The First Buddhist Mission to the West: Charles Pfoundes and the London Buddhist mission of 1889 – 1892


Abstract

This article challenges two general assumptions shared by scholars of Western Buddhism: (1) that the earliest Buddhist missions to the West were those established in California from 1899 onwards; and (2) that Ananda Metteyya's (Allan Bennett's) London mission of 1908 was the first Buddhist mission to London and thus to Europe. Recent collaborative research by scholars in Ireland and Japan demonstrates instead that the Japanese-sponsored ‘Buddhist Propagation Society’ (BPS) launched in London in 1889 and led for three years by the Irish-born Japanese Buddhist Charles Pfoundes predates both of the above-mentioned ‘first’ Buddhist missions. In this article we offer a first attempt to document the nature, activities and significance of the London BPS, drawing on Japanese and UK sources to examine Pfoundes' role and that of his Japanese sponsors. We discuss the nature of Pfoundes' Buddhism, the strategy and activities of the London BPS and the reasons for its eventual demise. The conclusion examines the links between the BPS and the later ‘first’ Japanese Buddhist missions in California and asks what hidden connection there might be between Pfoundes' missionary campaign in London in 1889-92 and Ananda Metteyya’s return from Burma as the ‘first’ Buddhist missionary to London, almost two decades later.
LONDON - Buddhists in Japan — aided by an Irishman — established the religion’s first Western mission in London, according to research by a team of academics in Ireland and Japan. The recent discovery overturns the long-held assumption that the first Buddhist mission in the West was set up in California in 1899. The London mission was set up in October 1889 and educated thousands of people in Buddhism years before similar establishments were set up on America’s West Coast, according to the researchers. Pfoundes left for Japan in November 1892. A year later he was ordained as a Buddhist priest. He died in 1907 and is buried in the foreigners’ cemetery in Kobe. The very fact that the mission was so short-lived has meant that historians failed to record it.