

# **A Majestic Tree of Merit**



**Pothgulgala Dharmagrantha  
Dharmasravana Mādhyā Bhāraya**

This is to inform our readers that all Dhamma books so far written and yet to be written by Venerable Bhikkhu Kaṭukurunde Ñāṇananda will hereafter be published by the P.D.D.M.B. (Kandy) and that the D.G.M.B. (Colombo) would not be publishing any of his books.

P.D.D.M.B.  
Kandy  
2013.07.07

# **A Majestic Tree of Merit**

## **Biography of The American Bhikkhu Kovida**

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‘Those who know the pithy to be of pith  
And the pithless as devoid of pith  
Nursing right thoughts to go there with  
They in good time arrive at the pith’

**- Dhp. v. 12**

## INTRODUCTION

A foot-path or a human foot-print can kindle fresh hope in the heart of a person stranded in a thick forest or in a desolate desert. So is the biography of a righteous person to a world steeped in delusion. We believe that the foot-steps imprinted on the path of religious practice by the American bhikkhu Kovida who passed away in October 1987, are worthy of being traced as a source of similar guidance and encouragement to those groping in the dark, seeking after inward peace. This little book, titled 'A MAJESTIC TREE OF MERIT' is dedicated to that purpose.

Unlike in the case of a novel, when a biography comes out in its complete form, its real author is no longer among the living. The author, in this case, sacrifices even his very life to provide the lessons, variety and coherence to his narrative. Venerable Kovida too, brought his exemplary biographical narrative to completion with dedication and self-sacrifice, using a 'terse' style. The accompanying biographical sketch is but an attempt made by a bhikkhu practising meditation at the Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya, to recapture his terse but meaningful style of life, for the benefit of the future generation keen on the righteous path.

The biography first appeared in Sinhala with the title 'PIN - RUKEKA - MAHIMA' in January 1988. Venerable Mātara Srī Ñāṇārāma Mahāthera, the chief 'Kammaṭṭhānācariya' (Meditation-teacher) of the Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya and Venerable Pundit Kaḍavadduve Jinavaṃsa Mahāthera, the Founder of the Srī Kalyāni Yogāsrama Saṃsthā, issued two benevolent messages which enhanced the value of that publication. Both these veteran leaders of the Saṃgha were unanimous in their view that this biography which portrays emphatically the main objectives of

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1 Reprinted - March 1988. Published by M. S. D. Perera of Makumbura, Pannipitiya.

the Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya, should be published in English as well, for the benefit of a wider reading public. While the writer was hesitating over the suggestion, an initiative in this direction was taken by some enthusiastic members of the laity. Helpful hints also came from the members of the Nissarana Vanaya Saṅgha. As the present English version is the final outcome of all these contributory factors, it follows its Sinhala original in honouring the literary tradition of anonymity.

This publication has been made possible through the generous contributions from a group of benefactors of the Sāsana who also wish to remain anonymous. May this ‘gift of Dhamma’ redound to their well-being and to their attainment of Nibbānic Bliss!

**- Editor -**

2532 (B. E)

18. 6. 1988

Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya,  
Meetirigala.

MESSAGE BY

**VENERABLE MĀTARAŚRĪÑĀÑĀRĀMA  
MAHĀTHERA**

**END OF AN EXEMPLARY LIFE  
OF A MEDITATING MONK**

We realised at the beginning itself that Bhikkhu Kovida was backed by a store of mature merit and was steadily drawing upon it. He arrived in Sri Lanka with a set purpose of a very high order and made a great endeavour in the field of the Buddha Sāsana to reap lasting happiness and solace.

I earnestly wish that this character sketch would serve as a source of guidance and solace - particularly to our group of meditators keen on their Goal.

**Mātara Ñāṇārāma Mahāthera**

2532 (B. E)

23.12.1987

Nissarana Vanaya,

Meetirigala.

