

# Appreciation – Mr. H.G.A. van Zeyst

By Pat Jayatilleke

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Mr. Henri Van Zeyst is no more. Born in Utrecht, the Netherlands in 1905 to devout Roman Catholic parents he was ordained a Catholic priest and Benedictine monk in 1933. In 1936 he was in charge of a church in London. Even as a Roman Catholic priest he got interested in the study of the religions of the East and to study Buddhism more deeply. In his own words “I knew something of religion as a whole and of several types of religion in particular. There were religions of faith, of hope, of fears, of devotion, of discipline, of reward and punishment and I did not want any of that. I had drunk them all and did not care for the brew. What I wanted was a religion with a difference really and then I had come across Buddhism in London and I had to come to Sri Lanka to the real taste of it.”

He arrived in Colombo on the August 28, 1939 and was ordained as a *sāmaṇera*. He was called Bhikkhu Dhammapāla, who, as a preacher, teacher and author was loved and respected by hundreds for his radio talks, lectures, debates, publications and the personal touch he was able to give to all who contacted him. He spent his time studying the Buddhist texts and the Pali language. He studied and lived as a simple monk in Buddhist temples and he devoted his energy to the young people, becoming the revered leader of a younger generation on the All Ceylon Buddhist Association. He disrobed in 1947 because according to him all the rites and rituals involved

were becoming meaningless to him. Thereafter he went to India, visited Rishi Valley and Adyar. He spent some time with Ramana Maha Rishi of Tiruvannamalai and Rama Das Swamiji at Ananda Ashram at Kanhanghat, Sai Baba of Puthapathy, Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh and Guru Sri Purus Uttama Ananda at Vasistha Geehe in the Himalayas. During this period he came in contact with Krishnamurthi whose teachings deeply touched him. He said he really understood the teachings of the Buddha after his meeting with Krishnamurthi. On his return he became the Asst. Editor of the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, the office of which was then located at the Peradeniya University. He got married around this time and I got to know him in 1956. I was greatly impressed by his brilliant wit and humour. His general knowledge was phenomenal. His wife predeceased him in 1983. Thereafter he retired to a life of meditation. At Nilambe he gave himself freely to all who sought his advice and the fruits of his experience. His whole life of 50 years in Sri Lanka was devoted to Buddhism which he used to say was his first and last love.

I consider myself most fortunate to have associated with such a remarkable man. Talking and discussing with him was a stimulating experience. Although he was 84 at the time of his death his mind was sharp and alert as ever. In the last few years of his life his eyesight was very poor and deteriorating and so was his hearing. He said he was aware – he stressed the word “aware of” his gradually failing senses and so adjusted to the situation accordingly, in a way he was able to make the maximum use of the faculties. He managed it so well that no one ever suspected how bad his condition was.

He was laid up in bed for a month after surgery two months before his death. Never was there a murmur or a complaint – on the contrary he was in good spirits though obviously he must have been in great pain. I asked him quite seriously how he could be so happy. His answer, given equally seriously, was “just accept what comes”. Back home from hospital he practised diligently walking

with the aid of a walker. He was quite pleased with the progress he was making. I was amused and thought of myself, “at 84 what is all this for”. As though he read my thoughts he said, “the past is gone forever, the future is yet to be – only the present exists: live fully in the present”. He was a man who really lived what he accepted as the truth.

One of his happiest feelings till the end was that he had been able to write two more books for which no funds were found but which will be printed and published by the Public Trustee posthumously from his own savings which were invested enabling him to live independently on the interest and which now after his death will find a more useful source for others to experience in themselves the living truth of Buddhism for which he lived and died. He did not die but will live long with us in his many writings, recorded talks and personal contacts, the memory of which remains the living image in the hearts of many who loved him and were loved by him.

May his journey in saṃsāra be short and fruitful.