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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa

Published by

**Buddhist Discussion Centre Australia.**

A.C.N. 005 701 806 A.B.N. 42 611 496 488

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Associated Institution of the World Buddhist University  
World Fellowship of Buddhists Regional Centre

May You Be Well And Happy

Buddhist Discussion Centre (Upwey) Ltd

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The late scholar, Dr. Ananda Guruge's ability to cognize and foresee that Buddhism in the West is closing the gap between different schools and sects, will interest many students. Even a new term, "Triyana" has been used by some western scholars to identify the unison of the three Buddhist traditions: Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. Perhaps this development is the way that Buddhism will flourish in the Dharma ending age. Dr. Ananda Guruge's following article will expound how Buddhism flourishes from an individual to a society, and how diversity is uniting our mind and heart to appreciate Buddha's fundamental teaching.

UNIVERSAL BUDDHISM - Author: Dr. Ananda W.P. Guruge.

The subject I have chosen for this afternoon is "Universal Buddhism" I began speaking and writing on this subject exactly thirty years ago. At that time we were celebrating the 2500th anniversary of the death of the Buddha. I was the editor of a souvenir which the Government of Sri Lanka had decided to publish. I requested scholars from all countries connected with Buddhism either historically or by the presence of sizeable Buddhist populations to contribute articles on the present situation of Buddhism. Each article was expected to trace the history of the development of Buddhism with special reference to how specific doctrines and practices evolved. I had a very rich and interesting array of contributions. What I read was a revelation to me as well as to many readers in Sri Lanka.

The first conclusion I reached was that we knew so little of the different traditions of Buddhism. Of course, we knew that there were different sects and schools. We have read of Mahayana, Theravada, Vajrayana and formed the impression that they were opposing and mutually contradictory forms of Buddhism. We, in Sri Lanka, have preserved the Theravada system of Buddhism. We have been very proud of our history as protectors of this form of Buddhism. A Sinhala Buddhist rarely fails to display his chauvinism whenever he speaks of his country as the home of Buddhism in its pristine purity. In addition, the ecclesiastical history of Sri Lanka is a record of the repeated victories of the Theravada tradition over Mahayana tradition. To make matters

worse, we, in Sri Lanka, have had no opportunity in coming into contact with Mahayana or Vajrayana Buddhism. The Chinese migration to Sri Lanka had been negligible. The contact with Tibet or Korea or Vietnam was almost non-existent. Japan had commercial relations but the cultural impact was infinitesimal. (Ed. Note: From the manuscript supplied, there is some doubt as to whether this is the correct word). Of foreign Buddhists, we had close ties with Burma, Thailand and Cambodia. These upheld the same form of Buddhism and the books we used were the same: namely, Pali Tripitika, its numerous commentaries and many poems and scholarly treatises. The World Fellowship of Buddhists has just been founded and the dialogue among the Buddhists of the world was just beginning. In such a situation, one must expect a lot of ignorance to exist as regards the vast range of Buddhist doctrines and practices.

This situation was universal in all Buddhist countries with the exception of perhaps Vietnam where the Theravada and Mahayana met across the border. As it is usual, wherever ignorance pervades, prejudice, distrust and misunderstanding become prevalent. This describes the background against which I started my little campaign to appreciate the diversity and richness of Buddhism.

How very different it is now. Several human tragedies had led to what could rightly be called a Buddhist Diaspora. With the fall of Nationalist China, many Buddhist scholars and leaders - specially the religious heads - moved into Hong Kong, Taiwan and other parts of the world, particularly Asia and North America. The self-imposed exile of His Holiness the Dalai Lama resulted, in a dispersal of the vigour and the resourcefulness of Tibetan Buddhism to every nook and corner of the world. It is no exaggeration to say that the most vibrant tradition of Buddhism in the international scene today is Tibetan Buddhism. A few decades later, the Indo-Chinese exodus resulted in the establishment of numerous Buddhist institutions in Europe and America. Today, those of us who live in big cities of Europe have easy access to all traditions of Buddhism. There is hardly a school or sect which is unrepresented. The new influx has merged with the missionary efforts of the first quarter of this century, which had concentrated on Theravada and Zen Buddhism. Thus, as opposed to the insularity of each type of Buddhism, we find today not merely the coexistence but more forcefully the intermingling and cross-fertilization of diverse traditions, schools and sects of Buddhism.

It is, therefore, both opportune and necessary to delve deeper and find what constitutes the unity and oneness of Buddhism. It is opportune because we have access to diverse forms of Buddhism and scholars with ability and sympathy are available to undertake in-depth comparative studies. Specially, the West today is indeed the best available laboratory for a detailed study of Buddhism. It is important that we make the best use of the opportunities which the unique combination of events have presented to us.

Such a study is also necessary because we have still to combat many pockets of ignorance and prejudice. It is sad but true that most Buddhists - specially those of traditionally Buddhist countries - continue to be aloof. We are involved with our compatriots and hence conduct ourselves as transplanted patches of our original home countries. In the practice of our religious life, this is particularly so. Only a very few among us have begun to look for the common basis of our religious heritage. By being insular, we fail to take advantage of what the genius of Asian Buddhists have evolved in philosophy, religious life, art, literature etc.

The diversity of Buddhism results from a unique characteristic of the Buddha. His attitude as a teacher had been very liberal. He wanted people to think for themselves. He encouraged exploration. He did not build obstacles in the path of critical examination. One of the epithets he gave his doctrine was that it was open for anyone to come and inspect. The Buddha discouraged the very idea of dogma.

