

THE APPEAL OF BUDDHISM IN THE WEST

By Pandit Medagam Vajiranana Thera

FOR a variety of reasons, Buddhism had only a limited appeal to those in the Occident prior to 1939. However, the cathartic experience of the Second World War so revolutionised man's intellectual propensities and his social patterns of behaviour, that he felt drawn towards a philosophy of life which could effectively eradicate the **dukkha** that was ever present in his present world.

In Western Europe and North America in particular, numerous people (mainly of the younger generation) busily engaged in forming study and meditation groups so as to more readily appreciate the liberating effects of the **Buddhadhamma**. To cater for their needs, publishing companies felt impelled to give more serious attention than hitherto to Buddhist manuscripts, or those on allied subjects, that reached them.

If anyone were to ask for reasons for the remarkable phenomenon that is the rise of Buddhist interest in the West, then perhaps three reasons may be singled out:-

1. *The spiritual aspect of Western civilisation was seen as outmoded and bankrupt.*
2. *Moreover, an over-emphasis was given to material values, the individual's pursuit of wealth being termed the "rat race".*
3. *The Dhamma, as an intensely individualistic and practical way of daily life, was seen to be infinitely preferable to organised communal and stereotyped patterns of traditional, religious behaviour.*

Here, then, was a system of thought and practice which was eminently adaptable to any and every situation, which overcame any problem, whether of an ethical or of a psychological nature, and which answered the need for a rational, non-theistic, ethicophilosophy - a "do-it-yourself religion" or "spiritual humanism", as it has been termed by some.

Meditation seems to have become the most appealing facet of the Buddha's teaching, especially in its **vipassana** form with its encouragement to win enlightenment in the "here and now." Book sales are booming, Buddhist conventions are held in England, West Germany and the U.S.A., and numerous journals are published in English, German, French, Italian and Swedish. There

are four Buddhist monasteries in Britain, two in West Germany, one in Switzerland and several in North America.

One must, however, be careful when attempting to evaluate the net influence of Buddhism in the West. In Europe, for example, there exist a comparative handful of groups and societies, membership of each varying greatly in quantity but rarely reaching large proportions. The reason is not hard to find and indeed has already been implied earlier in this article: the appeal of something **personal** and **individual**. No doubt a majority of Buddhists in this part of the world are not affiliated to any organised movement and have no desire to get involved in such mundane affairs - this is a fact that is not always appreciated by my fellow Asian observers or visitors. A second, perhaps unpalatable, fact is that society in North America and North-Western Europe in particular is still largely materialistic where religion is, generally speaking, on the defensive; where nihilistic political ideologies have gained greater attention, especially amongst the vast student population.

The only way to ensure that Buddhism gains where other philosophies have failed is to ensure that its presentation is really applicable to current social and economic conditions. It is of no use, for example, in preaching the necessity for filial piety where the family as a social unit has all but disappeared. In other words, the Dhamma has just got to be up-dated and much of the traditional verbiage and imported customs discarded. At the same time care must be taken to avoid the temptation of diluting the teaching with any other spurious "philosophy", the Dhamma is and can remain self-sufficient for all occasions and for all manner of men, provided the requisite effort is exerted.

If the above guiding rules are adhered to then a new spiritual renaissance may be looked for in the Western world.

Extract from "Sri Lankaramaya Vesak Annual 1970" Published by Singapore Sinhala Buddhist Association, St. Michael's Road, Singapore.