

Reminiscences of Venerable Ñāṇavimala Mahāthera

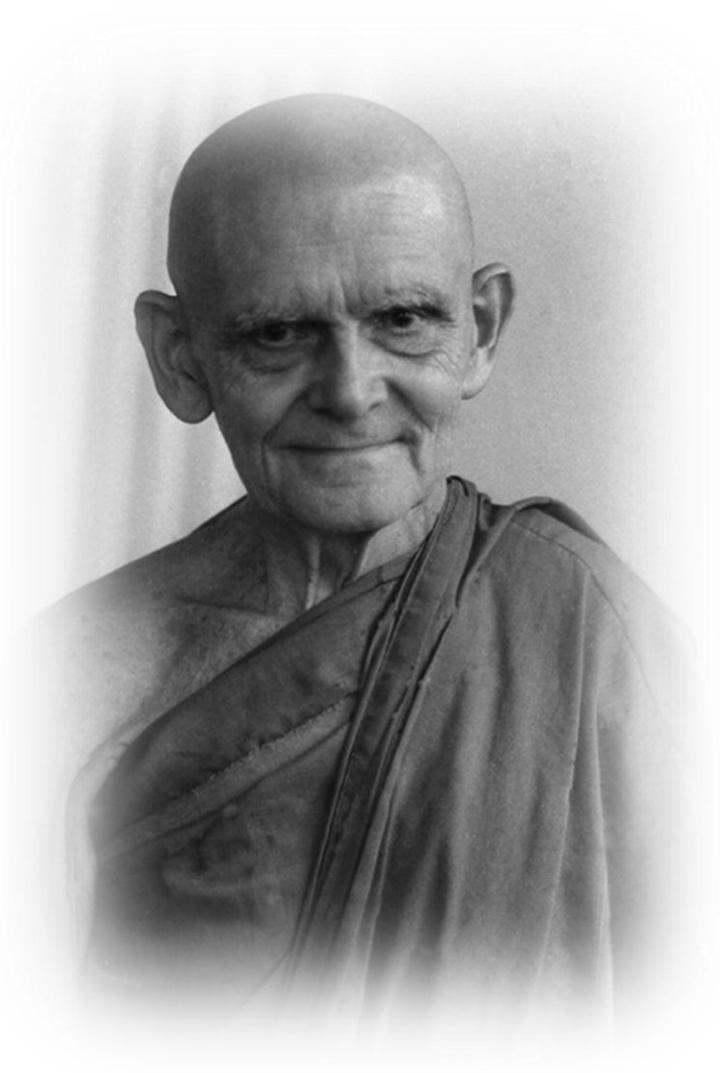


Bhikkhu K.Ñāṇananda

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2016



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Venerable Ñāṇavimala Mahāthera belongs to that rare category of monks whose lives epitomize for us the exemplary lives of the Buddha's times. For me, he was the Mahā Kassapa of this age. After I went forth under Venerable Kadugannawe Ñānāloka Mahāthera at Island of Hermitage in 1967, I had the privilege of associating him for five years. When I met him for the first time, he had just returned from his first *cārikā* after twelve years of cloistered meditation in the little island. From what I heard about the hardships he had undergone in his long trek on foot, it was perhaps the first test of endurance for his later life style.

As a young *upāsaka* looking forward to ordination, I visited him in his *kuṭi* to get his advice and blessings. In his deep reverberating voice, he reminded me of the true aim and purpose of an ideal monk's life. After my ordination, I sought his instructions and guidance from time to time. Apart from that, it was a great inspiration for me to watch him going about his daily routine with mindfulness and full awareness. There was a formality of his own which cut off excesses that make for distraction. His frugal ways and stern simplicity emanated an atmosphere of seriousness reminiscent of the life of Venerable Mahā Kassapa as recorded in our scriptures.

The evening session of chanting was held at the refectory of the Hermitage those days. Venerable Ñāṇavimala used to come with his lantern, which he put down on the table near the kitchen before he took his seat in the refectory. While some of the other monks were chatting, he would keep his gaze fixed on the flame of the oil lamp before the Buddha statue. Only rarely did he pay attention to the conversation going around him and respond to it.

