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Christmas Humphreys, 1901–1983

A Pioneer of Buddhism in the West

Our friend Christmas Humphreys has died again. ‘Dying again’ and ‘being born again’ were favourite terms of his, and he was quick to cut across the notion of life and death as a pair of opposites: “Birth and death are the opposites, Life transcends both.”

In 1924 he accepted that his dharma for this life was working in the West ‘to publish and make known the principles of Buddhism, and to encourage the study and application of those principles.’ To this end, together with his wife, he founded a Buddhist Society in London. From that moment until his death on 13th April 1983, nearly sixty years later, he never wavered for a moment from that dedication. At the age of 82 he was still the active President of the Buddhist Society; he had just completed a new article for its magazine *The Middle Way*; he had redrafted his history of Buddhism in Britain; a new radio programme was recorded ready for broadcasting, and he had just written a new poem. We could always count on an immediate smile, a pithy comment, and a helping hand from our ever young-in-heart President. After a long life spent in untiringly and unstintedly giving himself for the good of others, he was still steadily ‘walking on’ towards the goal of enlightenment for all beings. When he died he was, relatively speaking, looking forward to continuing his endeavours in whatever next life he might be useful.

Born on 15th February 1901 into a family famous for its associations with law, he was christened Travers Christmas, names which had been traditional in the Humphreys family for nearly two centuries. Nevertheless, during his happy childhood he was dubbed ‘Toby,’ and remained Toby Humphreys to his family and multitudinous friends for the rest of his life. The family’s motto ‘Be Always Just’ gave him food for thought which in later life led to an easy acceptance of

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the law of karma. He grew up with a natural, joyous Christian faith until the sudden war-time death of his much-loved elder brother. This shocked him into the understanding that no dogmatic form of religion could ever be sufficiently all-embracing to satisfy his needs. At the age of 17, after much self-inquiry and reflection, he recognised that the Buddha offered a Way for himself and for many others like him.

His horizons widened when he went up to Cambridge University to read Law. He found new and stimulating friends; but, above all, he discovered Theosophy—the love of the divine knowledge to be found at the heart of all religions. To his delight he learned that the founders of the Theosophical Society had been Buddhist. Both had taken Pansil; Mme Blavatsky had studied under Tibetan teachers, and Colonel Olcott had done valuable work for Buddhism in Ceylon. With his innate wholeheartedness the young Christmas Humphreys, already in love with the mystery of the totality of all-in-one and one-in-all, formed a determination to follow a practical Buddhist way which might perhaps help his dogmatically-minded English fellow-countrymen to open their minds and hearts to the Buddha. He knew that the ordinary Englishman of that time did not want robes and ritual, but rather a practical and ethical basis for his everyday life, and help in learning to see reality more clearly.

The year 1924 saw the formal opening of both aspects of his future greatness. Early in the year Christmas Humphreys was called to the Bar; this was the commencement of a distinguished career as fine as that of his famous father. He was later to rise to be Senior Prosecuting Counsel, then a Q.C., and finally to become a Judge at the Old Bailey; all the time naturally putting his Buddhist principles into practice and becoming known as ‘the Gentle Judge.’ On November 19th 1924, together with Miss Aileen Faulkner (his future wife), he founded *The Buddhist Lodge*. This later became *The Buddhist Society, London*, and was to prove the pioneer framework for building up the Buddhist movement in Britain. The new Founding President had a dynamic personality and capacity for leadership; a power of vision with an intuitive sense of right action and timing; and, above all, an impressive ability to teach. All this made it possible for a new transmission of the Dharma to take place in the West. Not only did the Dharma flow directly through him but, by being President of the Society, he acted as a catalyst in transforming the climate of English opinion towards acceptance of the seemingly strange new modes of thought flowing from Ceylon, Thailand, Burma, and later from Japan and Tibet. After all, this was no freakish youngster, this was a highly cultured English gentleman whose intelligence and judgement could only be regarded with deep respect.

