

Buddhism in Malaysia

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The origin of Buddhism in Malaysia can be attributed to the Spice trade routes, that existed before the Common Era, which passed through the straits between Malaya and Sumatra. Trade was between Eastern points in Asia/Africa and China in the East. The land route through central Asia from China to India is known as the Silk route. Both the Silk and Spice routes are complementary and has seen emergence of trade gateways at various land and maritime points for exchange of goods.

The earliest Buddhist influence in Malaya has long been attributed to Indian influence and also the Malay kingdom of Sri Vijaya which was based in Indonesia. The Sri Vijaya Kingdom was responsible for the building of the mammoth Borobodur complex in Java, Indonesia.

Lembah Bujang, Kedah in northern Malaya bears testimony to this influence with archaeological findings of Buddhist sculptures and images up to the 5th Century AD and also Buddhist inscriptions. However the announcement in 2011 by the Malaysian government of archaeological findings on what looks like the base of a pagoda dating back to 1st Century AD is unprecedented, as this finding predates all archaeological sites in South East Asia to date. Only 10 % percent of the 90 identified archaeological sites in Lembah Bujang has been excavated so far, fuelling fresh debate to the actual site of the great Indian Buddhist Emperor Asoka's Dhamma missionary to Svarnabhumi (the Land of Gold).

Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Sumatra, Malaya and Cambodia are possible Svarnabhumi, one of the 9 destinations emissaries were sent by the court of the great Indian Emperor Asoka in the 3rd Century BC to carry the message of the Buddha. The emissaries to Svarnabhumi were the Venerables Sona and Uttara, and interestingly some suggested coupling both the names to get "SonaUttara" and suggested similarities to the name of the Indonesian island of "Sumatra".

Thambapani (now known as Sri Lanka) has an unbroken link to Emperor Asoka and thus the Buddha, by their well recorded historical trails of one such emissary, ie Emperor Asoka's son, Arahant Mahinda. Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia especially have often claimed to be Svarnabhumi, to attain a direct historical link and thus legitimacy to an unbroken lineage to the Buddha.

Malaya or Lembah Bujang and Sumatra has not laid any such claims being currently Islamic but this recent archaeological discovery truly puts Lembah Bujang well ahead of even Thailand, Myanmar or Cambodia as the possible Svarnabhumi. Lembah Bujang being the first land mass after days of sea voyage of traders from India towards China, is the natural port of embarkation, rest, supplies replenishment, before the Indian traders continued the voyage to China. It is also the possible gateway (hub) of goods exchange for the Indians with the Chinese traders. Indian villages have been set up in Lembah Bujang and naturally with it, Indian culture and religions as the archaeological findings have shown.

These beginning Buddhist influence in northern Malaya eventually evolved into a mixed form of Buddhism and Hinduism and finally Islam was wholly embraced by the rulers and the people.

The second wave

The next wave of Buddhism came to Malaya possibly through the Chinese who settled in the kingdom of Melaka in central Malaya. Trade and relationship between China and Melaka were close. There were even legends of a Chinese princess marrying the ruler of the kingdom of Melaka and converting to Islam. Chinese and Indian settlements were built in the Melaka kingdom for the traders, each led by a certain leader of their ethnic group. These Indian and Chinese communities still exist in Malaysia today having a distinctive locally evolved culture known as Chitti (Indian) and Peranakan (Chinese).

There is however no trace of a Buddhist temple built in Malaya in the period of the kingdom of Melaka from 1400 to 1511, when it eventually fell to the Portuguese conquest. It is also not known if there were Buddhist temples and if these temples were destroyed by the Portuguese who were known for their disdain contempt of other religions, as historically recorded of their wanton destruction of Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon) and the forced conversion of the local populace. The oldest Buddhist temple in Malaya is traced to be the Cheng Hoon Teng temple in Melaka, dedicated to the Goddess of Mercy, built in 1645, about 134 years after the fall of the kingdom of Melaka, during the Dutch occupation of Malaya. This Cheng Hoon Teng temple was also used to settle disputes within the Chinese community and has also dedicated shrines within the temple to other deities as well and a major tourist site. The Dutch colonists were not as overzealous in religious conversion as their Portuguese counterparts, and in Sri Lanka's case were even welcomed as liberators from the tyrant Portuguese rule.

