

## Buddhist Ley People in the West

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### Abstract

People in the West, where Christianity is the main religion, seemed to hear little - if not nothing - of him. Today, more and more western people know about Buddhism. Some become ordinary Buddhists who come from Asean Buddhist Countries. Some are the well-known Buddhist teachers and/or authors

Buddhist lay people are equally important for the sustainability of Buddhism. In the West, where there is there shortage of monks, Buddhist lay people play even more important roles in the name if main disciples of Buddha are Bhikkhus, Bhikkhunis, Upasikas, Upasikaas. Upasikas and Upasikaas are the lay disciples who respect the teaching of the Buddha. They are the disciples of Buddha and consider the pillar of Buddhism. There are interdependent. Monks cannot live and practice the dhamma easily without the support of lay people. On the other hand, lay people who are very busy with the living - having no time studying the teaching - find it hard to understand the teaching without the guidance of the monks, nevertheless lay people in the west always practice their duty such as learning and teaching, writing and publishing, doing meditation, charity supporting monks, preserving precepts (silas) and donating money to help sustain temples

Thus the roles of Buddhist lay people in promoting Buddhism in the West. It also tells the readers how Buddhism came to the West. In addition, it tries to give a piece of suggestion for being a good lay Buddhist in the West.

**Keywords :** Buddhist, Ley People, in the West

### Introduction

Buddha was one of the most influential people ever lived in this world (source?). He was born and became a Buddha in India, but his teachings have been adopted by people around the world. In the early times, his teaching was accepted by people in Asia. People in the West, where Christianity is the main religion, seemed to hear little - if not nothing - of him. Today, more and more western people know about Buddhism. Some become ordinary Buddhists. Some are the well-known Buddhist teachers and/or authors. A great deal of great books on Buddhism were written by prominent western scholars in the aim of spreading the teaching of the Buddha to the people around the

world, particularly the westerners. Three of those books should be mentioned here: The Awakening of the West: the encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture by Stephen Batchelor (Parallax Press 1994); How the Swans came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America by Rick Fields (Ahambhala, 1992); The Face of Buddhism in America edited by Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (University of California Press, 1998). These three books and many others have been one of the key factors making people in the West learn about the teaching of the Buddha.

For your note, the authors abovementioned are lay people playing very vital roles in promoting Buddhism in the West.

When taking about the key disciples of the Buddha, people usually refer to monks and nuns. However, Buddhist lay people are equally important for the sustainability of Buddhism. In the West, where there is there shortage of monks, Buddhist lay people play even more vital roles. In fact, there four main disciples of Buddha are Bhikkhus, Bhikkhunis, Upasikas, Upasikaas. Upasikas and Upasikaas are the lay disciples who respect the teaching of the Buddha. These four types of the disciples created by the Buddha are the pillar of Buddhism. This can indicate that monks and lay people are equally important in Buddhism. There are interdependent. Monks cannot live and practice the dhamma easily without the support of lay people. On the other hand, lay people who are very busy with the living—having no time studying the teaching—find it hard to understand the teaching without the guidance of the monks.

The short paper seeks to explain the roles of Buddhist lay people in promoting Buddhism in the West. It also tells the readers how Buddhism came to the West. In addition, it tries to give a piece of suggestion for being a good lay Buddhist in the West.

## Defining Key Terms

### 1 The West

According to Tasha Trubetskoy ( December 7, 2017), there is no unique definition of what the West is. This list of the countries changes depending on context. Sasha cited the dimensions of the West.

**Cultural definition:** The West are all the countries shaped by the Western Christianity—today Catholic and Protestant churches. They are usually called the Latin West. These countries use Latin alphabet and have similar cultural and ethical values. There are not necessarily wealthy or politically aligned, according to the writer.

**Political definition:** they are the countries whose dominant culture is European aligned against the USSR during the Cold War. These countries had democratic, capitalist government after WWII. They are sometimes called the Cold-War West.

**Economic Definition or the Rich West:** The Rich West consists of all European-settled countries whose GDP per capita is over US\$ 10, 1000 (World Bank 2016, as cited in Sasha Trubetskoy, 2017).

Here are some countries that fit any of these three definitions.

COUNTRY	CULTURAL	POLITICAL	ECONOMIC
Argentina	Yes	Yes	Yes
Australia	Yes	Yes	Yes
Belgium	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bolivia	Yes	Yes	No
Brazil	Yes	Yes	No
Canada	Yes	Yes	Yes
Estonia	Yes	NO	Yes
Germany	Yes	Yes	Yes
Greece	No	Yes	Yes
Hungary	Yes	No	Yes
United Kingdom	Yes	Yes	Yes
United States	Yes	Yes	Yes

Figure 1 List of Western countries (Source: Sasha Trubetskoy, 2017)

## 2 Lay Buddhist People

**Lay Buddhist people** refers to the ordinary followers of the teaching of the Buddhist but live household life, not becoming a monk. There are called upasikas (Male) or upasikaas (Female). They support monks by giving food, clothes, shelters, transportation, and medicine.

### I. Limitation

While many Western countries adopted Buddhism, this paper, however, will discuss about only the roles of the lay Buddhist people in the United States of America.

### II. Brief History of Buddhism in the West

According to pbs.org (2010), beginning in the 1840s, Chinese immigrants who settled in the western parts of the United States brought Buddhism to North America. Also, North Americans and Europeans who had visited Asia brought back with them Buddhist texts. In the later parts of 1800s, Walt Whitman, Henry Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson had Buddhist thought to showing in their literary works.

