

CONCEPTS OF SPACE

ANCIENT AND
MODERN

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The Ritualization of Space in Buddhist Architecture in Sri Lanka

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The word *ākāśa* is used popularly in the Sinhalese language to mean 'the sky' but the meaning very often varies according to the context, giving wider interpretations such as 'space', 'the atmosphere' and 'open air'. The classical Sinhala word *abasa*, meaning 'sky', is derived from the Sanskrit *ākāśa* through the middle Indo-Aryan Pāli word *ākāsa*. Thus, we have the Sanskrit, Pāli and Sinhala words *ākāśa*, *ākāsa* and *abasa* alternatively used both in the written and spoken Sinhala language to interpret the conceptual and physical sky, and the word *avakāśa* to mean outer space, room or opportunity.

Men, for well over a hundred thousand years, as ordinary men, as scientists, as seers, or as artists, have explored this space either mentally or physically. It would be interesting no doubt to study at length the concepts of space that are widely current among the various cultures of the world in order to understand the common beliefs of the people who live as one family under the atmosphere of a single canopy which is the sky (Sinh: *abas viyana*), but in fact being divided by race, language, religion and politics.

The aim of the present author is to contribute towards the understanding of the concept of *ākāśa* as a ritual space as viewed and experienced by the Sinhalese people of Sri Lanka during the last two thousand five hundred years, deriving much inspiration from neighbouring India and its culture and civilization. The ideas of the majority of the Sinhalese population represent the Buddhist thought that has influenced and shaped their lives for well over two thousand years, but they have been further enriched by Hindu thought and culture from the Tamil people living on the Island, thus giving birth to a unique civilization in South Asia.

Hindu cosmology, as explained by Stella Kramrisch, begins with the creation of space. Indra created heaven and earth by dividing an egg. With this separation, sun, moon and stars were filled. The space was called *antarikṣa* (that lies inbetween) and it is the *ākāśa* that fills the extent of heaven and earth.

The Buddhist Concept

To begin with, we will briefly examine the Theravāda Buddhist viewpoint of the concept of *ākāśa* as space, atmosphere, sky and open air. According to Buddhism, *ākāśa* is not a reality, not an ultimate (*paramattha*), but a concept (*paññatti*), an idea or notion which corresponds to a collection of attributes.¹ According to *Dhammasaṅgani* (638), *ākāśa* is treated separately from the four great material elements or the *mahā-khūtas*, namely: earth (*paṭhavī*), water (*āpo*), fire/heat (*tejo*), and air/wind (*vāyo*). According to *Atthasālini*, space is that which is not scratched, not scratched off, which is not possible to scratch, cut or break (*na kassati na nikassati kassitum chinditum bhinditum vā na sakkoti ākāso—Atthasālini*).² Thus, it is seen in the Theravāda that space is only a potential and is separated from extension (*paṭhavī*). "Space is a potentiality and a limitation of matter and extension is the solidity of matter, one of its four essential elements or constituents (*mahābhūta*). Thus, space is mental and extension is material.

While the earth (*paṭhavī*) gives extension to objects, space (*ākāsa*) circumscribes its limitations which is a void (*sūñña*), and has nothing in common with either air, or ether or matter in any form.³

It is only in the *Mahā Rāhulovāda Sutta* that *ākāsa* is considered as one of the *mahā-bhūtas* or great material elements. In this sutta we find the Buddha advising Rāhula to develop a mental concentration, and which he compares to an open space (*ākāsasamaṃ bhāvanam bhāvehi*). He goes on to explain the element of open space (*katamā ca Rāhula ākāsadhātu*), and says that internally it is the space enclosed by material, such as the openings inside the mouth or nose; external (*bāhira*) space would be that which surrounds matter. The Buddha then gives his ruling on the subject and says that perfect intuitive wisdom which is explained as *sammappaññā* in respect to this element of empty space cleanses the thought (*cittam virājeti*) of the misconceptions of 'I' and 'mine'.⁴

In the *Pabbajjā Sutta* the Buddha explains to his disciples at the request of Ananda how he gave up his household life in search of truth and became a monk. He says that household life is an obstacle to meritorious deeds and a birth-place for cravings. Having realised this, the Buddha became a monk, and he compares monk-hood to open air (*abbhokāso*).

*Sambādhoyam gharāvāso rajassāyatanam iti
abbhokāsova pabbajjā iti disvāna pabbaji.*⁵

Here the expression is clear. It definitely refers to the moving from the inner space of the household life with its limitations to the unlimited open space of homelessness.

Further, *ākāsa* is a pure and empty void, it is an unsheltered place suitable for simple living and meditation. In meditation, the object of the higher mental state of absorption (*jhāna*), which is explained under *ākāsānañcāyatana*,⁶ is reached by the infinity of space (*ākāsānañca*) or the sphere (*āyatana*) of unbounded space. Even the limited space device of the *paricchinna ākāsa kasiṇa* helps the wandering mind to concentrate or meditate. In the *Dasabhumika Sūtras* of the Mahāyānists, *śamādhi*, the state of concentration of both mind and body, is called *ākāsadhātuvipula*.⁷ In both instances space is taken as a topic of *kasiṇa* meditation. In *Nāmarūpaparicchedaya* it is called *ākāsālanbanaya*.⁸

As we learn from the Buddhist commentaries, the element of space (*ākāsa dhātu*) is two-fold: namely, inner and outer. One speaks of space limited (*paricchinna ākāsa*) and of the other, unlimited space which is cosmic space (*anantākāsa* or *ajātakāsa*).⁹

Inner space is described as the mouth space that partakes of food and drink etc. and the space where the food and drink is deposited, and the space of the body from which the digested food is sent out. These, and the nose and the ears are considered as inner space. The openings created by doors and windows of a house are considered as outer space. Thus the inner openings of the human body are regarded as inner space while the openings found in the outer world of man are considered outer space. Thus it is clear that the word *ākāsadhātu* found in the *Abhidhamma* texts always refers to cavities, holes and vacuums, and is considered as a *upādā rūpa*.

