

Death-wish Psyche

Interestingly, the theme of an inevitable end of the dharma appears to have played an avantgarde role in the formation of the death-wish psyche of Buddhism. Thus, it is not surprising that the prophecy of '*decline*' has been a recurrent theme in Indian Buddhism (See for the different interpretations and responses of various traditions, Nattier 1991). References are not wanting in Buddhist literature indicating the belief entertained by Buddhists that their faith was neither aeternum nor aeonic and that the impending end to their faith was unavoidable. There

appeared to have been a sort of ‘death-wish’ psychology at work in Indian Buddhism, so to say. The *Vinaya Piṭaka* refers, for instance, to the decline of moral life resulting in the anticipated collapse of the religion (Oldenberg 1879-1883: i.12, 19). The Buddha himself is said to have expressed the view that his religion would last only one thousand years and that the entry of women would further cut its life-span to half.¹ It is quite interesting to note that women’s ordination was perceived as a serious

¹“If women had not been allowed to go forth from the home to the homeless life, then long would have lasted the godly life (*dhamma*); for a thousand years... But now... since women have gone forth... not for long will the godly life last... just for five hundred years” (Walleser and Kopp 1956-1973:iv.278).

and inescapable threat to the very survival of Buddhism (Blackstone 1999). Both the *Cakkavatti-SīhanādaSuttanta* and the *AggaññaSuttanta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* refer to the idea of imminent decline as part of the cosmic cycle of evolution and devolution spanning vast expanses of time (Davids and Carpenter 1890-1911: iii. nos. 26 and 27 respectively). Thus, it is not surprising that such an idea of inevitable decline in Theravāda led to an aggressive conservatism directed at the preservation of the teachings of the Buddha for as long as possible in their >original= form. Within this sort

of framework, change of any kind was perceived as a change for the worse. One can clearly discern a sort of depression and despair in the *Da Tang Xiyu Ji* which Xuanzang unmistakably conveys to the mind of his readers. He gives examples of the different legends which were widely current when he visited India. These legends are highly suggestive of the attitude of helpless defeatism that had overtaken the Buddhists at that time. He talks about the prophecy of a holy man who left his garment behind saying that the garment would survive as long as Buddhism itself. This garment had already begun to show

signs of corrosion when Xuanzang visited India, thereby indicating the fulfilment of the prophecy at a not too distant future (Li 1996: 39). Xuanzang also relates the story of a stūpa. According to this story, the Buddha had prophesied that the stūpa would be burnt seven times and seven times would it be rebuilt and then Buddhism would come to an end (Li 1996: 74). When Xuanzang came to India, it had already been burned down four times (Li 1996: 74). At Bodhagayā, Xuanzang saw the statue of Avalokiteśvara which was destined to sink completely in the ground with the disappearance of Buddhism. He

found it sunk up to the chest and estimated that it would be completely buried in about 150 to 200 years. Again, amidst the bustle and grandeur of Nālandā, Xuanzang was haunted by a prophetic dream. He foresaw the evil days that would follow the death of king Harṣavardhana, when a conflagration would devastate the celebrated centre of Buddhism and the humming halls of Nālandā would be deserted (Beal 1911: 155). Thus, the Buddhists themselves believed that they were living in the valley of decline and were in fear of an approaching cataclysm. It may be interesting to see if such a mind-set

played any role in the decline of Buddhism in India as no effort was made by the Buddhist sangha to build a mass-base for itself.