

Ancient Monastic Education System in Sri Lanka with Specific Reference to Anurādhapura Period

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Historical Background

Monastic Education System is very worthwhile term and has enough meaning for using in Theravāda Buddhism. The above term is derived from **Monasteries + Education + System**. The term **Monasteries** refers to a community of persons, especially monks, bound by vows to a religious life and often living in partial or complete seclusion. Likewise, it refers to the dwelling place of such a community of Buddhist monks.¹

Monasteries may vary greatly in size,² comprising a small dwelling accommodating only a hermit, or in the case of communities anything from a single building housing only one senior and two or three junior monks or nuns, to vast complexes and estates housing tens or hundreds. A monastery complex

typically comprises a number of buildings which include a church, dormitory, cloister, refectory, library, balnearia and infirmary. Depending on the location, the monastic order and the occupation of its inhabitants, the complex may also include a wide range of buildings that facilitate self-sufficiency and service to the community. These may include a hospice, a school and a range of agricultural and manufacturing buildings such as a barn, a forge or a brewery.

In English usage,³ the term "**Monastery**" is generally used to denote the buildings of a community of monks. In modern usage "convent" tends to be applied only to institutions of female monastics (nuns), particularly communities of teaching or nursing Religious Sisters. Historically, a convent denoted a house of friars (reflecting the Latin); now more commonly called a "friary". Various religions may apply these terms in more specific ways.

Buddhist monasteries are generally called Vihāra (Pālī language). Vihāras may be occupied by males or females, and in keeping with common English usage, a Vihāra populated by females may often be called a nunnery or a convent. However, Vihāra can also refer to a temple. In Tibetan Buddhism, monasteries are often called Gompa. In Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, a monastery is called Wat or they also can call Wat Ārāma.⁴

Therefore, āvāsa and ārāma were also used for the settlement of the Bhikkhu Saṅghas in the Buddha's period. According to the Buddha's idea of the āvāsa was observe an annual break for introspection, confession and settlement of doctrinal matters.⁵ This demarcation has been a distinct feature of the āvāsa, ārāma and other later monasteries. A āvāsa, established in the countryside as an improvised and temporary encampment came to be known as āvāsa. Later on, the lay-devotees came forward with the donations of their gardens and groves for the settlement of the Bhikkhus. So those places then became to be termed as ārāma where was also a section of the Bhikkhus who opted to spend their Vassāvāsa.

The Concept of Pirivena (Monastic College)

Although "Pirivena", a Buddhist Monastic Education Institute or Complex originated in mid era in Sri Lanka, the term "Pirivena" in the early history of the Buddhist Order refers to a monk abode fortified with a fence (Āvāsa) or a separate cell for a bhikkhu(kuṭī) where Tripiṭaka was daily recited according to oral tradition by Bhikkhus. The Pirivena tradition dates back to the 1st century CE, when the Mahavihara and Abhayagirivihara were commissioned through royal patronage. Other Pirivena institutes were created throughout the island during the rule of successive kings. The Sri Lankan rulers and the Sangha (monastic) community considered the education of both monks and lay people within a Buddhist society to be of utmost

importance. The resulting Pirivena education significantly assisted in the propagation of Buddhism not only locally, but also overseas.

1. According to Ven. Matale Shasanatilaka, term 'Piriveṇa' is derived from the Pali word "Pariveṇa" and may refer to courtyard, hall, hut, or cell (*pariveṇaṃ sammajjiti* - *piriveṇa* is wept).
2. Wilhelm Geiger say this refers to Kutī or Pāsāda.⁶
3. Pācittiya Pāli mentions that Bhikkhunis (nuns) sought instructions and dwelled at 'pirivena' at the time of the Buddha.⁷
4. It is mentioned in the Commentary to the Dhammapada that Ven. Mahāmoggalāna and Ven. Ānanda opened the doors of pirivenas with keys and informed the monks in them of the preaching of Dhamma by Ven. Sāriputta in the presence of the Buddha.
5. 'Piriveṇa' is used in the Cullavaggapāli "*anujānāmi bhikkhave pariveṇaggena dāpetuṃ*"⁸
6. A statement in the Commentary to the Saṃyutta Nikāya directly mentions that Piriveṇa refers to monastery.

