



THE ASCENDANCY OF THE DHAMMA: A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

The Sri Lanka Island, historically known as Tambapanni and later Serendib, boasts one of the most enduring and vibrantly practiced Buddhist traditions in the world. The introduction and subsequent dissemination of Buddhism on the island represent a pivotal moment in its cultural, social, and political history, shaping its identity for over two millennia. This paper undertakes a comprehensive academic examination of the spread of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, tracing its origins, the key figures and events involved in its establishment, the mechanisms of its propagation throughout different regions and social strata, and its profound and multifaceted impact on Sri Lankan society. Utilizing a historical and socio-cultural analytical framework, this research draws upon primary and secondary scholarly sources, including ancient chronicles, archaeological evidence, and contemporary academic discourse. The paper argues that the successful and sustained spread of Buddhism in Sri Lanka was a complex interplay of royal patronage, monastic missionary efforts, cultural assimilation, and the inherent appeal of Buddhist doctrine, which resonated deeply with the indigenous populace and subsequently became inextricably interwoven with the island's identity.



KEYWORDS : Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Mahindra, Sanghamitta, Anuradhapura, Theravada Buddhism, Religious History.

INTRODUCTION :

Buddhism, originating in ancient India, embarked on a remarkable journey of global dissemination, with its arrival and establishment in Sri Lanka marking a particularly significant chapter. Unlike many other regions where Buddhism's presence fluctuated, Sri Lanka became, and remains, a stronghold of Theravada Buddhism, preserving and developing its doctrines and practices throughout centuries of historical change. The narrative of Buddhism's spread in Sri Lanka is intrinsically linked to the island's state formation, its artistic and architectural achievements, its literary heritage, and its social organization. Understanding this process requires an in-depth exploration of the historical context, the pivotal figures, the methodologies employed for dissemination, and the enduring legacy of this spiritual and cultural transformation.

The Genesis of Buddhism in Sri Lanka:

The primary historical account of Buddhism's introduction to Sri Lanka is meticulously detailed in the **Mahavamsa**, an ancient Pali chronicle compiled in the 5th century CE. While acknowledging the chronicle's inherent narrative biases and hagiographical elements, it offers an invaluable and largely

accepted framework for understanding the initial spread. According to the Mahavamsa, the pivotal event occurred during the reign of **Devenampiya Tissa** (c. 307–267 BCE), a king of Anuradhapura, the island's ancient capital.

The chronicle attributes the introduction of Buddhism to the missionary zeal of **Mahindra**, a son of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka the Great. Ashoka, a fervent convert to Buddhism, played a crucial role in its expansion within India and beyond, dispatching missionaries to various regions. The Mahavamsa recounts Mahinda's miraculous descent from the heavens onto the Mihintale mountain, where he encountered and conversed with King Devenampiya Tissa. This encounter, shrouded in legend, is depicted as a moment of profound spiritual revelation for the king, who subsequently embraced the Dhamma. To solidify this royal conversion and ensure the continuity of the faith, Mahindra's sister, **Sanghamitta Theri**, is credited with bringing a sapling of the sacred Bodhi Tree from Bodhi Gaya to Anuradhapura, where it was planted with great ceremony. This event, the planting of the Bodhi Tree, became a potent symbol of Buddhism's establishment and its deep roots in Sri Lankan soil.

While the Mahavamsa presents a singular, divinely ordained event, historical and archaeological evidence suggests a more nuanced and gradual process. The reign of Devenampiya Tissa coincided with a period of increased cultural and trade links between India and Sri Lanka. Ashoka's patronage of Buddhism was a significant factor in fostering these connections. It is plausible that Buddhist monks, traveling along established trade routes, were already present on the island prior to Mahindra's alleged arrival, perhaps engaging in informal proselytization. However, the Mahavamsa narrative highlights the catalytic role of a direct, officially sanctioned mission from a powerful Indian emperor, which lent immense legitimacy and authority to the nascent Buddhist presence. The royal conversion provided the crucial impetus for widespread adoption, as the king's endorsement signalled the official acceptance and promotion of the new faith.

