

## International Webinar on Theravāda Buddhist Studies: Challenges & Prospects

Friday, July 17, 2020 on Microsoft Teams

Aiming to provide a sincere attention on the challenges and prospects, which are concurrent in Theravāda Buddhist Studies in Modern times, a 1-day International Webinar on “*Theravāda Buddhist Studies: Challenges & Prospects*” was held on July 17, 2020 through an online platform “Microsoft Teams” by the Pāli unit of Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath. The webinar was also broadcasted live of Institute’s facebook page and on the YouTube channel.

The webinar was hosted by **Dr Animesh Prakash**, Assistant Professor in Pāli, Department of Classical and Modern Languages, CIHTS, who gave the welcome address. Dr Prakash, through this webinar, reiterated the vision of CIHTS and of His Holiness the Dalai Lama for the fresh research Theravāda Buddhist studies and Pāli canonical translation in Tibetan. There were four academic sessions on the said theme along with two separate sessions—inaugural and valedictory.



In the inaugural address, **Professor Geshe Ngawang Samten Ji**, Hon’ble Vice-chancellor of CIHTS, Sarnath discussed the challenges and the ways to overcome the problems we are facing in Theravāda Buddhist Studies.

He began his talk by analysing the meaning and scope of the term ‘Buddhism’ and ‘Buddhasāsana’. The Pāli term *sāsana* has different connotations which cannot be captured precisely by the English terms which are commonly used as teaching or doctrine. There are two important aspects of Buddhasāsana—*Āgama* and *Adhigama*. The former aspect, the *Āgama* can be brought into practice through teaching and studies whereas the latter *Adhigama* can be developed through practice and realization. Without both of these two aspects, we cannot claim that we hold the *Buddhasāsana* in a true sense. Therefore, he drew attention of the academicians of the Theravāda stream to do fundamental research within the traditional domain as well as encourage them to investigate canonical system with twofold approaches of *Āgama* and *Adhigama* by collaborating the Pāli canonical concepts with other modern subjects such as neurology, medicine, science, biology, philosophy and political science.

Secondly, he emphasized that the Buddha, right from the beginning, addressed the issues of mental problems. Therefore, Buddhist canonical works are based on

bringing happiness, peace, and reducing unsatisfactoriness by addressing the issues related to mind and mental system. As a result, we have a very rich system of science of mind and technologies to solve the problems as given in the Pāli canonical material such as *sati*, *citta*, *cetasika*, *samatha*, *vipassana* etc. He motivated strongly to make our tradition intellectually sound as it is and carry forward the spiritual approach which is the very purpose to address the ailing huamanity.

Lastly, in order to fulfil the necessity of “Pāli-Tibetan Studies”, which is less studied by the scholars, he shared his vision of expanding this small Pāli unit for fresh research and canonical translations. This is also a vision of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to comprehend the Pāli canon minutely and make the Pāli canon available in the Tibetan language.

There were following five speakers in the webinar, who gave their talk on various aspects of Theravāda Buddhist Studies.

1. Professor G A Somaratne, The University of Hong Kong
2. Professor K T S Sarao, Delhi University (retired)
3. Professor Bimalendra Kumar, BHU, Varanasi,
4. Professor Mahesh A Deokar, Pune University, Pune, and
5. Professor Charles Willemen, International Buddhist College, Thailand

**Professor Somaratne** spoke on the topic titled “*Reinstating the Theravāda Buddhist*



*Canon as a Subject of Research and Teaching in Buddhist*

*Studies.”* Contrary to the general trend in recent Buddhist

studies, this presentation aimed to discuss the significance of

the Theravāda Buddhist Canon as a subject in research and in

teaching particularly in the West that insist in research, we

should focus on the sources other than Buddhist canon and in

teaching, they insist to teach contemporary Buddhist practices . He clearly pointed

out the role of the Pāli canon and the canonization taking place within Buddhist

Studies, both for research and in teaching.

He claimed the canonical texts are heterogeneous and diverse, even though western idea is that it is sort of homogenous. So that is why they tend to reject the Pāli canon in Buddhist research. We need to be aware that Pāli canon contains not only norms

but also practices. Re-reading texts held us understand our inherited pre-suppositions particularly from earlier generation of Buddhist studies scholars. So

there is more to gain from canon than some Buddhist scholars who focus on contemporary practice only might expect. He lucidly highlighted the Theravāda Buddhist canon as a rich source for contrary to what the general trend in contemporary Buddhist studies.



