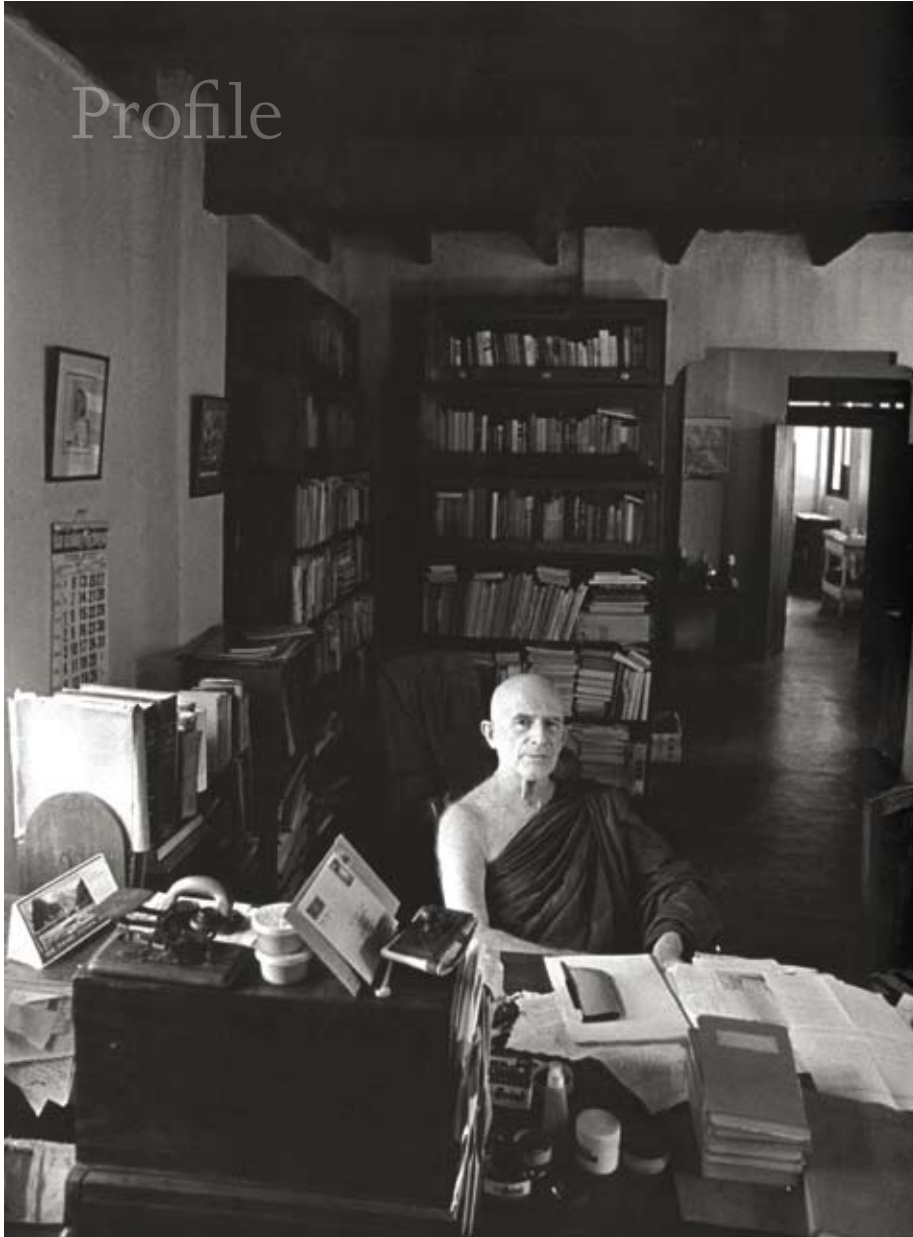


Profile



Nyanaponika in his office at Forest Hermitage in the early 1970s

BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

By Andrea Miller

For thirty years, the Buddhist Publication Society (BPS) in Sri Lanka was the most important publisher of Theravada literature in English. Now, American companies also publish works in the Theravada tradition, but Bhikkhu Bodhi, a former editor of the society, says, “The BPS was the one that ploughed the path through the jungle.”

The Buddhist Publication Society had its start in 1957 when A.S. Karunaratna, a former mayor of Kandy, decided to sponsor the publication of a booklet in

memory of a deceased relative, which is a tradition in Sri Lanka. His booklet was still at the printer’s when he came up with the idea to produce an English series on basic Buddhist teachings and to issue it for free distribution in Western countries.

Karunaratna’s friend Richard Abeyasekera was enthusiastic about the idea of spreading the dharma in the West and he became, as Bhikkhu Bodhi puts it, one of the society’s “guardian deities.” But since neither Karunaratna nor Abeyasekera

were Buddhist scholars, they needed somebody with the requisite knowledge to take on editorial responsibility. They approached Ven. Nyanaponika, who was living just outside of Kandy.

