

Anagarika Dharmapala

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anagarika_Dharmapala

Anagārika Dharmapāla (born Don David Hewavitarne, Pali: Anagārika, [eˈnɛgɑː[ɪkɛ]; Sinhala: Anagārika, lit., Sinhala: අනගාරික ධර්මපාල; 17 September 1864 – 29 April 1933) was a Sri Lankan Buddhist revivalist and a writer.

Along with Henry Steel Olcott and Helena Blavatsky, the creators of the Theosophical Society, he was a major reformer and revivalist of Sinhala Buddhism and an important figure in its western transmission. He also inspired a mass movement of South Indian Dalits including Tamils to embrace Buddhism, half a century before B. R. Ambedkar. In his later life, he became a Buddhist monk with the name of Venerable Sri Devamitta Dharmapala.

Early life and education

Srimath Anagarika Dharmapala at the age of 29 (1893)

Anagarika Dharmapala was born on 17 September 1864 in Colombo, Ceylon to Don Carolis Hewavitharana of Hiththetiya, Matara and Mallika Dharmagunawardhana (the daughter of

Andiris Perera Dharmagunawardhana), who were among the richest merchants of Ceylon at the time. He was named Don David Hewavitarne. His younger brothers were Charles Alwis Hewavitharana and Edmund Hewavitarne. He attended Christian College, Kotte; St Benedict's College, Kotahena; S. Thomas' College, Mutwal and the Colombo Academy (Royal College).

Buddhist revival

In 1875, during a period of Buddhist revival, Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott had founded the Theosophical Society in New York City. They were both very sympathetic to what they understood of Buddhism, and in 1880 they arrived in Ceylon, declared themselves to be Buddhists, and publicly took the Refuge and Precepts from a prominent Sinhalese bhikkhu. Olcott made several subsequent trips to Ceylon, where he devoted himself to the cause of Buddhist education. He founded many Buddhist schools, some of which are still in existence. It was during this period that Hewavitharane changed his name to Anagarika Dharmapala.

'Dharmapāla' means "protector of the dharma". 'Anagārika' in Pāli means "homeless one". It is a midway status between monk and layperson. As such, he took the eight precepts (refrain from

killing, stealing, sexual activity, wrong speech, intoxicating drinks and drugs, eating after noon, entertainments and fashionable attire, and luxurious beds) for life. These eight precepts were commonly taken by Ceylonese laypeople on observance days. But for a person to take them for life was highly unusual. Dharmapala was the first anagarika – that is, a celibate, full-time worker for Buddhism – in modern times. It seems that he took a vow of celibacy at the age of eight and remained faithful to it all his life. Although he wore a yellow robe, it was not of the traditional bhikkhu pattern, and he did not shave his head. He felt that the observance of all the vinaya rules would get in the way of his work, especially as he flew around the world. Neither the title nor the office became popular, but in this role, he "was the model for lay activism in modernist Buddhism." He is considered a bodhisattva in Sri Lanka.

His trip to Bodh Gaya was inspired by an 1885 visit there by Sir Edwin Arnold, author of *The Light of Asia*, who soon started advocating for the renovation of the site and its return to Buddhist care. Arnold was directed towards this endeavour by Weligama Sri Sumangala Thera.

At the invitation of Paul Carus, he returned to the U.S. in 1896, and again in 1902–1904, where he traveled and taught widely.

Dharmapala eventually broke with Olcott and the Theosophists because of Olcott's stance on universal religion. "One of the important factors in his rejection of theosophy centred on this issue of universalism; the price of Buddhism being assimilated into a non-Buddhist model of truth was ultimately too high for him." Dharmapala stated that Theosophy was "only consolidating Krishna worship". "To say that all religions have a common foundation only shows the ignorance of the speaker; Dharma alone is supreme to the Buddhist."

Statue of Angarika Dharamapalan in Sarnath

Statue of Angarika Dharamapalan in Sarnath

At Sarnath in 1933 he was ordained as a bhikkhu, and he died at Sarnath in December of that year, aged 68.

Religious work

A letter written by Srimath Dharmapala on 23 June 1902 to a friend in Japan.

The young Dharmapala helped Colonel Olcott in his work, particularly by acting as his translator. Dharmapala also became

quite close to Madame Blavatsky, who advised him to study Pāli and to work for the good of humanity – which is what he did. It was at this time that he changed his name to Dharmapala (meaning "Guardian of the Dharma").

