

THE CHALLENGES, NEW AND OLD ***

T IS A GREAT PRIVILEGE to take part in this historic meeting of World Fellowship of Buddhists here in the United States. I wish to express my appreciation to the organizers of this event for giving me the opportunity to speak to you and share a few thoughts regarding the challenges both old and new which face Buddhism in our contemporary world. The very fact of your gathering in North America and the existence of this impressive structure, Hsi Lai Temple are both indications of the changes which have occurred in regard to the Western awareness and involvement with Buddhism. In a sense our presence in this complex of buildings with this particular group is an example of the recent success of Buddhism in regard to the challenges that have come from the encounter with the West. When one considers how little was known of Buddhism outside of Asia, until recently, this present meeting in Southern California of delegates representing millions of Buddhist from a variety of nations is all the more starting. For my part in these proceedings, I would like to discuss some of the challenges, both old and new which you, who are leaders in the Buddhism communities must face.

One of the important issues confronting Buddhism is the growing importance of the contact between the West and Asia. The global awareness which characterizes our age carries with it a number of thorny problems with regard to the traditional cultures of both areas. It is perhaps not of order in this present environment to recall a few of the facts regarding Western understanding of Buddhism. The first time the name of the Buddha appeared in the literature of the West was in 200 A. D. when Clement of Alexandria made a passing reference to this Indian tradition. Two centuries later Hieronymus stated that the Buddha was born from the side of a virgin. Apart from these two minor passages in the literature, nothing survives which provides us with proof that Europeans paid any attention to, or even knew of, the existence of Buddhism until trade and Christian missionary activity in the 13th century brought Asia and some of its cultural and religious institutions into the consciousness of Westerners. There is one exception to this 13th century date, for there was one point of early contact between Buddhism and the people to the West, but it was not recognized as such. The story of the life of Sakyamuni speared into west Asia but it was not taken for the biography of the founder of Buddhism. This story became instead the basis for the biographies of two Christian saints: Barlaam and Josaphat, Josaphat being a variation of the Sanskrit term Bodhisattva. The story of the young prince Josaphat finding his religious vocation in spite of the attempt of his father to keep him from his destiny, was the narrative used to tell about these two popular medieval saints of the Church. They were not seen in their true light as thinly disguised Buddhist figures until the work of the scholar Laboulaye in 1859. After that time Josaphat as we now know Sakyamuni Buddha, was removed from the list of Christian saints.

Consider that a little over a century after the Church discovered that it had inadvertently included the Buddha among the saints, we find ourselves in a meeting of hundreds of Buddhist delegates in California. The fact that knowledge of Buddhism was so slow to come to the West, raises the question as to how it ever made that journey. In the 13th century, the Mongols ruled China and large portions of Asia and they were anxious to open up trade relations with the West. In many ways, this conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists had its root in the success of the Mongols in breaking through some of the boundaries which separated East and West. Our romantic view of this process is dominated by the story of the Italian Marco Polo who returned from Asia after a trip that lasted from 1275-1291. He made a few comments about the Buddhists although he does not seem to have attempted to find out any detail about the structures, monastic dwellers or practices which he had seen. Just prior to Marco Polo's Asia visit, the Pope in 1245 had dispatched envoys to the Mongol court. These Catholic representatives

came into contact with the Tibetan form of Buddhism which was favored by the ruling Khan. The early travelers from Europe made little headway in understanding the doctrine or the history of the religion. The oldest description of Buddhist teaching in a Western language is that of the Jesuit Desideri (1684-1733) who had learned Tibetan and wrote an informative account of the Buddhist tradition as described by his Tibetan teachers. His report, which could have been of great value for those wishing to know more about Asia, was unfortunately placed in the archives of the Vatican and did not get published until 1904.

In the 19th century, a small group of academics within the European universities began to make a study of the documents which were brought from Asia by travelers and individuals such as merchants and diplomats who had lived there. The interest in the religions of Asia was spurred by the growing economic and political involvements of European nations in their colonial expansions. Over the last century scholarly studies have expanded and from the work of the pioneer investigators, Buddhist studies have grown into a recognized discipline in higher education in Europe and North America.