Third wave

The opening up of Malaya physically by the British colonists on the economic frontiers in the 19th century in areas of tin mining and rubber planting did not appeal to the local Malay population who were keen in fishing and farming. The struggle for labor force resulted in active promotion of economic migrants and also traders into Malaya from China, India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Most of the Chinese engaged in commerce, contract work and tin mining while the Indians and Ceylonese were absorbed into the civil service, rubber estates, roads and railways.

A famous Chinese temple set up in this period in 1893 was the Kek Lok Si in Penang, reputedly the largest Chinese Buddhist temple in South East Asia adorning a hill with a huge pagoda, mammoth image of Kwan Yin and dotted with shrines dedicated to various guardian deities. The Chinese continued to build more temples throughout Malaya. Many were a mixture of Taoist temples rather than Buddhist temples but they were all regarded as Chinese temples. Another huge temple set up was the Kwan Inn Teng in Penang in the 1800s. Even the Malayan Buddhist Association which is an umbrella body of all these Chinese temples consists of Buddhist and

Taoist temples. In the 1990s however, there was increasing awareness of the distinction between Taoism and Buddhism and also on the national census and national identity card on religious affiliation. A Federation of Taoist Associations Malaysia has also been established in the 1990s to create a clear identity for Taoism as a religion in Malaysia.

Mahayana Buddhism

The activities of the Mahayana group has been limited to rites and rituals only but took great strides forward in the area of Dhammadutta, socio-welfare and meditation with the arrival of monastics from China/Taiwan who have been a dynamic force such as Venerables Keng An, Chuk Mor , Seet Kim Beng, etc.

The emergence of energetic and resourceful local monks such as Venerables Chi Chern, Boon Kheng, Wei Wu, etc too has been a great catalyst for the growth of Mahayana Buddhism in Malaysia especially among the youths. Strong associations committed to Dhammadutta work were formed. Among them were the Malaysian Buddhist Association with branches throughout the country, Penang Buddhist Association, the Triple Wisdom Hall, Than Siang Temple, the Taiping Buddhist Society, Kuan Imm Teng in Selangor, Hoeh Beng temple, Wisma Buddhist, Tham Wah Wan, etc.

Today the Mahayana group forms the largest group of Buddhists, Buddhist youths and monastics in Malaysia, largely inspired by dynamic masters from institutions in Taiwan such as Fo Guang Shan, Tzu Chi, Dharma Drum Mountain, Hai Tao Foundation, Amitofo Care Center, etc. The medium of communication and instruction in most Mahayana temples is predominantly Mandarin. The Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia which was formed in 1971 is an umbrella Buddhist youth organization with over 250 Buddhist youth societies of which over 80% are Mahayana which gives a good indication on the percentage breakdown of Buddhism into Mahayana and Theravada associations, temples and adherents in Malaysia.

Most Buddhists who follow the Mahayana tradition have undergone primary schooling in Mandarin as medium of instruction while Theravada tradition has mainly those schooled in English or Malay as medium of instruction. The Malaysian Buddhist Association operates a monastic training centre in Penang called the Malaysian Buddhist institute while the Fo Guang Shan operates one center in Selangor called the Dong Zhen. Ven Wei Wu also operates a Buddhist university in Southern Thailand and an institute in Penang. There is also a Buddhist Free School, ie Phor Tay operated by the Mahayana group. These institutes illustrate the extant of strength, commitment and sustainability of the Mahayana tradition in Malaysia. There are about 700 Buddhist monastics in Malaysia, mainly from the Mahayana tradition. Tzu Chi Foundation is the foremost Buddhist welfare group in Malaysia and the world, having 10 million members and chapters worldwide. Tzu Chi is a clear and dominant image of Buddhist welfare on the Malaysian landscape.