MESSAGE BY

**VENERABLE KAḌAVADDUVE  
SRĪ JINAVAMSA MĀHĀTHERA**

### **THE INHERENT POWER**

‘I am my pupil, I am my teacher too’. These are not whimsical utterances. They are indeed meaningful and are in keeping with the sayings of the Buddha such as: ‘One is one’s own saviour’; ‘Live, being an island unto yourself’; ‘You yourself should make the effort’.

We should proceed on our procession towards inward peace being both a pupil and teacher to ourselves, at the same time. The light we get from the Buddha’s dispensation, is a search-light that enables us to see ourselves, and to recognise ourselves. In other words, a light to see our inner selves. This is an aspect that cannot be seen by ordinary light. There is an ‘inner self’ in everything. The magnitude of miracles accomplished by that inherent power staggers one’s imagination.

Think of a jack tree fully laden with fruits. Ponder reflectively on its inner self. You would then be able to see the miracle of this mighty tree which grows up, and puts forth its fruits in due season in such abundance. This is the majesty of its inner-self. That is, the germinating and productive power inherent in the tiny jack-seed. Let us call this the ‘inner self’. As in the case of this inner-self of the tree, the various special skills we display in life, should be reckoned as the miracles of our inherent power.

Through this booklet entitled ‘PIN RUKKA MAHIMA’ (A MAJESTIC TREE OF MERIT) written by a competent writer, we saw the internal grandeur of the character traits of a noble son of the Buddha, the foreign bhikkhu, Kovida. We are pleased to note the marvellous qualities he possessed. Seeing them, we

are comforted. Noble sons of the Buddha, since ancient times, have proceeded along this path to inward peace unwearied, with determined enthusiasm. Bhikkhu Kovida too followed this same path, calling forth mighty internal energy, enthused by sayings such as, ‘energetic in endeavour, resolutely persevering, ever steadfast in exertion’ (āradhaviṛiyo pahitatto niccaṃ dalhparakkamo’). Kovida lived for the Dhamma, and died for the Dhamma. May the virtues cultivated in the life of Kovida, reach their consummation in Nibbāna!

May the life story of Kovida be an energising factor in the lives of our younger generation of monks lined up for the journey towards inward peace!

‘Formations are not eternal’.

**Kaḍavadduve Jinavaṃsa Mahāthera**

2532 (B. E)

11.12.1987

Gunawardhana Yogāsrama Centre,

Galdūwa.

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## **Abbreviations**

- A - Anguttara Nikāya  
Dhp. - Dhammapada  
M. - Majjhima Nikāya  
Sn. - Sutta Nipāta  
P. T. S. - Pali Text Society

## A MAJESTIC TREE OF MERIT

### BIOGRAPHY OF THE AMERICAN BHIKKHU VENERABLE KOVIDA

‘Sārañca sārato ñatvā  
asārañca asārato  
te sāraṃ adhigacchanti  
sammā saṃkappagocarā’  
- Dhp. v. 12

‘Those who know the pithy to be of pith  
And the pithless as devoid of pith  
Nursing right thoughts to go therewith  
They in good time arrive at the pith’

#### **The Plant of Merit**

The first foreign pupil of Venerable Mātara Srī Ñāṇārāma Mahāthera, chief meditation master at the Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya and of Venerable Pundit Kaḍavadduve Srī Jinavaṃsa Mahāthera, Founder of the Srī Kalyāni Yogāsrāma Saṃsthā, the American Bhikkhu Venerable Kovida passed away in the early morning of 21st October, 1987, at the government hospital at Hettipola in Laggala, Sri Lanka.

He was in his 29th year when death came upon him and he had been a monk for a short period of only 8 years. Nevertheless, this ‘plant-of-merit’ which knew the pithy to be of pith, took firm root in the dispensation of the Buddha and growing in that pith, became a luxuriant and stately tree. Spreading out its branches, it bore flowers and fruits to render fragrant the field of the Sāsana.

