



## First Buddhist Council in Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

This research paper discusses the spread of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and describes the first Buddhist council in Sri Lanka, as well as the first stupa built in Sri Lanka during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa. It also discusses the arrival of the sangamitta in Ceylon.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Sri Lanka, First Council, Ceylon, Devanampiyatissa, Thuparama Dagoba.

### Transfer of Buddhavacana from India to Ceylon

According to the tradition preserved in the Sri Lankan chronicles the great Emperor Asoka organized a network of missions to preach the teachings of Buddha in and outside India. One such mission was sent to *Tambapanni* which is identified with Ceylon or Sri Lanka. The chief of this mission was *Thera Mahindra*, the son of King Asoka and was accompanied by four other monks, viz., *Itthiya*, *Uttiya*, *Sambala* and *Bhaddasala*.<sup>1</sup>

However, there are many objections raised by V.A. Smith against the legend of the mission to Ceylon.<sup>2</sup> Firstly, Asoka has mentioned in his Rock-edict All that he had sent missions to foreign countries but he does not mention Ceylon. Secondly, Smith holds that *Tambapanni* in the inscription refers to *Tinneveli* district in South India and not to Ceylon. Thirdly, he mentions that the Rock edicts do not mention the name of *Mahinda* and the accounts given in the chronicles are so much woven with supernatural elements that they cannot be trusted at all. But on the basis of certain reasons, scholars have tried to identify *Tambapanni* with Ceylon as it has been found that modern *Tinneveli* in South India had the name of *Sembil* during the time of Asoka. Secondly, from the foreign records, too, we come to know that Ceylon was called *Tambapanni*.<sup>3</sup> Further in the *Dipavamsa* text<sup>4</sup>, the name of the island during the Buddha's time is given as *Tambapanni*. Moreover, as any name of the officers of the king or of the prince is not found on any inscription of Asoka, so the absence of the name of *Mahinda* cannot be,

doubted as to the historicity of *Mahinda's* missionary activities in Ceylon. Kern<sup>5</sup> opines that the fact that Buddhism was introduced into Ceylon in the days of Asoka is historical and not fiction.

*Mahinda's* arrival in Ceylon with his four companions and *Samanera Sumana* has been mentioned in a supernatural manner. He and his companions are said to have swum through the air and descended on the peak of the *Missaka* mountain, which is known in modern times as *Mahintale*.<sup>6</sup> At that time, King *Devanampiyatissa*, the son of *Mutasiva*, was the ruler. Though *Devanampiyatissa* was the second son of *Mutasiva*, he superseded his elder brother in intelligence and thus occupied the throne after his father. The *Mahavamsa*<sup>7</sup> describes the miracles that took place during the time of his ascending the throne. As soon as he became the king, he is said to have sent envoys to *Devanampiya* Asoka who not only welcomed them but also conferred upon them titles of honour and dignity. Asoka is also credited to have sent his ministers with gifts and a friendly message to the king to adopt Buddhism, which read, "I have taken refuge in the Buddha, his doctrine and his order. I have declared myself a lay disciple in the religion of the Sakya son,<sup>8</sup> seek then, even thou, the best of men, converting thy mind with believing heart, refuge in these best of gems."<sup>9</sup>

### Conversion of Devanampiyatissa to Buddhism

On the day when *Mahinda* reached *Missaka* mountain, the festival of *Jethamula* was being celebrated there. King *Devanampiyatissa* with his family and a retinue of forty thousand persons also went to the mountain on a hunting expedition. There, a divine thought that the king must see *Thera Mahinda* and as such assumed the form of a Red Deer and started grazing near the king.<sup>10</sup> When the king followed the Deer in order to shoot it, the Deer went to the place where the *Thera* was standing and then disappeared.<sup>11</sup> The *Thera*, seeing the king called him by his name 'Tissa'. The king could not guess who the caller was and when



the *Thera* himself ascertained the dilemma of the king, *Mahinda* told the king that he was a follower of the Buddha who had come to -Jambudvipa.<sup>12</sup> As soon as the king heard *Thera's* voice, he instantly laid his arrow aside and took a seat on one side.<sup>13</sup> Thereafter, *TheraMahinda* preached to the king the *culahatthipadaSutta* with the result that the king along with his forty thousand attendants became convert unto the three refuges.

The king thereupon extended an invitation to *Mahinda* and his companions and sent a chariot for the purpose. But according to the *Sadhammasangaho*, all of them again rose into the air and descended to the east of Anuradhapura. There the king himself received them, taking the alms-bowl from *TheraMahinda's* hand and led him and his companions into his palace.<sup>14</sup>

At the palace, *Mahinda* recited the *Petavatthu*, the *Vimanavatthu* and the *Sacca Samyuttas*<sup>15</sup> before an audience which comprised princes, princesses, and many other persons. All the listeners were soon converted to Buddhism after listening to the teachings of Buddha.

