

# THE BUDDHIST MISSIONARIES

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## The Early Buddhist Missionaries

*"Go Ye, O Bhikkhus, and wander forth for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, in compassion for the world, for the good, for the gain, for the welfare of gods and men. Proclaim, O Bhikkhus, the Doctrine glorious, preach ye a life of holiness, perfect and pure."*

This saying of the Buddha fully contained the missionary spirit. He further said:

*"O Bhikkhus, don't go together two in one direction";* and because of this encouragement his disciples travelled in different directions wandering from village to village, country to country.

In the beginning the Bhikkhus didn't live together in monasteries; they carried their Master's message in all directions. In this way, during the life time of the Buddha, the Buddha-Dhamma (the Teachings of the Buddha) spread to many parts of India.

Two and a half centuries after the passing away of the Buddha, according to the tradition preserved in the Sri Lankan chronicles, the emperor Asoka (third century B.C.) organised a net-work of missionaries to preach the teachings of the Buddha outside India. At that time his son and daughter went to Sri Lanka to teach the Buddha-Dhamma. Also two monks named *Sona* and *Uttara* were sent to *Suwanabhumi* (Burma) to spread the Teachings. According to this tradition Buddhist missionaries went abroad from the third century B.C.

Buddhism was introduced to central Asia 234 years after the passing of the Buddha into Nibbana, i.e. in 240 B.C. China received Buddhism for the first time in the first century BC and within a century it was officially recognized as a religion by the state. Buddhist monks began going to China from the end of the first century B.C., and Buddhism arrived in Korea and in Japan in the fourth century A.D. and in the sixth century A.D. respectively. Tibet received the Teachings of Buddhism in the seventh century while the Buddha-Dhamma has flourished in Thailand from the first or second century A.D.

According to Chinese chronicles and archeological findings, Cambodia became a Buddhist country from the end of the fifth century A.D. A large number of inscriptions discovered in different parts of Malaysia are written in Sanskrit show that Buddhism was already flourishing in this part of Asia at this time.

From this it can be seen that these Buddhist monks travelled to many strange countries without any financial support, facing many hardships during their journeys. They did not know anything about the countries where they were going and relied only on a strong confidence in the teachings of the Buddha.

There were many religions born in India; but only Buddhism was flourishing all over Asia within a few centuries. Today, Buddhism has become one of the major religions, still flourishing firmly all over the world. Teachings of the Buddha are suitable for all kinds of human nature and applicable to people of all ages without changing their cultures or abandoning their traditions. The Buddha invited people to investigate his teachings before accepting them and allowed freedom of thought to his followers, unlike the founders of many other religions. Because of this Buddhism can be adopted easily by everyone as a way of life.

### **Buddhism in Burma**

Although there is no strong evidence to show that *Sona* and *Uttara* were actually sent as missionaries to Burma by Asoka, nevertheless, the Burmese proudly claim that the Buddha's first meal was offered by two Burmese merchants named *Tapussa* and *Bhallika*. According to Buddhist literature they came from *Okkala* - presently known as Rangoon - on their way to Rajagiri and saw the Buddha at the foot of the Rajayatana tree in the seventh week after His Enlightenment. After they offered the Buddha rice cakes and honey they requested Him to give them something to remember Him by. The Buddha gave them eight pieces of His hair, which were brought with respect and honour back to Burma. The king of *Okkala* welcomed them with great honour on their arrival and the hairs were enshrined in a pagoda, which is now the biggest and highest pagoda in the world, the *Shwedagon* golden pagoda of Rangoon

There is no reliable evidence that Buddhism flourished in Burma before the fifth century A.D. However, considering the close proximity of Burma to India and

the existence of not too difficult land routes between the two countries, it is easy to believe that Buddhism did flourish in Burma long before this time and it cannot be reasonably doubted that in all of Lower Burma the Theravada form of Buddhism was widely followed before the fifth century A.D.

The *Mrammas* or *Myanmas* established a powerful kingdom with its capital at *Pagan* and gave their name to the whole country in the tenth century A.D. At that time Tantric Buddhism was already flourishing amongst them, but the great *Anawratha* was converted to pure Theravada Buddhism, which he received from Lower Burma. Since that time Burma has been known as a Theravada Buddhist country. It always had a good relationship with Sri Lanka and there was a constant exchange of monks between the two countries to study Buddhist literature and to strengthen the Buddha-Dhamma. There were numerous Burmese contributions to Theravada Buddhism and to Pali literature.

