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Bhadrajee Hewage

Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) was a Buddhist speaker, activist, missionary, and founder of the Maha Bodhi Society. A complex and influential figure in modern Buddhism, multiple characterizations of his life are certainly possible. He cleverly crafted different images of what he stood for, and of what he wanted for each of his many constituencies – thus disorienting the many scholars who have written extensively about his career. Espousing a heterogenous rather than a homogenous identity throughout his life, Dharmapala is indeed exceedingly difficult to describe in straightforward terms. Categorized variously as a Buddhist fanatic, Sinhalese supremacist, Sri Lankan patriot, and a pioneering interlocutor between East and West, among countless other apt classifications, Dharmapala remains a figure of incomparable intrigue for those wishing to interpret developments across subcontinental Buddhist circles at the turn of the twentieth century. In terms of that which motivated him, however, a clearer picture emerges of what he believed was his purpose in life.

Indeed, Dharmapala seemingly had two interconnected objectives in life, and both goals involved considerations of what it meant to be Buddhist and how Buddhist teachings and practice were best applied to wider society. Committed to achieving Buddhahood for himself, Dharmapala nonetheless augmented his personal mission with public campaigns to improve the lives of those around him based on what he believed were clear Buddhist principles. As an *anagārika* (‘one without a home’), he was of no fixed abode and moved between his native Ceylon and his adopted India with several global tours helping to greatly inform his wider outlook. As a *dharmapāla* (‘protector of the dharma’), he believed it his greater duty to safeguard and promote the Buddha’s teachings. Known also as Don David Hewavitarane at birth and Sri Devamitta Dhammapala at death, Dharmapala nonetheless found in Buddhism a system of values and beliefs which remained a constant during times of change, both in his own life and in the wider world around him.

This article relates the various and novel ways in which Dharmapala engaged with Buddhism and what exactly the religion represented for him. For most of his life, Dharmapala straddled the traditional lay-clerical divide by carving out a new role for himself. In how he understood Buddhism’s concepts and communicated its practices, theosophical frameworks and Western mentors proved just as important as canonical texts and clerical instruction. His evaluations of the weaknesses and limitations of other religions complemented discourses on the strengths and boundless possibilities of Buddhism itself. An avid reader and a prolific writer and speaker, Dharmapala’s many tours and campaigns enabled him to maintain an incomparable influence on Buddhist developments across

South Asia and beyond. Despite his contested legacy, his importance to global Buddhist discourses cannot be ignored.

Keywords: Anagarika Dharmapala, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Ceylon, Buddhism and Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, Nationalism, Theosophy

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1 Introduction

Dying as Sri Devamitta Dhammapala in 1933, Anagarika Dharmapala's ashes were brought from Sarnath in northern India to Colombo in Ceylon, where a two-mile funerary procession took place across the city. The procession of mourners which followed his casket stretched half of the route's distance. Today, twelve statues of Dharmapala exist across what is now Sri Lanka, with several streets dedicated to his memory in cities such as Colombo, Kandy, Galle, Anuradhapura, and Matara (Kemper 2015: 3). In India, too, three statues of Dharmapala exist at Sarnath, College Square in Kolkata, and Bodh Gaya in Bihar (Siri Sumedha Thero 1999: 35–36). Yet for those who wish to understand Dharmapala's fame, the difficulty in ascribing any kind of linear progression to his life and trajectory becomes painfully obvious. Indeed, he doctored different images of who he was and what he stood for, thus disorienting all those who seek the real Dharmapala (Amunugama 2019: 2).

For his supporters, Dharmapala's indefatigable struggle to reclaim Buddhist ownership of the Mahabodhi temple complex at Bodh Gaya remains the key memory associated with a lifetime spent working for the benefit of Buddhists far and near (Mukherjee 2015; Senanayake 1965). For his opponents, however, Dharmapala's lifelong desire to uplift his native Sinhalese community and their traditional Buddhist faith highlight the narrow mindset of a bigot who cared little for those from other backgrounds (Sarvan 2017). Here emerges Dharmapala's contested legacy as an icon who strove to bridge Asia's colonized present with its authentic Buddhist past, or a dangerous nativist whose abrasive rhetoric demonized racial and religious minorities. Nevertheless, by uncoupling Dharmapala from the legacies for which he is remembered, his reflective and analytical skills in using Buddhism to promote change become readily apparent.

2 Living Buddhism

Born the eldest of four children in Colombo as Don David Hewavitarane on 17 September 1864, Anagarika Dharmapala emerged into a life of affluence and prestige. His father, Don Carolis Hewavitarane, was a successful furniture trader who had recently migrated to Colombo, and Dharmapala's mother, Dona Mallika Dharmagunawardhana, was the daughter of the prosperous Colombo-based businessman, Don Andiris Perera. Though Don Carolis belonged to the dominant Govigama landholding caste and Dona Mallika came from the Durāva caste traditionally associated with toddy tapping, they married in a Colombo where caste distinctions were largely becoming obsolete. Moreover, both Don Carolis and Dharmapala's maternal grandfather, Don Andiris, had been raised to the status of *Muhandiram* (Headman) by the colonial government, thus confirming the Hewavitaranes as esteemed members of the Colombo elite (Obeyesekere 2018: 278–279).

Whereas Dharmapala's natal name and the given names of his family members suggest the Christianization and Westernization of the household, the Hewavitaranes remained a pious Buddhist family. Though styled with biblical and European-derived given names and surnames, as was the norm for many Sinhalese families since Portuguese times, the Hewavitaranes never wavered in their allegiance to Buddhism. Dharmapala's maternal relatives were known in Buddhist circles for their piety. His father and several other paternal relatives helped to establish the Vidyodaya *piriveṇa* in Colombo in 1873, the first Buddhist monastic complex of any kind within the city since precolonial times (Karunaratna 1965: 21). One of Don Carolis' brothers was himself an ordained monk who traced his monastic lineage back to the re-establishment of higher ordination on the island in 1753 (Karunaratna 1965: 19–20; Malalgoda 1976: 61–69). Such was their commitment to the religion, Dharmapala's parents supposedly delayed formally registering their marriage due to their refusal to participate in a Christian church ceremony to complete the process (Karunaratna 1965: 21). As Dharmapala himself beamed, '[m]y family which is Sinhalese, has been Buddhist without a break for twenty-two hundred years […]. All the members of my family were devout' (Dharmapala 1965i: 682).

The Hewavitaranes did not just embrace their Buddhist heritage but also actively participated in Buddhist observances and practices. On *Upōsatha* days of observance in the Buddhist calendar, Dharmapala reflected on how the family 'assembled to spend twenty-four hours in meditation and in reading the Buddhist scriptures and commentaries in honour of the Buddha' before then travelling to temples to make offerings (1965i: 682–683). The Hewavitaranes also maintained a close pastoral relationship with Hikkaduwe Sumangala and Migettuwatte Gunananda, two leading clerical figures who were at that time associated with the then burgeoning Buddhist revivalist movement in Ceylon which Dharmapala himself would later dominate (Blackburn 2010). Such was the intimacy between the family and the two clerics, Don Carolis even managed to convince them to migrate to Colombo from their bases in the island's southern regions to minister to the faithful in a city long devoid of Buddhist establishments and institutions.

The Buddhist environment which surrounded Dharmapala, however, did not itself inspire Dharmapala to dedicate his life to Buddhism. Discontent with the norms and expectations of Ceylonese society, especially for those who belonged to the same social milieu as the Hewavitaranes, proved the ultimate trigger. As were most Sinhalese during the time, Don Carolis was keenly interested in astrological charts. As the eldest son of the Hewavitaranes, Dharmapala was set to succeed his father in managing the family's business affairs. Aware that his eldest son's horoscope foretold of a destiny as a *hatara kēndaraya pāḷuvuna kenek* ('one destined to become either a king or a beggar'), Don Carolis handed over the reins to Dharmapala's younger brother Edmund instead (Kemper 2015: 32). Passed over by Don Carolis, Dharmapala later admitted that his father 'loved

money more than me' (Diary, 19 March 1898). Although Dharmapala did not explicitly mention so, Don Carolis also likely took negatively to Dharmapala's deformed leg – a visible physical defect traditionally associated with poor karmic merit in a previous life.

