Buddhism and Colonialism

From the initial formation of the various Buddhist schools, the integration of the schools into indigenous cultures continued throughout the centuries without significant intrusion from areas other than those dominated by Islamic sultanates, who began to infiltrate the Silk Road’s destinations in India and Mongolian (Northern) China during the 8th and 9th centuries. Islam at that time was not basically militant and aggressive unless there was significant resistance; the culture was largely mercantile—Mohammed was, after all, a trader—and it is likely that the diminished presence of Buddhism in India was because of the inability of Mahayana and Theravadin Buddhists to adapt to the sociological pressures as Indian culture became increasing dominated by the onset of Hinduism. This was an early form of colonialism but didn’t have the impact that would be important to consider compared to the intrusion of European mercantile and imperial interests.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, European explorers began sailing around the tip of Africa, past the Middle East, avoiding the silk road and establishing contact with India, Sri Lanka (which was called Ceylon by the British), and Indochina, and eventually the southern coast of China including the Korean peninsula and the western tip of Japan. The explorations coincided with the onset of the first corporations, which provided investment opportunities for merchants to take safe risks regarding the difficult and uncertain passage of trading ships to those areas and back.

These early incursions by Portuguese, Dutch, French and English traders was enhanced by the armed vessels of those countries’ navies that accompanied them and this was the onset of colonialism in Asia, as well as elsewhere around the world. The dominant force, beginning in the late 18th century, was the English Empire. I want to focus on the effect that imperial colonialism had on Buddhist schools around Asia and how that shaped Buddhism at the beginning of the 20th century when the tensions that produced WWI and then WWII set the stage for the onset of contemporary Buddhism around the world as the various areas liberated from imperial rule vied for power. As with previous talks, my intention is to consider how these events can affect our contemporary attempts to integrate Buddhism into our lives.

**THERAVADA**: Buddhism entered the island of Sri Lanka during the 2nd century BCE with the immigration of a son and daughter of Asoka ((a-sho-kah) which established an enduring Buddhist presence. In the 5th century CE, a monk named Buddhagosa came to Sri Lanka after hearing reports of Buddhist texts (likely the first written, on banana leaves) that were authentic renderings of the original teachings. He compiled what is still the primary source material for Theravada Buddhism, the *Visuddhimagga* (vih-soo-dih-mah-gah, the *Path of Purification*). This accomplishment, combined with the decline of Buddhism in India, established Sri Lanka as the “home base” of Buddhist concepts and practices for centuries after. Research suggests the Visuddhimagga does not reflect the same concepts and practices of the earliest forms of Buddhism but was influenced by other schools and some of the current Vedic concepts and practices.

Portuguese explorers first landed on Sri Lanka in the 16th century and were able to dominate the coastal areas because the indigenous political situation was fragmented. The religious atmosphere was mixed—most of the population were Buddhist, but Islam and Tamil Hindu sects also existed. The Catholic Portuguese sent missionaries and significant pressure was put on the population to convert to Christianity. In the 17th century, the indigenous Sri Lankan leadership made a pact with Dutch traders, assuring a trade monopoly if the Dutch would get rid of the Portuguese. They did, but took over the entire island, demanding indigenous Catholics become Protestant; however, the Buddhist, Muslim and Tamil Hindu population could continue their practices.

Early in the 19th century, the British took over the island from the Dutch and renamed it Ceylon. They largely disenfranchised the population and divided the land up into estates, much like what happened in England during the previous century. This created much tension among the populace and conflicts arose periodically for the next several decades. When the British gave up their colonial control of the island in the 20th century the name Sri Lanka was restored.

In the 2nd century BCE, the Indian emperor Asoka sent Buddhist missionaries all around the known world, including Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia. The prevalent designations of nations were imposed by 20th century Western powers; prior to that time the political boundaries were defined by different dynasties, but a unifying element for all has been Buddhism, primarily Theravadin.

