



**LOOKING BACK**

**AND**

**LOOKING FORWARD**

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**BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY  
KANDY — CEYLON**

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## *Looking Back and Looking Forward*

It is an admirable custom in certain Buddhist countries to commemorate a loved relative who has died, by publishing a book or pamphlet on Buddhism for free distribution in the dead person's name. The merit of the *Dhamma - dana*, or Gift of the Truth, is then passed on to the deceased. It is the highest merit that can be offered.

This was the intention of a devout Buddhist gentleman of Kandy, the hill capital of Ceylon, when he undertook to print an edition of a small work on Buddhism in English, in memory of a near relative. While the booklet was still in the press the idea occurred to him to start a series of such publications — small books, paper-covered, on various aspects of Buddhism, in English, and chiefly for distribution abroad. He discussed the project with a friend, a senior teacher, and a Buddhist monk living in the neighbourhood of Kandy, and they received the suggestion with enthusiasm. Knowing that there was a great desire for knowledge of Buddhist teachings among an increasing number of thoughtful people all over the world, they foresaw great possibilities in the idea. A wider reading

public could be reached by a steady stream of small booklets than through the medium of full-sized publications. At the same time, various aspects of Buddhist thought could be dealt with by different writers, thus offering continual variety and an appeal to all types of readers,

On the practical side, the originator of the plan felt confident that he could get the support of a number of friends, each of whom would subscribe for a single issue at least of the booklets. In that way the initial costs of printing could be met.

On this basis, and with no further formalities, the new project was launched. The three constituted themselves an informal society, with the Monk as honorary Secretary, the original sponsor as honorary Treasurer and his friend as honorary Assistant Secretary and Assistant Treasurer. It was agreed that they did not wish to be encumbered with constitutions, committees and all the troublesome machinery that so often suffocates a young society at the very start. They were content to begin in a modest way and to trust that further helpers would come along as the work showed its value.

They did not even wait to obtain office premises. The Buddhist Publication Society was born, and for the first three years of its life grew up, in an overcrowded little room in a hermitage set in the thickly-wooded hills of Kandy. Nothing more different from a modern publishing office, with staff and equipment, could be imagined. Here was just a book-lined room lit at night by an oil lamp, containing nothing in the way of office appurtenances beyond a typewriter, a table for writing and some shelves which soon became unexpectedly stacked with office files. All around, the quiet of the forest, broken only by the shrilling of cicadas and the occasional note of a bird.

The first booklet published was the one already in the press, 'The Seven Factors of Enlightenment.' A second was chosen and printed, and the two sent out together as the first of the series titled *THE WHEEL*. With them went a smaller tract, 'An Outline of Buddhism'; this was the first of the sister series, *BODHI LEAVES*, intended to contain popular introductions to Buddhism and short essays.

It was a very unpretentious beginning. A thousand copies were printed of the two *WHEEL* booklets, and 5000 of the first *BODHI LEAVES*. These were dispatched in January 1958 to altogether two hundred addresses in Ceylon and abroad. But to get them out was no easy matter. Lists of addresses were compiled, classified, typed and even pasted on the envelopes by the Secretary, while the larger parcels were packed by the servant boy of the Hermitage. Then, and for a long time thereafter, the Secretary and Assistant Secretary had no help in the Society's work. Transport was a recurring problem. Sometimes a car was available for conveyance between the Hermitage and the town, but a great deal of the time was spent by the Assistant Secretary in going backward and forward on foot, negotiating two steep hills between the Hermitage and his home. For the Secretary, a long walk from the Hermitage to the printer's office was a regular feature of his routine.

More and more addresses were added to the mailing list, and for the third issue the number of copies printed was increased to three thousand for the *WHEEL*. The response to the first issues had been highly encouraging. Many letters began to arrive from Buddhist societies and from individuals abroad who had received the booklets. Dealing with this mail involved more work, and the do-it-yourself policy was strained to the utmost; but still it

was carried on cheerfully without any additional clerical staff. In the first year seven issues of *THE WHEEL* and four of *BODHI LEAVES* were published in this way.

