

THE BUDDHA IN THE WESTERN WORLD

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Buddhism is being profitably cultivated by an ever-increasing number of people in the West today. The Buddha has come to occupy a permanent place in the religious and ethical consciousness of all thinking men. The social and philosophical thought in the contemporary West is being dominated by men and women whose views are characterized by ethical earnestness and sweet reasonableness. In an intellectual and ethical atmosphere of this sort, Buddhism is bound to appeal powerfully to all cultivated sections of the people. This is precisely what is happening all over the world today.

The popularity which the Buddha has gained in the last few years is truly remarkable. Some time back, the 'Life Magazine' brought out an illustrated article on Buddhism in its series on the great religions of the world. The international enthusiasm for Buddhism was so much that Life Magazine had to issue three million additional copies to meet a most legitimate demand. Way back in 1951, the Penguin Series brought out a book on Buddhism. Only 40,000 copies were printed at first. Today the sales have exceeded 200,000. These facts speak for themselves.

What is the reason for this phenomenal enthusiasm for Buddhism? To say, as some people actually do, that all this and more is due to the coming of the Buddha Jayanti amongst us, is to let sentiment get the better of reason. Buddhists must especially beware of any such thing happening. It is much more edifying to explain the present in the light of the past than to do so in the unmanifested light of the future. As a matter of fact this is what the Buddha inculcates. It seems to me that the present progress of Buddhism in the West is causally connected with two chief events, the achievements of Buddhist scholarship on the one hand, and the gradual growth of change in the dominant sense of values on the part of a section of the Western people on the other. Historically these two events were co-equal and co-extensive and their combination together has resulted in the present advance of Buddhism.

At the beginning of the last century when the Westerners first came to contact with Buddhism in a more intimate political sense, their interest in the subject was purely academic. Inspired by the ideal to promote knowledge largely for its own sake, a number of Western scholars came to the East to uncover to the West every available form of the proverbial Eastern wisdom. Political and academic interest in Buddhism was invariably accompanied with an evangelical interest in it on the part of religious missions from the West. While Buddhist studies were being pursued by Western scholars in this manner for academic,

political and evangelical reasons, the Buddha and his teaching began to be gradually better known in the countries of the Western hemisphere. The sacred books, belonging to numerous Buddhist schools and written or inscribed in many different languages such as Pali, Sanskrit, Prakrit, Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese, Sogdian, Khotanese and Mongolian, were critically edited and translated into the main languages of the West. The learned men and women of the West thus had an opportunity of getting to know Buddhism directly from the original authorities themselves.....

The material circumstances of living in the West soon came to be greatly emphasized and exaggerated and advance in civilization came to be associated with more and better material comforts. But wealth and comfort bought at the expense of those of other people was neither secure nor abiding. The whole concept of civilization which tended to perpetuate this sort of materialistic values became revolting to the ethical consciousness of minority of thinking men. The impact of the dominant philosophy was felt not only on society but on every individual as well. Leisure for reflective self awareness came to be gradually reduced to a minimum and men and women tended to become almost mechanical in their habits and day-to-day work. As people began saving time for its own sake, the business of life became a hectic and hurried affair.

Above all thing, religion and ethics became rigid formalities. The average man had neither the time nor even the inclination to take a more critical interest in these subjects. Almost everybody was content with either attending church on formal occasions or acquiescing in the claim that Christianity was the foundation of Western civilization. But in actual practice Christianity exercised little influence on daily life. While the greater majority of the people in most Western countries continued to profess nominal belief in the tenets and claims of Christianity, there was a very significant minority of thoughtful men and women who began to be disappointed with the counterfeit philosophy of professing one thing and doing another. These were the genuinely religious seekers who insisted on cultivating an attitude of critical reflection towards religion and ethics.

This minority of inquirers had one persistent aim; to inquire into all available religious and philosophical thought with a view to choosing and cultivating a way of life that was both relevant and useful to their time and clime. It was precisely at this time that the great storehouse of Indian wisdom was being opened for the West. Before very long the inquiring minds in the West came to recognize the eminently useful philosophy of life enunciated by the Buddha. By its scientific temper, critical outlook and ethical pragmatism, the Buddhist way of life was something that was refreshingly relevant to the needs of the West. To help the West in this task of re-discovery, the Buddhists of Ceylon played a very significant part. For, it was the great Anagarika Dharmapala who

initiated an evangelical movement to carry the message of the Dhamma to the countries of the Western world in our own day. Thus three continuous events converged together to mark the beginning of a virile Buddhist movement in the West, namely, the achievements of Buddhist scholarship, the sense of dissatisfaction with formal religion and the birth of a sense of criticism on the part of people in the West and lastly, the Dhammaduta activity on the part of Ceylonese Buddhists out in the Western countries.

Especially since the beginning of this century, Buddhism has tended to grow over more popular in the Western world. England and Germany were among the first countries to evince great interest in the new spiritual movement. Sir Edwin Arnold's inspiring poem on the Buddha and the writings of Paul Dhalle contributed immensely to make the Dhamma better known and appreciated in many parts of the world. The Buddhist evangelical movement did not seek to make converts in the West, for conversion was a thing that ran counter to the teachings of the great Master. Its only aim was to proclaim the same message of useful living among all communities of people. As a result of intense reading and reflection, a few of the Western people began openly to claim themselves to be disciples of the Buddha and to cultivate the middle way of eight steps. At first these instances of becoming a Buddhist were few and far between. Later they became regular and frequent. By tens and then by hundreds, people in the West began to drift towards the Buddha's way of life. Western disciples of the Buddha formed themselves into communities with a view to exchanging useful information to enable them to live the good life as best as they could. Thus began the various 'Buddhist' societies which now dot the whole of the Western hemisphere...

The example of the British Buddhists is worthy of emulation. They are Buddhists by sincere conviction, not by nominal profession. That makes such a difference. It has been my great good fortune to be closely acquainted with the work of these societies by speaking to them on Buddhism frequently. Buddhist societies are not the only bodies who are interested in Buddhism. Many Christian Churches and synods arrange for lectures by Buddhist speakers. There have been recently several instances of Christian ministers inviting Buddhist monks to take over the sermon at the pulpit at some congregations in London. Many public and semi-public platforms are being provided for the Buddhists to express their point of view. There is an increasing awareness on the part of everybody that Buddhism has a right to be heard and cultivated in any assembly whatsoever. With growing enlightenment, it will be cultivated more and more in the West.

(condensed from an article in the Maha Bodhi.)