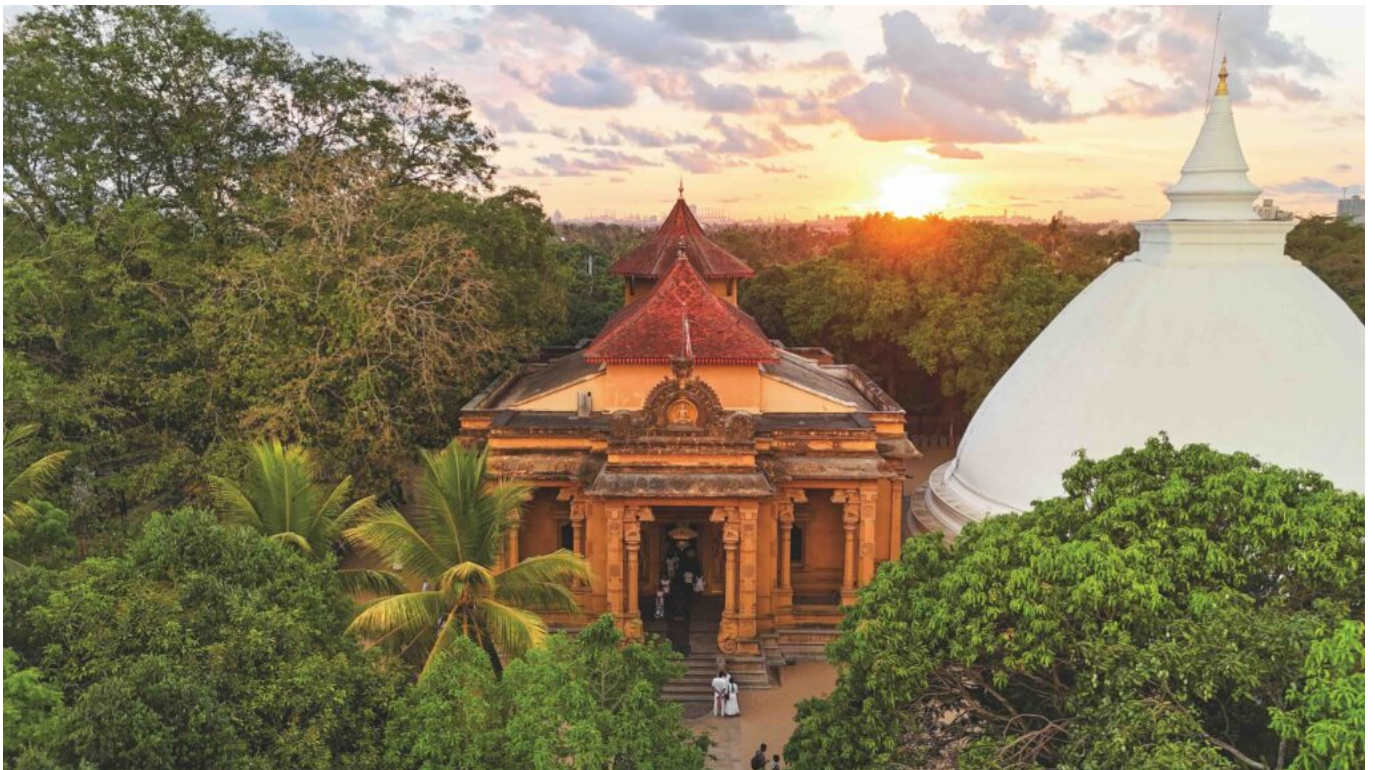


Where the Buddha Walked: The Enduring Sanctity of Kelaniya

Posted on



The Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya stands in a majestic expression of heritage and reverence.

On the outskirts of Colombo, the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya has endured the tides of history for a singular, sacred reason – it is believed that the Buddha himself once preached here.

Words: Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Photography: Sujith Heenatigala and Dinesh Fernando.

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An archway from the Kandy era – a graceful symbol of heritage.

The quiet, unhurried morning at the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya gives way to a definite shift as evening falls. The temple begins to fill – barefoot devotees arriving in pairs, as families, and small groups; some supported by companions when they can no longer walk unaided. All come with a shared purpose – to worship, to seek blessings, and to strive towards a better life.

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Venerable Professor Kollupitiye Mahinda Sangharakkhitha, the Chief Priest.

Seated on a step overlooking the Sacred Bodhi Tree, one devotee observes that “Kemmura Days”—Wednesdays and Saturdays, considered especially auspicious for worship and rituals—draw larger crowds, which explains the steady swell of visitors. Around the vast Bodhi Tree, people gather along its outer perimeter. Earlier, its leaves had hung still in the lingering heat of the day. But as dusk settles, they begin to stir, as if responding to the changing light and mood.

