

Anagārika Munindra and the Historical Context of the Vipassanā Movement¹

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ABSTRACT: Anagārika Munindra (1915–2003) played an important role in the movement to teach *vipassanā* meditation, and to spread this method widely in South Asia and the West. His life is examined with respect to its historical context and the spread of the *vipassanā* movement from Burma to India and then to North America, Europe, and Australia. His family background as a Barua caste member, involvement with the Mahābodhi Society and the Buddha Jayanti celebration of 1956 are examined in order to clarify the origins and historical significance of *vipassanā* meditation as it spread in popularity during the second half of the twentieth century. The importance of his role as an essential link between the Burmese *vipassanā* masters with whom he studied and his western students who have now become important meditation teachers is explained in order to shed light on the origins and significance of the *vipassanā* movement in contemporary Buddhism.

Anagārika Munindra, or Munindraji as he is often called lived from 1915 to 2003, and was a pivotal figure in the movement of *vipassanā* meditation from Asia to the West in the second half of the twentieth century. His students include Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg, founders of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts; Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence* and a former science editor at the *New York Times*; and Wes Nisker, founder of the *Inquiring Mind, a Journal of the Community*, along with many others who have been instrumental in establishing *vipassanā* meditation and Buddhism in the West during the past thirty years.

Munindraji was active as a meditation teacher in Bodh Gayā, India, from 1966 to 1980, and made several teaching tours to North America between 1977 and 1987. During the period from 1966 to 1969, he was virtually the only English speaking *vipassanā* teacher available in India.² This was a period when young westerners were arriving in India with a keen interest in Buddhism and meditation, so they were therefore delighted to meet Munindraji in Bodh Gayā and to

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1. This paper was first given at the 2005 International Association of Buddhist Studies Conference, London.
 2. After the arrival in India of S.N. Goenka in 1969, Munindraji and Goenkaji were the two primary teachers of *vipassanā* in India throughout the 1970s.

receive instruction and guidance from him in the *vipassanā* method of Mahāsi Sayādaw that he had learned in Burma. Since Burma was closed to foreign visitors from 1962 to 1980, Munindraji's presence in Bodh Gayā created a significant opportunity for these Westerners to have access to meditation instruction that was otherwise not available to them at that time in India or Burma.

The questions that I will endeavor to answer in this paper focus on this key period in the history of the movement of Buddhism to the west and the background of Munindraji. How does it happen that there was an English-speaking *vipassanā* teacher in Bodh Gayā in 1966, but not before this time? Why was he living the lifestyle of an *anaḡārika*, or homeless one, rather than wearing the robes of a Buddhist monk? What was his family background, his training in India and later in Burma? What social and political forces were at work during this time that made it possible for Munindraji to receive his training? In short, what is the historical context for Munindraji as a key figure in the movement of *vipassanā* meditation from Burma to the West in the late twentieth century?

FAMILY BACKGROUND AND EARLY LIFE

Anaḡārika Munindra was born in a small village near Chittagong in what is now Bangladesh, but was in 1915 still a part of India. This area is very near to the border of Burma and therefore the Theravāda Buddhism practised in Burma could have an active influence on the lives of people in the district. His family were members of the Barua caste, who consider themselves to be the descendents of Gotama Buddha that had been pushed east by the pressures of history. Therefore his family were devout Buddhists, and he was raised in a milieu that supported the study of Buddhism along with Buddhist ritual practice. His father was a traditional doctor and astrologer in the village, while his mother's family were local landlords, so it can be said that he came from a rural intellectual family with deep Buddhist roots.

From an early age Munindraji showed a strong motivation for learning and excelled at his academic work. He attended a local high school where the English language was part of the curriculum in addition to Bengali, so he therefore mastered English at an early age. This accomplishment would have an important effect on his later ability to teach Westerners. After graduation from high school he did not wish to get married and remain in the village, but instead wanted to continue his studies. His father suggested that Munindra become a Theravāda Buddhist monk, but he objected to this idea as he felt that his studies would progress more rapidly if he remained a layman. Therefore, shortly after his graduation from high school he made the decision to move to Calcutta where his studies could progress in a cosmopolitan environment.³

3. The personal information on Munindra's biography is taken from a series of interviews conducted with Munindra by the author in Bodh Gayā, September 2000 and September 2002.

