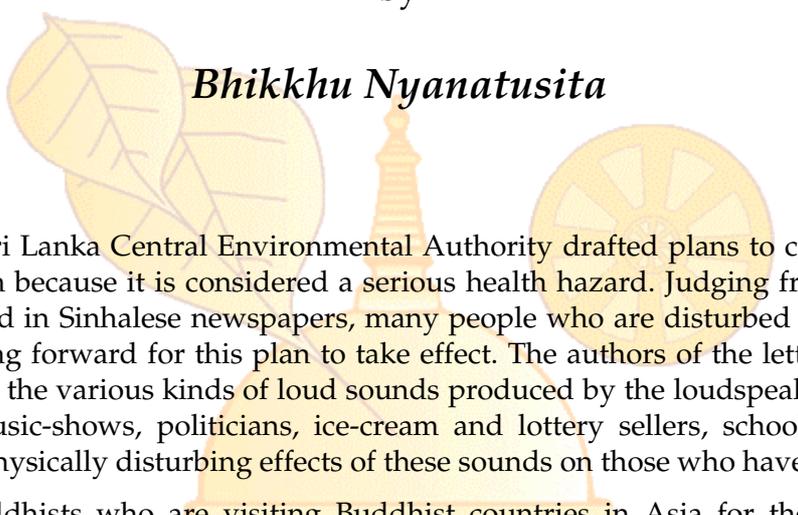


Buddhism and Sound Pollution

by

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Recently, the Sri Lanka Central Environmental Authority drafted plans to curb community sound pollution because it is considered a serious health hazard. Judging from articles and letters published in Sinhalese newspapers, many people who are disturbed by loudspeaker noise are looking forward for this plan to take effect. The authors of the letters and articles complain about the various kinds of loud sounds produced by the loudspeakers of religious institutions, music-shows, politicians, ice-cream and lottery sellers, schools, etc, and the mentally and physically disturbing effects of these sounds on those who have to hear them.

Western Buddhists who are visiting Buddhist countries in Asia for the first time are surprised on how noisy the environment is due to the blatant use of loudspeakers. They are even more surprised when discovering that a lot, if not most, of the noise is coming from Buddhist temples. Religious institutions of any kind, all attempting to assert their importance over others, are known to be noisy—a famous German statesman once remarked that church-bells are the artillery of the Christian clergy. The Buddhist newcomers though, having learned the original Buddhist teachings, expect Buddhist monasteries to be very quiet places, but reality is often otherwise. Buddhist village and city temples are among the worst sound-polluters in the world. In Burma, loud chanting of the huge Abhidhamma text called Patthāna is blared for hours and days from loudspeakers. In Sri Lanka very slow and long drawn “protective” (*paritta*) chanting is sometimes chanted through loudspeakers for the whole night until dawn. Many people in Sri Lanka don’t need to use an alarm clock and are automatically forced to wake up at 5 am every day because Buddhist “protective” chanting recordings are blared from neighbourhood temple loudspeakers for an hour. The Uposatha or observance days, when Buddhist laypeople come to the monasteries and take the eight precepts, are often the noisiest days because of the five-precept chanting and sermons blared over loudspeakers. Likewise in Thailand and Cambodia Buddhist ceremonies (and any kind of ceremonies and meetings) are not complete without loudspeakers.

It is not only foreign Buddhist visitors who are suffering from the noise, Asian Buddhist meditators too are troubled. There are many forest monasteries where the meditating monks are regularly disturbed by loudspeaker noises from temples and houses kilometres away. For example, the author of this article could hear at the time of working on this article, early in the evening on a Saturday at a hermitage on a hill in Kandy, a strange multi-religious melange of the following loudspeaker sounds: Buddhist chanting from three temples, Sinhala Christian folk music from a church (which had been going on non-stop the whole day), and prayer calls from several mosques.

For anyone familiar with the original teachings of the Buddha, the deliberate sound-pollution caused by Buddhists appears to be in straight contradiction to the Buddha’s own example and advice. There are many instances in the Buddhist scriptures that indicate that Buddha and his disciples were lovers of quiet and peace, and were commending it to others. For example, in several discourses it is related that when ascetics of other sects saw the Buddha coming to visit them, one of them would say: “Be quiet, Sirs! Don’t make a sound! It

is the ascetic Gotama who is coming. That venerable is a lover of quietness (*appasaddā*, lit. “without sound,” can also be translated as “silence”), one who praises quietness.” Similarly, when a disciple of the Buddha, such as Ānanda or Anāthapindika, would come to visit ascetics, one of them would say, “Be quiet... The venerables are lovers of quietness, disciplined in quietness, praising quietness.” The phrase “disciplined in quietness” suggests that the Buddha trained his pupils in being quiet.

