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

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Buddhist Discussion Centre (Upwey) Ltd  
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## Summary

This article provides a brief history of the global organization World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB), from its formation in 1950 in Sri Lanka and its development over the past four decades. The permanent Headquarters of the WFB in Bangkok, Thailand was selected by the committee in 1973.

The achievements and activities of WFB include the unity and solidarity among Buddhists around the world, and the spreading of Buddhism has reached every continent of the world. WFB also expanded its involvement with other global issues, such as world peace and security, poverty, illiteracy, welfare of displaced Buddhists, women, youths and children, relations of Buddhism with other religions.

### World Fellowship of Buddhists From Sri Lanka to Thailand- A Bird's Eye View

Looking back: It was in 1950 that the World Fellowship of Buddhists was founded through the initiative of a distinguished and world-renowned Ceylonese scholar, Professor Malalasekera, who managed to invite prominent Buddhists in various countries, irrespective of Schools or Sects, to come to a general meeting in Sri Lanka. It was in June of that year when Buddhist delegates having accepted the invitation came to meet one another from 27 countries. These included both Bhikkhus and lay disciples, men and women, young and old, Mahayanists and Theravadins. Thus, it could be said that for the first time in the history of Buddhism so many Buddhists from so many countries, unknown to each other before, were brought together in a spirit of unity through the courageous and discerning initiative of Dr. Malalasekera of Sri Lanka. In a general meeting Dr. Malalasekera was unanimously selected President of the Organization to be founded, with its Headquarters to be located in Colombo, Sri Lanka, the home of its founder. At the expiration of Dr. Malalasekera's second term, each lasting four years, the Headquarters was moved to Rangoon, Burma in 1959 under the Presidency of H.E. U Chan Htoon, a chief Justice.

It had been agreed upon that the Headquarters was to move to various member countries in order to prevent a monopoly by any one country. Then there occurred a political event in Burma, by which U Chan Htoon was unable to perform his duty as President and WFB activities were thereby disrupted. WFB members then called for the transfer of the Headquarters to Bangkok in October 1963 as the only alternative and on a temporary basis. It was later in 1964 that Her Serene Highness Princess Poon Pismai Diskul was unanimously elected President of the Headquarters in Bangkok, Thailand.

In the meantime, there was discussion among WFB members regarding the site of the Headquarters which was then stipulated to move from one country to another every four years. Regarding this as a hindrance rather than a help in implementing whatever plan and project there was to carry out, the members found it advisable to have a permanent Headquarters in a suitable country. With this suggestion agreed upon, there was formed a set of criteria for the selection of a proper country where the proposed permanent Headquarters should be located. According to the requirements later formed, the country to be selected had to be (1) in which the majority of people are Buddhists, (2) of which the head is a Buddhist, and (3) in which Buddhism is recognized as the national religion. Several

countries competed for this honour. Thailand, being able to fulfil all the three requirements, won the majority vote during the WFB ninth General Conference in Malaysia in 1969 and as a result the permanent WFB Headquarters has been established in Bangkok since 1969 with Her Serene Highness Princess Poon Pismai Diskul elected as President. According to the Constitution, the President is to remain in office for a term of four years, after which there is to be another election. Her Serene Highness Poon Pismai Diskul had been elected twenty years from 1964 until 1984 when H.E. Sanya Dharmasakti, also a Thai national, was elected President.

Looking around: Thirty-four years have elapsed since the foundation of the WFB in 1950; twenty-one years have elapsed since the transfer of the WEB Headquarters to Bangkok in 1963; fifteen years have elapsed since Bangkok was voted the permanent site of the WFB Headquarters, and eleven years have elapsed since the opening of the present office building of the WFB Headquarters in 1973. The year 1983 marked the second and the first decade of the establishment of the WFB Headquarters in Bangkok and the opening of the WFB Headquarters present office building respectively. Following are some of the WFB activities and achievements during these periods.

Through its General Conferences every two years Buddhists from all corners of the globe, irrespective of schools, sects and denominations, have been brought together in a warm atmosphere of a reunion of members of one great family. With this family togetherness there arises the feeling of brotherhood and tolerance. Buddhists, who had previously felt so far apart from each other, either in terms of geography, tradition or outlook, have been made to feel like brothers and sisters and to tolerate whatever differences there may be among themselves. So far, we have had fourteen General Conferences, namely, three times in Colombo, twice each in Bangkok, Tokyo and Chiangmai and once each in Rangoon, Kathmandu, Phnom-Penh, Senarath and Kuala Lumpur and Penang. They have done much to help implant the virtue of tolerance and bring about the harmonious relations between various Buddhist groups the world over. They have understood that the spirit of unity could underlie the phenomena of diversity and appreciated the importance of unity in diversity. In 1986 there would be another such conference in Nepal, namely the 15th General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists.

