

August 01, 2018

## **ROLLING THE DHAMMA WHEEL IN CUBA**

Bhikkhu Mihita (writing from Havana, Cuba )

History was made on April 07, 2018 on Cuban soil when 25 or so Cubans, out of a head count of 75 or so attending, came to be initiated into Buddhism in capital city Havana. Held at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Edificio de Arte Cubana, Sala de Audiovisuales (Audiovisual room at the National Museum), this is the *first known formal introduction of Buddhism to Cuba*. The initiation was conducted by Bhikkhu Mihita of Canada, in the presence of three senior Bhikkhus from Canada who graced the occasion – Venerables Wimalabuddhi and Ratanasiri (Sinhala tradition) of the Toronto Mahavihara and Ajahn Punnadhammo (Thai tradition) of the Arrow River Forest Hermitage, of Thunder Bay, Ontario. The Sangha members, seated in chairs draped in white, had made the visit to Cuba for the occasion.

The initiation was part of the program of Encuentro 2018, an annual event held in Havana. It was under the title ‘Living Buddhism’, itself made up of two parts: ‘Living Buddhism I- Sangha’ and ‘Living Buddhism II – Lay’. As per the Proposal submitted from Canada, the objective of the Lay activity read as follows:

### **Objectives of the Program “Living Buddhism: Lay”**

In Western society, the exclusive focus in relation to Buddhism is on Meditation, towards individual liberation. While liberation indeed needs to be everyone’s goal, it is an unrealistic expectation when it comes to the average ‘individual in family/community/society’. The ‘*Living Buddhism – Lay*’ Program is intended to introduce, to one and all, how to live a Buddhist life, in a mundane family and social living setting, bringing personal and social happiness, good health and healthy long life. The moral life encouraged and lived on a daily basis is intended to be conducive to an eventual goal of liberation, in this life or another, the moral life lived in this life being the very steps towards Nibbana.

Living the Buddhist life begins by having Trust in the Buddha, by no means through blind faith, but in a ‘reasoned trust’ - that the Dhamma brings happiness, health and long life, to the individual, family, community, society and world. The proposed Program, then, is to initiate interested participants to take Refuge in the three Gems - Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and undertake to live by the ‘Five Training Principles of self-discipline’ (*Pancasila*) - abstention from taking life, stealing, sexual misconduct, wrongful language and misconduct in liquor and drugs.

But once initiated, how does one continue to cultivate self-discipline on an ongoing basis in our busy lives? This explains the second component - Homage to the Buddha (*Buddhapuja*). Practicing Homage on a daily basis, individually and/or in a whole family setting, keeping us reminded of the Pancasila, is a sure-fire way of helping to keep the religious fires going, with the practical gains of happiness and a healthy long life individually, with resulting family and social cohesion and professional success – in politics, economy, academy, fine arts, media, etc.

While the compassionate Buddha would want nothing less of his followers than ending one’s Dukkha ‘suffering’, the pragmatist in him also offers spiritual protection. The third component of the proposed Program, Paritta chanting, then speaks to this, when the Sangha members will chant some Suttas (Discourses), in an authentic, musical but calming, ‘Intonational

Speaking' (*sarabhanna*) style, in order to calmly bring spiritual blessings to every citizen and the country at large.

Opening this Part II, the initiation comprised of Homage to the Buddha (Namaskaraya), Taking Refuge in the three Gems – Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha (Tisarana) and the Five Training Principles – (Pancasila). In a pedagogical exercise, the lines were broken down into word segments to make the repeating easy for the initiates. Prior to inviting the participants to repeat after, an explanation was given of the three-step process, as well as the meaning of the Pali words. Following the initiation, each of the new Buddhists paid obeisance to the Buddha three times, and then to each of the Sangha members. While some, including a 100 year old lady, did the five-point touch (*pasanga pihituvā*), as demonstrated, others paid homage standing.

Incense sticks and candle light, passed along hand to hand of the newcomers, were offered to a one-foot, all white, sitting Buddha gracing a table draped in a white cloth. The Homage was followed by a small scale Buddhapuja, conducted by Ven. Wimalabuddhi, in Pali, as the new initiates, standing, clasped their palms chest high. Time constraints did not allow a Paritta chanting.

