

The Dhamma in Spanish-Speaking Countries

*Alina Morales Troncoso*¹

In this paper I intend to explore the different ways in which the Dhamma is taking roots in Mexico and other Spanish-speaking countries and becoming a way of life for many people who live in conservative societies where the predominant religion most of the time remains unchallenged in its tenets.

Buddhism has a lot to offer to the Spanish-speaking societies from the standpoint of ethics, psychology and mental well-being, but the way Buddhism has been introduced in these countries rarely has given these things the importance they deserve. On the contrary, it is the different cultural and ritualistic aspects of Buddhism that sometimes take precedence over the teaching of ethics and psychology and mental well-being.

From the time I met Buddhism what I have seen is that the Mahayana traditions, that is, Tibetan and Zen Buddhism, have more acceptance and followers than Theravada Buddhism. Something that has to do with this preference is the misinformation or lack of adequate knowledge about the Theravada tradition. Generally speaking those who inform others about the Theravada tradition are persons who have superficial knowledge of it and they attribute things to it that do not reflect what it really is.

In the Spanish-speaking countries –unlike the United States or Canada where Buddhist immigrants have played an important role in the development of Buddhism– Buddhism is taking roots without the support of a Buddhist community of immigrants. In a certain way the Spanish-speaking countries are unique in the modern history of Buddhism because of this peculiarity.

The way to bring Buddhism to a new level in these societies would be through the establishment of educational and academic institutions which would offer an unbiased approach to the teachings of the Buddha of the three main branches, Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. I believe that right now is the moment, it is the opportunity, in our societies, to devote effort and resources towards establishing Buddhism in a way that people can relate without the cultural and ethnic trappings.

In the following pages I will discuss the results of the research I have done with practitioners of the different traditions in Latin America and Spain.

This research was motivated by the fact that in my country, Mexico, there are various Buddhist groups of different denominations. I had the opportunity to meet individuals belonging to most of these groups. And one often finds that each of these groups claim that they represent the true teachings of the Buddha. Coming from the Theravada tradition myself and knowing that the Pali Canon represents, if not the Buddha's word itself, the oldest extant record of what the Buddha taught, I often wonder why those belonging to other traditions do not come to our tradition for the original source of their teachings. I have pondered again and again over this matter, and I have come to the conclusion that it is because of the lack of information about what the Buddha taught.

Let me state from the beginning that Mexico is the country with the highest number of Buddhist groups in the Spanish-speaking world. I think there are two main reasons for this. Number one, its closeness to the United States of America, which is one

¹Alina Morales Troncoso is the President of Buddhismo Theravada México A.R. (BTMAR), and Executive Secretary of the newly formed Hispanic Institute of Buddhist Studies (IEBH). She has been practicing and studying Theravada Buddhism for 14 years.

of the countries with the highest number of Buddhists in the West. Number two, Mexico is the largest country population wise of the Spanish-speaking countries. There are over 110 million Mexicans plus about more than 50 million inside the United States.²

There are many Buddhist groups of different denominations in Mexico, most of them belonging to the Zen and Tibetan traditions. Since I have belonged to the Theravada school for 14 years, over time I developed some interest in knowing how Buddhists from other traditions perceived my own tradition. And the opposite too: how my fellows perceived the other traditions. Therefore I approached people that have an appreciation and respect for both modalities of the teachings, Mahayana and Theravada. I wanted to find out what people, belonging to one of the main traditions, thought of the other and vice versa. In this way, I surmised, I could find some common ground in this cross-referencing.

For that purpose I prepared a questionnaire with a number of relevant questions to explore how people perceived the establishment of Buddhism in their countries.

I handed over this questionnaire to different Buddhist practitioners of South America, Spain and Mexico. I think these three groups of people represent a reliable sample of what is available right now. Let me mention that those who answered the questionnaire are highly educated students of Buddhism, whose answers, I think, provide an insight in the trends of the Buddha's teaching in this Spanish-speaking world.

The first two questions I asked have to do with the way they first got in contact with Buddhism and what particular aspect of Buddhism had grabbed their attention. I think these two questions are important if we want to understand how Buddhism is going to be established in our countries, if it is, because it has to do with the particular modes of the teachings and their guts appeal.

Although the responses to the two first questions were not uniform, I could discern a unifying principle, that is, that ethics and compassion on one hand and the development of the mind on the other hand were the paramount reasons for those embracing Buddhism. For example, one of the participants said the following: "I discovered that the teachings corroborated my way of thinking, which was different than the rest in a Catholic country like mine. I understood why I cared for the animals and tried to follow an ethical life. The teachings came to nourish and give me strength to uphold my beliefs, so different, on occasions, to the Catholic fold."

This answer clearly reflects the experience of many people who have embraced Buddhism in the Spanish-speaking world. It is important to point out that Buddhism is the only religion I know which has a specific precept regarding the protection of all kinds of life. Although this, at the beginning, may seem strange to many people in our societies, I have discovered that over time they start to understand and connect, in surprising ways, with this precept of not taking life or harming beings. A precise example of this can be found in the recent movements in Spain and Mexico working towards abolishing the cruelty against animals like in the case of bullfighting. It should be said that although some of these movement's principles may not derive directly from Buddhism, undoubtedly they have been influenced by it.

