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Buddhism in the Netherlands: History and Present Status¹

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In this paper the development of Buddhism in the Netherlands is sketched, from the Middle Ages up to the present time. Theravāda, Zen and Tibetan Buddhism are discussed next to a non-denominational foundation which sees its aim as the study of the principles of Buddhism in all their diversity, in close co-operation with Buddhist organizations and institutions. Finally, an estimate is given concerning the number of Buddhists in the Netherlands.

The first sign of Buddhism in the Netherlands can be traced back to the Middle Ages. In a book published by Philip van Utenbroeke in the thirteenth century, the story about Barlaam en Joasaph was included. It contained the Buddha legend in Christian disguise. The name 'Barlaam' is derived from 'Bhagavan' (Lord) and 'Joasaph' or 'Josaphat' is a corruption of 'bodhisattva'. The story came from India to the Middle East and was translated into Persian, Syrian, Arab, Ethiopian, Hebrew and Greek. The Dutch version by Philip van Utenbroeke was based on a Greek manuscript by the patriarch Johannes Damascenus who lived around 700 A.D..

In 1651 the name of the Buddha appears in a book by the Dutch missionary Rogerius who had worked on the Coromandel coast of India. He mentions the Buddha as the ninth Avatar of Viṣṇu.

The scientific study of Buddhism began in the Netherlands with the appointment of Hendrik Kern (1833-1917) as the first professor on the chair for Sanskrit at Leiden university. He published a study '*Geschiedenis van het Buddhisme in Indië*' (History of Buddhism in India) in two volumes in 1882 and 1884. It was followed by a '*Manual of Indian Buddhism*' in 1896. Kern shares the opinion of the French scientist Senart who considers the Buddha as a legendary being, a hero representing the sun.

In 1905, Felix Ortt published a Dutch translation of the well known work by Paul

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Carus *'The Gospel of the Buddha'*. It was and is very popular; after many reprints it can still be obtained in Dutch bookshops. Also *'The Light of Asia'* by Edwin Arnold proved to be very successful. The fifth edition had already been printed by 1910 in the Netherlands.

Around the beginning of this century some works by Dutch authors were published: *'Het boeddhisme en zijn wereldbeschouwing'* (Buddhism and its world-view) by C. J. Wijnaendts Francken in 1897 and *'Boeddhisme en Christendom'* (Buddhism and Christianity) by H. Bouwman in 1906. An influential Dutch minister (S. van Houten, 1889) translated from German a Buddhist catechism, destined for Singhalese and Burmese children: *'De leer van de Boeddha naar de heilige boeken van het zuidelijke Boeddhisme voor Europeanen bewerkt'* (The Teaching of the Buddha according to the holy books of Southern Buddhism, adapted for Europeans). He rejected the idea of rebirth and saw no place in Buddhism for the fruitful principle of solidarity.

The scientific study of Buddhism continued at Leiden university. Kern was succeeded by Speyer who translated several Mahāyāna texts and translated the *Jātakamālā* for the series *'The Sacred Books of the Buddhists'*. After Speyer J. Ph. Vogel was appointed. He became famous as an archaeologist by proving that Kasia in India must have been Kusinara, the place of the Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha. He also conducted investigations on the Borobudur, the great Buddhist monument on the Isle of Java.

After these early beginnings in the field of science, a practical interest in Buddhism as a living religion began to take form after the Second World War. It came from the theosophical movement. The Dutch secretary of the Theosophical Union in Adyar (India), Mrs. Spruitenburgh, after the war came back to the Netherlands and started 'gatherings' in her home in Huizen that attracted some tens of people from all over the country. Among them was Ernst Verwaal who founded the 'Buddhistische Vriendenkring Den Haag' (Circle of Friends of Buddhism The Hague), later renamed as 'Nederlandse Buddhistische Vriendenkring' (Dutch Circle of Friends of Buddhism). He issued a simple journal, called *'De Samenspraak'* (The Dialogue). Verwaal published two books on Zen. The centre of the 'Circle' was in The Hague, where in 1966 the wife of the Thai Ambassador, Mrs. Bhakdi, started receiving on Saturdays its members in the Thai Embassy. Later the group was presided by Ronald Poelmeijer.

