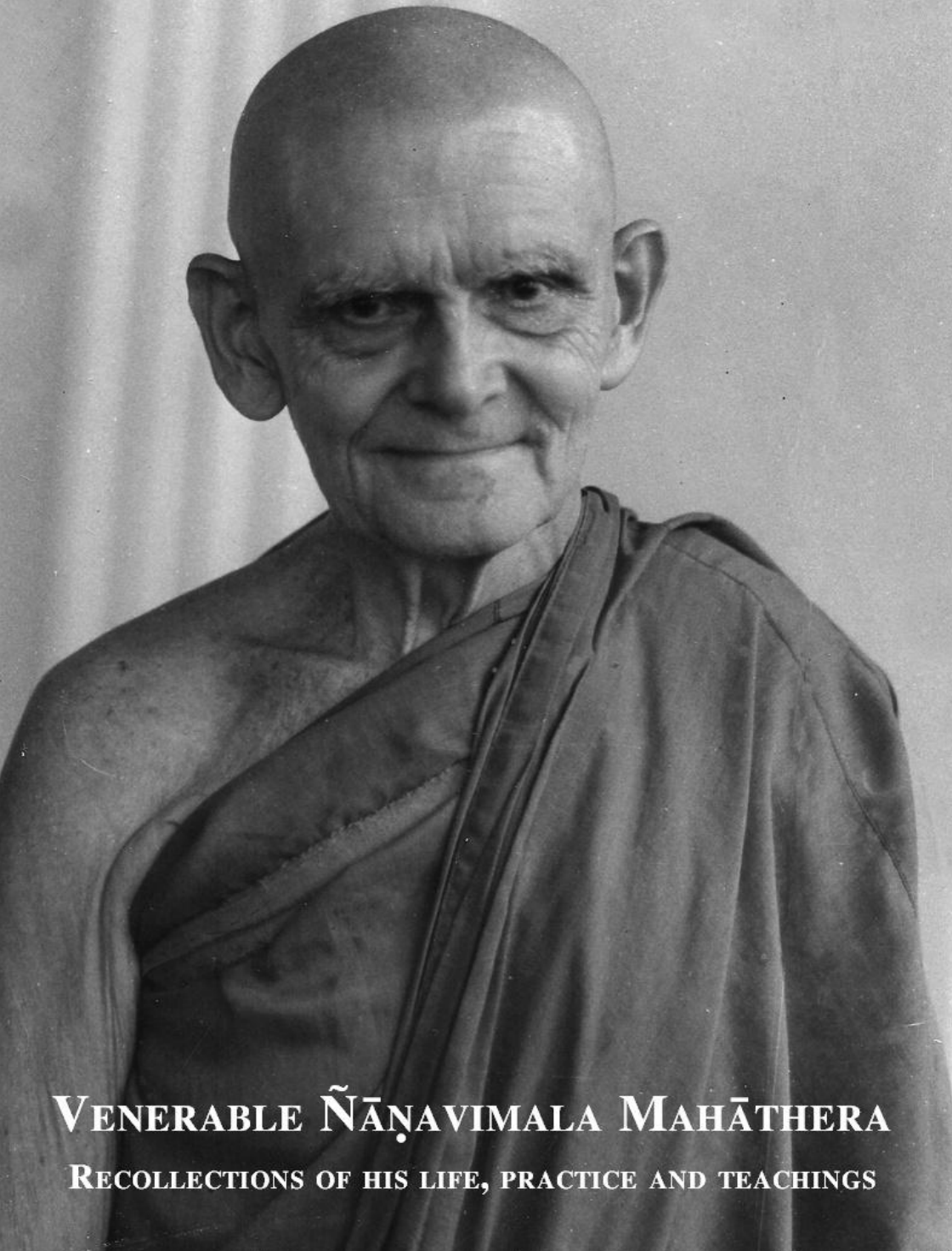
# PURE INSPIRATION



## Venerable Ñāṇavimala Mahāthera

### Recollections of his life, practice and teachings

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*Cover Photo: Ven. Ñāṇavimala, Colombo 1991*

# Preface

The German-born Ven. Ñāṇavimala was one of the great forest monks living in Sri Lanka in modern times. I had the privilege of staying in the same monastery with him for a couple of years near the end of his life (from 1999-2002) and like everyone else who came into contact with him, could not help but be deeply impressed.

Bhante was surely one of the most inspiring monks one could hope to come across. Unfortunately, due to his infirmity at that time, we were not able to meet him very often – generally only when we could think up excuses that couldn't be ignored: blessings for New Year's Day, or Sinhala New Year, the beginning of the Rains retreat or the end of it, etc.

Those were days we all looked forward to, and Bhante would give uplifting talks about the Dhamma, the Path and the need to exercise effort and attain Path and Fruit. Old and infirm though he was, he could easily speak for an hour or more on just this subject, with his eyes alight and the atmosphere electric, inspiring the young monks, and we would all go back to our rooms more determined than ever to practice and do our very best to achieve what he himself assured us could be attained.

Bhante was an ascetic to the end, and although his legs were very swollen and he was barely able to walk, let alone go out on alms-round, he had his two monk attendants go out, and he lived on the almsfood

*Previous Page: Outside Vajirarama, On Almsround, 1990s*

(piṇḍapāta) that they brought back, and had blended so he could easily digest it.

In 2011, I was contacted by the former forest monk Chittapala who had shared his notes about Ven. Ñāṇavimala's teaching. I subsequently published them on my blog Dharma Records, and suggested that we contact others who knew Ven. Ñāṇavimala and request them to write up their memories of him.

The testimonies and recollections we have managed to gather here come from many sources, including fellow senior monks, who go back to his early years, attendant monks who knew him towards the end and lay disciples whose lives were changed by their encounters with him.

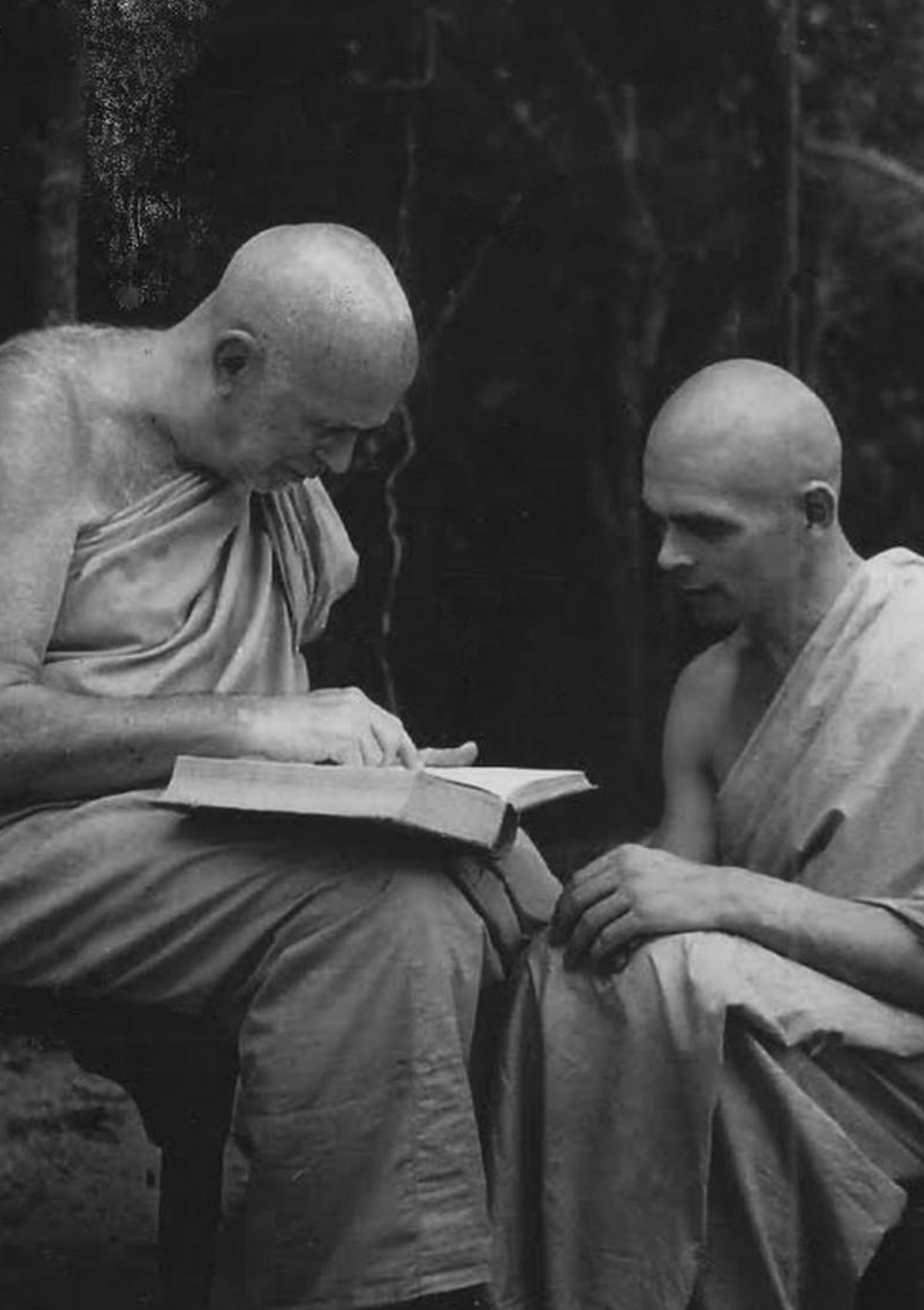
When making this collection we have sought views from many people to try and give a full picture of this extraordinary monk and the effect that he could have on people's lives, his one aim always seeming to be to inspire others to make their very best efforts to put the teaching into practice.

Bhante himself was very severe in his practice, and some of the people writing here remember that, and are even critical of it, but there is no doubt that if Ven. Ñāṇavimala was tough on others, he was even more tough on himself, and even by his own very strict standards, he lived what he preached and proved to be an exemplary monastic himself because of his total commitment to the life he had chosen.

It seems unfortunate that no one thought to record his Dhamma lessons and instructions, as many feel, as I do, that they were the most uplifting talks they have ever heard. Bhante did however keep a list of readings he would recommend to people, both lay and monastic, which are reproduced in an appendix here, and Bhante would be the first to declare that the best person to learn from is the Buddha himself.

We sincerely hope that this small collection of materials about this great monk will serve the purpose of firstly, keeping his memory alive, and secondly, inspiring a new generation with the thought that, if they have the commitment and are willing to put forth the energy, they will be able to attain the unattained, and gain a safe passage out of the round of births and deaths once and for all.

Ānandajoti Bhikkhu



# The Life of Ñāṇavimala Thera

**23rd November 1911 – 10th October 2005**

***Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi & Ven. Bhikkhu Ñāṇatusita***

After a long period of physical weakness, on the 10th of October 2005, the highly respected German bhikkhu (monk) Ñāṇavimala Thera passed away on the island of Parappaduwa in the Ratgama Lagoon near Dodanduwa, aged 93. Ñāṇavimala Thera was the last living disciple of Ñāṇatiloka Thera (1878-1957), who was himself the first Buddhist monk from Continental Europe. Thus, with his passing away, an important chapter in the history of Western Buddhism has been closed.

At the time of his death, Ñāṇavimala Thera was the oldest, as well as the most senior, Western Buddhist monk in the world. He was highly respected by monks as well as laypeople and many people believe that he attained the highest stage of Buddhist sanctity. For the last years of his life he was bedridden and continuously cared for by one or two dedicated attendant monks. He stayed in almost complete seclusion on the former nuns' island Parappaduwa, near the Island Hermitage in the lagoon at Dodanduwa.

In lay life, Ñāṇavimala's name was Friedrich Möller. Born in 1911 in Hessendorf bei Rinteln, he was spiritually inclined from an early age. Although he was first a Christian, a meeting with an Indian medical student in Germany aroused his interest in yoga and Hinduism, and he decided that he wanted to go to India to further his new religious

*Previous Page: Island Hermitage, Ven. Ñāṇatiloka with Sāmaṇera Ñāṇavimala, 1955*

pursuits there. Because the German military was preparing for war and needed many recruits, it was generally quite difficult for German men to leave the country, but three or four years before World War II, Möller managed to arrange for the trading house in Hamburg at which he was employed to send him to Mumbai in India to work as a trader. About a year before the war started, Möller was appointed the director of a German trading house in Colombo. In Colombo he led a pleasant and luxurious life, which, however, abruptly came to an end with the outbreak of war in 1939. Along with many other German male nationals living in British colonies, Möller was arrested by the British government as an enemy. He was first interned in Diyatalawa in the Sri Lankan hill country and then, early in 1942, was sent to the large and fairly comfortable 'Central Internment Camp' near the town of Dehra Dun in northwest India. He was placed in the same wing as Ñāṇatiloka and his German pupil Vappo, where he built up a friendship with them.

Being a strict vegetarian, Möller refused to eat the non-vegetarian food served in the camp and almost died because of this. On the brink of death, he took the advice of his Buddhist friends to give up his vegetarian views and quickly recovered. Later, while recounting this experience, he said that he then understood the wisdom of the Buddha in not promoting vegetarianism. Here, in the internment camp, he became a pupil of Ñāṇatiloka and a devout Buddhist.

In November 1946, most of the German inhabitants of Dehra Dun were repatriated by the British to Hamburg in the British occupied area of Germany. Thanks to the efforts of the increasingly politically

powerful Sinhalese Buddhists and several of their organizations, Ñāṇatiloka and the other Buddhist monks were spared the return to the misery of a bomb-ravaged Germany and were able to return to Ceylon. Friedrich Möller, however, had to go to back to Germany despite his strong desire to become a Buddhist monk in Ceylon. He was not eligible to do so because he had not been a Buddhist monk in Ceylon before the war. Möller first worked on a farm in the countryside near Hamburg. The only remuneration he received was free food and lodging, but this was his only alternative to going hungry. After some time, however, he found work as an English teacher in Hamburg and could stay with his former landlady, who treated him like the son she had lost during the war. Many German men had died during the war and the large majority of Möller's pupils were females. Möller was able to resist the temptations of sensuality and romance because he was firmly determined to return to Ceylon and become a monk.

He became involved with a Buddhist group in Hamburg. One day in 1953, in a hotel in Hamburg, he had to translate from English into German a speech given by Asoka Weeraratna, the founder of the German Buddhist Missionary Society (Lanka Dharmaduta Society) in Colombo. Weeraratna and Möller agreed that he would come to Ceylon with the support of the Dharmaduta Society, which would arrange for him to be trained in missionary work for three years before returning to Germany with the first German Buddhist Mission.

After an absence of almost thirteen years, Möller returned to Sri Lanka, arriving in Colombo on June 1953. He lived for a year at the

Dharmaduta Society in Colombo and also spent time at the Forest Hermitage in Kandy. He moved from Colombo to the Island Hermitage and, at the age of forty-three, was accepted as a novice by Ñāṇatiloka on the 19th of September 1955, taking the Pāli name Ñāṇavimala. As Ñāṇatiloka's health was declining, he put the novice under the care of Ñāṇāloka, the abbot of the Island Hermitage. It was the English monk Ñāṇamoli, however, who especially helped him by teaching him Pāli and explaining the monk's rules and other aspects of the monk's life. Exactly two months after his novice ordination he received the higher ordination with Madihe Paññasīha as his preceptor. Then he realized that he first had to work on himself and did not regard himself capable of being a teacher for others yet. He decided to stay on in Sri Lanka. He later related that this change of mind had been brought about by conversations he had with Ñāṇamoli. The Dharmaduta Society respected his wish.

For ten years Ñāṇavimala lived quietly at the Island Hermitage, completely dedicating himself to study and meditation. He was studying the Pāli suttas (discourses) and put the understanding he gained into practice. He generally kept to himself and had little contact with others. Then, in 1966, he left the Island Hermitage to go on a walking tour (cārikā) through Sri Lanka. For about twenty-five years he walked all over Sri Lanka, from south to north and back, from west to east and back. He would normally stay in monasteries and other places on the way for at most three days at a time and would then continue walking. The aim of his austere practice was to avoid accumulating possessions and mental attachments to places and people. When staying in a place for a long time various attachments can easily

build up which can be in conflict with the Buddhist monk's state of being a 'homeless one.' Ñāṇavimala would only carry his alms bowl and a small bag with some essential requisites. He did not even use sandals. Once, robbers came up to him and investigated his bag, but, finding nothing of value, left empty handed.

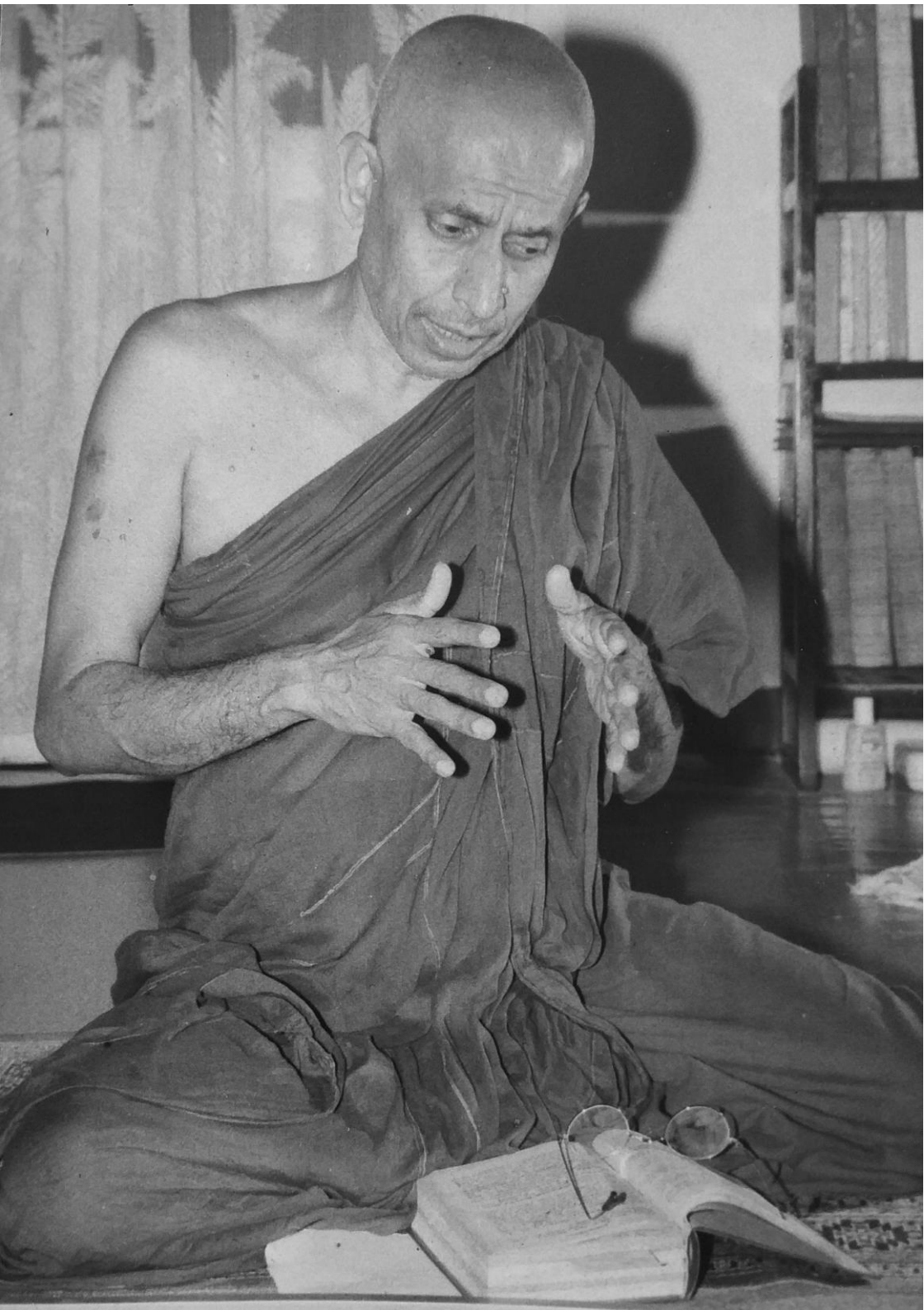
To be even more free and detached inside, Ñāṇavimala would normally have no fixed destination. Once, he had been staying for a few weeks at the Siri Vajirarama temple in Colombo. One morning he left the monastery and was walking down Vajira Road towards Galle Road. A supporter of the Siri Vajirarama saw him walking down the road, came up to him and saluted him. Seeing his bag and bowl slung over his shoulder, he realized that he had left the monastery and said to him: 'Well, venerable sir, I see you've decided to leave the monastery and resume your travels. Where are you heading?' Ñāṇavimala promptly replied: 'I haven't decided yet. I'll decide when I get to the corner.'

He would collect his food by going on almsround (piṇḍapāta) in villages and towns along the way. Only during the rainy season retreat (vassa) would he stay put in a monastery for three continuous months, in accordance with the prescribed rule; most often he would spend the rains at the Island Hermitage. To undertake such a difficult ascetic practice for a long time can be quite physically demanding even for young monks, how much more so for an elderly monk. Nevertheless, Ñāṇavimala persisted with this practice up to 1991, although after 1987 a hip affliction prevented him from walking for long stretches at a time. He then spent 4 years in Colombo at the Siri Vajirarama

monastery. In 1995 he returned to the Island Hermitage, and later moved to the more secluded island, Parappaduwa, where he expired.

When he met people, Ñāṇavimala would encourage them to practice the Dhamma with the suttas as a guide. Again and again he emphasized that the practice of the Dhamma, a simple renunciant lifestyle, and the giving up of all worldly attachments will lead one to the supreme bliss of Nibbāna. His own renunciant lifestyle and mental well-being certainly exemplified his advice to others. He inspired many younger monks and, when he still had physical strength, was happy to give wise counsel to them on how to live the bhikkhu life to best advantage. One hesitates to say, 'May he attain Nibbāna!' since he might well have already done so, but since that is the tradition, let us add our voices to the chorus and say: 'May he attain Nibbāna!'

*Next Page: Memorial Stūpa, Pannapitiya*



# Inspiring Virtues

***Ven. Gampaha Pemasiri***

Ven. Gampaha Pemasiri Mahāthera is a renowned meditation teacher in Sri Lanka and is abbot of Sumathipāla Araṇa, Kanduboda. He first met Ven. Ñāṇavimala Mahāthera in 1967 and then on many more occasions in the following decades at various locations in Sri Lanka. The recollections below have been compiled from translations of talks Ven. Pemasiri gave in Sinhala in November 2016 and February 2018 at Sumathipāla Araṇa.

Even before I was ordained I had heard of Ven. Ñāṇavimala. After I ordained, I met him for the first time in 1967. He became ill with fever in Jaffna, moved to Habarana, and later came to Arankele, Kurunegala where I was staying. He was like a skeleton at that time, very weak and didn't have enough strength to draw water to bathe or even wash his under robe. I offered to wash his robe and help him bathe, but he flatly refused my help.

Later, wherever I happened to be living, he would sometimes visit, staying a few days longer than he normally would in one place. Whenever this occurred, we saw his way of life and saddhā (faith) would arise in us. He had a lot of viriya, mettā and upekkhā (energy, loving-kindness and equanimity) and other wholesome qualities.

In 1968, when I was living in Gampola, I met him near Nuwara Eliya around 7:30 in the morning. It was wet and cold and he

was coming down from a forest area. I was in a vehicle and offered him a ride, but he refused and continued on foot. Later in the day I saw him again, still walking, and that night he turned up at the temple where I was staying. This was long before he developed a hip condition from his continuous walking trips (cārikā). Almost every place I stayed, I would meet him, in Gampola, Kurunegala Anuradhapura, Kanduboda or in Colombo. In himself, he had no connection to anybody, anywhere. After leaving Germany, Ven. Ñāṇavimala never returned there. Eventually, he was given citizenship in Ceylon.

If he had already returned from his alms round and someone placed more food in his bowl, he would not like it. Sometimes people put a complete papaya fruit in his bowl, but he would not show his displeasure. However, on one occasion a lady put too much chocolate in his alms bowl and he told her in future not to do things like that.

There was no way you could give Ven. Ñāṇavimala in excess of what he needed. An extra robe would definitely not be accepted. If there was a patch on his robe, it was a genuine patch, not like the modern trend of wearing patched robes just to simulate austerity. Once, I offered Ven. Ñāṇavimala a new robe, which he refused saying, “I already have a robe. What if I take this and I pass away before the old robe is worn out, it won’t serve any purpose”. Having seen his example, I have no doubt about what

standard of moderation and sense of contentment monks should have. Even what he said in declining that offer, he said in the most gentle, pleasant way possible. I recall with veneration that I knew a person like this. It was a privilege. This fewness of wishes (appicchā) is something we can all hold in high esteem. He relinquished things to get the maximum benefit from consistently practising detachment. His mental elements were extremely pacified and this manifested in moderation and contentment. Having seen such people as Ven. Ñāṇavimala practising as the Buddha taught, really encourages one and is a boost to the monk's life.

Ven. Ñāṇavimala was satisfied with whatever he received. He would go around barefoot and carried just three robes, his almsbowl and a sitting cloth. In keeping with the requisites, he had a thread and needle and also carried a piece of soap wrapped in a jack leaf. Whether you prepared a very comfortable place for him or whether he had to sleep on the floor, it was all the same to him.

