The Ruby Statue of the Vitarka Buddha

Posted on
Natural ruby statue of the Vitarka Buddha seated on a natural ruby (gem) in zoisite crystal base

Something stirred in the soul of a Hong Kong art and gem collector when he saw an elderly woman clasp her hands in worship before the statue of the seated Buddha at the Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Words Manu Gunasena **Photographs** Mahesh Bandara and Isuru Upeksha

A certificate that proves the Buddha statue is an authentic gemstone

Transfixed at the sight of the woman’s deep reverence for this image of the Buddha and immensely moved by her awe for the sacred icon, the collector – who had spent his life collecting rare and beautiful Buddha statues – came to a realisation. The rightful place for these objects was not behind closed doors, but in the public eye. Divinely inspired art depicting the Buddha in his sublime state of enlightenment belonged in the temple, not the home. It should be worshipped and adored by the many, not kept purely for the selfish aesthetic enjoyment of the few.

With this thought in mind he returned to Hong Kong, to his private collection of Buddhas – unseen, unsung and unworshipped. Though born a Buddhist, the collector had not practised his faith in a long time. His most prized possession, a seated Buddha statue exquisitely sculpted from a unique Tanzanian ruby (gem), had been purchased for its artistic rather than spiritual merits, and as a means of showing off his good taste to his friends. Realising the shallowness of his motives, the collector decided to break his ties of attachment to the object and donate it to a temple. Up to this point the priceless Buddha had offered satisfaction to him alone – now it would bring joy to countless worshippers.

What better choice of temple than the one where his revelation had ocurred? It was at the Gangaramaya Temple, one of Colombo’s most significant locations for Buddhist worship, that he had recognised his own selfish vanity and resolved to change his ways. It would be here that he would restore his statue to its proper

setting.

After notifying the temple prelate of his intention and dealing with the practicalities of transporting the art work, he presented it to the temple's chief monk, the Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thera.

"This Hong Kong gem collector had arrived in Sri Lanka to attend the International Gemology Conference," Ven Galaboda explained. "Thereafter he had taken part in the city tour and as part of the itinerary had visited the Gangaramaya Temple. Here he had experienced a great realisation. Then he came and met me and spoke of his intention to donate his ruby (gem) Buddha statue to the temple to be displayed for the people to venerate. He told me that objects of worship should be kept at temples and not as ornaments in houses. True to his word he returned within a month and gifted the statue. He also gave me the International Gemological Institute's identification report to prove the authenticity of the ruby Buddha statue he was gifting. He also said that he does not want any publicity and that he preferred to remain as an anonymous donor."

According to the report issued by the International Gemological Institute, the world's largest independent laboratory for testing and grading gemstones, the artefact is a natural ruby Buddha seated on a base of natural ruby in zoisite crystal. The robe and bowl are made of gold-plated silver. It has a total weight of 14.1kg. The deep purplish gem measures 18cm x 12cm x 33cm and is believed to have originated from Tanzania. The deep green and purplish red base is shaped in a free form and rectangular prism.

The Buddha once described his role as that of a teacher. "The Thathagathas [Buddhas] are teachers," he said. "They can only show the way." It is this aspect of the Buddha that the master ruby carver has chosen to depict in his work, the statue's right hand forming the 'Vitarka Mudra', the holy gesture of discussion and explanation. The usual cross-legged posture of the seated Buddha has been slightly altered, to show the right leg folded and the left leg touching the rock upon which the figure is seated.

But if the dynamic Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thera, affectionately known as 'Podi Hamuduruwo' (a term generally used for novice monks), thought that this was just a one-off donation made in a flash of generosity, he was recently proved wrong. Apparently loosening the attachment bonds of thanha (greed) made an impact on the Hong Kong collector, empowering him to further loosen his dependence on

earthly pleasures. Because last month he returned to the temple with another of his prized possessions: a ruby Hotei, or Laughing Buddha.

Symbolising good fortune and prosperity, the Laughing Buddha depicts an eccentric Chinese monk who lived a thousand years ago. Famed for his benevolence, he is also considered to be a Chinese folkloric deity, and as a result came to be considered as an incarnation of the Maitri Buddha, a future Buddha of this world. The Hotei Buddha appears in many different postures, all with their own specific symbolism. Sitting Laughing Buddhas, for example, are said to bring wealth and good luck. The standing posture of the one gifted to the temple by the collector, on the other hand, signifies health, wealth and happiness.

As the International Gemological Institute's report on the statue states, it is a deep purplish red natural ruby Buddha standing under a four-layered pavilion, with a measurement of 20cm x 12.40cm x 8cm. The three columns of the pavilion are made of the same natural ruby and the upper and lower bases consist of black octagonal slabs of natural obsidian. Its total weight is 4.5kg.

The two new valuable Buddha statues among other sacred treasures

The two ruby Buddha statues will be on public display at the Gangaramaya Temple from November 8 to December 31, 2015.

Foreign visitors as well as devotees of the Temple can visit on any day at a time convenient to them to worship and also receive the blessings of these sacred Buddha statues.

During the period of exhibition you can reserve a date and time to worship the ruby Buddha statues in private. In order to make the arrangements please type Reg GT on your Mobitel or Dialog mobile and SMS to 77100.

The sculptor has highlighted the Laughing Buddha's most famous physical features, namely the big belly, long ear lobes and large smiling mouth. The wealth ball he holds in his right hand symbolises safe travels and enlightenment, and in his left hand there is a bowl of plenty, meaning abundance. Furthermore, he is depicted standing on a sack of money, signifying his protection over wealth and conveying the message that he will not only shower the devotee with prosperity but will

safeguard them as well.

The Hong Kong collector – whose identity has never been revealed – has experienced prosperity beyond expectations. But, like the Laughing Buddha, who carries his worldly possessions around with him in a small cloth sack, he has realised, perhaps, that there are things more important than material wealth. The collector is certainly poorer, having parted with two of his most valuable possessions, now on display at the Gangaramaya Temple. But in spiritual terms, he is richer than ever before.

61, Sri Jinarathana Road, Colombo 2
(+94 11) 243 5169
gt@gangaramaya.com
gangaramaya.com



