

# The Forgotten Theravadin

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From: The Island, Sunday, September 14th 1997, page 12,  
“Features”.

## Abstract

Henri van Zeyst was born in Utrecht, Netherlands in 1905 from a well-to-do middle class family with a strict Roman Catholic outlook. His final year of studies in philosophy and theology and his first year after his priestly ordination were spent in an Italian monastery near Florence. At the age of 31 he was sent to London to be in charge of a new foundation of his Order, during which time he was also teaching Dogmatic Theology to the scholastics of Christus Rex Priory in North London.

Across the intellectual firmament of the nineteen forties in Ceylon there streaked a luminous mind. For a brief five years it burned fiercely like a meteorite in the night sky and then, like any of those short lived celestial wanderers, soon spluttered out and disappeared abruptly from public view.

I have been moved to write about this remarkable man because the 15th of September next year will mark the tenth anniversary of his passing away in Kandy and it seems to me that it will be a fitting occasion for those who had the privilege of knowing him, to get together to bring out a commemorative volume on the man and his works. I do not recall reading many tributes to him in the past nine years, except a beautiful piece written by Mrs. Pat Jayatilleke

(the wife of late Prof. K.N. Jayatilleke. Both K.N. and Pat were great admirers of the man) published in the ISLAND Paper on 13th October 1988. A constant reminder to us of the world's skewed values is the way it lavishes its accolades and laurels on men and women of little or no substance while it relegates to oblivion those of intellectual, moral or spiritual excellence, who precisely because of who they are, will neither hanker after nor accept public acclaim.

In my view, few individuals touched the lives of the Buddhist youth of the forties as did this single man. I can recall at random a few of those whose lives he influenced and who went on to hold positions of great distinction in the country – among them – a Speaker of the House, a Secretary to the Treasury, a Governor of the Central Bank, Civil Servants, Ambassadors, at least a dozen Professors in the University of Ceylon, several leading journalists, researchers and umpteen teachers, doctors and lawyers.

## The Man

Who was this man about whom I write in such superlative terms and yet about whom not many talk today, much less acknowledge, either for the quality of his mind or for the nobility of his character?

In the forties he was known amongst us as Bhikkhu Dhammapāla. He was a Dutchman, in fact he had been a Roman Catholic priest known to his contemporaries in Holland as Fr. Henri Gerard Antonius van Zeyst. Born on the 25th of July 1905 in Utrecht to a devout Roman Catholic family, van Zeyst shows early a rich cerebral endowment, a scalpel like mind. He read Philosophy and Logic at the University and later Theology at the Seminary, after which in 1935 he was ordained a priest in the Benedictine Order. In 1936 his superiors sent him to be in charge of the Priory Christus Rex in Cockfosters in North London. There, in order to equip himself as a lecturer in apologetics, i.e. the science of defending the faith, he embarked on a thorough study of Buddhism.

Bringing to bear on his Buddhist studies the same incisiveness and clarity of mind that had characterised his studies in Scholasticism he soon found himself unable to continue accepting the dogmas and fundamental beliefs of his church. Not only that. He decided that his thirst for the Truth could be quenched only through a deeper encounter with Buddhism. He then formally renounced his Roman Catholic faith, defrocked himself and on the 8th of August 1938 set sail for Colombo.

The episode of renouncing the faith to which he had been born and indeed the avocation of priesthood which he had sworn to follow, was a more dramatic and lacerating experience than can be here recounted. In later years, he once told me how upon hearing that he was sailing for Colombo to study Buddhism, directly from London without even returning to his home in Utrecht, his mother and sister to whom he was deeply attached, came overland by train to confront him at Marseilles when his ship docked there and how amidst tearful scenes they tried to dissuade him from his misguided adventure and how, notwithstanding the terrible anguish he felt over being the cause of their pain, he persisted in his mission.

I mention this episode for more than its narrative interest. I believe it illustrates how, when even a glimmer of light breaks through the dense layers of tradition and superstition that shroud a man's consciousness, it can lay hold of him, spin him around and spur him on to deeds and endeavours which are inexplicable on rational grounds. This relentless quest for the Truth, this unquenchable thirst for the Unconditioned, was the driving motor of van Zeyst's life. Within a brief decade this ceaseless inner drive was to lift him up again and send him looking among new pastures for what he thought must be even more satisfying spiritual substance.

