

Remembering Venerable Mahathera Madawela Punnaji

(November 26, 1929 – July 27, 2018)

Sri Lanka and the Buddhist world lost one of its most brilliant and scholarly monks, Venerable Madawela Punnaji Maha Thera, in the early hours of Friday, 27 July 2018, at the Nisala Arana Forest Monastery and Retreat Centre in Kalutara District, Sri Lanka, at the age of 89 years.

THE EARLY YEARS

Puspananda Wijyaratne Madawala was born on November 26th, 1929, to an aristocratic Sinhala family in the hamlet of Madawala in the Kurunegala district of then Ceylon, today Sri Lanka. Puspananda was the youngest of three children in the family. His birth was welcomed by his two older sisters, who were both adolescents at the time.

Growing under the shadow of a very pious and kind mother, the young Puspananda was introduced to Buddhist practices from a very young age. He would accompany his mother to the village temple on full moon days to undertake the eight precepts and meditate. His curiosity about the Buddha was much to the delight of his mother, who took great pains to explain Buddha's teachings. His father was a landowner and managed the ancestral rice fields and coconut estates, which provided a comfortable life for the family. Enrolled in the local school, Puspananda excelled in his studies while maintaining a keen interest in Buddhism and Buddhist practices his mother encouraged and nurtured.



Ancestral home of Venerable Punnaji, Madawala, Kurunegala, Sri Lanka

After his elementary school, his parents decided to send him to Dharmaraja College in Kandy, a leading Buddhist institute established by the American Buddhist visionary Col. Henry Olcott Steele. Living

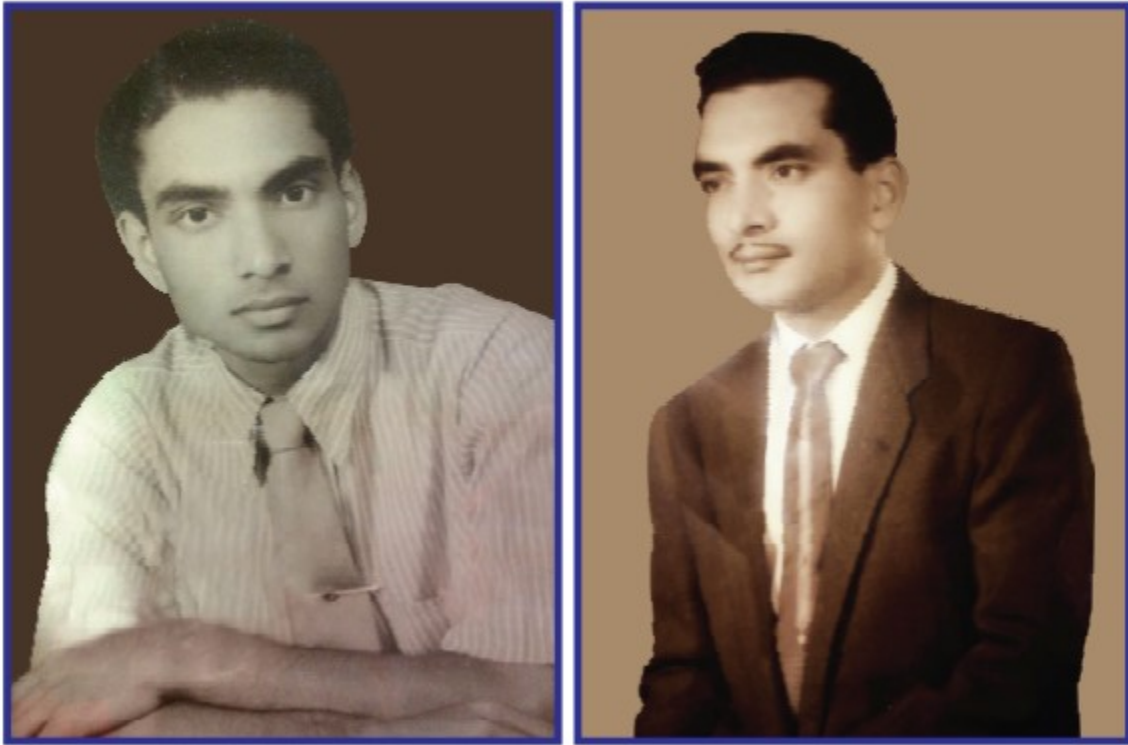
as a boarding student at Dharmaraja College, he flourished in its nurturing environment learning the English language from teachers recognized island-wide for their excellence. This influence instilled a great appreciation for English literature, grammar, writing, and elocution, which in his adult years made him an excellent writer and skillful *Dhamma* teacher the world over. At this same college, he was exposed to two great Buddhist monks who had a remarkable life-changing influence on the young Puspananda. First, the famous and most revered Venerable Narada of the Vajirarama temple impressed the youngster greatly. Venerable Narada's serene disposition, calm and extraordinary presence, and communication style mesmerized Puspananda, who at this age aspired to emulate such a cultured monk. The other monk was Venerable Dhammapala of Dutch origin and residing in Kandy, and later as a layman Henry Van Zest, who established the Buddhist Student Association. Henry Van Zest explained the *Dhamma* using scientific concepts to the keen youth who flocked around him regularly to learn the *Dhamma*. This exposure stimulated Puspananda's interest in science and psychology as inroads to understanding the Buddha's original teachings. He could unravel and demystify the Buddha's teachings through more than half a century of research and practice.



Parents: Moonamale Kumarihami & R.M. Banda Madawala

Two tragedies in the young Puspananda's life were the sudden death of his younger sister and later the loss of his father. These deaths greatly influenced his thinking and reflection on life and death. He moved to Colombo to prepare for university entrance examinations as he reached the high school level. While living in Colombo, he had the opportunity to associate with the monks at the famous Vajirarama temple, where he became an avid user of the vast collection of Buddhist scriptures at the library. Reflecting on these years, he fondly remembered his passion for exploring *Dhamma* and Western psychology rather than his academic pursuits. Whenever he returned home, he also met regularly with the local head monk, Venerable

Dikwelle Piyananda, a humble teacher with great patience in answering knotty points in the *Dhamma* and difficult translations of *Pāli* words.



