



Kalutara Bodhi



Kalutara Bo Tree

## 125<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary of Sir Cyril de Zoysa

# LIFE AND TIMES OF THE PIONEER BUDDHIST REVIVALIST

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There is no gaining the magnitude of the service that has been rendered by the great Sinhala Buddhist philanthropists of yore, by the erudite, and by outstanding persons devoted to the cause of the preservation of the *Sambuddha Sasana* (the Dispensation of the Buddha.) Even in modern times, there is no dearth of such special persons. The distinguished Social Worker and great Buddhist Leader, Sir Cyril de Zoysa, was one among them. Today is his 125th birthday. Although it is hard to highlight the immensity of his service in a brief note such as this, the purpose of this article is to disseminate among the present generation, even but briefly, information about Sir Cyril's vast contribution.

Born on the 26th of October 1896 to a distinguished family in Balapitiya, Sir Cyril as a young boy had his education at St. Thomas' College, Matare, then at Richmond College, Galle and finally at Royal College, Colombo. After receiving his secondary education at Royal College, he entered Law College, Colombo, took his oaths as a lawyer and chose to practise the law at the District Courts of Kalutara. After Court Sessions, he made it a part of his evening routine to offer flowers and light lamps as is customary, and receive blessings before the Sacred Bodhi Tree, which stood tall, close to the railway line. He treated this sacred place with utmost devotion and honour. He then invited a few well-wishers to rally round the cause of maintaining this sacred place and in 1951 established the Kalutara Bodhi Trust.

He began constructing a *Chaitya* upon the hillock that stood opposite these premises and spent his wealth and his energy on making the place a beautiful sacred spot which would attract all, be they Buddhist or non-Buddhist, passing to and fro along the Galle Road, evoking within them sentiments of



Drone view of Kalutara

solemn devotion, zeal and piety. The fact that today this place has turned into a magnificent spot worshipped and honoured by hundreds and thousands of people is for us, the Sangha, as well, a matter of great joy and prime satisfaction. Sir Cyril was of utmost service to the cause of the welfare of all Buddhist places of worship in Kalutara, especially some such as the *Kandé Viharaya* in Aluthgama, the *Aranya Senasanya Moraḡalla*, the *Saddharmalankara Pirivena* in Pinwatta and in Colombo the *Vajira-aramaya* in Bambalapitiya, *Gaṅga-aramaya* in Hunupitiya and the *Jayasekhararamaya* in Kuppuyawatta.

### YMBA and religious activities

Sir Cyril took upon himself a matter of immense responsibility when he accepted the position of the President of the *Kataragama Kiri Vehera* Restoration Society. This was by way of undertaking to restore a most venerated *Chaityaya* erected upon a spot where the Buddha had spent a moment of bliss; and to develop the infrastructure such as Pilgrims' Rests and the roads required to reach the Sacred City of Kataragama. The *Kiri Vehera Chaityaya* was speedily

restored and it was declared open on the 26th of February 1970 by Dudley Senanayake, the incumbent Prime Minister. Sir Cyril also successfully commanded the full co-operation of the Department of Cultural Affairs and the Department of Archaeology. The Buddhist elite was by now convinced of the value of the services rendered by him and unanimously elected him Honorary President of the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA). Through the YMBA a vast number of activities was performed, in the cause of the education of Buddhists, especially of Buddhist children, spread throughout Sri Lanka.

The construction of the building in Colombo Fort for YMBA is one that was pioneered by Sir Cyril. The larger part of the income that is generated by this building contributes towards meeting the expenses of the services provided by the YMBA. Sir Cyril has also rendered great service in his capacity as the Honorary President of the Sri Lanka Mahabodhi Society. When he was Chairman of the Kalutara Urban Council he associated with Dudley Senanayake, Prime Minister, very closely.

Sir Cyril served as President of the Senate for a period of about 12 years. In this capacity he took steps to engage widely in the service of the Buddha Sasana, and in national and social services, islandwide. Among these services, what comes to mind is a special instance which was revealed when my mentor related the story of the beginnings of the Gotama Tapovanaya in Kalapaluwawa, and its history. The initiative in establishing this Tapovanaya was taken by Sir A. E. de Silva and Lady de Silva. They were Sir Cyril's close associates. In his capacity of the President of the Senate, he was invited by them to visit the Tapovanaya. What struck him at once was that the Bhikkus were attending to their studies and religious activities by the light of kerosene oil lamps. Sir Cyril felt

very strongly about this. On the very next day, he took steps to have the Government authorities provide a connection to the Tapovanaya which was quite a distance away from the main lines. It is only after this that all families in the vicinity of Kalapaluwawa had the benefit of enjoying electricity. This is but one of the signal services that he rendered to society.

### Clever businessman and philanthropist

Sir Cyril was a man who served the cause of the Buddhist Revival with commitment and dedication. He was indeed a philanthropist. Apart from all this, he was a clever businessman and a man of principles. First, he launched a passenger transport service by operating a bus named 'Swarnapali' and later started the North Western Bus Company, which became the largest and the main Private Bus Company of the day, in Sri Lanka. When in 1956 bus services were nationalized, it is very readily that he cooperated with the project, and even handed over all the buses with no empty tanks but with every tank topped up with fuel.

