

## Promoting Buddhism in Europe

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### Prologue

Asoka Weeraratna was a man of vision who had the drive and stamina to translate his vision into fact. He once told me that his favourite saying of the Buddha was, “Do not become discouraged and give up, and do not rest satisfied with partial achievements.” He himself took this piece of advice to heart. Whenever he set himself a goal, he did not merely dream about it and sing praises to its glory. Rather, he worked with incredible foresight and energy to make the goal a reality.

Because he followed these guidelines, Asoka Weeraratna’s life was crowned by three great achievements: the establishment of the German Dharmaduta Society in Sri Lanka; the founding of the Berlin Buddhist Vihara in Germany; and the creation of the Nissarana Vanaya Hermitage at Mitirigala.

Already in the 1950s, he foresaw the potential for establishing Buddhism in the West, and to make his own contribution to the westward movement of the Dhamma, in 1952 he founded the German Dharmaduta Society. He started the Society in the back room of the family shop, though later it moved to premises purchased with funds he acquired through a zealous fund-raising drive.

Asoka realized that if Buddhism was to send down roots in Germany, it was not enough to set up a base for German Buddhist missions here in Sri Lanka. He saw the need to have a Buddhist centre right in the heart of Germany itself. Thus he personally searched for suitable premises throughout Germany, and he found the ideal site in the lovely Frohnau district of Berlin. The place he discovered was Das Buddhistische Haus, an old Buddhist compound built by Paul Dahlke in 1924. Under his initiative the German Dharmaduta Society purchased the compound, renovated it, and in 1957 brought it back to life as the Berlin Buddhist Vihara. In the same year, Asoka Weeraratna organized the first Buddhist mission to Germany, led by three Sri Lankan Bhikkhus accompanied by himself. From that time to the present, monks from Sri Lanka and elsewhere have lived at the Berlin Vihara, helping to maintain a Theravada presence in Germany.

Asoka Weeraratna later turned his attention to the construction of the Nissarana Vanaya Hermitage at Mitirigala, which became one of Sri Lanka’s most respected meditation monasteries. He equipped the monastery with all the facilities conducive to the meditative life, found an accomplished meditation master, Ven. Matara Sri Gnanarama Mahathera, to direct the meditation training, and then, his mission accomplished, he himself entered the Buddhist order under the name Ven. Dhammanisanthi Thera. Even by establishing Nissarana Vanaya, Asoka continued to make Buddhism available to Westerners, for the hermitage has accommodated Western monks resident in Sri Lanka since 1977.

### Asoka and the German Theras

I myself first met Asoka in the early 1980s, when he was known as Ven. Dhammanisanthi. I immediately felt a close bond with him through his commitment to disseminating Buddhism in Germany. Though I am not German myself, my spiritual mentor was the great German scholar-monk Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera, with whom I lived at the Forest Hermitage for twelve years. Ven. Nyanaponika and his teacher, Ven. Nyanatiloka Mahathera, also German, always had a keen interest in the spread of Buddhism in their native country. In this respect they shared a common vision with Asoka, which they expressed by their support for the German Dharmaduta Society. Ven. Nyanatiloka served as the first patron of the Society during the early 1950s, and through the years Ven. Nyanaponika was always ready to give advice. Before he left for Germany in 1982 to take up residence at the Berlin Vihara, Ven. Dhammanisanthi came to the Forest Hermitage in Udawattakele, Kandy to meet Ven. Nyanaponika. The two monks spent several hours, spread over two days, discussing prospects for the spread of Buddhism in Germany. I still recall that the discussion presented an interesting contrast between Ven. Dhammanisanthi’s enthusiastic optimism and Ven. Nyanaponika’s pragmatic realism and restraint.

### An Opportune Time

The topic of this seminar, “The Necessity for Promoting Buddhism in Europe,” is quite appropriate for commemorating Ven. Dhammanisanthi, and reminds us of his life’s mission of trying to bring the Sasana to the West. The topic is also very timely, for the opportunity for disseminating Buddhism in the West is much more ample today than it was fifty years ago when the German Dharmaduta Society was born. At the same time, however, we should not assume that Buddhism is barely known in Europe and has to be introduced almost from scratch. To the contrary, in the past two decades public awareness of Buddhism in the West has increased sharply. In many Western countries

today Buddhism is the fastest growing religion. In North America, Western Europe, and Australia-New Zealand, hundreds of Buddhist centres have sprung up almost overnight, offering teachings and meditation retreats even in remote regions. Thus the challenge we face is not that of discussing how to introduce Buddhism to Europe as though it were an utterly unfamiliar creature, but of discovering how to promote the healthy growth of a Buddhism already sending down roots into European soil.

I will deal with my topic in three major parts. *First*, I will present a short survey of the historical development of Buddhism in Europe. This will necessarily be oversimplified and thus inadequate, but my aim is not so much to lay out all the facts as to show how Buddhism has arrived at its present stage of development in the West. *Second*, I will raise the question why Buddhism, at just this particular time, is exerting such a strong appeal on Westerners. Then, in the *third* place, I will briefly discuss a few special problems we face in trying to make our own Theravada form of Buddhism accessible to the West as a living and relevant tradition.

