

Programme : WBU BUDDHIST SUNDAY FORUM
Topic : A Sacred Tooth and its magic
Date & Time : October 3th, 2553 (2010), 12:00 – 13.30 P.M.
Speaker : Prof. J.B. Disanayaka
Moderator : Dr. Chris Stanford
Rapporteur : Mrs. Suttinee Yavaprapas

The speaker is at present the Ambassador of Sri Lanka to Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. He is also Professor Emeritus of the University of Colombo where he taught for 45 years. He writes on linguistics, history and culture. His book titled 'Lanka: the Land of Kings' was specially written when he was asked to come to the Kingdom of Thailand as ambassador.

The Temple of the Sacred Tooth, *Dalada Maligava*, in Kandy, Sri Lanka is one of most outstanding shrines of the Buddhist world. Its uniqueness comes from many sources; it is the only Buddhist temple that is located in a palace, *maligava*, the residence of the king. It is the only Sri Lankan Buddhist temple that is under high security. In it is enshrined one of the most precious relics of the Buddha, his tooth relic, which is charged with magic and political power. Its magic comes from its power to cause rain, and its political power gives its possessor the right to rule the country. This talk will tell the story of this Sacred Relic and the rites and rituals associated with it and the monks and officials who perform them. It brings into sharper focus many aspects that pass almost unnoticed at this Temple.

This is one of the main centres of pilgrimage of the Thai Buddhists. They visit this Temple in July, which marks the end of the summer, to witness the grand procession that is held in Kandy to cause rain so that Buddhist monks can begin their Rain-Retreat. The hundreds of elephants that march in the procession symbolize rain-clouds.

The Indian concept of '*maha purisa*' (Great Being) maintains that there are among human beings a few with exceptional physical features. A '*maha purisa*' has 32 physical characteristics [*maha purisa lakkhana*], which no one else has. For instance, he has 40 teeth [*danta*], 20 in each jaw, all equal in size and shape. The Buddha passed away at the age of 80 at Kusinara in India. In the minds of the Buddhists, however, he is still alive, in a symbolic way. There are three kinds of 'symbols' which are also called 'relics' that stand for the Buddha.

- 1- Bodily Relics (saririka cetiya)
- 2- Associative Relics (paribhogika cetiya)
- 3- Commemorative Relics (uddesika cetiya)

Bodily Relics are the material remains of the human body of the Buddha, such as his hair (*kesha dhatu*), collar bone (*aku dhatu*), and teeth (*datha dhatu*). These relics are deposited in different places, for example, in small vessels. Bodily relics are mostly deposited in stupas which are also called 'cetiya'. For example, Thuparama at Anudharapura in Sri Lanka contains the collar-bone of the Buddha. Some bodily relics are deposited in relic caskets. For example, one of the tooth relics of the Buddha is deposited in a golden casket, now at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth in Kandy.

Associative relics are those objects used, touched or enjoyed by the Buddha such as the begging bowl and the bodhi tree under which Prince Siddhartha attained Enlightenment. A branch of the original Bodhi tree is now at Anuradhapura. It is considered the oldest historic tree in the world.

Commemorative relics are the icons, images and other man-made symbols that represent the Buddha.

Among the tooth relics of the Buddha are four that are designated 'canine teeth' [*datha:*] After His passing away, His four canine teeth found their way to 4 places:

- a. *Tidasa pure* or *Tavatimsa* Heaven, taken there by Sakka, the king of the gods
- b. *Na:ga pure* (City of the Nagas, not identified as yet)
- c. *Gandha:ra* (in Modern Pakistan)
- d. *Si:hale* (Sri Lanka)

That there is an important relic in Gandhara is corroborated by certain sculptures in Pakistan. There is one sculpture, found in many museums, bearing the title 'Transportation of Relics'. Could this be the Tooth relic, transported from Kusinara (where the Buddha was cremated) to Gandhara? In the Museum in Taxila near Islamabad there is a relic casket which, in their opinion, may contain the Tooth Relic. This was exhibited to the Sri Lankan chief monks a few years ago.

The Tooth Relic in *Si:hale* (ancient name of Sri Lanka) is now in Kandy in the Highlands. The building that houses the Tooth Relic is however not a temple [*viha:ra*] but a palace, [*ma:liga:va*]. The Tooth Relic is now in Kandy because Kandy was the last royal capital. The last king of Kandy was Sri Wikrama Raja Singha. (1798 – 1815) In recent times, it became a target of the LTTE. In 1998 it was bombed by the LTTE but no damage was caused to the Relic. Since then the Temple of the Sacred Tooth was declared a high-security zone.

