

SYMBOLS & SYMBOLISM: Embrace Multiculturalism



**BY
G. K. ANANDA KUMARASIRI**



Holistic Education Series

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இலங்கை சனாதிபதி
President of Sri Lanka

FOREWORD

I congratulate Ambassador Dato' Dr. Ananda Kumarasiri for his significant scholarship on a topic of great global concern. His latest book would contribute appreciably towards the much needed mutual understanding, goodwill, tolerance and moderation in life that are desperately needed to soothe the troubled world we live in today.

Despite dramatic scientific, technological and other progresses achieved by mankind, generally, people do not respect basic cultural, religious and human values. A sound understanding of the meaning and significance of symbols and symbolism is one such major shortcoming. This human failing is evident even among those who regularly use symbols and symbolism connected with their own culture and/or religion. Invariably, they also fail to understand those they come across in other religions and cultures.

Dr. Kumarasiri points out that a case in point is the lack of knowledge and understanding among many followers of the Buddha Dhamma about the meaning and significance of symbols and symbolism in the religion. The insightful explanations he proffers in his masterly authored book will certainly help readers to benefit more fully by a proper understanding and effective usage. This is pertinent given the misinformation and disinformation about the Buddha and His Teaching that is pervasive around the world today.

The ideas, concepts and many important and timely propositions contained in the highly readable and well-illustrated text provides invaluable insights into multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding, harmony and peace. History has shown that a failure to embrace pluralism, diversity, multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding has proved highly disruptive to societies. However, despite living in the global village, a great many prejudices and bigoted beliefs regarding symbols and symbolism pervade the world. Without a doubt, this poses a direct serious threat to global peace and harmony.

I feel sure that this thought-provoking study would go a long way towards encouraging people to abandon superstitions, prejudices and bigoted beliefs about symbols and symbolism.



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Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka



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President of Sri Lanka

Leaders from all sections of society will find the ideas, concepts and advice proffered most beneficial in promoting social cohesion amidst religious, cultural and ethnic diversity in their respective societies. I concur with Dr. Kumarasiri's view that through holistic education we can restrict, even pre-empt, religious, cultural and racial extremism that is sweeping across the contemporary world. This would help to develop the much needed wholesome mental culture that he stresses, of truly embracing multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding, harmony and peace in our wonderfully diversified world.

I am delighted to record that inspired by Sri Lanka's glorious Buddha Dhamma heritage, the Government is committed to a comprehensive program to restore the country's ancient Buddhist sacred places to be showcased as the common heritage of humankind. The Island's awe inspiring heritage, significantly, was born out of centuries of cultural, religious and trade cross-flows since ancient times. This rich global connectivity is being fostered in the spirit of pluralism. We fervently believe that we owe it to the present younger generation, and those who are yet to come, to preserve our enviably glorious history, rich civilization, deep spiritual heritage and vibrant creative genius.

I am pleased to reiterate that the Government's developmental programs encompassing holistic education, protection of the ecology, sustainable development, good governance, social justice, strengthening of the twin institutions of marriage and family, and other UN Development Goals are to be also vigorously promoted.

For the foregoing and other important reasons, I recommend this book as a basic reading by the general public. In particular, I wish to earnestly urge leaders from all sections of society to encourage their communities to pursue the insightful ideas and concepts on the wide range of critical subject-matters proffered by Dr. Kumarasiri. They are bound to help contemporary societies to embrace multiculturalism, inter-religious harmony and peace with greater confidence. Most importantly, they would be inspired to imbue the noble human values in daily life.

24th July 2017

Maithripala Sirisena



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About the Author



Ambassador Dato' Dr. G. K. Ananda Kumaraseri was a distinguished career ambassador (1966-1995). He has the rare distinction of setting up and heading the Centre for International Relations and Strategic Studies (1979-1981) for the Malaysian Public Service. The assignment stimulated his interest in education, human resource development and professional training. He retired in 1995 as Director General ASEAN. He is the Founder President of the Human Development and Peace Foundation (HDPF). Apart from being appointed Adjunct Professor at University Utara Malaysia, he is an active Dhamma Speaker, giving regular public talks across the country and abroad. He has authored several widely circulated books:

- My First Word Book: Buddhist Pedagogical Approach
- A Compendium of Buddhist Personal Names: Heritage and Significance of Adoption
- Living Buddhism: The Way Forward
- Living Buddhism: Advancing from Knowing to Being
- My Alphabet Book: Buddhist Pedagogical Approach
- SIDDHARTHA: The Prince of Peace
- Professional Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs Management: An Ambassador's Insight
- Siddhartha : My First Story Book

About the Author

- The Way of Siddhartha: Glorious Righteous Prince
- The Terrifying Drug Menace
- Welcoming the Birth of a Child
- Angulimala: Transforming Life
- Matu Posaka: Joy of Honouring Parents
- Mothercare and Parenting: Key to Social Structuring.
- King Bimbisara the Great: A Father's Unremitting Love
- SIDDHARTHA: Colouring and Drawing Book
- Glorious Prince Siddhartha
- The Great Matu Posaka
- Dhamma Weera: Wise Student of Nagaloka
- Nipunna: The Expert Archer of Taxila
- Suren: The Clever Young Adviser
- My Book of Riddles
- Have Great Fun with Riddles
- Riddle My Riddles
- Compassionate Emperor Ch'eng Tang
- Chinese Basket Story
- The Spirited Smith Family

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It would not have been possible for me to publish this challenging study if not for the good fortune I had of receiving valuable assistance from several persons. I wish to record my appreciation and gratitude for the help they extended so willingly. There are too many of them to list out individually. I would, however, like to single out a few for special appreciation.

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Honourable President of Sri Lanka, H. E. Maithripala Sirisena for kindly obliging to pen the Foreword. His Excellency's personal initiatives to restore and showcase the rich civilization and the religious and cultural heritage of Sri Lanka, and, to transform the country into a progressive vibrant nation is indeed laudable. One has to personally visit the awe inspiring heritage sites of Sri Lanka to bask in their richness, vibrancy and uniqueness. I am naturally delighted that His Excellency has anointed the book as an important text especially for leaders from all sections and levels of society around the world.

I would also like to take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to the Most Venerable B. Saranankara Nayake Maha Thera for the encouragement Bhante had so spontaneously extended. Ven. Nayake Maha Thera's forthright support has appreciably helped me to accomplish this challenging study amidst my other Dhammaduta programs and projects. I am also greatly indebted to Most Venera-

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I would be remiss, if I fail to acknowledge my gratitude for the support and encouragement as well as the many sacrifices my dear wife, Asoka, my daughter, Prasadani, and my sons, Priyantha and Sanjaya had to bear with due to my various Dhammaduta commitments. Their moral support and patience have indeed been a great source of strength. I will be forever indebted to them for their understanding and forbearance towards the fulfilment of my Dhammaduta aspirations.

Sukhi hotu

G. K. Ananda Kumaraseri

30th September, 2017

PREFACE

Symbols and symbolism are essentially aimed at capturing what is not easily expressible. More specifically, they are to convey an intention, idea, concept or feeling that is complex and not easily transmitted verbally or in writing. Symbols and symbolism have been intrinsic to human society from the time of our earliest ancestors. They remain striking features in practically all aspects of life, especially in the political, social, cultural and religious fields. They have a profound psychological bearing on a people, particularly those that are enjoined with religion. The more significant a symbol or symbolism is to a person the more this is the case.

In his book, “Man and his Symbols”, Dr Carl Gustav Jung, the world renowned psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, maintains that a principal role of spiritual symbols is to give meaning to human life. He cited the example of the Pueblo Indians in South America who believe that they are offsprings of the Father Sun God. This provides them with a powerful sense of confidence and ample hope in life. It is this belief that endows their life with a perspective and purpose or goal that extends well beyond their simple limited existence.

In Christianity for instance, the cross symbolically represents the mode of Jesus’s death. To a devout spiritually steeped Christian, however, the cross personifies greater significance, deeper meaning and a higher purpose in terms

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of communication or expression. In the spiritual context consequently, the crucifixion of Jesus symbolically represents the deep suffering he bore and the very ultimate sacrifice he had undergone for followers of the faith. Further, the cross on which Jesus died is symbolically conceived in Christian myths and legends as axis mundi, that is, the Great Tree which forms the axis of the world. It is a sad commentary on modern civilization that the concept of axis mundi of venerating Nature has disappeared due to heedless human greed. This has given vent to crass materialism and wanton exploitation of Mother Earth for selfish ends, to the catastrophe of humankind.

Symbols and symbolism abound in myths, legends, folk tales and religion. A good illustration is the symbolism of a shepherd in Christianity which is inscribed in the Old Testament, as in the daily prayer, “The Lord is my Shepherd”. The symbol can be traced to the ancient Egyptian symbolism of venerating the Pharaoh, who was regarded the unquestioned authority and supreme power on Earth. This belief is similar to the concept of the shepherd being anointed by the Egyptian Sun God to protect and safeguard his subjects. Further, in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics the imagery of the shepherd is symbolised by the crook. The crosier or pastoral staff of a bishop which symbolises, inter alia, overriding ecclesiastical authority and spiritual leadership, interestingly, has its origins in the very same imagery of the ancient Egyptian shepherd’s crook.

A common practice among different cultures and religions in respect to using symbols and symbolism is the commemoration of departed leaders. This has been observed

universally as a way to preserve and pass on important memories of the revered departed person. The commemoration is also meant to inspire future generations about her or his outstanding character, human qualities, achievements or contribution to society. An underlying motive and motivation of the commemoration is to create an eternal visual presence of the personage in order to readily recall and honour for posterity.

The culture of commemorating departed personages has been entrenched since ancient times. Often mythological characters were sculptured as in the case of the magnificent Greco-Roman statues of Hercules, Apollo and Venus. Another classic illustration is the exquisite sculpturing of the courageous youthful hero, David who killed the giant, Goliath, with just a simple sling. In the East, in China, statues of ancient Chinese personages such as that of the highly venerated Sage Confucius, the pantheon of deities in Taoism and succession of past Emperors have been similarly honoured throughout the ages.

Likewise, it was a common practice in the Indian subcontinent for statues of gods, deities and kings to be sculptured and honoured. More recent examples of the commemoration of distinguished personages through images are those of the famous Indian philosopher and literary icon, Sri Rabindranath Tagore, the father of Indian Independence, Mahatma Gandhi and that of the Father of the Indian Constitution, Dr. Ambedkar, to name just a few.

In modern times, in the West, such as in the United States of America, statues of President Washington, the father

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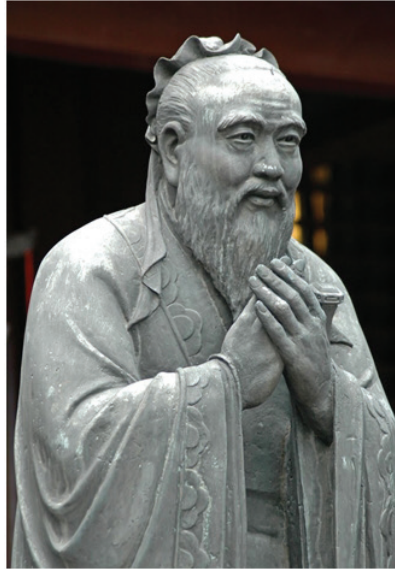
of the nation, President Abraham Lincoln and other past Presidents as well as iconic leaders such as Martin Luther King, the great champion of Human Rights and Peace, hold Americans in great awe. The same can be said of the practice of honouring notable personages who have passed on, in other regions of the world, through images of them.



Immaculate Sculpture of David by Michelangelo

It is also a common practice in most societies for significant places and events associated with important personages and/or having a historical, cultural, political, or religious importance to be similarly commemorated through symbols and symbolisms. To this day, people all over the world construct monuments, name buildings, commission

paintings, display photographs, produce documentaries and publish books on significant places or events such as the recent Ground Zero and 9/11 Memorial in New York.



Statue of the revered Chinese Sage, Confucius

The significance of a person, place, thing or event conveyed through symbols and symbolism transcends time and geographical space. Remembering a noble person, a sacred or historical place, or a momentous event through symbols and symbolism is a wholesome human quality which ought to be encouraged universally. This practice bears a positive impact across societies and a country as a whole. However, it is regretted that the use of symbols and symbolism is not always fully understood. This does not brood well for respecting diversity, pluralism, multiculturalism, inter-religious understanding and harmony. Deliberate efforts may be committed by leaders to promote among their

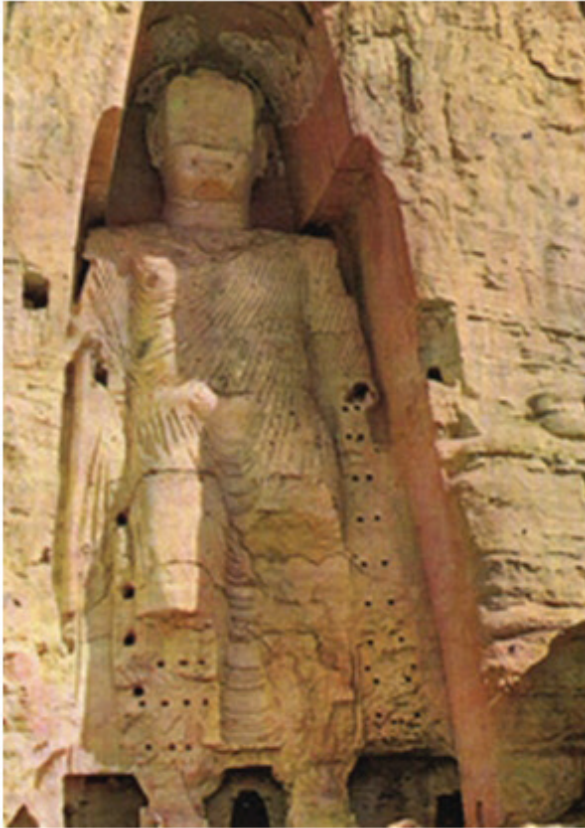
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respective communities the significance, appreciation and respect of symbols and symbolism of all cultures, religions and climes in the spirit of harmony and peace.

History presents us with copious evidence of prejudice and intolerance committed against symbols and symbolism in the name of religion, race and culture. Growing numbers of religious and political leaders today have gone beyond passing derogatory remarks against symbols and symbolism to brutally vandalising fascinating religious, historical and culturally steeped precious heritages of humankind. Destructive acts stemming from bigoted religious beliefs, unfounded dogma, disinformation and misinformation regarding symbols and symbolism have in fact reached an alarming state in many regions of the world. These indulgences in extremism portend serious repercussions to global peace and harmony. They may be arrested forthwith through concerted commitment of leaders, from all sections of society. This can be achieved through a genuine embrace of pluralism, multiculturalism, inter-religious understanding and mutual respect. Equally important, this is to be reinforced through holistic education.

Religious extremist have been destroying priceless cultural heritages of humankind on the grounds that such civilizational treasures are forbidden in Islam. The desecration of the fabled city of Timbuktu housing ancient sacred shrines, the destruction of the magnificent temples of Palmyra in Syria and the ransacking of the city South of Mosul in Iraq are glaring examples of such atrocious happenings in recent times. It would be also recalled that not too long ago, the sacred 6th century CE. 180 feet tall colossal Bamiyan Bud-

dha statue in Afghanistan, was mutilated into rubbles by the Taliban under the orders of their leader, Mullah Omar. Pleas by world leaders to the Taliban to respect and honour the cultural treasures in Afghanistan as a common heritage of humankind proved to be of no avail. The priceless historical heritage of humankind suffered unspeakable destruction. The sacrilege was purportedly justified by an immutable dictum that Muslims are compelled to destroy all images of the human form.



Colossal Bamiyan Buddha image before mutilation

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The dreadful trend of destroying symbols and images have exacerbated. Today, frightful numbers of self-serving irresponsible political as well as religious leaders disparage religious, cultural and ethnic diversity in their respective communities. They have fanatically advocated the complete annihilation of priceless civilizational monuments and edifices in the name of religion. They have no qualms whatsoever about the horrifying destructive consequences that follow their trail of bigotry. Their narrow thinking and extremist advocacy have resulted in bloody conflicts and tragic human suffering in many regions of the world. Many of their compatriots commit heinous crimes against other cultures, faiths and races such as the destruction of revered monuments and edifices, at their behest.



Totally destroyed Bamiyan Buddha Image

These extremists totally reject, even utterly despise, precious civilizational heritages of other cultures and religions. In blindly following extremist dictates of their leaders, they obviously do not possess a right understanding of the true meaning and significance of symbols and symbolism. In the true spirit of multiculturalism and respect of cultural and religious pluralism; governments and leaders from all sections of society may gainfully mount concerted efforts to pre-empt such senseless destructions of the glorious common heritages of humankind. Indifference towards this urgent global challenge could easily result in a spiralling of violence and loss of precious human lives.

At the same time, it is pertinent for us to be mindful that symbols and symbolism can and have been grossly misused and abused for narrow selfish gains and dubious ends. History is replete with examples of symbols and symbolism being exploited by individuals and organised groups for sinister purposes. As elaborated in the next chapter, all manner and form of devious means and methods are employed by such quarters to achieve their vile objectives.

It is clear that the way to address global challenges such as extremism, terrorism, climate change, sustainable development, gender equality and attainment of world peace is not by mere slogans, platitudinal declarations and issuing vociferous statements. It is far more realistic and effective to achieve tangible results through the implementation of a concrete and comprehensive plan of action that addresses the root cause of the malaise. The root cause as the Supreme Self-enlightened Buddha stressed is an untrained or

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uncultivated mind. Simply put, the mind is the forerunner of negative thoughts such as prejudices, bigoted beliefs and dogmas. It is imperative to overcome erroneous thinking and misperceptions of religious beliefs, culture and ethnicity, if we are to arrest the destruction of priceless heritages of humankind and accompanying senseless bloody conflicts and sufferings. An effective way is for governments and community leaders to encourage the cultivation of a wholesome mental culture and positive human values as the bedrock of our inter-connected global village.

Such a concerted program would also lead to moderation in thinking and behaviour in daily life. People would then be mindful of their thoughts, speech and actions. In so doing they would self-regulate themselves and refrain from committing wrongdoings and harm to themselves and others. People would instead interact with each other with greater understanding, respect and harmony, regardless of ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, social status or any other differences. This would serve to generate, among other notable positive outcomes, mutual understanding and the acceptance and celebration of differences in culture and religion among peoples. These wholesome developments would in turn ensure the creation of harmonious and peaceful environments in our increasingly troubled world.

One of the greatest ironies of humankind is that people all around the world yearn for peace and happiness. But the stark truth is that a great many people spend time, effort, money and a great deal of other resources that undermine these very universal goals. The same irony is evident in the

practice of religion. All religions preach love, harmony, tolerance, mutual understanding, moderation, happiness, peace and other noble human values. Yet human history is replete with conflicts and bloody wars perpetrated in the very name of religion. The time is long overdue for humankind to eschew acrimony, rivalry, animosity and hatred among fellow human beings. Peoples instead should fully embrace diversity and multiculturalism as a reality and beauty of the human tapestry of our Planet Earth.

The global strategy should incorporate children and youths as it is critical to develop a wholesome mental culture from a young impressionable age than to instil this in already disorientated and corrupted adult minds. Government officials and leaders from all sectors and levels of society may do well to genuinely embrace human values, pluralism, multiculturalism, inter-religious understanding, tolerance, moderation and harmony. They may by their very example, reflect a right understanding and appreciation of symbols and symbolism and celebrate diversity and pluralism under the proposed global program.

Another key measure is for governments and leaders from all sections of society to promote holistic education. Education systems all around world are marooned in the sea of cognitive learning. They have proven to have failed. A holistic system of education that includes affective and psychomotor levels of learning is critical to bringing about attitudinal changes and transformation in thinking and behaviour. Such a paradigm shift in teaching and training pedagogy would also simultaneously foster other equally

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crucial elements such as freedom of thought, intellectual curiosity, intellectual honesty and integrity. These maxims of holistic education are essential for ensuring the development of a wholesome mental culture.

The adoption of a holistic education system, above all, would encourage the development of a positive mental culture of open mindedness, a balanced liberal attitude, tolerance and moderation. This would most certainly engender a right and meaningful usage and application of symbols and symbolism as well as their genuine appreciation, regardless of differences in culture, religion, ethnicity, social status, gender or any other distinction.

For a start, prominent symbols associated with major world religions, a sampling of which is illustrated below, could be taught as an integral to developing a wholesome mental culture. Most certainly this would encourage mutual respect for symbols and symbolism and the beliefs, ideas, concepts and practices associated with them. Leaders from all sections of society may, by their very example, genuinely and joyously celebrate multiculturalism, inter-religious understanding and harmony in thought, speech and action. We could then expect them to promote a mental culture of truly embracing and not merely tolerating cultural and religious diversity.

It is in the context of providing a right understanding and appreciation of symbols and symbolisms that a few prominent examples in the Buddha Dhamma are presented. The ideas, concepts and guidance they embody bear universal

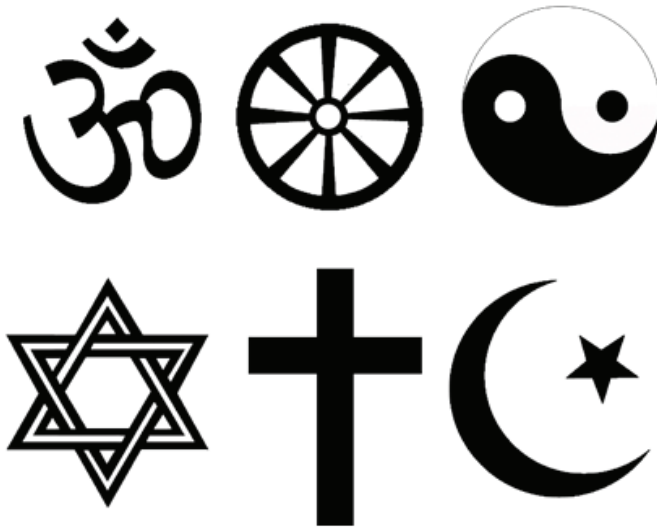
relevance and application. Further, the realism and rationalism of the Buddha Dhamma help to put into proper perspective the practices and values associated with symbols and symbolism in general. One would then be conditioned to embrace symbols and symbolism, irrespective of differences in ethnicity, cultural moorings, traditions and religious beliefs.

The foregoing brings us to a significant point. That is, one of the most edifying aspects of symbols and symbolism is their legitimacy of being common heritages of humankind. As we progress through the chapters their metamorphosis through the ages as a result of cross cultural flows becomes self-evident. A classic example is the evolution of the twin Islamic symbol of the crescent moon and the star. The origins of the symbol can be traced to early Byzantine and Roman civilizations. Similarly, the Om symbol of Hindus is derived from ancient Vedic times and the Buddha image is an offshoot of Hellenistic influence in North India centuries ago. One would also be conscious that there is no one pure race and culture, just as there are many commonalities, adoptions and adaptations in beliefs and practices among religions. In the interest of promoting multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding these and other important realities of human history and heritage need to be ingrained in the mind set of all peoples around the world.

Yet, regrettably, religious and political leaders, in particular, get stuck in the mire of labelling and branding as well as indulge in playing the card of race, religion and culture. In their earnestness to garner supporters to satisfy their

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self-serving agenda they promote begot dogmas. Their narrow mind sets should be overhauled. We need to urge them to embrace diversity in race, religion and culture for the common good of humanity. As Leonardo da Vinci, the great thinker and artist cryptically remarked: “We should learn to see clearly, and realize that everything connects to everything else”.



Symbols of major world religions

The International Criminal Court recently opened an unprecedented case against the alleged Malian militant, Ahmad al-Faqial-Mahdi, for his self-confessed war crimes in destroying the UNESCO world heritage site of Timbuktu’s famous mausoleums, the Sidi Yahya mosque and other sacred Muslim shrines. The punishment meted out to him may act as a deterrent. However, it is critical to address the root cause and prevent such inhuman acts from ever hap-

pening in the first place. The root cause as cited earlier is an untrained, uncultured mind. This underlying drawback is best addressed through the development of a wholesome mental culture in a child through what may be referred to as, 'home education' or, 'informal education at home'. Ideally, the cultivation of a wholesome mental culture is to commence from the foetal stage of a child as elaborated in my book, "Mothercare and Parenting: Key to Social Structuring". This initial process of mental cultivation is to continue through infancy and reinforced in school through a holistic system of education as underlined earlier.

A strategy for cultivating a wholesome mental culture that embraces multiculturalism, inter-religious understanding, harmony and peace is imperative in our diversified pluralistic world. It is pertinent that this urgent and important challenge is not confined to adults. The point can hardly be stressed that a pre-emptive global strategy aimed at promoting a wholesome mental culture should focus on the younger generation. They are our future leaders. Moreover, as stressed earlier, it is more meaningful and effective to develop a wholesome mental culture from a young age well before the mind is filled with unwholesome thoughts, sentiments and negative orientations.

Aside from the foregoing cogent considerations, it is to be duly recognised that symbols and symbolism, serve a number of important purposes especially in the sphere of spiritualism. They intrinsically help people to develop devotion and confidence in the pursuit of their spiritual as well as worldly goals. But the trend today is for followers of most

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religions to place extra-ordinary emphasis on the outward form rather than on the substance and right practice of their religion as an index of piety. Outward expression of religion should not constitute the be all and end all of one's piety or devotion. Piety is best reflected in the correct understanding and practice of religion along with a genuine respect of other faiths, beliefs, practices and customs.

This brings to mind a key teaching of the Buddha that is contextual and is of direct relevance to embracing multiculturalism and inter-religious harmony. The Buddha consistently stressed to monks, nuns and lay followers alike, the imperative of diligent practice of the Dhamma (the Doctrine, or Teaching of the Buddha), than to rely solely on outward manifestations of the religion. This maxim is encapsulated in His admonishment that it is one who practices the Dhamma who honours Him most and not one who is merely erudite about the Dhamma or outwardly demonstrates devotion towards the religion. The focus of Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras (daughters and sons of the Dhamma) therefore is not to be merely on the outward form or manifestation of their religious practice, or knowledge of the scriptures, or memorisation and regurgitation of the Dhamma, but on the Right Understanding and the practice of the Buddha's Teaching in daily life. Accordingly, it is urged that in embracing multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding and harmony, stress should be on encouraging a right understanding and practice of pluralism and diversity.

In promoting universal understanding, harmony and peace,

it is important for us to have at least a basic understanding of the deep-seated human need to use symbols and symbolism. We should appreciate their significance to individual communities that hold them dear to their culture and/or religion. Regrettably, this task is handicapped by a lacuna of literature. This critical handicap prompted me to share some reflections on the serious repercussions to global peace and harmony that misinformation, disinformation and a lack of a right understanding of symbols and symbolism portend.



Embracing symbols and symbolism from a young age

To discuss all forms of symbols and symbolism within the limited pages of this book is obviously too ambitious a task. I have therefore confined myself to some of the principal symbols and symbolism in the Buddha Dhamma (the Buddha's Teaching). Furthermore, the realism and rationalism

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upon which the Buddha's Teaching is anchored, would help to put into proper perspective the religious values and practices associated with symbols and symbolism. This can facilitate our understanding and appreciation of such elements in other religions as well.

Finally, I beg to be forgiven for any errors, omissions or inadequacies in the treatment of the subject-matters, and of any other shortcomings in the narrative. I also wish to state categorically that the views expressed in this preliminary study are purely my own and do not represent the opinion of any organisation or institution, including the Human Development and Peace Foundation of which establishment I have the good fortune of being the President.

CHAPTER I

AN OVERVIEW

The term symbol originates from the Greek word, symbolon (σύμβολο), meaning a token or catch word which refers to an emblem or ensign. A symbol by its very definition is not what it physically appears or stands for. In practice, however, symbols are commonly viewed as if they are what they represent. It consequently carries different connotations to different people. Symbolic representations which appear in the form of images hold deep meaning and purpose to those who adopt them. That is why symbols are usually multi-dimensional in terms of the meaning they embody and the objective they serve.

In ordinary parlance a symbol is an item which stands for or represents something that is usually complex and laden with deeper meaning and significance than its visual form. It generally represents a profound idea or concept than the two dimensional vision of the sign or tangible form they assume. It is aimed at conveying in a simplified and/or graphic form an important idea, concept, value, belief or practice, generally in the political, social, cultural or religious sphere.

Symbolic representations define the collective identity of a people. Monuments become iconic symbols such as the Statue of Liberty which symbolises the human spirit to be free. It resonates with the beholder as she or he senses the

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free spirit from the image. In other words, symbols have a deep meaning and a life that extends well beyond the supposedly outward material form that they otherwise appear to persons who are not of the same orientation.

The application of a symbol in relation to a thought or activity is generally understood as symbolism. Various symbolism manifest in practically every aspect of life although we may not be conscious of this when doing so. For example, symbolism is evident in a variety of simple bodily gestures such as by giving a bear hug to a person to express affection, love, empathy, amity, friendship or camaraderie; in placing the index figure across the lips to urge silence; kneeling down in prayer as a mark of humility; prostrating before a religious image, reverential person or one's parents as an expression of respect; or standing up and remaining upstanding in the presence of an authoritative or respected person as acknowledgement of her or his high status and so on. The last example cited is especially evident in the case of the entrance of a ruler, judge, leader, teacher or an honoured guest.

A fascinating feature of symbols and symbolism is that they come in a variety of forms and expressions such as images, words, sounds, allegories and gestures. Their wide spread usage is often found in religious and cultural practices. Most religions encourage their followers to have close to their hearts a replica of their religious leader, or some form of an insignia representing their faith. This is done in a variety of ways for example by wearing a symbol of the religion on their person or by keeping close, in a religious

context, a statue or portrait of their religion's founder or of a significant deity. The cherished religious representations are usually displayed in places of worship, religious institutions and in the home in a dedicated space such as an altar or prayer room, as seen in the display of images of Jesus Christ among Christians. In Roman Catholicism, statues and portraits of Mother Mary and of celebrated saints adorn churches and altars in the homes of devotees, whilst the Orthodox Christian Church maintains its own tradition of saints and iconography.



Statue of Jesus



**Statue of
Virgin Mother Mary**

Followers of most religions also are encouraged to possess or display certain items associated with the faith as a symbolic expression of their piety. They are generally given to believe that the symbols they possess have important spiri-

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tual values and offer protection from danger and harm from those who may harbour evil intentions against them. This could mean carrying a string of prayer beads or a rosary, or wearing a symbol identified with the religion. Some people prefer to don a particular attire so as to project an outward form of their religious identity, faith and devotion.

In most traditions of Christianity, the cross which symbolises the crucifixion of Jesus Christ stands out as a popular symbol among followers. It is common for Christians to wear a cross around the neck as well as display it in an appropriate place of worship in their homes and churches.

In Islam, the crescent moon and star appearing together is used as a standard symbol. This motif is displayed in numerous forms and in many places by Muslims to symbolise their religious presence and devoutness.

Significantly, when viewed from a historical perspective, the crescent moon and star symbol predates Islam by several centuries. They featured in combination as part of the celestial symbols of the peoples of Central Asia, the Mediterranean, Persia and Siberia in their worship of the Sun, Moon and Stars and sky gods. In particular, the twin symbols featured prominently in ancient Sumerian iconography where the crescent was associated with the Moon God, Sin, and the star with Ishtar, a deity who is often identified with the Goddess Venus. The twin symbol, interestingly, was also widely impressed on ancient Byzantine and Roman coins as illustrated in the following page.



Byzantine coin bearing crescent moon and star

The crescent moon and star symbol came into popular use during the 19th century as the national symbol for the Ottoman Empire and of states that formed part of it. During the 1950's and the 1960's the twin-symbol was adopted, in addition, to grace the national flags and emblems of a number of newly independent Islamic states.



**Roman coin of Emperor Hadrian
with crescent moon and star**

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The Islamic crescent moon and star symbol

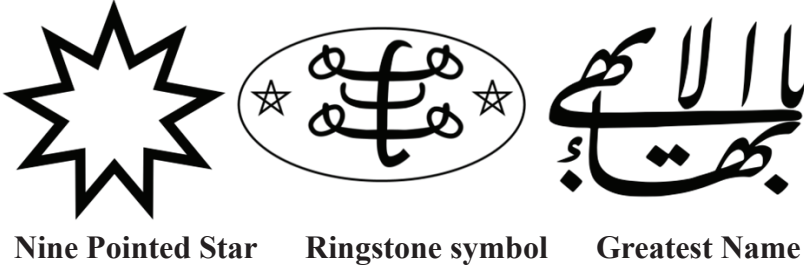
For Hindus, the resonance emitted by the sound Om (Aum), which followers believe invokes divinity, is used to personify the religion. Om is believed to be the vibrational sound that occurred at the time of the creation of the universe by Brahma, the Creator God. It is regarded as a cosmic sound which symbolises everything in the Universe. The renowned German Indology expert, Max Muller, pointed out that Om is also used as a medium or tool for practising meditation. When Om is chanted, it drives away worldly



The Om Symbol

thoughts and distractions, and simultaneously, infuses positive thoughts and energy into the body. For these spiritual connotations, the Sanskrit letter for Om is commonly displayed by Hindus in their homes, vehicles and at the work place.

The extensive use of symbols and symbolism is not just limited to age old religions. They are also used by followers of later-day religions such as in the case of the Baha'i Faith, where the Nine-pointed Star, the Ringstone and the Greatest Name are extensively used.



Nine Pointed Star

Ringstone symbol

Greatest Name

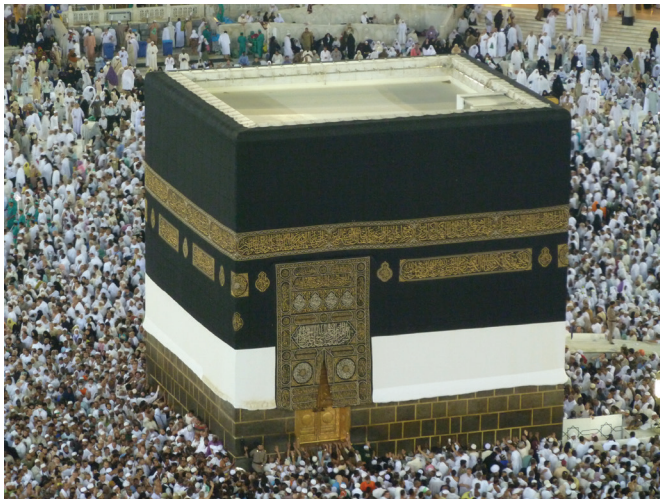
Number nine enjoys a special significance in Baha'i. The word Baha (Arabic for glory), corresponds to nine in the Arabic system of numerology that is referred to as the Abjad system. Number nine which is the highest single digit numeral, symbolises comprehensiveness and culmination. The Baha'i faith claims to be the fulfilment of the expectations of all prior religions. The symbol is used in the nine-sided Baha'i Houses of Worship to reflect a sense of fulfilment and culmination. The Ringstone symbol serves as a visual reminder of God's purpose for humankind. Another symbol that is particularly cherished in Baha'i is the cal-

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ligraphic form of the word Baha, known as the Greatest Name, in reference to the founder of the faith, Baha'u'llah.

In the case of the Buddha Dhamma, a host of symbols have been widely used over the centuries. Foremost among them is the Buddha image and symbols and symbolism related to the Teaching of the Buddha Dhamma. An insight into the origin, meaning and significance of the Buddha image is provided in chapter III. For now it would suffice to recognise that the Buddha image is a paramount iconic symbol of Dhamaputris and Dhammaputras.

Followers of most religions make it a practice to display representations of places they regard as holy or sacred as a mark of religious reverence. A striking illustration of this common religious practice is the display by Muslims of images of the Kaaba which is held as the most sacred symbol



Muslim pilgrims worshipping the Kaaba

of Islam. The religious symbol is located in Mecca, in Saudi Arabia and represents the single most worshipped object among Muslims.

In Arabic, kaaba literally means a cube. It is a huge square granite structure which represents a house of monotheistic worship. It is held by adherents of Islam to signify the birth place of their religion. Muslims customarily prostrate towards Mecca when they perform their daily prayers. They also aspire to undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca to worship the Kaaba and perform circumambulation of the holy rock.

Jews, Christians and Muslims commonly regard a number of religious places located in West Asia as highly sacred to their individual regions. Prominent among them is the city of Jerusalem which the three Abrahamic religions regard as holy. It is an ardent aspiration of their followers to go on



The Holy City of Jerusalem

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a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and other holy places as a testament of their piety. Adherents of the Abrahamic religions, in particular Muslims, also like to display pictures of Jerusalem and other holy places in West Asia in their homes as a symbolic manifestation of their faith.

In the same vein, Hindu sacred sites such as the Ganges, Badrinath, Sangam and places of worship like the temples of Ayodhya (regarded as the birthplace of the Hindu God Rāma), are visited by pilgrims regularly. Images and printed replicas of these sacred places are commonly displayed in Hindu temples and prayer rooms in the homes of Hindus. These symbolic religious representations help devotees to focus their mind on the holy places while performing their daily prayers and other religious activities which they observe in conjunction with auspicious festivals. They draw great spiritual strength by performing their religious activities with the aid of such symbols.



Hindus performing rituals in the sacred Ganges

Since the time of the Buddha, Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras venerate as sacred a number of places associated with the religion. Foremost amongst them are the four historic sites of Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha; Buddha Gaya where the World Honoured One attained Supreme Self-enlightenment; Saranath where the Exalted One first expounded the Dhamma, and Kusinara the sacred place of His Mahā Parinibbāna (Passing Away of the Buddha). These four holy places directly associated with major events in the life of the Buddha have remained cardinal sacred places of pilgrimage among followers.

Scriptures reveal that the Buddha advised Most Venerable Ananda, His Chief Personal Attendant bhikkhu, on the significance of the four holy places thus:

There are four places the sight of which will inspire strong spiritual sentiment in those possessing śraddhā (Sanskrit śhraddhā, confidence based on right understanding of the Dhamma as opposed to blind faith). What four are they?...

Here the Tathāgata was born... Here the Tathāgata had attained Bodhi (Supreme Self-enlightenment)... Here the Dhammacakka (the Wheel of the Dhamma) was set in motion... Here the Tathāgata attained final Nibbana (Nirvana)... The bhikkhu or bhikkuni, the upāsaka (layman), or the upāsika (laywoman), who possess śraddhā should undertake a dhammayatra (pilgrimage of piety, or religious expedition), to these holy places... Whosoever passes on while on a pilgrimage to these sacred shrines, being filled with piety and established in śraddhā, will upon the disin-

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tegration of the body, at death, be reborn in a Deva Loka (celestial abode).

After the Mahā Parinibbāna of the Buddha, in keeping with His advice, successive royal patrons of the Buddha, wealthy traders, businessmen and ordinary lay devotees, undertook pilgrimages to these sacred places of the Buddha Dhamma. They devoutly did so according to the Buddha's teaching for an adherent to perform a dhammayatra at least once in one's lifetime. Other major sacred places of pilgrimage included Savatti, Sankassa, Rajagha, Vesali, Ananda Bodhi, Jetavanarama, Sanchi, Ajanta and Ellora.

The dhammayatra which devotees perform is unlike a sight-seeing tourist visit. It is a journey to sacred places inspired by religious motivation. In a pilgrimage, the holy places are looked upon with reverence and arouse the devotional spirit. By showing reverence to the sacred places, the devotee develops a wholesome mental state. Her or his śraddhā in the Buddha Dhamma is simultaneously reinforced. It is a common experience among devotees that the wholesome thoughts they cultivate and śraddhā they imbue in the course of their pilgrimage, long endure the meritorious deeds they perform.

A pilgrimage to sacred places of the Buddha Dhamma besides being an act of piety encompasses a number of religious significance. Devotees experience a lofty spiritual uplift of being in the presence of the Buddha which reinforces their śraddhā. The pujas (offerings of flowers, incense, lights and other traditional items as symbolic acts of



Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha



The Sri Maha Bodhi Vihāra, Buddha Gaya

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Saranath where the Buddha unravelled the Dhamma



Kusinara where the Buddha Passed Away

reverence and devotion), they perform strengthen their piety in the Ti-ratna (that is, the Noble Triple Gem or Trinity comprising the Buddha, Dhamma and Arahant Sangha – spiritually liberated disciples of the Buddha, similar to the concept of Saints in Christianity, Islam and Judaism). The Eight Precepts which they usually observe on pilgrimage, place a greater self-regulation and self-restraint of the senses than observed in the case of their daily five precepts. This forms a commitment to enhance their cultivation of a wholesome mental culture. As they contemplate on the Buddha's unsurpassed virtues and the purity of the Sublime Dhamma He discovered and unravelled to the world, their own practice of mindfulness is reinforced. Their paññā (Sanskrit: prajna or Insight Wisdom) is thereby nourished.

Among the historically significant and famous pilgrimages to the four holy places was the dhammayatra by Emperor Dhammasoka, on the twentieth year of his reign, in 249 BCE. To record his landmark dhammayatra, the Emperor – who was affectionately referred to as Piyadassi (Beloved of the Gods), because of his śraddhā in the Ti-ratna – erected towering monolithic pillars made out of polished sandstone and capped them with animal capitals, at the sacred places. In addition, he posted huge rock edicts which inscribed, among other royal proclamations, his piety in the Buddha Dhamma and devout adherence of the Buddha's Teaching.

Other noteworthy historic dhammayatras were those undertaken by Chinese pilgrim monks from around the 4th century CE. Driven by their indomitable religious fervour, a continuous stream of devout Chinese monks, nuns and lay

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devotees journeyed courageously westwards from the heart of China to the sacred Buddha Dhamma shrines in India. These devout Chinese pilgrims braved great hardships and perils in tracking along the overland route to India in order to collect original Pāli and Sanskrit suttas (Sanskrit sutras; discourses of the Buddha), and other scriptural texts to take back to China for translation.