The *Milinda Pañha* gives us a very interesting but quite different viewpoint on the concept of *ākāsa*. It states that space cannot be conquered (*sabbaso agayho*), is untraversed by Rsis, Tāpasas, Bhūtas and Dvijas (*isi-tāpasa bhūta-dijagaṇānusañcarito*), adventurous (*santā-saniyo*), not ending (*ananto*), unlimited (*appameiyo*), not attached (*alaggo*), not tied (*asatto*), not dependent (*appatitthito*), not disturbed (*apaṭibuddho*), the sky or space just like Nirvāna is not born of action (*kamma*), cause (*hētu*), and season (*ritu*)—*akammaja, ahētuja, anutuja*.¹⁰

The above description of space found in the *Milinda Pañha* is quite different from the descriptions given in the Pāli commentaries, and speaks of eternal space. The commentaries refer to this space as *ajātakāsa*, *anantākāsa*, *tuccākāsa*. Again they speak of two kinds of *ākāsa* in Theravāda Buddhism: the space limited by body (*rūpa*) and the unlimited cosmic space spoken of by Buddhaghosa, the author of the *Visuddhimagga*. The latter may correspond to the same described by the Vaibhāsikas of Kashmir in their *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, but differ in their analysis.

Explaining the Buddhist term *ākāsa*, *The Encyclopedia of Buddhism* states:

The space-concept (*ākāsapaññatti*) is not a notion corresponding to a thing thus named (*nāmapaññatti*), such as the idea of land or mountain; but it rather reveals certain attributes, or connotes them (*attha-paññatti*) as subjective views without corresponding to an undivided thing. Not being linked, even conceptually to a corresponding object, *ākāsa* is a permanent-concept, (*nicca-paññatti*) "by which the mind is enabled to distinguish objects in external perceptions (Shwe Zan Aung, *Comp. of Phil.* Intro., p. 16). Without having objective reality it is spoken of as that by which an object is limited and bound (*paricchedarūpa*). Space (*ākāsa*) is that by which objects are perceived as mutually distinct; it is the possibility—but not the actuality—of being occupied. Thus, space is to the external perception of matter what time is to mental perception. Just as events happen in time, so objects are placed in space. Both are essential in the process and succession of mental states, without having an individual reality of their own.

Ākāsa is not positive medium in which matter (*rūpa*) moves; but it limits the material units (*rūpa-kalāpa*). The units together with the space between them constitute a material object as it enters the field of the senses with its characteristics of solidity and extension and all the other varying phenomena, which give it appearance (*rūppanato rūpam*). From the central concept of space as potentiality of occupation is derived the meaning of place or even region of rebirth (*kāṇim ākāsa pravṛttajīvo Mhv. 11.49*). But even if it is raised to the rank of an element (*ākāsa-dhātu*), it is the empty space to be occupied by the elements, the void in which the elements are placed (*ākāśagatika Sdmp. 214*). From this again the notions of above, below and across are formed according to Buddhaghosa (Dhs. A.326).¹¹

Buddhaghosa, in his famous work, *Visuddhimagga*, says that:

The space element has the characteristic of delimiting matter. Its function is to display the boundaries of matter. It is manifested as the confines of matter; or it is manifested as untouchedness, as the state of gaps and apertures. Its proximate cause is the matter delimited. And it is on account of it that one can say of material things delimited that this is above, below and across that.¹²

The Ritual Space

Infinite space on the one hand and the space enclosed by man on the other, are both impermanent (*anicca*), full of sorrow (*dukkha*) and unsubstantial (*anatta*). These three universal properties of all existing things of the phenomenal world described as *tilakkhaṇa* or the three signata which form the essential basis for the understanding of the Buddha's scheme of emancipation (*vimokkha*).¹³

Early man erected ritual architectural monuments in diverse forms which replicated in physical structures the cosmos and philosophy of his religious thought. For the Buddhists some of those replicas of the cosmos and of the teaching of the Buddha appeared as *stūpas*, or *dāgābas* and *paṭimāgharas* (CP. XXXVI 1-3), each with a clear meaning attached to the individual components. Of these, the *stūpa* is a unique result of the early Buddhist imagination, for it exemplifies in concrete form the basic tenets of which we have written.

The use of ritual space in Sri Lanka was much influenced by the great sub-continent of India, in every respect whether it be art, architecture or sculpture. This was the result of the early Sinhalese settlers and their religion, Buddhism, having its origin in India. But Sri Lanka has also created and maintained some architectural characteristics of its own, thus making a distinct contribution.

It is believed that the Egyptians built their pyramids by crystallizing the shape of the familiar sand dunes of the desert to symbolize the rays of the sun from horizon to horizon in its profile. The Assyrians cut stepped terraces into the side of their pyramids to create the famous ziggurats to perform their rituals; in Mexico the Aztecs built their temples over piles of receding masonry like monumental staircases to the heavens above. The Buddhist architecture chose the circle as the shape of their monuments since the circle depicts the Buddhist belief of the world.

Some scholars believe that the circle-shaped stūpa symbolized the Buddhist Wheel of Law, as well as for performing the Buddhist ritual of endless circumambulation of the sacred object. Satish Grover says:

And so the irregular humble mound of rubble that had been piled over by the reverent worshippers over relics and ancient treasures to mark a sacred site was now transformed by the royal builders and a hemispherical brick paved tumuli, the plan, elevation section and total form of which were all derived from the circle. The embryo of the most powerful architectural form of Buddhism, the famous stūpa, thus emerged for the first time under the architectural patronage of Asoka.¹⁴

Paranavitana, one of the greatest intellectual products of Sri Lanka, clearly points out that the stūpas of Sri Lanka, in the pre-Christian and early Christian centuries had much in common with their Indian prototypes.¹⁵ The *Mahāvamsa*, the great chronicle describing the shape of the Mahāthūpa (*Ruvanvālisāya*) built by King Duṭṭhagāmini in the second century B.C., says that when the King inquired from the architect what the shape of the thūpa was going to be, the latter “had a golden bowl filled with water, took water in his hand and let it fall on the surface of the water. The great bubble rose up like unto a half-globe of crystal.”¹⁶ This description refers no doubt to a semi-circular bubble-shaped stūpa as was the case in places like Sānchi. This representation of the stūpa in the shape of a bubble is a symbol of the unreal nature of the world, for the Buddha frequently described the world as subject to the three signata, *tilakkhaṇa*, described above. The simile of a water bubble in this regard is very popular in Buddhist teachings.

