

The Atamasthana at Anuradhapura : A Brief Historical Survey

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The term Atamasthana connotes the eight places in Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka) sacred to Buddhists: the Sri Mahabodhi (*Udamaluwa*), the Lovamahapaya, the Ruwanweliseya, the Thuparamaya, the Mirisawetiya, the Abhayagiriya, the Jetavanaramaya and the Lankaramaya. They are, however not identical with the eight places that constituted the Atamasthana during the early Anuradhapura period.

Buddhists in Sri Lanka have always regarded these sites with deep veneration, and are used to make annual pilgrimages to them. Records of the British officials of the early years of the last century show that this practice continued even after the British captured the kingdom of Kandy, to which Anuradhapura belonged. Davy in 1818, three years after the subjugation of the Kandyan Kingdom, recorded that

“Anuradhapura, so long capital of Ceylon, is now a small mean village in the midst of a desert. A large tank, numerous stone pillars, two or three immense tumular (probably old Dagabas) are its principal remains. It is still considered a sacred spot and is a place of pilgrimage” (Levers, 1899, 66)

Even in 1834, Skinner found that the road from Kandy to Anuradhapura “was crowded with pilgrims on their way to the sacred Bo-tree” and that Anuradhapura “was alive with people.” (Ibid. 214) The first reference to the term *atamasthana* appears in the Sinhala prose work Pujavaliya (13th century.). Till then, though one finds references to the existence of eight sacred places at Anuradhapura, (MV. Ch. 15, also DV., Mbv) they were not referred to as such. When the Government sought the advice of H. C. P. Bell the Archaeological Commissioner, on this matter (first decade of this century), he reported that there was no mention of “the Atamasthana” in the Mahavamsa. (1908, 41/457).

According to the Mahavamsa (15.175) Arahāt Mahinda, who brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka, accepting the offer of the Mahamegha grove and the Tissarama from King Devanampiya Tissa “caused the earth-quake in eight places” namely;

1. The Mahamegha Park, where Arahāt Mahinda resided with other *bhikkhus*, and where the Tissarama Monastery was built later,

2. the place where the *picula* tree stood on the southern side of royal palace. The building erected here, later known as the Ransi Malaka, was used by monks to perform their religious rites and ceremonies,
3. the beautiful bathing tank on the northern side of the royal palace, where, later, the janthaghara" with rooms for warm bath" were built,
4. the gate-way of the royal palace, where, the southern branch of the *bodhi* tree of the three Buddhas of this aeon was planted,
5. the Mahamulamalaka, where lately the Uposatha Hall of the Maha Vihara Monastery (Lohapasada) was erected.
6. the Panhambamalaka, where the offerings made to the *sangha* were portioned among them,
7. the Catussala, where later, the refectory of the Mahavihara monastery was erected, and
8. the spot by the side of the Kakudha pond where the Mahathupa was erected later.

(MV. 15, 27-28, 45-50, 52-53, 175; Rahula: 1956:53)

Similar enumerations are given in the *Dipavamsa* (Ch. 15) and the *Sinhala Bodhivamsa* (*Mahavihara Pratigrahana Katha*). As a symbol of granting the Mahamegha Park or Tissarama to the *sangha*, the king Devanampiya Tissa poured water over the hands of the Arahat Mahinda, and when that water fell on the ground the earth quaked. In the case of the other seven places, the earth quaked when Arahat Mahinda scattered flowers over them. Further, according to tradition, the Gauthama Buddha as well as His three predecessors within this *kalpa* (aeon) i.e. Kakusanda, Konagama and Kassapa—had visited these eight places, where similar religious institutions or monuments stood during those times.

During the Anuradhapura and the Polonnaruwa periods when the Mahavihara influence upon the political as well as religious affairs was predominant there is no evidence to believe that any other places than those eight were considered as sacred places. Being hallowed by visits of the Buddha a supposition based on the chronicles, these places were considered sacred even before the establishment of other religious institutions there. They all belonged to the Mahavihara. Even the *Saddharmalankaraya* written in the 14/15 century mentions them as belonging to the Atamasthana group.

One noteworthy feature of the early Anuradhapura period itself was the emergence of two fraternities of the *sangha* Abhayagiri and the Jetavana, opposing the hitherto prominent orthodox Mahavihara. With the transfer of the capital to Polonnaruwa due to the Chola invasion at the end of the 10th century, the city of Anuradhapura gradually lost its pride and prestige, and its religious institutions also lost the customary royal patronage. On two later occasions too the island was devastated by Magha of Kalinga (1114-39) and the Javanese, Chandrabhanu (1250). When Parakramabahu I ascended the throne in 1153 A.D. the temples at Anuradhapura were overgrown with great trees. Though some sporadic attempts were made by some later kings to restore some of the principal religious buildings they could not stem the tide of the jungle for good.

