

## WHERE LEARNING REPLACES WORSHIP

From Our London Correspondent

Buddhism is practised among 500 million people in India, China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, Indo-China, Malaya, Burma, Thailand and Ceylon. More and more people in Europe and America are also taking an interest in it, and one of its furthest-flung out-posts is in a quiet corner of Chiswick.

Before going on to describe the Vihara temple – which is housed in an ordinary suburban-type dwelling in Heathfield Gardens, I think it is best to say something about the beliefs and way of life followed by Buddhists, which are still comparatively little known in this country.

### NO GOD

To start with, Buddhism is not a religion in the accepted sense of faith in a deity. It is an ethical philosophy, Buddha was not a God, and did not accept that there was one. Any of his followers can aspire to be a Buddha – “an enlightened one.”

The Ven. Dr. H. Saddhatissa, head of the London Buddhist Vihara in Chiswick, explained to me: “Buddhism possesses none of the characteristics of a religion and none of the activities of religions. It is more correct to describe it as a progressive scheme of self-discipline and self-purification.

“The fundamental difference may be put in a nut-shell by saying that a religion has to be accepted and believed, whereas Buddhism has to be understood and practised.” he added.

There are five basic precepts in Buddhism which are binding on all who wish to call themselves Buddhists. They are, in effect, a similar set of ethics to those demanded of Christians by the Ten Commandments.

But the difference is that whereas the Ten Commandments tell a Christian “Thou Shalt Not Kill,” the Buddhist “undertakes” not to.

“Thou shalt not kill,” for the Christian, becomes “I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from killing living beings,” for the Buddhist.

The other precepts include undertakings to refrain from stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and from taking intoxicating drinks and also drugs.

But in Buddhism, thought is free, and the disciple is encouraged to believe in doctrine only after he has understood and practised it. Blind faith is denounced.

It is not held to be a virtue in Buddhism, Dr. Saddhatissa told me, if a thief refrains from stealing from a shop at night because he might get caught or

because others might think him wicked. He must not want to steal. He must feel that it is wrong.

## REVOLUTIONARY

Buddha advocated the spiritual democracy of all men and women of all classes – revolutionary thoughts in 528 BC.

His teachings denounce cruelty to animals, cruelty to children, slavery, ascetism, war, the manufacture of destructive weapons, hedonism and alcohol.

Buddha was not a God. The essence of his teachings is that he was a human being who became enlightened, and so a fit leader for others. He found “Truth”, and then went on during his lifetime to practise a “boundless goodwill for all things, great or small, known or unknown.” His ethic was “Love for all.”

Because Buddha was not a God, any Buddhist can in theory become a Buddha and attain the level of “The Enlightened One.”

Self-reliance and tolerance are the keynotes of Buddhist thought. Deep respect is shown by Buddhists for all other beliefs and religions. Not one drop of blood has been shed in 2,500 years on behalf of its principles.

## INSULT

Buddhism in this country, as in all others, is not run on a missionary basis. Priests and monks encourage the interest of outsiders, but never try and convert people to their way of thinking.

Dr. Saddhatissa explained: “If I tried to convert you, it would be an insult to your intelligence. It would mean that I thought you were a fool.”

Man’s views are a result of experience, the Buddhists believe, and experience cannot be transmitted from one person to another. Man’s views change when experience of life changes them.

In the West, perhaps most is known about the Buddhist theory of “reincarnation” – which is in fact a belief that man is reborn, not reincarnated.

Buddha says that continuing consciousness is started not in each individual’s childhood, but from eternity. From eternity we are continually being reborn and then dying.

All the time we are collecting around us a “Karma” – the good and bad actions and thoughts that inevitably shape our lives and future. We continue to be reborn until we have released ourselves from the bondage of our desires – and until love, pride, fear and greed are annihilated, we retain a “Karma.”

## NON-ATTACHMENT

The ultimate goal of the Buddhist is to reach a state of non-attachment – “Nibbanadhatu.” But this state is not defined as heaven. From a metaphysical standpoint it is deliverance from suffering; psychologically it is the eradication of egoism; and from an ethical standpoint it is the destruction of lust, hatred and ignorance.

It is a popular misconception that Buddhist thought embodies the theory of reincarnation, which is the migration of the soul from one body to another. The “Karma” of a dying person enters the body of a child being born. The “Karma” of the dead can be made better or worse by the person who inherits it.

