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The Story of Mahinda, Sanghamitta, and the Sri Maha-Bodhi

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by

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Preface

“Go forth, my brethren, for the gain of many, for the welfare of many, out of compassion for the world.” In these words the Buddha, gave a message to the first sixty Arahants, and through them, to the Sangha for all time. This mandate was fully carried out for centuries, and in obedience to it, the Arahant Mahinda came to Lanka. On being asked by King Tissa who they were, the Arahant replied “Samaṇas are we, Oh King, Disciples of the King of Truth. Out of compassion for thee have we come from Jambudīpa.” The message he brought was the message of the Buddha Dhamma, the way to the attainment of happiness here and now and in the hereafter; from happiness which is transient, to the “Highest Happiness” the incomparable security of “Nibbāna.”



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ahinda’s work was twofold; one was to teach the “way to Happiness” and the other was the organisation of a national

Sangha, which was to maintain by practice and by teaching, the message of the Dhamma. In his first discourse, he most appropriately taught the essence of the Dhamma. In this celebrated discourse of "The Elephant Footprint," he pointed out that the Dhamma must not be merely accepted, but verified each one by himself. It is not enough to reason that as the elephant's footprint exceeds in size those of other animals so the Buddha Dhamma is greater than of any other teaching. One must follow up the elephant's footprint and see the lordly creature face to face. Even so must a follower of the Buddha Dhamma travel in the footsteps of the Buddha until he sees face to face, and realises the Truth of His Teaching. In this way Mahinda set forth the Dhamma, "in the spirit and in letter," as the Buddha had stated in His great message. The Buddha Dhamma is for all, and progress in the Way is gradual in keeping with the potentialities and capacities of the Wayfarer. There are some who "leave home" and dedicate their whole lives to the practice of the Dhamma. These are the true Sangha. But to the mass of mankind the Buddha showed a way to happiness. here and now, and in the hereafter. In reply to Dīghajānu's question; "Master we are men of the world who support wife and child. How can we attain happiness here and in the hereafter?" The Buddha replied that for happiness here one must practise "four

efforts." One must do one's work, whether in the King's service, or in agriculture, trade, commerce, arts and crafts, with zeal and earnestness. Next, one must guard what one has earned by rightful means, from fire and flood, thieves etc. Next one must see that one's expenditure does not exceed one's income (*Samājīvaakatta*), and finally, one must cultivate good friends. But this is not all. Economic well-being is no doubt essential for happiness here. For happiness hereafter the moral life is also essential. One must practise *sīla*, one must practise goodwill and service of one's fellow men. Finally, one must step by step, train oneself to attain that wisdom which will someday, somewhere, help one to take the road that leads to the undying happiness and security of Nibbāna (*paramam sukham*).

In these and other ways, the message that Mahinda brought, transformed the life of the people. It held out as a "Mahā Maṅgala," a "great blessing," the life of a good layman; "to support father, mother, to cherish wife and child; to follow a peaceful calling; this is a great blessing." The great commentator Buddhaghosa remarks that a "peaceful calling" includes "Social Service." He uses this very word and instances of "*anākulā ca kammantā*" are doing social service, planting gardens and groves, making bridges etc. History records the vast development of agriculture,

irrigation works, arts and crafts in ancient Buddhist Sri Lanka. Rice was exported to South India and cotton goods, gold and silver filigree work and Buddha images to ancient China. In the field of social welfare work, we read of a “medical service” with *raj vedhals*, royal hospitals, *bhesajja sāla*, dispensaries, and homes for the old and infirm, the orphan, the lame and the blind. The Buddha Dhamma created the Sinhala literature and the fine arts which were the artistic expressions of the Buddha’s way of life.

The Arahant Therī Saṅghamittā, true spiritual successor of Pajāpatī Gotamī, Bhaddakaccānā (Yasodharā), Dhammadinnā, and thousands of other Arahant therīs came to Lanka to help women who had the moral fibre and spiritual urge to live the Holy Life of the “Homeless.” The Sinhala Bhikkhunīs did not live lives of cloistered virtue. They too served society by maintaining maternity homes etc. Chinese records show that Sinhala therīs went to China to establish the order of Bhikkhunīs there.