The Tooth Relic was brought to Sri Lanka in the 4th century AD from Dantapura in Orissa in Eastern India. It was sent to Sri Lanka for its safety because

the Hindu kings were not happy about the honour accorded to it in India. Thus King Guhasiva sent to Sri Lanka through his daughter, Hemamala accompanied by her husband, Dantha Kumara. The Tooth relic was handed over to the king at Anuradhapura, Kitti Sri Meghavanna who placed it in a building named '*dhamma-cakka ge:ha*' built at Anuradhapura by Devanampiya Tissa, Sri Lanka's first Buddhist king. The Sinhalese Buddhists believe that the king who is righteous [*dhammako*] has the magical power to cause rain. This is expressed in the Pali stanza Buddhists recite every day:

Devo vassatu ka:le:na
Sassa sampatti he:tu ca
Pito: bhavatu lo:ko: ca
Ra:ja: bhavatu dhammiko

(May gods or clouds give rain in due season,
May the crops be bountiful,
May the people be joyous,
May the King be righteous)

Since people strongly believed that there will be rain in due season only if the king is righteous, the king kept the Relic that has the magical power to cause rain under his personal protection, in his own palace. Thus whenever the royal capital was shifted to a new place, the Tooth relic was also taken there.

Thus when Polonnaruva became the new capital after Anuradhapura, the Tooth Relic was housed in Polonnaruva. When Polonnaruva fell, the new capital and the Tooth relic were shifted to Dambadeniya. With the fall of Dambadeniya, the new capital and the Tooth Relic were shifted to Yapahuva. After Yapahuva, Kurunegala became the new capital, and the Tooth Relic was taken there.

With the fall of Kurunegala, Kotte near Colombo became the new capital. The Tooth Relic was housed there. When the Buddhists came to know that the Portuguese were planning to capture the Tooth Relic to burn it, they made a fake one and hid the real one in a royal monastery at Ratnapura. The Portuguese were happy to seize the relic and burn it but the Sinhalese were happy that the real relic was in their safe hands.

When Wimala-dharma-suriya became the new king in the new capital Kandy, he found that he needed the Tooth relic to claim sovereignty. Thus he brought the Tooth relic from Ratnapura and deposited in his palace. The last king was captured by the British in 1815 but the Tooth relic remains in Kandy until today. Folklore speaks of 'imitative magic' where certain things can be caused to happen by sheer imitation. Thus, if people imitate rain, then rains will come. The Sinhalese kings and the people began to imitate rain in order to remind and invite the Rain-gods, *vassa vala:haka de:va*, to send rain.

This imitation of Rain came in the form of a procession where the Tooth relic was taken on the back of an elephant. This took place a week before the fullmoon of the Sinhalese lunar month of Aesala (July-August), which marks the height of the dry summer season. The month of Aesala see many rain-making processions held at shrines of gods, such as Vishnu, Skandha and Pattini, the goddess of fertility. On the

advice of Ven.Saranankara, who was bestowed higher ordination by Ven. Upali from Ayudhya, four other processions were amalgamated into the procession of the Temple of the Tooth.

This procession imitates rain. Rain is preceded by thunder and lightening. In the procession, whip-crackers and drummers imitate thunder and torch-bearers imitate lightening. The sounds of the drums, beaten by hundreds of drummers, resound like the thunder before rains. The light that comes from the torches imitate lightening. Rain clouds are symbolized by elephants. In Indian thought, the elephant is a symbol of the rain-cloud. Thus the procession has hundreds of elephants because the more clouds there are the more abundant will be the rain. When will the actual rain come? At the grand-finale of the procession, known as the 'Water-cutting' [*diya kaepime mangallaya*] ceremony which takes place in the middle of the Mahaveli river.

The chief lay custodian of the Tooth Relic is known as the *Diya-vadana Nilame*, meaning literally, the Water (*Diya*) Increasing (*Vadana*) Officer (*Nilame*). Its modern equivalent may be close to 'Minister of Water Resources'. Although the present Head of State of Sri Lanka does not derive his power to rule by the possession of the Tooth Relic, his first duty after assuming his new office is to visit this Temple and pay homage to the Tooth relic and pledge that he will rule this country according to the ten principles of good governance: *dasa raja dharma*.

On the day the procession comes to an end, the Head of State will go to his Residence in Kandy to meet the *Diya-vadana Nilame* who will come to report to him that the procession has been completed successfully. The *Diyavadana Nilame* is accompanied by the *Basnayake Nilames* of the four shrines of God at Kandy. The Tooth Relic has been the theme for many works of Literature both in Pali and Sinhala. They bear titles such as ' *Datha Vamsa* ' (Chronicles of the Sacred Tooth) in Pali and ' *Dalada Sirita* ' (Customs of the Sacred Tooth) in Sinhala.

The Tooth relic of the Buddha may thus be considered the most sacred of His relics because of the magical power it possesses to cause rain and the political power it has to guide the Head of State of Sri Lanka to follow the path of the Dhammika raja , the righteous king . When the king is righteous, the Rain Gods will send rain in good season to fill the rivers and lakes. The Temple of Sacred Tooth overlooking the vast stretch of water of the Kandy lake has thus become the most sacred temple of the Buddhists in the world.