The early Chinese pilgrims travelled across the tortuous Taklamakan and Gobi deserts and scaled some of the highest mountains of the world along the rugged snowcapped Himalayan Mountain Range. Some preferred the sea route which was strewn with its own set of hardships and dangers of violent storms in the high seas, piracy and the high propensity of succumbing to fatal sicknesses. Foremost among the devout courageous band of Chinese pilgrims were the pious Chinese monks Shih Fa Hsien, Shih Hsuan Tsang and Shih I Ching (Shih is a Chinese honorific for monks). Records of their pilgrimages bespeak of vibrant ancient vihāras; world renowned universities and monastic centres of learning such as Taxila, Nalanda and Vikramasila; sacred stūpa shrines; venerated Bodhi tree shrines and other magnificent religious monuments in the holy places they visited and devoutly venerated.

The custom of having replicas and portraits of sacred places associated with the glorious religious and cultural history of the Buddha Dhamma are found in vihāras and in the homes of followers to this day. They serve to bring to mind the presence of the Buddha and the Sublime Dhamma He discovered and taught. These symbolic representations ev-

oke a deep spiritual resolve among devotees to live a purposeful and meaningful life in accordance with the Sublime Teaching of the Buddha.

In the same spirit of invoking a strong religious sentiment, events of significance to individual religions are often recreated by adherents. Classic illustrations of this in Christianity are the enactment and imagery of the birth of Jesus in a manger, the scene of the Last Supper and the Crucifixion of Jesus. Such scenes command a central place in churches and also at altars in homes, the work place and business premises of those of the Christian faith.



Crucifixion of Jesus

In a number of religions, significant events are also enacted ritually, at the community level, as symbolic expressions of unwavering faith and devotion. An example of this reli-

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gious practice that readily comes to mind is the enactment by Christians of the tortuous bearing of the cross by Jesus and his eventual Crucifixion. Another is Ashura, the religious practice observed by Shi'ite Muslims in Iran and in countries where they are found in sizeable numbers as in Iraq and Syria. The blood shedding religious ritual is held annually to commemorate the murder of Prophet Mohammad's grandson, the revered Imam Hussein, in the city of Karbala in Iraq. The ritual, which is observed in public, involves profuse blood letting by devout followers by means of self-mutilation with swords, knives, barbed chains and other sharp objects. The aim of this religious ritual is to inflict injuries on one's body in order to cause blood to ooze as a symbolic act of unquestionable faith.



Blood-shedding Ashura ritual by Shi'ite Muslims

Another Islamic religious ritual is stoning of the devil followed by Muslims as part of the Haj pilgrimage. At Mina which is located East of Mecca, Muslim pilgrims ritually

fling pebbles at three walls which were formally pillars, referred to as Jamarat. The religious significance of the Jamarat ritual is based on Prophet Abraham's encounter with the devil, where Angel Gabriel instructed him to pelt the devil.



Stoning the Devil in Mina

The three Jamarats represent the temptations of Abraham against sacrificing his son, Ishmael: of Abraham's wife Hazar to induce her to stop him; and of Ishmael to avoid being sacrificed. The ritualistic stone throwing symbolises Abraham's rebuke of the devil and his casting aside of base desires.

Religious vows or penances that sometimes involve the torturing of one's body are practised in a number of other religions such as Hinduism. They are performed in conjunction with certain important religious occasions or undertakings. Religious penance observed by Hindu devotees is widely witnessed, for example, during Thaipusam.

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A Hindu devotee fulfilling his vow on Thaipunam

The religious penance is devoutly practised annually in India, Malaysia, Singapore and several other countries where sizeable populations of Hindus reside. The religious observation is celebrated in honour of the God Subramaniam (also known as the God Murugan), who represents virtue, youth, the source of power and the destroyer of evil. Hindu devotees submit themselves to various forms of self-mortification as a symbolic test of their abiding faith in the hope of securing benign intervention from divine powers. Some subject themselves to severe self-mortification as an expression of devotion or submission to an Almighty God they believe in. Some undergo a ritualistic corporal atonement out of deep gratitude for the fulfilment of a supplication they had sought earlier from a particular Hindu deity.

In keeping with the age-old tradition of the Buddha Dham-

ma, followers celebrate Wesak which commemorates the birth, self-enlightenment and the Mahā Parinibbāna, or Passing Away of the Buddha. This most auspicious thrice-sacred day for Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras is celebrated on the first Full Moon Day of the month of Wesak, which coincides with May in the Gregorian Calendar.

In countries where the Buddha Dhamma has been traditionally practised, Wesak is celebrated with numerous meaningful religious practices, cultural traditions, togetherness and wholesome rejoicing. It is characterised by colourful festivals of lights, the construction of towering illustrative pandals (murals depicting the life of the Buddha and Jataka Katas or folk stories) and hoisting of large decorative lanterns of various designs and sizes. In contrast to most religious festivals, Wesak which is the most significant religious festival in the Buddha Dhamma calendar is celebrated uniquely. It is a celebration devoid of merry making and feasting. Instead, the religious festivities bring forth expressions of contentment and spiritual exertion among Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras. Their various noble acts of metta (unconditional friendliness or boundless goodwill) and karuna (indiscriminate compassion to all living beings and Nature), that spreads forth unreservedly from their compassionate hearts, manifest in various charitable deeds of giving to the needy and caring for all living beings and Nature.

In vihāras where the community customarily congregates, one would find streams of devotees making their way, right from the early hours of the morning until late into the night to partake in the religious celebrations. They express by var-

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ious symbolic deeds, their śraddhā in the Buddha Dhamma. Acts of veneration are performed by offering flowers, burning incenses and lighting oil lamps and candles in honour of the World Renowned One, the Buddha. Bakthi Gee (Devotional Songs) are performed to express devotion and pirith (recitation of protective sutras) is chanted throughout the auspicious day. Pujas are observed invoking the aspiration for unconditional benevolence, goodwill, friendliness, wellbeing, happiness and peace, in the all embracing compassionate spirit of the Buddha Dhamma.

The various religious observances and time spent in reflective prayers also render the celebration of Wesak a special effort on the part of devotees to bring happiness to the unfortunate, the aged, the disadvantaged and the sick. Apart from observing religious ceremonies, devotees participate in numerous compassionate and charitable activities. They offer dana (charitable acts and offering of alms), such as offering food, clothing, educational materials and other items to impoverished individuals and families. Some devotees make it a point to liberate birds caged in captivity, or save cattle and other livestock from being slaughtered and sold for their meat in the market place. The motive of devotees is to do wholesome deeds out of unconditional compassion, love, kindness, goodwill and generosity, in the letter and spirit of the Sublime Teaching of the Buddha – their Exalted Teacher.

On this auspicious thrice sacred day, fulfilment of dana is preferred by devotees as a more meaningful way to celebrate than to wine and dine and engage in sensual self-

indulgences. Numerous virtuous deeds are accomplished by devotees all around the world in accordance with the



**The President and the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka
performing a puja on Wesak**

Buddha's Teaching of Brahma Vihāra, that is, the Four Sublime Mental States of mettā, karuna, muditha (sympathetic or altruistic joy) and upekkhā (equanimity), on Wesak Full Moon Day each year.

In many countries where the Buddha Dhamma is traditionally practised, acts of friendliness, compassion, goodwill, kindness and unconditional benevolence abound in commemorating the humanistic spirit of the Sublime Dhamma. In Sri Lanka, for example, dansals comprising (temporary canopies, make-shift shelters and stalls) are erected by loc-

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Traditional Wesak Lantern Festival



**Wesak Thorana (Gateway) depicting scenes from the
Buddha Dhamma**

al community-based organisations and generous business establishments and devout individuals. These dansals offer drinks and food to passers by and revellers who throng the cities and towns to witness and/or to take part in the Wesak festivities.

The acts of unconditional goodwill and generosity carried out annually in conjunction with Wesak, regardless of one's ethnicity, culture and religious persuasion, merit adulation and imbuing, as they resonate hugely with promoting multiculturalism and fostering of social cohesion among diverse social groups in a country.

Viewed from the perspective of promoting spiritualism at the community level, religious symbols and symbolism help to provide a strong sense of spiritual affinity. They form an effective means of fostering fraternity among fellow adherents of the faith. This explains the frequent use of symbols and symbolism to enhance the spiritual atmosphere of places of community worship such as in Hindu temples, vihāras, churches, mosques, gurdwaras and synagogues.

A primary thrust of the common spiritual tradition of using symbols and symbolism among religions is for followers to strengthen the sanctity of the religious space and to induce a lofty spiritual experience. Copious examples of the use of symbols and symbolism in places of worship, which serve as integral elements of community-based or organised religion are found in most religions. Two symbols, namely the three-pointed spear and the Hanukha that are prominent

SYMBOLS and SYMBOLISM: Embrace Multiculturalism in Hinduism and Judaism respectively are commonly displayed in places of worship and in the homes of adherents.



Three-pointed spear symbol of the Shaivite Hindu sect



The Hanukah: Symbol of Judaism

At the personal level of religious practice, it is a proven fact that symbols and symbolism help followers to focus their mind on certain aspects of the religion they profess. They help to stir a lofty spiritual impulse among adherents. Followers tend to believe that otherwise their devoutness may go dormant and gradually dissipate. In this sense, symbols

and symbolism help to foster among followers a positive feelings of reassurance and confidence. They serve as vehicles for expressing devotion towards their religion. This is evident in the wide use of symbols and symbolism in religious ceremonies, rites and rituals. In this regard, it is not unusual for the use of symbols and symbolism to be viewed as somewhat simplistic or crass by those who have attained a higher spiritual understanding and whose spiritual calling is poised at a higher plane. Some intellectuals may even dismiss them as ritual tools.

Be that as it may, there is no denying that devotional practices are also therapeutic to the masses of ordinary devotees. They encourage them to develop wholesome thoughts, speech and actions and to live as responsible, compassionate, cultured members of society. For the average adherent, religious practices bearing symbols and symbolism are considered helpful for generating a sense of identity and spiritual uplift. To them cultivation of the devotional aspect of their religion is therefore essential.

One of the oldest and most widely used symbols is the iconic representation of the sun moving in a clockwise direction, referred to in Sanskrit as *svastika*. It is believed that the *svastika* was used by ancient Indians as a sacred symbol of auspiciousness aimed at invoking one's inner power. It was venerated as a manifestation of a supra-natural power that was able to fulfil a person's supplication for success, wellbeing and happiness. In Hinduism, the term personifies *sakti* or power that is symbolised by the sun, which followers are encouraged to worship daily.

SYMBOLS and SYMBOLISM: Embrace Multiculturalism

The earliest archaeological evidence of the svastika can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, located in present-day Pakistan. The svastika is one of the oldest symbols in India. The use of the svastika as an auspicious symbol is also found in a number of other ancient Eastern and Western civilizations, cultures and religions such as among the ancient Babylonians who worshiped the supremely powerful sun. The symbol of their invincible Sun-god, Shamash is captured in numerous archaeological excavations. For similar reason, the ancient



Symbol of the Babylonian Sun-god, Shamash

Egyptians and Romans venerated the sun. In the Catholic religious practice of holding Mass, a distinctive association with the sun is symbolically represented. This is evidenced in the customary use of the Monstrance which bears a remarkable similarity to the Sun symbol of the Babylonian

Sun God, Shamash. In addition, the Papal Throne at the Vatican on which His Holiness the Pope ceremonially sits has a large sun emblem above the seat which is more than a coincidence.



His Holiness Pope Francis holding the Monstrance



Large emblem of the sun over the Papal Throne

SYMBOLS and SYMBOLISM: Embrace Multiculturalism

Zoroastrianism which is arguably the oldest monotheistic religion in the world is strongly associated with the practice of worshipping the sun and fire. The religion was founded by Prophet Zoroasthustra between the 16th to the 10th century BCE. in ancient Persia. Today, small pockets of Parsis (Parsees) of Persian ancestry are traceable who practice the ancient religion and reside in India, primarily around the city of Mumbai (Bombay).

As for the Buddha Dhamma, the genealogy of the historical Gautama Buddha, is traced to the Surya dynasty (Sun dynasty). The genealogical reference of the Buddha to the mighty sun points to why the svastika commanded a pre-eminent status in the mind set of early followers of the Buddha Dhamma. This presumably led to the emergence of the iconographic tradition of imprinting a svastika on the chest of the Buddha image as commonly evidenced in the Mahayana Tradition that is popular in China, the Korean Peninsula, Japan and Vietnam. The incorporation of the svastika is distinctively evidenced in the recently excavated images of over 1,000 ancient Buddha statues in three rock caves in a cliff in Yangque in Shanxi Province in China. They date back to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). In Japan, the svastika was used to also mark the location of Zen shrines.

The most common use of the svastika as a religious symbol is to be found in Brahmanism which flourished in ancient India. Prominence was accorded to the symbol because of its spiritual significance. It symbolised the sun which was regarded worthy of veneration. It was customarily invoked



Svastika on the Buddha's chest in the Mahayana Tradition

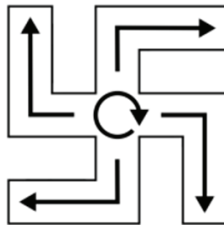


A Hindu devotee worshipping the rising sun

SYMBOLS and SYMBOLISM: Embrace Multiculturalism

before the commencement of a ritual or religious function to dispel obstacles and hindrances. As Hinduism later took root in India, sun worship became entrenched as a major religious practice among followers of the religion. The svastika was highly revered as a symbol of good fortune, purity, abundance and longevity. The worship of the sun has remained a common religious ritual among most Hindu sects to this day.

In its essence, the svastika takes the form of an equilateral cross with four arms bent at their individual ends, at right angles, in a clockwise direction. This is commonly referred to as the Right-facing Svastika. In some cases the arms are presented in a counter-clockwise direction and referred to as the Left-facing Svastika.



Svastika Symbol portrayed moving clockwise



Left-facing Svastika

Some Indologists theorise that the ancient Indians may have taken the four arms of the svastika to represent the four lokas (worlds or abodes, or realms of existence). These are the heavenly, human, animal and spirit or ghost worlds espoused in Brahminical scriptures. According to this belief, a person may be born into one of these worlds based on her or his past accumulated karma (Pāli: kamma). Wholesome karma or deeds accumulated in one's present life would ensure a favourable rebirth in either the heavenly or human realm. On the other hand, unwholesome karma, would cause a person to be reborn in a woeful loka such as the animal, ghost, or spirit worlds. The Brahmanical beliefs of karma and rebirth were subsequently refined by the Buddha, upon attaining Supreme Self-enlightenment or Buddhahood. The critical condition of volition was underlined in the Law of Karma the Buddha taught. That is to say, one reaps the consequence of one's wholesome and unwholesome thoughts, speech and volitional actions as one journeys in samsara.

While on the subject of the svastika, it merits highlighting as a cautionary note, the exploitation of symbols and symbolism for dubious ends. One of the most despicable episodes in human history was the surreptitious exploitation of the much venerated svastika symbol by Adolf Hitler as a political tool to serve his ambition for power and conquest. Through various dubious means, he corrupted the meaning and purpose of the auspicious svastika symbol. By distorting its true meaning and purpose and via other devious devices, he succeeded in whipping-up a heinous political ideology anchored on the concept of Germans as hailing

SYMBOLS and SYMBOLISM: Embrace Multiculturalism from an Aryan super-race.

Hitler embedded the bigoted belief deep in the minds of Germans, through his masterful propaganda machinery which eventually enabled him to achieve his ulterior objective of wresting absolute political power. The svastika, spelt in German as swastika was adopted with a slight modification as the symbol of the Nazi Party of Germany which he led. Subsequently, as the unchallenged supreme leader of the country, he incorporated the swastika in the redesigned German national flag. He then progressively harnessed the swastika as a rallying symbol of the terrifying fascist Nazi regime that was responsible for the horrific deaths and destructions of World War II.



The tilted Nazi Swastika Flag

Through the propaganda machinery that he unleashed, Hitler promoted the swastika as a symbol of his much-vaunted concept of a superior German race. The symbol of the swastika was employed as a powerful evocative tool to stir chauvinism, racism and blind nationalism among his countrymen. The German masses were misled into believing the despicable concept of their racial purity in being

the idolised Aryan super race. Germans from all levels of society, ages and gender were indoctrinated to trust in their predestined ethnic superiority. They were continuously brainwashed into believing that they were the master race: the anointed ones destined to assert Germany's supremacy over the whole world.

The irony, and indeed an important lesson of the masterful mass mesmerisation of Germans that should not be remiss in highlighting, is that, Hitler was such a poor specimen of the bigoted Aryan profiling that he propagandized.



Portrait of Hitler

He could hardly qualify as a muscular macho man that his propaganda machinery had churned out to brainwash Germans of their predestined Aryan racial superiority. He was short and physically small built in comparison to the broad shouldered typical Aryan stock. Furthermore, his hair was black and so was the little moustache he sprouted. These

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personal features were more akin to a Semitic profile which ironically his propaganda machinery castigated than the ideal of a blond haired well-built Aryan.

Notwithstanding the incongruities in respect to his own physical profile, through the masterful sinister exploitation of the swastika and by various means of mass psychology and invocation of chauvinism; Hitler succeeded in galvanising Germans to support his monstrous racist campaign of an invincible German super-race. His vile political goal was further reinforced by his fiendish ideology of anti-Semitism that called for the horrifying extermination of millions of Jews. Yet, ironically he himself bore a Jewish lineage. Such was the mass hysteria that Hitler was able to whip up by means of his devilish exploitation of the swastika symbol which came to be synonymous with the monstrous myth of an invincible Germany.

As a consequence of Hitler's sinister manipulation and exploitation of the swastika, the centuries-old symbol of auspiciousness, benevolence and wellbeing was reduced to an insignia of notoriety. Thus the once auspicious svastika symbol became associated with the abhorrent concept of Nazism that spawned hate, violence and wanton destruction of human life and property, never before witnessed in the history of humankind. This appalling chapter in human history of the devious exploitation of a symbol should compel us to never again ever allow a similar repetition in the future.

In most religions, symbols and symbolism are commonly

intertwined with religious rites and rituals. The motive is primarily to attach sanctity to the many ceremonies and conventional religious practices devotees observe. Often this is resorted to in order to encourage ready acceptance and devout observance of secular practices by followers. In the process, many originally cultural, sociological and even personal health-related practices became reinforced through some form of religious sanction and/or obligation via symbols and symbolism. That is why we find many social and cultural practices being sanctified through religion via symbols and symbolism.

Outward trappings of a religion expressed by way of symbols and symbolisms are in order. However, it is important to ensure that the substance of the religion is not compromised, misunderstood, or worse still, misrepresented for narrow self-serving ends. As a general maxim, a right understanding and practice of religious teachings should prevail and the correct understanding and use of symbolic forms and symbolism should be well established.

A symbolism that is commonly observed in most religions is cleansing of one's body before performing prayers or observing a religious obligation. The modern-day practice of washing one's feet, face and hands before entering a place of worship such as a temple or mosque is to be viewed as a symbolism of ablution. Such symbolic acts of physical cleanliness are to be taken as acts of ritualistic spiritual purifications by devotees. It is noteworthy that in most religions, water is commonly used in association with rituals. The origin of the symbolism of seeking inner spiritual pu-

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rification with water may be traced to the ancient religious practice of devotees having to observe a ritual of spiritual cleansing by bathing in a river.

In early Christianity, the practice of religious purification by immersing oneself ritualistically in a river was a popular belief, referred to as baptism. A significant religious reference point is the baptism of Jesus, by being immersed in the river, that was ministered by John the Baptist. The practice of baptism is still observed by Christians, particularly among Catholics, in a modified form, instead of the original practice of immersing oneself in a river or stream.



Acting scene of Jesus being baptised by John the Baptist

In Brahmanism too having a spiritual bath or ritually bathing in a river, referred to as tirtha, constitutes an important feature of the religion. Brahmin priests vouched that should a person commit pāpa karma (wrong or evil deed), the resulting vipāka karma (negative consequence), could be

washed away by observing tirtha. The symbolism of washing away in a river of one's sins or wrongdoings readily appealed to the masses. The religious concept was simple and the act of ablution easy to comply with.

The ritual of freeing oneself of defilements by having a symbolic spiritual cleansing remains an entrenched practice among Hindus to this day. In India, the ritual is practiced annually on a massive scale during certain religious festivals such as the annual Kumbha Mela. The mass religious observance takes place on the banks of the Ganges, which is held as the holiest of rivers by Hindus, for performing spiritual cleansing.



Naked ascetics participating in the Kumbha Mela

In the same spirit of invoking a spiritual aura, in many religions, followers are encouraged to dress in white to symbolise purity when observing important religious practices. Through centuries of conditioning of the human mind, white is associated symbolically with spiritual virtues of

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purity, sacredness, wholesomeness in faith and other positive notions of human values. So much so that lies are even justified as white if it is perceived to be for a good cause!

The wholly positive mind set towards white has been promoted symbolically in a number of religions. Followers are encouraged to don white clothes when they visit places of worship or participate in major religious activities. For instance, it is mandatory for a Muslim male to wear a white robe, in a similar fashion as a Buddhist monk dons a saffron robe, when performing a haj or umrah pilgrimage to Mecca. Female Muslim devotees likewise are fully clothed in white.



Malaysian Prime Minister and wife performing Umrah

It is a practice for Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras to don simple white attire when observing Eight Precepts (a religious regime of self-abstinence and self-restraint placed at a higher bar for lay followers than the daily observance of the five precepts), in a vihāra or when they follow a med-

itation retreat aimed at cultivating a wholesome mental culture by purifying the mind.



**Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras observing
Eight Precepts**

Rather interestingly, in contrast to the positive spiritual nuance attributed to white, the human mind has been conditioned to perceive black as symbolising unfortunate forebodings of inauspiciousness such as a death and of evil. The negative mental conditioning towards black has manifested in the coinage for example of English words that render black a wholly unfavourable connotation. Idioms such as black magic, black money, black market, black heart, Black Monday and so on have become everyday parlance. This entrenched symbolism stems from the deep-seated notion of bestowing white with the credence of purity and auspiciousness while stigmatising black as evil, misfortune and other negative representations. This brings to mind a rather

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intriguing observation: Could it be that a deeper symbolism is established in the convention for a bride being dressed in white and the groom in a black suit?

As we continue discussing the symbolism of colours, it is interesting to note that red symbolically has a rather ambiguous connotation. The dualism associated with red is evident in the Western world where it symbolises diametrically opposite values. There appears no clear-cut rationale for the Western world's ambiguity over the symbolism of red. It signals danger and avoiding harmful things as well as positive emotions such as vitality, love, passion, power and energy which is derived from the symbolism of the powerful super red-hot sun.

When viewed from a modern perspective, however, red is more widely associated with acts or things that are prohibited, or dangerous, or wrong to commit. Often we note red being linked to danger as it is the standard colour for danger-signboards and warning notices. We have a red light to signal traffic to come to a halt. Mistakes, debits, losses in accounting and errors in schoolwork are generally recorded in red. The conventional red card is used to flag down foul play in soccer and other sports; a red letter or notice is issued as a final warning; the red light district refers to trade in prostitution, and red tape is an idiom for excessive officialdom and so on.

It appears that in Eastern civilization and culture, red enjoys a distinctive profile of high esteem. In sharp contrast to

the common negative undertone often associated with red in the Western world, according to Asian thinking and values, red is distinctively associated with prosperity, happiness, festivity, good fortune and a number of other positive sentiments. This is markedly evidenced in Chinese culture and tradition where red is customarily associated with ushering in good fortune, joyous celebration, prosperity, festivity and all that is considered favourable or auspicious. One can witness lavish display of red during Gong Xi Fa Cai (Chinese Luna New Year) festivities where families make it a point to don red-clothes, offer Ang Paws (red-packets containing money), to family members and well-wishers, light up red lanterns and burn trails of fire crackers wrapped in red paper.



Malaysian Prime Minister and cabinet colleagues and wives celebrating Gong Xi Fa Cai

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Welcoming Chinese New Year with rich display of red

Above all, red represents a most appropriate symbolism for kinship among all human beings. It is a universal truth that irrespective of our pigmentation, ethnicity, gender, social status, or religious beliefs, all of us bleed red. The red in our blood streams should move us to embrace the Buddha's teaching of universal kinship. This ideal is underlined in His teaching of samagga (fostering of kinship among all living beings), that all human beings should accept and respect each other as kinswomen and kinsmen.

The teaching urges us to be ever mindful that we should nurture a mental culture of samagga, based on the reality that human beings belong to a single species. This is the human race. As members of one large inter-connected family, we should accordingly welcome and respect each other as

kith and kin. The Buddha went a step further to stress that we should also include animals, insects and all other living creatures in developing the wholesome mental culture of samagga. He stressed that they too bleed red and just like human beings, they too do not wish to be hurt, much less to be mercilessly killed. Just as we treasure our lives, we should respect and safeguard the life of all living beings. It will be a great leap forward for multiculturalism, pluralism, inter-religious understanding, harmony and peace in the much troubled world we live in today, if we were to nurture samagga, symbolised by red, and live as a noble, enlightened, caring harmonious human race.

An important feature of symbols and symbolism is their linkage with rites and rituals that lend religious sanctions to their use. Often times this is used to command blind allegiance from followers to scrupulously observe without question. Such a usage of symbols and symbolism also serve as an effective means of enforcing practical mundane measures that conduce to one's wellbeing. Purely by way of illustrating the point, certain mundane practices that are deemed necessary or appropriate to healthy living are overlaid with an aura of religious sanctity through association with a symbol or symbolism. The expectation is that followers would then conform unquestioningly in the belief that the practice is a religious dictate. This is largely because the actual mundane practical purpose may well extend beyond the intellectual grasp particularly among the ordinary masses.

A good example of such symbolic practices is male circum-

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cision. Historically, culturally and sociologically circumcision was born out of a practical reason among people in West Asia in having to live in the desert. Through experience, they came to know the high propensity for bacteria to form and infest under the foreskin of the penis, especially in the severe arid conditions they perforce live. Given the scarcity of water in the desert, it was difficult to keep their private part clean, resulting in the neglect of hygiene and consequently a serious health hazard to males. In order to ensure personal hygiene is observed, circumcision was decreed a mandatory religious practice for followers to piously abide as an article of faith.

In terms of chronology, circumcision was practised by Jews since many centuries ago. Those of the Muslim faith adopted circumcision as a mandatory religious requirement when they reach the age of twelve. Nowadays, many males of different faiths are circumcised, purely to ensure good personal hygiene without any religious connotation attached. In fact, many knowledgeable parents get their sons circumcised in the hospital soon after birth without even a hint of religious compulsion, but out of consideration of personal hygiene. This is done without any religious association because the procedure is less painful when carried out at infancy. Furthermore, to do so in a hospital is clinically hygienic and far safer.

The historical fact is that circumcision had been followed by the Semitic peoples since ancient times, long before it was dictated as mandatory in Judaism and Islam. Since this preventive measure in personal hygiene was optional, not

everyone observed the practice, though it was sound advice. By injecting a religious aura into the practice of hygiene and elevating it as a mandatory religious obligation, followers simply conformed to the religious dictate of undergoing circumcision unquestioningly, as if it is a religious obligation.

For much the same reason, religious sanctification was introduced to ensure that proper personal hygiene is observed by mandating Muslims to cleanse their private parts and recite a holy verse upon relieving their bladder. This was to ensure that they regularly washed their penis, notwithstanding the difficulty of obtaining water in the desert regions. Over the years these two practices, based on good personal hygiene, have become an integral part of Islam by arrogating to the acts a compulsory symbolism of religious conformity.

Many symbols used and symbolism practiced such as venerating the sacred Bodhi Tree which is entrenched in the Buddha Dhamma, (the subject is dealt with comprehensively in chapter six), are connected with elements or aspects of Nature that we need to respect. Regardless of the differences in our culture or religion, they offer important lessons in life which we should draw and benefit from. This would profoundly help to enhance, among peoples around the world, a better understanding and appreciation of their inter-connected and inter-dependent relationship with Nature.

We can confidently envisage that through a process of ac-

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culturation, fellow human beings would become conscious of the vital importance of their natural environment. In turn, this would invariably engender greater mindfulness that we are all inextricably intertwined with and are dependent on Nature for our very existence. An ingrained awareness would impel the imperative to protect and safeguard Nature. Viewed from this perspective, the symbol of the Bodhi Tree and the practice of duly respecting it as an integral of Nature and human existence is pertinent. This would greatly boost the cultivation of a universal consciousness towards sustainable development that the international community desperately needs.

We have noted that propagation of a right understanding and appreciation of symbols and symbolism can impact positively on contemporary society. The embrace of pluralism, multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding therefore constitutes a critical responsibility for leaders from all sections of society to adhere and promote earnestly. They may respond positively to this urgent global imperative in order to secure a progressive, harmonious and peaceful planet Earth for the benefit of all humankind for generations to come. While firmly rejecting the negative forces of hate, prejudice, bigotry and unfounded evil dogmas, leaders may promote positive human values such as samagga, kalyana mittra, Brahama Vihara and skilful practice of bhāvanā (cultivation of a wholesome mental culture) as a common noble heritage of humankind. Likewise they may promote values of diversity, pluralism, liberty, intellectual freedom and integrity among all peoples for a sustainable, peaceful and harmonious world for humanity.

CHAPTER II

Application of Symbols and Symbolism

Symbols and symbolism serve to steer societies along a wholesome path when used with right understanding and wise application. But as we noted in the preceding chapter, they are undermined by prejudices, biases, misinformation and disinformation. This fans erroneous thinking and misguided perceptions as to their significance and usage. Ever so often, we witness acts against symbols and symbolism being committed blatantly and ruthlessly that result in serious bloody conflicts. This precarious trend is frightfully alarming as evidenced in many climes. Failure on the part of leaders to address this challenge poses a serious threat to global peace and harmony.

The world can ill risk an escalation of the wanton destructions of civilizational heritages of sacred religious monuments, places of worship, and cultural and religious edifices. It is rather unfortunate that the promotion of multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding are merely talked about than readily carried out. Though it is a daunting task, prejudices and biases against symbols and symbolism ought to be addressed forthwith by leaders from all sections of society. A fundamental requisite is to remove misconceptions, misinterpretations, misinformation and disinformation regarding symbols and symbolism. At the same time, a global program to foster greater understanding and respect for them in different cultural and religious heritages

SYMBOLS and SYMBOLISM: Embrace Multiculturalism and practices may be launched by world leaders.

It is to be noted that the onus to actualize the illusive global harmony and peace humankind earnestly yearns, rests squarely on the shoulders of leaders from all sections of society and not just the government and political leaders of a country. The universal goals of mutual understanding, unconditional friendliness and goodwill are best achieved by way of example in thought, speech and actions. A good starting point is for leaders to encourage among their individual communities a right understanding and appreciation of symbols and symbolism. They may themselves nurture a culture of embracing symbols and symbolism as a common heritage of humankind, regardless of cultural, religious, political and other differences. Their self-example would go a long way to acculturate their communities to readily embrace the noble ethos of pluralism, diversity, multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding and harmony.

Just as in ancient times, in the modern world too, extensive use of symbols and symbolism is evidenced, in varying degrees of emphasis from country to country, particularly in the political, religious and cultural fields. In the political domain, three principal objectives which symbols and symbolism aim to foster are recognised. They may be summed up as the inculcation of a strong sense of patriotism among citizens, entrenchment of a national ethos and infusion of a distinctive national political, social, cultural, and in some cases, a religious identity as well.

Political objectives are clearly demonstrated in the efforts by leaders to encourage citizens to honour and love their

national symbols with a sense of patriotic pride and passion. A country's efforts to promote respect for the national emblem, national flag, national flower, national animal, national tree, national bird and other symbols associated with the country with gusto, fall into this common political objective of generating a strong nationalistic impulse among citizens.

An excellent illustration is the Indian experience of nationhood. A number of key features of the Indian national emblem, the national flag and several other national symbols demonstrate the use of symbols and symbolism in its nation building efforts, upon achieving independence from British colonial rule on August 15th 1947. A peek into the national symbols of the country would bear out the underlying objective of strengthening a nationalistic spirit by imbuing, among her citizens, noble concepts and high ideals in Indian thought, culture, civilization and history.

An understanding of the thinking and motivation behind the adoption of India's national symbols would also reveal an underlying goal to rejuvenate and preserve the rich civilization and cultural heritage which the Buddha Dhamma had bequeathed. A pertinent fact that needs to be given due cognisance is that India's two paramount national symbols, namely the national emblem and the national flag, were designated by Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. He is credited to have also designated the symbol of the lotus as India's national flower and the Pipal tree or the Sacred Bodhi Tree as the national tree, by harking back to the country's rich heritage of the Buddha Dhamma.

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Driven by the same spiritual inspiration evoked by the Buddha Dhamma, Dr. Ambedkar designated the Barat Ratna as the nation's most prestigious award for selfless service. The term is derived from the concept of the Ti-ratna. Ratna which means a precious gem or jewel is also a personal name that is popular among followers of the Buddha Dhamma. In combination with a prefix or suffix, it forms other proper names such as Priyaratna, Premaratna, Ratnasara and Ratnadevi and so on. Names bearing ratna extol the Buddha's teachings on virtuous living and of excellence in endeavours and selfless service which the distinguished Barat Ratna award signifies.

An insight into Dr. Ambedkar's motive and motivation in designating the key national symbols of India would help the reader to appreciate their profound significance of anchoring nation-building efforts on a platform of noble spiritual ethos. The account simultaneously sheds light on Dr. Ambedkar's momentous contributions to modern India and of his true significance as a world leader worthy of high honour and emulation.

Briefly, Dr. Ambedkar is venerated as the most renowned leader of Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras of modern India. In October 1956, upon publically declaring his faith in the Buddha Dhamma, he led a mass embrace of the religion by over 500,000 fellow low caste Indians across the country. This historic ceremony is referred to and celebrated annually as Dhammacakkra Parivata Dim (Day of Going for Refuge in the Buddha Dhamma). Dr. Ambedkar was thoroughly inspired by the perfect qualities of the Buddha and

in the sublimity of His Teaching which he emulated in daily life and benefited greatly. He drew great confidence from the noble character and magnificence of the Buddha and the profound rationalism and realism pervading the Dhamma He taught.

The designation of India's national symbols and Bharat Ratna award, reflects Dr. Ambedkar's patriotic insight and his vision of a truly independent India that he aspired to forge. His goal was to genuinely and faithfully serve the interest of his fellow Indians from all strata of society. A glimpse of the character and thinking of the illustrious leader is essential to better appreciate the symbols he designated as independent India's national ethos.

Dr. Ambedkar stands tall as an ardent advocate of multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding, harmony and peace which he endeavoured to promote through India's national symbols. He possessed a glorious vision of a modern India which was to embrace the true meaning of freedom for all its citizens, and not just for the privileged upper strata of society. He was weary of the entrenched political culture of elitism and the advancement of vested interests by the privileged in society. In particular, he abhorred the despicable discrimination and abject exploitation by the so-called higher castes and affluent sections of society of the downtrodden and greatly disadvantaged low caste communities.

Dr. Ambedkar was, however, a realist and not a wishful thinker. He understood that his noble vision of a truly demo-

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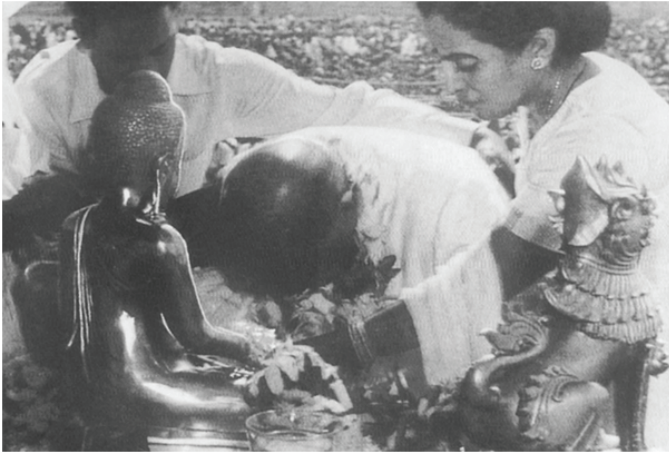
Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar



सत्यमेव जयते

**(Satyameva Jayata: Truth Always Triumphs)
The Indian National Emblem**

Chapter II : *Application of Symbols and Symbolism*

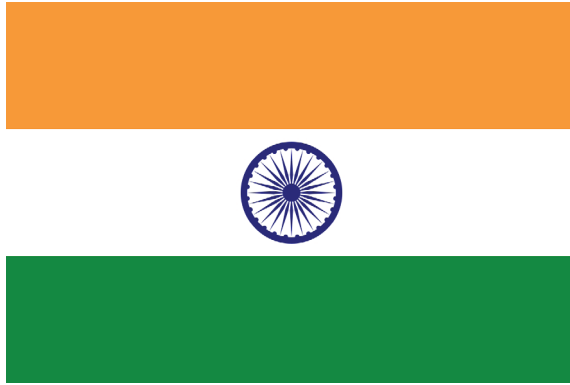


**Mass embrace of the Buddha Dhamma led by
Dr. Ambedkar**



**Dr. Ambedkar taking refuge in the Noble Triple Gem from
the Most Venerable U Chandramani of Kusunagar**

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The Tri-colour Indian National Flag

cratic India would not be realized easily. He was ever mindful that his ideals of justice, human dignity and human rights would encounter stout opposition from the firmly entrenched privileged and powerful vested interest groups in the country. He was not a naive leader who thought that his vision of a truly independent India which is steeped in freedom and genuinely embraces social, cultural, economic, educational and political maxims, based on the Buddha's Teaching would be achieved easily, much less overnight. Even so, he remained undaunted in his mission to forge a united India which is host to multiculturalism and pluralism the Self-enlightened One stressed.

India is indebted to Dr. Ambedkar for envisioning and promoting an enlightened national ethos of a modern independent nation steeped in freedom, democracy, egalitarianism and human rights which he tirelessly championed throughout his entire adult life. His remarkable achievements shine on to this day through the Indian Constitution of which he

was the principal architect. As the Father of the Constitution, his contribution to independent India is immense. The Indian Constitution he crafted embraces a visionary legal architecture, ethos and symbols and symbolism. It has indeed helped to preserve the highly diverse and complex country as a unitary nation state for well over two generations todate.

The historic Asoka Lion Capital which he designated as the national emblem is also the official seal of the Indian Government. It is based on the famous 3rd century BCE. Asoka Lion Capital Pillar which symbolises the Sublime Teaching and life ideals of the Buddha. It was erected at Isipatana (modern-day Saranath), by Emperor Asoka the Great of the Maurya Dynasty (268 to 232 BCE). This was to commemorate the spot where the Buddha expounded the Ultimate Truth underlining the Sublime Dhamma to His first five disciple monks.

The original pillar measuring 5 meters in height was crowned by the magnificent Lion Capital which represents a brilliant showcase of Mauryan sculpture. The well-polished sandstone Lion Capital measures 2.3 meters in height. It is composed of four stylised lions standing majestically back to back to each other on a circular abacus which is 0.3 meters high. Its circular base is embellished with carvings of four animals in running motion, namely an elephant, a galloping horse, a lion and a bull. Each is separated by an intervening Dhammacakka (Sanskrit Dhammachakra, Wheel of the Dhamma which symbolise the Buddha's timeless Teaching), of similar size resting over a large stylised bell-

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shaped lotus motif.

The elephant symbolises Prince Siddhartha's conception that was signalled by Queen Maha Maya Devi's wondrous dream of a white elephant holding a white lotus in its trunk and saluting her before entering her womb from the right side. The galloping horse represents Prince Siddhartha's renunciation of the palatial life as he rode away from the luxury-filled princely life on his favourite horse, Kanthaka. The lion represents, "The Lion's Roar", which epitomises the Buddha's Turning of the Wheel of the Dhamma and the courageous voice of the Buddha Dhamma. The bull represents His wondrous birth in the royal park in Lumbini.



The Asoka Lion Capital

The national emblem that was finally adopted in 1950 depicts four lions in a stylized motif with a fundamental teaching of the Buddha, “Satyameva Jayata” (Truth Always Triumphs), inscribed at the bottom. Since the insignia appears in a two-dimensional perspective in print, only three lions are visible and not four as appearing in the Asoka Lion Capital. The roaring lions facing the four cardinal directions symbolise the ideals of power, courage, pride and confidence.

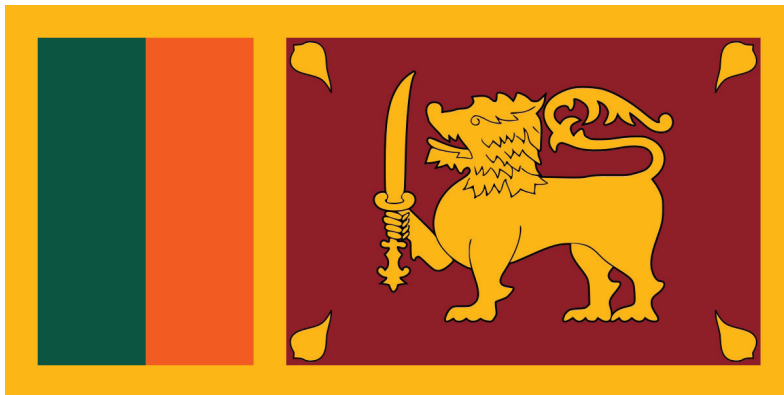
The choice of the stylized Asoka lions merits elaboration to capture the Indian spiritual and cultural heritage that Dr. Ambedkar strove to rejuvenate in independent India he envisioned. In Indian mythology and culture, the lion is associated with a number of esteemed qualities such as regal authority, courage, power and strength. In the context of the Buddha Dhamma, the lion is often used as a symbol of leadership and fearlessness. Hence, the metaphoric description used in the ancient scriptures to refer to the Buddha’s Teaching as, “The Lion’s Roar”. The object is to underline the supreme courage, confidence, power and strength that a follower may draw from practising the Sublime Dhamma. In the iconography of the Buddha Dhamma, the lion is thus endowed with regal standing and held as the fearless protector of the religion. The majestic lion is also proudly held in the highest esteem as the personification of loyalty and honour.

As in a number of other civilizations and cultures another interesting illustration of the eminent status that the lion symbol commands in the psyche of a people is to be found

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in neighbouring Sri Lanka. The island-nation, which has been the repository and disseminator of the Buddha Dhamma for over 2,000 years, also chose a stylised lion as the central motif of its national flag. Aside from the consideration of the qualities personified in the symbol of the lion, the regal animal occupies a very special place in the psyche of the Sinhalese.