Sometimes, whilst on cārikā when he stopped at temples for the night, they would not allow him to stay in the main building, but would offer him the dānasālā (dining hall) or verandah floor, but he did not mind. When he wasn't given a place to stay in temples, he stayed in churches, schools or village halls. The first time he went on cārikā, it was very difficult for him, but on

subsequent walking tours, after people got to know him, it became less difficult and he would readily be offered places to stay. He told me he visited just about every village in Sri Lanka and once remarked “Sri Lanka is such a small island country”.

I recall being in Arankele and the monks were discussing Dhamma with Ven. Ñāṇavimala. He could answer all of their questions. At that time, I didn’t know anything about these subjects, they were just words to me. Discussions about cetovimutti (liberation through mind) and paññāvimutti (liberation through wisdom) were very interesting, even though I didn’t understand them. The other monks became quite worked up during the discussions, but Ven. Ñāṇavimala remained calm and answered their questions in a very relaxed manner.

Any advice I received from Ven. Ñāṇavimala was mostly about mettā, karunā and khantī (loving-kindness, compassion and patience). He also suggested that I practise ānāpānasati (mindfulness of breathing). He didn’t say very much to me. Maybe he spoke to me at the level I could understand at that time. Later, when I had studied the scriptures and had more knowledge, he didn’t speak of those earlier topics. When I was very young, he would often speak about the value of ordination. Whenever I met him, Ven. Ñāṇavimala only spoke about some aspect of the Dhamma. There was no worldly talk at all.

No matter where he went, he would keep up the same routine. Mostly, he did not take the food offered in a temple, but would go on almsround. If you read books about monks in ancient times, it was similar to that. He had minimum requirements. I can't say too much about his spiritual attainments, but only give my impressions. Some people talk about monks these days with high qualities, but in comparison with Ven. Ñāṇavimala, it is like comparing the sky and the earth. This is something you can know only through association. There was nothing false, he was like that everyday. I have only seen three or four of that level and one of them was Ven. Ñāṇavimala. Their lives were similar in how they travelled by foot and their practices regarding food and meditation. They never found fault with others or got angry. Monks like that are very few.

The qualities of patience, compassion, humility and other virtues were the best things about Ven. Ñāṇavimala. These were at the highest level. My faith grew from seeing these qualities in him. His behaviour was always consistent and there was always something to learn from him. There was nothing put on. There was no conceit or hurried behaviour and I never witnessed a day when he clashed with anyone. Possessing such high qualities, even the devas would have taken notice of him. It could be said that his virtues protected him, for example, when he walked through jungles where there were wild animals such as elephants and leopards and no harm ever befell him.

One could honestly say that this person was definitely on the way to nibbāna (liberation). There was clearly no doubt about it!

# Slowly-Carefully-Mindfully

***Ven. K. Ñāṇananda***

Venerable Ñāṇavimala Mahāthera belongs to that category of monks whose lives epitomize for us the exemplary lives of the disciples of the Buddha's time. For me, he was the Mahā Kassapa of this age. After I went forth under Venerable Kadugannawe Ñāṇāloka Mahāthera at Island Hermitage in 1967, I had the privilege of associating with him for five years. When I met him for the first time, he had just returned from his first walking tour (cārikā) after twelve years of cloistered meditation on the little island. From what I heard about the hardships he had undergone in his long trek on foot, it was perhaps the first test of endurance for his later lifestyle.

As a young lay disciple (upāsaka) looking forward to ordination, I visited him in his hut (kuṭi) to get his advice and blessings. In his deep reverberating voice, he reminded me of the true aim and purpose of an ideal monk's life. After my ordination, I sought his instructions and guidance from time to time. Apart from that, it was a great inspiration for me to watch him going about his daily routine with mindfulness and full awareness. There was a formality of his own which cut off excesses that make for distraction. His frugal ways and stern simplicity emanated an atmosphere of seriousness reminiscent of the life of Venerable Mahā Kassapa as recorded in our scriptures.

*Previous Page: Ven. Ñāṇavimala at Parappaduwa, 1990s*

The evening session of chanting was held at the refectory of the Hermitage in those days. Venerable Ñāṇavimala used to come with his lantern, which he put on the table near the kitchen before he took his seat in the refectory. While some of the other monks were chatting, he would keep his gaze fixed on the flame of the oil lamp before the Buddha statue. Only rarely did he pay attention to the conversation going on around him and respond to it.

Once, the Burmese monk, Venerable Ñāṇinda Mahāthera, who used to visit the Hermitage quite often, asked Venerable Ñāṇavimala, after the chanting, whether he intended returning to his mother country at some time. Almost like a retort, Venerable Ñāṇavimala came out with the terse reply: paṭirūpadesavāso (residing in a suitable locality). It served to convey to the Venerable Ñāṇinda Mahāthera the fact that he preferred to remain in an environment most congenial to his practice – true to the Buddha's behest in the Mahā Maṅgala Sutta (Discourse on the Great Blessings, Sn 2:8).

Once, after this chanting session, I was going to light my lantern when I suddenly became aware that Venerable Ñāṇavimala was waiting nearby to light his own. Out of respect for him, I took his lantern and with an unnecessary haste, tried to light it first. Thrice, I tried to bring the half-lit paper strip near the wick, but every time it went out before I could light it. I was still fumbling with it when he took his lamp from me and lit it at the very first attempt, saying: 'slowly-carefully-mindfully'. These three words are still ringing in my ears like a souvenir worth a lifetime.

A learned Mahāthera who happened to visit me once, wished to see Venerable Ñāṇavimala and I took him to his hut (kuṭi). He was highly impressed by Venerable Ñāṇavimala's exemplary way of life, so much so that he humbly confessed: 'We are all dabbling with shallow things. Only you are doing the real thing.' But Venerable Ñāṇavimala's response was a modest compliment in return: 'But then, you Venerable Sir, are giving the people an opportunity to listen to the Dhamma. After all, everyone cannot go into solitude at the same time!'

Venerable Ñāṇavimala seemed to live in a 'present' which had no 'future'. No one could guess when he would set forth on his next cārikā until he came to hand over the key of his kuṭi. While on cārikā, he usually stayed three nights at one place. When he was asked where he would go next, he used to say: 'I will decide when I come to the junction'. Once, one of our fellow monks had gone to him and said: 'Venerable Sir, I hope to leave tomorrow'. His retort was: 'Go today, why tomorrow?'

While on cārikā, whenever he happened to stay for more than one night at a forest hermitage (arañña), he used to clean and arrange the kuṭi he was given as the first thing.

There is a strange incident relating to his sense of orderliness which I came to hear from a Western monk. Once, Venerable Ñāṇavimala in the course of his cārikā, had arrived at a certain forest hermitage. The chief monk had given him the key of the Uposatha Hall, a building which also served as the library of the hermitage. When the chief monk came to see him the next morning, he found the books which were earlier lying here and there, well arranged by the visitor. After a

couple of days, Venerable Ñāṇavimala had gone to the chief monk to say he was leaving and had handed over the key. After he left, the chief monk – probably out of curiosity – had gone to the Uposatha Hall and opened the door. To his amazement, all the books were found *disarranged* exactly as they were before!

A Western monk had heard this episode from that chief monk when he himself visited that hermitage. The chief monk had exclaimed: 'What a wonderful monk,' because he was impressed by the way Venerable Ñāṇavimala had mindfully *disarranged the books!*

We do not know whether this little incident had some deep meaning. It could be that Venerable Ñāṇavimala was conscious of the fact that he had no right to 'arrange' another's library. Or else, it may be that he had simply wished to leave behind an object lesson in mindfulness for the chief monk.

In the course of his cārikā, Venerable Ñāṇavimala visited the Kudumbigala Forest Hermitage, which was not easily approachable in those days. Upon his return, one of our fellow monks had asked him about his experiences with wild animals. He told him that he had suddenly met a bear on his path and that he looked directly at its eyes with mettā (loving-kindness). To the apprehensive question: 'But, Venerable Sir, if it had pounced on you?', his mild reply was: 'Well, I would have died with a pure heart.'

Sometimes he would be out on cārikā for several months. By the time he returned, he was emaciated and the soles of his feet were worn out. Even if the path to his kuṭi was fully covered with fallen leaves, he

would not make it a point to sweep it fully the following day itself. He would do it systematically, part by part, *thoroughly-slowly-carefully-mindfully*. It is as if he taught us that if we sweep hurriedly, we would be leaving more 'rubbish' in the mind than we had swept away.

When he was staying at Vajirarama in Colombo, a wealthy lay supporter who was highly impressed by a Dhamma discussion with Venerable Ñāṇavimala, came with his family the following morning to offer him alms. With all the delicacies he had brought, he was eagerly waiting at the gate of the temple until Venerable Ñāṇavimala came out to go on his alms round. As soon as Venerable Ñāṇavimala showed up, he reverentially approached him and served a hopper (rice flour pancake) into the bowl. He was going to offer more when Venerable Ñāṇavimala made a sign with his hand to prevent it, saying: 'Please give an opportunity for poor people also to offer alms.' Long after this experience, that particular donor told me about it, not with a sense of disappointment, but with great appreciation for the frugal ways of Venerable Ñāṇavimala.

One of our fellow monks was staying at another hermitage when Venerable Ñāṇavimala also came there in the course of his cārikā. The monks of that hermitage were in the habit of distributing food to crowds of poor people who regularly turned up there. Venerable Ñāṇavimala was curious why this practice was going on. Our monk had explained, saying: 'Venerable Sir, it is because they are poor.' Venerable Ñāṇavimala's rejoinder was: 'If they are poor, we should take food from them.' According to modern values, Venerable Ñāṇavimala's attitude is grossly unkind. But most probably, he meant

something deep by that retort. One reason for poverty according to the law of kamma is the lack of practice of giving. To encourage the poor to *take* from monks rather than to offer them, is to give them an inheritance of poverty in saṁsāra (endless round of rebirth).

Venerable Mahā Kassapa Mahāthera who was foremost in austerity, on rising from his attainment of cessation after seven days of fasting, used to prevent not only kings and millionaires, but even Sakka, the king of the gods, from offering him alms food and gave that rare opportunity of making merit to poor people living in huts. Materialistic thinking of today might, of course, interpret it as an exploitation of the poor.

Whenever Venerable Ñāṇavimala heard the pathetic excuse from a poor house on his alms round: 'Venerable Sir, today we have nothing to give', he used to console them with the sympathetic thanksgiving: 'I came to give you mettā!'

* * *

By fervour of austerity, severity of discipline and rigour of fortitude, the late Venerable Ñāṇavimala Mahāthera appeared hard like a stone. But, with his overflowing mettā (universal love) and deep compassion, he was at the same time, soft like a flower. It was not easy for some who knew him to understand this wonderful blend of qualities. They were not all able to appreciate the straightforward and brief advice he gave in his deep and reverberating voice. However, as he trekked from village to village, from town to town, from hermitage to hermitage, from monastery to monastery, he left an indelible

impression on those who met him of the exemplary life of an ideal lone dweller of the Buddha's time.

As he walked unshod from end to end over this island, he reminded the people of the heyday of Buddhism in this country. Wherever he sojourned, he had a word of encouragement for monks and novices who were attracted by his austere ways. Unswayed by the vicissitudes summed up by the Eight Worldly Conditions – gain and loss, fame and ill-fame, blame and praise, happiness and suffering – he endured all hardships on his way with equanimity. His spirit of renunciation and the sense of detachment was such that every time others inquired about his health, he reminded them of the sickly nature of this body. Though his body was sick, he was never sick in mind – well knowing where true health lies.

It was no coincidence that Venerable Ñāṇavimala, who began his monkship in Island Hermitage, breathed his last on the solitary isle of Parappaduwa nearby. Perhaps, by then, he had found that '*island*' which no flood can overwhelm.

'Uṭṭhānen' appamādena
saññamena damena ca
dīpaṁ kayirātha medhāvī
yam ogho nābhikīrati' [Dhp. v. 25]

By unflagging effort, by diligence,
by restraint and self-control,
let the truly wise man make for himself
an *island* which no flood can overwhelm.

# My Spiritual Father

***Ayoma Wickremasinghe***

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa

The Most Venerable Ñāṇavimala Thero was one of my dearly beloved Teachers who sadly passed away in 2005. My first guru was the Most Venerable Webu Sayadaw of Burma. In my close observation and association of both of them, I was convinced, in fact, I know, they had completed their journey in this most miserable, horrifying, and endless saṁsāra. They were Heroes who purified themselves fully with great wisdom and indefatigable and never ending endeavour. How very lucky they are! How I wish, and wish, I could emulate them fully. How wonderful it must be to have Complete Peace within, with no āsavas (mental defilements) hammering away!

The very first encounter with that Great Being, Venerable Ñāṇavimala Thero, really astonished me. It was just a few minutes past twelve noon in Hawa Eliya district, near Nuwara Eliya. The bhikkhu (monk) was walking with his bowl slung over his shoulder. The first time I saw him (I had already been told about him by my dear friend Geeta Sri Nissanka), nobody told me it was him, but I knew it instantly. I told my husband to kindly stop the car and having gone to a nearby shop and purchased some food, I raced back and offered it to the bhikkhu. Very sternly, he refused the food and said: 'Bhikkhus do not accept food after twelve noon'. I was amazed that,

even without a watch, he knew the exact time, when it was perhaps, only a few minutes past noon.

On having asked to where he was proceeding, I was sternly informed 'The Vajirarama at Hawa Eliya'. I visited him there twice or thrice and was disconcerted when he refused most offerings. This was quite contrary to the mode of practice of the Most Venerable Webu Sayadaw of Burma who, with overflowing mettā (loving-kindness), welcomed and accepted all people and their gifts. It was only later that I realized it is as Bhikkhu Bodhi has described him: 'If you want to get a sermon from Mahākassapa, go see Ven. Ñāṇavimala – the austere deportment, the ascetic bent of character, the firm self-assurance, the individualistic mode of practice – all these traits of Ven. Ñāṇavimala are reminiscent of Mahākassapa'.

From then onwards, I came across him throughout the years, often suddenly and unexpectedly. We were so thrilled when we had the opportunity of encountering him anywhere. In the early stages it was at Vajirarama and later at Island Hermitage and then Parappaduwa. Once, I met him on the road to Kandy and had the good kamma (accumulated merit) of offering almsfood (dāna) which he partook of on the roadside.

At one time, he stayed in a section of our own house in Ward Place, Colombo (my grandfather's surgery, converted by my husband for me to have solitude) for over one year, and as I recall, he spent the Rains Retreat there as well. He also spent over a year in our Pitipanna Estate residence, and another year, in the same place, in a delightful and quite large hut (kuṭi), under a huge spreading banyan tree, which was built especially for him. The kuṭi is now called 'Ñāṇavimala Thero Kuṭi'. Forest bhikkhus still use it, on and off.

He was so powerful. His aura and vibration left an unforgettable impression on one. Because of him, I came across ten or so lovely people, devout followers of the Dhamma, who became my life long spiritual friends (kalyāṇamittas). This wonderful bhikkhu's influence on us was unbelievable. We trusted him profoundly. What he advocated for us, we generally carried out to the best of our abilities. He was a 'father' and a kalyāṇamitta to all of us. He gave such comforting and valuable advice to all of us which helped tremendously, enabling us to tackle our lives' more serious problems.

For example, he advised a middle-aged lady, whose husband tortured her by having relationships with other females in front of her eyes, to go away and live a life of solitude in the Dhamma. Because of this, she became a great and very effective Dhamma teacher till she was over 83 years old in a famous meditation centre.

Another younger person was devastated when her Western fiancé went off with another woman. He comforted her by reminding her to recall how she herself, had let down a former fiancé just before their marriage, and thus, she must forebear the retribution. This young lady, who was almost losing her mind, became avidly absorbed in Dhamma practice and became a great yogi and Dhamma guide.

Also, he guided me through many years to get used to spells of solitude and when he knew I was 'ready' and had avid love for the Pāli suttas (discourses), he told me to renounce. I replied: 'I am not ready, Sir' and he said: 'We are never ready,' and so through great respect and belief in what he said, I renounced. And I am so happy that I did

so. It was the greatest and most profitable time in the Dhamma sphere of my life. Unfortunately, I gave up after a very wonderfully peaceful and happy one year, but got back into recluseship some years later and will continue to do so till the end of my life.

On his death bed 'as it were' (he passed away much later, but on this occasion was very ill), he said: 'You must be an example to the rest of your family. You must show them by living and practising the way'.

His 'letting go' of his own family was phenomenal. There was a 'clean cut' with no turning back whatsoever, no letter writing, no contact at all. He related a story when he was a young man about a pretty girl from his home town who was devoted to him. One day he saw her talking to another young man and was overwhelmed with jealousy. That moment he realised this sort of attachment gives such excruciating suffering, and that he must not indulge in relationships and attachments. Then and there, he estranged himself and cut the relationship completely. The girl was devastated and even had to be treated in hospital.

He repeated several times: 'One should not forsake one's own progress for another's sake (no matter what benefit to the other, even for a short period)'. He emphasised strongly and repeatedly: 'To read the suttas is imperative, it is essential'. He appreciated and praised very much my absorption and dwelling in the suttas.

He pushed hard for me to get into deep practice and to study the texts. I think he was particularly impressed how I studied the Pāli texts sincerely and deeply. He had a very deep knowledge of the Sutta

Piṭaka (‘basket’ of discourses) and generally knew chapter and verse. He often quoted and encouraged me to read particular texts. He did not, however, encourage me to explain to others the Pāli Texts, but rather to remain simple and unknown and press on with my own striving.

At a later date, he said: ‘…but not in a scholarly way of studying’ and he said: ‘It is high time you actually achieved something’. I was then sixty-four years old. He said: ‘Go away into solitude for six months and save yourself’. When I thought to myself: ‘Ha, he thinks I can do it in six months – what an achievement!’ He caught my thought and said: ‘No, not six months, but one year’.

Once, in private he said to me: ‘You have now understood dukkha (the noble truth of suffering)’; ‘At this time there is nothing more to say as advice to you’; ‘One should have pīti (joy) all the time’. Then I said ‘All the time, Sir?’ He said: ‘Of course, it is like planting a seed, one has to foster it and wait till it grows – it cannot mature in a hurry.’

One experience of his which he related to me was this: Soon after the war, alcohol was naturally very rare. One night some bottles were available in a bar. While some men were drinking, a fire broke out in the building. Other people screamed ‘run out, run out, the building is about to fall’, but so great was their attachment that the men continued to drink and all of them perished in the fire – so dreadful is the power and pull of desire.

Once, when he was walking for a long time in forest terrain, he was overwhelmed with hunger and wondered where he would next be

offered food. No one was around for miles and miles. Suddenly, he came across a little hut and an old devotee (upāsikā) came forward carrying a tray laden with food and offered it to him. He asked how she knew he was coming and she replied: 'When I was offering flowers that morning, a voice said 'a bhikkhu is coming this way, please prepare food and offer it' '.

He made us aware of his extraordinary knowledges only to teach us some aspect of Dhamma. Once, when I was driving him to Kelaniya temple, I was lightly doing ānāpānasati (meditation on breathing) as it helped me concentrate better (the Most Venerable Webu Sayadaw advocated doing ānāpānasati all the time). Ven. Ñāṇavimala Thero said 'when one is driving, it is best not to do ānāpānasati concentration'. How did he know? Wasn't that an extra-sensory awareness?

As Bhikkhu Bodhi states: 'Ven. Ñāṇavimala Thero seemed to have an acute ability to assess a person's character and station after just a brief exchange of words, and he would adjust his Dhamma talk to meet the other person in precisely the way that best fits the other person's needs.'

When he was living in the separate section in our Colombo house, my mother became bedridden and unconscious. He observed and studied her and commented: 'She has lost her intellect, but her 'inside' has been looked after'. And when she passed away, he commented: 'She has gone to a Deva (heavenly being) world, but not a great one'. When the mother of a friend of mine passed away (he was a devoted follower), he commented: 'He has gone to a higher deva world!'

He had related to some of my friends his experiences in past lives. He said in one former birth, he had been a father in a certain family. One day when he had climbed a ladder, he fell down and lay on the ground in a dire state. The sorrow of the family was forever devastating to him. What a sorrow existence is! It is such an overwhelming sorrow to glean from a True Disciple of the Tathāgata. The only solace being, 'How lovely that they have ended all sorrow'.

Here are some of Bhante's sayings that I remember hearing during the forty to forty-five years I knew him:

- Let your experience be your guide
- Vipassanā is seeing the aniccatā (impermanence) of the jhānas (meditative absorptions)
- The mind overcomes all physical infirmities.
- Satipaṭṭhāna (applications of mindfulness) in lay life: constant watch over the activities of the mind and verbal actions should be carried out.
- If one feels drowsy whilst doing ānāpānasati, then one is not enjoying it – enjoy it!
- The nimitta (meditative sign) in the form of light, etc. are distractions to Nibbāna. The nimitta of satipaṭṭhāna are the thought realizations, etc. that arise (not his exact words, but as I understood the meaning)

- Sammādiṭṭhi (Right View) must in every way be developed. Therefore, study the suttas and live in accordance with the suttas.

- All sīlas (precepts) must be fulfilled to terminate vyāpāda (aversion), etc.

- It is essential that all meditations be practised, otherwise it is difficult to suppress the hindrances. Important and essential is mettā bhāvanā (cultivation of loving-kindness). Mettā practice is to eradicate lobha, dosa, moha (greed, hatred, delusion) and to wish the same for others as well – to make an effort to do so!'

- 'Ownership is suffering, even the smallest thing'. Once, a dāyaka (supporter) gave him a plastic rope to hang His robes. One morning, before going piṇḍapāta, he washed his robes, hanging them on the plastic rope and went out. When he had returned, the robes were on the ground. Somebody had stolen the plastic rope! He often spoke of the power of Mettā-ceto-vimutti (release of mind through loving-kindness). Another oft-spoken of topic was the removal of asmimāna (conceit 'I am').

As far as I remember, he often quoted from the Majjhima Nikāya, Saṁyutta Nikāya and Aṅguttara Nikāya. He emphasised several times to study Saṁyutta No. 35 (Saḷāyatana Saṁyutta). Regarding ānāpānasati, he advised to study Majjhima Nikāya 107, 118 & 125 and Saṁyutta 5, 22 & 35. When he referred to the content of the suttas he always said: 'It is from this or that particular sutta', thereby it is not his wisdom, but that of the Enlightened Ones. He displayed this humility and great respect for the Tathāgata: 'Many current bhikkhus write books and articles using their name and indicating it is their

knowledge. Many books have even been written: 'The satipaṭṭhāna by so and so' when it is the Exalted One's satipaṭṭhāna. Hasn't all the Dhamma necessary for Nibbāna been lucidly set out by the Great Being in detail and succinctly? Is it necessary for anyone else to explain?'

In my observation, Ven. Ñāṇavimala Thero confined himself only to the Sutta Piṭaka explanations. He never encouraged the distribution of other writings in the ancient exposition of the Abhidhamma, Visuddhimagga, etc. I may be wrong in this.

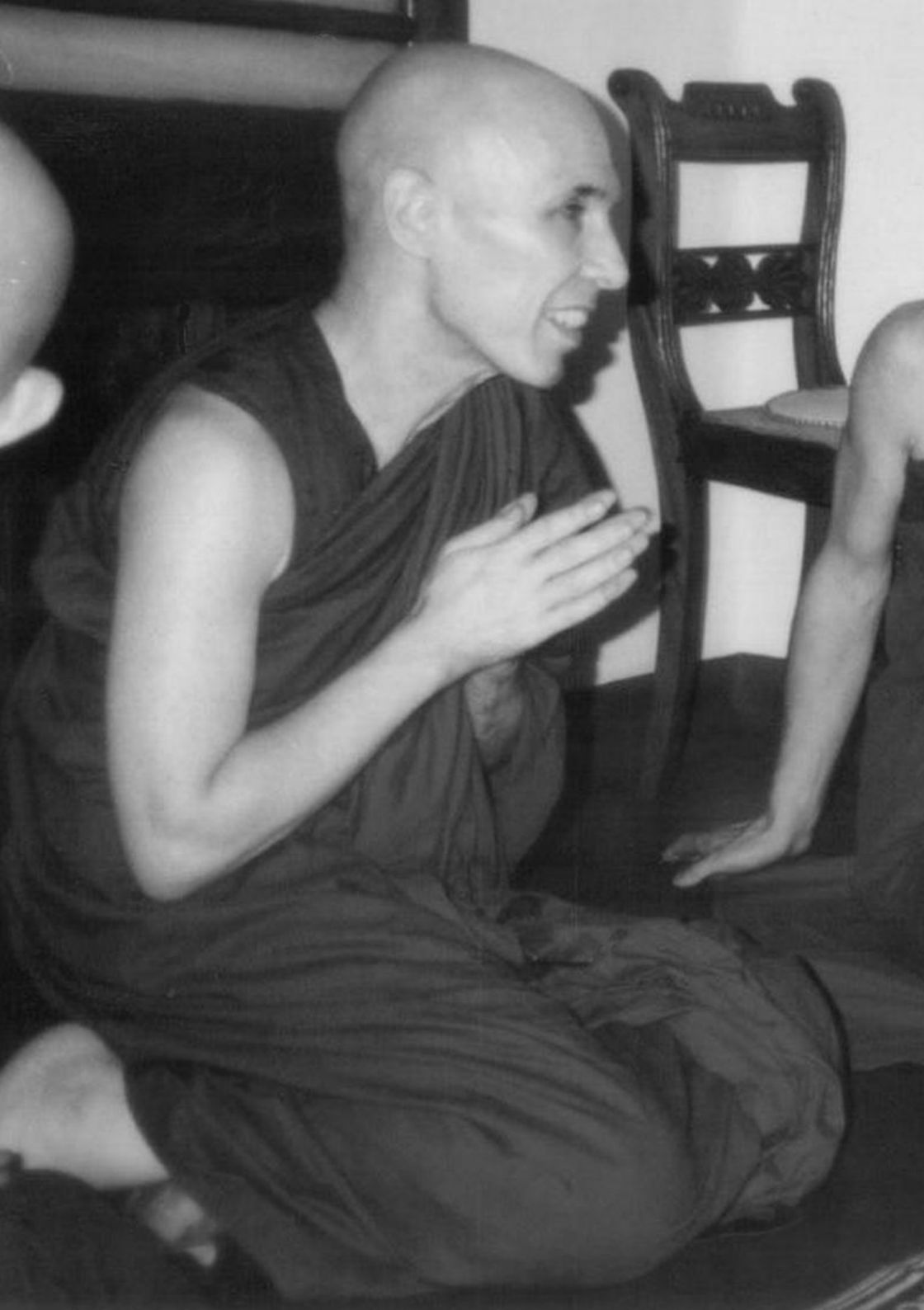
The Most Venerable Ñāṇavimala exuded mettā and sincere affection to all his followers, as a real father would. Actually, he cared more for us than our real fathers (all Perfected Beings do because this caring is based on anattā realisation and not on self-interest). When he passed away, it was a devastating sorrow – more than the passing away of our parents.

