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Buddhism in Switzerland

by

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This note is intended to provide a brief survey of the state of Buddhism in Switzerland. A brief look at the urban scene in Switzerland reveals that it is no longer necessary to travel to Asia to meet Buddhists and to visit Buddhist monasteries. In Lausanne, for instance, it is possible to participate in the activities of four different Buddhist centers: three Tibetan Buddhist circles and one Zen meditation group. Not far from Lausanne, the Rabten Choeling Buddhist monastery welcomes visitors. Inaugurated in 1977 near Mont Pèlerin, a community of Western monks striving to be educated in the traditional ways of Tibetan liturgy and Gelugpa teaching set up their center. The project of a study center specifically established for Western converts failed, however, and the monastery's mission was changed. Nowadays, the monastery has some 25 monks and nuns, who primarily take care of the spiritual needs of Tibetans living in Switzerland. However, to focus on Tibetan Buddhism exclusively would not do justice to earlier Buddhist endeavors and activities in Switzerland. For this purpose, a brief historical outline and some statistical information on the contemporary state of Buddhism are provided in the following paragraphs.

Some ninety years ago, in the winter of 1909/1910, the German-born Theravāda monk Nyanatiloka sojourned in southern Switzerland, near Lugano. This stay and his plan to establish a *vihāra* (Pāli: a dwelling place for monks) mark the beginning of the history of institutionalized Buddhism in Switzerland. Nyanatiloka and his lay supporters from the German Pāli Society ambitiously intended to build a monastery in which at least five monks could live according to the rules of the *Vinaya* (monastic

codex) and work towards the spreading of Buddhist teachings within the German language area. The thirty-two year-old monk lived in an Alpine shepherd's chalet, dressed in a traditional Theravāda monk's robe and scanty sandals. Nyanatiloka wrote his Pāli grammar and translated texts from the *Abhidhamma*. He did, however, suffer from the snow and the "unspeakable cold," as he later wrote in his autobiographical notes (edited in Hecker 1995). In danger of succumbing to his illness, Nyanatiloka left for North Africa in order to found a monastic settlement near Tunis. However, only a few weeks later he was told by the French colonial authorities to leave the country. Thus Nyanatiloka accepted an invitation to come to Lausanne to stay in a Buddhist *vihāra* called "Caritas-Viharo." This building with its exotic appearance, publicly displaying Buddhist symbols (a picture is provided in Hecker 1995: 328), was built by a certain Rodolphe-Adrien Bergier in the L'avenue d'Echallens. The local archives in Lausanne hold a few records of Bergier, as he belonged to a wealthy bourgeois family in Lausanne. Born in 1852, Bergier worked in the United States as a miner during the 1880s. It seems that he was able to make a fortune, and, after having returned to Lausanne in 1901 as a well-to-do engineer, he sooner or later must have come into contact with Buddhism. The records contain an index card stating that he became a member of the German Pāli Society (based in Breslau/Warsaw) on July 1, 1911. Bergier seems to have been the first Swiss lay Buddhist (*upāsaka*), supporting Nyanatiloka and his three disciples generously for months. It was also in Lausanne that a Buddhist ordination was conducted for the first time in European history, when in October 1910 the German Bartel Bauer (1887-1940) became a novice (*sāmaṇera*). His Buddhist name, Kondaṇṇo, was chosen after Buddha Shakyamuni's first disciple. A few months after this almost unnoticed historic event, Nyanatiloka left Lausanne for Ceylon, where he founded the famous Island Hermitage on the island of Polgasduva in 1911. This island, which became an important venue for Western monks, was purchased by Bergier and presented to Nyanatiloka. In view of these facts, Lausanne appears to have played a pioneering role in the history of Buddhism, both for Europe as well as in South Asia.

After Nyanatiloka's departure, some thirty years would elapse until the next traces of further Buddhist activities in Switzerland could be detected. Max Ladner founded a Buddhist group in Zürich in 1942 and published a Buddhist journal as well. The group remained embryonic, with twelve to fifteen people meeting once a month in Ladner's house. The journal was published until 1961, which is the same year in which the group dissolved.

Both of these early Buddhist activities had been of Theravāda inspiration, whereas Swiss interest during the 1960s and 1970s switched to Tibetan and Mahāyāna Buddhism. During the early sixties, Switzerland offered some one thousand Tibetan refugees a new home, with another one thousand Tibetans admitted over the following years. In order to care for the spiritual and cultural needs of the refugees, in 1968 the Monastic Tibet Institute was founded. The Institute is both an academic and a monastic-religious institution, newly established in Rikon near Winterthur and Zürich. The monastery accommodates several Tibetan monks—currently seven—and is probably one of the earliest Tibetan monasteries in Europe. The greatest event held there to date was the Kālacakra initiation in 1985, which was performed by the Dalai Lama and attended by approximately 6,000 people, Westerners and Tibetans alike.

