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1956 was a significant year for the Buddhists of Ceylon. In fact, it was a turning point in the history of the Island.

In February of that year, the Report of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry, otherwise known as the Buddhist Commission Report was published and presented to "The Maha Sangha and the Buddhists of Ceylon" at a mammoth meeting held at Ananda College.

There was a tremendous reawakening among the Buddhists as a result of the publication of this Report; and Buddhist monks in every village and hamlet in Ceylon organised themselves into committees and associations.

They actively campaigned for the late Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's party—Maha Jana Eksath Peramuna which had publicly promised to implement the recommendations of the Buddhist Commission Report. At the General Election held in April that year, Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's party had a sweeping victory. Mainly as a result of this Buddhist reawakening.

A Christian newsletter published immediately after the General Elections characterised the M.E.P. victory as a shift of the centre of power from "the urban elite to the rural masses, from the privileged to the under-privileged, from the non-Buddhists to the Buddhists.

One of the few Buddhist leaders behind this Buddhist re-awakening and the social revolution which followed was Mr. L. H. Mettananda.

Hello, Caesar

During this period, Mr. Mettananda was living at Pentrieve Gardens, Kollupitiya. One day in early May 1956, a few of us were chatting with him when his telephone rang.

Mr. Mettananda answered the telephone,

"Hello, Caesar," we could hear the words coming through the line in a deep voice.

"Yes, Sir", replied Mr. Mettananda.

We knew who was at the other end of the line. Caesar" was the late Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's nickname, for Mr. Mettananda. Mr. Bandaranaike apparently called him Caesar because of Mr. Mettananda's Julius Caesar-like profile.

The two conversed for sometime and after laying down the telephone receiver, Mr. Mettananda told us,

"You know that was the Prime Minister. He wants to know whether I would like to go to Burma as the Ambassador for Ceylon, at least for a couple of years.

If I do not like to go to Burma, he is prepared to send me in the same capacity either to Japan or China or any other Buddhist country. P.M. thinks that I should have a holiday abroad

Mettananda led new Buddhist revival

outside the Government and by being independent".

The monks went away disappointed.

Mr. Mettananda believed that a Buddhist should have three characteristics (a) Yathavadi Thathakarithavaya — that one's actions must be in accord with one's words. In other words, one must practise what one preaches.

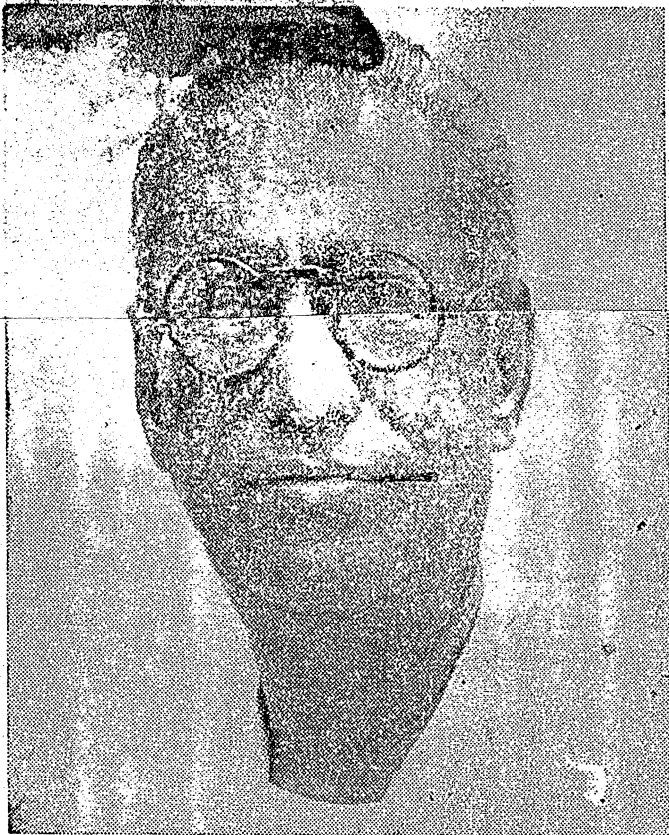
(b) Nissaranadhyasathaya — that one should take part in social and religious work for its own sake, for the good of the many without expectation of reward either here or hereafter. He believed that selflessness in the service to humanity was a concomitant of the Doctrine of Anatta e.g. the teaching that there was no abiding or eternal self in beings.

