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Was Mahāyāna ever in Sri Lanka? What evidence is available for its historical existence? If one wants to study Mahāyāna in Sri Lanka, what sources will one use? What are the strengths and weaknesses of available sources? Giving a supreme authority to ‘texts’ as suggested by DE JONG, should one rely only on written texts? If Sri Lankan literary sources, for example, the two Pāli chronicles, the Dīpavaṃsa and the Mahāvaṃsa, had distorted the actual facts – or, in other words, if they had misrepresented the actual events related to Mahāyāna as a religious movement – what are we going to do with them? If literary sources are distorted, what alternative sources will one use for one’s research? Withholding DE JONG’s claim because of obvious limitations, in this paper, I examine only one alternative source – a few relevant Sri Lankan sculptures – for the study of Mahāyāna in Sri Lanka.

“This island of Lanka belongs to the Buddha himself.” These are the faithful words of a medieval Buddhist monk Buddhaputra. Buddhaputra

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* I am grateful for three eminent scholars – Professor Gadjin M. Nagao, Professor Yoneo Ishii, and Professor Katsumi Mimaki – for their generous support and advice during my research at Kyoto University, 1995-96.


2. For an important discussion on the relative merits of literary sources against non-literary materials see Gregory SCHOPEN’s (1997: 1-3) discussion in “Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism.”

3. “mē lankādvipaya budungē ma tunuruvan bhāṇḍāgārayak vānna” (BUDDHAPUTRA Thera 1930: 699). The same text states in another place as “budun satu lakdivin...” (1930: 746). The notion that Sri Lanka belongs to the Buddha and Buddhists is very much rooted in the historical consciousness of ancient Sri Lanka. Before the Pājāvaliya, the tenth century Jētavanārāma slab-inscription (No. 2) of Mahinda IV (956-972 C.E.) vividly expressed this idea as “none but the Bōdhisattas would become kings of prosperous Lankā” (siri latkhi) no bosat hu no rajvanhayi...” (WICKREMASINGHE 1912: 234, 237, 240).
Thera, the author of the *Pūjāvaliya* (The Garland of Offerings, c. 1266 C.E.), was not alone in holding such a devotional motto. Many of his Sri Lankan contemporaries held similar mottoes and composed religiously inspired texts. In Ancient Sri Lanka, both in composing texts and creating artistic objects, that belief functioned as the central guiding principle. Whether it was stone or wood, all came into the service of the Buddha. His themes were Buddhist and what he created were also Buddhist with one important exception – the Sīgiriya. Perhaps, the Sri Lankan artist was less concerned with whether certain ideas or themes belonged to either Theravāda or Mahāyāna. Doctrinal and sectarian biases did not obstruct his artistic vision. Once an idea was born, he used it to express his artistic ability by transforming a stone to a beautiful statue like the Avukana Buddha. His mind centered on ‘one theme’: everything in his creative hand should be ‘in the service of the Buddha.’ The notion of service to the Buddha seems to have ruled out everything

4. For a discussion on Mahāyāna ideas within Theravāda with special reference to the *Pūjāvaliya*, see DEEGALLE 1998b.

5. I have no knowledge of any female who produced any artifact in ancient Sri Lanka; at least, there are no records left which show such female involvement. Ancient Sri Lanka seems to have been exclusively a male dominated place. Because of this, I am forced to use here male specific language such as ‘his themes,’ and ‘his mind.’ I think that future research should examine female involvement in religious and literary activities in ancient Sri Lanka.

6. Among all archaeological sites in Sri Lanka, the most profane and non-religious but equally important site is the rock fortress of Sigirya (Lion’s Rock). Sigirya built by Kassapa I (473-491 C.E.) is known for its female paintings found at a spot halfway up the western face of the rock. It gives an impression of what some Sinhala kings in ancient Sri Lanka thought about a pleasure garden. It is widely believed that there were more paintings there in the past than the ones that exist today. The following poem written on the Mirror Wall aptly demonstrates an observer’s emotions towards the paintings (REYNOLDS 1970: 30-1):

> “Since she held flowers in her hand,
> My passion was aroused,
> Her body catching my eyes
> As she stood in silence.”