In the second academic session, **Professor Sarao** addressed the gathering with a very critical approach on the topic “*Evaluation of the Role of Victorian Indologists and Anagārika Dharmapāla in the Revival of Theravāda Buddhism in India and Sri Lanka*”. Prof Sarao has highlighted the historical evidences about the Mahabodhi Temple and various claims by Hindus and Buddhists. He has made use of various statements said by various scholars including Cunningham, Lahiri, Guruge, and Kinnard.

He started his talk with late colonial period in South East Asia when the Colonial power started considering Hinduism and Buddhism as two cultures with no similarities through textual studies.

Prof Sarao mentioned that the Buddha did not reject but only redefined Brāhmaṇa and Caste (*jaccā vs kammunā*) and Brāhmaṇa. However, the Victorian Indologists “saw” them as rejection by the Buddha and hence saw “irreconcilable differences” between Buddhism and Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism. A large number of Ceylon Monks used to come and stay in Mahabodhi temple. For the first time the conflict arose at Mahabodhi temple and Prof Sarao claimed it happened only because of extremist Sinhalese views by Anagārika Dharmapāla and Instigation by Victorian Indologist. He also stressed upon various scholars who lied and conspired to break further harmony between Hinduism and Buddhism and further this agenda. Hamilton-Buchanan even went to an extent that he saw Hindus having “built a stair on the outside, so that orthodox may pass up without seeing the porch, and thus, seeing the hateful image of the Buddha”. Edwin Arnold even came up with the idea of purchasing Mahabodhi temple from Hindus in One Lakh Rupees. However, since ages both the Hindus and the Buddhists continues to share this sacred space.

Prof Sarao stressed on the fact that what is not so well-known about Anagārika Dharmapāla’s work in India, but which is perhaps his greatest contribution, is his inspiration behind a mass movement of South India’s low caste people, primarily Tamils, to embrace Buddhism. To Indians, Anagārika Dharmapāla is primarily known

for having laid the foundations of an aggressive campaign whose singular agenda was: the Mahābodhi Temple is purely a Buddhist shrine hence its ownership must be restored with the Buddhists led by him. To some extent, the seeds of communal discord around monuments were sown in the late nineteenth century when the Buddhist reformer Anagārika Dharmapāla began to pressurize the British Indian government of the day to put **'Buddhist monuments'** under the exclusive Buddhist control, and his most important success story was at Bodh Gayā". He founded the Maha Bodhi Society on 31 May 1891 whose rhetoric was also in line with the anti-Hindu propaganda of the Victorian Indologists., In his writings in *The Maha Bodhi* as well as speeches, he unequivocally began to contest not only Buddhism's roots in Hinduism but also the multi religious history of the Mahābodhi Temple of Bodh Gayā. Prof Sarao quoted Guruge, Obeyesekere and Amunugama and emphasized that In Sri Lanka, Anagārika Dharmapāla is primarily known for two things:

1. He was one of the leading contributors to the Buddhist revival of the nineteenth century that led to the creation of Buddhist institutions and schools to match and counter those of the Christian missionaries.
2. He is considered as an ardent Sinhala nationalist patriot and a heroic anti-colonial figure who was the spirit behind the independence movement of the twentieth century .

However, his work for the revival of Buddhism has been seen as being a direct contributory factor to the rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. In fact, he has often been accused of being an ultra-nationalist who "greatly contributed towards Sri Lanka's recurrent violence and ethnic tensions of recent times between the Tamils and the Sinhalas"

Prof Sarao spoke that under the strong influence of the Victorian Indologists, Dharmapāla erroneously believed that Buddhism and Hinduism could not and must not be seen as harmonious but at variance with each other. Dharmapāla declared that whereas Buddhists only pay tribute and not worship Buddha, the Hindus turned the image into a God and thus into an idol perverting the Buddha and its Image. Clearly, the agenda pursued by Dharmapāla was not only divisive but also considerably aggressive.