System and Purpose of Buddhist Monastic Education

"Buddhist Education" in a nutshell means the teaching and learning of Buddhism. The Buddha taught Buddhism to the Fivefold Ascetics at the Deer Park at

Isipatana in Benares solely for a spiritual purpose. In other words, the first five pupils (ascetics) learnt the Dhamma by listening to the First Sermon delivered by the Great Teacher of the Three Worlds in order to attain emancipation.⁹ The Buddha trained the first sixty Arahant monks and advised them to teach the Dhamma to many people irrespective of their social status. Many instances in the Sutta Piṭaka and the Vinaya Piṭaka show that the Buddha taught Dhamma and ethics to a great number of both ordained pupils and lay pupils in Magadha for forty five years and the other noble theras like Ven. Sāriputta, Moggallāna, Mahākassapa, Mahākaccāyana, Nanda, Ānanda, Anuruddha, etc. and Theris like Dhammadinna, Soma etc. discussed and clarified Dhamma. Thus, the Buddhist teaching was introduced, explained, clarified, discussed and interpreted by them, and this teaching-learning process occurred according to various circumstances at groves, parks, trees, fields, cemeteries, caves, glens, huts, doss houses, forest monasteries, village monasteries, houses of householders and sometimes at mansions, palaces, etc. at the time of the Buddha.

The first sixty Arahant monks went in different directions to teach Dhamma well-planned for the welfare and happiness of many people. According to the Siṅgālovāda Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, a Bhikkhu is to restrain his follower from evil, persuade him to be good, treat him with kind attitude, teach him Dhamma he has not learnt before, clarify the Dhamma he has already

learnt and show him the path to a heavenly state.¹⁰ A teacher is to train his students in the best discipline, see that they grasp their lessons well, instruct them in the arts and sciences, introduce them to their friends and associates and provide for their safety in every quarter. A student is to rise from the seat in salutation to his teacher, attend on him, learn with eagerness, do personal service and pay attention respectfully while receiving instructions. Parents should restrain their children from evil, encourage them to do good, train them for a profession, etc. It is clear from the above factors that the purpose of teaching and learning is first to establish ethics or moral values, next an attentive or concentrating mind for learning and then the ultimate goal of learning is to achieve a wholesome state of life in the mundane life oriented towards spiritual life. The above factors show that the entire Buddhist education draws its inspiration from the three constituents—*Sīla*, *Samādhi* and *Paññā*. Thus, the analysis of the above factors reveal the elements of concept, basis, nature, manner and purpose of teaching – learning process that led to the origin and foundation of Buddhist education in Sri Lanka from Anuradhapura period to its golden age. The purpose of the Buddhist education at its earliest inception in Sri Lanka (3rd Century B.C.) was entirely the study of the Tripitaka for the preservation of Buddhism in its pristine purity and for the spiritual development of Bhikkhus. Teachers were only scholarly Buddhist monks and the students were Bhikkhus and few royal members. The subject taught was restricted to

Buddhism and the system was teacher-centered residential teaching–learning process in temples through study, recital, memorizing, verification and interpretation of Theravada Dhamma – Sutta, Vinaya, Abhidhamma and *Atthakathā* (Mahāvihāra Tradition). Later (from 1st Century B.C. – Abhayagiri Tradition) this Buddhist education began to change in content, system and purpose as it was based on both spiritual and secular subjects taught by scholarly monks and laymen. As a result of the expansion and enhancement of Buddhist education, it reached its golden age by the later period of the 15th Century A.C. and the early period of the 16th A.C. Nevertheless, Buddhist education began to decline after the arrival of the Portuguese (1505) in the 16th A.C., the Dutch (1602), the French (1672) in the 17th A.C. and the English (1796, 1815) in the 18th and 19th A.C. The revival of Buddhist education and establishment of Buddhist education centres, societies and Colleges occurred in 1869 (19th A.C.).¹¹ The modern period of Bhikkhu education with the national and religious revival through Buddhist societies, associations and organizations began in the 20th Century A.C.