CALCUTTA

Reaching Calcutta in 1936, Munindra was first affiliated with the Bengal Buddhist Society where he lived and taught English to the monks. During this time he studied Pali and *Abhidhamma* with senior Bengali monks of the Society. It was suggested again that he become a monk, but he again made the decision to remain a layman, as he felt that the monk's life was too encumbered by ritual. Through his contact with members of the Mahābodhi Society, Munindra decided instead to adopt the lifestyle of an *anagārika* or homeless one, following the model established by Anagārika Dharmapāla who founded the Mahābodhi Society. For him, this meant that he followed the five basic Buddhist precepts, supplemented by celibacy⁴ and would wear the white clothing of an *upāsaka* or lay practitioner. At this time in India, the lifestyle of an *anagārika* was still very prevalent among members of the Mahābodhi Society although it has since gradually died out. After becoming an *anagārika*, Munindra's association with the Mahābodhi Society deepened and would continue to be important throughout the rest of his life.

Calcutta in the 1930s was an important intellectual and religious centre following the 'Bengal Renaissance' of the nineteenth century. The Mahābodhi Society and the Bengal Buddhist Society were both founded late in the nineteenth century, and they had established their headquarters in Calcutta. This environment was very compelling for Munindra as a young scholar of Buddhism whose curiosity and thirst for learning were an essential part of his personality. Here he was able to come into contact with scholars and diverse types of people to further develop his skills of communicating in English while also continuing his study of Pali and *Abhidhamma*. It was suggested to him by his teachers at this time that he should pursue a university degree, but he declined to do this as he felt that study on his own was preferable to following a set curriculum. Again he chose to follow his own path in pursuit of knowledge, and in particular in the pursuit of knowledge of Buddhism.

SĀRNĀTH

In 1938, Munindra was invited by the Mahābodhi Society to move to Sārnāth and help with the Society's projects there. He accepted this invitation and spent the next ten years at this pilgrimage centre where the Buddha had delivered his first teaching. During this time, Munindra was responsible for the bookshop in the new Mahābodhi Society Temple at the site, and he also would spend time with the many visitors who came to see the temple and its magnificent frescos of the Buddha's life. Among those whom he met in this manner were some important

4. According to his brother, Govinda, he followed the five precepts, not the eight, as he liked to have an evening meal. However, it seems that he did follow the third of the eight precepts, celibacy, rather than the third of the five, avoiding sexual misconduct.

religious and political figures of the period, including Gandhi, who sat on the floor of the temple with Munindra to listen while he explained the paintings of the Buddha's life.

During his time in Sārnāth, Munindra became fluent in Hindi as well as continuing his studies of both Buddhism and Theosophy with teachers at the site and in nearby Benares. At this time, a diverse group of spiritual teachers were attracted to the area, and Munindra met and became acquainted with Lama Govinda, Krishnamurti, and Ānanda Mayī Mā among others. During these years, he also practiced yoga, although he could not find anyone who could teach him Buddhist *vipassanā* meditation, and this was a continuing frustration. It is significant that although *vipassanā* meditation was known through the texts, there were no actual teachers of the method in India at this time.

RELIC MISSIONS

In 1949, the relics of the Buddha's two principal disciples, Sāriputta and Moggallāna, were returned to India by the British government. These relics had been excavated from *stūpa* #3 at Sāñci in 1851 by Alexander Cunningham, and stored for decades at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Their return to India was accompanied by much fanfare, which was accentuated by the fact that this was only two years after India's independence from England. The relics were given into the care of the Mahābodhi Society, at whose headquarters in Calcutta they were exhibited for two weeks. During this time, thousands of people paid their respects to the relics. The symbolic importance of the return to India at this historical moment of these two important 'sons of the soil' cannot be overestimated, as their release from bondage by the British could be seen in the same light as the release of 'mother India' from her long bondage into independence.

During 1949, the relics were taken on tour from Calcutta to the Buddhist sites in India, including Bodh Gayā and Sārnāth. At this time, the Burmese requested that the relics also be sent on a visit to their newly re-established country. The Mahābodhi Society agreed and one of the people entrusted to accompany the relics and represent the Mahābodhi Society was Munindra. This tour of Burma in early 1950 was quite extensive⁵ and allowed Munindra to not only visit the country but to meet many important people associated with the resurgence of Buddhism at this time. Munindra also accompanied the relics on tours of Assam and Ladakh during the spring and summer of 1950. In early 1951 he was part of the mission that took the relics through Sikkim to Chumbi, just inside the Tibet border where H.H. the Dalai Lama had established a temporary government head-

5. 'Sacred Relics of Lord Buddha's Two Chief Disciples Handed Over to the Hon. Thakin Nu, Prime Minister of Burma', *Mahā Bodhi: Journal of the Mahā Bodhi Society*, vol. 58 (March 1950), pp. 74-7; 'Burma's Memorable Reception to Sacred Relics of the Aggasavakas', *Mahā Bodhi: Journal of the Mahā Bodhi Society*, vol. 58 (June-July 1950), pp. 251-3.

quarters after the Chinese invasion of 1950 (Harrer, 1954: 310–11). Here Munindra was able to meet H.H. the Dalai Lama for the first time, and they became friends who would later meet again on many occasions in Bodh Gayā as well as the US. The impact of these relic missions on Munindra was profound, as they allowed him to broaden his perspective of the Buddhist world, satisfying his natural curiosity, while at the same time creating a network of Buddhist leaders with whom he was on personal terms. All of this was made possible by the natural good feelings generated during this time by these newly independent nations who saw the resurgence of Buddhism as an important element in their status as members of the world community.