According to the traditional history of the island, which is understandably embellished with myths and legends, the genesis of the Sinhalese is traced to Prince Vijaya who hailed from the Kingdom of Singapura (Kingdom of the Lion Race), located in present-day Bengal. It is believed that he migrated southwards along with his retinue to the island of Sri Lanka in the 6th century BCE. This historical migration forms the rationale for conceiving the Sinhalese as hailing from a courageous lion race. Over the centuries, the consciousness of a glorious lion-lineage became ingrained



National Flag of Sri Lanka

in the minds and hearts of Sinhalese rulers and their subjects. Upon achieving independence from Britain in 1948, the founding fathers felt it only fitting that the lion symbol should represent the identity of the island-nation.

Reverting to the Asoka Lion Capital insignia, it would be worthwhile to briefly examine how it came into being, following the dramatic spiritual transformation of Emperor Asoka the Great after his victory against the powerful Kingdom of Kalinga. Through a series of territorial conquests Emperor Asoka succeeded in creating a vast empire. He became easily one of the greatest rulers in Indian history. It is of great significance, especially in the context of good governance to note that this accolade is accorded not because of the many military conquests and the unprecedented territorial expansion of his Empire. More importantly, the singular honour is accorded for the spiritual transformation and accompanying benevolence the Emperor brought to bear on his subjects.

Though victorious in the war against the powerful Kingdom of Kalinga, Emperor Asoka was overwhelmed by a deep sense of remorse over the death of thousands of men, women and innocent children. The gross sufferings he had committed as a result of the carnage of precious human lives triggered a dramatic impulse to redeem himself of the horrifying episode.

Upon learning the Buddha Dhamma from a samanera (novice monk), at that poignant moment, a profound transformation in Emperor Asoka's thinking, attitude and character

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ensued. The spiritual uplift he experienced led to a pious embrace of the Buddha's Teaching, that left an indelible imprint, that places him as amongst the greatest monarchs known in history. Two specific aspects of his rule that propelled him to the vista of greatness deserve elaboration. The first is his superb record of good governance based on the Teaching of the Buddha. The second is his zealous patronage of the Buddha Dhamma.

In embracing the Buddha Dhamma, a profound sense of compassion engulfed Emperor Asoka. This manifested, among other developments, in a benevolent governance of his Empire. He was initially nicknamed Chandasoka (cruel, wicked, much feared Asoka), because of the ruthless territorial conquests he launched against neighbouring kingdoms. The polity of ruthless territorial expansion and quest for power was based on the entrenched traditional Indian political ethos of Digvijaya, or territorial conquest through military campaigns. His transformation into becoming a compassionate, benevolent and righteous Emperor rendered him a much revered ruler that earned him the glorious epithet of Devanampiya (Beloved of the celestial Devas) Dhammasoka (Righteous Asoka).

Emperor Asoka's embrace of the Buddha Dhamma set forth a humanistic culture in the administration of his vast Empire. As opposed to the Indian political philosophy of Digvijaya, he governed his subjects in accordance with the Buddha's Noble Teaching of Dhamma Vijaya (Victory of the Dhamma or Victory of Righteousness). Kudos is due for the distinctively humane policies he initiated, based on

the Buddha's Teaching of unconditional friendliness, goodwill, understanding and peace among his multi-ethnic and multi-religious subjects. The profound changes in government and administration included reformation of administrative and judicial systems to function in consonance with a humane, compassionate and benevolent apparatus of statecraft.

Inspired by the wisdom underlining the Buddha's Sublime Teaching, Emperor Dhammasoka extended deep compassion to animals and other creatures. His heart-filled compassion led him to build veterinary hospitals and clinics throughout his far-flung Empire. He also promulgated rules and regulations which ensured respect for and protection of animal life and safeguard of their welfare. In addition, he promoted the protection of flora, in particular the cultivation of herbal plants and trees for their medicinal properties.

An equally impactful and enduring noble legacy of Emperor Asoka was his commitment to spread the Buddha Dhamma. Driven by his devoutness, the Emperor became the greatest patron of the religion. Under his royal patronage, the Third Council of the Buddha Dhamma was held in the capital city of Pataliputra (present-day Patna), aimed at safeguarding the unity of the Sangha Order (Order of monks and nuns) and to spread the Buddha Dhamma. Emperor Asoka not only saw to the spread of the religion across his vast empire but also beyond the shores of India by encouraging monks, well established in the Buddha Dhamma, "To go forth". His Dhammaduta (Envoy of the Dhamma), commitment was carried out in keeping with the Blessed One's exhortation,

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to spread the religion in all directions. The most successful of the many Dhammaduta missions he initiated was the one dispatched to Sri Lanka, headed by his son, Arahant Mahinda. It resulted in the dramatic spread of the Buddha Dhamma in the Island.

It is significant to note that the all-powerful Emperor Asoka accomplished the widespread propagation of the Buddha Dhamma without any ill will, antagonism or intimidation whatsoever against other religions. In keeping with the abiding spirit of the Buddha Dhamma of being a gentle humane religion, his Dhammaduta efforts were carried out without any prejudice or discrimination towards other religions, but in a peaceful, unthreatening fashion. His missionary zeal contrasts markedly with the forced and unethical conversions perpetrated by other rulers and religious leaders over the centuries.

Emperor Asoka stands out as an illustrious epitome of inter-religious understanding, harmony and peace worthy of emulation by all leaders. His glorious rule which was richly laced with mettā, karuna, muditha and upekkhā, stands out as one of the most inspiring legacies of Indian history, civilization and culture and indeed of the world. The magnificent stone edicts which the Emperor erected across his vast empire along with the lion-capped stone pillars symbolise the Buddha's teaching of unconditional benevolence, regardless of differences in religious beliefs, and of good governance. They stand as glorious testimonies of Emperor Dhammasoka's commitment to embrace the teachings of the Exalted One on sagacious leadership and of upholding

the cardinal principle of righteousness in conducting statecraft. The Dasa Raja Dhamma or Ten Cardinal Principles of Good Governance that the Buddha taught and which Emperor Dhammasoka scrupulously followed, both in its letter and spirit, is highly applicable and commended in modern times.

The self-example of Emperor Dhammasoka is contextual to the global imperative for the international community to embrace multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding and harmony. World leaders may embark on this as a sacred universal ethos to be conscientiously honoured, safeguarded and cultivated across all sections of society. It is very much regretted that in contemporary times, all manner and form of unethical conversions are being unleashed in many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, particularly targeting the underprivileged, disadvantaged and marginalised communities. Such activities would inevitably lead to serious conflicts. Religious leaders may sagaciously take a leaf from Emperor Dhammasoka's spiritual uplift and refrain from unethical propagation of their religion. Our world would then be assured of far greater understanding, goodwill, inter-religious harmony and peace.

From its very beginning and right throughout its rapid spread across India, the Buddha Dhamma has been a multi-ethnic religion. A number of the Arahant Disciples of the Blessed One were renowned Brahmin priests or prominent followers of other religions such as Jainism who embraced the Buddha Dhamma without any coercion or enticement. Dr. Ambedkar was inspired by these ennobling characteris-

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tics of the history and teachings in the Buddha Dhamma. He wished to perpetuate the ethos of multiculturalism and the celebration of religious diversity, symbolised in the Asoka Lion Capital by promoting the glorious legacy of the Buddha Dhamma as an integral of independent India's ethos.

With this underlying noble objective in mind Dr. Ambedkar also strove to implant the Asokan Lion Capital as a proud testimony of newly independent India's steadfast commitment to international understanding and world peace. The Lion Capital national emblem symbolises India's firm resolve to uphold the universal principles of mutual respect, understanding and goodwill in the conduct of international relations among the global community of nations as well. This noble political philosophy is based on the Buddha's teaching of samagga which Dr. Ambedkar ardently believed and staunchly advocated. The concept is premised on the Teaching of the Buddha that all human beings are related to one another as they journey in samsāra – the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. This teaching also greatly inspired Dr. Ambedkar as an apt antidote to the inhuman discrimination against the downtrodden low caste communities that was all pervasive in Indian society.

Based on the Buddha's noble teaching of samagga, Dr. Ambedkar envisioned that Indians all across the country should regard each other as well as peoples from other lands as kinfolks. He was convinced that not only India, but the whole world, would be harmonious and peaceful if people were to embrace the Buddha's Sublime Teaching. For in essence the Dhamma encompasses universal ide-

als of unconditional friendliness, compassion, kinship and boundless goodwill as symbolised in the national emblem of the Asoka Lion Capital.

Viewed from a historical perspective, the symbol of the Asoka Lion Capital signifies the assimilation of various cultural practices that characterise the diverse heritage of the Buddha Dhamma which greatly enriched Indian civilization and culture. The unique Buddha Dhamma heritage was facilitated by two factors. The first was the unification of the sub-continent under Emperor Dhammasoka. The second was the burst of spiritual and cultural renaissance which he set forth through his patronage of the Buddha Dhamma. This witnessed a flowering of cultural and creative elements throughout the Indian sub-continent and beyond its shores, in particular in the Southeast and Northeast Asian regions where the Buddha Dhamma spread.

The royal patronages extended to the Buddha Dhamma by subsequent Indian kings, especially Emperor Kaniska of the Kushan dynasty, in the 1st century CE. further reinforced the Buddha Dhamma heritage of India. The support extended by the Gupta and Pala rulers in the 5th and 6th centuries respectively, also appreciably contributed to the steady spread of the Buddha Dhamma and its cultural and creative wellsprings across the Indian sub-continent and to other regions in Asia. The devout commitment of Indian rulers towards promoting the Buddha Dhamma led to the further consolidation and expansion of the religion and its civilization across Asia. The underlying feature to note here is that all of this was accomplished in the same peaceful,

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compassion-filled unthreatening manner, without conflict nor the spilling of even a single drop of blood in the name of the Buddha Dhamma.

The ardent royal patronages of the Buddha Dhamma in India spawned great centres of education such as the highly reputable universities of Taxila, Nalanda, Odantapuri and Vikramashila. These ancient fountains of scholarship served to stimulate the assimilation of diverse ethnic and cultural elements in the Indian sub-continent. Overseas, in Southeast Asia especially, so dominant was the Indian cultural, religious and commercial influence which rode on the crest of the Buddha Dhamma and Hinduism, that led historians to describe the region, in this period as Indianised States or Greater India.

Just as in the case of the national emblem, the national flag which flutters atop governmental buildings and institutions across the nation, holds profound meaning and significance in keeping with Dr. Ambedkar's vision of India's national ethos. He was entrusted, by Prime Minister Nehru, to design the national flag, along with other members of the Select Committee under his chairmanship. In similar fashion as the national emblem, the national flag exemplifies a number of noble tenets in the Buddha Dhamma that had stirred Dr. Ambedkar from a youthful age. These are expressed through the symbol of the Dhammacakka and the colours that adorned the national flag. The Dhammacakka distinctively occupies the centre of the national flag, and rests upon the band of white which runs horizontally across it, along with a band of saffron above and another in green

right below it.

The spokes of the Dhammacakka signify that Independent India is to progress in all directions of national endeavour along the path of the Dhamma. The Dhammacakka behoves upon Indians to be morally and ethically righteous. It serves as a guide for them to adopt a way of life that is governed by the Noble Eightfold Path, namely: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

Insight into the concept and significance of the Dhammacakka (which is elaborated in Chapter IV), provides an understanding and appreciation of the symbol as representing India's political, moral, ethical and spiritual ethos. its meaning and significance. For now, it would suffice to note that the Dhammacakka symbol embodies the Teachings of the Buddha such as the fundamental Truth of annicā (impermanence), of constant and unpredictable change of all life and matter, which He consistently stressed. Dr. Ambedkar aimed to imbue this universal reality in the mind set of his fellow countrymen, in order to urge them to advance as a nation in accordance with the Truth of the timeless Dhamma. He aspired to fortify independent India with śraddhā in the Buddha Dhamma that is to be rooted in Right Understanding of the universal realities of life and Nature all around.

Dr. Ambedkar envisaged that the ideal of righteousness which the Dhammacakka extols is to be fervently pursued

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in all areas and aspects of statecraft. That is to say, the ideal is to be observed not only in respect to domestic affairs of the country, but also with regards to the conduct of diplomacy and India's international relations as a responsible and active member of the global community of nations. He envisioned that at the international stage, the noble ideals symbolically encapsulated in the national emblem and national flag should be upheld as the overarching framework of India's foreign policy. Only then would India be truly independent and stand tall in the world as a champion of human dignity, justice and universal peace. Thus the Buddha's teaching of Righteousness in thought, speech and action forms the underlying basis for India's adoption of the principles of Pancha Sīla in conducting its international relations. Similarly, this rationale underpins India's foreign policy stance of adopting Non-alignment as a cornerstone of the country's diplomacy since independence.

Dr. Ambedkar endeavoured to promote India's identity as irreversibly linked to the glorious history and culture of the Buddha Dhamma. His efforts to reclaim independent India's profile as Buddha Bumi (the Land of the Buddha), by reviving the country's glorious Buddha Dhamma heritage, however, have been neglected since he passed on. The present generation of Indians under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is presented with an opportunity to bring to fruition the goals of a truly independent, progressive and dynamic India which Dr. Ambedkar envisioned. The Indian Government is thus presented with an opportunity to actualize his ethos encapsulated in the national symbols he designated as hallmarks of India's rich spiritual, cultural and political legacy.

Chapter II : *Application of Symbols and Symbolism*

The three bands of colours which grace the national flag, namely saffron, white and green were deliberately chosen by Dr. Ambedkar. They are in sync with India's spiritual and cultural values and symbolise ideals that he held as worthy of emulation as national ethos. Saffron bears a prominent religious distinction in India. It is the colour of the garb worn by religious persons since ancient times. In keeping with this tradition, the cheevera or robe of the Buddha and the Order of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis were of the same hue.

Saffron denotes refrain from seeking only material gains and pandering to sensual pleasures in life. It urges Indians to live in accordance with the Noble Middle Path of balance, moderation and contentment. It also represents courage and sacrifice which the Buddha personified throughout His life. Every citizen is to aspire to emulate these ideals and render a positive contribution to nation building.

White signifies mental and spiritual purity that is to be attained by freeing the mind of kilesa or defilements of thoughts, speech and actions. It symbolises restraint from abusing or worse still, pandering to one's 'sense doors' that comprise the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, tactile senses, and most importantly, the mind. One is to conscientiously inculcate sīla or virtuous conduct which will help to ensure restraint in all aspect of life and abstain from doing things harmful to oneself, and possibly, to others as well.

The band of white in the national flag symbolises the Right Path for all Indians to tread in order to live success-

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ful, healthy, happy and peaceful lives. Dr. Ambedkar had in mind the Buddha's teaching of the Ultimate Universal Truth as a worthy pathway. White represents illumination by which the darkness of ignorance of the realities of life and Nature that binds us to the Samsaric Cycle of birth, death and re-birth are dispelled. Fellow Indians are to accordingly liberate themselves from the dark vail of ignorance.

The maxims in the Buddha Dhamma of purity and universal peace which white symbolises equally appealed to Dr. Ambedkar. He earnestly wanted fellow Indians to cherish these noble qualities, irrespective of their religious persuasion and social and cultural moorings. He envisioned that they would emulate through their thoughts, speech and actions the noble values which white extols as a symbol.

The band of green denotes the inextricably intertwined and interdependent relationship all living beings share with Mother Nature. It underlines the Buddha's Teaching that we are all part of Nature and that we need to respect this reality for the very survival of humankind. Dr. Ambedkar believed that this teaching of the Buddha should be instilled in Indian society as a matter of priority. Adherence of this teaching is indispensable to overcome environmental degradation and consequential climate change and the horrendous destruction of the eco-system.

Dr. Ambedkar foresaw the need to ensure moderation in life in keeping with the Blessed One's Teaching. He recognised the importance of eschewing the pursuit of crass materialism in order to ensure a healthy and sustainable eco-system.

He understood that by extension, this fundamental principle also applies to all fields of national endeavour. The band of green thus symbolises a national commitment to development and progress in ways that are in harmony with Mother Nature. It is meant to inject into the consciousness of Indians the importance of striking a healthy balance between socio-economic development and a sustainable ecology for the present generation and those who are yet to come.

This wholesome mental culture of moderation which is a cornerstone of the Buddha Dhamma is more relevant today than ever before in the history of India, and for that matter, that of the world. Environmental degradation that has exacerbated in recent years has reached a point where natural catastrophes are being unleashed all around the world by the day. Needless to say that if the greed-driven wanton rape of Nature is not arrested forthwith, this could very well spell the doom for all humankind, in the not too distant future.

In a nutshell, the foregoing narrative outlines some salient illustrations of the application of symbols and symbolism, in the context of daily life and in nation-building. These significant applications, pivoted on universally acceptable moral and ethical maxims, provide compelling reasons for leaders from all sections of society around the world to earnestly embrace multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding and harmony. This goal is to be pursued in the letter and spirit of samagga, in the overall interest of humankind.

CHAPTER III

MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF IMAGES

The making and honouring of images regrettably has been misunderstood and misinterpreted by bigoted religious ideologues with tragic results to human civilization. During the Crusades, for example, a great deal of religious images and places of worship were destroyed on both sides of the Christian-Muslim divide. Another glaring tragic episode was the reprehensible sacrilege inflicted on religious and cultural heritages of India by the Turkish and Moghul (Mughal) invaders, mainly from the 11th to the 16th century CE. The foreign invading armies waged a series of ruthless attacks against the states in North India with the avowed goal of spreading Islam by annihilating Hinduism and other religions. This resulted in the mutilation and obliteration of temples, vihāras, monasteries and religious images of these religions.

However, not all Moghul rulers were guilty of sacrilege and the desecration of images and places of worship of other religions. Emperor Akbar, was an outstanding Moghul ruler who practiced understanding, tolerance, moderation and inclusiveness of culture and religion. One of his principal consorts was a devout Hindu and there were even Hindu shrines within the precincts of his royal palace. He also promoted the fusion of Islam and Hinduism as a cornerstone of statecraft.

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A particularly horrific episode of vandalism in India was the trail of destruction by Turkish invaders led by Bakhtiyar Khilji which saw the demolition of the world-renowned, Nalanda University, that resulted in an irreplaceable loss for humankind. The episode of brutal desecrations saw the dismemberment of images of the Buddha and His Arahant disciples and the burning of treasured manuscripts and sacred text of the Buddha Dhamma. These included precious scriptures, treatises, historical records and vast collections of ecclesiastical and literary works that were housed in the libraries and faculties of the sprawling ancient university complex. It is recorded that it took several days for the Sultan's rampaging forces to reduce to ashes Nalanda's priceless intellectual and spiritual heritage. This is not to speak of the ruthless killing of thousands of scholar bhikkhus and bhikkhunis as well as large populations of pious scholarly Buddha Dhamma devotees, their Hindu and Jain counterparts and thousands of their lay followers.



Ruins of the ancient Nalanda University

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Sacred places and items of worship associated with the Buddha Dhamma were not the only religious targets singled out for destruction. The Sultan's marauding forces engaged in a ruthless campaign to obliterate Hindu deities and Jain images, especially of the latter's revered founder, Mahavira. These inhuman acts were perpetrated on the justification that the religious objects destroyed were manifestations of idol worship prohibited in Islam.

It is incompressible that in our advanced scientific and technological age, that religious images as well as monuments of sculptural, artistic, architectural and engineering excellence are being brutalised in the name of religion. Tragic episodes of desecration of not just religious images, but also the sacred places of worship such as churches, Hindu temples, vihāras, Jain shrines, mosques and Jewish synagogues persist. Today, even areligious purely historical and culturally steeped monuments and treasured historical images are being brutally vandalised and destroyed.

We are painfully reminded of the recent trail of demolition of the civilizational treasures in West Asia, especially of the over 2,000 years-old Temple of Bel, located in the ancient Syrian oasis city of Palmyra. These monuments are held as among the most glorious of civilizational heritages of humankind. The ignominious destruction of this UNESCO World Heritage Site, located northeast of Damascus and famously known as the, "Pearl of the Desert", stands as a testament as to how horribly destructive, misconception, disinformation and misinformation about images and civilizational heritages can be. The heart-breaking episode

of the ruthless destruction of the ancient monuments of Palmyra portends yet another spate of heinous destructions of centuries old priceless civilizational treasures in West Asia.

Justification for the terrible destruction of the images, monuments and entire heritage sites is that they are anchored on heathen practices of paganism and idol worship, which is anathema to Islam. This assertion is unfounded and needs to be disabused by all right thinking people. Further desecrations of precious heritages of humankind may be pre-empted by leaders through close concerted collaborative efforts to embrace multiculturalism.

In the interest of pluralism, inter-religious understanding, harmony and peace, a multi-pronged global strategy may be collectively formulated and implemented by religious and political leaders to protect and preserve humanity's diverse heritage. Measures can be taken immediately, at the national as well as international levels, to stem the sacrilege of cultural and religious monuments, images and precious heritage sites. It is quite obvious that avowed declarations by the United Nation and other world organisations as well as individual world leaders, about the importance of promoting and safeguarding multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding are simply not good enough. Much more can and indeed must be done to pre-empt the escalation of such misguided brutal sacrileges around the worlds.

Among other urgent measures urged upon leaders from all sections of society is the re-education of misguided memb-

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Ancient Palmyra Amphitheatre before destruction



Destruction of the Temple of Bel in Palmyra

Chapter III : *Meaning and Significance of Images*

ers in their individual communities on the right meaning and significance of images. They need to be disabused of the fallacies embedded in the misinformation and disinformation that they have been indoctrinated with by self-seeking vested interest groups. This urgent task should be carried out forthwith lest it becomes yet another failure on the part of world leaders of doing too little too late, or worse still, of not doing anything at all. Indeed, the threat to the destruction of rich civilizational heritages of humankind is very real. World leaders cannot allow this trend proving to be yet another disastrous fait accompli.

First and foremost, leaders at all levels of society may earnestly promote, and most importantly, demonstrably practise the embrace of multiculturalism and inter-religious dialogue, understanding and harmony among their respective communities. We are reminded that the Buddha had stressed that the most effective pedagogy to accomplish any



World cultural treasures of Palmyra being destroyed

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objective is by example. This truism in teaching and learning psychology is encapsulated in His maxim, “I teach what I practice and practice what I teach”, without any compromise or excuse.

As far as the Buddha Dhamma goes, nothing can be further from the allegation that the religion supports pagan practices or idol worship. Despite self-evident facts to the contrary, many professing other faiths question the purpose of having an image of the Buddha who had Passed Away centuries ago. They criticise, even condemn, the practice of devotees placing, “a lifeless replica of the Buddha”, in a vihāra, or at home on an altar and of venerating the Buddha. A right understanding and appreciation of the religious practice would help to reorientate misguided quarters of their grossly erroneous thinking and attitude. This would serve to remove the wrong thinking and views against images and symbols used in other religions as well.

A thorough understanding and appreciation of the true meaning and significance of the Buddha image warrants a comprehensive treatment of the relevant subject-matters. For the purpose of this introductory book, a broad coverage on some of the more salient aspects is endeavoured. In order to have a right perspective of the subject, it would be useful to firstly establish what exactly idol worship entails.

It is equally important to recognise what is not entailed in the practice of venerating the Buddha image that is often erroneously assumed by other religionists. This would bring into sharp focus the wrong perceptions held by misguided

persons regarding the practice of honouring the Buddha. At the same time, this would put an end to the lies that regrettably are being flaunted by narrow vested interest groups of labelling Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras as idol worshippers. The two pronged clarification is deemed essential to better comprehend as to what exactly the Buddha image represents and what is actually involved in the practice of venerating the Buddha.

By definition, idol worship means worshipping religious images or symbols taken as representation of gods and goddesses, or deities. In most religions, pleading for supplication from an Almighty External Being, for success, good health, happiness, wealth, peace, divine providence, protection from harm, forgiveness for sins and wrongdoings committed and so on, forms an essential religious practice. In the Abrahamic religions, this is usually accompanied by an earnest invocation of prayers and observance of some ritualistic act. Often the religious practice includes sacrificial offerings entailing the slaughter of animals along with other offerings as appeasement to an Almighty God or deity. These belief systems and their spiritual practices and expectations on the part of followers, most certainly, are not equivalent, but in fact are far removed, from the practice of venerating the Buddha image.

According to conventional Western definition as outlined in well established English dictionaries and encyclopedias, a religion has to have a Creator God-head or a Higher All Powerful Entity who is worshipped and to whom prayers are directed by followers for supplication, protection, for-

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givenness and other favours as practised in theistic religions. Significantly, unlike theistic religions, the Buddha Dhamma does not subscribe to the concept of an Almighty Omnipresent, Omnipotent and Omniscient Creator God. The Buddha in fact dismissed the belief of an Almighty Creator God. There is simply no basis whatsoever for followers of the Buddha Dhamma to pray for supplication to an all-powerful Creator God as practised in theistic religions. Going by these salient facts there is absolutely no grounds for followers of the Buddha Dhamma to be castigated as idol worshippers.

Furthermore, in the Buddha Dhamma, prayer is different from what is conceived among theistic faiths as a religious practice as this is based on an entirely different conceptual and spiritual plane. In theistic religions especially, prayers are resorted to for seeking the intervention and aid of an Almighty Creator God, or a deity to overcome challenges and hardships as well as to fulfil various mundane expectations in life. In contrast, the religious practice of prayers that is usually accompanied by various forms of sacrificial offerings as a means of seeking supplication, or of appeasing an all powerful God, has no locus place in the Buddha Dhamma.

As a matter of fact, prayer in the commonly accepted sense of the term is not an essential religious practice in the Buddha Dhamma; much less does prayer constitute a mandatory commitment for practising the religion. Rather, the emphasis is on the self-cultivation of a wholesome mental culture through daily skilful practice of virtuous thoughts, speech

and actions and the purification of the mind of de-filements through mindfulness meditation practice. The thrust is distinctly on self-responsibility, self-reliance, right thoughts and right effort and not on a dependency or surrender to an Almighty External Being. Devotees are to be self-reliant in the same way as the Buddha strove to attain Supreme Enlightenment through self-reliance and self effort.

Followers of the Buddha Dhamma are urged to be ever-mindful of the Buddha's Teaching which stresses that prayers per se, even if they are accompanied by however great sacrifices of animals, invocations, incantations and other rituals cannot bring about success, wellbeing, real lasting happiness and inner peace. It is through the cultivation of a wholesome mental culture aimed at purifying one's mind of kilasa or mental defilements that we are able to live a meaningful fulfilling life.

In the Buddha Dhamma, prayer is a skilful spiritual practice to awaken the mind to one's inherent latent capabilities of practising the Sublime Teaching of the Buddha such as mettā, karuna, muditha, upekkhā, sīla (virtuous conduct), samādhi (concentration) bhāvana (cultivation of a wholesome mental culture). It helps to condition the mind to focus on positive and wholesome thoughts and deeds that the prayers allude to. Prayer enables one to remove negative thoughts and mental defilements triggered by external stimuli, and simultaneously, forestall those that originate from within, from taking hold in one's mind and manifesting in unwholesome thoughts, speech or actions.

Prayer also helps to bring forth positive and wholesome

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thoughts and feelings towards oneself and to others. It helps to strengthen one's mindfulness such as on the realities of life and of Nature. It urges one to be introspective and to appreciate the blessings that one is fortunate to enjoy as a human being than if one were to be born in a lower realm of existence, such as in the animal, or spirit worlds. Thus in the Buddha Dhamma, resorting to pleas for supplication by an Almighty God out of fear, idolatry, superstition or expectation of worldly gains or any other expectation is discouraged. Prayer instead encourages followers to face problems, issues and challenges in life, by addressing them realistically and rationally with an awakened insightful mind, based on the Buddha's cardinal maxim of self-reliance and self-effort.

The cultivation of a wholesome mental culture which is the thrust of the Buddha Dhamma equips devotees to understand life's encounters rightly. This is because they are able to realise the meaning and purpose of life from a totally different perspective. They are able to recognise issues, problems and challenges with *paññā* (Insight or Transcendental Wisdom). This contrasts starkly to those who view them as something resulting from the Will of an Almighty God that can only be altered by resorting to unquestioning blind worship, prayers, invocations, sacrifices and other incantations.

Based on the Teaching of the Buddha, prayer helps to generate a calm, positive and peaceful mental state among followers. Through prayer devotees are able to keep their mind in the present moment and not allow it to drift to the past or into the future. They imbue a firm conviction and

confidence that this is the right way to live life meaningfully. With an awakened mind, they become mindful and alert to the Sublime Teaching of the Buddha and endeavour to live a wholesome purposeful life.

Another fundamental fact to be noted is that the Buddha Dhamma is not a revealed religion handed down to humankind by an Almighty God as believed for example in the Abrahamic religions. The Dhamma or Ultimate Truth was discovered by the Buddha through spiritual self-exertion. It was through self-reliance and self-effort that He eventually attained Bodhi or Supreme Self-enlightenment. The Buddha consistently stressed that He was not an incarnation of God, or a Son of God, or a Prophet despatched by God to hand down religious instructions to humans. He was wholly human, albeit a suprahuman being who unravelled and taught the Sublime Dhamma for the benefit of all humankind.

Theistic religions propagated before, during and after the Buddha's time urge followers to worship a Creator God responsible for the origin of the world and all life forms and Nature. Further, these religions emphasise that it was God who determined the success, happiness as well as the suffering and fate of not only humans, but also of other living beings and Nature, as these are His very creations. This concept of the universe of having been created through intelligent design, poses a major crisis in our modern world. Advances in modern science and technology invalidate these conventional beliefs. Today, in place of the concept of a universe, the reality of a multiverse is convincingly

SYMBOLS and SYMBOLISM: Embrace Multiculturalism advanced by experts in the field of science and technology. Modern science thus validates the existence of other worlds just as the Buddha taught.

It is noteworthy that the Sublime Dhamma stresses the scientifically compatible evolutionary exposition of all life forms as elucidated by the Buddha in the Agganya Sutta. The Blessed One underlined that we should accordingly abide by the Truth of Dhamma than rely on any External Being for our success, wellbeing, happiness and inner peace. To respond meaningfully to the challenges and opportunities that best us in life, no ritual, or belief in dogmas, or idol worship is required. It is far more realistic and important for us to recognise the realities of life and Nature and to accordingly develop a wholesome mental culture to live a meaningful fulfilling life. Such a rational commitment would pre-empt us from succumbing to the deceptive world of human craving, originating through our six ‘sense doors’, comprising the mind, the senses of sight, smell, hearing, taste and tactile sensation or touch.

As opposed to the thrust in theistic religions on the abiding belief in God’s Will and Intelligent Design in determining our fate, the Buddha stressed the reality that our life is conditioned by our own mind. That is to say, our life is ultimately what we ourselves make out of it. It is we who create the world we live through our own minds. Regardless of our background, ethnicity, religious beliefs and any other differences, our mind is the forerunner of all our thoughts, speech and actions. The cultivation of a wholesome mind, as repeatedly emphasised by the Buddha, is paramount to

human development, progress and peace. This is a far more realistic approach to addressing life challenges than to rely on prayers to an Almighty God for supplications and for forgiveness of sins or religious transgressions committed.

The Buddha pointed out that by understanding and recognising life experiences as what they truly are and not just by arbitrarily attributing them to the dictates of an Almighty God; we will be viewing challenges and opportunities in life from a balanced perspective and with a critical sense of self-responsibility and self-reliance. We become more focused and mindful of the Buddha's Teaching such as *anicca* which underlines that all things, including our very life are impermanent. This constitutes a skilful practice in realising other fundamental teachings in the Buddha Dhamma such as understanding the reality of *anattā* (non-self), or the non-existence of a self and a soul. We would then not view life and the world around us as finite or everlasting. Rather, we would realistically recognise life's experiences in a neutral way and regard them as non-threatening, non-hostile and never pre-destined or fated. We would consequently become prone to readily accept life's experiences as natural phenomena and not as some extra ordinary, inimical happenings dictated by an Almighty God.

In recognising impermanence as a universal reality, followers realise that it is pointless to be tied down, or brood over *dukkha* (there is no exact definition of the term; it generally refers to unsatisfactoriness, aversion, or dissatisfaction), that we are bound to experience in life. We would understand the reality that being subject to change, unfavourable

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experiences too would eventually disappear just as sukha (favourable, pleasant experiences), are forever fleeting. By being mindful of these realities of life and Nature, we do not live in the past however painful or disturbing this may be as it has gone. Neither would we venture into the future as this is yet to take place. Our mind instead focuses on the present moment since precisely this is what we are experiencing and what really matters. It is only the present moment that we can act upon and make wholesome differences. In a gist, this is referred to as, “living in the now, or living in the real world”, which when accomplished will naturally take care of the future when we arrive at that time zone in life.

Realisation of a wholesome liberated mind that would enable the cultivation of a global consciousness of the realities of life and Nature around us as taught by the Buddha is not in competition with other religions. As a matter of fact, the Buddha Dhamma may be adopted by anyone professing another religion to free her or himself from the reality of dukkha in samsaraic existence because it is a tried and tested holistic pathway to one's essence as a human being.

It must be also stressed here that paying respect to the founder of a faith or the Teacher of Liberation, as in the case of the Buddha, is a practice common among religions and not peculiar to any particular belief system. What is required is for us to appreciate the true significance and meaning of religious, cultural and historical images. It is those with limited or no understanding of what the Buddha personifies who criticise and condemn the practice of paying homage

to a Buddha image. They fail to appreciate the purity of heart and wholesome quality of gratitude that effuses when devotees pay respect to the Buddha for teaching to live a wholesome, purposeful, happy and peaceful life. For indeed, this is the way they think and feel about the Buddha image and not as wrongfully condemned as representing a God-head who is to be worshipped for supplication.

Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras are ever-appreciative and grateful to the selfless services the Buddha had extended unreservedly for the benefit of all humanity. They feel greatly indebted to the Buddha for providing the Right Understanding of human existence and the realities of life and Nature all around upon which all living beings are inextricably dependent on. They feel ever grateful that His Sublime Teaching has enabled them to find solace in troubled times and to enjoy sukha, or real happiness and peace amidst the hardships and sufferings encountered in life's journey. Thus for over 2,000 years, fired by this lofty spirit of reverence towards the perfection of the Buddha and the sublimity of the Dhamma he taught, artists from all across India, and in countries where the Buddha Dhamma spread produced inspiring images of the Exalted One.

There are many other sound reasons for Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras to venerate the Buddha, who as a Teacher of spiritual emancipation, exemplified extra-ordinary human qualities and profound spirituality. The Buddha is a Lokavidu, that is, a Knower of the World who understood everything about life and Nature that is to be understood. He discovered and taught the Sublime Dhamma for the

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benefit of all humankind. He is held as the very embodiment of sīla, samādhi, paññā and numerous other spiritual qualities which He perfected. In possessing a pure and tranquil mind, the Blessed One was filled to the brim of His heart with mettā, karuna, muditha and upekkhā for all living beings, including animals and other living creatures. He showed the world the right path to actualize one's success, wellbeing, happiness and inner peace, here and now in this very life, by cultivating a wholesome mind and much more.

The Buddha image thus is to be rightly viewed as a visible representation of the superb qualities of the Supreme Self-enlightened One. It eloquently personifies the virtues the Exalted One perfected, referred to as Dasa Pāramitās (Ten Perfections of Virtues). This spiritual attainment is referred to in the scriptures as the Buddha's Dhammakaya, or His spiritual body, that is freed of all mental defilements. They are Dāna-pāramī (generosity), Sīla-pāramī (virtue), Nekkhamma-pāramī (renunciation of the householders life), Paññā-pāramī (insight or transcendental wisdom), Viriya-pāramī (positive energy), Khanti-pāramī (patience), Sacca-pāramī (truthfulness), Adhiṭṭhāna-pāramī (resolute determination), Mettā-pāramī (unconditional friendliness) and Upekkhā-pāramī (absolute equanimity). So when a devotee pays homage to the Buddha, she or he is actually paying respect to the noble qualities the World Renowned One exemplifies, and not just to a lifeless iconographic representation of a Supreme Spiritual Teacher.

The same spiritual sentiments are evoked in the practice of offering flowers to the Buddha image and in lighting lamps

and incense at an altar. The daily puja (symbolic offerings in homage of the Buddha), is not a mere ritual. The spiritual practice is an entrenched universal tradition that is particularly ingrained in the Indian psyche of expressing appreciation and gratitude to a venerated person. This is reflected in the customary offerings made to departed parents, significant elders, one's teachers and community leaders on special occasions. Even to this day, all over the world, people express joy, gratitude and appreciation with a garland or bouquet of flowers. As for the Buddha, He is honoured as a Great Teacher, if not in fact the greatest teacher known in human history. In fact, in the daily recitation by followers, He is venerated as, "Satta Deva Mānussanam" (A Teacher of gods and men), who provided a life-long selfless service to humanity in guiding people to live righteous wholesome lives.

When Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras pay homage to the Buddha image, this is done as an act of deep veneration and devotion for a real unsurpassed historical personage and not some imaginary or unknown mystical being. They do so out of profound respect towards the Unparalleled Teacher that the Buddha proved. It is only natural that feelings of love, gratitude, devotion and adulation should sprout in the hearts of devotees towards the Buddha and be expressed through thought, speech and deeds. The arising of such warm affectionate sentiments can be likened to those which arise from within oneself towards one's departed parents, other loved ones and teachers who had played a significant role in moulding one's life. This noble culture, based on the Teaching of the Buddha explains why in coun-

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tries where the Buddha Dhamma is traditionally practiced, worshipping parents, significant elders, and also profoundly respecting teachers is deeply ingrained in a person from infancy and becomes second nature.

Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras pay homage to the Buddha image out of profound gratitude towards their Teacher who is worthy of the highest respect and veneration. He is the very epitome of selfless service, who out of boundless compassion freely gave of Himself to humankind, to teach the right path to actualize sukha. This is self-evident in their daily recitation of the Vandana Gāthās (Verses of Homage). As a daily practice, devotees calmly sit on the floor or stand in front of the confidence-emitting, ever-smiling serene Buddha image. With their palms brought together in the anjali pose and with their hearts filled with śraddhā, they devoutly recite their daily gāthās (verses).

The daily recitation begins with the traditional Pubbabhagamana-makarapatha, commonly referred to as Namaskara (salutation or homage), to the Buddha. This is followed by the customary recitation of the Tisaranagamana patha referred to as Saranam Gamana (Taking Refuge in the Noble Triple Gem); Pancasikkhapada patha, that is, the pledge to skilfully practice Pañca Sīla or the Daily Five Precepts, and the Tiratananuserana patha which is the Recollection of the Noble Triple Gem, in that order.

Recitation of the first stanza in the Tiratananuserana-patha Gāthā, referred to as Buddhānussati, brings to mind the greatness of the Buddha. These daily recitations are com-

bined with devotional expressions of piety and affirmation of one's commitment to skilfully and devoutly practise the Buddha Dhamma in daily life.



Vandanā: Veneration of Buddha Image

In reciting the gāthās, the Buddha image serves an important purpose of strengthening a devotees bhakti or spiritual devotion. This in turn helps to reinforce her or his strong self-affirmation to observe the Buddha's Noble Teaching. A brief translation of the gāthā is rendered in order to capture the meaning and purpose of the spiritual exaltation of the Buddha. It is significant to note that the verses do not suggest, or even hint of one aiming to seek supplication, or any direct benefit, or benign intervention from the Buddha:

Such indeed is the great Araham (Blessed One, exalted,

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perfect and worthy of homage), Sammā-sambuddho (omniscient), Vijjā-caranasampanno (endowed with profound knowledge and virtuous conduct), Sugato (gone beyond the mundane world of sensual pleasures), Lokavīdu (knower of the worlds), Anuttaro Purisadammasārathi (peerless Teacher, a guide incomparable for training those who can be trained), Satta Deva Mānussanam (Teacher of gods and men), Buddhō (Enlightened and holy), Bhagavathi (Blessed One). In addition, devotees often recite a specific gāthā referred to as Nava Guna Gāthā (Nine Great Virtues of the Buddha) to specifically recollect Nine Supreme Virtues of the Self-Enlightened One. The gāthā brings to mind the supreme qualities and perfections of the Blessed One.

In all of these gāthās there is not even a hint of one seeking supplication, but only expressions of deserving adulation, gratitude, śraddhā, spiritual delight and uplift of confidence in recalling the Buddha's glorious virtues and greatness as a Teacher. In reciting the Vandana Gāthās, one's underlying śraddhā in the Tīratna is simultaneously strengthened. This helps to remove mental defilements and thereby purify the mind. An equally important outcome is the simultaneous deepening of paññā which strengthens a devotee's resolve to possess a balanced perspective to the various experiences encountered in life's unpredictable journey.

Veneration of the Buddha image is also born out of śraddhā based on right understanding. Respect and honour are expressed to images of the Buddha not as a form of blind faith or surrender to an Almighty Being, but out of admiration towards an Exalted Teacher who remains unparalleled and

peerless in human history. It is the śraddhā that one develops that equips one with the pattana (aspiration), adhiṭṭhāna (resolute determination), viriya (positive energy or effort), vinaya (self-discipline) and other essential ingredients to actualize a wholesome fulfilling life. The representation of the Buddha is to be seen as an object for expressing adoration towards the founder and Master of the noble religion that the Supreme Self-enlightened One unravelled and taught to the masses from all strata of society.

The very term worship is derived from the notion of a personage being worthy of respect and veneration. It is drawn from the root word, “worth”. A significant teaching that the Buddha stressed, as outlined in the Mangala Sutta, is accruing of supreme blessings by according reverence to those worthy of honour. The practice of venerating the Buddha image is therefore more correctly described as an act in ‘ideal worship’, or ‘hero worship’, and not as wrongly criticised and condemned, as idol worship.

The Buddha’s glorious presence continues to live in the minds and hearts of followers of the Buddha Dhamma through images of Him. They help them to recall His noble qualities and to focus their mind on His inspiring profile as an Unsurpassed Teacher who transcended all worldly limitations, distractions and aversions in life. As they concentrate and reflect on His ultimate attainment of Supreme Self-enlightenment through resolute spiritual exertion, unwholesome thoughts are pre-empted from entering and occupying their mind. Simultaneously, unwholesome thoughts that already exist in the mind are progressively

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evicted, and as a consequence, are not acted upon.

