

## Konferenzberichte

### 4th International Congress of the European Buddhist Union

Berlin, 24.-27.09.1992

The place was well chosen: Berlin, as Europe's current symbol of surmounting ideological differences and achieving unity and agreement, served as the venue of the 4th International Congress of the European Buddhist Union (EBU). The EBU was founded in 1975 to unite national Buddhist umbrella organisations. At present it consists of about 30 members from 11 countries. The conference, organized in co-operation with the German Buddhist Union, focussed as in previous conferences in Paris (1975, 1988) and Turin (1984), on the dissemination of Buddhist traditions in Europe and on the dialogue between these various traditions and schools.

The topic of the congress, "Unity in diversity - Buddhism in Europe", vividly mirrored the variety of Buddhist schools in Europe since the beginning of the eighties. Although Buddhism was adopted in Europe more than a century ago, at first exclusively by small societies interested in the ethics of Southeast Asian monastic Buddhism and then, after the Second World War, by circles of the middle classes focussing on Zen Buddhism as well as Theravâda Buddhism, a recognizable growth in interest and membership has only been observable since the appearance of Tibetan teachers and *lamas* in the mid seventies. At the same time the theme of the congress expressed the EBU's wish and intention to bring together Buddhists of different traditions and schools, in order to share common ground and experiences. The president of the EBU, Aad Verboom, estimates that there are currently about one to two million Buddhists living in Europe. The majority of them are refugees from Asia, many "boat people" from Vietnam, Tibetans in exile or Buddhists from Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Burma. In France Asian and European Buddhists amount to between 500,000 and one million; less than 100,000 are French. In Italy there are about 30,000 practising Buddhists and about 20,000 German and 40,000 Asian Buddhists in Germany (*Time*, 21, 1988, p. 54; *Lotusblätter*, 3/1992, pp. 46).

The organizers invited eight prominent Buddhist teachers, four Asian and four European, to give talks and meditation instructions. They were chosen as they are Buddhists who have mainly been active in the West and who represent either Asian traditional or new, Western Buddhist schools. Besides the main events a continuous "Buddhist Forum", information stalls of about 60 different Buddhist groups, centres, and publishers as well as two exhibitions of Buddhist artists attracted approximately 1,500 participants.

The congress was officially opened with religious ceremonies from the Theravâda, Zen, and Vajrayâna tradition. Like the cultural programme in the evening, the ceremonies gave a slightly exotic and foreign impression of Buddhism. These visual presentations stood in strong contrast to the talks of the speakers, who have been eager to adapt and apply the Buddhist doctrine and teaching, the *Dharma*, to Western conditions for many years.

Accordingly, Sogyal Rinpoche, an honoured teacher of the Tibetan Rime tradition, stressed the necessity to cultivate an environment in the West which facilitates and supports Buddhist training. Traleg Kinpoche, who came instead of the invited Sharma Rinpoche, expounded the argument that the 'discovery of the nature of mind' (i.e. achieving enlightenment) is independent of the cultural context. A position similar to this idea of the universal and culturally independent validity of Buddhist teaching was presented by Rewatta Dhamma, a Burmese Theravâda monk and meditation teacher. He has been living in the U.K. as the director of the Birmingham Buddhist Vihara for 14 years. Rewatta Dhamma explained the *Dharma* as a common and generally applicable law, in full agreement with the declaration of human rights.

Besides the mere presentation of European Buddhists the congress topic of "Buddhism in Europe" also included the question of the development of possible European forms and contents of Buddhism. To speak of an independent or original Western Buddhist 'vehicle' (*yâna*), seems to be too early at the moment - since the spread of Buddhism throughout Asia has only been successful after several centuries of developing culturally specific adaptations.

