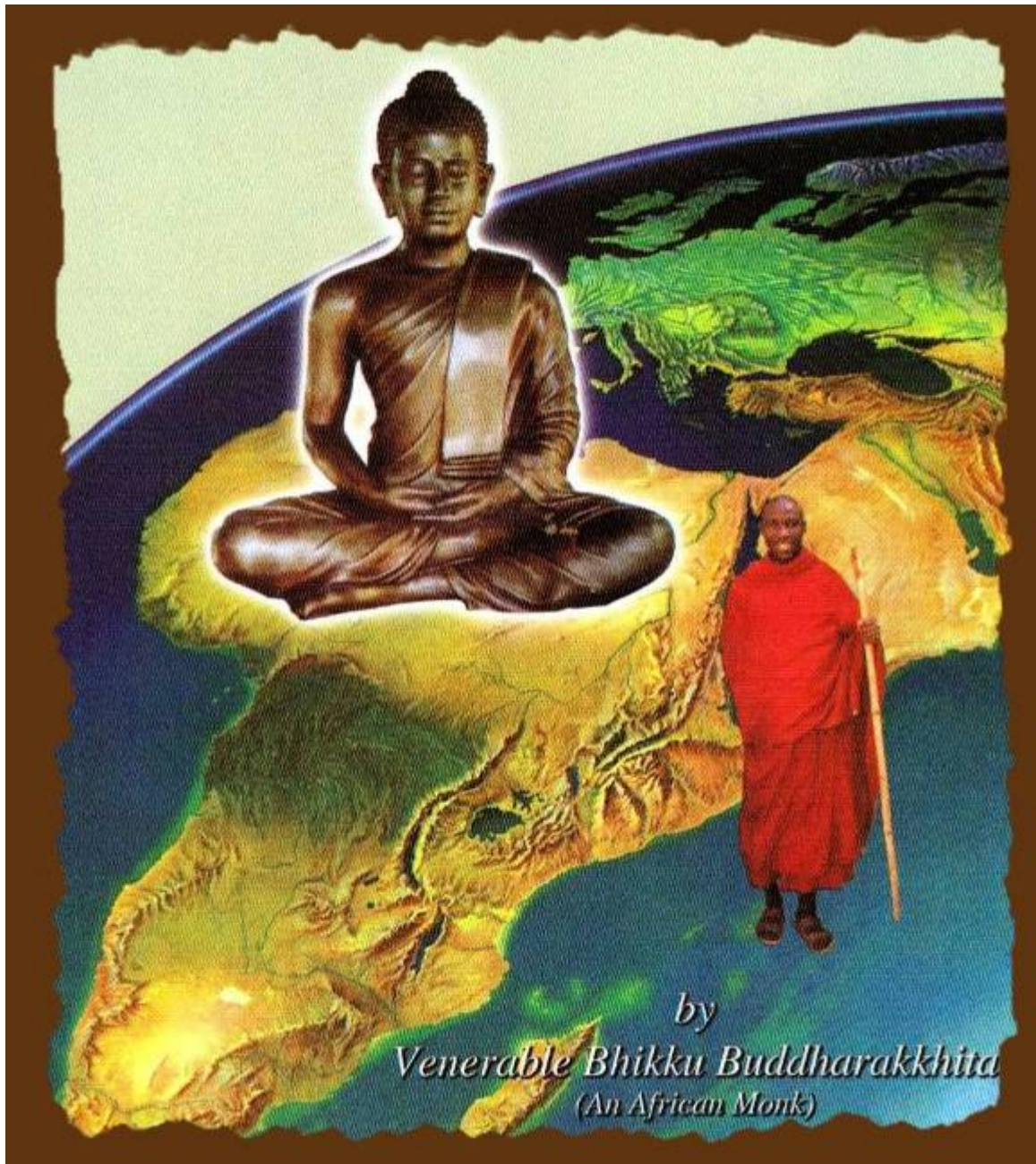


PLANTING DHAMMA SEEDS

THE EMERGENCE OF BUDDHISM IN AFRICA



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FOREWORD

The best and most direct communication comes from one's own personal experience. It is the most effective way of making people understand. This is the way many wise people have communicated with the rest of the world. This is the most praiseworthy part of the **Buddha Dhamma** (*Teachings of the Buddha*).

Bhikkhu Buddharakkhita's book brings the **Buddha's** message to people in Africa from his own personal experiences. He himself is a very practical **Bhikkhu**. His personal experiences in Africa, and other places during his travels, are very good examples of how people react to the appearance of a **Theravada** Buddhist monk wearing a brown robe with alms bowl in hand. The **Buddha** statue that he carried with him seems to have made his appearance even more suspicious in a country where Buddhism has never been known before his introduction of it. This reminds us of the story of Punna Mantāniputta who went to Sunaparanta to deliver the message of the **Buddha** for the first time. Fortunately, people in Uganda and other African countries are not as wild as the people in Sunaparanta were in the time of the **Buddha**.



Bhikkhu Buddharakkhita's introduction of Buddhism to Uganda also reminds us of Venerable **Arahant** (saint) Mahinda's mission to Sri Lanka in the third century before Christ. The then king of Sri Lanka welcomed Venerable Mahinda, his fellow **Bhikkhus** and lay stewards. In Uganda,

Bhikkhu Buddharakkhita's mother, his sister and her children welcomed **Bhikkhu** Buddharakkhita. They became his first converts to Buddhism. Now he is going to build a **Vihara** (temple/shrine) to house the **Buddha** image that his friends and students very generously donated to him and establish the **Buddha Dhamma** in his own native Uganda.

Once I asked him, "How many Buddhists are there in Uganda?"

"Only one," was his reply.

Then I asked him, "How many Buddhist monks are there in Uganda?"

"Only one," he responded.

At the time I asked these two questions, to the best of his knowledge, he was the only Buddhist in his country. Now his mother, sister and some nephews and nieces are Buddhists. When the **Buddha** introduced His Teaching, He found only five disciples initially. That number has increased to many millions since. Similarly, I hope this initial number in Uganda will also gradually increase to millions and bring this marvelous, peaceful Message of the **Buddha** to Uganda and its people.

Uganda, as I understand, is now a peaceful country. I believe this is a good time to introduce Buddhism so that the seeds of the **Dhamma** will take root and grow in a peaceful environment. I wish **Bhikkhu** Buddharakkhita every success in his undertakings.

Venerable Henepola Gunaratana

HOMAGE TO THE BUDDHA

***Namo Tassa Bhagavato
Arahato Sammā-
Sambuddhassa***

*Honor to Him, the Blessed
One, the Worthy One, the
fully Enlightened One*

THE THREE REFUGES

***Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ
gacchāmi***

*I go to the Buddha as my
refuge*

***Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ
gacchāmi***

*I go to the Dhamma as my
refuge*

***Saṅghāṃ saraṇaṃ
gacchāmi***

*I go to the Saṅgha as my
refuge*

***May all beings share in the merits accrued through
the writing, publishing and distribution of this
Dhamma book.***

DEDICATION

“THE GIFT OF DHAMMA EXCELS ALL OTHER GIFTS;
THE FLAVOR OF DHAMMA EXCELS ALL OTHER FLAVORS.
THE DELIGHT IN DHAMMA EXCELS ALL OTHER DELIGHTS....”

...The Buddha

*THIS DHAMMA BOOK IS HUMBLY DEDICATED TO MY PARENTS,
MY LATE PRECEPTOR VENERABLE SAYADAW U SILANANDA
WHO ORDAINED ME AND ENCOURAGED ME TO LEARN AND
SPREAD THE **DHAMMA** AND, ALL MY OTHER **DHAMMA**
TEACHERS*

May they all attain final liberation in this lifetime.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This booklet was inspired by many requests from people that I met around the world who were very eager to know about my experiences in spreading the Dhamma in Africa.

In preparing this book, I am indebted to many teachers and friends.

I offer my sincere gratitude to my mentor and teacher Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, for his inspiration and guidance and for writing the Foreword for this book; to my mother, Felister Namplima, for giving birth to me and her kind and loving support throughout my life; to my African helpers, Herman Nderitu, Sister Eliz and Joseph Ngugi; to John Streather for his kind support; to the owners of Krua Thai, Kampala for feeding me while I was in Uganda; to His Excellency Mr. James Muiwana, the head of the Thai Consulate in Kampala, for his kind support; to my Dhamma brother Venerable Aggasami for his thoughtful invitation to visit Canada; my Canadian helpers, Citta and Chon Tam, who transcribed the Dhamma talks I gave there; Bhante Rahula for his suggestions and to my American friends, Walt Opie and Janet Brendlinger, who helped me with editing.

May all beings attain **Nibbāna** (the final liberation or emancipation).

Bhikkhu Buddharakkhita

Bhāvanā (meditation) Monastery & Meditation Center
West Virginia,
U.S.A.

15 September, 2006

INTRODUCTION

This book was inspired by many requests from people that I met in Africa, America and Asia. They always asked me many interesting questions about Buddhism and Buddhist monks. Sometimes I answered them briefly but often there was never enough time to answer them at all.

They always asked me: What was your former religion before you became a Buddhist monk? How did you learn meditation in Uganda? How did you become a monk in Uganda where there is no monastery? Who inspired you to become a Buddhist or monk? How does one become a monk? Do you have your own temple in Uganda? Why did you become a monk? How does your family (mother) feel about you as a monk? What do Africans think about you as a Buddhist monk?

I have attempted to answer some of these questions here. It has been very difficult, in the process, to keep from making this book sound like an autobiography. If it does at some points, I would ask that you bear with me for my sole objective here has been to try and answer the many questions that have been raised while showing the world the development of Buddhism in Uganda, in particular, and in Africa in general. It is my fervent hope that this book will provide answers to your questions, satisfy your curiosity or inspire you to proceed on the Dhamma adventure.