Humiliated at the change in his career prospects, Dharmapala also witnessed the hardships his parents experienced – despite their wealth and privilege – and further feared for his own future. Observing Dona Mallika's frequent bouts of poor health, he lamented his mother's prolonged suffering and even proclaimed his wish to die before her (Dharmapala 2014f: 358, 369). Her profound grief after losing her daughter in infancy also deeply troubled him. Dharmapala explained, 'I, a boy of seventeen, decided that I would never be the cause of sorrow to a woman, and I made up my mind [then] not to entangle myself in the net of worldly desires' (1965i: 686). Recalling the death of his infant sister again in 1930, he described how '[t]his suffering of my mother made [me] to think of the misery of bringing forth children, and the future results of having sexual contact with a woman' (Diary, 18 October 1930). At the age of eighteen, Dharmapala argued that he understood the suffering associated with the teaching of samsara or the cycle of rebirths (2014f: 334). The toll of family life, Dharmapala decided on reflection, was simply too much to bear. Given the hardships of his own life, he vowed to instead spend the remainder of his life serving others. He explained, 'I would endeavour from then on to devote my life to the welfare of others'. Yet, as he ultimately acknowledged, '[e]xactly how I was to carry out my resolve, I was not [then] certain' (1965i: 686).

The growth of theosophical activity across Ceylon from the 1880s provided Dharmapala the path he needed to answer his calling. From their arrival onto the island in 1880, the Theosophical Society cultivated relationships with several leading Buddhist monastics – many of whom, such as Hikkaduwe Sumangala and Migettuwatte Gunananda, were already intimately connected with the Hewavitaranes. While still at school, Dharmapala obtained theosophist literature from these Buddhist clerics and learned to appreciate its teachings and insights. He noted, 'the desire for universal brotherhood, for all the things they wanted for humanity, struck a responsive chord'. Introduced to theosophy by the Buddhists around him, Dharmapala soon concluded that the theosophists 'were the exponents of Buddhism to the western world' (1965i: 685). Requesting to formally join the Theosophical Society in November 1883, he finally received permission the following year.

Whatever little the Hewavitaranes knew about theosophy and its origins, Dharmapala's parents firmly connected it with Buddhist piety, and they likely considered their son's involvement with it as indicative of Dharmapala's desire to deepen his personal Buddhist practice. Following an invitation for Dharmapala to travel to the Society's headquarters at Adyar near Madras in India, Dona Mallika willed her son to 'work for humanity' while Don Carolis insisted that he 'aspire to be a *Bodhisattva*' (1965i: 687). Helena Blavatsky, the Society's co-founder, further encouraged Dharmapala to work for 'the service of humanity'

and instructed him to improve his proficiency in Pāli – the liturgical language of the Theravada Buddhism he already professed (1965i: 687). Indeed, he returned to Ceylon and did just this. ‘I devoted my spare time in Colombo to the study of those beautiful old manuscripts’, Dharmapala recalled, ‘and thus became familiar with Buddhist canonical scriptures’ (1965i: 687).

The instructions of his parents and Blavatsky proved especially formative. Cast out of the family business and unwilling to marry and start a family, Dharmapala had nonetheless managed to secure entry into the Ceylonese civil service despite not completing his matriculation examination. His involvement with the theosophists, however, confirmed for Dharmapala his immediate priorities. As he recalled on his return to Ceylon, ‘[i]n 1886 I severed from the bustling world; in 1887 I began working for Humanity’ (Diary, 17 February 1891). Dharmapala felt that he knew now what ‘working for Humanity’ meant. On his return, he insisted to Don Carolis that he wished to devote ‘all [his] time to the welfare of the Sasana [Buddhist religion] […] as the Theosophical Society was working for the good of Buddhism’ (1965l: 702). His desire communicated to his parents and to those around him, he left the Hewavitarane household for the final time in November 1886.

When he distanced himself from the pressures of lay life in 1886, Dharmapala curiously chose not to become a Buddhist monk – the traditional avenue for Buddhists who renounced material comforts. Instead, he opted to dedicate himself to humanitarian activity and Buddhist welfare by embracing the *brahmacārya* path.

In traditional Hindu philosophy, *brahmacārya* represents the first *āśrama* or ‘dwelling phase’ of life focused on learning and spiritual discipline, and for Buddhists – both lay practitioners and clerics – it signifies a commitment to chastity and ethical living as a means of attaining liberation from suffering. Dharmapala first embraced this vow at the tender age of nine, though just for one day to mark a Buddhist observance. Making such a commitment at such a young age, however, even if only for a single day, was quite rare – particularly among those in the same social circles as the Hewavitaranes. Yet, for Dharmapala, a deeper commitment to the *brahmacārya* ideal after abandoning family life afforded him considerable flexibility.

As a *brahmacārya*, Dharmapala could freely skirt the boundaries between lay and monastic life and so obtain the benefits accorded to both ways of living. For Dharmapala, life as a *brahmacārya* ‘entailed celibacy, a vegetarian diet, reading Buddhist texts, wearing ochre robes and meditating’ (Kemper 2019: 232). Dharmapala himself explained how living as a *brahmacārya* signified a total commitment to the Buddha, daily meditation and worship, forfeiture of luxuries, and the avoidance of inflammatory language (2014f: 343). Moreover, Dharmapala was keenly aware of the destiny foretold by his astrological charts. While he himself never explicitly listed his horoscope as a justification to pursue

the *brahmacārya* path, Dharmapala perhaps reasoned that his decision would spare both him and the wider Hewavitarane family from the social stigma associated with his refusal to seek a professional career.

Furthermore, as a *brahmacārya*, Dharmapala renounced not just material comforts but also his natal names. Born Don David Hewavitarane, he discarded his given names Don David and began referring to himself as Hewavitarane Dharmapala. *Dharmapāla*, in Sanskrit, signified one who acted as a 'protector of the Dharma'. For Ceylonese Buddhists, the term was traditionally associated with commentators of canonical texts and with former monarchs. Dharmapala, however, seemingly adopted the name to highlight his self-professed determination to serve Buddhism by protecting Buddhist interests. Indeed, it was as the Hewavitarane Dharmapala that he began his campaigns to recover the Mahabodhi complex in 1891 by establishing the Maha Bodhi Society and travelling to the World's Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 to defend Buddhism in front of Western audiences. Nevertheless, he changed his name again in October 1895, just months after his legal defeat over the Mahabodhi site. As Dharmapala later reflected on the decision to discard Hewavitarane from his name, '[a]ctively as I had identified myself with the Buddhist cause, I still only wore the white robe of a student […]. But in October, 1895, I put on the yellow robe; I became an *Anagarika*' (1965i: 690).

A devotee who abandons all comforts and possessions to dedicate themselves completely to Buddhist practice, an *anagārika* ('one without a home') typically chooses this way of life as a stepping stone to eventual monastic ordination. Dharmapala again, however, blended both the *anagārika* and *dharmapāla* roles and crafted a new mode of living which allowed him to live a life which combined service with near-total renunciation. Dharmapala, in effect, achieved a 'betwixt-and-between' status as a 'homeless protector of the religion' (Sirisena 2017: 130). Indeed, his 'yellow robe' aptly fused the white sartorial attire worn by pious lay Buddhists with the ochre clothing traditionally associated with Theravadin monastics. As an *anagārika*, Dharmapala further emphasized his desire to emulate the Buddha himself given how the Buddha, too, was of no fixed abode following his renunciation of royal life. Indeed, Dharmapala's writings are replete with analogies between his life and that of the Buddha, and Dharmapala's wish to tread the same path as his idol remains clear for all to see.

As an *anagārika*, Dharmapala occupied a liminal position between lay and monastic life for roughly three decades. Nevertheless, he eventually undertook ordination and became a *sāmaṇera* (novice monk) in 1931 and obtained *upasampada* (higher ordination) just three months before his death in 1933. Ordination was not a spur of the moment decision for Dharmapala. Indeed, it was a decision which he grappled with throughout his life. He seriously considered ordaining in 1899 and again in 1906 but ultimately chose not to pursue the monkhood as he realized that '[t]hen my work was unfinished' (Diary, 30

December 1930). He explained that ordination was the culmination of an almost forty-year career dedicated to *śāsanika* (Buddhist welfare) work and maintained that ordination was justified only when he was too old and feeble to continue his activities (2014h: 254). Other issues, however, also factored into Dharmapala's considerations. As mentioned, Dharmapala suffered from a deformity in one of his legs, and physical disabilities generally precluded candidates from seeking ordination. His mixed-caste parentage proved another obstacle to ordination given the caste-based origins and distinctions of Ceylon's various monastic fraternities (Malalgoda 1976). Spending most of his career as an *anagārika* enabled Dharmapala to cultivate a reputation for piety and service which allowed him to eventually overcome the obstacles to ordination which would have otherwise prevented him becoming a monastic.

