

BUDDHISM IN THE WEST

Buddhism has a comparatively small but rapidly growing following in the west. On an organized level it exists in the form of groups, societies and a few temples established primarily for colonies of Chinese and Japanese residents. On an individual level many people practice and study Buddhism using books as their only guide or there are those who have learnt of Buddhism by living in the East. At present the interest is concentrated mainly in the U.S.A. and in England.

Buddhism appeals to many types of people and for many reasons but seems to find its greatest appeal among the following groups:

- (1) Those who feel a deep need for religion but have difficulty in accepting the somewhat dogmatic teachings of Christianity or Judaism.
- (2) Those who in a genuine search for the meaning of life are not satisfied with the answers given to them by their churches or their synagogues.
- (3) Those who see a common denominator in all religions and are therefore favorably disposed to Buddhism and its practice.
- (4) Those who are interested in meditation per se.
- (5) Those interested in Buddhism as an academic philosophy rather than a religion.
- (6) Those who are attracted to Buddhism as a new way of thinking but have little interest in its formal practice. Often they are not favorably disposed towards "organized" Buddhism.

In the U.S.A. particularly there is a growing dissatisfaction with materialism. The ever accelerating pace of living and all its associated stress and strain is causing people to turn and look inwards. This is manifest in the emphasis many Christian churches are now placing on meditation. Meditation rooms are now to be found in many hospitals and universities and other public buildings. However, some find that when they look inwards they have no concept of God: perhaps this is why the "godlessness" of Buddhism has such an appeal. Buddhism is gradually taking a firm hold in the west.

The development of Buddhism in the west lies ultimately in its practice by westerners. Teachers, books and organizations will be almost useless unless we ourselves put it into practice. It should be propagated as a way of living and the key to its propagation lies in the teaching of how to practice. The foundation should therefore be the training of small but sincere groups of westerners who after some years of application will provide well qualified priests, teachers and leaders. Although one cannot doubt the benefits of westerners going to the east and receiving instruction under the guidance of established masters eventually provision for training must be made in western countries. By direct observation of the practices of masters and their students a much larger number of people will be able to understand something of Buddhism. The first step then should be masters and teachers who are genuinely interested in furthering the cause of Buddhism taking up permanent residence in western countries. Of course this presents many difficulties. Buddhist groups and organizations must be prepared to provide for the financial and material support of their teachers. The problem of language is a very real one, but not insurmountable if both sides make an effort to learn. Then comes the problem of the teaching itself. There is a tendency among teachers and students to deliberately try to westernize Buddhism. Others think that eastern methods are too difficult for westerners to practice. This is surely an error. Buddhism should first be taught in the formal way to which the teachers are accustomed and allowed to develop in its own manner in the western atmosphere. In this way the west will then find its own form of Buddhism.

Once centers are established they should provide services, daily when possible, lectures, personal interviews and instruction, ceremonies in English and do all possible to publish books and magazines. They should also provide a strict training

program for future leaders who must be well qualified before receiving any title or rank. If the training is made too easy few would respect those so honored.

There is a tendency for us to think of Buddhism as something mystical and quite separate from our daily lives. Teachers must do all they can to emphasize the "ordinariness" of Buddhism and speak of mysticism only in relation to the culture in which it developed. This is particularly true when speaking of those forms of Buddhism which have been heavily influenced by the indigenous beliefs of those countries to which it spread. Some knowledge of Indian culture at the time of Buddha might prevent misinterpretation of the scriptures of that time. Many of the eastern concepts of mysticism are unsuitable to the western mind now highly conditioned by the scientific approach. Many Christian sects are beginning to discover this fact. Buddhism must be kept as simple and as practical as possible in order to fit into the present day western culture.

Meditation should be kept simple so that everyone may be able to practice it at least in part. However, it must not be made too simple or the more serious may become discouraged. All should be encouraged to practice regardless of their age or inability to acquire correct posture. At the same time it must not be thought that the majority of westerners are unable to sit in the formal cross legged position. Here again the "ordinariness" and simplicity of meditation should be stressed as we have a tendency to think of it as something quite mystical.

Most westerners are given a strict concept of morality in the sense of right and wrong as part of their upbringing. This right and wrong concept is an absolute, ordained by God, and the individual will reap benefits and retribution according to the way he obeys it. It is because of this deeply rooted concept that many westerners have so poorly understood the Buddha's teaching of karma. For this reason a new approach to morality is needed. The true value of morality lies in the fact that it is the putting into practice of Buddha's teaching on a social level. If we understand the teaching we can understand morality: morality is just another aspect of practice. We should practice morality as we practice meditation, that is without regard for benefits. Like meditation it is best taught by the example of a teacher. With these thoughts in mind we can look at the Buddha's five precepts on morality in a new light. These five precepts are closely akin to those of other religions and are therefore quite suitable for the western mind: yet a problem arises when we attempt to determine to what extent we can practically apply the principle. Ultimately this is a problem to be solved by the individual. However, teachers should do all they can to encourage people to follow the precepts strictly. The teacher, on his part must, by his example, leave no doubt in the mind of his followers that the precepts are to be interpreted in a strict manner. A more explicit and rigorous code may be required for monks and laymen desirous of becoming ordained priests.

Whatever path we adopt we must follow it sincerely. Sectarian rivalry is all too much a part of Christianity and should have no place in Buddhism, particularly when trying to introduce it to a new country. We must strive to cooperate with all those who are sincerely doing their best to introduce Buddhism to the west. The sincerity of the few will then work for the benefit of the many.

Grahame H. Petchey
Zen Center
1881 Bush Street
San Francisco