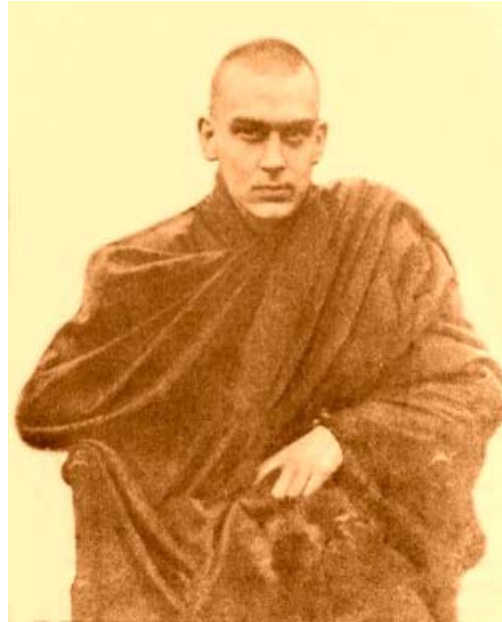


A Pioneer Western Buddhist

By
Dr. Paul Brunton, Ph.D.

From *Ceylon Daily News, Vesak Number May, 1941.*



Ānanda Metteyya

To the younger generation of today, the Bhikkhu Ānanda Metteyya is little more than a half-forgotten name. It may not be amiss to give some details about the extraordinary personality and exceptional career of a man who did much to introduce Buddhism to the West and who initiated me into its study.

During earlier visits to Ceylon I was able to follow up some of the tracks of my old teacher and a recent Sinhalese contact with the learned Dr. Cassius Pereira revived afresh this pleasant memory of a human flower, who shed the powerful fragrance of sincerity, purity, kindness, humility and simplicity. More than that he was, in my belief and so far as my experience went, the most advanced Western Yogi of the first two decades of this country.

He was born in London as Allan Bennett in 1872. His father was an engineer who died early. The orphaned boy was adopted by S.L. McGregor, who was Head of a secret society called the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which was devoted to magical and Rosicrucian studies.

He was educated partly at Hollesley College and partly at Bath. A precocious love of science became a great force in his nature and he took the keenest theoretical and practical interest in the subject. He decided on the profession of scientific research as the vocation of his heart and, such was his genius, that even in his teens he was able to earn a good living by chemical laboratory work. But his knowledge of electricity and magnetism was almost as advanced and it would not be too much to say that the age of seventeen found him with a profounder and wider scientific knowledge than that possessed by any other youth in England. He developed decided inventive ability which found full scope in the then young electrical industry.

His mother had put him on the path of Roman Catholicism but he drifted away from its ornate ceremonies as he grew and remained anchorless in agnosticism for a time. The halt was brief, however, for through the opportunities provided by his foster-father he passed thence into occult investigations and particularly those dealing with ritual magic. It was inevitable that he should be initiated into Mather's own Order in which he was known as Frater I.A. He put his whole zest into these investigations with the result that his genius once again showed itself and he even surpassed the grade attained by the Head himself. All the members stood in awe of this astonishing young man. Thus he lived for a while amid kabbalistic utterances and spectres from the shadow-world. During his endeavours to penetrate the mystery of the subconscious and super-normal mind, he tried various drugs upon himself and from that went on to experiment with poisons until once he took a tremendous overdose which would have instantly killed another man but which left him quite unharmed!

Spartan Existence

Even during those early days the future monk revealed his innate tendency towards simple and spartan existence by dwelling in a little room in an obscure corner of London. It was there too that he read for the first time Sir Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia*, which filled his mind with shoreline thoughts of Nirvana, and through this beautiful portal he entered into the grand and ancient religion of Buddhism, whose study and practice thereafter gradually replaced his zest for occultism, becoming his greatest passion.

In his twenty-eighth year came the greatest change of his external life—emigration to the Orient. Two factors drove him to take this decisive step. The first was his love of Buddhism and his desire to learn the art of meditation in the continent of its origin. The second was his failing health; every fresh winter in England increased his sufferings from asthma until the doctors prescribed a change of climate as necessary.

