The Extraordinary Life of Henri van Zeyst

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Henri van Zeyst was one of the last of that generation of Westerners who came to Asia to join the Buddhist monkhood before the Second World War. Of the many who came, few lasted long. Henri went to Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, and was still there 50 years later, although not as a monk. Those who came then and in later decades and did stay, usually flourished and became known to Western Buddhists through their writings on Buddhism and translations of Buddhist texts; Nyanatiloka and Nyanaponika, Nyanamoli, Nyanavira and Bhikkhu Bodhi being amongst the more famous. Henri van Zeyst remained little known outside his country of adoption, despite his numerous writings.

Henri was born in Utrecht, the Netherlands into a pious Catholic family in 1905. He was a brilliant student and in his early teens decided to study for the priesthood, to the delight of his parents. A younger sister eventually became a nun.

Educated throughout in Catholic schools and colleges, he ordained as a Dominican monk and later as a priest, and spent his final years of studies in philosophy and theology and the first year of his priestly ordination in an Italian monastery near Florence. In his early '30s he was sent to London to be in charge of a new foundation of his Order, where he was also teaching Dogmatic Theology to the scholastics of Christus Rex Priory in North London.

As part of his continuing intellectual development Henri did a course in comparative religion and came into contact with Buddhism for the first time. Gradually some of the uncertainties he had about aspects of Catholic doctrine but which up until then he had resolved to accept on faith, began to be aggravated by what he learned about the Dhamma. He was startled to discover that this sophisticated philosophy with its lofty ethical ideals dispensed with the notion of a soul and even with a divine arbiter. When he learned that there was actually a Buddhist temple in London, on Gloucester Road in Kensington, he started surreptitiously visiting it in his spare time. The monks there gave him books to read and did their best to answer his questions. The more Henri read the more he found himself agreeing with aspects of Buddhism which directly contradicted what he had always believed and had dedicated his whole life to. Neither fervent prayers for strength and guidance, nor fears about alienating his family, friends and teachers, nor concerns about what he would do with his life if he left the Church, could stop the fading of his faith.

Once Henri told me of the discomfort he felt when he succeeded in dispelling the doubts of a man who had been losing his faith, when he himself no longer believed. The pressure of living a lie was becoming unbearable. Something had to break and eventually it did. Convinced that the Dhamma, and not the Church, had the most credible explanation of reality, Henri decided to leave. Late one night he put all the monastery keys on his desk together with a letter saying that he was never coming back and stole into the night. He took a room in a small hotel and slept almost continuously for three days, the tension of living a lie for so long having utterly exhausted him. A few days later he booked passage on a steamship and left for Ceylon. The first port of call was Marseille in southern France and he looked forward to exploring the city and walking around without his clerical garb. But as he walked down the gangplank he saw, to his utter amazement, his parents, the family priest

and another cleric waiting for him on the pier. It seems his fellow priests in London had sensed his cooling religious fervor and despite his efforts to keep it secret, had also come to know of his visits to the London Buddhist Mission. When he disappeared they reasoned that one of the things he might have been considering was becoming a Buddhist monk. A check of passenger lists of steamers heading to Asia uncovered his name. The Church in Holland was notified and they arranged for his parents, his family's priest and a senior cleric from his Order to be driven at breakneck speed through Holland, Belgium and France to meet the ship when it arrived. When Henri saw his parents he retreated back on board and they and the two priests came up to meet him there. Several hours of pleading and arguing followed. The senior cleric assured Henri that he was just tired and after a good rest and some counseling everything would be back to normal. Henri replied that it wasn't a matter of tiredness; he simply no longer believed. Finally his mother announced tearfully but firmly: "If you go you will never see me or your father again." He never did either, although in early 1965 he made a trip back to the Netherlands where he had a happy reunion with his siblings. As a gesture of reconciliation they bought him a green Volkswagen and even in the 1970s and early 80s he could still be seen driving it around Kandy.

