Discovering Buddhism’s Journey on the Island

Posted on



Anuradhapura was Sri Lanka’s first kingdom—and the greatest of all. It held sway for over one thousand four hundred years as a Buddhist bastion, strengthening its growth, supremacy, and influence over the island. But the source of Anuradhapura’s enormous resurgence is situated nearly fifteen kilometers away, in Mihintale, where royalty met the ascetic to change the course of the country’s history forever.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane. **Photography** BT Images.

It is a story woven like a fantasy about a king who went on a hunting trip. Attentively pursuing his game, he was disturbed by a group of ascetics on a mountain who preached to him a new religion. Every Sri Lankan Buddhist knows this story inside out. They’ll narrate the same out-of-this-world tale of how, in the third century BC, King Devanampiya Tissa of Anuradhapura embraced Buddhism on a full moon day in June at the bidding of a group of messengers sent by Emperor Asoka of India. This vivid story is visually depicted in many temple paintings, demonstrating the significance of that event. Thus, the full moon day in June is an important day of celebration for Buddhists in Sri Lanka, which marked the beginning of a new era for the island. Naturally, Mihintale gets crowded in June as thousands climb a steep hill to reach a small summit overlooking a breathtaking landscape. But foremost to people’s pilgrimage is Anuradhapura, which exploded as the spiritual and physical manifestation of the Dhamma.

This dramatized story is just the tip of the iceberg. Having studied the popular narrative against historical writings, historians contend that Buddhism’s introduction to the island was not some supernatural spectacle that occurred in a single day. Emperor Asoka didn’t suddenly decide to send his son Mahinda to grow the Dhamma in an unknown land. On the other hand, it was a diplomatic endeavor, a well-thought-out intervention accomplished by Emperor Asoka, choosing Sri Lanka to establish the Dhamma and the monastic order. Hence, it entailed planning and intermediation between emissaries traveling back and forth to develop cordial relations before it was time for the emperor’s son, Arahant Mahinda, and his crew to land on the island. The Mahavamsa – the Great Chronicle of the country records that King Devanampiya Tissa and Emperor Asoka had established contact before this historical event, the emperor convincing the king to embrace the Dhamma as he did.

The Anuradhapura Kingdom was established in the fifth century BC. Arahant Mahinda arrived on the island in the third century BC. From then on, under the kingship of Devanampiya Tissa, Buddhism began its ascension on the isle, Anuradhapura, as the home of Theravada Buddhism, the built environment becoming the most striking symbol of royal sponsorship. During this time, new doctrinal and institutional elements were absorbed into Buddhism, such as Mahayana practices, the cult of images, the Bodhi Tree and the Tooth Relic worship, and the worship of the Bodhisattva (Buddha to be). Buddhism bolstered the growth of a bustling metropolis rife with palaces, lakes, temples, monasteries, hospitals,

gardens, and cemeteries. Most of all, Anuradhapura was the city of monasteries, as revealed in literature and inscriptions. It was a flourishing civilization of hydraulic technology at its best, where vast lakes surrounded the kingdom, supporting an agricultural economy and feeding the monasteries. This system remains intact today, as the city is encircled in the east and the west by four large man-made lakes.

Within the ancient city of Anuradhapura, one finds many architectural marvels, the stupa tradition being one of the sturdiest and giant symbols of worship. Stupas embody the Living Buddha as they enshrine his bones and relics. Several significant stupas belong to the eight places of veneration known as the Atamasthana in Anuradhapura. The eight places are located within three ancient monasteries in Anuradhapura that characterize the growth of the new religion, starting with King Devanampiya Tissa. A pilgrimage to Anuradhapura would be completed only by visiting the Atamasthana.

Buddhist Monasteries in the kingdom of Anuradhapura

Maha Vihara

Maha Vihara, or the great monastery, is one of the most significant locations among the sprawling ruins. As King Devanampiya Tissa embraced the Dhamma and made it the state religion, grandiose plans for an elaborate built environment to demonstrate his devoutness would have undoubtedly been foremost on his mind. According to the chronicles, upon the advice of Arahant Mahinda, the monarch built the first monastery in the country to embark on his mission of bringing his subjects to the Dhamma, hence its significance. Formerly known as the Maha Mevuna Uyana, the nearly hundred-acre complex houses some of the most iconic objects of worship, the holy of holies to Sri Lankans, namely the Sacred Bodhi Tree, the Ruwanweliseya stupa, and the Lovamahapaya among others. Evidence of the first monastery’s pre-eminence could be found in the ruins of hospitals, monks’ residences, and ponds, telling visitors the enthusiasm with which the king had championed the spread of Buddhism by sponsoring the infrastructure required for its growth.

