

A WBU reflection on the past seven decades of the WFB
Marking the 70th Anniversary of the WFB
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Most Venerable, venerable colleagues, honourable WFB, WFBY, and WBU members,

I am Ven. Anil Sakya, Honorary Rector of the World Buddhist University.

Buddhist Greetings from Bangkok, Thailand. As lockdown continues, the flowers are out and blossoms are flourishing. Nature is healing itself from the damage that humans have created. I guess, there is always something good out of the bad!

At this strange moment in history, I am thinking of all of our WFB members around the world who are trying to keep themselves, their families, and friends healthy. Please use the WFB network to stay connected at a time of potential isolation.

As is happening elsewhere, the rapid escalation of the Covid-19 pandemic has prompted the WFB to make an incredibly difficult decision. We have decided to postpone the WFB's 70th-anniversary commemoration which should have been taken place on the 25th of May.

On a good note, I have been heartened by the response of our WFB regional centres across the world to societal efforts to combat this pandemic and reach out to people whatever way we can. We have been showing our true spirit of Buddhism. All of these endeavours are aided by the remarkable power of modern technology, proving that – though most of us now have to work from home or monastery – we are better connected than ever.

As a part of our commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the World Fellowship of Buddhists. I welcome this opportunity to contemplate the seven decades of the WFB's achievements.

From past...

Our organization can look back on a proud record of fellowship achievement – and adaptation to an ever-changing landscape of the Buddhist world.

Today, we can be proud of being the oldest world Buddhist organization with almost twelve times as many members than in 1950 when it was first founded in Sri Lanka. Beginning with 17 Regional Centres in 17 countries in

1950, there are now 210 WFB Regional Centres in 38 countries in every continent of the world. The WFB aims to unite all Buddhist groups as One Buddhism. Every centre actively practices and propagates Buddhism in their own style and capacities.

Today, our world continues to be re-shaped by globalization, urbanization, migration, and other trends as sustainable development. Buddhist fellowships changed accordingly. Buddhism itself is greatly affected by all changes including modern social media, virtual world, and even AI. The changes have reflected in the nature of Buddhist practices, propagation, and Buddhist groups globally.

Throughout seven decades, we have witnessed many new challenges, from religious conflicts to Buddhist commercialization, Buddhist universalism, and Buddhist practice during pandemics and crisis. Way of propagation has changed hugely as many contents are available on cyber monastery more than the physical monastery itself. The study of Buddhism is available in many top universities and schools around the world instead of limiting itself within monastic boundaries. Many Buddhist centres are dotted everywhere. New types of syncretic Buddhists emerged such as Buddhayana,0 'Jubu' which stands for Jewish Buddhists;. New Buddhism continues to develop while traditional Buddhism is challenged.

In many respects, the world is becoming a global village through the web. Yet the WFB Charter remains a firm foundation for shared progress of World Buddhism with its wings of the WFBY and WBU. Serving Buddhist youth and Buddhist academic field respectively.

As we recognize Buddhist fellowships made possible by the WFB, we know that many Buddhists are still beyond our reach. Fellowship for today is not limited only in the creation of Buddhist harmony and unity but equally challenged by the various need of support both in the level of Buddhist institution, time of crisis, and individual to keep upholding their practices of varieties of Buddhisms.

Here, I intentionally add s to Buddhism. Undeniably, many forms of new Buddhism appeared around the world. Traditionally, we define Buddhism under three schools of Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. In the 21st century, we can see that Buddhism has developed beyond these traditional triple categories. Us as the traditional oldest Buddhist fellowship needs to contemplate on the new development of Buddhism. After all the WFB is the symbol of 'One Buddhism.'

Throughout seven decades, the WFB continues to hold its biennial general assembly hosted by different regional centres. The WFB organisation and activities are operated through 2 main wings of WFBY and WBU, as well as

its 9 standing committees, comprise of finance; publication, publicity, education, cultural and art; Dhammaduta activities; humanitarian services; unity and solidarity; youth, socio-economic development; women; and Buddhist Pancasila Samadana.

Each WFB sub-organization and standing committees are trying to reach and serve more people and more activities to let Buddhism play an essential role in improving the life of Buddhists and non-Buddhist alike.

However, under the powerful shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic, the commemoration of the WFB's 70th anniversary in physical form is halted. Nevertheless, it does not mean that we cannot celebrate the anniversary. Of course, we can celebrate our seven decades of accomplishment in a new normal Buddhist way.

The WFB and the Covid-19 pandemic

True, all celebrations and commemorations around the world are directly affected by the global pandemic of Covid-19. The pandemic also prevents the WFB for a traditional gathering and organizational activities as well as religious ceremonies. However, avoiding social gatherings and keeping social distancing is not something new in Buddhism. Social distancing is encouraged among serious Buddhist practitioners even by the Buddha himself.

