

Concise survey on Buddhism in the Netherlands written by the NBA on the EBU's request, May 2022.

The story of Barlaam and Josaphat (aka Joasaph) is a Christianized version of a Buddhist narrative on the life of the Bodhisattva. Within the Dutch language community, Philip van Uttenbroeke was perhaps the first to include a substantial version of the then presumed to be Christian legend in his sequel to Jacob van Maerlant's *Spieghel Historiael*, around the year 1300 CE.

With a growing trade in the 16th to 18th century and the dawn of the colonial Dutch enterprise with its piracy, violence and cruelty, the number of contacts and writings on Buddhism increased. An early Dutch-Buddhist link was accomplished by Samuel van de Putte (1690-1745), a lawyer, adventurer-cum-explorer born into a wealthy family. After leaving Ceylon in 1726, he traveled northwards through the Mughal Empire and Nepal to then reach Tibet via a route recommended to him by the **Italian** Jesuit Ippolito Desideri. Van de Putte resided in Lhasa at the mission founded by Capuchins, who had been assigned Tibet as their mission area. His sojourn is mentioned in several letters and travel logs written by Capuchin priests. It was not until 1927, however, that the orientalist Johan van Manen (1877-1943) became the second Dutchman ever to visit Nepal.

An influential Dutch publication to describe Buddhism is entitled *Het buddhisme en zijn stichter [1843]* (Buddhism and its founder [1843]) and was written by a Mennonite pastor named Dr. J.H. Halbertsma. This booklet was based on information presented by Brian H. Hodgson (1800-1894), a **British** resident at the Court of Nepal in Kathmandu.

During the years that followed, one had to make do with Dutch translations based on foreign publications. Notably a tome entitled *Geschiedenis van het Buddhisme in Indië* (A History of Buddhism in India), two vols., Haarlem, 1881-83, was written by the Leiden-based first professor of Sanskrit in the Netherlands, Prof. Dr. Hendrik Kern. In around 1900, pastor Dr. Louis A. Bähler (1867-1941) was to be considered a staunch sympathizer with Buddhism. This Protestant anarchist and pacifist translated a **German** pamphlet which he provocatively entitled *Het 'Christelijk' barbaredom in Europa* ('Christian' barbarism in Europe). Hardly any traces of practicing Buddhists existed in the Netherlands prior to 1945. A significant exception hereto is Frans Bergendahl (1885-1915). Having been inducted into a Sinhalese order in 1906 by Nyanatiloka, the first *bhikkhu* of **German** descent, this son of a wealthy Amsterdam merchant was later ordained the first Dutch *bhikkhu*. Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895, Madanapalle, India) resided at the Dutch town of Ommen in around 1920.

The history of Buddhism in the Netherlands during the first half of the 20th century has hardly been dealt with. Indeed far more could be stated on artistic expressions, the budding vegetarianism and teetotalism, and on Dr. Maria Lulius van Goor as well as other intellectuals such as J. Slauerhoff, the Dutch poet and novelist. Prior to WW II, a small but active movement could be observed in the Dutch East Indies. It may be mentioned here that Rev. Josias van Dienst initiated the Vesak celebration on site at the Borobudur, which to date is the largest Buddhist ceremony held in **Indonesia**. In the years leading up to WW II, the Buddha's teachings were primarily disseminated through theosophists such as M.A. Spruitenburg-Dwars (1882-1976). In 1938, after visiting the Theosophical Headquarters at Adyar (Madras, now Chennai), she returned as a Buddhist and founded the Nederlandse Boeddhistische Vriendenkring (NBV) on January 2, 1949. She managed to draw attention to this circle of friends on a national level, for example, by inviting *bhikkhus* via the **London**-based Buddhist Society to lecture both in Amsterdam and The Hague. In 1965, the NBV published [De Samenspraak](#), the first Dutch Buddhist magazine.