### **The Promising Buds**

This “plant-of-merit” already possessed a great store of saṃsāric maturity when it had its spring on 11th May 1958 as the only son and child of Mr. and Mrs. Philip Fant of Louisiana in America. The child who was christened ‘Craig’ at birth, showed certain uncommon traits, skills and tendencies during its formative years. Among his peer groups in school, he displayed various leadership qualities. By the age of 18 - 19 he was successful in obtaining employment in a hotel in Texas as a chef (chief cook), carrying a handsome salary. This was a responsible position, not usually held by a youth of his age. In this post, young Craig did not desist from insisting on strict discipline among the workers under his management, This naturally resulted in much opposition so much so that the Police gave him a bodyguard.

By this time, Buddhism had begun to mould Craig’s thoughts and aspirations. Even during his school days, Craig had the habit of putting away his books on returning home, to spend his time in the solitude of a forest glade. He had some incipient experiences in

mental concentration too. These, in fact, were the leaf buds promising a growing plant. Figures of Buddhist monks telecast during the Vietnam war had made a great impression on Craig's mind. His outlook on life underwent a significant change. He even had a distinct vision of his future vocation though he hardly knew anything about Buddhism by then. This innate yearning led to a seeking, so that by the age of 15 he had embraced Buddhism. To attune his mind to the moral precept of not-harming, he became a vegetarian. This also served as an incentive for him to control his craving for tasty food despite his exposure to it as a 'chef' at a hotel. As he read a book or watched television he had flashes of the empty and insubstantial nature of existence. Disillusionment about the tinsel glory of life gradually dawned upon him. His perplexed gaze now turned towards the East, in the hope of finding a ray of solution to the problem of existence.

### **On to Sri Lankan Soil**

Thus, as a youth of 20, Craig arrived in Sri Lanka in 1978. He found residence in a house in Negombo, and there spent the most part of the day in meditation. Some local Buddhists who were patrons of the Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya admired the ascetic ways of this young foreigner and took him to Venerable Mātara Srī Nāṇārāma Mahāthera the chief meditation master. Craig, who was thus introduced to his future guide in the spiritual journey, before long, undertook to observe the ten precepts of a lay disciple under him. His meditation hut was located on a hillock in a forest glade of the

meditation centre. There he started up his efforts right in earnest, preparing himself for the life of a Buddhist monk. However, it was not so easy for him to fulfil his great desire to 'go - forth' in the Sāsana. This was due to the opposition from his parents. They would not approve of their son, their only child, leading a rigorous ascetic life in a foreign country professing an alien religion. To add to all this, his health began to fail due to unaccustomed food in an unfamiliar clime. As a result, he decided to return to his home country, but with a firm determination to come back to Sri Lanka to spend the rest of his life as a Buddhist monk.

### **In Blossom - Ordination**

Forced by circumstances, Craig soon found himself at home. But he could not make himself at home as the environment did not provide the nourishment his mind longed for. However, for the nonce, he set up in his own humble way, a Buddhist shrineroom in his home. Once his health improved, he returned to Sri Lanka, yearning 'to go forth' in the Sāsana with the least possible delay. At this time, Venerable Ñāṇārāma Mahāthera was residing at the Siri Maṅgala Yogāsrama at Danaukanda in Weliveriya. As such, Craig's ordination ceremony was planned to be held there. The task of giving a suitable name to this young novice was entrusted to Venerable Pundit Jinavaṁsa Mahāthera, who had a special skill in suggesting apt names for his pupils. The name suggested by him on this occasion, was 'Kovida'. 'Kovida' means an adept, one who is skilled, or is capable. The name, then, had a challenge for this young foreigner. It urged

him to try and sharpen his capabilities and his potential merit on the whet-stone of the Sāsana. So he took up, in the proper spirit, both the name and the challenge, and ‘went forth’ (pabbajjā - ‘adventure’) in the Sāsana on Saturday, 25th August, 1979.

