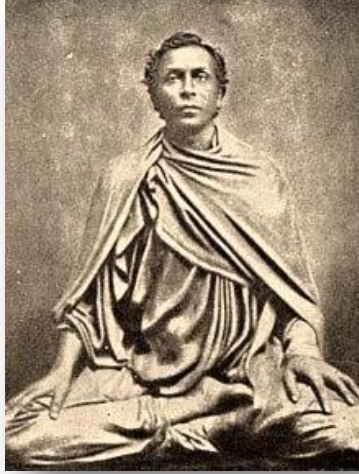


# 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary of Anagarika Dharmapala

1864-2014



Symposium

## **Anagarika Dharmapala and India-Sri Lanka Relations**

24<sup>th</sup> September 2014

**9.30 am – 1.30 pm**

Senate Hall, College House,  
University of Colombo

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### Anagarika Dharmapala: His Vision and Mission

**Keynote Address by Professor J.B.Disanayaka**

Former Sri Lankan Ambassador to Thailand

Emeritus Professor of Sinhala, University of Colombo



Organized by

**Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies (CCIS)**  
**University of Colombo**

# Anagarika Dharmapala: His Vision and Mission

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## Keynote Address by J. B. Disanayaka

A Sri Lankan who goes on pilgrimage to sacred Buddhist sites in India, particularly in the North, cannot bypass the presence of Anagarika Dharmapala, the Sinhalese Buddhist who led the Buddhist revival in the latter part of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century. As the pilgrim walks along roads that have been named after him and relaxes at the guest-rooms in the Mahabodhi societies, he cannot but thank the man who made all that possible, Anagarika Dharmapala.

Anagarika Dharmapala is considered the most outstanding ideologue of the Sinhalese Buddhist revival of the last century. It was he who provided the conceptual framework for this movement. He was a man with a vision and a mission. His vision was to regain the lost identity of the Sinhalese Buddhists and his mission was to spread the universal message of the Buddha beyond the land of His birth, India.

The Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, was born in India, which was then called 'Jambu-dvipa'. Sri Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime-minister of modern India, says in his 'Glimpses of World History' that the Buddha is "the greatest son of India". The English historian, H.G.Wells, says in his 'Outline of History' that Buddhism is "clear and simple and in the closest harmony with modern ideas. It is beyond all dispute the achievement of one of the most penetrating intelligences the world has ever seen." Albert Einstein has said that "if there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs it would be Buddhism"

Until the onset of Western colonialism in Sri Lanka at the turn of the sixteenth century, this island was a Buddhist kingdom where the majority was 'Sinhalese Buddhist'. The term 'Sinhalese Buddhist' had not come into currency because there was no need to identify them as a distinct ethno-religious entity. The Portuguese, the first colonial masters who arrived in this country in 1505, came here with "a sword in one hand and the Bible in the other".

With colonialism, the Sinhalese Buddhist identity began to lose ground. To seek employment under the colonial masters, the Sinhalese were compelled to give up the two most distinctive features of their identity: their Sinhala names and their

religion, Buddhism. This continued under the Dutch and the British, the two nations that followed the Portuguese.

In that colonial tradition, young Dharmapala was named 'Don David' by his father who was 'Don Carolis'. His younger sister was named 'Dona Engaltina' and his younger brothers were given alien names such as 'Edmond' 'Simon Alexander' and 'Charles'. Since charity begins at home, Don David began the revival by changing his own name from 'David' to 'Dharmapala': 'the one who is governed by the Dhamma, the teachings of the Buddha'

Since there were no Buddhist colleges of any standing at that time, he had no choice but to attend several Christian missionary schools, such as St.Thomas', St.Benedict's and Christian College at Kotte. The atmosphere in these schools was alien : boarding masters shooting birds that alight on the trees, and teachers throwing non-Christian books into the dustbin. Young Dharmapala was determined to change this sad state of affairs.

His mission was both ethnic and religious. Ethnically, he wanted to regain the lost identity of the Sinhalese and religiously, he wanted to spread the teachings of the Buddha. To regain the lost identity of the Sinhalese, he ridiculed those Sinhalese who had foreign names and those who wore the European dress.

Once he asked a bright boy whom he met at a meeting what his name was and the boy answered "Pedrick Silva". Snapped Dharmapala "Who is the bloody fool that gave you that silly name? Hereafter you will be called Piyadasa Sirisena!" Piyadasa Sirisena grew up to become one of the most outstanding writers of this period.

As Sarath Amunugama says, in his paper on 'Anagarika Dharmapala and Sinhala Buddhist Ideology', "Dharmapala launched a frontal attack on the concept of English superiority. He reversed the existing relationship and contrasted the past of English civilization with that of the Sinhalese. In place of the imperialist stereotype of the coloured man as a savage and heathen, Dharmapala, with a sense of mass psychology, substituted his own stereotype of the Englishman as a barbarian. In contrast, the Sinhalese were portrayed as the heirs of a magnificent civilization:"What other nation on earth is there which could boast of a history of the island, a history of the great line of kings, a history of religion, a history of sacred architectural shrines, a history of the sacred tree, a history of the sacred relics?"