Paying homage to the Buddha image is clearly a meaningful and highly worthy and honourable practice as one is so moved by the Buddha's perfection. Although the Buddha has Passed Away, His incomparable magnificence and Insight Wisdom continue to be duly appreciated. Over the centuries, trillions of devout followers from all around the world have benefitted from the use of images and symbols personifying the Buddha as a perfect human being. They have devoutly followed and benefitted from His Sublime Teaching as a religion of timeless relevance to all humankind. It is hardly surprising therefore that great adulation has been placed on the Buddha image across the world for over twenty centuries.

The magnificence of the Buddha's spiritual qualities is so unique that this is held in profound admiration by all cultured people and not just by followers of the Buddha Dhamma. This is succinctly elucidated by the world renowned philosopher and eminent exponent of Hinduism, who was also a highly respected President of the Republic of India, Professor Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, as outlined in his lecture at the British Academy in 1938:

We find in Gautama the Buddha, a powerful combination of spiritual profundity and moral strength of those rare spirits who bring to men a realisation of their own divinity and make the spiritual life seem adventurous and attractive, so that they may go forth into the world with a new joy at heart. While the great intellect and wisdom gave him

comprehension of the highest truth, his warm heart let him to devote his life to save from sorrow, suffering humanity, thus confirming with human affairs, even though they possess divine souls. The greatness of His personality, His prophetic zeal and burning love for suffering humanity made a deep impression on those with whom he lived and gave rise to those legends and stories which are the modes of expression available to ordinary humanity when it tries to express true things... So Gautama the apostle of self-control and wisdom and love becomes the Buddha, the Perfectly Enlightened, the Omniscient One, the saviour of the world.

His true greatness stands out clearer and brighter as the ages pass, and even the sceptical minded are turning to Him with a more real appreciation, a deeper reverence and a truer worship. He is one of those few heroes of humanity who have made epochs in the history of our race, with a message for other times as well as their own.

The Buddha's perfect qualities and exemplary profile as a Peerless Teacher are unreservedly acknowledged by many erudite cultured personages from the western world as well. On this point, I can do no better than to recall the inspirational remarks of the modern-day philosopher, Count Hermann Keyserling, founder of the School of Wisdom. The author of many bestselling books in the 1920's, he spoke with deep understanding about the Buddha image thus, "I know nothing grander in this world than the figure of the Buddha image. It is an absolutely perfect embodiment of spirituality in the visible domain."

The Buddha's unblemished character and unique qualities

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evoked inspiration in the minds of numerous other eminent personages who gained insight into His profound Teaching although they professed a different religion. They possessed a deep understanding of the Buddha image and were highly inspired by what it symbolises. They were well established in the meaning and significance of the Buddha image and kept them in their homes and place of work. From real life experience, they appreciated how the ever smiling serene Buddha image helped to create in them a deep feeling of emotional and mental calmness. Just by gazing at the compassion rendering Buddha image, they drew great therapeutic benefits that acted as a soothing balm, calmed their nerves and created a feeling of inner peace. They at once became blissfully relaxed by gazing at the Buddha image and contemplating on His supreme perfection and serenity, and, the insightful wisdom in the Dhamma He taught.

Daily veneration of the Buddha image is a purposeful devotional practice in expressing deep admiration for the noble qualities the Buddha personified. Followers of the Buddha Dhamma draw great inspiration from recalling through images of the World Renowned Teacher, His profoundly noble qualities. They endeavour to emulate the Exalted One's humane qualities as they devoutly practice the Dhamma in daily life. The image of the Buddha seated upright, with the two hands resting gently on the lap and bearing a confident, contented posture evokes spiritual uplift from within. The serene and ever-smiling Buddha image urges followers to strive on to develop wholesome human values such as love, compassion, friendliness, goodwill and peace within themselves, just as World Honoured One had done throughout

His noble life.

The Buddha image inspires a strong commitment among adherents to devoutly follow the Buddha Dhamma. When a devotee offers flowers and lights a lamp, candle or incense before the Buddha image, this is not meant to be taken as one praying for supplication, or forgiveness of sins and wrongdoings committed. The flowers will wither away, the fragrance of the incense will disappear and the illumination emitted by the oil lamps and candles will all fade away and eventually extinguish. Contemplation on these realities which the Buddha stressed induces devotees to be mindful of the Universal Law of Impermanence of all conditioned things and of one's own life that is perpetually strewn with changes, uncertainties and imponderables.

As for the iconography of the Buddha image, it is truly inspiring. The images of the Buddha have naturally drawn immense appeal for serious scholarship from renowned researchers, including those of other religious persuasion. They have undertaken an abiding interest on the subject without any reservation about the perfection of the Buddha which the sculptural representations of the World Honoured Teacher evoke. The Buddha's ever reassuring smile, which is born out of His ultimate revelation of the path to sukha, generates a soothing calmness and confidence in the eyes of the beholder. An excellent illustration of this spiritual uplift and delight is insightfully revealed in the real life experience of the first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. He graphically disclosed his deep spiritual inspiration and attachment towards the Buddha image

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in his autobiography, thus:

At Anuradhapura (ancient capital of Sri Lanka), I liked greatly an old seated statue of the Buddha. A year later, when I was in Dhera Dun jail, a friend in Ceylon [as Sri Lanka was then called], sent me a picture of this statue, which I kept on my little table in my cell. It became a precious companion for me, and the strong, calm features of the Buddha statue soothed me and gave me strength and helped me to overcome many a period of depression.

Another insightful illumination of the soothing balm that the calm and confidence-emitting Buddha image evokes that is worthy of recall is the personal experience of the renowned Russian philosopher, P. D. Ouspensky. In his book titled, “A New Model of the Universe”, he describes eloquently, his inner sentiments on the serenity the recumbent Buddha image arouses:

I began to feel the strange effect which the Buddha’s face produced on me. All the gloom that arose from the depths of my soul seemed to clear up. It was as if the Buddha’s face communicated its calm to me...

Everything that up to now had troubled me and appeared so serious and important became so small, insignificant and unworthy of notice, that I only wondered how it could have ever affected me. And I felt that no matter how irritated, and torn with contradictory thoughts and feelings a man might be when he came here, he would go away calm, quiet, enlightened, understanding...

I do not know of any work in Christian art which stands on the same level as the Buddha with sapphire eyes which expresses itself so completely the ideal of Christianity as the face of the Buddha expresses the ideal of Buddhism. To understand this face is to understand Buddhism.

An eminent modern philosopher who understood the meaning and value of the Buddha image was Schopenhauer. He kept an image of the Buddha in his bedroom and drew great inspiration just by gazing at the serenity and calm contemplation it effused. Yet another distinguished personage who understood the Buddha image, that merit reference, was the British general, Ian Hamilton. In presenting to the then British Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, an image of the Buddha which he found in the ruins of a temple in Mandalay in Myanmar, he attached to it a brief note which read, "If ever your mind gets perturbed and perplexed, I want you to see this image and be comforted."

The remarks, reflections and revelations of distinguished and intellectually steeped personages who were well established in the meaning and significance of the radiant Buddha image can easily run into a book. What is important for us to recognise is that they all found fortitude from reflecting on the Buddha image in times of seemingly insurmountable challenges, hardship, worries, anxieties and other disturbing experiences. They were able to smile and put away their troubles, just like the reposeful attitude captured in the ever-smiling Buddha.

Throughout the ages, the Buddha image has brought forth

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tremendous therapeutic benefit. The image helps to harmonise the body and mind. The calm serene compassion-evoking attitudes captured in the Buddha images create a strong śraddhā in the Exalted One and His Sublime Teaching that promotes an inner calmness and spiritual uplift among devotees. The Buddha image generates an atmosphere of tranquillity which permeates in the mind. As one concentrates on the greatness of the Buddha and focuses on the calm and serene persona of the World Honoured One, one's mind is brought to a tranquil state. The body becomes relaxed and the mind is stilled. A person is thereby gradually cleansed of negative thoughts, emotions, speech and actions. The combination of a relaxed body and a calm mental state along with a strong sense of confidence greatly facilitates the important practice of bhāvanā which the Buddha stressed. This in turn enables one to cultivate a wholesome mental culture which is essential to insulate the mind from being defiled. At the same time the mind is rid of defilements that had already entered it earlier.

As for the Buddha's thinking and attitude regarding the sculpturing of images, He persistently discouraged veneration of His person. People from all strata of society constantly paid homage to Him for the Peerless Teacher that He personified. However, the Buddha consistently stressed that the cultivation of a wholesome mental culture through devout practice of the Sublime Dhamma is far more beneficial and absolutely pertinent for one's liberation than blind veneration of Him.

Much to the vexation of other religious leaders during His

time, the World Renowned One specifically insisted on His disciples and lay followers not to venerate Him as a leader of a cult as they had demanded from their followers. The practice of promoting personality cults was widely resorted to by a number of religious leaders prior to as well as during the Buddha's age. Regrettably, cult movements have come into fashion in contemporary times as well, as evidenced in the proliferation of self-proclaimed 'god-men'. This has become a common bane in practically all religions as frequently featured in the print and electronic media around the world. Such deviations have no locus in the Buddha Dhamma as this run against the very thrust of realism and rationalism that characterises the religion.

While on this point, it must be clearly borne in mind that as far as the Buddha was concerned, He categorically insisted on not having any form of representation of Him. Neither did He wish followers to idolise Him as a God, or the Son of God, or a Messenger of God, or a Prophet, or even as a heavenly deity. As Professor Dr. Radhakrishnan pithily pinpointed, "Yet, the Buddha was so god-like". Rather than ascribe to Himself a status of divinity or even a distant association with a divine provenance, the Buddha stressed that we too possess a Bodhi chitta (the potential to attain a higher spiritual state of mind). This includes the attainment of the supreme liberation of Bodhi through spiritual self-exertion.

Buddhist scriptures speak emphatically of the many instances where the Buddha advised His disciples and lay followers against placing undue importance to venerating His

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person. A decisive reference is the advice He gave to Venerable Vakkali, who was struck with great admiration over the beauty of the physical appearance of the Buddha. The monk strove to be always in close proximity to the Buddha so that he could admire the physical perfection and serenity of the Exalted One. He did so even when the Blessed One was unwell and not in His best physical disposition. So excessive was Vakkali's admiration of the physical beauty of the Buddha that the Exalted One perforce had to admonish him to practice the Dhamma instead:

Vakkalī, what good is there in this foul one fathom-long body of mine to admire? It is far better to realise the Truth in the Dhamma than admire my physical appearance. Remember this always, the one who sees the Dhamma sees me. The one who practices the Dhamma is the one who honours me the most.

Upon reflecting on the Buddha's insightful advice, Venerable Vakkali realised his folly, and from thence onwards, focused his mind and accompanying spiritual exertion on perfecting his practice of the Dhamma with deep śraddhā. His reorientation in thinking and attitude to practice diligently the Sublime Dhamma enabled him to eventually attain the high spiritual stage of Arahant hood.

In a strict sense, it is not mandatory for a person to pay homage to the Blessed One. The Buddha Himself advised us that the best way to honour and express our gratitude towards Him is by skilfully cultivating wholesome qualities. By our own example and character, we are to live in accor-

dance with the letter and spirit of the Dhamma. It is far more important therefore for one to understand and skilfully follow the timeless Dhamma and thereby live a wholesome purposeful life that is pristine in thought, speech and action than to merely worship the Buddha image. Indeed, one would find it more beneficial to follow the Buddha's central teaching of cultivating a wholesome mental culture through meditation practice of relaxing the body and calming the mind, and thereby, attain tranquillity and inner peace.

The foregoing insight on the Buddha image establishes that the practice of honouring and paying homage to the Supreme Self-enlightened Buddha is far from indulging in idolatry. The evolution of the sculpturing of the Buddha image which forms an interesting study on its own accord, further repudiates the unfounded condemnation of the veneration of the Buddha image as an act of idol worship. Early representations of the Buddha and His Sublime Teaching comprised symbols such as the Dhammacakka, the lotus, the Sri Pada (the symbolic footprint of the Buddha), the sacred Bodhi Tree and an unoccupied throne. It is also noteworthy that images of the Buddha began to be sculptured not during the life-time of the Blessed One. Neither was this done soon after the Blessed One Passed Away. Sculpturing of the Buddha Image in fact became popular much later, around four hundred years after His Mahā-Parinibbāna.

Based on copious historical evidence, scholars generally hold that the tradition of sculpturing images of the Buddha evolved as a result of the cross-cultural confluence in North India that followed on the heels of Alexander the Great's

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vast territorial conquests from Macedonia, across Persia and onto North India. The region began to be progressively peopled by Macedonian descendants. Over time, this led to the progressive infusion of Hellenic civilization into the Indian cultural landscape. It is held that it was this underlying ambition that motivated Alexander the Great to conquer the then civilized world.



Ancient symbolic footprint of the Buddha

The youthful Alexander was fired by a burning idealism to spread Hellenistic culture from his homeland, in ancient

Macedonia, to the rest of the civilized world right up to India, as a universal cultural mosaic. The cultural cross-flow from the Greek archipelago through to the former Persian Empire and into the Indus and Ganges plains in North India ensued. This resulted in the fusion of Hellenistic and indigenous cultures. Historians and art scholars recognise this cultural confluence as one of the most creative periods in world history. Thus, true to Alexander the Great's grandiose vision, the vibrant Hellenistic culture, which embodied a highly developed artistry of sculpturing as well as other forms of humanistic creative expression, flowered across the regions he conquered.

As Hellenistic culture took root in North India from around the 1st century CE. the sculpturing of images in the human-form progressively became a popular artistic expression. In the midst of the blossoming of Hellenistic culture emerged a desire to sculpt a perfect human form. Sculptors of the vibrant Hellenistic cultural renaissance embraced the personage of the Buddha as a natural choice for artistic expression. The Buddha image consequently became a popular subject for sculptors to give expression to their artistic talents and creative skills. This explains the strong Hellenistic imprint in the Gandahāra Buddha images sculptured during the formative artistic period. Distinctive expressions of the beauty of the human form is visible in these stylisations of the Buddha images as in the entrenched tradition of Greek sculptors evidenced in the sculpturing of figures of Apollo and Venus. Ever since the serene, ever-smiling, calm peaceful image of the Buddha in a lotus-meditation posture has remained by far the most widely used symbol in the world

SYMBOLS and SYMBOLISM: Embrace Multiculturalism of the Buddha Dhamma.



Sacred Bodhi Tree symbolising the Buddha

With the passage of time, stylized images of the Buddha were artistically expressed in various mediums that combined with a keen sense of ingenuity. We owe it to the pious pioneering endeavours of inspired sculptors for not reducing the persona of the Buddha to that of an imaginary mystical figure. The Buddha was presented in the visual form as a real historical personage who commanded a profound influence over bludgeoning masses of followers from all walks of life. One cannot but be simply overwhelmed by the cultural, artistic and archaeological richness of the awe-inspiring images of the Buddha and monuments associated with the Buddha Dhamma in the wake of the Hellenistic

Chapter III : *Meaning and Significance of Images*
influence in North India.

The magnificence of the Buddha images and monumental Buddha Dhamma edifices were devoutly recorded by ancient pilgrims, especially Chinese pilgrim monks. Among the most notable accounts were by Shih Fa Hsien who lived and studied in India from 399 to 413 CE. Shih Huang Tsang who did likewise from 630 to 645 CE. and Shih I Ching from 671 to 687 CE. (Shih is an honorific in Chinese for monks). Fortunately for us, some of these magnificent creative works have withstood the ravages of time as well as the human desecrations and destructions, that were severely inflicted over the centuries, by misguided Muslim and Hindu leaders. Those that still stand erect today represent only a small portion of what existed in the glorious creative past of the Buddha Dhamma era in India.

The cultural and artistic renaissance triggered by Hellenic culture, in the beginning of the first millennium, which rode on the crest of the Buddha Dhamma, coincided with the rise of the Mahayana School. The Mahayana Tradition laid stress on the devotional aspects among followers. Of particular emphasis was the practice of strengthening one's bakti or devotional fervour towards the Buddha as a way to achieving emancipation from the samsaric cycle of birth, death and rebirth. An offshoot of this trend was a popular demand for physical representations of the Buddha to which followers could readily resonate with in pursuing their religious aspiration whilst at the same time express their piety.

The trend towards devotional practices coincided with the

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flourishing of the Buddha Dhamma under the rule of the Kushan Dynasty in North India, in the 1st century CE. In the midst of a vibrant rejuvenation of the Buddha Dhamma, Emperor Kanishka, who in similar religious zeal as that displayed earlier on by Emperor Dhammasoka, proved a fervent patron. On the wings of his royal patronage, a distinctive Buddha Dhamma art form evolved through the fusion of Hellenic, Roman and Parthian (Persian) elements.

Based on the foregoing account, of the origins of the iconography of the Buddha image, it is widely conjectured that images of the Buddha were first artistically expressed in stone with hammer and chisel at this juncture of Indian civilization. With this, came into being a transformation from the conventional aniconic (symbolic or suggestive rather than literal representation, or not made or designed in the true likeness as evidenced in Christianity and Hinduism), to the anthropomorphic practice of having representation of the Buddha in the human form.

About the same time as the Gandahāra tradition took root in North India, there emerged in the midst of the liberal interpretation of the Buddha Dhamma, the sculpturing of the Buddha image in another stylised form. In response to the devotional impulse of followers, the Buddha was figured as a manifestation of *bakti* (devotion). The art form brought forth a distinct tradition of sculpturing, referred to as, “compassion-rendering images”, of the Buddha in what came to be recognised as the Mathura Tradition of iconography of Buddha images. The emerging art tradition was based on the conception of the Buddha as being a Maha-Pu-

rusha (A Great Being), bearing lakshanas or distinct body marks as recorded in the scriptures.

It is generally acknowledged that by around the 3rd century CE. distinctive stylisations of the Buddha image were already very much in vogue in India. As the Buddha Dhamma spread from North India to other regions in the subcontinent, and subsequently beyond its shores to distant lands in Asia, the sculpturing of Buddha images proliferated into a number of artistic traditions. In India itself, besides the Gandahāra and Mathura art traditions, the later Amaravati and Gupta Schools of art produced a wellspring of sculptures, monuments and Buddha images.



Gandahāra Tradition Buddha Image

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In this creative milieu the narration of the life of the Buddha had a great bearing on the sculpturing of images of the Buddha. Major events in the life of the Buddha as well as places associated with the Exalted One were immortalised through the construction of numerous monuments such as stūpas and vihāras which were embellished with elaborate Buddha images and symbolic motifs. These early inspiring religious structures progressively developed into significant sacred pilgrimage sites.



Standing Buddha Image : Gandahāra Tradition

Chapter III : *Meaning and Significance of Images*

The creative genius also found expression in the sculpturing of Buddha images in significant attitudes or postures referred to as mudras. This noteworthy development of the iconography of the Buddha image offers an interesting study. The Buddha images were sculptured in various stylised attitudes to give expression to important Teachings. They were primarily conveyed through the medium of hand-gestures and body postures. The object of the sculptor was to convey a specific meaning or message of the Buddha's Teaching.

A popular mudra was the Dhammacakkappavattana Mudra (Turning of the Wheel of the Dhamma), which brilliantly captures the Buddha unravelling the Dhamma to his first fi-



Dhammacakkappavattana Mudra

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ve disciple monks, referred to as Pancha Vaggas. This historic expounding of the Buddha Dhamma took place at the Royal Deer Park in Saranath on Asala Full Moon Day (Full Moon in July), that is, two months after the Buddha attained Supreme Self-enlightenment. In this mudra, both hands of the Buddha are drawn close to the chest with the left hand facing inwards and the right hand facing outwards. The index finger and thumb of each hand form a symbolic wheel to capture the notion of unravelling the Ultimate Truth of the Dhamma. The historic scene is commonly referred to as the Buddha's Turning of the Wheel of the Dhamma. The mudra is often used as a visual illustration of the momentous event of the Buddha expounding the Four Noble truths while seated in the Lotus position.

Among the other more common mudras is the Dhyana Mudra or Meditation Mudra which is also referred to as the Lo-



Dhyana Mudra: Gal Vihāra, Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka

tus Mudra. The mudra depicts the Buddha in a calm and serene pose seated cross-legged in the lotus meditation posture. Here, both hands rest on the lap at the centre and facing upwards, with the right palm placed over the left and the fingers fully stretched. It depicts the Buddha in deep meditation practice with eyes closed to shut off distractions that could otherwise enter the mind through the six ‘sense doors’.

The Bumisparsha Mudra or the Gesture of Witness Mudra, or the Affirmation Mudra recalls Mara’s (metaphorical inner evil thoughts and emotions that strive to obstruct one’s



Bronze Bumisparsha Mudra in the Thai Tradition

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emancipation from samsaric existence), confrontation against the Buddha is also widely displayed in vihāras. The mudra recalls Mara's failure to frustrate the Buddha's resolute determination to totally remove the residual kilesa that remained in His mind. The mudra depicts poignantly the dramatic historic event of the Buddha calling upon Mother Earth to bear witness to His spiritual exertion through samsāra in His Noble Spiritual Search to attain Bodhi. In this mudra, the right arm hangs down over the right knee with the fingers inwards and touching the earth, whilst the left hand rests confidently on the centre of the Buddha's lap as He remains seated in the lotus-meditation position.

Another popular mudra is the Abhaya Mudra or The Attitude of Fearlessness Mudra which portrays the Buddha wi-



Abhaya Mudra in the Burmese (Myanmar) Tradition

th the right hand lifted up at the elbow, the palm fully open and fingers extended upwards. This mudra conveys the Buddha's attitude of providing spiritual protection and offering confidence to followers. It depicts the Buddha's act of transmitting blessings to devotees and inspiring them to be courageous through their śraddhā in the Buddha Dhamma. For these reasons, this mudra is also referred to as the Gesture of Protection as well as the Gesture of Blessings.

The Varada Mudra conveys the Buddha's boundless compassion and generosity to all living beings that includes animals and other creatures as well as plant-life. The mudra is one where the Buddha's right hand is in the Abaya Mudra attitude and facing forward with the fingers extended. They symbolise the Buddha's perfection of generosity, morality, patience, right effort and meditative concentration. The left hand rests alongside the body with the palm wide open and the fingers extended. The open palm signifies that the Exalted One has unravelled everything that He had discovered through His spiritual perfection. In contrast with the conventional idiomatic closed fist practised by other spiritual teachers during His time, here the Buddha is seen as an open book. The image symbolically portrays the Blessed One as an incomparable compassionate Teacher who held back nothing whatsoever about the Dhamma from His disciples and lay followers.

Though it does not strictly fall into the conventional mudras, in most countries traditionally practicing the Buddha Dhamma, the Mahā-Parinibbāna of the Blessed One represents a popular visual depiction of the historic event.

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In common parlance this Buddha image is referred to as the, “Recumbent or Reclining Buddha”. Besides capturing the important historical event of the Passing Away into Nibbana of the Buddha, the image is also significant in reminding devotees of the Exalted One’s final exhortation to his disciple monks and nuns: “Behold, O’ bhikkus, this is my last advice to you. All component things in the world are subject to change. They are not lasting. Work diligently to gain your own salvation.”

Long before modern audio-visual aids were introduced in the 20th century, the mudra-based Buddha images and Buddha Dhamma symbols were effectively used as instructional visual aids to help teach the Sublime Dhamma to ordinary folk. This was generally resorted to in order to simplify the explanation of complex ideas, concepts and principles in the Buddha’s Teaching and to lay upon them graphic visuals to ease memorisation and recall. Monks and nuns who, “went forth” (entered into the Sangha Community) selflessly to spread the Buddha Dhamma found the mudra-based Buddha images particularly effective to teach the religion to uninitiated communities in unfamiliar distant lands. They continue to be particularly useful to this day for guiding ordinary men, women and children who wish to learn and practice the Sublime Dhamma and benefit from a clear comprehension and better understanding of the religion.

Images of the Buddha in various expressions, artistic stylisations and sizes abound in countries that traditionally practice the Buddha Dhamma. For example, Sri Lanka though relatively a small island, boasts a host of Buddha images,

Chapter III : *Meaning and Significance of Images*

both of historical antiquity and those of more recent vintage. Among the many inspiring Buddha images in Sri Lanka are those venerated at the Gal Vihāra in Polonnaruwa (the ancient capital city of earlier Sri Lankan kingdoms), which like many hundreds more are steeped in history.



**Mahā-Parinibbāna Buddha Image,
Gal Vihāra, Polonnaruwa**

The Gal Vihāra hosts four magnificent Buddha images of different sizes and attitudes carved out of solid rock cliffs and standing majestically against natural surroundings. It has been a major pilgrimage site since ancient times. One has to see the images to appreciate their artistic beauty and the spiritual inspiration they evoke in the beholder. Little wonder that those of other religious preference too have been awed by these gigantic rock images of the Buddha,

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carved several centuries ago, just like the famous Catholic priest, Reverend Thomas Merton who was moved into exaltation when he visited the sacred Gal Vihāra. The civilizational heritage site has also become a major tourist attraction drawing vast numbers of awe inspired visitors from all regions of the world.

The Buddha image represents a marvel of human creativity and a classic example of cultural contacts and civilizational flows resulting in an enriched fusion of cultural heritages in the Buddha Dhamma world. An underlying factor was the ready and liberal embrace of diversity and multiculturalism of Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras. The evolution of the Buddha image thus holds out a powerful message of the absurdity of claims of purity or exclusivity of human culture and civilization from any quarter.

Besides the Buddha image, one is bound to come across a number of other prominent symbols and symbolism within the precinct of vihāras and other significant religious places of the Buddha Dhamma. Prominent among these are the ever-radiant lotus, Dhammacakka, Sacred Bodhi Tree (commonly referred to as the Tree of Enlightenment), sacred stūpa and the Flag of the Buddha Dhamma. Among other spiritual and practical purposes, these symbols help followers to understand and practise the Sublime Dhamma. A sound appreciation of their meaning and significance in the true spirit of celebrating multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding would serve to contribute appreciably towards strengthening global peace and harmony.

CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTICAL LOTUS

The lotus which is endowed with an alluring beauty and a sweet fragrance is one of the oldest flowers known to humankind. The ever-luxuriant bloom is decorated with fascinating myths and legends surrounding its mystical origins and pre-eminence in the Asian psyche. Its spectacular splendour and enduring nature have inspired thinkers, literary personages and artists throughout the ages. It is little wonder that the enchanting blossom found a distinctive expression in many aspects of life among the peoples of Asia.

The unique character and beauty of the radiant lotus destined it to assume an intimate association with spirituality. This character of the lotus is particularly distinctive in Indian and Chinese cultures and civilizations. So entrenched was the lotus in the mind set of Indians, since ancient times, that the magnificent flower did not suffer the massive destruction which other symbols in Hinduism, Jainism and the Buddha Dhamma encountered at the hands of the Moghul invaders. As they settled down to rule North India, the Moghuls were enamoured by the mystical lotus. They too embraced the lotus and celebrated it as a significant symbol and symbolism of the social and cultural landscape of India.

Given its magnificent civilizational and spiritual backdrop, Indians have good reasons to feel gratified for having the resplendent lotus as their national flower. We noted earlier that Dr. Ambedkar had envisioned the integration of India's

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diverse cultures and religions through national symbols. This included the unique and fascinating lotus. He wanted fellow Indians to be beholden to the moral, ethical and spiritual ethos the lotus exemplifies in Indian culture and civilization.



The enchanting lotus

In the realm of creativity and also with regard to human values, the lotus personifies lofty ideals. Herein lays the secret to its pre-eminence as a motif in art and sculpture across Asia. Painters and craftsmen using different mediums of expression, constantly evoked the lotus as an ornamental device as much as they lay upon it symbolic content. Extensive use of the lotus as a motif is distinctively evident particularly in the countries that were impacted by Hinduism and the Buddha Dhamma as in India, Sri Lanka, China, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Japan, South Korea, Bhutan and Mongolia.

The exhilarating beauty and enchantment the lotus exudes

has been a perennial source of aesthetic delight to writers and lovers of literature through the ages. Enchanted by the exotic lotus, poets and authors often coined evocative references of the floral beauty to capture exceptional human endowments. These included coinages such as, “lotus-like face, lotus-petal eyes” and, “lotus-like feet”. To this day, writers frequently make idiomatic and poetic use of the lotus, especially to express ideals of beauty and human values. Likewise, personal names associated with the spiritually anointed auspicious lotus were coined and popularised for adoption. In the Indian sub-continent especially, where the aesthetic appeal of the lotus is deeply entrenched, parents eagerly imbue its noble qualities on to their new-born babies. This is done by giving them proper names associated with the captivating lotus. Personal names such as Padma (Padmani; lotus-faced beauty, which significantly is another name for the Hindu goddess Lakshmi), Pankaja (lotus-like son), Padmapani (lotus-handed daughter), Padmasari (daughter as beautiful as a lotus), Pandarika (pure, lotus-like beauty of a daughter), Padmarupa (a lotus-like beauty), and so on, remain very much in vogue to this day.

In the countries where the Buddha Dhamma is traditionally practised, the lotus commands a distinct omnipresence in the hearts and minds of the people. In Vietnam for example, the bloom enjoys the august status of being the logo of the country’s national airlines. In Sri Lanka, the feeder-national carrier, Mihin Airlines, similarly has the lotus as its logo. As a matter of fact, since historical times, the lotus has occupied a high profile through numerous creative expressions, particularly in respect to art and architecture. This is exten-

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sively evidenced in viharas and Buddha Dhamma monuments. A recent high profile example of its creative appeal was the construction of the impressive national theatre for performing arts, named Nelum Pokuna (Lotus Pond). It was inspired architecturally to symbolise the lotus.



Vietnam Airlines Logo



Mihin Lanka Airlines Logo



Nelum Pokuna: National Theatre for Performing Arts

In the Hindu psyche, the lotus significantly symbolises knowledge and wisdom. These ideals were earnestly incorporated into the worship of certain gods and goddesses from among the religion's pantheon of deities. The radiant lotus is also intimately identified with education. This is a subject-matter which the ancient Indians possessed a profound understanding as well as developed great insight. Indian acariyas (tutors or mentors), of bygone years were acutely conscious of the meaning and purpose of education, referred to as Vidya or Vidhya (correct knowledge, or clarity in the fullest sense of what the term education encompasses). Their holistic perception of education stands in sharp contrast to the essentially cognitive-based rote learning that characterises modern-day secular education systems around the world.

Education was placed on a high pedestal and accorded great value in Indian society. It drew comparison with the pre-eminent status the lotus commands as an icon of precious beauty, purity and wisdom. Learning was premised on a holistic pedagogy. The ancient acariyas stressed the importance of education and principals of teaching pedagogy through the analogy of the lotus. Thus unlike in contemporary education systems, learning extended well beyond mere accumulation and regurgitation of knowledge and information.

According to the estimation of the Indian acariyas of ancient times, the acquisition of knowledge is the lowest level of learning. Far greater emphasis was placed on the internalization of what was taught than the accumulation and retention of facts and information. This was to ensure that

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students not only acquired knowledge, but more importantly, they become the learning they were being tutored, just like the ever radiant lotus. The real test of the effectiveness of teaching pedagogy was premised on the internalization and manifestation of learning through proof of wholesome thoughts, speech and actions of students in their daily life. This meant that not only did students gather knowledge on various subject-matters; they advanced further and lived according to the knowledge that was passed on.

Equally significant was the ancient Indian acariyas' understanding of wisdom which extended far beyond intelligence and the memorization of knowledge. Wisdom according to the ancient Indian concept of Vidya entailed spiritual exertion as well. This was aimed at strengthening the overall moral and ethical conduct of a student in respect to holistic human development despite the negative conditions that may prevail in the clime. They are to possess an unblemished character, imbue virtues and observe meditation practice to purify the mind just like the vibrant radiant lotus blossoms forth unblemished by the murky surroundings in which it grows.

In accordance with the deeper understanding of education promoted by generations of insightful acariyas, a holistic approach to learning was accorded emphasis. Along with a sound grooming in culture, the arts and spirituality, human values were reinforced through their linkages with prominent gods, goddesses and deities. The intimate linkage between Education and spirituality is illustrated by the close association of the lotus with Saraswati, the Hindu Goddess of Learning, Knowledge, Wisdom and Music.



The Goddess Saraswati

The lotus is also closely associated with the God Ganesh (also referred to as Ganesha or Ganapati), the Remover of Obstacles. He is venerated as the legendary scribe who wrote the mythological Mahabharata epic. God Ganesh's blessings are traditionally invoked at the start of Hindu rituals as well as in connection with literary and artistic works and stage performances. This custom once again alludes to a spiritual patronage accorded to Education through the metaphor of the lotus.



The God Ganesh

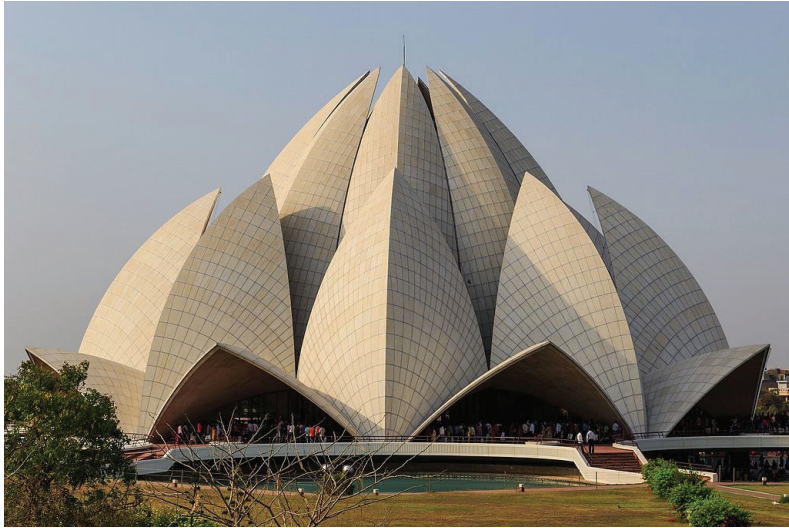
In Hinduism, aside from the linkage of the lotus with the Goddess Saraswati and the God Ganesh, the pink lotus specifically is associated with the Goddess Lakshmi; who is venerated as the Goddess of Wealth and Beauty. Perhaps the most important feature of the brilliant lotus is that it has long served as an eternal fountain of spiritual nourishment. Since historical times, the auspicious flower has been used to symbolically convey numerous profound ideas, concepts, principles and whole teachings in the principal religions that originated in Asia. In Hinduism and the Buddha Dhamma in particular, the lotus is anointed with an aura of divinity and is accordingly embraced as an iconic religious symbol. As a result, the petalled beauty became irreversibly rooted in the two world religions.



The Goddess Lakshmi

The mystical lotus was accorded a spiritual fervour not only by ancient faiths, later religions like Baha'i too found spiritual inspiration from the fascinating blossom. A few decades ago, followers of the faith built a magnificent, "Lotus Temple", in New Delhi. This impressive house of worship of outstanding artistic and architectural expression, designed to symbolise a lotus, is over 50 meters in height. The temple has 27 huge lotus petals arranged around the structure. It stands as a glorious modern tribute to the spiritual profile of the mystical lotus.

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Baha'i Lotus Temple, in New Delhi, India

The spiritual aura the lotus commands in the Indian psyche is as extensively recorded in Buddhist scriptures as in the Hindu holy books. Its spiritual significance in the Buddha Dhamma was anointed by the Buddha Himself. The Buddha drew the metaphor of the lotus to underline to the renowned Brahmin Dona, His very supreme attainment of Bodhi thus, “As a lotus, fair and lovely, by the water is not soiled. By the world I am not soiled. Remember me, Brahmin, as Awakened; I am the Buddha.”

Another significant indicator of the spiritual ambiance the iconic lotus commands is evident in the Mahayana Tradition. The Mahayana School of the Buddha Dhamma accords the highest importance to the Lotus Sutra, referred to in Sanskrit as the Maha Saddharma-pandarika Sutra, or

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the Great Sutra of the White Lotus. The Lotus Sutra (Pali: sutta), is the most revered and extensively used religious text in the Mahayana Tradition. The sutra contains the ultimate teaching of the Buddha. It is believed that recitation and contemplation on the Sublime Dhamma outlined in the Lotus Sutra is a pre-requisite on the part of devotees.

Among other important teachings, the Lotus Sutra underlines the concept of upāya (expedient means or pedagogy) and of the diligent practice of this teaching. It is an essential pāramitā or perfection of virtues that the Buddha exemplified. The sutra also places emphasis on the important teaching of Buddha Citta, or Buddha Nature which the Buddha pinpointed is inherent in all of us. It stresses that every one possesses the potential to attain Bodhi, provided she or he devoutly practices the Buddha Dhamma with śraddhā. That is to say, we should all strive to practice the Buddha Dhamma with steadfast faith and devotion, in the same way as the lotus pierces through the muddy waters and actualizes its brilliance.

The foregoing details clearly establish that the omnipresent lotus has been venerated as a sacred flower by Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras since the age of the Buddha. They embrace the lotus as a symbol of purity and as a mark of a high distinction of spiritual attainment. The lotus is thus widely personified with auspiciousness, devotion and devoutness in practicing the Buddha Dhamma in daily life.

By virtue of its august status as a symbol of sacredness, the lotus symbol continues to occupy a central place and role

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in the Buddha Dhamma to this day. Since the ancient past, devotees felt that it was only fitting that the lotus, which stands out as amongst the most fascinating of flowers, richly deserves this high honour. They used the lotus-metaphor to represent the Buddha's Wisdom and Insight that enabled Him to discover and teach the Sublime Dhamma. This is why the Buddha Dhamma is popularly referred to as the Lotus Path. Above all, the lotus enjoys the distinct honour of symbolising the Supreme Self-enlightened Buddha. This singular distinction of personifying the historical Gautama Buddha is accorded to the pink lotus.

Given its deep-rooted historical, cultural and spiritual backdrop, it seems only natural that the radiant lotus should occupy a pride of place as a primordial motif in the Buddha Dhamma in which it adorns so profusely and majestically in a variety of stylisations. As noted earlier, prior to the culture of sculpturing images of the Buddha, the lotus was commonly used to represent the World Honoured One. With the development of the iconographic representation of the Exalted One from around the 1st century CE, the venerated lotus was directly incorporated into the sculpturing of the Buddha image. It was deemed only fitting that this high honour be given to the pink lotus. Ever since, the pink lotus has been incorporated as the asana (majestic throne), of the Buddha image. It formed an integral motif as a stylised lotus-seat of the Blessed One, that is referred to as the Padmāsana or the Lotus Throne of the Buddha. This motif is particularly evident in images of the Buddha in the seated lotus-meditation and the teaching mudras as observed in the preceding chapter.



The Pink Lotus

Interestingly, in meditation practice, the traditional position of sitting crossed-legged as typified in the images of the Buddha in the meditation mudra, is referred to as the Padmāsana Mudrā or the Lotus Meditation Posture. The conventional cross-legged seated position of one's thorax erect is considered ideal for meditation. This is because the lotus meditation position facilitates the circulation of blood through the body as one remains motionless for long periods at a stretch while practising mindfulness. The lotus-seated meditation position is found to be conducive for practising Anāpānasati Meditation (Meditation on the in and out breath). This is because the movement of the diaphragm is facilitated when one inhales and exhales in a relaxed mindful rhythmic manner while seated in the lotus position.

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Other meditation practices such as bringing one's mind to focus on a specific object such as the Buddha image are also enhanced when the meditator is seated in the Padmāsana posture. Here again, the lotus meditation-position facilitates the objective of the meditator to keep the body relaxed and the mind calm and focused, just like the lotus which remains tranquil in the still waters of a placid lake or pond.



Padmāsana: The pink lotus throne of the Buddha



The lotus meditation position

The brilliant lotus is associated not only with representing the beauty of the Buddha's spiritual perfection, but it is also commonly used to personify His noble qualities of Brahma Vihara (virtuous mental state), of mettā, karuṇa, muditha, upekkhā and paññā. According to the Buddha's Teaching on skilful cultivation of Brahma Viraha, the benevolent thoughts and sentiments effused in the process are also to be extended to animals and other creatures as well as to Nature of which we are an integral part. He stressed the fact that though we may not always be fully mindful of it, the reality is that we are all directly dependent on Nature

SYMBOLS and SYMBOLISM: Embrace Multiculturalism as symbolised by the ubiquitous lotus.

The Buddha drew upon the natural enchantment among human beings with the alluring beauty of the lotus to imbue respect and love for Nature. The cultivation of this fine lotus-inspired human quality is borne out in His teaching calling upon us to be guided by gentleness in our relationship with one another and with Mother Nature. This maxim was reinforced in the Mahanaya Tradition through the imagery of the Goddess of Mercy, Kwan Yin.

As the Buddha Dhamma took root and progressively expanded across ancient China, towards the end of the Han



Kuan Yin holding the ever-radiant lotus

Dynasty in the 4th century CE. the iconography of Kuan Yin, as the Goddess of Mercy, emerged as a prominent deity. Alongside this development the spiritual idealism of mettā and karuṇā which the lotus personified was incorporated into the iconography of Kuan Yin. The compassion-rendering deity, hence was popularly portrayed as delicately holding a white lotus in her right hand.

The motif of the white lotus is aimed at transmitting symbolically, Kwan Yin's fathomless compassion for all living beings and Nature. Just like the Buddha image, the compassion that Kwan Yin personifies can be effectively harnessed by leaders around the world to reinforce the clarion call today, for the protection of the global ecological system.

The failure on the part of the modern materialistic world to respect the reality of the interdependence between humankind and Nature has manifested in disastrous consequences. This has been repeatedly demonstrated, in recent times, in the ecological front. Climate change and the resultant massive destruction of life and property all across the world is no longer a scary prospect. This is already a very real, dreadful and frequently recurrent global phenomenon. Sustainable development and other preventive programs and measures by world leaders aimed at safeguarding the environment and pre-empting catastrophic repercussions of climate change may be effectively reinforced with the profound teaching the lotus symbolises.

