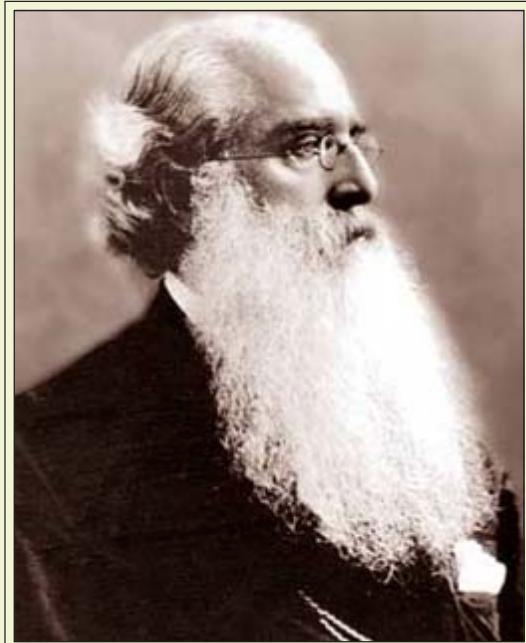


# **COLONEL HENRY STEEL OLCOTT**

## **Centennial Commemoration**

*(August 1, 1832 - February 17, 1907)*



**Sunday, 18<sup>th</sup> February, 2007**

*Venue: UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson  
Medical School*

*Room 3403 (3<sup>rd</sup> Floor) Clinical Academic Building  
New Brunswick, New Jersey, 08901*



## Program

3.00-3.30 pm	Networking, Reception & Refreshments
3.30-3.35 pm	Call to Order and Welcome – Wasantha Dalawella
3.35-3.45 pm	National Anthems: USA and Sri Lanka
3.45-3.55 pm	Pancha-Seela (Five-Precepts) by Bhante Piyatissa
3.55-4.00 pm	Introduction – Dr. Wije Kotachchi
4.00-4.30 pm	Olcott Memorial Oration – Prof. Sunil Wimalawansa <i>One-hundred years of Legacy of Col. Olcott:</i> What can we learn from this great American?
4.30-4.50 pm	America and Buddhism – Prof. Kurt Spellmeyer
4.50-5.10 pm	Why Americans becoming Buddhists? Dr. Timothy Trotman
5.10-5.20 pm	Community Projects – Athula Seniviratne
5.20-5.30 pm	Bringing West-East together – Dr. Anil Vitharana
5.30-5.35 pm	Vote of Thanks – Tanya de Silva
5.45-6.45 pm	Film showing Colonel Olcott in Sri Lanka
7.00 pm	Adjournment



All Are Welcome



# **One-hundred years of Legacy of Col. Olcott: What can we learn from this great American?**

## **“An inspiring example of World Citizenship”**

by Sunil J. Wimalawansa, MD, PhD, MBA, MRCPPath, CCD,  
FCCP, FRCP, DSc. Professor of Medicine, Physiology &  
Pharmacology

### **Abstract:**

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The centennial anniversary of Colonel Olcott's death falls on February 17<sup>th</sup> 2007. Buddhists from all over the world remembers this great American and his work. We remember the centenary by having Col. Olcott commemoration event in NJ, USA.

Henry Steel Olcott was born in 1832 into a pious Presbyterian household in Orange, New Jersey. After graduating from New York University, Olcott migrated to West in search of youthful adventures. In Ohio, at the age of twenty, he became a convert to spiritualism. Since then he championed a host of other causes, including antislavery, agricultural reform, spiritual movement, women's rights and temperance. He worked as an experimental fanner, served in the Army, lawyer, and even worked as an investigator on the special commission charged with scrutinizing President Lincoln's assassination and several major fraud investigations in the Army and Navy. *Colonel Henry Steel – American lawyer and journalist, received his title in the Civil War.*

After these adventures, he returned to New York City, where he worked as a journalist and lawyer. In 1874, while covering reports of spirits materializing at a farmhouse in Chittenden, Vermont, he met Helena Blavatsky. A year later, he and Madam Blavatsky co-founded the Theosophical Society, an organization that would soon play a major role in introducing Americans to the ancient wisdom of the East.

Olcott was a practical man, an expert in agriculture. He had served U.S. in both war and in peace. He had a promising career as a lawyer and a correspondent for New York newspapers, but when he met Madame Blavatsky, he changed his mind to become a Buddhist and focus in spiritualism. He committed himself to the service of the society, especially for those who were suppressed with Colonial and evil forces.

Historians describe Henry Steel Olcott as the President-Founder of the Theosophical Society (*held this office from 1875 to his death in 1907*), one of America's first Buddhists, and an important contributor to both the Indian Renaissance in India and the Sinhalese Buddhist Revival in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). In fact he is the one who laid down the principals in the minds of people in both these countries for their liberation from British. Sri Lankans praised Colonel Olcott as "one of the heroes in the struggle for their independence and a pioneer of the present religious, national, and cultural revival after suppression by European invaders for over five decades.

In Sri Lanka and in India, he was a champion of the religious and legal rights of the inhabitants, especially those who have been suppressed by the ruling British at that time. In Sri Lanka he is considered as the savior of Buddhism and of the Sinhalese. His clear vision for Buddhism together with Anagarika Dharmapala made him a major power behind the modern Buddhist revival. His commitment to universal humanism makes him a model of tolerance and understanding. Learning about exceptional people such as Col. Olcott who dedicated their lives to others, their social, educational and spiritual work and the approaches he made to solve problems could help one to develop his or her own inner resources.

**SRI LANKA** is a small island in South Asia with over 2500 year history of an unbroken, well-recorded and long history, unique culture and religion (Hela and Buddhism). It is known that the Buddha had visited Sri Lanka on three occasions and blessed this beautiful country. It was during the reign of Emperor Asoka in India that Buddhism was officially introduced to Sri Lanka by the Venerable Arahant Mahinda 236 years after the Buddha. Emperor Asoka, the unified ruler of India sent several Buddhist missionaries to various countries. He chose his own son Ven. Mahinda to be sent to Sri Lanka, probably thinking that this island would one day be the centre of Theravada Buddhism.

Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka at a time when the country was under the rule of King Devanam Piyatissa. There was then no other established religion in the island. Hence the King and his subjects embraced the Buddhist philosophy wholeheartedly and with the full realization that this was after all the most rational and genuine religion to follow. Ever since the people endeavored by all means at their disposal to follow and to preserve this noble religion without polluting it in any way with other existing forms of faith or traditional beliefs

## History of Col. Olcott:

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Henry Steel Olcott, Co-Founder and first President of The Theosophical Society, was a descendant of a family which had settled in America many generations early as Puritans. Thomas Olcott came to the US from England. His father was Henry Wyckoff Olcott, and his mother Emily Steel; both of New York City. He was born in Orange, New Jersey, on August 2, 1832, the eldest of a family of six children.

When he was in his twenties Henry Olcott was interested in agricultural experimentation, and gained international recognition for his work as an Agricultural scientist. After turning down several prominent positions both in the US and abroad, he founded the Westchester Farm School near Mt. Vernon, New York.



This was designed as a model farm for agricultural experimentation and became the first American Scientific School of agriculture. Here, he conducted experiments with sorghum and published his first book, "Sorghum and Imphee, the Chinese and African Sugar Canes", which became an agricultural school textbook later.

He then proceeded to Europe to study agricultural methods and developments and this mission was published in the American Cyclopedias. Upon his return to America, he became Associate Agricultural Editor of the *New York Tribune*, which position he held until 1860. At the same time, he was American correspondent of the *Mark Lane Express*, London.

In April 1860 he married Mary Morgan, of New Rochelle, New York, daughter of the Reverend Richard Morgan, rector of Trinity parish in that city. To them were born four children; three sons and a daughter, but the daughter and one son died in infancy. In 1861 began happily enough for Mr. and Mrs. Henry Olcott. In January of that year their first child was born-a son. He was named Richard Morgan after his maternal grandfather.

In 1862, he enlisted in the Northern Army and fought through the North Carolina campaign under General Burnside, and continues in the Northern army campaign. General Burnside wrote "Olcott's hatred of dishonest practices was sufficient qualification for recommending him for serious investigatory activities". He then appointed Henry Olcott to investigate a suspected fraud by Kohnstamm. This investigation was expected to take about two weeks to determine the suspect had been robbing the US government of \$25,000.

With his Sharpe mind he soon discovered many more irregularities including wide-spread corruption. He realized that Kohnstamm was not the only culprit. He continued to discover wide spread fraud, corruption, and misconduct and hence his work increased. With the increase of his staff of detectives and stenographers he had to open offices in both Washington as well as New York. The job, which was supposed to take a fortnight, went on for months.

As the Special Commissioner, Colonel Olcott frequently had to face the dangerous, task of bringing, racketeers to justice. Some of them, powerful and ruthless, were either trying to make quick fortunes out of the war, or giving undercover help to the enemy. Unfortunately, even today, we hear about this kind of unacceptable and unethical behavior in many counties.

This particular case he reported that "by a corrupt conspiracy between a governments purchasing agent, an inspector, a Cincinnati contractor, an Indianapolis horse dealer, and Republican politician, the United States government had been systematically robbed of one million dollars in the purchase of horses and mules, at the Cincinnati corral, during the preceding year." After the conclusion of the case, forty-eight counts of indictment were brought against Kohnstamm. The contractor was brought to trial, and in May 1864, and sentenced to ten years with hard labor at Sing Sing prison.

His exemplary, honest and dedicated works in the Army was well recognized by the war administration. So after fifteen months as the Special Commissioner for the War Department, he was asked by Secretary of the Navy to perform similar services for that department. So he was officially temporarily commissioned as Special Investigator for the Navy. He found the same abuses, the same corruption, and the systematic robbery of the Navy as it was in the Army. He had the bravery and the guts to take up this challenge of cleaning up corruption in the Navy. The rank or the power of the wrongdoer meant

nothing whatsoever to Col. Olcott. He continued to get anonymous threats and his life was frequently in danger from those racketeers he was bent on exposing.

In both of these appointments he distinguished himself, receiving again the highest praise from the heads of both departments they stated. Secretaries stated, "that you have thus escaped with no stain upon your reputation, when we consider the corruption, audacity and power of the many villains in high position whom you have prosecuted and punished, is a tribute of which you may well be proud."

In April 1865, while the Colonel was working late at his office in New York, Abraham Lincoln, the wartime President of the United States was shot at close range by Booth at the Ford's Theatre, in Washington. The plot to kill Vice-President and the Secretary of State was failed, but the President died of a single bullet injury to his head at that night, as the Civil War, which he had steered to victory, drew toward its close. Following this event, the next day, Colonel Olcott offered his services to the Secretary of war, E.M. Stanton in Washington which was accepted immediately. Once he arrived in Washington, Olcott, an authority of a highly efficient and incorruptible investigator, was appointed as one of a three-man commission to investigate conspiracy behind the assassination of the President, and to flush out the conspirators. Within two weeks, their efforts were made to identify all those who were involved and corner the Booth who killed the President Lincoln.

Toward the end of 1865, three years after the beginning of his so called "fortnight's job," Olcott resigned his commission. His chiefs, in letters of farewell, thanked him for the good work done, and their letters provide many testimonials to the Colonel's honesty, integrity, and moral courage.

All throughout, Olcott was given unlimited authority, because he made no mistakes that called for correction and had not committed one single act of dishonesty. The Judge-Advocate General of the Army wrote to Colonel stating "been the means of rescuing vast sums of public money from peculators and swindlers for whom the vigor and skillfulness of [his] investigations had been a continual terror." He had done his work with thoroughness, "zeal, ability, and uncompromising faithfulness to duty despite the clamors and calumnies" with which he had been assailed in the interests of crime. The Assistant Secretaries of War and the Navy wrote of him in similar vein.

His high reputation and many contacts could undoubtedly have secured him a good government post after his work as a Special Commissioner was over, but perhaps he had had enough of official duties. At any rate he decided to start on an entirely new career. Meanwhile, the Colonel Olcott was admitted to the bar in 1868; and at the end of his government service, he entered private legal practice. Colonel Olcott who had been interested in Spiritualism, in 1874 he was asked to take a special assignment for the New York Graphic to report the psychic phenomena at the Eddy farm in Vermont. As a result of this experience, he published his second book, *People from the Other World*.