7. Avukana is located in Kalāvīva, Anurādhapura District, North Central Province. The monumental standing Buddha (h. 12.5 m) belongs to eighth or early part of the ninth century at the latest. The right hand of the image is in *abhaya mudrā* (‘gesture of fearlessness’) which is peculiar to Sri Lanka, and its left hand holds the edge of the robe. Monumental Buddha statues like this which attempts to express Buddha’s superhuman qualities are conceived as evidence of Mahāyāna impact.
else. The result is a rich cultural heritage: a vast collection of artistic objects with religious and aesthetic sensibilities.

**Contested Avalokiteśvara: Healing and Compassion in Sri Lanka**

Let's look at a well preserved Bodhisattva statue which has puzzled previous scholars raising identification problems. This Bodhisattva statue (h. 3.6 m)\(^8\) popularly known as Kuṣṭhārajagala\(^9\) (Leper King's Rock)\(^10\) at Vāligama\(^11\) is carved on a rock in an arched niche of three feet deep.\(^12\) This Bodhisattva statue stands in 'samabhanga'\(^13\) while the right hand\(^14\) displays the 'gesture of argumentation' (vitarkamudrā) and the left hand the 'gesture of calling' (āhvāna mudrā).\(^15\) It is in 'royal garb' and wears

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8. PREMATILLEKE 1978: 170; while DOHANIAN (1977: 147) gives its height as 'about' fourteen feet, VON SCHROEDER (1990: 294) gives as 3.6 meters.

9. At present, this is the most often used Sinhala name to identify this Bodhisattva statue as well as its geographical location. The Sinhala term for 'leprosy' is written in two ways – kūṣṭha and kuṣṭha (SORATA Thera 1970: 288); its Pāli and Sanskrit equivalents are kuṣṭha and kuṣṭha respectively (APTE 1986: 590; RHYS DAVIDS and STEDE 1986: 219). To identify this place, PREMATILLEKE uses 'Kuṣṭarājāgala.'

10. See below for PARANAVITANA'S documentation of a local tradition which contains a legend of healing a king who suffered from leprosy. In the Northern Buddhist traditions, Avalokiteśvara was also known for his efficiency in healing patients afflicted with leprosy.

11. Kuṣṭhārajagala is located about 550 meters from the sea on the Old Matara Road just near the railway crossing at Vāligama, Matara District, Southern Province.

12. While PREMATILLEKE (1978: 174) states that the statue belongs to Agrabodhi Mahāvihāra, VON SCHROEDER (1990: 221) strangely calls this place 'Kuṣṭarājāgala Nāṭha Dēvālē' though such a place for divine worship does not exist here.

13. Samabhanga is a standing iconographic posture in which the body is straight without any bends and equal weight is placed on both feet. This posture expresses tranquillity and equilibrium (BUNCE and CAPDI 1997: 259).

14. PARANAVITANA (1928: 49) wrongly states that one of the hands held a lotus. Though DOHANIAN (1977: 72-73) mentions that "not in the hand" but just above "the right shoulder" on the rock is carved "the bud of a lotus," when I visited the site in 1997 I was not able to verify it.

15. For the first time, SIRISOMA'S (1971: 146-9) study has delineated the difference between āhvāna mudrā ('gesture of calling' which he identifies as 'summoning or beckoning') and kaṭakahasta mudrā ('ring-hand gesture'). The Sanskrit term āhvānam ('calling') derives from the root ṣvhe ('to call out') (APTE 1986: 379, 1758; WILLIAMS 1971: 74). Until SIRISOMA's study, most scholars seem to have misinterpreted āhvāna mudrā as kaṭakahasta mudrā. Except VON SCHROEDER (1990: 702) who followed SIRISOMA (but subsequently coined the āhvāna
a ‘cloth round the waist’ (dhoti); the ‘ornamental loops and folds of the dress’ fall on either side; the triple-banded girdle is found at the level of the dhoti; the bare upper part of the body is decorated with a broad and long necklace (hāra), and a ‘wide belt’ (udarabandha) worn at the waist; both arms of the Bodhisattva are adorned with amulets and bracelets; the ears are decorated with nakrakundala. On the basis of stylistic features, it is dated to the eighth or ninth century.

