

Das Buddhistische Haus

History



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The founding father of the Mitirigala Nissarana Vanaya:

Life sketch of Ven. Mitirigala Dhammanisanthi Thera

(Asoka Weeraratna)

By Senaka Weeraratna,
honorary secretary of the "German Dharmaduta Society" Colombo

It was 12 April 1961. This historic day marked the first entry into space of a human being, Yuri Gagarin, the Russian cosmonaut, in a rocket launched by the Soviet Union celebrated by millions across the globe as a monumental day of scientific and technological achievement. In becoming the first human in space, Yuri Gagarin shattered boundaries of what was then thought scientifically possible by human spirit and endeavour and spawned new dreams and aspirations in space for the adventurous and ambitious.



Ven. Mitirigala Dhammanisanthi



Asoka Weeraratna (circa 1956)

Coincidentally, this same day serves as a milestone in the life of a young Sinhalese, Asoka Weeraratna, who had by then achieved the remarkable feat of leading and establishing the first Sri Lankan Buddhist mission in Germany on a permanent footing and negotiated the purchase of Dr. Paul Dahlke's famed Das Buddhistische Haus in Berlin – Frohnau on behalf of the Trustees of the German Dharmaduta Society, converting it into Buddhist Vihara with resident monks – the first Theravada Buddhist Vihara in continental Europe. This day was a moment of reckoning in Asoka Weeraratna's life, providing an impetus to the unfolding of a new chapter in his spiritual path, combined with a firm resolve and commitment to serve the sāsana and to realise the Buddha's timeless wisdom.

The unfolding of a new chapter

As he listened to the news of Gagarin's success, a thought precipitated in his mind, generating an urge to embark on a life long quest in search of and putting into practice the Buddha's teachings with goals firmly set. Some years later, this earnest quest for liberation and the need to find a suitable teacher and a place for the practice became a catalyst for the establishment of the Mitirigirala Nissarana Vanaya, one of Sri Lanka's foremost Buddhist monasteries in the strict forest tradition.

In 1961, Asoka Weeraratna recollects:

"At that moment, I was resident at the Berlin Vihara in Germany. At 11.00 am, I listened to the news report on Gagarin's launch, marking a historic moment for humankind. The following thought occurred to me: 'this overwhelming moment in history was possible due to one's capacity to develop an intelligent and well thought out plan and strive towards its realisation with great dedication. Similarly, if one were to emulate a well structured plan such as the noble eightfold path and continually strive towards its realisation, path and fruition consciousness is possible in this life itself!'"

"As soon as this thought occurred to me, I paused. I lost my desire to listen to the news broadcast on Gagarin's monumental achievement. I turned off the radio. I closed my fists and made a firm resolve. I made a clear determination. I thought: "as of today, I will not use these two hands to earn money or to strive towards material enrichment. To assist my elder brother, I will continue to work for another six months, during which time, I will also train someone to replace my role in the business. From then onwards, I will go forth on this spiritual journey."¹

Very often, Buddhist commentary in ancient chronicles and the Tripitaka recollects the unique and special qualities; and the wholesome nature of those with virtuous karma. Just as a shining moon emerges from the darkest of clouds, the virtuous qualities of those with well nourished wholesome deeds of the past bear fruit in the most unexpected circumstances. It is well known to us that Upatissa and Kolita, who later became Venerable Sāriputta and Venerable Moggallāna, the Buddha's chief disciples, also, as young men, decided to go forth in their journey towards liberation, realising the fruitless nature of worldly pursuits, whilst being in the audience of a small village play - the Giragga Samajja.

It is a rare moment for such wisdom to generate in one's mind, when the external world clamours in celebration, rejoicing at a moment of scientific advancement. The wholesome thought which permeated in Asoka Weeraratna's mind in a moment of scientific upheaval and universal sentiment, became a day of resolve to commit to material renunciation, only to be replaced by an insatiable spiritual thirst.

An exemplary human spirit

Asoka Weeraratna was born in Galle as the youngest son of Mr and Mrs P.J. Weeraratna, the owners of a reputed jewellery establishment at Wakwella Road, Minuwangoda in Galle on 12 December 1918. He was named Alfred by his parents who, following the general trend in colonial Sri Lanka had named their children after members of the British Royalty. In his adult life, he renounced the name Alfred and adopted the name Asoka, an apt name for the Buddhist Dharmaduta work he was to undertake later. It is no mere coincidence that such a wholesome son was born to two parents, who themselves displayed austerity and simplicity in a lifestyle steeped in Sinhalese culture and rooted in Buddhism.

Asoka's elder brother, Dharmasena recollects how Asoka, at the age of 3 years had used to sit in a sitting meditation posture, closing his eyes and leaning against a wall. His mother and some others were quite surprised at this behaviour, which had continued for some time, feeling concerned whether this conduct was a continuation of conduct coming from his past life or a foretaste of his future, or both.

As a child, Asoka possessed special qualities, vehemently rejecting any pursuit of comfort and wealth, instead, nestling in abstinence and moral restraint. As a young child, he was endowed with an extraordinary vision, an aptitude for critical reflection and search, particularly on the meaning and purpose of life and boundless energy, always maintaining the five precepts and approaching life with great compassion and loving kindness. He was a strict vegetarian. His character, even in his youth, exuded dynamism and a show of exemplary determination.

Keeping Buddhist principles and ideals at the forefront, he undertook his primary and secondary education initially at Sangamitta College, Galle and later at Mahinda College in Galle, two leading Buddhist schools in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka. His elder sister and brother both attended Southlands Girls School, Fort in Galle for their Kindergarten classes.

At the age of seven years, Asoka used to build Dagabos with sand while other children made houses and animals. He used to join his mother (a very religious type lady) every Poya Day and observe Sil. Asoka followed in the footsteps of his mother and continued to take great interest in Buddhist activities.

Even as a child, he never missed a single radio broadcast of a Buddhist sermon and encouraged the fifteen craftsmen working for his father, P. J. (Paiyagala Jewathamy) Weeraratna and the neighbours to come and listen. The Radio was placed in the drawing room and the lights were switched off to avoid distraction. At the conclusion of the radio broadcast light refreshments and tea were served to those who listened to the sermon.

Several Buddhist monks used to visit their parental house at Wakwella Road, Galle daily on 'Pindapatha'. One of these monks was Venerable Pandit Akuretiya Amarawansa Thera, later to become a Nayake Thera and Principal of Vidyodaya Pirivena, Maligakanda, Maradana, Colombo 10. Another visiting well - known monk reputed for his scholarship on Buddhist and Pali Studies was Venerable Suriyagoda Sumangala Thera (teacher of Dr. Paul Dahlke, German Buddhist). These monks were resident at Vidyaloka Pirivena, Galle. Asoka took great delight in assisting his mother in offering dana to these monks.

Asoka's father, Jewathamy, had once remarked to his mother that if she pets him i.e. Asoka, too much and allows him to keep company with bad (not so well behaving) children he may become worse than Devadatta. However if he turns to do good, he may even beat Mahatama Gandhi in virtue and determination. These intrinsic qualities in Asoka were noticed from his school days by his father.

Asoka used to attend sermons and talks on Buddhism given by learned people at the YMBA. Dr B. R. Ambedkar, the Law Minister of India, once delivered a lecture at the Colombo YMBA on 'The Rise and fall of Buddhism in India' sometime in early 1950. Asoka attended the talk and then asked him a couple of searching questions on Buddhism in Indian History. Dr. Ambedkar was taken aback and then thanked him for his courage in posing such challenging questions.