## Disrobed

On the 10th of March 1947, for reasons I shall later recount, Dhammapāla abruptly disrobed as a Buddhist monk and went off to India. There for another two years, he meditated, studied and taught in the famous Rishi Valley School where he also had the opportunity to meet with and learn from all the living Indian savants of the time – among them, Ramana Maha Rishi of Arunachala, Sri Satya Sai Baba of Putharappathi, Swami Sivanandan of Rishikesh and Jiddu Krishnamurthi at Adyat. At the end of that period he decided that there was no spiritual truth higher than pure Theravāda Buddhism and resolved to spend the rest of his life in Sri Lanka studying, writing and teaching Theravāda. He returned to this country shortly thereafter but now in the van Zeyst mode and for another thirty eight years, (for some of those years while working on the Buddhist Encyclopaedia, but most of the time as a recluse) continued to write copiously, pouring out into more than thirty publications the distilled essence of his works to realise that here indeed is the quintessential Theravāda mind, the nearest we have come in our time to matching the dialectical skills of a Nāgasena or a Buddhaghosa.

The years when van Zeyst, in his Bhikkhu Dhammapāla mode, burst upon our island scene were the best of times, when to be alive and young was very heaven. The air was vibrant with the imminent dawning of a brave new world and every prospect was pleasing and not even man was vile. I recall those brief sparkling years with a nostalgia that even now has not fully expended its power to motivate and inspire. The World War had come to a close and we were standing on the threshold of the atomic age with all its frightening prospects and unfathomed opportunities beckoning to us. The United Nations Organisation was in the throes of being born, heralding a new age of peace and harmony. The Beveridge Plan had set out the blue print for the new welfare state which would

banish from our midst for all time poverty, injustice and oppression. As if that was not enough, in our own island home we were also caught up in the euphoria of our impending Independence and a new social order round the corner.

S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike had tabled a Bill in the State council calling for immediate Independence and Whitehall had responded with a promise of a Commission under Lord Soulbury. Furthermore, N.M. Perera, Colvin R. de Silva, Phillip Gunawardena et al had been released from prison and were weaving their own magic on diverse esplanades throughout the land. It was upon this scene, pregnant with promise and simmering with high hopes, that Bhikkhu Dhammapāla first made his appearance. His coming was the spark that ignited the Buddhist youth of the time.

## ACBSU

Actually, Dhammapāla had been on the island since 1938, being ordained as a Sāmaṇera at Maligakanda the very year he arrived and taking higher ordination at Udawattakele Temple, Kandy, in 1940. Thereafter for another two years he hardly made himself visible, being content to pore over the Sutras and the Abhidhamma in the quietness of his mountain retreat. Then in 1942 he suddenly emerged to organise the youth of Kandy and Gampola and launch the All Ceylon [p. 23] Buddhist Student's Union. The ACBSU was to serve as his platform for the next five years.

Between 1942 and 1947 Dhammapāla made Kandy and Mt. Lavinia his principal centres of operation and it was at the latter place that I first met him in 1944. I was barely fourteen at the time and my principal role was to arrange the chairs for the evening meetings and organise the gilānpasa – the Orange Barley, the tumbler and the bottle opener. However, even from the periphery, I could scarcely fail to be overwhelmed both by the quality of Dhammapāla's personality and by the awesome power of his mind.

He stood six feet six inches in his bare feet and when addressing a meeting had the profile of a Roman senator in a toga. If one had not met him and known at first-hand what a deeply humble man he actually was, one might have thought that he was a man of extraordinary arrogance, so imperiously did he carry himself and so unperturbed and dignified his demeanour. Furthermore, concealed within and enhancing that magisterial exterior was a mind like a razor, a faculty so endowed with the capacity to analyse, take apart and cut through to the heart of an issue with such an economy of words and time, that the effect was quite startling. Before he came to study the Buddhist scriptures Dhammapāla had already acquired the discipline that comes from reading Plato and Aristotle in the Greek original, the Scholastics in the Latin original and Immanuel Kant in German. He had also studied the works of the British Empiricists and was thoroughly versed in Hume's presentation of the central issues of epistemology. However, as I later discovered, there was a big gap in his philosophical knowledge base, I do not think that he had studied the epistemological problem as interpreted by the Logical Positivists or by the Symbolic Logicians of later times. On the other hand, he did not need to, because for him philosophy was not a body of knowledge or an inventory of what various thinkers down the ages had said on ultimate issues, but merely a tool for analysis. As I recall it, Dhammapāla's favoured method for uncovering Truth was the Socratic dialectic. He would himself refrain from making categorical statements, preferring to allow the student or the listener to make the statements and then systematically, through question and answer, lead them to contradict themselves and admit the error of their beliefs or claims. In that respect Dhammapāla could have been a reincarnation of Nāgasena in his dialectical polemics with King Menander.