Abhayagiri Vihara

The second monastery complex, the Abhayagiri monastery, rose as a contending monastery in opposition to the Maha Vihara for six hundred years. The Abhayagiri stupa complements the immensity of the complex, rising 320 feet to the sky. According to the Chinese traveler monk Fahien, who had visited the monastery in the fifth century AD, the monastery had become a citadel of Buddhist teaching, with five thousand resident monks; the monastery was serving as a Buddhist university with links to other countries. The Abhayagiri monastery is a symbol of Buddhism’s development on the island, where, as time went by, new features, such as from the Mahayana tradition, came to be included in worship. Visitors will see ruins of image houses, chapter houses, Bodhi Tree shrines, monks’ residences, and ponds at this monastery complex.



Abhayagiri Stupa.



Lankarama Stupa.



Jetavanarama Stupa.

Jetavana Vihara

The heart of this third-century AD monastery is its stupa, rising to 400 feet. The monastery complex extends to a hundred acres, with ruins of a large image house, chapter house, and monks’cubicles. The Jetavana monastery came up in opposition to years of wrangling between the Maha Vihara Theravada practicing monks and the Mahayana-leaning monks of the Abhayagiri monastery. Into the simmering disagreement entered the mighty leader of the land, King Mahasen, whose leaning towards Mahayana was looked upon critically by the Maha Vihara monks. Infuriated by their position, the king split the Maha Vihara. He donated a section to one of his favored monks in the Mahayana tradition, upon which came up the Jetavana Vihara. The drama surrounding its founding may have been why the king commissioned one of the most extraordinary building projects in history – the construction of the

Jetavana stupa.

Eight places of veneration in Anuradhapura

Thuparamaya

This was the first stupa built by King Devanampiya Tissa in the third century BC on the advice of Arahant Mahinda. Thuparamaya marks the beginning of the king’s patronage to prosper Buddhism; hence, the stupa was built inside the Maha Vihara premises, the first monastery in Anuradhapura. The name is an amalgamation of the words stupa and aramaya – a residential complex for monks, which was built within the precincts of monks’ residences. According to archaeologists, the stupa marked a significant advancement in architecture, this being the first Vatadage, or circular enclosure built around a stupa, historians conjecturing that at some point, the stupa may have been held within a roofed circular enclosure. The dozen or more stone pillars at the site are surmised as having supported a roof. The stupa is said to contain the right collar bone, alms bowl, and other relics of the Buddha.

Lankaramaya

Lankaramaya was built in the first century BC by King Valagamba, also known as Vattagamani Abhaya. The stupa, not more than 50 feet in height, represents the earliest forms of the cir- cular Vatadage architectural form built around it, with multiple stone pillars standing as evidence of its earliest design form. Hence, the stupa was held inside a circular enclosure. The history of the stupa is poignant. The peaceful kingdom began to fracture as South Indian incur- sions increased. War ensued. Defeated at war, the king and his entourage of two consorts and their children fled the enemies when the weight on the chariot slowed its pace. Soma Devi, one of the consorts, voluntarily left the chariot, saving the king’s life. The king built the stupa in tribute to Soma Devi’s noble sacrifice upon his triumphant return to the throne. Legend says that besides a piece of the Buddha’s collar bone, the stupa contains Soma Devi’s jewelry.

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> one will discover some of the most beautiful images of the Buddha and many ruins standing in solitariness among thickets, each with its unique

story in history.

Abhayagiri Stupa

Situated at the northern gate of the city, this colossal monument rising to a height of 320 feet, the second largest stupa in the world was constructed in the first century BC by King Vattagamani Abhaya, popular as King Valagamba, of Lankaramaya fame, during his second reign, and is located in the second monastery complex – Abhayagiri Vihara. Since its discovery, like many other historical edifices of the Anuradhapura kingdom, the stupa underwent an extensive restoration spanning 20 years and was completed in 2015. Although some believe that it was built on the supposed footprint of the Buddha, a more plausible explanation is a story surrounding King Vattagamani Abhaya, who commissioned its construction. He, having inherited a peaceful kingdom, had to flee when South Indian invaders dethroned him in a matter of a few months of his ascendency, whose escape earned the ridicule of a Jain priest and the king who returned to the throne 14 years later, having defeated the invaders had committed to the building of a stupa on the very ground where the Jain monastery stood and from whence he was ridiculed for taking flight. The site of sweet revenge got its name by joining the king’s last name – Abhaya, and that of Giri, the Jain priest who ridiculed him. Many centuries later, the stupa is a mighty reflection of a great building culture and the many tales that led to its construction.

