

Steps Through Time: The Living Landscape of Mihintale

Posted on

It was a sunny day in Mihintale, and all was set for the ascent along the step-laden path, traipsing a route through Buddhism's history, stamped across many millennia.

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Sela Cetiya marks the exact spot where Arahant Mahinda is believed to have met King Devanampiya Tissa.

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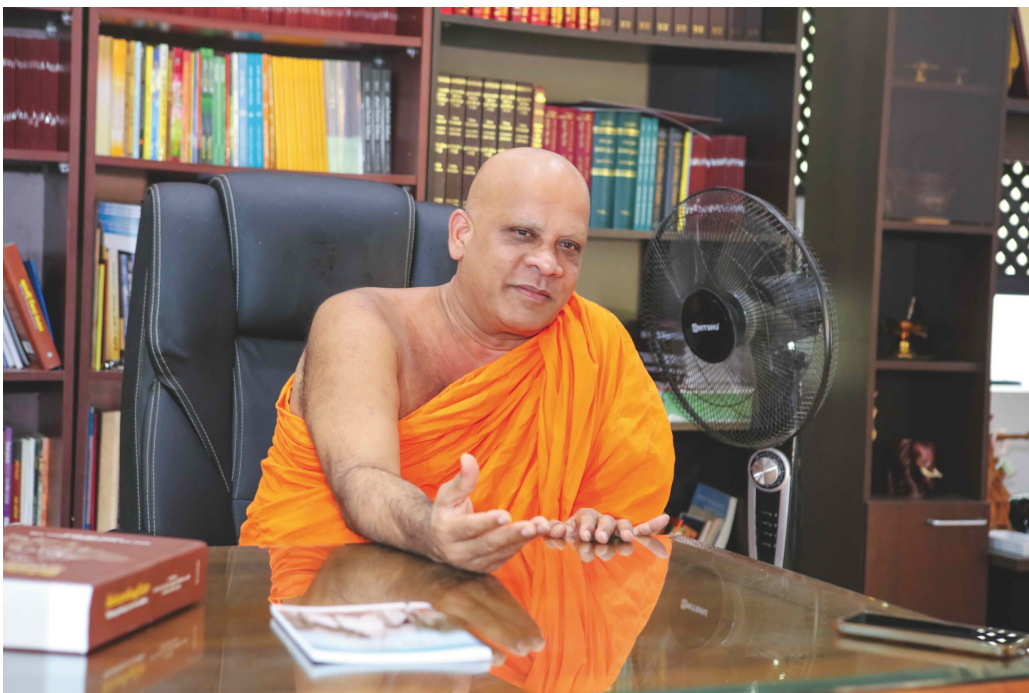


A replica of Arahant Mahinda marks the spot where he is thought to have delivered his first sermon to King Devanampiya Tissa.

What, apart from determination and piety, could motivate even the feeblest of humans to undertake the climb to the summit of Mihintale?

Perhaps the travails of travel were of little concern in the third century (BCE), when Indian Emperor Ashoka's son, Arahant Mahinda, met the Sri Lankan king, Devanampiya Tissa - the former on a mission to spread the message of non-violence, the latter on a hunting expedition.

On that moonlit night of Poson Poya in June, all ended well. The mission was accomplished. Buddhism found its forever home in Sri Lanka.



Venerable Dr. Walawahengunawewe Dhammarathana, Chief Priest of the Mihintale Raja Maha Viharaya.

Thousands of years later, people continue to visit Mihintale in the hope of reliving that sacred encounter and celebrating the birth of Buddhism on the island. And yes, the challenge was embraced, even as an elderly man complained of knee pain, attributing it to years of hard work, while a companion remarked that a walking stick should have been brought along.



One of the highest points of Mihintale is Aradhana Gala — the famed “Rock of Invitation” that every devotee aspires to climb.

