

Buddhism in Poland

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Buddhism as religion, occurred in Poland in the second half of the 19th century, when it was visited by Kalmyks and Buryats who were serving in the Russian army. However, interest in Buddhism among Poles began together with the general European fascination with Schopenhauer's thought and The Upanishads. Since 1873, lectures devoted to Schopenhauer's philosophy, and three years later also to Buddhism were held at Wroclaw University. In the years 1878-1883, three disputes by Seweryn Smolikowski were written: *Filozofia wyzwolenia* (Philosophy of Liberation), *Nirwana wobec metafizyki* (Nirvana in Relation to Metaphysics), *Rozbiór krytyczny podstaw zasadniczych filozofii Schopenhauera* (Critical Analysis of the Principal Fundamentals in Schopenhauer's Philosophy), and then the works by Maurycy Straszewski: *Powstanie i rozwój pesymizmu w Indiach* (1884) (The Origin and Development of Pessimism in India), *O pesymizmie indyjskim* (1888) (On Indian Pessimism), *Dzieje filozofii na Wchodzie* (1894) (History of Philosophy in the East). The works present the concept of nirvana, which is often interpreted in the nihilist spirit as nothingness¹. Antoni Lange (1861-1929) in the last part of Books of Prophets, called Liberation or the Book of the Buddha, which is a philosophical allegory, presented nirvana as the limit which is approached by the development of the whole world. The philosophical and literary divagations about Buddhism quite often appear in *Próchno* (1901) (Wood Dust) by Waclaw Berent, where nirvana constitutes an ethical postulate. Quite unusually for the Polish literature at the time, the author paid attention to the fact that according to Buddhism nirvana can be achieved already during lifetime, as the effect of ascetism and forswearing desires, and not of wishes and sighs. By paraphrasing Schopenhauer, he advised avoiding sensual contact, the result of which is to be the lack of will, and, as a consequence, the lack of attraction, which implicates the scattering of the mind. This postulate was related to the core of the famous Buddhist formula of the dependent origination.

At the beginning of the 20th century, first translations of the works with references or commentaries on Buddhism appeared.² A very colorful personality at that time was Wanda Dynowska (Umadevi), who, apart from theosophy, also propagated Buddhism by inviting foreign lecturers and publishing foreign books that were mainly translated from English.³

¹ Cf. Grela, J., *Nirvāna. Motyw nirvāny w literaturze Młodej Polski*, Powszechna Encyklopedia Filozofii, Wyd. Tomasz z Akwinu, Lublin, vol. VII, 2006, pp. 673-675.

² Arnold, E., *Światło Azji*, 1905; Dahlke, P., *Opowieści buddyjskie*, 1906; Rhys-Davids, T.W., *Buddyzm*, 1912; and polemics from the side of the Catholic Church: Father Dębicki, *Filozofia nicości. Rzecz o istocie buddyzmu*, 1896; Father Czujka, J., *Buddyzm*, 1917.

³ E.g. she published Paul Carus's *Nauka Buddy* (*The Teaching of Buddha*)

The Buddhist issues were also taken up by Polish orientalists, like Andrzej Gawroński from Warsaw University⁴, or a Lodz University scholar, Stanisław Franciszek Michalski, who translated and added commentaries to e.g. *Dhammapada*.⁵ In the thirties of the 20th century, at Warsaw University, lectures on Buddhist philosophy were held, and they were followed by the publications of the well – known authors: Stanisław Schayer, Konstanty Regamey, Arnold Kunst, Maryla Falk, and Jan Jaworski. Buddhist studies were also run by e.g. Eugeniusz Słuszkiewicz, Father F. Tokarz, T. Pobożniak, and J. Makowiecka. It seems that Buddhism began to be practiced in Poland only after the Second World War. At that time, in 1949 in Radom, thanks to the initiative of Władysław Misiewicz and P. Boniński, *Koło Przyjaciół Buddyzmu* (Circle of Friends of Buddhism) came into existence. Until 1977, the circle had published the biannual bulletin *Ehi Passik*. The circle was related with the school of Theravāda.

Misiewicz had a considerably large for that time and Polish realities Buddhist book collection of several hundred volumes. It is difficult to determine the number of persons attending the readings and borrowing the materials because the circle was in conspiracy and it was invigilated by the communist security services. Misiewicz's articles were published in English in *Buddhist Quarterly* by British Mahabodhi Society and London Buddhist Vihara. Misiewicz translated many suttas from the Pali language and wrote a textbook on Pali grammar.

