



FROM A SIMPLE BOWL OF PORRIDGE

THE LIFE OF NYANATILOKA THERA
The Biography of a Buddhist Pioneer

By Bhikkhu Nyanatusita and Hellmuth Hecker

Buddhist Publication Society, 2009

\$8.00; 274 pages (paperback)

Reviewed by Ajahn Punnadhammo

The dhamma clearly has become well established in the West. Buddhist books, including reliable translations of the scriptures, are readily available, in many cases just a mouse-click away. Most large cities have temples, meditation centers, and sitting circles, usually offering students a choice of different schools and traditions. It is even possible to take full ordination in several Western countries.

We should be careful not to exaggerate Buddhism's reach in North America and Europe—after all, it remains very much a minority religion. However, just

by perusing the articles and advertisements in this magazine it's possible to get a feel for the diversity and increasing maturity of Western Buddhism.

It is easy to forget how recent this is. Few Buddhist institutions in America and Europe predate the 1970s. We would do well to remember with gratitude the brave struggles of the pioneers who made it possible for us to receive these teachings.

One of the most important of the early Buddhists from the West was the Venerable Nyanatiloka Thera, the first German bhikkhu, who was ordained in Burma in

1904. His remarkable life is detailed in a new book from the Buddhist Publication Society. *The Life of Nyanatiloka Thera* begins with a short essay on the early history of Buddhism in Germany—itsself an interesting historical document—written by Walter Persian in 1931. The largest section of the book is Nyanatiloka's autobiography. Unfortunately, this breaks off in 1926, but the next section, researched and written by Bhikkhu Nyanatusita and Hellmuth Hecker, covers the remainder of Nyanatiloka's life to his death in 1957. The book also contains three valuable appendices: a brief biography of his disciple Nyanaponika Thera, by Bhikkhu Bodhi; a bibliographical essay detailing the writings and translations of Nyanatiloka in German and English; and a listing of Nyanatiloka's disciples, which provides a good overview of this lineage. The book is supported by thorough and informative endnotes. Taken as a whole, the book is not only a fascinating historical narrative, but a worthy example of the fine tradition of Western Buddhist scholarship begun by Nyanatiloka himself.

The young man who was to become Nyanatiloka Bhikkhu, Anton Walter Florus Gueth, grew up in a dynamic milieu. Germany in the 1880s and '90s was a prosperous, progressive society. The nation at that time was among the world leaders industrially, scientifically, and intellectually. It was also a leader in the importation of Eastern and Buddhist thought. The influence of Buddhism on German philosopher Schopenhauer, and through him, on German philosophy generally, is well known. Persian's essay demonstrates other strands of Buddhist influence—on Nietzsche and Wagner for instance—that are perhaps more surprising.

The Buddhism known in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century was, however, hardly orthodox. Much of it was mixed up with the craze for occultism, and with Theosophy in particular. The popular presentation of Buddhist doctrine was confused with Upanishadic ideas as well.

AJAHN PUNNADHAMMO, born Michael Dominskyj, is the resident bhikkhu at the Arrow River Forest Hermitage, a Theravada Buddhist monastery and meditation center in northern Ontario. He began practicing Buddhism in 1979 and was ordained in Thailand in the forest tradition of Ajahn Chah in 1990.

The young Anton Gueth first encountered Buddhism while listening to a Theosophical lecture at a vegetarian restaurant. “Paradoxically as it may sound,” he recalled, “the reason for... my conversion to Buddhism... was my love for oat porridge.” One of the themes that run through the book is the mature Nyanatiloka’s steady efforts to encourage and propagate a more scholarly rigorous, scripturally based, and traditional form of Buddhism than had existed in the West up until then. He required all his students to learn Pali, and many of our best-known translations in both German and English are the work of monks in his lineage. Nyanatiloka himself translated, among other texts, the *Vissudhimagga* into German, and his student Nyanamoli rendered the same important text into English. Bhikkhu Bodhi, a contemporary monk in this tradition, has published what are now the standard translations of the *Majjhima* and *Samyutta Nikayas*, building on the unfinished work of Nyanamoli.