Youthful Puspananda

Having completed his advanced level university entrance exams, Puspananda taught science and math at Dharmaraja College in Kandy and Maliyadeva College in Kurunegala for a few years. After that, he entered and graduated from the Colombo Medical College and served as an assistant medical practitioner at a rural hospital in the Kekirawa area. The exposure to and view of the frailties of life from many perspectives, including humanitarian, biological, and medical, expanded Dr. Madawala’s knowledge and perspective of the human condition. Furthermore, his reflective, insightful nature honed by years of dabbling in psychology enabled him to practice hypnotherapy to heal local villagers who believed in mythological spirits invading their bodies and causing illness. These experiences contributed to the foundation on which his landmark discoveries in Buddhism were made in later years.

At 32, Puspananda committed to entering the Order and was ordained under the name Madawala Punnaji to the Amarapura Nikaya by the most Venerable Madihe Pannaseeha Maha Thera. At the time of ordination, his officially appointed lay supporter was Lionel Senanayake, Barrister at Law and longtime friend. As a young monk with a non-traditional view of Buddhism, he attracted many followers and a faithful group of young Buddhists who regularly visited to learn *Dhamma*. However, he also faced some opposition for his stand on the traditional translations of *Pāli* words, which, in his view, distorted the meaning of the Buddha’s original teachings. As one professor of Buddhism at a leading Buddhist University in Sri Lanka put it, “Venerable Punnaji is an intellectual giant of our times, and he has dived deep into the

Buddha’s original teachings and understands and explains it so well that there is no one who can disagree with him.”



The Most Venerable Madihe Pannaseeha
and the newly ordained Venerable Punnaji

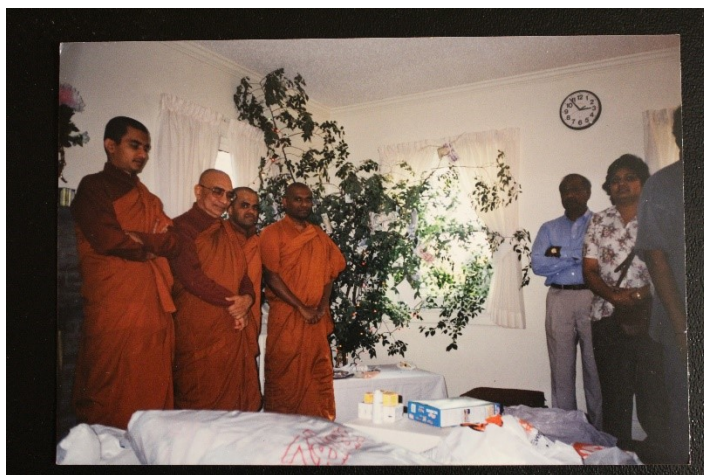
UNITED STATES AND CANADA

With permission from his teacher, the newly ordained Venerable Punnaji undertook an extended leave of absence to seek solitude and practice meditation at the island hermitage of Dodanduwa. At this hermitage, he met very advanced meditators, both local and foreign, who had reached the higher levels of *samādhi*. With their guidance and instructions, Venerable Punnaji entered into deep states of meditation and, for the first time, experienced a glimpse of imperturbable serenity of mind or *Nibbāna*. Unfortunately, he was summoned to Colombo by his teacher, who announced that he had been selected to travel to the United States to serve at the Washington Buddhist Vihara, the first Sri Lankan Buddhist temple in the U.S.A. He met his former teacher from Kurunegala, Venerable Dikwelle Piyananda, and Venerable Henepola Gunaratane, who had arrived a few years earlier to undertake Buddhist missionary work. During this time, Venerable Punnaji contributed one of his significant articles titled “Buddha the Radical Shrink” to the *Washington Buddhist*, a regular newsletter published by the temple. What is remarkable about this article is that not only did it demonstrate to the readers the author’s deep understanding of the mind from a Buddhist perspective, but also his ability to deliver the *Dhamma* to the average American in their “language.” Having spent nearly three years at Washington, Venerable Punnaji was recalled by his teacher to Ceylon. It was at this visit that his mother passed away. He recalls attending her funeral without experiencing great sorrow as was at his sister’s and father’s deaths, with his greatly expanded view of the realities of life.

In 1977, Venerable Punnaji decided to return to Boston, in the United States. Having no Buddhist temple to reside in and no source of income, he recalls with great appreciation the kindness and generosity of an American who provided him with free board and lodging. Here he conducted his *Dhamma* sermons and meditation retreats. He also started the Triple Gem Society of Boston, handed over in 2012 to Venerable Wimala, a Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka. During this time, he researched Buddhist psychology and

psychotherapy in association with Boston and Harvard Universities. He engaged in several academic pursuits, including teaching Buddhist Psychology at the Adult Education Center in Boston, and Buddhist Philosophy, as a visiting professor, at the University of Vermont. His depth of knowledge and teaching style was noted by the professor in charge of the Buddhism classes. Venerable Punnaji fondly recalled a topic on which he was invited to deliver a presentation by this professor: “How to kill your “self” without committing suicide.” It was during his early years in the U.S. that his thinking was inspired by the American philosopher and religious scholar Alan Watts who proposed that Buddhism could be thought of as a form of psychotherapy, not a religion. Venerable Punnaji was especially impressed by Freudian psychology, which aligned somewhat with the Buddha’s teachings on the self and personality. He started introducing these concepts in his Dhamma talks to Americans who were familiar with Freudian thinking. This enabled his American students to appreciate the Buddha Dhamma and the profound teachings of the Buddha. Furthermore, Venerable Punnaji’s voracious appetite for knowledge and truth led him to explore Western philosophy in-depth. He examined the evolution of thinking in Western philosophy in relation to the *Kālāma Sutta*. In his workshops on “Buddhism as a Philosophy,” he explained the inability of Western philosophers to solve the problem of existence, which the Buddha solved through a paradigm shift from a personal existence to an impersonal experience.

