

Anāgārika Dhammapāla: The Buddhist Revivalist and Freedom Fighter

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Abstract

"To be brave and retaliate when they are given a blow" is the prime slogan preached by *Anāgārika Dhammapāla* to the people of Ceylon to retaliate against colonial powers and achieve freedom of Dhamma. He was a pioneering revivalist and nationalist figure of Ceylon, widely regarded as one of the most influential personalities in the modern revival of Buddhism in the Asian Subcontinent. He sparked the movement to revive *Mahābodhi Mahāvihāra* at Bodhgaya, India — the major pilgrimage shrine — after centuries of decline and neglect, and was a key contributor to the spread of Buddhist teachings globally. He represented Buddhism at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and introduced Buddhism to the West. He campaigned worldwide including Europe, America, Japan, Thailand, and India for Buddhist education, ethics revival and resistance to colonial cultural erosion.

Keywords: Freedom Fighter, Buddhist Revivalist, Missionary, Visionary, Mahabodhi Mahavihara, Mahabodhi Society, Mahabodhi Journal, World's Parliament of Religions, Theosophical Society, Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee

Prologue

“To be brave and retaliate when they are given a blow” is the slogan given by *Anāgārika Dhammapāla* who was the prominent freedom fighter, Buddhist revivalist, missionary, visionary and founder of *Mahābodhi* Society, Journal *Mahābodhi* and good author and orator. He dedicated his life in reviving Buddhism in Asian Subcontinent during reign of Christians, The Brown Aliens. The Alien Christians missionaries were spread as clouds of locusts and subjugate the Buddhists all over the Asian Subcontinent particularly in Copper-Coloured *Tāmrāpani* Island, Ceylon now Sri Lanka. They forced the people of Ceylon to abandon and forgo the Buddhist monasteries, shrines, education institutes and they forced the Buddhist to convert into their own fold of Christianity. What wouldn't the people do when they are desperate; they embraced Christianity in words but at heart they remained Buddhist. But on the other hand, in the villages of Ceylon, the Buddhist performed and practiced their own dhamma and cultural activities at their homes privately. The persons in cities were terrified by aliens to follow their religion by applying different tactics. Therefore some of them adopted

Christianity to gain favour with the colonial Government but continued following Buddhist practices as well secretly.

His earlier education was influenced by Christian missionary schools however he retained a strong bonding to Buddhist teachings and practices at home. This dual exposure led to an inner conflict and a deep reflection on the role of colonialism in eroding native cultures and religion. He emerged as a Buddhist modernist, a global missionary and a zealous advocate for his country's cultural and religious revival and freedom from the Christians aliens.

His life work transcended over and above the boundaries of religion, culture, nationalism and positioning him as one of the influential Asian Sri Lankan Personalities of the world. He stands as one of the most pioneering personality in the present history of Buddhism in Indian Subcontinent. As a visionary, he foresaw the potential of resurgent Buddhist identity in Asia and the critical role he could play in resisting colonial subjugation and cultural erosion. His legacy is a testament to the power of spiritual nationalism, harmony in inter-religion and the most important is the revival of ancient traditions in the face of modern challenges.

He was pivoted as a Buddhist spiritual protester, revivalist and staunch freedom fighter during the height of colonial reign of Christians. He is known for his in-exhausted zeal to resuscitate of *Mahābodhi Mahāvihāra*, the Buddhist holiest Shrine in the world and ultimately *Mahāvihāra* was liberated from the clutches of Non-Buddhist, Gir Sect of the Saiviste Hindu in India. Gosai GhamandiGir (1590-1615CE) encroached the Shrine during reign of Mugal ruler Akbar the Great (1556-1605CE) in 1590 C.E. Since then their sect lineage controlled over the *Mahābodhi Mahāvihāra* upto 1949 when an act of Government was promulgated and management of the *Mahābodhi* directly comes in the hands of Bihar Government through District Magistrate (DM) of Gaya District as ex-officio chairman of BTMC (Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee) through B.T.Act 1949.

Childhood and Education

Anāgārika Dhammapāla was born on 17th September 1864 to Don Carolis Hewavitrne (father) and *Mallikā* (mother) as Don David Hewavitrne. David's family was wealthy peasant and staunch devotee of Buddhism, engaged in furniture manufacturing business at Colombo in Ceylon.

David was sent to a minor Christian school for study in the nearby location and at the age of six he was sent to Anglican missionary school Kotte, about six miles away from Colombo. Later he attended St. Thomas' College near Colombo.

