

Ānanda Metteyya

The First British Emissary of Buddhism

by

Elizabeth J. Harris

Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka

The Wheel Publication No. 420/422

Published in 1998

Copyright © 1998 by Elizabeth J. Harris

ISBN 955-24-0179-8

The Wheel Publication No. 420/422BPS Online Edition © (2011)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS Transcription Project

For free distribution. This work may be republished, reformatted, reprinted and redistributed in any medium. However, any such republication and redistribution is to be made available to the public on a free and unrestricted basis, and translations and other derivative works are to be clearly marked as such.

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Preface. The First Buddhist Mission to Britain..... | 3 |
| Chapter 1. Ānanda Metteyya: A Dedicated Life..... | 4 |
| The Search for Truth..... | 5 |
| In Sri Lanka..... | 7 |
| In Burma..... | 8 |
| The Mission to England..... | 10 |
| Years of Crisis..... | 11 |
| Chapter 2. 19th Century British Attitudes to Buddhism..... | 14 |
| Chapter 3. Ānanda Metteyya’s Interpretation of Buddhism..... | 17 |
| A Suffering World..... | 17 |
| The Buddha..... | 18 |
| The Path..... | 20 |
| Nibbāna—Inalienable Peace..... | 23 |
| Morality and Meditation..... | 25 |
| Chapter 4. Buddhism as Social Comment..... | 28 |
| Hope through Science..... | 30 |
| A Message for Today?..... | 32 |
| Journals Quoted..... | 35 |

Preface

The First Buddhist Mission to Britain

In April 1908 a small Buddhist mission arrived in London from Burma, headed by a tall, lean, ascetic looking monk named Ānanda Metteyya. Unlike his companions, Ānanda Metteyya was not Burmese but British—the second Westerner, in fact, ever to take the saffron robe. Born in London with the name Allan Bennett, trained as an analytic chemist, he had been drawn by an intense spiritual thirst to the teachings of the Buddha, and in 1901, in Burma, he had entered the order of Buddhist monks. Although the mission did not fulfil its intended purpose, Ānanda Metteyya's eloquent writings and selfless efforts sowed the seeds that would gradually bear fruit in the growth of Buddhism in the West.

The present study, written with deep sensitivity, examines the life and thought of this Western Buddhist pioneer, whose premature death at the age of fifty deprived British Buddhism of one of its most capable early spokesmen. The author not only discusses Ānanda Metteyya's thought in its own historical context but also inquires into its relevance to us today.

Elizabeth J. Harris is Secretary for Inter-faith Relations for The Methodist Church in London. She holds a doctorate in Buddhist studies from the University of Kelaniya and co-produced the recent BBC series, "The Path of the Buddha."

BPS Editor

Chapter 1

Ānanda Metteyya: A Dedicated Life

His face was the most significant that I have ever seen. Twenty years of physical suffering had twisted and scored it: a lifetime of meditation upon universal love had imparted to it an expression that was unmistakable. His colour was almost dusky, and his eyes had the soft glow of dark amber.... Above all, at the moment of meeting and always thereafter, I was conscious of a tender and far-shining emanation, an unvarying psychic sunlight, that environed his personality.¹

Clifford Bax, artist and dramatist, wrote these words after meeting Ānanda Metteyya in 1918. A sick man incapacitated by asthma for weeks at a time, he was then wearing the clothes of a lay person and had reverted to his civilian name, Allan Bennett. Yet, ten years earlier, as the Venerable Ānanda Metteyya, he had led the first Buddhist mission to England from Burma. The Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland had been formed to prepare the way for him. Bennett, in fact, was the second British person to take on the robes of a Buddhist monk and his influence on Buddhism in Britain in the first decades of the twentieth century was deep.

Even within his own lifetime Allan Bennett was a controversial figure. In 1894, he joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a society concerned with spiritual growth through esoteric knowledge. He gained a reputation as a magician and a man of mystery, which was not completely shaken off even when he embraced Buddhism several years later. In the early years of the twentieth century, he was much praised by Western Buddhists. Yet, as time passed, he became more and more marginalised as asthma took an ever deepening grip on his life, leading to dependency on drugs. By 1916, his case is described as a “sad” one by *The Buddhist Review*, published by The Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland. In 1917–18, he managed to give a series of lectures and when he died in 1923, he was the acting Honorary Secretary of The Buddhist Society. Yet, his final years were marked by poverty. Clifford Bax wrote in the conclusion of his 1918 article:

As a Buddhist, he was an alert and powerful personality: as Allan Bennett, a poor man, dwelling unknown in London, he was a sick creature prematurely old. As he was putting on his overcoat, I heard Meena Gunn saying, “Why it’s riddled with moths,” and Bennett responding, “They’re such pretty little things,” and Meena continuing, “Some day we must get you a new one: this coat is too full of holes,” and Bennett answering, shy of his pun, “But, you see, I’m supposed to be a holy man.”²

Bennett was buried without a memorial stone in Morden cemetery. His lifelong friend, Dr. Cassius Pereira, wrote:

And now the worker has, for this life, laid aside his burden. One feels more glad than otherwise, for he was tired; his broken body could no longer keep pace with his soaring mind. The work he began, that of introducing Buddhism to the West, he pushed with enthusiastic vigour in pamphlet, journal and lecture, all masterly, all stimulating thought, all in his own inimitably graceful style. And the results are not disappointing to those who know.³

Allan Bennett was a holy man. His writings reveal sensitivity, conviction, and passionate concern that Buddhism should grow in the West. He combined a poetic imagination, a scientific mind, and a deep concern for justice and peace. He was also able to make the Buddhist path live, not so much through lectures as through the written word. In this study, I seek to make his thought come alive. I look at his life and place him in historical perspective. Then I probe his view of the world and his interpretation of Buddhist doctrine. I show how his thought developed through the trauma of the First World War, and finally I discuss the relevance of his writings today.

¹Clifford Bax, “Ānanda Metteyya” in *The Middle Way*, Vol. 43:1, May 1968, p.23.

²Ibid., p.27.

³*The Buddhist*, 28th April 1923, p.6.

Of course, it is impossible to re-create the thought of Ānanda Metteyya with authenticity two generations after he died. I rely mainly on what he published in England and Burma, a few personal letters, and the impressions of his contemporaries in Sri Lanka and the West. Furthermore, no biographical writing is objective. It reflects the biographer's character as much as it portrays the person written about. Allan Bennett, or Ānanda Metteyya, will elude any attempt to pin him down. He was a man of his time, born when the British Empire was at the height of its power and the wish to probe new religious pathways was gripping many young minds. Yet, I believe the message he strove to share is still relevant. A probe into his life not only uncovers forgotten history but can give inspiration to the present.

The Search for Truth

In piecing together the biography of Allan Bennett, I am heavily indebted to the writings of two of his closest friends: Aleister Crowley and Dr. Cassius Pereira (later Ven. Kassapa Thera).⁴ Bennett's relationship with Crowley was not lifelong. It began when Bennett was more interested in esoteric mysticism than Buddhism and petered out as Crowley sank deeper and deeper into study of the occult. The friendship with Pereira was based on a more solid foundation, that of commitment to Buddhism. They met on Bennett's first visit to Sri Lanka in 1900 and the relationship continued when Bennett went to Burma. Alec Robertson⁵ told me that Ven. Kassapa had told him he had had such a close rapport with Bennett that the two could communicate by telepathy. Each knew the other's thoughts, even at a distance.

Allan Bennett was born in London on the 8th December 1872. His father, a civil and electrical engineer, died when Allan was young. Cassius Pereira claims he was adopted by a Mr. McGregor and kept this name until McGregor died, a fact repeated to me by Ven. Balangoda Ānanda Maitreya.⁶ Yet, it is possible that his mother was still in contact with him, since Crowley refers to him being brought up by his mother as a strict Catholic.⁷ His education was in Bath after which he trained as an analytical chemist. He was eventually employed by Dr. Bernard Dyer, a public analyst and consulting chemist of international repute who was based in London as an official analyst to the London Corn Trade at the time of Bennett's association with him.⁸

Information about Bennett's early years is sketchy. What is available suggests that he was a sensitive and serious young man who became alienated from Christianity both because it seemed incompatible with science and because he could not square the concept of a God of love with the suffering he saw and experienced. The asthma which plagued him throughout his life seems to have begun in childhood. As a young man, it prevented him from holding down a permanent job. Together with his family circumstances, this meant that he was at times desperately poor. Suffering, therefore, was part of his life from an early stage. Crowley, in fact, wrote of him, "Allan never knew joy; he disdained and distrusted pleasure from the womb."⁹

If Bennett distrusted pleasure, he certainly didn't distrust the search for truth and goodness. This seems to have informed his life from youth. Nineteenth century developments in science gripped

⁴Dr. Cassius Pereira was a prominent Sri Lankan Buddhist. Together with Ven. Narada, Dr. W.A. de Silva, and Hema Basnayake, in 1921 he founded the Servants of the Buddha, an organization which provided a forum for English-speaking Buddhists to discuss the Dhamma. At the age of 65 he was ordained with the monastic name Kassapa, receiving both novice ordination and higher ordination on the same day. Throughout his life, he was an influential exponent of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka, stressing its rationality. His father built Maitriya Hall (Lauries Road, Bambalapitiya), which was named after Ānanda Metteyya.

⁵Alec Robertson, a prominent exponent of Buddhism, has been linked with the Servants of the Buddha since 1948, since 1970 as its President. He was a close associate of Dr. Cassius Pereira.

⁶Ven. Balangoda Ānanda Maitreya Thera was born in 1896 and entered the Bhikkhu Sangha in 1911, gaining higher ordination in 1916. During his life, he has earned international renown as a scholar and spiritual leader. Still alive and in good health at the time this publication goes to press (1998), he was one of the few people I met during my research having first-hand memories of Ānanda Metteyya's era.

⁷*The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, eds. John Symonds & Kenneth Grant (Penguin (Arkana), Harmondsworth, U.K., 1989), p.180.

⁸Kenneth Grant, *The Magical Revival* (Frederick Muller Ltd., London, 1972), p.82n.

⁹*Confessions*, p.234.

him, particularly in the areas of chemistry and electricity, and scientific metaphors permeate his writing. Science meant far more to him than technical knowledge. He linked it with the search for truth about the human being and human consciousness. In his youth particularly, it was intertwined with his religious quest. After rejecting Roman Catholicism, he turned first to Hinduism and Buddhism. In 1890, at the age of eighteen, he read Edwin Arnold's poem, *The Light of Asia*. Some say he became a Buddhist at this point but this is doubtful. The poem certainly had a profound influence on him but it was part of a larger exploration which included Hindu literature as well. Both Cassius Pereira and Aleister Crowley refer to him practising yogic forms of breath control and meditation at this time, a practise closer to Hinduism than to Buddhism. Pereira thought these exercises might have exacerbated his asthma. Crowley refers to him experiencing, at eighteen, Shivadarshana, which Crowley describes as an extraordinarily high state of yogic attainment. "It is a marvel that Allan survived and kept his reason," Crowley remarked, but he also claimed that Bennett had told him that he wanted to get back to that state.¹⁰

In addition, Bennett was also being drawn both into Theosophy and spiritualism, psychology and Western esoteric mysticism. Spiritualism entered Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, based on the conviction that there was a spirit world which could be contacted by clairvoyants. It became linked with interest in alchemy, magical invocations, and esoteric or secret knowledge. Helena Blavatsky, one of the founders of Theosophy, for instance, claimed she was in contact with mahatmas, masters in the spirit world. Significant for Bennett was the creation of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1889 by William Wynn Westcott and Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers.¹¹ At first its members were little more than spiritual philosophers, interested in such things as astrology, alchemy, mysticism, and the kabbalah—esoteric practices connected with Judaism. Later, magical rituals were developed and practised. Bennett joined in 1894. He took the name Iehi Aour, Hebrew for "let there be light," and rapidly became an important member, respected for his psychic powers.

At this point most of the available information about Bennett comes to us through the eyes of Aleister Crowley, who joined the Order in 1898. Crowley's first impression of him was that he possessed "a tremendous spiritual and magical force."¹² He finds him living in a tiny tenement—"a mean, grim horror"¹³—and says of his appearance:

Allan Bennett was tall, but his sickness had already produced a stoop. His head, crowned with a shock of wild, black hair, was intensely noble; the brows, both wide and lofty, overhung indomitable piercing eyes. The face would have been handsome had it not been for the haggardness and pallour due to his almost continuous suffering.

Despite his ill-health, he was a tremendous worker. His knowledge of science, especially electricity, was vast, accurate, and profound. In addition, he had studied the Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, not only as a scholar, but with the insight that comes from inborn sympathetic understanding.

I did not fully realise the colossal stature of that sacred spirit; but I was instantly aware that this man could teach me more in a month than anyone else in five years.¹⁴

An unpublished manuscript by Crowley cited by Kenneth Grant adds more:

We called him the White Knight, from Alice in the Looking Glass. So lovable, so harmless, so unpractical! But he was a Knight, too! And White! There never walked a whiter man on earth. He never did walk on earth, either! A genius, a flawless genius. But a most terribly frustrated genius.¹⁵

¹⁰*The Magical Revival*, p.85.

¹¹See R.A. Gilbert, *The Golden Dawn: Twilight of the Magicians*. A Concise history, drawing on new material from privately printed and manuscript sources, of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (The Aquarian Press, Wellingborough, UK, 1983); Ellic Howe, *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn: A Documentary History of a Magical Order* (The Aquarian Press, Wellingborough, UK, 1972); Kenneth Grant, *The Magical Revival*.

¹²*Confessions*, p.178.