Mechanisms of Propagation: Monasticism, Royal Patronage, and Cultural Integration

The sustained spread of Buddhism in Sri Lanka was not a passive inheritance but an active and multifaceted endeavour driven by several key factors:

- **The Monastic Sangha:** The establishment of the monastic order (Sangha) was central to the dissemination of Buddhist teachings. Mahindra himself ordained the first Sri Lankan monks, and Sanghamitta established the bhikkhuni (nun) order. The Sangha served as centers of learning, repositories of religious texts, and active missionaries. Monasteries, often strategically located and generously supported, became hubs for religious instruction, meditation practices, and the performance of rituals. Monks were instrumental in translating Buddhist scriptures into local dialects, making them accessible to a wider populace. Their ascetic lifestyle and dedication to the Dhamma lent them considerable moral authority and respect, facilitating their influence.
- **Royal Patronage and State Support:** The initial impetus provided by King Devenampiya Tissa was crucial, but subsequent rulers continued to champion Buddhism, integrating it into the fabric of governance and state ideology. Buddhist institutions were endowed with land, resources, and tax exemptions. Kings commissioned the construction of magnificent stupas, viharas (monasteries), and image houses, many of which survive today as testament to their devotion and the significant investment in religious infrastructure. This royal patronage not only provided material support but also elevated Buddhism to a position of national importance, making it the religion of the state. This fostered a sense of religious unity and provided a common cultural and spiritual identity for the island's inhabitants.
- **Cultural Assimilation and Indigenous Adaptations:** Buddhism did not arrive in a cultural vacuum. Its successful integration involved a degree of assimilation with existing indigenous beliefs and practices and the adaptation of Buddhist tenets to the Sri Lankan context. While the core doctrines remained consistent with Theravada Buddhism, certain local customs and rituals may have been incorporated or reinterpreted within a Buddhist framework. The construction of stupas, for instance, while rooted in Indian Buddhist tradition, also resonated with indigenous practices of venerating relics and sacred sites. The emphasis on merit-making (puñña) through acts of devotion

and charity resonated with existing social values. Furthermore, the development of a distinct Sri Lankan Buddhist literature in Pali and later in Sinhala served to further embed the Dhamma within the local cultural consciousness.

- **Geographical Expansion and Regional Influence:** Initially concentrated in the Anuradhapura kingdom, Buddhism gradually spread to other parts of the island. The establishment of monastic centers throughout the kingdom and eventually in peripheral regions facilitated this diffusion. The influence extended to rural communities as well, where monks served as spiritual guides and educators. The construction of irrigation systems and agricultural infrastructure, often undertaken by the ruling elite, also facilitated the establishment of settlements and, by extension, the spread of religious institutions. The island's relatively compact size and interconnected river systems likely aided the movement of monks and lay followers.

Spread of Pivotal Figures and Institutions:

Beyond Mahindra and Sanghamitta, numerous other figures and institutions played significant roles in the ongoing propagation of Buddhism:

