

Sambodhi Chaitya: Reaching The Spiritual Sky

Posted on



Elevated stupa, stair-tower and bridge: an awesome sight

Of all the sacred architecture in Colombo – Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim or Christian – the oldest, though brimming with tradition, cannot compare with the modern boldness of the skyward design of the stupa of the Sambodhi Chaitya.

Words Richard Boyle | **Photographs** Mahesh Bandara

In 1953, the Most Ven. Henpitagedara Gnanaseeha Thero, a renowned Buddhist prelate and educationist of rare calibre, understood that Colombo needed a Buddhist landmark to indicate to approaching passenger liners and merchant ships the major religion of the country.

The primary Buddhist landmark is the large dome-shaped dagoba (from Sanskrit dhātugarbha “containing relics”) as it is best-known in Sri Lanka, but also termed stupa (from Sanskrit “heap”). The suggestion was to locate such a sacred structure at a point near the Indian Ocean, next to Colombo harbour. But large though it is, such a structure would be lost alongside the port cranes and overwhelmed by a backdrop of buildings, so the idea was to loftily elevate it on graceful concrete arches in order to be clearly viewed out to sea.

It would be a stupa next to a preaching hall, a combination known as a chaitya: in this case the Sambodhi (“perfect enlightenment”) Chaitya. A.N.S. Kulasinghe, a civil engineer of great repute who had invented reinforced concrete technologies useful to the project, was chosen to design and construct the stupa, initially for the Colombo Port Commission and later the Colombo Port Authority.

In 1956 the project began with the inauguration of the construction of the “Sri Sambuddha Jayanthi Chaithya to commemorate the advent of the Sambuddha Jayanthi, signifying 2,500 years of Buddhism reckoned after the Parinirvana (Passing Away) of Gautama Buddha the Enlightened One.”

The elevated bell-shaped rather than dome-shaped stupa, with a circumference of 158 feet (48m), provides an extraordinary sight. Kulasinghe's four pale yellow arches – one straddles the road – consist of sloped slabs of concrete to create the necessary curvature for them to intersect at a height of 107 feet (33m) underneath the square platform on which a stupa is based.

This platform is in fact a one-storey affair as can be determined by its height and many recessed windows. It is divided into four rooms, all representing bhavana (spiritual cultivation) kuti (a single-roomed abode), which are traditionally situated in forest solitude, but here transformed in a port-city setting for those who wish to still the mind.

The dazzling white stupa is 154 feet (47m) tall, and the whole structure reaches 261 feet (80m) into the sky. Note the structure on top of the dome, 37 feet (11m) tall. At the bottom is the cube-shaped hatharas kotuwa, then the conical spire known as koth kerella, and finally a pinnacle made of metal, the kotha, on top of which is a chudamanikya, a precious crystal or gemstone.

What makes the stupa even more extraordinary is that alongside is an 11-storey tower-like stair structure at the top of which is a steel bridge that leads to the stupa. Unless you suffer from fear of heights or are dressed in an inappropriate manner, boldly remove your shoes as is the custom and start the ascent. There are 258 steps in total, but they are shallow and mercifully smooth. As you ascend, breathtaking views of the port and Colombo city are revealed.

Eventually cross the bridge, enter the stupa through the impressive wooden doors, and marvel at the domed wonders inside. What catches the eye first is an imposing round shrine for worshippers in the centre of the circular floor, in which are four recessed seated Buddha statues. Then look around and you will observe that murals envelop the dome. In November 1986, Ven. Mapalagama Vipulasara Maha Thera, a locally and internationally acclaimed artist and sculptor of Buddha statues, was chosen to head a team of artists to create a series of 31 murals.

The highest row should be viewed first (they are numbered). They depict scenes from the life of the Buddha, such as Birth of Prince Siddhartha, Ordination, Self Mortification, Nursing the Sick, and, regarding the Island, Visit to Mahiyangana – in order to settle a dispute between Yakkas and Nagas, two tribes that inhabited this area.

The lowest row features Buddhist sites in Sri Lanka such as Kataragama Kiri Vehera (dagoba), Aluvihare (rock temple), Dambulla (cave temple), Gal Vihara (statues at Polonnaruwa), Lankatilaka Vihara, and lastly the Sri Sambuddha Jayanthi Stupa.

A hand-painted message on the lower wall reveals the murals were “Unveiled by the Honourable Lalith Athulathmudali, Minister of National Security, on 4th January 1988 for the edification and pious contemplation of all devotees and visitors.” Athulathmudali had been involved with the project for some years, from the time he was Minister of Trade and Shipping from 1977.

Shift your gaze higher than the murals and you will discern four statues mounted on plinths at the cardinal points. Probably created by artistic director, Ven. Mapalagama Vipulasara Maha Thera, these figures represent the Sohana Wasam Deiyyo, the guardian gods of the Island: Viruta, chief of the South, Virupashta, chief of the West, Vaishravana, chief of the North and Dutharashta, chief of the East. These gods are said to be the protectors of Buddhism. Above them, the apex of the dome is painted sky blue.

After your descent, take a quick tour of the temple grounds: there is a bo-tree planted by Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the world’s first elected woman prime minister. And when you espy canons, anchors, massive chains and a vintage steam crane you will discover that the Sambodhi Chaitya is conveniently located adjacent to the Sri Lanka Ports Authority Maritime Museum. Housed in a former Dutch prison built in 1676, which is the only surviving Dutch building within the Colombo Port area. Take the opportunity. It is a contrasting yet complementary visit.

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