

*Builders of Our Nation:***Anagarika Dharmapala: Learning from the World,
Serving the Nation***by***Senaka A. Samarasinghe MSc***Coordinator, Institutional Development Unit (Retired)**Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka*

Anagarika Dharmapala (September 17, 1864 – April 29, 1933) is remembered as one of the most influential figures in Sri Lanka's Buddhist revival and national awakening. What makes his life especially interesting is that his ideas were not formed only in Sri Lanka. Through extensive travel across India, Britain, the United States, Japan, Southeast Asia and Hawaii, he observed how different societies responded to colonialism, religion, education and economic change. He then tried to apply those lessons to the needs of Ceylon.

Dharmapala believed that true freedom required more than political independence. A nation also needed confidence in its own culture, education, economy and values. He used his English education in an unexpected way: instead of simply becoming part of the colonial elite, he used the language to communicate Buddhist and national ideas to both local and international audiences.

His participation in the **World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893** was a major turning point. There, he presented Buddhism as a rational, compassionate and nonviolent tradition and built international connections that later supported Buddhist causes.

One of his greatest missions was the revival of Buddhist sacred sites in India, especially **Buddha Gaya**, where the Buddha attained Enlightenment. Through the **Maha Bodhi Society**, founded in 1891, he worked to restore Buddhist heritage, promote Buddhist education, and establish schools, libraries, hospitals, publications and centres of learning. His efforts also helped create stronger links among Buddhists in Sri Lanka, India and other parts of the world.

Dharmapala also understood the power of communication. He travelled throughout Sri Lanka, spoke to communities and used publications such as *Sinhala Bauddhaya*, *Sandaresa* and the *Maha Bodhi Journal* to spread his ideas. He encouraged people to value their cultural heritage, support Buddhist education, avoid harmful habits such as alcohol and become more economically self-reliant.

For him, national development also meant practical skills. After observing industrial education abroad, he supported technical training, handloom weaving, match manufacturing and other local industries. He encouraged young people to develop useful skills and reduce unnecessary dependence on imported goods. His initiatives also extended to indigenous medicine, including a



free Ayurveda clinic in Colombo, while his international Buddhist work contributed to the establishment of a Buddhist Vihara in London.

Dharmapala's legacy should also be studied thoughtfully. While he promoted national awakening, peaceful action and communal harmony, some nationalist writings associated with his movement used harsh language about minority communities. Understanding history means appreciating achievements while also learning critically from its difficult aspects.

For today's youth, perhaps his strongest message is this: **learn from the world, but do not lose your identity.** Education, discipline, service, self-reliance, peaceful action and respect for cultural heritage can all become tools for building a better society. Dharmapala's global experience did not make him less connected to Sri Lanka—it helped him imagine how the country could stand with greater confidence in the world.

