

CHAPTER TEN THE IRON BIRD FLIES:

BUDDHISM AND THE WEST

When the iron bird flies,
 and horses run on wheels,
The Tibetan people will be scattered
 like ants across the World,
And the Dharma will come
 to the land of the Red Man.

So runs an ancient Tibetan prophecy. Like most prophecies its precise meaning is unclear. Some Buddhists hold that it refers to the Tibetan people, who used to paint their faces red when preparing for war, and that the saying foretold Buddhism's arrival in Tibet many centuries ago. A more popular interpretation amongst Buddhists today, however, is that it refers to the spreading of Buddhism westwards. Some Buddhists believe that the 'Red Man' is the American Indian and that the prophecy predicts the advent of Buddhism in the USA. The iron bird sometimes has been thought to mean the aeroplane, and the horse running on wheels the motor car, both of which were invented around the turn of the century, almost coinciding with the British invasion of Tibet in 1904. Of course the Tibetan people were not scattered until half a century later, with the advance of the Communist forces in 1959; nevertheless all these events are roughly contemporaneous with the advent of Buddhism in the West. Whatever the prophecy really means, Buddhism in all its varieties has spread westwards and interacted with many new cultures, ideologies and religions, not least of which is Christianity.

Christian Missionaries Arrive.

Apart from inaccurate hearsay, Christianity's first knowledge of Buddhism was gleaned from the Christian missionaries and from the translations and writings of scholars. The nineteenth century saw the beginnings of the vast undertaking of making Buddhist scriptures available to the West, principally in English, German and French. Of the translators, the most influential were Eugene Burnouf (1854-1920), who translated and edited the Lotus Sutra in 1852. In Germany, Hermann Oldenberg (1854-1920) edited the complete Pali Vinaya-pitaka, while in England T. W. Rhys Davids (1843-1922) was extremely productive in his translation work and founded the Pali Text Society in 1881. At this stage, western interest in Buddhism was largely academic and few westerners actually embraced Buddhism.

Another source of introduction to Buddhist ideas was through English 'transcendentalist' poets such as Emerson and Blake, who used ideas derived from Buddhism. Edwin Arnold's epic poem, *The Light of Asia* (1879), recounted in English verse the story of the birth, enlightenment and mission of the Buddha. This was a literary landmark for Buddhism: the one-way system of traffic between westerners and Buddhists was soon to change.

During the nineteenth century the Christian missionaries' attitude towards Buddhism was one of disapproval, and often outright hostility. Hindus, amongst others, had permitted Buddhists to practise their religion in conjunction with their own faith, believing that there was no conflict, but for the Christians the idea of

following more than one religion at a time was (and still is) totally unacceptable. Protestant missionaries were especially offended by the use of images of buddhas and bodhisattvas as aids to devotion. These were often viewed as 'idols' or 'graven images', and were seen as a serious breach of the second of the Ten Commandments. As Reginald Heber wrote in his famous hymn:

In vain with lavish kindness
The gifts of God are strewn;
The heathen in his blindness
Bows down to wood and stone.

The missionaries seem to have found it hard to accept that Hindus and Buddhists do not worship the images themselves but what they represent. The Rev George Smith, later Bishop of Hong Kong, has this to say about his missionary encounters with the Buddhist faith:

I was disturbed at an early hour by a [Buddhist] priest groaning in the ante-room and uttering doleful sounds, as he prostrated his body before the hideous idol, after relighting the perfume sticks. I remonstrated with the poor creature, who, with a vacant stare, asked me whether there were no Buddhist priests in my own country, and what idols we worshipped. I gave him a tract, which he was unable to read, and which I therefore received again. In the afternoon I passed through some lesser temples, in which a few priests were performing their customary mummeries.¹

Smith implies that many of the Sangha were illiterate, but we are not told in what language the tract was written (it would almost certainly have been English), and this may explain the monk's difficulty. Smith goes on to describe how he continued to hand out to Buddhist monks, while they were meditating, tracts which 'contained a remonstrance against the sin of idolatry'. Later, in a small temple, he attempted to show the senselessness of 'idol worship' by poking the 'ugly idols' with his umbrella. He records:

