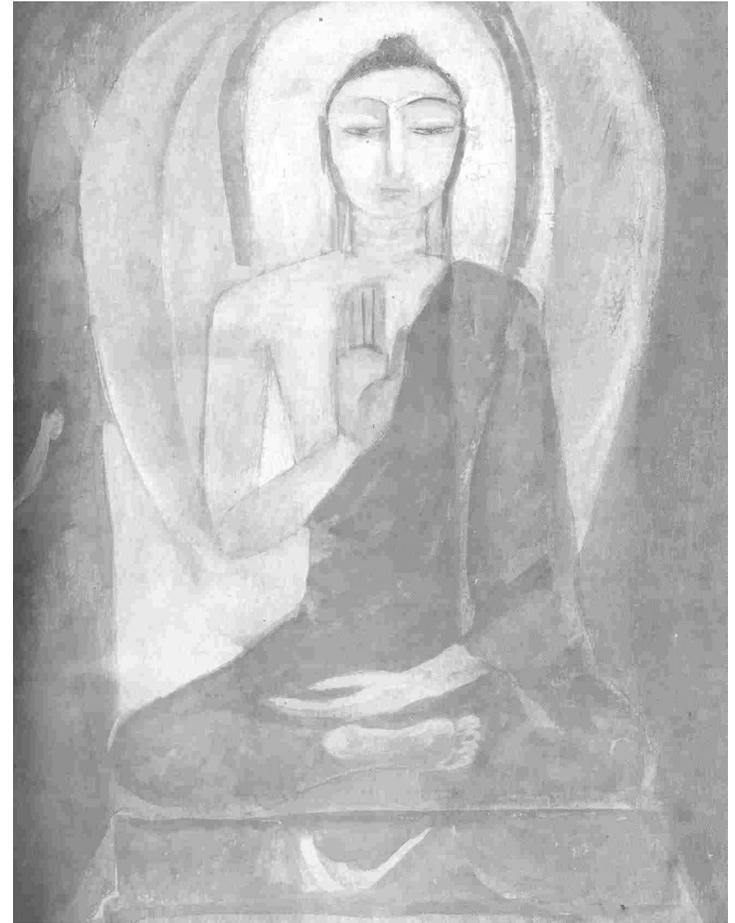


The Appeal of Buddhism in the West



Radhika Abeysekera

Gotama the Buddha

The Gotama Buddha is the most dynamic personality we know of, who lived and worked upon earth. He was a rational moralist, whose compassion for all living beings and whose devotion to their needs seem to have been boundless. The most striking feature about the Buddha is an almost unique combination of a cool scientific head and the profound sympathy of a warm and loving heart. This perhaps is the reason why the life of the Buddha has universal appeal. His teaching is clear and simple and in close harmony with modern ideas. It is, beyond all dispute, the achievement of one of the most penetrating intellects the world has ever seen. The path the Buddha showed us is the only path humanity must tread if it is to escape stress and suffering.

Moni Bagchee
(Adapted from) *Our Buddha*

Monasteries and Residential Meditation Retreats

Abhayagiri Forest Monastery www.abhayagiri.org

North of St. Francisco in Redwood Valley this monastery is headed by Ajahn Passana and Ajahn Amaro.

Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, www.amaravati.org

Publications and details regarding the Amaravati Forest Monastery, UK, which is headed by Ajahn Sumedho.

Birken Forest Monastery www.birken.ca

Set in beautiful British Columbia, Canada this monastery is headed by Ajahn Sona.

Bodhinyana and Dhammasara monasteries www.bswa.org

Headed by Ajahn Brahmavamsa and Ajahn Sister Vayama these monasteries in Australia provide ordination for monks and nuns.

Dhammaduta, www.parami.org/duta/duta.htm

Theravada Bhikku Sangha in the Buddhist borderlands.

Metta Forest Monastery www.mettaforest.org

Located in an Avocado grove this beautiful monastery in California is headed by Ajahn Geoff author of “Wings to Awakening” and “Mind like Fire Unbound”.

Vipassana Meditation, www.dhamma.org

Vipassana meditation retreats and talks as taught by S.N. Goenka. Includes scheduled residential Vipassana meditation retreats.

Books for Purchase on line

Non profit educational organizations where books and tapes on Theravada Buddhism are available for purchase.