Nowadays Burma has become a very popular centre for the study of Abhidhamma and the practice of Vipassana meditation. As a result many western investigators have exclaimed that Burmese Buddhism is far stronger than Buddhism in any other Theravada nation.

### **Burmese Missionaries**

As mentioned previously, some Burmese monks went to Sri Lanka in the twelfth century A.D., to re-establish Theravada Buddhism on that island. According to archeological findings in Buddhagaya in India there were some Burmese monasteries and monks living there in the thirteenth century AD. In the same century one Burmese monk was sent to China, to the great Chinese emperor's capital. It was probably for political reasons that a Theravada Bhikkhu visited this capital of a Mahayana dominated country. Since then Burmese monks have very frequently visited neighbouring countries, such as Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Wherever they have gone they have strictly followed and preserved the Burmese way of Theravada Buddhism. Because of this one can see today several Burmese monasteries and the descendents of the Burmese school of Buddhism in these countries.

In the beginning of this century Burma established an association of Buddhist Missionaries for Europe; through this association the country played an important part in the establishment of Theravada Buddhism in Europe - particularly in England. This association sponsored the first Englishman (Charles Henry Allan Bennett, 1872 -1923) ordained in Burma as *Ven. Ananda Metteya Thera* who came back to live in England and collaborated with and encouraged others to found the Buddhist Society. There were also some German and Italian monks who lived in Burma, studied Buddhism, and played an important role in establishing Theravada Buddhism in their respective countries.

At that time also Burma was very fortunate to have the outstanding Buddhist figure *Ledi Sayadaw*, who was well known to scholars in many countries. There was a great demand for his discourses and writings in western lands. Some of his great works were translated into English and published by the Pali Text Society in London. There were also some Burmese scholars who collaborated with this society in translating Pali texts into English, especially the Abhidhamma texts.

Since the nineteenth century a number of Burmese monks who have lived in India, Malaysia and Thailand have preached and preserved the

Burmese way of Theravada Buddhism. After the independence of Burma there were Burmese monks who went to Australia, Europe, Indonesia, Japan and the USA to propagate Buddhism. Among them *Taungpulu Sayadaw* and *Mahasi Sayadaw's* visits were remarkable.

After *Ledi Sayadaw*, *Mahasi Sayadaw* and *Taungpulu Sayadaw* were most greatly respected in the western world. We should also recall the efforts of *Sayadaw U Thithila* who lived in England for many years and travelled worldwide for the propagation of the Buddha-Dhamma.

The International Burmese Buddhist Sangha Organization has already planned to publish the biographies of many of the *sayadaws* who have lived or are still living in foreign countries, so that people will know about them and their noble work for the Buddha-Dhamma.

### **International Burmese Buddhist Sangha Organisation**

There is a well known English saying that "*great oaks from little acorns grow*" Similarly many a great and beneficial organisation started from small beginnings.

In May 1985 a group of 13 Burmese *Sayadaws* (Buddhist monks) representing 7 countries met in Penang, Malaysia, to establish the 'International Burmese Buddhist Sangha Organisation'. These *Sayadaws* were representative of many Burmese Buddhist monks living outside Burma in order to teach the Buddha-Dhamma to people in many different parts of the world. It was an historical event for these Burmese monks meeting together for the first time to discuss their activities, share their experiences and to establish this organisation so that they could continue to work together.

There are many Burmese monks who have lived for many decades abroad. Even through some of them have had to face many problems and difficulties in their work, they still remain in their adopted countries dedicating their lives to working for the Buddha-Dhamma and for the preservation of the traditions and monasteries of Burmese Buddhism. Yet few people, even few Burmese, realise that these monks exist and are so dedicated to their work.

Countries in which these *Sayadaws* are active include India, Japan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the UK and the USA. Some have been living abroad for over fifty years preserving Theravada Buddhism in the Burmese tradition and its monasteries. It is most important that the lives and works of these monks be publicised so that others, both now and in the future, can share in their responsibilities, enabling the Buddha Dhamma to continue and to spread over the centuries.

This was the reason behind the setting up of the International Burmese Buddhist Sangha Organisation' which was officially established on 3rd May 1985, Wesak full moon day, in Penang, Malaysia. The meeting was sponsored through the generous *dana* (gift) of the trustees of the Burmese Buddhist Temple, Penang, Malaysia.

The world's religious history tells us that the missionary spirit has its roots in Buddhism and the Buddha himself. It was after the first rains retreat at *Isipatana* (Deer Park), Varanasi, that the Buddha advised his disciples:

*(First published by the International Burmese Buddhist Sangha Organisation in 1985)*