Asoka was a voracious reader. He read life stories of great men especially that of philosophers, great thinkers, inventors, and social workers, in addition to Books and Journals on Buddhism and Psychology. He had a great admiration for the British Philosopher Lord Bertrand Russel and had among his possessions almost the entire collection of Bertrand Russel's publications, which he later gifted to his nephews.

He valued ideas that help to build one's character and saw in abstinence and self – sacrifice an excellent moral basis for self – development. The Buddhist tenets of reverence for life of all living things and compassion (maithri) for animals were well grounded in him. His nephews are able to recall the occasions when they were in their teens when Uncle Asoka (their 'baappa') cautioned them not to harm even an ant. The austere life he led sans any form of indulgence had a great influence on all those who were close to him; some of them in admiration saw in Asoka a role model for their own self - development and frugal living.

One of his favourite verses was the following verse of the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow which Asoka constantly used to encourage people including his nephews to strive and succeed in their studies at school:

The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the night

Another poem that Asoka took to heart was 'If' by Rudyard Kipling which has Buddhist nuances, and this may partly be explained by the long years that Kipling spent in India and his exposure to Buddhist philosophy and thought.

Asoka's brother

A tower of strength and the individual who was constantly at Asoka Weeraratna's side, in giving both moral and logistical support was his only brother, Dharmasena, the elder of the two. The first names of the two brothers, Dharmasena and Asoka, can be joined to form (with little editing) the name 'Dharma-Asoka', reminiscent of the greatest Buddhist sovereign, Emperor Dharma Asoka of India, as recounted by the Malwatte Mahanayake Thera in his address at the historic meeting held in Mihintale on June 11, 1957 (Poya Day) to mark the commencement of the journey i.e. the first steps taken, by the Buddhist Mission to Germany. The two brothers had spent a large part of their time and money towards the preservation and up – lift of the Buddha Sasana. Without fanfare Dharmasena Weeraratna had also donated large sums of his personal funds to worthy Buddhist causes.

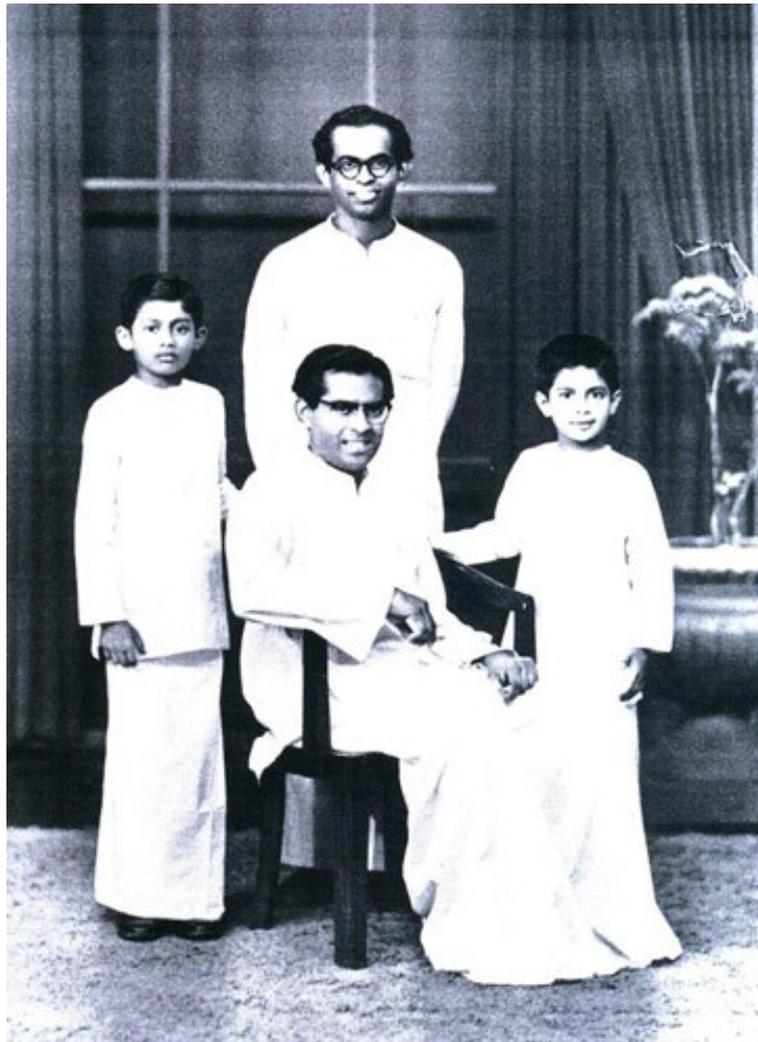
Dharmasena Weeraratna



Photos: Left - Dharmasena Weeraratna at 41 years of age. Photo was taken on June 15, 1957 at the Elizabeth Quay, Colombo Harbour on the occasion of the departure of the First Buddhist Mission to Germany.

Right - Dharmasena Weeraratna as a student (circa 1936) in his up - stair study room in his parental house at Wakwella Road, Galle. He would have been around 20 years of age.

Note the brief description in his own handwriting at the bottom of the picture.



Family Photograph (1957)

From left to right (Standing)

Senaka Weeraratna, Asoka Weeraratna, Tissa Weeraratna

Seated: Dharmasena Weeraratna

After his father's demise in 1943, both Asoka and his elder brother, Dharmasena became partners of their family jewellery business. In 1948, they re-located their business from Galle to Maradana in Colombo.



This picture was taken while the guests were standing on the balcony of the new building at Maradana, Colombo which was declared open by the Prime Minister Mr. D.S. Senanayake, on September 9, 1948.

Photo: Left to Right (Front Row) Mr. Asoka Weeraratna, Sir John Kotelawala, Minister of Transport and Works (later Prime Minister), Mr. Dharmasena Weeraratna, Mr. D.S. Senanayake, Prime Minister, Mr. C.W.W. Kannangara (former Minister of Education), Mr. S.P. Wickremesinghe (Municipal Commissioner), and Mr. Victor Ratnayake, (M.P. for Deniyaya) holding his son.

Picture: The shop of Messrs. P. J. Weeraratna & Sons, 2nd Division, Maradana (in the late 1950's).



P. J. Weeraratna & Sons, Jewellers and Watch Dealers, Maradana, was a well - regarded Business establishment in the country. Asoka Weeraratna, was a Partner together with his brother Dharmasena of this family business (which had been in existence for over four (4) generations). In the late 1950's this firm was the largest importers of watches to Sri Lanka. Asoka's total involvement in religious activities eg. Mitirigala Forest Hermitage, led to the closure of this reputed business in 1965.

The business expanded rapidly after they diversified it to become importers and dealers of Swiss made wrist watches. Asoka Weeraratna made a number of business trips to Europe in the 1950s beginning in 1951 and imported a range of well-known Swiss made wrist watches, such as Paul Buhre, Boilet, Henry Sandox, Enicar and Fountain Pens made in Germany under the brand name 'Reform'. In the late fifties, P.J.Weeraratna & Sons became the largest importers of Swiss made wrist watches to Sri Lanka and a leading business establishment in the country, having a sizeable staff of skilled workmen to engage in wrist watch service and repairs and the making of traditional and exquisite jewellery.

