



BUDDHISM IN SRI LANKA

By Venerable Thich Nguyen Tang

Member of the Dharma Propagation Committee

World Buddhist Sangha Council

I/ INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka, known to Vietnamese readers as Tích Lan, is an island nation in the Indian Ocean, southeast of the Indian subcontinent. Its official name is the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. Located in South Asia, it has an area of approximately 65,610 km² and a population of more than 22 million. Colombo is the executive and commercial capital, while Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte is the legislative capital. The country is a democratic socialist republic with a multi-party system, and the president serves as head of state. The Sinhalese make up about 74% of the population, and most of them follow *Theravāda* Buddhism, making Sri Lanka one of the world's most important Buddhist centers. Sri Lanka has one of the most developed education systems in

South Asia, with adult literacy at about 93% and youth literacy close to 99%, supported by a policy of free education from primary school through university. Its economy is based on tourism, tea exports, rubber, textiles, and port services. Per capita income is around US\$4,000 a year, placing the country among the more developed economies in the region. Because of its strategic position on international sea routes, Sri Lanka has long served as a commercial bridge linking East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. After gaining independence from Britain in 1948 and emerging from a civil war that lasted from 1983 to 2009, Sri Lanka has continued efforts to restore its economy, deepen international integration, and maintain its role as an important center of culture, tourism, and Buddhism.

Although the country is not large in area, it occupies a particularly important place in the history of world Buddhism. For more than two millennia, Sri Lanka has been not only one of the oldest centers of *Theravāda* Buddhism, but also a major contributor to the preservation of the *Pāli Tipiṭaka*, the formation and transmission of commentarial literature, the continuity of ordination lineages and the *Saṅgha*, and the spread of *Theravāda* Buddhism to many other countries.

In ancient sources, the island was known by several different names. *Laṅkā* is a familiar name in Indian literature and Buddhist chronicles; *Tambapaṇṇi* appears in the *Pāli* tradition as a name for the land associated with the earliest Sinhala settlers; and during the colonial period the island was known in the West as Ceylon. After gaining independence from Britain in 1948, the country continued to use the name Ceylon for some time, until 1972, when it became a republic and officially adopted the name Sri Lanka. In *Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History*, H. R. Perera also notes that the publisher replaced “Ceylon” with “Sri Lanka” or “Lanka” in the text to reflect this official change.^[1]

According to the island’s chronicle tradition, the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka is commonly marked by a momentous event in the third century BCE, during the reign of King Devānampiya Tissa. Against the background of Emperor Aśoka’s patronage and wide dissemination of Buddhism in India, the Venerable Mahinda – regarded in the Sri Lankan tradition as Aśoka’s son – arrived in *Laṅkā* with a missionary delegation. The meeting between Mahinda and King Devānampiya Tissa at Mihintale is regarded as the beginning of the formal establishment of Buddhism on the island. From that time onward, Buddhism gradually took deep root in the spiritual, cultural, educational, and social life of the Sinhala people. H. R. Perera dates the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka to around 250 BCE and regards it as a profound turning point in the cultural history of the island.^[2]

From that initial foundation, Sri Lanka gradually became a center of Buddhist learning whose influence extended beyond the island. The establishment of the *Mahāvihāra* at Anurādhapura, the founding of both the *Bhikkhu Saṅgha* and the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, the bringing of a branch of the Bodhi Tree from India to Anurādhapura, the tradition of committing the *Pāli Tipiṭaka* to writing, and the later development of *Pāli* and commentarial literature all closely connected the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism with the formation and preservation of the *Theravāda* tradition. The sources used by Perera in studying this history include such major chronicles as the *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvāṃsa*, together with the works of E. W. Adikaram, Walpola Rahula, G. P. Malalasekera, and others.^[3]

Yet this history of more than two thousand years was not an uninterrupted period of peace. Sri Lankan Buddhism repeatedly endured war, foreign invasion, famine, divisions within the *Saṅgha*, decline in ordination lineages, invasions from South India, and centuries of Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial rule. At certain times, the bhikkhu lineage on the island declined so severely that monks had to be invited from Burma or Siam to restore higher ordination. Precisely these cycles of decline and revival reveal the remarkable resilience of Sri Lankan Buddhism and helped create a reciprocal network of transmission between Sri Lanka and *Theravāda* countries in South and Southeast Asia.

In the modern period, especially with the Buddhist revival of the nineteenth century, Sri Lankan Buddhism again moved beyond the island's shores. Figures such as Migettuwatte Gunananda, Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala, Henry Steel Olcott, and Anagārika Dharmapāla contributed to the revival of Buddhist education and culture while bringing the voice of Sri Lankan Buddhism to India, Europe, and the United States. After Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, and particularly from the *Buddha Jayanti* celebrations of 1956 onward, the study of the *Tipiṭaka*, Buddhist education, and international Buddhist exchange continued to expand.

On the occasion of my visit to Sri Lanka to attend the 60th Anniversary Celebration of the World Buddhist Sangha Council (1966–2026) and the Second Meeting of the Executive Committee, held in Colombo from November 27 to December 2, 2026, I have prepared this essay to explore the journey of one of the major lineages of *Theravāda* Buddhism – a tradition that has repeatedly received, preserved, revived, and transmitted the *Dhamma* to other lands. The essay focuses on three principal processes: the relationship between Buddhism and Sri Lankan history; the formation, development, and

transformation of the *Saṅgha*; and the contributions of Sri Lankan Buddhism to world Buddhism, from the mission of the Venerable Mahinda to 2026, when Sri Lanka continues to hold an important place in international Buddhist life and exchange.

II/ SRI LANKA BEFORE THE INTRODUCTION OF BUDDHISM

From the Vijaya Legend to Devānampiya Tissa

Before Buddhism was formally introduced to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE, the island had already undergone a long process of demographic formation, political organization, and religious development. Our knowledge of this early period is preserved mainly in two important Buddhist chronicles, the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvaṃsa*. According to the tradition recorded in these sources, Prince Vijaya and about seven hundred followers came from India to Laṅkā and became the founders of the Sinhala community on the island. The chronicles also place Vijaya's arrival in Laṅkā on the very day of the Buddha's *Parinibbāna*, thereby establishing a religiously meaningful link between Sinhala national history and Buddhist history.[\[4\]](#)

When using these sources, however, it is important to distinguish between the Buddhist chronicle tradition and what can be established through modern historical and archaeological methods. H. R. Perera himself notes that modern historians do not fully accept every detail of the Vijaya story as literal history; rather, they tend to view it as a mythologized memory of communities migrating from the Indian subcontinent and settling in Sri Lanka. The figures described in the chronicles as *yakkhas* and *nāgas* may preserve memories of indigenous communities already living on the island before later waves of migration. Archaeological discoveries of flint and quartz tools likewise indicate that Sri Lanka had human inhabitants from a very early period. The Vijaya legend is therefore especially valuable for understanding Sinhala historical consciousness and identity, but it should not be presented as an account in which every detail has been archaeologically verified.[\[5\]](#)

After the period associated with Vijaya, the island's political organization gradually became more consolidated. Settlements developed along rivers and in agriculturally favorable regions, and Anurādhapura in particular emerged as an important political center. Under King Paṇḍukābhaya, the city was planned and expanded; he was followed by King Muṭasiva. Around the third century BCE, Muṭasiva's son Devānampiya Tissa succeeded to the throne, opening a period of decisive importance in Sri Lankan religious history, for it was during his reign that Buddhism was introduced and institutionally established.

It is important to note that before the introduction of Buddhism, Sri Lanka was by no means a society without religion. On the contrary, its religious life was already diverse. Perera observes that prior to the reign of Devānampiya Tissa there was no single religion accepted by the whole population. Indigenous beliefs included the worship of yakkhas, yakkhinīs, nature-related deities, and sacred trees. Religious currents from India were also present, including Brahmins, Nigaṇṭhas (Jains), Ājīvikas, and other groups of ascetics and wandering renunciants.[\[6\]](#)

This background helps us better understand the significance of the later mission of the Venerable Mahinda to Sri Lanka. Buddhism did not enter a land devoid of religious belief, but a society in which many religious and cultural traditions were already present. Its rapid success was therefore not simply a replacement of earlier beliefs, but part of a long process of transformation in religion, culture, education, and social life, through which Buddhism gradually became one of the fundamental forces shaping Sinhala civilization for more than two millennia.

III/ EMPEROR AŚOKA AND THE MISSION OF THE VENERABLE MAHINDA

Third Century BCE

The transmission of Buddhism to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE is closely associated with two figures of profound importance in the history of Asian Buddhism: Emperor Aśoka of the Mauryan dynasty and the Venerable Mahinda (Mahendra). If Aśoka created a favorable political environment for the propagation of the *Dhamma* beyond central India, Mahinda is revered in the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition as the pioneer who established Buddhism on the island.

1/. Aśoka and the Propagation of Buddhism

Emperor Aśoka, who ruled the Mauryan Empire in the third century BCE, is one of the most renowned monarchs in Indian history. A major turning point in his political life was the Kalinga War, a conflict that caused immense loss of life. In Rock Edict XIII, Aśoka expressed deep remorse over the death, deportation, and suffering caused by the conquest. Thereafter he increasingly emphasized *Dhamma*, advocating rule based on morality, non-harming, tolerance, and concern for the welfare of his subjects. In Buddhist tradition,

Aśoka later became the exemplary Buddhist monarch, an active patron of the *Saṅgha* who helped extend Buddhism beyond its traditional regions in India. According to the *Theravāda* chronicles, the Third Buddhist Council was held at Pāṭaliputta during Aśoka's reign under the leadership of the Elder Moggaliputta Tissa. After the council, missionary delegations were sent to various regions. Among them, a mission consisting of Mahinda, Itthiya, Uttiya, Sambala, and Bhaddasāla was sent to Laṅkā.^[7]

It should be noted that the details concerning the Third Council and the list of missionary delegations are preserved mainly in the *Theravāda* historical tradition. Accordingly, a modern historical presentation should distinguish between evidence attested in Aśokan inscriptions and details preserved in later Buddhist chronicles.

2/. The Historic Encounter at Mihintale

According to the *Mahāvamsa* and Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition, the Venerable Mahinda, regarded as a son of Emperor Aśoka, arrived in Laṅkā with his companions on the full-moon day of the month of Jetṭha, now commemorated in Sri Lanka as Poson. At Mount Missaka, later famous as Mihintale, the mission encountered King Devānampiya Tissa while he was hunting.

Tradition relates that before teaching the *Dhamma*, Mahinda asked the king a series of questions to test his capacity for understanding. Having determined that Devānampiya Tissa was capable of comprehending the teaching, he delivered his first discourse, the *Cūḷahatthipadopama Sutta*, the Shorter Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint (MN 27). The discourse presents the path of a disciple from hearing the *Dhamma* and developing faith, through renunciation, moral discipline, restraint of the senses, mindfulness, and meditation, to the attainment of liberating wisdom. The choice of a discourse that presents a relatively complete path of training suggests that, in the Sri Lankan traditional account, Mahinda was introducing not merely a new faith but, above all, a path of education and human transformation.

