

London Buddhist Vihara: Impetus and Consolidation 1925-28

Both the London Buddhist Vihara and the British Mahabodhi Society, which administered it up to the end of 1985, owe their existence to the untiring efforts of one man: the Anagarika Dharmapala of Sri Lanka.

Born as David Hewavitarne in 1864, he came under the influence of Col. H.S. Olcott and Mme H.P. Blavatsky, the founders of The Theosophical Society. Later he renounced the householder's life and spent his remaining years in reviving Buddhism in India and Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was known until 1972), and making it known and appreciated in the West, particularly in Great Britain and the USA.

Due to his efforts, The Mahabodhi Society was formally established on 31 May 1891 in Calcutta with the specific purpose of restoring Bodh-Gaya (the *Buddhagaya* of history) to Buddhist hands from which it had passed seven hundred years previously. Much later, in July 1925, whilst convalescing at a Swiss nursing home, he conceived the idea of *Dhamma* assistance to Britain: "It is too bad that although Ceylon Buddhists have been friends of England, yet no attempt has been made to enlighten them (English people) regarding the *Dhamma*."

Corresponding with Christmas Humphreys, the Founder-President of The Buddhist Lodge, he arranged to pay a visit to England – the first for a Buddhist 'missionary' since Ananda Metteyya (the late C H A Bennett) in 1908. A special meeting was organized by the Lodge at 23 Bedford Square (London WC1) on 28 September 1925 at which Dharmapala heard the President outline the current position of Buddhism in Britain. Nothing, however, was settled, and after staying a week, Dharmapala sailed for the USA on 4 October to fulfill prior engagements.

In spite of his absence, however, he clearly perceived that a *Vihara* was the prime need for any permanent centre of Buddhism "where we could have our preaching hall, library and residential quarters." The following year, having canvassed sufficient support, he returned to England and, having failed to secure a suitable property in Central London, finally bought a house at 86 Madeley Road, Ealing (London W5) for £2,500. On 24 July 1926, 'Foster House' (named in honour of Dharmapala's American benefactress, Mary E. Foster) was ceremonially opened in the presence of some fifty people. On this occasion also was born the British Mahabodhi

Society, which had for its objects "the extension of the knowledge of the tenets of Buddhism, the establishment of a *Vihara* in London and the promotion of the cause of Buddhism in the West."

The Society gained the support of such leading English Buddhists as Mrs. E.E. Grant and Messrs. Francis J. Payne, B.L. Broughton, J.F. McKechnie (ex-*Bhikkhu Silacara*), A.H. Perkins, Bayard Elton and Lt-Col. E.R. Rost. Mr. Payne had been extremely active during the last days of the old Buddhist Society of Great Britain & Ireland (1907-26) and was to prove a pillar of strength in the new Society, a doughty champion of *Theravada* Buddhism no less. The Patrons of the Society were, until their deaths in 1933 and 1930 respectively, Dharmapala and Mrs. Foster, together with the Thai ambassador of the day.

During October of the same year, the final meeting of the Buddhist Society of Great Britain & Ireland was held, at which the books, magazines and records were formally transferred to the British Mahabodhi Society, thus establishing a spiritual, lineal succession. Shortly afterwards, the earlier Society was officially dissolved.

Dharmapala returned to Ceylon for a few months on 30 October for family reasons, but not before appointing his nephew, Daya Hewavitarne, to manage affairs and launching of the Society's own monthly journal, *The British Buddhist*.

Early in 1927, Dharmapala returned and a search for suitable premises, which could be converted into a *Vihara*, was begun in earnest. His youngest brother, Dr. C A Hewavitarne, headed negotiations on behalf of a special committee formed for the purpose in Ceylon. An account was opened with the National Bank of India in Colombo bearing the name, 'London Buddhist *Vihara* Fund.'

The efforts of Dharmapala even at this early stage had not gone unrecognized. At a general meeting of The Mahabodhi Society of India (Calcutta) on 19 March the following record of appreciation was recorded: "That this meeting of The Mahabodhi Society of India desires to place on record its high appreciation of the work started by the Anagarika Dharmapala for the enlightenment of the people of England and the propagation of Aryan culture, which will be the means for true union between England and India, and pledges itself to support the work by all means in its power.

"This meeting expresses its hearty thanks to all friends, sympathizers and supporters in England who have extended ungrudging assistance to the

Anagarika Dharmapala and ensured in a great way the success of his mission."

Heartening words indeed, if somewhat optimistic! As was to be shown, 'success' was always in the balance and not easily 'ensured' either.

A Mr. and Mrs. Nugent Head donated a Buddha image to the Society's shrine room in July and on the 14th a Buddhist funeral was conducted for Capt. Rolleston; lectures were held every Sunday at 4.00 pm. On the occasion of the first anniversary, it was proposed to acquire a site at Clapham Park (South London) and also to obtain rooms close by in order to carry on activities until the work of conversion had been completed. The following office-bearers were elected for the forthcoming year: Director-General – Dharmapala, President – Broughton, Hon. Secretary – de Zoysa, Hon. Treasurer – Perkins, Hon. Adviser – Payne.

In November, however, the plans were changed and negotiations commenced to purchase a Georgian mansion at 41 Gloucester Road, Regent's Park (London NW1). It was expected to cost £10,000, including the costs of conversion, but this figure had to be whittled down to half the estimate 'considering the general apathy of the subscribers'. In the event £5,000 was gifted by Mrs. Foster and the house was duly converted into a *Vihara* by the architect appointed by the Society, Ernest Bates, ARIBA. It was officially opened on 5 February 1928.

Meanwhile, in Ceylon, plans were already afoot to find suitable teachers who could take up residence. At a meeting in March of both *bhikkhus* and laity in the *Vidyodaya Pirivena*, the leading monastic college in the Island, under its principal, Ven. Kahawe Ratanasara, it was announced that Dharmapala would take three *bhikkhus* to London. At the same convention, W E Bastian, the Treasurer of the London *Vihara* Committee, enumerated the sums collected for the purpose from Ceylon and Australia together with pledges towards the cost and maintenance of the *Vihara*.

On 24 June the party from Ceylon duly arrived in England and on 8 July – on the occasion of both the second anniversary of The Buddhist Mission's foundation and *Dhammacakka* Day – a formal welcome was held to those whose presence ensured the transition from lay mission to *Vihara*.

In 1993, the Founder of the London Buddhist *Vihara*, the Anagarika Dharmapala passed away in India, aged 68 – exhausted by a lifetime's service to the *Dhamma*. A memorial service was held on May 6 at the *Vihara* with Christmas Humphreys speaking first, followed by several others. It was stated that the best memorial to the memory of the deceased

would be to carry on with greater vigour, and not allow to perish, the various activities he had set on foot during his lifetime, and to carry on unimpaired the Mission to present Buddhism to the people of England.

The *Vihara* had established greater affiliation with several other Buddhist organizations that had begun in the rest of Europe over the years. In September of 1934, Daya Hewavitarne, nephew of the Anagarika, was appointed Organising Secretary of the European Buddhist Congress, and the British Mahabodhi Society can justly claim the credit for hosting what must have been the largest gathering of Buddhists in the West to date.

The Mahabodhi Society itself opened new branches in Italy (Bologna), Netherlands (Amsterdam), Germany (Berlin), Austria (Vienna) – and even in the United States of America (New York).

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