Even though he undertook the development and expansion of the family business with great dedication, his main and deep seated interest lay in his work associated with the dissemination of the Buddha's teachings and the strict cultivation of the spiritual life through meditation and abstinence. It could be said that his humble demeanor, simple lifestyle and unstinted commitment to spread the message of the Buddha in the West was fashioned at a young age in response to a fundamental question he had been asking himself quite early in his life: "what is the life worth leading?"

His acceptance of the Buddha's earnest call for renunciation, the cultivation of a life of austerity and a deep urge to serve the sāsana, constitute in essence the informed answers that he had worked out for himself in response to the aforesaid question. The exemplary nature of this rare human spirit is gleaned from the total renunciation of his wealth at a relatively young age (53) and fame he accumulated due to the success of his entrepreneurial leadership and his vision and indefatigable labour and sacrifice to serve the Buddha sāsana.

The well-known American Buddhist scholar-monk Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi in a commemorative talk given at the first death anniversary of Asoka Weeraratna in Colombo in July 2000 said:

“Asoka Weeraratna was a man of vision who had the drive and stamina to translate his vision into fact. He once told me that his favourite saying of the Buddha was, “Do not become discouraged and give up, and do not rest satisfied with partial achievements.” He himself took this piece of advice to heart. Whenever he set himself a goal, he did not merely dream about it and sing praises to its glory. Rather, he worked with incredible foresight and energy to make the goal a reality. Because he followed these guidelines, Asoka Weeraratna’s life was crowned by three great achievements: the establishment of the German Dharmaduta Society in Sri Lanka; the founding of the Berlin Buddhist Vihara in Germany; and the creation of the Nissarana Vanaya Hermitage at Mithirigala” (which houses one of Sri Lanka’s foremost and respected Aranyas which he built using largely his private wealth).

First visit to West Germany

In 1951, Asoka Weeraratna undertook his first business visit to West Germany. Seeing many people who had lost their families, wealth and possessions, left a deep impression in him. In post-war Germany, the widespread sentiment was one of desperation and resignation, "kaput, kaput, alles kaput (finished, finished, everything is finished)." He recognised the growing thirst for an alternative moral and spiritual philosophy, one that placed a very high emphasis on peace and non-violence, compassion and loving-kindness. It dawned on him that the time was ripe to introduce to the war weary Germans moral and ethical ideas emanating from the East.

The German Dharmaduta Society

On his return from West Germany and convinced of the potential for growth of Buddhism in that country, Asoka Weeraratna founded the Lanka Dhammaduta Society on 21 September 1952, more or less in the back room of his family shop, P.J. Weeraratna & Sons at 592, 2nd Division, Maradana, Colombo 10 and later moving it to separate premises at 417, Bullers Road, Colombo 07 in August 1956, constructed with funds he collected under the banner of the Society through a zealous fund-raising drive. This Society was later re-named the German Dharmaduta Society on 8 May 1957.

The idea of forming this Society was conceived by Asoka Weeraratna when visiting Europe in 1951. Venerable Ñānatiloka Mahāthera, the well known German Scholar monk was the first Patron of the Society. In 1953, Asoka Weeraratna, who was by this time the Honorary Secretary of the Society, paid a second visit to Germany and conducted a survey of Buddhist activities in that country.

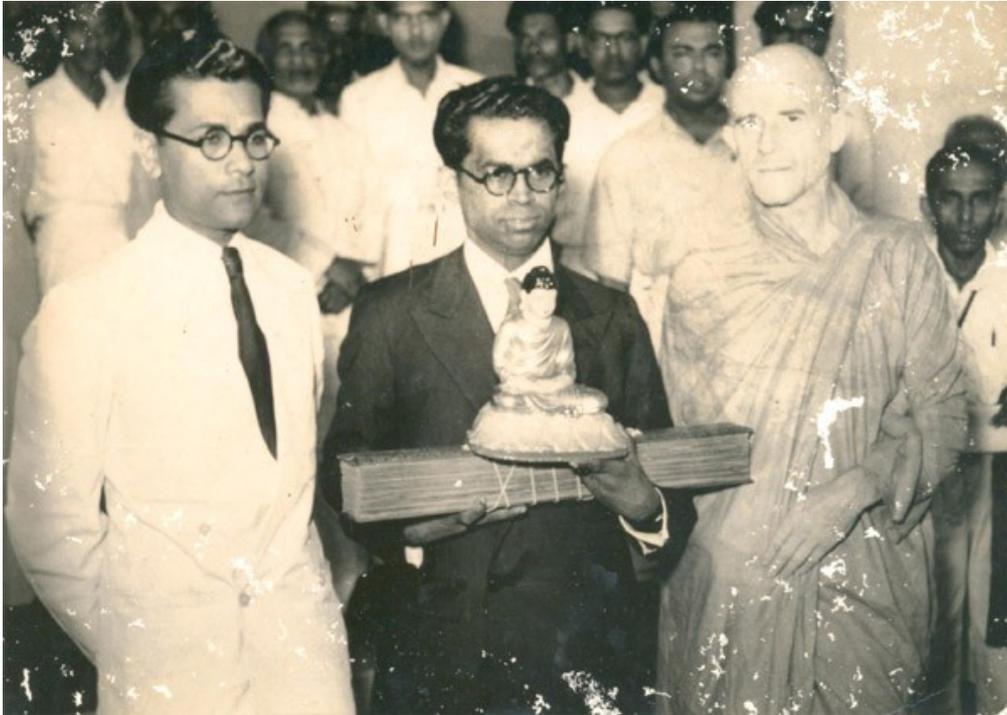


Photo: Left to Right - J.L.E. Fernando (President, LDS), Asoka Weeraratna (Founder and Hony. Sec. LDS) and Ven. Nyanaponika Thero (German monk) at the Ratmalana Airport on February 20, 1953 prior to Asoka's departure on a Dharmaduta Mission to Germany

During this trip, he travelled widely all over Germany, meeting leaders of Buddhist organizations in various German cities and enlisting their support for the cause of establishing the Buddha sāna in Germany.

On his return to Sri Lanka in early May 1953, Asoka Weeraratna prepared a report under the heading 'Buddhism in Germany', giving his impressions of his visit to Germany and details of his meetings with German Buddhists. The Report was subsequently published by the Society in both English and Sinhalese and thousands of copies were distributed to the public all over the country. In 1953, Asoka Weeraratna reported:

"The general outlook of Germans has greatly changed after the war. The bitter experiences of two great wars have taught them but one lesson, that "all conditioned things are impermanent". If you stop to ask about the post war, a German would have nothing else to add but the words ' Alles kaput ', which meant, 'All destroyed'. Buddhism with its elucidation of the Four Noble Truths and the three signs of 'Impermanence, Suffering and Soul-lessness' as the characteristic feature of all things, has appeared to them as the most perfect teaching ever made known to mankind'.

Public Meeting at Ananda College, Colombo on May 30, 1953

At the public meeting held at Ananda College on May 30, 1953, Asoka Weeraratna made public, the findings of the survey that he had carried out on the current state of Buddhist activities in Germany and then discussed the prospects for a Buddhist Mission to Germany.

Hon. Dr. C.W.W. Kannangara, Minister for Local Government presided at the meeting, which was largely attended and comprised a very representative gathering of leading Buddhists. Venerable Baddegama Piyaratana Maha Nayake Thera, Principal of Vidyodaya Pirivena, administered 'Pansil' at the meeting.