Ruwanweli Seya

Belonging to the Maha Vihara monastery, it is revered as one of the most sacred sites in Anuradhapura. Its author has much to do with its pre-eminence as the most revered stupa in Sri Lanka. King Dutugemunu, who commissioned the construction in the first century BC, is a hero among the islanders and the Sinhala Buddhist populace for being the first to defeat a foreign ruler – Chola King Elara, to unite the island under his leadership. Dutugemunu epitomizes the ethos of the island’s majority population. A warrior, a hero, and a king who championed Buddhism and unified the island. The stupa is believed to contain a significant amount of Buddha’s relics, supposedly one-eighth according to an ancient chronicle named Dhatuwamsa, and large amounts of precious stones and precious metals, hence the name, which means ‘sand of gems’. The stupa was completed by Dutugemunu’s

younger brother Saddhatissa upon the monarch’s passing. At 200 feet, it was the first largest stupa in the ancient world.

Mirisawetiya

Mirisawetiya was the first stupa com- missioned by King Dutugemunu. There are legends surrounding its creation, the most popular being that the king built it in reparation for consuming food before offering it to the monks, a promise he had made as a child to his father. It was in ruins when discovered in the 19th century and underwent a lengthy reconstruction process until the 1990s. Still intact is the western frontispiece, a masterwork in its own right demonstrating the grandeur surrounding the stupa from four corners, making it a rare remnant from such a long time ago.

Jetavana Stupa

Four hundred feet tall Jetavana stupa is a marvel to behold. It is compared to the Great Pyramid of Giza because it is the tallest in the world and the tallest brick building in the ancient world. Built in the third century AD by King Mahasen, the brick-laden structure is a mammoth edifice of supposedly 93 million bricks, which took 15 years to complete. The Jetavana stupa’s reputation is also buttressed by the fact that Arahant Mahinda had preached at this spot for seven consecutive days, an event so significant that the place came to be called ‘Jotivana’. According to histo- rians, Arahant Mahinda and his fellow emissaries’ remains were cremated at this spot. After its discovery through centuries of jungle growth, the restoration of the glorious edifice began in 1980, a meticu- lous project that required colossal funding, spanning three decades until its comple- tion in 2009.

Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi – Sacred Bodhi Tree

The stupa tradition is traced to two thousand years on the island, but of greater significance is the Bodhi Tree in Anuradhapura, which precedes all of them. As a branch of the original Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha meditated and attained Enlightenment, the Bodhi Tree in Anuradhapura is the only surviving cut from the original tree at Buddha Gaya in northern India. As Buddhism flourished on the island and more features entered worship practices, the Bodhi Tree became a pivotal object of it, which was brought to the island in the third century BC by Emperor

Asoka’s daughter and Arahant Mahinda’s sister, Theri Sangamitta and planted in Anuradhapura, making it the ‘oldest historical tree in the world’. According to historians, worshipping the Bodhi Tree was not alien to the islanders, who, in ancient times, venerated trees. Hence, the veneration of the Bodhi Tree and Bodhi Tree shrines is an extension of those practices, which counts as one of the earlier sacred monuments of Buddhism.

Lovamahapaya

Built inside the Maha Vihara, the Lovamahapaya, or the Brazen Palace, was once a multi-storied chapter house, one of the largest in the country, a place that would have throbbed with monks preaching and engaging in discourse. Belonging to the first century BC, its description in the Mahvamsa is so elaborate that one can only imagine its grandeur. In its heyday, it was a nine- storied structure, each story having a hundred window chambers overlaid with silver. In the middle was a gem pavilion adorned with gem-studded pillars with figures of lions, tigers, and gods. The pavilion had a bright ivory throne with a quartz seat. It had costly beds and chairs according to rank and carpets and bedspreads of great value. Its name, the Brazen Palace, was derived from the copper plates that covered it, giving it a magnificent glow like the ‘heaven of the thirty-three gods’.

