

Nyanaponika

A Hundred Years from Birth

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Author's Note

The two essays of mine included in this volume were written in the aftermath of Ven. Nyanaponika's death. "A Noble Friend of the World" originally appeared in the BPS memorial booklet, *Nyanaponika—A Farewell Tribute*. It is based on the commemorative discourse I gave at the BPS headquarters two weeks after the Mahathera's passing.

The essay "Two German Emissaries of the Dhamma in Sri Lanka" was written for a symposium organized by the Goethe-Institut, held in Colombo in July 1995. The theme of the symposium was the German contribution to scholarship about Sri Lanka. Though the focus of the symposium was the work of Wilhelm Geiger, the organizers wisely felt that a presentation on the life and work of the two great German scholar-monks, Venerables Nyanatiloka and Nyanaponika, was needed to give complete coverage to the theme, and they asked me to prepare a paper on this topic. Interestingly, through no deliberate design on anyone's part, the presentation of my paper took place on 21st July, the Ven. Nyanaponika's 94th birth anniversary. Thus once again, though he was unavoidably absent on that occasion, he was still vividly present in that account of his life and work.

The essay "Presence Within Absence" was written for a German publication being issued in connection with the Venerable's hundredth birth anniversary.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera

A Hundred Years from Birth

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

Introduction

July 21st this year marks the hundredth birth anniversary of the late Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera, and on this occasion I wish to offer some reflections on the significance of his life and work. Ven. Nyanaponika was a colossal bridge-builder in understanding who through his writings helped to shape the contemporary expression of Theravada Buddhism. A thinker with deep insight into the human condition, a gifted communicator and masterly stylist, he sought in his writings to relate the Buddha's teachings to the momentous existential problems that face humankind in the modern age. Like his teacher, Ven. Nyanatiloka (1878–1957), also from Germany, he possessed a thorough and precise grasp of the essential principles of the Dhamma. But as a creative thinker he went far beyond the exposition of orthodox Buddhist doctrine and clarification of technical terms to forge a distinctive *vision of Dhamma* which is at once uniquely his own yet true to the authentic Buddhist tradition at its best.

Keenly aware of the moral and spiritual vacuum that had opened up at the very core of Western civilization, he saw in the Buddha's Teaching the most effective remedy for the spiritual malaise besetting contemporary man. Through his work as a scholar and commentator he sought to make this remedy known to the world at large. His silent labour in solitude bore as its fruit a large body of translations and expository works – in both German and English – which have guided large numbers of people, both in the East and the West, to a correct understanding and practice of the Buddha's Teaching.

Life Sketch

The person who was to become Nyanaponika Mahathera was born in Hanau on 21st July 1901 as Siegmund Feniger, the only child of a Jewish couple. His parents gave him a traditional Jewish upbringing, and even at a young age he evinced a keen personal interest in religion. In his late teens, soon after he finished his schooling, he started work in the book trade. At this time disturbing religious doubts stirred him to an intense spiritual search, in the course of which

he came across books on Buddhism. The new discovery had an immediate appeal to him, an appeal which grew increasingly stronger until by his twentieth year he considered himself a convinced Buddhist.

When he encountered the writings and translations of Ven. Nyanatiloka, a compelling urge took shape in his mind to go to Asia and become a monk. This idea, however, could not be acted upon for some time. For in 1933, shortly after the death of his father, Hitler came to power and began his heartless program of persecuting German Jews. At first Siegmund tried his best to stand his ground in the expectation, shared by many, that the persecution was a passing phase that would soon cease. In time, however, it became clear to him that the waves of hatred, ignorance, and violence unleashed by the Nazis were gaining momentum at an alarming rate, and he realized that neither he nor his mother could safely remain in Germany. Thus in November 1935 he left Germany along with his mother, heading for Vienna, where relatives of theirs were living. Having arranged for his mother to stay with their relatives, in early 1936 he left Europe for Sri Lanka, where he joined the Sangha as a pupil of Ven. Nyanatiloka at Island Hermitage.