Buddhist Cultural Centre www.buddhistcc.com

Buddhist Publication Society www.bps.lk

Pariyatti www.pariyatti.com

The Appeal of Buddhism in the West

Many many years ago, while traveling in Tibet, the 8th century Indian sage Padmasambhava made the following prediction; “ *When the iron eagle flies and horses run on wheels, the Tibetan people will be scattered over the earth and the Dhamma will go to the land of the red man*” (the colour of Westerners or Caucasians was considered to be red by Asians). We now live in an era of iron eagle airplanes and fast paced cars that have taken the place of horses on wheels and the Tibetan people are scattered all over the world. True to his prediction the Buddha Dhamma (teachings of the Buddha) has spread from the mountains of Tibet and the forest monasteries of Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma to the West. Buddhism is one of the fastest growing religions in North America, Europe and Australia. Buddhism has taken root in the West as ordained monks, nuns, and lay devotees from the West practice and teach the Dhamma to both Western and Eastern audiences.

The Appeal of Buddhism

What has caused this surge of interest in Buddhism? While it is impossible to name one single cause, I would like to begin by quoting some well-known Western monks who have adopted the Buddha Dhamma and dedicated their lives to the practice and spread of the Teachings. When Bhikkhu Bodhi of the Bodhi Monastery in USA was questioned why he felt Buddhism was becoming so popular in the United States of America, he replied:

“It is not difficult to understand why Buddhism should appeal to Americans at this particular junction of our history. Theistic religions have lost their hold on the minds of many educated Americans and this has opened up a deep spiritual vacuum that

needs to be filled. For many, materialistic values are profoundly unsatisfying, and Buddhism offers a spiritual teaching that fits the bill. It is rational, experiential, practical, and personally verifiable. It brings concrete benefits that can be realized in one's own life; it propounds lofty ethics and an intellectually cogent philosophy. Also less auspiciously, it has an exotic air that attracts those fascinated by the mystical and esoteric¹".

Ajahn Sumedho, the Chief Monk of the Amaravati Forest Monastery in the United Kingdom was asked why he chose Buddhism as his religion and path to emancipation. He said:

What impressed me about Buddhism was that it did not ask me merely to believe. It was a way where one was free to doubt. It offered a practical way of finding out the Truth through one's own experience rather than through accepting the teachings of other people.

I realized that was the way I had to do it because it is in my nature to doubt and question rather than to believe. Therefore religions that ask one to accept on faith were simply out. I could not even begin to get near them.²"

Bhikku Bodhi and Ajahn Sumedo have given us a starting point for examining the reasons for the marked increase of Western interest in the Buddha Dhamma. However, to have a full understanding of this phenomenon including why it is happening at this point in time in our history we have to examine the nature and character of those that are adopting the Buddha's path. This examination would lead us to the cause of the Western interest in Buddhism at a time when there is a decline of Buddhism in Eastern countries such as Korea and Sri Lanka.

¹"Climbing to the Top of the Mountain" an interview with Bhikkhu Bodhi at the Bodhi Monastery in USA. Insight Journal fall 2002.

²"Ajahn Sumedho Interviewed" by Roger Wheeler Buddhasasana web site.

Resources for further exploration

Bhikku Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words*

Dalai Lama His Holiness, *Ancient Wisdom Modern World*

Levine Noah, *Dharma Punx*

Hart William, *The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation*

Hetherington Ian, *Realizing Change: Vipassana Meditation in Action*

Khema Ayya, *When the Iron Eagle Flies – Buddhism for the West*

Kornfield Jack, *A Path with Heart*

Smith Huston, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*

Doing Time Doing Vipassana (DVD) *Dramatic results of Vipassana meditation among inmates in India's Tihar jail.*

Theravada books on line

Access to Insight, www.accesstoinsight.org/

Translations of the Pali Text and publications of Thai Forest Monastery Tradition.

Buddhanet, www.Buddhanet.net

A comprehensive Buddhist Information and Education Service initiated by Australian meditation monk Venerable Pannavaro.

BuddhaSasana, www.saigon.com/~anson/

A wide range of excellent publications on Buddhism by well known monks, nuns and lay devotees.

