Tales, Trials and Tribulations of Teaching Dhamma in Uganda

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The following is an examination of various approaches to pioneering Buddhist teachings in parts of the world that are new to Buddhism such as Uganda, East Africa. In this era, Buddhism is no longer constrained to its birthplace in India and other Asian countries. Buddhism reached Africa in the nineteen century and was introduced even more recently in Uganda, a predominantly Christian country.

While undergoing this process many questions arise. How can Buddhism flourish amongst people having no experience with Asian culture and Buddhist traditions? How can one avoid conflict with existing religions? How can one become motivated to teach Buddhism? How can Buddhism be introduced and assimilated into society while coexisting with traditional culture? Which of the Buddha's teachings best advance Buddhist education?

Finally, this account explores the obstacles to and solutions for disseminating Buddhism in Uganda. Although Buddhism is still new to this African nation, Uganda holds a great potential for the advancement of Buddhism. As with all people, there is much suffering on the continent of Africa, as well as the need to be free from suffering, to gain inner-peace, true happiness and ultimate liberation.

Introduction

Uganda has a population of approximately 32 million² and is located on the equator, in East Africa. Buddhism was born in Uganda when Venerable Buddharakkhita established the Uganda Buddhist Centre (UBC) near Lake Victoria in Entebbe, April 2005. The Centre is a major initiative in the heart of Africa, intending to provide a stable source of the Buddha's teachings (Dhamma) in Uganda. We consider the Dhamma to be a form of medicine that can end suffering and transform ordinary human beings into compassionate and wise beings. The UBC maintains a base for monastics and Dhamma leaders (laypersons) to preserve and transmit the Buddha's teachings throughout Uganda and Africa as a whole. The Uganda Buddhist Centre includes a temple where people gather to receive and practice spiritual instruction, learn meditation and yoga, and offer service to the community through the UBC's activities and projects.

Three Stages of Introducing Buddhism in Uganda

While introducing Buddhist Dhamma (Truth), The Uganda Buddhist Centre has passed through several phases, some evoked honor while others proved quite challenging. According to Arthur Schopenhauer,

"All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident..."

Why? Because we all tend to regard what is "new" and "unusual" with skepticism, resulting from our western upbringing, which teaches us to view the world rationally.

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² CIA - The World Fact book - Uganda. Available on the Internet,

https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ug.html (Cited 2010-08-30).

Last updated on August 30, 2010.

² Available on the internet. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Schopenhauer. Arthur Schopenhauer

^{(1788–1860),} a German philosopher known for his pessimism and philosophical clarity.

Stage 1 - Ridicule

One bright sunny afternoon after a heavy downpour, while walking around Wandegeya Township (a suburb of Uganda's capital, Kampala) with my attendant, I requested to him to buy a sitting cloth. Whilst visiting a shop stall in the market, my attendant asked for the price of the cloth and the shopkeeper responded with another question, "What is your religion?"

"Buddhism," I answered.

"Why are you wearing bark cloth⁴?" she questioned me again.

I told her my robes are made of cotton not bark cloth, then she asked, "Do you believe in God?

"Yeah, I believe in the Four Noble Truths," I replied.

"You are just kidding around in your religion," she laughed.

I smiled.

She said, "My God is stronger than yours! I am saved, a born again Christian."

I wanted to tell her that in Buddhism, we are born again, and again, until we reach final enlightenment, but decided against opening that "can of worms."

She requested me to: "Please raise both your hands upwards."

I refrained.

Emphatically, she declared, "I am going to pray for you and prove to you that our God is stronger than yours, the Buddha. And as a proof of the power of God, you are definitely going to fall on the ground!"

I decided to leave the scene. Personally, I wondered what falling down on ground, and perhaps hurting me, had to do with "loving your neighbor as yourself." Such incidents would teach me patience as I continued to meet and relate to many people holding differing views.

Stage 2 - Opposition: Searching for the Baby Buddha Again

After having settled in our new property for several months, I felt a sense of ease and peace. I felt hopeful now having planted the Dhamma seed, which only needed nurturing, by watering it and removing weeds.

Our neighbors and numerous local people began visiting us, however, some seemed to fear approaching the small Temple. I had built a small room for the Buddha statue and the rest of the space was open without walls for us to practice meditation. Whenever people saw the Buddha statue for the first time from a distance, they would not go near it.

