
*THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF
"BUDDHISM" AND "RELIGION" IN THE STUDY OF
THE THERAVĀDA BUDDHIST TRADITION*

We launch our discussion in this chapter by turning again to the ground-breaking theoretical contributions made by Wilfred Cantwell Smith. In his classic study, *The Meaning and End of Religion*,¹ Smith made the point that the concepts "religion," "religions," "Hinduism," and "Buddhism" are rather recent, of Western origin and, in an attempt to understand humankind's religiousness, are inadequate.² In developing his argument, Smith considered the Buddhist case with penetrating insight but, because his thesis was of such comprehensive scope, chose not to go into a detailed consideration of relevant matters in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition.

In the historical considerations that led Smith to his conclusions, he considered the Buddhist case in India and noted an absence of the reified concepts "religion" and "Buddhism."³ He wrote,

Perhaps the most eloquent testimony to the inappropriateness of the new concept ["an entity-concept 'religion'"] to that situation and those processes lies in the persistent problem of whether or not primitive Buddhism was a religion. The modern West has proven incapable of answering this question.

The early Buddhists and their neighbours, we may note, were incapable of asking it.⁴

Smith was quite right, as we will come to see by focusing on the Buddhist case in general, the Theravāda in particular, and the Sinhala Theravāda Buddhist tradition specifically.

Western scholars of the Buddhist tradition have not been totally unaware that the languages of that tradition had no words representing the concepts “religion”⁵ and “Buddhism.”⁶ And now more than a quarter century has passed since Smith reminded us—and this in a compelling way that should lead us not soon to forget—that Buddhist men and women had lived religiously, had gone about the process of living life well, without conceptualizing that what they were doing was practicing Buddhism.

In studying the classical Sanskrit, Pāli, and Sinhala languages, one confronts an unalterable difficulty in trying to propose words in these languages that would carry the weight of the concepts “religion” and “Buddhism.” Sinhala Theravāda Buddhists, within the last two hundred years, I would suggest, have become acquainted, however vaguely, with the concepts “religion” and “Buddhism” and have either attempted to coin Sinhala terms to match the concepts or have decided to adopt new terms or new meanings first proposed by Westerners, perhaps by Christian missionaries.

A brief survey of some of the terms most frequently used by Sinhala Buddhists to represent the notions “religion” and “Buddhism” should, on the one hand, demonstrate the degree to which those indigenous terms have tended to lose precision and, on the other hand, indicate the novelty of the rather recently acquired notions of “religion” and “Buddhism.” Further, this survey might suggest that persons who study the Buddhist tradition and attempt to discern the faith of Buddhist men and women should refrain from imposing upon the data the concepts “religion” and “Buddhism” without an awareness that these concepts have had a history and that they were not originally proposed by Buddhists to represent their understanding of the religious life.

I

The first term we might consider is *bauddha-samaya*, or *budu-samaya*, a term occasionally found in literary Sinhala as a counterpart to the con-

cept "Buddhism." This term, formed by the words *bauddha/budu* and *samaya*, carries, through extension, wide connotations. *Samaya* is the pivotal word in this compound; whatever its meaning, it is modified by the adjective *Buddhist*. *Samaya* literally means "a coming together," and through extension the word means "convention," both in the sense of what is customary among Buddhists—tenets (*maṭa*), opinions (*diṭṭhi/dṛṣṭi*), teachings (*dhamma/dharma*)—and, perhaps, also in the sense of multitude, collectivity, or, better still, community (*samūha*).⁷

If one were to take *bauddha-samaya* or *budu-samaya* to mean "the Buddhist community," although this meaning has not been clearly supported by frequent and wide-ranging evidence, one would be dealing with those men and women who see themselves as forming a community and who have found community by becoming Buddhists. The difference between *bauddha-samaya* and *Buddhism* would be significant; without the former the latter would not have had a history. Had there not been a community of men and women who, through their common orientation to each other, to the world, to life, enabled outsiders to discern a uniform pattern in their views and behavior and consequently call them *Buddhists*, or had there not been a community of men and women who discovered through the teachings of the Buddha a capacity to participate meaningfully in a common heritage, there would not have been present before the Western observer that which first caught his or her eye and for which, later, was conceived a generalized classification, a reified concept "Buddhism."

