Temple’s Little Upasikā

Posted on



Sadu! Worshipping Ven Rathanasara Thero

She swayed impatiently at her customary spot at the temple. She lifted one of her back legs to gently nudge her mahout, Pradeep, who was preoccupied in conversation. It was time for her morning walk and there was no time to dilly-dally. Ven Rathanasara Thero approached, petted and fed her fruits – her favourite. Within seconds the basket was empty. She

expressed a low rumble of satisfaction as the mahout led her away and Ganga, the temple’s little upasikā (devotee), was on her way to the park.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara Photographs Menaka Aravinda

Ganga is seven years young. Born at the Kataragama estate to parents Nawam Raja and Namithi, she arrived at the Gangaramaya temple at two years old. There she grew up under a doting caretaker and priests who indulge in her whims and fancies. At five years she made her debut at the temple’s annual pageant, the Nawam Perahera, taking after her parents. The priests of the temple who are accustomed to her many moods and temperaments only speak fondly of Ganga’s affectionate and sometimes mischievous nature. Still a youngster, Ganga is said to enjoy being a part of the Perahera procession and the sound of drums is a cause of excitement for her.

Known as a very affectionate elephant since her younger years, Ganga is also the pet of devotees who flock around her. Her routine begins at nine in the morning where she walks from the temple to the Vihara Maha Devi Park. It is not often you see a medium sized elephant ambling along the busy streets, but this is a daily occurrence that Ganga enjoys thoroughly. Commuters, shopkeepers and pedestrians are accustomed to her passing by and often stop to pet her and even offer her a tasty titbit. With her trunk wrapped around the mahout’s hand she plods gently along, stopping to investigate familiar corners, wrench off fresh blades of grass for a quick munch and even draw from a nice pail of cool water at a roadside car wash. Her mahout, however, is watchful of her to keep her out of trouble and unhealthy pickings.

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At the park Ganga gets into full fledged jumbo mischief. In the shade of tall trees and wide expanse she lolls about, flings sticks and grass in the air (most land on her back), and displays a range of comical antics. You couldn’t tire of watching her and it’s no surprise that visitors to the park stop to take pictures and pose with the elephant. After several hours of relaxing and indulging in the limelight, by noon Ganga sets off to the temple again.

After a walk back in the afternoon sun, Ganga is more than eager for her daily bath. She steps into a pool filled out with cool water for a nice long dip while Pradeep cuts

and shapes coconut husks to use as scrubs. After a long soak and scrub down, she must be coaxed out of her lazy stupour and out of the ‘tub’. Back at her shed she sways impatiently waiting for a midday meal.

The mahout must travel to plantations to gather up to 80-90 fronds of coconut and palmyrah to supply her voracious appetite. While she strips leaves and folds them into her mouth, roadside cart vendors stop by to offer her corn cobs, which simply disappear in one gulp. Fed and watered, by late afternoon Ganga carries out her routine observances at the temple. With fresh lotuses raised in her trunk, she walks thrice around the temple’s stupa before offering it to the Buddha. She gently drops the flowers upon the altar and kneels down in solemn prayer.

It is not just to the Buddha that she pays obeisance, but to the temple’s priests as well. Ganga often wanders in search of the monks of the temple, whom she recognises on sight. On one occasion, failing to seek out Ven Rathanasara Thero whom she regards with much affection, Ganga trumpeted in frustration and ran hither and thither. She could only be placated by the Thero’s reappearance.

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Since her baby years, Ganga would end her rounds at the temple by sauntering straight into a nearby office room to greet the resident monks. As she grew in leaps and bounds, however, this practice had to be restrained. Ganga though cannot easily be deterred. Even now she approaches the room and shifts her head through the doorway to find the familiar presence of saffron robes.

By ten in the night it is bed time. Ganga, after a long day of walks, meeting friends, relaxing and routines, takes refuge in her customary place. Here she is often seen visible over the temple walls and vehicles and pedestrians stop by to watch the elephant for awhile.

Parents pacify temperamental children and even coax them to take spoonfuls of food as the sweet tempered jumbo serves as ample distraction for them. Ganga, as the monks of the temple say, is a treasure.

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