

Exporting Dharma to New Lands: Empirical Approaches of Teaching Dharma in Predominantly Non-Buddhist States

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Introduction

*Muttāhaṃ, bhikkhave, sabbapāsehi, yedibbā ye ca mānusā.
Tumhepi, bhikkhave, muttā sabbapāsehi, ye dibbā ye ca mānusā.
Caratha, bhikkhave, cārikam bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya
Lokānukampāya atthaya hitaya sukāya devamanussānaṃ.*¹

This verse is expounded by Buddha to sixty of his *ariyā* disciples after a year of his buddha-hood, while residing at Mighadāvum forest, almost two thousand-six hundred years ago. According to this, Buddha urged his disciples to make journeys in order to disseminate dharma for the benefit of all the sentient beings including humans, deities and brahmās. It was the very first mission assigned by Buddha to his *ariya sāṅghā*. Throughout two and a half millenniums, dharma has been taught and learned by Buddhists from generations to generations.

In this paper, three particular approaches for teaching dharma are explored and discussed in accordance with the Pāli Texts. The emphasis is made on teaching dharma in new lands where Buddhism is never known or little known.

The Need to Export Teachings of Buddha

In simple economic term, we export goods and services to other regions and countries in order to gain income in return. Regarding the export of teachings of Buddha, what can we expect in return? The return is greater than we can imagine. In simplest way, it reduces stress, tension and anxiety of every individual. This has ripple effect and as an accumulated output of this, society as a whole may become less aggressive and more peaceful which tends to be the ultimate goal of the present day global society which is more or less in turmoil.

Again, in terms of wealth, wealth can be classified into human-wealth and non-human wealth.² Human wealth refers to aptitude and attitude of human beings whereas non-human wealth refers to capital stock. Both type of wealth can be income-generating, however, only the human wealth which is endowed with dharma can generate peace and harmony. It will also be the determinant of self-sustained growth.

We cannot deny the fact that socio-economic system across the globe produces many tensions in people's life. With dharma we will be able to make intelligent choices without fear. Moreover, Dharma is adaptable and inclusive. That is why we should not be confined dharma or the Teachings of Buddha to ourselves, the Buddhists. It is needed to be spread as far as it can reach. Thus, we inevitably need to export dharma.

¹ Vin. III, Myanmar Version, page 27-78

² Lim Chong Yah (1996), Singapore Economic Review, Vol.V, No.2

Defining What to Export

From the very first mission, Buddha stressed the importance of disseminating dharma on the grounds that apart from all its benefits and advantages towards the sentient beings, Buddhist Teachings have auspicious qualities from the beginning to the middle until the end. They are also flawless in meaning and in grammar. We can say that it is also an explicit practical guideline in formulating social ethics to address the never ending human problems.³

Therefore, when defining what or which part of dharma to be exported, we should not miss the essence. All the Teachings of Buddha are grouped into Tri Pitaka- the three baskets. The Pāli word, *Buddhasāsanā*, means Teachings of Buddha. The essence of *Buddhasāsanā* is *sīla*, *samādhi* and *pāññā*. For *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration) and *pāññā* (wisdom) – the buddha taught *Vinaya*, *Suttānda* and *Abhidhamma*.

Sīla is expounded and explained through *Vinaya* where as *samādhi* is expounded and explained through *Suttānda* and likewise *pāññā* is expounded and explained through *Abhidhamma*. Thus it is very clear that when disseminating *Buddhasāsanā* or the Teachings of Buddha, there should be no exclusion, but to teach all *sīla*, *samādhi* and *pāññā* through teaching of *Vinaya*, *Suttānda* and *Abhidhamma*.

Agents and Recipients

In order to export the Teachings of Buddha to new lands as well as to non-Buddhist states, first we need exporters or the disseminators of dharma. In this paper, the disseminators of dharma are referred to as ‘Agents’. As the knowledge of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *pāññā* needs to be disseminated, the role of agents is important. Agents can be Buddhist monks (*bhikkhus*), nuns (*bhikkhunis*), laymen and lay women. In Buddhism, there is no restriction that only those who are in Buddhist Order, that is, monks and nuns can teach the dharma nor is there such gender discrimination like only males are allowed to teach dharma. That is why in Myanmar history, it has witnessed that a royal princess by the name of Ma Soe Min taught dharma to many scholar monks in the royal court of 11th century Bagan Dynasty. She was also known as Than Byin Princess and was a famous figure in history. She was the chief instructor of dharma at the court not because she was a princess but because of her intellectual skills and solid knowledge in dharma.

Regarding the recipients, they refer to both Buddhists and non-Buddhist people in new lands as well as in non-Buddhist states.