Upon ordination, Dharmapala adopted the clerical appellation Sri Devamitta Dhammapala. Styling himself as a *dēvamitta*, Dharmapala wished to convey that he was indeed a 'divine friend' to all when carrying out his Buddhist mission. In choosing the name, however, Dharmapala also highlighted his reverence for another monastic who had instructed him in his youth, Heiyantuduwe Devamitta. Through him, Dharmapala strengthened his bond to both the Siyam Nikaya monastic fraternity to which his instructor – and Don Carolis' brother – belonged and to the pupillary tradition of the now long-deceased pastor of the Hewavitarane family, Hikkaduwe Sumangala. Furthermore, the *dharmapāla* name associated with his *brahmacārya* and *anagārika* phases, now became *dhammapāla*. The Sanskritic and Hindu connotations of the term, in effect, were replaced by those associated with the Pāli language and Buddhism. Indeed, there is no question that Dharmapala's decision to adopt its Pāli variant clearly specified his moorings not just as a Buddhist but as a Theravada Buddhist (Karunaratna 1965: 134).

3 Interpreting Buddhism

Despite the shifting self-identifications throughout his career, Dharmapala nevertheless remained wholly committed to Buddhism. While he continually straddled the divide between lay and monastic modes of life, Dharmapala nonetheless always remained firmly within the Buddhist fold. His commitment and devotion to the faith into which he was born was never in doubt. When it comes to interpreting how exactly Dharmapala himself interpreted his Buddhist beliefs, however, a series of difficulties arise. As mentioned, Dharmapala maintained two solid objectives to which he continually referred across his lifetime: namely, a personal wish to achieve Buddhahood which accompanied his vow to serve humanity through campaigns focused on Buddhist welfare – of which the Mahabodhi legal campaign was most prominent. This personal desire to achieve Buddhahood compels us to analyse Dharmapala within the *bōdhisattva* framework. As noted, Don Carolis urged his son to become a *bōdhisattva* following Dharmapala's

decision to abandon lay life. Yet Dharmapala's bespoke career and way of living meant that he did not fit neatly into the traditional *bōdhisattva* schema.

In general terms, a *bōdhisattva* in Buddhism forsakes premature enlightenment to help others to obtain liberation from suffering. In Theravada Buddhism, the wider hagiography of the Buddha – describing his numerous births and rebirths before his final emergence as Siddhartha Gautama – functions as the prime model of one willingly giving up one's own liberation from samsara to teach and serve others. Within the Theravadin understanding of the term, however, a *bōdhisattva* does not openly 'exhibit' their goal or progress to others. For a *bōdhisattva*, there is simply no necessity or urgency in revealing their '*bodhisattvahood*' to those whom they wish to guide (Ratnayaka 1985: 88–93). From his writings and speeches, Dharmapala did not shy away from proclaiming his mission to achieve Buddhahood and even reflected on his progress towards the goal at various points throughout his life. Nevertheless, he bought into the importance of hagiography in the *bōdhisattva* tradition of Theravada Buddhism, and clearly expressed his wish 'to receive the vivarana from the Buddha Metteyya' whereby he could attain Buddhahood through the receipt of a warrant from the future Buddha (Diary, 9 May 1924). Believing that the future Buddha would be reborn as a Brahmin in India, Dharmapala even explicitly expressed his desire for rebirth as a Brahmin in India to follow the Buddha's path (2014c: 250; 1965o: 113). Michael Roberts highlights this disjuncture between Dharmapala's identification with orthodox Theravada Buddhism and his unorthodox Buddhahood pursuit in which he publicly asserted his *bōdhisattva* status. He suggests, '[i]n deciding to take the path of a *bodhisattva* Dharmapala could be said to have invested both his life work and his serial accounts of this endeavour with the character of a heroic saga' (Roberts 2000: 126).

Rather than emphasizing the hagiographical tradition of the Buddha in its description of the *bōdhisattva*, Mahāyāna Buddhism instead actively encourages everyone to become a *bōdhisattva* and so a future Buddha (Harris 2015: 203). In principle, Dharmapala agreed that all beings should work towards Buddhahood and help others achieve the same. Yet he frequently declared that not everyone was suited to pursuing *his* specific path and that only a handful of select aspirants could truly achieve *bōdhisattva* status. A greater problem, however, was Dharmapala's rejection of Mahāyāna Buddhism's historical authenticity. Mahāyānists, he argued, polluted Buddhism by 'sensualising ritualism' and cultivating 'indifference' which allowed 'ferocious iconoclastic invaders to plunder and destroy the Aryan civilization that had existed for nearly 2000 years' (Dharmapala 1965t: 56). To reclaim the Mahabodhi site, Dharmapala saw no issue with soliciting the help and support of Mahāyāna communities across Asia. Yet their form of Buddhism was not one which he could bring himself to promote.

On reflection, Dharmapala therefore vowed to attain Buddhahood following the Theravadin understanding of the *bōdhisattva* concept, which prioritizes and focuses on individual

paths to liberation, but resolved to help and serve everyone in accordance with its Mahāyāna interpretation. Such was again the intriguing position which Dharmapala occupied in pursuing his mission, Roberts writes that 'Dharmapala was a *bosat* [*bōdhisattva*] crusader […] a socio-political reformer who was at once traditionalist and modernising' (Roberts 2000: 131). Dharmapala therefore became a hybrid *bōdhisattva* of sorts, his objectives readily identifiable with neither sectarian affiliation. Serving humanity, for Dharmapala, did not just mean uplifting Buddhists. Rather, in totally committing himself to Buddhism, he also wished to act as a guide from whom other Buddhists could learn and receive guidance. This betwixt-and-between status Dharmapala occupied as he moved through life greatly affected the ways in which he went about achieving his mission. Indeed, his very mediation of Buddhism itself generates additional transgressions of conventions and custom.

Indeed, Dharmapala, unlike other pious Buddhists who sought to further their commitment to the religion, did not seek out an established Buddhist cleric – in Ceylon or elsewhere – for mentorship or personal instruction. Despite the close association of the Hewavitarane family with several leading monastics, Dharmapala did not request any of them to provide him with personalized spiritual guidance. He seemingly preferred to strike out on his own and make sense of Buddhism on his own terms. As Ruth Harris (Forthcoming: 27) suggests, perhaps his self-perception as a crusading *bōdhisattva* reflected his belief that he was no longer in need of close direction from an established authority figure from within the religion. What is clear, however, is his aptitude for self-learning and for educating himself in religious affairs. As Steven Kemper (2019: 228) notes, the lists of the books Dharmapala references in just his diaries alone runs to roughly seventy-pages – single spaced. Dharmapala did not just limit himself to Buddhist discourses and treatises but rather read widely on all matters related to religion, science, and the occult. Put simply, ideas from these fields excited him and helped to shape his personal mediation of Buddhism which itself perhaps reflected a modernistic understanding of spiritual development which valued direct access to spirituality without the need for ritual and clerical guidance.

Concerned with religion, science, the occult, and many other matters, theosophy proved a critical intellectual influence. As mentioned, Dharmapala's introduction to theosophy and theosophists strengthened his commitment to Buddhist service, and it is difficult to unpick his personal Buddhist beliefs without first understanding theosophy's place within them. 'I am again thinking of the Masters', he wrote in 1924, '[t]he two Adepts [Koot Hoomi and Morya] are trying to revive the Sasana […] in the next life I hope to be born physically strong to climb the Himalayas and to study the sacred science' (Diary, 9 March 1924). With its references to 'Masters' and 'Adepts', it is difficult to believe that these words came from the pen of an orthodox Theravada Buddhist. Nevertheless, words such as these – and countless others across his diaries and other writings – demonstrate the pervasive

influence theosophical vocabulary had on Dharmapala's thought and distinguish him from other Buddhist figures who had less intellectual contact with theosophy.

Despite his proficiency in both Sinhalese and Pāli, Dharmapala accessed and developed Buddhist ideas primarily through theosophical works in the English language. As an eighteen-year-old, he read A. P. Sinnett's *The Occult World* (1882) which first provided him with the inspiration to serve as a *chela* or 'disciple', finding Sinnett's argument that true knowledge came from 'science and religion commingled' especially compelling (Harris Forthcoming: 16). Dharmapala further accepted the existence of masters and adepts who functioned for him as *mahatma*s or a form of advanced spiritual beings who lived in the elevated Himalayan planes from where they disseminated messages of hope and service worldwide. Two such *mahatma*s of particular importance to Dharmapala were Master Moriya and Koot Hoomi from whom Dharmapala insisted he received personal messages and secret instructions (Kemper 2019: 73). Personal contact with masters and adepts of a *mahatma* nature was, of course, absent in orthodox Buddhist practice and descriptions of them simply did not exist in Buddhist texts.