Similar to developments in other European countries, Zen Buddhism became popular during the late 1960s and 1970s. Local meditation groups were founded, some of which grew to well-established *dōjōs* or meditation halls. The period since the mid-1970s also coincides with the founding of local Tibetan Buddhist groups, some of which developed into respectable institutions. One of the best known is the above-mentioned monastery, Rabten Choeling near Mont Pèlerin.

However, not only Zen and Tibetan Buddhist groups made an appearance during the 1970s. Theravāda Buddhism once again gained a foothold with the founding of Vipassanā meditation groups and a House for Contemplation near St. Gallen. During the early 1980s, further Theravāda institutions developed due to the flight of Southeast Asian people and their asylum in Switzerland. Cambodian Buddhists founded

a Khmer cultural center in Zürich, and Vietnamese boat people established several places of worship.

Two further Theravāda activities deserve to be mentioned: in 1996 a beautiful Thai monastery (Wat Srinagarindravaram) was officially opened, forming the central stage for the preservation of the religious and cultural traditions of the roughly 9,000 Thai nationals in Switzerland. A few years earlier, in Kandersteg, near Berne, the Dhammapala Monastery was established. The monasteries and their monks and nuns can be traced back to the tradition established by the Thai reformist Ajahn Chah. This monastery is affiliated with further monasteries located in Great Britain and Italy, as well as to some fifteen local meditation groups in Switzerland and southern Germany.

This brief overview underlines, similar to other Western societies, the existence of a plurality of Buddhist traditions in Switzerland. So far, intra-Buddhist, ecumenical activities have reached only a low degree. The Swiss Buddhist Union founded in 1976 was resuscitated in the early 1990s. The Union currently has some thirty Buddhist societies as members and organizes festivities such as, for example, joint Vesak celebrations.

STATISTICS

A register provided by the Swiss Buddhist Union (1995) and the *Répertoire des centres bouddhiques en Suisse 1997-1999* lists some ninety-eight Buddhist groups and centers. On the basis of these lists, we are able to draw some further conclusions concerning the percentage of Buddhist traditions and their geographic distribution. As far as groups, centers, and monasteries are concerned, twenty-one (21 percent) are of Theravāda, thirty (29 percent) of Mahāyāna, and forty-six (48 percent) of Tibetan Buddhist orientation. Thus it becomes obvious that Tibetan Buddhism numerically dominates in terms of institutions, that is, groups and monasteries. This might be due to the early presence of Tibetan lamas in Switzerland and the well-functioning infrastructure of established monasteries.

The roughly one hundred groups and centers are somewhat irregularly

distributed across Switzerland's cantons. A concentration is noticeable in the north and west, particularly in conurbations and cities. Zürich, with its sixteen groups and centers, is currently Switzerland's "Buddhist stronghold," while other cities have on average some five to eight places of worship.

DATA

The number of groups and centers does not provide a straightforward indication of the total number of Buddhists, because the size of groups and centers can vary considerably. There are small local meditation groups of some ten to fifteen people at most, but also huge organizations with several affiliated centers and groups, numbering up to several hundred members. Consequently, we can only estimate that currently 3,000 to 7,000 Swiss-born Buddhist converts are to be found in this country. The figure of Buddhists from Asian countries is much higher. On the basis of existing census data regarding foreigners from Asian countries residing in Switzerland, one might conjecture that an estimated figure of 20,000 Buddhists appears realistic. With altogether around 25,000 Buddhists, this would make up 0.36 percent of the Swiss population, currently totaling 7,000,000 inhabitants. This percentage rate thus equals the one for Jews in Switzerland (0.3 percent), and is quite below the percentage of Muslims (2.2 percent, or some 250,000). Compared with other European countries, however, Switzerland is among the shining stars: though eclipsed by France, with an estimated number of 350,000 Buddhists (0.6 percent of the overall population), Switzerland is on par with Great Britain and well above Germany (0.18 percent) and Italy (0.13 percent) in terms of the percentage of Buddhists in the overall population.

CONCLUSION

In Switzerland, Buddhism has certainly not become mainstream, as scholars have observed with an eye on Buddhism in the United States. Compared to the situation in the U.S. or Germany, Buddhists and Buddhist institutions

seem fairly invisible. Buddhism so far has not been an object of interest in Switzerland for scholars or for the media. Despite all this, however, Swiss Buddhists can claim to have established monasteries and institutions of an importance and historical significance reaching far beyond Switzerland's borders.

REFERENCES

Hecker, Hellmuth (ed.), *Der erste deutsche Bhikkhu. Das bewegte Leben des Ehrwürdigen Nyāṇatiloka (1878-1957) und seine Schüler*, Konstanz: University of Konstanz 1995.

A longer and more detailed version of the history and contemporary situation of Buddhism in Switzerland is provided (in German) as "Geschichte und Gegenwart des Buddhismus in der Schweiz," in *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft*, 82 (4) 1998: 255-280.