Approaches for Teaching Dharma

Agents must be aware of the certain fact that they are going to deliver their message to the recipients with totally different mindset and belief system. Even for people who claim themselves Buddhists in the non-Buddhist states, they have the potential to have different way of thinking and judgment from that of people from Theravāda Buddhist countries. Thus, we need to clarify our approaches in a manner which most appropriately suit the situations and circumstances. The followings are some suggested approaches:

1. The Use of Two Dimensional Tools
2. Never Let the Language Barrier Block the Way
3. Agent as Ideal Person & a Kalyānamitta

³ Facing the future: A Buddhist Social Ethic for the New Century, Bhikku Bodhi, pg. 3

The Use of Two Dimensional Tools

As mentioned before, the agents can be both monks and nuns in Buddhist Order or the lay people who are Buddhist devotees. These agents need certain tools to transfer what they have learned to the recipients. The two most important tools are *karunā* and *pāṇṇā*. All the above mentioned agents can and must cultivate these two dimensions of attribute in them once they have decided to act as agents. The Buddha himself cultivated *karunā* and *pāṇṇā* to the highest level in him above all others in the universe. In other words, these tools are invincible armors against all obstacles of relative world. The mind of Buddha was ultimately purified by his greatness in *karunā* and *pāṇṇā*. Whenever Buddha taught the beings, He spread *karunā* towards each being and used *pāṇṇā* to gauge their *anusaya*⁴ so that Buddha knew which discourse to deliver according to each individual's *anusaya* in order to enlighten that person. In the light of this, agents who teach a way to purify minds need to develop as much compassion- *karunā* and wisdom- *pāṇṇā* as they are capable of.

Compassion, *karunā* is one of the four characteristics of *Brahmacariya*. When an agent is successful in cultivating compassion to a certain level, it becomes easier for the agent to cultivate loving-kindness, *mettā*. Again if an agent has developed a successful level of wisdom, *pāṇṇā*, it is easier for the agent to cultivate equanimity, *upakkā*.

As an empirical success story, the following is how a Myanmar monk named Ashin⁵ Ottama, very famous for his higher state of compassion, exported dharma to northern part of Myanmar where Buddhism was unknown before his time.

Ashin Ottama was born in 1910 in middle part of Myanmar. He was ordained at the age of nineteen. He started his missionary works since the British colonial era. At that time, Buddhist monks were not allowed to travel northern part of Myanmar as missionary because the colonial government encouraged Christian missionaries to do their missionary work at the remote and hilly regions of Myanmar. If a Buddhist monk was found by the colonial government authority there, the monk would be arrested. In such kind of situation, Ashin Ottama took the risk to disseminate the Teachings of Buddha in the hilly regions of the North after the World War II. He travelled on foot crossing the Rakhine Yoma mountain ranges. Then he decided to stay on the mountain, 7000 feet above the sea level.

There the natives were ethnic tribal races. The majority of these people belonged to ethnic race called Chin. They had their own spoken language but it did not have written form. Thus, the British created written language for them by using English alphabets. At that time, the natives there were illiterate and they worshipped spirits, except some of them were converted into Christianity by the western missionaries. Ashin Ottama had a great compassion for these people and thus he decided to disseminate dharma there. First, the natives did not accept him and they regarded him as an evil because his head was shaved, he wore robe and carried alms bowl which they had never seen before. They were hostile to him and even tried to harm him. However, Ashin Ottama had mastered *mettā Bhavanā*. He constantly radiated loving kindness, *mettā* towards all the beings. This again is a result of possessing a higher level of compassion and had developed wisdom in him. Those who have compassion, *karunā* are easier to develop *mettā* and are also able to effectively radiate *mettā* to the beings.

His contemplation of *Mettā Bhavanā* was very strong and persistent that eventually the natives started to change their attitude towards him. Some of them offered him food and some repaired his little hut to be stronger and warmer. Because Ashin

⁴ Anusaya = The ability to know level of intelligence of each being

⁵ Ashin = Bhikkhu

Ottama radiated *mettā* and *karunā* to all beings, wild animals did not harm him as well. He was completely protected from men and beasts because of his *mettā* and *karunā* towards all beings. Natives were surprised to see that even wild animals did not harm him but pay respect to him when they approached his hut. Eventually, these people came to him for healing of their wounds and to cure different kinds of illnesses. Ashin Ottama cured all the patients just by contemplating *Mettā Bhavanā*.