## **I. Historical Overview**

I divide the history of the Western engagement with Buddhism into three major phases. These phases are not totally discrete, for they intersect and overlap, but the threefold division provides a useful way of determining general trends.

### **Phase I: The Discovery of Buddhism**

Phase I consisted in the academic study of Buddhist texts, aimed at discerning the broad contours of Buddhist history and doctrine. This project took place during the peak of the colonial period, when European countries were busy subjugating Asian peoples and incorporating their nations into their hungry empires. In many cases European interest in Buddhism was bound up with the Christian missionary enterprise of converting the native populations to Christianity.

Although reports about Asian Buddhist beliefs and practices had been drifting back to Europe since the thirteenth century, a clear picture of Buddhism as a unitary whole did not take shape in Europe until the middle of the nineteenth century, just a little more than 150 years ago. Before then, the sundry reports that had reached scholars in Europe were generally haphazard, inaccurate, and conjectural, if not utterly fantastic. The first person to comprehend Buddhism as a unitary tradition and establish its historical origins was the brilliant French philologist Eugène Burnouf. Burnouf had studied Pali, Sanskrit, and Tibetan manuscripts that had been sent to him in Paris from the East. Based on these texts, with barely no other clues, he wrote his 600-page tome, *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism* (1844), in which he traced in detail Indian Buddhist history and surveyed its doctrines and texts. Though later generations of scholars have greatly expanded upon Burnouf's work and filled in many missing pieces, they regard as essentially accurate the outline of Indian Buddhism he proposed in his groundbreaking study.

In the decades following Burnouf, there appeared throughout Europe a galaxy of brilliant scholars who opened up the treasures locked away in all the different branches of Buddhism. These scholars fall into three main schools. The scholars of the "Anglo-Germanic School" focused on the Pali tradition. Their work emanated from the Pali Text Society, founded by T.W. Rhys Davids, and their ranks included Caroline Rhys Davids, Oldenberg, Woodward, Hare, and Horner; the Danish scholars Trenckner, Fausboll, and Anderson; and the Swede Helmer Smith. The "Franco-Belgian School" investigated Indian Buddhism both Hinayana and Mahayana in Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese texts; its luminaries were de la Vallée Poussin, Sylvain Levy, and Lamotte. The "Russian School" -- represented by Stcherbatsky, Rosenberg, and Obermiller -- concentrated on scholastic Indian Buddhism as preserved especially in Tibetan texts. Although these scholars usually remained reticent about their own religious beliefs, by collecting Asian manuscripts, publishing modern editions of these texts, and providing translations and scholarly studies of Buddhist thought, they laid the indispensable foundation stone for the spread of the Dhamma in the West, namely, access to the original Buddhist sources.

The academic study of Buddhism initiated by these pioneers has continued through to the present time, despite the setback of two world wars and frequent shortages in funding. In Western universities and institutes, scholars map in ever finer details and with broader sweep the entire Buddhist heritage -- from Sri Lanka to Mongolia, from Gandhara to Japan. Thus what I call "Phase I" in the history of Western Buddhism is not so much a temporary stage superceded by its successors as a preparation for the further evolution of Buddhism in its Western setting.

### **Phase II: Elite Appropriation**

Phase II in the European encounter with Buddhism I shall call "elite appropriation." By this, I mean the adoption of Buddhism as a living creed by an increasing number of intellectuals, writers, artists, and professionals. In the German-speaking world the catalyst for the transition from the mere academic investigation of Buddhism to its active appropriation was the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer published the first edition of his philosophical masterpiece, *The World as Will and Representation*, in 1819, before he had come across reliable accounts of Buddhist thought. However, his philosophical intuitions showed such striking parallels to the Dhamma that several decades later, when Schopenhauer did gain access to accurate material on Buddhism, he at once recognized the

affinity of his own thought to the Buddha's doctrine. Thus, in the second edition of his book, he hailed Buddhism as "the most perfect" of all the world's religions. Such was his admiration for the Buddha that he kept a small statue of the Master on his mantle alongside a bust of his philosophical hero, Immanuel Kant.

Schopenhauer did not become a Buddhist himself, which would have been almost unthinkable in the Europe of his day, but his writings had a profound impact on later European thinkers and guided many to the Dhamma. At least three major figures owed their discovery of Buddhism to Schopenhauer's influence: the Austrian Indologist K.E. Neumann, who translated the Digha and Majjhima Nikayas and other Pali texts into German; the Bavarian judge George Grimm; and the Berlin homeopath Paul Dahlke. The last named pair, through their writings and promotional work, became the two leading proponents of Buddhism in Germany during the early part of the twentieth century. Their writings did not simply analyse Buddhism in terms of objective, impersonal categories, but tried to explain it from the inside, as experienced by one who had made the personal leap of faith.

