

# Remembering Godwin Samararatne

Based on a talk given at the Nilambe Meditation Centre on the 4th anniversary of Godwin's passing away

by

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Godwin Samararatne was born on the 6th of September 1932 in Kandy, Sri Lanka. His father was the chief clerk of a tea estate at Hantane in the hills above Kandy and his mother was a simple up-country housewife. He had three brothers and four sisters. A younger sister died prematurely and an older brother died in a car accident on the day of his wedding. His three surviving sisters were Dorothy, Matilde and Lakshmi and Godwin was the youngest of the two surviving brothers, Felix and Hector.

The family lived in a modest house on the Peradeniya Road just a short walk from the heart of Kandy. Everyone agrees that Godwin showed an interest in Buddhism from his earliest time, due mainly to the piety of his mother. He always accompanied her to the temple on Poya days and would sit listening to the sermons rather than play games as the other children did. Once he turned up at home with two brinjals which he had surreptitiously picked from someone's garden. His mother went back with him to the house where he had got the vegetables and made him return them.

During his High School years Godwin's best friend was Siri Gunawardana who later ordained as Venerable Sivali and became a well-known and respected meditation teacher. Godwin's interest in meditation was such that during the school holidays he went to the Kanduboda Meditation Centre several times and later got his mother to go too. He was an able but average student and after finishing his

education got a job at the Kegalle Public Library in 1956.

Even then his gentle, kindly nature was evident. On one occasion the night-watchman of the library, asked him for permission to spend the night inside the library as he had nowhere else to sleep. Feeling sorry for him, Godwin gave it. But when he came to work the next day, the man was gone, as were many library books as well. Godwin had to replace the missing books out of his own salary. Later Godwin became Chief Librarian in the D.S. Senanayaka Library in Kandy where he worked until his early retirement in 1979.

Godwin was about 5 foot 10 inches tall, of average build and with a dark complexion. His hair was straight and black, turning gray and then silvery-white when he got older. He had slightly hunched shoulders which became a little more so as he aged. One of his mannerisms was to run his hand over the hair as if to flatten it. Another mannerism was to hold his right elbow with his left hand and put his right hand up to his cheek. He would sometimes remain like this for hours. At other times he would cross his arms in front of him as if giving himself a hug.

Very often when talking to people, listening to them or just sitting quietly, he would close his eyes. But by far Godwin's most noticeable physical feature was his beautiful smile, a smile which would often break into a giggle or a laugh. Godwin had almost no interest in his appearance other than that he be presentable and clean. Whether at home, at the meditation centre or traveling overseas, he always wore simple, plain clothes which he had often not even bothered to iron.

When I was staying in Hong Kong in 1996, I invited him to stop off there after one of his tours before returning to Sri Lanka. I had spoken to my friends in the Colony about him and they were anxious to hear him teach. About fifteen of them accompanied me to the airport to welcome Godwin. He emerged from the arrival lounge

dressed as usual in his nondescript clothes, wearing an old pair of sandals and carrying a rather tattered bag. I noticed my friends' faces drop. 'Is that him?' one of them whispered to me, a doubtful look on his face.

Clearly, they were not impressed. But of course it wasn't long before they warmed to him and developed a deep appreciation for him. Godwin needed no fancy props, grandiose titles or public relations techniques to impress people. One only needed to spend a little time in his company to become aware of his very special qualities.

The three people who had the most influence on Godwin's spiritual development were the German monk Ven. Nyanaponika, the famous Buddhist academic and philosopher K. N. Jayatillake and the Indian thinker J. Krishnamurti.

Although interested in meditation from an early age, Godwin found it difficult to find people who could explain it to him in terms he could understand. In the early 1960's he had begun going to the fledgling Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy to help Ven. Nyanaponika and the then general secretary Mr. Richard Abhayasekera.

He would help out around the office, greet visitors and afterwards talk with Ven. Nyanaponika about meditation and psychology. In time, he developed the highest regard for Ven. Nyanaponika and always recommended his book *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* and *The Power of Mindfulness* as one of the best books on meditation.

