

## Conversations with Buddhist Monks

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In my visit to Badulla, south-eastern Sri Lanka, in 2004, I had the opportunity of another visit to the senior Buddhist monk I had met the previous year. He used to be a teacher of monks but is now retired due to health reasons. He lives in a small cottage on the compound of a Buddhist temple.

The subject of our conversation, done through an interpreter, was the stages on the path (marga): *sotapatti*, *sakridagamin*, *anagamin* and *arhat*. They are mentioned in theosophical literature. He mentioned the well-known notion of the “fetters” (*samyojana*) and said that progress from one stage to another is by getting rid of a number of “fetters”. Of these, one of the central ones is the sense of self (*sakkayadhitti*). He said this is the most serious impediment for one to thread the path.

He said the *anagamin* (non-returner) is free from *tanha*, the thirst for experience which is the source of suffering (*dukkha*). “There is suffering but no sufferer”. Almost incomprehensible to me, he said that even the *anagamin* has fetters to deal with, even when they are necessarily of a subtler nature. One of them is *avijja* (Pali word for *avidya*), ignorance.

I then asked him: “Are there Arhats alive today?” To which he answered: “Possibly, but it is very difficult to verify it. It is a universal truth that no Arhat would say that he himself is an Arhat”. An Arhat, he added, is free from the illusions created by the sense of self (*sakkayadhitti*).

My questions became slightly bolder: “When do you think Maitreya-Buddha will manifest himself in the world?” His answer was quite remarkable: “Maitreya-Buddha will manifest when the present world is ‘destroyed’ and after a new cycle of life begins, either on this or on another planet”. Was he referring to another Round?

“Is the Boddhisatva Maitreya [he differentiated between Maitreya-Buddha and Boddhisatva Maitreya] in physical incarnation now?”, I ventured to ask. He said: “Yes.” “Do you have any idea of the place where he would be living now?”, I continued. “Bharatha” (India), he said. He made clear that these were just his views and he did not claim the authority of any traditional Buddhist text in support of them.

What he said about Maitreya-Buddha reminded me about what Prof. Samdhong Rimpoche had told me in a conversation in Sydney, in 2001, during the World Congress

of the TS with Headquarters at Adyar. He said that, according to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Maitreya-Buddha would manifest in the world in a million years from now, but that there would be partial manifestations before the full manifestation would take place. These partial manifestations would prepare humanity for the future teaching.

Rinpoche also said that in this age (Kali-Yuga) there is individual clarity and collective darkness, and that in the next age (Satya-Yuga) there will be collective clarity but individual darkness, for these two poles must always be together.

On being asked about the existence of the Mahatmas, he said Tibetan people are aware that Mahatmas do exist, the difficulty being that since they do not attract any attention to themselves it is very difficult to recognize them.