

Buddhism online: A global spiritual force

By Janaka Perera



"The Internet gives us many opportunities to promote Buddhist values, understandings and insights on a global scale" - Ven. Pannyavaro Colombo, Sri Lanka -- When the Information Superhighway i.e. Internet, was launched in the mid 1990s Buddhist communities worldwide vigorously took up the challenge. With Buddhism becoming one of the fastest growing religions in the West, they converted Buddhist literature into the electronic format with a great deal of enthusiasm.

Today Buddhist websites are proliferating covering almost every known school of Buddhism ranging from Theravada to Mahayana to Tantric. Making known the contribution that Buddhist mental culture can offer to fill the spiritual vacuum that has come with modernization and consumerism is a vital need today. Meditation techniques, for example, can be clearly explained and illustrated on the Net, with an online teacher guiding the student. A core Buddhist understanding is interconnectivity and global interdependence both of which are characteristics of the Internet.

The appreciation of this universal truth leads us to empathize with all suffering life.

Although Buddhism does not seek to win over or convert non-Buddhists, it certainly has a sense of its own mission in spreading the message of the Dhamma. In the past the Buddha's Teachings spread slowly, not only due to the limitations of ancient communications, but because it needed to make a local adaptation to each new culture it encountered - to accommodate itself to the indigenous religions and philosophies.

The difference between then and now is that the acceptance of the Buddha's teachings does not depend on whether it can accommodate itself to a particular culture or religion but the appeal of its core insights. In fact the cultural accretion has to be differentiated from the fundamental understandings before it can be seen to resonate with universal truths.

Ven. Pannyavaro and Buddha Net (www.buddhanet.net)



Realising the Internet's potential in disseminating the Dhamma worldwide, the German Dharmaduta Society, Colombo, invited the Australian Buddhist monk Ven. Pannyavaro, Founder and Web Master of the Sydney-based Buddha Net (www.buddhanet.net) - a non-sectarian Buddhist information network, to visit Sri Lanka in year 2001 and deliver a public lecture and conduct a workshop on the theme 'Buddhism on the Internet'. The main purpose of the exercise was to impart skills to Sri Lankans to establish websites on Buddhism related themes, and make Buddhist literature particularly the writings of eminent Buddhist scholars of international renown such as Professor G. P. Malalasekera, Dr. K.N. Jayatilaka, Ven. Walpola Rahula, Ven. Narada, Dr. A. P. De Soysa, and Dr. Ananda Guruge accessible to the foreign public via the internet.

The Buddha Net website includes an on-line Buddhist magazine – BuddhaZine, - an on-line instructional meditation section: 'Insight Meditation On-line' and a section on Buddhist studies. This website attracts the highest number of 'page hits' for a Buddhist website (over 400,000) per day.

Addressing the GDS-sponsored meeting at the Mahaweli Centre Auditorium in Colombo, Sri Lanka on the 7th of July 2001 to commemorate the second death anniversary of the Society's Founder Asoka Weeraratna (later Ven. Mitirigala Dhammanisanthi Thero), Ven. Pannyavaro said, "The challenge that Buddhism faces today is not with the Dharma itself, the Buddha's teaching - as the timeless message embedded in the Four Noble Truths maintains its validity - but how to present this ancient teaching as a meaningful alternative to people who have been shaped by the values of the consumer society."

He was speaking on the topic 'E-Learning Buddhism on the Internet.'

Ven. Pannyavaro further observed: "Because a teaching is ancient that doesn't mean that it cannot sit comfortably with the new technology. If the Buddha were alive today, he would surely be at ease in the digital world. There is a new generation growing up with the Internet's technologies, who regard it as the natural place to find information, for online learning and for spiritual and emotional support. Can we hope that it will be a place that one goes to have a meaningful experience of the Buddha's Dharma as well - it's the future! "

The Venerable monk also noted the difficulties some groups in society face in even getting access to computers and the Internet. "This especially applies to the economically disadvantaged Buddhist countries in the Theravada tradition, Cambodia, Myanmar and here in Sri Lanka. Online technology is unequally distributed because access to and use of computers and the Internet mirror the socio - economic divide between rich and poor individuals and nations. Another factor is that the English language dominates cyberspace so students and others with little or no understanding of English are often denied access to online learning. Although this is changing as the Net is becoming more multi-lingual."