From very small beginnings the newly-formed Society took shape. Since the last third of the 19th century there had been a flow of English translations from Buddhist Scriptures, almost all Theravada, but these were mainly a basis for

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academic study. Now here were laymen, led by a teacher with a diamond mind, demanding to know: "How can we apply these teachings to our ordinary lives?" There were no precedents for such an adaptation to Western life. When the President married, he wrote a wedding ceremony for himself and future Western Buddhists to use. It soon became necessary to compose a funeral service which could also be performed by lay people, and this was still in use for his own cremation nearly sixty years later. There was no English Sangha; but English Buddhism was laying its own foundations. While ready and waiting to welcome visiting teachers, such as the Anagarika Dharmapala from Ceylon, the platform was deliberately kept open for all schools of Buddha-Dharma.

For many years Christmas Humphreys and his beloved wife, always known as 'Puck,' ran a hospitable and friendly house. This was far larger than necessary for a young couple, so that there should be space in their home for a Buddhist meeting room, a shrine, and a library. It was not until 1943 that this devoted pair, who would be inseparable companions until her death fifty years later, had nurtured the young Society into sufficient maturity to necessitate its own larger premises. During these years knowledge of Theravada grew apace. Christmas Humphreys was an inspired speaker, and by now he had written four books on Buddhism, three on law, and two books of poems. So much vitality, joy and love flowed through his whole being that frequently it could only find expression in poetry. He had many and varied interests—from music to kendo, ballet to herbalism, Jungian thought to the Shakespearean Authorship Society—but equally he had a calm, deep, meditative side to his nature. Also he was unfailingly generous with money, goods, help and encouragement; always he watched for ways in which he could aid anyone. "Can I help you?" was one of his favourite phrases.

With such a man as this, is it surprising that the greatest formative experience during this period was the visit to London of Dr. D. T. Suzuki in connection with the 1936 meeting of the World Congress of Faiths? To have an inner contact with Dr. Suzuki, to see Zen in action, to have a wider glimpse of the glorious realm of Mahayana of which the Zen School is part—all this deepened the understanding of Christmas Humphreys and gave him an extra sparkle. The immediacy of Zen spoke directly to the heart of the man and filled his need.

The war came, and the Society continued its meetings in bomb-torn London. Conditions were extremely difficult, but nevertheless the Society grew. Instead of a group on Mondays only, there was a demand for several meetings a week; some were open for publicly making known all schools of Buddhism, and others were for members who wished to meditate or study more deeply the tenets of any particular school. Gradually a Council was formed to run what was now becoming a national organisation. Christmas Humphreys continued to lead his own pupils in a now Zen-oriented Monday Group, and acted as President, Chairman and Publisher to the Society as a whole, being able to delegate many of the other duties.

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Immediately after the war, Christmas Humphreys had the opportunity to combine his duty as a barrister with his love of Buddhism in a prolonged stay in Japan. This, of course, gave him the opportunity to seek out Dr. Suzuki in Kamakura and they were delighted to see each other after a gap of ten years. Christmas Humphreys continued to spend as much time with him as possible, literally sitting at his feet. He prepared and edited a complete edition of Sensei's work in English, and was delighted to be appointed Agent in Europe for all his writings published there. He accepted as a sacred duty the task of keeping all Suzuki's English writings in print all the time, and his sincere carrying out of this obligation for the rest of his life has helped thousands of Westerners who would not otherwise have had the good fortune to contact Buddha-Dharma in this inspired way. Future visits of Dr. Suzuki to London were planned and later took place in 1953, 1954 and 1958, forging inseparable bonds with Zen and English Buddhism, and laying a firm groundwork for the later flowering of Zen in the West.

Another theme came to the fore while Christmas Humphreys was in Japan and continued to develop throughout his subsequent tour of other Buddhist countries. Since the day of the Buddha the transmission of his teaching had slowly spread during the centuries, and each country had come to specialise in certain aspects of the Dharma. As the living teaching was carried North, South and East, it developed and, being a way of life as well as a religion, it naturally became closely interlinked with the language and customs of each nation. It spread slowly and steadily; it had time to mature as it became fully integrated in each host country. However, after twenty-five centuries Buddhism had come West in the age of speed and instantaneous communication, creating new and interesting problems.

