

## **The Role of a Missionary: A Buddhist Perspective**

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### **Introduction:**

In this account, we will explore the true spirit of missionary work that culminated in the establishment of the first Buddhist Temple in Uganda. We will highlight the Buddhist leadership qualities or virtues of a true missionary such as freedom from all bonds of greed, hatred and delusion as exemplified by the Buddha when sending out the first sixty missionaries. A true missionary should be virtuous and able to proclaim the holy life in its perfection and purity. Such Buddhist leadership qualities have helped me to sensitize our local community by imparting Buddhist practices and principles through actions of compassion. Furthermore, we examine Buddhist contribution to African societies from time to time. Buddhism has uplifted the social relationships among the people who uphold the Buddhist precepts or virtues such as abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, taking intoxicants and drugs that lead to negligence and heedlessness. These precepts when undertaken individually can lead to personal safety, national security and social transformation. Also, we will explore the Buddhist contribution to the African economy. Finally, we will discuss the challenges of the missionary work and how to overcome them.

### **The Role of a Buddhist Missionary**

In May 2008, I met a Roman Catholic nun at the Inter-religious Council in Kampala, Uganda. She asked me whether Buddhists have missionaries. I answered her that there are some Buddhist missionaries in Asia, America and Europe but very few in Africa and Latin America. She advised me to invite more Buddhist missionaries to Africa in order to spread Buddhism. This encounter with a Catholic nun left me with many questions in my mind such as: How can I make Buddhist missionary activities more effective in Africa and the rest of the world? How can I spread the knowledge of and familiarity with Buddhism, not only to the privileged people in rich industrialized countries but also to the poor countries like Uganda, Africa? I would get some answers and guidelines from the original teaching of the Buddha.

The Buddha said before “sending forth” the sixty fully enlightened beings to various places to propagate the Dhamma. He said, “Free am I, O Bhikkhus, from all bonds, whether divine or human. You, too, O Bhikkhus, freed from all bonds, whether divine or human.” “Go forth, O Bhikkhus, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, benefit, and happiness of humans and gods... Let not two go by one way.” “Preach, O Bhikkhus, the Dhamma, excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, excellent in the end, both in spirit and in the letter. Proclaim the Holy life, altogether perfect and pure... There are many beings with little dust in their eyes, who, not hearing the Dhamma, will fall way... There will be those who understand the Dhamma. I, too, O Bhikkhus, will go to Uruvela in Senanigama, in order to preach the Dhamma” “Hoist the flag to the sage. Preach the Sublime Dhamma. Work for the good of others, you who have done your duties.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From the *Mahavagga*, as quoted in *The Buddha and His Teachings* by Mahathera Narada, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1988. Page 61.

These passages provide us with the framework for the Buddhist missionary to follow in the spreading of the Buddha's teaching... If we hope to effectively spread the Buddha's message of peace, harmony and freedom to the rest of the world, it is important to uphold four indispensable guidelines (the four "P" s) as encapsulated in the Buddha's message of a true missionary:

- Purification of one's mind;
- Purpose of spreading the Dhamma;
- Propagation of true Dhamma;
- Patience

### **Purification of ones' Mind**

The first step to purify the mind by removing all bonds (greed, hatred and ignorance). One needs to cultivate this highest virtue at the outset in order to be free from suffering and its causes. Such a degree of freedom, even on a temporary basis, is necessary for spreading Buddhism to the rest of the world. In order to get rid of the "bonds", it is necessary to undergo mental purification or development (meditation practice). Of course, the act of going forth will help to accelerate this mental purification process. Personally, I have attended several insight meditation retreats in order to purify my mind. Also, at the Uganda Buddhist Centre, we offer many mediation retreats to the public and most people have learned how to slow down, cultivate mindfulness, loving-kindness and social harmony. Plans are underway to establish a Centre for training Theravada Buddhist missionaries and prepare them for the much needed missionary work in Africa and the world.

### **Purpose of Spreading the Dhamma**

The second step is to ascertain the purpose of spreading the Dhamma. A true missionary spreads the Dhamma not for financial gains, fame and honour but rather for the happiness, welfare and benefit of all beings who are willing and able to internalize the Dhamma. A true missionary does not spread the Dhamma in order convert others followers but to convince other follower about the true Dhamma. Depending on the people's openness to hearing the Dhamma, they may either accept or reject it. A true missionary should be motivated by compassion – the mental quality of opening ones heart and mind for the suffering of beings in the world. Since I lived in Uganda, I noticed that existential suffering was particularly acute. After becoming a monk, I realized that many people are in dire need of the Dhamma. I began to teach the Dhamma out of compassion. In fact, I offer meditation retreat for free of charge at the Uganda Buddhist Centre. It would be wonderful to see more and more true missionaries flocking to Africa in order spread the Sublime Dhamma in Uganda and Africa. . It is high time, the International Buddhist Community, out of deep compassion, focus on facilitating missionary work in traditionally non-Buddhist areas like Africa and Latin America.

