

In 1880 Madame Blavatsky and Col. Olcott visited Ceylon (now called Sri Lanka) and were enthusiastically received by the Buddhists of the island, which included most of its inhabitants. They drew round themselves practically all the chief priests of Ceylon and formed the Buddhist Theosophical Society in that land.

Olcott became greatly concerned about the ability of Ceylonese Buddhists to practice their religion freely. The British governor of Ceylon, trying to promote Christianity on the island and to discourage the public celebration of “pagan” practices, had forbidden Buddhist public processions, which had long been customary on special Buddhist holy days. Olcott, relying on his American reputation, went to the Foreign Office in London to protest such discrimination on religious grounds. He was successful, so the right to hold religious processions in Ceylon was restored.

On his return to the island, Olcott also went all around the country founding Buddhist schools for Ceylonese children, whose formal education had been restricted to Christian missionary schools. As a result of such actions, Olcott became a national hero in Ceylon, where his statue is in the main square of the capital city, Colombo; his birthday became a national holiday; and his image has appeared repeatedly on postage stamps. No other non-Ceylonese has ever been so highly regarded and honored.

Although Colonel Olcott was the lecturer and organizer, the phenomena of Madame Blavatsky caused her to be the chief attraction throughout India. When in Simla in 1880, she gave striking demonstrations of her powers, they were reported and discussed throughout India and elsewhere. Those phenomena are described in A. P. Sinnett's book *The Occult World*, published in 1881. At that time, while Blavatsky remained in Bombay to edit *The Theosophist*, Col. Olcott went on another tour in Ceylon.

In 1881, Olcott published his *Buddhist Catechism* for educating Buddhist youngsters in their religion and founded a Buddhist Educational Association. That catechism has never been out of print since its first publication and is still widely used as a basic introduction to the religion. It is faintly ironic but eclectically appropriate that the best and most widely used introduction to Buddhism is in a format characteristic of Christian instruction, both Protestant and Catholic.