

Transmission of Buddhism to the West in the 19th and 20th centuries And the role of Sri Lanka in the process

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Three identifiable modalities had been adopted during the last two centuries by Sri Lanka to transmit Buddhism to the West:

1. Promoting "Orientalism" in the initial stage of enabling and supporting Western Scholars comprising mainly missionaries and civil servants to discover the wealth of Buddhist literature and the wisdom and values of Buddhism. This phase resulted from the realization of the British administration that the officers sent to govern Sri Lanka needed to know the culture of the people. It was particularly explored after the Rebellion of 1848. A number of learned Buddhist monks became tutors to Childers, Rhys Davids, Dickinson, etc., and in the process Buddhism reached the academia of the West. Reference will be made to the role of Yatramulle Dhamarama, Waskaduwe Sri Subhuti, Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala, Aluthgama Silakkhanda etc. The arrival of Colonel Olcott at this time made the exposure of Sri Lanka to the West more productive. Major result: worldwide installation of Buddhist Studies in Universities. The work of the Pali Text Society in which Malalsekera, Polwatte Buddhaddatta, N, A, Jaywickrema made an important contribution has brought the Buddhist literature preserved in Sri Lanka to the attention of the Western academia and the public.

The second modality, which can be identified as institution-building phase, was when Sri Lankan activists and scholars reached out to the world through international organizations like the Mahabodhi Society of Anagarika Dharmapala (1891) and the World Fellowship of Buddhists (1950) and eminent scholars and missionary monks propagated Buddhism in the West.

One of the most successful steps was the establishment of the London Buddhist Vihara in 1926 by Anagarika Dharmapala Trust and the installation of Sri Lankan monks like Dr. Paravahera Vajiranana and later Narada, Mirisse Gunasiri, Ananda Maitreya etc., right up to present times to cater to the British public. The role of Malalsekera both as a scholar and as the Founder-President of the World Fellowship of Buddhists is significant. These organizations have enabled Sri Lankan monks like Hammalawa Saddhatissa, Walpola Rahula, Piyadassi to do effective Dhammaduta work in the West.

The third modality which is now both visible and effective is the establishment of Sri Lankan Buddhist Viharas in many of the important capitals and cities of the West. These institutions which are directly connected with and supported by the Buddhist expatriate community from Sri Lanka go beyond the ministerial services to the community and serve as centres which enable Western nationals to acquaint themselves with the practice of Buddhism.

It is important to evaluate the results of each of these modalities and explore what needs yet to be done and how Sri Lanka could assume a role which it is well equipped to handle.

Keywords:

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