### **Propagation of the Dhamma**

The Buddha advised us to propagate the excellent Dhamma: excellent in the beginning (virtue), excellent in the middle (Mental training), and excellent in the end (Penetrative wisdom).

How can we proclaim this teaching? We have to demonstrate the Holy life in its perfection and purity. In other words, we have to teach by example and precept, not by simply words. A true missionary has to practice and teach the three trainings in a systematic way namely, virtue, concentration and wisdom. And in order for the followers to gain faith and

confidence in the Dhamma, they need a role model of a monastic or a Buddhist mendicant. In Uganda, I have taught the people by example and precept... A couple of years ago, the Uganda Buddhist Centre launched a water project and installed a borehole at the Temple. Many people from our local community always can now gain access to clean water. We wanted to teach our local community the practice of generosity and compassion in action. The local people have learned this lesson and the net effect is that they are very friendly to us. Whenever I pass through the village, the kids always say, "Bye Buddha...!" Sometimes they say, "I greet you in the name of the Buddha", doing this greeting with palm together in the traditional sign of respect.

### **Patience**

Another important quality is patience. When spreading the Dhamma, one needs to be patient with other people and the way they react to the Dhamma. People's receptivity to the Dhamma varies a lot and we have to be patient in order to accommodate their views. The Buddha said: "Enduring patience is the highest austerity. "Nibbana is supreme," say the Buddhas. He is not a true monk who harms another or a true renunciate who oppresses others."<sup>2</sup> During my missionary work in Africa, I have observed that many Africans are thirsty for the Dhamma. Of course, sometimes the people will have no clue about the Dhamma but one has to be patient with them. A few years ago, I met some of my fellow Africans who asked what I was doing. I told them that I was meditating. They said, "Oh sorry! You are taking medication! I repeated two times meditation but they did not get it. Sometimes, people are not receptive to our message but there are other Africans who said meditation is a science that benefits with happiness and peace.

### **Social Implications of Missionary Work**

Buddhist contribution to the society cannot be underestimated. Buddhism has contributed to the social growth and development of Ugandan societies. According to Buddhism, a society is made up of families. And a family is made up of individuals. In order for social transformation to take place, an individual must undertake a minimum of five precepts: abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, taking intoxicants and drugs that lead to negligence. In other words, one has to develop the wholesome inner qualities of heart and mind corresponding to these rules of restraint:

- **Loving-friendship and compassion for all living beings:** The practice of non-harming has reduced the rate of violence where Buddhism is practiced. For instance in Uganda, our Buddhist followers gave up killing living beings. In 2006, while standing together with the chief of the village, a rat ran near us. The chief began to chase it and as he was about to kill it, my nephew (who had just learned taken the precept of not killing living beings) shouted at him: "we Buddhist never kill". The chief suddenly stopped and the life of the rat was saved!
- **Generosity:** It is a very important practice for social transformation and bonding. In Buddhism, generosity is practiced in order to overcome craving and attachment which creates individual stress, social ills, personal or inter-personal conflict such as wars and tribal clashes.
- **Faithfulness to one's marital vows:** Many countries in Africa have a problem of HIV/AIDS. Certainly, people who are faithful to their spouses had been socially transformed into living a happy and peaceful life.

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<sup>2</sup> Dhammapada Verse 184

- **Truthful and honesty:** Buddhism teaches the Dhamma, the Truth. And telling the truth leads to trustworthiness among other fellow beings. By being honest in ones' dealings, one can improve on both personal and inter-personal relationships.
- **Mindfulness and sobriety of mind:** When the mind is clear and not clouded by intoxicants, it can be used in a creative and constructive ways such as perform wholesome deeds like meditation which in turn can heal all sorts of mental diseases. In Uganda, most of the Buddhist followers have reported a general improvement in their happiness since they joined Buddhism.
- **According to the Buddha, by practicing the five precepts such as preserving life, one yields many benefits for instance:** one gives an intangible gift of fearlessness and freedom to all living beings and as a result, one enjoys the same benefit of freedom, safety, and fearless. Certainly, one contributes to both personal and national security. By protecting oneself, one protects others and vice-versa. African leaders need to uphold these moral values, in order to reduce or eliminate government-spending on natural security and law enforcement authorities.

### **Economic Implications of Missionary Work:**

Buddhist contribution to the economy cannot be underestimated. Buddhism has offered many employment opportunities to all people without discrimination but for the welfare and benefit of all. With the establishment of the Buddhist temple and other development project in Uganda, many jobs have been created for the local people. For instance in Uganda, it is said that there are thousands of graduates who pour onto the streets every year yet to find jobs.

