

# The Bodhi Tree at Kalutara

Theja Weeratne



A smaller dagaba inside the large stupa at Kalutara.

If you travel South on the Galle Road passing Kalutara, it will be hard to miss the famous Bodhi tree which greets you at the entrance to the town. If you are a tourist in a hired car or coach, the chauffeur will pull up near the tree and alight to drop a few votive coins. While Sri Lankan Buddhists who go past the Bodhi tree at Kalutara would break journey briefly to make an offering of a few coins and make a wish for a safe journey and eternal bliss after life, travellers of most other faiths too have now acquired the habit of treating the much venerated tree with some reverence.

The Bodhi tree at Kalutara is met as you cross the twin spans of the bridge across the Kalu Ganga, which flows into the sea from nearby. With the Galle Road being Sri Lanka's busiest trunk route, the shrine near the Bodhi tree is always full of devotees. Bus loads of pilgrims will often come to worship there, as do the passengers of many other vehicles.

The Buddhists offer flowers at the Bo-tree shrine, hang prayer flags on the fence around the tree, and the many props erected to bear its weight. Some pour offerings of milk or water to the tree, in fulfilment of vows. Some meditate in its shade. Three times a day, at dawn, pre-noon and dusk, drums are beaten and temple music heard when special offerings are made to the Buddha and the sacred tree. The Bodhi tree (*Ficus Religiosa*) at Kalutara, popularly known as the "Kalutara Bo-tree", is believed to be one of thirty two saplings miraculously produced from fruits of the famous Sri maha Bodhi -the Great Bodhi Tree -when it was planted at Anuradhapura more than 2,200 years ago. The ancient chronicles of the Sinhalese record that the saplings were planted at several sites throughout the island, and Kalutara was one of them.

The Sacred Bodhi Tree at Anuradhapura - the oldest historically documented tree in the world -is venerated by Buddhists because it is grown from a branch of the tree under which the Buddha meditated till he attained enlightenment. The original tree at Bodhi Gaya, in India, does not exist. While this association of the Bodhi tree with Buddha is the cause for its being held in veneration by Buddhists, the Bo-tree at Kalutara is held in special respect because of its link with the Sacred Tree at Anuradhapura, and the many belief among many Sri Lankan Buddhists that it has certain supernatural powers.

Kalutota - a port of the Kalu Ganga became Kalutara over the years. The British considered it the Richmond of Ceylon due to its picturesque location on the banks of the winding Kalu Ganga, where it flows into the sea.

The Hindu epic Ramayana mentions Kalutara as a fortress of Prince Kande (God Kataragama) during the Sura -Asura war (between two rivals celestial beings described in Hindu mythology). This was during the reign of Ravana when it was considered the gate to Ruhuna - one of the three districts Sri Lanka was divided into in ancient times.

In the early 11th Century a South Indian Prince, Vikramapandiya, had come to

Ruhuna for fear of the Chola invaders and made Kalutara his seat of government. He built a palace - Gangatilake Maligawa which was later destroyed by floods. He had also planted the Bo-tree on a little hillock in the palace grounds.

In the 15th century, the Gangatilake Viharaya (temple) was built on the same location by a ruling monarch - Sangabodhi Buwanekabahu. Later in the 16th century the Portuguese Governor Jeronimo de Asavedo confiscated the land of the temple ransacked and levelled the temple to the ground. However the Bo-tree was spared. But the Portuguese made the site out of bounds to pilgrims. Neglected through the years the Bo-tree in a poor state with a wooden enclosure and was a crumbling brick foundation. In the early years of the 20th Century, Cyril de Zoysa a Buddhist lawyer of Kalutara, took upon himself to build a protective wall round their Bo-tree and an altar for offerings like flowers and incense. When the British Government Agent who lived in his residence next to the Bo-tree complained the beating of drums and attempted to the about tree destroyed, de Zoysa intervened. He get did not rest till he got the Government Agent ejected from his residence and used the land to improve sacred precincts of the bo-tree. He acquired the the adjoining Administrative building and converted it to a preaching hall. He installed collection tills by the side of the busy main road. Cyril de Zoysa who became a prominent figure in politics and Buddhist affairs and was elevated as a knight by the British, had a second Bo-tree by the side of the road protected by a parapet wall and built a small Gantakara (bell shaped) dagoba by its side. This was for the convenience of worship for travellers.

The transport service Sir Cyril owned was instructed to stop at the Bo tree and offer Panduru (money offered to show one's veneration). As a result today, this has become a ritual to almost every traveller of many religions who passes this Bo -tree.

People of Kalutara say that at this time, one of his employees in the transport company was dismissed by Sir Cyril. The employee had then joined another transport service and defiantly driven the bus past the Bo-tree without stopping for the ritual offering. Before he could proceed a few yards from this spot, he had crashed into a lamp post. This incident strengthened the belief that many held of the supernatural power of this venerated tree.

By the ancient Bo-tree was later constructed a magnificent Stupa 180 feet sheltering a smaller bubble shaped dagoba. The protective granite wall built

around this Vatadoseya (a shelter built over a stupa) has four miniature dagabas at the four corners and flood lights lighting up this glittering white bubble shaped shelter. It is a magnificent and novel construction with flights of steps leading upto a shrine room with four gold painted Buddha statues round the inner dagoba. Seventy five murals depicting the Buddha's life are painted on the inside walls of this structure, that of the Buddha's first incarnation till his birth as Siddharta and the final attainment of Nirvana. The inside of the dagoba is also an echo chamber. A statue of Sir Cyril de Zoysa stands on one side of this Vatadaseya built by a grateful townspeople in remembrance of his tireless work. To the south of the temple grounds is St. John's Church built in 1876, an Anglican church. Kalutara has been famous for its cottage industry of cane and colour-fully woven mats and bags. Striking shades of dyed rush, plaited into intricately woven designs to produce mats, bags, and boxes. The wayside stalls exhibit their wares to the travellers on this ever busy highway. Between May and August is the season for Mangosteen fruits (*Garcinia Mangostana*) which is a speciality of Kalutara. These tropical fruits have a hard purplish brown shell, covering the white fleshy and succulent pulp round the seeds. The vendors build little wayside huts and arrange the fruit in piles to catch the eye of the commuters on the mainroad. Kalutara is 45 km from Colombo on the Galle Road. A bus or train could be taken from Colombo Central bus station or Fort Railway station.



Lotus and Water Lily to be offered at the Kalutara Shrine



Devotees hang prayer flags on the branches of the sacred tree.