

2493 (1950)
The First General Conference
Colombo

The First General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists took place at Colombo, Sri Lanka, from 26 May to 6 June, 2493. No one can deny that any movement begins with the first step and its significance cannot be overemphasized. The credit for organizing the inaugural session and the First General Conference of W.F.B. goes to the Buddhists of Sri Lanka under the leadership of Dr. G.P. Malalasekera. The World Fellowship of Buddhists was inaugurated at the Dalada Maligawa, the Holy Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy. The Sri Lankan organization committee followed through on its considered view that an event of world-wide importance, the creation of W.F.B., should be held in a place *redolent of sacred associations* with Buddhism. So it was that on 25 May 2493, a day associated with the Buddhist Visasak, in an edifice with renowned holiness in Buddhism, that the World Fellowship of Buddhists came into being. The meeting did not lose time in adopting the following resolution:

We who constitute this gathering of Buddhists from many countries and numerous organizations from all parts of the world, assembled in this venerated shrine of the Holy Temple of the Tooth, at Kandy, once the capital of Lanka's Buddhist Kings, today pledge ourselves and those whom we represent to make our utmost endeavor to observe and practice the teachings of the Lord Buddha, that we may be radiant examples of the living Faith; to foster unity, solidarity and brotherhood amongst Buddhists everywhere; to strive with all might and main to make known the Sublime Doctrine of the Lord Buddha so that its benign spirit of service and sacrifice may pervade the entire world, inspiring and influencing the people of the earth and their governments to lead the Buddhist Way of Life, which is for all ages and all climes, that there

may be peace and harmony amongst men and happiness for all beings. To achieve this aim we hereby resolve that the World Fellowship of Buddhists be founded and the Heads of delegations here present be empowered to implement this resolution and bring it into immediate effect. May the blessings of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sanñgha be on us and our endeavors.

This, of course, was the most important decision made by the Buddhists in the post World War II era. No wonder, then, that a good part of this resolution was incorporated into the Preamble of the W.F.B. Constitution which was adopted on 6 June 2493.

As was to be expected, the enthusiasm for action by the participants at this First W.F.B. Conference knew no bounds. The hosts to the meeting had anticipated some 30 or 40 delegates, but there were no less than 129 delegates representing 29 countries, excluding those from Sri Lanka. This large gathering of like-minded spirits resulted in a plethora of ideas and suggestions for the work and activities of the Organization. It was within this vast array of suggestions that the early meetings of W.F.B. had to preoccupy itself to sieve out and refine in trying to fashion a purposeful program. There were, however, some significant resolutions which were adopted at the first Conference. Among them, mention may be made of the following:

1. The Dharmacakra(Wheel of the Law) with eight spokes representing the Noble Eightfold Path, to be the International Buddhist symbol and the six-colored Buddhist Flag, at that time in use in Sri Lanka, to be adopted as the International Buddhist Flag. These two symbols of Buddhism have been recognized by every group of Buddhists through the world, thanks to W.F.B.'s action at its first session.
2. The Conference also requested that all Governments of countries in which Buddhist communities are to be found, either large or small, *take steps to make the full moon day of the month of May declared as Buddha Day and observed as a Public Holiday, in honor of Lord Buddha who is universally acclaimed one of the*

greatest benefactors of humanity. In connection with this resolution, it is necessary to bear in mind that the World Fellowship of Buddhists is a non-governmental organization (NGO in United Nations usage). As such, it can only make suggestions to Governments and the concerned policy makers to consider implementing the recommendations of W.F.B.. In any case, in some countries where Buddhists form the majority population, the first full moon day of May had been recognized as Buddha Day. This question of having a universal Buddha Day was to recur at several W.F.B. meetings, and until 2533 (1990), it is yet to be resolved.

3. Another resolution called for the term *Hināyana* in all contexts to be replaced by the term *Theravāda*. In the first flush of the desire to have unity and solidarity among all the Buddhists, this request was for the complete elimination of the term *Hinayāna*. In the historical context, there was a stage when the Mahāyānist, as a derogatory remark, called some of the earlier Buddhists as the followers of the lesser vehicle while they believed that they were following the greater vehicle. It cannot, however, be denied that both the schools grew out of the main, basic *trunk* of the Buddhist tree, the Theravāda tradition. In fact, the so-called Hinayānists were soon to die out. Somehow, some of the later schools of Buddhism forgot the original source and confused it with the Hinayāna. It was only proper for the first W.F.B. conference to ask for the complete deletion of Hinayāna from the Buddhist vocabulary. In connection with this, some degree of success had been achieved, although a number of Buddhist sects have not given up the bad habit, especially when trying to get new converts in the Western countries. They seemed to have lost the proper historical perspective and have failed to realize that Hinayāna is, to borrow a phrase from the English author Charles Dickens, *as dead as a door nail*. Do we need ghosts of the past to guide our present and our future, if the true teachings of the Buddha are to be followed?

The above commentaries are offered only to underscore that the work of the W.F.B. in the years of its existence should not be measured

simplistically in terms only of *success* and *failure*, but that they need to be viewed as to whether essential building blocks have been laid down as infrastructure for the future of W.F.B. and the Buddhist population throughout the world.

The First Conference also dealt with the basic organizational structure of the W.F.B.. In adopting the Constitution, the W.F.B. provided itself to hold biennial General Conferences participated by Buddhist groups in good standing from every part of the world. The management and administrative responsibilities were to be entrusted to an Executive Council of the World Fellowship of Buddhists to be composed of the President, the Vice-Presidents (the First Conference elected 5 Vice-Presidents), the Honorary General Secretary (later changed to Secretary-General), the Honorary Treasurer and 20 other members selected from the participants of the meeting.

In terms of the substantive aspects of W.F.B.'s work, Committees, now known as Standing Committees, were established, having the two way responsibility of (i) contributing to the policy-formulation of the General Conference and (ii) promoting the implementation of substantive programs. There were 5 Committees which the First Conference created, viz., (I) Finance Committee; (II) Publications Committee; (III) Dhammadūta Activities Committee; (IV) Mettā (later known as Humanitarian) Services Committee; and, (V) Unity and Solidarity Committee.

Despite the enthusiasm and the hard work of the participants, the First W.F.B. General Conference deferred a heavy load of unfinished business for the Executive Council and the Standing Committees to follow up with appropriate action.