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Laurence O'Rourke / U Dhammaloka:
working-class Irish freethinker, and the first
European bhikkhu?

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Article

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Abstract

The first European members of the bhikkhu sangha have normally been identified as Gordon Douglas / Asoka (1899), Allan Bennett / Ananda Metteyya (1901), and Anton Gueth / Nyanatiloka (1903 / 4). However, this note suggests that the first westerner to be ordained, in Burma in the mid-1890s, was working-class Dubliner Lawrence O'Rourke / Dhammaloka. The note summarises the evidence for his remarkable life and his free-thinking views.¹

The Irish *Sunday Independent* for August 6, 1911 has an article describing what it rightly calls "Dublin man's remarkable career." The gist of the article, which cites "the American Press" as an authority for its information, is that a Dublin-born Irish-American, Lawrence O'Rourke, having been "sailor, tramp, shepherd, truckman, stevedore and tally clerk" (this last for "a British timber firm in Rangoon") came across a Buddhist pamphlet in English, studied Pali with bhikkhus and became a novice at Tavoy monastery in Rangoon (learning Burmese and Tibetan in the process). After five years as a novice he was fully ordained, and sent travelling "from village to village on the front teaching the gospel of Buddha." After this, according to the article, he became an elder, and subsequently an abbot, finally attaining "a rank which corresponds to a Bishopric in

Christian churches" (Anon. 1911: 8).

At this point, according to the article, "every Buddhist monk above the rank of abbot must make a pilgrimage to Lhasa [sic]," which he is represented as doing, meeting the Dalai Lama and staying for three months.² The article adds that on his return, the population of Mandalay was too busy acclaiming him to pay any attention to Lord Curzon, and concludes by distinguishing Dhammaloka from Ananda Metteyya, who had recently visited England. Again according to the article, he was a noted newspaper correspondent,³ and his letters "displayed a very remarkable interest in Western religious controversy and a very advanced theological standpoint for a gentleman signing himself as a Buddhist priest" (Anon. 1911: 8).

Contextualizing Dhammaloka's story

While it is possible to confirm the basic outlines of this story (as the rest of this note aims to show), there are some obvious discrepancies. A pilgrimage to the Dalai Lama might indeed have been of interest to a western Buddhist, though not of course for the reason given (no such requirement exists). It is unlikely that there was any significant contact between the Burmese and Tibetan sanghas in this period. Similarly, learning Tibetan in Rangoon at this date seems impossible, and (like the supposed requirement to visit the Dalai Lama) is presumably to be ascribed to a journalist's misunderstanding in this second- or third-hand account.

Conversely, the contrast between O'Rourke's working-class background and his reported familiarity with western theology is only apparent. Autodidact traditions were strong in Ireland, and O'Rourke's Scottish-Irish near-contemporary James Connolly,

known as a substantial Marxist thinker, worked as printer's devil, soldier, labourer and manure carter before he became a professional activist.

O'Rourke's presence in Burma as clerk in a logging firm (no doubt his rise from working-class employment came from being white and literate) fits well with the later Buddhist sympathiser Maurice Collis' experience of Rangoon as a young colonial administrator, who saw that it was

not a Burmese city but a trade emporium, where the products of Burma were handled by foreigners, companies which bought its rice and milled it; refined the oil they had won from its fields; cut up the teak they had felled from its forests.... (cited in Derné and Jadwin 2006: 193)

The timing is perhaps the most surprising claim in the article. Dhammaloka's career as outlined (notably his identification in 1911 as having been promoted to abbot and a further rank subsequent to becoming a *Thera*, which in itself requires ten year's monastic seniority) implies full ordination well before the turn of the century (and apparently novice ordination five years earlier), making him the first European bhikkhu by some margin (Gordon Douglas / Asoka was ordained in Ceylon or Siam in 1899, Allan Bennett / Ananda Metteyya in Burma in 1901 and the first non-British European, Anton Gueth / Nyanatiloka in 1903 and 1904).⁴ Given that he is said to have been a novice for a further five years before this, he would have had to join the sangha in the early 1890s if not before; Burma was only finally annexed by the British in 1885.⁵