The form of the stūpa itself is very interesting. At the base of the dome on a level with the surface of the uppermost terrace, as in stūpa No. 3 at Sānchi, is a relic chamber (Pāli: *dhātu gabbha*; the Sinhalese: *dāgāba* for the stūpa is derived from the Pāli term). This was constructed of six huge monolithic slabs like cist.¹⁷ On close examination of some of the relic chambers of early stūpas in Sri Lanka such as at Sīgiriya, Panduvas-nuvara, Mihintale and Topāwāva, it has been revealed that a square stone slab containing nine, sixteen or twenty-five square holes arranged in three, four or five rows, often referred to as *yantragal*, was buried under the relic chamber. This was intended for the deposit of auspicious objects in the foundation in order to bring good luck. On the slab was the square obelisk found in the centre of the cella, which represented the mythical mountain *Mahāmeru*. One such obelisk discovered at Topāwāva had all the characteristics peculiar to *Mahāmeru*. The seven horizontal ribs on its sides represent the seven circles of mountains which surround *Mahāmeru*. The obelisk stood on three small props as the mythical mountain is believed to rise from three peaks (*trikūṭa*). The lower half of it was buried in the foundation just as *Mahāmeru* is said to have its lower half immersed in the ocean. The four sides were painted in different colours: the eastern side white, the southern side blue, the western side red, and the northern side yellow. One of the reputed wonders of *Mahāmeru* is that its eastern side is of silver, the southern side of blue sapphire, the western side of coral, and the northern side of gold. The partitioned receptacle placed below the stone had figures of Nāgas in all its compartments, with the world of the Nāgas located below *Mahāmeru*.¹⁸

A.M. Hocart believed that the stūpa with *Mahāmeru* at the centre symbolized the centre of the universe.¹⁹ The relic chamber in the shape of a stone box or cist was in the centre of the dome on the level of the top of the basal terrace or at the uppermost of the basal terrace of the stūpas which had all three of these adjuncts. In the larger stūpas there were two more relic chambers, one at the ground level and the other below that. Paranavitana believed that the “relic chamber at the ground level symbolized the earth, the one above it the heavenly world, and that below ground the subterranean world of the serpents. The stūpa therefore symbolizes the cosmos.”²⁰

Among the exhibits in the Archaeological Museum at Anuradhapura, is a small chamber of a *dāgāba* from Mihintale with their objects still deposited therein. In the centre is the mountain *Mahāmeru* supported on three props representing *trikūṭa* (CP. XXXVI 4). On the four sides of the mountain are four stones which represent the four great continents. The walls of the chamber are painted with figures of *devas* of the *Cāturmahārājika* heaven moving among clouds. The chamber thus represents the middle world consisting of earth (*bhū*) and the atmospheric regions (*antarikṣa*). Placed on top of *Mahāmeru* is a casket containing relics

symbolic of the Buddha as the Lord of the Worlds (Lokanātha) or the great being (Mahāpuriso). Below the chamber is a smaller *garbha* containing a conch-shell representing the submarine world of Nāgas. The uppermost chamber, which was the largest, must have represented the various planes of existence above *Mahāmeru*. Finally, stūpa represents the cosmos itself.

Above the dome of the stūpa is found a square platform with lines corresponding to a railing as seen in the ancient Sānchi stūpa which the Indian architects of that period called the *harmikā*. The great chronicle *Mahāvamsa* refers to this platform as *caturassa-caya*, meaning four-cornered pile.²¹ Today in Sinhalese it is called *hatarās koṭuva*, meaning a square enclosure which looks as if protected by either a fence or a wall. Therefore it is clear that valuable objects were deposited in this part of the stūpa. The architects of the later periods replaced the stone or wooden railing that protected this area with one solid platform built out of brick and plastered over, imitating the railing with just signs of the railing. These features can still be observed today in the ancient stūpas in Sri Lanka.

The middle of each face was decorated with the sun and moon, emblems in relief with the pattern of railings in the background. Paranavitana believed that the sun and moon symbolised the light of the Buddha's teaching.²² But it is reasonable to believe that these symbols representing the sun or the sun and moon indicate that the stūpa is the universe.

Just above the *hatarās koṭuva* and below the conical spire, the *chatrāvalī* (Sinh: *kotkārālla*, a row of umbrellas), is found a circular drum of brickwork which is called *devatā koṭuva* or the enclosure of gods. Here we find the figures of eight deities representing the eight guardian gods of the world, with hands held in the attitude of veneration. Both the *devatā koṭuva* and the *kotkārālla* of the later stūpas of Sri Lanka are believed to be a development of the *yasṭi* and the *chatrāvalī* of the ancient stūpas in India.²³ The idea of the *lokapālas* or the guardian gods of the world no doubt symbolises the relationship between ritual space and the stūpa believed by the Sinhalese Buddhists. The guardian gods are: (1) Indra of the east, (2) Agni of the south-east, (3) Yama of the south, (4) Sūrya of the south-west, (5) Varuṇa of the west, (6) Vāyu of the north-west, (7) Kubera of the north, and (8) Soma or Chandra of the north-east.²⁴ All of these gods belong to the Hindu pantheon. Thus it is seen that the world and the universe as envisioned by the early Buddhists is basically Hindu, the major difference being that to the Buddhists all things, including the gods, are subject to impermanence or *anicca*.

