

The Downward Path: 1982-85

Subsequent developments at the *Vihara* suggested that it had 'lost its way' insofar as the original and prime purpose of the Centre was concerned. Misgivings in the mind of Russell Webb, the Hon. Secretary led him to compile a confidential report as early as 20.7.1980. Since this is now part of history, there is no sound reason why it should not be finally divulged. The main points which it contained are as follows:

- (a) Anagarika Dharmapala founded the British Mahabodhi Society in 1926 and the "Buddhist Mission" (precursor of the London Buddhist *Vihara*) in 1928 with the express purpose of offering Buddhism to the indigenous population, i.e., it was specifically intended as a *Dhammaduta* centre. Other religious or pastoral activities were to be regarded as sub-ordinate to the primary aim.
- (b) The success of a *Dhammaduta* centre will depend on having: (i) convincing, dedicated and inspiring teachers, (ii) teachers who can present the *Dhamma* in an appealing and acceptable manner, and (iii) a centre suitable for such teachings.
- (c) With the notable exceptions of Ven. Dr. Saddhatissa, Ven. Piyatissa and Ven. Vajiragnana, no resident *bhikkhu* during the preceding 20 years had made a lasting impression on the Buddhist scene.
- (d) Full-length, structured courses have been largely lacking.
- (e) Too much attention has been paid to rites and customs expected by the Asian community.
- (f) There were too few English supporters attending the *Vihara* - this at a time when there had been an upsurge of interest in Buddhism from Westerners.

Similar criticisms were made in a hard-hitting statement from Mr. Webb at the Annual General Meeting on 28.11.82. This was followed by a letter from Mr. Webb, Mrs. Irene Quittner and Mrs. Joan Hamze to Ven. Dr. Saddhatissa dated 18.2.84, in which they deplored what they considered to be the deterioration in standards and services at the *Vihara*. In particular, they mentioned the lack of young people among the *Vihara's* supporters, the lack of resident *bhikkhus* who could speak and write in English and who were enthusiastic to participate in *Dhammaduta* work, and the absence of encouragement and facilities for people to study the *Dhamma*. The letter was copied to Mr. Gamani Jayasuriya, President of the Mahabodhi Society

of Sri Lanka, who replied saying it was very difficult to find "erudite *bhikkhus*, well versed in the English language, with dedication to serve abroad and capable of explaining the *Dhamma* in English."

In the summer of 1984, tragedy struck with the sudden, but peaceful, death of Mrs. Irene Quittner on 20 July. At a stroke, the *Vihara* lost one of its main cornerstones and the West one of its staunchest advocates of *Theravada* Buddhism.

The Annual General Meeting of the British Mahabodhi Society was held on 25 November 1984. Both Spiritual Advisers and both Patrons were re-elected whilst Joan Hamze was elected to occupy the vacant position of Chairman. The Hon. Secretary's role was divided into two positions, that of Administrative Secretary (Mr. Sarath Perera) and *Dhammaduta* Secretary (Mr. Russell Webb). The remaining members of the committee were re-elected except for Perera (who was 'kicked upstairs') and Mr. Herbert Munasinghe who was replaced by Mr. Lionel Samarasekera, and Mr. John Wilson. The allocation of secretarial roles can be seen as 'clipping the wings' of Webb who was undoubtedly perceived by the Sinhalese nationalist faction as exerting undue influence on *Vihara* affairs. In his report at the Annual General Meeting on 25.11.84, Mr. Webb reported that at long last tangible progress had been made in connection with the acquisition of new premises at 85 Barrowgate Road in Chiswick. The Anagarika Dharmapala Trust made an extremely generous donation and this amount was added to the accumulated funds from the Society's No. 2 a/c. Tenders to renovate the building had been received and analysed by a sub-committee and actual work would commence in the New Year. He also noted that the enthusiasm engendered for making No. 85 serviceable should not, however, be allowed to obscure urgent concern for its long-term purpose.

The 19th Annual General Meeting of the British Mahabodhi Society was held on 24 November 1985. It was to prove traumatic for all those attending and to sound the death knell of the Society to all intents and purposes. In his Annual Report, the Administrative Secretary stated that "1984/85 has been an eventful year. Building control permission to commence renovations to 85 Barrowgate Road was at last obtained after two years of negotiations with Hounslow Council, and phase 1 work was started in June 1985. The work has progressed satisfactorily. During the course of the building operation, some items of work not previously noticed and therefore not included in the original plan had to be carried out. As a result, completion of the phase 1 work is a few weeks behind the

scheduled date. However, the *Vihara* complete in all features will not be ready until the completion of phase 2, which is an entirely new extension for a large sermon hall, meditation room, office with a reception area and adequate toilet facilities for lay visitors. Therefore, building control permission to commence phase 2 works is already being sought. The new *Vihara* will have 5 bedrooms for resident monks as compared to 3 in the present one. It may be possible to spare one room exclusively for a fulltime, practicing meditation teacher to fulfill a crying need, especially for Western Buddhists and inquirers of the *Dhamma*.

"I am pleased to report that more and more people from different communities are getting interested in the activities of the *Vihara*. This is proven by substantial donations received from them; namely, £2,500 from the Cambodians who participated in the recent *Kathina* ceremony and £500 from the Hindu Community in Southall. This is a clear sign of progress and popularity of the *Vihara*. A group of well-wishers in Leicester invited the representatives of the Society and handed over a donation of £1,100 they had collected. This year we have received more donations for the *Vihara* Building Fund. With further help from our well-wishers the entire building project can be completed within a short period of time. A detailed list of all donations will be published towards the end of the building programme.

"There have been some changes in the administration of the *Vihara*. Due to health reasons and increasing pressure of *Dhammaduta* work, Venerable Dr. Hammalawa Saddhatissa *Maha Nayake Thera* relinquished administrative responsibilities and Venerable Medagama Vajiragnana *Thera* took over as Head of the *Vihara*. The Society wishes to express their deep gratitude to the two *Theras* and the other resident *bhikkhus* for their invaluable service."

Although the three Spiritual Advisers (Ven. Vajiragnana, Ven. Saddhatissa and Ven. Revata Dhamma) were reelected, a motion was raised and pushed through reinstating Saddhatissa as both President of the Society and Head of the *Vihara*, thereby undermining the position of Ven. Vajiragnana who had been appointed in March as Head of the *Vihara*. This shock event set the tone for the subsequent conduct of the meeting, which was dominated by an aggressive minority of Sinhalese who more or less brow beat or shouted down any dissenters.

As the saying goes, it all ended in tears. A faction of the British Mahabodhi Society continued to support the reinstatement of Ven. Saddhatissa. This came to a head on 18 March when the managing Trustees of the Anagarika

Dharmapala Trust gave formal notice that they 'hereby refuse access to the [*Vihara*] premises and all other Trust properties for the purpose of meetings of the British Mahabodhi Society or any section or group thereof.'