

The Prospects for Buddhism in Europe and America¹

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INTRODUCTION

I WOULD LIKE to talk about how Buddhism is being received in Europe and America today [1909]. First, while we casually speak of the East and the West as if the two were close together, in fact a great distance lies between the two. As a result the situation that prevails in one sphere is not readily known in the other. And so when a Japanese does some insignificant thing in America, the press report to the Japanese readers is blown out of proportion. In the same way, if something happens to Christians in Japan, that news is heard immediately overseas. Generally speaking, though, the degree of importance attached to such events is greatly exaggerated. For instance, a newspaper might state that “Japan is on the verge of abandoning the [Buddhist] religion it has practiced for centuries, and the Emperor and all fifty million citizens of this country will convert to Christianity.” No Japanese would believe it, of course, knowing it to be the unreliable reportage churned out by the press. However, in the country where that newspaper is published, it would be accepted as fact.

Similarly, in America, if forty or fifty people were to gather for a Buddhist event, such as the Buddha’s birthday celebration, and if this happened in New York, then the event would be reported [in Japan] so as to suggest that all New Yorkers had converted to Buddhism. In the process of

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relating the event to those who were not present, the description gets elaborated on as it passes from one person to the next. In the end, the truth of the matter is completely distorted. This kind of psychology naturally comes into play when one deals with things one has not observed directly. Thus, when we hear that something Japanese is being lauded in the West, it is best to invest it with less significance than it is accrued.

The things which I will speak about today are those that I have seen and heard with my own eyes and ears. All the same, in order to ward off the baneful effects just mentioned, I would like to ask you to exercise discretion in judging their true significance.

BUDDHIST SYMPATHIZERS IN AMERICA

The Belief of the Grateful

First, let us talk about America. In America today we find two kinds of people who sympathize with Buddhism. The first are those who can be said to have blind faith, those who believe unquestioningly [in Buddhism] with no clear reason. They do not profess conviction formed by deliberating critically on the principles involved or feel a sense of gratitude for the conviction based on these principles. The second are the kind of believers for whom religious conviction derives from boring down to the bedrock of reason and logically adhering to the principles. These processes agree perfectly with the motivation for the Shin Bukkyō 新仏教 (New Buddhism) movement with which I am involved. In this second category, we find Buddhist sympathizers in the West whom we can call practitioners of Shin Bukkyō.

However, as to the former category of believers, or rather sympathizers, who may not know the slightest thing about Buddhism but would gladly abandon their Christian faith if they were to see something of benefit in it for them. They are—regardless of whether they are somewhat educated or not educated at all—asking whether there might be a good religion other than the religion with which they have always been familiar or not, and believe [in Buddhism] based on spiritual and emotional needs. And so we must ask what has made Americans today this way, and there are of course many causes to which we might point. From a rather superficial point of view, it is an undeniable fact that America has recently undergone major social changes. Thus, those things that are out of step with the new social order must be reformed and improved at any cost. However, the majority of

those who follow the teachings of Christianity are under the control of an old system of thought that is by and large medieval, and this medieval way is completely inapplicable to today's new society. Therefore, it has become quite common for people to ask whether or not there is something better out there. This kind of believer is to be found in great numbers among the uneducated classes.

Today, if someone [from Japan] were to go to America and were serious to the extent that he felt he could make that land his final resting place, and if that person had learning and virtue, then I believe that he would be able to set up a Buddhist temple there. I believe that he would be able to do so even if he did not have money, but had the time. However, it would be very hard to find a suitable person for such a role. In order to transmit Buddhism to Westerners, it is not enough just to have a Western education; what is necessary is an understanding of the history of Western thinking. Also, it is vital to have some knowledge of the Western intellect and morality. What Japanese people find unpleasant about Christian preachers is that they do things in the Western way. If people went to America to spread Buddhism and similarly did everything in the Japanese way, it is likely that their efforts would only end in failure.