The lotus commands a high significance as a symbol of the Buddha Dhamma in several other forms as well. Frequent

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reference is made in Buddhist literature of the uniqueness of the lotus and the lessons that are to be drawn from its magnificence and enthralling qualities. Certain characteristics of the lotus were often cited by the Buddha to illustrate metaphorically His Teaching. The Buddha drew similes, parables and anecdotes based on the unique qualities and charismatic features of the lotus in order to symbolically convey a number of complex teachings. Of particular significance are teachings that abound in the scriptures, of purity, compassion and inner peace, conveyed through the symbol and symbolism of the lotus.

These teachings are collectively referred to as, “The Lessons of the Lotus”. The simile about the ability of the lotus to produce brilliant blossoms that remain unstained by the muddy unappealing environment in which it grows, serves as an excellent illustration of the lessons of the lotus in self-development. The Buddha alluded to the simile to urge us to rise above our defiled sentiments and aspire to attain a higher mental, emotional and spiritual state. The simile lays stress that though its roots are embedded in the filthy mud in which it grows naturally, yet the lotus rises above its murky surroundings and blossoms forth into a most brilliant fragrant flower for all to feast their eyes. We should therefore be constantly mindful of our thoughts, speech and actions and rise above our defiled surroundings and bloom forth into a wonderful human being, in the same way as the brilliant lotus. This noble aspiration demands unwavering śraddhā in the Buddha Dhamma and resolute upāya.

The Buddha frequently drew upon the distinctive features

of the lotus to underline several other key teachings. The profound teachings include the purification of the mind, development of resilience, wisdom, detachment and of the victory gained by living a life of righteousness. Copious examples abound of His use of the lotus to exemplify such important life-ideals for us to follow and benefit therefrom. They most certainly merit recall. One which is contextual to fostering harmony and global peace is the Exalted One's teaching on the importance of cultivating an abiding spirit of samagga among fellow human beings.

The Buddha drew the analogy of the lotus which comes in a variety of petals and hues; yet the blossom is able to retain its individual aesthetic presence while existing under a common genre. He highlighted this characteristic of the lotus urges us to regard fellow human beings as kinsfolk despite belonging to different ethnic, cultural, social and religious communities. We are encouraged to draw lessons from the origin and nature of the ever-radiant lotus and likewise mindfully live in harmony and peace as a common human race on Mother Earth, for indeed, this the one and only planet we have.

In similar fashion, the Buddha often drew attention to the admirable resilient nature of the lotus. He used this as an allegory of hope for the masses of ordinary men, women and youths in facing challenges and opportunities in life. He taught that just like the lotus bud that pierces through the murky water, before it opens out its captivating petals for all to admire: we too may similarly surmount any and all challenges encountered in life and achieve the sweetness of success, wellbeing, goodness, happiness and inner peace.

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The Buddha underlined that the inherent resilience of the lotus should inspire us to believe that however bleak or gloomy our present condition may appear, we should never give up, but relentlessly persevere to actualize our aspirations. For, there is always hope in the future as all things are subject to change and can be changed through positive self-effort and self-reliance. The Buddha pinpointed that the lotus teaches us that wholesome thoughts are evoked from strengthening śraddhā in the Buddha Dhamma. We must therefore be steadfast and resolutely strive with confidence and devoutly follow the Sublime Dhamma. This is essential for us to realise whatever goals in life we may aspire to achieve.

A classic reference in the Buddha Dhamma of the characteristic resilience the lotus exemplifies which we may all gainfully emulate is highlighted in the Dhammapada (An Antology of the Sayings of the Buddha), Verses 58 and 59:

Just as in a rubbish heap
Discarded by the side of a highway,
A lotus can grow even there,
That is well scented and delightful

So too in the group of beings
Who are blind and full of defilements,
A disciple of the Supreme Self-enlightened One outshines
with her or his Insight Wisdom.

This simile of the lotus has direct relevance to many aspects of life. It stirs us to persevere in our efforts to actualise our

aspirations, regardless of the circumstances we are placed in. Even if we are born in the worst of conditions, much like the lotus cast away in a heap of rubbish; through the guidance the Buddha prescribed, we can successfully overcome our disadvantages and unfavourable circumstances and conditions. These include ingredients of self-development which the Buddha tried and tested successfully, such as adhiṭṭhāna (determination or unyielding resolve), viraya (positive energy) and vinaya (discipline). We can accordingly establish ourselves in the Buddha Dhamma and grow up to become more than the circumstances and conditions we are born into by harnessing these ingredients. We have to be ever mindful that every one of us has the potential to become successful, healthy and happy, notwithstanding difficulties and unfavourable situations or obstacles we may face. This reality of life is exemplified by the lotus which so magnificently blossoms with fragrance and brilliance for all to admire, despite its unappealing surroundings.

The lotus reminds us that negative influences and conditions that we are bound to encounter in life should not foreclose our ability to live a purposeful life. In the same way as the magnificent lotus exemplifies resilience, we should aspire to rise above our defiled environments by cultivating wholesome thoughts, speech and actions. We should strive resolutely to skilfully practice the Teachings of the Buddha and thereby conscientiously internalise the Sublime Dhamma in our daily life. This would ensure that we too would blossom with fragrance like the lotus as we live a successful fulfilling life.

Through the metaphor of the lotus that captures the wonder-

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ful quality of resilience, the Buddha pinpointed that greatness is latent even among the seemingly lowest in society thus, “just as a radiant lotus springs forth from even a heap of discarded insignificant rubbish along the wayside”. He underlined that even in the worst of situations; we can overcome our problems and challenges and make the best out of the conditions and circumstances we find ourselves in life.

Nowadays life coaches and trainers proffer these very same guidelines for achieving success. They, however, couch these and other fundamental teachings of the Buddha in modern-day jargon. They claim that their guidelines are newly discovered, “secret”. Promotional materials such as the movie, “The secret” directed towards marketing their so-called novel training programs, fail to credit the Buddha Dhamma as the real source material of their widely advertised coaching on self-development.

Another significant analogy of the lotus the Buddha employed is His teaching of detachment. He drew attention to the nature of the lotus to allow drops of water that fall to easily slide off from its lovely supple petals and large green leaves. Similarly, we are to reduce our craving and greed by practising detachment. This is achieved through skilful means, of cultivating contentment in our daily life. This particular characteristic of the lotus at the same time underlines the Exalted One’s teaching that everyone of us inherently possesses a Bodhi Chitta (a wholesome Buddha Nature), which can be developed to its fullest potential through self-reliance, self-effort and spiritual self-exertion. The important ingredient we require for realising this life-

goal is to firstly possess a strong paṭṭhāna or aspiration to attain our innate skills, talents and potential, including Bo-dhi. In other words, every one of us is vested with an inner potential to become perfect and attain liberation and blossom forth as a wonderful being, just like the ever-persevering radiant lotus.



Lotus buds with water drops sliding off

Again, in the Caṇḍāla Sutta (Discourse on the Outcaste), the Buddha used the analogy of the lotus to extol upāsikās (lay female followers) and upāsakas (lay male followers) to be jewels among lay followers by being lotus-like and pursue the following five guidelines of:

- Strengthening śraddhā in the Noble Triple Gem,
- Cultivating sīla as a way of life ,

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- Being self-reliant and depend on one's viraya or wholesome efforts and not on so-called protective charms and superstitious ceremonies for success, wellbeing, happiness, inner peace and ultimate liberation,
- Believing in the Eternal Universal Law of Kamma; and
- Seeking guidance from the Mahā Sangha (monastic community of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis).

The lotus is found in a variety of hues. In the Buddha Dhamma, each of them symbolises important human qualities that are to be taken to heart as yet another guide to live a fulfilling purposeful life. We noted earlier that the honour of symbolising the Buddha and His perfection was accorded to the pink lotus.



The ever-radiant Pink Lotus

The white lotus is often stylistically presented with eight petals to represent symbolically the Noble Eightfold Path which is central to the practice of the Buddha Dhamma. The holistic framework of wholesome living is aimed at refining our defiled nature and thereby enabling us to attain final liberation, real happiness and inner peace. The white lotus is also commonly used to exemplify the life-ideal of purity and inner peace that the Buddha personifies. This spiritual ideal of purity became entrenched particularly in the Mahāyāna Tradition of the Buddha Dhamma which took firm roots in China, the Korean Peninsula, Japan and Vietnam from the 2nd century CE.

The white lotus is revered as the symbol of Bodhi or Enlightenment that signifies the state of complete spiritual purity the Buddha attained. He achieved this supreme spiritual goal purely through self-reliance and self-effort in his six years-long Noble Spiritual Search, upon renouncing His princely life. In the same vein, we are reminded to perfect ourselves by practising the Sublime Dhamma and through our own effort optimise our inborn potential here and now in this very life.

On the subject of the symbolism of purity associated with the white lotus, it will be recalled that before giving birth to Prince Siddhartha, Queen Mahāmāya Devī had experienced a wondrous dream. She dreamt a snow-white elephant calf holding a beautiful white lotus in its trunk descending from the heavens and entering her womb from the right side. The omen of the white lotus was considered auspicious by the royal astrologers who prophesied that it symbolised the

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birth of a glorious prince. This attribute of auspiciousness of the white lotus remains entrenched in the psychic among Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras.



White Lotus symbolising purity, happiness and inner peace

The red lotus symbolises the original nature of the heart which is pure and loving. It exemplifies love and compassion which are noble qualities intrinsic to human nature. But because of our defiled minds that arise from negative influences triggered by external stimuli and internal mental aberrations we accumulate over the years, these noble sentiments are progressively removed from our character of intrinsic goodness of heart which we initially possessed.

The blue lotus is a symbol of victory of our inner spirit over our senses. It reminds us to always mindfully guard our six ‘sense doors’, against negative influences. We are

forewarned that the negative influences could easily undermine our ability to triumph in our spiritual as well as mundane aspirations. We are therefore urged to follow this realistic and effective way to purify our mind. In the sacred scriptures, the blue lotus also epitomises paññā which is to be achieved through the cultivation of a wholesome mental culture through diligent meditation practice.



The Radiant Pink Lotus

Then there is the age-old practice associated with the lotus which we find in the Buddha Dhamma culture of Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras greeting each other, “Sukhi hotu”, meaning, “May you be happy and well always”. In popular parlance this wonderful greeting is referred to as the Lotus Greeting. This is because the greeting is accompanied by the meaningful gesture of bringing one’s palms together which then form the shape of a lotus bud, referred to as añjali. The one greeted responds similarly and recip-

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rocates the benevolent thoughts that the Lotus Greeting evokes.

The Lotus Greeting is universally acceptable and transcends space and time. Furthermore, it personifies noble humane sentiments that are so very relevant regardless of the society in which the greeting is being used. The greeting Sukhi hotu is born out of the Buddha's teaching on cultivating Brahmā Vihāra. Thus it triggers us to cultivate the Four Sublime Mental States of mettā, karuṇa, muditha and upekkhā in our daily life.

When we wish a person, “good morning” as we customarily do according to the Western conventional practise, we are actually wishing the time of the day and not the person as such. For, when we meet the same person at mid-day, we wish her or him, “good afternoon”, and, “good evening”, if



The Sukhi hotu Greeting

the encounter takes place at that time of the day. Likewise, when we take leave of someone after sunset, we wish the person “goodnight”. Whereas the greeting, “Sukhi hotu”, wishes a person to be happy and well not just in the morning or afternoon, or evening or night, but throughout life. The greeting Sukhi hotu which is accompanied with the añjali gesture is clearly a far more meaningful and expressive humanistic greeting. Futhermore, it is certainly spiritually elevating, than the conventional Western greetings of wishing the time of the day instead of the person directly.

The greeting Sukhi hotu can be encouraged universally for a number of cogent reasons. The Lotus Greeting exudes the benevolent thoughts that are radiated to the person/persons being greeted, “May you come into full bloom like the beautiful and fragrant lotus”. In response, the person who is being greeted brings to mind the noble aspiration to bloom like the radiant sweet-scented lotus. Simultaneously, both persons bring to mind the Ten Pāramitās or Ten Perfections attained by a Bodhisattva (One aspiring to attain Bodhi) and are urged to cultivate them. This is symbolically represented by the ten fingers of the two palms brought together in the shape of a lotus bud. The Lotus Greeting thus evokes an aspiration in us to develop the Ten Pāramitās, in order to realise through self-reliance and self-effort our success, wellbeing, happiness and inner peace.

Yet another wonderful feature of the Lotus Greeting is that it brings to one’s mind the beauty and fragrance of the lotus and the valuable lessons espoused by the Buddha associated with the beautiful bloom. Futhermore, the greeting is

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cast in a graceful and meaningful form of expression that one cannot but be impressed by the evocative sentiments that it brings forth. For these and other sound reasons, the Lotus Greeting is appropriate to use to greet one another than the modern-day practice of routinely shaking hands. It may hence gainfully be put into practice by everyone as a meaningful universal greeting.

The Lotus Greeting brings to mind another significant matter of public interest. Recently I chanced to come across large posters prominently displayed all over the wards of the General Hospital in Kuala Lumpur. It was aimed at discouraging the general public from following the conventional western hand-shake to greet each other. The rationale extended is that the practice of shaking hands, when greeting one another, is prone to transmit viruses upon physical contact. The instruction to the general public is to forsake the hand-shake and to limit bodily contact to only the area of the thumbnail when greeting someone. The advice proffered is unfounded for the scientific reality is that germs may be transmitted to another person despite limiting the area of body contact to only the thumbnail.

It would be of interest to recall that for centuries since the time of the Buddha, the Lotus Greeting, “Sukhi hotu”, was the preferred greeting among monks, nuns and lay followers of the Buddha Dhamma. The Lotus Greeting, without question, is pregnant with meaning and purpose and is as relevant today as it was in the glorious past of the Buddha’s time. It helps to radiate within us the wholesome mental culture of unconditional friendliness and boundless goodwill

each time we greet a fellow human being, “Sukhi hotu”. Yet another lofty feature of this wonderful meaningful greeting is that it serve to promote samagga, notwithstanding whatever differences that may exist between or among peoples who use this meaningful humane greeting.

Due to the accident of history, as a result of Western colonialism that led to the subjugation and rule of traditional Buddhist countries, the Lotus Greeting went out of usage. The Western greetings, “Good Morning, Good Afternoon, Good Evening”, and, the coinages, “Good Night”, were promoted in preference to the traditional Lotus Greeting. These Western expressions were also translated into the vernacular languages and actively promoted through schools. A good example of what transpired in a number of countries which underwent Western colonial rule is Sri Lanka. With the entrenchment of the conventional English greetings during British colonial rule, the Lotus Greeting came to disuse though it was far more meaningful and evoked warm humane sentiments. So children grew up using the Western norm in greeting their teachers, parents, significant others, friends and each other. Now that these countries have been freed from their colonial yolk for over two generations, the time is long overdue for the revival of the use of the Lotus Greeting as a truly meaningful universal greeting.

The foregoing unique character and sublime spiritual aura the lotus holds are deeply ingrained in the psyche of Asian civilizations and cultures. Asians in general hold a passionate association with the mystical lotus which extends far beyond its captivating beauty and heavenly fragrance. Given

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its rich spiritual profile, it seems only natural that the ever-radiant lotus would continue to enjoy a distinct auspicious status in the Asian psyche. Predictably, the mystical lotus would continue to remain a spiritually inspiring revered symbol in Asia where people would share a deep sense of glory, pride and confidence for generations to come.

The rest of the world would do well to emulate Asian values and noble sentiments associated with the spiritually anointed ever-glorious, brilliant lotus. In line with this aspiration, may the Lotus Greeting, “Sukhi hotu” be the preferred meaningful universal greeting. May the mystical radiant lotus forever evoke the lofty spiritual ambiance it personifies for humanity to resonate in similar fashion.

CHAPTER V

DHAMMACAKKA : Wheel of the Dhamma

The symbol and symbolism of the wheel, referred to in the Buddha Dhamma in Pali as cakka (Sanskrit: chakra; wheel or disk), had attained a high state of development in Indian thought since ancient times. This was as way back as the Indus Valley civilization of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, circa 3,000 BCE. Nowadays of course we tend to regard the wheel as a commonplace item. We hardly reflect upon the revolution that followed its creation. Little, if ever, do we give a thought to the momentous invention of the wheel towards human progress and civilization. Yet, the fact is that the wheel represents one of the greatest inventions of humankind. It is credited to have brought about a dramatic transformation in human history, superseding beyond measure, other highly significant inventions such as the making and harnessing of fire.

Virtually every aspect of our practical life can be traced to the invention of the wheel. The ancient wheel and axel gave birth to the potter's wheel, the spinning wheel, the grinding wheel and the chariot wheel which ultimately proved powerful weaponry in ancient warfare. The invention of the chariot wheel led to the evolution of a stream of sophisticated ideas and concepts pertaining to statecraft, trade, industry and other fields of human endeavour. Life and most certainly human progress would have been drastically stunted if the wheel had not been invented. None of

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the items connected with transportation except for a few items such as crafts that float on water, which largely rely on wind, would be available today if not for the wheel. Likewise, the clocks, engines, machines, motor vehicles, aeroplanes and the very many gadgets we use daily and simply take for granted would not exist. In short, without the critical component of the wheel none of the millions of items we see around us would have evolved.

In the metaphysical and philosophical plane of Indian thought, the cakka holds great significance. The concept of the cakka is closely associated with yoga, meditation and Ayurveda as evidenced in the reference to wheels of energy, or energy cakras that function in the human body. In terms of cosmology, mythology, political philosophy and spirituality, the cakka connotes the ideal of temporal as well as spiritual kingship, or the apex of power. According to ancient Indian polity, the cakka represents regal power which is symbolised by two sets of concentric wheels; one operating on a vertical axis and the other on a horizontal axis.

The concentric wheels of the vertical-axis symbolically portray political power as emanating directly from a Maha Raja or monarch who wields absolute authority. He is represented by the royal palace which forms the epicentre of political power. The Maha Raja is assisted by a set of concentric circles of imperial authority comprising a High Council of Royal Advisers who are close family members, the nobility, higher aristocracy, and the Commander in Chief of the armed forces. They collectively administer the day-to-day running of the State. These royal advisers and

representatives are assisted by another set of concentric-circles comprising high governmental officials who are under the employ of the ruler. They hold various ranks and are entrusted with specific duties and responsibilities of governance. Below them are teams of functional employees detailed to carrying out a wide range of administrative responsibilities and functional duties.

The set of concentric-circles of the horizontal-axis represent the extension of a monarch's political and military power and rule over the kingdom. This emanates from the royal court which forms the fountainhead of political power and the epicentre of the governance of the kingdom. From the royal palace, which is customarily located in the capital city, the apparatus of government and administration extends in concentric circles to the urban city centres, towns and ultimately to the outlying rural villages populated by ordinary subjects who are primarily engaged in agriculture and farming. Along with their urban counterparts the country folks are obliged to regularly pay taxes towards the king's coffers.

In ancient Indian polity, the concept of Chakravati Raja, or Wheel-turning monarch, meaning a king of kings, or an Emperor was premised on the notion of a powerful kingship that holds overlordship over vast stretches of territories comprising smaller political entities. The latter polities were treated as subservient vassal states by the Chakravati Raja. The political legitimacy of the Chakravati Raja evolved from the concept of a royal chariot moving forward, unobstructed and unopposed, right across subjugated

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neighbouring kingdoms.

At the time of the birth of Bodhisattva, (One aspiring to attain Bodhi) Prince Siddhartha, it was prophesied that he would either become a Chakravati Raja or a Chakravati Dhamma (Turner of the Wheel of the Dhamma). His father, King Suddhodana, relentless strove to ensure that he would become the much-prophesied Chakravati Raja, for which role he was comprehensively tutored as heir to the throne.

Bodhisattva Prince Siddhartha, however, chose to be the spiritual mirror image of a Chakravati Raja, which is, to become a Chakravati Dhamma. Accordingly, he aspired to achieve this goal by attaining the spiritual pinnacle of Bodhi and earning the appellation, Buddha (the honorific for One who has attained Supreme Self-enlightenment or Buddhahood). Such a leader advances forward like the chariot wheel, unobstructed because of his unblemished moral and ethical purity, to guide people to enjoy sukha, or real happiness which he achieved by perfecting his pāramitās (virtues) and purifying his mind. So at the mature age of 29 years, Prince Siddhartha renounced the comforts of the luxurious palatial life for a spiritual one of a samanera, or a wandering homeless mendicant. After six long-years of his Noble Spiritual Search, he ultimately actualized his spiritual aspiration of being a Cakravati Dhamma, or a Wheel Turning Universal Teacher of the Dhamma.

Based on His Insight Wisdom and spiritual perfection, the Buddha injected into the conventional political philosophy of the cakka, His cardinal teaching of righteousness in gov-

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ernance. This was done via the usage of the symbolism of the Dhammacakka. The ideal of good governance the Buddha enunciated are as relevant in the contemporary world as it was at the age of the Blessed One. It is noteworthy that in the modern day context, the Dhammacakka embodies a particularly critical framework for addressing the alarming challenges of good governance and sustainable development besetting contemporary society around the world.

Among other laudable principles of righteousness in conducting statecraft, the Buddha stressed that the conquest of oneself is far greater than the conquest of territories and the subjugation of vanquished peoples. He exhorted the ideal of a wheel-turning sage-like Chakravati Raja who rules with an abiding sense of justice, avowed respect for human rights and an unblemished sense of social responsibility and social justice as opposed to an uncaring brute authoritarian ruler devoid of moral and ethical scruples and compassion. The ideal of a righteous Chakravati Raja is epitomised by the monarch being the fountainhead of benevolence. His reign accordingly is characterised by high moral and ethical standards. This includes sustainable development and deliberate policies and measures aimed at safeguarding the ecology and all living beings, including animals, other creatures and Nature. The Buddha referred to such an enlightened reign as sarvabhauma. By ruling his kingdom in a compassionate and just spirit, the righteous Chakravati Raja would without doubt ensure peace, tranquillity and delight among his subjects.

In addition, the Buddha taught numerous ideas, concepts

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and ideals relating to the wheel to elucidate the Dhamma. In fact, some of the most profound teachings of the Buddha were espoused through the symbol and symbolism of the wheel. Of a particular importance is the symbolism of the cakka to illustrate profound teachings embodied in the Paṭicha Samupāda Sutta (the Buddha's exposition on the reality of the Law of Dependent Origination of all living beings). Given the foregoing backdrop of the intimate traction of the concept of the cakka with the insightful perception and profound Teaching of the Buddha; the wheel symbol became intrinsically linked with the Buddha Dhamma. It commands a pre-eminence in the religion similar to that which the cross holds sway in Christianity, the twin symbol of the star and crescent moon and the Kaaba in Islam, the Star of David in Judaism and the Om symbol in Hinduism and so on with symbols in other religions.

The Buddha's act of turning the Wheel of the Dhamma is a spiritual metaphor for the Enlightened One's historic unravelling of the Sublime Dhamma to His first five disciples. The cakka-based symbolic representation of the Buddha and His Teaching is further reinforced by the historic Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta (the Buddha's Discourse on Setting into Motion the Wheel of the Ultimate Truth), after attaining Sammā Samboddhahood or Supreme Self-enlightenment. The sutta also signalled the establishment of the Order of the Sangha that commenced with the ordination of the first five disciple monks who were privileged to receive the Buddha's Teaching. The Buddha highlighted in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta that the key to achieving real lasting happiness which all human beings earnestly

seek, is through a Right Understanding of the root cause of dukkha experienced, as we journey in saṃsāra. History bears witness, to the fact that this epic sutta is credited to have changed the destiny of humankind in profoundly positive ways. The symbolism of the Dhammachakkapavātana Sutta which expounds the Dhamma is graphically captured in the teaching mudra of the Buddha image, one commonly witness in vihāras, that we noted earlier.

Judging by the important spiritual and moral teachings it conveys, the Dhammacakka represents a highly sophisticated spiritual symbolism notwithstanding its simplicity. Firstly, it symbolises the Buddha's epic attainment of the spiritual pinnacle of Bodhi. Secondly, it symbolises the Buddha's setting into motion of the Supreme Wheel of the Empire of Truth and thereby becoming a Dhamma Chakravati. Thirdly, it represents the Buddha's establishment of the Kingdom of Righteousness for the benefit of all humankind. Fourthly, the Turning of the Wheel of the Dhamma conveys to followers the importance of moving forward in life in accordance with the Right Understanding and practice of the Sublime Dhamma. The Buddha's Sublime Teaching as outlined in the Dhammacakkapavātana Sutta is imperative for one to follow in order to advance in life. It guides devotees to adopt, by skilful practice, a positive and wholesome mental culture in everyday living and to progressively achieve their individual spiritual and mundane aspirations. Fifthly, it encapsulates the Buddha's emphasis that the Dhamma is *akalika*. That is to say, the Doctrine He discovered and taught is relevant for all times, peoples and climes. The Dhammacakka thus signals that the Bud-

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dha Dhamma will usher success wellbeing, happiness and peace to one and all who practises the Sublime Dhamma, regardless of time and space. Sixthly, it symbolizes the progressive spread of the Buddha Dhamma from its birth place in India to the rest of the world, just like the forward moving cakka of the chariot wheel.



The Dhammacakka symbol

The symbolism of the Dhammacakka in respect to the propagation of the Sublime Dhamma is of primary significance in the context of embracing pluralism, multiculturalism, inter-religious understanding, harmony and peace. It is no exaggeration that one of the greatest epoch making events in the history of human civilization is the Buddha's exhortation to His disciples to, "Go and wander forth for the gain of the many; for the good of the many; in compassion for the welfare and happiness of the many...." The abiding commitment to, "go forth", that endears from a calling to enter the Order of the Maha Sangha, was perceived as a desire to serve the needs of society in not just spiritual matters, but also in terms of the welfare and wellbeing of the needy. It was this noble spirit of unconditional benevolence

that fired the Buddha and His continuous chain of disciple monks and nuns to, “Go forth” across many uncharted lands for over 2,500 years. They were the first global NGO dedicated to selfless service for the welfare and wellbeing of humankind.

Regrettably, nowadays ordination as a monk or nun, by and large, has been confined to providing spiritual guidance and teaching the Sublime Dhamma to lay followers. The exemplary unconditional benevolence, zeal and boundless zest of the early monks and nuns who extended great social services and care for the needy, is hardly visible today. This is a challenge that the Buddha Dhamma communities around the world must recognise and address. Monks and nuns must demonstrate their commitment to selfless service by example. They should preserve the true meaning, commitment towards compassion and the noble spiritual spirit of selflessness in, “going forth” as symbolised by the Dhammacakka. It was this underlying character of boundless benevolence embedded in the Buddha’s Teaching of unconditional friendliness, compassion, kindness, equality and peace among communities that helped the religion to spread rapidly across North India within a short period.

Millions of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis have since the age of the Buddha travelled far and wide to spread the Buddha Dhamma. Fired by the Buddha’s example of serving the needs and welfare of the community, they have given of themselves in the same fashion as a cakka steadily advancing forward. History bears witness to the fact that this is exactly what underlined the spread of the Buddha Dham-

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ma. Having put the Wheel of the Dhamma into motion, the Buddha's Teaching spread across the Indian subcontinent aimed at serving the masses and without any resentment, malice, ill will or hatred to other religions, cultures and civilizations. This noble heritage of Buddha Dhamma is worthy of the highest emulation, regardless of differences in creed, culture, ethnicity, social standing or religion.

The Dhammacakka symbolises the enviable glorious history and culture of the Buddha Dhamma of not having resorted to violence or coercion in the course of its over 2550 years-long history of the spread of the religion in different climes around the world. The glorious heritage of the Buddha Dhamma also sprouts from the Buddha's Noble Teaching of samagga and His exhortation to promote understanding, tolerance and peace, regardless of differences in religious beliefs. Thus, over the centuries, the Buddha Dhamma spread amiably across Central Asia, East Asia and



An intricately designed Dhammacakka in Odisha

Southeast Asia without a trace of belligerence or violence against other faiths. In addition, the Buddha Dhamma spawned noble cultural and civilizational heritages in the climes the religion took root across India and much of Asia.

With greater access to literature and information on the Buddha Dhamma, in the wake of the information communications technology revolution, the religion has reached out to peoples in all corners of the world. Today, it is recognised as the fastest growing religion in a number of countries especially in America, Europe and Australia. However, concern has been raised of late over the involvement of the Sangha Order in politics that have manifested in a couple of isolated happenings of inter-religious intolerance, extremism and violence, in a few climes. As in the case with all human problems and challenges such issues are best resolved by addressing the root of the problem, which as we noted earlier, is an untrained or uncultured mind.

The Dhammacakka has been presented in various stylized forms in all traditions of the Buddha Dhamma. Its essential elements have, however, remained consistent over the centuries in the different regions of the world where the religion spread and took firm roots. In essence, it comprises three basic components, namely the hub at the centre, the outer circumference or the rim and the spokes which collectively hold the two other components together as an integrated whole. Various interpretations have been advanced to explain the meaning and significance of the component parts of the Dhammacakka which merit elaboration and reflection.

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The rim of the wheel signifies motion as in the Buddha's historic setting into momentum the Supreme Wheel of the Universal Law of the Dhamma. This is why the Buddha is often referred to as the Turner of the Wheel of the Dhamma. Strengthened by śraddhā which the Exalted One personifies, we are to progress in our practice of the Buddha Dhamma out of love and compassion for ourselves, the family and the larger interest of society. Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras are to commit themselves to conscientiously spread the Buddha's Universal Teaching out of compassion to fellow human beings. They too would then be encouraged to strengthen their śraddhā in the Noble Triple Gem and in practicing the Buddha Dhamma and is so doing live wholesome fulfilling lives.

The circle formed by the rim represents perfection and the totality of the Truth of the Dhamma for followers to benefit from, by devoutly practising the Buddha's Teaching. The rim itself represents Bhāvanā, that is, the cultivation of a wholesome mental culture through skilful perfection of sīla (virtuous, noble way of live) and meditation practise. It also represents samsara – the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth which all living beings go through without exception. It symbolises inclusiveness and oneness in belonging to the symbiotic four-fold Sangha Community. This comprises the Maha Sangha of bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs, and the lay Sangha composed of upāsikās and upāsakas. The Maha Sangha is dedicated to teach the Dhamma to the lay sangha who are to benefit from the spiritual guidance. On their part, the lay sangha is expected to extend pious support for the preservation and perpetuation of the Maha

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Sangha for posterity.

The hub represents Nibbāna (Sanskrit: Nirvana), that is, the ultimate spiritual goal. It also denotes the Noble Triple Gem namely, the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Mahā Sangha comprising Aryan or Arahant (Spiritually Liberated) disciple monks and nuns to whom followers go to for refuge. In terms of practising the Buddha Dhamma, the hub of the Dhammacakka represents sīla, that is, the moral and ethical discipline that one is to follow in daily life. This constitutes the foundation or base of our spiritual exertion and the actualization of our mundane aspirations in life. For a start it calls for skilful practice in the observance of the Five Precepts in everyday life.

The spokes signify a number of important principles contained in the Buddha's Teaching. According to the number of spokes depicted in the Dhammacakka, they symbolise specific teachings of the Buddha:

The four-spoke Dhammacakka represents the Four Noble Truths which is the path to sukha or real lasting happiness and inner peace the Buddha unravelled and taught. The First Noble truth is the Universal Reality of dukkha, or the reality of all forms of unsatisfactoriness in life and aversions; the Second Noble Truth is the Cause of Dukkha; the Third Noble Truth is the Cessation of Dukkha; and the Forth Noble Truth is the Path to the Cessation of Dukkha, or the Path leading to sukha, which is, the Noble Eightfold Path.

It is difficult to find an exact English translation of the Pali

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term dukkha. A reasonable English rendering is unsatisfactoriness and the aversions we invariably encounter as we journey in life. This pertains to the various forms of physical, emotional and mental disappointments, frustrations, disenchantments, fears, anxieties, sadness, aversions and so on that one experiences in life.

The eight-spoke Dhammacakka represents the Noble Eightfold Path to success, wellbeing, happiness and inner peace for all humankind to actualize. Among the different designs of the symbol, the eight-spoke Dhammacakka is adopted as the universal emblem of the Buddhist fraternity. It is the most commonly used Dhammacakka design to symbolise the Buddha Dhamma.

The ten-spoke Dhammacakka stands for the ten cardinal directions for the Buddha Dhamma to spread to other lands. In effect, this means to spread the Sublime Dhamma in all directions to signify that the Blessed One's Teaching is universally applicable, regardless of time and geographical space. The ten spokes in addition symbolise the Dasa Pāramitās which the Supreme Self-enlightened Buddha personifies. This is to serve as an inspiration and guide for devotees to emulate. They also collectively represent the Dasa Raja Dhamma (Ten Principles of Good Governance), essential for ensuring the progress of society in the mundane sphere that is signally relevant for all times.

The twelve-spoke Dhammacakka symbolically represents the twelve links of Dependent Origination which the Buddha expounded in the Paṭicca Samupāda Sutta, of the end-

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less samsaric cycle of birth, death and rebirth. A clear understanding of the reality of our samsaric existence paves the way for us to reverse the twelve links of Dependent Origination and ultimately attain final liberation and deathlessness.

The twenty-four spoke Dhammacakka which is recognised as the oldest example of the symbol is often referred to as the Asokan Lion Capital Dhammacakka. This is because it is imprinted on the magnificent pillars erected by Emperor Dhammasoka which he posted all across his vast empire. It signifies *akalika* or the timeless relevance of the Buddha Dhamma to all humankind; and



Dhammacakkappavattana Mudra

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The thirty-one spoke Dhammacakka represents the thirty-one planes, or realms of existence. It prompts us to be ever mindful that we may be reborn into any one of these realms, depending on our Kusala Kamma (merits arising from wholesome deeds) and Akusala Kamma (demerits arising from unwholesome deeds), which we accrue as we journey in the samsaric circle of life.

From the very beginning of the dispensation of the Buddha Dhamma, the Dhammacakka has been used as a teaching aid to convey the Ultimate Universal Truth the Buddha discovered and taught. It encapsulates the fundamental spiritual and moral teaching of the Exalted One namely, the Middle Path or the Middle Way to achieve sukha. This spiritual path is to be pursued by ridding oneself of the cause of dukkha.

The Enlightened One stressed that the way to true happiness and inner peace is by understanding the universal reality of dukkha, and also most importantly, its root cause. It is by eradicating the root cause of dukkha by following the Noble Middle Path the Buddha taught that we can experience sukha, or enduring true happiness. It is imperative therefore for one to first recognise why human beings experience dukkha before they can aspire to achieve sukha.

In its essence, the Middle Path teaches us to avoid the two extreme spiritual traditions that were already entrenched during the time of the Buddha. On the one extreme was self-indulgence in sensual pleasures to the point where moksha or Union with the Almighty Creator is achieved. On the other extreme was the practice of self-mortification

by following tortuous ascetic practices. Muni Siddhartha had realised the futility of pursuing these two extreme spiritual pathways. He opted instead to follow a balanced Middle Path of spiritual exertion. The spiritual framework for treading the Middle Path is the Eightfold Noble Path the Buddha taught.



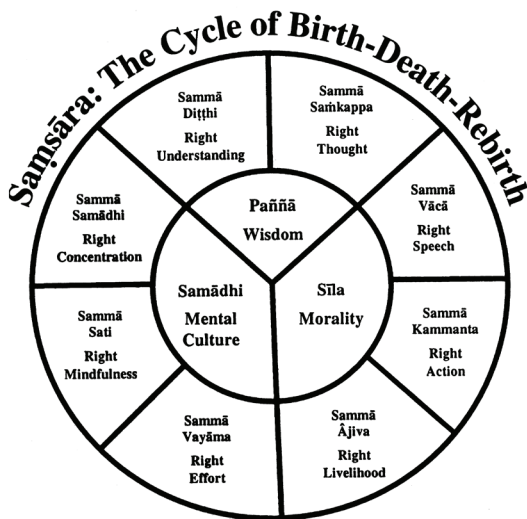
A stylised Dhammacakka

The framework for wholesome and purposeful living which the Eightfold Noble Path offers, as noted earlier, is symbolically conveyed through the eight-spokes of the Dhammacakka that extend from the centre of the wheel to its rim. It teaches us how to overcome negative influences or kilesas which arise in our mind from time to time. We recognise that the negative thoughts that arise from within us and also by way of external stimuli operating through our ‘sense doors’, are the primary causes of the various forms of dukkha we experience in life. These negative stimuli are to be overcome by developing a wholesome mental culture by diligently treading the Eightfold Noble Path.

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The Noble Eightfold Path which the Dhammacakka symbolises represents a core of the Buddha's Teaching. It forms a holistic and practical framework for one to understand the meaning and purpose of human existence. Once this is rightly understood, one is well placed to live a meaningful contented happy life. It is to be noted that the term, "Noble Path", is a figurative expression. Although normally reference is made to, "Tread the Noble Path", in the ultimate sense, the Path comprises eight segments of skilful practice in living a wholesome meaningful life as depicted in the diagram. By devoutly practicing the Noble Eightfold Path, we can experience sukha. This is exemplified in the convergence of the eight spokes at the centre of the Dhammacakka which symbolises Nibbana.

The eight spokes that form the eight segments of the wholesome mental culture which we are to cultivate earnestly are:



The Noble Eightfold Path

Sammā Dīṭṭhi --- Right Understanding or Perspective,
Sammā Saṅkappa --- Right Thought,
Sammā Vacā --- Right Speech,
Sammā Kammanta --- Right Action,
Sammā Ajīva --- Right Livelihood,
Sammā Vāyāma --- Right Effort,
Sammā Sati --- Right Mindfulness or Consciousness; and
Sammā Samādhi --- Right Concentration

The foregoing eight segments of skilful practice in living a wholesome life are inter-related and inter-dependent. They are to be followed as an integrated program of spiritual development and not as independent disjointed ad hoc practices. An important principle to bear in mind is that the underlying thrust of the Eightfold Noble Path is the cultivation of a wholesome mental culture. This is to be accomplished with Right Understanding which runs through all the segments of the Dhammacakka like a golden thread and holds them together as an integrated framework for actualizing our spiritual as well as mundane aspirations.

In order to facilitate developing a wholesome mental culture, the eight segments are grouped under three broad incremental steps. They are the skilful practice of sīla (moral or virtuous conduct), samādhi (cultivation of a wholesome mental culture), and paññā (attainment of Insight or Penetrative Wisdom).

The symbolic representations of this important Teaching are elaborated in chapter VII on the Sacred Stūpa. For now

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it would suffice to note that the self-training spiritual program begins at the base with the skilful practice of *sīla*. From here one progresses to practicing *samādhi* through *bhāvanā*, that is, the cultivation of a wholesome mental culture through mindfulness meditation practice. This is symbolised by the dome component of the *stūpa*. Consciousness of one's thoughts, speech and actions are thereby sharpened to a point that this becomes second nature. Through devout practice of the Dhamma one is able to cultivate a wholesome mental culture which ultimately leads to the attainment of *paññā*, whereby one is endowed with deep Spiritual Insight or Penetrative Wisdom. The high spiritual state is represented in the illustration by the pinnacle that rests atop the *stūpa*.

The Dhammacakka is also used as an effective visual aid to teach significant aspects of practising the Buddha Dhamma in daily life. Three principal elements merit highlighting. The hub represents *vinaya* or discipline which forms an essential teaching. The Buddha laid down very specific monastic rules, regulations and procedures for the Order of Monks and Nuns to scrupulously follow without compromise. The monastic disciplinary rules are detailed and compiled in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*. The eight spokes denote the eight pathways to *paññā* while the rim signifies *samādhi* or the cultivation of a wholesome mind through practising *bhāvanā*.

As for the *vinaya* for lay followers, the absence or lack of which the Buddha stressed is a primary cause of the malaise of most societies, numerous important guidelines were

Chapter V : DHAMMACAKKA : *Wheel of the Dhamma* provided. These are elaborated in specific discourses such as the Sigalovada Sutta and the Parābhava Suttas which provide instructions for the lay to follow as vinaya in daily life.

The Dhammacakka, in addition, holds important lessons for anyone to progress in life in any field of endeavour, including the achievement of mundane aspirations. For this important reason, it is also regarded as the Wheel of Personal Self-development. As outlined in the Cakka Sutta, we are guided by four wheels of positive ingredients in order to progress in life, namely:

Paṭirūpadesavāsa – to live in a favourable natural and social environment,

Sappurisāvaṣṣaya – to associate with and rely on Kalyana Mitras (virtuous friends),

Aṭṭasammāpaṇidhi – to aspire and direct oneself in the right path, and

Pubbekatapuññatā – having done puñṇakamma (meritorious deeds) in one's former lives one may expect to achieve success, wellbeing, happiness and peace, in this present life.

When endowed with the foregoing positive ingredients of personal development, one can expect to progress along the four-wheeled framework for success and abundance. Operating at the larger societal level, the Dhammacakka serves as a framework for people to live harmonious, happy and peaceful lives. Based on the foregoing account, it is obvious that the Dhammacakka which encapsulates the Buddha Dhamma holds the key to addressing a number of chal-

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lenges confronting contemporary society. These include the alarming challenges of environmental degradation, climate change, good governance and world peace. Notably, these global challenges are central to the United Nations sustainable development goals. In this regard, a Right Understanding of the nature of man or the human being is of paramount importance. This is simply because the Buddha's Teaching identifies Man as the principal actor or agent of the pressing challenges confronting the world.

Beyond question, the Dhammacakka symbol would continue to occupy a place of high significance in understanding, practicing and teaching the Buddha Dhamma for posterity. It is a symbol that beholds us to perpetuate the Buddha's Turning of the Wheel of the Dhamma, and to joyously embrace those who live by the Noble Teaching that the Dhammacakka encapsulates. Indeed, embracing noble human values of tolerance, understanding and peaceful co-existence in the spirit of samagga which the Dhammacakka symbolises is a singular way for world leaders to ensure sustainable development and a harmonious peaceful world for our present as well as future generations.