¹³*Ibid.*, p.179.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p.181.

¹⁵*The Magical Revival*, p.82.

Crowley also claimed that he was known all over London “as the one Magician who could really do big-time stuff,”¹⁶ and in two places he recorded an incident when Bennett used a wand to render motionless a sceptic who doubted its power.¹⁷

By the year 1899, therefore, Bennett was deeply interested in the religious heritage of the East. He was appreciated as a gentle person who would be loathe to harm anyone. (Crowley was later to write that he was, “the noblest and the gentlest soul that I have ever known.”)¹⁸ He was widely read and had practised some forms of meditation, probably using yogic methods of breath control and trance-inducement. He felt an affinity to Buddhism and had been influenced particularly by *The Light of Asia*. He was also interested in Western esoteric practice and magic and had discovered that he possessed certain psychic powers. Asthma had already made deep inroads into his health. He was knowledgeable about the latest scientific discoveries and optimistic about science’s potential.

In 1900, Bennett travelled to Sri Lanka, the cost of his passage raised by Crowley.¹⁹ It was an attempt to save his life. His friends feared he would die unless he was sent to a warmer climate. Crowley also hoped that Bennett would spread Western esoteric lore in the East. He did not. Crowley’s hopes were ironically twisted. Bennett turned away from the emphases of the Order of the Golden Dawn, became a Buddhist monk, and eventually brought Buddhism to the West, convinced that it was Buddhism alone which could meet the religious crisis there.

In Sri Lanka

Bennett spent between one and two years in Sri Lanka. He learnt Pāli, developed his meditation practice, and delivered his first sermon on Buddhist doctrine. All the evidence suggests this period was a turning point. His asthma improved. He gave up the cycle of drugs he had found so necessary in England.²⁰ Most of all, he found a focus for his religious quest.

Bennett began by spreading his exploratory net quite wide. According to Cassius Pereira, he went to Kamburugamuwa and studied Pāli for six months under an elder Sinhalese monk. By the end of six months, he could converse in it fluently—“Such was the brilliance of his intellect,” Pereira adds.²¹ Yet, he did not restrict himself to Buddhism. Crowley, who visited him, claimed that he learnt much about the theory and practice of yoga from the Hon. P. Ramanathan, the Solicitor-General of Ceylon, a Tamil gentleman who engaged Bennett as a private tutor for his son. Crowley’s descriptions of Bennett show a person experimenting with different practices. According to Crowley, for instance, Bennett could, with a breathing trick, release leeches from his arm, having purposely fed them.²² He could also enter such a deep state of trance-like meditation through his breathing exercises that his whole body could be upturned without him realising it.²³ Pereira confirms this. He later wrote that Allan had taught him much about meditation at this time. He had thought it was all Buddhist in origin but later realised that it also contained “mystic Christian, Western ‘occult,’ and Hindu sources.” His conclusion was that Bennett’s knowledge was then “vague, wonder seeking, and really only played about the fringe of a truly marvellous avenue for study and practice.”²⁴

¹⁶Ibid., p.85.

¹⁷See *Confessions*, p.180; *The Magical Revival*, p.85.

¹⁸*Confessions*, p.234.

¹⁹Ibid., pp.181–82.

²⁰In the late 1880s, the remedies prescribed by doctors for asthma included cocaine, opium, and morphine. Bennett was heavily dependent on them in Britain. See *Confessions*, p.180; James Adam, *Asthma and its Radical Treatment* (Henry Kimpton, London, 1913), which advises the use of cocaine and, with restrictions, morphine; A.C. Wootton, *Chronicles of Pharmacy* (MacMillan & Co. Ltd., London, 1910), which affirms the beneficial effects of laudanum, an opium-based drug, in a variety of ailments; John C. Thorowgood, *Asthma and Chronic Bronchitis* (Bailliere Tindall and Cox, London, 1894), which recommends arsenical cigarettes, cocaine, cannabis, and morphine together with less toxic drugs.

²¹*The Buddhist*, 28th April 1923, p.6.

²²*Confessions*, p.247.

²³Ibid., p.246.

²⁴Dr. Cassius A. Pereira, “Why do I renounce the World?” *Ceylon Daily News Vesak Number 2491* (1947), (Colombo, Sri Lanka), p.67.

So, was Bennett merely a person who selected what he wanted from a variety of sources? The Order of the Golden Dawn certainly did this. Yet in Sri Lanka another process was at work. Bennett gradually came to see that eclectic experimentation with psychic power and the development of iddhi was a mundane accomplishment, divorced from true wisdom or liberation. Theravada Buddhism gained the upper hand. According to Crowley:

Allan had become more and more convinced that he ought to take the Yellow Robe. The phenomena of Dhyana and Samadhi had ceased to exercise their first fascination. It seemed to him that they were insidious obstacles to true spiritual progress; that their occurrence, in reality, broke up the control of the mind which he was trying to establish and prevented him from reaching the ultimate truth which he sought. He had the strength of mind to resist the appeal of even these intense spiritual joys.²⁵

In July 1901, Bennett gave his first Buddhist address before the Hope Lodge of the Theosophical Society, Colombo. His subject was the Four Noble Truths. For the young Cassius Pereira it was a turning point which directed him towards his eventual renunciation.²⁶ Almost certainly, Bennett, by this time, was speaking from the depths of his own conviction that renunciation, as a committed Buddhist, was the only path for him. During his visit Crowley concluded that, in spite of his experimentation, "Allan was already at heart a Buddhist. The more he studied the Tripitika, 'the three baskets of the law' ... the more he was attracted."²⁷

Bennett decided to become ordained in Burma. Crowley's writing suggests that Bennett saw Burma as a place where the Sangha was in a purer state than in Sri Lanka.²⁸ Bennett was disillusioned, for instance, by such practices as "devil dances" and the Kandy Perahera.²⁹ Other accounts do not mention Bennett's reason for leaving Sri Lanka but it is certain that he left realising that the path of magic, psychic power, and esoteric lore was inadequate. In all his later writings he condemned it.³⁰ The message of the Four Noble Truths became uppermost.

In Burma

On 12th December 1901, Allan Bennett was ordained a novice at Akyab in Arakan, Burma. The name he took was the Venerable Ānanda Maitreya. Later he changed the second name to the Pāli, Metteyya. At Akyab, he continued his Buddhist studies, supported by Burmese lay people. Pereira and Crowley mention one Dr. Moungh Tha Nu, the resident medical officer, as one of these.³¹ Six months later, on 21st May 1902, he received upasampadā, higher ordination, under the Venerable Sheve Bya Sayādaw. Crowley visited Ānanda Metteyya in February 1902 and it is again interesting to see through his eyes. He refers to Allan, in robes, as seeming to be "of gigantic height, as compared to the diminutive Burmese" but claims, "The old gentleness was still there."³²

Unfortunately, Crowley also referred to the return of Ānanda Metteyya's asthma. He puts it down to the cold air of the pre-dawn alms rounds and shares a wish that "sanctity was not so incompatible with sanity."³³ As a new monk, Ānanda Metteyya would not have wanted to have broken any of the accepted practices.

The next time Crowley visited Burma, Ānanda Metteyya was in Rangoon. He went there soon after his higher ordination and stayed in a monastery about two miles from the city. Two interesting points emerge from Crowley's writing: the suspicion of the British authorities, who imagined political

²⁵*Confessions*, p.249.

²⁶See "Why do I renounce the World?", p.67.

²⁷*Confessions*, p.237.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p.237.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p.250.

³⁰See *Buddhism*, Vol. 1:4, pp.677–68, where Ānanda Metteyya justifies representation at the first International Freethought Conference because Buddhism is opposed to all supernaturalism; *Buddhism* (Vol. 1:1), p.27, where Buddhism is divorced from the esoteric.

³¹See *The Buddhist*, 28th April 1923, p.6; *Confessions*, p.271.

³²*Confessions*, p.270.

³³*Ibid.*, p.271.

dangers when Europeans “thought Burmese beliefs better than their European equivalents,”³⁴ and the fact that Ānanda Metteyya’s health was still not good because of lack of proper medical attention and “his determination to carry out the strict rules of the Order.”³⁵

Yet, it was from Rangoon that Ānanda Metteyya began to plan what he had come to see as his life’s mission—bringing Buddhism to the West. The first step was the forming of the Buddhasāsana Samāgama, an international Buddhist society which aimed at the global consociation of Buddhists. Its first meeting was on 13th March 1903. Ven. Ānanda Metteyya took the role of General Secretary. The Honorary Secretary was Dr. E.R. Rost, a Westerner and member of the Indian Medical Service.³⁶ *Buddhism—An Illustrated Quarterly Review* was launched, edited by Ānanda Metteyya, the first volume appearing in September 1903.

The six issues of *Buddhism* which were published between 1903 and 1908—it soon became evident that it could not be a quarterly review—give much information about Ānanda Metteyya’s priorities. His vision was missionary and international. The aims of the journal, as set out in the first issue, were:

Firstly, to set before the world the true principles of our Religion, believing, as we do, that these need only to be better known to meet with a wide-spread acceptance among the peoples of the West,—an acceptance which, if manifested in practice, would in our opinion do much to promote the general happiness:—Secondly, to promote, as far as lies in our power, those humanitarian activities referred to in the latter portion of THE FAITH OF THE FUTURE³⁷ and, Thirdly, to unite by our Journal, as by a common bond of mutual interest and brotherhood, the many Associations with Buddhist aims which now exist.³⁸

From Rangoon, Ānanda Metteyya maintained a network of international contacts and kept abreast of developments in science, Buddhist scholarship, and politics in Buddhist countries. By 1904, the journal was being sent free to between 500 and 600 libraries in Europe on the condition that each copy be left on the Reading Room table until the next was received.³⁹ Burmese donations made this possible. The Buddhasāsana Samāgama gained official representatives in Austria, Burma, Ceylon, China, Germany, Italy, America, and England. The articles published were drawn from scholars worldwide. Ānanda Metteyya’s comments embraced all his interests, religious, scientific, and political. He could write about the life of philosopher-scientist Herbert Spencer, discoveries concerning the origins of life at the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge,⁴⁰ and research on the dangerous effects of alcohol.⁴¹ Since Sri Lanka is also mentioned in every edition of *Buddhism*, it is obvious that Ānanda Metteyya remained in close contact with the country and he went back there at one point. Pereira records that he gave “several inspiring addresses from the Maitriya Hall.”⁴²

During these years, two men who eventually became better known than Ānanda Metteyya joined him. The first was J.F. McKechnie. Inspired by Ānanda Metteyya’s article on Nibbāna in the first issue of *Buddhism*, he wrote to him in 1904 to offer his services in business management free. He was accepted. Once in Burma, he learnt Pāli and took on far more than business management as his book reviews in the October 1905 issue of *Buddhism* reveal. By 1908, he was Ven. Silācāra. Then, by the beginning of 1905, Ven. Nyanatiloka was also staying with Ānanda Metteyya. Nyanatiloka or Anton Gueth was born in 1878 in Wiesbaden, Germany. He was ordained in Burma in 1903, after a period of exhausting travel which had included Sri Lanka. Ānanda Metteyya facilitated his return to Sri Lanka to

³⁴Ibid., p.462.

³⁵Ibid., p.464.

³⁶For further information about Rost see Christmas Humphreys, *Sixty Years of Buddhism in England (1907–1967)* (The Buddhist Society, London, 1968).

³⁷“The Faith of the Future” mentions arbitration instead of warfare; equality between the sexes; humane treatment of criminals.

³⁸*Buddhism: An Illustrated Quarterly Review*, Vol. 1:1, pp.63–64.

³⁹Ibid. Vol. 1:3, p.473.

⁴⁰Ibid. Vol. 1:3, pp.503ff.; Vol. 2:1, p.119.

⁴¹Ibid., Vol. 1:3, p.515.

⁴²*The Buddhist*, 28th April 1923, p.6.

learn Pāli,⁴³ a return which sealed the future for Nyanatiloka. He spent almost all his monk's life there, and at his death was given a state funeral.⁴⁴

The Mission to England

Health continued to elude Ven. Ānanda Metteyya. This was one reason why the publication of *Buddhism* became erratic. Apologies for delays due to illness appear in almost every issue. Yet, his ailment was not serious enough to prevent him from commencing the first Buddhist mission to Britain. Ānanda Metteyya had entered the Order "chiefly with the object of eventually forming a Sangha in the West."⁴⁵ His life was inspired by the conviction that the West had only to understand the message of Buddhism to embrace it. He was convinced the West was ready. Yet, the first step in this process was not an unqualified success.

Ven. Ānanda Metteyya arrived in England on 23rd April 1908 with some of his most faithful supporters, Mrs. Hlā Oung, her son, and his wife. He remained until 2nd October of the same year, "the time allotted to the Mission," according to Christmas Humphreys.⁴⁶ The Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland, formed in preparation for the mission the previous November, welcomed him eagerly. Ānanda Metteyya himself told a Rangoon paper on his return that he was highly gratified with the visit⁴⁷ but the response of some of his British supporters was different. Disappointment comes across, for instance, in the account later written by Christmas Humphreys.