## Dialectical Skills

I must hasten to add that while Dhammapāla's dialectical skills held us all spellbound at that time, in later life, when under his inspiration I took to reading philosophy on my own, I realised what a limited tool the dialectical method was for inquiring after Truth. While I still hold his memory in great respect I believe that Dhammapāla's over-indulgence in dialectics shut him off from a wholly different perspective on Reality, namely the holistic or integrated view. Dhammapāla was a classic example of the overly developed left hemisphere intellect, the mind that compulsively disaggregates, analyses, quantifies and explains away. He was the archetypal reductionist mind. However he seemed to lack the complementary intellectual faculty, which psychologists call the right hemisphere intellect that tries to stand back and see things whole, that re-integrates the component parts into gestalts or patterns, that reaches beyond the rational and opens itself to insights and intimations which cannot always be validated through logic or empirical observation. Within a matter of a few years Dhammapāla had assumed among the Buddhist youth of the country the same legendary image as had Anagārika Dhammapāla in an earlier age. Thereby hangs the story of his abrupt exit from involvement in the public domain.

From the very start Dhammapāla's aim was to awaken the Buddhist youth in particular and the Buddhist public in general to their extraordinary inheritance in the Word of the Buddha. To this end he travelled the length and breadth of the country expounding the Sutras and the Abhidhamma, engaging in polemics with Christian theologians and Buddhist traditionalists, seeking to wean Buddhists away from the quagmire of empty ritualism, superstition and false beliefs that had come to characterise Buddhism in our land.

Openly, he derided belief in astrology and was fiercely intolerant of devala worship and practices such as seth kavi, poojas, the

worship of relics and images and the popular recourse to charms, talismans and making and redeeming vows. All of this he characterised as crude primitivism and animism unworthy of a Theravāda Buddhist's high calling. He used to ask of what use is listening to pīrith if you do not understand what is being said and if the Word of Buddha is not reaching through to your consciousness. He would point out that being lulled to sleep by the sonorous intoning of a Maha Pīrith was no substitute for meditating on the meaning of the Sutras chanted. To his mind all this bespoke how abysmally ignorant Buddhists were of their own religion and what little impact two thousand five hundred years of claiming to follow the Tathāgata had made on the country's culture.

## **Anathema**

This sort of iconoclasm was anathema to the Buddhist hierarchy, clergy as well as lay, who seeing in Dhammapāla a trouble maker who was threatening to undermine the entire edifice of what passed for Buddhism in this country, marginalised him from the very start. Gradually even the youth who flocked to him at the beginning saw that keeping the course with him meant giving up cherished practices and beliefs and preferring the more comfortable ways of tradition and superstition, quietly dropped away.

## **Sinhala-Buddhist Psyche**

What was perhaps most disconcerting to Dhammapāla was the ever increasing trend towards making the religion of the Tathāgata into a rallying cry for a political and nationalist resurgence. To him this was the ultimate heresy, a setback to Buddhism that far exceeded the cumulative destruction wrought upon it by four hundred years of the Christian missionary enterprise. He could not understand how a teaching that has as its fundamental proposition the doctrine of

anatta, i.e. the claim that all identities are false, can be perverted to underpin ethnic, cultural or national identities, which are merely the widening effects of the primal avijjā or the original illusion? In Dhammapāla's view a Buddhist who also called himself a nationalist was a grotesque contradiction, the clearest proof that the basic teaching of the Buddha had not been understood. This inexorable trend in the Sinhala-Buddhist psyche saddened him deeply and provoked within him another fundamental self-reappraisal. On the 10th March 1947 unbeknown except to an intimate handful Dhammapāla threw it all up and withdrew to the Himalayas. However he had not ceased to be a follower of the Thathagatha although for ever thereafter, he ceased to give himself a label. For van Zeyst Buddhism was not a label or a "thing" that had to be propagated or defended. For him Buddhism was a way of understanding phenomena, a way of coming to see things as they are, and a way of seeing through appearance to the hidden reality, and a way of ordering one's life on the basis of that understanding. By late 1948 he reappeared amongst us as Henri van Zeyst and lived for several years with Proctor Ananda Mivanapalana off Templar's Rd, Mt. Lavinia.

