Research Paper

The Solitary meditation complex in Rajagala monastery at Ampara, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Rajagala is one of the ancient Buddhist monasteries in the eastern province's Ampara district, Sri Lanka where hundreds of monks lived from the 3rd CBC to 13th CAD. Focusing on the layout of the entire site, it could be close to the Tapōvana monastery, which was directly engrossed in the meditation practices, as well as having an exceptional complex center, including a meditation building and a pathway that had never been recorded and realized in archives. This study focuses on 'whether those buildings and structures were related to Buddhist meditation practices', and to identify the actual meditation activities attached to this complex, according to the pertinent literary sources. Particularly, systematic surveys had been done and recorded, measuring, and drawing each building's available features; furthermore, literary surveys had been carried out. According to the results, there is one isolated square building that was used by monks to practice meditation. It was made on the natural rock surface of stone with one window and one door to use single monks at once. The place used by monks to practice the meditation, as well as the meditative walking pathway (Caṅkamana) on the rock surface adjacent to the main building, was one of the significant architectural features that was recognized as an exact walking pathway of respecting the code of discipline of the Vinaya. Rajagala architects had followed the rules carefully, respecting the Vinaya and doctrine with a deep thought of the Buddhist perception.

Key Words: Rajagala, Monk, Meditation, Caṅkamana, monastery

1. Introduction

Considering the Buddhist monastery in Sri Lanka, it can be divided into two categories: Formal and Non-Formal (Silva 2006:11), the formal monastery can be classified into three groups: Mahāvihāra, Pancāvāsa and Vanavāsa, those were used by thousands of monks. The Non-formal monastery directly based with the natural cave such as Mihintale, Kudumbigala, Situlpavuva, Pulukunawa, Rajagala etc, and this can be considered to have originated since the time of Venerable Mahinda thero visited to the country, during the first rain-retreat or the 'vas' season they had spent time in the caves (Mahavansa 16:1-13). These cave residences which formed the nucleus of the vihara (Silva, 2006:115).

The *Maha Sangha* Society in the country accepted to live in cave dwellings to maintain a simple lifestyle without disturbances and, get away from the public, and the hectic environment, which had used to inhabit

in their life, was close to one of the earliest Buddhist traditions, such as forest groves, open terrace, leaf huts, cemetery, simple tree shrines, and earthen mounds etc., (Cullavaggapali 2005:129). With Royal patronage and political enthusiasm, those disciplines had been changed and arranged with more domesticated architectural features of creating hermitages for monks (Cullavaggapali 2005:129). Since the period of the Mauryan Empire in the 3rd century BC in India, Buddhist monasteries had been developed and certain formal concepts had influenced to the country after being introduced the Buddhism (Bandaranayake 1974:33).

After the arrival of Venerable Mihindu to Anuradhapura, king Devanampiyathissa facilitated the pleasure garden for the monks, nevertheless, venerable Mahinda thero refused the place, because the garden area had closed to the city center, it means

the restrained monks did not like to live in congested areas, because of that, they accepted Mahamewna as a resting place in the city (Mahavansa 15. 1-17), furthermore, besides that they decided to reside in the caves arranged in Mihinthalaya, place where the monks who could practice their meditation activities according to Dhamma (Mahavansa 16.12). Since then, the royal family and their followers in the society had donated to enough facilities and arrangements for the monks (Paranavitana 1970, cxix-cxx), yet concerning matters, the monks had followed Buddhist concepts, though they were facilitated by the royal patronage the organic monasteries became one of the developed religious places in the ancient monastery in the country. Among them, Rajagala is specifically recognized as the cave based ancient monastic site where many architectural features can be identified through the remaining structures and monuments, which are dated back to the 2nd century BC, and those have been recognized as the first phase of the construction of the monastery.

