A Report from a Norwegian Buddhist

Delegation to Sri Lanka in 2003

The Dalada Maligawa, the most sacred shrine of Buddhism in Sri Lanka hit by a suicide bomber 25 January 1998
1. INTRODUCTION

In July 2003 a delegation of seven Buddhists, representing the Buddhist Federation of Norway, visited Sri Lanka. The main part of this report consists of their accounts of their encounters with Sinhala Buddhists during a twelve-day journey through various parts of the country.

The report is a string of snapshots of holy sites of Buddhism, of encounters with ordinary people, of meetings with Buddhist leaders, both monastic and lay, as well with people in the field of economics, politics, and social work from the Sinhala Buddhist community.

As a fact-finding mission our goal was to engage in dialogue with our fellow Buddhists in Sri Lanka. We wanted to explore their views on how the Dhamma relates to society and particularly how it relates to the issues of violence and peace.

A number of events, both religious and political, since July 2003, have already made for a changed scene in Sri Lanka. However, we have adhered to the principle of presenting to our readers the words of the people we met, with a minimum of comments from our side.

Undoubtedly many of our readers will be in a better position than we were, to interpret the wider significance of the words spoken by the persons we met. To grasp the full significance of those statements, however, one needs a considerable knowledge of Sri Lankan history and politics, as well as of Theravada Buddhism and Sinhala culture.

Although some of our readers may not have this knowledge, we think that by letting the Sinhala Buddhists speak for themselves, we have chosen the most effective way to convey their concerns, something which has been very much in our hearts. We have also tried to record our own reactions and ideas from hour to hour, during those days, without any attempts to "improve them" with the advantage of hindsight.

The delegation

The members of the delegation to visit Sri Lanka were representatives of various Buddhist communities in Norway and were all members of the council of the Buddhist Federation of Norway.

Ms. Shantana Berg was born in Thailand but has lived in Norway the last twenty years. As for her profession she works in an insurance company in the field of shipping. She is the chairwoman of the Thai Buddhist Association of Norway and is presently heavily involved in the building of a new Thai temple and cultural centre in Norway.

Rev. Anagarika1 Gunaketu is a Norwegian who discovered Buddhism in the UK while he was studying there. The form of Buddhism he found there was the movement: *The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order* (FWBO) founded in 1967 by Ven. Urgyen Sangharakshita in. Gunaketu entered the Western Buddhist Order in 1996 and was at the time of the visit to Sri Lanka an Anagarika.

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1 Term anagārika meaning ‘one who does not inhabit a house’. Before and during the time of the Buddha the term indicated those who had left home to live a more ascetic life and therefore became an epithet of a Buddhist monk. The term was adopted by Anagārika Dharmapāla of Sri Lanka in the 20th century to denote the intermediate role between layman and monk introduced by him. The term indicates someone without home or family ties who nevertheless lives in the world, as opposed to the isolation of a monastery.
Rev. Karen Hagen Listø was born in the USA of Jewish and Catholic background. She grew up in France but has lived with her family in Norway for the last three decades. By profession she is a psychologist working with terminally ill patients. She has practised Buddhism in various traditions such as Theravada and Korean Zen. Later she joined the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and recently ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist nun.

Mr. Egil Lothe is a Norwegian who discovered Buddhism through reading books while still a teenager. He met Buddhists from various traditions in the UK in the early seventies. In 1977 he joined a Tibetan Buddhist centre in Oslo as a lay member. He has a degree in Buddhist studies including Pāli and Sanskrit and has been active in the leadership of the Buddhist Federation of Norway, of which he has been the President since 1987. He has also been the leader of the Inter-faith Council of Norway, which was established in 1996. In his professional life he works with the integration of refugees and immigrants in Norway.

Mr. Bjørn Petter Hernes is a Norwegian who discovered Buddhism through the movement set up by in the West by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. He has been active in Buddhist organisational activities during the last decade and has also participated in inter-faith projects. By profession he is a senior executive in the field of information, being attached to the Canadian Embassy in Oslo.

Mr. Tilakasiri Perera is a Sri Lankan expatriate presently living in Norway. He is a paramedical professional in a major hospital in Oslo. The last few years he has been the President of the Tisarana Buddhist Association, an organization of the Sri Lankan Buddhists in Norway.

Ven. Thich Vien Dai was born in Vietnam but grew up in Norway as one of almost 15,000 Vietnamese refugees who have settled in this country. He became involved in Buddhist activities at the Vietnamese Buddhist monastery in Oslo and entered the Sangha about ten years ago. He is now a Bhikkhu of the Vietnamese Mahayana order, and is presently pursuing studies in China and France.

Connections with Sri Lanka

In a larger picture of contemporary Buddhism in the West the Sri Lankan Theravada tradition has, in spite of its historically important role, been overshadowed by other traditions of Buddhism such as Vietnamese, Chinese and Japanese Buddhism in the expatriate Buddhism of the West and of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism among Western converts to Buddhism. As far as Western Buddhism is concerned, the prevalent forms of Theravada found are the various forms of vipassana movements where the practice of meditation has been largely taken out of its traditional religion context.

Some of the Norwegian Buddhists had connections with the Sri Lankan Buddhist community, however. Mr. Egil Lothe, who in 1987 became the second President of the BFN, visited Sri Lanka in 1979. Frequenting the Gangaramaya Vihara in Colombo the deputy abbot at the time, Ven. Galaboda Nanissara, gave him a letter of recommendation to stay at the Mahindarama Temple in Penang in Malaysia where a friend of his was living as a resident monk. Through his visit to this temple, Egil Lothe became aware of the presence of Sri Lankan monks spreading the Dhamma among the Chinese English educated middle class in this region. This eventually led him to do field work in the mid eighties on the Theravada
concept of *dhammadūta*², among the Sinhala Buddhist monks in Singapore and Malaysia, thus deepening his relationship with the Sri Lankan Sangha.

Another significant link between the BFN and Sri Lanka was forged by a Sri Lankan studying in Norway, Mr. Sisira Wijesinghe, later the Diyawadane Nilame³ of the Bellanwila Temple near Colombo. A socially active man, he brought the Sri Lankan Buddhists together by establishing the *Tisarana Educational and Cultural Society*, which became one of the member associations of the BFN. Through his involvement, teachings by Sri Lankan monks at major functions of the BFN became a regular feature. Among the number of Sinhala monks visiting Norway, venerables such as Bhante Y. Wimala, Ven. Bellanwila Wimalaratana and Bhante Paranagama Sumanaratana may be mentioned. The latter (presently Mr. Sumana Ratnayake, lecturer at Peradenya University) was particularly important. As the incumbent of the Stockholm Buddhist Vihara he regularly visited Norway and became highly appreciated by the Norwegian Buddhists, irrespective of their particular Buddhist allegiances.

A particular link with Sri Lanka was created by one of our young Norwegian Buddhists, Hasse Krystad. He ordained as a monk in Sri Lanka, first in the Amarapura Nikaya⁴ at the Sambodhi Vihara in Colombo, and later in the Galduwa Samsthana⁵ as a forest monk. Although he disrobed some years later, he has remained an active Theravada Buddhist in Norway, promoting the practise of meditation among our members.

**Inter-faith cooperation in Norway**

The external activities of the BFN have been concentrated on the development of Buddhism within Norwegian society. However, our domestic cooperation brought us into contact with the Christian churches in Norway as well as with government authorities, especially in connection with international efforts to promote human rights in the field of freedom of religion. *The Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief* was particularly important in this regard. This institution was co-founded by the *Council of Life Stance- and Religious Communities in Norway* and *The Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations* and supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and initially, also by the EU. It gradually became important to the BFN, giving us the opportunity to develop our network and our skills in the area of international human rights. More specifically it also gave us the opportunity to develop a relation with Chinese Buddhists through our participation in the dialogue on freedom of religion with the Peoples Republic of China.

**The Norwegian Inter-faith Support Initiative for Peace in Sri Lanka**

In early 2001 the Buddhist Federation of Norway was approached by *The Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations* to join a *Norwegian Inter-faith Support Initiative for Peace in Sri Lanka*. Also cooperating with The Church of Norway in this project was the Catholic Church in Norway through its humanitarian organisation CARITAS.

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² Litt. “Messenger of the Dhamma” i.e. Buddhist missionary.
³ I.e. a the lay custodian of a temple
⁴ The Amarapura Nikaya is a Sri Lankan monastic fraternity (a lineage of ordained monks) founded in 1800. It is named after the city of Amarapura, Myanmar (then Burma), the former capital of the Burmese kingdom.
⁵ Another Sri Lankan monastic fraternity considered to be generally more austere than the others.
As Buddhists how could we decline this invitation? To what extent our efforts would be helpful we had no way of telling. Still, with the dreadful prospect of further human carnage looming over the horizon we could hardly deny our responsibility in this matter, although our capacity for making positive contributions was clearly limited.

Returning to the initial stage of this project, we should mention the fact that some of us in the BFN had deep connections with Sri Lankan Buddhists. We felt very strongly that we had a role in facilitating contacts between Sinhala Buddhist monks and those engaged abroad on the issue of the conflict in Sri Lanka, whether Christian churches or government institutions. This was especially the case, as the Christian churches had been so dominating in the international involvement with Sri Lanka, in spite of the fact that it is predominantly a Buddhist country. With the new initiatives of Norway as facilitator between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, the opening of channels of communication with the Sinhala Buddhists would be particularly important.

We felt that it was important that initiatives from our side would take the central role of the Maha Sangha into account in exploring peaceful means of resolving the conflict in Sri Lanka. A first step would be to create arenas for Sinhala Buddhist voices to be heard.

At this stage the idea came up of finding an academic venue for a conference on Buddhism and the conflict in Sri Lanka, exploring the teaching in the Tipitaka on non-violence and peace and how it could be related to the present conflict, inviting both Sri Lankan monks and scholars as well as scholars from other countries.

**The Bath Conference on Buddhism and Conflict in Sri Lanka**

The work of organizing the Bath Conference on Buddhism and Conflict in Sri Lanka began in March 2001 when Egil Lothe wrote to *The United Kingdom Association for Buddhist Studies* (UKABS), an association of scholars in academic Buddhist Studies, suggesting that it organise a conference on Buddhism and its relation to the conflict in Sri Lanka. After several months of communication on this suggestion, the UKABS made the decision to organise such a conference with funding provided by the BFN at its AGM in July 2001. The two representatives of the BFN, Bjørn Petter Hernes and Egil Lothe, were invited to this meeting where they presented our ideas regarding the conference. Quite by accident, or by the workings of karma, we met at this meeting Ven. Dr. Deegalle Mahinda, a Sri Lankan monk and lecturer at the Bath Spa University College who responded enthusiastically to our ideas and who immediately offered a number of valuable suggestions. From this point onwards the planning of the conference became the responsibility of the UKABS.

In organising the conference, attention was paid to examining the way Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka were actually coping with the issues of promoting peace and reconciliation in the context of the present ethnic conflict. At the very outset, the participation of Buddhist monks and Sri Lankan Buddhist scholars was seen as desirable in the hope of engaging them in an intellectual exchange with Western Buddhist scholars in an academic setting.

In organizing the conference and selecting speakers and respondents, attention was also paid to the textual resources within Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Both the Pāli canon and post-canonical chronicle literature were emphasized in searching for resources in creating peace in Sri Lanka. The conference itself was organized under four headings: (i) Material from the Pāli Canon relevant to an analysis of the place of armed conflict, human

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6 In the context of Sri Lankan Buddhism this term refers to the whole monastic community of the country
rights, and conflict resolution, (ii) The Pāli chronicles, and the way they have been used by some parties to the conflict, (iii) The roots of the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict inasmuch as these indicate factors which may aid a solution, and (iv) Voices, perspectives, fears, aspirations that feed into the conflict. As topics for individual papers, attention was focused on peace, violence, Just War, the role or potential of the Sangha in acting as a force for peace and reconciliation.

The organizing committee consisted of Professor Peter Harvey, Dr. Mahinda Deegalle, Dr. Rupert Gethin and Mrs. Rita Langer.

The conference on Buddhism and the conflict in Sri Lanka was held at Bath Spa University College from June 28th to 30th, 2002. 69 participants attended the Bath conference: 22 scholars from the United Kingdom, 11 Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka (9 had come to England for the conference), 9 lay scholars from Sri Lanka, 9 scholars from the United States of America, 5 scholars from Germany, 2 scholars from Sweden and one scholar from Denmark. There were 24 Sinhalese, 3 Tamils and 10 women in the audience. Six Buddhist monks, one Tamil scholar and 6 Sinhala scholars gave presentations. Five of the respondents were Sri Lankans. Two of the participants from Sri Lanka were also members of the Parliament.

The intention of the BFN was to have a conference purely devoted to Buddhism and its role in relation to the conflict in Sri Lanka. The UKABS, however, chose to include scholars representing the Tamil side (including the very controversial Dr. Peter Schalck), which we think, with the wisdom of hindsight, gave the conference added significance, showing both the challenges as well as the potential of the kind of dialogue that such conferences facilitates.

At the conference were three representatives of the BFN: Mr. Hernes and Egil Lothe, as well as Mr. Hasse Krystad, the former forest monk in Sri Lanka. In spite of conflicting viewpoints between those voicing Tamil perspectives and those representing the Sinhala Buddhist tradition, the exchanges were generally amicable and academic in the best sense of the word, expressing a willingness by the participants to go beyond established positions. Especially the concluding panel discussion showed that, although underlying tensions could still be sensed, there was a broad agreement to find non-violent means to solve the conflict in Sri Lanka. The fact that a variety of viewpoints within the Mahasangha were represented at the conference (from monks such as Ven. Baddegama Samitha to Ven. Maduluwave Sobhita and Ven. Athuraliye Rathana) also contributed to its success by providing a secluded space for inter-Buddhist dialogue.

An English Edition in the Journal of Buddhist Ethics

Since the academic community in the UK realized the need for making available the conference proceedings in English, due to increasing numbers of enquiries from interested readers, it was decided to publish an English edition. Ven. Dr. Deegalle Mahinda and Dr. Damien Keown published the papers from the conference in the electronic Journal of Buddhist Ethics\(^7\). Also involved in this work was Professor Peter Harvey. This English edition includes twelve paper presentations and seven response papers.

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\(^7\) *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 2003 edition which also contains the papers from the conference, [http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/10/bath-conf.html](http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/10/bath-conf.html)

\(^8\) Ibid.
Launching the Sinhala Book in Sri Lanka

Having to some extent contributed to the hearing of Sinhala Buddhist voices abroad, we felt a need to focus our attention on Sri Lanka itself as our engagement was with the conflict in Sri Lanka and how it could be resolved peacefully. At a very early stage in the planning process of the Bath conference we therefore discussed the possibility of publishing a Sinhala version of the conference proceedings. The suggestion was taken up by Ven. Dr. Deegalle Mahinda who worked very efficiently on the project, and completed it in less than five months!

The BFN was very honoured to be the publisher of a book in Sinhala containing the papers of a galaxy of distinguished scholars on Sri Lankan Buddhism. Bearing the title of Budusamaya saha Sri Lankave Janavargika Ghattanaya (Buddhism and the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka), ed. Mahinda Deegalle (Oslo: The Buddhist Federation of Norway, 2003, pp. xx+378) the book was released on December 20, 2002 at Mahaveli Centre in Colombo. Given the book’s variety of perspectives from monks and scholars of very different positions, it was perhaps not surprising that it also provoked a few reactions (“Book launch disturb Buddhists”, Sunday Times, 22.12.02). To us, however, frank and honest exchanges of ideas in the proud tradition of the Panadura Vadaya9 are something to be encouraged rather than to be feared. Thus our next step was to plan a Tamil translation of the papers.

Present at the book launch was also Mr. Hernes from the BFN for whom Ven. Dr. Deegalle Mahinda had organised a very busy programme. This included visits to the two Mahanayake Theros in Kandy as well as the Mahanayake Thero of the Amarapura Nikaya, ministers in the government, and others. Particularly significant was the renewed contact with Ven. Akuratiye Nanda Thero of the Vidyodaya Pirivena, who had also participated at the Bath conference. He offered valuable suggestions as to future projects involving Sri Lankan Buddhists. One such project would be the visit by a larger delegation of Buddhists from Norway. Also, through Mr. Hernes’ contacts with the Norwegian Embassy in Colombo, a meeting between Norwegian officials and leading Buddhist monks was organised on the 3rd of January 2003 at the Vidyodaya Pirivena.

9 The historic debate ‘Panadura Vadaya’ between Buddhists and Christians was held in Panadura in Sri Lanka in August 1873 and was the climax of the first phase of the Buddhist revivalist movement during the colonial period.
2. REPORT FROM THE VISIT TO SRI LANKA

Compilers’ introduction

This report has been authored by members of the delegation from the Buddhist Federation of Norway. As stated in the introduction we have aimed at presenting events as they occurred. We have therefore kept the presentation informal, for instance in referring to the members of the delegation by their first names.

During our visit to Sri Lanka, Egil Lothe, was our spokesperson and asked most of the questions from the Buddhist Federation of Norway. Questions from him as well as from other members of the delegation have been labelled “BFN”. The questions were mostly asked on behalf of the delegation in meetings. In some cases, individual members of the delegation, brought up particular issues, voiced their own opinions, or offered suggestions about future activities. Rather than expurgating these parts of the recordings we have included them (also labelling them “BFN”) to preserve the immediacy of the report.

Most of our meetings with monks and several other Sri Lankan informants were conducted in the Sinhala language. Throughout the tour, Venerable Dr. Deegalle Mahinda translated back and forth from Sinhala to English and from English to Sinhala. His efforts in facilitating the exchange of ideas between the parties involved did much to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation. On the basis of Venerable Mahinda’s translations, Anagarika Gunaketu took extensive notes, and Karen Hagen Liste took notes to complement these. Occasionally we would comment on these notes in between meetings, check names etc. Back in Norway, Karen wrote up her notes. Gunaketu then incorporated and checked these with his notes, facts from guidebooks etc. and distributed the first full draft to the group of eight for comments. Egil has worked further on the manuscript, incorporating his additions and comments from the members of the delegation, as well as asking for corrections from the persons met during our visit to Sri Lanka.

We have attempted to preserve the unedited character of the report, keeping out interpretation and analysis, focusing rather on our immediate reactions, on what was said, and on what actually happened from hour to hour during those twelve days in July 2003. We think there are good reasons for applying this approach:

We wanted to emphasise the viewpoints of the Sinhala Buddhists, not those of the BFN. It was therefore essential for us let the voices of the Sri Lankan Buddhists speak for themselves. We think that careful and sympathetic listening to the various viewpoints is essential for a wider dialogue to develop on the difficult questions raised during our journey. We have therefore tried to avoid hasty conclusions and preconceived ideas.

Departure from Norway

Egil Lothe, President of the Buddhist Federation of Norway, Bjørn Petter Hernes, from The Dharma Group (under the leadership of the Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh), Shantana Berg of the Thai Buddhist Association, Venerable Vien Dai from the Vietnamese Buddhist Community in Norway, Tilak Perera of the Tisarana Cultural and Educational Association (Sri Lankan Buddhists in Norway), and Karen Hagen Liste, a nun representing Karma Tashi Ling Buddhist Association (in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition), met at Oslo Airport to start our journey to Sri Lanka. We flew from Oslo Gardermoen to London Heathrow and there transferred to an Air Lanka flight to Colombo. We were to meet the two other members of our delegation in Sri Lanka the next day: Ven. Deegalle Mahinda, who had
arrived in Sri Lanka a few days earlier, and Anagarika Gunaketu, of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, who was to arrive on a later flight and join us at our hotel the next evening.

**Arrival**

At the Colombo airport we were met by Venerable Dr. Deegalle Mahinda, a Sri Lankan Theravada monk and a Lecturer in the Study of Religions at Bath Spa University College, United Kingdom, who had arrived in Sri Lanka a few days earlier to organize our tour. He was to travel with us throughout Sri Lanka. Also at the airport was Venerable Akuratiye Nanda, Deputy Director of Vidyodaya Pirivena, Maligakanda, Colombo, and Deputy Editor of Sinhala Sabdakosaya, a prominent monk in the contemporary political climate in Sri Lanka, who had arranged a number of important meetings for us at the request of Ven. Mahinda. Looking for our luggage we made the disappointing discovery that it had not been put on the plane at Heathrow! As it turned out we were to travel without it during our first week in Sri Lanka.

Together with our Sri Lankan hosts we had our first lunch at a nearby hotel. Afterwards we went into town, guided by our Sri Lanka delegation member Tilak, to do some shopping for essential clothes and toiletries. After this considerable delay, we proceeded on our journey towards Dambulla, where we were to stay for the first three nights. Navigating through the congested roads going out of Colombo our driver took us into the lush green countryside, heading towards the Northeast. We only stopped a few times to buy rambutan from a roadside stall and to enjoy a cup of tea at a lovely outdoor lounge at the town of Kurunegala. The soft light of the afternoon sun reminded us that we were far behind the schedule for that day.

![Tea break at Kurunegala](image)

**The Golden Temple of Dambulla**
Our first meeting, at dusk (originally scheduled for 2:30 pm), was with the Chief Incumbent of the Golden Temple of Dambulla, Ven. Inamaluwe Sri Sumangala Nayake Thero. A visit to the Dambulla caves had been scheduled, but had to be postponed to another day, as it was too dark. We were offered tea and we presented ourselves and our mission, gave our leaflet on Buddhism in Norway as well as copies of the book published by the BFN with the papers from the Bath conference translated into Sinhala. We were then kindly invited by the Nayake Thero to ask questions.

