

Ayubowan! Namaste! I seek the permission of the Venerable Sangha to speak. Ven. Dr. Rewatha, Ven. Dr. Sumedha, Hon. Kumari Selja, Minister of Tourism & Urban Poverty Alleviation and distinguished invitees at the dais. Dear Buddhists from Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Singapore, Thailand, Laos, as well as all Buddhists who are present here from India and the international community. I would also like to specially welcome the Venerable Chief Priest from Matale, who has come from Sri Lanka. To come to this sacred land as Sri Lanka's representative in India and as a Buddhist is a very special occasion for me. It is also significant that the Chief Guest today is Hon. Kumari Selja, the Minister of Tourism and Urban Poverty Alleviation of the Union Government of India. I do not know the history of this observance very much but I believe this is the first occasion that a woman is Chief Guest at this important function. This is a manifestation of the Buddha's message that all humans are equal. We are born into that tradition and we are therefore very happy that this tradition continues. During my year-long stay in India, I have heard about Madam Selja, about her clean image, about her compassion and her support of and interest in those who are disadvantaged in society as well as her positive action to uplift their conditions. All that plus her clean image is again a tradition that this land, this place is used to. It is therefore important that we recognise Madam Selja's presence here. In 1931, at the Opening of the Mulagandha Kutty Vihara, the Chief Guest was Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru Today, Madam Selja, you follow that great tradition. We Buddhists are thankful to all those from Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru up to you, Madam, for gracing this sacred occasion.

I want to speak a little about Sarnath, about the significance of this place. Ven. Dr. Sumedha mentioned that the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* which set in motion the Wheel of Truth was preached here by the Buddha. That is not all. The second sermon of Sakyamuni Buddha, the *Anantha Lakkhana Sutta*, was also delivered here. Having heard the Buddha's Message, the five disciples of the Buddha, attained nibbana in this sacred land. There was also the ordination of Yasa Kula Puthra, in this land. The concept of the Triple Gem, the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha emerged in this world from this land. The Sakyamuni Buddha sent 60 Arahants out into the world to preach from this land. The Buddha also spent the first rainy season in this land. This is also the place where Anagarika Dharmapala visited in his quest to provide Buddhism a new life. What is most important in this land, in Sarnath, after the Buddha set in motion the Wheel of the Dhamma, is that this is a place where King Asoka blessed with his own patronage. King Asoka's contribution is there right behind us, the Dharmek Stupa which marks the place where the Buddha preached his First Sermon. That Sermon gave light to Asia and that light travels today, far beyond the shores of India and across the world.

Therefore, I want to pay tribute and say a little bit about King Asoka, whom we in Sri Lanka hold in high reverence. King Asoka lived in 3<sup>rd</sup>

century BC and was a noble warrior king with great prowess. It is said that, as a warrior king, he was ruthless and also clever. But having defeated enemies and having taken almost the whole

of India under his control, he became despondent after the Kalinga War where over 80,000 people died. He realised that he needs something else in life; that it is not enough to conquer land and people; that one needs to conquer one's mind and one's own self. He came back to his kingdom and although he was a very powerful man, he asked various people to come and tell him what options were available. Various sages, sadhus, and numerous people were consulted, but he was not happy. One day, he was looking out from his window and he saw a young

*samanera*

, a ten year old novice monk walking on the streets and the way that the little monk was walking and his demeanour moved Emperor Asoka. He asked his court mentors to bring that monk to the palace. When the young 10-year-old monk who had not yet attained

*Upasampada*

came in, he asked the monk to sit down. The young monk looked around and he went and climbed onto the King's throne and sat there. Asoka, although a very powerful man, was taken aback but kept his cool. He asked the monk, "why did you go and sit on my throne?" The young monk said, "I have devoted my life to the noble cause of the Dhamma and according to the protocol of my belief, all humans are subject to the Dhamma and as the representative of the Dhamma, I cannot sit in a lesser place than that". He was impressed. He thereafter started following Theravada Buddhism. From that point onwards, Asoka's benevolence, Asoka's compassion, Asoka's support helped Theravada Buddhism to thrive in India. We in Sri Lanka benefitted from this when in the 3

rd

century BC, King Asoka sent his son Arahant Mahinda and daughter Bhikkhuni Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka with the message of Buddhism. Since then, that religion has stayed in our country and it has flourished. Buddhism since then spread from one side to Afghanistan and on the other up to Japan. It still baffles me, I leave it to the experts to decide why Buddhism did not go beyond Afghanistan to the West. For some reason, it did not proceed beyond at the time.