If one were to take *bauddha-samaya* to mean "Buddhist tenets, doctrines, opinions, views, teachings," as reflected in the terms *maṭa*, *diṭṭhi/dṛṣṭi*, and *dhamma/dharma*, one might have a meaning rather close to a frequent use of *Buddhism*, namely, "Buddhist thought." And one might move further, through extension in meaning, to understand *samaya* as connoting also rites, institutions, and practices that have been customary among Buddhists. The antiquity of this latter extension in a compound *bauddha-samaya* or *budu-samaya* is not clear. We have yet to see written the history of this compound; and Sorata Thera makes no reference to a Sinhala text when he glosses *budu-samaya* with *buddhāgama* (a compound to which we will turn later) in his impressive Sinhala-Sinhala dictionary, *Śrī Sumaṅgala Śabdakoṣaya*.

It appears that *bauddha-samaya* or *budu-samaya* probably meant something like “Buddhist views” or “Buddhist thought” and subsequently had added to it the extended meanings of Buddhist rites, institutions, and practices. In any case, when this compound is met, one moves closer to grasping its import when one takes it to mean “Buddhist thought” in a straightforward sense or “Buddhist tradition” in an extended sense.

One might interject that my point thus far is obvious. Of course, one might contend, there is a significant difference between the concepts “Buddhist community,” “Buddhist thought,” and “Buddhist tradition,” on the one hand, and “Buddhism” on the other; the latter is much broader in scope, more comprehensive, and this comprehensiveness is the rationale for its continued use by those who study also texts, rituals, monastic and lay institutions, practices, doctrines, and customs. I would reply that Buddhists have had terms for these latter areas of inquiry, and they have had them for many centuries. Moreover, Buddhists have considered aspects in these areas, discussed those aspects, debated them, understood them, might have discarded a few of them and incorporated others, without trying to maintain that a particular combination was important because it represented “Buddhism;” rather, they did so because they found a particular combination consistent with mutually endorsed tenets, consistent within their community, and consistent with a tradition, on the one hand, and the process of living life well, on the other. Apparently Buddhists, for centuries, never sensed a need for a concept like “Buddhism” because such a concept, in its lack of clarity and precision, would have been of assistance only for those who were not very familiar with what is involved in living one’s life within the Buddhist community and, as an expression of one’s faith, participating actively in that community as that community is given form by and informs the Buddhist heritage.

Another old and significant term is *sāsana*. It occurs both by itself and in compounds such as *buddhasāsana* (*buddhaśāsana*, *buduśasna*). In the compound *buddhasāsana*, the term *sāsana* provides a straightforward meaning: “instruction, admonition of the Buddha.” Standing by itself, the term *sāsana* appears not always unequivocal in its meaning. This term, too, has had a history and it appears that throughout its long history a degree of reification might have occurred.

Basically the term *sāsana* means "instruction, admonition, message, order"; and this seems to have been a customary meaning in the canonical literature. A very well-known verse among Buddhists reads,

Refraining from all that is detrimental,
The attainment of what is wholesome,
The purification of one's mind:
This is the instruction [*sāsana*] of Awakened Ones.⁸

This usage of *sāsana* is frequently met in conjunction with the terms *awakened one* (*buddhā*)⁹ and *teacher* (*satt̥har*).¹⁰ Of passing interest is the use of *sāsana* with the name Gotama.¹¹ Thus far, it should be apparent that *sāsana* represents an equivalent for neither *religion* nor *Buddhism*. Certainly the verse quoted would be misrepresented if one were to translate it so as to read "This is the religion of Awakened Ones" (for *etaṃ buddhāna sāsanaṃ*) or elsewhere to offer in English "religion of the Teacher" (for *satt̥hu sāsanaṃ*) or "in the Buddhism of Gotama" (for *Gotamasāsane*).