One of the people who had a regular contact with Mrs. Spruitenburgh in Huizen was Peter van der Beek. In 1953 he became a member of The Western Buddhist Order, represented in Europe by the well known British Buddhist Jack Austin. The Western Buddhist Order had been founded in the USA in 1951 by Ven. Sumaṅgalo (Robert Stuart Clifton) as an organization dedicated to interpreting the Dharma to the West and establishing groups where none existed.

National Buddhist Organisation

Some years later Peter van der Beek was appointed as a lay missionary of the Mahāyāna Saṅgha and representative of the Western Buddhist Order for the Netherlands. On New Year's eve 1965, in a letter to Ernst Verwaal he conceived the idea to create an 'umbrella' organization in order to bring together the small Buddhist groups arising

here and there -- like in Germany "die Deutsche Buddhistische Union" (the German Buddhist Union). Besides, he did not welcome the close connection to the Embassy of Thailand and the resulting strong influence of Theravāda Buddhism. If Buddhism were to have a chance in the West, then it should be free from any school or sect. Against Buddhism as an 'organized religion', many of the objections can be raised as against Christianity or any other institutionalized religion. This was his conviction.

On 8 October 1966 the board of the Circle wrote a letter to him in English, signed by the Hon. President V. Busaparoek, first secretary of the Thai Embassy in The Hague, that one "was not convinced of the necessity of calling into being a 'so-called' Nederlands Buddhistisch Centrum". A month later the members of the Circle received a circular letter stating that, in concert with a Thai monk of the Buddhapadipa Temple in London who functioned as a supervisor to the Circle, its name was changed into 'Buddhist Society in the Netherlands'. The reason given was that it was more an international than a specifically Dutch union. This opinion was probably based on the growing number of Thai immigrants who became members of the Circle. The activities of the new Society were continued on an 'ecumenical' basis. This resulted in contacts with Tibetan lama's and finally to a serious conflict about the coming of the Lama Chögyam Trungpa from London. The board resigned and the Buddhist Society was dissolved, as it had "no real Buddhist basis any more".

Now Peter van der Beek, Leo Boer, Miss Perk, Bruno Mertens, and Miss Laterveer grasped the opportunity to fill in the gap that was produced, and created the 'Stichting Nederlands Buddhistisch Centrum' (Dutch Buddhist Centre Foundation) on the eighth of November 1967, a memorable day for Buddhists in the Netherlands. This foundation saw as its aim 'the study of the principles of Buddhism in all its diversity and to encourage the practical application of these principles; the Foundation strives after doing its work in close cooperation with Buddhist organizations and institutions in the Netherlands'. In 1968 the Centre issued the first number of the journal '*Saddharma*' that is still flourishing and has existed now for 22 years.

In 1973 Leo Boer (1919-1983) took over the presidency of the Centre. It was due to his driving-power and directing capabilities that the Centre managed to survive, in spite of the many centrifugal forces. What happened? The Centre did not succeed in being the 'umbrella' organization for all Buddhist denominations it had wished to become. Many new *saṅghas* came into being under the guidance of monks, lamas and Zen masters from the East and their members saw no necessity in using the Dutch Buddhist Centre as a common meeting place. Because the Centre could not function as a 'centre', it changed its name in 1978 into 'Stichting Vrienden van het Boeddhisme' (Friends of Buddhism Foundation), as it is still called at present. A second reason for this re-baptism was the establishment in 1978 of the 'Boeddhistische Unie van Nederland' (Buddhist Union of the Netherlands) consisting only of *representatives* of Buddhist groups and thereby taking over the (unsuccessful) overall function of the former Centre. Dr. Tony Kurpershoek-Scherft was its first President. This Union became a member of the European Buddhist Union. In 1989 Aad Verboom took over the presidency -- he has also been elected as Vice-President of the European Buddhist

Union. The common meeting place for Buddhist groups of diverse origin, sought for a long time, seems to have been realized at last. The Friends of Buddhism Foundation has become more and more attractive for those people who do not want to commit themselves to one of the traditions imported from the East, but strive for a complete adaptation of Buddhism to the cultural pattern of the West. Fortunately many followers of *bhikkhus*, lamas and Zen teachers still contribute to this Foundation, of which the present writer has the honour to be the President.