In the following days, he continued to teach other discourses. Perera specifically mentions the *Devadūta Sutta*, the Discourse on the Divine Messengers (MN 130), and the *Bālapaṇḍita Sutta*, the Discourse on the Fool and the Wise Person (MN 129).^[8]

These discourses on kamma, the consequences of good and evil, and human moral responsibility were especially suitable for the first stage of introducing the *Dhamma* to a new community. The king, members of the royal household, and the wider populace gradually developed faith, creating the conditions for

Buddhism to grow from a small missionary community into a religious institution of major importance in Sri Lankan society.

3/. The Establishment of the Mahāvihāra

After accepting the teaching, King Devānampiya Tissa became an enthusiastic patron of Buddhism. He invited Mahinda and the monks to the capital, Anurādhapura, and donated the Mahāmeghavana garden to the *Saṅgha*. This event was of special significance, for on the donated land arose the *Mahāvihāra*, the “Great Monastery,” one of the most important Buddhist centers of ancient Sri Lanka.^[9]

The *Mahāvihāra* later became not only a great monastery but also a long-lasting center of *Theravāda* scholarship and transmission. There, the Sutta, *Vinaya*, and Abhidhamma were studied, recited, transmitted, and commented upon through successive generations. The *Mahāvihāra* tradition would later be associated with developments whose significance extended far beyond Sri Lanka, especially the preservation of the *Pāli* scriptures and the commentarial work of the great scholar Buddhaghosa in the fifth century.

Thus, the encounter at Mihintale was not simply a meeting between an Indian renunciant and a Sri Lankan king. In the historical memory of Sri Lankan Buddhism, it was a meeting between the *Dhamma* and a new land. Through the mission of the Venerable Mahinda, a lineage was established and gradually took deep root in Sri Lankan life; in the centuries that followed, the island itself would become one of the most important centers for preserving and transmitting *Theravāda* Buddhism to other countries.

IV/. SAṄGHAMITTĀ, THE BHIKKHUNĪ ORDER, AND THE SRI MAHA BODHI

The missionary work of the Venerable Mahinda in Sri Lanka led not only to the establishment of the *Bhikkhu Saṅgha* but also opened the way for the formation of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*. Two events closely connected with this process – the arrival of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅghamittā* and the bringing of a branch of the Bodhi Tree from India to Anurādhapura – left a profound imprint on Sri Lanka’s religious and cultural history.

1/. Bhikkhunī Saṅghamittā and the Establishment of the Bhikkhunī Order

According to the Sri Lankan Buddhist historical tradition, after hearing the Venerable Mahinda teach, Queen Anulā, the wife of the king’s younger brother

Mahānāga, together with about five hundred women of the royal household, developed strong faith and wished to enter the religious life. Mahinda explained that, under the rules of the *Vinaya*, he could not himself confer bhikkhunī ordination upon them. He therefore advised King Devānampiya Tissa to send an embassy to Emperor Aśoka's court and invite the *Bhikkhunī Saṅghamittā* and a community of nuns to Laṅkā to establish ordination for women.^[10]

According to the *Mahāvamsa*, *Saṅghamittā* was the daughter of Emperor Aśoka and the sister of the Venerable Mahinda. She had entered the monastic life and become a senior bhikkhunī. Responding to the request from Sri Lanka, *Saṅghamittā* crossed the sea to Laṅkā with a group of bhikkhunīs. After the nuns arrived, Anulā and the women who had prepared themselves for the holy life received ordination, and the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* was formally established in Sri Lanka. Perera regards this as an important completion of the Buddhist monastic structure on the island: from then on, both the *Bhikkhu Saṅgha* and the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* were present and developed in Laṅkā.^[11]

This event also had significance beyond Sri Lanka. In later centuries, the bhikkhunī tradition from Sri Lanka contributed to the ordination of women in other countries and had an especially important influence on the history of the Buddhist nuns' order in China. *Saṅghamittā* is therefore remembered not only as the founder of the bhikkhunī order in Sri Lanka but also as one of the most important women in the history of Buddhism's transmission across Asia.

2/. *Saṅghamittā and the Sri Maha Bodhi*

Along with bringing the bhikkhunī order to Sri Lanka, *Saṅghamittā* is associated with another event of profound symbolic significance: the bringing of a branch of the Great Bodhi Tree from Bodh Gayā to Laṅkā. According to tradition, this was the southern branch of the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gayā beneath which the Buddha Siddhattha Gotama attained unsurpassed perfect enlightenment.

The Bodhi branch was ceremonially welcomed upon its arrival in Sri Lanka and was then planted at Mahāmeghavana in Anurādhapura, in the area associated with the *Mahāvihāra*. The tree later came to be known as the *Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi* and became one of the most revered sacred sites in Sri Lankan Buddhism. For more than two millennia, veneration and care of the Bodhi Tree have retained a special place in the religious life of Sri Lankan Buddhists.^[12]

From the perspective of religious history, bringing the Bodhi branch from Bodh Gayā to Anurādhapura meant far more than transplanting a sacred tree. The Bodhi Tree created a direct symbolic link between Bodh Gayā, the site of the

Buddha's enlightenment, and the new Buddhist center in Laṅkā. Through this connection, Anurādhapura became not only a political capital but increasingly a sacred Buddhist landscape.

At the same time, the ceremonies of receiving and protecting the Bodhi Tree helped shape a close relationship among the Triple Gem, the *Saṅgha*, and royal authority. The king was not the head of the *Saṅgha*, but as a protector of the *Buddha Sāsana* he bore responsibility for safeguarding sacred sites, supporting the monastic community, and creating conditions in which the *Dhamma* could flourish. This helped establish a model of relations between Buddhism and kingship that would exert a long influence in Sri Lankan history and later in many *Theravāda* countries of Southeast Asia.

It may therefore be said that if the Venerable Mahinda symbolizes the transmission of the *Dhamma* from India to Sri Lanka, *Bhikkhunī Saṅghamittā* symbolizes both the completion of the monastic community and the bringing of a living symbol of enlightenment in the *Sri Maha Bodhi*. These three elements – the *Dhamma*, the *Saṅgha*, and the Bodhi sacred relic – helped lay the foundations of the Buddhist civilization of Anurādhapura and left a deep imprint on Sri Lankan spiritual life that continues to the present day.

V/. THE ANURĀDHAPURA ERA: FROM A NATIONAL BUDDHIST TRADITION TO AN INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF BUDDHIST LEARNING

Lasting for more than a millennium, the Anurādhapura era was one of the most important periods in the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism. From the foundations established by the Venerable Mahinda and King Devānampiya Tissa in the third century BCE, Anurādhapura gradually developed into a Buddhist capital with a network of monasteries, stupas, educational institutions, and scholarly traditions whose influence extended beyond the island. This was also the period in which several enduring features of Sri Lankan Buddhism took shape: royal patronage, the central role of the *Saṅgha*, the veneration of relics and sacred places, the growth of *Pāli* literature, and the presence and interaction of different Buddhist intellectual currents.

1/. King Duṭṭhagāmaṇī and the Development of Buddhist Architecture

In Sinhala historical memory, King Duṭṭhagāmaṇī (Duṭugāmuṇu) is one of the most prominent rulers of the Anurādhapura period. After a period of instability and the rule of the Tamil king Eḷāra, Duṭṭhagāmaṇī regained Anurādhapura and brought much of the island under his authority. His lasting significance for

Buddhist history, however, lies not only in military victory but especially in his patronage of the *Saṅgha* and construction of major Buddhist monuments. Perera notes that the advancement of Buddhism was one of the king's principal concerns.[\[13\]](#)

The most famous monument associated with Duṭṭhagāmaṇī is the Ruvanvelisāya (Ruwanwelisaya), also known as the Mahāthūpa, a great stupa that became a symbol of Anurādhapura and one of Sri Lanka's most important Buddhist sacred sites. The king also built the Lohapāsāda, the "Brazen Palace," a multi-storied structure for the monastic community, and the Mirisavetiya, another important stupa. These works were not merely architectural achievements; they also reflected the close conjunction of royal power, Buddhist merit-making, and patronage of the *Buddha Sāsana*.

Under later rulers, Anurādhapura continued to develop into an extensive religious complex of stupas, monasteries, reservoirs, libraries, and institutions serving the monastic community. The capital thus became not only Sri Lanka's political center but also increasingly a "Buddhist sacred city," attracting monks and pilgrims from many parts of South Asia.

2/. Mahāvihāra, Abhayagiri, and Jetavana

A particularly important feature of Buddhism during the Anurādhapura period was the existence of three major monastic centers: *Mahāvihāra*, *Abhayagiri*, and *Jetavana*. The history of these three institutions shows that ancient Sri Lankan Buddhist life was more diverse and complex than the image of a country possessing only a single, completely uniform form of *Theravāda*.

The *Mahāvihāra*, established from the Mahāmeghavana garden donated by King Devānampiya Tissa, was the oldest of these centers and over time became a major stronghold of *Pāli*-based *Theravāda*. The study of Sutta, *Vinaya*, Abhidhamma, and commentarial traditions was maintained there through many generations. The scholastic lineage of the *Mahāvihāra* later had a decisive influence on the forms of *Theravāda* transmitted to many countries of Southeast Asia.

The *Abhayagiri-vihāra* arose during the reign of Vaṭṭagāmaṇī Abhaya around the first century BCE. According to Perera, the initial separation between monks of the *Mahāvihāra* and *Abhayagiri* was primarily related to disagreements within the *Saṅgha*; in later periods *Abhayagiri* also received new currents of thought and texts from India.[\[14\]](#)

Especially noteworthy is that *Abhayagiri* became an international center in which different Buddhist traditions could meet and develop.

The third major center was the *Jetavana-vihāra*, founded during the reign of King Mahāsenā. Together with the *Mahāvihāra* and *Abhayagiri*, *Jetavana* contributed to the large-scale monastic life of Anurādhapura. Competition among these great monasteries sometimes led to conflict and differing patterns of royal patronage, but it also reflected the dynamism of Sri Lankan Buddhist intellectual life over many centuries.

3/. Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna in Ancient Sri Lanka

Chronicles compiled from the standpoint of the *Mahāvihāra* often refer to certain doctrines received by *Abhayagiri* or *Jetavana* as *Vaitulyavāda* and regard them as unorthodox. From the perspective of modern Buddhist history, however, such polemical classifications should be treated cautiously. Perera himself notes that the terms *Vaitulya*, *Vaipulya*, and *Vaidalya* in Sri Lankan sources often refer to texts or tendencies associated with *Mahāyāna* and do not necessarily designate a single sect.

