

Mahiyangana Cetiya - the first of its kind in Sri Lanka

by **Aryadasa Ratnasinghe**

"Bodhito navame mase - phussa punnamiyam jino,
Lankadipam visodhetum - Lankadipam upagami".
Mahavamsa 1:19

The above Pali stanza means that on the 'Duruthu' (January) full moon day, in the ninth month after Enlightenment, the Buddha made his first visit to Lanka, to purge the country from malignant influences of uncanny spirits. On that historic day, the Buddha, having taken his meal near the Anotatta lake, by the foothills of the Himalayas, had left for Sri Lanka by evening to accomplish his mission, because he foresaw that the Buddha Sasana, once established, would remain for 5,000 years.

At the time of the Buddha's visit, the aborigines or the original inhabitants of the country were 'yakkas' (demon-worshippers) and 'nagas' (snake-worshippers). The 'yakkas' were numerous and very powerful, and held themselves aloof and confined themselves to the mountain fastnesses of the North-Central region, whereas the 'nagas' confined themselves to the sea-board, and Maniakkhika was the 'naga' king of Kelaniya.

The luxuriantly wooded Mahanaga garden, on the right-bank of the river Mahaveli, which discharges its confluence into the sea near Trincomalee, was at that time a strategic stronghold of the 'yakkas'. When Buddha arrived at the Mahanaga garden to intercept the 'yakkas' who were assembled there, they were more surprised than alarmed, when they saw him clad in a yellow robe and shaven-headed.

Being inquisitive of the intruder and to know who he was, the 'yakka' chief asked the Buddha, "Who art thou to come here and disturb us?" At once, the Buddha, to their bewilderment, performed a miracle by sitting cross-legged in the air. Now, the 'yakkas' through fear, emotional excitement and apprehensive of danger, begged the Buddha to save their lives and set them free.

Whereupon, the Buddha, addressed them saying "I shall, O yakkas, save thee from all danger, provided I am offered a place to sit down, and make known to thee my mission". The evil horde verily agreed saying "O Great Being! We shall offer thee the whole island". Buddha, having seated at the spot, where the Mahiyangana cetiya now stands, delivered to them a discourse, whereby they became spiritually evaluated and attained the stages of holiness (i.e., the fruits of Sovan, Sakadagami, Anagami and Arhat).

Among them was the 'yakka' commandant Saman who, after listening to the discourse, became elevated to the first phase of spiritual eminence ('Sovan'), and came to be known as Saman deviyo, who is now propitiated as the tutelary deity of Sri Pada. The god, thereupon, appealed to the Buddha to give him something as a token of symbolic worship, in the absence of the Buddha. Buddha in accedence of the earnest request, gave the god a handful of hair from his head, which the god accepted with great devotion.

The god had the hair-relic secured in a golden reliquary and enshrined it in a small tope 10 ft. high and 24 ft. in circumference (Mhv. 1:36). It is the first cetiya in Sri Lanka, built during the life-time of the Buddha. All other cetiyas were of later construction.

After the Mahaparinibbana (demise) of the Buddha in 543 BC at Kusinara (now Kusinagar) in India, 45 years later, the Arhant Sarabhu Maha Thera, having recovered from the funeral pyre, where the Buddha was cremated, the left clavicle (collar-bone) as a relic, brought it to

Sri Lanka, and had it also enshrined in the same cetiya, and enlarged it to a height of 18 ft (Mhv. 1:39).

History tells us that prince Uddha Culabhaya, a cousin of king Devanampiyatissa (307-267 BC), seeing the cetiya, enlarged it further to a height of 45 ft. King Dutugemunu (161-137 BC), who launched his offensive against the Dravidian king Elara alias Ellala, in fulfilment of his old dream, to save the country from Tamil domination, left Rohana, with his magnificent fourfold army of elephants, cavalry, chariots and infantry, and while passing through Guttahalaka (now Buttala) and the jungle-clad Malayarata (upland country), met his first encounter at Alut-nuwara (Mahiyangana).