Indeed, the debate over control of Bodh Gayā was not a debate initiated by the Buddhists and the Hindus but it was just an opinion created by selected group of Orientalists who were engaged in a prolonged Anti Hindu sentiments.

Prof Sarao also talked of the case filed by Anagārika Dharmapāla in Calcutta High Court though against the wish of everyone including his Sri Lankan key supporters. With the meagre resources of Anagārika Dharmapāla and Mahabodhi Society it was a huge loss to them.

Prof Sarao Concluded that unambiguous fallout of the Calcutta High Court Judgement was that support within Sri Lanka for Dharmapāla's missionary work abroad almost ceased to exist. Most unfortunately, the exclusivist Anagārika Dharmapāla failed to see that it is quite natural for the two Indic religions to share holy space and coexist in peace and harmony.

**Professor Kumar**, in the third academic session, made us aware about the nuances of



Abhidhamma terminology, and their true meaning. He spoke on the topic titled as *Theravāda Abhidhamma: Some Problems in Interpretations*. He, in his deliberation, highlighted the problems of interpretations in Abhidhamma as given in the canon and the commentaries. The Abhidhamma Commentaries present the detailed analysis of the concepts discussed in the texts of the

Abhidhamma Piṭaka. The *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* in its chapters mentions about the possibility of the further additions. The commentaries of the Abhidhamma present the explicit relation between consciousness and the heart-base or the seat of consciousness by suggesting that it is implied in the canonical texts. It can be presumed that heart-base (*hadaya-vatthu*) is not like the heart (*hadaya*) and the sense organ (*indriya*). It has the characteristic (*lakkaṇa*) of being the material base for the manodhātu and manoviññādhātu. It has the function (*rasa*) to uphold them. It has the manifestation (*paccupaṭṭhāna*) of carrying of these elements. It is very subtle and delicate; it is to be located in dependence on the blood inside the heart; is assisted by four basic material qualities (*mahābhūta*) and maintained by the life vitality (*jivitindriya*). It comes into existence through the action (*kamma*). It becomes the base of the *mano* and *manoviññādhātu* but it does not control them.

He said, Interpretation was a systematic mode that was inextricably used in the process of resolving doctrinal matters. Accordingly, many monks and lay disciples, who required detailed explanations on what the Buddha had spoken, frequently re-approached the Buddha, a senior monk, or a senior nun for further clarifications while few of the disciples were satisfied with abridged versions. Sāriputta, Ānanda, Mahākoṭṭhita and nuns named Dhammadinnā, Khemā and Paṭācāra were highly appreciated by the Buddha for providing correct interpretations of his teachings.

Besides, Ven. Mahākaccāyana was considered as ‘the most skilled’ for explaining various styles of communication that the Buddha adopted for the discourses.

The Buddhist method of explication had been on the four-fold ingenious methods namely characteristics (*lakkhaṇa*), function (*rasa*), manifestation (*Paccupaṭṭhāna*) and proximate cause (*padaṭṭhāna*). The last two characteristics respectively refer to the ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ relationship. The method of Interpretation can be seen in the text *Nettipakaraṇa*, composed by Mahākaccāyana. There are two purpose of text namely (i) to know phrasing or the phrasing (*byañjana*) structures and meaning or meaning (*attha*) structures properly, which represents the Buddha’s words in the sutta; and (ii) to know clearly (*pariyeṭṭhi*) the Teacher and Taught but strictly in accordance with testing the Nine-fold Divisions of the sutta’s. The term *pariyeṭṭhi* describes a method that advocates a ‘systematic search’ and a ‘careful investigation’ on the subject matter of order (*sāsana*). An attentive search is needed to understand the teachings of the Buddha as it consists of the two characteristics namely Immeasurable (*aparimāna*) in the structures of ‘Meaning’ and Immeasurable in the structures of ‘Phrasing’. He also continues on the method of *Puggalapaññatti*.

**Professor Deokar**, in the next academic session, emphasised on *Pāli Śāstra literature: A New Scholastic Tradition*. He minutely focused on the non-canonical or the extra-canonical works in Pāli literature.



When we look into Theravāda tradition as a whole, we see that after the canonical period, we had the commentarial period. Although, the tradition ascribes the commentaries on Nikāya and then on Vinaya etc. to the commentator Buddhaghosa, but modern researches now quite conclusively pointed out that it was done not by the Buddhaghosa himself but by people, scholar, who were kind of referring his works; they were probably working with his teams, said Professor Deokar.

