

Mahāyāna Concepts in Sri Lankan Literature

(A brief literary review)

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1. Introduction

The Sri Lankan history of *Nikāyas* and the conflicts among them are of great attraction in the historical Buddhist academic discipline. Depending on royal sponsorship, particular *Nikāyas* have shown rise and fall in different eras. In many occasions, the *Nikāya* with royal patronage reached the pinnacle of its development, even as it attempted to destroy the opposing *Nikāyas*. Although historical evidence reveals that the Thera tradition (*sthaviravāda*), which took firm root quite early in Sri Lankan Buddhist history, eventually surpassed other *Nikāyas*, we still find elements of other *Nikāyas* which are blended into the Sri Lankan culture. In this discussion, special attention will be paid to analyse Mahāyāna elements in Sri Lankan literature.

2. Background

Mihintalaya in Sri Lanka, where the Arahata Mahinda *thera* arrived and introduced Buddhism, had also transformed into a dissentient Mahāyāna centre for a considerable period. *Trikāyastava* inscription and *Indikaṭuseya* (a Cetiya) of Mihintalaya provide comprehensive information to justify the expansion of Mahāyāna during this period.¹

The king Vaṭṭagāmiṇī Abhaya built a Buddhist monastery called the Abhayagiri-vihāra and presented to a monk called Mahā Tissa who had helped the king in his exile. In this regard, the monks of the Mahāvihāra imposed the punishment of expulsion on Ven. Māha Tissa on the charge of improper contact with lay families.

¹ Paranavitana, S., Ed., *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, Vol. IV. Colombo: Department of Archaeology, 1934, pp.242-246; 238-242