After a short stay at Danaukanda, Sāmaṇera Kovida went back to Nissarana Vanaya and spent his time there engaged in meditation and study of the Dhamma and the Vinaya. Gradually, there matured in him, a deep faith in the Buddha’s teaching and a keen desire to practise the code of Discipline enjoined for the monks. At this time, the ceremony of Higher Ordination (upasampadā) was gone through mostly as an essential religious custom or as a mere act of obedience to one’s teacher. However, Venerable Kovida’s ‘upasampadā’ was not the outcome of such a perfunctory attitude. He naively expressed his fitness to receive ‘upasampadā’ when he confessed: “I have read the Vinaya Pitaka. I have a keen interest to submit to that training” The Venerable Ñāṇārāma Mahāthera not only endorsed his desire but also, with much enthusiasm, made all arrangements for the ceremony. At this time Srī Kalyāni Yogasrama Saṁsthā used to hold an ‘upasampadā’ ceremony only once in two years. That too was normally held within a Boundary (sīmā) located on water, not on land. Nevertheless, it was decided to hold a special Higher Ordination ceremony for Sāmaṇera Kovida at the Boundary belonging to the Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya. Thus on Wednesday, 26th November 1980, Venerable Kovida received his Higher Ordination. Venerable Mātara Srī Ñāṇārāma Mahāthera and

Venerable Kaḍavadduve Jinavaṃsa Mahāthera functioned as his preceptor and teacher, respectively. Delivering his oration at this function, Venerable Jinavaṃsa Mahāthera touched upon the uniqueness of this ceremony when he declared that it was the first and the last occasion that he would be sanctioning such a departure from normal practice.

### **Flowers of Morality**

In order to fortify his upasampadā sīla (moral precepts) and to attune his body to the rigours of a meditative life, Venerable Kovida adopted a number of austere practices. He always tried to keep only a limited number of requisites for his use in his meditation hut. He used to reject as unnecessary even an item that he had earlier reckoned as necessary, whenever he decided to bring into his ‘kuti’ (hut) something more necessary. One who leads a meditative life alone in the forest, has, at times, to sleep even on a hard rock, or under a tree. In order to prepare himself for such situations, Venerable Kovida even rejected the use of a pillow. He gradually got used to sustaining himself on alms-food received by begging from house to house and to be content with one meal a day. Venerable Kovida drew inspiration from the exemplary character traits of the arahant Mahā Kassapa Thera and from the austere lives of the meditative monks of ancient Sri Lanka, as portrayed in the Visuddhimagga (‘Path of Purification’). He was attracted by the frugal practices of noble recluses outlined in Ariyavaṃsa Sutta (A. 11.27.P.T.S.) as well as by the ideal of the ‘lone

dweller' upheld by such discourses as Muni Sutta and Nālaka Sutta (Sn.).

Venerable Kovida who was looking forward to a life of meditative seclusion, did not, however, neglect his duties towards his preceptor and fellow monks. On one occasion, when the Venerable Ñāṇārāma Mahāthera was warded at the Colombo General Hospital, he attended on him with such dedication that even the doctors admired it. He acquitted himself well of his share of the duties towards the preceptor, with such services as massaging his feet. He even got down for him rare and expensive medicines from his own country.

In addition to this attendance on the Venerable Ñāṇārāma Mahāthera, Venerable Kovida rendered another memorable service for the preservation of the Sāsana by taking steps to see that the heritage of Dhamma sermons given by the Venerable Mahāthera to his pupils, is duly handed down to posterity. He got down from his parents in America the necessary equipment to prepare a systematic tape library of more than 50 such sermons. He also devised a far sighted set of regulations for its preservation. He was instrumental in improving the English section of the Nissarana Vanaya Library for the benefit of foreign monks. He not only donated a good number of his own private books to the Library, but also encouraged his relatives to do likewise. There were occasions when he volunteered to help his fellow monks out of some difficult situation facing them and successfully negotiated solutions to crucial problems. He owed this special skill to the managerial and

administrative training he had early in his life. Besides, he had an inborn ability to take impartial decisions unswayed by emotions.

As regards the general steps he had taken for the benefit of the Saṅgha at the Nissarana Vanaya, special mention may be made of the initiative he took in reorganising the administration of the general stores. At a juncture when its administration was threatened with disruption, Venerable Kovida courageously came forward to remedy this state of affairs. Securing the necessary formal sanction according to the Vinaya, he reorganised the whole system of administration of the general stores, solely for the benefit of the Saṅgha. That his frugal living pattern remained unchanged through all these activities, may be cited as an index to his strength of character.