In welcoming those present, Asoka Weeraratna explained the object of the meeting and presented a detailed account of his survey of the present state of Buddhism in Germany during his recent visit. He pointed out the importance of Germany and the unique contribution it has made towards the enrichment of European thought, culture and science. He stated that Germany was the pulse of the European continent, and that the largest number of Theravada Buddhists of Europe was found in Germany.

The Meeting adopted two Resolutions calling on the public of Ceylon to fully support the efforts of the Lanka Dhammaduta Society to establish the Sambuddhasasana in Germany and to propagate Buddhism in Europe, and secondly that Lanka Dhammaduta Society should take immediate steps to send a Buddhist Mission to Germany before 1956 in order to commemorate the 2500th year of the birth of the Buddha and further that the Society should take immediate steps to establish a permanent Buddhist Centre in Germany comprising a Vihara, Preaching Hall, Library, and Settlement for Upasakas.

Hon. C.W.W. Kannangara, Minister of Local Government, speaking from the Chair said that he had known the Honorary Secretary of the Society, Mr. Asoka Weeraratna from his boyhood and that he could vouch for his integrity. The Hon. Minister added that the Society was going to serve one of the greatest causes of Buddhism launched after the Great Emperor Asoka of India. He therefore urged that all Buddhists should back the Society in every way in order to help it to establish the Buddha sāsana firmly in Germany before the Buddha Jayanthi of 1956.

Temporary Training Centre at Dalugama, Kelaniya

Soon after his return from his second visit to Europe in 1953, Asoka realized that a Training Centre for Dharmaduta work was one of the pressing needs of the Society. A temporary Centre for this purpose was therefore opened at No. 145, Kandy Road, Dalugama, Kelaniya. The well - known German monk, Venerable Nyānaponika Thera and several other Bhikkhus were given accommodation there. In the meantime, the Society continued to look for a permanent Training Centre for Dharmaduta monks at a suitable place in Colombo.



Soon after his return from his second visit to Europe in 1953, Asoka Weeraratna realised that a Training Centre for Buddhist Dharmaduta work was one of the pressing needs of the Society. A temporary Centre for this purpose was therefore opened at No. 145, Kandy Road, Dalugama, Kelaniya. Several Bhikkhus including the German monks, Ven. Nyanatiloka Mahathera and Ven. Nyanaponika Thera were given accommodation at these premises. Standing (left to right) Ven. Galle Anuruddha Thera, Upasaka Freidrich Moller (later known as Ven. Nyanawimala Thera) Mr. Asoka Weeraratna, Ven. Nyanaponika Thera and Ven. Kudawella Vanghesa Thera. (Seated) Ven. Nyanatiloka Maha Thera, the Patron of the Society (circa: latter part of 1953)



Picture (left to right) Mr. Simpson Wijeratne, Ven. Galle Anuruddha Thera, Ven. Nyanaponika Thera, Ven. Nyanatiloka Maha Thera, Upasaka Freidrich Moller (later known as Ven. Nyanawimala Thera), Ven. Kudawella Vanghesa Thera and Mr. Asoka Weeraratna.

In addition before the Buddha Jayanthi celebrations in 1956, Asoka Weeraratna embarked on a membership drive for the Society and held various public meetings.

Launch of the Million Rupee Trust Fund

In 1954, with great determination and energy, Asoka Weeraratna launched under the auspices of the Society a 'Million Rupee Trust Fund' for the permanent establishment of the Buddha sāsana in Germany and appealed to the public for contributions. The Million Rupee Trust Fund was inaugurated at a Public Meeting held at the Colombo Town Hall on 6 September 1954. Mr Dudley Senanayake, the former Prime Minister presided at this Meeting.

L.D.S. MILLION RUPEE FUND
for
Buddhist Mission to Germany
ESTABLISHMENT OF BUDDHA SASANA

THE HON. MR. DUDLEY SENANAYAKE...
MR. A. RATNAYAKE...
MR. ASOKA WEERARATNA...
MR. H. NELSON H. SOYSA...
MR. D. M. NONIS...

TO-DAY PUBLIC MEETING
6 SEPT.
CHAIRMAN: MR. DUDLEY SENANAYAKE
TOWN HALL
Colombo
5 p.m.

FREE:...
Lanka Dhammaduta Society



This photograph was taken in front of the Colombo Fort Harbour building sometime in 1954. The banner reads " Let us establish the Buddha Sasana in Germany. Please make a contribution to the Rupees One Million Fund ". Within three years i.e. in 1957, the German Dhammaduta Society was able to sponsor the first Theravada Buddhist Mission to Germany. The first three monks Ven. Soma, Ven. Kheminda and Ven. Vinitha took up residence in ' Das Buddhistische Haus ' in Berlin – Frohnau in 1957. Asoka Weeraratna founded the Lanka Dhammaduta Society in Colombo in 1952, with the primary aim of propagating Buddhism in Germany. The name of the Society was later changed into the German Dhammaduta Society in 1956. With great determination and energy, and with the support of the Maha Sangha and the Buddhist public, Asoka Weeraratna launched in 1954 under the auspices of the Society a ' Rupees One Million Fund ' and appealed to the public for contributions.

From left to right (front row) Beginning 4th from left Mr. A. Ratnayake (Minister of Home Affairs), Mr. Asoka Weeraratna (Founder and Hony. Secretary, German Dhammaduta Society), Ven. Galle Anurudha Thero, a Buddhist monk name unknown (Burma), Ven. Nyanaponika Thero (Germany), a Buddhist layman name unknown (Nepal), Mr. H. Nelson H. Soysa (a Trustee of the German Dhammaduta Society), The Ambassador from Burma, Mr. D.M. Nonis (an employce of P. J. Weeraratna & Sons, Berlin-Frohnau, Colombo).

This public meeting received wide publicity in all the newspapers and the Colombo Town Hall attracted (according to the Guardian newspaper on the following day) the biggest Buddhist gathering for a public meeting at that venue. The proposed Buddhist Mission to Germany had by now captured the public imagination..

Note: The young Buddhist Monk from Burma in the picture denoted as 'name unknown' is Ven. Sayadaw U Seelananda, who is an icon in Myanmar for his invaluable contributions to Buddhism. He later became the Rector of the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon, Myanmar. He was one of the Burmese monks who arrived in Sri Lanka in the early 1950s and became closely associated with the work of the German Dharmaduta Society in the initial period in its mission to propagate Buddhism in Germany and other western countries, while being based in Sri Lanka from 1954 - 1956. Ven. U Seelananda accompanied a delegation of the Society that included Asoka Weeraratna to visit Burma in December 1955 to garner support and funds for the propagation of Theravada Buddhism in Germany.



Asoka Weeraratna contributed a sum of Rs. 25, 000 (Twenty Five Thousand Rupees) from his personal funds to this Trust Fund at the Inauguration of this Fund. This was in addition to the Rs. 1,000 (One Thousand Rupees) he had contributed to the Society on the day of its formation i.e. September 21, 1952.

With growing public support, the Society soon won the recognition and encouragement of the State and the Government declared the 'Million Rupee Fund' an Approved Charity. Among the many benefactors who contributed to this Fund, particular mention must be made of Walther Schmits, a German Buddhist, who left a valuable legacy of DM 550,000 to the Society upon his death in 1957, and who had befriended Asoka Weeraratna in Colombo in 1954 and was supportive of his pioneering missionary endeavour and this legacy met the costs of maintenance of the Berlin Vihara.