By the 17th century the area around Anuradhapura was neglected, deserted and isolated from the rest of the country. For instance, in order to protect the Sri Mahabodhi from wild animals like elephants, King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe (1747—1782 A.D.) caused the dilapidated wall enclosing the sacred-Bodhi tree to be rebuilt, and Ilipangomuve Samanera Unnanse with the help of the Maha Vanniya of the place organised the re-construction of the wall. (Harischandra, 1908, 32.)

Buildings like Ransimalaka, Janthaghara and Catussala had vanished totally, leaving no trace as they were probably constructed with non-durables. That is a possible cause for other sites to be regarded as Atamasthana institutions subsequently.

This situation was evident even before, after the decline of the Polonnaruwa kingdom. According to the *Pujavaliya* (756) of the 13th century the contemporary Atamasthanas were the following:

1. Sri Mahabodhi
2. Lovamahaprasada
3. Janthagraha pond
4. Ruwanvalisaya
5. Dakkhina Mahasaya
6. Pirith Chanting Hall
7. Thuparama
8. Mahasaya of Mihintale

The last four places were included in the Atamasthana anew and only four of them—Sri Maha Bodhi, Lohaprasada, Janthaghara pond and Ruvanveliseya belonged to the traditional list. It is possible that the new sites replaced those that could not be identified for centuries. Secondly “place outside the city of Anuradhapura too, was accepted as belonging to the Atamasthana: the Mahasaya of Mihintale, a popular place of worship. This likely inspired, during later times, the concept of Solosmahasthana which envisaged not eight, but sixteen in the island.

The *Nampota* written during the Kandyan period cites eight sacred places also referred to as Atamasthana which are not consistent with the traditionally accepted Atamasthana as mentioned in the *Mahavamsa* and *Dipavamsa*. They are the Sri Mahabodhi, Lovamahapaya, Ruvanvaliseya, Abhayagiri, Thuparama, Jetavanarama, Mirisavatiya and Mihintale Mahasaya. Except the Minhintale Mahasaya, the other seven are situated in Anuradhapura. A *gatha* used by Buddhists at least from the Kandyan period mentions not eight but sixteen sacred places (Solosmahasthana) of the island. These also include almost all the places mentioned in the *Nampota*. They are the Sri Mahabodhi, the Mirisavatiya, the Ruvanvalisaya, the Thuparama, the Abhayagiri, the Jetavanarama and the Sela Cetiya. All these eight places were in Anuradhapura. Here the Sela Cetiya was believed to have been the *cetiya* of the same name constructed by King Lanjitissa to the west of Jetavanarama on a stone pavement. Some believe that it was the *cetiya* in Mihintale as mentioned in the *Nampota*.

When referring to the eight sacred places at Anuradhapura, the *Mahavamsa* and the *Pujavali* name the eight sacred places where religious monuments were later erected. The popular acceptance during the Kandyan times as seen above are not places themselves, but the monuments that stood on those places. Even today, the Buddhists consider those eight Buddhist institutions or monuments as Atamasthana, but not the places where they stood, in particular.

As mentioned above, the city of Anuradhapura and the surrounding area were subjected to gradual decline, and the meagre population of the area could keep only a very few places clear of the jungle for the purpose of general worship. In 1869 there were only two temples at Anuradhapura—one at the Sri Maha Bodhi (Udamaluva) and the other at the Ruwanveliseya. (Karunananda, 1990. 144) Perhaps with the Buddhist revival that took place during the Kandyan times under King Kirti Sri Rajasinha an impetus may have been given to Buddhist activities at Anuradhapura and possibly the concept of Atamasthana may have been subject to a new interpretation. A committee headed by Nuwaraveva Mahavanniya was entrusted with the affairs of the Atamasthana which was under the authority of the Atamasthanadhipathi—the chief incumbent monk who was regarded as an Anunayaka, the Deputy Chief Prelate, i.e. of the whole island, chiefly because he was in charge of the Sri Maha Bodhi, the second most sacred Buddhist shrine in the island—the first being the Temple of Tooth Relic at Kandy of which the Mahanayaka was considered the Chief Prelate of the whole island. (Brodie, 1851; 41/154; Karunananda, 1990, 92 Karunananda, 1991. 60.)

During the last century new names of outstanding sacred places appear to have been agreed upon, because some of the places mentioned in the *Mahavamsa* were then practically unknown. This “revised list” of the Atamasthana represented all the three Nikayas or fraternities of the *sangha* prevailing at the

later Anuradhapura period. The traditional Atamasthana included only those places which belonged to the Mahavihara fraternity. By this time the concept of the three nikayas vanished from the scene and subsequently Buddhists may have got used to considering the famous religious institutions at Anuradhapura without any prejudice. This resulting in their being included as part of the Atamasthana group.

