

BUDDHISM IN NEW LANDS

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Undoubtedly we are living in a speedy and changing world nowadays. For Buddhism this is of a crucial point of attention because the Sangha is facing a major challenge to sustain and establish the Buddha-Dhamma in old and new lands respectively. In places where the Dhamma is strong, as for example traditional Buddhist countries, the Sangha, as the visible representation of the Triple Gem, is facing clear and distinctive barriers to overcome in the 21st century if they want to continue being the representation of the Buddha in the world, this means, maintaining Buddha's values and principles as he laid them out more than two centuries ago. Briefly, regarding these barriers, we can mention for example the increasing and rapid changes in the influence of technology and communication in society; the people's pursuit for a better and more professional education than ever; as the cities become more and more populated due to a very high economic activities in search of wealthy standard of living leads society to drive its attention away from spiritual matters; and the increasing tendency to social and international conflicts among people intensifying day by day human differences, are some of the challenges that the Sangha is facing nowadays in its interrelationship with the laity.

This can be said that in general, is the picture of the entire world, but I mentioned towards traditional Buddhist countries where the Buddha-Dhamma is strong because for new lands beside these above mentioned challenges there are some other aspects that have to be in consideration to understand what it means to spread the Buddha-Dhamma there. One first point to consider is that for the Sangha to be established in new lands it has to be clear that the soil where it will develop its influence may be full of the wrong views that the Buddha taught. These wrong views have set firm hold in the mind of the people and have produced certain patterns of thought in the culture of these new lands. As a result this may lead to a rejection towards new and different ideas. A second aspect that needs to be considered is the nature of the interrelationship between the Sangha and the laity as it is understood since the time of the Buddha. Current days show a clear deterioration of the human values which will redound into a weaker relationship among individuals and their views for spiritual organizations. Also, how Buddhism engages areas where western world have developed for long time such as poverty, human rights, justice, etc., it is a matter of the perception of people on adopting Buddhist values in new lands.

The increasing speed of technology is a major factor that needs to be into consideration when analyzing Buddhism in new lands, in a positive way though. Nowadays technology has improved the standard of living to a certain level, reduced child mortality. and diseases such as malaria and others have decreased in a high percentage during the last few decades compared to a couple of centuries ago. Also, the life expectancy has almost doubled from the beginning of the 20th century. These things among others have made people to be now in a better position to pursuit more and better education than ever. Also with the development of the Internet, information is available around the globe in a way that it was unthinkable just twenty or thirty years ago. All these have made Buddhism available to anyone who has access to technology possible in a way that in the past was only available in remote places and only coming from the Sangha, like in temples at Buddhist countries. In a country like

Venezuela about 37% of the population has access to Internet, compared with the 70% average in developed countries.¹

But this is not the main concern when analyzing Buddhism in new lands because technology is now improving at an exponential rate; and also, it doesn't seem to soothe desires and provide contentment in people but the opposite. Furthermore, more needs to be proven on how is the spread of Buddhism thanks to the Internet. Therefore, this is another problem. What is more important to understand in our concern are the other two factors mentioned above: wrong views, and the interrelationship between the Sangha and laity.

In a country like Venezuela where about 98% of the population is Christian, mostly Roman Catholics,² one that has numerous followers in the world, a very well established pattern of thinking by culture is a main barrier when introducing another school of thought as a spiritual path. The Buddha discovered that human beings have a latent tendency to cling to unwholesome views conditioned by contact; where cultural education by family and schools count as contact. Although Buddhism is not invasive, when people encounter it at the beginning is a psychological shock the fact that it does not introduce the concept of an omnipresent ruler of experience of the person. The major wrong view present in countries like Venezuela is aforementioned in the Brahmajāla Sutta; partially among the ones that have to do with the explanations about the beginning of things or the origin of man and the universe, and partially with the views concerning the destiny of beings after death, or the ultimate destiny of living beings. Particularly, couple of examples are, wrong view 5, as stated in the Digha Nikaya (Translation by Maurice Walshe, Wisdom Publication 1987), in respect with point 2.6 which is the first case with the view of partly Eternalists and partly Non-Eternalists, concerning a creator being eternalist and the being created impermanent; also with respect with the same view, wrong view 8, the fourth way, where thought, mind or consciousness, is considered as self that is permanent, eternal, not subject to change, and the material form (Rupa) being impermanent.

Few schools of Buddhism are somehow present in non-buddhist countries. For example in Venezuela there is mostly Tibetan Buddhism and Zen Buddhism. This is of a particular interest because for these schools people do not need to be Buddhists in order to practice Buddhism. This is so because without much explanation on Buddhism doctrine or taking refuge on the Triple Gems people can practice meditation and start experiencing the benefits of it. But although this is in a way a good benefit, it is not the final aim of Buddha-Dhamma at all; much has to be done in this regards. Going deeper from this stage, the enormous barrier that Buddhism confront, in other words, is the cultural background on "Attā" which is established in people's mental continuum for centuries. For example, there are practitioners of Zen Buddhist meditation for more than ten years of practice and still saying "thanks God" when something good happens to them or also, being God's will if something bad happens to them. In non-buddhist countries it is in the root of culture the concept of Attā.