A Catholic Christian mob attacked a Buddhist procession at Kotehena, North Colombo opposite a Catholic Church in 1883 when he was 19 years old that infuriated his father Carolis Hewavitrne and thereafter his father refused to allow his son David to attend any Christian school in future.

Adoption of Celibacy: Life as a Homeless

In 1880 Colonel Hanery Steel Olcott (1832 -1907 CE) and Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831 -1891CE) founded Theosophical Society in 1875 CE and the society gained a belief system following throughout the globe as their primary members.

On 21st May 1880 CE, the duo Col. Olcott and Mme Blavatsky arrived in Galle, South Ceylon and embraced Buddhism publicly in the familiar *Pāli* language from a Buddhist monk. This event profoundly influenced the young David deeply who was present there with his parents on this occasion. It was first in the history of Buddhism in Ceylon that the two Western Christians had openly embraced Buddhism. The conversion of Mme Blavatsky and Col. Olcott to Buddhism manifested the beginning in Buddhist history in the country.

At the age of twenty years in 1884 CE he sought his father's permission to take celibacy vows and dedicated his whole remaining life to the service of Dhamma. He joined the Theosophical Society in Ceylon along with two monks and became lifelong members of the society. The young David spent time studying with Mme Blavatsky of the Theosophical movement in India at the headquarters of the Society. Mme Blavatsky encouraged him to study *Pāli* and learn tripitaka by heart. Now David believed that the interests of Buddhist and Theosophical Society are the same as the other intellectuals of Buddhist thought.

Buddhism's prospects in the reign of Christian aliens (Portuguese, Dutch and British) during the mid nineteenth century were dark indeed in Ceylon. Successive alien incursion had swept away much of the established traditional culture of the country. Christian schools were opened in every conceivable denomination, where Buddhist boys and girls were crammed bible texts and taught to be ashamed of their own religion Buddhism, their language, their culture, their race and their colour ; even though of their everything.

David gave no clue of his mind-set in the early years as he was insensible in adopting at the age of six when he joined "Pettah Catholic School" (later St, Mary's School), and one day he was asked to kneel down and kiss the ring of the visiting Bishop Hilarion Sillani, he obediently did so, probably without fully understanding the significance of the act. Thereafter he attended a Private Sinhalese school where he remained for further two years up to the age of ten.

The Buddhist parents' born children had to be brought for registration to a church, where some Christian name would be bestowed on them, with the result that, if they were Catholic 'converts,' or an English Christian name and a Sinhalese surname, if they were Anglicans.

The maximum Buddhist Sinhalese were ashamed or terrified to declare themselves Buddhists. But the villagers did the Dhamma of their Buddha and retain some vestiges of their former generations. But they were not free from attacks of the catechists who were hired for twenty rupees a month and were ready to go about slandering and insulting the religion of their forefathers.

The Buddhists had been forced to declare themselves as Christians in the country until this law was abrogated when Col. Olcott made representations on behalf of the Buddhists.

Anāgārika Dhammapāla's First Visit to Bodhgayā

Anāgārika Dhammapāla visited Bodh Gayā, the shrine where Awaken One get Enlightenment on *Veśāka* Purina (Full Moon Day) 528BCE, on 22nd January,1891 CE and in spite of the recent restoration by Burmese, his first glimpse and impression was that the holy shrine has been neglected and allow to decay. That day afternoon at the hallowed Shrine, he experienced a sense of mission that would structure the rest of his life.

“As soon as I touched with my forehead the Diamond Throne (Varasana) all of a sudden intuition aroused to my mind to stay here and take care of this hallowed Shrine that nothing is equal to this Shrine in the world, where the Bodhisatva Gautam achieved Enlightenment under the Bo-Tree.”

Within the short span he came to know that the Hallowed Shrine was in the hands of Gir sect and angrily recorded that “a powerful eloquent voice of Buddhist is needed to show the way to the knavery of the selfish prejudiced Gir Brahman abbot known as Mahant.” With this entry he initiated a movement for Buddhist control of the hallowed Shrine. He was the first Buddhist who wages the war against unjustified control of the non-Buddhist Shaivist Gir Brahman over the Shrine that lasted with his life. In fact he by undertaking the project for recovery of the Hallowed Shrine continued with the personal project of constructing what he considered an authentic Buddhist identity.