As I gave them a slight thrust they trembled, tottered, and tumbled from their thrones. The people again laughed heartily, as the priests tried for some time in vain to make one of the idols maintain its sitting posture, the fall having disordered its component parts. Thinking that this liberty might put their good humour to too severe a test, I became more serious in my manner, and spoke of the wrath of God on those who thus dishonour his name.²

The Great Debate of Panadura

At the time of the missionary hey-day, Christian-Buddhist relationships were very strained, to say the least. In Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Buddhists believed that the Christian presence discriminated against them. Children had to be educated in Christian schools and only Christian holidays were recognized by the government. If children absented themselves to celebrate Buddhist festivals, they were punished. In the law courts, Buddhists were obliged to swear on the Christian Bible that they would not perjure themselves. Although Buddhist processions were tolerated, the use of the drum and other musical accompaniments were banned.

Missionaries often failed to recognize that Buddhism confronted them with a much older religious tradition than theirs — a religion which had its own scriptures

and which was very deeply embedded in the cultures in which it had taken root. Relatively few converts to Christianity were gained; Christianity had much greater success in countries like Africa with its non-literate tribal religions which contrasted markedly with the scholarly tradition of the Buddhist faith.

By viewing Buddhism as primitive and superstitious, Christian missionaries underestimated the ability of the Buddhist Sangha to argue its case forcibly against them. One Protestant missionary, the Rev David de Silva made anti-Buddhist comments in a sermon preached in Ceylon in 1873. The Buddhists took exception to his remarks and requested him to state publicly his objections to Buddhism and to dispute with them. A time and place was set and so the Great Debate of Panadura occurred in August 1873.

It was an impressive occasion. Protestants of all denominations — Baptists, Wesleyans and clergy from the Church Missionary Society — turned out in force. The Rev David de Silva and a new Christian convert, Mr F S Sirinamme, prepared to speak on behalf of the Christians. The Ven Migettuwatte Gunananda, a formidable scholar, was the spokesman for the Buddhists, and brought with him some two hundred members of the Sangha. An enormous crowd of five or six thousand had assembled in the early hours of the morning, determined not to miss this momentous event. Sinhalese youths made their way around the congregation selling refreshments (sherbet and roasted chick-peas), and the police were present to keep order.

The Great Debate lasted for two days, with morning and afternoon sessions of two hours apiece. De Silva began the debate, attacking, amongst other issues, the Buddhist notion that there are no souls, enquiring how rebirth was possible if this was so. However, de Silva spent much of his time simply explaining to the audience the basic teachings of Buddhism. In order to convince his audience that his facts were right, he quoted lengthy passages from Buddhist scriptures in the original Pali (long since a dead language) and it is doubtful whether more than a mere handful of the audience understood him.

Ven Gunananda, by contrast, was better able to address a crowd of ordinary people. Not only was he a competent Buddhist scholar, but he had read the Bible thoroughly too, even quoting some very obscure passages with which, in all probability, most Christians today are unfamiliar. He posed many penetrating questions to de Silva: why is God described as 'jealous'?; how could an all-powerful God ever have to 'repent' of making humankind?; why did Jephthah kill his own daughter as a sacrifice to God?; why did the Bible suggest in some places that salvation was gained by faith, and in other places by deeds? For Gunananda it was illogical to believe that Jesus rose from the dead: his disciples must have stolen his body. De Silva had cast aspersions on the morality of certain members of the Sangha, noting that some of the leading figures in Buddhist history had been murderers. 'What about Moses?' Gunananda objected; the Bible not only records that he killed the Egyptian, but condones it. At least in the Buddhist tradition the murderers who became enlightened repented of their misdeeds, he argued.

