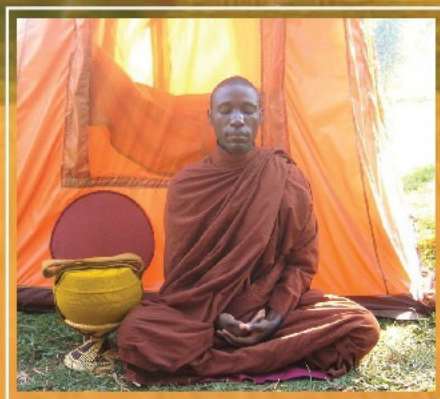

Planting Dhamma Seeds:
THE EMERGENCE
of
BUDDHISM
in
AFRICA



Bhante Kaboggoza Buddharakkhita

FOREWORD BY VENERABLE BHANTE GUNARATANA

PRAISE FROM AFRICA, THE MOTHER LAND

Bhante Buddharakkhita is a rare kind of spiritual gardener, planting seeds of Dhamma and nurturing a Buddhist community in Uganda against innumerable obstacles.

Bhante distills the path of Buddhism with extraordinary simplicity, weaving tales of his travels in Asia, South America, the United States and Africa, with hilarious anecdotes, surreal encounters grounded in the essence of Buddhist principles.

Inspirational... Insightful.... Virtuous... This is a unique story of an African monk and the flowering of Dhamma in Uganda.

— ***Oyunga Pala***

Kenyan writer and Nationally acclaimed newspaper columnist

Planting Dhamma Seeds is a narrative of the sheer determination of Bhante Buddharakkhita's journey to finally realising his real potential as a Theravāda Buddhist monk. He skillfully and compassionately navigates the grim indignities of being a Buddhist monk in Uganda, utilizing powerful anecdotes and gently delving into Buddhist teachings to conceptually highlight cultural nuances that breed misunderstanding. Bhante has gifted most of us orphaned Buddhists of African descent a home finally.

— ***Anyango Odhiambo***

Medical Anthropologist and African Buddhist

Planting Dhamma Seeds

The Emergence of Buddhism in Africa

Bhante Kaboggoza Buddharakkhita

FOREWORD

Ven. Bhante Gunaratana

(Author of Mindfulness in Plain English)

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PUBLISHING NOTES

Newark Center for Meditative Culture is honored to publish “Planting Dhamma Seeds – The Emergence of Buddhism in Africa” in association with the Uganda Buddhist Centre. *Bhante (Venerable Sir) Buddharakkhita (protected by the Buddha)* is the first African *Theravada* Buddhist monk of Ugandan origin to author a book on Buddhism in English.

In the preparation of this book, common *Pāli* (*ancient Indian dialect spoken by the Buddha, the Enlightened One*) words have been freely used. The object is that practising Buddhists should become familiar with *Pāli* for the better understanding and appreciation of the *Dhamma* (*the Truth*). All *Pāli* words used here are presented in italicised type and where they appear in the text, a brief and contextually appropriate English meaning is given in italics immediately, and generally in parenthesis.

Additionally, a “Glossary of Pāli Words” is provided at the end listing all the *Pāli* words used, arranged in alphabetical order, followed by their common English meaning(s).

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*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato
Samma Sambuddhassa.*

Honour to Him, the Blessed One, the Worthy One,
the Fully Enlightened One

May all beings share in the merit accrued
through the writing, printing and distributing
of this Dhamma book.

FOREWORD

The best and most direct communication comes from personal experience. It is the most effective way of making people understand. Many wise people have communicated this way 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 *Buddha's* message to people in Africa from his own personal experience. He himself is a very practical Bhikkhu. His personal experience in Africa and other places during his travel is a very good example of how people react to an appearance of *Theravāda* Buddhist monk wearing a brown robe with alms bowl in hand. The *Buddha* image that he carried with him seems to have made his appearance even more suspicious in a country where Buddhism has never been stepped in before his introduction. This reminds us 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 in the time of the *Buddha*.

Bhikkhu Buddharakkhita's introduction of Buddhism to Uganda also reminds us of Venerable *Arahant* Mahinda's mission in Sri Lanka in the third century before Christ.

The then king of Sri Lanka welcomed Venerable Mahinda, his fellow Bhikkhus and lay steward. In Uganda Bhikkhu Buddharakkhita's mother, his sister and her children welcomed

Bhikkhu Buddharakkhita. They happened to be his first converts to Buddhism. Now he is going to build a *Vihara* to house the *Buddha* image that his friends and students very generously donated to him and establish *Buddha Dhamma* to his own native Uganda.

Once I asked him, “How many Buddhists are in Uganda?” “Only one,” was his reply. Then I asked him, “How many Buddhist monks are in Uganda?” “Only one,” he said. At the time I asked these two questions, certainly according to his knowledge, he was the only Buddhist in his country. Now his mother, sister and couple of nephews and nieces are Buddhists. When the *Buddha* introduced his teaching he found only five disciples and eventually that number increased up to many millions. Similarly, I hope this number in Uganda also will gradually increase up to millions and bring this marvelous peaceful message of the *Buddha* to Uganda.

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

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana

DEDICATION

*The gift of Dhamma excels all other gifts
The flavour of Dhamma excels all other flavours.
The delight in Dhamma excels all other delight...*

— 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.

*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 Buddha.*
(Dhp: 182)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This book was inspired by many requests from people I met around the world who were 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 writing the foreword for this book; to my mother, Felister Nampiima (a.k.a. Ven. Dhammakami) for giving birth to me and for her kind and loving support throughout my life. It was her profound reverence for silence that prepared me later to be receptive to meditation; Mr. and Mrs. T. K Malwokweza for his kind support; Vimalaji Thakar for being utterly simple and spontaneous, that enabled me increasingly revere both mother nature and the present moment; Mi Khin Khin Soe and Sisi Than for sponsoring my ordination; Mai Anh (Anne Tu) for her continuous support; John Haywood for his real and continuous spiritual companionship, kind support and meticulous attention to revising the manuscript till late night; to my African helpers, Sister Eliz and Joseph Ngugi; to John Streather for his kind support; to my students, Ven. Sangharakkhita, Bakaki Andrew and Ofosu Jones-Quartey for their kind support; to the owners of Krua Thai, Kampala, and Thammapon for offering food while I was in Uganda; to the late Hon. James Mulwana, the former head of the Thai consulate, in Kampala, and Hon. Barbara Mulwana for their kind support; to my Dhamma brother Venerable Aggasami for his thoughtful invitation to visit Canada, and to my Canadian helpers Citta Luong and Chon Tam who transcribed the *Dhamma* talk I gave there; Ven. Ashin Osadha, Ven. Dr. Khammai Dhammasami, Ven. Dr. Sitagu Sayadaw and Ven. Nandisena for their kind support; Edwin Kelley for his inspiration and friendship; Joseph Goldstein for his guidance and support; and to my American friends, Janet Brendlinger and Walt Opie who helped me with editing. I thank Sasana Abhiwurdhi Wardhana Society and the efforts of Mr. N.B. Dayananda for their editing and publication support. I also thank Anyango Odhiambo for reviewing the current edition.

May all beings attain the final liberation!

INTRODUCTION

This book came about due to numerous requests from people that I met in Africa, the America's and Asia. They continually asked many interesting questions about Buddhism and Buddhist monks. They were also very eager to know about my experiences in spreading the *Dhamma* in Africa. Sometimes I answered them briefly but usually there was never enough time to answer all the questions. One constant question was: What was your former religion before you became a monk? How did you learn meditation in Uganda? How did you become a monk in Uganda where there are no monasteries? What inspired you to become a Buddhist or monk? Why and how did you become a Buddhist monk? Do you have your own temple in Uganda? How does your family especially your mother and other Ugandans feel or think about you as a Buddhist monk?

I have attempted to answer some if not all of these questions here. It has been challenging, in the process, to keep from making this book sound like an autobiography. If it does at some point(s), I would ask that you bear with me for my sole objective here has been to try and answer as many questions as possible that have been raised whilst 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.

Bhante Buddharakkhita

PLANTING DHAMMA SEEDS

The Emergence of Buddhism in Africa

PLANTING DHAMMA SEEDS



Bhante Buddharakkhita
(a.k.a. Steven Kaboggoza)
as a teenager.

Part I:

First Encounter of Buddhism

Born into Christianity: Buddhism in the Eyes of Africans

I was born as Steven Kaboggoza to a Christian family in 1966 in Kampala, Uganda, East Africa. Uganda borders Sudan in the north, Congo to the west, Rwanda in the south. It shares Lake Victoria, with Tanzania and Kenya in the southeast.

The Country is small with an agrarian population. Uganda's population is made up of a complex and diverse range of ethnic groups that include the Baganda who I originate from.

It has been a war-torn country for many years with harsh dictatorships and a history of suppressed freedoms. Despite its sorrowful state, a marked resilience sustains the larger population for once we were majestic. Winston Leonard Spenser Churchill in 1908 after visiting Uganda, famously touted in his memoir "My African Journey" then gushed about Uganda "...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.'"

As for the Buganda Kingdom's civilization, he wrote "a fairy tale... One endowed with unique environmental attributes, with a remarkably and unexpected vibrant, structured and cordial social and political system nestled out of reach of the outside world."

*He, who sits alone, rests alone,
walks alone in diligent practice,
who in solitude controls himself,
will find delight in the forest.*

(Dhp: 305)

Childhood:

My First “Non-formal Meditation” Lessons in Uganda

When I was growing up, Buddhism was unknown in my country. The predominant religions were Christianity and Islam.

At the young age of five years, I was highly influenced by my mother’s open-minded, gentle and moderate character that had a great effect on my life. Most of the time she accepted our differences easily and did not try to bend us to her will, especially in matters regarding religion. It seems she had her own natural wisdom.

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

These two admonishments were very unsuitable to my character and temperament. I did not want to sleep during the day-time but, since I had nothing to do, she forced me lie down. Unfortunately, often I could not sleep. I kept on tossing and turning in bed. As a result, I often remained awake in the room, let my thoughts wander or I would observe my mother who was fast asleep. In hindsight, when I now reflect on those sleepless days I realize that, although, I did not have any of what could be termed a proper “object of meditation,” my

John Kizza, the grandfather of Ven. Buddharakkhita.



Basasira Bageya Nakacwa, the grandmother of Ven. Buddharakkhita in 1969.



Nampiima Felister (a.k.a. Ven. Dhammakami, the mother of Ven. Buddharakkhita.



Ven. Buddharakkhita with his family members.

child-like approach was actually one of the simplest ways to meditate—being silent, still and calmly observing the passing show or mental events. Now I know that this period provided wonderful training in being comfortable with silence and stillness. It would have been beneficial if, at that time, there had been someone to teach me how to practice insight meditation (formal meditation).

Where could further real meditation skill be acquired?

In primary school as a little boy, I enjoyed going to attend Sunday school 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 attended lessons. In fact, failure to attend church services lead to punishment. This approach gradually created an inner resistance in me against church services.

Teenager: Wondering and Questioning

As an adolescent, the Catholic boarding schools I attended molded me in the Christian lifestyle. In Uganda, especially in my family, those who deviated from customary expected pious Christian behavior were often chastised. Personally, I was beginning to question whether going to church was for pleasing others or for personal spiritual growth and development.

As a teenager, I faintly remember learning in my world history class that there was an Indian personality named *Gotama* (the

family name, surname, of the Prince Siddhatta) Buddha. Just like most Ugandans, I knew only that much!