As conditions changed, Venerable Punnaji received a surprise invitation in 1979 from the Toronto Buddhist temple to come and assume the head monk position, which he accepted. Living in an old, dilapidated restaurant building converted to a temple, Venerable Punnaji started in earnest his services to serve Buddhists of Sri Lankan origin and Canadians of other faiths who flocked to the temple for guidance and instruction in Buddha *Dhamma*. A vibrant newsletter and a children’s *Dhamma* School also flourished under the direction of Venerable Punnaji. His influence was not limited to Toronto—he was invited by Buddhist groups across North America to conduct Buddhist ceremonies and meditation retreats. He became a very popular and well sought-after Buddhist monk. He could deliver talks, retreats, and workshops to the laity and the wider audience of listeners and viewers of mass media. He was interviewed on radio and TV on his visits to various parts of North America and made an outstanding impression on everyone who met or heard him. In 1992, Venerable Punnaji, along with Ven. Kulugammana Dhammawasa Nayaka Thera and Venerable Brahmanagama Muditha Maha Thera founded the West End Buddhist Temple & Meditation Centre in the City of Mississauga.



Bhante Punnaji at the Kathina ceremony at the West End Temple, with Venerables K. Dhammawasa, B. Muditha, W. Pannasara, and members of the management committee and lay devotees (circa 1995).



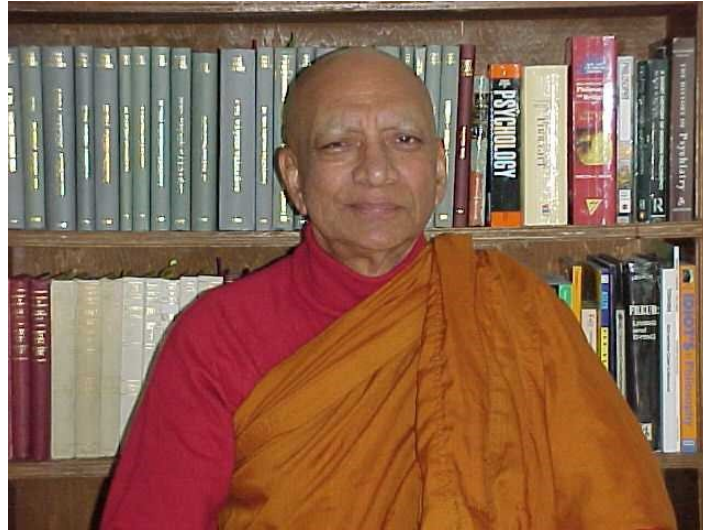
Venerable monks and lay devotees at the newly acquired property of the West End Temple at 1560 Cormack Crescent, Mississauga.



Venerable Madawela Punnaji Maha Thera with Venerable Kulugamma Dhammawasa Nayaka Thera and Viharadhipathi of the West End Buddhist Monastery & Meditation Centre, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada.

In later years, Venerable Punnaji took residence at the North Hollywood Sri Lankan Buddhist temple run by two former student monks, Venerable Ambalantota Kolitha and Venerable Yatirawana Siriniwasa.

It is noteworthy that Venerable Punnaji changed his name from Madawala Punnaji to Madawela Punnaji in the early nineties, or perhaps even earlier. The reasons for this change are unknown to the writer. Most of his published writings and presentations are under “Madawela Punnaji.”



At his library, N. Hollywood Temple

RECOGNITION, APPEASING THE BUDDHISTS, AND A VISITING PROFESSORSHIP

In 1993, the President of Sri Lanka bestowed on him Director, Mihindu Institute for Buddhist Research, located at Mihintale, considered the cradle of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. While engaged in the development of the research center in 1994, Bhante Punnaji wrote a ground-breaking article that appeared in local newspapers under such titles as “*Why the Buddhists should not quarrel with the Pope*,” and “*Did We Cross the Threshold of Hope? A Buddhist response to Pope John Paul’s ‘Crossing the Threshold of Hope.’*” It concerned the demeaning characterization of Buddhism² by Pope John Paul II in the chapter on Buddhism in his book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*³. The Pope stated that “the Buddhist tradition and the methods deriving from it have an almost exclusively negative soteriology.” The Pope’s book was published in late 1994 on the eve of his visit to Sri Lanka from January 20 to 21, 1995. In his book, Buddhist leaders in Sri Lanka were disturbed over the Pope’s comments about Buddhism—remarks whose intent, a Vatican spokesman said, were misinterpreted out of context.

Not surprisingly, a controversy exploded when his visit to the island was announced. Many letters of displeasure were penned to the editors of local papers, some extremely critical of the Pope. Monks took to the streets protesting against the visit. The Buddhist prelates announced that they would not attend an inter-religious meeting requested by the Pope unless he formally retracted his unfavorable remarks about Buddhism. Upon arrival, the Pope tried to appease the feelings of Buddhist leaders. However, he avoided offering an apology. As a result, Buddhist leaders refused to meet him. The Pope’s negative portrayal of Buddhism received widespread criticism within the various branches of Buddhism across the world. Amidst all this malaise, Bhante Punnaji’s article was a calm, appeasing, and amiable response in the spirit of Buddhism.

Although the chronology of events that transpired after his articles is unavailable, it is noteworthy that in recognition of his broad understanding of Buddhism and Christianity, the Vatican invited him to speak at the Buddhist-Christian colloquium on “*Buddhism and Christianity: Convergence and Divergence*” held at the Buddhist Monastery, Fo Kuang Shan, Kaohsiung, Taiwan, from July 31 to August 4, 1995. Colloquium organized by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican City⁴. His presentation was titled “*The Ultimate Reality and the Experience of Nirvāna*.” It was an exposition of *Nibbāna*, his main subject of inquiry over many decades. The paper also provided a dispassionate and scholarly treatment of Buddhism and Christianity to serve as a valuable source of information for followers of both religions about each other’s beliefs.