However, Buddhism's powered march gradually declined by the end of the first millennium for various reasons. The final blow was in the 12

th

Century when the Muslim invasions resulted in the destruction of most of what was left. Holding pockets of the Indian subcontinent, some semblance of Buddhism survived. But in Sri Lanka, it survived for long years, helped perhaps by Sri Lanka being an island nation. Then came a very important turning point in history, the interaction of Western civilisation with Buddhism. That happened around the 18

th

and 19

th

centuries. This interaction was a very positive force. I think it was mentioned by Ven. Sumedha Thero who spoke earlier. It provided for the revival and reformation of Buddhism in our part of the world as well. And there were leaders in our country, in Sri Lanka, like in India, who were involved in this revival and reformation movement. Anagarika Dharmapala was one of them.

Anagarika Dharmapala, like Prince Siddhartha, was born with a silver spoon in his hand. He was born to a very rich family. But at a very early stage in his life, he renounced the business of his father, and started working on the revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. He didn't stop there. He came to India in 1891. His first effort was to revive Buddhagaya which was in total neglect and disrepair at that time. Having done that work in Buddhagaya, he also focused his attention here on Sarnath with the aim of reviving Buddhism that was totally lost at that time in India. In this effort, he was not alone. There were other Sri Lankans and there were Indian leaders as well who worked with him in that effort. In this regard I want to recognise today, a very important person, Brahmachari Devapriya Valisinha who was his right hand person or the ADC throughout his life, who gave him courage. In fact it is Brahmachari Valisinha who did the building of this Mulagandha Kutty Vihara and also the setting up of the Mahabodhi School. For nearly forty years, Brahmachari Devapriya Valisinha followed Anagarika Dharmapala and contributed immensely to this city, its revival and the revival of Buddhism in India. Today is a very special day as his immediate family is here with us to hand over the correspondence between Devapriya Valisinha and Anagarika Dharmapala to the Museum so that history will be recorded. We are very grateful for this initiative taken by the family of Brahmachari Devapriya Valisinha. I thank them on behalf of all of you for having done that deed for the sake of the Buddhist community.

Buddism's revival in India was a combination of the efforts of Buddhists all over the world. Anagarika Dharmapala had very important supporters in India. Shri Motilal Nehru, father of Shri Jawaharlal Nehru was one very important figure we should always remember. It is Motilal Nehru who gave Anagarika Dharmapala that important support in his quest to work with British rulers to revive and resurrect Buddhist Centres of importance. He also had the support of people like Rabindranath Tagore who wrote a poem for the 1931 opening of the Mulagandha Kutty Vihara when Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru came as Chief Guest and opened this Vihara and donated the flag of the Indian National Congress to the Vihara Museum. Jawaharlal Nehru's contribution to Buddhism is immense. I think it is not an accident that the Indian National Congress chose the symbol of Asoka which in a way exemplifies what Buddhism is, as India's national symbol. Why? Jawaharlal Nehru was enamoured or was a follower of the principles of Buddhist practice. He found it an ideal for the modern world as well. Therefore, if you look at the Indian Constitution, you will see a lot of ideas that the Buddha preached 2500 years ago, have been incorporated as basic principles for the Indian State, the Indian Union. We should not here forget Anagarika Dharmapala's travels to the West and to the East and the significance of his travels for the revival of Buddhism. He went to Japan, he went to England, and he went to US with Swami Vivekananda in 1893 to the World Congress of Religions in Chicago and explained for the first time to the West what Buddhism is all about. That revelation was instrumental in Buddhism reaching far across the globe to the West. There were others like Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Foster, Dr. Annie Besant, Henry Walden, and many other Westerners who were a part of this Buddhist renaissance movement that we should pay homage to.

Now what is Buddhism? Is it a religion, a philosophy or a science? Certainly it is a religion because Buddhism contains rituals, it contains certain practices that are normal in a religion, so it definitely is a religion. It is also a philosophy because if you look at Buddhism, from the days

of the Buddha, Buddha's clan or the Sakya clan practiced democracy. If you look at Buddha's teachings, it contains elements that are today in the universal declaration of human rights, what we practice as social democracy. Buddhism has been in the forefront in enunciating social responsibilities and discipline – all that is a part of Buddhist core teachings. So it is a philosophy. Is it a science? To me it is also a science because modern science discoveries like quantum physics have not disproved Buddhism. I myself have been a student of science and there is nothing in science to disprove Buddhism. Even the Darwinian theory of evolution does not contradict Buddhism. So that itself is a great reason to believe that Buddhism is also a kind of a science. Even if you think of relativity, if one were to go deep into the four noble truths that the Buddha enunciated, it is a relative concept. It is not absolute. Absolute truth is nibbana. Only the Buddha and the Arhants will know absolute truth. Until then, until one becomes an Arhant, the Four Noble Truths remain a relative truth. So relativity also has not disproved Buddhism. So it means that Buddhism is therefore a religion, a philosophy, a science and I am, as a Buddhist very comfortable with my religion. I therefore want to share with you on this occasion, some of my beliefs guided by Buddhism which have helped me in my passage through life. My father who was a Sanskrit and Pali scholar was a senior public servant. When I joined the public service nearly 32 years ago, he wrote me a letter congratulating me and on top of that he wrote a verse from the Dhammapada –