The positive, according to Humphreys, was this:

He was then thirty-six years of age, tall, slim, graceful, and dignified. The deep-set eyes and somewhat ascetic features, surmounted by the shaven head, made a great impression on all who met him, and all who remember him speak of his pleasing voice and beautiful enunciation. It seems that his conversation was always interesting; and in his lighter moments he showed a delightful sense of humour, while his deep comprehension of the Dhamma, his fund of analogy from contemporary science, and power and range of thought combined to form a most exceptional personality.⁴⁸

Humphreys continues to explain that by "correspondence and constant interviews" Ānanda Metteyya collected around him a body of scholars who supported the mission and that he "formally admitted into the fold of Buddhism all who wished to be received." Yet, the negative side of the mission included: the difficulties supporters faced in ensuring Ānanda Metteyya could follow the Vinaya rules; the uncomprehending and sometimes ribald laughter levelled at his orange robes in the streets; the uncharismatic nature of Ānanda Metteyya's public speaking style; and his frequent ill-health. Ānanda Metteyya was understandably unwilling to compromise when it came to handling money, eating after noon, or sleeping in the same house as a woman. This meant he could not journey alone, his programme had to allow for a meal before noon, and the team needed two houses. For a small group of supporters, this was perhaps more than they had bargained for.⁴⁹

As for his communication skills, in private conversation, he was probably engaging and impressive. Humphreys declares that "he was popular wherever he went."⁵⁰ Yet, in public speaking, he seems to have been self-effacing, avoiding eye contact by keeping his eyes cast down on a prepared script,

⁴³Unpublished letter from Ven. Ānanda Metteyya to Dr. Cassius Pereira (Forest Hermitage, Kandy, Sri Lanka).

⁴⁴William Peiris, *The Western Contribution to Buddhism* (Motilal Barnasidass, Delhi, 1973), p.139.

⁴⁵*The Buddhist Review*, Vol. 9, 1917, p.184.

⁴⁶Humphreys, *Sixty Years of Buddhism in England*, p.7. It is unlikely that Ānanda Metteyya came to England intending to stay on permanently and that failure sent him back to Burma. More probably, his visit was intended to begin a process that would eventually produce an indigenous monastic Sangha in the West.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p.7.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p.6.

⁴⁹See also Sandra Bell, "British Buddhism and the Negotiation of Tradition," paper given at a symposium on "The Invention and Re-Invention of Tradition" held at St. Mary's College, 22–24 September 1994. Bell writes, "Those middle class and upper class late Victorian Londoners who chose to support the activities of Ānanda Metteyya were, despite his British origins, faced with alien forms of behaviour to which they had difficulty in adapting."

⁵⁰Christmas Humphreys, "Ānanda Metteyya," in *The Middle Way*, Vol. 47, 1972, p.133.

from which he deviated little. Such an attitude would have been the norm for a monk in Burma, but for those who had enthusiastically hoped for a flowering of Buddhism in Britain, his inability to engage with his audience would have been disappointing, perhaps even embarrassing. The deterioration of his health must also have caused serious concern.

There can be no doubt, however, that the young Buddhist Society was strengthened by Ānanda Metteyya's visit because it attracted enthusiastic scholars. It also sealed a friendship with Burma which was to prove invaluable in terms of financial support in the years ahead. *The Buddhist Review*, the organ of the newly-formed Buddhist Society, was able to say in 1909 that he left behind him "golden opinions and the friendship and respect of all who had the privilege of meeting him."⁵¹

Years of Crisis

Ven. Ānanda Metteyya hoped that he would return to England in two and a half years to establish a permanent Buddhist community in the West.⁵² This was the next step in his mission plan. The hope died. He remained in Burma until 1914. During 1909, records show that he was still mentioned with much respect at The Buddhist Society in Britain. For instance, he and his colleagues were congratulated for pressing successfully for Buddhism to be taught in schools in Burma.⁵³ The 1911 mission was anticipated. Yet, as time passed, he was mentioned less and less. Ven. Silācāra's name began to arise more often than his in *The Buddhist Review*. In 1912, Ānanda Metteyya appeared in the Minutes as having sent many copies of his book, *The Religion of Burma*, to the Society as a present⁵⁴ but when bringing a bhikkhu to England was discussed later in the year⁵⁵ he was not mentioned. It was Ven. Silācāra who was eventually considered.⁵⁶ By 1914, Ānanda Metteyya's mission was remembered with respect but he was no longer considered a possible future missionary.

One reason for this silence, of course, was his health. According to Cassius Pereira, his health began to fail rapidly on his return to Burma, with gallstone trouble superimposed on his chronic asthma. "He was operated on twice," Pereira wrote, "and on the urgent advice of his doctors, he reluctantly decided to leave the Order where he had now attained the seniority of Thera or Elder."⁵⁷ Pereira did not give a date for this. In 1912 and 1913, The Buddhist Society was still referring to him as Ven. Ānanda Metteyya,⁵⁸ but it is possible that he had already disrobed by this time. In 1914 doctors in Burma pressed him to leave the country if his life was to be saved. His Burmese friends, therefore, sent him to England where he was to meet up with his sister, who had come from America to lead him back to her home in California. A passage from Liverpool was booked but the ship's doctor refused Bennett permission to board because he feared the American authorities would deny him a landing permit on health grounds. His sister travelled without him. Bennett, now a lay person, was left to the mercy of British well-wishers.

From this point onwards, Allan Bennett's story was a sad one. A member of the Liverpool Branch of The Buddhist Society, a doctor, took him in and gave him incessant medical care. During the First World War his sister came back from America but she stayed with friends and could not look after her brother. For the doctor's family, the financial and emotional burden of having a chronically sick, prematurely old person in the house was great. Mrs. Hlā Oung offered £10.00 a year towards maintenance but it was not enough. At this point an anonymous group of well-wishers were forced to write to *The Buddhist Review* in 1916 appealing for money to save Bennett from being placed "in some institution supported by public charity."⁵⁹ His asthma attacks were occurring now more than once a day.

⁵¹*The Buddhist Review*, Vol. 1, 1909, p.3.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p.3.

⁵³Minute Book, December 3rd, 1909 (The Buddhist Society, London).

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, April 4th, 1912.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, November 1st, 1912.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, December 23rd, 1914.

⁵⁷*The Buddhist*, 28th April 1923, p.6.

⁵⁸See Minute Book, April 30th, 1912; March 14th, 1913; December 19th, 1913 (The Buddhist Society, London).

⁵⁹*The Buddhist Review*, Vol. 8, 1916, pp.217–19.

Help did come, from overseas as well as Britain. Yet, Bennett's final years were far from comfortable. The First World War, which killed a generation of young people in the trenches of France, had a profound effect on him, as it did on many sensitive Westerners. It drove him into deep introspection about the human condition, the sustainability of Western culture, and the contribution of Buddhism. There was also the ever present awareness that his health had prevented him from realising his hopes for Buddhist outreach in Britain. Yet, the very trauma of the war eventually impelled him into writing and speaking again. In the winter of 1917–18, he was persuaded by Clifford Bax to give a series of papers to a private audience in Bax's studio. These were later published as *The Wisdom of the Aryas*, just two months before his death.

Then, on Vesak Day (May) 1918, Bennett gave to The Buddhist Society what Christmas Humphreys called "a 'fighting speech' which aroused the listening members to fresh enthusiasm."⁶⁰ It marked a return to active work. He opened by reminding his listeners that it was ten years since his mission to Britain, "the first Buddhist Mission which for over ten centuries had been sent forth from any Buddhist country." He reported with sadness that the parent body of The Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland, the Buddhasāsana Samāgama, had completely broken up, and he referred to the war as "the opening of an era of well-nigh universal calamity and woe."⁶¹ He went on to tackle the central question of how the "priceless treasure of the Law" could offer solace, strength, and clear vision even when "it appears that all our world is rocking about us to its fall." The wider content of his talk I will deal with later. What is important here is that Allan Bennett returned to active work in Britain. He seems to have been helped financially by friends in Britain and Sri Lanka. Cassius Pereira refers to Clifford Bax and Dr. C.A. Hewavitarana as patrons.⁶²

According to one account, Bennett moved to London in 1920.⁶³ Although he was incapacitated for weeks at a time, he took over the editorship of *The Buddhist Review* from D.B. Jayatilaka, who returned to Sri Lanka. He spoke at meetings organised by the Buddhist Society and became actively involved in the Society's plans. His conviction that Buddhism offered hope for the West remained unshaken, as his first editorial in 1920 made clear:

These facts, we consider, justify us in our conclusion that in the extension of this great Teaching lies not only the solution of the ever-growing religious problems of the West; but even, perhaps, the only possible deliverance of the western civilization from that condition of fundamental instability which now so obviously and increasingly prevails.⁶⁴

By 1922, however, Allan Bennett was dying. The January 1922 edition of *The Buddhist Review* was the last that he edited and indeed the last that was published. Before his death he was reported to have lived at 90 Eccles Road, Clapham Junction. His financial situation was grave, but help continued to come from Dr. Hewavitarana and probably Cassius Pereira. He died on 9th March 1923. A Buddhist funeral service was prepared by Francis Payne, a prominent Buddhist and convert from the 1908 mission, who was present when he died. Dr. Hewavitarana cabled money from Sri Lanka to buy a grave in Morden Cemetery in South London. Humphreys wrote that "flowers and incense were placed on the grave by members of the large gathering assembled, and so there passed from human sight a man whom history may some time honour for bringing to England as a living faith the Message of the All-Enlightened One."⁶⁵

No gravestone has ever been placed on Allan Bennett's grave. This could have been due to suspicions which continued to surround his name after his death. For instance, Bennett never completely outlived his reputation as a magician and a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn. The young Buddhist Society was keen to dissociate itself from anything esoteric. Allan Bennett's involvement as a young man with a movement which was controversial and his early friendship with Aleister Crowley, by then a known occultist, would have been cause enough for suspicion. It is significant that several articles during his lifetime took pains to stress that he was not a man of "mystery", that he had

⁶⁰Humphreys, *Sixty Years*, p.14.

⁶¹*The Buddhist Review*, Vol. 9, p.141.

⁶²*The Buddhist*, 28th April 1923, p.6.

⁶³Kenneth Mullen, "Ānanda Metteyya: Buddhist Pioneer" in *The Middle Way*, Vol. 64, 1989.

⁶⁴*The Buddhist Review*, Vol. 10, pp.186–87.

⁶⁵Humphreys, *Sixty Years*, pp.16–17.

rejected that part of his past. "It is necessary to say this, since some attempts have been made to surround him with mystery. There is no more mystery attending the Bhikkhu Ānanda Metteyya than any other person," an editorial of *The Buddhist Review* stated in 1909.⁶⁶ Clifford Bax said something similar in 1918: "At first glance I realised that he never could have played at being a man of mystery."⁶⁷

Ven. Ānanda Metteyya rejected the path of "mystery" as a hindrance to the goal. It was not "mystery" and magic which taxed his mind but two quite different aspects of life: the search for truth and the pain within human existence. He brought the sensitivity of the poet and the mind of the scientist to this. Yet, he occasionally shared a conviction that there was a power, an energy, which moved to good and which could be used by humans on their way to liberation. This could mistakenly have struck some Western Buddhists as touching the theism they had rejected. As for his friendship with Aleister Crowley, it ended as Ānanda Metteyya travelled further and further from the path Crowley chose. His influence on Crowley was great but ultimately Crowley chose to reject it.

Another reason for suspicion might have been his illness. Throughout his life, he was reliant on dependency-creating drugs such as cocaine, opium, and morphine, no doubt first prescribed by a doctor, although by the end of his life some of the dangers were known and new remedies were being tried. The consequence, however, could have been times of hallucination, giving the appearance of the "mystery" with which some linked him. The truth about the unmarked grave might never be known. My feeling is that it was an injustice to a person who, in his writing, communicated the message of the Buddha with a poetic sensitivity and a scientific directness which still speaks to us today.

⁶⁶*The Buddhist Review*, Vol. 1, 1909, p.3.

⁶⁷Clifford Bax, "Ānanda Metteyya" in *The Middle Way*, Vol. 43:1, p.23.

Chapter 2

19th Century British Attitudes to Buddhism

Where could Bennett have found information about Buddhism before travelling to Sri Lanka? When he was born, in 1872, Buddhism was already beginning to touch the consciousness of the West. It was the year when Robert Childers, retired from the Ceylon Civil Service, published the first part of his *Dictionary of the Pāli Language*, a pioneering work of Buddhist doctrine based on his own scholarship and dialogue with members of the monastic Sangha. In the same year, T.W. Rhys Davids returned to England from Sri Lanka, eventually to found the Pali Text Society in 1881. Max Müller was living in Oxford, editing the *Sacred Books of the East* series. Viggo Fausböll was in contact with Ven. Vaskaduve Subhūti of Ceylon about gaining manuscripts for his six volume edition of the Jātakas. Yet, although Buddhism was entering popular conversation and was on the curriculum of European universities, “only two Pāli texts of any size and importance had appeared in editions accessible to scholars in the West”⁶⁸—the Dhammapada and George Turnour’s translation of thirty-eight of the hundred chapters of the Sri Lankan historical chronicle, the Mahāvamsa.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, travellers, missionaries, and a few civil servants in Ceylon, Burma, and India were beginning to write about their encounters with Buddhists and to collect manuscripts. Some accounts were scholarly, but in general the information which reached Europe was sketchy and ridden with contradictions and speculations. Whether the Buddha was a god, a myth, a man, or a man who had been deified; whether Buddhists believed in a Supreme Being or were atheists; whether the world for Buddhists was governed by law or chance—these questions received inconsistent answers, and the whole was surrounded with an air of irrationality, mythology, and exotic distance.

As the decades passed, linguistic study of the Buddhist texts took precedence over oral methods of gaining information. Pāli and Sanskrit scholars appeared. Most significant is that interpretations polarised into the negative and the positive.