When he recited *Metta Sutta*, bubbles come out of water in glass or cup or any kind of container. This water cured certain illness and released pain. Sometimes, they asked him for simple thing like weather forecasting, and Ashin Ottama always gave them very précised forecasting which was valuable for the farmers and hunters. This is not because he had possessed some kind of supernatural power, but because he was highly literate in Buddhist literature, he was very knowledgeable and he was endowed with wisdom. The villagers thought Ashin Ottama was more powerful than their gods and spirits they worshipped. Thus the natives came to believe in him and devoted him. They listened to him and the dharma he taught them. Their lives became more meaningful and more peaceful. They could change themselves from superstitious, primitive people to open-minded, adaptable people who came to believe in the Law of *Kāmma*.

When analyzing Ashin Ottama's missionary work, first he gave the impression to the natives that he was harmless. The next impression he gave was that he was reliable and he cared for the welfare of these native people. And finally, he could deliver the message which was the objective of his mission. In fact, this kind of mission, living at a place where people speak different language with different belief system and where one is prone to be alienated with full of hostility, is almost impossible for an ordinary agent. However, in the case of Ashin Ottama, he set an example for future agents that with genuine and perfectly practiced *karunā* which is accompanied by *pāññā*, it is possible to make a success in disseminating the Teachings of Buddha to the new lands. Thus agents are highly advised to develop *karunā* and *pāññā* which are essential tools in teaching dharma.

Never Let the Language Barrier Block the Way

Another issue to be seriously taken into account by agents is the language barrier. The Teachings of Buddha are originally in the Pāli texts. Pāli is a language without written forms and each Buddhist country uses their own characters and alphabets for written expressions. Here, translation is pivotal. A very minor divergent in meaning can lead to totally different concept or explanation. Again, mastering the language of both Pāli and recipients' language is crucial.

In Myanmar, Ashin Thittila, a renowned Buddhist monk of 20th century, was a very reliable example who tried extraordinarily hard and conquered the language barrier in teaching and exporting Dharma to the West. Ashin Thittila was born in 1896 and was ordained in 1915. At that time, Myanmar was still under the British ruling. Although English was used as office language, majority of natives were against learning English purely out of patriotism. This was most prominent in Buddhist community. The elder Theravāda Buddhist monks condemned learning of English and so did their patrons. Ashin Thittila had a strong ambition to propagate Buddhism in the world which was full of aggression and anxiety. In order to fulfill his ambition, he was well aware of the need to master the language which was commonly spoken in the western world that is English. Thus, against all odds, he started learning English. He learned English in Myanmar, India and Sri Lanka. Moreover, since he was an expert in Pāli, it was easier for him to learn the grammar of English language. With great effort, *vīriya* and strong will, *saddā* he finally achieved his goal in a short period of time.

His first journey to the West was in 1938. He went to England and stayed in London. It was just before the outbreak of World War II. He endured all the hardships there. When the War broke out, he did not go back to his country although many friends and colleagues insisted him and this was because he thought he hadn't even started to accomplish his mission. During the War, he stayed at his friend catholic priest's estate in Summerset. While residing there, he volunteered to do 'black out' which was to put out lights at night to avoid exposure to the bombers. He also volunteered as a first-aid nurse to take care of casualties and victims of bombings in London. Amidst the hardships where all the situations were very irrelevant for the livelihood of a Buddhist monk who also needed to comply with *vinaya*, Ashin Thittila survived and started to launch his Buddhist missionary works.

In order to teach Buddhism, agent needs to master Pāli first. If the recipients' language and the agent's language are the same, then there is not much effort needed for the agent in teaching the dharma, except to be careful with the Pāli translation. However, if the agent and the recipients do not share the same language, then it is a must for the agent to master the language of the recipients which would be second tongue for him or her. It is suggested that agent should master at least 70% of both Pāli and the recipients' language. In the case of Ashin Thittila, he firmly believed that he needed to master English and as a result of his hard work, he could break the big barrier. He organized group discussions and weekly public lectures. Then he became meditation instructor. His lectures and his instructions were very clear, precise and easily understandable by the English native speakers that the recipients keep on attending the sessions with increasing number of attendees every week. His British landlady called him 'Uneducated Easterner'. She always commented that there was nothing new for westerners to learn from the easterner like Ashin Thittila. However, once she saw even famous academics started to attend his lectures, she stopped calling him 'Uneducated Easterner'. He was a monk who learned and knew very well about the mindset of 20th century western people. He believed in the fact that Buddhist way is not to convert, but to raise the consciousness of others by our own deeds.

Ashin Thittila started giving a course on Abhidhamma in 1948 and conducted exam in 1949. He made such abstract and metaphysical topics very interesting by his skills in language. Among the candidates who entered the Abhidhamma exams, many of them passed with distinctions and those who passed were awarded certificates. He encouraged his students to learn synonyms for each Buddhist terminology and technical terms to help them make it easier to learn and understand.

