

THE VENERABLE LOKANATHA :

By

DR. R. L. SONI

(Mandalay)

The great Buddhist missionary, the Right Venerable Lokanatha, popularly known as the Italian Buddhist monk, passed away in Maymyo (Burma) in the early hours of the 25th May 1966 in his 69th year.

Born in Italy in 1897 in the celebrated family of Cioffi and given the name of Salvatore, meaning the Saviour, he lived up to the glorious name. Brought up in an atmosphere of talented culture, he had his education in New York (U.S.A.) in Columbia University, wherefrom he had his B.Sc. degree in 1922. He also worked at Cooper Institute and attended to biological and medical research at the Rockefeller. It was the scientific impulse in him which led him to Buddhism, which he embraced not long after graduation. Shortly he was on pilgrimage to the places sacred to Buddhism and was ordained a Buddhist monk in Burma in 1925. Thereafter he was ardently resolved to propagate the teachings of the Buddha all over the world, for peace and happiness in the human family.

Returning home after mastering the precepts and practices of Buddhism in six months, he found the general atmosphere not favourable to his new religion in Italy. He returned to India on foot walking across Southern Europe and Asia Minor, reaching back Burma in 1928. The five years that followed were spent in deep study and meditations, his time being divided between monasteries and the Hima-

layan caves and forests. Strictly observing the 13 *dhutangas*, he emerged towards the end of 1932 with a spiritual radiance around him. From the year 1928 throughout his life he observed the self-imposed rule of sleeping in the sitting posture: only in his death he lay on his back.

Three Buddhist missionary expeditions were launched by the Venerable Lokanatha in the years 1933, 1934 and 1935 from Burma, Thailand and Ceylon respectively to Buddha-Gaya in India, where the Buddha had attained Enlightenment. Great was the enthusiasm aroused and great was the awakening that these Expeditions occasioned. It was towards the end of January 1933, in the course of the First Expedition that the author was converted to Buddhism by the Ven. Lokanatha overnight and ever since he has been strenuously engaged in Buddhism, specializing in the *Dhammaduta* activities on a world level.

The Ven. Lokanatha wrote extensively and published several Booklets with a view to use these in his missionary expeditions in the West: he also completed a large volume dealing with his missionary work in the East. Alas! While the plans for a missionary tour of Europe and America were getting finalised, the World War II broke out. And, what a shock! All those precious writing were lost. Besides, during the War he was interned in India. Returning back to Burma after the War in Octo-

ber 1946, he found the Buddhist Foreign Mission organized at Mandalay, under the auspices of which he was sent out in July 1947 for a Buddhist survey of the contemporary world, with special reference to the U.S.A. This marks a landmark in the history of Burma, for, it was the first Mission of its kind ever launched from the shores of the country. The magnificent outcome of this Mission is detailed in his work "*Girdling the Globe with Truth*". Preaching through Singapore and Malaya, Hongkong, Shanghai and Manila, he sped across the Pacific through Hawaii to the U.S.A., and after a very successful tour of the States and preachings in England and on the Continent, he arrived in Ceylon in 1950 to attend and address the First Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists. In March 1951 he was back to Burma, where right-royal receptions awaited for him in Rangoon and Mandalay. In Mandalay he hoisted the World Buddhist Flag on 24th March 1951 - for the first time in Burma.

After 1951 he preached extensively and repeatedly throughout Burma, also dividing his time between Burma and India and Ceylon - mostly staying in Burma. He attended and addressed the World Fellowship of Buddhists' Conference in Rangoon in 1954. Also, he was elected the Spiritual Patron of the *Mahajayanti* Celebrations in 1956 in Pakistan, over which the author presided.

It was in the early thirties of this century that the Ven. Lokanatha and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the great leader of the Untouchables in India, contacted each other. The correspondence between them reveals the wholesome and lasting influence the Venerable exercised over the Doctor in favour of Buddhism. However, it took

shape in the conversion of millions of Indians to Buddhism. The final decision for the Doctor's formal conversion was made in 1954, when the Doctor by then the father of the Constitution of free India, was a guest of the author in Mandalay. It was then that he positively decided for formal entry into the Buddhist fold in 1956. Besides, Dr. Ambedkar showed marked keenness to have the Ven. Lokanatha in India to help in the cause of educating the mass of new converts in the Buddhist values.

Donations for the world *Dhammaduta* work flowed freely to the Ven. Lokanatha in Burma. He had planned for a World Preaching Tour in 1963-1965, which somehow failed to materialize. The Venerable was throughout in excellent health, taking due care as much of his body as of his mind, having trained both to a high grade discipline. However, towards the end of 1965 he developed a sore on his forehead, which turned cancerous. While preparing for his visit to the U.S.A. for proper treatment, he succumbed to the temptation of trying indigenous treatment, against all expert advice: certainly, he would have been better off without this interference, for, the cancer was absolutely localized as certified by the experts some ten days before his death, and as such certainly amenable to modern treatment. Apart from his death being a tremendous shock to me, it is an irreparable loss to the Buddhist world.

The Venerable Lokanatha, a staunch vegetarian, was a personality superb. Ever beaming with youthful vigour and ever with the spiritual aura of *metta* about him, his very presence filled the atmosphere with peace, infusing all around him with the sterling impulses of the Buddhist

values. Ever ready to help others in distress, he was verily generosity personified. Charitable in disposition, he was ever in quest for opportunities to give. His generous donation of kyats fifty thousand to the *Sunlun Dhammayone* in Rangoon testifies to this. Devotees flocked to him from all ranks of life ; intellectuals, scientists and people in authority in different lands found themselves spellbound before his arguments ; many were the friends he had among the wealthy, the intellectuals and the high-ups, and particularly among those spiritually advanced ; even the poorest found in him a ray of hope and help ; innumerable were the converts he brought to Buddhism and more numerous are the people across the world in whose hearts seeds of the *Dhamma* have been sown through his preachings.

Theravada by designation, the Ven. Lokanatha was broadminded for all viewpoints. Endowed with the missionary spirit of the ancient pioneers and ever radiant with universal friendliness, he was a *Dhammaduta par excellence*.

Having served the cause of Buddhism in Burma for over forty years, he is the only Buddhist Westerner in history with such a long, devoted and continuous con-

tact with the country. Also, he will be remembered for popularising Cemetery Meditations and the heroic battles he fought with the British authorities before the War in favour of separate wards for monks in the hospitals and for male nurses to attend on the members of the *Sangha*. No wonder, the people of Maymyo took it as a signal honour that such a unique Buddhist monk passed away in their town, decidedly the queen of hill stations in Burma. There, his body was taken on the 29th May in a stately procession to the *Shwezigon* Monastery, where it lies in state for all Burma to pay homage. It is indeed a wonderful experience to witness the military, the civil and the municipal authorities as much as the people doing their devoted best for elaborate arrangements to honour the Right Venerable Lokanatha even in his death. While they earn an abiding merit, the town is expected to become an eternal seat of pilgrimage for the Buddhists from far and near. Born in Italy, educated in America and ordained in Burma, the Right Venerable Lokanatha, after preaching the *Dhamma* in the three continents, leaves his earthly remains in Maymyo. Blessed shall ever be the name of Maymyo.

