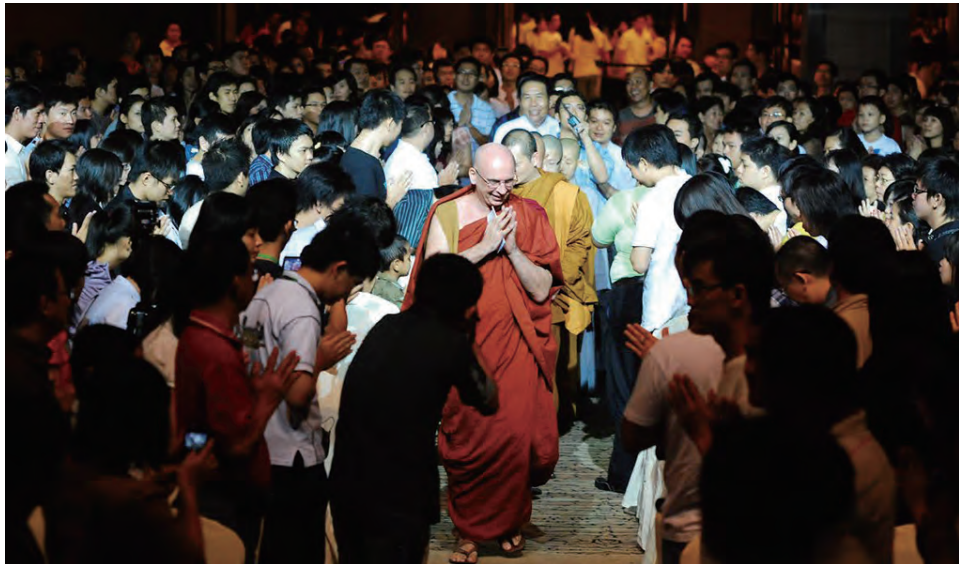


INTERVIEW WITH BHANTE DHAMMIKA



Venerable Shravasti Dhammika, or Bhante Dhammika as known to devotees, his students and friends, is an author of more than 25 books and scores of articles on Buddhism and related subjects. One of his books, an introductory guide to Buddhism – *Good Question Good Answer*, presents clear, concise and insightful answers to more than 140 commonly asked questions about Buddhism, which has been translated into 37 languages.

A great speaker who is well-known for his engaging and insightful public talks, he represented Theravada Buddhism at the European Buddhist Millennium Conference in Berlin in 2000. Apart from Buddhist philosophy and meditation, Indian history, art and botany, Bhante Dhammika also has a deep interest in the historical topography of Buddhism and the phenomenon of pilgrimage and has travelled widely in India and other Buddhist lands.

Bhante Dhammika was born in Australia in 1951 into a Christian family and he converted to Buddhism at the age of 18. In 1973, he went to Thailand with the intention of becoming a monk. After which, he went to Laos, Burma and finally to India where he spent three years to learn yoga and meditation, and subsequently took his lower ordination at Nava Sri Lankarama, Sravasti under Venerable Matiwellan Sangharatna, the last disciple of Anagarika Dharmapala, the influential Sri Lankan Buddhist revivalist and writer in the early twentieth century. In 1976, he went to Sri Lanka where he studied Pali at Sri Lanka Vidyalyaya, and later became the Co-Founder and a teacher of Nilambe Meditation Centre in Kandy. He later took higher ordination at Palilai Temple in Singapore and since 1985, travels between Sri Lanka and Singapore to give teachings, and in 1986 became the Spiritual Advisor of Buddha Dhamma Mandala Society, Singapore where he continues to lead and guide till today. *For You Information* is privileged to speak with Bhante Dhammika to find out more about his views on the development of Buddhism in Singapore in this millennium and how should one approach Buddhism.

Over the decades, what are the observations about the development of Buddhism in Singapore?

Firstly, with the Buddhist Studies programme in schools in the early 1980s, school children had a chance to learn about Buddhism, and some of those who have been influenced by Buddhism have gone on to become leaders who have made significant contributions to

the Buddhist community today. Since then, the impetus has declined considerably but as a result of the Buddhist Studies programme in schools, more people know about Buddhism rather than just calling themselves Buddhists (and knowing nothing).

Secondly, I have noticed that the number of people calling themselves Buddhist have declined significantly; by 10 percent from 2000-2010¹. I foresee this declining trend (people calling themselves Buddhist) to continue, but I also think that the number of informed Buddhists will increase.

There is also increased diversity in Buddhism over the years. In the past, there was very little exposure to Burmese and Tibetan Buddhism, and now, you can see significant increase in both of these Buddhist societies. Also, the commercialisation of Buddhism; particularly in activities such as meditation is unfortunately becoming a phenomenon. There were numerous occasions where people enquired about meditation and one of the first few things asked is the course fee; reflecting their expectations (of it being commercialised).

Lastly, I observe that the inter-Buddhist cooperation has not progressed much, even within the same sects, let alone amongst the different schools such as Theravada, Mahayana or Tibetan, etc. This will inhibit the growth of Buddhism if the importance of inter-Buddhist cooperation is not understood and valued; and people continue to focus on the teacher (segregating themselves as disciples of a particular teacher), instead of focusing on the Dhamma.

There seems to be an influx different traditions of Buddhism into Singapore, as much as this has increased awareness about Buddhism but does it create some sort of confusion?