## **Fruits of Wisdom**

Venerable Kovida recognised the fact that the service rendered in respect of the Dhamma to his fellow monks was superior to any material service. He therefore endeavoured to gather the necessary spiritual strength. He tolerated those who were satisfied with learning alone, with as much patience as an express bus would have for a sluggish bullock-cart obstructing the roadway. It was as an eye opener to such 'slow coaches' that he once remarked: 'I didn't come half the way round the world to read books.' He was thoroughly convinced that the preservation of the Sāsana did not rest on mere buildings. Referring to those who displayed an

excessive interest in setting up buildings, in one of his letters, he winded up a paragraph with the words: ‘Most people in the world delight in building; very few delight in un-building.’ When one understands the word ‘building’ as an allusion to ‘saṅkhāras’ (formations) which make up this Saṃsāra and ‘unbuilding’ as a term for Nibbāna (the ‘Un - made’) this statement would reveal an extra- ordinary depth of meaning.

Venerable Kovida always tried to be mindful and fully aware in all his activities. Whenever his achievements in this direction fell short of the required standard, he used to admit, smilingly, that he is still ‘akovida’ (unskilled). His simple daily routine and his mindful demeanour were an object lesson to his fellow monks. The example he set was so striking as to elicit the remark: ‘The very sight of Kovida is an inspiration.’

The strength of Venerable Kovida’s spirit of renunciation and his firm faith in the Triple Gem, were well exemplified in an incident that occurred in 1982. Unable to bear up the separation from their only child, the Fants arrived in Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya determined to take him back into the family circle. The Mangala Sutta had been a very favourite text of Venerable Kovida. He had, therefore, no hesitation in making the best use of the opportunity that came his way to attend on his parents - ‘mātāpitū upatṭhāna’. He attended on his parents with much devotion. He accompanied them in visiting various places of interest in the island. But he was resolutely firm in not agreeing to their repeated entreaties to return home. His parents

even made representations, with tearful eyes, to the Venerable Ñāṇārāma Mahāthera in the hope of softening Venerable Kovida's attitude. All their efforts, however, were of no avail as Venerable Kovida remained unmoved through the ordeal. Out of the thirty eight blessings mentioned in the Mangala Sutta, it was the thirty-eighth and last that Venerable Kovida had as his aim.

‘Phuṭṭhassa lokadhammehi  
cittaṃ yassa na kampati  
asokaṃ virajaṃ khemaṃ  
etaṃ maṅgala muttamaṃ’

Sn: v 268

Whose mind remains unshaken  
Amidst worldly vicissitudes  
The sorrowless, stainless, state secure  
That state is the blessing supreme.

## **The Developing Core**

Venerable Kovida decided to lead a completely detached life, aloof from the company of both laymen and monks, unattached to a particular place or dwelling. It was in 1984 that he seriously took to this way of life, keeping himself on the move and sojourning in places which afforded meditative seclusion. During this period, he had one such sojourn at the forest hermitage at Rajavaṅgala in Opāta in the Galle District. It gradually dawned on him that if he is to realise his goal of Nibbāna,

he should take to the forest as a lone-dweller and strive on regardless of his body or his very life. He went into the Simharāja forest and lived there, alone in an open rock cave, devoting himself to meditation. Here he had to walk two miles through the jungle to reach a village for alms-food. He spent some months enjoying the bliss of solitude in the depth of the Simharāja (‘Lion King’) forest which for him had an echo of the life of sages of yore.

‘Ekaṁ carantaṁ muniṁ appamattaṁ  
nindā pasamsāsu avedhamānaṁ  
sīhaṁ va saddesu asanta santaṁ  
vātaṁ va jālamhi asajjamānaṁ  
padumaṁ ca toyena alimpamānaṁ  
netāramaññesamanaññaneyyaṁ  
taṁ vāpi dhīra muniṁ vedayanti’

- Muni. S. Sn: v. 213

‘The diligent sage who wanders alone  
Unstaggered by blame and praise  
Unstricken with terror by sounds - like the lion  
Untrammelled by the worldly net - like the wind  
Unsullied by the worldly splash - like the lotus  
Showing the way to the rest - by them unled  
It is him that the wise make known - as a sage’.