The Type of Monastic Education

The type of Monastic Education was divided even during the Buddha's time which known as *Gantha Dhura* and *Vipassana Dhura*. Actually, there were many types of Buddhist Education in ancient India. We have, in here, referred to the four types which were described and

regarded as the most important type of Buddhist Monastic Education. They are as follow:

- 1) *Spiritual Education,*
- 2) *Moral Education,*
- 3) *Literature Education and*
- 4) *Technical Education.*

The first type of spiritual education is related to the doctrinal teaching, instruction on the Buddha's teaching, Buddhist philosophical doctrines and the essentials of spiritual progress. Moral lesson was also regarded as the primary importance of monastic education. It mostly referred to the rules of the lord Buddha were laid down and also permitted to his disciples. Beside this, it not only referred to the Buddhist monks, but also included to the lay people who has to practices the five precepts and the eight precepts as they wishes. The learning of the five precepts may be taken to have been the first moral lesson taught to the students. It is not only practicing in Buddhism, but also Brahmanism. The Five Precepts was regarded as the Ancient Precept or the Oldest Moral Education in the world. The third type of monastic education is the literary of education which is reoffered to compulsory for all resident monks of these institutions. The last one type is Ethical of Education with the special reference to Buddhist art and architecture, sculpture and painting which is the part of education. There were many artists of Nālandā

University which was described during that age of Monastic Education.

The Teaching Methods of Monastic Education

Ancient Buddhist Monastic Education firstly was a private and group teaching. Later it developed into class room. In due course Sanghārāmas developed into residential college and universities. Those universities played major role in the propagation of Buddhism, Buddhist history, Art & Culture. Buddhist Education is a combination between individual and classroom education.¹² The curriculum was spiritual in nature. Mental and moral development was emphasized. Following were the teaching methods of Buddhist Monastic Education:-¹³

- 1) *Verbal of Education*
- 2) *Discussions of Education*
- 3) *Evident of Education*
- 4) *Prominent of Logic*
- 5) *Tour of Education*
- 6) *Conferences of Education*
- 7) *Meditation in Solitude*
- 8) *Medium of Instruction*

The method of education is also the most important factor of Buddhist education. Within this, the candidate who had received the Upasampadā ordination has to pay some fees which could be the either trifling or

extravagant to his two teachers, Upadhyāya and Karmacārya. The Upādhyaya then has to deliver the primary lesson which is referred to the precepts; the offences and the contents of Pātimokha to his pupils. The Buddhist monks then have to study the large Vinaya Pitaka. They had started with the regularly day and night, especially, they also have to examined what they had learnt every early morning which is regarded as the best way to remember their lesson.

The Role of the Mahāvihāra as the Buddhist Monastic Education Centre

The first Buddhist Monastery or known as kālapāsādaPariveṇa¹⁴ in ancient Sri Lanka in Anuradhapura was Tissārāma built in Mahamevṇā by King Devanampiyatissa (236 – 276 B.C.) in the 3rd Century B.C. and offered to Arahant Mahāmahinda Thera.¹⁵ Minister Ariṭṭha with other 500 men and Queen Anulā with 1000 ladies entered the Buddhist Order here. Later this Tissārāma which came to be known as Māhāvihāra is the First Buddhist Education Centre in Sri Lanka. According to Prof. Mangala Ilangasinghe and Prof. Senarath Paranavithana, it took about two or three centuries for the Māhāvihāra to become an extensive education complex and by the 5th century A.C. it had earned world recognition. The Pañcāvāsa – Thūpārāma, Mirisaveti, Isurumuṇi, Vessagiri, and Mihintale belonged to the Māhāvihāra, its two main sacred places were Sri Mahābodhi and Ratnamāli Cetiya and the

Lovāmahāprāsāda (Bronze Palace) was its centre where Bhikkhu education like Vinaya karma was conducted. By the 5th Century A.C. the Māhāvihāra had become the Theravāda Education Complex equipped with Pañcāmaṇḍapa, Pañcā Nikāya Maṇḍapa for common discussion by reciters (bhānakas), Lecture Halls, Recital Chambers or Cells (bhānaka Kuṭi), Libraries, Seminar Halls, Student monk Abodes, Resting Halls or Relaxation Lounges, Refectories, etc.¹⁶

