

# VAJRAYĀNA BUDDHISM IN MEDIAEVAL SRI LANKA: A SURVEY OF HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

**Ven. Rangama Chandawimala Thero**

Buddhist College of Singapore

Email: chandawimala@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

As a result of the liberal attitude of the Abhayagiri fraternity towards heterodox Buddhism, not only Mahāyāna but also Vajrayāna Buddhism came to Sri Lanka around the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. It could be that new developments of Buddhist doctrinal interpretations which arose in India would have come to Sri Lanka first before they spread to other countries, because of Sri Lanka's close proximity to the mainland. There are, in fact, local and foreign historical records and a greater collection of historical and liturgical monuments and artefacts in the island related to Vajrayāna Buddhism.

**Keywords:** Vajrayāna Buddhism; historical

## **Introduction**

The *Nikāyasaṃgrahaya*, Chinese and Tibetan records provide information about Vajrayāna Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Beside the historical records, fragments of *Ratnakūṭa Sūtra* found in the Cetiyaḡiri Monastery; images of Vajrasattva, Jambala, and Goddess Tārā, dhāraṇīs taken from esoteric sūtras such as the *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgrahasūtra* and the *Āryasarvatathāgatā-dhiṣṭhānahṛdayadhātu-*

*karaṇḍamudra-nāma-dhāraṇī-mahāyānasūtra*, votive tablets with the most popular short formula of *pratītyasamutpāda*, ‘*ye dharmāḥ hetuprabhavā...*’ and another popular Tārā mantra, ‘*Oṃ Tāre Tuttāre Ture Svāhā*’, and the protective blessing sūtras found in the *Piruvāṇāpotvahanse* (the Book of Protective Blessings), Vihāras represent Vajrayāna tradition and Tantric Buddhism such as *Dhāraṇī Gṛha* shrine at Galvihāra in Polonnaruva, the shrine hall of Nālandā Vihāra in Mātale etc (Chandawimala, 2016). can be cited here as evidence for Vajrayāna or Esoteric Buddhism in mediaeval Sri Lanka. However, this article covers only the local and foreign historical records about Vajrayāna Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

The *Nikāyasamgrahaya*, which was composed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century C.E., provides details about the arrival of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The *Nikāyasamgrahaya* used the term ‘Vājiriyavāda’ in the text to signify the Vajrayāna. ‘*Vājiriyā*’ is the ancient Sinhala term used for the Sanskrit word *Vajra*, diamond. As the *Nikāyasamgrahaya* records the Vājiriyavāda arrived in Sri Lanka from Vajraparvata of India during the reign of King Matvalasen (846-866 C.E.). King Matvalasen has been identified as the Sena I, who preferred the teaching of the Abhayagiri to that of the Mahāvihāra. The *Mahāvamsa* recounts that the king practised religious rituals unheard of before and it is said that *bhikkhūs* and *bhikkhuṇīs* found those activities contained features something in excess when they are compared them with facts given in Pāli texts (Geiger, 1996). King Sena I appeared to have practised the new teachings introduced by Vajraparvata *Bhikkhūs*. It is very interesting that in his investigation of the birthplace of the Vajrayāna Buddhism, Chandra asserts that Vajraparvata means Sriśailam in South India. He says: “It is Śrīparvata of the Tibetan traditions, Vajraparvata in Sri Lanka, and the Diamond Mountain in Korea. Vajrayāna developed here hence is termed Vajraparvata-vāsi-nikāya in the Sri Lankan work *Nikāya-samgrahaya*” (Chandra, 1995). Chandra’s view further strengthens the notions that the *Nikāyasamgrahaya* reference to the Vajraparvata denotes the above mentioned location and hence, the teaching is Vajrayāna.

