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Ven Galboda Gnanissara Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple, continues to be a strength to the country

Venerable Galboda Gnanissara Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple, has been the guiding light that has exemplified the true teachings of Buddhism of equality and compassion. The Venerable Thero through strength and perseverance has made a difference in the lives of many regardless of religion, race or creed.

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe

Born on December 13, 1943, just after midnight, Ven Galboda Gnanissara Thero's birthday was registered as December 14 according to the western method. However, Podi Hamuduruwo, as affectionately known by those close to him, says that if it had been according to the Sinhala method his birthday would be on December 13. He mentions this to demonstrate that deficiencies of superstitious beliefs on numbers as the date a person is born has no bearing, it is rather his character and service to society that is of importance. Podi Hamuduruwo is not dissuaded by superstition, and is instead inspired and motivated by negativity to work towards the betterment of the country according to the teachings of the Supreme Teacher, the Buddha.

Having weathered a challenging year, Podi Hamuduruwo reflects on the reality of life as he celebrates his birthday on December 14, 2017. He is no stranger to adversity. Throughout his journey the Thero has faced many close encounters with tragedy, which he has survived, emerging stronger and ready to face renewed challenges. An incident etched in Podi Hamuduruwo's memory is a cobra bite he suffered at the age of three, which left him unconscious for three days. "I was with my elder brother at the Sadhu Perahera of our village temple when I saw the cobra and tried to touch it. My brother had run away. Incidentally, the same cobra had attacked the neighbour's dog before, thus reducing its venom," explained the Thero. Sri Lankan traditional Ayurvedic treatment saved his life.

At the tender age of ten, the young boy from Galboda, Matara, was ordained at the Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo on November 8, 1954. He was named Ven Galboda Gnanissara Thero. Since then the young priest was known as Podi Hamuduruwo. "I was ordained by the Maha Nayaka and Anu Nayaka of the Malwatte Chapter. The Maha Nayaka Thero hailed from the Sanga Paramparawa (lineage) of the great Ven Weliwita Sri Saranankara Thero, who was pivotal for the revival of Buddhism in the country Sri Lanka," explained the Thero. His first sivura (robe) was presented by A Ratnayake, the then Minister

of Internal Affairs, and the Dayaka responsible for the ordination was the son of D R Wijewardene, Dr D E Wijewardene who was the father of the Sri Lankan engineer and inventor Ray Wijewardene.

The Gangaramaya Temple has always been an advocate of vocational training and skills development for the younger generation in Sri Lanka. Podi Hamuduruwo attributes this interest in technical and engineering aspects to his association with Ray Wijewardene. The Thero said, "Scotsman James Bollock was impressed upon seeing our Chief Priest Devundara Sri Jinarathana Thero recording information on Ola leaves and gifted a printing press manufactured in England to the temple in 1834. This was the first printing press in the country, and it later became a proofing press. Many books were printed by the Gangaramaya Temple including the 1,800-page publication of the Pansiya Panas Jathakaya." As such Podi Hamuduruwo also acquired the knowledge and skills of printing from typesetting to the completion of printing. Citing that he was inspired by visits to vocational training centres operated by Christian churches, especially the Tewatte Basilica, Podi Hamuduruwo says the church should be appreciated for its contribution.

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Striving towards the betterment of the youth in the country, in 1979 Podi Hamuduruwo's dream saw fruition with the opening of the Sri Jinarathana Vocational Centre by President J R Jayewardene. The first course was in iron melding and blacksmith work as tools are essential for the livelihood of the country. Tyre tube vulcanising was a pioneering training programme introduced by the Thero and relevant centres were established across the island. Podi Hamuduruwo recalls, "When Queen Elizabeth II visited Sri Lanka for the opening of the Victoria Dam, I too participated in the ceremony. Back then roads were not very good and many vehicles would have tyre punctures. It was interesting to see many diplomatic vehicles at temple tyre tube vulcanizing centres on that day."



Podi Hamuduruwo (last row fourth from left) as a novice monk among students of Sri Gnanissara Pirivena

Printing was introduced to the curriculum at the Sri Jinarathana Vocational Training Centre, where the World Lutheran Church, Canada donated an off-set printing machine, camera and plate maker - each of cutting-edge technology.

Though audio-visual methods for language teaching are used today in developed countries, this method was first introduced in temples. Buddhist priests would explain the Dhamma while showing murals on temple walls, thus students were able to learn faster. "In 1971, I met with a motor accident near the Koggala airport where I sustained a serious injury. I travelled to England for my surgery. Once recovered, I visited the Language Centre at the

Oxford University where I was introduced to the audio visual technology used in teaching. I followed a course that was 50 pounds per semester. At that time, Sri Lankans were not allowed to take more than three pounds of foreign currency out of the country. Due to the support of the Chief Priest of Malaysia and relatives of the Chief Incumbent of Gangaramaya Temple who were residing in UK, I was able to successfully complete my studies and purchase the necessary equipment.”

Podi Hamuduruwo has constantly endeavoured to instil good values in Sri Lankans and currently he has shifted focus to promoting a healthy lifestyle.

Subsequently, Podi Hamuduruwo used this knowledge to introduce audio-visual techniques for learning English language in Sri Lanka. The language laboratory with material sourced from the British Council was opened in 1976 by Governor William Goppalawa. Yet, Podi Hamuduruwo is saddened that this technology was not utilised by Sri Lankans resulting in the many skill shortcomings the country faces today. Although the Vocational Training Centre has grown in strength over the years, the Thero explains youth are no longer interested in these fields as most give preference to earning a daily wage than education.



A young Podi Hamuduruwo with senior Buddhist priests

Podi Hamuduruwo has constantly endeavoured to instil good values in Sri Lankans and, currently, he has shifted focus to promoting a healthy lifestyle. “We were born in the 1950s.

Podi Hamuduruwo: Strength and Perseverance

Sri Lankans were healthy and strong back then, ready to face any challenge. They were talented and skilled. Yet, today the young are plagued with health issues. We must speak about these matters and create awareness of healthy eating and clean water.”

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Recalling the adversities he has faced, Podi Hamuduruwo says, “A few months ago I underwent a kidney transplant surgery and I will be celebrating my birthday this month with a new lease of life. My kidneys had been affected by the cobra venom from the bite I sustained when I was three years old.” Podi Hamuduruwo epitomises the philosophy of being strengthened by his experiences. He is now focused on creating awareness of kidney disease and to promote the consumption of clean water and nutritious meals.

Buddhism is a way of living; Podi Hamuduruwo exemplifies this in his daily life. Each challenge that he has faced has motivated the Thero to continue and do more for the people of Sri Lanka. Gangaramaya Temple is Podi Hamuduruwo.

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