It was the Christian missionaries who pressed the negative viewpoint. Conditioned to see Christianity as the sole vehicle of truth, they expected to find the false in Buddhism. Their attack was many-pronged—that Buddhism was atheistic and therefore pessimistic; that it was nihilistic because its goal appeared to be annihilation; that it was irrational because the extravagance of Buddhist cosmology and the doctrine of rebirth seemed to flout science; that its ethics were governed by selfishness because they promoted “merit-making.” Even as Bennett was reading *The Light of Asia* with positive delight, Christian missionaries in Sri Lanka, for example, were writing that Buddhism was a “vast system of negations,”⁶⁹ that it was “without hope in the world,”⁷⁰ and that it considered existence a “curse.”⁷¹

Among the British who refused to accept the nihilistic construction were William Knighton and Sir Frederick Dickson in Sri Lanka, and Fielding Hall in Burma. Knighton, planter and journalist, wrote, “Buddhism is essentially a philosophical religion. Its virtue is meditation, and its perfection an entire victory over the senses and passions.”⁷² He also insisted that the Sinhala people saw Nibbāna as some-

⁶⁸T.W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhism: Its History and Literature, American Lectures on the History of Religion, First Series, 1894–95* (G.B. Putnam & Sons, London, 1896), p.50.

⁶⁹Rev. H.A. Lapham (Baptist Missionary) in J.B. Myers, ed., *Centenary Celebration of the Baptist Missionary Society 1892–3* (Baptist Missionary Society, London, 1893), p.192.

⁷⁰Rev. Thomas Moscrop (Methodist missionary) in *The Ceylon Friend*, 16th October 1889.

⁷¹John Murdoch (Scottish missionary), *Buddha and his Religion—Compiled from the works of Gogerly, Hardy, Kellogg, Titcomb, Davids, Oldenburg, Bigandet, and others* (Christian Vernacular Education Society, SPCK Press, India, 1887), p.32.

⁷²William Knighton, *The History of Ceylon* (Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, London, 1845), p.338.

thing to be desired.⁷³ Sir Frederick John Dickson, civil servant in Sri Lanka between 1859 and 1885, was even more positive. Writing in 1889, he declared that Buddhism “lives enshrined in the hearts of a pious, simple, and kindly people; it leads them through a life of charity to a peaceful deathbed such as most Christians may envy. Having conquered desire, they enjoy a repose which cannot be disturbed.”⁷⁴ Fielding Hall, another civil servant, had a similar approach to Dickson’s. His book, *The Soul of a People*, published in 1898, delves with great sensitivity into Buddhist practice in Burma. Nibbāna, for instance, is described as “the mighty deliverance from all sorrow.”⁷⁵

Ven. Ānanda Metteyya’s writings reveal an unmistakable awareness of the nihilistic interpretation. He attempted to overturn it in the very first edition of Buddhism. It is unlikely that he knew much about Knighton but quite possible that he read Dickson and Fielding Hall. There are certainly echoes of Fielding Hall in his writing.⁷⁶ Yet, it was from Edwin Arnold and probably the Theosophists that he first absorbed the positive. Theosophy and Buddhism are not the same, but at that time the Theosophists saw Buddhism as closest to their own beliefs. Having rejected Christianity as corrupt and discredited, they turned with excitement to the East. The mood can be glimpsed in a letter sent, in 1878, by Colonel Olcott, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society, to Ven. Piyaratana in Dodanduva, Sri Lanka. He presents himself as ignorant in comparison to “my Brothers in the Oriental priesthood” and claims that “divine knowledge” is alone “in the keeping of the temple and priests and ascetics of the East.”⁷⁷

Since we know from Crowley that Bennett was in contact with Theosophists in London, such enthusiasm could well have touched him, though after his ordination he spoke against them openly, particularly about their concept of an evolving soul. One of the profoundest influences on Bennett, however, was undoubtedly Sir Edwin Arnold. His biographical poem about the Buddha, *The Light of Asia*, published in 1879, did more to encourage an understanding of Buddhism in the West than perhaps any other piece of writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century. For Allan Bennett, it was a turning point in his life and its influence can be seen clearly in his writing. Arnold became the first Honorary Member of the Buddhāsāna Samāgama and, when he died in 1904, Bennett paid a glowing tribute to him, claiming that, although *The Light of Asia* was written in the turmoil of a busy life, it still breathed “the calm sweet atmosphere of Buddhism; even as the lotus springs uncontaminated from the mire and water into the fresh, pure air.”⁷⁸

Since Arnold’s influence over Bennett was so great, it is worth looking briefly at how *The Light of Asia* portrays Buddhism. Its primary focus is the Buddha’s compassion and sensitivity. The narrative combines the romantic and the heroic, the human and the more-than-human, and the whole is surrounding by the urgency of suffering. Yet while the poem describes the human condition as “long-drawn agony” and “a mighty whirling wheel of strife and stress,” its message is not pessimistic. Arnold was among the first writers in Britain to emphasise that Buddhism spoke not only of suffering but also of a way out of suffering. The reality of suffering need not lead to pessimism, the poem implies, because the path to liberation has been found. He was also among the first to see that the doctrine of no-soul or *anattā* need not be nihilistic. Arnold, in fact, brought it into the centre of his writing but he put his own interpretation on it. Suffering, the poem declares, is present because humans place a “false Self” in the middle of their life and cling to the illusion this fosters.

It is the false self rather than no-self which Arnold stressed. An important part of the Buddhist path, according to Arnold, is to purge “the lie and lust of self” from the blood. In other words, the er-

⁷³William Knighton, *Forest Life in Ceylon* (Hurst & Blackett, London, 1854), Vol. II, p.414.

⁷⁴John F. Dickson, “Ceylon” in *The English Illustrated Magazine* (London), October 1889, p.24.

⁷⁵H. Fielding Hall, *The Soul of a People* (MacMillan & Co. Ltd., London, 1906), p.47.

⁷⁶Fielding Hall terms Nibbāna “the Great Peace” (p.47), stresses love and compassion as part of the path (p.48), declares that Buddhists believe “Man’s life is not apart from other life, but of it” (p.48), and uses the term “One Life” to speak of the Burmese belief in nats, spirits (pp.250ff.). All these emphases can be seen in Ānanda Metteyya’s writings. Another explanation would be that both writers drew from a common source, the Burmese people. Fielding Hall’s sympathetic portrayal might also have induced Ānanda Metteyya to go to Burma.

⁷⁷Letters held at the Kumara Maha Vihara, Dodanduwa, Sri Lanka. Also quoted in Ānanda W.B. Guruge, *From the Living Fountains of Buddhism* (The Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Colombo, 1984), p.338.

⁷⁸*Buddhism*, Vol. 1:4, p.584.

ror the Buddha identified is the human tendency to place the “I” at the centre of all, as though it is separate from everything else.

Not surprisingly, *The Light of Asia* also presents Nibbāna as positive. If the poem had been a Western philosophical treatise, Arnold would have been accused of inconsistency. Nibbāna is tranquillity and rest. It is the “change which never changes.” It is a state which speaks of life, no-life, and oneness with all that exists.

Ānanda Metteyya’s writings show that his heart must have leapt in recognition at many of Arnold’s emphases. Direct lines of continuity can be seen, particularly in Arnold’s stress on the suffering of humanity and interdependence. As a scientist, Bennett would also have warmed to Arnold’s insistence in this and other writings that Buddhism joins hands with science. The Middle Path of Buddhism, the poem declares, is one “whose course Bright Reason traces.”

A way out of suffering, a path of action and optimism, an affirmation of interdependence, a condemnation of selfishness, a human pattern of heroic renunciation and compassion, and a positive, blissful goal—this was the message which *The Light of Asia* presented. It is no wonder that many, including Allan Bennett, responded. After 1879 even Christian missionaries were forced to give credit to the Buddha’s exemplary life and the sincerity of his search for truth, even if they could not admit to sympathy with his doctrine.

Chapter 3

Ānanda Metteyya's Interpretation of Buddhism

In his introductory editorial in the first edition of *Buddhism*, Ānanda Metteyya named and rejected three “misconceptions”: that Buddhism is heathen and idolatrous; that it is connected with “miracle-mongering and esotericism”; that it is “a backboneless, apathetic, pessimistic manner of philosophy.”⁷⁹ In other words, he leapt right into the contemporary debate about Buddhism. The manifesto which he nailed to the wall was that: Buddhism cannot be idolatrous since it has no concept of placating a god; it is rational and has nothing to do with esoteric truth about the evolution of a soul; its ultimate message is optimistic. These emphases were part of the discourse of his time and contributed to the redressing of past misconceptions. Yet the place to begin any analysis of Ānanda Metteyya’s understanding is his awareness of suffering.

A Suffering World

Crowley commented that Allan Bennett “never knew joy.” This is only partially true. There is both joy and hope in Ānanda Metteyya’s writing. It would be more accurate to say that Ānanda Metteyya, throughout his life, had a keen awareness that happiness did not lie where most people tried to locate it. Speaking of the progression of thought in one who attempts to look at the world with “the cold, clear light of Reason,” he wrote:

Firstly, he sees Life,—the interminable waves of Life’s great Ocean all around him; the pulsing, breathing, gleaming waters of the Sea of Being; and, at first thought and sight of this, he thinks: this Life is Joy.

He lives. Living, he learns. Learning, he presently comes to know—for Learning is Suffering, and Suffering is Life. He sees beneath this so fair-seeming face of Nature lies everywhere corruption. Behind all this thrilling, hoping life, reigns Death; certain, inevitable, and by all life abhorred.... He looks deeper into life, hoping that thus he may find the secret of happiness.... Learning more, he sees that this Nature is a battle-field. He sees each living creature fighting for its life, Self against the Universe.... He sees at last how all this life is a cheat, a snare,—so long as you look at it from this standpoint of the individual. If he had had faith in God,—in some great Being who had devised the Universe, he can no longer hold it; for any being, now he clearly sees, who could have devised a Universe wherein was all this wanton war, this piteous mass of pain coterminous with life, must have been a Demon, not a God.⁸⁰

In childhood and adolescence, Ānanda Metteyya must have become aware of suffering, not only in his own life but in the lives of all living beings. Together with his study of science and Darwin’s theory of evolution, this made belief in God impossible for him. Taking Darwin’s view that life continued through the survival of the fittest, Ānanda Metteyya concluded it was sacrifice that pervaded existence, not joy:

The life of each one of us means at this moment the living, suffering, dying, of other forms of life beyond all numbering;.... All of life ... a terrible and ruthless strife, a ceaseless battle of the strong against the weak and pitiful.⁸¹

⁷⁹*Buddhism*, Vol. 1:1, p.25.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, Vol. 2:2, pp.183–84.

⁸¹Allan Bennett, *The Religion of Burma and Other Papers* (Theosophical Publishing House, India, 1929), pp.172–73.

His phrases about this were vivid: “Life ever offered up to Life on its own altar”;⁸² nature is “a slaughter-house wherein no thought of pity ever enters”;⁸³ “Life alone can feed life.”⁸⁴ On a cosmic scale, it could take on horrific dimensions:

Chaos would waken, shuddering with torture, into life, to Cosmos for a moment’s seeming; the unfathomable depths of empty-seeming spatial darkness flash to an instant’s trembling life; the Vast Emptiness be filled with hurrying stars and galaxies past thinking, gleam for a little while and then be lost in gloom forever; and through the whole of it, life hastening through the gates of Pain to Death; a horror of living past conceiving, full of the Pain of Being, darkened by Not-Understanding; thrilling with Hope in youth, and ever ageing in Despair! Nowhere stability, nowhere cessation, nowhere an instant’s slackening of that mad race of life.⁸⁵

Ānanda Metteyya’s vision of suffering was, of course, an encounter with dukkha, the First Noble Truth. For him, it was confirmed by science and personal experience of pain. That Buddhism looked suffering in the eye was part of its attraction:

Very far from representing, with the child-like beliefs of our forefathers, the creatures of this ravaging torture-house of life as blessing their creator for their continuing agony, it looks life boldly in the face—as should befit a mind grown out of childhood,—and, refusing to be blinded against the facts of existence by specious and speculative dogmas, it places this very suffering of life in the forefront of its doctrinal structure.⁸⁶

For *Ibid.*, pp.142–43. Ānanda Metteyya, suffering was the true face of reality. Together with impermanence (*anicca*) and non-self (*anattā*), it had to be grasped with courage as the first step along the religious path: “To dare to look on life as it really is: Anicca, Dukkha, Anattā; Transient, and Sorrow-laden, and Devoid of Self—that is the first step we must take.”⁸⁷

The Buddha

Ānanda Metteyya’s human existence was linked to physical pain far more than is the case with most people. His clear and unflinching vision of suffering is not surprising. Into this, came the Buddha. The realisation of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* would be intolerable, according to Ānanda Metteyya, if not for the Buddha. It would result in the pessimistic nihilism that some Christian missionaries projected on to Buddhism.

In Ānanda Metteyya’s writings, the Buddha arises as a being beyond both humans and gods. At a time when most Western scholars of Buddhism were stressing the humanity of the Buddha, Ānanda Metteyya saw in the Buddha a being who had reached such a stage of perfection that no comparison with ordinary humanity was possible:

[B]ut his Buddhahood consists not in His humanity, but rather in the fact that, through lives of incredible effort and endurance, He has attained to a spiritual evolution which renders Him as different from a human being as the Sun is different from one of its servient planets; which makes of Him, His personality whilst it endures; His teaching, after that personality has passed away; a focal centre of spiritual power no less mighty in its sphere than that of the Sun in the material realm.⁸⁸

Self-sacrifice qualified the Buddha for this, according to Ānanda Metteyya. If sacrifice lay at the heart of the world’s agony, if life was sacrificed to life continually, what qualified the Buddha to show the path to liberation from suffering was unimaginable self-sacrifice in innumerable lives preceding Buddhahood. It was sacrifice “so great, so utterly beyond our ken, that we can only try to dimly rep-

⁸²Allan Bennett, *The Wisdom of the Aryas* (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., London, 1923), p.3.