Though this image is widely believed to be a statue of Avalokiteśvara (J. Kannon) disagreements exist among scholars. Among Sri Lankan Bodhisattva statues, it stands out because of several peculiar iconographic features in the headdress. Its composition does not agree in all details with any textual description of Avalokiteśvara as found in iconographical canons such as the Sādhanamālā and the Nīspannayogāvalī. Early scholarship recognized only one dhyāni Buddha in the ‘gesture of meditation’ (samādhi mudrā) in the headdress of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. The most significant feature in this Bodhisattva statue is its headdress. The headdress contains four miniature dhyāni Buddhas, all in samādhi mudrā – two in front (one above the other) and two on left and right. For the first time, in 1914, E. R. AYRTON, mudrā as ‘gesture of discourse or argument’), all others wrongly identify the mudrā of its left hand as ‘kaṭakahasta’ (DOHANIAN 1977: 71; PREMATILJLEKE 1978: 170). Some other Bodhisattva statues with vitarka mudrā in the right hand and āhvāna mudrā in the left hand are: (i) the bronze image of a Bodhisattva (h. 0.370 m), which was discovered on April 6, 1983 at Girikāndaka Vihāra, Tiriyāya, Trincomalee District, belongs to eighth century (VON SCHROEDER 1990: 258); (ii) the bronze image of Maitreya (h. 0.215 m), which was discovered in 1934 at Kāṅkayanōdai, Batticaloa District, also belongs to the eighth century (VON SCHROEDER 1990: 258); and (iii) the image of Saman Deiyō (h. 2.650 m) at Dambulla Rajamahaśivihāra, Mātālē District belongs to 1187-1196 C.E. (VON SCHROEDER 1990: 404-5). An image of Tārā (h. 0.190 m.) from Tiriyāya (7th–8th c.) also bears āhvāna mudrā in the left hand.

17. While PREMATILJLEKE (1978: 170) dates it to the eighth or ninth century, VON SCHROEDER (1990: 221) gives as the ninth or tenth century. Seeing early Chola style in the image, its closeness “to the Pallava style of Ceylon,” and certain characteristics of South Indian sculpture of tenth century in the costume, DOHANIAN (1977: 72-3) prefers a late tenth century date.
18. BHATTACHARYYA 1925.
19. ABHAYĀKARAGUPTA. The Nīspannayogāvalī belongs to 11th–12th centuries.
20. VON SCHROEDER (1990: 294) affirms that the four identical Buddhas in dhyāna mudrā are Buddha Amitābha.
recognized these four miniature Buddha effigies in the headdress. For a while, it was considered “the only extant Mahāyāna image” in Sri Lanka found with four dhyanī Buddhas in the headdress. This iconographical innovation has been praised by previous scholars. It is hailed as “not a copy of an Indian prototype” but “an independent, local iconographical variation of Avalokiteśvara” which aptly demonstrates the innovation and creative spirit of the Sinhala artist of the past. Comparison with Indian iconography is conceived as “often misleading” and scholarly opinion rests on the conviction that the image at Kuṭṭhārāgala “should be accepted as a more or less independent development of Sinhalese Mahāyāna Buddhism.”

For a moment, let’s examine scholarly contestations on this Bodhisattva statue. While AYRTON identified this statue as “Naladevi,” PARANAVITANA proposed it as an image of Avalokiteśvara by demonstrating his argument with a theory of two traditions – a popular ‘local tradition’ of healing a foreign leper king and a ‘tradition’ of healing a foreign leper king.

