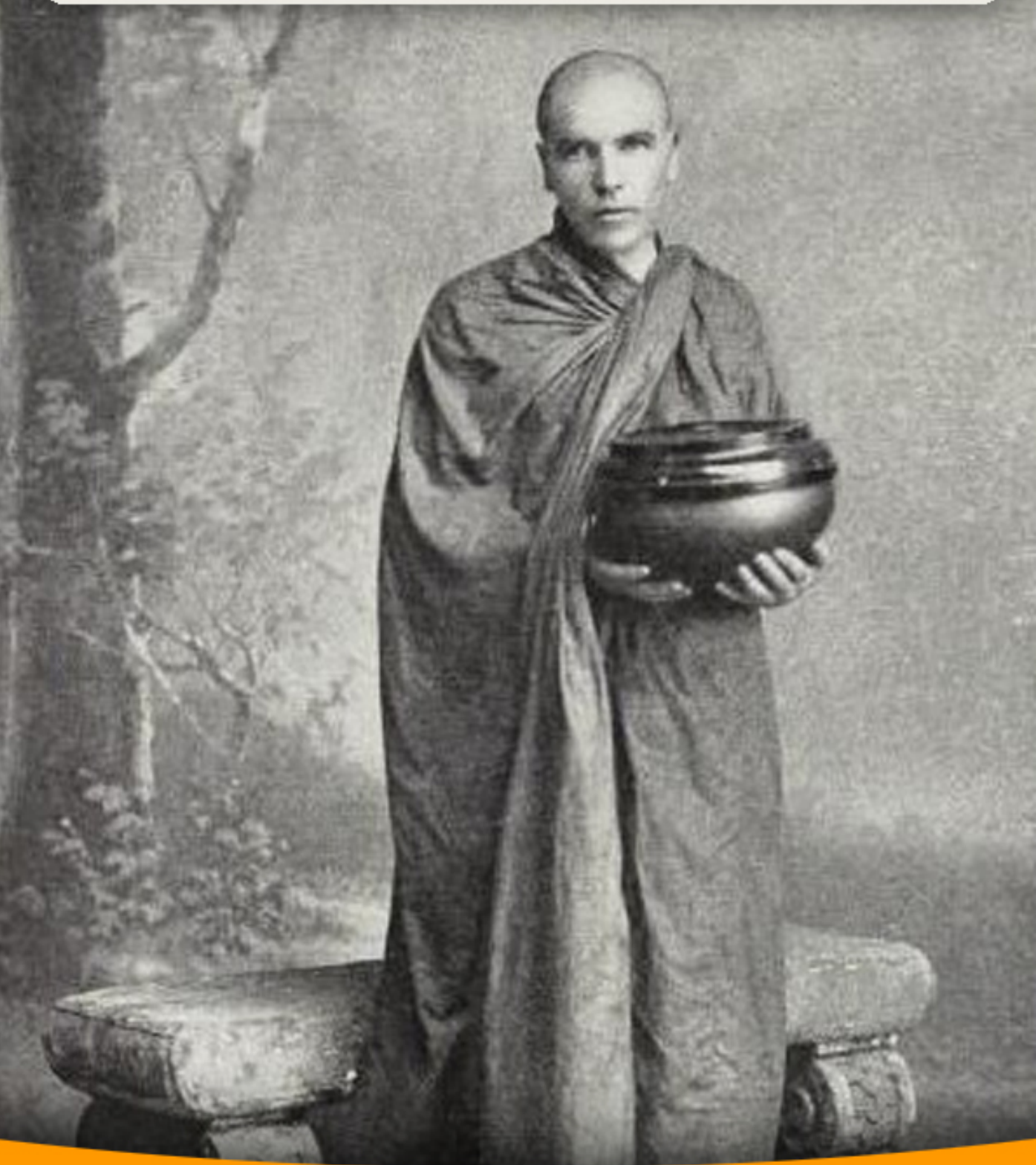


The First Buddhist Mission to the West



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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

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The establishment of a previously alien religion in a new environment is bound to be one of fits and starts, successes and dead ends, and so it has been with Buddhism in the West. Until fairly recently, the beginnings of Western Buddhism was thought to be fairly clear and well-known, but recent research has shed new and unexpected light on this phenomenon.