*Abandon wrong. It can be done.
If it were impossible to do
I would not urge you to.
But since it can be done,
I say to you. "Abandon wrong."
Anguttara Nikaya II, 19*

*Winning gives birth to hostility.
Losing, one lies down in pain.
The calmed lie down with ease,
Having set winning and losing aside.
Samyutta Nikaya III.14*

*Hatred is not appeased by hatred
Hatred is appeased by loving kindness
This is an eternal truth.
Dhammapada 5*

*Though one may conquer
A thousand times a thousand men in battle,
yet he indeed is the noblest victor
Who conquers himself.
Dhammapada 103*

*If one's understanding is a result of
Faith, preference or blind conviction, one should maintain,
"This is my faith, this is my preference."
One should avoid coming to the conclusion
"This alone is Truth all else is false".
Majjhima Nikaya 95*

*An intelligent person should strive
For awakening Truth and experience of Truth.
After these two steps there is knowledge
verified and experienced.
It is not view (or faith) any longer.
Majjhima Nikaya 95*

Darren Nelson in his article, "*Why is Buddhism the Fastest Growing Religion in Australia?*"³ asks the question, "How is it possible that a 2500 year old philosophy, which began five hundred years before Christianity and one thousand years before the Muslim faith is relevant to modern life in Australia?" In answering his question he suggests the following: "*It does not preach a dogma of a strange cult, nor seek converts with evangelistic fervor. Those Australians who actively convert to Buddhism do so voluntarily, and are usually well-educated middle-age professionals who are attracted to a sense of inner peace.*"

Jan Nattier in her article "*American Buddhists: Who are they?*"⁴ confirms this socio-economic assessment of the Western Buddhist, which she has termed Elite Buddhism. She claims that the American Buddhist is upper-middle class, well educated, financially comfortable and overwhelmingly of European-American constituency. Recent statistics and information seems to confirm this assessment. While 2.5% of the American population are of the Jewish faith 25% of the American Buddhist population were formerly of the Jewish faith. The concentration of Jewish Buddhists then is 10 times more in the Buddhist population than in the average American population. In general Jewish Americans are well educated, financially comfortable and typically at the high end of the socio-economic scale.

In the last decade the Western media has also focused its attention on Buddhism. Several years ago the C.B.C. radio program *Tapestry* claimed that Buddhism was the fastest

³"Why is Buddhism the fastest Growing Religion in Australia" by Darren Nelson. June 1998, Buddhasasana web site. <http://www.saigon.com>

⁴"Buddhism Comes to Main Street" by Ms Jan Nattier, Associate professor of Buddhist studies, Indiana University. The Wilson Quarterly, Spring 1997. Buddhasasana web site <http://www.saigon.com>

growing religion in North America. By the middle of 1999 The Dharma Web Ring was the largest religious web ring in the world with the highest number of daily hits. America's fascination with Buddhism has spread to Hollywood and been translated into such movies as *Little Buddha*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, and *Kundun*. In October 1999, the *Times* magazine was titled, *America's Fascination with Buddhism*. It focused on celebrities such as Steven Seagal, Tina Turner, Richard Gere, Adam Yauchand, and Phil Jackson who have adopted the Buddha's Teaching and incorporated it into their daily lives. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 has through his talks, seminars and publications brought the Buddha to the forefront and made the Dhamma synonymous with peace and compassion.

What are the characteristics of the Buddhist philosophy that attracts well-educated upper middle class Westerners and celebrities? Bhikku Bodhi acknowledged a fundamental change in society when he said, "*Theistic religions have lost their hold on many educated Americans.*" With Western science's acceptance of Darwin's Theory of Evolution and the archeological and geological evidence that dates the earth as being many millions of years old many schools, universities and museums have updated their curriculums. Today few people accept that the world was created in six days.

Events in the last decade such as September 11, 2001 in USA have further eroded the belief of an omnipotent compassionate creator God. More and more educated Westerners are questioning the cause of physically and mentally challenged babies and the role of an omnipotent God in a world filled with pain and suffering. Recent statistics published by the World Hunger web site had significant impact on the West. Current estimates state that one person dies of starvation every 4

Wisdom from the 6th century BC – Gotama Buddha

*Mind precedes all things;
mind is their chief, their maker.
If one speaks or acts with a mind that is pure,
Happiness then follows like your shadow.
If one speaks or acts with a mind that is impure,
Suffering then follows like the cart wheel behind the ox.*
Dhammapada 1 and 2