To the two noble Brother and Sister, the Sinhala Buddhists owe an immense debt of gratitude. We too must not forget the message they brought and for which they spent their lives here. Their earthly remains too are with us. Our forefathers walked by the Light of the Dhamma. Let us hope that we and those who come after us, will do likewise. The Lamp that

Mahinda and Saṅghamittā lit centuries ago in Lanka,
should not be allowed to flicker or go out.

S. F. De Silva

(Former Director of Education and Ambassador
for Sri Lanka in China)

The Story of Mahinda, Saṅghamittā, and the Sri Mahā-Bodhi

*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma
Sambuddhassa*

To the Buddhists of Sri Lanka, each and every full moon day (*pasalovak poya*) of the year has a definite significance. Of these the most holy and the most significant is the Vesākha (Vesak) full moon, because it is connected with three events in the life of the Buddha—the birth, enlightenment and the final

passing away (*Parinibbāna*). Vesākha, therefore, is a triple anniversary most sacred to the Buddhists all over the world.

However, full moon days like *Poson* (June) and *Unduvap* (December) have a special significance to the Buddhists of Sri Lanka only. The reasons are well known to them and that is why they celebrate with whole-hearted devotion these full moon days.

To the Buddhists of Sri Lanka, *Unduvap* full moon day is a day of sacred memories in view of its unforgettable association with an emperor's daughter, a noble woman of great self-sacrifice and deep religious fervour, who came to this island and dedicated her life for the weal and happiness of the people, especially the womenfolk of Laṅkā.

She is none other than the Arahat Therī, Saṅghamittā, the daughter of Emperor Asoka of India, and the sister of Arahat Thera Mahinda, who introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BCE, on a full moon day of June (*Poson*).

Before we learn more about this saintly figure, let us look back into the island's history and see what the religious background of this country was, before the arrival of Mahā Mahinda, and Saṅghamittā.

Sri Lanka Before the Arrival of Mahinda

Although the recorded history of the Sinhala begins with the landing in Lanka of Vijaya in 543 BCE, the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka starts with the arrival of the Arahata Thera Mahinda, the son of Asoka the Great. Nevertheless, one cannot justifiably conclude that before the coming of Mahinda Thera, Buddha and His Teachings were altogether unknown to the people of this island. The Sri Lanka Chronicles, *Mahāvamsa* and *Dīpavamsa* and the *Samantapāsādikā*, the Vinaya commentary, give vivid descriptions of the Buddha Gotama's three visits to this island, made in the fifth year, and the eighth year after his Enlightenment.

When Mahā Mahinda arrived here in the reign of King Devānampiyatissa, 236 years after the landing of Vijaya, and expounded the Dhamma to the people, they were able to grasp quickly the Message of the Master, which spread throughout this island with surprising speed. This indicates that the sowing ground allotted to Mahā Mahinda had already been prepared by reason of earlier contacts with Magadha, where Buddhism flourished. We know that at the request of the ministers of Prince Vijaya, the Pandyan

King of Madhura sent his daughter to be the queen of Vijaya. She was accompanied by many maidens from the Pandyan Kingdom, craftsmen, and a thousand families of the eighteen guilds. Now these Pandyans were originally a Ksatriya race of the Aryans from the Madhyadesa, the scene of the Buddha's lifelong ministry.

We are also told that Panduvasudeva, the nephew and immediate successor of Vijaya, married Bhaddakaccānā, the beautiful daughter of the Buddha's own first cousin, King Pandu. Further, as we know from the Mahāvamsa, the non-Buddhist Indian sects like the *Nigaṇṭhas* and *Paribbājakas* were already in Sri Lanka. We must also infer that the contemporaries and the fellow countrymen of the Nigaṇṭhas also would have been here.