In 1891 Anagarika Dharmapala was on a pilgrimage to the recently restored Mahabodhi Temple, where Siddhartha Gautama – the Buddha – attained enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, India. Here he experienced a shock to find the temple in the hands of a Saivite priest, the Buddha image transformed into a Hindu icon and Buddhists barred from worship. As a result, he began an agitation movement.

The Maha Bodhi Society at Colombo was founded in 1891 but its offices were soon moved to Calcutta the following year in 1892. One of its primary aims was the restoration to Buddhist control of the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya, the chief of the four ancient Buddhist holy sites. To accomplish this, Dharmapala initiated a lawsuit against the Brahmin priests who had held control of the site for centuries. After a protracted struggle, this was successful only after Indian independence (1947) and sixteen years after Dharmapala's own death (1933), with the partial restoration of the site to the management of the Maha Bodhi

Society in 1949. It was then the temple management of Bodh Gaya was entrusted to a committee comprised in equal numbers of Hindus and Buddhists. A statue of Anagarika Dharmapala was established in College Square near Kolkata Maha Bodhi Society.

Anagarika on a 2014 stamp of India

Maha Bodhi Society centers were set up in many Indian cities, and this had the effect of raising Indian consciousness about Buddhism. Converts were made mostly among the educated, but also among some low caste Indians in the south.

Duration: 3 minutes and 25 seconds.3:25

Voice of Srimath Anagarika Dharmapala / Excerpt from a Public Speech.

Duration: 1 minute and 8 seconds.1:08

Voice of Srimath Anagarika Dharmapala / Excerpt from a Dhamma Deshana.

Due to the efforts of Dharmapala, the site of the Buddha's parinibbana (physical death) at Kushinagar has once again become a major attraction for Buddhists, as it was for many centuries previously. Mahabodhi Movement in 1890s held the Muslim rule in India responsible for the decay of Buddhism in

India. Anagarika Dharmapala did not hesitate to lay the chief blame for the decline of Buddhism in India at the door of Muslim fanaticism.

In 1893 Dharmapala was invited to attend the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago as a representative of "Southern Buddhism" – which was the term applied at that time to the Theravada. There he met Swami Vivekananda and got on very well with him. Like Swami Vivekananda, he was a great success at the Parliament and received a fair bit of media attention. By his early thirties he was already a global figure, continuing to travel and give lectures and establish viharas around the world during the next forty years. At the same time he concentrated on establishing schools and hospitals in Ceylon and building temples and viharas in India. Among the most important of the temples he built was one at Sarnath, where the Buddha first taught. On returning to India via Hawaii, he met Mary E. Foster, a descendant of King Kamehameha who had emotional problems. Dharmapala consoled her using Buddhist techniques; in return, she granted him an enormous donation of over one million rupees (over \$2.7 million in 2010 dollars, but worth much more due to low labor costs in India). In 1897 he converted Miranda

de Souza Canavarro who as "Sister Sanghamitta" came to establish a school in Ceylon.

Dharmapala's voluminous diaries have been published, and he also wrote some memoirs.

Dharmapala, science, and Protestant Buddhism

The term 'Protestant Buddhism,' coined by scholar Gananath Obeyesekere, is often applied to Dharmapala's form of Buddhism. It is Protestant in two ways. First, it is influenced by Protestant ideals such as freedom from religious institutions, freedom of conscience, and focus on individual interior experience. Second, it is in itself a protest against claims of Christian superiority, colonialism, and Christian missionary work aimed at weakening Buddhism. "Its salient characteristic is the importance it assigns to the laity." It arose among the new, literate, middle class centred in Colombo.

The term 'Buddhist modernism' is used to describe forms of Buddhism that suited the Modern World, usually influenced by modern thinking, and often adapted by Buddhists as a counter to claims of European or Christian superiority. Buddhist modernists emphasise certain aspects of traditional Buddhism, while de-emphasising others. Some of the characteristics of

Buddhist modernism are: importance of the laity as against the sangha; rationality and de-emphasis of supernatural and mythological aspects; consistency with (and anticipation of) modern science; emphasis on spontaneity, creativity, and intuition; democratic, anti-institutional character; emphasis on meditation over devotional and ceremonial actions.

Dharmapala is an excellent example of a Buddhist modernist, and perhaps the paradigmatic example of Protestant Buddhism. He was particularly concerned with presenting Buddhism as consistent with science, especially the theory of evolution.

Survey of writings

Most of Dharmapala's works are collected in *Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, Essays, and Letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala*. (Edited by Ananda Guruge. Colombo, Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs (1965)).

