

Das Buddhistische Haus



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History

50 YEARS German Dharmaduta Society at Das Buddhistische Haus in Berlin-Frohnau



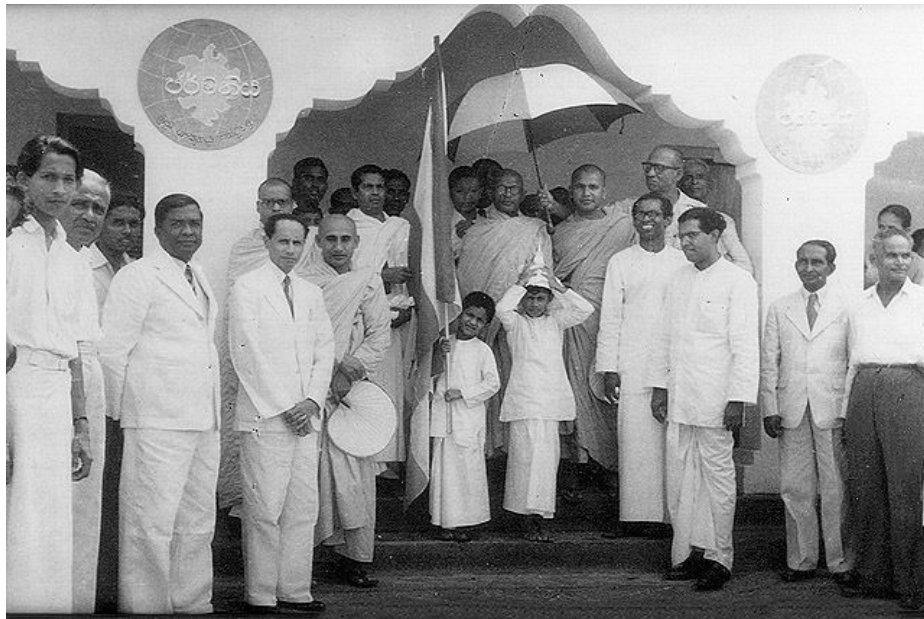
**The first Buddhist mission at the entrance to the Berlin Vihara
Das Buddhistische Haus (1957)**

Sitting in front: Ven. Kheminda; Ven. Soma; Ven. Vinîta; Standing (left to right): Mr. W.J. Oliver Soysa; Mr. J.T. Sirisena; Mr. Asoka Weeraratna (Founder and Hony. Secretary, German Dharmaduta Society), Mr. Knobloch; Mr. Henry Amarasuriya (Chairman, Board of Trustees, GDS); Mrs. Leena Amarasuriya, Ms. Wittiber, Mrs. Fischer, Miss Indrani Amarasuriya, a German lady



The first Buddhist Mission to Germany

Senaka Weeraratna (nephew of the founder of GDS) with the reservoir with relics on its head, that they brought to the Buddhist Vihara to Berlin as ambassadors of the Lanka Dharmaduta Society



In the middle flag carrier Tissa Weeraratna, right next to him his brother Senaka Weeraratna with the Stupa on its head, next to him Ashoka Weeraratna.



**The First Theravada Buddhist Mission
...that left for Germany on June 15, 1957**

Left to right: Ven. Kheminda, Dharmasena Weeraratna, Ven. Soma, Asoka Weeraratna and Ven. Vinitha; Note: Dharmasena Weeraratna was not a member of the Buddhist Mission to Germany



**Epochal event in the history of Buddhism
First SL Buddhist mission to Germany 1957**

Fifty years ago on June 15, 1957 an unique and unshakable bond was forged between Sri Lankan and German Buddhists. On that day three scholar monks drawn from Vajiraramaya, Colombo set off on a Dharmaduta mission to Germany. Leading the delegation was the Venerable Soma Thera. The other two bhikkus were Venerable Kheminda and Venerable Vinitha. They formed the first permanent Theravada Buddhist mission to Germany from Sri Lanka. It was an epochal event in the history of Buddhism.

