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Creating Space for the Non-Buddhist in Sri Lanka: A Buddhist Perspective on the Other

Mahinda Deegalle



At one of our interfaith Thinking Together workshops on “From Xenophobia to Philoxenia,” held in Florida, we gathered to discuss the religious attitudes and practical concerns of the world’s religious traditions on the notion of the “stranger.” This topic is as timely as ever. Within the last few years, several catastrophic events that have implications for interreligious relations have occurred in the Western hemisphere—for example, the Al-Qaeda attack on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001;¹ the July 7, 2005, bombings in public transport in metropolitan London; and the foiled terrorist attempt to destroy ten jets bound to the United States from the United Kingdom on August 10, 2006.² All these events have significant impact on the “other,” since a religious other is suspected in connection with these atrocities.

This topic of the stranger needs creative reflection informed by religious teachings and supported by positive, genuine social practices cultivated in the contemporary competitive and tense interreligious environment. More than at any other time in the history of human civilization, the issue of the other and of difference has become a practical issue and a concern of our

¹ See Ian Markham and Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi, eds., *11 September: Religious Perspectives on the Causes and Consequences* (Oxford, U.K.: Oneworld Publications, 2002); and Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

² See *Western Daily Press*, August 11, 2006.

daily lives. Without any religious difference, we all are affected today by the stereotypes of the stranger and misconceptions of the other.

After the turmoil of the September 11 attacks in New York, in the Western hemisphere the place, location, attitude, and notion of the other have been continuously debated, argued, and evaluated in relation to the natives of the country and their ways of life. While immigration officers are busy identifying aliens and restricting their entrance to Western society at all levels, democratic values of human liberty and freedom are at stake due to surveillance and persecution based on difference. Awareness and concern are how we deal today with difference; in particular, manifest differences in relation to religious doctrines and practices are misconceived, manipulated, and misrepresented.

How can we appreciate difference as a positive dimension of human life? To what extent can we accept and accommodate differences that appear in religious doctrines and cultural practices? How should we incorporate difference and plurality as a powerful resource for a healthy society in this global village? More than at any other time in history, religious communities are challenged to seek and to develop religious resources that enhance communal life in a pluralistic society and the healthy incorporation of plurality for spiritual growth in a diverse social and religious context.

Here, I want to explore and understand Buddhist views toward the stranger, the other, and the non-Buddhist. I want to search for teachings and practices that locate the stranger in a culturally and socially positive environment in contemporary society. For a contextual and detailed analysis of Buddhist attitudes toward the stranger and the other, I focus on Theravada Buddhist society in Sri Lanka. While identifying doctrines and concepts that shape Buddhist attitudes toward the other and the stranger, I explore here in depth how Buddhist teachings construct a practical worldview for the contemporary world and guide human actions that are genuinely informed by and rooted in religious virtues in a healthy fashion.

In our modern, tense political context, there is a strong need to examine the use and effectiveness of Buddhist principles in developing a practical ethic toward the stranger. As religious communities, we are challenged again and again within our communities as well as outside them to test religious teachings and views that we hold dear and their practical use in communal life. We are encouraged to search for relevant resources and place the

resources that are useful to create a practical religious view toward the stranger in a complex web of human interactions in our modern society.

In our communities, we realize that, unless the community is homogeneous, we do not share the same religion or worldview; there are multiple resources for resolving conflicts and creating harmony and peace, and each community proposes different solutions to contemporary problems. How do we find a balance in these different, occasionally tense and conflictive, views in resolving problems?

In our Thinking Together workshops, we struggled to identify and understand various notions of xenophobia embedded in the textual corpus of the world religious traditions and their subsequent translation into cultural practices that lead people to persecute the other living within their community. In the global context where xenophobia is growing rapidly, we, as religious communities, are challenged more and more to find creative ways that foster positive attitudes toward the stranger. The need for acceptance, tolerance, and hospitality is much greater than it was before.

As religious communities, we share a common virtue. Rooted in compassionate thoughts, as religious people, we reject the prevalent fear and hatred toward strangers and foreigners. We want to minimize the anxiety of the underprivileged and marginalized; instead of discrimination and prejudice, we want to enhance healthy social relationships among all members in our global communities. As religiously committed groups, we are compelled to search for resources in scripture to create an ethic of support that encourages hospitality toward the stranger, and we need to identify religious teachings that cultivate love for the stranger (*philoxenia*). In this respect, we need scriptures that help us create an inclusive, broader, and embracing perspective toward the stranger.

