

Colonel Olcott

His Service To Buddhism

by

B. P. Kirthisinghe
and
M. P. Amarasuriya

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Colonel Henry Steele Olcott

The Great American Buddhist

*by Dr. Buddhadasa &
P. Kirthisinghe*

Colonel Olcott was an inspiring servant of mankind. He lived in our age and dedicated the later years of his life to Buddhism and the peoples of Asia, particularly those of India and Ceylon. He gave up an affluent life for a simpler and nobler one. He devoted his energies to working for the benefit of the common people. The services rendered to Asia and particularly to the revival of Buddhist cultures are contributions worthy of an honoured place in the pages of Asian history.

Colonel Olcott died on 17 February 1907, at his home in Adyar, near Madras, India, after having served his beloved Asian people for nearly 32 years. The anniversary of his death is celebrated throughout India and south-east Asia and particularly by the people of Ceylon, who have a special veneration for him. As a demonstration of their gratitude, a large photograph of him hangs in most of the Buddhist schools and colleges which he helped to establish in Ceylon.

Colonel Henry Steele Olcott was born on 2nd August 1832, in Orange, New Jersey, U.S.A. After a brilliant school career at the City College of New York, and Columbia University, he became interested in scientific agriculture. He edited a farmers' periodical, and in 1858 he became associated with the *New York Tribune* as the agriculture editor. When the American Civil war broke out in 1861, he gave up his newspaper work and went to the front, where he eventually attained the rank of colonel.

Colonel Olcott served in special capacities in both the Army and Navy Departments. After the conclusion of the War, he was admitted to the Bar of New York State. He became prominent as a lawyer, as well as an investigator of "graft," especially in connection with the scandals in the Mustering and Disbanding Departments. This work required unusual integrity and courage, as his life was constantly threatened.

As a result of his investigations, several malefactors were sent to jail. As a lawyer he had a lucrative practice. Later he was employed by the Government to investigate certain abuses in



Col. Olcott

the Navy Yard. He was appointed by the President in 1878 to report on trade conditions between America, India and Ceylon.

The year 1874 is of special significance in the life of the noble colonel. It was in this year that he was employed by the *New York Sun* to investigate the mystic phenomena which took place at the Eddy Farm in New York. His methods of investigation and his reports made a deep impression on the American public, and the book he wrote called *People of the Other World* sold out rapidly. It was in connection with these investigations that he met Madame H.P. Blavatsky at the Eddy Farm. From then on began a long friendship and collaboration with her which lasted until her death in 1891. During this time Colonel Olcott became interested in oriental religions, especially Buddhism. In 1875, he and Madame Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society of New York. The main objectives of the society were to establish the nucleus of a universal brotherhood of humanity, to promote the study of comparative religion and philosophy, and to make a systematic investigation of the mystic potencies of life and matter, or what is usually called occultism.

He set out with Madame Blavatsky for India in 1878 to study various religions there, and they arrived in Ceylon on 17th May 1880. Sometime later in the same month both of them embraced Buddhism publicly in Galle, a town 75 miles from Colombo, on the south coast of the island.

Madam Blavatsky

What profoundly influenced Colonel Olcott to adopt Buddhism as his religion was his study of the famous public debates that took place in 1873 at Panadura, a small town 20 miles from Ceylon's capital. These debates erupted between incumbent monk Venerable Migettuwatte Gunānanda of Kotahena Temple, Ceylon's greatest orator in modern times, and his adversaries in the Christian priesthood, occasioned by the persecution by Christian missionaries of the Buddhists under the British colonial administration. It is recorded by a *bhikkhu* that Venerable Gunānanda faced the united forces of Christian orthodoxy. So powerful was his eloquence and reasoning in the Panadura controversy, which was intended to bring discredit to the Buddhists, that the tables were turned against Christianity in Ceylon. It was so impressive that no Catholic or Protestant ventured to cross words with Buddhist wisdom. Bhikkhu Sangharakshita states "If at the Panadura controversy Christian fanaticism suffered its first serious repulse, by the ceremony at Galle (where Colonel Olcott and friend embraced Buddhism), Buddhism scored its positive victory, and this victory for Buddhism was won by the founders of the Theosophical Society." They hold him in boundless gratitude.

Therefore the two decades between 1870 and 1890 became a crucial period in the history of modern Ceylon. The four notables in this period were Venerable Migettuwatte Gunānanda, Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala, Maha Nayaka Thera of



Olcott with Hikaduwa Sumangala Thera

Maligakanda Vidyodaya Pirivena College, Colonel Olcott, and his pupil, the Ven. Anagarika Dharmapāla. Their contributions to the revival of Buddhism, Buddhist culture and Buddhist education will never be forgotten by the Sinhalese Buddhists, who revere their memory.

Colonel Olcott had a deep sympathy for all Asian religions, Hinduism, Islam, etc. When he came in contact with Asians, they became his blood brothers. He lectured on Hinduism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism, and he wanted to equip archaeological expeditions with the aid of the Parsis of Bombay, to go to Persia (Iran) in search of Zoroastrian remains, and particularly to search for their lost scriptures.

When he went to India, the magnificent civilisation of India was in a state of decay. He was the first in India to organise in Bombay, in 1879, a Swadeshi exhibition of Indian manufactures to show the public of India what beautiful objects were being produced by Indian craftsmen. These crafts were slowly being forgotten in India because Indians cared little for them. In short, he stimulated India's awakening after a deep slumber of ages, and the revival of her past glories. This was long before Mahatma Gandhi, who led the Indian masses to freedom. The work of Colonel Olcott later stimulated the formation of the Indian National Congress, which inspired India to produce great leaders and attain her freedom peacefully and with the retention of the friendship of the British people. As a matter of fact, Colonel Olcott's influence was so great on both the elite and the masses of India, that his successor to the presidency of the Theosophical Society, Dr. Annie Besant, an English lady, became the first president of the Indian National Congress at its very inception.