However, archaeological artefacts show that Vajrayāna Buddhism could have been prevailed in Sri Lanka much earlier than the time given in the *Nikāyasamgrahaya*. Beside that the best evidence to support this hypothesis is the Chinese accounts of the biographies of two eminent Indian Tāntric masters namely Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra, who visited in Sri Lanka in the 8 century C.E. (Iiang, 1945)

The *Nikāyasamgrahaya* which represents the orthodox Mahāvihāra views shows a strong negative attitude towards the esoteric Buddhism. It records that king Sena I, being stupid, accepted Vajrayāna Buddhism in the same manner that a grasshopper reaches the flame thinking it is gold, but unaware of its danger (*Nikāyasamgrahaya*, 1997). In this manner the *Nikāyasamgrahaya* vehemently criticises this King for accepting Vajrayāna Buddhism. The *Nikāyasamgrahaya* further says that in accepting Vajrayāna he committed a transgression. As a result of this bad action he lost his kingdom, betrayed the country to South Indians and died in Polonnaruva. However, king Sena I seemed to have been delighted with the new teaching and he had been admonished by Vajrayānist masters emphasising that the Vajrayāna was a top secret preaching (Sin: *rahas bana*) (Geiger, 1996). The term “*rahas bana*” that *Nikāyasamgrahaya* used to designate Vajrayāna teaching is very much compatible with the word “*guhya dharma*” of esoteric Buddhism. In the *Sarvatathāgatattvasamgraha*, when the ‘Maṇḍala of the Four Symbols’ (*Caturmudrāmaṇḍala*) is taught to the pupil, the master gives instructions to the neophyte not to reveal this secret teaching to anyone else. The reason for this is people are ignorant, holders of wrong views, and do evil actions and so on. Therefore, the information given in the *Nikāyasamgrahaya* on the secret practice of the Vajrayāna Buddhism is acceptable.

In explaining about sectarian works, the *Nikāyasamgrahaya* gives a long list of 34 books that belonged to various Buddhist schools, namely, Vaitulyavāda (Mahāyāna), Vajraparvata *Nikāya* (Vajrayāna) and other non-Theravāda schools such as Hemavata and Rājagirika. Mudiyanse has taken a laudable effort to identify those Mahāyāna and Tantric works listed in the *Nikāyasamgrahaya*, comparing them

with the Chinese and the Tibetan translations of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon and the Taisho edition of the Chinese *Tripitaka* (Mudiyanse, 1967). Elsewhere we observed that the *Nikāyasamgrahaya* was written around the 14<sup>th</sup> century C.E. but Tantric Buddhism would have arrived in Sri Lanka approximately in the 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E., 500 years earlier than the *Nikāyasamgrahaya*. Other than in the *Nikāyasamgrahaya* we do not find any other source in Sri Lanka which provides information about the Mahāyāna and the Vajrayāna texts. However, we can infer that at least some of those texts mentioned in the *Nikāyasamgrahaya* would have been in circulation among Vajrayāna followers in Sri Lanka. To support this view we can quote the evidence from the *Nikāyasamgrahaya*. It records that due to its secret practice, the Vajrayāna was protected as a “*secret dharma*”, and it was circulated among stupid, ignorant and ordinary community in the island of Lan̄kā from the time of King Sena I (Nedimala, 1997).” Perhaps, its ‘secret practice’ was the secret of its success in Sri Lanka. The best example is that even after the unification of the *Saṅgha*, this practice still continued and some of its elements are being practised up to the present knowingly or unknowingly.

The *Nikāyasamgrahaya* is very important as it refers to a number of non-Theravāda works by their names. Altogether, there are thirty four books mentioned therein, in which twenty-six of them are considered as Tantric works. The *Ratnakūṭa Sūtra* is mentioned there as a work of Andhakas. We know that some esoteric sūtras such as the *Tathāgataguhyā* belong to the collection of *Ratnakūṭa* (Pinnacle of Gems). It is possible that Andhaka *bhikṣū*s, who lived in Andhakaratt̄ha would also have followed Tantric Buddhism. The following Tantric works can be seen in the list given in the *Nikāyasamgrahaya*.

1. *Gūḍhavinaya*
2. *Māyājālatantra*
3. *Samājatantra*
4. *Mahāsamayattatvantra*
5. *Tattvasamgrahatantra*
6. *Bhūtaḍāmaratantra*

7. *Vajrāmṛtatantra*
8. *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*
9. *Dvādaśacakratantra*
10. *Herukādbhūtantra*
11. *Mahāmāyātantra*
12. *Padankṣepatantra*
13. *Catuṣpiṣṭatantra*
14. *Parāmarddhatantra*
15. *Mārīcudbhavatantra*
16. *Sarvabuddhatantra*
17. *Sarvaguhyantra*
18. *Samuccayatantra*
19. *Mārīci kalpa*
20. *Herambha kalpa*
21. *Trisamaya kalpa*
22. *Rājakalpa*
23. *Vajragandharakalpa*
24. *Mārīciguhya kalpa*
25. *Śuddhasamuccaya kalpa*
26. *Māyāmārīci kalpa*
27. *Ratnakūṭa sūtra of the Āndrakas*

