

Flowers Divine: Nelum blooms from the tank to the temple



Bud and bloom: White and red blossoms amongst white buds
(Photograph Lakmal Silva)

It is the flower of divinity born from the marsh. The thousand petal lotus that is the abode of Lakshmi, the Goddess of Prosperity. The flower that soars from the mire, held worthy to adorn the feet of the Buddha and provide the lotus seat. And this is the story of how Eastern religions' iconic flower blossomed in a people's heart and found its way from the tank to the temple.

Words and Photographs Manu Gunasena

This sacred lotus, unlike the royal rose, is born not in the stately gardens of the affluent to be cared, watered, pruned and pampered and sung to high heavens. It finds birth in the marshy bog of nature's sewers, amongst noxious weeds and poisonous reeds. It must struggle for sheer survival in the dark, murky, stagnant waters of earth's unspeakable netherworld. But even in that infernal company, in the gutters amidst the wretched and the depraved, the lotus is looking up at the sun.

Yet, with her roots tenaciously embedded in her muddy bed, she is no pushover. The toughness of her stem enables her to demonstrate her resilience as she fights for space in the stifling stillness of her seemingly perennial pond of despair. If hope that comes to all never comes to her at that exacting hour of her tender days when she most needs it, she transcends the injustice of her birth. She rises above the lowly station in the watery ghetto that she was condemned to live in and die.

But she's made of stronger stuff and the mettle of her stem, having undergone the submerged vortex, sees her through. Whilst her inferior mud mates, content to languidly float upon the water, she soars over the water mark to greet the inviting sun above.

For three days she will perform her suriya namaskaraya, her worship to the Sun

God, and will unfurl her many splendoured pinkish petals one by one in his honour and before his radiant eyes. Touched by his warming rays and caressed by nature's gentle breeze, she will open up her folded bud to reveal to heaven and earth, the divine beauteous blossom that bloomed from below.

On the fourth day she will reveal her innermost soul and bask in beauty, bathed in the sun's spotlight, blazoning her loveliness. Her petals will gradually draw back pushing forth the yellow pod within her that encases her seeds. She will generate her own heat, so that when she blossoms her petals will be 30 centigrade whilst around her the air may even be only 10⁰ C. The heat she expels creates an aroma, which draws bees and insects to her inner core to drink on her nectar and feed on her pollen. In so doing she becomes a benefactor of nature, providing all creatures small and microscopic the wherewithal they need to eat, mate, live and propagate.

Then her autumn dawns and its melancholic tinge brushes her petals grace, heralding the onset of her winter days. One by one, they wither and fall and she herself arches toward the waters to shed her seeds, to sow the nelums of the future, to procreate her species. Then with one last sad sigh at the inevitable cycle of life in this cruel world, she bids the sun farewell and droops to die in the watery grave that was once her cradle.

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That's if nature had had its way. But man had other ideas, other plans for her. The cycle of her life, symbolizing that of man, inspired sages of old to treat her with a blessed sacredness. India made the nelum the nation's national flower when for centuries it had been the flower of flowers in people's heart.

If legendary alchemic substance became known as the philosopher's stone then nelum, with all the thousand truisms of life she held and symbolised in her thousand petals of earthly existence became the philosopher's flower.

In almost every auspicious facet of eastern life, the lotus was used to portray joy, purity and wisdom and nelum's collective soul. Instead of being left to die in grimey waters of death's grotto, it was immortalised in song, in art, in sculpture and in a people's heart as a flower of beauty, a bloom of striving and a blossom of

realisation.

In the Hindu mythological version of the genesis of the universe, the lotus makes its appearance simultaneously with the Gods. With the entire universe engulfed in darkness, the Preserver of Life, the great Vishnu is asleep on the primordial waters, dreaming of the worlds to arise. As his dreams unfold and with the sacred sound 'Om' humming from the ocean's depths rousing him, the lotus makes its appearance from his navel. Within the thousand petal flower sleeps the Creator, Brahma who then stirs and, with his awakening, creation begins to unfold and the new world comes into being, bearing life.

The flower also features in the practice of yoga, with the lotus posture, the padmasana, being advocated as the ideal posture to adopt when meditating. Here is one form of meditation, suggested by yoga practitioners, you can practice. Focus on your root chakra, the base of your spine. Now imagine a seed planted there. Imagine further a stem born in it. Imagine it slowly rising through the chakra line, up your spine, heart, throat, nose, eyes and then resting on the forehead or even an inch above your head. Imagine the lotus flower opening to the sun's energy. Let the energy thus garnered flow downwards down the forehead, down the eyes, nose, throat, heart and back to the base of your spine. Allow about five minutes to complete this visualisation. It should leave you feeling relaxed, connected to the earth below and the spirit above.

In Buddhism, too, the lotus is associated with the religion, right from the start with the Buddha's birth. As Prince Siddhartha stepped forth into the world, the chroniclers of the age found the lotus the most befitting flower to sprout from the earth to cushion the tender feet of the new born, lest the ground should soil the soles of one destined to become the Enlightened One.

Nelum grows in many parts of Sri Lanka, in almost every stagnant pool and pond, but is mainly found in abundance in the large tanks and lakes of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. Everyday an army of men take to the water to harvest the nelum from its muddy watery beds. Forget the roses, the carnations and the anthuriums coming from Nuwara Eliya. The booming flower trade is in the blooming lotus and hundreds of thousands are plucked each day for immediate transportation to various religious sites through Sri Lanka.

They make their journey from the North Central and North Western provinces

and arrive in the cities either by train or in lorries and vans. From six in the evening to six the following morning nelum flower shops near temples and kovils await to receive their daily bud and bloom. Timing is of the essence for all know that the life span of the flower, though beautiful, is not a joy forever. In fact once cut from its mother bed, the bud can survive only upto three days after which it wrinkles, turns black and becomes unsellable.

The nelum has many uses and is not solely to be offered in worship. When the stem is broken, the sticky strands that emit from it are spun to make wicks to light the temple lamps. Its seeds are used to make a rosary, a prayer chain of lotus seed beads. The nelum also has its medicinal properties and from ancient days have been used in traditional medicines. The nelum leaves, known for being an effective water repellent, is used in the villages as plates to serve food on.

All parts of the nelum are also used for food. The starchy root is eaten as a vegetable and the seeds are eaten raw or dried or eaten like popcorn. In China, for instance, the seeds are boiled down to a paste to be used as a sweet soup or together with sugar to make pastries such as mooncakes. In India the seeds are used in cooking and the petals are used as a garnish. In Sri Lanka the nelum root is a welcome dish on the table and is cooked in a variety of ways. It can be stir fried with ginger, green chilie and onions and used in a Chinese meal or cooked as a mild or hot red spicy curry. It can also be batter fried and used as a snack or as an accompaniment to an appetiser.

But for all its gastronomical delights, for all its many favoured medicinal properties, it is not in the kitchen or in the pharmacy that the lotus finds its shrine. From the mire of the tank to bloom in beauty in the sun, it blossoms its sublime message of the cycle of life and death at the pristine feet of the Buddha. And lives, awaiting to be born, in the heart and soul of all mankind.