Trip to Burma

The Society sought funds and the support of other Theravada Buddhist countries for this noble project to spread the Buddha Dhamma in Europe. Burmese and Nepalese living in Sri Lanka attended public meetings of the Society. Special mention must be mentioned of His Excellency U Ba-Lwin, the Ambassador from

Burma, who addressed several public meetings of the Society, and Ven. U Seelananda (Burmese Monk) who joined a delegation of the Society to visit Burma in December 1955 to collect funds for the propagation of Buddhism in Germany.

The delegation from Sri Lanka to Burma comprised Ven. Nyanaponika, Ven. Galle Anuruddha, Ven. U Seelananda (a Burmese monk who later became the Rector of the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon, Myanmar), Nelson Soysa and Asoka Weeraratna.

New Headquarters of the German Dharmaduta Society

In November 1955 the Government granted to the Society an acre of vacant crown land in Bullers Road, Colombo on a 99-year-old lease. The foundation stone was laid on December 9, 1955 and number of prominent personalities including Hon. Dudley Senanayake, Hon. H.H. Basnayake, Dr. Georg Ahrens (German Ambassador), Hon. Arnold Ratnayake (Minister for Home Affairs), Mr. J.L.E. Fernando, Mr. H. Nelson H. Soysa, Mr. Asoka Weeraratna and Mr. Walther Schmits participated in the function. Among the Monks in attendance were Venerable Narada Thera (Vajiraramaya), Venerable Madihe Pannasiha Thera (Vajiraramaya) and Venerable Baddegama Wimalawansa Nayaka Thera..



Photographs of the Foundation laying ceremony on 9 December 1955 2

The newly built Headquarters and Training Centre of the German Dharmaduta Society

On August 7, 1956, Hon. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Prime Minister, declared open at a ceremonial public meeting, amidst a large gathering, the newly built Headquarters and Training Centre of the Society at 417, Bullers Road (Bauddhaloka Mawatha), Colombo 7 consisting of a two-storied dormitory of 14 rooms, an Assembly Hall, Office and Library, built at a cost of Rs. 125.000.

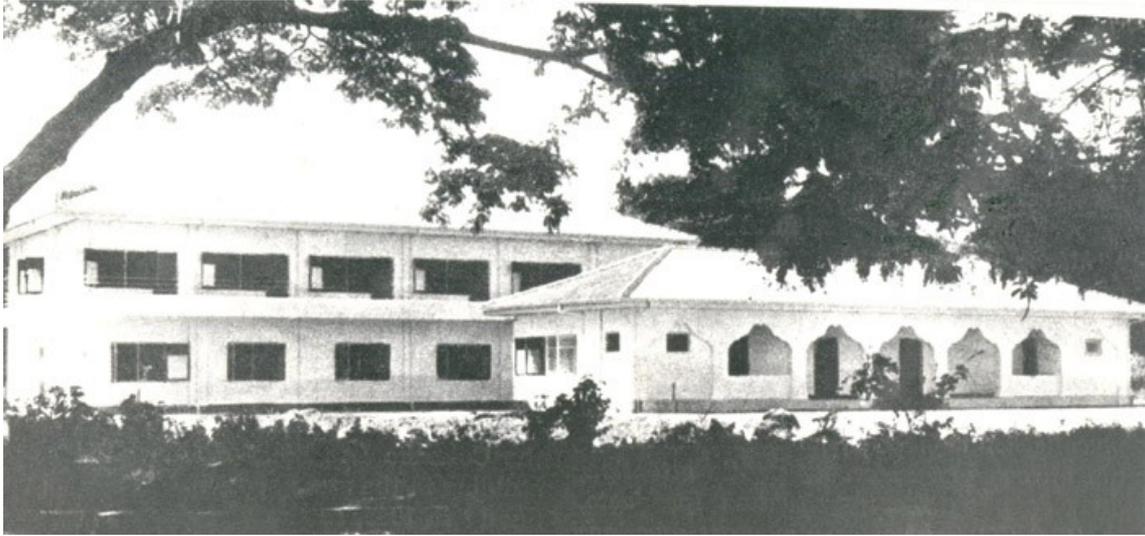


Photo: Left to Right: Asoka Weeraratna, (Hony. Secretary, G.D.S.), Hon. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Prime Minister, and Mr. J.L.E. Fernando, C.C.S. (President, G.D.S.)

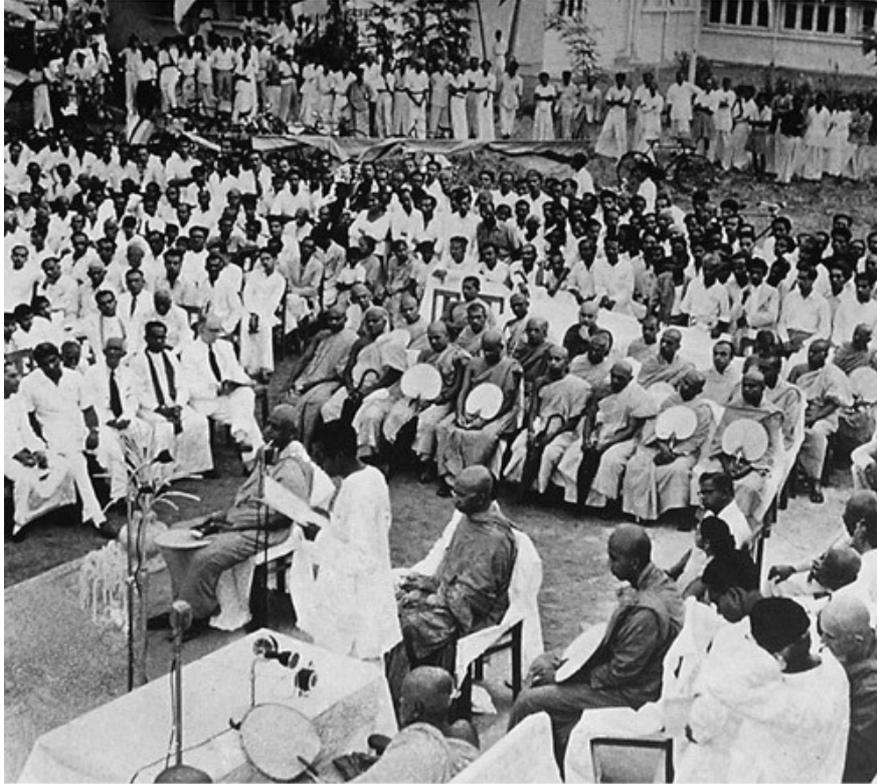


Photo: Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike is seen lighting the oil lamp on the occasion of the opening of the newly built Headquarters and Training Centre of the German Dharmaduta Society at 417, Bullers Road (Buddhaloka Mawatha), Colombo 7 on August 7, 1956.



Asoka Weeraratna - 7 August 1956

Opening of the New Headquarters and Dhammaduta Training Centre for Buddhist Monks (August 7, 1956)



The two new buildings at 417, Bullers Road (now Bauddhaloka Mawatha), Colombo 7, were built within 8 months of the laying of the foundation stone on December 9, 1955. The then newly elected Prime Minister Hon. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike declared the new premises of the German Dhammaduta Society open on August 7, 1956. A largely attended Public Meeting was held to mark the event.

Picture shows Asoka Weeraratna addressing the gathering. On the lefthand side (front row) Hon. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, Hon. R.G. Senanayake (Minister for Trade and Shipping), person unknown, Hon. M.P. de Zoysa (M. P.), His Excellency Georg Ahrens (West German Ambassador)

On the bottom righthand side of the picture, the figure of the German monk Ven. Nyanaponika Thera can be seen.