Once, prior to a visit by Uganda's President to the Vice President's house (1 km from the Temple), soldiers came to our village for security reasons. Rumors were circulating that the Uganda Buddhist Centre had kidnapped a baby and was keeping it inside the small house. Lo and behold, the soldiers came searching for that baby. They broke the front door and anxiously inspected the entire place. They were trying to rescue the rumored "baby in captivity". Dismayed and disappointed, they found no baby, only a

⁴ Bark cloth, made from tree bark, used in ceremonial rituals and by royalty in the Baganda Kingdom (the most populous ethnic group in Uganda). Bark cloth's appearance is similar to the rust-brown-colored robes worn by Theravada monastics. Buddhist monastics are forbidden from wearing bark cloth.

Buddha statue. The soldiers proceeded to sit on the porch and drink alcohol the whole night until morning. After they left the next morning, I repaired the door.

Stage 3 - Self-Evident: Increasingly More People Join With Us

It seems the Uganda Buddhist Centre is now in the second stage, heading toward the third stage as many people have embraced Buddhism in Uganda. One even painted the Dhamma wheel on his gate.

Various Approaches to Teaching Buddhism in Uganda

While introducing Buddhism it is important to develop the "Four Bases of Success or the Four Roads to Success"⁵. The stronger the Four Bases of Success, the more we are determined to accomplish our missionary work, and to teach by precept and example. We need to "walk the talk" and to promote cooperation, not competition. There is a need to focus on the main teaching of the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths, and to develop a conceptual framework for disseminating Buddhist teachings. As more people embrace Buddhism, remind the newcomers about Freedom of Inquiry.

It is very important to use the available technology in order to promote the Dhamma to the wider community. It is necessary to impart Dhamma education to the young people, the future generation. Finally, it is necessary to lead by example and to express compassion in action through social work. These methods are explored here.

Developing the Four Bases of Success

1. Chanda - Desire to Act: One must have the inspiration and aspiration to spread Buddhism in the new land. Without this initial spark or vision, it is impossible to spread the Dhamma. "No man can be a good teacher unless he has feelings of warm affection towards his pupils and a genuine desire to impart to them what he believes to be of value."⁶

Is the desire to teach Buddhism in new lands, another form of attachment? Well, we call this kind of desire "desire to be desireless" which leads to happiness as contrasted with desires which lead to more suffering. Finally, once attaining enlightenment, there should be no more desires, including the desire to spread Buddhism in new lands.

2. Viriya - Effort: Three Kinds of Effort

- **A.** <u>Initial Effort</u> is the first effort to establish and teach the Dhamma. This is very important in the initial stages of establishing Dhamma Centres. We must apply effort to accomplish whatever needs to be done.
- **B.** <u>Sustained Effort</u>: Sometimes there are difficulties that arise with staff, devotees and general management of the Temple. One should arouse this kind of effort to overcome any difficulty that might arise on the way.
- C. <u>Non-stop Effort</u>: It is very important to have the determination not to give up the Dhamma projects until they are successfully completed.
- **3.** Citta Mind: One needs to focus and concentrate on spreading the Dhamma. It is important to prioritize the projects. Do you want to emphasize teaching meditation, or social work, or both? I found that concentrating on one particular project at a time provides the opportunities and resources to plan and successfully implement projects.
- 4. Vīmamsā Discernment, Wisdom, and Understanding: It is very important to constantly discern, examine and evaluate successes and failures. This kind of wise

⁵ Samyutta Nikaya: Iddhipādā Samyutta. Chapter: 51. 20 / S V 268-9

⁶ Bertrand Russell, English logician and Philosopher (1872-1970).

discernment is necessary in order to identify weaknesses and to overcome failure. It also helps to identify opportunities to improve one's success.

For instance, at the Uganda Buddhist Centre⁷, SWOT Analysis elucidates the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats facing the Uganda Buddhist Centre. This, in turn, gives us a clearer picture of the current state of Buddhism in Uganda.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats:

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
 UBC is only Buddhist temple in Uganda. Founded by Ugandan monk. Meditation programs attract local and international practitioners. Convenience of close proximity to Entebbe International Airport. Beautiful, quiet environment conducive to teaching and practicing the Dhamma. 	 Not yet self-sufficient and sustainable due to lack of human and financial resources. Some people associated with the Temple are motivated by a desire to travel overseas seeking greener pastures, rather than by Dhamma. Transportation problems for local visitors without personal vehicles.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
 UBC provides a model for introducing the Buddha's teachings, in addition to establishing meditation centres and schools that propagate the Dhamma throughout Africa. 	 Due to no exposure to Dhamma, many locals associate Buddhism with witchcraft, responding fearfully and negatively to this erroneous view of Buddhism. Some people have hidden agendas motivated by greed, believing that UBC can open up greener pastures.