He travelled to Ceylon in 1900. At Kamburugamuwa he made an intensive study of Pali, the language in which the Southern Buddhist texts are

written. Within six months his brilliant mind had conquered this ancient tongue and he talked quite easily in its archaic accents. He paid visits to various monks, monasteries, and sacred places and familiarised himself with the general atmosphere of Buddhist Ceylon. In Colombo he met a highly-advanced yogi named Shri Parananda who was of Tamil birth. The young Englishman took a whole course of practical lessons in yoga practice from him until he succeeded in mastering the postures, breathings and mental concentrations involved in an incredibly short period. The extraordinary powers which he already possessed became augmented as a result. Years later I myself had personal evidence of this development but was forbidden to talk about it, even as he himself would smilingly turn the subject or remain silent.

Ordained a Bhikkhu

The day arrived when he felt ready to renounce the world, where life seemed too purposeless and perfunctory to him, and join the Order of Buddhist Monks, for he had no ties to keep him back. Various reasons made him prefer to do this in Burma and so, after two years' stay, he left Ceylon. He took the yellow robe in the monastery of Akyab, on the picturesque west of the Burmese Coast, and was ordained a Bhikkhu in the presence of seventy-five priests under the name of Ānanda Metteya. The suns which had risen over this land had witnessed such a scene but once before. He was the second white man to enter the Order. The English meaning of his name was "Bliss of Loving Kindness." It is no exaggeration to say that the Bhikkhu was one of the most compassionate men I had ever known. Nobody was exempt from the wide sweep of his love.

He became fascinated by Burma which was then more primitive and less spoilt than it is now. He founded the International Buddhist Society in 1903, and settled down quite cheerfully to life in various monasteries.

Annie Besant had a kindly corner of her heart for him. She gave him a standing invitation to come and stay as her guest at Adyar whenever he wished. She did not fail to recognise the sterling worth of the man although he was emphatically not a Theosophist and disagreed with her on fundamental points.

The tropical climate did little to improve his chest, however, whilst it brought him new ailments peculiar to the East. As a consequence his health completely broke down and he was sent by the doctors to California, where it was thought that the mild or drier semitropical air would help to preserve his life. He travelled to England as the first stage on his way to the States, but the outbreak of war in 1914 cut him off for a time from financial support (which had come from the East) and forced him to stay in his native land. Clifford Bax, the playwright, came to his rescue. He gradually got caught up in the

Buddhist Society work again and for some years gave all his time and energy to it. Somehow he never got to California.

Once he met Rudolf Steiner, the famous anthroposophist, and greatly admired his character, but just as greatly disagreed with his clairvoyant views on the Christ-mystery.

Knowledge of Meditation

It was during this period that I met him and was at once impressed by his deep knowledge of Buddhist meditation and his lovable personality. The Bhikkhu could not cope with the mass of work which the publication of *The Buddhist Review*, the organisation of the Society, the granting of interviews and the compilation of literature forced upon him. He requested me to assist him and out of affection for his fine person, respect for his spiritual attainment, and reverence for the name of Buddha, I gladly agreed, devoting my week-ends or evenings for the purpose.