Dhammaloka's earlier career

However, Dhammaloka was already active as a preacher by 1901: the Salt Lake City-based *Deseret Evening News*⁶ for August 24, 1901 covers his views in some detail:

While exponents of modern Christianity in this part of the world are straining every nerve, to create the impression that the Gospel of Jesus is a system of blasphemous falsehood, it may not be without interest to note that disciples of Buddha, on the other side of the globe, proclaim against "Christianity," much in the same way as ministers here preach against "Mormonism". And they are not Asiatics either. They are Europeans gone to Burma for the express purpose of reclaiming the few converts to "Christianity" that reside in that country.

One of these anti-Christian missionaries is an Irishman, known in Burma as Dhammaloka. He is in his denunciations as vehement as most anti-"Mormon" emissaries. Some specimens of his speeches are given in a Chicago denominational journal. He gives vent to the following:

"Christianity, as a system of religion, is sorry stuff. Unbelief is steadily gaining ground in Europe. Look at the lawlessness in the Church of England at the present time. No wonder! The other day three Christian bishops came together at Manchester and openly confessed how the advance of science was making it impossible to continue to believe in many of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. As science advances,

belief in Christianity is fading in Europe. Christianity spreads in this country, not because it has any intrinsic worth – for science has shown it has none – but because its missionaries are backed up by the powers of the purse."

About the missionaries in Burma, this zealot has this to say:

"There are at present, you know, many Christian missionaries in Burma, trying to pick holes in your blessed religion and convert you, Burmans, to Christianity. These missionaries are very fond of writing pamphlets and tracts that deal with disparaging and critical remarks on Buddhism, and distributing them among the Buddhist population; and I am afraid some Buddhists, knowing very little of the excellence of their own religion, will in an evil hour be led astray by their persuasive, though hollow, arguments. So now, I come to you, not particularly as a preacher, but rather as a warner. I presume you all know very well that 'forewarned is to be forearmed.' You should always be on your guard against the preaching of those missionaries. If they apprise you that they have brought to you what they call western civilization, or religion of peace, do not hesitate a moment to reply that you would rather call it western attraction, or religion of bloodshed. If they ask you to give the reasons why, refer them to me and I will explain them all. Christianity teaches an imaginative heaven, supposed to be full of happiness.... Again, you must be able to analyze the reasons why so many bloody wars and cruel murders took place in the history of Christianity, as also why so much peace and prosperity prevailed in that of

Buddhism. On these grounds I remind you not to be so weak in moral courage as to readily fall a victim to the Christian missionaries." (Anon. 1901: 4)

This article's original source⁷ was cited by Rufus King Noyes (1906: 48) thus:

Christianity spreads in this country (Burma) not because it has any intrinsic worth, for science has shown it has none, but because its missionaries are backed up by the powers of the purse.

Noyes was a Boston doctor associated with the origins of Christian Science; his free-thinking compilation *Views of religion* was widely quoted at the time.

Tom Paine in Burmese

The free-thinking connection was not accidental. In 1909, Dhammaloka appears as president of the Buddhist Tract Society, based at Tavoy monastery in Rangoon, and author of two letters in the Kentucky rationalist journal *Blue-grass blade* (Dhammaloka 1909a, b).⁸ In his first letter, entitled "From far-off India", he writes appreciating a copy of the *Blade* which had been sent on spec (presumably in response to recent letters to other papers), and sending a subscription:

I was wondering how you got my address, as I did not think that we 'heathens' in far-off Burma should attract attention from any person of intelligence, except the 'holy and sanctified' Christian missionary. (Dhammaloka 1909a: 6)

This letter is correctly signed U Dhammaloka; the second is misleadingly headed "A Hindu on Paine", and the name

misprinted as "D. Dhammaloku." The latter, rather wonderfully, states that the Society intended to translate Paine's *Age of reason* and allies Buddhism and free-thinking:

You ask if there are 2,000 admirers of Thomas Paine in Burma. Yes, and double as many. There were sold in Burma over 10,000 copies of the "Age of Reason" last year, as well as some copies of the "Rights of Man."