SWOT Analysis of the Uganda Buddhist Centre (UBC)

Fig 1: SWOT Analysis of the Uganda Buddhist Centre in Entebbe, Uganda

Teaching by Precept and Example:

The Buddha taught by precept and example. In order to teach the Dhamma, one needs to act as a role model for others. We need to live a life that exemplifies Buddhist tenants and ethical conduct. We must purify our physical and verbal behaviors. Once others have confidence in our own appropriate behaviors they observe, they will listen to the Dhamma we teach. At this stage, a teacher must have the ability to teach and convince their listeners. Once the listener notices that the Dhamma is applicable in their own life, they will take it into their heart and mind to apply it in their daily life and perhaps become your disciple.

⁷ Available on the internet: www.UgandaBuddhistCenter.org.



Fig. 2: Pathways of the Dhamma in new lands

Cooperation, Not Competition

Teaching Buddhism in new lands requires a lot of cooperation with other religious communities in the country, rather than competition. Most of the well-established and well-organized religions are very difficult to compete with due to their centralized nature. They have an abundance of financial and human resources. When teaching the Dhamma, one must be open to all religions, never quarrelling with their followers. We need to form a platform for discussion such as inter-faith dialogues or inter-spiritual interactions. Personally, I have given Dhamma talks at Christian Universities in Uganda and Brazil. The audiences were very interested in learning about Buddhism, which was new to them.

Focus on the Buddha's Main Teaching: The Four Noble Truths

All Buddha's teachings are summarized in the Four Noble Truths. These teachings center on a single theme of suffering. Everywhere in the world, there is suffering. The Buddha formulated his teaching akin to the ancient Indian way of treating disease. The doctor would diagnose the disease, its causes, and the cure. In the same way,

the Buddha taught the way out of suffering by using the fourfold formula in the Satipatthāna Sutta⁸.

- <u>The Noble Truth of Suffering</u>: Birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental displeasure, despair, association of the hateful, separation from the beloved and not getting what one desires and the five aggregates of clinging are suffering.
- <u>The Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering</u>: Craving for sensual pleasure, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence.
- <u>The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering</u>: The state of true happiness, innerpeace and final liberation (Nibbāna).
- <u>The Noble Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering</u>: The path leading to the cessation of suffering is the Middle Path (avoiding extremes). Here the two extremes are sensual indulgence and self-mortification.

The Noble Eightfold Path

- Right Understanding
- Right Thought
- Right Speech
- Right Action
- Right Livelihood
- Right Effort
- Right Mindfulness
- Right Concentration

When we practice the Four Noble Truths, each one of them reveals the Buddha's mission statement to inner-peace and ultimate happiness. When we cultivate the principles of the Noble Eightfold Path that lead to the end of suffering, we come to understand suffering. Once we understand suffering, we abandon the cause of suffering. When we abandon the cause of suffering, we finally realize ultimate happiness.

We must develop a conceptual framework to effectively propagate the Dhamma. First, the Dhamma Leaders - monastics and laypeople - (sender) must undergo the necessary training and practice of the Noble Eightfold Path (content). Then, ascertain the method of delivery (channel) that is suitable to the audience, after identifying the target audience (receiver).

Conceptual Framework of Buddhism Dissemination⁹

SENDER	CONTENT	CHANNEL	RECEIVER	

⁸ Majjhima Nikāya: 10. Translated by Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

⁹ Extracted and modified from the Dissemination of Buddhism in Globalized World, presented by Somsuda Pupatana PhD. at the Fourth World Buddhist Sangha Youth General Conference in 2009 in Thailand.

Self-Training Sangha: • Monastics • Lay Devotees	Buddha's Teaching Right Understanding Right Thought Right Speech Right Action Right Livelihood Right Effort Right Mindfulness Right Concentration	Methods 1. Individual • Home visit • Prayer (reflection) 2. Group • Retreat • Ethical camps 3. Mass Media • Networking • Cable TV • Broadcasting • DVD, CD, MP3, MP4, etc. • Books and journals	Target Audience1. Government Sector• Education• Military• Social welfare• Administrator2. Non-Government Sector• Non-profit organizations• Teachers and students• Parents and children3. Sangha Sector• Temples• Monasteries• Meditation centers
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Fig. 3: Dissemination of Buddhism in Globalized World Remind Newcomers to Buddhism about Freedom of Inquiry

The Buddha encouraged all to understand the teaching experientially rather than to be swayed by blind faith. He said we are free to test him as well as his teachings.¹⁰ All are free to inquire in order to clear any clouds of doubt. It is not necessary to accumulate droves of devotees with blind faith. The Buddha gave us the criterion for accepting any teaching in the Kālāma Sutta,¹¹

"...Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias toward a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, 'The monk is our teacher.'"