By inviting de Silva to begin the debate, Gunananda had thereby ensured that he had the last word. As he dealt his final blows to Christianity, he was greeted with cries of 'Sadhu!' from the crowd, meaning 'Excellent!' The missionaries had failed to convince their audience and the Buddhists were judged to have won the day.

Colonel Olcott and the Buddhist Revival in Ceylon

A full account of the debate, containing the text of the speeches, translated into English, appeared in the Ceylon Times. This issue of the journal was seen by an

American, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, and Olcott's discovery was a landmark in Sinhalese Buddhist history.

Olcott (1832-1907) was a soldier who fought in the American Civil War, aspiring to the rank of Colonel. Having completed his military service, he became a successful lawyer in New York. His contacts with Buddhism began when he was commissioned to investigate a case involving a new religious group. He was actually impressed by what he saw there, and decided that he wanted to study more. In the group he met Madame Blavatsky and they jointly became the founders of the Theosophical Society. (Theosophy seeks to discover unexplained laws and powers in the world, and encourages the study of religions, especially Buddhism, in order to find an ancient secret wisdom which lies at their core.) Olcott and Blavatsky set out for India in 1878, eventually reaching Ceylon in 1880. When Olcott read the account of the Great Debate of Panadura, he concluded that the Buddhists had gained the victory. In 1880 he and Madame Blavatsky took the Three Refuges and Five Precepts.

Olcott wanted to ensure that Buddhists could practise their faith unimpeded, and founded a Theosophical Society in Ceylon, with the aim of preserving Buddhism. He established a number of Buddhist schools providing free education for children. Because of the zeal of the Christian missionaries, Buddhists had become somewhat demoralized, and children, laity and even monks did not know their tradition as well as previous generations had done. Olcott compiled a Buddhist Catechism in 1881 to enable better understanding of Buddhism: it proved somewhat difficult for children and a simpler one had to be devised for them.

On Easter Day in 1883, a procession of Buddhists was organized. Opponents of Buddhism used physical violence to prevent it and at least one Buddhist participant was killed. This event caused Buddhists to set up a Buddhist Defence Committee, which prevailed upon Olcott to visit London and plead the cause of Buddhism to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. Olcott's visit bore various results which pleased the Sinhalese Buddhists. From then on, Buddhists were allowed to act as registrars for marriages, Buddhist witnesses in the courts were no longer obliged to take the Christian oath, and Buddhist festivals were recognized as public holidays. As a symbol of the resurgence of Buddhism against western colonialism, Olcott designed a Buddhist flag, which proved acceptable to Buddhists of all traditions, and is still used today.

Olcott also visited Japan, lecturing widely on Buddhism and aiding a Buddhist revival there also. He devised a set of 'Fourteen Fundamental Buddhistic Beliefs' which was endorsed by all major schools with which he made contact, namely Theravada, Pure Land, Zen and Nichiren. (Olcott did not meet Tibetan Buddhists.) Interestingly, the sixth point of his Buddhist creed contains a thinly disguised criticism of the Christian missionaries' message:

Ignorance also begets the illusive and illogical idea that there is only one existence for man, and the other illusion that this one life is followed by [a] state of unchangeable pleasure or torment.³

Olcott died in 1907, near Madras in India. His corpse was taken to the cremation ground, swathed in the Buddhist flag which he had designed, together with the 'stars and stripes' flag of his home country.

Anagarika Dharmapala (David Hewavitarne, 1864—1933)

Anagarika Dharmapala was a Sinhalese Buddhist who was highly influential in the development of modern Buddhism. His given name was David Hewavitarne and he was born into a Buddhist family in Colombo. He disliked the missionary presence, which he described as 'Christian barbarism'. He met Colonel Olcott in 1891, became his student and subsequently sought ordination as a Buddhist monk. In the same year, he visited Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, and was dismayed by the state of neglect in which he found the place. In order to work for its restoration, he founded the Mahabodhi Society in Colombo. Although Buddhism has a strong tradition of meditation, the practice had almost died out. Dharmapala discovered a manuscript of an old handbook on Buddhist meditation when he visited a monastery at Bambaragala. This was later published by the Pali Text Society and translated as the *Manual of a Mystic*. Teachings on meditation were thus re-discovered. In Burma, too, a monk called Narada restored the practice of 'awareness of mindfulness', and so a new Burmese tradition of meditation was established.