Dharmapala's fascination with these *mahatma*s highlights again the formative influence of Blavatsky – who compelled him to devote his life to Buddhism – on his thinking. Born into the Russian aristocracy, Blavatsky abandoned her husband and family, travelled across Europe, North America, and Asia, and became a renowned spiritualist and occultist famed for her unusual psychic powers. As Harris demonstrates, even in Sinnett's impactful monograph, 'many saw little more than Blavatsky's imitable style in [Sinnett's] words'. With Blavatsky's own discourses on periodicity and cyclicity in her *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), Dharmapala would have welcomed her emphasis on karma and the importance of rescuing religious 'truths' from degradation (Harris Forthcoming: 17). While he likely would have strongly disagreed with her musings on individual souls and the existence of a universal 'oversoul', he undoubtedly appreciated Blavatsky's efforts to embrace – from a theosophical perspective – that which he believed lay at the heart of Buddhist thought and practice. Blavatsky, however, was not the only theosophist who played a leading role in influencing Dharmapala's mission.

A Civil War veteran from the United States and of a Presbyterian background, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott was keenly interested in reshaping Asian religions on his own terms and was especially inspired by visions of what Harris terms a Buddhist 'enlightenment' (Harris Forthcoming: 20). Buddhism, he argued, needed to be stripped of its folk superstitions, ritualism, and sectarianism, but he curiously emphasized what he saw as its inherent rationalism and alignment with the occult. As Harris suggests, Olcott reasoned that science and the occult were not mutually exclusive and that science was miraculous just as the miraculous was scientific (Harris Forthcoming: 20). Introduced to Olcott when he first arrived in Ceylon with Blavatsky in 1880, Dharmapala learned

from him to appreciate Buddhism's applications to phenomena which were beyond the strictly spiritual and found validation of his engagement with the *mahatma*s in his personal practice (McMahan 2008: 99–101). Nevertheless, he was never as reverential towards Olcott as he was towards Blavatsky. Olcott, undoubtedly, was an important mentor who helped Dharmapala embark upon his career. Yet Olcott's clashes with his acolyte over the Mahabodhi campaign, relationships with Indian theosophists, and treatment of Buddhist relics resulted in Dharmapala always lying somewhat beyond Olcott's authority (Kemper 2015: 82–89).

Furthermore, the tensions Dharmapala experienced with Olcott mirrored the turbulent relationship he later developed with institutional theosophy more generally. Theosophy emerged first in North America as a repudiation of mainstream Christian thinking and practice, and in South Asia – especially in Ceylon – Western theosophists were welcomed as allies against Christian missionary activity. Indeed, in Ceylon, both Blavatsky and Olcott championed the island's Buddhist revival and even formally converted to Buddhism following their arrival in 1880. Moreover, Blavatsky and Olcott helped Dharmapala soften the absence of Dona Mallika and Don Carolis from his life following his renunciation and enabled him to gain autonomy in his own mission from both his biological parents and the wider Buddhist clerical establishment. Nevertheless, he resented what Alan Trevithick describes as the 'Great White Brotherhood' which the Theosophical Society created in which 'little dark helpers' merely enabled the whims of Western theosophists (Harris Forthcoming: 24; Trevithick 2015: 1). Questions about the probity of these theosophists further troubled Dharmapala (Harris Forthcoming: 24–25). Perhaps his greatest frustration with the Theosophical Society, however, was the 'Hinduized direction' in which institutional theosophy in South Asia travelled under Annie Besant following Olcott's death in 1907 (Kemper 2015: 58). While Dharmapala publicly reconciled with Besant and the Society in 1911, he still privately maintained – right through to his final days – that they had betrayed Buddhism.

Indeed, Dharmapala firmly labelled himself as a Buddhist above all. Theosophy, in Olcott's words, aimed 'to aid in the institution of a Brotherhood of Humanity, wherein all good and pure men of every race shall recognize each other as equal effects (upon this planet) of one Un-Create, Universal, Infinite, and Everlasting Cause' (1935: 400–401 [vol. 1]). Dharmapala though showed scant regard for any 'brotherhood' which claimed to supersede his natal religion. The Buddha, he argued, founded 'for the first time in history' the very 'idea of a brotherhood of man' (1965m: 205). Dharmapala's own activities did not push for the creation of a united Buddhist world as an end in itself. Working for Buddhist unity, he hypothesized, was needed both to recover the Mahabodhi site – a location significant to all Buddhists regardless of sectarian affiliation – and to generate karmic merit in his mission to achieve Buddhahood. The Theosophical Society's lofty ambition to

promote the truths present in all religions mattered little. Theosophy itself was important only in its constructed relationship with Buddhism.

Inherently transidiomatic but also additive, theosophy thus enabled Dharmapala to mediate his surroundings in ways that were Buddhist, theosophist, or both. ‘I could sum [up] by calling Dharmapala a Tantric Theravadin’, Kemper suggests, ‘but we could just as well call him a Theosophical Tantric Theravadin’. Dharmapala, he continues, ‘was simply up to his neck in transidiomatic vocabulary’ (Kemper 2019: 239). For Dharmapala, a cycle emerged wherein his own interpretation of what it meant to identify as a Buddhist linked him to a subsection of theosophical concepts which in turn confirmed what he already accepted and reenergized the religion into which he was born. While he described how ‘I came to India first because I was a Theosophist, and I came to Buddha Gaya as a Buddhist’, there really was no clear chronological demarcation between his associations with theosophy and Buddhism (Memorandum to 1919 diary). Theosophy, in its institutional manifestations, often troubled him. Yet as a personal philosophy replete with masters and adepts, it remained with Dharmapala right through to his final days.

He therefore remained as devoted to the Buddha as he was to Blavatsky. He embraced the *brahmacārya* and *anagārika* paths just as wholeheartedly as he did the *mahatma*s. A maverick *bōdhisattva* who defied convention and charted his own course to Buddhahood, Dharmapala was without parallel in the Buddhist world. His ties to Buddhism ran through theosophy just as his ties to theosophy ran through Buddhism. While Dharmapala’s Buddhism remained overcoded and transidiomatic given its entanglements with theosophy, for him the religion’s infallibility and superiority over other religious systems was without question. Various political, economic, and social issues plagued the different publics through which Dharmapala moved, but Buddhism again seemed the only way through which to come up with meaningful answers to society’s problems. Whereas other thinkers posited a wide variety of theories and actions to combat the societal malaise which gripped the *fin de siècle* period through which he spent the bulk of his adult life, Dharmapala firmly believed in Buddhism’s supremacy in driving change. It was a pragmatic faith, he insisted, with lessons for everyone regardless of background or circumstance.

In how he represented Buddhism for others, however, Dharmapala took a different approach and emphasized Buddhism’s appeal for those minded towards both tradition and modernity. For Ceylonese Buddhist audiences, he railed against the introduction of what he perceived as ‘Western abominations’, from weapons to whisky, which he believed were plaguing Buddhist societies. He further lambasted what he described as an adherence to ‘heathenish diabolisms’ which for him marked a turn away from the path of ‘ethical purity’ on the island (1965o: 105). For Dharmapala, Buddhist antiquity and the precolonial period represented a harmonious past with freedom and prosperity for all in society. As he explained in 1918, a society built upon traditional Buddhist principles was destined for

‘loftier heights’ (1965s: 41). Indeed, his opposition to British policy in Ceylon was driven largely by resentment at what Britain permitted in its mainly Buddhist colony rather than by frustration at the inherent nature of colonial rule in and of itself. As he noted in his diaries, ‘the British perpetrated atrocities on the helpless Sinhalese’ but ‘the time [has] come to show our generous spirit by giving them the Ambrosial Dhamma’ (Diary, 6 March 1926). Buddhism’s value for the Ceylonese, as Dharmapala continually emphasized, was as their traditional religion that had greatly enriched their lives and defined their society.