### **Arnold and the Theosophists**

In the English-speaking world, the primary impetus for the adoption of Buddhism by educated Westerners came from Sir Edwin Arnold's inspirational poem on the Buddha's life, *The Light of Asia*. Arnold depicted the Buddha as a figure of heroic stature whose personality combined deep compassion for all humanity with a masterly capacity for rational thought. These two characteristics dovetailed perfectly with the intellectual milieu of the period and aroused in Arnold's readers a new respect for the Buddha and interest in his teachings. Though conservative Christians were indignant at the poem's success, the British intelligentsia of the period were liberal enough not to feel constrained by Christianity's claims to sole possession of the truth. The Theosophical movement, founded by Madame Blavatsky and Henry Steele Olcott, also gave Buddhism a profile in the Anglo-American world. While their interpretation of Buddhism as a popular expression of esoteric wisdom bordered on the chimerical, the Theosophists helped to make Buddhism fashionable among those attracted to alternative ways of thought.

### **The First Flowering**

Inspired by the Dhamma, a few adventurous spirits, not content with mere book knowledge, left their homelands to travel to the East to learn Buddhism at its sources. Others like Childers and Rhys Davids, working in colonial administrations in Asia, already had access to native authorities on the Dhamma. By the turn of the century several Westerners took the decisive step of coming to the East to enter the Sangha. The pioneers in this development were the Englishman Allen Bennett, who became Ven. Ananda Metteyya in Burma (1901), and Anton Gueth, who became Ven. Nyanatiloka (1903). Though Ven. Ananda Metteyya later disrobed after a tentative mission to Britain, Ven. Nyanatiloka settled permanently in Sri Lanka, where in 1911 he founded Island Hermitage as a monastery especially for Western monks.

Within Europe, starting early in the twentieth century, Buddhist societies began to sprout, Buddhist journals commenced publication, and numerous books on Buddhism, of varying degrees of authenticity, attempted to bridge the gap between classical Buddhism and the Western intellectual heritage. During this phase of "elite appropriation" most proponents of Buddhism favoured the Pali tradition, as being far closer to the Buddha's original teachings than the baffling and ornate Mahayana sutras. What these thinkers emphasized in Buddhism was its rationality and realism, its ethical purity, its tolerance, its non-dogmatic approach to truth, and its compatibility with modern science. In this phase, with a few exceptions, the meditative, communal, and devotional aspects of Buddhism were left quietly on the sidelines. In other words, theory prevailed over practice.

### **Phase III: The Popularization of Buddhism**

Phase III in the spread of Buddhism in the West began roughly in the 1960s and continues through to the present. This third phase might be described as the popularization of Buddhism. During this phase, Buddhism comes to exert its appeal on an increasing number of people of different lifestyles and its following proliferates rapidly. At the beginning of this phase Buddhism was largely a counter-cultural phenomenon, adopted by those in rebellion against the crass materialism and technocratic obsessions of modern society: hippies, acid heads, disaffected university students, artists, writers, and anarchists. But as these youthful rebels gradually became integrated into the mainstream, they brought their Buddhism with them.

Today Buddhism is espoused not only by those in the alternative culture, but by businessmen, physicists, computer programmers, housewives, real-estate agents, even by sports stars, movie actors, and rock musicians. Perhaps several hundred thousand Europeans have adopted Buddhism in one or another of its different forms, while many more quietly incorporate Buddhist practices into their daily lives. The presence of large Asian Buddhist communities in the West also enhances the visibility of the Dhamma. Thousands of books on Buddhism are now available, dealing with the teachings at both scholarly and popular levels, while Buddhist magazines and journals expand their circulation each year. Buddhist influences subtly permeate various disciplines: philosophy and ecology, psychology and health care, the arts and literature, even Christian theology. Indeed, already three years ago *Time* magazine devoted a full-length cover story to the spread of Buddhism in America, and at least five books on the

subject are in print.

### **Facilitating Factors**

The transition in Western Buddhism from Phase II to Phase III was facilitated by two main factors. One was the increasing number of Asian Buddhist teachers who travelled to the West -- Theravada bhikkhus, Japanese Zen masters, Tibetan lamas -- either to give lectures and conduct retreats, or to settle there permanently and establish Buddhist centres. The second factor was the return to the West of the young Westerners who had trained in Asia in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and now came back to their home countries to spread the Dhamma. From the mid-1980s on we see even a new sub-phase of Phase III, or perhaps an incipient Phase IV: the emergence of a generation of Western Buddhist teachers who have never been to Asia but have received their full training in the West.

What is characteristic of Western Buddhism in Phase III, in distinction from the earlier phases, is the focus on Buddhist practice, especially the practice of meditation. In this phase it is not the academic study of Buddhist texts and doctrines that dominates (as in Phase I), or the attempt to interpret the Dhamma through the prism of Western thought (as in Phase II), but the appropriation of Buddhism as a practice that can bring deep transformations in one's innermost being as well as in the conduct of everyday life. This does not necessarily mean that Buddhist practice is being taken up in accordance with canonical or traditional Asian models, nor that it is pursued to attain Nibbana in the sense upheld by classical Buddhist doctrine. Often Western Buddhists give their own twist to Buddhist concepts, sometimes in ways that depart drastically from canonical standards and from an Asian standpoint might border on "heresy." But in Phase III, Buddhism is viewed as in some sense a path to awakening, a way that brings deep understanding of the mind and makes accessible new dimensions of being. Hence at this stage Buddhism becomes a means of spiritual transformation through direct experience, through insights not arrived at by mere conceptual reflection.

