

The Resurgence of Buddhism in Burma

G. P. CHARLES

Buddhism is one of the principal living religions of the world and a universal or international religion. It is claimed that there are nearly 500 million Buddhists and that they are found in all parts of the world. They are mainly found in the East, spreading from Ceylon to Japan. Buddhism is practically the state religion of Thailand, Burma, Ceylon, Tibet, Laos and Cambodia ; in these countries except for Tibet, the school of Buddhism is that called the Hinayana or the philosophic Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism, also known as the popular Buddhism, is in vogue in Japan, China and Tibet.

Lord Gautama Buddha received his spiritual enlightenment in India, 2,500 years ago. From India Buddhism spread into the Far East. The missionary character of Buddhism promoted the rapid expansion of Buddhism. Brahmanism partly absorbed and partly swept away Buddhism from India, the land of its origin, leaving only a very small fraction of Buddhists in India. Yet Buddhism captured the nations of the East as no other religion has.

One of the causes for the rapid expansion of Buddhism in the East is the large part played by monasticism in the Buddhist way of life. Although a large percentage of Buddhists do not practise monasticism, it must be remembered that a good Buddhist is a monk or at least one who practises the severe austerities of the monastic way of life. There are many Buddhist monasteries and monks all over South-East Asia. In Thailand and Burma almost every male member of the family wears the yellow robe, enters a monastery and lives like a monk at least for a few weeks. It is said that at least one-third of the males in Tibet are monks and Tibet is ruled by monks. Usually the monk is a celibate except that in Korea and Japan there are sects of Buddhism which permit their monks to marry.

The monasteries of Buddhism are always schools where Buddhism is taught to children. Boys are initiated into Buddhism or confirmed as Buddhists very early in their lives. This is an important ceremony in which the boy comes to a monastery and learns to recite the rules and practises a life of meditation and poverty. During the ceremony he dons the

yellow robe and spends at least one night in the monastery. This monastic ideal in Buddhism has been a chief attraction of Buddhism in the East and particularly in Burma.

BUDDHISM IN BURMA

Although it is disputed whether Buddhism came to Burma during the lifetime of the Lord Buddha, yet it undoubtedly received missionaries in the days of King Asoka of India who was a great promoter of the Buddhist faith. Two Buddhist saints Sona and Ottana were sent to Burma by the President of the Third Great Buddhist Council held in the days of Asoka. Buddhism captured Burma almost entirely from those days.

The population of Burma is about 18 million and it is claimed that 90 to 95 per cent of the total population of Burma are Buddhists. The major race of Burma is called the Burmese and there are about 12 million of them; among the other minor groups there are the Karens, the Shans, the Kachins, the Chins and the Mons. Among the Karens more than 60 per cent are Buddhists and among the Burmese and Shans nearly one hundred per cent are Buddhists.

It is also claimed that Burma has been associated with a very high standard and tradition of learning in the doctrines of Lord Buddha. Burmese kings have given full support and encouragement for the spread of Buddhism. The monks of Burma have from the beginning commanded veneration and respect for their profound learning in the Buddhist Scriptures.

In the days of the Burmese kings and before the British occupation of Burma, Buddhism was the state religion of Burma and the kings were called the Promoters of the Faith. In the days of those Burmese kings the monks were strictly controlled by a chief monk who was appointed by the king. The king was a head of the Buddhist Church and he had a personal chaplain who was the chief monk. It was the duty of this chief monk to prevent schism, to manage pagoda lands and to administer discipline among the monks. It is estimated that in the period of the Burmese kings there were over 90,000 monks.

THE DECLINE OF BUDDHISM

It is lamented by all good Buddhists that with the fall of King Thebaw and with the advent of British rule in Burma, Buddhism was in a neglected state. His Excellency U Win, who was the Minister of Religious Affairs in the Union of Burma and who is at present the Burmese Ambassador in the United States, in one of his speeches spoke as follows:—

‘Our religion has been in a neglected state for the sixty years since the overthrow of King Thebaw, Promoter of the Faith. The prosperity of a religion, as you are all aware, depends on the presence of a ruler, who is genuinely inclined to promote it. The

absence of such a ruler makes for the decline in religion in all its three aspects. When we were denied freedom, what was the state of our religion? Sanghas (the Church) split up into different sects; contacts between the Sanghas (clergy) and laymen were few and far between; there was a dearth of learned men; religious practice was neglected and darkness gradually fell on our Sasana (Teaching). It came to such a pass that the Buddhist got bewildered and became unable to sift the true from false. . .

