

Buddhism in Europe

By Tampalawela DHAMMARATANA¹

I: Introduction

Buddhism has become one of the leading and popular spiritual traditions on European soil. One has not found very clear information regarding the first Buddhist interaction between European people and Buddhism. According to some researches, the Buddhist population today exceeds in Europe 4 million followers without counting a greater number of sympathizers, who learn and practice the teaching of the Buddha. In this study, we wish to concentrate in brief on how Buddhism came to be known in Europe and how it has been influencing European Society.

II: Early Contacts with Buddhism in Europe

According to available historical information Europe began to interact with Buddhism during the period of Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE) and of the ancient Greek empire.² History reveals that ruler Alexander the Great had expanded his empire with military power to Western Asia and northeastern Africa. His territorial expansion resulted in the conquest of the northwestern parts of India in the 3rd century BCE.³ There is evidence that Greek colonies in the region adopted Indian Buddhism and developed Greco-Buddhist Culture in the 4th century BCE.⁴ The Seleucid Empire founded by Alexander the Great and the Greco-Bactrian kingdoms held sway for more than two centuries.

The second important historical evident reveals that the Greek and Indian rulers developed direct contacts and exchanged their political and cultural values. It is important to note that such relationship became strong due to sending Greek Ambassadors to the court of the Mauryan Empire. Among them were Megasthenes (350-290 BCE), and Deimachus (3rd Century BCE), who played an important role at the courts of King Chandragupta (340-297 BCE) and King Bindusāra respectively.⁵ Ambassador Megasthenes lived in the ancient capital of Pataliputra, present day Patnā. During his diplomatic career in India, he never forgot to record facts on Indian culture, civilization, administrative policies and many other valuable details. His remarkable work on India was known as “*Indikā*” which, unfortunately, has been lost. The

¹ This Article is a summary of a lecture of Zoom Conference delivered by the author, which was organized by the University of Artois in France 2020.

² See: *The History of the Life and Reign of Alexander the Great*, by Quintus Curtius Rufus, translated from Latin with supplementary notes, and a map, Vol.1, London, 1809, p. 116f.

³ *Alexander the Great*, I, Narrative, by W.W. Tarn, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1948, p.66f.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Age of the Nandas and Mauryas*, edited by K.A. Nilakānta Sāstri, Published for the Bhāratiya Itihāsa Parishad, Motilal Banarsidass, Banaras, 1952, p. 46f.; See also: *Asoka, the Buddhist Emperor of India*, by Vincent A. Smith, Clarendon Press, Oxford, MCMXX, p. 18f. “ Greek writers have preserved curious anecdotes of private friendly correspondence between Seleukos and Chandragupta and between Antiochos and Bindusāra, of value only as indications that the Indian monarchs communicated with their European allies on terms of perfect equality. The mission of Dionysios, who was sent to India, and no doubt to the Maurya court, by Ptolemy Philadelphos, King of Egypt (B.C. 285-247), must have arrived in the reign of either Bindusāra or his son Asoka”.

above-mentioned two diplomats, who lived in India, reported on the Greek Empire, on Indian civilization, Buddhist culture and philosophy.

The other important historical evidence is the interaction between the Greek King Menander or popularly known as King Miṇḍa, and the great Buddhist Master Nāgasena.⁶ King Miṇḍa reigned from Sāgala, modern Sialkot in Pakistan. The meeting and debate between King Miṇḍa and Master Nāgasena, widely known in the Buddhist world, is recorded in the *Milindapañha*.⁷ The *Milindapañha* is recognized as a Canonical text in the Burmese Buddhist tradition, included as part of the *Khuddakanikāya*. This same text also exists in Chinese, translated from a Sanskrit version known as the *Nāgasena Sūtra*. In Theravāda Buddhism, especially in Thailand and in Sri Lanka, the *Milindapañha* is not recognized as a Canonical Buddhist text, but as an extremely important Buddhist document. King Miṇḍa became a pious Buddhist after the above noted famous dialogue with Venerable Nāgasena and remained devoted to Buddhism until his last breath. In evidence of the great King Menandra or Miṇḍa, there is an historical and archaeological testimony: a gold coin with a Karoṣṭhi inscription: “*Mahārājasa tratadasa Menandrasa*,” of saviour King Menander, Rev. Palm of Victory’.⁸