When war broke out between Germany and Britain in 1939, the two German bhikkhus, like all German males resident in British colonies, were consigned to internment camps, first at Diyatalawa and later at Dehra Dun, in northern India. Despite the difficult circumstances of internment, Ven. Nyanaponika completed German translations of the *Sutta Nipata*, the *Dhammasangani* (the first book of the Abhidhamma Pitaka), and its commentary, the *Atthasalini*. He also compiled an anthology of texts on Satipatthana meditation. When the war ended, the two monks were released from internment in 1946 and returned to Sri Lanka, where they resumed residency at Island Hermitage. In early 1951 they were both made citizens of the newly independent Sri Lanka, their adopted homeland.

In May 1957 Ven. Nyanatiloka passed away after a long illness. Six months later Ven. Nyanaponika's career as an exponent of the Dhamma launched out in a new direction when, together with several lay friends, he established the Buddhist Publication Society (BPS). In his earlier writings Ven. Nyanaponika had been developing a vision of the Buddha's teachings as the most viable solution to the spiritual crisis faced by modern man. Now, as President and Editor of the new society, he found himself presented with the opportunity to transform this vision from the personal guideline of his own writing into the governing philosophy of an entire publishing enterprise aimed at an incipient world-wide interest in Buddhism. The measure of his success in achieving his aim is indicated by the success of the BPS itself, which through his

guidance has become one of the world's most prolific publishers of Theravada Buddhist literature.

As advancing age began to sap his strength, in 1984 Ven. Nyanaponika retired as Editor of the BPS, and in 1988 he retired as President, accepting appointment as the BPS's distinguished Patron. Despite minor infirmities and advancing blindness over the last years of his life, Ven. Nyanaponika had enjoyed remarkably good health through his 93rd birthday on 21 July 1994. His last birthday was celebrated joyously by his friends and the BPS staff with the release of the BPS edition of his book *The Vision of Dhamma*, a collection of his writings from the Wheel and Bodhi Leaves series. In late August, however, the relentless process of aging suddenly accelerated, and on 19 October, the last day of his 58th Rains Retreat as a bhikkhu, he breathed his last in the pre-dawn quiet at the Forest Hermitage in Kandy.

The Exponent of the Dhamma

Through his own writings and in his editorship of the BPS, Ven. Nyanaponika played a momentous role in shaping the expression of Theravada Buddhism appropriate for the latter half of the twentieth century. Gifted with keen intelligence, a profound grasp of the Dhamma, and extraordinary sensitivity to the needs of his fellow human beings, he endeavoured both in his personal writings and in his publication policy to articulate a vision of the Buddha's teachings that underscored its crucial relevance to the present age. The early decades of the century provided the background to this vision. In his own mature years he had witnessed two world wars (one involving the mass extermination of his own ancestral people, the European Jews) as well as countless smaller scale conflicts and, in the post-war period, the breakdown of existential meaning in the lives of so many thoughtful, well-intentioned people. Against this background he constantly sought to emphasize, from different angles, those aspects of the Buddha's teachings that speak most directly and meaningfully to earnest men and women in search of clear spiritual direction.

Here I would like to discuss briefly several of the dominant strands that enter into Ven. Nyanaponika's vision of Dhamma, the themes that give his presentation of the Teaching its distinctive stamp. I have organized these themes under four headings.

(i) The Prospect and Challenge of Freedom

For Ven. Nyanaponika the Buddha's Teaching is first and foremost a doctrine of freedom, of freedom from suffering. This is the explicit aim of the Dhamma as embedded in the Four Noble Truths, and for Ven. Nyanaponika it is also the

underlying aim and origin of all religion. The uniqueness and greatness of the Buddha's Teaching, among the various world religions, consists in its enunciation of a path that leads to experiential release from suffering. What it offers is not the promise of salvation in the next world, but the prospect of deliverance attainable here and now through an utterly realistic insight into the human situation.

For Ven. Nyanaponika, what is most impressive in the Buddha's Teaching is its clear definition of the path to freedom. The path is explained in minute detail, with all its essential elements plainly described and its major milestones marked. To follow this path does not depend upon momentous leaps of faith or reliance upon external redeemers. The path calls only for moral earnestness, self-reliance, honest reflection, and diligent effort. It does not lead us away from immediate experience, but to a profound penetration of the true nature of experience through the cultivation of the simple faculty of close, careful attention to one's own processes of body and mind. Even though the path may be long and hard, Ven. Nyanaponika repeatedly stresses that it is a gradual path which advances in stages. Thus even those without much spiritual strength to start with can still take the first steps, and any earnest effort brings concrete results.