Sri Lanka being very close to the sub-continent of India, there would have been continuous intercourse between the peoples of the two countries. Also, Sri Lanka was often touched by sea-going vessels from India, and we can be sure that Buddhist traders came to this country and spoke of the Buddha and his Teachings to the inhabitants whom they met.

From the history of the *Devānampiyatissa* period we can gauge that the institutions which prevailed in India's middle country, Magadha, also prevailed in Sri

Lanka. These facts afford abundant evidence that the Buddha and His Teaching were known to the people of this island even before the arrival of the Great Saint Mahā Mahinda and his Sister, Therī Saṅghamittā

The fascinating story of this brother and sister is recorded in our chronicles and in writings dealing with the life and works of King Asoka of India.

The Birth of Mahinda and Saṅghamittā

In the year 326 BCE Alexander the Great of Macedonia invaded the Northern part of India and made Takshasilā (Taxila as the Greeks called it), a great and flourishing city, his capital. His kingdom, however, did not last long, as he passed away at the age of 32, at Babylon in 323 BCE. Following the death of Alexander, Candragupta, known as Sandrocatus among the Greeks, having attacked the officers in command of the Greek garrisons left behind by Alexander, defeated King Nanda, his predecessor, and in or about 323 BCE. He became the monarch of Magadha, whose capital was Pataliputra (Patna), and established the Mauryan empire. As Vincent A. Smith writes, in the *Oxford History of India*, he is the first

strictly historical person who can be properly described as Emperor of India.

Candragupta was succeeded by his son, Bindusāra whose reign came to an end in 273 BCE. Asokavardhana, popularly known as Asoka, one of the sons of Bindusāra, succeeded to the throne. During his father's reign, Asoka had served as Viceroy at Taxila and Ujjain. It is said that while Asoka was proceeding to Ujjain, he tarried for a time at Vedisa, modern Besnager, or Vessanagāra, mentioned in Visuddhimagga, and there fell in love with Devī, a daughter of a banker named Deva. Taking her as wife, with her parents' consent, went with her to Ujjain. There she bore him two children. It was these two who became renowned as Mahinda and Saṅghamittā, two distinguished Arahāt members of the Order. They worked. with undaunted courage to establish the Buddhasāsana, the Dispensation of the Buddha, in this land of ours.

When King Bindusāra was breathing his last, Asoka was summoned to Patna, and he succeeded his father as the third ruler of the Mauryan Empire. Devī, though she stayed back at Vedisa, her home town, sent her two children to the capital, to their father's court. Asoka was not satisfied with the empire left behind by his father, and being a war-like monarch like his grandfather, Candragupta Maurya, thought of

extending his territories. In the eighth year of his coronation he invaded and conquered Kāliṅga. It was a fierce and terrible war in which 100,000 were slain, 150,000 were carried away captive, and many times this number died. When Asoka heard of the carnage wrought by his army in Kāliṅga he was deeply worried. Remorse overtook him and he gave expression to his feelings in his longest Rock Edict (No. XIII).

It can be said that the Kāliṅga war was not only the turning point in Asoka's career, but it also became one of the decisive events in the history of the world. He realised the folly of killing and gave up warfare. He is the only military monarch on record who after victory gave up conquest by war (*dig-vijaya*), and initiated conquest by righteousness (*dharmavijaya*). He sheathed his sword never to unsheath it again, and no longer wished harm to living beings.

According to the Sri Lanka chronicles, it was a little Arahāt, Sāmaṇera Nigrodha, son of Prince Sumana, a brother of Asoka, who converted Asoka to Buddhism, by a very short but highly illuminating discourse, the theme of which was mindfulness (*appamāda*). Ever after these he who had been called Asoka the fierce (*Candāsoka*) was known as Asoka the righteous (*Dhammāsoka*). He became a very generous patron of the Sangha, and a great supporter of the

Buddhasāna. The spread of the Buddha's creed of compassion throughout the Eastern world was largely due to his enterprise and tireless effort, and Buddhism became the most profound influence that moulded the culture of Asia.

