

Mary Foster

Patron of Buddhism



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Mary Foster, Patron of Buddhism

In some sense Anagarika Dharmapala can be seen as the first modern Buddhist. For all its emphasis on change (*anicca*) Buddhists at the end of the 19th century were still locked in the past, content to do what had always been done and resistant to any innovation. But the world around them had changed, including the religious landscape. New religions with all the most up to date techniques and technologies to promote themselves and their ideas were closing in on Buddhists. However, a small but significant change was about to meet this challenge. On the 16th of May 1880 the American Henry Olcott and the Russian/American Helena Blavatsky arrived in Galle and in front of a crowd of thousands took the Five Precepts, an event that heralded the beginning of a realization that engagement with modernity was necessary if Buddhism was to survive. One person who was influenced by all this was Don David Hewavitharane, later to go by the name of Anagarika Dharmapala.

Dharmapala's thinking and vision was far ahead of most of his compatriots and indeed most others in the Buddhist world. He wanted to disseminate the Dhamma through new and modern mediums, and he saw the need for Buddhism to become socially relevant through new approaches; i.e. literature, schools, dispensaries, training centres for monks and similar projects. Unfortunately, Dharmapala's fellow Buddhists were not enthusiastic about new-fangled ways of doing things; they wanted their resources used for *danas*, elaborate *pujas* and building stupas. Dharmapala's family was quite rich and they financed some of his schemas but there was a limit to what they could do to help. The logical source for funds was Asia's Buddhist communities and Dharmapala was quick to reach out to them but they too were slow to extend their hands to him.

Dharmapala's diaries and magazine articles reflect his continual frustration at getting financial help, indeed any kind of support, from Buddhists. As part of his efforts to garner international support for his projects, the most important being getting Buddhist administration of the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya, Dharmapala visited Thailand in February 1894. He was received politely and invited to address an audience of princes, including the PM, in Bangkok's royal library and left with the promise of a regular donation of Rupees 150 a month. Later he wrote, "This sum was never delivered and the visit to Thailand was a failure. The answer inevitably comes that 'charity begins at home'." The Maha Bodhi Journal which Dharmapala started in order to help re-establish the fellowship that once existed between Buddhists of different sects and lands, and which was the first international Buddhist organ, was eagerly read by Westerners interested in the Dhamma but attracted little support or interest amongst traditional Buddhists. Dharmapala bemoaned: "The journal is sent free to learned societies throughout the world as well as to the princes and nobles of Buddhist countries...[We] are sorry to state the wealthy Buddhists dignitaries in Buddhist countries have failed to respond generously for the expansion of objects of the Maha Bodhi Society." In another article he wrote: "Japan and Siam have not helped by a single contribution for the furtherance of the noble objects of the [Mahabodhi] society. Burma contributed generously at the commencement of the society... but since sixteen years have failed to render any assistance." Most disappointing of all was when funds were contributed they sometimes vanished before reaching Dharmapala. A large amount of money collected in Burma ended up being misappropriated, something Dharmapala still bitterly complained about even years later.

In the end money did come, from a most unexpected and unusual source and from a country far from Buddhism's traditional homeland. Mary Robinson Foster was born in 1844 in Hawaii when it was still an independent kingdom. Her mother had French and Hawaiian ancestry and dated back to native chiefs from Maui and Hawaii Island. Her father was British and had founded a large shipbuilding company and her brother became a notable politician and businessman. When Mary was 16 she married Thomas R. Foster who worked in her father's business but in 1889, he died leaving her widowed and childless at the age of 45. In 1893 her close friend Queen Lili'uokalani of Hawaii was overthrown in a coup d'état by American soldiers and business interests and imprisoned in her palace. Foster was one of only two people who were permitted to visit the queen during her imprisonment. In 1893 Dharmapala was invited to represent Buddhism at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in the US. On his return journey his ship stopped in Hawaii where he stayed as the guest of a Japanese

Buddhist he had been corresponding with. Foster had still not recovered from the death of her husband and her grief was not helped by the anger she felt over the American annexation of her country and the treatment of her friend the former queen. Someone informed her that a “holy man from Ceylon” was in town and she expressed a desire to meet him. A meeting between the two took place and it was to have a profound impact on Buddhism throughout Asia. Dharmapala taught Foster the basic principles of meditation which greatly helped her to improve her mental state and as a result a lifelong bond between the two was formed. It also began a lifelong interest in Buddhism for Foster. Over the next 40 years, Mary Foster donated significant amounts of money to Dharmapala's Mahabodhi Society which was used to support Dharmapala's numerous projects. One of her institutions founded with her money which still operates in Sri Lanka is the Foster-Robinson Hospital for the Poor, now part of the National Hospital of Sri Lanka in Colombo.

Foster's generously enabled Dharmapala to start and run most of the things he did; securing land in Sarnath, Bodh Gaya and Calcutta, buying a press to print the Mahabodhi Journal, building a headquarters, and paying for the huge amount of travel Dharmapala undertook in his efforts to make contact with and try to motivate those sympathetic to his mission. Mary Foster's single biggest donation to Dharmapala's work was Rupees 56,000 to build the Mahabodhi Society's headquarters in Calcutta. It should be noted that other generous donors to Dharmapala apart from Foster who were not a Buddhists but a Hindu, were the Raja of Bhinga and His Highness the Maharaja of Baroda who gave generously whenever Dharmapala was in serious need. Dharmapala was able to start the London Buddhist Mission in the UK, later to evolve into the London Buddhist Vihara, because Foster contributed 61 Pounds a month for its establishment and operations. She also gave Rupees 6000 for Dharmapala's Rajagirya Vocational School in Colombo which housed and educated 300 pupils. In his diaries Dharmapala records 82 times he received funds from Foster.

Not surprisingly, Dharmapala always referred to Foster as “the gracious lady” and sometimes called her “a modern Anathapidaka” which was not an exaggeration. Once he praised her in these words: “Mrs. Foster's benefactions amount to several lakhs of rupees. She has been rightly called ‘the queen of the empire of righteousness.’”

Buddhism was not the only cause Foster supported. She donated land for the building of the Honpa Hongwanji Mission, the first Buddhist temple in Honolulu and one of the first in the US. She was also a long-time patron for the Buddhist Hongwanji High School, funded scholarships at other schools, purchased beds at Kapiolani Hospital for the exclusive use of poor patients and acquired land that would otherwise have been purchased by foreign investors, enabling native Hawaiians to live there. Even today's Hawaiians who know nothing of Mary Foster are at least familiar with her name because she was partly responsible for establishing the Foster Botanical Gardens in Honolulu, the capital of Hawaii, the loveliest public spaces in the city. During one of Anagarika Dharmapala's several trips to Hawaii to meet with and personally thank Foster for her generosity, he brought a sapling from the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya which was planted in the gardens and still grows there. Recently the American scholar and Buddhist teacher Patricia Lee Masters published a biography of Mary Foster which gives a detailed account of her benefaction to Buddhism and other worthy causes. It is a long overdue tribute to a great Buddhist and a remarkable woman.