

Frank Lee Woodward erudite Pali scholar and translator

by Rohan L. Jayetilleke.



During the British rulership of Sri Lanka, there were many civil servants from England who arrived to serve in the British establishment. Some of them, besides their official duties, were keenly engrossed in the study and research on Theravada Buddhism, and wrote numerous works, which remain as benchmarks on Buddhism, even to date.

Frank Lee Woodward, born in England (1871-1952) and trained as a schoolmaster arrived in Sri Lanka and assumed duties as the Principal of Mahinda College,

Galle. Within ten years of his arrival he perfected his knowledge of Pali, so much so that stanzas of the Anguttara Nikaya were rendered by him into English. Woodward was a serious student of Buddhism and Pali and took meaningful steps to popularise Buddhism with translations of the sections of the Tipitaka. He collaborated with Mrs. Rhys Davids, (the wife of the founder of the Pali Text Society), commencing in 1915 and continued his association with the Pali Text Society.

Woodward wading through the entire Tipitaka, made critical editions of a volume in Pali text and rendered them into English. As regards his scholarship the most eloquent tribute came from Mrs. Rhys Davids who recorded as follows; "In the dark days following the completion of Part One, the translation of the Samyutta Nikaya during the World War years, and when others were blocking the way F. L. Woodward wrote from Tasmania (Australia) his home, offering services, with purity, disinterested kindness of heart. He consented to write us a draft translation of Part two. Joyous and swift in his wisdom, like Sariputta's, in a few months the typescript was done, completed even with footnotes. We cannot sufficiently thank him for his brotherly hand that has helped us to keep walking. Not many would have spent well - earned leisure hours in rendering service from across the world like that".

In 1927 Mrs Davids commenting on Woodward's translation of further parts of Samyutta Nikaya noted; "I did it both accurate and alive. Great is our debt to the labourer's gift, genial, patient, accurate, trustworthy, who has placed here within our reach, more knowledge of the world movement, concerning which many knowing very little have written much."

"Woodward's' some sayings of the Buddha", according to the Pali Canon, first published in 1925, endeared him to the Buddhists world over and naturally and genuinely gained a place of honour and wide acceptance, as a translator very faithful in rendering every word in Pali to English, with no change in the meaning to be conveyed to the reader.

This was a rare and signal achievement as there was an economic depression in the wake of the cessation of the World War I. This was a time when soup queues were lengthening in England and everybody was in the quest of food for survival after the divesting war. Six million people had lost their lives in the war and Englishmen accounted nearly half of it.

During these days of bread and butter survival there was only a handful of dedicated workers. The high quality of Woodward's work," Some Sayings of the Buddha according to the Pali Canon" was soon recognized by the Oxford University Press, London, which republished it in 1942, 1945 and 1949. All editions carried an introduction by Sir Francis Yuenghusband of Tibetan fame. Woodward's Preface just ran into four paragraphs manifesting his self-effacing character.

The rendering of the stanzas in the Anguttara Nikaya into English was of the highest order. The stanzas were included in the translation of the Anguttara Nikaya by Edmund Roland Jayetilleke Gooneratne,

who along with Louise Corneille Wijesinha, being inspired by the translations of Buddhist Scriptures into English and their language Pali, were led to take the oriental path, to give up their adherence to Christianity and to espouse Buddhism. They then put their shoulders to promote the Buddhist Theosophical Society too. Edmund Rowland Jayetilleke Gooneratne was the First Mudliyar of the Governor's Gate and was a resident at Atapattu Walauwa, Walawwate, Galle, a scholar and an Orientalist. The English rendering of the Anguttara Nikaya by Woodward was included in the Gooneratne's translation of the Anguttara Nikaya and published by the Pali Text Society in 1913.

In 1915 Woodward began the translation of the Dhammapada which was published under the title 'The Buddha's Path of Virtue'. He too was the editor of the magazine 'The Buddhist' inaugurated by the Buddhist Theosophical Society in 1890 and later taken over by the YMBA. Colombo. When Woodward came out with his work, 'Some Sayings of the Buddha according to the Pali Canon,' there were popular works in circulation by other writers such as Light of Asia by Sir Edwin Arnold, Buddhist Catechism, The Gospel of the Buddha, Buddhism in Translations.

Woodward's 'Some Sayings of the Buddha according to the Pali Canon' eclipsed, as his work was most faithful to Theravada Buddhism as recorded in the Pali Canon. The other works were ostensibly an amalgam of Theravada and Mahayana traditions.

Still another work 'Buddhism in Translations' by Henry Clarke Warren though containing authentic extracts from the Pali canon and the relevant Pali literature, it was a massive volume of over 500 pages. The work of Woodward was not large and faithfully based on the Pali Canon. Christmas Humphreys, who was a live wire in the Buddhist movement in England observed, "It has lived in the pockets of thousands of English Buddhists from that day (i.e. 1925) to this (i.e. 1973).

This magnum opus of an anthology of Frank Lee Woodward was more readable, in that it had a technique of preserving the spirit of the original Pali, in a very lucid, direct and dynamic English rendition.

Even in log sentences Woodward had his own prose style as is mirrored in the following extract from the Samyutta Nikaya translation: "Non monks, if a log does not ground on this bank or the further bank, does not sink in mid-stream, does not stick fast on a shoal, does not fall into human and non-human hand, is not caught in an eddy, does not fall inwardly, - that log monks, will float down to ocean, will slide down to ocean, will bend towards ocean. And why? Because, monks, Ganges' stream flows down to ocean, slides down to ocean, bends waves of ocean".

In revising his edition for the World classics Series Woodward, replaced the words "brother" and "sister" with "monk" and "nun" and "Thatagatha" with "Way-Farer". In this work chapters like, 'The Tongue,' The Stabilizer of societies, Charity, Happiness in the World, advice mainly to the laity, are even relevant to modern conspicuous consumption and open-market riddled modern times. The other chapters on the life of the Buddha, of the teaching of Buddha and the evolution of the Sangha manifest an effort to educate facts and the way of life the Buddha advocated.

Although at the time there were several anthologies, like Dwight Goddard's, 'A Buddhist Bible' (1938), Clarence Hamilton's 'Buddhism-a Religion of Infinite Compassion' (1952) Edward Conze's 'Buddhist Texts Through the Ages' (1954), E. A. Burtt's 'The Teaching of the Compassionate Buddha' (1952), Christmas Humphrey's, 'The Wisdom of the Buddha' (1960), all these works were an amalgam of Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese versions of Buddhism, more towards Mahayana and Woodward's works were most outstanding, as they were faithful to the Pali Canon.

As regards Pali it has a unique feature, which has not been revealed to the student as well as to the general readers. Bhikkhu Nanamoli (Englishman - Osbert Moore, graduate of Exter College, Oxford, who came to Sri Lanka in 1948 and was ordained by the founder of the Island Hermitage, Dodanduwa, German national Ven. Nyanatiloka (a violin-virtuso) in 1949 under the name Nanamoli) in his preface to his work, 'The Life of the Buddha' (published by Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, (1972) says, "Pali is a language reserved

entirely to one subject, namely, the Buddha's teaching. With that it is unlike Buddhist Sanskrit or Church Latin; a fact that lends it a peculiar clarity of its own without a counterpart in Europe. It is one of the Indo-European groups and is closely allied to Sanskrit, though of a different flavour. The style in the Suttas (Discourses) has an economic simplicity, coupled with a richness of idioms.

Woodward, as principal of Mahinda College, Galle, with his own resources had erected a building for the school. He had a plaque as regards the donor as 'Vanapala'. It was later known 'Vanapala' was translated from his name in Sinhala word for Wood.