Nyanaponika was born Siegmund Feniger in 1901 to a Jewish family in Germany. His father operated a shoe shop and couldn’t afford to send him to university, so after finishing secondary school, Feniger took a job in a bookstore. There he found himself attracted to dharma books, and by twenty he considered himself a committed practitioner.

When Hitler came to power and began persecuting the Jews, Feniger escaped to Vienna and then went to Sri Lanka to study with Ven. Nyanatiloka, a German-born monk. Feniger received ordination and was given the name Nyanaponika. He settled easily into the ascetic life until World War II erupted, and, as a German male living in a British colony, he was interred from 1939 to 1946.

In 1951, Nyanaponika moved to Forest Hermitage, a cottage compound near Kandy. This was where he was living when he became a BPS cofounder.

Years later, when Bhikkhu Bodhi was the BPS editor, he also lived and worked at the Forest Hermitage, as does the current English editor, Bhikkhu Nyanatusita. “Due to the remote location in the forest,” says Nyanatusita, “there is only twelve-volt power from solar panels. The first solar panels came to the hermitage in the late 1980s. Before that, Ven. Nyanaponika and Ven. Bodhi were working at night with kerosene lamps. They did their writing by hand and on an old typewriter.

“Maintaining the Forest Hermitage is quite a task. Two days ago, I had to go into the mosquito- and leech-infested jungle for a few hours to fix a leak in the plastic pipe that supplies drinking water; then this morning I wanted to

pump water up from the storage tank, but the petrol pump does not work, and also the pipe into the well is broken. Despite all these difficulties, things are better now than in the past. It's amazing that Ven. Nyanaponika and Ven. Bodhi worked hard for years in such austere conditions."

By 1960, it was clear that the BPS needed a more suitable office, and a Buddhist dentist in Kandy offered half of the bungalow he used for his business. In time, he donated the whole building, and it was replaced with a larger structure when BPS outgrew it. This growth surprised the founders, who had defined the society's editorial mission as publishing about twenty-five booklets. However, the society's formation coincided with the growing interest in Buddhism in the West, and the first booklets were so well received that the founders decided to continue publishing.

The Buddhist Publication Society came to be best known for two series of booklets: *Bodhi Leaves* and the *Wheel*. *Bodhi Leaves* is a series of compact, informal essays expressing personal insights into Buddhism. The *Wheel*, in contrast, consists of substantial tracts on topics such as meditation, comparative studies, and Buddhist history, as well as translations from the Pali canon. In his day, Nyanaponika himself wrote many of the *Wheel* booklets.

In 1984, when glaucoma limited his ability to read, Nyanaponika retired from his position as editor and his longtime American student Bhikkhu Bodhi took over. Bhikkhu Bodhi laughs when he recalls Nyanaponika saying that he intended to recommend him to the board. "I replied: 'Bhante, I agreed to be the editor when you pass away, but at this point I don't think I'm ready.' He said, 'I'm now eighty-two and it's time I retire. I'm going to recommend you.' That night, as I lay in bed, I considered fleeing through the forest, but I couldn't leave this old monk alone in the hermitage."

Bhikkhu Bodhi became the editor, and under his direction the society flourished. He started a newsletter, for which he wrote extensively, and in the late 1990s he arranged for Pariyatti, a Theravada publishing company, to distribute the society's works in North America. Luke Matthews, executive director of Pariyatti, explains that before it started distributing BPS books, Americans had difficulty getting them. "You would have to write to Sri Lanka," he says, "and when I say 'write,' I literally mean 'write,' because this was before email and online shopping. Sometimes it took months."

Bhikkhu Bodhi resigned as editor in 2002 but stayed on as president of the society. Now, Bhikkhu Nyanatusita from Holland is the English editor and a Sri Lankan scholar is at the helm of the society's Sinhalese publications. Though the original purpose of BPS was to publish material in English, in recent years it also has been publishing more extensively in Sinhalese because many Sri Lankans can't read English and need teachings in their native language.

Another change for the society is that it no longer publishes *Bodhi Leaves* booklets and only occasionally publishes *Wheel*, which are available through the society's online library. Now it's focusing on publishing books, with many substantially sponsored by its three thousand members, including seven hundred outside Sri Lanka.

"The BPS has geared up its publishing," Matthews says. "The covers are more artistic. The paper quality is better and the binding has improved greatly. Now it sells online."

The society still strives to keep its prices low. It has a fund called the Nyanaponika Dhamma Dana Project, which enables it to disseminate BPS titles free to about a hundred monasteries, universities, and institutes around the globe. Recently it issued *Similes of the Buddha* by Hellmuth Hecker.

"There are individual authors who publish books about the Theravada," Matthews says. "But as for a nonprofit dedicated to providing high-quality translations and interpretation of the traditional approach to the dharma in English, there is nothing like the Buddhist Publication Society. Its reach is very broad." 