The eight places are a great distance to cover in a day, especially for a history buff. Besides the great stupas, one will discover some of the most beautiful images of the Buddha and many ruins standing in solitariness among thickets, each with its unique story in history. Even beyond those eight places, there is a great deal to explore in Anuradhapura.



Thuparamaya Stupa.



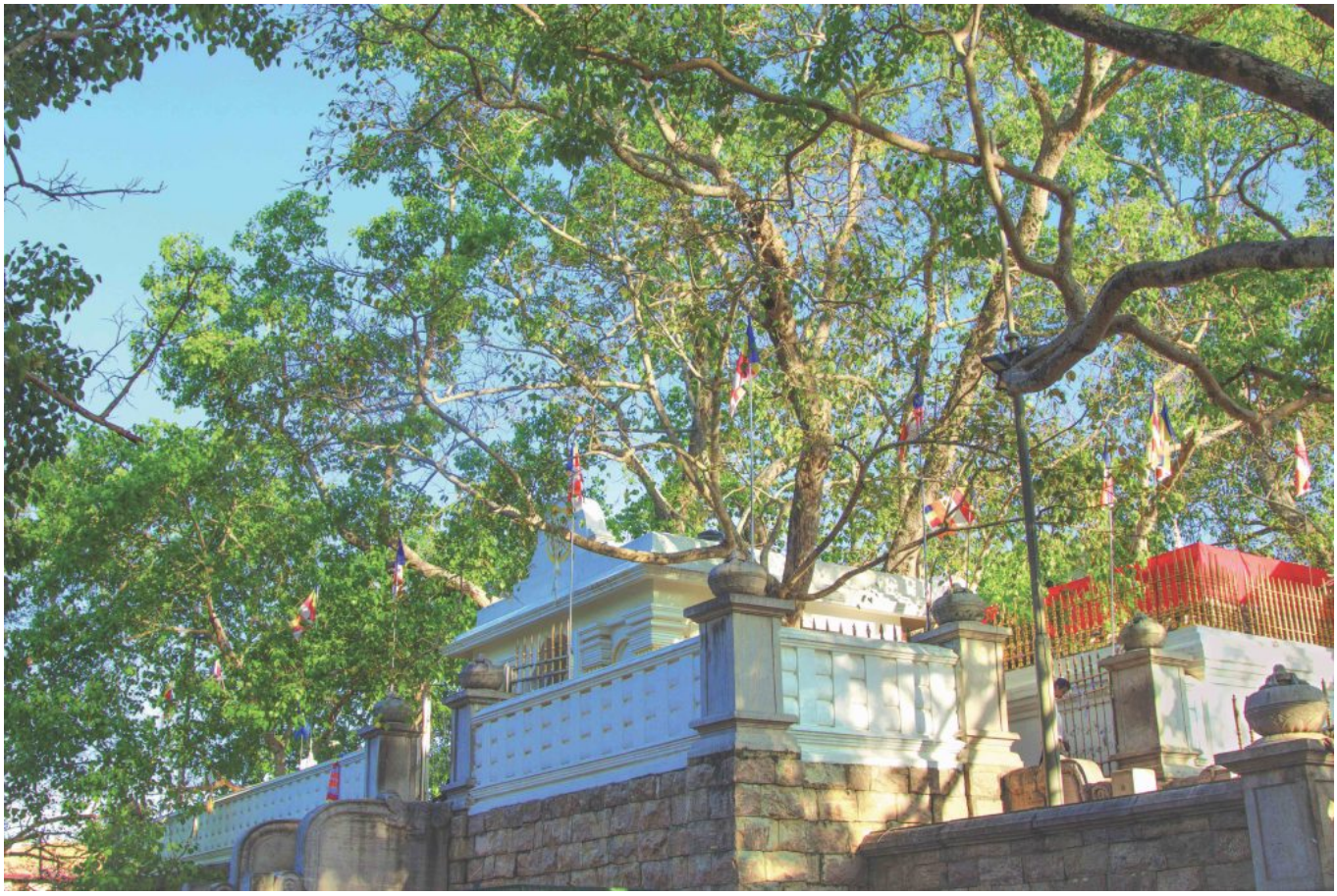
Mirisaweti Stupa.



Lovamahapaya.



Ruwanweliseya Stupa.



The Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi, also known as the Sacred Bodhi Tree, holds a special place of reverence for devotees.