

Founder of the Amarapura Nikaya - Gnanawimala Maha Thera

Laudable contribution to enhance Buddhism

Ven. Emeritus Professor **KANDEGODA WIMALADHAMMA ANUNAYAKA THERA**

The Founder of the Amarapura Nikaya, Venerable Gnanawimala Thera was an illustrious Buddhist Prelate, whose invaluable services to the development and spread of Buddhism in Sri Lanka during the colonial period were remarkable. He was born and grew up in one of the most volatile periods in the religious history of the country.

During this time, the colonial administration that ruled in the Maritime Province was determined and acting malevolently to convert citizens to colonial religion while restraining the practice of Buddhism. On the other hand Kandyan Sinhala Kingdom had adopted a narrow policy of restricting higher ordination in Buddhism or the Upasampadawa to a certain caste, thereby closing the door opportunity for many gifted and brilliant Samanera or student monks at the time.

The path breaking monk, was born in 1766 in the village of Mahakarawa in Welithota Balapitiya area as the eldest son of Carlo de Silva Veda Arachchi and Magdalena Hamine. He received his early education under Piriappu Ganinnanse, who was his father's brother of the Ambagahepitiya temple. As many temples in that area at the time, Ambagahapitiya temple was also a Walawwa donated to the Monk by another Mudliyar – brother of him.

The Ganinnanses were, inordinate Buddhist monks, whose knowledge of the occult sciences, astrology and the Ayurvedic medicine was enormous, though they may have lacked in understanding of the abstract Buddhism, for which proper and methodical learning under the ordinate monks was necessary but scarcely available.

Such pristine knowledge of Buddhism in the Sinhala Kingdom of Kandy, where Buddhism had been revived under State patronage and the dedication of the Most Venerable Weliwita Saranankara Sangharaja Thera. The young student priest Gnanawimala Thera having showed his brilliance in education at a young age, intended to go to Kandy and take up a studentship to obtain a thorough knowledge of Buddhism. This opportunity came to him after quiet a coincidence, thorough an acquaintance made with Chief Sanghanayake Venerable Bowala Dhammananda Thera of Mathara.

Famously known as “Bowala Hamuduruwo”, he was a highly influential monk with a high command in the Southern Province and who

Commemoration day of the most Venerable Ambagahapitiye Sri Gnanawimala Thissa Maha Thera will be held at Kotahena Deepadutthamarama Thai Temple today (July 8) at 3.00 p.m.

maintained very healthy contacts with the Kandyan King and Malwatte Chapter. For the same reason, colonial administration tried various methods to curb his influence in the region but without success. Bowala Hamuduruwo was an erudite monk with a liberal perspective, that made him highly popular and respected in the region. Being a devoted adherent of Weliwita Saranankara Sangharaja Thera and strong supporter of the Sinhala King, it was customary for him to make an annual visit to Kandy. On his return journey to Mathara, he opted to stay overnight in the Ambagapitiya temple. Upon his arrival which as a progressive act on the part of Bowala Hamuduruwo, Piriappu Ganinnanse entertained the Nayaka Thera with respect and hospitality. Piriappu Ganinnanse who has a vast knowledge of skin diseases offered to cure a persistent skin disease that Nayaka Thera was suffering from in just two weeks. He accepted the offer and as promised the ailment was cured. The Chief Monk was highly impressed of the Piriappu Ganinnanse and asked him what he could do for him in return.

There the Ganinnase informed of his wish to send his nephew, the Samanera to the Malwattha temple of Kandy and admitted to the Sangha there for his higher education. Bowala Nayaka Thera happily agreed to comply with and to take him to Kandy on his next visit.

It was upon his journey to Kandy that he received the name Gnanawimala, signifying extreme intelligence. Sangharaja Thera who gave him this name, adopted him as his pupil for a few years and even caused several books to be written slowly for his education. Those Ola leaf scriptures are still preserved in the library of the Ambagahapitiya temple.

Upon reaching the age of twenty, the Samanera expressed wish to obtain higher ordination. Unfortunately, Sangharaja Thera had passed away by then and administration of the Malwatte Chapter turned down his request on the plea that the King Rajadhi Rajasinghe had ordered the higher ordination to be given only to the members of a certain caste.

However, the administration agreed to confer a abridged form ordination, which Ven. Gnanawimala abruptly rejected and returned



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to Ambagahapitiya with the imbedded conviction that he should go to Siam (current Thailand) from where the Kandyan ordination had been imported and get himself ordained properly.

Once in Ambagahapitiya, he started teaching to the young and preaching to the folks starving for fresh insights into Buddhism. In that period of religion, he became extremely

popular among the people of the Southern province for his in-depth knowledge and strong personality. Soon he was famously known as the “Malwatthe Hamuduruwo” and around him flocked the wealthy Mudliyors and the most pious Buddhism of the area. Among them were the Mudliyors Sahabandu brothers, who were convinced that in order to continue the propelling religious activities of the coastal belt they had to have monks with higher ordination. It was deemed necessary that the caste restrictions on the higher ordinations had to be broken. Such break away would only be possible, if the Samanera Gnanawimala went himself to Siam and obtained the higher ordination.

With this intention, the Sahabandu Mudliyors agreed to bear the expenses of a mission to Siam to obtain higher ordination. In 1798 the mission, Samanera Gnanawimala, a group of five of his pupils and three laymen boarded a Dutch ship bound from Galle to Siam via the port of Hansawathy (pegu) in Myanmar. The journey was disturbed on the way as the winds stopped suddenly making it impossible for the ship to travel any further. This was a situation that the seasoned Dutch sea farers had never experienced before in wonderment, they began to suspect that the monks on board was a bad omen, as they days passed by leaving the ship deserted in the middle of the ocean for days and weeks. While the rations on board were running out.

Samanera Gnanawimala got to know the worry of the crew with his flair of the Dutch language and reassured them by telling them the date and time the winds will come. Such ability to predict was never heard by the Dutch and despising their scorn, the winds started to develop at the exact time on the date that had been predicted. Upon this miraculous discovery, the ship's captain inquired the reason of the monks to visit Siam. As Samanera Gnanawimala disclosed about his intention of obtaining the higher ordination, he suggested that he first met the consul and the religious leaders in Amarapura of Burma as Buddhism was flourishing there. Agreed to his suggestion, he proceeded to Amarapura and met the Emperor, who was happy to help the mission on its purpose and directed them to the Venerable Gnanabhiwans, the Sangharaja Thera at the time. They continued education under the Sangharaja Thera for two years and obtained the traditional higher ordinance in 1801.

Venerable Gnanawimala Thera returned to

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Sri Lanka with three Burmese monks in 1802 and founded the Amarapura Nikaya in the same year. This was an important move in the democratization of religion in Sri Lanka, breaking its feudal ties in religious administration. Since the Amrapura Nikaya became very popular along the coastal belt of the country with temples flourishing in the capitol Colombo and many other cities. It also led a very successful movement in lay-education that later supplied the educated young people to the Independence movement of the country.

Venerable Gnanawimala Thera returned to Amarapura for a further course of education for two years, after the completion of which he was conferred the title Maha Dhamma Rajadhi Rajaguru by the Emperor. If not for the religious movement led by Ven. Rajaguru Thera, most Sri Lankans would have been converted to other religions, while the country's Independence movement hampered.

May the Venerable monk attain the Supreme Nibbana.

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