Walukaramaya: A Fusion of the Old and the Contemporary

Posted on



The decorated arch with the ubiquitous dragon at the entrance to the temple.

Walukaramaya may not be the most ostentatious Buddhist temple in Colombo. Still, as one of the oldest in the capital, its historic role in a burgeoning colonial setting and the vicissitudes of Sri Lanka's sociopolitical landscape remains a constant.

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Photography Sujith Heenatigala and Dinesh Fernando.

What began as a noble cause supporting Buddhism's revival in a conquered country cannot be pushed into obscurity at the end of a lane as a remnant of a past era. To the keen observer, the decorated dragon arch rising at the corner-most space of a narrow street on Colombo's busy Duplication Road is the surest identification of a Buddhist temple.

Cocooned in modern history, surrounded by the tremendousness of urban hustle and sound, the Temple in its prime was led by monks who fiercely championed a Dhamma revival in an era of subjugation. Walukaramaya symbolizes that movement, a rising, and a restoration. It was set up as a beacon of rebirth in 1841 by Venerable Walane Sri Siddhartha, who began his mission of re-establishing the primacy of Dhamma and its scholarly study in Ratmalana through the Parama Dhamma Chethiya Pirivena.

Walukaramaya is older than many of today's more famous Colombo temples. It is among the first three Buddhist temples established in Colombo, and when it was founded, it was to fulfill a specific mission. Hence, it drew huge patronages from Colombo's entrepreneurial families turned philanthropists. Walukaramaya was once known as the Cinnamon Gardens Temple, signifying its predominance in Colombo and its popularity among the new upwardly mobile middle-class conservatives at the forefront of a new movement. It was also a temple for all, where the pull of the Dhamma under erudite monks made it a fount of learning.

The reawakening of Walukaramaya in the 20th century and beyond is symbolized by the new buildings represented in the Image House, the relic chamber, Bodhi-tree shrine, preaching hall, Pirith Mandapa (an enclosure for monks when reciting pirith), stupa, and the monks' dwelling. The Temple's surroundings testify to the changes that have swept the commercial capital, a mini trading hub bubbling with energy, just like what Walukaramaya was meant to be when it was built in those halcyon

days. Walukaramaya is a testament to the rise and influence of the 19th century's Sinhala-Buddhist bourgeois. The traditionalists joined the restoration mission and donated generously to that cause. Walukaramaya was built on land donated by Ayurveda physician Arnolis Silva.

Chief Priest Venerable Maharagama Nanda, steering the Temple's fortunes in a modern setting, says that the Temple enjoyed a prominent place in Colombo, surrounded by families contributing to its maintenance and development. However, today, most of those affluent families who lived around the Temple have moved out, and the surrounding geography has been reinvented to suit the changing socioeconomic realities of the capital. Over time, the Temple may have drowned in the crowded commercial space, but it was always maintained. Under successive monks' leadership, the Temple was pre-served and developed. Venerable Nanda's predecessor, Venerable Niwanthidiye Ananda, the longest-serving chief priest for fifty years, introduced significant changes to Walukaramaya. Under his leadership, he built a new preaching hall and initiated the renovation of the Image House. It was Venerable Ananda who, in 1963, introduced an Esala Perahera in Colombo through Walukaramaya.

The mission to elevate Walukaramaya to its glory is evident inside. The air inside the Temple premises is calm despite the constant refrain of children's voices from a neighboring school. At the center of the property, staring at the entrance, is a one-of-a-kind mini stupa. Venerable Nanda revealed that the white marble stupa weighing 11 tons from Myanmar is the only one in the world. The Temple is not its final resting place. It is destined for another temple belonging to Venerable Nanda, the Maharagama Sri Nanda International Buddhist Center in Sella Kataragama, under construction. Until such time, the edifice remains to be admired for its remarkable craftsmanship.

The Image House and the shrine room are situated at the end of the property after the abode of the monks, the preaching hall, and the Bodhi-tree shrine. One finds solitude inside the Image House, because the room is overwhelmed by the incredible presence of a seated Buddha, an image calling for contemplation and aloneness. Construction of the Image House began in 1926 and was supported by the Wijewardena family, well-known Buddhist benefactors. The magnificent Buddha image flanked by images of Sariputta and Moggollana, Buddha's two chief disciples,

were hewn by the famous artist monk Ven Mapalagama Wipulasara, believed to be his very first sculpting of a Buddha image.