At the end of the preaching of the Dhamma, the king offered the royal pavilion in the Meghavana Garden to the distinguished guests for lodging. When King *Devanamapiyatissa* came the next day to visit the monks and learnt that they were very much pleased with their lodgings the king dedicated the MahameghavanaGarden<sup>16</sup> to them which later on became the site of Mahavihara or Tissarama.<sup>17</sup>

After some time, on the day when the relic of the right collar bone of the Buddha was laid down in the *Thuparama*, some thirty thousand individuals received the ordination.<sup>18</sup> Then on the day, when the great Bo-tree was planted, Queen Anula Devi along with five hundred maidens and five hundred women of the palace received the ordination from the *Thera Samghamitta*<sup>19</sup> who was the daughter of Asoka. All of these newly ordained

persons, attained arhathood very soon. The king's nephew (sister's son) Arittha also received the ordination along with five hundred men and attained arhatship.<sup>20</sup>

About the arrival of Samghamitta in Ceylon, the Siamese chronicle *Samgitivamsa* mentions that the king at first rejected her desire to visit Ceylon. But upon her insistence the king asked Samghamitta to take also the Bodhi branch along with her. On her arrival in Ceylon after seven days' voyage, King *Devanamapiyatissa* worshipped the Bodhi-branch for three days on the bank. Regarding the ordination of Queen Anula, the *Samgitivamsa*<sup>21</sup> refers that it took place on the fourteenth day after the arrival of Samghamitta. With the ordination of the Queen, the order of Nuns was established in Ceylon.

#### **Cause of Convening of the First council in Ceylon**

Such great was the zeal of *TheraMahinda* that in a very short span of time, the whole island started glowing with yellow robes of the converted monks. Observing such phenomenal popularity of the new religion, the king enquired of the *Thera*<sup>22</sup> whether the religion was established in the island of Ceylon. Upon this the *Thera* replied that although the religion has been established but it has not taken deep root. The king then asked as to when would the religion be deep-rooted. Upon this question, *TheraMahinda* replied "when a son born in Ceylon of parents residing in Ceylon, entering the order in Ceylon having studied the Vinaya expounds it, only then the Sasana (religion) will be called deep-rooted." The king thereafter enquired whether there was such a person. The *Thera* replied that a bhikkhu named Arittha was capable of doing that.<sup>23</sup> The king offered his help for the purpose whereby *Mahinda* requested him to erect a hall for that purpose.



This is the first stupa to be built in the country after the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka. Built in the time of king Devanampiyatissa (250BC-210BC) This was a stupa as well as an Aramic complex (monastery). Today ruins of this complex covers nearly 3½ acres. The stupa was built on the instructions of Mahinda Thero who brought Buddhism to the island to enshrine the right collar bone of Lord Buddha.



**ThuparamaDagoba - Anuradhapura - Sri Lanka**

The king had a big monastery *Thuparama* erected which resembled the one that was built by King Ajatasatru at the time of the Great Council at Rajagrha. He also ordered all the musicians to display their respective skills. When all the arrangements were completed in the *Thuparama*, the king accompanied by thousands of people reached there to witness the proceedings of the council, which was convened to recite the Dhamma in order to make the Sasana deep-rooted.

#### **Proceedings of the council**

On the first Pavarana day in the month of Kattika (Kartika), in the *Thuparama* monastery, one thousand monks had assembled. There was an elaborate arrangement of seats. *TheraArittha* occupied the seat of preacher (dhammasana) facing towards north. Facing the south, a seat was prepared for the *TheraMahinda*. When he asked *TheraArittha* to take his seat he, first of all, paid homage to the elder bhikkhus and took his proper seat. Thereafter sixty-eight *theras*, who were leaders of separate companies and were free from the asavas (defilements), controlled in their senses, skilled in the three kinds of knowledge and gifted with the supernatural powers were seated around the preacher's seat.<sup>24</sup> The younger brother of King *Devanamapiyatissa* named *TheraMantabhaya* along with five hundred monks also took his seat around the seat of *Arittha*. Besides these, there were some sixty thousand bhikkhus who witnessed

the proceedings of the council in which the Dhamma was recited.

*TheraArittha* first of all spoke on the source of Vinaya. As soon as this was spoken by the Venerable *Arittha*, there occurred a great thunder in the sky and the earth quaked in praise of this great achievement.<sup>25</sup> Afterward *TheraArittha* expounded the Vinaya Pitaka and explained the reason of the Buddha's admonitions and removed the scufflings of physical and vocal actions. Thereafter *TheraMahinda* rehearsed the Dhamma and the Vinaya by way of Pitakas, Nikayas, Angas and Units of texts as had been done in the past by *TheraMahakassapa*, *Yasa* and *MogaliputtaTissa* during the earlier councils and thus helped the roots of the Sasana descend in the island of Ceylon.

Thus this council, which, according to the Ceylonese tradition, was fourth in succession, was held in the reign of King *Devanamapiyatissa* 238 years after the death of Buddha with the help of one thousand monks. This council helped in the revival of Buddhavacana in the form which was given to it in the preceding councils.

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