A bit of Heritage ……..

9. SRI MAHA BODHIYA AT ANURADHAPURAYA

by

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Following the arrival of Arahant Mahinda in the island of Lanka in 250 BCE—sent as an emissary of Emperor Ashoka of India to propagate Buddhism across Asia—Mahinda advised King Devanampiya Tissa (r. 247–207 BCE) to invite Theri Sanghamitta to establish the *Bhikkhuni* (nuns') order in Sri Lanka. Welcoming this proposal, the King dispatched royal emissaries to the Mauryan court of Emperor Ashoka to arrange for the Theri's journey.



Theri Sanghamitta embarked on her Dhamma mission carrying a sapling propagated from the southern branch of the sacred Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*) at Bodh Gaya, India, under which Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment more than 2,500 years ago. To ensure the protection, maintenance, and ritual upkeep of the sacred tree, representatives from eighteen royal, craft, and occupational guilds accompanied the mission. This retinue included members of noble and ministerial families alongside Brahmins, traders, weavers, potters, and various artisans assigned with specific hereditary duties in service of the Bodhi tree.

The delegation set sail from the ancient port of Tamralipti on the eastern coast of India and disembarked at the northern Sri Lankan port of Jambukola Paṭṭana (modern-day Dambakola Paṭuna) on the *Unduvap* full moon day (occurring in December). Received with great honour by King Devanampiya Tissa and his court, the sapling was escorted to the capital city of Anuradhapura in an elaborate royal procession. According to ancient chronicles, citizens adorned the entire route with flags and bunting, illuminated the path with oil lamps by night, and carpeted the roadway with white sand in deep reverence for the sacred tree.

Upon reaching the capital in 249 BCE, King Devanampiya Tissa ceremoniously planted the sapling within the precincts of his royal pleasure park, the Mahameghavanārāma (Mahamevna Garden). As recorded in the chronicle Mahavamsa, dignitaries from both the northern and southern regions of the island assembled to witness this historic consecration. Consequently, the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi stands today as the oldest living, human-planted tree in the world with a documented planting date, venerated daily by thousands of pilgrims.

Furthermore, Sri Lankan chronicle tradition holds that Gautama Buddha entered into meditation at this exact site during his third visit to the island. Therefore, this site is considered as one of the sixteen religious places *(Solosmasthāna*) venerated by the Buddhists of Sri Lanka. Throughout subsequent centuries, successive Sri Lankan monarchs consistently patronized, protected, and expanded the sacred precinct.

Architecturally, the sacred tree is enshrined upon an elevated terrace known as the *Uḍa Maluva*, accessed via a flight of steps from the surrounding courtyard. The complex is structured into three distinct terraced levels: the uppermost *Uḍa Maluva*, enclosed by a gilded railing; a middle terrace designated for devotees paying homage; and a lower terrace containing several companion trees known as *Parivāra Bodhi*. Surrounding the

compound is a massive stone perimeter wall constructed by King Kirthi Sri Rajasingha (1747–1782 CE) to protect the terraced sanctuary from wild elephants.

Even during periods of political upheaval and foreign invasion when Anuradhapura fell into ruin, local villagers faithfully guarded the sacred tree. Following the shift of the royal capital to Polonnaruwa, devotees maintained continuous vigils, lighting bonfires throughout the night to deter wild elephants from the shrine. Gathering firewood for these protective fires evolved into an enduring cultural custom. Today, the descendants of these ancient guardians commemorate their ancestors' service through an annual procession known as the *Daramiṭi Perahera* (Firewood Procession).

In addition to the *Daramiṭi Perahera*, three other major annual rituals sustain the living heritage of the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi:

One is the *Alut Sahal Mangalyaya* (New Rice Festival) being an ancient agrarian rite in which farmers of the Rajarata region offer the first portion of their harvest to the sacred tree, honouring it as a living representation of the Buddha.

Another ritual is the celebration of the Sinhala New Year. Celebrated annually in April, during which devotees prepare traditional milk rice (*kiribat)* and sweetmeats to offer at the shrine.

Next is the Kartika Festival which is held in November, this festival of lit oil lamps reflects shared cultural and Hindu-influenced commemorative traditions.

Within the temple courtyard also stands an image house containing two monumental stone sculptures of the Buddha—one seated and one standing—which have been finished with plaster and traditional paint. Today, as a centrepiece of the Sacred City of Anuradhapura, the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi and its surrounding precincts are designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

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