Gal Vihara Etched In Stone

Posted on



The majestic Samadhi Statue – Lord Buddha is seated under a framed arch, adorned with objects and symbols

Observing the four statues, housed at the Gal Vihara Rock Temple, from afar, we are overwhelmed by its sheer magnificence and charm. Hewn out of solid granite, each figure is deeply expressive and intricately carved, with their details elaborately and perfectly captured by the craftsman. Although we've stood here before, gazing above at these colossal creations, we are once again left astounded, as we pay reverence to these wonders.

Words Madhushala Senaratne Photographs Mahesh Prasantha

Believed to have been constructed by King Parakramabahu, the Great, during the 12th Century, the statues are carved out of a cliff that extends over a length of 180ft and a height of 30ft. Yet, what is so captivating about these larger than life

portrayals of Lord Buddha is that they are designed in such an exquisite and brilliant manner, that one marvels at the unmatched skills of the craftsmen of the bygone era.

Although now only one statue is housed in an enclosed area, history chronicles that the Gal Vihara Rock Temple consisted of four separate cave shrines, namely, the Cave of Vijjadhara, the Excavated Cave, the Cave of the Standing One and the Cave of the Reclining Image, each housing one of the images seen today.

On the left corner is an elegantly carved seated statue of Lord Buddha, said to have been housed in the Cave of Vijjadhara. Also referred to as the Samadi Statue, the 15ft high statue depicts Lord Buddha in a meditative posture or Dhyana Mudra. Seated under a thorana or framed arch, adorned with images and objects, it displays the great reverence attached to Lord Buddha. The four miniscule Buddha statues that are designed in meditative pose, looking out from their dwellings, are said to portray the previous Buddhas and those of the future. The arch is also dotted with symbols of lotuses and diamonds. The pedestal upon which the statue is seated contains images of lions and vajra, a ritual object, and is said to portray Lord Buddha’s sublimity and nobleness of character.

A similar, yet smaller statue is housed in the Excavated Cave. The arch that is carved behind this statue is also richly decorated with symbols and figures. The statue is seated on a lotus pedestal and flanked by two devas, believed to be Brahma and Vishnu. The cave also contains frescoes and located outside the cave is an ordinance inscription.

> The Samadi Statue depicts Buddha in a meditative posture or Dhyana Mudra… seated under a thorana or framed arch, adorned with images and objects, displaying the great reverence attached to Lord Buddha

Historians debate over the standing statue that was at one time in the Cave of the Standing One. Some believe this 22ft high and 9ft wide statue as that of Ven Ananda Thero. With his eyes half closed and arms folded, there is a deep expression of sadness portrayed through this image, and many believe that the Thero here is mourning the passing away of Lord Buddha, as the Enlightened One has passed this stage of deep sorrow. The statue’s location, nearby the reclining statue of Lord Buddha, further adds to this claim.

The rough face of the granite has been carved out to acutely capture the solemn expressions

However, other historians refer to the statue's many distinguishing features such as the length of the ears, the hair curled rightwards and it standing on a padmasana, or a double lotus pedestal. Such notable features indicate that this is indeed the statue of Lord Buddha, as Ananda Thero had not yet attained enlightenment.

The last statue, the reclining image of Lord Buddha is 46ft in length. The rough face of the granite has been carved out to acutely capture the solemn expressions. Some argue that this illustrates the passing away of Lord Buddha. This is evident in the manner in which the feet are placed – with the left foot slightly drawn back over the right foot, whereas if it was Lord Buddha in reclining position, the feet would have been placed together. However, others argue that this was done so to avoid discomfort. In addition, the Cave is named 'Nipannapatima Guha', translating to Cave of the Recumbent Image, which is also significant.

2600th Sambuddha Jayanti
This year marks the 2600th year since the enlightenment of the Buddha with the Sambuddha Jayanthi. The attainment of Nirvana and Buddhahood by the Siddhartha Gauthama is recalled by Buddhists all over the world with profound veneration.

The great craftsmanship lies not merely in the magnitude of these structures, but rather in the ability of the craftsman to acutely capture each expression and characteristic of Lord Buddha. There is a sense of serenity surrounding the statues and we continue to observe these masterpeices, awed by its majesticity and grandeur. Walking back, we glance its way one more time, and it seems as if the statues are gracefully looking back at the many visitors who walk towards it.

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