

Aluvihare: The Temple of Wisdom; Tripitaka, a National Heritage

Posted on



Known to be the repository of Buddhist wisdom, Aluvihare has a legacy that dates back millennia, recorded in its many caves as intricate murals, inscriptions and artefacts. The Tripitaka, the scriptures of Buddhism placed within its walls was declared a National Heritage by President Maithripala Sirisena recently.

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Photographs Menaka Aravinda and Anuradha Perera

On the foothills of the Wiltshire mountain range in Matale is an ancient rock cave temple, renowned for its illustrious history. Aluvihare, or Aloka Viharaya as it was known in the past, means ‘the temple of light’. It is unknown whether ‘Aloka’ or ‘light’ refers to the ample sunlight that filtered into the temple despite being a series of rock caves. However, the legacy of the temple is such that it enhances its name, with the light of wisdom that it came to be associated with, by the documentation of the Tripitaka (Tipitaka), the Buddhist scriptures within the premises.

The temple is assumed to be established in third century BC under the patronage of King Devanampiyathissa, during the period that Buddhism was brought to Sri Lanka. However, the temple came to be renowned worldwide in the first century BC when the wisdom and the teachings of the Buddha were completely documented on ola leaves, for the first time in the history of the world, at the Aluvihare Rock Cave Temple.

During King Walagamba’s reign, the island was impeded by a great famine, and continuous South Indian invasions. Buddhist monks across the island, who suffered greatly during the harsh period realised that if they were to perish, the Dhamma passed on by oral tradition would perish as well. It is at this point of time that the need arose to document the Dhamma in order to preserve it for the future. Hence,

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across three years, three months and three days, 500 bhikkus gathered at Aluvihare and transcribed the three Pitakas; Vinaya Pitaka, Sutta Pitaka and Abhidhamma Pitaka on ola leaves (Puskola Poth). Since then, Aluvihare has come to be known as the centre of Buddhist knowledge in the world.

Ven Inamaluwe Nandarathana Thero, Chief Incumbent of Aluvihare, elaborated on the process of treating ola leaves to make them withstand decay, signifying how strenuous it may have been for the bhikkus who dedicated their time and effort to preserve the Dhamma. In a gracious gesture, Nandarathana Thero demonstrated how to write on the treated ola leaves with a specially designed metal stylus, transcribing a Pali verse as a blessing for us.



The sacred Aluvihare emanates peace and spirituality

Recently, Tripitaka was declared a National Heritage by President Maithripala Sirisena. In an auspicious ceremony at Aluvihare with the participation of venerable Bhikkus, leaders and dignitaries, Tripitaka was acknowledged a National Heritage. Addressing the gathering, President has brought forth his intentions to declare the Tripitaka a World Heritage in the future.

In addition to the sanctity hailed by the legacy of Tripitaka, Aluvihare is a remarkable temple. The wall paintings in two of the caves depict the realms of hell, with the due punishments for sins stated.

The view from the small rock on which the dagoba is built is both enchanting and

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spiritual; the gilded Buddha statue on the Wiltshire mountain behind the temple bears the Abhaya gesture, meaning to offer protection and blessing.



President Maithripala Sirisena presents the declaration of the Tripitaka as a National Heritage to Most Ven Warakagoda Sri Gnanarathana Thero, Asgiriya Chapter. Most Ven Niyangoda Vijitha Siri Thero, Malwathu Chapter and Most Ven Aggamaha Panditha Kotugoda Dhammawasa Thero, Amarapura Chapter, Sarath Ekanayake, Chief Minister of Central Province and Members of Parliament are also present in the photograph

Photo President's Media Division

The international museum is home to archaeological items across centuries of Buddhist international relations; there are countless miniature Buddha statues of Thai origin, and artefacts from Cambodia, India and Korea. Meemure Sumanathissa Thero, Trustee of the Temple, states that the Aluvihare Museum is a prime example of how the countries that follow Theravada Buddhism hold Aluvihare Temple in high esteem, since it is known to be the knowledge centre of the Theravada Buddhism.

Aluvihare Rock Cave Temple, now a National Heritage, will continue to thrive as the world centre of knowledge for Theravada Buddhism, a legacy that was crafted by the preserving bhikkus who dedicated their efforts to safeguard the teachings of the Buddha.

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Ven Inamaluwe Nandarathana Thero, Chief Incumbent of Aluvihare.



The Nayake Thero specially inscribed a blessing on an ola leaf using a Panhinda (a stylus) for BT Options.



Aluvihare is an ancient temple with a history dating back 2,500 years.



Known as a Tunnel Temple, Aluvihare consists of a series of caves.



Varying in sizes, the puskola poth are traditionally bound in wooden covers.



Ven Meemure Sumanathissa Thero, Trustee of Aluvihare Temple.



Depiction of the Council of Bhikkus who transcribed the Tripitaka.



Within the inner chamber of the Image House.