Sources further record that during the reign of King Sena I in the ninth century, a monk of the *Vajraparvata Nikāya* came to Sri Lanka from India; at about the same time texts such as the *Ratnakūṭa-sūtra* and elements associated with *Vajrayāna* appeared. Such currents coexisted with *Theravāda* during certain periods.^[15]

These data help correct the common assumption that Sri Lanka possessed only a single, pure, and uniform form of *Theravāda* throughout its history. On the contrary, especially at *Abhayagiri*, the island participated in the wider Buddhist networks of the Indian Ocean and encountered multiple currents of thought from India and other parts of Asia. After centuries of change and monastic reform, however, the *Mahāvihāra Theravāda* tradition became dominant and decisively shaped the later character of Sri Lankan Buddhism.

The Anurādhapura era should therefore be understood not only as the period when Buddhism became a spiritual foundation of the Sinhala polity, but also as the period in which Sri Lanka developed into an international center of Buddhist learning. Its great stupas, monasteries, and sacred sites expressed religious vitality in architectural form, while the *Mahāvihāra*, *Abhayagiri*, and *Jetavana* reveal the depth of a Buddhist intellectual culture that both preserved tradition and engaged with broader currents of Asian Buddhist thought. It was in this environment that developments of enduring importance for *Theravāda* – especially the writing down of the *Pāli Tipiṭaka* and the growth of the commentarial tradition – would emerge.

VI. THE CRISIS OF VAṬṬAGĀMAṆĪ ABHAYA AND THE COMMITTING OF THE TĪPĪṬAKA TO WRITING

One of the most significant events in the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism occurred during the reign of King Vaṭṭagāmaṇī Abhaya, also known as Valagambāhu, around the first century BCE. This was a period in which Sri Lanka faced war, foreign invasion, political instability, and a severe famine at the same time. These upheavals not only weakened the kingdom but also placed the *Saṅgha* at risk of losing part of the scriptural heritage that had been preserved primarily through oral transmission.

1/. War, Famine, and the Risk of a Break in Scriptural Transmission

According to the Sri Lankan chronicle tradition, only a few months after Vaṭṭagāmaṇī Abhaya ascended the throne, internal unrest broke out while a Tamil force from South India invaded the island. The king was defeated and forced to leave the capital, living in exile for about fourteen years before he was able to recover Anurādhapura. During the same period, Sri Lanka suffered a devastating famine traditionally known as the Brāhmaṇatissa-bhaya. Perera describes monasteries being abandoned and monastic life becoming extremely difficult; many bhikkhus died or had to leave Sri Lanka for India in order to survive.^[16]

This crisis was especially dangerous for the preservation of the *Dhamma* because, in the early centuries, the scriptures were not primarily preserved in written books as they are today. Different portions of the *Tiṭṭaka* were memorized, recited, and transmitted from teacher to disciple by specialized groups of monks. This oral method depended upon a continuous community of learned monastics with disciplined study and strong powers of memory. When war and famine caused many masters of the scriptures to die, contemporaries recognized that if a similar catastrophe occurred again, the *Dhamma* preserved in human memory could face the danger of being lost.

This painful historical experience is regarded in the Sri Lankan tradition as an important reason for a decision that would have far-reaching consequences for the whole history of *Theravāda*: the transmission of the scriptures from oral recitation into written form.

2/. Committing the Pāli Tīpīṭaka to Writing

After Vaṭṭagāmaṇī Abhaya regained the throne and the country gradually stabilized, Sri Lankan historical tradition relates that the elders assembled and

decided to commit the teachings to writing in order to ensure their preservation for future generations.

The material written down comprised the entire *Tipiṭaka* – the *Pāli* Canon: *Vinaya Piṭaka* – the Basket of Discipline, preserving the monastic rules and regulations governing the life of the *Saṅgha*;

Sutta Piṭaka– the Basket of Discourses, preserving the discourses and teachings traditionally regarded as the words of the Buddha and his great disciples; and *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* – the Basket of Higher Teaching, presenting the *Dhamma* through analytical and systematic methods.

Importantly, this work concerned not only the *Pāli Tipiṭaka*. According to Sri Lankan historical sources cited by Perera, the *Aṭṭhakathā*– the commentaries transmitted in Old Sinhala – were also committed to writing in order to preserve the tradition of scriptural interpretation.^[17]

Centuries later, these Sinhala commentarial sources became important materials for Buddhaghosa and other commentators in composing the *Pāli* commentarial tradition.

3/. Aluvihāra and the Memory of a “Council in Writing”

Later tradition particularly associates the writing down of the *Tipiṭaka* with Aluvihāra, also known as Alulena, a cave monastery near Matale in central Sri Lanka. According to the *Nikāya Saṅgraha*, after the teachings had been recited and reviewed, a group of monks learned in the scriptures, together with scribes, went to Aluvihāra and recorded the *Tipiṭaka* and its commentaries on ola, or palm leaves.^[18]

From the standpoint of modern historical research, however, it is necessary to distinguish between the core event preserved by tradition and details added by later chronicles. Rather than asserting that every detail concerning the location, the number of participants, or the method of execution has been archaeologically confirmed, it is more cautious to say that, according to the Sri Lankan chronicle tradition, the *Pāli Tipiṭaka* was committed to writing around the first century BCE, during or near the reign of Vaṭṭagāmaṇī Abhaya; later tradition especially associates this work with Aluvihāra near Matale.

Although some historical details require caution, the significance of this tradition for *Theravāda* Buddhism is immense. The transition from oral transmission to writing provided an additional means of preserving the scriptures alongside the recitation traditions that had existed for centuries. Sri Lanka thus became one of the most important centers for the preservation of the *Pāli* scriptural heritage, a heritage later transmitted to Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos and studied throughout the world.

If the arrival of the Venerable Mahinda at Mihintale marked the transmission of the *Dhamma* to Sri Lanka, the tradition of committing the *Tipiṭaka* to writing

under Vaṭṭagāmaṇī Abhaya may be regarded as a turning point in Sri Lanka's emergence as a place that preserved and transmitted the *Dhamma*. Upon this foundation of scripture and commentary, Buddhaghosa and later commentators would, centuries afterward, build a body of *Pāli* literature that profoundly influenced the entire *Theravāda* tradition.

VII/. BUDDHAGHOSA AND THE AGE OF PĀLI LITERATURE

From the Fifth Century Onward

If the committing of the *Pāli Tipiṭaka* to writing under Vaṭṭagāmaṇī Abhaya marked a turning point in the preservation of scripture, the arrival of Buddhaghosa in about the fifth century marked another: the systematization and internationalization of the *Theravāda* commentarial tradition in *Pāli*. From this time, Sri Lanka was not only a repository of scripture but also one of the most important centers for interpreting, systematizing, and transmitting *Theravāda* thought.

1/. Buddhaghosa and the Mahāvihāra

According to tradition, Buddhaghosa was an Indian Buddhist scholar deeply learned in the *Tipiṭaka* and Buddhist doctrine. He came to Anurādhapura and resided at the *Mahāvihāra*, where a rich body of ancient commentaries had been preserved through generations. These commentaries were believed to derive from traditions of interpretation transmitted by the Venerable Mahinda and successive elders, but over time most of them had been preserved in Old Sinhala.

At the *Mahāvihāra*, Buddhaghosa gained access to a rich collection of commentarial materials. Among the important sources remembered by tradition were the *Mahā-Aṭṭhakathā*, also called the *Mūla-Aṭṭhakathā*, the “Great Commentary” or “Root Commentary”; the *Mahāpaccarī Aṭṭhakathā*; and the *Kurundī Aṭṭhakathā*, together with many other commentarial sources and interpretive traditions preserved in Sri Lanka. This treasury of material formed the textual foundation for his extensive literary work.[\[19\]](#)

2/. Visuddhimagga – The Path of Purification

Buddhaghosa's most famous work is the *Visuddhimagga* – The Path of Purification. According to tradition, the elders of the *Mahāvihāra* wished to test his learning before entrusting him with the Sinhala commentaries and therefore asked him to expound the *Dhamma* on the basis of a number of verses. The result was the *Visuddhimagga*, composed as a systematic synthesis of the *Theravāda* path of practice.[\[20\]](#)

The entire work is organized around the three fundamental trainings of the path: *Sīla* – virtue, *Samādhi* – concentration, and *Paññā* – wisdom. Buddhaghosa discusses in detail moral discipline, meditation subjects, stages of absorption, methods of mental cultivation, analysis of mind-and-matter, dependent origination, and the progressive development of insight leading toward liberation. The *Visuddhimagga* therefore became not merely a commentary but one of the most influential works on doctrine, meditation, and practice in the *Theravāda* tradition.

After the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa continued to draw upon the ancient commentarial sources of the *Mahāvihāra* to compile or render into *Pāli* a large body of the commentarial tradition on the *Tipiṭaka*. The historical significance of this work is considerable: although many of the ancient Sinhala commentaries were later lost, the material Buddhaghosa received, systematized, and rendered into *Pāli* could circulate beyond Sri Lanka. As *Pāli* became a common scholarly language of *Theravāda* countries, these works could be transmitted in Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and other centers of Buddhist learning.

3/. From Buddhaghosa to the Pāli Commentarial Tradition

Buddhaghosa was not the only major *Pāli* commentator of this age. Alongside and after him appeared important scholars such as Buddhaddatta, Upasena, Mahānāma, and *Dhammapāla*.^[21]

These authors continued to compose commentaries, subcommentaries, and systematic works on doctrine, contributing to the formation of a transnational *Pāli* literature in which Sri Lanka played a central role for many centuries. The development of *Pāli* literature marks an important transformation in the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism. Traditions of interpretation once preserved in Old Sinhala were now transferred into a language that could circulate widely throughout the *Theravāda* world. Sri Lanka thus not only preserved the heritage it had received from India but also edited, systematized, and transmitted that heritage back to the wider Buddhist world.

The significance of these two major historical turning points may be summarized as follows: if writing down the *Tipiṭaka* helped Sri Lanka preserve the textual body of the *Dhamma*, the work of Buddhaghosa and later commentators helped preserve the tradition of interpreting that textual body. Scripture and commentary therefore became two parallel streams of heritage that helped shape the intellectual character of *Theravāda* from Sri Lanka across South and Southeast Asia.

VIII/ THE CHOLA PERIOD, POLONNARUWA, AND THE REVIVALS OF THE SAṄGHA

Eleventh–Thirteenth Centuries

From the end of the first millennium into the beginning of the second, Sri Lankan Buddhism entered a highly turbulent period. After many centuries as the island's principal political and Buddhist center, Anurādhapura gradually weakened under internal struggles and repeated invasions from South India. In particular, the expansion of the Chola Empire in the tenth and eleventh centuries inflicted severe damage on both the state and the monastic community. Yet out of this crisis emerged important revivals under Kings Vijayabāhu I and Parākramabāhu I, inaugurating the Polonnaruwa period of Sri Lankan history.

