

Buddhist Preaching in Contemporary Theravada Sri Lanka: Lessons for the Church

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Introduction

In Sri Lanka, Buddhist preaching fills the air throughout the day in preaching halls, public ceremonies, on TV, and even over the radios in taxi cabs. For two thousand years, preaching has shaped not only the devotees of Buddhism but also the culture of Sri Lanka. The following will describe the practice of preaching in Buddhism as well as some of the comparisons and contrasts with the Christian practice and what the Church might learn from the homiletic approach of our Buddhist neighbours.

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Preaching in Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism refers to preaching as the transmission of the dharma (*dharma-desana*), a practice with great spiritual and moral significance for the Buddhist. At the very beginning of his ministry, Buddha deemed it was important to share his enlightened knowledge with others. He then journeyed on foot over one hundred and fifty miles from Buddhagaya to Benares to preach his dharma. Throughout his life, Buddha travelled in Kosala and Magadha preaching the doctrine. Thus began an unbroken history of the tradition of Buddhist preaching (*bana*) that has lasted more than two thousand years. The Buddhist texts say that Buddha sent his first disciples in various directions as messengers of truth to preach and teach what he had discovered for the welfare and happiness of all beings.

Purpose

The foundation of Buddhist doctrine is the Triple Gem: Buddha (Enlightened One), Dharma (teaching of the Buddha) and Sangha (the assembly of monks). In Buddhist religious preaching, the Sangha impart this knowledge to the laity. Buddhists utilize preaching for public instruction and as an educational instrument focusing the listener on religious and moral aspects of living. Listening to Buddhist

preaching is considered an act of merit (punyakarma), at the same time it is a constant reminder to the lay people to live moral and ethical lives. In this way, the laity considers listening to preaching as materially and spiritually rewarding, and beneficial for the present and future, both in this world and the next. It also is a method to preserve the social ties between laity and monks with future material and spiritual rewards for both parties. Buddhist preaching begins by chanting the Five Precepts as another lesson in the virtuous life. Preaching inspires the laity to avoid bad karma in life and engage in good karma to gain a better life in the future. The core concepts of Buddhist ethics, morality, and social values are re-imposed through preaching, helping listeners achieve contentment and happiness. Listening to preaching has merit that takes on a salvific value in Buddhism with benefits for both the laity who hear and the sangha who preach.

Invitation

Paying respect to a Buddha is indispensable in Buddhism. As the second person of the Triple Gem, the sangha is also respected and even venerated. Preaching is a part of Buddhist monks' parish obligations, but Buddhist monks do not preach without a formal invitation, offered in either public or private. When there is a possibility of large numbers in attendance at an event, an educated, well-known Buddhist monk may be invited for the occasion, with an announcement made through a printed advertisement.

Lay Buddhists listen to sermons delivered by monks with great enthusiasm and with reverence both to the dharma and the sangha. The sangha is called *punnakketa* (field of merit) where one could sow seeds of merit and reap good harvests in future rebirths. Devotees invite monks to preach when they celebrate various personal occasions such as life cycle events (excluding weddings). Wealthy individuals may organize preaching to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries in their homes and invite friends, relatives, and neighbours to share the benefits of this merit-making act. Interestingly, Buddhist preaching is used on occasions of joy as well as times of grief.

Buddhist preaching ceremonies have been used for other purposes. Politically motivated people use these occasions to attract a Buddhist audience for their benefit. The preaching of dharma is offered as an instrument of blessing at the commencement of a public venture. Politically minded monks may use the occasion to insert their personal political views in the preaching. Preaching ceremonies also have been used to give blessings to national cricket teams and soldiers fighting in the civil war.

In Theravada Buddhism, popular preaching has been in the centre of focus in disseminating the basic tenets as well as philosophical teachings of Buddha. In doing so, narratives, anecdotes, parables and examples have been used to communicate the religious knowledge and practices that are relevant to the devotees. In particular, acquaintance with the Dharma through preaching and other forms of teaching is what the monks directly give the laity in return for the material upkeep they receive from the laity. The three ennobling qualities of Buddhism are *dana* (gift), *sila* (virtue) and *bhavana* (meditation). Dharma, which is Buddha's teaching, is the most meritorious form of giving. Therefore, the gift of dharma outshines all other gifts as knowledge is transformative. It has the potential to change the outlook on life of the devotee.

Preaching of dharma is the best gift (*dana*) that one gives to others. It outweighs any material gift that laity can offer to the sangha. Usually, the monks preach dharma. Although a few lay preachers now appear in the mass media, the people still generally prefer the monks. In addition, preaching is among the ten meritorious duties of Buddhism. Listening to sermons is another of the ten. Therefore, both the preaching of dharma and listening to sermons form important measures of faithfulness in Buddhism.