The frontispieces of the stelae of the four cardinal points of a stūpa which project from the base facing the gateways are now called *vābalkaḍas* in Sinhalese. These reliefs are well worth investigating for an understanding of the stūpa in relation to space. The *vābalkaḍas* of the Kaṇṭhaka Cetiya at Mihintale, which dates back to the first century A.D. and which is remarkably well-preserved, display stone figures of four animals on the tops of the stelae of the *vābalkaḍas*: the bull, the elephant, the lion and the horse. Many scholars such as H.C.P. Bell,²⁵ Vincent Smith²⁶ and Paranavitana²⁷ believe that these four animals symbolise the four quarters of the earth. Another interesting piece of sculpture that adorns the same stela is a foliated scroll known as *kalpalatā*, rising from a vase sometimes held by a dwarf. Paranavitana describes this stela in this manner:

The scroll is so designed as to form five circular spaces, one above the other, within which are figures of elephants, lions, horses, bulls, man and birds. In some others the scroll design, springing from a vase, is combined with pairs of men and animals standing back to back on either side of the stem. The taller of the two stelae on the side of a *vābalkaḍa* is generally ornamented with the representation of a *kalpa-vṛkṣa* literally the “tree of imagination” generally referred to as the Tree of Life. This is formed of a tapering stem, springing from a railing or a vase with long conventionally treated leaves spreading on either side, gradually decreasing in size and length as they ascend.²⁸

According to Buddhist belief, the *kalpalatā*²⁹ and the *kalpa-vṛkṣa*³⁰ are found in the heavens and have the power to bestow anything that is wished for by any person.³¹

With these investigations of the early Buddhist constructions, it should be asked: “What then

represented the *stūpa* in relation to space?" To my mind, the *stūpa* was no doubt the representation of the impermanent world that is surrounded by the other worlds which protect the Buddha either in the form of his corporeal relics, his *dhātū*, or his doctrine, *dharmadhatū*, in his womb (*garbha*), for he alone is the supreme being of the whole world (*mahāpuriso*). Parānavitana observes:

The stupas rose from a circular platform, the sides of which were ornamented with the foreparts of elephants, giving the beholder the impression of the circle of the earth borne on the backs of the elephants in the directions, as it was conceived in mythology. The simple and austere lines of the hemispherical white dome would thus have conveyed the pious devotee the idea of the vault of heaven, with the celestial abodes represented by the superstructure. The relics enshrined within the stupa which at once symbolizes the world and the Tathāgata, would convey the idea of the Tathāgata being imminent in the world. The umbrella, the symbol of sovereignty, suggested to the faithful the idea of the Buddha being Lord of the world.³²

There is yet another interpretation which is quite similar to the above. Jeanette Mirsky says:

Mount Meru, sacred to the pre-Aryan peoples, became the world mountain on whose summit the Aryan gods had their celestial mansions. It represented both the central mountain of the universe, making the mid-point of the earth's surface, and the vertical axis of the egg-shaped cosmos. This dual significance determined the meaning also given to the Buddhist stūpas.

Within the enclosure and the gate was the terrace, the altar mountain; on it the spherical mound, the egg *anda*. Together they symbolized Nirvāṇa, the transcendent reality beyond forms. The plain hemisphere built of solid brick with a masonry covering and above it rose the finial in the shape of a tiered umbrella, the sign of royalty.³³

All these variant interpretations have one common meaning. Temples and shrines are meant to be regarded and their decoration used to facilitate meditation through devotion and therefore the religious representation of space within the form of architecture or sculpture or painting is a religious message symbolically conveyed to the devotee, the ultimate goal being the spiritual liberation, the individual's release from the travail of birth and rebirth.³⁴

The Buddha image (Sinh: *Budu pilimaya*) and the image house (Pāli: *paṭimāghara*; Sinh: *pilimagē*) built for it in the form of a *gandhakūṭi* (Sinh: *gaṇḍakiliya*), a name applied to the dwelling house of the Buddha, are two representations of religious sculpture and architecture that demand our attention (CP. XXXVI 5-7). The majority of the architectural remains of the early image houses are still to be seen in Anurādhapura and Polonnaruwa. The image houses found there fall into two categories, the first being a square sanctuary from which projects a perron of smaller dimensions, a flight of stone steps giving access to the shrine which lies at the end of the longitudinal axis at one of the narrow sides of the building; the inner section consists of two intercommunicating rooms, the larger one behind the smaller, namely, the *garbha-grha* and the *antarāla*, meaning the sanctuary and the vestibule which separates sacred space from secular space. The second room is an oblong. The flight of steps access to the shrine is placed in front of a porch, the *mandapa*, projecting from the middle of it are the longer sides. The second category is a building known as *vaṭadāge*, a circular relic house having a small stūpa and four seated images of the Buddha at the four cardinal points. The Sinhalese word *vaṭadāge* and the Pāli *thūpa-ghara* or *cetiya-ghara* are synonymous and carry the same meaning. Although we can find the origin of these structures in India, the Indian structures cannot be compared with the same type found in Sri Lanka. In the Sri Lankan structures, the *stūpa* and the four images are situated on a much higher elevation than the ground, and the ascent to the circular platform on the top is through a flight of steps. The retaining walls of the platforms and the wing-stones, guardstones, moonstones of some of these circular shrines (CP. XXXVI 8), such as those at Mādirigiriya and Polonnaruwa, are profusely ornamented with sculpturing of high quality and therefore are unique in the expression of an architectural conception. The moonstones, known as *saṇḍakaḍa-paḥaṇa* in Sinhalese, the guardstones (*dvārapāla*), the flight of steps leading to the platform where the statue of the Buddha is found, and the seat of the Buddha in the *paṭimāghara* or in the *vaṭadāge* are some of the features that were subject to much discussion

among art historians and archaeologists in the past. They are interesting to us because they throw much light on the use of spacing of the Buddhist statues in ritual buildings.

The fully developed moonstone is a very intricate composition consisting of the following decorative features arranged in concentric semi-circles around the central lotus. The outward-band of decoration consists of conventionalized flames. Separated from this by a plain narrow band is the most prominent feature of moonstones in general, the four beasts, namely, the elephant, horse, lion and bull, racing each other in a procession. The sequence of the four beasts is not the same in all moonstones. A creeper with wavy stem and intricate foliage comprises the next band. Separated from this by a narrow plain band towards the centre is a band consisting of geese, all proceeding in the same direction.

