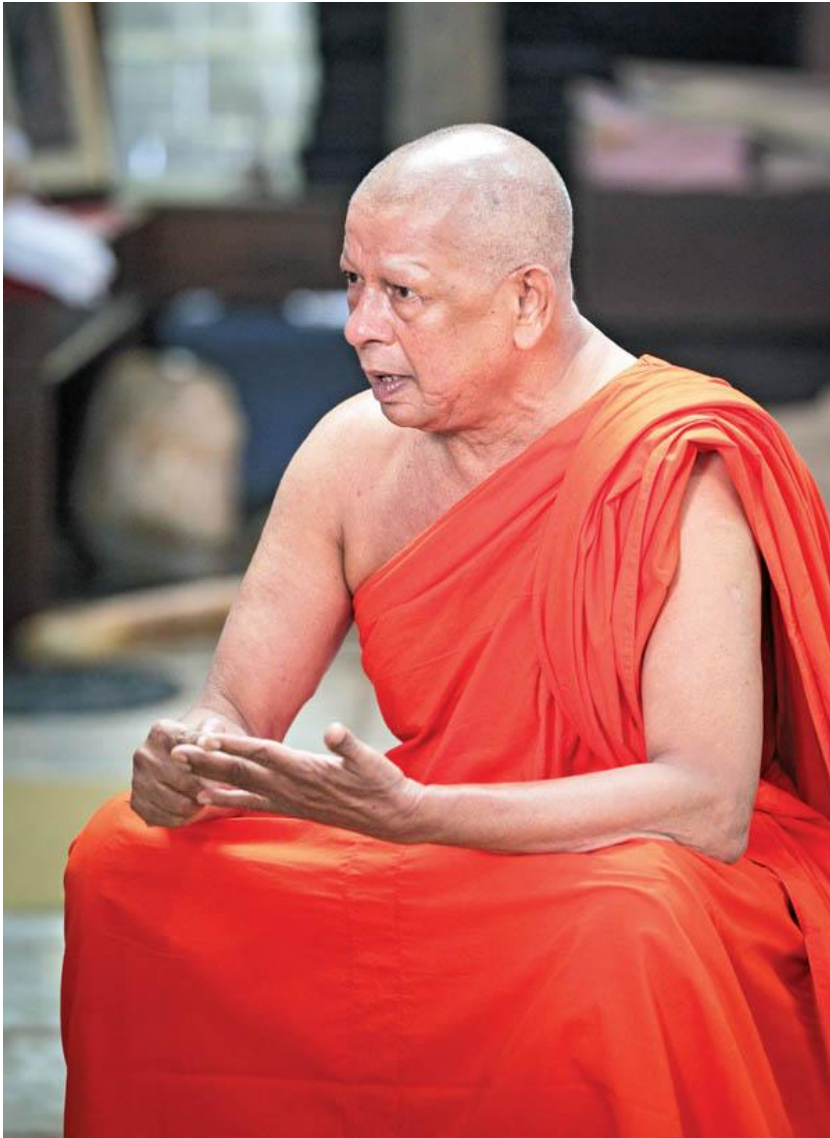


For the Greater Good

Posted on



Podi Hamduruwo is often seen offering counsel to those who seek it

Building lives, protecting a nation's future, paving the way to knowledge and wisdom and above all, courage for the preservation of humanity; these are no small feats by any measure, but feats accomplished nevertheless.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Indika De Silva

In total, these exemplify one individual making a difference, a story that is already being told and retold time and again. It is no less the life and legacy of Podi Hamuduruwo... as it continues to unfold.

Hailing from a generation that was known for their strength of character, integrity and forthrightness, Podi Hamuduruwo or Galaboda Gnanissara Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple has more than upheld a legacy; one that began with his predecessor Sri Sumangala Nayaka Thero the founder of the temple. Since taking on the tasks of running a temple at the tender years of 16, as he reaches a seasoned 69 years the Venerable Thero is all of wisdom, experience and an indomitable strength of character.

It is his unfailing clarity of vision that draws people seeking answers that seem to elude them. Podi Hamuduruwo is known to generously offer his views, often where wrongs need to be set right. His beliefs and opinions are those that are not known to waver, or falter in the face of authority, or danger. They are steadfast in their cause - for the greater good, for the country and its future.

One such instance that resonates in his illustrious past occurred as far back as 1972 during a Presidential inauguration when the country was declared a Republic. William Gopallawa the President elect bestowed the task upon a young Podi Hamuduruwo who was the last in line amongst the most senior monks in the country present, to carry out the religious observances and bestow blessings. At that occasion Podi Hamuduruwo felt compelled to offer a few words of advice to Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike who had gained an extension of two years in power. The Ven Thero succinctly declared; "to make the most of the two years that you have gained in power, firstly avoid succumbing to the same mistakes, second, what is right and good must be accomplished no matter what anyone says to the contrary, thirdly, what is moving at a slow pace - speed up its course, and only then will there be a fulfillment of duties. Failing to do so will lead to an inevitable fall from grace, as can be learnt from the past" - words that ring true to most any individual or circumstance.

