

BUDDHISM IN BRITAIN TODAY

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Britain can now boast of over three dozen Buddhist groups up and down the country besides the old centres in London. It must be borne in mind that the majority of the provincial groups can master no more than between one to two dozen members each but nevertheless it is a great achievement on paper to have at least covered all the most important cities in the British Isles besides large parts of the countryside outside the urban areas. Nine universities are also connected with Buddhist activities: Oxford, Cambridge, Reading, York, Leeds, Lancaster, Durham, Manchester and Southampton. At each of these centres of higher learning, either actual Buddhist groups exist or personnel/graduates reside sympathetic to Buddhism.

In such limited space it would be unwise to focus attention on any but the most important or influential organisations which very largely continue to thrive in and around the Greater London area, although it is noteworthy to recall that, alone of provincial groups, the societies at Brighton and Hull have long possessed their own permanent quarters. This is to exclude the Samye-Ling Tibetan Centre in Scotland and the Vipassana Centre at Hindhead, Surrey. The former was established in 1967 as a meditation, retreat and crafts centre but its spiritual directors have subsequently reverted to lay life. The latter centre, as its name suggests, is purely a meditation centre and was established in 1968 under the (now ex-) Head of The Buddhapadipa Temple, Ven. Chao Khun Sobhana Dhammasudhi. Unfortunately, it is limited in potential as only five meditators can be accommodated in addition to the teacher and a lay assistant.

Apart from the London Buddhist Vihara, the only active bodies in London itself having permanent quarters are The Buddhist Society and The Buddhapadipa Temple. The Buddhist Society has, as most readers must now be well aware, been under its President, Mr. Christmas Humphreys, since its inception in 1924. Now an Old Bailey judge, Mr. Humphreys has over a dozen books to his credit and continues to be the driving force and guide to his creation. The Society claims to be non-sectarian and holds classes on Zen, Tibetan and Pali Buddhism throughout the week. It boasts a library of over 3,000 volumes and has long circulated the quarterly journal, *The Middle Way*, to a circle of supporters all over the world. Although the premises have been acquired on a long lease basis, there are adequate facilities to meet the needs of students and visitors.

The Buddhapadipa Temple, situated in a quiet suburb (East Sheen), was established in 1965 and is now under Ven. Somboon Siddhiyano, the Senior Incumbent. A meditation class and talk and discussion group are held at the weekend, the latter activity in particular being the responsibility of the Lay Buddhist Association which came into being only last year (1970). Although established by the Government of Thailand primarily to serve the religious needs of its nationals in Britain, it soon became a welcome centre of Dhamma for all nationalities. A well-produced quarterly journal, *The Friendly Way*, is circulated to supporters and subscribers. The property is freehold and incorporates a beautiful shrine/lecture room, reception/library room, living quarters for the bhikkhus and a spacious garden backing onto Richmond Park.

The London Buddhist Vihara is situated in the quiet outskirts of West London (5 Heathfield Gardens, W4.4JU), but prior to 1964 it was to be found in the bustling, cosmopolitan, fashionable world of Knightsbridge. At that time it was administered by a Trust composed of leading philanthropic citizens of Ceylon who established the Vihara (temple/ monastery) in 1954.

The address in Knightsbridge proved a very popular focal point for Buddhist activities in London and the membership was numbered in several hundred. Also, people of various nationalities participated regularly in the classes and discussions held there all through the week. Unfortunately, the building was on a short-term lease and it was judiciously decided to purchase a freehold property in quieter and less expensive surroundings. Thus, the move to Chiswick nearly seven years ago.

The first vihara in London, indeed, in the West, owes its existence primarily to the untiring efforts of the late Anagarika Dharmapala, a Sinhalese by birth but renowned in both Ceylon and India as a social and religious reformer towards the end of the last century and the beginning of this. He first came to England in 1925 to establish The Buddhist Mission. A property was acquired the following year in Ealing, Middlesex, which boasted the support of leading native-born Buddhists such as Francis J. Payne, B.L. Broughton and F.J. McKechnie. In 1928 the Mission moved to Gloucester Road, Regent Park, and three monks from Ceylon took up residence in what was now constituted a vihara. Activities continued until the outbreak of war forced the Vihara to close down and the monks to return to Ceylon. The building was requisitioned by the local borough council but not finally sold to Dharmapala's heirs until 1965.