### **A Variety of Schools**

In Phase III, we also find the arrival of various schools of Asian Buddhism, which peacefully coexist, pursuing their own growth and cooperating with each other to secure common aims. With the passage from Phase II to Phase III a noticeable shift takes place in the type of Buddhism generally adopted by Western Buddhists. In Phase II, Pali Buddhism was dominant, though I must stress that this adherence to the Pali heritage did *not* entail a commitment to any form of Theravada Buddhism as practised in Asian lands. In fact, the elite Buddhists often looked upon Asian Theravada as a degeneration from the pristine canonical doctrine, which they believed was a unique possession of their own. But with the rise of Phase III the focus of attraction shifts away from the Pali tradition: first to Zen Buddhism in the 1960s and 1970s; and then to Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism in the 1980s and 1990s. Further, new types of Buddhism come onto the scene, schools peculiar to the West, such as Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing (based in France, but with a strong American chapter), the Arya Maitreya Mandala (centred in Germany), and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (based in Britain, but with several Continental chapters). These are partly syncretistic, partly innovative attempts to create new styles of Buddhist practice conformable to the Western temperament. Also the age range of Buddhist followers varies between the schools. Today in Germany most followers of the Pali tradition are in their 50s and 60s, while the followers of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism are in their 30s and 40s. This development is critically important for us, as followers of the Theravada, to understand, and I will therefore return to it later.

## **II. The Western Receptivity to Buddhism**

At this point, I want to raise the question: How are we to understand the surge of interest in Buddhism among Westerners in recent years? How do we account for the eagerness with which so many today are ready to explore the Dhamma and often to deeply embrace it? It is necessary to address this question in order to begin to see the needs that we must fulfil as we try to make our own contribution to the spread of the Dhamma in Europe.

### **Nature Abhors a Vacuum**

I think the answer to this question unfolds in roughly two distinct stages, corresponding to the last two phases in the Western adoption of Buddhism that I spoke of just before. During Phase II, "the phase of elite appropriation," intellectuals were drawn to Buddhism because it filled a vacuum that had been growing ever wider in Europe since the seventeenth century. This vacuum was the absence of any comprehensive body of wisdom teachings that could offer a key to the deeper meaning of human existence. The responsibility for shedding light on the meaning of existence had traditionally been assigned to philosophy, but from the seventeenth century onwards philosophy came to renounce this task in favour of other concerns. Besides, such guidance that philosophy did offer, as in Spinoza's *Ethics*, was usually embedded in systems of thought so subtle and complex that few people could understand them.

Of course, Christianity too staked out for itself a claim to hold the key to the riddle of existence, but the main thrust of orthodox Christianity has not been to show the way to wisdom. Its purpose is to offer the prospect of an eternal afterlife in heaven through faith in God and Christ the Saviour, and it was just such faith that was coming into question. Further, Christianity's own record as a defender of human values was far from impressive. Its legacy of crusades,

inquisitions, forced conversions, and intolerance repelled rather than attracted ethically sensitive minds, while its alliance with the colonial regimes confirmed suspicions about its imperialistic designs. Moreover, as science strode boldly into one arena of knowledge after another, often in the face of staunch resistance from the Church, it discredited Christian claims to the infallibility of revelation. Thus for a growing number of independent thinkers the Christian religion had become irrelevant.

When translations of Buddhist texts and expositions of Buddhist thought began to appear in the late nineteenth century, they seemed to offer the West exactly what it was lacking: a system of spiritual wisdom that could give illumination and moral guidance yet did not demand unquestioning faith in theological dogmas. Instead, it rested its claims upon human reason and personal insight into fundamental truths and universal laws. The way Buddhism impinged on the Western mind during this period reveals both the strength and weakness in the Western perception of Buddhism. The strength lay in a deep and clear grasp of the doctrinal principles of the Dhamma, expressed in works that were utterly compelling in their insights, logic, and literary eloquence. The weakness was the understanding of Buddhism as primarily a rational, ideational system, to replace the tottering belief system of the Christian churches. Another limitation was that Buddhism in this phase still appealed mainly to the educated elite and thus could attract only those astute enough to break away from the cultural and religious mainstream, which was still predominantly Christian.

### **The Conditions for Popularization**

For the transition to Phase III to take place, that is, for Buddhism to spread more widely through the general population, certain additional conditions were necessary, and these only became sufficiently widespread in the second half of the twentieth century. One was the triumph of liberal democracy over autocratic political systems. Under the heading of democracy we must include not only political democracy, but also the democracy of the mind, an openness to new ways of thought and tolerance for viewpoints that differ radically from those of one's own intellectual heritage. This openness was encouraged by a partial change in the attitude of the Christian churches towards other faiths, which in the West after the Second Vatican Council (1963–65) swung towards greater respect and tolerance for non-Christian religions.