Ven. Nyanaponika's couches this conception of the Dhamma in terms especially addressed to Western man in the late 20th century – and by extension to those in Asia whose mental horizons have been shaped by Western influences. He speaks to those who can no longer rest content with doctrines of salvation through faith, who no longer seek refuge in ideologies or systems of belief, yet who demand deeper answers to the fundamental questions of existence than materialistic modes of thought can provide. He is thus tackling the doubts of the countless men and women who find themselves stranded between the old religions of faith, which they no longer believe in, and the new religions of technological progress and economic consumerism, which they find vain and hollow. For such seekers, the Buddha's Teaching offers a path to freedom that scales the highest towers of spirituality yet remains fully respectful of the moral and intellectual autonomy of the individual.

(ii) A Secure Foundation for Ethics

One of the major spiritual problems of our age that weighed heavily on Ven. Nyanaponika's mind was the widespread erosion in moral standards that had infected modern society. He was keenly aware of course that even in past ages, when religion reigned supreme, human behaviour was often ruled by blind lust, ambition, cruelty, and hatred. In our epoch, however, even an objective

foundation for ethics was in jeopardy. In the West, ethics had always been seen as rooted in God. Hence, as belief in God ceased to be an effective force in many people's lives, moral principles were left without an anchor. The cult of unrestrained self-interest had started to spread with alarming speed, threatening to trample all higher ideals underfoot.

Ven. Nyanaponika saw in the Buddha's Teaching a secure foundation for ethics that does not require any appeals to external authority but can be derived directly from the constitution of the human mind. He found the key he was seeking above all in the teaching on the unwholesome and wholesome roots – greed, hatred, and delusion, and their opposites – to which he devoted an entire booklet, "The Roots of Good and Evil."

In this essay Ven. Nyanaponika investigates the teaching on the "roots" in extensive detail. With numerous citations from the Pali texts he explores not only the psychological inter-relations of the roots, but their kammic consequences, their effect on the process of rebirth, and their social repercussions. He devotes separate sections to the methods for overcoming the evil roots by meditative training, and finally he discusses the significance of Nibbana as the destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion. For him it is important that the Buddha's Teaching displays an inviolable internal consistency: from its simplest maxims on ethics to its conception of final liberation, it focuses upon the task of internal purification through the overcoming of the three unwholesome roots and the perfecting of detachment, lovingkindness, and wisdom.

(iii) The Comprehension of Inner Reality

This theme leads us to the next strand in Ven. Nyanaponika's vision of Dhamma. According to Ven. Nyanaponika, the process of self-transformation to which the Buddha directs us must begin with self-knowledge, with the understanding of one's own mind: "In the Buddhist doctrine, mind is the starting point, the focal point, and also, as the liberated and purified mind of the Saint, the culminating point." Self-understanding, according to the Mahathera, requires the discipline of inward contemplation, particularly the practice of methodical mindfulness. But besides this, it also calls for a precise and detailed analysis of the contents of the mind. Through his deep study of the Buddha's discourses and the Abhidhamma, as well as through his long meditative experience, Ven. Nyanaponika had acquired a profound understanding of man's psychological makeup, his passions, struggles, and anxieties, his potential for good and for evil, which he explores with extraordinary acumen in his writings.

Ven. Nyanaponika is perspicacious not only when describing our disruptive psychological pathologies, but also (or especially) when exposing the

condition of the ordinary undeveloped mind, which we commonly take for granted as normal and unquestionable. Thus, on the theme of “tidying up the mental household,” he writes:

If anyone whose mind is not harmonized and controlled through methodical meditative training should take a close look at his own everyday thoughts and activities, he will meet with a rather disconcerting sight. Apart from the few main channels of his purposeful thoughts and activities, he will everywhere be faced with a tangled mass of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and casual bodily movements, showing a disorderliness and confusion which he would certainly not tolerate in his living room.... Hundreds of cross-currents flash through the mind, and everywhere there are “bits and ends” of unfinished thoughts, stifled emotions, and passing moods.... If we observe our own minds, we shall notice how easily diverted our thoughts are, how often they behave like undisciplined disputants constantly interrupting each other and refusing to listen to the other side’s arguments.

