

## **Decline and Resurrection: 1964-81**

The news of the termination of the ten-year lease on 10 Ovington Gardens followed hard on the difficult transitional period of new management. Whilst there were obvious disadvantages (a centre in the heart of London) – the peculiar nature of a *Vihara* necessitated a locality far from the madding crowd. Many would think it incongruous for a centre exhorting renunciation to be situated so close to one of the capital's leading departmental stores, such as Harrods, but nevertheless one clear advantage was accessibility, which facilitated large attendances at the regular activities. The appearance of prosperity proved illusory: from a material point of view the *Vihara* was in a deplorable condition following years of neglect. Both the library and the central heating system had ceased functioning; no redecoration had ever been undertaken and the existing paintwork, both inside and out, was beginning to peel. Many in this Sinhalese community were using the *Vihara* purely as a 'place of convenience' – leaving prams, etc., whilst shopping in the neighbourhood.

However, once the lease came to an end there was no viable alternative but to seek new quarters. Lalit Hewavitarne, the General Secretary of The Mahabodhi Society of Ceylon, arrived in London to head negotiations for acquiring a new property. His stay was limited and perhaps this factor more than any other determined his decision, regardless of any possibly damaging long-term results. A freehold, detached house was finally bought in Heathfield Gardens, Chiswick for the (then absurdly high) sum of £10,000. Although this amount was available from the Anagarika Dharmapala Trust and was partly offset by the sale of the (derequisitioned) house at 41 Gloucester Road in 1965 (which had been taken over by Holborn and St. Pancras Borough Council in 1940), nevertheless it is clear that someone was 'conned' somewhere along the line. A further £3,000 was expended on a complete renovation, which included generous sums from Mr. & Mrs. Broughton, I.B. Horner and Mrs. Quittner.

By the spring of 1964 the renovation was completed and, on 23 April, the physical move from Knightsbridge was effected. The formal opening took place on Sunday, 24 May, amidst a vast concourse of supporters and sympathizers, the High Commissioner for Ceylon, Dr. G. P. Malalasekera, hoisted the Buddhist flag; the traditional milk-boiling ceremony was performed by Mrs. Mallika Perera, the President of the London Buddhist Association; the oil lamp was lit by Mrs. Quittner and Maurice Walshe, the

Chairman of the English *Sangha* Trust; and the casket of Buddha-relics was carried into the new *Vihara* by Mr. and Mrs. Broughton.

At the Public Meeting, presided over by Ven. H. Saddhatissa, then Head Monk at the *Vihara*, and including as a guest the Mayor of Brentford and Chiswick, Cllr. G.E. Henniker,

Ven. Saddhatissa, Ananda Bodhi, Miss Horner and Dr. Malalasekera addressed the large gathering and the ceremonies were terminated with a two-hour chanting of *paritta*.

The same day was used to celebrate *Vesakha* and about twenty-five devotees observed the Eight Precepts. In the morning a German, Heinrich Knote, was ordained *Samanera Saddhaloka* by Ven. Saddhatissa. A *Sanghika-dana* was given to nine *bhikkhus* including the *Phra Maha Rajasiddhimuni*, the Director of the Vipassana Meditation Centre, Bangkok.

On the occasion of the 2511<sup>th</sup> Buddha Jayanti and 76<sup>th</sup> Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Jayanti, jointly celebrated under the auspices of the Indian Buddhist Society of the UK, the 'Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Committee' was formed at the *Vihara*. The office bearers nominated were: President, Ven. Saddhatissa, General Secretary, S.S. Gaikawad, and Hon. Treasurer, S.D. Khobragade. A committee was formed after the meeting to collect funds with a view to establishing a 'Dr. Ambedkar Bhavan' – a students' hostel with a Buddhist shrine room for the use of Indian Buddhist students whilst in this country. However, as with some of the previous projects, of a similar nature, this well-intentioned plan failed to materialise.

In August 1967, a new *bhikkhu* took up residence who was to prove extremely dynamic in many fields of activity, Ven. Medagama Vajiragnana *Thera* (b. 1928) who had held the positions of Principal of Paramadhammacetiya Pirivena (Mount Lavinia), Lecturer at the *Bhikkhu* Teacher Training College (Ratmalana), Founder-Principal of Bellanwila College, and Incumbent of the Hippola Purana *Vihara* (near Kandy) and Dalukgolla Rajamaha *Vihara* (Ampitiya). Shortly before embarking for London, the Malwatta Chapter of the Siyam *Nikaya* conferred on him the honour of *Kammacariya* with the title of *Vidyakirti*.

A sad event occurred on 10 September with the sudden death of a temporary resident *bhikkhu*: Ven. H. Punnaratana *Nayake Thera*. A scholar and historian, he had been studying in London for three months and was preparing to go on to the USA. His body was flown back to Ceylon for cremation.

In October, Ven Saddhatissa also returned to Ceylon. Both the meditation and Pali classes were suspended (the latter following Dhammaloka's departure to complete his studies elsewhere). Ven. Vajiragnana and Ven. Mahanama took over the Sunday talks and the former continued a fortnightly series of talks, which had been started at The Buddhist Society. Ven. Mahanama also ably represented the *Vihara* at The Buddhist Society's Summer School in August.

At the beginning and end of 1967 two sincere attempts were made to bring the *Theravadin bhikkhus* resident in the United Kingdom and the *Vihara* they occupied closer together. The first move was to re-establish the Sangha Sabha, which had lain dormant since it was created almost three years earlier.

In response to a letter sent out by the Ven. Chao Khun Phra Sobhana Dhammasudhi, a meeting of *bhikkhus* was held on 8 January at The Buddhapadipa Temple, to form a British *Sangha Sabha*. This term means a committee of monks set up to act as monastic parliament and spiritual advisory council for the benefit of the *Sangha* and of the Buddhist lay organizations in this country. Those attending the meeting were from the London Buddhist *Vihara* in Chiswick, Ven. Dhammaloka, who acted as Chairman of the meeting, Ven. Dhammavisuddhi and Ven. Sumanashanta; from the Hampstead Buddhist *Vihara*, Ven. Phra Maha Prasit Bodhivaddhano; and representing The Buddhapadipa Temple, Ven Chao Khun Phra Sobhana Dhammasudhi, who acted as secretary of the meeting.

The second move was to co-ordinate policy and activities between the three *Viharas* in London (The Hampstead *Vihara*, London Buddhist *Vihara* and the Buddhapadipa Temple). Although a Central Committee for the Advancement of Buddhism was formed, neither it nor the *Sangha Sabha* achieved very much as each *bhikkhu* reserved his traditional right to freedom of action and the *Viharas* were too well-established to accept overlordship from an 'umbrella' body.

The only other event of note in 1983 affecting the *Vihara* was the visit in October of Gamani Jayasuriya (1924-98), President of the Mahabodhi Society of Sri Lanka and Minister of Agricultural Development and Research and Food and Co-operative Undertakings. On 20 November he addressed supporters on the subject of the proposed new premises in Barrowgate Road and discussion ensued over raising additional funds through overdrafts on the British Mahabodhi Society's accounts, mortgages on both properties and/or a further donation from the Dharmapala Trust or

other sources, enhanced by a new appeal to be launched in this country and abroad in the New Year. In the meantime, acknowledgement was made of the many donations received, especially the extremely generous gift of £1,000 from The Buddhist Society which had been facilitated by a friend on their Council, Peter Sharp.