Around this time he also met and became friends with Prof. Jayatillake, author of the ground-breaking work *The Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*. He would often visit the professor at his home to talk about Buddhist philosophy, and in particular, its relation with Western philosophy. It was also Prof. Jayatilleke who first interested Godwin in parapsychology. Godwin once said to me:

'I learned to think from K.N (Jayatillake), Ven. Nyanaponika encouraged me to read the suttas, and Krishnamurti's writings made sense of it all.'

It was Krishnamurti's radical and unstructured approach to spirituality that appealed most to Godwin. He sometimes described it as 'Dhamma without the Buddhism'. He was deeply influenced in particular by Krishnamurti's idea of 'choiceless awareness' and of having no opinions, no self-image and no expectations. But despite his great admiration for Krishnamurti, when the great man came to Sri Lanka in 1980 Godwin did not go to Colombo to attend his talks.

I asked him why he was not going and he replied that he was familiar with Krishnamurti's teachings, that seeing him would add nothing to that and it was therefore not necessary to go. Krishnamurti was well-known for sometimes scolding his audience and saying that if they really understood him they wouldn't keep coming to hear him speak. I think it is true to say that Godwin was one of those people who really did understand Krishnamurti.

Except for the few times he went to Kandaboda in his youth Godwin never really meditated in the formal sense of sitting crossed-legged and practicing a particular technique. He was not a meditator in the conventional sense, rather he just seemed to have become effortlessly meditative. From an early age, encouraged by what he learned from Ven. Nyanaponika, Krishnamurti and the suttas, a spontaneous awareness led him to becoming naturally mindful and serene. Likewise, the very palpable warmth and compassion that people felt in his presence were not a result of practicing meditation on loving-kindness in the conventional way, it just seemed to arise from something innately good within him.

I once asked Godwin how he got the way he was and he said, 'I don't really know, Bhante, it just happened. I must have meditated a lot in my last life.' Then he let out one of his characteristic giggles. On

another occasion I asked him if he was ever interested in women and he told me that he did in fact once have a girl friend. 'What happened?' I enquired. He replied, 'I was in my early twenties. In those days boys and girls could only meet in secret. We would agree to meet at a particular place and sometimes she would turn up and sometimes she wouldn't. When she was late or when she didn't come I used to notice how painful I felt and so I just stopped going to meet her and so she gave up on me.'

When I first met Godwin in 1977, he was still living with his mother and sister and her family on the Peradeniya Road. He shared a small room with his young nephew Palitha. The room was cluttered and everything was covered with the dust thrown up by the busy road outside the window. Shelves covered two walls right up to the ceiling and these were stacked with books, photocopies of magazine articles and off-prints of papers from various academic journals.

If the state of the room did not necessarily reflect Godwin's mind then the contents of his reading material certainly did. The range was wide but several subjects predominated - psychology, parapsychology, anthropology, sociology and Buddhism. Godwin's bed too was usually covered with books, newspaper cuttings and journals. Anyone who came to visit him would be invited to sit on the edge of his bed and talk. During the discussion he would sometimes begin rummaging through the mess on his bed or go the shelves, pull out a book and show a passage from it to the visitor or give it to them to take and read. I often borrowed some of his books and although I always returned them, I can never remember him asking me if I had done so.

Godwin had accumulated his huge unruly library from all the overseas friends he had made through the years. One of the first of these was Prof. Ian Stevenson, the famous parapsychologist from the University of Virginia. He first came to Sri Lanka in 1968 to study

cases of children who could remember their former lives. During Stevenson's stay he was helped by Francis Story and V. F. Gunaratna, both good friends of Godwin's. On his return in 1970, Francis Story introduced Stevenson to Godwin who from then on became the professor's interpreter, friend and indispensable research assistant. Whenever Godwin heard of a child with past life memories, he would collect the data and make detailed reports for Stevenson.

In 1977 the professor invited Godwin to Virginia to help with his research. As a result of this association, Godwin gradually came to be known by many of the sociologists and anthropologists who came to Sri Lanka to study. There were few who did not benefit from his translation skills, his understanding of Buddhist doctrine and his wide knowledge of Sri Lankan customs and traditions, and Godwin for his part was always happy to help.