When asked about the political situation, Ven. Sumangala answered that this was not an area that should concern monks. However, he was concerned about what he referred to as unethical conversions by Christians. According to him, some Christian missionary organisations worked to convert poor Buddhists, giving material help as an inducement to convert to Christianity to the poor and in this way incurred their gratitude and subsequent conversion. In order to counteract these activities as well as to express his concern and because he was also concerned about the welfare of the people, he had set up several programmes for the needy in his area such as vocational training programmes as well as mutual help societies among the farmers.

When asked about how to adapt to the rapid changes in the world, he said that it was important to use the techniques and technology of the modern world in order to help the people of the modern world in contemporary society.

We also asked about the issue of giving women full ordination as Buddhist nuns (Bhikkhunî). Here we were given an unexpectedly long and thorough answer. We had no idea that he was so deeply involved with this question, which is considered very controversial in the Theravada world. He told us that he and a number of other monks had formed a committee to look into the matter of Bhikkhunî ordination. This had disappeared from Sri Lanka 900 years ago, but they found that it had been a Sri Lankan nun who had brought the Bhikkhunî ordination to China in 500 CE. Since then China has had an unbroken and strong tradition of female ordination. This committee decided that there was no reason why Sri Lankan women who wanted ordination could not receive it from China, even though it was through Mahayana nuns. Ven. Sumangala told us that ordination of Buddhist nuns had taken place at his temple. His policy was to be strict about the qualifications of the applicants and emphasise quality rather than quantity. Thus, out of hundred who applied and went through the initial training, only about one third was chosen to receive the ordination. There had so far been two groups of nuns ordained, and another one was going to be ordained soon.

After this meeting we proceeded to The Culture Club, the hotel that was to be our base for the next three days. We had heard from Gunaketu that he had been delayed due to overbooking of his flight from England, but that he would be coming the next day.

**Anuradhapura**

It was still dark when we left the hotel in the early morning hours, taking food packets with us rather than staying for breakfast. As we ate the sandwiches we watched the surrounding countryside gradually becoming visible to us: the wide plains of the Northern dry zone of Sri Lanka, less densely populated than the Southern regions we had passed yesterday. This is, however, the heartland of the ancient Sinhala culture where a flourishing civilization developed around the old capital of Anuradhapura that we were approaching this morning. Modern Anuradhapura is a newly built provincial town; a far cry from the metropolis travellers met two millenniums ago. The ruins, covering huge areas, reminded us of its past glories. Using surprisingly simple technology, some of the largest stupas of the Buddhist world have
recently been restored and now shine brightly in shades of white among the green foliage. One of these stupas is the Mirisawetiya where our Ven. Mahinda had agreed to meet its Chief Incumbent: Ven. Eetalwatunawe Gnanathilaka Thero. This monk was to guide us to the holy sites in this most ancient of the historical cities of Sri Lanka.

Waiting for tea in Anuradhapura

After tea at a colonial style rest house we went back to visit the Mirisawetiya Stupa where we took part in a ceremony to lay the foundation stones for the reconstruction of one of the altars. The ceremony was conducted by the abbots of the eight holy sites in Anuradhapura and attended by senior monks, politicians, archaeologists and the heads of the local police force. We were struck by the apparent devotion of several of the policemen during the ceremony. We presented copies of our Sinhala book, with the translated papers from the Bath conference, to the monks, and were afterwards invited to a reception with tea and a variety of many unfamiliar delicacies at the temple. Shantana and Karen were the only women there, as they were during most of our meetings in Sri Lanka.
At the Mirisawetiya stupa – Tilak Perera and Bjørn Petter Hernes with Ven. Eetalwatunawave Gnanathilaka Thero

Accompanied by the Chief Incumbent of the Mirisawetiya Temple we visited the Bodhi tree, were we made offerings of lotus flowers, and witnessed the great devotion of the Sri Lankan Buddhists, circumambulating and worshipping at this oldest historical tree in the world. According to tradition, the nun Sanghamitta, who was also the daughter of the great Buddhist emperor Asoka, brought the sapling of this tree from Northern India in the third century BCE. Nuns were still conspicuous on the grounds of the sacred Bodhi tree. They were rather curious about our own nun Karen, dressed in the dark red robes of a Tibetan Buddhist nun.
We then went to have lunch at Nuwarawewa Rest house, where two Sri Lankan journalists, representing a national Sinhala newspaper (*Dinamina*) as well as the Independent Television Network (ITN), were waiting for us. Having covered the ceremony at the Mirisawetiya Stupa they had seen us participating in the ceremony. Thus the discovery by the media. We ate lunch together while answering their questions. After lunch an interview with Egil was taped for television.
Apart from the sacred Bodhi tree the Ruanweli stupa is the most prominent Buddhist shrine in Anuradhapura. Towering 55 meters above the ground, it is the largest of the stupas that have been restored in modern times. It is a centre for pilgrimage, where we also did a short puja led by our Ven. Mahinda.
The Ruanweli stupa

Not having the time for a full view of Anuradhapura we had to select a few places such as the Isurumuniya Rock Temple, the twin ponds (Kuttam Pokuna) and the Samadhi Buddha statue.

An overbooked plane resulted in Gunaketu arriving even later than scheduled. Being, well received by Ceylon Tours and taken to Dambulla he ventured further on his own on a coach,
a motorized rickshaw, and finally on foot, until we met him, sitting meditating in front of the Samadhi Buddha. At this auspicious place the group was finally complete.

Having circumambulated the impressive Abhayagiri stupa, still in the process of being restored, we set off for Mihintale, the cradle of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. In 247 BCE King Devanampiya Tissa of Anuradhapura met the holy monk Mahinda, son of the great Indian Buddhist emperor Asoka. The King was out hunting deer and Mahinda arrived from India, miraculously coming through the air and landing on the rock that rises majestically out of the jungle. The king was converted and the wheel of Dharma was set in motion in Sri Lanka. A most significant spot!
Ven. Mahinda descending Mihintale Peak
Aukana

As the sun set we travelled further towards Aukana. This is a site from the fifth century CE with a thirteen-meter high standing Buddha statue carved out of the rock, towering over the surrounding plains. We did a fine and spontaneous puja in front of the statue. Offering incense and candles, standing barefoot in the sand, we gazed at the Buddha. Even after more than a thousand years he looked as if he had just emerged from the rock, shaped by the masterful hands of his creators. A moment of wonder! We finished as the sun was setting and the darkness framed the candles and incense offered to the Buddha. The resident monk invited us afterwards for tea and cakes and told us how he wanted to make the Buddha statue a focus for living Buddhism, including Dharma practice, education, and social work. In return we offered him a book, our leaflet about Buddhism in Norway and a small contribution to his work.

First debriefing

After dinner at the hotel we had our first debriefing. Sitting in a circle we listened to each member of the group speaking about his or her impressions from these first two days of our journey. Not surprisingly a sense of exhilaration was the most common reaction. We also discussed practical matters such as whom to assign the task of taking notes during meetings. Suggestions of using a tape recorder were rejected because it would restrain people too much. Entering the world of Buddhism in Sri Lanka from our individual Buddhist backgrounds we needed to reflect together on the meaning of this journey and the goal we had set out to achieve: Establishing a dialogue with Sri Lankan Buddhists about how to work to solve the conflict in this country through peaceful means. How would we be received? How could we support the Sri Lankan Buddhists?

And a question concerning our own group: How were we to practice the Dharma together during this journey? After all we were all different in our approach to Buddhism, representing almost the whole spectrum of Buddhism, from Theravada to Tibetan Buddhism and Zen. Quite easily, it seemed, we agreed on meditating and doing devotional practices together at the sacred places, as well as chanting at our meals, assigning the task of leading these practices to various members of the group.

Sigiriya
We started the next day with a chant, led by Karen, expressing our gratitude to the whole universe for the excellent breakfast served at the hotel at 6:30 AM. Vien Dai had coughed all night and decided to take a day off, stay at the hotel and consult a doctor. We went off with the bus at 7.15. Our first stop was the spectacular rock fortress of Sigirya. This impressive wet season palace was built by king Kassapa in 473 CE to protect him from his half-brother, son of their father and king who Kassapa had dethroned and killed. The fruits of Kassapa’s actions later caught up with him and he drowned in a swamp with his war elephants. Sigirya was later used as a monastic refuge and later eventually fell into disrepair. This is one of the architectural feats from Sri Lanka’s ancient history. How did they get all the water required for such a household up the 200 meters? The wall paintings halfway up the rock rival the Ajanta caves in India in detail and preserved colour.

On the way to Pollonaruwa we had a good traditional Sri Lankan meal: Lotus roots, banana flowers, and drumsticks. Some of us went native, eating with our fingers.

**Polonnaruwa**

After lunch we continued our journey to Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka's medieval capital (11th - 12th Century AD). Conspicuous in this region are military camps of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces, usually with a Buddhist shrine on the grounds. The army personnel appeared to have retreated into their camps, leaving the military checkpoints along the road mostly vacant.

And then Pollonaruwa. At the circular relic house of Vatadage, with beautiful moonstones and seated Buddhas, the ground was too hot to walk on with bare feet. Gunaketu mentioned that a guidebook said one should have thick socks along. "Yeah, good idea! They're in the suitcase, but where is that? Ok, walk where the walls and statues cast shadows...which is better, and on we go". The Thuparama ‘gedige’ or image house, containing a huge standing
Buddha, had a small window high up on the wall. At a certain time of the day, the rays of the sun would fall on a jewel between the eyes of the Buddha and light up the whole room.

At Gal Vihara the world famous rock carvings of Buddhas or Arahants in seated and reclining positions awaited us. Unfortunately, two of the figures were having a roof construction built over them and were covered. We meditated and chanted and had just finished, as a group of Muslim school children arrived. The Muslim girls took off their hijab or headscarves as a sign of respect. One of their teachers stopped to talk to us, and asked where we came from. He was a Buddhist and bowed to Karen, paying respect to her as a Buddhist nun.

Another impressive monument in this area is the cathedral like building of Lankatilaka. The 17 meter tall image house contained five stories, perhaps as balconies from which people could pay their respect face to face with the monumental Buddha. The remaining pillars now stand like fingers pointing at the moon above. Behind the Buddha there is an isle for walking meditation, though you shouldn't be too broad shouldered. At each end there is a window where you can gain inspiration from watching the stupas of Kiri Vihara and Rankot Vihara on each side of the temple, amazingly well preserved after one thousand years. School children on a day out flocked around us, laughed and quizzed us who we were and then paid respect to Ven. Mahinda.

Outside a handicraft shop we also met five young novice monks and gave them Sinhala books from the Bath conference as well as some money to encourage them in their studies. Ven. Mahinda told us afterwards that deficiency in the training of the new generation of monks is the most serious problem facing Sri Lankan Buddhism today. With monks entering into a variety of secular vocations, lack of guidance from their elders can have serious consequences for their prospects of succeeding in the monastic life!
With novices in Pollononaruwa

**Dambulla caves**

We get up and pack – easy! Our luggage had still not arrived. This was our last breakfast at the Culture Club and Ven. Mahinda ordered sandwich packages for us to take along. We then went off to the caves of Dambulla, which are situated halfway up the slope of a rocky hill. It is thought that king Valagambahu, when driven out of Anuradhapura around the First Century BCE, took refuge here and carved them into magnificent temples when he was enthroned. They were fantastic! The numerous Buddhas and Bodhisattvas had various *mudras*, or hand gestures. There was also a small shrine dedicated to the god Vishnu. The modern Dambulla temple at the foot of the hill is very a rich one and has lots of facilities for helping the local people, including a micro bank, library and IT facilities.

**Nalanda Gedige and Aluvihara**

At Nalanda Gedige we could see ruins inspired by South Indian architecture revealing perhaps also the existence of both Mahayana and Vajrayana in Sri Lanka. The next stop was at the Aluvihara in Matale, where the Pāli canon was first written down. According to tradition this took place during the first century BCE. It is a natural open cave, sheltered by a huge cliff. Recent paintings show some horrifying scenes from various hells one can be reborn in, including one for people having wrong views, such as believing in monotheism (according to the interpretation of the painter). Surrounding the temple were steep mountain sides, impressive even to Norwegians.
Kandy

We arrived in Kandy, checked into our hotel, the famous Queens, which had clearly seen better days, but still with lots of colonial atmosphere. After lunch we proceeded to a meeting with members of the Department of Pāli and Buddhists studies and the Department of Philosophy, at the University of Peradeniya. Slowly getting out of the congested streets of Kandy we entered the Arcadian grounds of the Peradeniya campus. The trees are huge and are really amazing sights!
Our group with lecturers at the Peradeniya University

Professor Premasiri gave us an introduction explaining that Peradeniya is a university based on the British model and has all faculties except law. Classes are both in English and in Sinhala. The university also has a department of Tamil. He then described the Department of Pāli and Buddhist Studies of which he is the head. It was established as the first department of Religion in 1940. Many excellent scholars were educated here and a number of foreign students come to study. Unfortunately, Buddhist studies are deemed less productive than other subjects, and a lack of funding hinders the acceptance of more foreign students. The department has started a program on the history of Buddhism and Buddhist studies for people who are not able to enter the university. There is also a drive to promote interdisciplinary and comparative studies, interacting with the Department of philosophy and to bring in linguistic resources from the Far East. An idea of establishing a chair in Comparative Religion, in cooperation with BFN or the University of Oslo was briefly explored and gathered much enthusiasm. Prof. Premasiri also introduced Dr. Sumanaratne, Ven. Ananda, Mr. Sumana Ratnayake (who some of us knew as Bhante Sumanaratana from his years as a Buddhist monk living in Stockholm, frequently visiting Buddhists in Oslo), Dr. Mallikarachi, Mr. Carita Herath, as well as a number of other scholars.

Egil then presented the members of our group and outlined the history of the BFN's engagement with Sri Lanka, describing at some length our belief that in order for Buddhism to be relevant it must be related to actual conflicts such as the one having taken place in Sri Lanka during the last two decades. However, as outsiders we were not suggesting specific solutions to the conflict in Sri Lanka, which is solely for the Sri Lankans themselves to decide. Our contribution was rather to support Buddhist efforts to promote non-violence and peace. But first of all we were here to listen and to learn from our Sri Lankan fellow Buddhists about the situation in this country and how the Buddha's teaching could be applied.

The ensuing discussion highlighted the emphasis on the character-building nature of academic studies of religion, the importance for monks to command Pāli and the desire to establish a chair of comparative religion. There is, however, an acute need of funds,
exemplified by the fact that a single computer served the whole department. Also, comparatively low wages is an obvious handicap when trying to recruit researchers and lecturers. Talking about resources, a professor in philosophy raised his concern about funds coming from the Norwegian government. Suggesting that the Norwegian government had helped the LTTE and caused trouble in Sri Lanka he questioned the timing of our tour and our gestures of support. Could it be to somehow undermine the government of Sri Lanka?

Egil pointed out, as he would again and again during this trip, the difference between the Norwegian government and the Buddhist Federation of Norway, the fact that Sri Lanka was free to withdraw from cooperation with Norway at any time, and that it was for Sri Lankans themselves to decide about their future, not people from the outside. The professor also raised questions about the distribution of additional resources. Were equal offers given to Muslims, Christians and Hindus as for Buddhists? Dr. Ratnayake responded that this was not an issue as the Department was interested in human beings, not in favouring particular groups of people.

After the official meeting, conversations continued and we reluctantly left with invitations to meet again in the evening.

**Devales**

On coming back to the hotel Egil chose to spend the next hour strolling around the Temple of the Tooth, absorbing the peaceful atmosphere of this most sacred place in Sri Lanka. The sound of drums tells that the daily rituals take place in the temple as they have for hundreds of years. In Kandy there are four significant smaller temples, devales, honouring the protective gods: Vishnu, Kataragama, Natha and the goddess Pattini. The last two are situated in the compound facing the Temple of the Tooth Relic. These temples are all part of the religion of Sinhala Buddhists. One of the kapurales, priests offering worship to the gods, explained that these are Buddhist gods protecting Sri Lanka. However, in a corner of the
temple of Pattini, a shrine to the goddess Kali has been set up. “This is a Hindu goddess” he said, giving no explanation of this apparent fusion of religions. As the darkness set, oil lamps, surrounding a huge Bodhi tree, lit up the compound. Only the iron fences, set up to protect the sacred area, reminded us of the suicide attack of the LTTE that took place here in the morning of 25th January 1998, killing ten devotees who had come to worship at Temple of the Tooth Relic.

Meeting with SUCCESS

Later that evening we had a meeting with Ven. Nanda Thero and one Mr. W.D.J. Kulatunga from SUCCESS, an organisation addressing problems of around so-called unethical conversions. To illustrate, he told the story of one particular village, Gampola involving Jehovah’s Witness and Korean Unification Church missionaries, where an NGO (a Christian one as it turned out) got permission to build a technical college. The groups of missionaries were young attractive girls from Korea who went to different villages. They gathered the village children for informal songs and hymns, in attractive buildings. After befriending the villagers, they told about their activities using equipment and resources the local Buddhists could not afford. They provided social activities introducing Christian influence in a gradual and subtle way. They also showed videos conflicting with Buddhist values. Mr. Kulatunga claimed they did not use their resources to develop the technical college but to convert people, even to brainwash people. In another case a Catholic schoolteacher allegedly encouraged children to destroy the Buddha statue in the school. Another incident involved a young girl who was prevented from getting medicine, as some local Jehovah’s Witnesses put their faith in prayer, and she died. Ven. Nanda wondered why Mr. Kulatunga had not brought more evidence and hard facts as had been done at a conference where both Ven. Nanda and Ven. Mahinda had been present. We asked for a copy of the report. It was acknowledged that the unethical conversions are not carried out by the well established churches but by groups such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses and World Vision.

Over the last 10 years, the Sri Lankan Government has started to investigate the problem. This issue raises a number of questions such as the difference between ethical and unethical conversion. Due to an incident where “Redd Barna” (The Norwegian Save the Children Fund) was involved, failing to repatriate a number of Indian Tamils according to an Indian-Sri Lanka agreement had led to much mistrust, both of “Redd Barna” and the Norwegian Government and in particular the previous Norwegian Ambassador Jon Westborg who was reportedly involved in this particular case.

Ven. Nanda explained that there are around 30,000 monks in Sri Lanka – 6 to 10,000 of them are young monks. Many of the young monks join the JVP (Janatha Vimukti Peramuna / People’s Liberation Front). The monks should be trained and educated to counter unethical conversions, yet resources are scarce and make it difficult to provide them with up-to-date education.

Sumana Ratnayake and his wife Srima joined us for dinner. Srima works at a monastic college (Pirivena) that teaches English and computer skills to monks, recently established by one Ven. Dhammagavesi. This seems like the very thing that was called for in our previous discussion. This monk is raising money for the centre himself and works quite independently. There are five teachers employed. We learned during our visit that there are a number of such initiatives, each quite impressive, although we are left to wonder to what extent they are coordinated.

The Temple of the Tooth Relic
At 6.00 AM we went to join the service at the Dalada Maligawa or the Temple of the Tooth Relic. The combination of Ven. Mahinda’s influence and our official status opened the doors into the room which contains the golden casket, which in turn contains the golden casket, which again contains a golden casket etc., which contains the Sacred Tooth Relic. Just outside the inner chamber, people were passing by to do their worship accompanied by the chants and drumbeats from the musicians and officials serving the temple. We lingered on in yet another shrine hall, watching the ebb and flow of people. Then it started to rain, soft tropical rain, to cool the heat of the passions.

Raindrops in a temple courtyard, far away from home, how will the old man eat his gruel?

We then went to visit the three chief custodians of Temple of the Tooth Relic. They all have different keys to the casket, all needed to open it. In 1847 he British handed over the custodianship of the Tooth Relic, which had been inherited from the Sinhala king, deposed in 1815, to the Mahanayake Theros of Malwatte and Asgiriya temples and an elected Kandyan chief, thus inaugurating the present system.

The two Mahanayake Theros head the largest monastic fraternity (Nikaya) within the Sangha in Sri Lanka, in unbroken succession since their lineage of ordination was revived in 1753 by monks from Thailand (Siam) who had been invited by the king of Kandy. This fraternity is therefore called the Siam Nikaya. The higher ordination of monks, within this fraternity, only takes place at the temples of Malwatte and Asgiriya, making them and their Mahanayake Theros the apex of traditional Sinhala Buddhism. Although the rather decentralised character of the Sri Lankan Sangha make their position largely symbolic, they are widely respected as the traditional figureheads of Buddhism. Thus they are regularly consulted by the political leaders in Sri Lanka.
Meeting with the Malwatte Mahanayake Thero

First we visited the Malwatte Mahanayake Thero, The Most Venerable Rambukwelle Sri Vipassi Maha Thero who received us in his residence by the lake in Kandy. We offered robes and fruits and then spoke for just under an hour.

Having learned about our mission and concern to find out how Buddhists in Sri Lanka look upon the conflict in the country, he pointed out that he thought monks should be active in the spiritual realm and not in the political. The two don’t mix. He also thought that the considerable aid Sri Lanka was given from abroad was not purely beneficial. People should work for their sustenance and the accompanying dignity of having earned one’s keep. The Malwatte Mahanayake Thero was interested in how Norway had managed to become a rich country and Egil therefore gave a brief resume of how Norway had gone from being a very poor country, just over 100 years ago, to become very wealthy. The Mahanayake Thero expressed his support to the peace process and his appreciation of the efforts of the Norwegian government and the Buddhist Federation of Norway. He thought, all the same, that the government of the USA was pulling strings behind the scene of the Norwegian government’s peace initiatives. As for a way forward, he emphasised the need to train and educate monks more thoroughly.