The Thero's urgency to protect the country often takes the forefront. It was during President J R Jayawardena's tenure that Podi Hamuduruwo demonstrated his dissension to the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka accord which the Thero viewed as a threat to the country's welfare. Although the President and his family held close ties with the Temple as long standing devotees, it was the message that the Thero was compelled to convey through his actions, and not breed enmity. Many decades later, it was Podi Hamuduruwo that the President Jayawardena requested to his bedside, to chant pirith as the final moments of his life approached.

Through mere words delivered at timely moments Podi Hamuduruwo has been able to change the course of events to benefit society and communities particularly in the sphere of education. At a time where books, magazines and most publications came at high prices due to a tax, Podi Hamuduruwo inquired from the then President Jayawardena, as to why a “tax was being imposed on the brain”.

Three days later a ruling was passed in cabinet and the tax promptly removed. As a result many books, including medical and other educational books not only became abundantly available, but also affordable to the public. Similarly when President R Premadasa was to appoint a new Minister of Education, Podi Hamuduruwo ventured to suggest that such an important sphere deserved far greater prominence; taking the Ministry under the President’s wing and the appointment of a Mini cabinet would better serve the sector, was the Thero’s view. Consequently the Mini Cabinet was appointed for the first time in the history of the Ministry and the programme to provide free uniforms to school children was also introduced island-wide and continues to this day.

Podi Hamuduruwo works towards the many causes with the belief that as balanced members of society the clergy of all religions must have the strength to question authority for the benefit of society. When the present President Mahinda Rajapaksa came into power, Podi Hamuduruwo expressed his view that terrorism prevailed in the country as a result of past misjudgments and failings. It was now in his hands as the President to commit himself fully towards its eradication.

The President accepted these views fair-mindedly and it was good fortune that prevailed upon the country that he took on the task, whole heartedly, to eliminate terrorism. Following a period of trying times, the country is today at the threshold of unity; one that must come from within its people, be it at places of worship or elsewhere. The past endured must not be forgotten at any cost is what Podi Hamduruwo opines three years after the end of the conflict.

Courage is a quality that Podi Hamuduruwo is often identified with. His outspoken nature has compelled the Thero to send clear messages to those who cause harm. An adequate instance of this nature is portrayed when, six months prior to the end of the war, the Thero published one page letters in the news papers, in English, Sinhala and Tamil. It was a direct appeal to the terrorist leader, that it was his duty to surrender at a time when most others had denounced terrorism, so that the blood shed may finally end. After its publication, where many others may have shied away from public view, Podi Hamuduruwo went about his daily tasks as was customary.

Often devising ways and means towards the betterment of society, it was Podi Hamuduruwo who first initiated the concept of Jana Saviya, the poverty alleviation programme which was undertaken by the then President Premadasa who worked tirelessly towards its success. Incidentally it was the Gangaramaya Temple that made the first donation to the programme.

Furthermore, the Temple with Podi Hamuduruwo at the helm, has often extended assistance generously in the hour of need. During the infamous attack on the Central Bank, the temple took immediate steps to assist the injured. The funds allocated for the vibrant annual festival of the Temple, Nawam Perahera, were instead utilised for those injured in the blast and a simple flower procession replaced the customary culturally rich pageant. During the Tsunami relief operations, the Temple stepped in promptly collecting provisions and distributing them in the North of the island. The students of the Temple's vocational training centre designed up to 1200 houses which could be setup on site in as short a time as one hour. These houses which have been solidly structured remain to this day.

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To Podi Hamuduruwo the many ailments or failings of society never cease to go unnoticed. Recognising that the future of the country lies greatly with the impressionable youth, the Thero's efforts to direct them in the right path are numerous. The Vocational training centres of the Gangaramaya Temple that offer professional job oriented qualifications to those who have had a disrupted education is one such fruitful endeavour. Popularising the concept of receiving blessings for December 31 and the New Year, the Podi Hamuduruwo devised the means to draw youngsters to spend time at the temple.

Devotees of the temple, some who have close ties that last for many decades often speak of Podi Hamuduruwo's many admirable qualities. For instance, a devotee from Switzerland, who often visits Sri Lanka has remained a frequent visitor to the temple for the past 40 years. Inspired by the social welfare work Podi Hamuduruwo engages in, in Kataragama, particularly with disabled children, he was struck by the humanity that exuded from the Thero's actions. Like for many others, the Thero's visionary outlook knowledge and experience, and above all respect for all beings made a lasting impression.

A Life Enriched With Purpose And Service To The Community Podi Hamuduruwo Continues To Brim With Meritorious Deeds. In the eventide of his life the Thero is drawn further to commit his energies to rid the grievances of society. Solace from a troubled childhood, finding courage and mental well-being in the face of illness, helping those who have failed in their religious rites and duties for their departed loved ones, are just a few that the Podi

Hamuduruwo has identified. It is, in the end, so that one may live the last stages of life in peace and happiness.

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