By the early 1970's, hardly a week would go by without him receiving a package from the United States, the UK or Germany, with a book or a monograph either inscribed to him or acknowledging his contribution to it. Godwin's copy of Ian Stevenson's *Children Who Remember Their Previous Lives* is inscribed, 'For Godwin with many thanks for all your contributions to this work, from Ian Stevenson, January 15, 1988'. His copy of J. S. Kruger's *Metatheism - Early Buddhism and Traditional Christian Theism* is inscribed by the author, 'To my teacher and friend Godwin with affection and gratitude'. There were dozens of such books in his library.

Although Godwin read widely and enjoyed talking with or listening to academics, he was anything but bookish or academic himself. He had no academic training and was interested in such things only to the degree that they shed light on the human condition. As soon as a discussion he was participating in or a book he was reading became theoretical or over-speculative he would lose interest.

In about 1977 Godwin got to know Dr. L. Rodrigo who worked in the Psychiatric Ward of the Kandy General Hospital. The doctor was interested in the therapeutic applications of meditation and asked Godwin if he would be interested in seeing some of his patients. People often talked to Godwin about their problems sensing that he was a sympathetic listener and a skillful counselor, but Dr. Rodrigo's offer gave him the opportunity to work more systematically with people. He enjoyed this work enormously, not only because it introduced him to the diversity and complexity of human suffering but also because he liked nothing more than helping people in distress.

Soon a steady stream of people came to see him. On many occasions he invited me to sit and listen as he talked with these people. It was fascinating and deeply moving to watch him work. You could almost see the compassion welling up in Godwin as these people unburdened themselves to him. He nearly always listened with his eyes closed. If they broke into tears, he would open his eyes and take them by the hand or gently pat them on the back. Not surprisingly, many people felt better by just spending some time with him.

Using ideas he had read about in the Buddha's discourses, he gradually evolved ways of helping people with mental problems. His approach was based on these concepts: befriending the person so that they could speak openly and freely about their problem - reassuring them that their problem was solvable - encouraging them to take responsibility for themselves - calming them with breathing meditation - teaching them ways to deal with the symptoms - getting them to do meditation on loving-kindness.

Apart from this informal help, Godwin also initiated several projects around Kandy to assist people in a more sustained manner. The first and most successful of these was the Visitors Program he set up for the Cancer Home. He organized people to provide terminal patients

at the home with food, toiletries and other basic necessities. His role in this project was to offer patients counseling and in particular to teach them, through meditation, to deal with pain and the fear of death.

I accompanied Godwin on his weekly visits for about two years and I noticed that sympathetic smiling presence was often enough to make people feel better. On one occasion we stopped to talk to a woman who had a large tumor in her mouth. So bad was the stench of her breath as she spoke that I had to discreetly turn aside. Godwin, on the other hand, sat talking with and listened to her, seemingly unaffected by the smell.

On another occasion a very poor old Tamil woman pleaded with us for some money so she could buy a tin of powdered milk. Godwin took some money from his pocket and gave it to her. After we had finished in the wards, we walked out to the bus stop. As we stood waiting for the bus Godwin said to me, 'Bhante, have you got any money?' In those days I never used money and I replied, 'You know I have none. Where is the money you had?' 'I gave it all to that woman' he said and then giggled. We had to walk all the way back to town. It was typical of Godwin that when moved by compassion he would give without the slightest thought of himself. Of course I know that the Buddhist scriptures speak of 'giving without holding anything back' but Godwin is the only person I have ever met who was able to do this quite naturally and unselfconsciously.

After the students' uprising in 1971 in which many young monks had been involved, the Peradeniya University authorities closed down the University monastery. However, by the late 70's, they decided to reestablish a Buddhist 'presence' on the campus. Consequently the old Engineers' bungalow was given over to be used as a Buddhist centre.

As it happened, very few students were interested in religious



activities at that time and the centre was largely unused. However, a few lecturers from the University, specifically Prof. Mrs. Lily de Silva and Prof. W.C. Vitnachchi began meeting there once a week, mainly to discuss suttas. Gradually a few outsiders began to attend as well and by 1977 a regular group had formed. Those in the group were Godwin, Mrs. de Silva, Vitnachchi, Mr. Ratnakara, Pat Jayatillake and Dr. Parakrama Fernando. It was here that I first met Godwin.