On a wall of Vijayananda Vihara, Welliwatta, Galle, was the above in Colonel Olcott's own handwriting. ("This is to certify that on the 19th May 1880 the Founders of the Theosophical Society Madame H. P. Blavatsky and myself took the Panchasila for the first time at Vijayananda Vihara from Akmemana Dhammarama Thera.")

In 1879 Colonel Olcott wrote as follows on the first Swadeshi exhibition in India in an old diary:

"On 29th November, an event of much importance occurred: we celebrated with great éclat the fourth anniversary of the formation of the Theosophical Society. It was also our first public function of the kind...

"Mr. Wimbridge designed and lithographed an artistic invitation card, inviting our friends to 'attend at the Headquarters, 108 Girgaum Back Road, Bombay, at 8.30 p.m. on the 29th November 1879, a meeting commemorative of the Society's fourth anniversary, the founding of the *Theosophist*, and the opening of the library. There will be addresses and a display of machinery made by native artisans.' Signed by myself as president, and H.P. Blavatsky as corresponding secretary.

"The grounds and the land leading to them from the public road were brilliantly illuminated; arches of flame and pyramids of Indian coloured lamps were placed at the mouth of the lane and the entrance to the compound; Chinese lanterns were hung on wires stretched between the palm trees; an arch of gas jets, spelling the word 'Welcome' lighted up the library façade; the

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S. Olcott

whole ground was spread with striped Indian carpets; 400 chairs were placed for guests; a band of twenty musicians played Indian and foreign airs—among the latter the American national hymn and the scene was altogether beautiful. Far above the palms, the azure, tropical, star-studded sky looked down on us.

“Inside the library building, tables and walls were covered with exhibits of indigenous work in brass, ivory, sandalwood, steel; the marble mosaics of Agra, the lovely shawls and soft woollen stuffs of Kashmir, hand-woven muslins from Dacca and elsewhere, cutlery from Pandharpur, and work from the Baroda School of Arts. The Dewan of Cutch, the enlightened Mr. Manibhai Jashbai, sent a complete collection of arms and some of the famous silver work of that state.

“About 500 invited guests—the best known and most respected in Bombay—were present. Addresses were made by Messrs. Gopal Rao Hari Deshmukh (as chairman); Naoroji Fundunji, a beloved Parsi statesman; Kashinath Trimbaknath Telang, subsequently a Justice of the Bombay High Court; Shantaram Narayan, a most respected Maratha lawyer; Nurshunker Lalshunker, the ‘Guzerati poet’, and myself. Altogether, it was a most appropriate and encouraging help to our Indian career. The Europeans present expressed themselves charmed with the industrial display, and gave deserved praise to Vishram Jetha’s mechanical exhibits.”

The noble colonel decried the Indian caste system, which was one of the causes of the downfall of the great Indian civilisation. He made every effort to get India to forbid this much-abused social system, which culminated in its being banned in the new Indian constitution.

He founded schools for the outcastes in South India. Colonel Olcott stipulated that no school fees should be charged; that the school hours were to be convenient for the occupations of the domestic servants and others who might seek education; that no Christian or other proselytism was to be permitted; Tamil (reading, writing and correct spelling) as well as arithmetic, English speaking and Hindustani speaking were to be taught.

Colonel Olcott departed for Europe on the 14th May 1894, but he left full instructions with Mr. S. Ryder, a European Theosophist, for supervising the erection of the building (a mere mud-walled, half-open, palmyra-thatched structure, like most Indian village schoolhouses) and its management until his return. The school was opened in June 1894, and appropriately named “The Olcott Free School.”

The success of the experiment is reported by its manager in the *Madras Mail*, 1896. He wrote: “The free education offered by Colonel Olcott is now so well appreciated that we shall soon have to refuse further admission of pupils for want of room. The movement is becoming so popular that I believe it would be comparatively easy to gather several thousand pariah boys and girls into free schools in Madras and its suburbs alone.”

In 1898 a second school named the “H.P.B. Memorial Free School” was founded at Kodambakam, and in 1899 a third school named the “Damodar Free School” was opened at Teynampet. In 1901 Colonel Olcott made an appeal to his countrymen in a letter to the *Record-Herald* of Chicago, for funds for extending this work, and in September 1901 a fourth school was opened at Mylapore. It was named after the great South Indian yogi, Tiruvalluvar, himself a *panchama*. The fifth and last school was opened on the 1st May 1906, at Krishnampet, five miles from Adyar, outside the city limits, and named the “Besant Free School.”

In 1925, owing to financial difficulties, it was found impossible to carry on work in all the schools, and on 6th January 1926, the three schools within the municipal area of the city of

Madras were transferred as gifts with all their property, such as buildings, books, furniture, etc., to the Corporation of Madras.

The transference of these three schools was facilitated by the fact that there had been passed a law for free elementary education to be provided from taxes. This had never existed up to this time in India. The two schools managed today by the Olcott Panchama School Committee are outside the municipal limits of the city of Madras, and therefore could not be taken over by the city. They lie within the district of Chingleput, but the District Board has, owing to lack of funds, refused to take them over.

The Panchama Schools organised by Colonel Olcott secured very early the services of Miss Sarah E. Palmer, B.Sc., of Wisconsin, U.S.A., who volunteered to come for this special work. Miss Palmer introduced for the first time into elementary schools in Madras the ideals of the kindergarten, and these five schools for outcaste children became in many ways more advanced in their methods than the schools in the city for caste children. Teachers from these latter schools constantly visited the Panchama Schools to observe the new methods. Miss Palmer returned home in 1931 after many years of service to these and other schools conducted by Colonel Olcott.

Colonel Olcott's reform movement has been greatly assisted by the expansion of the Theosophical Headquarters at Adyar. A large number of boys of these schools, as they grew up, found employment as servants at Adyar, the European and American residents invariably so employing them, and giving them such training as has enabled them, when not employed at Adyar, to find places among Europeans in the city of Madras. While among caste people there is still objection to employing them as domestic servants, even this objection has greatly lessened among many Hindu residents and visitors at Adyar. Colonel Olcott's work has now affected a larger field, and the very name "depressed classes" is tending to disappear.