It seems certain now that the first Westerner to ordain as a monk, remain so for an extended period, and have at least some influence, was Bhikkhu Dhammaloka. His early life and given name are uncertain. He reportedly gave at least three names for himself at different times; Laurence Carroll, Laurence O'Rourke and William Colvin. He was born in Dublin in the 1850s, immigrated to the United States, and worked his way across the country as a migrant labourer before finding work on a trans-Pacific liner. Leaving the ship in Japan, he made his way to Rangoon arriving in the late 1870s or early 1880s, around the time of the British annexation of Upper Burma. He became a monk sometime before 1899 and started giving public talks a year later. As with some other early Western monks in Asia, Dhammaloka urged people to remain true to the faith of their fathers and not be seduced by the enticements of the missionaries. He told the Burmese that their religion was as ethical, coherent and valid as that of the missionaries, if not more so. Being Irish, Dhammaloka was also decidedly anti-British and he attacked the colonial government at every opportunity, making him something of a hero to the Burmese and an irritation to the British administration. Touring the country huge crowds assembled to listen to the white monk who lauded rather than disparages the Burmese and their religion. In 1907 Dhammaloka founded The Buddhist Tract Society which during its existence published numerous books and booklets on the Dhamma. His anti-British comments eventually led to Dhammaloka and some of his supporters being charged with sedition, found guilty and fined Rupees 1000 each. Dhammaloka left Burma shortly after and disappeared from history. He is thought to have died in 1914.

More well-known successors to Dhammaloka were H. Gordon Douglas, Bhikkhu Asoka formerly head of Mahinda College in Ceylon, who ordained in February 1899 and died of cholera in Burma in April 1900. The Scotsman Allan Bennett (Bhikkhu Ananda Metteyya) ordained in Burma in May 1902 and founded the International Buddhist Association and Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland. He died in 1923. Anton Gueth (Ven. Nyanatiloka) of German was ordained in Burma in 1904 by Ananda Metteyya and lived much of the rest of his life in Ceylon; and J. F. McKechnie (Bhikkhu Silacara) ordained as a novice in July 1907 in Rangoon. After disrobing in 1925 McKechnie continued as editor of *The British Buddhist* for many years.

However, recent research has uncovered a surprising number of other Westerners who were drawn to the Buddhist monkhood before these more well-known pioneers. In the 1870s a destitute Russian became a monk in Bangkok and in 1878 an Austrian man is reported to have ordained in Bangkok. Nothing more is known about these two individuals. In June 1892 a Mr. MacMillan arrived in Ceylon from Scotland and ordained under the name Sumangala. Records from Japan show that a Dr. Norman, "a well-known Englishman" became a monk there in 1900. A Jewish man named Arnold Abraham or Abrams who had lived in the Straits Settlements in Malaya ordained in Rangoon in June 1904 and took the name Dhammawanga. M. T. de la Courneuve was ordained as a novice by Dhammaloka under the name Dhammaratana in Singapore October 2nd 1904. He was an ex-Inspector of Police, Pahang, Straits Settlements in Malaya and his father had been a Deputy Commissioner in the Burmese Civil Service. An individual named C. Roberts, a Welshman who is said to have spoken with an American accent, ordained as a novice probably in Rangoon in 1904. He disrobed in October 1904 after receiving a remittance from parents. He may have put on the robe simply because he was without money. An American sailor whose name has not been recorded ordained in Burma and in 1905 was residing in the Tavoy Monastery in Rangoon.

Others who have come to light include Frans Bergendahl (Sunno), a 20-year-old son of a wealthy Amsterdam merchant and a German, Mr. Stange (Bhikkhu Sumano), who were both ordained by Nyanatiloka in 1906. Sumano died in 1910 and Sunno died in 1915. An Irishman whose lay name is

unknown took the name Bhikkhu Visuddha and was involved in mass conversions of untouchable mine-workers in Marikuppam in India in 1907-8. Nothing else is known of him. A Mr. Solomon became a novice in Burma in 1907 but was disrobed shortly after for breaking rule about drinking alcohol. The German Walter Markgraf became a novice under Nyanatiloka in 1907 and disrobed half a year later. E. H. Stevenson born in the UK in 1863 ordained under the name Sasanadhaja in Burma in September 1908 and is mentioned as giving lectures in Australia on a tour as a missionary for Buddhism in 1910.

As with most of these others we have only the barest information about them, mainly from incidental sources. Because of this lack of information, it is difficult to know why these men took, what then such an unusual step was, and why they eventually disrobed. No doubt some were at a loose end or were eccentrics, others may have developed a fascination for Asian culture and wanted to experience it from the inside. Certainly all of them would have found the climate and food in the tropics challenging, and Asian Buddhist norms so different from their own, and this probably explains why so few of them lasted long in the robes. One who did survive and indeed flourish was Captain Charles Pfoundes.

Up until recently it has been widely accepted that the British monk Ananda Metteyya (Allan Bennett) founded and organized the first Buddhist mission to the West in London in 1908. Recent collaborative research by historians in Japan and Ireland however has shown that this assumption needs to be revised. In fact, it was not Theravadian but rather Mahayana Buddhists who were the first to try to teach Buddhism in the West. In 1889 the Japanese sponsored Buddhist Propagation Society (BPS) of Japan launched a mission to London led for three years by the Irish-born Buddhist Captain Charles Pfoundes.