Buddhist principles and ideals coloured the thoughts and feelings of Asoka to such an extent that he became quite a different person altogether, and brought about many changes in his administrative system. He endeavoured to educate the people by popularising the teaching of the Buddha, especially the ethical aspect of it. He caused those lofty ethical teachings to be engraved on rock, and they became sermons on stones, not metaphorically but actually. Asoka was imbued with that great spirit of tolerance preached by the Buddha, and during his regime all other religions enjoyed absolute freedom.

His devotion to the teachings of the Buddha was so strong that he even permitted his dear son and daughter to be ordained, with their consent. At that time the son was twenty years old and received the Upasampadā, higher ordination that very same day. The daughter was eighteen. [1]

Asoka's Missionary Zeal

Realising the immense benefit that humanity would derive from a teaching of compassion and wisdom like that of the Buddha, Asoka made all endeavours to spread the teaching of the Buddha outside India.

When the third Great Council (*Dhamma-saṅgāyana*) was brought to an end (the first was held three months after the passing away of the Buddha, during the reign of Ajātasattu, and the second after hundred years, during the time of Kālāsoka), Asoka with the advice and guidance of the *Arahat Moggaliputta Tissa*, dispatched the missions to foreign lands. It is stated that each mission consisted of five *Theras* so that it would be possible to perform the *Upasampada* ordination in remote districts. The archaeological discoveries made at Sāñchī and Gwalior and so forth, clearly proved that these missions were actual facts.

In those distant days there were disciples of the Buddha who followed their Master's injunction: "Go now and wander for the welfare and happiness of gods and men ... Proclaim the Dhamma, the doctrine ... Proclaim the life of purity." They were ready to undertake any mission abroad, though contact and communication in those days were most difficult, and travel was full of peril. Aided by Asoka's unceasing missionary zeal, and the effort, determination and courage of those early *Dhammadūtas* (messengers of the Dhamma), Buddhism spread to many countries.

Asoka's records speak of missions sent to the Hellenistic kingdoms of Asia, Africa and Europe, to Syria and Egypt, Cyrene, Macedonia and Epirus, to Bactria and Central Asia.

Modern discoveries have proved that Asokan edicts were written not only in an Indian language in Brāhmī characters, but also in Greek and Aramaic (the language which Jesus spoke), indicating that the Greeks and Semitic races, too, had access to the words of the Buddha, which were engraved on rocks by Asoka.

According to the chronicles, King Asoka and Devānampiyatissa of Sri Lanka, though they had never seen each other were great friends even before the arrival of Mahā Mahinda. It is said that the King of Sri Lanka sent envoys to his friend Dhammāsoka with costly presents, and the latter gratefully sent an embassy of his chosen ministers with gifts and the following message:

“I have taken refuge in the Buddha, his Dhamma, the doctrine, and in the Sangha, the Order. I have declared myself a lay disciple in the religion of the Sakya Son; seek then you too, O Best of men, converting your mind with believing heart, refuge in these best of gems.”

Thus was the ground prepared for the Ven. Mahinda's mission to Sri Lanka.

Now when the Thera Mahā Mahinda was requested by his preceptor, Moggaliputta Tissa Mahā Thera and the Sangha to visit Sri Lanka and establish the Sāsana there, he set out from his monastery, Asokārāma, in Patna, to Vedisagiri, to have a last look at his dear mother and bid farewell to her. With him also went the Arahat Theras Ittiya, Uttiya, Saṃbala and Bhaddasāla, the wonderfully gifted Arahat Sāmaṇera Sumana and the Anāgāmi lay disciple Bhanduka, a grand-nephew of Vedisa Devi.

When they came to Vedisagiri, the mother glad at heart, welcomed her son and his companions, and led them to the lovely Vedisagiri Mahāvihāra, erected by herself, and ministered to them for one month.

