Bhikkhu Hiriko

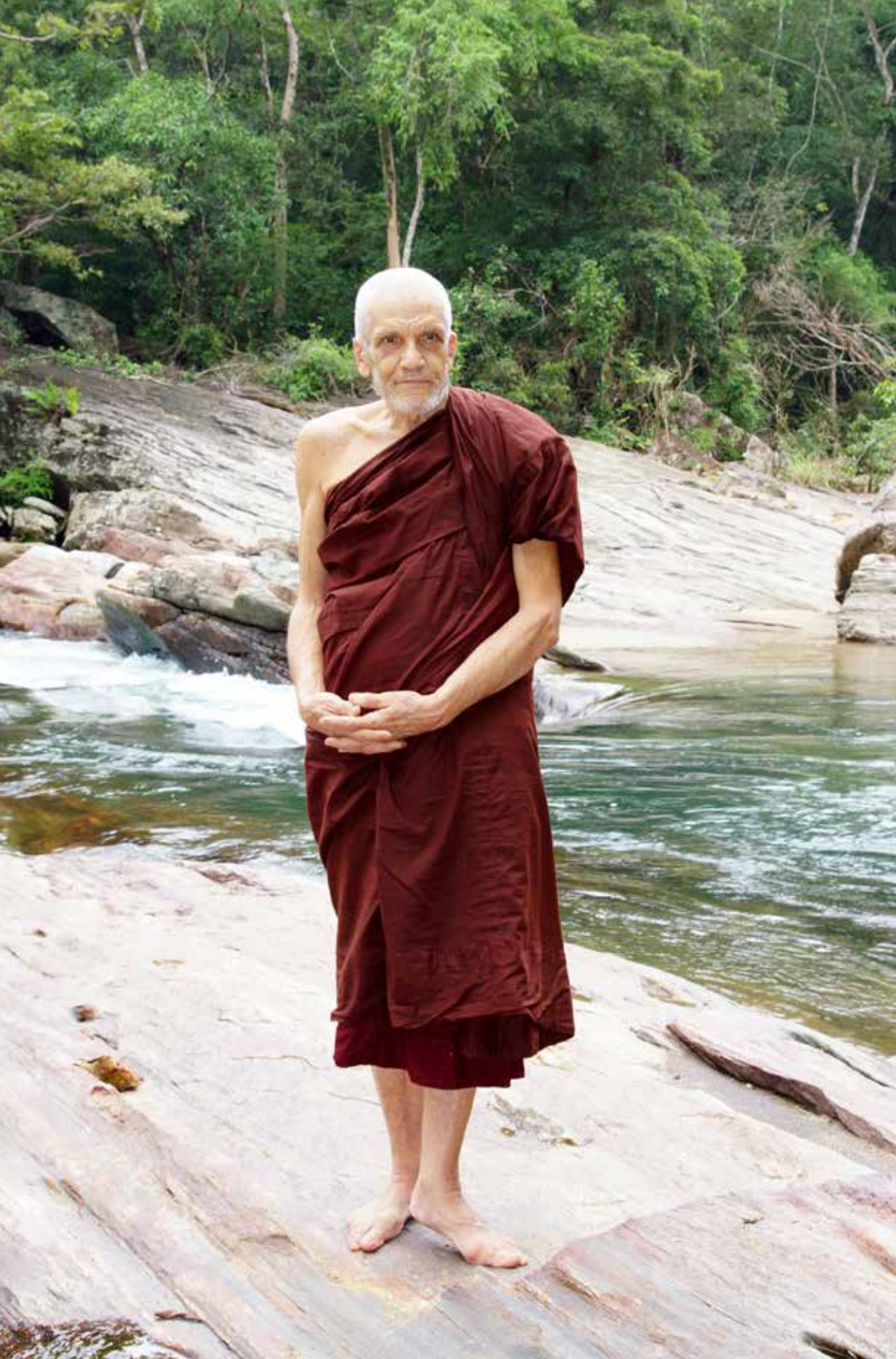
THE ISLAND WITHIN

The Life of the Hermit Monk

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa

Path Press Publications

THE ISLAND WITHIN



The Island Within

THE LIFE OF THE HERMIT MONK

BHANTE ÑĀṆADĪPA

by

BHIKKHU HIRIKO

Path Press Publications

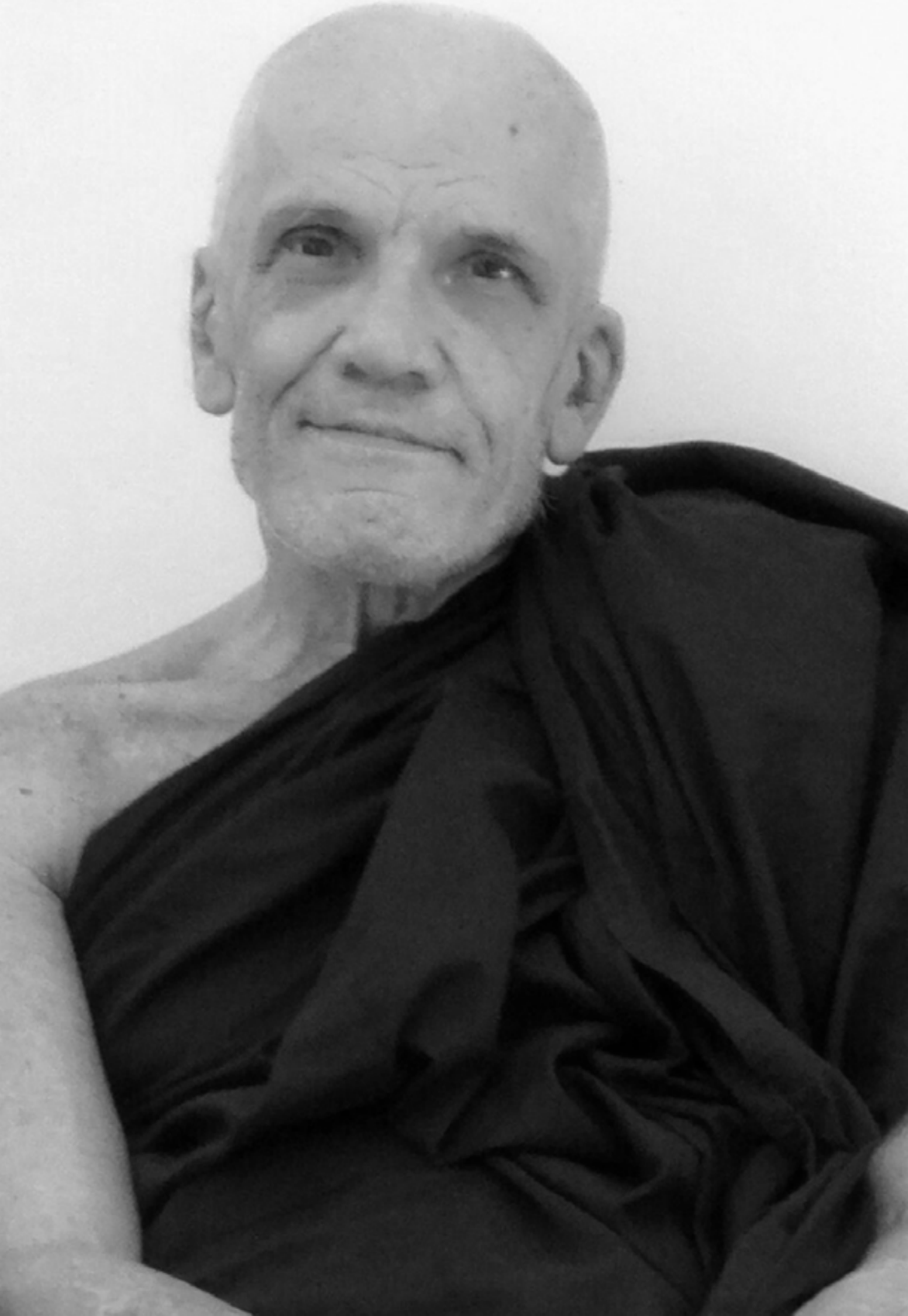
First edition: December 2020
Path Press Publications
ISBN 978 94 6090 034 1 (paperback)
ISBN 978 94 6090 035 8 (epub)
ISBN 978 94 6090 036 5 (mobi)

Path Press Publications
www.pathpresspublications.com

Contents

"Monks, there are these ten thorns. Which ten?
"For one who delights in seclusion,
delight of entanglement is a thorn.
"For one committed to the mark of the unattractive,
commitment to the mark of the attractive is a thorn.
"For one guarding the sense doors,
watching a show is a thorn.
"For one practising celibacy,
company with women is a thorn.
"For the first jhāna,
noise is a thorn.
"For the second jhāna,
thinking and pondering are thorns.
"For the third jhāna,
rapture is a thorn.
"For the fourth jhāna,
in-and-out breathing is a thorn.
"For the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling,
perception and feelings are thorns.
"Lust is a thorn; aversion is a thorn; delusion is a thorn.
"Dwell thornless, monks! Dwell without thorns!
The arahants are thornless, monks. The arahants are without thorns."

—AN 10:72



I

Evaṃ me suttaṃ

(Preface)

Biographies are usually written about well-known public figures, but the subject of this book, the Venerable Ñāṇadīpa Thera, did everything he could in his life as a Buddhist monk to secure his seclusion and privacy – to live where only few people could find him. Whenever he felt the increasing attention that unwanted fame was bringing him, he would quickly move on to a new place. But acquiring a permanent solitude proved difficult; his very attempts to do so created, inevitably and perhaps naturally, a growing mystery around his persona. And with this increased curiosity and admiration for the way he led his life, there even arose heroic tales and legends which spread through the wider world. Thus, ironically, these very attempts at finding solitude and near anonymity made it all the more difficult to acquire them. But with the announcement of Bhante[1] Ñāṇadīpa's death, on the 12th of September 2020, there ended any need to discourage public interest in his life; to curtail publication of photos or articles about this forest monk whose life so many people found fascinating and intriguing. In fact, we can say that finally now he is secure from the pressing public attention he always wished to avoid.

But memories remain.

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa is, indeed, an incredible figure and, by any measure, *the* ideal forest monk. We might read about such people from centuries ago, like the Venerable Mahā Kassapa, in the ancient Buddhist texts, or read about the more recent famous Thai forest monks, such as the late Venerable Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta. But these exemplary monks are no more, and today it might seem that the original way, the forest way, has been lost. But on closer inspection we find that this is clearly not the case. Indeed, though the *sāsana*, the Buddha's Dispensation, may show signs of corruption and decay, this fact should not prevent us from learning

1. Respectful way of addressing a monk - in English this would be "Venerable."

about those monks and nuns who, even in these modern times, have dedicated themselves fully to the eradication of the impurities which defile their hearts and minds, and for whom no compromises or easy shortcuts are allowed. This is important, for by learning about the ways and practices of old we may gain inspiration, and from that inspiration we can generate for ourselves the energy and commitment to start walking that ancient path as did those who inspire us – the path to a full understanding of the nature of experience and existence itself, and thus liberation from it. Stories about saints and sages, of any time or place, should therefore not be used as entertainment, but should be used to evoke urgent and deep reflection on how best to lead our lives. Saints and sages are examples for us, but hearing about them is ultimately of no value if we do not make an effort to become one of them, and it is in that spirit that this book has come to be.

I first became interested in and fascinated by Bhante Ñāṇadīpa when I was collecting materials associated with the Venerable Ñāṇavira Thera for a biographical book I was writing, called *The Hermit of Bundala*. In my research for that book I used, among others, the materials Ven. Bodhesako had collected. Ven. Bodhesako was the main person who, through hard work, preserved the writings of Ven. Ñāṇavira, and who eventually

published them as *Clearing the Path*. In Ven. Bodhesako's letters I found an expression of respect for a certain monk "Nd". Who did this "Nd" stand for? After some time I eventually found someone who could tell me that it was "Ñāṇadīpa." But not only that, I was told that "Nd" was actually still alive... somewhere deep in the Sri Lankan jungle.

I was greatly impressed that in this present world there was actually a monk who was living in the way that we usually find recorded only in the ancient Buddhist texts. Just this fact was what was most fascinating to me. Of course, I could not have known Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's understanding of Dhamma; I only knew that he had a great respect for the Suttas and also a deep gratitude for Bhante Ñāṇavira. But simply learning of his existence filled a gap for me. It provided a kind of support and gratification, knowing that there was a living example of someone completely dedicated to the Dhamma and living as a true forest monk. And that was enough for me. I did not try to seek him out; rather, I wanted him to continue following his way of seclusion. Just knowing that he was doing this remarkable practice was a great and inspiring lesson.

I had heard that Bhante Ñāṇadīpa would occasionally go to the Forest Hermitage in Kandy, when his health required it. When there, he would generally pick up a few books and maybe even write notes in the margins of pages. After the release of the book *Notes on Dhamma*, written by Bhante Ñāṇavira in 1965 and published by Path Press Publications in 2009, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa picked it up and found an error in it, and he wrote a letter to the Editor of Path Press Publications, addressed to me. Even though it was a letter primarily about an editorial correction, I was absolutely delighted to receive it. It was amazing that instead of a standard closing of good wishes the letter ended with the words, "Please do not publish my name (you may say: 'an early follower of Ñāṇavira'). And also do not try to contact me." And after his signature Bhante Ñāṇadīpa added that he still had "great gratitude to him." "Very well," I thought, with a smile, especially at his stern admonition not to contact him. I valued his sincerity, and dedication to seclusion, and this was stronger than my wish to engage with him.

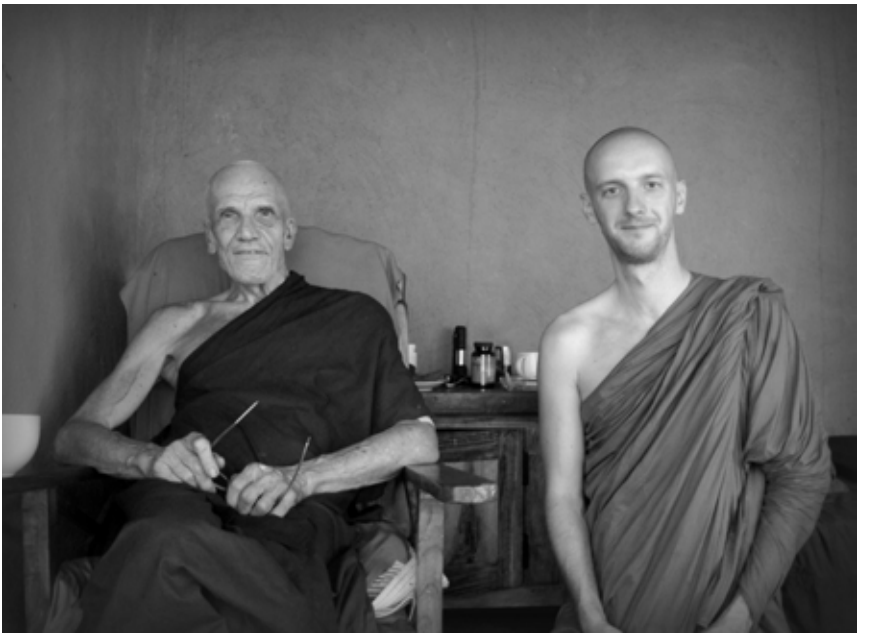
Later, however, I was able to get some more information from Bhante Ñāṇadīpa and indirect access to him, and he eventually agreed to my request for a meeting. So, when visiting Sri Lanka, I immediately took the opportunity to visit him, even though it was a hard journey to a secret location. I made sure I was in the country around February and March,

during Māgha Pūjā,[2] as I knew that Bhante would move to another *kuṭī* (forest dwelling) at that time and was more available for interaction with other forest monks.

I remember very well my first trip to see him. Geographically, Bhante was not too far from the place I was staying at that time, but the journey to reach him was long. After the usual slow pace of travel on Sri Lankan roads, we turned onto a very obscure gravel road which passed a few lonely houses. And then, after a few kilometres, we turned onto an even more remote road which was hard on the vehicle. At some point the car could go no further and we had to walk on foot for some time to reach a small forsaken hamlet. Was that the place? Not yet! Behind one of the houses there was a path, and that path led to a mountain. So we walked for another hour in the jungle, where elephants could be seen, and after a sweaty climb, there was Bhante, peacefully sitting in his chair. His *kuṭī* was simple, without a front wall. There was a hard wooden bed, a tiny table, and a small cupboard for some medicines. But he was only staying at that place for a few weeks; he actually lived in an even more remote area. As mentioned above, Bhante's practice was to simply walk away to another location as soon as his place of residence got too well-known. And with time, the more he sought seclusion, the more mysterious he became to others – and consequently more famous. And the more famous he became, the more he sought seclusion. For years fame continued to chase him, but with his ageing and ailing body it was increasingly difficult for him to avoid its unwanted consequences.

But his life of seclusion had actually created a wonderful community of monks who were inspired to live in a similar way. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa moved many times from one *kuṭī* to another, and those empty huts have then been occupied by other monks who wanted to walk in his footprints. Eventually a slightly more organized community was created, called Laggala Saṅgha. As with any community it has scheduled meetings – that is, at the rate of three times... *a year*! If one is a competent hermit, then even so few meetings need to be attended. The monks inspired by

2. Māgha Pūjā is the second most important Buddhist holy day, celebrated on the full moon day of the third lunar month in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and on the full moon day of Tabaung in Myanmar. It celebrates the unplanned gathering of the Buddha and 1,250 of his first disciples which, according to tradition, preceded the custom of periodic recitation of the code of discipline (*pātimokkha*) by monks.



Bhante did not have to receive much verbal instruction from him. Rather, his lifestyle was the great lesson. His determination strengthened their motivation, and his faith was their inspiration. In this community there was no interest in superficial traditions, ordination lineages, the kind of robe one was wearing, etc. Nor was there any tendency to start any kind of personality cult. What brought those monks together was pure faith in the Buddha's Teaching and a regard for the Buddha's words alone as the most authoritative teaching. There was only Dhamma and Vinaya – an attitude that was standard and normal in ancient times.

When interacting with Bhante, he could certainly be a bit intimidating. His toughness and physical strength were remarkable. My first meeting with him was on my thirty-first birthday, and he was over seventy at the time. Yet I felt that I was much more fragile than him: I found his lifestyle too hard for me. During that first meeting, I also quickly realized how sharp and clear his memory was! It was a real battle for me not to embarrass myself with a weak memory, and I realized that true age should not be measured by the age of the body, but how one nourishes one's mind: not by indulging in laziness, but by putting oneself outside of one's comfort zone!

Our future meetings were less intimidating, and my relationship with

Bhante became warmer. It felt as if we had known each other from before this life. I also had the good fortune to take care of him when he was ill, and we had a chance to talk for many hours. I listened with great interest to his stories of his life as a monk, even from fifty years ago. His recollections were always incredibly clear and detailed. We also had an occasional laugh, something that is for many people hard to imagine since Bhante is generally well-composed and serious. But his face would always brighten when he had a chance to discuss Dhamma. That was his passion. He would quite quickly dismiss pointless talk and walk away, but for the Dhamma he was ready to sacrifice his seclusion, especially in his later years. It was great for me to be around him and to talk to him... well, until he started to quote too many Sutta verses in Pāli to me! He was probably the greatest expert in Pāli of our time, and I the least. It was hard to hide my confused expression when his high Pāli was spoken, and I always hoped he would not notice. But it encouraged me to improve in this regard, too.

I was also able to use some sweet-talking to convince Bhante to translate some Suttas – at least the *Aṭṭhakavagga*. I told him that he was probably the only person qualified to translate those verses. He was an expert in Pāli, especially in verses (*gāthās*), and he was living the same life as described in those Suttas. He originally rejected my proposal, but in 2016 he translated the *Aṭṭhakavagga* and in 2018 also the *Pārāyanavagga*.[3] These Suttas have been published under the title *The Silent Sages of Old*. I am still very grateful for this and honour the book as my little Bible. Unfortunately it is his only major legacy for the world. There was also the idea to translate the *Theragāthā*, but unfortunately his sickness prevented this.

Bhante loved jungle life. He knew the natural world, the plants, the lives of animals – especially elephants and snakes. There are many anecdotes of his encounters with dangerous and deadly animals; some of them are mentioned in this book. He loved to spend hours just walking on jungle paths while constantly reciting *gāthās*, especially those from the *Sutta-nipāta*. He carried with him only two notebooks, in which he

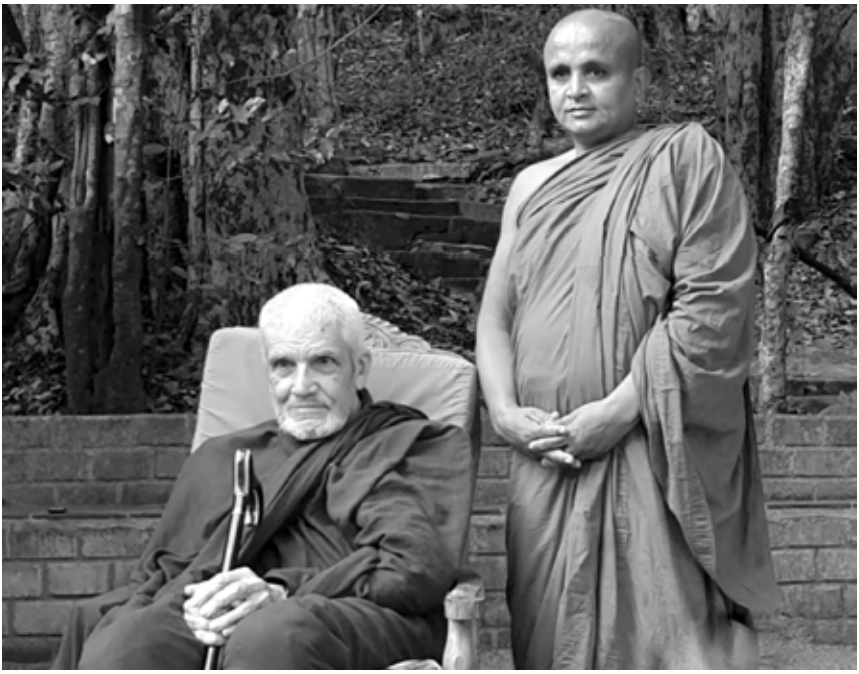
3. The *Aṭṭhakavagga* (Pali, "Octet Chapter") and the *Pārāyanavagga* (Pali, "Way to the Far Shore Chapter") are two small collections of Suttas within the *Sutta-nipāta*, a part of the Pāli Canon of Theravāda Buddhism. They are among the earliest existing texts of Buddhist literature.

wrote all the *gāthās* that he wanted to learn by heart. He scarcely read anything other than Suttas in Pāli. Also, he really owned only what he could put into his little bag. There was nothing else! If he received gifts that he did not need, he immediately gave them away to other monks. And if he received something useful, like a torch or a compass, he then discarded the old. He never accumulated anything. In Laggala and elsewhere in Sri Lanka his huts were always built with only three walls, the fourth side being open to the jungle. And sleeping? Three hours was more than enough. I was really impressed by that. He did not need stuff, fame, people; his wealth was freedom, Dhamma, and – who knows – maybe the company of *deva*s.

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa became seriously ill three years ago. At that time we sensed that his health would deteriorate dramatically. The last time I saw him was in February, 2020 – I felt it was a goodbye. Many great and caring monks were around him helping and protecting his seclusion as much as they could. I contributed only a little. And now he is truly and completely secluded from us. His eagerness to understand Dhamma was tremendous: he wanted to live longer only for the sake of attaining *arahat*ship in this lifetime. We will never know for sure the degree to which he succeeded, but the kind of tireless fight against the defilements he exhibited will surely destroy them completely and finally.

When I was working on Bhante Ñāṇavira's book, I learned just how hard it was to acquire the remaining records and documents concerning his life. At that time most of the people who knew Bhante Ñāṇavira had already passed away. That is why, even before I met Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, I saved all the information about him, including photos, I received from other monks. And when talking with him personally, one of the topics of discussion was his way of life, his way of surviving in the jungle. It was a great fortune for me to be able to spend hours with him, enabling me to dig slowly and respectfully into his understanding of Dhamma and into his life. I listened attentively, and made many notes, which now have become very valuable.

I also asked Bhante Ñāṇadīpa how he would feel if somebody were to write a biography, perhaps a book, about him and also about the Laggala Saṅgha. "It would be interesting to read about it...," I said. He looked down and said, "I don't mind. But only after I die." And after a short pause he continued, "Meister Eckhart has something to say about biographies: 'Beware of biographies. Don't enjoy making your own biographies.' ...



But if there has to be a biography, there should be no exaggerations... Anyway, my life is not important."

I will respect Bhante's wishes. This biography will not share with you my or others', assumptions about his life, nor speculations of a mystical or supernatural nature. Rather, its purpose will be to relate the stories or events that are known to me through direct communication with Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, and with those monks and devotees who knew him well. Tales about the supernatural might be evocative and entertaining, and might come from faithful hearts, but to avoid exaggeration and embellishment I will keep only to the stories that are established as factual.

Of course, there are undoubtedly many more stories and facts that some who knew Bhante could share, though I have tried my best to collect as many as possible. I expect that some readers who knew Bhante might discover small errors in the story line, but what is presented is all that I am able to offer in this present edition. My assistant and I have done our best with the materials that we have at our disposal, and have endeavoured to present these materials as faithfully as possible.

And also, to respect Bhante's wish, I will avoid mentioning the names of monks who are still alive, especially those who live in seclusion in

forests. Some of the monks who were consulted for this book expressed a wish not to be mentioned by name, and others were unavailable to indicate a preference. Therefore I have decided that it is better to avoid personal references to other monks in the included stories, in order to preserve their anonymity and minimize possible disturbance to their lives.

After all, the reader must understand that the monks who knew Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, and are following his example, are sincerely dedicated to the realization of Dhamma, living in forests and jungles. They do not want to be found. With the passing away of Bhante, lay devotees soon started to express their wishes to make large offerings to the Saṅgha. But, although very grateful and happy to see the increasing faith and generosity in their hearts, the Saṅgha does not seek fame and does not want to abide with an abundance of requisites. The accumulation of "things" limits freedom, and fame and wealth invite corruption. The monks of the Laggala Saṅgha want to honour Bhante Ñāṇadīpa and "the sages of old" by living lives of purity and simplicity, avoiding an excess of comfort and safety, and wish to remain dependent only on the humble offerings of local villages, with which they have close, respectful relationships.

My intention in writing this book is to inspire its readers. Perhaps there will even be someone who also finds the motivation and courage to walk out of the safety of four walls, become a monk, and move out into nothingness. Authentic Dhamma practice, though increasingly rare in this modern world, is still alive. And sincere forest monks, equally rare, are still, right now, deep within forests and jungles, meditating in mud huts or at the roots of trees, hearing only the sounds of wildlife, or perhaps cornered in a hut to stay dry from a rain; maybe hungry, lonely, or sick; or delighting in meditation and realizing a profound freedom: finding in themselves "the island within." We can honour them, not by seeking them out, but by imitating them.

* * *

I feel obliged to thank the many people who helped me in assembling the material which made this book possible, with especially deep gratitude to the Venerable Guttasila Thera. He generously allowed us to tap his sharp memory of many events involving Bhante Ñāṇadīpa and Laggala, and without his help, this book would probably never have come into

existence. Also Venerable Pāsāda who – with great respect for Bhante Ñāṇadīpa – made a tremendous effort to visit many locales in order to interview a number of the forest monks of Laggala as well as villagers who knew the great Elder. I am, of course, also more than grateful to all those forest monks who not only shared very inspiring stories of their experiences with Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, but also entrusted me to write this official biography. In addition, I express my sincere thanks to Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's brother, Mr. Bernard Junge, for sharing stories from the early life of his brother Denys, as he was known at home. My thanks also go to Dr. Lasantha Weerawardhana, who treated Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, for sharing medical information. The book is also being translated into Sinhala by Venerable Dhammarakkhita Thera, and appreciation for this great effort goes to him too. Thanks also to Venerable Ranmuthugala Buddhawansha and to Venerable Bandarawela Ñāṇasumana and to others for sharing many photos, and to my assistant who edited and helped proofread the book's text, and to Venerable Phāsuko, Michael Rae and Bernhard Kletzander for the final proofreading; and to my publisher, Gerolf T'Hooft, for his very professional work in preparing and printing this book. Thank you all!

Bhikkhu Hiriko
Samanadipa Hermitage, Slovenia, EU
12th November 2020

REFERENCES

Anandajoti, Bhikkhu: *Pure Inspiration, Venerable Ñāṇavimala Mahā, recollections of his life, practice and teachings.* Sri Lanka.

Bodhesako, Samanera: *Getting Off, A Portrait of an American Buddhist Monk*. Path Press Publications, 2012.

Bodhi, Bhikkhu: *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*. Wisdom Publications, 2000.

Bodhi, Bhikkhu: *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*. Wisdom Publications, 2012.

Hiriko, Bhikkhu: *The Hermit of Bundala, Biography of* Ñāṇavīra *Thera, with reflections on his life and work*. Path Press Publications, 2nd Edition, 2019.

Jeune, Bernard: *Presentation at the occasion of the commemorative ceremony to mark the 75 year of the bombardments of the ships in the Neustadt bay*. 3 May 2020.

Joe Atulo, Bhante: *To the End of Body and Mind*, Audio notes. Dhamma-Vinaya Paṭipadā, 2020.

Lee, Ajaan Dhammadharo: *Keeping the Breath in Mind and Lessons in Samadhi*. Wat Metta, 2000.

Ñāṇadīpa, Mahāthera: *The Silent Sages of Old, Suttas from the Sutta Nipāta*. Path Press Publications. 2020

Ñāṇananda, Kaṭukurunde Bhikkhu: *A Majestic Tree of Merit*. Pothgulgala Dharmagrantha Dharmasravana Mādhya Bhāraya, Sri Lanka, 2012.

Ñāṇavīra, Thera: *Clearing the Path* (1960-1965). Path Press Publications, 2011.

Nyanatusita, Bhikkhu & Hecker, Hellmuth: *The Life of Nyanatiloka Thera, The Biography of a Western Buddhist Pioneer*. Kandy, Sri Lanka, BPS, 2008.

Nyanatusita, Bhikkhu: *'Information about Meditation Centers, Forest Monasteries, and other important places in Sri Lanka for Western bhikkhus and serious lay practitioners'* (article). Kandy, Sri Lanka, Updated January 2005.

Yogavacara Rahula, Bhante: Meetings with a Remarkable Monk. *http://bhanterahula.blogspot.com/2010/10/meetings-with-remarkable-monk.html*, 14 October 2010.

Wikipedia.

II

Vanapattha

(Secluded Life in the Forest)

THE ISLAND WITHIN

On one occasion, the Buddha set out on tour for Pārileyya.[1] When he arrived there, he went to a very secluded forest (*vanapattha*) and sat at the root of a lovely *sāl*-tree. Then, as the Buddha was meditating in private, a thought arose in his mind thus: "Formerly, beset by those monks of Kosambī, makers of strife, makers of quarrels, makers of disputes, makers of brawls, makers of legal questions in the Order, I did not live in comfort; but now that I am alone with no other, I am living in comfort removed from those monks."

At that time, an individual large elephant was beset by other elephants. He ate grass already cropped by them. They ate bundles of branches as he broke them off; he drank water muddied by them, and when he crossed over at a ford, the other elephants went pushing against his body. Then it occurred to that large elephant: "Now I am living beset by them. What if I were to live alone, secluded from the crowd?" Then that elephant left the herd and moved to the same forest where the Buddha was staying. After some time living there and surviving by himself, it occurred to the elephant: "Formerly I was beset by a crowd, and I did not live in comfort. But now that I am alone with no others, I am living in comfort removed from them."

Then the Buddha, having understood his seclusion and knowing, by mind, the elephant's reasoning, thought: "Both of us, I and the great elephant, delight in this secluded forest."

The boldness of this elephant, in leaving the security of the herd, has been the model followed by countless monks and nuns over more than two millennia. They have all heard and understood the Buddha's words:

---

1. This story is from Khandhaka 10, Vinaya Piṭaka.

If for company you cannot find a wise and prudent friend who leads a good life,
then, like a king who leaves behind a conquered kingdom,
or like a lone elephant in the elephant forest,
you should go your own way, alone.
—Dhp 23:10[2]

Especially today, when it is becoming increasingly difficult to find knowledgeable and noble teachers, there is an increasing call among monastics to follow the elephant's way: to find the inner strength and courage required to step away from others' needs and to face one's insecurities, alone. This is the way of Forest Wisdom. Though books are informative, they cannot impart wisdom; people may be kind and compassionate, but even with all the goodwill in the world they cannot grant inner freedom to another. Pursuing sensuality can bring pleasure, but it cannot provide a lasting happiness. But being in a forest, in a wilderness of nature, away from the ruminations of abstract pondering, away from people and sensual enticements, one has no option but to confront one's mind, its hunger and darkness, stress and fear. There, though alone, the attentive and discerning renunciant may find that he or she is not lonely but has gained access to a source of wisdom that is to be found in Dhamma.

The tendency to idealize and romanticize the forest life – the life of seclusion – is understandable. We may imagine that somewhere there is in the world a man or a woman, away from society and sensual distractions, enjoying undisturbed peace. A reader might imagine such a soothing scene while sitting in a comfortable chair, in a room with air conditioning, having enjoyed a good and hearty meal. But is such a reader truly soothed and contented by such imaginings? If he or she is experiencing contentment, then why daydream about the happiness of some faraway hermit? What is so fascinating in such thoughts, so alluring? Perhaps, through reflection, that person will come to a vague realization of the inadequacy of hope for material security and begin to see the world's fragility revealed in personal, private experience. We, like that person, might feel blessed for not having experienced war. Still, we also sense how quickly a small mistake, perhaps seemingly inconsequential, can crush and destroy everything we have built up. Things that are dear to us can disappear at any time; social forces beyond our control may exert

2. Translated by Acharya Buddharakkhita.

divisive pressures; an invisible enemy such as a virus or other plague can overwhelm us or a loved one, bringing deadly disease – all this is real, genuine, and sensed as a ubiquitous possibility. Deep within ourselves we know very well that the supporting cushion on which we are sitting, both figuratively and literally, cannot bring us any lasting satisfaction or contentment. We might like to forget these disquieting thoughts and subtle impulses and prefer to enjoy the many opportunities to pursue sensual distractions. But then we are reminded once again why we seek to engage our senses: the need to run from something that is haunting us, imagining that we can sufficiently manipulate and manage the world of our experience to escape these existential anxieties. At some time an honest man or woman will come to understand that the choice to pursue and enjoy sensual distractions arises only if states of pain and discomfort have already occurred, and that this underlying discomfort is not something which we have, in a fundamental sense, any real control over.

What do those renunciant hermits see? What have they realized? How do they embark upon their paths? The hermit's reality does not match the romantic and dreamy musings of the casual but superficially comfortable observer. Most certainly they do not enjoy easy seclusion, and jungles, though beautiful and exotic during brief and glancing encounters, are not pleasant to live in continuously with only essential and

primitive material support. Such a life is not for one who seeks physical pleasures. Going to nature means going to the things of experience, just as they are; the rough edges of material existence are not smoothed over. A hermit in the dense, deep forest is like a small insignificant element of nature's vastness. The experience resembles that of a lost swimmer in the ocean. There is nothing but water and a vast, impersonal sky. One may feel as insignificant as an ant under the feet of a giant—a very fragile being, and nothing more.

And since there are no distractions when living this way, a hermit is left very much alone with himself. He has no other people around him to serve as a kind of mirror, who call him by this or that name, who smile at him or attack him with harsh words. In social life, others reinforce our identity, even our purpose in life. But being alone, with little sense of "me" or "my purpose," can be horrifying for one who is looking for a mirror, especially when desire takes over. One tries to be, or define oneself as, something that one is not.

But even though there are no others to tell him who he is, there is, in another sense, still a mirror present to the hermit: the mirror of his mind. And in this mirror he may see the reality of his actual state of mind. He may see the beauty of the virtue developed in his life to this point, or he might see the dark side of his hidden wickedness. With few opportunities to turn away, an attentive hermit will see very well what he is made of.

But the purification of mind and heart is not accomplished by merely going into a forest and waiting for some beneficial consequences to arise automatically. Many who attempt the forest life are not ready for seclusion. Because of a lack of strength, they might even lose their mental balance, falling into a kind of madness. Success with this practice of solitude requires the proper guidance of a Buddha, the development of virtue, and enough wisdom to investigate the phenomena of experience. Being a true hermit is much more than sitting alone and waiting for a revelation or a miracle. It takes on a huge responsibility, for one's mind and for all that it holds.

When one is ready, one takes this path, not running away from the world but facing it as it is. One has established the firm knowledge that seeking security externally through sensual pleasures is nothing more than being an animal with intuitive pursuits. But a hermit, if he wants to break his chains, must remove himself from all of that, no matter how painful doing so might be. He must come to see just what this Self of his

experience is, what it is dependent upon, and that it is indeed nothing without those false securities. To see what this Self is all about, what this pain is all about, a seeker must first remove these obstacles, compulsions, and distractions.

With developed virtue, with proper contemplation, a mind can realize the peace of 'absence' and the happiness of relinquishment. One can recognize that it is that very desire for safety in the comforts of contrived experiences, together with the effort to control the circumstances of living, which are the problem and source of the pain encountered in life – not the things in the world, but the mind's engagement with and reaction to the world. This is how a hermit indeed finds an island within, a refuge that is not dependent on anything, not on any particular experience or circumstance – not even on seclusion. Such a person is genuinely a hermit, no matter where he resides, whether in a forest wilderness or among crowds of people.

THE DHAMMA AND VINAYA

Buddhist monks are ordained according to the Buddha's guidance, and the monastic lineage has been unbroken since the Buddha's time. No authority can change that. The monk's discipline comprises hundreds of rules relating to how a *bhikkhu* should behave, how he should deal with the requisites supporting his life, how he is to protect his celibacy, and how community affairs of the Saṅgha should be managed, including the means of resolving disputes. Up to the present time these old rules have remained unchanged. Forest monks of the past took special care to truly live under Vinaya, the monastic code, in both letter and spirit.

Below are listed some rules to be observed by *bhikkhu*s, fully ordained Buddhist monks:

Celibacy: A *bhikkhu* lives in complete celibacy. If he engages in sexual intercourse, he is automatically no longer a monk, and re-ordination is not possible in his lifetime. A *bhikkhu* must refrain entirely from all sexual activity, including the mere touching of a woman or man with lustful intent. He also may not flirt with them or seek privacy, especially with the opposite sex.

Dwelling: A forest *bhikkhu* will usually stay in a simple hut (known as a *kuṭī*). *Kuṭīs* may be of different sizes and styles, but they are generally

small and very simple. There are restrictions if a monk wants to own a *kuṭī*, and *kuṭīs* are generally held by the wider *Bhikkhu Saṅgha*, or community of ordained monks. A *bhikkhu* is expected to take care of the *kuṭī* he is using, and the furniture therein. Generally, *kuṭīs* are to be built in secluded places, as far from disturbances as possible, though not so far from human habitation as to preclude the daily alms round (*piṇḍapāta*). Next to the *kuṭī*, there is generally a short walking path to be used by the resident *bhikkhu* for walking meditation.

Food: A *bhikkhu* is not allowed to store or cook food. Whatever food he consumes has to be offered to him by another or provided to him by another. This is why forest monks walk on *piṇḍapāta* every day: to collect alms (in countries where that is possible). With his alms bowl, the monk will walk in the early morning from his secluded *kuṭī* to a village, or to another prearranged location a few kilometres away, where laypeople will come to offer him food. Then he will walk back to his *kuṭī*. A *bhikkhu* may eat only during morning hours, from dawn until midday. In the afternoon he may not consume food but may take water, tea, or other drinks and medicines. A forest monk owns his bowl, which is today usually made of stainless steel but in ancient times was made of clay.

Clothes: A forest monk will own only one set of robes: a lower robe,

which wraps around mid-body, and an upper robe which wraps around the whole body. He might also choose to have an outer robe, which is similar to the upper robe but made of a double layer of cloth. His robes may be ochre, brown, or magenta. A forest monk might also own a simple bag in which to carry a few small belongings.

Forest monks do not live according to a prescribed schedule. They might create one of their own, or they may spend entire days in meditation or contemplation, performing various tasks only as necessary. They may study Suttas or Pāli (the ancient language of northern India in which those Suttas are written). A *bhikkhu* would also study the Vinaya (the codified monastic rules of discipline) and other books that might support his practice. Some monks might also recite some of the passages from the Suttas that they have memorized. And while some dedicate themselves to a technique or formal practice, hoping perhaps for a mystical experience or a magical light to appear, most will instead seek the light of wisdom. Some monks may focus their efforts on gaining intense concentration (*samādhi*).

In contrast, other monks prefer to reflect upon the words of the Buddha and generate a feeling of joy in contemplating the Dhamma. Thus, each hermit is an individual, and each one has to find a way that suits

him best. Some monks have enough wisdom to be able to penetrate the truth. Still others, caught in arrogance or other mental hindrances, might find themselves walking, aimlessly, on misdirected paths.

Many forest monks find themselves dwelling in very wild terrain, close to many dangerous animals such as elephants, leopards and poisonous snakes in the jungles of Sri Lanka, or tigers and scorpions in the rural areas of Thailand. *Bhikkhu*s ought not to intentionally put themselves in danger from their fellow inhabitants of the forest. However, living in places where fear or heightened alertness is easily aroused is highly recommended. And this is precisely what forest monks seek for their practice. It is not their goal to find secluded, quiet and beautiful places. Instead, they search out sites where they will face real discomfort and even a significant possibility of fear.

Forest monks have traditionally lived in the wilderness, in relatively unpopulated areas, their *kuṭī*s somewhat distant from villages. There they could quickly put the teachings of Dhamma into practice. The jungles have few human visitors, but wild animals abound. The sounds of nature can be heard day and night but they are not a hindrance to meditation, for they do not carry any specific meaning for a monk. The same cannot be said for human sounds, hence the interest in avoiding them. Seclusion from social interaction is essential, especially if a monk has weak or undeveloped *samādhi*. In such cases, human noises would surely provoke memories and other mental reactions, distracting the undisciplined mind of such a monk from its goal. For these reasons, should human visitors approach a forest monk's *kuṭī*, they would not usually be permitted to stay for a long time.

Of course, there can be physical dangers from animals. One story about a monk's encounter with a leopard illustrates this fact, and how such risks are appropriately used by forest monks to further their practice. One night this monk heard the heavy breathing of a leopard outside his open and exposed *kuṭī*. It was very dark and he experienced great fear. Eventually, stillness came to the night and it appeared that the leopard had left, but the monk knew the leopard could still be nearby. So, he decided to confront his fear, take a torch and walk around the *kuṭī*. Anxious and afraid, he returned to the *kuṭī* and recovered for a while. Then he walked out again, this time a little further away from the *kuṭī*. Again fear and apprehension overwhelmed him, and he returned. He repeated this several times, moving further and further out until he reached the end

of the nearby meditation path. Fear and terror had entered his mind, but he repeatedly summoned the courage to confront it, never entirely sure that panic would not set in. And by summoning his courage, he eventually overcame his fear. Such are the mental struggles and battles of living without protection in the jungle!

Thus, forest monks have to be prepared for anything, including the possibility of death. Yet, despite this, their hearts may eventually experience contentment if they can win the battles with their hindrances and defilements. When a monk lives constrained by the restrictions of forest life (for example, living in uncomfortable and even frightening places, where food and other requisites are limited), the skill and power of his mindfulness will increase. Such a monk will become more awake, clear, and bright. While, externally, his body is touched by unpleasant feelings, there will be peace and contentment *inside. Samādhi* can develop under these conditions of discomfort more quickly than might usually be expected.

The forest way puts everything on the line – both physically and mentally. Everything has to be sacrificed, like peeling off all that is superfluous and not needed – all for the sake of Dhamma. The monk, correctly practising in the forest, knows that everything born must die. He un-

derstands that to realize the ending of birth there must be an ending of new possessions and attachments. That is the truth, the honest truth, which cannot be altered.

With the conquest of fear, a natural consequence of this forest practice is an increase in the monk's love for nature and animals. With growing awareness of the terrible struggles all living beings endure, an alert and increasingly sensitive monk will feel compassion for any creatures that walk, crawl, or swim. He will understand that they too are lost. That they too suffer from minds defiled by blind passions and emotions, and that they, even more than most humans, live in a state of constant fear and anxiety. Such monks have no wish to cause harm to anyone or anything. Their old habitual defensive reactions to threats scatter away with the conquest of fear, and their hearts are radically humbled. This is experienced as a breaking down of mental negativity. And when interacting with humans, such monks likewise lose the susceptibility to resentment they may have been subject to earlier in their lives. And with that they lose any inclination to abuse or wish harm to anyone, openly or secretly.

Those who understand the nature and purpose of such training, likewise understand that pursuing physical comfort can produce effects opposite of those mentioned above. For such a pursuit inevitably brings with it the fear of losing what has been acquired. With anxiety one becomes defensive and self-centred. With a self-centred heart, one becomes suspicious of others, thinking ill of them, even developing much anger and resentment leading to verbal or physical abuse. But the hermit's path is to destroy the fortress around the ego, and the foundations upon which such unwholesome mental structures are built.