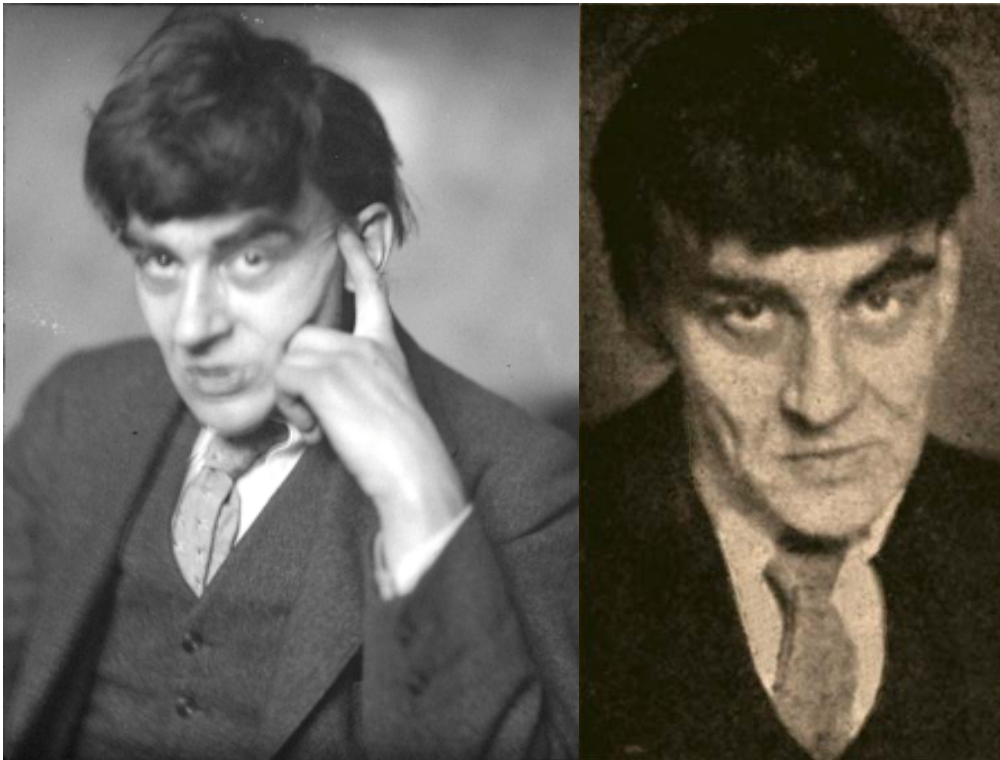
To serve Ānanda Metteya was an honour and a privilege. However I occupied an anomalous position because I could not honestly join the Society as I could, never bring myself either then or now to wear a doctrinal label. So it came about that although technically a non-Buddhist I carried through some of his secretarial work, assisted the editorial preparation of the *Review*, arranged lectures and even delivered them. He lived in the same humble room which he had occupied during his youth.

There he would sit amid heavy Victorian furniture, his table covered with books and palm-leaf classics, the floor around his chair littered with a miscellaneous assortment of manuscripts, letters and scientific instruments. Some statuettes of Gautama would rest on the mantelshelf, gazing benignly down at the disorderly scene. The white yogi would lean back in the large and battered arm-chair, in which I invariably found him, throw his head up and to one side, gaze reflectively through the window into the little garden and answer my questions in lengthy sentences. For the remaining few years until his death we were close friends. He taught me the lofty ethic and stern ascetic philosophy of his faith, as embodied in its central and cardinal doctrines. He helped me towards two precious possessions: a rational balanced outlook and a desire to bring some light from archaic Asia to help the adolescent West.

His work for Buddhism was not that of a scholar so much as it was to provide a living example of its meaning as well as an inspiring advocate of its value. However two excellent little books remain as his written legacy to posterity, *The Wisdom of the Aryas* and *The Religion of Burma*.

It is now nearly a score of years since he died at the age of fifty, and vanished from our time-fronted and space-backed existence, but it will be difficult to forget the terrible agonies which he calmly and uncomplainingly endured for months at a time. Shocking spasms of asthmatic cough racked his

lungs every day. Yet his serene face would immediately break into a smile the next moment and he would utter some light humorous phrase or profoundly spiritual remark, as his mood went. Here one saw how his meditation, training and Buddhistic detachment had proved their worth, for although his body was stricken his mind proved invulnerable.



