

## Buddhism Rises in the West

Buddhism began to become effectively global with Alexander the Great's invasion of northwest India (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE). This cultural cross-current gave us a remarkable work on Buddhist apologetics, entitled the *Milinda,panha* (The Questions of Milinda). Milinda was **Menander 1 Soter** (reigned 155-130 BCE), a Buddhist ruler of the Indo-Greek Bactrian kingdom in present day Pakistan. With Greek influence, too, we see perhaps the most beautiful of Buddha images, modelled after the sun-god, Apollo, complete with wavy hair, flowing pleated robes and halo.

Buddhism reached its height in the time of the Indian emperor Asoka (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE), who it is said to have sent out various missions that brought Buddhism to south and southeast Asia (and Vietnam), Persia (modern Iran), the Middle East (including Israel), Egypt and the West, especially Asia Minor (or Anatolia, including modern Turkey), Greece, and Italy. With the rise of the Abrahamic religions, much of this is history now, although we still see vestiges of Buddhist stories in local folk tales, especially that of "Barlaam and Josaphat," a Christianized version of the Buddha story.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently, the relics of the Buddha made their way to the West. Few mediaeval Christian names are better known than those of **Barlaam and Josaphat**,<sup>2</sup> who were credited with the "second conversion" of India to "Christianity," after the country had relapsed to "paganism" following the mission of the Apostle Thomas. Barlaam and Josaphat were remembered in the roll of saints recognized by the Roman Catholic Church with the festival day of **27 November**. In the Greek Church, Iosaph (Josaphat) was commemorated on **26 August**, while the Russians remember both Barlaam and Ioasaph, together with the latter's father, king Abenner (Suddhodana), on **19 November** (2 December, Old Style). Sir Henry Yule once visited a church at Palermo, Italy, dedicated to "**Divo Josaphat.**"

In 1571, the Doge Luigi Mocenigo presented to king Sebastian of Portugal **a bone and part of the spine** of St Josaphat. When Spain annexed Portugal in 1580, these sacred treasures were removed by Antonio, the pretender to the Portuguese throne, and ultimately found its way to Antwerp, Belgium, where they were preserved in the cloister of St Salvator.

After the European colonists had settled in India, with the arrival of Roman Catholic missionaries, some of them were struck by the similarities between episodes and features of the life of St Josaphat and those of the Buddha, as is clearly evident from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese writer **Diogo do Couto** who declared this fact. By the 1850s, European scholars doing comparative study of the legend of St Josaphat ("Bodhisat") and the life of the Buddha, "came to the startling conclusion that for almost a thousand years, the Buddha in the guise of the holy Josaphat, had been revered as a saint of the principal Churches of Christendom"! (DM Lang, introduction, *Barlaam & Josaphat*, 1967:x-ix).

With Western colonialism and European contact with the East, Buddhism again began flowing back to the West, beginning with scriptural scholarship, and now blossoming into numerous Western Buddhist groups and teachings. After about a century of Western scholarship in Buddhism, we now have ever more accurate editions and translations of the early Buddhist texts, complete with critical apparatus, in English and other European languages.

Following the 1960 hippie counterculture movement that experimented in Oriental religions and altered states of consciousness, growing numbers of westerners, including many well-educated seekers, came to the East to become Theravada monastics, Zen priests and Vajrayana practition-

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<sup>1</sup> See eg [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barlaam\\_and\\_Josaphat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barlaam_and_Josaphat).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Graeme MacQueen's "Changing Master Narratives in Midstream: *Barlaam and Josaphat* and the Growth of Religious Intolerance in the Buddhalegend's Westward Journey." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 5 1998:144-166.

ers. The latter two traditions have been successfully westernized, although not without some major hiccups.<sup>3</sup>

A new, and very important, development is the interest of **Western science in Buddhist meditation**, especially the mindfulness practices of early Buddhism. This interest in Buddhist psychology started over a century ago, with pioneers like William James, but it was only in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that the momentum began to pick up. Mind scientists can now see and measure, for example, what happens in the human brain during meditation. So significant is this new meeting of science and religion, between western psychology and ancient Buddhism, that the scientists now even have their own annual retreats conducted by other scientists experienced in Buddhist meditation.<sup>4</sup>

When Buddhism left India and changed the societies that adopted it, Buddhism was in turn changed by these societies, so that what is originally the Buddha's teachings and methods went through a sea-change or were altogether set aside. However, with the rise of Westerners and the western-educated turning to "forest" Buddhism today, seeking a more pristine practice in early Buddhist meditation, we now have a better chance of tasting the refreshing spiritual springwater at its source, as it were.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century British historian, Arnold Toynbee, was attributed with saying, "The coming of Buddhism to the West may well prove to be the most important event of the Twentieth Century." The truth of such words goes beyond who actually said them. Let's say it is now becoming common wisdom of an uncommon phenomenon.

Revisioning Buddhism 24

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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<sup>3</sup> See **Bad friendship** = SD 34.1: [http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/?page\\_id=2583](http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/?page_id=2583)

<sup>4</sup> See **Meditation and Consciousness** = SD 17.8c: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.8c-Meditation-consciousness.-piya1.pdf>