It is clear therefore that the Vihara in Heathfield Gardens, Chiswick, headquarters of the London Buddhist Association, is a temple where followers may go to learn, contemplate and discuss the teachings of Buddha, rather than to worship him.

The flowers which surround his statues and the heavy smell of oriental incense which pervade the house, are marks of respect for the greatest teacher of all, not worship for a God.

## STRANGE PERFUMES

Outside, the Vihara has none of the colourful trappings normally associated with an Eastern religion, but when the door is opened by Dr. Saddhatissa, dressed in his ceremonial robe of brown and orange, you are whisked into another world of strange statues and perfumes.

But before taking me on a detailed inspection of the Vihara, Dr. Saddhatissa told me something of the history of Buddhists in this country and the purpose of the temple.

Buddhists monks first came to London in 1925, and in succession Viharas have been set up in Ealing, Lancaster Gate, Regents Park, Knightsbridge, and now Chiswick.

The Vihara was moved to Chiswick in 1964, because the previous headquarters in Knightsbridge had become too noisy for meditation. The monks find that Heathfield Gardens – despite its nearness to Chiswick fire station – a perfect spot for the Vihara.

Dr. Saddhatissa told me that it was hoped one day to open a proper Vihara in a reasonably quiet part of central London, easily accessible to students and embassy staff which the Vihara is designed to serve.

He also told me something of his own life as a Buddhist monk. He came to England nine years ago, but he left his native Ceylon many years before that to teach all over India and Asia.

He started life as a monk at the age of 14 and is now 53 – but has not a single line on his face. He doubts now if he will ever leave the Order – although it is quite the accepted thing to do if a monk wishes to marry or take up an ordinary life again.

For example, it is traditional for Thai Kings to do a spell of training in a monastery before they take the crown. It is also common for young people to train in the Order and then leave.

Dr. Saddhatissa told me that ex-monks were coveted as husbands by anxious families for their daughters, as monks are trained in morality and kindness.

His duties as a monk involve giving lectures and advice to followers of Buddhists and to all those interested. Although much of his time is spent in meditation, he frequently gives lectures at universities, religious societies, and has even talked in a Catholic church.

First we went to the shrine room, which is used solely as a place of meditation. Dr. Saddhatissa removed his shoes – again not as an act of worship – but as a sign of respect to a great teacher, as are the flowers and incense in the room.

#### CENTRAL FIGURE

Besides the central figure of the Buddha, which stands on a gold-clothed marble shelf in the middle of one wall, the most important object in the shrine is the incarcerated relic of the Buddha, which has brought to the Vihara with great pomp and ceremony by the former premier of Ceylon, Mrs. Bandaranaike.

It stands in one corner of the shrine room. Inside the domed casket made of ebony, chased silver and ivory, which is studded with precious stones, lie some of the ashes and burned bones of the Buddha.

Placed around the central Buddha are smaller caskets, statues and figures of all shapes and sizes, presented to the Vihara by many Eastern countries.

#### GILDED TRAPPINGS

In one corner stands another large Buddha, dressed in the gilded trappings of an Emperor as he is depicted by Northern adherents of Buddhism.

Downstairs is the lecture room, where the philosophy of Buddha is taught and where disciples and students of Buddhism may read about His life and work in the extensive library.

At one side of the platform is a Thai sacred bookcase, which contains the teachings of Buddha as compiled by his contemporary followers. The book, which contains three sections in 17 volumes, is called the “Tripitaka.”

The ornate sacred bookcase stands high off the floor and inside the red and gilt painted outside lie the ceremonial volumes of the “Tripitaka,” which are written on palm leaves.

Buddhist monks are required to know most of the Tripitaka – which contains the discipline, sermons and philosophy of Buddha – by heart.

Around the room stand more figures of the Buddha, a bust and picture of the founder of the London Vihara, and ornate pedestals for flowers and candles. An antique gong from Burma marks the beginning and end of periods of meditation.

*Whether one believes in the philosophy of Buddha or not, it is hard not to respect a way of life which strives to be so tolerant – and has a message for those in 1966 as it did in 528 BC. when Buddha became “The Truly Self-Enlightened One” and started to preach.*