The term *sāsana* has had a history, yet a careful study of its history would require more space than available here. It seems that in the course of time the term *sāsana* came to designate a patterned or established set of teachings, systematic injunctions, connoting a system of training.¹² This can be noted in those passages that relate one's "going forth into the *sāsana*,"¹³ that is to say, entering the monastic order. *Sāsana* seems also to have reflected in its usage a self-conscious institutional awareness on the part of Theravāda Buddhists. There are occasions in which the canonical texts speak of a person accomplishing this or that "right here" (*idh'eva*) and the commentarial tradition frequently understood the emphasis as "in just this *sāsana*."¹⁴

An interesting process of interpretation can be noted in the commentary on the *Suttanipāta* with regard to the term *brahmacariya* as it occurs in verses 693 and 696. *Brahmacariya* is a rather complex term but basically it means "mode of chaste living," "chaste behavior," and in a broad sense, "the higher life."¹⁵ In verse 693 the phrase under consideration reads "His mode of chaste living [*brahmacariyam*] will be widespread." The commentary takes *brahmacariya* as meaning *sāsana*.¹⁶ The commentary interprets *brahmacariya* in verse 696 as

samaṇadhamma, that is, the *dhamma* for those striving for inner calm or, following traditional interpretations, duties for monks (*bhikkhus*). The spatial references, “widespread” (*vitthārika*) together with the notion “right here,” seem to suggest an awareness of a recognized set of distinctive principles and practices that readily differentiate the Theravāda Buddhist movement from others and, within that movement, demarcate prescribed behavior for monks. Consider, moreover, a commentarial gloss: “thus announcing, expounding, roaring the lion’s roar he both announces and expounds ‘just here in this *sāsana* is this *dhamma*; it is not so elsewhere’.”¹⁷

Sāsana, although closely identified with established principles and a system of training prescribed for *bhikkhus*, was also broad enough to include laymen (*upāsakas*) and laywomen (*upāsikās*). Consider, for example, a passage in the *Mahāvamsa* in which one who has gone to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha as refuge is considered a layman (*upāsaka*) in the *sāsana* of Sakyaputta (i.e., the Buddha, the Sakyan son, the son of Suddhodana).¹⁸ And Visākā, preeminent among the laywomen (*upāsikās*) is said to have been endowed with faith in the *Buddhasāsana*,¹⁹ no doubt seeing herself as actively engaged in this *sāsana*.

At times *sāsana* is used interchangeably with *dhamma* when the latter means portions of the received teaching²⁰ or prescribed practice.²¹ And *sāsana* occurs as a gloss for “teaching and training” (*dhammavinaya*).²² Moreover, it is recorded that a question was raised at the first council, shortly after the demise of the Buddha, whether the “teaching” (*dhamma*) or “training” (*vinaya*) should be recited first. The *vinaya*, it was decided, was to be recited first because “when the *vinaya* is established, the *sāsana* is established.”²³

The *Mahāvamsa*,²⁴ the old chronicle of Sri Lanka, provides passages that suggest a reification of the earlier notion of *sāsana* and a tendency to use the term in close connection with the way of life prescribed for those in the monastic order, the Sangha.²⁵

The use of the term *sāsana* to reflect an awareness of an institutional understanding of the Sinhala Buddhist community, monks and laity, is noted in the *Mahāvamsa* when Duṭṭhagāmaṇi interprets his conquering the Tamils (*Damiḷa*) as a means of bringing glory to the *sāsana*.²⁶

Having gone to Tissamahārāma, having
 revered the Sangha [he] said,
 "I, myself, shall go to the further side of the river
 to brighten the *sāsana*.
 Give us, that we might honor them, *bhikkhus* to
 accompany us,
 For the sight of *bhikkhus* is both auspicious and
 a protection for us."