SPECIALIZATION OF BUDDHIST GROUPS

Zen Buddhism

Now some attention must be paid to the growth of more specific groups, led by members of oriental *saṅghas* or westerners trained in the East. In 1968 Leo Boer and Janwillem van de Wetering founded a Zen group. The latter one had spent some time in a Japanese Zen monastery and had written a book about it: *The Empty Mirror* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973). He moved to a Zen settlement in the USA and wrote another book: *Het dagende niets* (The Dawning of Nothingness) (1973). These books were very influential in our country -- they made Zen popular. The guidance of the group was taken over by Erik Bruijn who is still in charge of a flourishing community.

The largest Zen group at this moment is the Kanzeon Saṅgha, led by Nico Tydeman under the supervision of the American Roshi Genpo Merzel Sensei, a former pupil of Maezumi Roshi in Los Angeles. This group is planning to found a centre in the near future where a teacher and some students will live permanently. Nico Tydeman also organizes many lectures by Buddhist teachers from all over the world in the 'Kosmos' -- a general centre for meditation and all kinds of spirituality. Besides, the 'Nederlands Boeddhistisch Studiecentrum' (Dutch Buddhist Study Centre), under the direction of Nico Tydeman, the present writer and others, offers courses on Buddhist topics and instruction in meditation, in the building of the Kosmos.

Theravāda Buddhism

Theravāda started its career in the Netherlands with the meetings in the Thai Embassy, as already mentioned, led by Mrs. Bhakdi who was herself a qualified teacher of meditation. The meditation-master Chao Khun Sobhana Dhammasuddhi (now known as Dhiravaṃsa) came several times from the Buddhapadipa Temple in London to teach vipassana-meditation. In 1971 the Dutch merchant Monshouwer gathered some people in order to discuss the possibility of founding a Theravāda temple. The new ambassador of Thailand, Mr. Sompong Sucharitkul, was strongly in favour of this initiative and supported the undertaking wholeheartedly. In 1973 the temple was officially founded, as the first Buddhist temple in the Netherlands. Two monks came from Thailand: Phra Maha Theeraphan Mettāvihārī and Phra Samuh Pherm Ariyavaṃso. The temple was located in Waalwijk. The opening ceremony and consecration were performed by the Chief Abbot of the Buddhapadipa Temple in London, Chao Khun Phra Medhidhammacariya. The temple was named Wat Dhammasucaritanucharee, but two years later renamed as Buddharama Temple, which is easier for Dutch people to pronounce. At the same time the Foundation

'Young Buddhists Netherlands' came into being as a support to the temple. The foundation has its own journal: '*Vipassanā-Sāra*'. The Ven. Mettāviharī moved to Amsterdam and is leading there a large community of *vipassanā* practitioners.

From the workgroup that had prepared the foundation of the temple in Waalwijk, another foundation had issued: the 'Nederlandse Buddha Dhamma Stichting' (Dutch Buddha Dhamma Foundation). This organization invited in 1974 an Indonesian monk (Ven. Jinamitto) to come to the Netherlands. He accepted as his pupil a young man, called Pierre Krul. In 1977 he was ordained in Indonesia and received the name 'Dharmaviranatha'. The new monk erected the 'Buddhayana Centre' in The Hague, which is still under his active guidance. He issued quite a number of booklets and a regular journal '*Boeddhayana*', now in its thirteenth year.

Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhism became established through contacts between people who went to study with lamas in Scotland, the USA, Switzerland and India where the Dalai Lama and many lamas had settled in 1959 after the Chinese invasion of Tibet. In 1977 Dr. Han de Wit, an authorized pupil of the Kargü lama Chögyam Trungpa, founded a centre in Amsterdam which is engaged in teaching the Dharma and meditation according to Tibetan tradition. The building of this centre is probably the largest in the Netherlands. There is a smaller centre in Oegstgeest, also founded by Dr. de Wit, and groups in two other towns (Utrecht and Nijmegen).