Buddhism in those areas was affected by indigenous tribal shamanic and deity worship, as was also the case in many Eastern cultures influenced by Buddhism. In the 19th century a Thai Buddhist monk named Vajrayan, who was of the Royal family, became the King of Siam (a name for the area bridging between Burma and Thailand) reformed the religion to remove the more tribal magical and ritualistic elements. He re-established a disciplined Sangha and Vinaya code. His name as king was Monkut, and he is the model for the book “Anna and the King of Siam”, from which the musical “The King and I” was created. In addition to restoring meditative and ethical discipline to Buddhism, he modernized the culture to 19th century standards as much as possible.

In the later years of the 19th century, a war between British India and Burma, which was between Siam and India, installed an Indo-British administrative rule that challenged the traditional hierarchy of Buddhist leadership and transformed the indigenous Burmese culture radically. The British also introduced Protestant Christian missionaries, who aggressively attempted to convert the indigenous Buddhists, creating great sociocultural conflict that endured for generations, prompting various Buddhist uprisings. This created a reform movement of Buddhists who revised their otherwise exclusive monastic meditation practices to be more accessible to lay Buddhists.

A prominent leader of the movement in Burma was Ledi Sayadaw (leh-dee sah-yah-daw)—Ledi was the name of the forest he lived and taught in, and Sayadaw is the title of an acknowledged leading teacher. He began his career as a monk with traditional studies of the Abhidhamma (ah-bee-dah-mah), a core part of Buddhist conceptual teaching. He mastered his scholarly pursuits and then devoted himself to years of intensive meditation practice. Realizing that the intrusion of British colonialism and missionary Christianity was a significant threat to the national commitment to Buddhism, he decided to share what he learned with the general population, something unheard of in the Buddhist world at that time. He travelled around the country, teaching whoever was interested about vipassana practice, regardless of whether or not they were renunciates, which was a radical action on his part. He taught various individuals who had a significant impact either directly or indirectly on how vipassana is understood and practiced currently. Among those influential people were Mahasi Sayadaw, who was one of the main influences for the foundational teachers of the Insight Meditation Society, and U Ba Khin (ooh-bah-kin), a lay meditation master, who trained S. N. Goenka and, incidentally, Ruth Denison, who led my first retreat in 1982. The influence of these teachers set the tone for the development of Buddhism in the U.S. in the late 20th century, the topic for the next discussion. Here is an interesting article about the life and importance of Ledi Sayadaw for Western Buddhism: <https://www.lionsroar.com/the-insight-revolution/>

**MAHAYANA**:

The various Mahayana schools subdivided into different regions of Asia over the centuries, having been significantly influenced by the coinciding development of Hindu schools. The following reviews will focus on the sociocultural aspects of the various schools of East Asia:

**Chan**: As Buddhism developed in Chinese society over hundreds of years, there was a different atmosphere in China as the British, French and Russian commercial and imperial interests intruded, which was not as impactful as was the case for the Theravadins. The first missionaries were Jesuits in the 16th century, but with the onset of the British in the 18th and 19th centuries, there were cultural clashes that called forth reactions from elements of the Chinese political culture influenced by Confucian concepts and practices. There had been tensions between the various Buddhist traditions, Chan in China, Seon in Korea and Zen in Japan over the centuries, but these inspired more creativity than hostility. The intrusion of colonialism by the British created various wars over opium and European access to inland China during the 19th century; these conflicts involved Chan practitioners but didn’t have a significant impact on how Buddhism was understood or operated.

**Zen**: Zen was relatively unaffected by Christian missionaries over the centuries. During the time of the Shoguns—11th-19th centuries, Japan militarized Zen institutionally, although many Zen practitioners were not militaristic in practice. when the West began to intrude into Japan in the 18th and 19th centuries, the response of the Japanese leadership was rejecting of Western influence to a great degree. The militancy of Japanese culture eventually led to the invasion of China and WWII, with disastrously transformative effect on that culture.

**Tibet**: Tibetan culture was largely unaffected by European intrusion over the centuries—the greatest impact on Tibetan Buddhism came about as various Mongolian and Chinese intrusions affected state sponsorship of Vajrayana Buddhist schools. Generally, the remote location of Tibet significantly reduced the mercantile and imperial aspirations of Europeans.

The next topic to be reviewed will be how Buddhism came to the West during the 19th and 20th centuries, creating the conditions for contemporary Buddhist concepts and practices.