*This is the entire spiritual life, Ananda, that is,
good friendship, good companionship,
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.*

(SN 45:2)

Adulthood:

Face to Face with Buddhist Monks

In June 1990, I went off to Panjab University in India to study business with the goal of achieving an MBA. This would later morph into 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 on how to meditate immediately but gradually they introduced me to Buddhism. They kindly took me to the local markets and customarily offered me food. Actually, at the time, I did not know the correct etiquette towards Buddhists 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 temple, Ashoka Buddhist Temple, in the outskirts of Chandigarh city (the capital Punjab state) where an Indian Buddhist monk resided. This was the first time I had ever attended a Buddhist ceremony. I saw a big *Buddha* statue but did not understand its significance. With time, I got more interested in the *Buddha's* teachings. I really admired these monks. Whatever they did awakened deep feelings of loving-kindness, and gratitude in me. During 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 follow the path of stars.*

(Dhp: 208)

Special Connections with His Holiness (H.H.) The Dalai Lama

During the summer holidays, I continued my search for Buddhist friends. I took the night bus from Chandigarh to Dharamsala, India, the seat for H.H. The Dalai Lama. Musing, I thought, “Wow, this is a wonderful country, one can even safely travel at night!” In Uganda, we spent decades under state imposed bans on night traveling due to a chain of wars and other political problems. I experienced a new level of freedom. It was a very long bus ride in a “mango shake” (low-fare rattletrap

bus) to Dharamsala situated 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 is also the sentiment I felt when I was first exposed to the *Dhamma*, the Buddhist teachings: “Wow! I’ve discovered something that brings freedom!”

One day, I went for a public meeting of H.H. The Dalai Lama. I joined hundreds of Westerners waiting to pay homage to the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. In the crowd of mainly white extraction from all over the world, I was the only visibly black person from Africa. And because of that, I stood out distinctively from within the crowd.

I was very happy to be near H.H. The Dalai Lama 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 Dharmasala!” I resolved to spend all my holidays in Dharmasala for the next several years.

Later on, I requested a private interview with H.H. The Dalai Lama. When I arrived at his residence, he greeted me with great warmth and kindness. We sat down in his living room and faced each other, and his interpreter joined us. I asked him, “How can I set up an organization that connects Tibetan Buddhist culture with African tradition and culture?”

He replied, “In order to accomplish this work... you have to find spiritual friends!” I was inspired by this uplifting and practical

advice that would guide me in my endeavors on the spiritual path. Before I left, I requested his blessings.

My spiritual journey towards Buddhism began by encountering Thai Buddhist monks in India. I was very much inspired by these newly discovered spiritual friends and their teachings. I encountered Buddhist teachings that offered me practical ways to reach ultimate happiness... as spelled out in the Buddhist teachings of the Noble Eightfold Path. This was an eye-opener. Finally, a path to inner-freedom was unfolding in my life!

Later on in 2013 after I ordained as a monk for eleven years, while attending the Global Buddhist Conference in India, I had an opportunity to meet again with His Holiness The Dalai Lama.



Bhante Buddharakkhita with His Holiness The Dalai Lama at the Global Buddhist Conference, India in 2011.

Searching for Spiritual Teachers and Spiritual Friends: Window-shopping many religious traditions—a Ugandan youth in a candy store!

There were many spiritual traditions in India; Hinduism, Sikhism, Sufism, Baha'i Faith, Christianity, Buddhism, and a multitude of others. However, dormant spiritual aspirations that lay deep in my personality continued to push me to search for "something" but at that time, this "something" was still ambiguous to me. Nevertheless, I was open to and willing to learn about many religions. I happily joined them. At some stage, I had a lot of doubts about which religious or spiritual tradition to follow in my life. I sought many traditions but most of the time I felt empty and unsatisfied.

I was born into a family of Roman Catholics and pursued more of that in India by going to church. Here, the mass (religious services) was conducted in Hindi. Though, I did not understand Hindi, I had faith that God had "big eyes" and had "seen me" attending the Sunday service. I believed this because I was schooled as youngster about the omniscient and omnipotent God. Also, I was told that God keeps tabs on one's regular attendance at the Church.

In fact, Sunday services become the centre of my practice. On other weekdays, there was nothing much going on with my Christian faith. This process eventually left me feeling very hollow.

On one occasion, there was an exhibition of the Baha'i Faith in Rose garden, Chandigarh. I saw a display of the Baha'i Temple around the world including Uganda.

I inquired about their philosophy. Immediately my search ended in being officially confirmed in the Baha'i Faith at a beautiful lotus-like Temple in New Delhi. But why the Baha'i Faith above all other religions? I had found some of the tenets of the Baha'i teachings very attractive and convincing at that time: For instance, Baha'is are required to love all humans regardless of religion, gender, race or community. I found out that they had much respect and inclusive of other religious believers like Muslims, Buddhist, Hinduism, Christianity and many others. This appealed to me because I had grappled for long time with the idea that heaven is only reserved for pious Christians. Later on, I found a small community of Baha'i Faith in Chandigarh and happily joined. We met on Friday evenings and after meeting we would have tea and refreshments.

Still unsatisfied...

Then I practiced Raja Yoga in the Brahma Kumaris tradition (a kind of Hindu concentration meditation). Then, I followed Hinduism by attending the Satsang of Radha Swami. Finally, I got initiations for a few weeks with a Hindu teacher (guru), Kalkaji, in New Delhi. However, I still felt a need for further investigation as to what kind of religion and spiritual tradition would help me to relieve my void. I began window-shopping spiritual books. I would go to bookshops and spent hours browsing through various spiritual books. I landed on a book about Sufism and visited their temple in New Delhi.

Next on the list, I opted for general practice of spirituality (no name, no labels and nothing real specific), a kind of "spiritual cocktail!" Clouds of doubts began looming over my horizon:

Should I practice with form or formless meditation; should my practice be effortless or should it require effort? Do I really need a teacher or no teacher?

Then, I read a book about Krishna Murti, a great spiritual teacher of the nineteenth century who held that the “Truth” is a pathless path. I really got confused and even hopeless regarding what to practice and what particular tradition to follow. I kept pondering on the best course that would lead my spiritual life. This confusion, was appeased by labeling myself a spiritual seeker.

At long last, I met Vimala Thakar—through an English friend, John. Her constant admonition was “life is the best teacher!” This was the most profound and practical advice that I had ever received from a “teacher.” Now, I would turn to my life itself as the best teacher and the greatest Open University. I would become a student of life, under-graduate in self-education, as the spiritual path began to unfold...

Vimala Thakar’s Teachings and Their Impact on My Life

One early summer, I went to Dalhousie, northern India, attended the gatherings, and listened to spiritual teachings by Vimala Thakar—an indescribably special person. She radiated loving-kindness and open-heartedness, which I instantly admired and profoundly respected. However, she never developed a personal relationship of a “Master-disciple” with anyone. She said, “I am Teacher who teaches in an impersonal

way, even in personal dialogues, in group meetings or summer camps.” Her role was that of a “spiritual friend”, who wanted to share from her own personal experience. She invited us to live according our understanding. She laid emphasis on the value of verbal silence, physical solitude and psychic freedom. This reminded me of my childhood—when I stayed awake in a room, in total silence, while my mother was fast asleep. I felt very connected to her teachings.

While attending gatherings at her residence, we always began our sessions with silence followed by her talk. During that time, I was full of questions. I asked her some of the burning questions that had plagued me for a long time: Why am I here in this life? Where am I going after-life? And what is the purpose of life...? She told me that the purpose of life is to awaken to divinity, inner happiness. Consequently, I got a sense of direction and purpose, and would make spiritual inquiry the centre of my life.

Vimalaji was constantly representing meditation as the only way to set oneself free of this wheel of thought, volition, and destiny. We need to withdraw from the field of constant movement.

Every day for some time, we should sit down quietly in the solitude of our “I-ness”, retiring from the field of mentation (and all subtle mental grasping). So from activity to non-action, from speech to verbal silence, from movement to non-motion, we become voluntarily silent. I found Vimalaji’s message to be fresh and clear. It resonated with me because some of her teachings had great similarities with Buddhism—which was very profound. On a later occasion, I decided to request an interview with her.

I travelled from New Delhi to Dalhousie. She offered me to stay in the dormitory next to her residence, Shivkul. The next day, I was ready for an interview poised with a pen and notebook. I eagerly went to meet her.

She commented, “Steven, you have lost weight since I last saw you!” I told her that I have lost peace of mind. I was constantly worried about being “disowned” by my family in Uganda. I had diverse unsettled issues in life. She said, “Nobody can give you peace of mind, except yourself.”

I sat down on the chair provided and had an interview with her. As she began giving some important advice about navigating my life, I began to jot down some points. She requested, “Please stop writing.”



Vimalaji Thakar

I wondered why she suddenly stopped me. Of course, I wanted to retrieve her information and guidance in the future, since it was very important to me.

She answered, “I am writing in your heart!”

Immediately, I dropped my pen and notebook, and begun paying total undivided attention to her. I felt her amazing presence and silence. I told her how my life was very fragmented, and falling into pieces.

Not only did she encourage me to lead life in a non-fragmented way, but also she strongly advised me not to be psychologically dependent on others. She advised me to get exposed to nature

as much as possible—to be a disciple of my own understanding—and to keep my 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.*

(Dhp: 282)

Wonderful Tibetan Buddhism Meditation Retreat

The definitive opportunity finally came. In 1994, the Tushita Monastery in Dharamsala organized a 12-day meditation



Dr. Alex Berzin

retreat, which was guided by an American, a 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 intentions in whatever activities we are doing. Observing one's intentions is actually being mindful of the mind. I also learned *The Eight Verses of Thought or Mind Transformation*, a

text by the Kadampa geshe Langri Tangpa, which explains the *Paramitayana* practice of method and wisdom: the first seven

verses deal with method—loving-kindness, bodhicitta—and the eighth deals with wisdom.

- “By thinking of all sentient beings as more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel for accomplishing the highest aim, may I always consider them precious!
- Wherever I go, with whomever I go, may I see myself as lower than others, and from the depths of my heart, May I consider them supremely precious.
- May I examine my mind in all actions and as soon as a negative state occurs, since it endangers myself and others, may I firmly face and avert it.
- When I see beings of a negative disposition or those oppressed by negativity or pain, may I, as if finding a treasure, consider them precious for they are rarely met.
- Whenever others, out of jealous, revile and treat me in other unjust way, may I accept defeat myself and offer the victory to others.
- When someone whom I have helped or in whom I have placed great hope harms me with great injustice, may I see that person as a sacred friend.
- In short, may I offer both directly and indirectly, all joy and benefit to all beings, my mothers, and may I myself secretly take on all their hurt and suffering.
- May they not be defiled by the concepts of the eight mundane concerns and, aware that all things are illusory, may they, ungrasping, be free from the bondage.”

(From The Compassionate Life by H.H The Dalai Lama)

This meditation retreat was like the journey to self-discover. Definitely, the meditation practice helped me to have faith and confidence in the precious *Buddha's* Teachings. I abandoned the academic path and embarked on the spiritual path. I joined a spiritual community in New Delhi where I continued listening to the spiritual talks, practicing meditation and read many *Dhamma* books. The Buddhist teachings on *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion) and *pañña* (wisdom).

The *Buddha's* teachings on *kamma* (volitional actions) especially put great emphasis on self-reliance and responsibility for one's actions as causes for the events in one's life. I learned about the potential for beings to attain even final liberation (*Nibbāna*), which is beyond heaven. All these Buddhist teachings appealed to me greatly.

After living with the spiritual community in New Delhi for one year, I left India for a pilgrimage to Nepal, Tibet and finally landed in Thailand.

A Ugandan Buddhist Traveling in Tibet

My interest in Buddhism grew exponentially and I wanted to meet the higher Tibetan Lamas in Tibet. In 1996, I visited Tibet for one and a half months. On arriving at the airport, the immigration officers seemed perplexed to see me. Probably, they had never seen an African up close. I spent ages at the airport waiting for the officials to approve my entrance into Tibet. Furthermore, I was worried about my travel guide who had come to pick me up and drive me to Lhasa. Finally, they let me into Tibet.