One can infer from this passage that an attempt to drive away a Tamil army, and in the process slaying a few hundred Tamils and creating a situation in which many Sinhala warriors would be slain, was interpreted and remembered as an act that would bring glory to, make illustrious, brighten, the *sāsana*. In this context *sāsana* clearly does not mean "order, message, instruction;" nor, for that matter, "doctrine." It would be difficult, moreover, to maintain that *sāsana* in this context meant the *buddhasāsana* upon recalling the verse quoted previously in which the *sāsana* of the Awakened Ones referred to, "Refraining from all that is detrimental, The attainment of what is wholesome, The purification of one's mind." This sense of *sāsana* appears diametrically opposed to the activities of Duṭṭhugāmaṇi. No, *sāsana* had, by this time, acquired a broader, reified, indeed, institutional meaning. Consider another passage:²⁷

Having thoroughly cleared the country [Of Tamils (*Damiḷas*)] and
 having put the populace at ease,
 He established the *sāsana*, which was destroyed by the foreigners,
 In its former place.

Geiger, when he came across *sāsana* in this passage made the comment, "P[āli]. *sāsanam* 'the doctrine' is used in exactly the same sense as we speak of 'church'. He restored the Buddhist church."²⁸ Our concern is not to take issue with Geiger's comparison by arguing that the notion of "church" is considerably different from *sāsana*. What is important is Geiger's discernment that *sāsana* was used in a particular way—and one worth noting—to suggest an institutional meaning. He elsewhere translates *sāsana* (in a compound *sugatasāsanam*) with "he reformed the Order [*sāsana*] of the Perfected One."²⁹

Sāsana has undergone a development in meaning, one not entirely uniform, not always unequivocal. In the course of its history and varied usage, *sāsana* has developed from a meaning much like *institute*, in the sense of authoritative precept or rule, to *institute*, that is, an *institution*, in the sense of an organization promoting the precepts; a shift akin to one from *order* as command, say, to *order* as organization.

For some time Sinhala Buddhists have been aware of a notion of the decline and disappearance of the *sāsana*.³⁰ They have addressed this notion by noting that, first, there will be a decline and disappearance of persons who follow the precepts and rules and that, subsequently, when all of the texts containing the precepts and rules are lost and forgotten, the *sāsana* will have disappeared. In other words, the institutes, precepts laid down by the Buddha, are the basis of the institute, the institution promoting those precepts; and when the latter becomes dissolved and the former are forgotten one can speak of a disappearance of the institute—*sāsana* in both meanings.

Now then, can *sāsana* be translated “Buddhism?” Hardly. Consider the awkwardness of the phrase, “The purification of one’s mind, This is the Buddhism of Awakened Ones.” And one must allow room for a translation to represent accurately the use of the term *sāsana* when it refers to Nigaṅṭha Nātaputta, the leader of the Jain movement.³¹ Nor would the matter be made clearer were one to speak of a person “going forth into the *sāsana*,” undergoing the ceremony that symbolizes one’s entering the monastic community, as “going forth into Buddhism.”

Perhaps one might speak of a king going into battle in order to bring glory to “Buddhism” (*sāsana*) and, in other contexts, as one protecting “Buddhism,” or cleansing “Buddhism,” or establishing “Buddhism” in its former place. Such understanding is closer to the extended, institutional meaning of *sāsana* but is lacking in precision not because of the scope of meaning of the term *sāsana* but, rather, because of the inherent vagueness of the notion “Buddhism.” Expressed more accurately, to bring glory to the *sāsana* is to create a situation in which the monastic organization can flourish, the laity can express its loyalty and thereby make manifest, make illustrious the

teachings of the Buddha. By establishing, cleansing, and protecting the *sāsana*, one creates the conditions in which there are neither internal nor external threats of destruction for the monastic organization and no radical barriers or pressures inhibiting the support of the laity; one seeks to maintain consistency between the inculcations of the Buddha and the mode of conduct of the *bhikkhus*, who are exemplars for the laity. These dimensions are held in the one term, *sāsana*; they are relatively obscured by the vague term *Buddhism*.