In 1893, the World Parliament of Religions held in conjunction with the Chicago World's Fair was a key event in bringing Buddhism to the West including the United of America ( pbs.org, 2010). The event allowed Shaku Soen, a Japanese Zen master to travel to America many times and went around the country giving lecturing on Buddhism. Three of his students also came to the USA to help Buddhism take deeper root in America (pbs.org, 2010).

According to the same source, the Buddhist Mission of America was established by members of Pure Land School in 1898. Later, it changed to the

Buddhist Churches of America, one of the largest and most stable Buddhist communities in America.

A member of Buddhist teachers, including Taizan Maezumi, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, Dae Soen Sa Nim, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and His Holiness Dalai Lama, were/are very important people bringing Buddhism to the West, particularly America.

In the 1970s and 1980s, refugees from Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia brought Theravada Buddhism to the USA, making Buddhism in America very diverse.

### **III. What lay people in the West do to promote Buddhism**

Buddhism can be practiced anywhere in the world. The Teaching is universal, for humanity and divinity alike. Lay Buddhists in the West can perform many forms of religious ceremonies and rituals.

#### **1. Learning and Teaching**

Learning is the first step to understanding the Dhamma taught by the Buddha. Without proper learning, one can be a blind follower.

Most Lay Buddhists in the West are interested in learning and understanding the teaching of the Buddha. They try their best to make sure they understand what the Buddha really taught. They learn the teaching through the books, tapes, videos, and internet. They usually go to the temples to listen to the Dhamma Talks by the monks or other lay teachers in special days.

They like teaching each other, asking and explaining the Dhamma. They believe that teaching Dhamma to others is the most important and valuable forms of giving because they can spread the truth to more people.

#### **2. Writing and publishing**

You can find thousands of articles on Buddhism by Westerners, many of whom are lay followers. You can also find many different kinds of books on Buddhism by Western writers. Those books play very vital roles in promoting Buddhism in the West, allowing more and more people to learn about Buddhism.

#### **3. Doing Meditation**

Meditation has been very popular among the Buddhists and non-Buddhists in the West. People like meditation a lot. In 2003, Times Magazine estimated that 10 million people meditate regularly (Time Magazine, 2003). Among those people are Westerners. I can tell this by firsthand. Most of American people who came to my temple learnt and did meditation from and with the monks in the temple. They want to calm their own minds.

#### **4. Charity**

Charity is the most important in Buddhist practice for lay people. Charity is one of lay

People's role. Western lay people mostly they are Asean people who go to live in Western country but they still practice their own culture and

religion, mostly Buddhism. Also in Buddhism, charity is important one for them to complete the goodness. Buddhist community always does charity for monks, other elderly people as well as the make charity for helping the people. Dana or giving is a duty of lay Buddhist people.

#### 5. Supporting Monks

Monk who fed their lives depends on lay people. The practice of monk is preserve Sila (morality), Samathi (meditation) and Panna (meditation). Differently from lay practices, Dana (charity), Sila (morality) and Bhavana (mental develop). Lay people have the duty to support the monk by robe, food, residence and medicine. They always bring these things to the temple in order to offer the monks and getting the merit for themselves and their ancestors.

#### 6. Donating money to help sustain temples

Temple is the central community for Buddhist people. When the Buddhists make merit they always go to the temple. In order to build the sustain temple they would join together to help the temple in such as things. Lay people offer the money for the committee of temple in order to support the building the sustain thing in the temple. Most things that they donate are their money and sometimes if they have free time they go to help during decorating or building temple. Some lay people make merit for collection money for offer the monk in order to help in such building the temple. As in present day there are many Buddhist temple in Western counties which were build by Buddhist peoples.

#### 7. Preserving precepts ( Silas)

Other duty from charity lay people always practice the morality for purify the own self in such to release problem. The preserve morality of lay people is most from the basic morality. This is five precepts. Buddhist people least preserve the five precepts such as not to kill, not to steal, not having sexual misconduct, not telling lie and not drinking alcohol. Most of lay people are preserve this precept, especially the middle age. But the elder people preserve eight precept. This is the way of Buddhist people. Although they are Buddhist people, some of them preserve the precept due to their lack of understanding of Buddhism.

### Conclusion

To sum up lay people play the vital roles in promoting of Buddhism in the West. They people are equally important for the sustainability of Buddhism. Monks cannot live and practice the dhamma easily without the support of lay people. The lay people who are very busy with the living—having no time studying the teaching—find it hard to understand the teaching without the guidance of the monks.

The roles of Buddhist lay people in promoting Buddhism in the West are:

**Lay Buddhist people** support monks by giving food, clothes, shelters, transportation, and medicine.

**Lay people promote Buddhism:** The teaching is universal, for humanity and divinity alike. Lay Buddhists in the West can perform many forms of religious ceremonies and rituals.

**Learning and Teaching:** Most Lay Buddhists in the West are interested in learning and understanding the teaching of the Buddha and learn the teaching through the books, tapes, videos, and internet as well as going to the temples to listen to the Dhamma Talks by the monks or other lay teachers in special days.

**Writing and publishing** Those books play very vital roles in promoting Buddhism in the West, allowing more and more people to learn about Buddhism.

**Doing Meditation:** Meditation has been very popular among the Buddhists and non-Buddhists came to my temple learnt and did meditation from and with the monks in the temple. They want to calm their own minds.

**Charity** is the most important in Buddhist practice for lay people. Lay people make charity for monks, other elderly people as well as the make charity for helping the people.

Lay people have the duty to support the monk by robe, food, residence and medicine. They

**Donating money to help sustain temples:** They offer the money to support the building the sustain thing in the temple which were build by Buddhist peoples.

**Preserving precepts;** Other duty from charity they always practice the morality for purify the own self in such to release the problem such as five precepts.

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