22. PREMATILLEKE 1978: 170; VON SCHROEDER (1990: 221) notes that the compositions of this statue is ‘unique’ and “does not relate to any of the various forms and emanations of Avalokiteśvara known from Sri Lanka or elsewhere.” Note that this image contains only four dhyanī Buddhas; the image of Ādi Buddha or Vajradharma (8th-9th c.) in virāsana (h. 0.161 m) discovered on April 6, 1983 at Girikanda Vihāra, Tīriyāya, Trincomalee District, however contains five dhyanī Buddhas – Aksobhya, Amitābha, Amoghasiddhi, Ratnasambhava and Vairocana in the headdress (VON SCHROEDER 1990: 290-1).
23. VON SCHROEDER 1990: 221.
24. Ibid., p. 294.
25. AYRTON 1920: 90.
26. Perhaps this is a wrong spelling for Nātha (=Avalokiteśvara). For Nātha and Avalokiteśvara, see HOLT 1991: 10-11.
27. PARANAVITANA 1928: 49-50.
28. VON SCHROEDER (1990: 221) also agrees by maintaining that it is “a form of Avalokiteśvara.”
29. PARANAVITANA (1928: 49) outlined what he called popular ‘local tradition’: “[T]his figure represents a foreign king who left his native country because he suffered from leprosy, landed at Vālīgama [a coastal place] and was cured by a local physician. This tradition seems to preserve in a distorted way some facts regarding the Bodhisattva Avalokita.” PREMATILLEKE (1978: 173) adds: “Local legends agree that the figure was caused to be carved by either a foreign king or a local potentate who was afflicted with leprosy and was cured by the divine munificence of a god.” In addition, PARANAVITANA, rightly points out that this
educated Sri Lankan Buddhists who believed that the statue was that of the god Natha. Rejecting its identity as Avalokiteśvara and Simhanāda, DOHANIAN\textsuperscript{31} has suggested that it represents Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī as 'the princely offspring' of the five mystical Buddhas (pañcavīra-kumāra). Because of the four miniature dhyanī Buddhas in the head-dress, VAN LOHUIZEN-DE LEEUW\textsuperscript{32} thinks that it represents the Ādi Buddha Samantabhadra in his dharma-kāya (‘law body’) aspect. Disagreeing with the Ādi Buddha aspect suggested by VAN LOHUIZEN-DE LEEUW, PREMATILLEKE argues that it is "not impossible" to represent "Samantabhadra in his Sambhoga-kāya aspect" and concludes suggesting a possible confusion in the history of iconographic representation of Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas in Sri Lanka: "The 'Kuṣṭaraja' image" may "well be a representation" of Samantabhadra "in his Sambhoga-kāya aspect." But one should not lose sight of the fact that Samantabhadra came to be identified with Sinhala deity Saman and also "corresponded with Avalokiteśvara" who was a healer of diseases as identified with the 'Kuṣṭharāja-gala' image at Valigama.\textsuperscript{33} While PARANAVITANA main-

\textsuperscript{30} In light of the legend of a foreign king who is believed to have constructed this image, one wonders what kind of symbolism prevails around this statue when one reflects for a moment why a few foreigners have been buried just across from the Bodhisattva statue. An inscription on one of such recent tomb reads: "In loving memory of Thomas Gouder, born 25th August 1825 and died 10th August 1907, Jesus Our Peace." When a fence was constructed at the site on June 21, 1980, with auspicious of Major Montague Jayawickreme, Member of Parliament for Weligama and E. L. B. Hurulle, Minister of Cultural Affairs, it was constructed enclosing the tombs. Just across the newly constructed fence to the right of the statue still remains a Christian cemetery.

\textsuperscript{31} DOHANIAN 1977: 71-2.

\textsuperscript{32} VAN LOHUIZEN-DE LEEUW 1965: 253-261.

\textsuperscript{33} PREMATILLEKE 1978: 179-180.
tains that Avalokiteśvara and Nātha are identical, PREMATILLEKE suggests an equation between Sinhala deity Saman and Mahāyāna Bodhisattva Samantabhadra and Avalokiteśvara in the image at Kuṣṭharājagala. Thus, this statue at Kuṣṭharājagala embodies the conflated representations of three Bodhisattvas — Avalokiteśvara, Samantabhadra and Sinhala deity Nātha — in the history of iconography and religious legacies in Sri Lanka.