*As a mother would risk her life
To protect her child, her only child,
Even so should one cultivate a boundless heart
to all living beings.*
Sutta Nipata I, 8

*Overcome the angry by non anger;
Overcome the wicked by goodness;
Overcome the miser by generosity
Overcome the liar by truth.*
Dhammapada 223

*"As I am, so are others;
As others are so am I."
Having thus identified self and others,
Harm no one nor have them harmed.*
Sutta Nipata III, 11

*If a person does good,
he should do it again and again.
Develop a penchant for it.
The accumulation of good works brings ease.*
Dhammapada 118

*Hate brings great misfortune,
Hate churns up and harms the mind;
This fearful danger lies within
Most people understands this not.*
Itivuttaka 88

Bishop Piper: *In that respect, yes. Whenever it is not based in the truth of Christ, it would be a deception. Because Buddhism is basically an atheistic religion. There is no God⁶.*

Reporter: *Why is that a problem?*

Bishop Piper: *Because God has revealed himself through Christ. Christ has been raised from the dead. He said he is God. There is no other way to the truth and no other way to really live except through Christ.*

The growing interest in Buddhism has so worried Bishop Piper that he has made a video called “*In Search of Paradise – A Biblical Response to Buddhism*” to warn all Christians of the evil deception of Buddhism that has arrived to convert them⁷.

While such extreme beliefs will deter some from living the benefits of the Buddha Dhamma, it will also contribute to some Westerners moving away from theistic religions⁸. The Western potential for the practice of the Dhamma with its educated and affluent society is vast. As the Indian sage Padmasambhava foretold the Buddha Dhamma has spread from the mountains of Tibet and the forest monasteries of Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma to the West. It will enrich and awaken Western society as it has every other culture that it has touched.

⁶ Buddhism dispenses with the notion of a Creator God as does science, and explains the origins of the universe in terms of natural law. The Buddha is referred to as the Teacher of Gods and men. Buddhism accepts celestial beings that are transient and subject to the laws of nature.

⁷ Why is Buddhism the fastest growing Religion in Australia?” Darren Nelson, June 1998. Buddhasana web site.

⁸ The compassionate Buddha claimed that the heavens were open to the righteous. Entrance was not based on faith, belief, prayers, the will of a personal God, or religious tradition. Buddhism focuses on the purity of its devotees by developing purity of mind, speech and action.

seconds, and ¾ of these deaths are children. How does one reconcile these and other natural disasters which cause enormous suffering with the role and example set by a compassionate omnipotent God?

The concept of a personal God that takes only his followers to heaven and places those of all other religions (about 80% of the world population), in eternal hell is losing appeal. Once such beliefs brought fear into the minds of people, instilled obedience and resulted in forced and coerced evangelizing by well-meaning missionaries who wanted to save the world. Now it brings embarrassment in countries that are actively combating racism with recognition of multi-cultural and religious freedom. In the past it was believed that questioning God was a sacrilege now many young Westerners have no qualms asking questions—and they expect reasonable answers. These individuals are seeking a spiritual experience to fill the void left by the movement away from theistic religions and are drawn to Buddhism. They are finding in Buddhism, a religion that encourages questioning and experiential wisdom before acceptance. This is seen as a fresh breath of air by those who have analytical minds and see no merit in blind faith. Ajahn Sumedo summarized the need of these educated Westerner when he said; “*Religions that asks one to accept on faith were simply out.*”

Modern man likes to experience and see things for himself. This has resulted in a great emphasis on meditation in the Western practice of Buddhism. It is through insight meditation, *Vipassana*, that we can see for ourselves and experience the Truth of the Buddha’s teachings. Preferring to see for themselves as opposed to gathering knowledge through learning, Western Buddhists have emphasized the importance of meditation and the development of the mind. While Eastern

devotees have concentrated on developing spirituality through the practice of generosity and morality (infinite compassion and loving kindness to all living beings) our Western counterparts have surpassed the average Eastern devotee by using virtue as the foundation for mental culture and incorporating meditation in their daily life. As such the commitment of Western Buddhists is strong for they are Buddhists by conviction and they have experiential wisdom.