The organized Buddhist practice can be dated for the turn on the sixties and seventies. A group of friends, mainly artists, were meeting in Andrzej Urbanowicz's flat in Katowice and meditating according to the instructions received by post. The first Buddhist teacher that came to Poland was a Japanese, roshi Sasaki. However, his visit in Warsaw did not influence the reception of Buddhism in Poland in a significant way.

In 1975, after the invitation of the group from Katowice, Philip Kapleau, an American disciple of the Japanese Zen masters S. Hardy and H. Yasutani visited Poland. The contemporary Association of Zen Buddhists "Bodhidharma" stems from that group. Another Zen master who visited Poland was a Korean master, Seungh Sahn, around whom Buddhist Association Jogye Zen was formed. Both of these groups have their main centres in Falenica under Warsaw.

At that time in Krakow one can notice the activity of Władysław Czapnik, who was a priest of two Christian denominations (Adventist and Methodist), a co-founder of the Union of Polish Brethren reactivating the Christian Arian tradition. Being a representative of a worshipping community legalized by the socialist authorities, he could enjoy rare for that time opportunity of distributing materials in the quantity up to 100 copies. When Czapnik together with Tomasz Hołuj got interested in Tibetan Buddhism, he invited to Poland the Danish teacher Ole Nydahl, who, from autumn of 1975 onwards began to regularly visit the country. The group attached to him is now the largest in number

⁴ Gawroński, A., *Studies about the Sanskrit Buddhist Literature*, 1919; translations of some writings of Aśvaghosha.

⁵ Michalski, S.F., *Dhammapada*, Warszawa 1925; several suttas (in *Przegląd Orientalistyczny* 1957-1959).

and the most active Buddhist Association Karma Kagyu (Diamond Way) with its central headquarters in Kuchary.

From 1975 onwards, together with the popularization of Buddhism in the West, other Buddhist worshipping groups, belonging to the Japanese Soto and Rinzai Zen, Korean Jogye, Tibetan Buddhism, Amidism Jodo Shinshu came into existence. These associations still exist and they run a rich publishing activity. Initially it was underground or copied “for internal use”, and later it was done in their own publishing houses. Bulletins⁶, translations, explications of classical works and lectures by contemporary teachers are published. Because the limitations concerning travelling outside Poland were diminishing, Polish Buddhists began to visit Western and Asian centres. There were also coming more teachers from other traditions.

At the beginning of the eighties regular meetings of the representatives of the communities took place, thanks to which the idea of “mahasangha” or “intersangha” developed. It was the basis for the origination of Polish Buddhist Union (1995) with the headquarters in Grabnik, the Tibetan Buddhist centre connected with Tenga and Sangye Nyenpa Rinpoches, represented in Poland by Waldemar Zych (alias Lama Rinchen). The member of PBU are Buddhist Association of Karma Kamtzang Tradition (Tibetan Buddhism, Kagyu), School of Zen Kwan Um (Korean Zen), Buddhist Association Khordong (Tibetan Buddhism, Nyingma), Buddhist Association Zen Kannon (Japanese Zen, Soto school), Buddhist Association Zen Sangha „Kandzeon (Japanese Zen), Dzogczen Community (Tibetan Buddhism, Nyingma), Association of Zen Buddhists “Bodhidharma” (Japanese Zen), and Association of Chan Buddhists (Chinese Chan). From 1997 PBU is patronized by XIV Dalai Lama, and its representatives co-operate with e.g. International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, and they also participate in numerous inter-religion meetings and collective meditations, e.g. in Benedictine monk monastery in Tynieć and Lubin, as well as they organize collective celebrations of Buddhist festivals. Polish Buddhist associations that are not members of PBU are the following: “Community Without Gates” Mumon-Kai, Buddhist Association Karma Kagyu and Buddhist Mission “Three Refuges”. The last one, founded in Szczecin by Jeremi Maślankowski (alias Kanzen, educated in Soto monasteries in Japan), contrarily to other Associations, does not embrace the followers of one, concrete Buddhist tradition but disciples of various masters, and its aim is the extradenomination propagation of Buddha Dharma in Poland and supporting the education of Polish monks and nuns in Buddhist countries.