Meeting with the Asgiriya Mahanayake Thero

We then went to the Asgiriya Vihara to offer robes and fruit to the Ven. Asgiriya Mahanayake Thero, The Most Venerable Udugama Sri Dhammadassi Ratanapala Buddharakkhita Maha Thero, and stayed for over an hour. As we were there, more and more people came into the room, some of them taking notes, perhaps for a newspaper.

The Asgiriya Mahanayake Thero said that Tamils and Sinhala people had lived together peacefully for two millennia. The four main religions of the Island – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity – are not a source of serious conflict. One of the main problems is population growth. Sinhala people are pushed out of some areas. Missionaries arrived from Jaffna in the North and spread to the South. When the Tamil population increased, they spread further south but there were no serious attacks from Sinhala people until last few decades. Tamil leadership needs a country and a territory. An easy option was Sri Lanka. War was waged for an independent state in the North which could be the first step to making the whole Island Tamil. It seems like this Tamil leadership is now mainly of Catholic conviction. Although the Sinhala people have suffered much, they have been patient. A war is being fought, which we, monks, do not approve of. It is not the average people who fight, yet there is great suffering on both sides. We need peace, and for that we need tolerance. We need to learn to coexist rather than creating two separate states. If there were two states in Sri Lanka, with one exclusively for Tamils, it could happen that a similar ethnic cleansing could happen in the South with the Tamils being driven out. Rather than risking perpetuation of violence in this way we should rather work out peaceful solutions based on coexistence of Sinhalese and Tamils and Muslims. Monks do not think that war and bloodshed will solve the conflict. Neither loss nor victory will solve it. In the midst of the difficulties the Government keeps up its responsibility to the whole people. Unfortunately we cannot guarantee that the aid from the Sri Lankan Government is distributed fairly. Several hundred thousand Tamils suffer, for which he is very sorry. For these reasons the Asgiriya Mahanayake Thero welcomes the peace process.

BFN: Could the Venerable please explain further about the reservations regarding Catholics’ involvement in the North?
AMT: Catholic priests in the North East are Tamil and spread negative rumours about Sinhala people and Buddhism. The Church in Sri Lanka is not very strong but they have powerful international networks that they make use of. These also reflect poorly on the Sri Lankan ambassadors abroad who do not counteract rumours or explain matters when there are misunderstandings, leaving the Catholic versions unchallenged.

BFN: BFN has invited monks to build good relations and speak about their concerns.

AMT: Yes, this is important work that you do and is appreciated. Norway is doing a lot for peace in Sri Lanka, and I have been appreciative of this from the beginning. There is public displeasure about the Norwegian influence due to some incidents in the past. As the transgressors do not seem to have been punished there is doubt amongst both Sinhala and the LTTE concerning the impartiality of the Monitoring Mission. Everyone likes peace. Yet, a lot of groups have ambitions and are prepared to crush divergent voices. Wise people from all over the world give advice to the Sri Lankans but there are extreme elements who will not listen to such advice. Anyone who listens to the Buddha’s teachings would not go to war! This means that ecclesiastical leaders are not able to uphold the values of Buddhism. The Buddha’s teaching is clear on two points:

1. No violence and not hurting others.
2. If you are targeted to be killed, only then you can defend yourself.

BFN: What could you say about the role of monks in Sri Lankan society and in relation to the conflict?

AMT: Monks should function in a different sphere than politicians. The monks should focus on:

1. Developing self-perfection - to attain Nirvana
2. Helping others - as we depend on others we are obliged to help others
3. Educating – oneself and others.

For five centuries monks did not pay much attention to politics, but with important changes in 1948, political ideas have spread to the Sangha, like a disease bringing confusion. The monastic training we offer is serious and based on values and virtues. When young monks enter a secular institution they meet lay students who have political convictions that attract the monks by presenting them with propaganda and recruiting them for their political parties. Only a minority are able to maintain the integrity of their monastic vows. Teachers have no influence or control over the monks after they have left school. Images of monks burning flags are a result of this. I have heard that in the UK, some young people leave the Christian churches to join Buddhist centres. This is a contrast to the situation in Sri Lanka

BFN: Thank you for frank and detailed answer to our questions.

AMT. Monks in Sri Lanka are delighted to see the unifying work that the BFN and others are doing to unify different Buddhist communities. I am personally grateful that you come as a non-sectarian group with a wide range of Buddhist perspectives which is itself unifying, and that you practice the Buddha’s teaching.

Meeting with Mr. Neranjan Wijeyeratne
Finally we went back to the Dalada Maligawa to visit Mr. Neranjan Wijeyeratne, the lay custodian of the Temple of the Tooth. He remembered Bjørn Petter from his previous trip in December the previous year. Neranjan Wijeyeratne was concerned that many archaeological sacred sites – 271 – in the North and East had been destroyed, and that others were not protected from effects of the war. An example is the Stupa at Tiriar with ancient inscriptions. The Sri Lankan Government has forwarded a recommendation to India to support this work. Neranjan Wijeyeratne also talked about future plans for the Temple of the Tooth, which included a new shrine hall, an adjacent conference centre, and a hospital for monks, made possible with generous aid from Thailand.

After lunch we had over an hour at our own disposal and Karen went shopping for sandals at a shoe shop not far from the hotel (the luggage had still not arrived!) A monk introduced himself in very good English as Bhante Kassapa. He had lived twelve years in Australia and had counselled cancer patients there. Now he was back in Sri Lanka working with local cancer patients as well as setting up a meditation centre in the forest. Being a psychologist working with terminally ill patients Karen found that they had much in common.

**Leaving for Nuwara Eliya**

Ven. Mahinda had studied at the University of Peradeniya and during the first years there he lived at a local temple: the Gannoruwa Rajamahavihara, where we made a brief halt on our way to Nuwara Eliya. The 85-year-old abbot of the temple was pleased to see us and after having paid our respect to the Buddha in the shrines we sat down for a short chat with the monks drinking King Coconut juice.

Moving southwards we started climbing into the hills. The temperature drops, the vegetation becomes deeper green from the moisture, and then there are the tea-bushes. An engaging lady showed us around a tea factory and we sampled some of the stock. Gunaketu complained that they didn’t actually serve, nor sell the *flower broken orange pecoe*, which they did produce. By chance, he bought some in Colombo, to his delight and admitted surprise that it rivalled the Queen of teas – Darjeeling.
Up the hills we carried on, and downwards, and up again, round bends on narrow mountain tracks. This was a real journey! Arriving in Nuwara Eliya in the darkness of the night we checked into The Grand Hotel, an old colonial style hotel with an impressive Tudor facade. Going by a tip, we chose not to eat in the dining room with its live music, and went in search for a local place. We ended up in a cheap, plastic, neon lit place that looked like it could have served the local specialities, but didn’t. Here in this cool foggy landscape one might easily forget that one was still in Sri Lanka. The fact that the only spiritual nourishment found in the hotel rooms was the Bible, also contributed to this impression. Our Ven. Mahinda did however complain to the hotel about this, so maybe next time things will be different.
Vidurupola Sri Piyatissa Pirivena and Dhamma School

Breakfast at the hotel was tasty and set us up for a visit to a Buddhist Sunday school. We had not arranged a visit in advance and went driving in search for one to visit. We found the Vidurupola Sri Piyatissa Pirivena and Dhamma School, with Ven. Wimalajoti, Ven. Keppetipola, Ven. Saranpala, and Ven. Sumangala as some of the teachers. We first spoke to a class of fifteen-year-old girls and boys and told them where we came from.

Hasita, one of the young boys told us: “I welcome you to our village. You know about our problems and I ask you to help for peace in our country.” Then a girl named Vindia asked: “Why are you in the West Buddhists?” and Hasita wanted to know: “How it is to practice without the religious surroundings, such as statues and so on?” Viveka said: “We are villagers. What is your message after having seen the various sites?” As we reflected back that we are in the process of taking it all in, he continued: “Sri Lanka is a developing country. If the various Buddhist countries coordinate, they can spread the Dharma!” Vindia broadened the discussion further: “I understand there are two forms of Buddhism: Mahayana and Theravada. What are the differences?”

With thanks and greetings both ways, we went on to visit some smaller children. A young boy told us that he wanted to become a monk. Ven. Vien Dai offered to give him ordination at the Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Norway! Gunaketu sang verses in Pali, a short puja taken from the Dhammapada, including the Three Refuges, compiled by the Buddhist leader of the Indian untouchables: Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar.

177 students come for Sunday school while 600 students attend classes from Monday to Friday. There are also 60 monks doing ‘GC advanced level’ to prepare for university. They study Pali, Sanskrit and English. There are also pujas in the evening followed by fifteen minutes of meditation. On leaving, the Head of the School presented us with consecrated
brass statues of the Buddha, probably from a set of 24, representing the Buddha’s previous births.

Such an inspiring meeting did of course delay our schedule, but we reached Ella’s Rest House in time for lunch. The scenery in this part of Sri Lanka is spectacular! In high spirits we continued to Buduruwagala or “Buddha-images-of-stone”.

![Ven. Vien Dai and Ven. Mahinda with the children at Vidurupola Sri Piyatissa Dhamma School](image)

**Buduruwagala**

Carved over 1000 years ago the Buduruwagala represents an interesting mix of a traditional Buddha image, accompanied by the Bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara and Tara, as well as the future Buddha Maitreya and the god Vishnu. We did a short puja, tried to take in the significance of the place and went to see the 81-year-old custodian monk with a fierce twinkle in his eye. His Vihara was decorated on the inside with pictures of wise people and sacred places from all over the world from the various traditions of Buddhism. The latest of his many projects was to have the *Dhammapada* copied onto transparent sheets and displayed them in the museum he was building for this purpose, for people to read in their own language. We promised to send him a Norwegian translation of the Dhammapada, which will probably be duly exhibited.
Gunaketu at Buduruwagala
Maligawila

We went on to Maligawila where we did another puja in front of the beautiful Buddha statue. It is said to be one of the largest freestanding statues in Sri Lanka, reaching a height of eleven meters. Further into the grove we came to a stone image of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara of almost the same size, in a monumental setting with various terraces and steps leading up to it. Old Inca architecture came to mind. This reminder of the presence of Mahayana Buddhism in ancient Sri Lanka had been put up in the 6th Century CE. Long ago it had been split into hundreds of pieces and only recently put together again: the old legend acting itself out again in small ways?

Back on the coach we picked up a new passenger who turned out to be a bard (virindu karaya) travelling around to various temples singing songs praising the holy places and the land. With his tambourine he sang spontaneously composed verses in Sinhala, and in between, Ven. Mahinda would translate. He sang about us, about our trip, our meeting with him and about himself, until he sang us farewell. Moved both by Manjughosha – the sweet voiced one – and the bard, Gunaketu sang him a Norwegian folk song in return. All smiles.

Further down the road we were stopped by a group of men and a soldier-like man with a gun. After a while it transpired that they wanted to ensure the safe return of a young monk and his uncle, as the sun was setting, so we gave them a lift.

At the hotel in Tissamaharama, most of our luggage had arrived and we abandoned the enforced simplicity. The rest arrived the following day. Karen was getting used to washing clothes at night and putting on damp clothes in the morning. It was so hot and humid anyway, it didn't make much difference.

Kataragama

Firewalk leading up to the stupa at Kataragama
Our first stop the next day was at Kataragama, one of the most important religious sites in Sri Lanka. Buddhists, Hindus and even some Muslims all come here to worship the deity Kataragama (Skanda). Walking through a large grove on the way to the Kirivehera Stupa we saw flocks of monkeys. Under the shades of the trees women sold lotuses and incense to offer to the Buddha. A young elephant, led by a couple of trainers, was led around the stupas and temples, bowing in front of the various shrines. We followed suit in our individual manners with prostrations, meditation, and offerings of the lotuses that we had bought outside.

At the Maha Devale, the main temple of the deity Kataragama, Tilak went out to buy offerings while we waited for the next puja. A local businessman we talked to, an ethnic Tamil from Jaffna, was clear in his verdict: “Tamil and Sinhala came from the same mother. Sri Lanka should not be split apart!” He was pleased about Norway’s contribution towards peace in Sri Lanka. Some of us went down to the river where we met a group of Tamil Hindus enjoying the coolness of the sacred waters. Among them was Patrick. Patrick was an American pilgrim who had travelled with the group of Tamil pilgrims on their feet for 45 days through the jungle down from Batticaloa every year, making his way from Jaffna, through the jungle with a group of pilgrims, begging for food on the way to Kataragama. He had done this the last seventeen years with different people. Another great smile and a twinkle!

Other pilgrims entered the grounds while we were there and we saw people coming one by one smashing coconuts in a small enclosure – to make a wish. We, too, made our wishes. There was an older man prostrate, lying stretched out on the hot sand, taking three turns, stop for a while, and continue. We were there so long that we saw him come around the other side; he had circumambulated the temple in that manner. An older woman accompanied him (his wife maybe?) wailed in between, lifted him up by the legs and changed his direction when he came to a corner. Then, with much sound and flurry, the puja began. Following the crowd of devotees of Sinhalese and Tamils, Buddhists and Hindus, equally longing for the encounter, the darshan with the mighty deity Kataragama, we carried our baskets with offerings of fruit and money to the priests in the sanctum sanctorum. Leaving the offerings of money with the deity we enjoyed the fruits afterwards, now blessed by the deity Kataragama. Although this fusion of Sinhala and Tamil religiosity was not part of the Buddhism we knew, we could still sense the power of this mysterious world of faith, uniting the otherwise divided people of Sri Lanka.
Exhausted by the hours spent in the intensity and heat of Kataragama we entered our air-conditioned bus and continued the journey towards the southern coast of Sri Lanka. The immensity of the ocean and the thunder of the waves that strike the beaches, add a sense of drama to the otherwise intimate landscape of Sri Lanka. The ocean stretching out in all directions also suggests a sense of solitude, of an island kept apart from the rest of the world by the inconceivable distances of the sea.

Only stopping to watch the colonial baroque of Buddhist art in the Vavurukannala temple we travelled on through Matara and Galle to our heaven of rest for the night at the Coral Sands in Hikkaduwa. Wishing to be fit for important encounters in Panadura and Colombo the next day, we could hardly wait to go to sleep.
With monks and lay people at Malamulla Srisudharshana Bimbaramaya

**Malamulla Srisudharshana Bimbaramaya**

The President of the Tisarana Buddhist Association in Norway, Mr. Tilaksiri Perera, originates from the village of Malamulla on the outskirts of the town of Panadura. Although working abroad for many years he had maintained a close relationship to his home temple. At his initiative the temple had organised a public meeting for the delegation of the BFN.

Mr. Perera had also brought from Norway a multi media projector donated by the Tisarana Buddhist Association, to be formally presented to the temple on this occasion.

We were warmly received at the temple of Malamulla, the Srisudharshana Bimbaramaya, by Ven. Morakandegoda Dhammaratana, Mr. Neil Perera and Mr. Chandana Rodrigo as well as a crowd of local devotees. Having paid our respect to the Buddha in the image house and at the Bodhi Tree, we were taken to the newly established library and computer institute. In addition to many books, periodicals and newspapers, they had 18 computers upstairs to cater for 850 students from 5 surrounding schools, starting 1/9/2003. The main donor, Mr. Noel Mendis who is a Catholic and previously the mayor of Panadura, was present, as were two journalists from national newspapers, *The Island* and *Dinamina*. We finally had breakfast and then went to the lecture hall for the public program.

After the presentation of the gift from the Tisarana Buddhist Association Ven. Morakandegoda Dhammaratana Thero offered Dhamma books to his to the association before he opened the meeting by thanking the Norwegian government and the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission for their helpful contributions that have led to a cease-fire for more than one and a half years. This has lead to, a relaxation of tension, particularly for Tamils, and to the abandoning of checkpoints. He also recognised that the peace process has a long way to go, and the fact that the LTTE has left the negotiating table is a sobering reminder that one has some way to go before peace is secured. There is therefore a need, he said to canvas
support for peace and explore public opinion about the matter. “In a multi-racial country like ours, a unitary administration can exist only if the involved communities live in harmony and have trust in each other. In Sri Lanka, unfortunately, we have neglected this during the stage in our history that prevailed some years ago.

For the present situation, the best solution is the devolution of power within a united Sri Lanka. The majority of the people agree with the idea of introducing a federal system of government in the country because it has been demonstrated that such a system of government is most effective in resolving conflicts in multi-ethnic, multi-religious communities like ours.

If Sri Lanka were to become a nation with a federal political structure, the federal relationship between the central government and provincial administrative bodies must be confirmed through a written constitution. However, the matters like finance, security, and foreign affairs which are in the common interest of the whole country should be on the list of the central government’s responsibilities.

Almost all the prominent political parties have accepted the federal system of government as the final solution that the country can resort to. But no political party or parties in power have been able to implement it. That has been mainly due to the lack of consensus among the major political parties. The cause of the illness is well diagnosed and the remedy is also clear. But why can’t we treat the patient using the correctly prescribed medicine?

We all, the Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and all other ethnic groups, must be able to live together on this land of ours with dignity, respect and freedom. The majority of people in our country yearn for peace. The benefits of peace are not only for the present generation but also for the generations to come."

Egil then introduced the BFN and our engagement with Sri Lanka and concluded by asking if there was any way in which Norwegian Buddhists could contribute to the situation. “We believe that Buddhism can contribute to society as well as to individuals. Buddhism is as relevant today as it was 2500 years ago. As Buddhists we need to apply the Dhamma to the situation today, and it is therefore useful to see how Buddhists as Buddhists respond to the situation in Sri Lanka. This was achieved to some extent through the Bath Conference and the publication of its papers in a book in Sinhala and in English on the Internet, with a translation into Tamil on the way. As we all know, it is not so difficult to understand the general ethical principles of the Dhamma. But knowing how to apply these principles to a specific situation can be a great challenge. Our purpose in coming to Sri Lanka now is to listen and to learn from the Buddhists here.”

There were some more speeches, including one by Mr. Sisira Wijesinghe, a long time resident in Norway and former member of the board of the BFN, and then the audience was invited to comment or to ask questions. One man commented on how important it was for the Sri Lankans not to take the Dhamma for granted but really reflect on what it means, and live by it. The reporter from the Island asked how she could help. Egil indicated that she could help by letting people know about what we have learned from the Sri Lankans we talked to. Perhaps the main lesson is that peace can only be won through peaceful means. Gunaketu asked for two things. First to help with peace journalism, focusing on events and statements that contribute to peace. News connected to war is unfortunately often considered more ‘newsworthy’. Secondly, he called for a strict adherence to observable facts rather than best-selling fiction.

Someone mentioned that no one from the village of Malamulla had been punished by the law and claimed that this stemmed from their Buddhist practice. Regarding the national issue, one person claimed that language barriers had been exploited by extremist to split and rule.
This person added that he was grateful to the Norwegian efforts to bring about a cease-fire, yet wondered if they could not do more.

Meeting at the Srisudharshana Bimbaramaya in Panadura

It was a great atmosphere of trust and there was nothing to do but extend our stay at the temple with an extra hour. We were left with a strong impression that although these people are not directly affected by the conflict, they care much for peace in Sri Lanka, and for all its inhabitants. Of course the extra hour was taken from the next item on our agenda, in Colombo, so we made a beeline for the bus and were back on the road.

Meeting with Mr. Karu Jayasuriya, Minister of Power and Energy

A meeting had been arranged with UNP's Deputy Leader and Minister of Power and Energy, Mr. Karu Jayasuriya. As we belatedly arrived, Mr. Jayasuriya greeted us, expressing his appreciation of the visit of the BFN and of the efforts of the Norwegian government in facilitating the peace process. He stressed that we need peace, but peace with dignity, in which everyone's rights are acknowledged, is crucial. Egil then introduced us and explained the purpose of our visit.

After our general introduction, Mr. Jayasuriya explained to us how Sri Lankan Buddhists value the importance of being compassionate and patient and grateful, honouring their

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10 The United National Party, often referred to as the UNP is a leading political party in Sri Lanka. It currently (2009) is the main opposition party in Sri Lanka and is headed by Ranil Wickremesinghe. The UNP is considered to have right-leaning, pro-capitalist policies.

parents and showing respect to the sacred places such as the Bodhi trees, and continued: “Due to the influence of Buddhism, people will respond by being helpful even when they are provoked by others. Unfortunately virtues such as gratitude to parents and teachers are weakened these days. With the increasing commercialisation of society, these virtues are slowly disappearing. Still, foreigners sense some unique qualities in this culture. As a government we have decided to promote Buddhism abroad because we see that there is a growing interest in it in the West."

Mr. Jayasuriya mentioned how Vesak had become a day recognised by the UN and was keen to see increasing international cooperation between Buddhists. He also asked us about the Sri Lankan community in Norway as well as about how the Dhamma was practiced in our country. We shared with him some of our experiences of being Buddhists in Norway before leaving Mr. Jayasuriya to his many tasks.

**Meeting with Sinhala Urumaya**

The nationalist political party Sinhala Urumaya was founded in 2001. During the election the same year it secured one seat in parliament, after polling 127,898 votes. Although numerically small it represents a vocal minority within the Sinhala Buddhist community, often attracting the attention of the media as they, in their own words, protects “the Sinhalese against the violence unleashed by Tamil racists and Muslim fundamentalists”.¹²

We were late in arriving in Colombo and after our meeting with Mr. Jayasuriya our delay was even greater. Many of the formalities were therefore omitted as we sat down with four members from the party Sinhala Urumaya (SU) (Sinhala Heritage): Mr. Tilak Karunaratne, Mr. Nevile Karunatilake, Mr. Oliver Abeynayake and Mr. Udaya Gammanpila. Mr. Karunaratne, the leader of the Sinhala Urumaya, initiated the conversation with the following question:

SU: Who has sponsored your trip?