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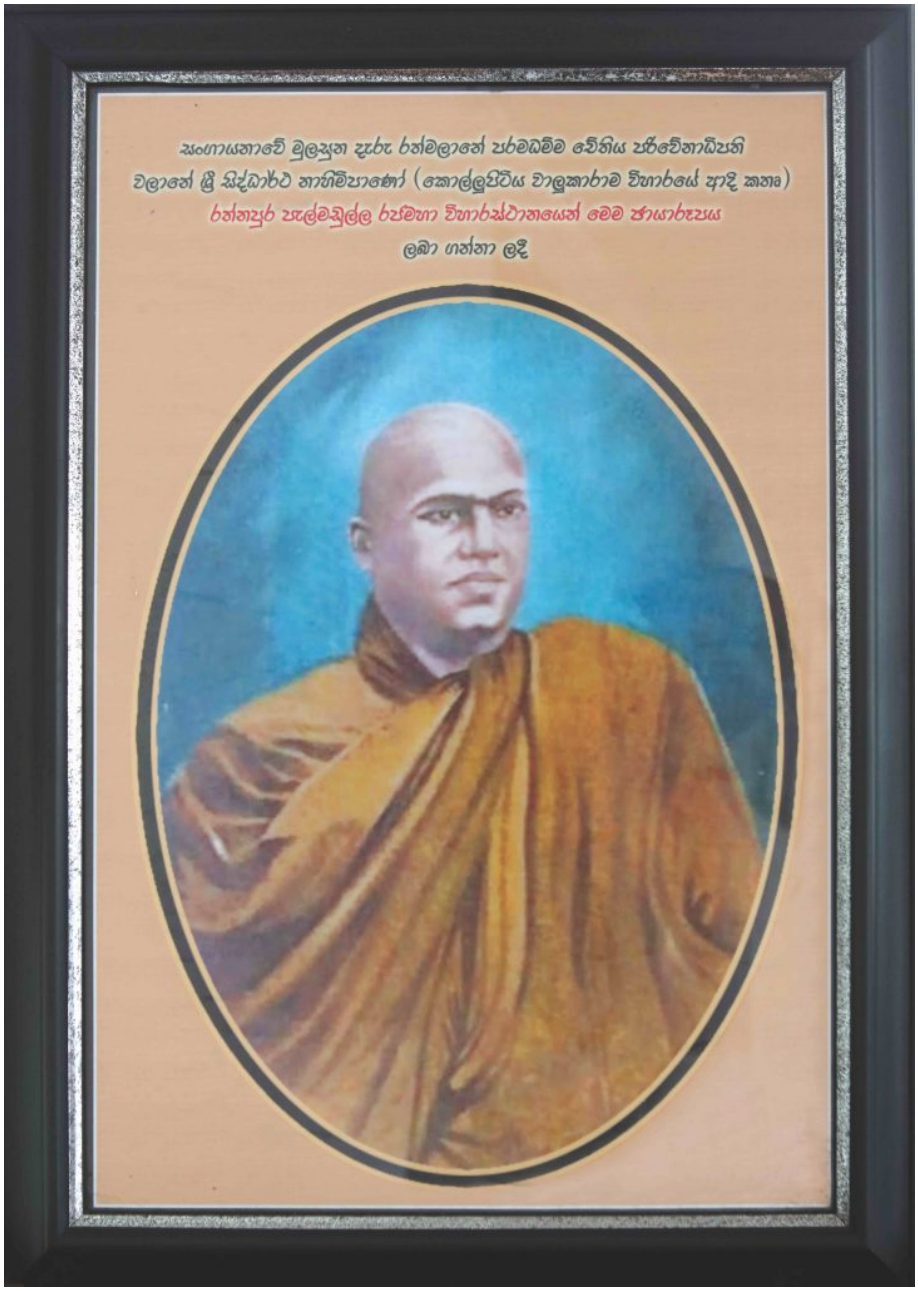
Successive chief priests of Walukaramaya who have dedicated their lives to preserve its mission.



The founder of Walukaramaya Ven Walane Sri Siddhartha.

The dragon arch at the entrance to the inner chamber of the Image House is flanked below by images of Devangana – celestial beings on the sides. Symbolizing the Temple’s cosmopolitan nature, the dragon arch was built under the patronage of the Kathiresan Hindu Kovil in Colombo. The surrounding outer chamber has a giant

statue of a reclining Buddha created by an Indian artist, a Buddha image depicted in Dharmachakra Mudra. Encased in glass are three new images that resonate with the Temple's heritage. Walukaramaya belongs to the Siam monastic order, an order established in Sri Lanka by Thai monk Ven Upali, who arrived in Sri Lanka in the 18th century on the invitation of Ven Weliwita Sri Saranankara during the reign of King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe in Kandy. To their dedication, the once defunct institution of monastic order was re-established in Sri Lanka along with the Upasampadha – the practice of higher ordination. Three life-size metal images of Ven Weliwita Sri Saranankara, Ven Upali, and Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe, a donation from Thailand, were unveiled in the outer chamber of the Image House by President Ranil Wickremesinghe as a tribute to their dedication to re-establish monastic orders in Sri Lanka. The relic chamber on the upper floor of the monks' dwelling guards the Buddha's relics in an ornamental enclosure, fittingly stored amid a bevy of ostentatious symbols and decorations, making it a worthy abode for Buddhism's most treasured remnant.

In a present setting where historic feats are overshadowed and forgotten, the Temple's role in the country's history should be celebrated. Luckily, part of that history is preserved in the adjoining Mahanama College, national boys' school, which is a testament to the role of scholarly monks in establishing Buddhist schools in the 20th century. Seventy years ago, Ven Mawittara Sri Rewata of Walukaramaya gathered 60 deserving children from the neighborhood to the Temple's preaching hall, and as the numbers grew, Ven Niwanthidiye Ananda banded with the government of that time to shift the school to a larger property, which then moved to land situated next to the Temple, and hence hours of incessant cantor of voices is a weekday staple that one encounters at the Temple. But that doesn't disturb anyone who comes to the Temple; their intention guides their thoughts and allows them to focus their mind on the object of worship.



The Bodhi tree shrine.



The casket containing the Sacred Buddha relic is placed atop the elephant from this elevated booth.



The marble stupa is displayed in an enclosure fitting its status as one-of-a-kind.



Venerable Maharagama Nanda, the current Chief Priest of Walukaramaya.



The decorated dragon arch flanked by images of celestial beings marks the entrance to the main shrine.



The recently inaugurated metal statue of Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe of Kandy in the outer chamber of the Image House.



The Relic Chamber.



An image of the reclining Buddha crafted by an Indian artisan.



President Ranil Wickremesinghe accepting the casket containing the Relics of the Buddha prior to the commencement of the Temple’s Esala Perahera in 2005.