*“Dhammo Have Rakkhathi Dhammchari”*

that means “righteousness protects the righteous”. Even today, I keep this verse on my table. Wherever I go, I keep it on my table first. There's one other sutta I consider very important. It is popularly known as the

*Karaniya Metta Sutta.*

I am going to recite a stanza from the sutta, a particular verse which I think is what a public servant or a professional should follow. If we follow that, I think we will have a better life and those who interact with us will also have a better life.

*Sakko ujū ca sujū*

*ca,*

*sūvaco c'assa mudu anatimānī. Santussako ca subharoca,*

*appakicco ca sallahukavutti;*

*Santindriyo ca nipako ca,□*

*appagabbho kulesu ananugiddho Na ca khuddam samācare kiñci,*

*yena viññū pare upavadeyyum...* Now what does that mean? Perhaps you recite that often,

but I don't know how many will understand. It means this, be capable, upright, straightforward and disciplined, easy to instruct, gentle, not conceited, able, with few duties, living life with peaceful faculties, masterful, modest, and not be greedily attached. Do not do the slightest things that the wise would later censure. This particular verse of the Karaniya Metta sutra is what we all as professional public servants should follow. I think that is where we need to be grateful to the Buddha, for this religion that we treasure. I want to mention a few more things before I close. One is that the people of Sri Lanka, starting with Anagarika Dharmapala, came to this land of India which is the birthplace of Buddhism, as a manifestation of one particular quality. That is our gratitude to the people of India for having given this great religion to us. The Buddha taught us that gratitude is a very important quality and that is the spirit with which the people of Sri Lanka came to this country and helped the religion to again revive and thrive. Rev.

Sumedha Thero, Rev. Rewatha Thero and all the other monks who are here and all of our Buddhist pilgrims who are here are in the same spirit coming back to the roots where we were given a great way of life, way of thinking, a religion. So our gratitude to India therefore is immense for providing this opportunity. The role of India in this is very important. India's greatest gift to the world to my mind is Buddhism and Buddhism will be a force to reckon with in time to come for one very simple reason. Human beings live on two levels, one is our physical body and the other is our mental faculty. The physical body, after the Industrial Revolution, has been given immense amount of comfort. About two centuries ago, what we have achieved today would have been thought of as things that only God can give. Today, humans have obtained these things. So, in a sense, the human has played God and today, the body has been practically satisfied but not the mind. The Buddha said *"Ma no Pubbhanga Dhamma"*

, for everything the mind is supreme or the mind is the forerunner of all things. Humans, although having acquired an immense amount of material comfort still cannot find lasting happiness because happiness concerns ones mind. So the mind has to be nurtured for us to be happy and human beings that are useful to society. Therefore, in time to come, since humans have played God and satisfied their bodily needs, humans will have to find happiness through the mind and Buddhism will be the help that will be available for many. Therefore, Buddhism's march in the Western world is going to continue. In that, the role of India, the role of the Mahabodhi Society will become more and more important in this endeavour.

Before I conclude, I would like to thank the Government of India through Minister Hon. Kumari Selja, for being alive to this reality and for making very practical arrangements for Buddhists from Sri Lanka as well as Buddhists from all over the world to practice their religion without any hindrances in this land of the Buddha. At the same time, I would also like to thank the Mahabodhi Society, its General Secretary Ven. Dr. Rewatha for their immense contribution and also Ven. Dr. Sumedha, the Chief Incumbent of this Vihara, for the work that he has done. One particular task of his requires special mention. That is his effort in translating the *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta*

into all major languages spoken by Buddhists, which is commendable. It reflects the universality of the religion and I think such initiatives will be required more and more in time to come. Let me conclude by saying that as Buddhism reaches out to the world, the cooperation between India and Sri Lanka will have to continue in the same direction for that purpose. The Mahabodhi Society will have a greater role in this regard for making Buddhism accessible to all countries in the world and to all people who are interested. It is very important here for us to realise that Buddhism is a religion of tolerance and like in Sri Lanka, it does not challenge any other religion. It coexists and works with all other religions of the world and we, as Buddhists, should be proud of our peaceful tradition. I am thankful once again for this opportunity to speak to you.

Namasthe, Ayubowan!