In the involved and demanding process of translating from one language into another, one might adopt as a working principle the practicability of retranslating into the former language what has been translated into the latter. This principle would lead one not to translate *sāsana* as "religion" because, for example, a Sinhala Buddhist upon reading the phrase "the origin and development of *sāsana*," if he or she were reading it in the Sinhala language, would wonder what might have happened to the marker equivalent to the definite article in English, that is, *the sāsana* or, if he or she were reading it in Pāli, would anticipate a discussion of the doctrines and organizations in the Buddhist tradition. *Sāsana* is both too specific for the generalized and reified notion of "religion" and too definite in its frame of reference to represent that personal, engaged, attitudinal sense of "religion."

II

Rather recently, Sinhala Buddhists have introduced terms to represent the concepts "religion" and "Buddhism"—*āgama* and *buddhāgama*.

Āgama is an old Sanskrit and Pāli word. Its basic meaning is "coming, approach, arrival," and it is used also to mean "that which has come down to the present" in the sense of tradition preserved in writing. Through this extension the term means also "religious text," "authoritative text," and further, "established procedure, discipline."

The manner in which *āgama* came to be chosen to represent the notion "religion" is by no means clear. I have not found the word *āgama* so used in canonical, commentarial, or medieval Pāli texts nor in classical and medieval Sinhala texts. It is difficult to note the precise

date for its first usage to represent “religion”; my guess would be in the later part of the eighteenth century or the early part of the nineteenth.

A cursory glance at the contexts in which *āgama* is used suggests its being closely affiliated with a consideration of the authoritative texts. One finds in the canonical collection known as the *Dīghanikāya* a passage in which *āgama* means “traditional or authoritative texts.”³² Further, The Pāli commentary on the *Dhammapada* (v. 208) glosses “one who has heard (and remembered) much,” that is, a learned one, (*babussuta*), with “one endowed with textual learning,” that is, endowed with knowledge of the authoritative texts (*āgama*).³³ In the commentary on the *Vimānavatthu* one finds the term *āgamaṭṭhakatthāsu*, meaning “in the commentaries on the authoritative texts” or “in the textual or traditional commentaries.”³⁴ In 1886, E. R. Goonaratne, a provincial administrative assistant³⁵ in Galle, Ceylon (now, Sri Lanka), under the British reign, chose to translate this compound “in the Commentaries of the religion.”³⁶ However, four years earlier, in 1882, Piyaratana Tissa Thera, in a letter written in Sinhala to Professor T. W. Rhys Davids, uses the term *āgama* to mean “authoritative text, canonical text.”³⁷ In the same year, Ven. Paññānanda, also writing in the Sinhala language, mentions an *āgamadharma* that is worthy of respect.³⁸ This writer seems to use this compound to mean a system of teaching (*dharmā*) that is based on canonical or authoritative texts (*āgama*). It is suggestive that approximately forty years after publishing these letters the editors of the *Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary* did not introduce the English term “religion” into their discussion of *āgama*³⁹ and that at about the same time, in 1924, it is noted in Charles Carter's dictionary, *A Sinhalese-English Dictionary*, under the entry *āgama*, “general usage [N. B.]: religious system, religion.”⁴⁰

I say *suggestive* first because the scholars working on the Pali Text Society's dictionary did not “read into” the term *āgama* a meaning *not found* in the Pāli sources consulted and second because Carter noticed a disjunction of sorts between the traditional meanings of *āgama* and the “general usage” of the term, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Thus far, it is possible to say that by 1924 *āgama* was used by quite a few people in Sri Lanka to represent the concept “religion.” Goonaratne gives the reader some idea of how a bilingual Sinhala man

or woman could interpret *āgama* in a Pāli text as meaning "religion"—and this in 1886. Where might one look for this change in meaning that the term *āgama* underwent? I would suggest, as mentioned previously, that Sinhala Theravāda Buddhists have become acquainted with the concepts "religion" and "Buddhism" and have either attempted to coin Sinhala terms to match the concepts or have decided to adopt new terms or new meanings first proposed by Westerners, perhaps by Christian missionaries.