A gentle breeze moves through the temple grounds, deepening the sense of sanctity, while devotees, carrying small pots of water, circle the tree in quiet chants before pouring their offerings along the boundary that surrounds it.

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The Sacred Bodhi Tree — a place of quiet worship, and spiritual reflection.

All seemed immersed in devotion –adults guiding the elderly, young parents bringing their newborns for blessings, some gently laying their infants before the Sacred Tree. Eyes were fixed on its spreading canopy, while a chorus of voices rose

in unison, reciting chants from memory and from well-worn prayer books. The Temple pulsed with quiet purpose; worshippers prepared pots of water, arranged flowers, lit incense, and assembled countless offerings. From collapsible stools to simple sheets spread on the ground, worshippers created small, personal spaces for prayer.

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The Stupa is believed to enshrine the throne from which the Buddha preached at Kelaniya.

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By six in the evening, the air is filled with the rhythms of drums and the horaneva, heralding the start of the Shabda Pooja - a musical offering to the Buddha and the deities.

The main shrine of the deity Vibhishana is at the Kelaniya Temple. Tradition holds that when the Buddha arrived in Kelaniya, Vibhushana, regarded as the brother of King Ravana of Sri Lanka, at first declined to pay homage, seeing him merely as a young ascetic - only later realizing that it was the Enlightened One.



The Relic Chamber — a sanctum of veneration and reverence.

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Witnessing these scenes unfold in a place revered for Buddha's visit across millennia, one begins to understand how the history of Kelaniya endures – how its story remains vivid and deeply embedded in the Buddhist consciousness and way of life.



The Image House is a veritable display of indigenous artistry, with ornate friezes and celestial vimana motifs.

The history of the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya dates back to the sixth century BCE, when the Buddha is believed to have visited and preached at the site following an invitation from the local ruler, King Maniakkhika. However, according to Venerable Professor Kollupitiye Mahinda Sangharakkhitha Maha Thera, who has served as the Temple's Chief Priest since 1992, the Buddha, who had initially accepted the invitation, had later deferred. It was only after the King himself journeyed to India to personally extend the invitation that the visit was affirmed.

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With the bell tower rising behind them, devotees gather before the Sacred Bodhi Tree, their quiet chants echoing in deep devotion.

The Buddha is said to have arrived in the eighth year after his Enlightenment, accompanied by an entourage of 500 Arahants – enlightened beings – including his foremost disciples, Sariputta, Moggallana, and Upali. What lends Kelaniya its singular significance, Venerable Kollupitiye Mahinda Sangharakkhitha notes, is the belief that this was the only occasion on which the Buddha physically set foot on Sri Lankan soil. On the two previous occasions when the Buddha is said to have visited Nagadipa and Mahiyangana, the Chief Priest notes, they were apparitions.

Thus, Kelaniya's sanctity is believed to have been consecrated for perpetuity by the

Buddha's presence. The Chief Priest offers further insight, drawing on the Pujavaliya, which recounts that during this visit, the Buddha is said to have left his footprint at Kelaniya, on the banks of the Kelani River. This belief, he notes, is echoed in accounts by an individual who came upon a manuscript in a British library that referred to another footprint of the Buddha on the island, said to have been made at the request of King Maniakkhika.

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Flanked by a scenery of the Himalayas, the serene image of the Samadhi Buddha is the first encounter at the entrance to the Image House.



A golden miniature stupa in the Image House.



The Kandyan-era paintings in the older wing of the Image House.

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Buddhist stories brought to life through the brushstrokes of Solias Mendis in the Image House's newer wing.

During his time in Kelaniya, the Buddha accepted alms and preached to the king and his subjects, seated not on any ordinary seat, but on the royal throne itself. He is also believed to have bathed in the Kelani River - an act imbued with significance. Enshrined within a small structure at the site is a boulder upon which the Buddha is said to have placed his robe while he bathed. Alongside the Buddha, the monks who accompanied him are also believed to have bathed in the river. Tradition holds that some of their bathing robes, known as "Nana Kada," are enshrined within a stupa at the Kithsiri Mewan Temple situated on the south side of the temple across the Kelani River.

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The serene recumbent Buddha in the Temple's Image House.

The royal throne, meanwhile, was never returned to the palace. In reverence to the Buddha's visit, King Maniakkhika is believed to have enshrined it within a stupa, consecrating the ground as sacred and establishing a place of worship to commemorate an event of profound spiritual importance that resonates through the centuries.



An ornate doorway and arch from the Kandy-era in the older section of the Image House.

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A reminder of Buddha's foot print believed to have been made at Kelaniya.

One of the most compelling attestations to the Buddha's visit to Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya is a stone inscription dated to the tenth century CE. Attributed to King Kanishta Tissa, who had visited the site, it records that the Buddha visited Kelaniya and that the throne on which he preached was enshrined within a stupa there. The history of Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya is marked by cycles of destruction and renewal, reflecting the resilience of Buddhist heritage in Sri Lanka.

