

**Remarks by H.E. Mr. Nopadol Gunavibool,
Ambassador of Thailand to Belgium and Luxembourg,
On “Promoting Buddhism Overseas”**

Delivered at the 8th General Annual Meeting 2014 of the Union of Thai Sanghas in Europe

On Sunday 24 August 2014, Wat Dhammapateep, Mechelen

Venerables,

Distinguished guests,

It is my honour to be invited to the annual meeting of the Union of Thai Sanghas in Europe (UTSE). As the Thai Ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg and the European Union, I deem that this conference represents a significant historical step in Thai-Belgian relations with the remarkable number of the Venerables and Dhammaduta Bhikkhus gathering here today. I am also very pleased to welcome representatives from Mechelen city today. Those of you who have spent some time in Europe know that the Europeans rarely attend social functions on an early Sunday morning during summer break. Their presence shows that the local authorities recognize the significant role of Buddhism in the Belgian community. The Dhammaduta Bhikkhus can take great pride for their roles in this significant outcome.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs fully realizes the challenges of disseminating Buddhism in countries that have different cultural and religious beliefs from Thailand, such as Belgium and other European countries. There are more factors to be considered than in Buddhist countries like those in Asia. Thus, every Thai Embassy considers it an important duty to support the work of Dhammaduta Bhikkhus and all Thai temples abroad. I, together with all the staff at the Royal Thai Embassy in Brussels, pledge our full support, in whatever way possible, to facilitate the work of Dhammaduta Bhikkhus in Belgium as well as in other European countries.

The activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in religious affairs is not limited to just Buddhism. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also supports the Muslim Association in overseas competitions as part of Thailand’s Strategy toward the Muslim World. This reflects Thailand’s commitment to religious freedom and support of all religions.

The Ministry also regards Buddhism as a medium of cultural diplomacy to foster understanding and good relations between Thailand and other counties around the world, for example, through supporting the study of Dhamma and the publication of textbooks on Buddhism and Sanskrit, as well as the Tripitaka in English. Buddhism is also an important area of cooperation with our neighbouring countries such as Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, and other Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka and India.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also supports religious interaction with countries that have different religious beliefs, as well as in various international forum. The Ministry attaches importance to supporting Interfaith Dialogue, which is an important part of promoting cultural and religious understanding, through activities such as cultural youth camps. These activities encourage the acceptance of diverse and different religions and beliefs to promote understanding, peaceful coexistence and a shared vision toward the future. These principles are in line with the Buddhist teachings of moderation and peaceful coexistence despite different beliefs.

The Royal Thai Embassy is proud that our Dhammaduta Bhikkhus serve as representatives of Buddhism in interfaith dialogue with representatives from other religions, and engage in activities to foster a better understanding of the various aspects of Buddhism with foreigners. The increasing number of foreigners, especially the Westerners, who are interested in studying meditation, reinforces the status of Buddhism as one of the most important spiritual alternatives that welcomes everyone from all cultural beliefs who seek peace of mind without any commitments.

To date, the Royal Thai Embassy has implemented several projects to support the dissemination of Buddhism in Belgium, such as the translation and publication of the Venerable Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's "Handbook for Mankind" in French to distribute to organizations, educational institutions and interested persons in Belgium and Luxembourg. The Embassy is currently exploring the possibility of organizing a Dhamma Roadshow for the Thai community and interested foreigners to different regions in Belgium, such as the German speaking community, to further strengthen the understanding of Buddhism at the people-to-people level.

The Embassy wishes to thank all the Thai temples for their active roles in supporting one of the most important missions of the Embassy, namely the establishment of a strong and self-reliant Thai community overseas, one that is proud of its cultural roots, and leads a dignified life in a foreign country. The Thai temples provide spiritual support for Thai people overseas who wish to perform religious rites, or for those who seek comfort and advice from monks or fellow Thais, may it be in times of happiness or suffering, in sickness or in death. The Thai temples also serve as place of advice for people as they adjust to life a new society, and as place to further understanding about Thai culture through activities, such as learning Buddhist teachings, traditional dance, and the art of fruit and vegetable carving. All these attributes are important to help Thai youths raised overseas grow up and develop to become competent, virtuous and happy individuals with a strong spiritual and mental health. This would not have been possible without the support of Thai temples and Dhammaduta Bhikkhus.

Moreover, the Thai temples play an important role as a place for people to meet and strengthen the Thai network overseas. The Thai temples also serve as a venue for activities on various important occasions and festivals, such as Father's Day on the occasion of His Majesty the King's Birthday Anniversary, Mother's Day on the occasion of Her Majesty the Queen's Birthday Anniversary, the Thai New Year or "Songkran" celebrations, and Loy Kratong Festival. The Thai temples have always extended excellent cooperation to the

Embassy in providing venues for official activities, such as elections or serving as the focal point in mobilizing funds for victims of the severe flooding in Thailand in 2011. In fact, from today until next Saturday the Embassy, in cooperation with Puen Thai Association, is organizing a youth cultural camp at Wat Thai Dhammaram in Waterloo. This camp aims to teach Thai youths in Belgium and Luxembourg about Thai traditional music, together with Buddhist teachings and Thai culture. The youths will learn about Buddhism while engaging in interactive activities with their peers and strengthening the network of Thai youths.

Last but not least, I had pledged at the outset the Embassy's full support for the smooth functioning of the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus, including passport issuance, visa facilitation and intervention with local authorities. There is, however, one pending issue that affects the work of Dhammaduta Bhikkhus in Belgium, and may also be a shared concern among other Dhammaduta Bhikkhus in Europe, namely, the complication in obtaining a long-term stay permit in Belgium, without which Dhammaduta Bhikkhus can not perform their religious duties on continuous basis.

The Embassy had lobbied the Belgian Federal Government to officially recognize Buddhism, which would greatly facilitate the issuance of long term stay permit for Dhammaduta Bhikkhus. Unfortunately, the Belgian Federal Government decided last November not to officially recognize Buddhism. This is likely due to budgetary constraints, as the Government is obliged by law to provide financial support for all officially recognized religions.

The Embassy has assessed that in present circumstances it might be difficult to further lobby the new Belgian Federal Government to officially recognize Buddhism. As the Belgian economy has yet to fully recover, the Government has to reduce the budget deficit to be within the EU-designated ceiling. In addition, the decentralization reforms under the 6th State Reform means that the Federal Government will have access to an even smaller budget. Having said that, I reiterate that the Embassy will spare no effort in finding a solution for the immediate issuance of a stay permit for Dhammaduta Bhikkhus in Belgium. We are discussing with relevant authorities both in the Federal and Regional Governments to find a sustainable solution on stay permits to facilitate the work of Dhammaduta Bhikkhus in Belgium and lessen the financial burden on the temples.

But most importantly, regardless of whether the Belgian Government officially recognizes Buddhism or not, I would like to reiterate that thanks to the impressive roles of Dhammaduta Bhikkhus here, Buddhism has taken firm root in this country. Buddhism is practiced not only among the Thai and Buddhist communities in Belgium, but it is also respected and recognized by local communities and authorities, as reflected from the overwhelming support this conference has received.

Finally, I hope that the close and effective coordination between the Royal Thai Embassy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Dhammaduta Bhikkhus will continue into the future. Together we can accomplish our common mission to garner more recognition for Buddhism throughout Europe and the world at large.

Thank you.