An influx of Buddhist schools and traditions is good because they are all teaching the Dhamma and some people would favour or respond better to one than the other(s). And it would be even better if there is more inter-Buddhist cooperation, thus reducing the confusion as people will learn that all schools in Buddhism are the same.

However, the mixing up with new-ageism (which is growing here) can be confusing and combined with the traditional association of Buddhism with Chinese folk beliefs, which has been and would continue to be a problem.

What are your observations of modern Buddhists or younger generation of Buddhists in Singapore?

They have greater access to authentic Buddhism and related literature from places like the Buddhist Fellowship and the Buddhist Library, especially where it has bilingual resources with a non-sectarian approach. Also, both locally produced and foreign Buddhist literature are widely available and accessible, and a lot of them are actually quite good; which is great for their development.

In Bhante Dhammika's book, *Good Question Good Answer*, it is mentioned that 'Buddhism is a philosophy but not just a philosophy. It is the supreme philosophy'. This philosophical perspective is known to appeal to many younger people, and those interested in the intellectual pursuit of Buddhism.



Good Question Good Answer (in various languages, including the most recent Swahili translation) is available for download at www.goodquestiongoodanswer.net.

What are your thoughts on the shift in how Buddhism is viewed; millennials “doing away” with more ritualistic practices and turning to more intellectual pursuit of Buddhism?

You can't practise Buddhism if you don't know what it is, so the basis (the beginning) is to have a good theoretical understanding as basic foundation.

How should we tackle the tension between the theoretical pursuit, practices and the self-imposed beliefs that one has to spend certain amount of time in meditation or chanting?

Well, one should follow Buddha's advice; have a good theoretical understanding and good practice too. I definitely see a problem in how people think about practice, they think (only) about meditation. Buddhist practice is more than that; speaking the right way, acting with integrity, having the right livelihood and ethics is Buddhist practice. The Buddha did not teach the 'one-fold' path, He taught the Noble Eightfold Path, of which meditation is a step.

Then, does one really need to take refuge to be a Buddhist if one practises Buddhism as a way of life?

I think it's a good idea to have a particular event, at a particular time where one can say, "From this time onwards, I'm starting to take it (Buddhism) seriously", and this is marked by taking the refuge which is a symbolic ceremony like a rite of passage. However, that being said, there are also many Buddhists who have never taken the refuge, but practise the Dhamma very well.

What makes a true Buddhist (is there one?) – practising love and compassion, or following the Noble Eightfold Path and aspiring to have other aspirations?

Buddha says that it is one who has taken The Three Refuges, and practises The Five Precepts. And I need to highlight that it is not just

someone who has attended the refuge ceremony, rather it is someone who knows about the Dhamma and makes an informed decision to take refuge, and then takes the moral precepts very seriously.

In light of Buddhist practices (such as meditation) becoming more popular and made into mainstream popular spiritual pursuit, how does one differentiate spirituality and Buddhism?

First of all, how I understand the word (spirituality) today is this; "I've got a vague commitment to religion but not big enough to make major changes and commitment in my life. In other words, I'm a 'goody-goody', but I don't go to church or the temple (or other places of worship) regularly." I feel that this is a wishy-washy term by itself. I personally think that one should either practise the Dhamma with sincerity and commitment; or don't at all.

Dhamma should not be like 'Buffet Buddhism'; like how you would go to a buffet and then 'take what you like and then not take those bit(s) that you don't like'. Dhamma is not like that.

How do we identify a real Buddhist teacher, does it have to be one who is ordained?

We don't always have to look for a teacher who is ordained. There are many lay teachers who are very good teachers and one example is Sylvia Bay, who is evolving to be a very good Buddhist teacher.

Is it acceptable for teachers to propagate Buddhist teachings using new methodologies?

It is perfectly legitimate as the Singaporean society is profoundly different from the past (or elsewhere), so we need different approaches, different terminologies and persona(s) as well. It's not about the colour of the clothes (robes), but the knowledge, and I don't think a sincere teacher will charge. Also, there some approaches (e.g. certain meditation techniques) that are more suitable for some and the teacher should get to know the student well enough before recommending any methodology or teaching.

How do you think Buddhism can be best presented to the younger generation?

I think Buddhism has got a lot going for it. Right now, there is the mindfulness movement; a widespread recognition that the Buddhist teaching on meditation has a lot of validity (and practicality). There is even a day of mindfulness in the British Parliament² and a Mindfulness Centre in the University of Oxford³. So meditation (and mindfulness) which is a probably one of the few religious practices that has scientific validity and with this alone, Buddhism has a lot to offer and it needs to be presented in a way that is practical and applicable. Also, Buddhist ethical values, such as the First Precept – emphasising kindness and compassion to animals, resonates with a lot of people and many find this attractive.

Thus, Asian teachers need to modernise the teachings as there is a lot of potential for Buddhism to flourish because it seems for now, Buddhism is a 'great product', but with 'lousy salesmen' and even more 'atrocious marketing'.

1. www.singstat.gov.sg/Statistics/Singapore 'Census of Population' – Religion, Table 2, accessed 23/6/16.
2. <http://themindfulnessinitiative.org.uk> 'Report but the Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group (MAPPG)', accessed 30/6/16.
3. <http://oxfordmindfulness.org>, The Oxford Mindfulness Centre – 'Supporting Mindfulness', accessed 30/6/16.