

## **BUDDHISM IN AMERICA**

By Ven. Pandit Dickwela Piyananda, Maha Thera (M.A. Lond.)

If you ask a Buddhist monk in Ceylon how many continents our earth is divided into he would say four, but modern geographers and historians would say that the world has five continents. If you ask a Buddhist monk in Ceylon who discovered America he would say that it was the Buddha in the sixth century B.C., but modern historians would say that it was Christopher Columbus, the Genovese navigator towards the end of the 15th century A.D. If you ask a Buddhist monk in Ceylon when it became known that the earth was round he would say that it was as early as in the time of the Buddha, but the modern geographers and historians would say that it was in the middle of the 15th century A.D. during the time of Copernicus. Whatever truth may be the facts are there to show that all are correct viewed from their own convictions. When you read the Theravada Buddhist Texts and their commentaries, the written period of which goes beyond the 5th century A.D. you may well see that those monks too have their own ground for their beliefs even current history. That ancient knowledge was long forgotten and lost and what we know of it is gathered as fragments from here and there those old scriptures.

We are, however, concerned today more about the present time in which we live than about that vague and little known past. We know, without a doubt, that the new world called America came to be known to Europe towards the end of the 15th century A.D. after its discovery by Christopher Columbus. The chaotic situation that had been caused by the political and religious struggles in Europe during that time urged many freedom-loving Europeans to leave their home lands and seek, build homes in the new world where they could settle down and live in peace and practise their own religious beliefs. This is why the Pilgrim Fathers came to America. The rich soil, vast open spaces and greater opportunities to progress gave unlimited scope for those who dared to cross the great Atlantic Ocean. This has resulted in the cosmopolitan population of America and the variety of religious belief of the country.

In the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries Buddhism was very little or not known to Europe. Those who went to the East as traders, missionaries and rulers did not care to know about it. They regarded Buddhism as a primitive heathen belief. So we cannot expect Buddhists to be among those early American settlers who came from Europe. They were Catholics or Protestants or Free Thinkers. This was more so among those who settled down in the eastern part of America. But when we consider the western coastal areas of the country the situation is a little different. The more adventurous people from Buddhist countries like China and

Japan began to cross the Pacific ocean in search of wealth in the west coast of the new world. They were the followers of Mahayana Buddhism, the reformed Buddhist that spread to Tibet, China, Mongolia, Korea and Japan. In doctrine as well as in ritual it is different from the Orthodox Theravada Buddhism that flourished in the southern countries like Ceylon, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam, Nepal & Chittagong. This is why we see several Mahayana Buddhist groups at the present time in California.

The history of these American Mahayana Buddhists hardly goes back 75 years. The Mahayana School is so widely spread in America today that at present you will be able to find at least a few followers or friends of that school in most cities in the United States of America. Chinese Mahayana Buddhists are mainly concentrated in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Fresno and in Honolulu in Hawaii as well as in New York City and in some other places in the New York and New Jersey States. The Tibetan Mahayana Buddhist group has a monastery in Farmingdale in the State of New Jersey. Among them there are Russian Kalmucks, Mongolians and Tibetans who fled to America to avoid Communist persecution in their motherlands. They number about 800. The Mahayana school called "Zen" is more popular than the other sect called "Shin". The well-known Mahayana Buddhist monks are Rev. H.E. Terao of Spokane, Washington; Rev. Hozen Seki; Rev. Borris Erwit; Rev. Lok To and Rev. Mew Fong in New York City; Rev. Dr. S. Hanayama, Bishop of Buddhist Churches of America; Ven. Harold H. Priebe in Ojai, California; Rev. Dak Chun in Montegal; and Ven. Geshe Vangyal in Farmingdale, New Jersey.

As it is given in the statistical tables in the book called "World Religions" by Benson Y. Landis (New Revised Edition, 1965) Buddhists (All Mahayana) in the United States in 1957 were 60,000. Old Catholic and Polish National Catholic 597,372; Eastern Churches 3,001,751; Jewish Congregations 5,509,000; Roman Catholics 43,847,938; Protestants including Protestant Episcopal Church 64,929,941. Among the American Civilians the amount of people with no religion not reported has come to 4,299,000.

The Theravada Buddhism, that is the Orthodox Buddhist Church, which is regarded to be least reformed or changed of all Buddhist teachings, has tried to preserve the pristine purity of the Teachings of the Buddha. This form of Buddhism is still a new in America. During the last decades of the 19th century and in the 20th several American scholars like Burlingame, English Scholars like Dr. Rhys Davids and Lord Charmers; German scholars like Paul Dhalke and Wilhelm Geiger, Ceylonese scholars like Dr. Ananda Cumarasamy of the Harvard University and Dr. G. P. Malalasekera of the University of Ceylon lectured on Theravada Buddhism from time to time in the United States. But the benefit of those lectures and the books of those scholarly authors had been

limited only to an educated few. At present, however, Theravada Buddhism is in the curriculum of subjects in several universities in America. The universities of Harvard, Yale and Wisconsin are well-known as institutions of higher education for Theravada Buddhism. Several American universities like The American University in Washington, D.C. also teach Theravada Buddhism but it is still only as a subsidiary branch to Comparative Religion.