The Mahāvihāra, the residential monastery of Arahant Mahā Mahinda became the Buddhist Education Centre of the Theravāda tradition in Sri Lanka. The letters and the scripts called Brāhmi Alphabet introduced by Ven. Arahant Mahinda became the method of writing used even in Mahāvihāra Educational Institute. At the inception, it became the Buddhist education institute only for monks. Then it became the common educational centre for everybody. For Instance, the children of royal and high class families as well as the ordinary children of poor families, laymen as well as lay women irrespective of their family backgrounds received their education at the Mahāvihāra. The kings of Sri Lanka such as Saṅghatissa, Saṅghabodhi, Goṭābhaya and Dhātusena received their education at this centre. The institutes which started as small schools gradually developed up to the standard of a Pirivena. Kālapāsāda, Sunāhata, Dīghacaṃkamana, Phalagga and Marugana are some of the leading pirivenas which belonged to the Mahāvihāra¹⁷.

The syllabus included subjects such as Theravāda Buddhism, Pāli Tipiṭaka (a compulsory subject), Science of letter Writing, Studies of Sutta, Vinaya and Abhidhamma, Religious studies, languages like Sinhala, Pāli and Sankrit, Prākṛit, Apabrānsa, Paishāvi, Shavraseni, Tamil, Veda, Vedāṅga, Medical Science, Astrology, Astronomy, Necromancy, Prosody, Embellishments, Literature, language, History, Archeology, Economics, Aesthetics and Fine Arts, Warfare, Archery, swordsmanship.

The foreign students also studied Pāli Tipiṭaka and Theravāda Buddhism. Indian intellectuals such as Buddhaghosa, Visākha, Pītimalla and Dhammapāla are prominent examples. Students from Myanmar and Thailand too studied in this centre. Pure Theravāda Buddhism was taken to various countries from Sri Lanka.

Compilation of Pali Commentaries

The Pāli Commentaries in Sri Lanka originated from Ven. Buddhaghosa thera who came here in the Period of King Mahānāma. After getting permission from the Mahāvihāra, all the Sinhala Commentaries were translated into Māgadhi or Pāli, the first language (*Mūla Bhāshā*). According to one of the Mahāvamsa stanzas, it is evident that Ven. Buddhaghosa translated all the Sinhala Commentaries into Pāli or Māgadhi language. This is mentioned in the Saddhamma Saṅgha.

‘Sīhalabhāsaṃ Parivattetvā Mūlabhāsāya Māgadhikāya.’ Seven Sinhala commentaries existed in Mahāvihāra by the 5th century A.D. they are Mahāṭṭhakathā or Mūlaṭṭhakathā, Mahāpaccariya aṭṭhakathā, Kurundiaṭṭhakathā, Andhaṭṭhakathā, Sankhepaṭṭhakathā, Porāṇaṭṭhakathā, Pubbaṭṭhakathā. The following table illustrates the relationship between Pāli commentaries and Sinhala commentaries.

Pāli Commentary	Invited by	Sinhala Commentaries
Visuddhimagga	Saṅghapāla	Mahaṭṭhakathā
Samantapāsādhikā	Thera	Mahaṭṭhakathā
Kankāvitarāṇī	Buddhasiri	Sīhalamātikāṭṭhaka
	Thera	thā
Sumaṅgala Vilāsinī	Sona thera	Mahāpaccariya/Ku
		rundi
Papañcasūdanī	Dhāṭhānāga	Mahāṭṭhakathā
	Thera	Mahāṭṭhakathā
Sārattappakāsinī	Buddhamitta	Mahāṭṭhakathā
Manorathapūraṇī	Thera	Mahāṭṭhakathā
Paramatthajotikā	Jotipāla	Porāṇaṭṭhakathā
Paramatthajotikā	Thera	Mahāṭṭhakathā
Jātakaṭṭhakathā	Bhadanta	Sinhalese Jātaka
Dhammapadaṭṭhaka	Jotipāla	stories
thā	No records	Sinhalese Dhamma
	No records	pada commentary
Atthasālinī	Buddhamitta	Āgamaṭṭhakathā
Sammoha vinodanī	/	Porāṇaṭṭhakathā
Pañcappakaraṇaṭṭha	Buddhadeva	Sinhalese

kathā	Kumāra kāsyapa Thera	commentaries and Āgamaṭṭhakathā
	Buddhagosa Poranattak atha Buddhagosa	