Mahinda's Arrival

By this time Tissa's father Mutasiva had passed away and Devānampiyatissa was appointed king of Sri Lanka. After spending one month at Vedisagiri, on the full-moon day of the month of Jetṭha, i. e., Poson full-moon, in the year 236 Buddhist Era (i. e., 308 BCE in the eighteenth year of Asoka's reign) Arahat Mahā

Mahinda, accompanied by those six others, rose up in the air by supernormal power. Departing from Vedisagiri and alighted on the Sīlakūṭa of the Missaka hill, the loftiest peak of present Mihintale, eight miles east of Anuradhapura, where, rising suddenly from the plain, the mountain overlooks the city of Anuradhapura.

It was a day of national festival. The king, who was enjoying the pleasure of the chase, suddenly encountered Arahat Mahinda. He was scared by this stranger—the first sight of a monk in saffron-coloured robe—but the Arahat soon put him at ease with these words;

*“Samaṇā mayhaṃ mahārājā
Dhammarājassa sāvakā
Taveva anukampāya
Jambudīpam idhāgatā.”*

“Monks are we, O great king,
Disciples of the king of Truth
Out of compassion for thee’
Hither have we come from Jambudīpa” [2]

The story of the arrival of the great mission, their meeting with Tissa, the king of this island, and how he embraced the new faith, with all his forty thousand followers, are graphically described in the ancient

chronicles, and it is too long to be detailed here.

The Cūla Hatthipadopama Sutta, (No. 27 of the Majjhima Nikāya), was the discourse, delivered by Mahā Mahinda to the king. This discourse gives a vivid description of the *Tri-ratana*, the Triple Gem, the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha, the monastic life of an ideal monk, and emphasises the value of discriminative examination of facts, and intelligent inquiry.

The news of the arrival of the mission, and the conversion of the king and his followers, were voiced abroad, and people thronged the palace gate. The enthusiastic king made all arrangements for the devotees to hear the teaching. The Venerable Mahā Mahinda's exposition of the Dhamma was so impressive that all who heard him were convinced of the Teachings of the Tathāgata. Before long, the Message of the Master quickly spread throughout the length and breadth of this Island of Lanka.

On a full-moon day of Poson, 236 years after the landing of Vijaya, the new religion gained official recognition in the island. Later, the Venerable Mahā Mahinda and the Arahats founded the Order of the Sangha, and the Sāsana was established in this country, now the world's centre of the Faith. Relics of the Buddha were obtained from Emperor Asoka and

they were enshrined at the Thūpārāma dagaba, the first of its kind to be built in the sacred city of Anuradhapura, where pilgrims and devotees gather in their thousands to celebrate the festival of Posa, in memory of the Saint Mahā Mahinda, the light of Lanka (*dīpapasādaka*). Dagabas, shrines and vihāras were built in the city of Anuradhapura, and in many other holy places. The offering of the Mahā Meghavana park to the Sangha by the king, was an important event, for it was there that the *Mahāvihāra*, the leading monastery and the centre of Buddhist education, was established.

In due course this seat of learning became far-famed and counted amongst its alumni distinguished scholars from many lands. Best known among them being Buddhaghosa of India, the great commentator, who wrote volumes of commentaries on the Buddhist doctrine, while residing at the Mahāvihāra. Also from this centre of Buddhist learning were sent *Dhammadutas*, both men and women, to several lands in Asia, to spread the teaching of the Buddha. Even today people of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos (lands where Theravada Buddhism flourishes) and far away China and Korea acknowledge their indebtedness for the service rendered by the Sri Lanka missions.

When Mahā Mahinda had thus planted the faith in

this country and constituted the *Bhikkhusāsana*, the Order of monks, there came the urge from the women-folk to enter the Order of nuns, the *Bhikkhunī sāsana*. The story behind this strong desire is told in the chronicles, and the Vinaya commentary, *Samantapāsādikā*.

Mahā Mahinda, an able exponent of the clear-worded exposition of the Buddha, delivered many inspiring discourses. He instructed, enlightened, and gladdened both the king and the commoner. People in large numbers sought refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha. The members of the royalty, too, were there to listen to his illuminating sermons, which were all new to them, for they had not hitherto heard the word of the Buddha.

