

THE FIRST RELIGIOUS MISSION IN THE WORLD

By The Ven. Pandit P. Pamaratana Thero
Mahindarama Pali School, Penang

It was the Buddha, 2500 years ago, who established the religious mission in the world in order to propagate his teachings among mankind.

After the attainment of enlightenment the Buddha thought “To whom shall I preach the Dhamma first? Who will understand the Dhamma quickly?” This was the first thought that appeared in the mind of the Buddha before he embarked on his religious mission.

Then He went to Banaras and addressed the five monks and said, “Give ear, O Bhikus, Immortality has been attained. I shall instruct and teach the Dhamma. If you act according to my instruction you will before long realize the Dhamma and attain Arahantship”. Dhamma Cakkap Pavattana Sutta – the wheel of the Truth – was the first discourse the Lord Buddha delivered to the five monks. At the end of the sermon they expressed their appreciation and Kondanna, the eldest one attained Sotapatti, the first stage of Sainthood. Later on, after listening to another discourse all of them attained Arahantship – the last stage of Sainthood.

In this first sermon the Buddha condemned the two extremes, sensual pleasures and self-mortification, because he had a real experience in the both extremes. At first as Prince Siddhartha he tried the enjoyments of all worldly pleasure, but he found that they were ignoble, profitless transitory and leading to various sufferings. Again after becoming a monk, he tried self-mortification or asceticism, but he found it was also painful and useless for the realisation of the Truth. Avoiding those two extremes the Buddha has found out the Middle Path – which is wise, for the attainment of the highest knowledge and the realisation of Complete Salvation. In this way the Exalted One expounded his first sermon, two months after his enlightenment, and those five monks became the first disciples of the Buddha.

After delivering of his first sermon the Lord Buddha spent the rainy season at Isipatana. During his stay there many people from different walks of life, came to the Buddha to listen to the Dhamma that they had never heard before.

At that time in Benares there lived a noble young man named Yasa, son of a millionaire. Although he spent a luxurious life, one day, realizing the worthlessness of sensual enjoyments, stole away from home and went towards Isipatana where the Buddha was residing. Having seen the Buddha, Yasa was extremely delighted and listened to Dhamma. As he did not like to return to worldly life he was ordained and became the sixth Arahant in the world.

When fifty-four friends of Ven. Yasa heard about his conversion, they also approached the Buddha and sought Ordination from the Blessed One. After being instructed before long they also attained Arahantship. In this way when there were 60 Arahants, He decided to start a religious mission for the first time in the history of the World.

Before sending off those 60 disciples to the various directions as missionaries, they were well-trained and well-admonished. The Buddha authorised them even to ordain suitable candidates, who were very anxious to be installed as monks in the holy order. Just before the dispatch of the missioners, a memorable speech was delivered by the Buddha as his final admonition to them:-

“O Bhikkhus, free am I from all fetters, human and divine. You too O Bhikkhus, are free from all fetters. Go forth O Bhikkhus, for the good of many, for the happiness of many, out of Compassion for the World, for the good, benefit, and happiness of gods and men. Let not two of you go by one way. Preach, O Bhikkhus, the Dhamma, excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, excellent in the end. Proclaim the holy life altogether perfect and pure.

There are beings with a little dust in their eyes who not hearing the Dhamma will fall away. There will be those who understand the Dhammas. I too, O Bhikkhus, will go to Uruvela in order to preach the Dhamma”.

Those 60 monks sent by the Buddha for the first time were very successful in their missionary work. They, wandering from place to place, made many converts in different walks of life, such as Kings, Queens, Princes, millionaires, paupers, murderers and courtesans. Some of them joined the Holy Order and many became lay Buddhists.

By this way during the life-time of the Buddha, his Dhamma was proclaimed by Himself, and His disciples in most parts of India. After the passing away of the Buddha His distinguished disciples continued to spread His sublime teaching not

only in India, but also to other neighbouring countries as well. Again two centuries later the Buddhist missionaries were sent by the Emperor Asoka, to almost every part of Asia under his patronage. History bears the evidence of remarkable success of those missionaries. The countless millions of people embraced Buddhism and sought refuge in the Buddha as their guide.

It is a well-known fact that the success of the Buddhist missionaries was accomplished not by force of arms, not by use of any violence. No war has ever been waged for the propagation of Buddha's teaching. Not a single drop of blood has been shed in the course of its propagations.

The only method the Buddhist missionaries used was that of gentle persuasion and Compassion – loving-kindness. Therefore wherever they went to propagate the Dhamma they did not experience much difficulty. People were very happy to welcome them with due respect and accepted Buddhism with great Confidence.

To-day more than ever before the world needs the message of the Buddha, His teachings of tolerance, peace and self-perfection. As such we should also endeavour as our profound duty to propagate the teaching of the Buddha in this country as much as possible with all our might.