1/. The Decline of Anurādhapura

Chola invasions and occupation profoundly altered Sri Lanka's political life. Anurādhapura, after centuries as the capital, was devastated and ultimately lost its central position. Political power gradually shifted to Polonnaruwa, a location better suited to controlling the eastern plains and defending against attacks from South India.

For Buddhism, the consequences of war were especially serious. Many monasteries and Buddhist institutions were damaged or lost their traditional sources of support; lands and properties used to sustain the *Saṅgha* were disrupted; and the number of fully ordained bhikkhus declined. According to Perera, when political independence was restored in the eleventh century, the condition of the *Saṅgha* had deteriorated to the point that maintaining *Upasampadā*– higher ordination – had become an urgent problem.[\[22\]](#)

2/. Vijayabāhu I and the Restoration of Ordination from Burma

The ruler most responsible for ending Chola domination was Vijayabāhu I. After a long struggle, by about 1070 he had regained control of the country, defeated the Chola forces, and established Polonnaruwa as the capital. Having restored political sovereignty, the king began rebuilding damaged Buddhist institutions and gave special attention to reorganizing the *Saṅgha*.

A particularly important detail preserved in Sri Lankan historical tradition is that, by this time, the island no longer had a sufficient number of validly ordained bhikkhus to conduct an *Upasampadā* ceremony. Vijayabāhu therefore sought assistance from abroad. He sent envoys to Burma, requesting help from King Anawrahta (Anuruddha). According to Perera, the Burmese king sent a delegation of monks learned in the *Tipiṭaka* to Sri Lanka; through them, higher ordination was restored and the *Saṅgha* was re-established on the foundation of *Vinaya* discipline.[\[23\]](#)

This event acquires special significance when viewed within the broader history of *Theravāda*. In earlier periods, Sri Lanka had played an important role in

transmitting ordination lineages and scriptures to other parts of South and Southeast Asia; by the eleventh century, however, Sri Lanka itself had to rely on the Burmese *Saṅgha* to restore its lineage. This demonstrates that *Theravāda* history is not the story of a single center transmitting the *Dhamma* in one direction, but the history of a transnational monastic network in which communities repeatedly assisted one another when a particular center faced crisis.

3/. Parākramabāhu I and the Reform of the Saṅgha

The revival entered a new phase under Parākramabāhu I (1153–1186), one of the most prominent rulers of the Polonnaruwa period. Alongside unifying the country, developing irrigation, and building the capital, the king devoted substantial resources to restoring Buddhist sacred sites and monasteries, including important institutions at Anurādhapura and Mihintale.

Parākramabāhu's most important legacy for Buddhist history, however, was the purification, reform, and unification of the *Saṅgha*. Over many centuries, the Sri Lankan monastic community had existed within different monastic traditions, most notably the *Mahāvihāra*, *Abhayagiri*, and *Jetavana*. War and political upheaval further weakened monastic discipline. Under Parākramabāhu's patronage, a major reform was undertaken to remove from the *Saṅgha* those regarded as failing to observe the *Vinaya*, to strengthen discipline, and to bring the monastic community under a unified system. The reform ultimately established the *Mahāvihāra* tradition as the dominant lineage in Sri Lankan Buddhism.^[24]

From a historical perspective, this process needs to be viewed in both its dimensions: it restored discipline, organization, and strength to the *Saṅgha*, but it also reduced the monastic diversity that had characterized the Anurādhapura period. After the reform, the shape of Sri Lankan *Theravāda* was increasingly defined by the *Mahāvihāra* tradition, and this form later exerted a wide influence on *Theravāda* in Southeast Asia.

The period from Vijayabāhu I to Parākramabāhu I therefore highlights an important pattern running through the history of Southern Buddhism: the preservation of ordination lineages has been a transnational undertaking. Sri Lanka once transmitted ordination lineages, scriptures, and scholastic traditions abroad; when the island itself faced crisis, Burma helped restore the Sri Lankan *Saṅgha*. In later centuries, this reciprocal relationship continued with Burma and Siam. The endurance of *Theravāda*, therefore, was not the achievement of a single country but the result of a network of mutual support and the transmission of the *Dhamma* among monastic communities across many centuries.

IX/. KANDY AND THE THREE MAJOR NIKĀYAS OF SRI LANKAN BUDDHISM

Eighteenth–Nineteenth Centuries

After the flourishing eras of Anurādhapura and Polonnaruwa, Sri Lankan Buddhism passed through many centuries of upheaval caused by war, dynastic change, and especially the presence of European colonial powers. By the period of the Kingdom of Kandy, a serious problem had again emerged: the *Upasampadā* – higher ordination – lineage of the bhikkhus had been interrupted. In these circumstances, Sri Lanka once more had to turn to *Theravāda* Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia to restore the ordination lineage. From this process, together with internal social changes on the island, three major Nikāyas gradually emerged: the *Siam Nikāya*, the *Amarapura Nikāya*, and the *Rāmañña Nikāya*.

1/. The Siam Nikāya and the Restoration of Upasampadā from Siam

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, although Buddhist life continued in Kandy, Sri Lanka no longer possessed a monastic community with a sufficiently complete *Upasampadā* lineage to maintain the continuous conferral of higher ordination. In this setting, *Saṅgharāja* Weliwita Sri Saraṇāṅkara (1698–1778) emerged as one of the most important figures in the eighteenth-century revival of Sri Lankan Buddhism.

With the patronage of King Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha, the Kandyan court sent an embassy to Siam (present-day Thailand) to invite monks to restore the ordination lineage. In 1753, a delegation of Siamese bhikkhus led by Upāli Thera arrived in Kandy and conferred *Upasampadā* on qualified Sri Lankan monks. From this ordination lineage arose the *Siam Nikāya* (*Siyam Nikāya*), marking an important turning point in the history of the Sri Lankan *Saṅgha*.^[25] This event once again demonstrates the transnational character of *Theravāda*. Centuries earlier, Sri Lanka had helped transmit ordination lineages and the *Mahāvihāra* tradition to Southeast Asia; in the eighteenth century, Sri Lanka itself received an ordination lineage from Siam in order to restore its own *Saṅgha*.

2/. The Amarapura Nikāya and the Question of Social Caste

The restoration of *Upasampadā*, however, did not resolve every problem within the *Saṅgha*. One particularly important social factor was caste. As the *Siam Nikāya* developed, access to higher ordination gradually became restricted mainly to men of the Govigama caste, a socially prominent group in Sinhala society. This created obstacles for those from other communities who wished to receive full bhikkhu ordination.

This context became one of the major factors behind the formation of the *Amarapura Nikāya* in the early nineteenth century. Rather than accept the existing social restriction, a number of Sinhala monks from non-Govigama communities traveled to Burma to receive *Upasampadā*. A prominent figure in this process was Ambagahapitiye Ñāṇavimala Tissa, who, together with companions, went to Amarapura, then the capital of Burma, received ordination there, and returned to Sri Lanka. From this lineage developed the tradition known as the *Amarapura Nikāya*.^[26]

The emergence of the *Amarapura Nikāya* was therefore not simply a doctrinal or ritual division. It reflected social tensions and questions of caste within modern Sri Lankan Buddhism. By widening access to *Upasampadā* for people from different social backgrounds, it helped make the monastic life more open and also demonstrated that the *Saṅgha* did not exist in isolation from the social structure of its time.

3/. The Rāmañña Nikāya and Another Ordination Lineage from Burma

In the nineteenth century, another lineage emerged: the *Rāmañña Nikāya*. It too derived its higher ordination from Burma, but arose in a context in which some Sri Lankan monks sought to renew monastic life through stricter observance of the *Vinaya* and by reducing practices they believed had moved away from the early ideals of the *Saṅgha*.

An important figure in the formation of this tradition was Ambagahawatte Saraṇaṅkara, who traveled to Burma for ordination in the nineteenth century and later returned to Sri Lanka. The name Rāmañña is connected with *Rāmaññadesa*, an old name for Lower Burma associated with the Mon tradition. From this ordination lineage, the *Rāmañña Nikāya* gradually became one of Sri Lanka's major monastic communities.^[27]

The formation of the *Siam Nikāya*, *Amarapura Nikāya*, and *Rāmañña Nikāya* shows that the history of Sri Lanka's Nikāyas cannot be explained simply as a division into three doctrinally distinct "sects." Fundamentally, all three belong to the *Theravāda* tradition and rely on the *Pāli Tipiṭaka* and *Vinaya*. Their historical differences are primarily connected with ordination lineages, organizational structures, social contexts, and approaches to monastic discipline rather than fundamental disagreements over doctrine.

The history of these three Nikāyas once again illuminates a theme running throughout *Theravāda* history: Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Burma repeatedly supported one another in preserving and restoring ordination lineages. The transmission of the *Saṅgha* should therefore not be imagined as a straight line from one country to another, but rather as a transnational network in which the survival of *Theravāda* was sustained through mutual assistance among Buddhist communities over many centuries.

X/. BUDDHISM UNDER COLONIAL RULE

Portuguese – Dutch – British

From the beginning of the sixteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism was closely bound to nearly four centuries of rule by European powers: the Portuguese (1505–1658), the Dutch (1658–1796), and the British (1796–1948). This was not only a period in which Buddhism faced pressure from colonial governments and Christian missionary activity; it was also a period in which the traditional structure of Buddhist society was profoundly transformed. Changes in education, royal patronage, monastic economics, and communal identity eventually helped create conditions for the powerful Buddhist revival of the nineteenth century.

1/. The Portuguese and Dutch Periods

The Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505 and gradually gained control of the coastal regions. Political and commercial power was accompanied by Roman Catholic missionary activity. In areas under Portuguese control, Buddhism lost many of its traditional sources of patronage; some religious institutions were destroyed or weakened, while conversion to Christianity was encouraged. The Kingdom of Kandy in the highlands, however, retained its independence for much of this period and became an important refuge for the preservation of Sinhala Buddhism.

In 1658, the Dutch replaced the Portuguese in control of the coastal regions. The Dutch administration was closely associated with the Dutch Reformed Church and continued to give Christianity significant advantages in education and administration. Although the policies of the two colonial regimes were not identical, both periods contributed to the weakening of traditional systems of Buddhist patronage in the territories they controlled.[\[28\]](#)

One important consequence was that education increasingly became a means of religious propagation and cultural power. In traditional Sri Lankan society, temples and *pirivenas* played a substantial role in educating monks and transmitting literacy and culture. Under colonial rule, schools associated with Christian churches gained increasing advantages, so Buddhism faced not only religious challenges but also competition in knowledge, language, education, and social opportunity.

2/. The British and the Kandyan Convention of 1815

The British took over the territories formerly controlled by the Dutch in 1796. In 1815, with the end of the Kingdom of Kandy, the entire island came under a single colonial government for the first time. The key event marking this

transfer was the Kandyan Convention, signed on March 2, 1815, between the British authorities and the Kandyan chiefs.

