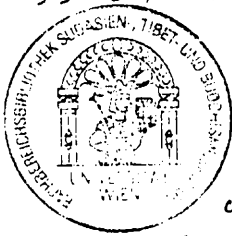


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# Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies

Volume 22 • Number 2 • 1999

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# MAHINDA DEEGALLE

## A Search for Mahāyāna in Sri Lanka\*

*Buddhist art, inscriptions, and coins have supplied us with useful data, but generally they cannot be fully understood without the support given by the texts.*

J. W. De Jong

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,<sup>1</sup> should one rely only on written texts? If Sri Lankan literary sources, for example, the two Pāli chronicles, the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvāṃsa*, 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,<sup>2</sup> 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 Laṅkā belongs to the Buddha himself."<sup>3</sup> These are the faithful words of a medieval Buddhist monk Buddhaputra. Buddhaputra

\* 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.

1. DE JONG 1975: 14.
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 laṅkādvīpaya budungē ma tunuruvan bhāṅḍāgārayak 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 *Pūjāvaliya*, 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 Laṅkā" (*siri la(khi) no bosat hu no rajvanhayi...*) (WICKREMASINGHE 1912: 234, 237, 240).

Thera, the author of the *Pūjāvaliya* (The Garland of Offerings, c. 1266 C.E.),<sup>4</sup> 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<sup>5</sup> themes were Buddhist and what he created were also Buddhist with one important exception – the Sīgiriya.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 Sīgiriya (Lion’s Rock). Sīgiriya 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 Kalāvāva, 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)<sup>8</sup> popularly known as Kuṣṭharājagala<sup>9</sup> (Leper King's Rock)<sup>10</sup> at Vāligama<sup>11</sup> is carved on a rock in an arched niche of three feet deep.<sup>12</sup> This Bodhisattva statue stands in 'samabhaṅga'<sup>13</sup> while the right hand<sup>14</sup> displays the 'gesture of argumentation' (*vitarkamudrā*) and the left hand the 'gesture of calling' (*āhvāna mudrā*).<sup>15</sup> It is in 'royal garb' and wears

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 – *kuṣṭa* 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 'Kuṣṭharājagala.'
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. Kuṣṭharājagala 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 'Kuṣṭharājagala Nātha Dēvālē' though such a place for divine worship does not exist here.
13. *Samabhaṅga* 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 *āhvānaṃ* ('calling') derives from the root  $\sqrt{hve}$  ('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*.<sup>16</sup> On the basis of stylistic features, it is dated to the eighth or ninth century.<sup>17</sup>

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*<sup>18</sup> and the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*.<sup>19</sup> Early scholarship recognized only one *dhyānī* 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 *dhyānī* Buddhas,<sup>20</sup> 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,

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*mudrā* as 'gesture of discourse or argument'), all others wrongly identify the *mudrā* of its left hand as '*kaṭakahasta*' (DOHANIAN 1977: 71; PREMATILLEKE 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 Girikaṇḍaka 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 Kaṅkayanōḍai, Batticaloa District, also belongs to the eighth century (VON SCHROEDER 1990: 258); and (iii) the image of Saman Deīyo (h. 2.650 m) at Dambulla Rajamahāvihāra, 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.

16. PREMATILLEKE 1978: 170.

17. While PREMATILLEKE (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 *Niṣpannayogāvalī* 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.<sup>21</sup> For a while, it was considered “the only extant Mahāyāna image” in Sri Lanka found with four *dhyānī* Buddhas in the headdress.<sup>22</sup> 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”<sup>23</sup> 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 Kuṣṭharājagala “should be accepted as a more or less independent development of Sinhalese Mahāyāna Buddhism.”<sup>24</sup>

For a moment, let’s examine scholarly contestations on this Bodhisattva statue. While AYRTON<sup>25</sup> identified this statue as “Naladevi,”<sup>26</sup> PARANAVITANA<sup>27</sup> proposed it as an image of Avalokiteśvara<sup>28</sup> by demonstrating his argument with a theory of two traditions – a popular ‘local tradition’<sup>29</sup> of healing a foreign leper king<sup>30</sup> and a ‘tradition’ of

21. See PREMATILLEKE 1968: 170; AYRTON 1920: 90.

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 *dhyānī* Buddhas; the image of Ādi Buddha or Vajradharma (8th-9th c.) in *vīrāsana* (h. 0.161 m) discovered on April 6, 1983 at Girikaṇḍaka Vihāra, Tiriyāya, Trincomalee District, however contains five *dhyānī* Buddhas – Akṣobhya, 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 (=Avaloliteśvara). 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 Vāligama [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 Nātha. Rejecting its identity as Avalokiteśvara and Siṃhanāda, DOHANIAN<sup>31</sup> has suggested that it represents Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī as ‘the princely offspring’ of the five mystical Buddhas (*pañcavīra-kumāra*). Because of the four miniature *dhyānī* Buddhas in the head-dress, VAN LOHUIZEN-DE LEEUW<sup>32</sup> thinks that it represents the Ādi Buddha Samantabhadra in his *dharmakāya* (‘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 ‘Kuṣṭarajā’ 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 ‘Kuṣṭharājagala’ image at Vāligama.<sup>33</sup> While PARANAVITANA main-

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‘local tradition’ is ‘later than’ the sculpture which characteristically differed from similar statues in Northern Buddhist traditions which held the belief that Avalokiteśvara heals leprosy. Though the *Cūlavamsa* (ch. 46: 35) mentions that a Sri Lankan king – Aggabodhi IV (667-683 C.E.) – died afflicted with an incurable disease and the *Rājāvaliya* states that this king lived in this part of the island as the ruler of Rohana, they cannot be taken as evidence for the origin of this statue without any substantial proof.

