

Scandinavia: A growing interest in Buddhism

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Learned friends, along with most western countries, interest in religion and philosophy of eastern origin is increasing in Scandinavia by each year. The history of the Scandinavian Buddhist scene is very much the history of our own development and for natural reasons focus will be on the Buddhist scene in Sweden, but this corresponds very much with the situation in the neighbouring countries.

SWEDEN

The earliest sign of Buddhism dates back to the Viking era, as a small image of the Buddha has been found on Helgö island, west of Stockholm. It was probably gained by trading in Konstantinopel by Vikings who travelled through Estonia and Russia. (pic 2)

First out in Sweden to display Indian thought were the famous lady socialist Kata Dahlström (1858 - 1923), and the popular poet Dan Andersson (1888 - 1920). (pic 3) The Buddhist movement in Sweden of today, however, began really in the forties and fifties with first the Reverend Dharma Master Tao Wei (Marcel Sirander) and then the Venerable Bhikkuni Amita Nisatta (Ingrid Wagner). (pic 4)

Rev. Tao Wei began his Buddhist studies in his late teens in his native town Nice in southern France but soon he left France for China where he received ordination as Bhikshu at the Tse Chia Chan monastery outside Nanjing in 1933 in a famous mass ordination of more than 3000 monks. There he stayed for six years in study of the Dharma.

At the outburst of the Sino-Japanese war he was forced to leave China. He then returned to Europe and ten years later he came to Sweden where he lived until he passed away in 1984. He had disrobed, married and came as an Upasaka, working at

the University of Gothenburg. At the suggestion of his friend Mahathera Narada from Sri Lanka he formed the Swedish Buddhist Society that became the regional centre of The World Fellowship of Buddhists.

In 1975, at the age of 65, Rev. Tao Wei returned to China - to Hong Kong - where he again received ordination. (pic 4) Back in Sweden he formed The Lotus Buddhist Order, following the Tien Tai tradition of The Lotus Buddhist Association in Hong Kong where he was ordained. This Order had members in Sweden, England, Israel and France.

As his Dharma successor we became the secretary of both organisations.

The painting artist Ingrid Wagner and her husband Karl-Henrik (pic 6) went to India in 1953 to study art and the Buddhist religion. Two years later Mrs Wagner was ordained at Swayambu in Nepal as a novice nun, and five months later Mr Wagner received ordination as Anagarika Sugata. After one year in Sweden Sister Amita - as she was called - was invited to study in Burma, and during this time Anagarika Sugata took over her work in Stockholm. Upon her return the Anagarika moved to Oslo in Norway to spread the Dharma there. She was later to become fully ordained in China. (pic 7)

Venerable Sister Amita gave inspiration to the forming of a society called 'Buddhismens Vänner' (The Friends of Buddhism), which has attracted people from many parts of Sweden and became the foundation for the growth of Theravada Buddhism. Her lectures in the Chinese temple room at the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm became quite famous.

In the early eighties Sweden began receiving refugees from different parts of the world, and out of this rose various ethnic Buddhist groups all over the country, mostly Thai and Vietnamese.

Today the official number of Buddhists in Sweden is around 18.000 – 20.000 out of a population of 9 millions. Of these the estimated number of converts is 5.000 – 8.000. The Buddhist religion was officially recognized by the government as late as 2005 and 2 special graveyards are offered, the oldest one in Malmö – our own hometown - in south Sweden and recently one in Stockholm (2007). Some of the traditions has joined forces, so to speak, and formed the Swedish Buddhist Cooperation Council (SBS) as a counterpart to the state and the member organisations are entitled to apply for a limited financial support.

Four years ago a woman, Mrs Lisbeth Larsson, in west Sweden got the idea of publishing a Buddhist magazine. (pic 8) To help her publishing correct and proper articles she invited a few of the most well known Buddhists in the country, and the result is a very well edited magazine, free from sectarianism. One of the main problems with editing a magazine of this kind is that there are so many views on what is considered “right” and this has caused a great deal of quarrels in the editors board. The other one is economy. It has proven to be most difficult to sell as many copies as is required and the magazine may not exist for very long.

Although today there are a number of them, there is a lack of official temples, mainly due to lack of funds in the various small congregations. But the number is steadily growing and today there are 6 places in Stockholm, one in Gothenburg (pic 9), three in Skåne, the southern end of Sweden. Europe’s largest monastery is being constructed in the very north, Frederika, (pic 10 & 11) in Lappland by the Venerable Bhikku Pramaha Boonthin Taosiri and the Thai community, although they presently lack around 3 million kronor (= 300.000 Euro). But the usual meeting place is a private apartment or an office room leased for the purpose.

