“Foremost among Religions”: Theravada Buddhism’s Affairs with the Modern Sri Lankan State

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Theravada Buddhism, often identified as an orthodox form of Buddhism, remains the dominant religion in Sri Lanka. Several Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand and Burma also subscribe to the same form of Theravada tradition. Buddhists in these South and Southeast Asian nations share a number of concerns, ideologies, and a vast body of Pali as well as vernacular literature that inspire their beliefs and practices. When the citizens of these nations relate to the modern government of their respective countries, some of which are postcolonial societies, they have certain expectations from the state with regard to Buddhism. In that respect, they make certain assumptions on the affairs of the state on the basis of their religious views as to what constitutes good governance.

As a small South Asian nation, Sri Lanka claims today to preserve the oldest living Buddhist tradition in the world, tracing its Theravada Buddhist roots to the third century BCE when one of the eight missions dispatched by Emperor Asoka (c. 268–239 BCE) as a result of the third council and headed by Arhant Mahinda reached the island.1 Historical, social, and religious circumstances that are yet not fully disclosed by scientific research are believed to have placed practical limits to the destiny and legacy of Buddhism in its birthplace in ancient India. The disappearance of Buddhism from medieval India as a living force has subsequently enhanced and supported Sri Lanka’s claim for preserving the oldest form of Buddhist tradition. In the case of modern Sri Lanka, Buddhism is still a vibrant and dynamic tradition. Buddhism not only continues to shape thoughts and lifestyle of most

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devoted Sri Lankans but also influences political affairs and matters related to the governance of the modern nation-state. This chapter aims to identify some of Buddhism’s interactions with the Sri Lankan state.

**Traditional Buddhism’s Dependence on Royalty and State’s Authority**

Among world religions, Buddhism’s dependence on the state is rather peculiar. In Buddhist societies in Asia, throughout history, Buddhism has required state protection: kings, ministers, and politicians are accommodated and incorporated into the ritual and religious life of Buddhist temples and institutional structures. Buddhist institutions themselves have not developed adequate organizational structures and mechanisms of their own so that Buddhists and Buddhist institutions themselves can function independently without relying heavily on the state’s resources and protection.

From a Theravada perspective, the relationship between the state and Buddhism is rather a delicate matter. Historically, it was in the time of Emperor Asoka (268–239 BCE) that the state became somewhat closely associated with Buddhist teachings and institutions. For the first time, the state, in that case, the Aśokan state, had an impact on the expansion of Buddhism to regions that were never earlier exposed to Buddhism (Nikam and McKeon, 1959, p. 29). In that Aśokan model, Buddhism was still left outside the state rather than forcing Buddhists and Buddhist institutions to subjugate to the state. In Theravada countries in South and Southeast Asia, the independent nature of Buddhism outside state operations has been an important feature that defines the relationships between state and Buddhists who live in that state. The state has been conceived as an important external factor that has a supportive role in enhancing the monastic community and facilitating proper functioning of Buddhist institutions.

In discussing relationships between the state and Buddhism, it is important to pay attention to emic understandings of kingship and its relevance for Buddhists in South and Southeast Asia. On many occasions, though the Buddha as well as many Buddhists in various Buddhist societies had seen kingship in somewhat negative terms, sometimes, equating kingship with food mixed with poison, its positive role in establishing and maintaining law and order that are essential for the long-term stability of Buddhism was recognized as healthy aspects. Kingship was viewed as a necessary “evil” for safeguarding security and maintaining law and order. Buddhists had to deal with