*"RARE IS THE BIRTH AS A HUMAN BEING.
HARD IS THE LIFE OF MORTALS.
HARD IS THE HEARING OF THE SUBLIME **DHAMMA**.
RARE IS THE APPEARANCE OF THE **BUDDHAS**."*

... Dhammapada Verse 182

PART I

MY FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH BUDDHISM

BUDDHISM IN THE EYES OF THE AFRICANS

BIRTH

I was born Steven Kaboggoza to a Christian family in 1966 in Kampala, Uganda, East Africa. Uganda is surrounded by



Sudan in the north, Congo to the west and Rwanda to the south. It shares Lake Victoria with Tanzania and Kenya in the southeast. The country is small and poor. Uganda's population is made up of a complex and diverse range of tribes that includes the Baganda and several other tribes. It has been a war-torn country for many years with harsh dictatorships and curtailed

freedoms. With its sorrows, it has balances. It was Sir Winston Churchill, at the beginning of the century, who said, “ ... for magnificence, for variety of form and color, for profusion of brilliant life — plants, birds, insects, reptiles, beasts — for the vast scale ... Uganda is truly ‘the pearl of Africa’.”

*“HE, WHO SITS ALONE, RESTS ALONE, WALKS ALONE IN DILIGENT
PRACTICE, WHO IN SOLITUDE CONTROLS HIMSELF, WILL FIND
DELIGHT IN THE FOREST”*

... Dhammapada Verse 305

CHILDHOOD

When I was growing up, Buddhism was unknown in my country. The predominant religions were Christianity and Islam. In Uganda, especially in my family, impious Christians were often considered as “black sheep” or “friends of Satan.”

MY FIRST “FORMLESS MEDITATION” LESSONS IN UGANDA

At the tender age of five years, my mother who was open-minded, gentle and moderate had a great effect on my life. She accepted our differences easily and did not try to bend us to her will, especially on matters concerning religion. She had her own natural wisdom.

She often told me, “If you have nothing to say, keep quiet. If you have nothing to do, go to sleep.”

These two admonishments were very suitable to my character and temperament. I did not want to sleep during the day but, since I had nothing to do, she forced me to lie down. Unfortunately, I could not sleep. I kept on tossing and turning in bed. As a result, I often stayed awake in the room and let my thoughts wander and observed my mother who was fast asleep. As I now reflect on those sleepless days, I

realize that, at the time, I did not have any “object of meditation.” However, wasn’t that also one of the simplest ways to meditate? That is to say, to be silent and calmly observe the passing show or events?

Personally, I got a wonderful training to be comfortable with silence and space. It would have been so beneficial if, at that time, there had been someone to teach me how to practice insight meditation. Where could further real meditation skills be acquired?

While I was in primary school as a little boy, I enjoyed going to attend Sunday schools and listening to songs and stories. However, attending church service soon became compulsory. The Headmaster of the school was most enthusiastic about his religion. He kept tabs on those who failed to attend lessons. In fact, failure to attend church led to minor punishments. This attitude gradually created inner resistance in me.

As an adolescent, the Catholic boarding schools I attended molded me in the Christian lifestyle. In Uganda, especially in my family, impious Christians were often considered as “black sheep” or “friends of Satan.” Personally, I was beginning to wonder whether going to church was for the purpose of pleasing others or for personal spiritual development? It would have been so beneficial if, at that time, there had been someone who could teach me how to practice insight meditation in order to gain wisdom. As a teenager, in my faint memory, I learned that there was an Indian personality named **Gautama** (the family name, surname, of the Prince Siddhatta) **Buddha**. Just like most Africans, I knew only that much!

“THIS IS THE ENTIRE SPIRITUAL LIFE, ĀNANDA, THAT IS, GOOD FRIENDSHIP, GOOD COMPANIONSHIP, AND GOOD COMRADESHIP. WHEN A MONK HAS A GOOD FRIEND, A GOOD COMPANION, A GOOD COMRADE, IT IS TO BE EXPECTED THAT HE WILL DEVELOP AND CULTIVATE THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH.”

...The Buddha (Saṃyutta Nikāya 45:2)

ADULTHOOD

Face to Face with Buddhist Monks

In June 1990, I went off to university in India in search of academic glory in business. This would later change to Buddhism! There were a few African and Asian foreign students at the university. Among the small group of foreign students were two young Buddhist monks from Thailand. I felt very close to these monks and practically considered them as my only friends. The monks felt the same way towards me. They did not instruct me how to meditate immediately but gradually introduced me to Buddhism. They kindly took me to the local markets and offered me food. Actually, at the time, I did not know the correct etiquette about Buddhist monks — I should have been the one to offer them food!

In November 1990, one of the Thai monks, Venerable Sandsiti, invited me to go with him to a small Buddhist temple in the outskirts of Chandigarh (the capital of Punjab, state) where an Indian monk resided. This was the first time I attended a Buddhist ceremony. I saw a big **Buddha** statue but did not quite understand its significance. With time I got more interested in the **Buddha**'s Teachings. I really admired

these monks. Whatever they did aroused deep feelings of loving kindness and gratitude in me. During the holidays, they returned to Thailand and I missed them a lot. I wondered where I could meet other Buddhist monks.

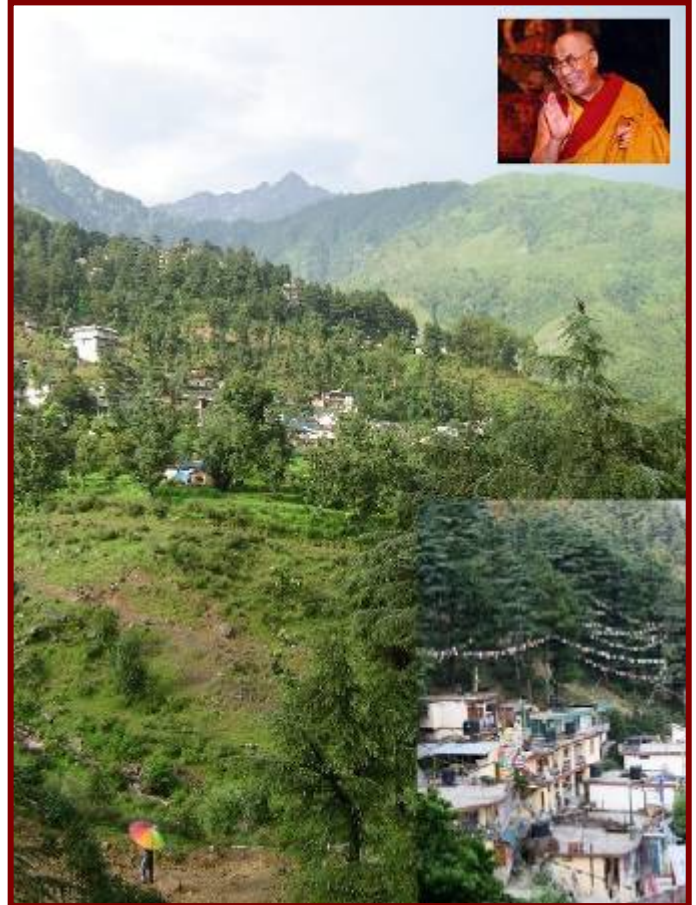
*“THEREFORE, ONE SHOULD FOLLOW THE NOBLE ONES, WHO ARE
STEADFAST, WISE, LEARNED, DUTIFUL AND DEVOUT.
ONE SHOULD FOLLOW ONLY SUCH A MAN, WHO IS TRULY GOOD
AND DISCERNING AS THE MOON FOLLOWS THE PATH OF STARS.”*

... Dhammapada Verse 208

Special Connections with His Holiness The Dalai Lama

During the summer holidays, I continued my search for Buddhist friends. I took the bus at night to travel to Dharamsala, the seat for His Holiness The Dalai Lama. I thought, “Wow, this is a wonderful country. You can even travel at night!” In Uganda, we spent a long time without traveling at night due to a chain of wars and other political problems. So I felt a new level of freedom. It was a very long bus ride in a “*mango shake*” (low-fare rattletrap bus) to Dharamsala lying at the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains. It was an amazing journey. Was it a dream or real? It was nothing that I would have imagined doing while I was still in Uganda. That was also how I felt when I first came to the **Dhamma**, the Buddhist Teachings: “Wow, I’ve come to something that brings freedom!”

One day, I went for a public meeting of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I joined hundreds of Westerners waiting to pay homage to the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. In the crowd of white people from all over the world, I was the only black person from Africa. And because of that, I stood out distinctively and visibly from the crowd. I was very happy to be near His Holiness for the first time and fortunate enough to shake hands with him. He gave me blessings and I felt that his personality radiated a gentle and boundless loving-kindness that brought freshness and calmness to my heart. I was inspired when I listened to his **Dhamma** talks. He represented the deep compassion and wisdom of the Lord **Buddha**'s Teachings. I thought, "This is my home. I have found my spiritual home in Dharamsala!" I resolved to spend all my holidays in Dharamsala for the next several years.



My journey towards Buddhism began with my encountering Buddhist monks in India. I was very much inspired by my excellent spiritual friends. I encountered Buddhist Teachings that offered me practical ways to reach happiness ... e.g. as spelled out in the Noble Eightfold Path. This was an eye - opener for me. The Teachings on **kamma** (*volitional action*) put great emphasis on personal

responsibility and self-reliance for one's actions. I later learned about the potential for beings to attain **Nibbāna**. All these Buddhist teachings appealed to me a lot. This was such freedom in my life! My academic training in India was transforming into a spiritual search.

*“THOSE WHO MISTAKE THE UNESSENTIAL TO BE ESSENTIAL AND
ESSENTIAL TO BE UNESSENTIAL, DWELLING IN WRONG THOUGHTS,
NEVER ARRIVE AT THE ESSENTIAL.*

*THOSE WHO KNOW THE ESSENTIAL TO BE ESSENTIAL AND
UNESSENTIAL TO BE UNESSENTIAL, DWELLING IN RIGHT THOUGHTS,
DO ARRIVE AT THE ESSENTIAL.”*

... Dhammapada Verses 11-12

SEARCHING FOR SPIRITUAL TEACHERS

Window-shopping Many Religious Traditions — a Ugandan Youth in a Candy Store!