"But when you know for yourselves that these things are immoral, these things are blameworthy and these things are censured by the wise, these things, when performed and undertaken, conduce to the ruin and sorrow - Then indeed do you reject them."

"When you know for yourselves that these things are moral, these things are blameless, and these things are praised by the wise, these things when performed and undertaken, conduce to the well-being and happiness - Then do you live and act accordingly..."

In this discourse, the Buddha taught about self-examination and reflection. He encouraged experiential knowledge. Personally, this open invitation to question the Buddha's teaching was very appealing. I am sure this would intrigue newcomers to Buddhism to ask questions and openly discuss the Dhamma. When people ask questions, try to be patient and not angry. Many people want to know whether Buddhists believe in God and are curious about Buddhist prayers and practices.

Meditation or Medication?

Sometimes I meet African people who ask what I have been doing in the United States. When I tell them, I am attending a meditation retreat and teaching meditation they often associate my meditation practice with suffering. They continuously mispronounce meditation as "medication" and due to their misunderstanding ask, "What kind of disease do you have?"

¹⁰ Majjhima Nikāya : Vimasaka Sutta : 47.

¹¹ Anguttara Nikāya : 3.65, PTS: A i 188.

Actually, they are not too far from the truth when misinterpreting "meditation" as "medication." Mindfulness practices and insight meditation (Vipassanā) certainly help to prevent, relieve and remove mental disease. This reminds me of a bumper sticker that says, "Mindfulness a day, keeps suffering away!"

Utilizing Available Technology to Promote the Dhamma

It is very useful to employ technology such as social media and the Internet to promote and propagate the Dhamma.

Dhamma Education for Young People

Involve young people, especially children, when they get involved their parents will follow. We should offer universal teachings that are common to all religions, namely:

- Universal Love: Loving kindness is the quality of the heart and mind that seeks the welfare and happiness of other beings. Refer to the Metta Sutta¹² (discourse on loving-friendliness) where the Buddha said: Let not anyone deceive another, neither should one despise another anywhere, nor wish ill of each other through hatred and sense repulsion."
- Social Values: The Buddha taught thirty-eight Blessings which serve as guidelines to developing and maintaining social values such as: respecting and supporting one's parents. In the Maha-mangala Sutta¹³ (the great discourse on blessings), the Buddha said, "...giving away in charity, leading a life of righteousness, fostering of kinsfolk and blameless activities, this is the highest blessing..." In Buddhism, the emphasis is on cultivating blessings as opposed to expecting blessings to come from others.
- Ethical Conduct: The Buddha gave advice to lay people in the Sigāvada Sutta¹⁴ (discourse on laypersons' ethics). For example, parents must keep their children from evil, support them in behaving well, teach them some skills, find a suitable spouse, and in due time hand over their heritage. Sons and daughters also have duties to perform for their parents. "Having supported me, I will support them, I will perform their duties, I will keep the family tradition, I will be worthy of inheritance and after my parent's death, I will distribute gift (merits) on their behalf. The discourse offers other moral behaviors between parents and children, teachers and pupils, religious leaders and lay followers, husband and wife, and employers and employees.
- Mental Culture: Through mindfulness practice, one's mind is purified of greed, hatred and delusion. These three mental states cause suffering that affects all beings irrespective of their religious or spiritual background. The Buddha expounded on the various benefits of cultivating right mindfulness in the Satipathāna Sutta¹⁵ (discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness), "...for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attaining of the true way, the realizing of Nibbāna..."

Social Work

Establish projects that benefit the entire community where your Dhamma center is located. For instance, at the Uganda Buddhist Centre we established a borehole and offer water to our community. In this way, we are practicing compassion in action.

Trials and Tribulations of Teaching Buddhism: From Venerable to Vulnerable

¹² Suttanipata, Uragavagga (1-8), Text and translation into English by A.N Jayawickrama, 2001.

¹³ Khuddhakapatha (Khp 5); Sutta Nipata, Culavagga (2-4).

¹⁴ Digha Nikāya : Sutta 31. Translated by Maurice Walshe.