In 1874 in Chittenden, Vermont, while he was on this assignment, Henry Olcott met Helena Blavatsky, a Russian aristocrat of esoteric interests and phenomenal abilities. They became close friends who had similar interests. Joining forces with her, from this point onward he worked to carry out the purposes of the Great White Brotherhood, especially as those purposes related to the specific mission assigned to Madam Blavatsky by her Master. "Bound together by the unbreakable ties of a common work — the Masters' work — having mutual confidence and loyalty and one aim in view, we stand or fall together" (See "The *Theosophist*," August 1932, p. 471). Of their personal relationship, Colonel Olcott says (*Old Diary Leaves*, vol. 1, p. 6): "Neither then, at the commencement, nor ever afterwards had either of us the sense of the other being of the opposite sex. We were simply friends, so regarded each other, and so called each other. She looked at me in recognition at the first hour, and never since has that look changed. It was teacher and pupil, elder brother and younger, both bent on the one single end, but she with the power and the knowledge that belong but to lions and sages (*Episodes From an Unwritten History*, p. 23, by Claude Bragdon)

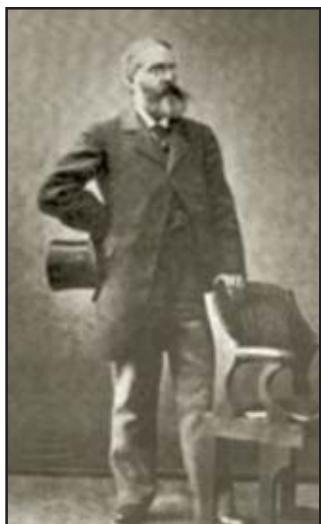
In September 1875 the idea of forming a society was proposed, and a committee, chaired by Olcott, began the organization. In October 1875, Colonel Olcott was elected President of the new Theosophical Society, delivering his inaugural address at Mott Hall in New York City on November 17, a date therefore taken as the founding of the Theosophical Society.

Since then he gave his unconditional attention to this organization, and fostered his administrative ability to nourish it and its growth. For he believed with his whole heart that the

good of mankind depended upon such a channel through which the Brotherhood of Adepts could work to destroy the gross materialism of the day and awaken the spiritual nature of man. In 1878, the Founders of the Society moved the international headquarters to India, and hence Colonel Olcott had to relinquish his flourishing law practice.

On December 18, 1878, Olcott and Madam Blavatsky left New York for India, via England, where they organized a branch of the Theosophical Society. Together they traveled throughout the India behalf of the Society lecturing on Theosophy, trying to get people to see that they could live together in harmony, understanding and brotherhood, despite the difference of religious background and race. Olcott also soon began work to revive and unify the sectors of Buddhism, for which he is especially remembered in Sri Lanka. There he helped to achieve

social justice for the Sinhalese (Hela nation) that had been continually suppressed by Western invaders for four centuries. Based on his observation and analysis he published *Buddhist Catechism* 1881, which has been translated into many languages and used as a basic textbook in Buddhist schools.



In December 1882, the two Founders moved the headquarters of the Society from Bombay to Adyar, outside the city of Madras (now Chennai). Although Olcott traveled extensively through India and Sri Lanka as well as around the world, Adyar was his home for the remainder of his life. There, in

1894, he founded a school for the children of poor and destitute families, the Panchamas or Harijans. Activities gradually expanded and this school is still run by the Theosophical Society and provides a free education for children from kindergarten through high school.

In 1882, when the headquarters was established at Adyar, that property was purchased from his own and Madame Blavatsky personal funds. In the early years in India, the Theosophical Society and the expense of lecture tours was supported in greater part from the earnings from their writings and lectures.

Colonel Olcott traveled all over the world lecturing and contributing to the society in spite of his failing heart. Extensive travel placed significant strain on his heart. In addition to traveling, exertion of many lectures crowded into too short a time taxed his health. In the Olcott Centenary issue of *The Theosophist*, August 1932, there are seven and a half pages given to the listing of his travels in the interest of his work.

Although formal diplomatic relations between the governments of newly independent Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and the United States of America was established in 1948, contacts between the people of the U.S.A and Sri Lanka are going back over 200 years. Meanwhile, Sri Lankans always hope that new Olcotts' will emerge from the US to continue the dedicated and very useful work carried out by this Great American.

While missionaries, merchants and other individual Americans left their mark on Sri Lanka in the 19th century, consular and commercial relations between the US and the then British Colony prospered. [A U.S. consular presence had been on the island since 1850] In 1850, John Black, a Scottish merchant resident in Galle, was named the first American Commercial Agent in Ceylon. The American Commercial Agency was to move to Colombo in 1870 and later became the American Consulate in British Ceylon.

The religious devotion of Colonel Olcott and his energetic dedication to a Buddhist renaissance served as the inspiration for the Anagarika Dharmapala (another highly dedicated, honest Buddhist who dedicated his life to this magnificent revival) who became one of Sri Lanka's greatest national reformers and a peerless missionary for Buddhism throughout the world.

As Colonel Olcott came to East from the West he became a giant among men in Buddhist circles. Similarly there are few who moved from Sri Lanka to US did great things as well. One such person was Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy; He went from Sri Lanka to the United States to become one of the world's leading Oriental scholars and left a rich intellectual legacy to the world. He was named the Curator of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1917. He was not content merely to interpret his native Sri Lanka and Asia for the West, but also used his scholarly gifts to create closer understanding between the two cultures. He was among the many of great Ceylonese scholars and writers who led the American people to an appreciation of both the art and the philosophy of the East. He has been described by his wife, as "the extraordinary production in art history, esthetic theory,

social criticism, comparative religion, symbolism and metaphysics of this man is astounding. As was with few other Sri Lankans and Indians at that time, he had intellectual powers with which few men of his generation could compare".

Since 1980, Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky began their search for 'Buddhist education' and establishment of institutions to impart it. As Prof. Heinz Bechert, the famous German Indiologist rightly points out, "The fact that two prominent Westerners came to Sri Lanka out of sympathy and admiration for Buddhism restored the self-confidence of the Buddhists in a period when Christian powers seemed to dominate the whole world." ('The World of Buddhism', edited by Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, p. 274).

## Contributions to Sri Lanka:

In 1873, a world-famous debate occurred between Christians and a Buddhist monk in Panadura, Sri Lanka. Manuscripts of this open debate were translated into English (*Panadura Vadaya - the Great Panadura Controversy*) by John Cooper, editor of the *Times of Ceylon*. Some time later, a copy of this given to Col. Olcott by Dr. JM Peebles, an American spiritualist and a Christian Priest form who was visiting Sri Lanka at that time. After reading this "Panadura-Vadaya", In 1879 Olcott and Blavatsky decided to visit Ceylon.

