



Ñāṇavimala Thera (23.11.1911 – 10.10.05)

After a long period of physical weakness, on the 10th of October 2005 the highly respected German bhikkhu Ñāṇavimala Thera, aged 94, passed away on the island of Parappaduva in the Ratgama Lagoon near Dodanduva. Ñāṇavimala Thera was the last living disciple of Ñāṇatiloka Thera (1878-1957), who was himself the first Buddhist monk from Continental Europe. Thus, with his passing away, an important chapter in the history of Western Buddhism has been closed.

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

In lay life Ñāṇavimala's name was Friedrich M"ller. Born in 1911 in Hessendorf bei Rinteln, he was spiritually inclined from an early age. Although he was first a Christian, a meeting with an Indian medical student in Germany aroused his interest in yoga and Hinduism, and he decided that he wanted to go to India to further his new religious pursuits there. Because the German military was preparing for war and needed many recruits, it was generally quite difficult for German men to leave the country, but three or four years before World War II, M"ller managed to arrange for the trading house in Hamburg at which he was employed to send him to Mumbai in India to work as a trader. About a year before the war started, M"ller was appointed the director of a German trading house in Colombo. In Colombo he led a pleasant and luxurious life, which, however, abruptly came to an end with the outbreak of war in 1939. Along with many other German male nationals living in British colonies, M"ller was arrested by the British government as an enemy. He was first interned in Diyatalava in the Sri Lankan hill country and then, early in 1942, was sent to the large and fairly comfortable "Central Internment Camp" near the town of Dehra Dun in northwest India.

He was placed in the same wing as Ñāṇatiloka and his German pupil Vappo, where he built up a friendship with them.

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

In November 1946, most of the German inhabitants of Dehra Dun were repatriated by the British to Hamburg in the British occupied area of Germany. Thanks to the efforts of the increasingly politically powerful Sinhalese Buddhists and several of their organizations, Ñāṇatiloka and the other Buddhist monks were spared the return to the misery of a bomb-ravaged Germany and were able to return to Ceylon. Friedrich M"ller, however, had to go back to Germany despite his strong desire to become a Buddhist monk in Ceylon. He was not eligible to do so because he had not been a Buddhist monk in Ceylon before the war. M"ller first worked on a farm in the countryside near Hamburg. The only remuneration he received was free food and lodging, but this was his only

alternative to going hungry. After some time, however, he found work as an English teacher in Hamburg and could stay with his former landlady, who treated him like the son she had lost during the war. Many German men had died during the war and the large majority of M"ller's pupils were females. M"ller was able to resist the temptations of sensuality and romance because he was firmly determined to return to Ceylon and become a monk.

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

After an absence of almost thirteen years, M"ller returned to Sri Lanka, arriving in Colombo on June 1953. He lived for a year at the Dharmadhuta Society in Colombo and also spent time at the Forest Hermitage in Kandy. He moved from Colombo to the Island Hermitage and, at the age of forty-three, was accepted as a novice by Ñāṇatiloka on the 19th of September 1955, taking the Pāli name Ñāṇavimala. As Ñāṇatiloka's health was declining, he put the novice under the care of Ñāṇaloka, the abbot of the Island Hermitage. It was Ñāṇamoli, however, who especially helped him by teaching him Pāli and explaining the monk's rules and other aspects of the monk's life. Exactly two months after his novice ordination he received the higher ordination with Madiha Pañṇasiha as his preceptor. Then, he realized that he first had to work on himself and did not regard himself capable of being a teacher for others yet. He decided to stay on in Sri Lanka. He later related that this change of mind had been brought about by conversations he had with Ñāṇamoli. The Dharmadhuta Society respected his wish.

For ten years Ñāṇavimala lived quietly at the Island Hermitage, completely dedicating himself to study and meditation. He was studying the Pāli suttas and put the understanding he gained into practice. He generally kept to himself and had little contact with others. Then, in 1966, he left the Island Hermitage to go on a walking tour (*cārikā*) through Sri Lanka. For about twenty-five years he walked all over Sri Lanka, from south to north and back, from west to east and back. He would normally stay in monasteries and other places on the way for at most three days at a time and would then continue walking. The aim of his austere practice was to avoid accumulating possessions and mental attachments to places and people. When staying in a place for a long time various attachments can easily build up which can be in conflict with the Buddhist monk's state of being a "homeless one." Ñāṇavimala would only carry his alms bowl and a small bag with some essential requisites. He did not even use sandals. Once, robbers came up to him and investigated his bag, but, finding nothing of value, left empty handed.