I miss him still – his lovely guidance, his peace, his genuine care and concern for us. Unfortunately, during the last couple of years of his life, we were not permitted to see him or mix with him. The bhikkhu looking after him thought that, for his benefit, he should not be disturbed. Many devotees and forest monks who sought his guidance, thus suffered tremendous loss by being unable to see or contact him.

His closest bhikkhu disciples were Bhante Ñāṇāloka and Bhante Upasama. Amongst his lay disciples were Brindley Ratwatte (later Bhante Siddhartha), Mrs Damayanthi Ratwatte, Sylvia Gunatilleke,

Janaki & Andy De Silva, Nirmal Sonnadara, Kusuma Abeysinghe, Komi Mendis, Sanath, myself and numerous others I did not know.

I ask forgiveness of the Great Bhikkhu and True Son of the Tathāgata, the Most Venerable Ñāṇavimala Thero for any misconceptions or misrepresentation in my words, and also of the readers if I have caused them any sort of unhappiness.



# A Mahākassapa for Our Time

***Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi***

It has often struck me that certain Buddhist monks I have known bear an uncanny resemblance to great disciples of the Buddha, at least in so far as we know them through the texts. This has raised in my mind the intriguing question whether the great disciples represent human archetypes, fixed molds that shape human character and behaviour, or whether, to the contrary, Buddhist monks tend to model themselves on their great predecessors. I have no way to answer my question with any certainty, but I believe the correspondence I have noted is real and not merely a figment of my imagination.

In terms of such correspondences, there is no doubt at all which of the great disciples the late Ven. Ñāṇavimala represents. Ven. K. Ñāṇananda (author of *Concept and Reality*, *The Magic of the Mind,* and other works) expressed the fact most succinctly one day when I met him in Colombo. He said: 'If you want to get a sermon from Mahākassapa, go see Ven. Ñāṇavimala.' The austere deportment, the ascetic bent of character, the firm self-assurance, the individualistic mode of practice: all these traits of Ven. Ñāṇavimala are reminiscent of Mahākassapa. And though we have, of course, no portraits of the great elder, I could not help noting the resemblance in physical stature and facial features between Ñāṇavimala and Mahākassapa as he is depicted in Chinese Buddhist statuary. They even share the same penetrating eyes, the broad forehead, and the large ears.

*Previous Page: Ven. Bodhi, Vajirarama, 1990s*

My relationship with Ven. Ñāṇavimala goes back almost forty years, to my first year as a monk in Sri Lanka. In June 1973, just a few weeks after my higher ordination, my teacher, Ven. Balangoda Ānanda Maitreya, brought me to the Kanduboda Meditation Centre for a course in vipassanā (insight) meditation. At the time, another American monk, a sāmaṇera (novice monk) named Samita, was living at Kanduboda. When I arrived he was in Colombo taking medical treatment but he returned to the center a few days after I started my retreat. One day after the mid-day meal he came to see me and we struck up a conversation. He told me that he had recently met Ven. Ñāṇavimala in the General Hospital in Colombo and had been deeply impressed, even awed, by this encounter. I had heard earlier of Ven. Ñāṇavimala from another German monk but was led to believe that, because of his itinerant life style, it was almost impossible to meet him in person. Now that door was about to open.

As a result of his encounter with Ven. Ñāṇavimala, Samita said, he had lost faith in the type of vipassanā meditation that was taught at Kanduboda, the dry insight practice stemming from the Burmese meditation master Mahāsi Sayadaw, under whom the Kanduboda meditation master, Ven. Sumathipāla, had trained in the 1950s. Samita told me that Ven. Ñāṇavimala had claimed that jhāna (meditative absorption) is necessary as a basis for vipassanā and that there can be no genuine insight not rooted in the jhānas. Since I was just beginning to read the Nikāyas in Pāli, and had been struck by the role that the jhānas played in the 'gradual training' sequence of the Majjhima Nikāya, I felt this report conveyed an important point.

Samita said that he intended to return to Colombo the next day to meet Ven. Ñāṇavimala again and invited me to come along. Impressed by what I heard, I thought I shouldn't let this opportunity slip by. Thus I decided to join him, even though this meant short-circuiting my meditation retreat at Kanduboda. We met Ven. Ñāṇavimala at the Colombo Hospital. Since he was about to be discharged, we did not speak much at this first meeting. He told us that he intended to spend a few days in Colombo, at Vajirarama Monastery, before setting out once again on his wandering. So the two of us, Samita and I, went to Vajirarama, where we again met Ven. Ñāṇavimala, perhaps the same evening or the next day. This time I could speak to him privately and at greater length.

At this meeting, in so far as I remember, he did not speak in any detail of meditation techniques or higher stages of attainment. He seemed to have an acute ability to assess a person's character and station after just a brief exchange of words, and he would adjust his Dhamma talk to meet the other person in precisely the way that best fit the other person's needs. Thus, after a few opening remarks, he spoke to me about the issues he thought were essential for a newly ordained monk to understand. He summed up the points he was about to cover under the general rubric of 'the work that has to be done.'

In this first talk with me he emphasized that the Buddhist training is a gradual path, which one has to traverse in stages, and he said that it's crucial to lay a solid foundation at each preliminary stage before attempting to scale the next stage. During his many years in robes he

must have seen dozens of Westerners come to Sri Lanka, ordain as monks, and rush off to attain arahantship (full liberation) on a fast-track schedule, only to wind up back in civilian clothes, with a plane ticket to their home country, before their first year as a monk was over. He might have had this in mind when he warned me not to be in a hurry to reach higher stages before mastering the lower, simpler, more elementary ones.

He stressed the importance of reading the Vinaya (monastic disciplinary code), of scrupulously observing the precepts, of daily self-examination, of studying the suttas (discourses), and of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the Dhamma based on the Nikāyas. He avoided speaking about philosophical issues, like the meaning of non-self or dependent origination, for he gave priority to practice over theory. He, no doubt, believed that proper understanding of these matters could only be acquired by those who had reached some level of maturity in the practice. He must have thought that for a relative newcomer to turn these teachings into topics of discussion and debate risked digression into the labyrinth of conceptual proliferation (papañca).

He spoke of the practice as a solitary journey, which we should be prepared to walk alone, without dependence on others. And he stressed the need to find delight in seclusion, to be content with simple requisites, and to establish solid right view and right motivation. He probably also spoke of the importance of serving one's teacher, whether or not one actually receives instructions from him, simply to fulfill the Vinaya requirement that one live under the guidance of

one's teacher for five years. This was a theme I heard him dwell on through the years whenever he spoke to other newly ordained Western monks.

I don't recall whether he gave any specific instructions about meditation. However, since in later talks he emphasized the importance of the jhānas, it is quite possible that in our first conversation he also brought up this topic. I do not recall him specifically criticizing the modern dry insight system of meditation, but his emphasis on the role of the jhānas might have implied a criticism of systems of meditation that devalue them.

During this same stay at Vajirarama, I also met Ven. Kheminda Thera, a senior Sri Lankan monk whom Ven. Ñāṇavimala respected for his scholarship and dedication to practice. In my talk with him, Ven. Kheminda confirmed the value of the suttas. Upholding the kind of 'suttanta fundamentalism' that prevailed at Vajirarama in those days, he said that one should only accept the commentaries when they are in accord with the suttas (as if a newly ordained American monk would be capable of making such nice distinctions). He certainly stressed the importance of the jhānas and spoke dismissively of the Burmese school of dry insight meditation as an aberration.

Ven. Kheminda showed me the records of an extended debate that he had had with a learned Burmese sayadaw, a teacher in the dry insight school of meditation. Their debate was published in the pages of the Sri Lanka-based magazine World Buddhism in the late 1960s or early 1970s. He told me that he wanted to extract his contributions to this

debate and weave them together into a single booklet, but poor health had prevented him from fulfilling this wish. I offered to do the work for him and spent much of my first rains retreat cutting out the articles, editing them, and linking them together to create a booklet that was privately published under the title The Way of Buddhist Meditation. Since my teacher, Ven. Ānanda Maitreya, was an advocate of the Burmese system of insight meditation, I did not want my name mentioned as the editor.

Subsequently, as my knowledge of the suttas developed and I acquired a broader perspective on the range of possibilities in the Buddha's path, I came to question this insistence on the necessity for jhāna as a foundation for insight. In my current understanding, it is certainly possible to attain the first two stages of realization — stream-entry and once-returning — on the basis of insight without a foundation of jhāna. I also came to see the whole subject of meditation as involving complexities that cannot be resolved simply by reciting sutta and verse. I now understand the jhānas to take on a crucial role, from the suttanta perspective, in making the transition from the second to the third stages of realization, that is, in moving from once-returner to non-returner. I also don't discount the possibility, attested to in the commentarial literature of several Buddhist schools, that even arahantship can be won by means of the 'dry wisdom' approach without reliance on the jhānas. In these early days, however, it was the views of Ven. Kheminda and Ven. Ñāṇavimala that most strongly shaped my understanding of meditation.

Over the following years I met Ven. Ñāṇavimala numerous times, usually at Vajirarama, and my recollection of his teaching is thus a collage of talks he gave on different occasions. Sometimes I spoke to him privately, sometimes along with other monks. Whenever we met one to one, after I paid respects, he would always begin the conversation by asking, 'How are you getting on?' This was not just a polite inquiry but a loaded question intended to elicit from me a disclosure of my state of development, which would open the way to a discourse on practice. For Ven. Ñāṇavimala, the Buddhist training was always something to be done, a matter of 'getting on.'

Over time, as I met him on successive occasions, he gradually introduced more explicit teachings on meditation, and there emerged from his talks a clearer picture of his methodology. He stressed that in the early stages of practice one should focus on tackling the two major hindrances, sensual craving and ill will. The remedy he prescribed for the first (following the suttas) is the perception of the impurity of the body (asubhasaññā); the remedy for the second, loving-kindness (mettā). He especially praised loving-kindness and spoke about how it can lead to higher and higher states of purification. Though in his personal cultivation he apparently made much use of mindfulness of breathing, he seemed to regard the breath meditation as a more advanced practice that could only unfold its potential when the groundwork had been prepared by the meditations on bodily impurity and loving-kindness.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a hip injury that he had incurred years earlier re-emerged and caused him great pain when walking

long distances. This made it hard for him to continue his wandering and he was therefore compelled to spend long periods at Vajirarama. Here he became much more accessible, not only to other monks, but to lay people living in and around Colombo. To protect his seclusion, he posted a notice on the door of his room stating that he would see visitors only between certain hours (I think between 6 and 8 pm, but my memory of the hours is hazy). It was not unusual to see people waiting outside his room to meet him. They would come either as individuals, as couples, or in small family groups, seeking to tap his wisdom and blessings. I usually stayed in a room close to his, where I could hear his resonant voice rising and falling in a steady, inspiring rhythm for hours. During the day, however, from early morning till evening, the door of his room would be shut and he would emerge only to admit the supporters bringing his meal.

My own relationship with Ven. Ñāṇavimala was not one of unmixed adulation or emulation. Certainly I had enormous respect for him and usually found his advice immensely useful. But not always. Temperamentally, we were far apart. From my point of view, he displayed a certain Teutonic sternness that did not mesh well with my own softer disposition and tolerant cultural background. His attitudes sometimes seemed to me more reminiscent of Western theistic religion than the gentle warmth that I saw embodied in many of the Sri Lankan monks I have known.

Taking a broad overview of the early Buddhist Saṅgha, I can see two major paradigms of monastic life taking shape in the Buddha's time and continuing down the centuries to the present. One was the model

of the solitary forest ascetic, which was perhaps derived from older forms of Indian spirituality preceding the advent of the Buddha. This ideal is reflected in Buddhist literature in the image of the paccekabuddha (solitary Buddha), who attains enlightenment without a teacher and then makes no effort to enlighten others. Mahākassapa, it seems, continued this heritage under a Buddhist imprint. The other model was that set by the Buddha himself, who gained enlightenment, taught others, created a community of disciples, and divided time between enjoying the bliss of seclusion and guiding others. This altruistic spirit seems to have been a distinctive contribution of the Buddha to Indian spirituality. According to tradition, it stemmed from his great compassion and his resolve over many past lives to deliver sentient beings from suffering. In the Saṅgha, Sāriputta and Ānanda may be seen as the ones who, after the Buddha himself, best exemplify this ideal. Both were able to combine a meditative life with dedicated service to the Dhamma and the task of teaching both fellow monastics and lay people.

I see Ven. Ñāṇavimala, especially during the early years of my acquaintance with him, as fitting into the former of these two models. In his teachings to Western monks, he placed an almost exclusive emphasis on personal development, discouraging involvement with others and engagement even in activities intended to promote the Dhamma. He sometimes expressed views that I thought were excessively pessimistic. For instance, he would say that there is no point in writing about the Dhamma since there are already enough materials available for those with sufficient interest, and no point in distributing literature on the Dhamma since few people have vision

clear enough to accept the teachings. While the amount of literature available on Buddhism today may indeed be excessive, I do believe that the efforts of organizations like the Buddhist Publication Society, the Pali Text Society, and now (via the internet) various Buddhist websites have contributed enormously to the spread of the Dhamma in ways that Ven. Ñāṇavimala had trouble grasping.

As the doctrine of impermanence implies, people do not have fixed and unvarying characters but can change over time, and this seemed to occur with Ven. Ñāṇavimala as well. Despite his emphasis on the solitary life, he was gifted with a unique eloquence and self-assurance that drove the teachings deep into the hearts of those who approached him for guidance. In his later years he came to share the teachings abundantly with others, and this engagement seemed to soften the hard stance that he had often displayed in earlier years. In the late 1990s I encountered Ven. Ñāṇavimala only infrequently, since I was living in Kandy in the Central Province and he was at Parappaduwa Island, deep in the south. But occasionally our paths would cross when we both had reason to come to Colombo. At the last meetings that I had with him, I could not help but notice changes in Ven. Ñāṇavimala's perspectives. He spoke more appreciatively of the work of the Buddhist Publication Society and showed a more positive attitude toward the efforts others were making to promote the Dhamma, especially among people in the West. He was also more appreciative of the efforts that I had put into the translation of Buddhist texts, a commitment of mine which, in earlier years, he seemed to regard as a distraction from the 'real work' of a monk. I

think he would also have admired the efforts of Western monks to establish Buddhist monasteries in Western countries.

Ven. Ñāṇavimala said nothing about any changes in his attitudes and he may well have believed he was being consistent all along. I believe, though, that the evolution in his thinking was real. I would attribute the change largely to two factors. One was his long period of confinement at Vajirarama in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This brought him into more frequent contact with lay people, which may have awakened in him stronger feelings of sympathy with their plight and respect for their attempts to apply the Dhamma to their daily lives. The other was his practice of loving-kindness meditation. Though this had been one of his staple practices for decades, perhaps in combination with his more extensive personal contacts it precipitated an interior change. However, while these explanations are merely speculative, I am confident that my perception of a softening in him was accurate.

There is a tendency among the admirers of Ven. Ñāṇavimala to regard him as an exclusive model of the ideal Buddhist monk. I look at him in a different light. I believe that the diversity that we can see among the Buddha's own great disciples represents different modes in which Buddhist spirituality can be embodied. From this angle, the great disciples can be seen as ideals for those of later generations to emulate. The Buddha himself held up Sāriputta and Moggallāna as the foremost models, the one representing the epitome of wisdom, the other of psychic powers. But other disciples represented excellence in other fields: in learning, in expository skills, in monastic discipline, in

devotion to the training, in meditation, in recollection of past lives, and so forth. Each is worthy of respect for the virtuous qualities that he or she manifests, and this respect should be extended to Buddhists of the present age who, though far from perfect, sustain the heritage of the Dhamma.

Thus it would be a mistake, I feel, to interpret the points stressed by Ven. Ñāṇavimala as constituting an exclusive model of the ideal monastic practitioner. In my view, other ideals are possible, and those who pursue them should not be denigrated by comparison with the more solitary and ascetic model that the German elder exemplified. However, at a time when examples of strict renunciation have become so rare in the Saṅgha, a person like Ven. Ñāṇavimala certainly stands out as a bright star in the firmament of the teaching. Though he never sought renown or publicity in any form, the worthy example he provided has won veneration and admiration from many, both from those who knew him personally and those who have learned about him by word of mouth.

# Spending Time with Venerable Ñāṇavimala

***Ven. Hiriko***

I believe it was 1997 when I went for the first time to the Island Hermitage and met Venerable Ñāṇavimala. His attendant at the time was a monk called Vappa, who was from the Netherlands, I think Vappa was getting ready to leave the Island and move to an Australian monastery to continue his practice there. Soon after I arrived at the Island, he took me to Venerable Ñāṇavimala's kuṭi (hut) where I paid my respects.

I was quite impressed with the Venerable's bearing and the quiet holiness that was radiating from him. His room was almost empty – no books, no extra clothes, not even a pair of sandals – he walked barefoot. He was quite skinny and walked with some difficulty since one of his hips wasn't in very good shape. He rarely smiled.

As I introduced myself he expressed his surprise that even though I had been in robes for some years I wasn't ordained as a bhikkhu (monk), but as a sāmaṇera (novice monk) and he encouraged me to take bhikkhu ordination soon. He gave some brief instructions about the life of a monk: that one should cut one's connection with one's family, lay-friends and one's old country. Then one should stay near one's preceptor or teacher without going here and there for the first five years at least, and even more, if one doesn't feel ready to live independently. Then one should study and memorise the important

*Previous Page: Outside Vajirarama, On Almsround, 1990s*

passages from the Pāli suttas (discourses) and Vinaya (monastic discipline). He didn't fully endorse the Abhidhamma books.

He praised the gradual training and recommended me to practice loving-kindness (mettā bhāvanā) as a foundation for a more advanced practice since it gladdens the mind and makes it vast and peaceful and happy. Then one should proceed to breathing meditation (ānāpānasati) and work towards developing absorption (jhāna). He praised the jhānas most highly, and considered them the foundation for insight. When told that some Burmese and Thai teachers don't emphasize jhānas he would reply with: 'Well, why then would Lord Buddha so many times teach about them in the suttas?'

As Ven. Vappa left the Island soon after my arrival there, and there were no other older monks keen on taking on his position as the Mahāthera's attendant, I gladly accepted the invitation of Ven. Rakkhita, the abbot at the time, to attend on him. I started going to Ven. Ñāṇavimala's kuṭi a few times a day, bringing him his meal (he ate once a day), afternoon tea (he drank tea, but totally refused black coffee, considering it harmful for practice), sweeping his kuṭi and occasionally helping him to wash his robes and as he got weaker, even helping to bathe him.

Venerable was around 84 years old at the time I met him. He even joked, saying: 'Lord Buddha lived till 80. I am already 84, it's not necessary for me to live longer than that.' But he lived on, and even though he didn't like it, he was once taken to a hospital in Colombo to remove a cataract from his eye. Ven. Mettāvihārī and I accompanied

him. I remember him telling us ‘I don’t need this surgery. After all, I’ve seen enough of this world. What more do I need to see?’ But a supporter who arranged the operation believed that the Venerable would really like to read books again. Thus, the operation was performed and his sight did get better. Nevertheless, he never read anything. He didn’t have any desire (or need) to read. As a young monk he memorised most of the important passages in Pāli and English, and he refused to study after that. Occasionally he would look at a small notebook with the passages, but only when he wasn’t sure about a quotation he wanted to share.

Interestingly, he refused to speak German even when people spoke German to him. He said it reminded him of his old country. At that time he had lived in Sri Lanka for over 40 years. He even became a Sri Lankan citizen, or at least, on his last visit to the Immigration Office in Colombo to renew his visa, the officer took away his German passport and promised to issue a Sri Lankan passport (even though it may not have happened since no one has seen that passport). The officer told him: ‘Hāmuduruvo (monk), you are too old, no need to come here again to renew your visa. It’s taken care of, you are a citizen of Sri Lanka, I’ll send you the passport.’ So Ven. Ñāṇavimala stopped going to the Immigration Office after that. I heard this story from some older monks.

He told me once about a woman, his adopted mother, who took care of him when he was a child in Germany. She didn’t have children of her own and was quite attached to him. During his first ten or so years in Sri Lanka, he would receive letters from her every once in a while.

But he wouldn't even read them at first. He would put them in a drawer, wait for some time, and only then open them. 'There would usually be some issue or other that she would ask me about,' he told me, as he was instructing me how to stay unattached to my own family, 'but by the time I would actually open the letter, it would be unnecessary to write back. By that time the issue in question would have been already solved, so I never wrote a single letter to her or to anyone since I became a bhikkhu,' he explained. I was never very good at following that instruction, I must admit.

As for the teachings that one could find in the texts, he often said: 'Go and look for that passage, it's in that sutta. It's from the Buddha who is the supreme teacher, so learn from him, it's the best. I can't say it better than him.' In that way he encouraged me to study the suttas. He was a compassionate man, but it was 'arahat's compassion' (detached compassion). He stayed with the Dhamma, and only talked the Dhamma.

Venerable Ñāṇavimala spent many years walking from one end of Sri Lanka to the other. He carried all his possessions with him. It wasn't much, and the begging bowl isn't that heavy, but if you carry it day after day always on one side, the right side (as is necessary because of the style of the Theravāda robe), then the spine can slowly bend to the opposite side – and that's what happened to him. So walking became difficult, and he returned to Polgasduwa after many years of doing his cārikā (walking tours).

Once, I asked him if during these wanderings anyone has ever stolen anything from him. He thought hard and said with a smile: 'Yes, once I arrived late in the town of Matara, and decided to sleep at the railway station. When I got up in the morning to leave, I realised that my bag had been opened. The thief had stolen the rope I would carry and spread between two trees to dry my robes after I wash them. I am sure the thief must have been bitterly disappointed that the bag didn't have anything better to take away but a single old rope.'

On one cārikā, the Venerable was walking through a forest, one of the bigger National parks, perhaps Yāla. 'There were not many villages there,' he said, 'and these villages were very poor. On top of that, I would arrive unannounced and so nobody would have any food to give me. Two days went without receiving any food, and on the third morning I was really hungry. But I was still deep inside the National Park and I didn't expect that I'd receive any food from the villagers even if I encountered any. Early that morning I arrived in a small village and as I was walking through it an elderly lady came from her house with a pot in her hands. She came towards me and made an añjali (reverential salutation). Then as I opened my bowl, she put the food inside. The food she offered was of excellent quality, so I was quite surprised. It looked as if she knew that I was coming and she had the food prepared and was waiting for me. So after I chanted a blessing, I looked at her and against my custom of not engaging in conversation during piṇḍapāta, I asked her about it. She answered 'Venerable Sir, last night as I was offering flowers and praying in front of my altar a devatā (celestial being) appeared to me. He told me to get up early tomorrow morning and prepare the best food. He said

that a bhikkhu is on his way and will pass through our village and that I should offer it to him to get some merit. So when I saw you coming I was already prepared and very happy because I already knew that you will come.' I heard this from the Venerable's own mouth, I don't remember the reason he told me, but there isn't any reason to doubt that it really happened.

During his wanderings in Sri Lanka Ven. Ñāṇavimala often slept in forests or tea plantations if he was unable to find a suitable temple for that day. One of the temples of the forest tradition that he was quite fond of, and mentioned a number of times, was Meetirigala. He was also on very friendly terms with the Ven. Abbot of Meetirigala. But he didn't choose to stay there for any longer period of time because, as he said, there is a danger of getting attached to the place, to always having nice food, and quiet.