For Buddhist history, a particularly significant clause of the Convention declared the religion of the Buddha to be “inviolable” and stipulated that Buddhist rites, clergy, and places of worship were to be maintained and protected.[\[29\]](#)

This was a highly significant commitment because, under the Kandyan monarchy, the king had played an important role in protecting the *Buddha Sāsana*, caring for sacred sites, and supporting the *Saṅgha*. When the British replaced the king, the question arose as to how far the colonial government would assume this traditional responsibility of religious patronage.

In practice, the relationship between the British administration and Buddhism became increasingly complex. The direct involvement of a Christian government in supporting Buddhist rituals provoked debate even among missionaries. After the Kandyan rebellion of 1818 and subsequent developments, the distance between the colonial administration and Buddhist institutions widened. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the British state gradually withdrew from many forms of Buddhist patronage formerly exercised by the monarchy.[\[30\]](#)

3/. From the Decline of Patronage to the Formation of Sinhala-Buddhist Identity

The impact of colonial rule on Buddhism cannot therefore be described simply in terms of “religious suppression.” The deeper transformation lay in the restructuring of the entire relationship among the state, the *Saṅgha*, monasteries, education, and the economy. When the Buddhist monarchy disappeared, the *Saṅgha* lost a major source of political patronage; monasteries had to adapt to new economic and legal mechanisms; and the school systems of Christian churches became increasingly influential in modern education.

Christian missionary activity also introduced a new form of religious debate. Missionaries used schools, printing presses, books, newspapers, and public debates to spread their teachings. What is especially striking is that Sri Lankan Buddhists gradually learned to use these same modern instruments to defend and propagate Buddhism: establishing schools, printing Buddhist texts, publishing newspapers, forming associations, and participating in public religious debates.

In this context, from the nineteenth century onward, the relationship between Sinhala identity and Buddhism was increasingly emphasized. Buddhism came to be seen not only as a religious tradition but also as a symbol of historical heritage, culture, and communal consciousness in the face of colonial power and Western missionary influence. In studying this phenomenon, however, it is

important to distinguish the long-standing Buddhist tradition of the Sinhala people from forms of Sinhala-Buddhist identity that became more explicitly political and national in the modern period.

A notable paradox emerges: colonial rule weakened many traditional structures of Buddhist patronage, yet at the same time created new conditions that compelled Buddhism to organize and modernize itself. Schools, newspapers, printing presses, and public debates – institutions of colonial society – were gradually appropriated by Buddhists themselves for the revival of the *Dhamma*. Out of these circumstances arose one of the most distinctive chapters in Sri Lankan Buddhist history: the Buddhist revival of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

XI/. THE BUDDHIST REVIVAL OF THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

By the second half of the nineteenth century, Sri Lankan Buddhism began to move from a defensive position under the pressures of colonial rule and Christian missionary activity into a period of vigorous revival. A distinctive feature of this movement was that Buddhists not only restored traditional forms of religious life but also actively employed modern means – public debate, journalism, printing, schools, associations, and international exchange – to defend and propagate the *Dhamma*. Three representative figures in this process were Migettuwatte Gunananda Thera, Henry Steel Olcott, and Anagārika Dharmapāla.

1/. Migettuwatte Gunananda Thera and the Religious Debates

As Christian missionaries actively criticized Buddhism through schools, printed literature, and public preaching, a number of Sri Lankan monks began participating directly in public debates to defend the Buddha's teaching. The most prominent was Migettuwatte Gunananda Thera (1823–1890), an eloquent preacher who played an important role in the early phase of the Buddhist revival.

The famous debates associated with him included Udanvita in 1866, Gampola in 1871, and especially Panadura in 1873. The Panadura Debate became the most widely influential of these events. The debate between Gunananda Thera and Christian representatives attracted large audiences and was reported, printed, and circulated beyond Sri Lanka. Perera regards Panadura as an important turning point in the Buddhist revival because it strengthened the confidence of the Buddhist community after a long period of pressure from the colonial system and missionary activity.[\[31\]](#)

Panadura had another long-term significance: Buddhism began to enter the modern public sphere. The *Dhamma* was no longer presented only within monasteries but also through public forums, printed books, and newspapers. English-language reports of the debate later circulated in the West and helped draw a remarkable figure to Sri Lanka: Henry Steel Olcott.

2/. Henry Steel Olcott and Modern Buddhist Education

Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), an American and one of the founders of the *Theosophical Society*, became deeply interested in Buddhism after reading materials concerning the Panadura Debate. In 1880, Olcott and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky traveled to Sri Lanka. At Galle, the two publicly took the Three Refuges and Five Precepts, an event of notable symbolic importance in the history of East–West Buddhist encounter.

Olcott's most enduring contribution in Sri Lanka lay in Buddhist education and social organization. Together with local Buddhist leaders, he campaigned to create a school system capable of competing with the educational networks of Christian churches. According to figures recorded by Perera, by 1897 there were 46 Buddhist schools – 25 for boys, 11 for girls, and 10 coeducational schools. By 1903 the number had risen to 174 schools with about 30,000 students, and by 1940 the system had grown to 429 schools.^[32]

From this educational movement developed well-known institutions such as Ananda College and Nalanda College in Colombo, Dharmaraja College in Kandy, Mahinda College in Galle, and many others. Education thus became one of the most important instruments of the revival: rather than merely reacting to missionary activity, the Buddhist community began to build a modern Buddhist intelligentsia that could embrace new forms of learning while sustaining its cultural and religious identity.

3/. Anagārika Dharmapāla and the Internationalization of Buddhism

If Gunananda Thera represented defense through public argument and Olcott represented educational reform, Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864–1933) carried the Sri Lankan Buddhist revival into a new dimension: the restoration of Buddhist sacred sites in India and the international propagation of Buddhism.

Born in Colombo as Don David Hewavitarne, Dharmapāla was influenced by both the Sinhala Buddhist revival and Olcott's activities. In 1891, after making a pilgrimage to Bodhgayā, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, he was deeply moved by the condition of the sacred site and vowed to work for its restoration to the Buddhist world. That same year he founded the *Mahā Bodhi Society*, launching an international movement to revive Bodhgayā and other

Buddhist sacred places in India.

Dharmapāla also recognized that the Buddhist revival could not be confined to Sri Lanka. He worked in India, Sri Lanka, and other countries, published journals, gave lectures, and established Buddhist institutions. Through these activities he made an important contribution to restoring Buddhism to public life in India, the land of the Buddha's birth and awakening, after many centuries of decline there.

A particularly important milestone came in 1893, when Dharmapāla attended the *World's Parliament of Religions* in Chicago, United States. At this renowned international interfaith gathering, he presented Buddhism to a broad Western audience, emphasizing teachings on ethics, mind, kamma, and the path to awakening. The presence of a young Buddhist layman from Sri Lanka in Chicago carried historical significance: Asian Buddhism was no longer only an object described by Western scholars and missionaries; Asian representatives were beginning to present the *Dhamma* directly to Western audiences in their own voices.[\[33\]](#)

Taken as a whole, the Sri Lankan Buddhist revival of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought about an important transformation. From a community that had long faced pressure under colonial rule, Sri Lankan Buddhism gradually rebuilt its educational, media, associational, and international networks. Gunananda Thera restored confidence through public debate; Olcott helped build a modern Buddhist educational system; and Dharmapāla carried the revival to Bodhgayā, India, and the West.

Even more significantly, Sri Lanka's historical role was changing again: from a country that had received Buddhism from India more than two thousand years earlier, Sri Lanka now began helping to bring Buddhism back into public life in India and introducing the *Dhamma* to the Western world. The journey from Mihintale in the third century BCE to Chicago in 1893 may therefore be seen as one of the most striking historical arcs in Sri Lankan Buddhism.

XII/. INDEPENDENCE IN 1948 AND THE 2,500TH BUDDHA JAYANTI OF 1956

After nearly four centuries under European colonial powers, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) gained independence from Britain on February 4, 1948. Political independence opened a new period in the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism. Whereas the Buddhist revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had

depended largely on the efforts of monks, laypeople, associations, and Buddhist schools, after 1948 the revival of Buddhist heritage increasingly received attention and support at the national level.

1/. From National Independence to Buddhist Revival

Independence in 1948 did not mean that every consequence of colonial rule immediately disappeared. Education, law, and administration still bore many marks of the British system. Yet within Sinhala-Buddhist society there was a growing desire to restore the place of Buddhism in the cultural, educational, and spiritual life of the country.

An important milestone was the establishment of the *Buddhist Committee of Inquiry* in the 1950s to investigate the condition of Buddhism after centuries of colonial rule. These efforts unfolded as Sri Lanka prepared to celebrate the *Buddha Jayanti*, which *Theravāda* tradition at the time identified as 2,500 years since the Buddha's *Parinibbāna*.

The year 1956 therefore became a special moment in the modern history of Sri Lankan Buddhism. The *Buddha Jayanti* was not merely a religious commemoration; it also stimulated major projects in Buddhist culture, education, scholarship, and heritage preservation.^[34]

2/. The 1956 Buddha Jayanti and Major Buddhist Scholarly Projects

In the atmosphere surrounding the 2,500th *Buddha Jayanti*, one major project was the translation of the *Pāli Tipiṭaka* into Sinhala. This was of great significance for ordinary Buddhists, because scriptures long preserved in *Pāli* were now systematically rendered into the language spoken by most Sri Lankans, making the teachings more accessible for study and wider dissemination.

At the same time, the *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* was undertaken in English as a major international scholarly project bringing together contributions from Buddhist scholars in Sri Lanka and other countries. The government also supported the preservation and restoration of Buddhist sacred sites, including works connected with the *Sri Dalada Maligawa*— the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy – and Mahiyangana, as well as many other ancient monuments.^[35]

These activities reveal a new feature of the twentieth-century revival: alongside faith and ritual, increasing emphasis was placed on scriptural research, translation, archaeology, heritage preservation, and Buddhist education. Buddhism was understood both as a spiritual tradition and as a fundamental element of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage.

3/. Vidyodaya and Vidyāṅkārā: From Pirivena to University

Another major achievement of the post-independence period was the development of Buddhist education. In the nineteenth century, the two great centers of Vidyodaya Pirivena and Vidyāṅkārā Pirivena had played very important roles in training monks and reviving *Pāli*, Sanskrit, Sinhala, and Buddhist studies.

In 1959, these two institutions were elevated to university status, marking an important transition: Sri Lanka's monastic educational tradition formally entered the modern university system.[\[36\]](#)

This was not merely an expansion in educational scale; it also represented a meeting between traditional Buddhist scholarship and modern university methods of research.