Henri arrived in Ceylon on the 26th of August 1938 with no money, no knowledge of the country he was determined to become a monk in, and only the address of the Maha Bodhi Society, given to him by one of the monks in London. Nonetheless, the natural hospitality of the Sinhalese soon helped him find his way and on the 10th Oct 1938 he took his novice ordination at Maligakanda in Colombo and was given the name Dhammapāla. Immediately he began a period of intensive study of Dhamma, Pāli and Vinaya at the Wikramashila Pirivena in Pallewela, on the outskirts of Gampaha. On the 5th of December two years later he received his higher ordination. In those days many of the educated class in Ceylon were

looking forward to the very real possibility of full independence after the war and there was a surge of interest in the nation's history, culture, language and particularly its religion. The presence of an impressive-looking European monk (Henri was 6 ft. 4";) who had not only adopted Buddhism but had actually become a monk as well, attracted an enormous amount of attention. The fact that he was not British gave him extra appeal. Soon he was surrounded by a crowd of helpers and admirers, the foremost of these being the famous lawyer and educator Ananda Mivanapalana.

In 1942 Dhammapāla became seriously ill and had to be hospitalized. During this time he was devotedly cared for by Richard Abhayasekera, later to become one of the founders of the Buddhist Publication Society together with the famous German monk Nyanaponika. After recovering his health Dhammapāla and Mivanapalana founded the All-Ceylon Buddhist Students Union, an organization that was to have a profound influence on a whole generation of high school and university students, many of whom went on to become senior figures in politics, the civil service, education and law.

One of his students from that time has written: "Dhammapāla spoke to [the students] in simple English, brilliant with human cameos and an impish humour that made Buddhism real and meaningful to the young. It shook them out of the lazy complacency, dull sermons and half-understood ritual that Buddhist practice in most schools had slipped into." Another organization inspired by Dhammapāla was the Kandy Buddhist Association which continued to conduct its activities up to the 1980s. One of the highlights of his teaching during this period was a three-day debate he had with the Rev. Clifford Wilson, Vicar of Christ Church, Galle Face, organized by students of the University of Ceylon. Although the audience was a mixed one, both Buddhists and Christians, the general consensus was that the Rev. Wilson had been bettered. At the end of the event he good-naturedly bowed to Dhammapāla and said: "Venerable sir,

I take my hat off to you." The crowd, which had increased exponentially each day of the debate, roared its approval—at Wilson's magnanimity and at Dhammapāla's victory.

While Dhammapāla's regard for the Buddha's teachings never faltered, he was increasingly dismayed by how it was practiced and understood in Ceylon. The general state of the Sangha disheartened him even more. Talking about his feelings at this time Henri once commented to me: "I finally came to the conclusion that you can practice the Dhamma without the Buddhism. In fact, I thought and I still think that you can only fully practice the Dhamma without the Buddhism." In 1947 he disrobed, to the great sadness of his many admirers.

Shortly after he disrobed Henri decided to go to India to visit Buddhist sacred sites and to explore the country's rich and diverse spiritual heritage. He met some of the great saints of the time; Ramana Maharishi, Anandamayi Ma, Sivananda Sarasvati and even Sai Baba, then just a young man little known outside the district where he lived. The Hindu saint who impressed him most was the gentle, smiling Ram Dass with whom he stayed with for some time. He also he met J. Krishnamurti in Varanasi, an encounter that would have an influence on his understanding of Buddhism. The two remained friends for many years and met for the last time during Krishnamurti's tour of Sri Lanka in 1980.

Henri had no patience for the ritualistic practices and supernatural claims of religions; he would occasionally jokingly describe himself as "a Kalama Sutta Buddhist." However, he did acknowledge that he had once been witness to what would normally be considered a miracle. During his time in India he had heard about the then 21-year old still little-known Satya Sai Baba and had gone to meet him. As he walked along the dusty road to the ashram he saw the swami coming towards him, took out his camera and took a picture of him. When the two met Sai Baba told him that the picture would not come out and that he should take another one.

When Henri cocked the camera to do so he found that his film was finished. Sai Baba crouched down, made a small pile of dust and suddenly pulled a roll of film out of it. Henri was utterly astonished. Even until recently, finding a roll of film in a remote Indian village was difficult; in the 1940s it was virtually impossible. When Henri related this story, and I heard him do so on several occasions, he would always end by saying: "You can believe it or not. I don't care. But that happened to me!" although he never attempted to give a rational explanation for the incident.