Regarding quietness of mind and deep concentration, here comes a warning. Even though Ven. Ñāṇavimala praised and commended jhānas, he related this story to me as a warning of the 'wrong jhāna trap': 'I stopped in Meetirigala and spent a few days there,' he said, 'they gave me a nice kuṭi to stay in. In the evening I sat in meditation and the practice went smoothly so I decided not to get up. But then, after what could have been a few hours, I heard the temple bell ringing and opened my eyes. The temple bell rings there only for the meals so I felt strange. I was sure it was still evening. In fact the light outside my window was something in between daylight and night so I felt it was dusk. Then I listened carefully to the singing of birds. They sing somewhat differently in the evening and at dawn, at the break of

the day. Well, after a while I realized it wasn't dusk, it was dawn. So, it seemed I spent the whole night sitting in meditation without even realising that all those hours had slipped by. And here is the real problem. Even though I had a pleasant abiding (he used these words often when talking about jhānas: pleasant abiding), I wasted all that time. I wasn't fully aware of the passage of the time. In other words, I felt I wasn't sleeping but I nevertheless wasted all these hours. Just feeling good, but not investigating body, feeling, mind and mind states. So one should be aware of the danger of concentration that is too deep.'

On another occasion, the Venerable told me how he meditated in a certain cave as it was very hot outside. Again he entered into deep concentration (samādhi), and as he came out of samādhi, and started moving, he realized there was something heavy lying on top of his hands. It was a coiled snake that he didn't even notice but that must have been lying there for some time. He quietly lowered it to the ground. The snake didn't do any harm to him.

Regarding animals, here is another story: While walking through a National park once he encountered a bear. He said: 'When I raised my head the bear was just a few metres away from me. We were both taken by surprise, and the bear looked like it was getting ready to attack. I lowered my gaze and started radiating mettā towards him. The next thing I knew was that when I lifted my gaze he was nowhere to be seen.' Again, if these two stories came to me from some of Ñāṇavimala admirers I would doubt them. But I heard them from him directly, and he wasn't a man who would make things up. It's just that

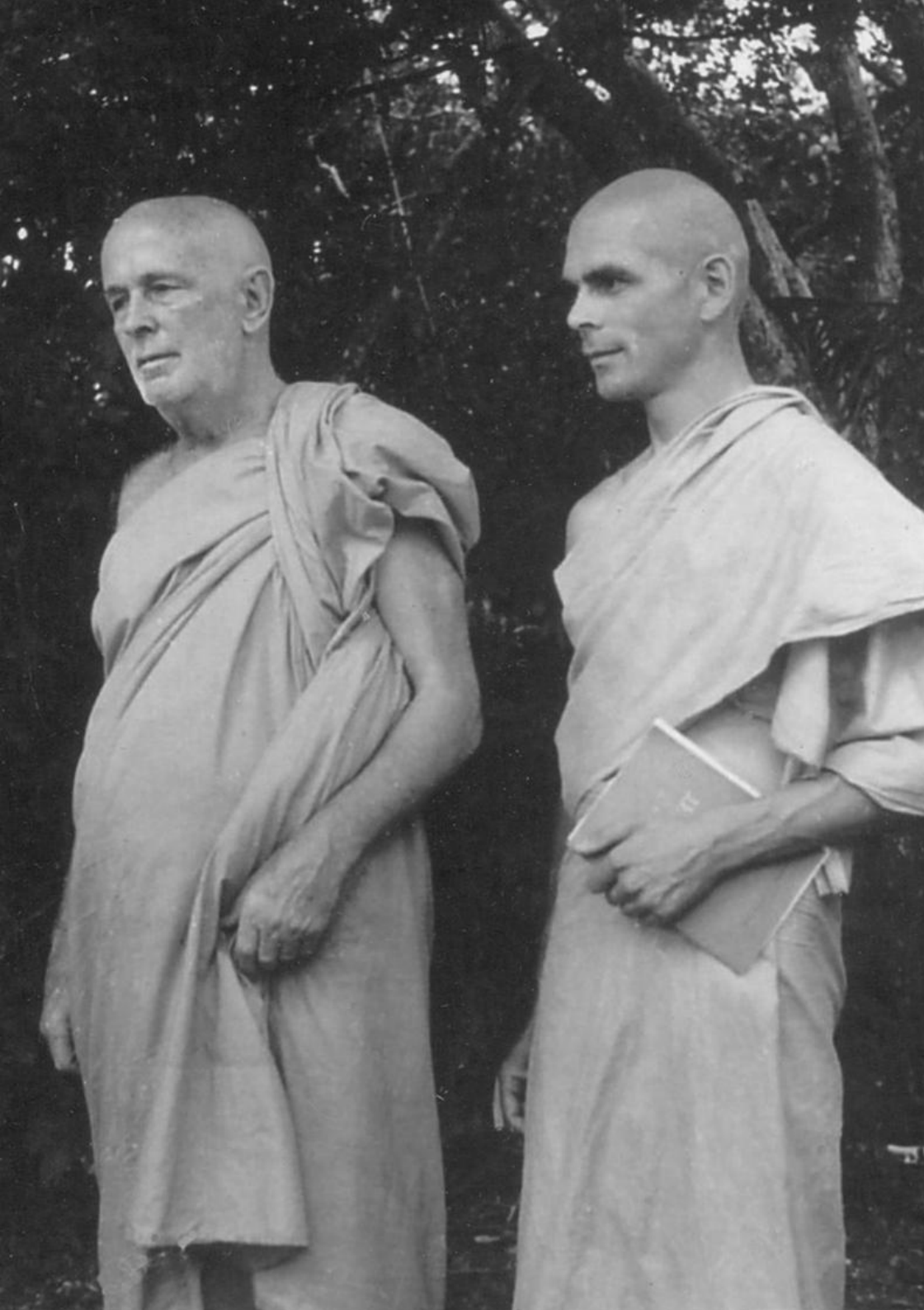
I spent considerable time with him during that year, and I asked him many questions, so on occasion he was in the mood to relate these stories.

Once in the evening, I entered his kuṭi, bringing him some tea. Ven. Ñāṇavimala was lying down in the lion's position on the concrete floor. I was a bit surprised to see him down there, but I assumed it was some practice he was doing, or else, since it was a hot day, he had moved from his bed to the cold floor to feel cooler. Well, I went around him in silence, put the tea on his table, and asked him whether I could do anything else for him. He said in a patient and kind way: 'Well you can pass me that tea, but first, would you please help me get up. It's not very comfortable to lie on the floor.' Ooops! I realized he ended up there against his will. As I was helping him to his feet, I asked, 'What happened Bhante?' Then he explained to me that he rose from his bed, tried to walk, lost consciousness, and fell down. His hip was injured in that fall, and he couldn't get up on his feet by himself. So he spent some three hours or so waiting for someone to show up and help him. I felt very sorry to hear that. After that event his walking became even more difficult.

On another occasion, I entered his kuṭi bringing him his daily meal. As I was passing him his bowl with food he smiled and told me that I had woke him up from a nap. He said he had just had a dream. 'What kind a dream was it, Bhante?' I asked curiously. 'Oh nothing special,' he said,' I was walking through a village, carrying a bowl, doing my piṇḍapāta, and then a laywoman approached me to offer some dāna. As I was getting ready to receive it, you entered the kuṭi, and I woke

up.' Interesting, I thought. His dreams weren't all that different from his real life – simple and pure.

*Next Page: Sāmaṇera Ñāṇavimala with Ven. Ñāṇatiloka, Island Hermitage, 1955*



# The Best Dhamma Talk I Ever Heard

***Ven. Ajahn Brahmavaṁso***

I only met Venerable Ñāṇavimala once, but the meeting left a lasting impression. Sometime around 1990, I was visiting Sri Lanka and staying at a monastery in Anderson Road, Nedimala. One afternoon, an English monk and I, together with our Australian attendant, decided to walk to Vajirarama to pay our respects to Venerable Piyadassi. We arrived hot and tired only to be told by Ven. Piyadassi to take a seat and he would arrange some tea. Little did I know that the great Mahāthera was to make the tea himself for us! I was stunned by such humility.

After some discussion with the Venerable, he mentioned that Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi was staying at Vajirarama, having just arrived back in Sri Lanka from the U.S. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi was another of my 'monk heroes' and I jumped at the opportunity to pay my respects and express my sincere gratitude to him for translating so many suttas (discourses) into readable English.

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi then mentioned that Ven. Kheminda was staying in the next room. Ven. Kheminda had written that excellent booklet on the importance of absorption (jhāna) and had, as a consequence, endured with admirable fortitude the unwarranted criticism from other less knowledgeable monks. I had admired him for many years and relished the occasion of bowing at his feet and expressing my

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support for his courage in standing up for the Dhamma taught by the Buddha.

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi then advised that we should pay our respects to another monk whom I had never heard of before, an ageing German monk called Ñāṇavimala. It was as if the Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi was saving the best treat for the last. I recall Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi saying that Ven. Ñāṇavimala doesn't speak very much so we should just enter the room, pay our respects and then leave. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi waited outside.

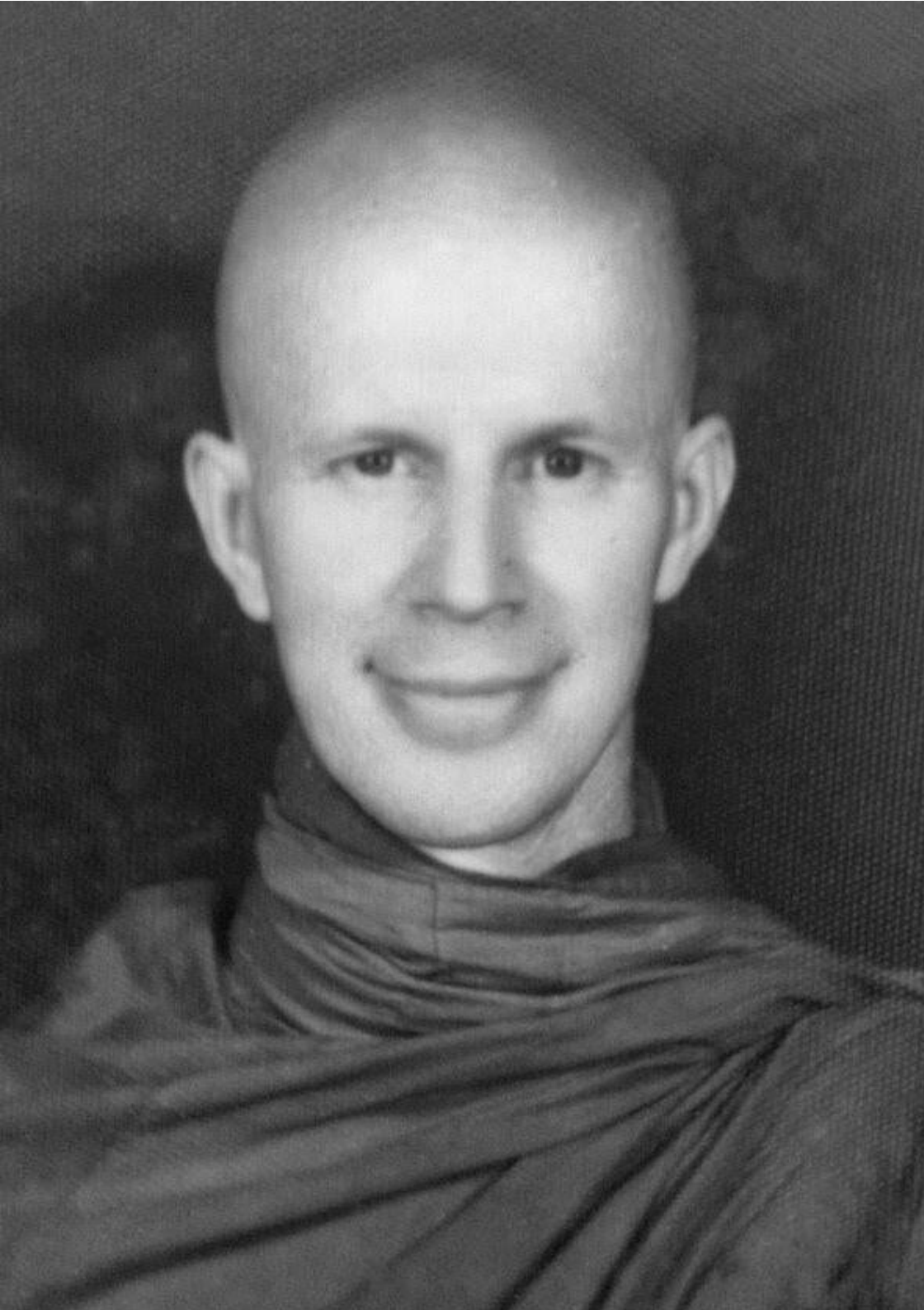
It was over an hour before we left that room. What happened inside remains with me today as the best Dhamma Talk that I have ever had the good karma (accumulated merit) to listen to! It was worth the whole journey from Australia to Colombo to experience. The Venerable Ñāṇavimala wove quotes from the suttas together with explanations from his own experience into such a symphony of Dhamma that I left not with stars in my eyes, but with more like Dhammacakka wheels in my eyes! They would call it 'Awesome' today.

I felt so sorry for the kind Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi. When we emerged he asked where we had been. When we replied that we had just heard a rip-roaring Dhamma Talk from Ven. Ñāṇavimala, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi lamented that Ven. Ñāṇavimala rarely if ever gives such talks and he had missed it!

I never had the good fortune to meet Ven. Ñāṇavimala again but that one chance meeting will never be forgotten. A photo of the Ven.

*Next Page: Relic Casket, Island Hermitage*

Ñāṇavimala hangs in our dānasālā (dining hall) in Perth alongside other great and inspiring monks.



# Recollections of Venerable Ñāṇavimala

***Ven. Bhikkhu Guttasīla***

*Rewritten transcript of an interview*

I was ordained at Wat Bowon, Bangkok in 1976 as a bhikkhu (monk) and in 1975 as a sāmaṇera (novice monk) at Wat Phleng Vipassana, also in Bangkok. In 1979, I was invited to participate, along with some other foreign monks, in a Dhamma seminar and pilgrimage to Sri Lanka. During this trip, we managed to visit Nissarana Vanaya at Meetirigala. There we met Ven. Katukurunde Ñāṇananda and the abbot, Ven. Mātara Śrī Ñāṇārāma. It was a very beautiful forest monastery and I could see that the Sri Lankan monks there were very dedicated to their meditation. But also, they were quite learned. What attracted me was the combination of sutta study with the meditation practice. I returned to Thailand and then in 1980, arranged to spend my fifth vassa in Sri Lanka. I had permission from my upajjhāya (preceptor), Somdet Ñāṇasaṁvara, the abbot of Wat Bowon to go to Sri Lanka. After the 1980 vassa at Island Hermitage, I got the opportunity to go to Nissarana Vanaya and that became the base for my stay in Sri Lanka for several years.

When we used to go to Colombo, we stayed at a study temple called Vajirarama. The abbot at that time was Ven. Nārada. It was still quite a beautiful place to stay in the suburb of Bambalapitiya as that area was not yet so commercialized. It was mainly just residential houses

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which made it easy for piṇḍapāta (almsround) practice. It was the seat of the Sri Dharmarakshita Nikāya (a sub sect of the Amarapura Nikāya), which was also the Nikāya that Island Hermitage belonged to. So monks at Island Hermitage had ordained through Vajirarama. This was also the place where Bhante Ñāṇavimala used to come whenever he stayed in Colombo.

I'd heard about Bhante Ñāṇavimala from some of the senior foreign monks in Sri Lanka such as Ven. Ñāṇaramita. In Sri Lanka, I had a lot of regard for foreign monks who were senior to myself. Sri Lanka was a place where we could still find this lineage of senior Western monks. Ven. Ñāṇapoṇika was still alive in Kandy. He must have been about 80 years old at that time. I think Ven. Ñāṇavimala was the most senior monk after Ven. Ñāṇapoṇika and he had quite a reputation. As young Western monks, we need senior monks to look up to, especially, senior Western monks.

Ven. Ñāṇavimala showed the more practical aspect of the monk's life. He lived a wandering life outside the vassa. Only during the vassa did he find a suitable place to stay. Apart from that, he had the reputation of only staying three nights in any particular place. As he was walking, then obviously, he would have stayed longer at places he liked. I understand there was one araññha at Polpitigama, Kurunegala where he liked to stay. Ven. Ñāṇavimala was a German monk, and he was very austere and spent his time on cārikā (walking tour). Because of his lifestyle and the different stories we heard about him, we were very impressed. This made him a good role model to look up to.

Ven. Ñāṇavimala, from what we heard of him had spent ten years continuously at Island Hermitage. I don't know if he did leave the island at that time. If he did, it was for only very short periods. Ven. Ñāṇavimala was very fortunate to have the company of Ven. Ñāṇamoli and some of the other very learned and inspiring monks from the Vajirarama tradition. These included Ven. Soma, who was a Tamil monk, and Ven. Kheminda who was a very close associate of Ven. Ñāṇavimala. Ven. Kheminda was someone that Ven. Ñāṇavimala looked up to and was very bright and healthy in those days at Vajirarama. Ven. Ñāṇavimala therefore had the company of some of these learned, very sincere, monks for ten years at Island Hermitage before he started his wandering career. Occasionally, he would return to Island Hermitage for visits.

I would have first met Ven. Ñāṇavimala when he called into Vajirarama on his walking tours in 1981 or 1982. He struck one as someone who was very self-contained. He had exceptional saṁvara (restraint) and he was extremely serious. By being restrained, I mean to say that he didn't enter into conversation easily or readily with those around him; the way he walked was very restrained – he wasn't looking here and there; he had very few possessions because he was walking and carrying everything with him. He only had his bowl and a carrying bag in which had his basic requisites – it was extremely light.

Every day he would go piṇḍapāta to the houses around Vajirarama in Bambalapitiya. There was one particular room where he tended to stay when he was at Vajirarama. It was quite a large room, self-contained with its own toilet and bathroom. When he entered the

room, you didn't see much of him as he tended to stay inside most of the time. But every day he would come out and he would have Dhamma discussion with Ven. Kheminda, either inside Ven. Kheminda's room or on the walkway outside the room.

If I was at Vajirarama, I would try to arrange to meet him. During introductions he would ask if you were a monk of more than five years, if you had freedom from nissaya (dependence on a teacher). For Ven. Ñāṇavimala this seemed to be one of the things that was important to him. He himself had spent his first ten years in Island Hermitage. Ven. Ñāṇavimala always took the position of being a teacher. It was never the situation of being a Dhamma discussion. Ven. Ñāṇavimala would be sitting in a chair and I would be sitting on the floor. There was always that big difference in vassa and seniority.

Ven. Ñāṇavimala had certain suttas from the Majjhima Nikāya which he liked very much – which he thought younger monks should study for training. For example the Gopaka Moggallāna Sutta (MN 108), a step by step training of a young monk – such things as the Dantabhūmi Sutta (MN 125), again a step by step training. Ven. Ñāṇavimala very much emphasised the need for good sīla (precepts), sense restraint, Pātimokkha (monastic code) rules, the need for sati-sampajañña (mindfulness and comprehension), the need to try to overcome the five hindrances and developing the four satipaṭṭhāna (applications of mindfulness).

He would talk more about the standardized gradual training in the discourses. Ven. Ñāṇavimala had a very strong, conservative,

traditional understanding towards Dhamma and sīla. Traditional here means the sutta base – that was his background. I am not sure how much he relied on the commentaries. Ven. Ñāṇavimala belonged to this small group of monks who believed that jhāna (meditative absorption) was necessary for progress in Dhamma – they were not very sympathetic towards the Mahāsi tradition. The Vajirarama Theras Soma, Kheminda and Kassapa took a really strong stand against the Mahāsi tradition. Whereas, Ven. Ñāṇapoṇika was part of the Vajirarama tradition, but was more a supporter of the Mahāsi tradition. Even though Ven. Ñāṇavimala joined in Dhamma discussion with Ven. Kheminda, I think he liked certain suttas (discourses) and was more limited or rigid in terms of what he based his practice upon.

However, the knowledge I had of Ven. Ñāṇavimala's actual practice, what he imparted to some of his Sinhalese disciples, was based on mindfulness and awareness of the six doorways. Of course, we can imagine when you are spending so much time walking on cārikā, it wouldn't be possible to practise deep samatha (tranquillity) meditation. The emphasis was on mindfulness in everything, so no matter what activity he participated in, to keep in mind the kammaṭṭhāna (meditation object), and also an emphasis on the six doorways.

I think he is the only monk who has walked around Sri Lanka a number of times, so in some areas he walked, like the Muslim or Tamil areas, it is quite likely he didn't get very much food at all on piṇḍapāta. But that would be insignificant for Ven. Ñāṇavimala, it would be just extra 'food' for practice. One of the tips we heard was that if piṇḍapāta in the village was not successful, he would sit down

some place where people could see what he was doing. That was actually a condition for people to go to bring a bit more food to supplement the piṇḍapāta.

I think he tended to stay in the village temples on walking tour and would return to those temples that were suitable. In his routine he would walk in the morning, which would include walking for piṇḍapāta, and then some time in the afternoon, if he'd found a suitable place such as a pansala (village temple), he would stop for the night. So, he would walk only ten kilometres a day. I think he didn't over walk. There is a tradition in Sri Lanka with the village temples that visiting monks can stay for three days. In many of the village temples, he probably would not like to stay any longer. I understand that when Ven. Ñāṇavimala, after arriving at the pansala and obtaining permission to stay and a room was given to him, then, basically he went inside the room and closed the door. I don't know if he would have even received black sweet tea from the pansala because he would have been concerned about breaking Vinaya (monastic discipline) if it was purchased by monks (rather than offered by supporters).

We must remember that Ven. Ñāṇavimala was walking in the '60's, '70's and '80's. I think the temples have become more worldly since then. Vajirarama back in the early eighties was still a very pleasant place to stay, even though it was right in the city. Now everything has become developed in the Galle Road area – there are so many cars and everything has changed so much. I think when Ven. Ñāṇavimala was doing his walking, the pansalas were more peaceful.

From what Ven. Mettāvihārī told me, Ven. Ñāṇavimala could speak Sinhala, but his thick German accent made it difficult to understand him. When Ven. Mettāvihārī was still a layperson, he invited Ven. Ñāṇavimala to their home and Ven. Mettāvihārī's Sri Lankan mother-in-law couldn't understand the Dhamma talk Ven. Ñāṇavimala gave in Sinhalese. His Sinhala was fairly basic, but also his pronunciation was very difficult to understand. From my understanding, Ven. Ñāṇavimala didn't like to get involved in conversations that were considered frivolous, thus his Sinhala was very basic – just sufficient to get around.

We heard various kinds of stories about Ven. Ñāṇavimala. For instance, he walked from Tissamaharama right through to Panama and Pottuvil on the other side (around 150km through difficult lands). He stayed in Kudumbigala Araññа at a time when there were no monks in residence and it was being looked after by Upāsaka Maitreya. There is a story about Ven. Ñāṇavimala staying in a cave there and how a bear came into the cave while he was sitting in meditation. But once the bear noticed him, it didn't do anything and turned around and went outside.

There is one story I heard where Ven. Ñāṇavimala was on the east coast on walking tour and was staying at a small Wathuruwila meditation forest monastery (belonging to the Siam Nikāya forest sect). He was staying in the sīmā (the building for official Saṅgha acts) and when he was away from the sīmā, the abbot had a look at Ven. Ñāṇavimala's possessions. The abbot found that everything Ven.

Ñāṇavimala had was old and used or broken – even a thief would not like to steal anything.

Another story was about how free Ven. Ñāṇavimala could actually live. Once, I was at Vajirarama and Alec Robertson, this very eminent lay Dhamma teacher, was visiting, as he often used to. He said at one time he was coming into Vajirarama and met Ven. Ñāṇavimala who was setting out on his trip. Alec Robertson asked Ven. Ñāṇavimala if he was leaving. Ven. Ñāṇavimala said yes. Then Alec Robertson asked 'Bhante, where are you going to go?' Ven. Ñāṇavimala said 'I decide when I get to the gate'. He hadn't even made a decision until he got to the gate of the monastery whether he would turn left or right.

Ven. Ñāṇavimala was a solitary monk. It was very hard to get close to him. I think, in the ten years that he stayed on Island Hermitage when Ven. Ñāṇamoli was still alive, he tended to isolate himself from the other monks. From what I understand, Ven. Ñāṇavimala had a very conservative attitude. I was coming from a later generation which was more open-minded. But Ven. Ñāṇavimala would have kept himself apart from the more 'hippy-ish' personalities, the more open liberal truth-seekers who came to Island Hermitage at that time – there must have been many. Ven. Ñāṇavimala was what we would call very 'straight' – kind of narrow in personality. There was a kind of severity, not wanting to waste his time, not wanting to be frivolous, not wanting to become involved in meaningless talk. So that's why he would have kept himself apart. He was so self-contained, he didn't need to talk to others and this made him a little bit unapproachable.