There were many spiritual traditions in India: Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and a multitude of others. However, spiritual aspirations that lay deep in my personality continued to push me to search for “something” but, at that time, this “something” was still unclear to me. However, I was open, and willing, to learn about the many religions. I happily joined the Baha'i Faith Centre in Chandigarh. It was inspiring for me to visit some of the Indian *gurus* and *swamis*. I studied spiritual teachings and meditation with Vimala Thakar, an indescribably special person. She radiated loving-kindness, which instantly made

me admire and respect her. Vimalaji said that she was not a Buddhist but she had a great respect for the **Buddha**. She taught meditation in all daily life activities and emphasized the value of silence. She advised us to expose ourselves to nature as much as possible, to be a disciple of our own understanding, and to keep our body and mind sensitive, alert and sharp. I took this advice to heart.

*“WISDOM SPRINGS FROM MEDITATION; WITHOUT MEDITATION
WISDOM WANES.*

*HAVING KNOWN THESE TWO PATHS OF PROGRESS AND DECLINE,
LET A MAN SO CONDUCT HIMSELF THAT HIS WISDOM MAY INCREASE.”*

... Dhammapada Verse 282

Wonderful Tibetan Meditation Retreat

The definite opportunity finally came. In 1994, the Tusita Monastery in Dharamsala organized a 12-day meditation retreat, which was guided by an American Buddhist meditation teacher named Dr. Alex Berzin. During the retreat he gave lectures on the fundamental principles of Buddhism and the basic steps of Buddhist meditation, primarily on how to observe our intention in whatever we are doing. During that retreat, I learned that observing one's intentions is actually being mindful of the mind. This was really a journey to self-discovery. Following that retreat I have never been the same. Definitely, the meditation practice helped me to have faith in the precious **Buddha's** Teachings. I abandoned the academic path and embarked on the spiritual path. I joined spiritual friends in New Delhi where I continued to listen to

spiritual talks, practice meditation and read many **Dhamma** books. The Buddhist Teachings on **karuna** (compassion) and **panna** (wisdom) inspired me. The Teachings on **kamma** especially put great emphasis on self-reliance and responsibility for one's actions as causes for the events in one's life (as compared to attributing good or bad things to an external force). I learned about the potential for beings to attain even **Nibbāna**, which is a state beyond heaven. All these Buddhist teachings appealed to me greatly.

After living with the **Saṅgha** (community of Buddhist renunciates) in New Delhi for one year, I left India for a pilgrimage to Nepal, Tibet and finally landed in Thailand. Have you ever heard about the thousand joys and thousand sorrows? I would learn about this as I continued my journey.

*“WHATEVER PLEASURE AND JOY THERE IS THE WORLD, THIS IS
THE GRATIFICATION IN THE WORLD.
IF, MONKS, THERE WERE NO GRATIFICATION IN THE WORLD,
BEINGS WOULD NOT BECOME ENAMORED WITH THE WORLD.
BUT BECAUSE THERE IS GRATIFICATION IN THE WORLD, BEINGS
BECOME ENAMORED WITH IT.”*

... Aṅguttara Nikāya 3:101-2

Searching for Worldly Pleasures Gratification

After staying in Tibet for one-month-and-a-half, I met a British traveler in Lhasa who advised me to go Thailand. First, I returned to Nepal, and then headed to a beautiful island called Koh Tao, in southern Thailand. I needed to earn

a living so I determined to develop scuba diving skills until I reached the Professional Instructor level. Eventually, I even landed a job as a diving instructor. I considered it funny that I could be paid to have so much fun, but I was soon hooked.



This job seemed to give me great joy. During that time, I also started to look for opportunities to learn and practice more

insight meditation. However, the conditions were not yet ripe for me to attend a formal insight meditation retreat in Thailand. Instead, I learned about the “sweetness and gratification” of a scuba diving instructor’s life! Day after day, I taught the wealthy scuba diving students from all over the world. However, as time went by, I became dissatisfied with my job and joys. How could this be?

*“THERE IS NO SATISFYING SENSUAL DESIRES EVEN WITH A RAIN OF
GOLD COINS.*

*FOR SENSUAL PLEASURES GIVE LITTLE-SWEETNESS (SATISFACTION)
AND MUCH PAIN.*

*HAVING UNDERSTOOD THIS, THE WISE MAN FINDS NO DELIGHT
EVEN IN HEAVENLY PLEASURES.*

*THE DISCIPLE OF THE SUPREME BUDDHA DELIGHTS IN THE
DESTRUCTION OF CRAVING.”*

... Dhammapada Verses 186-187

Un-satisfactoriness

At first, the position brought me many advantages and pleasures. However, I eventually tired of watching tourists come and go, and of the expensive resorts exclusively reserved for rich foreign tourists. I began to understand the unsatisfactoriness in my life as a scuba diving instructor and the danger. After becoming disillusioned with the business world, I quit teaching scuba diving and left Thailand to return to my homeland in Africa. Later, a guy who learned that I had left the luxurious life at the island resort, suggested that I needed to go see a psychiatrist. He thought that I had lost my mind! But wait: Had I not left when I did, I might still have been there in Thailand when the tsunami disaster struck later in 2004. It destroyed almost the whole of Phi Phi Island. Many people were killed in the same place where I used to dive. It was wise indeed of me to have left the island resort and returned to Africa.

My life saved?

*“CONSORT NOT WITH THOSE THAT ARE DEAR, NEVER WITH THAT
ARE NOT DEAR; NOT SEEING THOSE THAT ARE DEAR AND SEEING
THOSE THAT ARE NOT DEAR, ARE BOTH PAINFUL.*

*HENCE HOLD NOTHING DEAR, FOR SEPARATION FROM THOSE THAT
ARE DEAR IS PAINFUL, BONDS DO NOT EXIST FOR THOSE TO WHOM
NOTHING IS DEAR OR NOT DEAR.”*

... Dhammapada Verses 210-211

Hello... and Goodbye... Mother Africa

It had been seven years since I had left Africa. It had been a long, divergent, and unpredictable journey with many twists and reversals so I was excited to go home to visit my family. I felt a rush of emotions as the plane landed at Entebbe Airport. I was finally at home — everything was so familiar but so strange in some ways.

However, once I arrived home I realized that most of my relatives and loved ones in the family had expected me to return as a rich and successful businessman with a briefcase. But, I was now only a simple Buddhist yogi with a shaven head, carrying scuba diving gear in a backpack and many books on Buddhism. People could not understand why I was carrying the two in Africa. In Uganda there was no Buddhist temple or even a single Buddhist teacher and certainly there is no sea in which to dive.

Many relatives offered me goats or chicken to welcome and honor me but I did not authorize their slaughter as I did not want animals to be killed specifically for me.

They tried to convert me back to Christianity but by then I had great conviction in the **Buddha's** Teachings. Some of my distant relatives advised me to burn my books on Buddhism and read the Bible instead but, of course, I refused. They became very frustrated, disappointed and disillusioned with me.

I continued meditating in my room alone and read the books on Buddhism I had collected from Asia. But after so many years in India and Asia with access to good spiritual friends and teachers, in Uganda I had no spiritual friends for

me to relate to or with whom to discuss my spiritual findings. I felt unfulfilled and lacked a sense of community. I was frustrated, disappointed and disillusioned. I decided to leave my homeland for the second time to search for some deeper Truth. This time it would be to devote my entire time to spiritual practice.

*“BETTER IT IS TO LIVE ONE DAY VIRTUOUS AND MEDITATIVE THAN
TO LIVE A HUNDRED YEARS IMMORAL AND UNCONTROLLED.
.. BETTER IT IS TO LIVE ONE DAY WISE AND MEDITATIVE THAN TO
LIVE A HUNDRED YEARS FOOLISH AND UNCONTROLLED.*

... Dhammapada Verses 110-111

Welcome to the Americas

I spent one year in South America traveling and practicing meditation on my own before reaching the United States. In 1999, I attended a three-month retreat at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts. At long last, I had found established fellow Buddhist practitioners, my **Saṅgha**, and IMS became my spiritual home — a home away from home. Despite my initial plans to return to South America after the retreat, I joined the staff of IMS until 2000. During that time I worked, studied with the various teachers, participated in retreats and practiced meditation.



I met **Bhante** Gunaratana at IMS in 2000 when he had come to conduct a retreat. He took daily walks during the retreat. At the end of a walk together, Bhante Gunaratana told me that I should visit him at the Bhavana Society. This place would become my resident monastery — my “home for the homeless,” after my ordination later.



Everything happens due to causes and conditions that are always changing. The same applied to my time at IMS. It is important to observe the changes in life. Things might look very solid and stable but conditions do change and stability disappears. Unexpectedly, I had to leave IMS.

There is a saying that goes: the corner in the road is not the end of the road unless you fail to turn. Now I had to make a big new turn in life. But where would that lead in turn?

*“ONE IS THE PATH FOR WORLDLY GAIN (WEALTH), AND QUITE
ANOTHER IS THE PATH TO NIBBĀNA.
CLEARLY UNDERSTANDING THIS, LET NOT THE MONK, THE DISCIPLE
OF THE **BUDDHA**, BE CARRIED AWAY BY WORLDLY CONCERNS
(ACCLAIM) BUT DEVELOP DETACHMENT INSTEAD.”*

... Dhammapada Verse 75

The Renunciation

I made my decision. I would “escape” from worldly concerns. I had become dissatisfied with material wealth

through my experiences in Thailand. I had found happiness in my study of Buddhism. I wanted to devote my life to its study and practice. I would renounce a lesser happiness (worldly happiness) for what, to me, was a greater happiness ... my spiritual development. By the end of the three months' insight meditation retreat at IMS, I realized even more clearly that true happiness comes from within and not from without. Of course, we need external help (material things) to support our spiritual development but these external conditions are not the end all and, be all. They are simply a means to an end. If we make our material support the ultimate goal for our life then, this defeats the purpose of life. The Buddhist's purpose of life is to live a moral life and ultimately, to reach **Nibbāna**.

I was resolved that I would take the path to be confirmed as a Buddhist monk. This must happen in a monastery with a senior monk who is willing to take a student. Where should I go?

“ABANDONING THE DARK WAY, LET THE WISE MAN CULTIVATE THE BRIGHT PATH. HAVING GONE FROM HOME TO HOMELESSNESS, LET HIM YEARN FOR THE DELIGHT IN DETACHMENT, SO DIFFICULT TO ENJOY.

GIVING UP SENSUAL PLEASURE, WITH NO ATTACHMENT, LET THE WISE MAN CLEANSE HIMSELF OF DEFILEMENTS OF THE MIND.”

