



THE CEYLON PRESS HISTORY OF SRI LANKA 4

THE ISLAND THAT CULTIVATED PHILOSOPHY

SRI LANKA & THE MAKING OF NIRVANA

DAVID SWARBRICK

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“Would you tell
me, please,
which way I
ought to go
from here?”

ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN
WONDERLAND
LEWIS CARROLL. 1865.



ONE

The Dynasty
That Was
Almost
Textbook
Perfect

Sri Lanka's first recorded monarch founded a dynasty that would last over 600 years.

Expelled from either Bengal or Gujarat by his father, Prince Vijaya, the founder of an eponymous royal family, arrived on the island in 543 BCE, his landing kicking off recorded Sinhala history - though the first 100 years were anything but plain sailing.

Occasional bouts of regicide, lassitude, rebellion and navel gazing aside, the dynasty was as textbook perfect as it could reasonably be expected to be, and Prince Vijaya's thirty-six successors did all that was necessary to embed, improve, and make dominant the tiny state they had first instituted in the northwest of the land.

Not one to sit upon their laurels, and with a flair for marketing well ahead of their time, the Vijayans relaunched their realm barely a quarter of the way through their term, branding it as the kingdom of Anduraupura. They ruled it, according to the later Stone Book or Galpota Inscription, as human divinities, with an almost-but-not-quite-divine authority, the result of personal merit earned through their unusual, holistically philosophical approach to life and governance.

Their capital city would become one of the planet's longest continuously inhabited cities, enriched by cutting-edge industry, resources, infrastructure, administrators, soldiers, and all the many other disciplines critical to a prosperous ancient kingdom. Expanding with elastic ease, their kingdom soon grew far beyond the Rajarata, or traditional royal lands, to encompass most, if not all, of the island of what is Sri Lanka today.

To the east and south lay Ruhunurata, or Ruhana, a linked but junior principality founded around 200 BCE by Prince Mahanaga, brother to Devanampiya Tissa, the 7th or 8th monarch of the dynasty, and great-great-great-great-great nephew of Prince Vijaya himself.

To the west lay the third, much smaller principality of Mayarata, another linked family fiefdom, said to have been founded in the fourth century BCE by Prince Vijaya's nephew, Panduwasdev, the dynasty's third monarch.

Like light bulbs experiencing the almost reassuringly familiar power cuts and surges of the current Ceylon Electricity Board, a state company forever preoccupied by internal

disputes, both principalities rose, fell and rose again, depending on quite how strong the Andhraupuran king was at any one time.

All this was, of course, good wholesome leadership – but it was hardly groundbreaking. Seen from the perspective of the Shang, Hittites, Achaemenids, Ptolemaics, the Punks, Medians, Seleucids, Mauryas, and numerous other successful ancient dynasties, there was little to differentiate the Vijayans from the usual preoccupations with sound, hereditary hegemonic rule.



TWO

Changing
Everything
Forever

It was only halfway through the Vijayan rule that, in welcoming Mahinda, the Buddhist son of the Indian Emperor Ashoka, to the island, they did something that changed everything.

In this, their simple act of hospitality, they were to remodel their kingdom to be so profoundly different to any other, anywhere, as to endow it with an authority and energy so inimitable that, even today, it is protected and characterised by that misty encounter of 247 BCE.

Not only did the Vijayans welcome the young royal missionary, but they took him, with fervent haste, into their hearts, and with him, his evangelising philosophy of Buddhism.

Like all Buddhists, Mahinda did not acknowledge a supreme god, and, despite later shorthand references to Buddhism as a religion, it is more appropriately described as a philosophy. In welcoming Mahinda, the Vijayans crossed the line from standard overlords to philosopher-monarchs, governed by a formidable moral code and preoccupied with attaining transcendent bliss and well-being.

If being an island was the first and

foremost explanation for why Sri Lanka became Sri Lanka, Buddhism is, of course, its second explanation.

And a much more impressive one too, for it was a deliberate act – one that no less comprehensively than geography was to profoundly colour the country as if it had been dyed in Tyrian purple itself, that ancient and legendary dye, reserved by threat of death, for the clothes of the Roman emperors or the sails of Queen Cleopatra's royal barge.

Of course, not every king or subsequent island ruler made the moral imperatives of Buddhism their magnetic north. However, most tried to, and all were ultimately judged against its teachings as they are still today, by ordinary citizens in towns and villages across the land. For however ordinary Sri Lankans are, they are also unexpectedly religiously minded. Religion today, to the astonishment of many observers, is holding its own.