The first impetus for the establishment of a centre for Theravada Buddhism in America comes from the Most Ven. Madihe Siri Pannasiha Maha Nayaka Thera of Vajiraramaya, Ceylon. He deeply felt this need during his visit to America in 1965 in his Round the World tour sponsored by the generosity of the Asia Foundation of the Americans. As soon as he returned to Ceylon after his long world tour he moved the Sasana Sevaka Society Limited, Maharagama, Ceylon, of which he is the Patron, to do everything possible to establish a centre for Theravada Buddhism as early as possible in Washington, D.C., the capital city of the Federal Government of the United States of America. The Sasana Sevaka Society Limited took the noble task into their hands and with the help and backing of the Government of Ceylon sent Ven. Bope Vinita of the Vajiraramaya to Washington, D.C. in the year 1965 itself, to start a Buddhist centre for Theravada Buddhism.

With the help of the Ceylon Embassy in Washington, D.C. the Ven. Vinita was able to establish and register the First American Theravada Buddhist Centre with the name "Buddhist Vihara Society" in December 1966. Ven. Vinita thus became the Founder and first President of the first Theravada Buddhist Society on the American soil. During his stay in America for nearly two years he had delivered more than fifty public lectures on Theravada Buddhism in many universities, churches and colleges in several states in America. He returned to Ceylon for the purpose of health and is expected back again to take up the duties as the Secretary of the Washington Buddhist Vihara Society, Inc.

The Most Ven. Madihe Siri Pannasiha Maha Nayaka Thero, the Chief High Priest of a sect of Ceylon Buddhism, is appointed a life Patron of the Buddhist Vihara Society, Inc. According to the constitution of the Society the chief resident monk who is sent to Washington, D.C. by the Sasana Sevaka Society Limited becomes the President of the Society *ex officio*. The Board of Directors, the number of which is limited not to be over 15, who organize and conduct the activities of the Society, is well selected from the members of the Society who are Literary Doctors of several American universities and some of whom are distinguished men in the city. The other Patrons of the Society are: Dr. Kurf F. Leidecker of the University of Virginia and the President of the Society called "Washington Friends of Buddhism", His Excellency Sukich Nimmenheminda, Ambassador of Thailand, His Excellency Padma Bahadur

Khatri, Ambassador of Royal Nepal, His Excellency Oliver Weerasinghe, O.B.E., Ambassador of Ceylon, and His Excellency Khamking Souvanlasy, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary for Laos in U.S.A.

The Buddhist Vihara Society, Inc. is solely a non-profit making organization established to disseminate the Doctrine of Theravada Buddhism and for educational purpose. It is carrying on negotiations with the Thai Government in Bangkok to purchase a three storied building on the 16th Street, Washington, D.C. for its headquarters. The Government of Ceylon has presented to the Society as a gift the three bronze Buddhist statues and 20 valuable Buddhist pieces of art which had been displayed in the Ceylon Pavilion at EXPO '67 in Montreal, Canada. The largest of the three statues is an image of the Buddha 8 feet in height and 800 lbs. in weight. It is cast according to the style of the famous rock-cut statue at Gal Vihara, Polonnaruwa, Ceylon, in the 12th century A.D. The other two bronze statues, the height of each is 3½ feet and weight 100 lbs., are of great brother and sister Arahants Mahinda and Sanghamitta. They are the son and daughter of the famous Indian Emperor Asoka who ruled over India in the early half of the 3rd century B.C. The great Arahant Mahinda was the head of the first Buddhist mission that went to Ceylon to introduce Theravada Buddhism to the island in 250 B.C. The famous Buddhist nun Arahant Sanghamitta was the first female Buddhist missionary who introduced the Bhikkhuni Sasana (The Community of Buddhist Nuns) to Ceylon. The branch of the Bodhi Tree at Budh Gaya, at the foot of which the Buddha attained His Enlightenment 2512 years ago, she carried on her way to Ceylon, was planted in Anuradhapura, the ancient capital of Ceylon of 110 Sinhalese Kings, still flourishes. All these valuable and priceless pieces of art are the work of the well-known Ceylonese artist Tissa Ranasinghe. Besides the lectures and religious performances of the President Bhikkhu, the Society disseminates the teachings of the Theravada Buddhism through its monthly issued newsletter. Preparations are being made to open a Buddhist public library too.

As America is a great secular nation gifted with liberal thinking and tolerance inter-religious harmony has become something rampant. Christians, Jews, Moslems and Buddhists all live in harmony without any grudge against each other. The new Theravada monks receive generous hospitality and friendly welcome in every Mahayana Temple in the country.

Theravada Buddhist activities, although new, are making steady progress, even though the speed is slow. Ven. Dr. Hammalawa Saddhatissa, the head of the London Vihara in England and the head of the Department of the East Asian Studies in the University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada is busy in disseminating the Noble Dhamma in Canada. Ven. Piyadassi of Vajiraramaya, Ceylon, who

does the Buddhist missionary work in Ghana in West Africa also works in Brazil in South America. The Brazil Regional Centre of the World Fellowship of Buddhists has invited the Ven. Piyadassi to work in Rio de Janeiro. In Piraque, Brazil, a German national is interested in starting a Buddhist Centre there. In California, a gentleman is willing to offer one of his buildings to start a Theravada Buddhist Centre there.

Theravada Buddhist monks with a good knowledge of English are required more and more in America today. More and more Buddhist publications in English are needed to distribute among the interested readers the amount of which grows day by day. The sublime teachings of the Buddha in their original form which have in them a high ethical and social value that lead to happy and peaceful life is a great hope for the freedom loving Americans as the topmost nation in the present world, to make the whole world peaceful, healthy, wealthy and happy, first they themselves being so.