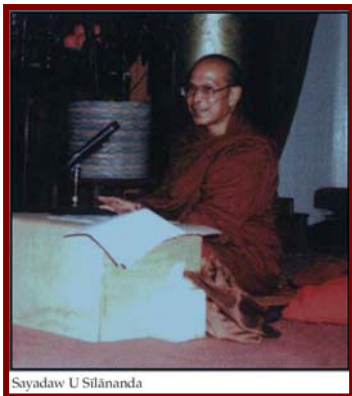
... Dhammapada Verses 87-88

Seeking Higher Ordination

A friend had recommended a small center, **Tathagata** (name the Buddha used to refer to Himself) Meditation Center (TMC) in San Jose, California. He said the people there, especially the Vietnamese devotees, had generous hearts even though it was only a small center. After considering various options, I went there in 2001. I met Venerable Pannadipa and



immediately, naively, asked him if I could be ordained. I had not realized that there was a whole training process leading to ordination. He seemed surprised to see a black African so sincerely interested in ordination without formal training. How could he know how serious I was? I was anxiously looking for spiritual transformation. He agreed for me to stay



Sayadaw U Silananda

at TMC in order to undertake the training before ordination. I started the intensive meditation and monastic training that finally led to higher ordination as a **Theravada** Buddhist monk by my Preceptor, **Sayadaw U Silananda** at TMC, San Jose, California in 2002.

After some time, I moved to the Bhavana Society, West Virginia to practice with **Bhante Gunaratana**.

My American journey had reached a quiescent place and I became a permanent resident.



Then, how did the **Buddha**'s Teachings get to Uganda?

Was I ready to interface with my fellow Africans most of whom had never heard about Buddhism?

Should I go to meditate in caves in India or spread the **Dhamma** in Africa?

*"GO FORTH TO TEACH THE **DHAMMA** OUT OF COMPASSION FOR
THE WORLD, FOR THE BENEFIT, WELFARE AND HAPPINESS OF THE
PEOPLE.*

LET NOT TWO OF YOU GO THE SAME WAY.

*SPREAD THE **DHAMMA** WHICH IS EXCELLENT IN THE BEGINNING,
EXCELLENT IN THE MIDDLE AND EXCELLENT IN THE END. "*

... the Buddha

PART II

BUDDHISM IN UGANDA

PLANTING DHAMMA SEEDS

FIRST DHAMMA MISSION TO AFRICA

More than a decade ago, while I was in India, I had made initial plans with a mixed group of Africans and other friends to launch the “Afro - Tibetan Friendship Society” to attempt to establish the **Dhamma** in Uganda and other African countries. Unfortunately, the African land was still dry, the fields were not tilled ... the time was not ripe.

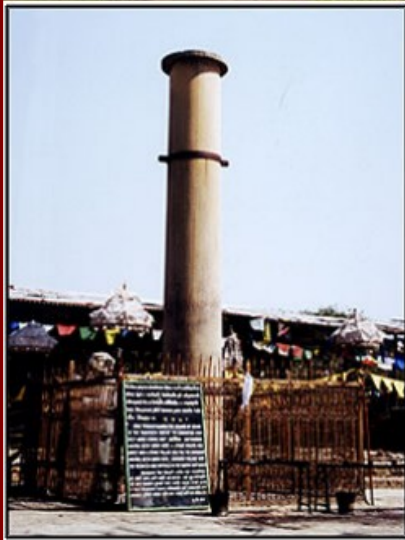
While I was at the TMC in San Jose, California, Sayadaw U Pannadipa had suggested that I go and spread the **Dhamma** in Africa, starting with my family. A few years before, Sayadaw U Beelin had asked me to consider returning to Africa one day and sharing the **Dhamma** — starting with my family too.

Later, I sought **Bhante** Gunaratana’s opinion whether at this time, it was better for me to go to India and meditate in a cave (something dear to the hearts of monks for their own personal training) or go share the **Dhamma** in Africa. He strongly advised me to go and teach the **Dhamma** to Africans sooner rather than later. A few friends in the United States discouraged me from going back to Africa. They were concerned regarding my support from the local people with respect to food and shelter and the other provisions, “the

basic requisites” Buddhist laypersons provide for monks. Would I be ready to interface with my fellow Africans who had never heard of Buddhism? I took heart in hand and decided to carry the **Buddha**’s Teaching to Africa.

GOING ON PILGRIMAGE TO BUDDHIST HOLY PLACES

I planned the initial journey that would extend over six



months in Asia and Africa. In October 2004, Venerable

Khippapanno accepted me to join a group on a Buddhist pilgrimage to India and Nepal. Despite my years in India, this was my first visit to the

Buddha’s birthplace and it added to my faith and confidence in the **Dhamma**.

Thereafter, I went to Burma and Sri Lanka before finally landing in Uganda to visit my mother and, hopefully, introduce Buddhism there. In Sri Lanka,

my host,

Dhammaruwan (a renowned Sri Lankan Buddhist child

prodigy who has been practicing **Samatha** (concentration) and **Vipassana** (insight) meditation for some twenty years since age nine), gave me a choice of two Buddha statues to take to Uganda — a small statue or a larger one. Since my name, **Buddharakkhita** means “*protector of the Buddha*” in **Pāli**, I boldly chose the larger statue and determined to protect it. However, I could not foresee that protecting the Buddha statue would give me so much hardship on my way to Africa.



Venerable **Buddharakkhita** receiving the **Buddha** image from **Upasaka** (lay male Buddhist devotee) Dhammaruwan

*“THE WORLD IS BLIND.
HERE THERE ARE FEW WHO CLEARLY SEE.
AS BIRDS ESCAPING FROM A NET, FEW GO TO A BLISSFUL STATE.”*

... Dhammapada Verse 174

TRAVELING WITH THE BUDDHA STATUE IN KENYA

After answering seemingly hundreds of questions about the Buddha statue in Mumbai (Bombay), India on a nearly five-hour layover, then on board the plane and again at Kenyan immigration, I felt exhausted. Even worse, I felt terrible because the statue, which I had vowed to protect, had broken from its base due to constant handling. I wanted to keep it with me, and in order to protect it during our travels, I had wrapped the statue in a monk's robe. But this was not good enough. The immigration officials asked so many questions.

"Is that a baby you are carrying? Where is its boarding pass?"

"No!" I insisted, "It is just a statue."

Another official asked, "Is this your mungu (God)?"

"No! In Buddhism the statue is not a God."

"Why do you cover it? You do not want other people to see it?"

"No, I cover it because it is fragile and to avoid it getting scratched," I explained.

When I placed the statue on the counter of the immigration desk, in order to hand over my travel documents, the immigration official asked, "What is this? It is scaring people! Please remove it!"



The **Buddha** image wrapped in the robe for protection

“It is a statue of the **Buddha**,” I replied. I was in a dilemma. I could not both hold the statue and show my travel documents at the same time. When I left the statue sitting alone, the authorities threatened to destroy it, but when I rested it on the counter, people were scared to come near it.

The officials continued, “It looks like African magic, weird things of witchcraft.”

“Why are you carrying this statue? Open it! Can I see it? Are you carrying things inside it? Possibly drugs?”

“No! It is simply a **Buddha** statue,” I answered and unwrapped it.

“Do not sell it in Nairobi!”

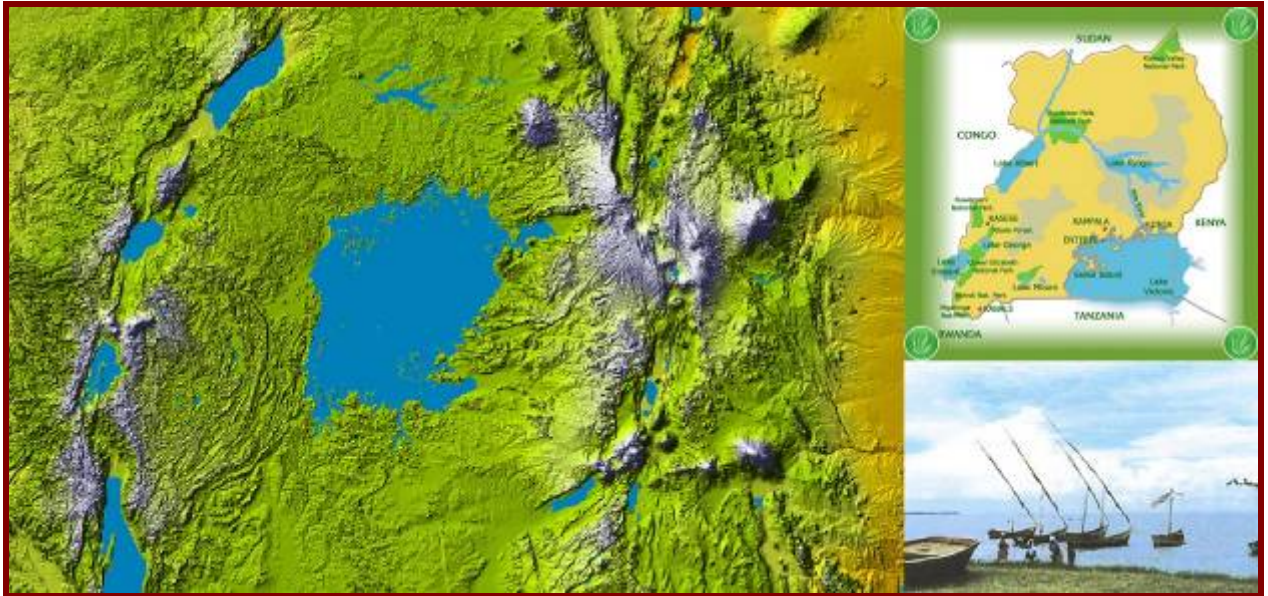
“It is not for sale,” I humbly replied.

Lastly he commented, “It is beautiful!”

I thanked him and walked away.

I spent a few days in Kenya recuperating from the journey. Before proceeding to Uganda, I determined to wrap the statue well in the robes, cover it with newspaper, and keep it in a bag on my way to Uganda.

LOVELY UGANDA!