The group met twice a week. On Thursdays we would read a sutta and then discuss it. Being a scholar of Pali, Prof. Mrs. de Silva would make comments on technical terms. Parakrama would point out any philosophical implications in it, while Godwin would suggest things that could have practical applications. Discussions would sometimes get heated or would drift off onto other subjects. I noticed that whenever this happened Godwin would cross his arms, close his eyes and become quiet. On Friday nights we would meet, do silent meditation for an hour and then have a discussion over a cup of tea or coffee. Again Godwin's contributions to these discussions were always pertinent and sometimes startlingly profound.

Eventually we all become friends and decided to call our little group Veluvana after the bamboo grove in India where the Buddha sometimes used to stay. As there was no monk at the centre, I was invited to take up residence and became the informal organizer of the group's activities. Various scholars visiting the University would be invited to address us or participate in our discussions, some of the more distinguished being Bishop Robinson, the famous 'Honest to God' prelate, the Sanskrit scholar Richard Gombrich from Cambridge, Walpola Rahula and Prof. David Kalupahana from the University of Hawaii.

In early 1979 a prosperous Kandy businessman, Mr. Alakoon, and

his wife began coming regularly to our Friday night meditations. When the University gave notice that we would have to move out of the bungalow so it could be used as the University Staff Club, Mr. Alakoon announced that he would donate some land from his tea-estate for the establishment of a meditation centre and pay for the construction of some buildings. Thus our small group evolved into what eventually became the Nilambe Meditation Centre. Godwin left his job as Librarian in Kandy in 1979, at first to be the caretaker at the new Center but later becoming the resident teacher.

The inaugural meditation course at Nilambe was taught by the popular American meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein and, having attracted about seventy local and overseas participants, was judged a success. But after the course, when everyone including Joseph Goldstein went home, it suddenly occurred to us that we now had a Meditation Centre but no meditation teacher!

In the end I was talked into leading courses during the first ten days of every month while Godwin managed the Center, although within a year he took over as the teacher. In the beginning, like me, he really had no idea how to structure and conduct a meditation course. During meditation sessions he would sit, as usual, slouched against the wall, holding his right elbow with his left hand and his right hand on his cheek. 'Godwin!' I chided him, 'You have to sit up straight or you cannot expect the meditators to do so.' But despite the fact that he did not have the look of a conventional teacher, word soon spread that there was something very special about him.

Initially, people came to Nilambe mainly to learn meditation but in time they came because of Godwin. By the mid-1980's, he became so well-known that he started to receive invitations to teach in Switzerland, Germany, the U.K. and later in South Africa, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. He taught meditation to all sorts of groups, including Christian priests and pastors, and Chinese

Mahayana Buddhists. Throughout the 1990's increasing numbers of both foreigners and Sri Lankans were coming to the expanding Nilambe Meditation Centre.

In all the years I knew Godwin I cannot remember ever hearing him say anything negative about anyone or ever showing the slightest trace of annoyance, anger or disapproval. I don't think this was because he was trying to be 'nice' or because he was blind to people's flaws - he could be uncannily perceptive about people. Rather it was because other peoples' negativity simply didn't affect him, even if he was on the receiving end of it. Nor can I ever remember him being impatient, depressed, angry or worried.

He was very close to his mother, but when she died on the 22nd July 1977, he sobbed for about half an hour and then returned to his usual serene self. During the funeral and the seventh day merit-making ceremony his other siblings either cried or were at least teary-eyed, but he was utterly calm and collected.

If Godwin had a fault it was that he was perhaps overly anxious to avoid any type of unpleasantness with anyone. When a meditator at Nilambe became disruptive or refused to follow the schedule despite being repeatedly asked to do so, Godwin would put off the task of talking to them for as long as he possibly could. There were a few times when his failure to be firm with people caused him or others considerable inconvenience. I recall that a rather unpleasant man used to come and see him at his home, ostensibly for counseling. In fact, all the man did was complain angrily for several hours about the numerous people he didn't like. Every Thursday he would wait for Godwin to come home from work and every Thursday Godwin would sit and endure the man's tirades. Sometimes he even avoided going home if he knew the man would be there. Only after several months did he finally tell the man that he couldn't help him and that he should not come anymore.

