

An Offering With A Difference



Many priests having received alms bowls and donations await the proceedings of the ceremony

In the early hours of the morning, the Ruwanweliseya in Anuradhapura is a sea of fluttering saffron yellow robes. Monks from over 1,000 temples in the country are gathered together for a special ceremony. As the day breaks, the assembled monks walk in procession, the morning sun glinting off the newly gifted alms bowls which they carry in their hands. It is a *pooja* (offering), but one with a difference.

Words Chiranthi Rajapakse Photographs Indika de Silva

Organised by the Gangaramaya temple, the ceremony was held to provide alms bowls and donate funds to improve water and sanitary facilities for 1,000 rural temples in the country.

Many priests arrived from far off temples in the Anuradhapura District and surrounding districts such as Polonnaruwa, Kurunegala and Trincomalee. Those who had to travel long distances arrived on the preceding night and the sound of chanting reverberated around the Ruwanweliseya Maluwa as an all night Pirith ceremony was conducted with the participation of devotees who had gathered for the event. The ceremony commenced early with priests being invited

to arrive at the Ruwanweliseya at six in the next morning.

The ceremony was conducted under the patronage of Prime Minister D M Jayaratne, with the participation of the Mahanayake Thero of the ÆAsgiriya Chapter, Ven Udugama ÆSri Budharakkitha Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple, ÆVen Galaboda Gnanissara Thero, ÆVen Assaji Thero, Bertie Premalal ÆDissanayake, Chief Minister of the North Central Province, Chinavais Sarasas and many other devotees from Thailand.

The priests were presented with alms bowls and donations towards the construction of bathrooms in each temple. Letters were presented to the participating clergy, outlining the details of the scheme. Ven Assaji Thero of the Gangaramaya Temple explained that these letters can be given to the local police and to '*dayakayas*' (well wishers) in the area enabling them to assist in whatever way they can. "The people in the area can assist by volunteering their labour. This service can also be considered as one of the '*ata maha kusala*' taught in Buddhism. It's the provision of a basic facility needed by everyone," says the Thero.

Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thero of the Gangaramaya Temple (popularly known as Podi Hamuduruwo) says "the assistance being carried out is of use to people from all religions and races. This is an area that has been neglected in the past – especially rural temples – no one inquired about the sanitary facilities. But nowadays many people visit temples; foreign visitors, children attending Sunday School and devotees. And such facilities should be provided. It's not only the provision, people should also be trained to maintain these facilities as well."

The background to this project was outlined by Ven Assaji Thero who explained that for many years, the Gangaramaya Temple has worked to develop the rural temples in Sri Lanka. With the help of the German Direct Help organisation and using donations given by well wishers of the Gangaramaya Temple, assistance was provided to help supply water and sanitary facilities to many rural *piriven* (monasteries) in Sri Lanka. Arrangements were also made to provide basic facilities such as blackboards, desks and chairs and mats (*peduru*) to these monasteries.

For many years, the Gangaramaya Temple has worked to develop the rural temples in Sri Lanka.

Through these activities it was realised that there was a need to improve sanitary

facilities in rural temples. Therefore when Chinavais Sarasas from Thailand decided to make a donation towards the development activities of the Gangaramaya Temple in order to commemorate his birthday, Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thero decided that this donation could be utilised to meet this need.

Ven Assaji adds, “most of the donations received by the Gangaramaya Temple are used for the development of rural temples. Therefore the donation given by Mr Sarasas, along with donations given by other well wishers to the Temple, was used to supply water and sanitary facilities to temples in rural areas.”

This is not the first time that this type of donation has been organised by the Gangaramaya Temple. A similar event was held in September last year and donations were made to 1,200 temples while in February 2011, donations were made to 300 temples. In July 2011, donations were made to 700 temples at a ceremony held at the Janadhipathi Mandiraya. Altogether more than 3,000 temples have been assisted in this manner.

In December the Gangaramaya Temple plans to organise another ceremony to benefit 400 priests who were unable to attend the ceremony in Anuradhapura. Once again the vivid hues of priestly robes will amass as another event towards the development of rural temples will get underway.

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