SUPERINTENDENT OF THE MAHĀBODHI TEMPLE IN BODH GAYĀ AND THE BUDDHA JAYANTI

In 1949, at the request of Prime Minister Nehru, the Mahābodhi Temple in Bodh Gayā came under the control of a government-appointed committee after centuries of management by the local Hindu *math* (monastery). In 1953, Munindra was chosen to be the Superintendent of the Mahābodhi Temple, a unique honour because this was the first time that the most important temple in the Buddhist world had been under the management of a Buddhist since the twelfth century. Munindra's responsibilities included not only the day-to-day administration of the temple and its staff, but also the delicate task of transforming the ritual practices at the temple from Hindu to Buddhist. He was also involved in government plans to develop Bodh Gayā as a place of Buddhist pilgrimage. These changes were given added urgency in light of the Buddha Jayanti of 1956, which according to the Theravāda calendar marked the 2,500 year anniversary of Gotama Buddha's *parinibbāna*. The return of the Mahābodhi Temple to Buddhist management and the celebration of the Buddha Jayanti were both accomplished as part of the wish of Prime Minister Nehru and his government to reach out to Buddhist nations at this time, and to place emphasis on the fact that Buddhism was a gift that India had made to the rest of Asia, which could form a continuing bond in the modern world. Nehru had been personally impacted by the teaching of the Buddha (Ling, 1980: 49), and he also felt that this bond could strengthen the non-aligned movement which he led at that time.

For Munindra, the importance of this time as the Superintendent of the Mahābodhi Temple was the opportunity that it gave him to serve the international Buddhist community at a crucial historical junction. His success at this endeavor created goodwill among the local population of Bodh Gayā, as well as with international Buddhist leaders at the time. Notable among these leaders was U Nu, the Prime Minister of Burma. During a visit to Bodh Gayā in 1956 for the Buddha Jayanti, Prime Minister U Nu invited Munindra to visit Burma for the purpose of receiving instruction in *vipassanā* meditation from Mahāsi Sayādaw at Thathana Yeikta, his meditation centre in Rangoon. Munindra had wanted to

receive such instruction for many years, but it was not available to him in India because the practice of *vipassanā* meditation had died out there centuries earlier. He therefore readily accepted U Nu's invitation and departed for Burma early in 1957.

VIPASSANĀ TRAINING IN BURMA

Munindra spent nine years training and teaching in Burma from 1957 to 1966. His visit was facilitated through a government project, organized by U Nu to sponsor foreigners who wanted to learn *vipassanā* meditation in Burma. This was an integral part of U Nu's emphasis on the government sponsorship of Buddhism which included the Sixth Buddhist Council in Rangoon in 1954, as well as the support of *vipassanā* meditation throughout Burma, and especially at Thathana Yeikta, the mediation centre of Mahāsi Sayādaw in Rangoon. U Nu and his like-minded associates in the government at this time saw the resurgence of Buddhism and in particular the *vipassanā* movement as a natural and essential part of Burmese nationalism (Spiro, 1970: 385-86). Therefore, they also wished to support the spread of *vipassanā* by helping to establish meditation centres throughout Burma and in foreign countries such as Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Thailand, and India. Munindra's training in Burma can thus be understood historically as a part of the revitalization of Buddhism in Burma that accompanied Burmese nationalism (Jordt, 2001: 13-24).

At the request of U Nu, S.N. Goenka, a wealthy industrialist born into a wealthy Indian Hindu family residing in Rangoon, became the sponsor of Munindra's visit to Burma. Trained in *vipassanā* by U Ba Khin, Goenka readily agreed to support Munindra's physical needs in Burma, and through this initial association they became life-long friends and colleagues as teachers of *vipassanā* in India and the West (Goenka, 2004). While in Burma, Munindra first spent three months in intensive meditation practice at Thathana Yeikta Meditation Centre in Rangoon, where he attained very high levels of realization as recognized by his teacher Mahāsi Sayādaw. He then decided to remain in Burma and study the entire Pali *Tiṭṭaka* in detail. For this purpose, he arranged to be tutored by Sayagi U Maung Maung, an eminent Pali scholar, with whom he spent the next five years in intensive study of the Pali texts. After this period, he returned to the Mahāsi Sayādaw centre where he became a meditation teacher under the guidance of Mahāsi Sayādaw, and was ordained as a monk for his final year in Burma. During this time he especially worked with members of the Bengal community living in Burma, and was the instructor of Dipa Ma Barua, who later became a well known *vipassanā* teacher in India and the West (Schmidt, 2005). As an experiment, he trained Dipa Ma and several other meditators in the practice of concentration and the attainment of extraordinary powers. During this period, he also received training in a variety of other meditation traditions in Burma, as his curiosity demanded a full understanding of the breadth of *vipassanā* techniques available in Burma at this