Statistics from the labour department show that 390,000 students who finish tertiary education each year have only 8,000 jobs to fight for. This means that for every one job that is available they are about 50 people to fill it. Statistics from all government departments point to major job crisis in Uganda. According to the labour force flow figures at the Uganda Investment Authority (UIA) and the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), of the more than 400,000 Ugandans who enter the labour market each year, only about 113,000 are absorbed in formal employment, leaving the rest have to join the informal sector...<sup>3</sup>

Undoubtedly, the presence of the Uganda Buddhist Centre has created employment opportunities in our community and the surrounding areas. We found that many people around the Temple were unemployed due to government regulation on fishing activities in the nearby fishing village. Once we begun the construction of the meditation Centre, many local builders were employed. We have created a lot of jobs and revenues for the construction business such hardware stores.

### **How to Earn and Distribute Wealth?**

Buddhist teaching on how to acquire wealth and how to distribute it had a potential contribution to the economy of African countries. The Buddha said: One should earn a living, whether by farming, trading, cattle herding, serving in the civil service, or by any craft at that a person should be skillful and not lazy. A person should have a sharp inquiring mind as to the ways and means to accomplish the tasks. "Acquisition of wealth should not be acquired by exploitation, but through effort and intelligent action; it should be acquired in a morally sound way."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Uganda Bureau of Statistics. Available on the Internet <http://www.ubos.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Available on the Internet <http://www.buddhanet.net/cmdsg/econ5.htm#Seeking>

Many people in Uganda have an attitude of “getting rich fast, overnight riches”. In many ways, this kind of attitude leads to the exploitation of natural resources such as forests, minerals and other beings in favour of short-term benefits. Buddhism offers a few guides on how to earn ones’ wealth in a moral way. The Buddha gave advice on how to earn wealth through diligence like the bee collecting nectar from the flower. He said “As a bee gathers honey from the flower without injuring its color or fragrance, even so the sage goes on his alms-round in the village (without affecting the faith and generosity or wealth of the villagers).”<sup>5</sup> The bee uses nectar to make honey yet when the bee collects nectar without hurting the flower. In fact, the bee cross-pollinates the flower. Both the bee and flower mutually benefit. Even so, people should earn their wealth without harming nature and others.

### **Distributing one’s Wealth**

When one’s wealth accrues like a termites’ mound, the expenditures should be planned in a skillful and balanced way. According to Buddhism, the proper use of wealth should be : (i) to support oneself and one's family; (ii) to support one's friends or associates; (iii) to set aside some wealth for contingencies such as warding off calamities arising from fire, floods, thieves and so on; (iv) to perform the five oblations to relatives, guests, the dead, kings and heavenly beings (devas) ; (v) to offer the virtuous, the restrained, followers of the holy life such as priests, monastics and contemplatives who abstain from intoxicants and heedlessness.”<sup>6</sup>

Generally in Africa, and specifically in Uganda, the attitude of sharing ones’ wealth with family and friends is expected. However, many Africans squander their wealth by living luxurious life styles beyond their means. The Buddha’s teaching on economics can contribute to one’s understanding of the proper way of distributing one’s wealth and leading a balanced livelihood.

### **The challenges facing missionary work in Uganda:**

Since Buddhism is still at an infant stage, there are endless challenges yet very interesting. Some of the problems and some of solution for develop missionary work in Africa are:

- **Financial Challenges:** Normally, when a community from a traditional Buddhist country needs a Buddhist temple for its spiritual activities, people simply come and offer their time and effort to build it. Support from the community is voluntarily and spontaneously offered out of a deep appreciation for the value and effectiveness of the Buddha's teachings. Usually, in such countries, active fund raising is not needed. However, since African countries are not traditional Buddhist countries, the establishment of the Buddhist Centre found support primarily from Asian Buddhist communities overseas. Thus, there is lack of financial support from the local community in order to carry out the Dhamma activities. In Uganda, the local Buddhist devotees still live from hand to mouth. They are either poor or do not understand the importance of generosity. Therefore, they cannot afford to support the Dhamma activities. Most of the times, they expect the temple to help them out of their financial problem. Some of the people, who show up at the Uganda Buddhist Centre, are looking for money to start their own lucrative business, instead of contributing to the temple. Some people who are well-off have little or no knowledge about the practice of generosity.