They received a royal welcome on their arrival in Colombo on May 16, 1880. Col. Olcott stated, "A huge crowd awaited us and rent the air with their united shout of "Sadhu! Sadhu!" A white cloth was spread for us from the jetty steps to the road where carriages were ready, and a thousand flags were frantically waved in welcome."

These two Theosophists were instrumental in founding the Buddhist Theosophical Society in Sri Lanka. Goals of this society were to preservation the heritage of Buddhism



and promotion of the Buddhist education and culture. The first educational institution to be established in Sri Lanka was Ananda College in 1886, from which the author also graduated. But this is only the beginning of Col. Olcott's efforts there.

Today, as it celebrates its 121<sup>st</sup> birthday, Ananda has become the premier Buddhist educational institution in Sri Lanka. The vision of the founders of Ananda was based on Buddhist Philosophy and education. In addition to general education, the Buddhist education in the view of the founding fathers was two-fold: the teaching of Buddhism in a scientific and rational way, and the imparting of the system of Buddhist values. The Theosophists held Buddhism in great esteem then and today, and for them, it was not merely a religion but a philosophy with a rational appeal.

Western scholars were beginning to study Buddhism in its original form, as preserved in the Pali scriptures. As H.G. Wells, the English historian says, in his 'Outline of History': "The fundamental teaching of Gautama Buddha, as it is now being made plain to us by the study of original sources, is clear and simple and in the closest harmony with environment perplexes modern ideas. It is beyond all disputes, the achievement of one of the most penetrating intelligences the world has ever known."

Anyone who is interested in Colonel Olcott's contribution as President of The Theosophical Society is illustrated in detail in the history of The Theosophical Society. His contribution to the Buddhism was second to none. By formally taking Pancha-Seela, he pronounced himself as a Buddhist in 1880, and immediately set about the revival of Buddhism in which interest had waned as a result of the ongoing negative activities of the Christian missionaries. He united the Buddhists of Ceylon.

Buddhist leaders inspired by the Theosophists call to re-examine the philosophical value of Buddhism in the light of contemporary modes of thought. Buddhist philosophy is started to be taught in the schools so that the new generation of Buddhist not only become better citizens, but also be able to defend themselves against invading external powers and barrage of negative influences constantly imparted to them. This is in fact becoming extremely important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with unethical and forceful conversions, effects of globalizations, and spreading of the Western culture and economic agenda into the South-Eastern countries. In this regards, countries unitary nature, heritage and the long standing culture (in the case of Sri Lanka and India, over 2,500 years), including languages and religion must be preserved from these external threats.

The second goal of Buddhist education was to impart the system of values fostered by Buddhism. The founding fathers of Buddhist education thought that it was necessary for Buddhist children not only to be aware of this system of Buddhist values in an academic sense, but also to grow up in an environment in which these values were put into practice. For example, tolerance, acquires real meaning only when it is practiced in everyday living in school and outside. For the community, it means believes of your self, not to harm others, abstaining from wrong-doing and jealousy, refrain from stealing, sexual misconduct and indulging in intoxicating alcohol and drugs.

On May 25, at the Wijyananda Monastery in Galle, Olcott and Blavatsky each knelt before a Buddha statue and “took *pansil*” by reciting in Pali the “Three Refuges and the Five Precepts” of Theravada Buddhism, thus becoming the first European-Americans to publicly and formally become lay Buddhists.

Later Olcott underscored the difference between what he termed a “regular Buddhist” and “a debased modern Buddhists.” “If Buddhism contained a single dogma that we were compelled to accept, we would not have taken the *pansil* nor remained Buddhists for even ten minutes,” he explained. “Our Buddhism was that of the Master-Adept Gautama Buddha, the “Middle Path”, which was the Wisdom Religion of the Aryan Upanishads, and the soul and the truths of all ancient world-faiths put together”. Col. Olcott was always against the “false” Buddhism, which was in his view modern, debased, sectarian, and creedal, and his ostensibly true Buddhism — ancient, pure, nonsectarian, and nondogmatic.

During his first visit to the island, Olcott founded seven lay branches and one monastic branch of the Buddhist Theosophical Society (BTS). He was explicit about modeling his Asian work after Christian examples he was very familiar with. He stated, “As the Christians have their Society for the diffusion of Christian knowledge, so there should be a society for the diffusion of Buddhist knowledge.” Olcott also founded, again on the Christian models, Buddhist secondary schools and Sunday schools affiliated with the Buddhist Theosophical Society, thus initiating what would become a long lasting and successful campaign for Buddhist educational initiatives in Ceylon.

During their trips to Sri Lanka, Olcott and Blavatsky had met a number of high-ranking monks, chief among them Venerable Hikkaduve Sumangala; one of the most respected and

highly educated Buddhist monk at that time. Soon he became Olcott's most faithful Sinhalese ally. Never the less, Olcott and Blavatsky had developed a large number of Sinhalese laypeople followers of their way of thinking.

Col. Olcott's second tour to Ceylon was in April 1881. Together with Venerable Mohottivatte Gunananda, the monk who had spearheaded the first phase of the Sinhalese Buddhist revival, they traveled across the country for eight months in a bullock cart design by him. This was the only practical mode of transportation at this time. Fascinated villagers observe the mechanical wonders of this device, complete with lockers for furniture and books, canvas roof to keep out rain, and cushioned central compartment with removable planks that could seat eight for dinner or sleep four. Designed and made by Olcott's American ingenuity. He solicited subscriptions to support his National Education Fund, wrote and distributed anti-Christian and pro-Buddhist tracts, and secured support for his educational reforms from representatives of the island's three monastic sectors.

Olcott remained disturbed by what he perceived as ignorance of the Sinhalese about Buddhism. This was an odd sort of judgment for a recent convert who had purportedly come to Asia not to teach but to learn. It was Olcott's uncritical and unconscious appropriation of academic Orientalism that led him to the conclusion that many Buddhists at that time knew little, if anything, about real Buddhism, although many indeed follow the Pancha-Seela , which influenced the harmony and the unity of the society. He hated missionaries and his beloved Orientalists, and so Col. Olcott assumed the right to define the Buddhism. No matter where he is, he always consider as one of them (i.e., identify himself with the local inhabitants). So, he assumed his duty was to steer Sinhalese masses from their ignorance and to instill in them what he believed as real their Buddhist faith. Hover, he understood well that this some deviations from the Buddhist Philosophy of locals were due to the continual suppression of Sinhalese and the Buddhism by successive Portuguese, Dutch, and the British invading governments over the previous 400 years.