## **Fragrance of Virtue**

Enriched with the experiences he gathered from his fearless solitary life in the Simharāja forest, Venerable Kovida returned to Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya. But before long, his love for solitude reasserted itself. This time his choice was the Laggala area in the Matala district. He started off to his destination in November 1985, and resided at first at the Kivulavāḍiya Meditation Retreat in Hettipola. In the meantime, a group of devotees of the village of Moragahulpota had constructed a small wattle and daub hut, thatched with ‘iluk’ grass at a quiet spot in the forest to suit Venerable Kovida’s simple needs. The bed was made of arecanut strips. So was the small table, and there was no proper door either. He went to live in this hut with contentment and the villagers in the area were surprised at his frugal ways. Wild elephants constantly roamed in the vicinity, bears haunted the place, and deadly poisonous snakes moved freely inside the hut. They all helped him to cultivate mindfulness of death, enlivening his thoughts of Nibbāna. Their presence in the neighbourhood also served to convince him of the value of loving kindness in the life of a hermit living in the midst of wild beasts in the forest.

Although the villagers of Moragahulpota were poor economically, they were rich in their faith in the Triple Gem. They were resourceful enough to sow the seeds of merit for a rich harvest on this ‘worthy field’ that came their way. The neighbouring villages too followed their example. Some devotees used to walk 10 to 12 miles to

get an opportunity to offer alms to the ‘sudu hāmuduruwo’ (‘White monk’). Venerable Kovida too had much compassion for these unsophisticated villagers who led similar ‘frugal’ lives - forced, though, by circumstances. He easily understood their aspirations and always remembered how they toiled in sun, wind and rain to offer him his alms food. He was contented and as such, was easily supportable for his devotees. Even the serene and mindful begging-round of this ‘sudu hāmuduruwo’ was a silent but eloquent sermon that went deep into their hearts.

‘Yathāpi bhamaro pupphaṃ  
vaṇṇagandhaṃ aheṭṭhayaṃ  
paleti rasamādāya  
evaṃ gāme munī care’

- Dhp. v. 49

‘Even as a bee that gathers pollen, without harming the flower, its colour, or its fragrance, so should the sage wander (for alms) in the village.’

The bhikkhus resident at the Srī Sumathipāla Meditation Center at Unagolla, Hettipola, who admired the exemplary life led by Venerable Kovida, came forward to render every attention to him whenever he fell sick. But due to his determined and energetic disposition, he was often disinclined to take any treatment until the sickness became aggravated. Sometimes the devotees were kept totally unaware of his sickness, till it forced him to keep away from his begging

rounds. Malarial fever and a lung ailment greatly impeded his spiritual efforts.

Venerable Kovida found it necessary, for health reasons, to avoid the rainy season in the Laggala area. Despite his failing health, he was determined to continue his lone-life as far as possible. He therefore spent this time in a 'Kuti' built on the top of a hill in a rubber estate in the Bulathsinhala area. The problem that faced the pious owner of this rubber estate Mr. Dudley Fernando, was not the question of attending on this monk, but the difficulty of getting him to agree to accept his services.

Bent on more seclusion than before, Venerable Kovida went to live in a 'Kuti' at Īriyagasulpota in the early part of 1987. Devotees of a cluster of villages around Īriyagasulpota thereby got the opportunity to gather merit. By this time a 'fragrance that is wafted even against the wind', had emanated from him to spread in and around Laggala. While touring on foot, he used to put up at various meditation centers and temples where the perceptive monks were attracted to him by his austere ways and ardour. Some of them were so much inspired by the example and the friendly advice of this 'Kalyāṇa-mitta' (salutary-friend), that they renounced even their influential positions and went in search of solitude to strive for the Highest.

villages around Īriyagasulpota thereby got the opportunity to gather merit. By this time a 'fragrance

that is wafted even against the wind', had emanated from him to spread in and around Laggala. While touring on foot, he used to put up at various meditation centers and temples where the perceptive monks were attracted to him by his austere ways and ardour. Some of them were so much inspired by the example and the friendly advice of this 'Kalyāṇa-mitta' (salutary-friend), that they renounced even their influential positions and went in search of solitude to strive for the Highest.