Charles Pfoundes was born 1840 in Waterford in Ireland in 1840 to Protestant parents who had been bankrupted during the great famine of 1845-50. Immigrating alone to Australia in 1854 he joined the colonial navy and later captained a Siamese ship and ever after usually prefixed his name with Captain. He came into contact with Buddhism first in Thailand and seems to have been fascinated by it. His travels led him to Japan in 1863 where, having quickly learned the language, he worked as a shipping agent, a policeman in Nagasaki, a mediator between the Japanese government and foreign diplomats, and later as a newspaper columnist. He returned to Europe in 1878 via the US, married, and worked at various jobs. On his return to Japan 10 years later without his wife he ordained as a priest in Kobe. Throughout the 1870s the Meiji government pressured monks to marry in the belief that it would weaken Buddhism and aid the modernization the country, and many monks gave in to this pressure. Thus most Japanese monks became and remain today technically priests rather than monks. Pfoundes died in Kobe in 1907 at the age of 67.

In the early 1880s a group of internationally minded Buddhists in Kyoto founded an organization called the Japanese Buddhist Propagation Society (*Kaihai Senkyokai*). They believed that their religion could have a universal appeal if efforts were made to disseminate more widely. Perhaps they also hoped that if the Japanese government, not well disposed to Buddhism at the time, saw Westerners taking an interest in the Dhamma, their attitude towards it might change. Pfoundes was asked to organize and lead the mission to London and between 1889 and 1892 which he did with a good deal of success. The JBPS had picked an opportune time to start its mission. Gilbert & Sullivan's Japanese-themed and hugely successful opera *The Mikado* had just finished, as had the Japanese Village exhibition in Knightsbridge, and all things Japanese were becoming very fashionable.

In London and elsewhere in the UK Pfoundes' lectures were well attended as he was apparently a convincing and interesting speaker. A photograph of him from this time shows him in the full regalia of a Japanese prelate, accoutrements that must have increased his authority and made him appear even more interesting. Newspaper reports of the time show that Pfoundes' two main subjects were Buddhist doctrine and criticisms of Theosophy, which he dismissed as nonsense masquerading as Buddhism.

In 1883 the Theosophist A. P. Sinnet had published his book *Esoteric Buddhism* which became and remains even today a seminal text of Theosophy. Sinnett claimed that his book was the gist of

“psychic communication” he had had with Mahatma Koot Hoomi, one of the supposed “Great White Masters” in the Himalayas. It should be kept in mind that the general public at the time knew little of genuine Buddhism and Madam Blavatsky’s and Sinnett’s “esoteric Buddhism”, actually a mish-mash of late Victorian spiritualism and occultism with a smattering of Buddhism and Hinduism, was attracting interest. In his lectures, Pfoundes made it clear that Buddhism and Theosophy had little in common. Numerous notices from newspaper and journals of the time show that he was determined to clarify Buddhism and distinguish it from Theosophy. Here are some –

‘Stratford, Enterprise Hall, Great Eastern Road. Sunday December 6th, at 7, Captain Pfoundes, ‘Theosophy: Its frauds and follies.’

‘Progressive Association, Penton Hall, 81 Pentonville Rd. Sunday December 13th at 7, Captain Pfoundes, ‘Theosophy: Is it true? – An exposé of a dangerous fallacy.’

‘Progressive Association, Penton Hall, 81 Pentonville Rd. January 31st, at 7, Captain Pfoundes, ‘Buddhism not Theosophy: The two critically contrasted, preceded by vocal and instrumental music.’

However, on several occasions Pfoundes went beyond criticizing Theosophy to pointing out the dubious background and behaviour of some of its leaders; calling Madam Blavatsky a charlatan, Sinnett either delusional or a liar, and Charles Webster Leadbeater a pederast. He was sued for libel and had to settle out of court for 550 Pounds.

Having said this, it is right to point out that while the early Theosophists had a confused understanding of the Buddha’s Dhamma, that the “Great White Masters” in the Himalayas were non-existent, and that Blavatsky and Leadbeater were shadowy characters, they had a significant role to play in the revival of Buddhism in Ceylon, Burma and elsewhere. They also stimulated and energised the independence movements in various Asian countries, particularly in India and Ceylon. However, their “esoteric” Buddhism owed almost everything to Blavatsky and Sinnett’s fanciful claims and almost nothing to the Buddha. Even Colonel Olcott, as he learned more about genuine Dhamma during his stay in Ceylon, quietly distanced himself from Madam Blavatsky and her followers.

So it is that the first Buddhist mission to the West after King Asoka’s of about 256 BCE that we know of was conceived by Japanese and led by a Westerner, Captain Charles Pfoundes.