Tantric Buddhism in Theravāda Guise?
Parākramabāhu I (1153-1186 C.E.) constructed the rock temple Gal Vihāra (or Uttarārāma), Polonnaruva enclosing four statues — (i) a colossal statue of the Buddha (h. 4.980 m) seated on a vīrāśana in the samādhi mudrā ('gesture of meditation'), (ii) to its right in a cave a seated statue of the Buddha (h. 1.400 m) in the same mudrā, (iii) to its right a standing statue popularly believed to be of Ānanda (h. 6.920 m), and (iv) at its extreme, a gigantic recumbent statue of the

34. PARANAVITANA (1928: 53) writes that Nātha is “only a shortened form of the fuller epithet” of Lokesvara Nātha and that the epithet Lokesvara is “one of the most familiar of the many names of Avalokiteśvara.” Then he states that the modern belief that “Avalokita of Vāligama is Nātha provides further circumstantial evidence of the identity of the two.”

35. Here ‘three Bodhisattvas’ only if I am permitted to include Nātha in the category of Bodhisattvas.

36. But the Cūlavamsa (ch. 78: 73-75) records that Parākramabāhu I constructed only three grottoes in the Uttarārāma (GEIGER and RICKMERS 1973: 111; GEIGER and RICKMERS 1980: 430): (a) the Vijjādhara-guhā, (b) the Nisinnapaṭimālēna (a cave with an image in sitting posture), (c) Nipannapaṭimāguhā (a cave with a recumbent image). While the Pāli terms guhā and lēna means a cave, the term vijjādhara means a ‘knower of charms’ (RHYS DAVIDS and STEDE 1986: 618). It is worth noting that the Cūlavamsa fails to mention the standing statue.

37. The vīrāśana is synonymous with satraparyātākāsāna. Its earliest occurrence is at Aamarāvatī (c. 150-200 C.E.). In this sitting posture, the right leg is placed upon the left and the sole of the right foot is completely visible. This vīrāśana posture is not identical with vajrāśana in which legs are crossed and interlocked displaying both soles of the feet upwards. While VON SCHROEDER (1990: 368) identifies the two samādhi statues at Gal Vihāra as in vīrāśana, FERNANDO (1960: 50) and MUDIYANSE (1967: 107) wrongly consider the sitting posture as vajrāśana.

38. Also identified as dhyaṇī mudrā in which the hands and the entire body display the sitting meditation posture.

39. GEIGER 1973: 111; scholars have identified this standing statue variously — some as that of Ānanda, the attendant of the Buddha and some as the Buddha himself. As early as 1894, in The Buried Cities of Ceylon, S. M. BURROWS suggested
Buddha (h. 14.1 m) – on a rock boulder rising about thirty feet and stretching from south-west to north-east.

Though many things can be said about the artistic merit of these magnificent pieces, my focus here is not on those statues themselves but rather on vajra symbolism found at the site. Vajra (J. kongōsha) is an attribute of Vajrapāni (‘thunderbolt-bearer’), Vajradhara (‘thunderbolt-holder’), Vajrasattva (‘thunderbolt-being’), and Indra (P. Sakka). Before becoming a liturgical symbol in Buddhism, among the earliest archaeological artifacts, iconographically, vajra was already found as a symbol in the right hand of Indra. In the development and expansion of Buddhism within Asia, vajra has become a liturgical symbol of both Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism. While a variety of vajras are found – one-pronged, three-pronged and five-pronged – the five-pronged vajra is believed as a representation of the Five Wisdoms and the Five Buddhas.

Among Sri Lankan cultural artifacts, several statues with vajra symbols have been found. For example, in 1952, during the restoration works near the lotus pedal of the Avukana Buddha, archaeologists discovered an image of Indra (h. 0.169 m), the guardian of the east, that it was a statue of Ānanda. In Old Ceylon (1908: 199), R. FARRER maintained that it was the future Buddha Maitreya. In over a century and a half, there is a rich scholarly literature on this topic. For an extensive bibliography of those interpretations see VON SCHROEDER 1990: 370.

40. P. E. E. FERNANDO (1960) has already argued for Tantric influences in these sculptures. With reference to ‘the full and round face’ of these statues, FERNANDO has suggested even Chinese influences (in particular, see p. 51 and footnote no. 9). Arguing against FERNANDO’s thesis on Chinese influences on Gal Vihāra, Nandasena MODIYANSE (1967: 108) suggests possible Burmese influences by maintaining that ‘facial types’ are not ‘distinctly Chinese.’