The teaching of the Four Noble Truths appeals to many as something beyond dogma that can be experienced by oneself. Buddhism is a very different religion from the others which emphasize blind faith. Some people who have embraced Buddhism say that this is liberating because finally they have come to a religion that appeals to the intellect. This is an important point in our increasingly secular and educated societies. In this

² http://articles.cnn.com/2011-03-24/us/census.hispanics_1_hispanic-population-illegal-immigration-foreign-born?_s=PM:US – accessed on 30 October 2011

respect it should be mentioned that Buddhism has entered our countries through the educated and affluent circles. Normally it is the educated individual who does not accept the established dogmas.

The fact that one is responsible for one's own actions was also often present in the responses of those interviewed. This is important because when they understand that, they are ready for taking responsibility for their actions and for what also happens to them.

Another question asked was about the main traditions established in their countries. Here I found that the Zen and Tibetan schools (Gelugpa specially) are at the front, being the first to have been established, especially in Mexico, and also the ones with the greatest number of followers. When asked why these were the prevalent traditions, the answer was, in the case of Tibetan Buddhism, because of its folklore and rituals, and because of having an authority structure very similar to the Catholic church. Also they answered that its practice was more within reach of ordinary people. Regarding Zen Buddhism, the answer had to do with its simplicity, 'only meditation practice'.

The next question was about the differences between the traditions. Here it was mentioned, in the first place, some discourses (suttas) that are not common to all traditions. Secondly, the difference in meditation techniques, the use of mantras and visualizations in the Vajrayana tradition, the vipassana in the Theravada tradition, and the Zen tradition emphasizing 'only sitting'.

There are also differences in the protection formulas, the ethics' demand, the emphasis that the Vajrayana tradition places on the shunyata concept, and the importance of Bodhisatva in the Mahayana tradition.

Regarding the Theravada tradition, they mentioned its sobriety and orthodox protocol, its emphasis in searching and practicing what the Buddha really taught, the absence of interest in rituals and ceremonies, the exhaustive study of the ultimate realities (consciousness, mental factors, matter and Nibbāna), and having the Canon Pali as its unique source of the teachings.

The following question explored the meaning of Sangha. For some Sangha meant a 'community' which includes both, lay and monastic people. For others it meant those individuals who have reached the holy life, the Ariya, the Noble Ones, the ones that got completely liberated from negative emotions and which constitute one of the objects of Refuge. For others, it only meant the monastic order.

When asked if the Sangha had a predominant place in their lives, most of them answered affirmatively. But this answer has to be qualified because as we saw in the previous paragraph, the word Sangha has different meaning to different people.

The next question was about a comparison between the place the Sangha occupies in their lives and the place the Sangha occupies in the lives of ethnic Buddhists. All the interviewed agreed that there was an important difference between ethnic Buddhists and themselves because the former understand perfectly well the protocol towards the monastic Sangha.

The following question was about the protocol required to address and relate to the Sangha. I thought about this question because we have seen in some Latin American countries that the protocol is a difficult issue for people. It is something completely alien to them. Most of the people seem to be looking for a teaching without the devotional aspect of Buddhism. This could lead us, in another dissertation, to explore more thoroughly about the establishment of Buddhism in Western societies as a religion or as a way of living, leaving aside the devotional way.

Some of those interviewed expressed that they found the Theravada tradition orthodox, but necessary in order to keep the traditional way, because it was taught by the Buddha; something that could not be comprehended by common people at first but could

be later understood. Someone wittily commented that the monastic Sangha could also search the Middle Way between (1) being simply members of a community of renunciate disciples of the Buddha that practice, study and pass on His teachings, and (2) being part of a group that needs organizational structures (and also a dose of external practices) in order to survive through time. Another person commented that one has to value the Sangha in order to accept the protocol and have the humility to apply oneself to that. For example, the offering of food is not an act of servility but a commitment with the Dhamma, valuing the teaching of the Sangha. Another commented that protocol was beneficial for lay people in order to be aware of the actions of speech and the body, and to help the Sangha to keep the Vinaya -meaning that it is good to make an effort to fulfill the protocol when the bhikkhus and the bhikkhunis make an effort to fulfill the Vinaya. Two of the interviewed answered they did not know the protocol.

The last question was about the future of Buddhism in their countries. Some of them were optimistic about it. A person from Uruguay said that people from her country are now able to differentiate between the true teaching and the one that comes from cheap talkativeness. Another person from Spain was more realistic, commenting that quite a few people prefer something rational, something that 'can be proven by oneself,' therefore rejecting kamma, rebirth, the heavens, the hells, the devas, and so on. This means that they only accept the practice putting aside all that has to do with religion. Those with a certain degree of curiosity about Buddhism and who do not feel rejection towards the religious issue, often tend to approach the Tibetan tradition, where they can live with some devotion. There are also those who only want to practice meditation without having to study at all; so they approach the Zen school.

