

Towards Opening the First Theravada Center in Spain

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Spain. A socio-political portrait.

Spain, also named Kingdom of Spain, is a sovereign country, member of the European Union and one of the most ancient countries in Europe. It is constituted as a social and democratic state based on the rule of law and its form of government is a parliamentary monarchy. King Juan Carlos I is the current monarch and head of state since he ascended the throne in 1975.

Its territory, with the capital in Madrid, occupies most of the Iberian Peninsula at the western end of the European continent, to which is added the Balearic Islands (in the western Mediterranean Sea) and Canary Islands (in the northeastern Atlantic Ocean) and two autonomous cities in northern Africa.

Spain covers an area of just over half a million squared kilometers, being the fourth largest country in the continent after Russia, Ukraine and France. With an average altitude of 650 meters is one of the most mountainous countries in Europe. According to 2011 municipal census, it has a population of more than 47 million inhabitants.

It is also the ninth country with the highest percentage of immigrants within the EU, behind countries such as Luxembourg, Ireland, Austria and Germany. In 2005, Spain received 39% of non-European immigration to the EU, mainly Latin Americans, citizens of other countries in Western Europe, Eastern Europe and the African Maghreb. As of 2009, 12% of the resident population is of foreign origin, with a greater number of Romanians, Moroccans and Ecuadorians. Citizens of the European Union represent 40.5% of all foreign nationals.

Spain is, by its nature and its history, a country accustomed to multiculturalism. The percentage of immigrant population, just mentioned, hasn't caused any social tension. The coexistence between people of different nationalities, races and religions has developed in an absolutely natural and smooth way.

Economy.

Spain is currently the world's twelfth largest economy, ahead of South Korea, but in the recent past, it has been the seventh as per its nominal GDP. The Spanish economy is one of the most open in the Eurozone. Moreover, according to the 2010 report of the UN, Spain has a human development index of 0.878, the twenty-third largest in the world, ahead of other major European countries such as Italy, United Kingdom and Greece.

Spain has traditionally been an agricultural country and is still one of the largest producers of Western Europe, but since the mid 1950's industrial growth was rapid, and soon it reached a greater weight than agriculture in the economy. However, the most important Spanish industry is, undoubtedly, the tourism industry of goods and services.

According to the World Tourism Organization, Spain is the second country in the world in receiving foreign tourists, just behind France, and enjoys a market share of 7% of world tourism, ahead of the United States and Italy.

Between January and December 2006, it received a total of 58.8 million foreign tourists -4.5% more than in the comparable period last year-. According to forecasts by the World Tourism Organization, the arrival of foreign tourists to Spain will grow an

average of 5% annually over the next twenty years, which makes it likely that Spain will receive 75 million foreign tourists in 2020, almost 20 million more than it did in 2005.

Spanish Language

According to the Spanish Constitution, Spanish is the official language and the most widely spoken one in the whole country. Spanish may be alternatively labeled Castilian as a reference to the ancient kingdom of Castile, within which it had its origin.

The estimated number of speakers around the world ranges from 450 to 500 million people. After Mandarin Chinese, Spanish is the second most spoken language in the world by the number of people who are native speakers, and third if you count those who speak it as a second language. In the future, it's expected to become the second international communication language after English. At present, Spanish is the second most studied language after English.

In addition to Spain, Spanish is the official language of nineteen countries in America and two in Africa, Equatorial Guinea and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. Nevertheless, it's spoken on five continents. In the United States is widely used, being the second most spoken language after English in addition to being the official language in a territory: the commonwealth of Puerto Rico. In 2009, the number of Spanish speakers in the U.S.A. was 35.4 million.

Spanish is a language clearly growing. The worldwide interest in Spanish is because people are realizing the growing importance of this language in the West. In addition, it has the advantage that it is used in many different countries. On the other hand, in a scenario of global economic crisis, it is important to note the economic strength and dynamism of Latin America where they are producing a lot of growth opportunities in areas of very different nature while there is a rapid evolution and cultural development. Several studies suggest that the economic value of Spanish in Spain is estimated at 15.6% of GDP. Today, three and a half million people have jobs directly related to Spanish. Factors of economic value itself are language teaching, industry and cultural publications.

In this regard, and in advance of what we'll discuss later, we should note the limited specialized Buddhist literature published in Spanish and translated into that language from the original canonical texts. Certainly, we need to note this gap while we notice a clear opportunity. The Spanish language must become a major vehicle for the expansion and teaching of Dhamma around the world at the same level as it has been, until now, the English language.

The characteristics of the Spanish language, compared with other languages, make it a very suitable language with a huge potential to reflect the subtleties and depth of Buddhist philosophy and the accuracy of the Buddha's words.