There are two training rules in the Buddhist monk’s Code of Discipline, which state that a monk should be quiet while going and sitting in inhabited areas. The origin story to the rules is as follows: “The Buddha was living at Sāvattihī... At that time the group of six bhikkhus was going among the houses making a loud, great sound. People looked down upon it, complained, became irritated: ‘How can the sons of the Sakyan go among the houses making a loud, great sound?!’ [The Buddha came to hear about it, called the monks, and said:] ‘Foolish men, how can you go among the houses making a loud, great sound?! It will not lead to faith in those who have no faith; it will not lead to the increase [in numbers] of those who have faith’... [and he laid down the training rule:] ‘I shall go quietly in inhabited areas, this is a training to be done.’”

In the Monuments to the Dhamma Discourse (MN 89), King Pasenadi said that he was greatly impressed by the discipline of a large assembly listening to the Buddha because there was not a single sound to be heard other than the Buddha speaking. In the Dīgha Nikāya (DN 25) the noisy members of other sects and the quiet, silent Buddha are contrasted: “Different are these wanderers of other sects, who, having assembled and come together, are noisy, making loud and great sounds, and are engaging in various kinds of pointless talk such as talk about kings ... And different is the Fortunate One who uses remote dwellings in forests, woods, and groves, which are quiet, free from loud voices, deserted, secluded from people, conducive to seclusion.”

In the Cātumā Sutta (MN 67), it is related that a large group of monks headed by Sāriputta and Moggallāna came to visit the Buddha. The monks, when arriving in the monastery, made some noise while greeting resident monks and setting up their lodgings. Hearing the noise, the Buddha asked his attendant Ānanda, “Who are these loud and noisy people? They are like fishermen hawking fish.” Then, after calling the visiting monks, the Buddha dismissed them and told them to leave the monastery.

Why did the Buddha put so much emphasis on a quiet and peaceful environment? The reason is simple: it is much easier to concentrate and focus the mind in a quiet environment than in a noisy one. Only a peaceful, quiet environment provides the right conditions for concentration and contemplation. This is why, for example, in libraries there are signboards forbidding library users to speak loudly and to make noise. In the context of Buddhist meditation, anyone who has tried to meditate knows how sounds draw away the mind from its object of meditation. Experienced meditators say that when the mind becomes quite calm, a sudden loud sound can be physically and mentally quite shocking and painful. According to the Buddha, loud sound is a major obstacle, a “thorn”, to the first deep and stable stage of meditative calm, *jhāna*.

It is part of virtuous conduct to leave one’s neighbours in quiet and peace. The noise one makes does not stop at the walls of one’s house but can affect the whole community. When one deliberately disturbs others and deprives them of the opportunity to study, think, meditate, or rest, it can be considered a harmful act and therefore unwholesome. The harmful effect of loudspeaker sounds is exemplified by a modern way of torture: loud pop music is blasted for hours and days from loudspeakers at suspects and victims in order to break their will.

Of course, there are occasions when the use of loudspeakers can be justified; for example when a monk gives a sermon to a large crowd of people who otherwise would not be able to hear him. But there is no need to turn the loudspeakers on louder than is necessary to reach the whole crowd and to turn them outward from the crowd so as to make the sound heard from miles away, as is often the case now. The sermon should only be audible to those who are motivated enough to come to the place where the speech is given.

The Buddha's teachings emphasise compassion, tolerance and non-violence. The Buddha, the peaceful sage, would strongly disagree with anyone noisily blaring his teachings through loudspeakers, disturbing the peace and quiet of many, including those who try to practise his teachings in the way he most recommended, i.e., through meditation. Until recently, the Buddha's teaching was quietly spread by way of mouth and writing all over Asia; there was no need for loudspeakers. The sound of sermons and chanting could not be heard from kilometres away, but instead was confined to the place where it belonged. There was no need to play loud "protective" chanting recordings in order to protect Buddhism and assert its importance over other religions. On the contrary, as is shown, in the passages quoted above, members of other religions were impressed by the Buddha and his followers because of their quiet demeanour.

The loudspeaker was only invented in the 20th century and there is no indication that Buddhists' faith has been strengthened because of its use. On the contrary, making loud sounds seems antithetical to faith. It does not lead to inspiring faith in those who have no faith and to the increase in those who have faith, which are the reasons for the Buddha laying down disciplinary rules.

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