Tibetan Buddhism

In 1974 the Venerable Kalu Rinpoche (pic 12) and H.H the 16:th Karmapa founded Karma Shedrup Dargye Ling in Stockholm, the first Tibetan centre in Sweden and in 1980 they founded Karma Dechen Ösel Ling with the Solbo Stupa (pic 13), some 200 km west of Stockholm, as the centres retreat cottage. They are led by two Lamas, (pic 14) Venerable Lama Ngawang and Lama Tsultim Rinpoche. The various Tibetan schools are all represented in Sweden and are also the most popular form of Buddhism among the converts today.

Zen

Zen Buddhism in its Japanese style began with a visit by Phillip Kapleau (pic 15) in 1982 when he kept a lecture in Stockholm. A young man named Mikael Pooromaa gathered some of the audience and formed the Zen Buddhist Society. Later he was renamed Sante by Kapleau Roshi (pic 16) and he is leading the society together with his wife and co-teacher Kanja Odland (pic 17). The society is a part of the international Cloud- and Water Sangha, today led by Kapleau Roshis succesor Bodhin Kjolhede Roshi (pic 18). Their base zendo is in Stockholm but they have zendoes in Lund, Gothenburg and Umeå too. Close to the Solbo stupa they run a large retreat centre named Zengården. Sante Sensei also has a growing following in Finland and a small society in England.

A variety of Soto Zen that mostly finds its practitioners among students are Roshi Deshimaru's French/Japanese AZI (Association Zen Internationale), in Sweden named Svenska Soto Zen Samfundet with centres, or dojo, as they call it in Lund, Uppsala and Gothenburg.

There is another very popular form of zen practise and that is what could be called Christian Zen. We estimate the number of practitioners to at least 1000 persons. Some of the teachers involved are students of the mystic master Roshi Willigis Jaeger in Germany and members of the Japanese Sanbo Kyodan School of Zen. This summer master Jaeger, however, left the

Sanbo Kyodan and formed his own lineage – Zen Linie der Willigis Jaeger (pic 19). Now being more Buddhist oriented this occasion created a dilemma for many of the Christian teachers who cannot decide which leg to stand on. It takes a some insight for a Christian to see the similarity between the Buddha nature and the Godhead.

Theravada

Apart from Sister Amittas and Rev. Tao Wei's teaching in the Tipitaka, Theravada didn't really begin to grow until it became popular for Swedish men to go to Thailand to find a wife. After a while these women imported monks from their homeland and today the Thai movement is by far the largest Buddhist activity in Sweden and probably in Scandinavia as such. In Stockholm there is also a Sri Lankan temple in an old villa as well.

Chinese Buddhism

So what about our own tradition then? Well, due to the political situation in the 20th century it came late to Scandinavia as well as the rest of the world and is as far as we know not represented in the other Scandinavian countries except for its Vietnamese and Taiwanese closely related forms. Although Rev. Tao Wei was ordained in the Chinese Tien Tai school he did not teach it. We wore Chinese robes but that was all. Almost nothing was known about Tien Tai until we ourselves published a book on the subject in 1998.

In 2004 we were invited to the large Chinese monastery Bailin Chan Sí in Hebei (pic20) in northern China by Chan Master Ming Qi (pic 21) of Switzerland and as a result we formed the Tao Zen Sangha with direct links to the monastery and its abbot Ming Hai Sifu (pic 22) as well as Grand Master Jing Hui (pic 23). Our base is a public temple in Malmö with a zendo (chan tang) in Gothenburg.

A few years earlier the Taiwan based huge organisation Fo Guan Shan and its lay organization International Buddhist

Progress Society opened a temple in Stockholm (pic 24) and later an apartment centre in Malmö mainly focusing on Chinese immigrants. The Malmö centre does however, not exist anymore.

Mixed traditions and others

There has been two mixed traditions in Sweden, the first and by far the largest one is The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, the British movement led by the British Bikshu Dharmarakshita (pic 25). It is a mixture of Tibetan and Theravada Buddhism which was also the case of the former Arya Maitrya Mandala founded by the German Lama Anagarika Govinda (pic 26), led by the *Dharmakarya* Dharmavajra (pic 27) though present for 20 years it is today not formally existing in Sweden anymore.