Theravada Buddhism

On the Theravada side, the first Burmese Buddhist temple in Malaya was built in 1803, ie the Dhammikarama Buddhist temple in Penang which was set up by a Burmese philanthropist lady on land purchased by her. The temple is today a major tourist site in Penang, and has a meditation center and Sunday School too.

Monastic teachers from Myanmar have inspired locals into meditation mainly in the Vipassanadhura using the Mahasi method or the Pa-Auk method. The most popular method remains the Mahasi method, which was popularized by a Thai monk, Ven Phra Khru Dhammabanchanvud at the Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Center, Penang. Several meditation centers have sprung up inspired by this tradition with resident Burmese monks and several English speaking Theravada centers too have Burmese resident monks. Several locals to have taken to the robes, inspired by the Mahasi tradition. The Goenka method of meditation too is popular in Malaysia with regular retreats held with huge participation from locals and foreigners. Of late several new Burmese Buddhist centers have been set up mainly catering to the needs of immigrant Burmese workforce in Malaysia. There are about 30 monastics from Myanmar currently in Malaysia. Among the foremost contributors of Burmese monks are Ven Pannavamsa from Penang.

The first Thai Buddhist temple in Malaya was built in 1845 on land donated by the British Government to the Thai people in the interest of commerce. This Buddhist temple, the Wat Chaiyamangalaram in Penang houses the worlds' third largest reclining Buddha image and is a major tourist site. There are about 90 larger Thai temples and an estimated 100 smaller Thai shrines in Malaysia catering mainly to the Malaysian Thai community who number about 80,000 people and locals seeking blessings. The larger Thai temples are located mainly in Kedah (48 temples), Kelantan (24 temples) and Perak (8 temples), the northern states bordering Thailand. This is due to the influence of Siam when the states of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu were ruled by the Kingdom of Siam. The world's largest reclining Buddha image and South East Asia's highest standing Buddha image are sited at Thai temples in Tumpat, at the northern state of Kelantan bordering Thailand.

There are about 200 local Thai and foreign Thai monks in Malaysia and they have an umbrella body to coordinate matters such as Kathina with the headquarters being the Wat Chetawan in Petaling Jaya in central Malaysia. The Chief Buddhist monk of Kelantan is known as Sangharaja and continues to be appointed by the ruler (Sultan) of Kelantan, a tradition they inherited when the state was a protectorate of the Kingdom of Siam (Thailand). There is keen interest in the Ajahn Chah books with thousands of copies published of various titles published in English and the annual Ajahn Chah Remembrance week is also commemorated in Malaysia on a large scale in the last few years. Among the biggest contributors of Thai monastics are Ven Chao Khun Silananda, Ven Phra Khru Dhammabanchanvud and Ven Phra Khru Chamriang.

The Sri Lankans built their first temple, ie Taiping BodiLangkaram in 1885 in Perak followed by the Brickfields Buddhist Temple (1894) - now known as Buddhist Maha Vihara Brickfields, Sri Lanka Buddhist Temple Sentul (1917) and the Mahindarama Buddhist Temple Penang (1918). Currently only the Buddhist Maha Vihara and the Sri Lanka Buddhist Temple is run by Committees made up of Sinhala Buddhists while the other two temples have Sri Lankan

resident monks but the Committee is made up of Chinese Buddhists. Several other centers too have resident Sri Lankan monks, who in total number about 30 monks in Malaysia.