CHAPTER VI

Sacred Bodhi Tree

The Bodhi tree (colloquially referred to as the Bo tree), which is commonly known as the Pipal tree, belongs to a family of fig trees found in North India. It is easily distinguishable by its distinctive heart-shaped leaves, which interestingly, is the shape that symbolises love and compassion around the word. The Bodhi tree bears the botanical reference, *Ficus Religiosa* because of its intimate association with the Supreme Self-enlightenment of the Buddha. It was under the Pipal tree that Muni Siddhartha (Sage Siddhartha, who had almost completely purified his mind of all defilements), had resolved to meditate and remove the remaining residual kilesa from his mind. He succeeded in his spiritual exertion to totally purify the mind and thereby attain Bodhi – absolute spiritual perfection of attaining Supreme Self-enlightenment.

Muni Siddhartha's historic attainment of Supreme Self-enlightenment holds great significance. On Wesak Full Moon Day, before sitting under the Pipal tree in the lotus meditation position, He declared with utmost resolve, to totally cease caring for worldly things and to rid His mind completely of all residual defilements. He solemnly vowed that He would not abandon his resolute determination to attain Bodhi even at the risk of death thus:

Let my sinews and bones disintegrate.
Let the flesh and blood in my body dry up.

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My time for spiritual ascent has arrived!

I will not relent from my firm resolve!

Never from this seat will I rise until I have acquired self-mastery of my mind, gained inner wisdom and attained Bodhi!

Muni Siddhartha meditated from sunset and right through the night with the unshakable resolve to eradicate all the residual kilesa remaining in His mind. At the break of dawn the following day, true to his unrelenting determination, Muni Siddhartha totally eradicated his mind of the remaining kilesa that arose from within him as well as those from external stimuli that entered through the ‘sense doors’. Upon purifying absolutely His mind of all defilements, He attained Sammasam Buddhahood (Supreme Self-enlightenment), and earned the honorific, “Buddha”. This became the spiritual appellation He was referred to from thence onwards. The paeon of joy the Buddha expressed captures the bliss that sprung eternal from the attainment of Bodhi:

Seeking but not finding the ‘House Builder’ (figurative reference to rebirth),

I have travelled through the round of births and deaths.

O’ painful is birth over and over again!

House Builder, I behold thee now,

You shall not build thy house again.

All thy rafters have been broken down,

Your ridgepole is shattered too.

My mind has now attained the unconditioned state of Nibbana.

It has reached the end of every form of craving, including

rebirth...

This is my last birth. No more dukkha will I encounter.

By eradicating craving completely, the Buddha freed Himself from the samsaric cycle of birth, death and rebirth and so liberated Himself forever of dukkha which follows rebirth. The Blessed One thus unravelled to the world the way to eliminate dukkha and to realise sukha of absolute happiness and inner peace. His ultimate attainment of Bodhi and the bliss that enveloped His Being, explains why the Blessed One appears forever smiling. Also, since the Buddha's epic spiritual achievement, the Pipal tree has been reverentially referred to as the Sacred Bodhi Tree, or the Tree of Enlightenment, or the Wisdom Tree.

The Buddha's Supreme Self-enlightenment took place in the outskirts of the township of Gaya, which is today known as Bodh Gaya. It is for this historical reason that the township is held in high spiritual reverence as one of the most sacred sites in India. The sacred Bodhi tree at Buddha Gaya is visited each year by thousands of followers of the Buddha Dhamma who make a pilgrimage to venerate the spiritually ordained Bodhi Tree as one of the most sacred shrines in the Buddha Dhamma world. Huge numbers of people from all corners of the world who profess other faiths too visit Bodh Gaya each year to honour this historic sacred Bodhi Tree. While on this point, I wish to record my fervent position that the spiritually steeped township ought to revert to its historical reference, "Buddha Gaya" in order to perpetuate its historical significance viz the Supreme Self-enlightenment of the Buddha. To the best of my

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understanding, the word Bodh in Hindi does not command an appropriate meaning. Some assert that Bodh Gaya connotes that a person's mental faculties have left her or him. Further, I wish to urge the Indian Government to ensure that Buddha Gaya's religious preeminence, as among the most sacred sites in the Buddha Dhamma world, be securely safeguarded and its sanctity duly preserved in every possible way.

Over and above having designated Buddha Gaya as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, concerted efforts may be earnestly harnessed by the Indian Government to transform the sacred site from being just a historical place to attract tourism to one of showcasing India's most glorious religious heritages. A comprehensive policy directive would serve to ensure that the sacred site is presented to the world as a vibrant spiritual fountainhead. This could incorporate all-year-round celebrations of religious activities as well as public functions and community-based festivals highlighting the Buddha as the Greatest Son of India. In addition, the country's glorious heritage of the Buddha Dhamma culture and civilization may be highlighted as one worthy of great exaltation and eminently deserving universal embrace.

The sacred Bodhi tree that exists in Bodh Gaya today is a sapling of the original Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha had meditated and attained Bodhi. It is reverentially referred to by Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras, as the Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa. The accompanying honorific, "Vahansa", meaning a respectful personage, is accorded to the historic Bodhi Tree to bestow upon it the highest spiritual

sanctity. This has infused a spiritual persona into the sacred Bodhi Tree similar to that attributed to a revered spiritually steeped personage. The spiritual persona sprung forth by the fact that the Buddha attained Supreme Self-enlightenment after meditating under the Bodhi Tree. Further, according to the scriptures, the first thing the Buddha did after attaining Supreme Self-enlightenment was to stand in front of the Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa and gaze upon it with unblinking eyes for seven days.



The Sri Maha Bodhi in Buddha Gaya

Some critiques have argued that the period of seven days is more in line with poetic licence than an indisputable historical fact. However, the Buddha's expression of sincere gratitude and profound humility, regardless of the exact pe-

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riod of time He committed to this noble act, bears important lessons to all humankind. The Blessed One's expression of deep gratitude to the Bodhi Tree for having provided shade and protection from the elements, as He sat at its foot in His night-long historic meditation, remains unprecedented in the annals of human history. As we progress through the text, it will become self-evident that the Buddha's singular act has a direct and critical bearing on contemporary society. This is specially so with respect to the urgent and pressing global challenges of environmental degradation and the catastrophic repercussions arising from climate change.

A shrine named Animisalocana Cetiya was built on the spot where the Buddha stood still in humility and expressed His profound gratitude to the Bodhi Tree. Emperor Dhammasoka, who as we noted earlier, ruled virtually the whole of India, and who became a devout follower and royal patron of the Buddha Dhamma, regularly paid homage to the Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa. The Emperor made it a point to hold a grand religious festival each year to honour the sanctity of the sacred shrine. His adoration of the sacred Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa was so ardent that this caused his principal consort, Queen Thissarakkha, to harbour an intense jealousy against the sacred shrine.

In order to end the Emperor's devout attachment towards the sacred Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa, she secretly conspired to kill it by injecting poisonous mandu thorns into the bark. The Sacred Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa, however, managed to survive Queen Thissarakkha's sinister intent to end its life. Emperor Dhammasoka went on to consecrate

a huge monastery, referred to as the Bodhimanda Vihara, close to the Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa. It is recorded that around 30,000 monks and nuns led by the Chief Prelate, Venerable Chittagutta, participated in the grand consecration ceremony.

The sacred Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa encountered two other attempts to end its life. Both were committed by Hindu rulers for political reasons. The first was by King Pusymitra Sunga in the 2nd century CE. The other was by King Shashanka in 600 CE. As the spiritual powers vested in the Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa would have it, a new sapling was planted at the same spot by devout followers after the parent Bodhin Vahansa was destroyed.

The sacred Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa is revered as a striking symbol of the Buddha's boundless compassion, unsurpassed goodwill and all encompassing love for humankind. It occupies a central place in the Buddha Dhamma and is regarded as among the most significant symbols of the religion. It also underlines a number of fundamental teachings of the Buddha. Apart from reminding the world of the Supreme Self-enlightenment of the Buddha, the sacred Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa evokes spiritual inspiration that impel followers to strive hard in practising the Sublime Dhamma.

In modern times, especially in the context of environmental degradation and the consequent catastrophic repercussions arising from climate change; veneration of the sacred Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa holds a significant message. It sig-

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nals a call to world leaders specially to embark on a proactive global program of concerted preventive action to address the grave challenge. This is contextual especially since the United Nations has placed sustainable development as a global priority among the community of nations.

The Buddha's unsurpassed humility in expressing profound appreciation to the sacred Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa, underlines an important teaching in the Buddha Dhamma of practising *kataññūkatavedī* (boundless gratitude). This serves both as an inspiration and a cue to mounting a global initiative to safeguard Mother Nature. The Buddha's profound appreciation and expression of gratitude to Mother Nature is a teaching that is so much wanting in the rat-race materialistic high-pressured world we live in today.

By his own example of consistently practicing *kataññūkatavedī* to its very letter and spirit, the Buddha poignantly demonstrated the importance of skilfully following this important virtue in our daily life. His unsurpassed humility in honouring the Bodhi tree is a constant reminder to us all to cultivate a sense of gratitude and appreciation for whatever kindness or good deed extended by any quarter, regardless of the background, culture, religion or ethnicity of the benefactor. This teaching can effectively serve as a potent maxim for fostering multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding, goodwill and harmony.

The Buddha emphasised the importance of practising *kataññūkatavedī* for a number of fundamental reasons. He stressed that we should cultivate a mental culture of being ever-grateful for the good fortune to be born as human be-

ings and not in the animal realm, or worse still, in one of the yet lower formless spirit worlds or apayas (woeful words). We are to feel deeply indebted to our parents for their unconditional love and for nurturing and guiding us through life, despite the many sacrifices and hardships they encountered in nurturing and providing for us since infancy; to our teachers for educating us and guiding us in developing our innate talents and skills; to our spouse for their unconditional love and great sacrifices; to our kalyāṇamitras for keeping us along the straight and narrow moral, ethical path and in not leading us astray as association with undesirable peers would have otherwise invariably resulted in treading an unwholesome, even dangerous path; to our neighbours for their goodwill, and fellowship; to our colleagues in the work place who have been kind and co-operative, and so on.

Today, people have no qualms in acting against Mother Nature. The Buddha's very example of respecting and honouring Nature is the key to preventing catastrophic consequences of environmental degradation and climate change. The Blessed One's expressed gratitude and humility towards the Bodhi Tree underscores the imperative for humankind to respect and live in harmony with Mother Nature. The Exalted One's very act drives home the universal reality that we are all an integral part of Nature and that we are inextricably inter-dependent with Nature. These profound lessons demonstrated by the Buddha are to be effectively taught and enculturalised. This would contribute immeasurably towards addressing the twin global crises of unprecedented environmental degradation and catastrophic

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consequences of climate change which have been unrelentingly unfolding all around the world for the past several decades.

The global community is to be guided by the teaching the Buddha demonstrated, that all living beings are inter-connected and inter-dependent. There is nothing in the world that is independent, or absolute, or happens without condition and cause. On the contrary, there is a cause and condition for all phenomena as enunciated by the Buddha in the Universal Law of Karma, or the Universal Law of Cause and Effect. Simply put, nothing comes out of nothing. The bare truth is that the grave challenge of climate change that confronts humankind is caused by humans and no one else. To be more precise, the root cause of environmental degradation and climate change stems directly from human greed, and not by an unseen Almighty Being as some religions advocate. They insist that their Almighty God wishes to wreck catastrophes as a way of punishing humankind for follies, disobediences, transgressions and wrong doings committed against their individual religions.

The horrifying destruction of the eco-system can and indeed must be arrested forthwith. We first have to own up full responsibility for the dire consequences of environmental degradation and climate change that we have set upon our one and only planet, Mother Earth. We must acknowledge and accept the reality that the global crises are caused by humans and not by any arbitrary External Being. The human being, more specifically, an untrained and uncultured mind is at the crux of the twin challenges of environmental

degradation and climate change confronting the contemporary world. As such the cultivation of a wholesome mental culture of respecting the inter-dependence between humankind and Nature all around us is absolutely imperative. We have to earnestly inculcate a collective consciousness in our everyday life to preserve planet Earth just as the Buddha had demonstrably taught humankind. This begins by teaching a child to develop a mental culture of honouring and respecting Mother Earth. This mental culture of safeguarding Nature for humankind's very survival is to be constantly reinforced in her or him while growing up.

This indispensable goal is best realised through a deliberate and conscious effort on the part of parents to cultivate in their child a wholesome mental culture of safeguarding the environment and ecology. They should regard this as a duty of being Pubba Acariyas (the first and foremost teachers of their child). For want of a better terminology, this fundamental parental responsibility in providing a sound upbringing of their child may be referred to as 'home education'. The reality of modern society comprising nuclear families that are bereft of extended family life of past generations and also with both parents being income earners; deprives a child of a holistic 'home education'. This denial profoundly affects early childhood learning and development which are critical for the cultivation of a wholesome mental culture. It is equally important that the the process of developing a wholesome mental culture is continuously reinforced throughout the child's formal education as an integral part of the education system. In this way, not only would the child understand and appreciate the interdepen-

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dence between humankind and Nature, but more importantly, she or he will be responsible in living accordingly. The child would ensure by self-regulation in thought, speech and deed that nothing inimical is inflicted on the environment and eco-system.

At this juncture it must be highlighted, that despite the catastrophic damages caused to the environment, over the past several decades, no comprehensive and systematic curriculum has been formulated in the education system to address the grave crises. Attention to the critically urgent aspect of curriculum development for the cultivation of a holistic mental culture towards preserving the environment and ecology is called for. This is to form an urgent and essential component of the United Nation's global strategy for achieving the Sustainable Goals it has set out for the international community of nations. We have to be mindful that knowledge and awareness of environmental degradation and climate change alone cannot ensure that thinking and behaviour would conform. This has to be internalised in a child from infancy so that it becomes embeded in the mind.

That is to say, childhood teaching and training should aim to advance a child from, 'knowing' to 'being' what is taught, as stressed in Buddha Dhamma Education and pedagogy. The critical importance of this maxim may be illustrated by a common tragic shortcoming in contemporary society. In my regular public talks across Malaysia and overseas, I often come across parents lamenting about the ungratefulness of their offspring's and of the growing neglect, even abuse, meted out to them by their adult children, in their

twilight years. Parents simply cannot understand how their offspring who they had sacrificed so much to bring up in life could ever be ungrateful towards them. In evaluating dispassionately this critical social abrasion, it can be said that in part, the parents themselves are to be blamed for their heart-breaking plight.

A primary reason for the malady of children proving ungrateful towards their parents in adult life is because their parents have not conscientiously taught them to cultivate a sense of gratitude from a young age. It is also often the case where parents themselves have failed to demonstrate filial piety towards their own parents and likewise show respect and caring towards their significant elders. It is hardly surprising therefore that when their child grows up she or he would be wanting, if not indeed be devoid of this basic human trait of honouring their filial duty. We should not blame the child for this was simply not acculturated in her or him from infancy by the parents.

Parents must provide moral guidance to their child on the importance of practising gratitude right from the infant years. Further, this is to be taught by example. Just as the Buddha had demonstrated His gratitude to the sacred Maha Bodhin Vahanasa, they themselves must cultivate *kataññūkatavedī*. Through the process of acculturation, children would imbue a sense of gratitude towards their parents. Over time the human value of gratitude would develop into a second nature in them. The same acculturation strategy applies to ensuring sustainable development and in addressing the challenge of ecological degradation

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and climate change. Parents, teachers and leaders from all sections of society need to demonstrate through personal example respect for and gratitude towards Mother Nature before they can expect the younger generation and society as a whole to develop such a mental self-culture.

On the rationale for attributing a sacred persona to the Bodhi Tree, we have to hark back to a number of historical antecedents and the Buddha's Teaching to better understand the abiding spiritual sentiments among Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras towards the Bodhi Tree. Besides the Buddha's own humility and deep sense of gratitude towards the Bodhi Tree, another important historical backdrop directly connected to the time of the Buddha is recalled.

It was customary then for groups of devotees to visit the monasteries where the Enlightened One resided. They came with great śraddhā to pay homage to the Revered Teacher and to seek His guidance on some aspect of life. Many would come to seek advice to resolve some personal problem, or to address a family matter such on how to live a happy married life, how to bring up children and so on. On one occasion when the Buddha was residing at the Jetavana Monastery, located close to Sravasti, a group of devotees visited the monastery to pay homage. It was customary in India then, as it is still being practiced universally today in modified forms, to present flowers and incense to a loved one or respected leader of the community, or a revered religious personage. So the devotees came with great expectation and brought along garlands of flowers, incense and other traditional items to devoutly offer to the Buddha as a

mark of their reverence for the Enlightened Teacher.

As it turned out unfortunately, the devotees who had travelled from a village on the outskirts of the capital city of Rajagaha were unable to offer the flowers and incense, since the Blessed One was away teaching the Dhamma. They felt disappointed and left the flowers and other offerings in a heap at the entrance of the monastery, before departing for their homes.

On the Buddha's return to the Jetavana Monastery, His Chief Attendant, Most Venerable Ānanda, conveyed the great disappointment the group of devotees had felt for not being able to make their reverential offerings to the Enlightened One. To avoid such future disappointments, he suggested that an image of the Exalted One be placed in the precincts of the monastery. In this way, devotees could place their offerings at the Buddha image, whenever the Buddha was not present. The Buddha dismissed outright Venerable Ānanda's proposition to cast an image of Him. He instructed Venerable Ananda instead to plant a sapling from the Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa in the precincts of the monastery for the purpose of placing offerings.

In accordance with the Buddha's advice, a seed of the sacred Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa contained in a golden bowl was planted by Ananthapindika, the devout Dhammaputra and great benefactor of the Buddha Sasana (Buddha's Dispensation). This was accomplished at the Jetavana Monastery amidst great pomp and ceremony on an auspicious full moon day. The Buddha spent the night in rapt medi-

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tation under the newly planted Bodhi seed. It germinated into a magnificent Bodhi Tree and was revered by streams of devotees who often visited the Jetavana Monastery. An altar was erected alongside the Bodhi Sapling for devotees to offer flowers and incense at the Bodhi Tree Shrine.

Since this historic Bodhi Tree was planted at the behest of the Most Venerable Ānanda, it is fondly remembered as Ānanda Bodhin Vahansa. The practice of paying homage and worshipping the Ānanda Bodhin Vahansa formed an important means of honouring the memory of the Buddha. Just as in the case of the Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa, the ori-



Ānanda Bodhin Vahansa

ginal sacred Bodhi tree in the Jetavana Monastery was felled by later Hindu rulers and a new sapling was planted

on the same spot and venerated for centuries since. Devotees who go on pilgrimage to the sacred places in India make it a point to venerate the Ānanda Bodhin Vahansa, being inspired with the same spiritual zeal as their predecessors did through the ages.

Following the planting of the Ānanda Bodhin Vahansa and honouring it as a sacred shrine, the practice of planting a Bodhi Tree within the precincts of a vihāra became an established religious custom. In the process the sacred Bodhi Tree became revered as a prominent sanctum by devotees who flocked to their vihāras regularly to partake in religious activities.

So since the time of the Buddha, devotees make it a practice to light lamps, offer flowers at altars placed around the sacred Bodhi Tree and pay homage to the Bodhi Tree Shrine with great reverence and devotion. They place puja offerings on the altar and also make it a practice to circumambulate the sacred Bodhi tree shrine in a clockwise direction while reciting gāthās (verses) eulogising its sanctity and their śraddhā in the Buddha Dhamma. Such is the reverence among followers of the Buddha Dhamma that a specific gāthā is included in the Daily Vandanā Gāthās to express salutation to the sacred Bodhi Shrine thus:

Yassa mule nisinnova
Sabbāri vijayaṃ akā,
Patto sabbaññ-utaṃsaṭṭha
Vande taṃ Bodhipādapam.

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Seated at whose base,
The Teacher overcame all foes,
Attaining Omniscience,
That very sacred Bodhi tree shrine,
I do venerate.

Imeete Mahā Bodhi
Loka Nāthenapūjitā,
Ahampitenamassāmi
Bodhi-Raja nmatthute

This great Tree of Enlightenment,
The Lord of the world revered,
I too shall salute you.
May homage be showered upon you,
O' sacred Bodhi tree shrine.

In Sri Lanka in particular, Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras traditionally hold a special spiritual attachment towards the sacred Bodhi Tree. This stems directly from the history of the introduction of the Buddha Dhamma to the Island and the planting of a sapling of the sacred Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa in Buddha Gaya in the Island. It would be recalled that the Third Buddhist Council (251 BCE), which was held in Pataliputta under the chairmanship of the Most Venerable Moggaliputta Tissa Maha Thera, during the reign of Emperor Dhammasoka, resolved to send several Dhammaduta missions across the Indian subcontinent and to countries beyond its shores. Emperor Asoka's son, Arahant Mahinda, together with four other bhikkhus and a royal retinue was despatched to Sri Lanka. The initial

meeting of Arahant Mahinda with the Sri Lankan monarch, King Devanampiya Tissa (247 – 207 BCE.) took place at the sacred Mihintale rock, on the Full Moon Day of Poson (which falls in June).

On that fateful day, the Sri Lankan monarch, was on a royal hunting expedition in the forest at the outskirts of the capital city of Anuradapura. The King who was in hot pursuit of a deer, was startled by someone addressing him by his personal name, “Tissa, Tissa, Tissa”, and not by the customary royal honorific address befitting a king.

King Devanampiya Tissa at once ceased stalking the deer which then quickly escaped into the thick forest. He looked up in the direction of the voice to discover to his amazement a serene fully shaven saffron-clad figure along with four other similarly profiled persons and a well-dressed entourage waiting in attendance, standing atop a high boulder. The King realised at once that they were not of native descent and requested that they disclose their identity as well as state the purpose of their presence. Thereupon, Arahant Mahinda calmly disclosed his identity and his mission, “Monks are we, O’ Great King; disciples of the Truth. Out of compassion for you and the people of Lanka have we come from Jambudipa (ancient reference to India)”.

King Devanampiya Tissa was so inspired by the saintliness of Arahant Mahinda that he spontaneously put aside his bow and quiver of arrows. With his palms brought together in añjali, the King bent low to express reverence.

Arahant Mahinda posed to King Devanampiya Tissa a few

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preliminary questions in order to ascertain whether the monarch's intellectual maturity was up to expectation for understanding and grasping the Buddha Dhamma. Once this was established, Arahant Mahinda delivered a discourse on the Buddha Dhamma to the King and his retinue. They experienced a profound spiritual uplift and instantly embraced the Dhamma. King Devanampiya Tissa invited Arahant Mahinda to teach the Buddha Dhamma to his subjects. Arahant Mahinda was deeply gratified to propagate the Buddha Dhamma to receptive audiences as he and his retinue travelled around the Island of Lanka. Many members of the royal family and aristocracy eagerly joined the Order of the Sangha as bhikkhus and bhikkhunis. This led to a rapid spread of the religion across the Island.

King Devanampiya Tissa's first encounter with Arahant Mahinda was poised on a high level of diplomatic relations that existed between the Mauryan Empire and Sri Lanka. It is a historic event that marked a dramatic spiritual revolution in the lives of Sri Lankans, the impact of which remains vibrant to this day, in the psyche of the Sinhalese. King Devanampiya Tissa's wholehearted patronage of the Buddha Dhamma helped to rapidly establish the religion in Sri Lanka. The Buddha Dhamma recorded a phenomenal progress within a short time since the introduction of the religion into the Island. Many Sinhalese who were spiritually motivated entered the Order of the Sangha. Several thousands became devout lay followers of the Buddha Dhamma. Under the patronage of the king and aristocratic families many vihāras and monasteries were erected. Succeeding Sri Lankan kings and affluent aristocratic families

and business circles offered handsome endowments for the management and upkeep of these religious institutions. Along with monasteries, the vihāras also became centres of education, both for the Sangha Order and lay populace.

This period in history which marked a high point in diplomatic relations between Sri Lanka and the powerful Mauryan Empire witnessed a series of frequent high-level goodwill visits and exchange of gifts between the two royal courts. The golden era of close and friendly bilateral relations between the two kingdoms was crowned by the gift of a branch of the Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa to Sri Lanka by Emperor Dhammasoka.

Not long after embracing the Buddha Dhamma, King Devanampiya Tissa requested Emperor Dhammasoka for a sapling of the Sacred Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa. In response, the devout Emperor despatched a sapling from the branch of the sacred Bodhi tree to Sri Lanka through no less a dear person than his daughter, Saṅghamittā Theri. Historical records state that when Emperor Dhammasoka handed over to Saṅghamittā Theri a sapling from a branch of the Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa, he exclaimed to his Mukya Mentri (Prime minister), with great delight, “Three times have I worshipped the sacred Sri Maha Bodhin Vanhansa and bestowed kingship upon the shrine”. Such was the deep veneration that the Emperor had for the Sacred Bodhi Tree.

Again, when the ship set sail for Sri Lanka with his daughter, along with a sapling of the sacred Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa, nurtured in a golden casket, Emperor Dhammaso-

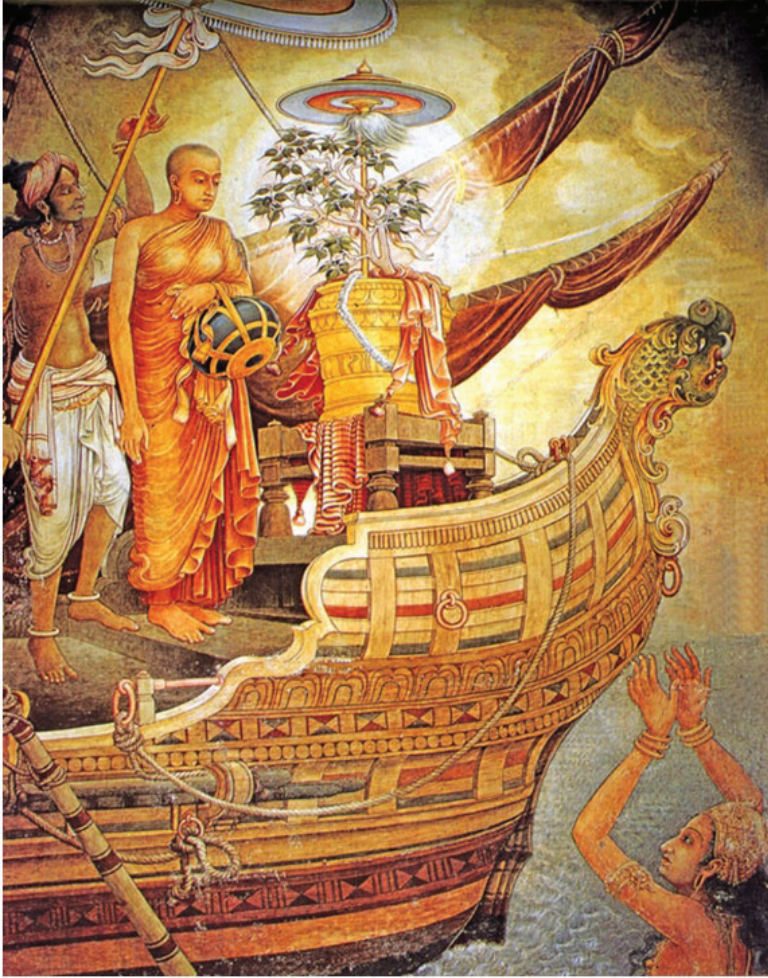
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ka is said to have stood with his palms together in añgali, expressing devout salutation to the Sacred Bodhi Sapling. He remained standing on the shore gazing after the Sacred Sapling until it completely vanished from sight. Only then did the Emperor return to the capital city, Patiliputta. With his heart filled with sorrow, he wept and lamented over the departure of his daughter. Emperor Dhammasoka's spiritual attachment towards the Sacred Bodhin Vahansa underscored the human persona that the pious Emperor had bestowed upon the sacred shrine.

The branch of the sacred Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa was received with great pomp and pageantry by King Devanampiya Tissa and Saṅghamittā Theri's brother, Arahanth Mahinda. They were accompanied by a multitude of devotees to receive the Sacred Bodhi sapling, at the seaport of Jumbukolapattana (modern-day Point Pedro), located in the northern tip of the Island. The Sri Lankan king personally waded into the blue waters till it was waist deep to receive the Sacred branch. He reverentially placed the sacred Bodhi sapling on his head and carried it ashore. Upon reaching the shore, the King piously worshipped the sacred branch and bestowed upon it the royal status of 'kingship' of the Island. He commanded that a series of grand religious ceremonies be conducted for three consecutive days to mark the sacred sapling's auspicious arrival.

The branch of the sacred Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa was conveyed in a magnificent procession to the ancient royal capital city, of Anuradhapura. The ceremonial journey took fourteen days on foot. At Anuradhapura, the sacred sapling

was received with a befitting ceremony. It was planted with great religiosity in the Mahamega Park on a specially prepared terrace. It grew into a luxuriant Bodhi Tree and soon became renowned as one of the most sacred symbols of the Island. Ever since it was referred to as Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi-



Drawing of the arrival of the Bodhin Vahansa to Sri Lanka

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in Vahansa. It stands erect to this day and is devoutly venerated by devotees as the most sacred Bodhi Tree in the Island.

The historic planting of the sacred branch left an indelible imprint in the minds and hearts of the Sinhalese Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras. Historians have observed that no other single event in the annals of Sri Lanka has seized upon the Sinhalese with such exuberance and tenacity as the planting of the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa. Copious historical records bear reference to the antiquity and sacrosanctity of the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa. According to the Mahavamsa (the genealogical history of Sri Lanka), the sacred sapling was planted in 249 BCE. This dating makes it the oldest verified tree in the world.

The historical, spiritual and religious significance the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa commands in the hearts and minds of the Sinhalese can hardly be exaggerated. Its veneration has penetrated into the innermost psyche of the Sinhalese to the extent that it assumes a wholly human character. Successive Sri Lankan kings and their subjects have cherished the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa as a most priceless treasure of the Island, for well over 2,000 years. It stands erect as a testimony of Sri Lanka's destiny as Dhammadipa. That is, the fervent belief in the psyche of the Sinhalese that the Island has been blessed and anointed by the World Honoured One as the repository and disseminator of the Sublime Dhamma for posterity. This entrenched belief in the symbolism of the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa has continued to evoke pious enthusiasm from devotees

from all over the Island to this day.

The strong spiritual attachment towards the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa in the psyche of Sinhalese devotees is reinforced by the performance of various rites and rituals around the sacred shrine throughout the year. The religious practices are observed with the aspiration that protective Devas (heavenly beings, similar to the concept of angels in the Abrahamic religions), who have taken abode at the Sacred Jaya Sri Bodhin Vahansa, would ensure that all is well for the devotee as well as her or his loved ones.

Over the ages a strong reputation and belief became anchored around the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa that the sacred shrine possesses spiritual powers that devotees could seek such as for healing sicknesses, for bringing about rains in situations of acute drought and other benign outcomes. Fired by this belief, eight saplings were nurtured from the seeds of the sacred Jaya Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa. They were ceremonially planted at various vihāras around the Island. An additional thirty saplings were nurtured subsequently and planted in different regions of Island.

As a religious practice of expressing devout veneration to the sacred Bodhin Vahansa, devotees regularly nourished it with pots of milk and water to buttress a luxuriant growth. This practice took on various religious embellishments and progressively culminated into a ritual of having special Bodhi Pūjās. The religious practice entails making offerings, chanting of suttas and the recitation of Bakti Geethas aimed at invoking the blessings of devas believed to be dwelling

SYMBOLS and SYMBOLISM: Embrace Multiculturalism at the sacred Bodhi Tree shrine. Over the years, the practice of having a Bodhi Puja became an ingrained popular religious practice in Sri Lanka.



The Jaya Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa

A number of concerned critics have questioned the religious validity of holding elaborate Bodhi Pujas. They view the ceremony as an over indulgence in ritualism that has crept into the straightforward religious practice of venerating the presence of the Buddha via the Bodhi shrine. They point out that the erroneous belief imputed by some monks and nuns to devotees of securing supplication through a Bodhi Puja has given rise to the injection of questionable ritualistic embellishments into its veneration. This is evidenced in the elaborate Bodhi Pujas now in vogue in an increasing number of vihāras in Sri Lanka. They point out that some bhikkhus and bhikkhunis have cashed in on the meaningful religious practice of paying homage to the sacred Bodhi Tree. These members of the Maha Sangha insist upon devotees performing elaborate rituals for conducting what they term as, ‘Special Bodhi Pujas’ on their behalf for a fee and/or other remunerations. They claim that their special blessing service directed towards invoking the intervention of protective Devas would relieve devotees of their sickness or troubles, or crisis confronted by the family or community.

Some members of the Maha Sangha have also recently promoted special ceremonies in conjunction with venerating the Bodhin Vahansa such as wrapping bales of saffron cloth around the sacred Bodhi tree. A similar ceremony of wrapping a sacred stupa with saffron fabric is also being promoted as a highly meritorious deed. Those who question the authenticity and rationale of promoting such religious ceremonies, innovated in recent years, point out that they run contrary to the rationalism in the Teachings of the Bud-

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dha Dharma. They call upon devotees to instead focus on the practice and practical application of the religion in daily life than on outward forms and rituals.

Ever since the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi Vahansa matured into a fully grown luxuriant tree, its saplings and seeds have been planted at various vihāras around the Island. Many were also taken beyond the shores of Sri Lanka to several countries in Asia and consecrated as holy shrines. This age-old practice has continued to present times so much so that saplings of the parent Jaya Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa are found as vibrant sacred shrines in thousands of cities and towns all around the world. Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras spread throughout the world, congregate in sizeable numbers under the umbrella of Buddha Dhamma societies, organisations or viharas to venerate the Sacred Bodhi Tree.

The hold that the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhin Vahansa has on the psyche of the Sinhalese as the Sacred Shrine of the Buddha Dhamma will remain etched in the minds of Sri Lankan Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras for posterity. Notwithstanding the tendency of devotees veering towards observing ritualistic practices associated with the sacred Bodhi Tree, its real symbolic essence would continue to be riveted to the Buddha's Supreme Self-enlightenment. The sacred Bodhi Tree shrine will be held in veneration as an auspicious religious symbol of the Buddha Dhamma. It would hold sway in the psyche of Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras as a symbolic spiritual presence of the Buddha for posterity.

CHAPTER VII

VENERATED STŪPA

The practice of building structures to enshrine the remains and possessions of those who have passed on can be traced to as far back as the time of our earliest ancestors. Ancient funeral grounds of primitive cave dwellers, in many regions of the world, reveal rites and rituals involving the burial of personal possessions, images, artifacts, utensils and weapons, of departed persons in specially prepared graves. The more sophisticated and advanced tombs of the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt and the highly elaborate imperial tombs in ancient China, for example, have presented copious evidences of the elaborate use of symbols and symbolism connected with burial customs and traditions. Funeral ceremonies which included the sanctification of the buried items disclose an innate human spirit to immortalise the memory of the departed person. They also reveal an underlying belief in an afterlife or rebirth, among our earliest ancestors.

In ancient India, it was customary to bury in a stūpa the bodily remains of a deceased person of important status, authority, or of high social standing. The term stūpa (thūpa in Pāli), literally means a heap, or a lock of hair. The consecration of bodily-remains of the departed was customarily undertaken with much ceremony when it came to honouring rulers, members of the royal family, renowned religious leaders, venerated teachers and key community leaders who have passed on. A primary purpose of building a stūpa

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was to enable people to honour and pay their respects to the personage long after she or he had departed from this world. Another important motive was to celebrate and pass on laudable qualities of the respected departed personage for future generations to recall and emulate. The burial ceremony involved gathering the ashes of the cremated person from the funeral pyre into an urn and burying it in a bell-shaped mound in order to mark the burial spot to be venerated for posterity.

Recognition of a stūpa as a symbol of honour and/or veneration has its origins in the ancient Indian practice of building a dome-shaped semi-hemispherical mound to bury the physical remains of a departed leader or of a person of high religious, educational or social standing. In the case of the history and heritage of the Buddha Dhamma, the stūpa, represents a sacred shrine as well as an important symbol. Early stūpas symbolising the Buddha's presence represented the most important object of worship among devotees for several centuries. With the tradition of sculpturing Buddha images and the practice of venerating them, which emerged from around the early 1st century CE. they superseded stūpas as an object of veneration.

Stūpas are considered as amongst the most significant architectural expressions of the glorious civilizational heritage of the Buddha Dhamma. Over the ages the simple stūpa became progressively elaborate in design and architectural style. It also incorporated various religious motifs. From a simple mound, the stūpa gradually developed into an elaborate impressive eye-catching structure endowed

with artistic motifs and creative embellishments. With the geographical spread of the Buddha Dhamma from its home in India to other distant lands across Asia, the stūpa took on localised references such as cetiya, dagaba and pagoda. The term dagaba, for example, is a Portuguese corruption of the Pāli term, “datugabbha”, meaning an enshrined relic. Since the Portuguese colonial masters of Sri Lanka then were not adept with the Pāli term, it was corrupted to dhagabba. Later on, the word was shortened to dagaba.

The practice of enshrining the bodily remains and belongings of departed bhikkhus and bhikkunis in a stūpa and venerating it as a sacred shrine pre-dates the Maha-Parinibbāna of the Buddha. A number of the Buddha’s prominent Arahant disciples such as Arahants Moggallana and Sariputta passed away well before the Supreme Self-enlightened Master. The Exalted One personally supervised the enshrinement of their remains and designated them as sacred relics worthy of veneration. According to the scriptures, as contained in the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta, Arahant Ananda faithfully recounted the instructions given to him by the Buddha on the enshrinement of sacred relics.

Base on Arahant Ananda’s exposition of the said sutta, the Buddha had set out specific instructions for holding a fitting ceremony for enshrining, honouring and venerating sacred relics. The Buddha had instructed that upon placing the bodily relics of an Arahant in a golden receptacle, devotees are to construct a stūpa at a prominent crossroad to enshrine them with a proper religious celebration. Devotees are to honour the sacred relics with parasols, banners

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of victory, buntings, flags, garlands, scented water and joyous music regularly as one would do in a place of worship. In so advising, the Buddha sanctified the stūpa and raised its significance from an ordinary burial mound to that of a sacred shrine to be piously venerated. Ever since, stūpa shrines have remained significant objects of veneration by devotees.

The Exalted One recognised the importance of the practice of honouring sacred relics. He foresaw that devotees would be inspired by the stūpas enshrining relics and that their śraddhā in the Buddha Dhamma would be aroused in the process. Such a positive religious disposition in turn would help them to calm their minds and to focus on practising the Buddha Dhamma in daily life. They would progressively establish themselves in the Buddha Dhamma by reflecting on the Buddha's Teaching such as on the reality of impermanence and the Universal Law of Kamma, as they venerate a sacred stūpa.

The Blessed One instructed Venerable Ananda on three categories of relics that are worthy of pujaniyatthana, or veneration. They are firstly the bodily remains of the Buddha and His Arahant Disciples, classified as Sārīrika Dhatunvahanasa. This injunction reinforced the sanctity accorded to the religious practice of enshrining relics in a stūpa, and, to devoutly venerate it as a sacred shrine. Accordingly, Saririka Datunvahansa stūpas enshrining sacred bodily relics of the Buddha and Arahant disciples such as the Ananda Stupa at Vaisali and the Sanchi Stupa in Bopal in India have been

been piously venerated for over 2550 years.

The second category of sacred relics is referred to as Pāribhogika Dhatunvahansa. The term refers to objects that were, “of use or serving a purpose”, for the Order of the Maha Sangha. This includes items used by the Buddha and Arahant disciples such as the alms bowl, razor, water pot and girdle.

The third category of relics was classified as Uddesika, which literally means indicating, or of significance. Primarily, these are important events in the life of the Buddha or sacred spots associated with the Enlightened One. They symbolise His presence and the Truth in the Dhamma. A much venerated example of an Uddesika is the Dhamek Stūpa in Saranath that was built at the site where the Buddha expounded the Dhamma to His first five disciple bhikkhus. The sacred stūpa enshrines clay tablets containing teachings of the Buddha which reads, “Ye Dhammahetupubbhava tesamhetum Tathāgata aha tesaṃ cayo nirodhaevam vadimahasamano’ ti”. The stanza is a reference to the Eternal Universal Law of Causation which the Buddha taught to His first five disciple monks.

A fourth category of stūpa construction which emerged later is votive stūpas. These relatively smaller stūpa structures were built in large numbers all across India and in the countries where the Buddha Dhamma was traditionally practiced. They were built by devout patrons of the Buddha Dhamma in the belief of acquiring great punya karma or merits for their noble deed. The belief is that the merits

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accrued would impact positively in their present and future lives. Many of these votive stūpas often enshrined miniature images of the Buddha and Buddhist texts transcribed on clay or stone tablets.



Ananda Stūpa at Vaisali in Bihar State, India

In terms of structural design, the stūpa represents concepts directly connected with the Buddha Dhamma by ensuring that cardinal teachings of the Buddha are incorporated into every stage of its construction. According to the Sri Lankan tradition, for example, the stūpa is made up of three basic components which symbolically represent key elements of the Sublime Dhamma. The base represents śraddhā in the Buddha Dhamma which devotees are to firmly establish themselves. The three bracelets or circles that follow represent the Noble Triple Gem.



The magnificent Sanchi Stūpa in Bophal, India

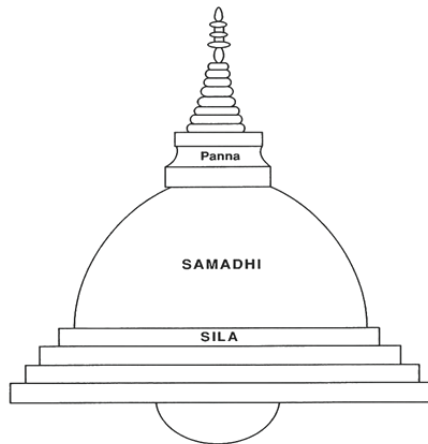


Torana of the Great Sanchi Stūpa

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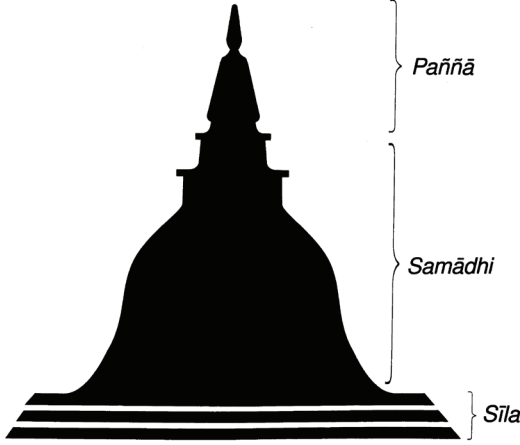
The dome represents the Buddha Sasana or Dispensation of the Buddha. The four-sided enclosure stands for the Four Noble Truths. The eight tapering's above the four sided enclosure stands for the Eightfold Noble Path, and the pinnacle on top symbolises the ultimate bliss of Nibbana.

