

Ven. Ananda Metteyya Thera The first Western Buddhist monk

by Rohan Jayetilleke

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Ask any person who has lived, really in contact with this Burmese people; Amongst which of the two, Burma's six millions of London's six millions, is there the greater suffering; which as a whole has most of happiness? That one will tell you that he doubts if the whole of Burma can show you as much squalor, as much starvation, as much down right preventable human agony as anyone of London's slums reveals.

These very words came true some decades ago during the race riots of Nottingham, in England. Today we read of the White-faced Australians, who are only migrants from various parts of the world, going on the rampage against the Arabian -faced naturalized Australians, in the suburbs of Sydney, Australia, Ananda Metteyya, foresaw these arrogant self-culture, which appalled him during his own time. He specifically wrote as follows:-

"It is the wrong view;" I am English; glorious English nationality is mine, so behoves me to fight against persons who have another sort of Self Theory, and say, "No, but a Teuton I", It is that wrong view which now makes necessary that the bulk of the resources of every branch of the West-Aryan race is wasted on armaments of war-wasted; when so much might, in the present state of our knowledge be achieved by man, were that great wealth to be expended in combating, not only physical disease, but also far more fatal mental sickness, to which so much of Western misery is due".

Ananda Metteyya, writing on entering the first jhana for stream entry, says meditation on compassion is the preparation for its liberating consciousness beyond human thought. He explains, "As from the heart of a dark thunder cloud at night when nought or but a little of earth or heaven can be seen, suddenly the lightning flashes, and for an instant the unseen world gleams forth instantaneous light, light penetrating every darkest corner, flushing the clouded sky with momentary glory — so at that great moment, will come the realization of all our toil. No words, no smiles, no highest thoughts of ours can adequately convey that mighty realization; but then, at that time, we shall know and see; we shall realize that all our life has changed and what of yore what we deemed Compassion — what of old we deemed the utmost attainment that the mind or the life of man can compass — that is ours at last; we have won, achieved, and entered into the Path of which mere words can never tell".

In England Ananda Metteyya stayed one year 1908 - 1909, the time assigned for the mission and returned to Burma in 1909. The Buddhist Review, the organ of the newly found The Buddhist Society of Britain and Ireland, editorially said, 'he left behind him golden opinions and the friendship and respect of all who had the privilege of meeting him'. He hoped to return to England to consolidate what he had established. The hope never germinated. He remained in Burma till 1914. The Buddhist Review had mostly now writings of Ven Silacara.

In Burma his life long asthma had a very heavy toll on him, with incessant bouts of great intensity. Being unable to adhere to the Bhikkhu Vinaya, in his state of sickness he reverted to lay life in 1913. In 1914 the doctors in Burma advised him to leave Burma if he was to save his life to serve the Dhamma another day. His Burmese friends, financed his passage back home to England, where he was to meet with his sister, who had come from America to lead him back to her home in California. A passage from Liverpool was booked to California, but the ship's doctor would not grant permission to board the ship. He feared that the American port authorities would not grant Bennett permission to land through the normal disembarkment permit, because of his aggravated and aggravating highly ostensible sickness of asthma. His sister, heart broken she was, sailed back to her home, and Allan Bennett McGregor was now left to the mercy of his British well-wishers.

Then the First World War broke out. From this point Bennett's life was one of agony and drudgery through his sickness that never toler-

ated any medication. During the war his sister came back from America but she stayed with some friends and could not look after his brother. He was in the care of a doctor member of the Liverpool branch of the Buddhist Society giving him necessary medical care. Even for the compassionate doctor, the financial and emotional burden of having a chronically sick, and prematurely old person, at the threshold of death was an unsustainable exercise. Mrs. Hla Oung offered 10.00 pounds a year towards maintenance, but it was not adequate. At this point a group of anonymous well-wishers appealed through the columns of the Buddhist Review in 1916. They appealed for financial aid to save Bennett being placed in some institution supported by public charity. Help did come from Britain as well as outside, as the periodical had a mass circulation around the world by then, which Bennett started with nearly 500 to 600 copies being mailed free abroad with a wish that after reading to have it on the desks of Reading Libraries of the respective countries.

Allan Bennett was not to be cowed down by Asthma, and the very trauma of mass murder in the First World War, impelled to deliver lectures and also to write. In the winter of 1917 - 1918 he was persuaded by Clifford Bax's his close friend to give a series of papers to a private audience in Bax's studio. These were later published as The Wisdom of the Aryas, just two months before his death. Then, on Vesak Day (May 1918) Bennett gave a speech to the Buddhist Society of Britain and Ireland, a fighting speech which aroused the audience to fresh enthusiasm. He prefaced his speech of the ten years of his Buddhist Mission to England, the first-ever of the kind, and regretted the parent body of The Buddhist Society of Britain and Ireland and the Buddhhasana Samagama of Burma are now completely disjoined and attributed the situation to the war, the opening of an era of well-nigh universal calamity and woe.

By 1922 Allan Bennett was a terminal case, with death closely in sight. Earlier in 1920, he took over the editorship from D.B. Jayatilleke (later Sir) who was returning after his studies in England and carried on The Buddhist Review as the editor, amidst the excruciating pain causing breathing difficulties. In this time, the inhaler therapy was not even in the embryonic stage in the discipline of medicine. His last edition of The Buddhist Review was that of January 1922 and indeed that was the last to be published. When the main root of a tree perishes, the lovely oak too perishes simultaneously. This oak of Allan Bennett too had the same fate. He was living at 90 Eccles Road, Clapham Junction, London. His financial situation was threadbare and assistance came from Sri Lanka's Dr. Cassius Pereira and Dr. C.A. Hewavitharana, the youngest brother of the savant Anagarika Dharmapala.

Allan Bennett McGregor, joined the wheel of Samsara, after his short an eventful sojourn in life, on 9 March 1923. A Buddhist funeral was organized and held by Francis Payne, a prominent and a convert from the 1908 mission of Allan Bennett. Dr. C.A. Hewavitharana cabled money from Sri Lanka to purchase a grave in Modern Cemetery in South London. So passed away from human sight a man whom history may some time honour for bringing to England as a living faith the Message of the All Enlightened One.

In view of the fact that nobody could decide under which name he is to be remembered either as Allan Bennett McGregor or Ven. Ananda Metteyya, no grave stone was raised the payment for the grave made by Dr. C.A. Hewavitharana covered the cost of a gravestone though.

It is opportune to record his conviction that Buddhism offered hope for the West, remained unshaken, as his first editorial in The Buddhist Review in 1920 made clear: "These facts, we consider, justify us in our conclusion that in the extension of this Great Teaching lies not only the solution of the ever growing religious problems of the West; but even, perhaps, the only possible deliverance of the western civilization from that condition of fundamental instability which now so obviously and increasingly prevails".

May Allan Bennett McGregor's (Ven. Ananda Metteyya) sojourns in Samsara be brief and happy in his quest of Nibbana. 