

BUDDHISM IN INDIA

By Ven. Dr. U. Dhammaratana Thero

India is the land of the Buddha. The Lord was born there and it was there that he attained Sammasambodhi or full enlightenment. For long forty five years he travelled up and down the country propagating the sublime message of love, peace and happiness for the good and welfare of humanity. After the Mahaparinibbana of the Master, the disciples went on fulfilling his mission by spreading his doctrine in various parts of the country. The Buddhist missionary activities received a great impetus after Emperor Asoka embraced Buddhism. Soon after the third Buddhist council, held under the patronage of the pious emperor, the Buddhist missionaries were sent to foreign countries both far and near. We have a list of these countries in Mahavansa, the great chronicle of Ceylon. From the Asokan inscriptions it transpires that missionaries were also sent to some of the Western countries. Thus since the 3rd century B.C. propagation of Buddhism in the world went on, and before long it took firm roots in many countries.

In India the sacred tradition flourished up to the 12th century. It moulded the life and thought of the people for seventeen centuries. But towards the end of the 13th century the tradition disappeared from the land of its birth. It was such a radical change that in course of a few centuries most of the people of India forgot the very name of the Buddha. Many reasons have been advanced for the disappearance of Buddhism from India. This is not the place to go into this matter. It may be said only this much that so far no satisfactory explanation of it has been found.

After the disappearance of Buddhism, the Buddhist sacred places, which once served as beacon lights of culture, were buried under ground and forgotten. Some people began to doubt even the birth of Lord Buddha in India.

There was a dark period of some eight hundred years. But thanks to a galaxy of Archaeologists. Through their indefatigable efforts the sacred places associated with the life and activities of Lord Buddha came to light. Lumbini, the birth place of Lord Buddha, was discovered with the Asoka pillar bearing the inscription of the emperor regarding his visit to the holy place. Thus one after another other places were also excavated. They shed a flood of light on the history of Buddhism in India.

Still the people of India remained quite ignorant of the Dhamma. Eight hundred years after the disappearance of Buddhism from India, the Ven. Anagarika Dharmapala of Ceylon went there on pilgrimage in 1891. When he visited

Buddhagaya, the place of the Enlightenment of the Tathagata, he was pained to see its neglected condition. It was no use shedding tears over the spilt milk. For some time he sat under the Bodhi tree in meditation and made a resolution to protect the Buddhist sacred places and propagate Saddharma in the land of its birth. With this end in view he founded the Maha Bodhi Society with its Headquarters at Calcutta and branches at various places. With a handful of workers he started his mission. Thus the revival of Buddhism in India was started by him. In the course of its existence of more than half a century the Society has been able to do a good deal and a good deal has yet to be done.

Since then several new factors have come into existence. After the independence of the country there is a great awareness among the people towards Buddhism. Many have come to realize that Buddhism is a part of their great heritage.

On the memorable occasion of 2500th Buddhajayanti that was celebrated in 1956, an event of great importance for the modern history of Buddhism in India took place. It was the embracing of Buddhism by Dr. Ambedkar along with half a million of his followers. Since then their number has increased beyond ten million. It has to be pointed out here that these new followers belong to the most backward section of the Indian society. They have to be helped in every possible way, especially in the matter of imparting the Dhamma. The Buddhist world has to make a united effort in this direction and repay its debt of gratitude to the land of Lord Buddha.