His third trip to Ceylon was on July 18, 1882. Olcott discovered that the Buddhist Theosophical Society was "lifeless" and the revival was 'at a standstill.' Of the 13,000 rupees that had been pledged to the National Education Fund, only 100 rupees had been collected. More ominously, a contingent of

Roman Catholic missionaries had converted a Buddhist pilgrimage site into a Lourdes-like healing shrine. Olcott feared “with the materialism-based ignorance, Buddhists may turn into Catholicism.” Again the same history is repeating even today in Sri Lanka as well as in India. Unethical conversion of Buddhist and Hindus to Christianity is currently blossoming in this part of the word. In part this is due to massive influx of money from the West earmarked for conversion, vulnerability and the desperation of the people due to poverty, intimidatory actions by mobs including killing Buddhist monks, and the inadequate governmental control. In an attempt to break the Catholic monopoly over this crucial segment of the religious marketplace, Olcott pleaded for monks to step forward and perform healings “in the name of Lord Buddha.” But when no monk came forward, perhaps due to the fear of persecution by the ruling British, then he decided to do the work himself.

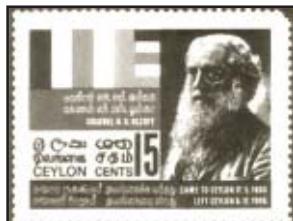
Olcott publicly attributed his healings to the Buddha. Olcott's first healing in Sri Lanka occurred on August 29, 1882. News of the Colonel's healing powers spread across the island and his fundraising tour was immediately transformed into a road show featuring the miraculous healing hands of the instantly charismatic “White Buddhist.” Before his healing tours of 1882 and 1883, Olcott had recruited most of his Sinhalese and Indian followers from among the English-speaking middle classes. But his celebrated cures popularized his message, especially in Ceylon, where he inspired messianic expectations among Sinhalese peasants.

Col. Olcott's leadership for the Sinhalese Buddhist Revival was in the wake of a tragic Buddhist-Christian riot that occurred on March 25, 1883, in Kotahena, a Catholic stronghold of Colombo. On that day a peaceful Buddhist procession marched through the streets on the way to Venerable Mohottivatte Gunananda's newly decorated monastery, the Deepaduttama Vihara, where a new Buddha statue was to be dedicated. When the procession approaching a Roman Catholic cathedral located a few hundred yards from the temple, the cathedral bell sounded, that was followed immediately by bells in other Catholic churches in the area. As per this pre-arranged signal, about a thousand men descended on the Buddhist's peaceful procession with clubs and machetes and a bloody brawl ensued. Authorities summoned police, but their batons were no match for the clubs, swords, and stones of the Catholic mob. Several Buddhists were killed and many were seriously wounded by the mob.

As the Governor's Riots Commission investigated the affair. Numerous cases were filed, but authorities dropped all charges against Catholics because of a lack of "reliable evidence." After it had become clear that the Catholics would not be tried in the court of justice due to the governmental favoritism, a group of Sinhalese monks cabled Olcott urging him to come to Ceylon. He immediately responded, and upon his arrival on January 27, 1884, Olcott organized a formal Buddhist Defense.

The committee elected him an honorary member and charged him to travel to London as its' representative. Thus, for the first time Olcott's role as an intermediary between East and West became apparent, not only to himself but to Buddhists and Colonial administrators alike. Before he left for London, a group of high-ranking Buddhist monks gave Olcott a solemn farewell ceremony, in which they authorized him "To register as Buddhists persons of any nation who may make to him application, to administer the Three Refuges and Five Precepts and to organize societies for the promotion of Buddhism." The first person of European descent to be given such an honor, Col. Olcott thus became the first Buddhist missionary to the West.

In a subsequent dispatch to Colonial Secretary Derby, Governor Longden from Sri Lanka mentioned Olcott, but in more ominous terms. It was only a matter of time, he wrote, before one or two individuals would arise and take control of Buddhist affairs on the island. Given the "negligent and timid character of the Sinhalese mind," he warned, it was likely that non-Asian Buddhists would fill these leadership roles.



In May of 1884, almost a year after Longden had warned his superiors about the Colonel, he arrived in London. Though officials were wary of augmenting his already significant influence, he was able to meet with Lord Derby's assistant undersecretary, R.H. Meade. Shortly thereafter he sent a memo to Lord Derby, demanding: (1) that Catholics accused of instigating the riot be brought to trial; (2) that Buddhists be guaranteed the right to exercise their religion freely; (3) that Vesak—the full moon day on which the Sinhalese commemorate the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death—be declared a public holiday; (4) that all restrictions against the use of tom-toms and other musical instruments in religious processions be removed; (5)

that Buddhist registrars be appointed; and (6) that the question of Buddhist temporalities (the supposedly negligent control of Buddhist properties by monks) be resolved. Col. Olcott enclosed with his memo some accompanying documents that testified to the “discontent and despair” that had in his view gripped the island’s Buddhists following the Kotahena riots. He hinted that, if ignored, their dissatisfaction might result in a rebellion.

Only two of Olcott’s requests were speedily granted. In the fall of 1884, Colonial officials agreed to pursue “more of a hands off policy” regarding the use of tom-toms and other musical instruments in religious processions. As a part of placing control over the religion, these traditional Buddhist activities were previously banned by these invaders. On April 28, 1885, Vesak became an official holiday in British Ceylon.

Most people recognized Col. Olcott as the leader of the Sinhalese Buddhist Revival. However, his point of view neither he is the originator (credit given to Mohottivatte Gunananda) nor he was a culminator (credit given to Anagarika Dharmapala), but as organizer and articulator. It was Olcott who agitated for Buddhist civil rights, and who gave the revival its organizational shape by founding voluntary associations, publishing and distributing tracts, and, perhaps most important, establishing schools. Olcott was a culture broker with one foot planted in traditional Sinhalese Buddhism and the other in liberal American Protestantism. By creatively combining these two sources, along with other influences such as theosophy, academic Orientalism, and metropolitan gentility, he helped to craft a new form of Buddhism that thrives today not only in Sri Lanka but also in the United States.

Among the Theravada Buddhist countries, Sri Lanka has been the most advanced in modern Buddhist studies and Philosophy. Two monastic parivenas of Vidyodaya and Vidyaalankaara were eventually elevated to university status. These not only admit monks, but also lay students. The older secular Universities of Sri Lanka offers courses in Pali and Buddhist studies both for the lower and for the advanced degrees to all students, Sri Lankan and foreign, including monks without any discrimination at all.

