

The Bodhi Mirror



Bhikkhu Nānājīvako Čedomil Velajačić

A native of Yugoslavia, Bhikkhu Nānājīvako Čedomil Velajačić, Ph.D., arrived at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas this past summer as a refugee from war-torn Sri Lanka with one robe, his daughter, and a remarkable past.

Coming to America was Bhikkhu Nānājīvako's fourth experience as a refugee. He was also born as a refugee, became a refugee again during World War II, and was a refugee in another sense when he left his native country to become a Buddhist monk. At birth, his mother fled with him from Bosnia, where World War I was beginning, to Zagreb. In 1944, soon after his own daughter was born, he and his family were evacuated from an Italian province of Yugoslavia to southern Italy during the Anglo-American occupation of World War II.

Shortly before the evacuation, he happened to find some Buddhist literature in an Italian bookstore. In the Jīvako Sutra, he found his own vegetarian convictions expressed by the Buddha's advice to the physician, Jīvako: "If you see, are told, or have doubts that food contains meat, don't eat it." Years later, he renounced his nationality, his property, his family, and his career as a professor to take the name of the physician as his own name and become a member of the Buddhist Sangha in Sri Lanka.

Because he has witnessed first-hand the devastation of war, Bhikkhu Nānājīvako has spent a lifetime devoted to the study, practice, and teaching of nonviolence. As a youth, he became interested in Buddhism through the teachings of the Theosophical Society, but orthodox Buddhist organizations and the authentic Buddhist canon were unavailable to him. The newspapers, however, were filled with articles about Mahatma Gandhi and his teachings on Ahimsa—nonviolence. Influenced by Gandhi's example, Bhikkhu Nānājīvako became a vegetarian and has been an active member of the Vegetarian Society of Yugoslavia since he was nineteen. In 1935, at the age of twenty, he began to

spread his ideas by writing and publishing various articles and essays in Yugoslavia on ethics, culture and vegetarianism.

Through his writings and knowledge of eight languages (Serbo-Croat, English, German, Italian, French, Latin, Pali, Sanskrit), he has established himself as an outstanding scholar. He received a prestigious literary award (Matica Hrvatska, Zagreb) for his first two volume book, Philosophies of the East, published in 1958. A bibliography of his writings since then lists approximately one hundred works in various languages including articles, translations, and introductions to translations of books on Buddhism, published both in Yugoslavia and abroad. Of the eleven books he has published in Yugoslavia, his main work is Crossroads of Asian Philosophies, a two volume book of over one thousand pages. His works in English include regular contributions to philosophical and Buddhist journals as well as two books: Schopenhauer and Buddhism (Kandy, 1970) and Studies in Comparative Philosophy (Colombo, 1983).

Bhikkhu Ñānajīvako's writings in Yugoslavia are particularly significant in that they introduced and spread Buddhism in a Communist country where religion was not tolerated. He refers to himself as "a dealer in prohibited fruit." His translation of the famous Pali poem, Rhinoceros (Khaggavisana Sutta from the Suttanipata), published by friends of his without his knowledge, had such an impact on artists and intellectuals that it served as Yugoslavia's definition of Buddhism and Buddhist monks. Buddhism, acceptable because it is a religion without God, proved to be an appropriate way to spread morality and ethics from a non-Marxist point of view. The Buddhist emphasis on self-reliance appeals to a land with a tremendous thirst for religion, but whose people feel that God has not been good to them.

The gentle scholar took to heart and put into practice the principles taught by the Buddha. Of World War II, he says, "I would have killed myself rather than take the life of another." His knowledge of many languages helped him to find work in refugee centers in southern Italy along with his fellow conscientious objectors, the Quakers.

Following the war, Bhikkhu Ñānajīvako served in the Yugoslav Diplomatic service in Rome, Italy and in Bonn, West Germany. He received his Ph.D. and became an Associate Professor at the University of Zagreb. He was also a visiting professor in various universities in India. When his daughter received her own Ph.D., he felt that it was finally time for him to fulfill his greatest wish. In 1966, he became ordained as a member of the Buddhist Sangha at Island Hermitage, Sri Lanka, and in 1968 he received higher ordination.

Bhikkhu Ñānajīvako wished to spend the remainder of his life in Sri Lanka as a hermit-monk. But a terrorist revolution brought civil war to that country and, with the additional factor that he needed an eye operation, his daughter persuaded him to join her in California. When he arrived, he sought a monastery that was strictly vegetarian where he could continue his quiet lifestyle. At the Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, he found a Way-place that firmly adhered to the Buddha's precepts and moral teachings and that fulfilled his requirements.

Although his life at the Sagely City may be peaceful, it might not be as quiet as he anticipated. A few weeks after his arrival, he participated in the summer Symposium on Ethics, often adding a Buddhist perspective to the talks by speakers from various fields. At the end of the summer, he was one of the Certifying Masters during the ordination ceremonies for Bhikshus and Bhikshunis. Although Chinese is not among the languages he understands, he regularly attends the Buddhist ceremonies and says that he has "discovered the spiritual in Chinese music...In Sri Lanka, even young Bhikkhus have turned to terrorism...But here where it's so quiet, the music resounds in my ears, helping my concentration."