It was during these years that my brother Stanley and I came to know the great man intimately – Stanley much more than I. In fact, Stanley and van Zeyst, along with a few others, ran a night school for the poor children of the area in the Ratmalana Pirivena close by for several years. I still recall with nostalgia how van Zeyst would often come to our home in Hena Road, after teaching at the night school and expound to a few of us gathered round him his views on a whole range of issues. Listening to van Zeyst unfold his mind was a rare experience in intellectualism and spiritual wisdom.

Mivanapalana was a true benefactor and friend to van Zeyst. He not only gave him shelter and encouraged him to continue writing but in order that he may not be burdened by a sense of being under obligation to anyone, got him a job as secretary to the General Insurance Company of which Mivanapalana was the Managing

Director. Unhappily, in the early fifties Mivanapalana passed away prematurely and I recall that this experience left a deep impression on van Zeyst. By then he had married Agnes Victor, a teacher at Methodist College, Kollupitiya and shortly thereafter Professor Malalasekera appointed him Assistant Editor of the Buddhist Encyclopaedia at Peradeniya from where having risen to the position of Senior Assistant Editor and Administrative Officer he took retirement in 1968.

Bandula Jayawardena, one of his colleagues on the staff of the Encyclopaedia, used to say that van Zeyst was himself the Encyclopaedia and all that the Chief Editor Malalasekera did was to insert the commas and the stops on the articles van Zeyst wrote.

## Retirement

Upon retirement the van Zeyst couple lived in rented houses in various places in the hill country – in Hindagala, Watapuluwa, Heel Oya, Udawattakelle and Bahirawakanda until 1984 when Mrs. van Zeyst passed away. Thereafter he lived for a while as a recluse in a little kuti he had built for himself at the meditation centre at Nilambe but when some marauding Neanderthal burned it down during the JVP disturbances in 1987, he was given shelter by Mrs. Pat Jayatilleke in an annex to her house in Kandy. Pat's gesture was a demonstration of profound respect for an old Master - van Zeyst was 84 then. The following year, on the 15th of Sept.1988, after a short illness, van Zeyst passed away peacefully. Our country has never lacked for Buddhist scholars of great academic distinction, many of whom probably had a wider textual knowledge base than van Zeyst but two things, above all, distinguished him from them. One was that he was essentially an original thinker, who even if he had never read the Sutras or the Abhidhamma would have stumbled upon the basic tenets of Theravāda doctrine on his own. The other was that he tried to live out his life on the basis that the central teaching of

Theravāda, the doctrine of anatta, which was not only cognitively true but was capable of demonstration in one's life on a daily basis. To live day by day on the basis that one's sense of self-identity is false, never seeking one's own, always yielding to the other, never seeking name, fame, publicity or popular acclaim, making of one's life a daily demonstration in self-effacement, an interminable dying to ego consciousness, is the ultimate test of a person's claim to be a follower of the Tathāgata. Van Zeyst more than most I have known embodied this doctrine in his life. Though endowed with some singular gifts - an awesome intellect, great powers of communication and a formidable physical presence - van Zeyst was one of the humblest human beings I have met, never flaunting his gifts but always tempering them with an unfailing sense of humour and a deep compassion.

I have written this piece on van Zeyst the man, not because I share with him all his views on the nature of Truth and Reality (this is not the place to discuss my differences with the great man) but because I respect profoundly the man's intellectual, moral, and spiritual integrity. In my view, the only Buddhist thinker of that time to match van Zeyst in his grasp of Theravāda concepts was the late Professor K. N. Jayatilleke. When I was in broadcasting I invited them both to deliver a series of lectures on Theravāda doctrines over the radio. The talks, subsequently published, make fascinating reading. I should add, however, that there are two others who having started with van Zeyst on the long march from Mt. Lavinia in 1944 stayed the course with him to the end and are therefore more competent than I to write about the man and his works. One is my brother Stanley who also held van Zeyst in great awe and who intervened with Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike to get him to confer Distinguished Citizenship on the man. The other was

Bandula Jayawardena who was eventually assistant to van Zeyst on the Encyclopaedia and who also still holds him in great respect.

When I left the country in 1974 I lost contact with van Zeyst and saw him for the last time in 1987 when I called on him along with Stanley, in his little kuti in Nilambe. By that time van Zeyst knew that my own world view and beliefs had diverged from his but that did not diminish the gaiety and warmth with which he greeted me. He presented me with several of his published works, all autographed by him then and there, adding with a twinkle in his eye that he hoped I would benefit from reading them some day!! We both laughed uproariously! Even in the twilight of his life van Zeyst's wit and his skill with the verbal rapier thrust had not deserted him!