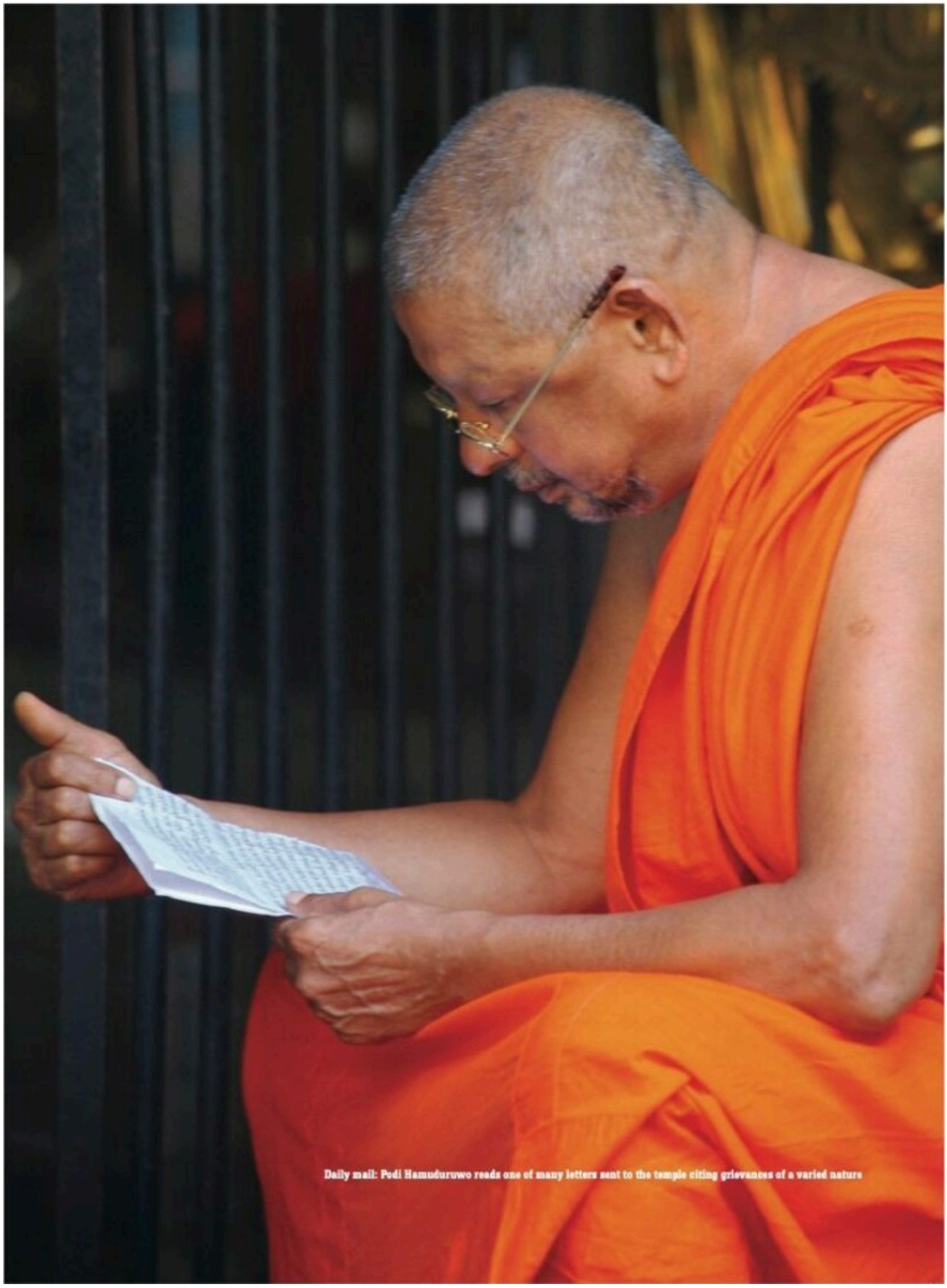
Supatipanno Bhagavato Savaka Sango: A life by example