When Henri returned to Ceylon he was uncertain what he could do to make a living. Having lived in monasteries since his teens he had little experience of the real world. He took several teaching jobs, and worked for the General Insurance Co. in Colombo. During a trip to Adyar to attend Krishnamurti's talks the next year Henri met a Tamil Christian woman Miss Leela Victor, a teacher at Methodist Girls' College in Colombo, and the two married in 1949. In 1956 an opportunity presented itself which was almost tailor-made for Henri. As a part of the Buddha Jayanti celebrations of that year the Government of Ceylon undertook to publish what was to be called The Encyclopedia of Buddhism. It was an ambitious project and some of the world's best Buddhist scholars were recruited to help. Henri was invited to join the staff. A plan for the encyclopedia was drawn up, and after a specimen fascicule was circulated amongst scholars and Buddhist leaders met with wide approval, it was decided to proceed with the project. Henri's entries appeared from the first fascicule onwards and are some of the most readable in the encyclopedia. He wrote on a variety of subjects but he became best known and appreciated for his articles on Buddhist doctrine.

The editor of the Encyclopedia was Dr. G. P. Malalasekera, but after he was appointed Ceylon's ambassador to the USSR and later his country's Permanent Representative to the UN he was only occasionally in Ceylon and rarely visited the Encyclopedia's offices

when there. As a result Henri became in effect the editor as well is its administrative secretary. By the late 60s there were troubles with the encyclopedia. The original vision of an in-depth coverage of all schools proved to be overly ambitious and the need to cut back the scope was recognized, the government's interest in the project had waned, and the budget for the project had been drastically reduced. Henri realized that it was time to leave and in 1968 he did.

In the early 1970s Henri began a fruitful relationship with the man who was to become his last 'disciple', Mr. Kuruppu. Kuruppu owned a printing business and had a deep interest in all schools of Buddhism. Years before Henri had planned to write an eight volume magus opus on Buddhism but the project never got beyond the planning stage. While still a monk he had written a substantial tome at the request of the publishers M. D. Gunasena but for some reason it was never published. In 1980 Henri contacted Gunasena asking if they still had the manuscript and if so they could return it seeing as 40 years had gone by without it appearing. They replied that after a great deal of searching they had found the manuscript and for R.15,000 he could have it back. Kuruppu by contrast, told Henri that anything he wrote, he, Kuruppu, would publish. And so he did. Over the next few years Henri wrote nearly a dozen books, all which were published and distributed.

In 1983 Leela died and shortly after Henri, already frail although still mentally as alert and sharp as ever, underwent an unexpected change. He began wearing his hair in a feminine manner, dressing in a sari and said that from then on he would like to be addressed as Pushpa, a common Sri Lankan woman's name. Friends and acquaintances were dismayed and some began keeping their distance from him. By this time I had moved to Singapore but I had heard what had happened. In a long letter Henri wrote to me explaining the decision he had made he said: "All my life I have wanted to be a woman." I was deeply saddened by this and other things Henri wrote, not because of his unexpected change of identity but

because it was clear that he had been fighting and denying this inner longing for much of his life. In 1985 at the invitation of the much loved meditation teacher Godwin Samararatne Henri moved to the Nilambe Meditation Centre in the hills some 20 kilometers out of Kandy where he built a small hut with room enough for himself and his helper, Chandra. Two years later at the height of the radical JVP insurrection there was an attack at Nilambe during which one of the founders of the meditation centre, Parakrama Fernendo, was murdered and Henri's hut was set on fire, although it was never established who was responsible for this or why. It was thought best for Henri to leave and arrangements were made for him to stay with Pat Jayatilleke, a long-time friend and wife of the late philosopher K. N. Jayatilleke. Henri died in her home on the 15th September 1988.

I knew Henri van Zeyst well and counted him amongst my best friends. Many a Sunday afternoon he, Leela and I, sometimes joined by a guest of his or a friend of mine, would sit discussing Dhamma or theology, Western philosophy or psychology, Henri contributing most to these subjects. While he had a profound knowledge of and appreciation for Buddhism he could be critical of it as it is traditionally understood and practiced. He also believed that Krishnamurti's teachings helped clarify some aspects of the Dhamma, a not unreasonable position. His discourse was always precise, clear and informed and often spiced with a cheeky humor. He could become just slightly agitated when mentioning what he took to be the irrational in religion, but other than such moments he was always cheerful and sanguine. Despite this, I always had a vague feeling that there was some aspect of Henri's personality that needed to be resolved or at least articulated but which wasn't being. Only later what this was became apparent.

Although Henri van Zeyst is almost unknown beyond Sri Lanka, and even there those whose lives he changed are growing fewer by the year, he deserves a place in the history of modern Buddhism,

especially the Western experience of Buddhism. Hopefully his writings, presented here in a 21st century format and for the first time since their original publication, will gain a new and appreciative readership.