These exquisite carvings are so placed as to be trodden by the devotees entering the shrines. It is therefore clear that their purpose is not what is called aesthetic today, but to convey a spiritual message by the symbolism of the different motifs which comprise the design.

The stone slab at the end of the balustrade contains the figure of a *nāga* king acting as a *dvārapāla*, i.e., guardian of the gods. They are in human form, but the multihooded head-dress indicates their *nāga* character. These figures are generally in the part called *tribhāṅga*, i.e., being bent at the knees, waist and shoulder, and stand with the weight of the body resting on one foot. The *nāga* king is shown as trampling down a dwarf personifying evil influences. In the left hand is held a pot with foliage at its mouth, and in the other a flowering twig, symbols of plenty and fertility. The *nāga*, therefore, appears as a beneficent being who averts evil influences, and brings plenty and prosperity to the house which he guards.³⁵

H.C.P. Bell, who examined the moonstone, at first thought that the animals depicted on them were an indication to the devotee that permission has been granted to him to enter the shrine. Parānavitana disagreed with this kind of interpretation on the ground that it is unsatisfactory to do so by selecting a few motifs. Therefore, Parānavitana attempted to give an overall meaning to this fascinating piece of sculpture in relation to the whole building complex. He saw the Buddha figure on the high seat as a *dharmaprāsāda* or a palace of the law on the top of a mountain. It might be noted that the image houses of the late Anurādhapura period were also called *prāsādas*. The Buddha, casting his eyes with compassion towards the people who are suffering in the world, is represented by the moonstone which symbolises the *bhava cakra*, or the cycle of existence. The lotus on the moonstone symbolises the highest intellectual life. The outermost stylised flames suggest that existence is enveloped by the flames of passion. The procession of the four animals symbolizes the four great stages of existence: birth, *jāti*; old age, *jarā*; sickness, *vyādhi*; and death, *maraṇa*. The third motif on the moonstone is an intricate foliage design which symbolises the world interwoven with craving. The fourth is a procession of geese. By examining the canonical literature, Parānavitana concludes that the geese represent wise men who turn away from this cycle of existence and proceed to the abodes of being, symbolised by the lotus, growing in the mud, rises above it. Thus, the lotus represents the result of the renunciation, that is the *suddhāvāsa*, the pure abode. He connects the steps that are to be climbed next by the devotee by interpreting them as indicating that the final deliverance from this cycle of existence is obtained by the meditations symbolized by the steps. By pursuing the four or five stages of meditation (Pāli: *jhāna*; Skt: *dhyāna*) symbolised by the steps, the devotee gains transcendental wisdom which is symbolised by the monolithic landing stone at the head of the flight of steps.

Thus, the creation of the *dharmaprāsāda* and the significance of the Sinhalese moonstone was motivated by the artists' design of the pathway leading to the image house of the Buddha.³⁶ Therefore, the pilgrim is expected to tread symbolically the path pursued by the Buddha to break the cycle of existence. The moonstones found at Mahasen Mādura, the Daladā Māligāva, at Anurādhapura, and the *vaṭadāge* at Polonnaruwa, are masterpieces of this philosophical art.

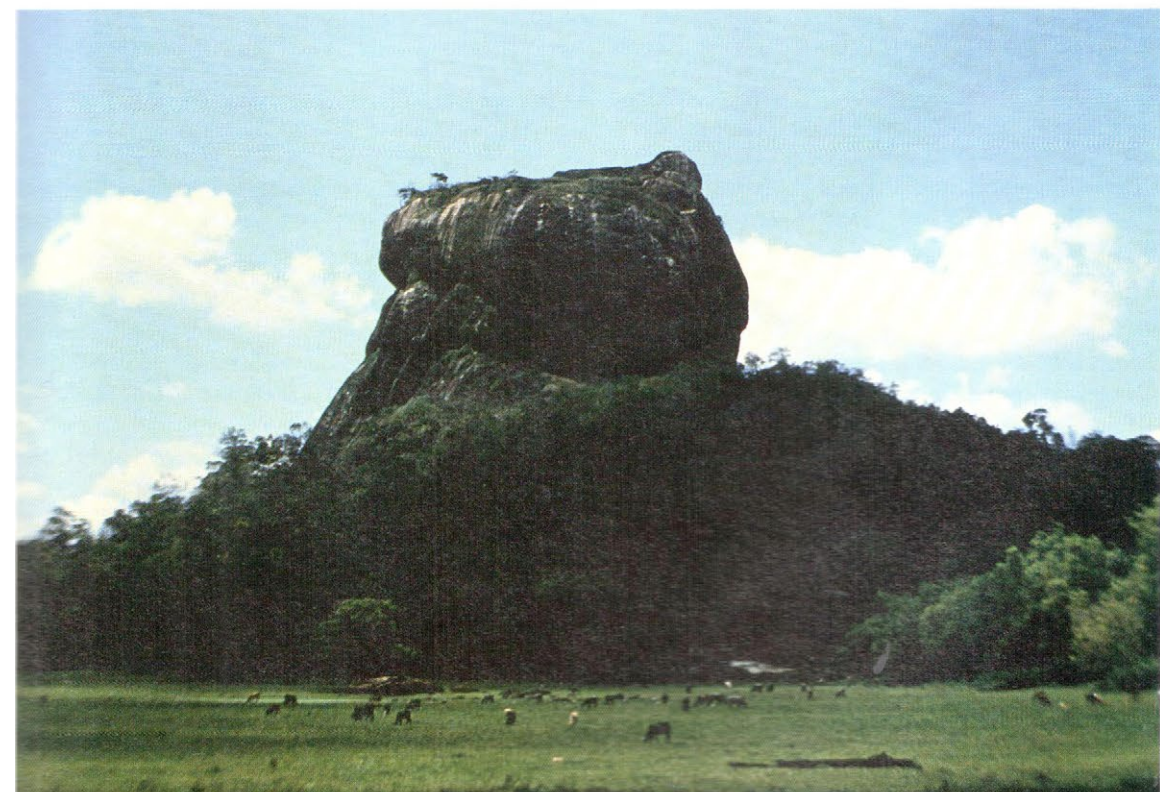
The colossal standing Buddha figures carved out of living rocks are very often depicted with the Buddha standing on a lotus such as those found at Aukana (5th/6th century) and the Galvihara in Polonnaruwa (12th century). In Buddhist literature the cycle of birth and death is