(iv) The Training and Liberation of the Mind

Examining the long-neglected quarters of our own minds will deliver “a wholesome shock,” convincing us of the urgent need for methodical mental training. This brings us to the fourth topic in our study, the most significant contribution Ven. Nyanaponika has made to our understanding of the Dhamma: his disclosure of Satipatthana, the meditative discipline of right mindfulness, as the foundation-stone of Buddhist mental training. This thesis is already indicated by the title of his best known book *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, which squarely demonstrates that the systematic practice of right mindfulness is indeed the heart of Buddhist meditation.

The book, translated into some seven languages, takes the form of a modern commentary on the Satipatthana Sutta, which it includes in translation along with an anthology of texts on Satipatthana. But Ven. Nyanaponika does not merely repeat stereotyped explanations of right mindfulness: instead, he opens our eyes to aspects of this system of meditative discipline that had never been articulated so clearly before, at least not in European languages. He begins his work by placing the practice of Buddhist meditation in the particular historical context in which he is writing, opening with a chilling account of the crisis confronting the world at the height of the Cold War. After two world wars, he cautions, humankind has still not learned its lesson; again, it is preparing “for a new bout of that raving madness called war.” And at its root “the same old mechanism is at work again: the interaction of greed and fear,” lust for power and the fear of our own instruments of destruction. Yet, the author observes,

despite the gravity of the danger, men are still bungling only with the symptoms of the malady, blind to the underlying cause, which is their own undeveloped minds.

The Buddha's Teaching addresses "this sick and truly demented world of ours" with words of "eternal wisdom and unfailing guidance." The advice the Teaching offers can be summed up in three challenges, which the Ven. Nyanaponika expresses thus: (i) to *know* the mind, that is so near to us, and yet is so unknown; (ii) to *shape* the mind, that is so unwieldy and obstinate, and yet may turn so pliant; (iii) to *free* the mind, that is in bondage all over, and yet may win freedom here and now. "Hence," he writes, "the resolute turning away from disastrous paths, the turning that might save the world in its present crisis, must necessarily be a turning inward, into the recesses of man's own mind. Only through a change within will there be a change without."

The instrument for this transformation, and for mind's final liberation, is the practice of Satipatthana meditation. Satipatthana, the Mahathera holds, is the *master key* for knowing the mind; the *perfect tool* for shaping the mind; and the *lofty manifestation* of the mind that has been liberated. The first task represents the theoretical aspect of Satipatthana, the other two its practical application.

Ven. Nyanaponika's treatment of Satipatthana in the book harmonizes with his entire approach to the Dhamma. He stresses its balanced combination of simplicity with profundity, its practicality, its universality. It is beneficial not only to the confirmed Buddhist but to all who endeavour to master the mind and develop its latent potential. It is a message of self-help and self-reliance which leads to tangible results, results that unfold in a graded sequence throughout the gradual training: in the initial stages it brings the immediate fruits of greater self-understanding, deeper contentment, pliancy and adaptability. It restores simplicity and naturalness to a complicated, problematic world addicted to artificial devices. At deeper levels it reveals more and more clearly the "three characteristics" of phenomena – impermanence, suffering, and egolessness; and at its highest level it eradicates the root-causes of all bondage and suffering – greed, hatred, and delusion.

What Ven. Nyanaponika stresses in his writings on Satipatthana is that Buddhist meditation is not an exotic, spiritual technology that leads to bizarre landscapes of the imaginary Beyond. At its core it is, rather, a discipline that centres around the systematic cultivation of a simple, very ordinary mental faculty that is normally employed only in a superficial manner. This is the faculty of awareness or attention. In our usual dealings with the world, the initial moment of attention with which any experience begins is almost immediately overwhelmed by currents of associative thought and conceptual construction, by which our awareness of our object is subordinated to our ego-centred desires and