* * *

When Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was still alive, he called himself "Vanaratana Ānanda Thera," the senior who enjoys the jewel of the forest. He was dedicated to living the forest life to the fullest. He was strict with himself; in the opinions of some, he was perhaps even too stubborn in his determination. But such was the discipline he chose, and he was not concerned if it was pleasing or distasteful to others. He faced dissatisfaction and unhappiness in his early life. That dissatisfaction followed him even into his early monastic life. During that time he was sometimes lonely, burdened with regret that he could not gain profound states of

samādhi. But that did not stop him. He continued to dig ever deeper into the hindrances and defilements of his mind, his anger and fear. He carried on along the lonely and thorny path, despite the physical hardships and illnesses he endured, such as malaria. And despite being very close to death many times, he persevered, year after year, approaching and entering old age, indifferent to others' praise or blame. Through it all, he always walked the straight path, never abandoning his resolve. He was absolutely remarkable.

III

Dīpa

(The New Light)

WAR CHILD, FRANCE

World War II was profoundly personal for Bhante Ñāṇadīpa. Eugene Jeune, Bhante's father, was part of the French resistance movement as a member of a group called "Combat." He was captured and sent to Germany after the invasion. But he continued being a fighter for the freedom of France. When he returned from imprisonment as a French soldier at the beginning of the war, he finished his medical studies in 1942. After that he immediately joined the French resistance as a young doctor in Lyon, first in the "Comité Interfaculté de Résistance" and later in the "Armée secrete." In June of 1943 he joined the network, "Service Pericles," that created the Maquis-Ecoles (Maquis schools), and took part in the organization and direction of the centre of this network in Lyon. As a young doctor in the hospital "Hotel Dieu" in the heart of Lyon, he managed the liaison and transfer of people between Lyon, the Maquis-Ecoles in the Alps, and the Jura Mountains. In this same way, Eugene helped Jews to secure hiding places in different places.

He married a French lady, Renée Duliège, and in 1943 they had their first child, Bernard. And while Renée was pregnant with a second child, the Gestapo chief in Lyon, the notorious "Butcher of Lyon," Klaus Barbie, personally arrested Eugene in his home on the 20th of April 1944.

He was first held in the infamous prison Monluc, where many French resistance fighters were imprisoned and tortured by Barbie and his henchmen. Nobody can say for sure if the Germans tortured Eugene, but it was known that other members of the Pericles network were. A few weeks before the liberation of Lyon Eugene was transported to Compiegne, and from there to Neuengamme with the third transport of prisoners on the 28th of July.

In the meantime, Renée remained in Lyon and on the 12th of Novem-

Eugene Jeune

Renée Jeune née Duliège

ber 1944, gave birth to their second child, and named him Denys. Soon afterwards he was baptised in the Catholic Church. Years later he would come to be named Ñāṇadīpa, "the lamp of knowledge."

The three lived in a ground-floor apartment in Lyon, between the old railway station Brotteaux and the Parc de la Tête d'Or where, as Bernard remembers, they often visited the little primitive zoo and watched the "Guignoles" (the famous French puppet theatre).

Alone with two boys, Renée continued her studies of English and Italian at the university, while at the same time working as a part-time schoolteacher. Needing help, she had to occasionally ask family members to take care of the boys. Consequently Bernard and Denys spent several weeks with their aunt in Nice. Bernard remembers those days:

> "I have a clear memory of us with our aunt on the stony beach at la Baie des Anges in Nice – close to the famous Hotel Negresco. We spent several weekends with my uncle's family. My uncle was the oldest brother of my father; he was also a physician and later a professor of paediatrics. I also remember that we stayed for a few weeks with our mother's friends in a little town in the mountain-plateau Auvergne in the centre of France, and very often at weekends with her cousins in Clermont-Ferrand, the capital of Auvergne. We drank goat's milk and ate so many cherries that we got some stomach problems. We

Lyon

also often spent weekends with my mother's friends in the Beaujolais district to the north of Lyon. When our mother had to study in England, we also spent at least a month in a children's home in Switzerland where we learned to speak a little German. Our parents' family members and friends were very much together in those early years."

But the boys' father, Eugene, remained in Neuengamme, still not having seen his newborn baby. During the winter of 1944/45, as a doctor-prisoner in one of the infirmaries (in Revier II), Eugene worked with other doctor-prisoners from different countries, including a Dane, Gregers Jensen, who spoke perfect French. Dr. Jensen was fifty-seven years old at that time. Despite the age difference, they became good friends.

Gregers Jensen

Gregers had been active in the Danish resistance on the island of Als in southern Denmark. The

Gestapo arrested him on the 6th of October 1944, after the sabotage of a German radar station on that island. First imprisoned in the Frøslevlejren (the Danish Compiegne) close to the frontier, he was transported to Neuengamme on the 29th of November. In April1945, he along with all the Danish and Norwegian prisoners from various concentration camps, was transported on the "white buses" that were a part of Bernadotte's effort.[1]

Eugene had a great hope to see his family again – his dear wife Renée, son Bernard, and little Denys. He believed that all would end well and that they would soon be liberated.

After the last evacuation of Danes and Norwegians on the 20th of April, the 10,000 prisoners of other nationalities, including Eugene, were transported from Neuengamme to the Bay of Lübeck, most of them by train. From there they were moved to Neustadt where they were put on ships. Eugene, with about 4000 other prisoners, was on the largest of them, called the "Cap Arcona" (also known as the "German Titanic"). Unfortunately, there was a tragic incident: the Cap Arcona was bombed. It was set on fire and almost sunk by the UK's Royal Air Force, which did not know that there were prisoners on board. The majority of prisoners died that day. His family did not know where Eugene was at that moment, hoping perhaps that he was in the ship's infirmary. However, Eugene was probably among the victims since there was no further sign of him being alive. This event occurred some time in the first days of May 1945.

After the war Gregers corresponded with Renée and invited her to Denmark, for he had promised Eugene that he would take care of her in case Eugene did not survive. He later also asked her to marry him since his wife had died of cancer at the beginning of the war. In January 1949, the whole new Jensen-Jeune family – Gregers, Renée, Bernard, and Denys (who was now four years old) – settled in the little town of Augustenborg on the island of Als in southern Denmark. This was the town where Gregers had worked as a general practitioner.

Denys never became a Danish citizen; he travelled with a French passport. Still, all of his education, from kindergarten to university, was Danish.

---

1. The "White Buses" was an operation undertaken by the Swedish Red Cross and the Danish government in the spring of 1945 to rescue concentration camp inmates in areas under Nazi control and transport them to neutral Sweden. Folke Bernadotte, Count of Wisborg, who was then vice-president of the Swedish Red Cross, negotiated the release of about 31,000 prisoners from German concentration camps.

BOYHOOD IN AUGUSTENBORG, DENMARK

Denys and Bernard grew up in Augustenborg, a small town some forty kilometres north of the German border. With a father they hardly knew, a language they did not speak, and relatives living far away, they struggled to adjust to their new life. They were admitted to kindergarten where their first priority was to learn Danish, or rather some local dialect spoken on the island of Als. Bernard remembers their time as kids:

> "I remember that one of the first days we escaped through the hedge probably because we could not yet communicate with the other children or perhaps because they teased us. But we soon got good playmates even if we were not allowed to play with the children of the minority Germans who had been Nazis or sympathized with the Nazis during the war. We did that anyway as some of them lived next door, and we later went to school with them. Our stepfather later accepted that we saw each other.
>
> "Augustenborg and surroundings were an excellent place to grow up as a boy, with several forests around the little town, a relatively big lake communicating with an inlet. After school, we used to play by the lake, which was right in front of our house or further out the inlet and in "Storeskoven," the largest of the forests. We made bows from hazelnut branches, arrows from the rush by the lake, and swords from the wood in "Storeskoven." We usually played Robin Hood or something like that peacefully. Still, we also often fought with the other gangs in the neighbourhood.
>
> "We belonged to a gang that had its base in "Lilleskoven" (the small wood) by the lake. Another gang had its base in "Storeskoven," but they were also often our good playmates. The gangs from the surrounding forests and villages were not; we could have real fights with them. My brother had a couple of playmates his age, and they stayed out very late. He was often late for dinner and, in consequence, got a scolding.
>
> "In Winter, we skated a lot, either on the lake or the inlet, where we could run several kilometres. In the 50s, there was strong ice for several weeks or even a couple of months every winter. In summer, we went swimming in the inlet at "Storeskoven." In winter, we were taught swimming in the indoor swimming bath in Sønderborg (the main city on Als with 25,000 inhabitants about seven kilometres from

> Augustenborg). We went there by bike. We both participated in competitions and won medals."

In his early childhood, Denys showed his many talents. He also liked classical music and some local Danish songs, something that he never forgot. As Bernard recalls:

> "We also learned to play the piano from a teacher who lived just on the other side of the road. I only managed to do this for two or maybe three years because of my departure to boarding school. Still, my brother continued until he finished the Gymnasium. I only learned to play some of Bach's easiest preludes. At the same time, my brother advanced to playing Chopin's nocturnes, and he played them very well. I think he could have been a talented pianist."

In 1955, when Bernard was eleven, he was sent to a boarding school in Sorø, on the bigger island, Zeeland, which is more than one hundred kilometres from Augustenborg and about one hundred kilometres from Copenhagen. Denys remained home and continued his schooling there for one more year. Then, in 1956, he went to college in Sønderborg, studying mathematics and physics. This meant that the brothers lived apart from each other and the family for the following four years, their puberty years. Bernard recalls:

> "Even if I came home one weekend per month, I have always felt that this separation perhaps was positive for me (I was away from home and learned a sort of independence in an at-times rough boarding school environment), but perhaps negative for him, who was suddenly an only child at home. Since our earliest childhood, I had been the protecting older brother in the changeable years after the war."

ADOLESCENCE IN SORØ, DENMARK

Bernhard came back home in 1959 to go to the same Gymnasium as Denys – a class above him. They now lived together for the next year and a half. They had adjacent rooms in their home in Augustenborg, sharing a balcony with a view on the lake.

> "From that balcony we could observe the lives of birds. There were always swans, ducks, coots, gulls, and the grove, our favourite animals. On the other side of the lake there were often one or two herons, which we watched through our binoculars as they ate. As boys, we often went to the other side of the lake to play in the rushes. When a little older, we began to 'smoke' the bulrushes."

During his time at Gymnasium, Denys' spiritual inclinations began to grow, overtaking his interest in the free physical activities of his childhood by the lake and in the forest. Bernard writes of this time in their lives:

> "Throughout the Gymnasium, we read quite a lot of philosophical and literary works, such as poems, novels, and dramas (the latter was mostly done by me). Denys was already interested in Buddhism, mainly Zen, which was introduced to Europe in the early 1960s. We read Zen Buddhist works in French as these works had not yet been translated into Danish. At that time our philosophical interests differed slightly, as Denys was more interested in the more spiritual philosophers and in the mystics. On the other hand, I was more interested in existentialism and the theory of knowledge.
> "But Denys got tired of studying mathematics and physics even if he was excellent at these subjects. He started to withdraw more into himself and became less interested in measuring the world with the means of science.
> "He began to take days off and wander in the forests instead, without telling our parents. Of course, his absence was reported to them. The result of this was that now it was *he* who was sent to the boarding school where I had been before, to Sorø Akademi. There he went to the 'classical' stream, that did not exist at Sønderborg Statsskole (Gymnasium). He was highly interested in languages in general and in ancient languages in particular.
> "As good as he had been in mathematics and physics at the Gymnasium in Sønderborg, he now excelled in Latin and Greek at Sorø Akademi. He even started to write poems in Latin for fun."

Denys also read the teachings of Lama Govinda and liked the book *Foundations of Tibetan Buddhism* by Kalu Rinpoche. The Theravada school of

Sorø

Buddhism did not appeal to him at that time, even though some materials were already available to him like the *Dhammapada* in Danish.

He also liked to read about the cultures and civilisations of the East, including Afghanistan, Mongolia, and Tibet, and showed an interest in Sanskrit and Pāli as well.

Together with some other classmates (among them a girl with whom he was a little bit in love), he attended a study group with their teacher in Religious Knowledge. This was to become a very important influence on his later choices in life, for it was with that group that he went to India for the first time, after their final exams.

Bernard recalls:

> "This curiosity initially drove him out on long travels to countries in the Middle East and Asia. He was never a hippie, even though he met many other hippies on his journeys and tried smoking hashish with them. He did not go to Asia to seek religion even though he was interested in Eastern religions."

In Sorø, Denys lived together with a few other students in the home of their Latin teacher and from their window they could see the statue of King Frederick VII, one of the beloved kings of Denmark. Searching for

a way to celebrate their graduation, they thought the statue could do with a fresh coat of paint. So one morning, a few hours before dawn, they gathered around the pot-bellied statue of the king and started to paint it... *white*.

> "The next day when we came to celebrate his exams, we inspected the painted statue on the square together with many spectators who were deeply scandalized by what had happened. I remember that my stepfather, who is originally from Sorø, murmured to himself: "Yes, but it *really* needed to be painted." The local people did not seem to appreciate this sort of statement.
> "In the end, my brother and his friends received a hefty fine and a lot of comments in the local paper."

FIRST TRAVELS

As children, the brothers took trips with their parents to France every summer to meet their relatives, from both their mother's and father's sides. But during their Gymnasium times, when Denys was sixteen, they were allowed to travel on their own. They went to Paris and had an extended stay at the Cité Universitaire. A year later, both hitchhiked through Germany, France, and further on to Spain. They travelled, each on their own, for a whole summer. In the same way they also visited Italy.

After graduation Denys went to northern India together with his teacher of Religious Knowledge and the study group. During that time he visited some of the holy Buddhist places. The others returned to Denmark but Denys continued his travels, both in the north and south of India. After that he also travelled through the Middle East before returning home.

At that time he was interested in Mahāyāna Buddhism and when he got back to Denmark, he took up the study of Tibetan at the University of Copenhagen for about a year.

In the following years he returned to Asia several times and on one of his extended journeys he made it as far as Japan. He also entered Mongolia once from Irkutsk, but had to return on the Trans-Siberian Railway because he came down with hepatitis and was almost entirely yellow. On another occasion, he wanted to enter Xinjiang province in China via Afghanistan's north-east passage, but developed a case of spontaneous

pneumothorax and had to return to Kabul, where he was admitted to an American hospital for surgery. After a successful treatment he returned home to recover.

In the various countries where he stayed, often for weeks or even months, he earned his living – paying for food, shelter, and transport – by doing any odd jobs he could get, e.g., in restaurants or writing letters for people. This was the case, for instance, in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, India, Laos, and Japan. In those places he rapidly picked up the local languages, at least sufficiently for daily use.

Denys liked Istanbul. He admired the architecture and was deeply impressed by the city's oriental beauty. He especially liked the many mosques with their impressive minarets and delicate stonemasonry.

He also visited south-east Asia. Bernard remarks:

> "On these travels he was very much in touch with Buddhism, not only in India but also in Myanmar (then Burma), Thailand, Laos, and Japan. Very often, he stayed overnight in Buddhist monasteries for free. He told me that this played a great role in his conversion to Buddhism."

In 1968, after spending some time in India, Denys decided to continue his travels in Sri Lanka. In the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, a spiritual community located in Pondicherry, India, he read more about Buddhism and thought to go deeper into it. He was already in the south of India, and Sri Lanka was close by. And when he learned that it was in Sri Lanka that the original scriptures and discourses of the Buddha were to be found, he immediately got excited and decided to go there. There could be found the tradition which preserved the legacy of the Buddha, where one could still see the remains of monasteries and stupas that were built and used over 2000 years ago, and where one could hear many legends of forest monks wandering the wild jungles in their efforts to realize the Dhamma.

When he was asked, years later, how he felt about Mahāyāna, he responded: "That's usually how people start. They're more intrigued by colourful religions."

When he arrived in Sri Lanka, he learned of a place where Westerners had been going to hear teachings and where they could become Buddhist monks. This aroused his curiosity, so he decided to travel south to visit the Island Hermitage, a forest monastery on the west coast of the island.

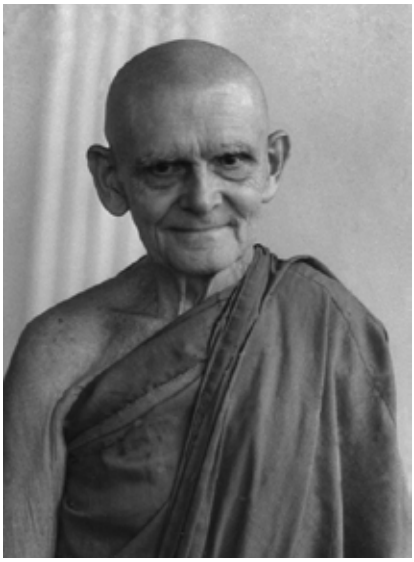
The Island Hermitage Sala

Located sixty-five miles south of Colombo, Island Hermitage was founded in 1911 by a German monk named Ven. Ñāṇatiloka, the first European to ordain as a Buddhist *bhikkhu* in Ceylon. Island Hermitage is made up of two islands in the large, brackish Ratgama Lake, Maetiduwa and Polgusduwa. The two islands are located next to the coastal town of Dodanduwa and joined by a small path.

Each island is only about 250 metres long, and is covered by rich jungle, abundant with bird and animal life. It was a peaceful place at that time, though mosquitoes and snakes were plentiful. Vegetation consisted of scrub and thorn-bushes, with creepers growing over the palm trees on the water's edge. The few paths that cut through the forest were arched with vines. The monks' *kuṭīs* – simple huts, around fifteen of them, each isolated from the others – were made of brick and mortar, with a small porch and an adjoining meditation walkway on well-swept flat ground. A communal centre, or *dāna-sāla* (alms hall), was used for gatherings. There was also a rich library with Pāli texts, dictionaries, and various other English and German literary works. Sanitation was primitive, life was modest, and robes were hand-sewn, and then dyed using a boiled tree-bark solution.

In the past, many well-known monks had lived, studied, and practised at Island Hermitage. Apart from its founder, Bhante Ñāṇatiloka,

the names Kheminda, Soma, Ñāṇaponika, Ñāṇavīra, Ñāṇamoli, Ñāṇavimala, among others, are associated with it. But by the time Denys arrived, almost all those famous monks had passed away, only Bhante Ñāṇavimala remained as a senior monk on the island.



Bhante Ñāṇavimala

Other Westerners on the island at that time were mostly junior monks, many of whom had been living a "hippie," traveller lifestyle before ordaining, and were now training as monks under the weak guidance of the current abbot, Bhante Ñāṇaloka.

The place did not inspire Denys, but he soon developed a great respect for Bhante Ñāṇavimala, although not so much for his teaching on Dhamma. Instead it was his commitment to the practice and his strict lifestyle as a monk that inspired him. For ten years after his ordination Bhante Ñāṇavimala had lived quietly at the Island Hermitage, where he generally kept to himself and had little contact with others. Then, in 1966, Bhante Ñāṇavimala decided to leave the hermitage and go on a walking tour (*cārikā*) through Sri Lanka. Thus he began an extraordinary, and soon legendary, period of practice which lasted for twenty-five years. He walked across all the island, from south to north and back, from west to east and back. During these *cārikās* he would generally stay in monasteries and other quiet places for at most a few weeks, but rarely for more than three days, and would then continue walking. The aim of this austere practice was to avoid the accumulation of possessions and mental attachments to places and people. He would carry only his alms bowl and a small bag containing some essential requisites. And he would not even use sandals. Only during the *vassa* (rainy season retreat) would he stay in a certain monastery for three consecutive months, following the Vinaya (monastic rule). Bhante Ñāṇavimala continued this practice up to 1991.

However, after 1987, a hip injury prevented him from walking for long stretches at a time. He passed away in 2005.

Denys deeply respected Bhante Ñāṇavimala for his commitment to such an austere mode of practice and, as we will see later, took up a similar way of life for himself. Not shy or reluctant to approach such an eminent monk, Denys had a few meetings with Bhante after one *dāyaka* (lay supporter) helped break the ice.

> "Ñāṇavimala stayed in a *kuṭi* (hut) on Island Hermitage that had originally been built for Ñāṇamoli. He kept strictly to his *kuṭi*, and one could see him outside only when he was sweeping, bathing or taking his single meal in the *dāna-sālā* (dining hall). Rare were the times when he would allow a visitor. I did not dare to approach him. But before I left in '68, the Sinhalese monk, Ñāṇasanta, obtained permission for me to visit him. He asked me why I was leaving. I said that I had not yet fully decided to become a monk. He advised me not to go, for I might not again get such good conditions for ordaining as I was having now. However, he did not insist when I said that there would always be some place where I could get ordained. The talk he gave me I do not remember, but I felt deeply impressed."[2]

Bhante encouraged Denys to study the Suttas, and further suggested that the young man ordain as a monk since he showed signs of being open to this possibility. Denys also received the strong advice not to return to Europe – for one never knows what temptations will distract a seeker of the path of liberation. However, Denys was considering going home again, practising the Dhamma in Denmark, and perhaps becoming an *anagārika* (a homeless one) there or perhaps in France. He also wanted to fulfil one of his greatest dreams: to trek in the Himalayas and see their beauty, to feel the remoteness and space. And he was not sure if monastic life was for him.

But before resuming his travels, Denys decided to visit the remote region of Būndala, on the southern coast of Sri Lanka. He had heard from monks and novices that an American monk was living there in seclusion. Denys was very curious about him. "So, there is a monk who is living alone, secluded? Is that possible?" The meeting occurred on the evening of the 2 of October 1968. Bhante Ñāṇasumana, who regularly wrote letters to his friends in the USA, later mentioned in one of them that a young

2. "Glimpses of Ven. Ñāṇavimala" by Ñāṇadīpa Thera, published in *Pure Inspiration.*

Danish man had walked to Būndala, "out on a little excursion (to blow off some steam)." He also wrote that Denys had spent eight months at the Island Hermitage learning Pāli, had a Latin/Greek-based education and a brilliant mind for languages, and that he was practising *ānāpānasati* and had started studying Ven. Ñāṇavira Thera's book, *Notes on Dhamma*. "A remarkable fellow," Bhante Ñāṇasumana wrote about Denys, impressed by the young man's intelligence and his interest in Dhamma.

After that meeting Denys decided to leave – but he would be back. Leaving Sri Lanka, he began his travels to fulfil his remaining dreams – the Himalayas. He went to Dharamsala, where he had a chance to meet the Dalai Lama in person. He then decided to take the mountain route to the "Land of Snow." But although impressed by the beauty of the mountains and the hospitality of the local population, he was surprised how crowded those beautiful mountains and foothills were with tourists. He hiked to the foot of Mt. Everest, a three day trek, to an elevation of four-thousand metres, and there pondered which path to take: to become a monk, or to remain as he was. On the foothills of the great mountains, affording spectacular views, he could feel a sense of ease, space, greatness and freedom. Recognizing his inclination to become a monk, he knew he wanted to be free.

Denys did not find attachments attractive – not at all. He remembered one incident, when he was in the company of a group of women, and one woman had embraced him very passionately and would not let him go. He felt disgusted by such an act of passion and saw it's ugly side. Attachments were madness, and he was not going to play with them. That was enough for him to start reflecting on which direction his life should take: sensuality or freedom.

He turned back, walking down from that spiritual mountain and travelled north to China. He continued west on the long Trans-Siberian Railway through Russia, then to Munich and finally back home to Denmark. This was in the summer of 1969.

Denys came back home as an *anagārika*, keeping the eight precepts. He wanted to live like a monk. He also visited his brother Bernard in northern Denmark, who was now a young doctor in a small hospital. Bernard later remarked that:

> "He went to a nearby forest to sleep at night during his stay with us, rejecting a bed in our flat. At that time, he had asked our parents to

find a meditation place for him in southern France. But as he told us later, he had already decided to return to Sri Lanka to live there as a monk for the rest of his life. It was a decision that he had already made on his way to Denmark when he had to queue at the central station in Munich. Still, he had not told our mother as he thought that she would be very sad. She only saw him again in 1978 when she went to visit him. I think it was a great relief for her, to see how he seemed to have found his spiritual way even if she might have wished that he had founded a family here in Denmark. My wife and I first saw him again in Sri Lanka in 2000 and again in 2004/5 and in 2018."

Denys considered moving to France, as he had relatives there who could help him. He had inherited some money from the French government, due to his father's service during the war. It was no great sum, but enough for a start, enough to possibly live alone, secluded. He thought he might grow some vegetables, practise Dhamma, and live as an *anagārika* there. Though initially the idea seemed promising, he soon realized that it was not the best way. He needed a structure, something that would support his discipline – he needed Vinaya. Desires can erupt in the mind and be too strong to battle on one's own. This was an essential fact and in later years he used to emphasize to his brothers in robes that they should practise with the support of the Vinaya – this was a must!

Late in 1969 Denys took up his travels again and left the comforts and safety of his home, never to return. With little money, he took the shortest route possible to Sri Lanka, going to Moscow, taking a Soviet plane to Delhi, from there to Karachi and to Colombo. From then on Sri Lanka would be his home.

IV
Būndala
(Beginnings)

GOING FORTH

On the 29th of September 1969 Denys took novice (*sāmaṇera*) ordination or "Going Forth" (*pabbajjā*) at Island Hermitage. He received a new name: Ñāṇadīpa – "Lamp of Knowledge." Bhante Ñāṇavimala had by then returned to Island Hermitage from one of his walks and stayed there for the *vassa*. And his participation in the ordination much delighted Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's heart; to have this most inspirational living monk nearby was a great blessing: "He was the only inspiring role model I had."

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa had great independence of character, inspired by the lives of past generations of forest monks and by the idea of a life of seclusion. He wanted to live entirely consistent with the descriptions of forest life in the Suttas – a life dedicated to the Buddha's teachings. Not finding any suitable teachers of Dhamma, he studied independently, and eventually became quite skilled in Pāli and the Suttas. Soon he removed himself from the entanglements that come with personal relationships. Highly impressed by Bhante Ñāṇavīra's writings, for many years he carried a notebook in which he had copied the *Notes* by hand, and which he used for his reflection. *Notes on Dhamma* was his teacher and his guide to the Suttas and, with this help he built up his understanding of the Dhamma. He would remark about these writings of Bhante Ñāṇavīra Thera, that they were "the only thing that has brought me any peace and that can hold me."

As the Island Hermitage continued on its trajectory of decline concerning Dhamma and Vinaya, Bhante realized that it was an unsuitable place for monks. So, he decided to leave for Būndala, back to his friend, Bhante Ñāṇasumana, whom he had met there a year earlier.

BŪNDALA

The time spent in Būndala was significant for the new *sāmaṇera*; he later said that it became the foundation of his practice. Here were the conditions that would begin to mould Bhante Ñāṇadīpa as a monk. There was time to study Suttas, to improve his Pāli, and to get used to seclusion. And some Dhamma fruits came to him – though mundane and not profound – as he learned and practised.

Būndala was then, no doubt, a remote, poor community of wattle and daub houses. Today one can drive on a new road off the highway from Tissamaharama in a straight line through sand, scrub, forest, and lagoons, where flamingos can be seen, to a fishing *wadiya* (camp) on the coast. From the main highway to the famous Kataragama Temple, a narrow gravel road runs through the jungle to Būndala and the sea.

Bhante Ñāṇasumana's *kuṭi* was built only a five-minute walk through the forest from the sea, half a mile from the village of Būndala, and seven miles from the nearest road. It was a beautiful area of untouched forest on the edge of a large bird sanctuary. Although secluded from people, one could not describe the place as silent. Deep in the jungle lived various noisy animals, especially during the north-east monsoon (October

Bundala

Būndala kuṭi

through March), and the sounds of waves thundering on the beach could be heard during the south-west monsoon (May through September). At that time the land was a forest reserve, and later it was upgraded to a wildlife sanctuary and even later to a national park.

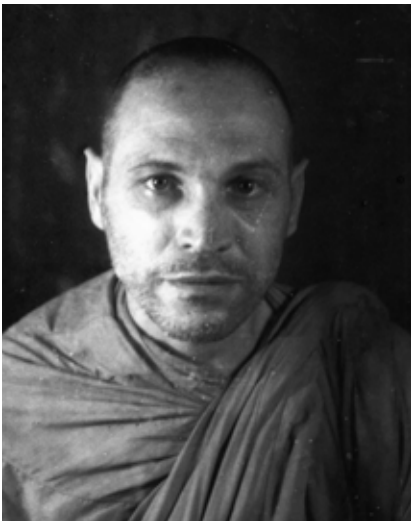
However, with the natural beauty of this place came also some dangers. Since few people lived there, it was a perfect habitat for many dangerous creatures. There were elephants, wild boars, and venomous snakes such as cobras and Russell's vipers. There were also monkeys and many species of migratory birds. Such an environment might be unattractive to someone looking for a life of comfort. Still, for one investigating the realities of life – and death – it is a perfect place. The dangers present a strong level of alertness and encourage diligence in the development of self-awareness. And here in the heart of this wilderness was the "Death *kuṭī*." A *kuṭī* not known so much for the presence of deadly animals, but so-named because it was there that the well-known English monk, Ven. Ñāṇavīra Thera, had ended his life due to severe sickness. Bhante Ñāṇavīra, through his book *Notes on Dhamma*, had acquired a reputation, at least for some, as being one who had awakened to a profound understanding of the Dhamma while living in this *kuṭī*.

Ñāṇavīra Thera

Bhante Ñāṇavīra was Bhante Ñāṇasumana's teacher, and Bhante Ñāṇasumana had inherited the *kuṭī* after his death. Following the example of his teacher, he lived there alone. Still, he soon found that complete seclusion was very hard to endure. How had Bhante Ñāṇavīra managed to live in the Būndala *kuṭī* for a full ten years? A young and relatively inexperienced monk, Bhante Ñāṇasumana did not have Bhante Ñāṇavīra's strength, and he felt a need for companionship. In his isolation he struggled, burning in the heat of the tropical weather and grieving for the loss of his teacher, with no one to talk to. Experiencing the "hell" of his current circumstances, his mind inclined toward disrobing. "It is impossible to lead the homeless life nowadays due to climate, and [internal] fights [...] I've lost my inspiration to practice being so completely alone." Suffering from depression, and to help make his time in Būndala more bearable, he invited young Western *sāmaṇeras* who shared his interest in Bhante Ñāṇavīra's writings to join him. Bhante was also invited and was the last in a string of visiting novices. Eventually, due to his perseverance and some degree of companionship with fellow monks, Bhante Ñāṇasumana's depression subsided.

Though Bhante Ñāṇadīpa did not develop a particular fondness for Bhante Ñāṇasumana, perhaps due to the differences in their characters and personality, he nevertheless respected him for many reasons and wanted to support him. From Bhante Ñāṇasumana he learned the Pāli language and also how to do *ānāpānasati* meditation, and he appreciated Bhante Ñāṇasumana's respect for Ven. Ñāṇavīra. He also respected Bhante Ñāṇasumana's perseverance in the face of his struggle to practise without a suitable teacher, as well as his persistence in seclusion, and his success in developing some fruits from his practice of *samādhi*

Bhikkhu Ñāṇasumana



Sāmaṇera Bodhesako

meditation. Bhante Ñāṇasumana in turn liked Bhante Ñāṇadīpa and even admired him. He appreciated such a Dhamma companion who had *hiri-ottappa*, a sense of high integrity and morality, someone who emphasized Vinaya and did not want to make compromises. And it was an excellent opportunity for both of them to continue studying Pāli. But, as Bhante Ñāṇadīpa later admitted, "it was more that Bhante Ñāṇasumana needed me than I needed him."

Days passed quite peacefully for the two monks. Early in the morning they would go on alms round (*piṇḍapāta*) to Būndala village to collect some prepared food. When they returned, they would eat a bit and save some for later in the morning (in the afternoon they would not eat, as doing so is prohibited by the monastic code). Mornings were spent in study and discussion in the *kuṭī*. After their final meal of the day, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa would disappear into the forest, where he would meditate, walk and spend the night. They generally did not see each other until the next morning.

In 1967, before Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's arrival, a *sāmaṇera* had arrived in Būndala who would eventually become a good friend of Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's. His name at that time was Bhante Ñāṇasuci (though today he is mostly known by his later *sāmaṇera* name, Bodhesako). He received higher ordination as a *bhikkhu* in June 1968, and was highly interested in Bhante Ñāṇavīra's work. His efforts, more than anyone else's, would prove instrumental in preserving Bhante Ñāṇavīra's legacy.

Thus, by the time of Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's arrival, there had developed a small group of monks and laymen deeply interested in Bhante Ñāṇavīra's writings, who placed great importance in them, not only because of Bhante Ñāṇavīra's understanding of Dhamma but also because of his ability to explain in Western terms what it was he had understood. They felt the letter were a bridge to the Suttas. Bhante Ñāṇasumana and Bhante Bodhesako had decided to prepare an edition of these writings for publication. When Bhante Ñāṇadīpa arrived, he offered his assistance. The great enthusiasm of Bhante Ñāṇasumana and Bhante Bodhesako for the project gave them the energy to spend hours, days, weeks, and months copying, re-typing, correcting, comparing, collating, and assembling those writings. They were "editing by day, meditating by night" – but Bhante Ñāṇadīpa soon realized that such work was not why he had come to Būndala, and soon he decided to step aside. The book project was too distracting, and he was content with just his own copy of Bhante Ñāṇavīra's *Notes*.

While involved in the project, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa observed that there were often disagreements between the other two monks concerning how to proceed, and that little was being accomplished. He felt that Bhante Bodhesako was perhaps more capable in the editorial work required. Yet he had to contend with Bhante Ñāṇasumana's desire to maintain authority and control of the project. Eventually, after they had managed to transcribe and roughly edit most of the letters and notes, Bhante Bodhesako left Būndala, and the typescript of the book remained incomplete.

During that time, the Būndala *kuṭi* underwent some significant modifications. Bhante Ñāṇasumana felt too hot in it and had a desire to live closer to nature, so his first adjustment was to move his bed onto the roof. And when this was not enough, he decided to remove the whole southern wall, and a few years later, with the help of Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, also half of the western wall. "It was fun," Bhante Ñāṇadīpa remembered, "when we pushed the weak supporting post, pretending to be Samson." He laughed. The walls were rebuilt a few years later during Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's time, with an additional door, but the idea of three-wall *kuṭīs* came back to Bhante in later years.

However, soon all of the projects, ideas, hopes and friendships developing at the Būndala *kuṭī* were interrupted by another unexpected and shocking incident. It was on the 26th of July 1970, a day which began as usual with Bhante Ñāṇasumana and Bhante Ñāṇadīpa going to the village

on *piṇḍapāta*, returning and having a meal, and Bhante Ñāṇadīpa then disappearing into the forest as was his habit. While Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was away, Bhante Ñāṇasumana received a visit from a young Catholic Tamil man from Jaffna, M.P. Newton, a constant and close companion and supporter of his. In the early evening, as Bhante Ñāṇasumana accompanied Newton down a sandy path from the *kuṭī*, Bhante Ñāṇasumana accidentally stepped on a snake, which immediately reacted by biting him on the right heel. In pain, he dropped down to the sandy ground. Newton somehow managed to throw the snake away from them, but it came back and bit the young *bhikkhu* again, this time on his brow.

Two minutes after the bite, Bhante Ñāṇasumana told Newton that his whole body was on fire. He collapsed as soon as they reached the village, about a kilometre away. Newton immediately summoned a local "snake doctor," who had cured many people from snake bites before – whether cobra, krait, or viper bites. He looked at the stars, searching for some kind of combination, and then pronounced: "This is the poison, and this is how the stars and the moon look. I cannot do anything." He said there was too much poison inside the body. And it was not an average snake; Bhante Ñāṇasumana had been bitten by a very poisonous Russell's viper (*polonga*), which, when stepped on, experienced pain and released most of its poison into his foot. There could be no hope for recovery. In great pain, Bhante Ñāṇasumana broke down and said to his companion, "No way to survive. I have to give up my life. No way to save me." The venom affected his nervous and vascular systems, and his muscles twitched uncontrollably. Unable to speak, he tried to write a final message but failed to control his hands. He was unconscious within two hours, and died during the night, eight hours after being bitten.

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, though not far away in the forest, was unaware of these events. The next morning villagers came to him with coffee and only then he learned of Bhante Ñāṇasumana's death. "He is gone," they told him. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was shocked, realizing how one's end can be so close. He went to the village to formally identify the body and then spent that entire night meditating with Bhante Ñāṇasumana's corpse. "Yes, we can die at any time! We must not be negligent!" he realized.

The following day Bhante Ñāṇasumana's body was cremated, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa remembered, with the villagers and five or six local monks being present. Bhante was the only forest monk there. There was no time for other monks to join them for the funeral. Bhante Ñāṇasumana's

ashes, including fragments of bones, were put into a glass jar and then stored in the Būndala *kuṭī*. Some of his ashes were also scattered at sea.

Years later Bhante Ñāṇadīpa related several unusual stories concerning Bhante Ñāṇasumana. It appears that he occasionally had, in meditation, visions of ghosts and other non-human beings. For example, a week or so after Bhante Ñāṇavīra's death, Bhante Ñāṇasumana had a vision of Bhante Ñāṇavīra's body, entirely covered in robes. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa described this experience of Bhante Ñāṇasumana's as one of "*antarā-bhava*."[1] It is an awareness of an event that might occur during the time between two lives. It has been interpreted as Bhante Ñāṇavīra appearing to his former student to comfort him and encourage him to follow the Dhamma.

Interestingly it had also been predicted to Bhante Ñāṇasumana by a "Crystal Lady," when he was still a layman in California, that he would die before the age of thirty. It was a prediction he took seriously, believing it would come to pass "if I had carried on as such in the material world." He died just after his twenty-ninth birthday.

A month or so after the funeral, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa moved to the Būndala *kuṭi*. He slept on the "death bed" among all the books which he had inherited: Pāli Suttas, the Pāli-English Dictionary (PTS), and other books of a philosophical nature, as well as some novels. In addition, there were some of Bhante Ñāṇavīra's letters, such as his correspondence with Ven. Ñāṇamoli, and the manuscripts of *Notes on Dhamma*.

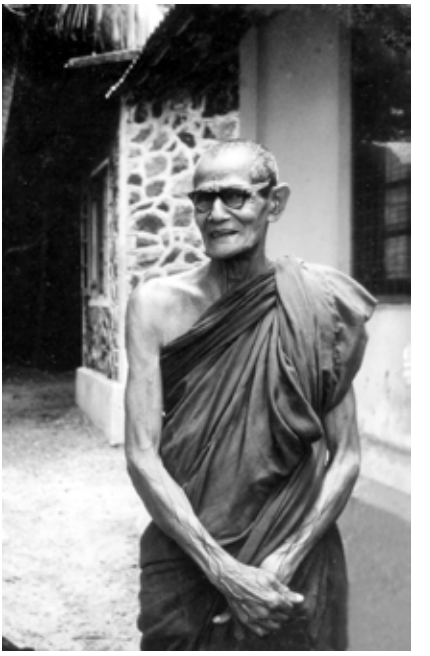
ALONE

After a few months in Būndala Bhante Ñāṇadīpa found that something was troubling him. Already versed in the Suttas, he realized that most discourses were addressed to *bhikkhu*s – to fully ordained monks – and

1. *Antarā-bhava* refers to "intermediate existence" between death and rebirth. It seems that Bhante Ñāṇadīpa did not go along with the traditional Theravāda theory that rebirth takes place immediately without a spatial-temporal gap. Bhante might argue that that the 'one who liberates in interval' (*anarāparinibbāyī*) attains Nibbāna in the intermediate existence and the concept of *gandhabbā* in early Buddhist discourses refers to a being in intermediate existence, and there are indirect inferences to a spatio-temporal gap between death and rebirth in the early Buddhist discourses.

he felt it would not be right to follow the Buddha's guidance selectively, as a novice monk. He *had* to become a *bhikkhu.*

Therefore he decided to go back to Island Hermitage for three weeks to take higher ordination (*upasampadā*). The event was on the 22nd March 1971 – Venerable U Ñāninda Mahāthera[2] was the *upajjhāya* (preceptor), and the *kammācariya* (teacher of the procedure) was Venerable Ñāṇaloka Mahāthera. His ordination lineage was the Sudhamma Nikāya, one of the many Theravāda schools of Sri Lanka.



Ñāṇaloka Mahāthera

Regarding lineage, we have to mention one more thing. Island Hermitage was set up by Venerable Ñāṇatiloka who was originally ordained in Burma in the Sudhamma Nikāya. Consequently his disciples and the their ordination boundary (*sīmā*) were associated with the Sudhamma Nikāya. That still applied to Bhante's ordination in 1971. However in 1972, the Island Hermitage officially became affiliated with the Vajirārāma Sri Dhammarakshita Nikāya. There was a meeting at Island Hermitage to discuss this matter and all monks there agreed to join Vajirārāma, apart from Bhante Ñāṇadīpa and one other monk. Bhante refused to join the meeting, maintaining that he wished to keep his Sudhamma lineage. He was always quite outspoken on this point. All the other monks of Island Hermitage re-registered with the Sri Dhammarakshita Nikāya. Although Bhante was ordained in 1971, the date of "Declaration" in his certificate is the 20th of April 1972 and the date of the registration stamp at the government office is the 11th of January

2. Venerable U Ñāninda Mahāthera was originally from Burma, but he had a small monastery in Galle. In the mid-seventies he became closely involved with the ordinations at the Island Hermitage. Later, Ven. Ñāninda received the Aggamahāpaṇḍita title from the Burmese government and a large monastery was built for him, the Myanmar Lankarama.

1973, almost two years after his actual ordination and one year after filling in the form.

His teacher immediately allowed him to leave Island Hermitage. He knew that, as Bhante Ñāṇadīpa later remembered with a smile, "I was hopeless and he would not stop me. Even if I did not get permission, I would go anyway." When telling me this story he admitted that he was somewhat of a rebel and smiled. He said his departure reminded him of the book *Le Petit Prince* (*The Little Prince*), which he had read in French: of the monarch who kept ordering others to do something when they had already requested permission to do it. A prince asked, "May I sit down?" and the monarch responded, "I order you to do so." "I beg that you will excuse my asking you a question." "I order you to ask me a question." In the same way, Bhante Ñāṇaloka "ordered" Bhante Ñāṇadīpa to go practise in seclusion after he had already decided to leave.

I spoke with Bhante Ñāṇadīpa about the importance of a new monk's dependence (*nissāya*) on his preceptor: a period of at least five years which he should spend with his teacher. He said it was essential to have a mentor. One had to find someone superior to oneself in the knowledge of Dhamma and Vinaya. But he had not found anyone suitable. He acknowledged that it was especially important that new monks, who had difficulty guarding their minds and were easily distracted by sensuality, should not seek lonely places too soon. Preferably, they should stay in forest monasteries with others. Yet it seemed to me, though Bhante did not spend time with a teacher, he in some way experienced his version of a suitable *nissāya*. He lived more than five years in the same place, establishing a strict discipline and studying the Suttas, with the guidance of the writings of his deceased teacher Bhante Ñāṇavīra. He proved that at least some monks can draw upon a deep inner strength and have no fear of being alone.

Seclusion suited Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, it was in his character. Bhante Ñāṇavīra was his guide at that time and, although he knew that his preceptor Bhante Ñāṇaloka could not offer guidance, their relationship remained friendly. Bhante Ñāṇaloka respected Bhante Ñāṇadīpa for his overall virtue and care concerning Vinaya. Also, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa never joined in with other monks in criticizing Ñāṇaloka's shortcomings, particularly concerning some serious matters of Vinaya. But Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was convinced that he had to leave Island Hermitage. There was already a significant decline in the Saṅgha and Vinaya there, and

things worsened during Bhante Ñāṇavimala's long absences from the island. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa knew well that for him to survive in the robes, he would have to leave.

Thus, back at the Būndala *kuṭi*, now as a *bhikkhu*, he became 'The Third Hermit of Būndala.' He stayed for eight years until 1978, considering – for his first two years there – the possibility of finding a place for himself in Denmark, or elsewhere in Europe. He even wrote a letter to his mother to find a place for him. But eventually he dropped the idea of returning to the West, and instead he strengthened his determination to focus on Dhamma, and not be distracted with plans or activities. He even decided that he would not leave his *kuṭī* for periods longer than twenty-four hours. At that time it was of great advantage for him that he had an influential supporter, a lawyer, who could take care of his visa. That spared him from travelling to Colombo every year.

What information we have from this period at Būndala comes from an American professor, Forrest Williams, who communicated with Bhante Ñāṇadīpa about some matters regarding Bhante Ñāṇavīra's legacy, and the publication of his writings. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa respected Bhante Ñāṇavīra's wish that his *Notes on Dhamma* be published, but he did not want to be involved with worldly matters. He enjoyed reading Bhante Ñāṇavīra's writings and some of the books on existentialism that were shelved in the *kuṭī*. He even compared Heidegger's book *Sein und Zeit* written in German to an English translation of it, noting several corrections to the translation in its margins. Still, after five years Bhante Ñāṇadīpa sent away all the books in the *kuṭī* that had nothing directly to do with Dhamma. "They were a disturbance for me," he explained. He realized that he could not just enjoy reading and studying books. He had to put all that he had learned into practice. "Only direct knowledge can reveal the truth," he said. "There is no easy way. You have to go through it the hard way. You cannot be afraid of *dukkha*. You have to see suffering. Then you can become a *sotāpanna*."[3]

Seclusion was difficult for Bhante Ñāṇadīpa at first but from this time onward it became the heart of his practice. He would later say that he was not happy, perhaps "occasionally even depressed." Learning to accept seclusion was difficult because even after several years in Būndala

3. A *sotāpanna* is someone who has awakened to the Dhamma and crossed over doubt – the first of four states of awakening.