Finally, I arrived at the Entebbe International Airport in Uganda on a bright, sunny day. I felt a fresh breeze off beautiful Lake Victoria. However, I was not sure how my fellow countrymen were going to perceive me in my Buddhist robes. I really appeared like a foreigner in my native country. I joined a long queue at the Immigration desk. Sure enough, the Ugandan people looked at me with inquisitive, anxious eyes. Inspecting my Ugandan passport, the official read my name confirming that I was from the *Baganda* tribe, which left him puzzled. He saw a man in robes apparently coming in from the Ugandan countryside but who had just arrived from the USA.

He asked me, shockedly, “Why pretend to be a *Maasai* when you are a typical *Baganda*?”

I told him that I am a Buddhist monk. He grudgingly let me go through but did not seem particularly convinced.

*“A MAN LONG ABSENT AND RETURNED SAFE FROM AFAR, HIS
KINSMEN, FRIENDS, AND WELL-WISHERS WELCOME HIM ON HIS
ARRIVAL.*

*LIKEWISE, HIS GOOD DEEDS WILL RECEIVE THE WELL-DOER WHO
HAS GONE FROM THIS WORLD TO THE NEXT, AS KINSMEN WILL
RECEIVE A DEAR ONE ON HIS RETURN.”*

... Dhammapada Verses 219-220

WELCOMING A LONG LOST BUDDHIST SON!

My sister met me at the airport; she was thrilled to see me and, respectfully addressed me as “Pastor.” We went home to meet my mother who was overjoyed to see me. It seemed unbelievable that almost another seven years had passed since I had last seen my mother. My family was amazed to see me in a Buddhist monk’s robes. My mother could not believe what she saw. She kept asking me, “Is that you, my son, Steven?”



“Yes, mother, it is I,” I responded.

Then she walked around the living room, constantly watching me while tears kept rolling down her face. She walked another round and said “Thank God! You have returned.”

I knew that there was no God who had brought me back home, but I did not want to dispute the point, fearing this would hurt my mother’s feelings. My relatives looked at my robes and carefully observed my behavior. I gradually realized that with the robe, the Buddhist monk’s etiquette requirements and the Buddha statue, I could no longer stay in this house.

“JUST AS WHATEVER GREAT RIVERS THERE ARE — SUCH AS THE GANGES, THE YAMUNA ... ON REACHING THE OCEAN, GIVE UP THEIR FORMER NAMES AND ARE CLASSED SIMPLY AS ‘OCEAN’.
*IN THE SAME WAY, WHEN MEMBERS OF THE FOUR CASTES — NOBLE WARRIORS, PRIESTS, MERCHANTS, AND WORKERS — GO FORTH FROM HOME TO THE HOMELESS LIFE IN THE DOCTRINE AND DISCIPLINE, DECLARED BY THE **BUDDHA**, THEY GIVE UP THEIR FORMER NAMES AND CLANS AND ARE CLASSED SIMPLY AS ‘CONTEMPLATIVES’, SONS OF THE **SAKYAN**....”*

... The Buddha

MAD MAN?

On the day I arrived in Uganda, there was a heavy downpour. It was difficult to look for alternative accommodation. Moreover, I wanted to stay near my mother and the rest of the family. I decided to get accommodations

in a nearby hotel. People continued to look puzzled, and sometimes even concerned, when they saw me. Some people thought that my robes were the traditional clothing of the Maasai tribe.



One morning as I left my hotel room, I walked past two women. I engaged in walking meditation, very slowly walking back and forth in a 20-foot path, with my gaze fixed only a couple of steps ahead of my feet. I overheard the two ladies arguing.

One said, “This man is a mad man!”

The other one said, “A mad man cannot afford to stay in such a good hotel. He cannot be a mad man!”

As I was returning to the hotel, two children looked at me fearfully and ran away saying, “This man is going to eat us!”

This reminded me of how as a young boy, I had been exposed to traditional Baganda tales of strange places with strange people. In fact, when I was a child, there was a ragged man that I came across regularly that I greatly feared and thought would eat me.

*“OF ALL MEDICINES IN THE WORLD MANIFOLD AND VARIOUS, THERE IS NONE LIKE THE MEDICINE OF **DHAMMA**. THEREFORE, O MONKS, DRINK OF THIS.*

*HAVING DRUNK THIS **DHAMMA** MEDICINE, YOU WILL BE AGELESS AND BEYOND DEATH; YOU WILL BE QUENCHED, AND FREE FROM CRAVING.”*

... The Buddha

MEDICINE MAN OR WITCH DOCTOR?

Some Ugandans thought of me as a medicine man when they saw me carrying my monk's bag. "Hey! What are you selling?" they would ask.

Ugandans seem to yearn for medicine even when they look healthy. Carrying my monk's bag, some locals thought that I was a traditional medicine man, commonly called a witch doctor. I later confirmed that the *Maasai* had started selling their traditional herbs and medicine around Kampala.

I gave up a business career to become a Buddhist monk but people in Uganda still think I am a businessman! Actually, monks are not allowed to engage in any business, exchange of money or to practice medicine. But the medicine of the **Dhamma** is not for sale! I was really carrying **Dhamma** seeds. I wish they could experience the real medicine of the **Dhamma**. I was later informed that the *Maasai* medicine was not necessarily just for illness, but also for the general well being of a person. This made me reflect on the **Dhamma** in which the medicine is a universal message of happiness and well being.

*"BY ONESELF IS EVIL DONE; BY ONESELF IS ONE DEFILED.
BY ONESELF IS EVIL LEFT UNDONE; BY ONESELF IS ONE MADE
PURE.
PURITY AND IMPURITY DEPEND ON ONESELF; NO ONE CAN PURIFY
ANOTHER."*

... Dhammapada Verse 165

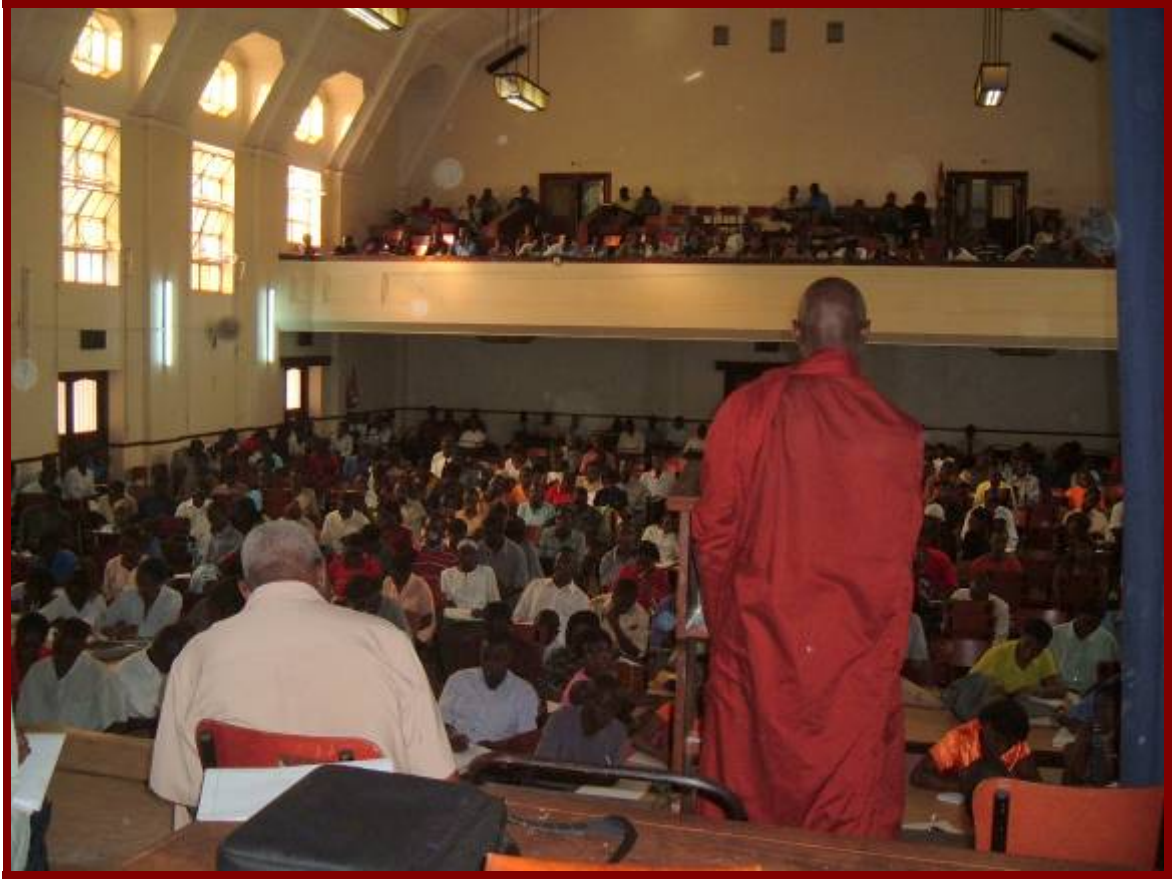
GOING TO PLAY LAWN TENNIS OR GUARD OUR KING? A MONK MISSING ONE ARM ... SALVATION!!

Seeing the big Buddhist fan, a religious object I had brought from Myanmar (Burma) some people thought that it was a new kind of tennis racket, “*ensero*,” and asked me where I was going to play lawn tennis. Some people thought it to be the shield that I use to protect my body. Still other people thought that I was the royal bodyguard of our King, or a notable representative of the Pope from the Vatican in Rome. (Pope John Paul’s funeral ceremonies taking place at the time may have prompted those thoughts!)

My orange — brown robe caused more confusion. I went to a village one afternoon while dressed formally in full robes. This entails having one arm fully inside the robes with the other arm free to move. When the kids saw me, they said among themselves, “Look at the man with only one arm!”

On visiting a pharmacist, I happened to lean on the counter with the arm folded inside my robe. He thought that my arm was broken and in a plaster cast. I had to convince the pharmacist that I had no problem with my arm. If you ever go to Africa as a Buddhist monk, you should expect to cause quite a stir!

At other times, the reactions were even stronger. One day, the University of Makerere in Kampala, invited me to deliver a public lecture on “The Nature of Buddhism and Its Significance in Africa.” I mentioned in my talk that the causes of human misery and suffering are greed, hatred, and delusion. The way out of the misery and suffering is to abandon these traits.