For Western audiences, Dharmapala preferred instead to present Buddhism as a religion of modernity. In addition to introducing the basic tenets of the religion to those assembled before the World’s Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893, he stressed Buddhism’s compatibility with Western morals and scientific principles. ‘Wherever Buddhism has gone’, he preached to those gathered, ‘the people have become gentler and milder’ (1965w: 18). Referencing the mathematician Lord Kelvin, the physicist John Tyndall, and the naturalist Charles Darwin, Dharmapala further insisted to the Chicago crowd that their respective discoveries were in full alignment with Buddhist doctrines of karma and dharma. Buddhism, he insisted, ‘is a scientific religion, in as much as it earnestly enjoins that nothing whatever be accepted on faith […]. Buddhism is tantamount to a knowledge of other sciences’ (1965w: 20). The audience did not have to take Dharmapala’s word for these claims. Indeed, he concluded his address by referring to a whole host of works on Buddhism, mainly by Western scholars, which he encouraged the crowd to read (1965w: 22).

That Buddhism was moral and scientific proved especially important for Dharmapala in selling the religion to non-Buddhist audiences throughout his career. Privately, in his diaries, he wrote his belief that Abrahamic religions did not have a scientific background and did not promote scientific advancement or progress (Diary, 18 October 1915). Publicly, he further argued that Buddhist considerations of science even surpassed European understandings due to Buddhism’s perceived special alignment with modern psychology. As he explained in 1924, ‘[t]he boasted progress that is to be seen in Europe is due to the discoveries in the realm of physical science’. Yet, believing psychology to represent ‘serious’ science and with Buddhism its best proponent, Dharmapala insisted that psychology ‘has made no tangible impression as yet in the European Consciousness’ (1965f: 440). Theosophy allowed Dharmapala to interpret Buddhism in his own unique way. Morality and science, however, represented for him the best way to enable non-Buddhist audiences to warm to and accept the religion.

4 Comparing Buddhism

From analyses of Dharmapala’s writings and speeches, it also becomes abundantly clear that his belief in Buddhism’s superiority emerged from his own evaluations of other

religious systems. Despite abandoning his formal education just shy of his matriculation examination, Dharmapala kept himself informed by reading widely on all matters – religious and otherwise. His reading habits naturally drove him to consider the merits and disadvantages of other religions and ultimately convinced him that Buddhism was '[t]he one religion that stands by itself' (Dharmapala 1965d: 156). Indeed, it is from these explorations of other faiths that we get his clearest reasons as to why Buddhism alone could solve societal problems.

Socialized in Buddhism at home, Dharmapala nonetheless received his schooling from a variety of different Christian missionary institutions in Colombo. There is little surprise, then, that Christianity proved especially influential in Dharmapala's wider studies of comparative religion. As a schoolchild, he explained, '[c]ontinuous reading of the Bible […] made me fond of the Bible unconnected with the lessons that I was expected to learn by heart' (1965l: 699). As he told an audience in the United States, '[a]long with the ancient Buddhist writings, I carry with me everywhere a leather-bound Bible, which is heavily underlined with references and cross-references and falling apart from constant use'. He continued, '[w]hat comparisons I make and parallels I draw between Christianity and Buddhism are the result of long study of the scriptures and observation of the every-day practices of the two religions' (1965i: 681–682). In London, too, he emphasized to those gathered around him, 'I [always] compare the teachings of Jesus with the teachings of the Buddha, his parables with the Buddhist parables, his ethical and psychological teachings with the ethics and psychology of Buddhism' (1965c: 445).

Examinations of Dharmapala's views on other religions often focus on his harsh rhetoric towards other religious communities – especially in his native Ceylon – rather than on what he explicitly discussed about the wider religions themselves. Christianity represented the religion with which Dharmapala was most familiar after Buddhism. Despite a generally negative attitude towards the faith, he nonetheless tempered this with bouts of praise. He critiqued Christianity through his understanding of Jesus as a religious personality, the activities of missionaries themselves, and the nature and content of both Christian antiquity and theology. Evaluating the religion in both its Ceylonese and global context, Dharmapala concluded that whatever good qualities Christianity and its practitioners possessed, Buddhism far surpassed the faith as a religious model worthy of emulation.

Indeed, Dharmapala's most scathing critique of Christianity was perhaps best reflected in his low view of the religion's founder, Jesus Christ. 'What has Jesus done for the world?' he once wrote before noting 'his teachings were confined to the poor and the low, and in two years he had finished his mission; and he vanished giving them false hope that he would return with his angels before their death' (Diary, 11 October 1902). 'There was nothing especially sublime in the teachings of Christ', he again insisted, '[h]is parables show him to be a man of limited knowledge' (1965e: 448). Personally attacking

Jesus, Dharmapala perhaps theorized, would encourage his audiences to reflect on the weaknesses associated with the wider Christian religion itself. ‘Jesus as a human personality was an utter failure’, he insisted in a supplement for Western readers, ‘[h]e made no impression on the public during the three years of his ministry’. He maintained, ‘[n]o thinker or philosopher took the least notice of his philosophy which helped to create imbeciles’ (1965k: 475).

For Dharmapala, key to diminishing Christ was highlighting his weaknesses when compared to what he believed were the Buddha’s strengths. ‘Jesus was not a friend of the rich’, Dharmapala argued, ‘[t]he inconceivable is that Jesus should say that a rich man shall hardly enter the kingdom of heaven’. This, he insisted, was the very opposite of the Buddha’s example. He noted how ‘[t]he Lord Buddha had some of the wealthiest disciples of the land as His disciples […]. He never expected impossible things from His disciples, and his ethics were within the range of human possibilities’. Yet ‘[u]nworkable ethics’, as Dharmapala described them, ‘we find in several places in the teachings of the Nazarene Carpenter’ (1965e: 449). Indeed, throughout the corpus of Dharmapala’s writings, unfavourable comparisons of Christ to the Buddha present themselves. In 1926, he raged, ‘[Jesus] taught no high ethic […]. He claimed to be the son of “God” and before him many had made a similar claim; but that was not sufficient for rational people to accept the claimant as a Saviour’. As Dharmapala insisted, ‘[t]he Prince Siddhartha was not satisfied with the crude theories of unenlightened nincompoops [*sic*]’ (Diary, 17 April 1926). His allegation that Christ appropriated content from the Buddha himself proved especially damning. Studying the Sermon on the Mount shortly before his death, Dharmapala – while acknowledging its ethical and moral content – highlighted it as proof that ‘Jesus had come under the influence of both Buddhists and Vedantins’ (1965v: 286).

Dharmapala’s insistence that Christianity, more generally, appropriated religious content from Buddhism and elsewhere further reflected his low opinion of its overall theological promise. The tale of Lazarus finding a place ‘in the bosom of (Brahma) Abrahma [*sic*]’, he posited, was ‘proof’ that Buddha’s teachings were accepted by Christ (Diary, 3 February 1892). Referencing seventeenth-century Chinese scholarship, he wrote how Christianity ‘pilfer[ed]’ the concepts of heaven and hell from ‘the refuse of Buddhism’ before then – astonishingly – using these ideas to target and attack Buddhism (Diary, 20 April 1892). Writing in Sinhalese, Dharmapala mused that the New Testament *dharma avavāda svalpayak tibē* (‘contained little dharmic advice’) which was nonetheless *upuṭāgat* (‘grabbed’) from Buddhism anyway (2014b: 176). Christian appropriation of religious material, Dharmapala countered, was also not just stolen from Buddhism. Biblical stories associated with Abraham and Noah were ‘borrowed’ from Chaldean and Babylonian folklore myths. The legend of the resurrection, he continued, ‘is a borrowing from Egyptian Osirism, also the sonship of God […] [and] [t]he legend of the conflict between God and the Devil is from Persian borrowing’ (Dharmapala 1965k: 467). Furthermore, whatever

Christianity taught which was not appropriated from elsewhere, he considered simply unremarkable. Dharmapala, however, does not discuss in detail how he came to hold views such as these. He relied on his own comprehensive ability rather than reference to established scholarship and saw no reason to doubt the validity of his claims and interpretations. His heavy exposure to Christianity from an early age, he reasoned, justified his self-professed authority on Christian matters.