After this period of *Aṭṭhakathā*, we had *Ṭīkā*, *Mūlaṭīkā* basically. During this early period up to 9<sup>th</sup> century, we see a kind of second phase of Pāli literature, which were more focused on exegetical literature of Pāli. Of course, there were also a beginning of Chronicals in this period, and we also see a beginning of Pāli grammatical tradition with the advent of Kaccāyana Vyākaraṇa. After 9<sup>th</sup> century, we see an interesting turn in the field of Pāli literature. And, the credit can go to one person

basically, a Sinhalese monk, who came to India, studied Sanskrit in different monasteries especially in the monasteries in the East, the Sopara monastery. He also spent time in Bodhgaya around that area and his name is Ratnamati. This scholar is also known by another name and that is Ratnasiriñña. He started a revolution in Pāli literary tradition, which first started in Sri Lanka then to Burma and to certain extent to Thailand and adjoining areas. Therefore, Ratnamati, what he did is, started a new area, where Srilankan monks started paying more attention to the study of śāstra. Here, the śāstra means grammar, lexicography, medicine, poetics, astronomy, and astrology. These śāstra-s became prominent during this period, which started in 10<sup>th</sup> century and continued till 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Ratnamati introduced Cāndra vyākaraṇa tradition in Sri Lanka with his own work— Cāndrapañjikā and Śabdārthacintā, which he wrote in Sanskrit language, said Professor Deokar. He also introduced the rich Burmese grammatical and Abhidhammic tradition of Pāli.

The speaker of the last academic session was **Professor Willemen**, who made



intelligible points on the development of early Buddhist schools. The term *Mūlasarvāstivāda* occurs at the end of the seventh century. It refers to the traditional *Sarvāstivādins*, who had come into existence in the time of King Aśoka (264-227 BC). The traditional *Saṅgha* at the time called its own kind of Buddhism *Vibhajyavāda*, analyst, distinctionist, a term used

by the Buddha for himself in *Aṅguttaranikāya* (*Numerical Discourses*), *Dasakanipāta* (*Book of Tens*), *Sutta 94. Sarvāstivādins*, proclaiming that “everything” exists, branched off. In India only a *Vinaya* disagreement can cause a schism, quite different from East Asia, but the *Vinaya* disagreement is quite often the result of doctrinal disagreements.

So, ca.240 BC *Sarvāstivādins* exist. They became quite diverse in their practice of *yoga, yogācāra*, constantly taking in practices and ideas of their *Mahāsāṅghika* rivals. Being the majority, *mahāsaṅgha*, ca.340 BC, in the time of Mahāpadma Nanda, they had called their own form of Buddhism *Mahāyāna*. When *Sarvāstivādins* took over a practice from them, they called the result *Mahāyāna* too.

During the reign of King Kaniṣka ( 155-179 AD) a *Sarvāstivāda* synod was organised in Kaśmīra, and a new, Sanskrit *Abhidharma* of seven texts, spoken by the Buddha, was established. These Sanskrit *Sarvāstivādins* are known as *Vaibhāṣikas*, because of the

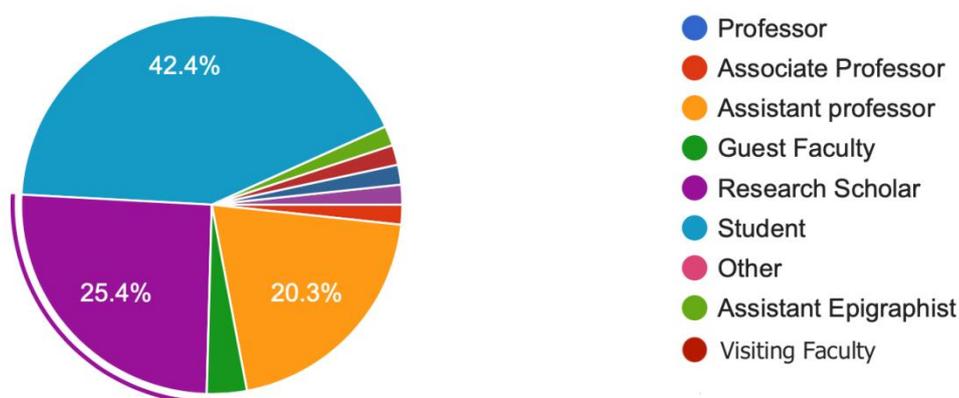
extensive commentary, *Mahāvibhāṣā*, on their central text, *Jñānaprasthāna*, *Development of Knowledge*. If an *Abhidharma* is spoken by the Buddha, an orthodoxy is established. In such case there is no action and reaction, no borrowing from others. *Mahāyānists* call that *Hīnayāna*, *Lesser Vehicle*. At the end of the seventh century the orthodoxy lost to the numerous traditional *Sarvāstivādins*, who were now called *Mūlasarvāstivādins*.