My Ugandan passport which caused a lot of confusion.

IS YOUR COUNTRY "REPUBLIC" "OF" OR "UGANDA"?

After one month, I decide to visit other places outside Lhasa city. The authorities required us to secure a permit for every place we would visit. It was a time-consuming process. During my travels, I would come across police posts where I was required to present travel documents. On one such stop, the official asked me for my passport. Then, he asked about my country. I told him to read the front cover of my passport, which bore the words, "Republic of Uganda."

He asked, "Sir, Is your country, 'Republic'?" I replied, "No!"

He continued to ask, "Is your country, 'of'?" "No," I replied.

He asked, “Is your country ‘Uganda’?” “Yes,” I replied!

It never occurred to me that I would travel to a place where they did not know my country, Uganda.

PROTECTOR DEMON OR GUARDIAN BLACK DEITY

Once I was visiting a Temple and noticed some Tibetans staring at me with their eyes literally popping. As they fidgeted and frowned. I wondered why? Later on, I found out that there were many Temples with murals depicting a black person laughing with prominent white teeth. The Tibetans might have thought that I was one of the Demon protectors or a Guardian Black deity. They were afraid I was an incarnation of Mahakala (a fierce aspect of one of the gentlest of Buddhist Deities). Several years later, when I became a monk, I was given a Buddhist name (Buddharakkhita) meaning: Protector of the Buddha or Protected by the Buddha, and not a “Protector Demon”.

STRANDED IN TIBET: ACCOMMODATION DENIED

After I had visited many interesting places in Tibet. I decided to go for more adventures heading off-the-beaten track. These rural areas received very few tourists and probably, no black person independently travelling had ever visited these places. I tried to look for a hotel but every place I went to the owners would literally run away frightened! I began to wonder why they were afraid of me.

I tried other hotels, which were a bit more expensive. I finally came to a hotel with a male receptionist and hoped that he would be confident enough to welcome me. As I approached

him, he ran away screaming his brains out, stumbling awkwardly into a wall.

Then as a last resort, I went to the most expensive, sophisticated hotel available. Confidently, I marched there. However, my appearance—an African guy with a shaved head—triggered again suspicion and fear in the female receptionist.

She first told me that there was no room. But she later hesitatingly checked and found out that there was actually a room but the most expensive one. I counted my money to check whether I would be able to afford it. Anyway, I had no choice since there was no bus to go back to Lhasa. She told me to wait till the management committee decided on my case. After another 30 minutes or so, they finally accepted me. I felt a great relief.

I went to my room, which still needed cleaning and attention. While in my room, I noticed the house keeping ladies were afraid of coming in to clean my room. They kept on pointing to each other, you go... no, you go...! I sensed they were frightened. I decided to give them my key and told them that I would return after some time. When I returned from my walk, they had meticulously cleaned it. (Tibetans in Tibet are very friendly and outgoing but since they were isolated from the rest of the world for a long time, they did not know about Black people. So a lone travelling Ugandan, Buddhist backpacker in Tibet was a novelty to them.)

Have you ever heard about the thousand joys and thousand sorrows? I would learn about this as I continued my spiritual journey to Thailand, a land of smile...

*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.*

(AN 3:101-2)

Searching for Worldly Pleasures

THE GRATIFICATION

After staying in Tibet for one-month-and-a-half, I met a British traveler at a restaurant in Lhasa who advised me to go Thailand. First, I returned to Nepal, and then headed to a beautiful island called *Koh Tao*, southern Thailand. I needed to earn a living and have some fun in the sun. I was determined to develop scuba diving skills until I achieved the Professional Instructor level. Eventually, I 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 initially seemed to give me great joy. I would even meditate under water when I had enough air left in my Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus (SCUBA) tank. Sometimes during drift dives, I adjusted the air in my scuba Buoyancy Control Device (BCD) just enough to stay buoyant under water. I would then assume a meditative posture like the sitting *Buddha*—gently drifting yet stable under the water. My students got a kick out of this method of underwater fun.

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 more 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?



Steven (Ven. Buddharakkhita) instructing Scuba diving in Koh Phi Phi, Thailand in 1996.



Steven working as Professional Association of Diving Instructor (PADI) Scuba diving in Koh Phi Phi, Phuket, Thailand in 1997.

*There are no satisfying sensual desires even
if 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.*

(Dhp: 186-187)

THE UN-SATISFACTORINESS

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

(Dhp: 210-211)

Hello... and Goodbye... Mother Africa

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



Steven Kaboggoza at Namirembe, Kampala,
Uganda in 1998.

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. Nevertheless, I was only a simple Buddhist *yogi* (*meditator*) with shaved head, carrying many books on Buddhism and Scuba diving gear. Most people could not understand why I was carrying these things in Africa. In Uganda, there was no Buddhist temple or even a single Buddhist teacher to teach me the *Dhamma* and certainly there is no sea in which to dive... except Lake Victoria, which is inhabited by many crocodiles and hippos.

Many relatives offered me goat or chicken to welcome and honor me but I did not authorize the 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. Eventually they became very frustrated, disappointed and disillusioned with me.

I continued meditating in my room alone. In addition, I read the books on Buddhism I had collected from Asia. However, after so many years in India and Asia with access to good spiritual friends and teachers, I had no spiritual friends for me to relate to or discuss my spiritual findings. Eventually, 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 deeper truth. This time it would be to devote my entire time to spiritual practice. Where would this take place?

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. Sometimes, the practice was very hard, especially with physical pain.

One day, Sharon Salzberg taught us the practice of *mettā* (*loving-kindness*) towards oneself and all beings. At the beginning of the practice I was bored. I was used to practicing insight meditation. One bright morning, before our first meditation session, I decided to take a walk in the woods, which were teeming with beautiful birds. I stopped walking and began practicing mindfulness meditation (mentally noting: seeing, seeing, seeing... hearing, hearing, hearing... as the birds began singing.)

Then, while feeding the birds, I switched to the practice of loving-kindness meditation. The next day, I threw seeds on the ground for the birds, waiting to see if the birds would eat them. To my great joy, many birds began eating the seeds. However, I noticed that some of the bigger birds were stopping the smaller one from eating. I started radiating compassion to them, “May you be free from cruelty...”

The smaller birds always ate after the bigger birds left. Once I put the seeds in my hands and waited for them to come and eat from my hands. Sure enough, many of them safely landed on my hand. I joyfully felt their feet tickling my palm.

Many of them took the seeds but some of them hesitated to land on my palm. I continued to radiate compassion to them:

“May you be free from fear...” Some of them gathered enough courage and took the seeds.

After weeks, the weather became very cold and it started to snow. I thought that the birds would have difficulty finding food to eat. Seized by compassion, I went in the woods to feed them but the ground was covered with snow. I could not drop the seeds on the ground. Since I was putting on a down jacket with a hat, I decided to put the seeds on my hat, shoulder and on my palm with grooves. At first, they were frightened of me since I resembled an astronaut or a scarecrow. However, they got over their fears as I waited patiently, radiating loving-kindness and compassion:

May you be well, happy and peaceful.

May you be free from fear.

May you be free from suffering and its causes.

After a few moments, they started landing on my head! Once the birds landed, they suddenly took off. Then, other birds landed on my shoulder and palms. Finally, the birds were all over me! I looked like an airport as the birds continued their landing and taking-off. I was infused with joy, happiness and loving-kindness. I went back and continued my formal meditation with great ease and understanding.



With Alicia, her daughter Monica, and Steven in Chile in 2000.



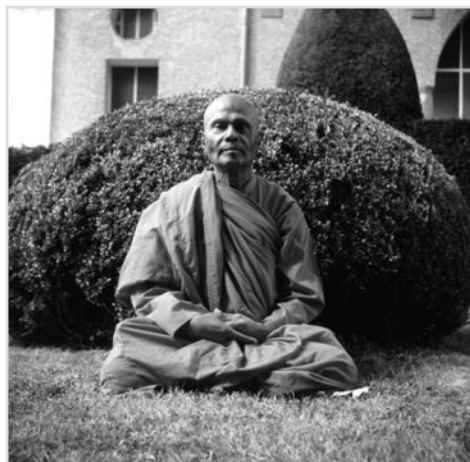
Bamiadele
Drummers and
Dancers in Armherst,
MA, USA in 2000.

Meeting Dhamma Friends at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS)

Finally, I had found established fellow Buddhist practitioners, my “*Sangha*”—and IMS became my spiritual home—a home away from home. Despite my initial plans to return to lovely Chile, South America, after the retreat, I was on staff until 2000. During that time, I worked, studied with the various teachers, participated in retreats and practiced *insight meditation* (*vipassanā*).

I met Bhante Gunaratana (Bhante G.) at IMS in 2000 when he had come to conduct an annual *Dana* (*Generosity*) Retreat.

Before meeting him, we had a discussion in our Tuesday Business meeting, regarding who had interest in “attending” to a visiting Buddhist monk. However, no one raised their hand.



Bhante Henepola Gunaratana

Our resident teacher prompted me to raise my hand.

She told me that I would like Bhante G. and I was simply required to offer him Soya milk once every evening. The next day, as Bhante G. was going out for a walk with a Sri Lankan couple, I was invited to join them. At the end of our walk together, Bhante G. invited me to visit him at the Bhavana Society. In the future, after my ordination, this place would become my resident monastery, my “homeless home.”

Everything happens due to causes and conditions that are always changing. The same applies 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 after three months, I had to leave IMS to complete my visa application and meet immigration requirements.

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 quest 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.*

(Dhp: 75)

The Renunciation, the Letting Go...

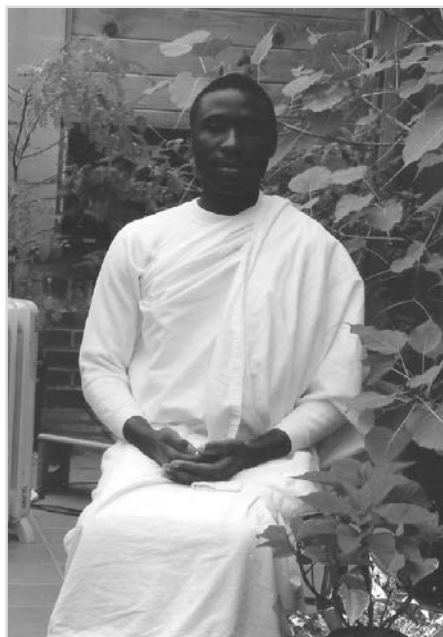
I made a firm decision; I would “escape” from worldly concerns. I had become dissatisfied with pursuing material wealth and pleasures through my experiences in Thailand. I had found happiness in my studies of Buddhism. I wanted to devote my life to the study and practice of Buddhism. I would renounce lesser happiness (worldly happiness) in consideration of, to me, a greater happiness... my spiritual development. By the end of the three-month insight meditation retreat at IMS, I had gained more clarity that true happiness comes from within and not from without. Of course, we need external supports (material things) to support our spiritual development but these external conditions are not the be-all and end-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 realize *Nibbāna*.

I resolved that I would take the path to be confirmed as a Buddhist monk. This could only 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.*

(Dhp: 87-88)



Buddharakkhita in 2000 at Bhavana
Society in West Virginia, USA.

Seeking for Higher Ordination

A friend had recommended a small centre, Tathagata Meditation Centre (TMC) in San Jose, California. He said that people there, especially the Vietnamese devotees, had generous hearts even though it was only a small centre. I finally arrived at TMC. One lady took me to the Abbot, Ven. Paññadipa and I paid him my respect. Immediately, naively, I asked him (through my translator), if I could be ordained. I did not realize that there was a whole training process leading to higher ordination! He seemed surprised upon seeing 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.