So rapidly did the field of distribution expand that at the end of the first year the publications were being sent to 470 foreign addresses, covering no less than fifty-five countries. Of these addresses, some were of Buddhist associations, some of individual Buddhists and others of people interested in Buddhism. All of them showed a keen desire to obtain authentic Buddhist literature, and many were the expressions of appreciation that came from grateful readers.

From the start the publications were generally distributed free of any charge, even postage being met by the Society. With the increase of the quantities printed it was, however, found no longer practicable to finance the publications entirely through single donors. The new need was met by introducing Associate Membership, together with the annual subscription scheme.

Membership in Ceylon was recruited chiefly by the efforts of the Assistant Secretary, who was indefatigable in making personal contacts with prospective subscribers and contributors, many of whom, since the Society was then small and unknown, would have been unlikely to respond to written appeals. In addition to this he shared the task of visiting the printers and helped with the editorial work at the Hermitage. Thus his days were filled, and his nights scarcely less so, for he often worked late into the night doing the accounts, writing up the ledgers of the Society, and preparing the monthly and yearly statements. It was only by such devoted and untiring work that the Society was able to maintain

and steadily expand its activity throughout that arduous period of its maturing.

There came a period when donations slackened, but the BPS continued on its way undaunted. That phase passed, and since then there have always been sufficient funds available for the programme immediately in hand. Apart from the support received from members and contributors, the consolidated position of the Society today is largely due to the fact that towards the end of 1958 the Society received a generous grant from the Department of Cultural Affairs, and since then this Ceylon Government subsidy has been received regularly. The official support was doubly welcome, in that it showed appreciation of the Society's work and the quality of literature it has produced, and because it testifies to the fact that the BPS booklets are not only helpful to readers abroad but are of great service to those in Ceylon whose education has been mainly in English. Owing to the predominance in former days of English education there are many people in Ceylon who find it actually easier to study Buddhism in the English language than in their mother-tongue. It is a fact that the small BPS booklets, handy to carry and easy to pass around, have done much to foster the reading habit among people who would hesitate to tackle a large book devoted to a serious subject such as religion or philosophy.

The regular grant from the Cultural Affairs Department has enabled the Society not only to increase its output to a significant extent, but also to do a certain amount of planning ahead. *THE WHEEL* series was increased to 5,000 copies per issue, thereby allowing a margin of reserve stock to be kept, so that requests, which are frequently received, for past issues can be met.

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As time went on donations, some of them very generous ones, began to be received from Ceylon and several foreign countries. The assistance thus rendered would doubtless have been greater but for the fact that the Society's well-wishers in a number of countries in East and West are prevented from sending donations by the restrictions placed on foreign exchange.

As the Society's clerical work mounted up to unmanageable proportions, voluntary helpers came forward and offered their assistance. They included some Government servants and municipal employees, who gave their help in clerical work during their leisure hours, and also formed groups of subscribers in their departments. A bank employee helped with the Society's accounts, whilst individual volunteers rendered other welcome assistance whenever they could. Among the latter, one in particular deserves special mention. He is a retired Government servant who offered his full-time services to the Society in May 1960, and for this purpose moved from Colombo to Kandy where, as no proper accommodation could then be offered to him, he was content to 'camp' at the Forest Hermitage. It is thanks to him, and to others who have sacrificed their time and personal convenience to help the work, that the Society has borne the strain of its rapid expansion with so little overhead expenditure. All the same, the volume of work always kept well ahead of the available assistance, a condition which still prevails today.

One great handicap from the beginning was the distance between the Hermitage and the centres of activity in the town, together with the fact that there was no telephonic communication. All contacts with printers and others had to be made by letter or personal visit — a time-consuming and energy-wasting procedure. Mail



was taken to the post office by cycle; a formidable task on mailing days, with some 1300 packages to be dealt with. Nevertheless, things were carried on in this way, with the work continually increasing, until February 1961, when at last an office was obtained nearer to town, on the drive by the lovely Kandy Lake, half-a-mile away from the Temple of the Sacred Tooth. So far as accessibility and communication was concerned this was a great step forward, but with the rapidly-growing clerical requirements, combined with the fact that the stock of publications is being added to monthly, there is still a great need for more accommodation. Storage space and working space are still uncomfortably restricted.

