

# The Buddha with the Sapphire eyes

Posted on

Theja Weeratne



The shrine room of the temple showing the statue of the reclining Buddha, with the sapphire eyes, and another statue of a seated Buddha also with the glow of gems.

Dehiwela is a suburb immediately south of Colombo, sandwiched between the city and picturesque Mr. Lavinia. Tucked a way, down a by-way in Dehiwela, near its busy bazaar, is an old Buddhist temple - the Subbodaramaya, famed for its statue of the Buddha with eyes set in sapphires, and some of the finest temple frescoes coming down from the 18th century. Karagampitiya, the area in Dehiwela where the temple is situated was fishing village in the days of the Sinhalese kings. The Subhodaramaya stands where there was once a shrine to Hindu deities. The original shrine was destroyed by Christian invaders. The Buddhist temple was later built by the villagers and Buddhist landowners of the area. An inscription over the door of the shrine room says it was completed in the year 2339 of the Buddhist Era (1795 A.D.). According to the chief incumbent monk of the temple, it took fifty years to complete, with all its statuary and frescoes. The principal buildings of the temple include the stupa, the image house, the bodhi tree shrine, the Devale, the preaching hall, a library, a belfry, two monastic residences and a refectory. The unusual buildings are the Sat-satige or "seven week house" and the Sri pada ge or Sacred Footprint house. The Sat - Satige has images of the Buddha and paintings depicting the seven weeks following the Buddha's enlightenment.

In a small room in the south end of the Sat - Satige is a sculptured and painted tableau of episodes from the Vessantara Jataka, a previous incarnation of the Buddha. King Vesantara handing over his own children to Juthaka, the mendicant who came begging for alms. This story illustrates the heights of detachment and generosity of the king - the Buddha to be - had reached through constant meditation.

The Sri pada ge, a dome shaped solitary building is remarkably different to the shrines one see in Buddhist viharas. It has an image of the Buddha's Foot Print and

a little stone alter for offerings.

The white-washed bell shaped or gantakara dagaba or stupa with four miniature dagabas in four corners for protections is a mound erected over a relic of the Buddha or Buddhist saints. It is crowned with a gile pinnacle with a precious stone at the tip of it.

The Bodhi tree at this temple is decorated with a gilded fence round it. A seated Buddha statue, in a glass enclosure is at the foot of the tree. There are twenty seven miniature statues in similar glass fronted cases right round the tree. An iron fence is build round these to accommodate the lamps lit by the devotees, who can be see in meditation under the spreading green branches of the sacred tree.

The Devale is a regular feature in the grounds of most temples in Sri Lanka, a reminder of the Indian princesses who were brought for the reigning royalty and retained their Hindu faith. The devales originally built for the queen and her retinue have become a prominent feature of worship with the Buddhists who adopt the Hindu deities for special worship.

Frescoes such as this adorn the walls of the Subhodharmaya. The temple was completed in 1795 AD.

Detail of a fresco at the Subhodharama.

The Dharmasalawa or preaching hall is a building with a triple tiered roof. The paintings in the central pavilion depict processional scenes in so mew hat stiff folk manner and decorative details in a purely traditional mode. These paintings are said to be the oldest in the temple. The paintings on the inside of the outer wall depict incidents associated with the life of the Buddha after his enlightenment. The paintings on the ceiling are in purely traditional style with lotus flowers and depictions of ancient sports.

The central pavilion which is built in the style of a Pirith Mandapaya – which is an intricately cut, wooden trellis screen has a row of seats for the monks to sit on and chant stanzas to ward off sorrow, fear and disease. In the centre of this pavilion there is a seat made of a valuable perfumed wood – Rath Handun – (Red

Sandalwood) where the monks sit on to preach the dhamma to the people. It is a beautifully carved chair where the monks sit in the lotus posture. The image house or main Vihara, has an unusual and old Sanda Kade Pahana or moon stone at the entrance. It is of plain granite in three pieces, in the shape of five petals. There is an inner shrine which houses the Buddha statues and an ambulatory corridor with murals on both walls. A painted trellis fence runs round the outside of the inner shrine protecting the ancient murals on the walls. The paintings in the shrine and the inner wall of the corridor are of the mid 19 th century. The best preserved and the most interesting are the ones on the inner walls. They have not been re-touched in recent times. The subject matter depicted are incidents from the Buddha's life and that of his previous incarnations.

A rare ceramic mosaic design decorates the floor of the Vihara in animal, geometrical and other patterns. These have been fashioned out of English and Chinese plate and porcelain, at least some of which have been deliberately broken for this purpose.

Next to the granite steps which lead into the inner shrine, the mosaic, design is of two lions and two unicorns. Dr. Senaka Bandaranaike, an archeologist who has made a study of temple paintings says of the Karagampitiya temple "As far as its paintings are concerned the temple is unique in two respects. It is perhaps the only Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka with wall paintings in three different types of buildings – the image house, the preaching hall and the Sat Satige. It is also one of only three temples in the Colombo area which have entire complement of 19 th century murals still intact."



Section of the wall of the temple covered with Buddhist frescoes.



The face of the famous statue of the Buddha with the Sapphire eyes at the Subhodharama. Karagampitiya.

Photo: Gamini Jayasinghe

The inner shrine has three Buddha statues. One seated, another standing and the

serene and peaceful daha ata riyan (27 feet) reclining statue which is the biggest attraction. Another statue facing the three Buddha statues is of the Hindu Lord Vishnu – an incarnation of the Buddha seen on a cobra, his mode of transport, and has been placed there for the protection of the other statues. All these statues have their eyes set with sapphires. In the light of a coconut oil lamp with the doors closed, the eyes seem to glow and light up instantaneously, giving it a life-like appearance. The reclining Buddha has a peaceful and serene beauty on the face-portraying the compassion of the Buddha embracing beings, which the artist has suggested in a very effective manner. P.D. Duspensky, the writer on mystic subjects, was completely moved and inspired to call it the “Buddha with the sapphire eyes” in 1914 when he visited Sri Lanka. He describes the effect it had on him in his book “A new model of the Universe”.

“When we entered the second room of the shrine it was quite dark as the light from the door through which we came could not reach it. I struck a match and saw behind the latticed glass frame running the whole length of the wall a huge statue lying on its side, with one hand under its head and the strange gaze of eyes which were not looking at me and yet appeared to see me”

“A second or two passed and I understood that I was in the presence of a miracle. The Buddha saw me, saw in me that which I could not see myself, all that was hidden in the most secret recesses of my soul. “Everything that was small, superfluous, uneasy and trouble came to the surface and displayed itself under this glance. “The strange effect which the Buddha’s face produced on me – all the gloom that rose from the depths of my soul seemed to clear up. It was as if the Buddha’s face communicated its calm to me. And I felt that no matter how agitated, troubled, irritated and torn with contradicting thought and feelings a man might be when he came here, he would go away calm, enlightened, understanding. All Buddhism was in his face, in this gaze. There is no need to read large volumes on Buddhism or to walk with professors who study eastern religions or with the learned bhikkus. One must come here, stand before the Buddha and let the gaze of those blue sapphire eyes penetrate one’s soul and one will understand what Buddhism is.