Many such conversations unfolded on the journey to the top, as the young ascended the steps with sprightly ease while the seniors climbed at a gentler pace. The saving grace was that the stairways ended intermittently, granting devotees a brief respite before yet another ascent began. Along the way, discussions on history

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arose; some appeared to know more than others, while a few adults paused to explain parts of the historic “Mahindagamanaya” to their children during moments of rest. There were also digressions along rocky surfaces, and in certain places, steps hewn into stone leading towards one of the many stupas, statues, ponds, refectory, and hospital associated with the Mihintale complex. Many who fix their eyes solely on the summit of Mihintale often fail to realize that the mountain is only one fragment of a vast sacred complex, sprawling across acres of history, devotion, and archaeological wonder.



Perched high above the sacred surroundings of Mihintale, the majestic seated Buddha gazes over the landscape.

Mihintale was once a thriving center of worship, meditation, and learning, growing steadily in stature and development until the close of the Anuradhapura period in the eleventh century. According to the Chief Priest, Venerable Dr. Walawahengunawewe Dhammarathana, a prelude to the arrival of Arahant Mahinda was the Buddha’s three visits to the island — visits that, he insists, were far from coincidental.

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The first encounter between the missionaries and the royal entourage took place in the jungles of Mihintale, and that moment stamped the site's historicity and reputation, making it a focal point for kings, beginning with Devanampiya Tissa.