BFN: We applied for funding from the Norwegian Government and received it.

SU: How many Buddhists are there in Norway? In 1955, I was in Trondheim and nobody had seen anyone like me.

BFN: About 18,000, of which 8,600 are registered in the BFN.

SU: Is the State religion of Norway Christianity?

BFN: Yes.

SU: Does that mean that there are restrictions for Norwegians to practice their religion, and would that restrain mediators coming to Sri Lanka? I hear a certain number of parliamentarians have to be a member of the state religion.

BFN: The Norwegian constitution, dating from 1814, is the oldest working constitution in the world, after that of the United States, and is to some extent antiquated. Religious affiliation have no relevance in Norwegian apart from a few specific cases such as that of the Governments dealings with matters of the Church of Norway and that of the King who is required to be a member of the Church. Today the king is, however, without any real political

power. Other religious or humanist groups are funded by the Government on the same basis as the Church, allocated pr. member.

SU: Who funded the Bath conference?

BFN: The Bath Conference on Buddhism and Conflict in Sri Lanka (2002) was organized by United Kingdom Association for Buddhist Studies (UKABS) with sponsorship of The Buddhist Federation of Norway (BFN). In Norway, various organisations and religious groups can apply for funding for various projects. The BFN, too, applied for funding to hold the Bath Conference to The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Norwegian Government and we received funds.

SU: There seems to be a very strong focus on Buddhist activities compared to Hindu, Muslim or other activities. It makes us wonder.

BFN: Understandably, this is due to the way we work in the BFN. We cannot speak for other groups.

SU: What were the conditions for funding for this trip?

BFN: We stated our own objectives before we received the money, and will report to, among others, the Government, on the basis of our stated objectives.

SU: How is it that the Norwegian Government has access to the Tamils in the North and not the Buddhists in the South? We think Norway is most unpopular among the Sinhala people as they have supported the LTTE. Jon Westborg, the ex-ambassador, was sent back to Sri Lanka as a special envoy. This makes us very displeased. Buddhism is under threat and the Norwegian Government stands behind it. Sri Lanka has been invaded several times but has never itself attacked other countries. We believe the Buddha wanted us to protect the Dhamma and we are willing to sacrifice our lives for that.

BFN: We are all practising Buddhists so our motives are clear. It is important for us to get your opinion about the assistance from Norway. Whether the master wants the service of the servant is up to the master to decide. So basically this is a discussion for the Sri Lankans. Norway is not the important issue here. Norway may have made mistakes, but if so, that judgement must be made by the Sri Lankans themselves. Clearly the issue of resolving the present conflict is an extremely crucial one. We spoke to one monk today who made the point that whatever decision is made today in relation to the conflict in this country will have repercussions for generations to come.

SU: Yes, Norway is there by invitation from the Government but it is not a voluntary invitation. It seems that Sri Lanka has been pressured into letting a third party mediate. It may well be a conspiracy of the World Council of Churches, which since 1984 has been based in Norway. This involvement has been a disaster. The Norwegians have not been impartial. A clear example is the problem with of the resettlements of Indian Tamils that Jon Westborg was involved with. I remember also a trade delegation, which travelled to Norway and had to return to Sri Lanka because of threats from the Tamils. In Sri Lanka, 74% of the people are Sinhala, and less than 9% Tamil. 4½ % of the people, that are Tamils living in the North, want 1/3 of the Country! There is no reason to grant Eelam. There is no archaeological evidence that Tamils have been the only ethnic group living in the North. Even human rights violations by the LTTE are not recognised as such by the Norwegian

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13 This statement is wrong. The Headquarters of The World Council of Churches is situated in Geneva, Switzerland, not in Oslo. See: [http://www.wcc-coe.org/](http://www.wcc-coe.org/)
Government and other countries. The Tamils even kill their own people! The real problem is the Tamil extremists. Norway and other foreign countries that have intervened have supported the LTTE by allowing them to raise funds. Islamic terrorists learned from the LTTE. Yet now 90% of the LTTE cadres are Christians. We cannot negotiate with LTTE as long as they are armed and uphold a claim on Eelam with their attitude unchanged!

Ven. Nanda: Can the BFN do anything to answer these challenges?

BFN: The Bath Conference gave voice to various views, which are published on the Internet, and in book form in Sinhala. We can raise the issue unethical conversions in inter-religious group such as the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, which is working with issues relating to freedom of religion or belief\textsuperscript{14}. The BFN is a small group in a small country, but we will do what we can and we will convey your opinions and observations to concerned people. This is part of our mission. You will also get a copy of our report. As Buddhists in this delegation, born or having converted, we are keen to do what we can to contribute to the peace process.

SU: Buddhism now poses a threat to Europe, and there seems to be a Christian plot to destroy Buddhism in return. We don’t need foreign mediators; we can manage our internal affairs ourselves.

SU: We are a political party, why did you want to meet us? Have you met with other political parties?

Ven. Mahinda: I thought you represented a distinct voice among Sri Lankans. We are only addressing Buddhists to see if it is possible to cooperate with Buddhists. There has been some negative publicity on Buddhists from outside Sri Lanka and we want to address this.

At this point Ven. Vien Dai and Mrs. Shantana Berg intervened, both stressing as Vietnamese and Thai Buddhists, respectively, that our group had come as Buddhist friends with a sincere intention to listen to Sri Lankan Buddhists, asking the leaders of the Sinhala Urumaya to keep that in mind.

The air had grown thick in the small room where we had spent the last 45 minutes, not without smiles. We shook hands, chatted with a couple of them at the door and learned that they had had a discussion earlier as to whether they should meet us or not.

**Meeting with Mrs. Ariyaratne of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement**

Founded in 1958 by a science teacher at a Colombo college, Mr. A.T. Ariyaratne, the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement has grown to become the major Sri Lankan NGO promoting social and economic development in thousands of villages throughout the country\textsuperscript{15}. Internationally the movement is widely recognised as the most significant example of contemporary “socially engaged Buddhism” and is very much admired in Buddhist circles in Europe and America. In Sri Lanka, however, reactions to the movement have been more mixed. A particularly contested issue has been the movement’s conciliatory attitude to the ethnic conflict in the country, which has drawn the ire of Sinhala nationalist groups.

Arriving at the headquarters of the movement at Moratuwa in southern Colombo, we were first received by Mr. Gnanasena, the head of the International division of the Sarvodaya

\textsuperscript{14} The home page of this institution, based in Oslo, is: \url{http://www.oslocoalition.org/}

\textsuperscript{15} See home page of the organisation: \url{http://www.sarvodaya.org/}
movement. He explained that Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, the founder and President would have liked to meet us but he was presently on a tour to the United States. The movement has currently 33 district centres and employs 600 full time workers involved with various projects around the country. This is funded through their own schemes and donations from abroad. Their ideal is to help organise people in small local units, legally recognised by the Government, to serve local needs. A project is intended to follow five steps:

1. Exploration: find out what the needs are and organise local task-groups
2. Organise activities to serve the chosen needs.
3. Establish a Sarvodaya organisation with legal recognition.
4. Establish a micro bank or saving and lending facility.
5. Establishment of a people centred village bank to strengthen the village independence.

The projects can be anything from building a road or latrine to establishing and running a care centre for disabled people. They promote ten basic human needs that must be satisfied for all individuals in a just society: A clean and beautiful environment, a clean and adequate supply of water, basic clothing, a balanced diet, a simple house to live in, basic health care, simple communications facilities, basic energy requirements, well-rounded education, cultural and spiritual sustenance.

Though the focus is on the local villages, their concern is with the whole island. There have also been a number of successful initiatives to help bring about peace, like a peace march and meditation in 1999 that drew more than 170,000 people and a nationwide project in 2002 with food distribution, the ringing of temple bells throughout the country and about 600,000 people gathering in Anuradhapura to meditate for peace. Most people want peace, though a few profit on the war and thus promote it. Sarvodaya believes in educating people in peace, both outer and inner.

Moving through the courtyards at the headquarters of the Sarvodaya we passed a group of young men doing gymnastics, men being trained to go to the Middle East as guest workers, a poignant reminder of the challenges of the globalised economy in the midst of a movement trying to find alternative ways of development.

We were then introduced to Mrs. Ariyaratne who warmly welcomed us into her home and we could ask her how Sarvodaya relates to the peace process in Sri Lanka.

Mrs. Ariyaratne: Before the conflict, Sarvodaya went to Jaffna with 1000 people from the South to build a road from Jaffna to a remote village, with the local community. The Government organised the camps and friendships were forged between the various ethnic groups who participated. Problems started from the late 1970s. There was a split in Jaffna University that led to the conflicts in 1983. Before 23rd of June 1983, youth exchange programs worked independently. All of that came to an end at that time. When the violence erupted Sarvodaya centres helped shelter Tamils under threat from both Sinhalese and Tamils. People from Sarvodaya also helped thousands of refugees who were put up in hangars. Because Sarvodaya is not political the people respect it. Then things got difficult under President Premadasa. He suspected Sarvodaya of helping the Tamils or being a political threat, and the movement came under a siege, which lasted until 1993. A government report found nothing to complain about and Sarvodaya sued a main newspaper, which came with unfounded allegations that Sarvodaya was selling children abroad. Today we have better relations and we are guarding our independence. We are not directly involved in the peace process, but both parties should get Dr. Ariyaratne involved because of his experience. They seem reluctant because they want to solve the problems themselves. Our Jaffna project is carrying on and has been recognised by the LTTE.

BFN: What is the most serious obstacle or threat to the peace process?
Mrs. Ariyaratne: Lack of respect for an independent body that both parties could relate to. Asking the current mediators to leave is not a solution. If the war starts again, where will it end?

BFN: Does the government manipulate the situation?

Mrs. Ariyaratne: They have a tendency to favour the Sinhala situation.

BFN: Will there be peace?

Mrs. Ariyaratne: Whatever happens, I don’t think even the LTTE will go back to war.

BFN: How do you respond to criticism of the previous Norwegian Ambassador Mr. Westborg?

Mrs. Ariyaratne: He is a close friend and it seems that the allegations were probably exaggerated and twisted.

BFN: Sarvodaya draws its vision from the past: the village, the lake, the temple and paddy field. Is this more of a dream today than it was 20 years ago?

Mrs. Ariyaratne: Yes, the old ways are disappearing and it is difficult to meet challenge this development. The new vision has to be a balance of old and new.

BFN: Do you have any advice to this delegation?

Mrs. Ariyaratne: Previously some monks looked with suspicion at the peace process. Now they seem to be getting more broadminded. If a Buddhist group from Norway can give this message to the Buddhist monks it would be a good contribution. Some monks need re-educating in the Dhamma. The many young monks going to University need mature, spiritual guidance; otherwise they will just get their degree and disrobe. It would also be good if you could meet with other clergy, Muslim, Hindu and Christian.

Mrs. Ariyaratne then took us on a tour of the premises. First we visited the orphanage and saw a room with 18 babies who are taken care of by 18 carers. The babies’ room is too quiet, even though it is evening time – about 7.30 PM. The toddlers next door, however, sound naturally noisy. Then we saw a section where physically handicapped girls are given 6 months training, especially sewing (there are a lot of garment factories in Sri Lanka). We met a girl who has been living in the orphanage all her life, and now works there. She has been to Japan where she worked with mentally handicapped people for 6 months. Then we were shown the beautifully designed and not quite finished meditation centre: Vishva Niketan. It has rooms for 18 people and 2 dormitories for 15 people. There is a peace museum, which includes Martin Luther King’s library. Money for the peace foundation has come from an American woman: Jacqueline Bennett, a follower of the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh and owner of Victoria’s Secret. (For those who don’t know – this is a large chain of shops in the U.S. that sells mostly women’s underwear and nightwear.)

We were all both touched and inspired by the vision of Sarvodaya and how it had been put into practice as we saw it at the centre. Perhaps this could be place for a future peace conference?

Gunaketu later gets a copy of the Sarvodaya 500 year peace plan. The essence of the plan is that peace is an ongoing process not limited particular individuals or groups. It spans over
generations with all that it entails. But it “takes two to dance a tango” and the plan may not be realised. Yet, failing to plan could be planning to fail.

From the beautiful mix of socially engaged life with meditative calm, so much the essence of the Dhamma, we go to the Galle Face Hotel, a grand symbol of Western upper class living from the colonial period. As a somewhat ironic frame around the rest of our trip, this is where we stayed until the end.

A reflection by Gunaketu:

“The contrast is great. Can I handle it? Maybe there is no problem dining in the Galle Face luxury hotel after coming in from the villages where people are poor or talking with people angered by what they perceive as threats from a capitalist/ consumer culture? The society and its values are changing, but how can we influence it”?

Meeting with Ambassador Hans Bratskar at the Norwegian Embassy

Bratskar expressed his appreciation of seeing and listening to our experiences, particularly as he was in the process of settling into the job as Ambassador. Soon were talking about the peace process.

Bratskar: A draft document was sent from the Government to the LTTE on the 18th of May this year. The LTTE has to come with a counter proposal. This is complicated both politically and legally. I hope that the LTTE will take the time they need to discuss it within their organisation. This will be a long drawn-out process where laws will have to be changed.
Norway as a facilitator is only useful up to a certain point, after which the parties need to negotiate directly with each other. I am cautiously optimistic. It is important that there be a broad political support both in the South and in the North and in the East, in government and non-governmental organisations. The Muslims as well as the Sinhalese need to be consulted.

There are always difficult issues coming up: political killings, incidents at sea, and recently an LTTE ‘camp’. These issues and people’s concerns about them have to be raised in the peace talks. To help investigate such incidents, the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) has only 50 people working for them, with great expectations placed on them. The LTTE ‘camp’ should for example not have been set up in an area outside the boundaries agreed upon by the parties. This was commented on by the SLMM. It is a small incident yet an issue of principle that can help build commitment to shared agreements or not.

BFN: The layers of misinformation and misconceptions are incredible, but this is not surprising, when the parties are so far apart.

Ven. Nanda: People remember the resettlement project where “Redd Barna” was involved, some 30 years ago, and are still suspicious. 70% of Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka were to return to India and 30% stay, according to the agreement between the two Governments (of India and Sri Lanka), yet the project collapsed, leaving everyone to stay in Sri Lanka.

BFN: People think that these refugees became active in the LTTE.

Bratskar: There were even claims in the newspaper that Mr. Westborg had his private army. I think he has been unfairly treated. Few people read the English papers. Most get their information through the radio or through informal channels. Peace negotiations in general are part of the Norwegian foreign policy, and are not special for Sri Lanka. How can we deal with rumours? Do you have any advice?

BFN: Our attitude has been to refrain from giving advice. The Asgiriyia Mahanyake Thero said that he did not think war would solve the conflict. That is the main point. It is not central to the peace process that people know what kind of a country Norway is. What is central are the needs and concerns of the Sri Lankans regarding the issue they are facing in their own country. It is of course interesting to some that we are a Buddhist delegation from Norway but that should not be the main issue.

Bratskar: It is very useful that a group like yours is here, so that our perspectives may be broadened and contacts widened. The knowledge of Norway in this country needs to be improved. People know about NORAD but not that it is Norwegian.

BFN: As Sri Lanka has all four main religions well represented in the country. It has thus a great potential as a place for the study of all these religion as well as their interaction in one area. The academic study of Comparative Religion can clearly contribute to the dialogue between these religions and thus contribute to a peaceful development of the country. Norway also has some capacity in Buddhist studies, which could be utilized in developing academic cooperation between our two countries.

Ven. Mahinda: Even supporting one scholarship would be good.

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16 NORAD (Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation), a Norwegian government directorate under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, coordinating development assistance to developing countries.
Ven. Nanda: There seems to be a need to educate monks in English and Tamil, and Tamil clergy in English and Sinhala, so that understanding can widen. Close interaction between Tamil and Sinhala is important.

Ven. Nanda: It is also important to recognise and listen to groups like SUCCESS and their concerns about unethical conversions. It is a sensitive issue with a growing number of recorded incidents. To counter rumours it is important for delegates to come and see for themselves and present facts as they see them.

BFN: There seems to be a concern that Muslims are slowly taking over the country, through success in commerce and through population growth. From the outside, one sees a Sinhala-Tamil conflict, yet Buddhists seem closer to Hindus than to Muslims (and Christians). We will bring these issues to the attention of the Thai Buddhists when we go there after this trip. We would also like to emphasise that the Norwegian government has done a lot to facilitate inter-religious dialogue in our country and we would suggest that this fact should be made better known abroad. The co-ordinator of the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, which is supported by the Norwegian Government, is a Norwegian convert to Islam. This is an interesting institution in this connection because it is dealing with issues which are very much the concern here. Thus the Oslo Coalition is developing a project on the question of unethical proselytising planning conferences on this issue.

Bratskar: This is good. I believe in facts. There is also a danger in responding to outrageous allegations, as one somehow gives credence to them, the allegations being given an unwarranted importance. It is also good for us communicate with organizations like the BFN, as they have credibility on various sides.

Ven. Nanda finished by suggesting it would be good if there were more religious visits like this one. The Ambassador thanked us for a very useful contribution, and we went off to the Sri Lankan Parliament.


In Theravada Buddhist societies there is a clear distinction between monks and lay people, as monks to a far higher degree than the lay people, are seen as belonging to the realm of the lokuttara, the unworldly, sacred, realm, while the laypeople to a large extent are seen as part of the realm of the lokiya, the worldly realm. Although the Sangha, the monastic order, has interacted with the larger society in various ways throughout history, it has not been seen as appropriate that individual monks themselves become members of this larger society. The ideal of the monk as a world renouncer has been challenged in modern times by those promoting a more active social and political role for the monks. Thus monks in post-colonial Sri Lanka have entered the field of secular education, social development and politics. Still, eyebrows were raised in 2001 when the first Buddhist monk, Ven. Baddegama Samitha, was elected a member of the Sri Lankan Parliament. Ven. Baddegama Samitha, a member of the Marxist Lanka Samasamaja Party, has held political offices since the early nineties and has also been active in student politics. A monk very much concerned with supporting a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Sri Lanka, he has also participated in the Bath conference and we were now going to meet him in the Parliament building at Kotte outside Colombo.

Security was high before we got to the warm welcome of Ven. Baddegama Samitha. At the outset he emphasised that it is important for us to come together from different traditions and learn from each other. The problems in Sri Lanka and the world at large need solutions based on the Dhamma. Violence cannot end violence. The Norwegian Government and the BFN delegation are trying to help Sri Lanka with a burning problem. Egil then briefed Ven. Samitha on the BFN and our experiences in Sri Lanka.
Ven. Samitha: The situation regarding Sri Lanka, Buddhism and the peace process is somewhat tense at the moment because the LTTE is a little stubborn. They have created negative impressions in the Tamil communities. The Tamil United Liberation Front was a democratic party that withdrew from the political scene when the violence emerged. With the cease-fire, the democratic elements came forth and refused to recognise LTTE as the only representatives of the Tamil, causing tension in Tamil communities. Sinhala and Buddhist feelings are often intertwined with nationalism. Buddhists were suppressed, so I can empathise when they react to too much compromise by the Government. It looks like a deal between the LTTE and the Government, and the Government makes no great effort to discount such an impression. There is an uneasy cohabitation between the President and the Prime minister. From early on, intellectuals and progressive forces warned against playing politics with the peace process: The Government comes with a proposal and the opposition opposes. Irrespective of political or ethnic lines we must support the peace initiative. We do not want to derail it, though there are problems. Only the youth are taking extreme lines, not the respected clergy. The clergy on their side should speak up. Quietness is dangerous. One should not keep quiet anymore. I try to listen to the clergy all over Sri Lanka and around the world to see if there is support for the peace process, and then deliver the messages to the Government. There is fear among the Sinhalese of a possible division of the country and only through open discussion can we explore such issues.

BFN: How could this be done?

Ven. Samitha: We have to find missionary monks from around the world, who have a broad perspective, and who are respected by the local monks. If we bring them together, openness may come after e.g. a week-long meeting. I need Ven. Mahinda and Ven. Nanda's support to stop the quietness.

Ven. Mahinda: We need to recognize our differences but we also need to work for a common goal.

Ven. Samitha: I am the most political monk in this country. During elections I have to choose a side, but when I am elected I work for the best of all. When it comes to national policy I am all in favour of non-violence.

BFN: If monks do not agree on an issue, can they speak out? There also seems to be a lack of unity in the South that makes the peace process even more difficult.

Ven. Samitha: The Sangha doesn’t have a tradition of dialogue in this country, and this we must learn. For a peaceful solution we have to keep a dialogue going. We can’t go on like this. Then we can be very strong.

BFN: In the Western Buddhist Order there is now a process of improving the dialogue in the Sangha and it has learned a lot from the rich mix of Buddhists in the San Francisco Bay area.

BFN: Among Sinhala Buddhists there are concerns also about the evangelical Christians who are converting Buddhists into Christianity. Some also seem worried about the Muslim population growing, whereas they seem more comfortable with the Hindus.

Ven. Samitha: This fear of Muslims is everywhere. Therefore we need to find a political system so that we can absorb these people. They are good in business. Among Buddhists we say that tanha, or thirst that lead to craving, is bad, and therefore we should give it up. This leads people to think that they should do little and earn little, and then they don't have anything to give. My opinion is that we should re-educate people to handle money in a skilful
way. We should earn, be generous, but not grasp. Work hard, use our brain, and use our body!