A second preparatory factor was a fair degree of economic affluence, which freed Europeans from excessive concern with material security and gave them the leisure to explore new avenues of thought. The rise of the consumerist society also helped them see the limitations to material development as a final solution to our quest for happiness.

A third factor was the relatively high standard of liberal education established in the 1960s, enabling a large proportion of young people to attend the university. Higher education exposed them to multiple viewpoints in all the domains of human knowledge, and also trained them to think critically and deeply about new ideas.

A fourth preparatory factor was improved means of transportation and communication, which facilitated contacts between East and West. Now curious Westerners could easily travel to the East to experience Buddhism first hand in its own native setting, while Buddhist teachers from Asia could move West to propagate the Dhamma.

The fifth factor, following naturally from the fourth, was the actual arrival in the West of Buddhist teachers, both Asians and Westerners trained in Asia. These teachers brought Buddhism as a dynamic faith that they embodied in their lives through years of serious training.

### **The Great Transition**

While the above five factors constituted the necessary conditions for Buddhism to become accessible to a sizable number of Europeans, they are not a sufficient explanation for the rapid escalation of Western interest in Buddhism. To pinpoint the decisive cause for this phenomenon, I must refer back to the vacuum or void that had opened up right beneath the feet of European civilization, that is, the absence of a solid, authoritative spiritual tradition that could give guidance in the mastery of life. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this void was acutely felt only by the more discerning Western minds, disenchanted with both doctrinaire Christianity and economic materialism. Ordinary people were somehow able to balance their ancestral Christian faith with a bright optimism about the coming Golden Age, to be achieved through science and technology.

By the late 1950s, however, the picture had drastically changed. After two world wars and a prolonged cold war that threatened the whole world with thermonuclear destruction, countless people found their trust in the intrinsic goodness of human nature crumble into dust. Such horrors as the Nazi Holocaust and the Hiroshima atom bomb not only undermined faith in a benevolent God guiding the whole creation, but also brought to light the dangers in mere rationality not illuminated by a higher wisdom and staunch commitment to ethics. The most brilliant minds of the West, relying on the rational intellect, had twice plunged the whole world into barbaric irrationality, with death tolls numbering in the tens of millions. Now, with even more lethal weapons of destruction at hand, they threatened to do so again. Thus the void that sensitive nineteenth century thinkers had seen on the horizon had expanded until it had swallowed up almost everyone. And not only had it expanded, but for many it had acquired a sharp and compelling urgency that could not be quenched by any system of ideas, however noble. What they needed was a programme of action, which

in many cases meant a deep personal engagement in the spiritual quest.

At the same time that the fear of nuclear war cast long shadows over the entire globe, unprecedented material affluence in the West brought into easy reach the comforts, conveniences, and sensory delights that earlier generations had only dreamt about. Yet while this consumerist paradise mesmerized many (and still continues to do so), at least a few people “with little dust in their eyes” realized that such mundane pleasures could bring no lasting peace to the heart. At this point, for such spiritually sensitive Westerners, the message embedded in the Four Noble Truths was no longer a splendid system of ideas, to be admired in the comfort of an armchair. The message had become, rather, a medicine for curing a terrible disease, the disease of suffering, and the one sensible thing to be done with it, as with any medicine, was to take it. Hence for the Buddhists in Phase III of Western Buddhism, the Dhamma presented itself as a path of practice pivoting on the training and mastery of the mind. As teachers and centres became available, growing numbers of Westerners took up the practice eagerly, ready to follow it wherever it might lead.

### **The Need for a Social Ethic**

But Buddhism offered not only a method of mind training that could bring inner peace and deeper self-knowledge, it also fulfilled another profound need of the Western soul. As part of its deep intellectual heritage, Western civilization was committed to the idea that human happiness largely depends on the reformation of the social order in ways that eliminate political tyranny, economic oppression, and social injustice. The commitment to this premise was responsible for the rise of democracy in the West, as well as for less successful experiments with various forms of socialism. However, the experience of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had shown that without some code of ethical guidance, mere aspirations for freedom and democracy could easily give birth to their opposites. Thus the French Revolution, launched under the motto of “liberty, equality, and fraternity,” ended up with the guillotine. The Bolshevik Revolution, with its promise of a “dictatorship of the proletariat,” culminated in the Soviet police state. Western idealists saw in Buddhism the foundations for a lofty social ethic devoted to world peace, social justice, and ecological sanity, yet internally protected by its moral code against the deformities to which secular political utopianism was prone.

### **The Search for Community**

To understand the appeal of Buddhism to many present-day Westerners, another factor we must consider is the general breakdown of community in modern Western culture. With increasing industrialization and urbanization, the older human-scale social structures that allowed each person to find a meaningful place in the whole gave way to huge, monstrous institutions that reduced individuals to mere cogs in an impersonal social order. People have come to feel isolated, alienated, cut off from the bonds of social solidarity, trapped in a system that fuels ruthless individualism. These destructive values have provoked a widespread psychological crisis marked by chronic stress, anxiety, and depression. The escape routes people seek are promiscuous sex, violent entertainment, alcoholism, and drugs; but these, of course, do not offer a real solution.