In 1865, about two decades before Goonaratne presented his readers with an interpretation of *āgama* in a Pāli text as "religion," a series of debates began between representatives of the Buddhist and Christian communities in Sri Lanka.⁴¹ Although it is an admirable quality in one's religious life to take religious affirmations seriously, the debates between those endorsing the Buddhist side or position (*buddhāgamē pakṣaya*, *bauddha pakṣaya*) and those holding the Christian position (*kristiyāni pakṣaya*) represent a period in which there was not only inadequate understanding of the other religious tradition, but also a deeply entrenched conviction that the one was in opposition (*viruddha*) to the other. Manifestly, there was demonstrated no concern to understand Buddhists or Christians; two monolithic giants had clashed, the one something called Christianity (*kristiyāni āgama*) and the other something called Buddhism (*buddhāgama*).

In some of the texts recording these debates⁴² one notes the occurrence of *āgama* meaning "religion"⁴³ and occasionally the term appears in the plural, as "religions."⁴⁴ Throughout some of these sources the terms *buddhāgama* and *kristiyāni āgama* occur frequently.⁴⁵ So thoroughly reified had become the concepts "religion," "Buddhism," and "Christianity" that the debaters found it intelligible to speak of the "untrueness of Buddhism"⁴⁶ or the "untrueness of the Christian religion or Christianity,"⁴⁷ the "trueness of Buddhism,"⁴⁸ and meaningful to say that Christianity is "a deceitful religion,"⁴⁹ and to attempt to argue that "Christianity is not an authentic religion,"⁵⁰ and maintain that "Buddhism is a true religion."⁵¹

It is probable that the use of the terms *āgama* and *buddhāgama* to represent "religion" and "Buddhism" respectively antedates these debates. By how many years? I would suggest by about 100 at most.

Sinhala Buddhist scholars have been aware of the development of these terms and the meanings that they have acquired. In a splendid Sinhala-Sinhala dictionary, Venerable W. Sorata lists seven meanings for the term *āgama*, all of which, except the last, are very old; for *āgama* he notes *kristiyānidharmaya*⁵² and provides a symbol that elsewhere he explains “that is in common parlance.”⁵³

The reader who turns to Sorata’s entry for *buddhāgama* finds only one explanation, *buddhadharma*, which elsewhere Sorata explains as the *dharmā* of the Buddha; that is, the eighteenfold *dharmā* possessed by the Buddha and the *dharmā* taught by the Buddha.⁵⁴ There is an enormous difference between *buddhāgama*, on the one hand, and *buddhadharma*, on the other, a difference not only in history, the latter being very old indeed, but also in attitude, which the concepts reflected by the two terms represent: the former is mundane, sectarian, provincial; and the latter is personal, of tremendous consequence for one’s life. Let me provide some examples.

First, turning to booklets written rather recently for children at the upper kindergarten level one finds the use of both *buddhāgama* and *buddhadharmaya* in the titles.⁵⁵ The opening three sentences in a beginner’s book written by J. Abēruvan, which utilizes *buddhāgama* in its title, read “Buddhism is our religion. It is according to Buddhism that we should act. For us, there is nothing more important than Buddhism.”⁵⁶ Abēruvan, in his slightly more advanced book for children, also utilizing *buddhāgama* in its title, begins a section dealing with reverence for the triple gems—the Buddha, Dharma, and the Sangha—with the following remark: “Buddha, Dharma, Sangha are the highest treasure of Buddhists. Indeed, those are our three gems or triple-gem.”⁵⁷ Now, consider how de Silva, Eratna and Vanigatunga, who utilized *buddhadharmaya* in the title of their book, begin their presentation of the three gems: “It is (i) our Lord Buddha, (ii) His Dharma, and (iii) the venerable Sangha that we call the triple gem. This, indeed, is the triple gem of Buddhism.”⁵⁸

