



LIVING THE BUDDHIST WAY: ROADSIDE BUDDHA SHRINE WORSHIPPING IN COLOMBO

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More than in any other period of the history of this country, the current socio-political environment suggests the importance of studying religious phenomenon, as tense situations in our everyday lives are connected to (politicized) religious practices. We recently witnessed how vandalization of roadside buddhist shrines in the mawanella area was allegedly committed by some extremist muslim groups instigated by the preacher Zahran Hashim who was the leader of the national Thawheed Jamath (alias NTJ) group in Sri Lanka (Griffiths 2019). Anyone travelling around the city of Colombo would notice the hundreds of Buddhist, Christian and Hindu shrines located on either side of public roads, junctions, roundabouts and communities, etc., in addition to conventional religious places of all religions. These roadside shrines are constructed and maintained by the Buddhists, Catholics and Hindus and that is testimony for the increase in religious density or religious influence (profane). This phenomenon testifies to the willingness of the people in the city to worship at these roadside shrines. Even though, not many people/ devotees gather at a particular time of the day in these shrines, it seems they are very active, evident in the way these roadside shrines are maintained and organized. Given this context a study was conducted to understand why and how city folk worship at roadside shrines though they live in a rationally organized city. The analysis of the ethnographic data collected for five months on worshipping at roadside Buddhist shrines reveals that they have been in existence for several decades. The analysis suggests that the usage of a functionalist perspective to study the worshipping pattern can open up and reveal new realities, which go beyond the simple explanation of inter- and intra- religious tensions and identity clashes as put forwarded by some scholars. Uncertainty, risks, corruption, immorality, lack of law and order etc., have contributed to the increase of these roadside shrines in Colombo. In a way one could say that the proliferation of shrines denotes the mismatch or lopsided development of social institutions with the development and expansion of the liberal socio-economic, political and cultural value system. Finally, this could be interpreted as “living the Buddhist way”, an everyday struggle to live amidst the changing socio, political-economic spaces in the city in line with lord Buddha’s teaching while staying connected and living in a morally justifiable manner (dhārmika) to him/herself and to the society.

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