The overall design structure of the stūpa also conceptualizes the three-tiered graduated practice the Buddha taught of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. This symbolically represents the interdependent, integrated, gradual steps in mental cultivation. As illustrated in the diagram, the base of the stūpa represents the daily practice of *sīla* which forms the basic moral precepts or ethical code for us to live a virtuous life. *Sīla* comprises the fundamental principle of refraining from saying or doing anything that would hurt oneself, other person/persons, or any living being. The next level, of spiritual self-development is *samādhi*, that is, the cultivation of a



Key components of the Stūpa

wholesome mental culture through bhavana practice. This spiritual exertion is to be pursued diligently in order for one to achieve paññā or Insight Wisdom that is symbolised by the pinnacle atop the dome of a stūpa.



Graduated Steps in Wholesome Mental Cultivation

With the stūpa accorded the religious significance of a shrine, it progressively became an integral of spiritual practice. Devotees find great solace in venerating stūpas and from contemplating on the Sublime Teaching of the Buddha in the process. The stūpa reminds them of the sacredness of the shrine, and specifically, of the sacred relics enshrined in them. As they seek refuge in the Noble Triple Gem, they are reminded to skilfully practice the Sublime Dhamma such as the Buddha's universally applicable teaching to avoid unwholesome thoughts, speech and action, and to instead, cultivate wholesome ones. The stūpa provides a religious sanctuary for devotees to connect symbolically with the Buddha through the enshrined sacred relics. They are

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to simultaneously draw inspiration to diligently practice the
Buddha Dhamma in daily life.

In keeping with the pre-eminence the stūpa commands as
a sacred shrine worthy of veneration, a specific gāthā is re-
cited by devotees, in the Daily Vandanā Gāthā. The daily
recitation declaring their devout homage towards the stūpa
is as follows:

Vandāmi cetiyam sabbaṃ
Sabbatṭhāne supatitṭhitam
Sārīrikadhātu Mahā Bodhim
Buddha rūpaṃ sakalaṃsadā

I salute every cetiya
That may be erected in any place.
The bodily relics of the Buddha, the Great Bodhi,
And all images of the Buddha.

The sacred stūpa shrines stand erect as symbols of the tri-
umph of the Buddha's Supreme Self-enlightenment. Since
ancient times, stūpas have helped followers to strengthen
their devotion towards the Buddha Dhamma and practice
of the religion. They serve as a symbol to recall the su-
preme qualities of the Buddha and His Arahant disciples.
The spiritual mind set of honouring the stūpa as a sacred
symbol is particularly evident in the Theravada Tradition
which is entrenched in countries such as Sri Lanka, Thai-
land, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos where it constitutes
an integral of a vihara. Elaborate pujas continue to be cus-
tomarily performed at stūpa shrines which include the of-

fering of flowers, incense and illumination. As part of their religious practice, devotees make it a point to circumambulate the stūpa when they visit a vihāra. They do so piously in a clock-wise direction in accordance with the custom of keeping the person or object of reverence on the right side, as a mark of high veneration.

Circumambulation around a religious object is an ancient spiritual symbolism which is believed to be derived from the circular movement of the sun which was perceived as being all powerful and unstoppable. According to ancient Indian thought circumambulation around the stūpa is in empathy with the powerful solar system and is to be regarded as a representation of one progressing in a noble or right direction. This belief in the spiritual practice of moving in empathy with the solar motion around a sacred object, interestingly, is an integral part of the devotional practice of many other religions such as in Hinduism and Islam that is being observed by followers.

Among the significant events that promoted the sanctification of the stūpa is the Mahā Parinibbāna of the Blessed One. The enshrinement of the sacred relics of the Buddha, irreversibly reinforced the practice of anointing sanctity to stūpas as sacred shrines that resulted in them commanding high veneration. Recapitulation of the Passing Away of the Buddha would serve to illuminate the entrenchment of the religious practice of bestowing sanctity to stūpas.

In His eightieth year, after observing Vassa (the annual three-months Monsoon Rains Retreat), in the mango grove

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of the famous courtesan Amarapāli, the Buddha proceeded to Pava of the Malla Kingdom. He halted at the home of a blacksmith named Chunda for dana (mid-day alms offering). Soon after partaking dana, the Blessed One experienced a severe attack of dysentery. However, the Buddha persisted on His journey towards Kusinagara, the capital city of the Mallas.

As the Blessed One journeyed through the suburbs of Kusinagara, He came across a scavenger named Subhadra, who because of his low caste untouchable status, shied away from the Buddha, even though he was awed by the Exalted One's presence. Characteristic of His boundless compassion and supreme sense of social justice, morals and ethics, the Buddha went up to Subhadra to inject confidence. He emphatically assured Subhadra that there was absolutely no need for him to be servile or feel inferior to others in society. He stressed that this included the so-called high caste members of the community.

Subhadra was completely overawed by the Buddha's powering presence and mesmerising serenity. In addition, His humility and unconditional compassion was profoundly impactful. An upsurge of self-esteem sprung from deep within him in the wake of his newly-inspired personal empowerment triggered by the Buddha's compassion. This propelled him to liberate his mind set from the shackles of the unjust, oppressive and inhuman caste system imposed upon him, his family and his entire community since birth.

Subhadra spontaneously requested the Enlightened One's

permission, “to go forth”. The Buddha gladly consented to Subhadra’s earnest request to enter the Sangha Order which made him the last, but not the least important person, He personally ordained. The historic transformation of Subhadra has inspired millions of downtrodden Indians to liberate themselves from the shackles of the unfounded caste system. Many millions more may be liberated by the embrace of the timeless Sublime Dhamma if only they be given the opportunity and support to do so by rational minded liberal leaders.

Subhadra’s ordination as a disciple monk by the Buddha – though he came from the so-called low caste community and condemned to a life of a scavenger by the self-proclaimed high castes who were driven by vested interest – continues to inspire millions of downtrodden, socially disadvantaged communities in the Indian sub-continent. His liberation from the dogma of caste discrimination is a source of confidence to marginalised people to free themselves from the bigoted oppressive inhuman caste system.

By following Subhadra’s decision to seek refuge in the Noble Triple Gem, millions among oppressed Indians have been able to break away from the pernicious dogma of untouchability that have been arbitrarily imposed on them by high castes Brahmins for centuries. Since embracing the Buddha Dhamma many of them have been able to live dignified liberated lives and to actualize their innate talents and skills and progress in life. The challenge set before leaders of the Buddha Dhamma, including and in particular, bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, is to liberate the millions of Indians

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and other marginalised peoples around the world by guiding them to embrace the timeless Sublime Teaching of the Buddha.

Soon after Subhadra's ordination as a samanera (novice monk), the Buddha decided to have a rest as His body could no longer cope with the chronic attack of dysentery. The Blessed One made known to His disciple monks that he was about to Pass Away into Nibbana. Upon His bidding, the faithful attendant, Venerable Ananda spread a couch between two Sala trees. The Buddha laid Himself on His right side on the hastily prepared couch in readiness to depart from the human world. On Venerable Ananda's inquiry as to how the Buddha's mortal remains were to be treated after His Mahā Parinibbāna, the World Renowned One instructed that stūpas be erected to enshrine his bodily relics.

At the last watch of the night, the World Renowned One Passed Away peacefully and entered blissfully into Nibbana (Eternal Bliss). Upon receiving news of the Mahā Parinibbāna of the Buddha, seven eminent claimants, namely the Sakyas of Kapilavastu, the Koliyas of Ramagama, King Kunika (nicknamed Ajatasattu) of Magadha, the Licchavis of Vaisali, the Mallas of Pava, a Brahmin of Vethadipa, and the Buliyas of Allakappa, despatched envoys to take possession of portions of the Saririka Datunvahansa of the Buddha.

The Mallas initially were reluctant to share the Saririka Datunvahansa of the Buddha with the other claimants who were also eager to erect stūpas to enshrine the sacred relics

to venerate the presence of the Exalted One in their respective states. Thanks to the diplomatic adroitness of the respected Brahmin Dona, an open conflict among the claimants was narrowly averted. He persuaded the rival claimants to consider seriously the larger interest and responsibility they shouldered in perpetuating the glory of the Buddha and in promoting the Sublime Dhamma for the benefit of humankind for posterity. His astute statesmanship couched in such fine persuasive language deserves attention for its relevance in modern-day conflict management and resolution:

My lords, kindly listen to my proposal. The Buddha's Teaching is about forbearance. It is simply not right that strife should arise from dividing the Best of Men's relics. Let us all be united in harmony and peace, friendship and goodwill and divide the sacred relics into eight equal portions. Then let stūpas be built far and wide that all may see and be inspired with confidence, in strengthening their piety in the Buddha Dhamma with utmost śraddhā.

The Mallas who were initially adamant on retaining the entire sacred relics of the Buddha were taken in by the persuasive diplomacy of Brahmin Dona and relented on their claim of exclusivity. They agreed to share the Buddha's relics with the other influential claimants who had gathered at Kusinagara. Based on the mutual understanding forged among the seven claimants of the Buddha's sacred relics, Brahmin Dona divided the Saririka Datunvahansa into seven equal parts and presented a portion each to the individual claimants. It so happened that the envoy and the royal del-

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egation of the Moriyas of Pippalivana arrived at Kushinagara just after the distribution of the Saririka Datunvahansa had concluded. As a result, they had to be contented with having the ashes from the Buddha's funeral pyre for them to build a shrine in their capital city.

For centuries since the age of the Buddha not much had been recorded about the geographical spread of the Buddha Dhamma. However, it may be safely adduced that at the time of the Passing Away of the Buddha, the popularity of the Buddha Dhamma was impressive. This is clearly evidenced by the number of prominent rulers who had come forth to claim a portion of the Buddha's Saririka Datunvahansa at the cremation ceremony.

The Mallas cremated the Buddha with rites befitting a Chakkravati Raja. They built a stūpa at the very site of the Passing Away of the Buddha, under the Twin-Sala trees that is referred to as the Maha Parinirvana Stupa. The Brahmin Dona personally erected a stūpa over the urn from which the Saririka Datunvahansa of the Buddha was collected and divided equally into separate containers. The seven portions of the Buddha's sacred relics and the ashes of the Buddha's funeral pyre were enshrined in stūpas in the capital cities of the individual recipients for the people in their respective regions to venerate. Thus the stūpas also served to promote the memory of the Buddha and simultaneously helped to propagate the Sublime Dhamma across India and later beyond its shores to much of Asia where the Buddha Dhamma spread.

Based on the Mahāvamsa (a genealogical chronicle of Sri

Lanka), that was written by Venerable Mahānāma in the 5th century CE. King Kunika of Magadha, who secured a share of the sacred relics of the Buddha declared, “Over the remains of the Buddha, I will build a sacred monument and celebrate the glorious life of the Enlightened One”. Out of his zealous support of the Buddha Dhamma, the king erected a huge stūpa to enshrine the sacred relics of the Buddha. In addition, he built several more stūpas all around the capital city, Rājagaha, to enshrine relics of venerated disciple monks of the Buddha.

The stūpas enshrining the relics of the Buddha and His Arahanat disciple monks are held in reverence as sacred shrines worthy of the highest honour and veneration. They have remained important symbols of devotion and have been piously venerated by generations of Dhammaputris and Dhammautras through the centuries. On this point, the renowned Chinese pilgrim scholar monks, Shih Fa Shien and Shih Hung Tsang had recorded in their pilgrimage of the sacred places in India, in the 5th and 7th century CE. respectively, of the existence of the awe inspiring stūpas built by Emperor Dhammasoka. Among the stūpas they venerated as recorded in their amazing pilgrimages was the prominent and historically significant cylindrical shaped Dhamek Stūpa. This sacred stūpa shrine features as the most imposing religious structure in Saranath. It is visited by thousands of pilgrims from all over the world each year.

Emperor Dhammasoka considered that the original stūpas that were built to enshrine the sacred relics of the Supreme Self-enlightened One were considered rather modest. His

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missionary zeal spurred him to build monumental stūpas across the subcontinent. The relics of the Buddha and Arahant disciples were exhumed and enshrined in larger and more elaborate stūpa structures. According to Emperor Dhammasoka's rock edicts, that over 84,000 stūpas were constructed which enshrined the redistributed relics, resulting in a dramatic boost to the practice of venerating stūpas by devotees. The Emperor's initiative also brought about a transformation of the construction of stūpas from their initial simple mound structure into grandiose elaborate monuments. The number of stūpas purportedly built by Emperor Dhammasoka appears somewhat exaggerated. But we can be certain of the kernel of truth of the religious tradition he set ablaze in erecting stūpas as symbols of the Buddha's presence and in reinforcing the practice of piously venerating them as sacred shrines.

A number of imposing awe-inspiring stūpas were also built to honour renowned disciples of the Buddha. One such monumental stūpa is the Great Sanchi Stūpa in Bopal, in North-Central India, built by Emperor Dhammasoka. It stands out as a marvel of creativity and magnificent expression of art and architectural excellence of ancient India. The stūpa was sanctified as the repository of the sacred relics of the Buddha's foremost disciples, namely Arahants Sariputta and Maha Moggallana. The Sanchi Stupa consists of a virtual hemispherical dome that is crowned by a triple umbrella. It has access from the four cardinal directions which are marked by elaborate toranas (gateways). These gateways marvellously depict important events in the life of the Buddha and of Jataka Katas (folk stories of past lives),

underlining moral and ethical lessons.

The Great Sanchi Stūpa has the distinction of being recognised by UNESCO as an archaeological and sculptural masterpiece of humankind. The toranas leading to the stūpa are particularly impressive. They depict in exquisite bas-relief many significant scenes from the life of the Buddha, just like a modern 3-D movie, albeit cast in stone of an ancient technological era. In keeping with the artistic tradition that prevailed then, the Buddha is not represented in the human form. His presence is commemorated aniconically through the traditional usage of symbols such as the Dhammacakka, the Sri Pada (Foot Impression of the Buddha), Bodhi tree, a throne and an umbrella.

Over the centuries, the simple structure of the stūpa was modified and elaborated according to artistic and architectural styles of individual cultural environments that prevailed then. As the Buddha Dhamma spread across the Indian sub-continent, the early simple structural model of the stūpa was progressively modified in its details to suit local artistic genres and architectural traditions. As a result, many adaptations as well as fresh artistic designs and motifs were introduced by later generations of builders of stūpas. In the wake of these developments, besides the bell-shape mound stūpas, numerous other architectural stylisations were introduced such as those constructed in the shape of a pot, water bubble, heap of grain, a flower, or a Nellie (a scallop-like fruit).

Mercifully for the Buddha Dhamma heritage, the Muslim

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conquest of India which saw the destruction and vandalism of Buddha images from the 13th to the 17th century CE. spared the stūpas a similar fate. This was because of the perception among the Muslim invaders that these structures were essentially burial monuments. However, as a result of neglect due to the decline of the Buddha Dhamma in India, most of the stūpas and other sacred shrines fell into ruin. Nature also took a heavy toll on the historic sacred stūpas. Many of them were usurped by Hindu priests and converted into Hindu temples. Fortunately, in the wake of an emerging interest to unearth the rich heritage of the Buddha Dhamma in India by British colonial officials in the 19th century, a number of historical and spiritually steeped stūpas which had fallen into ruin were carefully restored. Many hundreds more remain unexcavated all over the Indian sub-continent and in many regions of Asia. It will do well for the governments of the respective countries and UNESCO to restore and bring to life these glorious vestiges of humankind.

The tradition of building stūpa shrines was keenly adopted in the countries that embraced the Buddha Dhamma. The stūpas were stylised according to the cultural make-up of the peoples and the creative genius of individual civilizations in keeping with indigenous cultural norms. Its design structure and architectural style consequently took on a variety of forms. In Northeast Asia where the religion spread from China to Korea and subsequently on to Japan, the stūpa took on a particular architectural style and design structure of having numerous tiers. These multi-storied stūpas are more popularly referred to as pagodas. The Liuhe Pagoda

Chapter VII : *Venerated Stūpa*
of Hangzhou in China and the five-story pagoda of Haguro Mountain, in Japan are two classic examples of the several tiers high spiralling pagodas which came into vogue in the Mahayana Tradition. Instead of a dome shape or hemispherical structure, the pagodas were designed typically as



The Liuhe Pagoda of Hangzhou, China



The Five-story high Pagoda of Hagoro Mountain

towering multi-storied structures that also served as monasteries and centres of learning. Whatever the stylisations that were assimilated for constructing stūpas, they continued to represent a focal point of veneration and religious activity. This was particularly the case with respect to the

emphasis placed on the devotional aspects of the religion in the Mahayana Tradition.

With the spread of the Buddha Dhamma into Southeast Asia, a number of magnificent stūpas were built in many of the early civilizations in the region that were impacted by the Buddha Dhamma. An inspiring illustration is the Shwedagong Stūpa located in the sprawling city of Yangon, in Myanmar. It stands out as a truly magnificent symbolic expression of the ardent śraddhā of the people of Myanmar in the Buddha Dhamma. The massive glittering bell-shaped gold-gilt stūpa soars nearly 100 meters above its hilltop surroundings. The highly venerated and most impressive magnificent golden pagoda enshrines eight strands of the Buddha's hair which the Exalted One presented to two Burmese merchant brothers, named Tapassu and Bhalika.

The siblings had travelled to India to trade their goods in the course of which they had the good fortune of meeting the Buddha, not long after He had attained Supreme Self-enlightenment. They took the opportunity to offer the Enlightened One honey combs as dana. They were highly-taken up by the serenity of the Buddha and the profoundness of the Sublime Dhamma that they instantly sought refuge in the Ti-Ratna. They were privileged to become the Buddha's first lay disciples. As an expression of His gratitude for the dana which Tapassu and Bhalika offered, the Exalted One plucked out eight strands of His hair and gave the two merchant brothers to take back to Myanmar. It is these strands of hair of the Buddha that inspired the construction of the Shwedagong Pagoda to enshrine as the Buddha's Datunvahansa.



The Golden Shwedagon Pagoda

Another outstandingly elaborate stūpa worthy of highlighting is the Borobudur Chandi (stūpa), located in the vicinity of Yogyakarta, in Indonesia. This greatly renowned world heritage site which occupies an area of over 60,000 square meters is considered the largest vihāra complex in the world. The temple complex was built in the Mahayana Tradition of the Buddha Dhamma, by the Sailendra dynasty in central Java, around the 5th - 6th century CE. It includes the Great Stūpa which is surrounded by numerous smaller votive stūpas that have Buddha images enshrined inside them.



The Borobudur Chandi

In countries where the Buddha Dhamma was extensively embraced, we find a stūpa usually located close to the sacred Bodhi Tree. This is strikingly noticeable in Sri Lanka, the resplendent island which the Sinhala Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras believe has been destined to be the repository of the Buddha Dhamma and the foremost preserver and propagator of the religion. Driven by this belief the island-nation proudly hosts a number of historically and architecturally outstanding stūpas.

The Thūpārāmaya Dagaba located in the ancient capital city of Anuradapura was the first to be built in Sri Lanka by the devout King Devānampiya Tissa on the advice of Arahant Mahinda. It enshrines the sacred collar bone relic of the Buddha and has been held in great awe and reverence by successive Sinhala rulers and generations of Sinhalese. In addition, the King built the huge snow-white Ruwanwelisaya Dagaba which is celebrated by a wall bearing a distinctive motif of elephants around the sacred stūpa shrine and the Mirisavatiya Dagaba. Both these highly impressive stūpas along with several other notable monuments in the

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Island are revered as national treasures. A number of subsequent Sri Lankan kings built many similar stūpa shrines around the Island. These include the magnificent highly inspiring Jetavanārāmaya and Kiriwehera Dagabas which are piously venerated by devotees from all across the Island throughout the year. Devotees regularly undertake pilgrimages to these sacred stūpa shrines.



The Thūpārāmaya Stūpa



The Ruwanwelisaya Stūpa in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka



The Jetavanaramaya Stūpa in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka

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For centuries it was held that the Buddha Dhamma flourished primarily in the Great Gangatic Plains in North India. Archaeological excavations in recent years have unearthed scores of significant sacred stūpa shrines, vihāras and monasteries in several regions in South India. Some of these date back to the Age of the Buddha. Archaeological evidences and ancient historical records, for example, firmly establish that the new-born Telangana State is blessed with an enviable tapestry of history, culture and creativity inspired by the Buddha Dhamma.

Briefly, the Buddha Dhamma was introduced to Telangana in a village known as Badana Kurti, located in Adilabad District. From this religious foothold, the Buddha's Teaching spread peacefully to neighbouring states of Andara Pradesh, Odisha (Orissa), Maharastra, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamilnadu. As recorded in the Parayana Magga of the Suttanipata, Archariya Bavari, a renowned Brahmin Sage had travelled to Asmaka during the time of the Enlightened One. From there he crossed the Godavari River and settled on an island hermitage known as Kavittavana which is identified on the basis of historical records as Badana Kurti.

Upon learning about the Supreme Self-enlightened Buddha and the Sublime Dhamma, Brahmin Bavari instructed sixteen of his prominent disciples to travel to Magadha country to examine and evaluate the Buddha's Teaching. They were instructed on the Dhamma at the Venuvana Monastery in Vaishali where the Buddha resided then. The disciples were so impressed with the completeness and perfection of the Sublime Dhamma that they entered the Order of the Sangha and decided to reside in Vaishali.

Venerable Pingiya, the chief disciple of Archarya Bavari, however, returned to Asmaka and impressed upon the Master the sublimity of the Buddha Dhamma. The Brahmin Sage Bavari was also completely taken up that he spontaneously embraced the Buddha Dhamma. From his hermitage in Badana Kurti, Sage Bavari totally immersed himself in the practice of the religion. He devoted the rest of his life spreading the Buddha Dhamma to all corners of the Telugu Country that left a profound influence on the history, culture and spirituality of the Telugu people.

By around the 2nd century CE. several large communities of Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras mushroomed throughout the Telugu Country. The region soon was host to several renowned sacred stūpas, viharas, monasteries and universities, which attracted scholar-monks from around the Indian sub-continent and beyond. They came from as far as China, the Korean Peninsula, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. An ancient vihāra, referred to as the Sinhala Vihāra still stands erect to this day at Nagarjunakonda. This ancient vihara bespeak of the close spiritual contacts and relationship that flourished between the Telugu Country and Sri Lanka in ancient times.

During this period of the proliferation of vibrant Buddha Dhamma civilizations in South India, a particularly significant city developed in Vijayapuri which has been renamed today as Nagarjunakonda (Hill of Nagarjuna), after the highly venerated Buddhist monk and philosopher, Venerable Nagarjuna. He is acknowledged as the founder of the Mahayana Tradition of the Buddha Dhamma and is believ-

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The Sinhala Vihara, Nagarjunakonda



Restoration of the Sinhala Vihara at Nagarjunakonda

ed to have lived in the Telugu Country around 150 to 250 CE. The Most Venerable Nagarjuna is popularly referred to in the Mahayana Tradition as the ‘Second Buddha’. His exposition of the concept of Sunyata or emptiness or void is central to the understanding of the human being. The concept also represents the invention of the numeral zero which revolutionised the writing of numerals.



The Maha Stupa in the Precincts of Nagarjunakonda

The ancient Buddha Dhamma stūpas in Telangana are currently being restored. The Telangana Government deserve high praise for launching a laudable program to reconstruct the rich Buddha Dhamma heritage of the Telugu people. The Government’s Celebration of its Buddha Dhamma Heritage set out through an extensive set of programs and projects from the beginning of 2017, truly deserves commendation

SYMBOLS and SYMBOLISM: Embrace Multiculturalism and every support from all quarters. It commences with the hosting of the Global Celebration of Telangana's Glorious Buddhist Heritage to showcase its ancient Buddha Dhamma civilization and culture in the noble spirit of embracing multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding.

The revival of the vistas of Telangana's glorious Buddha Dhamma heritage would help to restore the Telugu Country as Buddha Predesha (The Land of the Buddha). The restoration of the ancient stūpas, viharas, monasteries, monuments and images of the Buddha Dhamma in the Telugu country will beyond measure simultaneously boost the revival of the Buddha Dhamma in South India and spiritually uplift the people in the region.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BUDDHA DHAMMA FLAG

The practice of hoisting flags has been in vogue since ancient times. They were flown for numerous purposes and in conjunction with various occasions. Some of the more common objectives were to commemorate auspicious events, invoke the inner human spirit, instil courage in the battlefield or in a contest, mark important sites and to serve as ceremonial or decorative displays on festivities. Flags were also popularly used in various cultural and religious functions in most civilizations throughout history.

In respect to the history, civilization and culture of the Buddha Dhamma, since the time of the Buddha, flags bearing motifs of animals were commonly used. These flags which featured recurrently in ritualistic practices usually had a lion, or makara (mythological naga or serpent incorporating a head of a crocodile and body parts of a lion, an elephant and peacock, commonly used in India and Sri Lanka as a cultural and religious motif), or a Garuda (mythological bird believed to be the vehicle of the Hindu God Vishnu), an elephant or a bull. Thus for centuries flags along with flowers, incense and alms-food formed an integral part of traditional pujas or veneration offerings by devotees to the Buddha and His disciple monks and nuns. To this day, in countries which traditionally practice the Buddha Dhamma, symbolic flags of a variety of hues and shapes are hoisted from atop the pinnacles of temples, stūpas, trees and high poles on religious festivals, auspicious ceremonies and cultural celebrations.

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In the Nalanda Tradition which is practiced primarily among the Himalayan Buddha Dhamma countries such as Tibet, Bhutan and Mongolia, prayer flags are often flown on important religious occasions and culturally related festivals. For example, on the occasion of the Tibetan New Year of Losar (which coincides with the Chinese New Year, that falls in the month of January or February depending on the astrological calculations of the lunar calendar each year), Tibetans make offerings to Dharamapalas (benign Dharma Protectors), to celebrate the auspicious three days-long festival.



Prayer Flags fluttering on the Festival of Losar in Tibet

The celebrations comprise a combination of religious traditions and customs which involve the invocation of prayers. As part of their spiritual observance, devotees raise prayer flags from atop vihāras, hills, mountains and rooftops in praise of the protective Dharamapalas and seek their bless-

ings through chants and devotional songs. The annual celebrations also include secular community-based festivals and partaking in traditional folk dances by individual communities. The secularism in these community based festivals invariably promotes multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding, fellowship and harmony within the plural society.

As for the Buddha Dhamma Flag specifically, its creation is of a more recent vintage. However, to understand and appreciate the symbolism and the historical, cultural and religious significance of the flag, we have to hark back into the origins of its conceptualisation, design and ultimate birth. The genesis of the flag can be traced to the revivalist movement of the Buddha Dhamma that spawned in Sri Lanka in the beginning of the 20th century CE. The thrust of the revivalist movement was the protection and safeguard of the Buddha Dhamma in the Island.

Since the Portuguese colonised and ruled Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then called), in 1517, and subsequently, by the Dutch (1665-1796), followed by the British till 1948; the interest and welfare of the indigenous Sinhala Buddha Dhamma communities had been seriously discriminated against during the four decades long Christian colonial rulers. By the end of the 19th century, there emerged a strong feeling among the Buddha Dhamma fraternity in the Island that the religion was being seriously undermined by unethical Christian missionary activities, aimed at converting the majority Sinhala Buddha Dhamma population to embrace Christianity. An equally important motivation of the emerging revivalist movement was the aspiration to propagate the

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Buddha Dhamma globally. This was in keeping with the age-old belief that the Island was specially anointed by the Buddha as Dhammadipa.

The Sri Lankan revivalist movement was significantly inspired by the upsurge of interest in the Buddha Dhamma in neighbouring India, which began to impact several decades earlier. The excavation by British colonial officials of several sacred historical sites associated with the Buddha Dhamma in India, from around the middle of the 19th century CE. stood out as a major landmark. The unearthing and restoration works of sacred Buddha Dhamma sites triggered a marked interest and awakening in the religion in Sri Lanka and around the world.

In this regard the monumental contribution of Sir Alexander Cunningham will remain etched in the history of the revival of the Buddha Dhamma in India in the modern age. His dedicated contributions included the discoveries of amazing ancient monuments, shrines and vihāras in remote forest covered areas in North India. Prominent among his excavations and restoration works were the magnificent Asokan Capital Pillars, Emperor Dhammasoka's rock edicts, the Maha Vihāra in Buddha Gaya and the Great Sanchi Stūpas. Equally amazing were the discoveries and restoration works, by later archaeologists, of the fabulous Ajanta-Ellora enclave of cave temples that was richly adorned with an exquisite array of sculptures, fascinating frescos and religious and civilizational heritages of ancient India. The amazing archaeological discoveries greatly aroused research and scholarship among an increasing number of

British colonial officials and Western researches. They took a growing interest in studying the rich religio-cultural heritage the Buddha Dhamma had spawned in the Indian sub-continent. The Sri Lankan revivalist movement rode upon the crest of the restoration and celebration of India's rich Buddha Dhamma civilization.



The Ajanta Caves in Maharashtra State in India

Another major fillip to the emerging global interest in the Buddha Dhamma was the scholarly pursuits of Western researchers on the religion and its 2,500 years-long glorious history and civilization. They helped to bring to light the inspiring civilizational and cultural heritages the religion had spawned to a much wider global readership. The religious and cultural flowering enamoured renowned scholars

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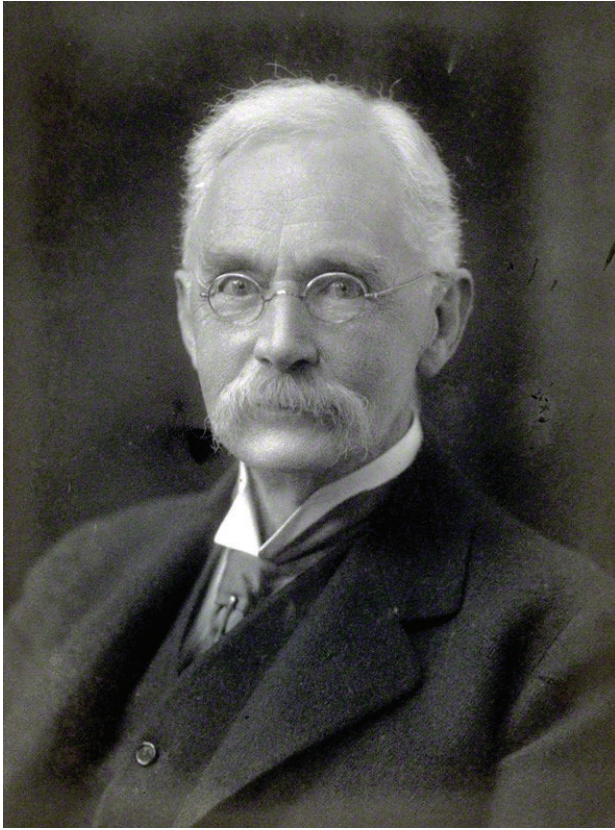
from around the world. They were equally impressed that the rich heritage the Buddha Dhamma had spawned in a characteristically unique highly refined humane way, without causing acrimony, animosity, bigotry or conflict. The intellectual freedom, honesty, integrity and rationalism that were all pervasive in the Teaching of the Buddha also appealed to their intellect and free spirit of inquiry.

The world-wide interest in the Buddha Dhamma was particularly visible in the West, as a result of growing interest in the study of Pāli and Sanskrit among scholars. This development in turn led to the translation of scriptures as well as other important texts of the Buddha Dhamma into English and several other major European languages. These learned translations of suttas and ancient Pāli and Sanskrit scriptures made it possible for a much wider readership to understand and appreciate the Buddha and the Sublime Dhamma He taught.

Among the trail blazers and prolific pioneering researchers who breathed insight into the Buddha Dhamma and its rich cultural heritage were two highly respected Christian personages, namely Mrs. Caroline Augusta Foley Rhys Davids and Prof. Dr. Thomas William Rhys Davids. The husband and wife team founded the Pāli Text Society in London in 1881. Their painstaking studies and translations of ancient scriptures, such as the Sutta-Nipata, the Dhammapada, Vinaya Pitaka (the Monastic Discipline), Abidhamma (Higher or Advanced Dhamma dealing with the mind and Parapsychology), and the Jataka Kathas, appreciably added to the growing interest in the Buddha Dhamma in the West.

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The selfless services of this devout couple in producing translations of several important Pāli texts served to arouse interest in the Buddha Dhamma, particularly among the English speaking readership around the world. Together with a growing number of Western scholars, their dedicated commitment to provide Buddha Dhamma literature in English and other major world languages proved a great spurt to the progressive global scholarship of the religion and its glorious heritage.



Dr. Thomas William Rhys Davids



Mrs. Caroline Augusta Foley Rhys Davids

A major landmark development in the revival of the Buddha Dhamma in modern times was the founding of the Mahabodhi Society in 1881, by the prominent Sri Lankan visionary and missionary, Anagarika Dharmapala. Fired by a strong nationalistic fervour, from his early youthful days, he is credited with being a principal driving force of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism that emerged in the island towards the latter half of the 19th century. His heart-burning

nationalistic pride and unshakable śraddhā in the Buddha Dhamma propelled him to champion Sinhala culture and the heritage of the Buddha Dhamma. Together with other revivalist leaders of the Buddha Dhamma, he protested vehemently against the steady erosion of the cultural and religious heritage of the majority Sinhala population by the Island's successive colonial rulers for over four centuries.

Young Dharmapala castigated the colonial masters, accusing them of discrimination against the majority Sinhala Buddha Dhamma population. He maintained that British colonial rule was equally guilty as its Portuguese and Dutch colonial predecessors of vigorously promoting the conversion of the Sinhalese to Christianity through unethical means. He vehemently protested that unethical conversions had become more ominous due to deliberate omissions and commissions on the part of the British colonial administration. He claimed that this was distinctly evident in the British colonial Government's policies and programs aimed at favouring Christianity which discriminated followers of the Buddha Dhamma, in all areas and aspects of government and administration.

In particular, Dhammapala openly criticised the British-colonial administration's relentless overt and covert pressures in converting into Christianity entire communities of Sinhalese who for centuries had traditionally followed the Buddha Dhamma as their way of life. For example, enrolment to school, employment in the civil service, granting of government contracts and business avenues were stacked strongly in favour of those who professed the Christian

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faith. As a result, many parents masqueraded their children by giving them Christian names. This expediency was resorted to stave off discriminations and biases against their enrolment into missionary schools, in seeking employment in government services and also opportunities in other government avenues, in particular to obtain contracts, licences and to engage in trade and business.



Anagarika Dharmapala

Anagarika Dharmapala who hailed from a well-respected affluent family in the capital city of Colombo was born in 1864 and named Don David Hewavitharana. He grew up

under the yoke of British colonial rule. Typical as it was during the colonial period in Sri Lanka, he had his formal education under a Christian missionary school system. However, through his strong Buddha Dhamma upbringing from a young age at home, coupled with his personal study of the Dhamma, he was drawn strongly towards the Buddha's Teaching.

Anagarika Dharmapala's early attraction towards the Buddha Dhamma was inextricably reinforced as a result of his close personal association with the renowned American journalist and a leading Orientalist, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott. Together with Madam Helena Blavatsky, Colonel Olcott founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875 to form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, that is devoid of any race, creed, caste and sex distinction. The Society aimed at encouraging the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science as well as investigate into Laws of Nature and the unexplained powers latent in human beings.

Colonel Olcott had the distinction of being the Society's Founder President. The two spiritually steeped personages visited Sri Lanka frequently from 1880 in pursuit of their interest in the Buddha Dhamma. Soon they found themselves in the forefront of the nascent Buddha Dhamma revivalist movement in the Island. They succeeded in galvanizing local community leaders to take up the cause of safeguarding the future of the Buddha Dhamma as their bounden duty as devout adherents and strove to promote the Sinhala Buddhist interests in the Island.



Colonel Henry Steel Olcott

By all accounts, Colonel Olcott was a most affable person. He was an investigations military officer during the American Civil War who subsequently pursued a legal career upon retiring into civilian life. He is credited to have initiated the establishment of around 400 Buddha Dhamma schools and several colleges in Sri Lanka. Prominent institutions such as Ananda, Nalanda, Mahinda and Dhammaraja colleges for boys, and, the Buddhist Ladies Collage and Visaka for girls, were founded as a result of his pioneering efforts in promoting Buddha Dhamma Education in the Island's school system. These high-profile educational institutions stand out as glowing legacies of his invaluable contribution to the preservation and propagation of the Buddha Dhamma in Sri Lanka in modern times. In addition, Colonel Olcott is credited to have introduced Buddha Dhamma catechism into the school curriculum as well as encouraged singing of

Bakti Geetha (Devotional Songs). It is little wonder that he continues to be revered as the Father of Buddha Dhamma Education in Sri Lanka's school system. A major undertaking he painstakingly strove was the provision of Buddha Dhamma Education in the school system at all levels, starting from the primary, and on to the secondary and tertiary grades.

Colonel Olcott is equally honoured for having inspired the founding of the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) as a platform for promoting the interest of the Buddha Dhamma among youths and in ensuring their overall development and progress. As a sixteen year-old youngster, Dharmapala developed a close association with Madam Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott. The two pioneering patrons of the Buddha Dhamma revivalist movement in Sri Lanka inspired him profoundly. He extended valuable assistance as a resource person, especially as a Sinhala translator to Colonel Olcott, in the latter's travels around the island.

Anagarika Dharmapala's early involvement in the propagation of the Buddha Dhamma set him firmly on the heroic path to becoming one of the greatest Dhammadutas (Envoys of the Buddha Dhamma) in modern times. To underline his zeal for the Buddha Dhamma, he discarded his Christian name, David. He adopted the Buddha Dhamma personal name of Dharmapala which means Guardian or Manager of the Dhamma. As he advanced into adult life, he embraced the higher spiritual path of an Anagarika. That is, the religious discipline of a homeless one which is mar-

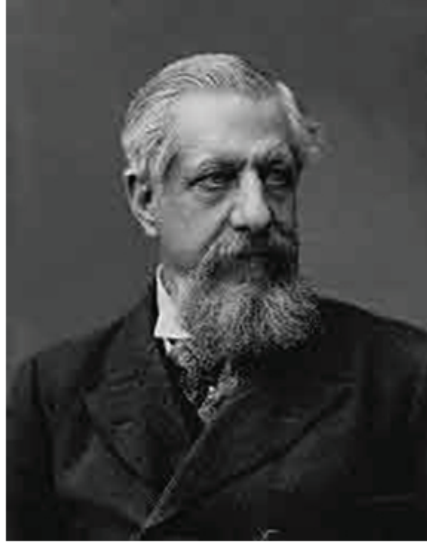
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ginally lower than the monastic discipline laid down for a bhikkhu. It means not having to don a saffron robe and shave off his hair, but to don only a white attire. In 1933, he was ordained as a full-fledged bhikkhu in the monastery in the sacred city of Saranath and led the conventional monastic life till his death the same year.

In 1891, at the youthful age of 27, Anagarika Dhammapala visited the Maha Bodhi Vihāra in Bodha Gaya on a pilgrimage to the sacred places of the Buddha Dhamma in India. The pilgrimage was in the tradition of those undertaken by great royal patrons of the religion since ancient times such as by Emperor Dhammashoka. He was shocked to the core of his being to find that the holiest of sacred sites converted into a Shiva temple and managed by a Mahant (Hindu high priest). He was doubly horrified to discover that the serene Buddha image which had adorned the sacred vihāra for centuries, replaced by statues of Hindu gods and a pantheon of deities. He gathered that this sacrilege against the Buddha Dhamma's holiest place had forcibly taken place in the 16th century CE.

So terribly aghast was Anagarika Dharmapala over the pathetic state of the most sacred place of the Buddha Dhamma that he resolved to redress the gross sacrilege forthwith. He instantly embarked on a single-minded agitation to secure the administration of the Maha Bodhi Vihāra and other sacred places of the Buddha Dhamma in India by followers of the religion instead of allowing them to be improperly managed by Hindus. At the same time, he resolved to revive the Buddha Dhamma in India. Towards this end, he set up the Mahabodhi Society, in 1891, in Sri Lanka along with

his other close Kalyana Mittras such as Sir Edwin Arnold, a leading journalist and poet, who authored the world renowned immortal literary work titled, “The Light of Asia”. Sir Edwin Arnold provided him the inspiration and support to fulfill his daunting Dhammaduta aspiration in India.



Sir Edwin Arnold

A primary objective of the Mahabodhi Society was to revive the Buddha Dhamma in India and to restore to the fraternity the ancient sacred shrines of the religion, especially Buddha Gaya, Saranath and Kushinagar. It also aimed to facilitate pilgrimages to these and other important sacred places for Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras from all across the world. The following year the Mahabodhi Society was shifted to Calcutta (renamed Kolkata), from where Anagarika Dharmapala helped to establish several branches in the major cities in India such as in New Delhi, Bombay (renamed Mumbai), Buddha Gaya, Saranath and Madras

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(present-day Chennai).

Anagarika Dhammapala's zealous commitment to resuscitate the Buddha Dhamma in India resulted in large numbers of Indians from all walks of life embracing the Teaching of the Buddha. Under his dedicated leadership, the Mahabodhi Society was able to rekindle interest in the Buddha Dhamma among a number of communities in India, in particular among the downtrodden and marginalised populace. The activities of the Society also had the positive effect of mushrooming a number of Buddha Dhamma organisations and societies in India such as the Himalayan Buddhist Association and the Assam Buddhist Association.