Everyone now seated in their chairs by the end of the event, the meaning of the Buddhapuja was explained by Bhikkhu Mihita, when there was a brief Question and Answer period. The initiation ended with the distribution of a few copies of books on Buddhism in Spanish translation. One was an Introduction to Buddhism, and the other a translation of the Digha Nikaya.

Asked during the Question period how they could get in touch with one or more of the Bhantes, a consensus emerged for two meetings with Bhikkhu Mihita on Monday, April 9, at a Park (Parque Almendares), at 10 am and 5 pm.

If that gives an overview of the Part II of the Program, Part I was a presentation by the three Venerables, speaking on the topic, "My Life as a Monk". The objective of this Panel, as per the Proposal, read as follows:

### **Objectives of the Panel Presentation under "Living Buddhism: Sangha"**

The Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha constitute the 'Triple Gem' in Buddhism. The Buddha is the first Gem, having discovered the reality of the world and helping Sentient Beings to minimize their Dukkha 'suffering'. Dhamma 'Teachings' is the second 'Gem', as recorded in the Tipitaka 'Three Baskets'. The Sangha, the Buddha's Disciples, both male and female, earn the honour of being the third 'Gem', because

- a. they are the very epitome of the ideal life as per the Buddha's Teachings, governed as they are by a rigorous code of conduct. Living a simple life, with no personal possessions, they depend on the community for their food, dwelling and robes.
- b. they also play the critical role of bringing the Dhamma to the public, and are the society's guide to the understanding of reality, facilitating everyday happiness and good health, spiritual cultivation and eventual Liberation (Nibbana).

However, while they serve the public, their life is an extremely private one. The purpose of the Panel, then, is to provide that extremely rare opportunity to learn about the life of a monk, in the

words of the Sangha members themselves. The makeup of the Panel seeks to reflect the geo-ethnocultural diversity of the Sangha membership in Theravada, the oldest Buddhist tradition of over two millennia.

The ethnocultural diversity at the event, however, was not as wide as had been expected. The Sangha complement was to be made up of two others. Ven. Buddharakkhita (Sinhala tradition) of Uganda, the first African monk, and Ven. Nandisena (Burmese tradition) of Mexico of the first and only Theravada Centre in Latin America, had made all arrangements to make the visit when unexpectedly, they had to withdraw.

As pre-planned, this part of the program included a surprise, another historic event - the ordination of a Buddhist monk, again *perhaps the first on Cuban soil*. From the speeches of the Sangha, the audience will have got an understanding of the life of a Buddhist monk. But how does one become a monk in the first place? The ordination was intended to provide a model for any Cuban who may, in the future, wish to be a Buddhist monk. Indeed the model for introducing the ordination was Arahant Mahinda when he came with his lay nephew Bhanduka, but ordained him on Tambapanni soil (as it was then called) after allowing King Devanampiyatissa to ascertain that indeed these were humans and there was no reason for concern. And it was to allay any concerns Cubans may have about being ordained that encouraged the inclusion of the ordination.

At the end of the process, taking the vows of a Samanera (novitiate) monk in the presence of the three elders, me, Professor Sugunasiri - the long-time Buddhist spokesman in Canada, emerged as Bhante Mihita (later Bhikkhu Mihita, upon Upasampada on May 31 at the Mahadhammika Burmese Temple). The ordination at 82 years of age may perhaps be counted as among the oldest to be initiated into the Sanghahood.

While the initiation was an unpublished item of the Program, an announcement had been made the day before that the opportunity to become a Buddhist would be available the next day. This was following a presentation by me, while still a layman the day before, invited for Encuentro 2018 Program held at Teatro Mello. Titled 'Buddhadhamma as Science in Praxis', it sought to show how the Buddha's discoveries of reality as they had come to be were arrived at empirically, i.e., after the fact, and not speculatively or mythologically. If that was the Science, applying them to help minimize suffering in sentient beings was the praxis.