Buddhism in the USA

While some westerners made contact with Buddhism as a result of journeys to the East, easterners also migrated westward, bringing their religions with them. Buddhism first came to the West with Chinese immigrants to California, who were attracted by the Gold Rush in the 1840s. They were mainly Pure Land Buddhists, and came as members of the laity without bringing priests with them. When they settled, they established 'joss-houses' (as their Chinese temples were called), where they met to perform their devotions. (The name 'joss-house' was given, of course, because of the burning of incense, or 'joss-sticks'.) Devotions were not exclusively Buddhist but often a mixture of Chinese ancestor veneration, cults of popular Chinese deities, and Chinese forms of Buddhism. Many temples were dedicated to the bodhisattva Kuan Yin. (Kuan Yin is the female form of Avalokiteshvara in Chinese Buddhism; she is called 'Kwannon' in Japan.)

When the Japanese came to San Francisco, arriving via Hawaii, they not only brought Pure Land Buddhism but Pure Land priests as well. This provided Buddhists and other seekers with a more organised form of Buddhism, with more precise and definitive explanations of it. California is well known as the seed-bed of new religious ideas and Buddhism gained a number of western followers.

The Parliament of Religions

As Buddhism came into contact with other faiths in the United States, particularly Christianity, one very notable event took place in 1893. This was the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. A staggering assembly of some 7000 representatives of all the major religious traditions of the world met 'to bring together in conference for the first time in history the leading representatives of the historic religions of the world'. The purpose was not inter-religious confrontation, as had occurred in Sri Lanka, but mutual understanding and learning. Although Buddhism was represented, it was mainly a selection of the Mahayana schools which attended, with a few Theravadins; no Tibetan Buddhists were present at all—the distance was no doubt too great and they may not have been aware that the Parliament was meeting.

A further goal of the World Parliament was 'to show.. An the most impressive way, what and how many important truths the various religions hold and teach in common. Despite this well-intentioned aim, much of the discussion at the Parliament focussed on religious differences as well as similarities. There was certainly no

attempt to pretend that all religions basically were expressing the same truths, or that any should compromise in order to create some new global religion containing elements of all the faiths which were present. The common interest was, rather, on sharing what each religion believed it had to offer, and to discover what light each shed on the problems facing humankind, particularly the quest for permanent international peace.

Two notable Buddhists, among others, spoke at the Parliament. One was Anagarika Dharmapala, Olcott's student and fellow worker from Sri Lanka, and another was Soen Shaku, a Zen Master of the Rinzai tradition. Paul Carus (1852—1919), an influential publisher, was inspired by Soen Shaku, and invited Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870—1966), Soen Shaku's pupil, to work for his publishing company. Suzuki was a prolific writer and did more than any other Zen teacher to make Zen accessible to a western popular readership. From about 1920 onwards, his works were read widely, and they are still readily available in bookshops.

Buddhism in Britain

In 1905, R J Jackson became the first practising English Buddhist, and began to lecture on Buddhism from a soapbox in Regent's Park. Together with J R Pain, an ex-soldier from Burma, they established a bookshop for the sale of Buddhist literature, and developed their Regent's Park lecture programme, having painted their portable platform orange, with the motto, 'The Word of the Glorious Buddha is sure and everlasting'. Sizeable crowds attended the lectures.

In the meantime, an Englishman called Allan Bennett had travelled to Burma and become ordained as a Buddhist monk under the name of Ananda Metteyya. From Burma he spearheaded a Buddhist mission to England, arriving back on St George's Day in 1908. The tide was turning. It was not long before a Buddhist Society was founded with its headquarters in London, representing all schools of Buddhism.