When Buddhism arrived on the scene it seemed to offer a counterweight to the loneliness and isolation so many people felt even in their overcrowded cities. For one thing, it stressed such values as universal love, compassion, cooperation, and altruism, half-forgotten ideals of the Christian legacy. But just as importantly, it ushered in a new sense of community. As Buddhist groups sought their own organizational forms, they gradually evolved towards the model of the Buddhist centre, where fellow practitioners meet regularly in a spirit of friendship to practise and study the Dhamma together, usually under the guidance of a teacher. Many Buddhist societies now have residential facilities where the more dedicated members live either temporarily or permanently. Some have urban centres accessible to people during the working week, and country centres some distance away to which members can resort for longer meditation retreats.

### **The Shift among Traditions**

As I mentioned earlier, when Buddhism in the West enters Phase III, a shift occurs away from the Pali tradition towards Zen and Tibetan Vajrayana. One explanation for this might be the more attractive, more exotic surfaces of these schools of Buddhism; another factor might be the charismatic personalities of their teachers, the Zen masters and Tibetan lamas. But such an explanation is not complete. The main reason these traditions have gained in popularity over the Theravada is, I believe, because within their fold the lineage of meditation practice has been kept more alive than in mainstream Theravada. Certainly in the Pali Canon the Buddha repeatedly emphasizes the urgency of meditation above all else, and this message does live on in small pockets of earnest Theravadin practitioners throughout southern Asia. However, the European Buddhists of the older generations had set the pace by viewing Pali Buddhism largely in rationalistic terms, as a lofty ethic and impressive system of thought. Almost as if to confirm this, the few representatives of Asian Theravada to settle in the West have tended to present Buddhism largely in doctrinal and ethical terms. Rarely do they exhibit the same degree of spiritual vitality as the Mahayana and Vajrayana masters. Since present-day Western seekers are looking for a practice they can incorporate into their lives, not just a system of

ideas they can admire and discuss, they naturally feel the appeal of the alternative forms of Buddhism — Zen, Vajrayana, and new Western Buddhist schools -- over the Theravada.

This, however, is not to say that a meditation tradition rooted in the Theravada is lacking in the West. A number of Westerners who had come to Asian countries years ago to practise under qualified teachers later returned to the West to teach and establish Buddhist centres. But what we find, as an interesting development, is that often such Western teachers of Theravada-based meditation do not consider themselves adherents of Theravada Buddhism in its doctrinal sense. Instead, explicitly or implicitly, they distance themselves from Asian Theravada and call their style of Buddhism “the Vipassana tradition” or “the practice of mindful awareness.” While they have evolved a rigorous system of training, they often lift Vipassana meditation out from its setting in Buddhist faith and doctrine, presenting it almost as an autonomous discipline of psychological insight and self-awareness. This is certainly a weak spot in the Western approach to the Dhamma, for the religious and philosophical dimensions of classical Buddhism are necessary for insight meditation to lead to its real goal, “the taintless liberation of the mind.” Neglect of the textual and doctrinal side of Buddhism can result in a diluted, shoddy understanding of the Dhamma. But the stripped-down style of practice -- non-religious, non-doctrinal, non-monastic insight meditation -- is the dominant mode in which Westerners are taking up Theravada Buddhism. This development might induce us to examine our own tradition more closely to ask ourselves why the Dhamma is being approached in such a partial fashion, through such a pick-and-choose policy, instead of being embraced as an organic whole.

### **III. The Challenge of Bringing Theravada to the West**

This brings me to the third major division of my talk, the special challenges we face in transmitting Theravada Buddhism to the West. When I ponder this issue, the question that immediately lodges itself in my mind is this: “What exactly is the type of Theravada Buddhism that we wish to spread?” For one thing, as I mentioned above, it is not merely texts and ideas that Westerners are looking for, not merely the Buddhism of the books. Books are certainly needed to introduce people to the Dhamma, to give them material for study and reflection. The point I wish to make is not that literature on Buddhism is dispensable, but that it is insufficient. For the Dhamma to take deep root in people’s hearts, it must come to them, not between the covers of a book, but in living, breathing persons who display the truth of the teaching in their lives.

#### **The Ideal Form**

Thus when I raise the question, “What type of Buddhism do we wish to spread?” I am not thinking of the pure canonical Dhamma, which exists as such only in the books. In actuality, Buddhism has always been expressed in concrete practices, embedded in social structures, and embodied by real human beings. Thus we have to consider this aspect of Theravada Buddhism and not merely the doctrinal formulas of the Pali Canon. So when we ponder how to bring Buddhism to the West, we have to decide which of the many faces of Theravada we want to bring. To some extent, this is premature, since if Buddhism does eventually take root in the West, it will assume forms particular to Western social and cultural conditions. But to begin we need something to serve as a seed or nucleus.