Through his untiring noble Dhammduta efforts, Anagarika Dhammapala took the Sri Lankan revivalist movement of the Buddha Dhamma into the very heart of Buddha Bumi (Land of the Buddha). It was as a result of his relentless efforts that much of the lost glory and status of the Buddha Dhamma in India was revived. Particularly noteworthy was his success in restoring, albeit partially, the major sacred sites and shrines that had been sorely neglected, even desecrated. In a number of instances they were usurped by leaders of other religious persuasion. His Dhammaduta activities also helped to lay the foundation for the birth of the Buddha Dhamma Movement among the downtrodden low caste communities in India. This was later spurred on and spearheaded, as we noted earlier, by Dr. Ambedkar in the middle of the 20th century CE.

It is noteworthy that 50 odd years before Dr. Ambedkar encouraged his fellow low caste communities, referred

to as Dalits, to embrace the Buddha Dhamma, Anagarika Dhammapala from Sri Lanka had already led many of them to liberate themselves. To the severely discriminated and socially ostracised Dalit communities, the Teaching of the Buddha such as the Law of Kamma and self-reliance in both mundane and spiritual aspirations were intensely appealing. The Sublime Dhamma gave them a new-found confidence not to regard their downtrodden plight as God's Will. They became convinced that their plight was neither predestined nor dictated by an Almighty God and can be overcome through self-effort. The Buddha Dhamma institutions, organisations, lay leaders and monks and nuns around the world can indeed help to liberate the Dalits communities in India.

By embracing the Buddha Dhamma, millions of downtrodden Indians who had hitherto been indoctrinated with the belief that they cannot ever alter their destiny, but resign to the fate of being born a low caste untouchable, were at once liberated. With the new-found spiritual emancipation they enjoyed as Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras, they developed a strong śraddhā and were able to live dignified and fulfilling lives. Millions more from the marginalised communities can look up to the Buddha Dhamma as a real way to free themselves from the discriminations they have been subjected to suffer for generations because of the bigoted dogmatic caste system.

In the course of his personal protracted legal battle to revert the administration of the Maha Bodhi Vihāra to followers of the Buddha Dhamma, Anagarika Dhammapala

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encountered an avalanche of threats and serious physical assaults by Hindu zealots. They posed a real danger to his personal safety. In one instance, he suffered severe head injuries caused by an attack by the Mahant's clique in the Maha Bodhi Vihāra. His very life was in real danger. Despite the serious confrontations he personally encountered, Anagarika Dhammapala persisted in his resolve to restore the management of the Maha Bodhi Vihāra and other ancient sacred sites in India, rightfully to the Buddha Dhamma fraternity.

At the same time, Anagarika Dharmapala busied himself with spreading the Buddha Dhamma. As he criss-crossed India and travelled to other countries, he earned glowing international tributes for his ceaseless missionary zeal and his tireless efforts in promoting inter-religious understanding, goodwill and harmony. He often travelled and participated in international conferences with other religionists such as the great exponent of Hinduism, Swami Vivekananda. He personally admired Swami Vivekananda who possessed an understanding and appreciation of the Buddha Dhamma. He participated together with him in a number of multi-religious forums such as at the World Parliament of Religion and Peace in Chicago in 1893. Together they promoted the Sublime Teaching of the Buddha in America and in Europe.

Due to Anagarika Dharmapala's steadfast Dhammaduta commitment, the glory and magnificence of the Buddha Dhamma once again began to command a glowing respect and reverence in India and in a number of other countries. The world was equally awed by the marvellous civilization

the religion had spawned across India and much of the rest of Asia. The Buddha once again became the inspiring and respected Teacher and guide to millions of Indians, and indeed, several millions more adherents of the religion from around the world. A good number of Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras are indebted to the zeal and dedicated efforts of the pioneering revivalists of the Buddha Dhamma like Anagarika Dharmapala for being able to benefit from the embrace of the Buddha's Teaching.

Through his resolute interventions, Anagarika Dharmapala was able to restore some of the rights and prestige of the Buddha Dhamma in the land of its birth. He saw to the restoration of some of the most sacred places of veneration in the Buddha Dhamma, such as Saranath, under the guidance of the Maha Bodhi Society. Though he was not able to ensure total control of the administration of the Sri Maha Bodhi Vihāra under the management of Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras, he saw to the passing of the Maha Bodhi Vihāra Act of 1949.

The landmark legislation was aimed at placating the growing disenchantment expressed by Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras over the pathetic state of the Sri Maha Bodhi Vihāra and other sacred shrines and sites in India. It provides for an eight-member Management Committee comprising four Hindus, including the Mahant, four followers of the Buddha Dhamma and the Gaya District Magistrate as Ex-Officio Chairman, who mandatorily has to be a Hindu.

In reality, however, the Sri Maha Bodhi Vihāra continued,

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and still continues to be managed by Hindus, whilst its sanctity suffers proper management. The Mahant wields a strong influence over the majority Hindu members of the Committee of Management. The element of a majority Hindu dominance in the existing composition and functioning of the management, of the Buddha Dhamma's most sacred vihāra goes against the very grain of embracing multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding and harmony. It would be appropriate and hugely constructive for religious and lay leaders of the Buddha Dhamma to be responsible for the management of the Sri Maha Bodhi Vihāra and other sacred sites of the religion in India.

In the meantime, unwarranted hyper-commercial activities of all sorts have proliferated and encroached into much of the space surrounding the sacred precincts of the vihāra. The serene ambiance that lent its sacredness in the past has been rudely eroded. In 1964, on my maiden pilgrimage to sacred Buddha Dhamma sites, I had the good fortune to experience a glimpse of the past pristine spiritual ambiance of the most sacred vihāra. Today, regrettably, the spiritual ambiance and serenity of the sacred vihāra is rudely violated by constant hustle and bustle of business and commerce and a host of other mundane activities that preoccupy the space around its sacred precincts. Aside from these disturbing intrusions, haphazard constructions of commercial buildings have encroached into much of the surroundings of the sacred township. Rubbish and wastes of all sorts are heedlessly scattered giving rise to heaps of littered garbage that pollute the atmosphere with an ever-present stench. A few years back, there was a serious incident of explosives

being set off reportedly by subversive elements at the Maha Bodhi Vihāra. No doubt this alarming episode also exposed a shocking lapse of security at the most sacred place of the Buddha Dhamma.

The foregoing facts point to a travesty of justice and indifference to multiculturalism and inter-religious understanding and harmony on the part of Indian officials. This naturally pains the hearts of the Buddha Dhamma fraternity world-wide. In sharp relief to the plight of the sacred sites of the Buddha Dhamma in India, Hindus temples are exclusively managed by Hindus. Likewise, it is Muslims who manage their mosques, Christians their churches, Sikhs their gurdwaras, Jews their synagogues and so on with all world religions. Having followers of the religion at the helm of affairs to manage the Buddha Dhamma sites is a giving and it is necessary for religious harmony and peaceful co-existence. It is only fair in the true spirit of pluralism that the management of the most sacred Maha Bodhi Vihāra and other historical holy places of the Buddha Dhamma in India be redressed forthwith by the Indian Government.

In part, it has to be admitted that global leaders of the Buddha Dhamma fraternity are responsible for the failure to secure the management of the most sacred places of worship of the religion in India. I hold this viewpoint based on my personal insight about the apathy on the part, for instance, of the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB), headquartered in Bangkok, to address this pathetic situation. I recall with great sadness the frustration I had faced in urging the world body to take up the long-standing issue of the right-

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ful management of the Maha Bodhi Vihāra and other sacred
sites of the Buddha Dhamma in India.

Briefly, my initiative in raising the matter of the management of the Maha Bodhi Vihāra resulted in a cleavage between opposing positions within the WFB. At its 18th General Conference held in Kaohsiung, in Taiwan, in 1992, in my capacity as the WFB Representative to UNESCO, I tabled a resolution at the bi-annual Conference. It called on the world body to formally make a representation to the Indian Government to earnestly address the gross dismay of Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras around the world over the management of the Sri Maha Bodhi Vihāra and other sacred sites of the Buddha Dhamma in India by Hindu representatives.

Based on a series of cogent facts, I further recommended that the WFB deliver a demarche to the Indian Government requesting it to urgently redress the said management and the need to enhance the proper administration of the environs of the most sacred shrine. I further recommended that WFB's representation to the Indian Government be reinforced by similar co-ordinated representations by governmental and non-governmental organisations and institutions. In particular, I urged that the WFB initiative be reinforced by co-ordinated representations to the Indian Government by the governments of countries that traditionally follow the Buddha Dhamma such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Bhutan, Mongolia and Laos. This was to strengthen the locus for redressing the gross injustice to the Buddha Dhamma fraternity.

To my utter disillusionment, instead of endorsing the resolution which was supported by a sizeable group of forward looking members, the Governing Council of the WFB responded by disbanding its Representative Office to UNESCO. I was dumfounded to discover that this rather myopic reaction by the big wigs of the WFB was a direct retort to my initiative to pass a resolution requesting the Indian Government to be seized with the anguish of the world Buddha Dhamma fraternity over the continued plight of the management of their most sacred sites. The Governing Council comprising octogenarian officials simply insisted that the WFB wished not to have any truck with adopting a resolution to be presented to the Indian Government on the management of the Sri Maha Bodhi Vihāra by the Buddha Dhamma fraternity. Unfortunately, the pathetic indifference and resultant inertia of the WFB have persisted since. This is a negation of an important duty and a lack of foresight as to why a resolution which is key to preserving the glorious Buddha Dhamma heritage has continued to suffer inertia.

Two and a half decades have passed since I strongly urge the WFB to take up the diplomatic initiative to request the India Government to be seized with the issue of the management of the Sri Maha Bodhi Vihāra and other sacred places of the Buddha Dhamma in the very land the religion was born and first spread. The time seems propitious for the Buddha Dhamma fraternity around the world to take up the issue with Prime Minister Narendra Modi who appears sympathetic to the concerns and interests of followers of the religion.

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The WFB and/or other Buddha Dhamma organisations could take up the proposal from where it was scuttled a generation ago. We owe it to the śraddhā and dedicated spirit of Anagarika Dharmapala and the other pioneers of the revivalist movement to ensure the fruition of their vision of restoring the management of the sacred places of the Buddha Dhamma, rightfully to its followers just like the sacred sites of other world religions enjoy in India and indeed all across the world. After all, it is to be appreciated that inter-religious harmony and peaceful co-existence hinge on suffering no other faith a deliberate injustice.

Another significant development relating to the revival of the Buddha Dhamma in India which needs to be highlighted once again was the formal embrace of the religion by Babasheb Dr. Ambedkar, the first Minister of Law and Father of the Indian Constitution, on 14th October 1956. As we noted earlier, his clarion call to millions of fellow low caste countrymen to observe Saranagamana (Taking of Refuge in the Noble Triple Gem, that is, to embrace the Buddha Dhamma), was enthusiastically received all across India. This resulted in the epoch making embrace of the Buddha Dhamma, in a single day, by over 500 hundred thousand Indians who trekked to the city of Nagpur, in central India, to join him in the historic embrace of the religion.

The mass embrace of the Buddha Dhamma by the down-trodden low caste communities in India is referred to and celebrated annually as Dhammachakka Parvartan Dim (Day of the Mass Embrace of the Buddha Dhamma). This unprecedented mass taking of refuge in the Noble Triple

Gem on a single occasion is linked to the historic Turning of the Wheel of the Dhamma by the Buddha on Asalha Full Moon Day in July. The site of the mass embrace of the Buddha Dhamma by downtrodden Indians has since been sanctified as Deksha Bumi – Land on which the historic embrace of the Buddha Dhamma took place.

Reverting to Sri Lankan's revivalist movement of the Buddha Dhamma, it would be propitious here to recapitulate the Island's long history of Western colonial rule for over 400 hundred years. As noted earlier, Sri Lanka was under Portuguese colonial rule from the early 16th Century. Subsequently, it was ruled under the Dutch followed by the British up till 1948, when the island-nation gained sovereign independence. The Sinhalese who formed the majority of the population and who mostly professed the Buddha Dhamma were discriminated against by the colonial administrators in practising their religion. The colonial masters who professed the Christian faith deliberately promoted their religion through their missionary schools and other proselytizing channels to the detriment of the Buddha Dhamma.

The indigenous Sinhalese followers of the Buddha Dhamma were pressurized, through all manner of direct and subtle means, to abandon their religion and convert to Christianity. In the midst of this undercurrent of a serious threat to the Buddha Dhamma in the country, there emerged a strong stirring among a number of community leaders to rally Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras to oppose the unethical conversion of Sinhala Buddhist families to Christi-

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anity. Several other important issues relating to the interest of the Buddha Dhamma such as the prevalent bias against admission of Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras into public schools and discrimination against their employment in the public services were increasingly voiced.

As the years unfolded, the Buddha Dhamma Revivalist Movement grew increasingly strident against the colonial government in articulating the plight of followers of the Buddha Dhamma and in taking up their cause with the colonial administration. In 1884 the movement succeeded in getting the British Colonial Government to declare Wesak Full Moon Day a public holiday. The newly gazetted public holiday was to commence from the following year. In the midst of the upsurge of the revivalist spirit arising from this notable success, sprung a desire among its leaders, to hoist a flag of the Buddha Dhamma on the Trice-sacred Day of Wesak. The flag was to serve as a rallying symbol of the Buddha Dhamma fraternity in the Island. Thus was born the concept of a Buddha Dhamma Flag to symbolically represent the religion to the world. A working committee commonly referred to as the 'Colombo Committee', was formed to design the flag based on details found in the scriptures.

It consisted of eminent members of the Sri Lankan Sangha and distinguished lay Buddha Dhamma leaders. Ven. Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Thera was given the honour to steer the committee as Chairman. Other members of the committee included Ven. Migettuwatte Gunananda Thera, Colonel Olcott, Don Carolis Hewavitharana (father of Anagarika Dharmapala), Andiris Perera Dharmagunawardhana (ma-

ternal grandfather of Anagarika Dharmapala), Charles A. de Silva, Peter De Abrew, William De Abrew (father of Peter), H. William Fernando, N. S. Fernando, and Carolis Pujitha Gunawardena who served as the Honorary Secretary.

The initial design of the flag was accepted by the Colombo Committee. It was first published in a local daily *Sarasavi Sandaresa*, on 17th April 1885. On Wesak Full Moon Day on 28th May, in the same year, the Buddha Dhamma Flag was hoisted for the first time at Kotahena by the renowned Venerable M. Gunananda, amongst a distinguished gathering of Buddha Dhamma leaders of the Island. The flag has five vertical coloured stripes of royal blue, golden yellow, dark red, white and saffron, running from left to right. The last column is formed by columns of the five colours placed horizontally instead of in a vertical alignment to symbolise the fusion of the five colours.

The initial design of the Buddha Dhamma Flag was longish and more akin to a streamer or banner. Upon reflecting further over the design dimensions of the newly hoisted Buddha Dhamma Flag, Colonel Olcott opined that its long streaming shape posed practical problems as this made it inconvenient for its general use on special occasions and festivals, in particular at flag-raising ceremonies. He suggested modifying the dimensions of the flag so that it conformed to the size and shape normally accorded to a national flag. The modified flag was duly adopted by the revivalist movement and was hoisted on Wesak Full Moon Day in 1886.

Having established the Buddha Dhamma Flag as an icon of

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the religion's fraternity in the Island, the Sri Lankan revivalist movement sought to garner international acceptance and endorsement of the newly-designed flag. With this object in mind, the modified flag was introduced to Japan by Colonel Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala who presented it to the Japanese Emperor for the country's endorsement. This was followed up with the official presentation of the flag to Burma (present day Myanmar), Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia for endorsement.

Another initiative mooted to secure wider international recognition of the Buddha Dhamma Flag was its endorsement by the WFB. In 1950, the renowned scholar and leader of the Buddha Dhamma, Dr. G. P. Mallasekara, was given the onus to table the flag as the Official Flag by the global Buddha Dhamma fraternity, at the Inaugural Conference of the WFB, in Kandy. Leaders from around the world joyfully acknowledged and enthusiastically welcomed the Buddha Dhamma Flag. It was unanimously adopted by the WFB as the symbol of Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras throughout the world. Ever since, the six-striped flag has fluttered in the sky and displayed at major Conferences, Meetings, gatherings and religious occasions as a symbol of confidence arising from the Truth of the Buddha Dhamma.

The Buddha Dhamma Flag has been used by all traditions or schools of the religion throughout the world. It is proudly flown on auspicious occasions and important gatherings. Thus, though it originated in Sri Lanka, the Buddha Dhamma Flag has been accepted and extensively flown by all traditions of the Buddha Dhamma as a symbol of the

religion and as an embodiment of the ideals of international friendship, goodwill and peace which are at the heart of the Buddha's Teaching.

Simplistic though it may appear on first sight, the Buddha Dhamma Flag is pregnant with meaning and purpose. It carries historical significance and deep spiritual stirrings as well. To begin with, the flag symbolises oneness among the principal schools of the religion, namely the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana Traditions. By the singular act of creating a Buddha Dhamma Flag a spirit of oneness was forged among followers of the religion across the world.



Flag of the Buddha Dhamma

To better understand and appreciate the design and symbolism incorporated into the Buddha Dhamma Flag, one has to refer to ancient scriptural sources. It is recorded that on Wesak Full Moon Day as the Buddha remained seated in the

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lotus meditation position under the Bodhi Tree after attaining Supreme Self-enlightenment, six rays of light (ramsī in Pāli), emitted from His body. They were nīla (royal blue), petha (golden yellow), lohitha (dark red), odatha (white), manjesta (saffron, or magenta) and pabhaswara – the colour formed from the fusion of the foregoing five hues. Collectively, these colours represent the many magnificent qualities of the Buddha and the timeless relevance of the Buddha Dhamma to all humankind. The noble qualities of the World Renowned One and the profundity of His Sublime Teaching form the core concepts of the Buddha Dhamma Flag.

Each of the colours of the Buddha Dhamma Flag symbolises an important aspect of the Buddha and the Sublime Dhamma. Followers are to reflect upon these elements the



A Buddha image emitting the five-coloured Ramsi

flag represent and endeavour to emulate them in daily life. Nīla personifies the Buddha's boundless mettā and karuṇā. That is, the Buddha's encompassing compassion for all living beings, including animals and other creatures. At the same time, it highlights His total commitment to promote harmony, peace, unconditional friendliness, boundless benevolence and goodwill that remains unsurpassed in the history of humankind. Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras are reminded to skilfully develop these supreme qualities the Buddha personified in their relationships within the family, neighbours, colleagues in the workplace, community members, the larger society, fellow citizens of the country, and beyond their national boundaries, to all fellow human beings as well as other living beings in the world.

Followers are to also bring to mind that the Buddha had attained Supreme Self-enlightenment not purely for his own liberation, but equally important, out of His profound compassion for all living beings and Nature all around. Likewise, their own practice of His Sublime Teaching is to be anchored on unconditional friendliness, harmony and peace with all living beings. This includes animals and other creatures as well as Mother Nature of which we are an integral part and dependent on for our very survival as a species. We are to understand and appreciate the reality that the inculcation of such a positive and wholesome mental cultivation towards Mother Nature is imperative and is in the larger interest of humankind. This is key to addressing the contemporary global challenge of environmental degradation and climate change with their attendant horrendous repercussions.

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Pīṭa represents the Buddha's fundamental Teaching of Majjhima Paṭipada, which is, the Noble Middle Path or the Path of Moderation. It instructs us to avoid the futility of self-indulgence in sensual pleasures on the one extreme, and on the other, of the tortuous practice of self-mortification. We are reminded that the Buddha had experienced and experimented these practices and discovered them incompatible to the attainment of the ultimate spiritual goal of Bodhi. It was through His own personal practice of living a virtuous life and relentless spiritual self-exertion for six long-years in His Noble Search for the path to sukha, that the Buddha ultimately attained Supreme Self-enlightenment.

During the time of Bodhisattva Siddhartha, religious traditions had developed to a sophisticated level. At one extreme of the spectrum of religious belief were the Cavakas who promoted indulgence in sensual pleasures as the ultimate goal in life. Their ideal of indulging in worldly delights to the very ultimate in order to attain Moksha, or Spiritual Union with Brahma (Almighty Creator God), was based on the religious dictum of Kamesu-kamasukhallikanu yoga. This goal in life is akin to the ancient Roman motto, "Enjoy life and be merry; for tomorrow you may die". The belief was based on the advocacy of unhindered indulgence in sensual pleasures. Regretably this is being extensively marketed and advertised nowadays in the print and electronic media for maximising profits by business interests.

As such the Cavakas did not subscribe to beliefs such as an after-life, rebirth, Judgement Day, eternal heaven and hell

and divine retribution by an Almighty God for not obeying His religious dicta as advanced by theistic religions, such as the Abrahamic religions. In support of their beliefs, the Cavakas maintained that human beings are born and eventually die just like any other life-form. Human existence was compared to an earthen pot which enjoys only a limited span of existence before it is destroyed due to one reason or other and ceases to exist. Human beings similarly have fixed time-spans until death eventually strikes and one's life is extinguished. So it is best to enjoy life sensually to the fullest.

At the other end of the spectrum of religious thought was the concept of Attakilamathanuyoga which was characterised by a rigorous religious regime that entailed dushkara-carya, or the practice of self-mortification. Various forms of extreme ascetic practices were advocated. This was based on the singular belief that spiritual perfection can only be realised by corporally punishing oneself severely. Therefore, rigorous adherence of extreme austerities was absolutely mandatory to attain vimukti (emancipation or liberation of the soul).

Given the unrealism of the two extreme schools of religious disciplines, which the Buddha had personally tried and tested, we are urged to pursue the central teaching of the Sublime Dhamma of balance and moderation. This is achieved by following the eight inter-linked segments of wholesome mental self-cultivation as outlined in the Eight-fold Noble Path. We are to skilfully cultivate in our daily life this comprehensive framework of wholesome living

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as outlined earlier in the discourse on the Dhammacakka. Upon understanding the futility of pursuing the two extreme forms of living, we are to follow the tried and tested Middle Path of Moderation that the Buddha taught in order to live a purposeful life and ensure our success, wellbeing, real happiness and inner peace.

Lohita symbolises the sublime blessings one is bound to enjoy by living in accordance with the Noble Teaching of the Buddha and by understanding and realising the purity and truth of the Dhamma. These include, among other direct benefits, the blessings of generosity, virtue, fortitude and wisdom. This teaching of the Buddha is rooted in the maxim of samagga. As elaborated earlier, this constitutes the mental culture of kinship which we are to establish with fellow humans as well as with all other living beings.

Lest we forget the universal truth that we all bleed red, regardless of our differences in ethnicity, culture, religion gender or social standing. This is exactly what the Blessed One underlined to His own clansmen the Sakyas (through His father's lineage), and the Koliyas (via his mother's lineage). Despite being related by blood ties they had readied to do battle against each other over the waters of the Rohini River which formed a common boundary between the two kingdoms. In intervening in the potentially bloody dispute, the Buddha exhorted to the two feuding parties a fundamental teaching that is so relevant to all humankind more so in contemporary times than ever before in human history:

Blood is thicker than the waters of the Rohini. It is utterly

senseless for either group of clansmen to wage war against the other ... It is sweet brethren that kinsfolk should dwell together in concord and unity... The fostering of kinship is crucial to human beings as even conscious-lacking trees understand by dwelling together in accord and unity... Therefore it is wise that you brethren too should be united and lovingly dwell together in concord and amity.

Contemporary society will benefit greatly by heeding the Buddha's teaching of samagga, both in its letter and spirit. The Buddha's Teaching of timeless relevance goes beyond religion, ethnicity, cultural moorings and other differences. The Supreme Self-enlightened One further reinforced His insightful advice on the social ethos of samagga through the parable of the gigantic Sala tree. This teaching too transcends time and space. The lesson derived from this parable is relevant in our contemporary world more than ever before in the history of humankind:

Once a very violent tempest struck a forest located in the Himalayan region. The Sala trees and the surrounding shrubs, bushes and creepers which lived close to each other as one closely-knit cohesive community, survived the violent storm. The powerful tempest blew over the tree tops and did not uproot even a single Sala tree. But not so the gigantic Sala tree which grew all alone far away from the cluster of the smaller Sala trees, shrubs, bushes and creepers. Despite its massive size, the isolated gigantic Sala tree was uprooted by the tempest. Had the solitary gigantic Sala tree too grown together with the rest of the trees, they would have provided it a protective shield against the tempest and

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it too would have remained firmly rooted like the other trees which grew in a close cluster. The World Renowned One's advice has been immortalized in the stanza, "United, forest-like should kinsfolk stand; The storm overthrows the solitary Sala tree."

The red in the Buddha Dhamma Flag stands as a constant reminder for us to embrace all living beings as kith and kin. This is further evident in the way that the Buddha Dhamma is non-judgemental of any human being, regardless of her or his religion, race or way of life. The Buddha Dhamma is all encompassing and teaches compassionate values. Based on the Law of Karma, all living beings are related to each other through past existence in saṃsāra. If not as yet already so, such a connectivity of kinship would consummate in some future life as we journey in the saṃsāric cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Odata personifies the purity of the Buddha and the Sublime Dhamma. Purity in the practice of the Sublime Dhamma is anchored on the cultivation of wholesome thoughts, speech and actions. This teaching is encapsulated in the Buddha's universally applicable dictum for living a wholesome purposeful life, which is, "to avoid unwholesome deeds, to do what is wholesome and to purify one's mind".

The Buddha's Teaching is akālika, that is, of timeless relevance to all humankind. The Dhamma the Buddha taught is based on His spiritual self-exertion, self-reliance and self-effort and not something handed down from an external Almighty Being or power as stressed in theistic religions. The Sublime Dhamma is firmly anchored on the Right Un-

derstanding of the nature of the human being, referred to as Manusia. Regardless of our background, ethnicity, culture or religious preference all of us are composed of a mind and a body which are inter-twined and inter-dependent. This is a universal reality which we must be ever mindful.

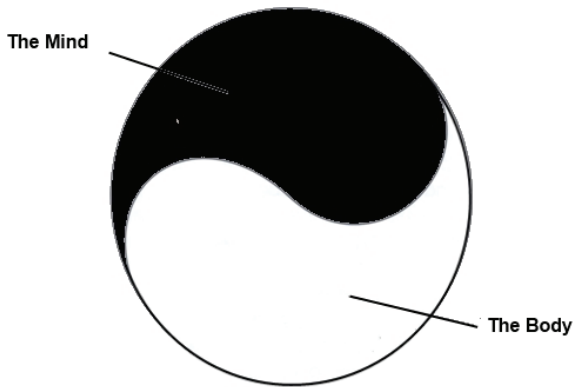
The term Manusia, is derived from the root word Mana or Mano (mind). It means a being that has a mind which can be trained to its highest potential through self-effort. The Blessed One unravelled that the complex personality we term as a human being, comprise two basic constituents, viz Nama (the Mind) and Rupa (corporeality or the physical body). He further pinpointed that, regardless of who we are or where we come from, all of our thoughts, speech and actions are determined by our mind and not by any Omnipotent External Being.

The power of the mind as stressed by the Buddha is only just being understood by modern-day psychologists and medical practitioners. The Insight Wisdom of the Exalted One is being couched with modern-day jargon and profitably marketed by life-coaches/trainers for handsome fees. It is regretted that these life trainers or coaches do not give due credit to the rightful source, for discovering and teaching the Ultimate Universal Truths. On the contrary, they re-bottle and market the Buddha's timeless teachings as their very own, "newly discovered secrets for achieving success in personal transformation". This is evidenced, for example in the movie, "The Secret", and in numerous video clips by modern-day life-coaches aimed at marketing their training programs as well as related services and products. They

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resort to coining jargons like, “manifestation of goals, visualization and alignment with the Universe” in place of the terminologies the Buddha used. They claim that they discovered these ideas and concepts themselves.

With wider access to the right understanding and practice of the Buddha Dhamma, a greater number of people will come to realise these so-called newly discovered personal development programs are actually based on the universal truths the Buddha discovered and unravelled over 2,550 years ago. People around the world will come to understand that they will be acquiring far greater benefits from following the holistic education and personal self-development training programs that are integral to the Sublime Dhamma. Furthermore, they would actualize success, wellbeing, happiness and inner peace without having to pay huge fees to these modern-day life-coaches.



Basic constituents of a human being

In a nutshell, according to the Buddha Dhamma, a symbiotic relationship between one's Mind and Body should constitute the uppermost goal in life. A healthy body needs a healthy mind and vice versa. We are to take care and safeguard our physical body by observing *sīla*. As regards the mind, we should aim to purify our mind by ridding it of defilements through *Bhāvanā*, or the cultivation of a wholesome mental culture. It is largely for these cogent facts that the Buddha Dhamma is regarded as a wholesome education and a complete self-training program for us to live a successful, healthy, happy and peaceful life, regardless of the circumstances or conditions we find ourselves.

Mañjesta, is a hue which resembles saffron. For centuries it has been associated with spirituality in India. In the context of the Buddha Dhamma Flag, saffron symbolises the Insight Wisdom the Buddha exemplified. It reminds us that with proper understanding and devout practice of the Buddha's Teaching, we too can attain Insight Wisdom, profoundly transform our lives, achieve the ultimate goal of liberation and actualize *sukha* and thereby enjoy real lasting happiness.

We live in a highly turbulent and stress-filled world that is burdened with ever competing demands. It is a world that is factious and deeply troubled with ever competing demands, conflicts and challenges. Societies everywhere are being torn asunder. Dark clouds of despondency envelope human society practically everywhere in the world today. In this precarious situation, the life and Teaching of the Buddha proffers precious lessons. An underlying lesson is

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how Bodhisattva Siddhartha after donning the simple saffron civara (robe), and fortifying Himself with such ingredients as śraddhā, self-reliance, self-effort, self-discipline, self-determination and resoluteness, succeeded in attaining Bodhi.

It would be of course far easier to actualize our life-goals which we set out to achieve from time to time, as they are mundane, than the attainment of the ultimate spiritual goal of Bodhi. So by following the Exalted One's holistic education and self-training program, we should feel confident in achieving the mundane goals we set our minds on.

In the context of the Buddha Dhamma, the saffron robe carries a number of other symbolism as well. Among the more significant is the symbolism of a person, 'going forth' from the family life into a homeless life of a penniless detached monk or nun. In terms of spiritual self-exertion, saffron symbolises a monk or nun's devotion to diligently tread the Path of the Dhamma to attain Nibbana, the ultimate liberation from samsaric existence. This is to be actualized by purifying the mind by freeing it of kilesas through an integrate program of bavana practice. Equally important, the spiritually-linked hue symbolises a monk or nun's earnest commitment to selflessly serve the welfare and happiness of the many, out of deep compassion for humanity, all animals and Nature all around on which we are dependent.

The choice is absolutely ours whether we wish to manifest the life goals the Buddha comprehensively taught and not to depend on some Almighty External Power or Being. The

Buddha proved by His own life-example the baselessness of the dogma of predestination that is believed to be dictated by an Almighty Creator God. Further, He stressed the futility of being dependent on an unseen External Being or Power for one's emancipation or for that matter to succeed in any aspiration, be it spiritual or mundane. As such, every person is free and able to actualize sukha and not be resigned to remain marooned in dukkha, as if there is no alternative.

An equally important symbolism of mañjesta is the Buddha's life-example of radiating Maha Karuna, (Great Compassion of boundless benevolence, goodwill and friendliness), to all living beings and Nature. In light of the alarming natural catastrophes triggered by environmental degradation and climate change, we can hardly afford to overlook the importance of the Exalted One's real life-example to safeguard Mother Earth.

Pabhassara which means resplendent glory epitomises the Buddha's successful purification of the mind through ridding it of all residual kilesa and thereby attaining to the supreme state of Sammā Sambuddha. The fusion of the various hues impresses upon followers to bear in mind the critical importance of diligently practising the Buddha's Teaching rather than endeavouring to be erudite about the scriptures. Accordingly, we are to advance from 'knowing' to 'being' the Buddha Dhamma by internalizing the Buddha's Teaching in our everyday life with compassion towards oneself and to all living beings as well as Nature.

By being mindful of our good fortune to be born into the

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human realm of existence, we are encouraged to earnestly realise the Truth of the Buddha Dhamma by following the Middle Path and live a life of modesty, moderation and contentment. In committing ourselves to pursuing such a life-goal, we can expect to realise the purity and truth of the Buddha Dhamma. This in turn will enable us to gain Insight Wisdom and free ourselves from dukkha that we invariably encounter in life. In so doing we are able to enjoy the everlasting bliss of sukha here and now in this life.

The fusion of the five colours is also meant to underline the fact that the Buddha Dhamma is a Universal Teaching of the reality of life and Nature for all of humankind to follow and benefit from. The Ultimate Truth that the Buddha unravelled through His own spiritual exertion does not belong exclusively to any specific group of people. It is a universal reality that is relevant to all human beings. That is to say, the Ultimate Truth of the Buddha Dhamma does not apply only to Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras, but to all living beings alike. The colours of the Buddha Dhamma Flag underline that regardless of ethnicity, social status, cultural heritage, sex, or religious persuasion, everyone possess the potential to live a wholesome life, even to attain Bodhi or Self-enlightenment.

What this means is that the Buddha Dhamma is not exclusive to any particular group or community. Anyone can follow the gentle and noble Teaching of the Buddha and benefit immensely from so doing. She or he is bound to shine forth as a capable and responsible member of society, just like the brilliant colours of the Buddha Dhamma Flag fluttering with great poise and dignity in the open sky for

everyone to understand and skilfully practise the Sublime Dhamma. It urges us to be mindful that anyone regardless of her or his background and circumstance can follow the Buddha Dhamma to gain a clear insight into oneself and set her or himself free of human burdens.

In summation, it may be stressed that the Buddha Dhamma Flag symbolises the universally accepted all encompassing Ultimate Universal Truth the Buddha taught. It embodies the vibrant revivalist spirit of the Buddha Dhamma that spawned in India and Sri Lanka in the early and mid 19th century respectively. It reminds us of the selfless service that Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras like Colonel Olcott, Dr. and Mrs. Rhys Davids, Sir Edwin Arnold, Anagarika Dharmapala, Dr. Ambedkar and a host of other personages had rendered in safeguarding and promoting the Buddha Dhamma, during the trying years of reviving the religion in India and Sri Lanka.

When Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras raise the Buddha Dhamma Flag and gaze at the hoisted resplendent symmetrical bands of blue, golden yellow, red, white and saffron, it stirs in them a deep sense of confidence and a strong spirit of oneness and unity. They behold the flag as a potent symbol of faith in promoting global understanding, harmony and peace. For, the Buddha Dhamma Flag evokes unconditional goodwill and benevolence towards fellow human beings, animals and other creatures as well as Nature.

The Flag of the Buddha Dhamma holds a number of other significance as well. Besides being a vital symbol of the

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renaissance of the religion in the modern age, it symbolises the noble spirit of fraternity and unity among Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras across the world. The colours of the flag collectively symbolise the Buddhist ideal of understanding, tolerance, harmony and peace. They are accordingly encouraged to confidently and proudly fly the flag on all major religious functions, gatherings and festivals as a symbol of faith, kinship and upholders of the ideals of global harmony and peace the Buddha bequeathed to all humankind.

The custom of flying the Flag of the Buddha Dhamma is today widely observed in countries that traditionally follow the religion. Buddha Dhamma institutions, organisations, societies and vihāras around the world make it a point to fly the flag, especially on auspicious occasions and when hosting a public event as a manifestation of their śraddhā in the Buddha Dhamma. They hold forth the flag as an inspiring banner of global peace advocacy. An excellent day to fly the Flag of the Buddha Dhamma in one's home is in the month of the thrice-sacred Wesak Purnima or Poya (Wesak Full Moon Day), which falls in May.

It would be most appropriate to begin the Commemoration of the Trice Sacred Wesak Poya Day with a Flag-Raising Ceremony of the Buddha Dhamma Flag. This practice is already widely observed in vihāras and Buddha Dhamma organisations and institutions around the world. Individual families are encouraged to likewise hoist the Buddha Dhamma Flag in their homes. It is only fitting that the practice be also observed in conjunction with other auspi-

cious occasions or religious festivals as widely practised in countries which traditionally practice the religion. In the same spirit of śraddhā, the ceremonial raising of the Buddha Dhamma Flag should be encouraged at the commencement of Sunday Dhamma Schools to teach Dhammaputris and Dhammaputras from a young age to honour and imbue the noble teachings of the Buddha embodied in the Buddha Dhamma Flag as outlined in the foregoing narrative.

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Glossary

<i>adhiṭṭhāna</i>	determination or unyielding resolve
<i>Adhiṭṭhāna pāramī</i>	Perfection of Resolute Determination
<i>Akusala Kamma</i>	unwholesome deeds
<i>Añjali</i>	gesture of veneration, homage or respect by bringing one's palms together which then form the shape of a lotus bud
<i>annicā</i>	impermanence; the reality of constant and unpredictable changes of all life and matter
<i>Arahant Sangha</i>	spiritually liberated disciples of the Buddha; similar to the concept of Saints in Christianity, Islam and Judaism
<i>Bakthi Gee</i>	Devotional Songs
<i>Bakti</i>	devotion
<i>bhāvana</i>	cultivation of a wholesome mental culture
<i>bhikkhuni</i>	nun
<i>bhikkhu</i>	monk
<i>Bodhi</i>	Enlightenment; the state of spiritual purity that the Buddha attained
<i>Bodhin Vahansa</i>	Sacred Bodhi Tree
<i>Buddha</i>	an honorific for One who has attained the state of Supreme Self-enlighten-

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	ment or Buddhahood
<i>Buddha Dhamma</i>	Buddha's Teaching
<i>Buddha Sasana</i>	Buddha's Dispensation
<i>Buddho</i>	Enlightened and holy One
<i>Cakka</i>	Sanskrit: chakra; wheel or disk
<i>Chakravati Raja</i>	Wheel-turning monarch, meaning a king of kings, or an Emperor
<i>Chakravati Dhamma</i>	Turner of the Wheel of the Dhamma; Universal Teacher
<i>Dana</i>	unconditional charitable acts; offering of alms to the Sangha
<i>Dāna pāramī</i>	Perfection of Generosity
<i>dansals</i>	temporary canopies, make shift shelters and stalls erected by community based groups
<i>Devas</i>	heavenly beings, similar to the concept of angels in the Abrahamic religions
<i>Dhamma</i>	the Doctrine, or Teaching of the Buddha
<i>Dhammacakka</i>	Sanskrit: Dhammachakra, the Wheel of the Dhamma which symbolise Buddha's timeless Teaching
<i>Dhammaputras</i>	sons of the Dhamma
<i>Dhammaputris</i>	daughters of the Dhamma
<i>Dhammayatra</i>	pilgrimage
<i>Dharamapalas</i>	benign Dharma Protectors
<i>Digvijaya</i>	territorial conquest through military

	campaigns
<i>Gāthās</i>	verses
<i>kalyāṇamitras</i>	virtuous friends
<i>Kamma</i>	Sanskrit karma; volitional action
<i>Kataññūkatavedī</i>	boundless gratitude
<i>Khanti pāramī</i>	Perfection of the of Patience
<i>kilesa</i>	mental defilements
<i>Kusala Kamma</i>	wholesome deeds
<i>Lokas</i>	worlds, abodes, or realms of existence
<i>Mahant</i>	Hindu high priest
<i>Mahā-Parinibbāna</i>	Passing Away of the Buddha
<i>Maha-Purusha</i>	Great Being
<i>Majjhima Paṭipada</i>	The Noble Middle Path
<i>Mara's</i>	Metaphorical reference to inner evil thoughts and emotions that strive to obstruct one's emancipation from samsaric existence
<i>Mettā pāramī</i>	Perfection of the Virtue of Unconditional Friendliness/Goodwill
<i>Muditha</i>	sympathetic or altruistic joy
<i>Mudra</i>	posture or attitude in Buddha images
<i>Namaskara</i>	salutation or homage
<i>Nekkhamma pāramī</i>	Perfection of Renunciation of the householders life

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<i>Nibbana</i>	Sanskrit: Nirvana, eternal bliss, ultimate liberation, deathlessness
<i>paññā</i>	Sanskrit: prajna; Insight Wisdom
<i>Paññā pāramī</i>	Perfection of Insight Wisdom
<i>pāpa karma</i>	wrong or evil deed
<i>pāramitā</i>	perfections
<i>Pattana</i>	aspiration
<i>pirith</i>	recitation of protective sutras
<i>pujas</i>	offerings of flowers, incense, lights and other traditional items as symbolic acts of reverence, respect, adulation or devotion
<i>Sacca pāramī</i>	Perfection of Truthfulness
<i>samādhi</i>	mental cultivation/practice for developing a wholesome mind; concentration
<i>samagga</i>	fostering of kinship among all living beings
<i>samanera</i>	a wandering homeless mendicant
<i>samsāra</i>	the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth
<i>Sangha</i>	Order of Monks and Nuns
<i>Shih</i>	an honorific in Chinese for monks
<i>sīla</i>	virtuous conduct
<i>Sīla pāramī</i>	Perfection of Virtue
<i>Śraddhā</i>	(Sanskrit: shraddha; confidence or faith based on right understanding of the Dhamma, unlike blind faith)

<i>Sri Pada</i>	the symbolic footprint of the Buddha
<i>stūpa</i>	a burial mould enshrining holy relics
<i>Sukhi hotu</i>	a universal greeting which means, “May you be Happy and Well Always”
<i>Sutta</i>	Sanskrit sutras; discourses of the Buddha
<i>Thorana</i>	gateway or decorative entrance
<i>Ti-ratna Ratna</i>	The Noble triple gem comprising the Buddha, the Sublime Dhamma and Arahant Sangha
<i>Upaya</i>	expedient means or pedagogy
<i>Upekkhā</i>	equanimity
<i>Upekkhā pārami</i>	Perfection of Absolute Equanimity
<i>Vandanā Gāthās</i>	Verses of Homage
<i>Vidya (Vidhya)</i>	correct knowledge, or clarity in the fullest sense of what the term education encompasses
<i>vihāra</i>	temple or shrine
<i>vinaya</i>	monastic disciplinary rules, self-discipline
<i>viraya</i>	positive energy or effort
<i>Viriya pāramī</i>	Perfection of Positive Effort