By this time, the changing conditions in Sri Lanka made his commitment to developing the Buddhist Research Institute no longer tenable. Upon returning to N. America, he received an invitation from the Fo Kuang Shan University, Taiwan, to serve as a visiting professor of Buddhism in 1997. He accepted the position, and his tenure was later extended by another year. Bhante Punnaji thrived in this supportive and secluded Buddhist environment to research Buddhist psychology and philosophy. He lectured in these and other subjects on Buddhism, and students and fellow staff members received him well.

MANY PUBLICATIONS ORIGINATED IN EDMONTON, ALBERTA

Edmonton, Alberta, was a regular and favourite destination of Venerable Punnaji, who made visits on formal invitations by the Alberta Buddhist Vihara Association and informal invitations over a thirty year period by the writer, who also served as president of the ABVA for a number of years. The Alberta Buddhist Vihara Association appointed Bhante Punnaji as a Patron and Advisor to guide the executive committee to develop a monastery in Edmonton. To his delight, the initial establishment of the Samatha Vipassana Meditation centre, a Sri Lankan monastery and place of worship in Edmonton, became a reality in 2006. Bhante Punnaji continued to provide guidance to the ABVA and the first Abbot, Venerable Talgaswewe Seelananda and resident monk Venerable Galkulame Medhankara. In 2016, Venerable Punnaji blessed the the newly reorganized Sri Lankan Temple named the Alberta Insight Meditation (AIM) Centre headed by Abbot Venerable Kotavaya Suseela, and resident monk Venerable Makola Nanda.

Edmonton, mid-1980’s to 2016



During a period spanning from the mid eighties to 2016, Bhante Punnaji's visits to Edmonton were eagerly anticipated by the Sri Lankan and other ethnic Buddhist communities, and even non-Buddhist Canadians who appreciated his clear approach to teaching Buddhism. He conducted workshops, retreats, public talks, and media interviews during these visits. In 1999, the writer and his family extended a private invitation to Bhante Punnaji to spend the Rains Retreat and put his discoveries and teachings into a book. With the support of many lay devotees, Venerable Punnaji delved into this project with great enthusiasm. Until then, his inexhaustible knowledge of the Buddha *Dhamma* developed over a time span of a half-century had not been documented except for a few articles in Buddhist magazines and booklets based on a few key *Dhamma* presentations in Sri Lanka. With proof-reading, illustration, typing, and many discussions to clarify finer points of the *Dhamma*, his first book titled *Awakening Meditation (Sambodhi Bhavana)* was completed. It was published in 2001, after several rounds of revision, by a publishing entity under the name Puremind Publishers of Edmonton. An initial limited edition of 500 copies of *Awakening Meditation* was printed and distributed worldwide to students and scholars who had exposure to Venerable Punnaji's teachings and retreats. The book received many appreciations for its clear style and logical explanation of Buddhist meditation and *Dhamma*. The book emphasized its genesis in the original teachings of the Buddha based on *Pāli* scriptures of the *Sutta Pitaka* and represented the first formal text encompassing a fragment of Venerable Punnaji's discoveries in Buddhism.



Venerable Punnaji in the company of Venerable Talgaswewe Seelananda, Abbot of the newly established Samatha-Vipassana Meditation Centre in Edmonton, and resident monk Venerable Galkulame Medhankara in 2006.

Several other texts, including his final book in English, *Ascending the Supernormal Eightfold Way*, were compiled during visits to Edmonton. Many hours leading to the wee hours of the morning were spent on transcribing Venerable Punnaji's dictation of the *Dhamma*. During breaks from the *Dhamma* discussions, he would share his life experiences which were recorded and formed the substrate for this biography.

About the teacher...

Mahathera Madawela Punnaji
A Buddhist Monk from Sri Lanka.



Venerable Punnaji has served in North America, as a Teacher of Buddhism and a Meditation Master, for nearly 30 years. He is well known for his clear and accurate presentation of Buddhism and has grateful students the world over.

The technique of meditation presented in this manual is based on over fifty years of scientific research, by Venerable Punnaji, to discover the original teachings of the Buddha. The research involved a thorough study and practice of various methods of meditation, hypnosis, and psychotherapy. No modern scholar has so far been able to identify this elusive original teaching. This meditation technique, based on the Supernormal Eight-fold Process, is what he discovered to be the original method of meditation taught by the Buddha. The technique captured in this manual of meditation is called **transformational meditation** because its aim is to transform the character and personality of a person. Needless to say, it is not based on the systems or teachings invented later by the followers of the Buddha or Buddhists.

From beginners to advanced meditators:

This book shows you, in three gradual stages, how to let go of self-centred behaviours (*sila*); self-centred emotional impulses (*samādhi*); and finally the attachment to the concept of "self" ("me," "mine" and "myself"); through penetrative awareness and understanding (*paññā*). This transformation leads to the freedom from discomfort or human suffering (*dukkha*), which in its ultimate sense is the attainment of Nirvana (*nibbāna*), the perfect peace and immortality that all religions seek.