Rajagala Monastery

During the Anuradhapura reign, King Lajjitissa (119-109 BC), the eldest son of King Saddhatissa (137-119 BC), established Rajagala monastery, according to literature and inscriptions. Dīpavansa and Mahāvansa depict that the king Lajjitissa had established the Ghirikumbhila Viharaya, when he was in the Degamadulla area during the rule of his father (Mahavansa 33.14, Dipavansa, 20.11). According to the chronicles, and inscriptions, Rajagala is recognized by numerous names such as *Girikumbhila Vihara* (Mahavansa 33.14,26), *Ariyakara Viharaya* (Mahavansa 43.58-60,47.32), *Girikumbhila Tissa Parvata Viharaya* (Sahassavatutupakarana 1999:187) and *Ariththraa Vehera* (Paranavitana 1943, 169-176), some names being associated with the word 'Kumbhila', had represented to the ranges of Rajagala signifies the shape of the mountains like a crocodile, according to the ancient chronical such as Mahāvansa, Dīpavansa, Papaṁcasūdanī, Sahassavatthūpakaraṇaya, Rasavāhiniya, and Saddharmālaṁkāraya, illustrated on the history of the ancient Rajagala, furthermore, epigraphic records describe the extensive information of the Buddhist monastic establishment since its inception, has mentioned an inscription which dated to the 2nd century BC, and which had confirmed arrival of venerable Mahinda thero to the country, therefore, the Rajagala must have occupied the most significant Buddhist monastery in the country (Paranavitana, 1970: 35; Hettiarachchi, 2018:50-51).

According to Mahavamsa, 60,000 monks had participated in the consecration ceremony of this monastery, and King Lajjitissa had offered three robes to each monk who was present at that event (Mahavansa 33.26). Several inscriptions which have been found in the premises state that King Lajjitissa and his queens had donated several cave dwellings to this viharaya. One of the inscriptions states that the King had donated 25 cold caves to the Viharaya (Paranavitana, 1970:33).

Following King Lajjitissa, King kūṭakannatissa Tissa (44–22 BC), King Bhātika Tissa (143–167 AD), King Mahāsēna (274–301 AD), King Buddhadāsa (33–365 AD), and King Mahinda II (777–797 AD), had constructed several structures (Paranavitana, 1983:2-4; 17-21; 194, Hettiarachchi, 2018: 66-67; Paranavitana,1943:136-137), according to the inscriptions, even Mahavamsa had also recorded a number of new constrictions in the reigns of King Dappula 1 (659 AD) and King Udaya 1 (797-801 AD), on account of it was possible to determine that construction had gradually been developed since the first century BC to the tenth century AD (Mahavansa. 43.60-61, 47.33).

Function of the monastery

Since this site is recognized as a forest monastery in the details, it seems to have been developed to maintain Buddhist religious activities respecting the concept of doctrine. More than hundreds of cave dwellings have been spread out on the east and south sides of the hill, most of them were modified by adding stone or brick walls and making alterations such as cutting drip ledges and carving out the ceiling to make sure the monk had comfortable a meditative life, according to the evidence between 300-500 monks could have resided in those caves (Kannangara 2018:10). The mountain's flat plain by way of two stone stairways is beautifully built through the dense forest and entre to the certain degree of flat area, and it had constructed into building complexes including such as stupa, Uposathagara, Bodhigara, Asanagara, and Dana shala, as well as to collect spring water, and there are two large stone bowls and small tank, several other unidentified buildings. The west outcrop also has surrounded with the relic house, stupa, two image houses, and unidentified buildings, in addition to, the two layouts were identified as the areas where ordinary people gathered to carry out religious observances, and to offer various donations to the meditation monks in the monastery. Beyond the two common areas, to the west and northwest, can be seen some unidentified buildings and structures, those may have been used in mediation practices for the residence monks. Other than that, some standing structures are remaining, and scattered throughout the area to confirm the kinds of ascetic practices that had been continued since the monastery was functioned, observing all those structures and layout, it can be said that these had built during the Anuradhapura era.

2. Methodology

According to the exploratory research approach, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to investigate the objectives of the research. The field survey, in-depth interviews, and archives records were used to collect the data. Among them, the systematic

field survey was used as the main method to gather existing features of each structure with its surroundings and had been conducted in-depth interviews by scholars who surveyed entire premises as well as literary sources, particularly the code of disciplines had been used (Vinayapitaka) and Pali commentaries, based on the Buddhist meditation concept. The content analysis was the main method, and used text and drawings related to the observation according to the survey and excavation data. In particular, the code of disciplines (Vinayapitaka) and commentaries were compared with survey data of archaeological remains on the buildings and structures. Furthermore, analysed the data that had been collected from interviews to make sure the concept had been used to build each structure.

to the solitary complex of Rajagala monastery, it exists even today, according to available evidence for ascetic practices.