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Now, midway through the fourth year of its existence, the position of the BPS is eloquent testimony to its achievements. It supplies regular Buddhist publications to over 1,800 addresses in fifty-nine countries ranging from Scandinavia to Italy in Europe, North to South America, Africa (including Ghana, Nigeria and Soudan), Israel, Australia, the Buddhist countries of Asia and the centres of recent Buddhist revival, India and Indonesia. Up to October 1961 a total of 320,000 booklets have been printed. It is particularly gratifying to note that the Society's publications penetrate to countries where Buddhist literature is scarce and difficult to come by, as in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Spain. The letters received from these countries tell of the sad dearth of books on Buddhism, and the thirst for knowledge of the Dhamma that many of the people feel. Owing to the limited knowledge of English, distribution of the books in these countries is restricted to a few persons, but translations are often made of the



Society's publications, in whole or in part, and in this way they reach a fairly wide reading public. Such translations are often printed in Buddhist magazines. It is also quite common for English-language periodicals in other countries to reprint entire BPS publications in their pages.

This is due, more than anything, to the high standard that has been set and maintained in the published material. Buddhist teachings now command a wider audience than ever before, and the standards by which their presentation is judged are exacting; they have to bear comparison with the best philosophical writings of the West. There is abundant proof that the BPS publications satisfy the requirements of the modern mind. Not all the readers who write to the Society are Buddhists; a number of adherents of other religions have written expressing their appreciation of the Buddhist doctrines which the booklets have made known to them for the first time. Besides ordinary people, scholars and even scientists in the West have written on the subject of Buddhist doctrines which in the BPS publications they have found presented in a manner to command their interest and respect.\* Nearer home, the Education Department of the Government of Ceylon purchases regularly a quantity of *THE WHEEL* publications for school libraries — a very gratifying proof of the service the Society is rendering to the country of its birth. It has been found that the booklets are very valuable to teachers and students alike.

In response to suggestion from many readers a series of booklets in Sinhala language, the *DAMSAK* (Pali,

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\* A few representative extracts from readers' and subscribers' letters have now been printed for free distribution, in a separate booklet, 'What Our Readers Say'.

*Dhamma-cakka*) series, was inaugurated in 1960, and has met with a friendly reception. They have earned much praise both from the clerical and lay readers. Up to September 1961, seven titles have been printed in that series, totalling 30,000 copies.

Regular supplies of the B. P. S. Publications are offered to the Hospital Welfare Service and the 'Buddhist Mission to Sea and Air Travellers' in Colombo. According to reports received from the monks in charge of the Hospital Service in the metropolis, the Society's English and Sinhalese publications are greatly appreciated by the patients. The demand on this service is rapidly increasing.

In London, a devoted friend of the Society has at her own expense inserted advertisements in English newspapers and magazines, offering in the name of the Buddhist Publication Society to send free copies of the publications on request. The Society supplies the books for mailing them to enquirers at this lady's expense. The response to this venture has been highly encouraging and it has brought several interesting contacts.

This brief backward glance would not be complete if it did not take in some aspects of the material the Society has already offered to readers. A survey of the titles shows the range of subjects the booklets have already covered. The first 35 issues of *THE WHEEL* comprise over 1,000 pages—a considerable volume of high-class writing on Buddhism. From the outset it has been the Society's aim to give authoritative information embodying the fundamental and original teachings of the Buddha, together with reliable translations of actual texts. The general tone has been set by that little classic, now published once more by the BPS, *The Word of the Buddha*, by the Ven. Nyanatiloka Mahathera, wherein is found a



statement of the authentic doctrine taught by Gotama Buddha, a formulation acceptable to all who follow the Dhamma. For the rest, the booklets are an attempt to present Buddhism in the framework of contemporary thought, and to interpret man to himself in the light of a wisdom that is lacking in this materialistic age. As the Society's correspondence testifies, the publications are serving this purpose for an ever-growing number of people in all parts of the world.