Once the Burmese monk Venerable U. Ñāṇinda Mahāthera who used to visit the Hermitage quite often, asked Venerable Ñāṇavimala after the chanting, whether he intended returning to his mother country after some time. Almost like a retort Venerable Ñāṇavimala came out with the terse reply:

“*Patirūpadesavāso*”
(‘residing in a suitable locality’)

It served to convey to the Venerable Ñāṇinda Mahāthera the fact that he preferred to remain in an environment most congenial to his practice – true to the Buddha’s behest in the *Mahā Mangala Sutta* (‘The Discourse on the Blessings’).

Once after this chanting session, I was going to light my lantern when I suddenly became aware that Venerable Ñāṇavimala was waiting nearby to light his own. Out of respect for him, I took his lantern and with an unnecessary haste, tried to light it first. Thrice I tried to bring the half-lit slip of paper (kept for the purpose) near the wick, but every time it went out before I could light it. I was still fumbling with it when he took his lamp from me and lit it at the very first attempt saying:

“Slowly – Carefully – Mindfully”

These three words are still ringing in my ears like a souvenir worth a life time.

A learned *Mahāthera* who happened to visit me once wished to see Venerable Ñāṇavimala and I took him to his *kuṭi*. He was highly impressed by Venerable Ñāṇavimala’s exemplary ways of life so much so that he humbly confessed:

“We all are dabbling with shallow things. Only you are doing the real thing.”

But Venerable Ñāṇavimala’s response was a well-worded modest compliment in return:

“But then, you, Venerable Sir, are giving the people an opportunity to listen to the Dhamma. After all, everyone cannot go into solitude at the same time!”

Venerable Ñāṇavimala seemed to live in a ‘present’ which had no ‘future’. No one could guess when he would set forth on his next *cārikā* until he came to hand over the key of his *kuṭi*. while on *cārikā* he usually stayed three nights at one place. When asked where he would go next, he used to say: “I shall decide when I come to the junction.” Once, one of our fellow monks had gone to him and told: “Venerable Sir, I hope to leave tomorrow.” His retort was:

“Go today, why tomorrow?”

While on *cārikā* whenever he happened to stay for more than one night at one *āraṇya* he used to clean and arrange the *kuṭi* he was given as the first thing. There is a strange incident relating to his sense of orderliness which I came to hear from a western monk. Once Venerable Ñāṇavimala in the course of his *cārikā* had arrived at a certain forest hermitage. The chief monk had given him the key of the *Uposatha* house which also served as the library of the hermitage. When the chief monk came to see him the next morning he found the books which were earlier lying here and there, well arranged by the visitor. After a couple of days Venerable Ñāṇavimala had gone to the chief monk to say that he is leaving and had handed over the key. After he left, the chief monk probably out of curiosity had gone to the *Uposatha* house and opened the door. To his amazement, all those books were found disarranged exactly as they were before!

That western monk had heard this episode from that chief monk when he himself visited that hermitage. The chief monk

had exclaimed: “What a wonderful monk.” Because he was impressed by the way Venerable Ñāṇavimala had ‘mindfully’ disarranged the books!

We do not know whether this little incident had some deep meaning. It could be that Venerable Ñāṇavimala was conscious of the fact that he had no right to ‘arrange’ another’s library. Or else, it may be that he simply wished to leave behind an object lesson in mindfulness for the chief monk.

In the course of his *cārikā* Venerable Ñāṇavimala visited Kudumbigala Forest Hermitage which was not easily approachable those days. Upon his return, one of our fellow monks had asked him about his experiences with wild animals. He had told that he suddenly met a bear on his path and that he looked directly at its eyes with *mettā*. To the apprehensive question: “But, Venerable Sir, if it had pounced on you?” his mild reply was: “Well, I would have died with a pure heart.”