The difference one detects in these approaches is more suggestive than conclusive. In both cases a young child is introduced to the notion of “Buddhism,” and this quite early and in a formal setting. Yet there is a difference: in the former a child is made to be self-conscious of an insti-

tution and the way in which certain practices are important for that institution, that is, "Buddhism." In the latter case, a child reenacts a practice and is made to understand that what he or she has done is an important part of "Buddhism." The latter case seems to represent more accurately the way self-consciousness has developed in the history of the Sinhala Theravāda Buddhist tradition. There was a time in which one would recite the three gems without being aware that this practice was a part of "Buddhism." The former case represents the way in which many Sinhala Buddhists tend to speak about their religious heritage; there is a radical self-consciousness of a reified "something," a system that separates some of us from others of us.⁵⁹ When a booklet entitled *Buddhāgama* is placed before children a statement is needed to clarify the meaning of the term. When one entitled *Buddhadharmaya* is so placed, there is no apparent need to explain the term at the outset.

Sinhala Buddhists have been aware of *buddhadharma*, the Buddha's teachings about a way of life that could lead one to penetrate that which he rediscovered, have tried to live their lives according to it, have been buttressed by it in times of personal anxiety, and have found that it holds when all else seems to topple. *Buddhadharma* is for all humankind; the possessive pronoun in a sentence, "*buddhadharma* is our *dharma*" would be awry.

Let me provide another example that might inform the point. Consider the following passage written by a well-known Sinhala *bhikkhu* Walpola Rahula:

The question has often been asked: Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy? It does not matter what you call it. Buddhism remains what it is whatever label you may put on it. The label is immaterial. Even the label "Buddhism" which we give to the teaching of the Buddha is of little importance. The name one gives it is inessential.⁶⁰

At first blush this passage appears straightforward, intelligible, if a whit Platonic. It is a passage that Śīripāla Līlāratna, who translated it and the book in which it occurs into Sinhala, most probably found rather subtle. There are terms, he might have thought, that communicate the concepts "religion" and "philosophy."⁶¹ Yet, both "Buddhism" and "Buddhism" occur in the English passage.

Lilāratna, probably with the concurrence of the author, chose to take *buddhadharmaya* as the key term to represent “Buddhism” throughout the book not because they are equivalent, but, rather, because *buddhadharmaya* comes closer to the awareness on the part of Sinhala readers of that which is most noble in their religious heritage. The thrust of Rahula’s book would have been severely limited, restricted, had his translator taken *buddhāgama* for the English term and concept *Buddhism*. The Buddha did not teach “Buddhism,” he taught *dharmā*, and the title of the Sinhala translation, *Budun vadala dharmaya*, “the *dharmā* expounded (divulged?) by the Buddha,” is more engagingly relevant than the English title, *What the Buddha Taught*.

To return to our passage, then, the force of the English term *Buddhism* together with the word *label* suggest that somehow the descriptive term under consideration is inadequate, a mere convenience. The translator chose the term *buddhāgama* for this use of *Buddhism*. The key points of the passage are, therefore,

The question has often been asked: Is Buddhism [*buddhadharmaya*] a religion [*āgamak*, of course the use of *buddhāgama* previously would have required that one say *buddhāgama* is a religion, *āgamak*] or a philosophy [*darśanayak*]? It does not matter what you call it. Buddhism [*buddhadharmaya*] remains what it [*buddhadharmaya*] is. The label is immaterial. Even the label “Buddhism” [*buddhāgama*] which we [*apa*] give to the teaching of the Buddha [*budunvahansēgē dharmayata*] is of little importance. The name one gives it is inessential.⁶²

The *we* in this passage referred originally to Westerners and, perhaps, Sinhala men and women capable of reading and speaking English. Non-English-reading Sinhala men and women are now able to see themselves in this pronoun and consequently in this conceptual activity. The passage is instructive for our purposes because it demonstrates the way in which the notion *Buddhism* is inadequate to catch and communicate the series of intricate, subtle thought patterns of Sinhala Buddhists. Obviously the passage as designed for Sinhala readers makes an important point not quite clear in its English original:

whether *buddhadharma* is called a *religion* or a *philosophy* or *Buddhism*, it is still *buddhadharma*.