Ānanda Metteyya/Allan Bennett as a layman

Yoga Practices

His appearance was striking. He was quite a tall man but he walked with a pronounced stoop, due partly to illness and partly to long hours bent over the palm-leaf text or the laboratory table. His face constantly wore a tragic look, but it was frequently illuminated by fitful smiles. Its skin had turned quite yellow through tropical liver trouble. His hair was raven-black and was flung wild and unbrushed over his forehead. His eyes were set deep beneath heavy brows and their intensity evidenced the profound mind which dwelt behind them. In England he wore ordinary Western clothes, in order not to make himself conspicuous, but in the Orient he was clad in the monk's robe and sandals. His sombre yet tranquil face was so unusual that it still haunts my fancies.

His knowledge of Buddhism was immense. He eagerly travelled through all the labyrinths of its psychological system, and its varied yoga practices yielded quickly to his remarkable powers of concentration. He could sit, sunk in profound meditation, for hours at will; or equally at a moment's notice, he could busy himself in the laboratory with batteries, chemicals and instruments. Such was the perfect balance which he had achieved. He never quite gave up his scientific researches and even in the Burmese monasteries a cell was usually fitted up as a laboratory for him. Few of the Indian yogis I met could hold a candle to him. He had realized the phenomenal character of all things in this parade of flickering shadows which we call life, as most of them have never done. Moreover his Buddhist teaching could not be separated from his personality: the one expressed what the other demonstrated. I have honoured and revered him, as he is still honoured and revered by some in Burma and Ceylon, because he stimulated me spiritually and quickened my dawning determination to decipher the profound enigma of life.

Such was the man I have storied in this brief memoir, this white Buddhist whose ship has sailed for the infinite waters of Nirvāna.

Ānanda Metteyya

(With some Observations on the English Sangha)

Christmas Humphreys

(From the *Middle Way*, November 1972, pp. 133-136.)



A unique photograph, taken in Rangoon, at the age of thirty. When first ordained he called himself, as his signature shows, Ānanda Maitriya, but later changed this to the Pali form of Metteyya.

The Bhikkhu Ānanda Metteyya (Allan Bennett) was born in London on the 8th December 1872. At the age of eighteen he read *The Light of Asia*, and like a hundred thousand before and since, found that it opened his eyes to a new world. In 1898 ill-health drove him to the East, and for three years he studied Buddhism in Ceylon. Then, unlike many later English Bhikkhus, he realised that being English-born it was his duty to bring to England the Dhamma which had changed his life so utterly, and he planned a Mission to London. He went to Burma for full ordination and there in 1903 formed an International Buddhist Society with himself as Secretary-General. As his plans

matured for the Mission, a Society was formed in London to receive him. This was our predecessor, The Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland, with Professor Rhys Davids as the first President. The Bhikkhu landed at Tilbury on 23rd April 1908, and England received its first talks by an English Buddhist in the Robe, who was boldly advocating the Buddhist life as suitable for his English audience.

The details of the work of the Society and of the Bhikkhu's six month's stay are all set out in my *Sixty Years of Buddhism in England*. Here, therefore, one need but summarise and reflect.

The Bhikkhu at once faced the difficulties in keeping the Vinaya Rules in London, which still obtain. He was not allowed to ride behind a horse, but London's public transport was horse-drawn. He could not handle money, so could never travel alone. No woman might live in the house found for him at Barnes. But somehow the Rules were kept and he proved an immediate attraction. Tall, good looking, as we see in Alexander Fisher's drawing of him in the Society's Library, with a pleasing voice and manner he was popular wherever he went. But as a lecturer he had the grave weakness of reading what he had to say, and it was only at question time that his great knowledge of the Dhamma, as of contemporary science, was made manifest.

The Society developed under his leadership, and a band of enthusiasts gathered about him of a quantity and quality to keep the movement alive when he was gone. And he was gone all too soon, to continue his work in Rangoon. He returned after the war, but as a very sick man, and after writing his one substantial work, *The Wisdom of the Aryas*, soon to be republished by Routledge and Kegan Paul, he died in 1923, and was buried in Morden cemetery. The Society too was dying, but after a brief interregnum, borne on the shoulders of Francis Payne as related in my history, it was replaced by the present Buddhist Society. We are here concerned, however, with the Sangha, and not with lay societies.

