

# **Disseminating Buddhism in the Modern World**

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Before beginning to consider the question of disseminating Buddhism in the modern world, let us remind ourselves why we should want to disseminate it. The Buddha said:

“Go forth for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the good and the happiness of gods and men. Let no two of you go in the same direction. Teach the Dhamma which is beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle and beautiful at the end. Proclaim both the letter and the spirit of the holy life completely fulfilled and perfectly pure.”<sup>1</sup>

It is an important part of Buddhism that it does not try to conquer hearts and minds, to convert others in order to prove that it is better than other teachings. It looks first at the person who is being introduced to the teaching. It is up to that person to listen, and to decide whether this teaching has anything to give them. The lessons of the Dhamma are offered to them. They can take them or leave them just as they please.

In a world with much violence and trickery, this may seem like a weakness, but just as in the Buddha's time it in fact gives great strength. Immediate results, in terms of numbers of converts, may be greater for those who use violence and trickery, but in the longer term their achievements will be short-lived and their teachings will not be found to be helpful.

The Buddha had advice on how the Dhamma should be disseminated:

“I shall not die until the monks, the nuns, the laymen and the laywomen have become deeply learned, wise and well-trained, remembering the teachings, proficient in the lesser and greater doctrines, and virtuous; until, having learned the teachings themselves, they are able to tell them to others, teach them, make them known, establish them, open them up, explain them and make them clear; until they are able to refute false doctrines taught by others

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<sup>1</sup> I have taken this English translation from the very valuable website, [Buddhanet.net](http://Buddhanet.net).

and are able to spread the convincing and liberating truth abroad. I shall not die until the holy life has become successful, prosperous, undespised and popular; until it has become well proclaimed among both gods and men.<sup>2</sup>

Buddhism is a teaching based not on faith and belief, but on experience and understanding. This gives it the self-confidence to meet and talk to other teachings and religions, which are by no means necessarily 'false' themselves, to listen, to debate, to teach and to learn. This is a great strength in today's world, where geographical distance is much less important than it used to be, and very different cultural traditions come face to face, perhaps for the first time.

After the Buddha passed away, Councils were held from time to time to systematize and agree on what his teachings really were. This was necessary before they could be spread effectively and in a pure form. It is perhaps time now, with the spread of the Internet, for the three main schools of Buddhism to come together to consider what they can contribute to each other. These revolutions in communication invariably have a powerful effect on discussion and the growth of scholarship.

The Internet is a revolution almost as dramatic as the invention of a new technique of printing in Europe nearly six hundred years ago. A result of that was that scholars had to be sure that what they were disseminating was the most accurate possible version of the Christian bible. There was a great growth of scholarship and much discussion which challenged existing ideas.

The Internet has also produced many challenges to traditional authorities, and it is important that those entrusted with protecting and disseminating the teaching of the Dhamma should watch closely what is being said, and be ready to question those whose reasons for spreading their own version of the Dhamma may not be completely pure and altruistic. There are some who see Buddhism as an easy way to make money, or to gain power over others. We need to be aware of what is going on, and ready to dispute untrue teachings by those who have not learned the teachings themselves until 'they are able to tell them to others, teach them, make them known, establish them, open them up, explain them and make them clear'. We need to be 'able to refute false doctrines taught by others and ... able to spread the convincing and liberating truth abroad'.

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<sup>2</sup> [Buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/disciples06.htm](http://Buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/disciples06.htm)

The Buddhist community should also keep itself informed of negative ideas about Buddhism which arise from ignorance or, occasionally, ill-will, and be ready to argue against these in appropriate ways. The Rector of Mahachulalongkorn has said that it is important to take part fully in inter-faith forums and to have a presence in national mass media and to seek representation at government level, which are a valuable way of doing this.

The Internet is a particularly appropriate way of disseminating Buddhism, because it cannot force people to believe what is said, and it is not expensive: you do not have to be rich in order to offer the teaching of the Dhamma to those who want to seek it out. At the same time, having an effective presence on the Internet requires an understanding of various technical matters, like how Search Engines work, and the principles of web design. Many Buddhists are already highly knowledgeable about these matters, and are willing to share their knowledge freely.

There is no need to re-invent the wheel. We need to look closely at the huge amount of excellent work which is already being done to disseminate Buddhism over the Internet, to see how we can supplement and support this, and to consider what the contribution of our own Sanghas and committed laypeople can be to spreading awareness of the Dhamma throughout the world.

Last year a very valuable paper was presented to the International Buddhist Conference, 2005 by Dmytro Ivakhnenko and Valery Pavlov of the Buddhist Educational Fellowship in Ukraine. Its title was “Websites as a Tool of Dhamma Dissemination” and it suggests all the things that should be considered when using the internet to spread the teaching of the Buddha. There is a helpful appendix titled “Internet dissemination tools”, which suggests ways to make a website of Buddhism more welcoming and easy to use. You can find their own website at [dhamma.ru/sadhu](http://dhamma.ru/sadhu).

There is an excellent Australian website, [Buddhanet.net](http://Buddhanet.net), which gives easy access to the teachings of all the schools, as well as offering free materials for personal study at various levels. I recommend that you visit this website, which is also happy to provide links to other serious Buddhist websites. A very extensive American Theravada website is John Bullitt’s excellent [accesstoinsight.org](http://accesstoinsight.org), which

brings together a library of more than nine hundred suttas in English-language translations, and several hundred articles and books.

We need also, of course, to be active within our own countries in spreading the teaching in our own local languages, not only to the international public through the medium of the English language. I hope the Thai Sangha will consider how this work can be organized, perhaps by setting up a specialist section for Dhammaduta work within Thailand. I hope this can be combined with reaching out to the millions of tourists who come to Thailand each year, many hundreds of thousands of whom are interested in finding out more about Buddhism. Western tourist companies often provide a one-hour talk on all aspects of Thai culture, including Buddhism. We should be able to offer something much more meaningful than this. We could develop Buddhamonthon into a centre for outsiders with a serious interest in Buddhism, but perhaps also it could offer something much simpler, perhaps just a one- or two-day introduction to Buddhism and meditation for tourists.

In conclusion, then, I believe it is important that the three schools of Buddhism, Mahayana, Theravada and Vajirayana, should strengthen their links and not fall into the trap of trying to compete with each other in order to capture a greater share of the 'Buddhism market'. Let us find ways of staying closely in touch, and build on the good work which has already been done to make full use of the new opportunities for communication. Perhaps the World Buddhist University is the right place to do this work. Together we shall be a stronger force for good in the world.

So let us now, 2,500 years after receiving the Buddha's teaching, go forth again to make sure that the Dhamma is 'well proclaimed among both gods and men'.