While unity and solidarity among Buddhists have been thus brought about, during the last three decades the progress of Buddhism in various parts of the world has also been noticeable. In South America as well as in Australia, Buddhism has been attracting a wider interest and Dhamma Duta activities are in great demand in Australia and Indonesia. The recognition of a new WFB Regional Centre in Ghana in 1980, another one in Tanzania in 1984 bear witness to the fact that Buddhism has also gained interest in Africa. Thus, the spreading of Buddhism has now reached every continent of the world. According to the world Buddhist Directory published by the Buddhist Information Centre in Sri Lanka, publications of the Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, are mailed to 87 foreign countries.

In addition to convening regular conferences and meetings to deliberate WFB affairs, in May 1968 an International Seminar of Higher Education in Buddhism was held in Bangkok, Thailand, under the auspices of the WFB Headquarters. This meeting brought together for the first time Buddhist educationists and scholars, both the Sangha and laity, from Sri Lanka, Republic of China, Hong Kong, Japan, Republic of Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Republic of Vietnam, and Thailand. It brought about a needed but long

overdue exchange of ideas, sharing of problems and administrative experiences and discussion of plans for the future development of Buddhist higher education in Asia.

Also, in June 1982 there was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, a world Conference of Buddhist Leaders and Scholars sponsored by the Government of the Republic of Sri Lanka. This was in implementation of a resolution passed by the 13th General Conference of the WFB in 1980 in Thailand. 162 noted Buddhist leaders and scholars from as many as 17 countries attended the conference. They came from every continent of the world, namely Africa, America, Asia, Australia and Europe. A variety of subjects were discussed on which opinions and ideas were exchanged. Altogether no less than 24 resolutions and recommendations were made covering such subjects as peace and security, poverty, illiteracy, welfare of displaced Buddhists, women, youths and children, relations of Buddhism with other religions, and so on.

The World Fellowship of Buddhists is duly recognized by UNESCO as an international non-governmental organization with the status of category B (Information and Consultations). It therefore endeavors to co-operate to the best of its ability with the various activities and projects of United Nations agencies. For instance, the WFB has been actively assisting the Development of Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha, a project planned by a special United Nations Committee and the Government of Nepal, was represented at the Sixteenth Session of UNESCO in Paris, 12-14 November 1970, held a WFB-UNESCO meeting in Colombo in 1974, and participated with UNESCO in the World Population Year in 1974, the International Year of the Child (IYC 1979) and the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP 1981). Moreover, many of UNESCO's appeals for funds and assistance for various causes have often found their ways to be publicized in the magazine of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, the WFB Review.

Although the WFB establishes a formal relationship only with one specialized agency of the United Nations, namely UNESCO, we always keep contact with some other specialized agencies of the United Nations on account of mutual interest and for mutual benefits. For example, we were requested by the U.N. to promote the human right activities and participate in the international anti-apartheid year. In 1979 we received communication from ECOSOC and UNICEF asking for co-operation in conducting and promoting activities which would upgrade the welfare of the child in the IYC. In November 1980 the United Nations ESCAP organized an Ad Hoc Meeting with Interagency and Non-Governmental Organizations concerned with Youth Development in the Region in Bangkok. A representative from the WFB attended the meeting. In January 1982 the WFB sent a representative to participate in the United Nations Regional Seminar on Disarmament for Non-Governmental Organizations in the Asian Region held in Bangkok, Thailand, at the office of the ESCAP.

In social welfare and humanitarian affairs, the WFB has undertaken various measures within the limits of its available resources. For example, the Headquarters collected and dispatched relief assistance to the riot victims in Malaysia in 1969 and to the cyclone victims in East Pakistan in 1970. The Singapore Regional Centre donated a sum in assistance for the reconstruction of schools and scientific and cultural institutions of the city of El Asnam destroyed and damaged by the earthquake in Algeria in 1980. In 1983 the Headquarters appealed to all Regional Centres to help victims of racial riots in Sri Lanka and many Regional Centres responded. The numerous WFB Regional Centres numbering 82 in 35 countries, customarily

conduct or support Buddhist kindergartens and schools, orphanages and homes for the elderly, and other public welfare programs. The WFB Headquarters itself is by no means indifferent to the fate of suffering humanity. It assists in every way possible the World Fellowship of Buddhist Youths in its undertaking of the Dhammayatra Project, which is designed to bring the Dhamma as well as material aids to the suffering Kampuchean refugees and displaced Thai citizens at the Thai border.