Das Buddhistische Haus
Berlin-Frohnau
www.dasbuddhistischehaus.de

Eight prominent Buddhist monks led by the German monk Venerable Ñānatiloka Mahāthera and including Venerable Balangoda Ānanda Maitreyya, Venerable Galle Anuruddha, Venerable Akuretiye Amaravansa, Venerable Ñānaponika (German), Venerable Kudawella Vangīsa and Venerable Vappo (German) were attached to the Centre. These monks offered their services to train German Buddhists and others in the study of Buddhist Philosophy.

First Buddhist Mission to Germany

The Society sponsored the first Buddhist Mission to Germany, which left the Colombo Harbour by ship 'SS Orantes' on 16 June 1957. The departure ceremony was held at the Elizabeth Quay, Colombo Harbour on 15 June 1957. The three monks in this historic mission comprised Venerable Soma, Venerable Kheminda and Venerable Vinīta of the Vajiraramaya Temple, Bambalapitiya, accompanied by Mr. W.J. Oliver Soysa. Mr. Nelson Soysa (later Anagarika Dharmapriya) had left earlier for Germany to receive the mission. Mr. Asoka Weeraratna joined the Mission in Berlin having flown in from Colombo.



The First Theravada Buddhist Mission to Germany (1957)

Left to right: Ven. Kheminda, Dharmasena Weeraratna, Ven. Soma, Asoka Weeraratna and Ven. Vinitha.

Note: Dharmasena Weeraratna was not a member of the Buddhist Mission to Germany. Photo taken at the Vajirarama Temple in Bambalapitiya, Colombo in May 1957.



**The First Theravada Buddhist Mission to Germany
Beginning of the Journey
Mihintale
(June 11, 1957)**

It was on Posa Poya day on June 11, 1957, that the first Buddhist Mission to Europe, sponsored by the German Dharmaduta Society, commenced its journey from Mihintale. A largely attended meeting was held under the patronage of the Mahanayake Theros of the three Nikayas. The Ven. Purijjala Sri Siddhartha Saranankara Maha Thera of the Malwatta Chapter presided. After the public meeting, which announced the Mission and invoked the blessings of the Maha Sangha and the Government and the people, the missionary monks were escorted to Colombo to await the arrival of the ship ' SS Orantes ' on June 15, 1957.

Picture: Asoka Weeraratna is addressing the gathering. On his left are H.W. Amarasuriya (Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the German Dharmaduta Society) Hon. Jayaweera Kuruppu (Minister of Cultural Affairs), Dharmasena Weeraratna, Ven. Akuretiye Amarawansa Thero. Seated at the table, with both hands on the table and looking at the camera is H. A. Vincent Soysa.

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Departure of the First Buddhist Mission in 1957



Photo: Public Meeting at Mihintale (June 11, 1957)

Photo of members of GDS taken in front of GDS Headquarters at 417, Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 07 prior to leaving the premises for the Colombo Harbour to farewell the first Sri Lankan Buddhist mission departing for Germany on board ‘SS Orantes’ on June 15, 1957



Photo: Left to right – front row: Dr. H.C.H. Soysa (white suit), Dr. R.P. Wijeratne (Hony. Treasurer, GDS in white suit), Buddhist monk, Master Tissa Weeraratna (holding Buddhist flag), Master Senaka Weeraratna (holding with both hands the casket containing sacred relics on his head), Mr. Asoka Weeraratna (Founder and Hony. Secretary, GDS, in white national dress), Mr. Dharmasena Weeraratna (in white national dress)
Second Row (middle) under the umbrella Ven. Pandit Akuretiya Amarawansa Nayake Thero and Ven. Kudawella Wangissa Thero



Photo: Young Senaka Weeraratna, (holding with both hands the casket containing sacred relics on his head) eight years of age, in national attire, nephew of Asoka Weeraratna, the founder of the German Dharmaduta Society, at the Elizabeth Quay, Colombo Harbour, prior to the departure ceremony at the Colombo Harbour on June 15, 1957 for the first Sri Lanka Buddhist mission to leave for Germany, sponsored by the German Dharmaduta Society.

Photo: Hon. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Prime Minister, arriving at the Colombo Harbour to farewell the



Buddhist Mission to Germany on June 15, 1957. Mr. D. Weeraratna, Mr. R.S.S. Gunawardena, Mr. Duncan de Alwis and Mr. M.J. Perera are also seen in the picture.



**Departure of the First Buddhist Mission to Germany
Colombo Harbour (June 15, 1957)**

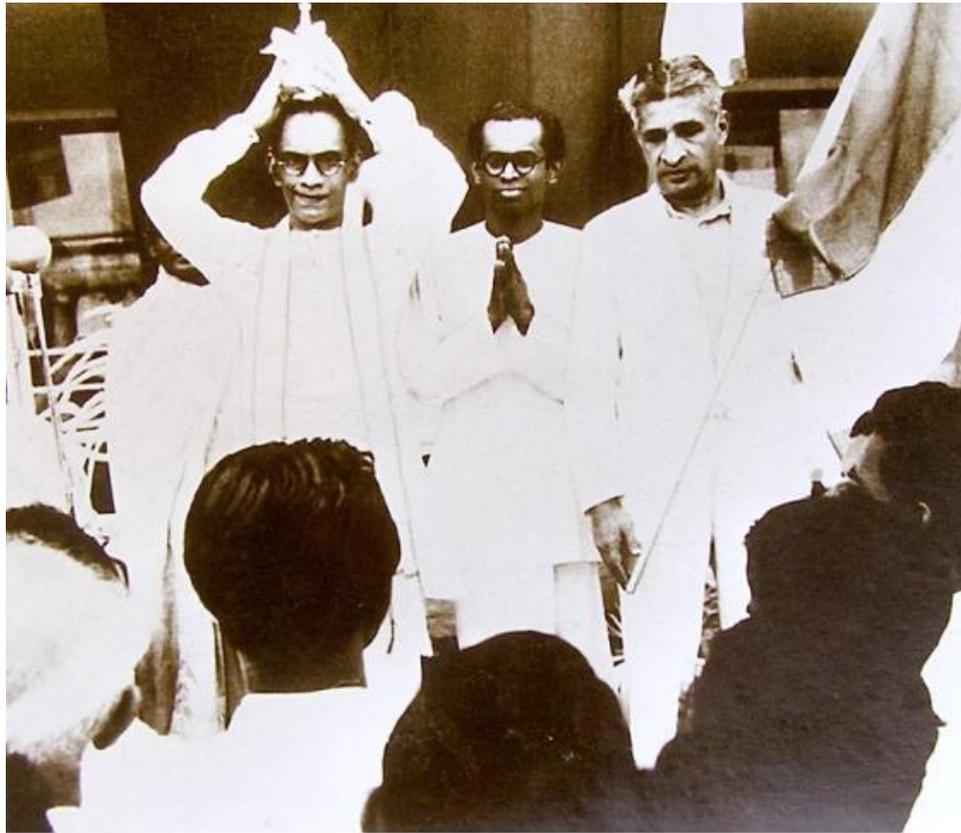
Picture: Dudley Senanayake (Former Prime Minister and a Trustee of the German Dharmaduta Society) addressing the gathering.