Fortunately, he accepted me to stay at TMC in order to undertake the training leading to ordination. I began my intensive self-retreat followed by a special 9-day retreat led by Sayadaw U Paññadipa. During non-retreat times, he focused on my meditation practice rather than my ordination training. On one occasion, there was no staff at the TMC to water the plants. I asked him, “Sayadaw, can I water the plants?”

He responded, “Why do you want to water them?”

I told him, “The plants are dry and there is no staff member to water them.” He said, “Do not worry about the plants, you should go and practice meditation instead of watering plants!”

At first I was perplexed by his reply, but I later on understood that his emphasis was on mind training through meditation practice.

One day, I told him that I had already practiced insight meditation for three months at Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts. But he said that I should continue to practice for one month before I ordained as a monk. After giving me the eight precepts, Sayadaw gave me a very tight schedule.

He even used to ask me, “What time did you go to bed or wake up.” I answered, “I slept at 9:45 pm and woke up at 4:30 am.” He said, “Why did you sleep fifteen minutes before bed time.” I kept quiet. Actually, I was tired but did not want to appear wimpy.

Before Sayadaw went for his walking exercise, he used to check on me by looking through the window to confirm whether I was practicing sitting or walking meditation. He kept strict tabs on my meditation progress.

One of the greatest challenges that occurred was due to my monastic training rule of not eating solid food after the noon hour. My empty stomach could be felt in the early morning meditation session and this stomach could be counted on to produce a symphony of sound—akin to that of an airplane engaging landing gears! Sometimes, I was embarrassed, and held my stomach with both hands!

Another challenge was practicing sitting meditation after lunch at 1:00 pm, with a full stomach. Eventually, I got used to it. Yet another challenge was walking barefooted on the tarmac roads while going for alms rounds in San Jose in cold or hot weather. This experience was humbling as it reminded me about my inter-dependence with other people.

Practicing with Burmese teachers in the Mahasi tradition required me to follow a very strict meditation schedule; meditating at 4:30 am, intermittently till 10:00 pm. I had to report my meditation practice to Sayadaw every other day. After my interview, he used to reply, “Try hard!”

I then returned to my meditation practice and tried harder and harder... The next day, I would go to the interview and report my practice. He replied, “Try hard!”

I thought that I was trying hard enough... Sayadaw spent several weeks telling me, “try hard.” Later on, his message became clear; he did not want me to be complacent with my meditation, he was simply encouraging me. Also, I noticed that I had nursed a subtle expectation for Sayadaw to praise my meditation practice.

Finally, I received my novice and higher ordination in the Mahasi tradition on August 19, 2001. My Preceptor was Sayadaw U Paññadipa and my Instructor, Venerable U Silananda who named me—Bhikkhu Buddharakkhita.

Unfortunately, both Sayadaw U Silananda and Sayadaw U Paññadipa had to go to Burma and I could not stay without a teacher. Moreover, I had some unfinished business, mainly pending immigration details. I decided to change my robes but not my mind, and temporarily disrobed. (The body disrobed but not the mind!) Thereafter, I went to live a monastic life and become an Anagarika (voluntary homeless life) with Bhante Gunaratana at the Bhavana Society. During that period, I was trained in mindfulness practice as well as an Introduction to Teachers Training course leading to Advanced Teachers training.

Bhante G. had a unique approach to practicing mindfulness in daily life that I would call, “off-the-cushion” meditation practice. He encouraged me to integrate mindfulness practice with daily work, even mundane chores. He taught me many discourses and *Pāli* studies with a great emphasis on the original teachings of the Buddha.

After staying at Bhavana Society for several months, I decided to return to TMC and began the intensive meditation and monastic training. This would culminate in higher ordination as a *Theravāda* Buddhist monk by my Sayadaw U Silananda, at TMC, San Jose, CA in 2002. I was very glad to be in robes again. After some time, I returned to Bhavana Society, West Virginia to practice with Bhante Gunaratana. My American journey reached a quiescent place and I became a permanent resident.



Steven (Bhante Buddharakkhita) receiving higher ordination, at Tathagata Meditation Centre, in San Jose, CA, USA in 2001.

Then, how did the *Buddha's* teachings end up in 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 sublime *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 excellent in the beginning,
excellent in the middle and excellent in the end.*

— The Buddha

I have great faith in a seed...

Convince me that you have a seed there

And I am prepared to expect wonders.

(19th Century American author,
Henry David Thoreau)

Part II: Introducing Buddhism in Uganda

First Dhamma Mission to Africa: Planting Dhamma Seeds

In 1993, while I was in India I had made initial plans with a mixed group of Africans and other friends to develop the “Afro-Tibetan Friendship Society.” (Also, I attempted to establish the *Dhamma* in Uganda and in Rwanda. Unfortunately, the African land was still dry, the fields were not tilled... the time was not ripe.)

While at the TMC, San Jose, California, Sayadaw U Pannadipa had suggested that I go and spread the *Dhamma* in Africa, starting with my family. Later on, at this particular time, I sought Bhante Gunaratana’s opinion of whether it was better for me to go to India (and meditate in a cave—something dear to the hearts of monks and nuns for their own personal training) or go teach the *Dhamma* in Africa. He strongly advised me to go and teach the *Dhamma* to my fellow Africans sooner rather than later.

A few friends in the U.S. 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 “the basic requisites” Buddhist laypersons

provide for monks. I took heart in hand and decided to carry the *Buddha's* teachings to Uganda.

Then I decided to first go on a pilgrimage to India and Nepal.

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, a Vietnamese senior monk, 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 (Lumbini, Nepal); the place where he attained enlightenment (Bodhi Gaya); the place where he taught the First sermon (Deer Park); the place where he reached the Great Nibbana (Kushinara) and many other places.

Visiting these places added to my faith and confidence in the *Dhamma*.

After my trip to India, I went to Burma for an intensive meditation retreat for two months at Panditarama meditation centre. I went straight to meet Sayadaw U Pandita. I was surprised that he still remembered me from the meditation retreat in the United States. He welcomed me.

During that retreat, I had many expectations and I was under the impression that Sayadaw U Pandita would give *Dhamma* talks on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. Surprisingly, he gave *Dhamma* talks based on the Four Wheels of Success, namely:

- Association with the wise (trained person), not to associate with the unwise (untrained person).
- Residing in a suitable place (where you can practice the *Dhamma*).
- Setting oneself in the right path.
- Having done good deeds in the past.

Once again, I would learn from Sayadaw U Pandita, the importance of spiritual friendship (and association) as the foundation for the whole spiritual path. He said, “Burma is very poor but very rich in the *Dhamma*!” He encouraged me to continue my *Dhamma* practice...

I paid my respects to him.

After Burma, I decided to leave for Sri Lanka before finally landing in Uganda to visit my mother and, hopefully, to introduce Buddhism.

Following the Footsteps of a Famous Saint, Venerable Mahinda

A few years ago, I had read about a Sri Lankan “fully enlightened” monk, who first introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka. I wanted to gain inspiration for my future endeavors by following his footsteps.

I flew to Colombo and stayed in the Negombo area for a couple of days. Thereafter, I visited many places and temples such as Dambulla Cave and Kandy (where they had a tooth relic of the *Buddha*). Later on, I went to Mihintale where Ven. Mahinda

(son of an ancient Indian King Ashoka) had landed for the first time to introduce Buddhism. I heard that he stopped the King of Sri Lanka from killing animals, thereby successfully transforming him.

I was inspired by his determination and courage in planting *Dhamma* seeds in Sri Lanka. Now it was my turn to plant *Damma* seeds in Africa. This Project would occupy the rest of my life and I was determined to follow his footsteps.

Big Buddha, Small Buddha?

My host, Dhammaruwan (a renowned Sri Lanka Buddhist child prodigy who has been practicing *samatha* (concentration) and *vipassanā* (insight) meditation for some twenty years, since he was nine), gave me a choice of two *Buddha* statues to take



Receiving the Buddha image from Upasaka (lay male Buddhist devotee) Dhammaruwan.

to Uganda—a small statue or a large one. However, I wondered where I would keep the statue since there was no temple in Uganda at that time. Since my name, *Buddharakkhita*, means “protected by the Buddha” in the Pāli language, I boldly chose the large statue and determined to protect it.

However, I could not foresee that protecting this Buddha statue would give me so much hardship on my way to Africa.

*The world is blind.
Here there are few who clearly see.
As birds escaping from a net,
Few go to a blissful state.*
(Dhp: 174)

Traveling with the Buddha Statue in Kenya

My long and memorable journey with the *Buddha* statue started in Sri Lanka. The official at the international airport in Colombo requested me to open the statue that was well packed in Buddhist robes. The Sri Lankan official humbly asked, “Is this *Buddha* statue an antique?” I said, “No, it is brand new.” He checked the statue and then told me to wrap it again.

At mid-night, I boarded Air Lanka, and the crew knew that I was carrying the *Buddha* statue on my lap. They respectfully asked me to put it on an empty seat till we landed at Mumbai International Airport. We were requested to identify our luggage and carry all our items before checking in for Kenya Airway outbound to Nairobi, Kenya.



The Buddha statue wrapped in the robe for protection for its trip from Sri Lanka.

After answering seemingly hundreds of questions about the *Buddha* statue in Bombay (Mumbai) on a nearly five-hour

layover, then onboard the Kenya airways, and again at Kenya immigration, I felt exhausted. Even worse, the statue had broken from its base due to constant handling, which I felt terrible about since I had vowed to protect it. 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 apparently not good enough. The immigration officials asked so many questions.

"Is that a baby you are carrying? Where is its boarding pass?" asked one official.

"No!" I insisted, "It's just a statue."

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

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

"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!"

"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. When I left the statue sitting alone, the airport 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,

marijuana or other 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 dark-brown 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 names confirming that I was from 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 U.S. He asked me, shockingly, “Why pretend to be a Maasai when you are a typical Baganda?”

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

*When, after a long absence,
a man safely returns home from afar,
his relatives, friends, and well-wishers
welcome him home on arrival.*

*As kinsmen welcome a dear on arrival,
even so his own good deeds will welcome
the doer of good who has gone from
this world to the next.*

(Dhp: 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 me.” Then she walked around the living room, constantly watching me while tears kept rolling down her face. She walked around again and said:

“Thank God you have returned!”

I certainly knew that there was no God who had brought me back home, but I did not want to dispute my mother’s words, fearing this would hurt her feelings. My relatives looked at my robes and carefully observed my behavior. I gradually realized

that with the robe, the Buddhist monk's etiquette and the *Buddha* statue, I could no longer stay in this house.

Madman

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

People continued to look puzzled and sometimes concerned whenever they saw me. One morning as I left my hotel room, I walked past two women. I engaged in walking meditation, walking back and forth very slowly along 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 madman!"

The other one said, "A madman cannot afford to stay in such a good hotel. He can't be a madman!"

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, as child, there was a ragged man 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, free from craving.

Medicine Man or Witch Doctor?

Some Ugandans thought of me as a traditional medicine man or a witch doctor when they saw me carrying my monk's bag. "Hey! What are you selling?" I replied, "I do not sell anything."

I gave up a business career to become a Buddhist monk but people in Uganda still think I am a businessman! Actually, Buddhist monks are not allowed to engage in any business or exchange of money, or to practice medicine. I was really carrying *Dhamma* seeds. But the medicine of the *Dhamma* is not for sale! It is free of charge or any commercial interest. I wish they could see and experience the real medicine of *Dhamma*.

It was much later that I confirmed that traditional Maasai men were selling their traditional herbal medicine around Kampala. I was informed that the Maasai medicine was not necessarily just for illness, but also for the well-being of a person. This made me reflect on the *Dhamma*, in which the medicine has a universal message of happiness and well-being.