He assisted them also in becoming acquainted with Buddhism, and a certain number of panchamas (a so-called low caste) in Madras became Buddhists (a tradition already existed among them that once they had been Buddhists.) At any rate, as Buddhists, they became a little less "untouchable."

It is recorded in history that the Emperor Asoka sent his own son and daughter to Ceylon for Buddhist missionary work in the 3rd century B.C. With the adoption of Buddhism as the state religion, the Sinhalese civilisation of Ceylon blossomed into its golden period. But when Colonel Olcott came to Ceylon in 1880, this great civilisation was in a decadent state. He found on his arrival that there were only three Buddhist schools in this Buddhist country. The education system was dominated and dictated by the Christian churches, which discriminated against the Buddhists and compelled them not only to go to Christian schools, but also to get marriage certificates only in Christian churches. It was a time when Buddhists were frightened and ashamed to call themselves Buddhists openly, due to fear of economic persecution by the missionaries. Colonel Olcott revolted against this prejudice. He therefore started the Buddhist educational movement and founded the Colombo branch of the Buddhist Theosophical Society, with the co-operation of local Buddhists. In a remarkable way, all the high Buddhist monks of the island gathered around and received him with much warmth, so that he was the envy of other Europeans who lived secluded and isolated from the native people. He became one of the oppressed Buddhists who fought for their rights.

Quite a unique document was granted to Colonel Olcott from the principal chief priests of Buddhism in Ceylon, to empower him to admit converts to Buddhism. By immemorial tradition the action of becoming a Buddhist consists of a statement of belief in the Three Refuges—Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha—and pledging oneself to observe the Pancha Sila, the Five

Precepts. This profession of faith is constantly reiterated, so whenever any Buddhist goes to a Buddhist temple to offer flowers before the image of the Lord Buddha, it is customary for him to repeat the vows before he enters the shrine. Usually he goes to a Buddhist monk and asks "to be given the Refuges and the Precepts." The monk then says the ancient Pāli words phrase by phrase, and the layman repeats them after him.

Till the giving of this commission to Colonel Olcott, no Buddhist layman ever considered himself authorised, as are the monks, to give the Pancha Sīla. But it was just this unusual privilege that was given to Colonel Olcott, by this document which is deposited in Adyar. Of the chief priests who signed it, the best known are Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala, the chief priest of Adam's Peak and principal of Vidyodaya College, Colombo, and W. Subhuti, another learned chief priest who was the instructor of the Pāli scholar T.W. Rhys Davids.

Colonel Olcott, together with Anagarika Dharmapāla of Ceylon, were pioneers in the Buddhist revival movement in India and Ceylon. They worked together in the development of Ceylon's educational movement. They travelled from village to village on foot and in bullock cart, exhorting the people to live Buddhist lives, and collecting funds. Principally to the credit of Colonel Olcott there are about 12 large colleges and over 400 Buddhist schools in the island, which have now been handed over to the government under the recent nationalisation act.

In 1883 a savage attack was made by the Christians on a Buddhist procession in Colombo, and rioting ensued. Colonel Olcott was invited by the Buddhists to assist them in their difficulties, and he became practically their champion in the redress of their grievances. Fortunately the governor of Ceylon at the time was Sir Arthur Gordon, later Lord Stanmore, whom Colonel Olcott found greatly sympathetic, due to his broad-mindedness, and also because he was somewhat interested in occultism and comparative religion. It was at an interview with the governor on 10th February 1884, that Colonel Olcott obtained a promise from him that the Buddhists should have their sacred day, the birthday of the Lord Buddha, declared a public holiday. The significance of this can scarcely be realised today. In 1883, Christian Protestant missionaries completely dominated the island. Only Christian holidays were recognised by the government as public holidays. Several instances happened, such as Buddhist boys in Christian schools absenting themselves from school on certain Buddhist festivals, being punished by the headmaster for their absence. This particularly happened to certain boys at the Vesak festival of 1883. When, therefore, Colonel Olcott, as the result of his work, obtained for the Buddhists a public holiday on their chief festival, the natural result was that later both the Hindus and the Muslims obtained the same right from the government. Colonel Olcott went as the representative of the Buddhists to interview the Colonial Secretary in London, and was able to put the Buddhist view of affairs before him.

One of the first things Colonel Olcott did while organising the Ceylon educational system was to compose a Buddhist catechism, so that Buddhists could teach their children. This Buddhist Catechism, which was endorsed by the chief priest Sumangala, was one of the most striking contributions to the resuscitation of Buddhism. The Catechism was first published in Sinhalese on 24th July 1881, and later in English and several other languages. As this Catechism was too advanced for some of the children, a simpler, more elementary one was prepared by Rev. C.W. Leadbeater, a British collaborator of the colonel. Colonel Olcott's Catechism has now gone through 44 English editions, and probably more in Sinhalese; and that of Rev. C.W. Leadbeater in Sinhalese (up to 1914) through 21 editions of Part I, and 18 editions of Part II.

At this point Colonel Olcott felt the need for a symbol to rally the local Buddhists. To meet this need, he designed a flag for the Buddhists from the aura that shone around the head of the Buddha. The first five stripes of the flag are blue, yellow, red, white, pink; the sixth colour is a mixture of the five, but for design, it has been broken up into its constituents.

The colonel's flag, in the course of time, came to symbolise the unity of all Buddhists. It was accepted as the international Buddhist flag by the World Fellowship of Buddhists which met in Ceylon in 1950 for the first time, and its acceptance was further confirmed at the conference in Japan in 1952. From then on, it came into use on a world-wide scale, and is now being used in nearly 60 countries, in festivities, particularly on the celebration of the birthday of the Buddha.