It all began six years after the end of World War II when a young Sri Lankan businessman dealing in jewellery and Swiss watches paid his first visit to Germany. The year was 1951 and the country was slowly recovering from the devastating effects of the war. The young man Asoka Weeraratna came across many people who had lost their families – lost their wealth – lost almost everything. It left in him a deep impression.

At the time the widespread sentiment all over Germany was "kaput, kaput, alles kaput (finished, finished, everything is finished)."

They had nothing to fall back on.

For the Germans the World War was a watershed. Nazi racism and brutality had pushed Germany into not only an ideological crisis but also a crisis of civilization - a severe moral predicament. The Holocaust had shamed the Germans. Consequently, an increasing number of them found no real solace in Western religious-political traditions since it was the very same environment that had paved the way for Hitler's rise to power and brought ruin to almost the entire European continent.

Upon returning from Germany, Asoka Weeraratna established on September 21, 1952 the Lanka Dhammaduta Society which was later renamed German Dharmaduta Society (GDS) in 1957. He was appointed its Honorary Secretary while the renowned German Monk, Venerable Nyanatiloka Maha Thera became the Patron. Ven. Nyanatiloka stands foremost in the history of Buddhism in Germany having become the first German to join the order of the Sangha and founded the Island Hermitage, Polgasduwa in Dodanduwa, Sri Lanka.

Second Visit to Germany to survey Buddhist activities

In 1953, Weeraratna embarked on a hectic and extensive tour of Germany to survey current Buddhist activities and the scope for sending a Buddhist Mission from Sri Lanka. He visited Hamburg, Stuttgart, Cologne, Bremen, Munich and Berlin, among other cities and towns. He met Germans from all walks of life and they turned to him because he had an unique message to offer: the message of the Buddha. He found that Germans were increasingly prepared to experiment with ideas where the terms of reference lay outside the Western system of thought. And Weeraratna was able to satisfy their spiritual hunger with the message of the Buddha. The Germans had found in Buddhism something unique – a highly developed ethical system with an heavy emphasis on peace and non-violence albeit without any dependence on an almighty God.

Until the outbreak of World War II, Buddhism prevailed in Germany among a small circle of thinkers and lay adherents. Among notable Germans living the Buddhist way of life was Dr. Paul Dahlke, a pioneering German Theravada Buddhist. The German Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer sparked an interest in Buddhism by being the first to present the Buddha's teachings to the West in lucid language.

Nazi Persecution of Buddhism

However under the Nazi regime, Buddhist activities suffered and one of its victims was Dahlke's Secretary Dr. Kurt Fischer. He died after receiving summons from the notorious Gestapo. A large number of German translations of the Pali Tripitaka and other books on Buddhism were lost in the war. Some of them were impounded by the Hitler Government.

Asoka Weeraratna clearly noted during his second visit to the country in 1953 that the most urgent need for German Buddhists was the establishment of a Buddhist Missionary Centre, a Vihara and settlement for lay Buddhists and upasakas.

In the words of the eminent American Buddhist scholar monk Bhikkhu Bodhi, Weeraratna "was a man of vision who had the drive and stamina to translate his vision into fact... Asoka Weeraratna's life was crowned by three great achievements: the establishment of the German Dharmaduta Society in Sri Lanka; the establishment of the Berlin Buddhist Vihara in Germany and the creation of the Nissarana Vanaya Hermitage at Mitirigala" (The Necessity For Promoting Buddhism in Europe - GDS 2000)

Historic turn around

Sri Lanka, which for nearly five centuries had been receiving waves of Christian missionaries from Europe, was now in a position to send Buddhist missionaries to the West on the basis of a new found confidence and conviction among Sri Lankans that they had something deep and far reaching to offer to Europeans reeling under the terrifying consequences of a brutal war. The opportunity had come for a historic turn around.