Bhante found it hard to be alone without a living mentor or guide. He initially enjoyed an occasional visitor and did not mind conversations, but after some time he noticed that he was happier when nobody came to visit him. The visits of others, he learned, were an obstruction.

He said that it would have been challenging to start with seclusion if he had had no library in the *kuṭī*. He probably could not have made it without those books. What helped him also was to remain in the forest, and make an effort at practising Dhamma. He took the Buddha as his teacher, and he established a firm determination to base his life on the Dhamma. He limited his amount of sleep and spent his mornings studying, and his afternoons roaming in the forest and on the coast, which became a pattern of practice for the rest of his life. He also copied the entire *Sutta-nipāta* into his notebooks and started to memorize it in Pāli.

A second burden Bhante had to deal with was anger. It was becoming more and more evident that his conceit was causing him much pain. He found that the practice of contemplation of the mind, *cittānupassanā*, worked for him – watching the mind and not getting caught up with emotions such as loneliness.

Another practice he began was to fast one day per week, but this training was not so much about food. Instead it was a way to limit human contact, providing an opportunity to deepen his practice of *suññatā-saññā* (perception of emptiness). In this way he could manage to spend almost forty-eight hours "empty" of "being with others." Both *araññā-saññā* (perception of forest) and *suññatā-saññā*, mentioned in *Majjhima Nikāya* 121, came to play a significant role in Bhante's practice of Dhamma. *Araññā-saññā* means developing and maintaining the peaceful and undisturbed mind of one living a contemplative life in the forest. It implies being able to hold those qualities of mind in place even amid the distractions of village activity, with the mind "empty" of the regular disturbances village life tends to provoke.

VENERABLE ÑĀṆAVĪRA THERA

Bhante Ñāṇavīra's writings had a significant influence on Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's early growth in Dhamma. Even in later times, one can still recognize their impact on the development of his understanding. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa felt that without help from a teacher such as Bhante Ñāṇavīra

he would have stumbled too long in darkness. It is just too easy to read Suttas and start seeking logical connections between discourses and overly rationalize them. Bhante Ñāṇavīra's main message concerned how to *contemplate* the Buddha's teaching, so one does not get lost in abstractions and then miss the main problem.

Later in his life, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa described himself as "an early follower of Bhante Ñāṇavīra" who had followed those teachings for a relatively long time and "still had gratitude for him." Some of his interpretations of certain aspects of Bhante Ñāṇavīra's understanding of Dhamma changed in later times, as will be discussed in the chapter "Bhāvanā." However, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa always trusted Bhante Ñāṇavīra's claim, stating "I have no doubts about Bhante Ñāṇavīra's attainments." Although he never found a living teacher, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa had found his guidance, and he continued to encourage monks who showed interest to read *Notes on Dhamma*.

THE SNAKE

As mentioned above, Būndala is full of physical dangers; it is impossible to live there and be oblivious to them. There are elephants (which can walk right up to the *kuṭī* at any time), tarantulas and deadly snakes. Living in such an environment, one must always be alert which kindles a basic kind of mindfulness.

During Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's time in Būndala, there was one incident when he faced death, eye to eye. One late afternoon he was sitting in the shade of a tree south of the *kuṭī*, not too far from the coast. While he was sitting on the sandy ground, he heard a Russel's viper hissing behind his back. He looked behind him and there it was! It was not long since the same kind of snake had killed Bhante Ñāṇasumana. He realized that a bird, which was also nearby, was probably after the snake, but knew that it was now too late to move and that he had to sit still and wait for the snake to go away. But instead of leaving, the viper decided to crawl into Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's lap, where it stayed for half an hour! Bhante's only option was to control himself and not allow his concern to turn into fear. While he was sitting as still as possible, the snake remained still as well. But when it started to hiss again, even louder than before, Bhante's calm was interrupted. It seemed that when he moved his head slightly to check

on the bird, the snake would become even more agitated. Now Bhante's fear was near maximum and he realized he had to keep absolutely still. The snake began to crawl along Bhante's body, reaching his head and touching his mouth, and only when it reached his eyes did he close them. The snake continued onto his shoulders and around his body but when it finally left him, he knew that it is possible to conquer one's fears with great determination. Later in his monastic life Bhante often encouraged young monks to live in the forest and face their fears and other mental defilements. Such challenges are sometimes necessary.

During his time in Būndala Bhante also contracted malaria for the first time. Symptoms experienced by one suffering this disease include vomiting and diarrhoea, shivering, fever, headache, nausea, severe muscle pain, and fatigue. When Bhante became ill with it, supporters took him for treatment and, in his absence, sprayed the *kuṭī*. But this would not be his last bout of malaria, for he never used mosquito nets and joked that he would only use nets if he had a blood deficiency. When away from the *kuṭī* for treatment, he asked the villagers to rebuild the wall which had previously been removed, and to add a door to the west wall. For even though he had few possessions, there were still books, manuscripts, and Bhante Ñāṇavīra's original papers which he wished to protect.

THE BREAK

Bhante took a break from Būndala in 1975. He walked to a forest monastery in Kalugala, located in the Central Province of Sri Lanka.

The monk who moved into the *kuṭī,* during Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's absence, was named Bhante Samita, an American *sāmaṇera* born in 1942. He had come to Sri Lanka in 1970 and ordained in July of that year, then disrobed in August 1973, re-ordaining that same year in October. Bhante Samita was known as a monk who had difficulty staying in one place for very long. He was introduced to Bhante Ñāṇavīra's writings by Mr. Wettimuny, one of Bhante Ñāṇavīra's followers. He became a friend of Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's, and when Bhante Ñāṇadīpa returned to Būndala, Bhante Samita had to vacate the *kuṭī*. He did this for two reasons: firstly, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa had been the previous occupant, and secondly, it is appropriate for a novice monk to give priority to a fully ordained monk in such situations.

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa remembers Bhante Samita as "an extraordinary individual." He had a great thirst for Nibbāna and is remembered as saying "I would be willing to go through hell if only I could go to Nibbāna as quickly as possible." He practised with a do-or-die effort. For him, austere practice was the only way not to get complacent and indulge his strong inclinations towards sensuality, which was his greatest fear. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa thought that Bhante Samita believed himself to be a *sotāpanna*. But for Bhante Samita, there was no acceptance of any remaining suffering due to ignorance. He aimed only for final Nibbāna. He knew that suicide was not a way out of suffering, and preferred to practise in line with the Dhamma, even if that entailed serious hardship. He would rather die than revert to worldly indulgences. There was no room in him for dishonesty, though perhaps there was a lack of balance in his approach.

Bhante Samita practised in his austere fashion until he suddenly went missing in 1975. He had left Būndala and walked east towards Yala National Park. Three weeks after his disappearance a skeleton was found in the jungle, thirty meters from a cave, in the vicinity of the Park. It was reasonable to conclude that the remains belonged to Bhante Samita. It is suspected that he had died of an overdose of sleeping pills. The body had already been eaten by wild animals when it was discovered. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa subsequently identified the skeleton as Bhante Samita's by the peculiar shape of the skull. He also ordered that it be preserved and used as a meditation object in the Maharagama Bhikkhu Training Centre, near Colombo.

Reflecting on his friend's death, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, in one of his letters, recalled a powerful verse from the *Godattattheragāthā Sutta* (Thag 14:2.12):

Jīvitañca adhammena,	There's life without principles,
dhammena maraṇañca yaṃ;	And there's death with principles.
Maraṇaṃ dhammikaṃ seyyo,	Death with principles is better
yañce jīve adhammikaṃ.	Than life without principles.

Because of the tragic deaths of the Venerables Ñāṇavīra, Ñāṇasumana and Samita, the Būndala *kuṭi* became known as the "Death *kuṭi*." It remains a challenging place to live in, a very remote *kuṭi* in the jungle. However it is still popular among monks with an ascetic inclination, though none of its later inhabitants have managed to stay there for as long as Bhante Ñāṇavīra or Bhante Ñāṇadīpa.

THAILAND

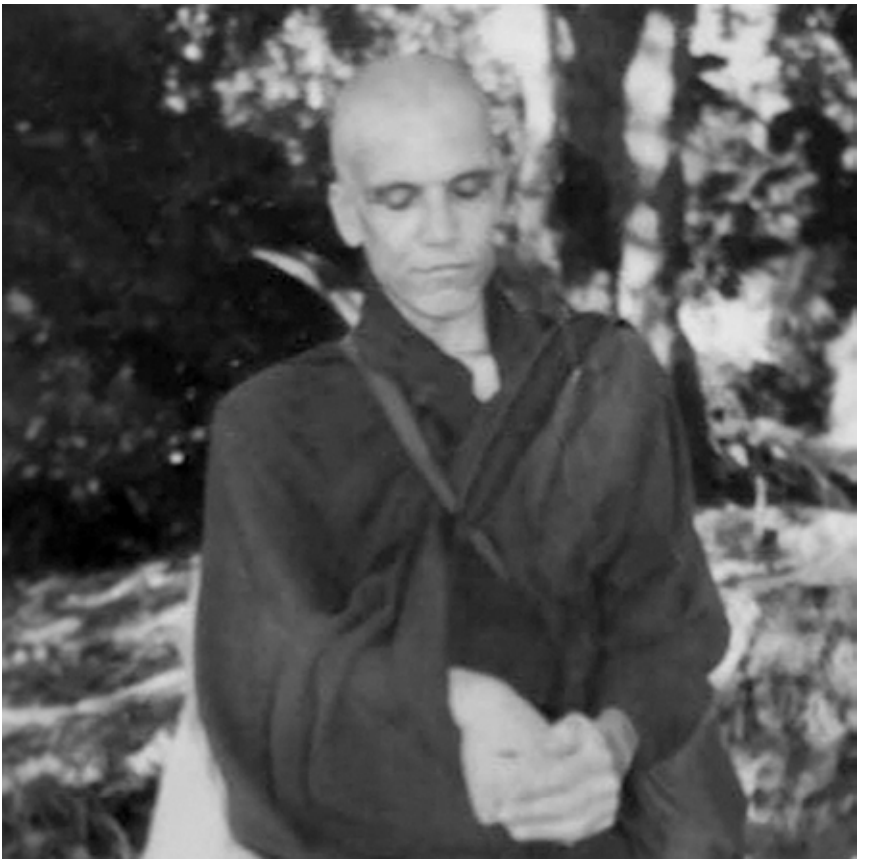
After eight years in Būndala, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was considering going to Thailand, a country known for its monastic forest tradition. Sri Lanka is small, Thailand is large – surely there must be virgin forests there and opportunities to practise in seclusion. He also wanted to visit the forest monasteries he had heard of and see the lifestyles of venerated disciples of Ajahn Mun, a renowned forest monk. Bhante greatly admired Ajahn Mun and the choices he had made as a monk in his quest for liberation. Maybe in Thailand he could discover something about forest practice he had not yet learned.

So in 1978 he went to Thailand. He liked the country; people were very respectful and supportive. He got along well with many of the monks he met, but was soon disappointed to find that Thailand was no longer the forested country he had hoped for. The countryside, once a lush jungle, had been mostly deforested, with only small patches of forest left here and there. So Bhante ended up staying in Thailand for only one year.

He arrived at Wat Bowonniwet Vihara in Bangkok in February of 1978. Wat Bowon, as it is generally called, is a large temple and the seat of the Dhamayutta monastic sect of Thailand. It was a long two storied building under the control of Somdet Ñāṇasaṃvara, the abbot of the temple and later Patriarch of the Thai Bhikkhu Saṅgha (the *Saṅgharāja*). Several foreign monks resided there in those days where they were very fortunate to be independent. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was remembered as sincere, earnest in his practice, and quite learned in the Suttas.

One of the first things Bhante did after arriving at the temple was to go to the English section of its main library. There he borrowed A. K. Warder's book, *Pāli Metre: A Contribution to the History of Indian Literature*. This was a book that was not available to Bhante in Sri Lanka. It would become one of the most useful books to him in his efforts to sharpen his knowledge of Pāli and the *gāthās* (verses), which he would come to love.

While in Thailand, Bhante visited several forest monasteries, including Wat Pah Pong and Wat Pah Nanachat, both in the north-east of the country. He arrived at Wat Pah Pong just as a new Uposatha Hall was being built, so he encountered much activity. Monks were busy carrying materials around and pouring concrete. He also had a short encounter with the abbot, Ajahn Chah, on the temple grounds. Bhante observed him sweeping leaves but thought Ajahn Chah's demeanour was a bit careless.



Unbeknownst to Bhante however, Ajahn Chah noticed his judgemental look and continued sweeping in an even more disorderly fashion. Unfortunately Bhante took Ajahn Chah's lesson a bit too personally and soon left Wat Pah Pong, unimpressed. Years later however, after he had learned more about Ajahn Chah, Bhante developed great respect for him.

Wat Pah Nanachat, a branch monastery of Wat Pah Pong, is an international forest monastery where English-speaking monks undergo training in the Thai Forest Tradition. The lifestyle emphasizes a fair amount of physical work and regular group meetings, as well as a strict and precise formal etiquette. When Bhante visited Wat Pah Nanachat, he felt this was not his cup of tea, since he valued his independence more than anything else, and life in a tightly organized community did not appeal to him. After a short period he decided to leave.

Visiting and living in Thai monasteries, Bhante quickly realized that he would not be happy there. In addition, he was already accustomed to different practices. For instance, after *piṇḍapāta,* Bhante would divide his food into two portions to be eaten at different times. He had the habit of eating rice and curries after *piṇḍapāta* and keeping fruit and sweets for later. This was something that monks in Thailand, who emphasized eating one meal at a single sitting, would surely find strange.

During his year travelling in Thailand, Bhante also visited Chom Tong District, in the southern part of Chiang Mai Province in northern Thailand. There he stayed in a forest monastery, Wat Phrathat, for about half a year. The abbot was a Thai monk, Ajahn Vimalo, who had been a *bhikkhu* two or three years longer than Bhante. Yet, even though Ajahn Vimalo spoke English and Bhante could live in solitude there, he felt that he was not ready to adapt to Thai culture and learn yet another language. By now Bhante could speak French, Danish, German, English, Sinhala, Pāli, Tibetan, and basic Latin. He was not interested in adding another language to this list. Also, Bhante was not satisfied with the standard of Vinaya maintained at Wat Phrathat.

Thus, though he had now found an excellent place to practise in a Thai forest, Bhante realized that it would be hard to maintain his independence in Thailand. Freedom was what he valued most. So, at the invitation of three lay supporters, he returned to Sri Lanka, a country familiar to him, where he could try to find a suitable wild and natural environment for practice.

NATIONAL PARKS

In 1979, back in Sri Lanka, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa had several options for places to stay offered to him by two of his supporters, who were familiar with Venerable Ñāṇavīra's teachings. He checked the properties himself, and accepted Mr. Dudley Fernando's offer of a *kuṭī*. Mr. Fernando was a chartered accountant, and they had got to know each other since Fernando had also been a student of Bhante Ñāṇavīra's teachings. The *kuṭī* was located on a stunning rubber estate in the Western Province, near Bulathsinhala, next to the river Kuda Ganga. Mr. Fernando, himself a very dedicated meditator, was very supportive, and later became a close supporter of Meetirigala Monastery. Bhante stayed in Bulathsinhala for a year.

As usual Bhante followed his regular *piṇḍapāta* practice and took many long walks in the nearby forests, sometimes for hours. He also took a few long walks to Kalugala, an area known for its ancient cave monastery, which at that time was one of the better *araññas*. This was in the Kaluttara district, a little south of Agalawatte, around ninety kilometres one way. And, while passing through the virgin forests, he would stop, meditate, and bathe. He would stay at Kalugala for three or four days, and then walk back to Bulathsinhala.

Bhante would walk through forests and paddy fields, sleeping wherever he could find shelter, and seek alms in villages and towns. On one occasion, when the night was approaching, he met three young men in a paddy field next to a hut. Bhante went up to them to see if they could direct him to a hut or some other refuge for the night. But he soon realized that doing so might have been a mistake. The men were overly friendly, pressing him into excessive conversation, and wished to hold him there till the next day so that they could offer him his meal. This was not to Bhante's liking, so when the three men retired for the night, he quietly escaped from the hut. Soon realizing that their new monk friend had left, and wondering what had happened, the three started searching for him, which Bhante observed – from behind a tree!

Now he started wandering further from his *kuṭī* at Bulathsinhala, deeper and deeper into wilder places, and soon discovered a truly magnificent wilderness, something he did not know existed in Sri Lanka. This was something he was looking for. It was the right place: extensive forests nearby, with caves, streams, and rivers. There he found an open rock cave, apparently carved out by humans. He decided to move there in 1980 and stayed for seven months.

It was Bhante's first experience of living in a cave. He had developed a great liking for life in deep jungles where humans usually feared to go, as this provided seclusion and a great sense of "emptiness" concerning social interactions. He realized that it is possible to live even more independently and without relying on a leading supporter.

Sometime later he learned that his cave was situated in part of an enormous area called Singaraja, which means "the Lion King" – a name that greatly impressed Bhante. Singaraja was formed during the Jurassic era (200 to 145 million years ago). The forest encompasses an area of 36,000 hectares. Today the reserve is only twenty-one kilometres from east to west and a maximum of seven kilometres from north to south.

Sinharaja

It is one of the densest tropical rainforests in Asia with rich varieties of trees, insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals. Leopards, wild boar and deer can all be found there.

When Bhante was walking from Kalugala he would have come to an area of Sinharaja where logging was allowed. He followed the logging paths and eventually got to Pitakale ("back of the forest"), probably following a river. There were no logging paths near the Pitakale *kuṭī,* which was about a thirty minute walk up the river from Pitakale village, just outside the protected area. Today tourist guides proudly mention that Bhante stayed there. The villagers built the simple *kuṭī* in 1981, accessible from a track used by loggers. It was built with mud, had only three walls, and faced the river. The *kuṭī*'s roof was made from leaves, woven together in a traditional tight pattern.

The area was thick with vegetation, and damp, and cracks in the skin under and between one's toes could become a real problem, much to the delight of leeches. But Bhante enjoyed Sinharaja's spectacular natural environment and his walks on *piṇḍapāta*, often as long as three kilometres through the forest to reach a village. He stayed there for a year and a half, before leaving the *kuṭī* to future explorers of Sinharaja.

Bhante walked along the river to Petiyakanda, a village of some twenty houses near Wedagala. In that area the terrain is very hilly; there were

only walking paths through the thick forest, with a few scattered houses. The river also passes through Petiyakanda. In that area he found an overhang, like a tunnel going into the side of the hill above the river, around ten metres deep. Bhante found the Petiyakanda "cave" by himself: he was walking along the river and looked up and saw this black hole going into the side of the hill covered with trees and vegetation. He had stayed there only a few months when he was visited by a young monk. It seems that this monk also had a liking for the cave where Bhante was staying. Well aware that it is dangerous to become attached to any one place, Bhante eventually decided to offer the cave to the young monk and moved on.

In 1983 he discovered a very steep mountain near an empty Wattugala village temple on the western side of Sinharaja. The temple had a Buddha statue and open mud buildings with thatched roofs where the villagers would observe their weekly *poya* days. It was perhaps a half hour's walk from the village through dense patches of forest. He stayed under a large overhang which gave shelter from the rain. A large banyan tree on top of the overhang had fallen down onto the lower forest, creating a large clear area in front of the overhang. The view from this spot was outstanding, with a wide view of virgin forest for miles. Bhante slept on a platform made from branches which he covered over with bark, and spent the *vassa* there. However, a village monk came along and decided to change the local arrangements for *piṇḍapāta,* and Bhante was not happy about that. He felt the changes put unnecessary pressure on his independence. In addition, he felt that the new arrangements were too demanding for the local village. He therefore decided to leave after the *vassa.*

Bhante then moved on to another region of Sri Lanka, to the Wilpattu National Park, located in the lowland, a dry and very hot zone of the north-western coastal region of the island. A unique feature of this park is the existence of "Willus," which are sand-rimmed water basins or depressions full of rainwater. Wilpattu is the largest and one of the oldest national parks in Sri Lanka and is renowned for its leopards.

Bhante hoped he could have a *kuṭī* built in the park but permission was denied, so the local villagers constructed a very basic hut for him just outside the borders of the park. The *kuṭī* was simple, just made of branches and leaves. The area was rough and the *kuṭī* very primitive, with no water nearby, and faithful villagers had to bring water on a daily basis. Even so, they rarely saw him. Bhante would spend his days in the national park, usually in caves, isolating himself from others, only to return to his *kuṭī*

Wilpattu National Park

just before nightfall. As it turned out, his time at Wilpattu had to be cut short, for after seven months he came down with amoebiasis and had to leave for treatment in Colombo. It seems that Bhante was drinking water from the wilderness.

In Colombo he stayed for a time at Vajirārāma Vihara. This is a well known monastery in which many illustrious monks such as Vens. Nārada, Paññāsīha, Piyadassi, Metteya, Rāhula, Soma, Kheminda, Kassapa and others had lived. Also, Bhante Ñāṇavīra occasionally visited it in 1960s when health required.

After his recovery Bhante was invited to visit Būndala again to see the *kuṭī* he had lived in several years earlier, and to greet the villagers who had supported him during his time there. From Būndala he walked to Bibile and then to an area near Mahiyangana, on the eastern edge of the central highlands, where many of the indigenous people of Sri Lanka, called Veddas, live. But, because he received insufficient support, he decided to head north, towards another National Park, known as Wasgamuwa. The region to the south-west of the southern boundary of this park is called Laggala, and it was there that Bhante would remain for the next twenty years. He would move from place to place in that area and establish several *kuṭīs*, attracting other *bhikkhu*s, inspired by

his example, to seek seclusion in the forest. And this eventually developed into a loosely organized network of hermit monks now known as the Laggala Saṅgha.

V

Laggala

(The Community of Hermits)

GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY OF LAGGALA

Wasgamuwa is a large national park in the dry zone of Sri Lanka, south of the ancient city of Polonnaruwa and north-east of the Knuckles mountain range of the central highlands. It was originally established during the British time as a "strict nature reserve" – the strictest category of national parks – one of only four in Sri Lanka.

After independence, wildlife officers did not go there until the early seventies. Prior to this, local people engaged in slash and burn cultivation (a traditional agricultural practice called *chena*[1]), as well as rice farming, in the park. When Bhante Ñāṇadīpa crossed over the Mahaweli river in 1984, he was not allowed to enter the park, and was advised to go to the Himbiliyakada area, about five kilometres south, where there was good forest without any restrictions. That forest was adjacent, and much of it is now part of the national park.

Since it had become impossible for Bhante Ñāṇadīpa to remain in Wasgamuwa, he continued his wandering to the south-west, towards the heavily forested foothills of the central mountains, and entered the region commonly referred to as "Laggala." There he had reached the northern edge of the Sri Lankan 'wet zone,' an area extending from the highland hills and mountains of the centre of the island, south-west to the wet tropical rain forests and hills of the Sinharaja and Yagirala forest reserves, and on to the coastal lowlands.

Laggala lies within the Matale district of the Central Province, at the northern edge of this vast wet zone. With regard to precipitation it actually lies within an area considered intermediate between the dry zone of the north and east, and the wetter zones of the higher mountains

1. *Chenas* are rain-flooded fields where vegetables, greens, grains and cereals were cultivated.

and lowland rainforests further south. The district receives on average over two metres of rain per year, mostly during the north-eastern monsoon. This brings moist air from the Bay of Bengal in a south-westerly direction across the island from October through January. The climate is drier at other times of the year and is distinctly seasonal. Water from the monsoon rains drains into rivulets and streams which eventually empty into four large rivers (the Hing Ganga, Kalu Ganga, Telgamuwa Ganga and Puwakpitiya Ganga), which in turn join the Mahaweli Ganga. What is known loosely as "Laggala" is actually an area consisting of two adjacent sub-districts: Laggala proper and Wilgamuwa. It is bounded by the Matale hills in the west, the Kandy hills in the south, the Mahaweli river in the east, and the Wasgamuwa National Park in the north.

Before the first asphalt roads were constructed in the region in the early and late nineties there were only rutted and dusty gravel roads. And because there are only limited ways to approach this area even now, it has retained its remoteness. The forested foothills of the region tend to run north to south. Villages were connected by walking paths maintained by village councils, paths which elephants would also use. The people of Laggala mainly subsisted on *chena* cultivation, as well as on hunting in the forest. Hunting was to provide meat for personal use, as well as for relatives in the village. Villagers mainly grew *kurrakan* (finger millet) and Indian maize in the *chena*. Certain forest products such as *bing khomba* (a kind of herb) and honey were sold in neighbouring towns for essentials such as salt. Rice cultivation was promoted by the government in the sixties and seventies, and there was no major agricultural development by the British in Laggala apart from some small tea estates in the higher hills. The forest is evergreen monsoon forest with tall riverine forest along the rivers, providing habitat for many species belonging to the wet zone further south. Within these forests lived elephants, leopards, sambhar deer and pythons, and by all accounts the terrain provoked, and still does today, the impression of a pristine, if not virgin, wilderness.

The villages of Laggala, some comprising as many as forty houses, but many consisting of only a few houses accommodating extended families, were generally located in valleys where some paddy and garden cultivation was practised. They were populated mostly by people whose families had lived in the area for generations; few outsiders, apart from some gem miners, had moved in. Thus, there were strong kinship connections throughout the region, resulting in a sort of strong social cohesion – the

Iriyasopotha

sense of a huge family social structure in which most people had relatives in distant villages, and everyone knew everyone else.

So, it was there in 1984 that Bhante Ñāṇadīpa discovered what were the best conditions for him to practise the form of forest training he had been hoping to establish for himself. He had lost his way while wandering from Wasgamuwa and found himself in the vicinity of the village of Iriyagasulpotha, the next village south of Himbiliyakada, and decided to remain there.

THE HERMIT

The greatest attraction Laggala afforded Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was the opportunity to practise *solitude* in close connection with *nature*. And it was for this reason that he would live in small, simple *kuṭīs*, constructed with just three walls for shelter from the elements. Living in such dwellings meant that he remained in permanent, intimate contact with the surrounding forest – the insects, reptiles and other animals having as much access to his dwellings as did the forest breeze. Large animals, too, would sometimes be discovered inspecting these remote, doorless *kuṭīs* and their attached walking paths with apparent curiosity. Elephants might approach *kuṭīs* searching for food or, if irritated by a human presence, seek to damage such dwellings when unoccupied.

Initially, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was perhaps more of a curiosity than an inspiring ascetic to the villagers he encountered when he arrived in Laggala. Speaking only very basic Sinhala early in his time there, he could not communicate fluently with them, and the sight of this foreign monk (an astonishing sight in such a remote place) wearing unusually dark-coloured robes, coupled with his efforts to maintain a significant distance from the villages, aroused some suspicion of his motives and intentions. Could he be some kind of spy, an agent of separatists or revolutionaries? Curiosity increased and some people were determined to know more about Bhante's purpose in their neighbourhood, and so they visited him and closely observed his manner of living. One person even attempted to test his knowledge of Buddhist chants, thinking he might be an imposter. But such suspicions were rarely expressed by the villagers of Laggala or surrounding areas, and Bhante was very quickly accepted and appreciated as a sincere and diligent forest monk.

Once, several years after he had first come to Laggala, and while staying by the Mahaweli Ganga near the Wasgamuwas park, some people from outside Laggala even thought that Bhante was the missing Osama bin Laden! Around that time bin Laden was the most wanted person in the world, and here was a white man, unshaven, limping in the wilderness – perhaps injured! On another occasion another rumour spread, and a few people feared that he might be a member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) – basically a terrorist – and the police were called. One adult village novice monk, along with two young men and policemen, crossed the Mahaweli River and approached Bhante. They immediately confiscated his bag and asked him where his pistol was. Bhante of course replied that he did not have a pistol. Then the novice monk challenged Bhante's knowledge of Dhamma and asked him to recite the five precepts – but Bhante began to chant the 227 rules of the *pātimokkha*! Though the novice kept trying to challenge him, the police quickly concluded that

Bhante was a true Buddhist monk living an austere and simple life: the life of an authentic forest *bhikkhu*.

Recently, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was asked by a fellow monk, who was thinking of going to Laggala, how to deal with the unlikely event of people showing distrust or even aggression. Bhante gave a simple and straightforward response: "Follow the Buddha's Teachings and do not reciprocate." Suspicious villagers would sometimes even spy on monks, as happened to Bhante, just to see if they sat in meditation.

Indeed, a *bhikkhu* such as Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was something the villagers had rarely, if ever, encountered and for many the presence of such a monk – a foreigner to boot! – seemed almost unbelievable. But their suspicions quickly allayed soon after his arrival, and they almost immediately developed an appreciation and deep respect for his presence and example. So much that when Bhante Ñāṇadīpa requested that they construct a small *kuṭī* for him, they readily agreed. This was the first *kuṭī* of the Laggala Forest Saṅgha, built near the village of Iriyagasulpotha, and it remained Bhante's favourite for many years.

BUILDING *KUṬĪS*

When Bhante Ñāṇadīpa first arrived in Iriyagasulpotha it was a rainy day. The village is located in dense forest with trees among the houses – a true jungle village. Bhante was immediately invited inside one of the houses. Already, at that moment some villagers showed a sincere kindness and faith towards this foreign monk. They wanted him to stay and invited him to use their house. But Bhante had to refuse, not just because of his desire for seclusion, but also because the monastic code (*vinaya*) forbids monks from sleeping in close proximity to women, and there was a wife and daughters living there. Bhante asked about caves in the jungle where he might stay; he would be more than satisfied with such a dwelling. But unfortunately, there were no caves nearby, the villager said. After some thought the man said: "What about a *kuṭī*? We can build it for you, Bhante!" "All right," Bhante Ñāṇadīpa agreed. "But can you make it in three weeks?" "Of course, Bhante," the villagers agreed. Bhante gave them simple instructions: it was to be a mud *kuṭī*, with three walls and a roof made with coconut branches or *iluk* (a variety of grass similar to cogon grass).

Before the *kuṭī* was built Bhante Ñāṇadīpa stayed in a kind of cow shelter. He slept there, and explored the forest during the day in order to find a suitable place for his dwelling. He soon found a nice area on the slope of a mountain, a few kilometres from the village. It was not too far to go on *piṇḍapāta* and water was available. It looked like a perfect place. Then Bhante left for two or three weeks while the villagers constructed the *kuṭī*. However, when he returned to the village, the *kuṭī* was not yet finished. There were some external conditions that prevented the villagers from finishing the work, but they were soon able to speed up construction so that Bhante could move in even though the walls were still wet.[2]

The local villagers quickly understood Bhante's purpose to live as a forest monk and made no demands of him. They rarely made requests that he preach or conduct ceremonies, learning quickly that such requests would be declined, and wanted little from him other than that he accept from them the alms and other material supports he needed, and that he live a holy life. With confidence in his maturity and skill, they also had little concern for his safety living alone in the forest, and eventually came to think of him as 'their' monk, part of the wider social community of Laggala.

The simple *kuṭī* built by the villagers for Bhante, and those built in later years, were generally made of very basic materials such as beams from small tree trunks bound together by strong forest vines, mud walls with mud packed together with branches to provide support, a thatched roof of *iluk* grass, and a dirt floor finished with cow or buffalo dung. And because of their practice of *chena* cultivation (which required that they leave their permanent dwellings and move into the forest for several months at a time), villagers were very skilled at quickly constructing these sorts of dwellings.

Kuṭīs would start as temporary structures which Bhante Ñāṇadīpa would use for a few weeks or months, testing out their locations to make sure they were suitable for practice. Generally, he would stay in a new *kuṭī* during the *vassa,* before moving on to new areas as he explored the wider region of Laggala. If the *kuṭī* did in fact prove suitable for extend-

2. This *kuṭī* does not exist anymore, but one can still see some remains of the foundation. A new *kuṭī* was built much higher up, next to a stream, and later one more *kuṭī* was built another five minutes further up. That *kuṭī* became one of Bhante's favourites, and he regularly visited it. Saṅgha meetings were often held there.

ed use, it might be reinforced later by villagers so that it could become a more permanent dwelling, to be used intermittently by Bhante or the other monks who would eventually find their way to Laggala. (If it was not suitable, it would be left to disintegrate into the jungle.)

Usually located from thirty minutes to one hour's walk from a village, these *kuṭīs* were often situated in a small valley behind some hills, and were therefore well secluded from the noise or other possible disturbances of human activity. They were also generally located near streams or springs or even waterfalls, which provided a ready supply of water for drinking and washing. In addition, adjacent to the *kuṭī* a walking path would be built, fifteen to twenty meters in length, to be used for meditation.

The use of simple materials in the construction of these *kuṭīs* was considered to be an advantage by Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, for it served to reinforce an awareness of their lack of permanence, and it discouraged the pursuit of or the attachment to physical security and comfort. With only a bed made from wooden boards or the bark of trees, and perhaps a chair, a small table and a simple wooden shelf, these huts provided the barest of shelter – but excellent support for the practice of a forest monk. And Bhante's preference was to stay in any of these *kuṭīs* for only a short time, regardless of whether the kuti was 'temporary' or 'permanent,' avoiding attachment to any one place, thus emphasizing his standing as one who had 'gone from the home life into homelessness.'

In this way, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa had established in Laggala, within a short time of his arrival, the conditions supportive of the forest monastic lifestyle he wished to pursue: a reserved, though respectful, relationship with supporting villagers; a style of physical dwelling that reinforced an awareness of life's inherent insecurity, while avoiding excess comfort; and a pattern of itinerant and intimate engagement with the surrounding wilderness and the creatures that lived there. In this way, the forest became not just a backdrop or background for practice but rather an integral part of the practice itself.

This is an important aspect of forest practice – '*araññña-saññā*' as Bhante and the monks of Laggala called it: to become attuned to, and actually embedded within, nature and the forces which mould it. And in so doing, to become acutely sensitive to the qualities of life people generally strive to ignore or escape: its inherent uncertainty and instability. Immersion into a natural wilderness, in solitude, with attention and acceptance rather than resistance and conflict, enhances the capacity to discern the fundamental characteristics of nature.

Thus, Bhante's practice emphasized long solitary walks through the forest. On his long walks, often along paths used by elephants as well as people, he carried old topographical maps (some from British colonial times), and a compass, and eventually became familiar with vast stretches of the Laggala countryside. He said that he had to have a number of copies of old maps stitched together to be able to find certain routes. Often, he even had to combine two maps of the same area. The old maps had paths drawn accurately, but not the terrain. And the new maps had the terrain correctly drawn, but not the paths. Navigating Laggala was not so easy.

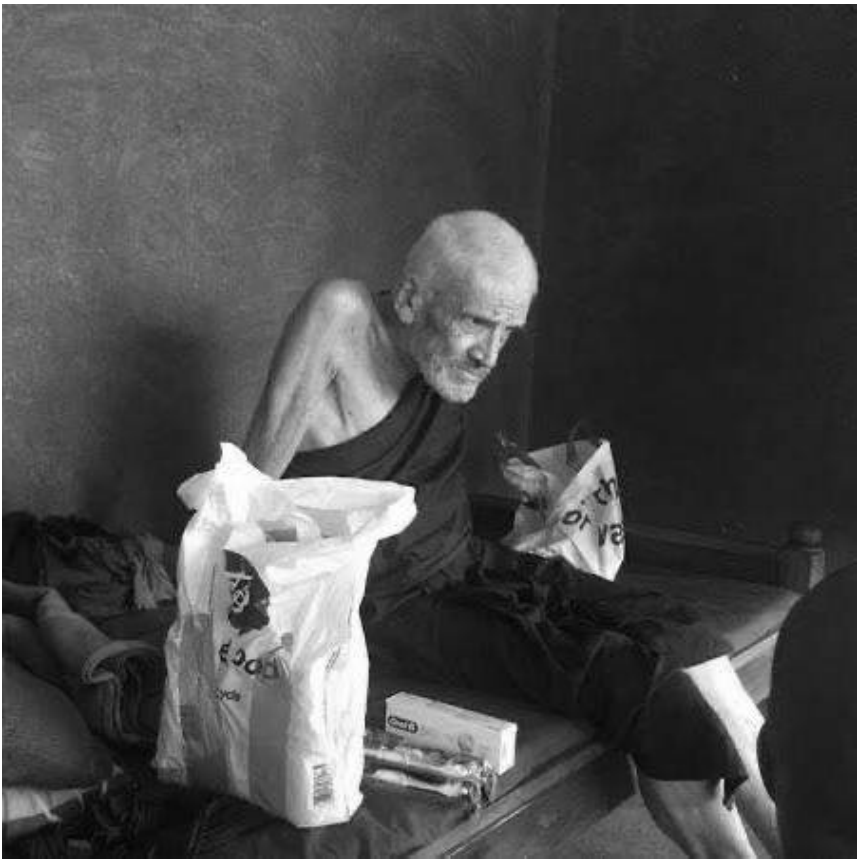
LIFE IN THE *KUṬĪS*

Early in his life as a monk Bhante Ñāṇadīpa had carried out an in-depth study of the Buddhist Suttas and the Pāli language, and he had developed a particular affinity for the *Sutta-nipāta* of the *Khuddaka Nikāya,* as well as the *Theragāthā,* the *Dhammapada* and the *Udāna*. The *Sutta-nipāta* is a large collection, mostly in verse, of many of the earliest discourses of the Buddha, many of which extol the virtues of the homeless wandering sage, detached from the world. He had copied out these verses into a notebook,

and even memorized more than 2500 of them, which he would recite and contemplate as he traversed the hills and forests.

Living in isolated *kuṭīs*, distant from human habitation, Bhante's practice of *piṇḍapāta* necessitated long daily walks. The organisation of the *piṇḍapāta* depended very much on which *kuṭī* he was staying in. Soon he developed various patterns of routes for alms round, visiting different villages on a predictable schedule so that villagers could expect him on particular days of the week or month. However, when staying near a remote village such as Galamudana, there would be no alternative *piṇḍapāta* routes possible and, a schedule not being necessary, Bhante could go unannounced. He also reserved for himself one day (or sometimes two) a week for fasting, foregoing alms round and thus human contact entirely, thereby enhancing his cherished isolation. And the villagers of Laggala understood and appreciated his commitment to undertake these long walks (sometimes up to three hours) for daily alms. Not interested in being a teacher, he did not preach or otherwise attempt to instruct laypeople, but he nevertheless made a deep impression on them through the simple power of his example and behaviour. One indication of this influence relates to the widespread practice among the villagers of hunting for food, as noted above. It had become general practice at the time of Bhante's arrival for men to hunt and trap animals in the forest for their own use. But within a year of his arrival this practice had diminished greatly, almost dying out in some villages – all through the influence of close contact with a monk living the teachings of the Buddha without pretension or pursuit of personal gain – a result of his example and moral authority. It was almost impossible to not be impressed by his way of life: his few possessions, his lack of interest in social interaction, his fearlessness while living so close to dangerous animals, and even his practice of simple yoga techniques, self-taught, in order to help maintain bodily health.

Living such a life of solitude and material simplicity in the forest one will certainly face many difficulties, both physical and mental. Among these are, unsurprisingly, the constant threats of biting insects and ticks together with the diseases some of them can transmit. Also, there is the constant danger of acquiring skin or blood infections resulting from inevitable cuts and bruises, which can be long-lasting and slow to heal in a tropical and seasonally very wet wilderness. Malaria was common in Laggala in the 1980s, as was amoebiasis, both potentially deadly if left untreated. And in addition to infections, dangerous encounters with poi-



sonous snakes and some of the larger animals sharing the forest were a constant possibility. Such encounters as well as other injuries could take place on long treks far from human habitation and help, and effective medical care for any of these problems could be difficult or almost impossible to get. In addition, the lack of control regarding one's food, both in nutritional quality and hygiene, could make it difficult to maintain health. Over the years, monks who have lived the forest life in Laggala have experienced all of these problems, some of them life-threatening. Bhante always carried with him basic medicines such as antiseptic cream and plasters, and so he rarely needed outside help.

Some forest monks have experienced psychological difficulties as well. This is not surprising considering the extreme break with normal living conditions such a life entails. Isolation, with little opportunity for the

distractions of social interaction or involvement in work and projects, throws one back onto oneself and repeatedly provokes a confrontation with one's own mind and the habitual mental patterns, good or bad, that have been established during one's earlier life. Without the close support and guidance of a teacher or mentor it may be difficult to break these patterns. The result can be a distorted obsession with one's own mind, a descent into loneliness and melancholy, self-doubt, and even hopelessness and depression. Whether these effects are temporary or long-lasting will largely depend on the practitioner's mental preparation for such an extreme practice: the maturity and balance, and even wisdom they bring to it.

SICKNESSES AND DYING

An illustration of the potentially catastrophic dangers monks living alone in the forest face can be found in the tragic experience of a young American monk, Venerable Kovida, who had come to Laggala a few years after Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's arrival. Bhante Kovida, like Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, had a strong affinity for solitary practice. He had ordained in 1979 at a young age and was immediately inclined to adopt an austere lifestyle of study and practice. Like Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, he was dissatisfied with monastery life, and travelled the island, living in remote locales. Eventually hearing about Laggala, a few years after Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's arrival there, he moved there in 1986, living mostly in Moragahaulpotha *kuṭī,* and there he contracted malaria. Then in 1987, at the suggestion of Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, he moved to Iriyagasulpotha *kuṭī*. He had previously developed respiratory problems and in 1989 became seriously ill with what he thought was a new bout of malaria. Weak, unable to digest food and taking medicine for malaria (which offered no help), he eventually allowed villagers to take him to the small hospital in Hettipola. But on the next day Bhante Kovida collapsed and died. It was later discovered that he had actually been suffering from pneumonia.

In Sri Lanka the public health system in rural areas is quite basic even today; and in the 1980s and 1990s it was even more so. For monks living in the forest, the unreliability of care and the difficulty in getting to a hospital from remote *kuṭīs*, on foot along jungle paths or rutted roads, encouraged them then, as it does today, to attempt treatment of minor (and

not so minor) illnesses and injuries on their own, or sometimes with the help of local traditional healers. This traditional medicine, called *Behet* or *Vedakam*, is a herbal-based system similar to Ayurveda, but considerably less sophisticated than the Ayurvedic or Western systems of medicine available in more populated areas. For very severe health conditions, requiring more serious interventions, villagers would be anxious to help monks receive care in a hospital. Sometimes, however, as in the case of Bhante Kovida, this could be extremely difficult to accomplish in time.

Of course, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was also subject to these sorts of threats to his health, and one of the more serious episodes he experienced occurred in 1990. While on a walk (*cārikā*) with a monk in a wilderness area near a small river called Paramana Oya, he developed a serious digestive illness which quickly led to dehydration, vomiting and extreme weakness. When he vomited, he also had diarrhoea, so Bhante removed his robes and spent the rest of the day lying naked on the ground, vomiting and excreting. Towards late afternoon Bhante felt well enough to go back to the village. The next day, he and his companion decided to return to their *kuṭīs*. On the way, Bhante again started vomiting and became very weak. Men from the Madumana village came and wheeled Bhante back to the village by bicycle, but Bhante was too week to make it to the *kuṭī*, so they spent the night in the forest. Bhante spent the next several days recovering at Madumana *kuṭī,* with a strong fever and with vomiting and bouts of extreme shaking. He thought that he had amoebiasis because of the diarrhoea, and medication for amoebiasis was obtained from the hospital. After some days Bhante was strong enough to go back to Iriyagusulpotha *kuṭī* but the sickness returned and Bhante became extremely weak, again with vomiting and diarrhoea. The villagers, remembering how Bhante Kovida had died after an incorrect diagnosis only three years before, became very concerned and hired a van to take Bhante to a hospital in Kandy, where his illness was found to be a case of malaria, which he had contracted in Wasgamuwa.

DEVELOPING SAṄGHA

By 1991 several *kuṭīs* had been built in Laggala with Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's direction, most named after their nearby villages, such as the Iriyagusulpotha, Madumana, Galamudana, Narangamuwa, Rambukkoluwa *kuṭīs*, and

the Nariyagallena *kuṭī* near Kiulawadiya. The *pansala* at Kiulawadiya was used for Saṅgha meetings. A *kuṭī* at Galamudana had been built in 1989 above a waterfall and another one was established near Madumana the same year, after villagers expressed the desire for a foreign monk whom they could support to live near them. These *kuṭīs* had almost always been established as temporary structures by Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, and were eventually made permanent after he had moved on (though he would often return to previously established *kuṭīs* for the *vassa*, particularly the ones at Iryagasulpota and Galamudana). By that time, several other monks, both foreign and Sinhalese, had become attracted to Laggala by the example of Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's practice, so reminiscent of the ways of the

elders at the time of the Buddha. And those who felt they had sufficient knowledge of Dhamma, as well as the discipline, fortitude and self-reliance to make good use of it, requested permission to live in the Laggala *kuṭīs*. Thus, seven years after his arrival, six permanent *kuṭīs* had been established in Laggala, accommodating four long-term forest monks – the result of an unplanned and undirected process of growth. Several more monks followed Bhante Ñāṇadīpa to Laggala throughout the years but few were really prepared to endure the physical and mental challenges of forest practice Many left after various durations of staying.