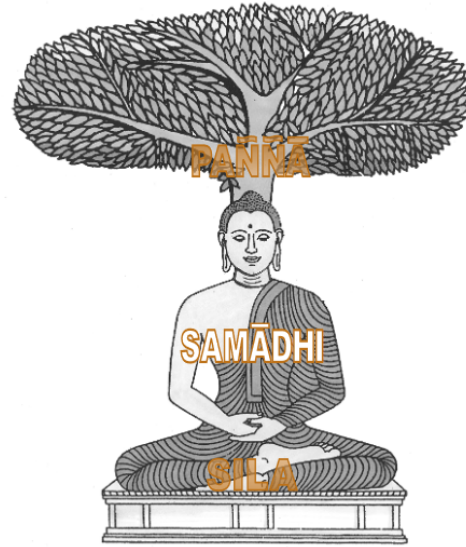
Puremind Publishers Edmonton

AWAKENING MEDITATION

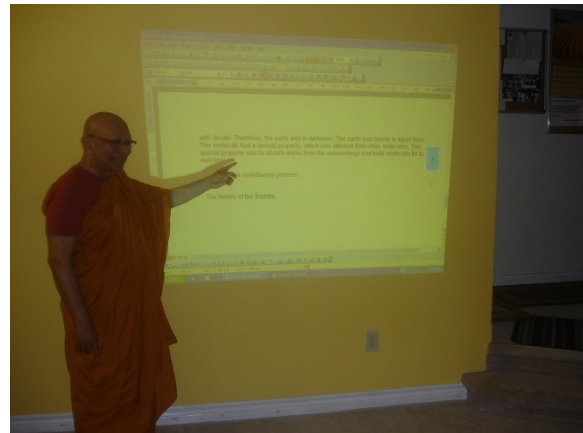
Madawela Punnaji

AWAKENING MEDITATION

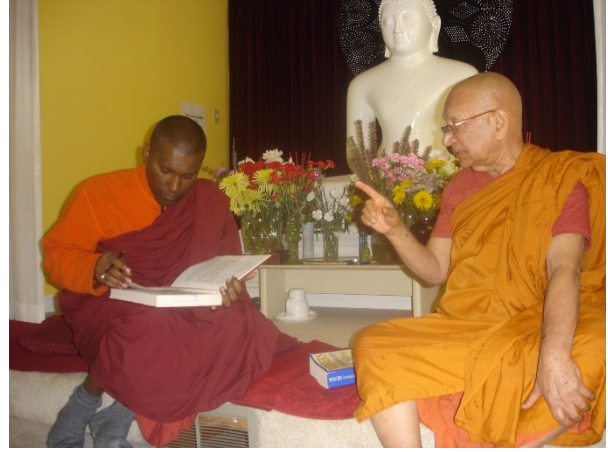
Sambodhi Bhāvanā



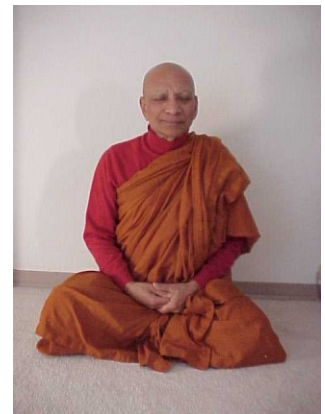
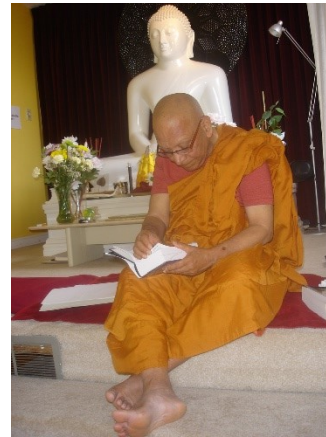
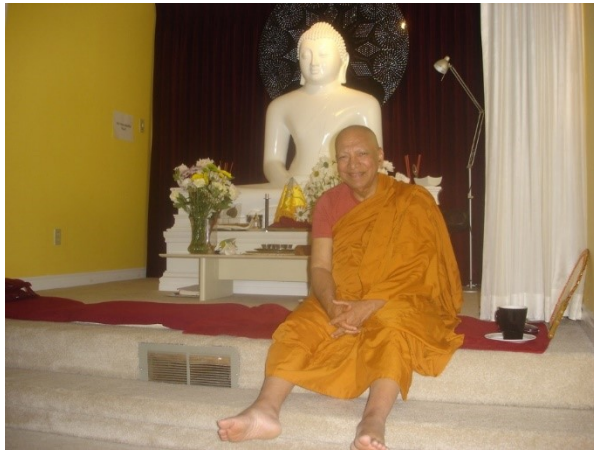
Madawela Punnaji



Projecting text to facilitate drafting book manuscripts at the writer's home.



Venerables Seelananda and Medhankara engaged in lively sutta discussions with Venerable Punnaji at the Samatha Vipassana Meditation Centre.



Many opportunities in Edmonton for deep contemplation, meditation, and Dhamma discussions were welcomed by Bhante Punnaji.

RETREATS IN EDMONTON AND VANCOUVER

A number of meditation retreats with the guidance of Venerable Punnaji were organized by the Alberta Buddhist Vihara Association and the Light of the Dhamma Society in Edmonton during a twenty year period spanning from the mid-'80s. The duration of these retreats varied from one-day retreats to weekends and one week. Bhante Punnaji was also invited by the Light of the Dhamma Society and later by the Dhamma Buddhist Society in Vancouver to conduct meditation retreats on the west coast of Canada, usually in a suburb or on an island off Vancouver. The last retreat of this kind was held in September 2016, Bhante's final visit to Edmonton and Vancouver.

It was customary for Bhante Punnaji to start each retreat day with a guided yoga routine, which usually started at 5:30 am, followed by a guided visualization and relaxation session that instructed participants on

Retreats on the west coast of Canada, 1980s to 2016

how to relax. Bhante expected participants to maintain this state of relaxation throughout the day as much as possible. Judging from the feedback Bhante received, everyone greatly appreciated the morning yoga and relaxation. Meditation instructions mostly followed the *Ariyamagga Bhavana* Levels I and II texts written by Bhante.

Retreats on the west coast of Canada, 1980s to 2016



Before boarding a float plane to fly to a retreat in British Columbia.



Group photo at retreat in British Columbia, circa 1980s.