On June 15, 1957, the first Theravada Buddhist group from Sri Lanka left for Germany. It comprised three Dharmadutha monks, namely Venerable Soma, Venerable Kheminda and Venerable Vinitha all drawn from the Vajiraramaya, Bambalapitiya. They were accompanied by W.J. Oliver Soysa, a close associate of the Vajiraramaya monks. Dharmapriya Mahinda (formerly known as Nelson Soysa) a Vice-President of the GDS had left for Germany earlier.

Journey commences from Mihintale

The mission commenced its journey from Mihintale on Poson Poya Day June 11, 1957 with the blessings of the Maha Sangha and the Buddhist public.

The second stage of the journey to Germany began on June 15, from the GDS Headquarters, No 417, Bullers Road (now Bauddhaloka Mawatha), Colombo 7. A motorcade of about 100 vehicles participated in the procession that escorted the three bhikkus from the GDS to the Elizabeth Quay, Colombo Harbour.

There, the GDS and the Harbour Buddhist Society organized a meeting under the Chairmanship of the Venerable Kalukondayawe Pannasekera Nayaka Thera to farewell the mission. Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike handed over a casket of sacred relics to the Ven. Soma Thera. Former Premier Dudley Senanayake presented the Buddhist flag to the mission to be used at the Berlin Vihara. The monks embarked on the voyage on board the 'SS Orantes' amidst cries of "Saadhu, Saadhu" from the people who had come to witness the memorable ceremony.

The ship reached Naples on June 29, 1957. The mission upon disembarking at Naples proceeded to Frankfurt by train via Switzerland and was met by Asoka Weeraratna, who had flown in from Colombo. The mission then flew from Frankfurt to Berlin where members of the Berlin Buddhist Society greeted them at the airport. On July 2, 1957, the mission took up residence at the Das Buddhistische Haus in Frohnau, Berlin.

A few months after the mission's arrival in Germany, it became known that Das Buddhistische Haus (the Buddhist House) that Dr. Paul Dahlke had built in 1924 was up for sale. Asoka Weeraratna stayed six months in Germany at his own expense to negotiate the purchase of the property from Dr. Dahlke's relatives. There was strong non-Buddhist opposition to the move to buy the building.

The GDS however purchased the house in 1957, renovated it, furnished it with additional rooms and a good library, and stationed Sri Lankan Bhikkus there to take charge of regular lectures and meditation courses. Asoka Weeraratna thus fulfilled a long-cherished wish of German Buddhists to have properly trained bhikkus in their midst.

This work earned for the GDS the immense gratitude of the German Buddhists. States Dr. Wolfgang Schumann, leading German Scholar, former counselor of the German Embassy, Colombo and author of many books on Buddhism:

"The Buddhist House founded by Dr. Paul Dahlke in Berlin-Frohnau in 1924 survived World War II in dilapidated condition and probably would have been auctioned and dismantled if the Ceylonese German Dharmandutha Society (founded 1952) - which inherited a large sum of money from a German Buddhist - had not come to its rescue..." (The Maha Bodhi Journal February March

1971)

The German benefactor was Walther Schmidt who left a sum of half a million marks in his last will to the GDS after he became a practising Buddhist following his meeting with Asoka Weeraratna.

The establishment of a permanent Buddhist Mission in his home country was the realization of Ven. Nyanatiloka's cherished dream, although unfortunately he did not live to see it. Four years earlier, on May 25, 1953, in a message to the GDS and published:

"I believe that chances for Buddhist mission work in Germany are now greater than ever before. I am therefore very happy that the Lanka Dharmaduta Society has undertaken that great task of sending a well-prepared mission to Germany..."

Since 1957 a stream of Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka and other countries have resided at the Berlin Vihara to propagate the Dhamma in the West. It attracts considerable amount of visitors daily ranging from researchers to school children. It has one of the best Buddhist Libraries in Europe. Meditation retreats, Dhamma classes, Saturday discussion circles and Sunday lectures are a regular feature of the programme of the Temple.

