

## In Sri Lanka

**I**n late December 2023 to January 2, 2024 I went with my family to Sri Lanka. First on our agenda was visiting the International Institute of Theravada in order to meet Venerable Subhuti and Venerable Maggavihari. It is an impressive vihara — not because of the facilities, which were good, but because of the reverence the bhikkhus have for Dhamma and Vinaya. I listened to a talk on the Abhidhamma by Venerable Maggavihari in English where he explained kalapas with examples from daily life. It was good to see the audience of bhikkhus following up with pertinent questions. On a youtube video Venerable Maggavihari said *‘the most important way [to develop paññā] is listening to good doctrines, studying them, listening to good Dhamma talks, questioning the Dhamma, clarifying the doubtful point, and also studying certain deep spiritual doctrines’*.



After the talk, while I was with Venerable Subhuti a young bhikkhu asked me about anatta and said he wondered if some elements could be controllable to some extent (I paraphrase). In fact all elements are anatta and what we might think of as ‘us’ doing things and planning things are conditioned processes of nama and rupa. This is so hard to see, it seems ‘we’ are doing, ‘we’ are choosing. The actions that are under our control in the conventional sense, like sitting up or lying down, moving our attention to this or that object, when investigated are actually many moments of conditioned mentality and materiality.

### ***Visuddhimagga***

*The absence of interestedness on the part of ignorance, such as ‘Formations [sankhara ] must be made to occur by me, or on the part of formations, such as ‘vinnana*

*must be made to occur by us'. One who sees this rightly  
abandons self view by understanding the absence of a  
maker. xvii 312*

As we were walking around Venerable Subhuti explained different aspects of Vinaya including the rules around the requisites such as robes and showed me the vihara storeroom which is all arranged according to Vinaya. There is also an extensive Buddhist library. The vihara has a knowledgeable senior bhikkhu, Venerable Devananda, and any bhikkhus wanting to stay there must follow the Vinaya in all details. I had a brief discussion with Venerables Subhuti and Devananda about the two ways of sukkhavipassaka and the jhana labhi, and then Venerable Devananda gave my children the precepts. Now Anna sometimes reminds her siblings that lying is bad, 'the monk said that'.



*With Venerable Devananda*

After the visit to IIT we were in a van on the way to Anuradhapura and I joined a zoom discussion with Sujin, Nina van Gorkom (just a few days before her death), Sarah and Jon Abbott, Sukinder and many others. I mentioned the vihara and there

were questions about the understanding there. I said that what I had heard was all useful, and more than mere lists which is sometimes the way Abhidhamma is taught. On zoom Sujin spoke about what is arising now and the characteristics of dhammas. It is happening right at this moment and by understanding more about this there will be the right conditions for direct understanding.

It was great to be in Sri Lanka where there is such history of and reverence for Dhamma. We circumambulated the wonderful Ruwanvelisaya stupa and then the Mahabodhi tree in the Mahamevnāwa park, a very special area with masses of devout pilgrims. Nearby is a statue of the great bhikkhuni Sanghamitta, the arahat who carried the sapling from the original Bodhi tree in India. In the Mahavamsa it states about the time when Mahinda first brought the Dhamma to Sri Lanka:

*But the Queen Anulā, who had come with five hundred women to greet the theras, attained to the second stage of salvation. And the queen Anulā with her five hundred women said to the king: “We would fain receive the pabbajjā-ordination, your Majesty.”*

*The king said to the thera, “Bestow on them the pabbajja!” But the thera made answer to the king: “It is not allowed to us. O great king, to bestow the pabbajjā on women. But in Pataliputta there lives a bhikkhunī, my younger sister, known by the name Saṅghamittā. She, who is ripe in experience, shall come hither bringing with her the southern branch of the great Bodhi-tree of the king of samaṇas, O king of men, and (bringing) also bhikkhunīs renowned (for holiness); to this end send a message to the king my father. When this therī is*

*here she will confer the pabbajjā upon these women.”*  
Mahāvamsa ch. XV

Thinking of the times Nina van Gorkom was in Sri Lanka I found this passage in *The Perfections Developed in Daily Life* (1980).

*Mindfulness may not often arise and our understanding may be weak, but we should not be misled as to the true goal of our life. In all sincerity we should scrutinize ourselves: do we cling to an image of ourselves, wanting to be full of kusala, with a great deal of sati, and to be very peaceful, or do we want to know ourselves as we really are, our defilements included?*

Here is another from Nina's *Pilgrimage to Sri Lanka* (1977)

*Ajarn Sujin [said] that right understanding is not a matter of catching the moment a particular reality appears. If we believe that there is a particular order in the appearing of realities, we think of concepts instead of being aware of whatever presents itself. Sometimes the object of mindfulness is seeing, sometimes thinking, sometimes visible object. There is no rule with regard to the object sati will be aware of.*

*Venerable Dhammadharo asked, “Who is trying?” and I [Nina] answered, “Self wants to know” [‘self’ meaning subtle self view]. He replied that people usually give the correct answer, but, do they realize the truth?*

*We forget to be mindful of clinging when it appears. When we keep on thinking of seeing instead of being mindful of seeing which appears now, seeing cannot be*