Contacts between the West and Asia have been extensive since the events of World War II. The series of military encounters in the Pacific during the World War, the aftermath of the Korean War followed by Vietnam have in a sad way kept a focus of attention on Asia. Growing trade between the regions promises to be a more positive and productive involvement. The general public in the West began to discover information about Buddhism through the books and articles of scholars such as D. T. Suzuki. Practice groups began to emerge, groups that were oriented to a particular type of Buddhism, often led by masters from Japan, China, Korea and Tibet and more recently from Southeast Asia. From a remote tradition that was not even identified by most Westerners in the 19th century, Buddhism is now a part of the religious life of the West. In 1987, the third meeting of the Buddhist Christian Dialogue Conference was held in Berkeley under the auspices of the University of California, the Graduate Theological Union and Institute of Buddhist Studies. To our surprise, more than 1000 delegates appeared for the week long event of lectures and seminars. I only point out these matters to indicate to you that this meeting of the Federation is a part of the whole process and history of the cultural interchange between Asia and the West.

We have a famous novel in Western literature. "The Tale of Two Cities" starts with the phrase "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." In some sense this phrase is applicable to the description of the challenges which has been confronted by Buddhism during this 20th century, a century that it is now about to enter its last decade. On the one hand Buddhism has found a worldwide audience and a growing role in the religious and educational communities of the West and on the other hand it has been severely impacted by the events of our time. The challenges which have been faced are not all new nor limited to this century there have been religious rivals throughout the history of Buddhism. One of these rivals has been Islam and in wide regions of Central and South Asia, former Buddhist areas within the present borders of Pakistan, India, Russia, Afghanistan, Malaysia and China are now controlled by the followers of the Prophet. Christian missionary activity in the Buddhist regions of Asia has been most successful in Korea and the Buddhist tradition of S. Korea is strongly affected by the growth of the various churches. Another rival from the West has been Marxism that has influenced the developments in China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Tibet and North Korea. Thus from one perspective the twentieth century has been a time of expansion of Buddhism outside of Asia and on the other it has been a time of great difficulties with monastic life curtailed, traditional education suspended and regular structures of organization destroyed. Thus we can echo the words of Dickens that the twentieth century has "been the best of times and the worst of times."

Even though the Buddhists and other religious communities have experienced some grave problems, we still live in a world which is dominated by religious concerns and problems. The Middle East is a

constant reminder to us of the power of the religious conviction and the role it plays in society. Battles in India between Sikhs and Hindus, in the Middle East between Jews and Islamic followers, or the ethnic and religious battles in Sri Lanka involving Buddhist tell us that religious divisions are not just Western or Eastern. We are also reminded that religious problems are not limited to the world of ideas or the pages of books in our libraries, they are at the core of much of the hostility which besets our world. The challenges for Buddhism from these encounters with other traditions has been and will remain difficult, and the tradition will constantly be tested as it attempts to find ways to a world of ever changing peaceful interaction of religions and this must be considered as one of the great challenges to you Buddhist leaders. If you can give the world some guidance in this arena of human interaction, it will be a gift of great value.

Another challenge for Buddhism and other religious bodies is the fact that we live in a time when education has been extended to a wide portion of the population in most nations and literacy rates are rising. The lay community of every religious tradition is becoming more interested in the problems of the doctrines and their application to society. No longer is religious study and publications regarding the faiths limited to the trained professional clergy; the role of the laity in such discourses has increased in a significantly way. Among this more educated laity, I sense that questions will and are being asked about the Buddhist tradition in ways which differ rather dramatically from those of the former times. Over the past five years, I have taken part in the project of the Ministry of Education in Singapore to provide classes in Religious Knowledge in the school systems of the nation. As an external consultant it was part of my task to help with the training of teachers for Secondary III and IV students. My workshops were given to more than 400 teachers, university graduates who chose Buddhism. At first, I found quite a few of the teachers were resistant to this type of classroom activity because they had never themselves been given training in the tradition even though many considered themselves to be Buddhists. I found myself trying to give answers to such questions as: "Why should we be teaching this type of material to our students when we are becoming a nation devoted to high technology?" Others wondered what could possibly be found in Buddhism which could be made into an academic study. During my first days with the teachers, I discovered how surprised they were to find that the University of California at Berkeley offered a Ph. D. in Buddhist Studies. It was of interest to see how their attitudes began to change as we undertook the process of studying the philosophy, psychology, ethics, logic, practice and history of Buddhism. They at last began to say, "it is not that there is too little to teach, there is too much." As Buddhism comes under scrutiny by people who are trained and have the sophistication of contact with the doctrines and practices of a wide range of world religions, I believe the challenge for the Buddhists will be to communicate to these laity the depth of their own tradition. I do not believe that Buddhists need fear those who study it; the Dharma in its entirety contains insights that extend to the entire range of our human experience. For those of us who have attempted to understand the doctrinal statements of Buddhism at the highest level of research and study, it is obvious that the wealth of material available and the complexity of ideas can test the analytic ability of even the most advanced students. We have only to remember that the Buddhist scriptures are the largest of any of the world's religions. The Chinese canon alone, in English translation would be approximately the size of ten sets of the Encyclopedia Britannica. From my experience in Singapore, I believe that Buddhist lay people are interested in studying their religion and delight in discovering the value of its doctrines in their everyday life. Therefore, I leave you leaders with the challenge of considering how you can provide training to your followers who have studied history, mathematics, social studies, economics but may never have turned the same attention to their religious tradition. At the same time I am aware that the practice of Buddhism involves meditation and spiritual exercise which are not determined by intellectual pursuits. The tradition which you represent offers a great deal to followers with regard to both aspects: there is a rich and enduring heritage of study and learning balanced with the meditation methods which have proven to be effective for generations of practitioners. The difficult task for the leadership of the sangha is to develop the skills which can communicate the full extent of the potential to be found in the Dharma.