Queen Anulā, the consort of an *uparāja* (sub-king) named Mahānāga, with 500 of her attendant ladies, having listened to the discourses, gained mental attainments, and implored Arahat Mahinda to grant them ordination. There was, however, no Bhikkhunī Order then in Sri Lanka, and according to Vinaya rules, Mahā Mahinda was not permitted to give ordination to womenfolk. This could be done only by a Buddha or by the members of the Bhikkhunī Order. Hence the Venerable Mahā Mahinda suggested to King Tissa that his sister Saṅghamittā, who was then a Bhikkhunī in India, be invited to Sri Lanka, to bestow

ordination on those desirous of it, and thus establish the Bhikkhunī Order in Sri Lanka.

The Arrival of Saṅghamittā

King Devānampiyatissa, glad at heart, made all arrangements to despatch a deputation, headed by Ariṭṭha, one of his ministers, to Emperor Asoka, intimating to him the wish of Mahā Mahinda and himself.

It is reported that when the deputation conveyed this message, Asoka was overcome by grief, over losing also his daughter when his son, too, had left him and the country. Asoka was not an Arahant, a perfect one, who had eradicated all personal attachments, and it was in accord with human nature that he tried to dissuade his daughter from leaving him. Saṅghamittā, however, consoled her father by explaining to him that the request had come from her noble brother, and that she would have the rare opportunity, and good fortune, to establish the Bhikkhunī Order in Sri Lanka. Thus being of service to the sāsaṇa and the people of Sri Lanka, the womenfolk in particular.

Finally the emperor agreed, and as requested by

Mahā Mahinda, suggested that she take with her a sapling of the Sri Mahā-Bodhi tree, under whose shelter the Bodhisatta Gotama gained full enlightenment. A sapling from the southern side of the tree was obtained, and Asoka made all arrangements for Saṅghamittā to take it to Sri Lanka, in the company of eleven Arahat Bhikkhunīs. Also members of the Kshatriya families, brahmins, ministers and noblemen in Asoka's court, accompanied the Bodhi. As the books mention, it was a solemn ceremony, and Saṅghamittā left the country from the port known as Tamratipti (Tamluk). It is said that, Emperor Asoka was at the port, gazing at the departing vessel, with feelings of deep emotions, until it passed out of sight,

The vessel arrived at the port of Jambukola in the North of Sri Lanka, in seven days. King Devanampiya Tissa received the sapling with great honour and full of devout feelings. He caused the sapling to be deposited in a pavilion on the beach. Ceremonies were performed in its honour and on the tenth day the sapling was placed on a chariot and taken, with pomp and pageantry, to Anuradhapura, the capital. There it was planted, with magnificent splendour and ceremony, in the Mahā Megha garden, where it still flourishes, and receives the veneration of millions of devotees. It is also the oldest recorded tree in the world. Saplings from this tree were planted at various

places in the island. It is interesting to note that some have been planted in foreign lands, too.

In this connection, it must be borne in mind, that whatever reverence or homage a devotee pays while under the shadow of a Bodhi tree, is paid not to an inanimate tree, but to what the tree represents. Namely, the supreme Buddha, who attained enlightenment under a Bodhi tree. The tree symbolises, in a vivid way, the Enlightenment.

The tree is known in Pali as *assattha*, the sacred fig tree, *Ficus religiosa*. Since enlightenment took place under this particular tree it became popularly known as Bodhi (in Sinhala 'Bo'), which means enlightenment. Bodhi tree, therefore, literally means "Tree of Enlightenment" or "Tree of Wisdom."

The Buddha himself refers to the tree at Gaya: "I, now, monks, am an Accomplished One (*Arahant*), a Supremely Enlightened One (*Samma-sambuddho*). I attained supreme enlightenment under the fig tree (*assatthassa-mūle abhisambuddho*)," (Mahāpadāna sutta, Dīgha Nikāya).