The presentation, made in Spanish drawing upon a translated text, also gave a historical account of Prince Siddhartha leaving the household life and ending up first as an Arahant, and then as Buddha, introducing in the process, the key figures in his life – mother Mahamaya, father King Suddhodana, nursing mom Mahapajapati Gotami, wife Yasodhara and son Rahula. His principal Teachings – Four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold Path, etc. introduced, outlined were also his Teachings on economic and social living. Explaining the second Noble Truth – the elimination of suffering, the self-discipline of the Five Training Principles (Pancasila) was shown to be the route to managing the Thirsts of sentient beings. While pointing out that it is meditation that would be the route to Nibbana, i.e., the total elimination of attachments and clingings (*tanha* and *upadana*), the point was stressed how, in the Buddha's Teachings, it only comes after the practice of *dana* 'generosity' and *sila* 'self-discipline'. The presentation ended by outlining 10 or more features of Cuban society compatible with the Teachings of the Buddha, such as e.g., individual freedom, gender parity, social harmony, spiritual harmony, cleanliness, a caring government offering free education, health and a basic food ration, etc. The compatibility was to be visually captured at the event by placing

the Cuban flag, made up of five stripes - blue, white, blue, white and blue, with a star on a red background, beside the Buddhist flag of five colour stripes –blue, white and red, plus yellow and orange.

An associated success in introducing Buddhism to Cuban soil was planting the seed of the idea of *dana* ‘alms-giving’ in the Cuban mind. Understandably, tourists are a primary source of income for the Cuban economy, and the Cuban people not being so well off, offering anything free for non-locals may be something that may be too much to expect. However, the idea planted, it is with great merit to them that alms for the Sangha were offered by Cubans of different strata. Interestingly, the first to offer was a Catholic priest, followed by two professors and our interpreter. If these donors were personally known ones to the writer, five of the of the new initiates were to join ranks as well in offering alms to sustain the Sangha for two weeks. To repeat, I had emphasized, in my Seminars at the University of Havana in 2017 as well as in my Encuentro 2018 presentation, how meditation is not the first, as many a western teacher might put it, but the last in the series *Dana, Sila, Bhavana*.

Helping critically in the total program was the Canadian couple Suren Fernando and Ramya Weligodapola who had flown in for the special occasion, bringing with them as well the one-foot or so all-white sitting Buddha statue, and the books on Buddhism in Spanish. Translation from Sinhala to Spanish was done by Lalith Rohana Samarajeeva, a Cuban resident of Sri Lankan origin. Kind support for the total program came from the Sri Lankan Ambassador A. L. Ratnapala.

The total program in 2018, planned, executed and financed by myself, this was my third contribution towards helping Cubans benefit from the wisdom and the compassion of the Buddha. During the earlier two initiatives, I had had the occasion to give, by invitation, 4 Seminars on Buddhism at the University of Havana, in 2010 and six seminars last year (2017). But what I found to be of great interest was that the University Seminar 6 was on meditation, 40 participants coming dressed in white, heeding a call. Part of my 2017 visit was additionally leading eight groups in meditation, outside of the university – in a Theatre, parks, Roman Catholic Church, etc.

The following ‘Personal Reflection’, ending the Proposal, speaks to my interest in the Cuban project:

It is my expectation that the proposed program will help the Cuban people to gain a healthy understanding of the Buddhadhamma, i.e., the Buddha’s Teachings, as well as Buddhism in practice. My confident hope and conviction is also that there may result, over time, a *spiritual revolution* that will help bring about a happy, healthy and contented Cuban people, towards continuing political stability, social harmony and world peace. But equally important could be an economic prosperity, not along the lines of unbridled Capitalism, but along the Principles of Buddhist Economics, promotive and supportive of a continuing social equity and social justice as in contemporary Cuban society.

