

SRI LANKAN BUDDHIST STUPA IN ITS CULTURAL CONTEXT

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The stupa popularly known as the Cetiya, Chaitya, Dagaba and Seya occupies a position par excellence of the Buddhists of Sri Lanka. The ingress of the stupa into Buddhism occurred as a commemorative visual documentation of the demise of Buddha. Prior to its ingress into Buddhism it existed as a monument dedicated to the cult of the dead, which prevailed almost in every civilisation where the ancestor-worship was in vogue. The Buddhism in absorbing the stupa into its religious sphere gave a new meaning to it with a new sanctified significance. In Buddhism it is no longer a monument intended to be dedicated only to the cult of the dead or to be treated as an abode of souls or spirits or a mere receptacle of magic substances but it has become a venerable and sacred memorial monument which on the one hand reminds the later generations of the great pioneers of humanity and inspires them to follow their example and to encourage in their own struggle for liberation and make their hearts calm and happy and on the other hand the worship of which would enable them to acquire merit for a happy life in the next birth. Thus the Lama Anagarika Govinda says that the chaitya has been elevated from the service of the dead to the service of the living.¹

In India itself the stupa has become the chief component part of a Buddhist monastery and the kings like Asoka, who built up the first great empire in the sub-continent elevated it to a unique position by erecting stupas with durable materials and building a large number of them throughout his empire. The stupa was introduced into Sri Lanka as the main object of worship in Buddhism in the 3rd century B.C. Next to the Mahinda Thera and his retinue who introduced Buddhism into the island, our chronicle Mahavamsa emphasises the great significance of the stupa.² The three tangible and visual representations that the Buddhism set up to demonstrate its firm establishment in the island were the stupa, the Bodhi tree and the Buddhist monk of which the stupa became the most impressive and inspiring monument that focussed the attention of the common man. The stupa became the main ritual element in all the centres of Buddhism and in monasteries. The emergence of a large number of monasteries with a stupa as its major ritual element throughout

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1. Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Psycho - Cosmic Symbolism of the Buddhist Stupa*, California, P.4
 2. M. V. XYII. V ff