A Sacred Space and Posture of the Listener

The sanctity of the environment holds an important place in Buddhist preaching. Devotees attend the sermons at a given time after they complete their worship in the temple premises. *Bana* preaching usually forms the central role in worship on lunar holidays (*poya*). The saffron dressed, serene, calm and composed monk sits prominently in the preaching hall on a raised platform. A white cloth covers his chair. He appears like a little Buddha, transcending human problems and sorrows. The one who offered the invitation to the monk to preach sits below the stage where he repeats the chanting of the Triple Gems and the five precepts after the monk so that the audience will follow him. Talking in the preaching hall is discouraged so that the devotee can be brought into an atmosphere that is peaceful and spiritual.

Seating arrangements in a Buddhist sermon hall contrast sharply with those in Christian churches. When people assemble in the hall to listen to preaching they all sit on the floor, almost touching one another. They enter the hall with reverence. Men and women sit separately on opposite sides of the room. They take their spaces on the floor as a mark of respect to the monk who delivers dharma. Caste and social distinctions are not present inside the preaching hall. Even the President, the Prime Minister, or any other dignitary sits on the floor to

listen to preaching. Even a non-Buddhist can attend as long as the person remains respectful.

As Buddhist preaching is a solemn and sacred occasion, the devotees come in white attire. In Sri Lanka, white denotes purity and is used on auspicious and sacred occasions. Men and women adorn themselves modestly and simply. Women wear appropriate clothes according to tradition, long skirts that enable them to sit modestly. Everyone removes their shoes as an act of reverence.

Style and Delivery of the Sermon

The Buddha utilized several methods in his preaching. He communicated with a captivating style, often using examples, parables, anecdotes, similes, and questions to attract the audience. Most of the tales he used are found in the Jataka stories, which hold pride of place in Buddhism. The Jatakas consist of five hundred and fifty stories about the previous incarnations of Buddha in both human and animal form that have been used by generations of later monks in their preaching.

The monks also use various devices to keep the audience attentive. One of the most common is the chanting of Sadu by the congregation whenever the preacher utters the name of Buddha in the sermon. The preacher has the liberty to strategize, pick, apply and innovate the teachings of Buddha to suit his audience. The dharma preached to the uneducated is full of stories and entertaining. However, the preaching to an educated crowd is often deep and philosophical, yet with many anecdotes to elucidate the content. In this manner, the audience remains engaged throughout the sermon and does not fall asleep.

The average sermon lasts about an hour. However, it can be shorter depending on the occasion and the setting. The monk has the responsibility to keep the congregation awake during that period. Although Buddhist preaching is a solemn occasion with serious attention to teaching dharma, it also embodies a component of entertainment. In order to keep the audience attentive, the preacher may resort to the role of entertainer. Contemporary monks have innovated several methods to make their sermons popular. For example, the interpose songs sung in a pious rhythm within the prose component of the sermon. In the early twentieth century, monks introduced a style of preaching known as kavi bana (poetic sermon). Some popular preachers such as Panadure Ariyadhamma and Gangodavila Soma became very popular on account of this method.

Following a Buddhist tradition, monks will have the congregation statements of admonition uttered in the sermon. This repetitious chanting differs from the practice of some Christian preachers who have the congregation simply repeat a phrase, regardless of its connection to the theme of the sermon. The subject

matter frequently centers on the preaching of Buddha to bodhisattvas, deva, Arhats, and practitioners. Monks usually deliver sermons from a seated and often motionless position. They often speak slowly and serenely. They often ask open-ended questions that encourage consideration of the values taught in the sermon.

Buddhist preachers often quote Pali verses from Buddhist canonical texts (suttas) including the Dhammapada, which is a popular book for Buddhist preachers. Preachers often use selected portions from Buddhist scripture to provide the basic structure for the sermon with stories to support their points. Buddhist preachers choose themes relating to ordinary life, such as anger, jealousy, stealing, lying, and sexual misconduct as themes of preaching.

Buddhist preaching has a traditional format. Well versed in Pali texts, the monk translates the ideas of philosophy into simple formulae. He recites a Pali stanza rhythmically to suit the theme of the discourse. Buddhist preachers often assert and emphasize their dependence upon Pali texts for inspiration. Monks and nuns display their knowledge of the Pali language with direct quotations from the Pali text that make the sermons authentic and appealing to the audience. The monk then explains the meaning of the stanza in the national language, Sinhala, and illustrate it charmingly with a masterfully appropriate Jataka story and other anecdotes. They then include a moral and ethical application. Finally, the preacher will summarize the entire sermon, skilfully connecting it all to the central theme.

Buddhist scripture is vast and vivid. Therefore, innumerable examples and teachings are found therein. The erudite monks can bring in examples from those sources to enlighten the hearer. Preachers use eloquent sermons with the clear, simple, and analytical expositions of Buddha's teachings that will captivate and educate young minds. Remarkable communication skills, pleasing personalities, and fluent knowledge of the vernacular also help the monks to enrich their preaching.

At the end of the sermon is the benediction. In bana preaching, the monks transfer merit to the gods, devas, spirits, and dead relatives by reciting two stanzas commonly used at the conclusion of the sermon. They transfer merit to dead relatives because Buddhists believe that these departed loved ones anticipate merit as they are unable in their condition to create merit by performing good acts. At the close of his remarks, the monk will bless the audience by chanting the following Pali verse: "May all your hopes and wishes quickly succeed! May your aspirations be completely fulfilled! Just as the moon on the full-moon day." Finally, the monk gives a blessing, saying that all would attain nirvana in the time of the next Buddha named Maitriya.