Posted on



Daily mail: Podi Hamuduruwo reads one of many letters sent to the temple citing grievances of a varied nature

Just 16 years old, Podi Hamuduruwo is handed the administrative running of the Temple. Still a student attending lessons he takes leave to conduct interviews and select learned priests for the pirivena. Once concluded, he returns to his lessons to learn from a teacher he only just appointed… Great is the weight of responsibility on young shoulders. Greater still, is how they were borne.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara

It can be said that to understand the teachings of Buddhism is to gather insight into and appreciate the teacher himself, rather than through the events of his life. Summarising those very teachings, are a set of stanzas from the Dhammapada sutra that reads; refrain from sinful acts; engage in acts of merit; be of pure mind; these are the teachings of all Buddhas past. Seemingly simple, few are equal to the task of putting them into practice. However the Gangaramaya Temple is one that has journeyed from its humble beginnings, to become a testimony to those very teachings, which can be attributed to the Temple's driving force, its Chief Incumbent Galaboda Gnanissara Thero. As the prayer in respect for the virtues of the *Sangha* – the disciples of the Buddha – recites, *Supatipanno Bagavato Savaka Sango* (The Sangha of the Blessed One on the noble path), it is indeed a life exemplary.

The life of Podi Hamuduruwo, as he is popularly known, is best viewed through his meritorious work not only as a Buddhist priest, but also a leader who has lent his steadfast support – be it for uplifting communities or for the triumph of right over wrong. From remedial words of advice to building entire livelihoods, decades of innumerable deeds display the sheer strength and foresight of an infallible character. Hailing from an age of revival during colonial rule, led by luminaries that included Ven Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Thero, Podi Hamuduruwo inherited a firm foundation to soon become synonymous with an iconic temple.

The recollections of courageous and philanthropic interventions of Podi Hamuduruwo write like pages in a book. They display not only timely but also pragmatic responses to the grievances that ailed society.

The humble beginnings of the Temple can be traced back to the founder of the prestigious Vidyodaya Pirivena, Ven Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Thero, who planted

the Bodhi tree seen today, a branch of the sacred Sri Maha Bodhi of Anuradhapura. His disciple and predecessor, Ven Devundara Jinarathana Thero, elevated a humble temple comprising simply of a meditation centre and Bodhi tree to much renown. It was a time when Beira Lake submerged much of the paved roads and lands seen today and the Temple was accessed by boat. In 1954, a young boy from Galaboda, Matara is ordained at the age of ten. The day that this occasion takes place is regarded so auspicious, Chief Incumbent Ven Devundara Vacissara Thero establishes a pirivena – a learning centre of young priests named Sri Gnanissara Pirivena. It is here that the newly ordained 'Podi Hamuduruwo' would begin his education as a Buddhist monk.

As fate would have it, Ven Vacissara Thero suffers from an affliction that would render him blind. Aged just 16, Podi Hamuduruwo shoulders the administrative matters and responsibilities of the temple. The monks of the Gangaramaya Temple to this day speak with much appreciation and admiration of this feat. What would seem a herculean task to any 16 year old, Podi Hamuduruwo with an innate sense of maturity and leadership, unfalteringly fulfilled the duties expected of a Chief Incumbent. Decades past, it is this strength of character that has prevailed and by which the Temple has flourished to an unprecedented renown.

The recollections of courageous and philanthropic interventions of Podi Hamuduruwo write like pages in a book. They display not only timely, but also pragmatic responses to the grievances that ailed society. It can be said that these qualities are inherent from a generation of such venerable leaders. In the history of the Gangaramaya Temple one of the earliest and amusing anecdotes fondly reminisced by many is during British colonial rule. The Governor of the region forbade the playing of hewisi, the traditional drums at the Temple, at a whim of his displeasure. The Chief Incumbent of the time, Ven Jinarathana Thero, not reacting immediately, bided his time for an opportune moment. When the queen's birthday arrived and as it was customary for all colonial countries to celebrate, the Ven Thero amassed 150 artisans from all over the island to play hewisi throughout the day. The Governor upon learning that the reverberating drums were in celebration of the queen's birthday, had little choice but to concede and in effect vacated from his residence in the vicinity.

