending a monk on the alms-round, and came to the Mudaliyar's house to receive the food offered to the monks.

The ceremony began by the monks reciting three times the confession of faith—*buddhaṃ . . . dhammaṃ . . . saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*. Then followed the repetition of the five precepts, or, rather, the five chief vetoes, to the observance of which the monk is pledged. Then all in unison recited the Mangala-Sutta from the Khuddakapāṭha and Sutta-Nipāta. In Subhūti's edition of the 'Siamese Standard Parittas' this is printed first. It begins with the words: 'Many devas and men desiring salvation have pondered over what brings luck:—tell me the highest luck.' And each verse ends with the words: 'that is the highest luck.'

The recital was carried out in that strongly rhythmic intoning which never fails to impress the musical and extraordinarily finely developed rhythmical sensibility of the native listener. In conclusion, after one of the monks had wetted the forehead of each person present with water from the carafe on the table, the Mahāthera addressed a few words in Pali to us two, to which I made response in the same language. The priests then rose, the Mudaliyar stood up, and the ceremony was over.

I do not hesitate to confess that the little ceremony made a deep impression on us both. The demeanour of the priests was so serious and dignified, the quiet devotion of my friend

was so sincere, that we told ourselves: here is yet true and genuine piety; the Buddha-teaching has here yet spiritual force.

It has always been my endeavour to note how Buddhism is working in our time in lay and religious circles. Judging the religion from the standpoint of historical evolution, I cannot call myself a friend of the attempts to graft Buddhism on to our conditions, which are so foreign to it. The result is inevitably a distortion. Buddhism had its origin in India; it was conditioned by Indian ways of thought and Indian nature; it was adapted to the Indian climate and Indian modes of life. Where it was transplanted to other countries still on Asiatic soil, it has forfeited much of its specific character, perhaps just its very essence.

Nor can I avert a certain amount of mistrust when Europeans resort to Ceylon, Burma, or Siam to lead there the life of a 'bhikkhu.' To my mind the present brings us other tasks, from which duty demands that we do not withdraw ourselves. If we do, we make the impression of shipwrecked men, or, at the best, of men who have given up.

However, it must be for the historian to consider what part in India and among Indians Buddhism plays to-day. I speak only of Ceylon, to which island and the people of it my observations have been confined. Many are the judgments floating around, friendly and unfriendly, favourable and deprecatory. To a certain extent each can be justified; it all depends at what places the observations were made, and what is the range assigned them. Complaints about unworthy members of the Sangha, or about their unworthy conduct in certain places, can be heard often enough, even in Buddhist circles. This is chiefly the case perhaps in the districts about and south of Point-de-Galle, which are looked upon as the home of strictly orthodox Buddhism. In any case one's observations should not be limited to places like Colombo or Kandy. Here international intercourse has in many ways corrupted the good old customs. The European is himself largely to blame for that which he censures. I must, for example, confess that our visit to the caves of Dambul has left in me a very unrefreshing memory. How

very different, how infinitely more impressive was it there thirty years ago, when I visited the ' Golden Cave ' (Suvaṇṇa-guhā) for the first time ! The wondrous wooden veranda at the entrance to the caves, so picturesque in the dark brown of its old timber, had been made to give place to a brick edifice plastered in crude white. To me it was almost as a symbol. In those days a bhikkhu, bearing a gigantic key on his shoulder, climbed up with me over the gneiss-slabs, opened the cave-temple, and showed it me with ready courtesy. To-day globe-trotters in motor-cars go tearing by, ' Murray ' in hand, from Kandy through Matale to Dambul. There in each particular cave a bhikkhu is told off to wait for them and place a book before every visitor, in which the name is to be inscribed and—the regulation charge. This is modern industry !

I hasten here to add that, at the neighbouring Alu-vihāra, standing near the road from Matale to Dambul, and built so wonderfully into the wildest of rock-chasms, I got an utterly opposite impression. We visited the Vihāra, famous from the tradition that it was there the Piṭakas were first committed to writing. But it never occurred to any of the inmates to make business out of our visit. The monastery servant who escorted us back to the road refused to accept the trifle I offered him. The motor traffic races past this monastery.

In Kandy also the business sense of the bhikkhus obtrudes itself; still more irksome are the numerous and obtrusive beggars in the streets of Kandy. However, it was here that I had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of both the Mahānāyakas who are considered to be in authority over all the monasteries of the island. One of them resides at Asgiriya Vihāra, the other at Malvatte Vihāra. Both personalities impressed me as highly dignified and provocative of reverence.