To discuss what is entailed in the concept *buddhadharma* certainly would require more space than available here. Western students can move nearer its meaning by dropping the use of the term *Buddhism* when that concept does not represent the thinking of Buddhists. Should one want to continue to use the term *Buddhism*—admittedly an attractive convenience—in discussing the contemporary scene in Sri Lanka, one should be aware that this concept came into the thinking of Sinhala Buddhists rather recently. Further, even today, *Buddhism* is handled by Sinhala Buddhists religiously, conceptually, on a level more mundane than other concepts and is certainly secondary to *buddhadharma*.

Let me put it another way. The notion that *Buddhism* is "otherworldly" has been said before. My point is straightforward; *Buddhism* is "this-worldly" whereas *buddhadharma* is both "this-worldly" and "otherworldly." The *-ism* indicates a conceptual category into which several things in this world are placed and consequently are given some identifiable label for handling data; *-dharma*, the second member of the compound *buddhadharma*, provides the context in which everything in this world and beyond this world, conceived and beyond conception, is placed and thereby provides an intelligible structure for living life well.

III

In 1971, after months of public discussion led by the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, a significant resolve made its way into the basic resolutions adopted by the Steering and Subjects Committee of the Sri Lanka Constituent Assembly. I quote the English, which was probably the language in which the draft was originally written.

RESOLUTIONS

The Republic of Sri Lanka

1. Sri Lanka shall be a Free, Sovereign and Independent Republic.
2. The Republic of Sri Lanka shall be a unitary state.

Buddhism

3. In the Republic of Sri Lanka, Buddhism, the religion of the majority of the people, shall be given its rightful place, and accordingly, it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster Buddhism, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Basic Resolution 5 (iv).⁶³

Sinhala men and women have worked with the concepts “religion” and “Buddhism” for at least a century—the major debates began in 1865 and 1866—possibly two. Since the late nineteenth century, we have noted representatives of religious organizations using the concepts, educators introducing them to children, and more recently politicians grappling with them. The passage drawn from the *Government Gazette* clearly shows the extent to which these Western concepts have been adopted. There are the terms *Buddhism*, *religion*, and *religions*, and they are matched in the Sinhala language today with *buddhāgama* and *āgama*.

This is not the place to enter a discussion of the merits of this basic resolution proposal, however ambiguous the notions “Buddhism/*buddhāgama*,” “rightful place/*nisitāna*,” and “religion/*āgama*” might be.⁶⁴ Obviously complex historical factors have given rise to the situation in which this basic resolution was submitted, and obviously, the issue remains delicate. The important thing to grasp is that our contemporaries in Sri Lanka seem to be aware of the concepts *religion* and *Buddhism*, and are using them in their discourse. All this is instructive for students of the Buddhist tradition.

First, one can discern the manner in which Sinhala Buddhists have chosen to utilize the concept “Buddhism”: they have tended to use it in a restricted sense to refer to the external, the peripheral characteristics that have been manifested by a more personal, deeply significant awareness. Western students of the Buddhist tradition will do well to be alert to this.

In sensing a need to assure a continuing, flourishing presence of the Sangha, the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress and others, not fully aware of the precise program that would productively relate “Buddhism” (*buddhāgama*) with “its rightful place” (*nisitāna*), nevertheless led in the formulation of this resolution. They did not choose

another term in place of *buddhāgama*. They could have tried to make a break with a trend, somewhat more than a century old at the time, and propose *buddhadharma* or, more engagingly, *dhamma/dharma*, instead of the concept *buddhāgama*. But they did not.

I think they made the move they did because they were well aware that *dhamma/dharma*, rediscovered by the Buddha, provides a foundation for living religiously, provides an underpinning for an integrative interpretation of that which underlies the notion of law, on the social level, personal level, indeed, for the reflective person, also the cosmic level. Sinhala Buddhists are saying that the rightful place (*nisitāna*) for *buddhadharma* is in the minds and hearts of men and women—and no proposed basic resolution can alter that or assure it.

We, therefore, put aside "religion" and "Buddhism" and continue our attempt to understand Buddhists.