Indeed, Dharmapala's lived experiences with Christian missionaries further turned him against Christianity. An avid reader, he was horrified at their role in massacring Indigenous Latin American communities and was aware of their contributions to sectarian violence in Europe, especially in Ireland (2014g: 132–133). His own negative observations of them, however, were again especially damning. While he acknowledged that they sacrificed 'not only gold but blood which is more than gold' in their efforts, Dharmapala could not forget the memory of his schoolteacher shooting birds. He realized, '[t]his is no religion for me […]. He is a preacher of Christianity and he goes out cold-bloodedly and kills innocent birds' (1965i: 684). At a Catholic school, he remembered how '[t]he *padres* were great pork-eaters […]. These fellows must [therefore] be very dirty'. He continued, '[t]hat thought was enough to breed an early contempt for my missionary teachers' (1965i: 683). A further problem, Dharmapala believed, was the proliferation of low-class missionaries. In Ceylon, he lamented, '[h]alf educated ecclesiastical imbeciles we have by the hundreds'. He explained, '[i]n no other country does the missionary revel in such luxury as in the land "where every prospect pleases."' It was thus useless, he wrote, 'to expect anything beneficial to the development of the larger consciousness of the Buddhist Community' (1965g: 463–464).

Islam, too, faced Dharmapala's wrath. In terms of its religious teaching, he grouped Islam together with Christianity and explained, '[t]he two Semitic religions […] are responsible for the retardation of progress of the larger Humanity of Asia' (1965h: 456–457). He singled out Islam, however, for its seemingly bespoke violent past. 'Islam is responsible for the destruction of the Aryan civilization of India', he lamented, '[a]ll that was beautiful in aesthetic architecture, built by the devotees of Aryan spirituality, went down with a crash […]. The two thousand years of Aryan culture was utterly destroyed by the Moslem vandals'. From his observation of the Shia festival of Muharram, Dharmapala wrote, 'Islam is the religion for the brigand and the highwayman […]. It appeals to the ignorant mind' (Diary, 13 August 1921). In Bengal, where he noted Buddhism once flourished, he again mourned how the threat of religious warfare partitioned the region. In Ceylon, too, he further expressed his outrage at how Buddhists *mataka næti kara tibē* ('had forgotten') how Muslims treated them during rioting in 1915 (2014f: 340). Perhaps Dharmapala's biggest grievance, however, was his association of Islam with Buddhism's decline in India. As he explained, 'when the cohorts of Mahmud of Ghazni commenced their savage

vandalism, and persisted in their savage career under successive iconoclasts, extending for several centuries, Buddhism ceased to exist' (1965o: 106).

Nevertheless, despite his criticism of the religion, Dharmapala did not fail to highlight the characteristics of Muslims which he believed Buddhists could learn from. Unlike Buddhists, Dharmapala noted, Muslims 'have not forgotten their sacred sites' in Mecca, Jerusalem, and elsewhere (1965u: 331). Following the arrival of Shaukat Ali to Ceylon in 1924 to campaign against British involvement in Arabian affairs, Dharmapala emphasized his 'devotedness' as a quality which he believed was persistently lacking in Buddhists. If Muslims could collect 'twenty lakh rupees' to further the then burgeoning Khilafat movement, Dharmapala questioned why Buddhists could not then generate the same kind of funds to rescue the Mahabodhi complex (2014a: 190). Moreover, in the same diary entry where he described Islam as a religion for the 'brigand' and 'highwayman', he nonetheless concluded that '[i]t is superior to Christianity' (Diary, 13 August 1921). Dharmapala clearly did not rank Islam's historical traditions or its beliefs particularly highly. Yet the discipline and devotion he observed in Muslims left a favourable impression on him as qualities he wished Buddhists to emulate.

Judaism also did not escape Dharmapala's comparative analysis. Indeed, Dharmapala attacked the entire Semitic system as unsuitable for those wishing to live a highly moral life. 'With what savage fury the Jews destroyed the tribes that inhabited the Jordan valleys', he noted, 'we learn from the books of Joshua and the Judges'. The Old Testament of the Jews, he added, 'is a record of savage immorality suited only to a low type of human society' (1965f: 441). Given his voracious reading of Western texts, Dharmapala's usage of anti-Semitic slurs sadly does not come as a surprise. In addition to his consideration of Christ as a vastly inferior paragon to the Buddha, Dharmapala underlined how Jesus' recognition of usury in the Parable of the Talents 'showed his Jewish nature' (1965e: 450). From a description of Ceylonese Muslims, he labelled them 'an alien people who in the early part of the nineteenth century were common traders, by Shylockian methods became prosperous like the Jews' (1965a: 540).

For Dharmapala, therefore, Abrahamic religions lacked the lofty ideals and morality which he believed Buddhism possessed. When he looked inwards towards dharmic belief systems themselves, however, Dharmapala formed a far more favourable opinion of what he found. As the largest religious tradition across the subcontinent and the religion of those who then controlled the Mahabodhi complex, Hinduism became an important factor in Dharmapala's wider religious considerations. Indeed, the religion proved an obstacle both to regaining Buddhist ownership over ruined sites scattered across India and to winning over the masses to Buddhism. To counter its prevailing influence and to soften Hindu opposition toward his own missionary activities, Dharmapala employed a variety of strategies to leverage Buddhism above the religion. By splitting Hinduism into its 'good'

and ‘bad’ aspects, highlighting the commonalities between Buddhism and that which was good within it, and emphasizing how Buddhism still surpassed it in terms of its content, Dharmapala attempted to elevate Buddhism above its dharmic competitor.

Indeed, Dharmapala keenly emphasized how Hinduism was merely an umbrella under which two religious strands existed – ‘pure’ and ‘degenerate’ Brahminism. As he explained, ‘Brahmanism pure is renunciation of passions and ascetic life’ while ‘Brahmanism degenerate is abnormal sensuality’, which resulted in ‘intellectual degeneracy and sensual development’ (Diary, 26 July 1904). In antiquity, he reckoned, Indian people ‘had a most spiritualizing code of ethics for several thousands of years’ (1965p: 261). This era, however, was long gone. Hinduism, Dharmapala theorized, therefore consisted of an idealized past and a polluted present. In this idealized past, he insisted that Buddhism and Hinduism were perfectly complementary. ‘The Buddhism of the people of India was of native origin, the gods of the Buddhist were the gods of the Brahman’, he wrote, ‘[s]o far, history is silent as to a war between Buddhists and Brahmans […] but of persecutions to annihilate each other, we find no signs in contemporary history’ (1965o: 85). As he further maintained, ‘[t]he pure Brahman philosophy untainted by the doctrine of egohood is in no way antagonistic to the Dhamma of the Tathagata [Buddha]’ (1965p: 259).

Furthermore, Dharmapala keenly recognized that both Buddhism and Hinduism had shared historical enmity with Islam. As he once reminded an Indian audience, ‘remember that, but for the sword of the Moslem conqueror, Buddhism would still be flourishing throughout India, as it did for seventeen centuries, in neighbourly reciprocity with Hinduism’. Dharmapala continued, ‘I fully, heartily, unreservedly accept and hold to that orthodox Hindu text of the Upanishad which says that “[t]here is no religion higher than Truth”; I ask you to join me in so doing’ (1965n: 386). Buddhism and Hinduism were brothers, he contended, who grew apart from each other following the Islamic conquest of the subcontinent. He argued, ‘[t]he great gulf that divided the two great families in India began after the invasion of India by Mahmud of Ghazni’. This gulf, he lamented, ‘became wider, because every successor to the throne of the iconoclast was bound to continue the work of destruction’ (1965o: 86). Such was his belief in the common victimhood of Buddhism and Hinduism under Islam, he expressed his shock and frustration at the involvement of Indian Hindus in the outward-facing Khilafat movement. After all, as Dharmapala despaired, Indian Hindus expressed hardly any enthusiasm in helping Buddhists to recover ownership of ruined Buddhist sites located internally within India itself (2014d: 54).

Dharmapala, therefore, linked Buddhism to a version of Hinduism which – though highly moral and ethical – no longer existed and was so no longer a threat. Buddhism, he could then argue, was a much better alternative to what he believed were the problems which

pervaded modern Hinduism. The Buddha, as he explained, ‘appeared in Middle India at a spiritual crisis to lead man from the slough of ignorance and ignoble sensualism to the loftier heights where love and an infinite happiness reign supreme’ (1965s: 41). Buddhism was not, however, simply a reworked version of Hinduism. To say so, he insisted, ‘would be like saying that Darwin borrowed his philosophy from the Christian Bible and the Aristotilean [*sic*] ethics, and that Herbert Spencer got his philosophy from the treatises of medieval theologians’ (1965o: 106). Buddhism was ‘vigorous’ yet ‘puritanic’ and unlike the religion of the ‘arrogant Brahmans’ who he claimed sacrificed animals, consumed alcohol and beef, and cursed the gods (1965o: 106; 1965x: 577). While the ‘Brahmanical laws of social polity’ – he claimed – precluded those who were not ‘twice-born’ from meaningfully participating in religious life, with the Buddha, ‘the[se] teeming millions of India received a Religion’ (1965r: 221).