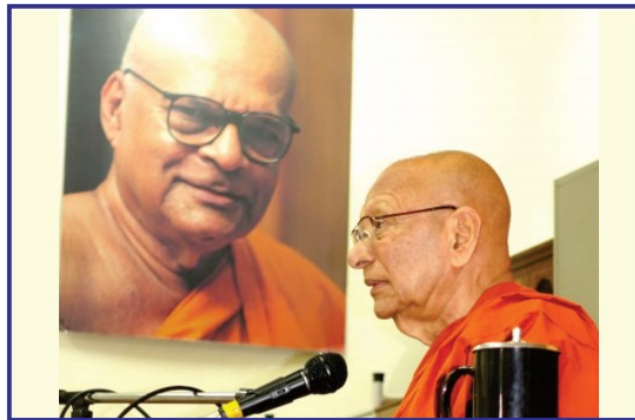


Photos from the last retreat in British Columbia, Canada, September 2016.

A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT IN MALAYSIA

In 2007, Venerable Punnaji, on invitation from the Buddhist Maha Vihara in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, took up residence as Spiritual Advisor to assist with the *Dhamma* programs delivered by this center which is active in *Dhammadūta* work. This appointment was at a crucial time of the Vihara following the passing away of its Chief Incumbent and a great communicator of the *Dhamma*, the Most Venerable Dr. Kirinde Sri Dhammananda, in 2006. Under the caring guidance and support of the Most Venerable Kirinde Sri Dhammaratana, the new Chief Incumbent and *Sangha* members and the lay Committee of Management at the Vihara, Venerable Punnaji's *Dhamma* sharing took on new energy and far-reaching influence across the globe. These efforts were much supported and appreciated by a new group of laities, primarily Malaysian Chinese. Among many lay supporters, two noteworthy were Bro Billy Tan, who skillfully illustrated Venerable Punnaji's teachings and posted many presentations on YouTube, and Bro Vong Choong Choy, who organized *Dhamma* and *Sutta* classes at the Vihara. Venerable Punnaji shared his knowledge through many weekly *Dhamma* Talks and regular meditation retreats conducted on the Vihara premises and other venues.

Buddhist Maha Vihara, Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur



A Dhamma discussion. Background photo: the late Most Venerable Kirinde Sri Dhammananda.



In the shrine room



With Venerable Seelawimala visiting from California (2017).



Venerable Punnaji with President Siri Perera of the Sasana Abhiwurdi Wardhana Society, Roger Lee and Sister Bodhi.



With Sister Meewathure Dhammadinna.



Co-instructing a meditation retreat with Sister Bodhicitta.



A retreat in Malaysia.

With encouragement from his devotees in Kuala Lumpur, Venerable Punnaji set up two websites to disseminate his teachings and write books on Buddhism and Buddhist meditation. The three books *Ariya Magga Bhavana* I, II, and III, based on an expansion of three chapters in his original book, *Awakening Meditation*, were written and would take the reader on a gradual journey of progress from the purification of mind, tranquility of mind and finally to the imperturbable serenity of mind. In these three books and in his final book in English titled, *Ascending the Supernormal Eightfold Way* (2016), published by Lionel Senanayake, President's Counsel and retired judge in Sri Lanka, Venerable Punnaji shared his vast knowledge of the original teachings of the Buddha that are not available anywhere else other than the *Pāli Sutta Pitaka*, which have undergone many incomplete and inaccurate translations by scholars with limited understanding of what the Buddha tried to convey 2600 years ago.

VISITS TO SRI LANKA

Venerable Punnaji did not forget the many Sri Lankan Buddhists searching for a clear explanation of the *Dhamma*. In 2017, under his guidance, a Sinhala translation of his English books on Buddhist meditation was compiled by one of his disciples, Sister Meewature Dhammadinna, in Sri Lanka (please see the list of publications).

During his annual visits to Sri Lanka from Malaysia, Venerable Punnaji resided at several monasteries. Chief among these were the Sri Rajasinghe Pothgul Vihara in Kandy in association with Venerable Yatinuwara Sumana Maha Thero and the Primrose Gardens Vijiraramaya headed by Venerable Akuramboda Dhammavilasa Maha Thero, where exquisite lodgings were specially constructed for the annual visitor. Also noteworthy is the close association since childhood with Venerable Kurunegala Indaratana Maha Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Kohilapokuna Rajamaha Vihara in Kurunegala, a favorite visiting place of Venerable Punnaji. At this temple, Venerable Punnaji guided the construction of an extensive series of three-dimensional sculptures emphasizing significant teachings and events in the life of

the Buddha. A booklet explaining the meaning behind each sculpture was prepared during Venerable Punnaji's visits to Edmonton, but it has not been published yet. A Sinhala translation has been published in Sri Lanka.

It is also important to recognize the services of Venerable Kiripitiye Vijitha, who was at Venerable Punnaji's beck and call both in Malaysia and Sri Lanka for nearly ten years. He kindly dedicated his time and energy to a caretaker and student role.

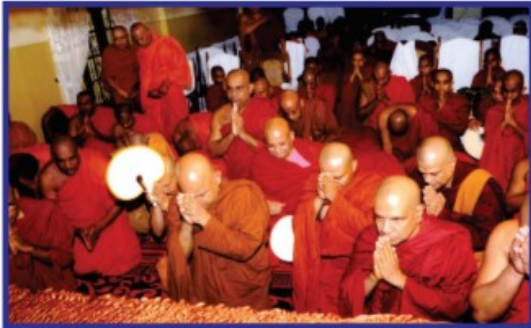


With Venerable Kiripitiye Vijitha.