Regarding morality, Asians have traditionally valued the whole and thus have grown spiritually rich; Westerners, in contrast, have had the tendency of valuing the individual. While both these attitudes are fine, as a consequence, it is unavoidable that Asians have developed the shortcoming of leaning toward the whole, while Westerners have the shortcoming of leaning toward the individual. That is, it is inevitable that the Asians' virtue of emphasizing the importance of the whole naturally leads to individual morality and responsibility being undervalued, while the Westerners' emphasis on the individual necessarily leads to undervaluing the whole and an impoverished patriotic spirit. If we take the good points of both sides and preserve the individual as a discrete entity while also accessing the whole, and fuse them to create a moral philosophy, I believe only then would there be no room for criticism. We would be assimilated within not only society but also the universe—call it the Ultimate (*shinnyo* 真如), if you will—while the element of individuality would be preserved. My senses and my intellect tell me that you and I are different, but viewing things from the basis of religious consciousness, asserting a difference between self and other or this and that, somehow does not grant us any sense of freedom. I think that the wonderful realm of true religion lies in an all-inclusive yet distinct dimension, and when this

dimension manifests in our everyday lives, is this not the perfect union of awareness and practice?

Thus, in America, those who want to believe in Buddhism without scholarly understanding can no longer be satisfied with just the emotional aspects of the traditional teachings of Christianity, such as the Bible's claim that God made us, or that Christ was crucified and gave his life so that we could be saved. Is there not some other good teaching? Is there not something better that might fulfill us not just emotionally but also intellectually? If there is nothing in the West, then is there something in the East? Not necessarily Buddhism, but something in Indian philosophy that would answer to that need? These questions reflect the current trend.

Americans first came to know about Buddhism from its importation as one of the philosophies that had arisen in India. The members of the Theosophical Society in America at first studied Buddhism and considered it to be the same as Indian philosophy in general. Then, Swami Vivekānanda [1863–1902] attended the First World's Parliament of Religions held at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, and gave a lecture on Vedānta that was warmly received by the religious world. He died some time thereafter. The Vedānta headquarters are near Calcutta, and there are missionaries who have been dispatched from there residing in various parts of America, including New York, Boston, and Pittsburgh, and on the Pacific coast, San Francisco and Los Angeles. I have also heard recently that a residence was to open in Chicago.

As I mentioned before, this society mainly studies and transmits the religion and philosophy of India. Buddhism is included only in an incidental way, one might say like a parasite or a freeloader. And so a person who makes no distinction between Buddhism and Theosophy might assume that one must be a branch of the other. The relationship between the Vedānta Society and Buddhism is the same. Because of this situation, I was often asked by the Vedānta Society to give speeches when I was in San Francisco. When Shaku Sōen 釈宗演 [1859–1919] went to America recently [1905–1906], he was also asked by various people to give speeches, and apart from the lectures hosted by Japanese people, many were hosted at the lecture halls of the Theosophical Society and Vedānta Society. The Buddhists themselves have no special hall of worship. Because the Nishi Hongwanji's mission office is directed toward Japanese [immigrants], it is difficult for Americans to gather there. At any rate, whether Theosophy or Vedānta, as long as it tasted of truth, people would add it to their medicine

cabinet without complaint, and while Buddhism has been shunted off into a corner in both societies, it has somehow survived.

So that is the situation [in America]: these people have religious convictions not because they understand something about Buddhist principles, but because they simply cannot find solace in the religion they have known up to now, and want to know how to find this peace of mind. Their old religion might have offered them some emotional fulfillment, but what they wish for as well is intellectual fulfillment and wonder if Buddhism can grant that to them. Of course, these people cannot reach a deep understanding by listening to theoretical explanations of the Four Noble Truths and the Twelve Interdependences, and one wonders if there might be something else that can satisfy them immediately. If *dharmakāya* and the karma theory are made comprehensible and explained in a way that is easy to grasp from both the intellectual and emotional aspects, listeners will find that they are completely different from Christianity, and that this difference does not engage their discriminative mental functions as much as it stimulates their curiosity. They will think how interesting Buddhism is and feel grateful for it.