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

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

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

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

—Bh. Bodhi and Bh. Ñāṇatusita

Buddhism Among Theistic Religions

1. *Common features of religions*

In most religions practiced through out the world the concept of eternal tranquility, peace and happiness hereafter are common goals. The Heaven in Christianity, Islam and Judaism, Moksha the ultimate return to God or Godliness in Hinduism and *Nibbāna* (Skt. *Nirvāna*) in Buddhism signify these common goals. The means such as spirituality, selflessness, moral purity and saintliness by which these goals are achieved is also common to all these religions.

2. *Some features of theistic religions*

In theistic religions believing in the existence of a supernatural God, the human spirituality is obtained through total submission to the Will of God. The moral purity and saintliness in these religions are achieved by total adherence to prescribed moral codes of conduct set down and transmitted to man through prophets of the God. Jesus Christ in Christianity and Prophet Mohamed in Islam are transmitters of moral conduct prescribed by the Gods of respective religions.

3. *The difference between Buddhism and other theistic religions*

Buddhism does not possess an all-supreme God. The Buddha the Enlightened One in Buddhism is not a transmitter of the Will of a God. The difference between Buddha Dhamma and the doctrines of other theistic religions lies in the fact that in the former the attainment of saintliness, selflessness or Enlightenment (*Nibbāna*) is internalized by purifying and developing one’s own mental conditions. In this process intervention of an external agency is not necessary. Attainment of saintliness in Buddhism depends entirely on each individual’s own will, understanding and effort. In theistic religions selflessness is achieved with the assistance of God or other external power

4. *The Buddha's approach to his investigations*

After spending 80 years in North India the Buddha passed away 544 years before the passing away of Jesus Christ (544 B.C.). In the Ariyapariyesana Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 36) the Buddha refers to two types of research or investigations that the human beings normally undertake, namely ignoble research (*anāriya pariyesana*) and noble research (*ariya pariyesana*). He clarifies that research relating to objects or conditions subjected to rebirth (*jāti*) old age (*jarā*) disease (*vyādhi*) death (*maraṇa*) sorrow (*sōka*) defilements (*kilesa*) fall into the category of ignoble research. The Buddha further mentions in this Sutta that he himself carried out such ignoble research before his attaining Enlightenment. While carrying out such research, it occurred to him that being subjected to rebirth, old age, disease, death, sorrow and defilements, continuing further research on the same unsatisfactory objects or conditions is meaningless. This trend of thoughts encouraged him to commence investigations on matters not subjected to rebirth, old age, disease, death, sorrow and defilements. In these investigations he first went to the reputed religious teacher of his time Ālāra-Kālāma and found that he cannot find what he is searching for in the Ālāra-Kālāma's doctrine. Then he went to Uddakarāma-Putta and found that his doctrine also will not help him in his investigation. Finally, he decided to venture out on his own and sat with determination under the Bodhi tree. Taming and directing his own supreme mind the *Bōdhisatta* finally realized the Four Noble Truths. After realizing the Four Noble Truths, he felt that many ordinary human beings would find it hard to comprehend the complex Truths he has realized with utmost difficulty. While considering a suitable person gifted with high intelligence and aptitude to preach what the Buddha has realized, his former teacher *Ālāra-Kālāma* came to his mind first. To his dismay it was found that *Ālāra-Kālāma* had passed away seven days ago.

5. *What the Buddha discovered.*

The most significant contribution of the Buddha to human knowledge is his discovery of the true nature of human existence comprising three characteristics (*ti-lakkhana*) namely impermanence (*anicca*), suffering or misery (*dukkha*) and non-self or egolessness (*anatta*).

Realizing the most unpleasant nature of the universal characteristics of human existence the Buddha strived further and found a lasting solution to end the misery of human existence. This most precious discovery of the Four Noble Truths (*catu ariya-sacca*) comprises the briefest synthesis of the entire teachings of the Buddha. They are: the noble truth of suffering (*dukkha-sacca*), the origin of suffering (*samudaya-sacca*), the extinction of suffering (*nirōdha-sacca*), the way to the highest goal (*magga-sacca*) comprising the Eightfold Path (*ariya-aṭṭhangika-magga*) leading to the extinction of suffering.