BFN: Could Sarvodaya be of help here?

Ven. Samitha: Sarvodaya has done a lot of good for our country, but they depend on money from the outside. But I agree with Mr. Aryaratne’s views and my opinion is that he could do even more.

Ven. Nanda: We hear concerns about unethical conversions and the need for inter-religious dialogue, but is there a program for the 2 to 3000 unemployed monks

Ven. Samitha: Yes, we can change, we can democratise this country. On the issue of conversion – it is everywhere. If you walk in London, you hear “Jesus is coming”. But here the evangelists come in by using the poverty. They go in and say: “Your roof is leaking”. I asked a pastor last week: “Why don’t you go to South America and help out the poor Catholics?” No reply. Many people seem particularly concerned about “World Mission”! And yes, we need to educate our monks and change our attitudes appropriately for a changing world, training them to be social workers, teach them languages, English, Tamil, computer literacy. They should not only be respected.

BFN: Perhaps conversion is not wrong in itself: If a twenty-year-old person finds another religion better, is there any problem? Are there sufficient guidelines and legislation to distinguish between ethical and non-ethical conversions?

Ven. Samitha: I will raise this with the Buddhasasana ministry.

BFN: There have been similar problems in Mongolia where the Government contacted Clear Vision, a UK based, Buddhist video production unity for education material, to get updated, appealing material.

Ven. Samitha: It bothers me that the Government does not have the money to look after the village temples and the resources, the treasures that are there. There is also a great need to co-ordinate efforts in the Sangha. Perhaps if we had a sister link-up program we may be able to help each other. We should encourage young monks to go abroad and broaden our vision, opening up to each other.

BFN: On our way through Sri Lanka we often found Bibles in the hotel rooms, often in several languages, but no Buddhist texts. This seems strange. A Dhammapada in several languages would be great.

I will see what I can do, said Ven. Samitha as we moved the discussion, in more informal ways to the lunch table.

**Gangarama temple**

This is a strange and mysterious mixture of temple, museum and curiosity exhibition. The shrine hall is filled with huge, freshly painted Buddhas and deities, making one feel appropriately humbled. In the courtyard there is a Burmese style pavilion. Next to it a tower of rows of Buddha statues, somewhat resembling the Borobudur. Then there is the search through the ‘curiosity exhibition’ filled with all kinds of artefacts mixed with Buddhist treasures: a sandalwood Buddha in a double enclosed chamber, a Japanese Buddhist altar, Bodhisattva statues from Korea, ancient Buddhas from Thailand. But what about the collection of padlocks or the unique and expensive Mercedes-Benz exhibited in the
courtyard? What is this all about? A young and very friendly deputy abbot leads us through this rather unusual monastery, which is also a focus of Buddhist activities in Colombo, having initiated new customs such as temporary ordination of monks, vocational training of youths etc. Egil fondly remembers the simplicity of Sinhala Buddhist architecture he saw here 25 years ago, preferring that to the exuberant chaos of pan-Asian Buddhist art seen here today. He thought that the Buddha images from various Buddhists countries could have been properly exhibited in a museum of Buddhist art.

Meeting with Mr. JVM Lokubandara at the Ministry of Buddhhasasana

Late that evening we had an appointment with Mr. W.J.M. Lokubandara, Minister of Buddha Sasana and Minister of Justice, Law Reform & National Integration. We were led in, past the long queue of people waiting to see the Minister at the end of a long day. After the initial introductions, Mr. Lokubandara asked Egil how he got interested in Buddhism.

BFN: Through reading books on the Dalai Lama and books such as the Dhammapada.

Mr. Lokubandara: The Prime minister is looking into upgrading teaching resources and he is interested in opening a modern Dhamma school. I am responsible for writing a paper on it. One problem seems to be that monks don't want to study Pali. There are also difficulties in the area of meditation.

BFN: Are there good examples and role models of monks meditating and studying Pali?

Mr. Lokubandara: There are centres for meditation as well as tutors. A commission from the Ministry of Buddhhasasana has written a paper on this topic which can be found on the Internet. There you will find information about developments in Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Yet there is a conflict as non-Buddhist ministers are not too keen on allocating funds to develop Buddhist resources. And, non-Buddhists should not be discriminated against.

BFN: After this trip, three of the delegates will be going to Thailand, and we will be talking about standards for ethical conduct in connection to missionary activities.

Mr. Lokubandara: There are always conversions, yet Buddhists tend not to convert unethically. And a final word, just because you are a Buddhist by name, unless you practice, that doesn't mean you really are a Buddhist.

Keeping in mind the long queue outside, the time of the day (it was 8:30 PM!), and the fact that the Minister seemed to be at the end of a long day of hard work, we expressed our appreciation for his kindness, offering him a volume of the Afghan Buddhist manuscripts published in Norway.

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17 The Ministry of Buddhhasasana has now (2009) been replaced by a Ministry of Religious Affairs and Moral Upliftment, covering all the four main religions of Sri Lanka. Homepage http://www.religiousaffairs.gov.lk/
18 Sāsana here means “religion”. The ministry may also be referred to as the ministry of Buddhist Affairs.
19 www.gov.lk/mob
Debriefing

Back at the hotel we summoned up the energy for a short debriefing. Bjørn Petter was disappointed that we had not found a better time to meet Mr. Lokubandara. Gunaketu was trying to let the paradoxes of Sri Lanka sink in: “Our expedition is like a pressure cooker. The eight of us are thrown together for a period of twelve days with an intensive program, spending the days together from early morning till late at night. Are we not trying to ‘squeeze’ too much into the given time, falling pray to a Western achiever mentality? We are after all Buddhists and virya, or energy, should be applied in a skilful way, like the strings of the lute - not too slack, and not too tight.”

Meeting with Ven. Mahinda Sangharakkhita at the Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara

According to tradition, the Buddha at one time visited Kelaniya, thus making it a sacred place. The Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara built on this place is therefore an important place for Buddhist worship in Sri Lanka. In 1557 the temple was completely destroyed by the Catholic Portuguese who built a church on its ruins. Only in 1767 did the Dutch (who had taken over the coastal regions of the island in 1658) allow the Kandyan King Kirthi Sri Rajasingha to reconstruct the temple.

We visited this historical temple at the outskirts of Colombo on an ordinary Thursday morning. Still the place was crowded with worshippers, many of them children, apparently from neighbouring schools, creating an atmosphere of lively devotion.

We were lucky in being invited, on the spot to a meeting with the abbot of the temple: Ven. Mahinda Sangharakkhita. Egil introduced the group and gave a brief outline of the BFN and its activities in relation to Sri Lanka and Ven. Sangharakkhita continued:
Ven. Sangharakkhita: We are fortunate to have the opportunity to have contact with the BFN. People in this country have a bad picture of Norway and think Norway will abolish the culture of Sri Lanka. This may be wrong, but we observe some events and make up our minds. Even I have a negative picture based on what has come through the available sources. It is important that we all come forward with facts and explore what Norway is actually doing. Then we can change our views. It is a good idea to translate the book from the conference in Bath into Tamil for all to read. We are now at a good juncture. People are willing to share power. They are ready for peace. The challenge is to find the appropriate way to share power, and BFN can help in this process. The Indian federal system seems better for us than the European system. The Swiss system is also interesting but people don't know enough about these matters.

Ven. Mahinda: Should India be the mediators?

Ven. Sangharakkhita: Yes, India will think of itself, and that will benefit Sri Lanka. They would take concrete steps to deal with LTTE so that it will not make problems in the future.

BFN: Do you have any advice regarding strengthening the Sangha of monks, particularly the young ones?

Ven. Sangharakkhita: I don't like monk's participation in demonstrations in general, but there is perhaps a shift. If we keep quiet, nothing happens. At the time of the Muslim invasion [in India], we did nothing. We meditated and the community was overrun and destroyed. We need to be active. We need to 'fight for our rights'.

BFN: Have you any thoughts about the future of Buddhism in Sri Lanka?

Ven. Sangharakkhita: We cannot do anything about the Christian propaganda as they come with money and are backed by powerful organisations. We need to be sure about, and strengthen our own system and not try to copy them. Those who don't like Buddhism can let go. Our monks need a broad education, not only of our own system but also of other systems of living and practicing.

BFN: Is there much interest in learning Pāli and Sanskrit?

Ven. Sangharakkhita: Yes, there is interest. However, monks lack knowledge of comparative religion. We have started a program of education here, and we need someone who can teach about Christianity. There will be 30 monks for 5 years, with compulsory meditation training.

BFN: What are the monks' limits of 'fighting for their rights'?

Ven. Sangharakkhita: When the others recognise us we can be quiet. Some people think Buddhists must practice ahimsa or non-violence all the time. We also have to learn to be assertive.

BFN: In Norway there is a state church yet equal support is given to all religions. In Sri Lanka, Buddhism is foremost among religions yet many Buddhists do not appreciate the role of the Government.

Ven. Sangharakkhita: We are not heard by the politicians. The Buddhasasana Ministry or Ministry of Buddhist affairs does little to help. The minister of Buddhist affairs is a good scholar but is ineffective as a minister. There is more practical support from the Christian minister.
BFN: How is the quality of Buddhist studies in the schools?

Ven. Sangharakkhita: In public schools, Buddhists have compulsory Buddhism, Christians, Christianity, etc. There is no teaching of Buddhism for children in private Christian schools - except for a few schools such as St Joseph College, which invites monks to talk on Buddhism. The Pentecostal schools use psychology to convert its students. Why should we do this? We would only use psychological concepts to convey the Dhamma.

BFN: Coming back to Sri Lanka after more than 20 years I see some visible changes: less local dress, yet more Buddhist shrines in the streets of Colombo. How has Buddhism changed?

Ven. Sangharakkhita: TV has contributed to show Western and Indian dress and we have to adjust to that. In the Buddhist Sunday Schools the children wear the traditional white dress and they have increased in numbers. Our Sunday school had 75 student in 1973, and 3000 students this year. Yet in rural areas it is difficult with few resources.

BFN: Do you see any ways in which you could help rural schools?

Ven. Sangharakkhita: We could send monks and teachers, material, etc. but we lack the organisation to administer this. Not everyone is satisfied with the Mahanayake Theros who need to lead the way in this work. In the meantime there are only individual efforts. There are some very good Buddhist programmes on television. That is good. Now some people like to stay at home to watch these programmes. There is an increasing interest in reading Buddhist books and listening to Buddhist tapes.

BFN: Much interest is directed to the Norwegians rather than to the central issue of the conflict: about choosing violent or non-violent solutions. What should one expect from the Maha Sangha?

Ven. Sangharakkhita: We should educate the monks about the political system so they understand their own dependence on it and are able to explain it to others.

BFN: The Norwegian Ambassador pointed out to us that there is no peace in Sri Lanka today, only a cease-fire. Eventually the Norwegians will have to pull out and leave the parties to negotiate directly with each other. What is your view on the prospect of success in this matter?

Ven. Sangharakkhita: We are ready for peace, but the LTTE still has to do some things, like giving up arms and start a democratic process. Other Tamils need to speak up, though that is not without risk.

BFN: Mr. Solheim claims that there are communication gaps. What is your view?

Ven. Sangharakkhita: Yes, between Mr. Prabhakaran, the Government and the monks. Prabhakaran could appoint a specific spokesperson. That would help.

BFN: Have there been delegations of monks to talk with the Tamils in the North?

Ven. Sangharakkhita: Yes, it has happened on a certain level, organised by a Christian organisation. It is difficult for monks to organise tours to meet different groups in the North because it is a contentious issue in the Sangha and it is difficult to guarantee their safety. A third party could organise such trips. The monks are willing, even the Vice Chancellor of Jaffna wants this and is ready. It is important that this comes as an initiative from Sri Lanka.
Maybe the BFN can help facilitate it? One has to tread carefully and will have to include all parties. International networks can be used to bring such meetings about.

At the end of the meeting Ven. Sangharakkhita complimented Europeans in general on our level of polite interactions and attitudes, of letting others go first etc. and we were all hesitant to take the first step out of his office.


**Meeting at Sampath Bank**

The previous afternoon, Tilak met an old friend, Mr. Aravinda Perera, at our hotel. Several of us got talking and it turned out that the bank Mr. Perera works for - Sampath Bank – is a Buddhist bank, although it cannot legally be classified in such ter. We therefore agreed to visit Mr. Perera and some of his colleagues in the bank the following afternoon. Ven. Mahinda and Shantana had to go to the Thai Embassy to get a visa for Ven. Mahinda, but the rest of us went to the high tech skyscraper housing the headquarters of the bank. The five of us met a group of representatives of the bank, including Mr. Aravinda Perera, Mr. Ranjith Amarasinghe, and Mr. Asoka Manikgoda. Mr. Perera gave a short description of the history of the bank and its present activities emphasising that it has pioneered in introducing new banking technologies in Sri Lanka. After the usual presentation of the BFN, one of the representatives of the bank started the discussion with a question:

SB: Is it true that Norway is a purely Catholic country and to live in Norway one has to be a Catholic?

BFN: No. Catholics have themselves at times been persecuted in Norway, by Protestants.

Egil gave a brief history of Catholicism in Norway and the introduction of Lutheran Protestantism more than 400 years ago and explained how freedom of religion actually
works in our country - enabling us to practise the Dhamma without restrictions and with financial support from the State allocated on the basis of equal per capita support to all religious communities.

Members of the BFN then briefly explained their own involvement in Buddhism and practice of the Dhamma. Then the employees of Sampath Bank told a bit about their work.

SB: It started as a building society, which later turned into a bank in 1987. The first 10 to 15 people involved were Buddhists, and due to personal recommendations about 90 to 95% are still Buddhists. But as we are represented throughout Sri Lanka we deal with all kinds of people and there is of course no discrimination. Our ethical guidelines mean no slaughter, no drugs, no liquor, etc. We also want to contribute to society at large. We help protect the environment through tree planting schemes and funding a bio-diversity trust. We help poor villages renovate the water tanks that the farmers depend on. So far three tanks have been renovated. We organise blood-donation campaigns bi-annually, we have established a self-employment project, we donate various equipment to institutions, we give leadership and IT training programs in less affluent areas, and support sports. There is also an association of employees to organise Dhamma teaching, festivals etc. as well as to collect money for worthy causes.

BFN: Is there any cooperation with other ethical businesses?

SB: There is no cooperation so far, but it would be interesting. We have a Buddhist Association, which is like a trade union, but more than that. All but three employees are members. At one point there was a take-over bid from a political cum Christian agent, and the small shareholders supported the bank to oppose the take-over. This will be a continuous issue, as the threats of take-overs will probably increase. So far, the Buddhist Association owns 20% of all shares.

BFN: Can you tell us something about your experiences with the tensions between Tamils, Sinhala and others?

SB: The 23rd of July 1983 was a black day for Sri Lanka, with the Sinhala riots and looting. Some of the people in the bank had themselves helped some Tamils from Sinhala mobs. Who were the original settlers in the Central Hills? One third of the Tamils live in Colombo and the Sinhalese treat them well. We want the Tamils in these areas to stay. Discussions about problems are always between politicians who are hungry for power. The problems are not mainly between the Sinhala and the Tamils but are stemming largely from the LTTE leadership who is abusing their power. There are, for example, death-threats to people in the administration, in the private and public sector, in order to maintain control. This is similar to what happened in the late eighties when the JVP bullied people into submission. The JVP had only a handful of weapons but through threats they managed to create widespread fear.

BFN: Do you see any solution to the conflict?

SB: There has to be a political solution with certain freedom and autonomy granted to all ethnic groups. Police, defence, control of land, and education has to remain in the domain of a central government. The claims for Eelam are unreasonable. There must be a peace with dignity for all - also the Sinhala people.

BFN: Have you done anything to enhance the education of monks?

SB: The bank has spent four million rupees for Dhamma schools. We can do more through the Buddhist Association but we need partners who can implement projects.
BFN: Perhaps some of your resources in team-building etc could be used for training others?

SB: Yes, that is possible. The BFN could of course also use SB as their bank in Sri Lanka.

BFN: Ven. Baddegama Samitha was worried that Sinhala people were not thinking very effectively or skilfully about money. What is your impression?

SB: It is not a problem for Sinhala Catholics but for Sinhala Buddhists. There are no initiatives to help Buddhist small-scale business projects, but we are trying to help indirectly by supporting responsible individuals, and are open for suggestions.

BFN: Many people have spoken about unethical conversions. How do you see the problem?

SB: Conversion through financial incentives is a problem.

BFN: In our country there is no question of buying souls.

SB: Making funds, e.g. for building institutions of colleges, through responsible banks can help ensure that it is used properly. We also need to empower Buddhists to explore, develop and stay firm on their values. There are various helping NGOs around but not many Buddhist ones. And so, we do receive money from rich countries, but it is difficult to distribute these funds. We also need to prevent child-conversion.

SB: How is the BFN different from missionaries?

BFN: We are first of all open and transparent about our activities, which are all voluntary. We are not giving money or jobs to poor people so that they shall convert. Poverty is of course a problem. So long as people are poor, they are susceptible to conversion to enhance the improvement of their living conditions. Is the religion of a rich person better than the religion of a poor person? You can't tell on these grounds.

SB: How and why did you ethnic Norwegians convert to Buddhism?

The five of us then described our individual paths that lead us to adopt Buddhism. None of us had a family background that suggested that we were destined to devote our lives to the Dhamma, something that made our friends in the bank suggest that stories about Western conversions to Buddhism would be an interesting topic for Sri Lankan television.

Meeting with Ven. Dr. Wimalaratana at the Belanwila Raja Maha Vihara

This was a happy reunion as we had all met less than a year ago when Ven. Dr. Bellanwila Wimalaratana came to Norway. He visited various Buddhist centres and participated in a public panel debate organised by the BFN about Buddhist views on the issue of a “just war”. Ven. Dr. Bellanwila Wimalaratana is a prominent monk in Sri Lanka, being active in the academic world as well as in public debate on the national issues. Besides he is a pioneer in inter-religious dialogue in the country having set up The Congress of Religions along with representatives of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. We met him at his temple: The Belanwila Raja Maha Vihara on the outskirts of Colombo.

Egil was keen to know if Ven. Wimalaratana had seen any reviews of the Sinhala book with the conference papers from Bath, but according to his knowledge there had not been any official reviews apart from the press report in connection with the launching of the book in December 2002.
BFN: Do people find the book controversial?

Ven. Wimalaratana: Some do.

BFN: It seems that Buddhists are less worried about Hindus than fundamentalist Christians and Muslims.

Ven. Wimalaratana: There have been many Mosques erected and money for this purpose is pouring into the country. The Muslims are also buying land, especially along the side of the roads for commercial purposes. 80% of the merchants in Sri Lanka are Muslims. I am concerned about "World Vision". The Government has approved their general activities and if people oppose them, they use aggressive methods to stop it. I also have some misgivings regarding the World Council of Churches, of which the Church of Norway is a member. Norway has been told about these misgivings. This conflict has nothing to do with religion. Hindus suffer. Muslim Tamils have leaders, but the Hindu Tamils have no strong leadership. Now Tamil leadership in general is taken over by Catholics. Political parties have to play to minorities as they are in a balancing position.

The Buddhists need to organise to unite different Buddhist groups, propagate Buddhism and in general learn to work together. We need broader umbrella organisations to include all groups. The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, for example has such a network, and it would be useful to link it up with others. The World Fellowship of Buddhists is another example. In these exchanges we also have to remember to hold onto our own practices.

BFN: Is it appropriate for monks in Sri Lanka to try to influence the peace process, for example with statements in the press as we saw last year?

Ven. Wimalaratana: We have been fighting for twenty years and lost so many lives and so much property. We should try another approach to solve this problem. The LTTE has broken its promises so many times that people don't believe them any more. During the last 1½ years of negotiations, the LTTE have already violated the cease-fire agreement more than 2000 times, and they don't seem to listen to the Monitoring Mission. The Government has done everything for peace, even taking great risks to honour the cease-fire.

BFN: Ambassador Bratskar told us that there were only 50 people monitoring the cease-fire, which is far too few.

Ven. Wimalaratana: Yes, and we listen to their reports and complaints. The public opinion about the last ambassador is bad. They claim he said one thing in public and another to the LTTE.

BFN: Do you refer to a specific incident?

Ven. Wimalaratana: It is more about the general perception. Once we met him and monks asked him questions, but we did not perceive him as honest.

BFN: Could you verify those facts you thought he was dishonest about?

Ven. Wimalaratana: It is obvious that he favours the LTTE. He was dismissed, which suggests this. And now, he is back as a special envoy.

BFN: Mrs. Aryaratne was optimistic about the cease-fire. She thought that it would hold.
Ven. Wimalaratana: So far there is more than 50% support for the peace process but it is deteriorating day by day due to activities of the LTTE. If the cease-fire does not hold, the major groups will still not go to war, only the small parties without much support.

BFN: Do you have any communication with the Tamil community?

Ven. Wimalaratana: Yes, but the leader is away now. The Tamils are also doubtful of the LTTE's activities, but in private. Those who say they do not support the LTTE are threatened by the LTTE.

BFN: Do you have any view on the Catholic Church in this conflict?

Ven. Wimalaratana: In the North they have to be sympathetic to the LTTE to survive. The statements of the Church must be seen in this light. The Sinhala Catholics on the whole keep quiet with their own concerns. There are reasons to believe that the LTTE gets shelter in the Catholic churches. Catholic priests do a lot of work to create harmony.

BFN: Are the Sinhala Catholics therefore seen as less patriotic?