Podi Hamuduruwo has continued this legacy with another more transformative event during the youth unrest rampant, in the early 1970s. Understanding that the impressionable youth simply required a productive distraction to direct their energies, Podi Hamuduruwo established the Sri Jinaratana Vocational Training

Centre, which ensured employment and livelihood to as many as 4000 youngsters during this period. The centre remains to this day, where many youngsters continue to salvage a future for themselves. Podi Hamuduruwo was also instrumental for the tax relief on educational books that students required; thus enabling a long lasting impact for the future of academia to flourish.

The Gangaramaya Temple itself is an exuberant display of culture, history and spirituality. A burgeoning museum of ancient and valuable artifacts is as a result of Podi Hamuduruwo's intent to protect and preserve a country's heritage. Items gifted by devotees overseas, too find their way here to form an eclectic mix of valuables. In recent times the Gangaramaya Temple acquired a Temple Art Photo Gallery that displays a comprehensive collection of temple art of Sri Lanka – another effort of the Temple's devotees bearing fruit. Devotees such as Taslim Moosajee are quick to declare that the Temple is unlike any other – one that is patronized by a diversity of devotees not seen elsewhere, characterised by its Chief Incumbent's neutrality, devoid of discrimination and acceptance of all communities. Keeping with a certain unconventional streak, the Temple too welcomes the hosting of weddings within its premises, where newly weds begin their life together with the blessings of the Temple. Along with the Temple, Podi Hamuduruwo ensured that the surroundings too were elevated and Hunipitiya of the past is a far cry from what it is today. The famous Navam Perahera, the religious and cultural pageant held annually is another of Podi Hamuduruwo's tireless initiatives. An invaluable means of preserving culture and heritage, it further ensures the livelihood for thousands of traditional artisans. It is one that can be spoken of in volumes in its benefit to society and the country.

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It can be said the secret to receiving is giving and as much as the Gang aramaya Temple imparts to society, the Temple in return receives, and generously by its inspired devotees. This further fuels and facilitates the Temple's many philanthropic events – some on a mammoth scale. The almsgiving for rural temples numbered in the thousands, to develop their infrastructure, is one such event that has been taking place annually since the recent past. Ever resourceful and never known to neglect or leave tasks unfinished, Podi Hamuduruwo is constantly engaged in working for the betterment of society. Similarly, the elders home in Kataragama, children's orphanages and the Akuressa estate are all conscientious projects initiated and sponsored by the Gangaramaya Temple and continue to serve towards

the greater good of society. A vastly different instance is when the Ven Thero took great pains to produce a medicinal oil and a capsule composed of rare herbs, to offer those in need of relief from a variety of ailments. A display of his knowledge and resourceful nature, the monks at Gangaramaya Temple speak with wonderment and a sense of privilege of being in the presence of a versatile wisdom, as Podi Hamuduruwo converses with ease on any number of topics.

As Podi Hamuduruwo reaches his birthday in December this year his inimitable character remains a source of strength and insipiration – a reassuring presence for all around him. Forthrightness, courage and many more admirable qualities are conveyed over five decades to date of an illustrious leadership. And it is to these very same qualities that can be attributed the presence of his Ven Thero, addressing a gathering of the corporate world’s top echelons at the Business Today TOP TWENTY. In no other instance can the presence of the saffron robes be seen at events of such nature…

Early morning at Gangaramaya Temple is a familiar sight where Podi Hamuduruwo takes his customary seat at his desk. It is crowded with visitors; some seek counsel on life’s innumerable problems, others guidance and assistance, and there are even those requiring medicines and blessings for illnesses. At other times Podi Hamuduruwo is seen penning replies to the countless letters of similar nature – tasks he fulfills unfailingly. It is an apt display of Buddhist virtues in practice.

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