As the *kuṭīs* were situated quite far from villages, Laggala monks would generally leave for their alms rounds before 6:30 am. Villagers would prepare to offer food at around 7:00 am, as monks stopped at the individual houses in the village. However, if a monk's *kuṭī* was located very far away, *dāyakas,* following a roster system, would bring food to a meeting place in the forest (generally a simple shed) somewhere between the *kuṭī* and the village. The practice of *piṇḍapāta* therefore varied depending upon the location of *kuṭī*. Some *kuṭīs* were reliant on one village, while other *kuṭīs* had access to several villages. And food was never brought to a *kuṭī* unless the monk was sick, as this *piṇḍapāta* system was designed to protect the seclusion of the *kuṭī*. Lay people were only welcome at a *kuṭī* if there was work to be done. And most monks would have 'free' days when they would not go on a scheduled *piṇḍapāta* route. These free days might be for fasting (to provide for extra seclusion), or they might be used to walk to isolated villages which did not normally have access to monks. Unannounced *piṇḍapāta* was also an established practice in Laggala. Such a practice might be associated with several days of wandering or it might be done to make contact with a distant village in order to set up an appointment for an arranged *piṇḍapāta* on a particular day in the future. Some of these walks to distant villages for *piṇḍapāta* were 'cross country,' along elephant and forest paths. Regardless of the particular circumstances, *piṇḍapāta* was always seen as a kind of gift to the laypeople, undertaken out of compassion: making oneself available to individuals or to a village so that they had the opportunity to give and thereby acquire merit. Many of the more remote villages did not have access to monks, although there was always a *vihāra* in the village where a visiting monk could stay and where the more devout villagers would observe the Buddhist precepts on the *poya* observance days each month. Before 1994 (when *chena* cultivation was outlawed), villagers would prepare forest

locations for slash and burn at the end of the dry season, in expectation of the wet monsoon season which normally started in October. After planting their crops, they would live in nearby huts in order to look after them. Most houses back in the village would then be closed, entire families would live in the huts near the crops, and this would often mean that monks would go to the places of *chena* cultivation for *piṇḍapāta*.

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's good reputation was rapidly spreading well beyond Laggala. He was, in fact, sufficiently known and respected by people of authority in public life that he was only required to go to Colombo to renew his visa every six years. This had been arranged by the judge of the High Court, and was an unheard-of advantage for a foreign resident. But even this requirement was felt to be a burden, as it interfered with Bhante's hermitic lifestyle. Therefore in 1991, when he went to the capital to deal with his visa renewal, he arranged with the French embassy to renounce his citizenship in the hope that he would then be granted Sri Lankan citizenship by the President.[3] But acquiring Sri Lankan citizenship turned out to be impossible, and Bhante would thereafter live his life as a stateless resident of Sri Lanka – a very special and irregular status, permitted and maintained for him by high-level authorities in the Department of Immigration.

At that time, the small developing Saṅgha in Laggala was comprised of monks committed to living very simple and solitary lives. As a result, what little organization and formal structure developed with it was equally simple. With their emphasis on self-directed study and practice, monks had little actual interaction with one another and needed to meet formally as a Saṅgha only three times per year: on the full-moon in February (Māgha Pūjā or Navam Poya as they call it in Sri Lanka); at the new moon two weeks before the *vassa* (when they discussed where monks would stay in the upcoming year); and at the end of the *vassa* (Pavāraṇā). These meetings consisted of group recitation of the *pātimokkha*, the Buddhist monastic code of discipline (which Bhante Ñāṇadīpa could recite from memory – it had to be done from memory), as well as discussions about Dhamma (with Bhante in the centre) and practice, some of which would

3. The President can grant six citizenships per year. However, the President at that time, His Excellency Ranasinghe Premadasa, could not help Bhante, fearing that in the future he would be pressed to grant citizenship also to religious figures of other faiths.

go on throughout the night. Apart from these meetings, no set formulae for study or practice were prescribed and no formal teachings were presented, this serving to reinforce the important principle of self-reliance in the monks.

However, as a practical matter, seclusion could not be maintained completely unbroken. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa occasionally had to leave Laggala, usually going to Kandy and the Forest Hermitage there for minor medical care. Or he might occasionally leave Laggala, seeking enhanced seclusion for a period in the wilderness of nearby Wasgamuwa National Park.

At Wasgamuwa National Park, Bhante was well known among the wildlife officers and they respected him. Quite often they approached him when they wanted to know about the movements of elephants and other wildlife. Bhante even became a consultant for the Department of Wildlife Conservation. When planning to build a new road to access certain areas within the park, they asked Bhante for his advice. One such road is named the "Denmark Road," as a sign of gratitude for Bhante.

And it was while staying in Wasgamuwa in 1993 that Bhante's life as a forest monk nearly came to a sudden and violent end.

THE ELEPHANT STORY

Bhante periodically stayed in the Wasgamuwa National Park north-east of Laggala, and when he was there, he tried to stay as far inside the park as possible. In order to do so he acquired permission from park officials for nearby village *dāyaka*s to bring their *dāna* (food offerings) about two kilometres into the park to a meeting place where Bhante would receive his meal. And while in Wasgamuwa, he still maintained the practice of free days either for fasting or for unannounced *piṇḍapāta,* when he would slip under the park border fence at various places and go to houses for alms.

In those years, encounters with elephants were quite common during long walks in the forests, either on *piṇḍapāta* or while exploring a wilderness, and over time Bhante Ñāṇadīpa had developed an ability to 'read' the behaviour of elephants, to recognize their moods and immediate intentions. Proximity to humans could be disturbing and irritating to wild elephants, especially to lone males, and encountering them unexpectedly was potentially very dangerous. On that particular day (the 14th of April 1993 – the Sinhala New Year) in Wasgamuwa, while re-

turning to his *kuṭī* after *piṇḍapāta* along an elephant path, Bhante came upon a lone male elephant, which was feeding in a grassy patch by the path. Realizing that he could not walk past the elephant safely, Bhante calmly retreated along his path, but soon came across a small group of elephants, feeding off to the side, which then began to cross the path ahead of him. He waited for them to cross and then continued. As Bhante walked on, a bull elephant suddenly came out of the forest and charged. Bhante would usually stand his ground in the face of agitated elephants; he would move out of their way as they approached but he would not run from them. He would also recite *gāthā*s, verses of friendliness and *mettā* at such times in order to help soothe the animals' irritation and calm his own mind, and this is what he did now. But in this case the elephant did not run past him on the path, but rushed up to him. There was no room for the elephant to go past; they are big and take up the whole path. So it was a time for instinctive action – a wrong move could prove deadly. The elephant, now right in front of Bhante, reared up on its hind legs and boxed him in the face with one or both of his front feet, knocking him to the ground. Bhante suffered lacerations on his forehead and both wrists as he tried to protect his face. One front foot of the elephant then came down on Bhante's left inner thigh, between the hip and knee (but

missing the thigh bone), severely crushing and tearing the tissues of his thigh and penis. The pressure on the thigh was so great that the neck of the thigh bone was broken.

But the elephant apparently had no intention to kill Bhante, which it could easily have done by stomping on him. Rather, it calmed down immediately and simply left. In great pain and bleeding from the penis, Bhante realized how serious his condition was and tried to eat some of the fruit he had received on *piṇḍapāta*, as the heat at that time during the dry season was extreme and dehydration could be deadly (Wasgamuwa is in an extremely dry and hot area). But he quickly vomited what he had ingested. It seemed that his only hope was to get to an unpaved four-wheel drive jeep road a few kilometres away, where there was a small chance that he might be found. So, he started to drag himself along the path with his arms as best he could. This was exhausting, and the trail of blood he left on the path attracted ants which followed and attacked him. Sharp stones also hurt his hands. It felt as if the gravel was cutting into his skin, which was very painful. But he had to keep moving through most of the day. Finally, he found a shaded and cooler spot off the trail where the ants did not follow, and there he could rest. He could not sleep that night because of the pain and exhaustion. He lay there overnight, and was fortunately found the next morning by villagers who had suspected that something was wrong when Bhante did not arrive on his regular *piṇḍapāta* route for that day. The men offered their sarongs to be used as a stretcher, and they carried Bhante back to the park headquarters. Then they rushed him in a jeep to the small, primitive hospital at Hettipola where some first aid, but little more, could be administered. That hospital had no electricity or anaesthetics and, when the doctors had to cut skin and tissue from his raw wounds, they expected Bhante to cry out in pain, and they were amazed at his composure when he did not. From Hettipola he was taken to a hospital in Kandy by ambulance, with a Dutch novice monk in attendance, and there he had to wait more than a week for an operation to fix the broken leg with the insertion of a metal pin, and to have skin grafts made to repair some of the damage to the tissues of his groin. Because the orthopaedic surgeon set the leg at a wrong angle Bhante's left leg was now between one and two inches shorter than the right one. A few months later he was advised to have another operation to correct the leg problem but Bhante refused, as he did not want to spend more time recuperating.

In the hospital they also had to graft new skin taken from his buttocks onto his penis. The entire procedure, which involved the presence of many young female nurses, was very embarrassing for Bhante. He felt that the experience was worse than dying on the elephant trail, and later told monks that next time they should leave him in the forest to die.

After about three weeks at the Kandy hospital, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was able to leave. He continued his recovery for a time near Kandy with the support of some *dāyaka*s, and spent the *vassa* at Nissarana Monastery. He eventually walked back to Kandy, slowly and on his own (no more than five miles per day on back roads), and after further recuperation with the help of lay supporters, he felt he was fit enough to make his way to Laggala. One of his *dāyaka*s drove him as far as Corbet's Gap in the Knuckles mountains, and from there he walked north by stages to Iriyagasulpotha – the place of the first *kuṭī* he had established in Laggala many years before.

After the incident with the elephant, Bhante still wanted to return to Wasgamuwa. However, nobody was ever allowed to dwell in the National Park again.

FEARLESSLY BACK TO THE FOREST

By now, in 1993, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa had been in Laggala for nine years; he was forty-nine years old. His style of practice had changed little during that time, though it appears that he may have been emphasizing the use of the *gāthās* of the *Sutta-nipāta*, which he had memorized, more and more as objects of meditation and contemplation, particularly on his treks in the jungle. He apparently also continued to deepen his formal practice of *samādhi* meditation, at some point (perhaps around that time) succeeding in being able to establish a coloured *kasiṇa* object of concentration. His practice of *piṇḍapāta* continued as before, and of course he maintained his austere lifestyle: living in *kuṭīs* exposed to the forest and the elements, sleeping without a mosquito net, holding few possessions and rarely using lanterns at night to scare off wild animals. He would also often sleep out in the open in front of his *kuṭī* on a rock or boulder if one was present, ever closer to the natural world around him. But he had to reduce and adjust his practice of yoga after the injury. Also, he was no longer able to sit in a proper lotus position but had to use the Thai style of "*puppiep,*" with one leg bent in front and the other one to the side.

Laggala was changing during those years, slowly growing in prosperity. Material development was bringing improved roads and electricity to some areas of the region and, perhaps most importantly, more people interested in meeting Bhante Ñāṇadīpa and the small Laggala Saṅgha, and supporting them with material requisites. During those years, the Saṅgha was growing without limitations regarding a monk's nationality or tradition of monastic lineage. All that was required was the monk's commitment to the *pātimokkha* as the basis of practice, and an understanding of the spirit of *araññа-saññā*, the way of the forest *bhikkhu*. But the growth of the Saṅgha did inevitably bring with it some problems. Younger monks (and some older ones too) were sometimes unprepared for life as self-reliant mendicants, insufficiently versed in the Buddha's teaching, or insufficiently mature psychologically to face the rigours of the forest lifestyle. (In 2014, Saṅgha rules had to become more formalized in response to these problems, and younger monks were required to show written permission from their preceptors or teachers to go to Laggala.) Bhante Ñāṇadīpa also worried that the influence of non-local laypeople coming from as far away as Colombo to meet and offer support to the Saṅgha could potentially become troubling. Bhante felt that this trend tended to corrupt the relationship of the local community with the Laggala monks, as some villagers began to seek material gain from the influx of outsiders as reward for their own support of the Saṅgha. *Kuṭīs*, too, increased in number, and many were further modernized with added concrete flooring (because termites were a constant problem with the dirt floors) and improved walls and roofs.

Yet most of Laggala remained relatively unchanged, a vast forested region between the town of Rattota and the Mahaweli river. Bhante still spent *vassa*s in older *kuṭīs* such as the one at Iriyagasulpotha or in newer ones. However, in 1998 he finally decided to travel even further afield, and at a Saṅgha meeting he announced his decision to leave Laggala for an undetermined period and walk several miles north to an area south of the town of Dambulla. He promptly set out on his journey, walking via the town of Pallegama to a place west of the Wasgamuwa National Park called Elahera. He spent the *vassa* in a *kuṭī* there and later, in 1999, he went further west to a cave at Eraula near Kandalama.

During Bhante's 2000 *vassa* in the Dambulla forest at Waewala he became ill with hydrocele,[4] and had to go to Kandy for treatment. He then stayed at Bovalawatte, a forest monastery just above the city. The abbot of Bovalawatte was very helpful, and Bhante was able to establish a very good seclusion there. But gradually his seclusion deteriorated. Bhante then remembered a place that he had seen while walking in Laggala, which was next to a sandy spot by the Puwakpitiya river, so he decided to return to Laggala once his illness was cured. There he spent succeeding *vassa*s in the new *kuṭīs* that had been built at Pottatawela and Kambara. Ever on the move, he again spent a brief time at the Eraula cave north of Laggala in 2003, returning once more to Laggala and the Naragalena *kuṭī* for the *vassa*. Bhante then spent the 2004 vassa in Rambukkoluwa *kuṭī*, which offered wonderful solitude next to the Kalu Ganga.

The reputation of the Laggala Saṅgha continued to grow and more lay people tried to find Bhante and the other monks, wishing to make offerings to the Saṅgha. And the meetings of Laggala monks attracted even more supporters who wanted to be part of such special occasions. Consequently, in 2004, at the Saṅgha meeting following the *vassa,* Bhante Ñāṇadīpa made an announcement: he intended to leave Laggala once again for good. Though this move would result in a more extended physical separation than his earlier departures, his decision was not a real break with the Saṅgha. And, of course, such separations were natural to Bhante, for the cultivation of detachment was at the heart of his practice, and he had no wish to exert control over the Saṅgha or anyone else. His announcement was made on the 26th of December, the day of the huge tsunami that devastated Sri Lanka.

4. This is an accumulation of serous fluid in a body cavity. A hydrocele testis, which is what Bhante suffered from, is the accumulation of fluids around a testicle.

A day later Bhante's brother Bernard turned up in Laggala with his wife and their daughter. Bernard drove Bhante to Kandy. At the beginning of 2005 he was driven from there, south-west to Colombo by a supporter, and then to the Island Hermitage near Galle to pay his respects to Bhante Ñāṇavimala. After that, Bhante decided to walk north-east until he found a new wild area in Tanjan Taenna.

TANJAN TAENNA

Tanjan Taenna is a region in the southern part of the central mountains twenty-three kilometres from the large town of Balangoda. It was quite undeveloped at the time of Bhante's arrival, largely wilderness and sparsely populated. Today it is still heavily forested and provides an extensive habitat for much wildlife. Honeycombing its hills are many ancient caves, some of which bear ancient inscriptions. There are also many streams throughout the area, and the Walawe River flows through the region. The climate is relatively dry and warm, though it can be hot from June to September. The main rainy season is from October through January, and there is also some rain between March and June.

Bhante found a cave there that he liked but it proved to be too close to a village. So, he built a very basic *kuṭī,* using robes, further away and up a slope, while still using the cave for his meals. When he arrived in the region Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was the only monk in the area; the nearest other monk was many kilometres away. His first *kuṭī* was called Welipitiyaya, and Bhante stayed there for a year and a half. His second *kuṭī*, where he spent the next two years, was in Dehipitiya. Eventually Bhante created five more *kuṭīs* in Taenna and more monks started to come to the area. During that time, he also stayed in a *kuṭī* at Kiula for one year, but the surrounding wilderness was home to so many elephants, it became too dangerous to remain there and he had to leave.

Today there is a group of more than twenty-five monks practising in secluded huts or caves (some from ancient times) in Taenna, and some of these dwellings are over twenty kilometres by road from the central meeting place, Gilanhala, in the village of Tanjan Taenna. Since those early days, the region has also become more populated as new villages have been established.

The dwellings (huts or caves) used by the monks in the area, range

from basic wattle and daub structures, to comfortable brick huts. Most are situated at least one kilometre from the nearest village, and two or three kilometres from each other. Monks collect their food on alms round in the villages nearest their caves or huts. The food is simple but adequate. Monks living in Taenna do not participate in any religious ceremonies, nor are they involved in any social or religious work in the villages.

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa never directly contributed to the development of the Saṅgha in Taenna, nor did he try to build the monastery we can see there today. However, without him there might not be a Tanjan Taenna Monastery. Bhante never took part in the transformation of any secluded places suitable for solitary practice into more formal communities or institutions. But he recognized that such developments could be a positive thing and of benefit to some monks, especially during their initial training.

The monastery in Taenna has a central meeting place, or 'Gilanhala,' which is only intended for the use of monks living in the community and for visiting monks. There are no religious ceremonies (Kathina, pujas, etc.) or meditation programmes conducted there; people who support the Gilanhala monastery, and the community, do so only for the well-being of the practising monks. Away from that central area, in the surrounding forests, there are many secluded places where monks still live as hermits, surviving on alms offered in the villages nearest their *kuṭīs*. The Saṅgha in Taenna reflects the impressive idea of a communion of forest hermitages, with emphasis on solitude and spaciousness, and only little focus on communal activity. It comprises an inclusive, non-sectarian, Pāli text and Tipiṭaka-based Theravāda monastic community.

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa liked Taenna. When he was old and sick he expressed the wish to die there, but circumstances led him to return to one of his favourite monasteries, at Athdalagala.

While staying in Taenna every February, Bhante went to the Belihuloya monastery of the Galduwa tradition in Udawatakele for Dhamma conversations (*Dhammasākaccha*) with monks. These were occasions when Bhante made himself available for meetings with other *bhikkhu*s, which could last for up to five days. And each year more monks came, the peak occurring in 2011 when around one hundred monks attended. With more and more lay devotees learning of these meetings, their presence also greatly increased, and they raced to bring whatever requisites Bhante and the Saṅgha might need. Finally, again not pleased by the huge crowds

and the excess of support and devotion, Bhante left Taenna and returned to Laggala. This time he chose to stay at Galamudana *kuṭi* – a beautiful location in the middle of the forest where the solitude is incredible but where the walk for *piṇḍapāta* is steep and difficult.

BACK TO LAGGALA

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's absence from Laggala had lasted seven years; as always, he would not tie himself to one place. Following his return, he spent the next several *vassa*s in familiar *kuṭīs* that had been built many years before, starting with the *kuṭī* at Galamudana. By that time Bhante was in his mid-sixties, and having lost some of his austere and intimidating manner he was now considerably more available and approachable for visitors, willing to discuss Dhamma with monks and laymen alike. The *ping kammas,* at the Kambarawa and Puwakpitiya *kuṭīs* in 2012, attracted many monks and *dāyaka*s to these remote places and became somewhat overly supported.

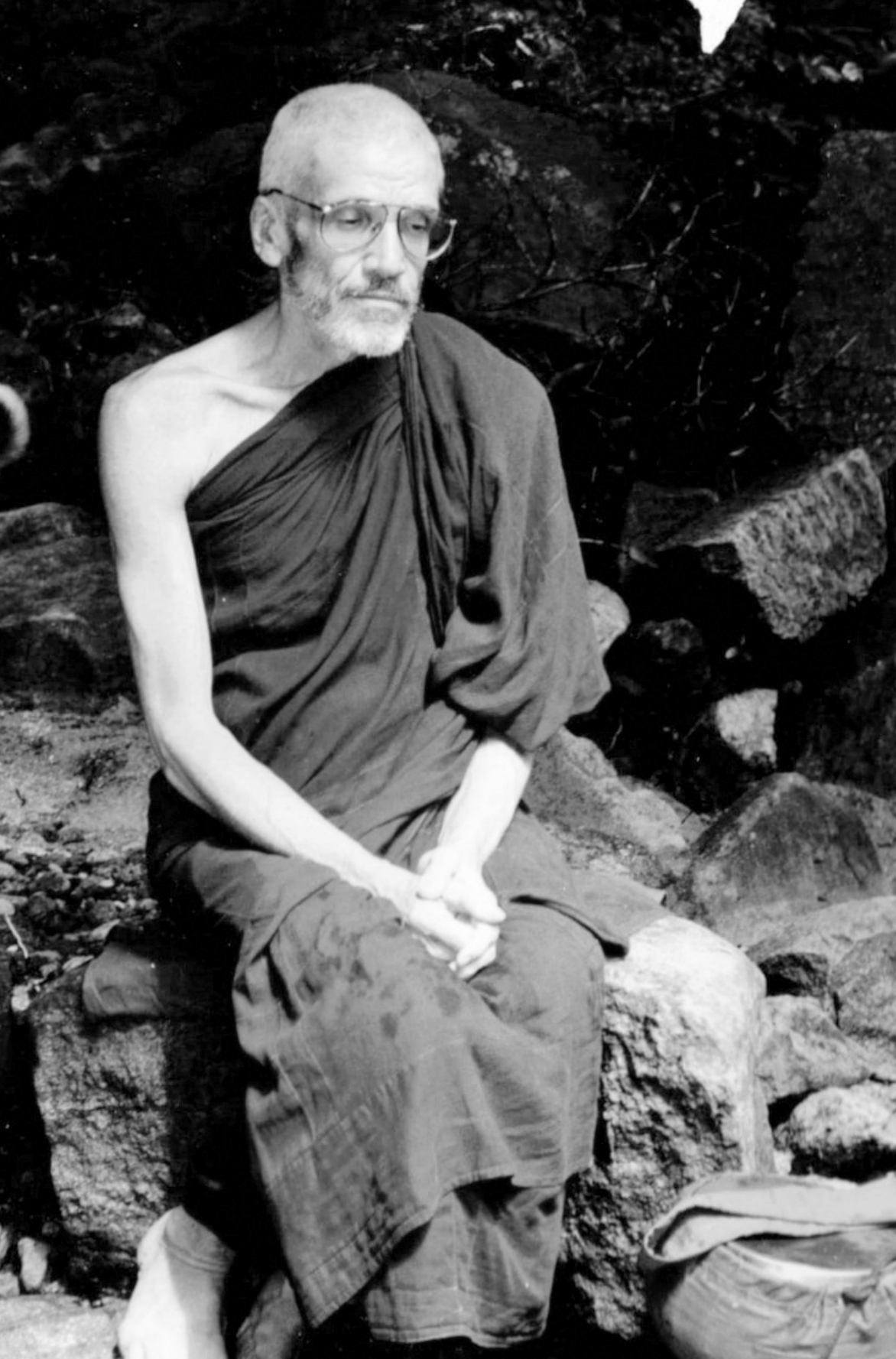
In 2014, Bhante suffered from a stomach ulcer and chronic gastritis, which in his case was caused by eating too much spicy food. He experienced bouts of nausea, vomiting, flatulence and diarrhoea. Very spicy food is standard fare for the villagers of Laggala (and thus for the Laggala monks as well), so this was another reason for him to leave once again.

Bhante's last *vassa* in Laggala, in 2014, was spent in Sule Gune *kuṭī*. He then spent some time in Kandy having tests, following which he went to Taenna where he spent about three months in Gilana *kuṭī*. After this Bhante spent the *vassa* at Ovilikanda near Matale to the north. He then returned to the Iriyagusulpotha *kuṭī* and stayed there for the February Saṅgha meeting. Although he was now not staying in Laggala permanently, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa continued to advise the Saṅgha there, and he attended several Saṅgha meetings, always willing to discuss Dhamma, offer advice and help set up the formal rules guiding the Laggala Saṅgha (see, for example, Appendix II for the 2019 version of these rules).

During his stay at Iriyagusulpotha a monk from Asirimalai near Pulmoddai visited Bhante and invited him to stay in a secluded *kuṭī*. Bhante was interested and went to see it but did not like the place. He then went to the Galpiyuma Araññha, in the north-east of the island, where the navy built a *kuṭī* for him.

Finally, with advancing age and in ill-health, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's independence came to an end. He could no longer go on *piṇḍapāta* on his own, but was now dependent on his fellow monks in hermitages and monasteries. Although these places attracted increasing numbers of lay supporters, his seclusion was provided for even there by those who attended him, and he was able to continue to decide for himself how much interaction he would have with others.

Laggala, where he spent more years as a *bhikkhu* than anywhere else in Sri Lanka, was profoundly important in Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's life. And although he has now left it for the last time, never to return, the extraordinary example of his remarkable life lived in its forests and jungles continues to inspire and guide both monks and laypeople.



VI

Muni

(The Sage)

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was a unique personality, admired by monks and lay-people from the very beginning of his monastic life. In the preparation of this biography we encountered only praise and universal respect for him, at all stages of his life as a *bhikkhu*. Indeed it appears that, with respect to the perseverance and strength exhibited in his life – for half a century! – he had no peer. Independent and self-confident, he was called a Lion of the Forest, a true leader.

> *Faring alone the Muni free of negligence,*
> *unshaken in blame and praise*
> *like the lion undisturbed by sounds,*
> *like the wind not caught in the net,*
> *like the lotus untouched by water,*
> *the leader of others, not led by them—*
> *him too the wise make known as the Muni.*
> —Sn 1:12

People who knew Bhante Ñāṇadīpa were very impressed by his lifestyle: his asceticism, his reticence, and his simple and austere manner of living in remote forests, bearing hardships even in old age. A great many monks, young and old, were personally inspired by him as well, because the way he lived and practised the Dhamma was known from the Suttas – and only a few people believed that it could be followed in our times. But in Bhante Ñāṇadīpa they had living proof that this was not so. He was a shining beacon, showing that the way of the *muni* had not faded into the darkness of history, but that it was as relevant today as it had been all those many centuries ago. Eventually some monks would follow in his footsteps, perhaps not able to match his determination and persistence, but nevertheless willing to make the effort – to move away from their

comfort zones, to forests, in pursuit of final freedom from worldly chains. For these monks, Bhante was a living guide and role model.

SINGLE-MINDEDNESS

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's main purpose was to integrate his understanding of the Buddha's Teaching with a determined effort to practise in strict accordance with it. He was single-minded, and would not be distracted by worldly matters – not to mention sensuality – and would waste no time on frivolous things. He believed that the only way to pursue the life of a reclusive hermit monk was to follow the guidance of the Dhamma-Vinaya of the Buddha, and on this point he was resolute. This then became the basis for his dedication to earnest study and practice.

His single-minded character was in evidence even before he became a monk. His brother Bernard remembers that Denys was always a bit stubborn and had a strong, independent personality. "He made his own choices and followed his head," he remembers. This might have been due to the influence of their father, who was described in a similar way, or it might have been as a result of the difficult circumstances of Bhante's and Bernard's childhood.

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa said privately that as a monk he was never really caught up in sensual pleasures, for he was able to effectively guard his mind and thus undermine such impulses. But he knew early on that he had a temper, and that he would have to work hard to keep it at bay and to ultimately be free of it. Eventually, through rigorous introspection, he could clearly see that it was his own arrogance and conceit that kept feeding this susceptibility to anger, and it was hard for him to accept that others might think of him differently than he thought of himself. There was a discrepancy, perhaps a wounded pride, and that pained him greatly. This tendency toward anger manifested in a somewhat rough and reserved way of interacting with others, and he was not very happy about this.

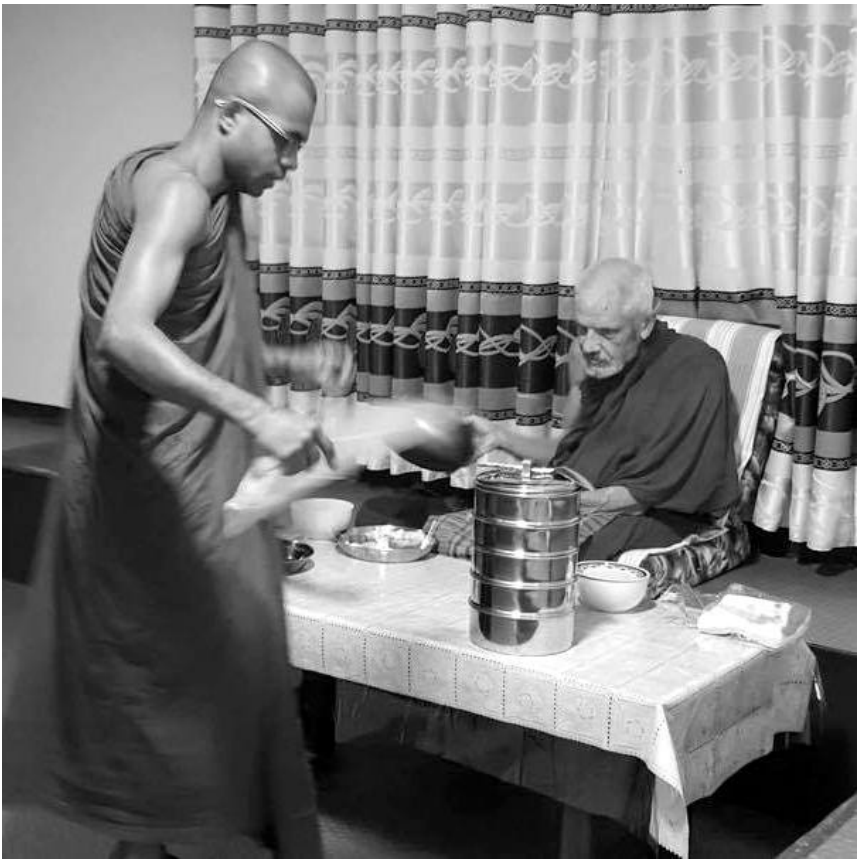
Even in later times, on casual acquaintance, he might appear to be lacking in sympathy, kindness or concern for others. However, monks who knew him better knew that this was not the case. Rather, they remember how comfortable it was to be around him, the enjoyment of sitting with him, and they came to look upon him as a kind of a spiritual

"grandfather." But Bhante certainly showed no interest in worldly matters and would not talk of such things. Nor did he have any interest in the praise and even veneration he would receive, for he was no charmer and would never give the impression that he was after something. Thus, for some, it might appear that Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was cold, but his face always brightened when conversation turned to Dhamma, and when he was visited by sincere monks.

True, visitors were generally not welcome to see him, especially during times of retreat. Bhante would normally agree to see visitors for only one week per year, around the time of Māgha Pūjā in February. Usually monks – as required by Vinaya – spend the *vassa* living in one place from the full-moon day of July to the full-moon day in October. But Bhante would add on an extra three months, for a total of six months in personal retreat, and would inform villagers not to allow anyone at all to come to his *kuṭī*.

On one occasion a novice monk did come unannounced to see Bhante. At that time, early in his life as a forest monk, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa would generally not show hospitality to unwelcome visitors, making it clear that it was not the right time to contact him. He might even ask an uninvited visitor to leave. However, on occasion, his compassion would overrule this strict determination to protect his seclusion, and then he could be quite open to discussing Dhamma. And that is what happened when that monk appeared. Bhante prepared a drink for the novice and himself, and they sat together and had a good conversation on Dhamma. He then invited the young monk to stay in a cave shelter, which is actually an overhang a hundred metres into the deep jungle. And though by that time it had started to rain, Bhante insisted on helping him get settled in the cave. The novice felt very uncomfortable with such a revered senior monk assisting him in this way, but Bhante told him that this was a proper service, the duty of a monk as prescribed by the Buddha. Needless to say, the novice was impressed by such an expression of compassion.

Though there was no real fire of anger in Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, he could firmly reject circumstances that were disturbing for him. Those who interacted with him noticed that he had a certain need for order: where he placed things was always deliberate, and if someone brought him something, he would point to where it should be put. He also appreciated punctuality when people came to see him. Such character traits are probably normal in one who lives alone for many years, and the practice of self-



discipline, particularly by someone prone to impatience, might manifest in this kind of effort to control one's environment. Just how Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was able to find the right balance in this respect, we do not know.

An interesting description of Bhante's early character can be found in some remarks of Bhante Bodhesako, after Bodhesako's return to Sri Lanka from Thailand in 1982. He and Bhante Ñāṇadīpa had a long discussion – about Dhamma of course! – and, in a letter to his friend in Thailand, Bhante Bodhesako said of Bhante Ñāṇadīpa that he

> "is very collected, no beating around the bush, he says what needs to be said and not more than that, albeit a certain rigidity apparent, perhaps necessary when one is developing straightforwardness. Nothing frivolous about him, little chance for honor or play. He has been

> through some tough times, and toughened himself in the process, and a hardness is only natural. It is a temporal hardness."

In later years Bhante Ñāṇadīpa would say that initially in one's practice one has to take a hard and painful path, and that maybe later with developed insight one could start to discern how to practise with a kind of ease. His hardness, Bhante Bodhesako thought, was due to a relative deficiency of *samatha*, which Bhante Ñāṇadīpa also recognized and was working on. But overall, Bodhesako was impressed by his determination:

> "He has given me a much stronger sense of how to go about practicing Dhamma, and also a much stronger sense of determination to do so."

Having more contact with monks in Laggala, his personality gradually changed. From being somewhat coarse or rough, unapproachable, and not wanting to associate with other monks, he began to be more sensitive to the needs of others. At the beginning he did not really know how to communicate with others but with more community involvement he changed. He also listened to feedback from fellow monks, and considered what was said. And with genuine sincerity, he managed to become much kinder and more approachable.

Many people noticed and were impressed by Bhante's mindfulness. Any task he undertook, no matter how small, received his full attention. Monks observed how Bhante would repair his requisites and belongings very carefully, how he checked passages in a book, how neat his notebooks were and how tidy he kept his dwellings.

Bhante was also known for his personal modesty. Refusing new robes, he might accept used robes from other monks. And he had very few belongings, just the things that he could carry with him in his bag. Apart from his robes and alms bowl, he had a head-torch, pocket knives, a compass and an umbrella; an alarm clock, a watch, spoon, scissors, nail clipper and thread and needle; a toothbrush, toothpaste, pens, notebooks, and perhaps a book. During most of his life he walked in ordinary flip-flops, but later, after suffering with numbness in his left leg for eight months (because it was shorter than the right one after the elephant incident), he had flip-flops specially made so that the one for the left leg was three centimetres higher than the other one. Being content with few possessions, Bhante would say "I do not have things, but I have happiness."

Clearly, living in the forest is not possible if one is not able to appreciate the things that are available, and be satisfied with them. One just has to learn how to make use of and be content with what is at hand, as illustrated by the following anecdote. On one occasion Bhante had malaria. He and another monk arrived at a *kuṭī*. There was a bed and a pillowcase, but no pillow, and the monk did not know what to do, so he just filled the pillow case with dry leaves and offered it to Bhante. One might think that such a senior monk, ill with malaria, would need or expect the best of things. But Bhante was very appreciative of this gift and gladly used it, he never requested a replacement.

THE VOICE OF DHAMMA

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was always firm in his determination to keep conversation solely on the Dhamma, following the instruction of the Buddha:

> *"he abstains from gossip; he speaks at the right time, speaks what is fact, speaks on what is good, speaks on the Dhamma and the Discipline; at the right time he speaks such words as are worth recording, reasonable, moderate, and beneficial."*
> —MN 27[1]

He never, not even occasionally, engaged in pointless talk. When with him, one could sense immediately that conversation about politics and other worldly matters would just not be welcome. Such talk would stand out very strongly as inappropriate. If such topics did come up, Bhante would meet them with silence, his head downturned or his gaze directed, empty, into the distance. He would never be bothered by the awkwardness of the resulting silence but when the topic of Dhamma would come up again, Bhante would become alive!

Bhante never made statements against others or shared gossip. In conversation he would not judge or take sides, for he had no wish to manipulate or control others. In short, he had no interest in interfering with anything or anyone in the world. He practised, to the fullest, according to the advice found in the following verse of the *Sutta-nipāta*,

1. This excerpt is from *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

which he regularly recited:

> *They do not make up, they do not prefer,*
> *"This is the highest purity" they do not say.*
> *Having undone the tied knot of holding,*
> *they do not form a desire for anything in the world.*
> —Sn 4:4.7

When he had to speak, Bhante would do so mindfully, carefully considering his words. If someone asked a question of him, he would take a short pause before speaking. Never careless with speech, he was never loud or offensive.

Even when meeting monks who did not follow the *pātimokkha* rules scrupulously, he never publicly confronted them about it. Once there was a monk living in a Laggala *kuṭī* who was not properly following the monastic rule regarding the prohibition of possessing or using money. When Bhante met that monk at a Saṅgha meeting, he talked to him privately, explaining to him that all Laggala monks, as instructed by the Buddha, did not own money, and that this fact was known to everyone

in the village. Thus it would not be good for him to continue in this way. The monk understood and took Bhante's admonishment well and departed, realising his own weakness.

Though very patient when dealing with disruptive issues that arose within or around the Saṅgha, Bhante was not reluctant to bring to others' attention problems that could tend to be corrupting. He would, for example, point out if a layman was bringing too many requisites for the monks in Laggala, or if monks showed an inclination to adjust their environment for the sake of convenience or comfort. Bhante felt that monks had enough for survival; they had no need to acquire extra "things" for the sake of convenience. And when one monk's *kuṭī* was too small and rain reached all the way to the bed, Bhante simply said: "No need to adjust the *kuṭī*. He can use an umbrella."

Once, on New Year's Eve after recitation of the *pātimokkha,* Bhante spoke to the assembled Saṅgha: "Do you hear the noise from the town?" We could hear the fireworks and loudspeakers from the town. "Well, we cannot do very much about that. But now monks are making noise, too stuck in their views. Remember, we are not here to criticize, but to learn."

The Buddha advised monks to avoid responding to disrespectful and rude criticisms from others. On one occasion a Western woman present at a Saṅgha meeting made some aggressive criticisms about how the monks lived, stating that they were not concerned enough about social welfare, but Bhante would not engage with her, remaining calm and silent.

On another occasion a Western monk confronted Bhante Ñāṇadīpa about his extreme seclusion. The monk suggested to Bhante that he was attached to solitude and that this was not the right way to practise. Bhante did not fight back, but his reply was straight from the Suttas:

> *"Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu lives in some jungle thicket. While he is living there his un-established mindfulness becomes established, his un-concentrated mind becomes concentrated, his un-destroyed taints come to destruction, he attains the un-attained supreme security from bondage* [...] *Having reflected thus, that bhikkhu should continue living in that jungle thicket; he should not depart."*
> —MN 17[2]

2. This excerpt is from *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

But when un-established mindfulness does not become established, that *bhikkhu* should depart from the jungle thicket that very night or that very day; he should not continue living there. As he did with the criticizing monk, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa would only respond to confrontation in this general way, basing his remarks on the Buddha's Teaching without argumentation.

Bhante also had a sense of humour which was quite wholesome. He would laugh at his own past activities, but never laughed at others' misfortunes. "Being able to laugh at oneself is okay," he said, "but making jokes for fun is not good."

And that is the manner of speech of a Sage (as listed in MN 27): he abstains from false speech and he speaks only the truth, is trustworthy and reliable and abstains from malicious speech. He does not try to divide people, rather he is a promoter of friendship, supporting concord, and abstaining from harsh speech. He speaks such words as are gentle and avoids gossip. And he speaks at the right time, about what is factual, about what is good, about the Dhamma and the Vinaya. At the right time he speaks such words as are worth recording, reasonable, moderate, and beneficial. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was indeed one such noble Sage.

ABIDING IN THE FOREST

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's practice was to avoid developing an attachment to dwellings. When he found a suitable place to reside, and villagers offered to set up a *kuṭī*, he gave them simple instructions as to how to build it. In the early years these *kuṭīs* would be three-walled mud huts, with dried mud and cow dung for the floor and palm leaves for the roof. After several years, the floors of the Laggala *kuṭīs* were generally updated to concrete since termites tended to invade them via the earthen floors. And their simple natural roofs were replaced either with tiles or tar sheets. During construction, Bhante might observe from a distance but he did not interfere with the villagers' work, for he knew that they were skilled in constructing such huts, and that they took great pleasure in their work. After all, these *kuṭīs* were their offering, and a monk should just accept and appreciate what is provided. Everything was built by the villagers; no external funds were allowed.

But although the *kuṭīs* were suitable, the villagers supportive and the forest peaceful, Bhante never settled in any one place for long. In fact, after leaving Būndala in 1978 it seems that he rarely remained anywhere for more than two years. His practice of non-attachment was designed in part to prevent himself from gaining excessive familiarity with where he was living. And with long stays, relationships with villagers could become too intimate and comfortable. In addition, his location would eventually become widely known and attract more and more people wishing to meet him and offer requisites. Another reason for him to move on might have been that he wanted to sustain that sense of insecurity and novelty a homeless wanderer must experience – for a monk must always avoid being too comfortable, lest he invite complacency.

There is a story of Bhante, when he was living in a cave in Sinharaja: A local novice monk asked if he could stay there, and Bhante responded by offering the cave. He just let it go although he had been quite content with it. "It's okay," he thought, "there are more forests and many possibilities, and I should be content with whatever comes." And he departed, giving up that space for the young monk.

And when Bhante left a *kuṭī*, he let it go completely, relinquishing all control over it. He would be happy if somebody else could use it, but would not be concerned if the hut would decay and return to nature. Even when he established the hermit community in Laggala, he did not consider himself to be its leader. The Saṅgha as a unit formulated what few rules it needed to preserve its integrity, to prevent it from becoming corrupted with worldly distractions and thus acquiring a bad reputation. Even with respect to this important responsibility, Bhante did not want to become a controlling force. He only wished to encourage monks to practise in forests, not to be their teacher – for that they had the Dhamma. He did his part in supporting the Saṅgha, but only to the point where it would not interfere with his independence and seclusion.

A large part of Bhante's practice was taking long walks in the forest. Sometimes he would wander with his maps and compass and explore new places, sleeping in the hollows of large trees, or on a pile of leaves in the shelter of their broad canopies. He would not bring any kind of tent or sleeping bag. He would just spread his bathing cloth on the ground, and lie down on it. Or perhaps he would just wander to one of the older *kuṭīs*. If it was unused, he might stay there for a while, but if it was occupied by another monk, Bhante would not request that he leave it, even if it was a newly-ordained novice.

This attitude of Bhante's is illustrated by the story of a young forest monk who was staying in one of the Laggala *kuṭīs*. When Bhante came upon the *kuṭī,* the young monk, out of respect and humility, very gladly offered to vacate it for his use. But Bhante – who at that time was sixty-eight years old, and a senior and very revered elder of the Saṅgha – would not accept the offer, no matter how strongly the monk insisted he do so. Instead, he was perfectly content to walk on a bit further and sleep somewhere deep in the forest. But with darkness there came a light drizzle, and the young monk, now worried, took his torch and went to search the forest for Bhante. As the junior was walking among the trees in the dark with his torch in hand, Bhante noticed his light and called

him, and the young monk found Bhante sitting calmly on a flexi-mat, without a lamp or umbrella.

The young monk was a bit shocked and suggested that Bhante come out of the rain and return to the *kuṭī*. But Bhante refused. The monk invited him a second, and then a third time, but Bhante still refused to accept the invitation, firm in his decision to remain as he was. Since Bhante was so used to forest life he did not really see why this should be a big issue. The monk said to Bhante: "When the Buddha was asked three times, he would then agree," thinking that Bhante would then accept his invitation. But Bhante Ñāṇadīpa responded, "When one is asked three times, and still says No, then it should be taken as that." And that settled the matter. The young monk could do nothing but leave Bhante in the dark forest and return to the *kuṭī* for his night's rest.

This anecdote demonstrates Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's determination to live in the way he had chosen, his insistence on being completely independent, even if doing so required him to pay a price, such as sleeping in the rain. He had toughened himself to such a degree that he could survive without a roof over his head.

Similarly, Bhante could endure hunger if necessary. He continued to fast one or even two days a week (though he would take a bit of sugar for energy), a practice he started in Būndala in order to free himself from interaction with villagers on those days. With this enhanced seclusion he was able to work more on his practice of emptiness (*suññata*).

Such fasting was helpful to learn to endure physical insecurities for, when walking through jungles, one may become lost or unable to find a place to stay near a village, and hence lose an opportunity for *piṇḍapāta*. Bhante learned to be unconcerned about when and where he would eat, and was always prepared to go hungry.

"What shall I eat?"—"Where shall I eat?"
"I slept uneasily"—"Where shall I sleep tonight?"
These thoughts causing lament
the one in training should dismiss.
—Sn 4:16.6

Also, if there was no other option, Bhante would take water from drying streams with only small puddles of water left. If foam covered the surface he would take a plastic cup and try to collect water from below.

It would of course be unappealing and taste terrible, but that would not bother him.

Bhante certainly had a deep concern for other monks. Not so much to help them with their physical discomfort, but rather to help them preserve the integrity and simplicity of their practice – to help them deal with and ultimately overcome their *existential* pain. To "put sugar on excrement" is not a solution for pain or discomfort; but to look deeply

into these difficult qualities of life, to examine them and their origins as they really are and then to deal with them courageously, this may bring meaningful relief.

On one occasion Bhante came across a monk in the Laggala forest who was enlarging a *kuṭī* and attempting to make it more attractive. Bhante questioned his need for such comfort and, when he told other monks about this encounter, they pointed out to him that nowadays monks do want to go to the forest, but do not want to face discomfort. Bhante was able to survive in the forest with some plastic or a tar sheet above his head, but those young monks needed many "things," and big, secure "cottages."

In response to this Bhante pointed out that well-built and beautiful *kuṭīs* would attract visitors who would come to admire the monks' creations. But this was not good; monks should not attract people to where they were living, and should not invite laypeople to admire their beautiful dwellings. Rather, it would be better to inspire them to appreciate and admire simplicity and relinquishment.