Ven. Wimalaratana: Not really. They are active on the international scene and locally as well, to show people that they are concerned. There are other groups like the White Lotus Flower who undermine peoples pride in their own roots. Buddhists cannot, for example, get involved in the fishing industry because of their vow of ahimsa or non-violence. Christians exploits this difficulty.

BFN: Since you are experienced in inter-religious dialogue, what is your opinion about getting religious leaders together?

Ven. Wimalaratana: Actually the religious harmony is maintained. We do activities together which the media cover. The only trouble is the evangelical Christians who disturb this. We can even tell Catholic bishops if something is wrong. In earlier days we were told by our parents not to go into churches, and we have to overcome such suspicions.

BFN: How do you think a group like ours can contribute in Sri Lanka?

Ven. Wimalaratana: You can clarify wrong views about ethnicity. You can help express how the culture is upheld by monks. Media focuses on Christian do-gooders and forgets the efforts of the monks.

And so, we bid our farewell, offering Ven. Wimalaratana a volume of the Buddhist manuscripts discovered in Afghanistan and published in Oslo by Prof. Braarvig20.

**Meeting at Vidyodaya Pirivena**

Ven. Nanda had been instrumental in organising this visit, together with Ven. Mahinda. We have also had very stimulating conversation with this unusual monk who seems to have connections with just about every Buddhist in Sri Lanka, having "fingers in lots of pies" it seems, and clearly a very sharp person. It was therefore delightful to be able to visit him 'at home' and meet his own teachers: Ven. Akuratiye Amaravansa Nayake Thero at 94 years,

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20 "Buddhist Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection". See: [http://www.hermesac.no/](http://www.hermesac.no/)
and Ven. Bellana Gnanavimala Mahanayake Thero of Siyam Nikaya, Kotte Chapter. Ven. Amaravansa is a successor of the famous Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala who founded the Vidyodaya Pirivena in 1874 as the first monastic institute of higher learning established in the modern period. This monk was also the teacher of the famous American reviver of Buddhism in the late 19th Century: Colonel Henry Steel Olcott. In 1959, to expand higher education in Sri Lanka, the two institutes — Vidyodaya (University of Sri Jayawardhapura) and Vidyalankara (University of Kelaniya)—were elevated into university status. At present, the two secular universities are separate from the monastic institutes.

Having paid our respects we were seated in their library hall, around a large table, and introduced to the various teachers and students from Sri Lanka as well as from Burma, Bangladesh, Laos, Nepal and, China. There are about 20 foreign monks studying here.

BFN: We would very much like to know how this institution works.

Ven. Nanda: In Sri Lanka there are 640 Pirivenas. But this institution is different. We are independent. We and our two sister institutions focus on the education of monks. There are 300 students here of whom 70 are residential, and 18 to 20 Staff. Most monks are between 11 and 13 when they start, and after eight years of successful study, the students become Pandits. They can then go to University, and they easily obtain first class degrees. The syllabus includes Pali, Sanskrit, Prakrit, Buddhism, Sinhala, English, Tamil, astrology, IT, and social studies. All students study in Sinhala. There are no fees for the students, and the teachers are supported on a moderate level with free board and lodging.

BFN: This is an impressive institution, particularly in the face of claims and rumours that classic institutions like this are in decline.

Ven. Amaravansa: It is true to some extent.

Ven. Gnanavimala: Young monks are not very interested in Pali, they are rather interested in political sciences, economics etc. In the monastic schools Pāli is compulsory. In the universities it is optional, and often looses out in competition with other subjects. We should not be afraid that Pāli should be lost. There are competent scholars and the institutions are committed to study Pali.

BFN: What is the difference of teaching Pāli here and at the university?

Ven. Gnanavimala: At the monastic school one begins at a beginner’s level and proceeds gradually. Monastic studies are vertical and plumb the depths. At the university they are horizontal and look for connections and comparisons, yet sever connections with the root.

Ven. Nanda: Those who learn Pāli are not getting the teaching posts, and there is not adequate funding for Pāli studies.

Ven. Amaravansa: In the monastic schools they study Pali. In university they talk about Pali.

Ven. Nanda: Those who study Pāli should study English and comparative religion; then they can teach anywhere in the world.

BFN: The Buddha asked the monks to study Dhamma, not other subjects, didn't he?

Ven. Amaravansa: It is true.
Ven. Nanda: there are two views on study: Vipassanadhura (doing meditation), for the forest monks, and ganthadhura (doing studies), for the scholars. The scholars have specialized in other subjects for various reasons. Monks from poor areas often think that they need some money to maintain their temple. We cannot ignore these material needs.

BFN: Are there different aims for monks and lay people?

Ven. Gnanavimala: Usually both types of people should do both practices. Buddhism is DIY (do it yourself) and one has to look after one’s own needs. Yet, someone has to look after the lineage, the Buddhasasana.

BFN: Do you also teach meditation here?

Ven. Gnanavimala: We have a meditation tutor and do some collective meditation, the Anapanasati method. We also do pujas, but those are not our main practices. Sometimes students go to other monastic institutions or meditation masters to specialise for a while and then return. There are not many meditation masters in Sri Lanka.

BFN: What is the role of the monks in contemporary society?

Ven. Amaravansa: The purpose of being a Buddhist monk is the same all the time, but many things have changed over the last 2500 years. If we had not made changes, Buddhism would have disappeared. The Buddha acknowledged that changes had to be made according to the times. The challenge is to change while staying true to the tradition. The fittest will survive.

BFN: We have heard that some modern monks try to improve Samsara rather than trying to get out of it.

Ven. Amaravansa: The pleasure of heavens and Nirvana are both important.

Ven. Nanda: Modern monks are better than some of the Buddha's companions if you go by the accounts in the Vinaya21.

Ven. Amaravansa: After thousands of years you cannot have the same religion. You have to take responsibility to relate to new conditions.

BFN: How can one evaluate whether one is innovative or conservative before history casts its vote?

Ven. Gnanavimala: There is no judge to decide this. It is determined by individuals and the society. We don't instruct anyone to modernise but to preserve the tradition. Monks inspire society and is an important source of inspiration to attract people to the Buddhist tradition.

BFN: How is the Vinaya studied?

Ven. Gnanavimala: We accept the texts of the Tipitaka as authoritative. Commentaries have followed and there are variances and different interpretations.

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21 The term vinaya refers to the rules laid down by the Buddha for the monks and nuns. These rules, along with the records of how they were established, are found in the Vinaya Pitaka, the canonical collection on monastic discipline.
BFN: There is the important question regarding violence. Monks cannot use violence, but what about advice to others, to lay people?

Ven. Gnanavimala: If terrorists are fighting against the country we cannot just give up. If the people don't fight the LTTE they will lose the country. Yet monks cannot advise people to fight. If monks don't encourage people to stand up they will lose. When a snake comes to bite you, do you let it bite? In actual self-defence you may have to use violence.

BFN: Have you considered alternative methods of non-violent direct actions?

Ven. Gnanavimala: We have to consider the motive of the LTTE. There are 60 million Tamils and no Tamil state. The Jews were in a similar position before the Second World War. The Tamil people want to establish a state in India, but India is too strong. In Sri Lanka it might be possible. Non-violence is advisable but may not be enough.

BFN: What can be done to help women obtain higher ordination, considering the recognition of equality between the sexes in other institutions and religions around the world?

Ven. Gnanavimala: In the Sri Lankan Theravada traditions we do not have nuns. In other countries it is different. The Bhikkhuni Sasana - order of nuns - flourished for 500 years and then died out. It does not seem to suit the Sri Lankan temperament. Women can practice the Dhamma without being nuns. They can become Arahants without being ordained.

It was getting late and as we had presented our various gifts, a young monk, Maharatana, spontaneously took the opportunity to thank the delegation. He was proud that we had paid a visit to see Sri Lanka and the educational institution. He also appreciated the discussion to help broaden understanding and confidence to lead a monastic way of life.

Back at the hotel, Gunaketu reflects in his diary:

"Kalyana mitratā (spiritual friendship) is not half the spiritual life" was the Buddhas reply to an enthusiastic Ananda, coming out of solitary retreat. "It is the whole of the spiritual life". It is lovely to see great care and respect, mixed with integrity of thought and dialogue in this heart of orthodox Buddhist practise. I have come to realise a thing or two about dangers and delights of working with spiritual hierarchies and this strikes me as a beautiful touch of a tradition seeking to honour its elders while meeting the needs of the young, in the spirit of spiritual friendship."

Meeting with Ven. Akuratiye Nanda

Ven. Nanda came with us back to the hotel, and the conversation continued about life and Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka today.

Ven. Nanda: Buddhism came here more than 20 centuries ago. 73% of Sri Lankans are born Buddhists, and they think they cannot violate their Buddhist commitment. People want to practice dāna (generosity) and transference of merits to their parents, rather than doing meditation, keeping precepts, etc. Because of this emphasis Sri Lankans have been ill equipped to face new challenges, like the Western style of alcohol consumption, introduced by the Portuguese. Previously we didn't need to address such issues, but now Sri Lankans are becoming alcoholics.
Sri Lanka has about 10,000 temples, 30,000 monks, and 400 pirivenas. In the old days, these institutions functioned well and there was good communication with the society. Now it is watered down. Villages are often poor with small families, so parents don't want to send any children to be monks. Previously, one had to train for a year to become a monk, now one can be ordained on the spot, and ordination is seen as a route to higher education. The monks need strong leadership. As it is, monks do what they like, which is no good for anyone. There are positive examples though. Forest monks sometimes practice all night meditating and spirit chanting, sometimes for seven consecutive days. We all have to think about how to interest and motivate young people. There is much talking and little doing. A few years ago, a National Buddhist Congress was organised, but it got caught up in politics.

BFN: Should monks take part in political activities, as citizens, or stay out? How far should monks go to do the work of society?

Ven. Nanda: One thing is clear: monks cannot go to war. In the Mahavamsa, monks disrobed if they wanted to go to war. Today, head monks are clear that we want peace in an undivided country. That might leave pragmatic problems but it does not mean a call for war.

BFN: Do you have any ideas or suggestions for the future?

Ven. Nanda: It would be good to get Hindu and Buddhist priests to meet and learn from each other - about the languages, and about the cultures. A possible first step might be to bring leaders from different communities together, maybe with leaders from outside of Sri Lanka.

BFN: Perhaps one could invite Thich Nhat Hanh, or work with Sarvodaya?

Ven. Nanda: Sarvodaya is mistrusted because of funding from Norway. Their rural development has also shrunk.

BFN: What about a program for comparative religion in universities? Is it useful?

Ven. Nanda: Yes, it is useful. I will give this whole area some more thought and come back to you.

It was soon midnight, so those of us who were still up followed those who were not and went to bed.

Gunaketu’s journal begins with the following entry:

“We have to be ready to let go of the formal Dhamma - the raft!

There is the extreme of not standing up for Dhamma when challenged and violated against.

There is the other extreme of fighting violations with unskilful and violent means.

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22 Pirivena is a monastic college (similar to a seminary) for the education of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka. These have been the centers of secondary and higher education in ancient times for lay people as well. Today 561 Pirivenas are founded and maintained by the Ministry of Education. Young monks undergo training at these pirivenas prior to being ordained.
I want to find a middle way, and the struggle carries on...

A Buddhist School - National Children's Educational Foundation

Leaving central Colombo we slowly pass through the suburbs entering the not yet urbanised countryside on the outskirts of the city. A cluster of modern buildings surrounded by huge trees: The National Children's Educational Foundation, a private Buddhist school run by Ven. Bandagiri Somawamsa Thero.

He tells us that he was inspired by the late President Premadasa to try non-traditional teaching methods. From 1980 to 1985, he went to Japan to learn, and opened the first private school in Sri Lanka, in 1998. It has now 800 students, 18 of them resident pupils. It is a delightful place, inspired by Montessori ideas of play and discipline. We were taken around the premises observing the children doing their various activities. Most of them were in the hall for the morning assembly. We joined them for a while, watching a performance of song and dances, both traditional and modern, which the children did very well, clearly enjoying what they were doing.

Ven. Somawamsa: The education focuses on the five senses, what comes in and how we relate to that. E.g. eye object - recognise - feeling - grasp, etc. “Awakening” means to awaken consciousness. If we let the children release their bonds, they become independent and able to discriminate skilfully. This has to be learned through experience and not through being imposed. Then we will foster real humans.

We ask teachers to explore their ways of teaching through inspiration and to encourage children to rediscover links with experiences from past lives. Elements from nature are used to create an identity with both self and the earth. Children don't wear footwear, to stay close to the earth

On the walls are boards where both children and their parents (from 3rd class onwards) are evaluated on a number of qualities such as theory, music, paying respect to the Buddha, punctuality (using their body-clock - no bells or watches), dress, homework, nutrition, cultural activities, cooperation, respect and greeting of staff, paying respect to the principle monk, greeting guests, conscientiousness about following rules, silence (in designated areas), independence, volunteering, extracurricular activities, skill in action, common sense, dedication to work, etc. The best student of the month, in each class, is honoured.

The pupils have a five-day week. They even have a 'camp-site' where some boys were building a fire, to spend the night 'out in the wild'. There are 20 students in a class, and the school is funded by parents and others. Poor students attend free of charge. Admission depends on the pupils being able to come every weekday at 8:00 am. Poor children from unprivileged areas are given a scholarship of 7000 rupees per month.

Ven. Somawamsa: Buddhism is not a religion and can accommodate other religions. There are both Muslim and Christian students. In the early days, we were looked upon with scepticism by the Teacher's Union but now we are seen as a model.

BFN: During your trip to Japan, what did you think of the Mahayana Buddhism you encountered there?
Ven. Somawamsa: We should not be too absorbed in details about Mahayana and Theravada. We should look for Nirvana. We could establish monastic education on these lines.

BFN: Do you address ways of dealing with conflicts of various kinds here at the school?

Ven. Somawansa: There is no specific strategy needed as long as one understands one's interconnectedness with others, responsibilities and accountability. Methods of counselling are not very effective and require much experience to be made effective. The larger community is the best arena to resolve conflicts through creating mutual understanding and cooperation. Counselling is more a “quick-fix”.

BFN: Do you place any emphasis on meditation?

Ven. Somawansa: There is some samatha training, even from the age of 2, to learn to concentrate. Various objects of concentration are used like a playing with a ball, an animal etc, and the concentration span is gradually increased from perhaps 10 minutes and onwards. It is easier to concentrate if you like something. This also fosters an understanding of interconnectedness. When children reach the age of 15 or 16, they plan to introduce vipassana meditation. Many people have misunderstood Buddhism. Our daily activities are our meditation, as Ven. Sangharakshita in the FWBO also emphasises in the West. This Buddhist vision should enter into the school curriculum. This has been born out of my experience.

BFN: What are the greatest obstacles to introducing these new ideas?

Ven. Somawansa: The slave mind is the first obstacle, which is found equally in Western education. The second obstacle is the Teachers Union, which expresses the opinion that if they introduce this they will have to work harder, which is not wanted. The third obstacle is not enough awareness among parents.

BFN: Sri Lanka is a diverse country and many people are concerned about Sri Lanka splitting apart. How do you deal with this issue at the school?

Ven. Somawansa: If we implement an education system like this there would be no problem around ethnicity and religion, because from the beginning the focus is on individuals, and as long as they learn the important skills and qualities, it doesn't matter what ethnic background or religion they come from. I have trained Christian and Muslim clergy, who found it useful, as well as monks, principals, secretaries etc. in the Western Province. Politicians are afraid of our success.

On the way back to the hotel, Gunaketu kicked himself for having forgotten to ask how Muslims or Christian students and parents found the evaluation on 'paying respect to the Buddha', and where children of other faiths would learn about those faiths. Maybe next time.
Ven. Mahinda and Egil Lothe at Mount Lavinia

Tapovana Meditation Centre, Mulleriyava

As we had not yet visited a meditation centre in Sri Lanka Ven. Mahinda suggested that we stop at one near the school. Suddenly we were in a different world. The noise and haste of the streets of Colombo seemed far away, hidden behind the thick green foliage of the grove in which thirty monks had found their haven of peace. Dressed in the dark red robes of forest monks they quietly entered the main hall for the dane that were about to be served by a group of lay people. We went further into the forest sitting down for a few minutes of meditation in the beautiful sima building. A layman dressed in white sat aside the beautiful statue of the Buddha, absorbed in meditation. Another image of Sri Lankan Buddhism!

Back at the hotel we lunched, and Egil was interviewed for the *Sri Lankan Sunday Times*. The sun was hot, the water cool, for a couple of hours we could just enjoy being in sunny Sri Lanka.

The Buddhist Cultural Centre

At the Buddhist Cultural Centre at Dehiwala a sizeable universe of Dhamma books opened up, from the Pāli Canon and the Avatamsaka Sutra to small pamphlets which would probably be collectors' items in many a Sangha in the West: early writings of Bhikkhu Bodhi, Thich Nhat Hanh, Sangharakshita, and of course the Dalai Lama. And yes, it is difficult to restrain the tanha and upadana - thirst and craving - for books, even Dhamma books, mixed in with noble intentions of studying or buying for various bookshops back home. The queue gets
long, the piles of books to be paid rise up while the clock ticks and soon tells us with some urgency about the need to move on. We leave piles of books to be paid for later.

**Meeting with Ven. Maduluwawe Sobhita**

Ven. Maduluwawe Sobhita has been a prominent monk in Sri Lanka since the seventies when he was a popular preacher on Radio Ceylon and later when he became a strong opponent of various attempts by Sri Lankan governments to settle the ethnic conflict. He has therefore been seen by his detractors as very much the embodiment of the nationalist Sinhala monk. In 2002, however, he chose to participate in the Bath conference where he emphasised the need for peace. We met him again at his temple, Naga Viharaya at Kotte, outside Colombo.

Ven. Sobhita was delighted that we had come to Sri Lanka, and remarked that although Norway is a Western country, some embrace Buddhism. He assumed that we had seen through, with our own eyes, some of the propaganda of the LTTE. Ven. Sobhita then wanted to know about the purpose of our trip and how he could be of assistance. We introduced ourselves briefly and Ven. Sobhita talked about his concerns:

Ven. Sobhita: There has not been a war on behalf of Buddhism. Buddhism proposes and accepts the non-violent path. The Buddhists are not only human beings, but also belong to a culture nurtured by the Dhamma. In 2500 years of history there have been wars and conflicts. We have only fought wars to protect us, and there is much to be protected: the country and Buddhism. It is important to remember that this is a Sinhala Buddhist country. Norway has adopted a Christian Lutheran religion, and there is an implicit understanding that one should protect one's religion, like in the UK, in Germany and in other countries. There are rumours spreading that no other than Sinhala have rights in this country. The country name itself does not refer to ethnic groups or religions, but to the country. Eelam is actually another way of saying Sinhala. All citizens of Sri Lanka are Sinhala, whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist. It is the name of the country.

The world should by now realise how tolerant the Sinhala people are after suffering so many atrocities and having so many temples demolished. If we accept that a certain area of Sri Lanka belongs to a certain ethnic group, this will cause serious problems in the future.

I am afraid that the accepted cease-fire can easily be broken, throwing us back into war. Why are these people so stubborn? During this cease-fire, 29 intelligence officers were killed, and the Monitoring Mission has been attacked by the LTTE, shouted at, etc. There is also a danger that the LTTE can have armed themselves during the cease-fire. And then there is the forced recruitment of child soldiers by the LTTE. A few Tamil ladies committed suicide when their children were abducted as child soldiers. Then, if they don't want peace, what are we to do? Can we trust people who are killing and threatening democratic institutions? Can we negotiate with them?

Perhaps the BFN could make contact with the LTTE and help build trust and confidence. That would be a positive contribution. The urgent need is to free innocent Tamils as well as maintaining the cease-fire.

The meeting finished, as it was high time for Ven. Sobhita to go to his Dhamma talk at another temple. We followed his smart car with darkened windows through the winding streets of suburban Colombo. At the temple, in a banasala (preaching hall), filled to capacity, we were ushered in and seated in front of the pulpit with Ven. Mahinda and Ven. Vien Dai.
being placed on the side together with the other monks. The talk was in Sinhala and it was interesting to focus on the atmosphere and on the non-verbal expressions. Ven. Sobhita is a famous preacher and it was easy to see why. All through his sermon he kept his audience spellbound. Afterwards we were invited for tea and snacks with the abbot of the temple. He treated us to a local delicacy reminiscent of chestnuts and gave us local batik scarves - perfect wrap for Dhamma books.

Meeting with Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya monks

Coming back to the hotel at night we had another meeting organised by Ven. Nanda with a group of young monks from the Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya (JSS) or National Conference of Buddhist Monks. The JSS has repeatedly hit the headlines of the media with their campaigns on religious grounds against compromising with the LTTE. Thus Ven. Athuraliye Rathana Thera, the General Secretary of the JSS (who incidentally participated in the Bath conference) stated at a press conference in March 2003: "The Muslim and Tamil extremists are bent on dividing the country. While the Tamils claim that the North and East is their homeland, the Muslim extremists argue that the East is their homeland. What these people have forgotten is that Lord Buddha has visited this country thrice. … Sri Lanka has been a Sinhala Buddhist country from time immemorial."23

The JSS monks present at the meeting were: Ven. Dhammika, Ven. Pannananda, Ven. Nandasara, Ven. Vimalasara, Ven. Sumanavansa, Ven. Saddhavansa, - coming from all the three Nikayas of Sri Lankan Buddhism. They were all either teachers or principals of pirivenas (they are referred to below as JSS).

JSS: Our priority is to give a voice to young monks not otherwise heard through the hierarchy. We have over 1000 members. Our plan is to train young monks and lay people and to establish an institution to facilitate Dhamma study, yoga, computer studies etc. for all people.