‘Sīladassana sampannaṃ  
dhammatṭham saccavedinaṃ  
attano kamma kubbānaṃ,  
taṃ jano kurute piyaṃ’

- Dhṛ. v. 217

‘He who possesses virtue and vision, who is established in the Dhamma, who knows the Truth, who does his own work, (i. e. training in morality, concentration and wisdom) - him do people hold dear’.

### **Three Signs on a Trunk**

It was the practice of Venerable Kovida to visit the Nissarana Vanaya once a year on an assigned day to get his visa extended and to pay his respects to his preceptor. Foreign Monks at the Nissarana Vanaya would eagerly look forward to his arrival as it gave them an opportunity to discuss their meditation problems with him. Because of his love for solitude, he did not encourage the lay-devotees associated with the Nissarana Vanaya or his bhikkhu friends there, to meet him at other times. When,

therefore, the news got round that Venerable Kovida would be visiting Nissarana Vanaya on December 1st 1987, both these groups were keenly expecting his arrival. However, the unexpected happened.

At the end of the Rains-retreat, as he was making arrangements to set out on tour, Venerable Kovida fell seriously ill with fever. Handy medicines failed to answer and his fever rose to 105 F. It was only then that he called on a devotee to get him some medicine from the hospital. However, as his condition took a turn for the worse, he had to enter the government hospital at Hettipola on 20th October. At the time, Venerable Jinānanda of the Hettipola Meditation Centre was also warded at this hospital. In spite of his own illness, he devotedly attended on the 'sudu-hamuduruwo' for whom he always had much respect. That evening, the doctor had advised Venerable Kovida who had been starving for three days, to take food if he felt hungry. But he was determined not to break the precept of abstaining from eating after mid-day. Although extremely weak, he sat up, leaning against the bedstead and spent the night in meditation. The following morning, after daybreak, he intimated to Venerable Jinānanda that he would like to have some food. Venerable Jinānanda immediately despatched a person to the temple to bring food. Sensing some delay, he tried to offer in the meantime, a cup of tea to Venerable Kōvida who however, gently refused it. Venerable Jinānanda understood by that gesture signs of getting ready for a final departure. So he hastened to give him a little glucose, after which Venerable Kovida opened his eyes to have a last look. Recognising the

three signs, ‘impermanence’ ‘suffering’ and ‘not-self’ he composed his body and took a deep breath which, he knew, would be his last.

‘....Evaṃ bhāvitāya, kho Rāhula ānāpanasatiyā evaṃ bahulīkatāya ye pi te carimakā assāsapassāsā tepi’ veditāva nirujjhanti, no aviditā’

- Mahā Rāhulovāda S. M. I. 425 - 6  
(P. T. S)

‘When, Rāhula, mindfulness of breathing is thus developed, thus practiced much, the final in-breaths and out-breaths too, are known as they cease, not unknown’.

## **Memorials**

Thus the heroic bhikkhu, Venerable Kovida, sick in body, but not sick in mind, passed away even before reaching the thirtieth milestone in his life’s journey. As it turned out at the post- mortem, the immediate cause of his death was the lung ailment which had persisted for many years. Since permission was not granted to cremate his body, arrangements were made for its burial at the Hettipola Meditation Centre by Venerable Upāli Piyananda and the bhikkhus there. For three days, the devotees of Laggala area came to see the ‘sudu hāmuduruwo’ who inculcated in their minds, the true spirit of the Dhamma. And on the 25th of October, 1987, in the presence of a large crowd of monks and laymen, including two foreign monks and the Consul of the American Embassy, the funeral rites were performed

over the remains of Venerable Kovida at the premises of the Hettipola Meditation Centre.