The Revival Movement of Buddhism and Buddhist Monuments

Anāgārika Dhammapāla's efforts initiated a long campaign for Buddhist control over *Mahābodhi Mahāvihara* and to get off from the clutches of Shaivist Gir sect abbot who perform Hinduism and their rituals at the hallowed Buddhist shrine. He initiated law suits against the then Shaivist Hindu Gir Mahant Krishana Dayal Gir and mobilized support from international Buddhist Countries. The movement was partially successful in 1949 after independence of India and the death of *Anāgārika Dhammapāla* in 1933 at *Sārnāth*, when the Bihar government passed the *Bodhgayā* Temple Act.17 of 1949.(B.T. Act 1949). According to this act, the management of the hallowed shrine was transferred to the committee; the *Bodhgayā* Temple Management Committee (BTMC) with equal representation of Buddhist and Hindus headed by the Chairman who was a District Magistrate of Gaya district and he must be Hindu. In this way virtually the control over the shrine remains of Hindus. This was the historic landmark in Buddhism; revival of Buddhist participation allowed in *Mahābodhi Mahāvihar* Committee as it ended the exclusive Mahanta Gir control. The first head of the Buddhist fold was *Anāgārika* Munindra linked to the society.

He worked to revitalise important shrines in India like *Sārnāth* and *Kushinārā* , organized pilgrimages and promoted Buddhist education and ethics as rational and compatible with science.

Foundation of ‘*Mahābodhi Society*’ and ‘*Mahābodhi*’ Journal

The *Mahābodhi* Society which was initially known as “the *Bodhgayā Mahābodhi* Society” was established on May 31, 1891 in Colombo, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) by *Anāgārika Dhammapāla* for the revitalization of *Mahābodhi Mahāvihāra* situated at *Bodhgayā*, India. The Society’s first office was situated in *Bodhgayā* (Burmese Guest House) and it soon shifted to Calcutta (Kolkata) in 1892. It was cofounded by *Dhammapāla* with the support of Sir Edwin Arnold with the objectives:-

1. To resuscitate Buddhist shrines especially *Mahābodhi Mahāvihāra* at *Bodhgayā* and revival of Buddhism in India.
2. To restore control of ancient Hallowed Shrines particularly the *Mahābodhi Mahāvihāra* at *Bodhgayā* to the Buddhists. This was the most immediate and passionate goal.
3. To revive and restore Buddhist control over other Buddhist important shrines such as at *Sarnāth* (First Sermon place of the Buddha) ,*Kushinārā* (The *Mahāparinibbāna* Shrine) and other important shrines and stupas in India; Lumbini Van (Nepal) birth place of Sidhatta Gautam, the present Buddha.
4. To promote and promulgate Buddhism through spreading Buddha’s message of peace, compassion and wisdom through education, Publications of *Pāli* and Buddhist language literature and also spreading global pilgrimage.
5. Publication and translation of tripitaka into Indian languages and publishing journal “MAHABODHI” to spread Buddhism in the world.

The society established its branches worldwide including India, Ceylon and other Buddhist Countries in the world. It publishes the journal “The *Mahābodhi*” starting from 1892 that focuses on the propagation of Buddhism, restoration of stupas, viharas, many other monasteries and humanitarian work for the welfare of Buddhist and others. The movement also inspired broader Buddhist renewal in India influencing Buddhist groups especially in Bengal, Assam, Nepal, Tibet, Ladakh.

The initiative of *Anāgārika Dhammapāla* is widely regarded as a cornerstone of modern Buddhist revival, transforming *Bodhgayā* from a neglected shrine to a thriving worldwide pilgrimage centre for Buddhists.

World’s Religious Parliament at Chicago

Anāgārika Dhammapāla represented Buddhism in the religious parliament at Chicago in 1893 where his eloquent speech introduced Buddhism to the west and sparked worldwide interest. He lectured across Asia, Europe and USA at various occasions, established Buddhist viharas and monasteries, schools and hospitals.

Visit to England

Anāgārika Dhammapāla made many significant visits to England as a part of his worldly tour and his efforts to promote and propagate Buddhism, establish societies and build up counter colonial influences. In 1893 travelled en-route to the World Parliament of Religion in Chicago where he represented Buddhism. He stayed there briefly, meeting with scholars Such as Sir Edwin Arnold, Annie Besant and other Theosophists. He upgraded his voyage arrangement with the help from supporters.

In 1926 he made a dedicated tour to England during which he founded the publication “The British Buddhist” to spread teachings of Lord Buddha among the English. This reflected his vision of introducing “Arya Dhamma” (The Noble teachings of Buddha) to the West. He also opened branches of the “Mahabodhi Society” in England. These visits were parts of his broader missionary work. His aim was to present Buddhism as rational, scientific and compatible for Buddhist rights under British rule in India and Ceylon. His efforts contributed to the first *Vesāk* Purnima festival in England in 1927 and laid groundwork for Buddhism’s progress in the West.