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Photo: Former Prime Minister Mr. Dudley Senanayake and Trustee of the German Dharmaduta Society addressing the gathering at the Elizabeth Quay, Colombo Harbour on June 15, 1957.



Photo: Ven. Madihe Pannasiha Nayake Thero addressing the gathering at the Elizabeth Quay, Colombo Harbour on June 15, 1957. From left to right Front Row: Asoka Weeraratna, Dudley Senanayake, Prime Minister Hon. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, and Ven. Madihe Pannasiha Nayake Thero (in front of the Microphone).



Two Prime Ministers back Buddhist Mission to Germany (June 15, 1957)

Picture: Hon. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Prime Minister of Ceylon (left) holding with both hands the casket of relics on the top of his head, Mr. Asoka Weeraratna, Founder and Hony. Secretary, German Dharmaduta Society, (Center), and Hon. Dudley Senanayake, the then Ex - Prime Minister of Ceylon (Right) holding the Buddhist Flag.

— This photo was taken on the historic occasion of the departure of the First Theravada Buddhist Mission to Germany, comprising Ven. Soma Thera (Head of Mission), Ven. Kheminda Thera, and Ven. Vinitha Thera from the Elizabeth Quay, Colombo Harbour, on June 15, 1957. The three monks embarked on the voyage to Europe on the ship ' SS Orantes '. On July 2, 1957, the Mission went into residence at ' Das Buddhistische Haus ' in the beautiful suburb of Frohnau, Berlin. The Berlin Buddhist Vihara commenced functioning from this date.

Das Buddhistische Haus
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www.DasBuddhistischeHaus.de

The purchase of "Das Buddhistische Haus"



Das Buddhistische Haus

One of Asoka Weeraratna's most significant contributions to the spread of Buddhism in Germany was the critical role that he played in the purchase of "Das Buddhistische Haus" established by Dr. Paul Dahlke in 1924. Dr. Dahlke died in 1928. Das Buddhistische Haus which is located in the picturesque suburb of Frohnau in North Berlin, was considered the Center of German Buddhism during Dr. Paul Dahlke's time. Today, it is the oldest Theravada Buddhist centre in Europe. It has been designated as a National Heritage site since 1995 by the German Local Government authorities and enjoys their protection.

Asoka Weeraratna personally negotiated with the nephew of the late Dr. Paul Dahlke and overcame several obstacles that stood in the way of the purchase of 'Das Buddhistische Haus'. At his own expense, he made a personal visit to the owners of Das Buddhistische Haus who lived in an island called 'Sylt' (near Denmark), in the extreme north of West Germany (over 500 km from Berlin) to negotiate the transfer of the land. He bought the property in December, 1957 on behalf of and in the names of the five Trustees of the German Dharmaduta Society (which comprised Dudley Senanayake (former Prime Minister of Sri Lanka) Henry Amarasuriya, Dr. P.B. Fernando, Nelson Soysa, Proctor, S.C., and Asoka Weeraratna).

The Ceylon Daily News (Dec. 21, 1957) reported the purchase of Das Buddhistische Haus, the title of which property was acquired by the Trustees of the GDS, on December 13, 1957 as follows:

“ The acquisition of these premises last week is an epoch making event, not only because these premises, will be the first Vihara and permanent Buddhist settlement which a Buddhist Country of the East owns in Europe but also because it will be a step forward in the successful achievement of founding the Buddha Sasana in Germany and the other countries of the West”.

Asoka Weeraratna spent nearly six months in Germany in 1957 (from June to December) at his own personal expense attending to various matters connected with the purchase of 'Das Buddhistische Haus' and the settling in of the first Buddhist Mission. Under his watch 'Das Buddhistische Haus' was subsequently converted into a Buddhist Vihāra, by the German Dharmaduta Society through the provision of residential and other necessary institutional facilities to Buddhist Dharmaduta monks drawn mainly from Sri Lanka beginning in 1957.

In a seminal article on the state of Buddhism in Germany, Dr. Hans Wolfgang Schumann, the reputed scholar and chronicler of the history of Buddhism in Germany, states as follows:

“Another important Buddhist Centre is the “ Buddhist House’ founded by Paul Dahlke in Berlin – Frohnau in 1924. It survived World War II in a dilapidated condition and probably would have been auctioned and dismantled if the Ceylonese ‘German Dhammaduta Society’ (founded 1952) which inherited a large sum of money from a German Buddhist had not come to its rescue. The GDS purchased the house in 1958, renovated it, furnished it with additional rooms and a good library, and stationed some Ceylonese Bhikkhus (monks) there who take charge of regular lectures and meditation courses.”

Refer Hans Wolfgang Schumann ‘ Buddhism and Buddhist Studies in Germany’, Maha Bodhi Journal, Vol. 79, (February – March 1971) page 99.

Today, Asoka Weeraratna stands credited with the founding of the Berlin Buddhist Vihara in 1957, the first Theravada Buddhist Vihara in Germany and continental Europe, in a manner similar to the wide recognition given to Anagarika Dharmapala for establishing the London Buddhist Vihara in England in 1926.

There is still more room for another Arahant in this world

On that historic day of 12 April 1961, a realisation penetrated deep within Asoka Weeraratna's heart. Making a firm commitment, he reminded himself that one's effort to transcend the cycle of birth and death is far more superior to the launch of an air shuttle into space. Having received a rare human birth, he contemplated how the Buddha's teachings were still live and available.

One must exercise moral restraint, exert energy and with great effort, cultivate a practice to develop the vipassanā insights. As true disciples of the Buddha, we must earnestly commence the practice, strengthen our morality and dedicate our time for the practice of meditation. Then, the world would not be empty of Arahants! He contemplated how path and fruition consciousness had become such a rare occurrence only because of a hesitation to renounce worldly possessions; to make the requisite sacrifice and embark on the practice without delay and indolence.

Whilst the world rejoiced at scientific achievement, he paused in contemplation, realising that liberation was possible in this very life. He felt great compassion towards all worldlings trapped in the cycle of birth and death, and felt a corresponding urge to free them. Realising the futility of worldly possessions, he made a determination to devote his time and wealth to foster the Buddha sāsana. These thoughts which were conceived in Germany began to ferment in his mind and with each day that passed, he developed the stamina to translate his vision into fact.

So he returned to Sri Lanka and expressed his thoughts to his elder brother, Dharmasena, who had been a pillar of strength to him in all his undertakings. Nothing significant was done by either without consulting the other. That was the nature of the relationship between the two brothers. Asoka always relied on his brother Dharmasena's moral and logistical support for his initiatives in both the material and spiritual planes. Given the sudden nature of the decision to abandon everything including a family business that had been in existence for over four generations beginning sometime in the 19th Century, there were some misgivings expressed by his brother Dharmasena in respect to the timing of such a decision, which might lead to the collapse of a longstanding family enterprise. In spite of these objections, Asoka forged ahead with his vision.

With the firm resolve and determination that had impregnated in his mind, he renounced his well accumulated wealth without any anxiety or lamentation. The well known P.J. Weeraratna & Sons, reputed dealers in Swiss made wrist watches and makers of fine jewellery that had been in existence for over four generations i.e. since the 1850's, closed its operations at the end of March 1965.

