

Progress made in In-sight (Vipassana) Meditation in Sri Lanka during the last Fifty years

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Sri Lanka has a long standing tradition of practices based on religious doctrines. The practice of meditation is considered by the followers of all religions, particularly Buddhism as more virtuous than other religious practices such as offering donations, moral practices and rituals. However the practice of meditation until the mid-twentieth century was based on traditions within the country and the practitioners did not consider it necessary to look for internationally recognized practices for meditation. During the last fifty years the situation has changed significantly within the country as well as globally. With global interactions, the interest shown by several other religious groups in the world including many lay practitioners has resulted in a positive influence on day to day activities.

In analyzing the causes for this change in Sri Lanka, one could see that up to the period of Buddha Jayanthi of 1956, the groups of meditators including monks who lived in villages in non –urban areas but particularly in jungle hermitages referred to as Aranyas as well as laymen who developed the techniques of meditation, limited the practices to ‘tranquility’ meditation also referred to as ‘Samatha’ or ‘one pointedness’. Even though there were several hermitages located in the outer regions of the country, important practices of meditation, for a very long period, never progressed beyond Samatha Bhavana or Tranquility meditation.

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It was noteworthy that interactions with Burmese and Siamese Traditions, particularly from Ramanna Desa and Amarapura, became more pronounced and frequent around the Buddha Jayanthi of 1956 and thereafter. It was inevitable that meditation guidelines had to be linked to the practices of such regions particularly in Myanmar (Burma). After the interactions with Meditation Masters - Maha Theras or Sayadows of Myanmar the gradual spread of 'Vipassana' or 'insight meditation' became a reality. Some of the Sri Lankan monks traveled to Myanmar and received training in meditation of which the Vipassana form or Insight meditation was considered the more progressive by both the clergy and laity.

The development of Vipassana form of meditation has special social significance and has attracted many followers of different religions both internationally and locally. The subject has been discussed in several important international fora in the recent past. A number of international and local meditation masters have made contributions and the followers are benefiting from this positive phenomenon.

Keywords: practice of meditation, virtuous, Buddha Jayanthi of 1956, hermitages referred to as Aranyas, Samatha Bhavana or Tranquility meditation, Ramanna Desa and Amarapura, Myanmar (Burma), 'Vipassana' or 'insight meditation', Vidarshana, Vishesha Dharshana'