Always encouraging monks to practise in the forest, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa said that they should use "natural *dukkha*" and not "extra *dukkha*". What he meant was that they must not place extra burdens on themselves. These extra burdens come with an accumulation of "things," the yearning for "things." With more ownership come more worries, fear and pain. Bhante advised monks to abandon all of that "extra *dukkha*". When the extra weight is scraped away, we are left with "natural *dukkha,*" the discomfort we face when living in the forest: mosquitoes and other creatures, heat and cold, a hard bed, loneliness, fear, the need to walk for *piṇḍapāta*, etc. This is suffering that is natural, which we cannot give up by choice or desire, but by understanding its nature.

When he heard of monks using those solitary *kuṭīs*, especially those built by him, he was openly joyful. On one occasion, Bhante encouraged a young monk to build a *kuṭī* in an area where one of his own *kuṭīs* had been built but later collapsed. The monk was surprised by this, since he was not familiar with building *kuṭīs* or staying in such remote places. But he greatly respected Bhante, and so he moved there without hesitation, set up the *kuṭī* and spent some time living in it. However, after a few months he abandoned the *kuṭī* following a terrifying meeting with a huge cobra. He had hesitated, but in the end he finally packed his belongings and left. Later, when meeting Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, Bhante asked the monk if he

was still living in that *kuṭī*. The monk told him of the encounter with the cobra and Bhante immediately looked sharply into his eyes and pointed to him: "You should not leave! You should stay in your *kuṭī*. If you cannot face fears, how can you expect to be enlightened?!" The rebuke was taken to heart, and the young monk decided not to repeat his mistake: he moved back to the forest, this time with increased determination.

ONE WITH NATURE

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was a lover of nature and animals. When *kuṭīs* were built, he emphasised the need to preserve as many trees as possible. Just as he would not interfere with the worldly matters of people, he had no wish to interfere with the natural world. The less impact he had on the forest, the better. And the idea of the three-walled *kuṭī* – which he borrowed from his old friend Bhante Ñāṇasumana – was to provide a constant view of the forest. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa said that this engendered the feeling that one is living under a tree. And, since *kuṭīs* were built with mud walls, there was a constant reminder that they would eventually return to nature and leave behind little if any sign of their existence. Just as monks, wandering the forest, leave little trace, so should their *kuṭīs*.

Bhante never demanded of villagers that *kuṭīs* be built for him. He said one should not worry about a dwelling, for there was plenty of forest and a monk could sleep under the trees. In his explorations, Bhante would just follow his maps and come to a place that might be secluded enough for him. Or when he was in a village to receive alms, he would ask villagers if there was a cave nearby where he could stay. If there was one, he would move there, and if not, the villagers would offer him a place in the village (which he would generally refuse) or offer to build him a *kuṭī*. But before they started to do so, Bhante would survey the area for a couple of weeks. He would sleep in various places, looking for a good location, one that was distant from human noise and disturbances and with a stream nearby.

If Bhante discovered an injured animal he would help it if he could. On one occasion he took care of a dying monkey. His compassion extended even to mosquitoes, allowing them to drink his blood, and he would not remove ticks from his skin, or allow other monks to remove them for him. He felt he was just one among these various creatures, somebody

who wants to live without conflict and, like them, wants to be free from suffering. (However, he did not welcome dogs around his *kuṭīs*, since they were domesticated and not natural to the forest, and would frighten other animals, bring noise, and likely damage the dwelling and its surroundings.) Bhante said that when one understands suffering, then one understands that there is not one being in the world that is not in need of compassion.

Over the years Bhante Ñāṇadīpa developed many skills to help him survive in the jungle, mostly as a result of trial and error. He learned how to find a good place to sleep, how to build a quick shelter or *kuṭī,* and how to find water when there was no running stream nearby. He learned about the medicinal properties of plants and roots, and how to perform first aid using leaves and branches, and how to deal with dangerous animals. Urban doctors would probably be shocked to see some

of the rolled leaves, or sticky and smelly concoctions he used to treat his wounds – but they worked for him. And all his knowledge and skills were gladly shared with other monks if a need for them arose or if they asked for his advice. To be able to live a simple life in the forest is not possible with just the knowledge of scriptures; one must have a practical knowledge of the ways of the natural world.

While in Laggala, Bhante suffered bouts of malaria on three or more occasions. But even at such times, he was extremely patient and calm in dealing with his condition. Once, although weak with malaria, he was walking with another monk and at some point had to stop. Without saying much, Bhante took off his clothes and then lay down on bare rock next to a stream and, allowing his body to do what it had to, he began to vomit and had a bout of severe diarrhoea. He had calmly chosen that spot by the stream to minimize the difficulties of cleaning up after the body's violent purges.

Bhante also proved his resilience when experiencing physical pain. At such times he never complained but bore it patiently. He particularly demonstrated this resilience after the incident with the elephant in 1993, and he endured many other injuries and falls – inevitable, considering his way of life – but he always kept going, even when over seventy years old. As noted, he was little bothered by mosquitoes, rejecting the use of nets, and when bitten by other creatures, even by those whose bites caused great pain, he never jumped or became frightened. He would simply remove the animal from his body and proceed with whatever he was doing – greatly impressing anyone who might witness such an event. And this patient endurance of bodily pain and discomfort was maintained even while he was very sick with cancer before his passing away.

Bhante was bitten by venomous snakes three times (he said that snakes are mostly not dangerous). On two occasions the bites produced just a little swelling, but on the third, his leg swelled up a lot. He had been bathing in a river and when he was approaching the shore, he noticed a coiled snake which was apparently there to hunt frogs by the shoreline, and the snake bit him. Apart from the inconvenience of having a badly swollen and painful leg, Bhante survived with no permanent after-effects.

The forests were his home, and he knew his living space. He knew in great detail their tracks and paths, and he could describe the jungle to other monks with great precision, telling them what trees were in a particular spot, how many and of what shapes, just as a householder would

be able to describe his own apartment. And monks found his descriptions to be very clear and easy to follow.

Once, one of his long-term supporters from Colombo came to see Bhante. People in cities are of course used to conveniences and comforts; they always seek out all kinds of luxuries. Knowing where the man was from, Bhante told him that he wanted to show him a great luxury, even better than what he was able to get in Colombo. "Come with me, and you will see what luxury I can afford here." The man was curious: "What comfort can one find in this dense, dark forest?" After walking some distance, Bhante pointed out a concrete basin with collected water from the nearby stream. "Here it is – fresh, clean, cool water in the jungle!" And he had a good point – for such water was something Colombo residents could not afford. "It did feel luxurious!" the man admitted.

ALONE WITH ELEPHANTS

As we have seen, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was not afraid of wild animals. He told monks that they should not really fear snakes since they were not aggressive. Most snakes are harmless, but even those that are not, do not want to hurt anyone and only bite when they feel threatened. Living mindfully in the forest with an attitude of friendliness towards all beings around him, a monk should feel safe enough. Once he was asked "Are you afraid of snakes?" He responded: "Yes, but I'm not afraid of that fear." And regarding crocodiles – he had seen many, in Būndala and elsewhere – he said confidently that they would not attack monks. But one should be aware of elephants...

For Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, seeing elephants was a normal thing, since they were a significant part of his environment. He eventually developed a fearlessness around elephants and became quite knowledgeable about them – how they behaved, what their strengths and weaknesses were, etc. – and knew so much that even forestry workers would come to him seeking advice. He had a great liking for elephants and almost always elephants were kind to him.

And he learned how to behave properly in their presence, becoming capable of calmly walking among them, with a heart of goodwill. Observing their behaviour he could also, at least to some degree, understand their intentions. But when other people saw Bhante among elephants –

even large groups of up to twenty of them – they would become alarmed, fearing that he would not survive the encounter. But elephants would usually let him pass peacefully.

Bhante had memorized a *gāthā* which many thought would tend to protect one from an elephant attack when recited. He did not think it could provide a supernatural protection, but that it was, rather, a means of focusing the mind in a calm and benevolent way, thus influencing the manner of interaction with the animal. So he would use it, as well as certain *paritta* verses, putting them to the test as last-ditch tools when he found himself in close and deadly circumstances. But he told others that these verses would be useless if one did not have a well-disposed mind, because developing and radiating goodwill is essential on these occasions, since animals can sense one's emotional state or attitude. Though there is no guarantee that these recitations can actually stop animals from attacking, they can certainly help one to stay calm and to trust in the Dhamma in a time of danger.

In a similar vein, Bhante said, on one occasion, he was approached by a bear, and it seemed that the recitation of the *Khandhā Paritta* made the bear leave him in peace.

Virūpakkhehi me mettaṁ	I have goodwill for the Virupakkhas,
Mettaṁ Erāpathehi me	towards Erapathas I have goodwill,
Chabyā-puttehi me mettaṁ	I have goodwill for the Chabya sons,
Mettaṁ Kaṇhā-Gotamakehi ca	towards the black Gotamakas I have goodwill.
Apādakehi me mettaṁ	I have goodwill for footless beings,
Mettaṁ di-pādakehi me	towards two-footed beings I have goodwill,
Catuppadehi me mettaṁ	I have goodwill for four-footed,
Mettaṁ bahuppadehi me	and towards many-footed beings I have goodwill.
Mā maṁ apādako hiṁsi	May footless beings do me no harm.
Mā maṁ hiṁsi di-pādako	May two-footed beings do me no harm.
Mā maṁ catuppado hiṁsi	May four-footed beings do me no harm.
Mā maṁ hiṁsi bahuppado	May many-footed beings do me no harm.
Sabbe sattā sabbe pāṇā	May all creatures, all breathing things,
Sabbe bhūtā ca kevalā	all beings—each and every one—
Sabbe bhadrāni passantu	meet with good fortune.
Mā kiñci pāpam'āgamā.	May none of them come to any evil.

—AN 4:67

The particular verses of protection from elephants that Bhante used are found in a Vinaya story wherein the Buddha, threatened by an elephant, uttered the following:

Mā kuñjara nāgamāsado,	Do not, elephant, strike the Elephant,
Dukkhañhi kuñjara nāgamāsado;	for painful, elephant, is the striking of the Elephant,
Na hi nāgahatassa kuñjara,	For there is no good destination, elephant,
Sugati hoti ito paraṃ yato.	for a slayer of the Elephant when he is hence beyond.
Mā ca mado mā ca pamādo,	Be not proud, be not careless,
Na hi pamattā sugatiṃ vajanti te;	for the careless there is not a good destination;
Tvaññeva tathā karissasi,	Only that should you do by which
Yena tvaṃ sugatiṃ gamissasī"ti.	you will go to a good destination.

—Kd 17:8

Bhante also recited these verses when he was attacked by an elephant in 1993, but unfortunately the elephant was a bit too slow to avoid hurting Bhante (though perhaps their recitation prevented him from being killed!).

There are many anecdotes of Bhante's meetings with elephants in Sri Lanka. Once, while he was straining water near Wasgamuwa, a baby

elephant come close to him. It was possibly lost, malnourished and very thin. The elephant was upset, no doubt due to its separation from its mother, and in a slightly threatening way came to Bhante, but it only pressed against Bhante's leg harmlessly while he was having his meal.

Another, more dangerous, event occurred when Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was in one of his three-walled *kuṭīs*. He heard a noise from the top of the roof and decided to chase away whatever was on it by hitting the ceiling with a broom or stick. But he soon discovered – too late! – what was actually making the noise: There was nothing on the roof; rather, an elephant was sniffing at it with his trunk. And when Bhante hit the ceiling with the stick the elephant became startled and agitated to such a degree that it hit the wall with its trunk, breaking open a big hole – and then walked away. But Bhante did not run from the *kuṭī*; he stayed there, not too bothered by the whole incident, apparently more concerned for his practice (which had been developing quite well at that time) than about any misunderstanding he might have had with an elephant. He later covered the hole with a plastic sheet and continued practising Dhamma, because when he felt his practice was going well he would not abandon it, even in the face of danger or a lack of basic requisites.

On another occasion he was walking on *piṇḍapāta* and encountered an approaching elephant on the path. It charged, but Bhante held his ground. There was nowhere to go as the path was leading through thorn scrub. At the last moment the elephant stopped, turned around and retreated.

On yet another occasion, deep in the forest, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa encountered an elephant that was looking at him intently, and that apparently wanted to frighten him. Bhante knew that this was something elephants often did when they were irritated: they try to scare people away but do not necessarily try to hurt them. So the elephant approached Bhante, who was standing on a path on a sloping hillside path. He knew that elephants have their limitations when moving (for example they cannot turn quickly), so moving away from the elephant in a zigzag fashion could have been an option. But Bhante chose instead to rush up the slope. The elephant noticed what he was up to and decided to follow a different path up the hill which was less steep. While Bhante was climbing he noticed the elephant reaching the top of the hill from another side. So he immediately turned around and rushed down the hill, and the elephant did the same on this own path. Seeing no benefit in repeatedly running up and down a hill with an agitated elephant, and since there was a river

nearby, Bhante crossed it, for he knew another limitation of elephants: they cannot cross rivers swiftly. Thus he was able to end the little game.

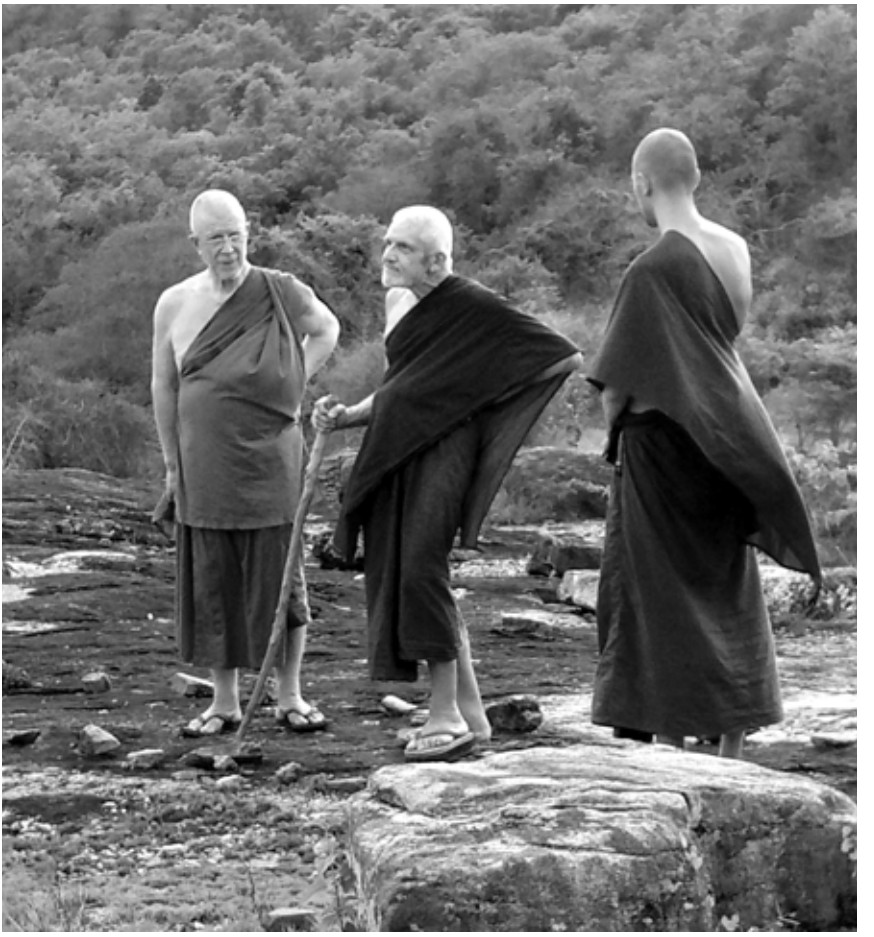
On another occasion, a very serious encounter with a herd of elephants occurred while Bhante was living near Taenna. As the group charged him, he attempted to move away, but he stumbled and fell down. And since the elephants did not stop (as they often would) he seriously thought that the end was near – that he was going to die! The elephants came up quite close but for some reason they did not harm him, and having calmed down they left. For Bhante, this was a moment in which he had really given himself up to die. It was so close and so frightening that there was for him almost a kind of internal breakdown, and from that point on he never again feared the dangers that come with living in close proximity to wild animals.

VILLAGERS

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's relationship with lay people is also quite interesting. For *piṇḍapāta* he would usually give priority to the poorer local villagers, and would try to avoid accepting food from his more affluent supporters. According to the Buddha's Teaching, practising generosity increases merit. Giving food to others lightens the heart and creates mental conditions suitable for future growth and development in Dhamma, and eventual liberation. Basically, when a gift is given, it is the donor who benefits more than the recipient. Bhante's compassion for humble villagers was not glossy, but was simply aimed at giving them a chance to practise generosity and in that way create merit for a better and happier future. His *kuṭīs* were built by poor villagers, and he lived dependent upon their support. There was a kind of close connection with these villagers; not intimate but within Dhamma, a relationship that held a beauty in its coolness, and which was not based on pleasures arising from attachment.

For this reason, Bhante was never pleased if affluent supporters from Colombo tried to take over the provision of requisites. He always said that he did not need much, and that food offered in the village was just enough.

On one occasion, when Bhante went on *piṇḍapāta* to a designated place to accept alms from local villagers, he saw an unexpected line of laypeople obviously hoping to offer him a meal: a special *dāna* of well-



prepared food and other requisites. These were wealthy people who had taken a long drive from Colombo and wished to offer food in order to gain some merit for themselves. But when Bhante approached them, he simply kept walking without making himself available to receive their offerings. Only when he reached the last man (Mr. Fernando, who had provided him a *kuṭī* when he had returned to Sri Lanka from Thailand) did he take an orange saying, "Okay, I will take that." He simply kept walking towards the village to receive alms from the locals, as had been arranged. Bhante would not be tempted by something which the world regarded as "better," and thereby disappoint the poor villagers.

On another occasion, during one of the Saṅgha meetings, over two hundred laypeople came to offer a meal to Bhante and the assembly of

monks. His reputation at that time was already big and rumours were going around that he was an *arahat* (a fully enlightened being). Bhante might have been glad to see such strong faith in people, but he felt it was a mistake for them to regard him as fully enlightened since he knew he was not. So he refused to go for the meal, saying: "I do not need much but they are offering so much, thinking I am an *arahat*. What is the purpose of them coming to me if they do not have questions on Dhamma?" It was also on that occasion that he announced that he would not return to that location for future meetings of the Saṅgha.

* * *

Yes, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa could certainly be stubborn, and monks knew that he was not always patient with others. Understandably, after spending a whole life living independently, it was not easy to change that trait in his old age. With age, he had to be cared for, a necessity he accepted reluctantly, but he rejected all medicines which he thought might not be needed. This naturally caused plenty of worries for his caretakers, and also some inconvenience for the monks who were attending him. In fact, throughout his life he was never a good listener to doctors or medical attendants.

But Bhante was a true forest monk, who found complete ease in the forest monk's way of life and practice. Even during his final months, when he was being cared for by other monks in a monastery, he requested that he be able to go on *piṇḍapāta* to the local village at least once a week, and not have that day's meal arranged by the monastery. He would slowly walk to the village, receive alms in his bowl, move to the forest to sit under a tree and eat his meal. He would then wash his bowl in a nearby steam and walk back to his *kuṭī*, happy that he could do once again what had become such an important part of his way of life and practice.

Seclusion was always paramount for Bhante, and most of his life as a monk was spent away from others. Thus unfortunately, there must be a great many incidents from his remarkable life, both interesting and instructive, of which we will never have the benefit of hearing. But we know enough to marvel at his accomplishments, and to be inspired by his remarkable example.

SIMPLICITY AND PATIENCE

In preparing this book, several stories have come to light which illustrate Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's character: the quiet kindness, practical wisdom and humility behind his reserved manner, which was so apparent to others in their interactions with him. The following are a few anecdotes others have shared, which reflect some of Bhante's qualities – the qualities of the *muni*, the true sage – which have encouraged so many monks to follow in his footsteps:

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa travelled to Meetirigala Nissarana Wanaya monastery once on foot. Bhante discussed many points of Dhamma with the resident senior monk and other monks in the monastery. On one such occasion the monk asked Bhante:

"Bhante, do you need anything we can offer you?"

Bhante respectfully replied, "Bhante, please, I could use two strainers," referring to a small piece of cloth that monks use to filter water. This shows qualities such as the respect Bhante Ñāṇadīpa had towards elders and the simplicity of his lifestyle. He would never ask for too much.

* * *

One day a senior monk together with two laymen went to visit Bhante Ñāṇadīpa at the Sule Gune *kuṭī* in Laggala. It was a rainy day. As they were approaching the *kuṭī*, they saw Bhante building a roof by himself with branches, for protection from the rain. At that time, Bhante was suffering from numbness in his legs, but he did not complain or ask anyone for help or to do the job for him. Bhante did his own work.

* * *

On one occasion, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was visited by another monk to discuss Dhamma. While talking, Bhante accidentally cut his hand trying to cut a fruit. Even though Bhante was bleeding from the wound, he calmly held his hand up to reduce the blood flow, and continued the conversation with the monk as if nothing had happened, without any hesitation or distress.

* * *

On another occasion during *piṇḍapāta* at Sule Gune, Laggala, a group of people from Colombo were present to offer *dāna*. When Bhante Ñāṇadīpa arrived at the shed, he first accepted *dāna* from the poor villagers and then accepted *dāna* from the group from Colombo.

Afterwards Bhante asked them: "Where are you from?"

The group replied: "Bhante, we have come from Colombo to offer the *dāna* to you."

Bhante gave a direct reply: "Okay good, but don't come again."

A woman from the group said: "But, Bhante, we are also in need of merit."

He replied with kindness: "Observe the character of Venerable Kassapa Thero. People from Colombo already have merit, so let these poor people from the villages obtain merit by serving a spoon of *dāna*."

* * *

On another occasion at Padaviya, at Galpiyuma Forest Monastery, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa said to supporters from Colombo: "No need to come again, serve other monks. It is a merit to even have the thought to offer *dāna* and required requisites to meditation *bhikkhu*s living in the forest. But

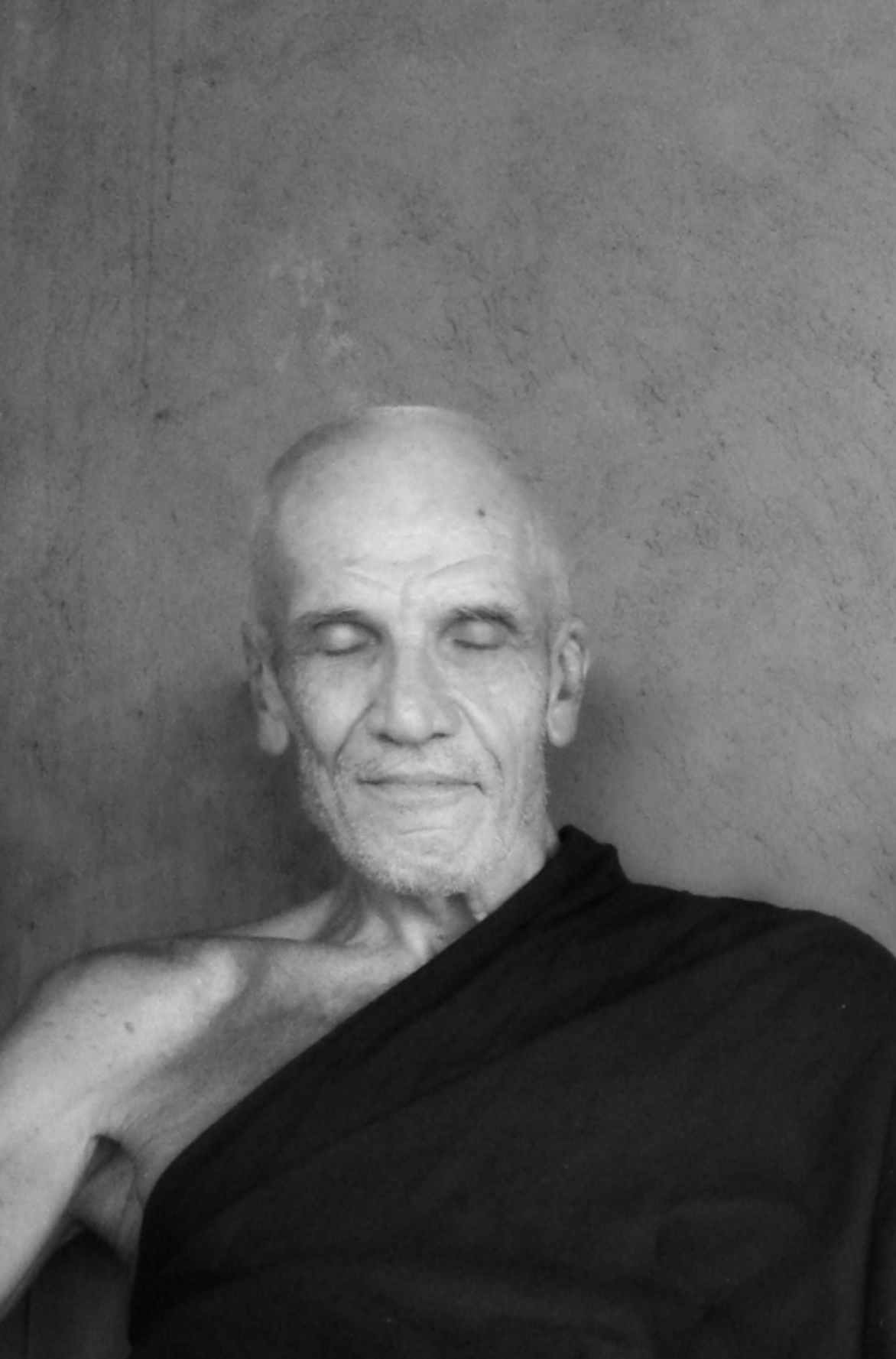
these monks are living in peace. It is not suitable to disturb them. Hence not visiting forest *kuṭīs* is a superior merit." That was his way of explaining well-wishing supporters to avoid coming to see him.

* * *

When Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was going for *piṇḍapāta* and heard or suspected that a group of people in a certain village were preparing delicious food and waiting to offer alms to him, he would not go to that village. He would go to another poor village instead and then go back into the jungle.

* * *

Once, while living in Balangoda, a group of lay devotees were preparing to renovate his cave hut. But Bhante Ñāṇadīpa did not allow the room to be repaired, since the workers revealed that there was a bat inside the cave. He did not allow work on the cave *kuṭī* as long as the animal stayed inside. "It doesn't bother me," Bhante said, "It would be bad for us to hurt it. When it leaves, then we will renovate the room."



VII
Bhāvanā
(Development of Mind)

People wonder, no doubt, what leads a man to a life of seclusion. What is actually happening internally? What is such a person's practice? What is it he knows, and how can he maintain mental stability and contentment living alone in dense jungles? These questions and many more arise in the minds of ordinary people. For them the pursuit of solitude is hard to understand since they live with an accepted and almost irresistible impulse to escape from "emptiness," and to follow the impulses coloured by the three "primary colours" which dominate their minds: greed, aversion, and delusion.

Of course, the wisest way to answer these questions is to actually step onto the Path of Dhamma and see for ourselves, to take that step even though it initially appears very frightening. Doing so requires that we pull away from the madness of compulsive social involvement, develop internal honesty, acquire a familiarity with the Buddha's Teaching, and apply those teachings in our lives, preferably in seclusion. Then we will see that working with the mind takes great effort – in fact our entire being – and that there is no space for complacency. But eventually such effort may yield an understanding which brings with it an internal satisfaction and peace, and we may finally find the answers to our questions. We will not only understand what a hermit is, but become one in a fundamental sense: a person secluded from those primary defilements of mind. There can be no other way to really understand Bhante's way of life and his practice, or anyone else's for that matter. And when we actually get to know the Dhamma for ourselves, we will not need to worship and admire others, yet we will be worthy of respect ourselves. But the respect and admiration of others will be of no use to us unless we find in it the encouragement to further the training of our own minds.

In the next two chapters these questions will be dealt with. The intention is not to analyse Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's mind (nobody is qualified to

speak for him), or come to conclusions about him but rather to bring up some themes concerning his practice that are discoverable through an examination of his life; themes that might encourage others to follow his path. This is based on many hours of speaking with Bhante, probing his mind and challenging him. The recollections of others as well as their impression of Bhante's understanding of Dhamma will also play an important role. Even so, I know that it is not really possible to understand somebody else in any fundamental sense. Therefore, what is presented here can only be a superficial view reflecting a personal perspective. Therefore all that follows has to be taken with some caution and not as absolute truth. But it is hoped that these reflections will provide a glimpse into Bhante's practice and its purpose, and that they will strengthen the motivation of readers to make an effort to understand for themselves the nature of subjective existence.

INSPIRATIONS

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa deeply admired the Buddha. He delighted in his Teaching, and the Buddha was his only true guide. He regularly reflected on the qualities of the Buddha (*buddhānupassanā*), without feeling a need for props and images like statues and paintings. He felt the presence of the Buddha, especially when in private; sitting perhaps under a tree, he would close his eyes and recite some of the Buddha's verses in Pāli. He particularly enjoyed reciting the verses that list the Buddha's noble qualities. One example of his selected verses is from the *Pārāyanānugīyigāthā* (Sn 5:17), verse 13:

> *My faith and joy, my mind and memory*
> *do not depart from Gotama's teaching.*
> *Whatever direction the one of broad wisdom walks*
> *to that very direction I am inclined.*

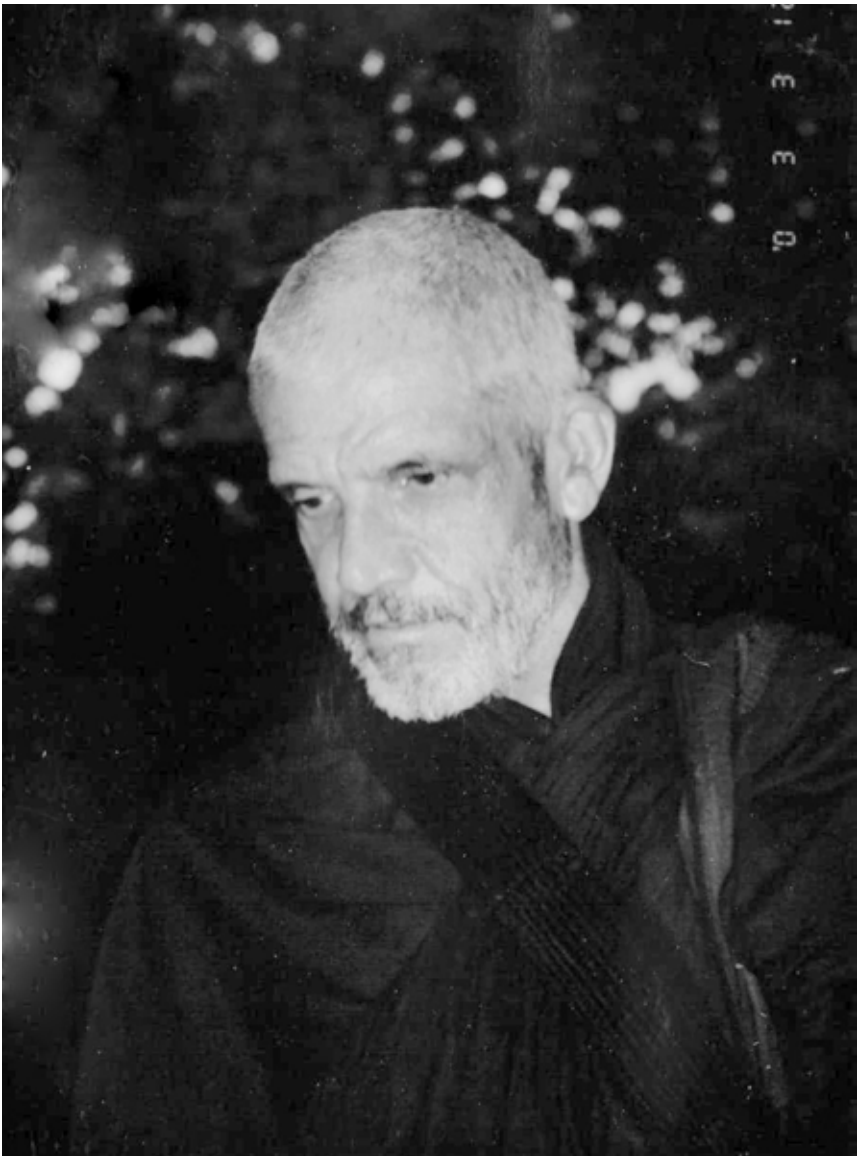
Two senior disciples of the Buddha that Bhante particularly admired for their outstanding wisdom were Venerable Sāriputta and Venerable Ānanda. One of Bhante's favourite Suttas, which he enjoyed reciting, is the *Sāriputta Theragāthā* (Thag 12:2), especially verse 16:

Not for knowledge of past lives,
Nor even for clairvoyance;
Not for psychic powers, or reading the minds of others,
Nor for knowing people's passing away and being reborn;
Not for purifying the power of clairaudience,
Did I have any resolve.

Among living *bhikkhus*, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa initially found an inspirational figure in Bhante Ñāṇavimala. Not so much for his understanding of Dhamma, as Bhante said, but for his way of life. For Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, Bhante Ñāṇavimala was a *muni*, a saintly being, a monk of higher mindfulness. Worthy of respect and admiration, he had great *mettā*, kindness. However, they had some disagreements concerning some interpretations of the Suttas, and also a difference of opinion about Ven. Ñāṇavīra Thera. Bhante was a follower of Bhante Ñāṇavīra, while Bhante Ñāṇavimala strongly opposed him. This disagreement produced a conflict in Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's mind. He said:

> "Well, the trouble is that my relationship with Bhante Ñāṇavimala was coloured by my relationship with Ñāṇavīra. In that Ñāṇavimala detested Ñāṇavīra, and I was very clearly a student of Ñāṇavīra's teaching. And so there was this contradiction inside of me, in that the monk that I liked the most as a person was actually Ñāṇavimala. But, the teaching didn't go together."

After Bhante Ñāṇadīpa left for Būndala following his higher ordination, he did not have much connection with Bhante Ñāṇavimala, since both were inclined to be independent and to have, as their primary concern, a very personal investigation of Dhamma. We are aware of two meetings between the two: Bhante Ñāṇavimala visited Bhante Ñāṇadīpa after Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's return from Thailand in 1978, and Bhante Ñāṇadīpa went to Island Hermitage in 2005 to visit and pay his respects to Bhante Ñāṇavimala. After 2005 they never met again, and Bhante Ñāṇavimala passed away a few months after their last meeting. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa also attended Bhante Ñāṇavimala's funeral, though he later admitted that he did so more because it was expected of him than because he felt a personal need to attend (after all, such conventions are only determinations, arising and ceasing as the *muni*s would say). However, Bhante



Ñāṇadīpa subsequently referred to Bhante Ñāṇavimala in conversation on many occasions and occasionally used examples from his life to make his own points with respect to Dhamma.

But when he was asked which approach to meditation was most profitable in his development of insight, he answered: "Ñāṇavīra." It is really impossible to understand Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's practice if we do not

look into the teachings of Ven. Ñāṇavīra. As a young layman, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was inspired to follow the original discourses of the Buddha, and that lead him to Sri Lanka. There, learning of a monk who had lived as a hermit and dedicated himself to the Suttas, Bhante was very curious about him and wanted to know more about his life and thought. But unfortunately Bhante Ñāṇadīpa missed the opportunity to meet Ven. Ñāṇavīra for he had died three years earlier. Still, Bhante immediately began to study and practise with the guidance of Ven. Ñāṇavīra's book, *Notes on Dhamma*. This book became a foundation for him and his future practice rested upon it with some modifications.

Monks would often ask Bhante about the writings of Ven. Ñāṇavīra, and he would generally just tell them of his debt to Ven. Ñāṇavīra and of the gratitude he felt for his guidance. Bhante enjoyed discussing Ven. Ñāṇavīra's ideas though not necessarily with everyone. He expected those who approached him with a desire to discuss Ven. Ñāṇavīra to be familiar with his writings and to have some understanding of them, and did not see much point in talking about them otherwise, since doing so would be largely for the sake of abstract judgements and would serve no useful purpose (and judgements concerning Ven. Ñāṇavīra were quite common). Bhante was also not at all interested in being categorized as belonging to any ideological movement. He would take offence if somebody called him a "Ñāṇavīrist." But Bhante was keen to discuss Bhante Ñāṇavīra with those who genuinely wanted to understand the Dhamma. He never initiated conversations about Bhante Ñāṇavīra though, but had to be asked to engage in such discussions.

"Never blindly take on others' ideas" Bhante often advised, and he was personally not blinded by his trust in others. Bhante also recognized that Bhante Ñāṇavīra had made some mistakes in his interpretations of specific Suttas (although he thought that Bhante Ñāṇavīra would be open to some of his criticisms) and believed that Bhante Ñāṇavīra would have changed some of his ideas if they had had a chance to discuss Dhamma together. But he felt also that these mistakes were not of great importance, being rather mundane, and they were not significant enough to cause him to doubt Bhante Ñāṇavīra's noble attainment.

Though generally praising *Notes on Dhamma,* Bhante paid little or no attention to Bhante Ñāṇavīra's discussion of "Fundamental Structure." Instead, he attended to that which referred to the supramundane. But here Bhante also pointed out that ideas which were essential for him

might not be essential for someone else.

Also, his general advice to others was to resist being inspired too quickly. Once, when a layperson he knew was inspired by another Western monk's teaching, Bhante wrote to him:

> "This may be sufficient to caution you about too enthusiastically accepting *any* interpretation of the Buddha Word, even if inspiringly presented. Having read and learned from the interpretations one returns to the un-interpreted Buddha Word, the inspirational power of which is inexhaustible."[1]

Regarding other teachings, Bhante never used the Abhidhamma and rarely the Commentaries in his practice. He was familiar with them and could see that there might be some valid points in them, but he never considered them to be the Buddha's Word. He had no inclination to criticize those texts, he just said that they were of no use in his practice. His only encouragement to monks who approached him was to encourage study of the Suttas, and to dedicate their lives fully to practising in the manner described in those texts. And he was always more than happy to discuss Dhamma with those who adopted such an attitude.

Thus, the Suttas were always his fundamental guide, and he lived in conformity with them to the fullest. He studied all the texts, memorized many of them, and even recited some of them by heart. For Bhante Ñāṇadīpa the Suttas were not merely some interesting collection of old literature from a forgotten time but something alive and vitally relevant, something that describes the fundamental nature of experience and existence. He felt that there could be no other texts in the world as personal as the Suttas. Sometimes, he said, he felt as if the Buddha was talking to him directly through his discourses. He once remarked:

> "Suttas are essential. According to the development of individuals, one takes different Suttas. In the Buddha's time, just a few Suttas were enough. But because today we do not get spoken words from the Awakened one, we have to read more from the Nikāyas."

---

1. A letter to Ranjan Wettimuny, 11th April, 2013.

METHOD

The main framework for practice in the Buddha's Teaching is the Eightfold Noble Path (*ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*): right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*), right intention (*sammā-saṅkappa*), right speech (*sammā-vācā*), right action (*sammā-kammanta*), right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*), right effort (*sammā-vāyāma*), right mindfulness (*sammā-sati*), and right collectedness (*sammā-samādhi*). And Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's practice did not skip or minimize any of these essential requirements for realizing Nibbāna.

In interviewing monks who knew Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, I encountered somewhat of a debate about what might have been Bhante's meditation system or technique of practice. In the spectrum of Buddhist "techniques" it can often be found that practitioners embrace one or two practical instructions, and all conversation about practice is then confined to just those things. However, it seems that Bhante did not use any such techniques, at least none that could be shared with the world. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise, for if we carefully examine the Suttas, "techniques" cannot be found, at least not in the various forms that we see in the world today. There are no step-by-step practices that require one to focus on some specific thing, like body-sweeping, visualizations, or mental absorptions focused upon a single object hoping that some special experience will be produced. There are, however, instructions concerning "gradual practice," the keeping of the Vinaya rules, sense-restraint, and the establishment of mindfulness. To which Bhante would add an emphasis on purifying virtue, learning Dhamma, enjoying Dhamma, practising seclusion, and striving right up to the last breath.

As stated above, in order to understand Bhante Ñāṇadīpa we have to be aware of Ven. Ñāṇavīra's approach to Dhamma and contemplation. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was very familiar with the most fundamental requirement: that proper attention be established, as emphasised also by Bhante Ñāṇavīra. And though Bhante Ñāṇadīpa disagreed with some of Bhante Ñāṇavīra's conclusions on other matters of Dhamma, their fundamental attitudes concerning contemplation was the same.

An important point to note is that, for Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, the most fundamental insight into Dhamma concerned the relationship between *saṅkhāra* and *dhamma*. Bhante learned how to restrain the tendency to think about Dhamma in terms of linear time-and-place (*tiracchāna*). Doing this requires the development of a contemplation that enables one

to discern in experience that which must be present on a *general* level for a *specific* thing to be concurrently present. To accomplish this one must avoid getting caught up in abstract and imaginary thinking with respect to these ideas. Instead, one must learn how to recognize the *background* of one's experience without making the background the object of investigation and thus bringing it to the foreground.

Bhante wrote an important marginalia note which illustrates his understanding of proper contemplation. He was commenting on a passage from the *Sallekha Sutta*, MN 8: "Does the abandoning and relinquishing of those views come about in a *bhikkhu* who is attending to the very beginning?" Bhante noted that "beginning" here means "root cause."

> "Here, Mahā Cunda is asking whether one has to go back to the 'very beginning' or root cause in order to abandon those views. The Buddha's answer is more practical: Focus on the *background* (the *yattha* or 'where'), both the source and the playground of those views. If that is seen as 'this is not mine etc.,' those views will not arise. In other words: abandon *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*—then no more views."

The contemplation of Dhamma is not so much in looking at something in time and space, but rather in recognizing the background which is present during that act of looking. For example, while we are attending to our breathing in and breathing out, we can recognize that the necessary background for this breathing is the body. We do not attend to the body directly, but we do recognize it as being there while we maintain attention on the breath. Similarly, we can attend to anger that has arisen in our minds, and recognize as a background the general purpose or desire to control unpleasant feelings. In fact, this is how Bhante dealt with his own proneness to anger.

In his Dhamma practice Bhante Ñāṇadīpa used an understanding of the similar relationship between *nāmarūpa* and *viññāṇa*, "name-and-matter" and "consciousness". In simple terms, as suggested by Ven. Ñāṇavīra, one can consider *nāmarūpa* to mean "phenomenon" and *viññāṇa* to mean "presence of phenomenon". Together, *nāmarūpa* and *viññāṇa* constitute the five *khandhā*s (the five "aggregates"), the irreducible constituents of experience. Bhante Ñāṇavīra, in *Notes on Dhamma*, describes their relationship:

"In any experience (leaving out of account *arūpa*), there is a *phenomena* that is *present* (i.e., that is cognized). The presence, or cognition, or consciousness, of the phenomenon, is *viññāṇa* (q.v.). The phenomenon has two characteristics, *inertia*, and *designation* (*patigha* and *adhivacana*). The *inertia* of a phenomenon is *rūpa* ('matter' or 'substance'), which may also be seen as its *behaviour*; and this *presents itself only in the passage of time (however short)*. (These four *mahābhūtā* are the general modes of behaviour or matter: *earthy*, or persistent and resistant, or solid; *watery*, or cohesive; *fiery*, or ripening, or maturing; *airy*, or tense, or distended, or moving. [...]) The *designation* of a phenomenon is *nāma* ('name'), which may be seen also as its *appearance* (the form or guise adopted by the behaviour, as distinct from the behaviour itself). [...] To be *present* is to be here-and-now; to be *absent* is to be here-and-then (then = *not* now; at some other time) or there-and-now (there = *not* here; at some other place) or there-and-then. *Attention* is (intentional) difference between presence and absence, i.e., between varying degrees of presence, of consciousness ('Let this be present, let that be absent!'). *Consciousness* is the difference between presence (in *any* degree) and utter non-presence (i.e. non-existence)."[2]

2. This excerpt is from *Notes on Dhamma*, "A Note on Nāma" by Ñāṇavīra Thera.

This passage was fundamental, even crucial, for Bhante Ñāṇadīpa. For Bhante, without having a basic understanding of *nāmarūpa* and its relationship to *viññāṇa,* one could be led in a wrong direction.

Since Bhante Ñāṇadīpa did not offer any personally designed techniques, monks and lay devotees who came to him wondered if his method was a secret. In fact, there was nothing hidden and nothing to hide. As Bhante said, it is essential to resist the temptation to be drawn towards "things," and categories of behaviour. This means that one must do more than just restrain the senses: one must not act with anger or passion and resist an inclination to judge and criticize others (though Bhante was extremely scrupulous with regard to standards of personal conduct). It also means that one must not become fixated on a particular practice nor hold on to an object and get obsessed with it. And this means that one has to restrain the impulse to seek any special or unique experience.

Also, Bhante said, there is a danger if one rigidly holds to certain established approaches to Buddhist practice: one can easily become lost in abstract views (*diṭṭhi-upādāna*). "But, there are no different truths," said Bhante, "*samaṇa brāhmaṇa*, through various *saññās* (perceptions) think that *saññās* are permanent, and then arrive at this conflict, leading to the statement that 'only this is true, everything else is false'." One should not hold the reins of practice so tightly.