The Sri Maha Bodhi

The advent of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, and the planting of the south sapling of the Sri Mahā Bodhi tree at Anuradhapura, are most sacred moments in Sinhala history, and the accounts of them excite deep feeling.

Writers in Sri Lanka, and historians (most of them foreigners), never forgot to mention these events, and their accounts of them are so lively and fascinating that they are not out of place here:

Dr. Paul E. Peiris (of Sri Lanka) writes: "It is doubtful if any other single incident in the long history of their race has seized upon the imagination of the Sinhalese with such tenacity as this of the planting of the aged tree.

"Like its pliant roots, which find sustenance on the face of the bare rock, and cleave their way through the stoutest fabric, the influence of what it represents has penetrated into the innermost being of the people, till the tree itself has become almost human, and even now on the stillest night, its heart-shaped leaves, on their slender stalks, ceaselessly quiver and sigh, as they have quivered and sighed for twenty three centuries."

H. G. Wells observes: "In Sri Lanka there grows to this day a tree, the oldest historical tree in the world, which we know certainly to have been planted as a

cutting from the Bo Tree in the year 245 BCE. From that time to this it has been carefully tended and watered. Its great branches are supported by pillars. It helps us to realise the shortness of all human history to see so many generations spanned by the endurance of one single tree.” [3]

Fahien, the Chinese monk and traveller, who visited Sri Lanka in the fifth century after Christ, and spent two years at the Mahā Vihāra, saw the tree in vigorous health and makes mention of it in his records.

Referring to Asoka’s mission, Dr. Rhys Davids writes:

“Its central incident is the transplanting to Sri Lanka of a branch of the tree at Bodh Gaya under which the Buddha had achieved enlightenment.

“Now this event is portrayed on two curious bas-reliefs on the Eastern Gateway at Sāñchī, which must be nearly as old as the event itself. In the middle of the lower picture is the Bodhi tree, as it stood at Gaya, with Asoka’s chapel rising half-way up the tree. A procession with musicians is on both sides of it. To the right, a royal person, perhaps Asoka, is getting down from his horse by the aid of a dwarf. In the upper picture there is a small Bodhi tree in a

pot, and again a great procession, to the left, a city, perhaps Anuradhapura, perhaps Tamralipti, to which the young tree was taken before it went to Sri Lanka. The decorations on either side of the lower bas-relief are peacocks, symbolical of Asoka's family, the Moriyas (the Peacocks), and lions, symbolical of Sri Lanka, or of the royal family of Sri Lanka (that is, of Sinhala, the lion island)... ..

"It was a great event, an impressive state ceremony, and a fitting climax to that one of the missionary effort of Asoka's reign which was most pregnant of results."

It is also interesting to note what Emerson Tennent has to say with regard to the history of this tree:

"Compared with it, the Oak of Ellersile is but a sapling; and the Conqueror's Oak in Windsor Forest barely numbers half its years.

The Yew-trees of Fountain Abbey are believed to have flourished there twelve hundred years ago; the olives in the Garden of Gethsamane were full grown when the Saracens were expelled from Jerusalem and the Cypress of Soma in Lombardy is said to have been a tree in the time of Julius Caesar; yet the

Bo-tree is older than the oldest of these by a century, and would seem to verify the prophecy pronounced when it was planted that it would 'flourish and be green for ever.'"

Further says Tennent:

"Though ages varying from one to five thousand years have been assigned to the baobabs of Senegal, the eucalyptus of Tasmania, the dragon tree of Orotava, the Wellingtonia of California, and the chestnut of Mount Etna, all these estimates are matters of conjecture, and such calculations, however ingenious, must be purely inferential,

"Whereas the age of the Bo-tree is a matter of record, its conservancy has been an object of solicitude to successive dynasties, and the story of its vicissitudes has been preserved in a series of continuous chronicles amongst the most authentic that have been handed down by mankind." (*Sri Lanka*)

Saṅghamittā made the Upāsikā-vihāra, a nunnery within the city, her abode. When the planting of the Bodhi sapling and the ceremonies connected with it were all over, Anulā and her women were ordained, and the

Bhikkhunī Order was set up under the able guidance and leadership of the Arahāt Therī Saṅghamittā. The Bhikkhunī Order, thus established, flourished in this country for several centuries. History tells us that Sinhala Bhikkhunīs even sailed to far away China and established the

Bhikkhunī Order in that country during the time of Yuan Chia (429 CE).