In addition, he refused to establish a hierarchy within the Sangha - religious community. A group of monks or nuns in a village was a separate community. Within it each monk or nun was responsible for his conduct to himself or herself only. There was no divine law or central church law to check their thinking. Further, the Buddha encouraged the Sangha to study and teach. It turned out to be one of the oldest and most efficient learning societies in the world. The monastery became a centre of learning. And as monks went far and wide into every corner of Asia and also some parts of then known Europe, they established more and more such monasteries. As scholars they entered into debates and dialogues with philosophers, thinkers and religious leaders in various places.

The result of the meeting of minds was a growing transformation of Buddhism<sup>5</sup>. This is how Buddhism subdivided itself. As in the case of some other religions, Buddhists did not go through cataclysmic experiences similar to reformation, counter-reformation or long- drawn religious wars.

Each one of us, here, has inherited a form of Buddhism which developed in our countries of origin in response to specific philosophical, social and religious needs and influences. The very early teachers who brought Buddhism to our countries did not believe in replacing all religious ideas and practices with Buddhism.

Following the noble principles of tolerance which is fundamental to Buddhism, they allowed other religious beliefs and practices to co-exist with Buddhism. The result, of course, was that many of them got absorbed into Buddhism.

If we try to purify Buddhism by removing them, we will only be trying to do something both difficult and useless. It is difficult because we will never be able to agree on what is pure Buddhism. It is useless because Buddhism is a way of life and to live according to its principles does not call for a very rigid doctrinal base.

The Buddha, himself, had been quite pragmatic. He insisted on knowing the minimum of the doctrine but practising it with intensity. He also pointed out that the doctrine was only an instrument for use when needed and thrown away once the objective is achieved. His parable of the raft compares a person who clings on to the doctrine as one who carries a raft on his head after crossing the river.

The Buddhists are recognizing throughout the world that there is no reason whatsoever for them to argue on what is true or untrue and what is early or late and what is orthodox or not. This recognition stems from the fact that every school and sect of Buddhism has preserved a central body of teachings which go right back to the Buddha and which remain unchanged. The differences are in outward embellishments, emphasis and sometimes interpretation. The basic Buddhism remains one.

Two years ago, I listened in Italy to a learned discourse given by Lama Yeshe on the core doctrines of Buddhism. He elaborated one by one the four noble

Truths; the three characteristics of Impermanence, Suffering and Negation of Soul; the twelve factors of Dependent Origination; the basic code of Buddhist ethics and the concept of Nibbana. He was talking on the basis of Tibetan Buddhism. If I had closed my eyes, I would have thought that it was a learned monk of Sri Lanka expounding the doctrine according to Theravada Buddhism.

The President of Sri Lanka, His Excellency J.R. Jayawardene, records a similar experience he had had with famous D.T. Suzuki, the Zen scholar whose works are very popular in the West. When asked about the common basis of all forms of Buddhism, Dr. Suzuki has listed all such doctrines and told Mr. Jayawardene, "Do not look for differences but look only for the common core, which consists of the Buddha's own teachings".

The more one delves into the comparative study of different schools and sects of Buddhism, the more one is pleased to discover the oneness of this great religion. When we look at various beliefs and practices from this angle, we see the meaning and the importance of the differences. Man's religious needs are many and different. These vary according to one's intellectual development and social background.

A highly developed mind derives satisfaction only in meditation and progressively complex mental exercises like trances. The intellectually oriented persons seek pleasure in study and contemplation. For them religion is an area of intellectual experiences. To others, there are day to day problems and worries to absorb their attention. They seek solace from religion. This solace they expect with the least amount of effort. Buddhism, as we see it among us, serves each of these needs according to our own standards and criteria. It is simply fantastic that one religion could have developed to meet all these needs. It is not at all surprising that people choose different forms of Buddhism as their favourites because each of them caters for a special need or circumstance.

The more we recognize this fact the more we realize the wisdom of our ancestors who had allowed Buddhism to become diversified. But as we come closer and begin to have more and more contact, we see the need for some symbols of unity among the different schools and sects of Buddhism. Over the last thirty-six years, we have achieved much in this direction. I am very happy personally that the effort began in my country. At the very first meeting of the

World Fellowship of Buddhists in 1950, a series of decisions were taken: they<sup>7</sup> include

- the adoption of the six-coloured Buddhist flag universally;
- the universal recognition and celebration of Vesak; and
- the acceptance of Pali Formulas for the three refuges and five precepts.

As we look around and observe the proceedings of the ceremony today, we see the extent to which these external features have given us a sense of unity and oneness.

I foresee new tendencies to arise in Buddhism in the West. The close interaction of different schools and sects must result in mutual influences. Already western scholars had spoken of their preference for a form of Buddhism that combines the three traditions of Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. We hear of such terms as Triyana the three paths - and Buddhayana - the Buddha's path - as the names for such eclectic forms of Buddhism. We should not decry this natural development because this is exactly how Buddhism evolved over the last two thousand five hundred years.

It is with a sense of deep satisfaction that I share these thoughts with you. By your participation in the common celebration of Vesak, you are forerunners in a new growth in Buddhism. With tolerance and understanding, our common efforts should contribute to a greater enrichment of our religious heritage. Our goal should be to continue Buddhism as a living influence on our lives and through our example on lives of all around.

May all beings be happy and contented.

### Reference

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