When the king saw the ruinous state of the Mahiyangana cetiya that had seriously suffered the onslaught of the enemy offensive, he took steps to renovate it, regardless his interest on the war front. He raised the cetiya to a height of 120 ft., somewhat as a covering to the original one, which we see today.

King Voharaka Tissa (204-236), was so much bent on religious activity, that he renovated many viharas and cetiyas, including the Mahiyangana vihara, and built on 'catta' (parasol) to the cetiya with unbound devotion. (Mhv. 36:33). After king Sanghabodhi (246-248), we rarely come across any historical evidence about the Mahiyangana cetiya.

During his childhood days, prince Sanghabodhi, son of Selbhaya, who lived in Mahiyangana, was handed over to his uncle, the Maha Thera Nanda, the incumbent of the Mahiyangana Vihara, to be brought up under this guardianship, because the father of the prince had died when the child was 9 years old. As the child was handed over to the Sangha under the bo-tree of the temple, he came to be known as Sanghabodhi. He, having ascended the throne, did much to protect the Mahiyangana cetiya from ruin.

King Sena II (850-885), not only paid his benefactions to the cetiya, but also alienated land for the vihara as a token of gratitude. (Mhv. 51:74). King Kassapa IV (896-913) also alienated

a village for the vihara to expand its perimeter. (Mhv. 52:15). King Vijayabahu I (1058-1114), who established the Polonnaruwa kingdom, seeing the ruinous state of the cetiya, overgrown with wild vegetation and fauna, took steps to renovate it, without allowing it to undergo further deterioration.

King Viraparakrama Narendrasinha (the last Sinhala king of Sri Lanka), (1706-1739), also known as Kundasale Rajjuvuro (King of Kundasale), had conducted grand 'poojas' (offerings) to the cetiya, and had it decorated with multi-coloured banners and sweet-smelling flowers. (Mhv. 97:28-30). King Kirti Sri Rajasinha (1747-1780), did much to maintain the cetiya in good condition and also built edifices for the bhikkhus to spend their time peacefully and in meditation.

In 1851, the Ven. Iddamalgoda Dhammapala, the incumbent of the Mahiyangana vihara, seeing the sad state of the cetiya, took a keen interest to renovate it, and the restoration work began in earnest. In 1873, the top portion of the cetiya collapsed. In 1980, after years of planning and hard work, a pinnacle to the cetiya was ceremonially fitted, with the zeal and enthusiasm of Ven. Yatawatte Sri Candajothi Maha Thera of the Asgiriya Chapter, supported by Ven. Wattedagama Sumangala Nayake Thera, Duniwila Nilame, Timbirigaspiye Disawa and others.

On June 18, 1942, a conference was held at the Mahiyangana vihara, in the presence of Rt. Hon. D. S. Senanayake, Minister of Agriculture and Lands, who expressed his approbation for the restoration of the



ruined cetiya. For the purpose, a society was formed under the name Mahiyangana Vihara Vardhana Samitiya, headed by the Hon. Minister. The ceremonial laying of the foundation stone was done on September 24, 1953, in the presence of a great gathering.

The crystal-cut gem that adorns the pinnacle was a gift received from Myanmar (Burma), and it is the biggest of the kind of Sri Lanka, weighing 14.5 kg. (32 lbs). The cetiya was ceremonially opened on September 21, 1961, amidst a great concourse of devotees who flocked to witness the historic incident.

Purity

In Buddha-Dhamma, the purity does exist within.
But not anywhere else.
In reality, it should be in the mind.

The Buddha said: "Purity and impurity depend on oneself.
No one can purify another."

Until one can eradicate and eliminates one's own defilements and mental viruses, is not pure and free.
After one's liberation from the bondages of craving, hatred and delusion, one can be free and happy in the state of purity

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