Love for the stranger should be nurtured as a sublime religious virtue. To nurture love for the stranger and cultivate a creative mental framework, scripture can be used in our religious practices. In the Theravada Buddhist case, meditative practices and Buddhist scriptures in the Pali canon can be used to create a positive psychological framework for healthy human relationships. The positive mental attitudes generated through the practice of meditation on lovingkindness—*metta*—will be useful in this respect. The philosophical inclusiveness proposed toward all sentient beings in the *Metta Sutta* is very valuable for cultivating positive cultural practices in the accep-

tance of the stranger. The *Metta Sutta* presents a powerful and positive mental framework extended toward all sentient beings as follows:

May all beings be happy and secure; may their minds be contented. Whatever living beings there may be—feeble or strong, long (or tall), stout, or medium, short, small, or large, seen or unseen, those dwelling far or near, those who are born and those who are yet to be born—may all beings, without exception, be happy minded! Let not one deceive another nor despise any person whatever in any place. In anger or ill will let not one wish any harm to another. Just as a mother would protect her only child even at the risk of her own life, even so let one cultivate a boundless heart toward all beings. Let one's thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world—above, below and across—without any obstruction, without any hatred, without any enmity.³

Functionally, these positive scriptural insights have not been limited to a few religious seekers living in Buddhist monasteries. Friendly thoughts cultivated toward all beings became an important part of pre-modern Buddhist societies such as Sri Lanka in dealing with the other. Buddhists living in a predominantly Buddhist social environment tried to deal with the difference that they witnessed in the midst of colonialism and political invasion by the other without compromising their commitment to the adherence of the Buddha's teaching—in particular, the notion of lovingkindness. They translated those noble virtues into their public policies to make the stranger and the other happier since suffering is not just an ideal problem that only the Buddhists faced in this world but also a real and an existential problem for all humanity.

Hospitality in Theravada Buddhism

Hospitality continues to be an important concern, even today, for all Buddhists across Asia without distinction, whether one adheres to Theravada or Mahayana traditions. In Theravada societies, hospitality extended toward

³ *Suttanipata*, vv. 145–150; see also Mahinda Deegalle, “The Moral Significance of Buddhist Nirvana: The Early Buddhist Model of Perfection,” in Frank J. Hoffman and Mahinda Deegalle, eds., *Pali Buddhism* (Richmond, Surrey, U.K.: Curzon Press, 1996), pp. 108–109.

beggars and travelers is a practical and functional virtue of wholesome Buddhist life. At all levels, Buddhists are encouraged to cultivate attitudes of hospitality for the visitor, whether local, national, or international. In village contexts, average Buddhists learned the virtues of hospitality and genuine acceptance of the other and translated them into their daily lives as public expressions of *bodhisattva*⁴ virtues in practicing the ten perfections⁵ as illustrated graphically in the *Jataka* narratives.

Until recent times, there were several important customs in Buddhist villages that facilitated visitors. For the benefit of travelers and pilgrims, Buddhists used to place water pots in front of their houses along the road. To rest during night journeys, they also constructed *ambalam* (roadside rest houses) for travelers. The remnants of those welfare activities can still be found in rural Sri Lanka. These other-benefiting cultural practices were inspired by Buddhist teachings advocated in the popular preaching rituals such as the recitation of the *Maitreya Varnanava*—The Laudatory Account of the Buddha Maitreya—in which the arrival of the future Buddha Maitreya is presented as encouraging the public to engage in social-welfare activities. The *Maitreya Varnanava* maintains: “Those who offered alms to beggars, *bhikkhus*, and Brahmans will see the Buddha Maitreya. . . . those who constructed *thupas*, planted Bodhi trees, constructed flower altars, fruit altars, gardens, pools, dining halls, wells, and set *pin pan*⁶ will see the Buddha Maitreya.”⁷

⁴ A *bodhisattva* is a person who follows the middle way with the aspiration of becoming a fully awakened Buddha.

⁵ While in the Mahayana traditions the perfections (*paramita*) are enumerated as six, in the Theravada traditions there are ten: giving (*dana*), morality (*sila*), renunciation (*nekhamma*), wisdom (*panna*), effort (*viriya*), patience (*khanti*), truth (*sacca*), determination (*adhitthana*), lovingkindness (*metta*), and equanimity (*upekkha*).

⁶ The practice of setting *pin pan* (Sinhalese) refers to the act of placing water pots in front of one’s house for the benefit of travelers.