⁸³*Religion of Burma*, p.156.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p.170.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, pp.142–43.

⁸⁶*Wisdom of the Aryas*, p.xiv.

⁸⁷*Religion of Burma*, p.221.

⁸⁸*Wisdom of the Aryas*, p.111.

resent it in terms of human life and thought and action."⁸⁹ He implied that it was only such sacrifice which could have led to the "ultra-cosmic dawn of Utter Wisdom in His Heart."⁹⁰

Wisdom and compassion, the two pillars of Buddhism, are clearly represented in this picture and, in Burma, Ānanda Metteyya seemed to see them flowing through the present as though the Buddha were still alive, re-created in the intensity of devotion to his memory. In the first of his 1917 lectures, Ānanda Metteyya struggled to put across to his Western audience the depth of devotion he had found in Burma. As if answering the Christian accusation that Buddhists worship a being who has passed away, he said:

There, into the daily lives, the very speech and household customs of the common folk, this ever-present sun-light of the Teaching penetrated; there, hearing at a fiesta the gathered crowds take refuge in the Buddha, you could all but see them turn their faces to bathe them in the splendour of His very presence—till one could understand how, instead of getting angry when they hear the Christian missionaries tell them they are taking refuge in a Being whom their own religion tells them has passed utterly away, they always answer, as they do answer, only with a wise and a compassionate smile.⁹¹

Never did Ānanda Metteyya imply that the Buddha is a personal "saviour" or a living being to whom prayers could be addressed in the present. Yet, he saw the Burmese devotion to the Buddha as much more than deference or thanks to a dead teacher, as it is often presented to be in rationalised works on Buddhism that seek to emphasise its "scientific" character. In Burma, Ānanda Metteyya came across an atmosphere of worship so intense that for him the air seemed to vibrate with a "palpable" potency, an "immediate" presence.⁹² It was the presence of the Dhamma but it was also more. Through the worship, it was as though Ānanda Metteyya saw the person of the Buddha re-created so that compassion and wisdom became living qualities streaming through the air. So, he wrote that the air was "vital with the urge" of the teaching, "and ever with that Great Figure of The Teacher Who Attained at the source of it all."⁹³

Ānanda Metteyya, I believe, could parallel his own experience with part of the Buddha's story. In *The Religion of Burma* he describes, with a most sensitive touch, Prince Siddhartha's search for the truth—his awareness of suffering, his hope for a remedy, and his experiments with meditation:

To the very heights of Being He attained—to that supreme, that ultimate of conscious Being, known in India as the Brahman or the Paramatman; the uttermost of Selfhood, the Light of Life whereto all this Universe is as it were but a shadow; this living, breathing, manifold existence but the wavering darkness of Its multiscient Light. To that Supreme Cosmic Consciousness He won, and yet turned back to earth in what approached despair. As indeed all others who thus had reached that Higher Self of all the Universe, had also seen, in the light of the wide-reaching understanding that that attainment of itself involves, so He saw that even here was no Finality, no Endless Peace such as He had sought for the Liberation of All Life.⁹⁴

Here is the voice of someone who has also touched these deep levels of consciousness and has rejected them. This particular article goes on to follow the Bodhisatta's onward journey. Māra is described as "the Tempter of men's hearts, the Spirit of Worldliness that lives in each of us." The Bodhisatta's resolution not to arise from his posture under the Bodhi Tree until he had seen into Truth becomes "Never will I arise from this place though this My frame shall perish of starvation—not though the blood within these veins shall cease to flow."⁹⁵

In this article Ānanda Metteyya devotes few words to the Buddha's teaching career, his reason being that it was in these earlier years that "the Master's Power over Burmese hearts lies hid."⁹⁶ His

⁸⁹Ibid., pp.16–17.

⁹⁰*Religion of Burma*, p.49.

⁹¹*Wisdom of the Aryas*, p.6.

⁹²Ibid., p.7.

⁹³Ibid., p.7.

⁹⁴*Religion of Burma*, p.38.

⁹⁵Ibid., p.45.

⁹⁶Ibid., p.50.

point was that a struggling, striving, searching figure, who tortured himself before he reached the Truth “can thrill our lives to greater nobleness; stirring our life’s depths until we long—yet ah! how vainly long—to grow a little nearer to His likeness, to live a little nearer to the life He lived.”⁹⁷

Thankfulness for the Buddha’s achievement and teaching, recognition of his more-than-human stature, awareness of the depth of wisdom and compassion which flowed from his person, inspiration to follow the same path, and identification with the experience which made renunciation and search inevitable—these can all be found in Ānanda Metteyya’s appreciation of the Buddha. Acts of devotion to the Buddha, in Burma, therefore, did not seem unnatural or irrational to him. But the question of what the Burmese people were doing when they showed devotion did tax him. He was quite sure that some practised it out of dependency, reliance, and blind faith. For him, this was an important step on the religious path but something akin to childhood, not the final stage. It could lead to heavenly rebirth but not to the ultimate goal: “it is impotent to help us to enter and walk upon the Way of Peace.”⁹⁸ On the other hand, he insisted there was a higher devotion connected with questioning, investigation, and recognition. So, he insisted that the mature Buddhist’s answer to the question of devotion would be:

...that it is not Faith indeed, so far as faith is blind, unreasoning, based on no principle or fact in life, but only on our hope and our desire. Rather it is the maturer Love, the devotion that comes in the train of Understanding; the true heart’s adoration that springs from within us when we have gained a little self-mastery; when, this delusion of the self seeming no longer all our hope in being, we begin to understand the value of self-sacrifice, when we attain some glimpse of the tremendous meaning of the Love that has for us resulted in the knowledge of the Law we have.⁹⁹

Yet, in line with the Buddha’s own teaching in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, for Ānanda Metteyya action or internal devotion was far more important than external devotion:

The true worship of the Buddhas is not even in divinest-seeming outer offering or praise; rightly that one shall be called a follower of The Buddha, rightly will he merit the name of Buddhist, who walks the Way The Buddha found; that is, the Way that He, the Master of Compassion, walked first Himself, twenty-five centuries ago in India.¹⁰⁰

The Path

How did Ānanda Metteyya interpret the path outlined by the Buddha? For him, it was far superior to the hopes which Roman Catholicism, the Order of the Golden Dawn or even yoga could hold out. The key was simple—the rule of Law, the simple insight that it was not chaos, chance, coincidence, capriciousness, or cosmic evil which lay at the root of impermanence and suffering but Law:

How, bound in self-wrought pain, in the transition and illusion of our life, can we, in Ignorance enmeshed, hope to find the Peace Beyond? Because the processes which we describe as “Life”, occur in conformity with the Law of Cause-Effect.¹⁰¹

For Ānanda Metteyya, hope lay in the fact that “whatsoever phenomenon arises, it is invariably an effect produced by an antecedent cause.”¹⁰² Such an analysis removed from him the need for esoteric knowledge or for contacting external powers of evil or of good, the urge which featured in his early religious search. The basis for human hope, Ānanda Metteyya discovered, was as simple as it was profound. The movement from *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* (impermanence, suffering, non-self) to religious path and from pessimism to optimism lay directly through *paṭicca-samuppāda* (dependent origination) as shown in the Four Noble Truths. Suffering had a cause and if the cause was eliminated, suffering would cease.

⁹⁷Ibid., p.51.

⁹⁸Ibid., p.370.

⁹⁹Ibid., p.378.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p.320.

¹⁰¹Ibid., p.356.

¹⁰²*Wisdom of the Aryas*, p.32.

Ānanda Metteyya's treatment of the cause of *dukkha*, suffering, was varied. Sometimes he used science. Take the amoebae, one of the smallest known living entities, he said, and *dukkha* can be seen. The amoebae moves only when irritated, in other words, when feeling aversion. When still, it is at peace. From this, he continued, the reactions of all other animal forms have developed. By the time human aversion is reached, a thousand complex cravings have arisen, all of which involve suffering. Such an illustration locates the cause of *dukkha* in attraction and aversion and the craving they generate. Yet *avijjā*, ignorance of the true nature of existence, was the concept Ānanda Metteyya used most often to explain human suffering, and the picture he evoked of a world enmeshed in ignorance was dark and became more horrific in the later years of his life as the First World War proved his view that Western civilization was in crisis.

From ignorance, he stressed, flow *lobha*, *dosa*, and *moha* (greed, hatred, and illusion) and he linked each with one of the three attributes of existence. So *lobha*, greed, defined as the wish to possess worldly goods, springs from a denial of impermanence (*anicca*) through the belief that the world contains the changeless. *Dosa*, hatred, arises in a mind that has no appreciation of suffering and therefore cannot feel pity. *Moha* comes from ignorance of *anattā* and the belief that there is a self to be seen in everything.

It was ignorance of *anattā* which Ānanda Metteyya wrote about most. Late Victorian culture was steeped in individualism. Without a knowledge of Buddhist ideas, he wrote, it is almost impossible to become aware "how much every mode of expression of Western thought involves the assumption of the existence of a Self."¹⁰³ Buddhism taught him that the darkness lay not in no-self but in self, that a society steeped in individualism was a society brutalised. So, devotion to the Buddha also hinged on:

no less significant a thought than that of our own true place in life's progression; as compared with the heights of selflessness won by the Holy and the Great of old. Seeing, by the clear logic of the Law, how self is the cause of all the pain of life, seeing how difficult for us is each poor feeblest act of sacrifice of self, our hearts are filled with wonder and with love at the thought of one who could give all that men hold dear, not in the sure knowledge of success, but only in the Hope of finding a Way of Peace for all. That is the sort of Faith, of Love, of Devotion, that can help us on, and why? Because it means another conquest over self-hood; a further achievement of the deeper, vaster, universal Love.¹⁰⁴

To the person who clings with every fibre of his being to the concept of self, Ānanda Metteyya says:

Life, so far as it is individualised, enselved, ensouled is— even as the Reason teaches—evil, co-terminous with Pain... Give up all hope, all faith in Self... Dream no more "I am" or "I shall be" but realise, Life suffers; and only by destruction of life's cause in Selfhood can that suffering be relieved, and Life pass nearer to the Other Shore.¹⁰⁵

In other words, "Wherever in the All of conscious life there reigns no thought of self, there lies that Path of Peace; so hard to win, and yet so nigh to all."¹⁰⁶ Ānanda Metteyya did not preach merely that belief in self might be linked with pain, but that it is inseparably linked and is the cause not only of individual suffering but of worldwide, even cosmic, suffering.

Ānanda Metteyya's words about *anattā* speak, I believe, of his own personal pilgrimage towards renunciation. His youthful explorations into spirituality were probably linked with a wish for personal achievement, making his first encounter with *anattā* difficult, as these words indicate:

Because so much in all our lives is founded on and guided by this sad belief,—to him who realises its utter falsity, there comes at first a great and awful blank in life, a grief well known to all who have in any sense attained: wherein all good and useful object in the Universe seems lost to him, for the Soul for which his life has heretofore been lived, has passed away for ever, and with it all the army of his former hopes and aspirations, in so far as these were founded on that conception of the Self. It is the darkest hour in all the evolution of a man, this realisation that the Self

¹⁰³"Mental Culture" in *Buddhism*, Vol. 2:2, p.279.

¹⁰⁴*Religion of Burma*, p.380.

¹⁰⁵"Propaganda" in *Buddhism*, Vol. 2:2, pp.186–87.

¹⁰⁶*Religion of Burma*, p.47.

that he has striven to perfect and work for is no more than a delusion;—but it is also the darkest hour which goes before the dawn.¹⁰⁷

Ānanda Metteyya must have experienced this. All his words about “the dawn” which rises when the truth of anattā is realised are permeated with a quality of brightness which speaks of a deep personal experience of liberation through the doctrine. The liberation was both personal and communal, both an internal release from bondage and the birth of new possibilities for a more humane society. He believed that even a glimpse of the truth of no-self should lead to greater tolerance and humaneness. He also believed it led to the awareness that all beings were bound together, that all life was One.

The phrase “One Life” occurs frequently in Ānanda Metteyya’s writings. The simile he most frequently used was that of a wave:

The Buddhist conception of Life, that is to say of the Universe, may be summed up, as already stated, in terms of the formula—All life is One. Just as all the waters of the ocean are one water, and one body of water, so it is with this universal teaming life; and just as, in the great ocean, there is, and can be by the very nature of it, no individual body of water separate from the rest, so in life’s ocean there is—and can be by the very nature of it— no single separate unit or body of life, whether it be the highest or the lowest, most subtle or most gross.... Each satta—each living being that our Nescience makes us regard as an individual, a real and separate entity, a self or soul or Atma— is in truth only one such wave, whether a billow or a ripple only, upon the surface of life’s ocean.... Just as the only real wave is no individual mass of water, but a complex collocation of hydraulic forces, themselves constantly in process of minor modifications—so is the satta no individual unit of life.¹⁰⁸

Edwin Arnold stressed the interdependence of all. But Ānanda Metteyya took the imagery further. For him, all animal and plant life was so fused together that every action, movement, or thought affected the whole. It is as though he saw the universe as one organism, constantly being torn apart because this unity was denied through selfishness. This led him to stress that the usual boundary between what is good for self and what is good for others was meaningless. There simply was no “self” and “other.” If one killed another, one killed oneself. If one stole from another, one stole from oneself. To begin with oneself was to benefit all:

If you aspire to lighten the burden of the world, to bring humanity a little nearer to the Peace it craves:— start right at home, and strive to free, to ennoble, to purify yourself,— your own life, your own heart’s aspirations:— for in all the worlds there is no greater help to render or grander service for the sake of all mankind. And why? Because each man is an integral portion of humanity, because each thought of love, each effort after purity man makes or thinks is gain to all, — because it is but the Illusion blinding us that bids us think , “I am one soul, one mind, one life — and these my brothers are without, and separate from me.” All life is one in very truth,— the ant, and man, glory of sun and star, and the vast gulfs of space are one, one and no other, save that the darkness of our vain self-hood hides.¹⁰⁹

The concept of “the One Life” does not have any conceptual counterpart in the original Dhamma. It could have been an interpretative principle that early Western Buddhists introduced, perhaps in reaction against the increasing individualism in Western life. Since Fielding Hall also used the term and claimed his data had been gathered orally, it could also have echoed words used by the Burmese to express their awareness of interconnectedness.¹¹⁰ Whichever explanation is adopted, it was an utterly liberating idea for Ānanda Metteyya.