Some people thought that my dark-brown robes were the traditional clothing of the Maasai tribe. All the time, they used to call me a member of the Maasai tribe. Once I met a tax collector who asked me, “Where are your tax-tickets, you Maasai?” I replied, “I am a Ugandan living in the United States but visiting Uganda,” He never said anything to me again. I went off.

Meditation or Medication?

Sometimes I meet African people who ask me what I have been doing in the United States. I tell them that I am attending a meditation retreat and teach meditation. They often feel pity for me as they associate my meditation practice with suffering. They keep mispronouncing it as “medication” instead.

They typically asked me, “What kind of medication?”

I repeated, “Meditation.”

They replied, “Oh sorry, what kind of disease do you have?”

Normally I would repeat the word meditation practice two or three times, but they often failed to distinguish it from “medication.” Actually, they are not too far from the truth since meditation such as mindfulness (*sati*) and insight meditation (*vipassanā*) helps to prevent, relieve and remove dis-ease. This reminds me of an admirable bumper sticker that says: “Mindfulness a day, keeps suffering away!”

*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.*
(Dhp: 165)

Going to Play Lawn Tennis or Guard Our King: A Monk Missing One Arm... And the Way to Salvation!

Upon seeing the big Buddhist fan, a religious object I brought from 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 was the shield that I use to protect my body. Other people even thought that I was the royal bodyguard of our King, or a notable representative of the Pope from the Vatican in Rome. (Considering that the Pope’s funeral ceremony happened when I was visiting Uganda.)

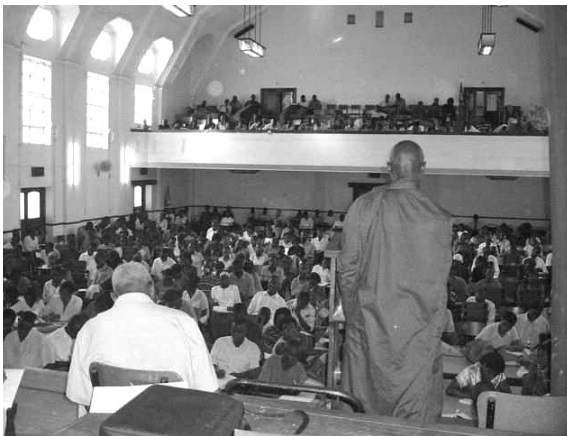
My orange-brown robe continued to cause more confusion. I went into a village one afternoon while dressed formally in full robes. This entails having one arm fully inside the robes with the other arm free to move. When the kids saw me, they said among themselves, “Look at the man with only one arm!” On visiting a pharmacist, I happened to lean on the counter with the arm folded inside my robe; he thought that my arm was in plaster of china (a 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 get many expressions of sympathy.

Other times, the reactions were even stronger. One day, the University of Makerere in Kampala, invited me to deliver a public lecture to over 200 students on the theme “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 misery and suffering is to abandon these traits.

After my lecture, one student sent me a note (rather a kind of ultimatum) that said, “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 believes that he or she is responsible



Venerable Buddharakkhita delivering his lecture at the University of Makerere in Kampala in 2005.

for their choices; salvation or attainment of will come only from within oneself.

I had been surprised and happy that the website of Makerere University had a caption from the *Dhammapada* on their home page which I quoted in my lecture:

*You (yourselves) should make the effort;
The Buddhas only point the way.
Those who meditate and enter this path
are delivered from the bonds of the evil.*
(Dhp: 276)

One of the university students had a personal question, “I have found interest in the attire or the clothes you are putting on. Should we take it as Buddhist attire? If yes, how come the converts are not putting on the same attire? May I know the religious essence of that mode of dressing?”

My reply was that the attire was only for Buddhist monks. The lay Buddhist followers are not required to put on robes. They wear ordinary clothes like other people. Usually, the color of robes is saffron, ocher or brown, which symbolizes renunciation. Traditionally, monks used natural dye from jackfruit trees to dye their robes (simply because it was the only color of dye available in natural forests). But now we can use chemical dyes with different shades of color allowable for monastics. However, some forest monasteries in Thailand still use jackfruit wood to dye their robes.

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 me with my friends, of when I was ordained, and of my pilgrimage in India, 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 U.S.) 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.



Venerable Buddharakkhita ordaining his mother, Nampiima Felister (on the left), October 17, 2008. She became the first Theravada Buddhist nun in Uganda.

So, I decided to visit some Thai nationals in Kampala with my mother. The first visit was to a restaurant run by four Thai owners.

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 Theravāda 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 Sri Lankans.

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, nor the story of Venerable Sariputta's mother during the time of the *Buddha*.

When Venerable Sariputta returned home, many "devas" (angels from heavenly realms) came and paid homage to him. This was a pleasant surprise to his mother, which awakened her faith and made her decide to convert to Buddhism, taking refuge in the *Buddha*, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*. Amazingly, later, my mother would respond in much the same way.

*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 clothes 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 texture and complexion of the *Buddha*. I pointed out that, apparently, people who meditate tend to have beautiful minds. Consequently, they get a beautiful skin



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



Sri Lankan visitors with Ven. Buddharakkhita in Uganda.

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 converted to Islam over 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 to take the Three Refuges. However, to become a virtuous Buddhist you also have to take the five precepts.

The Five Precepts

- I undertake the training rule to refrain from destroying living creatures.
- I undertake the training rule to refrain from taking that is not given.
- I undertake the training rule to refrain from sexual misconduct.
- I undertake the training rule to refrain from false speech.
- 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 Five Precepts into our local language. This was the first time I was to administer the Refuge and Precept-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 *Dhamma* is universal, just like the law of gravity. Perhaps she had the *Dhamma* seeds in her for many lives! Who knows? Soon, within one month since I set foot back in my homeland, five members of my family and other friends took refuge in the *Buddha*, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*. Among them were my mother, my younger sister and my brother-in-law. This reminded me of the first five disciples of the *Buddha* over 2,600 years ago.



Ven. Buddharakkhita administering the Five Precepts in front of the “mobile temple.”

No Money to Feed the Three “Refugees!”

Some people used to offer me food and I always offered blessings to the donors. 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 *Buddha*, *Dhamma* and *Sangha* repeating the phrases for taking the refuges (which is repeated three times as follows):

For the first time:

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(I go to the Buddha as my refuge)

Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(I go to the Dhamma as my refuge)

Sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(I go to the Sangha as my refuge)

For the second time:

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(I go to the Buddha as my refuge)

Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(I go to the Dhamma as my refuge)

Sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(I go to the Sangha as my refuge)

For the third time:

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(I go to the Buddha as my refuge)

Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(I go to the Dhamma as my refuge)

Sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(I go to the Sangha as my refuge)

As I continued to teach, I saw her frowning from time to time. She interrupted, “What if I do not have enough money to feed the three refugees?”

“Do not worry.” I explained the Three Refuges to her and she felt much relieved of the financial burden of caring for three strangers. Did she think that the “*Buddha*, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*” were proper names of refugees from Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo or Sudan?

Before I left Uganda, she visited our Buddhist centre. The number of devotees started to increase and some more took the Three Refuges!

A few weeks before I left for the U.S., my three nieces and one nephew entered the path of the *Buddha*. In a period of one month, nine local Ugandans became Buddhists. On my second visit to Uganda, my nephew said, “I want to be like you,” meaning he aspired to become a monk. Later on, my nephew gave away all his clothes to other kids. He said that he wanted to dress like a monk. I was impressed by my nephew’s determination. However, I felt that he was too young to make such a bold decision. He was only 11 years of age. I called his mother to tell my nephew to be patient till I get him novice monk robes. My sister had to re-buy new clothes for him. I promised to ordain him as a novice. Actually, this boy is very attentive whenever I give *Dhamma* talks (he always sits still like a rock during meditation sessions!). It seems that the *Dhamma* seeds are germinating. Plans are underway to send him to one of the Asian countries such as Burma, Thailand or Sri Lanka and for him to ordain as a novice monk.

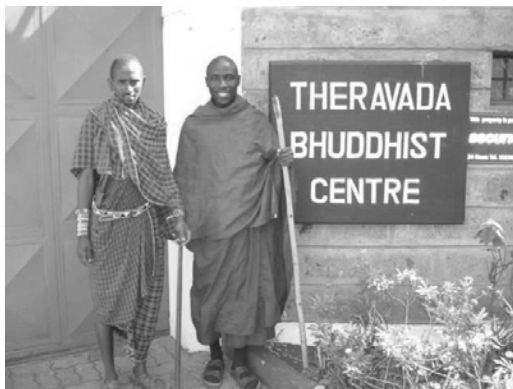
PLANTING DHAMMA SEEDS



*Thai Buddhist
visitors at the
Uganda Buddhist
Centre.*



*Teaching
meditation to
a niece.*



*Ven.
Buddharakkhita
with a real Maasai
outside.*

Maasai Monk?

Before returning to the U.S., I spent one week in Nairobi, Kenya. The Maasai people were very friendly and I seemed to fit into this society. On one occasion, a Maasai man stopped me saying “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 language. The Maasai people wrap “shukas,” a sheet of cloth, very close to the colour 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 clasp-ing her hands together. Interestingly, this is the traditional way to greet monks. I do not know how she learned to greet me.

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 African society. I would later use this friendly atmosphere to teach *Dhamma* to the locals who were more willing to listen since 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 sow and water 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.*
(Dhp: 130)

Returning to Irrigate the Dhamma Seeds: Settling in and Culture Clashes

On my second trip to Africa after almost a year in the U.S, I noticed that people continued to look at me curiously, trying to understand my role in an 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 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 that I always ate anything offered, but I suggested 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, “Why do they kill animals?”

He said, “God told us to kill cows, goats, chickens and so on, but he forbade us to kill and eat beings, leopards, elephants, etc.” (This might have been his personal interpretation of the Bible.)

I then told him that animals have a right to live happily 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 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 called “cha’ngaa” (African vodka) were the food

and drink that mark the celebration 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. He exclaimed, “Just a little bit!”

Concerning my preference for vegetables, he commented that too much “sukuma wiki” (kales) might end up growing alive in my stomach! He warned me not to eat only vegetables.

*Happy indeed we live who possess nothing
feeders on joy we shall be,
like the Radiant gods*
(Dhp: 200)

The Dollar Man

After many encounters with John, he learned how I became a Buddhist monk, and that I was 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 ro-tund 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 the workers are well 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 said, “Only blessings?” He seemed to value more tangible things than the blessings. Later on, he continuously asked for dollars. I replied, “I have no dollars.” I explained that as Buddhist monks, we do not get a salary or own anything. I helped him understand that as monastics, we depend on the generosity of others; therefore we go for alms round 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 without harming the flower,
its colour or scent, flies away, collecting
only the honey, even so the monk (sage)
goes on his alms-round in the village (without affecting
the faith and generosity or wealth of the villagers).*

(Dhp: 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 “jem-be.” This reminded me of my layover in Heathrow International Airport, London once, when an English waitress also mistook my bowl for an African drum. When she started beating on it, I told her it was my alms bowl, and 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 the robe and alms round in the Buddhist monkhood.

On a particularly hot 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 I was walking barefoot like a chicken! He said that walking barefoot signified that I was poor and jobless. Moreover, there were many broken pieces of sharp 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?” And 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 on 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 a bit and asked him, “Are you a Christian?”

He said, “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 big wide smile.

I said, “You see, it’s the same situation, we don’t stand in church on Sunday, instead, we roam around every day to give the people the opportunity to make meritorious actions of 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!

*Health is the precious gain and
Contentment is the greatest wealth
A trustworthy person is the best kinsman
Nibbāna the highest bliss.*

(Dhp: 204)

Just a Simple Monk...That’s It!

Amazingly, when I next went on alms round, John again asked me to give him something. 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 someday net him large sums of U.S. dollars. 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 “superpower”—could be going around with an alms bowl “begging” for food. Actually, monks do not beg for alms. Instead, they collect alms. (It is a minor offence for a monk to beg or ask for food from people who are not related to him by blood).