Religion in Spain.

In the last thirty years, the Spanish situation has evolved in all areas of society. This development was reflected in a special way with regard to religious beliefs and practices, thereby directly affecting the Catholic Church, one of the pillars of history and identity in Spain.

The causes identified as part of the change in religion are many, gaining nowadays significant weight globalization and migration. These two processes have led to both cultural diversity and multiplicity of faiths. The result is a complex and disparate religious phenomenon.

Certainly, Spanish society is not homogeneous and there can be found positions ranging from Catholic religious conservatism to agnosticism away from any religious manifestation. In this context, Madrid represents an intermediate position regarding the presence of the Catholic religion. As the state capital, Madrid has great migration, cultural

diversity and confessions that identify it as cosmopolitan and inclusive. This implies an attitude of openness, moderate and adaptive population to social change. The vibrancy and dynamism of the city makes difficult the persistence of absolute “truths” and permanent dogmas.

Article 16.3 of the current Spanish Constitution defines the country as a secular State: “No religion shall have a state character.” However, it guarantees freedom of religion and worship of individuals and ensure cooperative relations between public authorities and all faiths.

A study by the Spanish Center for Sociological Research conducted in 2010 showed that 75% of Spanish people were considered Catholics, atheists or unbelievers accounted for 21.3%, and 1.6% were attached to another religion. However, practitioners’ percentage is much lower: only 18% of the Spanish people go to church regularly. Among those under 30 years old, that percentage drops to 14%.

As for the religion of the Spanish youth, a January 2012 study of the same institution reveals that 42.5% of those aged 18 to 24 say they are not Christian or atheist, indicating the decline of population’s religiosity, which, in the context of Spain, also means the decline of the Catholic religion.

The Spanish Ministry of Justice grants to some religions the status of “deeply rooted religion”. Besides Catholicism, the following ones have this character: (in order of agreement): Protestantism, Judaism, Islam (all since 1992), Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Buddhism, the latter accepted in 2007.

Buddhism in Spain.

Buddhism in Spain has a long history, but, as just mentioned, has only been recognized as a “deeply rooted” religion in the fall of 2007. This recognition makes it equal to the other religions in all respects, in the legal, political and administrative fields. The Spanish came in contact with Japanese Buddhists when some Jesuit missionaries settled in Japan and China in the sixteenth century. By then St. Francis Xavier and, somewhat later, the superior of the mission in Japan, Cosme de Torres, wrote some reports about the new discovered religion and its priests, the monks. They say that it is a “predominant religion” and they point out some features, such as long meditations of Zen monks and how devilishly difficult it was to “refute their arguments.”

In Spanish Buddhism, the faithful are called “students of dhamma” or simply “students” and their meeting places “centers of study”. In Spain, the first research center opened in 1977 in Barcelona and belongs to a Kagyu lineage, Karma Kagyu of Tibetan Buddhism, promoted by the teacher Akong Rinpoche.

That same year it started to run the Zen Doyo in Seville, launched by a disciple of Taisen Deshimaru. In 1977 the lama Thubten Yeshe comes to Ibiza, a master of charisma that excited people who had never heard about this religion which is primarily a philosophy. That drove the creation of centers of all traditions: Zen, Tibetan schools, Theravada, Triratna Buddhist Order (formerly Western Buddhist Order), and so on, in many places in Spain.

Later, they were creating monasteries, temples and retreat centers at selected sites and generally away from big cities to facilitate the best conditions for its practice. The lot of them have been mixed, with some closed after several years of activity and others have come down to us with force.

One of the most important in Spain, with more than ten centers attached to it, is Dag Shang Kagyu. It was founded in 1984 in Northern Spain by former Kyabje Kalu Rinpoche, linked to the Kagyu lineage Shangpa Dagpo and Vajrayana Buddhism. The center is run by the spiritual authority of Ven. Drubgyu Lama Tenpa and is home to

approximately eight Lamas, Western, Tibetan and Bhutanese, as well as several residents and staff that come from different parts of Spain and other countries.

There are also meeting places and temples of the Chinese and Japanese immigrants who do not mix, so far, with Spanish practitioners.

Since 1991, the Federation of Buddhist Communities of Spain is working as the official representatives of Buddhism in Spain before the government and society. It is estimated that in Spain there are about 40,000 registered centers related to Buddhism, about 65,000 practitioners, and adding those sympathetic to Buddhism, their number would reach 300,000 people. Those centers belong mainly to Zen and Tibetan traditions. The Theravada tradition doesn't have any study center in Spain and is only represented by a very few Vipassana meditation centers.

Theravada Buddhism in Spain

From the foregoing, several conclusions can be drawn. First, we can find in Spain a phenomenon similar to other Western countries in the development and spread of Buddhism, but with some particular tones.