Utilizing Technology

Traditionally, monks train for many years in the skills of preaching to spread the word of Buddha, skilfully condensing the discourse into an hour of nonstop preaching with an eloquent flow of thoughts and words. More recently popular preachers, both men and women, have employed technology to disseminate their messages. Some of these popular monks are using TV media extensively with exceptional communicational skills. Some monks use their oratory skills to draw in audiences from the youth. Popular dharma preaching can be found in audiocassettes, videos, CDs, DVCs, DVDs, and internet sources. It is now quite common to hear Buddhist preaching over radios in public spaces and taxi cabs.

Comparison with Christian Preaching

While they share many similarities, Buddhist preaching also has some clear contrasts with the Christian counterpart. As in Buddhism, the Christian sermon takes place in a context of worship. In Christianity, the sermon is an address or discourse delivered to an assembly of Christians, containing theological or moral instruction. The sermon has been an important part of Christian services since the earliest days of the faith, and remains prominent in both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. The goal of much Protestant worship, as conditioned by these beliefs, is to rouse the congregation to a deeper faith. Yet, in setting, style, and delivery the Christian sermon has some significant differences that create challenges within Buddhist culture.

For example, the environment of Buddhist preaching is more respectful than in Christian churches, offering an aura of holiness. The Church and the Buddhist preaching hall (*Dharma-sala*) differ not only in the seating arrangement but more importantly in the approach to the sacred. Buddhists often note the familiar attitude exhibited by many Christians as they engage in worship. Many modern churches resemble theatres or audience halls in their design, with the little regard for the holy. Such an approach is alien to the Buddhist culture. The dress code among the Christians when they attend church is in complete contrast to the simplicity of Sri Lankan cultural tradition. Clothing in the Christian communities often displays current fashion or extremely casual attire. Both seem to indicate a disregard for the holy and reverent found in the Buddhist culture.

Buddhist preaching exhibits a deep knowledge of Buddhist texts. Quotations from the Pali texts provide an added authority and reverence. In comparison, the average Christian preacher in Sri Lanka does not know how to quote from the original languages of the Bible. They often quote English writings as if English is the original language of Christianity. References to English in a sermon give the impression of an 'alien' religion as well as the preacher's boastful nature because

English is the language of the elite.

In Buddhist preaching, the congregational response, such as chanting of Sadu, or repeating stanzas uttered by the monk, keeps the listeners attentive. In the Buddhist sermons, the preacher gives utmost respect to the person of Buddha. They follow any reference to Buddha with use of the best honorifics to show veneration and admiration. Christian preaching is generally a monologue. A person can listen to a Christian sermon without any active participation, mental or spiritual. Although Christians say that their worship is congregational, they often have very few communal components to the service, especially in the 'new' churches. Congregations often do not join together for prayer or the unison reading of scripture. The worship leader directs everything from the stage. The common practice of reciting the Lord's Prayer, Ten Commandments, and the Nicene Creed has been given up, leaving a vacuum. By contrast, Buddhist preaching is full of participation from beginning to end.

Buddhist preaching takes place in a ritualistic setting; therefore, there is much reverence for the sermon and the preacher. In contrast, Christian preachers, who are influenced by a Western style of preaching, do not use honorifics when referring to God or Christ, thereby reducing the person of Christ to an ordinary person not worthy of worship. From a Buddhist perspective, the lack of reverence undermines Protestant claims that the sermon is the centre of their worship, scripture is holy and authoritative, and Christ is above all in the creation therefore worthy of worship. Buddhist preaching takes place in a ritualistic setting therefore there is much reverence for the sermon and the preacher. In contrast, Christian preachers, who are influenced by a Western style of preaching, do not use honorifics when referring to God or Christ, thereby reducing the person of Christ to an ordinary person not worthy of worship. From a Buddhist perspective, the lack of reverence undermines Protestant claims that the sermon is the centre of their worship, scripture is holy and authoritative, and Christ is above all in the creation therefore worthy of worship.

Conclusion

Buddhism and Christianity have some fundamental differences. Buddhism is a religion without a relationship with Creator God and preachers base their sermons on the impersonal law of karma on life and the afterlife. Christian worship directs the faithful at a much higher power than anything that the Buddhists can imagine. However, the Christian church can still learn from Buddhist preaching. Christians should learn from the Buddhists to offer due reverence and honour to God and Jesus Christ in their preaching. Christ is so much more than an ordinary being.

Similarly treating god without the highest respect found in the language and

culture brings him down to the level of one of their gods who depend on merit from the humans for their well-being. A being who does not receive respect in a particular culture does not deserve worship. Therefore, it is essential that Christian preachers give proper reverence according to their cultural milieu. In addition, the preaching environment including the behaviour of the congregation, preacher and the place should convey to the Buddhists that they worship a God that is lower than their Buddha by neglecting the practices of the culture where religious sanctity is given the utmost tribute.



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