'It is true that even after the fall of King Thebaw the Buddhist public endeavoured to promote the great religion as best as they could. Pagodas and monasteries were built, thousands of monks were well looked after, religious associations were formed and scripture examinations were conducted. Those good intentioned people carried on the noble work for over sixty years without the material support of the then Government. They were the real Promoters of the Faith in the absence of the Faithful Ruler. Now the circumstances have changed. Independence is once more restored and the Government is duly elected according to the constitution. It is but inevitable that the Government becomes the Promoter of the Faith, on behalf of the people who elect it.'

The Buddhists of Burma blame the British Government for being partly responsible for the decline of Buddhism in Burma. They say in all Buddhist circles in Burma that during the British regime Buddhism suffered a decline in many respects and claimed that there was a general deterioration in morality during this period because of the decline of Buddhism in Burma.

THE REVIVAL OF BUDDHISM

When Burma regained her independence, with the aid of the Government and through the inspiration of Buddhist monks and saintly Buddhists both in political and social life, there began a deep and vital revival of Buddhism. This revival has been supported by the general resurgence of Buddhism in Ceylon, India, Japan and other Buddhist countries. There is a world-wide revival of Buddhism of which the revival in Burma is a very strong link. The Government of Burma has girded itself to revive and revitalize Buddhism, and to help the Buddhist clergy in their effort to restore Buddhism in Burma from the decline which took place during the British rule.

The revival of Buddhism in Burma has been motivated by nothing short of a real earnest and spiritual longing of the inner man. During the last war when the Japanese had occupied Burma the country underwent a great deal of suffering. The revival of Buddhism has come about as one of the direct results of that suffering. The events that took place during the Japanese occupation of Burma showed very conclusively that human life on earth is fleeting, the powers of the earth are transitory and material wealth and prosperity are nothing but things that easily

pass away. During those days a rich man became poor overnight and a poor man became rich in the same way. The great powers of the world had collapsed like mud walls in an earthquake or flood. Human lives were lost by the thousands not only in the battle field but also in peaceful homes.

The questions that arose in the minds of everyone were 'Where is security?', 'Where can man find foundations that cannot be shaken?', 'Where is Life Eternal?' These questions continued to burn in the minds of everyone after the war had done its damage. The revival of Buddhism in Burma is an effort to find answers to these perplexing questions of life.

The revival of Buddhism in Burma has been evidenced by the very great increase in the number of worshippers at the pagodas on sabbath days and on festival days. Buddhist festival days which before the war were mostly for fun and material enjoyment, are now marked with an increase of spiritual observances and devotion. The revival is further evidenced by the fact that the sabbath and lenten days are observed with greater zeal and piety. Public and street preaching of Buddhism to devout and responsive listeners is another evidence of the revival of Buddhism. A great number of articles on Buddhism appear in local newspapers; booklets and pamphlets are published very frequently and they are eagerly read by many Buddhists. There is a large percentage of literates in Burma.

PROMOTION OF THE FAITH

The Government of the Union of Burma and Buddhist leaders and priests rose to the occasion and took this opportunity of promoting the Faith. Some important measures have been taken during the last ten years by the leaders. Every effort has been taken by them to revive and revitalize Buddhism in Burma.

The Government went to the extent of enacting certain acts to promote Buddhism in Burma. In 1950 the Government passed the Pali University and Dhammacarya Act to promote the study and research of Buddhist Scriptures and the training of Buddhist clergy. The Government allotted large sums of money towards the implementation of this Act year after year. Another Act was passed called the Vinichaya Thana Act and the Buddha Sasana Council Act. These Acts enabled the leaders to establish the clergy councils and a general Buddhist Council. By the Buddha Sasana Council Act religious measures and reforms can be undertaken by the government through the Council.

THE RENOVATION AND BUILDING OF PAGODAS

Many old neglected pagodas (Buddhist temples) have been rebuilt and some of those which were damaged by war and earthquake are being reconstructed. New pagodas are also being built here and there.

General Cunningham of the British Army in 1851 discovered the sacred relics of the two disciples of Lord Buddha, Sarputta and Maha Moggalana, at one of the three principal stupas (sacred pillars) at Sanchi in India. He took these sacred relics to the British Museum in London and there they were preserved. Recently these relics were returned to the Government of India by the British Government. These sacred relics were received by thousands of devotees wherever they were taken in many parts of India and Ceylon. They were also brought to Burma three years ago and great enthusiasm was displayed by devotees everywhere in Burma when these sacred relics were taken around in the country. These sacred relics were enshrined last year in Sanchi at a ceremony in which the Prime Minister of Burma and the Prime Minister of India and several hundred representatives from many Buddhist countries and several thousand devotees from India took part.