Well known are the theories that analyze the different trends of the phenomenon of expansion at the time that allows for a classification of the different Buddhist groups that have formed in Western countries. The first group are called "elite Buddhist" consisting of Western people who have actively sought Buddhism by going to their sources or having a proactive attitude towards the Dhamma. The second group is the "Buddhist missionaries" formed by groups from Asian countries seeking converts among the Western general population. The third and last group is the one of "ethnic Buddhists" who practice Buddhism as part of their cultural or ethnic heritage.

This model can be applied to societies like the American or British and, with some exceptions, also to the Spanish society.

The so-called "elite Buddhists" are those who feel attracted to Zen meditation, Tibetan Vajrayana practice and Vipassana meditation, but are not looking for a religion of faith and devotion, or expand their social circle with other people to whom are only linked by a match in beliefs. This approach takes place in an intellectual way, so that their involvement does not usually get to bring a deep commitment. Most of them are trying to get away from the religions based on faith and devotion as Christianity or Judaism. Many are disappointed with the culture of consumerism and the superficiality which is material success. They seek to give their existence a spiritual varnish, which could mean even a change of life.

This intellectual approach cannot belong more than to people with strong background and whose daily concerns go beyond material needs. Therefore, this group is often part of the dominant social culture or, where appropriate, of the counterculture. Buddhism is, for them, something quite personal and not generally shared with friends or family, so it serves no social interests.

Along with this group, the second group, the Buddhist missionaries, is the one in which is based the spread of Buddhism in Spain. The aforementioned examples of Buddhist centers correspond directly to teachers or small communities that arrived in the country for this purpose, voluntarily or by the hand of people in the elite group.

Among the causes that explain the almost total absence of representation of the Theravada tradition in Spain, we can mention the little immigration from the Theravada Buddhist majority countries: Thailand, Sri Lanka, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia. There are no historical ties that facilitated cultural and economic exchanges between our countries, resulting in a generalized mutual ignorance. This explains the absence in Spain of the phenomenon what is called "ethnic Buddhism". Only in recent years the country

has seen waves of immigrants from the East, specifically from China. The future consequences of this fact are yet to be seen.

AEBT - Spanish Association of Theravada Buddhism.

The Spanish Association of Theravada Buddhism (AEBT) is a non-profit religious organization founded in March 2008.

This project was developed among various of the most important cities of Spain: Barcelona, Madrid, Alicante, Zaragoza and Castellon, the cities where the founding members reside.

We do not intend in any way to assume the representation of all followers in Theravada Buddhism in the country, but we hope that anyone sincerely interested in the Buddhadhamma can join us to share their experience of the Dhamma and help to promote the Buddha's original teachings in Spain. The association has finalized its policy and objectives, which are described below:

- To become a meeting point for the Spaniards or those residents in Spain who are interested in Buddhadhamma.
- To contribute to the original Buddhist teachings, as they are reflected in the Tipitaka or Pali Canon, so they are kept alive in our country.
- To promote visits of monks and nuns of the Theravada tradition, to organize events such as Vipassana meditation retreats, lectures, etc.
- We are not only interested in the theoretical aspects of Teaching. Moreover, one of our goals is to promote the practice of Vipassana meditation, the method of meditation that the Buddha himself taught.
- The ultimate aim in our horizon is to join forces and resources to put "the cornerstone" of what, in the future, will become a Buddhist Center of the Theravada tradition in Spain.

Project for the Spanish Center of Theravada Buddhism.

The Spanish Association of Theravada Buddhism considers that it's absolutely necessary to create a Center that can serve as a stimulus for the dissemination and practice of the Dhamma in Spain. The existence of this center becomes a necessary and sufficient condition because the experience of recent years has shown us that there have been a large number of individual efforts that have not had the desired result due to the limitations of the geographical dispersion or the scope thereof. We can see, almost daily, through our website and other means, that there is a real demand among Theravada Buddhist community and supporters for the creation of a center.

Western society is undergoing a crisis that goes far beyond the mere economics; there is a real crisis of values. From our life experience and our contacts with the countries of Asia, we know that Buddhism is the answer. At the same time, we have a responsibility towards the society in which we live. If we want to change Western society and integrate Buddhism into it, we must create the appropriate institutions.

Always after the retreats we organize, many of the people involved in them feel that they want to extend this kind of experience. Despite the difficulties of living in large cities and they're absorbed by their duties, they know that they want to live with other Buddhists, they want more time to reflect on the Dhamma and, of course, they want to have more opportunities to practice. Our initiative is being greeted with real enthusiasm. For our part, we believe that we have the responsibility to respond to this demand and this is the message we wanted to bring here today. The bridge between East and West should be built on both sides.