Monks cannot ignore terrorist acts against people, temples etc. We are not affiliated with any political party. We simply support good deeds and expose bad deeds. Though we are independent, some people within existing parties support our work. Some people label us as extremists but we don't accept that label. We are concerned with national issues - both with long-term plans and immediate threats. In the long term, we must revive the Buddhadasana. The immediate threat is through unethical conversions in rural villages. The Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya has held conferences with over 4000 participants to bring young monks, affiliated Sanghas and NGOs together. There were Mahanayakes from all the Nikayas present. Our aim with the Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya is to have a world congress to help promote the Buddhadhamma. Perhaps we can co-operate with the BFN? We are honest and expect you to be honest.

There have been acts of betrayal by using young monks. About 80% of the monks live in rural areas. It is an austere life, often without funds, though they do receive food. These monks have a local authority we can make use of. They may not know European languages, but Pali, Sanskrit and local culture. They attract the public due to their virtue. A serious problem is that all governments in the past have used Western methods of government, relying heavily on money. The etiquette of the monastic practice is very simple - be loving

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23 Quoted from Daily Mirror 13th of March 2003
and compassionate, as reflected in the Karaniyametta Sutta, towards everything, even trees. Don’t betray the Buddhasasana or the country. Because we have love and compassion we are not ready to betray the country. Our loving-kindness includes all of nature.

Norway is perceived as a country that sends missionaries to Sri Lanka. We are therefore happy also to meet Buddhists from that country, though one has to live together for a long time really to get to know one another.

BFN: We are thankful that you have come here to meet us. We have two objectives: 1) to enable Sri Lankan Buddhist voices to be heard outside of Sri Lanka. 2) To hear what the Buddhadhamma has to say on society, and especially on violence and non-violence.

Ven. Nanda: Some say that a Father from the Tøyen Church in Oslo brings missionaries24.

BFN: The clergyman you refer to is no missionary and is not working to bring in any.

BFN: What is your attitude on the use of violence? Can there be any justification?

JSS: Even in the Buddhas days there were kings that had armies to protect their subjects. A strong state had an army that could protect the country. The Buddha never asked kings to dismantle their armies. Even when the kings came to the Buddha after having killed people, he did not reproach them. Without law and order the society cannot be preserved. Law and order is not sufficiently upheld in Sri Lanka today.

JSS: In 2001, the United Nations celebrated the Buddhas birthday (Vesak), but Norway abstained from voting in favour of the resolution on adopting Vesak as a day of celebration - why?25

BFN: I thought Norway voted in favour of this, but the legislative process is complicated. I will ask the foreign ministry about what happened.

JSS: If the Norwegians did not support this, how can we trust that the Norwegian Government has our interests at heart? People in the Jathika Sangha Sammelanya have not got a good impression of the Norwegian Government.

The monks from the Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya then described their visions of an institute for Buddhist research where Bhikkhus from other countries could also come to study, meditate and do yoga, with all the necessary facilities, including training programs for school children and youths to help clear the mind and show the path towards self realisation. A centre for these purposes, Sadham Sevana Asapuwa, has already been started and some of the monks are going to Kandy tomorrow present their plans.

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24 The Tøyen Church in Oslo is run by a social welfare organisation of the Church of Norway and caters to drug addicts and other disadvantaged people. It is not involved in missionary work abroad.

25 A letter dated 28th October 1999, signed by representatives of sixteen countries (not including Norway), was passed without vote by the UN General Assembly on 15th of December 1999 as Resolution 54/115 (see http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/resguide/r54.htm). However, on the inaugural celebration of Vesak at the United Nations Headquarters on Monday 15th of May 2000 “the Minister of Buddha Sasana Lakshman Jayakody inaugurated the occasion by lighting an oil lamp and was joined by the distinguished Ambassadors of Bhutan, Cambodia, India, Ireland, Laos, Norway, Pakistan, Spain and Thailand.” (According to news compiled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka, on 19th May 2000.) The fact is thus that Norway was one of eleven nations being represented at the first Vesak celebration to have taken place under the auspices of the United Nations!
JSS: If you were to plan a conference in Sri Lanka in the future, we would very much like to be a part of it. We also hope to see you on your next visit to Sri Lanka. What are the expectations and hopes from the BFN delegates of the monks in Sri Lanka?

Egil explained, according to his tradition of Buddhism: “A Tibetan monk will do his practice and is not concerned with gaining money, status etc. The main thing is to change oneself,” and Gunaketu added: “We have to reflect on how to make the Dharma relevant in a rapidly changing society.”

JSS: There are many elements that undermine people’s virtues in Sri Lanka. Advertisement is an important source of making money but it is inappropriate in our culture - among other things it stimulates greed.

BFN: Sri Lanka is not a very big country but there are still four religions and three major ethnic groups. What plans do you have to keep the different groups together?

JSS: Yes. In Colombo, all groups are living in harmony. If the country split apart there would be all kinds of problems. We want to create an environment where all can live in peace. What we have in Sri Lanka is not an ethnic problem, but a terrorist problem. Different religious groups need to come together to discuss issues of ethnic relationship.

There are programs to convert people in Sri Lanka with money. Buddhists do not do this and are losing out. There is a need for the world opinion to stop this. Poor people are easily taken advantage of. By stopping the war, more resources will be available for the country and will alleviate some of these problems.

The majority of Tamils live with Sinhala people in Sinhala areas. This is what we want to preserve. It is only the Buddhists who are prohibited from parts of the island. Without sharing the whole island there will be no peaceful solution. Perhaps you could organise a conference, similar to the Bath conference, in Sri Lanka?

Bjørn Petter left us during the conversation to catch a plane back to the other side of the globe. The rest of us are not left with much of the day, and most of the monks have to get up at 4am to catch a train to Kandy. So, curbing our desire to carry on the meeting we part and go to bed.

Conversation with Ven. Nanda

After breakfast, a few of us found ourselves back at the Vidyodaya Pirivena for further discussions with Ven. Nanda, to thank him for all he had done to make this trip possible, and ask if he has any ideas and recommendations for the future.

Ven. Nanda: Pāli education is unfortunately in decline in the East, while interest is growing in the West. If one wants to learn the basics of Buddhism one needs to know Pali. How can we encourage this? We need to spell out the importance of Pāli studies and upgrade the educational facilities.

BFN: Would it be important to establish links with comparative studies?

Ven. Nanda: This is a foremost institution of clerical Pāli teaching, belonging to the people, with a board of trustees etc. If we wanted to set up a trial course of comparative studies it
could be done efficiently here. Speaking more broadly, we have problems with the Mahanayake Theros who don't do enough for the people. The current education system for monks is not doing well enough.

BFN: Could the teaching methods be upgraded, perhaps inspired by the National Child Foundation and Montessori principles?

Ven. Nanda: Yes, but it will be in a gradual manner, and we need the resources to upgrade - time and money. Usually the Pandit degree takes 8 years. Now the Government funds crash-courses to prepare Bhikkhus in three months.

We then met two Bhikkhus, Ven. Kotte Dhammasena and Ven. Balangoda Gunaratana who are taking part in such a Pandit crash-course. During the weekdays, they are teachers of Pāli in small monastic schools, so this works as a bit of teacher training. They are also candidates for external examinations at the University. They are funded by the Government for travel and food. They have passed initial and intermediate levels of teacher education, which is slightly higher than the University admission requirements. They only come in the weekend from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, with 60 other monks, and have to do homework during the week, in addition to giving and preparing lessons in their home villages. It makes for a full life. Topics are: Pali, Sanskrit - grammar and literature, and study of the Digha Nikaya, the first ten chapters. The main benefit seems to be to learn new techniques for understanding and teaching and to get ideas and inspiration. The two Bhikkhus then go back to their class.

Ven. Nanda: The main benefit of the long course is the focus on learning and not just getting an exam. The Chinese students (studying here) are usually older when they start, and they do it in 6 years.

BFN: Could an exchange program be set up with Norway?

Ven. Nanda: If there is funding, it would be a very good incentive for the good students to have the opportunity to study abroad. One would probably need 11/2 years to get such a course started. If the decisions were made and funding found it could be done before September 2005.

BFN: One idea behind our trip is to bring Buddhism more centrally into the peace process. Therefore we also had the idea to co-operate with the Thai Buddhists.

Ven. Nanda: Two years ago there were discussions on mass teachings of Dhamma, and the conclusion was that such methods of teachings do not inspire the young. We have to find new methods to communicate the Dhamma, having discussions, exploring the Tipitaka, using science etc. Mass movements that focus on Buddha images or cultivation of devotion are useless if they do not also do something to help alleviate poverty, educate young monks, address unethical conversions etc. So, we all have to rethink and reflect on what we are doing, and come up with new strategies and practices. It would be good if one could secure funding for such a Buddhist think-tank.

BFN: Do you think it interesting to bring in scholars from abroad?

Ven. Nanda: Yes, that is interesting, and the problem is again funding. Perhaps BFN could contribute with raising funds? I also think it important to have meetings in Sri Lanka with the Buddhists here.

We tossed some more ideas around before we again parted to have the afternoon free.
From Gunaketu’s diary:

“I venture out into Colombo on my own, holding Avalokiteshvara in one hand and Mara in the other. I help a boy to some cherries on a tree and enter heaven. I get cheated by a tuc-tuc driver and enter hell. I go to a park, sit down and get talking to a young woman with both Sinhala and Tamil background, and we talk about how important it is to have a real dialogue with monks - where they listen – and not only preach. I walk along a dirty river, seeing the locals and their flowers, and smile. Ah - delightful human race! One day I'll keep my feet on the ground”.

Meeting with representatives of various Buddhist organisations

In the evening we had our final meeting with various people, organised by Ven. Nanda: Mrs. Indrani Devendra from the All Ceylon Women's Buddhist Congress, Mr. Gamani Perera, President SUCCESS, Colombo branch, Mr. Manohara de Silva (a lawyer involved in the issue opposing unethical conversions), Ven. Kusaladhamma and Ven. Shantasumana, from the Sambodhi Vihara and the Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya.

The discussion was lively and the note-taker lost track of the names in the struggle to record the discussion. They will therefore all be referred to by SL - Sri Lankan. Egil gave a brief introduction, and then we had a round-table discussion.

SL: Thank you very much for inviting us here. We are very cautious in dialogue with people from Norway, and we prefer to be frank. We trust that this is a confidential discussion.

The general public is getting onto the bandwagon called peace process. We oppose this process, which harasses Buddhists and undermines Buddhism. Have any of you, in the past, opposed actions of the LTTE or the Norwegian Government who have hindered the peace process? Express it! If not, we ask you to show solidarity and support us in our cause. The Norwegian Government has for example provided radio equipment to the LTTE in contrast to what the Sri Lankan government did in the case of the Dalada Maligawa. This is against the conditions of the cease-fire, and we are looking into the case.

A possible interim government will not take Buddhist concerns into consideration, and the leader of the LTTE has already caused the death and harassment of Buddhists. In 1992, the BFN brought some monks to Bangkok and brainwashed them. At the Bath conference, Peter Schalk was brought in as a Tiger from India to propagate the interests of the LTTE. Whatever has happened in the past, by BFN and others, out of ignorance or not, this was a possible turning point.

BFN: BFN is a religious community strictly without political connections or ties. It represents Buddhist groups from various traditions. In the context of our contact with Sri Lanka we do not express any opinions on matters in Sri Lanka. That is for the Sri Lankans themselves to do.
Regarding the conference in Bath, the idea was to hear Buddhist voices from Sri Lanka and elsewhere, and we approached the United Kingdom Association of Buddhist Studies to organise the conference. They were responsible for selecting a broad range of speakers. The topic was Buddhism and not the issue of the Tamils. The selection of Peter Schalk was due to the wish of the organisers to present a diversity of voices, as can be seen in the published collection of papers, in English and hopefully soon in Tamil. Regarding the conference in Thailand, it had nothing to do with the BFN. At that point, the BFN did not concern itself much with the international Buddhist scene. Mr. Sisira Wijesinghe, then the head of the Tisarana Sri Lankan Buddhist association in Norway and member of the board of the BFN, suggested that we speak out when the LTTE bombed the Dalada Maligawa on the 25th of January 1998. The rest of the BFN did not think the LTTE would care much what Norwegians would say. Sisira was disappointed with this. The present mission of the BFN can to some extent be seen as an effort to redress this lack of action. We can come here with financial support of the Norwegian Government, though we have our own views and agendas. As for the role of the Norwegian Government as mediators, that is a matter for the Sri Lankans themselves to decide upon.

Ven. Nanda: It seems that the Norwegian Government provided radio equipment for the LTTE, yet when the Dalada Maligawa (The Tooth Relic Temple) asked for a licence to broadcast, that was refused. Westborg lied about the matter.

SL: This delegation should know the facts about the Government. We are disappointed with Westborg and the Norwegian Government. What does your government expect from you?

BFN: They expect a report which they will get, which will include a variety of views from Sri Lanka, as accurately as we can do. The report will be publicised on the Internet for everyone to read.

Ven. Mahinda: “Ven. Mahinda: Let me clarify the situation with regard to the invitation made to Dr. Peter Schalk of Uppsala University, Sweden to participate in the “Bath Conference on Buddhism and Conflict in Sri Lanka.” In the Western academic setting, when scholars think of Buddhism they do not think in ethnic and nationalist terms. Schalk has written extensively on Sri Lanka. His early study was in German language on the Paritta chanting26. He is the first person to examine the sermon styles of Ven. Maduluwve Sobhita27. Recently he has also written a work on Tamil Buddhism28. Given his academic work on Sinhala and Tamil Buddhism, it is impossible not to invite Schalk to a conference on Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Even if he might be accused of having some links with nationalist movements, from an international point of view we have to take into consideration his views and knowledge. To be frank, the BFN did not have any control over the invitation made to Dr. Schalk. Regarding this trip, it is a delegation from BFN not the Norwegian Government. We have organised this two-week visit with sincere hope of understanding the problems that Buddhists, Sinhalese and politicians face in resolving the troubling ethnic issue in Sri Lanka.”

SL: If there should be equality for the LTTE, why not invite people who oppose the LTTE?

BFN: This issue is a bit beside the purpose of our visit. We respect the independence of academic institutions to make their own free decisions, so it is not up to the BFN to influence the selection of speakers at an academic conference.

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26 “Der Paritta–Dienst in Ceylon”. (Lund: Lunds Universitet, 1972)
SL: If you are not a political organisation but want to gather data, why do you invite us as a group? If your task is to report back to the Government, on relations of Buddhists, social impact etc, there seems to be a contradiction as these are in their nature political acts. One can separate religion, philosophy and politics, but you do not seem to do this. From our point of view, it seems that your government will get information from us - monks, intellectuals, volunteers from various sectors - information, arguments, reasons that will facilitate its efforts to undermining our culture and religion. In this light, the Norwegian Government appears a little like a Trojan horse. We are still thinking of the "Redd Barna" incident some time ago. Also, what would an academic study of Buddhism have to do with the current situation in Sri Lanka? This is not an academic exercise, and if seen as such, perhaps it would contribute to undermine our culture, in which case we would oppose it.

BFN: It is good that we are frank and honest with our concerns. It is our intention to help Buddhism, to promote it and to bring it into centre stage where appropriate. Buddhism has not been helped by Sri Lankan Buddhists, being portrayed as narrow minded, nationalistic and oppressing, and it is important to do something about this. The best way for us to help Sri Lanka is perhaps to help various voices to be heard. The Bath conference and Sri Lankan monks coming to Norway to express their views is part of this process. I am confident that we all want to listen to each other’s points of view.

SL: Yes, we want to express our views, and how can you help to bring Buddhism into the centre stage, in concrete terms?

BFN: The next step is to publish this report, which reflects a number of different Buddhist voices throughout Sri Lanka. Then we will discuss if there are further ideas we can explore, but it is too early to talk about that now.

SL: If you think about the grass roots, are there other ways to bring our voices out to the international community, in addition to the report? How informed are Norwegians about the Sri Lankan situation? Why has the LTTE gotten so much press coverage?

BFN: This is an important point. The Norwegians do not know much about the Sri Lankan Buddhist situation. Many people have difficulty understanding why there is a conflict. Those who watch the news are now getting a clearer understanding that LTTE has done many violent acts, and that it is a dangerous organisation. For us it is important to focus on Buddhism, and it seems like Sri Lankan Buddhists have been portrayed in darker colours than the facts warrant. We find it a moral issue to explore non-violent responses to conflicts. Could you say something about such alternatives?

SL: The principle of equality should be upheld. The majority of Buddhists in Sri Lanka do not support the peace process, as it is not based on equality. The process must have an equitable element. For example, an interim government will have a majority of LTTE representatives, which is not based on the people they represent. This is not equitable. The 17th amendment discriminates against Buddhists as they will not be represented in the highest council. It is not the right question. We all oppose war and want peace, but a peace based on unequal treatment is no peace at all. If the basic premise is faulty and you ask those opposing it why they oppose it, it is the wrong question. The ‘homeland’ claim is such a false premise. This is not a question of war or peace; it is a question about maintaining rights for Buddhists.

BFN: We are sometimes surprised about the opposition to and critique of the Norwegian Government. As mediators, they serve the people of Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan government, and the LTTE. It only takes five minutes for the government to terminate the Norwegian
involvement. So why is so much concern directed to the Norwegians and not the central issue of how to deal with the LTTE?

SL: The issue is not that the Sri Lankan Government asked the Norwegian Government. The Norwegian Government serves itself. There are about 14,000 Tamils in Norway. Regarding Iraq, the US Government claimed that ‘the people of Iraq invited us’. Your Government has bought some government politicians. Foreign governments such as that of the US and Japan have pressured the Sri Lankan Government to accept the mediators as a condition for certain aids and grants. The Norwegians must act responsibly!

Ven. Mahinda: It is good to co-operate. Could we focus on how we can help each other?

SL: The BFN can speak of rights of Buddhists in real public places, where they are heard, not in some dusty report hidden in some office. Don't give illusions of fixing the problem and then celebrate. Openly tell the international community that we are for equality and bring out our views and concerns regarding discrimination. Describe how Buddhists are discriminated against. Some of this has been documented. We oppose the handing over of a part of the country in an undemocratic way. This does not require money. If you do this, the Buddhist attitude will change. Also bring these issues to the Sri Lankan Government.

Traditionally, schools are privately funded by local sponsors. Now, international NGOs come in with loads of money and push out the local system. It is a way of converting through funding.

Ven. Nanda: To demonstrate the bona fide credentials of the BFN it is important to see some acts from your side. Sri Lankan Buddhists will then extend our cooperation

BFN: Thank you very much. You have been specific on a number of points. We, on our side, are careful to stay clear of politics. We have already brought up some issues concerning the Buddhist community, like the lack of Dhamma-texts alongside existing Bibles in hotel rooms. To go further than that in having opinions about local issues would not be constructive. To draw hasty conclusions would also be unwise. We have travelled around Sri Lanka for just under two weeks, and though we have listened to a lot of people, taking notes all the way, our exposure to the situation is still very limited. We realise that we are a small organisation but we will try to do what we can.

The energy stirred up from the meeting is cooled down by the tiredness of the body and mind. We part, shaking hands, and under the low hanging moon of the Tropics we let the issues slide into our subconscious mind, and go to sleep.

Siri Vajirañāna Dharmayatanaya Bhikkhu Training Center

On the last day of our visit to Sri Lanka we went for another visit to a Sunday school. This Sunday school is situated at the Siri Vajirañāna Dharmayatanaya Bhikkhu Training Center at

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29 Actual number according to official statistics as per 1.1.2003 is 7785 first generation immigrants from Sri Lanka and 3690 persons born in Norway with parents from Sri Lanka. These figures do not specify ethnic background. However, Tamils constitute overall majority of these persons. See http://www.ssb.no/english/subjects/02/sa_innvand_en/tab-2003-09-12-01-en.html

30 See the paper “The Predicament of the People in the North East” ISBN 955-8552-02-x.
Maharagama, and is the largest one in Colombo. This is also the monastery of Ven. Madihe Pannasiha Maha Nayke Thero of the Amarapura Nikaya, one of the most prominent monks of the Sangha in Sri Lanka. This monk has also been an influential voice on various issues connected with “the national issue”.

We arrive just in time, and there is a huge hustle and bustle of white, about 6000 children from grade 1 to 15 entering the premises. To accommodate all these children and youths, there are three great halls that are linked with personal amplification system so that the sermon held in the main hall is heard in the others. There are some 200 staff, all volunteers. We sit through the sermon and are impressed by the concentration and quietness of the about 2500 children in the hall. The monk is also keeping the audience engaged through questions and points to reflect on. We are then fortunate to meet with the Ven. Hakmane Sumanasiri.

BFN: Thank you for receiving us, and letting us experience the concentration and enthusiasm of all these children and their parents. Do you have any particular views on the present situation in Sri Lanka?

Ven. Sumanasiri: I have read the publication from the conference in Bath and do not agree with all the points. I think some important Theravada voices are excluded. As a Sri Lankan, I feel no separation between Buddhism and the Nation. For more than two millennia Sri Lanka has developed according to Buddhism and it is now difficult to separate Buddhism from the Nation.

BFN: It is inspiring to see Sri Lankan Buddhists taking initiatives, as there seem to be so many concerns about the future.

Ven. Sumanasiri: The main problem is NGO’s who come with money and try to convert. Buddhism, which is more of a philosophy than a religion is easily swept aside.

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BFN: What do Buddhists in Sri Lanka do about this?