*Vibhajyavāda* developed and spread all over India, i.e. *mahī*, the earth. It was then called Mahīśāsaka. Ca. 20 BC a movement returned to the original *Vibhajyavāda* of Aśoka's time. A *Buddhabhāsita Abhidhamma* was written down. The text which gives the best expression to this conservative orthodoxy is the *Kathāvatthu*. This *Abhidhamma* of seven texts was said to be proclaimed by the Buddha. So, it was considered to be *Hīnayāna*. It is striking that the number of texts in both cases is seven, and that the contents and the languages were different.

Now that we know more about (*Mūla*)*sarvāstivāda* and about *Vibhajyavāda*, it has become very tempting to undertake comparative studies in *Abhidharma*.

### Online Participation

There were 148 participants joined via Microsoft Teams, and around 1400 participants were participated through Facebook live link. Altogether, we had around 1.5k participants. On the Microsoft Teams platform, around 65% of total participants were Teaching faculty from various institutions including Professor, Associate Professor, Assistant Professor, Visiting faculty etc. and rest 35% were Research scholars and other students.

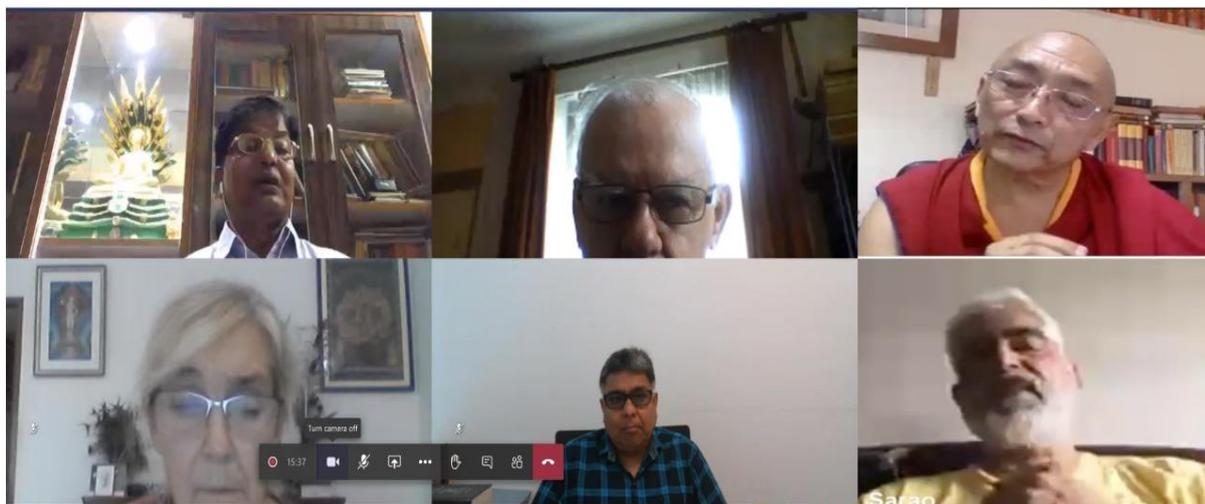


In addition to Indian participants, we had participants from various countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, Burma, Bhutan, China, Nepal, and United States.

## Vote of thanks



In the valedictory session, **Dr Himanshu Pandey Ji**, the Registrar of CIHTS gave the vote of thanks to all the speakers, participants, and distinguished guests. He also encouraged us to collaborate with great scholars of the world and for performing new academic activities in coming future.



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