In practice one must be careful not to become a seeker of some special experience or identify with a certain practice. There is the danger that one is diverted from the task of recognizing the fundamental nature of *dukkha* and one thus lack the urgency needed to develop wisdom.

CITTĀNUPASSANĀ

One's practice is not something to be developed abstractly by just focusing on what may be in front of oneself and then trying to analyse it. The context, the associated mental aspects of what is central, should not be ignored. Ignoring these aspects means tolerating and welcoming a fundamental ignorance – the ignorance that is the source of one's fundamental existential pain. Thus Bhante Ñāṇadīpa noted that one must not focus solely on what is at the forefront of experience – attending only to the positive object will be useless. We must include all other mental aspects of experience in our investigations, which function more like a

background to the specific objects of experience and must be recognized as such. If we believe that we need a special technique for contemplation, the danger arises that we will try to create or look for some "thing" there, the positive object, forgetting or missing the object's broader context or supporting background. Related to this understanding of the nature of experience, Bhante noted that the five aggregates cannot be separated and then investigated separately, but that their mutually dependent relationship must be discerned.

Though "techniques" are of little value, there *is,* however, a way to reflect properly, and this will take us to the "method" that Bhante used in his own practice. When people asked him about meditation, he would usually say: *cittānupassanā*, mindfulness of the mind. With the guidance of the Suttas he developed his own understanding of this important concept, and it seems he benefited from doing so. *Cittānupassanā* is the third of the four foundations for establishing mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*). It is explained and taught by the Buddha in several discourses, the *Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* ("Greater Discourse on the Foundation of Mindfulness," DN 22), the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* ("Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness," MN 10), and throughout the *Satipaṭṭhāna-samyutta* (SN, Chapter 47). The relevant text is as follows:

> *"And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind? Here a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust/hate/delusion as mind affected by lust/hate/delusion, and mind unaffected by lust/hate/delusion as mind unaffected by lust/hate/delusion. He understands contracted/distracted/exalted/unexalted mind as contracted/distracted/exalted/unexalted mind. He understands surpassed/unsurpassed mind as surpassed/unsurpassed mind. He understands concentrated/unconcentrated mind as concentrated/unconcentrated mind. He understands liberated/unliberated mind as liberated/unliberated mind.*
>
> *"In this way, he abides contemplating mind as mind internally, or he abides contemplating mind as mind externally, or both. Or else he abides contemplating in mind its arising factors, or he abides contemplating in mind its vanishing factors, or both. Or else mindfulness that 'there is mind' is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a bhikkhu abides, contemplating mind as mind."*

Bhante's work with *cittānupassanā* apparently mostly involved examining emotions, together with their determinations or conditions. For example, when a feeling of emotional injury arises, behind it there will be a condition which determines that quality of hurt, such as, e.g. conceit. If one examines the painful event closely, one will find out that there is attachment present as well, a form of craving. And recognizing the pain arising dependent on that attachment one might be able to drop any anger that has arisen with that craving. One can then start to recognize that one's mind or Self is in reality nothing but craving. There is the pain of desire: desire to be something other than what one is now, to have something one does not possess now – an endless need to "create my self," which can never be fulfilled. And since there is no lasting fulfilment of this or any other need, through the acquisition of objects of desire, the only way to bring this dilemma to an end is to "go against the stream," to resist the

pull of those needs and desires. This is done by "tracking back" to the sources of pain: the attachment, craving, ignorance, and the fundamental conceit of subjectivity. In this way anger and passion can fade away. That is why there is no space in such meditation or contemplation to resist or push aside painful feelings, or to judge experiences as the reason for pain. For Bhante it was crucial to investigate pain and to understand it, rather than either explaining it for the sake of some release or denying it with the use of some monotonous technique.

But Bhante also pointed out that accomplishing this cannot necessarily be regarded as a durable attainment. There needs to be repeated discernment of this law of Dhamma, a recognition of its universality to the degree that one has seen the Four Noble Truths. These Truths describe the arising of pain determined by craving at the most fundamental level. All this has to be done in a direct and straightforward manner, not through logical analysis, at the level of actually felt emotions. It is more about *seeing* this truth, this law of Dhamma, rather than figuring it out. And when this has been done, one might then make use of the fourth foundation of mindfulness (*dhammānupassanā*) in the investigation of the determination of conceit (*dhamma* used here in the sense of "teaching" rather than as "mental phenomena"). The important thing is to be directly involved with the object of investigation and its context.

The recognition that all things (*dhamma*s) arise dependent upon determinations (*saṅkhārā*) is crucial to all this: everything (*dhamma*) has a background, a support. And one must see that background, those determinations as impermanent and beyond one's control in order to see the impermanence of the thing in the forefront. This is how the perception of impermanence regarding the mind is developed. Seeing that one's mind is not really one's own, it need not be acted upon.

And how is one to discern these qualities of experience? Bhante said that by restraint of the senses, developed collectedness (*samādhi*), and with the development of mindfulness one may become aware of what is subjectively happening in the more general sense. There is no need for a step-by-step technique; only the application of mindfulness and the other seven factors of the Noble Path are required, as the Buddha instructed, throughout the day in all activities. Mindfulness should be considered something like "remembering" what is already there, rather than "doing something" or "getting somewhere." And, as with all practice, the Suttas remain essential for they provide a description of things as they are.

We must recognize within our own minds what the Teachings describe, and be less inclined to look for confirmations of our own speculations.

Bhante learned this when he was still new in robes, when he was absorbed in Bhante Ñāṇavīra's *Notes on Dhamma*. The important message here is to not think about Dhamma abstractly, but to learn how to practise it concretely:

> "Now all conceptual thinking is *abstract*; that is to say, the thought or concept is entirely divorced from reality; it is removed from existence and is (in Kierkegaard's phrase) *sub specie aeterni*. *Concrete* thinking on the other hand thinks the object *while the object is present*, and this, in the strict sense of the word, is *reflexion* or *mindfulness*. One is mindful of what one is doing, of what one is seeing, while one is actually doing (or seeing) it. This, naturally, is very much more complicated than abstract thinking. Still, it has an undeniable advantage: if one is thinking (or being mindful) of something while it is actually present, no mistake is possible, and one is directly in touch with reality; but in abstract thinking, there is every chance of an error, since, as I pointed out above, the concepts with which we think are composite affairs, built up of an arbitrary lot of individual experiences (books, conversations, past observations, and so on)."[3]

Abstract thinking occurs when we focus on content, compare things and analyse them in time and space. We do this all the time: thinking about what we are going to eat, where we want to go, how to get out of trouble; asking if God exists, what the connection between the nerves, the brain and the mind is; speculating about politics and philosophy. But concrete thinking is thinking about things while they are present: body, feelings, moods, etc. Only with concrete thinking can we start to contemplate Dhamma in the right way.

Therefore this concrete thinking or mindfulness, cannot be something that we actively *do*. If we are *doing* it we are moving towards abstraction. For Bhante, mindfulness is just "laying out the work to be done. It's not doing the work."

> "When such an impasse arises, one can be mindful of the impasse.

3. This excerpt is from *Clearing the Path*, "Letter 88" by Ñāṇavīra Thera.

> There is stepping back from and looking at the experience. But also, and just as important, there is the being involved in the experience. That is to say, there is not me here, stepping back from experience there."

And how are we to connect more directly with experience? Bhante Bodhesako had a long discussion with Bhante Ñāṇadīpa about this, and he came up with the following answers: Bhante Ñāṇadīpa emphasized that emotions must be *experienced*. They cannot just be imagined. Emotions are the great deceivers, and one must investigate: When there is an emotion, what else is there at the same time? With what as a condition is there this emotion? Bhante said, generally it is "hurt." And with what as condition is there hurt? The answer should be conceit (*māna*), pride (*atimāna*), and inferiority-pride (*omāna*). The main point with respect to practice is that one must establish a proper frame of mind, i.e. establish contemplation with concrete thinking. Then one can start to recognize how the elements of phenomena are beyond our control, how they relate to one another, and one begins to see their nature as impermanent (*anicca*), painful (*dukkha*) and not-self (*anatta*).

Bhante often stressed that he would not say that this approach to working with emotions and moods was suitable for everyone; we must all find our own way. But there is a sense of what needs to be done. One has to make an effort to purify virtue, to abide in seclusion, to absolutely maintain restraint, to be content with little, to maintain constant mindfulness, and to recall the teachings of the Buddha. There are no other ways to realize Dhamma. It requires more than just an occasional session of sitting meditation. He did not believe that a person living in a city, with its many distractions, can come to understand what has to be realized. The same is true for one who is distracted with social activities, or many worldly duties. One has to offer one's whole self to Dhamma.

For Bhante *cittānupassanā* was not just for understanding Dhamma; it also helped him recover from sickness. With a well-established mind, one can see that a present illness does not actually need an owner, and one can leave it solely to the body. With the release of all the unnecessary pressure employed trying to control it, the disease fades, and eventually, with the power of the mind, one can quickly recover from it. This practice is similar to that described in the Suttas. For example, in SN 46:14 we learn that setting up mindfulness, investigating phenomena, and developing other factors can actually cure one of an illness.

SAMATHA

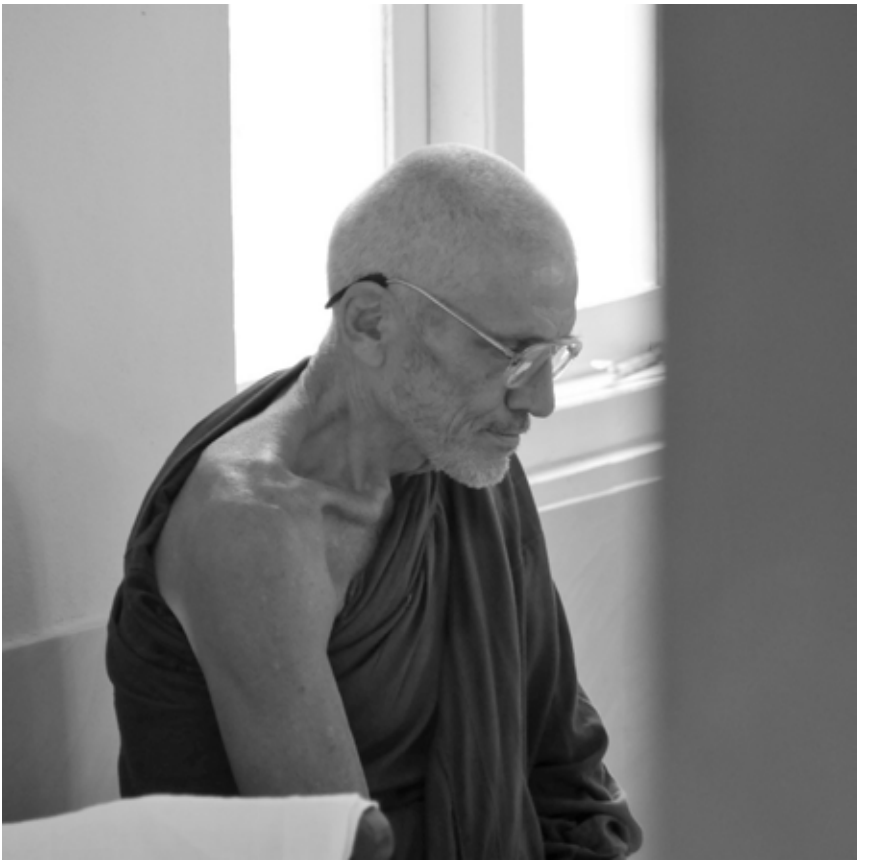
As a young monk, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa struggled to develop a deep state of calm (*samatha*). While in Būndala, he made a great effort in this regard and managed to achieve a sense of serenity. He asked Bhante Ñāṇasumana, who had considerable skill in *samatha*, for advice on how to achieve durable peace of mind, and was guided by him in the use of *ānāpānasati* (mindfulness of breathing) which helped him to a certain degree.

But in discussions with *sāmaṇera* Bodhesako Bhante advised him that he should not worry too much about developing *samatha*. He said: "That is a different vehicle, and not everyone is suited to an approach with *samatha* foremost, maybe a few are." Bhante knew early on that he would have to take a different approach, something that the Buddha recognized was required for some people.

That remark to Bhante Bodhesako was made at a time when Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was struggling with *ānāpānasati*. Sometime later he was introduced to the teachings of Ajahn Lee, a disciple of Ajahn Mun, and a meditation master from Thailand. The main feature of Ajahn Lee's teaching has to do with his treatment of the breath while meditating. His instruction was to play with the breath and try different kinds of breathing to discover and provide the right place to settle down for the mind. Ajahn Lee taught that the meditator should not just watch the in and out breaths, but should also investigate the body's breath energies. For breathing is not just the movement of air in and out of the lungs; rather it's connected to the dynamic energies of the body as well, and one can play with these energies via the breath to make meditation more interesting. The point is to not try to settle the mind – one should not force it to be still. Instead one has to use good judgement to figure out how to make the mind *want* to settle down. This model of breath meditation helped Bhante to establish calm in a more beneficial way.

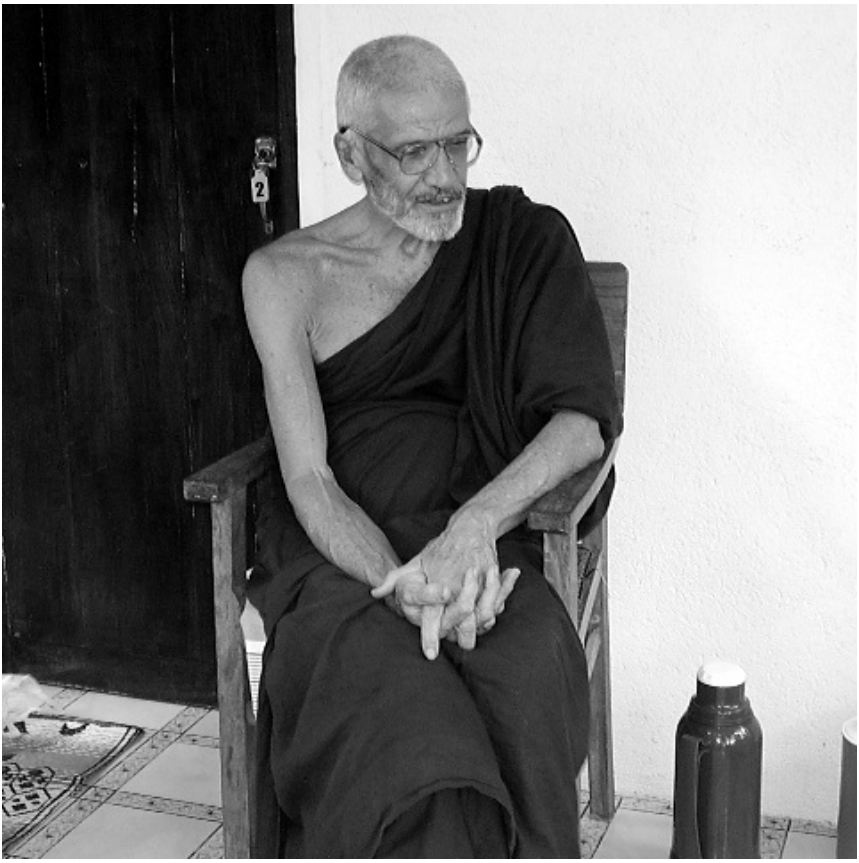
However, Bhante did not consider *ānāpānasati* to be a sixteen stage practice as described by the Commentarial tradition for he did not see it as a linear step-by-step guide. Rather he felt that it described sixteen possible options one could discern while breathing in and breathing out. *Ānāpānasati* was a practical tool for Bhante, which he used for looking at *dukkha* and for discovering its origin.

We should note that Bhante also practised body awareness with yoga (especially the headstand), and he adopted the practice of standing on



his head for over thirty minutes a day. He also discovered that creating and holding a mental image of the colour blue calmed his mind, and used this practice during surgical treatments, impressing doctors with his calm endurance.

When talking to other monks, Bhante warned that they should not think that they could gain the fruits of Dhamma with *samādhi* alone. One should not separate *samādhi* from the broader aim of the Dhamma, which is to develop wisdom and freedom from suffering. He said that *samādhi* should be coupled with right view, and there cannot be right *samādhi* if there is not right view. Bhante believed that having only *samādhi* would be quite dangerous: Under such circumstances practitioners could easily accept any spiritual idea, no matter what. They might be Christian, Muslim, Hindu or follow any other ideology since without right view, they would just be collectors of unique experiences, without understanding.



(Bhante disagreed with the popular notion that other religions can also lead to freedom from suffering. He once said: "They seek permanence.")

For that reason he did not recommend S. N. Goenka's style of meditation, since it lacks precisely what is necessary: a means of developing the mind in a way that could support the growth of wisdom. By merely observing "sensations" one will not be able to discern the background of, or conditions giving rise to, mental defilements. Such instructions use only fragments of the Buddha's Teaching – not enough to lead one to liberation.

Is *jhāna* essential for the attainment of *arahat*ship? Of course it is—at least the first *jhāna*. But Bhante would admit that he was not the best person to discuss these advanced states of concentration, and that it would be better to approach someone else for useful information about them. However, he did claim that he had achieved a state of *jhāna* while

reading Suttas, at least at some point in his life. It seems that, while reading the Buddha's discourses, one can at the same time recognize in one's own experience the things described therein. This experience can lead to a withdrawal from engagement with concepts and permit the development of a unification of the mind, together with mental joy and physical pleasure. An example of just such an occurrence is found in SN 46:3 where a monk, as he investigated Dhamma, fulfilled all seven of the enlightenment factors, including *samādhi*, and realized Nibbāna.

In addition to the approaches to meditation described above, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa developed *mettā* contemplations in order to deal with feelings of irritation and anger. These involved first the creation of an attitude of good-will towards himself, which then formed a basis for the development of *mettā* for others, and eventually he was able to reduce his susceptibility to irritation by maintaining a healthy and kind mental attitude toward all beings.

SADDHA

Bhante eventually came to realize that his personal approach to the Buddha's Teachings was essentially faith-oriented. In the Suttas, Noble Ones are described as having been able to reach their high levels of attainment primarily through the strength and agency of one of three character traits: that of deep faith, the use of wisdom or intellect, or great skill in *samādhi*. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa believed his path was on the side of faith (*saddhānusāri*). Having got to know him, I knew he would say that *samādhi* was not his strength, and I used to think that he made his greatest progress through the use of his intellect. But on reflection I can see how *saddhā* might have been the superior quality influencing his growth in Dhamma. For how could he risk his security and comfort in Denmark for a homeless life in Sri Lanka? How could he stay alone, eat food that was not always the best for Westerners, sleep under trees, and live in dangerous and insecure forests where there are snakes, leopards, bears and elephants? How could he walk up to the edge of death if there was not great faith, a total trust in the Dhamma? He broke ties with his family and relations, with his origins, with monasteries, all because of his firm conviction that he was on the right path. Nothing of this kind can be done without faith. Faith can arouse great power and a fierce de-

termination to risk anything; a trust that the Dhamma will protect one who is virtuous and meditative.

Bhante's great faith is also reflected in his practice of reciting verses (*gāthās*) from the Suttas. He really loved them. He loved Dhamma. And he read these verses with faith, and they increased his confidence. As the Buddha said: with outstanding dedication, with sufficient wisdom and *samādhi*, one can be liberated (*saddhāvimutta*).

The differences in character and aptitudes among monks might explain why there are sometimes differences in the ways they teach, for each monk has a unique personality. One teacher might inspire in others' hearts a faith in Dhamma, like Bhante, while another could emphasize making a clear, cold, penetrating thrust, straight at the heart of ignorance, as did Bhante Ñāṇavīra. Still others might emphasize the cultivation of a stillness of mind as a support for penetrating insight, like Bhante's old friend Ñāṇasumana. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa would often say that what worked for him might not work for others, and that everyone had to find their own approach. However, this did not mean that they should necessarily follow their own preference – that would likely lead only to the proliferation of views that had already been established. What really matters is that one find a way to radically question one's opinions, perspective and prejudices and to become free of them all. One should not be like a jumping monkey which, after releasing one branch, immediately grasps another one. In fact, all three factors of mind must be developed – wisdom, composure, and faith – and only later will one discover which of them will ultimately lead the way.

On the question of what his own method of practice was, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa declared that it was "to delight in the Dhamma." His regular recitation of Sutta verses brought joy to his heart, and one could see, at an assembly of monks, that while Bhante was reciting a verse in Pāli his face would brighten. He genuinely enjoyed memorizing these verses – that was obvious to all who knew him, and at the appropriate time and place he would recite a verse or two in Pāli. Even when he was sick and close to his death, when his memory was not quite intact, he could recite any verse that he had memorized with ease and delight. These had been neatly written in his notebooks which he carried with him throughout his life.

Bhante paid great attention to these simple notebooks, the first of which was made while living in the Sinharaja forest in 1981-82. It contained about one thousand verses, arranged section by section, which

he recited weekly in three half-hour sessions per day: in the morning, after lunch, and in the evening. He named his notebook *Sattānagāthā*, and it kept growing during his time in Laggala (from 1984 onwards). When it had reached some three-thousand verses a new notebook had to be started (at Galamudana, the first *kuṭī*, in 1987), and by then it took three weeks to recite them all. And verses continued to be added, reaching a peak of more than 3200 while Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was in the Balangoda-Wellanuraya area (from 2006 onwards).

In its last stage the three-week system reached a point where it could no longer be maintained. At Dadayanpola, in 2008, Bhante decided to reshape the entire collection into units of equal length, for recitation in a single evening. This was a "free" system, a free choice for each day. The former material was reduced to 3055 verses, arranged into 55 groups with an average of about 55 verses per group. This collection was called *Pancapannāsāgāthā*, and with some slight alterations it became Bhante's Third Book, written in the Galamuduna (new *kuṭi*) in 2012, and slightly amended in Galpiyam in 2015. One section, *Mārasenā* S17, was removed entirely, necessitating a new name for the book: *Catupannasāgāthā*.

Bhante had already had some inclinations towards poetry as a layman, and that continued also in his monastic life. Verses were his favourite part of the Canon, because they are concise and one can keep them in mind. But he remarked that it was required to be familiar with the whole Canon to be able to understand those verses. Verses alone were not sufficient.

Bhante said that for a *saddhānusāri*, a faith-follower, it was not enough just to have trust in the Buddha and his Teaching. Rather, a full and unshakeable conviction concerning impermanence, suffering, and not-self was required. Such faith was therefore not to be placed in any particular thing, object or idea, but had to be grounded in the confidence that arose with wisdom.

FRUITION

Bhante was determined not to leave his work half-done. He wanted to fulfil his purpose as a bhikkhu, and was tireless in his efforts to realize final knowledge and attain Nibbāna. But as far as we know he never claimed to have done so, and we will never know the degree of his success for sure.

In his old age he said he was content. During his final illness, which

he knew was terminal, he expressed a hope for some more time for practice, to work towards Nibbāna. But, at the same time, he accepted the fact that his body was subject to the laws of nature, and he was content with what was in store. And he had no regrets about the past.

Bhante realized that *asmimāna* is not something of the past; it is present before thought, i.e. it is fully there even in the quietest mind. Such a mind, still and supremely calm, reveals its *dukkha* if proper attention is applied. When this is truly seen there is no longer a need for learning, for curiosity or for new information; nothing new needs to be experienced. But what has been seen must be taken up, deepened, and used to fully penetrate the mind, leaving no trace of *asmimāna.*

Certainly, Bhante's attainments were often the subject of speculation. People understandably wanted to know if there was some kind of reward that comes from following a lifestyle such as Bhante's. On those occasions, when monks would dare to ask directly about his attainments, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa would generally point out the inappropriateness of such questions. But curious monks still tried to test him with indirect questions to determine in just which category to place him. But Bhante was not concerned with the world's measurements and did not want to engage with them. Whatever conclusions people arrived at are mere speculations and simply could not be seen as reliable.

But, too often, it seems others "knew" more about his attainments than he did himself! There was an incident, which took place on the morning after a Saṅgha meeting in Laggala, and it illustrates Bhante's attitude about the veneration he tended to receive. On that occasion Bhante was aware that many people had come to honour him with their offer of a meal, believing that he was an enlightened being, an *arahat*. But he would not appear for the meal with the other monks, for those devotees wished to worship an *arahat* and he knew he was not, meaning those offerings were not for him. He felt it would be wrong under those circumstances to show his presence and receive their offerings. And he added, "Anyway, I do not need much."

This desire of many of Bhante's lay supporters to worship an *arahat* could occasionally lead to some embarrassing and sometimes amusing confusion. When vacating a *kuṭī* for good, Bhante would routinely dedicate the dwelling to the wider Saṅgha, and on one such occasion there was also a group of devotees present. Bhante formally announced that he was offering the *kuṭī* for other monks, stating: "I am offering it to the

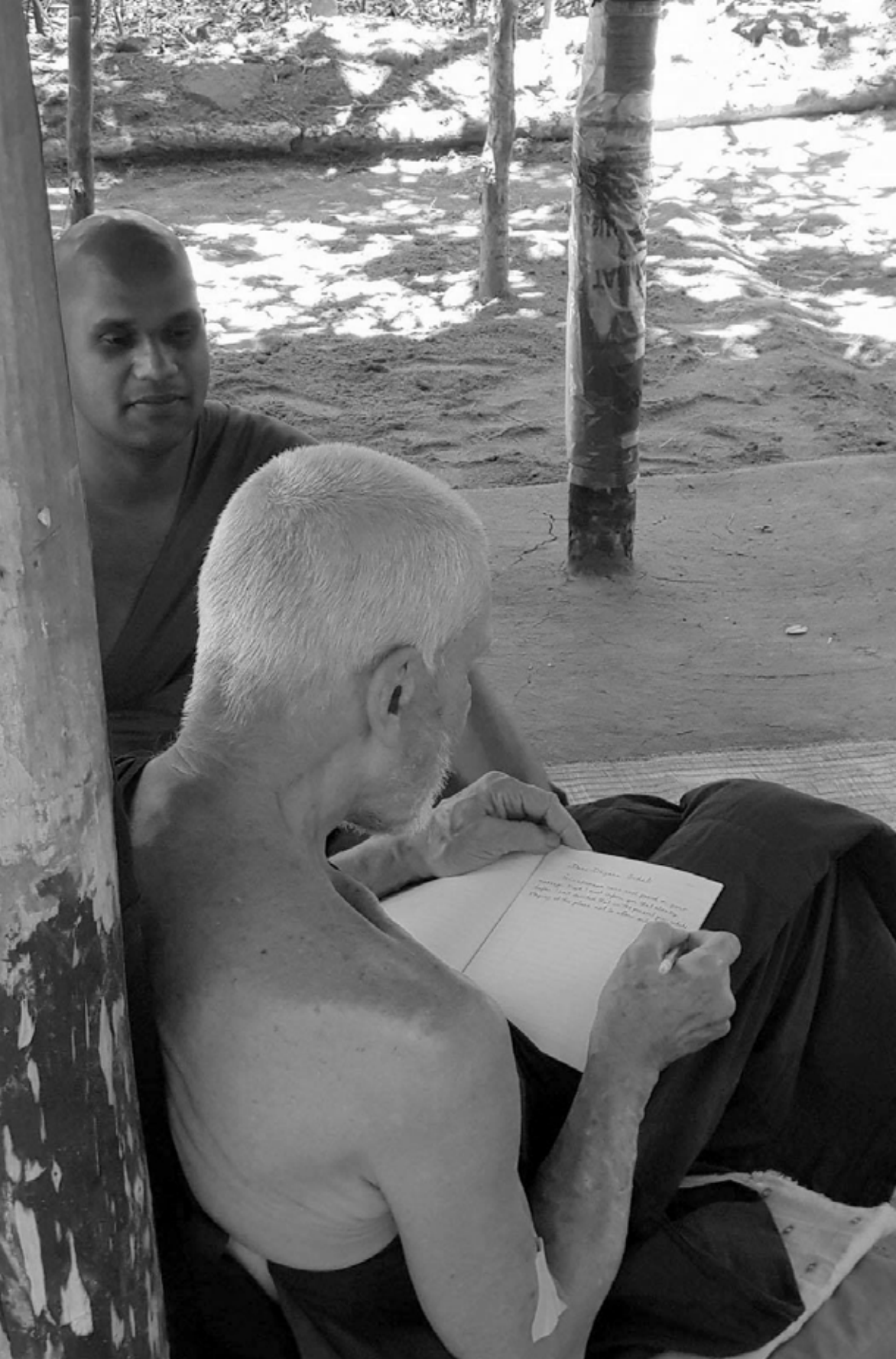
Saṅgha of the Four quarters, to all past *arahat*s, and to the Saṅgha yet to come." But the laypeople misunderstood him and thought that he just claimed that he was an *arahat*! This was a great delight to hear! They exclaimed with joy: "*Sādhu! Sādhu! Sādhu!*" Bhante was initially surprised by such an unexpected outburst of delight, and he looked around in confusion to see other monks' expressions. He quickly realized that there was a misunderstanding, which he immediately corrected with his usual sincerity: "I am not on that level yet. I was referring to the *arahat*s of the past, and I was dedicating it to them." This shows how easily one such as Bhante could become admired by the faithful too quickly – but Bhante never wanted such devotion, and always pointed people to the truth.

When people asked him about higher *jhānas*, super-human abilities, and other unique experiences, Bhante always dismissed their questions. He said:

> "We have to remember that the Buddha's Teachings, as recorded in the Suttas, are not concerned with special experiences of *puthujjanas*, but are concerned about the Noble Way. That is why it is not essential to debate if *puthujjanas* can have high *jhānas* or other attainments. That is not important. What is important is to understand Dhamma!"

And that was the whole point. It is a waste of time to discuss attainments. Instead, it is important to establish faith in the Buddha and to practise according to his guidance. The monastic discipline includes a rule (*pācittiya*) prohibiting monks from discussing their own achievements with laypeople. And it is an even graver offence (*pārājika*) to deceive others with respect to one's attainments. For there is always the danger of establishing personality cults and creating splinter groups of monks dedicated to various teachers. All monks, even those who are fully liberated, must acknowledge the Buddha as their fundamental teacher. No matter how noble an individual monk might be, it is the Buddha whom one should focus one's deepest attention and respect towards.

For this reason Bhante Ñāṇadīpa did not support the practice, found in some other traditions, of monks recognizing one another's attainments. He saw a greater risk of danger in this, more than any possible good and wholesome effect. "The realization of the Four Noble Truths is a personal matter, and it does not concern others. Just do not worry about Noble attainments," Bhante said, "but keep walking on the path to realize Nibbāna."



VIII
Dhamma
(Showing the Path)

TEACHING

Practice should always be a higher calling than teaching others. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was sceptical of monks who had an ambition to lead and teach. Such monks usually got involved with people far too early in their training, while their understanding was still incomplete and unreliable. When teaching, one can become overly engaged in interacting and communicating with others and in this way one will compromise one's own practice. False confidence tends to grow and such monks often become seekers of praise, gain and fame rather than promoters of relinquishing, abandoning, and letting go. Bhante felt that being a teacher should never be a priority in a monk's life but that monks should be disciples until they attain complete freedom from *dukkha*.

We can see this attitude reflected in Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's life. He always avoided the role of being a teacher and never took on a responsibility for disciples. In his own eyes, with full honesty, he knew he still had work to do in Dhamma and, even in old age, he remained first and foremost a disciple of the Buddha. Certainly, he enjoyed discussing Dhamma, and he answered questions that were put to him. But he never considered the offering of advice, or even instruction, to be his profession, or something that he would allow to compromise his seclusion and progress in the practice of Dhamma.

In the same way, he encouraged other monks to avoid teaching if possible, or at least to establish some boundaries. Teaching, when one has not fully realized the truths of the Dhamma, is not beneficial for anyone – not for oneself (for one may stop making an effort to realize those truths), and not for others (who could be exposed to wrong views). It was of crucial importance to Bhante that, in the Dhamma, we have enough humility to be able to listen rather than be listened to, to learn rather

than to teach, to realize Dhamma rather than to "save the world." Māra's temptations can manifest in many ways, even in the allure of becoming a teacher of Dhamma.

When it came to Dhamma discussions, it was often not easy for Bhante to communicate with others, since they generally wished to discuss theoretical "points" and "facts." When Bhante noticed that a practitioner was excessively seeking abstract explanations on some topic, he would sometimes dismiss him, even saying something like, "that is too advanced for you," or "you cannot understand that," or "we can agree to disagree." Bhante was aware of the difficulty in communicating the essence of Dhamma, so he might turn the conversation more to an encouragement of monks to live in seclusion. For perhaps only then will a monk truly recognize his mind (*cittanimitta*), and then be able to ask the right questions.

Sometimes Bhante Ñāṇadīpa did not have a ready answer to a question, a fact he would not hesitate to acknowledge. These instances often became a useful and welcome prompt for him to consult the Suttas and thereby expand his own knowledge, which might in turn prompt his reflection on important aspects of Dhamma that might not have been clear to him.

Nowadays in Sri Lanka there is a kind of desperate desire for meditation teachers and techniques and people would approach Bhante Ñāṇadīpa with this hope for guidance. But he never provided practical meditation instruction. The most useful instruction he would give people was to encourage them to purify their virtue. He would say: "When you purify your virtue, you will meet suitable and wonderful friends." On one occasion, he said to a devoted monk follower who often brought him requisites: "Friend, now it is enough for accumulating merit. Meditate now." One has to take good care of one's virtue and acquire stores of merit accumulated through generosity, but Bhante repeatedly emphasized that that was not enough. His advice was to seek seclusion. It was not just because he saw limitations in the use of techniques, but this was also his way of avoiding creating a personal style that could "sell well," that would ensure he was never in danger of attracting disciples and becoming the subject of a cult or guru following.

Bhante never gave long discourses. He did not like them, and also they were not his strength. He preferred to talk little. And when he spoke, it was more on the level of a conversation rather than lecturing – short but to the point.

And when he spoke it was not easy for everyone to understand him. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's knowledge was too advanced for many, and he had a habit of using a great many Pāli words, even reciting in Pāli passages from the Suttas. One who is new to the study of Dhamma would very likely find himself a bit lost and intimidated in all those "deep" matters. But the main message was always to practice the hard way, which is the only way to make a breakthrough in Dhamma today. After listening to Bhante many monks were energized and motivated to make an increased effort to realize the truth.

When Bhante had discussions with large groups of people he tended to be "encyclopaedic," bringing up Sutta passages from memory. He was brilliant in remembering these passages in Pāli, and noting their connections with other parts of the Canon. Listeners would always be impressed. But he rarely talked about his personal understanding of Dhamma in these circumstances, intentionally avoiding that subject. In his later years he opened up more about it, but even then he would do so only when in private conversation with one other person.

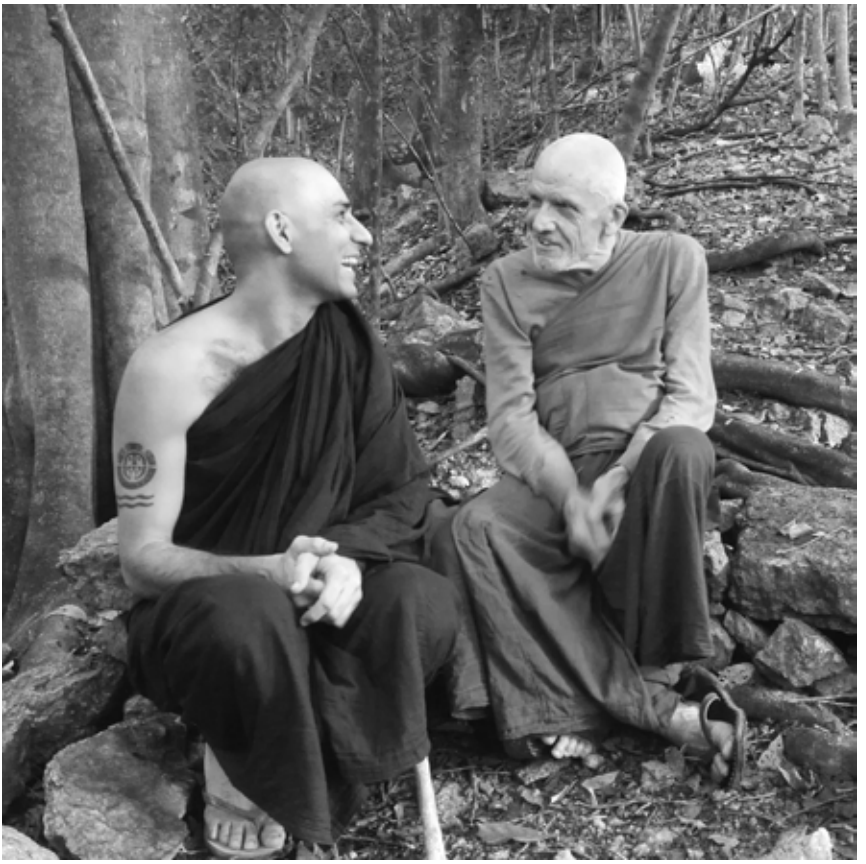
Many times Bhante encouraged others thus: the forest is the teacher, the forest can be regarded as a chapel where we try to "hear" the Dhamma, and it is the battleground where we face Māra's army, the mental defilements (*kilesa*s). Bhante said that we cannot see these defilements when we are amid sensual and other distractions. Only when we go to a

solitary place, to a forest, and we start to recollect our past will we notice these defilements. And with that reflection, we will not forget what led to such a state, and then we will be able to establish a commitment to future restraint. The forest can be where we step back a bit from engagement with the world and clear our minds. Lonely places away from people should be our "retreat centres."

"Going to seclusion, one can also better recognize the three feelings," Bhante said. There are three kinds of feeling: pleasant, painful, and neither-pleasant-nor-painful. But when we are engaged with the world, we do not recognize the surface of our experiences as a feeling. Rather, there are the engrossing qualities of passion, aversion and the sense of subjective existence – which means the whole mass of suffering. And in this context Bhante found it crucial to reflect on *bhavanirodha nibbāna*, "with the cessation of existence, Nibbāna," which he understood as: with the *understanding* of feeling one can become free. But to arrive at this understanding of feeling, one has to abide alone.

ADVICE FOR NEW MONKS

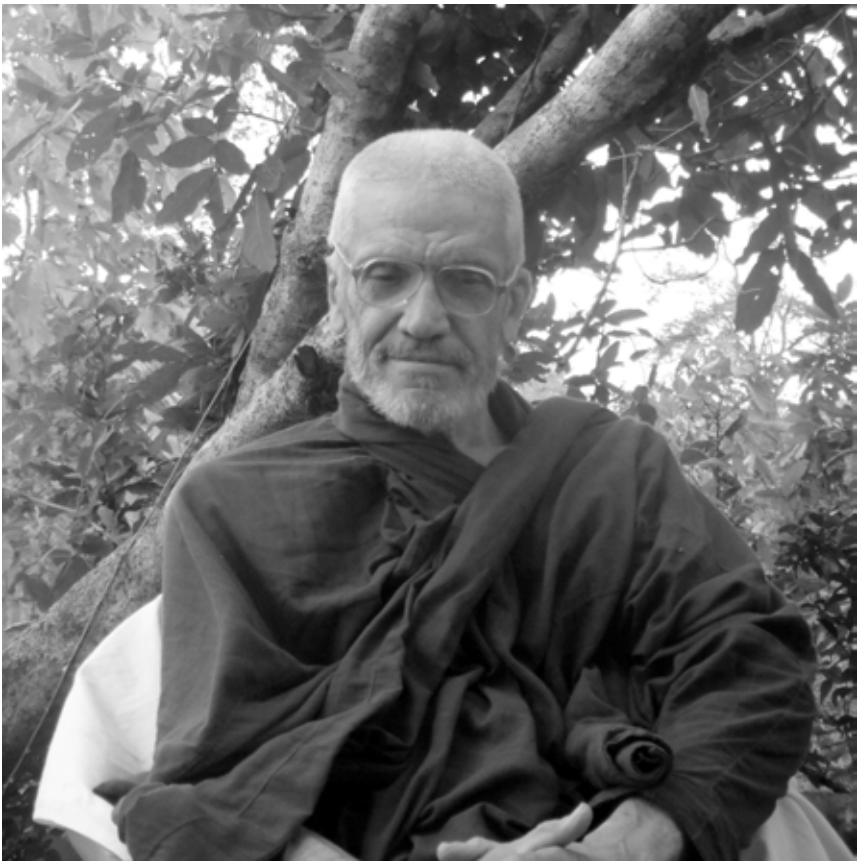
Many novices and newly-ordained monks approached Bhante Ñāṇadīpa. He was an inspirational figure, and some of those who sought him out ordained because of this inspiration. Even though Bhante refused to take on the responsibilities of a teacher, in order to protect his freedom, he was nevertheless willing to respond to the questions of newcomers on appropriate occasions. If they had not taken full ordination as *bhikkhu*s, he would encourage them to do so, because the Buddha formulated the Vinaya for the welfare of others. The Buddha is the one who knows and sees, and the Vinaya was given to us out of compassion. Bhante would also make clear to new monks that they should stay in a suitable place and find a good teacher. They should not be in a hurry to move to the forest and be alone, but should go to a suitable forest hermitage (*araññha*) where they should put in an extra effort to purify virtue (*sīla*) and learn the Code (*vinaya*). But new monks should avoid staying in town monasteries where they could quickly become occupied with duties and be distracted by activities and sensual attractions. Staying in forest hermitages, where they could practice seclusion with mentors and guides, was the best way to start monastic life.



Also, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa felt that it was necessary for a monk to spend time to learn the language of Pāli. The Suttas are written in Pāli and, in order to avoid being misled by imperfect translations, it is better to read them in their original language. Bhante said that one could feel much closer to the Buddha if one reads his discourses in Pāli – "one could almost hear the Buddha's voice." Pāli has a deep connection with the ancient World of Dhamma.

In a similar vein, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was in agreement with Bhante Ñāṇavīra's assessment regarding the trustworthiness of the Suttas:

> "These books of the Pāli Canon correctly represent the Buddha's Teaching and can be regarded as trustworthy throughout. (Vinayapitaka:) Suttavibhanga, Mahāvagga, Cūlavagga; (Suttapitaka:) Dīghanikāya, Majjhimanikāya, Samyuttanikāya, Anguttaranikāya, Suttanipāta,



> Dhammapada, Udāna, Itivuttaka, Theratherīgāthā. [...] No other Pāli books whatsoever should be taken as authoritative, and ignorance of them (and particularly of the traditional Commentaries) may be counted a positive advantage, as leaving less to be unlearned."[1]

Thus all monks were encouraged to become familiar with the Suttas, and to apply them to their own practice and contemplation.

But of course, within the Suttas, there might be a very small selection of passages that have been wrongly transmitted throughout the centuries. This could sometimes be of concern to new monks, but Bhante was not too worried about these rare instances. Rather, he encouraged monks to look for the Dhamma in the Suttas, to discover the meaning

1. This excerpt is from *Notes on Dhamma*, "Preface", footnote (a) by Ñāṇavīra Thera.

the discourses conveyed, and not to develop the habit of obsessively searching for linear connections between them and then get carried away by scholarly studies.

But for those who did not know Pāli and preferred to read the Suttas in English, he recommended the translations of Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi as being the best available at present. Bhante held that there were no reliable translations before Ven. Bodhi's, and there was no alternative to them but to learn Pāli and read the Suttas in the original language.

Regarding daily practice, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was succinct: he felt that it was good to spend about two or three hours a day studying in order to gain knowledge, but not more than that. One had also to spend sufficient time meditating and developing mindfulness. Related to this, Bhante encouraged practitioners to be very careful with sleep – one should be devoted to wakefulness. He had personally reduced sleep to three hours, but said that for others five hours should be sufficient, and insisted that six hours was too much, for the practitioner had to avoid sluggishness. However, sometimes an afternoon rest of an hour or so was acceptable; as was practised by Bhante himself.

Only after a certain level of knowledge is reached would one be ready to live an independent, solitary life in the forest. And that was the next step Bhante recommended over and over again. All monks who knew him can attest to that. Seclusion is crucial: it is essential for seeing Dhamma. But that does not mean just isolating oneself from people. People often dream of seeking a period of seclusion in order to find some privacy, to recharge their batteries, to have some space for private thought, and to avoid disturbances while engaging with this or that project. But solitude in Dhamma is something different. It means to step away from society, which stimulates the arising of a broad array of mental defilements, and to attempt to develop a sensitivity to, and general perception of, the mind and its fundamental nature – the nature of its arising and ceasing. Living as a hermit, one should abandon computers and phones; true solitude requires full dedication to the realization of Nibbāna.

Bhante felt that a monk should fear fame and gain; he should completely abandon such worldly ambitions. Going to the forest means leaving the world. One should not look back. Bhante took this attitude to heart very strongly. His single-mindedness and determination was demonstrated when he was informed of his mother's death. Very calmly, without noticeable sadness, Bhante responded: "I gave up my mother

thirty years ago. I have no worries." He knew that he had to fulfil a *bhikkhu*'s purpose: to bring to cessation every kind of "holding."

One also goes to the forest to face one's fears. "Don't be so concerned with safety," Bhante used to say. To this end, when selecting a place to live one must carefully consider how wild and dangerous a place is. Of course, Bhante said, one should not go full of anxiety and then run away, but one should also not be too bold, with false confidence, since one could walk straight into danger and lose the chance to test the limits of one's fears, and to benefit from this. Clearly, finding optimal circumstances must be an individual quest. Bhante stated that the greatest danger in living alone was losing delight in the Dhamma, and that the highest courage was that which allowed one to let go of one's sense of self.

