

Biography

Venerable **Gangodawila Soma Thera** was born in Gangodawila, a semi-urban locality in the outskirts of the capital city of [Colombo](#).

Soma **Thero was ordained in 1974 when he was 26 years of age** under the tutelage of two of the most revered monks in Sri Lanka – Most Reverend Venerable Madihe Pannasiha Maha Nayake Thera and Venerable Ampitiye Rahula Maha Thera. He received training at the Bhikkhu Training Centre, Maharagama – an institution established by these two monks for the training of novices who enter the Order of the Maha Sangha.

Having obtained his higher ordination in 1976, Soma Thera continued to study the Buddhist texts in [Pali](#), their original language. He was particularly interested in doing research into the teachings of the Buddha and have written several books based on such research.

His mission was to mould the younger generation to live according to the Dhamma. He had the right approach in handling youth problems and soon they rallied round him in an organisation called 'Tharunu Saviya' (Strength of the Youth).

A keen student of meditation, he also took time off to be in solitude in distant, lonely locations where he could meditate undisturbed. His interest in meditating on the qualities of the Buddha made him work on an exhaustive study on the subject. His published work 'Buddhastupa' is a useful guide to those interested in such meditation.

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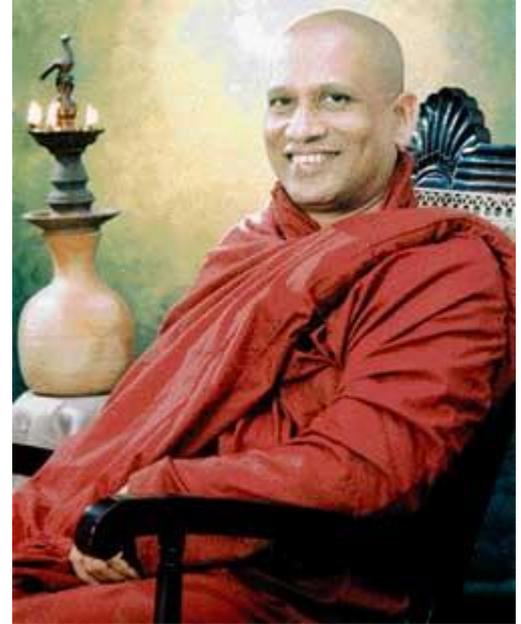
Soma Thera's last visit to Sri Lanka made him realise **the need to inject Buddhist values into the minds of people**, travelling widely throughout the country spreading the message of the Buddha on how to lead simple lives based on the Five Precepts. Thousands flocked to listen to his sermons, which were delivered in simple language yet most effectively. Most of the listeners were young men and women. He discussed religious and social issues on television and these became popular.

The Buddhist Vihara Victoria

The Buddhist Vihara Victoria, a new temple, was established in 1993 at Noble Park. This was established in view of spreading the Dhamma to not only the Sri Lankan community but also other nationalities. At present all religious work is going well. As this premises is not big enough to provide the Buddhist service on a global scale, Soma Thera bought another 5-acre (20,000 m²) block of land with the help of the community to found the [Sakyamuni Sambuddha Vihara](#). 800 trees were planted on the land and necessary plans were drawn up.

Prior to being ordained Venerable Soma had been engaged in business, but had worked closely with the Siri Vajiragnana Dharmayathanaya as a student leader and lay preacher. His teachers were the most Venerable Madihe Pannaseeha Maha Nayaka Thero and Venerable Ampitiye Rahula Thero. His love and veneration for his teachers was exceeded only by his deep and abiding veneration of Lord Buddha.

Educated at Isipathana Vidyalaya, formerly Greenlands College, Venerable Soma, in lay life known as Somaratna played Rugby for the school.