6. *Misconceptions relating to the concept of avijjā(delusion) in Buddhism*

The three characteristics of the world order namely, the state of impermanence (*aniccatā*), the state of suffering (*dukkhatā*) and impersonality of existence (*anatta*) over which the human beings have no control has made the world a place of suffering and a place unsatisfactory to live in. Yet the human being born in the world accept it as the world order and try to find ways and means of minimizing worldly suffering. This state of affairs is referred to as *avijjā* (ignorance, unknowing; synonymous with delusion) in Buddhist terminology. It is due to delusion that worldly life appears as permanent, happy, substantial and beautiful. It prevents comprehending realities of life as they are. As an example modern research in medicine has produced better drugs to fight disease making human beings live longer, but no drug will ever be found to make human beings immortal. Although research in medicine results in reducing human suffering, such research also falls into the category of ignoble research (*anāriyapariyesana*) according to the Buddha's reckoning, since the end result of such research does not bring about a lasting and permanent solution to the suffering of humanity.

7. Misconceptions relating to the doctrine of anatta (non-self, non-ego, egolessness, impersonality) in Buddhism

In Buddhism *anatta* (non-self, non-ego, egolessness, impersonality) is the last of the three characteristics of existence. The *anatta* doctrine teaches that neither within the bodily and mental phenomena of existence, nor outside of them, can be found anything that in the ultimate sense could be regarded as a self-existing real ego-entity, soul or any other abiding substance. This is the central doctrine of Buddhism. Without understanding this doctrine clearly a comprehensive knowledge of Buddhism cannot be acquired. Most people including scientists, academics, adherents of theistic religions and even some Buddhists are unaware of the significance of the *anatta* doctrine. They believe in a self that should be developed to face the realities of the world. The belief in a self or ego-entity has become so deep seated in the modern society that it is now considered an essential component for modern living. With all its perceived worldly advantages, self-ego is also a fruitful source of conflicts arising from misconceived judgments leading to suffering and misery.

8. The Buddhist view of discovering the true nature of human existence and following the Eightfold Path (*aṭṭhangika-magga*)

Buddhism is a religion that encourages human beings to discover the true nature of human existence and work out their deliverance (*vimutti*) by following the Eightfold Path (*aṭṭhangika-magga*) leading to the extinction of suffering. Unlike in theistic religions where directions are provided in religious practices, no directions are provided to Buddhist followers how they should proceed on the Eightfold Path. Hence it is said that the *Tathāgatas* are the guides (*akkhātāro tathāgatā*) and they only indicate the path. [*Tathāgata* meaning “One who has thus gone” is an epithet of the Buddha used by him when speaking of himself.] Those who possess the willingness to understand and appreciate the teachings of the Buddha may follow the path. As much as discovering the truth is difficult, following the truth is still more difficult. Yet being acquainted with truth makes human being more comfortable amidst suffering. In the *Mahā Mangala Sutta* this matter is well articulated in the saying “*puṭṭhassa loka dhammehi — cittam yassa nacampati*” (One who is acquainted with the world-order possess a mind that does not vacillate). Such persons are better equipped to face the realities of human existence. The Buddha’s teachings therefore serve the purpose assisting human beings to follow a less troublesome and more meaningful life in a grief-stricken world, enabling them to lead a meaningful life and making their future births better and successful.

9. Survival of Buddhism among other theistic religions of the world

The theistic religions take the world order as the Will of God. Unhappy world conditions are also taken as the wish of God. This belief leads to making pleas and prayers to God requesting the favour of God to save the prayers from bad world conditions. The followers of theistic regions are not expected to take time to investigate the root cause of unsatisfactory world conditions and find an escape from these disappointing conditions..

It is therefore apparent that Buddhism differs from all other theistic religions of the world. The examination of its 2550-year-long history indicates that many theistic trends have made their mark on pure Buddhism. Even in a country like Sri Lanka where comparatively pure Theravada Buddhism is surviving, theistic tendencies are visible in Buddhist practices today. Making offerings to local and Hindu Gods invoking their blessings and laying excessive emphasis on Bodhi Pujās as a means of getting rid of evil influences may be quoted as examples.

With all these outside threats to Buddhism it has survived as a world religion for over twenty-five centuries. It has provided peace and satisfaction to innumerable number of human beings of the world and it will continue to be so in future. The Buddha Dhamma is becoming more appealing in the affluent western world at present, because those living in the affluent countries have realized that modern living (surrounded by comforts and pleasures created by new scientific discoveries) is not devoid of sorrow and lamentation.

The vision of the Buddha is highly rational and scientific. It is important that up to now, none of the pure Buddhist concepts have been disproved by modern science. In this context it is well known that many concepts established by theistic religions have been disproved by modern science.

In the present world dominated by several theistic religions, the mankind will be greatly benefited, if the light of Buddhism could continue to dispel the darkness of delusion and bring about the dawn of peace and tranquility.

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—N.T.S.A.Senadeera
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Kandy, Sri Lanka
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