Viewed across the longer span of history, the period 1948–1959 carries deep symbolic significance. More than two thousand years earlier, Sri Lanka had received the *Dhamma* through the Venerable Mahinda; later it preserved the *Tipiṭaka*, developed the *Pāli* commentarial tradition, and repeatedly restored the *Saṅgha*. By the middle of the twentieth century, a newly independent nation was using translation, education, universities, academic research, and heritage conservation to continue preserving the *Dhamma* in a modern world.

The *Buddha Jayanti* of 1956 should therefore not be seen only as a celebration of 2,500 years. In the modern history of Sri Lankan Buddhism, it also served as a catalyst for a nationwide cultural and Buddhist scholarly revival, connecting the nineteenth-century revival with a new post-independence phase of Sri Lankan Buddhism.

XIII/. FROM 1966 TO 2026: SRI LANKAN BUDDHISM IN THE MODERN WORLD

H. R. Perera's work concludes around 1966; the following six decades must therefore be examined through contemporary historical, legal, and scholarly sources. Between 1966 and 2026, Sri Lankan Buddhism continued to occupy a central place in the country's cultural life while facing new issues of modern society: relations between religion and the state, ethnic conflict, nationalism, the globalization of Buddhism, and the restoration of *Theravāda* bhikkhunī ordination.

1/. The Constitution and the Special Position of Buddhism

An important change in the postcolonial period was the explicit recognition of Buddhism's position within the constitutional structure. Special guarantees for Buddhism appeared in the Republican Constitution of 1972 and were retained in the Constitution of 1978. Article 9 of the 1978 Constitution provides Buddhism with the "foremost place" and makes it the duty of the state to "protect and foster the Buddha Sasana," while also guaranteeing to other religions the rights set out in Articles 10 and 14(1)(e), including freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and religious practice.^[37]

This provision reflects Buddhism's special historical place in Sri Lankan society, while also generating continuing debate over how to balance the state's responsibility to protect the *Buddha Sāsana* with the principle of religious equality in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country. Modern legal studies show that Article 9 is not merely symbolic; it also influences debates concerning law, the *Saṅgha*, monasteries, and the relationship between Buddhism and the state.^[38]

2/. Buddhism, Civil War, and the Question of Reconciliation

One of the most painful periods in modern Sri Lankan history was the ethnic conflict that lasted for decades, especially from 1983 to 2009, between the Sri Lankan state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The war left profound consequences for Sinhalese, Tamils, and other communities and raised difficult questions about the relationship among religion, ethnicity, and politics. The role of Buddhism in this period must be presented with care. Some monks and Sinhala-Buddhist organizations participated actively in political life and supported nationalist positions; certain currents even justified military solutions to the conflict. Modern scholars have devoted substantial attention to the tension between these phenomena and the Buddhist ideals of *ahiṃsā*—non-harming— and compassion.^[39]

At the same time, it would be inaccurate to identify Sri Lankan Buddhism as a whole with nationalism or wartime politics. In the same context, monks, lay Buddhists, and Buddhist organizations also engaged in interfaith dialogue, social work, relief for victims, and efforts toward peacebuilding. The history of 1983–2009 should therefore be understood as a period in which the Sri Lankan Buddhist community confronted a fundamental question: how can the values of compassion, nonviolence, and reconciliation be practiced in a society divided by war and the memory of conflict?

3/. Sri Lankan Theravāda Goes Global

Alongside upheavals at home, from the second half of the twentieth century Sri Lankan Buddhism increasingly became a global tradition. Sri Lankan monks

traveled abroad to teach and establish monasteries, meditation centers, and cultural institutions in Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and many countries in Europe and Asia. Studies of Sri Lankan communities in Britain and Australia show that temples serve not only as places of religious practice but also as spaces for cultural continuity, education of younger generations, and connection between migrant communities and their new societies.

In this process of internationalization, many monks and scholars associated with Sri Lanka exerted influence far beyond the island. Walpola Rahula helped introduce *Theravāda* teaching to academic circles and Western readers; Balangoda Ananda Maitreya became renowned for *Pāli*, meditation, and Buddhist education; and European monks who lived and practiced for long periods in Sri Lanka, such as Nyanatiloka Mahāthera and Nyanaponika Thera, made important contributions to transmitting Buddhist scriptures, meditation, and *Theravāda* thought to international readers.

Significantly, this process continued a pattern that had appeared repeatedly in Sri Lankan history: receiving, preserving, systematizing, and then transmitting. If ancient Sri Lanka received the *Dhamma* from India, in the modern period the island became one of the bridges through which *Pāli*, *Theravāda*, and Buddhist meditation reached many Western societies.

4/. The Restoration of the *Theravāda Bhikkhunī Order*

One of the most significant developments in Sri Lankan Buddhism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been the movement to restore the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*. This development creates a remarkable historical arc: Sri Lanka was the land where the *Bhikkhunī Saṅghamittā* established the order of nuns in the third century BCE; that lineage was later transmitted to China, while in Sri Lanka itself the *bhikkhunī* order eventually disappeared during the medieval period.

In the late twentieth century, efforts to restore *bhikkhunī* ordination were undertaken with the participation of Sri Lankan monks and nuns together with East Asian Buddhist traditions. In 1996, a group of Sri Lankan women received higher ordination at Sarnath with the support of Korean monks and nuns. In 1998, a group of Sri Lankan women participated in an international ordination at Bodhgayā involving *Dharmaguptaka* monks and nuns from East Asia together with *Theravāda* monks. Afterward, the Sri Lankan participants continued the ordination procedure within a *Theravāda* setting, and *bhikkhunī* ordinations subsequently continued to be conducted in Sri Lanka.^[40]

This restoration also generated an important debate in *Vinaya* scholarship: can a *Theravāda* *bhikkhunī* lineage that has died out be validly restored with the participation of a *Dharmaguptaka* *bhikkhunī Saṅgha*? Supporters appeal to the history of transmission and provisions of the *Vinaya* to argue that restoration is

possible; opponents question the continuity of the ordination lineage and differences among *Vinaya* traditions. Thus, in the modern period the bhikkhunī issue in Sri Lanka has been both a movement of religious renewal and a broad discussion about *Vinaya*, the legitimacy of lineage, and the status of women in the *Saṅgha*.

Looking back over the six decades from 1966 to 2026, Sri Lankan Buddhism has both continued a heritage of more than two thousand years and adapted to unprecedented challenges of the modern world. From the constitutional position of the *Buddha Sāsana* to the trials of war and reconciliation, from Sri Lankan monasteries established across several continents to the restoration of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, this history shows that *Theravāda* in Sri Lanka is not an unchanging tradition but a living religious current that continually adjusts, debates, and reshapes itself in new historical circumstances.

The history of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, in particular, forms a meaningful circle: *Saṅghamittā* came from India to Sri Lanka → the Sri Lankan bhikkhunī order developed and transmitted ordination to East Asia → the order in Sri Lanka disappeared → East Asian lineages participated in the restoration of the bhikkhunī order in Sri Lanka at the end of the twentieth century. This is perhaps one of the clearest illustrations of the transnational and mutually supportive character of Buddhist transmission history.

XIV/. WORLD BUDDHIST SANGHA COUNCIL: COLOMBO 1966 – SRI LANKA 2026

Sixty Years of Connecting the Global Buddhist Saṅgha

A fitting point at which to conclude the historical journey of Sri Lankan Buddhism from the time of the Venerable Mahinda to the present is the birth and development of the World Buddhist Sangha Council (WBSC). If ancient Sri Lanka was distinguished by its role in preserving the *Tipiṭaka*, developing the commentarial tradition, and maintaining *Theravāda* ordination lineages, in the modern period the island has also become an important venue for the movement toward international Buddhist monastic unity.

1/. Colombo 1966: The Founding of the World Buddhist Sangha Council

The World Buddhist Sangha Council was founded in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in May 1966, when its First General Conference brought together monastic delegates from many countries and Buddhist traditions. The WBSC Constitution was adopted in Colombo on May 16, 1966. Its fundamental aims included promoting exchange among *Saṅgha* organizations throughout the world, supporting *Dhammadūta* missionary work, strengthening harmony among Buddhist traditions, and spreading the Buddha's teaching of compassion in the service of world peace.^[41]

From the beginning, the WBSC was not conceived as an organization exclusively for *Theravāda*. Its basic spirit was to create an international monastic forum transcending differences of nation and tradition. Current WBSC materials describe the organization as Sangha-led and non-sectarian, a setting in which *Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna*, *Vajrayāna*, and other Buddhist traditions can meet in a spirit of mutual respect and harmony.

An especially important intellectual contribution at the time of the Council's founding was the “*Nine Basic Points Unifying Theravāda and Mahāyāna*,” associated with the eminent Sri Lankan monk-scholar Walpola Rahula Thera. These points were accepted at the First Conference in Colombo and reflected an effort to identify a shared doctrinal foundation among Buddhist traditions rather than emphasize differences that had developed over the course of history.^[42]

2/. From Colombo 1966 to Sri Lanka 2026

Sixty years after its founding, the WBSC returns to its place of origin for the 60th Anniversary Celebration in Sri Lanka in 2026, together with the Second Executive Committee Meeting of the 11th General Conference. According to the official program, the full schedule for delegates runs from November 27 to December 2, 2026. November 27 is devoted to arrival and registration, while the official opening and anniversary celebrations begin on November 28. The program is especially meaningful because it is not confined to a single conference venue. The principal activities on November 28 and 29 are held at the *Nāgānanda International Institute for Buddhist Studies* (NIIBS); on November 30 the delegation travels to Anurādhapura; on December 1 it proceeds to Kandy for the closing ceremony; and on December 2 delegates depart Sri Lanka.

According to information from the Organizing Committee and the Government of Sri Lanka, the event is expected to bring together around 600 delegates from 50 countries, representing the *Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna*, and *Vajrayāna* traditions, together with approximately 500 Sri Lankan monks, including leaders of the major Nikāyas. The Government of Sri Lanka has identified the anniversary as an event of national importance and established a coordinating mechanism to support its organization.^[43]

3/. From Mahinda to the WBSC: An Arc of More Than 2,300 Years

The WBSC's return to Sri Lanka in 2026 carries historical meaning far beyond an institutional anniversary. Around the third century BCE, Sri Lanka was a land that received the *Dhamma* through the missions of the Venerable Mahinda and *Saṅghamittā*. In the centuries that followed, the island became a place

where the *Dhamma* was preserved through the *Pāli Tipiṭaka*, the *Mahāvihāra* tradition, Buddhaghosa, and the commentarial literature. In the medieval period, Sri Lanka both transmitted ordination lineages to other countries and received assistance from Burma and Siam when its own *Saṅgha* had declined. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Anagārika Dharmapāla to Walpola Rahula and many generations of monks, Sri Lanka continued contributing to the spread of Buddhism throughout the world.

Within this long history, the WBSC may be regarded as a modern expression of a principle repeatedly seen in Sri Lankan Buddhist history: the *Dhamma* is preserved not through isolation, but through transmission, exchange, and mutual support among communities of the *Saṅgha*.

