WSORKSHEET 1

HOW BUDDHISM CAME TO THE WEST

As early as the 19th century and increasingly in the 20th century, British, Russian, German and French scholars were studying Buddhist scriptures. Famous philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer and the writer Hermann Hesse were inspired by Buddhism. Based on academic interests and a fad that developed among the upper middle classes, a few Europeans eventually discovered Buddhism as a way of life. The first Buddhist communities emerged in Europe. Personalities such as Alexandra David Neel and Anagarika Govinda traveled to Tibet, became convinced Buddhists, and described their experiences.

From the 1950s on, Asian teachers, including the well-known Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, increasingly came to the Western world, where they in turn contributed to a great reception of Buddhism in the West. Suzuki Shunryū , an acknowledged Sōtō Zen master, also went to the United States as early as 1958, where a large number of American followers soon gathered around him. So that he stayed until the end of his life.

As an example, we can also mention the Jesuit Father Lassalle, who was sent to Japan by his order in 1929. Lasalle wanted to understand the Japanese mentality, felt attracted by the culture of Buddhism and practiced meditation according to Zen Buddhism. Many years later, a lecture on "Zen and Christian Spirituality" at a congress in Elmau brought the Jesuit his breakthrough at the age of 69. The Zen movement in Germany and Europe grew rapidly.

In the period after the Second World War profound processes took place. Reconstruction in Europe required a great deal of effort, the Iron Curtain divided East and West, the Vietnam War escalated, and the Cuban Missile Crisis nearly plunged the two great powers of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union, into a Third World War.

In Asia, revolutionary events took place, culminating in China's so-called "Cultural Revolution" under Mao Zedong in 1966. The hitherto relatively isolated highlands of Tibet were also affected. The first invasion of Tibet by China with about 40,000 soldiers took place in 1950. Many of the Buddhists living there were tortured and killed - the numbers vary between 250,000 and 1.2 million out of a population of about 6 million at that time. Out of 6,500 monasteries, only three remained undamaged. In 1959, the Chinese finally took power in Tibet. A thousand-year-old Tibetan Buddhist culture was destroyed. High Buddhist teachers, such as the 14th Dalai Lama and the 16th Karmapa, fled with their people into exile in northern India and Sikkim. As best they could, they continued the Buddhist tradition.

In the economically well-established West, a counterculture emerged in the 1960s. The need for new ways of life without entrenched moral views was great. New ways of life were tried out and a clearly justified antithesis to materialism, capitalism and consumerism emerged.

The time of the hippies, rock music and experiments with "mind-expanding" drugs came. This time was also marked by the student movement, free love, communes, birth control pills and feminism. The longing for Asian countries, especially India and Nepal, grew stronger. In search of meaning, new ways of life and cheap drugs, people from Western cultures reached these countries, often by land. This led to encounters with Hindu gurus and Buddhist teachers of all currents, including the Tibetan lamas who had fled. Through these exchanges, a new way of thinking opened up to the Westerners, and their interest in inner development and meditation grew.

In exactly this mood of change, for example, the Danes Hannah and Ole Nydahl met their Buddhist teacher, the 16th Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, in Katmandu in Nepal in 1969. They became his disciples, received explanations and empowerments for meditation practice, and were later sent to the West to introduce the Diamond Way to lay people there. The Buddhist path, with its logical clarity and efficient meditations, coincided with the increasing openness and receptiveness of people and society. Buddhist personalities gained worldwide recognition, such as the 14th Dalai Lama through the Nobel Peace Prize received in 1989.

The disintegration of the Buddhist culture of Tibet and the simultaneous spirit of awakening of the



wild 1960s in politics, media, culture thus resulted in many people practicing Buddhism. Hannah and Ole Nydahl, for example, founded about 700 Buddhist groups of the Tibetan Diamond Way on all continents since the beginning of the 1970s.

This fulfilled the prophecy of Guru Rinpoche from the year 750, when he said: "When the iron bird flies, the fire horse rides and the Tibetans are scattered around the world like ants, then Buddha's teachings will come to the land of the red-faced (Westerners)".

Today, almost all traditions of Buddhism are represented in the West, most notably: Theravada, Mahayana/Great Way, Vajrayana/Diamond Way, and Zen. Buddhist centers of all directions have sprung up all over the world, offering lay people how to integrate the Buddhist view and meditation into everyday life.

Meditation is generally regarded, even by non-Buddhists, as an efficient method of reducing stress and developing mental serenity and experiencing more surplus and happiness.

EXERCISES

Read the text and note down relevant factors with your partner.

1. How was it possible for Buddhism to gain a foothold in the modern West? Include political, social, and personal reasons.

2. Discuss why Buddhist teachings became attractive to people in modern society.