The World's Debt to Buddha (1893)

This paper was read to a crowded session of the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, 18 September 1893. At this early stage of his career, Dharmapala was concerned with making Buddhism palatable to his Western audience. This talk is full of references

to science, the European Enlightenment, and Christianity. While presenting Buddhism in these familiar terms, he also hints that it is superior to any philosophy of the West. In addition, he spends considerable time discussing the ideal Buddhist polity under Asoka and the Buddha's ethics for lay people.

The Constructive Optimism of Buddhism (1915)

Buddhism was often portrayed in the West, especially by Christian missionaries, as pessimistic, nihilistic, and passive. One of Dharmapala's main concerns was to counter such claims, and this concern is especially evident in this essay.

Message of the Buddha (1925)

In the later stages of his career, Dharmapala's vociferous anti-Christian tone is more evident. Dharmapala must be understood in the context of British colonisation of Ceylon and the presence of Christian missionaries there. This work is a good example of "Protestant Buddhism," as described above.

Evolution from the Standpoint of Buddhism (1926)

Darwin's theory of evolution was the cutting edge of science during Dharmapala's life. As part of his attempt to show that

Buddhism is consistent with modern science, he was especially concerned with evolution.

Contributions to Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism

Dharmapala was one of the primary contributors to the Buddhist revival of the 19th century that led to the creation of Buddhist institutions to match those of the missionaries (schools, the YMBA, etc.), and to the independence movement of the 20th century. DeVotta characterises his rhetoric as having four main points: "(i) Praise – for Buddhism and the Sinhalese culture; (ii) Blame – on the British imperialists, those who worked for them including Christians; (iii) Fear – that Buddhism in Sri Lanka was threatened with extinction; and (iv) Hope – for a rejuvenated Sinhalese Buddhist ascendancy" (78). He illustrated the first three points in a public speech:

This bright, beautiful island was made into a Paradise by the Aryan-Sinhalese before its destruction was brought about by the barbaric vandals. Its people did not know irreligion... Christianity and polytheism [i.e. Hinduism] are responsible for the vulgar practices of killing animals, stealing, licentiousness, lying and drunkenness... The ancient, historic, refined people, under the

diabolism of vicious paganism, introduced by the British administrators, are now declining slowly away.

Later life

Venerable Sri Devamitta Dharmapala

In the last years of his life, he visited Ceylon in 1931, during which he established the 'Dharmapala Trust'. That year he was ordained a Buddhist monk with the name Sri Devamitta Dharmapala. Two years later he took his higher ordination. He died on 29 April 1933 at the Mulagandhakuti Viharaya in Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Legacy

In 2014, India and Sri Lanka issued postage stamps to mark the 150th birth anniversary of Dharmapala, along with the Central Bank of Sri Lanka which issued a commemorative coin. In Colombo, a road has been named in his honour as "Anagarika Dharmapala Mawatha" (Anagarika Dharmapala Street).

The biographical film, Anagarika Dharmapala Srimathano, on life history of Dharamapala was released in 2014, where Palitha Silva played the role.

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Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933)

<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Buddhism/AnagarikaDharmapala>

Bhadrajee Hewage

Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) was a Buddhist speaker, activist, missionary, and founder of the Maha Bodhi Society. A complex and influential figure in modern Buddhism, multiple characterizations of his life are certainly possible. He cleverly crafted different images of what he stood for, and of what he wanted for each of his many constituencies – thus disorienting the many scholars who have written extensively about his career. Espousing a heterogenous rather than a homogenous identity throughout his life, Dharmapala is indeed exceedingly difficult to describe in straightforward terms. Categorized variously as a Buddhist fanatic, Sinhalese supremacist, Sri Lankan patriot, and a pioneering interlocutor between East and West, among countless other apt classifications, Dharmapala remains a figure of incomparable intrigue for those wishing to interpret developments across subcontinental Buddhist circles at the turn of the twentieth century. In terms of that which motivated him, however, a clearer picture emerges of what he believed was his purpose in life.

Indeed, Dharmapala seemingly had two interconnected objectives in life, and both goals involved considerations of what it meant to be Buddhist and how Buddhist teachings and practice were best applied to wider society. Committed to achieving Buddhahood for himself, Dharmapala nonetheless augmented his personal mission with public campaigns to improve the lives of those around him based on what he believed were clear Buddhist principles. As an anagārika ('one without a home'), he was of no fixed abode and moved between his native Ceylon and his adopted India with several global tours helping to greatly inform his wider outlook. As a dharmapāla ('protector of the dharma'), he believed it his greater duty to safeguard and promote the Buddha's teachings. Known also as Don David Hewavitarane at birth and Sri Devamitta Dhammapala at death, Dharmapala nonetheless found in Buddhism a system of values and beliefs which remained a constant during times of change, both in his own life and in the wider world around him.