While His Holiness the Dalai Lama's charismatic personality and inspiring talks have made Tibetan (*Vajrayana*) Buddhism popular in the West, students of Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Chah and Mahasi Sayadaw have introduced the Thai and Burmese Theravada Forest Monastery tradition to the West. Theravada Buddhism with *dhutanga* (austere) practices in the forest monastic tradition has taken root in the West as Western monks such as Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Geoff, Ajahn Passano, Ajahn Sona, and Ajahn Amaro head monastery's for the benefit of Western monks, nuns and lay devotees. Branch monasteries are now appearing in UK, USA, New Zealand, Italy, Switzerland, Australia and Canada. Many Buddhists consider Ajahn Mun who reintroduced the forest monastery tradition in Thailand and his disciples Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Lee Dhammadaro and Ajahn Maha Boowa as *Arahants* (awakened beings). In addition the charismatic lay teacher S. N. Goenka has introduced the *Vipassana* (Insight) meditation tradition as taught by U. Ba Khin of Burma to the non monastic Western community. Today there are one hundred and ten permanent meditation centres worldwide with over seven hundred trained assistant *Vipassana* teachers. These great contemporary disciples of the Buddha have shared their experiential wisdom with the West. This sharing has resulted in providing many followers with the opportunity to experience the truth of the Buddha's teaching through practice.

Buddhists should examine and adopt from the East that which would result in long-term stability and social benefit to ensure that the "Buddhism boom" in the United States, which occurred in the 1890s and faded in the 1920s, does not replicate itself.

In the meantime the response from mainstream religions will greatly impact Buddhism's stability in the West. The Jesuit Father Johnston spoke of the value of Buddhist meditation when he visited Sydney in January 1997. Speaking at the Religion, Literature and Arts Conference at the Australian Catholic University, he spoke of the need for Christian churches to introduce aspects of Eastern Mysticism – such as meditation, yoga and Zen – if they wanted to increase the current numbers attending weekly services.

However, the response to the popularity of Buddhism and its contribution to society has not been all positive. The Anglican Bishop of Wollongong, (south of Sydney) the Reverend Reg Piper sees Buddhism as a philosophy that is evil. He expressed his opposition to the opening of a fifty million dollar Taiwan-based temple just south of Berkley. He directly opposed the Buddhist monks of the Nan Tien temple plan to promote their style of humanistic Buddhism, which emphasizes the oneness, and co-existence of the global village. The following extract is from an interview given by Reverend Piper on Tuesday, June 18, 1996 on ABC's 7.30 report:

Bishop Piper: *See, when you have the bible view of humankind, generally if it is outside the framework of truth – the bible terms it as evil.*

Reporter: *It is a deception?*

It would be unrealistic to expect it to happen much faster in the West!

In my opinion, in order for Buddhism to stabilize in the West, Western practitioners need to accomplish two things. First they need to move beyond the concept of Buddhism as an individual religious preference and incorporate it in everyday practice of families and larger social networks. The heavy emphasis on meditation with experiential wisdom attracts university students and upper-middle class educated adults. Currently there does not seem to be a formal avenue open for the children of these first generation Western Buddhists to adopt the Dhamma and for families to incorporate the Dhamma in their daily life. While the most effective method of sharing the Dhamma with Western children is yet to be seen, in 1995 the Blackheath Primary School of New South Wales adopted Buddhist instruction in addition to Catholic and Protestant options at the request of a group of parents.

Second Western Buddhists must build strong institutions to take the place of the informal associations of those interested in the Dhamma. With the ordination of Western monks and nuns and monasteries for Western Sangha (order of monks and nuns) this may be just a question of time. However, the assimilation may be slow because the Judeo-Christian clergy are financially independent and the Westerners are unaccustomed to providing the requisites of the Sangha who have renounced all possessions. Perhaps it is at this juncture that the Asian and Western Buddhists will merge. The mutual learning between Western and Asian Buddhists would strengthen and provide the foundation for Buddhism to flourish in the West. Each group has much to learn from the other. Credit must be given to Theravadan Buddhists for the stable system that has resulted in the preservation of the Dhamma for over 2,500 years. Western

The internet which hosts great Buddhist web sites produced by Western Buddhists such as *“Access to Insight, Buddhasasana web site, and Teachings of the Elders* have made it possible for the interested Westerner to access high quality books with ease. Prolific writers such as Ajahn Geoff of the Metta Forest Monastery in California have translated sections of the Vinaya Pitaka (monastic discipline) and the Sutta Pitaka (discourses) from Pali (language spoken by the Buddha) to English for free distribution. He has further enriched the body of books available by translating the teachings of the great Thai Arahants into English. Lay disciples such as Jack Kornfield and Gil Fionsdal have advanced the spread of the Buddha Dhamma with their dynamic presence, writings and meditation classes.