Around the world, experts and pollsters have had to rethink their views on what would befall religion as countries modernised. Atheists, agnostics and all who are religiously unaffiliated account for a shrinking 16% of the global population, even if

the balance of believers has a whiff of the secular in their spiritualism.

But as the West has become more secular, the rest has become less so - with God ever more likely to be best seen by Muslims or Hindus, but not Christians. Nor Buddhists, for Lord Buddha's followers make up a shrinking 7% of the world's population. But not in Sri Lanka, where Buddhism is estimated to hold its own at around 70% of the island's population.

Hardly surprising, then, that in repeated world polls, Sri Lanka is almost always found amongst the top five most religiously minded countries.



THREE

Suffer Not

Once, most of Asia was Buddhist - but such countries are now a rarity as alternative religions, politics, and secularism have shrunk their reach.

Yet in Sri Lanka, Buddhism remains an indisputable force, supported by over 6,000 monasteries, 30,000 monks, and its own government ministry. Other gods retain a modest purchase.

Christianity probably arrived sometime after Thomas the Apostle's visit to Kerala in 52 CE, though it wasn't until the Portuguese arrived in 1505 that things really got going. Even so, just 7% of today's population is Christian, less than the nearly 10% who practise Islam following the arrival of Arab traders in the seventh century CE, or the 13% practising Hinduism, here since even before the Chola invasion of the tenth century CE.

Buddhism and Sri Lanka are almost synonymous. It is impossible to understand one without comprehending the other.

The Buddhist mindset – that life is one of suffering, only alleviated by enlightenment through meditation, spiritual work and doing good – is stitched invisibly into every fibre of island life. From its earliest

beginnings, it has shaped the country's language and culture, morality, education, politics, family, finance, prosperity, health, work, and its approach to the environment.

Presidents, for example, may win elections. But they are not taken seriously until they have received the blessings of the Chief Prelates of the Malwathu and Asgiri chapters, the two most critical Buddhist orders in the land. Indeed, so great is the continual rush of ambitious politicians to the doors of both prelates that a traffic-light system might usefully be considered to ease the bottlenecks.

Although Buddhism aims to help its followers overcome suffering and achieve enlightenment, it cannot be said that paradise beckons with a visa stamp on arrival at Colombo's Bandaranaike Airport. Even so, despite invasion, colonisation, civil war, corruption, climate change, and bankruptcy, the country is miraculously identified in survey after survey as the one with the least number of people feeling distressed or struggling – a mere 14%, compared with, say, 51% in the UK or 41% in India.

No science, branch of logic, or forensic deduction can empirically

account for this. Still, only the most reckless gamblers would bet that Buddhism plays no part in this remarkable reality.

Of course, the nation has its fair share of crooks and gluttons, killers and narcissists, manipulators, attention seekers, lairs, and demigods, payday lenders, pimps, mobsters, sharpies and blackmailers. Buddhism has not made the country sin-free – but it has equipped it with a shrewdly guileless approach to life that marks it out as rare. And it is stylishly understated.

You won't notice it unless you can. You might glimpse it at an unruffled alms giving, or in passing a busy temple on a poya day; in the flash of blue sapphire, or cat's eye in a Nawarathna Ring; on tables piled with plenty of vegetarian food; in how money is used, school lessons taught; how people turn to traditional and Ayurvedic medicine as much as science when ill; or in its deep - though occasionally destructively nationalistic - reach into politics.

And most especially, you see it in homes. Life in Sri Lanka revolves around the family; its interests come before those of the individual in ways more profound, all-embracing, and

palpable than in most other countries.



FOUR

Shapes of
Philosophy

Everything came down to one man converting on one day in 247 BCE on a small mountain near Anduraupura, when he encountered Mahinda, the missionary son of an Indian Emperor.

The legacy of that meeting is encapsulated in a type of structure exclusive to Buddhist countries: stupas. The shape is made for perfect skylines as much as for philosophy. Bells, bubbles, pots, lotuses – even heaps of paddy: Sri Lanka's many thousands of stupas were built in a range of complementary shapes, and in such numbers that it is unlikely that a five-minute car journey anywhere in the country will fail to take you past one. They are still being constructed today – in Kandy, Kalutara and Kotmale, to name just three.

Whatever their shape or age, they are outstanding architectural creations, mesmerisingly graceful as they rise over their visiting pilgrims, offering them a place to meditate and a home for the relics and religious objects they venerate. The eleven most important are found in the island's heartland - Anuradhapura.