Meeting with Mrs. Mary E. Foster at Honolulu

The prominent meeting between *Anāgārika Dhammapāla* and Mrs. Mary E. Foster took place on the board of steamer “S.S. Oceanic” on 18th October 1893 which was docked in Honolulu Harbour when he was returning home from the historic World Religious Parliament in Chicago. She was a wealthy generous donor of Hawaiian royal descent. She read newspaper reports about his powerful speech. At that time she was struggling with grief, anger and emotional challenges after her husband’s death. She sought his guidance on whether Buddhist Teachings could help her to manage temper and inner turmoil.

He taught her Buddhist vipassana (meditation) techniques and spiritual consolation which she found transformative. This initiated deep lifelong friends and collaboration and she became his most generous benefactor.

Mrs. Foster played a major role in the life of *Anāgārika Dhammapāla* in propagating and promoting Buddhism in the world. She donated several thousands of dollars by which *Anāgārika Dhammapāla* built monasteries, hospitals and schools in Ceylon, India and England. He referred to her as his “Foster Parent” after his father’s death.

Visit to United States

Anāgārika Dhammapāla’s second visit to the United States began in 1896 at the invitation of Paul Carus, a publisher and scholar of Eastern religions. He again travelled widely in the United States for a longer period during 1902-1904.

Pilgrimage and Touring –Ceylon, India, Japan

Anāgārika Dhammapāla dedicated his life to reviving Buddhism and resuscitating the Mahabodhi Mahavihara at Bodhgaya in India. He also promoted and propagated Buddhism worldwide and countering colonial and missionary influences. He extensively toured and worked in various countries in the Asian Subcontinent. While undertaking international missions to spread Buddhism and sought support for restoring Buddhist Shrines in India such as Bodhgaya, *Kushinārā* and *Sārnāth*. He extensively toured his native country Ceylon and worked to revive Buddhism through educating, anti colonial advocacy and cultural nationalism. He was educating Buddhism to the people of Ceylon throughout the country.

A major focus of his life was to resuscitate *Bodhgayā Mahābodhi Mahāvihār* and reclaimed and restored the Buddhist control over this shrine. He founded *Mahābodhi* Society for this purpose. He toured and educated the people of India from North East, Bengal, Madras and Uttar Province to revive Buddhism. He built Bodh Viharas and monasteries in India such as at *Sārnāth* and established its branches across India. He spent his last span of his life at *Sārnāth*.

He toured Japan in 1888-89 with Colonel Olcott and delivered lectures and aimed to foster unity between Buddhist various traditions and for arranging financial support to garner his demand to restore Buddhist glory.

Anagarika Dhammapāla’s view on Protestant Buddhism and Science

The term “protestant Buddhism” refers to a modernized form of Buddhism that emerged particularly in colonial Ceylon in the 19th -20th centuries. It is “Protestant” in two main senses-

1. Influences by Protestant Christian ideals such as emphasis on individual conscience, freedom from heavy institutional hierarchies that are less reliant on monastic authority, personal interior experience and rationality.
2. A Protest against Colonialism and Christian Missionary Dominance

It actively countered claims of Christian superiority and sought to revive and defend Buddhism under British rule.

Anāgārika Dhammapāla’s Protestant Buddhism emphasized:

- The role of the laity over monks
- Rationality and de-emphasis on supernatural or mythological elements
- Meditation and ethical practice over elaborate rituals
- Compatibility with modern science

This reform movement arose among the emerging literate middle class in Colombo, influenced by Western education and exposure to Enlightenment ideas while firmly resisting Christian missionary efforts to convert Buddhists.

He was deeply concerned with showing that Buddhism is fully compatible with modern science-in fact, argued it anticipated scientific discoveries. He was particularly enthusiastic about Darwin's Theory of Evolution, aligning viewing with Buddhism teachings on impermanence (Anicca) and the natural processes of life without needing a creator God.

He presented Buddhism as rational, empirical and non-dogmatic qualities, he saw as superior to certain aspects of Christianity. In his speeches, He highlighted how Buddhist philosophy harmonized with scientific progress, the European Enlightenment and reason. He made these facts clear in his speech at the 1893 "Parliament of the World Religions" in Chicago. This made Buddhism appealing to Western audiences as a "scientific religion" that did not conflict with evolution or empirical inquiry. His efforts helped portray Buddhism as a forward looking, modernist tradition, one that could stand equal to Western scientific and religious thought during colonial times.

