

Bringing Vesak to the World: Anagarika Dharmapala's Contribution

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Anagarika Dharmapala's role in reviving Buddhism in Sri Lanka and pride in Sinhala ethnic identity is well known. His career abroad, where he spent almost 90% of his adult life, is less appreciated. For most of his life, Dharmapala lived in Kolkata, although he spent over a year living in London towards the end of his life. Those sojourns were broken up by frequent travels, during which he renewed friendships, visited places, and tried to promote Buddhism. To that extent, he was a missionary, although a missionary with minimal interest in converting people. In the matter of recovering Bodh Gaya as an exclusively Buddhist place, he was fierce; in the matter of spreading Buddhism he was interested only in making non-Buddhists aware of the religion's virtues. One of his strategies for making Buddhism present in new places was to celebrate the Buddha's birthday in a public venue. In that context, he initiated the celebration of Vesak in Kolkata, Lahore, and Chennai, as well as Japan and the West. In Kolkata the celebration not only shown respect to the Buddha, it also signaled the return of the Buddhasasana to the land where the religion began. Because of the Buddha's own attitude to religious truth and Dharmapala's imitation of his example, Vesak became a "come-and-see" thing, drawing the attention of people of various backgrounds and religions.

Key Words : Vesak, conversion, Kolkata, Buddhism abroad