Some of the Buddhist groups, in order to organize retreats or invite a monk to give them Dhamma talks, have suggested the cooperation with small fees. It is not unusual to find that, for example, of the thirty people that belong to a group, only three or four are the ones that cooperate and pay the fees. It happens often that one or two persons are the ones that end up supporting all the costs of whatever event they undertake. Most of the time everything is done with the donations of the few ones who have the financial resources.

Buddhist groups in the Spanish-speaking countries need financial help in order to further develop and to be able to focus completely in the teachings. Most Buddhist groups are formed by volunteers who have busy schedules and scarce time and resources. This is a serious limitation for the further progress and development of Buddhism in the Spanish-speaking countries.

For almost 15 years Venerable Nandisena has been doing much work teaching Buddhism in the Spanish-speaking world by means of the Internet and also personally in the Dhamma Vihara, Mexico, and in different countries. Through all these years we have seen many people coming and rejoicing about the monastery where the conditions are optimal for the practice of meditation. But some of the people that show so much gratitude sometimes do not stay because they are very much involved in their own life and this does not allow them to go deeper into the practice or to support the monastery.

Conclusion

I have written about the differences between the various Buddhist traditions, but before finishing this paper I want to assert that whatever these differences are, what really matters are the points of convergence. When you find generosity, compassion, and the Noble Eightfold Path in someone, you find a real and good companion, you find somebody you can count on.

In fact there are several differences between the different traditions as there are within the different groups belonging to a same tradition. Some years ago Venerable Bhikkhu Nandisena provided me with some reading material. Then I learned about one subtle difference, which has not been mentioned in this paper, that some type of citta (consciousness), one of the ultimate realities, is considered by some within the Theravada tradition as unconditioned, when in fact, the only unconditioned ultimate reality is Nibbāna. This subtle difference is important because if citta were unconditioned that would make all the difference.

Why are the Zen and the Vajrayana traditions predominant in most of the Spanish-speaking countries? Some of the reasons have already been mentioned here. One of them could be because rituals and folklore are something attractive to people, as well as the meditation practice. Also due to the style, more open and adapted to the Western modern mentality. Regarding the Zen tradition, the explanation seems to revolve around its simplicity, ‘only sitting’. Quite a few people prefer something that goes far from anything that could possibly sound as a religion, so ‘sitting’ seems to be quite simple and enough to get what they need: interior peace, tranquility and inner strength.

Many years have passed since I belonged to the Buddhist Community of Mexico. Then we used to have regular meetings so we could get to know each other better. It was in one of those meetings when someone belonging to the Zen or Tibetan tradition provided me with the information she had about the Theravada tradition. In fact she did not know the Theravada as Theravada, but as “Hinayana”, and she told me it had a selfish approach, and so on. This was something I could not understand. Now that many years have passed I realize that when people have this kind of answers, it is because of the lack of correct information.

I think nowadays it is becoming easier to find out things for oneself. So it will only depend on the people themselves when doing the searching. I think the decision they will make then will be closer to what they want and need.

Another matter I want to deal with is the protocol in the Theravada tradition. As I mentioned before, I thought to apply this questionnaire to people either belonging to the Mahayana or the Theravada tradition, but people that finally know both traditions fairly well and also have met Venerable Bhikkhu Nandisena and respect him.

The question about the Theravada protocol was very simple, with no specifications, so people could answer freely. So most of the interviewed answered they did not have problems with it, but mentioned something like: ‘it’s a little orthodox, but it’s alright because we are keeping the original Buddhist tradition’, ‘for the Dhamma it is worth the effort’, or ‘one has to exert regarding the protocol when the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis exert on the Vinaya’ or ‘you can exert yourself to keep up with the protocol if you value the Dhamma’.

Although no one mentioned something in particular, I could see there seems to be certain kind of resistance to the idea of vowing before someone. The Western idea of doing so is synonymus of accepting that someone else is better than oneself or superior. But when you think of the Vinaya the Sangha is observing, and ponder about the time dedicated by them working for the Dhamma, you realize that vowing is totally appropriate and corresponding. But regardless of that for Western people it is an important issue to consider.

One of the interviewed answered the following: ‘For me the sobriety of the Theravada tradition is its most outstanding feature’.

Now I have come to the end of this paper. Regarding the future of Buddhism in the Spanish-speaking world, although there were some optimistic opinions, there were also others, with which I personally agree, that were not so optimistic. Unfortunately the

Theravada tradition, although very much appreciated by quite a few people, does not seem to have much future because people seem to reject the religious part. A proof of this is the success of the Goenka method that keeps aside completely the religious part and focuses on the meditation part. But there is hope because we are going to introduce Buddhism in a completely different way.

We have come to the conclusion that we need to establish Buddhism on a different footing. This new way of establishing Buddhism is through the creation of educational and academic institutions. Regarding this, I have good news. On October 3, 2011, the Hispanic Institute of Buddhist Studies (IEBH) was founded in Mexico City. The IEBH is one of the first institutions of its kind in the Spanish-speaking world. It will be dedicated to the academic teaching of Buddhism as well as carrying on different kinds of research regarding the application of the teachings to our societies, and forming a translation team that will be tasked with rendering the teachings from the different canons into Spanish.