

Sanath Nanayakkara

Our community in Melbourne has been host to numerous artists and film stars but rarely does it get a chance to play host to someone who can rattle our rusty minds. On Sunday, the 8<sup>th</sup> of February at the Dandenong Arts Centre, Melbourne, the alumni association of the University of Peradeniya helped fill the gap. We had Sanath Nanayakkara speaking on Buddhism. A quality audience listened in stillness for one and a half hours.

It is hard to rattle religiously held views. We accept our religion from our parents, get brainwashed in our respective faiths and are willing to die for it rather than apply our thinking faculties.

Many traditional preachers of Buddhism have dominantly emphasised the negation of life's impulses. The true Buddhist man or woman has been stereotyped as either the one who renounces worldly life or the one who, living as a layman remains white-clad repudiating life's avenues of pleasure. Pleasure seekers are frowned upon and youths form the bulk of the latter.

Sanath spoke differently giving hope to life-lovers and yielding space to the younger generations who want to live fully but who need a compass. We are living in times when young people are increasingly retreating from religion.

Sanath Nanayakkara, nurtured in the intellectually fertile mid-fifties of Peradeniya, retired after twenty years constructing the Buddhist Encyclopaedia. He was Deputy Editor when he retired some years ago and took to freelance writing on Buddhism. Well known for his translation of the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, Sanath is the author of a very popular series of Dhamma books for children called "Graduated Course in Buddhism." Adept in Pali and Sanskrit he has access to the original sources of the written word of the Buddha. That evening he spoke with an impressive command of

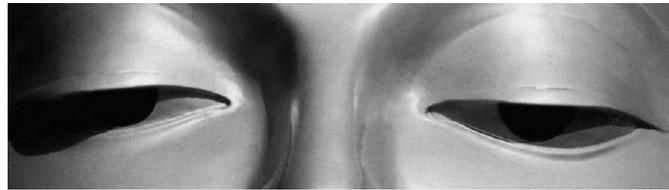
the English language.

Sanath pointed out that Buddhism welcomes the pleasure seekers (*gihī kama bhogī*) and has a role earmarked for the latter. The white-clad layman (*gihī odāta vasana*) colloquially known as 'upasaka', too, remains within the fold while the renunciators (*pabbajita*) are those who opt for the deep end of the pool of Buddhist philosophy. All three types have a place as practitioners of the Dhamma. The trouble with our kind of society, said Sanath, is that we try to mix up the roles and end up in confusion and

is an important part of Buddhism. It states that phenomena arise together in a mutually interdependent web of cause and effect. Sanath pointed out that the Buddha employed this diagnostic tool primarily to explain the Four Noble Truths although it is implied in the texts (*Aganna Sutta*) that this doctrine can explain any social phenomena or institution in broader life.

This doctrine shows that events don't occur by chance. Nor does it make way for the idea that a supreme being created and monitors the world of humans. Likewise,

**Buddha said that if a man has only one eye and it is focused on spiritual progress then he will lose his material life. On the other hand, if a man has only one eye and he fixes it on material progress neglecting spiritual progress then that is also ruinous. One should act like a man with two eyes focussing on both.**



# BUDDHISM FOR PLEASURE SEEKERS

unhappiness.

In other words some of the vast majority who opt for *gihī kama bhogī* find themselves in a predicament when they attempt to emulate either the *pabbajita* or the *gihī odāta vasana*. Young people who should be *gihī kama bhogī* are made to feel guilty when they engage in life-fulfilling activity. They are deemed to be out of the norm. That this should not be is Sanath's message. He would tell the youth, "Go out and enjoy yourselves. Have all the fun. Only live righteously." It is not hard to demand righteousness from anybody. Isn't it?

Sanath pointed out that basically a Buddhist should follow three basic steps: (a) Understand the reality of the Four Noble Truths (*sacca gnana*) (b) respond to that reality (*kiccha gnana*) (c) adopt that truth (*kata gnana*)

The doctrine of *paticca samuppada* often translated as 'dependent arising'

expecting external intervention out of practices like *Bodhi Puja* does not fit into such a scheme of things. In response to a query, Sanath Nanayakkara pointed out how the practice of *Bodhi Puja* originated in Buddha's time as a purely symbolic one. Since then people have tried to employ it to cure ills and rectify misfortune. *Bodhi Puja* is good as it may give us confidence and morale, said Sanath, "but don't forget to see a good doctor when you are ill."

Sanath pointed out that the approach to *kata gnana* or realization of truth is so difficult that Buddha at the beginning enjoined his followers to renounce (*pabajja*) the life of householder if they were to properly achieve this. He showed the effectiveness of *pabajja* by his own act of renouncing and by the example of sixty enlightened individuals who had achieved realization within two months. The disciples, in turn, began persuading others to renounce the household life.

Social resentment grew and many people who had great admiration for the Buddha came up to him and told him that social unrest would result if this path were pursued. They asked the Buddha to preach a way of living that would satisfy the vast majority of his followers who opt for a normal life. What they wanted was happiness in this life and in the next, they urged. Evidence of this request, Sanath said, is found in the *Iyagghapajja Sutta* (*Anguttara Nikaya*).

The Buddha readily responded and showed a path of happy and contented living for the normal householder or *gihī kama bhogī*. The Buddha mentioned four conditions for success in this life which he called *sampada* (blessings). They were (a) striving or working hard (b) protection of what one earns by not falling into debt (c) good friendship and (d) a balanced life

For the next life, the following steps should be followed: (a) develop confidence in the Triple Gem (b) practice virtue or *sila*

(c) practice sacrificing generosity which means not mere charity but giving up something you have and (d) develop wisdom or prajna ie understanding the nature of life and knowing what right and wrong is.

In this way, the Buddha developed a fine work ethic for *gihī kama bhogī* founded on striving and righteousness.

Sanath referred to the *Ekacakkha Sutta* (*Anguttara Nikaya*) where the Buddha said that if a man has only one eye and it is focused on spiritual progress then he will lose his material life. On the other hand, if a man has only one eye and he fixes it on material progress neglecting spiritual progress then that is also ruinous. One should act like a man with two eyes focussing on both.

According to the *Tevijjavaccha Gotta Sutta* it is said that the a lay person can go up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of spiritual progress namely the *anagami* level and that such a person is definitely assured of good birth in the next life. Basically, the *gihī kama bhogī* way constitutes a leisured slow path. In the *Muni Sutta* (*Sutta Nipatha*) the Buddha has likened

the path of renunciation to that having the gait of a swan and the *gihī kama bhogī* path to that bearing the gait of a peacock.

The *gihī kama bhogī* need not dabble too much on *Dukkha* nor be bothered about metaphysical issues like rebirth, said Sanath. If one takes rebirth for granted and works toward it one would gain it if it does exist. On the other hand, if there is no other birth one would still gain happiness in this life by living righteously.

The latter remark reminded me of Blaise Pascal's famous wager argument applied by that French philosopher to the question of God's existence: "Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is... If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is." In fact Sanath Nanayakkara told me that in the *Apamaka Sutta* (*Majjima Nikaya*) the Buddha presented a similar wager kind of argumentation. The follower of the lay path without tiring his mind in trying to fathom the deeper end of Buddhism can fall back on the wager position by assuming the truth of these things and living the virtuous life that these truths demand, suggested Sanath.



Shyamon Jayasinghe

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