¹⁵ Majjhima Nikāya: 10. Translated by Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

Spreading the Dhamma in new lands is not only interesting but also challenging. Being a missionary monk in Uganda, I felt less venerable, and more vulnerable. On June 17, 2011, I experienced a terrible and unexpected attempt on my life. After meditation, I went outside and conversed with our security guard. The Temple employed him to protect the facility and its dwellers from violence due to political instability in Uganda. He advised me about moving the solar security light to a part of the Temple grounds that was not completely fenced off. He had a point, but I did not think this was a good idea at the time. I declined to move it. While returning to the Temple the security guard followed me closely. Shortly, I heard fast moving footsteps and through my peripheral vision, saw the security guard run from one side of the temple to the other side, closer to me. I turned to see what he was doing when he ran towards me shouting, "But you man!" He then pointed his assault rifle in my face. I turned to run inside the Temple, and everything went blank.¹⁶



Figure 1. The bullet hit the glass of the main entrance door.

¹⁶ Attempted Murder of a Buddhist Monk. *Tales and Trial of Planting Dhamma Seeds in Africa*. By Ven. Bhikkhu Buddharakkhita.



Figure 2. The bullet hit the metallic window and lodged into the wall.

A phantasmagoria of horror and mystery followed. Panic, confusion, and trepidation – I felt all these emotions at once. Then the security guard fired a single shot. I did not see the gun go off, but I heard the shot. It struck the Temple doors just before I went through them and sent glass flying all over the place.

I had no time to close the doors behind me. As soon as I was inside and out of the security guard's view, I stood behind the wall for a moment. I needed to put more distance between us, and to find a safer hiding place from him. I was fleeing for my dear life. I had no time to think, and was merely acting on instinct. I made a dash for my room, all the while thinking a bullet had hit me. There was no time to focus on that, while escaping through the Temple dining area and closing the door behind me.

I made it to my room and decided to hide in the ceiling. The opening in the bathroom ceiling was very tiny and presented a nearly impossible angle, making it difficult to hoist myself up. I desperately believed that I needed to get up there if I was to live through this night. I stepped onto the toilet seat and onto the shower curtain rail, which dislodged from the wall, while gravity hurled me to the hard tiled ground. My sash came off and my phone fell to the ground. I had to find a way to get into the ceiling. This seemed like a safe place to hide. I was sweaty with saliva drooling on me and the phone, which I'd held in my mouth while attempting to climb into the ceiling. Everything was dark and dusty, the air was thick, but that was the least of my problems. I called my driver, telling him briefly what had happened and to quickly alert the police. After the phone call, I silently waited to hear sounds of a rescue ...of help ...of hope.

The security guard is now in police custody.

I have forgiven him.

Solutions to Problems of Teaching Buddhism in Uganda: More Dharma, Less Drama

Establishing Dhamma educational programs in areas where Dhamma seeds are not yet planted will propagate Buddhism. We must train lay people to be Dhamma teachers who will take on the role of teaching Buddhism to those who are interested in the Dhamma. In case the lay people are interested in becoming monastics, there should be programs to ordain them as novices, monks and nuns. We need more friends (local and international) to support the spreading of Dhamma in Africa by building Dhamma schools in Uganda and other parts of Africa that teach non-violence, mindfulness, ethics and social values.

I would like to see the Ugandan government establish a police station in the village of Bulega near our Temple in order to ensure that the surrounding area is secure. We need to establish another Temple in the capital city of Kampala where we can reach more people and where it is easier to get help from the police. I am sure if our temple were located in Kampala, it would take roughly five minutes for the police to arrive at the scene as opposed to the 45 minutes it took for police to rescue me the day of the shooting.

Conclusion

Buddhism is one of the fastest growing religions in the world. Dhamma is taught, not through conversion, but by convincing others through what is revealed in our own lives. To accomplish this we must "walk our talk," and teach by example and precept. Local people who belong to other religious organizations are often skeptical. They will take time to observe the Dhamma teacher's character. There is an old saying that, "seeing is believing." We need to offer teachings that are relevant to the peoples' daily lives and then they may listen to us and finally take the Buddha's teaching to heart. It is very necessary to focus on universal teachings such as faith, generosity, ethical conduct, loving kindness, compassion, suffering, and overcoming suffering. We should cooperate and not compete with existing religions. It is essential to empower young people as future leaders through Dhamma education. When the youth get involved, they will bring their parents and the Sangha will continue increasing.

We invite you to offer suggestions and donations for spreading Buddhism in Africa.

Wishing you much Mettā