Other religions, Dharmapala believed, only appealed to specific categories of people. Christianity catered towards the poor and deluded; Islam accommodated the brigand and highwayman; Hinduism valorized the selfish and the privileged; Buddhism, he argued, was for everyone. Buddhism, for Dharmapala, therefore represented the singular religious tradition which could bring society forward. Culturally ambidextrous, he evaluated other religious systems to construct persuasive arguments for both his followers and opponents. Moreover, Buddhism achieved primacy in early Indic societies – he reasoned – because of its inherent proclivity to reckon with rival traditions to maintain its own relevance in a competitive belief-driven environment. Buddhism, as he explained,

> shows the errors of monotheism, atheism, fatalism, nihilism, agnosticism, polytheism, materialism, sensualism, asceticism, spiritualism, [and] deism by analysing the contents of each of the beliefs. (Dharmapala 1965j: 33)

There is little wonder then that Dharmapala considered his hereditary faith the ‘religion of religions’ (1965q: 35). Indeed, even his own comparisons of Buddhism with other religions were pointless given its self-evident superiority. There could be no comparison, as he maintained, ‘between a stone and a diamond’ (1965g: 463).

5 Reforming Buddhism

For Dharmapala, Buddhism’s basic appeal lay in its universality which further demonstrated its suitability for all audiences regardless of background or circumstance. Nevertheless, for all his claims of Buddhism’s superiority over other religious systems, Dharmapala was keenly aware that Buddhism itself needed reform to maintain its relevance in society. Both its laity and clergy, he believed, were behind the times and needed guidance and an impetus to change. The Buddha himself did not prescribe a singular code to dictate the broader social interactions of his lay followers. Buddhists,

to overcome this, instead followed other social norms derived from either preexisting societies or the societies which dominated them during periods of subjugation (Gross 1993: 142). Here, Dharmapala pledged to turn an apparent oversight into an opportunity to completely reshape the duties and expectations of lay life. For ordained clerics, however, a monastic code of conduct did exist, formulated according to the instructions of the Buddha. Yet Dharmapala again insisted that change was needed, and he slammed the monkhood – especially in his native Ceylon – for their defeatist and antiquated position in society.

Indeed, the Theravada texts with which Dharmapala was most familiar focused little on the everyday conduct of Buddhist men and women (Brekke 2002: 70). To resolve this, Dharmapala drafted his own *Gihivinaya* (Householder Teaching) which contained two hundred rules spread out under twenty-two different headings (2014e: 26–41). Commentaries and treatises on lay living, such as the *Bauddha Ädahilla* (Buddhist Beliefs) in Ceylon and the *Gihivinaya Saṅkhep* (Abbreviated Rules for Householders) in Cambodia, were, in fact, commonly used as reference guides across the Buddhist world long before Dharmapala's public emergence in the late nineteenth century (Turner 2014: 89; Hansen 2007: 155; Anderson 2003). Dharmapala, however, seemingly viewed these textual materials as insufficient to properly influence the laity. First published in 1898, Dharmapala's *Gihivinaya* both cited Buddhist scriptures – the *Sigālōvada Sutta* proving especially influential – and built on the 'genteel metropolitanism' which Dharmapala first experienced through his interactions with Blavatsky, Olcott, and other Western theosophists (Kemper 2015: 435–436; Prothero 1995: 297).

Indeed, in his lay code, Dharmapala's instructions to the Buddhist laity illustrated the influence of both Buddhism and the West in his reformatory vision. When consuming food, he insisted on the washing of hands, forbade loud chewing noises, and encouraged the proper use of cutlery (2014e: 26–27). When travelling on public transport, Dharmapala recommended that travellers read to pass the time, dress appropriately, and avoid drawing unwanted attention to themselves through bad behaviour (2014e: 35). Formulating four specific guidelines for the correct use of bathroom facilities, there were hardly any areas of everyday conduct that Dharmapala overlooked and for which he did not provide recommendations and instructions (2014e: 29). Nevertheless, with its specific sections on conduct towards monastics and behaviour in temple settings, the code's Buddhist focus is immediately apparent to its readers. Wherever gaps existed which Dharmapala could not plug with references to Buddhist texts or Western practices, his *Gihivinaya* drew on other familiar religious influences – especially from Hinduism – to deliver instruction while still maintaining a veneer of authenticity (Jayawardena 2002: 186–193).

From his travels and tours across the Buddhist world and beyond to drum up support for the Mahabodhi campaign and to preach Buddhism, Dharmapala observed for himself just how disadvantaged he believed Buddhists were when compared to those who belonged

to other religions which he believed possessed clear ethical and moral guidelines for everyday conduct. Uplifting the Buddhist laity therefore naturally complemented Dharmapala's own mission. Though the *Gihivinaya* was originally written in Sinhalese and was primarily aimed at his fellow Sinhalese, its applications held true for all Buddhists. As mentioned, Dharmapala wrote at length about the correct behaviour in both domestic and public settings for lay Buddhists. Detailed descriptions regarding the behaviour of spouses, parents, and children towards each other but also towards others, animals, and even Buddhism more generally emerged from it. From the rules he drafted, Dharmapala clearly envisioned lay Buddhists as role models for everyone in society to emulate. Their probity, as his directions implied, necessitated constructive regulation through adherence to practices of purity and religiosity which he believed other religions already dictated for their own followers.

The sangha, or Buddhist monkhood, also did not escape Dharmapala's wider machinations. Influenced by the presence of Christian missionaries active around him in Ceylon and elsewhere, Dharmapala wanted a monkhood which fused social service with religious and moral cultivation. For Dharmapala, the sangha thus had an obligation to carry out missionary activities. Yet, in addition to serving as missionaries, he further desired them to become a critical fixture in the everyday lives of lay Buddhists. The monkhood, of course, had existed in Buddhist societies for well over two millennia. Nevertheless, he insisted that its long history of institutional presence was meaningless without changes to its current societal function. Indeed, he wished monastics to partake in the broader mission in which he himself participated – what Kemper (2019: 233) characterizes as 'missionising the Dhamma' and 'asserting the interests of Buddhism'. Dharmapala, however, did not just theorize about his visions for the sangha. Instead, he launched his own projects to enable his plans for monastics to become reality.

In the same year he first published his *Gihivinaya*, Dharmapala established the Ethico-Psychological College in 1898 on the outskirts of Colombo to provide an education which blended asceticism, meditation, secular studies, and foreign language instruction. Ordained monastics and lay students willing to commit to the *brahmacārya* life were invited to attend, and Dharmapala wanted its graduates to preach Buddhism across the world as modern Buddhist missionaries (Kemper 2019: 227). Establishing the College, he appeared to stress the need for his own lineage of Buddhist renunciant who operated beyond the confines of the lay community and the established monastic orders – just as he did. While the College ultimately failed, mainly because of Dharmapala's difficulties in finding students who were willing to follow the specific career trajectory he suggested, he did not abandon his efforts to shape the sangha. Indeed, following the failure of the College, Dharmapala launched a new initiative to reform the monkhood which did not require its members to change their ordained status to match his own.

While the Ethico-Psychological College did not succeed, Dharmapala still saw the merits in its broad curriculum which fused secular and theological subjects. Learning mathematics and foreign languages, he maintained, was just as important in educating monastics as was studying Buddhist philosophy and the Pāli language. Dharmapala knew, however, that he was unlikely to convince clerical leaders of his plans, so he instead encouraged novice monastics to transform the sangha from the bottom up. To do this, Dharmapala established a *sāmaṇera* seminary in the Ceylonese city of Kandy in 1925 and recruited both Indian and Western teachers to educate the monks (Amunugama 2019: 467; Kobbekaduwa 1993: 69–70). After schooling them in his new curriculum, Dharmapala sent them to Colombo for additional training before then shipping them off to educational institutions in India – such as Tagore's Santiniketan and Benares Hindu College – to further their studies. Following all this, they were then posted to different Buddhist pilgrimage centres across northern India, while some ended up dispatched to Europe and beyond (Dharmapala 2014f: 374).