Many scholars believe that the Gandhāra tradition of Buddhist art shows Greek influence on Indian Buddhist art and sculpture. Since then, Buddhism naturally mixed with Greek culture and is known as Greco-Buddhism. This development of Buddhism seems to have continued until the time of the Great Buddhist Emperor Asoka⁹, who sent missionaries to the Hellenistic and other parts of the World,¹⁰ where Buddhism was established in many places including Alexandria in Africa. Early Greek and Indian cultural exchange naturally influenced even poetry. In his famous Odes (11,10), Horace (1st century BC), a renowned Latin poet, highlights

⁶ *The Questions of King Milinda*, translated from the Pāli by T.W. Rhys Davids, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1890, p. 36ff.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See Google Web site :<https://www.google.com/search?q=King+Menender+gold+coin&sxrf=>

⁹ *Op.cit. Asoka, the Buddhist Emperor of India*, by Vincent A. Smith, Clarendon Press, Oxford, MCMXX, p.9ff.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 42f. « Rock Edict XIII, published with the rest of the Fourteen Rock Edicts in the fourteenth ‘regional year’ (B.C.256), gives a detailed list of the countries to which the imperial missionaries of the Law of Piety had been dispatched. We are told that His Majesty sought the conversion of even the wild forest tribes, and that missions were sent to the nations, on the borders of his empire, who are enumerated as the Yonas, Kāmbojas, Nabhapamtis, of Nabhaka, Bhojas, Pitenikas, Andhrās, and Pulindas, that is to say, various more or less civilized tribes occupying the slopes of the Himalayas, the regions beyond the Indus, and parts of the Deccan and Central India, which were under imperial control, although not included in the settled provinces administered by the emperor or his viceroys. Envoys were also sent as far as the Tāmraparni river, to the Chola and Pāndya kingdoms of the extreme south of the peninsula, which were independent. But these operations extensive though they were, did not satisfy the zeal of Asoka, who ventured to send his proselytizing agents far beyond the limits of India, into the dominions of Antiochos Theos, King of Syria and Western Asia (B.C. 261-246); Ptolemy Philadelphos, King of Egypt (B.C.285-247), Magas, King of Cyrene in Northern Africa, half-brother of Ptolemy (about B.C.285-258), Antigonos Gonatas, King of Macedonia (B.C.277-239), and Alexander, King of Epirus (acc.B.C.272). Rock Edict V adds to the list of border nations given above the names of the Rāshtrikas of the Maratha country, and the Gandhāras of the Peshawar frontier, nothing that there were yet others unnamed; while Rock Edict II, which again names Antiochos, with a reference to his Hellenistic neighbours, as well as the Cholas, and Pāndyas, as far as the Tāmraparni river, adds the Satiyaputra and Keralaputra kingdoms of the Western coast to the list of countries in which healing arrangements for man and beast were carried out. The date of the missions is fixed approximately by the fact that the year B.C.258 is the latest in which all the Greek sovereigns named were alive together. The statements in the two edicts quoted constitute almost the whole of the primary and absolutely trustworthy evidence concerning Asoka’s missionary organization”.

in his Latin classic: “ Juste milieu précieux comme l’Or” (*Aurea mediocritas*).¹¹ This expression of Horace was surely influenced by the Buddhist teachings of the Middle Path or *Majjhimapaṭipadā*.

The contact of European people with Asian Buddhist culture is again endorsed by the Italian traveller Marco Polo (1254-1324), who visited China.¹² According to his travel map, he recorded many interesting facts on Chinese and other Asian Cultures. His documentation deals with the followings:

- (a) Description of regions of the Middle-east and Central Asia
- (b) of China and the court of Kublai Khan
- (c) of Japan, India, Sri Lanka, South- East Asia and Africa and of
- (d) Wars of the Mongols in some regions

In addition to the above-mentioned early historical information, some knowledge of Buddhism and its philosophical and cultural message was brought to Europe by commercial travellers to Asia. Because European ships transported commercial goods to Asia, naturally they stopped over in Indian Ocean ports, especially in Mumbai, India, Colombo in ancient Ceylon and in many other ports on Asian shipping routes, where Buddhism and its rich civilization interacted with European commercial travellers.¹³

