

A Homage to my Teachers and the BPS in Sri Lanka

by

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From the time I was a teenager in Canada in the 1950s, I had a strange predilection towards Buddhism. This predilection continued through my university years and my professional career as a lecturer in English for twenty years with the University of Maryland. Thus it was hardly surprising that one day, in the late 1980s, I ended up in Kandy, and asked the Buddhist Publication Society (BPS) to arrange for me to visit the Forest Hermitage at four o'clock in the afternoon, during prescribed visiting hours.

From the very first moment I entered the door of the Forest Hermitage, I was met with loving-kindness, both from the Venerable Nyanaponika, who was then in his eighties, and Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi, who was staying at the Forest Hermitage and looking after him. In due course, I was allowed to be seated on a low wicker chair near the window just inside the door facing Venerable Nyanaponika who was sitting in an armchair, while Venerable Bodhi was seated at a table to the left of the door facing me. I can still see it as though it were yesterday.

After some preliminary exchange, I posed the question I had come to ask, which was, "What is the heart of Theravada Buddhism?" Venerable Nyanaponika smiled and said, "Why look anywhere else but the words of the Master?" and then he told me to read, *The Word of the Buddha* and *The Path to Deliverance* by his teacher, Venerable Nyanatiloka. Venerable Bodhi, who could see I would have trouble remembering the titles, wrote them down for me and explained that I would find these two texts in the BPS bookshop. Through this introduction, they set me on the Noble Eightfold Path.

In many subsequent visits during the next five years it was always like this. The seating arrangement remained the same. I would ask a question and Venerable Nyanaponika would answer in a few words, usually quoting the Buddha from the texts, and Venerable Bodhi would explain, usually telling me where I could find appropriate references and resources.

In those days, Venerable Nyanaponika was still walking and not showing visible signs of deteriorating health. He was a benevolent monk full of loving-kindness who became a role-model for many others who followed his example. Venerable Bodhi, at that time, seemed to me to be a very perceptive and discerning Ph.D in philosophy who happened, not by coincidence, to have appeared in the right place at the right time with the right skills and aptitudes to carry on in the tradition of the Venerables Nyanaponika, Nyanatiloka and, of course, Nyanamoli, and others.

In those days, as well, there was still a formidable amount of work to be done in translating and explicating the Pali texts in accordance with the Theravada tradition as a guide for monks and lay practitioners who were ready to understand. Although those who were in a position to benefit may not have been so many at that time, now, a quarter of a century later, the influence of these works has reached from Sri Lanka to the rest of the world, especially now that many BPS books and booklets are beginning to appear on the BPS Internet site www.bps.lk.

Venerable Nyanatiloka's declared mission in the first half of the last century was to disseminate a wider knowledge of the Buddha's teachings based on the Pali Canon. Now this aim seems to be coming to fruition in a way that no one, then, could have ever imagined. This gives those who have followed in his footsteps great joy and

satisfaction, and great praise is due to Venerable Bodhi who was able to finish the work by doing what had to be done.

Venerable Bodhi was always very kind to me. In addition to talking to me, warmly and patiently, at the Forest Hermitage, I occasionally corresponded with him during those years. In particular, he helped me, at a time when he was very busy with other more important work, to edit the text of a lecture I had been asked to give on the Noble Eightfold Path, which followed the line of his own book of the same name, combined with some observations taken from Ledi Sayadaw, Venerable Nyanatiloka, and Venerable Nyanaponika.

One cannot but be amazed at the quantity and quality of scholarly output produced by Venerable Bodhi and those who preceded him. The huge amount of work that Venerable Bodhi has done, often on the most difficult texts, will put him down in history alongside his venerable teachers. These monks are, indeed, world treasures.

Historically, Venerable Nyanaponika's and Venerable Bodhi's selfless contributions in making the Dhamma better known in English for the benefit of others have become synonymous with the development and fulfillment of the noble and meritorious mission of the BPS, a mission that is still being carried on to this day.

Few people know that much of this early BPS work was done by lamplight at night at the Forest Hermitage at a time when there was no electricity, and it was sometimes quite cold and damp in the rainy season. It was only relatively recently, under Venerable Bodhi, that solar panels with battery storage were installed to give at least 12 v. light and limited power to run a laptop with an adapter. One would not think that these famous monks, so well-known world-wide, lived and worked where even

water was sometimes in short supply. Such matters, however, did not curb their ardent devotion. Their lives serve as brilliant examples of the noble skills of teaching and educating people.

On one of my visits to the BPS, it was suggested that it would be of benefit for me to meet Venerable Ampitiya Sri Rahula at Peradeniya University Vihara, nearby, and, in due course, this came to pass. It was a great blessing as well, for, in addition to having a thorough knowledge of the Buddha-Dhamma, Venerable Sri Rahula was a monk devoted to the practice of loving-kindness. A well-respected and much-revered mentor of younger monks, he was more devoted to showing and pointing the way than he was to reading or writing about it. He used to end his letters to me “with millions of thoughts of loving-kindness.” Venerable Sri Rahula was yet another radiant example of his time. Many who were influenced by him went on to become great teachers themselves.

From the first, Venerable Sri Rahula seemed to know just what to do to help me deepen my understanding. I clearly remember that, when his monastery, called "Forest Solitude," first opened, he invited me to come and stay as a layman in white. I lived with the monks like a novice, and he taught me the monastic practice. He used to say that as long as there was a group of monks practicing the Dhamma the way it was practiced by the Lord Buddha and his disciples, Buddhism would never die. Every morning, he would take time to teach me what he could see I was ready to understand. One day, he took me out into the forest and sat me down on a massive log and started me in the practice of the meditation on loving-kindness.

