The Global Spread of Buddhism

Posted on



The Buddha delivering his first sermon, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, to his five disciples at the Deer Park in Sarnath, India.

Buddhism has spread to many countries around the world since the Buddha delivered his First Sermon at Isipathana in India. This event took place on Esala Pōya Day in June at the temple in Isipathana, where the Buddha addressed five Brahmins who were seeking redemption from Sansāra: Kondanna, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Mahānāma, and Assaji. During this sermon, Brahmin Kondanna realized the Sōwān, the first of the four higher states of mind. The Buddha expressed his happiness to them for this achievement. After the second and third sermons, all five Brahmins attained Nirvana, the highest state of mind or self-actualization. Following the ordination of the five Brahmins, an additional fifty-five young people were ordained, bringing the total number of disciples to sixty.

The story of Yasa, the prince of a nobleman, illustrates a significant lesson. The Buddha recognized Yasa's internal struggles and addressed them through his teachings on Dharma. Without Yasa in his parents' home and among his friends, chaos ensued. In search of their son, Yasa's parents went to the temple where the Buddha was residing. They listened to his teachings and, along with Yasa, came to understand the truths of life. This newfound insight allowed them to reach a higher state of mind. Later, when Yasa's four closest friends visited him, he decided to take them to see the Lord Buddha. Upon learning about this new perspective, another fifty friends chose to join them. Being intelligent individuals, they too recognized the essence of life and attained a new level of consciousness.

With the addition of those fifty-five, there were now a total of sixty monks in a short time. The Buddha wished to teach His Dharma through these monks and instructed them to preach a doctrine that is pure in its beginning, middle, and end. He advised them to avoid traveling two by two on the same path and instead to go in different directions. This occurred on Ill Pōya Day this month. The Buddha urged them, "For the betterment and progress of all beings, including humans and gods, please travel from village to village to teach this path to salvation from samsāra. Ensure that you teach it simply, yet meaningfully, using proper grammar, as there are those with great sinfulness and defilements, as well as others with only a few. If they miss this opportunity, they may fall from their high potential. Since some can grasp this Dharma, I encourage you to travel and preach the teachings" (from the writings of Venerable Ananda Maythree.)

This quotation suggests that the Dharma is not easily understood by everyone due to its profound nature. Throughout history, including during the Buddha's time, people have often been overwhelmed by greed, hatred, and ignorance. This lack of understanding about the true nature of existence can lead to sadness, sorrow, lamentation, and

even mental health issues. Consequently, individuals may engage in arguments, seek revenge, fight, harbor hatred, and even start wars. However, if people follow the teachings of the Buddha, it can lead to peace in the world. The Buddha recognized that many individuals struggle to grasp the Dharma, which he described as "very subtle," even before delivering his first sermon. He stated that the Dhamma he attained is profound, difficult to perceive, hard to realize, subtle, and beyond the limits of speculation, yet it is peaceful and can be experienced by those wise enough to understand it. Some may feel discouraged from following the teachings due to their complexity. Nevertheless, the Buddha identified a method to

address this challenge. In the Sūtra, he explains, “I surveyed the world with the eye of an Awakened One. As I did so, I saw beings with few defilements and many, those with keen faculties and those who are dull, individuals with good attributes and others with bad, as well as those who are easy to teach and those who are difficult. Some see disgrace and danger in the other world.”

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After surveying the world, the Buddha compared it to a pond filled with lotuses. He stated, “Just as in a pond filled with blue, red, and white lotuses—born and growing in the mud—some may rise above the water while others remain submerged.” According to the Buddha’s teachings, individuals can embark on a path and progress to higher states of Dharma. To begin this journey, one can follow the ‘Thri Shikshā,’ or Three Disciplines, which are:

1. Training in moral conduct – Sheela.

2. Training in concentration – Samādhi.

3. Training in wisdom – Paññā.

Impor tantly, this Dharma is characterized by peace and compassion, making it highly beneficial for individuals seeking to lead a good life free from prejudice. A fundamental principle in Buddhism is the recommendation to avoid the intoxication of the five senses in order to achieve this. Specifically: Prevention of intoxication by sight – avoiding being overwhelmed by what we see; Prevention of intoxication by sound – avoiding being overwhelmed by what we hear; Prevention of intoxication by smell – avoiding being overwhelmed by what we smell; Prevention of intoxication by taste – avoiding being overwhelmed by what we taste; and Prevention of intoxication by touch – avoiding being overwhelmed by physical contact. In today’s society, it is crucial to prevent hatred and to refrain from intoxication through alcohol and drugs. This Dharma promotes a peaceful society and supports national prosperity. As such, it can be followed by anyone, regardless of religious beliefs.

After a few centuries, the Dhamma was established in India during the reign of the Great King Emperor Ashoka (277-236 B.C.), who ruled the entire country. His

teachings were meant for all communities, and he inscribed them on rocks and pillars with the message: “All religious people should live in peace and harmony; there is no greater work than promoting the welfare of all people. And let my sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons conform to this for the welfare of the world.” After the devastating Kalinga War, Ashoka witnessed the destruction caused by violence and decided to convert to Buddhism, incorporating the principle of non-violence into his rule. He played a crucial role in spreading Buddhism across the globe, including to Sri Lanka. As a result, he successfully initiated missionary journeys to South India, Burma, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Central and West Asia, Egypt, Macedonia, East Africa, and Greece. Central Asia stretched from the Caspian Sea in the West to China and Mongolia in the East, including countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in the South to Afghanistan and Iran. However, many countries today face significant challenges in their efforts to maintain peace.



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