Something that happened to me slightly changed my attitude to Ven. Ñāṇavimala. In 1984, I decided to go back to New Zealand as my mother had a stroke and my father had a by-pass operation and pacemaker fitted. My parents were too old and sick to visit me in Sri Lanka. The last time I had seen them was in 1973 in Australia when we spent a couple of days together. I hadn't had a long meeting with my parents since 1970. I stayed in New Zealand till the end of 1984. I couldn't take New Zealand anymore, so decided to come back to Asia. I was in Thailand on the way back to Sri Lanka when I heard that my mother had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, so I decided to go back to New Zealand for the 1985 vassa also, as I wasn't sure how long my mother had to live she died toward the end of 1986. So after my mother died, I decided it was time to go back to Sri Lanka.

When I arrived in Sri Lanka, I stayed in Vajirarama at a time when Ven. Ñāṇavimala was resident. On piṇḍapāta that particular morning, as I was going down the street toward the main road there was an old beggar lady sitting in the door of a closed shop. She must have been well into her seventies and she showed a lot of faith toward me, with her hands in añjali (respectful salutation), as I walked past. On the piṇḍapāta, I received some food that was a little bit extra special. I passed the old lady on the way back and it crossed my mind that I wanted to give her a small portion of my piṇḍapāta food. I could hear someone walking behind me and this made me change my mind. Who knows, it could have been people who actually gave it to me? I thought I'd better not give food to this old lady even though I wanted to.

After going for piṇḍapāta, I went to see Ven. Ñāṇavimala. I explained to him how the last three years I was away from Sri Lanka and how I looked after my parents, etc., but I also explained I was able to keep my monk's precepts during that time. Bhante Ñāṇavimala gave a little bit of a Dhamma talk to me. I brought this question up about the old lady to Ven. Ñāṇavimala. He changed and became kind of stern and he spoke to me in a very hard way saying 'You went back to New Zealand just to indulge your senses, just to enjoy yourself, sāmaṇeras like you shouldn't go piṇḍapāta. You should just keep your mind on the meditation object and take your meals in the dining hall (dānasālā)'. I was not a sāmaṇera, but a bhikkhu and for me, this was just so severe and insensitive. He said, 'That's enough now, you can go'. So I paid respects and left. This is a monk I thought very highly of, a role model, someone to inspire one in one's monk life. I still saw him as a very wonderful monk, very sincere in his practice, but what this showed me was that he could be very insensitive.

Ven. Ñāṇavimala could be very conservative, very narrow and set in various ways. He couldn't understand how anyone could go back to the West. For him, anyone who went back to the West only went to enjoy himself. He couldn't appreciate how someone could have gone back to spend time with aged parents out of compassion and also to serve the Buddhist community. On another occasion I was present in Vajirarama when a Dutch monk went to see Ven. Ñāṇavimala. When Ven. Ñāṇavimala learned this monk had been back to the West, he severely admonished him about indulging in sensuality. Ven. Ñāṇavimala, we could see, had certain set views. This is what I mean about the rigidity and conservative attitudes in Ven. Ñāṇavimala's

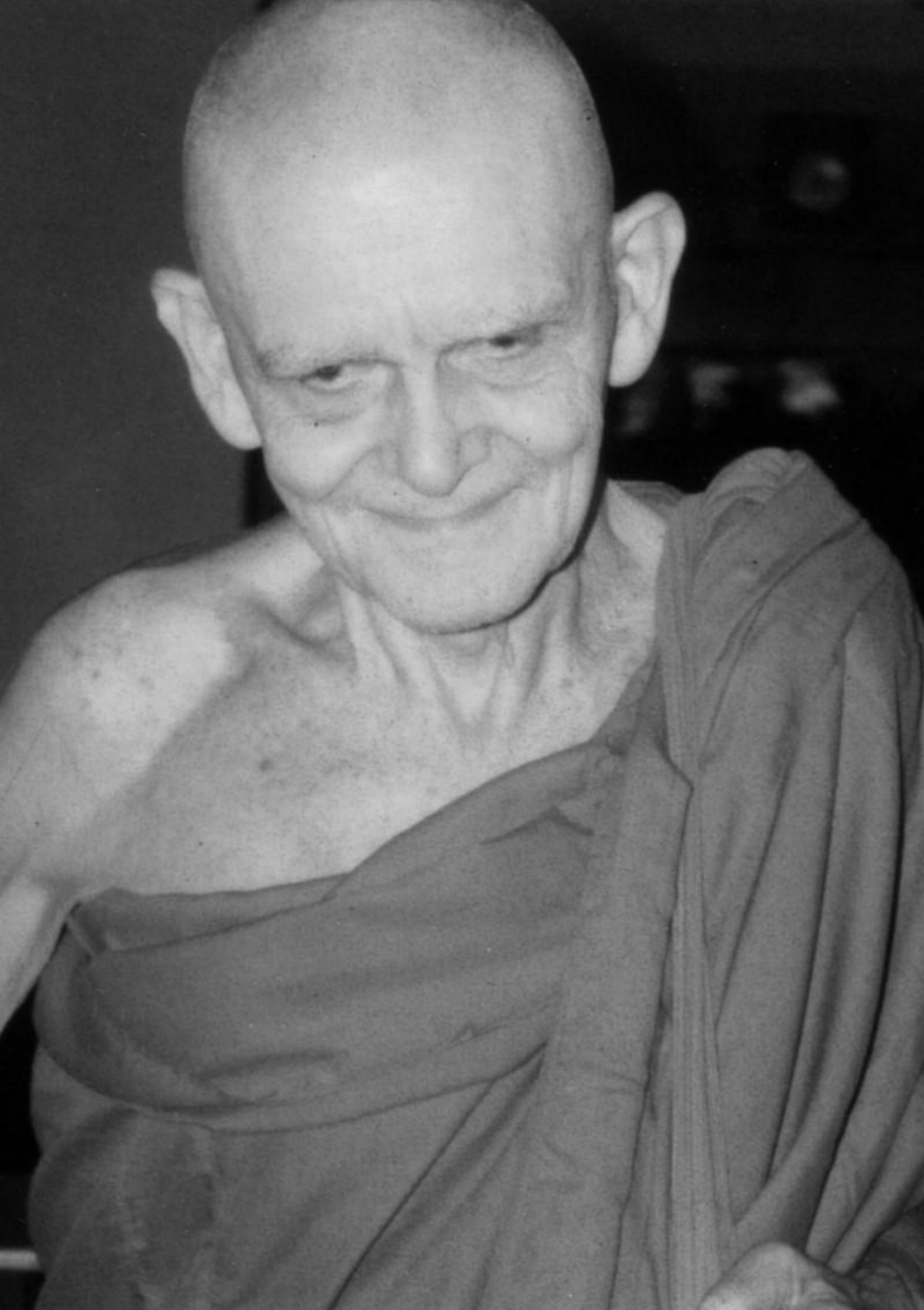
mind. I think another thing here is Ven. Ñāṇavimala's lack of ability to actually communicate with the other person. Ven. Ñāṇavimala was remote, it was almost like a person from a previous generation talking to one of a younger generation and the gap was just so wide.

I think Ven. Ñāṇavimala was a very sincere, upright, Western monk, so senior to us. Of the senior Western monks, Ven. Ñāṇavimala stood out as being very strict in terms of his Vinaya practice – very ascetic, having fewness of wishes, very restrained in every way. In his walking lifestyle and in other ways he embodied a number of austerities that was a very good role model for us.

Later on when Ven. Ñāṇavimala became infirm and had to be cared for, his attitude completely changed. I am not sure, but I think Ven. Ñāṇavimala's walking tours ended in the early 1990s. I can remember when staying at Vajirarama in the early 90s that Ven. Piyadassi had met Ven. Ñāṇavimala at a temple in Ratnapura. Ven. Ñāṇavimala was heading off for Colombo – he was unwell and was having difficulty walking. Ven. Piyadassi offered to take Ven. Ñāṇavimala to Colombo by car, but Ven. Ñāṇavimala refused and walked. We were expecting him to come to Vajirarama – walking from Ratnapura would take a few days. But then we'd heard that he'd actually walked to the vihāra (temple) in Colombo hospital where there is a monk from Vajirarama in residence. When he got to the hospital, he was in an extremely sick condition with complete fatigue and exhaustion and he may even have been put in the intensive care unit. Also, he was beginning to have extreme difficulty with his hips. Basically, he wore out his hips from

walking. A couple of years later, Ven. Ñāṇavimala spent some months at Vajirarama before permanently moving down to Island Hermitage.

I was staying in Vajirarama in the mid-nineties when Ven. Mettāvihārī was looking after Ven. Ñāṇavimala. At that time he had become so skinny, just like a bag of skin and bones. He could only take liquid foods. He was so sick that everyone thought he was going to die. Ven. Mettāvihārī used to help him walk one length of the room. This little bit of exercise was all he could accomplish. Even to turn in bed, he had to be assisted – he was just so weak. Ven. Mettāvihārī was very wonderful, the care he gave him during that time. When present, I was also helping a little bit. Ven. Ñāṇavimala's character completely changed, he was helpless. Here was this person who had a very bright mind which actually showed a lot of love and patience. This was very different from the Ven. Ñāṇavimala that I saw previously – self-contained, austere.



# Glimpses of Ven. Ñāṇavimala

***Ven. Ñāṇadīpa Thera***

Ñāṇavimala stayed in a kuṭi (hut) on Island Hermitage that that had originally been built for Ñāṇamoli. He kept strictly to his kuṭi, and one could see him outside only when he was sweeping, bathing or taking his single meal in the dānasālā (dining hall). Rare were the times when he would allow a visitor. I did not dare to approach him. But before I left in '68, the Sinhalese monk, Ñāṇasanta obtained permission for me to visit him. He asked me why I was leaving. I said that I had not yet fully decided to become a monk. He advised me not to go, for I might not again get such good conditions for ordaining as I was having now. However, he did not insist when I said that there always would be some place where I could get ordained. The talk he gave me I do not remember, but I felt deeply impressed.

During my stay with him as an upāsaka (layman) in '68 and as a sāmaṇera (novice monk) in '69, he was the only inspiring role model I had. What inspired me, however, was the sight of him rather than the Dhamma (teachings) he spoke. In those days he was very reserved and when he talked, it was always to emphasize the importance of the preliminary parts of the practice, which I found rather uninteresting. On a few occasions, however, he became very friendly. For instance, when I was getting ordained as a sāmaṇera (a simple ceremony done in the dānasālā), he got up from his seat and gently helped me put the robe on. Towards the end of the stay, he could more often be seen

*Previous Page: Ven. Ñāṇavimala, Vajirarama, 1990s*

outside the kuṭi, sometimes joining for breakfast and the evening recitation that ended with tea-drinking. Once, I even saw him have a swim in the lagoon, which I found rather surprising.

The last two or three weeks before leaving, he remained in the dānasālā (dining hall) after tea drinking in order to be taught Sinhalese by the chief monk, Ñāṇāloka. He got help for composing a mettā-kathā (talk on mettā meditation) so as to be able to give a small baṇa (sermon) to the people who helped him on his cārikās (walk tours). When he left, he was gone and no one knew to where. He left leaving a vacuum – no one anymore to be inspired by. Conditions gradually deteriorated and a few months later, I found it necessary to leave for Bundala, not heeding his advice to 'stay at least five years'.

The bear incident at Kudumbigala he told to me in '69. He was staying in a faraway cave. I was shown that cave later, it still had most of the ancient walls. At night, a bear came through the entrance, stood up on its hind legs, raising its front legs with the claws out and slowly approached him (anyone who has seen a bear with its claws open, knows what a terrifying sight that is). Ñāṇavimala started to recite the so-called Khandha-paritta (Group Protection), a chant to appease snakes, but it can be used for other animals too. The bear slowly drew back its claws, turned around and left. This incident dates back to his first cārikā ('67-'68). We came to know about Kudumbigala because of him.

Later on, Ñāṇavimala rarely (if ever) had a prolonged stay in the forest. As he said to another monk 'The forest is not my kamma'

(accumulation). I don't think he often stayed out in the open. That would only have been for lack of a suitable place. He preferred the closed room to an open forest. When walking, he kept to the beaten track. That was more convenient to his practice of sati-sampajañña (mindfulness and comprehension). To me, he once said: 'Why the forest?' For him, of course, it was not needed. But he failed to understand that it could be an important part in a monk's practice. (Note: in this respect he was unlike Mahākassapa who was a forest monk who kept resorting to the forest, even in his old age. In the Theragāthā his verses echo his delight for the forested hill far away from human habitation.)

Some people say that outside vassa he would not stay any more than three days in one place. This is not completely true. Occasionally, he would stay longer if he found a suitable place. At Sinharaja Aranya (Wathuruwila branch), I was told by the chief monk that he had spent a month in a kuṭi. He gave me the same kuṭi. That was in '70, my first cārikā. When passing through Tamil areas, he would sometimes stay with Christian priests. He said they treated him very well. He would sometimes talk to them about mettā and dāna (loving-kindness and generosity) and other things common to both religions. Beyond that he did not go, 'That is all I can say', he would say. However, when there was both a Christian and a Buddhist place, he would choose the Buddhist place though he was less well treated there. For, as he said, 'that is where I belong, dāyakas (supporters) have built it for Buddhist monks'.

When he was about sixty, he lost all his teeth. He simply stopped caring for them. They became rotten and fell out, one by one. Regarding this, he said to me, 'All the trouble I had in caring for my teeth, toothpaste, toothpowder and brushes, all that I am free from now.' He said he managed to chew an apple with his gums.

Once he was staying at Vajirarama in a room next to the common bathroom. I had gone to his room to pay respect when someone flushed the toilet cistern next door making a loud noise, he smilingly dismissed the loud sound saying, 'Waterfall', showing his equanimity toward such disturbing sounds. This was a teaching for me in regard to handling such unwanted disturbances.

Regarding Ñāṇavimala's giving up vegetarianism as detailed in 'The Life of Ñāṇavimala Thera', I have heard a different explanation. At Polgasduwa in '69, I heard him telling this story: 'I got very sick from lack of protein and the doctor kept telling me that I had to eat meat. Still I refused. Finally, they told me: "If you don't eat meat, we will send you back to Germany." ' Bhante continued, 'Well, going back to Germany, I would have to kill people - so I decided to eat meat.'

In the same article, it is stated that Ñāṇavimala set out on cārikā in '66. I disagree with this. It must have been in '67. In '68, I spent seven months at Polgasduwa (April-November) and he came back in the middle of that period. The day he came in '68 was exactly one year after he left in '67 (as the first Yugoslavian monk, Ñāṇajivaka told me). He had set out on that first cārikā after eleven years (not ten) years of uninterrupted stay at Polgasduwa. On a later occasion, he said

to me: ‘I didn’t leave on cārikā till I knew I could control my mind’. After returning he spent one more year (or slightly more) at Polgasduwa, after which he left for good. Thus, altogether, he spent some twelve years at Polgasduwa in his initial grounding period. I had left in November ‘68, but was back in June ‘69 in time to have a few more months with him. I was ordained as a sāmaṇera in September, a few months before he left for good (apart from some short return visits).

In ‘Spending Time with Venerable Ñāṇavimala’, Hiriko says that Ñāṇavimala ‘refused to study’ after the first period as a young monk. That is not so. When he returned from his first cārikā in ‘69, he picked up Warder’s ‘Introduction to Pāli’ (which would not have been available when he was a new monk) and also some other sutta books. He also sometimes picked up some sutta books when he was at Vajirarama (at least in the earlier period).

Guttasīla says in ‘Recollections of Venerable Ñāṇavimala’ that Ñāṇavimala would walk only ten kilometres a day. This should be corrected to ten miles. He told me that if he walked longer, the soles of his feet would get worn out.

I read the article ‘Slowly-Carefully-Mindfully’ in Sinhalese some time ago and one point has to be corrected. It is related that once Ñāṇavimala was staying in an araññha (forest monastery) belonging to a very learned monk. He was given the sīmā (area/building designated for Saṅgha acts) to stay in. it contained a lot of books that were not properly arranged. Carefully, he put all the books in order. But before

leaving, he put them all back into the disordered arrangement he had found them in. The learned Thera supposed that he had done so in order to teach a lesson. I don't think so. I heard a similar story from a monk staying in another araññha. He was given a kuṭi and the first thing he did was to rearrange all the things that were found in the kuṭi. Before he left, he put all the things back in the original order. The monk was amazed at his precise memory. He did so not to teach or criticize, but for the sake of his own well-being. Things around him had to be harmoniously ordered. It may have even been his habit to rearrange things in kuṭis and rooms he was staying in, at least if he intended to stay some length of time. Certainly, his kuṭi in Polgasduwa was neatly arranged.

I did not intend to make a portrait of Ñāṇavimala, only to give a few glimpses of him. I always had a deep respect for him and liked him as a person. But due to different ways of approaching Dhamma, I didn't look to him for guidance. But still now, years after he has gone, I can at times feel greatly inspired by thinking of him.

*Next Page: Stūpa & Buddha Statue, Pannapitiya*

# Finding the Path

***As told by Ishanka to Amal Randhir Karunaratna***

**Amal**: My earliest memory of Ven. Ñāṇavimala was after he visited my father in his medical surgery in Kandy with some discomfort in his stomach. My father examined him and diagnosed some kind of gastritis problem, as I recall, and wanted to prescribe some medication. He seemed to be in some pain. When my father asked him if he could obtain the medication for him, he politely refused, saying "the pain arises and passes away". I remember my father telling me that he couldn't sleep that night, and kept thinking about this tranquil monk who refused medication and seemed to tolerate pain. This story was imprinted in my young mind as well as my father's.

Over the years, I encountered Ven Ñāṇavimala when he visited our house for dāna in Kandy or when my father and I saw him at the Forest Hermitage with Ven Ñāṇaponika on one of his infrequent visits to Kandy. We moved to New Zealand in 1972 and then to Australia in 1975, and, on visits back to Sri Lanka, I would try to see him if I heard of his whereabouts. Whenever I met him, he would immediately ask me about my parents by name: "How is Dr and Mrs Karunaratna?"

On one occasion, I was driving to Anuradhapura and happened to be wondering where I may find him, when he suddenly appeared ahead, walking along the road at a steady pace. I stopped the car and ran over to him to pay my respects. He had

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not seen me for many years and I was much older then and taller than when I left, but he recognised me instantly and asked me the usual question about my parents.

Whenever I saw him and he was in a position to talk at length, he seemed to talk to me about things that were concerning me at the time - he never failed to astonish me with these comments. When I visited Sri Lanka in 2004, I met a monk at Kudumbigala who was one of his caretakers and he told me that Ven. Ñāṇavimala was gravely ill and wasn't seeing anyone. That was the last news that I had about him before he passed away.

* * *

I once heard my teacher say that a spiritual friend (kalyāṇamitta) is one who supports and guides one on the path to liberation. While I count my friend Ishanka as a kalyāṇamitta, she, in turn, had the great fortune to be so guided by Ven. Ñāṇavimala.

Ishanka is not her real name. She wishes to remain anonymous, so I have used a pen name to narrate her story. Here, she tells me how, despite being born into a Sri Lankan Buddhist family, her path to the Dhamma was established only after meeting Ven. Ñāṇavimala.

Ishanka really found Ven. Ñāṇavimala at a time when her life was in crisis, and, as is often the case, it is during such times that

the wise turn to spiritual guidance, which she received in abundance from Ven. Ñāṇavimala over a span of some 20 years. This is the story of how his guidance changed her life and brought her to the path.

* * *

I first met Ven. Ñāṇavimala as a young child. The first time I saw him was when I accompanied my family on a visit to the Island Hermitage at Dodanduwa on the south coast of Sri Lanka to take dāna (meal offered to monks) for the resident monks, one of whom was Ven. Ñāṇavimala.

My family took dāna to Island Hermitage from time to time. On one such occasion, Perera, a supporter (dāyaka) following his dāna presentation at Island Hermitage, continued on to Kataragama, where a man dressed in white walked up to him and said, 'What are you doing here? You've just given a highly meritorious dāna,' and wandered off. Perera was puzzled by this encounter and searched for this man shortly after, but never saw him again. The next day, Perera went back to Island Hermitage to see Ven. Ñāṇavimala and told him of his Kataragama encounter and asked Bhante if he was a sotāpanna, a stream enterer. Ven. Ñāṇavimala did not respond to this question but, instead, sat quietly with his eyes downcast. Perera concluded that Ven. Ñāṇavimala was somehow special and that it was a deity who had brought him this information at Kataragama.

I lived abroad for around ten years and completed my university education and also holidayed in France and learned to speak French.

After this period I decided to return to Sri Lanka. When Ven. Ñāṇavimala was in Colombo he would stay at the Vajirarama Temple where my cousin visited him regularly.

Sometimes Ven. Ñāṇavimala would stay at Lanka Vipassana Meditation Center on Wijerama Mawatha (the well-known Mahāsi centre), and he would walk the short distance to our house, possibly because he had a long association with my aunt and her family. We invariably offered him tea and then transport to wherever he needed to go. He always politely refused, stating that his feet were capable of doing the job. My family all considered Ven. Ñāṇavimala 'special'.

One of my cousins, Sarath was a hard drinker and considered a bad boy in the family, but later, due to his close association with Ven. Ñāṇavimala, who guided him in reading the suttas, Sarath underwent a dramatic transformation. He stopped drinking and became a model citizen – to the infinite gratitude of his wife. She prepared meals and visited Ven. Ñāṇavimala with Sarath, and I accompanied them during one of these visits and was re-introduced to Bhante. On one such occasion, I offered some liquid refreshment (gilanpasa) to Bhante who commented about the heat of the day and expressed his appreciation of the drink.

I used these opportunities to sit and talk with Bhante for a while. I explained my background to him, that I had been offered good career opportunities, one of which was to work and be trained in the U.S.A., but I never followed this up. Bhante commented that it was a good thing that I was back in Sri Lanka. He said it was important that I was

brought up as a Buddhist and this background was necessary for the acceptance and development of virtue (sīla), as I had been resentful of discipline as a child. He commented on this without being prompted and said, 'Yes, you are lucky to be born a Buddhist, if we simply follow our instincts, we fall away from the path.'"

At this early stage of my association, I noted very little in particular about him, other than his calm demeanour. I commenced working at a foreign embassy and had to deal with a hot-tempered Corsican woman who was constantly sarcastic and irritating. Others, too, found this woman's behaviour annoying, but I found myself responding in a like manner. My usual response was to 'give as good as I got', and I felt entitled to do so, but I also became aware that my responses were too aggressive and soon became ashamed of my reactions.

I found myself talking to Ven. Ñāṇavimala about this work problem. He listened patiently, and to my surprise, asked if this person was a Sri Lankan. I answered no. He listened further and finally said, 'Well, you are also responsible for this state of affairs,' from which I concluded that this interaction was karmic. I felt like a worm. I had to think again and stop being a victim. Ven. Ñāṇavimala then advised me to practice loving-kindness (mettā). I accepted this advice readily and followed his instructions to develop mettā to myself, to someone dear, someone neutral, and also to someone hostile and focus loving thoughts on this person and on all living beings.

On one occasion, I had been disturbed by the behaviour of some monks during a dāna I had attended. I was upset by their lack of

decorum and was reluctant to be respectful and wanted to seek out only worthy monks to support and venerate. Without my raising this matter, Bhante commented on this incident, saying that I should not judge nor discriminate between such monks based on my own perceptions and conditioning, but to respect them as members of the Mahā Saṅgha. And, despite the accelerating deterioration of the Saṅgha, the institution should be supported, so that if at least one gem arises, he would be supported. 'All inherit their own karmas (actions), may they all realize this and experience the bliss of nibbāna, (liberation),' he exhorted.

By this time, I had developed total confidence in Bhante, and started doing mettā practice morning and evening, despite difficulties during the early stages. When it came to generating mettā for the hostile being, I had to virtually grit my teeth and say, 'Ok, may you be happy!!' After two months of this practice, however, I found myself having a gentler attitude towards the Corsican woman, even though I had no further interactions with her. After some time, she even started to smile and was actually pleasant, and her behaviour stopped being a problem. I was certainly impressed by this development and I thought, 'If mettā works on this hard case, then it is truly amazing.'

In 1992, six months after this situation had settled, Bhante asked me how the problem at work had turned out. I waved my hand and said, 'All finished.' I continued my mettā practice after that, just in case, but quite convinced of its efficacy from my own experiences with this woman at work.

Around this time I had started a relationship with a Frenchman I had met. At the time, as I was of marriageable age, I was presented with a string of proposals and met with several eligible young men. In addition, my cousin Sarath introduced a suitor's formal proposal which was well approved of by my family. All this pressure resulted in me throwing a tantrum which Sarath duly reported to Bhante. He responded calmly and advised Sarath 'not to push anyone into a life of kāma (sensuality).' Sarath had also discussed the matter of the Frenchman with Bhante whose response was: 'They (the French) are good people, but morally loose, but this is her karma.'

By 1993, I realized that the relationship was falling apart. This man had other partners, and made no promises or commitment to me. When the relationship finally ended, I was unable to sleep or eat. In short, I spiralled into a state of depression without realizing what was happening. While I never felt suicidal, I felt quite empty and flat, with nothing to focus my attention on, and feeling like a zombie. I gave up my work and chilled out at home. Living in a world of my own thoughts from August through October. Then, late in October, around the 22nd, I decided that I needed to visit Ven. Ñāṇavimala again who was 81 years of age at the time.

