

## BUDDHIST UNITY

By Dr. G. P. Malalasekara

*The need for Buddhist unity today seems as unattainable and as much of a dream as it was when this article first appeared thirty-one years ago. Although many attempts have been made by the Sangha as well as by laymen to forge some kind of cohesion among Buddhists, we are yet very far from achieving our goal. Many may argue that Buddhism, by its very nature discourages any kind of control of the masses, but we must consider some kind of unity, if only to ensure peace and sanity in a world gone crazy with hate and greed.*

*The late Dr Malalasekara as the founder-president of the World Fellowship of Buddhists truly deserves to be honoured for having taken the first steps towards realizing this dream. If we believe that Buddhism can truly bring peace and dignity to mankind, we have to make every effort to practise the teachings of the Buddha to promote harmony and goodwill among men.*

— Ed.

When the Buddha preached His first sermon, after the attainment of Enlightenment, His human audience consisted of but five people, the five ascetics who had once been His companions but who later had abandoned Him because He had given up extreme austerity in order to follow a more fruitful path. It will be recalled that the Buddha continued His ministry as Teacher for 45 years. Already in His life-time, therefore, His message of Peace and Happiness had spread over vast tracts of territory and the followers of the Middle Way amounted to many hundreds of thousands, in all ranks of life. When, 300 years later, the great Emperor Asoka, after a career of conquest, embraced Buddhism and thenceforward followed the paths of Peace, he sent forth messengers carrying the Good Tidings of the Buddha-word, across mountains and seas to the lands of the then known world. From India, within a few centuries, the Dhamma spread far and wide over the whole of Asia, and today five hundred and fifty million people acknowledge the Sakyan Sage as their Guide, His Doctrine as their Rule of Life and the Community of His Disciples as their Exemplars.

Five hundred million people, i.e. one-fifth, almost one-fourth, of the world's total population, call themselves Buddhists. No other religion can claim to have so large a number of adherents. If numbers signify anything, this must mean

that one-fifth of the whole responsibility for the world's peace and happiness devolves upon the Buddhist. How do they, how can they, discharge this unmistakable obligation? Not very effectively, as things are, if the truth were told.

Why should this be so? Because the Buddhists are unorganised, because they lack unity. They are like grains of sand, scattered on the sea-shore, great in number but having no cohesion and, therefore, possessing no strength. Mix these grains of sand with cement and water and their combined strength will be beyond measure. It is this that Buddhists need, unity and solidarity, cohesion and organisation. It is in order to supply this deficiency that the World Fellowship of Buddhists was inaugurated at the Sacred Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Ceylon, in May, 1950. With its foundation was planted a seed which, if watered and nurtured and protected from chill blast and scorching sun, will eventually produce a wide-spreading Tree whose benign protection will cover the wide earth and shelter under its shade the groaning millions who now hunger for happiness and peace of mind.

This unity of the Buddhists, now living in many lands and many of them separated from each other often for centuries, because of political and other circumstances – this unity cannot be achieved in a day. It must be sought after with courage and determination, with wisdom and foresight, with understanding and tolerance. It can be brought about only by those who are prepared to recognise the fundamental oneness that underlies all Buddhist belief and practice and not by those who strive to accentuate the seeming, outward differences of ritual and ceremonial.

The old adage **Tout comprendre est tout pardonner** (to understand all is to overcome desire for censure) holds good in the sphere of religious activity as it does in the realm of the emotions. It is so fatally easy and so temptingly self-satisfying for followers of one Buddhist sect to go about with nose in air, puffed with a sense of superiority, unctuous with self-righteousness, saying “Behold, we are It; the others are just mud, or even, dung.”

It is such arrogant conceit that the Buddha condemned as **mana**, the desire to measure oneself against others, as being one of the greatest obstacles on the path to Nibbana.

The Buddha declared that each man must find out the truth for himself. This liberty which He enunciated in that famous Discourse, the **Kalama Sutta**, is one of Buddhism's greatest glories. The Buddha levied no penalties on knowledge, the Buddhists have no proscribed literature. Attempts to lay down the law to others as to what is or is not Buddhism by those who cannot claim Arahantship are palpably absurd and should be treated with contempt. The Buddhists have no Pope and any pugnacious prelates who try to set themselves

up in such a role will only succeed in making themselves look ridiculous. Happily, the authentic teachings of the Buddha are found recorded in numerous books which have come down the ages, sanctified by common acceptance. The fundamental doctrines of Buddhism are easy to distinguish, given a certain measure of intelligence and, above all, a sense of humility.

Buddhist unity has to be achieved not by hurling invectives at those who hold beliefs and follow practices in some slight way differing from one's own, but by learning more about the different Schools and seeking the highest common factors of agreement. Mutual ignorance and mutual recrimination are the enemies of friendship and goodwill. The removal of such ignorance and prejudice should be one of the chief objects of the World Fellowship of Buddhists and their substitution by desire to investigate and understand, without rancour and conceit, other points of view besides one's own. There have been undisguised attempts to belittle its importance and even to prevent its being held. The followers of Mara lurk in many places but Righteousness must, in the end, prevail. The Buddhists of the world have many common problems awaiting solution. These can best be solved by a united effort and every endeavour calculated to promote such unity deserves the goodwill and the assistance of those who have at heart the welfare of the Buddha sasana.

“Happy is the appearance of Buddhas in the World;  
Happy their proclamation of the True Doctrine;  
Happy the unity of the Community of Believers;  
The efforts of those thus united lead to happiness.”

The “Buddhist”