The initiative, which has been brought to the attention of Spanish authorities, has been received very favorably. While it is true that Buddhism is known in a very general or superficial way, the idea that ordinary people have of it is very positive. Asian immigration in Spain has a great social value and the administration is willing to make efforts to further integration of these communities. Moreover, other faiths such as Islam, whose communities are more socially problematic - in Spain like in other countries - have received institutional support. Tacitly, we know that the Spanish administration may prefer to give their support to the creation of a large Buddhist center than to other non-Christian religious centers.

Our project is a comprehensive center, which may fit all socio-cultural events around the Theravada Buddhism. We are thinking about a center which will spread both culture and information while permitting the practice of the Buddhist life. As mentioned above, there is an intellectual interest to Buddhism, but in this case we do not mean personal interests but academic. Some Spanish universities already offer specialized studies in Buddhist philosophy and we are taking requests for cooperation in knowledge sharing. Fortunately, with the invaluable help of some Venerable Bhikkhus, we can meet those demands.

If we are to integrate fundamental Buddhist ideas in our Western society-ideas that have surprised those previously unacquainted with the force of a revelation - we must show them to people with high educational level. We also need to establish, where possible, the connections between Buddhist ideas and Western concepts. For that we need the best means. Our Center must have adequate space for a library and research labors such as debate of ideas or texts translation and editing.

However, we cannot separate the philosophical issue from the religious issue. In Spain, as in other Western countries, we have checked the existence of “meditators”, people who don’t know the philosophy behind the meditation practice. Although in our opinion this is a sad fact, our work must be inclusive and not exclusive. These people need to know the Dhamma from our hand and to know the true meaning and purpose of meditation and its importance for the practice of the Dhamma, both for monks and for the laity. To do this, we will welcome them in our facilities to perform our Vipassana meditation retreats of various lengths, always accompanied by appropriate training in the Dhamma.

The center will have a monastery with capacity for resident and visitor bhikkhus. We want to have an open center, away from ethnic centers that have proliferated especially in the United States and are supported by ethnic communities to which, in turn, they serve. We want our center not to be identified with any particular school and all at once. We think that this exercise of “eclecticism” will abound in the quality of teaching. We hope that the coexistence of bhikkhus from different schools will be an enriching experience for all.

Being Buddhist in Spain, and throughout the West, is difficult to the extent that, as there is no tradition, the social mainstream is not favorable, and not only so, but usually walking in the opposite direction. It’s not a secret that the establishment of a center that includes a monastery and, of course, a temple in Spain would pose a number of difficulties. To overcome them, first we must get the center to be recognized by the community as their own. We must flee from orientalisms that can result in considering it as something exotic by the people. The architectural team who has been working on the design of buildings has taken many months studying the functions and needs of the center and have been trying to combine religious character of Buddhism, practical use, monumentality and Spanish architectural tradition.

On the other hand, the relationship that can be established between the community and the center's residents will also be very different from the usual relationship between a community in Asia and the bhikkhus of the nearest temple. In the Catholic tradition, the priest is responsible for his flock. According to the practice of Dhamma, is the community which is responsible for the maintenance of the bhikkhus. Therefore, for the location of the center, we are thinking about a charming natural environment in the surroundings of small village near Madrid. It seeks to foster a direct relationship between village's people and the bhikkhus at the center. Evidently, the maintenance and support of it will depend on the Buddhist community and the Spanish Association of Theravada Buddhism. As for the involvement of the local administration, the property formula that we will use is that of a right to use a public land, so we won't need to incur in expenses to purchase real estate, thereby reducing the budget.

The metropolitan area of the capital of Spain has a population of nearly 7 million people, ensuring a sufficient critical mass of users and visitors for the center.

At present there is already a list of possible cities interested in hosting the Buddhist center on its territory. In our conversations with different majors, we had the opportunity to highlight the ethical values of Buddhist philosophy, which results in the social function that can be done for the community from the center. This social function will be a true reflection of the meritorious actions contained in the teachings of the Buddha. In the future, social initiatives will be launched in order to provide added value to the teaching and training activities provided by the center. Once we have the project's final draft, we will consider different options and offers from the various municipalities.

The project to come true.

As you can see, from Spain, we are prepared to give all necessary support to the creation of the first center of Theravada Buddhism in this country. During last months, we had the opportunity of discussing about our project on the occasion of different trips to Theravada countries. We have always received support and consideration and this has led us to think about the real possibility of turning this dream into a reality.

From this forum, we invite all Theravada Buddhist countries and institutions to lend strong support to carry out the financing for building the center. We emphasize our determination that this is a project of all, so that all the initiatives, opinions, suggestions and help are welcome.