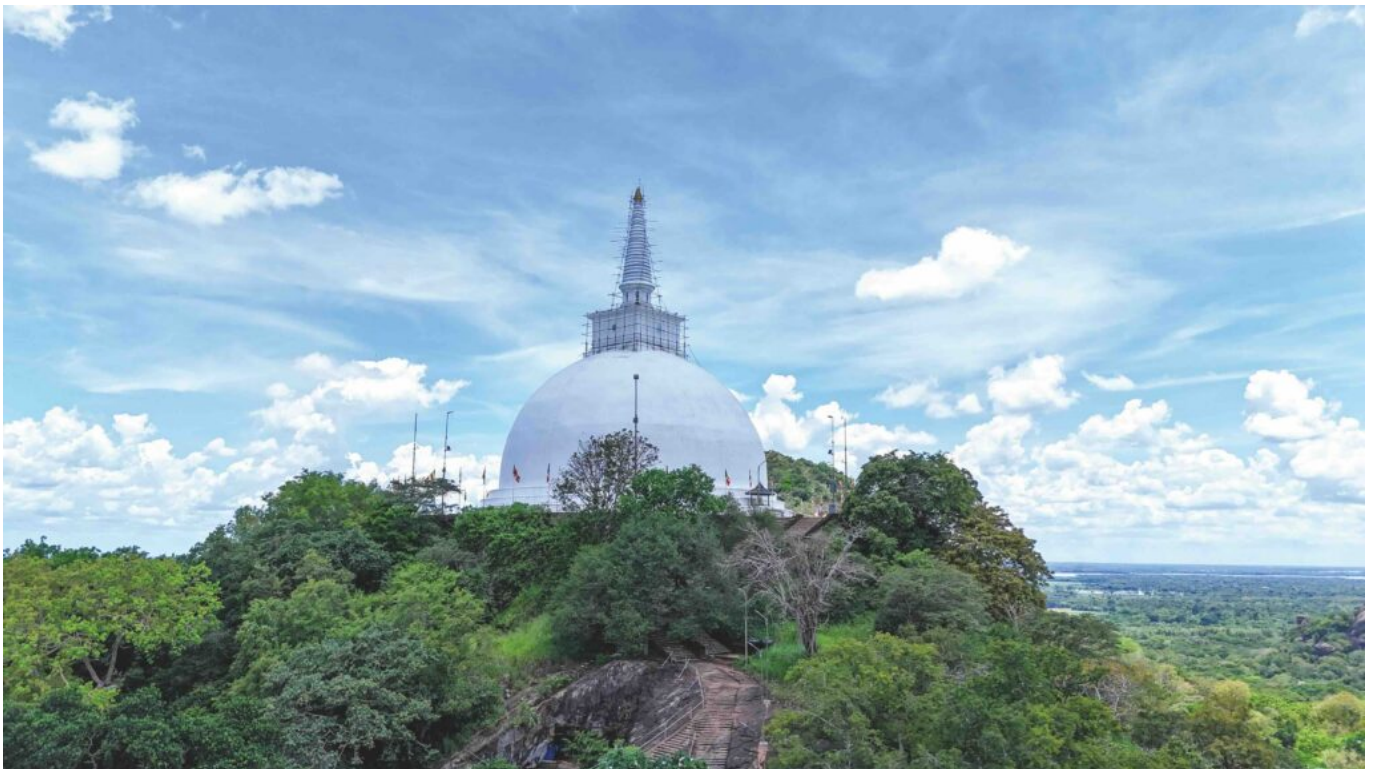


The Sacred Bo Tree stands in quiet reverence.

Over thousands of years, Mihintale continued to grow, developing into a vast monastic complex for monks and devotees – spanning nearly 460 acres and home to around 360 stupas. These stupas were not built in isolation, not merely added to swell numbers or stand as displays of royal ambition, as so often happens. They were constructed as active centers of worship for people. Supporting this expansion

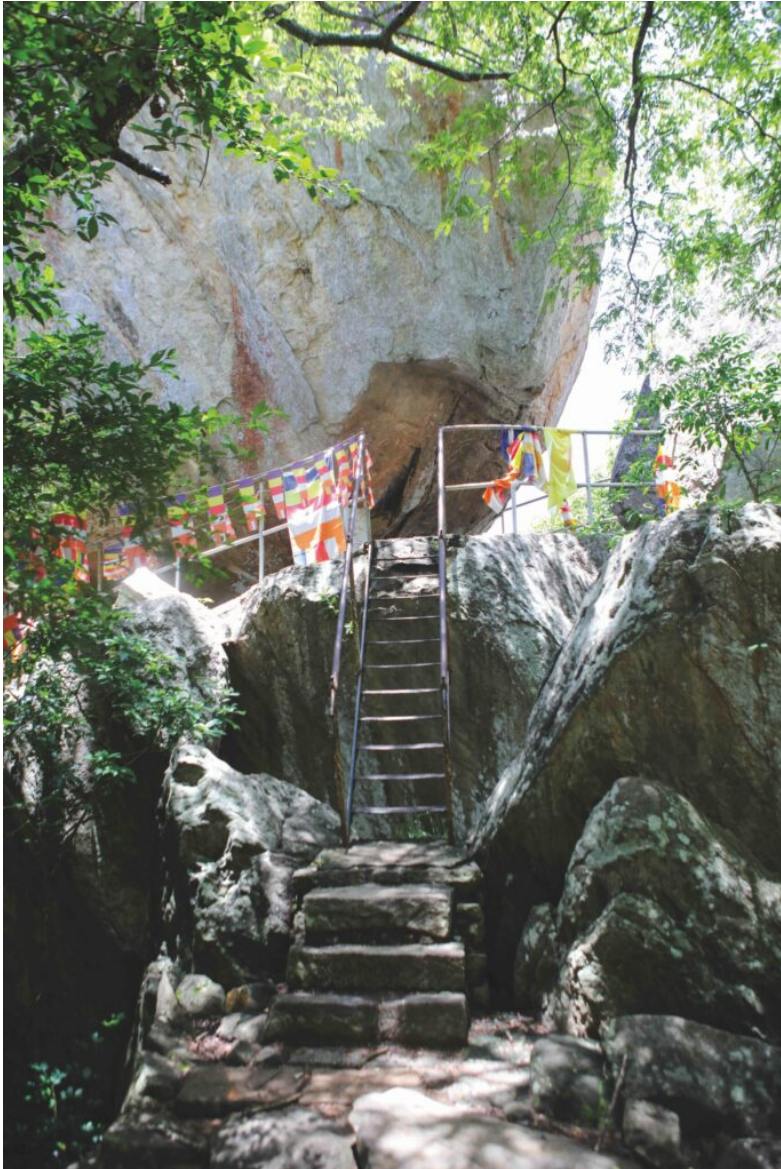
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of the built environment was the flourishing of monastic life itself. The fifth-century traveler-monk Fa Hien wrote that the site accommodated as many as 2,500 monks. This is further corroborated by scholarly studies of the “Bath Oruwa” – the apparatus used to serve rice in the refectory, which is believed to have been sufficient to serve nearly 3,000 monks.



