

Anagarika Dharmapala

It was on April 29, 1933 that Anagarika Dharmapala died at Saranath at the age of 69 gazing at the Mulagandakuti Vihara, where he spent his last days, wishing that he be "reborn again twenty-five times to spread Lord Buddha's Dhamma".

He was born to a wealthy and influential Buddhist family on September 17, 1864 renowned for their piety and generosity. Named Don David in conformity with the fashion in vogue he was sent to St. Thomas' College, a missionary school where he pursued his studies with diligence.

His mother, Mrs. Mallika Hewavitarne exerted a salutary influence in fashioning his attitude to the Buddhist way of life; he also came under the benign influence of two of the greatest Buddhist savants of the day, Ven. Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Nayaka Thera and Ven. Migettuwatte Sri Gunananda Thera.

As a boy of 16, he met Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky in 1880 and began to take an interest in Theosophy as expounded by them. When Colonel Olcott and Mr. C.W. Leadbeater arrived in Sri Lanka in 1886 to collect funds for the Buddhist Educational Fund, Don David Hewavitarne gave up his job in Government Service and toured the island with Colonel Olcott in their campaign for Buddhist schools.

This was the beginning of the unique career of the Anagarika Dharmapala. He had by this time prepared himself for the great task which lay ahead of him by acquiring a sound knowledge of Sinhala and English and of the Pali language and Buddhist scriptures.

His tour of Sri Lanka was an eye opener. He saw the increasing degeneracy of his people and his spirit rebelled within him. He was seized with a patriotic fervour which galvanized him to launch a crusade to regenerate the race and to revive its religion. He gave up his alien name Don David and adopted instead the national and Buddhist appellation of Dharmapala meaning "Protector of the Dhamma".

Dharmapala was convinced that any movement for the emancipation of the people would have to go hand in hand with the revival of the national culture, traditionally Buddhistic. In the firm faith of his convictions he started his campaign with the object of infusing into the habits and thoughts of his countrymen his ideals of a national renaissance.

It even included a reform of dress. He deplored the use of foreign names. He exposed the shortcomings of the Sangha of his day.

He carried his message from town to town shaking his rebellious fist even in the face of the then mighty British Raj. It was indeed a very brave thing to have done in those times. Seeing the havoc brought on the country and its manhood by the encouragement by the colonial government of the production and sale of liquor, Dharmapala threw himself into the Temperance Movement, which was then engaging the attention of the national leaders.

The revival of Buddhism in his island home was but a prelude to his dedication to missionary endeavour. He created a great impression at the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. It led Mr. C.T. Strauss of New York, a life-long student of philosophy and comparative religion to become a Buddhist.

At a simple ceremony this gentleman took the Five Precepts administered to him by Dharmapala. He was the first to be admitted to the Buddhist fold on American soil.

Dharmapala was no longer thinking in terms of his own country and his people alone. Within the compass of his vision appeared India, the birthplace of his faith, Honolulu, Japan, America, Europe and the British Isles.

His work in India is undoubtedly the greatest not only because of the results achieved but also because of its significance to the future of the world. When the Anagarika visited India in 1891 for the first time, he found not a single Buddhist in such sacred places as Buddhagaya, Saranath, Kusinara and Lumbini hallowed by the feet of the Blessed One. Even the name of the Buddha was completely forgotten.

The inspiration to work for the revival of Buddhism in India came to him at Buddhagaya. He had gone there as a pilgrim, but when he saw the neglected condition of the place, his sensitive nature brought tears to his eyes. Then and there, he made a vow that he would not leave the place but work for the restoration of as holy a place as Buddhagaya where the Lord Buddha had attained Supreme Wisdom.

The first thing that he had to address his mind to was the question of the Buddhagaya Temple which was in the hands of the Saivite Mahant of Buddhagaya whose predecessors had usurped it some centuries earlier when the Buddhists had been compelled to abandon the place due to the Muslim invasion.

Friendly overtures to the Mahant having failed, he had to resort to court when some of the Monks he has stationed at the place were assaulted. This case became famous all over the world as it helped to open the eyes of the Buddhists to the holiest of holy shrines.

He established in Calcutta, the then capital of India, the headquarters of the Maha Bodhi Society from where he started the English monthly 'Maha Bodhi'. Edited by Anagarika Dharmapala it became an important vehicle for the dissemination of the Dhamma throughout the world.

The Anagarika's attention was next drawn to Saranath where the Buddha preached his first sermon. The place was stinking with refuse and dirt as it was utilized by the community for breeding pigs. He bought a plot of land and built a rest house, established a school and stationed a monk. After many years of effort in 1931, he was successful in completing the magnificent Mulagandakuti Vihara.

In July 1931 the Anagarika was ordained as a Bhikkhu with the name of Sri Devamitta Dharmapala. The Buddhists of Sri Lanka remember him with veneration and profound gratitude as an ardent nationalist, a social reformer and above all, as a Buddhist missionary who took back to India the Light of the Dhamma which the Arahat Mahinda brought to Sri Lanka over 2000 years ago.

Sir Baron Jayatillaka paying tribute to the Anagarika Dharmapala when his ashes were brought to Colombo from India said "Without doubt it was the Anagarika Dharmapala who brought about the national regeneration of Ceylon. He showed the way and others followed. Indeed it may be said that there has not been in Ceylon in the last two or three centuries a national leader who served his people and his religion with such self sacrifice, singleness of purpose and altruism as the Anagarika Dharmapala".