

Buddha Abhisheka: Coronation of Buddha Image

Dr. Sumudu Dharmarathna

Introduction

Sri Lanka as a Theravāda Buddhist country has preserved a great tradition of Buddhism and various ritual performances could be understood as a unique aspect of its Buddhist culture. Originally Buddhism offered a path to the enlightenment through personal endeavor, but it did not completely reject pre-Buddhist cultic practices and ceremonial activities that served the various religious needs of the society.¹ Therefore Buddhism has been spread throughout the world closely associating beliefs, rituals, and practices to satisfy particular religious needs of the community within the context of the host country's ethos. In this paper, consideration of the Sri Lankan Buddhist ritual culture will be centered on the practice of Buddha – Abhisheka or ceremonial bath of Buddha Image, which was commenced with the establishment of Buddhism on the Island. I conduct reference to research in the litterer and a survey of archaeological and inscriptional descriptions on the practice of Buddha Abhisheka or ceremonial bath of Buddha Image in Sri Lanka.

The three main symbols, thūpa for bodily relics of the Buddha, Bodhi Tree, and Buddha icon are the three main objects of Buddhists of the world. It is clear that the practice of stūpa worship and Bodhi Tree worship in the Island was established with Buddhism was introduced. Subsequently, Image worship also became one of the main cult practices of the Buddhists. The Image gained a much more important place among the various other cult objects which were introduced to Buddhism with the rise of Mahayanism. It is impossible to suggest a precise date for the origin of the worship of the Buddha Image. But traditionally, it is accepted that Image worship came into existence in the first century BCE. or CE.² However literary sources and inscriptional remains clearly show that Image worship was more easily spread than the other earlier developments.³ These three objects are considered as the three sacred objects which preserved the memory of the Buddha and also represented him. Thus, they were coroneted with water considering it as a great opportunity to treat the Buddha.

Devotional Sensibility of Buddhism

A point that I need to draw attention to at the very beginning of this paper is that the devotional sensibility of Buddhism. It will start with the explanation made by S.B. Hettiaratchi on Buddhist culture.

... Buddhism is a religion that advocates by itself only super-mundane, gained acceptance now that Buddhism is a way of life. ... the nibbāna can be attained only by the man who is a member of society and until he reaches that super-mundane stage he interacts with his co-members and

¹ R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, **Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Mediaeval Sri Lanka**, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1979, p. 212.

² S. Dutt, **Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India, Their History and their Contribution to India culture**, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1989 (1st publication 1962), pp.188, 189.

³ Gregory Shopen, **Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks**, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997, p. 240.

interested groups, in a given social background and environment.⁴

Accordingly, the Buddha looked at man's life as a whole, interwoven in its entire social, economic, and political spectrum. Buddhism is a way of life that can attain the ultimate goal, nibbāna, by being a member of society.

Scholars such as A.K. Coomaraswamy,⁵ R.A.L.H. Gunawardana⁶ and many others have observed the changing pattern of Buddhist culture based on the religious needs of the people. Various rituals, beliefs, and practices were absorbed into the original religion from time to time with the religious needs of the people. There are no hard and fast restrictions in the Buddhist discipline. Originally, Buddhism did not reject the new assimilations and absorptions. On the other hand, though the Pāli canonical texts did not indicate the devotional sensibility of Buddhism in a significant way, rare indications giving vent to feelings of devotion had begun taking shape from the initial stage of Buddhism.⁷

The statement made by R.A.L.H. Gunawardana clearly illustrates the nature of Buddhist culture that consists of various devotional activities: rituals, beliefs, and practices. He says:

Buddhism offered a path to salvation through the personal endeavor and, originally, it had no cults to cater to the "specific plebian religious needs" of society at large. Hence it did not demand that its followers completely reject non-Buddhist cultic practices. Even during the early years of its history, Buddhism came to terms with popular cults like the propitiation of *Yakkhas* and *Nāgas* and the worship of Brāhmanical gods. Buddhist texts merely claim that the *Yakkhas*, *Nāgas*, and the *Devas* accepted the supremacy of the Buddha. In Sri Lanka, some of the pre-Buddhist cults had been appended to Buddhism by the beginning of the period under consideration, and this did not necessitate any change in its fundamental principles. In some cases, "Buddhist" rites were introduced to perform the functions of pre-Buddhist practices. On the other hand, the contact with, Mahāyāna, Saiva, and Vaisnava faiths stimulated the development of cultic practices and elaborate ceremonial in Sinhalese Buddhism. Together, these trends represent the development of Sinhalese Buddhism into a comprehensive religious system capable of serving the varied religious needs of society.⁸

Gananath Obeyesekere⁹ attempted to use Redfield's¹⁰ the concept for understanding the nature of Buddhist culture that is "great tradition" and "little tradition." Here, the ritual transactions identified with little tradition consist of Mahāyāna and other local traditions which were historically assimilated various beliefs and practices for serving the varied religious needs of the society.