The British Government appointed a Commissioner of Temple Lands to inquire into lands belonging to the Buddhist temples in the island and to recommend them for recognition. Accordingly, title plans were issued in favour of their incumbent. Thus, a title plan No. 88737 dated 20 November 1872 (Hansard, Oct. 23, 1901) was handed over to the Atamasthanadhipati and the following were mentioned as the eight great sacred places therein:

1. The Jetavanaramaya
2. The Lankaramaya
3. The Thuparamaya
4. The Abhayagiriya
5. The Lovamahapaya
6. The Sri Mahabodhiya
7. The Mirisavetiya and
8. The Ruvanvaliseya

In the contemporary records, there is no evidence of any opposition to the inclusion of these eight places as the Atamasthana. Perhaps the commissioners sought the opinion of at least the Atamasthanadhipati, Nuvaraveva Banda, and other Rate Mahatmayas (District Officers) and other leading Buddhists of the area before hand. Even when the question of the composition of the Atamasthana was raised in 1908 the Atamasthanadhipati and Bulankulama Ratemahatmaya (the lay custodian of the Atamasthana) proposed the acceptance of these eight places mentioned in the title plan (Proceedings, Atamasthana Committee, Dec. 28 1908 41/457). But Ievers, the Government Agent, Anuradhapura, when describing the composition of the Atamasthana omitted the Ruvanvaliseya and substituted the Sela cetiya. This change may have been caused by the fact that the Temple lands Commissioner, at the beginning, did not include the Ruvanveliseya in the list of the Atamasthana. The Ruvanveliseya was thus included in the list of the Atamasthana after this omission was pointed out to the Commissioner, (Wimalaratna 1984).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Buddhists in Sri Lanka headed by Brahmajari Valisinha Hariscandra agitated against the occupation of sacred lands around the Atamasthana and other religious places at Anuradhapura, by Government. As we shall see later, their chief demand was the restoration of such "lost temple lands" to the Buddhists. As a result Governor Ridgeway (1896-1903) made arrangements to grant some tracts of land adjoining certain

religious places belonging to the Atamasthana at Anuradhapura for the construction of Buddhist temples (Lakpahana, Nov. 7, 1903; Col. Secy. 1907, 41/457) but was suspended subsequent to the 1903 riots at Anuradhapura. Later when Governor McCallum (1907-1913) re-commenced this activity the question of the identity of the sites arose. The Governor requested the Atamasthana Committee members to submit names of the eight places as acceptable to them, but as they themselves were not unanimous about them they called for the opinions of learned scholars such as the Vens. Sumangala Mahanayaka and Tibbotuvave Mahanayaka of Malvatta. (Proceedings, Atamasthana Committee, March 2. 1908) The Ven. Sumangala in his reply pointed out that there were two groups of names, one according to the Mahavamsa, and the other according to popular belief among the contemporary Buddhists and those of the Kandyan times. (Sumangala, March 2 1905; 41/457) He therefore, advised the committee both lists to send to the Government for consideration. The Atamasthana Committee which met on 22nd March 1908 at the Headmen's bungalow at Anuradhapura, decided that the following eight places be recognized as belonging to the Atamasthana:

1. The Mahamegha Park
2. The Ransimalaka
3. The Janthaghara
4. The Sri Mahabodhi
5. The Lohaprasada
6. The Panambattikha Hall
7. The Catussala and
8. The Ruvanveli (Proceedings, Atamasthana Committee, March 22. 1908, 41/457)

In addition, the committee decided to mention in their application the following sacred places too as they were subsequently built as parts of the Tissarama temple. (loc. cit)

1. The Thuparama Cetiya
2. The Jetavanarama
3. The Mirisavatiya
4. The Abhayagiri
5. The Kujjatissa Vihara
6. The Isurumuni Vihara
7. The Dakkhinagiri Vihara alias Vessagiri
8. The Dakkhina Vehera
9. The Mahaseya of Mihintale (loc cit)

The idea behind following the names of these 17 places was that the first eight sacred places were dedicated to the *Maha sangha* at the time of King Devanampiyatissa and therefore constituted the Atamasthana of old, while the latter were later built incorporate to the Atamasthana.