I have come into contact with many monks, often of course only in a momentary way. With some of them a streak of vanity displeased me. Learned culture in them was very diverse. But I am far from affirming that the monks in whom

this was wanting were bad Buddhists. In Mulkirigala we had the sense of being in a genuinely Buddhist atmosphere, and enjoyed genuine Buddhist hospitality, albeit not one of the monks—the head of the monastery was absent—appeared to understand Pali. Intercourse with monks has to be in Sinhalese or in Pali. Speaking in Pali was at first a pretty hard matter. When acquaintance with so old a tongue is derived entirely from literature, the words for quite everyday things are apt to fail us. Moreover, when we are accustomed only to read, it is hard at first to understand the words when spoken. But to both speaking and hearing I got quickly and easily accustomed. In any case I had the satisfaction of observing that the monks evinced great pleasure when I addressed them in Pali, and showed and told me most willingly what I wanted to see and know.

I need hardly say that there is every variety of degree in the knowledge of Pali. The ' High-priest ' of the Dambul Vihāra, Sri Dhammasiddhi, whom I met in Asgiriya, spoke it so fluently that I was scarcely able to follow him. Another good Pali-ist is Gopatissa Thera, who is engaged as teacher of Pali at the Mahinda College at Point-de-Galle. The Mahānāyaka of the Amarapura sect, Widurupola Piyatissa, with whom I had much talk at Nuwara Eliya, is the author of a Pali-kāvya on the life and work of Mahā-Kassapa. And once more I found in the High-priest of the Dharmasāla College at Ratnapura, Urapola Ratanajoti, a very well-informed man.

But I will not conceal the fact that repeated laments came to my ears of the regress of the monks in learned culture. This is to me the more regrettable, in that I have come more and more to the conviction that an ungrudging collaboration between European and Indian scholars would bring about the best of results.

In conclusion a word on the laity. That here too Buddhism has significance was shown me by the really profound demonstration to which the untimely death of Senanayaka gave rise. Senanayaka was unquestionably one of the most prominent personalities in Buddhist Ceylon—a rich man, whose reputation

it was that he, *dānaparāyaṇo*, spent the half of his income in acts of benevolence. It is certainly not easy to say how much of the imposing sympathy in his fate was due to the boundless reverence of the people, resembling an incipient hero-cult for him personally, and how much to Buddhist sodality.

The deportment of the staff at our hotel gave me occasion for observing much that was of interest. Colombo was overfull, and by a change of plan we got in at the Bristol Hotel. We had no reason to regret it; we were excellently accommodated, and made the hotel our headquarters, from which we made excursions to the interior of the island. The hotel servants were almost entirely orthodox Buddhists. The visits which different Buddhists were good enough to pay me at the hotel caused us to rise considerably in their esteem, and they were evidently at pains to carry out every little wish as soon as it was uttered. Moreover, it became a real joy to witness the interest and also the intelligence shown by the staff in our work and our enterprise. Here, I said to myself, is the real ancient culture. When we came back from our expeditions, all the dark faces were beaming, and everyone had some cordial inquiry to make about what we had seen and done.

Again, at this and that sacred spot there were always to be witnessed scenes of real piety and fervent faith. One such scene is especially in my memory. Before the Bodhi-tree opposite the Dalada temple in Kandy we came upon a man with his little daughter. He was kneeling with the child before the tree, and folding her hands and rehearsing a prayer to her, she repeating it word for word after him. Our coming did not disturb their devotions.

That side by side with this there are thousands who are tepid and indifferent goes without saying. The same, for that matter, may be said of so-called higher civilizations—more properly to be called younger civilizations—and of these perhaps in a higher proportion.

One thing I do much deplore, and this is that the highest circles of Sinhalese society attach so little weight to the maintenance of their national ways. While I was yet on the

steamship, the *Lancashire*, an official of the C.C.S., when I told him I had last been in Ceylon thirty years ago, said I should find things very much changed, 'Anglicized but not improved.' And in fact the uppermost strata, especially at Colombo, seem to lay themselves out, in mode of life. clothes and language, to be as far as possible like the English, The children of such families often can no more understand Sinhalese. It is the British Government which is at pains to maintain the Sinhalese language in the schools, and is at present planning, efficiently supported by the Legislative Council, to bring out a great scientific dictionary of the Sinhalese language.

It gave me a real shock when one of the most highly educated and eminent of the Sinhalese, calling upon me, remarked: ' You see me here in English dress; I speak English with you. That's how it is with us now. My mother was a thorough Sinhalese.' While in these words a man whom I highly esteem clearly revealed—with much regret, of course—a certain state of decadence, there are nevertheless many in the same social circle who know how to ward their ' Ceylonianity.' Among the people several associations have arisen to serve the same object. Let us hope that the Sinhalese people will as such take heed to itself while yet there is time. I have learnt to appreciate and love it; for a generation and more I have loved its history, its culture, its language. May it never lose a just pride in its own way of being and in its past !

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