The above factors show that the Sinhala commentaries had been used as the sources for these Pāli commentaries. Ven. Buddhagosa was invited to compile Pāli commentaries by the Sinhalese Monks who resided in the Mahāvihāra in Anurādhapura. Ven. Dharmapāla who lived in Badaratitta compiled commentaries for seven Tipiṭaka books which belonged to the Khuddhaka Nikāya by the name of Paramatthadīpanī. Ven. Buddhaghosa, Dhammapāla, Buddadatta, Upasena and other commentators have referred these Sinhala commentaries when Pāli commentaries are compiled.

The Role of the Abhayagiriya

In the meantime a teacher by the name of Dhammaruchi of India vajjiputra etc came with his followers and associated closely with Abhayagiri Bhikkhus. History records that these vajjiputrakas were those who resided at Palavarama temple in South India. Theravadins of Mahavihara called the Abhayagiri Bhikkhus unrighteous Dhammarucihans. Another reason

for the progress of Abhayagiriya as an educational institution was that seven warriors of King Valagamba built five institutions and handed them over to the vihāra. Abhayagiriya had given an important place to subjects outside the Pirivena syllabu. Therefore, it became a centre that helped propogate eular philosophies, arts and sciences. Just as Mahavihara by such synonyms as Pali Magadhi, Tantibhasa and Pavacana so did the learned theras of Abhaygiriya make Sanskrit their medium for writing.¹⁸

Characteristics of the Abhayagiri Monastery

Accepting new opinions, compilation of books, study of the Abhidhamma and other disciplines, relationship with China and other overseas countries, development of the concept of Bodhisattva. Some of the main reasons for accepting new opinions by the Abhayagiriya were refusal of accepting the leadership of Mahāvihāra, requirement of the system of privatization, opening ways for spreading the power and the assistance of the people, receiving the royal patronage, appreciating the spiritual liberation than the worldliness etc.

The System of Holding Classes

At Pirivenas and monasteries where there were specialist teachers, lectures were held three times a day, in the morning, after lunch and in the evening after religious observances to teach both the laity and the

ordained. There Tripitaka Pela (Tat) was explained during the day and at night it was recited from memory. People from the surrounding villages gathered at the spacious hall in front of the Pirivena listened to the Theras lectures and learnt the profound doctrine.¹⁹ According Theravada tradition it was customary for learned Bhikkhus to gather at least twice a year at the headquarters, discuss problems and arrive at conclusions. This was the most recognized principle in the best of Pirivenas.²⁰

Compilation of Books

The Bhikkhus of the Abhayagiri Monastery started to compile books for the first time in the history after defeating the Vinayadhara group at debate which took place between two groups of monks Dharmadhara and Vinayadhara. It is clear that the first and foremost books were written by the Abhayagiri Bhikkhus.

1. Vimuttimagga, the ancient book found in Ceylon written by Ven Upatissa who lived in Abhayagiri in 1st or 2nd centuries.
2. Rājavaṃsa Pustakaya by Ven. Maha Buddhārakkhita, a scholar expert in languages like Panjab, Persian, Greek and Latin.
3. Uttaravihāravamsaṭṭhakathā written in Sinhala language by Abhayagiri Bhikkhus.
4. Catussathakaya of 400 stanzas, the first book of Sri Lankan Sanskrit literature and its authored by Ven.

Aryadeva who received the ordination from the Abhayagiri Monastery, having been to India and learnt Mādyamaka Philosophy from Ven. Nāgārjuna.