The Tibetan Nyingma tradition is represented by several groups. They have a centre (Nyingma Centrum Nederland) and a bookshop in Amsterdam. These groups belong to the organization of Tarthang Tulku who resides in California.

The Gelugpas own an estate in the woods around Emst. On this piece of land the Maitreya Institute has been erected, based on the initiative of Paula Koolkin in 1976. In August 1979 lama Thubten Yeshe and lama Zopa Rinpoche came to teach. At present lama Geshe Konchog Lhundup is the teacher in permanent residence.

The Sakya tradition of Tibetan Buddhism took a foothold in 1976 as Geshe Lama Sherab Gyaltzen Amipa established the 'Sakya Thegchen Ling' in The Hague. Lama Amipa is connected to the Tibetan Institute near Zürich in Switzerland where he has his home address. He founded centres in France, England, Sweden and Western Germany as well.

Buddhism & Christianity

Zen has an interesting relationship with Christianity as testified by father Dr. Enomiya Lassalle S.J. who in his advanced age still comes almost every year to the Tiltenberg, originally a Grale centre in Vogelenzang. The Tiltenberg organized in 1988 and in 1990 very successful international conferences concerning the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity. On the Buddhist side, the contribution of the Japanese Kyoto school, represented on these conferences by Prof. Dr. Masao Abe, was most conspicuous. Well known Christian theologians like Waldenfels, Knitter, Vroom and van Bragt showed a considerable understanding and sympathy for Buddhist points of view and discussed similarities and differences between these two religions.

Other Groups

Finally two smaller groups should be mentioned. In the first place the 'Friends of the Western Buddhist Order', connected with the large movement of Ven. Sangharakshita in England and secondly the Ārya Maitreya Mandala, a group of pupils of Lama Anagārika Govinda, to which the present writer belongs. This group has separated itself from the larger group in Germany after the death of Lama Govinda.

SUMMARY OF THE PRESENT SITUATION

Summarizing the above, one may come to the conclusion that Theravāda, Zen and Vajrayāna Buddhism are present in the Netherlands, distributed over many groups and centres. The question may be raised: how many persons are actually involved? There is no central registration by the government concerning religious denomination, as state and religion are completely (and fortunately) separated. In 1971 we had the last census. Nine hundred people declared to be Buddhists. One may suspect that these persons were mostly unorganized. At that time there was not so much choice, as there is now, among Buddhist centres. Since 1971 the number of Buddhists has increased considerably, probably in connection with the rise of 'alternative' views in society and the decline of Christianity. The increased interest in Buddhism is evident from the growth in number of Buddhist centres. At this moment there are twelve general Buddhist centres belonging to no specific denomination, seven centres belonging to the Theravāda tradition, twelve belonging to the Vajrayāna and eleven belonging to the Zen tradition. In total there are forty-two groups.

Recently, in 1986, we tried to get an idea of the number of people related to these centres. This was not an easy task. Many centres were reluctant to disclose the number of their adherents. Yet, we managed to come to a reasonable estimate. We distinguished between 'Buddhists' and 'people interested in Buddhism'. The latter category consisted of 'visitors', 'subscribers to Buddhist periodicals', 'participants in courses in Buddhism' and so on. We reached the following estimate: 610 Buddhists engaged in Vajrayāna centres; 540 in Zen centres; 500 in 'general' Buddhist centres, 150 in Theravāda centres. In total there were 1,800 Buddhists. The people interested in Buddhism numbered 2,300. Thus, in the present day, there are about 2,000 organized Dutch Buddhists and about 2,500 unorganized persons moving within the sphere of Buddhist centres. There are also Buddhists of Asian origin. Their number is estimated at about 12,600. Altogether, some 17,000 people are more-or-less committed to the Buddhist Dharma. This is 0.1% of the population of the Netherlands (around fifteen million at present). The impression seems warranted that the number of Buddhists in our country is slowly, but gradually increasing, depending on the adaptability of Buddhism to western culture.

NOTES

1. The historical data in this contribution are derived from three articles by I. den Boer, 'Boeddhisme in Nederland', *Saddharma*, 19(2), 19(4), 20(1). The quantitative estimations are based on a survey by V. van Gemert.