What is the cause of this surge of interest in Buddhism from the Western World? In my opinion, the reason for the increased Western interest in Buddhism is the scientific approach of the Buddha, his infinite compassion to all living beings, and his teaching by example. Buddhism addresses both the intellect and the heart. In the Kalama Sutta the Buddha asked his followers to examine the Teaching carefully and accept that which is conducive to the moral benefit of one self and others. Buddhist should not accept the Teachings simply because of tradition, because it is spoken and rumoured by many, because it is found written in our religious books or even because we respect the teacher or elder who proclaims it. Blind faith has no place in Buddhism. The French philosopher Voltaire said, *“Faith is to believe in something which your reason tells you can not be true.”* The Buddha asked us to examine his teachings as the wise test gold and to accept what appeals to our reason as being wholesome. The Buddha invited us to come and see and experience the truth before acceptance. Throughout history, this scientific approach - testing and experiencing for oneself - has attracted many intelligent people to the Buddha’s teachings. Some scholars from the past who are worthy of note are Professor Vincent Fullsball of Copenhagen, Herman Oldenberg,

Max Muller, Paul Dahlike and Winternitz of Germany, Sylvan Levi and Poussin of France, H.C. Warren and E. W. Burlingame of the USA, and Professor Stcherbatsky of Russia. Albert Einstein went so far as to claim:

“The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God, avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things natural and spiritual and a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description. If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs it would be Buddhism.”

However, people require more than just intellectual stimulation from a religion. A religion must have truth, compassion, tolerance, and be uplifting to help people to reach their highest potential. It should bring calm and inner peace to individuals living in a world that is crumbling with greed, hatred and materialism. Through His example the Buddha elevated man to his highest potential by teaching a path of wisdom, infinite compassion and loving-kindness. It is this combination of wisdom and compassion, the benefits of which can be experienced in this very life, that has attracted people to Buddhism throughout all ages. This has also led to the peaceful existence and spread of Theravada Buddhism without bloodshed or evangelizing over two thousand five hundred years. Possibly the greatest compliment that the West paid to Buddhism was when the United Nations recognized the Buddha for his pioneering contribution to the peace and welfare of mankind through the first official celebration of Vesak (the day marking the birth, enlightenment and passing away of the Lord Buddha). On May 15th 2000, New York born Bhikkhu Bodhi inspired the dignitaries and masses in his enlightening message to the United Nations when he said:

“Ever since the fifth century B.C., the Buddha has been the Light of Asia, a spiritual teacher whose teaching has shed its radiance over an area that once extended from the Kabul Valley in the west to Japan in the east, from Sri Lanka in the south to Siberia in the north. The Buddha’s sublime personality has given birth to a whole civilization guided by lofty ethical and humanitarian ideals, to a vibrant spiritual tradition that has ennobled the lives of millions with a vision of man’s highest potentials. His graceful figure is the centerpiece of magnificent achievements in all the arts - in literature, paintings, sculpture and architecture⁵”.

The Stability of Buddhism

While the Western World’s fascination with Buddhism cannot be denied the question whether this is a passing fad or a permanent transformation for the Western Culture must be asked. The Buddha’s words tell us that for a religion to take root in a country and stabilize it must have ordained monks who in turn have been ordained by monks from that country. While the first wave of Western monks in the Theravada tradition were ordained in Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka we now have Western monks ordaining Western monks. At present, the West is still experimenting with the various traditions of Buddhism. They are sifting through the ethnic traditions that have been imported by Asian immigrants, the textural material, which is now readily available, and the direct experiences from meditation. There is no doubt that over time Western Buddhism will incorporate the unique characteristic of its people and their needs and stabilize. In 1938 a Japanese Shinto monk noted that it took three centuries for China to adopt Buddhism from India.

⁵ Bhikkhu Bodhi’s Vesak address to the United Nations, May 15 2003. watthai.net/BhikkhuBodhiVesak200.htm