CP. XXXVI 1, 2. Stupas from Anuradhapura and Polonnaru



CP. XXXVI 2



CP. XXXVI 3. Stupas from Aphayagira.

often compared to a muddy ground which the Buddha has crossed. The lotus, arising from the mud, therefore, symbolises a state beyond birth and death. At Aukana, under the lotus pedestal were deposited images of Brahmā and the four *Lokapālas*, the guardian gods of the world. The idea thus conveyed was that the Buddha is supreme to all the gods of the world as he is on a plane above those of the three worlds, that of *nāga*, *manuṣya* and *dēva*.

In ancient times many of the Buddhist shrines of worship were built on the mount of high rocks. The Mihintale, Dambulla and Piduragala *vihāras*, all three from the early periods, were so built, and can still be seen today. At least three *stūpas* in ancient Sri Lanka are known as *ākāsa cetiyas*, or *stūpas* in the sky. One was a *stūpa* at Samantakūta, another at Situlpauwa (2nd century B.C.) which is still known by that name, and the third near acchagala viharaya in Anurādhapura.³⁷

Image houses have been built at Anurādhapura in groups of five, the main building in the centre and four subsidiary buildings in the four corners. These groups of five are known as the *pañcāyatana*, the five abodes, namely, the Bo tree, *Stūpa*, Image house, chapter house (*uposathāghara*) and the dwelling house (*āvāsa*). There are also image houses of two-floors which appear to have had their origin with the arrival of the Tooth Relic of Buddha in the 4th century A.D. In the two storeyed edifice, the lower storey housed Buddha statues while the Sacred Relic was kept in the upper storey. Examples of these in the 12th century are seen at Polōnnaruva and at Dambadeniya belonging to the 13th century. The modern Temple of the Tooth Relic (*Daḷadā Māligāva*) in Kandy has the same traditional plan.

Some ancient cities in Sri Lanka are noteworthy for the planning of their layout, for their use of space in a linear plane. Of these the ancient capital of Sri Lanka known even today as Anurādhapura is of interest for our study. The *Mahāvamsa* and many other literary works speak of the ancient city and its impressive planning. It is quite possible that this site was chosen for the city because of the Malvatu-oya which flowed close by, supplying the necessary quantity of water for a city. We do not see any other reasons for making this choice, such as a site easily defensible. In the 4th century B.C. King Pandukābhaya built a new lake called Abhayavāpi, today known as Basavak-kulam, which covers an area of 205 acres. We have in the *Mahāvamsa* a very detailed description of the planning of the city of Pandukābhaya in the 4th century B.C. It says:

He (the king) settled the yakkha kājavela on the east side of the city, the yakkha cittarāja at the lower end of the abhaya tank. The slave woman who had helped him in time past and was reborn of a yakkhinī, he settled at the north gate of the city. Within the royal precincts he housed the yakkhinī in the form of a mare.

He laid out also four suburbs as well as the abhaya-tank, the common cemetery, the place of execution, and the chapel of the queen of the west, the banyan-tree of Vessavana (Kubera—god of wealth), and the Palmyrah-palm of the Demon of Maladies (the God of the Huntsmen), the ground set apart for the Yonas and the house of the Great Sacrifice; all these he laid out near the west gate.

He set five hundred caṇḍālas to the work of cleaning the (streets of the) town, two hundred caṇḍālas to the work of cleaning the sewers, one hundred and fifty caṇḍālas he employed to bear the dead and as many caṇḍālas to be watchers in the cemetery. For these he built a village north-west of the cemetery and they continually carried out their duty as it was appointed. Towards the north-east of the caṇḍāla village he made the cemetery called the Lower Cemetery for the Caṇḍāla folk. North of the cemetery, between (it and) the Pāsāna-mountain, the line of huts for the huntsmen were built thenceforth. Northward from there, as far as the Gamini-tank, a hermitage was made for many ascetics; eastward of that same cemetery the ruler built a house for the nigaṇṭha Jotiya. In that same region dwelt the nigaṇṭha named Giri and many ascetics of various heretical sects. And there the king also built a chapel for the nigaṇṭha Kumbhaṇḍa; it was named after him. Towards the west from thence and eastward of the street of the huntsmen lived five hundred families of heretical beliefs. On the further side of the Jotiya's house and on this side of the Gāmiṇi-tank he likewise built a monastery for wandering mendicant monks and a dwelling for the ājīvakas and a residence for the brahmanas and in this place that he built a lying-in shelter and a hall for those recovering from sickness.³⁸

The above description of the city of Anurādhapura in the 4th century B.C. is an indication of how well the ancient capital was planned to accommodate a vast population. Further, King Mutasiva, the son of King Pandukābhaya, laid out an extensive garden with fruit trees and flowering trees

which came to be known as the famous *Mahāmeghavana*, in which the Mahāvihāra, the centre of Theravāda Buddhism, was later built during the reign of Devanampiyatissa in the 3rd century B.C.

This park was donated to the community of the Sangha of the four quarters, and later some important shrines were erected at various sites in the park and in its precincts. King Devanampiyatissa himself ploughed a furrow marking the boundaries of the consecrated area which included the citadel which was also donated to the *Mahāsaṅgha*. The sacred Bo-tree, the Mahāvihāra, which developed in the future into one of the greatest monastic establishments of Buddhism anywhere in the world, the Ruvanvālisāya, the great thūpa, Thūpārāma, the first *stūpa* to be built in Sri Lanka, came up in the Mahāmeghavana Park outside the citadel. Anurādhapura was surrounded by the great reservoirs, bringing the city cool breezes for the comfort of the inhabitants, and an ample water supply for the growth of crops.