42. Vajra (thunderbolt) is a Buddhist and Hindu iconographic device which represents indestructibility, or wisdom which destroys passion. In Buddhist traditions, as a symbol, the five-pronged vajra represents the five Buddhas. As a symbol, it is masculine. While in the Hindu tradition it is associated with Agni, Hayagriva, Indra and others, in the Buddhist traditions it is associated with Ādi Buddha (Vajradhara), Achala, Rudhira-varna-Rakta-Karma-Yama and others (BUNCE and CAPDI 1997: 324)
holding a *vajra* in his right hand. Iconographically, both Indra and Vajrapāni hold a *vajra* in the hand and represent east. Vajrapāni is one of the eight principal Bodhisattvas enumerated in the *Śāddhanamālā*. Bodhisattva Vajrapāni, an emanation of the dhyāni Buddha Aksobhya, holds a *vajra*. In Sri Lanka, there are two known Vajrapāni statues: (1) in 1988, a statue of Vajrapāni (h. 0.390 m) was discovered near Ratkaravva Purāṇavihāra, four miles north-east of Kurunāgalā town, Central Province; and the other is found (2) at Buduruvagala. The Vajrapāni statue at Ratkaravva is dated to 750–850 C.E. and its right hand is in *vitarka mudrā* (‘gesture of argumentation’) while the left is in *katakahasta mudrā* (‘ring-hand gesture’) holding a three-pronged *vajra*. Also a bronze image of Ādi Buddha Vajrasattva (h. 0.156 m) in *vīrāsana* holding a *viśva vajra* in the right hand and displaying *samādhi mudrā* with the left hand was discovered by S. Paranavitana at Mādirigiriya Vatadāgē in 1940.

Galvihāra contains two *samādhi* Buddha statues. A Sri Lankan scholar who has strongly argued for Tantric influence at Gal Vihāra, has pointed out with specific reference to the larger *samādhi* statue “several features” which were not found in earlier Sri Lankan Buddha statues. The throne on which the two statues are placed contain *vajra* symbolism. In

43. VON SCHROEDER 1990: 302-3.
44. BHATTACHARYYA 1925: 49.
45. The Coomaraswamy collection of the Boston Museum also contains a ninth century copper image of Vajrapāni (h. 11.1 cm) from Sri Lanka (MUDIYANSE 1967: 61-62).
46. VON SCHROEDER 1990: 222, 258.
47. Buduruvagala is perhaps the most important existing archaeological site in Sri Lanka which proves historical existence of Mahāyāna. Including a gigantic statue of the Buddha Dipāṅkara, it contains the statues of Avalokiteśvara, Tara, Maitreya, Sudhanakumāra (or Mañjuśrī) and Vajrapāni. For a detailed analysis of Buduruvagala, see DEEGALLE 1998a.
48. While Wijesekera (1984: 105) and VON SCHROEDER (1990: 290) have assigned a 8th-9th century date, following DEVENDRA (1957), MUDIYANSE (1967: 62) has given a 5th century date.
49. FERNANDO 1960: 53; MUDIYANSE, however, has argued against FERNANDO’s thesis. For any reader who seriously wants to know Mahāyāna and Tantra in Sri Lanka, it would be essential to compare the opinions of these two scholars. Reading FERNANDO (1960: 53-57) and MUDIYANSE (1967: 109-112) side by side will produce a balanced picture of both the uniqueness and indebtedness of Gal Vihāra.
the recessed dado of the pedestal of the larger samādhi Buddha statue, viśva vajra is carved vertically by alternating five vajras with six lions. When this site is compared with Pāla sculptures, a notable difference appears; Pāla sculptures contained only a single vajra rather than a viśva vajra. Though the Sādhanaṃālā advises to place the vajra on a double lotus on the main āsana, no such representation is found here. The dado of the small samādhi Buddha statue in the vijjādharaguhā is also decorated by alternating three vajras with two lions. Though the double lotus seat is found here, it is not marked with the vajra. FERNANDO strongly believes that the small samādhi Buddha statue in the vijjādharaguhā is also “on the lines of a Tantric stele.”