Likewise, he started a textile weaving project for the first time, in Balapitiya, thus generating employment for hundreds of people. At that time sarongs, towels and bed sheets hand-woven in Balapitiya turned out to be very popular in the market. Later on, the Department of Textiles and a Ministry set up exclusively to be in charge of this Department, was formed, and Sir Cyril's venture came under the administrative control of these two institutions. In Sri Lanka the pioneer in the field of the Tye Industry too was Sir Cyril himself.

This great humanist who commanded the regard and respect of both the ruling party and the Opposition, was honoured with a Knighthood and hence it is that he is addressed as 'Sir Cyril'. It is an outstanding fact that his brother, Mr. V. T. de Zoysa, stood shoulder to shoulder with him contributing towards the discharge of their duties and provision of their services. After the demise of both these brothers the mantle of continuing these invaluable services fell upon the shoulders of the two brothers of the next generation - Deshamanya Ajita de Zoysa and Deshabandhu Tilak de Zoysa. They both took on the responsibility without any disinclination or aversion, treating their commitment to religious, national and social service as the highest tribute they could pay to their father and their paternal uncle. It is a matter of great joy for us, as the Maha Sang-



Sir Cyril de Zoysa

### Sir Cyril de Zoysa



- Founder of Kalutara Bodhi Temple
- Founder of Kalutara Bodhi Trust
- Founder of Kalutara Buddhist Society
- Founder of Kalutara Vidyalaya
- Founder of Kalutara Balika Vidyalaya
- Founder of Kalutara Town Plan
- Founder of AMW Company

### The Man Who Lifted Kalutara

The many achievements of Sir Cyril de Zoysa

ha, to watch them protect and promote such services to the nation and the religion. It is wonderful the way that the Kalutara Bodhi has been designed so beautifully, and in such a way that devotees who come and go are imbued with a sense of deep devotion and religious zeal. These sacred premises are replete with Preaching Halls, Bodhi Trees each together with the traditional constructions described as *Vatadage* and lodgings (*lagunge*) complete with all facilities and infrastructure, for use by monks on occasions such as overnight *Brith* Chanting. Apart from these perceivable services rendered by the Kalutara Bodhi Trust, the rest are beyond estimation.

### Bodhi Trust and development activities

Every Saturday and on all Poya days, *Dhamma Deshana* (Preachings of the Dhamma) are held, Meditation Programmes are conducted and lay participants are provided with food and drink. These are indeed very special service programmes. Moreover, the Bodhi Trust engages in development activities with regard to the Temples and *Dhamma* education, including the award of scholarships to *Dhamma* School students in the area and also to young *Bhikkus* in the island studying for *Pracheena* examinations.

In recent times the *Bodhiya* donated to one hundred temples in the Kalutara District, a package of consumables traditionally called a '*Giribhanda*', each costing Rupees Two Hundred Thousand. (This was by way of emulating a time honoured tradition of donating 'a mountain of consumables'. Here each package is so arranged as to resemble a mountain and is traditionally known as *Giri Bhandu*, '*Giri*' meaning 'mountain' and '*Bhandu*' meaning 'Goods'). These are acts of merit which fetch unceasing returns or reactions, in terms of the inexorable Law of Karma.

In addition, contributions to the construction of a separate Ward for *Bhikkus* in the Hospital at Nagoda, Kalutara, the construction and maintenance of two Homes for the Aged, the maintenance of a '*Meheni Aramaya*' or Dwellings for Ordained Women, the construction of 51 houses on land in Balapitiya that appropriately belonged to this

Zoysa family and the donation of these houses to the victims of the recent tsunami disaster are but a handful of the services rendered in memory of the late Sir Cyril de Zoysa and the late Mr. V. T. de Zoysa in commemoration of, and as a mark of gratitude to them for, the multitude of remarkable services they had themselves rendered to the *Sasana* and to society.

Moreover, when the Sri Lanka Amrapura Nikaya received from the State a gift of a block of land in Wellawatta, Colombo, at a time that this Nikaya had neither an office nor Headquarters, Deshamanya Ajita de Zoysa, on behalf of the '*Dayaka Sabha*' of the Advancement (*Abhivardhi*) of the Sri Lanka Amrapura Nikaya or Sect, donated a sum not less than 60 million Sri Lanka Rupees, of his own private funds, to construct 'the Office of the Sri Lanka Amrapura Nikaya-abhivardhi Dayaka Sabha' and offered it to the Sri Lanka Amrapura Nikaya. This constitutes one of the greatest services, ever rendered by anyone, to the entire Amrapura Sect. It is in order to honour the memory of Sir Cyril that this building was named 'The Sir Cyril de Zoysa Commemoration Mandiraya'. That's not all. While the responsibility for the security of this Sangha Sabha building, and for the related administrative work, from 16th August 2020 up until now, is held under the leadership of Ajita de Zoysa. Meanwhile, a Trust has been established for this purpose.

Accordingly, the name of this generation of De Zoysas will be chronicled as very special and of vast importance. It is the view of the Sangha that in order to ensure that the third generation will continue these activities and services unbroken, Ashan de Zoysa, who belongs to the third generation, has been effortlessly so exposed as to absorb looming responsibility. We are of the view that this way of 'training' is an ideal way of ensuring succession.

I am firmly persuaded that Sir Cyril de Zoysa whose 125th birthday is being celebrated today has his divine vision focused upon all these activities and extends his blessings upon us all.

May Sir Cyril attain the eternal state of Nibbana.  
(The writer is the Supreme Maha Abhaya of the Sri Lanka Amrapura Maha Nikaya)



Kalutara Balika MV



Kalutara Vidyalaya