All this would be impressive enough had Nyanatiloka and his disciples been able to work peacefully and comfortably. However, this story is also one of heroic struggles. After Gueth had decided to journey to the East to find the original teachings, he faced years of difficulty making his way there. Long journeys at the time were by sea, and very expensive. Gueth was an accomplished musician, and he parlayed his talent into musical jobs, working his way east in stages via Greece, Egypt, and India. He eventually made it to Burma, where he sought out a Westerner who had preceded him, the Scotsman Ananda Metteya. (When Britain is included, Nyanatiloka was the fourth European bhikkhu.) Nyanatiloka took ordination in Burma, though for most of his life his monastic home was Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).

As it turned out, Nyanatiloka’s struggles were far from over. In the early years of the Island Hermitage he founded in Ceylon, conditions were primitive, the climate hard on northern constitutions, and the food often inadequate. Yet, by his own

account, he was happy and productive. However, the history of the greater world was to intrude on his austere but peaceful retreat. As a German national living in a British colony, Nyanatiloka was interned in both world wars. The conditions of internment during the First World War were particularly harsh. Nyanatiloka and his small group of German disciples were eventually shipped to Australia. The book includes an historic photograph of the first time bhikkhus set foot on that continent, walking under armed guard down the plank of a British prison ship. Several of the monks abandoned their yellow robes under these stress conditions, but Nyanatiloka held to his faith. As he says, “I was never much concerned about my physical comfort.”

Before the war ended, the British policy changed and German prisoners deemed harmless were released. They were supposed to return to Germany via the neutral United States, but Nyanatiloka’s only thought was to get back to a Buddhist country. The British sent him to Honolulu, where he got on a ship bound for China with the intention of traveling overland to the Shan States bordering Burma. His journey across China accompanied by another monk was yet another series of hardships and misadventures, including a further period of imprisonment.

It was not until 1926 that he was able to return to Ceylon, and only after many more travels and difficulties, including being caught in the crossfire of the 1919 revolution in Germany and finding himself in the midst of the Great Japanese Earthquake of 1923. After all this, he returned to his “beloved Lanka” to find his hermitage in ruins. Nevertheless, through all this he maintained his steady devotion to the dhamma and even proceeded with his literary work.

The Second World War internment was longer but the conditions were less severe. This time the German internees were sent to the Dehra Dun camp in northern India. Here also were several of his disciples, including Nyanaponika. During his time in the camp, Nyanatiloka completed much

literary work, including his influential *Buddhist Dictionary*, which is still a standard reference. *The Life of Nyanatiloka Thera* includes a long extract from a book by Walther Eidlitz that describes life in Dehra Dun. This is a fascinating glimpse into a chapter of history that deserves to be better known—a microcosm of cultural interchange and political intrigue in the shadows of the Himalayas during a time of global conflict.

After the war Nyanatiloka returned to Ceylon, where he spent most of the rest of his life. In 1951 he moved upcountry to the new Forest Hermitage, which had a healthier climate. By the end of his life Nyanatiloka was known and respected internationally, and his funeral in 1957 was a national event in Sri Lanka attended by many dignitaries.

This brief synopsis certainly can’t capture the full scope of Nyanatiloka’s heroic life. His struggles included not only imprisonment, illness, long wanderings, earthquakes, and hunger, but—for a long time at least—a lack of understanding in Germany. During his lifetime, his attempts to establish a monastery in Europe met with frustration. Nevertheless, in the autobiographical section of the book his tone always remains calm, humble, and even cheerful. If it were not for Bhikkhu Nyanatusita’s excellent endnotes we would not appreciate how difficult things were for Nyanatiloka.

It would be difficult to overstate how important Nyanatiloka’s legacy has been for the development of Buddhism in the West. The tradition he established emphasized careful, precise, scholarly work, and has been prolific both in translation and original works. The publisher of this book, the Buddhist Publication Society, was founded by his disciple Nyanaponika and continues to produce a regular stream of books and pamphlets. It is not an exaggeration to say that the existence of the traditional Theravada teachings in the West today owes more to Nyanatiloka than to any other person.

It seems that quite a lot can come from a simple bowl of porridge. **BD**