

IMPRESSIONS OF BUDDHISM IN MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE

By Alec Robertson

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Ed.

Buddhism has long been an important part of the cultural heritage of South East Asia. The monuments of Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Borobudur in Indonesia are just two of countless testimonies to the former greatness of Buddhism in this region.

In Singapore too, Buddhism is an important element in the cultural heritage of the people. The fact that a large section of the Chinese Community as well as the small but influential Sri Lankan Community acknowledges Buddhism as the primary force shaping their religious ideals and moral values is more than proof of this. Nevertheless, it is certain that if Buddhism is to continue to exercise a positive influence upon present and future generations, it cannot remain content with the achievements of the past.

The religious ideals and moral values of Buddhism which have proved so useful to past generations must be transmitted to men and women living in a changing world. In order that this can be accomplished, it is important that the Teachings of the Buddha be made available to the largest number of people.

Service

In my recent visit to Singapore and Malaysia I saw for myself the vast strides and yeoman service rendered by the Sri Lankan Monks to the Chinese Buddhists in these countries.

One was struck by the large numbers of the younger generation who have evinced a keen interest in the study, practice and propagation of Theravada Buddhism which had been accepted by all scholars as the genuine and authentic teachings of the Buddha.

The ornate rituals and ceremonies which have been usually associated with Buddhism and practised as religious worship have not appealed and satisfied the scientific and rational outlook of modern youth as they find that it does not give them a satisfactory answer to the problems of life and death and Man's predicament in modern society.

Having tasted the good things of life and being surrounded with an abundance and surfeit of the material comforts, possessions and pleasures, they have realised that the materialistic outlook on life has not given them peace, and happiness and contentment but have left behind their trail a sense of disillusionment, frustration and emptiness in their lives.

Theravada Buddhism has at last provided them with an empirical, pragmatic and scientific method of approaching and solving the problems that confront them.

The interest and enthusiasm displayed by them was amply demonstrated when I delivered my first talk on the religious significance of the Full Moon at the Phor Kark See, the largest and most prestigious temple in Singapore where there was an audience of over 800 consisting mainly of youth.

They bombarded me with a volley of questions. This talk was arranged by the Singapore Buddhist Mission. The moving spirit behind this movement was the Ven. Mahinda Thera, a Chinese Buddhist Monk who received his post-graduate training in Theravada in Sri Lanka. He has been mainly instrumental in creating an interest in Theravada Buddhism among the Chinese youths in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Malacca and Johor.

He has been ably assisted, advised and guided by the Ven. Dr. Kirinde Dhammananda, Nayaka Thera, the Chief Sangha Nayaka of Malaysia who has been one of the pioneers in the establishment of Theravada Buddhism in Malaysia.

His services have been for over a period of 40 years at the temple at Brickfields in Kuala Lumpur. This temple has been the focal point and nerve centre where the sublime and benign message of the Buddha had radiated far and wide to the states of Malaysia and also to the four corners of the world through his writings and books which invariably have an attractive title that catches the eye.

Progress

One could gauge the progress, enthusiastic interest, and development of Theravada Buddhism when one takes into consideration that 32 males from

various walks of life shaved their heads and took to the resplendent yellow robes of the Buddhist monk for two weeks, cutting themselves off from all family bonds and social entanglements according to the Theravada traditions.

They spend their time listening to sermons, reflective studies, contemplations and meditation and strictly abiding by the ten precepts of the monastic order. One was deeply moved by their serene countenance and calm demeanour. Five of them had joined the permanent Order by proceeding to Thailand. The deep conviction and sincerity were evident from the type of questions they posed and also in the poised and dignified manner they conducted themselves during this period. Indeed they were mindful of the great responsibility and the nobility and sanctity of their task. 25 female devotees ranging from 19-35 years observed the 8 precepts for 14 days.

They also displayed great religious fervor and sense of dedication to the Triple Gem. The unique ceremony took place at the Phor Kark See temple, the most prestigious and largest Mahayana temple in Singapore where there was a gathering of nearly 2000 people.

The Sri Lankaramaya Temple which is run by the Sri Lankan Monks caters not only to Sri Lankans residing in Singapore but also to the large number of Chinese Buddhists who are benefactors and great supporters of this temple.

This temple has been the stronghold of Theravada Buddhism for over 5 decades and resident monks have been disseminating the pure and sublime teachings of the Buddha and indeed the luminous words of the Buddha had radiated their soothing and healing power bringing much peace and tranquility to tormented and trouble minds.

Regular Dhamma talks, discussion and Sila campaigns have been held throughout the year besides the Sunday Dhamma School for children. The knowledge and practice of the Dhamma have been strengthened further and consolidated among the youth with introduction of Buddhism in the school curriculum in recent years by the Government of Singapore.

Even in the Universities the study of Buddhism has been encouraged and fostered. Research on the impact of Theravada Buddhism on the lives of the people has been carried out by the undergraduates and moreover it has also been a thesis for an M.A. degree in Sociology.

I was struck by the impressive and delightful display of books arranged and catalogued in the Buddhist library of Singapore by Ven. D. Bellanwila Dhammaratane, the chief incumbent of the Bellanwila Temple, who is residing

in Tisarana Temple in Singapore. There is a large circle of readers who are members and a constant stream of readers who are making the best use of the facilities provided by this well-equipped library which provides Buddhist books in English and Chinese. The Chinese Buddhists are making generous contributions for the up-keep of this library and avid and voracious readers are taking to Theravada Buddhism as ducks take to water.

Activities

During my visit to Penang I found that though the Buddhists are in a minority they play an active and dynamic role in Buddhist activities. This was conspicuous and prominent among the youth. The traditional system of religious practice carried out by their forefathers seem to them as mere mumbo jumbo and do not have in any way given them a satisfactory answer to their problems.

They have also realized that their critical faculties have been deadened and they wish to have a philosophy of life in keeping with the trends of modern and scientific thinking and also a way of life which is practical and beneficial not only for this life but the next life as well.

Theravada which is pragmatic, practical, rational, ethical and a psychological approach to all problems whether they be personal, political, economic, social, cultural and religious had indeed captured the imagination of the modern youth in Penang.

This was quite evident from the questions asked of me when I addressed the Penang Buddhist Association "On Buddhism and Science" which drew a large crowd. They are not only interested in the study and practice of Buddhism but also in its propagation and a good number of Buddhist Youth movements are active and enthusiastic in spreading the Dhamma.

The Ven. Pandit Premaratne Nayaka Thera, Chief Monk of Mahindarama Buddhist temple, Penang who has been the resident monk for over 30 years has spearheaded the movement for the revival and resuscitation of Buddhism in Penang and with his dynamism have inspired them to nobler heights, to a life of dedication and devotion to the Triple Gem. With this noble and altruistic aim in view he established the Mahindarama Sunday Pali School 21 years ago.