

नमो तस्स भगवतो अरहतो सम्मासम्बुद्धस्स ।

आणन्द भूमि

(नेपालको पहिलो बौद्ध मासिक पत्रिका)

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(English language)

Tribute to a Japanese Martyr of Peace

– Suwarn Vajracharya
International Herald Tribune, Tokyo, Japan

It was an unprecedented peace march and a gathering of Buddhists of Nepal held recently in Kathmandu in respect of a Japanese Buddhist monk Yunataka Nawatame who died in Lumbini last month. The peace march and the rally held afterwards in Kathmandu were organised by a Joint Committee of 115 Buddhist organisations of Nepal to show support of sympathy to the bereaved family of the late monk and to pray his attainment of blissful Nirvana. The Peace march and the rally also demanded the government of Nepal for a proper investigation on his death.

The rally of Buddhists held demonstrated the unity of Nepali Buddhists for a common cause of calling the government of Nepal for justice and providing enough security in and around Lumbini, the holiest site not only for Nepali Buddhists but also for Worldwide Buddhists as it is the Birthplace of Lord Buddha.

The peace march attended, at its starting point, Vasantpure at noon on 21st July, by 50,000 Buddhists including monks and nuns of all three traditions of Buddhism, the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana was later joined by a hundred thousands others at the rally held late evening at the "Khulla Manch", an open ground theater in the centre of the city. The mass rally of Buddhists of this kind held second time after Democracy returned to Nepal in 1990 should open any blind eyes to see how Buddhism is treated in Nepal. Nepali Buddhists had held their first mass rally in 1992 to protest the reproclamation of Nepal to be a Hindu country and to demand equal rights to all religions in Nepal, which the then government so called democratically installed by people's power never heeded to. But I do not think the rally held this time to protest the murder of a human life can be ignored by any authorities if they are worth their self.

The peace march and the gathering of hundreds of thousands of people, in which I attended in person was a very silent and peaceful one worth to its very word. It was also a gathering of Nepali Buddhists who paid their heartfelt respect to the monk who served

and died for the cause of peace for world's human beings through Buddhist teachings of non-violence. In addition, several other Buddhist temples and organizations throughout Nepal held a number of religious prayers for the late monk, who deserved a genuine respect.

A Pious Monk

The late Ven'ble Nawatame was supervising the construction of a biggest-to-be Peace Pagoda in the world at the time of his unexpected death. A young monk of Nippon Myohoji Buddhist temple of Japan. Nawatame came to Nepal to help build the peace pagoda in the Lumbini peace Park, which has been declared to be a sacred site by Emperor Ashoka and recently as a site of world heritage by the United Nations. A Billion dollar UN project plan is underway to develop Lumbini to an enclave of world Buddhists and to a site of international touristic interest. Under one of several projects being planned. Nippon Myohoji undertook to build a peace pagoda in the sacred park of Lumbini. The Nippon Myohoji has built several peace pagodas in many countries and has plans to complete building 108 peace Pagodas before the end of 20th century, a last will of late Fuji Guru, the head of the Nippon Myohoji temple

Nawatame went to Nepal first time some 15 years ago as a tourist and second time in 1993 as a disciple of Fuji Guru to help his master's dream comes true by building the world's largest peace pagoda in the sacred park of Lumbini, where the Buddha who preached the message of peace to the world, was born. As was his master's wish to spread Lord Buddha's message of peace, he decided to leave his family to become a monk in 1983 and to contribute as much as he can for the world peace. As a monk and a disciple of Fuji Guru, he went to India, where several peace pagodas were being built in places such as Rajgriha, Sanchi and Bombay. And his experience in these projects took him to Nepal to build the Lumbini peace pagoda.

Peace Pagoda Project

Unlike previous occasions, in which projects to build peace pagodas in Nepal had failed due to invisible evils, he proposed to build the pagoda under an agreement signed with Lumbini Development Trust, a government appointed body to supervise the development projects in Lumbini. Accordingly, an agreement on the "Peace Pagoda Project" was signed between the Nippon Myohoji and the Lumbini Development Trust to build the pagoda covering an area of 48400 sq. metres and a 156 feet high dome with an estimated cost of US \$ 1 million inside the "New Lumbini Village Cultural Zone". The agreement was

signed in an unprecedented gathering of just five individuals, two representatives from each party and a prominent Nepali monk to witness the signing. No special guests, no ceremonies nor parties that are usually thrown costing a lot of money when agreements are signed. Nawatame had said at the signing of the agreement that he could not afford to spend for parties as the money comes from collections of funds donated by Japanese elders by either selling one of their two houses or by Japanese salary men and women, who donated their bonus money for the project.