*From craving springs grief,
from craving springs fear;
for him who is wholly free from craving
there is no grief, much less fear.*

(Dhp: 216)

CARRYING A BOMB OR 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 said, “Habari yako?” (How are you?) and I said, “Mzuri” (I am fine).

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’s just full of air!”

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

Before I answered they immediately asked me if they were welcome to visit the temple. I was surprised by their eagerness to visit the Buddhist centre.

Overall, my stay in Africa was wonderful. I came to learn a lot about how the locals viewed Buddhist monks (*Sangha*) and Buddhism (the *Dhamma*) that I represented. Well, I have tried to go for alms round in Africa many times, so far without much success. One reason I am not successful in getting alms on my alms-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 them herbal medicine. 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 OR BUDDHIST MONK?

When I was in Uganda, I continued the alms round tradition. I decided to go to Mengo and as I went through the gate of the camping site where I had put 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 and going on alms round. He offered me a packet of peanuts.

This was an amazing gesture for me. Then, I proceeded to Mengo town for my alms. People looked at me with astonished expressions on their faces. They continually asked me to sell the basket (alms bowl) to them, but I told them it was not for sale, that I used it for eating. I returned back to the campsite without alms. One of the campsite attendants was willing to offer alms to me. She offered me alms at the campsite. This was the first time I ever received alms from a campsite attendant. Some people are beginning to understand me a little better now though. Among them is a campsite attendant who has 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 began to enjoy offering me

alms, though they themselves were living hand-to-mouth. A few days later, an English couple offered me two bananas and one passion fruit. I could see people developing in the faith of the *Dhamma* (the *Dhamma* seed) when they got exposed to the simple life style of a Buddhist monk. However, they got a different picture of what they thought to be Buddhist bishop.

At long last, some local people began taking pleasure and joy in offering me alms, though they were living hand-to-mouth. A few days later, an English couple offered me two bananas and one passion fruit. I could see people developing in the faith of the *Dhamma* (the *Dhamma* seed) when they got exposed to the simple life style of a Buddhist monk. However, they got a different picture of what they thought to be Buddhist Bishop.

*Be who you are and say what you feel
because those who mind do not matter
and those who matter do not mind.*

— Dr. Seuss

SHAO-LIN MASTER OR BOY SCOUT MASTER?

Going for alms is very humbling. I never know how things are going to turn out. Also, I became the centre of attraction in Kampala, Uganda

People always stared at me as they walked or drove by on the roads with my shaved head and dark-brown robes. Sometimes, I became the object of sympathy. Whenever I shaved my head and walked barefoot during alms round, people thought that I

had lost my relatives. (My dark-brown robes, which resemble a bark cloth used during a funeral, strongly reinforced this impression.) In my Baganda customary tradition, we normally shave our head and walk barefoot during funeral processions as a sign of mourning for the deceased.

Often, I did not receive any food on my alms round, but luckily I had a backup from a group of four Thai's (from Krua Thai restaurant) in Kampala, who committed to offering me food while I was in Uganda. Additionally, from time to time my mother would bring me food.

Sometimes when I go to the suburbs of Kampala with my shaved head and robes, people say I am a Shao-lin master who does not talk to anyone. (Perhaps these misconceptions were due to a lack of familiarity with my practice of mindfully walking in silence.)

One man said to his friends, "Be careful with that Shao-lin master, he will kick you. I saw that in the movies."

Sometimes, when I do my walking meditation, walking back and forth on the same path, they assume I am lost and am looking for the right road.

I answer, "I am going nowhere, just doing walking meditation."
"Sorry, I thought that you were lost," she said.

While I was residing at Natete campsite, some people were leaving early in the morning for the airport. They saw me doing my early morning walking meditation and, assuming that I must be a patrolling watchman, they wanted to leave their keys with me.

I remember one man asking me, "Are you a watchman?"

“No sir, I am a Buddhist monk. I am just doing my walking meditation.”

He said that he saw me wandering around the compound and thought that I was working in the campsite as a watchman. Some people mistook me for what is referred to in Africa as a “night dancer,” or some kind of entertainer, and wondered why I was doing “night dancing” so early in the morning. (Normally, it is done late at night.)

Once I went to Kitoro, a hamlet of Entebbe town, near the airport. One lady thought that I was a Muslim. Her friend urged that I was one of the Teso tribesmen who have just undergone the African ritual of circumcision. Yet another lady observed that I was dressed in layered robes and wondered whether I was feeling cold or having chills caused by severe malaria fever. I told her, “No, the weather is hot and I am fine.”

Surprisingly, some Ugandans even found it very hard to identify my gender. While quietly going on alms round, I overheard two ladies discussing this question among themselves.

One asked, “Is that a female or a male?” The other one said, “That is definitely a female.” They both agreed that I was a female. Reflecting on these comments, I began to think of the way to make the public know that I was a male and not a female. I thought of wearing my robe in an informal way by not covering both shoulders. But I remembered this was against the disciplinary rules. I decided to let it be.

Other people thought I was a Boy Scout Master due to my attire. As I was walking past the university town, one man asked, “Are you a recent graduate?” (He wrongly assumed that I was

wearing my graduation gown.)

It has been interesting to see how people perceive me and how these perceptions affect or distort their view of reality.

*Enduring patience is the highest austerity,
“Nibbāna is supreme,”
says the Buddhas...*

(Dhp: 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 they had space available for one person in the taxi. At first, the driver slowed down but on approaching me, he speeded up.

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

When I first arrived, I was carrying my brown “monk tent” with me (which would later become a “mobile temple”). I searched unsuccessfully for a place to camp. One person I contacted advised me to rent a room from him, but I decided to look near my mother’s town for camping instead. Finally, as I was not able to find a campsite, I went back to the same man who had offered me a room. When I called on him again, he informed me that there wasn’t any room for me on his premises. Suspicion had started reigning in this man’s mind. Finally, I managed to secure accommodation in a different location for a few days until the campsite offered me a space to camp. The Uganda 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 entered my mind that it would be good for the Ugandan Buddhists to have a permanent location. The people who lived near this property would not speak to me, suspecting that I was a wizard. Instead, they spoke to my companion. It is very a strange feeling when people do not accept one in the society.

On another occasion, I wanted to register our Uganda Buddhist Centre. Eventually I went to submit my application to register the Uganda Buddhist Centre as a non-government organization (NGO) at the Regional District Commissioner (RDC) offices in Wakiso.

One officer asked, “What are some of your practices?”

I told him, “Lay people observe five precepts, and one of them is not to kill living beings.” I thought that he was going to be

impressed by our pure ethical conduct. But he frowned at me. He said, “You mean you cannot defend yourself and your country. I do not like your religion.”

I thought he was going to refuse to register our organization. But he processed our papers and took them to the Regional District Commissioner, who suspected that I might be mentally disturbed. But he went ahead and signed the paper hesitatingly. Then, finally, 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 she nearly ran away when she saw me approaching her desk. She had mistaken me for a lunatic. People continued to judge the book by its cover!

Comparing Our Gods, Like Comparing Bank Notes

One bright sunny afternoon, after a heavy downpour, I took a walk around Wandegaya Township just within the suburbs of Kampala. Then I requested my attendant to buy for me a sitting cloth. We entered a shop stall and I had my attendant ask about the price of the cloth. Before quoting the price, she asked, “What is your religion?”

I answered, “Buddhism.” She questioned me, “Why do you put on bark cloth?” I answered her that my robes are of cotton, not bark cloth. (In fact, monks are forbidden from wearing bark cloth.)

She questioned, “Do you believe in God” “Yeah, I believe in the Four Noble Truths,” I replied. “You are just kidding around in your religion,” she commented. I smiled at her. She said,

“My God is stronger than yours! I am saved, a born-again Christian.”

I wanted to tell her that in Buddhism, we are born again and again... till we reach final enlightenment, but I decided not to open that can of worms.

She asked me, “Please raise both your hands upwards.” I refused to raise my hands. She strongly said, “I am going to pray for you and prove to you that our God is stronger than yours, the *Buddha*. And as a proof of the power of God, you are definitely going to fall on the ground!”

I decided to leave the scene... Personally, I wondered what falling down on the ground and perhaps hurting myself had to do with “loving your neighbor as you love yourself.” These incidences would teach me patience as I continued to meet and relate to so many people holding differing views.

Learning Precious Lessons of Patience

As I share my experiences of spreading the *Dhamma* in Africa to many *Dhamma* friends around the world, they always ask me how I felt amidst all these difficulties and challenges. I told them that I follow the footsteps of the *Buddha* and his disciples. Actually, I am inspired despite all the hardships and challenges... The *Buddha* had a lot of patience. He said:

“Monks, even if bandits brutally severe limb by limb with two-handled saw, he who entertained hate in this heart on that account would not be one who carried out my teachings.” (MN: 21)

One of the disciples of the *Buddha* named Punna also inspired me on how to practice patience while planting *Dhamma* seeds. According to the *Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Venerable Punna once approached the *Buddha* and said:

“Venerable sir, it would be good, if you would advise me in brief, so that I could live alone and secluded, zealous to dispel—diligently.”

The Buddha gave him teachings on sense restraint and said, “Punna, I have advised you in brief. Now in which state will you abide?”

PUNNA: “I will live in the Sunāparanta.”

BUDDHA: “The people of Sunāparanta are cruel, if they scold and abuse you, what will you do?”

PUNNA: “Venerable sir, it will occur to me, indeed these people are good, in that they do not hurt me with their hands.”

BUDDHA: “If those people hurt you with their hands, what will you do?”

PUNNA: “Venerable sir, it will occur to me, indeed these people are good, in that they do not hurt me with clods.”

BUDDHA: “If those people hurt you with clods, what will you do?”

PUNNA: “Venerable sir, it will occur to me, indeed these people are good, in that they do not hurt me with a stick.”

BUDDHA: “If those people hurt you with a stick, what will you do?”

PUNNA: “Venerable sir, it will occur to me, indeed these people are good, in that they do not hurt me with a weapon.”

BUDDHA: “If those people hurt you with a weapon, what will you do?”

PUNNA: “Venerable sir, it will occur to me, indeed these people are good, in that they do not end my life with a sharp weapon.”

BUDDHA: “If the people put an end to your life with a sharp weapon, what will you do?”

PUNNA: Venerable sir, it will occur to me thus. There are disciples of the Buddha, who loathing the body and life search for an assassin. Here, I have an assassin even without a search.

BUDDHA: “Good! Punna, it is possible for you to live in Sunāparanta endowed with that kind of discipline.

“Monks, Punna is wise. He stood on his own in the teaching of the Buddha. Venerable Punna proceeded to Sunāparanta and having made a following a thousand male and female followers, he passed away after attaining the final enlightenment.” (SN 35:88)

Of course, the people in Africa have not done any physical harm to me. However, I am inspired to patiently continue to expose my fellow Africans to the teachings of the *Buddha*.

This disciple—Venerable Punna—is one of the finest examples of practicing patience.

The Choice to be “Grumpy” or “Happy” is Yours

Personally, I have applied these teachings on patience while spreading the *Dhamma* seeds in Africa. During my overseas travels, I always undergo rigorous security checks at the airport. I used to get bothered by this, especially when I had limited time to catch my flight. Now, I view the security checks in a more positive way.

Once I was at Dulles airport, near Washington D.C., when the security officer asked me to turn my left hand or leg forward and right hand or leg in front, and keep on alternating. I felt like I was doing gymnastics. I thought what an excellent way to get some exercise before a long-haul flight!