⁴ S. B. Hettiaratchi, 'Ancient path of wisdom and sustainable development in ancient Sri Lanka – A conceptual and historical perspective,' unpublished article, in K.M.R. Dasanayaka ed. **R.A.L.H. Gunawardana Felicitation Volume**, Department of History: University of Peradeniya, (to be published).

⁵ A.K. Coomaraswamy, 'The Origin of the Buddha Image,' in **The Art Bulletin**, Vol. IX, 1927, pp. 297-328.

⁶ R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, 1979, **op.cit**, pp. 212.

⁷ A.G.S. Kariyawasam, **Buddhist Ceremonial, and Rituals of Sri Lanka**, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995, pp. 1-5.

⁸ R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, 1979, **op.cit**, p. 297.

⁹ Gananath Obeyesekere, 'The Great Tradition and the Little in the Perspective of Sinhalese Buddhism,' in **The Journal of Asian Studies**, Vol. XXII, No. 2, 1963 Feb. pp. 139-153.

¹⁰ Robert Redfield, **Present Society, and Culture**, Chicago: University of Chicago 1956.

In several cases, it clearly shows that the 'Buddhist' rites were introduced to perform the functions of pre-Buddhist practices.¹¹ According to the Buddhist litterer, it is well known that to settle disputes that arose with regards to questions of devotional activities the Buddha had to recommend some of these devotional practices.¹²

As pointed out earlier in Sri Lanka worship of trees and deposit of corporal remains of important personalities in the tomb was an important religious belief of the pre-Buddhist people in Sri Lanka which were incorporated with Buddhist culture. The practice of Abhisheka or ceremonial bath of religious symbols also one of the most important practices which were absorbed into the Buddhist culture from an early stage of Buddhism.

Origin of Ceremonial bath

The ceremonial bath is known as the coronation ceremony or "Abhisheka" is one of the most important pre-Buddhist practices that assimilated into Buddhism and perform with Buddhist rites. Thus, various words and terms have been used to define the word Abhisheka.¹³ It can be traced back to the origin of the kingship. The coronation can be considered as one of the major forces to confirm the power and authority of the king. It contributes the king to spread his hegemony among his subjects. This ceremony has been impacted by many religious thoughts, i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism¹⁴ and Jainism. In the Buddhist tradition, the Buddha is recognized and treated as the king of the Buddhist world and is honored performing 'Buddha Abhisheka' similar to the regular coronation ceremony of the kingship.¹⁵ As a Theravada Buddhist country, in Sri Lanka, the coronation ceremony of Buddhism is performed related to the three Buddhist symbols continually until today from the 3rd-century BCE., onwards. This festival is considered as the best way of giving the maximum respect for the Buddha.

In Buddhist literature, several terms were used to imply the Buddha as the king of the Buddhist world. As mentioned in the Pāli Thripitaka, the Buddha said that "I'm the king and I'm the Dharma rāja" (king of the Dharma or doctrine).¹⁶ In **Vimanavatthu**, the Buddha was called as 'Nara Dēva' - god of the people.¹⁷ Also, the Buddha was known as "Naranāyaka – the leader of the people and 'Narasabha' – the chief of the people. The word "Rāja Rāja" (king of kings) has also been used to introduce the Buddha. The texts of Mahāyāna tradition usually reveals that the Buddha has been treated as 'Dharma rāja'.¹⁸ Therefore, some specific Buddhist rites were introduced to perform functions similar to the king. In the Mahāyāna

¹¹ Walpola Rahula, **History of Buddhism in Ceylon, (3rd Century B.C.- 10th Century A.D.)**, Colombo: M.D. Gunasena & Co. LTD. 1966, (1st publication-1956), pp. 190-192.

¹² **Ibid.**

¹³ The various words and terms have been used to define the word *Abhisheka*. It is possible to construct a composite meaning of *Abhisheka* as follows: anointing, inaugurating or consecrating (by sprinkling water), the inauguration of a king, royal function; the water or liquid used at an inauguration; religious bathing, ablution; bathing of the divinity to whom worship is offered. Jyotindra Jain, 'The Ritual of Bath,' in **Homage to Shravana Belgola**, Bombay, 1980, p. 51; **A Sanskrit-English Dictionary**, p. 71.

¹⁴ **Encyclopedia of Buddhism**, ed. G. P. Malalasekera, Colombo: Government of Ceylon, p. 1961, pp. 125-129.

¹⁵ Jyotindra Jain, 'The Ritual of Bath', in **Homage to Shravana Belgola**, Bombay, 1980, p. 51.

¹⁶ Chandra Wickramagamage, **Coronation of Buddha and Anointing Ceremony**, in Sinhala, Tharanga Printers, Maharagama, 1986, p. 2.