Monks are generally advised to have lamps lit next to their forest *kuṭīs* to signal to wild animals that there are humans present, and doing so generally keeps them away. But Bhante did not use lamps. He liked to be in the dark during the night; he did not mind potential encounters.

Bhante also advised others that they should have sufficient *mettā* (kindness) towards themselves and towards others when fear did arise. For if *mettā* is not developed, fear can be overwhelming. Ultimately, with the support of mindfulness and wisdom a practitioner should come to see the nature of fear. Basically, one should not be afraid of fear, but one should be interested in understanding fear. For, as is the case with all other phenomena, fear has its own nature of arising and its own nature of ceasing, and should not be taken as "mine." Recognizing this, a monk can wander through the dark forest in confidence and safety.

GRADUAL TRAINING

During Saṅgha meetings Bhante was happy to respond to all questions the monks asked him. These would mostly be about some obscure or challenging Sutta passages or about personal difficulties in practice. And one of the things Bhante often brought up in response to these questions was the idea of *gradual training*, an instruction that all monks should hold dear to their hearts. Here is how it was described in an analogy given by the Buddha:

> *"Just as the ocean has a gradual shelf, a gradual slope, a gradual inclination, with a sudden drop-off only after a long stretch, in the same way, this Discipline and Dhamma has a gradual training, a gradual performance, a gradual progression, with penetration to Dhamma only after a long stretch."*
> —Ud 5:5

Just as human habits which give rise to suffering have been built up over a long period of time, so these same habits can take a long time to undo, requiring a sustained effort, achievable only with a genuine commitment to training. This is the case with the development of wisdom and the eradication of mental defilements.

The Buddha guided his disciples in how to gradually develop and deepen their practice with the following descriptions of a proper monk:

> *"Having thus gone forth and possessing the bhikkhu's training and way of life, abandoning the killing of living beings* [...]. *Abandoning the taking of what is not given* [...]. *Abandoning incelibacy* [...]. *Abandoning false speech* [...]. *Abandoning malicious speech* [...]. *Abandoning harsh speech* [...]. *Abandoning gossip* [...].
>
> *"He abstains from injuring seeds and plants. He practices eating only one meal a day, abstaining from eating at night, and outside the proper time. He abstains from dancing, singing, music, and theatrical shows. He abstains from wearing garlands, smartening himself with scent, and embellishing himself with unguents. He abstains from high and large couches. He abstains from accepting gold and silver. He abstains from accepting raw grain. He abstains from accepting raw meat. He abstains from accepting women and girls. He abstains from accepting men and women slaves. He abstains from accepting goats and sheep. He abstains from accepting fowl and pigs. He abstains from accepting elephants, cattle, horses, and mares. He abstains from accepting fields and land. He abstains from going on errands and running messages. He abstains from buying and selling. He refrains from false weights, false metals, and wrong measures. He abstains from accepting bribes, deceiving, defrauding, and trickery. He abstains from wounding, murdering, binding, brigandage, plunder, and violence.*
>
> *"He becomes content with robes to protect his body and with alms food to maintain his stomach, and wherever he goes, he sets out taking only these with him. Just as a bird, wherever it goes, flies with its wings as its only burden, so too the bhikkhu becomes content with robes to protect his body*

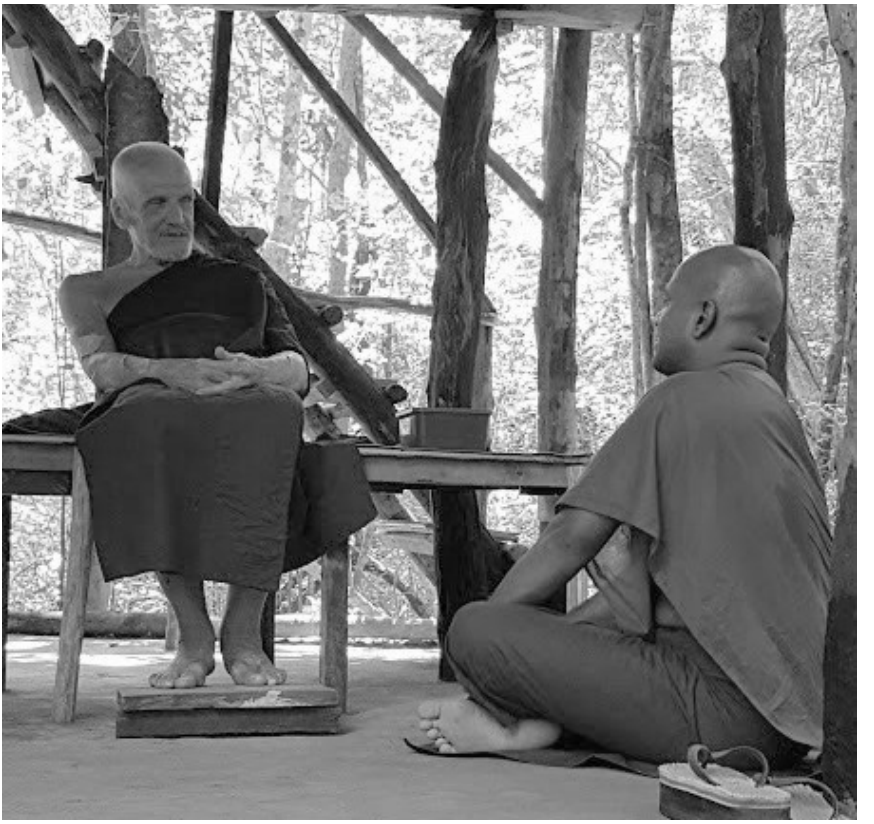
and with alms food to maintain his stomach, and wherever he goes, he sets out taking only these with him. Possessing this aggregate of noble virtue, he experiences within himself a blameless bliss.

"On seeing a form with the eye, he does not grasp at its signs and features. Since, if he left the eye faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of covetousness and grief might invade him, he practices the way of its restraint, he guards the eye faculty, he undertakes the restraint of the eye faculty. On hearing a sound with the ear...On smelling an odour with the nose...On tasting a flavour with the tongue...On touching a tangible with the body... On cognizing a mind-object with the mind, he does not grasp at its signs and features. Since, if he left the mind faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of covetousness and grief might invade him, he practices the way of its restraint, he guards the mind faculty, he undertakes the restraint of the mind faculty. Possessing this noble restraint of the faculties, he experiences within himself a bliss that is unsullied.

"He becomes one who acts in full awareness when going forward and returning; who acts in full awareness when looking ahead and looking away; who acts in full awareness when flexing and extending his limbs; who acts in full awareness when wearing his robes and carrying his outer robe and bowl; who acts in full awareness when eating, drinking, consuming food, and tasting; who acts in full awareness when defecating and urinating; who acts in full awareness when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent.

"Possessing this aggregate of noble virtue, and this noble restraint of the faculties, and possessing this noble mindfulness and full awareness, he resorts to a secluded resting place: the forest, the root of a tree, a mountain, a ravine, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a jungle thicket, an open space, a heap of straw.

"On returning from his alms round, after his meal, he sits down, folding his legs crosswise, setting his body erect, and establishing mindfulness before him. Abandoning covetousness for the World, he abides with a mind free from covetousness; he purifies his mind from covetousness. Abandoning ill will and hatred, he abides with a mind free from ill will, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings; he purifies his mind from ill will and hatred. Abandoning sloth and torpor, he abides free from sloth and torpor, percipient of light, mindful and fully aware; he purifies his mind from sloth and torpor. Abandoning restlessness and remorse, he abides unagitated with a mind inwardly peaceful; he purifies his mind from restlessness and remorse.



> *Abandoning doubt, he abides having gone beyond doubt, unperplexed about wholesome states; he purifies his mind from doubt."*
> —MN 27

And from there, the *bhikkhu* develops the four *jhāna*s and other attainments, culminating in the point...

> *"When he knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it is liberated, there comes the knowledge: 'It is liberated.' He understands: 'Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.'"*
> —MN 27[2]

2. This excerpt from *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

LEGACY

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa personally found translation work and writing a disturbance. However, giving into requests, he agreed to translate his favourite text in the whole Sutta Canon: the *Aṭṭhakavagga*. A year later he also agreed to extend this project, and translated the *Pārāyanavagga*. Both chapters are part of the *Sutta-nipāta* and are considered by scholars to be of great antiquity, the oldest compilation of discourses in the Suttas that we know of. And there is even good evidence suggesting that the *Aṭṭhakavagga* existed in its own right prior to the compilation of the *Sutta-nipāta*. These texts place considerable emphasis on training to achieve freedom from sensuality, attachment and speculative views. Bhante would recite these two *vaggas* regularly, and both are very suitable reading for forest monks. (His translations have been published under the title, *The Silent Sages of Old.*)

A second piece of writing that Bhante left us is a Dhamma article, *"No cassa": A Nibbāna Focussing Practice*. It consists of a detailed explanation of the *"no cassa"* formula, "It might not be and there might not be for me; it will not be (and) there will not be for me" (*no cassa no ca me siyā, na bhavissati na me bhavissati*), which is found in several Suttas in the Pāli Canon. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa thought deeply about this formula taught by the Buddha, since it can be used to cut the five lower fetters, and even to attain Nibbāna, something that Bhante yearned for very much.

It's safe to say that during his lifetime Bhante was probably the greatest expert in the world at translating Pāli verses. He even studied the Gāndhārī Dhammapada (possibly the version of Dharmaguptaka or Kāśyapīya origin in Gāndhārī), written in a Prakrit language. When other translators got to know of him, they were keen to approach him with requests for help with the difficulties they encountered while working on their own translations. Bhante would deliberately not always be available to scholars (and he made that very clear), however he did respond to some of their requests. One of those who consulted Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi – the well-known translator of the entire Sutta Piṭaka – who asked for feedback on some of his translations, especially those recorded in the verses of in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* and the *Aṅguttarā Nikāya*. Bhante noted all of his corrections in a number of A5 notebooks, which were then shared with Bhikkhu Bodhi; his input is acknowledged in these translations under the name "Vanaratana Ānanda Thera" and is

recognized for its "radical but convincing readings." Also, at the request of others, Bhante wrote comments on two translations by K.R. Norman: his translation of the *Theragāthā*, published as *Elders' Verses*, volume I & II, (PTS edition, 1969) and his translation of the *Sutta-nipāta*, published as *The Group of Discourses* (PTS edition, 1992). Norman was a renowned Pāli scholar, the author of books that Bhante used himself in his studies of Pāli metre. When Bhante's notes came to Norman's attention he gladly accepted them and corrected his translations, acknowledging "a forest monk from Sri Lanka."

In a copy of *The Group of Discourses*, Bhante also left a note:

> "This book is an admirable work of scholarship, and many things can be learned from it. But it seems that *dhamma-vicaya* is being disregarded for the purpose of interpreting these Suttas. When all the scholarly analysis has been done, we still have not come to the Dhamma, which is what these Suttas are about. So unless *dhamma-vicaya* is adopted as a necessary part of the work of interpretation, many important things will be missed. This applies especially to the philosophical Suttas of the last two Vaggas [the Aṭṭhakavagga and the Pārāyanavagga]."

Bhante developed a habit of writing notes in the margins of books and articles that came to his attention, which would later circulate among a few monks. Usually these marginalia consisted of comments on translations, where he clearly showed his scholarly knowledge of Pāli. Still, here and there, one can find a few notes illustrating his understanding of Dhamma. The following are several examples:

> *Sakkāyadiṭṭhi*
> "Personality view" is much preferable to "identity view" since it is defined as 'regarding as self' in relation to the five aggregates. If one uses 'identity view,' the finer distinctions between self (*attā*) and individual (*puggala*) are no longer possible—but this, of course, might be agreeable to the commentarial understanding. And also, 'identity' for *sakkāya* is not very satisfactory. I would suggest 'personal existence' for *sakkāya,* while keeping 'personality view for *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. *Sakkāya* is less technical than *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* and needs to be translated a little differently to its occurrence in the compound.

This note echoes Ven. Ñāṇavīra Thera, who, in his *Notes on Dhamma* and in the letters in *Clearing the Path,* had written that the *arahat* still remains an *individual* (i.e. distinct from other individuals) but is no longer a *person*. This is an important point since one could fall into the wrong view of denying the reality of the phenomenon of the individual in experience. One has to abandon *upādāna* (holding) within *pañc'upādānakkhandhā* (the five holding aggregates), but one does not have to abandon *pañcakhandhā* (the five aggregates).

Some of Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's notes on Nibbāna:

Nibbāna
Sabbesu dhammesu samūhatesu samūhatā vādapathā pi sabbe.
"When all things have been abolished, all ways of saying have been abolished too." – [Upasīvapucchā, Sutta Nipāta]
Note that in the two quotations, from the Udāna and MN 26, all the terms by which Nibbāna is asserted (emphatically in the Udāna's case) are negative. Even the one that might seem optimistic, "security from bondage," is more satisfactorily translated as "rest after exertion" (i.e. laying down the burden and toil of *saṃsāra*), may also be understood as involving a 'negative' in the sense of *no more*. Everything that is said of Nibbāna is about 'finishing,' 'ending', 'cessation', 'no more of this', 'no more of that', or in one word 'utter cessation of existence'

(*sabbaso bhava nirodho*—MN 60, note that also there the emphatic *atthi*, 'there is,' is being used). In whatever way Nibbāna is being described, it is always in terms of what vanishes; there is never is answer to *what then?*—i.e. *after anupādisesā nibbāna-dhātu*. In fact, to say anything at all about *the other* is to fall into a *diṭṭhi* of some sort. *Then after* or even questions about it, is *ṭhapanīya* ("to be put aside"). In AN 4:173 (Ch. 18, Sutta 3), Mahākoṭṭhita asks Sāriputta "after the utter cessation of the six spheres of contact *is there* anything else—*is there not* anything else (and *both together* and *neither*)," to all of which Sāriputta replies: *Mā hevaṃ* (not the simple "no" which is *no hetaṃ*)—"Do not [ask] like that." And then continues to say: if one were to give any of those answers, one would *appapañcaṃ papañceti* (try to expand what is not expanded), with the utter cessation of the six, there is *papañcanirodha* (cessation of the expanded). Refer back to the above quotation.

* * *

And even in "focussing upon the *Nibbānadhātu,"* it is that very ending that is being focussed upon. In other words, the *dhātu* is *nirodhadhātu* (the word *dhātu* does not by itself imply something positive). *Dhātu* has a wide application. Consider the instance "Whatever Tathāgatas arise or not that *dhātu* stands that all formations are impermanent." There is also *avijjadhātu* and *vyāpādadhātu*. 'Element' will not do as a general translation.

* * *

There is no description of Nibbāna that goes beyond *cessation*; indeed, the *foundation* of truth in the highest sense is: "freedom from deception." (See MN 140.)

* * *

Apart from Nibbāna, nothing "falls outside."

Bhante's position was clear: *Nibbāna* should not be understood as a thing, being, or a place that we go to – an erroneous belief many Buddhists prefer to hold.

DHAMMA IN NATURE

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa also developed a particular personal skill that helped him to navigate forests and survive in jungles. He called it "a skill in *dhātus.*" This is not a skill essential for the understanding of Dhamma, but is rather a practical skill that few monks come to possess. It is a kind of "knowing nature," which Bhante called "magnetism." He believed that the entire animal world is in tune with such magnetism. It is how elephants and fish are able to find their way. They sense it. They know it. They are in tune with it. It is like the language of nature. "If you develop that skill," Bhante said, "then you can find your way in the forest whenever you get lost – you know where to go. This can provide you with a skill that can help you everywhere. It is like tuning in, into the problem." But he emphasized that such a skill has no importance in Dhamma; for him it was merely a practical tool that helped him many times and saved him from troubles.

"Such a magnetism is already present, but hard to recognize. We may control it only as far as we follow it, and in doing so there is no need for the Self. Self or *atta* means assuming mastery. But we are at the mercy of *dhātu*, not the other way round. *Dhātu* are external, impermanent. If we are like animals that completely trust nature, we will not escape the World. Magnetism is not about energy; rather it's knowing your own body. But Dhamma is not found just by going with nature."

This was a warning, for even though magnetism can help us survive or deal with some problems, we must be careful to avoid adopting the view that we are in some way "one with *dhātu*" and just going with the flow of it. Going with the flow is what animals do but we have the potential to understand nature. We may use magnetism for survival but we must not get lost in it.

VINAYA AND BHIKKHUNĪS

Bhante had an excellent knowledge of Vinaya. He was not only well-read, but he also had good judgement and common sense. In many conversations with him I noticed that he was not only able to hold true to the letter of the Vinaya, as it is believed to have been laid down by the Buddha, but he was also able to see the wisdom within it. But he definitely

would not grasp any traditional interpretation too tightly, especially if it obstructed seclusion and some degree of independence – in Bhante's view essential for realizing Nibbāna.

Apart from Bhante's concern for the quality of life for *bhikkhus* regarding their opportunities for seclusion, he also had concern for *bhikkhunīs (nuns)* and other Buddhist female renunciants. He was aware that their lives are fraught with difficulties: it is hard for women renunciants to find good teachers or suitable environments facilitating the proper practice of the Buddha's Teaching under Vinaya. Bhante sympathized with them about this and expressed compassion for their hardships and challenges. He said it was a great pity that it should be so, especially in a Theravada Buddhist culture that prides itself on preserving its ancient traditions. Bhante remarked that the path of Dhamma was hard enough for *bhikkhus,* even with all the traditional support they receive – how much more challenging must it be for those of the female gender.

Bhante believed that, if *bhikkhunīs* were to start going on *cārikas* (walking tours) in Sri Lanka, people would become accustomed to them again and the culture would redevelop due to the devout, faithful, and supportive nature of the people. But seclusion should not be neglected. He observed that most *bhikkhunīs in* Sri Lanka lived lives "crowded" together in communities, closely associating with many laywomen, attached to a particular monastic dwelling. He acknowledged how strong this culture was in Sri Lanka and in Asia generally, but some progress needed to be made. Bhante encouraged nuns to keep making an effort in Dhamma-Vinaya. Indeed, he understood that it would take time for society to change since people were not familiar with *bhikkhunīs*. People very much want to support what is right and pure, however, and if they see dedicated monastics sincerely practising the Buddha's Teaching and genuinely attaining its fruits, he believed lay people would support them wholeheartedly. When trust in *bhikkhunīs* is established, he believed supporters will be there too.

SILENCE IS HOLIER

Bhante also visited places of pilgrimage in Sri Lanka with other monks. But he observed that a culture of worship tended to make it hard to find quiet places for meditation or quiet contemplation in these great ancient sites. Over time, these places had become so crowded and noisy with loudspeakers that Bhante and his fellow forest-monks stopped visiting them.

Many devotees these days are encouraged to spend their most valuable assets of time and money on external and material developments – to create more and more Buddha images and stupas, for example – rather than to preserve and support the things that are of far greater value in Buddhism. Bhante mentioned that people were mistaking the authentic "pure gold" and "real treasure," which brings peace and happiness, for a worldly wealth which is subject to constant decay. Sri Lanka's heritage is rich in *arahat*s and it is a place where the Pāli Canon has been preserved, but now too many people merely gaze at statues covered in gold or tin foil and shiny jewels. And while staring at the gilded surface, they are casting aside the real gold – the internal wealth of the Dhamma.

Nowadays, sound pollution is also widespread in Sri Lanka. It is becoming harder and harder for forest monks to find silent places and adequate

The Silence is Holier

seclusion. Bhante saw this change as a great harm and a disservice to the very heart of the tradition. Environments supporting silent abiding are where ordinary people become *arahat*s, and such places are where *arahat*s like to stay. And he wondered if Sri Lanka can truly be called "the Buddhist Island" if it is not really supportive to the profound practices of those seeking liberation.

Bhante did not wish to criticize, but he felt sorry to observe such a significant decline over the fifty years he spent in Sri Lanka. He believed that it was essential to understand and support those who have "little dust in their eyes," with compassion, so that they may continue to deepen their practice. And for those whose practice is already deep, he felt that supportive environments must be maintained, and that doing so would be of great merit and a profound blessing for the island.

STRAIGHT PATH

To ordinary people, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's way of practice probably appears to be extreme, but he enjoyed a great freedom and closeness with nature. There was admittedly some level of austerity but Bhante emphasized many times that nowadays one has to take a difficult path in order to understand Dhamma. That means facing one's insecurities, fears, and pains. He avoided all kinds of distraction in his own practice, including reading anything of a speculative nature. "I want peacefulness,"

Bhante said, "I do not want to waste my time with pointless reading." One of many reasons for his seclusion was to be free from worldliness and pointless talk. However, he admitted that when he had to be in forest hermitages with other monks for health reasons or for some other business, he might pick up some books (such as, for example, a study of ancient Brahmi scripts) that were given to him by others. He thought that some reading might help him gain some teaching skills, or prove useful should he wish to translate some texts.

As we have seen, Bhante's days were almost entirely spent in seclusion. He slept minimally – around three hours. He kept his dwelling tidy, recited some *gāthā*s and Dhamma verses in Pāli and went on *piṇḍapāta*. After his meal he would go for long walks in the forest where there were several spots where he would simply just sit and contemplate Dhamma. When he was asked how he practised, he said, "I do not *study* Suttas, but rather use them as reminders. For example, if I am too lazy with my meditation, then I remember, I recite the *Theragāthā*. Having too much on your mind you cannot practise properly. Then contemplation is just repeating what has already been done. Fundamentally, there is nothing new for me, I just continue to deepen it, dwelling in pleasant abiding. There is no need to ponder. There is just *upekkha*." He started with the *hard way* (*dukkapāṭipada*), but as his practice developed, it transformed into a *pleasant way* (*sukhapāṭipada*). "Since we are now so remote from the time of the Buddha, it is now only possible to practise through *dukkapāṭipada dandha abhiññā* [painful practice resulting in knowledge slowly acquired] for us. Only later can we come to *sukhapāṭipada*. One must start with *dukkha*; you must feel *dukkha* straight there in the heart!"

When I asked him to elaborate on this, he said that "the other practice for *sotāpanna* is to delight in Dhamma and remember the Dhamma. Some can do better amid the Saṅgha, but others do better alone. Of course, seclusion is important and essential for everyone, but the necessary degree might be different. Complete seclusion is not necessary. But one's character changes, as did mine. I am generally inclined to seclusion. Basically one should be able to do the work wherever one is, even if it is not quiet. One has to cope with any environment."

These words should be kept in mind. Many young monks became very inspired by Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's lifestyle. True, his way of practice was remarkable and inspirational but we also have to be aware of the tendency to idealize what might appear to be a perfect life. For there is

no such thing as a perfect life – Bhante warned us that it is not about choosing to live in seclusion, but about training the mind and coming to know its true nature. "The best external conditions depend on the individual," he said. "No matter what the environment is, we have to take the hard way. That simply means a total restraint of the senses. It is not optional, but a must!"

I asked Bhante if he had any extra advice for new monks. He immediately responded: "One should be alone only if one is sure one can manage on one's own." He said that had also been Venerable Ñāṇavimala's advice. "Go for seclusion or *cārika* only when you know you can control your mind. This means you will avoid falling into sensuality or anger. Anger is not so dangerous in seclusion, but a monk has to be able to control sensuality. If he does, then he is fit for solitude, otherwise he isn't. Anger can be controlled in solitude, but it is hard to control sensuality."

When I asked what the purpose of all this was, he responded sharply, "In the practice, we have to come to the point when we release everything. If you do not let it all go, then you do not fulfil your own purpose." We release everything before it is taken away. These words echoed those of one of the most outstanding teachers of Dhamma, Ajahn Chah, who said, "Die before you die." Of course that does not mean that we should commit suicide but that we should release what was never ours in the first place. This Self, this mastery, assumes that it is at the centre of our private world, and that all other things in that world are just "for me." Releasing means the ending of holding, *upādāna*, as we learn from the Suttas.

Bhante also had an interest in the works of Meister Eckhart, a German theologian and philosopher, who has acquired the reputation of being a great mystic within contemporary popular spirituality. Unfortunately too little is known about Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's interest to be able to discuss what he found attractive in Eckhart's works. I suspect that Bhante would have the same attitude as Bhante Ñāṇavīra, who objected to any attempts to find mysticism in the Buddha's Teaching. When asked, Bhante agreed that mysticism has nothing to do with Dhamma. But he admitted that he found some joy in its beauty, a pleasurable resource for a kind of playful experimentation of thought. As far as I can gather, occasional moments of mysticism for him were more an artful expression of faith, than a useful tool for understanding Dhamma.

IX

Jarāmaraṇa

(Sickness and Death)

Short indeed is this life,
within one hundred years one dies.
Even if anyone should live longer,
then he is bound to die of decay.
—Sn 4:6.1

A once strong and independent man grew old, sick and dependent on others. "Nothing can be done about it," he said. "I am old now." Dependency is not something he wanted – he was a free forest deer for his whole life, but nature demanded a change.

In his middle years Bhante's physical endurance and austere life had been legendary. But by the age of sixty Bhante looked aged, much older than he actually was. In his uncompromising efforts to realize the Dhamma, his mind might have reaped the rewards but his body had paid a price. He survived malaria, gastritis, amoebiasis, numbness of his left leg for many months, several injuries, elephant attacks and snake bites. In addition he had to manage the mental stresses and pains that came in his early monastic life: loneliness, anger and disappointments. He would often sleep in cold and damp places, eat poor food, feel hungry and weak. But his commitment to the Dhamma energized him. He had found Dhamma's best medicine, and felt brighter when he remembered the words of the Buddha or talked about the Dhamma with others. One of his attendants in later years said that it was almost as if he returned to his old self when the Dhamma was spoken.

In 2013 Dr. Lasantha Weerawardhana treated Bhante Ñāṇadīpa in Kiri Oya Araññā for a perianal abscess several times. Abscesses are caused by a high-density infection of common bacteria. Anal abscesses are likely to spread without treatment and affect other parts of the body, particularly the groin and rectal lumen. All abscesses can progress to serious

generalized infections requiring lengthy hospitalizations if not treated. Dr. Lasantha examined Bhante Ñāṇadīpa and advised that he be taken to a hospital in Colombo for a full check-up but Bhante refused. The doctor tried to persuade him: "Bhante, we will take care of you. I am going to get a helicopter here. Let's take it." Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, the exact opposite of a hypochondriac, smiled and replied: "I've been roaming the Laggala jungle only on foot. I don't want these things." But after much persuasion and numerous requests by many who knew him, he reluctantly agreed to travel to Colombo, but only by car and for only two days. That was his first visit to Colombo after many years, and this incident illustrates his attitude of independence – his reluctance to request medical help unless absolutely necessary.

The doctor made an incision and drained the abscess under local anaesthesia, successfully treating it. On several other occasions Dr. Lasantha travelled long distances to treat Bhante following falls, and on one occasion he treated Bhante in his *kuṭī*. From 2013 up until his passing away, Bhante felt a great appreciation for Dr. Lasantha's devoted concern and support.

Bhante's physical health was gradually decaying, and it forced him to leave the remote *kuṭīs* of Laggala in 2014, at the age of sixty-nine. However, he still maintained a significant degree of seclusion, most often on the grounds of *araññas* (forest monasteries or hermitages): Ovilikanda near Matele, Ranakithulgala Forest Sanctuary, Tanjan Taenna Forest Monastery near Balangoda, Aetdalagala Forest Sanctuary near Meegalewa, and Udawatta Kele Sanctuary. But even then, the *kuṭīs* the monks kindly provided him with were generally the furthest ones from the monasteries' busy centres. That meant that he was still able to strive for Nibbāna, but it also meant that he had come to the end of complete seclusion, and the end of the style of daily *piṇḍapāta* that had enabled him to survive for almost fifty years. All the monks he encountered in these monasteries were incredibly supportive but it was not easy for them, because they had to put aside their own seclusion to a large extent in order to support Bhante. They had to be very careful to ensure that Bhante was safe and at the same time provide him with a sense of being alone and in seclusion. Their love and respect for Bhante was immeasurable.

"I wish it could be otherwise," Bhante Ñāṇadīpa said, "but that is unavoidable. I am old, and cannot live in the way I used to. The monks are good to me. They try to protect my seclusion, they care for me." He knew

how much people wanted to help him, but although he felt gratitude, he wished he could continue to be free and live independently. When Bhante was ill, he admitted that perhaps he was not the best patient and he would sometimes refuse restrictions, demands and suggestions. I once told him, "You are a rebel monk," referring to his attitude when he immediately left for seclusion after ordination back in 1969. "Yes," he said with a chuckle. That "rebelliousness" followed him all his life, even to the end.

In these later years he was also more open to talking about his past. In earlier times he was quite private about it; after all, why would it matter? He was always cautious if people wanted to discuss his life or his practice with him as that could lead to more people attempting to search him out. When I asked him how he was feeling about somebody writing a book about his life, since there were such amazing stories from his time in the jungle, he said, "Yes, you can. I do not mind. But after I die. But I hope I still have ten more years to live, so there is no hurry to get all the stories." Later he said to another monk, "I think what matters most is Dhamma. I hope people are coming to me because of Dhamma. And when it comes to Dhamma, I still have work to do. I have not finished my practice, it is incomplete, I am not an *arahat*." He felt it would be unwise to share too many stories about his life, when the story had still not reached a happy ending.

But his body would not allow him to stay alive for ten more years, it could only provide two and a half, a short time for him to complete the work of every true *bhikkhu*. If in fact he did reach his desired goal we will never know.

In 2016 Bhante's health deteriorated further. He was declining, though the physical decay was not outwardly apparent, and few people noticed it. And in March of 2017 he started to behave somewhat strangely. Later, doctors diagnosed prostate cancer which had spread throughout his body. Still, at first it was not clear what was happening. The monks who attended Bhante did not recognize his first symptoms but they noticed changes in his manner and they became concerned and confused. They realized that Bhante was having hallucinations. (He had managed to hide new physical pains from others.) What they did not know was that Bhante also had paraneoplastic syndrome, which was a consequence of the cancer in the body manifesting in neurological dysfunction: there was the sub-acute development of short-term memory deficits, irritability, sleep disturbance, delusions, hallucinations, and agitation. Also, the doctors later said that there had been micro-metastases in his brain.

At that time, all this caused great concern among the monks who were following in Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's footsteps because they did not know the cause of it. Some feared that seclusion had resulted in some kind of "madness." Bhante had lived such a remarkable life living in the forest and facing all these difficulties including the extremes of solitude. "Se-

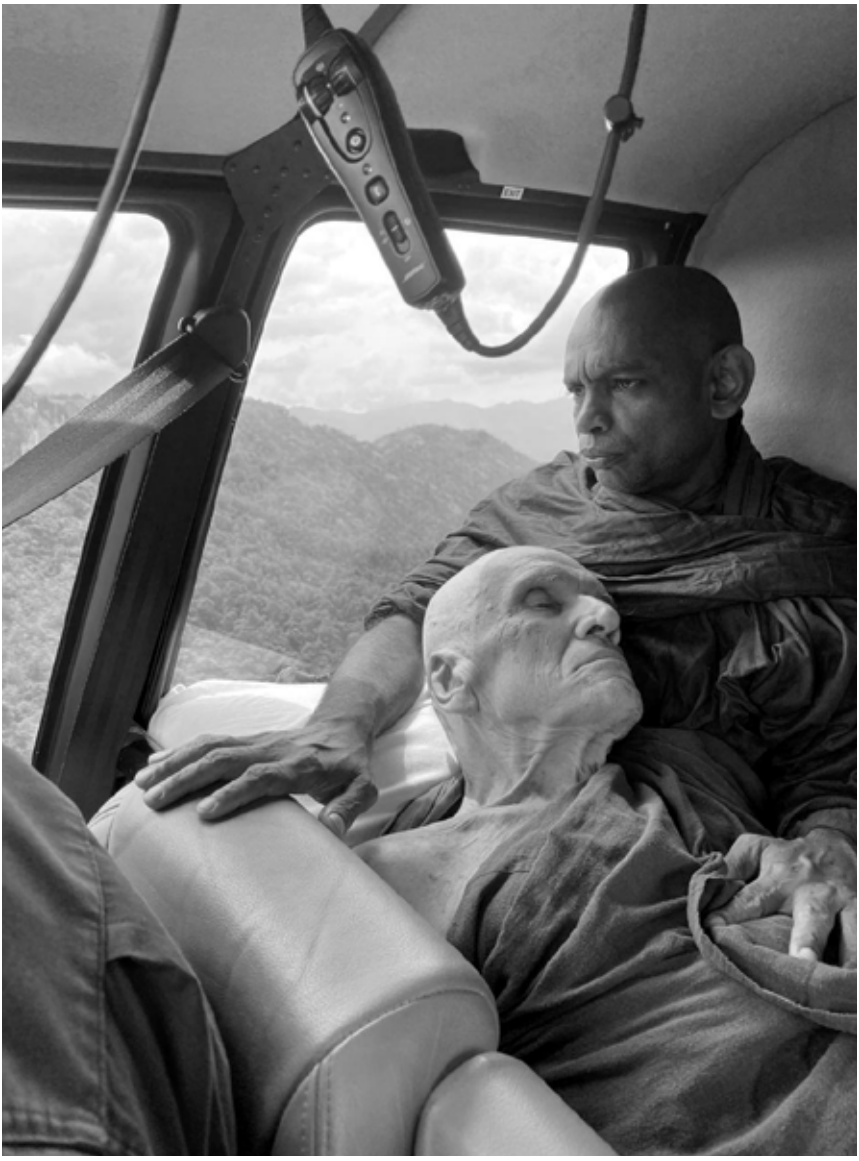
clusion cannot have done that to him, right?" they wondered. "And why did it happen after fifty years of practice?" It was also hard for Bhante to understand all the fuss around him, and he felt that he was not understood. It ultimately took two years to discover the causes of these debilitating problems.

LEAVING LAGGALA

Bhante later admitted that he had already been physically unwell some time in 2016, "as though I was in purgatory." However, through the strength of his practice of *cittanupassanā,* he thought he had recovered.

In March of 2016, while on a walk in the jungle with a new monk to show him some locations where he would often go for meditation, he got lost. That was quite unusual since he was regarded as an expert in navigating the local forests. He knew them like the back of his hand, and he never lost his way. Yet on that occasion he did, even in a place that was very familiar to him. Fortunately he and his companion found their way back to the *kuṭī* before it got too dark. The new monk was relieved, no doubt, that he was not trapped in the jungle with an old and frail – and revered – senior monk. But for the next two days Bhante was puzzled as to how it could have happened that he had got lost. He was not at peace with that and he sensed a problem.

In February 2017 there was a Saṅgha meeting, during which Bhante Ñāṇadīpa showed no signs of strange behaviour apart from the fact that he cut the meeting short, apparently after being confronted by an argumentative monk. Bhante disliked having to deal with monks who disregarded Saṅgha regulations by building new *kuṭīs* without the Saṅgha's permission, even more so if this was done despite its disapproval. At that time the number of monks living in Laggala had reached its peak, and with more monks came more issues and problems. In response, Bhante tried to protect the Saṅgha by establishing a list of ground rules that he felt should be observed by all monks staying in Laggala. This was done in order to support a forest tradition the likes of which could not be found anywhere else in the world. For he knew it would be a terrible loss if monks started to corrupt the way of practice in Laggala by pursuing luxuries and comforts or by otherwise disturbing the general set-up of the *kuṭīs* that had been established. Bhante joined the Saṅgha meeting



to support the establishment of these protective rules, even though he personally had no need for them, and he expected others to accept them and to follow them. (See Appendix I for the Laggala *Kuṭī* Rules.)

At this meeting Bhante had another concern: on the next morning there would be a *ping kamma*, an occasion for laypeople to join together to offer food and requisites to the monks who had gathered for the Saṅgha

meeting in the jungle. Usually a *ping kamma* ceremony is reserved for the poor local villagers, but these gatherings had been increasingly dominated by wealthy supporters from Colombo over the past few years. It is meritorious for urban supporters to come and offer support, but Bhante was concerned that the villagers, and also the hermit monks, might be corrupted by the abundance of material support provided. He wanted to preserve the purity and simplicity of the ceremony as it had been conducted in the past. He was always very clear about this, and he brought the matter up at the meeting, warning that this situation could lead to the decline of the Laggala Saṅgha. Therefore, because of his disapproval, Bhante refused to join the Saṅgha for the *ping kamma,* and with five other monks he decided to go for alms round to another more distant place, and accepted his meal from the poor villagers there.

Apart from administrative issues regarding the Saṅgha, Bhante's usual sharpness of mind was not as brilliant as before. A few days these events Bhante Ñāṇadīpa attempted to help a monk find a suitable place to build a new *kuṭī* deep in the forest. But that too did not go as planned, for it seems that Bhante lost his way and they ended up in a completely wrong location. This was of course odd and disturbed the monks who observed Bhante's confusion.

Around that time another monk visited Bhante to clarify a question concerning Vinaya, but perhaps he expressed himself too harshly. Bhante could usually handle such encounters well and patiently, even when addressed disrespectfully, yet on that occasion he looked disappointed and became withdrawn. Bhante was worried about his well-being and the internal discomfort that he could not understand.

With all these events it seems that Saṅgha issues were building up, and Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was now old, frail and feeling unwell. "Enough," he said, and on the full moon of February (Māgha Pūjā or Navam Poya as they call it in Sri Lanka) he decided that he did not want to be involved in administrating the Saṅgha any longer, and he informed the monks about this. He knew he still had work to do in Dhamma and he wanted to realize Nibbāna in this lifetime. Therefore it was time for another big decision: to cut himself off from the world for the sake of realizing Nibbāna. On the 28th of March 2017 he wrote:

Namo Buddhaya!

For the knowledge of the Saṅgha,
As all the *bhikkhu*s know, I am a monk who has been in solitude for a long time. As the founding *bhikkhu* of the Laggala Saṅgha Meetings, I attended those meetings to help the *bhikkhu*s on the path of Dhamma. From now on, for a *bhikkhu* who is on the path of Dhamma, his inadequacies and issues of *sīla* and *samādhi* of others should not be relevant or have any concern for me. Deal yourself with your *sīla* and *samādhi* shortfalls. This is my advice.
For me to die mindfully, do not admit me to a hospital in my last days.
Blessings of the triple gem,
Ñāṇadīpa Thero

This note was intended to be a goodbye letter to the Laggala Saṅgha; it was meant to formally assert that he was no longer a member of the Laggala community.

Now he was looking forward to moving to the Siyambalagamuwa *kuṭī*, seventeen kilometres from Giribawa, the place where he had spent the previous year. He found this location to be very rewarding and suitable for practice, and he hoped to remain there for at least one or possibly two years. However, within only one month, his plans had to change dramatically.

At Siyambalagamuwa Bhante lived very strictly. He was secluded, with one monk nearby in case of an emergency. He slept little and ate little, even to the point of fasting for three or four days at a time. But he reached a point where he was not taking care of himself. He became dehydrated and lacked a sufficient salt intake. And his health deteriorated further: Bhante became confused, incontinent, unable to feed himself, to go to the toilet without the help of others and unable to clean himself. It was a very difficult situation. An attending monk, unable to cope, appealed for help, which was offered quickly by the monks who had been closely associated with Bhante over the years. During this time Bhante needed full-time care; he was no longer young and strong and from this point on he had to be treated as an ageing monk.

SICKNESS AT AETDALAGALA

These events occurred only two weeks after Bhante had translated the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, the fourth chapter of the *Sutta-nipāta*. The monks attending him now realized that he could not be left alone. Eventually it was decided that Bhante should be taken somewhere where he would receive better care, so he was brought to Aetdalagala Araññа near Resvehera. This is a small *araññа* belonging to the Kanduboda tradition, and the trustworthy abbot and Saṅgha provided excellent support.

On the 1st of May 2017 Bhante was taken to the Medical Laboratory at Kurunegala Hospital for some tests and to receive medication, which unfortunately did not prove helpful. Two weeks later he was taken to Colombo to see a psychiatrist, who prescribed a mild medication that Bhante agreed to take for a certain period, and this did prove helpful. At that time it was also discovered that his body was not producing haemoglobin normally. Later it was learned that this was due to the spread of the cancer to the bone-marrow, and as the cancer had probably also spread to the bladder, he was losing red blood cells through his urine.

During his time at the *araññа* Bhante's mental clarity became quite normal when he took medication, but it worsened when he refused it. For example, on one occasion when Bhante went for a walk, he got lost in the forest for two days, requiring the police to be called to help find him. Episodes of confusion would recur depending on whether or not he had taken his medication.

At that time the diagnosis of his doctors was that Bhante was suffering from a "mood disorder of organic cause." They reported that an MRI scan showed evidence of some damage to the brain. Moreover, they discovered that his prostate was enlarged. Unfortunately, they did not have a chance to investigate further since Bhante Ñāṇadīpa refused more tests and discharged himself from the hospital. The doctors said that Bhante needed to take the prescribed medication for a complete recovery and that if Bhante did not do so, his condition would deteriorate until he would no longer be able to function normally. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa agreed to take the medicine, but soon after reduced the evening dose, while continuing to take the prescribed morning dose.

The *vassa* of 2017 was spent in Aetdalagala. However, when it ended Bhante wanted to move to another cave in Epalogama which is located twenty-three kilometres from the Aetdalagala monastery. He had visited

it just before the *vassa* and had liked it very much. The monks were very concerned about his wish to go there since he was not healthy, however at the end of the *vassa* it seemed that Bhante's health had stabilised. Bhante decided to live at Epalogama in seclusion until the beginning of March. The cave had no electricity and was very primitive – it was described by others as "pitiful." One even had to climb steep stone steps to get to it.

While Bhante was there visitors came to see him hoping to discuss Dhamma, and he gladly obliged them. Although he did not always feel well, his confidence and wisdom continued to influence people's lives, and they found in him a great source of inspiration in spite of his difficult situation. He gladly responded to monks' questions, and his attendant believed that asking Bhante about Dhamma was his best medicine.

Every Thursday he would walk slowly to the village on *piṇḍapāta*, receive his meal from a village family, and then walk to the nearby for-

est and sit under a tree to take his meal – once again alone, as was his preference. After finishing his meal he would go to the nearest stream to wash his bowl, and then slowly return to his *kuṭī*. Though extremely frail he wanted to preserve his independence, away from the "fuss" of his attendant monks.

Bhante never wanted to be a burden, and therefore never asked for anything if not invited to do so. He remarked to one of the monks that it was essential for a monk to be flexible regarding his environment, and that a monk should always incline towards seclusion. It was not a monk's task to change others, but instead he had to change his own lifestyle so as not to disturb the Saṅgha. Bhante did not care what he received or did not receive, or whether he was respected or dismissed; such worldly conditions are of no concern to a true monk.

During his time at the Epalogama cave Bhante visited a sick lay supporter who was very poor. He was in great pain and asked Bhante for advice. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa gave a straightforward reply: "Bear it." That is how Bhante dealt with his own health. He then received refreshment from the sick man, and in that way Bhante afforded the man an opportunity to perform a meritorious action. Merit is what one carries through life, not the sick body.

Bhante was calm, cheerful and friendly during that time but nevertheless he was neglecting himself physically, and he weakened once again. Unwashed and unshaven, he would walk increasingly slowly and unsteadily, and he fell several times. In December his health worsened. By now he was malnourished and physically quite weak, with some injuries due to falls, even from cliffs. Falls were occurring with greater regularity now, something that can happen to someone suffering from cancer (though, to remind the reader, at that time the cancer still remained undiscovered).

KANDY

In mid-December it was decided that two monks would take him to Forest Hermitage in Kandy where a Western monk with a medical education volunteered to care of him. Bhante agreed and packed his belongings, which consisted of just a small bag containing a few books and essential requisites.

When he arrived at the hermitage he was extremely weak, and needed

help even to stand up from a chair or bed. The medical monk washed him and prescribed medicines for him, including antibiotics, since his left leg was inflamed and swollen and was in danger of infection. Within a week his condition improved.

His stay at Forest Hermitage lasted from mid-December until March, during which time his situation stabilized further and he was feeling better. And with this improvement he was spending more time alone in the forest. Also, he started to eat regularly, but fasted on Sundays. He went on alms round in Kandy once a week, and was able to take care of his *kuṭī* by himself, as well as care for his hygiene almost independently. And through all this he continued to focus his attention on Dhamma. Though he was not in the best shape physically, his mind was remarkably sharp. During that time he translated the *Pārāyanavagga*, the fifth chapter of the *Sutta-nipāta,* and enjoyed discussing those verses and other Dhamma subjects, as well as sharing memories of his earlier life. Consequently it was one of the best times to delve into Bhante's mind and his memories in conversation.

BACK TO AETDALAGALA

Bhante was content at Forest Hermitage, but on invitation he moved to a secluded forest *kuṭī* in Siyambalagamuwa Arañña in February 2018. There a Laggala monk looked after him. Later in May he returned to Aetdalagala because he once again did not feel well, and he had fallen three times. The second time occurred when he tried to bathe in the shallow water of a stream, the fall severely hurting his knee. Unable to stand up, he had to remain there until someone came to help him. With the third fall he suffered another serious injury, again to the knee. By now he could not walk because he was so weak. In addition, Bhante was having a problem with urine retention and urine incontinence, a very humbling condition.

After the *vassa* of 2018, though not yet fully recovered, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa decided, without announcing his intention, to go trekking in the forest for a few weeks (in Sri Lanka this is known as *carika*; in Thailand it is known as *thudong*). During that time it was not easy for monks to follow his moves. Whenever he emerged from the forest, monks were informed, because they worried that Bhante would lose his way again. On some days, at the requests of his friends, he agreed to return to the

relative safety of the monastery. Bhante also now decided to begin a translation of the *Therāgāthā,* being dissatisfied with previous translations, but his increasing illness prevented him from finishing that task. He remained most of the time at Aetdalagala Araññ a.