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 Gauder, 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.
31. DOHANIAN 1977: 71-2.
32. VAN LOHUIZEN-DE LEEUW 1965: 253-261.
33. PREMATILLEKE 1978: 179-180.

tains that Avalokiteśvara and Nātha are identical,<sup>34</sup> 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<sup>35</sup> – 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<sup>36</sup> – (i) a colossal statue of the Buddha (h. 4.980 m) seated on a *vīrāsana*<sup>37</sup> in the *samādhi mudrā* ('gesture of meditation'),<sup>38</sup> (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),<sup>39</sup> 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 Lokeśvara Nātha and that the epithet Lokeśvara 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 *Vijjādharaḡuhā*, (b) the *Nisinnapaṭi-māleṇa* (a cave with an image in sitting posture), (c) *Nipannapaṭimāḡuhā* (a cave with a recumbent image). While the Pāli terms *guhā* and *leṇa* 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 *vīrāsana* is synonymous with *sattvaparyankāsana*. Its earliest occurrence is at Amarāvātī (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 *vīrāsana* posture is not identical with *vajrāsana* 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 *vīrāsana*, FERNANDO (1960: 50) and MUDIYANSE (1967: 107) wrongly consider the sitting posture as *vajrāsana*.
38. Also identified as *dhyānī 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,<sup>40</sup> my focus here is not on those statues themselves but rather on *vajra* symbolism found at the site. *Vajra* (J. *kongōsho*) is an attribute of Vajrapāṇi ('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.<sup>41</sup>

Among Sri Lankan cultural artifacts, several statues with *vajra*<sup>42</sup> 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,

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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 MUDIYANSE (1967: 108) suggests possible Burmese influences by maintaining that 'facial types' are not 'distinctly Chinese.'
41. GAULIER 1987: 48. The five *tathāgatas* (J. *gochinyorai*) of the five wisdoms are: (1) Mahāvairocana (Dainichi), (2) Akṣobhya (Ashuku), (3) Ratnasambhava (Hōshō), (4) Amitāyus (Muryōju), and (5) Amoghasiddhi (Fukūjōju) (INAGAKI 1992: 66-67; Japanese English Buddhist Dictionary 1991: 86; TACHIKAWA 1989: xxxi).
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.<sup>43</sup> Iconographically, both Indra and Vajrapāṇi hold a *vajra* in the hand and represent east. Vajrapāṇi is one of the eight principal Bodhisattvas enumerated in the *Sādhanaṃālā*.<sup>44</sup> Bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi, an emanation of the *dhyānī* Buddha Akṣobhya, holds a *vajra*. In Sri Lanka, there are two known Vajrapāṇi statues:<sup>45</sup> (1) in 1988, a statue of Vajrapāṇi (h. 0.390 m) was discovered near Ratkaravva Purāṇavihāra, four miles north-east of Kurunāgala town, Central Province;<sup>46</sup> and the other is found (2) at Buduruvagala.<sup>47</sup> The Vajrapāṇi 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 *kaṭakahasta 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 Vaṭadāgē in 1940s.<sup>48</sup>

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.<sup>49</sup> 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 Vajrapāṇi (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 Dīpaṅkara, it contains the statues of Avalokiteśvara, Tara, Maitreya, Sudhanakumāra (or Mañjuśrī) and Vajrapāṇi. 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<sup>50</sup> by alternating five *vajras*<sup>51</sup> with six lions. When this site is compared with Pāla sculptures,<sup>52</sup> a notable difference appears; Pāla sculptures contained only a single *vajra* rather than a *viśva vajra*. Though the *Sādhanamālā* advises to place the *vajra* on a double lotus on the main *āsana*, no such representation is found here.<sup>53</sup> The dado of the small *samādhi* Buddha statue in the *vijjādhara-guhā*<sup>54</sup> 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 *vijjādhara-guhā* is also “on the lines of a Tantric stele.”<sup>55</sup>

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).
53. “*Tasyopari viśvapadmaṃ vajraṃ ca tatra sthitam*” (BHATTACHARYYA 1925: 20).
54. VON SCHROEDER (1990: 368) raises the possibility whether this statue can be a representation of Buddha Akṣobhya. This may be due to the belief that *vajra* is often associated with Akṣobhya. 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 Akṣobhya.
55. FERNANDO 1960: 60.

comes from another Sri Lankan historian Nandasena MUDIYANSE.<sup>56</sup> In his study, MUDIYANSE uses exact headings and subheadings which FERNANDO used but comes up with completely different explanations and conclusions. While MUDIYANSE<sup>57</sup> 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 maṇḍala.” He<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup> Behind the Buddha’s head is an oval circle of flames (*prabhāmaṇḍala*). An arch (*torāṇa*) 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 *maṇḍala*. 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-pattinam, South India rather than the common models found in Anurādhapura.<sup>60</sup> 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-

56. MUDIYANSE 1967.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

59. FERNANDO 1960: 54.

60. FERNANDO 1960: 56 discusses the *stūpa* not just as a ‘representation’ as MUDIYANSE 1967: 111 suggests but the very unusual shape of the Gal Vihāra *stūpas*.

bha.”<sup>61</sup> The four Buddha effigies in *samādhi mudrā* with Śākyamuni Buddha at the center have been interpreted along Tantric lines as representing a *maṇḍala* “in concrete form” “intended” for Tantric followers in Sri Lanka.<sup>62</sup>

### *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.”<sup>63</sup> Even FERNANDO,<sup>64</sup> 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.”<sup>65</sup> 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

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.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

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.<sup>66</sup>

An important question arises: What happened to Mahāyāna after the twelfth century? What was the nature of this prosperous religious movement after the unification? What were the obstacles for its continuity in Sri Lanka? Two events seem to have determined the future of Sri Lankan 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 weakened 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.

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