pragmatic aims. The Buddhist practice of mindfulness aims at sustaining the rudimentary moment of attention, and, by repeated practice, at transforming it into a steady, uninterrupted, potent beam of awareness that can then be used to probe into the very constitution and structure of conscious experience. Ven. Nyanaponika states that it required the genius of the Buddha to discover “the hidden talent” in this homely, unobtrusive faculty of bare attention: “Through the master mind of the Buddha, mindfulness is finally revealed as the Archimedean point where the vast revolving mass of world suffering is levered out of its twofold anchorage in ignorance and craving.” I would add that while the efficacy of mindfulness has been known to Buddhist meditators through the ages, it took the master mind of Ven. Nyanaponika to reveal so lucidly, with such penetrating psychological insight, exactly how mindfulness fulfils the onerous duties entrusted to it by the Enlightened One.

Presence Within Absence:

Reflections Six Years After His Passing

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

As I write, it is almost exactly six and a half years since Ven. Nyanaponika left his mortal body, and only three months short of his hundredth birth anniversary. I sit in the very seat at the Forest Hermitage where he himself had sat almost every day for close to forty years, the seat he sat in when writing the books that would make his name so well known throughout the Buddhist world. Though I am using a new chair, I write in the same spot, leaning over the same desk, in a room that has changed very little since his passing.

Sitting in this seat, I experience the intersection of stability and change; the blend of the enduring with the impermanent; the dialectic of presence and absence. The present perishes and vanishes from our midst, yet as time devours the present and discharges it as the past, part of the past persists in the present and makes its presence inexorably felt. It is this that gives continuity to human life, this that makes possible gratitude and appreciation to our forbears who no longer dwell among us. Though we all must die and leave our friends and relations, leave our bodies too, we live on through our deeds. This is so not only in the sense that we must inherit our accumulation of kamma, but also in the sense that our deeds exert an inescapable influence on the lives of those who survive us. This influence can be uplifting or degrading, beneficial or harmful, depending on the moral quality of our own lives.

For over forty years, the all-pervasive presence at the Forest Hermitage was Ven. Nyanaponika himself. By mentioning the Forest Hermitage in the preface to his most famous book, he has inscribed the magical name of this cottage in the Udawattakele Reserve upon the minds of many people around the world. I myself remember how, many years ago, before I came to Sri Lanka to become a monk, I had been captivated by the image conjured up by the words "Forest Hermitage." I was living in Los Angeles at the time and had been using *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* as my guidebook for meditation. Whenever my novice attempts at concentration faltered due to the roar of LA traffic and the barking of the neighbourhood dogs, I would slip off into the idyllic fantasies that the words "Forest Hermitage" evoked in my mind. At that time I hardly

suspected that soon I would be travelling to Sri Lanka to join the Sangha, and that close to twenty years of my life would pass at this same hermitage.

Having lived here from 1952 until his death, Ven. Nyanaponika established an indissoluble bond between himself and the Forest Hermitage, between himself and the Udawattakele forest. He was utterly determined that, in case he fell seriously ill, he should remain at Forest Hermitage and should not be brought to a hospital for longer than emergency treatment. Fortunately, we were able to help him realize his wish, and it was in the same room that he lived and slept that he breathed his last. Following his death, his form became one with the forest. While most of his bodily remains were brought to Island Hermitage for interment, the bone matter he left exceeded the capacity of the casket purchased for that purpose. We therefore pulverized the remaining bone matter and scattered the powder over the hills of Udawattakele. Thus the substance of his own body, his residue of bones, lost its identity as bone-matter, its identity as Nyanaponika. Inundated by rain, baked in the hot sun, shrouded in mist, strewn about by the winds, it became soil, became earth, became forest. Nyanaponika disappeared, but at the same time he persisted, his absence transformed into the presence of the great silent hills at the heart of this beautiful forest.

Over the past six years several other monks have come and stayed in his room for varying periods of time, but his own invisible presence still lingers on. The arrangement of the furniture has changed only slightly; the pictures on the wall are almost the same, but now augmented by a striking photograph of the Venerable hanging on one wall. Many of his German books have been given away for the use of those who read German, but most other books remain, and the general appearance of the front room is very much the way it was ten years ago. Thus, despite his absence, the room, even the hermitage itself, remains indelibly his own. His presence breaks through his absence and permeates the Forest Hermitage with its almost tangible actuality.