Spring 1964 saw the Vihara rehoused in a completely renovated detached freehold situated in an easily accessible part of Chiswick, almost facing Turnham Green. The move would not have been possible without the financial assistance of the Dharmapala Trust, the Maha Bodhi Society of Ceylon (which had taken

responsibility for the Vihara from the beginning of 1963) and many generous contributions from English Buddhists and sympathisers, such as Miss I.B.A. Horner, the President of the Pali Text Society, London. Since 1966 the British Mahabodhi Society (first founded by Dharmapala in 1926), with a committee of native-born Buddhists, has been responsible for the maintenance of the Vihara with occasional financial aid from the parent body in Ceylon and even their government's Department of Cultural Affairs. Regular support, however, comes from about two hundred (many of whom are English or European) in the form of monthly pledged gifts.

Although only two-storied, the Vihara is able to cater for the needs of students, meditators and visitors. On the top floor is situated the focal point of any vihara, the shrine room, which is used for private devotions and meditation. Bathed in a spotlight, a large gold-leafed image of the Buddha peacefully sits in the cross-legged position on a narrow black column. A long, wide platform made up of polished industrial bricks on a wood base extends on either side far below on which candles, incense (joss sticks) and flowers are offered daily by the numerous devotees. Apart from the many beautiful images representing different national styles that have been gifted by pious donors (now to be seen in the lecture hall), reliquaries are also noticeable symbolising, as they do, the presence of the Buddha.

On the ground floor the main attraction is the lecture hall which is headed by a magnificent altar – a gift from Thailand many years ago - made up of various sized red and gold wooden tables; an Indian image of the Buddha occupies the central position and is flanked by two brass representations from Burma and Thailand. At the far end of the hall the library is housed containing over 1,000 volumes on Buddhism, Comparative Religion, Philosophy and Art. Complete sets of the Pali Canon or Tipitaka the sacred texts of Theravada Buddhism — are also to be seen in romanised Pali script, English, Sinhala, Burmese and Thai, together with ola-leaf manuscripts from Ceylon.

The main activities are held on Sundays and Wednesday evenings. Each Sunday a service is conducted by the resident monks, currently numbering four, which consists of a sermon/lecture, chanting of scriptures and meditation. Following this a discussion is occasionally held where those interested may clarify outstanding points of that day's talk amongst themselves. On Wednesdays, a meditation class is held and opportunities are also available for private instruction and "reporting" from those who prefer to practise alone at home and come across difficulties. The monks are always available to teach Pali, the philosophical or psychological aspects of the Buddha's teaching, and a correspondence course is also available for those living in isolated parts of the country, away from a Buddhist group which is usually to be found in a large

town. The monks are also on hand to lecture to Buddhist and non- Buddhist organisations up and down the country, and occasionally even abroad. Schools and colleges often send parties to the Vihara in order to familiarise themselves with the authentic voice of Buddhism and take away samples of the literature displayed there covering all aspects of the teaching.

Since 1957 the Head of the Vihara has been Ven. Dr. H. Saddhatissa, M.A., Ph.D. Born in Ceylon this outstanding Buddhist scholar has devoted his life to propagating Buddhism throughout the world. Having worked for eighteen years in India, he was invited to England which he has used as a base for his activities - lecturing here, on the Continent and in North America. He is ex-officio, President of the British Mahabodhi Society, and is the senior most monk in Britain. Having devoted a good deal of his time to making known the precise teaching of the Buddha, he serves on the Executive Council of the Pali Text Society and, besides being responsible for translation work, is author of two authoritative works published in England, "Buddhist Ethics" and "The Buddha's Way" (appearing this spring).