In 1972 Asoka Weeraratna joined the order of the Sangha as the Venerable Mitirigala Dhammanisanthi Thera and passed away at the age of 80 on July 2, 1999.

On Friday February 2, this year Foreign Affairs Minister Rohitha Bogollagama and Secretary to the Ministry Dr. Palitha Kohona visited the Berlin Vihara. Sri Lanka's Ambassador in Germany Jayantha Palipane, members of the Embassy staff and German officials accompanied the visitors. Ven. Welichchiye Dhamma Vijaya, resident monk, administered the recitation of pansil.

On May 6, Vesak was celebrated at the Berlin Vihara with the participation of members of the Maha Sangha, distinguished guests, Sri Lankan, German and Thai Buddhists and people of other nationalities.

The participating bhikkus were drawn from Sri Lanka, Thailand and Europe. They were the Ven. Dickwelle Seelasumana, Ven. Tammannawe Dhammananda, Ven. Aswatte Mangala, Ven. Achan Anusak and the Ven. Medhayo.

The Berlin Vihara was built primarily to serve the spiritual needs of German and other Western Buddhists. It is therefore the duty of all true Buddhists, both German and Sri Lankan, to ensure that this hallowed institution continues to meet these objectives and retains its exclusive Buddhist character.

To quote Dr. Raimar Koloska, Member of the Executive Committee of the Deutsche Buddhistische Union (DBU):

"Das Buddhistische Haus Berlin should in the future also be a place full of monks, nuns, upasakas, upasikas, friends, newcomers and interested people. It should facilitate the pursuit of its emanating spiritual work for all humanity for those who understand the profound message of the Buddha and are willing to integrate the Dhamma into their life." (50th German Dharmaduta Society Anniversary Souvenir)

Berlin Vihare - Gateway of Buddhism to the German world

By Ramani D.Wickramaratne, Asian Tribune, June 24, 2007

Berlin, Germany -- 50 years is a long time and it is highly commendable, that Das Buddhistische Haus (The Berlin Vihare) has withstood the passage of time and the challenges and continued to serve the noble ideals of the "visionaries" who stepped in to fill a void, a void of spirituality in the German world soon after the trauma of the 2nd World War.



The Buddhist world would naturally wish to see Das Buddhistische Haus in Berlin , grow from strength to strength and continue to provide an environment conducive for Germans and the German speaking people, to study, discuss and enjoy the profound philosophy of Lord Buddha through which, they will inevitably find solace and inner peace for themselves and those around them. In the modern competitive world of commercialism, many are the people who wish to get away from it all and seek peace of mind. The Berlin Vihare must take up the challenge and continue it's noble cause for another 50 - 100 years or more!

At a time when The Berlin Vihare is celebrating it's 50th Anniversary which fell on 15th June 2007, there has been "a storm" in the form of a communication among individuals who, in one way or another are involved in Buddhist work in Germany and abroad that has lasted almost through the whole month of June.

The "storm" was initiated by Dr. Marianne Wachs when she accused Ven. Nyanatiloka Maha Thero of being a Nazi sympathizer who discriminated against Jews - these statements made by her were obviously distorted information she received or rather that she was being used by a hidden hand for whatever purpose. The Buddha has taught us, to verify what we hear and accept only if we are convinced that it is the truth - He has never advised us to accept speculations or hearsay!

Whatever the purpose may be, it was most heartening to note in the "Asian Tribune" of 20th June, that Dr. Wachs had realized the grave mistake she made and tendered an apology to the Theravada Buddhists. If we are practicing Buddhists we need to accept her apology if it is given in all sincerity and hope that similar mistakes are not made in the future.

There is no necessity to quote from The Buddha Dhamma because all those who contributed towards the dialogue that followed are scholars in Buddhism or involved in Buddhist work. One noteworthy fact that surfaced was that the majority of those who championed and defended the late German Monks Nyanatiloka Maha Thero and Nyanaponika Thero and helped to set the records straight were mostly living on German soil who appreciated the great contributions of the late Monks.