Colonel Olcott travelled widely in the East and in Europe on lecture tours. He was also associated with the revival of Buddhism in Japan, and visited that country twice. On his first visit in 1888, he gave 70 lectures, and on his second visit in 1890 he brought the Mahāyāna Buddhists of Japan, Korea, China and Viet-Nam into closer co-operation with the Theravāda Buddhists of India, Burma, Ceylon, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, by calling their attention to the fundamental principles of Buddhism which are common to all schools and sects. Thereby he established a common platform for all Buddhists, whether of the Northern or the Southern school. It was one of the most remarkable and statesmanlike contributions of Colonel Olcott.

The following fourteen items of belief which were accepted as fundamental principles in both the Southern and Northern sections of Buddhism in 1891 by their authoritative committees, to whom they were submitted by Colonel Olcott personally, have such historical importance that they were added to the last edition of the Buddhist Catechism as an appendix. It has been reported that the chief lamas of the Mongolian Buddhist monasteries declared to Prince Ouchtomsky, the learned Russian orientalist, after the document was translated to them, that they accept every one of the propositions as drafted, with the one exception that the date of the Buddha is by them believed to have been some thousands of years earlier than the one given by Colonel Olcott. This surprising fact had not hitherto come to the prince's knowledge. Could it be that the Mongolian Sangha confused the real epoch of Sakyamuni with that of his alleged predecessor? Be this as it may, it is a most encouraging fact that the whole Buddhist world may now be said to have united at least in accepting the Fourteen Propositions.

Colonel Olcott's Fourteen Fundamental Buddhist Beliefs

- I. Buddhists are taught to show the same tolerance, forbearance, and brotherly love to all men, without distinction; and an unswerving kindness towards the members of the animal kingdom.
- II. The universe was evolved, not created; and it functions according to law, not according to the caprice of any god.
- III. The truths upon which Buddhism is founded are natural. They have, we believe, been taught in successive kalpas, or world-periods, by certain illuminated beings called Buddhas, the name Buddha meaning "Enlightened."
- IV. The fourth teacher in the present kalpa was Sakyamuni, or Gautama Buddha, who was born in a royal family in India about 2,500 years ago. He is a historical personage and his name was Siddhartha Gautama.
- V. Sakyamuni taught that ignorance produces desire, unsatisfied desire is the cause of rebirth, and rebirth the cause of sorrow. To get rid of sorrow, therefore, it is necessary to escape rebirth, it is necessary to extinguish desire; and to extinguish desire, it is necessary to destroy ignorance.
- VI. Ignorance fosters the belief that rebirth is a necessary thing. When ignorance is destroyed the worthlessness of every such rebirth, considered as an end in itself, is perceived, as well as the paramount need of adopting a course of life by which the

necessity for such repeated rebirth, can be abolished. Ignorance also begets the illusive and illogical idea that there is only one existence for man, and the other illusion that this one life is followed by a state of unchangeable pleasure or torment.

- VII. The dispersion of all this ignorance can be attained by the persevering practice of an all-embracing altruism in conduct, development of intelligence, wisdom in thought, and destruction of desire for the lower personal pleasures.
- VIII. The desire to live being the cause of rebirth, when that is extinguished rebirths cease, and the perfected individual attains by meditation that highest state of peace called Nirvāna.
- IX. Sakyamuni taught that ignorance can be dispelled and sorrow removed by the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths, that is,
 - 1) Existence is misery;
 - 2) The cause productive of misery is the desire ever-renewed of satisfying oneself, without being able ever to secure that end;
 - 3) The destruction of that desire, or the estranging of oneself from it;
 - 4) The means of obtaining this destruction of desire. The means which he pointed out are called the Noble Eightfold Path, that is, Right Belief, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Means of Livelihood, Right Exertion, Right Remembrance, Right Meditation.
- X. Right Meditation leads to spiritual enlightenment, or the development of that Buddha-like faculty which is latent in every man.
- XI. The essence of Buddhism, as summed up by the Tathāgata (Buddha) himself, consists in: desisting from all evil; acquiring virtue, purifying the heart.
- XII. The universe is subject to a natural causation known as Karma. The merits and demerits of a being in his past existence determine his condition in the present one. Each man, therefore, has prepared the causes of the effect which he now experiences.
- XIII. The obstacles to the attainment of good Karma may be removed by the observance of the following precepts, which are embraced in the moral code of Buddhism: (1) kill not; (2) steal not; (3) indulge not in forbidden sexual pleasure; (4) lie not; (5) take no intoxicating or stupefying drugs or liquor. Five other precepts which need not be enumerated here should be observed by those who would attain more quickly than the average layman the release from misery and rebirth.
- XIV. Buddhism discourages superstitious credulity. Gautama Buddha taught it to be the duty of a parent to have his child educated in science and literature. He also taught that no one should believe what is spoken by any sage, written in any book, or affirmed by tradition, unless it accords with reason.

This was drafted as a common platform upon which all Buddhists can agree, and signed by H.S. Olcott. The document then closed with the following endorsements.

“Respectfully submitted for the approval of the high priests of the nations which we severally represent, in the Buddhist conference held at Adyar, Madras, on the 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th of January 1891 (A B. 2434).

Japan

Kozen Gunaratana, Chlezo Tokuzawa

Burma

U Hmoay Tha Aung

Ceylon
The Maghs of Chittagong

Dhammapala Hevavitarana
Krishna Chandra Chowdry, by his
appointed Proxy, Maung Tha Dwe.

Burma

Approved on behalf of the Buddhists of Burma, this 3rd day of February 1891 (A.B. 2434):

Tha-tha-na-baing Sayadawgyi;	Aung Myi Shewbon Sayadaw
Me-ge-waddy Sayadaw	Hmat-Khaya Sayadaw
Hti-lin SayadHla-Htwe Sayadawaw	Myadaung Sayadaw

and sixteen others.