Then he requested, “Now, I am going to ‘pat down’ your body.” Then he scanned it with a machine. Afterwards, I really felt more relaxed and happy. I thought of all this as a great opportunity to get a free full body massage! Finally, I was requested to sit down on the chair—and place both feet on the ground and spread my feet out. He began to pat the soles of my feet. By the end of this check, I felt much better. Again, I thought, how extremely fortunate to get free treatment, reflexology for my feet!

I felt a sense of gratitude for these “free treatments” and would often thank them.

Searching for the Baby Buddha Again!

After several months of settling in our new property with a small temple, I felt a sense of ease and peace. I had great hope that the *Dhamma* seed was planted and the remaining task was to nurture the “seed,” keep on watering, to remove some weeds. Some local people and our neighbors began to visit us; however, some of them seemed to fear getting close to our small temple. I had built a small room only for the *Buddha* statue and the rest of the space was open, with no walls, for us to practice meditation.

Sometimes we would open the door to the *Buddha* statue and at other times, when there was no meditation session, the door was closed. People started to spread the rumors around our village, far and wide about the locked statue. Whenever people saw the *Buddha* statue for the first time from a distance, they never came near it. It seems they expected to find the cross of Jesus Christ.

One day, our President of Uganda visited the Vice President’s house, which is one kilometer from our temple. The day before his arrival, the government officials sent soldiers to scour our village for security reasons. Some of the soldiers heard the rumor that the Uganda Buddhist Centre had kidnapped a baby which they kept inside the small house. Lo and behold, the soldiers came searching for that baby. They broke down the front door and anxiously searched all over the place. They were trying to rescue the rumored “baby in captivity.” To their dismay, they failed to see the baby but only a *Buddha* statue! Utterly thwarted and disappointed. They decided to sit down

on the porch and drink the whole night until morning. The next morning, they left... I had to repair the door.

Compassion in Action

A few months later, I continued to build the new temple. I thought to have a glass door so that everyone who visited us could see the statue even with the door closed. Another rumor spread around the village that “the Uganda Buddhist Centre is selling the heads of children overseas as their major fundraising effort to build the temple.” It seems the villagers were very puzzled about my long absences, during my travels overseas. Also, they were surprised to see the steady progress in the building of the temple.

After these incidences, I established a Peace School—an equivalent of the Sunday school—for educating people so that the community could understand what we were trying to accomplish. I even raised money for scholarships for ten children. While selecting the kids for the scholarship, I deliberately chose the child of the person who was generating the rumors that brought soldiers to our temple.

Some people approached me and asked, “Why did you give a scholarship to that child?” I told them that this was the exact person who deserved our help, our compassion. They asked me, “Why did you give a scholarship to a kid whose parents had spread the rumors that the Uganda Buddhist Centre was ‘selling the heads of kids overseas’?”

I jokingly replied to them: “I am sharing the proceedings of

our lucrative business with that person!” They chuckled and walked away happily. Since then, those who spread the rumors have changed their attitude. For instance, one parent has sent a letter addressed to: “Mr. Buddhist, thank you for paying school fees for my kid....”

Also, this same parent sent me a batch of sweet bananas, and whenever I pass nearby their house they wave to me with a wide warm smile.

This incident reminded me of the *Buddha’s* teachings about the virtues of compassion. The highest compassion is to share with people the path to happiness. I concluded that it is always good to return good for the evil that often comes with human limitations in real life circumstances.



Ven. Buddharakkhita having a Dhamma talk with people from the surrounding communities of the Uganda Buddhist Centre (UBC).



Children from Bulega and surrounding communities collecting water from the UBC borehole.



Ven. Buddharakkhita offering blessings during the reopening of one of the boreholes donated to the community by the UBC.

PLANTING DHAMMA SEEDS

Part III: Windows of Hope, Winds of Change

Since the inception of the Uganda Buddhist Centre, we have noticed a growing acceptance of Buddhism. Also, the people's perception of Buddhism and a Buddhist monk has somewhat changed, probably due to media exposure in several newspaper articles and a television appearance.

I feel there are many windows of hope for transformation, and for the *Dhamma* seeds to sprout, grow and produce abundant *Dhamma* fruits.

From a "Mobile Temple" (monk tent) to Meditation Temple

The construction of the new Buddhist temple began on April 5, 2007. So far, the facilities include: a meditation hall which accommodates about 138 people, a small library and reading room, two single room accommodations, a *kuti* for the nun, my mother, and volunteer facilities including campsites and outdoor meditation sites with a lovely view of Lake Victoria.

The water project was a major accomplishment because we had no access to clean water. The whole village had only one borehole (well) dug by the government of Uganda. Now, the Centre has its own borehole. Most people from the village come to fetch water. Many people are getting to know us better.

Whenever I pass through the village, people enthusiastically wave and appreciatively applaud:

Bye “Buddha!” bye “Buddha!” bye “Buddha!”

Sometimes, I felt terrible that I could not reverse people’s wrong perception. The name *Buddha* has spread afar. Most people have nicknamed me, *Buddha*. Most people have shortened my name since they could not pronounce my rather long name.



The exterior view of the Uganda Buddhist Temple.



The interior view.

The Mirembe (Peace) Buddha Statue: Not “Baby” Buddha

The Centre houses a bronze *Buddha* statue called “Mirembe” Buddha, which means “Peace” Buddha in the local “Luganda” language. It was donated by a group of generous devotees from Thailand and has distinctive African facial features. The statue symbolizes bringing the peaceful *Buddha’s* teachings to Africa, which has, in the past, been torn by tribal clashes, wars, and political turmoil.

The Peace Buddha sits on a beautifully decorated stand (throne) made in Burma. It was offered as a gift by the Burmese people, headed by Ashin U Osadha, from the Bay Area, California, and U.S.



Mirembe
Buddha

Great Costume, Good Fashion

Most immigration officials at the Entebbe airport have begun to admire my attire. Once, when I arrived from the United States, the lady at the counter commented, “You are dressed exquisitely!”

I replied, “Thank you.”

She asked, “How can I get that cloth material?”

I told her that I was a monk and I got the robes at my ordination.

Then I met another man who admired my fashion. I kept on wondering whether people thought that I was putting on a fashion show!

Another lady asked, “Are you a Nigerian?”

I answered, “I am a Ugandan.”

She said, “I thought you are from one of the West African countries.”

Most people focus so much on the external things, material things that they see with the eyes. They ignore the internal things such as spiritual values that they cannot see with their eyes.

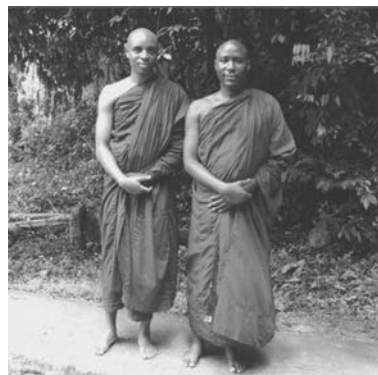
Ugandans Searching for Blessings...

Most people in Uganda do not know much about Buddhism. However, some of them always request blessings or favor. In Buddhism, blessing means something quite different from its meaning in other traditions. In Buddhism, the word blessing means avoiding all unskillful states of mind; cultivating

skillful states of mind; and purifying the mind as the way to achieve blessing. In other words, we are enjoined to plant the seeds of generosity, universal love, compassion, and wisdom and so on in order to realize the highest blessings for ourselves rather than waiting for external forces to give us these blessings. For instance, among the thirty-eight blessings mentioned by the *Buddha* in the *Blessing Discourse* (*Mangala Sutta*) is the following: “Self-control, chastity, comprehension of the Four Noble Truths, and the realization of *Nibbāna*. This is the highest blessing.”



Ven. Buddharakkhita dressed in robes in a “formal fashion.”



Ven. Buddharakkhita (right) and Ven. Sangharakkhita (left) dressed in an “informal fashion.”

Give Us Prayers

There is also a great yearning for prayers in Uganda. On many occasions, I have been requested to pray for them. I always invoke the *Buddha's* words on peace and happiness. It is a kind of meditation practice of reflecting and wishing loving-kindness for all beings, including oneself. We do not pray to external forces to offer us loving-kindness. Instead we cultivate the intention or wish to be happy and develop skillful ways to be happy through our thoughts, words and actions. I always request them to repeat these words to themselves:

May I be well, happy and peaceful.

*May friends, relatives and parents,
teachers be well, happy and peaceful.*

May all being be well, happy and peaceful.

This discourse on loving-kindness is similar to the Sermon of Mount in Christianity. Since most people relate to it very well, they always humble themselves, sit in stillness and silence with palms together and close their eyes for “prayers.” However, other people have many higher expectations from prayers. They always expect me to perform miracles (seemingly like other pastors commonly do in Uganda.) There was one young man who asked, “Pastor, can you perform miracles of healing?”

I told him that my mission is to teach meditation, leading to peace and ultimate happiness. He asked, “Can you then pray for me to get money?” I told him that once you are happy and peaceful, you will get a job easily and consequently make adequate money through your hard work. He questioned, “Can you perform miracles and heal lame people and those with

HIV/AIDS like other pastors?” ” I’m sorry,” I said, “I do not perform such miracles.” I suggested he go to the pastor who heals people with HIV/AIDS. (In Buddhism, the only miracle worth pursuing is changing a person’s unskillful way of life to a skillful way.) He replied, “But you are sending me away from your temple?” I answered, “You are more than welcome to meditate and chant at the temple anytime.” Meditation is a self-healing process which may reduce or heal your disease. It can strengthen your immune system and make you mentally aware of your disease and its causes.

Sojourning to the Far West, Japan

I was nominated as a Supreme Buddhist leader and I was invited to travel to Japan to undergo the selection process, which was simplified because I was the only Buddhist monk from Uganda. I began my preparation for the trip when I was in Uganda. I was invited to Japan with two attendants from the Uganda Buddhist Centre. On entering the embassy gate, my attendant followed me. I knocked on the door of the gate. After opening the door, the Ugandan gateman looked at me with a stunned expression. His eyes nearly bulging out of their sockets. I knew that he had never seen a Buddhist monk before.

He asked, “Please would you give way to other people first.” I calmly tolerated that first treatment. Then he requested my attendant to enter. The gatekeeper checked him cursorily but when my turn came, he asked many questions. He asked, “Do you have any weapons in your bag?” I said, “No.”

He then checked it thoroughly. He scanned me with a security machine all over my body. He then let me into the Japanese embassy but suspicion continued to loom over his conscience. He checked me with great dishonor. (Normally, in Buddhist countries, the security check for monastics is quite gentle.) But, since I understood that the gateman did not know anything about Buddhist monks, I felt more balanced and understanding toward him. I knew that he was doing his duty.

Later on, I returned to the U.S. and finally flew to Japan. The reception in Japan was totally opposite to the reception that I received at the Japanese embassy in Uganda. I was welcomed and greeted with the Japanese spirit of kindness, honor and hospitality. (Some of the places that I visited in Japan had about ten security personnel though we did not need them.)

Also, we had a well-qualified medical doctor on standby who meticulously checked my blood pressure and other conditions in the morning and evening in my room. Sometimes memories flashed in my mind of how I was treated at the Japanese embassy in Uganda, by a fellow Ugandan with dishonor and disrespect (but now I am in lovely Japan as a representative of Buddhism in Uganda). I decided to make my mind balanced in the face of honor, too. I knew dishonor and honor are just worldly winds and they will pass away. When there is no attachment to honor or aversion to dishonor our mind can remain calm and clear. Now, the virtue of equanimity has become my main practice in leading a more peaceful, grounded and balanced life.



The World Buddhist Summit welcoming Ven. Buddharakkhita at Kansai International Airport, Osaka, Japan.



Ven. Buddharakkhita welcomed at the World Buddhist Summit, Japan in 2008.