Ven. Pannyavaro also conducted a workshop sponsored by the GDS and the University of Colombo focused on the theme ' Promoting Buddhism via the Internet', at the University's Computer Centre in July 2001. Thirty young invitees selected on the basis of their computer literacy participated in the workshop to learn how to create Buddhist websites. The then head of the Centre, the well known late Professor V.K. Samaranayake and S.T, Nandasara (Lecturer) were among those who participated at the workshop.

Among the other participants were Ven. Mettavihari, Olcott Gunasekera, and Yukie Sirimanne, a Sri Lankan pioneer in this area. She is the Web Administrator of the Theravada Buddhist website - Beyond the Net. (The well-known Singaporean firm, B.P. De Silva Holdings Company - founded by Sri Lankan-born B.P. De Silva in 1872 – sponsored 'Beyond the Net' for seven years before the Damrivi Foundation, based in Kotte, Sri Lanka took over its management).

Buddhist Channel (www.buddhistchannel.tv)



Today, the most popular website covering Buddhist news, events and personalities is the Buddhist Channel (www.buddhistchannel.tv) which was

officially launched on October 25, 2004. It is based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The BC is actually a "re-branding" exercise which commenced from the demise of the old "Buddhist News Network" (BNN), which began operations in May 8, 2001. Using the latest web technologies on content publication, the BC remains the world's foremost dedicated Buddhist news website, providing daily updates and in-depth coverage.

To augment the BC's premier position as a Buddhist news site, five prominent Buddhist individuals were appointed as members of its "International Advisory Panel (IAP)". Each of the panelists - coming from several countries and with expertise in various disciplines - played a critical role in establishing the Buddhist Channel as a truly global, web based media platform

The five appointed BC advisers are Anurut Vongvanij (Thailand), Benny Liow (Malaysia), Gary Gach (United States), Oon Yeoh (Malaysia) and Senaka Weeraratna (Sri Lanka). Their appointments were made in their individual capacity, but the selection was based upon their vast contribution to Buddhist development in their own areas of expertise.

The IAP goes back to the time (May 2001) when the old Buddhist News Network (BNN) first originated. This happened when the Taliban first threatened to blow up the 2000-year-old Bamiyan Buddhas of Afghanistan. According to Buddhist Channel's founder, Lim Kooi Fong he was immensely frustrated of not having a platform to disseminate that important piece of news, as traditional media tend to downplay such items. He had turned to many organizations, pleading them to take action when he first received the shocking news.

"Yet they (media) had just shrugged it off and even asked me if the news were legitimate, as it was not yet reported on mainstream newspapers."

Lim says that if a Buddhist media and a corresponding IAP had existed then, it would have been possible to engage an expert panel of archaeologists to lobby governments and their respective associations to take concrete steps. Nevertheless, the destruction of the ancient monoliths gave birth to new millennium icons, such as the BNN and now the BC. Lim firmly believes that with these facilities in place, Buddhists will be better prepared to face any danger or confront any eventualities, as he says in his own words. "Buddhism fits very nicely into the gloves of globalization".

Lim Kooi Fong is a well known Dharma preacher in Malaysia and has been involved in Buddhist related activities since 1985. Apart from giving talks, he also conducts Sutta Study lessons and has published children story books based on the Jataka tales.

He currently manages an Internet Development company based in Petaling Jaya, a suburb located near the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur. He has a team that helps him to develop web based technologies which sustain the Buddhist Channel and to also edit and moderate articles before they are published. All efforts to sustain the site are made voluntarily, and the Buddhist Channel remains very much a not for profit endeavour.