Ceylon

Approved on behalf of the Buddhists of Ceylon on this 25th day of February 1891 (A.B. 2434):

Yatawatte Chandjoti, high priest of Asgiri Vihara at Kandy.

(Sd.) YATAWATTA

Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala, high priest Adam's Peak and the district of Colombo.

(Sd.) H. SUMANGALA

Suriyagoda Sonuttara, librarian of the oriental library at the Temple of the Tooth Relic at Kandy.

(Sd.) S. SONUTTARA

Dhammalankara, high priest.

(Sd.) W. DHAMMALANKARA

Waskaduwe Subhuti, high priest.

(Sd.) W. SUBHUTI

Japan

Accepted as included within the body of Northern Buddhism.

Shaku Genyu	(Shingon Shu)
Fukuda Nichiye	(Nichiren Shu)
Sanada Seyke	(Zen Shu)
Ito Quan Shyu	(Zen Shu)
Takehana Hakuyo	(Jodo Shu)
Kono Rioshin	(Ji-Shu Shu)
Kiro Ki-Ko	(Jodo Seizan Shu)
Harutani Shinsho	(Tendai Shu)
Manabe Shun-myo	(Shingon Shu)

Chittagong

Accepted for the Buddhists of Chittagong.

Nagawa Parvata Viharadhipati Guna Megu Wini-Lankara, Harbing, Chittagong, Bengal.”

Adyar Oriental Library

Colonel Olcott established the Adyar Oriental Library in 1886. It has become one of the famous oriental institutions of the world, and during the course of his life, he collected and preserved rare Sanskrit, Pāli, Tibetan, Burmese and Sinhalese manuscripts which were fast becoming unavailable. The institution was dedicated to the revival of ancient learning, and its connection with the great religions of India.

In this library there are over 17,584 palm-leaf manuscripts. Today, there is a large staff of Indian and Western-trained workers in charge of the library. Copies of these manuscripts are made in the library and are available to other oriental libraries of the world. The sign of Theosophy in the hall, which is based on the word of the Buddha, is the seal of the society, with its motto, “There is no religion higher than truth.”

H.G. Wells, writing in his *Outline of History*, states, “For eight and twenty years, Asoka worked sanely for the real needs of men. Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties, and graciousnesses, and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Asoka shines and shines almost alone, a star. From the Volga to Japan, his name is still honoured. China, Tibet and even India, though it has left his doctrine, preserve the tradition of his greatness. More living men cherish his memory today than have ever heard the names of Constantine or Charlemagne.”

It can be safely asserted that the name of Colonel Olcott is honoured in Hindu-Buddhist Asia from India and Ceylon to Japan, more than that of any other American who has lived in Asia. Ceylon’s educational system, the international Buddhist flag and Adyar Oriental Library stand today as living monuments to his greatness.

Shortly after his death, the new president of the Theosophical Society, Annie Besant, reported: “When he was lying dead in his Adyar home, the flag which he had devised, and which had been accepted by the Buddhist nations—that and the American flag—covered his corpse, and were carried with it to the burning place.”

Olcott’s Last Message

“To my beloved brethren in the physical body: I bid you farewell. In memory of me, carry on the grand work of proclaiming and living the brotherhood of religions.

“To my beloved brothers on the higher planes: I greet you and come to you, and implore you to help me to impress on all men on earth that ‘there is no religion higher than truth’, as the Buddhists say and that in the brotherhood of religions lie the peace and progress of humanity.”

2 February 1907

H. S. Olcott

Colonel Olcott and the Buddhist Revival In Sri Lanka

M. P. Amarasuriya

Right from the time that the first European races landed in Sri Lanka, at the beginning of the 16th century, attempts were made to replace the culture of the Sinhalas with that of Europe. In this movement it was the missionaries that played the most prominent part. They were, of course, well intentioned, but, unfortunately for us, they came to Sri Lanka with the deep-rooted idea that the Sinhalas were a primitive people and that their religion—which represented the high-water level of their civilisation—was something that should be combated whenever and wherever possible and with every available means. The process of eradication thus started continued for many decades, and the defeatist mentality of the Sinhalas, which was the direct consequence of the missionary campaign, became more and more pronounced. It was at the depth of this decline that the people awoke to the sense of the abject humiliation and deep degradation under which they lived. The religion had somehow been kept alive in the recesses of monasteries, and it was from those that there arose men of outstanding ability, of knowledge and wisdom, to kindle into flames the sparks that lay smouldering.

A fighter was needed to supply the dynamic energy; the hour produced the man. He was Ven. Migettuwatte Gunānanda. There is an unauthenticated story that as a layman he had joined a class for the training of catechists held by a Christian clergyman, a well-known Sinhala scholar, the Rev. C. Alwis. Whatever the truth of this story may be, Ven. Migettuwatte seems to have spent several years in a thorough reading of Christian books and also the works of critics of Christianity. He entered the *sangha* at Kotahena temple and started battle with the missionaries.

