

# *Buddhism in European and Italian Cultures*

*by Dharma Master Heng Ru*

In 325 B.C. Alexander the Great reached India and information about Buddhism arrived in the Western World. But it was mainly during the kingdom of Ashoka Maurya (274-236 B.C.) that direct contact took place between Buddhism and Western philosophical and religious thought. The great Indian Emperor, in fact, sent monks and missionaries not only to Sri Lanka, Burma and Cambodia, but to Alexandria in Egypt, Syria and Greece. Regrettably we do not have clear information about the results of such missions. It seems that quite independently of each other, both cultures gave birth to some remarkably similar ideas, such as Pythagoras' teaching on cyclic rebirths and the extinction of the being once perfection is attained. Scholars have noted as well the parallel patterns in Plato with Buddhist perspectives.

Since then, intercultural exchange has flourished and today there is not a European country where the Dharma is not known and practiced to one extent or another.

Historically Buddhism has always integrated itself with the cultures of the countries to which it spread. It assimilated Hindu elements in India, Taoist and Confucian principles in China, Shinto in Japan, and in Tibet it blended certain local shamanistic influences into the original source teaching. All of this give-and-take facilitated the adoption of Buddhism by the local cultures.

Perhaps in Europe, and in Italy too, a connection with the traditional Western culture will help the understanding and diffusion of Buddhism. Conversely, a presentation of the Dharma as an exotic and esoteric doctrine may make such understanding more difficult. Even today many Europeans, including many learned people, consider the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha as something peculiar to the East, and as such, destined not to take hold in Western culture. Yet, as those of us who have investigated Buddhism know, as a teaching based on the purification of the mind, psycho-somatic harmony, mental clarity and altruism, it does have a universal value. The mind of European people is fundamentally not different from the mind of the Chinese, Japanese or Burmese. The only differences lie in the superficial cultural milieu in which that mind expresses itself. There is in Europe a scientific tradition that goes back to Galileo and Descartes; a religious tradition moulded by Christianity; a philosophical tradition influenced by Aristotle, Bacon and Kant; a literary and artistic tradition that has created the masterpieces of Dante, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Raphael and Cervantes.

It is into such a rich and complex cultural heritage that Buddhism needs to find itself in Europe, just as it assimilated itself so well with the traditional cultures of Asia. This East-West encounter could be most fertile for both Asia and the Occident in several areas--Buddhism could present the catalyst in the West for a needed cultural transformation that is characterizing this second half of the twentieth century. We find significant examples in all fields: physics, medicine, religion and psychology. Many consider the West and perhaps the world to be on a threshold of a new humanism, a new Renaissance. Since the times of the Indian king Ashoka, the major influence Buddhism exerted on those

environments receptive to it has been a general heightening of moral conscience. This moral element is precisely what has been lost in the post-industrial countries and such loss is at the root of the massive social, spiritual malaise in these highly developed societies.

However, any attempt at a facile blending of Buddhism with European culture should be avoided. If Buddhism "adapts" itself too radically so as to lose its vital essence, then it will prove useless to the West and harmful to itself. Basic elements of the Dharma—the Four Noble Truths; the Eightfold Noble Path in all its aspects of Precepts, Concentration and Wisdom; the Paramitas; the Pratityasamutpada; Nirvana and Shunyata--these elements need to remain complete, without alterations, as they have been transmitted from generation to generation. Rather, the encounter presupposes a clearer definition and a more rigorous application of such essential principles of Dharma.

For Italy, in particular, the impact and importance of Buddhism lies in three main areas. First of all Buddhism has been studied by scholars, especially by those specialists involved in Asian studies and in psychology. Anthropological and philological research, rather than the strictly philosophical, have dominated the field of Asian studies. The earliest contacts between Italy and Buddhism bore little fruit. Marco Polo, for example, reported about Buddhism upon returning from his extensive travel throughout China and his visit to Sri Lanka. Much later, Father Desideri, a Jesuit missionary, lived in Tibet for many years during the seventeenth century. He brought back to Italy an accurate account of the customs and religion of Tibet, but such precious information remained within the circle of church academics. However, Professor Giuseppe Tucci, a philosopher by profession, has investigated Tibetan Buddhism and the Eastern religious world. With his many skills as explorer, alpinist, philologist and above all, with his personal religious commitment, he has enlivened interest and enthusiasm for Buddhism.

Although fewer and less significant in comparison to other major European countries, Italian Buddhist studies nonetheless grew during the second half of the sixties. Most notably, they began to attract psychologists who were looking with interest to Buddhist meditative practices as self-regulating strategies.