The ideal form of Theravada to present would be one that fuses all healthy aspects of the tradition into an organic whole. The transmission would have to focus on the practice of meditation, yet it should include a strong emphasis on Buddhist ethics (including Buddhist perspectives on contemporary ethical issues), textual and doctrinal study, devotional practices, and a fair share of ritual, too; but ritual would have to be integrated into the spiritual path, not pursued in compliance with mere cultural norms. The meditation practice should be the heart of the transmission. Once students experience the beneficial effects of meditation on their lives, in time they will develop keener interest in the study of texts, in devotional practices, in the precepts, and in ritual. Ritual will then serve to cement these varied aspects of Dhamma into a coherent whole, animated from within by the meditative experience.

#### **A Monastic Transmission**

But now we come to the heart of the issue. Theravada Buddhism, in its orthodox mould, has always looked upon the monastic order, the Sangha, as the bearer of the Buddhist heritage. Thus, if Theravada is to take hold in the West, it seems it should be through a monastic transmission guarded and upheld by lay support. Without this, we would probably wind up with a watered-down or secularized version of the Theravada, as we find today in the Vipassana sanghas. A monastic transmission is needed to keep alive the stress on renunciation and restraint so characteristic of the true Dhamma.

The need for a monastic transmission, however, immediately runs up against a practical problem. In Sri Lanka today it is extraordinarily difficult to find monks who possess the personal qualities needed by a Buddhist “messenger of Dhamma” (*dhammaduta*), including the ability to communicate the Dhamma effectively to people from a very different cultural background. This has adverse repercussions for the whole project of propagating Theravada Buddhism abroad, making the Theravada something of a still backwater on the otherwise lively Western Buddhist frontier.

Of all the Asian Theravada communities, I feel the Sri Lankans have the strongest potential for transmitting the

Dhamma to the West. From what I have observed, the Thai, Cambodian, and Burmese monks cater almost exclusively to their own communities and seldom even imagine that the Dhamma can have any pull on Westerners. It is the Sri Lankans who have been most inspired by the ideal of passing the Dhamma to the West, and again it is the Sri Lankan Sangha that includes monks ready to learn Western languages and translate the teachings into a message meaningful to Westerners.

Yet, despite this, when we survey the Western Buddhist scene, the results are disappointing. We see a tremendous surge of interest in Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, in new Buddhist movements like the Order of Interbeing and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, and in Vipassana as a secular practice. But apart from Ajahn Sumedho's Amaravati network, which consists of Western monks and nuns, the orthodox Theravada Sangha has had relatively little impact in the West. Of course, one might just interpret this as evidence that Westerners are too decadent to appreciate the true Dhamma. However, that interpretation would not only be uncharitable, but it would also be wrong. A sizeable number of Western Buddhists feel themselves powerfully drawn towards the Theravada tradition and are on the lookout for monks to offer teachings. Thus the desire is there; it is just the resources to satisfy it that are in short supply.

### **The State of Monastic Education**

Although I do not have an easy solution to this problem, it would be useful to make a preliminary diagnosis of its origins. I believe part of the explanation lies in the system of monastic education that prevails here in Sri Lanka. This system is extremely inadequate and needs drastic revision from the ground up: revision with respect to the aim, depth, and breadth of monastic training. When monks trained in this system go overseas to expound the Dhamma, they find themselves facing severe handicaps. Not only must they learn to adapt to a society where social relationships are not governed by clearly defined roles and expectations, but they must really strike at the existential concerns of Western students. Routine preaching and ceremonies simply won't do.

The only way for the Sri Lankan Sangha to help meet the challenge of promoting Theravada Buddhism in the West is by making exponential improvements in monastic education right here in Sri Lanka. If a monk is to go abroad to spread the Dhamma, he must have not only a thorough knowledge of his own Theravada tradition, but acquaintance with other subjects too. He will need some knowledge of the history and schools of Buddhism, comparative religion, and English. He should also know, or be ready to learn, the language of the country in which he will work.

Beyond these specific areas of competence, he will require the intellectual openness and acuity to comprehend the dispositions, attitudes, and worldviews of people from a different culture and relate to them in meaningful ways. He must also have some grounding in the real practice of the Dhamma, for knowledge of books and doctrines, however wide, will be fruitless if not coupled with dedication to the practice. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to find a monastic institute that can impart the necessary training, and the Buddhist prelates, due to their conservatism, resist proposed reforms. In this respect Buddhist educational institutions compare poorly with Christian seminaries, which equip their own missionaries with a thorough and wide-ranging education that often excels the Buddhist institutes even in the field of Buddhist studies.

### **The Revival of Meditation**

The problem of deficient education is compounded by the decline of the practical training in meditation throughout the Sri Lankan monastic system. Thus the training of the monks focuses not so much on guiding them along the Buddha's path to awakening as on teaching them how to serve as custodians of a distinct social and cultural heritage. I do not want to dismiss the value of this service, for within this country it is quite necessary to preserve the cultural and social pillars of Sri Lankan Buddhism, especially against the incursions of evangelical Christianity and materialistic consumerism. But this function should be subordinated to the more important one of teaching the young monks the path to wisdom and peace; it should not become so domineering that the original path gets covered with mist and weeds.