Figures 1. Meditation complex site. MC – Meditation Complex, CRB – Common Religious Buildings (GPS Location 7.49070 N, 81.60689 E)

3. Results and Discussion

Considering the site layout, including main religious buildings and cave dwellings, this area is far away and seems to have been detached as a lonely environment, since then, deep forest cover had been converted into a place where meditation monks dwelled (Fig 1), to follow an extreme ascetic life. The Visuddhimagga, written by Buddhaghōṣa thero, in the 5th century in Sri Lanka, also guided to select appropriate monasteries for meditation, including five factors, such as one of them having little frequented sound or being away from voices by nighttime, which was more suitable for the meditation complex here, furthermore, Visuddhimagga has mentioned 18 unsuitable monasteries for inhabit, particularly for Samādhi Meditation (2010:113-116). Samantapāsādikā mentioned that ''if one does not give up cities, town and village, it is difficult to enter the meditation of Anāpāna (2009:385), furthermore, Visuddhimagga describes the benefits of living in the forest, when he lives in a remote abode his mind is not distracted by unsuitable visible objects and so on, is free from anxiety; he abandons attachment to the normal life; he enjoys the taste of the bliss of seclusion…..''(2010:68). As example, Anathapindika was looking for peaceful and suitable resting place in Śrāvasti, (Pali Savatthi), ancient city of India, to offer to the Lord Buddha, considered some important requirements, such as a place with trees and ponds, not too far away, not too close, easy to travel, accessible to people who like to visit, without busy environment during the day time, quiet at night, free from noise, suitable for solitary meditation practices (Cullavaggapali 2005:169). Therefore, has it mentioned entire requirements are more appropriate

Figures 2. The meditation complex consists of stone buildings and a pathway nearby on the leftt side to the building (GPS Location 7.49070 N, 81.60689 E)

Meditation Building

There are the few unknown buildings and structures that have identified in this place, among them the single stone building, the meditative pathway, and the stupa mound have been closely located to each other, to be recognized as a specific place rather than common (Fig 2), as well as there are some more ruined buildings yet to be identified. There is the special building which made of stones and flakes, is uncommon structure compared to the other archaeological buildings that have already been found in the monastery complex in country, yet there are not enough archives records or evidence have been found of it. The squire-shaped man-made building was positioned on the natural rock, it indicates simple technique which is called the stone-on-stone method, while it was constructing the building, it had used

some cut and polished rectangular stones, and used some binding materials as lime plaster to fix the stone each other, also, evidence for this can be identified a few places inside the building.

The building is fixed with four stone walls, which are measured in width at 36 cm. Except for the east wall, other sides are characterized by nine stone layers of the same length, and three slabs of stone are laid on top to resemble a roof. The main door of the building was oriented to the south side, and its height is 1.83 m, and its width is 76 cm (Fig 3), this space is enough to enter the inside even a well-built man, the inside area has been expanded to 1.80m x 1.70m, (Fig 4), the place where a single monk can do prescribed practices meditation without exertion, as well as can keep his personal belongings, and he could have stayed in meditation all day. Though the building has been made of stone, the inside condition is cool, because the roof has been made using

Figures 3. Front Elevation (South side)

three stone plates whose thickness seems to be sufficient to hold sunlight well, and keep inside cool temperature, the square-shaped single window is placed to the east side (Fig 5), and it also helps to control the inside temperature.

Figures 4. Inside of the building

Figures 5. Side Elevation (East side)

Figures 6. Conjecture art for the meditation building

This stone building might have used the monks who resided for special meditation activities such as Samatha (mindfulness) and Vidarśanā. Shamatha is a well-known Buddhist practice that concentrates on developing calmness, clarity, and equanimity. Furthermore, according to the Theravada tradition some meditation practices (such as contemplation of a kasina object) favor the development of samatha, which are the systems or methods to calm the mind, taking spot (signal) such as fire, air, light, water also other meditation disciplines might have functioned at the place. For instance, "One who is learning the light kasina (Ālōka Kasina) apprehends the sign in light in a hole in a wall, or in a keyhole, or in a window opening." So firstly, when someone has merit, having had previous practice, the sign arises in him when he sees the circle thrown on a wall or a floor by sunlight or moonlight entering through a hole in a wall or when he sees a circle thrown on the ground by sunlight or moonlight coming through a gap in the branches of a dense-leaves tree or through a gap in a hut made of closely packed branches. Anyone else should use that same kind of circle of luminosity just described, developing it as "luminosity, luminosity" or

"light, light." If he cannot do so, he can light a lamp inside a pot, close the pot's mouth, make a hole in it, and place it with the hole facing a wall. The lamplight coming out of the hole throws a circle on the wall. He should develop that as "light, light." This lasts longer than the other kinds of practices (Visuddhimagga, 2010:165). Monks who need to follow other meditation practices at the location can do so without disruption, and an appropriate environment can be created with enough space at the location (Fig. 6). However, the precise name of this construction, and it is still unknown, but in terms of its characteristics, it was used to be a simple meditation practices place.