FERNANDO’s study was one of the earliest on Tantric Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Using two archaeological sites – Gal Vihāra and Tantrimalai – FERNANDO forcefully argued for two things: (1) Tantric influences in medieval Sri Lankan archaeological sites and (2) the existence of Tantric Buddhism as a ‘living force’ in Sri Lanka in the twelfth century when Parākramabāhu I constructed the Gal Vihāra. Since his pioneering work, scholars are in possession of many archaeological objects for proving and disproving his theories. One important contribution which attempts to deconstruct FERNANDO’s theories on Tantric influences in Sri Lanka.

50. However, MUDIYANSE (1967: 109) attempts to suggest that “one might mistake it to be a flame like emblem.”
51. In The Buried Cities of Ceylon, S. M. BURROWS (1894: 109) refers to these vajras as “a pair of dragons’ heads.”
52. Pāla refers to an iconographical style which developed during the Pāla dynasty (765-1175 C.E.) under the patronage of Pāla kings such as Dharmapāla (769–809 C.E.) who, in particular, was devoted Buddhism and constructed monuments at Nālanda (SIVARAMAMURTI 1977: 227). Other archaeological sites which depict Pāla style of art are Vikramaśīla, Uddanpur, and Paharpur. Peculiar Pāla style art developed around Bengal with some influences from the Gupta traditions (ZIMMER 1984: 15).
54. VON SCHROEDER (1990: 368) raises the possibility whether this statue can be a representation of Buddha Aksobhya. This may be due to the belief that vajra is often associated with Aksobhya. Note also his interpretation of the two fly-whisk bearers beside the Buddha as Mañjuśrī and Vajrapāṇi because these two Bodhisattvas are considered as emanations of Buddha Aksobhya.
55. FERNANDO 1960: 60.
comes from another Sri Lankan historian Nandasena MUDIYANSE. In his study, MUDIYANSE uses exact headings and subheadings which FERNANDO used but comes up with completely different explanations and conclusions. While MUDIYANSE finds both agreements and disagreements in comparing Gal Vihāra with Tantric stelae, he asserts that one should be cautious in considering “the whole sculpture” at Gal Vihāra was “meant to be a Tantric mandala.” He raises a valid and an important question: “Our sculptures are almost contemporaneous” but why is there no “agreement with the Sadhanas” if “the artist who executed them was influenced by Tantric iconography?” According to MUDIYANSE, the aim of the Gal Vihāra sculptors was “not to create Tantric sculptures” since such need was not found in Sri Lanka at that time. Arguing thus MUDIYANSE maintains that Tantrism had already “ceased to be a living force” in Sri Lanka.

For affirming possible Mahāyāna or Tantric influences at Gal Vihāra, the unique elaborate decorations behind the larger samādhi Buddha statue are relevant. Three horizontal bars on either side of the Buddha constitute six makara heads. This makara toraṇa, a unique Sri Lankan production, is conceived as having some resemblances to the Jaina makara toraṇa at Mathura. Behind the Buddha’s head is an oval circle of flames (prabhāmāṇḍala). An arch (toraṇa) decorated with lotuses encircles the Buddha’s aureole. The outer arch is the most fascinating part; it leads one to wonder whether this is an imagined Sri Lankan mandala. The four miniature representations of the stūpa, whose shape is unusual for Sri Lanka, are carved on either side of the arch. In carving these stūpas, the artists seem to have followed the votive stūpas at Nāga-paṭṭinam, South India rather than the common models found in Anurādhapura. These features are seen as Tantric influence on Sri Lankan artistic works. The four vimānas (‘heavenly palaces’), two on either side of the arch, are carved with four miniature Buddhas in samādhi mudrā. These effigies are believed to be “identical representations of Amitā-
The four Buddha effigies in *samādhi mudrā* with Śākyamuni Buddha at the center have been interpreted along Tantric lines as representing a *mandala* "in concrete form" "intended" for Tantric followers in Sri Lanka.\(^{62}\)

**Thoughts for Reflection**

In light of the complexities in interpreting Sri Lankan Buddhist sculptures, there is no doubt that time has arrived for us to recognize that Sri Lankan sculptures should be considered and evaluated with some openness to ingenuity. They represent unique innovations and characterize the serene mind of the Sri Lankan artist. All iconographical canons which apply to India should be used for Sri Lankan objects with caution knowing their limitations.