Another interesting aspect of Godwin's character was that despite having a profound understanding of the human psyche and being usually a good judge of character, he could be remarkably naive about people, particularly if they were trying to deceive him. Being good-hearted and completely straightforward himself, he could not always see that others were not necessarily like that too. On occasion this caused him to make some bad judgments.

Godwin had been suffering from a liver disease for some time which left him progressively weaker and more and more tired, Although he knew this was a life-threatening condition, he continued with his commitments all over the world. When he returned after a three-month trip to South Africa in February 2000, his ankles were swollen and his stomach was slightly bloated. He was staying with his good friends Harilal and Visakha Wickramaratne and they took him to a specialist who recommended some medication. However, Godwin thought that seeing this specialist might upset his long-time family doctor and so he insisted on going to see him as well. This second doctor recommended a very different medicine.

Two days later at about three in the morning Harilal heard a noise in Godwin's room and went in to see what the problem was. He found Godwin lying incapacitated on his bed. I had returned from India that very morning and, on being told that Godwin had been admitted to hospital, rushed up to Kandy. He looked tired and drawn but otherwise was his usual cheerful, smiling self. I didn't know it then but this would be the last time I would see him. Later he lapsed into unconsciousness and remained in a coma in the Intensive Care Unit for 48 hours. He eventually regained consciousness, and, after being discharged from the hospital, returned to the Wickramaratne's home where they did their best to let him rest despite the many people who wanted to visit him.

While in hospital he had said to Visakha Wickramaratne, 'I'm going

to give up teaching. I've done a lot for others, now I think I should do something for myself.' About two weeks later he collapsed into a coma again and was taken to Peradeniya Hospital. After two days Visakha received a call from Upul Gamage telling her that she should come to the hospital quickly. When she arrived the two of them went to the ward where Godwin was but he had died just a few minutes before. I received a call from them to come to the hospital immediately and arrived some twenty minutes later. When I saw Felix, Upul and Visakha, their faces white and with tears in their eyes, I knew what had happened. Godwin had died at 9.30 a.m. on the 22nd of March, 2000.

In Sri Lanka, the body of the deceased is usually kept for two or three days so that family and friends can pay their respects. However, Godwin had specified much earlier that his funeral be conducted as soon as possible after his death. Accordingly, he was cremated the day after his death. Although only one small notice of the funeral appeared in the paper that very day, word had spread throughout Kandy and over six hundred people flocked to Mahayawa Cemetery.

When I arrived at the funeral, Godwin's brother Felix approached me and asked how we should proceed. I was not expecting to be asked to conduct the service, but after thinking for a moment I suggested that for a man who loved silence as much as Godwin did, it might be appropriate if we all just observed a fifteen-minute silence. Felix agreed and an announcement to that effect was made. We closed our eyes, bowed our heads and silently remembered this person who had given all of us so much.

A few minutes later a man suddenly came out of the crowd and began a long-winded farrago at the top of his voice. As this unknown speaker droned on, his finger raised in the air, I was too sad to feel annoyed but I was finding his loud voice an unpleasant intrusion.

The faces of many others in the crowd showed a similar feeling. Quite suddenly I remembered how patient and understanding Godwin had been with human folly and how he often saw the funny side of it. I imagined him looking down on all of us, watching this intruder rambling on and then saying, 'Bhante, do you think he's doing that mindfully?' and then giggling. That thought lifted my sadness a little. Eventually, someone grabbed the man by the arm and whispered to him to stop, which he did. When the fifteen minutes were up Godwin's brothers and nephews lifted the coffin, slid it into the crematorium and closed the door. We all chanted the Metta Sutta as a final tribute to our beloved teacher and friend and then one by one left. A few days later Visakha Wickramaratne took Godwin's ashes and tipped them into the quietly flowing waters of the Mahaweli River.

It has been four years since Godwin died and yet hardly a week goes past without me thinking about him. I am sure that at least one or two of my better qualities are due to his gentle admonishments and his example. Godwin showed me by his person that it really is possible to transcend the narrow confines of ego, negative emotions, petty ambitions and fears and become a truly joyful, loving person. To me, he was living proof that the Buddha's Dhamma does work. I am now 55 years old and looking back on my life, I can say, without the slightest hesitation, that I owe more to Godwin Samararatne than I do to anyone else, and that he was the wisest and kindest person I have ever had the privilege to know