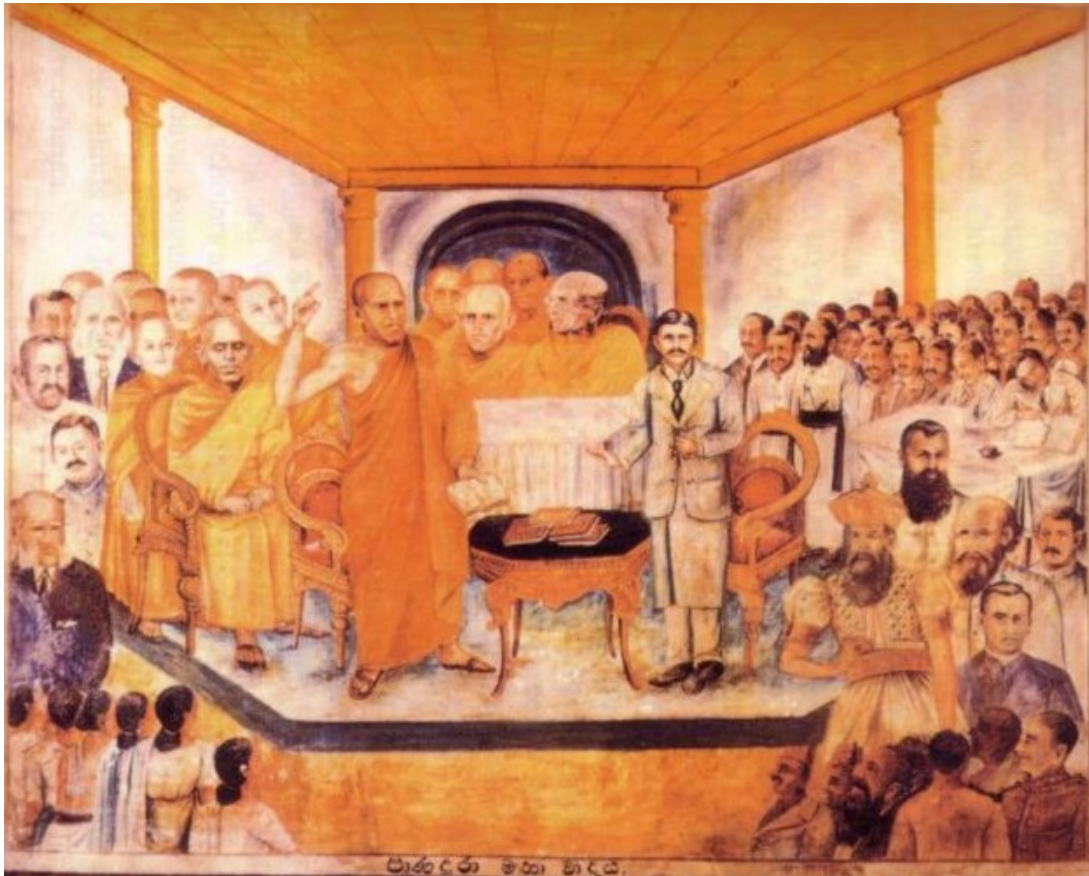


Col. Olcott with a group of monks

He published numerous pamphlets, leaflets and books in defence of Buddhism, meeting the charges that were being urged against it; but he went further. He also started a counter-campaign, carrying war into the enemies' camp. He was a man of ceaseless activity, he toured the country from end to end in the Sinhala districts, sometimes addressing several meetings a day, and thousands flocked to hear him wherever he went. Olcott described him as the most brilliant polemic orator of the island, the terror of the missionaries, a middle-aged shaven monk of full medium stature, with a very intellectual head, the boldest, most brilliant and powerful champion of Sinhalese Buddhism.

A well-known missionary, Rev. S. Langden, wrote to the *Ceylon Friend* in September 1873, after hearing Migettuwatte speak, "There is that in his manner as he rises to speak which puts one in mind of some orators at home. He showed a consciousness of power with the people. (His) voice . . . is of great compass and has a clear ring about it. His action is good and the long yellow robe thrown over one shoulder helps to make it impressive. His power of persuasion shows him to be a born orator."

Migettuwatte's activities culminated in the famous Panadura controversy held in August 1873. It was a historic occasion. Rev. David de Silva led the Christian side, supported by a galaxy of very learned clergymen. Migettuwatte had on his side the most eminent *bhikkhus* of the day—Hikkaduwe Sumangala, Bulatgama Dhammānkara, Potuwila Indajoti, Koggala Sanghatissa and Weligama Sri Sumangala, to mention only a few. The controversy ended in an undoubted victory for the Buddhists, both factual and, what was far more important, moral. The Christians had been challenged and met face to face and had been convincingly defeated. John Capper of the *Ceylon Times* (later *The Times of Ceylon*) published in book form a full account of the historic controversy, with the speeches of the protagonists on either side, translated into English. This book had an unexpectedly wide circulation both in Europe and in America.



The Panadura Debat

A copy fell into the hands of a brilliant American, Colonel Henry Steele Olcott. He became interested in religion, and in 1875 he abandoned his very lucrative practice at the bar. In the same year he founded, with a few friends, the Theosophical Society. In 1878 he and his colleagues came out to India to study the religious systems of the country, and from there to Sri Lanka to study Buddhism and to meet the great fighter who had become the "terror of missionaries." Olcott's fame had preceded him to Sri Lanka, and when his ship was berthed in

Galle on the 17th May 1880, a tumultuous welcome awaited him. Earlier, the ship had touched at Colombo and with prophetic vision Olcott had written in his diary, on the day before reaching Colombo, "New and great responsibilities are to be faced: momentous issues hang on the result of this visit."

The days after his arrival with Madame Blavatsky, the pair were admitted to the Buddhist faith, by taking the Five Precepts at Vijayananda Temple in Galle. From Galle, Olcott and his colleagues proceeded to Colombo. It was a real triumphant march. Arriving in Colombo, in addition to the numerous lectures and public meetings, Olcott had several private conferences with the Buddhist leaders, both bhikkhus and laymen, and as a result, at a home called Red Cliff in Slave Island, on 17th June 1880, the Colombo branch of the Theosophical Society (called the Buddhist Theosophical Society) was founded with about forty members. Its object was "the promotion of Buddhism by guarding it from the attacks of those who propagate other religions, by strengthening Buddhists in their faith and in the practice of Buddhist morals, and by the spreading and teaching of Buddhist doctrines."

During the course of his stay in the island, Olcott travelled widely. Wherever he went, welcome was widespread and spontaneous. He was deeply moved and made up his mind to do all he could to help Buddhists in Sri Lanka regenerate themselves. Sri Lanka always had a soft corner in his heart. "Ah! lovely Lanka," he wrote in his Diary Leaves many years later, "how doth thy sweet image rise before me as I write the story of my experiences among thy dusky children, of my success in warming their hearts to revere their incomparable religion and its holiest founder. Happy the karma that brought me to thy shores."