Venerable **Buddharakkhita** delivering his lecture at the University of Makerere in Kampala

After my lecture, one student sent me a note (a sort of ultimatum!) that read “Dear Sir, The source of suffering is the devil. So, once you accept Jesus Christ, together with his father, God, then you will attain happiness. I advise you to accept Salvation in order to attain happiness which is not found in your small gods.”

A Buddhist understands that people are responsible for their own choices. Final salvation or the attainment of **Nibbāna** will come only from within oneself.

I was pleasantly surprised that the website of Makerere University had a caption on their home page which was a quote from the **Dhammapada** from my lecture, “You,

yourselves, should make the effort; the **Buddhas** are only teachers.” (They only show the way).

“Those, who enter this path and are meditative, are delivered from the bonds of evil.

*“HE, WHO HAS GONE FOR REFUGE TO THE **BUDDHA, DHAMMA**
AND **SANĠHA**, PENETRATES WITH TRANSCENDENTAL WISDOM.
THE **FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS**: SUFFERING, THE CAUSE OF
SUFFERING, THE CESSATION OF SUFFERING, AND THE NOBLE
EIGHTFOLD PATH LEADING TO THE CESSATION OF SUFFERING.”*

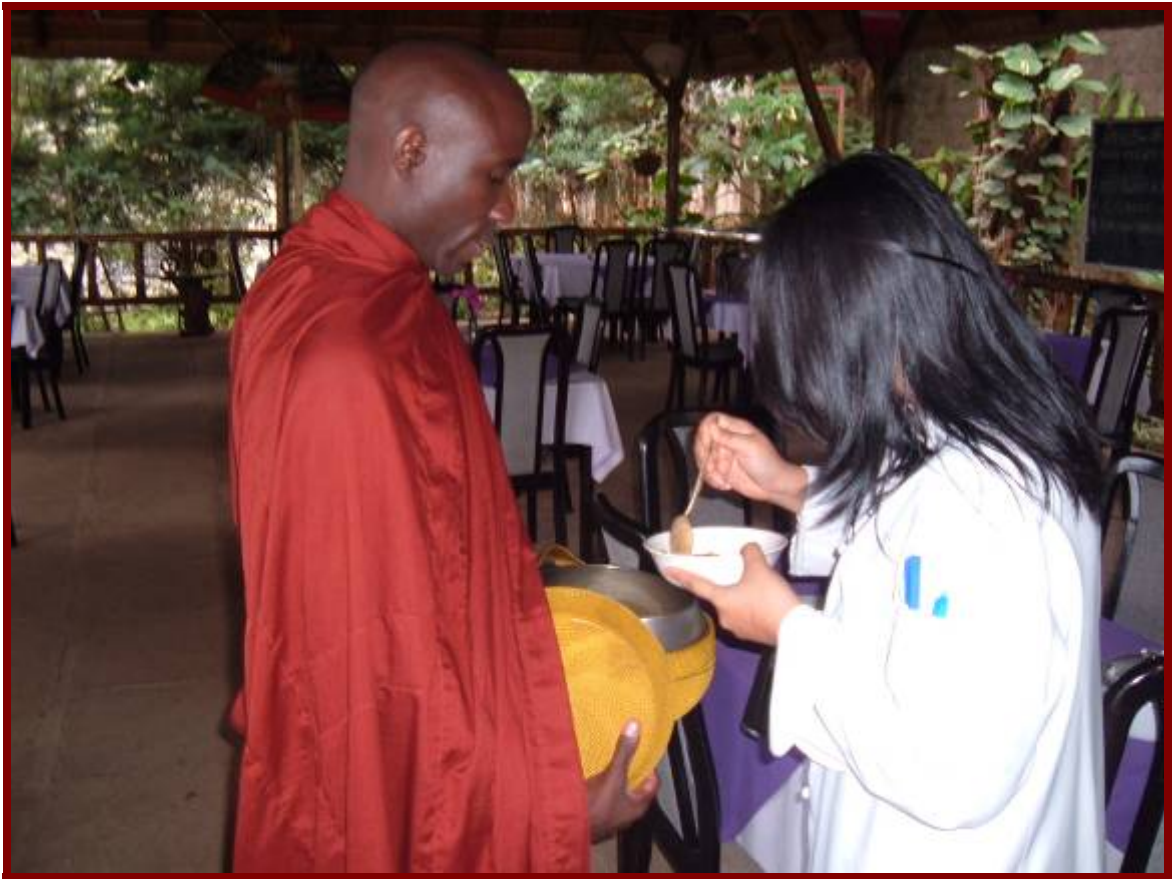
... Dhammapada Verses 190-191

MOTHER TAKES REFUGE

At first, only my mother, younger sister and brother-in-law visited me in the hotel. Eventually other relatives and their friends followed, perhaps out of curiosity. I showed them pictures of my Buddhist friends, of when I was ordained, my pilgrimage in India, Myanmar (Burma) and Sri Lanka. They all said the pictures of temples and monks were beautiful. I also brought the gifts that the Vietnamese and Thai Buddhist devotees (from the USA) had sent especially for my mother. She was deeply moved and could not understand why these Buddhist devotees had thought of her and had made such loving and kind gestures toward her.

Explaining Buddhism to my mother and other family members was not easy. Luckily, some of my friends in the

USA had given me addresses of some people from Thailand and Sri Lanka who were living in Uganda.



Thai devotees offering alms to Venerable **Buddharakkhita** during **pindapatta** (alms round)

So I decided to visit them with my mother. The first visit was to a restaurant owned and run by four Thais. Upon seeing me, these Thai people were very happy and treated me with deep respect. They bowed all the way to the ground and offered me orange juice. This is the custom often seen in **Theravada** Buddhist countries when a layperson meets a Buddhist monk. My mother was very surprised, perhaps even a bit confused. Afterwards, we went to visit a factory owned by a Sri Lankan. The factory manager was a tall, well-dressed gentleman. As soon as he saw me, he also bowed in the customary way, as a gesture of respect to me. Once

again, my mother was utterly surprised. Certainly, she did not know about the custom of bowing or the story of Venerable Sariputta's mother during the time of the **Buddha**. When Venerable Sariputta returned home to see his mother, many **devas** (*beings from heavenly realms*) came and paid homage to him. This was a pleasant and an awakening surprise to his mother that made her decide to convert to Buddhism, taking refuge in the **Buddha**, the **Dhamma** and the **Saṅgha**. Amazingly, later, my mother would respond in much the same way.



Sri Lankan visitors with Venerable **Buddharakkhita** in Uganda

*“BUT SOME PEOPLE HAVE A LITTLE DUST IN THEIR EYES; THEY
WILL BE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND THE DHAMMA.”*

... The Buddha

BEHOLDING THE BEAUTY OF THE BUDDHA STATUE

A few days later, I moved to another hotel, near the Thai restaurant, where I officially unwrapped the cloth covering the **Buddha** statue. My sister exclaimed, “The **Buddha** statue looks like a female figure!”

I told her that it was beautiful and many people admired the complexion of the **Buddha**. I mentioned that, apparently, people who meditate tend to have beautiful minds. Consequently, they get a beautiful skin complexion. On that day, my mother was also present. I saw her gazing at the corner of the room and I asked her what she was looking at. She said that she was fascinated by the beauty of the **Buddha** statue and had become absorbed in beholding it. A moment later, she told me that she wanted to become a Buddhist. She had once been a Christian (Protestant) and then she had become a Muslim for the past ten years. Now she certainly had to reflect deeply on the many new and strange things happening since my homecoming before deciding to become a Buddhist. Officially, to become a Buddhist you have only to take the Three Refuges. However, to become a virtuous Buddhist you also have to take the Five Precepts:

THE FIVE PRECEPTS

- 1. I undertake the training rule to refrain from destroying living creatures.***
- 2. I undertake the training rule to refrain from taking what is not given.***
- 3. I undertake the training rule to refrain from sexual misconduct.***
- 4. I undertake the training rule to refrain from false speech.***
- 5. I undertake the training rule to refrain from taking intoxicating drinks and drugs, which lead to heedlessness.***

I spent a lot of time translating the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts to our local language. This was the first time I was to administer the Refuges and Precepts taking ceremony in my native language. However, I conducted the ceremony for her. My mother took the Five Precepts easily and naturally. She had never known Buddhism but morally, one could almost say she has lived her life as a Buddhist. That shows how the **Dhamma** is universal. Perhaps, she had the **Dhamma** seeds in her for many lives! Who knows? Soon, within one month of setting foot back in my homeland, there were five members from my family and friends who took refuge in the **Buddha**, the **Dhamma** and the **Saṅgha**. Amongst them were my mother, my younger sister and my brother-in-law. This reminded me of the first five disciples of the **Buddha** almost 2,600 years ago.



Venerable **Buddharakkhita** administering the Five Precepts in front of the “mobile temple”

No MONEY TO FEED THE THREE REFUGES!

Some people used to offer me food and I always offered blessings to the people who offered me the food. One of them had a keen interest in Buddhism. She wanted to know how to become a Buddhist. I told her that she should take the Three Refuges in the **Buddha**, **Dhamma** and **Saṅgha** repeating the phrases for taking the Three Refuges (which are repeated three times) as follows:

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
*(I go to the **Buddha** as my refuge)*
Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(I go to the **Dhamma** as my refuge)
Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
(I go to the **Saṅgha** as my refuge)

For the second time:

Dutiyampi Buddhamaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
(For the second time I go to the **Buddha** as my refuge)
Dutiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
(For the second time I go to the **Dhamma** as my refuge)
Dutiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
(For the second time I go to the **Saṅgha** as my refuge)

For the third time:

Tatīyampi Buddhamaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
(For the third time I go to the **Buddha** as my refuge)
Tatīyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
(For the third time I go to the **Dhamma** as my refuge)
Tatīyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
(For the third time I go to the **Saṅgha** as my refuge)

As I continued to teach her, I saw her face frowning from time to time.

She interrupted, “But just wait ... What if I do not have enough money to feed the three ‘refugees’?”

“Do not worry,” I said and explained to her the Three Refuges and she felt relieved of the burden. Did she think that these are proper names of refugees from Sudan, Rwanda or the Congo?