I had confidence in Bhante and felt instinctively that he would be able to advise me. It also dawned on me that, while I was born a Buddhist, with some knowledge of rituals and customs, I needed to learn the Dhamma and practice meditation to calm the mind. I knew my mind was going off the rails. I was irrational, I couldn't maintain a clear line of thought. I knew something was wrong and couldn't trust my own judgment.

When I saw Ven. Ñāṇavimala, he looked at me with deep compassion and said simply, 'Only faith (saddhā) can hold you together.' He also said, 'Parting from the beloved is painful, but you have done this to him and now he has got back at you.' I understood that this was karma working, I had my just deserts. I found that when someone really understood my situation, it was very comforting. I had managed to hide everything from my family, but with Bhante it was clear that he knew everything!

He advised me to read Ven. Ñāṇatiloka's book The Word of the Buddha, which he said was the book that brought him to Buddhism. Before that, Bhante had mentioned to my cousin that he had been a Hindu of sorts.

I calmed down with this knowledge of karma and its result. Then Ven. Ñāṇavimala spoke about his cousin, whose husband had treated her very badly. Although she was not a Buddhist, she had been very patient and didn't lose her temper with him. Instead, she had been kind and considerate, and he finally realized his mistakes.

The fact that Bhante understood my situation gave me a great deal of solace. He knew that I was not sleeping, he said: 'At night, even though your mind and body are tired, you may not be able to sleep.' He asked me to practice mettā regularly, as often as possible, and explained the benefits of mettā practice. 'You will sleep well and the gods will protect you and so on.' (one of the eleven benefits of practising loving-kindness according to AN 11:16).

So I practiced mettā daily for around three months, and at the end of this time I was out of this mental cloud. I remember that the practice of mettā, this time round, resulted in feelings of inexplicable joy accompanied by tears. I enquired from him why I cried every time I practiced mettā. He replied, 'Yes, it can be quite emotional at times, these may be tears of joy.' I felt reassured.

I had now gained confidence and went back to Bhante to ask if I should practice ānāpānasati, watching the in-out movement of the

breath. He asked, 'Why?' I replied that I just felt like it. Perhaps I had read somewhere or heard that the practice of ānāpānasati held the key to happiness. I had known this from before, but perhaps I was not ready for ānāpānasati yet. After three months, Bhante approved. When I asked him how to go about it, he referred me to the Girimānanda Sutta (AN 10:60) which explained the Ten Perceptions including ānāpānasati practice.

I read the sutta in Pāli (language of early Buddhist texts) and English before starting ānāpānasati. The long and short breaths seemed obvious, but I was stuck at the third sentence, sabbakāya paṭisaṁvedi (experiencing the whole body) with regard to observation of the breath. I asked Bhante to explain what it meant, but he said it had to be realized through experience and gave me some basic instructions to observe the breath. 'The mind,' he said, 'will wander and you will believe these other things are permanent, happy and relevant to self (nicca, sukha, atta) but remember they are not, that they are all dukkha (suffering) and to bring the mind back to the breath.' He didn't explain any of the other teachings I read. Even with just these instructions, I practiced ānāpānasati and mettā, and some strange things happened at home.

Although nothing happened initially, most of the time, my thoughts were about the relationship. I was due to see Bhante in a week, but I was too ashamed to tell him about my lack of progress and inability to stay on the breath. Finally, after two weeks when I went to see him again with my cousin, he asked me, 'How is your meditation?' I said, 'I may not be trying hard enough, if I tried harder, I'm sure I could do it

properly.' He smiled and said, these emotions will come up, sometimes you want him, sometimes you hate him and sometimes you will be glad it's all over.' This was quite true, but I was particularly impressed by the accuracy of the latter statement. I hadn't thought it remotely possible. I smiled inwardly at this as I had barely acknowledged it to myself.

I was now starting to observe the workings of my mind. Bhante talked about a sense of relief now the whole relationship thing was over. I was aware of this but hadn't admitted it to myself. Bhante was always able to anticipate the key issues in my life and give me the right advice that alleviated my problems. One example was when I had developed an idea that I had insulted a monk in a former life. I read somewhere that such an act would prevent one from walking properly on the Path. In reply, he simply said, 'You have nothing to regret.' I was able to put that doubt to rest for good after this assurance.

Not long after, the mental cloud lifted, I thought of the meaning of the word sandiṭṭhika, here and now, and I realized that here was someone who had actually transformed himself with the words of the Buddha. I thought to myself that it would be good to be like Bhante and mentally said this to him. I then checked myself, wondering, 'How can I aspire so high?' To me, he embodied the pinnacle of achievement.

I wondered how he, a foreigner, became accustomed to a strange climate, language and people, a different way of thinking in order to be a monk in Sri Lanka. I felt that since I was born here, perhaps I should be able to do this better and more easily! I realized that I had to have Nibbāna as my goal. At one stage, I thought that attaining sotāpanna (Streamwinner) would be nice, and then I read the story of King Bimbisāra (a Streamwinner who was tortured by his son, Ajātasattu) and realized that this was an inadequate aspiration.

In the course of the conversation Bhante said: Now that you aspire to overcome dukkha, follow the path, step by step. I continued my

practice, combining it with reading of suttas and Dhamma books, including The Eightfold Noble Path by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Bhante also helped to fine tune some lapses in my sīla (precepts). 'You have a tendency to exaggerate things a bit, so be careful how you report things to people. Speak gently and mindfully.'

After practicing for some time, I was starting to experience a feeling of disintegration of the body and its components. This was strange and unexpected. I wondered whether everything was liable to break up and whether nothing at all endured. When I went to see him with these experiences he asked, 'Do you still think there is something permanent?' Nothing is permanent, not even true love, and he shook his head. I knew there was no point in asking further questions; it was clear that he knew what was passing through my mind.

At one point, I felt that I should go somewhere to practice meditation, and even wrote to Parappaduwa monastery but received a reply which informed me that they were not accepting any new people. It was then that I came across Dhammakuta, a retreat centre outside Kandy where the Goenka system of meditation was taught and practiced. I was confident that I could practice more intensively on a retreat than at home as I had been doing. My two sisters had already participated in many different types of meditation retreats, and they had more knowledge and experience than me.

Before that, I had also briefly considered ordaining as a nun. It was a fleeting thought, really, but to my surprise Bhante picked up on it. I had started to wear white and was about to cut off my hair. When I

went to the temple one day, Bhante asked me why I was wearing white. The question was loaded. I was guarded about answering this question as the family were unaware of all this, and I was accompanied on that occasion by a male cousin who would have been shocked! So I sort of swallowed and replied, 'Because I feel like it.' Then Bhante said: 'There is nothing special to do, walk the path step by step.' This was unusual as in some other cases I know he had advised people to give up household life, but not in my case.

By this time, my former partner was back, but as a friend. At work there were people who were anti-Dhamma who said, I prefer to live with my imperfections than to die of wisdom, and another one who thought that, a life worth living was lived with passion at full throttle. The latter comment was from Marie, a very well educated woman with two PhDs. Neither had any interest in the Dhamma. I encouraged Marie to do a Dhammakuta course, and she did, but gained nothing from the experience. She played the part of an objective observer of others and wrote a very witty article about it, and she said that she wanted to stay in contact with me. When I saw Bhante, without any prompting he said: It is better for you at this stage not to associate with people who are not in the Dhamma. I nearly fell through the floor!

I was now full of gratitude and deep affection for Bhante and this came with the fear that I would lose him as he was now quite old. So, I wondered, 'What was to happen now?' He was preparing to leave Colombo after an extended period of being unwell. With this concern

in my mind he advised: ‘Do not depend on uncertain bhikkhus, you should stand on the Dhamma.’

I was full of attachment and full of reverence. I wondered if I had met him in a previous life. He responded to this thought with, ‘this is not the first time we have met.’ I started to accept these mental questions and verbal responses as quite normal.

When I recited the Saṅgha Guṇa (virtues of the Saṅgha), he appeared to me in my mind. I read somewhere that the Buddha exhorted: 'If you meet a Buddha Putra (lit: a son of the Buddha, i.e. a true disciple) venerate him as you would me.'

I thought that he had given me so much, I wanted to do something for him, but without expecting anything in return. Then, this thought occurred spontaneously and I understood: 'This is not possible, whatever you give him, will return greatly enhanced to you,' which is roughly my understanding of anuttaraṁ puññakhettaṁ lokassa, the unsurpassed field of merit to the world. I wished that in saṁsāra (the never ending cycle of rebirth), I had given something, even a glass of water, to quench his thirst when he needed it.

In April 1994, Bhante returned to Island Hermitage, Dodanduwa. My world fell apart. I wondered: 'Why is he subjecting himself to all this hardship, why can't he stay here?' I thought he might die before long. Before his departure, I went to see him with another cousin and during our conversation he said quite casually as if we were discussing the weather, 'I might die. This body is useful for certain things but when you have done what you want, it doesn't matter anymore, it will take its own course.' I didn't stay long, I was overcome with emotion and in tears. I left the jug of beli (bael fruit) juice that I had brought for him and left very quickly.

A couple of weeks later, another cousin went to see him in Island Hermitage to see how he was doing, so I sent some more beli juice that I had prepared for him – it was sufficient for about five people. He

found that Bhante was well settled in his kuṭi (monk's hut) but he fell into conversation with other monks and had forgotten to give Bhante the beli juice. When he eventually returned to Bhante's kuṭi, he was reminded about the beli juice he was supposed to deliver: 'You have brought some gilanpasa? Pour some into this cup and take the rest and offer it to the other monks as well.'

I also had occasion to offer alms at Island Hermitage in June 1995, along with my parents, elder sister and some relatives. My parents had just celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary with a grand party for family and friends in Sri Lanka on one of their frequent visits from Australia. But I was more keen on this dāna, as I knew how they would benefit. Bhante was not well, but he graciously participated, slowly walking from his kuṭi (hut) to the hall with the help of his walking stick. Watching my mother and father serving dāna to him, I was quite overcome with excitement and joy. I distinctly remember telling myself to calm down or else risk spilling whatever dish it was I had in my hands. Bhante partook of only a little of what was served to him. After dāna, much to my delight, he especially blessed my parents.

In March 1998, Ven. Ñāṇavimala accepted an invitation to stay at Dhammakuta, near Kandy, along with Ven. Mettāvihārī, who took care of him devotedly. They took up residence in the kuṭi at the top of the hill. I went to the centre, planning to stay there for three days, but extended it for three weeks. Meditation courses continued in the meantime and Indra, who was in charge of the kitchen observed that when stocks started to run out, the most important items would turn up without any prompting – someone would turn up with exactly the

items that were required. There was such an abundance of food during that time, it was more than sufficient for everyone. During this time, Bhante did very little talking, but blessed many people. Everyone came to pay their respects and received his blessings as they completed the course.

An incident occurred with the cook, Mrs. Daya, who had had a miserable life. Her husband was an alcoholic and was totally crazy. She went to see Bhante to pay her respects, but said nothing. She wept with emotion. Bhante gently said to her 'anun te kala de thaman to pala de' (What you do unto others, comes back to you), 'tell your husband to come and see me.' A few days later, she brought her husband and the children to see Bhante. After giving a short blessing, he dismissed the rest of the family, but asked the husband to remain. Bhante spoke in English to him about the dangers of alcohol, the virtues of protecting the family and the implications for future lives. This man was dumbfounded by this discussion and highly moved. He came to his senses and gave up his drinking. This change was considered to be a miracle by the family. Further, he became helpful, calmed down, and resumed a normal family life.

Often, when he was giving talks, Bhante would mention devas: 'We have all been devas and brahmās (celestial beings), there's nothing unusual about this. There are devas who can help you on a spiritual path at his or her level but don't look for them.'

Commenting on this further, while walking through a remote area of Sri Lanka it was approaching noon when monks traditionally eat their

midday and sometimes only meal of the day. Bhante described how he approached an intersection of two roads and, underneath a tree, a village woman and a little girl were standing, holding a parcel of food. She was a chena cultivator (one who clears the land by burning it). 'What are you doing here in the middle of nowhere?' Bhante asked them. 'We were waiting for you, Bhante,' was the reply. This morning, a relative who had passed away, but was now a deva had told her that she could do something good and acquire some merit. The deva instructed her to make food for her family and some additional food for a worthy monk who will be along shortly and that she should offer him this food.

While on cārikā (walking tour) around the south of the island in elephant country, Bhante had expected to reach the next village before nightfall but it was getting quite dark as the sun had set. Some way in the distance he could see a light and when he approached it, he could see that it was a monk standing patiently by the road with a lantern. When he approached the monk, he invited Bhante to accompany him to his kuṭi in the forest, about one kilometre from the road, where there was a well with good water. Bhante asked the monk how he knew of his approach? He replied, 'I was meditating earlier today and was informed (by a deva) that a monk will be approaching who is one your relatives. You can do him some service. He will be here soon.' Bhante stayed with this monk for about three days and continued on his way.

Bhante left Dhammakuta the day after Vesak. In his final blessing to everyone, he said: 'You have perfect conditions here for your

practice,' and his face was radiant even though he was now quite weak. To me, he said, 'Forget the past and continue with your practice.' His departure coincided with the final day of a ten day course, focussed on mettā.

Everyone gathered in the corridors of the hall, waiting to line up on both sides of the road leading from the top kuṭi to the hall to pay their respects. It was raining heavily and it didn't seem as though there was going to be any let-up, but right at the time Bhante was due to leave, around 8 am, the clouds parted, the rain ceased, and the sun burst through the clouds. Bhante emerged from his kuṭi smiling and was carried in a chair along the path. A chorus of 'Sādhu! Sādhu! Sādhu! (It is well!)' broke out as he was helped into the car which was taking him to Colombo. The car had barely left the property and the clouds closed, the sun disappeared and the rain came crashing down again as the car disappeared into the rain soaked distance.

## Post Script

I wish to share a couple of anecdotes related by friends who were also students and supporters of Ven. Ñāṇavimala

### Anecdote I

Whenever Ven. Ñāṇavimala was on cārikā (walking tour) in the hill country, he would unfailingly visit my friend and her husband, who were devoted longtime supporters. He would accept their invitation to stay for a few days in an annex on their property. While there, Bhante would set off on his alms round in the morning and then retire to his quarters for the rest of the day. In the evenings he would see visitors and answer their questions on the Dhamma. Bhante Ñāṇavimala was precise and generous with his advice.

Both my friend and her husband were keen meditators and relished the opportunity to discuss their practice and relevant suttas with Bhante. On one occasion, it occurred to my friend's husband to tape record Bhante's words for posterity and asked permission to do so. Bhante Ñāṇavimala declined and advised him instead to listen carefully to the instructions, to bear them in mind, and to put them into practice as soon as possible. Despite this admonition, my friend's husband recorded their conversation that day. This detailed some aspects of his own practice, including the jhānas (absorptions).

Later, however, my friend's husband was disappointed to find the audio tape was a complete blank. He checked the equipment to make sure it was not malfunctioning. Satisfied that it was, indeed, working properly, the next day he went to Bhante Ñāṇavimala's quarters accompanied by his wife. This time, he placed the tape recorder in full view of Bhante who asked what it was. My friend's husband replied truthfully, switched it on and pressed the 'record' button. Bhante did not say anything that day to dissuade him and the Dhamma discussion continued. Later, he was once more disappointed to find that there was nothing whatsoever recorded!

He then conceded with grace, that this must have been a case of mind over matter.

## Anecdote II

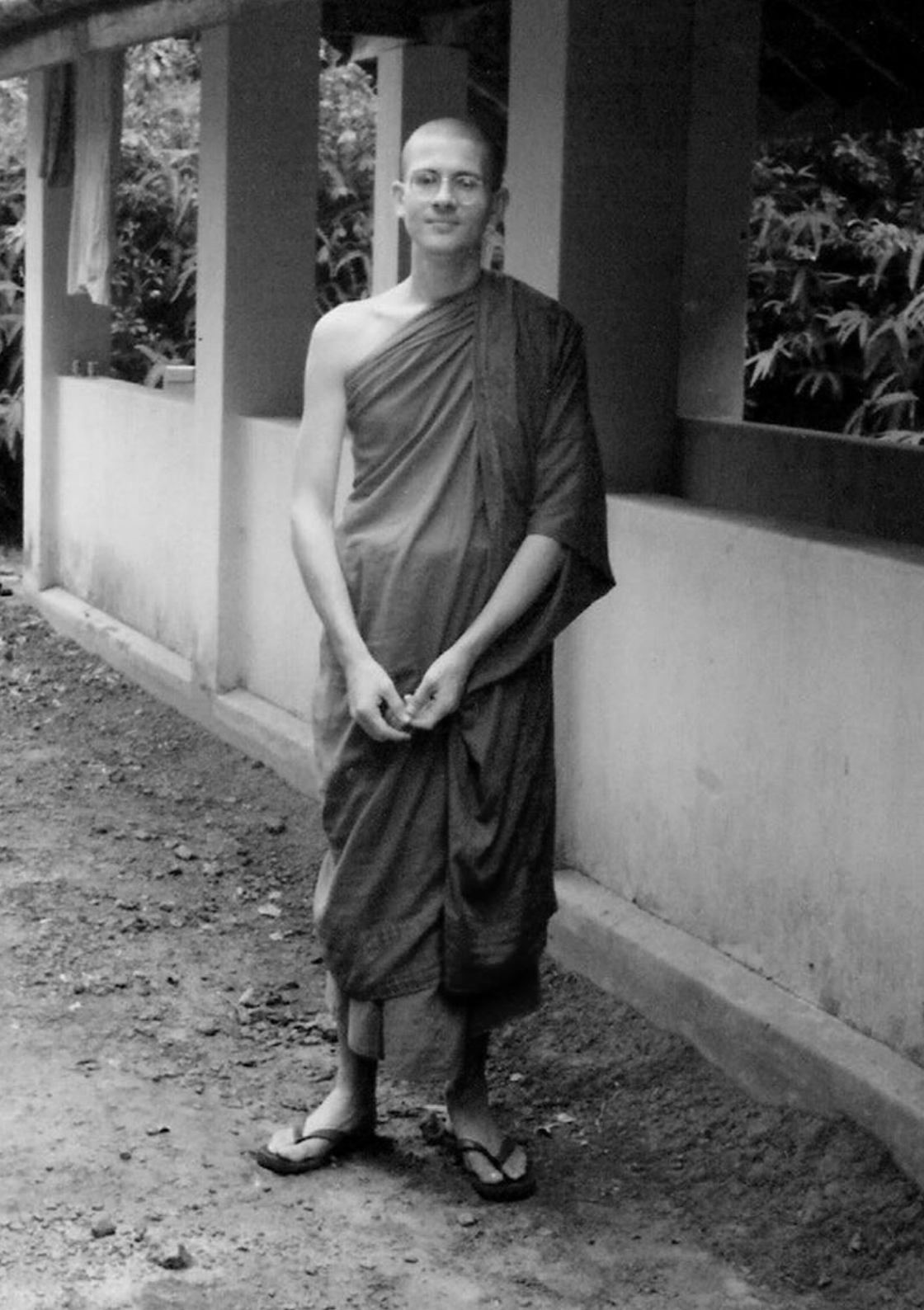
My dear friend and mentor who was in her late sixties at the time, was informed by her husband of forty plus years that he, relatively late in life, wished to ordain as a monk. She was not entirely surprised as he

had expressed such a wish earlier. She set about helping him to settle his worldly and financial matters before going forth as a monk.

A property they owned had been illegally occupied by squatters for some time and all attempts to get them to leave peacefully had failed. At that point, a well-meaning family friend advised them to seek the assistance of a 'spiritualist' who, in turn, assured her he would 'deal with the problem' effectively. My friend hesitated and confided to her family friend that she didn't want the squatter to be hurt in the process, but only to get him to leave the property peacefully without causing further trouble. She felt compelled to act in order to help her husband in his aspiration to become a monk.

After my friend paid the fee, she was instructed to collect the 'magic potion' (a powder) a few days later. This was to be sprinkled surreptitiously on the boundary of the disputed land. It was during that time that my friend, a longtime supporter, visited Ven. Ñāṇavimala. She paid respects, made some offerings, and then inquired about his health. She didn't mention her own problems. Bhante was unwell and frail in appearance, but his face was serene and his mind was very clear. His response astonished her, for he simply said 'Not for the sake of oneself, nor for the sake of another, would a wise person do something wrong' (summarising Dhammapada verse 84). My friend understood immediately the meaning of Bhante's words and decided not to go through with the prescribed 'spell'.

The happy ending to this story is that there was a legal ruling in favour of my friend to evict the squatters and return the property to the rightful owners.



# Bhante's Advice

***Chittapala***

Bhante's Advice' has been compiled from handwritten notes I made after meetings with Ven. Ñāṇavimala at Vajirarama Temple, Colombo in the early 1980's. In 1991, the notes were typed up at Amaravati Monastery in England and distributed to some branch monasteries.

I was ordained in Thailand in early 1977 and relocated to Sri Lanka at the end of 1978. The first I heard of Bhante Ñāṇavimala was in 1979 when I was residing at Island Hermitage, Dodanduwa. The abbot, Ven. Piyaratana, announced Bhante had arrived on the island and would be staying a few days before continuing on cārikā (walking tour). At the midday meal, I and Ven. Visuddhācāra (compatriot Australian monk), paid respects to Bhante, who agreed to meet us in the eating hall at 3 pm that day. We arrived at the eating hall just after three, only to learn that Bhante had already left. This could be considered a first teaching from Bhante. It doesn't pay to be unpunctual when meeting a senior monk! After all, we had only been in robes two and one years, respectively. At evening chanting, we had the opportunity to apologize to Bhante, and he kindly agreed to meet us again the next day. For that meeting, we arrived well ahead of time! I can't remember what Bhante said during the meeting, but I am sure it would have been excellent dhamma (teaching).

*Previous Page: Chittapala, Island Hermitage, 1979*

I lived at Island Hermitage for twelve months and Bhante visited again during this period. On that occasion, he was in silent retreat mode. When I had opportunity to visit his kuṭi (monastic hut) to deliver some requisites, I remember the path to the kuṭi had been swept very methodically, as was the entire enclosure. Everything about Bhante was meticulous - his robes, his requisites and his dwelling place. He conveyed an air of minimalism, a result of decades of mindfulness practice. An example of this was told to me by another senior western monk: when Bhante was on cārikā he was known *never* to have left any belongings behind at the places he stayed.

Where I met Bhante most often was at Vajirarama in Colombo. This seemed to be his base in the eighties. At Vajirarama, he stored a few requisites and some handwritten dhamma notes. Also at Vajirarama, he had a mentor in Ven. Kheminda, a very learned senior Sri Lankan monk. I regularly saw them engrossed in dhamma conversation on the wide verandah outside Ven. Kheminda's room. I'd heard that in earlier years, when more able bodied, Bhante would travel the length and breadth of Sri Lanka on his walking tours. Later on, the duration and distance of his walking tours was increasingly less, and so he more frequently passed through Colombo.

Constant cārikā can be hard on the body and I wondered if decades of subsisting on alms food in very poor regions of Sri Lanka had been one of the conditions for Bhante's deteriorating health in his later years. If so, I don't think it would be an issue for Bhante who cultivated a mind strong enough to overcome all obstacles.

Bhante advocated aloofness and that was his general persona. Once, I met him at Vavulagala Araññha, Imaduwa, and when we were washing our alms bowls after lunch, his parting words were 'keep aloof'. It took many years for me to fully appreciate the depth of this instruction. On another occasion, Bhante told me not to worry about learning to speak Sinhala. He said if a Western monk speaks Sinhala too well, he will regularly be requested to give sermons, which would be a distraction for practice. Some Western monks told me that there was also an 'abrasive' aspect to Bhante's personality. I didn't experience this, but Visuddhācāra mentions it in the following account.

"I resided at Vajirarama on occasions when Bhante Ñāṇavimala was also in residence. I had the privilege of being in his presence and listening to his dhamma instructions. On one occasion, I experienced another side of his dhamma (nature). This was when I had just finished bathing in one of the bath cubicles at Vajirarama and the soap in that bath cubicle was finished. I saw Bhante Ñāṇavimala mindfully headed for that same cubicle, so I went to my room and retrieved a bar of soap and proceeded in haste to the bathing house. Bhante had already entered the cubicle and locked the door. I politely knocked on the door, he opened and I offered the soap, but he was obviously not impressed with my intrusion, and refused the soap in the coldest manner. That day I felt I had interrupted the Buddha himself as he was about to enter Nibbāna (cessation of suffering)!

On a later occasion, when I had more maturity as a monk, I had a wonderful session listening to Bhante talk in his room at Vajirarama. He emphasized how to get over some of the difficulties of the monk's

life by being practical with your chores and reflecting on the reason we have to do sweeping and cleaning, 'It's because of aniccatā that I have to do this again'."

Bhante didn't encourage or aspire to having students. However, he was very generous in sharing dhamma. When I asked to speak with him, he always made himself available for meetings in his room. After I paid respects, he would ask a few questions about my well-being and what I had been doing, much in the mode of the Buddha who would exchange convivial greetings before instructing in dhamma. Bhante presented teachings in a structured manner with a recurring theme of the gradual training based on morality, mindfulness and contemplation. During these sessions, he constantly smiled, beaming mettā (loving-kindness). The session would typically end with Bhante saying, 'well then, get on with it'.