Meditation walking-way

Adjoining to the right side of the building, in the north-east and south-west direction, can see the 30 m long walking way which had been used as Caṁkamana (Meditation walking-way), it was not only for walking meditation, but also for open walking exercise, it made using stone slabs paved upright on both sides and space between the short boundary wall filled with sand, making a flat way of terrace, and it was at a width of 2.80m, but now we are unable to see the whole structure due to deterioration (Fig 7-8). The end of both sides, oriented to the north and south, can be identified, the south-west side has an upright stone to mark the end of the walking way, it indicates the limits of the walking path (Fig 9). These types of Caṁkamana and Caṁkamanaghara (with roof) had been used in other monasteries such as Arankælē, Māligātænna and western monasteries belonging to the Anuradhapura epoch (Wijesuriya, 1998:101-102).

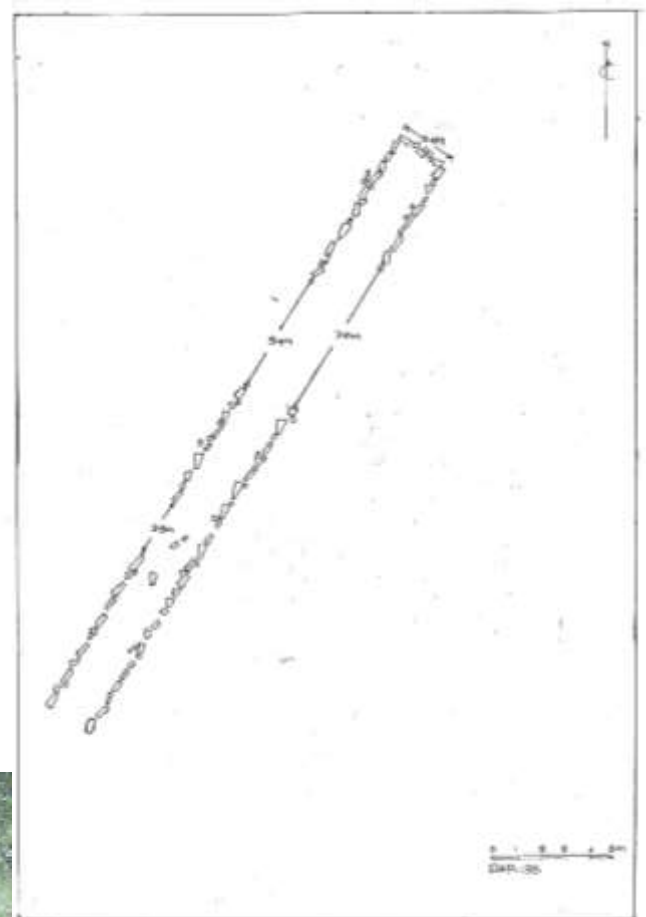Figures 8. Side view of the meditation walking path

Fig 8. Scale drawing of the walking path (Mandawala et al. 2013:42)

Figures 7. Meditation Waking path.

In Sanskrit, *caṅkrama / caṅkramā* (चङ्क्रम) is defined as a place for walking (Monier-Williams, 1899: 382.2) According to the Mahāvaṁsaya caṁkamana used in the 3rd century BC in Mihinthale, In the second century BC, there is evidence of the same meditative walking way being used in India in Baruth in northern India (Wijesuriya 1998: 102). There was a story of introducing cankamana at first for monks who were in viśālā, by the famous physician jīvaka at the incidence of illness of the monks who had been

taking lavish food for their main meals (Cullavaggapāli 2005:43-44). However, at the discussion with Load Buddha, jīvaka got permission to introduce caṁkamana as a discipline of the Vinaya.

Further, additional information provided by the Vinaya pitaka, at first, monks were advised to use caṅkamana, but it hurt to the monk feet, because the walking way was rough and uneven, it was not comfortable for monks to use, with the permission of Load Buddha, caṁkamana was created into the level surface, adding new components such as a raised platform to prevent filling rain water, and different kinds of fence made of stone, brick, and wood to protect the place, while they were walking, added handrail to support to enter to the caṅkamana, ultimately, this walking path had developed with sufficient features as a building covered with a roof to avoid warm, rain and cold weather, there are some evidence to prove such construction, but not clear enough. (Cullavaggapāli 2005:43-44).