The other face of the coin on the concept of an omnipresent being ruler of human faith, is that it is tied with morality. Most of the population that lies on this ground seems to be "moral" due to the believe on future well being granted on this omnipresent being or punishment in the opposite cases. In a country like Venezuela, where about 33% of the population is living in state of poverty (Instituto Nacional de Estadística INE, National Institute of Statistics) and the sympathy for the head ruler of

¹ Internet World Stats; www.internetworldstats.com.

² Source: Wikipedia, but most of the information in the Internet says the same.

the government is the majority of it (for particular reasons that are not the scope of this paper), and he begs to God in public for extending his life under a terminal disease, it is a strong sign of ignorance within the country. Recently there have been known cases, although I am sure it is more common that it is publicly known, that prove that faith in omnipresence and intelligent all powerful force or entity diminishes quickly under the eye of reason, critical thinking, and deduction; which is an attitude strengthened in Buddhism.

It is my understanding that the concept of Attā goes indirectly proportional with the sense of urgency present in people (this is sensing *samsāra* as dangerous or indulging in sensual pleasures by clinging as dangerous). It is my aim to search and measure the two variables, the concept of Attā and the sense of urgency to prove that they go in opposite directions. This means that as much is the sense of urgency the easier to break the concept of Attā psychologically, and vice versa. The conduct of this research will be done through a field questionnaire aiming to measure both variables against the decisions the person has made in life in terms of the spiritual path, conducted into different social stratus.

If this theory is proven true, then, for non-buddhist countries, it is worthy of applying more efforts to awake the sense of urgency in people through the teachings of wholesome world view (the first factor on the Noble Eightfold Path) as the starting point of all moral endeavor, and then Kamma, along with Buddhist ethics. Of course meditation can not be left aside at any moment since both have to be hand by hand, study and practice, in order for the individual to develop into the spiritual path.

About the interrelationship between the Sangha and laity, now more than ever the monastic Sangha is needed for the continuing presence of the three Jewels in the world, and especially in new lands, where this presence is weak or in some cases misunderstood. Furthermore, the Sangha has to go through a process of understanding and “adaptation” into the new trends where it is going to develop in order to survive and fulfill the Buddha-Dhamma principals and values. Nowadays the values of compassion and patience are becoming of vital importance grounded into the moral values from which the Sangha is such a pristine example. I think that a point to start spreading the Dhamma in new lands has to be making big efforts into the enforcement of morality and right views, as mentioned above, as a strong link with laity. Moreover, the concept of generosity, where the Sangha is most benefited, in terms of material sustainability, as is understood in Buddhism is not the same as is understood in non-buddhist countries. In Venezuela, for example, what is more practiced is the concept of charity. This view means that giving is good in the eyes of God and has to be done mostly to the needed, for example, poor people and/or when necessity strikes. Nothing has to do with the true meaning of generosity practiced as is taught in Buddhism where the quality and virtue of the recipients, the intention of the donor and what is giving are of equally importance in the act of generosity and the better quality of them a better deed it will be. That is why, in the view of Venezuelan people, for example, it is hard to find sympathy when supporting a spiritual organization different from the “church” through generosity. In a particular case, the Zen Center where I am familiar with, has survived financially due to many other activities related to Japanese Zen culture besides meditation, like calligraphy, Ikebana, etc. which represent an income to the Center. If the Zen Center had to live only out of the population that meditates most probably would not have made it up until now. For this reason, to establish a solid foundation of the Sangha based on the link of morality and right view, it is crucial for spreading Buddhism in new land. From my perspective there can not be a Buddhist organization in new lands without

sharing the right view as is taught in Buddhism, as for example, *Kammassakā*, the only thing that beings own is their kamma; *Kammadāyādā*, beings are the heirs of their own kamma; *Kammayonī*, all beings are the descendant of their own kamma; *Kammabandhū*, kamma alone is the real relative of all beings; *Kammappaṭissaraṇā*, kamma alone is the real refuge of all beings. This referring about Kamma, but there are other right views to take into consideration.

Also, there is not an established academic institution for Spanish speakers that seriously teach Buddhism. That is why a group of people from Mexico and other countries have taken the initiative to establish one, aiming to introduce very well structured courses of Buddhism throughout several channels of communication, for example, Internet, media, and several Universities around the Spanish speaking communities in order to have Buddhism available to people in new lands. Although the base ground is planned to be in Mexico, particularly near the Theravada Buddhist Monastery, Dhamma Vihara.

It is said that the darkest part of the night is just before dawn and even though the Buddha never spoke or foresaw the kind of transformation that the society was going to go through, always the instruction is to strive diligently in the present moment. It is my impression that society is going through a dark process of decline and degeneration in terms of moral values, but the Sangha has the tools and foundations to respond effectively and creatively to the new challenges especially in new lands. To conclude, enormous amount of work has to be done in terms of right view and morality as a true link and prosperous relationship between the Sangha and laity in new lands.