Following the initiation, steps were taken to form a Society, in order establish some continuity. While its formalization is in the process, here then is the Logo: [see attached]

## **BACKGROUND TO THE INITIATION**

However, it may be of some passing interest that it was none of these lofty ideals that first took me to Cuba in my lay family life. It was the sun, the warm waters and the rolling waves of the Varadero beach,

over 10 years ago. Driving to Havana in a rented car, it was curiosity that took us to the University of Havana. But going around the campus of the 100 or year old historic university, none did we meet who spoke English. And then, almost when we were leaving, somebody pointed out to a Professor who was about to get into his car to leave. Catching him in quick time, and introducing myself as a Buddhist scholar, it was to my amazement that he said, “Without Buddhism, we can’t understand the world”! He was also to say that there were Cuban psychologists who were interested in Buddhism. Right then and there emerged my interest in introducing Buddhhadamma to Cuba. This was to get a shot in the arm leading eight meditation sessions outside of the university, attendance ranging from 20 to 400! What I saw was a calm and educated people in great spiritual thirst. All of the initiatives as outlined above, then, can be said to have been conditioned by that chance meeting, although I would like to say that it was conditioned by some unknown force, better, kammic hand.

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Invited to offer some Seminars at the University of Havana (see list below) in 2010 (May 20-25), several books on Buddhism were offered as a donation to the Library. Here then is the listing of Invited Seminars: 1. *Buddhism as Science & Religion*; 2. *Buddhist Social Philosophy*; 3. *Buddhism & Bioethics*, and 4. *Buddhism in Canada*. Here is a list of books donated:

1. Arnold, Sir Edwin, 1879, *Light of Asia*, reprint 1998, Dehiwala: Bud. Cultural Centre.
2. Bodhi, Bhikkhu, 2005, *In the Buddha’s Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon*, Boston: Wisdom.
3. *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies*, Numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. (Journal is online as well).
4. Gunaratana, Bhante Henepola, 2001, *Eight Mindful Steps*, Boston: Wisdom.
5. Harding, John S, Victor Sogen Hori & Alexander Soucy, 2110, *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press.
6. Kalupahana, David & Indra, *A Way of Siddhartha*, Ratmalana: Vishvalekha.
7. Nanamoli, Bhikkhu, 1956, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, by Buddhaghosa), Singapore Buddhist Meditation Centre.
8. Narada, 1973, *The Buddha and His Teachings* (Reprint: Taiwan: Corporate Body of the Buddhist Educational Foundation).
9. Rahula, Walpola, 1959, *What the Buddha Taught*, New Year : Grove Press.
10. Rahula, Walpola, 1956/1993, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, Dehiwala: Buddhist Cultural Centre.
11. Ratnapala, Nandasena, 1997, *Buddhist Democratic Political Theory and Practice*, Ratmalana, Sri Lanka: Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha.
12. Sugunasiri, Suwanda H J, 2001, *Towards Multicultural Growth, A look at Canada from Classical Racism to Neomulticulturalism*, Toronto: Village Publishing House.
13. Sugunasiri, Suwanda H J, 2001, *You’re What You Sense: Buddha on Mindbody*, Dehiwala, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Cultural Centre
14. Sugunasiri, Suwanda H J, 2005, *Embryo as Person*, Toronto: Nalanda Publishing Canada
15. Sugunasiri, Suwanda H J, 2008, *Two Palm Bow*, Toronto: Nalanda Publishing Canada
16. Sugunasiri, Suwanda H J, 2008, *Waves of Cuba*,
17. Sugunasiri, Suwanda H J (Ed.), 2008, *Thus Spake the Sangha: Early History of Buddhism in Toronto*, Toronto: Nalanda Publishing Canada.
18. Warder, A K, 1970, 2000, *Indian Buddhism*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

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Invited back in 2017, a series of six Seminars were to be presented on “Buddhist Ethics and the Social Problems of Contemporary Science”, “in memory of Swarna Sugunasiri (1937-2017)”, as per the “REPORT ON THE ACADEMIC PROGRAM held at the University of Havana, Cuba, Nov. 6-17, 2017.” Opening the Report, “The academic program turned out to be a space for exchanges, interdisciplinary and intercultural, with a systematic registration of 67 representative professionals of:

1. Institute of Neuroscience of Havana,
2. University of Medical Sciences,
3. Center for Research and Development BioCuba-Farma,
4. Enrique Jose Varona Pedagogical Institute,
5. Ministry of Culture,
6. Latin American Institute of Chess,
7. Culture Institute Juan Marinello,
8. School of Art Paulita Concepcion,
9. Juventud Rebelde Newspaper,
10. Center for Theological Studies Father Loyola”.