The year 1925 saw the arrival in England of Anagarika Dharmapala from Sri Lanka. Dharmapala's mission presented traditional Theravada Buddhism to England, which is probably its best known form.

One of Jackson's converts, Francis Payne, delivered a series of lectures on Buddhism in 1923 in the Essex Hall, the Strand. These lectures were attended by Christmas Humphreys, a lawyer, who became one of the leading and most prolific exponents of Buddhism in the West. Like Colonel Olcott, Humphreys was a Theosophist, and he formed a Buddhist Lodge within The Theosophical Society in 1924. This eventually developed into the Buddhist Society, which exists today in Central London. Humphreys travelled widely, particularly during the Second World War, when he was asked to take part in the prosecution of Japanese war criminals. (Humphreys also made himself controversial in Buddhist circles, being the prosecuting counsel in the trial of Ruth Ellis, the last person to be hanged in the UK.) In his travels, Humphreys did much to assist Buddhists in other countries, and, in the style of Olcott, he devised 'Twelve Principles of Buddhism' which he circulated to Buddhists of different traditions as he met them. Humphreys' Twelve Principles of Buddhism proved acceptable to most communities, although not all. Humphreys' own favoured brand of Buddhism was Zen but The Buddhist Society represents all schools.

In the 1950s the Sangha founded a residence within Britain, with Sinhalese Buddhists opening the London Vihara in 1954. The year 1962 saw the establishment in Hainpstead, London, of the first vihara in the United Kingdom which accepted British candidates for ordination. This was a very traditional Theravadin order,

coming from a Thai community who lived in forest huts. It has now moved to the forests of Hampshire. Since then, many varieties of Buddhism have gained momentum in Britain, and today there are around 180 groups of practising Buddhists, although some of these are very small.

Tibetan Buddhism in the West

As a result of the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, refugee lamas came to the United States and to Europe. Of the Tibetan refugee teachers, two are particularly noteworthy. Tarthang Tulcu was chosen by the Dalai Lama as a teacher of the Nyingmapa ('ancient') tradition at the Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies at the Sanskrit University of Varanasi. He gave up the robe before emigrating to the USA in 1968, where he established the Nyingmapa Meditation Centre in Berkeley and the Tibetan Relief Foundation, among various other religious projects.

Chogyam Trungpa (1939-47) came to Britain and founded the Sarnye-ling Monastery in Dumfriesshire. This was the first Tibetan monastery ever established outside Tibet. After a serious car accident in 1969, Trungpa gave up the robe and emigrated to the States where he founded the Kanne Choling ('Tail of the Tiger') Meditation Centre, and the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. He was a prolific writer, and did much to transpose traditional Tibetan ideas into a western setting. The Sarnye-ling Monastery continues to exist, and an impressive temple is under construction, due to open in 1988.

In the Gelugpa tradition is the Lam Rim Buddhist Centre in Wales, set in eight acres of ground, with a resident Tibetan teacher. The Manjushri Institute near Conishead in the Lake District was converted from a Christian priory: it now has two resident Tibetan lamas and is used for the training of geshe. (A geshe is someone who has undergone extensive training in Tibetan religion and philosophy. The programme of study takes nine years—longer in Tibet itself—and is sometimes said to be equivalent to a western doctorate.)

The Westernisation of Buddhism

When a religion arrives in a new or foreign culture, changes are inevitable. Religions adapt to new environments, and Buddhism has proved in the past to be eminently capable of changing its outward form to accommodate the cultures it has met. Are we therefore likely to see new forms of Buddhism in the West as Buddhism absorbs western ideas?

One Buddhist movement which is dedicated to finding such a new form is the Western Buddhist Order (WBO). The Order was founded in 1968 by Ven Sangharakshita, a former English army conscript who served in India during the War, and tore up his papers to take on the robe and follow the Buddhist path. The Western Buddhist Order is highly critical of those western Buddhists who, it claims, have treated Buddhism as a kind of 'hobby'. These Buddhists have taken up the study of the religion and some of the meditative practices, but have lived a typically western lifestyle, drinking alcohol, eating meat and wearing furs. As Sangharakshita has said, 'a difference must make a difference' and, for example, 'Buddhism and beefsteaks do not go together'.