The following day, two bhikkhus went to see the ‘kuti’ at Īriyagasulpota which was Venerable Kovida’s last abode. In a quiet and peaceful forest glade stood the quieter hut made up of three wattle-and-daub walls and two wicker-blinds. The warmth of ascetic fervour was still there to receive the visitors. And there was the simple bed too which, though short, once accommodated diagonally, a six-foot ascetic frame. A table- cum-chair appeared alongside, with its own story of simplicity and contentment. But above all this, hung on a wall, was a motto which was more eloquent in greeting the visitors:

‘Khaṇo ve mā upaccagā  
Khanātītā hi socanti’

‘Let not the opportune moment slip-by! For those who let the moment slip-by, are sure to lament!’

This, then, is a fitting epitaph to a memorial penned by a fellow bhikkhu at the Nissarana Vanaya as a tribute to the American Bhikkhu Kovida who lived and died for the cause of the Dhamma. In a wealthy country where people live in luxurious sky scrapers and pride themselves on satellites launched into outer space, he was born as the only darling child to his parents. Yet he left them, weeping and wailing, discarding all wealth and comfort, like a lump of spit spat out in the morning. In the prime of radiant youth he went forth from home to

homelessness and donned the saffron robe, shaven headed, in a hermitage in a far off isle. With the Triple Gem as his only wealth, he took to the forest life, which promised that solitude which always has a charm for the sages. Wild beasts around, mellowed his mind with ‘mettā’. The flavour of the Dhamma, augmented his frugal meals. The sylvan solitude strengthened his inward peace. Day and night he strove unwearied to see an end to the Samsāric suffering which knows no beginning. Regardless of his very life, he toiled in the Sāsana-field to raise fragrant flowers of virtue and rich fruits of calm and insight. Mindful and fully aware, he breathed his last, accepting the truths of impermanence, suffering and not-self.

May his exemplary life be a beacon light to a shipwrecked world!

## ADORATION TO A TEACHER

(A few years after ordination, Venerable Kovida drew a ‘profile’ of Venerable Nāṇārāma Mahāthera in a few paragraphs as his contribution to a Felicitation Volume. Although this literary project did not materialize, a Sinhala translation of the ‘profile’ has been preserved, the original having been lost. What follows is a re-translation which, perhaps, is the only profile we can present of **Venerable Kovida himself, as a writer**).

I met the Venerable Loku Hamuduruwo for the first time towards the end of 1978 while searching for a meditation- master and a place to meditate in. I was fortunate to find both at the same time.

If I were to say something about my first impression of him, it was enough for me to return to the West for a short while, close down the household and come back to receive ‘pabbajjā’ under him. Since then, it has been my great privilege to live under his guidance trying to imbibe as big a portion as I can, of his knowledge.

Apart from his distinctive qualities as a meditation-master, if I may mention here in particular one of his qualities I like most, it is his relaxed and composed attitude. He is able to remain calm and composed even in a very difficult situation. But this never meant any indifference or a hard-hearted disregard on his part. Coming into his presence is like entering a field of ‘mettā’ and ‘karuṇā’. Whoever enters it, is sure to come out of it more enriched in mind.

At a time when the attitude towards mental culture is extremely lethargic, it has been a source of great encouragement to me, to get to know one of the handful of living examples which prove that the human mind still has in it the capacity to reach such heights as mentioned in books written in the distant past.

**- American Kovidā Bhikkhu**  
Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya

## By the Same Author

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\* Buddhist Publication Society, P.O. Box, 61, Kandy  
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**Pothgulgala Dharmagrantha  
Dharmasravana Mādhyā Bhāraya**

This is to inform our readers that all Dhamma books so far written and yet to be written by Venerable Bhikkhu Kaṭukurunde Ñāṇananda will hereafter be published by the P.D.D.M.B. (Kandy) and that the D.G.M.B. (Colombo) would not be publishing any of his books.

P.D.D.M.B.  
Kandy  
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