Italy as a strongly traditional Catholic country and the locus of the Holy See has been fertile soil for a growing Buddhist-Christian religious dialogue. This dialogue began with articles in specialized magazines and has steadily evolved through other initiatives, such as the intermonastic exchanges, where Catholic and Buddhist monks share periods of practice living together in monastic settings in Asia as well as in Europe. In the wake of Vatican II this inter-religious dialogue overcame historical sectarianism and intolerance to offer a contribution to all humankind on issues like world peace, disarmament, human rights, and religious and civil freedoms. The development of this new phase in the dialogue has already touched official positions within the Catholic hierarchy. Monsignor Marcello Zago of the Vatican Secretariat for non-Christians, an ardent and long-time student of Buddhism, himself spending many years in Asia, states that Christians and Buddhists can help each other to "grow together," because "the inter-religious dialogue

supposes affection and deepening of one's own faith and sincere respect for the faith of others."

Initiatives like the World Day of Prayer for Peace called by Pope John Paul II in Assisi, Italy on October 27, 1986 marked a new phase in the inter-religious dialogue. There is a commitment not only to mutual respect and dialogue, but also to common "statements in deed" on behalf of peace in the world. "Prayer for peace must be followed by appropriate action for peace," declared Pope John Paul, who sponsored the gathering of Christian, Buddhist and other world religious leaders.

A third, and perhaps the most significant area of influence, centers around Buddhism and the society at large. As mentioned before, there is a cultural movement emerging in this pivotal period of Western civilization. The movement is marked by the decline of consumerism and a gearing towards a better quality of life, a widespread ecological awareness and concern for the environment, and interest in natural food, holistic medicine, research into the development of clean energies to replace the polluting ones, solidarity with the third world and a growing sense of pacifism to accomplish these goals. This movement involves mainly the younger generation and may prove to be a major force in transforming the present civilization. It is interesting that general emerging values are also looking to Buddhism as a possible way to bring about a peaceful, effective and wholesome transformation of themselves and the world at large.

Within contemporary Buddhism itself we see a new discussion unfolding on the issue of commitment to the social-political process; and among the emerging tendencies and movements in society, some show similarities with Buddhist attitudes. One called "integral ecology", for example, seeks to coordinate a balance between social and environmental reform and the equally necessary purification of the mind by means of meditative practices, thus overcoming the dichotomy between inner work and social engagement.

The unique and particularly attractive idea that Buddhist philosophy brings to social change is this: the outer environment is only as good as the inner environment. To improve the world one must first improve one's own person and mind. With such interest, young people during the last decades have begun to earnestly involve themselves in meditative practices along with the study of Buddhist doctrines. Some have traveled to the East; others have invited teachers to come and hold retreats in Italy. Consequently Italy has seen Buddhist meditation teachers, some genuine and some not. They initially come for short periods of time, then later establish centers in different Italian towns and develop long-term study programs.

The growing interest in Buddhism, involving approximately ten thousand to fifteen thousand people so far, has spurred a desire for the various groups to meet, participate in dialogue and join in common initiatives. A reputable nationwide Buddhist periodical called Paramita, gives voice and space to all different groups. A foundation, the 'Fondazione Maitreya', now exists to help introduce the Buddhadharma in Italy by helping, for example, to locate and provide facilities to train and support a western

Sangha. Italian Buddhists have also established the 'Unione Buddhista Italiana', which is part of the European Buddhist Union, with eighteen Buddhist centers participating. It is a legal body that serves many functions including working with government offices to expedite the entry and residency of foreign Masters, and making Buddhist teachings available in public schools and other institutions.

Each person who is touched by Buddhism changes along the way. Those with weaker motivations give up; others deepen their investigation and develop a wider vision of reality and their own spiritual potential. A few have chosen a life-long commitment and received the precepts from Buddhist elders. Yet, the Buddhadharma is still in its beginning stages in Italy. Only with the establishment of monasteries thriving with properly ordained monks and nuns will the Buddhadharma be correctly transmitted and rooted in the Italian soil and bear fruit for the benefit of the entire country.

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### *Upcoming Special Events at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas*

Jan.1 One day of recitation for the New Year (solar)

Jan.1 evening-Jan.22 evening Three weeks of Chan meditation

Jan.4 Shakyamuni Buddha's Enlightenment (check with nearest monastery regarding celebration)

Jan.26 evening-Jan.29 evening Three days of Chan meditation

Jan.27 Maitreya Bodhisattva's Anniversary (actual day and celebration)