¹⁷ **Sutthanipatha**, Bhudhajayanti Tripitaka, 1979, p. 176, V. 557.

¹⁸ **The Saddharmapūṇḍarīka Sūtra**, xxxvii, Sacred Books of the East, Vol. xxi, p. 388.

tradition, the coronation ceremony including bathing and other rituals refers to the most important step that should perform by a royal prince to become a 'chakkavatti'.¹⁹ When the coronation bath of the prince, he was sat on a golden chair and bathed using a golden pot filled with fragrant water. A similar practice has been followed as the tenth stage of perfection of the Bodhisattva to attend the Buddhahood. At that ceremony, Bodhisattva was sat on a lotus flower and bathed by using the fragrant water.²⁰ After the ceremonial bath, the prince named the 'cakkavatti' king and the Bodhisattva named the Buddha or the Jina; the person who won the whole world. As mention in the Tāntric text, **Śrī Cakra-Sambhāra - Cakra** there are six types of pots were used to perform the Buddha Abhisheka, i.e. Abhisheka with Udaka (water), Mukuta (crown), Vajra (indestructible), Ghantā (bell), Nāma (name) and Ācāraya (preceptor).²¹ These six Abhishekas were of the nature of six Tathāgathas.

1. The initiation with Udaka (water) is the nature of ideal knowledge and it represents Aksobhaya.
2. The initiation with Mukuta (crown) represents the equalizing knowledge (Samatajñāna) and it represents Ratnasambhava.
3. Initiation with Vajra refers to discriminative knowledge. It stands for Amitabha.
4. The initiation with Ghantā connotes the performance of duties and it represents Amoghsiddhi.
5. The initiation with Nāma represents the knowledge of pure Dharma Dhātu and it represents Vairocana.
6. And the last kind of Kalasābhisheka by Ācāraya represents pure knowledge (Vajrajñāna).²²

This tradition was named the six pots coronation. Other than that the coronated Buddha was offered by golden garlands and various other ornaments similar to the king. After the Buddha's Parinibbāna (demise) the Thūpa (relics), the Bodhi Tree, and the Buddha statue were considered as the three sacred objects which preserved the memory of the Buddha and also represented him. These three symbolic objects were coronated with water considering a great opportunity to treat the Buddha as a king. Thus, it is clear that the coronation bath has been played a vital role in the South Asian Buddhist culture protecting the dignity of the Buddha.

Ceremonial Bath in Sri Lankan Buddhist Culture

The ceremonial bath of the Buddha statue is a special ceremony that was developed related to Buddhism in Sri Lanka. According to Sri Lankan Chronicles, the first coronation festival for the Buddha statue has been held by the king Dātusēna in the fifth century CE. King Dātusēna held a beautiful coronation ceremony for the Buddha statue at the Mahabodhi temple and decorated it with golden ornaments.²³ Then again in the time of Kassapa I, the elder son of the king Dātusēna, the chief commander named Migāra, built a house over the Buddha statue at the Abhayagiri monastery (higher than the Buddha statue named 'Abhisheka Buddha' or 'Abhisheka Jina' which was built earlier at this premises) and requested permission to hold a dedication festival of 'Abhisheka'.²⁴ Thus, it is clear that there was a special type of Buddha statue known as 'Abhisheka Buddha' in Sri Lanka even from the period of the fifth century CE.

¹⁹ **Dhigānīkhaya**, ed. Velitara Sri Gnanavasa, Colombo: Vidya Sagara Press, 1929, p. 98.

²⁰ Chandra Wickramagamage, 1986, **op.cit**, pp. 2-3.

²¹ **Encyclopedia of Buddhism**, ed. G. P. Malalasekera, Colombo: Government of Ceylon, p. 1961, pp. 125-129.

²² **Ibid.**

²³ **Māhāvamsa**, chap. XXXVIII, v. 55.

²⁴ **Māhāvamsa**, chap, XXXIX, vs. 6-7.

Though there are no more details in this regard, it is clear that the festival known as 'Buddha Abhiśeka' was performed at this monastery. The special group of monastic community who represented the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition known as Dhammaruchika in Abhayagiri Vihāra played a great role in introducing the 'Buddha Abhisheka' ceremony.²⁵ This has been further confirmed by the inscription dated to the 10th century from the monastery known to have come within the fold of Abhayagiri vihāra at Buddhannegala. It records that the rites of abhisheka was known and practiced at this monastery.²⁶

From the sixth, seventh centuries onwards, these new Buddhist traditions must have acquired a substantial amount of adherents in Sri Lanka. According to the commentary of the **Mahāvairocana Śūtra**, the abhisheka was an essential rite that had to be performed before a teacher of the tantra began to instruct a disciple.²⁷ Vjrabodhi and Amoghavajra the great Tantrayana teachers who were the guest at Abhayagiri vihāra during the end of the seventh century must have added much to the contents and prestige of Tāntrayāna Buddhism in Sri Lanka also given important details regarding the Abhisheka that was prevailed in the monastery at Abhatagi. Amoghavajra's description shows that Samantrabhadra (Tantric teacher) is said to have performed the ceremony of Vajradhātu and Garbhadhātu Maṇḍalas and to have taught the secrets of the five abhishakas.²⁸ Chinese records further reveal that the Buddhist monk Vajrabodhi erected kanjo-dan a place meant for the ceremony of sprinkling water on the heads of devotees (Abhisheka), at the temple where he lived in China.