According to the Mahavamsa, the temple was first renovated in the 3rd century BCE—around 300 years after its founding—by King Yatala Tissa, and later by his brother, Kelani Tissa. Thereafter, Kelaniya came under the influence of the island's southern kingdom.

In the 13th century CE, the South Indian ruler Kalinga Magha, who had established his rule in Polonnaruwa, is believed to have destroyed the temple, suspecting it to be a center of conspiracy against his rule. Subsequently, King Vijaya Bahu the third had restored it. Centuries later, the Portuguese occupation from 1505 ushered in another period of destruction, including a ten-year prohibition on Buddhist worship at the site. Oral accounts recount how even revered figures such as Venerable Weedagama Maithree were compelled to venerate the temple from a distance

during this period. Restoration began under Dutch rule, when King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe of Kandy obtained permission to rebuild the temple in 1767. He appointed Venerable Dehigaspe Attadassi to oversee the restoration, and most of the current structures date from this period. The Venerable Kollupitiye Mahinda Sangharakkhitha explains that much of what stands today – the stupa, residential complex, one section of the Image house, the preaching hall, the Poya Ge, the Vibhishana Devalaya, and the southern archway – belong to this 18th-century reconstruction phase, with further additions made in 1927 through the patronage of Helena Wijewardene. The temple's artistic heritage spans two distinct eras, reflected in the old and new sections of the Image House. The older wing, comprising the vestibule and the shrine hall, dates to the Kandyan period.



A boulder, believed to bear Buddha's robe while he bathed in the Kelani River, is preserved with great respect.

It houses a striking recumbent statue of the Buddha, along with murals depicting six Jataka stories, guardian deities and scenes of everyday life. These paintings are characterized by deep hues of blue, yellow, green, and red that lend them a rich intensity. In contrast, the newer wing features the work of Solias Mendis, whose masterful brushstrokes capture the physical and emotional nuances of human expression. His murals, completed in the 20th century, portray the birth, evolution, and spread of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, including depictions of 12 important Buddhist sites across the island. While Kandyan-era paintings have remained largely intact,

Mendis's work has faced preservation challenges.



An image representing King Maniakkhika, the revered ruler believed to have invited the Buddha to Kelaniya.

According to the Chief Priest, experts attribute this to Mendis's technique of blending natural pigments with egg, which, over time, has attracted insects and led to paint deterioration. Yet, the Temple continues to safeguard Mendis's legacy, carefully restoring and retouching the murals to ensure that the brilliance of his artistry endures.

The Image House, which bears the paintings, is in itself a striking expression of indigenous artistry, adorned with ornamental friezes of elephants, dwarfs, and geese. Its walls, richly embellished with sculptural depictions of celestial "Vimana", echo the island's classical architectural traditions seen in Polonnaruwa and Dambadeniya, imbuing Kelaniya with a fittingly ancient character. The temple's famous January street procession – the Duruthu Perahera – established in 1927, represents a significant cultural contribution. The monk explains that, while it follows the Kandy Perahera format, it incorporates dance forms from all regions of Sri Lanka, making the procession culturally more diverse.



The only stone inscription attesting to the Buddha's visit to Kelaniya and records that his preaching throne was enshrined in a stupa.

The Temple conducts Sunday school classes in Sinhala and English and has one of the largest student populations, 4,000, from grade one to Ordinary Level. The venerable opines that he witnesses a vast difference between the children produced by his Sunday school and elsewhere, imbuing them with discipline and specific future skills. "Our Sunday school nurtures a disciplined future generation who are trained in debating and public speaking skills, building confident personalities in the process." Venerable Kollupitiye Mahinda Sangharakkhitha's personal journey reflects the intersection of traditional Buddhist education with modern academic achievement. Ordained in 1966 after studying at the Royal College, he pursued Buddhist philosophy at Kelaniya University, studied French language at Sorbonne University in Paris (1979), and completed MA, MPhil, and PhD degrees at Delhi

University. He taught at Taiwan's Kun Shan University from 1991 until becoming chief priest in 1992 following his teacher's death through pupillary succession. He later served as a professor at Kelaniya University, teaching Buddhist philosophy and psychology, and has been the Chancellor for the last six years. From its origins in the sixth century BCE, following the Buddha's visit, the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya has endured as a shining center of faith, celebrated in poetry and devotion. One verse proclaims that a single act of worship here can absolve the weight of past karma. Perhaps it is this belief, alongside the sacred memory of the Buddha's presence that continues to draw devotees to Kelaniya in search of redemption and release from the cycle of existence.

Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya, Kelaniya
+94 112 911 505
kelaniyatemplelk@gmail.com
kelaniyatemple.lk