Sri Lanka has made great contributions to the progress of international Buddhism. Besides the Maha Bodhi Society, Sri Lanka gave birth to another great international Buddhist organization, that is, the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB.) in 1950

[2493]. Professor Malalesekera who initiated the idea was elected the first president of the organization. Now the organization has its permanent headquarters in Thailand. In addition, until 1975 [2518] Sri Lanka had sent abroad a far greater number of Dhammaduutas than any other Buddhist country, except Japan. Sri Lankan monks can be found residing in their vihaaras of London, Washington, Berlin and other Western cities, as well as in India and in Japan. The Buddhist Publication Society of Kandy, established in 1958 [2501], has regularly published two useful serial publications called 'The Wheel' and 'Bodhi Leaves', which have enjoyed a world-wide readership. Sri Lanka's monthly journals such as World Buddhism, meet with increasing numbers of readers in the English-speaking world. Sri Lanka (formally Ceylon) and its scholars have also played a larger part than any other Buddhist country in making known to some of the non-Buddhist areas of the world the principles and practice of Buddhism.

However, one need to take into account that Sir Lanka suffered many foreign invasions from time to time. Sri Lankan kings successfully manages to expel and counter invasions by Indians on and off for 1,500 years. However, over the past 500 years it was difficult to resist fully the guns and swards of ruthless European invaders, starting with Portuguese, then Dutch and British. This resulted in the deterioration of the culture and the religion by design, and destruction of many magnificent Buddhist Temples and Pagodas which represented the treasures and the glories of the country and the people.

The Sinhela kings and peasants were very religious and devoted much of their time to the building up of the country according to the Buddhist way of life. A visit to Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, the ancient cities of the island will reveal the might, skill and intelligence of the Sinhalese people through the buildings, pagodas, statues, art and craft built nearly 2,000 years ago, and which today lie in ruins as a result of the destruction by foreign invaders. Many such places were destroyed. In particular in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka by invaders and laid waste by the invaders including the invading armies from Tamil Nadu. However, as a self-dependent and determined race it is indeed wonderful that the Sinhalese people could do such things in those ancient times, and more importantly managed to preserve its heritage, Theravada Buddhism and the Hela culture in spite of such major difficulties and destructions they exposed to over centuries. It is the time that Sri Lankan government takes real responsibility in restoring and protecting these not only national, but world heritage treasures of Buddhist sites.

Sinhalese great architectural monuments in the form of Pagodas, monasteries and shrines, though now mostly in ruins have still a message to the world of what could be done by men with very limited resources or modern technology if only they become steady of purpose. There are many engineering wonders constructed by Sinhala Buddhists, going back 1,000 including gigantic works or irrigation tanks like Yoda-Ala, Kalavewa, and Minneriya.

450 years of successive foreign rule under the Portuguese, the Dutch and later the British Lanka had been subjected to alienated culture and manipulated distortion and robbing of local heritage. During this period, more particularly during Portuguese period, Buddhists had to undergo enormous sufferings and indignities because they did not accept the religion of their new rulers. Those who were not converted to Christianity were brutally massacred. History suggests that Portuguese alone have killed more than 200,000 Sinhala people who refused to accept new religion (i.e., the original inhabitants of Sri Lanka), which is not that different from the plight of inhabitants of other new territories invaded by Europeans. It is not too late to systematically investigated these genocidal activities and bring them to World Courts for appropriate justice and compensation.

Over the five centuries of European rule, Sinhala people and in particular the Buddhists were not given proper jobs, they were denied their rights in the land of their birth and even their marriages were not recognized unless they were baptized or married in a Church. Properties of the Temples were taken away, Buddhist education was neglected and replaced by Christian Missionary education and in place of the Sinhalese language a foreign language was introduced to the people. Buddhist monks were killed, temples were destroyed and new churches were built on these premises. Some Buddhist Temples were burnt and destroyed and some of them were desecrated by the slaughtering of cows therein. Those who embraced the new religion were partially protected by the Church. Buddhist monks forced to be neglected and they were not given a proper place in society. Infants were killed when their mothers refused to accept the new faith. All sorts of forceful methods were applied by those foreign rulers to destroy Buddhism. Again this is not unique, as these kinds of atrocities have been documented in several other countries by the western invaders. Ironically, albeit in a different tone, similar persecutions and brutal activities are still continuing even today. This is illustrated by the recent killings of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka.

# **Contribution of Buddhism:**

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In Sri Lanka, Col. Olcott decided to compile for use in his Buddhist schools a Catechism of basic Buddhist principles, “on the lines of the similar elementary handbooks so effectively used among Western Christian sects,” both Protestant and Catholic. Olcott’s *The Buddhist Catechism*, which would eventually go through more than forty editions and be translated into over twenty languages, is in many ways the defining document of his understanding of Buddhism. It first appeared in both English and Sinhalese, on July 24, 1881. Hugely influential, it is still used in Sri Lankan schools and temples.

While Olcott himself characterized his *Catechism* as an “antidote to Christianity,” a reliance on that tradition was evident in its explicitly Christian questions: examples;

Q.     *Was the Buddha God?*

- A.     No. He was a human being who attained enlightenment. Buddha teaches no “divine” incarnation.
- Q.     *Do Buddhists accept the theory that everything has been formed out of nothing by a Creator?*
- A.     We do not believe in miracles; hence we deny creation, and cannot conceive of a creation of something out of nothing.

Olcott’s non-Christian Buddhism sounded like liberal Protestantism. More than an antidote to Christianity, it included a distrust of miracles and creations, an emphasis on reason and experience, finding the truth and self-reliance.

As a result of the great Buddhist revival which he started in Sri Lanka, within a short period the Buddhist society with his leadership managed to establish three Colleges and 205 schools, of which 177 received government grants. Over 25,000 children were in attendance at these Buddhist schools at that time. Those children who in former years would have had only one option; convert to Christianity, which would then allow them to attend Christian Mission Schools. Thanks to Col. Olcott, these children now had the option of attending culturally and religiously compatible Buddhist schools. In addition, he brought the Burmese, Siamese and Ceylon Buddhists into a Convention of Southern Buddhists; and he formulated the *Fourteen Propositions of Buddhism*, a document which was the basis upon which the northern and southern Buddhists were united.