He annulled the Westerners' point of view on Buddhism that 'Buddhism is pessimistic' and was successful in convincing them that 'Buddhism is optimistic' through his lectures and dharma talks. This is one of his major achievements. He was always very careful in translation and careful study of his works shows that he avoided personal ideas when translating the Pāli words. This is another issue on which agents need to pay much attention. Sometimes, when we focus much on the relevancy between the message we want to instill and the recipients' situation, we try to formulate that would suit the situation and there is a tendency of divergence from the original meaning. As Theravādans, throughout these 2600 years, we have never added, subtracted or made changes to the Teachings of Buddha. Thus we need to keep this tradition and should be cautious about this. As for Ashin Thittila, he firmly aware of this and it is reflected in his lectures and his writings. He had written and translated many famous and best selling books on Buddhism such as The Book of Analysis, The Path of the Buddha, The Buddha and Personal Life, Essential Themes of Buddhist Lectures and many more.

He passed away in 1997 at the age of 101, but his writings and lectures have been quoted and referred to by many scholars and writers of Buddhism in East and West. He had himself a good example for the agents who wish to disseminate dharma in the West without language barrier.

Agent as Ideal Person & a Kalyāṇamitta

It would be advisable for the agents to set themselves as role-models or ideal persons to be more effective in disseminating dharma. Agents do not need to take much trouble in formulating the principles which would make them role-models because these principles are already mentioned in the Pāli Texts. The most basic and simplest principle is to fully observe the Five Precepts in the case of layman agents. This is the number one step and all the layman agents should not overlook it. Among many rules and principles for monks, one notable set of principles is described in Pāli Text- *Āvāsikasuttaṃ*⁶ They are known as Characteristics of Abbot. In simple English, they are:

1. To have pleasant appearance
2. To be knowledgeable
3. To be able to live secular life
4. To speak politely with consideration
5. To be wise

Although these characteristics are originally meant for monks, especially abbots in this case, however, layman agents can also adopt these characteristics. By so doing, they can be role models for their recipients.

The ideal placed by the Buddha before us is mutual service men being in need of each other- to help each other. In Pāli Text, *Nikāya* there are three modes of conduct for the Buddhists namely *Buddhattha Cariyā* (striving for Buddhahood), *Ñātattha Cariyā* (working for the benefit of one's relatives), and *Lokattha Cariyā* (working for the benefit of the whole world). Likewise, each of us has three modes of conduct. The first one is *Atta Cariyā* which means striving for self-development so that one may attain happiness, self-culture and self-realization. The second mode of conduct is *Ñātattha Cariyā* which stands for working for the benefit of one's relatives and friends. The third mode that is to be observed is *Lokattha Cariyā* which means to work for the benefit of the whole world without any discrimination like caste, color or creed. Buddha asked us to practice these principles to refine our own nature and to elevate ourselves on the scale of being.⁷ These modes directly reflect the aptitude and attitude of an agent and these reflections create greater impression on the recipients.

Another aspect that the agents are advised to bear in mind is that they should be *Kalyāṇamitta* for the recipients. *Kalyāṇamitta* represents a genuine and reliable friend who considers and acts only for the benefit of his or her friend. Agents should think, speak and act for the good of their recipients. Those agents who help their recipients to be able to reach on the right track, that is the Noble Eight-fold Path, are the *Kalyāṇamitta* of their recipients and also that of their surroundings. Here, we should note that there is always a ripple effect.

When Ānandā made a statement that having a *Kalyāṇamitta* meant a person has 50% achieved his aim to attain *Nibāna*, the Buddha responded that in fact having a *Kalyāṇamitta* meant the person has 100% achieved. With a support of *Kalyāṇamitta*, a person can achieve his aim to attain *Nibāna*. Buddha claimed himself as a *Kalyāṇamitta* for all beings. This indicates the importance of the role of *Kalyāṇamitta* and thus agents

⁶ AN II , Myanmar version, pg.228

⁷ Ashin Thittla (1992), Essential Themes of Buddhist Lectures, DRA Press, pg.86

should not over look this in building themselves as ideal person when disseminating dharma.

Concluding Remarks

This paper does not attempt to replace the present-day's widely accepted methodologies of teaching Buddhism in new lands and non-Buddhist states. It solely aims to highlight the methods which are already mentioned in the Buddhist texts, but are prone to be overlooked by many scholars and disseminators of Buddhism lately. This re-exploration of specific means of teaching dharma hopes to add more flavors in improving the efficiency of the existing system in disseminating the Teachings of Buddha and helping people to make their lives better.

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