III: Buddhism Made Known in Europe by Academics

In modern history thanks to academic circles, Buddhism became known in Europe through scholars’ learning and writing on Buddhism as a Philosophy. Among them were Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Eugene Burnouf (1801-1852), Sir Edwin Arnold (1832-1904), Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891) and many others. In the very beginning, European scholars began to study Indian Vedic and Brāhmanic texts and became familiar with Sanskrit, Pāli, Prākṛit and other Indian sub-continental languages. Many scholars began to specialize in the *Bhagavat Gītā*, *Rāmāyana*, and Vedic texts giving new inspiration to them. By learning Indian culture and philosophy, they also discovered Buddhist philosophy with its many centuries of history. They were deeply impressed by the critical and philosophically liberal teachings

¹¹ See, Horace, Odes. 11.10.

¹² *The Travels of Marco Polo (The Venetian)*, Revised from Marsden’s Translation and edited with Introduction by Manuel Komroff, published by W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1926, p. 23f.

¹³ *Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Historical Topography of Ancient and Medieval Ceylon* (New Series, Volume VI, Special Number), by C.W. Nicholas, Colombo, 1963. P. 7. “In Greek literature of the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C. accounts appeared in the writings of Onesicritus, the chief pilot of Alexander the Great, Megasthenes, the Greek Ambassador to the Indian court of Chandragupta, and Eratosthenes, the first of the geographers about what they had heard concerning Tabrobane. These accounts, since they were not based upon personal knowledge, were as is to be expected, partly fabulous but in this respect they were not unique, because fanciful notions about the Island and its people persisted up to the 2nd century, even after Greek and Roman merchants and mariners had long been trading in its ports. Onesicritus, the earliest European writer, would have gathered his information about Ceylon from the sea-faring men in the Indus delta, and it is evident that the Island of Tāmbapaṇṇi had a reputation among the people of that region which it could not have acquired unless sea communication between the Indus delta and Ceylon had been established well before the time of Onesicritus’ journey down the Indus (B.C.325)”.

given by the Buddha.¹⁴ Such teachings include the refutation of eternity regarding an *Ātman* and *Brahman* or a creator God, of the permanent soul theory and openness to critical and analytical understanding of Buddhism.¹⁵ Among such scholars, Prof. Eugene Burnouf (1801-1852) is recognized as the father of Oriental and Indian studies in France and in Europe. His valuable works such as *Essai sur Pāli* (1826), *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme Indien* (1844), or *Le Lotus de la Bonne Loi, Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra* (1852) have proved most valuable and helpful to study and learn Buddhism. After his great contribution to Buddhism in France and in Europe, his students have continued his path of academic contribution with great support given by the French Government. Due to such encouragement and acceptance of Buddhism in France several prestigious institutions were established under the guidance and support of French authority. Among them are (a) INALCO (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales), (b) Institut de Civilisation Indienne, (c) Sanskrit and Chinese Chairs at the College de France, (d) the Chair of the Department of Comparative Indian Philosophy at University of Sorbonne, (e) Ecole Française d'Extreme Orient etc. At these institutes Buddhism is taught and opportunities are offered to pursue academic and scientific research. In other European countries, too, scholars began to take a keen interest in Buddhism. Mention should be made, in particular, of Prof. and Mrs. Rhys Davids who founded the Pāli Text Society (PTS) in London 1881. The PTS has been publishing ever since until now Buddhist Pāli texts in Roman characters and their translations into English. The early PTS scholars – the Rhys Davids, Childers, I.B. Horner and others-had been in close contact with erudite Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka who were very helpful to Western scholars in their study of Pāli and interpretation of Buddhist texts.

IV: Establishment of Buddhist Centres

In the beginning of the 20th century, Buddhism was known in Europe as an Asian religion and a philosophy. There was a great interest by European intellectuals to deeply learn this great tradition. Due to that reason and because of the celebration of the 2500 years of *Buddhajayanti* (the reaching of 2500 years of *Mahāparinirvāṇa* of Buddha Sākyamuni Gotama), many young intellectuals as well as cultured people began to visit Asian Buddhist countries. Theravāda countries, such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and those of the Mahāyāna tradition, Vietnam, Korea, Japan and China were visited by many Westerners. Having seen the extraordinary Buddhist civilization in Asia, many of them turned to Buddhism. Fascinated by Buddhism in Europe, many embraced the Buddha's teaching of non-violence, peace, freedom of thought, against all kinds of discrimination, and of the vast and deep philosophy in canonical texts. Dr. Paul Dahlke, a German physician who visited ancient Ceylon, was fascinated by the 2500 years of Buddhist cultural heritage of Ceylon and became a Buddhist. By regularly visiting Ceylon, he learned the sacred language of Buddhism, Pāli, under the tutorship of the Venerable Sūriyagoda Sri Sumaṅgala Nāyaka Thera and from other monastic scholars. Having grasped the basic teaching of Buddhist doctrine, he converted to Buddhism and established the first