Bhante began the *vassa* of 2019 in a new, small *araññ a* in Padawiya far to the north of Anuradhapura. However, just two weeks into the *vassa*, at the end of July, he became very thin and extremely weak. His feet were swollen and he complained of back pain. It looked very serious. This provoked a panic that Bhante was about to die, and therefore his supporters took him to Colombo Hospital on the 29th of July. There it was quickly decided by doctors and *dāyaka*s that Bhante needed to be transferred to Singapore, where the necessary testing would produce a rapid diagnosis. Everything was organized by Bhante's devotee, Mr. Prabath Nanayakkara.

At that time Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was stateless, meaning that he had no passport and could not legally travel internationally. However, as a special gift, in recognition of his commitment to practice, the President of Sri Lanka issued a special order to provide a passport for Bhante – in three hours!

Surname: VEN POLGASDUWE
Other names: GNANADEEPA THERO
Nationality: SRI LANKAN
Date of Birth: 12/11/1944
Sex: M
Place of Birth: POLGASDUWA
Date of Issue: 01/08/2019
Profession: BUDDHIST MONK

Under Sri Lankan law foreigners cannot become citizens of the country. With this passport Bhante received a new identity, a new official name, and a new birthplace, Polgasduwa, the island where he was ordained as a monk – a very exceptional case!

With these new documents Bhante, together with a trusted novice monk as attendant and the lay supporter, flew to Singapore. The layman arranged all required medical support and exams, and Bhante Ñāṇadīpa spent about one week in the ICU of a Singapore hospital, and received a thorough medical evaluation.

Now, for the first time, the doctors discovered that his recent back pain was due to prostate cancer which had spread to the lumbar region. They also reported that Bhante's heart and lungs were compromised, and that he had pneumonia (from which he later recovered). In addition, he had a thyroid problem, accounting for Bhante's mental agitation. The Singapore doctors said that Bhante's mental weakness had been misdiagnosed by the doctors in Sri Lanka, but they did not share much information; instead they sent a book-sized report back to Sri Lanka. At that time the report was not distributed to Bhante's fellow monks, who had only heard rumours that the cancer might be incurable. The Singapore doctors advised that Bhante be prescribed anti-cancer drugs to help prevent further spread of the cancer, but Bhante refused such therapy.

While in Singapore Bhante had a chance to get out of the hospital and see some of the city. He had never seen skyscrapers before. But he had been to Singapore fifty years earlier as a layman, and noticed a huge difference from his last time there. He was amazed to see in what direction the world was going. He had not been aware of such developments, living in the wild forest.

After a week of tests and examinations performed by the very professional and friendly staff of the hospital in Singapore, Bhante Ñāṇadīpa returned to Sri Lanka, where he spent the remainder of the *vassa* at Aetdalagala Araññña, receiving very good care from the resident monks.

After the *vassa* in November 2019 Bhante returned to Laggala for a week, where he received some traditional Sinhala medicine for cancer. He then returned to Aetdalagala Araññña. It seems that the Ayurvedic medication, which was administered through oil rubbed on his body, helped him to some degree, but many questions about his condition remained.

Monks tried to persuade Bhante to go to Colombo for another PSA test, but Bhante refused. Then the abbot used his skilful speech: "Look, Bhante, I've been looking after you for three or four years. You don't know how much work I've done to help keep you alive. And I'm telling you to go." Bhante could not refuse this request. So in January 2020 he travelled to Colombo to have a cancer scan.

When the test results arrived on the 29th of January, there was a gathering of twelve Laggala monks to receive them. The report showed that Bhante's body was riddled with cancer. Any further medication – whether Western or Sinhala – would not be effective. By now the monks had also seen the report from Singapore which stated the same thing.

The opinion of the Singapore doctors was that Bhante had about one and a half years to live, meaning that at the end of January he had probably less than a year left.

A delegation of about five or six monks went to see Bhante Ñāṇadīpa with the medical report. It was like a death sentence. But Bhante accepted it. He took the news well without showing any shock. He was only surprised because he thought the Sinhala medicine had cured him, wondering, "then why do I feel so well?" But he accepted that it would soon be time to die.

He then said he would address an assembly of monks in one hour's time. It was then that he announced that he had decided to go to Tanjan Taenna to die.

TANJAN TAENNA

Bhante left Aetdalagala the next morning. He planned to stay at the secluded forest *kuṭī* called Wimalanyana at Tanjan Taenna, where he had stayed before when he was recovering from a stomach ulcer. He wanted to use his remaining time for practice while he still had some strength, and Gilanhala was ideal for him because medical facilities were available nearby. Bhante would walk to the *dāna-sāla* and eat his meal there in the monastery. Happy and peaceful during those days, Bhante very much enjoyed Dhamma discussions, which were usually reserved for Thursdays and which inspired many of the monks staying at Taenna or who visited from elsewhere. His mind was bright, and his memory remarkable.

At that time a swelling appeared on Bhante's chest, though its cause was uncertain – it might have been due to cancer or to one of his falls. But Bhante Ñāṇadīpa said that, apart from some "discomfort" on the left side of his chest, he was well.

He knew that the doctors could not help him with his cancer and that he might die at any time. "There is no point for me to see doctors," he said, though he continued to use Ayurvedic medicines to try to slow down the progression of his illness. Bhante regretted his prognosis only because he wanted a longer life for the practice of Dhamma. "But I am old. That has to happen, and I am not too bothered by it."

His health deteriorated quickly. He got weaker and slower. He also had another fall. Eventually he had to leave his *kuṭī* and move into another

forest *kuṭī* where the food could be brought by vehicle. Then Bhante himself wanted to stay in the Mahāthera *kuṭī* in the centre of the monastery, where he could receive the support of other monks more easily. A help schedule was set up so that he had twenty-four hour assistance, and he soon needed to use a wheelchair.

At one point Bhante Ñāṇadīpa refused to eat and had difficulty talking due to short breath, so his attendant monks called Dr. Lasantha. The doctor carefully examined Bhante Ñāṇadīpa: his blood pressure was quite normal but his breathing was very short and he showed a severe pallor, meaning his haemoglobin level was very low and that he urgently needed a blood transfusion. Bhante initially refused to be hospitalised, but after his condition was clearly described to him he gave his consent.

Because of the outbreak of Covid-19, resulting in limited transport services to the local hospital, it was quickly decided to accept an offer from Mr. Prabath to take Bhante to Lanka Hospital in Colombo by helicopter. This decision was sudden, and Bhante was too weak to make decisions on his own. That was on the 24th of June.

LAST DAYS

Bhante stayed in the hospital for about two weeks, receiving three pints of blood transfusions. After that he was taken by helicopter to Mr. Prabath's place in Hatton in the upcountry to rest and recover. However, Bhante did not like the cold there and so on the 10th of July he was taken to Aetdalagala, to be in the care of Laggala monks once again. That time Bhante spoke out against any more helicopter flights.

Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was now very weak, and he was forced to spend most of his time lying down, in significant pain. While at Aetdalagala during this period his haemoglobin level dropped several times, and he was admitted to Anuradhapura General Hospital (the "Bhikkhu ward") on three occasions, receiving altogether thirteen pints of blood. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa now requested of Dr. Lasantha that when his end was near he not be hospitalized, not be put in an ICU, and not receive CPR – he wished to stay at the monastery until his last breath, and his doctor promised to honour that request.

After two weeks the monks again called the doctor, and reported that Bhante had once more developed shortness of breath, was refusing food,

had difficulty walking and was very weak. His haemoglobin was now very low, around 6g/dl, so he was taken to the Galgamuwa base hospital. There he was transfused with two pints of blood. While hospitalised, Bhante developed a fever, chills, rigose and dysuria due to urosepsis. He received the antibiotic amikasin, intravenously, but the sepsis did not improve. After two days Bhante refused to stay in the hospital any longer and it was decided to continue with IV antibiotics at the monastery, under the supervision of his doctor. Since Bhante's urosepsis did not respond to amikasin the doctor changed to IV meropenum, which finally resolved all symptoms.

For a week Bhante Ñāṇadīpa was quite well, but day by day his haemoglobin level declined and he grew weaker and weaker. On the 18th of August he had to be taken to Anuradhapura General Hospital by ambulance, where he received three pints of blood, anti-cancer drug therapy, and morphine tablets for pain. After two days he had recovered to such an extent that he could return to Aetdalagala. Very happy because of his improved condition, Bhante could now walk, eat better and talk well. People around him were delighted to see Bhante doing so well.

But after about ten days they had to repeat the full blood count (FBC) since his haemoglobin level was down to 7.5g/dl. Bhante allowed himself

to be taken to the hospital again, after he was promised that it would be the last time. There he received four pints of blood, and he was taken back to the monastery.

His last days were relatively peaceful. A good monk friend questioned Bhante Ñāṇadīpa about his well-being, and asked if he had any regrets about his life, something *bhikkhu*s might ask a dying monk, as suggested in the Suttas. Bhante Ñāṇadīpa said that he was happy, satisfied, and content. He appeared to be at peace and without agitation.

His last day with awareness and energy was the 11th of September 2020. Bhante had been given a new drug that was meant to prevent the cancer from growing. He wanted to read some Suttas, and felt so well that he thought he would actually survive the *vassa* (which would end on the 31st of October). In the late evening he was able to ingest a coconut drink, but nothing more, and finally he even refused water. By

midnight, he was in great physical pain. The attendant monk panicked and the other monks were summoned. At times Bhante let out sounds as the pain was so great. Although he had expressed the wish to die in the monastery and not to be taken to the hospital, one monk could not stand the sight of Bhante's suffering so much that he wanted him to be taken to hospital. But the abbot stood firm, insisting that Bhante must be allowed to die in the monastery even if he was in extreme pain. The monks were in phone contact with Dr. Lasantha and he told them to administer two tablets of morphine. This helped to reduce the strong bouts of violent pain that lasted for four hours! Bhante became much more comfortable and relaxed.

Monks attending him chanted some *paritta*s (they said it was mostly for their own benefit, to help them calm down since it was hard to helplessly watch Bhante die). After Bhante calmed down, the monks then recited the Girimānanda Sutta, for which Bhante Ñāṇadīpa had particular respect, and Bhante tried to raise his hands, palm-to-palm, as a sign of veneration. That happened two times in appreciation of the chanting and the meaning of the Sutta.

Girimānanda Sutta,
On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. Now on that occasion the Venerable Girimānanda was sick, afflicted, and gravely ill. Then the Venerable Ānanda approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, sat down to one side, and said to him:

"Bhante, the Venerable Girimānanda is sick, afflicted, and gravely ill. It would be good if the Blessed One would visit him out of compassion."

"If, Ānanda, you visit the bhikkhu Girimānanda and speak to him about ten perceptions, it is possible that on hearing about them his affliction will immediately subside. What are the ten?

"(1) The perception of impermanence, (2) the perception of non-self, (3) the perception of unattractiveness, (4) the perception of danger, (5) the perception of abandoning, (6) the perception of dispassion, (7) the perception of cessation, (8) the perception of non-delight in the entire world, (9) the perception of impermanence in all conditioned phenomena, and (10) mindfulness of breathing.

(1) *"And what, Ānanda, is the perception of impermanence? Here, having gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty hut, a bhikkhu reflects thus: 'Form is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception is imperma-*

nent, volitional activities are impermanent, consciousness is impermanent.' Thus he dwells contemplating impermanence in these five aggregates subject to clinging. This is called the perception of impermanence.

(2) *"And what, Ānanda, is the perception of non-self? Here, having gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty hut, a bhikkhu reflects thus: 'The eye is non-self, forms are non-self; the ear is non-self, sounds are non-self; the nose is non-self, odors are non-self; the tongue is non-self, tastes are non-self; the body is non-self, tactile objects are non-self; the mind is non-self, mental phenomena are non-self.' Thus he dwells contemplating non-self in these six internal and external sense bases. This is called the perception of non-self.*

(3) *"And what, Ānanda, is the perception of unattractiveness? Here, a bhikkhu reviews this very body upward from the soles of the feet and downward from the tips of the hairs, enclosed in skin, as full of many kinds of impurities: 'There are in this body hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, stomach, excrement, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, snot, fluid of the joints, urine.' Thus he dwells contemplating unattractiveness in this body. This is called the perception of unattractiveness.*

(4) *"And what, Ānanda, is the perception of danger? Here, having gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty hut, a bhikkhu reflects thus: 'This body is the source of much pain and danger; for all sorts of afflictions arise in this body, that is, eye-disease, disease of the inner ear, nose-disease, tongue-disease, body-disease, head-disease, disease of the external ear, mouth-disease, tooth-disease, cough, asthma, catarrh, pyrexia, fever, stomach ache, fainting, dysentery, gripes, cholera, leprosy, boils, eczema, tuberculosis, epilepsy, ringworm, itch, scab, chickenpox, scabies, hemorrhage, diabetes, hemorrhoids, cancer, fistula; illnesses originating from bile, phlegm, wind, or their combination; illnesses produced by change of climate; illnesses produced by careless behavior; illnesses produced by assault; or illnesses produced as the result of kamma; and cold, heat, hunger, thirst, defecation, and urination.' Thus he dwells contemplating danger in this body. This is called the perception of danger.*

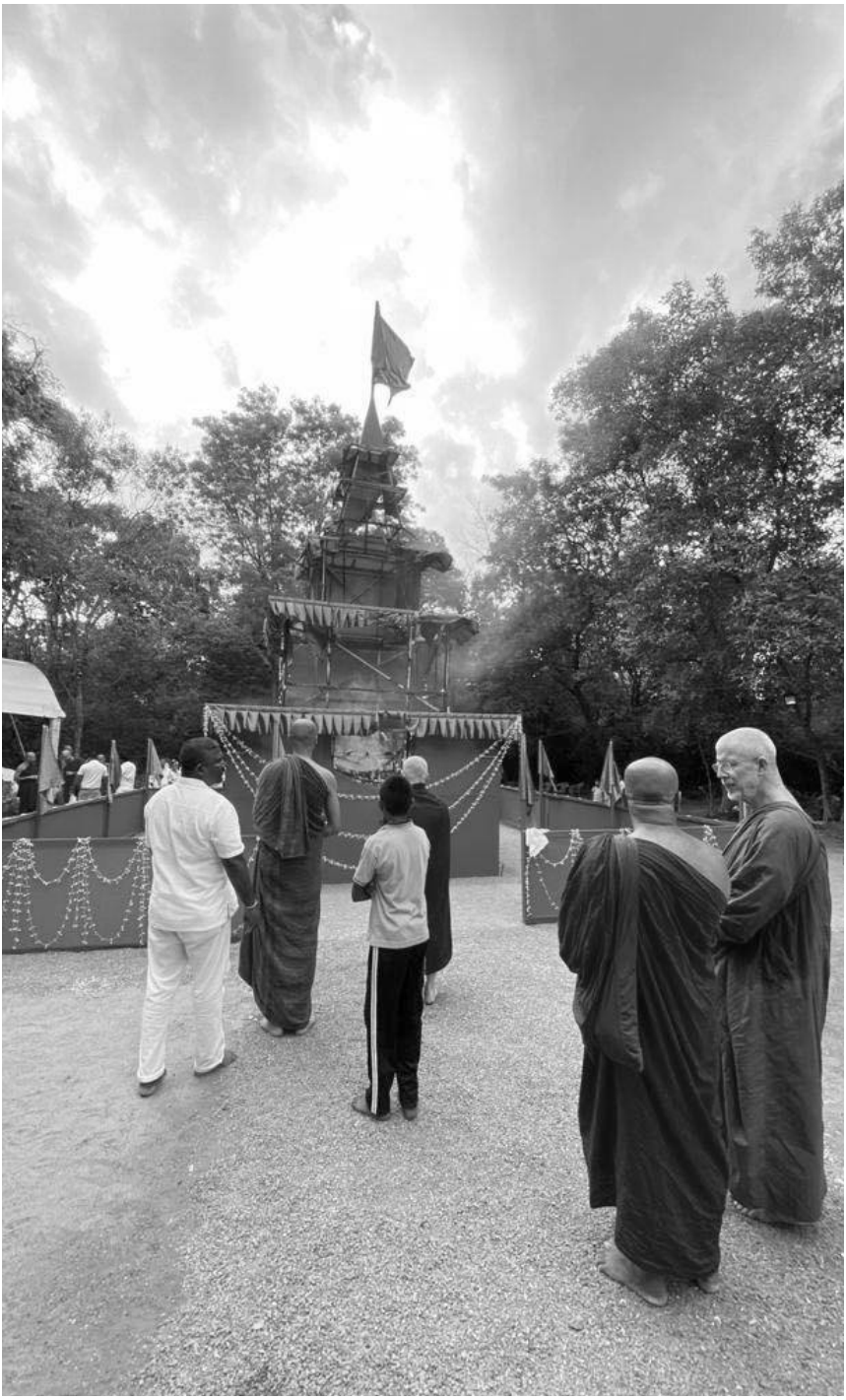
(5) *"And what, Ānanda, is the perception of abandoning? Here, a bhikkhu does not tolerate an arisen sensual thought; he abandons it, dispels it, terminates it, and obliterates it. He does not tolerate an arisen thought of ill will ... an arisen thought of harming ... bad unwholesome states whenever they arise; he abandons them, dispels them, terminates them, and obliterates*

them. This is called the perception of abandoning.

(6) *"And what, Ānanda, is the perception of dispassion? Here, having gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, a bhikkhu reflects thus: 'This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, the stilling of all activities, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, nibbāna.' This is called the perception of dispassion.*

(7) *"And what, Ānanda, is the perception of cessation? Here, having gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, a bhikkhu reflects thus: 'This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, the stilling of all activities, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, cessation, nibbāna.' This is called the perception of cessation.*

(8) *"And what, Ānanda, is the perception of non-delight in the entire world? Here, a bhikkhu refrains from any engagement and clinging, mental standpoints, adherences, and underlying tendencies in regard to the world,*



abandoning them without clinging to them. This is called the perception of non-delight in the entire world.

(9) *"And what, Ānanda, is the perception of impermanence in all conditioned phenomena? Here, a bhikkhu is repelled, humiliated, and disgusted by all conditioned phenomena. This is called the perception of impermanence in all conditioned phenomena.*

(10) *"And what, Ānanda, is mindfulness of breathing? Here, a bhikkhu, having gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty hut, sits down. Having folded his legs crosswise, straightened his body, and established mindfulness in front of him, just mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.* [...]

"This is called mindfulness of breathing.

"If, Ānanda, you visit the bhikkhu Girimānanda and speak to him about these ten perceptions, it is possible that on hearing about them he will immediately recover from his affliction."

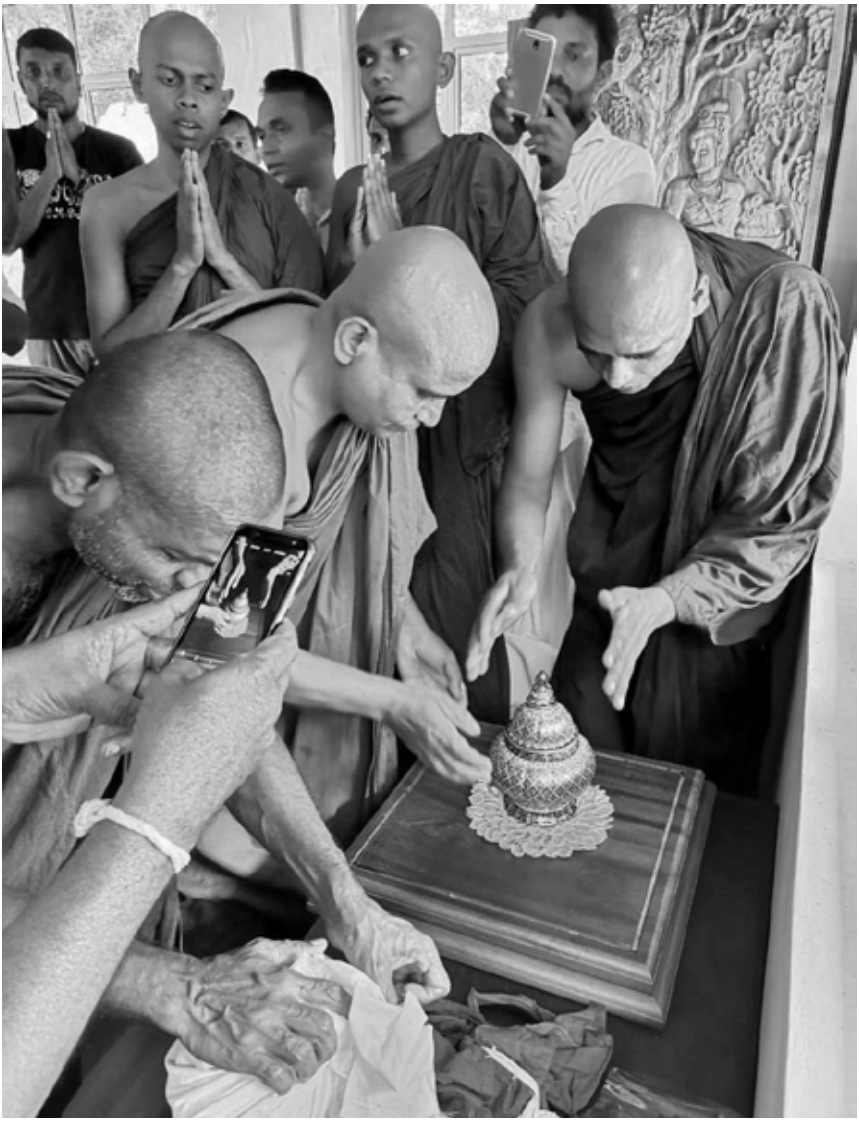
Then, when the Venerable Ānanda had learned these ten perceptions from the Blessed One, he went to the Venerable Girimānanda and spoke to him about them. When the Venerable Girimānanda heard about these ten perceptions, his affliction immediately subsided. The Venerable Girimānanda recovered from that affliction, and that is how he was cured of his affliction.
—AN 10:60[1]

Monks continued to monitor Bhante. His blood pressure began to rise, reaching 180 systolic, then it began to drop until it could no longer be measured by the machine. His pulse became weak until it could not be felt. The monks chanted verses from the *Sutta-nipāta*, which was Bhante's favourite Sutta compilation. Finally, at 7:15 am, he stopped showing signs of life – Bhante Ñāṇadīpa had passed away.

The monks continued to chant the *Sutta-nipāta* next to the body and then, after a few hours, they noticed a change in its facial expression: it appeared to be smiling. For those monks, who had been assisting Bhante tirelessly and with full hearts, it was refreshing and very beautiful to see their spiritual father's last smile. It was a gift of hope.

Before Bhante Ñāṇadīpa died an attending monk asked him about funeral arrangements. Bhante replied they should just get it done quickly. He did not see why anybody would make a fuss about the dead body.

1. This excerpt is from *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

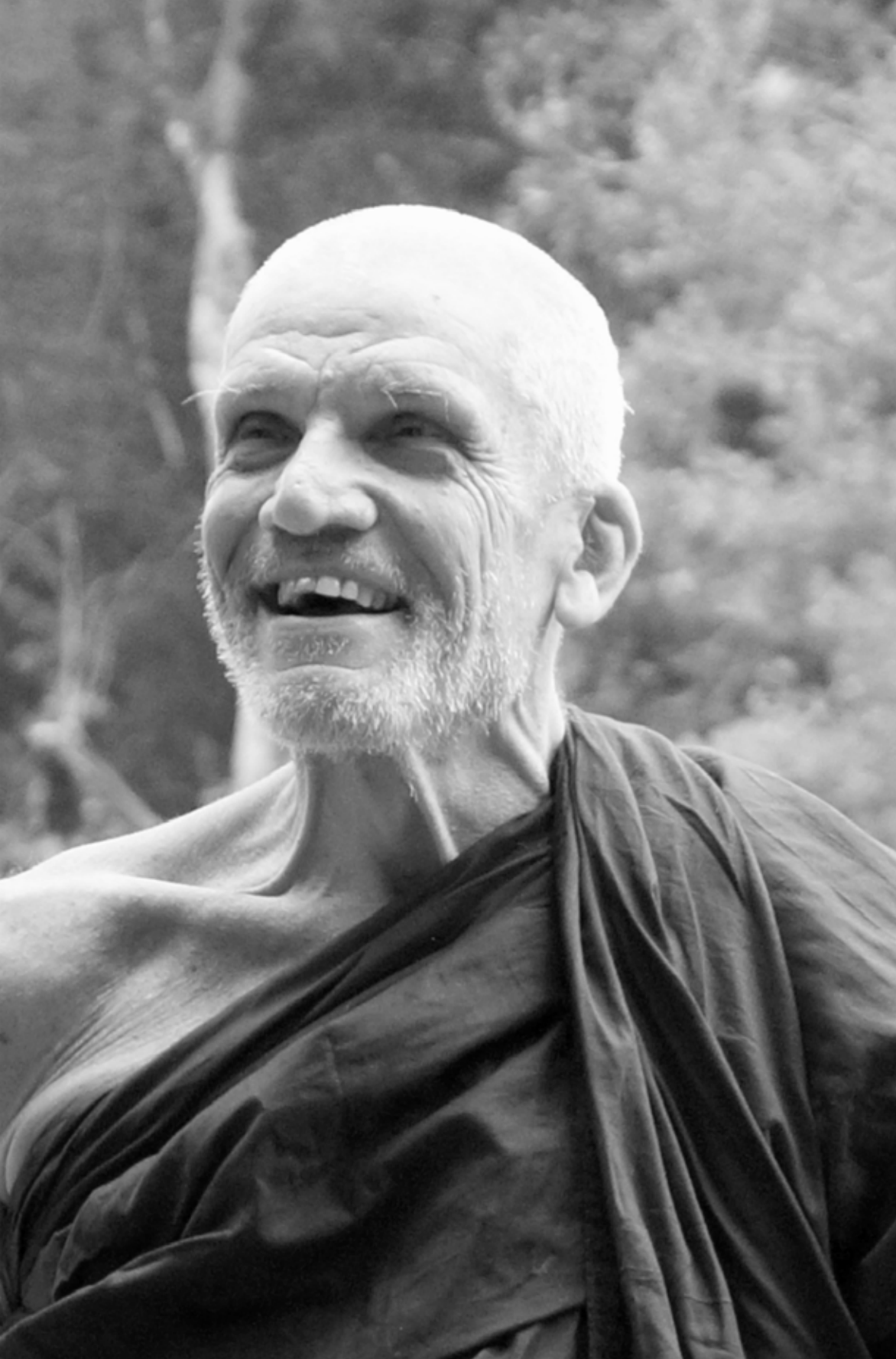


And the monks respected his wish, organizing the funeral for three days hence. Bhante's body was displayed in the pavilion of the monastery with traditional decorations of flowers, and villagers from Laggala and other areas hurried to Aetdalagala to pay their respects. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta was chanted continuously without break day and night until the funeral, and some monks also spent entire nights in meditation as an expression of their gratitude for Bhante's guidance. As for the funeral itself, there

were over one hundred monks and thousands of laypeople present, an amazing number of people attending on such short notice.

In accordance with Bhante Ñāṇadīpa's preferences, the funeral was a simple affair. There were short speeches, and no elaborate ceremonies. After displaying the body, the coffin was closed. Monks carried it, circling the prepared charnel ground three times, to a tent-like structure. The coffin was placed inside, and then the fire was lit.

Just as what has come together in a dream
no longer is seen when a man wakes up,
so too when a loved person
is dead and gone one does not see him.
Seen and heard are those people
of whom such-and-such a name is spoken.
Only the name remains
to be told of the person who is gone.
—Sn 4:6.4-5



X

Evaṃ

(Epilogue)

Many memories of Venerable Ñāṇadīpa have been brought together from diverse sources and presented in this book. This volume unites those tales of Bhante's life and thought and practice, and I believe that any unrecorded impressions of others who knew Bhante would confirm the fact that he was a unique, remarkable, saintly and inspirational *bhikkhu*. His name will certainly not be forgotten.

Bhante's fellow monks respected him greatly. They often said that it seemed as if Bhante had jumped from the Buddha's time to the present. Even a fleeting awareness of the way he lived his life brought forth a recollection of the stories of the Great Disciples of the Buddha, giving them a vivid and concrete reality in this present age. As a result many monks, their hope and faith amplified, have been inspired to make a sincere effort to realize an ultimate knowledge of Dhamma, and to bring to an end the pain of existence. Perhaps not everyone will fully agree with Bhante's understanding of Dhamma, but there is no doubt that Bhante Ñāṇadīpa will be regarded by many in the world as a *bhikkhu* worthy of respect, offerings and veneration, due to his deep and sincere devotion to the Buddha, Dhamma and the training.

In later years, when he was old, his charisma attracted many younger monks. Even physical decline did not stop him; within the Saṅgha he remained the strongest mentally, even in comparison to the young ones, energetic as they were. He did not fear or worry about anything whatsoever, for he had lived in a peaceful manner that is hard for many in this world to even imagine. For him there were no mundane and futile concerns, there was no guilt or remorse. He was, as somebody put it, "a Lion," who confidently – and sometimes stubbornly – wandered, a beacon of light, through the forest which most of us inhabit: the forest of fear and confusion.

One cannot really honour Venerable Ñāṇadīpa by carving his name in stone. To truly honour Bhante we must examine his life, and courageously

act according to the inspiration it evokes. We should also inspire others to follow the path of the solitary seeker – if not by becoming a monk or a nun, then by following a path that leads one out of one's habitual comfort zone. For we have little time to waste and must not indulge in playing around within our imaginary boundaries of safety. The measured world goes against the Dhamma and brings only pain in the long term. To know the Dhamma, the Truth that has no shapes and lines, one has to cross over the limitations of the world, as did "the silent sages of old."

* * *

Dear Bhante did not have relatives in Sri Lanka,
yet everyone took care of him like their son.
Dear Bhante did not have students of his own,
yet many bhikkhus served and followed him till the last breath.
Dear Bhante did not have a special personal donor,
yet he received all the requisites he needed till the last breath.
Dear Bhante preferred to walk on his feet as long as there was strength,
yet many offered him special travel arrangements when he was weak.
Dear Bhante did not have a permanent place to live,
yet many monasteries awaited his visit.
Dear Bhante, who was happily satisfied by poor people's spoons of rice, sips of porridge or some fruit, never had a deficiency of nutritious food, and never lacked in medical assistance and facilities. Until his last breath, his mind was not corrupted or troubled. Even when the body was ill, ageing, and dying, there was no sorrow, regret or grief. This is the glory of following Lord Buddha's Teaching. This is the wonder of following Lord Buddha's guidance. Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu.
—A fellow Laggala monk

APPENDIX I

Laggala katikāvata

(Rules for Laggala Saṅgha *Kuṭīs*)

The first rules were compiled in 2014, and they continue being adjusted according to the arising issues at Laggala. We are sharing here the 2019 version, though it is not the latest one.

1. Monks residing in the Laggala *kuṭīs* are required to observe the *Pāṭimokkha vinaya* including strict adherence to the rules regarding money.

2. The Laggala *kuṭīs* are to be used by monks for the purpose of cultivating seclusion. Therefore resident monks are requested not to be involved in undue outside activities such as preaching *bana* or *puñña kammas*. Relationships with external *dāyakas* should be kept at a minimum level and lay people should not be accommodated in the *kuṭīs*. Other activities such as chanting *paritta*, Buddha *pūjā*, etc., should not be conducted with the villagers.

3. No phones, tablets or computers are to be kept in the Laggala *kuṭīs*.

4. No major changes are to be made to the Laggala *kuṭīs* without permission of the Saṅgha at a Saṅgha meeting. When making a new *kuṭī* there should first be consultation with the Saṅgha. *Kuṭīs* should not be built with the help of external *dāyakas*. Two *kuṭīs* should not be built in the same village.

5. Monks only receive the right to consider themselves resident of a *kuṭī* after spending a period of three months or more in the *kuṭī*. Subsequently, if a monk should spend more than a month away from the *kuṭī* without the permission of the Saṅgha, then the monk loses the right to retain the *kuṭī*. The monk should always consider that the *kuṭī* belongs to the Saṅgha and is not personal property.

6. All monks resident in Laggala are required to attend two Saṅgha meetings: the *Navam poya* and the Saṅgha meeting two weeks before the *Vassa*. New monks are required to attend all three Saṅgha meetings including the *Pavāraṇā*.

7. As the *kuṭīs* are Saṅghika, resident *Sāmaṇeras* must give up the *kuṭī* to an incoming *Bhikkhu* unless they have received permission to stay in the *kuṭī* at the Saṅgha meeting. Permission to stay should be requested at each Saṅgha meeting.

8. Two monks should not go *piṇḍapāta* to the same village without a special reason (e.g. sickness).

9. The *kuṭī* and its surroundings should be kept clean. Food remains should not be used to feed monkeys or rats, but should be disposed of far from the *kuṭī*.

10. Only what is needed should be accepted. Monks should not collect unnecessary items in *kuṭīs* and leave them or other personal items (e.g. robes) behind.

This *katikāvata* should be read at each Saṅgha meeting. This set of rules approved by the most ven. Ñāṇadīpa Mahā Thera was agreed upon by the Saṅgha at the Saṅgha meeting on 19 February, 2019, at the Iriyagasulpota *kuṭī*.


Galpiyuma Araññna
Wilpattu Nat. Park
Siyambalagamuwa Araññna
Giribawa
Epalogama
Aetdalagala Araññna
Dambulla
Wasgamuwa Nat. Park
Laggala
KANDY
Kalugala Araññna
COLOMBO
Meetirigala NV
Balangoda
Bulathsinhala
Tanjan Taenna Araññna
Sinharaja Nat. Park
Bundala
the Island hermitage

APPENDIX II

Kālika

(Timeline)

LAYMAN PERIOD

1944 Born in Lyon, France;
1949 Moved to Augustenborg, Denmark;
1955 Boarding school in Sorø, Denmark;
1956 College in Sønderborg, Denmark;
1968 Travel to Asia, visit of Sri Lanka;
1969 Back to Denmark;

EARLY MONASTIC PERIOD

1969 Arrived to Sri Lanka, The Island Hermitage (*pabbajjā*);
1969-75 Bundala (in forest and then in the *kuṭī*); (1971 *upasampadā*);
1975 Kalugala Araññña;
1976-7 Būndala *kuṭī*;
1978 Thailand;
1979 Bulathsinhala *kuṭī*;
1980 Cave near Bulathsinhala;
1981 Pitakale *kuṭī*, Sinharaja;
1982 Pitakale *kuṭī*, Sinharaja; short time also in Petiyakanda cave;
1983 Wattugala cave, on opposite side of Sinharaja to Pitakale; Wilpattu National Park (after *vassa*);
1984 Wilpattu National Park; Vajirarama, Colombo (April);

THE FIRST LAGGALA PERIOD

1984 Iriyagusulpotha *kuṭī* (the first lower *kuṭī*);

1985 Hunukatamuni *kuṭī* (*vassa*) near Madumana (*piṇḍapāta* village);
1986 Nariyagallena cave (*piṇḍapāta* to Kiulavadiya and Guruvela);
1987 Galamudana *kuṭī*, above the waterfall;
1988 Galamudana *kuṭī*, above the waterfall;
1989 Iriyagusulpotha *kuṭī*;
1990 Wasgamuwa (unfinished *vassa*); Galamudana *kuṭī* (remaining *vassa*); Kandy hospital;
1991 Galamudana *kuṭī* (below the waterfall);
1992 Rambukkoluwa *kuṭī* (not cartain);
1993 Staying in 'holely' tree in Wasgamuwa National Park (the elephant accident); Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya (*vassa*);
1994 Iriyagusulpotha *kuṭī*;
1995 Iriyagusulpotha *kuṭī*;
1996 Leloya cave (three weeks) and *kuṭī* (*vassa*);
1997 Iriyagusulpotha *kuṭī*;
1998 Elahera/Dambulla forest; Elahera *kuṭī* (*vassa*);
1999 Eraula Cave (near Kandalama Hotel);
2000 Wewala *kuṭī* (*vassa*); Dambulla forest;
2001 Bovalawatte Araññña, Kandy (four months); Pottatawela *kuṭī* (new *kuṭī*, *vassa*);
2002 Pottatawela *kuṭī*; Kambarawa *kuṭī* (new *kuṭī*, *vassa*);
2003 Eraula *kuṭī*; Nariyagallena (*vassa*);
2004 Madumana *kuṭī* (3-4 months); Rambukkoluwa *kuṭī* (*vassa*);

BALANGODA PERIOD

2005 Welipatayaya *kuṭī*, Balangoda;
2006 Dehipitiya cave *kuṭī*, Balangoda;
2007 Dehipitiya cave *kuṭī*, Balangoda;
2008 Dadayampola, Balangoda;
2009 Nikapitiya *kuṭī*,Welawaya;
2010 Kiula cave *kuṭī*, Balangoda;

THE SECOND LAGGALA PERIOD

2011 Galamudana *kuṭī* (a new *kuṭī*);

2012 Galamudana *kuṭī*;
2013 Sule Gune *kuṭī*;

THE AGEING PERIOD

2014 Sule Gune *kuṭī*; Wimalanyana *kuṭī*, Balangoda (3 months); Ovilikanda *kuṭī* (*vassa*);
2015 Iriyagusulpotha (new upper *kuṭī*, 4 months); cave *kuṭī* in Galpiyuma Araññna near Padaviya (*vassa*);
2016 New *kuṭī* in small *araññna* near Giribawa (*vassa*);
2017 Giribawa; Aetdalagala Araññna (*vassa*); Epalogama *kuṭī*;
2018 The Forest Hermitage (Kandy); Siyambalagamuwa Araññna; Aetdalagala Araññna (*vassa*);
2019 Athdalagala Araññna; Galpiyuma Araññna at Padaviya (unfinished *vassa*); Athdalagala Araññna (remaining vassa);
2020 Tanjan Taenna Araññna, Balangoda; Athdalagala Araññna.

APPENDIX III

Pāli

(Glossary)

ācariya—teacher.
abhidhamma—higher (or extended) Teaching.
adhivacana—designation.
akālika—timeless, intemporal
anāgāmī—non-returner.
ānāpānasati—mindfulness of breathing.
anattā—not-self.
anicca—impermanent.
anidassana—non-indication, non-indicative.
aññā—the *arahat*'s knowledge.
anupādisesa—without residue.
araññña—forest.
arahat—one who is worthy. (Usually untranslated.)
ariya—noble. (Opp. *puthujjana*.)
asmimāna—conceit '(I) am. ('Conceit', *māna*, is to be understood as a cross between 'concept' and 'pride'—almost the French '*orgueil*' suitably attenuated. *Asmi* is 'I am' without the pronoun, like the Latin '*sum*'; but plain 'am' is too weak to render *asmi*, and *ahaṃ asmi* ('*ergo sum*') is too emphatic to be adequately rendered 'I am'.)
aṭṭhaṅgika—eight-factored.
attā—self.
avijjā—nescience, ignorance. (Opp. *vijjā*.)

bhante—sir (monastic address, junior to senior; seniors address juniors, and equals to equals, as *āvuso*).
bhava—being, existence.
bhāvanā—development.
bhikkhu—monk, almsman.
bhikkhunī—nun, almswoman.

caṅkamana—path for walking meditation.
cārikā—wandering.
citta—mind, consciousness, cognition, spirit, heart, purpose, (conscious) experience, &c. (*Citta* is sometimes synonymous with *mano*, and sometimes not; it is occasionally equivalent to *viññāṇa* in certain senses. Related to *cetanā*, but more general. Its precise meaning must be determined afresh in each new context.)
cittānupassanā—contemplation of mind.
cetanā—intention, volition, will.

dāna—gift, esp. of a meal.
dānasālā—a hall for the distribution of alms to the bhikkhus.
dāyaka—(male) giver, supporter.
diṭṭhi—view. (Usually, wrong view.)
deva (pl. *devā*)—deity.
dhamma—thing, image, idea, essence, universal, teaching, Teaching, nature, natural law, ethic, ethical law, &c. (cf. the Heraclitan *'logos'*).
dhammatā—nature (dhamma-ness).
dhammānupassanā—contemplation of (correct) ideas (of things).
dhammānusārī—teaching-follower. (Opp. *saddhānusārī*.)
dhātu—element.
dosa—hate.
dukkaṭa—wrong-doing (a category of minor offences in the *bhikkhu*'s disciplinary rules).
dukkha—unpleasure (opp. *sukha*), pain, suffering.

gāthā—verses.
gilampasa (Sn)—beverages derived from gilāna paccaya (Pāli)

jarā—ageing, decay.
jāti—birth.
jhāna—meditation.

kāma—sensuality.
kālika—temporal, involving time.
kamma—action.
kasiṇa—whole, totality; a contemplation device.
khandha—aggregate, mass, totality.

kuṭi—cottage, hut.

lokiya—worldly.
lokuttara—beyond the world, world-transcending.

magga—path.
mahāthera—great elder.
Māra—Evil One, a demon.
maraṇa—death.
mettā—friendliness.

nāma—name.
nāmarūpa—name-&-matter.
ñāṇa—knowledge.
nicca—permanent.
nibbāna—extinction.
nimitta—sign, object.
nissaya—support.

opanayika—leading.

pañcakkhandhā—five aggregates.
pañc'upādānakkhandhā—five holding aggregates. (This needs expansion to be intelligible.)
paññā—understanding.
pansala (Sn)—a village temple.

pabbajjā—gone forth.
paṭiccasamuppāda—dependent arising.
paṭigha—resistance.
pātimokkha—monks rules.
pavāraṇā—the ceremony that concludes the vassa.
phala—fruit, fruition.
piṇḍapāta—alms-round.
ping kamma—gathering to offer requisites for the Saṅgha.
Piṭaka—basket, collection.
poḷoňgā (Sn)—viper.
poya=pūjā

pūjā—observance, chanting.
puñña—merit.
puthujjana—commoner. (Opp. *ariya*.)

rūpa—matter, substance, (visible) form.

saddhā—faith, confidence, trust.
saddhānusārī—faith-follower. (Opp. *dhammānusārī*.)
saddhāvimutta—released through faith.
sakadāgāmī—once-returner.
sakkāya—person, somebody, personality.
sakkāyadiṭṭhi—personality-view.
samādhi—concentration.
samaṇabrāhmaṇa—recluses and divines.
sāmaṇera—novice monk.
samatha—calmness; mental concentration.
sammā—full; right.
sampajañña—awareness.
saṃsāra—running on (from existence to existence).
saṅkhāra—determination, determinant.
saṅgha—community, order.
Saṅgharāja—the leader of a wider community.
saññā—perception, percept.
Sāsana—advice; used today in the sense of 'the Buddha's Dispensation'.
sāti—mindfulness, recollection, memory.
satipaṭṭhānā—foundations of mindfulness.
satisampajañña—mindfulness-&-awareness.
sīla—virtue, (right) conduct.
sīmā—boundary.
sotāpanna—stream-attainer.

taṇhā—craving.
thera—(male) elder.
tipiṭaka—three baskets, i.e. Vināya, Sutta and Abhidhamma.

upādāna—holding.
upajjhāya—preceptor.
upāsaka—male lay-follower.

upāsikā—female lay-follower.
upasampadā—ordination (into the status of *bhikkhu*).

vedanā—feeling.
vihāra—dwelling for monks.
vinaya—discipline, 'leading out'.
viññāṇa—consciousness, knowing.

yoga—yoke; discipline.
yoniso manasikāra—proper attention.

Index

COLOPHON
Typeset at Path Press Publications
in Gentium Book Basic
distributed with the SIL Open Font License by SIL International
using Adobe InDesign CC on MacOS 11
Printed on 80 grs Munken Premium, FSC-certified
Produced by Ipskamp Printing, Enschede

PRINTED AND BOUND IN THE NETHERLANDS

This book is about Bhante Ñāṇadīpa, an incredible figure and, for many, *the* ideal forest monk. We might read about such people from centuries ago, like the Venerable Mahā Kassapa, in the ancient Buddhist texts, or read about the more recent famous Thai forest monks, such as the late Venerable Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta. His very remote forest swellings (*kuṭī*) were basic, without a front wall. He was dedicated to living the forest life to the fullest. He was strict with himself; such was the discipline he chose, and he was not concerned if it was pleasing or distasteful to others. Nothing stopped him. He continued to dig ever deeper into the hindrances and defilements of his mind, his anger and fear, and aimed for the final realization of the Buddha's Teaching. He carried on along the lonely and thorny path, despite the physical hardships and illnesses he endured, such as malaria and attacks from elephants and other wild animals. And despite being very close to death many times, he persevered, year after year, approaching and entering old age, indifferent to others' praise or blame. Through it all, he always walked the straight path, never abandoning his resolve.

Bhikkhu Hiriko is a Slovenian Buddhist monk, ordained in the tradition of Ajahn Chah. He is also the chief editor and the administrator at Path Press and the author of 'The Hermit of Būndala', the biography of an English monk, Ñāṇavīra Thera. He is also a writer of Slovenian articles and translator of Buddha's talks or Suttas. Currently, he is the Guardian (the chief-monk) of Samaṇadīpa Forest Hermitage in Slovenia, a monastery dedicated to Bhante Ñāṇadīpa.

Path Press Publications
www.pathpresspublications.com

9 789460 900341