Though some in their enthusiasm, venture to say, that this Order still exists in China in its pristine purity, it is not so. There are many nuns in China and other Mahāyāna countries. In Taiwan (The Republic of China), for instance, there are more nuns than monks. Some of the large nunneries are well organised and maintained. However, the Bhikkhunī Order established by the Buddha is not found in these countries, nor in any Buddhist country. These nuns do not anymore follow the *Pātimokkha* precepts set forth and laid down by the Buddha. That is why it must be said that no Bhikkhunī Order exists today. They do live a secluded and meditative life, but they are not *Bhikkhunīs*. In Theravada countries like Burma, Siam, etc. there are *upāsikās* who follow the *dasa sīlas*, the ten precepts.

In the absence of a Buddha and the members of the

Order of nuns, the Bhikkhunī Order cannot be resuscitated.

Saṅghamittā gave ordination not only to princess Anulā and members of the royalty and higher strata of society, but to all, irrespective of their standard in society. Women from all walks of life joined the Order. Following in the footsteps of the Buddha, who treated women with consideration and civility, and pointed out to them, too, the path to peace, purity and sanctity. Saṅghamittā did all in her power to raise womankind from lower to higher levels of life. She worked with unflagging devotion and undaunted courage for the moral, intellectual and spiritual uplift of the womenfolk of this country.

Buddhism makes no distinction of sex with regard to doctrinal matters. All follow the same doctrine and discipline set forth by the Buddha. All, irrespective of sex, caste or colour, can reach the highest attainments found in Buddhism provided they follow the path pointed out by the Master, namely the Noble Eightfold path, which is Buddhism in practice.

The Death of Mahinda and Saṅghamittā

By her saintly character and virtue, her compassion and conscientiousness and service for the religion, Saṅghamittā Therī endeared herself to the people of this country. Like her brother, Mahā Mahinda, she stands a vivid and notable figure. In the annals of history there never was an instance of a brother and sister dedicating themselves to the task of a spiritual ministration abroad with so deep a devotion and such far-reaching results as Mahā Mahinda and Saṅghamittā.

Both Mahā Mahinda and Saṅghamittā survived Devānampiyatissa who reigned for forty years.

The Venerable Mahā Mahinda, the *Dīpapasādaka*, he who made the island bright—the Light of Lanka—who dedicated his whole life to the weal and happiness of the people of this fair isle, passed away in the eighth year of the reign of Uttiya, younger brother and successor of Devānampiyatissa, at the ripe age of eighty, while he was spending the rainy season (*vassana*) on the Cetiya mountain. King Uttiya carried out the obsequies with great honour and solemnity. A number of stupas were built over the relics which remained after the cremation of the body. One of them was built at Mihintale where Mahā Mahinda spent most of his time.

The passing away of the Venerable Therī

Saṅghamittā took place in the following year, at the age of seventy nine, while she dwelt in the peaceful Hatthalhaka nunnery. Her funeral, too was performed by Uttiya, with honour and proper solemnity, at a spot not far from the Bodhi-tree. A monument in her honour was built there.

These great saints are no more, but they still speak to us through the work they did. Their good names will remain ever green in our memory. The people of Sri Lanka are ever grateful to these great beings, and even today, thousands of pilgrims ascend a staircase of 1840 steps, hewn out of rock, to reach the holy spot, Mihintale, where the great brother and sister lived, propagating the Dhamma and setting an example, by their own religious lives, to the people of this country.

Notes

1. The age of twenty is the minimum for *upasampadā*.
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2. India [\[Back\]](#)
3. *The Outline of History*, Cassell 1934, p. 39 [\[Back\]](#)

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