Before I left Uganda, she visited our Buddhist Center. The number of devotees had started to increase and they took the Three Refuges!



Thai Buddhist visitors at the Uganda Buddhist Center

A few weeks before I left for the USA, my three nieces and one nephew joined the path of the **Buddha**. In a period of one month, which I spent in Uganda, a group of nine local Ugandans became Buddhists. On my second visit to Uganda, my nephew said, “I want to be like you,” meaning that he aspired to become a monk. Plans are under way to send him to an Asian country and ordain him as a novice monk.



Venerable **Buddharakkhita** teaching meditation to a niece

MASAAI MONK?

Before returning to the US, I spent one week in Kenya. The people were very friendly and I seemed to fit into the society. On one occasion, a *Maasai* man stopped me, “Er-wo!” I was at a loss, not realizing the significance of the word. I stood in silence for a while not knowing what to say. Later, it occurred to me that it might have been a greeting in the local *Maasai* dialect. The *Maasai* people wrap *shukas* (a sheet of cloth), very close to the color of my dark-brown robes, around their bodies.

When I passed through Kangemi village, a *Maasai* lady, who sells traditional medicine, always gave me a salutation

by clasping her hands together. Interestingly, this is the traditional way Buddhists greet monks. I do not know how she learned to greet me.



Venerable **Buddharakkhita** with a real Maasai outside the Buddhist Center

My resemblance to the *Maasai* and their friendliness eventually gave me a sense of belonging — I had found a place as a *Maasai* monk in the society. I would later use this friendly atmosphere to teach the **Dhamma** to the locals who were more willing to listen as I appeared to be one of them.

Was there still **Dhamma** work for me to complete in Africa? Undoubtedly I was motivated by the faith of the new Buddhists and determined to continue to scatter the seeds of the **Dhamma**.

*"ALL TREMBLE AT VIOLENCE; LIFE IS DEAR TO ALL.
PUTTING ONESELF IN THE PLACE OF ANOTHER, ONE SHOULD NOT
KILL NOR CAUSE ANOTHER TO KILL."*

... Dhammapada Verse 130

RETURNING TO IRRIGATE THE DHAMMA SEEDS SETTLING IN AND CULTURE CLASHES

On my second trip to Africa after almost a year in the USA, I continued to notice that people looked at me curiously, trying to understand my role in African society. Sometimes I received support and encouragement from the locals and other **Dhamma** adherents. I visited Kenya after one month in Uganda. Each morning, I would go for **pindapatta** (alms round).

A gatekeeper named John at the University of Nairobi turned out to be a great storyteller. Over Christmas my charming friend asked me what I intended to have for lunch on such a special day. I informed him I always ate anything offered, but I would suggest a vegetarian lunch. He informed me that on such a day, they 'chinja' (butcher) a cow, a chicken and so on, to signify that it is a special day amidst all the other days in a year.

I asked him why they kill animals. He said that God told them to kill cows, goats, chickens and so on, but he forbade them to kill and eat human beings, leopards, elephants, etc. I then asked him if animals have a right to be happy and enjoy "Christmas" as he does. "Animals do not know Christmas," John replied. I put it strongly that one should not kill

animals because they are living beings too and suffer a lot while being killed. He confidently responded that people enjoyed killing animals for food. He maintained that ‘*nyama choma*’ (roasted meat) and locally brewed liquor going by the name of ‘*cha’ngaa*’, African vodka, were the food and drink that mark the celebrations of Christmas Day. I told him that monks are not allowed to drink alcohol, while he tried to convince me that a little wine certainly does not do any harm. “Just a little bit!” Concerning my preference for vegetables, he commented that too much ‘*sukuma wiki*’ (kales, a healthful garden vegetable) might end up growing alive in my stomach! He warned me not to eat only vegetables.

*“HAPPY INDEED WE LIVE, WE WHO POSSESS NOTHING.
FEEDERS ON JOY WE SHALL BE, LIKE THE RADIANT GODS.”*

... Dhammapada Verse 200

THE DOLLAR MAN

After many encounters with John, he learned how I became a Buddhist monk, and that I was now a permanent resident of the United States. He said, “You are a dollar man. Can you give me a sack of dollars that you brought from America?” He made me laugh when he informed me that he would be eager to work in the temple because the gatekeeper in the Buddhist Center had ‘*tumbo kubwa*’ (a big stomach). Contrary to Western belief, Africans believe that having a big stomach is a sign of being well off. In this case, when John saw our gatekeeper, he believed that there was more food and money in the Buddhist temple and that the workers

there are better fed. I had to explain to him that the only thing I could offer was some blessings. When I was about to offer the blessings, he proceeded to amaze me by the respect he displayed as he took off his cap and bowed for the blessings. Before I left, he asked, “Only blessings?” He seemed to value more tangible things than the blessings. Later on, he continuously asked for dollars. I replied that I had no dollars. I explained that as Buddhist monks, we do not get a salary or own anything. I helped him understand that we, as monastics, depend on the generosity of others. Therefore, we go for alms rounds each morning in the neighborhood. Meanwhile, the lay people depend on the monastics for their spiritual guidance. So there is a symbiotic relationship between monastics and lay people.

*“AS A BEE GATHERS HONEY FROM THE FLOWER WITHOUT INJURING
ITS COLOR OR FRAGRANCE, EVEN SO THE SAGE GOES ON HIS ALMS-
ROUND IN THE VILLAGE (WITHOUT AFFECTING THE FAITH AND
GENEROSITY OR WEALTH OF THE VILLAGERS).”*

... Dhammapada Verse 49

GOING FOR ALMS — MANY ALMS ROUNDS, ONE SWEET BANANA!

My alms bowl was a constant source of inquiry. Some people thought I was carrying an African drum, perhaps a small “*jembe*.” This reminded me of my layover in London once when an English waitress also mistook my bowl for an African drum. When she started beating on it and I told her it was my alms bowl, she quickly apologized. On my daily alms

round in Kenya, whenever I passed by the University gate, my friend John always had questions for me and stories to share. He wondered how on earth an African man who was not a *Maasai* could be wearing a robe and roaming around with a “*bakuli*” (alms bowl). I had to explain to him the significance of a robe and going for alms round in the Buddhist monkhood.



Venerable **Buddharakkhita** going for **pindapatta** (alms round)

One day, while going for alms, I decided to walk barefoot. John was amazed and said I was quite a funny sight. He burst out laughing and told me that I was walking barefoot like a chicken! He said that walking barefoot signified that I was poor and jobless. Moreover, there were many sharp, broken pieces of glass along the road, so he worried that I might end up in the hospital Emergency Room. He asked,

“Don’t you have slippers or sandals?” He warned me half-jokingly, “Next time you come barefoot I will close the gate and refuse to let you through.” This was a kind, albeit misguided, expression of concern. Later on, after my lunch I went back and explained to John that it is our tradition as monks to walk barefoot while going for alms. He was finally convinced.

Earlier, John had asked about my alms bowl, which to him resembled a pot and signified that I was on a long journey. He asked whether I was going out of the country.

I said, “No, I’m going for alms-round to look for food.” He just laughed.

Then he said, “Look for food? You’re already rich!” (Actually, monks and nuns are not allowed to possess any money, so this was quite a misunderstanding).

I paused and asked him, “Are you a Christian?”

He answered, “Yes.”

I asked him, “Do you give something to the priest or to the church?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“When you give, how do you feel?”

“Ah, I feel happy,” he responded with a wide smile.

I said, “You see, it is the same situation. We don’t stand in church on Sunday; instead we roam around every day to give

the people an opportunity to perform meritorious actions by giving. If you give, you feel happy, don't you?"

Finally, he seemed to understand and gave me a sweet banana. Getting that one banana had been like squeezing blood from a stone!

I gave the blessings. He was very respectful. I was happy to offer blessings to him. That banana had a special taste quite different from other bananas — the taste of **dana** (generosity).

*"HEALTH IS THE MOST PRECIOUS GAIN AND CONTENTMENT THE
GREATEST WEALTH.
A TRUSTWORTHY PERSON IS THE BEST KINSMAN, **NIBBĀNA** THE
HIGHEST BLISS."*

... Dhammapada Verse 204

JUST A SIMPLE MONK ...THAT'S IT!

Amazingly, on my next alms round, John again asked me to give him something at least. I promised to send him this **Dhamma** book once it is published. He was so happy. It is as if he had invested a banana in some future enterprise that might net him large sums of US dollars some day. In the end, I was not surprised because many people give things with the expectation that they will get back something in return — at the very least a pleasant thank you. Of course, we should always be grateful to people who give us things out of charity. Traditionally, when people offer something to a monk

or nun, they are the ones who give thanks to the monks or nuns. The donors do not even expect a word of thanks from the monks or nuns. Each donor knows that they are the ones receiving merits. John couldn't understand how a person who resided in one of the richest countries in the world — the so-called “super power,” America — could be going around with an alms bowl “begging” for food. Actually, monks do not beg for alms. Instead, they collect alms and must accept any food offered them. (It is a minor offence for monks to beg or ask for specific foods from people who are not related to them by blood).

I convinced him that although I live in a rich county. I am only a simple monk born in Uganda. This incident reminded me of an American lady who once asked me, while I was getting ready to go for my alms round in Winchester, West Virginia. “How does it feel going for your alms round as a black African, in orange robes, begging for food in a rural mountain town in one of the most conservative states in America?”

*“FROM CRAVING SPRINGS GRIEF, FROM CRAVING SPRINGS FEAR.
FROM HIM WHO IS WHOLLY FREE FROM CRAVING THERE IS NO
GRIEF; WHENCE THEN FEAR?”*

... Dhammapada Verse 216

CARRYING BOMB, BALL OR BASKET?

During my morning alms round, a man mistook my “food bowl” for a football. I also met a group of ladies waiting to

harvest coffee beans in the nearby coffee plantation. They stopped me and asked, “*Habari yako?*” (How are you?)

One of the ladies started frowning at me. She looked scared and said, “I am afraid of the bomb you are carrying.” Later on she asked, “Is that really a bomb?”

“No!” I said, as I opened my alms bowl while a handful of them surrounded me. I told them it was an alms bowl.