I trust this year that we shall do better than last year. You will convey the greetings of ten millions of Buddhists of this province to your Association on the occasion of the great celebration of that grand Hero of Freethought. I am making the necessary arrangements to celebrate the occasion on a grand scale...

We have not translated any parts of the "Age of Reason" as yet, but our Society intends to do this work next year, and you shall receive a copy of the same. We are going to bring it out in three parts, and if the funds permit we shall bring it out in full.

I am sure that every friend of Truth will agree with me that it is time that we should show the bigots and the ministers of every church that Thomas Paine was the real friend of man – in fact, we can call him a Humanitarian of the loftiest type. (Dhammaloka 1909b: 7)

Tom Paine was an obvious point of reference for a Catholic-born freethinker in Ireland, and had been for over a hundred years; the *Rights of man* had circulated widely between 1791 and the 1798 rebellion (Barnard

1999: 62), while in 1825 the Presbyterian moderator commented that "the works of Tom Paine ... were put into the hands of the people. Paine's *Rights of man*, a political work, and *Age of reason*, a 'deistical' one, were 'industriously circulated' ... 'not a few of the schoolmasters were men of bad principles, who preferred any book to the Bible' " (MacManus 2002: 36). Paine was thus a traditional point of reference for Catholic anti-clericalism.

The final piece of this jigsaw is an envelope from the Buddhist Tract Society, sent from Rangoon to an AV White in Toronto and bearing stamps of King Edward VII (1901 – 1910), now in my possession. This much is as far as I have been able to discover to date.

Conclusion

Thus as far as I have been able to check the facts, Dhammaloka seems to be exactly who the *Sunday Independent* reports him to be. It is possible that he was embroidering the facts of his monastic career (and hence, for our purposes, pushing back the implied date of his ordination); if so, he was putting his position in the sangha in jeopardy by doing so.

More research is obviously needed, in the Burmese records as well as in the American magazines of the day, to fill out what by any account is an extraordinary story. For now, the evidence suggests that the first Westerner ordained as a bhikkhu was a working-class Irish freethinker.

Notes

¹ Thanks are due to Cristina Rocha and an anonymous referee for the *Journal of Global Buddhism* for their

helpful comments on this article.

² According to the article, the journey was Rangoon to Calcutta by boat, Calcutta to Darjeeling by train, and Tibet was entered via the Donghkya (Donkia) pass in Sikkim, "with Sikkim followers of Buddha for guides" (Anon. 1911: 8). This visit itself should at least in principle be verifiable.

³ Presumably of American newspapers or more likely magazines: he does not appear in Irish newspaper databases or the London *Times*, nor in those American dailies which I have been able to consult other than the *Deseret Evening News* (see below), which cites a "Chicago denominational journal" as source.

⁴ The multiple dates for Nyanatiloka represent novice / sramenera and full / bhikkhu ordination. The details of Douglas' career are sketchy, paralleling the situation for Dhammaloka.

⁵ He is in any case presumably not identical with the Dhammaloka Thera who established a Theravada vihara in Nepal in 1943 and published a *Jnanamala* in Newari in 1958.

⁶ "Organ of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" – hence the critique of other forms of Christianity, indicated with inverted commas in the journalist's commentary.

⁷ We can say this because Noyes gives him the title "Rev. U. Dhammaloka," incidentally confirming his ordination while confusing the Burmese "U" with a personal name.

⁸ The *Blue-grass blade* (1884 – 1910) was one of the first atheist journals in the US and was widely circulated, as well as widely targeted for persecution. Its founder, Charles Moore, was twice jailed for blasphemy and supported a wide range of other liberal-radical causes.

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