One time, I asked Bhante if I could discuss a personal problem with him. He declined, instead suggesting I discuss it with a kalyāṇamitta (spiritual friend). On a couple of occasions at Vajirarama, when Bhante learned that I was ill, he came to my room concerned about my welfare, and offered me some fine foods he had received on his alms round.

Bhante Ñāṇavimala's focus on the path was unwavering, nothing distracted him from the practice of mindfulness. He had no interest or concern about any worldly matters whatsoever. He lived and breathed nothing but Dhamma. For this reason, he was an incredibly inspiring

role model. Indeed, it was a great blessing to meet such a practitioner in this life.

* * *

The Buddha-dhamma (teaching of the Awakened One) is different to the Hindu system which builds up a world of happiness and bliss. Dhamma points to that which is dukkha (inherent suffering of existence). One has to be independent of all externals in following the dhamma. One's happiness is not in high meditation states as these can just be a further object of clinging and also disappointment. One's happiness is in following dhamma, the knowledge that each day one has not given in to one's desires and aversions and one is keeping one's mind pure. One has to learn not to delight in anything because all experiences last but a moment and can't be kept.

There is a danger in a well-kept arañña (forest monastery). One delights in having a nice kuṭi, (monk's hut) seclusion and certain foods. Then there is aversion when these conditions fall away. Monks in the Buddha's time lived in the forest, dependent on piṇḍapāta (alms round). They had illnesses to contend with, just as we do, but learned to accept whatever arose. We have to develop detachment no matter what the externals are. All externals are conditioned and forever changing. One depends on one's past kamma (actions). We have to be careful to take care of our body, but we should not store up conditions for a new one. It will be sick, decay and die just as this one does.

Learn to live in the present. Making plans troubles the mind. Live with whatever arises. Turn away from everything. Develop nibbidā (dispassion) from day to day – we have to develop this from the beginning – to learn to delight in solitude – if one is to die alone, one has to learn to live alone. Study, stay in a suitable place under a teacher. Do not break Vinaya (code of monastic discipline) for whatever reason. Don't make arrangements with dāyakas (supporters). One doesn't even have to talk with them. One just has to concentrate on becoming a puññakkhettaṁ (field of merit). Communications, letters, etc. are just a further bond and do not help to free one. Simplify one's possessions so that they are no weight on the mind. There is less trouble for Vinaya practice if one has only three robes, no shoes and does not accept invitations, etc.

Happiness comes from following the dhamma. Learn to see defilements as impermanent, not yours, and they won't be so troublesome. If one can't do bhāvanā (meditation) as one would wish, then just accept it – that is the way things are. One has to be independent of everything external to oneself. In the first five years, learn to accept whatever conditions prevail – and see to one's duties between teacher and pupil properly. If one is training properly, one should be able to be independent of the teacher after those five years. There is a danger in solitude wrongly grasped, if one is unhappy or happy to receive visitors, or if one is unhappy or happy not to receive visitors, learn to see that all these mental states as dukkha.

The bhikkhu (monk) should just look to the present. One has broken with one's past, family and friends. Why renew old fetters or take on

new ones? Don't go back to what one has renounced already. Thoughts about the future, expectations, 'what will I experience?', etc. are all motivated by unwholesomeness, by craving. One should just aim to have a pleasant state of mind in the present, without greed, hatred or delusion. This can only condition pleasant states in the future. One can do no more than that.

A bhikkhu should not have a mind of depression, dejection or disappointment. Having learnt Buddha's dhamma, we have to apply it. Having come to this state, being a bhikkhu, don't go back to the past. If you are in a suitable place with a teacher, seclusion, etc., don't go craving to be anywhere else or do anything else. Study the dhamma and follow it. Nothing else will give happiness. One has to give up the comforts of food and lodgings. This is helpful to see dukkha. Don't seek happiness connected with this world. Seek happiness of the mind secluded from defilements.

It is important to have sukha (happiness) in this bhikkhu life. Without sukha one cannot develop bhāvanā. Count one's blessings, that one has come so far to the bhikkhu state and has the opportunity to get on in the dhamma. Feel happy even when one sits down to read the dhamma in Pāli.

When learning a language one initially learns the grammar and has to continually refer to the dictionary for every word to get the sentence meaning. Later on, with practice, one can know the meaning of whole sentences. So it is with various dhammasaññā (perceptions according to reality). One is continually taken in by objects until one practises

enough. Then one immediately sees the object's inherent nature as asubha (bodily unattractiveness) anicca (impermanence), anattā (not self) or dukkha (suffering).

Living in solitude in the forest is very good because one feels close to the Buddha and his early disciples. Having had the good kamma to live in such conditions, one has to reflect wisely and strive while one is young. Soon one will be old and not able to practise in the same way. If any internal disturbances arise, don't neglect to consult with a kalyāṇamitta. Sometimes things are locked up inside and it needs discussion to bring it out.

Keep contemplating the dangers of the kāmaloka (sense realm) and kāmasukha (sensual happiness). Even if just the thought of a girl arises, contemplate the unattractive nature of the form you desire. If strong urges arise (not unusual when one is living alone trying to do bhāvanā), practise caṅkamana (walking meditation) or do some work to put them away. Make sure to avoid falling into a heavy offence.

Everything is affliction and one has to learn to delight in nothing. But in the beginning one has to delight in one's meditation, being wary of attachment to it. Unless nekkhamma, renunciation of kāmārammaṇa (sensual objects), is developed, one will not be able to give up this loka (world). In meditation, don't try to develop nimittas (signs) as the Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification) says, but rather see that the mind is free from nīvaraṇa (hindrances). One can then delight in the purity of mind that comes from jhāna (absorption). Jhāna is that samādhi (concentration) that has no connection with this loka.

One aspect of dukkha is that one can't expect to stay in one place forever and when one seeks a new senāsana (lodging place), one can't expect to find a suitable place.

Don't try for quick results. Having dedicated one's life to Buddha-dhamma, just keep practising. Don't hold on to any experiences, nimittas, etc. as being attainments. Don't try to force the length of sittings. Use mettā (loving-kindness) to calm the mind before ānāpānasati (mindfulness of breathing). If the mind is too distracted, recite gāthā (verses) or practise caṅkamana. One should use all the different kammaṭṭhāna (meditation objects) to combat the different defilements when they arise. Mettā is the easiest meditation from which to gain great happiness.

The monk's life is one of restricted activities in order that one can contemplate dukkha. Sweep around one's kuṭi carefully or spend time cleaning one's room mindfully. One can contemplate anicca in fallen leaves and suññatā (voidness) in one's empty room. One should respect and be very careful when using Saṅgha (monastic community) property.

In the first years, there must be solitude and the chance for complete application to practice so that one can fulfil indriyasaṁvara (sense restraint) and also to leave nothing incomplete in one's Vinaya training and duties to one's teacher. One's present residence is a result of one's kamma, so one has to work out ways and means to overcome one's problems.

In the village one should avoid non-dhamma talk, although girls can possibly be instructed in the dhamma. It is good to recite selections about mātugāmā (women) and asubha because then it sticks in one's mind. See the asubha in the outer form: hair, bodily hair, nails, teeth and skin, etc. Get the asubhanimitta (sign of the unattractive) in one's mind. When one has practised for a while one can look at women, but if rāga (passion) arises, just do internal contemplation until asubha is developed. It is difficult not to look at or speak to women, but one should try to keep all one's attention on one's practice. It is good from time to time to have periods of non-speaking.

This body has been conditioned through innumerable lives with sex urges being a major cause. Anusayas (underlying tendencies) are very difficult to put away, especially when one is young. Seeing women just nourishes rāgānusaya (underlying tendency to passion). This body is enough trouble and dukkha. Why do you want more trouble? Most actions in life are just to keep this body going. It needs physical supports and nutrition, and thus we can't avoid contact with women, 'yaṁ kiñci dukkhaṁ sambhoti, sabbaṁ āhārapaccaya' (whatever suffering arises, all of it is due to nutriment).

The body never stops giving trouble. Even if one sits in deep meditation for five or six hours, it seems like only a couple of minutes and then one is back to the dukkha of the body again. Thus, one has to continually contemplate anicca and see that no experiences can be clung to. Aniccasaññā is begun in a general way, i.e. seeing that one has to keep repeating the same processes of living day by day – all for

what? Later on this contemplation will become more specialized, e.g. seeing the rise and fall of the breath.

When there is strong bodily pain, lie flat on one's back, really relax and view one's body from above. Recognize pain when it arises. Just accept it, see how it comes and goes, different intensities at different times. See it as anicca, dukkha, anattā. If there's too much pain for ānāpānasati, go to a meditation one has previously developed in order to make one's mind happy, e.g. mettā or Buddhānussati (recollection of the Buddha). Then go back to the breath. Have a whole range of meditations to combat certain defilements as they arise.

The Saṅgha is in decline, so one has to make the effort oneself. As long as one is making the effort, paṭisota (against the stream), one is doing the proper thing as a member of the Saṅgha. Even if the whole Saṅgha is corrupt, one knows at least one person is making the effort. One should be a fighter of defilements. Even if it kills one, one has to make good conditions for one's rebirth. If one just goes the way of one's desires, one cannot say where one will be reborn. Each day, one should reflect if any defilements have arisen which would be obstacles if one were to die. If there has been, one should determine that these obstacles will not arise tomorrow. One must continually examine the mind to see that craving is not arising.

When studying, read the suttas (discourses) and select the most useful parts for practice. It is not helpful to just read and read because one tends to forget. Collect useful sections under headings. Study and recitation are means only and are useful at certain times. Practice is

most important. Study can become just another 'piyarūpaṁ sātarūpaṁ' (dear and pleasing form), a condition for clinging. Concern with words can take one in the wrong directions, one may become a scholar. Going towards the 'true idea', one turns away from the 'sign'. Going to the 'sign', one goes away from the 'true idea'. Recitation is very useful to combat thīnamiddha (sloth and torpor), a great danger when one is living alone). Contemplating the dhamma awakens the mind.

Sīla is the basis and should be kept perfectly. If there are occasional light transgressions of the Pāṭimokkha (major disciplinary rules), these can be rectified. Pāṭimokkha is only to do with speech and body, but the ten kammapatha (ways of action) should be kept perfectly. Mind is most important to look after, because then one's speech and bodily actions will fall into line. Don't let Vinaya become a 'bugbear'. Differences in practice between monks are not so important. If practice is not clung to and one is firm in it, that is okay.

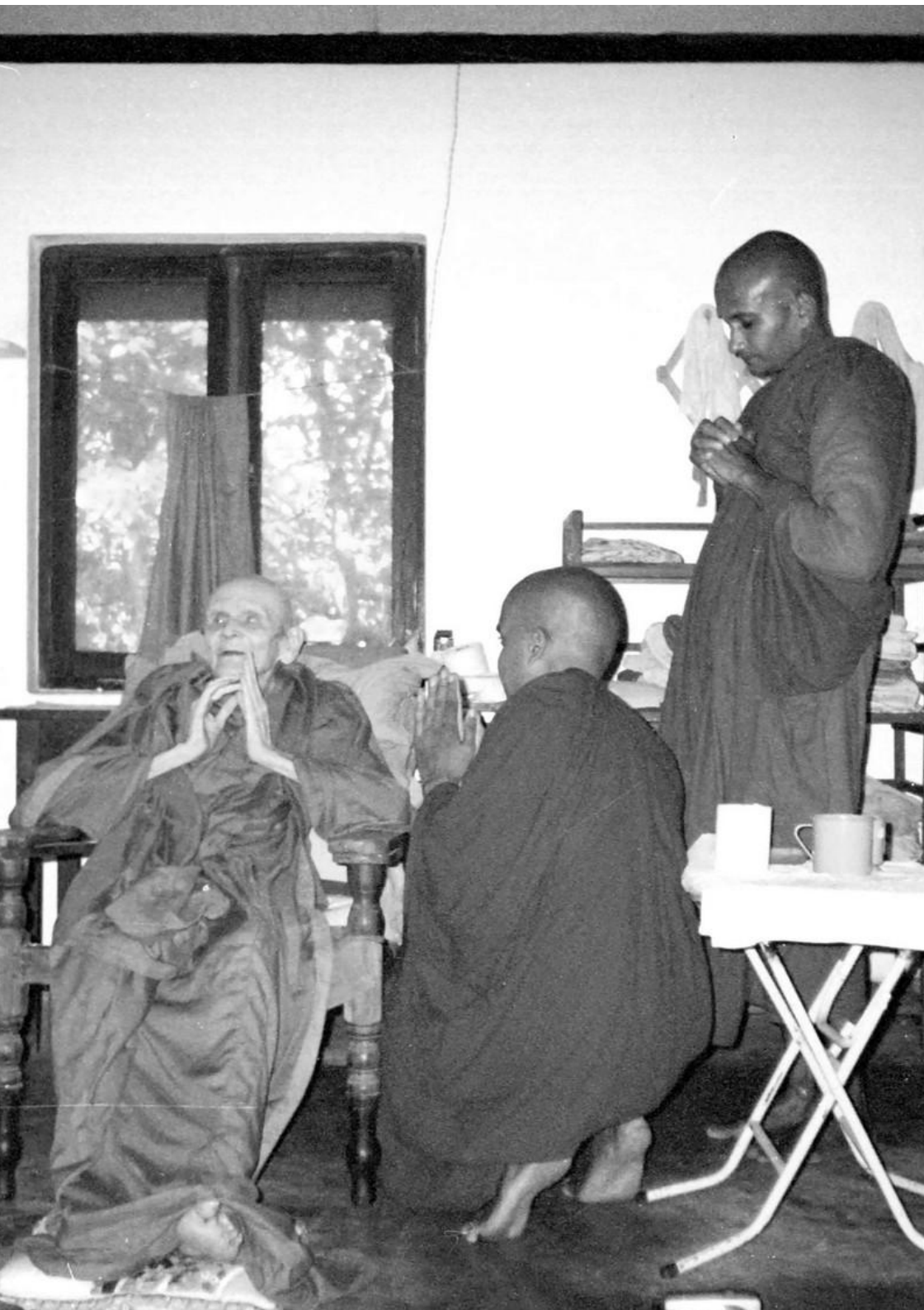
It is difficult when one is young to go out alone. I wouldn't advise cārikā at all because one meets so many things, one is continually confronted with sense objects. Before setting out, one must be established in asubhasaññā and aniccasaññā (the perceptions of unattractiveness and impermanence). On cārikā, one must consider whether the mind is developing well and whether one is affected by the various objects. If so, one should return to solitude. One's satipaṭṭhāna (applications of mindfulness) practice during the day should be strong. In solitude one may feel that some obstacles have been eliminated, but on cārikā, new ones can arise. Having seen one's problems, one should then try to overcome them. When on cārikā, one

should announce from where you come from and one's teacher, etc. when one arrives at a temple. Do vandanā (pay respects) even to bad monks as one is then paying respects to the Saṅgha. If one hasn't been given nissayavimutti (release from dependence), one should live near a teacher.

Don't be overly concerned with food or the body. The body is not yours, so why cling to it? Don't be making arrangements with dāyakas, etc. Learn to avoid this from the beginning. Avoid special dānas (meal offerings). Develop detachment. Eat mindfully, considering what it is for. Don't let defilements grow. If on piṇḍapāta, one gets a lot, a little, or nothing at all, develop detachment just the same. Bless those houses even where one does not receive food. One should not wait too long and only a short time in front of shops to see if there is spontaneous giving.

If one thinks one has realized some attainment, don't even announce it to oneself. It can hinder progress and strengthen asmimāna (the conceit 'I am'). Time will tell whether one has attained this or that. Remember the simile of the adze handle – if ones looks every day one can't see the wearing away of mental impurities - only over time, through constant practice, one can see this.

*Next Page: Ven. Ñāṇavimala's Almsbowl, Island Hermitage*



# Unforgettable Experience of Attending on Venerable Ñāṇavimala

*Ven. Pannipitiye Upasama and Nimal Sonnadara*

I thought of writing the details of our memories, how it all began, and the experiences we had with the most Venerable Ñāṇavimala. In this writing, Buveneka Wijetilaka is the lay name of Venerable Pannipitiye Upasama and my name is Nimal Sonnadara. Until Buveneka was ordained, our meetings with Ven. Ñāṇavimala mostly overlap, so the description presented here, with the permission of Ven. Upasama, is from both of us. As well, Ven. Upasama has collected some short Dhamma teachings he heard from Ven. Ñāṇavimala.

## First Acquaintance

We first happened to visit Island Hermitage (Polgasduwa), where Ven. Ñāṇavimala lived, with Ven. Vipassī, a British monk we met at Ratnagiri Buddhist Monastery, Harnham, England. Ven. Vipassī spoke highly about Ven. Ñāṇavimala's presentation of Dhamma regarding mental development, e.g. jhāna (absorption). That day, we couldn't meet Ven. Ñāṇavimala as, after taking his one meal a day, he retired to his kuṭi (hut) for the rest of the day.

We had an opportunity to see him when we visited Island Hermitage next time to engage in some voluntary work requested by the then abbot Ven. Rakkhita. I think we stayed two nights. It was

*Previous Page: with Ven. Ñāṇāloka & Ven. Upasama, Parappaduwa, 2005*

unforgettable. At 6:00 am Ven. Ñāṇavimala was taking his seat in the dining hall (dānasālā) and four of us went straight to him to pay our respects. The blessings we received were well concentrated and directed towards us. After the breakfast, he sat on the front verandah and we approached him and had a brief discussion. He asked, 'Do you meditate?' He gave some suttas for us to read and went on 'You can use the library and it may be you can get help from the Saṅgha.' What we gathered at the end was that one has to put in effort or else, 'Nobody can help you'.

The next encounter we had was when we had to fix the cistern in his toilet. We saw him meditating and he gave no attention at all to the disturbance which came from our work. Finishing the day's work, we went to pay respects, and it was particular with him that he blessed us mindfully and mentioned that this work was done for the Mahā Saṅgha.

**Becoming Attendants**

As we were marine engineers we went back to sea for some time to engage in our work. I received a letter from Buveneka that he was back in Sri Lanka and had the opportunity to look after Ven. Ñāṇavimala, who was then at Vajirarama, Bambalapitiya. He asked me to also take the opportunity to look after Bhante. Thus I got the opportunity to care for him with the guidance of Ven. Mettāvihārī.

Buveneka told me that a dāyaka (lay supporter) had provided a paid attendant for Ven. Ñāṇavimala. When Bhante came to know about

this, he insisted that a paid worker should not look after him as it is against the sāsana paṭipadā (accepted practice of the Buddha) and it would be better for him be at a hospital where no payment is required). Buveneka then offered to look after Ven. Ñāṇavimala instead of the paid worker and that's how the foundation was laid for Buveneka to start his life with Ven. Ñāṇavimala.

As well as Buveneka and myself, there was Kshanaka also looking after Ven. Ñāṇavimala at Vajirarama whenever he could. He used to go to work at the office in the morning and then spend the evening attending to Ven. Ñāṇavimala. On his off days, he would attend for the full day.

Bhante occupied a spacious room at Vajirarama, but the neighbourhood adjacent to the temple premises was noisy and smoky due to a hotel kitchen. We felt another venue would have been more suitable, although Ven. Ñāṇavimala made no comment whatsoever. Buveneka and Ven. Mettāvihārī were looking for a place in the country where Bhante could be accommodated for a longer period.

Later, Bhante spent one vassāna (rains retreat) at Hindagala Dhammakuta near Kandy where Buveneka was present to care for him towards the end of that period. Ven. Ñāṇavimala had one eye operated on for cataract in 1997. In January 1998, he got the other eye operated on for cataract. He was thereafter in Bowalawatte Forest Hermitage, which was affiliated with Vajirarama, and during his stay there was cared for fully by Buveneka.

In 1998, for the rains retreat, we took Ven. Ñāṇavimala to Island Hermitage and Buveneka and I looked after him. I remember an unforgettable experience with Ven. Ñāṇavimala on the Kaṭhina Day in 1998. In the morning he felt a little unusual and refused to take food, only a spoonful of water being accepted. He stayed in bed as if he was in a coma from 9:30 am to 3 pm. After that he said he was okay. I asked 'What were you doing during that time?' and he replied he was observing his mind. This gave us a hint that the trained mind could do miracles when one's health is in crisis.

On the open verandah of a kuṭi overlooking the lagoon of Ratgama, Bhante was seated in a reclining chair. He asked me, 'Can you see the far end of the lagoon?' It looked really beautiful with the borders of coconut trees, etc. Then he continued, 'although all the things of the scenery looked really beautiful, among what you see are the houses in which people are living. These people could never escape old age, sickness and death. So one should not be pleased or displeased about what you see, and you should not cling to it.'

Ven. Ñāṇavimala always stressed the importance of piṇḍapāta (walking for almsround). In 1999, Kshanaka was ordained and became Ven. Ñāṇāloka of Bambalapitiya. At that time, Parappaduwa Island (the nun's island) was vacant. Buveneka suggested that Ven. Ñāṇavimala move to Parappaduwa along with the newly ordained Ven. Ñāṇāloka. There, they could have the practice of piṇḍapāta (almsround), as at Island Hermitage, the lay supporters brought alms (dāna) daily. With the support of many lay people, we soon got Parappaduwa Island ready with a couple of kuṭis with the surrounding

suitable enough for Ven. Ñāṇavimala. We shifted then from Island Hermitage and the piṇḍapāta practice was started.

The dāna was entirely supported from piṇḍapāta by Ven. Ñāṇāloka, and Buveneka went behind as an assistant lay supporter observing ten precepts. Once, when Buveneka was away to settle things at home for a few days, I also had the opportunity to walk behind Ven. Ñāṇāloka on almsround as a lay supporter observing the precepts. Those memories were unforgettable. This happened for many years till Ven. Ñāṇāloka got permission from Ven. Ñāṇavimala to go on cārikā (wandering). By that time, Buveneka was also ordained and the piṇḍapāta practice went on uninterrupted.

For some time Ven. Ñāṇavimala was given Stugeron (antihistamine) and Cardiprin (aspirin) tablets as a life support drug because he had long experienced blackouts. Then, he suggested that as a monk living on piṇḍapāta, he should abstain from taking this medicine and stressed that giving up taking the tablets would have no effect on him. So we stopped giving him any medicine and he was healthy till the last day proving his words were right.

**Ven. Ñāṇavimala's Early Life**

Ven. Ñāṇavimala's lay name was Friedrich Möller and he lived in the village, Rinteln (about ten houses), four miles from Hessendorf (about sixteen houses). This town is now called New Hessendorf and is 50-60 miles from Hannover. His father was Karl Möller and his mother's name was Charlotte. His sister, Lina was married to Friedrich Meier

and he had a brother who was killed in a nearby village. Also, he had a younger stepbrother named Karl.

He liked athletics and the vertical and horizontal bars in gymnastics. He was injured when he was swimming and got an infected leg. He also took part in the 1936 Olympic March, where he attended the speeches of Adolf Hitler. He mentioned that the speeches had authority and his actions drew the youth towards him.

Sometimes we used to ask about his childhood. He mentioned that he did not like the work in a farm as there was animosity towards animals and he stated as a child that this was not his place. His mother used to say to him, 'What would happen to you when you grow up without knowing the farm work?' One day he was asked to slaughter a chicken. He recalled the experience as devastating and he determined not to do it again.

After World War I, he saw the wounded and destitute coming to his village looking for food. There was so much suffering. He told me of a person known to him saying that he had nothing to worry about as he was a wealthy owner of an insurance company. But after the war he lost everything and was on the road like everyone else. His teacher, who was serving in the Army, went to help a wounded enemy soldier and was shot in the eye while bringing him water. He suffered a lot and was in agony with the pain. So the teacher asked him not to join the Army and even suggested his parents encourage him in his studies.

He happened to come across the Bhagavad Gīta (a Hindu religious text) and this appealed to him as it encouraged compassion, similar to what he practiced on the farm toward animals. As a child he liked the Army uniform (probably because of past lives inclination). He also liked to be in the woods alone and he had migraine headaches from childhood.

He once had a distant friendship with a girlfriend. When she intended to strengthen this friendship by introducing him to her parents, he explained that his inclination was to lead a spiritual life and he wished for her that she would meet a partner, which indeed happened later on.

**Past Lives and Karma**

One day Bhante said that in the past, not only did he perform wholesome activities, but unwholesome ones as well. He was having migraine headaches even after becoming a monk, and wanted to know the cause. He told me that after a deep meditation, he realized what had happened in the past to make him suffer so much from migraine: during the time of the Crusades, he was a German soldier and there was a battle with the Romans in a German village. One Roman soldier, short in height, approached him and he gave a blow to his head with the club which killed him.

Then in the life after, he was in the Army again and this time he fell from the horse he was riding and had injuries. He could remember lying down, near a monument, taking his last breath and thinking, 'Why did all this happen to me and why did I join the Army?' He then passed away, as did his horse.

In another life, he remembered he was in a church during a battle. Fire surrounded the church and he could not get out. Through the window he saw the bell ringer jumping from the tower. He too jumped out, was injured and died. Afterwards he became a ghost, and whilst roaming around he saw the villagers coming to put the fire out. They saw him as a ghost. He was shy and slipped away to another place where he met a friend who was also a ghost and they had this brief conversation, 'Ah! You are here?' 'Yes I am also here.'