It is here that we see the true value of Buddhist teachings in the world today. The BPS booklets are being used more and more in group study by Buddhists who are cut off from large-scale Buddhist activities. Wherever there is a small nucleus of Buddhists, ardently pursuing knowledge of the Dhamma, there the BPS publications are found. Large and well-organised Buddhist associations find the booklets valuable not only for group and individual study but also for introducing the Dhamma to non-Buddhists. In this way the BPS is helping to create a climate of thought in which Buddhist ideas and ideals can take root. The spread of Buddhism in the West has shown over and over again how a whole life can be transformed by a single book on the Dhamma, perhaps given by a friend, perhaps picked up in an idle moment. Every booklet that goes forth from the quiet Hermitage in the heart of the Kandy hills contains immeasurable potentialities. To one it may carry intellectual satisfaction – the answer to questions that have perplexed and disturbed him, and for which his own religion could furnish no answers. To another it may bring courage and incentive to live the good life. To yet another it may be nothing less than salvation from complete despair. So great is the power of the printed word in human life—so great the power of the Dhamma in one small book.

For the workers of the BPS during those early, difficult days it was that which made it all worth while. It made worth while the planning and contriving, the long hours at the typewriter, the eyes strained from proof-reading in the dim light of an oil lamp, the ache in the not-so-young legs from the stiff climb into the Kandyan heights, the fingers sticky with office paste . . . They were making their Gift of Dhamma to the world.

Few of the readers who received and enjoyed the first publications could have guessed the conditions in which they came into existence, or the labour of their birth. Many must have thought that 'Forest Hermitage' was just a picturesque name, perhaps for some urban residence—or, at the least, a well-appointed monastery in which the Secretary did his editorial work surrounded by servants, with the publishing office somewhere adjacent. But the small, shuttered room of the Buddhist monk is still the heart and nerve-centre of what, from humble beginnings has grown into something like an institution.

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And now the Buddhist Publication Society faces the future with high hopes. What has been done so far is little compared with possibilities that lie ahead. The field for Buddhist work lies not only in the West but very close to hand, for example in India. Though the pressing need there is for literature in the vernaculars, there are many thousands of new converts to Buddhism in the sub-continent who are conversant with English yet still lack proper instruction in the Dhamma. But despite the language obstacle, BPS publications are being used there with success. They are being rendered into the vernaculars and taken as the basis of lectures and study courses, and



to provide material for original writing in the indigenous languages. Here alone there is enormous scope for progress and development.

In the Western countries the need is for more organised distribution of the booklets through large booksellers; but this of course calls for more clerical staff and a greater number of qualified office workers. Given the staff, there is no doubt whatever that a successful campaign could be planned and carried out from the headquarters in Kandy. Booksellers in England and America, to mention only two countries, are quite prepared to give their co-operation, but unless large quantities of books can be dealt with systematically, it is pointless to embark on any ambitious programme. Nevertheless, it remains a distinct possibility for the future, and one that only awaits the opportunity. The two prime requisites are suitable office accommodation and equipment, and paid personnel to deal with the complex routine of book-keeping, correspondence, mailing and the numerous other functions of a publishing organisation. With these facilities another side of the work could be developed as well—that is, the systematic distribution of BPS literature to public libraries and other suitable institutions all over the world. From that it would be only a step for the booklets to find their way to reading-rooms, youth clubs and other places where miscellaneous reading matter is available to the general public. In this way a new and hitherto untouched class of readers would be contacted, with who knows what stimulating results?

There has already been evidence that advertisements in the press, particularly in publications that cater for an intelligent readership, produce an encouraging response. Advertising, however, is costly, and at present the BPS relies on its well-wishers to take the initiative in this

direction. The results achieved by the lady in London already mentioned, have shown what can be done by judicious advertising. Perhaps others in the future will come forward with similar offers of help.

Many other ideas come to mind for development in the days ahead. It is hoped that in time to come the Society may be in a position to sponsor the publication of full-sized books. This would be a logical, and most fruitful, extension of the work already being done. Whenever the necessary funds become available it will be a priority item in the Society's planning.