time. Therefore, when Munindra determined to return to India in 1966 and teach *vipassanā* meditation in Bodh Gayā, he was a uniquely trained individual. Not only had he mastered the meditation techniques of Mahāsi Sayādaw and worked as a teacher at his centre, he had also experienced a wide variety of other meditation methods and studied the Pali *Tiṭṭhaka* very thoroughly. This training and experience combined with his command of English, Bengali, and Hindi prepared him well to instruct those whom he might meet in India.

RETURN TO BODH GAYĀ

When Munindra departed from Burma in 1966, the political climate had changed dramatically from his arrival in 1957. In 1962 General Ne Win led an army coup that replaced the government of U Nu, and also abandoned his policies of government sponsorship for Buddhist activities. Ne Win's new government was authoritarian, strongly secular, and isolationist in its approach. In fact, from 1962 to 1980 Burma remained closed to foreigners who wished to visit the country for the purpose of extended meditation practice. There was also increasing pressure on the large Indian community in Burma to return to India at this time. In this new environment, Munindra felt that he could be most effective as a teacher of *vipassanā* in India rather than in Burma. When he departed from Burma in 1966, he saw his return to India and his plan to teach *vipassanā* there as a part of the revitalization of Buddhism in the land of its origin. At this time he also decided that he would be most effective in India as an *anagārika* rather than an ordained Buddhist monk, owing to the fact that in his view the people of India did not respect the Buddhist robes. He therefore gave up his ordination, putting aside the ochre robes of a Burmese monk, and returned to the white of an *anagārika*. During his stay in Burma, Munindra had collected several hundred books on Buddhist subjects in Pali and English, and despite restrictions on exports at this time, he was able to convince the government to let him take 26 large cases of these books with him to India. On the day that Munindra departed from Rangoon by steamer for India, hundreds of well-wishers saw him off at the pier. They shared with him the view that his return to India was an important step in the reestablishment of Buddhism in the land where it had originated centuries earlier.

On his arrival back in Bodh Gayā, Munindra established himself at the Burmese Vihāra which had originally been built to house Burmese pilgrims, but was now nearly empty due to the Burmese government's travel restrictions. At first he taught a few local people in Gayā and Bodh Gayā who were interested in learning Buddhist meditation, but after a short time his students were primarily young Westerners. As word spread that an authentic teacher of *vipassanā* was available in Bodh Gayā, more and more people found their way to Munindra. He followed the teaching style of the Mahāsi Sayādaw Centre, which meant that all of the instruction was done individually through personal interviews. There were no organized group courses, and each practitioner was responsible for their own lodging and

food. The meditators would visit Munindra to report on their meditation practice, and people stayed for varied lengths of time depending on their interest and progress. In this way Munindra introduced *vipassanā* meditation to people from Europe, America, and Australia as well as his local students.

Munindra resided and taught in Bodh Gayā until 1980, when he relocated to Calcutta. Beginning in 1977, he also made teaching tours to North America and Europe at the invitation of his students. His impact on Buddhism in the West was most profound during this period from 1966 to approximately 1980. During those years he was one of only a few highly qualified *vipassanā* teachers available who spoke fluent English and was accessible to practitioners from the West. In fact for several years from 1966 to 1969 he was the only teacher of *vipassanā* residing in India who was fluent in English.

CONCLUSION

We can see that it was no accident that Munindraji was such an important link in the movement of *vipassanā* meditation from Burma to the West. His family background as a Buddhist in India, personal commitment to studying Pali texts, along with his life style as an *anagārika* working with the Mahābodhi Society, uniquely prepared him for an important historical role as the first Buddhist Superintendent of the Mahābodhi Temple in Bodh Gayā. At the time of the Buddha Jayanti in 1956, this position then brought him in contact with U Nu and the *vipassanā* movement of Burma. Munindraji's training by Mahāsi Sayādaw in Burma and his return to teach in Bodh Gayā can be seen as important outcomes of the revitalization of Buddhism that accompanied Burmese nationalism and independence, while the later isolation of Burma was linked to Ne Win and the political reaction engendered by U Nu's Buddhist policies. Therefore, in the life of Anagārika Munindra we can clearly see the historical forces at work that made it possible for his unique abilities as a teacher to have such a powerful impact on Buddhism's development in the West.

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