Sometimes he would be out on *cārikā* for several months. By the time he returns he is emaciated and the soles of his feet are worn out. Even if the path to his *kuṭi* is fully covered with fallen leaves, he would not make it a point to sweep it fully the following day itself. He would do it systematically part by part but thoroughly – ‘slowly – carefully – mindfully.’ It is as if he taught us that if we sweep hurriedly we would be leaving more ‘rubbish’ in the mind than we had swept away.

When he was staying at *Vajirārāma* in Colombo, a wealthy lay-supporter who was highly impressed by a Dhamma discussion with Venerable Ñāṇavimala, came with his family the following morning to offer him alms. With all the delicacies he had brought, he was eagerly waiting at the gate of the temple until Venerable Ñāṇavimala came out to go on his alms round. As soon as he showed up, he reverentially approached him and served a hopper into the bowl. He was going to offer more when

Venerable Ñāṇavimala made a sign with his hand to prevent it, saying:

“Please give an opportunity for poor people also to offer alms.”

Long after this experience that particular donor told me about it, not with a sense of disappointment but with great appreciation for the frugal ways of Venerable Ñāṇavimala.

One of our fellow monks was staying at another hermitage when Venerable Ñāṇavimala also came there in the course of his *cārikā*. The monks of that Hermitage were in the habit distributing food to crowds of poor people who regularly turned up there. Venerable Ñāṇavimala was curious why this practice was going on. Our monk had explained saying: “Venerable Sir, it is because they are poor.” But Venerable Ñāṇavimala’s rejoinder was:

“If they are poor we should take from them!”

According to modern values Venerable Ñāṇavimala’s attitude is grossly unkind. But most probably he meant something deep by that retort. One reason for poverty according to the Law of Kamma is the lack of the practice of giving. To encourage the poor to take from monks rather than to offer them, is to give them an inheritance of poverty in *samsāra*.

Venerable Mahā Kassapa Mahāthera who was foremost in austerity, on rising from his attainment of cessation after seven days of fasting, used to prevent not only kings and millionaires but even sakka, the king of gods from offering him alms food and gave that rare opportunity of making merit to poor people living in huts and slums. Materialist thinking of today might of course interpret it as an exploitation of the poor.

Whenever Venerable Ñāṇavimala heard the pathetic excuse from a poor house in his alms round: “Venerable Sir, today we have nothing to give” he used to console them with the sympathetic ‘thanks giving’:

“I came to give you my METTĀ!”

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By fervour of austerity, severity of discipline and rigour of fortitude the late Venerable Ñāṇavimala Mahāthera appeared hard like a stone. But then with his overflowing *mettā* (universal love) and deep compassion he was at the same time soft like a flower. It was not easy for some who knew him to understand this wonderful blend of qualities. They were not able to appreciate the straightforward and brief advices he gave in his deep reverberating voice. However, as he trekked from village to village, from town to town, from hermitage to hermitage, from monastery to monastery, he left an indelible impression on those who met him of the exemplary life of an ideal lone-dweller of the Buddha’s time. As he walked unshod from end to end over this island he reminded the people of the heyday of Buddhism in this country. Whenever he sojourned, he had a word of encouragement for monks and novices who were attracted by his austere ways. Unswayed by the vicissitudes summed up by the Eight Worldly Conditions – gain and loss, fame and ill-fame, blame and praise, happiness and suffering – he endured all hardships on his way with equanimity. His spirit of renunciation and the sense of detachment was such that every time others enquired about his health he reminded them of the sickly nature of this body. Though his body was sick, he was never sick in mind – well knowing where true health lies.

It was no coincidence that Venerable Ñāṇavimala who began his monk's life in Island Hermitage breathed his last on the solitary isle of Parappuduwa nearby. Perhaps by then he had found that 'ISLAND' which no flood can overwhelm.

*‘Utthānenappamādena
saññāmena damena ca
dīpaṃ kayirātha medhāvī
yaṃ ogho nābhikīrati*

– Dhp. V. 25

By unflagging effort – by diligence
By restraint and by self-control
Let the truly wise man make for him self
An ISLAND – which no flood can overwhelm