Another challenge that is important in today's world is the relationship of Buddhism to society. The ethical systems and institution of Christianity and Marxism that are focused on social change and action are often held as models against which the Buddhists are compared. In particular, the Minjung theology movement in Korean Christianity, comparable to the liberation theology of Catholic Church, expounds a doctrine of social concern based on the "suffering servant" motif of Christianity. The ethics which are based on these teachings are appealing and deserve to be supported, and in my following remarks I do not intend to reject as invalid the attempts of those who are devoted to providing help to those they consider to be more unfortunate than themselves. However, this social action approach is not without problems, and these problems are now being recognized by the psychological community. For example, John Bradshaw, in the recent volume gives us an indication of the negative side of the system which we have seen developed within Western culture. The problem says Dr. Bradshaw is that of patronizing and he defines this in the following words:

"To patronize is to support, protect or champion someone who is unequal in benefits, knowledge power; but who has not asked for your support, protection or protection or championing. It is a way to feel one-up on another person. Being patronizing leaves the other person feeling shame. The interpersonal transfer of shame through patronization is very subtle. On the surface you seem to be helping the other person through support and encouragement, yet in reality the helping does not really help. He feels ashamed. Patronizing is a cover up for shame, and usually hides contempt and passive aggressive anger.

Healing the Shame that Binds You J. Bradshaw, (1988)

This statement about the difficulty of knowing how to proceed with concern and compassion does not negate the fact that the problems of our world are pressing and we need to find methods for dealing with the wide variety of human needs. I suggest that the Buddhists need not mimic the social action approach of the West. The world needs innovative ideas to meet the teaching in Buddhism which seems to directly speak to this issue. The First Noble Truth makes the simple statement: "There is Suffering." In this way there is the affirmation of the fact that suffering is universal, it is felt by the rich and poor, the sick and the healthy, male and female. This is a radical doctrine but it is one which ties us all together, regardless of our situation, nationality or even religious affiliation. Here we have the proposition that everyone of us suffers and compassion is not just towards the obvious objects of pity, those who are below us on the scale of resources and knowledge. If all suffer then social action must be based on mutual concern for all. The rich suffer and need support and concern from the poor. The poor suffer and need support and concern from the rich. Taking this concept at its face value, social action and concerns take quite a different turn from the traditional social action principles of the West. It is this last aspect which provides us with an approach to the problem of unity. Can there be any greater unity possible than that which exists between individuals who recognize that each is suffering, and who learn to give help to each other? A recent event in England may help to describe this more universal approach to social action. When the Prime Minister asked the Archbishop of Canterbury to declare a time of prayer for the soldiers killed in the Falklands battle, he stipulated that he would only agree if the prayers were offered for the dead of Argentina as well. The Prime Minister rejected that suggestion I wonder how healing it would be if he had been allowed to pray for the dead sons of both nations. Parents who lose their sons and daughters suffer equally regardless of place or time, and so imagine if we could comfort one another as equals in our suffering. It is not for me to even attempt to provide the answer to this problem, but I do ask you leaders to consider the possibilities of action based on the First Truth.

I wish the best of this important meeting and trust that Buddhism can play a role in providing leadership in the area of peace and unity between people. It is a formidable task and a continuing one. I salute you for giving it your consideration.

NOTE

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