The Sri Lankan monastics have played a big role in the field of Dhammadutta and socio-welfare among Malaysian Buddhists. Among the dynamic Sri Lankan monks of the past and present are Ven K. Gunaratana, Ven K Sri Dhammananda, Ven Ananda Mangala, Ven H. Gunaratana, Ven P. Pamaratana, Ven K Sri Pemaloka, Ven K Sri Dhammaratana, Ven B. Sri Saranankara, Ven Ratanasiri and Ven I. Indraratana. Their role in the resurgence of Buddhism among the English educated Chinese Buddhists and youths in Malaysia is significant through Dhamma talks, discussions, free publications, Sunday Schools, Adult Dhamma classes, socio-welfare work, etc. Tiratana Welfare Society and and Maha Karuna Foundation are two prominent Buddhist welfare societies inspired by Sri Lankan monks.

The local Chinese, Thai and Sinhalese Theravada monastics are limited in number, however they have indeed set landmarks and milestones in the annals of Malaysian Buddhism in their own right. There are about 18 forest Buddhist monasteries in Malaysia. Among the famous local Chinese monks who have set up forest meditation centers are Ven Aggacitta (Sasanarakkha), Ven Dhammavuddho (Vihara Buddha Gotami), Ven Sakaro (Balik Pulau Meditation Center), Ven Suvanno (Lunas Meditation Center), Ven M. Mahinda (Alokaramaya), Ven Sujivo (Santhisukkharama), etc. Ven Javana shines among the local Thai monastics and is a well known travelling meditation teacher, and not having a permanent abode. Ven Sumana Siri shines among the local Sinhala monastics having excelled scholastically and also in the field of inter-faith harmony though he spends his time mainly in Europe.

Japanese Buddhism

The Japanese Buddhism influence in Malaysia is largely through the Nichiren Soshu with two centers and Soko Gokai Malaysia who have been set up in many towns throughout Malaysia. They have strong fellowship among their followers but do not have contact with other Buddhist groups within Malaysia. They are always prominent in the media through their large scale rhythmic gymnastic activities including performances for National Day Celebrations or the South East Asian biannual Games which could hold the audience in awe by the rhythmic beats and effortless synchronization of hundreds of participants to the beat of music.

Vajrayana Buddhism

The Vajrayana group could be said the fastest growing group among the Malaysian Buddhists. It has gained great impetus with the visit of the Venerable Gwalya Karmapa in 1980, H.H. Dalai Lama in 1981, Lama Zopa Rinpoche in 1996, etc. They have set up centers in various places of the country and formed a Federation called the Vajrayana Buddhist Council of Malaysia consisting of 20 founding societies of the 4 Tibetan traditions. Their ability to organize large scale prayer sessions attracting thousands of people far exceeding Mahayana and Theravada groups despite being new is a new phenomenon in the Malaysian Buddhism landscape.

Kechara Soup Kitchen is the most prominent socio-welfare group among the Vajrayana tradition, feeding the homeless selflessly.

Moving Forward

While the national census show Buddhists to form 19% of the population of Malaysia's 28 million people, they are merely Buddhists in name, many of whom do not regularly go to a Buddhist temple or center to learn the Dhamma, except perhaps going once a year to the temple for Wesak or when a lifecycle event dictates it, such as birth, death, marriage, sickness, blessings for prosperity, etc. Even these free flow of devotees walking through the gates of a temple are not tapped through effective outreach, let alone having good Dhamma books or CDs as food for the inquisitive or non-committed mind.

Current efforts to educate Buddhists are simply an iota compared to Christian and Islamic missionary efforts and there is continuous drop of the Buddhist population due to conversions.

Wesak is a national holiday. Though Malaya gained independence in 1957 and Wesak was a holiday in some states of Malaya prior to independence, it was declared a holiday only in 1962. The struggle to get it declared a holiday has indeed been historical with a massive public signature campaign and lobbying by the Buddhist monks and lay leaders, the Chinese community and the Buddhist temples. Buddhists need to rise up to the occasion to be foresighted and focused in the field of Dhammadutta taking leaf from their forefathers' struggle to make Wesak a national holiday, and to have a strong rebirth of Buddhism in Malaysia.