At Mihintale alone, the King donated sixty-two caves for the monks, and made Mihintale a residential centre for the meditating monks. Since, according to the rules of discipline (*vinaya*) it is necessary for monks to live away from the residential quarters of lay-people, Mihintale, ten miles from the city of Anurādhapura, was selected for this purpose. Not far from the citadel were two other monasteries, Isurumuni and Vessagiri. Thus the holy city of Anurādhapura with all its important religious buildings, both at its inception and in later years, was originally planned and laid down by the great Thera Mahinda (who introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka). Reverend Walpola Rahula believes that Mahinda was the only person at that time who was well-educated and refined, more widely-travelled, and better informed, who could plan an *ārāma*, a monastery.³⁹

The establishment of *sīmā* or boundaries for *sanghakamma*, acts of the monks, was also a necessary feature in monastic architecture in which the concept of space played a very important role. It was in the limited space of the open areas that the community of monks gathered together and performed their *Vinaya* acts. The places meant for the performance of the acts of the order (*sanghakamma*) such as admitting new members to the order were called *mālaka* meaning high places. They must have been raised terraces of earth held in position of retaining walls with possibly an open pavilion.⁴⁰ Today such places are called *sīmā mālaka* meaning bounded terrace. A meeting place of the monks was demarcated by boundaries and for this reason the required space was taken into consideration. During the Buddha's time a place enclosing a space of three *yojanas* in the city of Rajagaha was declared a *sīmā* which included the eighteen monasteries therein. Therefore, a congregational place of the monks for their *Sanghakamma* was limited to three *yojanas*. The *uposathāghara* was also included within the declared *sīmā* area. A *baddhasīmā* is a chapter house in which the whole viharā complex was included and boundaries fixed. The dwelling quarters, image house, *stūpa*, and even the *uposathāghara* is included within its boundary. The *Baddhasīmā pāsāda*, the chapter house of the 12th century Polōnnaruva Kingdom is found on the highest platform of the ālāhana Parivena complex. In the chapter house was done the enforcement of the rules of the Sangha to ensure strict discipline. The monks recited the *Vinaya*, the rules of discipline once a fortnight by meeting in the chapter house with the chief abbot. After each rule, the monks had to confess in the presence of the community of monks if they had broken any *Vinaya* rule and be publicly disciplined. The *Sīmā* or boundary stones indicating the limits of the sacred area where monks have assembled in this manner is well described in the texts dealing with *Vinaya*.

Polōnnaruva in the 12th century was a place of strategic importance. Its citadel was considered to be the inner fortress and the last line of defence of the city. At the northern end of Polōnnaruva was the royal palace complex with its administrative buildings housing fifteen chief officers of state, eight departments of the treasury, eight departments of the elephant industry, eighteen thousand villages not included in the above departments. From the corner of the citadel by the royal baths, the wall of the city, running north, could be seen. The medieval city of Polōnnaruva (11-12th centuries A.D.) during the reign of Parākramabāhu I, according to the

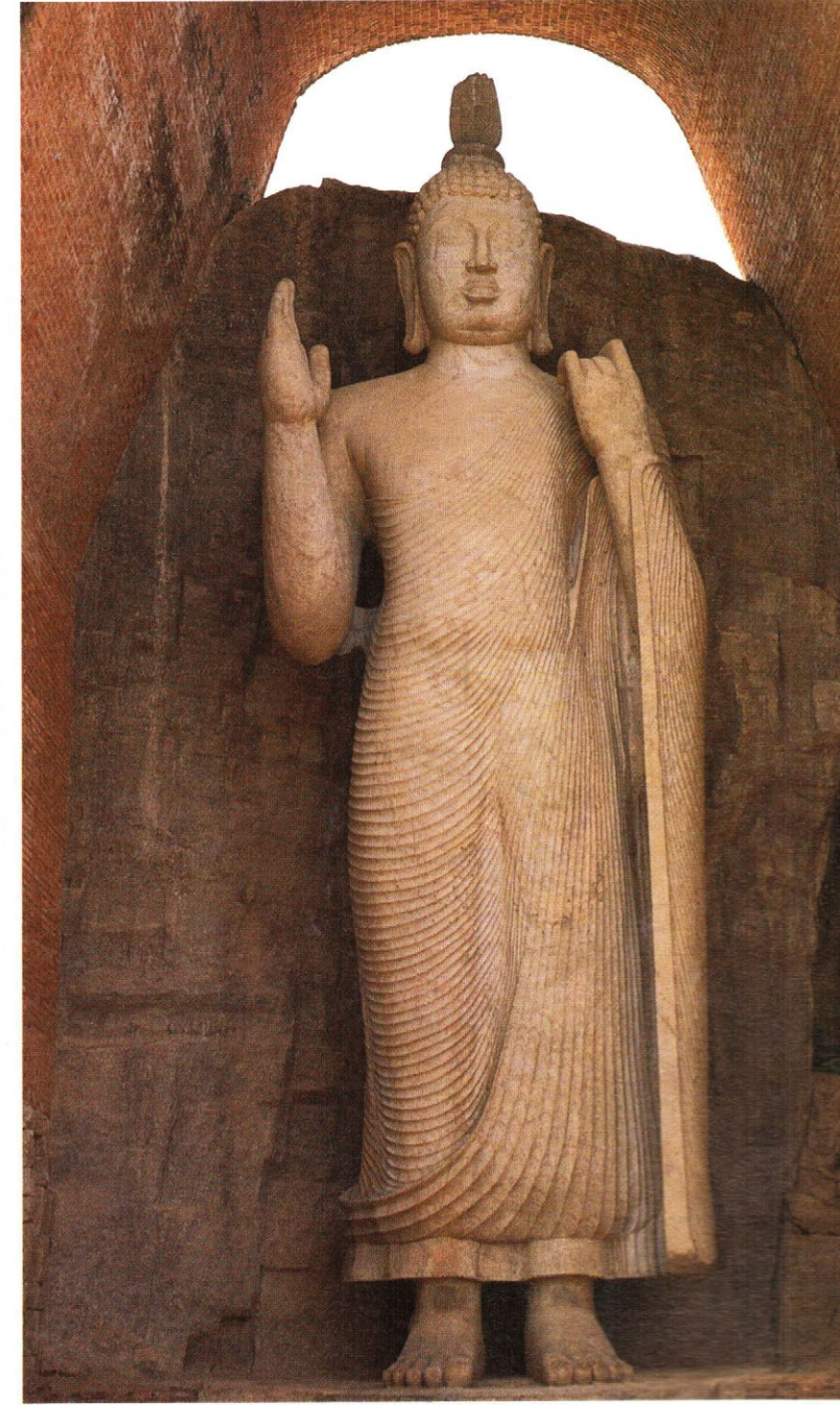
CP. XXXVI 4. Concept of
Mahameru Minitale.