The Buddhist Channel is now virtually a household name among computer literate Buddhists with an interest in the rapid growth of Buddhism world wide. Buddhist News and Comment (BNC - Buddhist-News@yahoogroups.com) Senaka Weeraratna who is the Honorary Secretary of the German Dharmaduta Society was instrumental in founding the Yahoo E-mail discussion group, 'Buddhist News and Comment' popularly known as BNC (Buddhist-News@yahoogroups.com) on March 20, 2002. In setting up the BNC, he was assisted by a young computer savy student Kaveenga Wijesekera who founded the Dhamma and Young Adults (DAYA) Group, which also functions as a Yahoo Email discussion group. Wijesekera is now based in Australia.

The BNC provided for the first time an internet based forum to a large number of Sri Lankan born-Buddhists - both in Sri Lanka and abroad – to discuss subjects of mutual interest ranging from Buddhist philosophy, Sri Lanka's history and national and cultural issues, and threats to the Buddhist community from non-Buddhist proselytizers.

The BNC forum attracted among others Daya Hewapathirana (Canada), Dr. Chandrasiri Wijewickrema also known as Chand Wije(Texas, USA), Professor Sunil Wimalawansa (USA), Dr. Victor Gunasekera, Ranjith Soysa, H.L.D. Mahindapala (former Editor, Observer) (Australia), Ajantha Premaratne (Dubai), Wimal Ediriweera (UK), Anura Seneviratne(UK), Bodhi Dhanapala, Channa Lokuliyana (UK), Ananda Wijesinghe (Canada), Ananda Jayasinghe, Anoma Akmeemana (USA), Mahinda Gunasekera (Canada), Asoka Weerasinghe (Canada), Mohn Senaratne (Canada), Mohan Samaranayake, Kamal Rajapaksa (UK) Douglas Wickremaratne (UK), L. Jayasooriya and Ramani Wickremaratne. Several foreign-born Buddhists too were drawn to the discussions in this forum.

The following are some of the other leading Buddhist Websites:

Dhamma Journal (<http://web.ukonline.co.uk/buddhism/dhamajnl.htm>) 'The Dhamma Journal' published by the Burmese Buddhists and most likely sponsored by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Myanmar. The main attraction of this Journal is that the content comprises a select collection of articles written over the last 70 years by leading Burmese and western scholars on a variety of topics as seen from a Theravada perspective. The contributors include U Nu (former Prime Minister of Burma), the internationally renowned monk U Thittala, Ven. Dr. Revata Dharma, Mahasi Sayadaw and Francis Story (also known as Anagarika Sugathananda).

Buddhapia (<http://www.buddhapia.com/eng/index.html>)

This is one of the largest websites on Buddhism in Korea. It provides detailed information on Korean Buddhism, Temples, Dharma Talks of Korean Meditation Masters, Research and Books, Buddhist Holidays.

Vietnamese Buddhism (<http://giacngo.vn/chude/vesak2008/>)

The Vietnamese Official Buddhist Website (in Vietnamese) provides colourful pictures of this years Vesak celebration throughout Vietnam including the holding of the UN Day of Vesak in Hanoi.

Himalayan Art: Features over 1500 artworks from Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, India, China and Mongolia. Firstly, the Website exhibits images of art from museum, university and private collections around the world. Secondly, the Website catalogs all Himalayan art objects that are known through past or present collections or publications.

Women Active in Buddhism: The Web's first comprehensive collection of links and resources on contemporary Buddhist women. Female teachers, activists, scholars, nuns, and yoginis (practitioners) may be found on these pages, as well as teachings and special events, projects, organisations, bibliographic and contact information.

Access to Insight is another popular Theravada Buddhist website providing access to a huge collection of translated texts from the Tripitaka as well as contemporary materials published by the Buddhist Publication Society and many teachers from the Thai Forest Tradition.

With the internet's potential to reach millions, it is likely that computer technology will be a driving force behind one of the world's oldest religions for generations to come. Buddhism on the Internet will become a powerful communication tool. If Sri Lanka wishes to re-assert its claims as a source of Buddhist scholarship on the rapidly expanding Internet, then the writings of Sri Lankan Buddhist scholars must be published on the Internet.

Source: Buddhist Channel

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