Somewhat beside the traditional Buddhist Orders you'll also find that organisations such as the Soka Gakkai, the Maitreya cult of Dao and the Fa Lun Gong has gained a wide range of followers. (Whether or not the latter tree can be called Buddhist is another topic we won't discuss here).

DENMARK

The first Danish translation of a Buddhist text was done back in 1855 when the Dhammapada was published. In the 1920-s there were groups sympathizing with Buddhism who met and was reading from the Dhammapada.

In 1970 the National Museum arranged an interesting exhibition on Buddhism that became a great success. Young people with a background in the psychedelic movement travelled to the east and learned more about the Dharma. One of these was the now famous Lama Ole Nydhal and his wife Hanna. (pic 28)

They became personal students to the 16th Karmapa (pic 29) whom they also invited to Copenhagen where he performed the 'Black Hat' ceremony in 1976. (pic 30) By then they had already established a large Tibetan centre in an old beautiful villa in north Copenhagen. (pic 31)

In 1991 T.D. Lakha Lama (pic 32) from Drepung in Tibet, who is living and married in Denmark, took the initiative to organize the Danish Buddhism by founding 'The Buddhist Forum'. It became the wheel of the development of all kinds of Buddhism in Denmark but in January this year (2009) it was cancelled due to a vanishing number of active members. Today one will find around 20 various types of Buddhism in the country with more than 30 centres. Most of Buddhism in Denmark is of Tibetan origin.

The zen scene is rather small with a few groups, most of them led by the Danish Zen Master Denko Mortensen of the Rinzai sect, (pic 33) who also was the last chairman of the Forum. He was trained partly in Japan but mostly in the U.S. where he lived for 20 years. Today he runs a small monastery at the island of Bornholm.

The only representation of Tendai Buddhism in Scandinavia is a small group found just north of Copenhagen.

Conclusion

There have been several attempts to create national forms of Buddhism in the Scandinavian countries, with little or no success at all. One has to remember that when the triple gem arrived in the various Asian countries it took usually a couple of hundred years before one could discern something like local traditions.

As Buddhism only has like a 60 year history in Scandinavia there is due time for something unique to develop. There is always a risk involved that it doesn't come out naturally and so will feel constructed.

So what is it that attracts Scandinavian people to the Dharma? One main cause is that that His Holiness The Dalai Lama (pic 34) appears frequently on television. People see this nice old monk talking about Buddhism with a gentle smile in his face. Every so often these people show up at courses but gets rather

distressed when they find it so complex and that practising the Dharma requires some effort of their own.

The most people that shows up is, however, mainly interested in learning meditation and has little if any, interest in the thesis of the Buddha or any other master. Those who stay on usually develop a deeper interest and some even asks for the Threefold Refuge. (pic 35) In our temple we have this ceremony once a year.

NORWAY

The development of Buddhism in Norway has 2 major backgrounds, as is the case in Sweden as well as in Denmark.

The first one is the slow but growing interest in the Dharma among the Norwegians which led to the establishment of Buddhist associations. In 1972 the Zen-school were established and in 1975 the Karma Tashi Ling Buddhist Society were founded. These two where later followed by other societies. In 2002 the registered number of ethnic Norwegian Buddhists was 920 persons. There is one single person who has a great influence in the Buddhist scene and that's Dr. Kåre A. Lie (pic 36).

The second background is that there has been a severe immigration to Norway by Asian people of the Buddhist religion. The main group is the Vietnamese (pic 37) who count a number of 9000 persons with 5275 registered Buddhist practitioners, mainly of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. As in Sweden the Thai constitute the second largest Buddhist group with around 3000 active Buddhists.

Among the Chinese immigrants there is an estimated number of 1200 practitioners, mainly of the Pure Land Sect. There a few hundred people from countries as Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia, Burma, Tibet Japan and Korea as well.

As for the Norwegian Buddhists only a few of them are organized or attached to a special group, mainly in the capital.

Buddhists throughout the country have to practice and study Buddhism on their own. In Oslo, however, there is a Theravada society, as well as different Mahayana schools, like the Chan of the late Grand Master Shen Yen (pic 38) of the Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan, The Pure Land Sect and also a small Tibetan monastery.

In Norway the estimated number of Buddhists is around 15000 persons out of which 10% are Norwegian converts. These 15000 followers of the Triple Gem are organized in around 15 organisations throughout the country, covering most of the traditional sects as well as a few new ones. Among others there is the Korean Lotus Sangha/Yun Wha denomination of World Social Buddhism. This is so far the only Korean group in Scandinavia. Otherwise the picture is very much the same as in Sweden but with less Tibetan centres.