From afar, the Maha Seya rises like a white crown in Mihintale.

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The final flight of steps leading to the rock opening said to have been used by Arahant Mahinda.

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Tradition holds that Arahant Mahinda once resided and meditated beneath this rock shelter.

Thus, Mihintale was once a thriving center of worship, meditation, and learning, growing steadily in stature and development until the close of the Anuradhapura period in the eleventh century. Here lies one of the most intriguing aspects of Mihintale. According to the Chief Priest, Venerable Dr. Walawahengunawewe Dhammarathana, a prelude to the arrival of Arahant Mahinda was the Buddha's three visits to the island — visits that, he insists, were far from coincidental.



Scattered across the hills, 360 stupas are testaments to the site's spiritual legacy.

He explains that the Buddha had chosen the island as the eventual preserve of the Dhamma. Thus, according to the Mahavamsa, the Buddha, through these visits, strategically laid the foundation for the great advent to come. Through his journeys, he is believed to have transformed the errant lives of the tribes inhabiting the island, cultivating them into a people refined and discerning enough to understand and embrace the Dhamma.

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Further, the chronicle states that King Devanampiya Tissa, followed by a massive hunting retinue said to number 40,000, had no indication of the presence of Arahant Mahinda and his missionaries in the jungles of Mihintale until, in pursuit of his prey,

he encountered them unexpectedly. The meeting may have appeared accidental on the surface, but it had long been in the making.



The Maha Stupa and Mihindu Stupa standing in sacred harmony.

By then, bilateral exchanges between the two kingdoms had already taken place, as attested by the Mahavamsa and other chronicles. These accounts state that seven days after Devanampiya Tissa ascended the throne, he dispatched a delegation led by his cousin, Prince Aritta, bearing gifts to Emperor Ashoka. In return, they were received with great honor, and the emperor reciprocated with gifts, titles, and coronation regalia for the Sri Lankan king. It was during this second anointing ceremony that Tissa came to be known as Devanampiya Tissa, having taken Ashoka's own epithet - "Devanampiya" (meaning the beloved of the gods).

Thus, the arrival of Arahant Mahinda did not occur in a vacuum. It may well have been one of the earliest known instances of international diplomacy — an exchange between two foreign kingdoms. His arrival on the island appears to have been carefully organized over a considerable period of time and, given the political climate of the era, executed with remarkable precision.

The mission was undertaken only after the demise of King Mutasiva, father of Devanampiya Tissa. According to tradition, the planning was so meticulous that the missionaries deliberately waited, believing the elderly king would be less receptive to a new doctrine, whereas a younger ruler would be more open to change. In the meantime, Mahinda learned the islanders' language. Venerable Dhammarathana describes Arahant Mahinda's mission as a "beautiful invasion" — one that stood in stark contrast to the campaigns of his father, Emperor Ashoka, who had once unleashed a wave of conquest through violence before his eventual conversion to and embrace of the Dhamma. Back on the trails of ancient Mihintale, conquering the vast expanse of the sacred complex within a day would itself be an accomplishment. Many of the ruins lie off the beaten track, nestled in forest-like surroundings and imbued with a haunting serenity. The weathered stones of the stupas — some left largely untouched, still retaining their spherical forms, while others have been reduced to little more than their foundations — carry the dignity of centuries, seemingly undisturbed by modern restoration.



