

Buddhism Rejoins the Great Conversation in India



A conference organised by
the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies
(A Recognised Independent Centre of the University of Oxford, UK)
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The Buddha lived and preached in the 5th century BC. His teachings were a milestone in the history of the human race, establishing new standards in personal morality and social justice. His rational thought showed the importance of individual responsibility and for the first time demonstrated human equality. This initiated an age of material and spiritual progress in India, which two centuries later culminated in the glorious reign of the Emperor Asoka. Although Asoka was last to rule almost the whole of the subcontinent until modern times, he established a pan-Indian urban culture based on Buddhist values, which lasted for more than half a millennium after the decline of his empire, and was the source of the major developments in civilisation throughout pre-modern Asia.

Buddhism flourished in India for more than a millennium and a half, until in the 13th century AD almost all its institutions were destroyed by external forces. Until then, it contributed greatly to Indian civilisation through its dialogue with other religions. After its fall, India continued to shelter a rich diversity, but the loss of Buddhist values was a grave setback.

About Buddhist ideas and practices there is bound to be controversy, and this is as it should be. But it is beyond dispute in this 21st century AD that gross inequality

cripples both economic advance and personal happiness in a modern society. The Buddha established the equal worth and equal rights of men and women. (The story that he was reluctant to found an order of nuns has been shown to be a later prejudiced invention.) Systems of social inequality, especially those prescribed at birth, create cruelty, injustice and misery. To flourish, a society must be able equally to raise up all of its citizens of both genders to achieve their potential. Opportunity for all is the only way to economic and social progress. The great social reformer Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar clearly saw this, and his legacy has inspired many, but it has still not been realised throughout India how much it offers to the whole nation.

This conference aims to help reactivate the great conversation between Buddhism and the rest of India. We shall take a brief look at what can be learnt from the past, and then scrutinise the present with the aim of building a far better future. In terms of focus, it will range from considering the possible role of India's Buddhist revival on the world stage to clarifying immediate local problems and, we hope, suggesting solutions.

Here are a few specimen topics on which we plan to focus during the three days of the conference.



- 1) A couple of historical lectures about great Buddhist revivals which have taken place elsewhere in the world, e.g. in Japan.
- 2) Examples of contemporary Buddhist movements elsewhere in the world, from which there is much to learn. We hope here to discuss Tzu Chi of Taiwan.
- 3) Other organised movements by oppressed minorities, large or small, and scope for advice and collaboration between them.
- 4) A survey of Buddhist institutions and organisations in India today, and whether they could gain by better cooperation.
- 5) An account of the crisis in Buddhist education, particularly in India, where even if courses are established it is very hard to find qualified teachers, and where there is a great lack of reading material in Indian vernacular languages; education about Buddhism should not be confined to Buddhists.

The organisers do NOT intend this conference to be 'a conference of Buddhists for Buddhists'. Rather we view this as an opportunity to meet and learn from each other for people who would ordinarily never encounter one another: theorists of social change, historians, social critics, journalists, the informed and concerned public, makers and executors of public policy, active members of a great range of communities, and indeed those for whom religion in traditional terms does not figure prominently in their lives.

The organisers expect that the conference's panels, discussion sessions, question-and-answer events, and press conferences will attract broad interest in India and abroad. The sessions will be captured in video and placed online, and a volume of the most important papers and panel discussions will be published in due course.

During the next several months the organisers will work with those sharing a common interest in this endeavour to flesh out the details of organisation, execution, and funding and to identify key participants. These discussions are expected to take place in India, in Thailand, and at Oxford in the UK.

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