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Speech by Venerable Ajahn Brahmavamso

Respected Venerables and Distinguished Guests. It is an honour for me to be here today.

I was born a Christian, was educated in Christian schools, and I even sang in the local church choir. But when I read my first book on Buddhism, at the age of 16, I immediately knew I was a Buddhist. I was moved by the compassion, the wisdom, and the freedom that shone more brilliantly in the Lord Buddha's Teachings than in anything else I had met before. Experiences similar to my own are being repeated hundreds of thousands of times, in the lives of the people of this 21st century. When ordinary people in non-Buddhist countries encounter the pure Teachings of Buddhism, presented in a clear and reliable manner, then they quickly recognize it as the most fragrant of all paths, the most precious of all truths, and the best of all religions. They only wonder why such liberating wisdom is not made more widely known.

In my own land, Australia, the number of Buddhists was insignificant in 1983, when I first arrived from Thailand. By 1991, the proportion of Buddhists grew to 0.8%. In 1996, that had increased to 1.1%. Recently, in the Australian Census of August 2001, the number of Buddhists had grown by 75% to 1.9% of the population. That is almost one in fifty Australians declaring themselves to be Buddhists. As the Christian religion declines in the West, Buddhism has become the fastest growing religion in Australia and many other developed countries.

That is good news and bad news. It is good news in that more Australians are benefiting from the world's most peaceful religion. It is bad news in that it means monks like me have to work so much harder with more disciples to look after!

I would now like to suggest why I think Buddhism is growing so well in the West. I will use the acronym PURE to summarize four key strategies that have helped extend the spread of Buddhism:

1. Presentation -- in ordinary language
2. User friendly -- inviting and accessible
3. Relevant -- concerned with everyday problems
4. Examples -- monks leading by example

1. Presentation

If we want the wonderful Teachings of Buddhism to reach our modern generation, then it needs to be presented in a modern way. It is not the essence of the Dharma that needs to be changed, it is the presentation that needs continual adjustment. The generations of tomorrow are not going to listen to boring monks droning on, giving irrelevant sermons.

We all know that the Lord Buddha said to teach the Dharma in ordinary language (e.g. Aranavibhanga Sutra). Let me give an example of what I think this means. Last century, Western priests and scholars dismissed Buddhism as pessimistic, saying that it only focuses on suffering. This was even repeated by Pope John Paul II in his controversial book on world religions. To avoid this misunderstanding one may rearrange the central Dharma Teaching of the Four Noble Truths as Happiness (Dukkhanirodho); the Cause of Happiness (the Eight-Fold Path); the Absence of Happiness (Dukkha); and the Cause for the Absence of Happiness

(Craving). This shifts the focus onto happiness.

This is a simple re-packaging of the Dharma that retains the essence while being more attractive to modern audiences. It is justified by the Lord Buddha's statement that "Nirvana is the highest happiness" (Dhammapada 203, 204). When I present the Four Noble Truths in such a way, I find all generations listen and come back for more.

2. User Friendly

Presenting the Dharma in ordinary language is the first step to making Buddhism user friendly. However, I have found many cases of people, in the West and in the East, who want to learn about Buddhism but are too afraid to come into the temple or monastery because they are not familiar with the traditional customs, or even because they are scared of scowling monks! When Buddhist temples are more welcoming to their visitors, and more accommodating to newcomers, when the monks are more approachable, then the temple is user friendly.

In these modern times, though, people are so busy that they rarely have time to visit the temple. So the temple should go to the people with books, audio cassettes, CDs and, of course, the Internet. Our Buddhist Society of Western Australia has a large web-site that loads weekly spoken Dharma talks in English so that anyone, anywhere in the world can listen to Dharma in the comfort of their own homes at a time convenient to them. This has been highly successful with a large audience of regular disciples all over the world, with no need for expensive and extravagant buildings.

3. Relevant

Religions like Christianity are declining in the West because they are seen as irrelevant to most people's lives. Few are concerned about abstract philosophy, rituals with no apparent meaning, or with speculations that go against reason. However, they are very concerned about how to find more happiness amid the common problems of life.

I have found it easy to explain that keeping moral precepts raises one's average level of happiness, just as a rising tide lifts the average level of the sea. The result is that many of my audience keep the Five Precepts. It is also not difficult to illustrate that kindness to your colleagues, family and to yourself, brings much more comfort into your life. So my disciples become less angry and more forgiving. There is so much medical evidence to prove that traditional Buddhist meditation practices ease the stress of modern life and relieve so many other related problems. So the members of my temple are all keen meditators. These three central Buddhist trainings — morality, kindness and meditation — when framed in the context of personal growth in happiness, attract so many to Buddhism. They relate to what many people consider as important to them.

When we focus on what is relevant to ordinary people, then Buddhism becomes important to them. They might begin with interest in solving their worldly problems, but that soon leads to the Path that liberates one from all suffering.

4. Examples

All this means nothing to the modern generation without high quality leaders to provide the inspiration. The growth of Buddhism relies crucially on living examples of virtuous, compassionate, wise and peaceful monks. People of the 21st century are sceptical. They withhold their belief until they see some evidence that it will benefit them. Does Buddhism help? Does it really lead to virtue, compassion, contentment and freedom? They are looking at us monks for examples of where Buddhism leads, before they will follow. How can we expect to inspire the questioning modern generation when monks live in luxury, more wealthy than the common person, when we are slack in our precepts and know little of serenity? The Dharma is spread mostly by

example, much more powerfully than by any sermon.

As one well educated Australian wrote in her recent book, before becoming a Buddhist she observed the monks in Perth for many months. When she saw that they were very frugal, kept their precepts, worked hard and were very happy, only then did she go for refuge and start calling herself a Buddhist. Actions speak louder than words.

So, for example, in Western Australia we have established monasteries for training Sangha leaders of both genders, what I call a 'monk factory' and a 'nun factory'. By putting many resources into training high quality Sangha leaders we will be ensuring the supply of high quality examples for the next generation.

These are some of the strategies that have worked in Australia to make Buddhism the fastest growing religion there. We do not need to change the message of the Lord Buddha, nor do we need to change the monastic rules. We may fulfil our duty to the Greatest Teacher, our Lord Buddha, and spread the delightful Dharma throughout all parts of our modern world, by making Buddhism PURE. That is Presented in ordinary language, User friendly, Relevant, and with us monks as the inspiring Examples.

Thankyou.

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