On November 8, 1967, Peter van der Beek founded the Stichting Nederlands Boeddhistisch Centrum (SNBC) which NVB members joined. The SNBC started publishing a magazine named [Saddharma](#) in

1968. Seven years later, the European Buddhist Union (EBU) was formed in Paris hereby creating a conglomerate of national Buddhist umbrella organizations but without individual members. The SNBC, being invited to join, declined this offer as it was not an umbrella organization and did not wish to become one. This explains why a separate Boeddhistische Unie Nederland (BUN) was established on 25 June 1978 in order to form a cooperative body comprising a number of Buddhist groups, starting from eight which were part of the SNBC. Its key task was split off from the SNBC with the founding of the BUN. In December 1978 the SNBC changed its name to Stichting Vrienden van het Boeddhisme (SVB). Now known as [Vrienden van Boeddhisme](#) (VvB), this foundation has (in particular thanks to its late board members Prof. Dr. Rob Janssen and Jan de Breet MSc.) engaged in an unique translation of the Pali canon into Dutch. Yvonne Mattaar is currently dedicated to continuing their work.

Dr. Tonny Kurpershoek, officiating as BUN chairwoman, further expanded the infrastructure of Buddhism in the Netherlands. However, the many new Buddhists were generally speaking occupied with their own groups. Hence little interest existed as to other activities, including those of the BUN which remained dormant until 1989. After the EBU conference held in Paris, however, Prof. Dr. Rob Janssen breathed new life into the BUN, together with the young Buddhist scholar Dr. Aad Verboom.

H.H. the Dalai Lama's visit in 1973 proved another highlight for Buddhism in the Netherlands where the first Tibetan Buddhist centre, Karma Deleg Chö Phel Ling, was established in 1976. Note in this regard, too: temples organizing Tibetan, Thai, Sri Lankan, Indonesian, Burmese, Vietnamese and Chinese Buddhist ceremonies across the Netherlands, and their variegated visitors. Moreover, the effect of yoga, art and the martial arts (e.g., Kung Fu) on the Dutch interest in Buddhism should not be underestimated. The form of mindful drawing known as [Zen Zien Tekenen](#) is not only a fine example of the direct influence of visual arts on Buddhism but also created a unique Dutch phenomenon whereby Buddhism and Catholicism intermingled. A new-age centrum named *De Kosmos* (1969-1992) contributed significantly to the acceptance of Buddhism, too.

Under a three-person leadership comprising the Rigpa Buddhist Jean Karel Hylkema MSc. (interim manager and former director of *Het Financieel Dagblad*), the acclaimed cinematographer and Dzogchen Buddhist Babeth VanLoo and the BUN chairperson, Prof. Dr. Johan Niezing, a Radio/TV broadcasting license was obtained on 1 September 2000. Granting this license to the [Boeddhistische Omroep Stichting](#) (BOS) implied the official recognition of Buddhism as an established religion in the Netherlands. The BOS folded at the end of 2015 due to a reorganization after which the KRO-NCRV continued such broadcasts with the name [De Boeddhistische Blik](#). After magazines such as *Kwartaalblad Boeddhisme*, *Vorm & Leegte* and *Boeddhamaagazine*, published by Gerolf 'T Hooft, the first digital daily [newspaper](#) aimed at a Dutch-Buddhist readership was launched in 2011, an initiative of the journalist Joop Hoek. In 2012, thanks to contributions from, among others, Prof. Joest 't Hart, the BUN acquired permanent recognition from the State Secretary of Justice and Security. From that moment on, the BUN serves as one of the sending agencies with which the Spiritual Care Service (DGV) of the Ministry of Justice and Security collaborates on an on-going basis. As an extension hereof, the post-academic official training as a Buddhist spiritual counselor has been created. It is provided at the Vrije Universiteit (Amsterdam) under the supervision of, among others, [Prof. Bee Scherer](#) (Germany) and [Dr. Henk Blezer](#). In 2012, too, a former BUN vice-president, Rinus Laban, founded the [Nederlands Boeddhistisch Archief](#) (NBA), which continues to aim at conserving the history of Dutch Buddhism to this very day.

Sources: information published through Jacques den Boer MSc., Dr. Henk Blezer, Fred Gales MSc. and the NBA.

Disclaimer: This short statement was composed with an emphasis on the depth of the timeline in view of the national Dutch accent and is therefore by no means a full historical overview.