

Builders of our Nation:

Most Venerable
Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Maha Thera
(1827-1911) - A Visionary Monk of the 19th Century
By
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Most Ven. Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Thera
and Colonel H.S. Olcott
in Colombo, 1889

The disastrous effects of the coming of Europeans since 1505 was visible by the end of the century. Many of the temples in the maritime area of Western and Southern regions were vandalized and the Buddhasāsana was at such a low ebb that it was not possible to find five upasampada or higher ordained monks, the minimum required for a Buddhist ecclesiastical act. King Kīrti

Sri Rajasinghe (1747-1782 C.E.) at the behest of Pindapatika Weliwita Sri Saranankara Sangharaja, sent a mission to the King of Siam requesting higher ordained bhikkhus to re-establish the *upasampadā kamma* in Sri Lanka. This was done with the coming in 1753 of Venerable Upali and other higher ordained monks who re-established the *Sīma* or ecclesiastical boundaries at Malwatta, Kandy. It was the beginning of the Malwatta Chapter of the *Siyāmapāli Nikāya*. Buddhist scholarship too was at a very low ebb and one of the earliest pirivenas to be established was the Parama Dhamma Cetiya Pirivena (1841) at Ratmalana, from where Most Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Maha Thera had his final training.

The given name of Most Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Maha Thera at the time of birth on 20 January, 1827 was Don Nicholas Gunawardhana. His parents were Don Johannes Abeyweera Gunawardhana Ralahamy and Dandangoda Gamage Christina Hamine of Hettigoda, Hikkaduwa. He was the fifth in the family. When his horoscope was drawn according to his time of birth it was mentioned that he was more suitable to lead a bhikkhu life. Accordingly, he was ordained at the age of nine at Totagamuwe Rajamaha Viharaya at Hikkaduwa with the name Hikkaduwe Sumangala. He showed great skill in learning the oriental languages of Pali and Sanskrit and displayed in-born talent. He was an eloquent speaker as well. His thirst for knowledge took him to several teachers to study Sanskrit and English. He was finally placed in charge of Most Venerable Walane Siddhartha Maha Thera, the founder of the Parama Dhamma Cetiya Pirivena. The student life of Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala showed the dearth of facilities for learning and the hardships that had to be undergone. In spite, mainly through self-study and determination, he was able to reach the highest level with recognition by reputed language scholars in India. According to records, he became proficient in Sinhala, Pali, Sanskrit, English, Buddhism, history,

arithmetic and archaeology. He gained his higher ordination at the Uposathaghara at Malwatta Chapter in Kandy in 1848.

One of his contemporaries at Parama Dhamma Cetiya Pirivena was Ven. Ratmalane Sri Dharmāloka (1828-1887), who was equally proficient in the oriental languages. Fully realizing the lack of educational facilities for monks both of them ventured out to establish the Vidyodaya Pirivena at Maligakanda, Colombo in 1872 and Vidyalankara Pirivena at Peliyagoda, Kelaniya in 1875, respectively. These two Pirivenas or Religious Institutes for monks developed their own traditions. To some extent there was scholarly rivalry that enriched scholarship in oriental studies even to attract foreign scholars for further learning. A noteworthy debate was in regard to the donning of robes. The Vidyodaya tradition upheld that both shoulders should be covered when stepping out of the temple and on all special occasions.

The products of Vidyodaya Pirivena include learned scholar monks like Peleṇe Sri Vajirañāṇa, Rambukwelle Sri Siddhartha, Kahawe Sri Ratanasara et al, whose contributions to the fostering of the Buddhasasana and Buddhist scholarship were immense. The common factor that was instilled in all his pupils was strict compliance to the monastic rules of discipline or the Vinaya.

Among his foreign students were T.W. Rhys Davids, who came to Sri Lanka as a member of the Ceylon Civil Service and served as the Government Agent of Anuradhapura. On his return to UK, he established the Pali Text Society (PTS), which had translated the entirety of the Pali Tipitaka and the commentaries into English for the first time. The PTS Pali-English Dictionary edited by Rhys Davids and William Stede is yet the standard dictionary.

Most Venerable Hikkaduwe Siri Sumangala Maha Thera was considered the spark that brought victory to the Buddhist standpoint at the famous Panadura debate between the Christian missionaries and the Buddhist monks in 1873. The proceedings

appeared in the daily newspapers. The reports were gathered from the Press and was published in book form by Dr. J.M. Peebles with the title 'Buddhism and Christianity – Face to Face'. This record fell into the hands of Colonel H.S. Olcott of USA, which resulted in his coming to Sri Lanka and embracing Buddhism. One of his closest associates was Most Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Maha Thera from whom he gained a deeper knowledge of Buddhism. This had a chain reaction in forming the Buddhist Theosophical Society and the opening of schools for Buddhist children who were deprived of higher educational facilities. It may be noted that his parents baptized him for him to gain entry to an English school. His elder brother who was also baptized had later become a Christian it is said. These were the hazards of learning at the time.

All these activities resulted in the Buddhist revival of the late 19th century, which was mentored by Most Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Maha Thera. Not only was he consulted on many an issue but also, he was unanimously appointed the patron or head of many committees. One such committee he headed was the committee to design a flag for the Buddhists. The Buddhist flag that was designed and finalized at the time was recognized by the Buddhist World as its flag. This was on a resolution passed unanimously at the World Fellowship of Buddhists that was established after the 2500th year of Buddha Jayanti celebrated in Sri Lanka in 1956. A few years later Vidyodaya and Vidyalandkara Pirivenas were granted University status. They are renamed now as University of Sri Jayewardenapura and University of Kelaniya respectively. The services rendered by Most Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Maha Thera to Buddhist education and scholarship, and the revival of Buddhism is commemorated on April 29th of every year by a grateful nation.

There were many anecdotes relating to Most Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Maha Thera. Shall end this short

note with one such anecdote. Most Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Maha Thera was traveling by train. He took his allocated seat in the first-class compartment in which there was an English couple seated. On seeing him they were making awkward aspersions. He was undisturbed and was staying calm without a murmur. The train reached Polgahawela station and on the down train the Governor was returning to Colombo. When the Governor saw him, he alighted from the train and respectfully approached him and had a short conversation in immaculate English. The English couple vanished.

**An intelligent person
will open your mind,
a beautiful person
will open your eyes,
a loving kind person
will open your heart.'**

- Author unknown-

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