THE END OF AN EXALTED LIFE

Although Venerable Punnaji wished to travel to North America, his usual summer destination, his doctors in Kuala Lumpur had advised him to refrain from long-distance travel in 2018 since he was recovering from an illness earlier. Instead, he visited Sri Lanka in June 2018. He stayed at the Primrose Gardens Vajiraramaya and conducted several *Dhamma* discussions with lay and monastic devotees. Upon invitation by Venerable Bhikkuni Bodhicitta, head of the Nisala Arana Forest Monastery and Retreat Centre, Karawwa, Molkawa in the Kalutara District, Venerable Punnaji started a meditation retreat on July 25th. On the morning of July 26th, Venerable Punnaji presented an introductory sermon on meditation followed by what was to be his last sermon that same evening (both sermons are posted on YouTube).

Venerable Punnaji passed away in his sleep peacefully the next morning of July 27th, Esala Full-Moon Poya Day. On July 28th, a special convoy of vehicles transported the final remains to the Vajiraramaya at Primrose Gardens, Kandy, amidst much respectful and somber reverence. The body of Venerable Punnaji was displayed for three days at Primrose Gardens for monastics and laypeople, both local and foreign, to pay reverential respects and to conduct customary Buddhist funeral rituals. Venerable Punnaji's body was donated to the Faculty of Dentistry at the University of Peradeniya in accordance with his wishes.



Venerable Sangha at the funeral service for the late Venerable Mahathera Madawela Punnaji.

#1: Speech by the most Venerable Kirinde Sri Dhammaratana, Chief Incumbent, Brickfields Buddhist Vihara, Malaysia.

#2: Speech by the most Venerable Akuramboda Dhammavilasa, Primrose Gardens.

VENERABLE PUNNAJI'S UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE BUDDHA *DHAMMA*

Only a monk of Venerable Punnaji's caliber can make sense of the Buddha's teachings and lay it out for consumption by the modern world, especially in the West, hungry for a clear and lucid explanation of Buddhism. His writings and *Dhamma* talks are truly a breath of fresh air, and this can be left to the readers and listeners to decide for themselves. In conclusion, what makes Venerable Madawela Punnaji a unique scholar of Buddhism in modern times? The summary below provides a brief answer to this question:

- A monk with extremely rare and unique qualifications enabled him to translate the Buddha's original teachings recorded in the *Pāli* language. This unique skill set came from his accumulated experiences from childhood and perhaps even from his past lives to think like a meticulous scientific investigator in researching and trying to understand Buddhism. His preparation for this task through the study of the *Pāli* language, science, medicine, astronomy, psychology, philosophy, and even comparative religion greatly enhanced his ability to translate the *Dhamma*, which has been hidden from Buddhists for many centuries.
- In his early explorations as a layman and later as a novice monk, using his deep reflection, supplemented by meditative practice and self-discovery, Venerable Punnaji realized the value of relaxation of the body (*passaddhi*) as an essential requisite to achieving tranquillity of mind (*samādhi*). He recalls how a book titled "*How to Relax*" by the English author Wilfrid Northfield validated his relaxation practice. In his meditation retreats, participants started each morning with a yoga and guided relaxation exercise session, at the end of which most participants experienced a deeply relaxed body and a fully awake and alert mind, thus gaining a glimpse of what *samādhi* feels like. He cautioned meditators that *ānāpāna sati* is not an exercise in concentration. Concentration is associated with the danger of entering the hypnotic state, a state midway between sleeping and waking that can produce hallucinations (seeing lights and various images) and a state where whatever one expects to happen will happen.
- A common theme in many of his sermons was that people normally think: the world exists first. Then "I" come into existence and meet the "world" and "I see the world." The fact, however, is: seeing arises first, and it is only from the seeing (or perception) that the "I" and the "world" come into being. In the seeing, there is only the seeing. There is neither the seer nor the seen. In other words, experience precedes existence. Existence is only a product of the process of perception, which is experience. Experience produces the subject and the object that is supposed to exist. The dream of existence (*bhava*) as a "self" in a "world" is filled with unhappiness, dissatisfaction, frustration, failure, loss, inadequacy, and the millions of worries, anxieties, depressions that commonly fill our lives. Ageing, sickness, and death are unavoidable, unfavorable parts of this dream. *Nibbāna* is the Awakening from this dream of existence. His Sinhala book, *Ariya Magga Bhāvanā* sub-titled, "*Bhava namathi sihinayen awadiweema*," is a testimony to his teachings on this important topic.
- His research and explanation of *Paticca Samuppāda*, one of the most complex subjects in Buddhism that even the Buddha cautioned his chief attendant Venerable Ananda not to assume lightly, is entirely different from the traditional three-lifetime explanation by most teachers

and writers. According to Venerable Punnaji, *Paticca Samuppāda* is an unconscious mental process that happens independently of time and space due to the necessary conditions that create the “world” and the “self.” Furthermore, it does not explain how rebirth takes place and how it can be stopped. Thus, he has **dispelled the myth that *Nibbāna* is the stopping of rebirth**. In his book *Ascending the Supernormal Eightfold Way* (page 238), he has emphatically stated: Nirvana has been described by the Buddha **not** as the ending of rebirth (*jāti nirodho*), but as the ending of the delusion of existence (*bhava nirodho Nibbanan*), by Awakening from the dream of existence (*sammā sambodhi*). Venerable Punnaji has dispelled many myths in the traditional teachings to the delight of countless students and scholars confused by erroneous translations and misinterpretations of the *Dhamma*.

- *Tanhā*, according to Venerable Punnaji, means the emotional reaction to sensations (*vedanā*), which is of three types: 1. The desire for pleasant sensations (*dosa*) – (*vibhava tanhā*); 2. Dislike of unpleasant sensations (*dosa*) – (*vibhava tanhā*); and the notion of existence of neutral sensations (*moha*) – (*bhava tanhā*).
- After much scrupulous reflection, the introduction of English words or phrases that most closely and accurately bring out the meaning of the Buddha’s words. For example, *Paticca Samuppāda*, commonly translated as Dependent Origination, is translated as the Antecedental Concurrence. In contrast, the word mindfulness used to translate *sati* in *Pāli* is translated as introversion of attention. His books are filled with many such accurate translations.
- A lifetime of selfless service to the Buddha Sasana appreciated with much gratitude and reverence by *Dhamma* students and practitioners worldwide.