H.M. King Oyo Attending the World Buddhist Summit, Japan

The presence of Buddhism in Uganda led to the invitation and attending of the youngest king in the world (according to the Guinness Book of Records), H.M. King Oyo, attending the World Supreme Buddhist Conference, Japan in November 2008. I initiated the invitation after meeting the Secretary-General of the World Buddhist Summit at the United Nations Vesak Day in Hanoi, Vietnam.

His Majesty Oyo gave an inspirational speech and most delegates were impressed. He said, “I would like Uganda to attract the next World Buddhist Summit. My forefathers supported the establishment of Christianity, however, I would like to welcome Buddhism in my Kingdom, for my mission is Buddhism.”

He admitted that, in Africa, we desperately need peace. Though we do not know much about Buddhism we know that Africans are suffering. We need the peace that can be obtained by following the *Buddha*’s teachings on the Noble Eightfold Path namely: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

Most people applauded after his speech. After the King’s visit in Japan, one television station in Uganda telecast the congratulatory speech that I delivered in Japan. Since then, Ugandans are becoming increasingly more familiar with Buddhism.

Seeking Green Pastures

Most people view the Uganda Buddhist Centre as a great opportunity to go overseas. One man commented, “I saw you on television while in Japan, are you the one?”

I answered, “Yes!”

He requested, “Please can you take me to Japan?”

I questioned him, asking, “What do you want to do in Japan?”

He said that he wanted to learn Buddhism. I told him that he could learn Buddhism at the Uganda Buddhist Centre, without having to go to Japan.



His Majesty
King Oyo
Kabamba Iguru,
H.R.M. Best
Kemigisa and
other officials
from Tooro
Kingdom
attended the
World Buddhist
Summit, Japan
in 2008.

My Mother Became the First Ugandan Buddhist Nun!

Since 2005, my mother had been observing the “eight lifetime” precepts, and donned the white clothing. She had expressed her desire to be a nun. In 2008, I offered to take her to Japan for the World Supreme Buddhist Conference. A few months before the Japan trip, I called her from the United States and asked her whether she wanted to temporarily ordain as a nun, perhaps for a couple of months. She replied, “How many times are you going to ordain me as a nun?”

“Mom, you are not yet a nun...” (It seems that when I gave her the eight lifetime precepts in 2005, she thought she was a nun, not knowing the difference between an “eight lifetime preceptor” and a nun.)

She said, “I thought I was already a nun!”

I told her, “It is difficult to be a nun.”

She interrupted, “What do you mean by difficult?”

I answered her, “Because of your age!”

She said, “When you do something you love to do, it is never too difficult.”

I told her, “When you become a nun, you will have to shave off your hair and not eat solid food after noon, except clear juice! Will you be able to do that?”

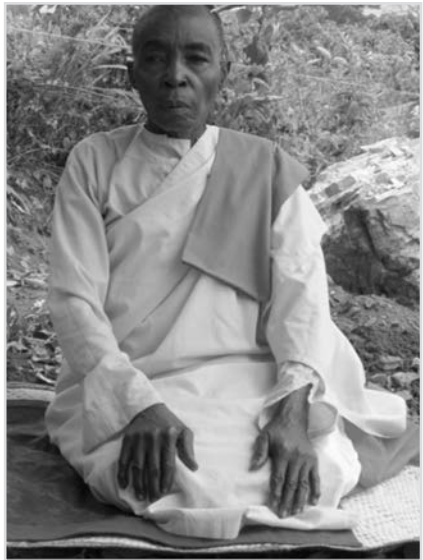
She said, “If you can do it, I can do it!” (Later on, she revealed to me that she had already been fasting after the noon hour. What a strong and admirable conviction!)

Thinking that she might have difficulties remaining with the practices of nuns, I asked her, “How long do you want to remain as a nun, three months?

She replied, “No! I will become a nun for the rest of my life. I will never disrobe.” I was impressed, even moved by her strong determination to join the monastic life. I then promised her: “When I return to Uganda, I will bring you nun’s robes.”

She replied, “*Sadhu, Sadhu, Sadhu!*” (*Well done, excellent!*)

Just a few months before I flew to Uganda, I obtained nun’s robes donated by a Burmese nun. Once I got the robes I asked her again if she still cherished the idea of becoming a nun, and she remained steadfast in her commitment. I was surprised by her great faith and confidence. She was very anxious about her ordination. She reminded me of my decision to become a



Ven. Dhammakami

monk several years ago. I planned to ordain her on November 17, 2008, shortly after arriving in Uganda.

My Mother's Ordination Ceremony

It was early morning on Sunday and the weather had promised a sunny day. I requested my mother to prepare for ordination. I was surprised to see her with a shaved head even before I gave her instruction to do so (I wanted to take pictures of her while cutting off the hair, since this was the first time in my life to see her with a shaved head!) Consequently, I gave her a *Pāli* name “Dhammakami” meaning “one who loves the *Dhamma*.” The ordination ceremony took place in the meditation hall. I invited a Burmese lady to train her in how to put on her robes. After ordination, I gave her gifts from a Chinese nun and other friends from the United States.

I continued to secure her Japanese visa in order to attend the World Buddhist Conference in Kobe City, Japan. I asked, “How do you feel about going to Japan since this is your first airplane trip as well as your first trip out of Uganda.”

She answered, “I cannot even sleep well at night, due to my excitement about the Japanese trip.”

Finally, the day arrived for our departure to Japan. We travelled together to Japan, along with three other delegates from the Uganda Buddhist Centre. On arriving in Osaka, in the evening, we received a warm welcome from our host.

My mother was fascinated with the development of Japan as compared to Uganda, where she had spent all of her life. We went for a study tour on a cruise to Nagasaki and Hiroshima... (She saw these world famous atomic bomb historical sites from a unique perspective of never having heard of the atomic bomb!)

On our last day, our host took us around Osaka, a city with endless ramps on top of ramps. On viewing these ramps and roads, my mother exclaimed, “Look at the long trains!”

I asked her, “Which ones, I do not see them?” She said, “Look above!”

I smilingly explained to her, “That is not a train.” (It is one road built on top of another.... I knew my mother had never seen such roads like that in Uganda.) She mistook a road for a train. It is all about perception. How we perceive the outer world is due our individual conditioning, our mindset.

*It is good to have friends when the need arises;
It is good to be content with anything that is available;
It is good to have merit when life is about to end;
It is good to be rid of all suffering.*

(Dhp: 331)

Attitude of Gratitude: The Dhamma Seeds Are Sown

As for the establishment of the Uganda Buddhist Centre, we were very fortunate to discover two acres of land near Lake Victoria in Garuga on Entebbe Road.

I was overcome with deep gratitude and happiness in knowing that people would now have a place to practice Buddhism and meditate in Uganda. Given that I had to cross the Indian Ocean to discover the *Dhamma*, I was very happy that the *Dhamma* was now gaining roots 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 arrived as a Buddhist monk. Now I am trying to scatter the seeds far and wide in the fertile fields by bringing the Buddha's teachings to everyone open-minded enough and willing to embrace it. The first "lay *Sangha*" in Uganda is established. Our local friends are beginning to join our Buddhist community. As for ordained *Sangha*, my mother ordained as a nun.

My nephew and niece were ordained temporarily as novices. And other nieces say they would like to become permanent nuns.

I am very grateful to the Vietnamese community and others at the Tathagata Meditation Center, San Jose, California, for their enormous support to help establish the Buddhist Centre. I also express my appreciation (*anumodana*) to a group of Thai devotees in Thailand and U.S. who donated the two African Buddha statues. May their generosity be a gateway to their liberation!

The first *Buddha* statue was installed at the Uganda Buddhist Centre while the second statue was 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 Centre.

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* teaching and attain final liberation in this very life.

PLANTING DHAMMA SEEDS

NOTES AND REFERENCES
WITH LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AN: Anguttara Nikāya, or The Gradual Sayings, available through the Pali Text Society (PTS), Oxford

Dhp: Dhammapada, or word of the Doctrine, available in translation through many publishers. (Example: Dhp: 1 refers to verse number one)

SN: Samyutta Nikāya or The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, available through Wisdom Publications (Example: SN: 40 refers to Sutta number 40)

DN: Digha Nikāya or The Long Discourses of the Buddha, available through Wisdom Publications (Example: DN: 40 refers to Sutta number 40)

MN: Majjhima Nikāya or The Middle Discourses of the Buddha, available through Wisdom Publications (Example: **MN:** 40 refers to Sutta number 40)

Dhammapada - A practical guide to right living: By Venerable Sri Acharya Buddharakkhita

Dhp: 11-12, 75, 87-88, 130, 165, 182, 184, 186-187, 190-191, 200, 204, 219-220, 282, 305, 308, 331

The Dhammapada: By Venerable K Sri Dhammapada

Dhp: 49, 111, 174, 210-211, 216, 276

The Discourse on Blessings: Translated from the Pāli by Piyadassi Thera.

GLOSSARY OF PĀLI TERMS

Arahant – saint; one who has attained the final emancipation

Bhante – an honorific title, “Venerable Sir,” for Buddhist monk in the Theravāda tradition.

Bhāvanā – mental development

Bhikkhu – Buddhist monk

Buddha – the Enlightened One

Buddharakkhita – protected by the Buddha

Buddha Dhamma – Teachings of the Buddha

Devas – beings from heavenly realms

Dhamma – truth; reality; the Teachings of the Buddha

Gotama – the family name, or surname, of the Prince Siddhatta

Kamma – volitional action

Karuṇā – compassion

Mettā – loving-kindness

Nibbāna – the ultimate emancipation

Pāli – ancient Indian dialect spoken by the Buddha

Pañña – wisdom

Samatha – concentration meditation

Sangha – community of Buddhist renunciates

Tathāgata – name the Buddha used to address himself

Theravāda – southern school of Buddhism

Vihāra – a dwelling-place or monastery

Vipassanā – insight meditation

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RECOMMENDED BOOKS ABOUT BUDDHISM,
DHAMMA AND INSIGHT MEDITATION
(VIPASSANĀ)

- *Mindfulness in Plain English* by Bhante Gunaratana
- *Beyond Mindfulness in Plain English* by Bhante Gunaratana
- *Eight Mindfulness Steps to Happiness* by Bhante Gunaratana
- *In This Very Life* by Sayadaw U Pandita
- *The States of Mind Called Beautiful* by Sayadaw U Pandita
- *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* by Nyanaponika Thera
- *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness* by Sayadaw U Silananda
- *Practical Insight Meditation* by Mahasi Sayadaw
- *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna* by Venerable Analayo
- *What the Buddha Taught* by Walpola Rahula
- *Awakening the Mind Lightening the Heart* by H.H. The Dalai Lama
- *Insight Meditation* by Joseph Goldstein
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The Emergence of Buddhism in Africa

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bhante Buddharakkhita was born and raised in Uganda, Africa. He first encountered Buddhism in 1990 while living in India, and he began practising meditation in 1993. In 2001, he began monastic training and consequently was ordained in 2002 as a Buddhist monk by his Preceptor, the late Venerable U Silananda, at the Tathāgata Meditation Center in San Jose, California. He continued his meditation practise for eight years under the guidance of Bhante Gunaratana at the Bhavana Society, West Virginia. His path then led him to found the Uganda Buddhist Centre in Uganda, East Africa in April 2005. Besides spending time and teaching there, he has been teaching meditation in Africa, Australia, Europe, Asia, and the United States since 2005. He is the spiritual director of Flowering Lotus Meditation Center in Magnolia, Mississippi. Bhante Buddharakkhita also serves on the council of advisers to Buddhist Global Relief in New York. He is the author of several books—*Planting Dhamma Seeds: The Emergence of Buddhism in Africa*, *Sowing Seeds of Peace: Mindfulness Meditation for Finding Peace Within*, *Drop By Drop: The Buddha's Path to True Happiness*, and *Caring for the Planet: Buddhism and Environment*.

The Emergence of Buddhism in Africa

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