The Prime Minister U Nu of Burma was able to secure by special request portions of the sacred relics of these two disciples for the worship of the peoples of Burma. A high plateau land about two miles out of Rangoon is the site of a former Pagoda and known as 'Sri Mangala Plateau'. This site was chosen for the erection of a new Pagoda to enshrine these portions of the sacred relics of the two disciples of Lord Buddha. The Pagoda known as 'Kaba-Aye Pagoda' (World Peace Temple) was rebuilt and completed in 1952. The encrowning and the enshrining ceremonies were conducted in March 1952. Hundreds of thousands of people from all over Burma as well as representatives from India and Ceylon attended the ceremony. The Pagoda is constructed in such a way that it contains a strong room in the centre as a reliquary which can be opened on occasions for the exposition of the sacred relics. This Pagoda is built as a symbol of the coming of Universal Peace to the World through the spread of Buddhism.

THE STUDY OF RELIGION

It is known that examinations in the study of the Buddhist Scriptures were held annually by the Burmese Kings from the beginning of the seventeenth century until the British annexation of Upper Burma in 1855. Attractive prizes were given to successful candidates. The British Government resumed the practice in 1895 and continued till the outbreak of the last World War. During the last forty years the examinations known as 'Pariyatti Examinations' were held in twenty centres. In addition to that an examination known as 'Dhammacariya Examinations', were also held for teachers of religion. These examinations were resumed in 1947 and are being continued.

Pali is the language of the Buddhist Scriptures and has been studied by monks and learned men throughout the many centuries. In the days of the Burmese Kings, Pali was a compulsory subject in all the schools. The Government of the Union of

Burma passed in 1950 an Act known as 'The Pali University and Dhammacariya Act'. A Pali University has been established under this Act. There are 22 constituent colleges and 114 Dhammacariyas (teachers) in the country.

An examination was started in 1948 known as 'Tipitakathara Examination' (knowing the Scriptures by heart). The curriculum covers the whole of the Buddhist Scriptures together with all the commentaries and the students must learn by heart the entire scriptures and be able to expound every passage of Scripture. It is claimed that it is by far the hardest examination in the whole world.

There is a collection of the most valuable precepts for the lay people containing 38 beatitudes called the Mangala Sutta. It is the first book every Burmese boy and girl had to learn for many centuries in the past in the days of the Burmese kings. During the war in 1944 and 1945 Mangala Sutta Examinations were held in Rangoon and out of 10,000 school boys and girls who sat for the examinations, 8,000 passed. The Young Men's Buddhist Association (Y.M.B.A.) has continued to conduct these examinations every year. In addition to all these the Government is taking steps to introduce the teaching of Buddhism in all the schools and in the Rangoon University and its constituent colleges.

THE WORLD MISSION OF BUDDHISM

U Chan Htoon, the Attorney General in Burma and leader in the Buddha Sasana Council, said as follows: 'Now we are threatened with another global war and total annihilation of mankind. The people of the world are greatly alarmed and very anxious to find some way out of this impending catastrophe. Buddhism alone can provide the way, and thus the World Buddhist Conference was held in Ceylon during May 1950. It was attended by Buddhist delegates from 29 countries, including delegates from almost every important country of the West; and one thing was noticeable at the Conference, and that was the unanimous belief of all those people present there that Buddhism is the only ideology which can give peace to the world and save it from war and destruction.

'What was aimed at the Buddhist conference was not to attempt to convert the followers of other religions of the world into Buddhists. But what we hoped for was this: people may profess any religion they like, but if their moral conduct is such as is in conformity with the principles of Buddha's teachings, or in other words, they lead the Buddhist way of life, then there will be everlasting peace in the world. The present is the opportune moment and long-hoped-for time to win the West over to the principles of Buddhism. We also see unmistakable signs and indications that the time has come for the revival of the Buddhism in India, the country of its origin.'

U Chan Htoon supported the enactment of a Bill to establish a Buddhist Central Organization for the Union of Burma, whose primary objects are to propagate Buddhism in other lands and to lay a solid and lasting foundation of Buddhism in Burma. Speaking about this Bill, U Chan Htoon said, 'We are of the firm conviction that the time has come for us to make every one in the country live according to the Teachings of the Buddha. All aspects of national life, including civilization, culture, literature, law and customs, etc., of all the indigenous people of Burma have risen from and still have their roots in Buddhism. According to history, Buddhism has taken root in Burma for more than 2,000 years, and Burma may be said to be the leading Buddhist country.'