Most important of all within Ānanda Metteyya’s concept of selflessness, however, is the place of love and compassion. When talking to Clifford Bax in 1918 about no-self, he touched on Nibbāna and continued:

¹⁰⁷“The Law of Righteousness” in *Buddhism*, Vol. 1:3, pp.369–70.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, pp.165–67.

¹⁰⁹“The Faith of the Future” in *Buddhism*, Vol. 1:1, p.22.

¹¹⁰See Chapter 2, note 9. Fielding Hall placed great stress both on the Burmese conviction that each person is responsible for himself or herself and their awareness that all of nature is alive and interconnected.

You will be wondering how the sense of selfhood may be dissolved. The great dissolvent is love. True love is a union of the perceiver with the perceived; and I think you will not deny that the more nearly you come to union with another being, the less emphatically are you yourself. We can go further. We can say that the person who truly loves is at once more than he was and less: less himself and yet an extended being. And so it is that when our seeming selves are “blown out”... something immeasurable and indescribable is released, as it were, and, as it were, takes their place.¹¹¹

It is this “something immeasurable and indescribable” which Ānanda Metteyya sought continually to define. Compassion and love were the words he most frequently used, but it is obvious that he used the terms in a supra-mundane sense. He was clear that wherever there was belief in the attā, the self, there altruistic love and compassion were tainted because somewhere there would be hope of future reward for self. The Buddhist concept of love was different:

To realise that we ourselves are but as transitory waves upon the Ocean of existence,—that all the good we do, the love we have, the wisdom that we garner and the help we give is wrought but for the reaping of the Universe, wrought because Pity is the highest Law of Life,—this is in Buddhism accounted the true beginning of all righteousness,—unselfishness that gives all, whilst knowing yet that it shall never reap the gain.¹¹²

For Ānanda Metteyya, the truest response to the concept of the One Life was compassion. It was the highest point in human evolution. Life’s “final, highest, holiest lesson” for a person was “to live no longer for himself, but for this piteous, suffering Life alone.”¹¹³ It was the fruit of deep penetration into the First Noble Truth—“He who realises in his heart of hearts how terrible is all this Pain of life can no more hate.”¹¹⁴ It led Ānanda Metteyya to a missionary commitment to spread a more humane ethic:

Understanding how all of it is doomed to sorrow—wrought of the very warp and woof of Pain and Suffering and Despair—let the divine emotion of Compassion that wakes in us at the thought of it kill out all Hatred from our hearts and ways. Seeing ... how Life is One ... let us live no more for self’s fell phantasy, but for the All ... let us live so that the All, the One, may be the nobler and the greater for our life.¹¹⁵

Throughout Ānanda Metteyya’s writings, compassion is presented as the key to life’s meaning and as the only response to the three attributes of existence. It was the highest expression of the human mind and heart and it lay at the heart of the goal of existence, Nibbāna.

Nibbāna—Inalienable Peace

If Ānanda Metteyya emphasised One Life, did he consider Nibbāna to be some form of absorption into this One Life? Edwin Arnold seems to imply this in *The Light of Asia*, giving his work a non-Buddhist touch:

Unto NIRVANA: He is one with Life,
Yet lives not. He is blest, ceasing to be,
OM MANI PADME, OM! the Dewdrop slips
Into the shining sea!

Ānanda Metteyya did not follow Arnold here. His was not a vision of integration into “One Life”. Interconnectedness was fact already. The need was to bring all life into Nibbāna. Two perspectives on Nibbāna lie in tension throughout his work: that it is near and attainable; that it is distant and indescribable. As a young monk in Burma, it appeared to him to lie just at the other side of the “terrible” truth of *anicca, dukkha, anattā*:

¹¹¹Clifford Bax, “Ānanda Metteyya” in *The Middle Way*, Vol. 43:1, May 1968, pp.26–27.

¹¹²“The Law of Righteousness” in *Buddhism*, Vol. 1:3, p.363.

¹¹³*Wisdom of the Aryas*, pp.69–70.

¹¹⁴*Religion of Burma*, p.163.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, p.177.

A Truth so deep that could our minds but grasp the whole of it, then, where erst our petty, finite minds were limiting and determining the Life, at that same point of Time and Space and Consciousness were none of these—were but Infinitude, Infinite Understanding and Compassion, Nibbāna’s sure, inalienable Peace.¹¹⁶

It was so important for him that he wrote on it for the very first issue of Buddhism, in 1903. Peace was the word he used most frequently to describe it at this time. It was a peace linked with the death of the “I” concept and the birth of compassion. “It grows but from the ashes of the self outburnt,”¹¹⁷ he graphically wrote. He was always quick to say that it had nothing to do with eternal life for a soul. In that first article, he urged his readers to place themselves “in the mental attitude of the Buddhist” and to free themselves from the belief that all must revolve around a soul and therefore that the question “Who attains Nibbāna?” was important.¹¹⁸ Yet, he was quite aware that the charge of nihilism could be flung at this. His answer in 1903 and later was:

To say, again, that Buddhism aims at final extinction is not true—the Goal of Buddhism is not in the hereafter, but here in the life we live—its Goal is a life made glorious by self-conquest and exalted by boundless love and wisdom.¹¹⁹

And the texts witnessed to the reality of this:

Our books are filled with such descriptions—filled with such words as these: the awe-stricken wondering articulations of those who had attained, even in this life, to the Goal of our Religion, to the glorious life of utter Peace, to the incomparable security of the Nibbāna.¹²⁰

Yet, for Ānanda Metteyya, it was also beyond description and human thought, especially when he looked beyond this life. In 1903, he resorted to rhetorical questions: “How shall we ... with our ever-changing minds, meditate on That which is past Life and Knowledge, past Death and Change—the Immutable, the Uncaused, the Supreme—that which no thought can realise, and no words make known?”¹²¹ With a touch of euphoria, he could claim that it was the opposite of all we know:

If I am asked, “Is the Nibbāna Annihilation? Is it Cessation? Is it the End of All?” I reply, thus even have we learned. It is Annihilation—the annihilation of the threefold fatal fire of Passion, Wrath, and Ignorance. It is Annihilation—the annihilation of conditioned being, of all that has bound and fettered us; the Cessation of the dire delusion of life that has veiled from us the splendour of the Light Beyond. It is the End of All—the end of the long tortuous pilgrimage through worlds of interminable illusion; the End of Sorrow, of Impermanence, of Self-deceit. From the torment of the sad Dream of Life an everlasting Awakening,—from the torture of self-hood an eternal Liberation;—a Being, an Existence, that to name Life were sacrilege, and to name Death a lie:—unnameable, unthinkable, yet even in this life to be realised and entered into.¹²²

Later, in 1917, his tone was less euphoric, tempered perhaps by the war, age, and illness:

Nirvana stands for the Ultimate, the Beyond, and the Goal of Life—a State so utterly different from this conditioned ever-changing being of the Self-dream that we know as to lie not only quite Beyond all naming and describing; but far past even Thought itself.¹²³

There is less emphasis here on its attainability but, in the same talk, he added that it lies “nearer to us than our nearest consciousness; even as, to him who rightly understands, it is dearer than the dearest hope that we can frame.”¹²⁴ Nibbāna was beyond words but closer to us than our breath.

¹¹⁶Ibid., p.174.

¹¹⁷Ibid., p.48.

¹¹⁸“Nibbāna” in *Buddhism*, Vol. 1:1, p.119.

¹¹⁹“The Faith of the Future” in *Buddhism*, Vol. 1:1, p.30.

¹²⁰“Nibbāna,” p.126.

¹²¹Ibid., p.127.

¹²²Ibid., p.133.

¹²³*Wisdom of the Aryas*, p.124.

¹²⁴Ibid., p.125.

Some would term such a vision mystical. Yet Ānanda Metteyya could also use atomic science to attempt an explanation. What happens at arahatship, he explained to Clifford Bax, could be similar to atomic disintegration—forces which had been bound together were separated and transformed into something completely different.¹²⁵ But even here that “something” could not adequately be described in words.

Morality and Meditation

How did Ānanda Metteyya encourage people to start on the path leading away from ignorance? What role did he give to action within the world? What role did he give to meditation? Two distinct lines of teaching can be seen: act with generosity and it will affect your mind; work on your mind through meditation and it will affect both your mind and your action.

Ānanda Metteyya often began his teaching with morality to the point where he could render one textual description of the path as morality, giving and meditation (*sīla, dāna, bhāvanā*) rather than the more usual giving, morality, and meditation (*dāna, sīla, bhāvanā*). Moral living was where the Buddhist had to start.

In *The Religion of Burma*, using the formula, *sīla, dāna, bhāvanā*, Ānanda Metteyya described *sīla* as avoiding evil and *dāna* as a more advanced stage where charity—or altruistic action aimed at alleviating suffering—was practised. He sees both as essential to those starting on the path but he is clear that the motivation for them could simply be a wish to ensure future lives of happiness rather than of pain. He does not condemn such “selfishness” but claims that the action itself could modify the motivation: “Starting to give for love of self, of self alone, the very contact with the lives and needs of others widens the erstwhile petty limits of man’s selfhood.”¹²⁶

In other words, *dāna* undertaken to bring merit to self could lead to self-denying love; acting with generosity could be a mind and heart-changing agent. The Dhamma could teach that, “like a flame of fire, Love kindles Love, grows by the mere act of loving.”¹²⁷

Ānanda Metteyya accepted, therefore, that many Buddhists followed the precepts and were generous purely to gain a better rebirth. His hope was that the resulting action would kindle a spirit of loving kindness that did not flow from a wish for rewards.

If action could be mind-changing, Ānanda Metteyya insisted that meditation could be action-changing. The two existed in a dialectical tension. Refraining from harming others and the practice of active generosity were essential, but culture of the mind was as important as good works even at the beginning of the Path. *Sīla* and *dāna* alone could not lead to “the Holy Path” of wisdom and compassion. Only *bhāvanā* (meditation) could do that.¹²⁸ Only meditation could give insight into the how and why of the mind and heart, which conditioned how the universe was seen. For, Ānanda Metteyya claimed, “in all our ideas about the existence of the Universe we are dealing, and dealing only, with the modifications of our own sensuous and mental modes.”¹²⁹

Meditation is presented in Ānanda Metteyya’s writings as the way towards knowledge and compassion. The knowledge he meant was not that of science, which at one point he described as “side-shows, specialised realms of knowledge only collaterally connected with the real advancement, the true maturity.”¹³⁰ What he sought was knowledge connected with insight and understanding, knowledge which could completely alter a person’s nature. For he believed Buddhist practice could enable a person to change the constitution of his being through the power of the “mental element” so that “his nature and subsequent career”¹³¹ could be altered.

¹²⁵Ibid., p.123; *The Middle Way*, 43:1, p.28.

¹²⁶*Religion of Burma*, p.65.

¹²⁷Ibid., p.66.

¹²⁸Ibid., p.327.

¹²⁹“The Law of Righteousness” in *Buddhism*, Vol. 1:3, p.356.

¹³⁰*Religion of Burma*, p.372.

¹³¹“Mental Culture” in *Buddhism*, Vol. 2:2, p.284.

Ānanda Metteyya's response to Westerners who branded meditation as selfish and individualistic was linked with this—that mental culture and the changes it brought ultimately benefitted all, since “from the Buddhist view-point, all reformation, all attempt to help on life, can best be effected by first reforming the immediate life-kingdom of the ‘self.’”¹³²

One practice which Ānanda Metteyya recommended as action-changing at the beginning of the path was meditation on an object such as the brahmavihāra (“divine abodes”) or an attribute of existence. One of the most moving expressions of this comes in his article “The Rule of the Inner Kingdom” when he speaks of the rush of power for action which could come when meditating on compassion (*karuṇā*):

That thrill of pity once awakened, directed as in our passage to the multitudinous beings caught in the surging whirlpool of Craving, Passion, and Illusion is to be dwelt on, magnified, purified in our thoughts, always with our ideal as its substratum, with the idea that this definite cultivation of an emotion otherwise only occasional, will open for us the entrance to the Path—the path that leads to power to help relieve the sorrow of the world.¹³³

Right “watchfulness” or “recollectedness”, the translation he gives of *satipaṭṭhāna*, is a further practice recommended to all, including beginners. He defined it as the observation and classification of thought, speech, and action, and “the constant application to each and all of them of the Doctrine of Selflessness” with the thought, “This is not I, this is not Mine, there is no Self herein.”¹³⁴ A meticulous discipline of watching the consciousness was required. This, Ānanda Metteyya insisted, could lead to higher forms of meditation, to samādhi, through which sudden revolutionary insight or gnosis was possible.