¹⁴ *Āṅguttaranikāya*, Part 1, (see *Kālāma Sutta*), edited by The Rev. Richard Morris, second edition Revised by A.K. Warder, PTS, London, 1999, p.188ff.

¹⁵ *Vinaya*, Vol.1, p. 13-14 (*Anattalakkhanasutta*) ; *Abhidharmakośa*, ch.IX.

Theravāda Buddhist centre in Berlin, Germany, by offering his own property under the name of “Das Buddhistische Haus” in 1924.

In introducing Buddhism to European countries, the Mahābodhi Society ¹⁶ was most helpful. As the first South Asian Buddhist Society, it was established under the great leadership of the late Anagārika Dharmapāla or Ven. Devamitta (1864-1933) in 1891 and had played an impressive role in creating another Theravāda Buddhist Centre in London, United Kingdom, in 1926. For these great initiatives, Mme. Mary Louise Foster (1865-1960) supported financially to transform Foster House in Ealing, London, to become a Sri Lankan Buddhist Vihāra under the auspices of the Mahābodhi Society. This second Theravāda Buddhist centre in Europe later on shifted to several locations under the name of London Buddhist Vihāra. This was the first Sri Lankan traditional Buddhist temple away from Ceylon, which began to disseminate Buddhism to both British as well as other Asian Communities who lived in United Kingdom. As resident monks of the London Buddhist Vihāra leading scholar monks from Ceylon came to England and gave teachings on Buddhism to a large public. Among such missionary monks of the Mahābodhi Society, Ven. Nārada Mahāthera (1898-1983), the Ven. Dr. Hammalawa Saddhātissa Nāyaka Thera (1914-1990) and others have been continuing to disseminate Buddhism in U.K. until today.

As in many other European countries, in France Buddhism became popular due to many reasons. As is well-known, the political crises of Asian countries, gave opportunity to seek political asylum in Europe, first of all in France. The immigrated Asians began to set up their temples or ethnic centres, which became more popular in Paris and many parts of France. However, the intellectual and academic tradition of Buddhism has been rooted in this great country since the period of King Louis XIV (1638-1715). According to historical evidence, the Ambassador of France in Siam, in modern Thailand, provided the first introductions to Siamese Buddhism.

In regard to creating and establishing Buddhist temples in France, a good example is the Grand Pagode Bois de Vincennes, the ancient African architectural building, which was created for a Colonial Exhibition in 1931 as Pavilion of Cameroun and Togo. This large pavilion was transformed into a Buddhist temple in 1977 and was inaugurated by the former President of the French Republic, Monsieur Jacques Chirac. The Grand Pagoda of Vincennes displays a very large statue of Buddha Sākyamuni, which was designed according to the Theravāda tradition of Buddhism. After the establishing of this first temple in Paris, many other centres and temples were founded such as Japanese Zen meditation centres, Tibetan Buddhist temples and Vietnamese Buddhist organizations. In consideration of all traditions of Buddhism, special reference should be made to the great service rendered by the Venerable Taisen Deshimaru (1914-1982), a Japanese Zen Master, to Ven. Thich Huyen-Vi (1926-2005), a Vietnamese scholar monk and to Geshe Lobzang Tengya (1927-2019), a Tibetan Master of the Vajrayāna tradition, to develop Buddhism in France and in Europe. It is to be noted that regularly the 14th Dalai Lama visited France, and his teachings widely attracted thousands of people. In the last century Madame Alexandra David Neel (1868-1969) had already done a great service to Buddhism in France and in Europe by writing many books, and by her other activities for the propagation of Buddhism.

¹⁶ The Mahābodhi Society was established in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1891, in order to safeguard Buddhist holy places of India and Sri Lanka and to revive the international Buddhist community.