Simultaneously the government referred the matter to the Archaeological Commissioner, H. C. P. Bell, for his expert opinion, and he maintained that the term Atamasthana was not mentioned in the Mahavamsa. (Bell, 1908, 41/457) Tracing the investigations made by the Temple Lands Commissioner, Hay Woodhouse over the claims made by the then Anunayaka of the Atamasthana, Bell mentioned that a Title Plan No. 88737 consisting of 10 allotments of land was issued by the Surveyor General on the 20th Nov. 1872 in favour of the Anunayaka of Atamasthana. This plan was prepared in accordance with Arnell's Survey and was approved by the Commissioner. He further pointed out that the 16 sites (Solosmahasthana) at Anuradhapura claimed by the Atamasthana Committee meant all the scattered sites from Jetavanarama in the north to Vessagiri in the south and from Mirisavatiya in the west and the Aghayagiri in the east. Therefore he proposed that the government should not go beyond the decision made by the Temple Lands Commissioners and the subsequent Title plans. (loc cit).

Further, the government wanted a specific list of eight places at Anuradhapura, as the term Atamasthana meant, Consequently, at the meeting of the Atamasthana Committee held on 28th December 1908, Bulankulama Rata Mahatmaya proposed the acceptance of eight places as recognized by the contemporary Buddhists in the island, namely, the Bomaluva (Sri Mahabodhi) Lovamahapaya, Ruvanveliseya, Abhayagiriya, Mirisavatiya, Jetavanaramaya Lankarama and Thuparama, But when the proposal was put to vote it was defeated by the President's casting vote. (Proceedings, Atamasthana Committee, Dec. 31. 1908, 41/457). Further it was decided that the Committee had nothing more to say beyond what they had said earlier. (loc cit).

As the matter was not settled, the Governor had a meeting with the Atamasthana Committee on 16th January 1909 at the Anuradhapura Kachcheri for this purpose. (Diary GANCP, Jan. 16, 1909, 41/504). It appears that at this meeting the members of the Atamasthana Committee were compelled to come to an agreement, because otherwise the Government was compelled to abide by the contents of the title plan of 1872 and, further, to withhold the concessions the government expected to grant. (Proceedings, Carey, Jan. 16, 1909, 41/457). Governor Ridgeway intended to grant land at different shrines for the construction of *pansalas* or temples but withheld with the outbreak of riots in 1903.

In this case, Governor Ridgeway withheld the grant till the Buddhists compensated for the damages done to the Roman Catholic Church and other property. Now the government was prepared to fulfill that promise as the said compensation had been paid. (Karunananda, 1991 : 98-100) The Governor in his address further mentioned that the eight sacred places were defined by the title plan of 1872 and therefore asked whether the Committee was prepared to accept them, whether other places were to be substituted.

Under the circumstances the members of the Committee decided to accept them. (loc. cit) At its meeting on the following day the Atamasthana Committee resolved to accept them. (Proceedings, Atamasthana Committee, Jan, 17 1909, 41/457).

Brahmacari Valisinha Harischandra who was engaged in Buddhist activities at Anuradhapura, vehemently criticised the acceptance of these places, because it is the eight places mentioned in the Mahavamsa that should have been preferred, he said. Further, he complained that the Atamasthana Committee was a creation of the British and that its members were government servants and therefore the decisions made by this committee were not acceptable. (Harischandra, 1908, 68-71) But, in fact, they had not merely worked according to the wishes of the Government as Government officials, only the circumstances had compelled them to accept these places as constituting the Atamasthana. Further it is clear that these eight places are popularly accepted as the Atamasthana from the Kandyan times. On the other hand, the majority of the places of the traditional Atamasthana were by then not traceable and had been forgotten by Buddhists, as pointed out before. Therefore it was not wrong to consider the popular accepted places as the Atamasthana rather than unknown places. When one reviews the history of the Atamasthana Committee, one realises that from its inception in the time of Kirti Sri Rajasinha, it consisted of persons holding state offices. Especially during the ancient times, they could not have performed their obligations connected with religious matters satisfactorily. Without the patronage of the kings and officers, it would not have been possible to maintain such a committee. Further it appears that it was difficult to find a suitable person in the area outside government service to represent the people, in it. The leading personnel of the district by way of maintaining their dignity and position before their fellowmen, were compelled to accept office in government service.

This study reveals that the concept of the eight sacred places at Anuradhapura termed Atamasthana existed from the earliest era of Buddhism in this island. At the beginning, the eight places on which important Buddhist monuments were erected later, were considered as eight sacred places. According to tradition there was a belief that there were similar religious monuments even during the times of the previous three Buddhas of this aeon (*kalpa*). They were considered as further holy because they were supposed to have been hallowed by the visit thereto of the previous Buddhas. But through the passage of time Buddhists have come to consider the monuments standing on those eight places as the Atamasthana. Even today it is the eight monuments that are of religious importance, and not the spots on which they stand. Among the eight places constituting the Atamasthana today, only three, the Sri Mahabodhi, the Ruvanveliseya and the Lovamahapaya, belong to those accepted as such especially during the Anuradhapura period. The other five have been selected out of that have come into prominence at a subsequent period.

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