The largest stupa by far is Anuradhapura's Jetavanarama stupa, for centuries the world's only man-made structure to eclipse in height

two others (the ancient Egyptian pyramids), and still thought to contain, within its vast and elegant bulk, part of a belt tied by Lord Buddha.

Older and smaller is the Ruwanwelisaya stupa, whose relic chamber has resisted all attempts at excavation. Within it is said to be a vessel filled with Lord Buddha's artefacts, placed atop a seat of diamonds, encased in a golden container adorned with gems, and set inside a room decorated with murals and a silver replica of the Bo Tree.

The Mahavaṃsa Chronicle, from the fifth century CE, notes its sovereign importance: "The relic-chamber shall not shake even by an earthquake; flowers that were offered on that day shall not wither till the end of Buddha Gotama's Dispensation; the lamps that were kindled shall not be extinguished; the clay that was mixed with perfume and sandalwood shall not dry; even a single scratch shall not appear within the relic-chamber; stains shall not appear in any of the golden goods that were offered."

Older still is the Abhayagiri Stupa, whose monastery espoused Mahayana Buddhism, a progressive interpretation of Buddha's teachings considered

heretical by the country's more traditional Theravada Buddhists. It was here that the country's famous tooth relic found its first home.

Other, lesser stupas, rise around Anduraupura: the unusual shell of the square Naka Stupa; the Mirisawetiya Stupa, built to celebrate the defeat of the distinguished Tamil invader, King Elara in 158 BCE; the Lankarama stupa, built by the twice-times king, Valagamba; the ruins of the mysterious Milk Rice Stupa; the truncated remains of the Dakkhina Stupa, possibly constructed over the cremation ground of an avenging King, Dutugamunu; the Thuparamaya stupa, the island's earliest documented stupa; and the modern Sandahiru Seya Stupa, commissioned by the Rajapaksa family to commemorate the ending of the Civil War in 2009.

But great, beautiful, or important as any of these are, all are outdone by the modest Ambastala Stupa, a small edifice, and the first thing you see on climbing the near-2000 steps of the ancient monastery of Mihintale, situated just across Anuradhapura's massive Nuwara Wewa tank built by the first-century BCE king, Valagamba.

Still surrounded by the pillars of a later Vatadage erected protectively around it, the Ambastala Stupa looks deceptively unimportant.

But it is not.

FIVE

Meeting the
King

It was here, at this very spot, that Sri Lanka converted to Buddhism.

Where now stretches the Ambastala Stupa is precisely where the missionary prince, Mahindra, met and won over one of the earliest and most imaginative of the early Anuradhapuran kings, Devanampiya Tissa, the five-times great-nephew of Prince Vijaya himself.

The king, by then comfortably into a most successful reign, adopted the new religion or philosophy without, it seems, much second thought. Was this because it was simply so persuasive, or were there other advantages to be had, not least to deepen and entrench royal authority? Looking at this decision nearly 2,500 years later, there is little further insight to glean: "when speculation has done its worst," noted Samuel Johnson, "two and two still make four".

Whatever promoted it, Buddhism had arrived in Sri Lanka, well ahead of its later mainstream competitors in other countries, predating Christianity by almost 250 years and Islam by 850 years. And, of course, it stayed.

Its royal adoption ensured it caught on quickly, rapidly replacing the

Hindu, animist, and Aboriginal cults of the original or other early islanders.

And as it spread, it took with the ever-stronger political reach of the new kingdom, expanding its authority and character, embedding a common language that would become known as Sinhala, and a standard script that evolved from ancient Brahmi.

Religion became the glue of an unusually early unified state that, for well over a thousand years, would reach right across the island, invasions, rebellions, and occasionally competing statelets notwithstanding. Four hundred years of colonialism may have dented it, but it failed to stop it.

As the centuries pushed Buddhism into the corners of Asia, leaving it surviving in just a handful of countries such as Bhutan, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Mongolia, and Laos, in Sri Lanka, it remained unshakably firm, a flourishing rarity.

It is worth considering all this when you come across an ancient, much weathered, almost vanquished statue at the Ambastala Stupa, for this is said to be a likeness of King Devanampiyatissa himself.

The statue's very existence is remarkable, as there are almost no surviving paintings or sculptures of any of the country's nearly 300 kings today. That one should have endured - and this one at that - is an astonishing piece of good fortune.

Gaze into his stony eyes and consider how a single decision from this man did more than any other subsequent human intervention or invention to make Sri Lanka Sri Lankan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer. He was born in Colombo and, with few concessions to modernity, raised in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as a board director across departments including sales, art, and marketing, and at HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and a set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams, and overseen by several small schnauzers.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com.

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