In previous scholarship, one encounters enormous biases. The evaluation often begins with an assumption: "This particular sculpture should be a 'deviation.'" The result is a negative attitude. For example, in comparison with the *sādhanas*, the four miniature Buddha effigies in *samādhi mudrā* at Gal Vihāra are seen negatively as "inconsequential deviations."\(^{63}\) Even FERNANDO,\(^{64}\) a scholar who eagerly asserted Tantric influences at Gal Vihāra, calls the sculptures "a deviation from the usual features laid down in the *Sādhanamālā*." In another instance, he states that the "deviation" was a "a concession."\(^{65}\) I am not sure here whether there is anything solid at Gal Vihāra except the sculptures themselves to deviate from. How can one be so sure that the *Sādhanamālā* was known and available for Sri Lankan sculptors at Gal Vihāra in the twelfth century? To my knowledge, there is no single reference to the *Sādhanamālā* in Sri Lankan inscriptions. Most of the rhetoric seems to be just mere hypotheses and assumptions which cannot be materialized. One should be cautious in speaking of mere 'concessions' to popular piety or poor 'deviations' from unknown canons. The rhetoric of deviation represents the 'received wisdom.' It definitely leads the reader

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\(^{61}\) VON SCHROEDER 1990: 368.

\(^{62}\) MUDIYANSE (1967) has rightly objected FERNANDO's this interpretation (1960: 55) and has pointed out the necessity of a little 'rethinking' by maintaining that it is "difficult to imagine that a Buddha should have around his head representations of the five Dhyani-Buddhas" (MUDIYANSE 1967).

\(^{63}\) FERNANDO 1960: 60.


astray and undermines the real artistic creation. These assumptions aptly
demonstrate that orthodoxy and narrow sectarianism are still in
operation in interpreting genuine visual arts. Heavy reliance on literary
documents should be suspected and questioned in light of hard material
evidence. Let us take actual conditions in actual Buddhist communities
in Asia into serious consideration.

The epigraphical, artistic, symbolic and liturgical artifacts so far found
provide ample evidence for the prevalence of Mahāyāna in ancient Sri
Lanka. This search for material evidence has demonstrated that in Sri
Lanka one discovers not only statues of some prominent Bodhisattvas
such as Avalokiteśvara but also a variety of Mahāyānic and Tantric
symbols. They prove the wide prevalence of Mahāyāna in Sri Lanka
from the eighth to eleventh centuries. In the Theravāda case, it was an
important historical period between two important events – (1) the
writing down of the Pāli commentaries by Buddhaghosa and other
commentators from the fifth to eighth centuries and (2) the twelfth
century reform of Parākramabāhu I (1153-1186 C.E.) which unified the
saṅgha and Buddhist monastic establishments in Sri Lanka.66

An important question arises: What happened to Mahāyāna after the
twelfth century? What was the nature of this prosperous religious move­
ment after the unification? What were the obstacles for its continuity in
Sri Lanka? Two events seem to have determined the future of Sri Lan­
kan Mahāyāna after twelfth century: (1) the disappearance of Buddhism
from India as a result of Islamic invasions and aggressive assimilation of
distinctly Buddhist notions by Hindus and (2) the unification movement
of Parākramabāhu I. These two historical events seem to have weaken
the influence of Mahāyāna after the twelfth century. It should be noted,
however, that Mahāyāna did not die completely. After twelfth century,
Mahāyāna kept a low profile. In the form of ideas, Mahāyāna legacy can
be discerned in Sinhala baṇapot literature such as the Pūjāvaliya which
were composed in the thirteenth century and the following.

66. For more information on the unification of the saṅgha by Parākramabāhu see
BECHERT 1993.
Works Cited