Continuing, the Report says,

“The series of Seminars ... reflected the assumptions of Buddhist Philosophy and Ethics and their contributions to both the natural and the social sciences. Similarly it allowed determining the elements of connections between the Western and the Eastern world... The Seminars also contributed to personal development, and directly to the welfare and emotional balance based in the method of introspective awareness, based in the Buddhist technique of meditation. The Seminars provided a holistic and humanistic understanding of reality and the importance of mindfulness of its participants.”

“... Another theme addressed was Bioethics, Buddhist ethics and human dignity from a gender perspective, ... in the search for alternatives to social problems and contemporary science.”

The Specific topics were:

- I. Rebirth as the empirical basis for the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths (Buddhadhamma).
- II. Mind-body communication. "You are what you sense".
- III. The mysteries of the mind: triumphing minds in Buddhism.
- IV. Buddhist ethics and the social problems of contemporary science.
- V. Embryo as person: Buddhism, bioethics and society.

## VI. Workshop: Mindfulness and Buddhist personal ethics (sila)."

Here, then, are some comments from the participants, under the heading, "Plurality of voices: what was left with us?" Responding, the Historians Group observes:

- "[The Seminars] primarily contributed to harmony and peace of the participants."
- "... none of us are the same since we received from the hand of the Professor the Teachings of Buddha."
- "It is our consensus ... that the Seminars have enriched our personal lives. Terms like SATTA, meaning both humans and animals, the books of the TIPITAKA, the search for NIBBANA, etc., have allowed us to gain another dimension of knowledge."

Here is the feedback from the Professors of Philosophy:

- "The presentation on Buddhist Ethics and its contemporary reception has been very useful, both at a personal as well as a professional level."
- "Of particular interest was the Buddha's denial of the existence of a soul, but the mind, Buddhism paralleling Marxism."
- "Buddhism teaches us to deal with our decisions and to take responsibility for them...."
- "For everyone, the religious, or the ideological, climate that prevailed [throughout the Seminars] was a respectful dialogue and not a dogmatic imposition."

Here then are a few other comments:

"The mind concept [in Buddhism] and its implications or direct relationships with reality was very well captured by the Teacher via the charts and flow diagrams. It was a way to expand the mind and see reality from another point of view, closely related to the psyche of man and neuroscience."

"Buddhism presents a method, a lesson of how to get to the truth, showing the different levels of it. Those who have identified with Buddhism think that studying it, applying it, helps us to be better human beings."

"The Seminars gave us the opportunity to open new doors to delve into .. how the human brain works according to its six senses".

If these cover the Seminars given at the University of Havana, there were also a series of Talks and Meditation Sessions offered in the wider society outside of the university. Among them were an ecological park (Almendares) (twice). Acapulco Theatre was the venue twice. One was on 'Buddhist Ethics', and the other on mindfulness meditation. This included "an encounter with a children's choir with the presence of 400 people". Another encounter was at a Cultural Center when "30 intellectuals explored topics on Nano science, nutrition, agro ecology, community projects and Buddhist and Marxist ethics." An opportunity for ecumenism was when a Catholic priest "offered his Church for a Buddhist meditation".

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Bhikkhu Mihita is the former Prof. Suwanda H J Sugunasiri, of Toronto, Canada, author of *Dhamma Aboard Evolution* (on the Aganna Sutta) and *Arahant Mahinda – Redactor of the Buddhapuja in Sinhala Buddhism*. His current research is on Gandhabba, the third partner in conception. His novel, *Untouchable Woman’s Odyssey* (online) seeks to capture a country of Buddhist praxis in all its history back from contemporary times. Later President Buddhist Council of Canada, he was the Founding Coordinator of Buddhist Federation of Toronto, bringing the Buddhists of Toronto together for the first time, also holding the first Canadian Wesak in 1981 at Toronto’s City Hall. Buddhist Spokesperson in Canada for over three decades, he is featured in *Canadian Who’s Who*.

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