"His honesty always reflected in all of his activities and his way of life" says the Ven. Sudarshan Mahathera, a prominent Nepali monk, who used to see Nawatame on his frequent visits to Lumbini for his archaeological research work and on his pilgrimage to the sacred temple of the Buddha, "Nawatame was very pious at his young age. He came to Nepal as a devotee of the Lokeshwara", a Bodhisatva cult worshipped in Nepal and in many countries including Japan. Despite various kinds of difficulties he had faced while supervising the project, such as barriers and delays in getting construction materials in time, "Nawatame was never tired of his work" says the Mahathera, who also witnessed the signing of the peace pagoda project, but got used to all hardships and difficulties faced when you have no political connection, which is ruining Nepal's many development projects. Yet he was not discouraged. Within four years since the project started, he has already built a shrine, resident quarters for monks, kitchen and bathrooms. And the huge concrete foundation for the pagoda has already been laid out to build up the Peace Pagoda. Supervising alone a huge project that is to be built in an area of 48400 sq. metres is not that simple. But "he did it" says the Mahathera.

Unnatural Death

The late monk Nawatame spoke fluent Nepali and supervised the peace pagoda project. According to workers in the project field, the monk "worked together with us not just supervising". He led a simple life sleeping on a bed made out of just four wooden legs and slabs of plywood and ate no special food. For him, even a little food offered to Buddha statue was tasty and bellyful. Such food is usually spread out for birds in Nepal as it is not enough to full a man.

But such a simple and gentle monk died on July 3rd night. Many who admired his work and way of life lament for missing him. The unbearable grief was that his death was not natural nor an accident. But was a result of an attack by a group of six sinners, who shot him dead for failing to "loot him" according a statement made by the Nepali police, which is hardly convincing. Out of six assassins already under custody of the Nepalese police, two

Indian Muslims had led the group that included four Nepalese to attack the monk while he was sleeping outside the temple in Lumbini. But there seem to have "no proper investigation conducted on the crime", complained many Buddhist leaders and organisations at the rally held at Khulla Manch, the open ground theater in Kathmandu held after a long peace march through out the city. The Buddhist leaders at the rally evoked Blessings to the departed monk. They grieved over the untimely death. They condemned the crime and demanded the authorities to appoint an impartial committee to investigate on the cold blooded murder.

Reflections

The mass media including national and private newspapers gave enough publicity of the rally of Buddhists that protested the murder of a Buddhist monk. National radio and television, which in the past used to keep a blind eye to Buddhist events and matters related to Buddhism, also gave this time a wide coverage of the rally for the first time broadcasting several programmes that covered the work of the late monk Nawatame and religious and public gatherings held in his respect. It is also noteworthy that even several ministers and members of Nepal's national Parliament have made official statements calling for justice.

However, the authorities that handle the murder case have yet to reveal the real motive of the cruel murder and bring the assailants to justice including those suspected to have involved in conspiracy and ordering the heinous crime behind the curtain. Only an impartial action will honour the late Venerable Yunataka Nawatame who remains a martyr of peace in the hearts of Buddhists all over the world.

Any alternative should reflect upon certain pathetic situations are still prevalent in Nepal despite the return of Democracy at the cost of lives of thousands of people including Buddhists some 7 years ago. First such crimes are ignored and human lives are not valued let alone the respect of human rights in Nepal.

Second, the authorities are not concerned over the safeguarding of Buddhists interests nor their holy places except Hindu temples like Pashupatinath Shrine in Kathmandu, where a wellmanned police station stand tall to prove that only the Hindu interest are safeguarded. Third, the name of the Buddha and the fact that the Buddha was born in Nepal are used only to deceive the international community for seeking foreign aid, and finally, the democracy is nothing but just a tool to grab political power for personal interests and gains.

Never the less, I am still hopeful the pathetic situation will change. May the Venerable Yunataka Nawatame attain to the supreme bliss of Nirvana !

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