In the fifty years since the death of Ānanda Metteyya various attempts have been made to establish an English branch of the Theravada Sangha in London, so far without success. What is the cause of this failure and what, if anything, should be done to replace it with success? I have read with interest the correspondence on the subject in *The Middle Way*, and will take this opportunity to add my own experience and views.

The history of religion shows the pattern of missionary enterprise when carried out without violence. The missionaries begin by forming a "cell" in the chosen country, from which is born first one then many monasteries for the conversion of the inhabitants and as centres of the new learning and its attendant ritual. So with Buddhism. In this way Buddhism spread from India to Ceylon, and within five hundred years to Thailand, Burma and Cambodia, where the Theravada school prevailed, and later to Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea and Japan, where the schools of the

Mahayana were preferred. The impact of the new teaching, culture and art on the countries so "invaded" is plain for all to see, as is the reaction of the local inhabitants, which in many cases profoundly modified the Buddhism presented, its ritual, culture and art and, inevitably, its monastic life and hence its Vinaya Rules. The Buddhist Sangha of the older school is very different from that, say, of Mongolia or Japan, yet both are truly Buddhist and dedicated to the same Founder. In the same way, the "Buddhism" of Ceylon, Tibet and Japan are three, or more accurately, a dozen "Buddhisms," yet none is the worse for this diversity. And if the branches of the Sangha differ so profoundly in their Robe, their habits of eating and their means of livelihood, why should not the West produce its own variation on the central theme?

Christian monasteries in the West, though widely differing in their Rule, have settled down into the European tradition, and have proved of immense service to Christianity. Their triple function in common has been to preserve the Doctrine, to teach it, and to exemplify the Life. The same applies to Buddhism. It cannot be disputed that without the Sangha, Buddhism would long be dead, as it rapidly died in India for example, when the Moslem sword put an end to Buddhist monasteries and those within them. Is there not a need, then, for an English Sangha, to preserve the Dhamma, to teach those interested the Buddhist way of life, and to show how it can be applied to daily life in the West?

I have watched the situation from the days when Dr Dahlke founded his Buddhistisches Haus in Frohnau, near Berlin, to the recent opening of the Buddhist Centre at Oaken Holt near Oxford. The Buddhist Society welcomed the Anāgārika Dhammapāla to London in 1925, and helped him to found the British Maha Bodhi Society, to the headquarters of which, to the north-east of Regent's Park, came three Bhikkhus in 1928. As a group of the Theravada Sangha they survived, with occasional visits from other Bhikkhus, until the outbreak of war in 1939, when the Mission was closed down. But they did not add to their number, by English ordinations or otherwise, and their difficulties in keeping the Rules, even where the will to do so remained unimpaired, were nearly as great as those of Ānanda Metteyya twenty years earlier.

During the war the Society found U Thittila Thera of Burma working as a stretcher-bearer during the bombing of London, for which purpose he would take off the Robe, assuming it when called on to lecture on Buddhism and for other Buddhist purposes. In the fifties, various Englishmen took the Robe but until the ordination of the late

Bhikkhu Kapilavaddho, none settled down in England, and it was not until 1954 that the Sinhalese Vihara was opened in Knightsbridge. So long as it remained there it was a great success, but it was run from Ceylon and in no sense an English branch of the Buddhist Sangha. When its lease

ran out and it moved to Chiswick, it moved from the centre to the periphery of Buddhist activity, and in spite of the eminence and dedication of some of its monks, played little part in the further development of Buddhism in England. In 1966 the Buddhapadīpa Temple at East Sheen was opened, as a royal Thai foundation. Under the able leadership, in things temporal and spiritual, of the Chao Khun Sobhana Dhammasudhi it developed rapidly into the most active and successful Western branch of the Buddhist Sangha to date. Here, however, though some Englishmen were ordained, the organisation remained solidly Thai.

In 1956 was the first real attempt at an English Vihāra. It was opened in Hampstead by the English Bhikkhu Kapilavaddho, moving to its present premises in Haverstock Hill in 1962. Its history in the last ten years has not been happy, and although at one time there was actually a quorum of five Bhikkhus, these soon disappeared, and as a Vihāra it has ceased to exist. What went wrong?