This much is traditional. What is less traditional is the financing of the movement, which does not look for alms, but has moved 'from beggars to business' by setting up a number of commercial enterprises, stressing the fifth point of the Eightfold Path — 'perfect livelihood'. The movement is also open in principle to Buddhist teachings finding a new form of expression which is amenable to the West. It has already

expressed a commitment to individual growth, in contrast to the traditional doctrine that there are 'no selves'. For such reasons, not all Buddhists applaud the WBO's attempts at adaptation.

Adaptations in the West

The WBO is not the first example of the westernisation of Buddhism. We have already seen westernisation occurring as Buddhists responded to the Christian missionaries. As Buddhism revived to fight back, it set itself up as 'the religion of reason'. One consequence of this was that Buddhists tended to jettison superstitions and accounts of miracles within their own tradition.

Another way of adapting to the West was to create organisations similar to those of Christianity. There were Sunday Schools for Buddhist children (later renamed 'Dharma Schools'), Buddhist catechisms and creeds, and organisations such as the Young Men's Buddhist Association in the USA, India, Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Some Buddhist teachers in the USA began to be called 'priests', and the leader of one large Buddhist organisation was actually referred to as a Buddhist 'bishop'. Christianity had made its mark, although perhaps not quite in the way the Christian missionaries had expected.

We have seen how the Christian presence caused Buddhists to recover their tradition of meditation. However, westernisation caused several important changes. In the East it is normal for Buddhists to meditate or engage in devotion in the company of members of their own tradition, even though there is inter-mingling of ideas. In the West this is not always possible, particularly in rural areas where only a few Buddhists reside, spanning a variety of traditions. Consequently, western Buddhists often come together and meditate en masse, each in his or her own preferred way. This contrasts with the eastern tradition where there is normally a one-to-one relationship between the meditation teacher and the pupil, and where the teacher acts almost as a kind of psychologist, offering advice to the pupil based on what he or she observes. An eastern teacher will observe the pupil carefully, taking note of how even menial tasks are performed — such as sweeping a floor — and will instruct accordingly. Not only is this barely possible in the West, owing to the scarcity of accredited teachers, but westerners appear to prefer group meditation to the traditional eastern master-pupil relationship.

It is difficult to see whether any substantially new form of Buddhism is in sight. Some Buddhists have spoken of a 'Navayana'—a new vehicle—which will emerge in the West. Others have attempted to create an 'Ekayana'—a single vehicle—which combines ideas from all Buddhist schools in an ecumenical way. As yet, however, no Navayana or Ekayana has established itself as a firm presence within Buddhism. Only time will tell whether some new form of Buddhism will arise. If Buddhism changes as a result of its encounters with the West, this would be consistent with its fundamental doctrine of anicca (impermanence). Everything changes—and this applies to the forms of Buddhism themselves. As Christmas Humphreys wrote:

Why should there not be in time a Western Buddhism...? There is no reason why it should not grow happily alongside, and even blend with the best of Western science, psychology and social science, and thus affect the ever-changing field of Western thought. It will not be Theravada or Zen, Prajnaparamita intuitive philosophy or Tibetan ritual. Just what it will be we do not know, nor does it matter at the

present time. The Dharma as such is immortal, but its forms must ever change to serve the ever-changing human need.⁴

Notes to Chapter 10

1 Quoted in Holmes Welch, *The Buddhist Revival in China* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, 1968) pp 224—225

2 Holmes Welch, *ibid.*

3 B. P. Kirthisinghe and M P Amarasuriya, *Colonel Olcott: His Service to Buddhism* (Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1981) p 15

4 Christmas Humphreys, *Sixty Years of Buddhism in England* (The Buddhist Society, London, 1968) p 80

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