The founder of the 'Friends of the Western Buddhist Order' (FWBO), Sangharakshita, an English Buddhist who lived for 20 years in India, presented the most emphatic and concrete conception of how to integrate Buddhism into Western society. Besides training in Buddhist meditation and teaching and a general dissemination of Buddhist concepts within Western intellectual discourse, the main impetus should be

placed on changing the conditions of the social environment. According to Sangharakshita, a personal and socio-political change is desperately needed in order for it to become possible to practise the *Dharma* in the West. To achieve this aim, any sort of 'Western Buddhism' has to create new Buddhist institutions, such as the residential spiritual communities and team-based, right livelihood businesses established by the FWBO. Such a nuclear Buddhist society could serve as a paradigm for a possible integration of Buddhism and, at the same time, strive for a transformation of society as a whole.

The invited speakers did not only differ according to their Buddhist affiliation but also in their style of presenting their message. The two women teachers, Ayya Khema, a Berlin born Theravāda nun, and Prabhāsa Dharma Rōshi, the founder of the International Zen Institute of America (Rinzai Zen), gave lively and cheerful talks combining Buddhist doctrines with everyday experiences and situations. On the other hand, the Zen teachers, Daishin Morgan Rōshi, a London born Sōtō monk, and Thich Nhat Hanh, the famous Vietnamese poet and peace activist, created a calm, concentrated and almost solemn atmosphere.

As for the topic "Unity in Diversity", besides referring to the practice of meditation the speakers stressed "Buddhist essentials" as a common ground above all dividing specifications of different schools. Such concepts as the 'Buddha nature in every person' were seen as being culturally independent and not bound by any specific tradition. This detachment of Buddhist contents from the Asian context by formulating universal, common principles, serves as a vehicle to adapt the Buddhist religion to the new, European environment. The creation of a newly interpreted 'core' or 'essence' of Buddhism helps to decide what may be considered worth transplanting to the West and what may be regarded as superficial and culturally bound. At the same time the new cultural setting demands that Buddhist teaching be transmitted in an appropriate way, e.g. concepts such as wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) need to be translated into "action" and into an "engaged Buddhism", as Sogyal Rinpoche and Thich Nhat Hanh declared.

On the whole Buddhists interpreted the diversity of Buddhist traditions in Europe as an advantage and as a mutual enrichment. Great interest was repeatedly shown in getting to know the other schools and traditions, "Buddhist ecumenism", which has gained more and more ground in Europe throughout the last decade through inner Buddhist dialogues and shared activities, was reinforced and extended at the Berlin congress. As speakers explained, Berlin, as the meeting place of East

and West, is also the place where Buddhists can tear down their "inner walls" and profit from the insights of other schools.

The congress illustrated that Buddhists in Europe increasingly regard themselves as a community. Dominant features in Asia such as the hierarchy between ordained and lay people and between men and women have been changed in Europe to an equilibrium of all 'practising Buddhists'. In Europe the Buddhist *sangha* is on the way to becoming newly interpreted as the community of all Buddhists, regardless of whether they are ordained or lay. Here the dominant influence of lay Buddhists as the main propagators of the teaching demands an adaptation and a democratization of power.

Although it was excellently organized, thanks to considerable financial help from the Senate of Berlin, the congress was not able to attract many Buddhists from Eastern Europe. Fewer than 50 Buddhists from the East of Europe attended the congress, which was rather a disappointment for the organizers. As an increasing interest in Buddhism is clearly measurable in Western Europe a similar development can only be presumed in the Eastern countries. Nonetheless, this conference can be considered as a successful presentation of Buddhism in Europe. Despite the comparatively small number of European Buddhists there was a visible response from the public.

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## Indonesian Democracy

Monash University, Melbourne, 17.-21.12.1992

Die Konferenz war seit Anfang des Jahres vom Centre for Southeast Asian Studies der Monash University gründlich vorbereitet und hatte sich zum Ziel gesetzt, die Zeit der liberalen Demokratie in den 50er Jahren mit den sozialen und politischen Voraussetzungen für eine Demokratisierung in den 90er Jahren zu vergleichen. Unter den rund 300 Teilnehmern waren die bedeutendsten Südostasienforscher Australiens, Indonesiens und der USA vertreten, u.a. Herbert Feith und John Legge (Monash University), Jim Fox, Merle Ricklefs, Anthony Reid und Jamie Mackie (ANU), Miriam Budiardjo und Selosumardjan (Universitas In-