This article relates the various and novel ways in which Dharmapala engaged with Buddhism and what exactly the religion represented for him. For most of his life, Dharmapala

straddled the traditional lay-clerical divide by carving out a new role for himself. In how he understood Buddhism's concepts and communicated its practices, theosophical frameworks and Western mentors proved just as important as canonical texts and clerical instruction. His evaluations of the weaknesses and limitations of other religions complemented discourses on the strengths and boundless possibilities of Buddhism itself. An avid reader and a prolific writer and speaker, Dharmapala's many tours and campaigns enabled him to maintain an incomparable influence on Buddhist developments across South Asia and beyond. Despite his contested legacy, his importance to global Buddhist discourses cannot be ignored.

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Dhammapāla

https://link.springer.com/rwe/10.1007/978-94-024-0852-2_909

Early Life

Dhammapāla was born in Kanchipuram in Pallava domain of south India. He lived in Badaratittha-vihāra (Padaratittha) in Damila country near the island of Sinhala. It was built by

Dharmaśoka at Negapatam and situated on the southeast coast of India in vicinity of Madras (Chennai). The Śāsanavamsa says that Negapatam was not far away from Sri Lanka and Dhammapāla who lived there was known as Ceylonese elder. He was trained in Mahavihāra of Sri Lanka and wrote his commentaries on basis of Sinhalese atthakathatradition. He was well read and well informed. His commentaries throw considerable light on social, religious, moral, and philosophical ideas of time....

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Anagārika Dhammapāla

<https://www.dhammausa.org/index.php>

Anagārika Dhammapāla: Pioneer of Global Buddhist Revival | On His 161st Birth Anniversary

By Bhante Nivitigala Sumitta

On September 17, 1864, a child was born in Colombo, Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka), who would fundamentally transform the landscape of global Buddhism. Don David Hewavitharane, later known as Anagārika Dhammapāla, emerged as one of history's

most influential Buddhist revivalists, becoming the first global Buddhist missionary and a pivotal figure in the transmission of Buddhism to the Western world.¹

Early Life and Transformation

Born into a wealthy merchant family, David Hewavitharane was the son of Don Carolis Hewavitharana of Hiththetiya, Matara, and Mallika Dharmagunawardhana.² Despite his family's Buddhist heritage, colonial pressures meant that David, like many Sinhalese children of his era, received a thoroughly Christian education. He attended prestigious missionary institutions including Christian College, Kotte; St. Benedict's College, Kotahena; S. Thomas' College, Mutwal; and the Colombo Academy (Royal College).³

By age nineteen, young Hewavitharane had mastered Christian theology and memorized more than half the Bible—knowledge he would later deploy to expose what he perceived as missionary hypocrisy.⁴ His transformation began dramatically in 1883 when Sri Lankan Catholics attacked a Buddhist procession. This incident prompted him to abandon his formal education and dedicate himself entirely to Buddhist study and practice.⁵

The Making of an Anagārika

The turning point in Hewavitharane’s spiritual journey came through his encounter with Colonel Henry Steel Olcott and Madame Helena Blavatsky, founders of the Theosophical Society. When they arrived in Ceylon in 1880, publicly taking refuge and precepts from a prominent Sinhalese bhikkhu, they catalyzed a Buddhist revival movement.⁶ Olcott’s subsequent efforts to establish Buddhist schools throughout Ceylon profoundly influenced the young man.

It was during this period that Hewavitharane adopted the name Anagārika Dhammapāla. The term “anagārika” (Pāli: “homeless one”) denoted his unique status between monk and layperson, while “dhammapāla” meant “protector of the Dhamma.”⁷ This nomenclature reflected his pioneering role as the first anagārika in modern times—a celibate, full-time worker for Buddhism who took the eight precepts for life, including refraining from sexual activity, eating after noon, and luxury.⁸

The Mahābodhi Mission

Dhammapāla’s most ambitious undertaking began in 1891 during a pilgrimage to Bodh Gayā, where he was appalled to discover

the site of Buddha’s enlightenment under the control of Hindu priests and in a state of decay.⁹ This experience galvanized him to establish the Maha Bodhi Society, initially in Colombo in 1891, with offices moving to Calcutta in 1892.¹⁰

The Society’s primary objective was the restoration of Buddhist control over the Mahābodhi Temple at Bodh Gayā. Dhammapāla initiated a legal campaign against the Brahmin priests who had controlled the site for centuries.¹¹ Though the full restoration would not occur until 1949—sixteen years after his death—the movement he launched represented the first organized effort to reclaim Buddhism’s sacred geography.¹²