QUOTABLE QUOTES OF VENERABLE PUNNAJI

- Buddhism today can be compared to a fire that has been nearly extinguished except for a few hot embers covered by ashes. Trying to understand the original message of the Buddha is like blowing away the ashes to expose the embers and rekindle them. This is what I have done for over half a century. My research and findings may not be accurate, but my humble request is that the reader examines the concepts presented with an open mind.
- It is now 25 centuries after the Buddha. People do not know what Buddhism is. Even the Buddhists do not know. All these professors who study Buddhism also do not know. They have understood only a little. It is like the children picking pebbles and seashells on the seashore, whereas the vast ocean of knowledge is out there, undiscovered.
- Human beings have evolved over millions of years, and this process of evolution happened unconsciously. Further evolution of the human being is through a conscious process that culminates in Buddhahood.

- I translate the commonly used Noble Eight-fold Path as the Supernormal Eight-fold Way, which is not a set of commandments or rules of living but a description of the character structure and disposition of the true and healthy Buddhist.
- See that all pleasures are impermanent, and all pains are impermanent. Not to desire pleasures and not to hate pain and to keep the mind calm and tranquil is the greatest happiness.
- Emotional reactions are mere reactions of the body to sensory stimulations or memories of them. They are mere disturbances of the mind and body, which are experienced as unhappiness. The only way to happiness is to cultivate calmness of mind and relaxation of the body.
- Emotional reactions happen to us almost without our knowing how. This is why they are so difficult to get under control. These emotional impulses (*tanhā*) are unconscious, blind, and impersonal.
- All living beings struggle and compete to exist by keeping their temporary lives and enjoying impermanent pleasure.
- Existence is a feeling rather than a rational concept. Even if we are fully convinced rationally that we don't exist, we still feel we exist.
- Existence is a static concept in a dynamic reality.
- The struggle for existence is not only futile but also painful. It should and can be stopped by realizing that existence is a delusion and that we do not really exist. There is only a struggle to exist but no real existence.
- Existence (*bhava*) is a concept derived from the process of perception, which happens unconsciously, and we are not aware of it. If we can become aware of it, we can know how the experience of existence occurs. When we are aware of this, we are free of the delusion of existence, and all the suffering based on this delusion comes to an end. This is the meaning of the attainment of *Nibbāna* – the Awakening from the dream of existence.
- Our desires are unrealistic. We are seeking permanence in an impermanent world.
- Our main problem is our inability to accept reality as it is.
- Do not pursue happiness. Just get rid of your unhappiness.
- When one becomes conscious of the body, feelings, emotions, and thoughts, the unconscious thought processes automatically stop. This is the secret to proper meditation.

- All impure thoughts or evil thoughts are emotional excitements. Good thoughts are calming thoughts.
- By purifying the mind, we become good, happy, and wise.
- Buddhists do not pray to the Buddha or supernatural powers for help. They take refuge in the wisdom of the Buddha to solve the problems in their lives.
- Humanistic Buddhism provides refuge through the natural wisdom of the Buddha by developing the human potential for goodness, tranquility, and intelligence.
- For the Buddhist, religion is a transformation of self and not an unrealistic effort to change reality with the help of supernatural power.
- Contrary to popular opinion in the West, selfless concern for others is not an emotion.
- True love is only possible in a tranquil state of mind.
- We are not fully human until we have learned to be calm and rational.
- While in Christianity, God descended to the human state, in Buddhism, man ascends to the divine state.
- Buddhism is not an atheistic religion as it is popularly known. It only has a different way of looking at the concept of God. This way is the humanistic way. Buddhism offers a humanistic definition of God.
- To cultivate tranquility, learn to stop reacting and start responding.
- Human beings are naturally social and responsible when they act calmly and rationally unless disturbed by self-centered emotions.
- One who acts rationally does not seek help from supernatural powers. Instead of seeking the support of one God or several gods, he seeks the support of society through social exchange. By doing his duty to others, others protect him. This is the humanistic way of practicing religion.
- The Buddhist cultivates a broad mind that is interested in the welfare of all beings.
- Having given up praying to gods, the Buddhist worships the Buddha and practices self-reliance and a social attitude.

List of Publications by Venerable Mahathera Madawela Punnaji

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YOUTUBE-PRESENTATIONS: <http://www.trekmentor.org/si/content/savaka/50853>

WEBSITES: <http://www.bhantepunnaji.com/> ; <http://www.protobuddhism.com> and <http://www.bhantepunnaji.com> www.buddhismdemystified.org

Obeisance to The Most Venerable Madawela Punnaji Maha Thera, my teacher and close friend for 30 years: I bow my head at your feet in gratitude for opening my eyes to the precious Buddha *Dhamma*. May You Attain the Supreme Bliss of Nibbana!

Writer: Mahendra Wijayasinghe, Ph.D., Edmonton, Alberta, Canada (Revised, Mar. 11, 2023).
(The writer assumes full responsibility and regrets any mistakes in this article).

May this article be an invitation to students and scholars of Buddhism to undertake further research and build upon the foundational knowledge discovered by Venerable Punnaji.

Miscellaneous photos:



Dāna at the writer's home (2016).



Bhante Punnaji and the writer, in Sri Lanka (2014).



At the Alberta legislature grounds (1999).





Thought precedes all experience
Thought predominates, thought creates

If with bad thought
one speaks or acts

Pain ^{does} follow ~~one~~ the doer
As the wheel shall follow
the doer

If with good thought
one speaks or acts

Pleasure ^{shall} certainly follow
As the shadow ^{follows}
one sure

The mind that is
undisturbed
By the changing vicissitudes
of life
worry free, passion free,
and secure

This is the Bliss Supreme