# **Designing of the Buddhist Flag:**

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He was also responsible for designing the Buddhist flag, which is made up of the six Colors as per the aura of the Lord Buddha. Being a predominantly Buddhist country that flag is flown throughout Ceylon, especially on Buddhist holidays when it waves from every temple and home.

The Buddhist flag, first hoisted in 1885 in Sri Lanka and continuing ever since, is a symbol of faith and peace used throughout the world to represent the Buddhist faith. It has the six Colors; Blue (nila), Yellow (pita), Red (lohitā), White (odata), Scarlet (manjesta), and the mixture of these six Colors (prabaswara) of the flag represent the Colors of the “aura” that emanated from the body of the Lord Buddha when he attained.

## **These colors represent:**

1. Blue: signifying the concept of loving kindness and peace in Buddhism
2. Yellow: signifying the Middle Path, that is, the complete absence of form and emptiness
3. Red: signifying achievement, wisdom, virtue, fortune and dignity.
4. White: signifying purity, emancipation that the Dharma will always exist regardless.
5. Orange: The essence of Buddhism which is full of wisdom, strength and dignity. of time or space.

The horizontal bars signify peace and harmony between all races throughout the world while the vertical bars represent eternal peace within the world. The Colors symbolize the perfection of Buddha-hood and the Dhamma. In simple terms, the Buddhist Flag implies that there is no discrimination of races, nationality, or skin color; that every living being possessed the Buddha nature and all have the potential to become a Buddha.

The combination of these five Colors symbolizes the one and only universality: The Truth of the Buddha's Teaching. Therefore, the overall flag represents that: “Regardless of race, nationality, division or Color, all sentient beings possess the potential of Buddha-hood”.

## **Fight for Buddhist Rights:**

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His peaceful protests made the British government (London, UK) to declare the birthday of the Lord Buddha, the "Vesak" as a national public holiday in Sri Lanka. Prior to this, preceding governments recognized only the Christian holidays. Those Sri Lankan children who were absent from the missionary schools on their own religious holidays were punished. Thanks to Colonel Olcott, once the Buddhist holidays were recognized by the government, other religions also quickly secured like recognition.

Colonel Olcott did not confine his activities to strengthening the Buddhist religion alone. He worked zealously to revitalize the Hindu religion in India, and helped to establish many Hindu schools. He started the Olcott Harijan (that is, "Children of God") Free Schools for the benefit of the Panchama outcastes of India, near the Adyar compound. Five of these schools were established in Madras Corporation, and the government eventually took over these schools into the education system. For his interest and efforts on behalf of Hinduism, Colonel Olcott was adopted into the Brahman caste by Indians.

He was also interested in the revival of the ancient Zoroastrian teachings. Typical of his work for that religion is his fiery letter to K. R. Cama (see *The Theosophist*, 1932), who was one of the "best, wisest and most honorable" Parsi leaders of that time. Colonel Olcott reproached the Parsis for being content with their wealth and modern culture and but so little value of their ancient teachings and the spirituality shown by the Parsis of old. He says: "They were led by the holy Dastur Darab whose purity and spirituality were such as to make it possible for him to draw from the boundless akash the divine fire of Ormuzd. Are you such men today with your wealth, your luxuries, your knighthoods, your medals and your mills? Have you a Darab Dastur among you, or even a school of the Prophets where neophytes are taught the divine science? The question your humble friend and defender asks is whether you mean to keep idle and not stir a hand to revive your religion, to discover all that can be learnt about your sacred writings, to create a modern school of writers who shall invest your ethics and metaphysics with such a charm that we shall hear no more about Parsi men preaching Christianity. I believe not. He goes on to warn them of the dangers that threaten them as a result of their aggressive worldliness and proceeds to make definite practical suggestions for the revival of their religion and their unique culture.

## **Contributions to India:**

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On his arrival in India in 1879, Col. Olcott's original plan was to spend some time learning about Hinduism and Buddhism from Eastern experts, then to return to America. His main mission at that time was to devote rest of his life to promoting Theosophy and building up the Theosophical Society in US. Before their departure, Sinhalese praised Blavatsky, and they hailed Olcott as one of their own - "The White Buddhist." But the celebrity status that Olcott achieved during his first visit to Ceylon led him to reconsider his plans. He began to consider himself as a teacher than a student and view India as a home.

In India, Colonel Olcott also organized the need and sponsored the first exhibit of Indian products. He urged Indians to get together and use their own local products instead of those which were imported, especially by the ruling British, and to develop an appreciation of them without regard to the religion or race of those who produced them. This was the beginning of "Swadeshi", later adopted by the Indian National Congress. Unfortunately, a similar approach was not successful in Sri Lanka due to aggressive intervention by the powerful missionaries and colonial controls. These continuing unpatriotic elements within Sri Lanka, now a days sponsored by international NGO's are not only a significant threat to its development, economy and hence the prosperity, but also to its heritage and the sovereignty.

Colonel Olcott founded the Adyar Library in December 1886, and for its dedication ceremonies he invited representatives of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam to be present and bless the work. All accepted except the Christian clergy. This was thought to be the first time that representatives of these various religions had been brought together to participate in a meeting under one roof, and was considered a remarkable accomplishment on the part of the Colonel at that time period.

## **Contributions to the Theosophical society:**

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In his early years in India, Colonel Olcott continued his healing work. He had great mesmeric healing power, and was known all over India for the cures he affected. So many came to him for healing that it finally became necessary for him to ask the cooperation of the press to make it known that he would only

treat such cases as received written permission to be brought to him (i.e., a referral from a local physician). However, after a few years, Theosophical Society asked him to disengaged from healing work, because of his health and vitality and the fact that his energies to be conserved for the performance of his duties as President of Theosophical Society.

During the years of his Presidency, he stood unflinchingly through many upheavals and tribulations suffered by the Society, he successfully steered it through many difficult crisis situations. In addition, with the military-like discipline and his great honesty, he was always willing to admit his error and reverse his position when anyone pointed this out to him. Quote, "He is one who never questions, but obeys; who may make mistakes out of excessive zeal, but never is unwilling to repair his fault even at the cost of the greatest self-humiliation" (*The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett*, p. 14).

Colonel Olcott, for sixteen years after the death of Madam Blavatsky, had to arrange pilot the Society without the stimulus of her spiritual teaching and backing, he continued the work of the society for reputation for human brotherhood and understanding, and built the organization of the Society into. He gave everything he had to the people, as he had done from the beginning - his devotion, his health, his energy, his worldly goods, family ties; Most importantly without expected anything back from them.