According to Jātakaṭṭakathā commentary (2007:10), there are five faults must be avoided while making a cankamana as below:

Hardness and unevenness: Feet get sore and tangled, the mind is not concentrated.

Growing trees inside: If there are trees inside, at the end or in the middle of the ambulatory terrace, the monks head may have hit the tree branches.

Covered thick grasses: If grasses on the surface grow, it would make some place for snakes to stay or any creatures will trample them to death underneath of the gloomy weather condition, and sometimes suffer from their bites.

Too narrow: When walking in a cubit (Riyana) or half a cubit wide chankamana, the legs get tangled, the nails and foot and toes may get hurt.

Too wide: if walking pathway is too long and wide, the mind gets tired, and it does not help to develop concentration. A walking path should be 60 cubits in length and two and half width were accepted to create meditation walkway (Wijesuriya, 2007:105).

According to the literary source, the perfect walking pathway should be 60 cubits[1] in length and 2.5 cubits in width (Jātakaṭṭakathā, 2007:10) Converting to the

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[1] The cubit, Pali in Rathana, is an ancient unit of measurement corresponding approximately to the distance from the elbow to the fingertips, estimated at 18 inches. (Wijesuriya, 2007:105).

meter from cubits, it is shown to be 27.43m in length and 1.4m in width. The measurements of the pathway were 30 m in length and 2.78 m in width. It seemed to be very close to the actual measurements. Therefore, it is said that while constructing the walking pathway, they used traditional methods and followed the Buddha literature to respect the Buddhist concept.

The monk Dīpaprasādaka who resided in the Mihinthalaya monastery, had developed a meditative waking pathway with necessary characteristics (Apadana, 2007:10). The chankamanisansa sutta in Anguttara-Nikya describes five benefits of using chankamana: easy walking, effective meditation, less disease, thorough digestion, and the concentration gained during the walk will last for a long time (2006, 44). According to those advantages, the Load Buddha was said to have walked for meditation practices, (Cullavaggapli 2005:163). Even as Treasurer in Buddha's dispensation, Ven, Ananda also practiced the method of walking to attain the stable of Araha (Nibbana) (Samanthapasadika 2009: 12). The monk named Bagu who attamed to achieve the Nibbana practicing waking meditation, (Thēragāthā 2006:95).

In the case of meditation, waking habit was the major part in the life of the Load Buddha, according to Sekha-Sutta in Majjhima nikāya (The Middle-length Discourses), during the day time, during the first watch of the night (dusk to 10.00 p.m.) and during the last watch of the night (2 a.m. to dawn), he had been doing waking meditation to clean his mind of walking and wakefulness (Majjhima nikāya 2006:31). According to the evidence, a walking path can be used at any time in the day, and it was good practice to do a kind of meditation to achieve the goal with sufficient. According to the above-mentioned practices were applicable in the Rajagala monastery, monk who were doing meditation applied walking path to achieve spiritual life.

It is possible to see a single stupa mound near where the monks used to support their meditation cavities. It has also been recognized as a part of a solitary complex, but it is very difficult to find the whole structure as it is damaged. Probably, this stupa would have been used to continue rituals according to the Vinaya.

4. Conclusion

Rajagala monastery belongs to its unique and splendid culture, where hundreds of monks had been inhabited during the Anuradhapura era. According to the evidence, monasteries had enough support from the

royal patronage and developed with different kinds of influence through the political and religious aspects, making a center of the monasteries in eastern Sri Lanka. Therefore, monasteries gradually developed with the view of Tapovana, which is focused on maintaining meditation activities among monks. As a cave base monastery, it usually forces monks to practice meditation in and out of the caves; therefore, the monks who needed to practice doctrine in deep had made another platform away from the general places and selected a solitary complex in the monastery itself. Considering the code of discipline, monks arranged appropriate buildings and structures, such as the meditation building, Chankamana, and Stupa together in a separate zone from the common area to support the practice of meditation and make the spiritual lives of the monks more stable in anticipation of the stable Maha Sange society in the country. Having concerned mental health to maintain the concentration among the monks, they had been practicing meditation with guidance from the elder monks who were educated in meditation at Rajagala monastery; therefore, as a meditation unit in the monastery, monks were able to achieve the goal of meditation using appropriate construction during the monastic life.

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