Furthermore, the WFB Headquarters in Bangkok facilitates the Buddhist studies and Sangha ordination of many Western as well as Asian young men and women. A weekly meditation class is held every Wednesday for an hour and a half from 7.00 p.m. to 8.30 p.m. and a Dhamma discourse is added to the meditation class every first Wednesday of the month beginning at 6.00 p.m. It has also published a Buddhist Bibliographical Directory to meet the growing enquiries for information from all parts of the world.

In commemoration of the Twentieth Anniversary of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in 1971, the Government of Thailand issued special stamps on Vesakha Day, 9th May 1971, which depicts the four sites marking the four historic Buddhist events: Lumbini-Birthplace, Buddha Gaya-enlightenment, Sarnath-First Sermon, and Kusinara-Passing Away of the Buddha.

In 1971, the Government of Thailand minted special 50-baht coins to commemorate the Twentieth Anniversary of the WFB and later in 1980 it minted special 10-baht coins to commemorate the WFB Thirtieth Anniversary.

The WFB Secretariat publishes various materials which report the activities of the WFB and facilitate the study and understanding of Buddhism throughout the World. For example, a journal entitled "WFB REVIEW" is issued quarterly under the editorship of Mr. Siri Buddhasukh, aided by an international Board of Advisors and foreign correspondents. This periodical contains articles, both popular and scholarly, by leading Buddhists, timely editorials, and news about Buddhist activities and personages in many countries.

The WFB BOOK SERIES is issued in English and Thai, consisting of paper-bound books and pamphlets by Buddhist writers on a wide range of timely Buddhist topics. Reports of WFB Conference seminars, and special meetings are also published periodically. A list of these publications may be obtained from the Secretariat.

Looking Ahead: As regards its future achievements, what lies in store for the WFB depends on the co-operation, support and attitudes of its various Regional Centres. Apart from spreading the sublime doctrine of the Buddha and bringing about unity and solidarity among Buddhists, there is a definite trend of the WFB progress toward co-operation with other organizations working for the same ends, especially religious organizations of other faiths. Our Declaration in Japan in 1978 during the 12th General Conference states that we will strive in concert with other world religions and humanist organizations to work for peace and harmony with the ultimate aim of achieving a world community. Again, in our 1980 Declaration this statement is reasserted, and it is further added that we are convinced that religious practice and humanitarian aid would contribute to the creation of a stable human mind leading to ultimate religious achievement and betterment of human life.

The world of Buddhism itself seems to be undergoing a process of becoming a united whole. In his Presidential Address at the first plenary session of the 14th General Conference of the WFB on August 3, 1984 in Colombo, H.E. Sanya Dharmamasakti said, "The drift toward Buddhism is most noticeable in the western world. In the past attempts were made, books were written, and formulae were worked out to reconcile all the principles and tenets of the various sects of Buddhism by persons of renown including such personages Major Olcott and the late Mr. Christmas Humphreys. These works have exerted their due influences on succeeding generations, and we begin to see the effects now. I view this tendency as a healthy sign, so long as the doctrine in its true form is not changed, since it works for the solidarity and unity among Buddhists throughout the world".

As a result of rapid advances in science and technology and the growth of mass media, the world has become increasingly one world, and no one seems to be able to escape this web of mutual relations. The communication of thoughts and ideas has become easily and readily available leading to world-wide understanding of and sympathy for a cause. Buddhism is no exception and the prospects of Buddhists' understanding of and agreeing on a common purpose are by no means absent.

This kind of unity and understanding is not a new thing. Atisha Dipankara Srijnana, whose 1000th birth anniversary was celebrated in 1982 and who was called an "enlightened son of the 10th century" and "an eye of the Indian sub-continent", used to bring about unity and understanding among Buddhists by recognizing that every Dhamma was an aid to the attainment of enlightenment.

If this kind of unity and harmony of all doctrines of Buddhism should actually transpire, then Professor Malalasekera's dream of uniting all sects and schools of Buddhism in the world would come true.

Prasert Ruangskul  
W.F.B. Secretary-General.