When I opened it, the lady shouted, “Oh! It is empty!”

I said, “It is just full of air!”

The women also innocently asked, “What God do you pray to in your temple?”

Before I could answer they asked me if they were welcome to visit the temple. I was surprised by their eagerness to see the Buddhist Center. All in all, my stay in Africa was wonderful. I came to learn a lot about how the locals viewed Buddhist monks and the Buddhism (the ***Dhamma***) that I represented.

Well, I have gone on alms rounds in Africa many times, without much success so far. One reason I am not successful in getting alms on my rounds in Uganda is that whenever people see me with my alms bowl, they want to buy it. They think it is a basket or a handbag.

“How much is this?” they always ask. Actually, the bowl costs around \$50 or so — quite a price for an average Ugandan. Sometimes they think that I am a local *shaman* trying to sell medicine to them. I am also not successful yet

because some people think I am just plain crazy....out randomly collecting things.

*“SHOULD A PERSON PERFORM A MERITORIOUS ACTION, HE SHOULD
DO IT AGAIN AND AGAIN,
HE SHOULD FIND PLEASURE THEREIN: BLISSFUL IS THE
ACCUMULATION OF MERITS.*

... the Buddha

BUDDHIST BISHOP, SHAOLIN MASTER OR SCOUT MASTER?

When I was in Uganda, I continued the alms round tradition. I decided to go to *Mmengo* and as I went through the gate of the camping site where I had put up my “mobile temple,” the gatekeeper asked where I was going at that time. I explained to him the purpose of traveling with my alms bowl, going for my alms round. He offered me a packet of peanuts. This was an amazing gesture for me. Then, I proceeded to *Mmengo* for my alms. People looked at me in astonishment. They continuously asked me to sell the basket (alms bowl) to them but I told them it was not for sale, that I use it for eating from. I returned to the campsite without alms. One of the campsite attendants was willing to offer alms to me there. This was the first time I had ever received alms from a campsite attendant. Some people were beginning to understand me a little better now though. Among them was a campsite attendant who had taken to addressing me as a Buddhist bishop. I tell her that I am a simple monk, not a bishop.

At long last, some local people have begun taking pleasure and joy in offering me alms though they are living a hand-to-mouth existence. I could see people developing faith in the **Dhamma** when they are exposed to the simple lifestyle of a Buddhist monk. However, they got a different picture of what they thought to be a Buddhist bishop. Another day, an English couple offered me two bananas and a passion fruit.

Going for alms is a very humbling experience. I never know how things are going to turn out. Also, I become the center of attraction in Uganda. People always stare at me while I am walking on the roads with my shaven head and robes. Oftentimes, I did not receive food on my alms round but luckily, I had a backup from a group of four Thais from Krua Thai Restaurant in Kampala who promised to offer me food till I left Uganda. Added to which, my mother would bring me food from time to time.

Sometimes when I go to the suburbs of Kampala, people say I am a Shaolin Master who will not talk to anyone, just because I tend to keep quiet. Or as I do my walking meditation, they assume I am lost and looking for the right road. Some people mistook me for a “night dancer” or some kind of entertainer and wondered why I was doing “night dancing” so early in the morning. They even found it hard to identify my gender. One lady asked, “Is that a female or a male?” Others thought I was a Roy Scout Master due to my attire. As I was walking in the university town, a man asked when I had graduated, having assumed that I was wearing a graduation gown.

*"ENDURING PATIENCE IS THE HIGHEST AUSTERITY.
"NIBBANA IS SUPREME," SAY THE **BUDDHAS**.
HE IS NOT A TRUE MONK WHO HARMS ANOTHER, NOR A TRUE
RENUNCIATE WHO OPPRESSES OTHERS."*

... Dhammapada Verse 184

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH, THE TOUGH GET GOING DENIED RIDES AND ACCOMMODATION

Some people seemed to feel more fear than interest. Apparently Ugandan taxi drivers have more than their fair share of fear and anxiety. Three different drivers refused to pick me up although they each had displayed a sign indicating that they had a space available for one more person in the taxi. At first the drivers slowed down but on approaching me, they sped off.

Sometimes I had to walk long distances on foot because the taxis refused to give me a ride. I faced many challenging situations. Sometimes we need to face those situations head on and see the possibilities in them. Of course, walking exposed me more to the local people. I was open to them. Finally I was in the field trying to apply loving-kindness, compassion, patience and understanding.

When I first arrived, I was carrying my tent with me (which would later become a "mobile temple" — see Page 36), and I searched for a place to camp unsuccessfully. One person I contacted advised me to rent a room from him, but I decided to look elsewhere (near my mother's town) for a campsite instead. Finally, as I was not able to find one, I went back to

the same man who had offered me a room. When I called on him, he informed me that there wasn't any room for me on his premises. Suspicions had arisen in the man's mind. Finally, I managed to secure accommodation in a different location for a few days until the campsite could offer me a space. The Ugandan Buddhist devotees would meet there for devotional services and meditation lessons.

Later on, with a **Dhamma** adherent, I went to look at some affordable land that was for sale. An idea had occurred to me that it would be good for the Ugandan Buddhists to have a permanent location to call their own. The people who lived near the property would not speak to me, suspecting that I was a witch. Instead, they spoke to my companion. It is a very strange feeling when one is not accepted by society.

On another occasion, I wanted to register our Uganda Buddhist Center. I went to submit my application to the Regional District Commissioner (RDC) who suspected that I might be mentally disturbed. However, he went ahead and signed the paper hesitatingly. Then I proceeded to another registration office in Kampala. The lady at the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) registration office frowned at me as I entered her office. She admitted that that she nearly ran away when she saw me approaching her desk.

People continue to judge the book by its cover.

*“GOOD ARE FRIENDS WHEN NEED ARISES; GOOD IS CONTENTMENT
WITH JUST WHAT ONE HAS; GOOD IS MERIT WHEN LIFE IS AT AN END,
AND GOOD IS THE ABANDONING OF ALL SUFFERING.”*

... Dhammapada Verse 331

THE DHAMMA SEEDS ARE SOWN



Uganda Buddhist Center facing the Lake Victoria

As for the establishment of the Uganda Buddhist Center, we were very fortunate to discover two acres of land near Lake Victoria at Geruga on the Entebbe Road. I was overcome with deep happiness in knowing that people in Uganda would now have a place to practice Buddhism and meditate. Given that I had had to cross the Indian Ocean to discover the **Dhamma**, I was very happy that the **Dhamma** was now gaining root in the “pearl of Africa.” Even though Buddhism has existed in this world for more than 26 centuries, Africans have known very little or nothing about it. Buddhism is still very weak on the African continent. In Uganda, no locals had ever practiced Buddhism before I had arrived as a monk. Now I am trying to scatter the seeds far

and wide in the fertile fields by bringing the **Buddha's** Teachings to everyone who is open-minded enough and willing to embrace it. The first “lay **saṅgha**” in Uganda is established and my nephew says he would like to ordain as a novice monk. Also, my mother and three nieces say they would like to become nuns. I am very grateful to the Vietnamese community and others at the TMC, San Jose in California, for their enormous support to help establish the Buddhist Center. I would like to express my **anumodana** (*sharing of merits*) to a group of Thais in Thailand and the US who donated the two African Buddha statues. May their generosity be gateway to their liberation. The first **Buddha** statue will be installed at the Uganda Buddhist Center and the second will be donated to the World Buddhist Summit Headquarters and installed at the Royal Grand Hall of Buddhism in Japan. I am very grateful to the President of the World Buddhist Summit in Japan for his generous support to help establish the **Dhamma** in Uganda. Plans are currently underway to develop the Uganda Buddhist Center.

At long last, the seeds of **Theravada** Buddhism have been planted in Uganda. It is time for nurturing the **Dhamma** seeds. May these wholesome **Dhamma** seeds be well nurtured and grow strong so that they may yield abundant, wholesome fruits for the benefit of all beings.

May all beings practice according the **Buddha's** Teachings and attain final liberation in this very life.

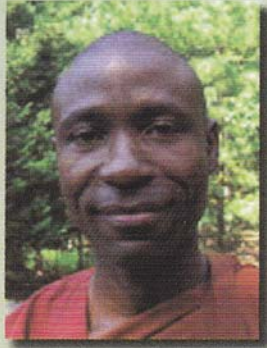


The Uganda Buddhist Center in Kampala

***This electronic version is prepared by Dhammavaṃsa
Nguyen for Bhante Buddharakkhita.***

GLOSSARY OF PĀLI TERMS

<i>arahant</i>	saint; one who has attained the final emancipation
<i>anumodana</i>	sharing of merits
<i>Bhante</i>	Venerable Sir
<i>bhavana</i>	meditation; development of the mind
<i>Bhikkhu</i>	Buddhist monk
<i>Buddha</i>	the Enlightened One
<i>Buddharakkhita</i>	protector of the Buddha
<i>Buddha Dhamma</i>	Teachings of the Buddha
<i>devas</i>	beings from heavenly realms
<i>Dhamma</i>	truth; reality, the Teachings of the Buddha
<i>Gautama</i>	the family name, or surname, of the Prince Siddhatta
<i>kamma</i>	volitional action
<i>karuna</i>	compassion
<i>Nibbana</i>	the ultimate emancipation
<i>Pali</i>	ancient Indian dialect spoken by the Buddha
<i>panna</i>	wisdom
<i>pindapatta</i>	alms round
<i>samatha</i>	concentration
<i>saṅgha</i>	community of Buddhist renunciates
<i>Tathagata</i>	name the Buddha used to address Himself
<i>Theravada</i>	southern Buddhism; oldest form of the Buddha's Teaching in Pali canonical scriptures. Commonly practiced in Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and now, the west
<i>upasaka</i>	lay male Buddhist devotee
<i>vihara</i>	temple; shrine
<i>vipassana</i>	insight



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is a Ugandan Buddhist monk, ordained in 2002 by the late Venerable U Silananda at the **Tathagata** Meditation Centre (TMC) in California, U.S.A. He is the founder of the Uganda Buddhist Centre, Kampala, Uganda, East Africa. Currently, he also resides at the **Bhavana** Monastery and Meditation Centre in West Virginia, U.S.A. where he continues to practise and teach the **Dhamma**.

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