Near the stone figure lies the site where King Devanampiya Tissa is known to have interacted with Arahant Mahinda.

Mihintale's geography is unique, marked by multiple gradients, while the network of pathways running through the complex reflects a remarkable harmony between the natural landscape and the built environment. Access to the complex begins with a wide flight of steps, a distinctive feature of Mihintale itself.

Beyond that, the entire network is composed largely of stairways branching into

stone steps leading to yet more stupas and ancient structures. Along these subsidiary paths, one encounters narrower step-laden trails and plain rocky byways, while somewhere in between, there is almost always a plateau offering a moment of respite before the journey continues. Hence, the stupas are primarily built atop the mountains that spread across the Mihintale complex, with each site connected by its own uniquely constructed access route. Meanwhile, the ponds are often carved into natural rock formations and served practical purposes, particularly at the “Naga Pokuna” — roughly translated as the Snake Pond — which supplied water to the refectory.

Moreover, Mihintale, being situated within a tropical dry evergreen forest, is home to numerous natural caves. The rock shelter believed to have been used by Arahant Mahinda lies east of the “Uda Maluwa,” or upper terrace of the complex — a secluded rock shelter cocooned by trees.

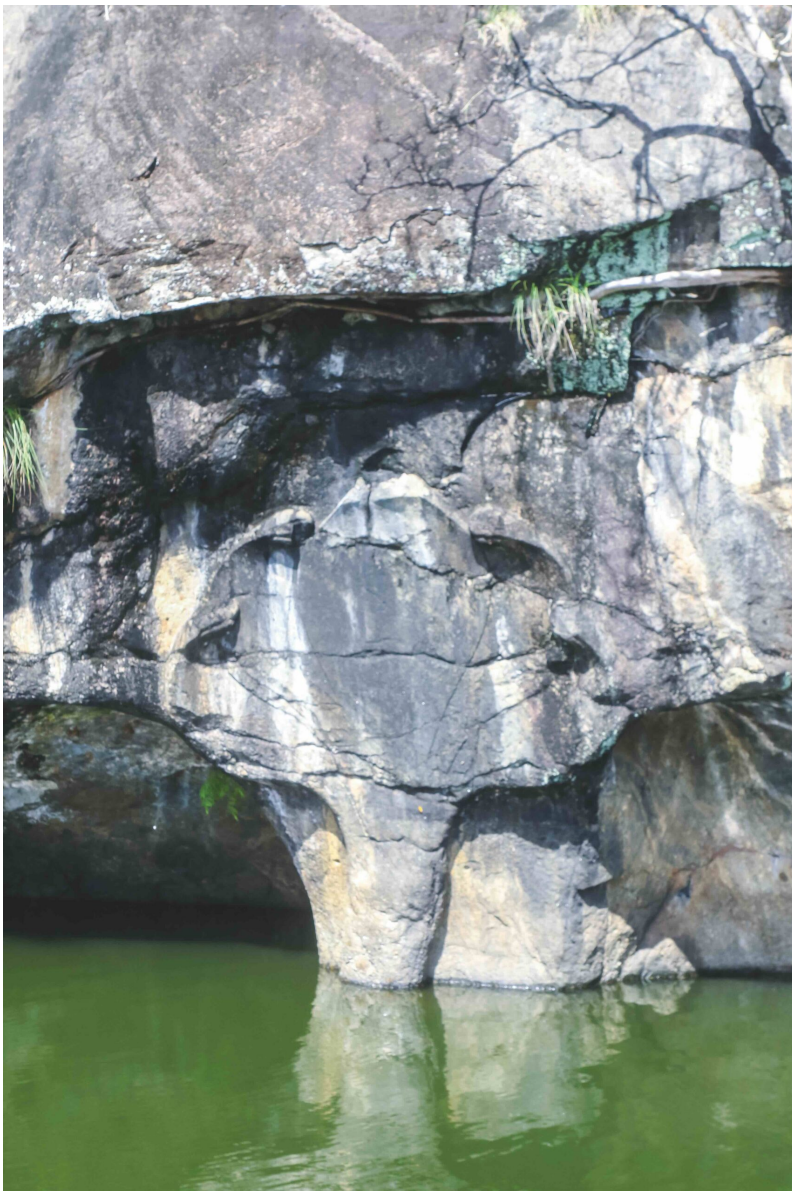
Visitors must descend a steep flight of steps to reach it, where a section of the rock resembles a bed complete with a pillow-like formation at one end. The Sela Cetiya stupa is another important site. Surrounded by mango trees, it marks the place where Arahant Mahinda and King Devanampiya Tissa are believed to have first met, conversed, and where the king eventually embraced the Dhamma. Then there is the famed Aradhana Gala, or Invitation Rock, perhaps the most iconic location associated with Mihintale.