5. Jātakamāla written by Ven. Aryasura at the Abhayagiri monastery.
6. Shramaṇadhūtakāvya, a Sanskrit message poem written by Ven Buddhāmitta who resided in the Abhayagiri monastery.
7. Saddahammopāyanaya, Pali poetry authored by Ven. Ananda thera to give advice to Ven. Buddhasoma.
8. Sārārtha saṅgaha, the oldest medical book written in Sri Lanka by king Buddhādhasa in 4th Century under the guidance of the Abhayagiri monks.
9. Abhayagiri Bhikkhus were versed in Sanskrit language.
10. The Bhikkhus of Abhayagiri monastery compiled a number of books in Sanskrit language namely, Anuruddha Satakaya, Buddhagajjaya, Namasthashatakaya and Baudhdhasatakaya.

The Study of Abhidhamma and other Disciplines

1. The Abhayagiri theras studied Abhidharmakosa written Vasubhandu to influence their books. (Even the Mahāvihāra Theras studied Abhidharmakosa.)
2. Abhidharmakosa had the influence on the compilations like sub commentary on Mahāvamsa, Visuddhimaggasanna of Dambadeni

Parakramabahu, Pancika Pradeepaya by Totagamuve Sri Rahula Thera.

3. Study of Other languages and related disciplines.
4. There Eight Institutes controlled under the Abhayagiri monastery known as Asta Mūlāyatana. Uttara Mula, Dakkhina Mula, Kappura Mula, Galatura Mula, Vilgam Mula, Mahanet Pa Mula etc...
5. Language such as Sinhala, Pali, Sanskrit, Tamil, Chinese as well as the worldly subjects, such as
6. Astrology, Medicine, poetry, arts and craft were taught at the Abhayagiri monastery.

Interactions with China and other Overseas Countries

1. The relationship between Sri Lanka and china in the 1st Century
2. Residing of Ven Fa-hien at the Abhayagiri monastery
3. Translating the Vimuttimagga by Upatissa thera into Chinese
4. Establishment of Bhikkhuni Order in China by Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis under the supervision of Bhikkhuni Devasara.
5. Arrival of Chinese merchants and the Bhikkhus to Ceylon.

The Major Characteristics of Buddhist Education in the Anuradhapura Period

(In the early period of Anuradhapura (3rd Century B.C.) – Mahāvihāra)

1. Buddhist education was totally pioneered by the Mahāvihāra.
2. Aspect of Buddhist education was only Theravāda – spiritual enhancement.
3. Buddhist education was totally based on the study of Tipiṭaka.
4. Subjects were related only to Buddhism and Theravāda tradition.
5. Teachers were Bhikkhus and students were Bhikkhus and few from the royal family (A teacher centered education system)
6. Residential Education – Temples were the institutes where studies were carried out.
7. Purpose of education was the study of Pali, study of Sutta, Vinaya and Abhidhamma, commentaries, sub-commentaries etc.
8. Other major purposes were practice of Dhamma and Vinaya, recital of Pali canon, translation of commentaries into Pali, interpretation and verification of the Buddha Dhamma, preservation of the Tipiṭaka, commentaries and the Theravāda tradition etc.

In the later period of Anuradhapura (1st Century B.C.) – Abhayagiriya (29th B.C.)

1. Aspect of education carried out by Abhayagiri was both secular and spiritual.
2. Residential teaching – learning process – teacher centered education
3. Teachers were both monks and lay scholars
4. Study was not confined to the study of Theravāda Buddhism but other Buddhist traditions like Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna, Tantrayānā etc.,
5. Study of languages like Pali, Sinhala, Tamil, Sanskrit and other secular subjects were taught.
6. Purpose of education was the translation and compilations of books, study of Buddhism, Pali, Sanskrit and other secular subjects like social
7. sciences, arts and crafts, medicine, astrology, aesthetic subjects like literature, poetry, errands etc.

Conclusion

Monastic Education was considered as the most popular one for educating Buddhist students in the ancient period even today. The students who attended the Monastic schools, they will get many advantages for their daily life. Monastic education not only educated the spiritual thing but also taught to the students with many majors and skills for supporting their life in the society.

The Buddhist monks who got higher education will educate all of the devotees such as moral education through their knowledge. They can solve the social problem which is related to spiritual one. In short, the Buddhist monks and also all devotees who got the higher

education from the monasteries were considered as the main resources for developing, propagating and preaching the Buddha's doctrines into the world.

End Notes

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