The dialectic of presence and absence also unfolds through the Venerable's influence on the lives of others. Though he never sought to dominate and control other people, Ven. Nyanaponika had a powerful influence on many folk who came into personal contact with him, both in Sri Lanka and in the West. For those of us in the immediate orbit of his life, he was the guide in our journey along the Buddha's path, the "noble friend" to whom we looked for counsel, encouragement, and advice. Through this close relationship, his own being has taken root in our being. He continues to speak to us and guide us -- not, however, through some mysterious psychic influence, but through the recollection of his example and of the high standards of personal integrity he established, above all for himself.

The Buddhist teaching of conditional relations speaks of the way one mind-moment affects its successors in the same mental continuum. By analogy, we can extend this conception to the impact one person has upon others within the interdependent, interwoven community of human beings. Though the mind that defined the personhood of Ven. Nyanaponika is gone, presumably to a fresh rebirth, like a plant that deposits many viable seeds, his mind-flower has sown in the mind-fields of many people seeds with the capacity to grow and bring forth wholesome fruit. He remains before our mind's eye as an embodiment of wisdom, equanimity, and compassion; a model of selfless service to the Dhamma and to all humankind. This mental image continues to give confidence and inspiration.

From still another angle, the dialectic of presence and absence is working itself out through the Venerable's writings. During his lifetime, his masterwork, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, proved to be the magnet that drew thousands of people to the practice of Buddhist insight meditation, including many of the leading present-day teachers of Vipassana in the West. Now, almost forty years after its first appearance, the book continues to be read and discussed. Though many other works on insight meditation now crowd the bookstores, it is hard to think of any that matches *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* in depth and comprehensiveness of understanding.

Since his demise, other writings of Ven. Nyanaponika that had previously reached only a limited readership are now receiving the wider distribution they deserve. The collection of his essays from the BPS Wheel and Bodhi Leaves series, *The Vision of Dhamma*, was issued in an enlarged second edition by the Buddhist Publication Society (BPS) at the Venerable's 93rd birthday celebration in 1994, just three months before his death. Late last year this work appeared in a parallel American edition by BPS's U.S. offshoot, BPS Pariyatti Editions, which should help to make his thought better known in the Americas. In 1996, I collected into a single volume all the Wheel booklets on the lives of the Buddha's great disciples, which included Ven. Nyanaponika's moving study of Sariputta Thera and his substantial contributions to the other life studies authored by Hellmuth Hecker. This book, *Great Disciples of the Buddha*, is published jointly by Wisdom Publications and the BPS. It is also available in a German translation.

The following year there appeared a new edition of Ven. Nyanaponika's wonderful *Abhidhamma Studies*, which first came out in 1949 and was reissued in an enlarged, polished edition by BPS in 1965. The new edition is again published jointly by Wisdom Publications and BPS. Through this book, the Venerable's profound insights into the great philosophical enterprise called Abhidhamma have become better known in the West and are helping to stimulate a keener interest in this ancient system of philosophical psychology. The Venerable's three

Wheel booklets, *An Anguttara Nikaya Anthology*, are now issued in a single handsome volume, published under the auspices of the International Sacred Literature Trust under the title *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*.

In the German-speaking world, the works of Ven. Nyanaponika still continue to be influential. They are maintained in print largely due to the enthusiastic dedication of Beyerlein-Steinschulte Verlag, which has inherited the old Verlag Christiani line of Buddhist books. It is heartening, too, to know that Ven. Nyanaponika's German translations of the *Atthasalini* and the *Dhammasangani*, for too long almost unavailable, are soon to see the light of day. All that is needed now to complete this circle is a German translation of *Abhidhamma Studies*.

Through his books, the great Mahathera has not been consigned by death to silence, but even beyond death continues to teach the Dhamma he loved so much and understood so deeply. While his physical form is no longer in our midst, his erudition and insights, his benevolent counsel and compassionate concern, spread out in widening circles, establishing more firmly his stature as one of the foremost Buddhist thinkers of our age. Erich Fromm described his writings as "a Guide for the Perplexed" in the last quarter of the twentieth century. No doubt they will still fulfil this function at the beginning of the twenty-first century, too.