One thing is clear to us from this long list of Tantric books: Tantric Buddhism or Vajrayāna Buddhism was known ~~in Sri Lanka~~ in mediaeval Sri Lanka. The *Nikāyasamgrahaya* mentions that all the aforementioned collections, except the Ratnakūṭa, are the compilations of the Vajraparvatavāsins or more commonly known as Vajrayānists. However, the *Mahāvamsa* is completely silent about the arrival of the Vajrayāna in Sri Lanka.

According to Chinese sources Vajrayāna masters such as Vajrabodhi (*Chin-kang-chih*) and Amoghavajra (*Pu-k'ung-chin-kang*) visited Sri Lanka and lived at Abhayagiri Vihāra (Wu-wei-wang-si in Vajrabodhi's records, which means Abhayarājavihāra). The former had lived six months there and taught Tantric Buddhism in Rohana kingdom. After visiting Sri Lanka, Vajrabodhi sailed with Persian merchants and went to twenty countries. The aim of Amoghavajra's visit to Sri Lanka was to collect Tantric Buddhist books to be taken to China. This story is very important as it tells us that many Tantric Buddhist books existed in Sri Lanka. Amoghavajra was a royal preceptor of the Tang Dynasty Court (618-907 C.E.) and had a great reputation in China, India and Sri Lanka as well. He arrived in Sri Lanka during the time of King Aggabodhi VI (otherwise known as Silāmeghavaṇṇa) (741-781 C.E.).

When he arrived in Ceylon, the king sent a deputy to welcome him. The guardsmen on foot and horse were stationed in ranks along the street when he entered the city. The king, having made obeisance at his feet, invited him to stay in the palace to be entertained for seven days. The king himself bathed Amoghavajra daily, using golden barrels [water containers] full of fragrant waters. The crown prince, the queens, and the ministers acted similarly.

Above cited passage explains the great reputation and honour that Amoghavajra enjoyed. While he was in Sri Lanka, the Indian king invited him back to India to get his blessings to get rid of the chaos faced during that time. Another important fact we find in the story of Amoghavajra is that he had a teacher in Sri Lanka. He studied not only with Vajrabodhi, but also with another Indian monk called Samantabhadra who lived in Sri Lanka. As Japanese Shingon tradition asserts he also was called Nāgabodhi or Nāgañña, the preceptor of Vajrabodhi. Master Samantabhadra must have lived at the Abhayagiri monastery.

His virtues were well known in South India. Perhaps he went to the Land of the Lions (Simhala=Ceylon) to preach esoterism.

He is the same person who under name of Dharmagupta lived in the monastery of Nālanda and under the same name of Fugen Ajari (Samantabhadra-ācārya?) visited Ceylon.

Amoghavajra received his *abhinēka* under his guidance. It is said that Amoghavajra helped his master Vajrobodhi with translation of Sanskrit works into Chinese. After the latter's death he went to Sri Lanka in search of Tantric books there. It is very significant and interesting to know that he went to Sri Lanka but not to India where Tantrism originated. Amoghavajra was thoroughly trained by Ācārya Samantabhadra in the doctrine of Yoga of the *Chin-kang-ting ching* [*Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha*] and the method of erecting altar in accordance with the *Mahākaruṇāgarbhadhātu-maṇḍala* in the *Vairocana Sūtra*. Before leaving he had collected more than five hundred sūtras and commentaries of esoteric Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Being one of the most important Esoteric Buddhist masters in China Amoghavajra translated Sanskrit Tantric texts into Chinese.

It is certain, in any case, that Amoghavajra returned to China in 746, bringing back with him a large number of texts which he had obtained in Ceylon with the help of the king, and of which more than eighty were translated under his supervision before his death in 774.