V: European Buddhist Union

In the 1980ies some French Buddhists realized that there was a need to establish a national Buddhist Union in France in order to develop Buddhist networks among all Buddhist communities in France. One of the main objectives in creating such a national organization was to organize an annual *Vesak* celebration (the thrice sacred events: birth, Enlightenment and Mahāparinirvāna of Sākyamuni Gotama the Buddha), with the participation of all Buddhists in France. The first meeting was held at Place de la Sorbonne in Paris and the French Buddhist Union as a national Buddhist Federation in France was founded in 1986¹⁷. This national Buddhist Union became the officially responsible institute to contact the French Government. The new Buddhist movement in France spread to other neighbour countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Italy, United Kingdom and many other countries which established their own national Buddhist Unions. This was a very successful establishment, because the Buddhist communities became recognized by their respective governments and by some countries even support was granted and necessary guidance to practice one's spiritual life without any hindrance. It is to be noted that thanks to such national Buddhist Federations in many countries in Europe official permission was given to telecast Buddhism in their national televisions.

Moreover, some leading Buddhists thought to set up an umbrella European Buddhist organization in order to develop Buddhist networks in all European countries. As a result, with a great support of all national Buddhist Federations, the European Buddhist Union was established in London, United Kingdom, in 1975. The first President of the European Buddhist Union to be elected was Judge Paul Arnold. Due to his indefatigable work and that of the successive Presidents of the European Buddhist Union, Buddhism has even become recognized by the European Parliament as one of the spiritual and philosophical traditions to deal with ethical and philosophical matters in the civil society. Now at this stage, Buddhism has become very popular on European soil, and the number of Buddhist temples of different Buddhist traditions, meditation centres of Asian as well as European Buddhists throughout Europe is impressive. At the beginning of the 21st century, Buddhism has become one of the well-known spiritual traditions in Europe.

Another milestone in the development of Buddhism in France and in Europe was the official recognition of the World Fellowship of Buddhists as a non-governmental organization at UNESCO in 2006. Since then the Buddhist community has a voice in the diplomatic community at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. It is to be noted that Ven. Dr. Tampalawela Dhammaratana, as a Consultant to the Division of Philosophy and Ethics of UNESCO and Vice-President of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in France, represented the Buddhist communities at UNESCO for more than 15 years. During this period, he very successfully organized Buddhist cultural events including Conferences, celebrations and forums with the support of diplomatic

¹⁷ The founding members of the French Buddhist Union was Ven. Dr. Tampalawela Dhammaratana, Prof. Jacques Martin, Rev. Roland Rech, Ven. Denny Rinpoche, Monsieur Bernard Lebeau, Dr. Patricia Gaden and other two members. Prof. Jacques Martin was elected as the first President of the organization. After his demise, Rev. Roland Rech, Dr. Patricia Gaden and Ven. Dr. Tampalawela Dhammaratana have continued the mission of the Buddhist Union. This national Buddhist Union in France continues its mission to promote Buddhism, peace and spiritual development.

missions of Asian countries represented at UNESCO. Thanks to the great support from many Buddhist leaders, including monks, nuns and generous devotees of Buddhism, today Buddhism is recognized as one of the living spiritual traditions guiding to heal human sufferings with uncountable people on the European continent.

VI: Conclusion

Buddhism today is well recognized in European countries. With its freedom of thought, intellectual conformity, scientific acceptance and open doors to wisdom and to one's own emancipation Buddhism has become a leading intellectual and spiritual force in Europe. Since the last century, Buddhism has become one of the great spiritual traditions in the West. The Buddha's sublime teachings have enlightened so many cultured, educated and peace-loving people in Europe.

About the Author:

Ven. Tampalawela Dhammaratana is a well-known Buddhist scholar, received his Ph.D. degree from the University of Sorbonne (Paris IV), France. He was a Consultant to UNESCO's Division of Philosophy and Ethics where he collaborated implementing the Universal Ethics Project. In addition to that he also worked as the copy-editor of the History of Humanity volume VI and VII in the UNESCO Culture Sector published in 2008. Currently he is the founder President of Frankfurt Buddhist Academy in Germany. He has published a number of scientific research articles in French and in English published in University Journals. In 2022, he has been honoured with a Felicitation volume by international scholars entitled "Dharmayatra" published by NUVIS press in Paris.