- **Kings and Queens:** Numerous Sri Lankan monarchs are celebrated in the chronicles for their devotion to Buddhism and their patronage of the Sangha and religious construction. Notable among them are **King Dutugemunu** (c. 161–137 BCE), who is credited with the construction of the Mahathupa (Ruwanweli Daagaba), and **King Parakramabahu I** (12th century CE), whose reign saw a significant revival of Buddhism and extensive religious building projects. Royal women also played a role, with queens often contributing to the establishment of nunneries and supporting female monastics.
- **Prominent Monks and Scholars:** Throughout Sri Lankan history, there have been numerous learned monks and scholars who contributed to the preservation, interpretation, and propagation of Buddhist teachings. Figures like **Buddhaghosa** (5th century CE), though believed to have originated from India, is credited with composing the *Visuddhimagga*, a comprehensive treatise on Theravada Buddhist doctrine, and translating key Pali commentaries into Sinhala, solidifying the scriptural foundation of Sri Lankan Buddhism. Later scholars continued this tradition, producing commentaries, philosophical works, and devotional literature.
- **Monastic Universities:** Institutions like **Nalanda** (though primarily an Indian institution) and later indigenous centers of learning within Sri Lanka served as crucial hubs for Buddhist scholarship and dissemination. The **Abhayagiri Vihara** and the **Maha Vihara** in Anuradhapura were not just monastic complexes but also vibrant intellectual centers that attracted scholars from across the Buddhist world.
- **The Relics Tradition:** The veneration of relics, particularly the Tooth Relic of the Buddha, played a significant role in fostering devotion and national identity. The Tooth Relic, brought to Sri Lanka in the 4th century CE, became one of the island's most sacred treasures and a symbol of its unique Buddhist heritage. Its custodianship was often linked to the legitimacy of the ruling monarch.

The Impact of Buddhism on Sri Lankan Society

The spread of Buddhism profoundly shaped Sri Lankan society across multiple dimensions:

- **Cultural Identity and National Unity:** Buddhism became the bedrock of Sri Lankan cultural identity. It provided a unifying force for a diverse population, fostering a shared set of values, beliefs, and practices. The narrative a "Dhamma-Dipa" (Island of the Dhamma) became deeply ingrained in the national consciousness.
- **Art and Architecture:** The patronage of Buddhism led to the development of a distinct and internationally renowned Sri Lankan school of art and architecture. The magnificent stupas, intricately carved moonstones, serene Buddha statues, and vibrant murals found in ancient sites like Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa are enduring testaments to this artistic flourishing, heavily influenced by Buddhist iconography and themes.

- **Literature and Scholarship:** The preservation and transmission of Buddhist scriptures led to a rich literary heritage. Pali commentaries, Sinhala translations, didactic literature, and philosophical treatises contributed significantly to the island's intellectual landscape. The development of a written tradition in Sinhala was closely intertwined with the dissemination of religious texts.
- **Social Structure and Ethics:** Buddhist principles of compassion, non-violence, generosity, and ethical conduct influenced social norms and individual behavior. The concept of karma and rebirth provided a moral framework for society. While the monastic order held a distinct position, the lay community actively participated in Buddhist practices through merit-making and devotional activities.
- **Political Legitimacy and Governance:** For centuries, royal legitimacy was often intertwined with the ruler's support for Buddhism. The king was seen as the protector of the Dhamma, and his devotion was believed to bring prosperity and stability to the land. This relationship fostered a close connection between religious and political authority.
- **Education and Welfare:** Monasteries often served as centers of learning, providing basic education to the populace, especially in religious matters. They also played a role in community welfare, offering rudimentary healthcare and social support.

CONCLUSION:

The spread of Buddhism in Sri Lanka stands as a monumental testament to the enduring power of religious ideals and effective dissemination strategies. From its heralded inception with the mission of Mahinda and the arrival of Sanghamitta, Buddhism was not simply introduced; it was actively nurtured, deeply integrated, and ultimately became the animating spirit of Sri Lankan civilization. The symbiotic relationship between the Sangha, royal patronage, and the receptive populace created an environment where the Dhamma could flourish, shaping the island's cultural landscape, artistic achievements, literary traditions, and core identity for over two millennia. The historical narrative, as chronicled in the Mahavamsa and corroborated by archaeological evidence, underscores the transformative impact of this spiritual journey. Sri Lanka's enduring commitment to Theravada Buddhism today serves as a powerful reminder of the profound and lasting legacy of this ancient faith's ascendancy on the island. The continuous practice and adaptation of Buddhist principles underscore its dynamic nature and its integral role in Sri Lankan life, ensuring its continued relevance for generations to come.

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