From the very start Olcott gathered round him a band of most able and enthusiastic workers. He became their "guide, philosopher and friend." He indicated in unmistakable terms the steps that were necessary to transform the new-found enthusiasm into practical shape, so as to achieve real and lasting results. He was a man of indomitable will, no obstacle could stand in his way. Antagonist propaganda only gave him greater strength, and even government opposition which he encountered in no small measure, only made him redouble his efforts. Even the attempt made on his life by some Christian fanatics served to increase his enthusiasm.

He put his finger at once on the weakest spot in the Buddhist position. He insisted that Buddhists should take the education of their children into their own hands. At the time of his arrival in Sri Lanka, there were only two Buddhist schools in the island; one at Dodanduwa started by the Ven. Piyaratana Thera and the other at Panadura, conducted by a local Buddhist society under the supervision of Ven. Gunaratana Nayaka Thera. The total attendance at both schools was 246. At this time there were 805 Christian schools with an attendance of 78,086 children, a very large percentage of whom were born of non-Christian parents. The Buddhist schools had, after many years, received a grant from Government of Rs. 532 whereas the grant of the Christian schools in the same year amounted to Rs. 174,420.

Olcott threw himself heart and soul into the fight for the establishment of Buddhist schools everywhere. He was most anxious that the Buddhist educational movement should primarily be a movement of the people, by the people and for the people, that it should grow from the soil, and that its roots should reach deep down into the peoples' lives. He wished to link it up with a national revival in which the people should be taught to take pride in their language, their customs and their noble culture. He himself gave of his time and services and even money, freely, generously. But he never dictated plans or lines of action. He allowed those who took up the work to find their own feet with him watching in the background only, to struggle, to make mistakes or, even, to quarrel. He wanted them to taste of the joys of achievement of success gained, of battles fought and won. When money was needed, he often went himself as a beggar, begging-bowl in hand.

The first “Buddhist Fancy Bazaar” was held on 23rd December 1883, and it is recorded that at the start there was opposition from the Buddhists for this type of collection. Later these “Fancy Bazaars” became a regular feature of Buddhist activities, and goods were for sale from lands overseas—Thailand and Burma, England and America.

On the full moon day of Wesak 1881, Olcott inaugurated at Kelaniya Temple a Buddhist National Fund for the “general promotion of religious and secular education of Buddhist children and the dissemination of Buddhist literature.” The first cheque (Rs.100) was handed to Olcott immediately after his speech by R.A.Mirando, who up to the time of his untimely death continued to be a great worker in the Buddhist cause. By 1886 the Buddhist National Fund had collected Rs.13,000. Olcott also did many things to rouse the people’s enthusiasm; he suggested the necessity for a public holiday on Wesak Day and helped in getting it for the Buddhists. He emphasised the need for a headquarters building for the new movement, and got the Buddhists to purchase it in May 1885.

He suggested the importance of propaganda and the establishment of a newspaper. The result was the *Sarasavi Sandaresa*, started in December 1889; it brought a new spirit into Sinhalese writing, a fine style, elegant and yet popular, which created a new era in Sinhala literature. The *Sandaresa* soon became an institution to be reckoned with. The editor was merciless in his exposure of corruption and snobbishness among members of the public service who had got accustomed to give themselves the air of petty *rajas*. Government officials raised the cry of sedition against the editor and spoke of “a new danger to the peace and prosperity of the island.” Their allies in the British press made editorial demands for the stern suppression of the growing tendency towards the creation of a seditious “native” press. But the editor was undaunted. He established contact with enlightened journalists and public men in England and the local government found it impossible to suppress him. *The Buddhist* was later started as an English supplement to the *Sandaresa* and published by the B.T.S. till it was handed over to the Y.M.B.A. (Young Men’s Buddhist Association) in 1918. The first editor of *The Buddhist* was C.W. Leadbeater. He was followed in succession by Mudaliyar L.C. Wijesinghe, the famous translator of the *Mahāvamsa*, A.E. Bultjens, D.B. Jayatilaka and W.A. de Silva, all of whom made their mark in the Buddhist renaissance movement in more ways than one, and worked wholeheartedly for its success.

Experience had shown Olcott that not only the children and the laity but even many Buddhist bhikkhus were ignorant of the fundamentals of their religion. He tried without success to get a Buddhist bhikkhu to compile a Buddhist catechism. Olcott therefore took it upon himself during his second visit to do the job, writing at odd moments during his travels, lectures and other activities.

His idea was to produce an elementary handbook on lines similar to those used so effectively by Christian sects. To fit himself for the task this indefatigable American read 10,000 pages of Buddhist books in English and French translations. After the manuscript of the catechism was completed Olcott got it approved by the Ven. Hikkaduwe Sumangala, head of Vidyodaya Pirivena.

The Sinhala and English versions appeared simultaneously on 24th July 1881, and it became a textbook in the schools and found its way into every Sinhala family. Olcott, noting that the book had been translated into 20 different languages, commented that “from a grain of mustard seed has developed a giant tree.”

These various activities roused opposition, as might be expected, from all quarters. In official eyes the Buddhist educational movement was the offspring of a factious opposition which had to be crushed out of existence. Repressive measures were often adopted; more often

discriminatory regulations were arbitrarily imposed to put handicaps upon Buddhist activities. One such was the "quarter mile" clause, by which no Buddhist school could be registered unless it happened to be more than a quarter of a mile away from an existing Christian school, even in villages where there was not a single Christian family. And, what was worse the regulation was brought into operation with retrospective effect: Another was the denial of the use of the tom-tom and other music in Buddhist processions, whereas no such restrictions were placed upon either the Hindus or the Muslims.

