

# The First Yellow Robes in the West



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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

## The First Yellow Robes in the West

After the Buddha preached his first sermon at Isipatana he gave this commission to his audience; “Wander forth for the good of the many, for the welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world. Let no two of you go in the same direction. Teach the Dhamma that is lovely, in the beginning, the middle and the end.” From its very beginning Buddhist Sangha took this call to heart and because they did the Dhamma eventually spread to every corner of Asia. And of the monks who undertook to proclaim the Dhamma far and wide none have been more energetic and ready to do so than those of Sri Lanka. It was Sri Lankan monks who spread Theravada to Burma and the various kingdoms which made up what is now Thailand. It was they who probably helped Buddhism survive in south India for as long as it did. While most Sri Lankan monks left their island home as missionaries, others travelled as pilgrims, some did so out of curiosity and a few were just looking for greener pastures. The history of Asia is littered with snippets of information mentioning Sri Lankan monks in the most unexpected places. The Japanese monk Ennin was in China during the emperor Wuzong’s persecution of Buddhism in 842-846. He was ordered to report to the local police office to have his permit cancelled and when he turned up there were two Sri Lankan monks there. What they were doing in China we do not know. When Xuanzang was in India in the 5<sup>th</sup> century he travelled through parts of southern India with a group of 70 Sri Lankan monks who were heading for the north. A Sri Lankan monk named Anandasri was in Bodh Gaya in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century from where he later he visited Tibet. One Tibetan source describes him as “foremost on the Sangha of the island of Simhala...skilled in two languages, one who seeks the benefit of the Dharma.” Numerous similar examples could be given testifying to the fact that Sri Lankan monks were great travellers. But given this, did any of them ever make their way to Europe before the modern period, i.e. before the late 1890s?

Shipping records in South Africa mention that in 1790 a Dutch frigate sailing from Ceylon to Holland was wrecked off the Namibian coast and after great difficulties the survivors managed to make their way to Cape Town. The records further mention that amongst these survivors was a “Ceylonese native” dressed in a yellow garb. Was this individual a Buddhist monk trying to make his way to Europe? Or was he a Hindu swami? Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing, but if he was a Buddhist monk he may have been the first to attempt to go there, although there is no record of what happened to him after his arrival in Cape Town.

In 1818 the wife of the first Chief Justice of Ceylon, Sir Alexander Johnston, became seriously ill and he decided to hire a ship to take her back to England. Just before leaving two Buddhist monks, Venerable Sri Gunamuniratana and his cousin Venerable Dhammaratana, turned up at the port and asked if they could also take the ship to England. The monks were from Silabimba Vihara, on the edge of the lake at Dodanduwa near Galle, where on an island in the lake one of the first Western monks, Nyanatiloka, was to establish a monastery in 1911. The two monks were told they could come if they were prepared to work on the ship which they agreed to do. When the ship arrived in England in May 1818 Johnson contacted the Reverend Dr. Adam Clark, a well-known Wesleyan clergyman, and asked him to look after the monks, which he was happy to do. With their striking yellow robes and exotic origins the monks were the talk of the town for a few months and were in demand in society. Eventually they announced that they wished to become Christians and to Clark’s delight he baptized them and gave them the names Adam and Alexander.

Was Sri Gunamuniratana and Dhammaratana conversion genuine? There are good reasons to doubt it. One might suspect that they feigned interest in the religion to please Clark or because they thought it might be to their advantage when they returned to their homeland. Of course, it is also possible that Clark pressured them into converting. Further, in an account of the monks’ instruction in Christianity and baptism it says, “the teacher and his pupils formed, in effect, a language for themselves, and that principally out of the Portuguese, Cinghalese and Sanscrit [sic]: these helps, however proved insufficient; but Dr. C had the high satisfaction of frequently witnessing, that his pupils, under the immediate influence of a Divine Teacher, comprehended his meaning.” Reverend Clark in his enthusiasm may well have believed that the monks understood and accepted what he was telling them about the Gospel but it’s hard to imagine that they did if they knew no English and he no Sinhala.

In 1820 Gunamuniratana and Dhammaratana, aka Adam and Alexander, returned to Ceylon with a letter from Clark to Governor Edward Barnes stating that he believed that their conversion was genuine and asking that they should be given all assistance. Their ship docked in Trincomalee where Alexander disembarked and Adam stayed on board. Adam wished to proceed to Calcutta where he intended to train as a missionary, or so he said. A few hours out of port his ship was struck by lightning, it returned to Trincomalee and no other records of Adam survive. Perhaps he thought that the gods were angry at him for renouncing the faith of his fathers. Jehovah is not the only deity who hurls thunder bolts! Alexander got a minor job in the government and there is no record of his involvement with Christianity or the church. Beyond that we know nothing of two former monks.

Fortunately, there are at least two pictorial records of these first two Buddhist monks who we know of who arrived Europe. The largest is a painting showing the Reverend Clark in his book-lined drawing room together with the monks. Behind Ven. Sri Gunamuniratana who is standing, can be seen a cloth painting of the type that were once common in Sri Lankan temples but few of which survive. It depicts the Buddha with a halo around him and sitting beneath the Bodhi Tree. Perhaps the monks brought it with them when they came to England. The original of the fine portrait of the three men is in the John Wesley House and Museum in London and a copy of it, I am told, is in Colombo's National Museum. The other pictorial record is a portrait of Gunamuniratana, aka Adam. He is shown after he disrobed dressed in early 19<sup>th</sup> century coat and with long glossy-black hair. His handsome features and attentive gaze gives the impression of poise and intelligence. This sketch is now in the British Library.

Although to the best of our knowledge Gunamuniratana and Dhammaratana did not go to Britain to teach the Dhamma they still stand as the first Buddhist monks to arrive in Europe, an extraordinary adventure in itself. It would not be until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that the first '*dhamma dhuta*' monks came with that intention.