The Birth of the Nissarana Vanaya Aranya

Having given up his worldly possessions, Asoka Weeraratna was well on his way to progress on his onward journey towards liberation. However, two obstacles stood in his way. First, he had to find a suitable place for the practice. Secondly, he had to find a suitable teacher. He travelled the whole country for a period of about six months in search of a suitable dwelling or place for the practice, often without food or sleep. During his travels, he realized the importance of establishing an appropriate place for the practice, how many would benefit from such an initiative as it was a common aspiration of many. With this in mind, he realized the importance of constructing a hermitage in an appropriate location to fulfil the common aspiration of many to realize the Buddha's timeless truth.

A fortuitous encounter

The office premises of the German Dharmaduta Society at 417 Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 07 were Asoka Weeraratna's sanctuary - often referred to as his home. In 1964, at the official premises of the Society, in a rare and auspicious moment, Asoka Weeraratna had his first encounter with one of Sri Lanka's foremost meditation masters, the late Most Venerable Matara Sri Ñānārāma Mahā Thera. Their discussion was dictated by a topic mutually appreciated by them both - the urgent need for a realisation of nibbāna in this life itself!



**Venerable Ñānārāma Mahā Thero (left) and
Venerable Mitirigala Dhammanissanti Thero (right)
in a hospital room in Colombo in 1974**

It is documented that the Venerable Mahā Thera, at the conclusion of their discussion, with great determination, joy and commitment in his heart, declared to Asoka Weeraratna that his quest for spiritual liberation could commence from the next day forward. In a moment of great spiritual jubilation, the first of Asoka Weeraratna's spiritual challenges was fulfilled. He found the appropriate meditation teacher, to help him steer through to a realisation of a truth, a truth that was timeless, present and could be realised in one life's journey.

To fulfil his second wish to find a suitable place, Asoka Weeraratna underwent many hardships. Both together with his teacher and also on his own, he travelled to many remote and rural parts of Sri Lanka, covering a period of nearly six months, enduring whatever suffering that he encountered. He went virtually from one end of the country to the other, to find an ideal site.

Some of the places that he visited on this search included Tissamaharama, Deniyaya, Anuradhapura, Mihintale, Morawaka, Rakwana, Horana, Akuressa, Gampaha and Kalugala.

His journey ended when he came across the Mitirigala forest reserve, then known more specifically as 'Mitirigala Mukalana' in the District of Dompe and situated about 30 miles from Colombo, the perfect place for solitude and stilling of the mind. Both picturesque and practical for the life of a yogi, the Mitirigala forest reserve met with similar approval by the late Venerable Mahā Thera. In 1964, Asoka Weeraratna acquired initially 120 acres and subsequently about 380 acres altogether totalling nearly 500 acres of the forest reserve from the Government of Sri Lanka on a long term, 99 year old lease agreement granted to him in his personal name.

Then, using largely his own personal funds and with the help of others who had volunteered to build 'kutis' he began the construction of the Mitirigala Forest Hermitage. It was financed and organised by

himself alone and constructed subject to three strict conditions, namely: 1) Not to solicit any donations; 2) Not to accept even voluntary donations; 3) If any one volunteered to perform an item of work, it would be allowed under the direction and supervision of the founder.

The construction of the foundation of almost every 'kuti' and the buildings at the base of the Hermitage and the 'Bhāvanā Shālāwa' in the interior of the Hermitage were entirely financed by him but several 'kutis' and adjacent structures such as 60 or 90 foot 'sakman malu' in the compound of the 'kutis' were allowed to be completed by well-wishers who had come forward and volunteered to complete them. Within a period of just three years, the reserve was transformed into a hermitage, suitable for the practice of dedicated yogis.

On 13 July 1967, Venerable Ñānārāma Mahā Thera arrived at the Nissarana Vanaya, accompanied by a few monks to commence their residence. This auspicious occasion was celebrated by a maha dana for almost seventy monks. The first rains retreat and the meditation program commenced on 22 July 1967. Forty five years later, the forest hermitage continues to serve the sāsana with the same ideal, that final liberation is possible in this very life.

Entering the order of Sangha

Asoka Weeraratna was not only a founding father of the Mitirigala Nissarana Vanaya or a noble man with great spiritual vision. His tireless effort to establish the monastery and to form links between Sri Lanka and Germany were surpassed by his noble aspiration of renunciation and abstinence, and the fact that he himself commenced the practice with great dedication. On 22 August 1972, Asoka Weeraratna was ordained as a resident monk at the Nissarana Vanaya Āranya under the name, Mitirigala Dhammanisanthi Thero.



Asoka Weeraratna
(circa 1968)



Ven. Mitirigala Dhammanisanthi
On the day of his ordination at Mitirigala
(August 22, 1972)



Venerable Dhammanissanthi Thero - Mitirigala (22 August 1972) ³



Monks at the Mitirigala Nissarana Vanaya

Venerable Mitirigala Dhammanissanthi Thero spent the next 27 years at the Nissarana Vanaya forest hermitage, undertaking meditation training and practice under the guidance of the Chief Kammatthanacariya and Chief Preceptor, the late Venerable Ñānārāma Mahā Thera. On 2 July 1999, Venerable Dhammanissanthi Thero passed away peacefully at the age of eighty years.



**One of the last photographs taken of
Ven. Dhammanisanthi
by his nephew Tissa Weeraratna,
a few months before
Ven. Dhammanisanthi passed away
on July 2, 1999**

Being an ascetic monk he left detailed instructions that his funeral should be one which reflects the triple aspects of anicca, dukkha and anatta, underpinning Buddhist philosophy. Fulfilling his wish, the funeral was marked with austerity and simplicity and on 3 July 1999, the day following his death, his remains were cremated at Kanatte amidst cries of "Buduweva" "Buduweva" from a small crowd of faithful mourners. Also present were a group of solemn monks from the Mitirigala Nissarana Vanaya Āranya, standing in appreciation and remembrance of his pioneering efforts to establish a place for dedicated practice, a monastery in the strict forest tradition, venerated and benefited by many lay and forest mendicants forty four years later.

Venerable Mitirigala Dhammanisanthi Thero has left the world with a shining example of a selfless human spirit, a life full of devotion, labour, sacrifice and service, a noble visionary whose sweeping contributions to the spread of Buddhism extend across continents and a mendicant monk with impeccable morality and ethical conduct.

Venerable Mitirigala Dhammanisanthi Thero (Asoka Weeraratna) is destined to be ranked in history as one of the pre-eminent figures of Sri Lanka's post-independence Buddhist renaissance.

¹ A translated excerpt from Ama Bindu Letter from Venerable Dhammanisanthi, p119 cited in Sith Nivena Nissarana Vana Aranya(2003), pp 39-52

² Included in the photographs on the left hand side in the row of monks seated in front of the microphone is Venerable Madihe Pannasiha Nayake Thera administering Pansil, seated immediately next to him on his right is Venerable Baddegama Wimalawansa Nayaka Thera, and two seats next on the right is Venerable Narada Thera.

At the Head Table in the middle of the picture - Seated left to right: Dharmasena Weeraratna (brother of Asoka Weeraratna); J.L.E. Fernando, President, Lanka Dhammaduta Society (LDS); Dudley Senanayake, Former Prime Minister and Trustee of the LDS; Asoka Weeraratna, Founder, Hony. Secretary and Trustee of the LDS Nelson Soysa, Vice – President and Trustee of the LDS.

³ The photograph of Venerable Dhammanissanthi Thero was taken on 22 August 1972, the day on which he entered the order of Sangha at Mitirigasla Nissarana Vanaya. Venerable Dhammanissanthi Thero is seen engaged in walking meditation on a walking meditation path adjacent to his kuti.

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