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<sup>5</sup> Dhammapada Verse 49

<sup>6</sup> AN 5.41 PTS: A iii 45 - Adiya Sutta: Benefits to be Obtained (from Wealth) translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

A partial solution would be to preach the role of generosity as a foundation for spiritual growth and development. Another solution would be to create jobs for the locals to work at the temple while encouraging others devotees to practice generosity by volunteering. It is important for the temple to establish an endowment fund for the purpose of sustainability. Also, there is a need for local and international fundraisers.

- **Difficulty to Teach Non-harming and Non-killing:** Today's Africa evolved from an ancient hunting culture. Therefore, it is very difficult to teach the Buddhist precept of non-violence, not killing animals and other beings. In 2005, when I had just established the Uganda Buddhist Centre, I went to submit the application forms in order to register as a non-government organization (NGO) at the Regional District Commissioner (RDC) offices in Wakiso. One officer asked, "What are some of your practices?"<sup>7</sup> I told him, "Lay people observe five precepts, and one of them is not to kill living beings". (I thought that he would be impressed by our pure ethical conduct!). But instead he frowned and said, "You mean cannot defend yourself and your country. I do not like your religion." I thought he was going to refuse to register our organization. But he processed our papers and took them to the Regional District Commissioner who suspected that I might be mentally disturbed. But, he went ahead and signed the paper hesitatingly. However, after teaching Africans the Sublime Dhamma, many have begun to value the life of other living beings.
- **Lack of Self-reliance:** In Africa, most of the people believe that God is responsible for everything: their life and death, success and failures, food and drinks, profit and loss, and rainfall and sunshine. It is very difficult to introduce a new Buddhist philosophy on self-reliance and the law of cause and effect, which seem to contradict with African well-established beliefs. Even some people who have just learnt about Buddhism, often "smuggle" in some terms from Christian religion. For example, one person said, "Thanks the Buddha for giving us this chance to see you again." There is a great need to educate people about of impersonal laws causes and effects which have nothing to do with God
- **Misconception of Buddhism and Buddhist Religious Objects:** One morning, while going for alms in Africa, I was carrying my alms bowl, and on the way, I met a group of ladies carrying baskets. They stopped me and greeted me, "How you are?" Suddenly, one of the ladies started frowning at me. She looked very scared and said, "I am afraid of the bomb you are carrying." Later on she asked, "Is that really a bomb?" "No!" I said, as I opened my alms bowl while a handful of them surrounded me. I then explained that it was an alms bowl. When I completely opened it, the lady shouted, "Oh...! It is empty!" I said, "It is just full of air!"<sup>8</sup> I had been spreading the Buddha's peaceful message, but somehow the message was mistaken for bombs! One of the ways to dispel the misconception of Buddhism is to make a documentary about Buddhist activities in Uganda and Africa. Such a documentary once finished and shown to the general public, will increase public awareness about Buddhism.
- **Lack of Networking with Other Buddhist Organization:** Buddhism in Africa is still relatively new. Unfortunately, Buddhists in Uganda and other African countries have not yet established good networking with the rest of the Buddhist world. Moreover, each Buddhist Centre works individually in order to promote its own aims and objectives and would like to focus on developing relationships with other Buddhist organizations, regardless of tradition. As the Buddha said, so long as monks hold regular and frequent assemblies, meet and break up in harmony, and carry out their business in harmony, they may be expected to prosper and

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<sup>7</sup> Planting Dhamma Seeds: The Emergence of Buddhism in Africa (by Ven. Buddharakkhita)

<sup>8</sup> Planting Dhamma Seeds: The Emergences of Buddhism in Africa (by Ven. Buddharakkhita)

not decline. We would like to be connected to all Buddhist traditions and work together. I do hope that we can cooperate with each other and develop outreach programs in Africa. I believe that if the Buddhist community in Africa and worldwide works together, support each other and propagates Buddhism in Africa and throughout the world, we will succeed in our Dhamma mission in Africa. All Buddhists in Africa need to join hands and form a Pan-African Buddhist Association (PABA) and seek cooperation with other global Buddhist organizations like the Association of Theravada Buddhist Universities, World Buddhist Fellowship, World Buddhist Summit and others.

### **Conclusion**

The future of effectively spreading Buddhism beyond traditionally Buddhist countries is going to hinge on the way we understand the Buddha's original message on the spreading the Dhamma. Firstly, we have to begin with purification of our mind (in order to be free from mental impurities). Secondly, we should remember the purpose of spreading the Dhamma - out of compassion. Thirdly, we have to propagate the excellent Dhamma (ethical conduct, mental training and penetrative wisdom) in its pristine way. Finally, we have to be patient with people's receptivity of the Dhamma. Some people are ready to listen to the Dhamma and others are not. There is a high chance that people who suffer a lot, are ready to listen to the Dhamma. Let us join hands and spread the Dhamma in Africa and other parts of the world. The Dhamma is excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, and excellent in the end.

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