Venerable Soma first visited Australia in 1986, when he came on an invitation from the Buddhist temple at Richmond, where he stayed for a period of three months. Venerable Soma realised that Mahayana practices had a strong foothold in Australia and felt that there was a need for a Vihara where Theravada practices could be followed correctly. When he returned to Australia in 1989, Venerable Soma established the first Sinhala Vihara in Melbourne. This was known as the Melbourne Sri Lankan Buddhist Vihara and was situated at Regent Street in Springvale. In 1993, he moved away from the Melbourne Sri Lankan Buddhist Vihara and established Buddhist Vihara Victoria at 21 Rich Street, Noble Park. Later, this Vihara was moved to Berwick and is called the Sakyamuni Sambuddha Vihara.

Venerable Soma was a farsighted person and his vision was to pave the way to establishing a centre of Buddhist philosophy in Australia. Sakyamuni Sambuddha Vihara was established with the intention of becoming a Buddhist Education, Research and Information Centre for scholars of the Dhamma and to cater to all those who were interested in the study and practice of the Dhamma.

In 1996 he returned to Sri Lanka after seven years in Australia. This was intended to be a short stay to revitalise his spiritual development and to be at the side of his father who had suffered a stroke. The stay was extended as his father became more gravely ill and his presence was required to comfort his mother who was also ailing. While in Sri Lanka Venerable Soma became aware that Buddhists and the Dhamma were increasingly under siege from various outside influences that threatened to distort the word of Lord Buddha and destroy Buddhism. He was moved by the plight of the rural people, especially those living in areas under threat from terrorist attacks, who were undergoing great hardship and suffering and had no one to turn to for help.

When Venerable Soma returned to Australia for a short visit, he launched a campaign to raise funds to reconstruct several tanks in these areas so that the villagers could engage in their traditional occupation of agriculture and be assured that they would not want for food. To support and sustain the villagers, he organised the local Buddhist monks at the village Viharas to move more closely with the people and help them in various ways.

On his return to Sri Lanka he was also appalled to note that alcoholism was rife in the country. He immediately began a campaign to open the eyes of the nation, especially the younger generation to the depravities of drink.

He also carried out a campaign to root out misconceptions entertained by all Buddhists with regard to the worship of Hindu deities practiced by Buddhists, and especially the practice of having Hindu Kovils as an integral part of a Buddhist Vihara. He also campaigned against the bringing in of Sai Baba worship into Buddhism.

He also helped in the establishment of the Sinhala School at Brunswick, which today boasts nearly 200 students.

Death

Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thera of the Vajiraramaya Maharagama died in [St. Petersburg, Russia](#) on 12 December 2003 in his 56th year. He was in Russia to accept an [honorary doctorate](#) conferred by the [Russian Government](#). He was rushed to a hospital in [St Petersburg](#) after a [heart attack](#). He underwent two emergency operations.

Sri Lankans were shocked and saddened by his death. The circumstances of his death aroused suspicion. It was widely believed that he was murdered by [Christian fundamentalists](#). Therefore two autopsy tests were carried out. A commission was appointed to investigate the death. Out of the four people in the commission, 3 deduced that it was intentional but the other thought the evidence was not enough.

Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thera, Head of Buddhist Vihara, Victoria hails from Sri Lanka. Following tradition, he uses the name of his birthplace, Gangodawila, in front of his name. It is a semi-urban locality in the outskirts of the capital city of Colombo.

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Soma Thera's last visit to Sri Lanka made him realize the need **to inject Buddhist values into the minds of people and has undertaken that task earnestly**. In the past few months he has been travelling widely throughout the country spreading the message of the Buddha on how to lead simple lives based on the Five Precepts. Thousands flock to listen to his sermons, which are delivered in simple language yet most effectively. Most of the listeners are young men and women. Television stations clamour to get him to discuss religious and social issues and these have become the most popular programmes of the day.

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As this premises is not big enough to provide the Buddhist service on a global scale, Soma There bought another 5 acre block of land with the help of the community to found the Sakyamuni Sambuddha Vihara. At present 800 trees have been planted on the land and necessary plans have been drawn up.

Very devoted and talented executive members of the community are doing their best to make this massive project a reality. If this task can be realised it would be a great service for the Buddhist world, and a large step in Soma Thera's missionary work for Buddhists in the Millennium.