To revive Buddhism, he had the support of many others: monks and laymen; Sri Lankans as well as foreigners. Among Sri Lankans were distinguished monks such as Ven.Hikkaduve Sumangala, Ven.Migettuvatte Gunanada, Ven.Heyyantuduve

Devamitta, Ven.Valane Siddhartha and Ratmalane Dharmarama – monks who were instrumental in conducting the so-called ‘Debates’, such as the Debate at Panadura, that inspired many a foreigner to come to Sri Lanka and embrace Buddhism.

Among Sinhalese laymen were scholars such as Valisinghe Harischandra and among non-Sinhalese Sri Lankans were men such as Leadbeater, (who later became the principal of the most prestigious Buddhist school). Among foreigners were men and women such as the American colonel, Henry Steele Olcott; the Russian theosophist, Madame H.P. Blavatsky and the American philanthropist Madame Mary Foster Robinson (from Honolulu).

To revive Buddhism in Sri Lanka, he established a series of Buddhist colleges for boys and girls to educate them in a Buddhist environment. Among the boys’ schools were Ananda (Colombo), Dharmaraja (Kandy), Mahinda (Galle) Maliyadeva (Kurunegala) and among girls’ schools were Visakha (Colombo) Mahamaya (Kandy) and Sanghamitta (Galle). To teach Buddhism per se, an educational institution known as a ‘Dhamma school’ was established and it was conducted on Sundays.

To coordinate work he established an organization that was named ‘the Mahabodhi’ in Colombo, which continues even to this day. To educate the Sinhalese Buddhists, he published newspapers and periodicals both in Sinhala and English: in Sinhala, the most prestigious Sinhala weekly was ‘Sinhala Bauddhaya’( Sinhalese Buddhist); in English, the most prestigious periodicals were ‘The Buddhist’ and ‘The Mahabodhi’.

To revive Buddhism in India, the land of its birth, he spent the best years of his life in India. His first visit to India was in 1884, when he was just a young man of twenty. It was Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky, the Buddhist theosophists that invited him to join them to visit Adayar in Madras where they had their Theosophical Society.

His visit to Bodhgaya, six years later, was an eye-opener. He found that the temple at Bodhgaya, where Prince Siddhartha attained Enlightenment, was under the control of the Hindus who religiously conducted Hindu rites and rituals in full vigour. His mission was to reestablish Buddhism at the place of its birth. Over many years, he had to fight a hard battle in a foreign land, and was able to gain a foothold for the Buddhists there. In this struggle, there were many Indian Buddhists who helped him. Today, Bodhgaya has become a UNESCO heritage site and the Mahabodhi there caters to the needs of the Sinhalese Buddhist pilgrims.

In Saranath, where the Buddha delivered His first sermon, he set up not only a Mahabodhi but also a new temple, named ‘Mulagandhakuti Vihara’. In old Calcutta, he built a vihara, which was named, ‘Dharmarajika Vihara’, to recall a temple built by Emperor Dharmasoka in Gandhara.

To spread the teachings of the Buddha and help pilgrims, branches of the Mahabodhi were established in many parts of India: Madras (Chennai), Calcutta (Kolkata), Bodhgaya, Saranath, Kusunagar and Lumbini (in modern Nepal).

It was Anagarika Dharmapala that took the message of the Buddha beyond India to the West and the East: His participation at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 was a landmark in the history of Buddhism in the West. His speech, made with eloquence and elegance, made such an impact on the non-Buddhist audience that Prof. Barrows who chaired the sessions is reported to have said that Dharmapala looked “like Christ in a saffron robe”!

To establish Buddhism in Britain, he went to London a couple of times. His visit in 1925, when he was 60 years old, was to open a Buddhist vihara in London. As Sinhha Ranatunga, ( Managing Trustee of the Anagarika Dharmapala Trust) says “His arrival in England, ten days after his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, was to realise his dream of opening a Buddhist vihara in London...As he sailed the Atlantic Ocean his diary entry for New Year’s Day (January 1<sup>st</sup> 1926)is as follows: ‘May the Sasana be established in England. Thirteen hundred years ago, the Roman clergy established the Catholic Church in England. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Henry VIII established the Protestant Church. Why should not England also have the Aryan Religion of the Shakya Prince?’” (‘Anagarika Dharmapala and Spread of Buddhism’, London Buddhist Vihara publication 2014). As a result of his endeavour, the London Buddhist Vihara was established in Chiswick, which celebrated its 88<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year.

Anagarika Dharmapala also inspired Buddhists in other Asian counties, such as China, Japan, Korea, Thailand and Myanmar to revive their Buddhism to keep up with modern trends. He visited all these lands where he was given a warm welcome.

For many years he was called ‘Anagarika’ meaning ‘the Homeless’, the one who has left household in pursuit of truth. In his last years, he entered monkhood and called himself ‘Devamitta Dhammapala’, after his teacher, Ven. Heyyantuduve Devamitta. He spent the last years of his life in Saranath and died on April 29<sup>th</sup> 1933 at the age of sixty nine, with the hope that he would be born at least twenty five times more to reestablish the Buddha Sasana by taking the universal the message of the Buddha to the world, for “the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world”.