A Pali word '*asangsagga*' can be translated as 'social distancing' of modern meaning. Moreover, the Pali Canon goes in detail on the type of activities encouraging social distancing. Buddha encourages social distancing in activities like group listening, group watching, group conversing, partying, and physical contacts. This Buddhist teaching of social distancing is more relevant than ever before.

Following a new normal lifestyle during the global pandemic, we have witnessed many WFB regional centres are active in practicing socially engaged Buddhism. Helping out communities affected by the pandemic. Reports from every WFB regional centre regarding their reach out during the Covid-19 pandemic defines who we are as Buddhists.

I think, we should consider our socially engaged Buddhist practice during Covid-19 pandemic as a part of true action for the 70th-anniversary commemoration. After all, we practice Buddhism 'for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the good and the happiness of gods and men.'

Let all of us be strong and endeavour to fight with the Covid-19 pandemic.

...to future

The WFB is firm in the conviction that in this age of immense social change and increasing limits, we must invest in sustainable resources: Buddhist fellowship, Buddhist education, Buddhist cultural diversity, Buddhist research and the boundless compassion of human ingenuity that will enable and drive the Buddhist fellowship and societies essential for a just and sustainable future of Buddhism.

Our mechanisms for addressing instability and fragility are being stretched to the limit. Every WFB regional centre needs to consider past performances in the equation to the modern development of society. The nature of society has transformed and we, Buddhists, need to be transformed accordingly in serving our Buddhist members. Digital disruption brings out great transformation in the field of Buddhist propagation. Many Buddhist organisations and institutions are upgraded in utilizing the digital platforms in propagating Buddhism.

The obvious examples are widely seen during the Covid-19 pandemic where many Buddhist services, sermons, lectures, and meditation classes are conducted live on Facebook, Zoom, and Youtube, etc. The online Vesak Live was another success story of new transformation which took place among Buddhist fellowships. These new trends will be our new normal practice even after the Covid-19 pandemic ends.

The WFB as the oldest world Buddhist organisation needs to review the past seven decades of achievement and need to foresee the role of the WFB amidst the culture of disruption. Many best practices in the past may not necessarily be best anymore. The WFB fellowship should consider transforming the organisation to update with the digital transformation and disruption. The traditional way of thinking and working may not work in the modern situation and social environment. In addition to the unification and harmony among Buddhist organisations, what role the WFB should play actively to make the age-old organisation revive to the current world. These are challenges lie in front of us.

In the months ahead, the WFB needs to make a plan to strengthen our efforts to serve Buddhist communities, sangha, and laities. The Covid-19 pandemic has taught us to create a virtual WFB in order to get support from each other in need. We need to rethink about the commemoration of the WFB's 70th anniversary. How are we going to celebrate virtually without physical gathering? What do we mean by celebration? Is that limit only to religious ceremony or something more?

The world after Covid-19 pandemic will be a critical opportunity to reinforce our common endeavour to serve Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. The WFB needs to retheorise 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development Goals for all regional centres to apply with their Buddhist activities and fellowships.

The world is relying greatly on Buddhist institutions, organisations, and monasteries for their input in the uplifting level of peace, prosperity, and happiness of mankind. All WFB members need to contemplate on these world realities.

First, a greater emphasis should be given in a master plan for the WFB to grow along with the ever-changing world. After the seven decades of accomplishments, what are our goals for the next decades to come? In other words, we need to realize our capacity of the Awakening i.e. the Buddhahood.

Second, educating and sharing a common understanding of Buddhist principles, so that all Buddhist fellowships have a strong thread binding us together as sons and daughters of the same Buddha. In other words, we need to rethink the common principles i.e. the Dhamma.

Third, strengthening fellowship building, so that we can sustain all Buddhists as a fellowship of 'One Buddhism' or 'unity in diversities' of the Buddhist world. In other words, we need to re-evaluate the fellowship i.e. the Sangha.

Taken together, the WFB's 70th anniversary presents an opportunity for comprehensive and specific reform. We have to urge the WFB members to take early action in response to the contemplation of the future of the WFB operations.

Keeping pace with evolving Buddhist development and incoming challenges is a collective responsibility.

The WFB Charter calls on us to unite our strength. It also gives special responsibilities to the members of the WFB members to materialise our common goal. We must do better in meeting this noble standard.

Let us take a lesson and inspiration from the Covid-19 pandemic in materialising the Buddhist doctrines in action.

Alongside despair in many corners, there remains great hope in the power of working together. That is the founding spirit of the World Fellowship of Buddhists – and in this 70th anniversary year, in the face of grave and global challenges, it is the spirit we must summon today.

Congratulations all WFB, WFBY, and WBU members for a successful seven decades! We have done it and for the sake of Buddhism and Buddhist fellowships we have to perform better for decades to come.

Thank you.