During this time I came to feel that, although I was already a teacher, I wanted to be the same kind of teacher and practice the same kind of loving-kindness as Venerable Sri Rahula. From that time on, I changed my attitude towards teaching and

speaking and interacting with others. Later, when visiting other temples and monastic sanctuaries, I often thought of the purity of the practice as it was regulated by Venerable Sri Rahula in the Forest Solitude Monastery.

At that same time, Venerable Dhammavihari had just been ordained and was also resident in the Forest Solitude Monastery. Since he had been a university professor, we found we had much in common. Every morning, we would walk together and discuss the Dhamma. He called me his brother in the Dhamma and was, by character, always warm and kind. By his manner, one would never have guessed that he was a famous scholar. The only giveaway was his voice, which still retained the distinctive tone of a professor.

Earlier, at the University in Peradeniya, I had also met Professor Lily de Silva and often visited with her and benefited from her wide knowledge and seemingly boundless kindness. She had recently been lecturing at Harvard on her sabbatical year and was now back at her regular job. Her knowledge of the texts was profound. I also gained much from her unspoken wisdom. I have always thought that she and Venerable Piyadassi have been the foremost in expressing the Dhamma in a plain English that normal people can understand.

Another memory that remains fresh in my mind, from the early days, in the Forest Hermitage, is the time that Venerable Bodhi and Venerable Nyanaponika told me that knowledge and study alone are not enough. Knowledge of the suttas had to be balanced with practice in the way the Buddha had explained. I remember asking the Venerable Nyanaponika how he could write a whole shelf full of books without it interfering with the practice, and he said, “Just don’t hang on to it.” Scholars should balance study with practice; otherwise, they get lop-sided.

Thus far, I have shared some reminiscences from the past in homage and respect to my teachers as I then knew them. But the past has passed, and what is left is the present leading into the future. So now, before concluding, I'll go on to make some comments on the BPS, limiting my observations to things that I have seen and known.

In 2001, Bhikkhu Bodhi went to Singapore, and the following year returned to America, due to a chronic headache condition that obstructed his work in Sri Lanka. He presently stays at Bodhi Monastery, in New Jersey (not named after himself!), where he is able to receive specialized medical help for his condition. After his departure, it took a while for the BPS to regain its balance and re-establish a solid footing. Physically, the building and staff remain in place and do what they are intended to do.

Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi remains President and gives advice to the Editor and Board of Directors. The BPS is financially sound, based on donations from the past, and the Board of Directors maintains a steady hand on the helm. The noble virtues and intentions of Venerable Nyanaponika are still the guiding-light.

When one walks into the BPS bookstore these days, one is amazed to see the great number of books now published in Sinhala on sale alongside the range of English editions listed in the BPS booklist. New Sinhala translations of standard BPS texts are now being made available at subsidized prices. The reading library in the back of the bookshop is packed with thousands of Theravada books, many of them now rare editions or in bound sets of early publications. There is also a computer there with an e-library of texts and sound files of Dhamma talks by Theravada teachers from around the world.

Upstairs are the offices and a spacious meditation hall that could accommodate up to a hundred meditators. On November 11th, 2006, the annual Dana was held there for fifteen Sri Lankan and foreign monks, with about fifty lay supporters attending. Among the themes discussed was our shared respect for the memory of Venerable Nyanaponika and those noble friends in the Dhamma who founded the Buddhist Publication Society almost half a century ago.

Coming soon, a bicentennial edition is planned with a collection of essays and talks on the importance of the Buddha-Dhamma for the present day. Venerable Bodhi's good name will, hopefully, encourage a number of well-respected writers on Theravada Buddhism to contribute to this book.

After the Dana, a noble-minded Sri Lankan gentleman said to me that Sri Lankan Buddhism had been greatly influenced by scholar/teachers like Venerable Nyanatiloka and Venerable Nyanaponika and others, like Venerable Nyanamoli, who followed in the BPS tradition. Although the Tipitaka had long been translated into formal Sinhala and had been available for study, it could only be understood by a narrow range of highly-trained scholars. The form of the language, as written, was too erudite for most people, who spoke the common, colloquial form of Sinhala. When the English translations of the foreign monks started appearing, they were more intelligible to the well-educated middle class Sinhalese who were fluent in English and thus enabled to obtain and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the teachings upon which their ancient Buddhist culture was based.

In turn, some of these well-educated Sri Lankans started translating BPS texts into Sinhala and writing Dhamma books in Sinhala. Consequently, in the course of time, as more texts and teaching became available in Sinhala, a body of literature and a

tradition of practice grew up which had a positive influence on people nation-wide—monks and laypersons alike.

In a nutshell, many Sri Lankans of that generation were better enabled to develop on the path and subsequently serve as examples and teachers to the generations to come, and even to numerous people like me who came from all around the world to the BPS in Sri Lanka to study and learn the practice of the Buddha-Dhamma.

Indeed, as the Sri Lankan summary of events, ties-up and evaluates the BPS' contribution from a broader historical perspective than I could ever do, I think it apt to conclude my observations here and end with the following ardent wish:

“May the editor and worthy monks and staff of the BPS continue to work in harmony in disseminating the Buddha-Dhamma for the sake of those who want to know, following the examples of their Theravada teachers of both the near and the distant past, reaching all the way back to The Noble Tamer of Men.”