At such places as the Nishi Hongwanji branch office, sermons on Buddhism are sometimes given to Americans but their skill in the first language [of America] is insufficient and it is no easy matter to explain Buddhist principles without the use of philosophical terminology. One doubts how much the listeners can really understand. That is because many of the people who gather at these places to hear the sermons have no intellectual background. In the worst cases, Buddhism is treated like some kind of spell, where misguided faith and superstition are brought together in one place. This is the experience I had at one or two places in California. From this I deduced that it would not be easy to establish a basis for Buddhism in America, in an American way. Putting aside the question of whether or not they fully realize the true spirit of Buddhism, the fact is that it is not impossible that Buddhism will be transmitted to Americans, and it is never hopeless as long as there are people to do this.

Among the American people, there are those who are quite serious. These people have long expressed their feelings directly, and when angry they are angry, and this is shown in their facial expressions. And when they are happy, they laugh and display it without disguise. But the Japanese are not like this. This was pointed out to me by people over there [in America] on several occasions and I am inclined to agree. Japanese, especially women,

are difficult to deal with. Whenever I have Japanese ladies to entertain, I am at a complete loss as to what to do. "Do you like this?" I ask, and all I get is silence for an answer. "Is something wrong?"—silence. In fact, whatever I ask, they are silent, and smiling all the while. If I serve something to eat, and ask, "Is it good? Is it not to your taste?" then once again that smile and the reply "Yes, that's fine." I cannot tell whether they are really satisfied or not. But on the contrary, people in that land [America] are extremely simple, and if they like something they say they like it, if it tastes good they say it tastes good, if it tastes bad they say it tastes bad; they say it like it is. The same thing goes for religion. If they think it is good or bad for them then they say so openly, and so if we were to examine what people like and do not like, I think one would find that they are quite easy to observe. Therefore it is possible to make a few predictions about the future of Buddhism in that land.

Sympathizers among Scholars

Next, there are those believers (that is, sympathizers) who have approached Buddhism from the academic standpoint, and of course these are people who put aside their emotions and emphasize knowledge; they read the literature and enjoy the insights derived, and they enjoy discussing their findings with others. These people do not wait for us to propagate the message, but take the initiative to read freely through the literature, and so there is no need to bring such people to the path; all that we need to do is to tell them what we have to say, and then it is better to let them take it from there. When we do this, we win their sympathy, and it could well be this kind of person that will sow the seeds for the building of [Buddhist] churches one day. I found it like that in one place I went, where I met someone who told me, "I am a Buddhist. I find Buddhism very rational in contrast to Christianity's dogmatics." People like these already have their own thoughts about things, and it is not necessary that they embrace Buddhism, nor is there any need to preach to them. When one is speaking to someone like that, it is enough just to explain in detail what Buddhism is.

In that land [America], the interpretation of Christian teachings has recently undergone a noticeable change, and it can be said it has come to reflect a tendency to fuse with Buddhist thought. From the Buddhist side too it cannot be denied that there are Buddhist doctrines that have come to approach those of Christianity. Recently, an English writer, Reginald John Campbell [1867–1956], published a book called *The New Theology*

[London: George Bell & Sons, 1907], and I have heard that the church where he preaches is always full. This latest work was a recent bestseller and has become famous, but the content so closely approximates Buddhism that were the Christian terminology to be replaced by a Buddhist one, I think that Buddhist followers would probably believe in what it teaches. If I were to show you this book, having changed the terms, you would surely forget that it had originally been a book of Christian sermons. So we would have this peculiar situation in which Christians would say that the book is about Christianity while Buddhists would say it is about Buddhism. In short, there are not a few indications that the flow of thought in Buddhism and Christianity is gradually going in the same direction, and I think this is a most interesting phenomenon indeed.

This is something that is happening in England, but I believe it can be said that in America as well the same kind of thing is occurring to a certain extent. I will have to address the theme of the Buddhist tendencies of Christianity on another occasion and so will not do so here.

THE SITUATION OF BUDDHISM IN EUROPE

The situation of Buddhism in America is just as I have outlined above, but I would like to talk about the situation across the Atlantic in Europe. As you all know, Europe is unlike America, and as an old society, there are many people who are interested in the historical research on Buddhism as if it were a relic from the past. I think it is correct to say that there are few who pursue it from an emotional or intellectual perspective. Whatever it may be, America is always in competitive pursuit of the new, and whether in terms of society or intellect, it strives to attain the new. Europe, by contrast, has a long history and has become set in its ways, and will not change easily.