Anāgārika Dhammapāla embodied a dynamic fusion: he drew inspiration from Protestant like individualism and rationality while using them to strengthen and modernize Buddhism against colonial Christian pressures. His vision of Buddhism as aligned with science helped shape its global image in the 20th century and beyond. He remains a revered figure in Ceylon often seen as a national hero and Bodhisattva like protector of Dhamma.

Last Journey of Life at *Sārnāth*

Anāgārika Dhammapāla, the pioneering Buddhist revivalist, founder of the Mahabodhi Society and a key figure in restoring Buddhist sites in India, spent his final years in *Sārnāth*, the hallowed place where the Buddha delivered his first sermon.

After decades of tireless global missionary work, health issues and dedication to reviving Buddhism he chose *Sārnāth* as his residence toward the end of his life. He had overseen the completion of Mulagandhakuti Vihara, a significant shrine symbolizing his lifelong mission to restore and honour Buddhist heritage sites.

In 1931 he made his last visit to his native country where he established the "Anāgārika Dhammapal Trust". Upon returning to India, he fully embraced monastic life:

- On 31st July 1931, he was ordained as novice monk (*Sāmaṇera*).
- He took higher ordination (Upasampada) in January 1933 adopting the monastic name Sri Devamitta *Dhammapāla*.

His health had been declining for years due to chronic illness including stomach and heart diseases yet he continued his work with unwavering dedication.

He passed away on 29th April 1933 at the age 68 years at the Mulagandhakuti Vihara in *Sārnāth*- the very shrine he had helped build and cherished as a centre for Dhamma.

His final words reflected his lifelong passion for spreading the Buddha's teachings.

“Let me be rebornI would like to be born again and again several times in Sārnāth to promote and promulgate Lord Buddha’s Dhamma and continue the battle to revitalize the Bodhgayā.”

This poignant expression of his bodhisattava-like aspiration captured the essence of his last journey—not an end, but a transition rooted in boundless commitment to the Dhamma. After his death his ashes were taken to Colombo, Ceylon for a great state funeral procession attended by thousands of people. *Sārnāth* remains a living testament to his legacy with statues and memories honouring him at the site. His final days there were a peaceful culmination of a life dedicated to restoring Buddhism’s glory in the land of its birth.

National Freedom Fighter

He is commonly regarded as one of the most influential personalities in the contemporary world as revivalist of Buddhism in Ceylon and India but he is also a zealous freedom fighter of Ceylon through love and compassion. While he was primarily a Buddhist reformer and revivalist but he was deeply involved in anti colonial sentiments and the Sri Lankan independence movement. He promoted Buddhist identity, social reform and resistance to alien cultural dominance and Christian missionary activities. His efforts blended spiritual revival with national pride, making him a symbolic FREEDOM FIGHTER for Buddhist cultural and national awakening in Ceylon. He also interacted with contemporary Indian independence leaders. He travelled extensively across Ceylon and inspiring and instigated people of Ceylon against the dominance of the British Government.

Epilogue

It is not too much to say, I think, that *Dhammapāla* could not find long term satisfaction in any institution or community. All of this is left out of the garden which was “a paradise for a child”. We are sometimes presented by *Dhammapāla* with a very fully constructed and culturally correct type of person - even the snakes are alive to the local cultural ideal. But of course this sort of history as total as can be in the sense that twenty two hundred years of unchallenged Buddhism faith seem unproblematically sedimented in the mind of one particular Sri Lankan boy yields a picture of some Ceylon where it would be necessary to advise children “to be brave and to retaliate when they are given a blow.”

If on other hand much is left out of the garden, it is still a very full place, full of movement, ancestry and the self image of a man who has painfully manufactured out of tradition, opportunity and accident, in a modern colonial and international world—a career of action and accomplishment. In this somewhat specialized essay I have highlighted the tendency of anthropologists to rely on some version of the culture exemplification model for history. *Anāgārika Dhammapāla*, in his “garden paradise” voice, employed a mode of thought very similar to this. In his attempt to place himself within an unbroken stream of Buddhist tradition.

Anāgārika Dhammapāla remains revered in Sri Lanka in modern times as a “BODHISATTVA” who sacrificed his personal comfort for Dhamma and his nation’s heritage and independence. His legacy continues through organizations like *Mahābodhi Society*.

The struggle for revival of *Mahābodhi Mahāvihara* from the clutches of Gir Hindu tradition is still going on through organizations like “All India Buddhist Form” led by Shri Akash Lama and “All Buddhist Organization Of India”.

They achieve success soon.

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