In the short space of one lifetime all schools have reached the English-speaking world. This provides an almost overwhelming mixture of teachings and scriptures, inextricably mingled with the specialist applications of Northern, Southern and Eastern schools. This wisdom comes West dressed in richly woven exotic robes. The first of the many books written by Christmas Humphreys was entitled *What Is Buddhism?*, and one of his lifelong endeavours was to extract the essence of the Buddha's teaching in order that the West might weave its own national costume and learn to live the Way in its own everyday experience. To this end, after much meditation, he compiled *Twelve Principles of Buddhism* which all schools could accept as basic. On this foundation English practice could develop.

Another problem raised by the age of instantaneous communication is that of sudden bulk confrontation of these widespread schools holding specialist tenets. Christmas Humphreys felt it essential for all Buddhists to find out where they agreed rather than where they differed, and to proclaim the Dharma which they held in common. His *Twelve Principles* helped to avoid sectarianism and to

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soften the cultural shock as masses of Buddhist monks and laymen came face to face for the first time. Dr. G. P. Malalasekera was another great figure of our time who saw this danger, and when he founded the *World Fellowship of Buddhists* Christmas Humphreys was happy to become a Vice-President. Through the work of such men Buddhism is consolidating throughout the world.

On his return to England, Christmas Humphreys continued working with the ever-growing Buddhist Society and celebrated his 50th birthday with the publication of *Buddhism* in a Penguin paperback. This book has done more than any other to propagate the Dharma in Britain, and perhaps in the whole Western world. It has become the standard text-book, is available everywhere, and has already sold over a million copies. Here was the turning point; from being of minor fringe interest, Buddhism became a talked-of subject. Streams of people came for more information; and groups formed in several English towns, wishing to be affiliated to the main Society.

Now the seedling Dharma was well established and must be brought to maturity. Lecturing, writing, radio, television, teaching in the Society, were all dealt with. The resultant letters and requests were invariably answered on the same day. He always carried what he jokingly referred to as his N.T.B.D. list (short for the next-things-to-be-done); and in spare moments between all this and his demanding legal career his buoyant heart still overflowed into poetry. His ever-ready (often impish) wit and twinkling eye endeared him to all.

During this period came contact with the Tibetans and, at the request of the Dalai Lama, he visited and reported on all of the exile camps in India, and then assisted His Holiness in creating a *Council of Tibet* to co-ordinate work for the Tibetans in exile and the preservation of Tibetan Buddhism.

These were busy years, and gradually Buddhism became completely accepted in England. Buddhist lay-groups were forming and re-forming in various towns, for the first time independently of the efforts made from the Buddhist Society in London. Monks from various schools were being invited to teach; Ceylon and Thailand were enlarging their missions, and the Dharma thrived.

In 1977 came the outward and visible sign of the maturity of his life's work. Christmas Humphreys, as Founding President of the oldest and largest Buddhist organisation in Great Britain, was invited to be present at the Thanksgiving Service in St. Paul's Cathedral in commemoration of the Queen's Silver Jubilee. This Royal mark of recognition showed Buddhism to be fully accepted as one of the resident religions of England.

Now, in the year of his death, there are in Great Britain about a hundred Buddhist organisations. They range from monasteries with several acres of ground, through University groups and Societies with their own premises, down to those with a dozen or so members who meet in private houses, in the same way that the Buddhist Society itself started. The Buddha-Dharma is in the

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British Isles to stay!

How is it possible for us to express our gratitude for a man of such nobility? We can only marvel that one person was able to do so much to help so many. None whom his presence touched remained unchanged; indeed, the warm radiance of his life's work is rippling throughout Western civilisation wherever a place is found for the Buddha's word to be spoken.

Thank you, Christmas Humphreys.

MURIEL DAW

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During his life Christmas Humphreys wrote more than 30 books. Of these, his own favourites were:

Concentration and Meditation (The Buddhist Society, 1935)

Via Tokyo (Hutchinson, 1948)

Zen Buddhism (George Allen & Unwin, 1949)

Buddhism (Penguin Books, 1951)

A Western Approach to Zen (George Allen & Unwin, 1952)

Walk On! (The Buddhist Society, 1956)

Buddhist Poems (George Allen & Unwin, 1971)

The Search Within (Sheldon Press, 1977)

Both Sides of the Circle (George Allen & Unwin, 1978)