⁷ My translation; see Mahinda Deegalle, *Popularizing Buddhism: Preaching as Performance in Sri Lanka* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 126. The original text of the *Maitreya Varnanava* can be found in the *Mallikovada Sutrāya* (Colombo: Vidayasagara Yantralaya, 1894); and Makuluduve Piyaratana Thera, ed., *Anagata Vansaya nam vu Mete Budu Sirita, Vilgammula Pabanda* (Colombo: M. D. Gunasena, 1965). For a detailed account of the two-pulpit preaching and for understanding the place that the *Maitreya Varnanava* holds in the preaching ritual and in the beliefs of the Buddhists in Sri Lanka, see Mahinda Deegalle, “Marathon Preachers: The Two-Pulpit Tradition in Sri Lanka,” *Asiatische Studien: Études Asiatiques*, vol. 52 (1998), pp. 15–56; and Deegalle, *Popularizing Buddhism*, pp. 93–127.

Over the centuries, Christian missionaries, civil servants, and anthropologists who visited Sri Lankan villages received an unexpected degree of hospitality. The unsophisticated Buddhist villagers were ready to address the white person with respect, whether Christian missionaries who came to destroy their indigenous belief systems, civil servants who came to dominate and control them with the hope of exploiting them materially, or scholars who came in different guises to manipulate them intellectually and subordinate them to Western ways of thinking. Their vocabulary in public address was respectful, and they were not hesitant to use respectful titles reserved only for the nobility when they addressed the white person. They called the foreigner “*sudu mahattaya*” (white gentleman) and “*sudu nilame*” (white lord). Buddhists were helpful for the researcher in looking after their property, in cleaning their premises, and in providing necessary things—and the most essential mental and physical security—when one lives among the unknown. The villagers were trustworthy and useful, unsophisticated informants who were vulnerable and could be manipulated easily for one’s own advantage in this encounter with the other.

In the early encounters in Sri Lanka, Christian missionaries were respected with the same decorum reserved for Buddhist monks. The missionaries were readily given accommodation in Buddhist temples and allowed to use preaching halls in Buddhist temples for Christian religious activities, such as giving sermons. Reflecting on nineteenth-century Buddhist-Christian relations, Kitsiri Malalgoda remarked: “Christianity, of course, was nothing entirely new to many Buddhists; and they, in contrast to the missionaries, had no urge to regard the two religions as violently opposed to each other, to regard one as the ‘Truth’ and the other as ‘Error.’”⁸

Once the missionaries abused the hospitality of Buddhists by attempting to deconstruct Buddhism, they were gradually made unwelcome in Buddhist temples. Missionaries came to characterize as their backwardness the warm hospitality and ready acceptance of Buddhists. They saw the kindness and compassion of Buddhists as a weakness. Increasingly, they became hostile to Buddhist monks, institutions, and cultural practices. Once Buddhists noticed and realized the negative tendencies generated by the other, they gradually began to refuse to cooperate with them. Until this time of

⁸ Kitsiri Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750–1900: A Study of Religious Revival and Change* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), p. 206.

suspicion, Christian missionaries, in particular, were considered to be similar religious seekers.⁹ Buddhists were not hesitant to accord the respect and honor that they extended to Buddhist monks to other religious clergy. Even in modern Sri Lanka, Christian clergy are still accepted as an important religious group. Certain symbolic privileges that are accorded to Buddhist monks—giving the reserved front seat of a public bus or train, for example—is extended to other religious clergy.

Acceptance of the Other: Christians and Muslims

Sri Lankan history shows several occasions in which Buddhists freed Christians and Muslims. When the Portuguese and the Dutch persecuted Christians and Muslims, respectively, the Buddhist majority took action to safeguard the oppressed religious minorities. These events demonstrate the way Buddhists translated religious virtues into compassionate action by accepting the other. These episodes illustrate significant gestures of warm hospitality extended toward the stranger in a critical political climate.

Literary evidence proves that both the Kandyan kings and the public were tolerant toward non-Buddhist faiths, though they were different from Buddhism. Robert Knox (1640–1720), the British prisoner for twenty years in the Kandyan kingdom under the reign of Rajasinha II (1635–87), described positively the Sinhala attitudes toward the non-Buddhist faiths in his *An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon*, in 1681:¹⁰ “[A]s they are not bigoted in their own Religion, they care not of what religion strangers dwell among them are of. They do believe there is a plurality of Gods and more than they know of, for all nations have a free liberty to use and enjoy their own Religion with all or any manner of ceremonies thereto belonging without the lest [*sic*] opposition or so much as Ridiculing.”¹¹

⁹ For a recent exposition of colonial and missionary encounters with Buddhism, see Elizabeth J. Harris, *Theravada Buddhism and the British Encounter: Religious, Missionary, and Colonial Experience in Nineteenth-Century Sri Lanka* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁰ Robert Knox, *An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon, in the East-Indie: Together with an Account of the Detaining in Captivity the Author and Divers Other Englishmen Now Living There, and of the Author’s Miraculous Escape* (London: Richard Chiswell, 1681).