The number of translations into foreign languages that have been made of the BPS literature suggests another promising line of development, which is for the Society itself to duplicate pamphlets and booklets in various languages and scripts, from stencils supplied by the foreign Buddhist societies concerned. A service of this kind would be of inestimable benefit, particularly to small groups of Buddhists in countries where circumstances are unfavourable to the propagation of Buddhist teachings, or where the financial and other resources of the Buddhists are scanty. A good duplicating machine is all that would be required to start such a service on a modest scale; the foreign Buddhist Societies would provide the translations and no doubt many of them would also contribute towards the cost of paper and other expenses.

But the most interesting possibility of development is one that lies outside the printed page. Recently the idea occurred to some members of the BPS to start a circulating library of tape-recorded lectures on Buddhism, sermons, Scripture-reciting by Bhikkhus (Pirith), debates and other recordable Buddhist activities. These recordings, made in Ceylon on tapes provided by Buddhist associations abroad, could be air-mailed back to them.



and from there circulated to other organisations having standard tape-recording machines, and finally back to the BPS for transmission elsewhere. When it is remembered that many Buddhists abroad have never heard the Pāli scriptures recited by Bhikkhus in concert, and that many would welcome the sound of Pirith at their meetings, the fascinating possibilities of this scheme become at once apparent. It would enable Buddhists abroad to hear sermons by celebrated Monks, listen to stimulating lectures and discussions and to take part in Buddhist ceremonies as though they were actually present at them. For young people in particular the interest would be increased a hundredfold. And indeed who, having read something that appealed to him very greatly, would not welcome the chance to hear the voice of the author himself? There is without question a great future open to the propagation of Buddhism through recordings, and the BPS is in a unique position to institute such a service. The only thing lacking is a tape-recorder. If a suitable instrument can be obtained, recordings can be made straight away. Of all the contemplated schemes, this would be the simplest to put into operation. It requires no elaborate organising, and no extra staff. Wherever a Buddhist sermon or lecture is being given, there a recording can be made. In that way, something that is quite common in every Buddhist country could be transported to Buddhists in remote places who would hail it as a great rarity. We might well paraphrase a famous saying and ask, 'Why should Māra have all the best inventions?' Incidentally, it is worth remembering that in Ceylon there are monks who can preach in Hindi and several other Indian languages, besides English, whilst others can give discourses in German and other important European languages. The tape recorder is the best way to make use of all this talent in the service of Buddhism.

So the Buddhist Publication Society, three and half years old, looks forward to a future rich in unexplored possibilities. It is a society with courage and imagination—both essentials for the propagation of Buddhism in the modern world. You who read this are invited to take a share in its work. No matter how small the part you may be able to play, your help and co-operation will be welcomed. If what you have just read has given you any ideas of ways in which you can help to forward the Society's plans, please write to the Secretary, Buddhist Publication Society, Forest Hermitage, Kandy.

The past success of the Society has been in large measure due to the active support of its Members, Associate Members and Subscribers who have helped in various ways, such as by introducing the BPS booklets to others. Increased membership means more funds with which to plan ahead. Already the BPS has grown to adult stature, if measured by the amount of work it has put out in the 62 booklets and over 300,000 copies. If it is to expand at a similar rate in the future the extra facilities in the way of accommodation, staff and equipment must be forthcoming. The ideas are there, and the will to carry them out. The rest depends upon the goodwill of those who believe in the value of the Society's work, and wish to see its influence as a medium of disseminating the Buddha's Teachings spread over an ever-widening field in the days ahead.



WE OF TODAY, in view of this wonderful gift of the Dhamma that has been vouchsafed to us, cannot be merely recipients. We must be givers too. We have had the lofty privilege of coming to know something of the Teachings of the Buddha. We live in a Buddha - era, that is at a time when the Teachings of a Buddha are still remembered and are of significance. This alone would make it incumbent on us to spread this Teaching of Peace, inner and outer, as far and wide and as faithfully as we can.

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