Global Buddhist Pioneer

Dhammapāla’s international prominence was established at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago in September 1893, where he represented “Southern Buddhism” (the contemporary term for Theravāda).¹³ His address on September 18, 1893, alongside presentations by Swami Vivekananda and Zen master Soyen Shaku, catalyzed the first wave of Western interest in Buddhism.¹⁴

In his Chicago presentation, titled “The World’s Debt to Buddha,” Dhammapāla strategically presented Buddhism in terms familiar to Western audiences, drawing parallels with science, the European Enlightenment, and Christianity, while subtly arguing for Buddhism’s superiority.¹⁵ He countered common Christian missionary portrayals of Buddhism as pessimistic and passive, instead presenting it as a “synthetic religion” and “system of life and thought” that offered both ethical guidance for ordinary people and profound metaphysical insights for serious students.¹⁶

Literary and Educational Contributions

Beyond his organizational work, Dhammapāla was a prolific writer and educator. Most of his extensive writings are preserved in **Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, Essays, and Letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala**, edited by Ananda Guruge and published in 1965.¹⁷ His works span theological treatises, comparative religion studies, and practical guidance for Buddhist living.

As founder and long-time editor of **The Maha Bodhi**, the journal of the Maha Bodhi Society, Dhammapāla regularly contributed articles to popular newspapers including **The Buddhist** and

Sinhala Bauddhaya, counseling readers on leading meritorious lives.¹⁸ His English-language publications include seminal works such as “The World’s Debt to Buddha” (1893), “The Kinship between Hinduism and Buddhism” (co-authored with Henry S. Olcott, 1893), and numerous theological essays comparing Buddhism with Christianity and Western philosophy.¹⁹

Reviving Buddhism in India and Sri Lanka

Dhammapāla’s impact extended far beyond literary contributions. He pioneered the revival of Buddhism in India after nearly a millennium of virtual extinction, inspiring a mass movement among South Indian Dalits (including Tamils) to embrace Buddhism—anticipating B.R. Ambedkar’s neo-Buddhist movement by half a century.²⁰ His efforts also restored sacred sites: through his work, Kushinagar (the site of Buddha’s parinibbāna) once again became a major Buddhist pilgrimage destination.²¹

In Sri Lanka, Dhammapāla’s influence proved equally transformative. Working alongside Olcott, he helped establish over three hundred Buddhist schools, contributing to the revival of Theravāda Buddhism’s traditional stronghold.²² His advocacy

for Buddhist nationalism provided intellectual foundation for subsequent Sinhalese political movements, including the Buddhist Revolution of 1956.²³

Final Years and Ordination

Throughout his career, Dhammapāla maintained his unique anagārika status, never formally ordaining under a senior bhikkhu despite decades of monastic-style living.²⁴ This changed only in his final year: at Sarnath in 1933, he was ordained as a bhikkhu, adopting the clerical name Sri Devamitta Dhammapāla.²⁵ The name “Devamitta” (“divine friend”) reflected both his global mission and his reverence for Heiyantuduwe Devamitta, a monk who had instructed him in his youth.²⁶

Dhammapāla died at Sarnath on April 29, 1933, aged 68. His final recorded words captured his lifelong commitment: “I would like to be reborn twenty-five more times to spread Lord Buddha’s Dhamma.”²⁷

Legacy and Impact

Anagārika Dhammapāla’s influence on modern Buddhism cannot be overstated. He was the first Buddhist in modern times to preach the Dhamma across three continents: Asia, North

America, and Europe.²⁸ His innovative anagārika model provided a template for lay Buddhist practitioners worldwide, while his educational initiatives helped preserve and transmit Buddhist learning during a period of colonial suppression.

Today, Dhammapāla's birthday anniversary is celebrated annually with lectures and cultural programs in Buddhist and Pāli educational institutions across Sri Lanka and India.²⁹ In 2014, both India and Sri Lanka issued commemorative postage stamps marking his 150th birth anniversary, and Colombo's Anagārika Dhammapāla Mawatha (Anagārika Dhammapāla Street) honors his memory.³⁰

As we observe the 161st anniversary of his birth, Anagārika Dhammapāla's vision of Buddhism as a global spiritual force continues to resonate. His pioneering work laid the foundation for Buddhism's successful establishment in the West while simultaneously revitalizing the tradition in its Asian homelands. In an era of increasing global spiritual dialogue, his example of skillful adaptation—presenting ancient wisdom in contemporary terms without compromising essential teachings—remains profoundly relevant.

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