U Nu, Prime Minister of Burma, said as follows: 'The Council would send Buddhist Missions abroad in the same way as other countries have been sending their missions here. Another object is to counter the machinations of those who are out to destroy the very foundations of our religion. In introducing this Bill it is far from our intention to disparage in any way other religions like Mohammedanism, Hinduism, Christianity or Spirit worship. We have been prompted by the sole consideration to combat effectively anti-religious forces which are raising their ugly heads everywhere.'

THE SIXTH GREAT BUDDHIST COUNCIL

The Sixth Great Buddhist Council known as the Chattha Sangayana was held in Burma for two years beginning from the Full Moon day of May 1954 and terminating on the Full Moon day of May 1956; this day was also the 2,500th birthday of the Buddha, and was observed as the most auspicious day in the history of Buddhism. The Chattha Sangayana met on the hill known as Sri Mangala (glorious prosperity), the site of the Kaba Aye Pagoda which is three miles north of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Rangoon.

This Council came into being through the combined and zealous efforts of the government and the people of the Union of Burma headed by the Prime Minister U Nu. It was held in a great cave known as the Maha Pasana Guha, a cave like an assembly hall with a seating capacity of 15,000, 5,000 monks and 10,000 laymen. This cave was built near the Kaba Aye Pagoda which is the centre of the Sixth Buddhist Council.

The Sixth Buddhist Council was attended by a vast congregation consisting of foreign Buddhist leaders, 2,500 Sangiti-Karaka bhikkhus and several thousand Maha Theares from India, Thailand, Ceylon, Cambodia, Nepal, Formosa, Malaya, Assam, Pakistan, Germany and the Cocos Islands. Over the two year period, with brief intervals, the Council met in five sessions and re-edited the Tripitaka texts which were recited and formally adopted as the Canonical texts.

INTERNATIONAL BUDDHIST UNIVERSITY

An International Institute of Buddhistic Studies has been established at a site north of the cave built for the Sixth Buddhist Council on the Sri Mangala Hill. The Institute forms part of an International Buddhist University, contributing to higher academic studies and research in Religion, History, Art and Culture with Buddhism and South-East Asia as the central focus. For this purpose a well equipped library and a museum are included in this project.

This advanced International Institute is considered to be the answer to the postwar disintegration of moral and spiritual values in South-East Asia. The leaders of Buddhism in Burma are convinced that Buddhism, if brought alive in the hearts of its adherents, can restore moral purpose and the spirit of compassion. Therefore Burma as a new and forward looking nation, faithful to Asian traditions and to Buddhism, has taken the lead in restoring Buddhism to its appropriate rôle. This Institute is therefore considered to be the repository of the traditional wisdom as known to and interpreted by the Buddha himself and as handed down through the continuous succession of 'Achariyas' (teachers).

THE WORLD FELLOWSHIP OF BUDDHISTS

A World Buddhist Congress was held in Ceylon in 1950. Buddhists of both the Theravada and the Mahayana sects were present at this conference with a total of 190 delegates representing the thirty countries. The World Fellowship of Buddhists was inaugurated at this Conference. A World Buddhist Conference was held subsequently in May 1952 at Hirosaki, Japan, and this was followed by a second Convention of World Fellowship of Buddhists in September 1952. Two hundred delegates from 25 countries gathered together at this Conference. A third World Buddhist Conference was held in Burma in 1954 coinciding with the inauguration of the Sixth Buddhist Council. A fourth World Buddhist Conference was held in November 1956 attended by 400 delegates from 34 countries. This conference was held in Lumbini in Nepal, the birthplace of Buddha, and coincided with the 2,500th birthday of the Buddha. Burma played an important part in all these conferences.

Every Buddhist in Burma as well as in any other country is exhorted to commit himself seriously to the task of the proclamation of the Dhamma, the religion of the Buddha, to the whole world. The organizations connected with the revival of Buddhism in Burma have committed themselves to the task of the proper education of Buddhist children, social work by the Buddhists, restoration and improvement of the Buddhist worship places, establishment of places of social work, the preparation of a universally acceptable Buddhist calendar, the establishment of an international Buddhist university and the promotion and spread of the teachings of the Buddha throughout the world.