Again, however, many of the monks could not meet Dharmapala's expectations. While in India, some instead became more interested and involved in other ideologies such as nationalism and socialism. Many found monastic living away from their home environments too difficult, while others began relationships with local women and abandoned the sangha completely (Amunugama 2019: 467–470). Indeed, several of Dharmapala's letters during the late 1920s expressed his fears and frustrations regarding the progress of monastics under his instruction and patronage (Dharmapala 2014f). As Dharmapala's own health declined and as he underwent ordination himself, he was again compelled to reckon with yet another failure regarding his plans to reform the sangha. His decision to ordain in 1931 arguably reflected a natural culmination of a career dedicated to promoting Buddhism and working towards Buddhahood. Despite his misgivings and his failures to reform it to his liking, Dharmapala's decision to spend his final days within the sangha perhaps still demonstrated his trust in an institution which he believed was committed – in theory, if not in practice – to advancing Buddhism in its own mission.

It is important to remember, however, that central to Dharmapala's reformist activities was not a family member – nor even a close friend – but rather an incredibly wealthy Hawai'ian benefactress, Mary Elizabeth Mikahala Robinson Foster. They met first in Honolulu in 1893 – on Dharmapala's return from Chicago – and they corresponded regularly until her passing in 1930. The daughter of a shipping magnate and a devoted theosophist, Foster approved of Dharmapala's Buddhist activism and supported his career for the best part of four decades. Following the death of Don Carolis in 1906, Foster became Dharmapala's chief financial supporter, and she supplied him with extraordinary amounts of funding. In 1919, she gave him $50,000. Four years later, she delivered him another $100,000 (Kemper 2015: 65). Indeed, Dharmapala secured nothing other than a small fortune from

Foster during their long correspondence, and it is difficult to imagine Dharmapala building a career devoted to Buddhism without her steady financial support.

6 Applying Buddhism: lessons and legacies

Many of Dharmapala's initiatives, just as with his plans to reform the sangha, ended in failure. There was no mass conversion or reversion of Hindus, Muslims, and Christians to Buddhism during his lifetime. While the West began to learn more about Buddhism and to engage with its teachings, this again did not happen on Dharmapala's terms. His global campaign to recover the Mahabodhi complex, though achieving widespread media coverage during the early 1890s and early 1900s, ultimately fizzled out following his final legal defeat over the site in 1906 (Kemper 2015: 186–240; Trevithick 2001: 41–70). Only in 1949, following Indian independence and more than a decade after his death, did Dharmapala's efforts bear fruit, with Buddhists given a meaningful role in the administration and control of the Mahabodhi site. His Maha Bodhi Society continued its activities but without the publicity and dominance within global Buddhist circles it maintained throughout the first two decades of its existence (Surendran 2013: 149–248). Indeed, even within South Asia itself, other local Buddhist networks appeared which advertised their own agendas above that of the Society (Ober 2023). Buddhism, in effect, moved on from the legal wrangling over the Mahabodhi site, and Dharmapala became left behind.

Despite his lifelong work to promote Buddhism and to make it relevant and applicable to everyday life, Dharmapala refused to engage himself in political activities and so found it exceedingly difficult to implement wholesale changes where he believed they were necessary. While burgeoning nationalist movements emerged in Buddhist polities during the *fin de siècle* period, he believed that working for the nation through political means simply distracted Buddhists from their religious practice. While he wished for the political priorities of Buddhists and Asian nationalists to align, especially in his native Ceylon, this unity unfortunately was not achieved during Dharmapala's lifetime. Dharmapala's distance from the political classes and his disavowal of their nationalist agitation grew during the interwar period and his public profile gradually diminished. Whereas his activities publicizing Buddhism during his preaching tours of the West and campaigning for the Mahabodhi site in Asia once dominated news coverage both at home and abroad, Dharmapala eventually disappeared from international press reports from the 1920s onwards.

Indeed, along with the turn to nationalism in Buddhist societies, the emergence of socialist ideologies therein further diminished Dharmapala's capture of Buddhist publics. From his writings, it is difficult to find any kind of clear clarification as to who or what Marxists, socialists, communists, or leftists were. For Dharmapala, the key takeaways

from terms such as ‘socialism’ and ‘communism’ seemed to be the very words ‘social’ and ‘community’ or ‘communal’ contained within them rather than the wider theoretical foundation which they underpinned (1965b). Sinhalese essayist, Gunadasa Amarasekara, argues that Dharmapala’s loose understanding of this terminology likely emerges because of the specific period in which Dharmapala was most influential across the wide region (1980: 55–56). Focused on recovering the Mahabodhi complex and preoccupied with his personal mission to achieve Buddhahood, Dharmapala – Amarasekara implies – was simply too busy to grapple with the nuances of Marxist theory and historical analysis. Yet for those who did engage leftist thought as and when it appeared in Buddhist societies, global events elevated its influence and position in public discourse at Dharmapala’s expense.

Despite these failures, Dharmapala’s importance for us lies in the unique hold he had over Buddhist populaces – especially in his native Ceylon – during the height of his career from the 1890s through to the 1920s. Across the Buddhist world, it was this hold which other Buddhists shaped according to their own interests following the legal failures of the Mahabodhi campaign and the rise of nationalist and leftist movements during both the *fin de siècle* and interwar periods. In Ceylon itself, it was this capture which later generations of Sinhalese leaders manipulated to promote their own agendas which prioritized Sinhalese and Buddhist matters over those of other ethnic and religious communities (Rambukwella 2018: 73–101; Jiggins 1979: 8–16; Karunaratna 1965: 135). Moreover, Dharmapala attracted his strongest support and maintained his biggest influence over those who did not belong to elite communities and groupings. When the masses – be they in Ceylon or elsewhere – no longer held a tangible shared objective following his passing, a vacuum emerged which allowed those more politically attuned to societal realities to push populist policies which eventually resulted in violent ethnocentrism. Dharmapala, of course, was fiercely critical of anything which pulled attention away from Buddhism – or at least his interpretation of Buddhism. Without a solid political apparatus behind him, however, Dharmapala himself faced very real limitations both in what he could and could not do.

It is indeed impossible, therefore, to create a singular narrative of Dharmapala. He was not the political tactician that Gandhi was. Despite his important contribution to the transmission of Buddhism to the West, lecturing at the Chicago Parliament in 1893 and bringing Buddhist monastics to Britain and establishing the London Buddhist Vihara during the 1920s, he did not become the Western darling that Swami Vivekananda became. He was not even the global bridge-builder that his mentors Blavatsky and Olcott attempted to be. He was, however, a critic, missionary, and reformer wherever he travelled and in whatever situation he found himself in. His liminal identities did not just confuse scholars seeking to relay his life but also his own Sinhalese kin and his interlocutors in different settings. His contemporaries knew he was neither a monk nor a layman, but – beyond

knowledge of his professed mission – Dharmapala remained a Buddhist of unclear status for most of his career. As an *anagārika* who espoused the *brahmacārya* ideal, Dharmapala lived a life where his Buddhist mission came to the fore. As even his dying wishes revealed, he aimed to secure rebirth in India to spread Buddhism's teachings in what he believed was the land of its founder (2014c: 250).

Neither just a social reformer nor simply a religious servant but a mixture of both, Dharmapala became a hybrid character living in an ever-changing historical moment. Like the Buddha, he abandoned the material world but chose to return to it to effect meaningful change. Reaching Buddhahood required service to humanity, and personal spiritual cultivation did not discount working towards change and reform. As Asanga Tilakaratne writes of Dharmapala,

> [h]is life has been interpreted and re-interpreted, appreciated and condemned […]. Historical circumstances and life situations of Dharmapala are so complicated that it is unlikely that anyone will ever be able to say the last word on him or to explain all events in his life. (Tilakaratne 2015: 95)

Nevertheless, he certainly made a real difference in stressing just how different Buddhism was to other religious systems and what changes were necessary to further its progress. He introduced reforms for the clergy and published guidelines for the laity which, especially in Ceylon, presented new avenues for both communities to become engaged in Buddhist activity (Seneviratne 1999). Most of the interpretations of the difference Dharmapala made, however, continue to derive from the ways in which others appropriated his example and applied it to other national, political, and religious arenas. In the 1960s, Ceylon's United National Party (UNP) government published a collection of selected writings and speeches from Dharmapala to highlight his patriotism (Kemper 2015). Writing prolifically during the 1960s and 1970s, the scholar-monk Walpola Rahula further invoked Dharmapala when encouraging the politicization of the Buddhist monkhood (Raghavan 2011). Indeed, these are just two brief examples of what became a much wider phenomenon in the decades that followed Dharmapala's passing.

Attributions

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