I suggest that the principal cause lies in the word *Sangha*, which means assembly. No one man can set up a branch of the Sangha, and only a minimum of five full-ordained men can ordain a new candidate. The Indian tradition of a Guru and a group of picked disciples is unknown in the Theravada and is, as shown in our own brief history, of immense danger to the man who attempts it in the West, be he of Eastern or Western origin. Few can withstand the force of unbalanced adoration which is usually directed towards such a Leader, for he lacks the moral support of mutual confession and the presence of others keeping the same Rules. Without training in the long tradition of the Order his ego is naked to temptation, and all too easily comes to dominate his higher, nobler mind.

Even five men may find it difficult to keep such Rules as may be agreed to be binding. They will be trying to fit their English minds and morals and habits of life into an utterly alien tradition, to adopt a strange appearance, eat at unaccustomed times, live celibate lives unknown to their young contemporaries, to look on women in what is to them a totally unnatural way.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that some experienced English Buddhists take the view that the Sangha has no place in English Buddhism, whatever may be the advantage of foreign missions settled in their midst. What Rules, they ask, is such an "assembly" to follow. The whole 227? But consider the danger of relaxing a single Rule. If, for example, those concerning dress, hours of eating, the handling of money and the attitude to women are substantially relaxed to suit Western conditions, how many more will follow, and who shall decide how far? If the five or more of the moment make some specific change, what will the Sinhalese and Thai Sanghas in London say to the relaxation? Will they in time accept the newly ordained Bhikkhus as of their own standing?

Assuming that this problem can be overcome, for example, by some central Council, with Thera members on it, what would be the purpose and potential value of such a Sangha to the Buddhist community in England? The answer would surely include the following factors: (a) To study and preserve the Dhamma in England for the benefit of English Buddhists. (b) To teach it to all interested by lectures, classes and literature. (c) To teach meditation on Buddhist lines and to provide the best available conditions for its practice. (d) To set examples of the Buddhist life as lived in a Western environment. All these can surely be provided by a lay society. (e) To find and train suitable young men to expand the English branch of the Sangha, and to found in time subbranches about the country, and finally (f) which may be the most important contribution, to provide an approach to the Dhamma and its practice different from that of purely intellectual study and discussion, with something of the devotion, ritual and collective self-discipline which is all too easily omitted from prevailing English neo-religious studies. How far could such a Sangha safely differ from the conventional Vihara of, say Ceylon or Thailand? There is no magic in the precise Robes of Ceylon, when those of, say, China and Tibet are very different. The Chinese take a "medicine meal" in the evening, as needful to health in Northern latitudes. Money for travelling and the like could be drawn from a common fund, and not be privately owned. Women, especially in a society where their place is rising in importance, would have to be regarded as something above a perambulating menace to chastity, and self-discipline of thought and act might have to be encouraged and controlled by a system of confession modified to our changing Western ideas.

But surely these young men must use their hands and bodies in useful and creative exercise, preferably close to nature, growing their own food. Yet, if they are to be of service to the community, they must at times mix freely with their fellow citizens in order to appreciate the problems created by the modern stress of life.

But alas, all this supposes a steady supply of men, tested for their fitness for the strenuous life ahead, who are deeply dedicated to such a life and likely to remain so. Where are they? Until they appear and achieve in some existing branch of the Sangha the rank of Bhikkhu, and wish to form an English Sangha on their own, the formation of such remains an idle though a noble dream.

Fifty years ago Ānanda Metteyya brought Buddhism as a living force to England. It slowly grew, as an intellectual movement backed by the attempts of many to live the Buddhist life in the course of the day's work. Ānanda Metteyya did not during his brief stay in England try to found a branch of the Sangha here, and none has succeeded since. So, after fifty years the compound question remains; is there any need for an English branch of the Sangha, and if so what should be its Rules and where do we find the raw material?