Amoghavajra is considered as the most capable and energetic personage among Indian Buddhist masters who propagated Buddhism there and his name can be found in the several hundred of books in the Chinese canon. Not only he translated esoteric Buddhist books into Chinese, he also acted as the Royal Preceptor (*Rājaguru*) for three emperors namely *Hsüan-tsung* (712-756), *Su-tsung* (756-762) and *Tai-tsung* (762-779). Therefore, regarding Sri Lankan Esoterism, Amoghavajra's role cannot be taken as that of a mere visitor. His contribution to Sri Lankan Vajrayāna practices must be far more significant.

Beside the Chinese sources, some Tibetan sources also explain some important stories related to Tantric Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Tāranātha (Tib. *Kn dga' snying poin*

1575 C.E.), a Tibetan Buddhist monk who lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century C.E., made his well-known history, Tāranātha's History of Buddhism in India. Another interesting work we come across is *Buddha's Lions or Eighty Four Siddhas*. Both texts provide information about Ratnākaśānti or Śānti-pā. According to the accounts of Eighty Four Siddhas, among the six door-keeper Buddhist scholars (*Dvārapaṇḍitas*), the eastern door-keeper Ācārya Ratnākaraśānti arrived in Sri Lanka on state invitation by the Sri Lankan king, whose name has been given in the text as Kabina. Even though some information in this work regarding Sri Lankan Buddhism seems to be incorrect, it explains how a Sri Lankan king and people received Śāntipā and his delegation with great honour. Guru Śāntipā lived in Sri Lanka for years and he taught Tantric Buddhism to the islanders and then he left for Vikramaśīlā. Gunawardhana quotes Grünwedel and says Tāranātha has recorded the visit of a prominent Buddhist scholar Ratnākaraśānti, who was the abbot of Somapuri monastery during that time. He came to Sri Lanka with an envoy dispatched by the Sri Lankan king. On his arrival he had brought two hundred Mahāyāna texts. He taught for seven years in Sri Lanka and it is recorded that he maintained the sūtra schools. Tāranātha returned to India keeping five hundred Mahāyāna disciples in Sri Lanka. However, in the English translation of Tāranātha's account we do not find information on Śānti-pā's visit to Sri Lanka.

Tāranātha also records that another Tibetan monk named Vanaratana too visited Sri Lanka.

The precious Great Paṇḍita was born [in 1384 A.D. – Roerich n] as the son of king in the town of Sadnagara in eastern India [Chittagong District, East Bengal]... Then having become an ascetic he journeyed to Ceylon. He spent six years there.

To conclude this short article I want to say that through the scanty information we have shown here, it is apparent that Vajrayāna Buddhism also played an important role once in the history of Sri Lanka in greater sense and the historical records we have cited here prove that hypothesis.

## References

- Alex Waymen and Tajima, R. (1992). *Study of Mahāvairocana Sūtra*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.
- Chandawimala, R. (2016). *Heterodox Buddhism: The School of Abhayagiri*. Colombo: Quality Printers,
- Chandra, L. and David L. Snellgrove. (1981). *Sarva- Tathāgata- Tattva-Saṅgraha – Facsimile Reproduction of a Tenth Century Sanskrit Manuscript from Nepal reproduced New Delhi.*
- Geiger, W. tr. (1996). *Cūlavamsa: Being the More Recent Part of the Mahāvamsa*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.
- Gunawardana, R.A.L.H. (1979). *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Medieval Sri Lanka*. Arizona: The University of Arizona Press.
- James B. Robinson. Berkeley tr. (1979). *Buddha's Lions = Caturāsīti-siddha-pravṛtti : The lives of the eighty-four siddhas / by Abhayadatta ; translated into Tibetan as Grub thob brgyad cu rtsa bzhi 'i lo rgyus by Smon-grub Shes-rab; translated into English. Calif.: Dharma Publishing.*
- Lama Chimpa and Alaka Chattopadhyaya. Tr. (2004). *Tāranātha's History of Buddhism in India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private.
- liang, Chou Yi. (1945). Tantrism in China. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 8(3/4), 241-332.
- Mudiyanse, N. (1967). *Mahāyāna Monuments in Ceylon*. Colombo: M.D. Gunasena.
- Nedimala, D. (1997). *Nikāyasamgraha*. Sri Lanka: Buddhist Cultural Centre.
- Raffaello, O. (1981). *A Study of Chinese Documents Concerning the Life of the tantric Buddhist Patriarch Amoghavajra (A.D. 705-774)*, unpublished PhD dissertaion, Princeton University, University Microfilms International.

\*\*\*\*\*