The monastic community at Mihintale contributed to developing this tradition in Sri Lanka. Mihintale tablets of Mahinda IV, contain details of the coronation ceremony or 'Buddha Abhisheka' which was held for the Buddha statue in the temple. It contains details of offerings and other provisions for the 'relic house' or Dā-ge of the monastery.²⁹ It mentioned that the provision was made "to the official at the place of business who provides a cup in which to take oil for the function (of the statue) of the Buddha in the relic-house and an unbleached clothe for filtering water and the same articles for the image-house. In that tablet the word 'dāgebudbisovat' implying the coronation ceremony or 'Buddha abhisheka' which was held for the Buddha statue at the relic-house.³⁰

In this junction, it should be mention here that the architectural remains of an important structure, near a pond which is on the right-hand side of the southern entrance to the Abhayagiri stūpa at Abhayagiri monastery known as Abhiśeka man□d)APA.³¹ As pointed out by S.B. Hettiaratchi this building was perhaps used for bathing Buddha statues and other sacred items.³² It reveals the most important practice which was prevalent in the monastery. There are stone conduits on three side of the building leading to the pond are made to retain sufficient water in them. Opposite the entrance to the building is a narrow stretch of ground

²⁵ Chandra Wikkragama, **op.cit**, 1986, pp. 13-14.

²⁶ **Ibid**, 196.

²⁷ Gunawardana, **op. cit**, 1979: 32.

²⁸ Lal Mani Joshi, **Studies in Buddhist Culture in India, (7th century and 8th century A.D.)**, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas., 2002, (1967 1st publication), p. 168.

²⁹ **Epigraphia Zeylanica**, Vol. I, 1912, pp.75-113.

³⁰ **ibid**.

³¹ S. B. Hettiaratchi, T.G. Kulatunga, **Abayagiriya**, Colombo: State Printing Corporation. 1993, p. 11

³² **ibid**, p. 11.

paved in the stone slab at the middle is a small enclosure on each side of which are two raised platforms with an entrance to each. These two may have been used for depositing various items that were brought here for anointing. The water used for anointing was subsequently collected in conduits, and in the pond nearby would have been used for various purposes as sacred water. At the foot of each platform, there are holes carved out of the stone slab, which is perhaps meant to place the pots of fragrant water used for a ceremonial bath.³³ Most probably this building was used for the coronation bath of Buddha statues. However, it should be mentioned here that this structure reveals valuable details regarding the ritual culture of early Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

In some sources, there are pieces of evidence that even in the British colonial era, this image bathing ceremony was practiced in some temples in Sri Lanka. The ceremony was related to the annual image washing in the New Year season. The Buddhist monks washed the statues in the temple while a lay service tenant was holding a mirror.³⁴ The Buddhist monks only looked through the mirror to see the statue. The Gangaramaya temple in Kandy was one of the temples which have pieces of evidence on it. But this ritual is rarely visible now. Only in the temple of the Bodhi Tree, the Buddhist monks' bath a Buddha statue with the New Year Ceremony. The bathing ceremony is performed at the Buddha image in the main shrine at the Bodhi temple in Anuradhapura.³⁵

Summary and Conclusion

According to these references, it is clear that the Abhisheka ceremony of Buddhism is not only a part of the customs and traditions of the Theravāda Buddhists in Sri Lanka but also in the views of Mahāyāna too. Even in pre-Buddhist cultural practices, we can observe these kinds of traditions. It is believed that it was a custom to bless for the prosperity of Buddhists through the blessings of the Buddha using water.

Figure 01 Abhisheka Mandapaya Abhaygiri Vihāra



³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *Service Tenures Register*, Kandy, Vol. I, National Archives Kandy, 1872, p. 28.

³⁵ Anuradha Seneviratne, 'Customs, Rituals, and Traditions Grown around the Maha Bodhi tree', in *Maha Bodhi Tree in Anuradhapura Sri Lanka*, H.S.S. Nissanka (ed.), Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd., 1994, p. 210.

Figure 02 Abhisheka Mandapaya Abhaygir Vihāra



Figure 03 Abhisheka Mandapaya Abhaygiri Vihāra