As the Leaders of The Theosophical Society he continuously faced difficulties and obstacles, but always managed to overcome these via mindful-thinking and patients. Every disturbing element, every grave and often seemingly disastrous issue, he met fearlessly with the determination to bring the Society through with its strength undiminished. Spiritually the Society grew in strength as the Truth behind it was ultimately revealed after each time of turmoil. Crises were frequent and often were centered on Madam Blavatsky, who was a mystery to many. Yet, in the face of this, it was his responsibility to support her and, at the same time, to resolve each situation to the best interests of the Society. This he did with characteristic honesty, fairness and great courage.

## **The last year in his life:**

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In 1906, while he was returning from his last American visit, Colonel Olcott fell on board a ship and received an injury from which he never recovered. He still continued to work as usual.

Although his mind functioned beautifully, his physical health deteriorate, his heart failure gradually became worse from the strain of overwork, together with the lack of rest unfortunately prevented his recuperation. His last visit to Sri Lanka was in November 1906. Three months later, he died on February 17, 1907, at Adyar, India.

What had been said of him by government officials in Washington in his young manhood could still be said of him with regard to his service to the world: that he had performed his task "with zeal, ability, and uncompromising faithfulness to duty." He was a man of honor, integrity and constantly helped those who are in need without any returns for his services. It is natural with this kind of generosity, some extremists and ignorant people find it difficult to understand his mentality.

In 1906 Olcott attended the American Section's Convention for the last time; during his return to Adyar, he suffered a fall on shipboard, from which he never fully recovered. By December he was confined to his bed, and only with assistance managed to give his last public address at the close of the Adyar convention that year.

Olcott died on February 17, 1907, leaving behind a legacy of immense accomplishment. He also left a treasure trail and legacy of brilliant written work spanning his entire life, most notably his *Old Diary Leaves* in six volumes that chronicle the founding and early years of the Theosophical Society.

Colonel Olcott last message, signed by his own hand, on February 2<sup>nd</sup>: "To my beloved brothers in the physical body: I bid you all farewell. In memory of me, carry on the grand work of proclaiming and living the Brotherhood of Religions. To my beloved Brothers on the higher planes: I greet and come to you, and implore you to help me to impress all men on earth that 'There is no Religion higher than Truth,' and that in the Brotherhood of Religions lie the peace and progress of humanity"



Mrs. Besant then said: "Brothers, we are here to-day not to bid farewell to our dear President, for there is no farewell

between spirit and spirit, but to bid farewell to this cast-off garment of his, in which for the last 31 years he has so bravely striven to serve humanity. We are here to take, with all love and reverence, this cast-off garment to the fire, which shall give back to the elements that which is theirs, so that Nature, the Mother, may use again these elements for new forms of beauty and of life.

You heard our Buddhist brethren chant their loving farewell, and you heard Buddhist lips, with faltering tongue, say words of gratitude for what this man, their co-religionist, had done for Buddhism.

Colonel Henry Steel Olcott was a great:

- ⌚ Brilliant visionary
- ⌚ Sympathetic, understanding and caring person
- ⌚ Tough, but fair and kind hearted
- ⌚ Well organized, and hence focused in achieving his goals
- ⌚ Dedicated his life for welfare of others
- ⌚ Did all these things for the Society without expecting anything in return

## **What can we learn from this great personality?:**

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These are few of his great characters we should consider embracing upon. If one embarks on this path, it would make him or her clearly a better citizen. On February 17th every year, Buddhists throughout Sri Lanka and elsewhere light brass lamps and offer burning incense to commemorate the anniversary of the death of an American-born Buddhist hero. In Theravada temples, Buddhist monks conduct special religious ceremonies to remember him include engaging meditation practice and passing merit to him. School children across the Sri Lanka offer gifts in the memory of Colonel Olcott, and wish him happiness and peace, and for him to attain nibbana.

To be successful, no matter what profession of industry you are in, education and skills training must be geared for one to develop inquisitive mind which always encouraged in Buddhist

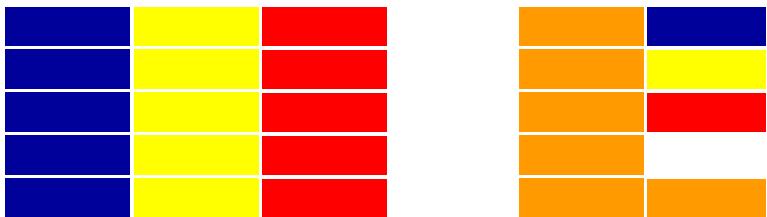
teachings and strong system integration skills to create the innovations and inventions. Together with an ethical leadership with strong product/services management skills to generate value out of these inventions. One reason why Col. Olcott managed to contribute so much to the society is that he passed both these great qualities; he had integration as well as management and leadership skills. Make no mistakes —these skills are applicable to you, no matter whether you are in education, services, production, or sales.

Other leading qualities of Col. Olcott one should adopt including philosophy of broad thinking, participate in extra work and extra-curricular activities; volunteer your time, money and efforts for a good causes (without expectation of returns); dedicate to pursue things that interest you and your own wellbeing (e.g., meditation and healthy life-style, practicing Pancha-Seela), read and widen you knowledge about the environment, the neighborhood, countries and the world; enjoy art and music, and learn about different cultures, religions, languages and be proud of your own roots.

Please note that being an outstanding student or a good citizen means much more than achieving straight A's in national exams or having a College degree. It means becoming a well-rounded person with academic achievements, do good deeds, good communication, leadership and social skills and finally as Col. Olcott did, to carryout tasks to help those who are in need without any expectations of retune for your service.

Col. Olcott was trusted under all circumstances, and his faithful service to communities US, Sri Lanka, India, and elsewhere, especially those who are suppressed were eye opening. The greatest homage we can pay to this extraordinary American personality is not only to remember him, but to adopt and practice his good qualities leading to become a useful and good world citizen.

He also laid the foundation for both Sri Lanka's and India for their liberation from Ruling British. His affection and the efforts on the revival of inhabitants of Sri Lanka, in particular the Sinhela (Hela people) and the Buddhism is remarkable. For this all Sri Lankans no matter of what religion or ethnicity must be grateful to him. His vision and actions carried out to achieve these aims with dedication has been truly without a parallel. May he conquer the 'truth' and nibbana (lack of rebirth) that he always considered to be above all else.



The International Buddhist Flag  
Recognized by All Buddhist Traditions

