

# THE ART OF PRINTING – WHAT ROLE DID IT PLAY IN THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM?

By Jayantha Karunaratne  
(Sri Lanka)

*Many early critics of Buddhism in the west had wrongly described the Teachings as life negating. In fact many unscrupulous missionaries of other religions even today like to tell their followers that Buddhism is 'a pessimistic religion'. This article gives one example of how Buddhism contributed to the advancement of mankind. Besides printing, Buddhism enriched many civilizations through art, architecture, music, philosophy and even politics.*

*Ed*

A study of the history of printing will help the practitioner of Buddhism to understand the role the art of printing has played, in the spread of Buddhism. Since early times the art of printing has become the principal medium of disseminating thoughts not only religious, cultural and literary, but also in such fields as economics, sociology and politics.

China, the oldest civilisation of the earth was also the birth place of the art of printing. The history of printing goes back to the middle of the 9th century A.D., when Buddhism had already established its roots deep in China, and the majority of China's population were Buddhists. Almost every beautiful site in the great land had been adorned by a Buddhist monastery and a stupa. The art of printing received a big boost from the related art of painting practised by the Chinese monks in their monasteries. Buddhism has thus played an unique role in introducing the art of printing to the world.

The ancient Chinese wrote on neatly cut strips of bamboo with an ink made of pigments obtained from leaves and barks of trees. This mode of writing continued till the latter part of 255 B.C. During the Han dynasty between the 5th and 6th centuries the system of stamping characters or rather symbols on earthen slabs came into existence. According to some of the original books on the "Art of Printing" by about 594 A.D., this symbol stamping system moved a step further when the Chinese carved designs on wood and printed them on Lithographic Stones.

The art of printing as we know it today, came into existence during the Tang dynasty. The period between 618 and 907 was one of the glorious times of the history of China. During this period literature, arts and religion flourished in China under the early rulers of the Tang dynasty.

Almost all the works belonging to the period of Lithographic Stone printing were on Buddhism. Excavations near the rock caves of the “Thousand Buddhas” in the Chinese town of Tung Huwang have led to the discovery of a large number of Buddhist scriptures. According to the “History of the Art of Printing” these scriptures are now in the custody of the largest library in Tung Huwang, Peking.

It is stated that a Taoist monk deposited this collection of Buddhist scriptures in an underground vault near the caves for safekeeping. The scriptures, printed on plates measuring 9 x 10 in. were found during excavations carried out in 1900 A.D. In book form they number over 500. The lithographic system has been used in printing the earliest work found among this collection. The book, a page of which measured 2½ x 12 inches is not only an example of excellent craftsmanship but also evidence of the high standards of the ancient techniques. The postscript to the book states that the book was printed and distributed among his community by Wong Chi on May 11, 868 A.D. in memory of his parents.

The subject of printing was the sermon of the Gautama Buddha title *Vajra Suthantra* which was preached by Kumarajeeva Thera, a Bhikku, who had gone to China to propagate the “Buddha Dhamma” in that country.

The world’s oldest printed works were those on Buddhism. Similarly the world’s first printer was Wong Chi who was a Chinese and a Buddhist. During this period Chinese Buddhist monks had been printing Buddhist works in their monasteries. Among the varying techniques they had been using were the lithographic system of printing.

This system of printing which originated in Buddhist monasteries during the rule of Peng Tao had his royal recognition. Later he proclaimed it as the “Royal Block Printing System”. Stencils used for printing of some of these ancient works, Lithographic stones, dyes used for textile printing and statues of the Buddha have been found both in Tung Huwang and Turfan.

During the tenth and fourteenth centuries this system of printing was used in the printing of China’s great literary works. During the Sung rule of the 14th century Chinese Buddhists were engaged in propagating the Buddha Dhamma in Japan. In this process they were also sending books on Buddhism to Japan.

Sir Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* which was printed in 1879 was one of the first sources of knowledge of the Buddha and his teachings to the Western world. The wealth of knowledge on which the English scholar's great work was based, was gained by him from Ven. Weligama Sri Sumangala Maha Nayaka Thera who was then living in Panadura, Rankoth Vihara temple and from Ven. Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Maha Nayake Thera.

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