

Sri Maha Bodhi 2600 Years Of Worship

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Words Chiranthi Rajapakse Photographs Menaka Aravinda

The devotees throng the compound. Their white garments contrast with the bright purple flowers, which they offer in worship. A man holds a small child; an old lady sits palms placed together, leaning against the temple wall, watching them. Age is of no significance here, only a single purpose, to lay an offering before one of the most well known sites of pilgrimage in the Buddhist world, the Sri Maha Bodhi.

2600th Sambuddhathva Jayanthi

2011 is particularly significant for Buddhists since it marks the celebration of the Sambuddhathva Jayanthi, the 2600th year since the enlightenment of Lord Buddha. May is always an important month in the Buddhist calendar because of the celebration of the Vesak Festival ; this year Vesak falls on May 17.

The Sri Maha Bodhi is said to be a branch of the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi at Buddha Gaya in India under which Lord Buddha attained enlightenment. It is said to be the only surviving branch of the original Bodhi tree and is thus famous as an object of religious worship, as well as being the oldest recorded tree in the world.

Brought to Sri Lanka by Theri Sanghamitta and planted in Anuradhapura in the 3rd Century BC by King Devanampiyatissa, the Sri Maha Bodhi draws devotees from around the country and beyond.

This year is of particular importance to those making the pilgrimage to the Sri Maha Bodhi since the celebration of the 2600th Sambuddhathva Jayanthi falls in May 2011. This commemorates the 2600th anniversary of the enlightenment of Lord Buddha and given its close association with the life of Lord Buddha, the Sri Maha Bodhi will be a focal point of celebrations to mark this event. May is always an eventful month in the Buddhist calendar with the celebration of the annual Vesak festival, which commemorates the birth, enlightenment and parinibbana (passing away) of Lord Buddha.

Brought to Sri Lanka by Theri Sanghamitta and planted in the sacred city of Anuradhapura in the 3rd century BC by King Devanampiyatissa, the Sri Maha Bodhi draws devotees from around the country and beyond. Theri Sanghamitta was the daughter of emperor Dharmashoka of India and the Bodhi sapling was brought to Sri Lanka on emperor Dharmashoka's instructions. Theri Sanghamitta is reputed to have come to Sri Lanka with a retinue, which included eighteen classes of artisans to attend to the services of the Maha Bodhi. The ship carrying the Bodhi sapling is said to have landed at Dambakolaputuna in the North, where it was received by King Devanampiya Tissa and conducted in a procession over four days to reach Anuradhapura.

In ancient times it was considered a royal duty to take steps to protect the Maha Bodhi premises and conduct restoration work when necessary. For example the stone parapet wall surrounding the Sri Maha Bodhi temple complex was built during the Kandyan period, under the patronage of King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe in order to

prevent elephants entering the Maha Bodhi premises.

Pilgrims can access the Maha Bodhi premises through four gates, of which the northern gate is the oldest. Entering the premises is itself an experience. As in most temples, pilgrims must pass between the impressive guard stones, step over the intricately carved moonstones and ascend a flight of stone steps. Inside the compound is a scene of busy activity. Pilgrims dressed in white walk around the compound or sit cross legged on the sand, worshipping. Whole families troop in and out. Little girls in lama saris (traditional dress worn by young girls) carry plastic baskets filled with flowers as they cling onto their mothers' hands. A man carries a kalaya (a type of clay pot) containing milk; an offering to the Bodhiya. The saffron robes of the priests moving among the pilgrims provide an occasional splash of colour. The sound of chanting reverberates through the compound. Above it all, the Sri Maha Bodhi watches it all while its leaves rustle gently in the breeze.

The Sri Maha Bodhi itself is situated on the upper terrace above ground level (referred to as the uda maluwa) and is encircled by a ran weta (golden railing). Pilgrims are not allowed to enter the upper terrace, but worship and offerings are made at the altars situated on the lower terrace. The daily rituals of cleaning, watering the Bodhi and making offerings, are performed by bhikkhus and selected laymen.

With this religious and historical backdrop, it's likely that the Sri Maha Bodhi will continue to draw numerous pilgrims from all over the world regardless of age, religion, gender, caste or creed in the years to come.

Over the years the Sri Maha Bodhi has become the focus of numerous rituals and beliefs. Several annual rituals are performed in honour of the Sri Maha Bodhi; the Aluth Sahal Mangalya, (the new rice ceremony) the Nanumara Mangalya, the Karti Mangalya and the annual deva puja offered to gods headed by Kalu Devata Bandara, the deity believed to protect the Sri Maha Bodhi.

Of these rituals, the Nanumara Mangalya is performed prior to Vesak Poya day. The Maha Bodhi is decorated with elaborate clothing and ornaments, and milk rice is offered to the Maha Bodhi as well as to the atamasthana or eight sacred places. There is a belief that this is done in order to give the honour of a king to the Maha Bodhi. The Aluth Sahal Mangalya is held on Duruthu Poya day and the main aim of

this festival is to make an offering of the harvest received from the paddy fields.

Daily rituals are also performed for the Sri Maha Bodhi. The Bodhi puja which is accompanied by a drum ritual is offered, and the teva hevisi or the beating of drums is ceremoniously performed three times a day. There is also a belief that the Maha Bodhi has the power to bring rain and during times of drought rituals are performed to bring rain. Other rituals include the lighting of coconut oil lamps and the offering of milk rice, fruits and betel.

As a result of its importance in the life of Lord Buddha, the Bodhi tree has become entwined with Buddhist rituals. All Buddhist temples in the country have a Bodhi tree, which is an object of veneration for worshippers. With this religious and historical backdrop, it's likely that the Sri Maha Bodhi will continue to draw numerous pilgrims from all over the world regardless of age, religion, gender, caste or creed in the years to come.

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