In the Easter Day riots of 1883, a peaceful procession of Buddhists was severely manhandled at Kotahena, and murder was committed, yet the apathy of the officials towards Buddhists was so marked that hardly any attempt was made to bring offenders to book. This roused the Buddhists to a sense of their insecurity, and they were constrained to set up an organisation known as the Buddhist Defence Committee to protect their own interests and to secure the redress of certain glaring grievances. This committee persuaded Colonel Olcott to proceed to London on their behalf, and to interview the Secretary of State for the Colonies. Olcott accepted the commission on the stipulation that "under no circumstances could he receive any remuneration whatsoever for his services."

Olcott's visit to the Colonial Office was fruitful in many ways. He was successful in getting Buddhist registrars of marriages appointed in various places, so that Buddhists could have their marriages solemnised without the necessity of a church ceremony. The Christian oath which even the Buddhists took in court was given up as affirmation. Buddhist holidays appeared in the official calendar and the Buddhists began to celebrate Vesak as a festival of lights.

The missionaries looked upon the movement at first with contemptuous indifference and with a metaphorical shrug of the shoulder. Then they began to take notice of it and referred to it as "the so-called Buddhist revival." By 1889 the position, from their point of view, was not quite satisfactory. In an appeal issued in that year, they asked for prayers and the assistance of the faithful: "We need these prayers and this help to enable us to cope successfully with the forces of the enemy that are spreading all around us. Buddhism is multiplying its agents and activities in opposing the progress of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In 1902 the success of Buddhist work prompted the Church Missionary Society to pass a resolution not to employ any Christian in their schools who had at any time served in Buddhist schools. By 1903 their complaints were louder against "the conducting of preaching campaigns (by Buddhists) to draw away the children placed under our care by their parents. Many children have been withdrawn and have cost us loss in the matter of government grants." That same year the Rev. (afterwards Canon) G. B. Ekanayake writing in *East and West* did not hesitate to admit that "the current of Christian concession had been effectively stemmed by the Buddhist revival." "The barrenness of missionary effort calls for energetic action," he urged. The Roman Catholics adopted a rather strange and amusing attitude. The following is an extract from the *Ceylon Catholic Messenger* of 20th May 1881: "The Theosophists cannot in any case be worse than the sectarian missionaries, and if Colonel Olcott can induce the Buddhists to establish schools of their own, as he is trying to do, he will be doing us a service; because if the Buddhists could have their own denominational schools as we have ours, they would put a stop to the dishonesty now practised by sectarian missionaries of obtaining government money for proselytising purposes under the pretext of grants-in-aid of education."

The progress made by the Buddhist educational movement in its early years, in the face of these numerous drawbacks was indeed remarkable. On 13th February 1881, the first Buddhist Sunday school was started at the Society's premises in Maliban Street. From May that year, C.W. Leadbeater, who had come to Sri Lanka with Olcott, was in charge of the Sunday school. On 1st November 1886, the same school in Pettah was converted into the Pettah Buddhist English

School, which later became Ānanda College. The school started with 37 pupils with Leadbeater as honorary head master. It is significant of the conditions of the times that at the public meeting held on 23rd October 1886 to inaugurate this venture, the invitations sent out contained words prominently printed in Sinhala to the effect that “on this occasion no collection whatsoever will be made.” Leadbeater records that on the memorable Sunday, just before school was started, *kiribath* and other delicacies were served. In the first year the Buddhist English School earned the very handsome grant-in-aid of Rs. 359. By 1899 there were 194 Buddhist schools with 15,490 children and of these 92 had been registered. At that time the Roman Catholics had 30,425 children in their schools, the Wesleyans 22,808 and the C.M.S. 14,110. The grant received by the Buddhists was Rs.27,430, while the expenditure incurred by the B.T.S. was Rs.34,000, in addition to Rs.15,000 spent by local managers and local committees.

Mention must be made, with due respect and gratitude, to early workers who gave of their best in the cause which brought them no glory or power, but only the satisfaction of having done their duty by their religion and their country. It would be impossible to give anything like a complete list. Some names have already been mentioned. But in the annals of the Buddhist educational movement, when its early career comes to be adequately recorded, tribute must surely be paid to other giants as well, like J.W.Bowles-Daly and Marie Musaeus Higgins, pioneers of Buddhist education in Ceylon; A.E. Bultjens, most distinguished alumnus of that very distinguished school, St. Thomas College; Dharmapala, missionary and fire-eater, yet the hardest working of the early workers, indefatigable, indomitable, nationalist, the value of whose services in numerous fields of activity, we have not fully recognised; Andrew Perera, B.T.S.’s first president; Muhandiram Dharma Gunawardena; John R. de Silva, secretary of the Buddhist Defence Committee; William de Abrew, Harry Dias, J. Munasinghe, C. Don Bastian and last, but not the least, C. P. Gunawardene, most lovable and self-effacing of men. None knew how much the Society owed its success to him, especially in its darker days when its very existence was threatened.

Olcott was in many ways eminently suited to lead the Buddhists of Sri Lanka. He was a distinguished scholar who had at one time been offered the chair of Scientific Agriculture by the University of Athens. He had served on the staff of a leading American newspaper as a journalist. On the outbreak of the Civil War he had joined the Northern army as an officer, and had a brilliant military record. His ability and integrity had been recognised and he had been appointed special commissioner for the War Department as well. Back in civilian life he had been called to the Bar and had built up a lucrative practice. He and Madame Blavatsky had already founded the Theosophical Society. The Buddhists in Sri Lanka could have found no better champion of their cause.

Before Olcott said goodbye to Sri Lanka he was able to see the fulfilment of the hopes he had had on the eve of his first landing on these shores. Of the many facets of his work, his achievement in the sphere of education is the brightest. There were when he left Sri Lanka, three first-class Buddhist colleges and two hundred schools to the credit of his movement.

Momentous indeed were the results of Olcott’s visit, and in the old *Diary Leaves* he reviewed for posterity his contribution in the following words. “For now we see the splendid harvest that has come from the sowing of the seed, schools springing up everywhere; 20,000 Buddhist children rescued from hostile religious teachers; religion reviving, and the prospect brightening every year.”