Ven. Sumanasiri: Some young monks do great work to redress the balance, but without money it is difficult, for example with a lack of appropriate literature.

People were queuing up to speak with Ven. Sumanasiri, so we expressed our appreciation and were taken for a tour of the complex by a volunteer, a physician. The school, which was established 35 years ago, focuses on spiritual development in addition to Dhamma knowledge. The program consists of collective puja, reciting of refuges and precepts and a brief talk. Then there is a break, and people split up into smaller groups based on age and gender. At 15 to 17 years, they are in mixed groups. There is a whole range of activities in addition to Dhamma study, like cultural programmes, leadership training etc. They also publish a monthly paper where the students can contribute.

The volunteer staff has a meeting with Ven. Sumanasiri once a month to study suttas from the Tipitaka and discuss freely. The more than 50 monks who are living here can focus on learning and teaching as the volunteers form a management committee that looks after the practical tasks. Once a month there is a meditation day, and there are a few kutis (huts) set aside for those who want to focus on meditation. There are also some programs to help poor people and refugees from the war in Sri Lanka. During the troubled days of the riots in 1983 Tamils were sheltered on the premises.

Again we are left with a very positive impression of a lively school that brings people together for serious study and practice as well as laughter and friendship. These seem like people with a direction in their lives.
Final debriefing

From final debriefing at Galle Face Hotel

Somehow, we are at the end of a long adventure. We sink back into our chairs at the hotel and intend to say something meaningful about it all.

Ven. Vien Dai: This has been my first trip to Sri Lanka and it has been a good visit. Seeing Theravada monks for the first time has impressed me. They are doing a good job for Buddhism! I would like to thank Ven. Mahinda and Egil for organising the trip and I will speak about all that I have seen back at the temple.

Tilak: We have achieved much, and I would like to say something about how I found it. People seem to do what they can to keep Buddhism alive. People were both sincere and hospitable. I am sympathetic to people who have aired their frustration. They may have no other outlet. In general, the monks seemed to be updated on what is happening in the world. Thanks to you all for the company, and especially to Ven. Mahinda and Egil on behalf of Sri Lanka.

Shantana: I am very glad that we started with the holy places, though it was exhausting. People were very forthcoming, and they seem well educated. I was very impressed with Ven. Nanda. Though he is not very traditional, he seems to be a very thorough practitioner underneath. I have a good feeling for the people of Sri Lanka and hope I can contribute to this project somehow.

Gunaketu: I am tired, and not in the best state to reflect on all the impressions we have had over the last two weeks. Things will emerge over time. I would like to express my gratitude to
Egil and Bjørn Petter who directly and indirectly have made this trip come about. I would like to thank Ven. Mahinda for having made possible all the connections and meetings throughout our trip, and for just meeting us and talking to us about all kinds of issues related to the Dhamma. Ven. Nanda has also been instrumental in the success of this trip. His efforts, both in organising the trip and asking the right kind of questions, have been important and demonstrates his commitment to the Dhamma. Personally, I am inspired by the legacy of Sri Lanka, as a place of pilgrimage and upholders of the Theravada tradition, nicely interwoven with Mahayana elements, often side by side with other religions. It is an important legacy of the possibility for multi-religious communities. I feel very grateful that I have been able to dive deeply into the Buddhism of Sri Lanka, and learn a lot. I am also puzzled by the strong bonds between Buddhism and the State. In Sri Lanka there seems to be a strong insistence that the State should be Buddhist based. There are probably various reasons for this, but none that I have heard so far seem convincing in the long run. I look forward to learn more about this in the future. It has been good travelling with you all, and particularly to have had a mix of monks, nuns, lay-people (and an Anagarika), Sri Lankans and others. There has been a lot of dynamics between clergy and lay-people. I have also appreciated sharing a room with Tilak.

Karen: I too am tired and not in the best frame of mind to debrief, but... It has been a wonderful trip, and I will not get the opportunity again. I hope to be able to pay back some of what we have gained, and particularly to Ven. Nanda. It has been good to get the history of Sri Lanka through visiting the various sites. Thanks to Egil and Ven. Mahinda for all the work you have put in. Great! Thank you all - it has been good to live and travel with you and get to know you a bit. It bodes well for further cooperation in Norway.

Egil: I can be short as I agree with everything that has been said so far. I am also tired, particularly mentally tired due to the steep learning curve. This has been an odyssey through Sri Lanka, meeting all kinds of important people. I have learned to respect people who have been challenging. I think it is important to loosen up our preconceived ideas of various people. We now have to digest what we have experienced, make a report and reflect on that. Ven. Mahinda, you have done a good job and we have worked well together under trying circumstances. It has been a challenge, but we carried on and managed! I think we are now more open regarding each other. We have all contributed in various ways with Ven. Mahinda, me taking the lead, Gunaketu writing notes, Karen taking notes and pictures, Tilak supporting us in his home country. Shantana will specifically step into the fore on the next stage of the journey to Thailand, and Vien Dai has brought with him his inimical perspectives from his Vietnamese Buddhist background. Generally, there seems to be much more creativity in the Sangha in Sri Lanka now than there was before. It should be possible to write a book about this journey, from all that happened. We have been stretched to our limits, which is a good thing for a limited period of time. I have appreciated Ven. Mahinda's humorous interactions with various people. Ven. Nanda provided connections to many people and I am glad that it turned out to be such a good visit.

Ven. Mahinda: Thank you all for what you have said and done. I apologise if at times I had been harsh or bullying others around to achieve a common goal. It is rare to have an opportunity to meet the Mahanayaka Theros, the leading monks of the country, politicians and political activists. We met a cross section of Buddhist population across the island and participated in religious and cultural activities throughout the country. In this tour, we also encountered non-Buddhists who openly discussed things with us. Wherever we went we were received warmly showing traditional hospitality. As a Sri Lankan, I am grateful to you and I have a deep concern with regard to what you have done so far for creating peace in Sri Lanka. If I were a Norwegian, I would have been offended by hearing all these allegations against the Norwegians who are involved in the peace process. As Buddhists, in these two weeks, we got an incredible opportunity to practice metta. It is better to forgive those who talked with ignorance. However, we should address their concerns by providing factual
evidence. In our encounters, we also noted that some journalists are not often scrupulous with what they quote as reliable sources. My concern is that verbal attacks on Norway and Norwegians on emotional grounds are a sign of weakness from the Sri Lankan side. The problem at hand in Sri Lanka is often explained by Sri Lankans in an emotional manner because of their closeness with sad and intimidating experiences. We must not forget that we are here to build bridges. The lack of common sense demonstrates that some Sri Lankans are not diplomatic. In the current climate, we need more diplomats who can cross over the ethnic and religious barriers. But their frankness in expressing their personal opinions is indeed valuable in creating peace in Sri Lanka. However, those emotional statements without critical reflection can function as obstacles for peace. For me, these two weeks have been an important learning experience. People have been very open about their views and have extended unusual cooperation towards us in receiving us warmly and allowing us to enter into their private worlds. Though there are certain weaknesses in the present political and social climate of Sri Lanka, there are many whom we met, conversed with and argued with who believe in the immense potential that we have in building bridges for peace and harmony. During the last six months, the conditions in Sri Lanka seem to have improved; though there are occasional ups and downs in the Sri Lankan political situation, we work hard with the hope of a bright peaceful future for Sri Lanka.

Last leg of the journey - A visit to Thailand

On Monday 4th of August our delegation of seven was dissolved: Bjørn Petter was already on his way to Norway to resume his duties as an official at the Canadian Embassy in Norway, Ven. Vien Dai was waiting for his plane back to Norway to join his brother monks at the Vietnamese temple in Oslo, Gunaketu was on his way to England to take part in a Buddhist retreat, and Karen and Tilak were going back to the village of Malamulla to stay an extra week in Sri Lanka.

For the remaining part of the delegation, however, the trip was not yet over. In order to explore possibilities of Thai Buddhist contributions to the dialogue with Sri Lankan Buddhists on the role of Buddhism in relation to the conflict, three members from the BFN: Egil Lothe and Shantana Berg, as well as our advisor Ven. Dr. Deegalle Mahinda, visited Thailand from the 4th to the 7th of August.

We therefore set out for Bangkok. Looking down from the plane we could see the mountainous landscape of the Kandyan hill country. Seeing only the beauty of its lush green forests from afar, one could easily forget the immense suffering the country had undergone. Very swiftly, however, the shores of Sri Lanka were behind us. In less than two hours we were in a different world: The busy metropolis of Bangkok.

The next morning we began our program with a visit to the monastery of Wat Sanghatarn, a monastery outside Bangkok in Nonthaburi province. The monastery covers a large area and organises a number of social as well as religious programs for the local people and consists of a meditation centre with quarters for people with social problems who are helped through vocational training and other services.

After having learned about this example of social engaged Buddhism we went to the office of His Holiness the Supreme Patriarch of the Thai Sangha at the monastery of Wat Bowornivet. Here were received by Ven. Anil Sakya, The Asst. Secretary of His Holiness (the latter being
hospitalised at the time). Egil introduced our group and explained about the engagement of the BFN with Sri Lanka and the purpose of our visit to Thailand.

It was suggested by Ven. Mahinda that cooperation between Thai and Sri Lankan monks would be of great value in presenting Buddhist values as important means for strengthening a peaceful development of Buddhist societies, including that of Sri Lanka, where the need for peace is very urgent. Egil explained that the intention of the BFN is to support a conference on the role of Buddhism in resolving conflicts peacefully and referred to an earlier conference on this topic in Bath, England, organised by the "United Kingdom Association of Buddhist Studies" with the support of the BFN. Ven. Anil Sakya’s response was very encouraging. He greatly appreciated our ideas and gave us valuable advice on how to proceed with our plans.

Later that day we went to see Ven. Maha Tiab who is Dean of the Faculty of Buddhism at the largest monastic university in Thailand: The Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya (MCU)32. His residence is, however, in Wat Po. Wat Po (Wat Phra Chetuphon) is actually much older than the city of Bangkok, founded in the 17th century, making it the oldest monastery in Bangkok. It is particularly famous for its huge temple, housing the largest reclining Buddha in the country.

After a walk around the grounds of Wat Po we went to the residential quarters for the meeting with Ven. Maha Thiab in his "kuti" (monk’s house). We introduced ourselves and explained the purpose of our mission, Ven. Maha Thiab kindly made an appointment for us next day with Ven. Sithawatchamethi, who is Foreign Affairs Assistant to the Rector of the MCU. Ven. Mahinda was acquainted with Ven. Maha Thiab from his previous visit to Thailand as a participant at the world conference of "The International Association of Buddhist Studies" that took place in Bangkok last year. We were very much encouraged by the very helpful attitude of Ven. Maha Thiab.

Through the involvement of His Excellency the Ambassador of Thailand in Norway, Mr. Domedej Bunnag, meetings in Bangkok with important religious leaders had been arranged through the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We therefore had a meeting, scheduled on Wednesday 6th of August, with Mr. Thavatchai Koopirom, the Director of the South Asian Division of the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Through the offices of the ministry a meeting with Ven. Dhammapitaka (Phra Payutto)33 as well as with the Rector of the MCU had been arranged for us.

Ven. Dhammapitaka, is generally considered the foremost intellectual among the monks in contemporary Thailand and is very highly regarded. Presently he does not usually participate in official functions, not being in good health. He lives in seclusion at his hermitage at Wat Yannasakkawan located at Phuttha Monthon some 20 kilometres from Bangkok. A meeting with Ven. Dhammapitaka had been arranged for us on this day and we therefore set out for Phuttha Monthon.

Phuttha Monthon is an enclave covering over 1,000 acres, a Buddhist Religious Park, commemorating the Buddha's enlightenment more than 2,500 years ago, and is dominated by a statue of a walking Buddha. This place is also a venue for international Buddhist conferences with modern facilities for this purpose.

Just behind Phuttha Monthon Park, at Wat Yannavetsakkawan, we met Mr. Somchai Surachatri, who is the Director of External Section, Department of Religious Affairs. He took us to meet Ven. Dhammapitaka, at his kuti. Ven. Dhammapitaka very kindly received us and

32 Homepage: http://www.mcu.ac.th/En/index.php
33 See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prayudh_Payutto
Egil introduced the members of our delegation and explained about the BFN, its involvement with Sri Lanka and the purpose of our visit to Thailand. Ven. Mahinda then outlined the conflict in Sri Lanka as seen from a Sri Lankan Buddhist perspective. Ven. Dhammapitaka listened very carefully, expressing his surprise regarding some of the points brought up, such as the Sinhala Buddhist perception of a Christian dimension of the conflict, which differed from the generally held idea of a Hindu/Buddhist conflict as suggested by some of the stories in the old Pāli chronicles.

Ven. Dhammapitaka expressed his wish to understand better the conflict in Sri Lanka. He also pointed out that if Buddhists thoroughly followed the Dhamma preached by the Buddha, there would be a firm foundation for peace. He also stressed that in order to cultivate harmonious and peace, three virtues must be developed in our minds: wisdom, purity and compassion.

We explained our approach as Buddhists: raising the issue of how the Buddhadhamma can be interpreted and practised so as to further a peaceful development of society. We also stressed that our approach was strictly religious, based on the Dhamma, and not political.

Our ideas of a conference on this issue with Thai and Sri Lankan participants, was then explained in some detail. Ven. Dhammapitaka pointed out that meetings between monks from Sri Lanka and Thailand would be very useful. He also asked about what kind of support the Thai monks could give to help the process towards peace.

Receiving the blessings of this most prominent of Thai monks we departed after having offered him a book with the ancient Buddhist manuscript from Afghanistan, that were saved from the destruction of the Taleban and published in Oslo.
We began the next day with a visit at the headquarters of the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) where had a short meeting with Mr. Phallo Phallop Thaiarry who is Hon. Secretary-General of the WFB. We introduced ourselves and told him that the BFN is interested in joining the WFB as a member. Mr. Phallo Phallop Thaiarry explained briefly about the WFB and gave us the application form with some documents. We also gave him an outline of our activities in relation to Sri Lanka.

In the afternoon we went for a meeting the leaders of the Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya / University (MCU)\textsuperscript{34}.

After introducing the delegation Egil gave a presentation of the BFN, its involvement with Sri Lanka and the purpose of the present visit to Thailand. We mentioned particularly the international conference in Bath, England, last year on "Buddhism and Conflict in Sri Lanka" organised by the United Kingdom Association of Buddhist Studies with the support of the BFN. In this connection we stressed the value of having a conference on the role of Buddhism in creating a peaceful society, presenting the issue in the context of applied Buddhist ethics. Although the Dhamma need to be related to actual societies, such as that of Sri Lanka, we explained that our approach was non political, stressing the ethical implications of Buddhism in this regard. As to the venue of such a conference Thailand or Sri Lanka would be desirable, as this would facilitate dialogue between Sri Lankan and Thai Buddhists on this issue and also place the discussions within a Theravada Buddhist context.

Apparently this issue was by no means new to the assembled heads of the university. Ven. Sripariyattimoli told us that about ten years ago he been member of a peace delegation visiting Sri Lanka. In this connection he had stayed three or four days in Jaffna. People there had told him clearly that the conflict was not between the various ethnic groups in the country but rather between the politicians. He also mentioned that Thailand had organised meetings with Sri Lankan monks but that the response of some of the Sri Lanka religious leaders was to see this as an unwanted interference in Sri Lankan issues.

After welcoming us, Ven. Thepsophon, the Rector of MCU informed us about the university and the activities taking place at this institution. He emphasised that the experiences referred to regarding the involvement with the Sri Lankan situation called for considerable sensitivity. However, he stressed very much the need to strengthen the relationship between Thai and Sri Lankan Buddhists. He added that he had recently participated in a conference in Sri Lanka in connection with the 250 anniversary of the introduction of the Thai tradition of the Upasampada\textsuperscript{35} monastic ordination in Sri Lanka. He regarded this as a very successful meeting and expressed his wish to do something similar for Sri Lanka in Thailand. Thus the

\textsuperscript{34} The participants from the MCU were:
- Ven.Prasripariyattimoli, Deputy Rector for Foreign Affairs.
- Ven.Pramaha Sawai Chotiko, Assistant Rector for Academic Affairs.
- Ven.Phra Thepsophon, Rector MCU.
- Ven.Phravisuddhisobhon
- Mr. Udom Songkhachon from Dept. of Religious Affairs.

\textsuperscript{35} Upasampadā (Pali) literally means literally "approaching or nearing the ascetic tradition." In more common parlance it specifically refers to the rite of ordination by which one undertakes the Buddhist monastic life. According to Buddhist monastic codes (Vinaya), a person must be 20 years old in order to become a monk or nun. A person under the age of 20 years cannot undertake upasampada (i.e., become a monk (bhikkhu) or nun (bhikkhuni)), but can become a novice (m. samanera, f. samaneri).
MCU was now working on plans for an international conference on Theravada Buddhism to take place in Bangkok in July next year.

In this connection Ven. Thepsophon suggested that the proposals of the BFN could be worked into the program of this conference through including one day devoted to the topic suggested by the BFN, thus including the issue of Buddhism and peace within the overall picture of Theravada Buddhism.

Clearly this offer was very welcome to us. We therefore thanked Ven. Thepsophon most heartily as the meeting came to a conclusion with the exchange of gifts.

At this stage our journey was completed. Our work in relation to Sri Lanka was not.

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DOCUMENTS ON THE INTERNET

The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Using simple and clear language, the author presents a concise yet thorough explanation of the Eightfold Path, the practical method the Buddha prescribed to uproot and eliminate the underlying causes of suffering.

Buddhism in a Nutshell by Narada Thera. An introductory overview of the fundamental principles of Buddhist doctrine.


Buddhist Ceremonies and Rituals of Sri Lanka, by A.G.S. Kariyawasam. This booklet provides a concise survey of the ceremonies and rituals that make up popular Buddhism of Sri Lanka. The author discusses such Buddhist rites as the Refuges and Precepts, devotional worship, the Bodhi-puja, and the pirit ceremony. He also explains the major Buddhist holy days and their significance in Sri Lanka.


Violence and Disruption in Society: A Study of the Early Buddhist Texts, by Elizabeth J. Harris. This essay explores the roots of violence in human society, and emphasises how the Buddhist teachings of non-violence are just as applicable today as they were in the Buddha's day.

A Buddhist Response to Contemporary Dilemmas of Human Existence, by Bhikkhu Bodhi (1994) In this essay, presented at an interfaith conference in Sri Lanka, the author enumerates several fundamental tasks that practitioners from all the world's great religions must undertake as part of a sane response to the current crisis.
http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/facingfuture.pdf Four essays by Bhikkhu Bodhi on the social relevance of Buddhism: A Buddhist Social Ethic for the New Century; A Buddhist Approach to Economic and Social development; The Changing Face of Buddhism; Sangha at the Crossroads.


SRI LANKAN BUDDHISM ON THE INTERNET.

Looking for websites on Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism is the expatriate temples of Sinhala Buddhists that first catches ones attention. This impression is misleading as there are presently a number of Sri Lanka based homepages on Buddhism in Sri Lanka in general as well as on organisations and temples. Some of these home pages contain extensive material on related topics while others are simple presentations of individual temples and organisations, but still conveying some of the character of these institutions. The home pages explored are all in English.

General presentations:

http://www.beyondthenet.net/mainframe.htm

http://www.metta.lk/

Buddhist organisations:


http://www.buddhistcc.net/ Homepage of “Buddhist Cultural Centre” (Publisher, bookshop and meditation centre) established by Ven. K.Wimalajothi Thero.

http://www.acbc.lk/ Home page of “All Ceylon Buddhist Congress”, a well establish lay Buddhist organisation.
Homepage of “Damrivi Foundation” for spiritual, social & economic development, recently established by Buddhist academics.

Homepage of The Dhamavijaya Foundation, a religious and social organisation connected to the Maharagama temple of the late Ven. Madihe Pannasinha Maha Nayake Thero.

Homepage of a religious and social organisation established by the late Ven. Gangodawila Thero.

Homepage of “Young Men’s Buddhist Association of Colombo

Official homepage of Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement.

Temples:

Homepage of Belanwila temple near Colombo.

Homepage of the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy. It also contains material on the two head temples of the Siam Nikaya: the temples of Malwatte and Asgiriya.

Another website devoted to the Temple of the Tooth Relic

Homepage of Gangaramaya temple in Colombo.

This is the homepage of the Kelaniya Temple near Colombo.

This is an interesting homepage devoted to the temple of Ven. Omalpe Sobitha, one of the key figures of the Jatika Hela Urumaya, describing the various religious and social activities taking place at the temple and documenting the links with Singapore.

This is the homepage of Ven. Bhante Kassapa and his meditation centre near Kandy directed at western meditators staying in Sri Lanka.

Sacred places / pilgrimage:

According to sacred history the Buddha ones left his footprint on the mountain of Sripada, otherwise known as Adam’s Peak which is described on this homepage.
http://www.srimahabodhiya.lk/ and http://srimahabodhi.org/ These two homepages are devoted to the site of the sacred Bodhi tree planted in Anuradhapura by emperor Asoka’s daughter, the nun Sanghamitta.

http://kataragama.org/ A very interesting homepage devoted to the sacred place of pilgrimage devoted to the deity Kataragama worshipped by both Tamil Hindus and Sinhala Buddhists.


http://www.lakehouse.lk/mihintalava/ This homepage describes the sacred hill of Mihintale near Anuradhapura important as the scene for the conversion of the first Buddhist king in Sri Lanka.

http://padayatra.org/ Associated with the sacred site of Kataragama are pilgrimages by Hindu Tamils which are covered extensively on this home page.