Ānanda Metteyya, of course, could speak with experience of the dangers of meditation. He knew personally the reality and entrancement of iddhi, psychic powers. He knew that they could feed the sense of “I,” not banish it. Thus he was adamant that meditation wrongly practised was worse than the absence of meditation:

[B]ut, if such attainment should result in the exaltation of our self-hood, the magnification of our ‘I,’ then we have done harm far greater than many lives of worldly ignorance could result in. And, on the other hand, every least act, here in this our world, which tends to abnegation of self—each deed of love and pity and helpfulness we do—is another stepping-stone we have laid in the shallows of life, over which we may presently pass to life’s Further Shore of Peace.¹³⁵

For the word *samādhi*, Ānanda Metteyya could find no adequate English translation. “Concentration” he rarely used. “Ecstasy” was better and he chose the simile of a flame. Usually the mind is like a flickering flame, he explained, in continual oscillation between consciousness and unconsciousness. In samādhi, the flame burns steadily and the oneness of life is seen clearly: “it is only in its steady-burning ardour that the higher wisdom, the true understanding of the Oneness of Life that makes for Peace, can be won.”¹³⁶ Here, he seems to equate samādhi with insight, in this case with a non-dualistic awareness of our interconnectedness with all that is.

Ānanda Metteyya did not frequently mention the jhānas. But there is one intense description in his writings of an experience which he linked with entering the first jhāna, although its quality speaks more of the attainment of stream-entry. Meditation on compassion was the preparation for it and then came a burst of liberating consciousness beyond human thought:

As from the heart of a dark thundercloud at night time when nought or but a little of earth or heaven can be seen, suddenly the lightning flashes, and for an instant the unseen world gleams forth in instantaneous light, light penetrating every darkest corner, flushing the clouded sky with momentary glory—so then, at that great moment, will come the realisation of all our toil. No words, no similes, no highest thought of ours can adequately convey that mighty realisation;

¹³²*Religion of Burma*, p.232.

¹³³*Ibid.*, pp.329–30.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, p.87; *Wisdom of the Aryas*, p.94.

¹³⁵*Religion of Burma*, pp.407–8.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, p.393.

but then, at that time, we shall know and see; we shall realise that all our life has changed of a sudden, and what of yore we deemed Compassion—what of old we deemed the utmost attainment that the mind or the life of man can compass—that is ours at last; we have won, achieved, and entered into the Path of which mere words can never tell.¹³⁷

Ecstatic joy is present here, the quality of the first and second jhānas. There is also the presence of compassion. Ānanda Metteyya did not often mention upekkhā, equanimity, the quality linked with the third and fourth jhānas. Yet, there is one interesting definition of it. In an article called “The Path of Attainment,” he explained it as “Discrimination or Aloofness from the worldly life.”¹³⁸ The word “discrimination” is significant here. An active quality is brought in, perhaps in response to those who wanted to stereotype Buddhism as a path of apathetic non-involvement. Upekkhā, as non-attachment, is linked with the ability to judge objectively and therefore act wisely.

Ānanda Metteyya, however, did not see moments of ecstasy as an end in themselves, though his description of them reveals an almost self-contained intensity. They were the servants of ethical living and the hard discipline of mental culture. In one of his most significant sentences, he claims that the heart of the Path was not through successive “subtilisations” of the false idea of selfhood, not through the jhānas, “but in the very humblest, simplest, and most intimate of all directions that the heart of man can turn and travel in ... so does the portal of the Path stand wide for all of us just only when—though it be but for a moment—we forget our Self; and live, aspire, and work for Life at large.”¹³⁹

¹³⁷Ibid., pp.333–34.

¹³⁸*Wisdom of the Aryas*, p.104.

¹³⁹Ibid., pp.125–26.

Chapter 4

Buddhism as Social Comment

While Allan Bennett's experimentation before he travelled to Sri Lanka centred on meditation, breath control, drugs, and esoteric knowledge, it was combined with a concern for social issues such as war, capital punishment, the sale of arms, and imperial exploitation. Nineteenth century Western movements connected with Theosophy, spiritualism, freethought, and esoteric knowledge were "dissident" in that they were a reaction against a culture which stressed the hegemony of Christianity, the rhetoric of Empire, and the superiority of Western civilization. They not only mounted a religious challenge to Christianity but also a social challenge to the imperialistic culture Christianity had spawned. Criticism of society, especially the Western model, is apparent in much of Ānanda Metteyya's writings. His message was not purely personal. Within the West he saw deep disillusionment with the optimism of the past and claimed "we slowly come to understand that all our deepest hopes must be abandoned, all our old-time thoughts must take on some new direction."¹⁴⁰

Ānanda Metteyya's started his critique of the West by citing moral corruption arising from selfish craving and individualistic competition. In his editorial in the first edition of *Buddhism*, he painted a vivid picture of the West losing religion as past generations knew it and condemned the result because of the loss of moral bearings:

Apart altogether from the misery that that civilization has spread in lands beyond its pale, can it be claimed that in its internal polity, that for its own peoples, it has brought with it any diminution of the world's suffering, any diminution of its degradation, its misery, its crime; above all, has it brought about any general increase of its native contentment, the extension of any such knowledge as promotes the spirit of mutual helpfulness rather than the curse of competition?¹⁴¹

"No", was his answer. Next, he criticised the West's war machine, tearing ten million men away from useful service, "waiting but a word to let Hell loose on earth"; then he turned to alcohol, "crowded taverns," "overflowing gaols," and "sad asylums" to prove that there had been no increase in happiness in the West because it had concentrated too much on "the multiplication of material possessions," ignoring "the culture of the highest faculties of the mind."¹⁴² In the fourth issue of *Buddhism*, the condemnation was even more pointed. He went through recent centuries in the West to highlight the barbarism present: that children could be hanged for stealing anything over the value of a shilling; that a man killed by lightning could be denied a Christian burial because it was thought to be the punishment of God; that Simpson of Edinburgh could be condemned for discovering chloroform as an anaesthetic; that Darwin could be the subject of bitter invective. He linked such things to "primaevial savageries"¹⁴³ flowing from the Christian heritage and the ferocity of its persecution of knowledge.

Ānanda Metteyya therefore overturned the accepted rhetoric of Empire and imperial conquest—that the West was the carrier of civilization—and his actions were as explicit as his words. The very fact that he learnt at the feet of Sri Lankans and Burmese was a visible contradiction of such values, an icon pointing to a different perspective. Both his words and actions questioned the very heart of the imperial venture—patriotism and nationalism. In a talk given during his mission to England, he linked them with craving and the self: "Whether we term it My Desire or My Dislike; or, going further afield, strife for Self's Beloved or Self's country, it is the Self which makes the Beloved One dear or Country worthy of devotion."¹⁴⁴ In *The Religion of Burma*, it was to a mistaken clinging to changelessness and Selfhood that he attributed them:

¹⁴⁰*Religion of Burma*, p.158.

¹⁴¹"The Faith of the Future" in *Buddhism*, Vol. 1:1, p.12.

¹⁴²*Ibid.*, p.13.

¹⁴³"The New Civilization" in *Buddhism*, Vol. 1:4, pp.535–36.

¹⁴⁴*The Middle Way*, Vol. 29, November 1954, p.126.

Man builds his pyramids, his shrines to all eternity: and ere the stones be fast cemented, already the invisible work of dissolution has begun.... "So long as the sun shall shine upon this land our Eagles shall rule over it" cried the Roman generals; but where on earth today endures one vestige of Rome's iron might? Today, in little-altered words, our generals boast it, to-morrow (if haply men shall grow no wiser in the meantime than to slay each other like the brutes), tomorrow the same words will be proclaimed by men not-understanding of a nation yet unborn.¹⁴⁵

It was the violence caused by such arrogant expansionism which appalled him most. In another article his attack was even more specific:

It is the Wrong View: "I am English; glorious English nationality is mine, so it behoves me to fight against persons who have another sort of Self-Theory, and say: 'No, but a Teuton I.'" It is that Wrong View which now makes necessary that the bulk of the resources of every branch of the West-Aryan race is wasted on armaments of war—wasted, when so much might, in the present state of our knowledge, be achieved by man, were that great wealth to be expended in combating, not only physical disease, but also those far more fatal mental sicknesses, to which so much of Western misery is due.¹⁴⁶

Another wrong view he detected in Victorian culture was the belief that there was a joy and happiness in life that could be gained through possessions. It was not so much the effect on the acquisitive individual that he criticised as the social inequality it nurtured. His words became a frontal attack on Western capitalism:

To produce that vast array of things really useless, thousands and hundreds of thousands of women, men, and even little children must live squalid and hopeless lives, ever in fear of some catastrophe of commerce that may deprive them of food, warmth, and shelter.¹⁴⁷

Looking at Burma in comparison, Ānanda Metteyya saw a nation infinitely more civilised and more happy than that of Britain:

In Burma (amongst the Burmese people) there is not, for example, a single orphanage in the land; and, what is much more to the point, there is not a single Burmese child in the land that is starving. Ask any person who has lived, really in contact with this Burmese people: Amongst which of the two, Burma's six millions or London's six millions, is there the greater suffering; which as a whole has most of happiness? That one will tell you that he doubts if the whole of Burma can shew you as much squalor, as much starvation, as much downright preventable human agony as any one of London's slums reveals.¹⁴⁸

It is not that he saw no wrong in Burma.¹⁴⁹ It was the arrogance of the West in seeking to civilise those who were more civilised that he attacked. When war broke out between Russia and Japan in 1904, whilst deploring the war, he praised Japan for shattering the stereotype the West had imposed on it—of an unintelligent, weak race incapable of standing up for itself.¹⁵⁰ He came to the point of almost justifying Japan's response because it punctured the West's confidence! It was outrageous, he believed, that the West should trample on cultures permeated by a religion which had "done more to promote the true civilization of the world than any of the great Religions which we know."¹⁵¹

Hope through Science

In spite of Ānanda Metteyya's criticism of the West, in his early writings he saw hope in two developments—science and the coming of Buddhism. Illustrations taken from science fill his writings and there is an excitement about science's potential to destroy reliance on speculation and "blind faith."

¹⁴⁵*Religion of Burma*, pp.139–40.

¹⁴⁶*Ibid.*, pp.217–18.

¹⁴⁷*Ibid.*, pp.219.

¹⁴⁸"Propaganda" in *Buddhism*, Vol. 2:2, p.190.

¹⁴⁹See "In the Shadow of the Shwe Dagon" in *Buddhism*, Vol. 1:4, p.631, when the "turmoil and clamour" of Rangoon is contrasted to the quietness of rural areas.

¹⁵⁰*Buddhism*, Vol. 1:4, pp.649ff.

¹⁵¹"The Faith of the Future" in *Buddhism*, Vol. 1:1, p.31.

Before the First World War, he could claim that the knowledge science fostered would pave the way to “a grander and more stable civilization than ever the world has known; to a unification of the sciences and a wider comprehension of the laws of nature; and, last of all, to actual Knowledge,—to the true comprehension of the nature of life and thought and hence of the universe in which we live.”¹⁵² He went on to claim that moral progress had resulted from the principles of science and added that “it is in this very fact of the substitution of unerring Reason for the transitory dreams of the emotions that the possibility,—nay, given time enough the absolute certainty,—of the universal extension of this New Civilization lies.”¹⁵³

He saw Reason leading to an appreciation of Truth, which would humanise society and break war and race hatreds. Within religion, there would be less intolerance for “sin,” a greater realisation that “evil-doing is in truth a disease that in many cases may be cured,” and an understanding that “true Religion is living a noble life, and not holding this or that view about the nature of the Deity, or the origin of ‘sin.’”¹⁵⁴ He was also convinced that only time was needed for the secrets of the universe to be revealed through science. By this, he not only meant truth about the material world but also truth about the psychological and the spiritual. To him, experiments into the nature of the thought waves emanating from the mind were pure science. He was inspired by the work into “aetheric” waves done by Heinrich Rudolf Hertz¹⁵⁵ and was convinced that this was relevant to the study of the mind.

Lying behind this hope in a future guided by reason was an evolutionary theory. Although Ānanda Metteyya rejected the Theosophist’s view that each human possessed a soul on an inevitable upward evolutionary course, he saw evolution working within societies as a whole. He pictured this as a movement from childhood to adulthood and described two progressions, one connected with compassion and the other with wisdom. Within the first, the stage of childhood was when good was done from fear of punishment. Adolescence came when the motivation changed from fear to the selfishness which saw that good deeds would bring happy future lives; the stage of adulthood, when renunciation triumphed over all self-interest and good was done out of pure compassion, with no expectation of reward.¹⁵⁶ In the area of wisdom, childhood was the realm of blind faith, when musts and must nots are accepted without question as the dictates of a hypothetical supreme being. Adolescence was the age of investigation and questioning, and adulthood the age of understanding.

When Ānanda Metteyya looked at the West from Burma before his mission, he saw the age of investigation. He saw reason beginning to triumph over an ontology based on faith. He was willing to praise the Western mind for its “incomparable achievements” in science¹⁵⁷ and he looked forward to an age of understanding as science and Buddhism joined hands. So, an almost eschatological hope can be seen at this time. He can end an article in 1904 with the words:

Surely that day will come, though Sorrow, servant of Nescience, be tardy in the teaching... Hatred grown into Love, and all the darkness of Ignorance illumined by the Light of Lights, which is the Law of Uttermost Compassion:—thus shall it be on earth when the Great Law shall have at last worked out the Destiny of Man:—in that supremest Day when Love and Wisdom shall have conquered all Humanity, and opened for all feet to tread the Way to the Illimitable Peace.¹⁵⁸

He was even able to speak at this time of a “Power that moves to righteousness and brings all beings to the greater Light: the Power of Wisdom.”¹⁵⁹ His encounter with Buddhism brought him hope for the future of human society.