Mr. Mettananda believed that both Democracy and Buddhism encouraged individualism and that this was the strength as well as the weakness of both. Very often there was a thin line of demarcation between individualism and egoism.

While genuine individualism gave scope to the individual to think freely and act freely and thus develop his personality, egoism generally whetted the individual's appetite for power, position and wealth.

He specially viewed with suspicion and alarm, those individuals who exploited such values as race, language and religion, in order to ride to political power or to attain high positions in life.

(c) 'Sallavukavutti' — plain and simple living as advocated by the Buddha was another value which Mr. Mettananda cherished and actually practised. He held that



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the economic backwardness and the spiritual degeneration so evident in our society was mainly due to our expensive habits of living and to our aping foreign manners and customs without rhyme or reason.

He used to say that just like the Britons under the Roman conquest in the first century B.C., who used to speak Latin, live in Roman villas, eat Roman food, dress in Roman fashions, bathe in Roman baths and even wor-

ship Roman gods but had lost their soul as a result of that denationalisation, we are also a people who have lost our soul. He did not decry European culture wholesale. He was fond of quoting Mahatma Gandhi's words, "Let the windows of India be fully opened. Let the winds come in from all four corners of the earth, but let those not sweep us off our feet."

In other words, we must maintain all that is good.

noble and true in our national culture while accepting the good, noble and true features in other cultures.

No fanatic

Mr. Mettananda was no communalist or religious fanatic. He was one of the first national leaders to advocate the teaching of Tamil to Sinhalese students and the teaching of Sinhalese to Tamil students. But he strongly held the view that the official language should be the language of the Majority and campaigned effectively to achieve that end. Among his close friends were Tamil leaders like the late Sir Kanthiah Vaithianathan.

Mr. Mettananda strongly

believed that the Sinhala Buddhists were being discriminated against by certain racial and religious minorities in Ceylon and that the discrimination was not due to any perverseness on the part of these minorities but as a result of the hang-over from Colonial rule. "The tragedy" he used to say, "is that those who are privileged do not realise that they are privileged and when a minority becomes a privileged lot they cling to their privileges because they equate privileges with survival values.

Mr. Mettananda stood for a democratic society, an integrated society, an egalitarian society, a classless society and a society in which there was unity in diversity. He genuinely believed that a classless society can be achieved by a parliamentary democracy. Hence his aversion to any type of authoritarianism or totalitarianism.

As an educationist, he believed that education should be the greatest leveller. Unfortunately, during colonial times, education had become a divisive force rather than a uniting force. It had tended to widen the gulf between the rich and the poor, between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, and between the Christians and the Bud-

dhist. He therefore advocated and actually campaigned for the taking over of the denominational schools which had become bastions of privilege and vested interests.

Institution

Mr. Mettananda was not merely an individual but an institution. Whatever people may say, there is now a greater consciousness among the Buddhists about their rights and also of the wrongs done to them in the past. They now react more quickly to discriminations of any sort and they are conscious of the pressure groups that are working behind the scenes to aggrandise their own groups and keep the Buddhists down. Their awareness was brought about by none other than Mr. Mettananda. He used to say that Bauddha Balavegaya was not just a group of individuals, but the consciousness of the need for unity and solidarity among the Buddhists—of the consciousness that they as Buddhists should have their rightful place in the democratic set-up, and also the awareness that they also have a duty to preserve and hand over to posterity what is good true and beautiful in their time honoured cultural traditions.

Mr. Mettananda is no more. But the consciousness or the Balavegaya he created in the minds of the Buddhists will live till the Buddha Sasana lasts.

"Rupan Jeevitha Machchanan."

Nama goththam najirathi". "The form dies but the spirit liveth for ever more".