It is believed to be the very spot from which Sumana Samanera, one of Arahant Mahinda’s missionary companions, invited the deities to listen to the Dhamma from the mountaintop. Adjacent to the Sela Cetiya is yet another flight of steps leading towards a massive white seated Buddha statue, further demonstrating how the various sacred sites remain interconnected through the main pathway network. Another ascent leads visitors to the spectacular Maha Seya, perhaps the largest stupa within the complex. It is believed to enshrine the Buddha’s “Urna Roma Dathu”—the sacred hair relic located between the eyebrows.

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The Maha Seya also serves as a vantage point overlooking the grand civilization of the Anuradhapura period. From here, one can glimpse the distant silhouettes of Abhayagiri Vihara and Ruwanwelisaya. The panorama is nothing short of breathtaking — a window into a civilization nurtured by stupas, reservoirs, and endless stretches of paddy fields.



At the Naga Pokuna, a striking five-hooded cobra carving stands guard over the serene stone pond.

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Close to the Maha Seya stands the Mihindu Seya, a stupa dedicated to Arahant Mahinda himself. Enshrined within are believed to be his relics and remains. Beyond it lie more stupas, many unrestored yet retaining a raw authenticity, thought to have been dedicated to the missionaries who accompanied Arahant Mahinda to the island. There are many significant sites to explore in Mihintale, including ancient stone carvings and rock inscriptions that offer a window into how successive kings sustained and expanded the site over time. It is entirely possible to visit a considerable number of these places within a single day, provided the journey begins early and time is managed efficiently. Practical considerations also help — wearing socks, for instance, can make a difference when traversing the sun-heated rock surfaces.

Anyone visiting Anuradhapura can easily visit Mihintale, which is approximately 18 kilometers away. On regular days, the site is relatively quiet, though it tends to get busier on weekends and especially on Poya days. Yet, even then, nothing quite compares to the atmosphere of June. June each year marks this historic visit on the full moon day, and Mihintale comes alive with thousands of devotees gathering to commemorate the event. The “Mahindagamanaya” is celebrated on a grand scale with State patronage.



From the summit of Mihintale, the sweeping landscape unfolds in breathtaking

beauty.

As unprecedented crowds assemble to celebrate, Venerable Dhammarathana finds his hands full, and the most meaningful way to support him in ensuring the smooth conduct of proceedings is through discipline – both in behavior and in the responsible disposal of waste. Such conduct would perhaps be the greatest mark of respect one could offer to a site regarded as sacred. Centuries have passed since the advent of Arahant Mahinda, yet his legacy continues to endure.

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The historic exchange it set in motion, too, remains one that ought to be sustained. With Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressing a commitment to developing Sanchi Stupa, there is renewed hope for a meaningful reconnection. Venerable Dhammarathana welcomes this vision, describing it as a mission to preserve and protect shared historical heritage for future generations. He notes that this may be an opportune moment for Sanchi and Mihintale to reconnect and celebrate their intertwined spiritual and historical identities.