In a recent previous life, he remembered he was a farmer and was arranging hay at a high place in a barn. He fell and had a serious head injury and, as he was taking his last breath, he saw his two children and wife weeping and crying. He mentioned that the sight was devastating.

So it shows after the first incident of killing the Roman soldier, in his following lives he always had head injuries or died, and in this life he suffered from migraine headaches.

He mentioned he faintly remembers in one life he was writing books, probably Dhamma books, and in another life he was going on piṇḍapāta, but was not sure whether it was in Lord Buddha's time.

He repeated these incidents a few times when we were looking after him, and each time the details were the same. There wasn't any variance which may have resulted from decaying memory.

**Anecdotes**

Ven. Ñāṇavimala related an incident that occurred during the Tamil insurgency in the early 1970's. Whilst walking on cārikā along a forested stretch of the Habarana Road, he was surrounded by insurgents suspecting him of being a spy. Threatening death, they took him into the forest. Knowing he would be shot at any moment, Ven. Ñāṇavimala requested that he be given a few moments to prepare his mind for the situation. He sat on a nearby rock and told them he would raise one arm to indicate when he was ready. Ven. Ñāṇavimala

closed his eyes, went into meditation and then raised his arm. A few minutes passed and nothing happened. He opened his eyes to see nobody around. Then, he continued on his cārikā again.

Once, whilst on alms round, Bhante noticed there was an unused home with no occupants and an unkempt garden. On another day, the house was not empty and he was invited for dāna (almsfood). He was treated well and the place was very clean. But, to his surprise in the coming days this house was exactly the same as before with no trace of ever being cleaned. Ven. Ñāṇavimala considered this event was organized, not by humans, but by devas (celestial beings).

This is an incident related by Mr Asoka de Silva: on one occasion he was having a Dhamma discussion with Ven. Ñāṇavimala in his room at Vajirarama. The discussion continued till dark and when it was finished, he came out of the room and met people outside who had seen coloured lights moving in and out of the room whilst the Dhamma discussion was taking place. Mr de Silva believed these lights were devas. On another occasion, my brother saw two large crimson balls descending outside Bhante's room at Island Hermitage making the entire area bright. I thought they were perhaps devas.

Once I asked Ven. Ñāṇavimala, 'Sir, have you crossed the river?' (I meant had he achieved an attainment and become an Ariya Puggala, a Noble Person). He gave a sharp look and did not answer. I even mentioned that when I was ten or eleven years old, after offering flowers to Lord Buddha, I made a wish to meet monks who had become Ariya Puggala. A day after Ven. Ñāṇavimala casually told me

only a Sammāsambuddha (Fully Awakened One) could accurately make statements about their attainments, and others could easily make misjudgements about themselves.

When Bhante Yogāvacāra Rāhula (an American monk) met with Ven. Ñāṇavimala, I heard Ven. Ñāṇavimala asking him, 'What were your intentions in becoming a monk?' After they discussed some more, I heard Ven. Ñāṇavimala say, 'I can tell you my experience is that my mind now does not cling to anything in this world'.

Ven. Ñāṇavimala pointed out that one scholarly monk who had translated suttas and was well versed in the texts, asked, 'Now, what am I to do next?' Bhante explained that even when one has knowledge of the Dhamma, but does not truly practice, this can lead to a state of puzzlement. He witnessed some well-known monks who were very good in preaching but who had very poor mental states at the moment of death due to their lack of practice.

**Last Days**

Bhante did not favour milk foods, Sustagen or any special foods or supplements, and had the practice of skipping meals completely some days, especially on Poya days. He mentioned the best drink was water.

Although Parappaduwa Island was supposed to be inhabited by reptiles we had never seen any snakes. A week before Ven. Ñāṇavimala passed away, a snake started to roam around outside his room. Ven. Upasama

saw that this snake was trying to peep through the window of Bhante's room.

He asked us to look at his aging body and said, 'you are looking at your future'. He also said, 'I was a Christian and from a different country and language, but you are born Buddhists with no language problems. What have you gained by being born Buddhists in this country compared to me?'

I remember when Ven. Ñāṇavimala was getting closer to his last days, he said he could hardly speak now and mentioned this is what is called jarā dukkha, suffering from old age. When we paid respect, he continued to bless us, his lips moved in the usual manner though the voice was hardly present. He also made a comment that the engineers (we were marine engineers) should stop, 'singing', i.e. indulging in worldly affairs, and direct their minds to Nibbāna after this experience.

Towards the end, Ven. Upasama sought Bhante's permission for him to receive medical support and was refused. Ven. Ñāṇavimala said he was quite capable and confident of handling his last moments. Bhante was on a liquid diet, then he wanted to be on water for few days, and at last even that was given up for the last three days. He only needed our help to turn his body over in the bed sometimes.

Half an hour before he passed away, Ven. Upasama was at his bedside continuously. Ven. Ñāṇavimala got himself prepared for the last minute by feeling his arms and fingers then cleared his ears, pushed up

his chin and pulled up his robe to cover his chest, then kept both the arms resting on the chest as if he was ready. Ven. Upasama happened to look at Ven. Ñāṇavimala's face and saw him expel his last breath peacefully. How fortunate would it be to face the last moment in this fully controlled manner! May he have attained the highest bliss, Nibbāna!

**Some Short Teachings**

- Lord Buddha has said those who follow my practice will come to an understanding of Dhamma.
- After the mind is firmly established on the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha, there is nothing to fear about the future.
- Don't forget your highest duty towards yourself, your relatives and ultimately towards the whole world, is to attain Nibbāna.
- The highest wholesome kamma is to look after one's own mind and to purify it. Highest happiness cannot be found in the saṅkhāra world. For the highest happiness, you have to go out of the saṅkhāra world by directing your mind to Nibbāna.
- The most important thing is to direct the mind to the higher state, Nibbāna, and other things will follow automatically, as stated by Buddha, 'mano pubbaṅgammā dhammā' (Dhammapada verses 1 & 2).
- What has to be realized, has been realized. What has to be practiced, has been practiced. So no worries…

- Always slowly, carefully, mindfully, before doing it, while doing it, having done it, always make sure of the purity of actions (following Lord Buddha's advice). This moment is the condition for the next moment. The future is conditioned by the way you practice at present.

- Never be satisfied, never be dissatisfied, always direct the mind towards Nibbāna. So called 'death' is just a certain procedure in the world of saṅkhāras (mental formations), it has no meaning at all, starting the same thing again, being born, old age, sickness and death. What a bliss to know the Dhamma that ends all suffering, once and for all.

- What a bliss that one knows about the awareness of Nibbāna. One must strengthen the awareness of Nibbāna. Never deviate from the awareness of Nibbāna – that is the most important thing. One step nearer to the highest bliss, Nibbāna, step by step, happiness to happiness, nothing but happiness.

- Indulging the senses to avoid suffering from saṅkhāras is dangerous. Follow the middle path with a slight inclination to dukkha [discomfort]. Do not burden yourself with this body, this body is a fleeting phenomenon in the saṅkhāra world.

- Human beings are always looking for new things, nice things, otherwise life would be awful – that is the nature of the world. But nothing new, always the same, something repeating again and again. Why should one do that? You can't find happiness by looking for nice things, tasting nice food, etc. The happiness to be

looked for is that which results from seeing according to the Dhamma.

- It is time for the world to be united by the Buddha's words. Not to fight with each other, to come to peace under Buddha's words. Blind beliefs and expectations propel this existence. The true Dhamma way of life is with less and less needs, with less and less work, but the world is doing the opposite - more and more things, which means more and more trouble. Saṅgha life is an example for a happy simple life without more and more things.

"TRANSIENT ARE ALL CONDITIONED THINGS"
WHEN ONE DISCERNS THIS WITH WISDOM,
THEN BECOMES DISGUSTED WITH SUFFERING,
THIS IS THE PATH TO PURITY
"GAUTHAMA BUDDHA"
VENERABLE NYANAVIMALA MAHATHERA
BORN IN RINTELN, GERMANY ON 23-11-1912
AS FRIEDRICH MOLLER
PASSED AWAY IN PARAPPUDUWA ON 09-10-2005

# Postscript: Most Venerable Ñāṇavimala Mahāthera

Some twenty years ago in a residential part of the city of Colombo, an ascetic monk of foreign origin walked from house to house, on piṇḍapāta (going for alms food). Although this was the practice enshrined in the Buddha's monastic teaching, it was a very unusual sight in the fast developing urban capital of Sri Lanka. The monk was serene and pleasant, and he walked slowly, mindfully and silently. After the morning meal was served into the alms bowl, he offered simple blessings and on occasion a brief Dhamma teaching prior to proceeding to his temporary abode, the Vajirarama temple. This practice of piṇḍapāta by the elderly foreign monk continued even when he was not in good health and had painful, swollen feet.

Typically, once a week, a pious and devout lady in her early fifties residing in an affluent part of Colombo, used to eagerly await this monk's visit. Indeed she even had a pre-planned 'menu' ready and waiting for this special opportunity to serve the morning dāna and to venerate the monk every week. Her blissful face radiating with joy was always an indication that the monk had, in fact, made his weekly visit.

Residing with his grandmother during those times was a young student named Kshanaka, who had the valuable opportunity of associating with this bhikkhu and offering dāna on a regular basis. Years passed by, and the young Kshanaka became increasingly interested in exploring the teachings of the Buddha, whilst also studying other religions and contemplative practices. Gradually, the visiting monk

*Previous Page:* V*en. Ñāṇavimala Shrine, Pannapitiya*

became a teacher to the young student, and a special student-teacher relationship developed, that was to make a significant impact on the life of the young Kshanaka.

On many occasions, as a lay practitioner, Kshanaka used to spend weeks and months on an island hermitage in the south of Sri Lanka with his teacher, practicing meditation and learning the deep teachings of the Buddha. He too took up the practice of cārikā, traveling miles on foot, using simple dwellings and residing in remote forests in sparsely inhabited parts of Sri Lanka. Whenever the teacher fell ill and required hospitalisation, Kshanaka slept on the floor beneath the hospital bed keeping a watchful eye over him. Over time, Kshanaka evolved into a steadfast disciple and a devoted attendant to his mentor, the German bhikkhu, the Most Venerable Ñāṇavimala Mahā Thera.

On December 18th, 1999 after ordination at a simple ceremony, Venerable Ñāṇavimala's earnest disciple Kshanaka became Venerable Bambalapitiye Ñāṇāloka Thera. The monastic student continued the same practice, taking abode at his teacher's monastery, the Island Hermitage in Polgasduwa. As before, while continuing to emulate his teacher, Venerable Ñāṇāloka led a life of austerity and simplicity, with a firm resolve to abide by the Dhamma and the Vinaya as prescribed by the Buddha. Living in seclusion, subsisting on food from alms rounds, staying in simple dwellings and striving ardently, were the hallmarks of the practice of these two monks. They lived by the teachings of the great Master and they demonstrated that such a monastic lifestyle was possible even 2600 years after the Buddha's

ministry. Indeed it was such exemplary spiritual lifestyles that inspired many lay Buddhists at that time to take up the practice of meditation ardently.

The monastic relationship between the mentor and pupil lasted until about 2004. During those memorable years the old lady who, facilitated the meeting between the two (i.e. Venerable Ñāṇāloka's grandmother), had the opportunity to visit the island hermitages at Polgasduwa and Parappaduwa many times, and to offer alms to the monks and listen to Dhamma teachings. She and her family were able to make a variety of offerings to both Venerables Ñāṇavimala and Ñāṇāloka, and to learn true spirituality from the exceptional lives they led. Her own devotion to the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha grew, and was epitomized by her unflinching adherence to sīla. The compassion and kindness she radiated were likened to these same traits inherent in the great German monk.

This postscript is to pay homage and to venerate with extreme respect, one of the most humble, simple, and yet a great son of the Buddha who lived on Sri Lankan soil, the Most Venerable Ñāṇavimala Mahā Thera. The writer is the sponsor of the publication and the daughter of the elderly lady who offered alms to Venerable Ñāṇavimala during the 1990's.

*Next Page:* V*en. Ñāṇavimala Shrine, Island Hermitage*

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# Ven. Ñāṇavimala's Suggested Readings

| List of Suttas for Upāsakas | |
|---|---|
| **Who is an Upāsaka?** | |
| AN 5.175 | Various qualities of upāsakas |
| AN 8.25<br>AN 8.26<br>SN 55.37 | Saddhā, sīla, diṭṭhi-ujuka |
| DN 31 | Sigalovāda Sutta: Duties to family |
| AN 4.60 | Duties of upāsaka to Saṅgha |
| AN 8.21 | Eight dhammas for laypeople (Gahapativagga) |
| AN 8.41 | Upāsakavagga |
| **Saṁvega** | |
| AN 7.74 | How life grew shorter |
| DN 26 | What will happen in the future |
| MN 130 | Devadūta |
| **Dāna** | |
| Iti 22 | Dāna, damma, saṁyama |
| AN 9.10 | Whom to give dāna to |
| AN 9.20 | How to give dāna |
| AN 10.177 | Merit to petas |
| AN 7.49 | Dāna as mahapphalaṁ |
| AN 5.35 | Dāna ānisaṁsa |
| **Sīla** | |
| AN 8.41<br>AN 8.42 | Eight sīla for laypeople |

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|---|---|
| AN 10.46 | Uposatha, not only once in a while |
| AN 3.70 | What is uposatha? |
| SN 47.47 | Sīla as kāya vāca mano sucaritaṁ |
| SN 55.2 | Ariyakanta sīla |
| **Bhāvanā** | |
| AN 5.176 | Sutta to Anāthapiṇḍika – even a lay follower should train in paviveka |
| SN 47.3 | Diṭṭhi ca ujuka, sīlañ-ca suvisuddhaṁ, four satipaṭṭhāna, samādhinimitta (M 44) |
| MN 143 | Anāthapiṇḍika Sutta |
| AN 11.12 | Sutta to Mahānāma |
| SN 54.12 | Sutta to Mahānāma |
| **How to judge the Dhamma** | |
| AN 8.53 | Eight qualities of the Dhamma |
| **Kālaṁ āgameyya** | |
| SN 22.1<br>AN 3.51<br>AN 3.52 | Keep the mind healthy at old age |
| MN 83 end | Don't be the last person in the line |
| **Benefits of Dhamma Practice** | |
| AN 4.116<br>AN 4.117 | No fear of death |
| AN 5.122 | Some benefits |
| **First duties to oneself** | |
| Dh 166 | Not to neglect oneself for the sake of others |
| Dh 158 | First establish yourself, then teach |
| **Duties to relatives** | |

| | |
|---|---|
| SN 55.17<br>AN 3.75 | Duty to establish relatives in faith in Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha, sīla |

| List of Suttas for Bhikkhus | |
|---|---|
| MN 117 | Complete the Noble Eightfold Path in a specific order to obtain samādhi. After that sammāñāṇa and sammāvimutti |
| MN 107<br>MN 39<br>MN 53<br>MN 59<br>MN 27 | The gradual training for a bhikkhu |
| MN 125 | The gradual training for jhāna. |
| A 10.61 | If you have difficulties at the present level of practice then take one step back and practice at that level |
| MN 61 | Sīla for laypeople - eight precepts for monks - Pātimokkha for ariyas - ariyakanta sīla. This sutta is describing a different kind of sīla which is purity in kāya, vāca and mano (tīṇi sucaritāni). Based on this sīla, pīti will arise |
| MN 7 | Reflecting on the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha leads to step by step progress as follows: saddhā, pāmujja, pīti, passaddhakāya, sukha, samādhi. This process is how one comes to samādhi with joy and Dhamma-understanding as a basis |
| MN 40 | More or less the same as M7, but based on purity of the twelve qualities |
| MN 64 | How to practice for sammāñāṇa and sammāvimutti |

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|---|---|
| | with jhāna as the basis |

# About the Contributors

**Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi**

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi is an American Buddhist monk from New York City, born in 1944. He obtained a BA in philosophy from Brooklyn College and a PhD in philosophy from Claremont Graduate School. After completing his university studies he travelled to Sri Lanka where he received novice ordination in 1972 and full ordination in 1973. From 1984 to 2002 he was the editor for the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy, where he lived for ten years with the senior German monk, Ven. Ñāṇaponika Thera (1901-1994), at the Forest Hermitage. He returned to the U.S. in 2002 and currently lives and teaches at Bodhi Monastery in New Jersey. Ven. Bodhi has many important publications to his credit, either as author, translator, or editor. These include The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, and The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha.

**Bhikkhu Ñāṇatusita**

Born in the Netherlands in 1967, as a youth he joined his father's business for a while, then went to see the world. He arrived in Sri Lanka in 1990 to learn meditation and ordained at Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya. After spending time at well-known monasteries in Australia and England, when he returned to Sri Lanka in 2003, he was invited by Bhikkhu Bodhi to stay at the Forest Hermitage and in 2005 took over as editor of the Buddhist Publication Society. Apart from his editing work, Bhikkhu Ñāṇatusita has authored works including

The Life of Ñāṇatiloka Thera (co-authored with Hellmuth Hecker) and An Analysis of the Bhikkhu Pātimokkha.

**Ven. Gampaha Pemasiri**

Ven. Gampaha Pemasiri was born on 5th December 1942 at Kidagammulle, Gampaha. After leaving school at age 15, he tried various studies and work, but none of these pursuits held his attention. From around the age of 17, he spent much of his time meditating at Siyane Vipassana Centre, Kanduboda under the guidance of respected teacher, Ven. Sumathipāla Mahāthera. On 11th March 1964, he ordained with Ven. Rerukane Candavimala as preceptor and Ven. Sumathipāla as teacher. He lived at Kanduboda for many years and regularly sat in whilst Ven. Sumathipāla was instructing yogis in meditation. He was formally appointed as an assistant teacher in 1969. After Ven. Sumathipāla passed away at age 86 on 14th July 1982, Ven. Pemasiri became the abbot of Kanduboda. Then in 1989, he was invited to be abbot of Vipassana Bhavana Centre, Colombo. He is currently abbot of Sumathipāla Araṇa, a new meditation centre he founded in 2002, on land adjacent to Siyane Vipassana Centre, Kanduboda. Ven. Pemasiri is recognized as one of the foremost meditation teachers in Sri Lanka. He has taught meditation in Australia, Japan, Oman, Slovakia, Austria and the Czech Republic and two books in English of his teachings have been published, 'Walking the Tightrope' and 'Affectionate Splendour'.

**Ven. K. Ñāṇananda**

Ven. Katukurunde Ñāṇananda was a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and scholar who was born in Galle District in 1940 and passed away in

2018. He was educated at Mahinda College, Galle, and in 1962, graduated from the University of Peradeniya, Kandy, where he specialized in Pāli Studies. He served there for a while as an Assistant Lecturer in Pāli, but renounced his post in 1967 to ordain as a monk in the Sri Lankan forest tradition at Island Hermitage, Dodanduwa. In 1972, he moved to Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya, Gampaha District to practise under the renowned meditation master, Ven. Śrī Mātara Ñāṇārāma Mahāthera. Some time after Ven. Ñāṇārāma died in 1992, Ven. Ñāṇananda moved to Pothgulgala Aranya, Kegalle District. Ven. Ñāṇananda has always maintained a simple, austere mode of practice with a strong commitment to strict Vinaya discipline. His best known works are Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought, published in 1971, and The Magic of the Mind, published in 1974, both completed during his stay at the Island Hermitage. His latest major work is a collection of his sermons titled 'Nibbāna – The Mind Stilled', initially published in Sinhala and later in English.

**Ayoma Wickremasinghe**

Ayoma Wickremasinghe is well known in Sri Lanka as a Mahā Upāsikā, a great supporter of the Saṅgha. In her teens she travelled to Burma where she studied under the guidance of Webu Sayadaw, where she made excellent progress in meditation. Ayoma is very well versed in the Pāli scriptures, and has translated selections into clear, modern Sinhala. She was a great devotee of Ven. Ñāṇavimala and built a kuṭi for him on her estate near Horana, where he spent many a rains retreat. She also dwelt for long periods of time on meditation retreat.

**Ven. Hiriko**

Okwang Sunim (previously Ven. Hiriko) is a Zen monk ordained in a Korean Chogye Order. He lived as a Theravada monk in Thailand and Sri Lanka from 1993-98. During 1997 he was the attendant to Ven. Ñāṇavimala at the Island Hermitage and in Colombo.

**Ven. Ajahn Brahmavaṁso**

Ven. Ajahn Brahmavaṁso (known to most as Ajahn Brahm) was born in London, England in 1951 and studied Theoretical Physics at Cambridge University. At Cambridge he joined the university's Buddhist Society and at the age of 18 saw a monk for the first time. He knew then that was what he wanted to be. After graduating from Cambridge he taught in a high school for a year before travelling to Thailand in 1973 to become a monk and train with the Venerable Ajahn Chah. In 1983 he was sent by Ajahn Chah to Perth, Western Australia where he helped establish Bodhiñāṇa Monastery, Serpentine, of which he is now the abbot. Ajahn Brahm has been influential in setting up Dhammasāra Nuns' Monastery, Gidgegannup and regularly teaches Dhamma in various parts of Australia and South East Asia. His weekly Dhamma talks are streamed live worldwide on the Buddhist Society of Western Australia YouTube channel. Ajahn Brahm has also several books, including Opening the Door of Your Heart (formerly published as 'Who Ordered This Truckload of Dung?') and Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond: A Meditator's Handbook.

**Ven. Guttasīla**

Ven. Guttasīla is a respected Western monk who lives in Sri Lanka. He was born in New Zealand in 1947 and after leaving school began studying medicine at Otago University. Whilst travelling in Thailand in the mid-seventies he came across the Buddha's teaching. He subsequently ordained as a novice at Wat Phleng Wipassana, Thonburi in December 1975 and took higher ordination in June 1976 at Wat Bowon, Bangkok. In 1980 he moved to Sri Lanka where he initially resided at Island Hermitage and later at Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya

where he practised under the guidance of Ven. Śrī Mātara Ñāṇārāma for many years. Since 1990 he has lived mainly in solitude in Sri Lankan forests, with the exception of several years practising under the guidance of Pa Auk Sayadaw in Myanmar.

**Ven. Ñāṇadīpa Thera**

Ven. Ñāṇadīpa is a monk of French-Danish extraction. He arrived in Sri Lanka in 1968 and took robes at Island Hermitage the following year. From the beginning, he has had a preference for austere living and has always stayed in remote forest areas. His deep knowledge of Pāli and the original teaching is renowned. He has been the inspiration for generations of sincere practitioners to follow in his footsteps.

**Chittapala**

Chittapala was born in Sydney, Australia in 1951 and studied humanities and social work at Sydney University. Whilst travelling in Thailand in 1975, he heard Buddha Dhamma for the first time, and in early 1977 ordained at Wat Bowon, Bangkok. In late 1978 he relocated to Sri Lanka, initially dwelling at Island Hermitage and later at Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya. In 1983, he began living a solitary monk's life in Sinha Raja Forest, south of Ratnapura. Then in 1986, he came down with a debilitating viral illness which was a condition for him to return to Australia and eventually disrobe in 1994. For many years Chittapala has been living a quiet contemplative life on Magnetic Island, North Queensland.

**Amal Randhir Karunaratna**

Amal was born in Kandy, Sri Lanka in 1957. In 1972 his family moved to New Zealand, where he completed high school and the family

moved to Adelaide, Australia three years later. He completed a B.Sc. (Hons.) at Flinders University, a MBA from the University of Adelaide, a M.Com at Bond University in the Gold Coast and a Ph.D. from Sydney University. He was Associate Professor (Adj.) at the School of Business, University of Adelaide, and CEO of Breakthrough Business Intelligence and Chairman of Sinhaputhra Finance and Honorary Consul for the British High Commission in Kandy. He has published numerous articles in international journals, book chapters, magazines and newspapers, presented papers in international conferences and has travelled widely throughout Asia, the US and Europe. With a family who are strong supporters of the Saṅgha, Amal has been interested in Dhamma from an early age and was strongly influenced by his parents. Since moving back to Kandy in 2007, Amal has been semi-retired, with ample opportunity to spend extended periods in Dhamma at different centres, but particularly under the guidance of Ven. Pemasiri Mahāthera at Sumathipala Nahimi Senasun Arana District, Gampaha District.

**Ven. Pannipitiye Upasama**

As a layman, Ven. Upasama was known as Buwaneka Nilkomal Wijethilaka. He was a successful marine engineer rising to the rank of Chief Engineer, obtaining a British License in a sea-going career which took him around the world. He had an inclination to Dhamma from his youth due to his father's influence which resulted in having close associations with Saṅgha. Meeting Ven. Ñāṇavimala led him to lead a stronger spiritual life and finally he became a Buddhist monk. Presently, he is living most of the time in forest retreats.

**Nimal Wijenarayana Sonnadara**

Nimal had the inclination to dhamma from a very young age due to the influence of his parents and took up a sea-going career and rose up to the rank of Chief Engineer with a British marine licence. He worked for Ropner Ship management based in Darlington UK and was a colleague of Buweneka in the training group for marine engineers at Walker Sons & Co. Ltd., Colombo. Much of his time spent on activities overlaps with Buvaneka and he was privileged to have an opportunity to attend on Ven. Ñāṇavimala. This laid a stable footing to develop a stronger understanding of the Dhamma.