The members of the particular Buddhist groups apart from strictly religious activity participate in charity actions (preparing and giving out meals for the homeless, voluntary work in prisons and hospices, etc.).

⁶ E.g. Association of Zen Buddhists had published a quarterly *Droga Zen (The Way of Zen)* for 15 years, and currently *Trzy Skarby (The Three Jewels)*. The Buddhist Association Karma Kagyu publishes *Diamantowa Droga (Diamond Way)*, The Buddhist Mission in Wrocław – *Dharmadhatu*, and the Buddhist Association of Karma Kamtzang tradition – *Mynsel*, to enumerate just a few.

There are also more or less formal groups in Poland that promote Buddhist culture and folklore, as, e.g. Association of Supporting Buddhist Culture in Katowice by Bogdan Ogródnik. They join the organisation, performances, help that accompany various festivals and events that are non-religious, as well as public ceremonies held with the intention of peace in the world, like, e.g. making mandalas, establishing Japanese gardens, etc.

Apart from that, several Polish Universities have lectures devoted to Buddhist religion or philosophy, as well as classes in classical languages, during which Dharma was taught. Scholarly research into Buddhism is conducted by: the Warsaw centre (Warsaw University – Marek Mejer, Agata Bareja-Starzyńska, Stanisław Godziński, Genowefa Zduń, Artur Karp, as well as fellows from Japanese and Korean departments), two universities in Lublin (Catholic University of Lublin and Maria Curie-Skłodowska University – ks. Franciszek Tokarz, Maciej Stanisław Zięba, Krzysztof Kosior, Tadeusz Margul), the Krakow centre (Jagiellonian University – Beata Szymańska, Łukasz Trzeciński, Krzysztof Jakubczak, Marta Kudelska, Joanna Grela), the Poznan centre (Adam Mickiewicz University – A.F. Majewicz, Piotr Klafkowski, the last one is currently related with Szczecin University). In Szczecin Marpa Institute was established to provide the translatorial works, just to mention some of the research centres.

Since 2000, under the auspices of Dalai Lama, Książnica Pomorska in Szczecin has been carrying out the programme “The Buddhist Book Project Poland”⁷, the main aims of which are assembling the primary sources and commentaries published in any language and in any country, organising conferences, exhibitions, etc.

Quite recently, Polish Association for Buddhist Studies was established in Krakow (by K. Jakubczak). The first conference, the aim of which was also to provide the integration of the scholars scattered around various universities, was held in 2006. The association plans to publish a magazine called Buddhist Studies, which would contain translations of primary sources, research conclusions, critical reviews, etc. However, the lack of sufficient financial sources and access to the literature considerably limits the possibilities of Polish researchers.

Apart from that, it is planned to establish Buddhist University in Katowice. There is also a big number of psychologists and psychotherapists related with various denominations of Buddhism.

It is difficult to determine the number of Polish Buddhists because it depends on the criteria assumed. There are many more persons who are sympathizers that occasionally participate in religious ceremonies and lectures than persons that are formally registered in worshippers’ communities. Thus, the number oscillates between a few thousand to several hundred people.⁸ What

⁷ Cf. www.bbpp.eu.org/angielski/project.htm

⁸ If compared with 150 thousand in France, 120 thousand in Great Britain or tens of thousands in Germany – on the basis: Baumann, M., *Creating a European Path to Nirvana and Contemporary Developments of Buddhism in Europe* *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 10, no1, 1995, p. 62.

is interesting is the fact that Polish Buddhists represent actually only the denominations of Mahayana: Zen and the Tibetan ones. Theravada is practically inexistent in Poland nowadays.

It seems that the period of the most intense interest in Buddhism, which was the first half of the eighties, passed. One of the obstacles in the development of Buddhism in Poland is worshipping only one religion and the lack of accepting religions other than the Catholic one. Another difficulty lies in the lack of financial basis and relatively small number of spiritual teachers.

Buddhism in Poland develops not only among Poles. After the political transformations at the turn of the eighties and nineties, Vietnamese people began to immigrate to Poland. Only in Warsaw, the Vietnamese Diaspora has around 40,000 members, and most of them are Buddhists. The Vietnamese have built a temple in Poland, where they perform the rites, celebrate festivals connected with the Buddhist calendar and their personal lives.

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