¹¹ Lorna Dewaraja, “Religion and the State in the Kandyan Kingdom: The 17th and 18th Centuries,” in K. M. De Silva, ed., *History of Sri Lanka (c. 1500–1800)* (Peradeniya: University of Peradeniya, 1995), p. 468; see Knox, *An Historical Relation*, p. 219.

At times of threat under colonial administration, Sinhala kings protected Muslims who were living in endangered areas of Sri Lanka. In 1505, when the Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka, Muslims opposed them because it was a threat to their overseas trade.¹² When the kingdom of Sitawaka (1521–93) fell in 1593, in order to avoid persecutions of the Portuguese and the Dutch in the coastal areas, over the years Muslims took refuge in the Kandyan kingdom and moved to Kandy in large groups. King Senarat (1604–35), successor of Vimala Dharmasūriya I (1591–1604), in particular, welcomed Muslims and settled 4,000 Muslims in Batticaloa as “friends” of the Kandyan kingdom.¹³ He gave them lands and encouraged them to cultivate the land in the area.¹⁴ This agricultural community made a significant contribution later in strengthening economic conditions in the area. In contemporary Sri Lanka, Muslims are the majority in Ampara District and form a quarter of the total population in the North and East of Sri Lanka. Before the forced expulsion of the entire Muslim population from the Northern Province by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 1990, there were 75,000 Muslims in more than 100 locations in the Northern Province.¹⁵

Kandyan kings also gave Muslims several important confidential assignments. Furthermore, on various occasions, Sri Lankan kings granted lands to Muslims to settle in the Kandyan kingdom. Not only did the Kandyan kings accommodate the Muslim communities in the kingdom, but they also gave special lands to set up mosques for religious functions, for example, in Katupalliya, Maddulbova, and Kahatapitiya. The Katupalliya

¹² See Victor C. de Munck, “Sufi and Reformist Designs: Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka,” in Tessa J. Bartholomeusz and Chandra R. de Silva, eds., *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 114.

¹³ See Lorna Dewaraja, *The Muslims of Sri Lanka: One Thousand Years of Ethnic Harmony, 900–1915* (Colombo: Lanka Islamic Foundation, 1994), p. 66; and Fernao de Queyroz, *The Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon*, tr. S. G. Perera (Colombo: Government Printer, 1930), p. 745.

¹⁴ See de Queyroz, *Temporal and Spiritual Conquest*, p. 742.

¹⁵ For details of the displacement of Muslims from their lands during the last two decades, see Shahul H. Hasbullah, P. Balasundarampillai, and Kalinga Tudor Silva, *Addressing Root Causes of the Conflict: Land Problems in North-East Sri Lanka* (Colombo: United Nations High Commission for Refugees and Foundation for Co-Existence, 2005), pp. 78–82.

and Miramakkam mosques in Kandy were constructed on lands granted by the king.¹⁶

Certain mosques that were constructed in Kandy can function as a unifying factor of diverse religious and cultural traditions. Architecturally, the Katupalliya mosque resembles the Audience Hall in Kandy. Its carved wooden pillars are reminiscent of the Embakke Devale. The doorway of this mosque is in the typical Kandyan style.¹⁷ These architectural assimilations employed in constructing mosques demonstrate coexistence and borrowings from the prevailing cultural tradition. Not only the rulers supported Muslims, but also Buddhist monks allowed Muslims to build mosques on temple lands. For example, the Pangollamada mosque was constructed on the land that belonged to the Degaldoruva Vihara.¹⁸ The mosque at Rambukandana was constructed on the land belonging to the Ridivihara at Kurunagala. Because of the generosity and tolerant acceptance of the kings, the Buddhist monks, and the public, Muslims were able to establish themselves as a religious minority in primarily Sinhala areas of the country.

In Sri Lanka, the compassion and tolerance of Buddhists extended beyond Muslim communities. When the Dutch established their power in the coastal areas of Sri Lanka, they prohibited the practice of Roman Catholicism in those areas by not allowing Roman Catholic clergy to enter into the Dutch-controlled areas. Because of fears of persecution, Roman Catholics fled coastal areas and took refuge in the Kandyan kingdom. To avoid persecution by the Dutch, the Kandyan king gave them amnesty in several places. They were allowed to settle in Kandy, Matale, Vahakotte, Kundasale, Kirioruva, Lallogalla, Narangoda, and Vaauda. Some also settled in Ruvanvalla, Sitavaka, Mahiyangana, Kendangamuva, Ratnapura, Galagamuva, Seven Korales, and Tamankaduva.¹⁹

The Portuguese established control of Jaffna in 1621 and began an intensive campaign of proselytization to Roman Catholicism. When the Dutch took over control of Jaffna in 1658, they began an aggressive campaign of persecution of Roman Catholics. During Dutch rule, the officially spon-

¹⁶ See Dewaraja, *Muslims of Sri Lanka*, p. 114.