If Mihintale symbolizes the encounter between Indian Buddhism and Sri Lanka more than 2,300 years ago, Colombo 1966 and Sri Lanka 2026 symbolize a new phase in which Sri Lanka becomes a meeting place for monastics from many countries and traditions. *Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna*, and *Vajrayāna* differ in their historical development, scriptures, and methods of practice, yet they can meet on the common foundation of Buddha – *Dhamma* – *Saṅgha* and the shared ideals of compassion, wisdom, and peace.

Thus, from Mahinda and *Saṅghamittā* to the World Buddhist Sangha Council, the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism forms a remarkable arc: receiving the *Dhamma* → preserving the scriptures → developing scholarship → restoring ordination lineages → international propagation → connecting the global *Saṅgha*. The 60th Anniversary of the WBSC in Sri Lanka in 2026 therefore provides a meaningful conclusion to more than two millennia of history: Sri Lanka, once a land that received the light of the *Dhamma*, has become one of the places that helps preserve and connect Buddhist lineages throughout the world.

XV/. FIVE MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS OF SRI LANKAN BUDDHISM Looking Back Over More Than 2,300 Years of History

Looking back over more than 2,300 years, from the mission of the Venerable Mahinda in the third century BCE to international Buddhist activities in 2026, it may be said that Sri Lanka holds a distinctive place in the history of world Buddhism. Its role lies not only in preserving an ancient religious tradition, but also in its capacity to receive, safeguard, systematize, revive, and transmit the *Dhamma* across many historical periods. The outstanding contributions of Sri Lankan Buddhism may be summarized under five principal headings.

First, preserving and developing the Theravāda tradition

Sri Lanka's most fundamental contribution has been the maintenance of one of the oldest and most influential *Theravāda* traditions in the Buddhist world.

From the time the Venerable Mahinda propagated Buddhism during the reign of King Devānampiya Tissa, the *Saṅgha* was gradually established, and the *Mahāvihāra* became an important center for the study and transmission of Sutta, Vinaya, and Abhidhamma.^[44]

This history was not perfectly continuous in the sense of having no breaks. Sri Lanka endured war, famine, foreign invasion, crises in the *Saṅgha*, and repeated occasions when *Upasampadā* had to be restored from abroad. Yet its capacity to recover after periods of decline is precisely one of its most striking features. The *Mahāvihāra* tradition endured and later became one of the major foundations of *Theravāda* in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.

Second, making a decisive contribution to preserving the Pāli Tipiṭaka in written form

One contribution of exceptional importance to world Buddhist history is the tradition of committing the *Pāli Tipiṭaka* to writing around the first century BCE. Against the background of war and famine during the reign of Vattagāmaṇī Abhaya, when the number of monks learned in the scriptures declined and oral transmission faced the danger of interruption, the elders decided to preserve the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, *Sutta Piṭaka*, and *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, together with the commentarial tradition, in written form.

Sri Lankan tradition later associated this undertaking especially with Aluvihāra near Matale. Although modern historians must remain cautious regarding some details of the chronicle memory, the significance of the event remains immense: Sri Lanka became one of the most important places in preserving the *Pāli* scriptural heritage for later generations.^[45]

Third, developing and transmitting the Aṭṭhakathā, the Pāli commentarial tradition

Sri Lanka preserved not only scriptural texts but also the tradition of interpreting scripture. This achievement reached an important milestone with Buddhaghosa in the fifth century.

At the *Mahāvihāra*, Buddhaghosa had access to ancient Sinhala commentaries such as the Mahā- or *Mūla-Aṭṭhakathā*, the *Mahāpaccarī Aṭṭhakathā*, and the *Kurundī Aṭṭhakathā*, and on the basis of this heritage he compiled and systematized many works in *Pāli*. The *Visuddhimagga* – The Path of Purification, in particular, became one of the most influential treatises in *Theravāda* thought and practice.

After Buddhaghosa came Buddhaddatta, Upasena, Mahānāma, *Dhammapāla*, and many other commentators. Because *Pāli* became a common scholarly language,

this body of commentarial literature could circulate beyond Sri Lanka. Thus it may be said that if committing the *Tipiṭaka* to writing helped preserve the scriptural word, the *Aṭṭhakathā* tradition helped preserve the modes of understanding, methods of interpretation, and systems of thought built around the scriptures.

Fourth, creating a two-way network of ordination and scholarship with Southeast Asia

The history of *Theravāda* shows that the relationship between Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia was never simply one-way transmission. In many periods, ordination lineages and scholarship moved from Sri Lanka to other regions; when the Sri Lankan *Saṅgha* weakened, however, those same *Theravāda* countries helped restore it.

Under Vijayabāhu I in the eleventh century, when higher ordination in Sri Lanka entered a crisis, the king invited monks from Burma to restore *Upasampadā*. In the eighteenth century, under the Kandyan kingdom, Sri Lanka received an ordination lineage from Siam, leading to the formation of the *Siam Nikāya*. In the nineteenth century, ordination missions to Burma contributed to the formation of the *Amarapura Nikāya* and the *Rāmañña Nikāya*.

These events show that *Theravāda* was preserved through a transnational network of the *Saṅgha*. Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian countries repeatedly exchanged scriptures, ordination lineages, monastics, and scholarly traditions. When one center weakened, another could help restore it. This is one of the important factors explaining the long vitality of *Theravāda*.

Fifth, playing a prominent role in the Buddhist revival and the internationalization of Buddhism

From the nineteenth century onward, Sri Lanka became one of the important centers of modern Buddhism and the internationalization of Buddhism. The debates of Migettuwatte Gunananda Thera, especially at Panadura in 1873, helped awaken a spirit of revival. Henry Steel Olcott supported the building of a modern Buddhist educational network, while Anagārika Dharmapāla, through the *Mahā Bodhi Society* founded in 1891 and his appearance at the *World's Parliament of Religions* in Chicago in 1893, helped bring Asian Buddhism directly before Western audiences.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, figures such as Walpola Rahula and Balangoda Ananda Maitreya, together with scholars and monks closely associated with Sri Lanka such as Nyanatiloka and Nyanaponika, continued to introduce *Pāli*, Buddhist scriptures, and *Theravāda* meditation to international readers. Sri Lankan *Theravāda* monasteries and centers are now present in many countries around the world.

The founding of the World Buddhist Sangha Council in Colombo in 1966 and the celebration of its 60th anniversary in Sri Lanka in 2026 extend this role beyond the *Theravāda* sphere into dialogue and cooperation among *Theravāda* – *Mahāyāna* – *Vajrayāna* traditions. Sri Lanka is therefore both a center of the *Theravāda* tradition and a contributor to building bridges among Buddhist traditions in the modern world.^[46]

In summary, the major contributions of Sri Lankan Buddhism can be seen as a continuous process: preserving tradition – safeguarding scripture – developing commentary – maintaining ordination lineages – and bringing Buddhism into a global network. These five dimensions help explain why a relatively small island in the Indian Ocean has held such an unusually important place in Buddhist history for more than two millennia.

XVI/. CONCLUSION MORE THAN 2,300 YEARS OF AN UNBROKEN STREAM OF DHAMMA

From the day the Venerable Mahinda arrived at Mihintale in the third century BCE and *Bhikkhunī Saṅghamittā* brought a branch of the Bodhi Tree from India to Anurādhapura, the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism has passed through more than 2,300 years of rise and decline. Across that long span of time, dynasties flourished and fell; capitals shifted from Anurādhapura to Polonnaruwa and then Kandy; the country repeatedly experienced war, invasion, and nearly four centuries of colonial rule. The *Saṅgha* too faced periods of weakness and interruptions in ordination lineages. Yet after every upheaval, the *Buddha Sāsana* was restored and continued.

What makes Sri Lanka's place in Buddhist history distinctive is not that its history was never interrupted, but rather its capacity to preserve and restore tradition through periods of crisis. When oral transmission of the scriptures was threatened with decline, the *Pāli Tipiṭaka* was committed to writing; when the interpretive tradition needed systematization, Sri Lanka produced and preserved a vast *Aṭṭhakathā* heritage, of which Buddhaghosa became an outstanding representative; when ordination lineages weakened, the *Saṅgha* turned to Myanmar and Siam to restore *Upasampadā*; and when Buddhism faced the challenges of colonial rule, generations of monks and lay Buddhists used education, journalism, scholarship, and modern institutions to revive the *Dhamma*.

This history, therefore, was never a closed stream confined within the boundaries of an island. From an early time, Sri Lankan Buddhism existed within a transnational network of transmission. The *Dhamma* came from India to Lanka; from Lanka, scriptures, ordination lineages, and *Theravāda* traditions influenced many countries of Southeast Asia; and in times of decline, those

countries in turn helped Sri Lanka restore its *Saṅgha*. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with Migettuwatte Gunananda, Anagārika Dharmapāla, Walpola Rahula, and many generations of other monks and scholars, Sri Lankan Buddhism continued beyond the borders of Asia and participated in the globalization of Buddhism.

Throughout this entire journey, perhaps no symbol is more fitting than the *Sri Maha Bodhi* at Anurādhapura. The Bodhi branch brought by *Saṅghamittā* from India to Lanka is not merely a revered sacred object. Historically, it also symbolizes the life of a tradition transmitted from one generation to the next. The tree has witnessed the flourishing of Anurādhapura, wars and dynastic changes, colonial rule, national independence, and Sri Lanka's entry into the modern world. Through all these changes, the *Sri Maha Bodhi* remains a living witness to the island's Buddhist memory.

This image also helps us understand the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism more deeply. A religious tradition can survive for more than two millennia not because it remains completely unchanged, but because it preserves its roots while adapting to new circumstances. Sri Lanka preserved scripture while also developing commentary; maintained monastic discipline while repeatedly restoring transmission lineages; sustained the *Theravāda* tradition while also serving at times as a meeting place for diverse Buddhist currents; and protected a national heritage while helping Buddhism enter a wider international space.

If the *Sri Maha Bodhi* at Anurādhapura is the living symbol of a Bodhi branch preserved for more than two thousand years, the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism may likewise be seen as a great tree: rooted in the Buddhist traditions of India, growing to maturity in the soil of Lanka, and extending its branches across many countries and continents.

In 2026, as monks from the *Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna*, and *Vajrayāna* traditions of many countries gather again in Sri Lanka for the 60th anniversary of the World Buddhist Sangha Council, this historical circle becomes even more meaningful. From Mihintale to Anurādhapura, from the *Mahāvihāra* to Colombo, from the *Sri Maha Bodhi* to the forum of the global Buddhist *Saṅgha*, more than 2,300 years of history seem to be joined together within a single stream of *Dhamma*.