This indeed, is the strength of Buddhism in Germany ! We are indeed grateful to Ven. Bhikku Bodhi (an American) who had the privilege of working extremely closely with Ven. Nyanaponika Thero with BPS work and at the Forest Hermitage in Udawattekale, Kandy for having explained clearly the roles played by the above mentioned erudite German Buddhist scholars who left an indelible mark in the dissemination of The Buddha Dhamma to the Germans and German speaking westerners. These contributions cannot be erased from history as was exhibited by the manner in which German Buddhists came forward to defend the late Venerable Monks and the role played by The Berlin Vihare during the past 50 years.

Through a period of 50 years, there are bound to be ups and downs in the running of any organization and certainly, there can be improvements in the future. From the outside, any individual trying to understand the workings of either The Berlin Vihare or The German Dharmadutha Society may find it difficult to understand in its entirety, operational problems that may crop up > from time to time. It is important for individuals to try and understand and offer whatever assistance we can, to solve such problems. We must not in anyway attempt to speculate or create dissention because that is not the Buddhist way - Lord Buddha always came forward to "solve problems but never to create them." Therefore, our fervent wish as Buddhists is that we learn from past mistakes, correct them and move forward to serve the noble cause of Buddhism with even greater fervour.

In this endeavour, we expect the German Dharmadutha Society to make deeper and even better efforts to made Das Buddhistische Haus or The Berlin Vihare, into a still better environment for the study & research, practice as well as the dissemination of The Buddha Dhamma to the German world. The Berlin Vihara must continue to be the gateway through which Buddhism reaches out to German public.

It is noted with sadness the viewpoints of Lakshman Perera who has come forward as spokesman for "Buddhist Forum Berlin" (established only in March 2007) who hopes either overtly or covertly, to transform The Berlin Vihare into a multi-cultural/multi religious centre as we note from

statements in their website! “Multi-cultural” means that it will also be used for “multi-religious” activities! “Forums” may be established and they may also be dismantled, but The Berlin Vihare and The German Dharmadutha Society have been in existence for 50 years.

Was that the original “vision” of the founding members? There is absolutely no doubt whatsoever, that this will be the greatest disservice a “Buddhist Forum” could do to the cause of Buddhism in Germany . Moreover, it is totally in contravention to the original vision of personalities such as Dr. Paul Dhalke, Arthur Schopenhauer, Dr.Schmidt, Freidrich Moller who became an Upasake under the tutelage of late Ven.Nyanatiloka Maha Thero, Asoka Weeraratne (later ordained as Ven.Dhammanisanthi Thero) whose tireless efforts resulted in the establishment of The German Dharmadutha Society as well as The Berlin Vihare, with Most Ven.Nyanatiloka Maha Thero being appointed as its First Patron Monk.

It takes many years for a seed to grow into a plant, from a plant to grow into a full fledged tree which bears flowers and fruits. The German Dharmadutha Society and Das Buddhistische Haus (The Berlin Vihare) have both grown into “full fledged trees” and the “flowers and fruits” have been enjoyed for 50 years by those keen on understanding The Buddha Dhamma, enjoying the fruits of proper practice and research for Germans and the German speaking western world. The “branches of this massive tree” have now spread throughout Germany and there is no turning back! With the marking of the 50th Anniversary in the year 2007, the time may be ripe to “prune the branches of this tree”, fertilize and nurture it with new vigour for it to sprout new branches and prosper for another 50 years or more. No individual or “Forum” with hidden agendas, should be allowed to “lop the trunk” and kill the tree! The onerous task of protecting and nurturing, is left in the hands of “genuine and sincere”German Buddhists and Scholars who must unite with the German Dharmadutha Society to move towards new heights to build a stronger and better environment for Buddhist studies and research. Sincere efforts will bear fruit with the Blessings of The Noble Triple Gem!

The Berlin Vihare must continue to be the gateway for further dissemination of Buddhism to the German world, for many more years to come-maybe another 50 years or even more!