In June of last year,² a Buddhist Society was formed in London, England, with the intention of carrying out Buddhist research and practice. This was occasioned by the return of a Scotsman, Allan Bennett McGregor [1872–1923], who had traveled to Ceylon some years earlier with the intention of becoming a monk, but finding no suitable elder, went to Burma where he was ordained. He spent seven years doing ascetic practice there, returning

² Translator's note: This part of the translation follows the original article that appeared in *Shin bukkyō*. In the version in *Suzuki Daisetsu zenshū*, the phrase "about seven years ago" is a textual amendment made when the article was published in book form in 1915.

to London only for a brief period last summer. In Burma, this monk made an impression on an English army doctor who was granted leave to return [to London] for the period between the winter of two years ago and the autumn of last year and with whom McGregor stayed while there. With the encouragement of the army doctor, the aforementioned Buddhist Society was established. Its membership comprises some two or three hundred people, all of whom pay an annual membership fee of ten yen, and it issues a quarterly magazine. Also, it meets every Sunday at one of the larger houses of its members for sermons. They of course do not have the funds to build their own temple, and the Society meetings are attended by only about ten, twenty, or at most thirty people.

This Society tends to emphasize practice over principle, observing, like Unshō Rissshi 雲照律師 [1827–1909], the ten precepts, and accepting the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path and the Twelve Interdependences. McGregor, whose Buddhist name is Ānanda Maitreya, is a commendable and impressive monk. As a Theravada believer he is exceedingly disciplined regarding the precepts, and to some degree he is what might be called a precept-hardened person. After another three years of training, he will have completed ten years as a monk, making him a fully-fledged elder qualified to ordain monks himself. If this comes to be, he will probably think of returning to England and building his own monastic community. Of course we cannot tell whether this will come to pass or not, but mustering the will and having the determination to pursue the spiritual path are qualities that Buddhists in our country these days shrink from. Is not this ambition alone an example worth following?

In addition, there are two or three Europeans (Germans) who are in Burma practicing as monks. They too hope to return to Europe to begin their own monastic communities, but whether they will succeed or not remains to be seen.

In Leipzig, Germany, there is a journal called *Der Buddhist*, produced by a man who is still young. It is a bimonthly journal, with one person compiling, translating and editing the materials. In it are texts that we might consider not worthy of translation, but if the journal can get by with this kind of material, that shows there is a market for it, and that Germany is a country with potential for Buddhism. The diligent editor of *Der Buddhist* is a man called Karl Bernhard Seidenstücker [1876–1936], who seems to be an impoverished scholar. This project has been going on for four or five years now, and we can deduce from this that Germany is a place that is not

without its Buddhist sympathizers. If a wealthy person were to assist, the project might be successful.

An issue of *The Buddhist Review* published by The Buddhist Society, London, shows that there is in Hungary, which is next to Austria, a dedicated Buddhist researcher. Also an Italian magazine that devotes much space to articles concerned with Buddhism has introduced a book by Murakami Senshō 村上專精 [1851–1929]. Also, *The Gospel of Buddha* [Chicago, 1894] by Paul Carus [1852–1919], published by Open Court Publishing Company, has been translated into Italian, French, and Spanish. From these developments, I believe it is possible to say that Buddhist thought in Europe is gradually starting to spread.

In addition to those people who are attempting to learn about Buddhism, it is well known to academics that there are also researchers of Buddhist history in Russia, the Netherlands, and Belgium, whose research interests are exclusive of any convictions related to practice or belief.

In light of this situation, the prospects for Buddhism in Europe and America are not without hope. One question that comes to mind is that, when introducing Buddhism to Europe and America in the future, are we simply to introduce Buddhism in its present form, or are we to introduce it through Christianity, that is, should we take Christian thought and reformulate it as Buddhism? Our decision is contingent upon various conditions, historical, social, and ethnic. Reaching a resolution to this problem will not be an easy or swift matter. However, I think that we cannot dispute the fact that Buddhist thought must eventually spread to the West and teach Europeans and Americans from a spiritual perspective.

(Translated by Wayne S. Yokoyama)