The First World War severely battered Ānanda Metteyya’s faith in science as a humanising factor. His belief that the West could be reaching adolescence by severing itself from the blind faith he asso-

¹⁵²“The New Civilization” in *Buddhism*, Vol. 1:4, p.533.

¹⁵³*Ibid.*, p.540.

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p.545.

¹⁵⁵Heinrich Rudolf Hertz (1857–94) was a German physicist who confirmed the existence of electromagnetic waves and showed that they obeyed the same rules as light.

¹⁵⁶“Right Aspiration” in *Buddhism*, Vol. 2:1, p.3.

¹⁵⁷*Religion of Burma*, p.253.

¹⁵⁸“The Law of Righteousness” in *Buddhism*, Vol. 1:3, p.376.

¹⁵⁹*Religion of Burma*, p.226.

ciated with Christianity was destroyed and he was thrown back into an awareness of craving at the root of human existence. So, in 1920, when he took over the editorship of *The Buddhist Review*, he wrote:

The marvellous advance of physical science during the past century has been to a great extent unaccompanied by such parallel improvement in matters of morality and self-restraint as was essential to the preservation of stability.... For stability, it is essential that every advance in the conquest over nature should be accompanied by an equal advance in the conquest over self;—over the spirits of greed and passion and ambition, which have brought this late calamity upon our Western world.¹⁶⁰

It is as though the war forced Ānanda Metteyya to come back to the heart of the Buddha's message. However compatible reason and scientific method might be with Buddhism, he saw that the two are not enough by themselves because they can be put to the service of craving and selfishness just as much as forces of unreason.

Yet, the final writings of Ānanda Metteyya still contain tremendous hope and optimism. He stood before the Buddhist Society on Vesak Day 1918, while the war still raged, and admitted that it appeared that "all our world is rocking about us to its fall," that force was triumphing over reason, hate over truth and love, heartless greed over charity.¹⁶¹ He recounted the commentarial story which tells of the Sakyans' willingness to be destroyed rather than fight and suggested that such an action would have been better for Britain in the current war. There could have been no starker contrast with his words in 1904.¹⁶² Yet he exhorted everyone to have faith that "the Good" would conquer in the end and to hold fast to the cultivation of the "Heart's Kingdom" where truth and compassion lay. He concluded:

When, then, the dark clouds of the sad world's dreaming gather thick around us; when grief and pain assail us; when poverty fills our lives with squalid care; when the vast agony of life about us grips our hearts well-nigh to suffocation; even when death itself draws near; in each and every bitter circumstance of life we can find solace and new inspiration in the Law our Master left.... And so, remembering, remembering how that great hope came to us; how He that won it was no God, but one just like ourselves, who suffered through life after life, yet ever strove to find a Way that all might follow to the Light Beyond all Life.¹⁶³

On that Vesak Day, with war raging, Ānanda Metteyya turned people inwards to the springs of their faith and hope. After the war, he urged Buddhists in Britain to move outwards. One thing the war had done, he believed, was to shake people out of apathy. Few houses had been untouched by tragedy. Materialism no longer satisfied. There was a quest for meaning. Therefore, in 1920, he could write that "no period could possibly be more propitious to the fulfilment of our aims than that upon which we have entered"¹⁶⁴—the aim being building Buddhism up in Britain.

A progression can, therefore, be seen in Ānanda Metteyya's thought. In his early years as a monk, science, reason, and the Dhamma seemed to offer joint hope to the world. In his later years, as his physical suffering increased, it was the Dhamma which took precedence, as a living Truth. It was not scientific advance, he realised, that would pave the way for the acceptance of Buddhism in the West but the experience of dukkha, suffering, and the glimpse of an alternative to it. So, eventually, it was not the scientific laboratory which Ānanda Metteyya looked to when he wanted the warmth of inspiration but the religious life of Burma. In his 1917 lectures, the contrast he depicted between the brightness and intensity of Buddhist faith in Burma and the greyness of wartime England was aimed at the heart rather than the intellect, at experience rather than rational argument. "Till I went out to the East," he declared, "I did not know what it was to experience the awakening to the Buddhist light of

¹⁶⁰*The Buddhist Review*, Vol. 10, 1920, pp.186–87

¹⁶¹*Ibid.*, pp.141–42.

¹⁶²See note 20. "The New Civilization" (in *Buddhism*, Vol. 1:4, p.560), also published in 1904, voices a similar eschatological hope.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*, pp.147–48.

¹⁶⁴*The Buddhist Review*, Vol. 10, 1920, p.181.

day.¹⁶⁵ In the West, he added, one cannot find religion as such “a vivid, potent, living force” as in the East.¹⁶⁶

For you must understand that this is no mere cut-and-dried philosophy—as it may seem to one who reads of it out here in books—but a living, breathing Truth; a mighty power able to sweep whomsoever casts himself wholeheartedly into its great streams, far and beyond the life we know and live.¹⁶⁷

Buddhism for Ānanda Metteyya was both rational Truth and also force, energy. It not only gave him a meaningful philosophy of life but also faith in a teacher, hope in an ultimate purpose for the universe and motivating energy, which could uphold him in the darkness of war. The intensity of this awareness sometimes made the Dhamma appear to him as a bright, almost tangible, external force leading human effort onwards. There is a remarkable passage from his 1917 talks in which the Buddha and the Dhamma are seen as the source and stream of regenerating and liberating power. Echoing Edwin Arnold, Ānanda Metteyya stressed that there was a power “whereby we may enfranchise that droplet of Life’s ocean which we term ourselves,” a power which moved to good and manifested itself as sympathy and compassion. He refused to name it other than as ultra-personal, “making for perfection,” but he located it in the Buddha and the Dhamma and claimed that, in its highest aspect, it “constitutes that force whereby we are ever, so to speak, drawn upwards out of this life in which we live, towards the State Beyond—Nirvana, the Goal towards which all Life is slowly but surely moving.”¹⁶⁸

I believe this awareness of a positive force for good could have been the cause of censure among some British Buddhists who had adopted Buddhism purely because it was a rational philosophy free of such things as devotion and energy generated by corporate religion. The significant thing is that, in the harshness of wartime Liverpool and with the pain of incessant illness, Allan Bennett remained hopeful and rooted in the Dhamma. He returned to teaching. He remained true to his vocation as a missionary Buddhist. It was a remarkable achievement. I believe it was his will, his understanding, the energy given to him by the memory of the Buddha’s compassion and Burma which were responsible. It was all of this which could make him say in 1917 that he could see no greater work on earth “than to attempt to bring this living power, this glowing light into our Western darkness.”¹⁶⁹

A Message for Today?

Has Ven. Ānanda Metteyya anything to say to us at the end of the twentieth century? He stands at the intersection between Victorian culture, with its heady mixture of Empire-building orthodoxy, scientific discovery, political dissent, and religious questioning, and the loss of optimism which characterised the first quarter of the twentieth century. Part of his hope has certainly been realised. Buddhism is now very much part of the West. Thousands there have understood its message and embraced it. A monastic Sangha exists. Teachers from Burma, Sri Lanka, and many other countries with a Buddhist heritage have uprooted themselves to settle there. Many of the misconceptions about Buddhism which Ānanda Metteyya tried so hard to correct have been discredited. Few now believe that Buddhism is nihilistic and many see it as much more than a “cut-and-dried philosophy.”

Yet many of Ānanda Metteyya’s insights are, I believe, still a challenge both to East and West. They bear witness to a network of concerns that are being overlooked in a global culture which stresses individualism, instant gratification, and acquisitiveness. Challenge comes both from the heart of Ānanda Metteyya’s appreciation of Buddhism and from the specific social issues he isolated.

To begin with the social, many of the issues highlighted by Ānanda Metteyya are still of critical importance today. Firstly, he pointed to the inequalities and squalor created by the rise of capitalism in Britain and located its cause in greed based on the mistaken view that joy could be a permanent possession through material goods. Today, global inequalities mushroom for the same reason with the

¹⁶⁵*Wisdom of the Aryas*, p.5.

¹⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p.ix.

¹⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p.7.

¹⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p.119.

¹⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p.8.

rich becoming richer on the back of the cheap labour of the poor. Multinational companies locate their activities where the labour is cheapest in order to produce consumer items for societies already replete. Quality of life is officially measured by the ability to buy consumer goods and the health of nations by the amount of such goods produced. The guiding ethic is profit and economic viability rather than human health and well-being.

Secondly, Ānanda Metteyya was repulsed by the excesses of British imperialism and the international trade in weapons. He warned against nationalism as a pernicious extension of self-love based on ignorance of the truth of impermanence. Today, nationalism based on religious and ethnic claims is tearing many countries apart, fuelled by the international arms trade. Ānanda Metteyya's challenge is that, in conflict, "the Other" should not be seen as a separate entity but as connected with Self, within the One Life of the planet. He stressed that harm done to the Other is harm done to Self. He pointed to the fact of impermanence and then to the ultimately destructive and pointless quality of wars fought to maintain and expand spheres of power and influence. Patriotism was not glorious—it could lead to war and the destruction of human life.

In isolating the two issues of nationalistic war and economic injustice, Ānanda Metteyya touched the pulse of the whole of the twentieth century in a prophetic way. His indictments might be very similar today.

To move to Ānanda Metteyya's appreciation of Buddhist doctrine, he did not emphasise in his writings the more technical aspects of Buddhism. Some of the categories he uses do not even spring from the textual tradition. If, for instance, he had a sound knowledge of Abhidhamma, so much emphasised by Burmese Buddhists, he did not communicate it in his articles and lectures. His main concern was to describe a path, a *magga*, and to lead others to it. It is a path which challenges many contemporary social and spiritual trends, particularly those that claim there are no values or beliefs having objective and universal validity.

The highest evolution of the human mind and heart, he stressed, lay in renunciation—of greed, self-gratification, and any thought of reward for good actions. This questions the validity of any form of religious practice, outside Buddhism or within it, which trades on current Western interest in self-fulfilment and a "feel good" factor. It also fosters a social consciousness which recognises the alarming potential of the human race to create societies where inequality and violence are endemic, rooted in human greed and "tribal" competition. The consequence of taking seriously Ānanda Metteyya's stress on renunciation is to discover that the only true religious path is one which runs counter to the dominant ethos of the twentieth century .

Another aspect of the path was recognition of interconnectedness. This perhaps resonates more with the end of the twentieth century than with the beginning. For, as in the nineteenth century, dissent is present and this dissent is having an influence on public consciousness. Interconnectedness has always been stressed by Mahayana Buddhists. Now it is the clarion call of parts of the ecological movement and leading socially engaged Buddhists such as Thich Nhat Hanh are finding an eager audience for it.¹⁷⁰ Nhat Hanh's emphasis on "interbeing" as motivation for social involvement echoes Ānanda Metteyya and makes him seem surprisingly contemporary. Then there are those who hold that the planet is one living organism, Gaia. This also seems to touch Ānanda Metteyya's thought with his stress on the "One Life." Non-exploitation of the environment and non-exploitation of others or oneself would have made as much sense to Ānanda Metteyya as it does to countless environmentally conscious people today.

Ānanda Metteyya's emphasis on compassion as the highest force within the universe also echoes down the decades with considerable power. Compassion, he insisted, was the other side of an appreciation of dukkha. The very fact that Ānanda Metteyya himself had to endure so much physical pain made him remarkably sensitive to the pain of others. Maybe he found that the only possible way to

¹⁷⁰Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk now living in exile in Plum Village, a retreat centre in France, is the author of over sixty books. He has offered what he calls "The Fourteen Precepts of the Order of Interbeing" which stress an ethic of non-harming, tolerance, and respect for self and others. He sees them as a re-phrasing of the Five Precepts for the modern world.

endure pain was to see it as part of cosmic pain, an insight which could well have transformed his personal pain into compassion for all.

This unwavering emphasis on the importance of compassion should challenge us all. Ānanda Metteyya rarely spoke of charity, except as a virtue marking the beginning of the path. Merit-making he linked with the realm of childhood. But compassion, he believed, was a power which could change the consciousness and destiny of the human race. Often he combined it with the idea of love, but it was a love stripped of possessiveness or any attribute which would connect it with greed, need, or a self. Ānanda Metteyya stressed the need for a personal discipline of mind-culture. He was convinced that the fruit of this could be both personal liberation and the destruction of a chain of suffering stretching into the future. He was also convinced that it released active compassion into the world. For Ānanda Metteyya, meditative detachment and compassionate action were not incompatible opposites. To the contrary, they were interdependent and inseparable qualities of life. This is a message that the world still needs to hear.

Journals Quoted:

Buddhism: An Illustrated Review, edited by Bhikkhu Ānanda Metteyya, Rangoon.

The Buddhist, published by the Theosophical Society, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

The Buddhist Review, the organ of The Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland. Published by The Buddhist Society, London.

The Middle Way, journal of The Buddhist Society, London.

The Buddhist Publication Society

The BPS is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for all people.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is—a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

For more information about the BPS and our publications, please visit our website, or contact:

The Administrative Secretary
Buddhist Publication Society
P.O. Box 61
54 Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy, Sri Lanka
E-mail: bps@bps.lk
Web site: <http://www.bps.lk>
Tel: 0094 81 223 7283
Fax: 0094 81 222 3679