The decline of a living meditation tradition in the bhikkhu training centres seems to stem from the sharp distinction that the Theravada tradition makes between village monks and forest monks. In this division, the village-and-town monks devote their time to preaching and community service, while the forest monks engage in full-time meditation. This division creates a situation where a monk not intent on winning the path to Nibbana in this present life postpones the practice of meditation to some future existence, justifying his life in robes as a service to society. Such social service, however, takes on a largely secularized hue and easily veers off into political activism. Seldom is it integrated into a true path of spiritual development.

On the other side of the divide, those monks who are keen on winning the goal in this life withdraw into the forest for full-time meditation and rarely show any inclination to share their insights with the wider community. Also, given their method of training, they will generally lack the linguistic and social skills needed to propagate the Dhamma in foreign countries. Thus we have this sharp dichotomy: educated town monks without deep personal insight into the Dhamma or experience in meditation, and meditation monks without much inclination to propagate the teaching.

Since it would be inappropriate to force monks devoted to full-time meditation to take up a more active vocation, the



remedy needed to redress this imbalance seems to require a revitalization of meditation practice within the bhikkhu training institutes. This cannot be done, however, merely by imposing meditation on the monks from the outside as a mandatory discipline. Meditation practice does not occur in a vacuum. It must spring up from an inner need, under the impetus given by a clear understanding of the foundations and objectives of Buddhist spirituality. So what is really needed is a rejuvenation of the spiritual challenge at the heart of the Buddhist monastic life.

### **The Training of Dhammadutas**

Personally, I do not think it is prudent to try to create institutions expressly for the purpose of training monks as “Buddhist missionaries” or *dhammadutas*. Such institutions could easily attract monks who want to go abroad for the wrong reasons: to gain prestige, to become popular, perhaps to find employment and disrobe. I feel it is wiser to strengthen programmes in the existing bhikkhu training centres. At the same time, we should keep an eye open for capable bhikkhus enrolled in these programmes who display the qualities needed to propagate the Dhamma in the West. We must also remember that the purpose in training monks is not to make them *dhammadutas*, but to lead them along the way to enlightenment. Thus the training should focus on the inner development of the monk, both in those qualities conducive to personal growth and in those that allow for a compassionate outflow of his spiritual development to others. Monks who have the special skills, and the inclination to work for the spread of the Dhamma, can then be chosen for overseas assignments, providing they also display the inner maturity required by such a task.

### **An Inconclusive Conclusion**

I come to an inconclusive conclusion. At the present stage in its evolution, Buddhism in the West is taking on a form that focuses on the Dhamma as a path of inner transformation through meditation and contemplation, with other aspects of Buddhist practice subordinated to this concern. We should not immediately conclude that Western Buddhism is therefore an ideal model for Asians to emulate. Western Buddhists often lack a solid knowledge of the texts, and thus are prone to bend the teachings to fit their own agendas and expectations. It is here, I think, that Asian monks with a sound scholarly knowledge of the Dhamma can make a valuable contribution. But while corrective measures are needed in Western Buddhism to ensure right understanding, it is clear that the central focus of Western Buddhists will be on personal meditative experience as the way to inner peace and wisdom.

If Sri Lankan Buddhists are to make a significant contribution to the healthy growth of Buddhism in the West, we will need representatives of the Dhamma who are also living embodiments of the Dhamma. That is, we need monks -- and nuns as well -- who express in their lives and characters the potentials of the Dhamma as a way of life that brings real wisdom, purity, and peace within, and overflows in expressions of kindness and compassion for others. This is a difficult challenge, but it is an indispensable requirement if Sri Lanka is to contribute to the development of Buddhism in the West. Since the main responsibility for transmitting the Dhamma rests with the monastic order, the Sangha in this country must set its own house in order if it is to be qualified to perform this task. This will require some intense internal criticism and attempts at genuine reform, especially in the system of monastic training. If such changes do not take place, it is unlikely that Sri Lanka will be able to contribute much more to the growth of Buddhism in Europe than to maintain viharas that serve Sri Lankan expatriates.

I will end on a bright note. Despite the shortage of qualified *dhammaduta* monks, scattered across the West there are a few Theravada viharas and Buddhist centres maintained by monks who, in their own quiet and non-assertive way, are working to spread the Dhamma. Prominent among them we find Sri Lankan monks, who often must take up this task with much hardship and self-sacrifice. The hardship they face is not only external, but internal as well. They must maintain a delicate discipline amidst the temptations of the Western consumerist culture, and must also struggle against the weight of Buddhist tradition to find the clear message of the Buddha hidden behind stultifying conventions. Such monks generally do not have large organizations behind them, or financial backing from home, but through their dedication to the Dhamma and compassionate concern for others, they actively seek to help Westerners find their way to the Buddha's path. Their selfless work deserves appreciation and support from all sincere Buddhists in this country.

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