¹⁷ See *ibid.*

¹⁸ See *ibid.*

¹⁹ See S[imon]. G. Perera, *Life of the Venerable Father Joseph Vaz, Apostle of Ceylon*, 2nd ed. (Galle: Loyola House, 1953), p. 78.

sored religion was the Dutch Reformed Church, whose prominent propagandist was Philip de Melho (1723–90), the son of a high-ranking official in the service of the Dutch. He was the first Sri Lankan to be admitted to the office of minister of the Dutch Reformed Church.

King Rajasinha II (1635–87) had a lifelong respect for Christianity. Christian friars were his tutors. Knox commented, “Both the king and people do generally like the Christian religion better than their own; and respect and honour the Christians as *Christians*.”²⁰ During the reign of Vimaladharmasuriya II (1687–1707), Father Joseph Vaz, who belonged to the Oratorian Mission, entered Kandy. With the king’s support, he was able to attend to the spiritual needs of the Roman Catholics. Royal support in Kandy gave legitimacy and authenticity to the Catholic Church, as the clergy and people were respected in the Kandyan kingdom and coastal areas.

King Narendrasinha (1707–39) welcomed Father Jacome Gonçalves and granted him many privileges. The successor to Vaz, Gonçalves was a South Indian immigrant (a Konkani Brahmin from Goa) who arrived in Sri Lanka as a missionary in 1705. He studied both the Sinhala and Tamil languages and translated Christian literature into both Sinhala and Tamil. He made the most significant contribution to Christian literature in these two languages. He is credited with twenty-six Sinhala prose and verse works and sixteen in Tamil. He authored polemical works in Tamil such as *Nava Tarkam* (1732) and *Nalu Vedam* (1738), which refuted the doctrines and religious beliefs of the country. The Sinhalese kings in Kandy appointed Christians to high offices and did not require them to change their religion.²¹ These compassionate actions and the high degree of religious tolerance practiced by the Sri Lankans in the past should not be forgotten in the turmoil and current tense ethnic strife.²²

With the accession of the Nayakkar dynasty (1739–1815) from Madura²³

²⁰ Knox, *An Historical Relation*, p. 243.

²¹ See *ibid.*, p. 221.

²² See Mahinda Deegalle, ed., *Buddhism, Conflict, and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), for a detailed exploration of the role of Buddhism in the current ethnic strife in Sri Lanka.

²³ The last four kings of the Kandyan kingdom belong to the Nayakkar dynasty: Vijaya Rajasinha (1739–47), Kirti Sri Rajasinha (1747–82), Rajadhirajasinha (1782–98), and Sri Vikrama Rajasinha (1798–1815).

to the throne of Kandy, the events related to Christian and Buddhist affairs took a different turn. Two events shaped the relationship of these two religions. Proselytizing activities of the missionaries raised acute awareness on the status of Buddhist affairs. Christian anti-Buddhist writings shocked the laity and Buddhist monks, including Gonçalves's *Matara Pratyakshaya*. These writings generated fears among Buddhist monks and nobles about the status of Buddhism, and they began to bring pressure on the king to withdraw the support and privileges granted to Christian missionaries.²⁴

In general, the five centuries of interactions between various forms of Christianity and Buddhism have been rather harmonious. The Buddhist-Christian debates²⁵ that emerged in the late nineteenth century and the Kotahena 1883 riots²⁶ were sporadic responses to aggressive evangelism, provocation, and abuse of the religious freedom of the people. These issues of religious liberty and freedom to believe and adhere to a particular religion appear in the Sri Lankan context from time to time. The tensions and reactions should not be taken as proof of withdrawn hospitality for the stranger, the foreigner, and the other.

²⁴ See Dewaraja, "Religion and the State," p. 469.

²⁵ See Richard Fox Young, *Vain Debates: The Buddhist-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth-Century Ceylon* (Vienna: De Nobili Research Library, 1996).

²⁶ See G. P. V. Somaratna, *Kotahena Riot, 1883: A Religious Riot in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Deepanee Publishers, 1991).