Sri Lanka, once a land that received the *Dhamma*, has become one of the lands that help preserve, revive, and transmit the *Dhamma* to the world. And perhaps this is the greatest legacy that more than 2,300 years of Sri Lankan Buddhism has left to the history of Buddhism as a whole: the *Dhamma* endures not only because it is preserved, but because it is continually studied, practiced, restored, and transmitted from generation to generation.

As a member of the Dharma Propagation Committee of the World Buddhist Sangha Council, I join my palms in reverence and prayer that the 60th Anniversary Celebration of the founding of the World Buddhist Sangha Council (1966–2026) and the Second Meeting of the Executive Committee, to be held in Colombo from November 27 to December 2, 2026, may be brought to complete and auspicious fulfillment.

May the blessings of the Triple Gem protect the venerable members of the *Saṅgha*, granting them good health and the successful fulfillment of their noble work; may the Buddhist monastic traditions of the world grow ever more harmonious and united in serving humanity together. May the light of the Buddha's *Compassion and Wisdom* continue to illuminate the world; may the *True Dhamma* endure and spread throughout the five continents and four seas, bringing peace and well-being to all beings and helping to build a world of peace, understanding, and loving-kindness.

May the Buddha's light ever increase; may the Wheel of *Dhamma* continue to turn; may the world be at peace and all beings dwell in happiness.

Namo Sakyamuni Buddha

Written at Quang Duc Monastery, Melbourne, Australia, in early October 2026

Ven. Thich Nguyen Tang

*Member of the Dharma Propagation Committee
World Buddhist Sangha Council*

[1] H. R. Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1966; later edition with the country name revised), "Publisher's Note."

[2] Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, chap. 1, "The State of Sri Lanka before the Introduction of Buddhism."

[3] Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, "Preface." In the preface, the author states that he relied on the *Mahāvamsa*, *Dīpavaṃsa*, and the studies of E. W. Adikaram, Walpola Rahula, G. P. Malalasekera, and many other sources.

[4] H. R. Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1966), chap. 2, "Early Traditions."

[5] Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, chaps. 2–4.

- [6] Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, chap. 5, “Religion in Sri Lanka before the Introduction of Buddhism.”
- [7] H. R. Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1966), chaps. 7–8; see also the *Mahāvamsa*, chap. XII, on the missionary delegations sent after the Third Buddhist Council.
- [8] Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, chap. 9. For the discourses mentioned, see *Majjhima Nikāya* 27, *Cūḷahatthipadopama Sutta*; MN 129, *Bālappaṇḍita Sutta*; and MN 130, *Devadūta Sutta*.
- [9] Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, chaps. 9–10, on King Devānampiya Tissa’s donation of Mahāmeghavana and the establishment of the Mahāvihāra at Anurādhapura.
- [10] *The Mahāvamsa, or The Great Chronicle of Ceylon*, trans. Wilhelm Geiger (London: Pali Text Society, 1912), chaps. XVIII–XIX, on the invitation of Saṅghamittā and the bringing of the Bodhi Tree branch from India to Laṅkā.
- [11] H. R. Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1966), the section on the arrival of Saṅghamittā and the establishment of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha in Sri Lanka.
- [12] Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, the section on bringing the Bodhi Tree branch to Anurādhapura and planting it at Mahāmeghavana.
- [13] H. R. Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1966), the section on King Duṭṭhagāmaṇī and the revival of Buddhism; see also *The Mahāvamsa, or The Great Chronicle of Ceylon*, trans. Wilhelm Geiger (London: Pali Text Society, 1912), chaps. XXV–XXXII.
- [14] Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, the section on Vaṭṭagāmaṇī Abhaya, the establishment of Abhayagiri, and the first major division within the Saṅgha.
- [15] Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, the section discussing Vaitulyavāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajiriyavāda; the author notes the appearance of the *Ratnakūṭa-sūtra* and traditions associated with Vajrayāna in medieval Sri Lanka.
- [16] H. R. Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1966), the section on Vaṭṭagāmaṇī Abhaya, the wars, and the famine during his reign.
- [17] Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, the section on committing the *Tipiṭaka* to writing; the author notes that Sri Lankan tradition records both the Pāli *Tipiṭaka* and the Sinhala commentaries as having been put into written form.
- [18] Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, citing the *Nikāya Saṅgraha* on the tradition that reciters and scribes went to Alulena (Aluvihāra), near Matale, to complete the writing down of the scriptures and commentaries.
- [19] H. R. Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1966), the section on Buddhaghosa and Pāli literature. Perera mentions ancient Sinhala commentarial sources such as the

Mahā- or Mūla-Aṭṭhakathā, Mahāpaccarī Aṭṭhakathā, and Kurundī Aṭṭhakathā used by Buddhaghosa in his work.

[20] Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*; see also Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, the section on Buddhaghosa at the Mahāvihāra and the composition of the *Visuddhimagga*. The work is structured principally around the three trainings of Sīla, Samādhi, and Paññā – virtue, concentration, and wisdom.

[21] Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, the section on the age of Pāli literature after Buddhaghosa, which discusses the commentators Buddhadatta, Upasena, Mahānāma, and Dhammapāla and the continuation of the Theravāda commentarial tradition.

[22] H. R. Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1966), the section on the decline of Anurādhapura, Chola domination, and the condition of Sri Lankan Buddhism at the beginning of the Polonnaruwa period.

[23] Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, the section on Vijayabāhu I. According to the tradition related by Perera, because Sri Lanka no longer had the required number of bhikkhus to conduct Upasampadā, the king sought assistance from King Anawrahta (Anuruddha) of Burma, who sent a delegation of monks to restore higher ordination.

[24] Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, the section on Parākramabāhu I (1153–1186) and the reform of the Saṅgha; see also the *Cūḷavaṃsa*, which recounts the Buddhist revival and the unification of the Saṅgha under Parākramabāhu.

[25] H. R. Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1966), the section on Weliwita Sri Saraṇaṅkara, King Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha, and the restoration of Upasampadā with the assistance of the Siamese monastic mission led by Upāli Thera in 1753.

[26] G. P. Malalasekera, *The Pāli Literature of Ceylon* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1928); see also H. R. Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, the section on the development of the Amarapura Nikāya. The formation of this Nikāya should be understood in the context of restrictions on Upasampadā within the Siam Nikāya to the Govigama caste and the journey of Sri Lankan monks to Burma to receive a new ordination lineage.

[27] Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, the section on the modern Nikāyas and the formation of the Rāmañña Nikāya, another Upasampadā lineage connected with Burmese Buddhism.

[28] H. R. Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1966), the sections on the Portuguese and Dutch periods in Sri Lanka, especially the changes in Buddhist patronage and Christian missionary activity.

[29] Kandyan Convention, March 2, 1815, art. 5. The fifth article declares the religion of the Buddha “inviolable” and commits the authorities to maintaining and protecting its rites, clergy, and places of worship; see also Perera,

Buddhism in Sri Lanka, the section on the establishment of British rule in Kandy.

[30] Perera, Buddhism in Sri Lanka, the section on Buddhism under British rule, the debates surrounding the responsibility to protect Buddhism after the Kandyan Convention, and the changing relationship between the colonial government and the Saṅgha during the nineteenth century.

[31] H. R. Perera, Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1966), the section on the nineteenth-century Buddhist revival and the debates at Udanvita (1866), Gampola (1871), and Panadura (1873); Perera particularly emphasizes the impact of Panadura on the awakening of the Buddhist community.

[32] Perera, Buddhism in Sri Lanka, the section on Henry Steel Olcott and the development of Buddhist education. According to the figures recorded by Perera, there were 46 Buddhist schools in 1897; 174 schools with about 30,000 students in 1903; and 429 schools by 1940.

[33] Ananda W. P. Guruge, Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, Essays and Letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala (Colombo: Government Press, 1965); see also G. P. Malalasekera, ed., Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, on Anagārika Dharmapāla, the founding of the Mahā Bodhi Society in 1891, the movement to restore Bodhgayā, and his representation of Buddhism at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893.

[34] H. R. Perera, Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1966), the section on Buddhism after Ceylon gained independence in 1948 and the preparations for the 2,500th Buddha Jayanti in 1956.

[35] Perera, Buddhism in Sri Lanka, the section on the Buddha Jayanti, which records programs to translate the Tipiṭaka into Sinhala, compile the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, and undertake government-supported preservation and restoration of Buddhist sacred sites.

[36] Perera, Buddhism in Sri Lanka, the section on the development of Buddhist education after independence. Vidyodaya Pirivena and Vidyāṅkāra Pirivena were elevated to university status in January 1959, marking a new phase in Sri Lankan Buddhist education.

[37] The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (1978), art. 9; see also arts. 10 and 14(1)(e). Article 9 accords Buddhism the “foremost place” and makes it the duty of the state to protect and foster the Buddha Sāsana while guaranteeing the religious rights provided by the Constitution.

[38] Benjamin Schonthal, “Securing the Sasana through Law: Buddhist Constitutionalism and Buddhist-Interest Litigation in Sri Lanka,” *Modern Asian Studies* 50, no. 6 (2016): 1966–2008. Schonthal analyzes both the 1972 and 1978 Constitutions and the legal consequences of the special status accorded to Buddhism.

[39] Mahinda Deegalle, ed., *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); see also studies on monks, politics, war, and the ideal of nonviolence in modern Sri Lankan Buddhism.

[40] Wei-yi Cheng, “Once We Were...: Former Child Nuns in Taiwan Reflecting Back,” in *Little Buddhas: Children and Childhoods in Buddhist Texts and Traditions*, ed. Vanessa R. Sasson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 305–325; see also studies of the 1996–1998 ordinations and the development of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha at Dambulla.

[41] World Buddhist Sangha Council, “Constitution,” adopted at the First General Conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on May 16, 1966; see also the history of the WBSC First General Conference.

[42] World Buddhist Sangha Council, “About the World Buddhist Sangha Council” and “WBSC History & Leadership.” Official WBSC sources describe the organization as an international, non-sectarian Saṅgha body seeking harmony among Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna, and other Buddhist traditions; they also record Walpola Rahula’s role in the “Nine Basic Points Unifying Theravāda and Mahāyāna.”

[43] World Buddhist Sangha Council, “WBSC 60th Anniversary & 2nd General Executive Committee Meeting: Sri Lanka 2026,” official program, November 27–December 2, 2026; see also announcements by the Government of Sri Lanka concerning the anniversary, the 11th General Conference Executive Committee meeting, and the expected scale of international participation.

[44] H. R. Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1966), the sections on Mahinda, the Mahāvihāra, the committing of the Tipiṭaka to writing, Buddhaghosa, and the restorations of the Saṅgha.

[45] Walpola Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon: The Anuradhapura Period, 3rd Century BC–10th Century AC* (Colombo: M. D. Gunasena, 1956), especially the sections on the Mahāvihāra, scripture, commentaries, and the development of the Saṅgha during the Anurādhapura period.

[46] G. P. Malalasekera, *The Pāli Literature of Ceylon* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1928), on the development of Pāli literature and the commentarial tradition in Sri Lanka.