CP. XXXVI 5 to 7. Buddha
images from Anuradhapura
and Polonnaruwa.



CP. XXXVI 6 CP. XXXVI 7



chronicle *Cūlavamsa*, had different kinds of streets laid down, many hundred in number, adorned with many thousands of dwellings, buildings of two, three and even more storeys.⁴¹

Many successive rulers built religious monuments immediately outside the citadel. Parākrāmabāhu the Great built the *ālāhana-parivena*, the principal buildings of which were the superb Lankātilaka image house, the great Baddhasīmāpāsāda, the *uposatha* house, the kiri vehera and the subhaddā-cetiya. The king himself demarcated the boundaries of the monastery. The layout of the entire complex was impressive but it is of paramount importance to note here that the chapter house was placed on a higher elevation in the centre of the area while the other buildings such as a hospital, residential *kuṭīs* of the monks, the famous Uttarārāma, or the better known Gal-vihāra were on the outskirts.⁴² In the cremation (*ālāhana*) grounds are small *cetiya*s built to honour the dignitaries cremated there at the time.

Space, for architects, was always a measurable area of this boundless earth. In this limited space all of the architects' creations were fixed in order of their priority and importance. Thus, their elevations, sizes, proportions and design were carefully selected. These were the main considerations of the architects of religious buildings beside the other factors such as climate, terrain, density, building materials, techniques and purpose. To some degree the Sri Lankan Buddhist temple architects no doubt were inspired by the Hindu temple architects and the *śilpa śāstra* works on this subject.

Mythical Space

Sigiriya of abundant splendour situated in the centre of Sri Lanka is a rock of gneiss rising almost sheer to a height of six hundred feet from the bottom. Beneath the rock are found several caves among the boulders with inscriptions that will speak about its past history. In or about the 2nd century B.C. these caves provided shelter to the recluses who in this seclusion found their salvation from the sufferings of the world. But the generation of recluses did not continue to live there forever. The Sigiri, the lion mountain, earned its name and prestige after Kassapa ascended the throne in the 5th century. He turned the mountain into a city of grandeur and marvel and built a palace on the summit of the rock with an immense lion of brick and stucco at the foot through which access to the rock summit palace was provided, a symbol of nationality to say he was a King of the Lion or a Sinhalese King. We have a brief account of his palace described in the *Cūlavamsa*.

He betook himself through fear to Sihagiri which is difficult of ascent for human beings. He cleared the land round about, surrounded it with a wall and built a staircase in the form of a lion. Thence it took its name of Sihagiri. He collected treasures and kept them there well protected and for the riches kept by him he set guards in different places. Then he built there a fine palace, worthy to behold, like another ālakamandā and dwelt there like the god Kuvera.⁴³

As history reveals though Kassapa ascended the throne, he lived in fear of the day of reckoning—the return of his brother Moggallana with military aid from India; his conscience repeatedly reminding him that he was not the legitimate ruler but his brother. He therefore built a stronghold outside the traditional seat of political power and moved to Sigiriya, an indefensible place to live in times of danger. The duration of his rule was just eighteen years, which was sufficient enough for him to put up a celestial palace on the rock with paintings and a pleasure garden with moats at the foot of the mountain that looked like the second *ālakamandā* or the city of the god of wealth—and there to live like Kuvera the god of wealth himself. The immensity of Kassapa's architectural and engineering achievements at Sigiriya—and that even as remains—is unbelievable and could not easily be achieved even today.

Kuvera is described in the Hindu mythology as the guardian of the northern region, described in respect of externals, as a mere man, but actually as a magnificent deity residing in the splendid

city of *ālaka*, otherwise called *śakra-rāja* or borne through the sky in a gorgeous car called *pushpaka*. He is also called Vaisravana and Buddhified in some *Suttas*.⁴⁴ Kuvera and Rāvaṇa are said to be half-brothers having different mothers.⁴⁵ This description of Kuvera anyhow fits Kassapa. He also ruled the north of Sri Lanka and was the half-brother of Moggallana born to two different mothers by his father Dhātusepa. Kassapa who by now ascended to the position of Kuvera—the god of wealth, made Sigiriya a *deva-rāja bhavana* or a mansion of the God King and lived up on the summit as if he were living in an abode in space (*ākāsa māligā*). Paranavitana believes that the frescoes at Sigiriya symbolise (CP. XXXVI 9) cloud and lightning owing to a description found in the *Ajāṇāṭiya Sutta* where it is said that in Ālakamandā there is a pond named *dharani* which produces rain through its clouds. The idea therefore to have fair and dark complexioned women was to symbolise cloud and lightning and further to convince the people of the King's ability to produce rain at any time, something that the agricultural people in the past expected from their King. Whatever the object of Kassapa would have been, in designing the city and palace of Sigiriya a large portion of the western face of the rock was decorated with hundreds of figures of damsels of which only a few remain today. These findings no doubt remind us of the paintings in the Ajanta Caves of India belonging to the same period though similarities and differences of the two could be drawn in a comparative study.

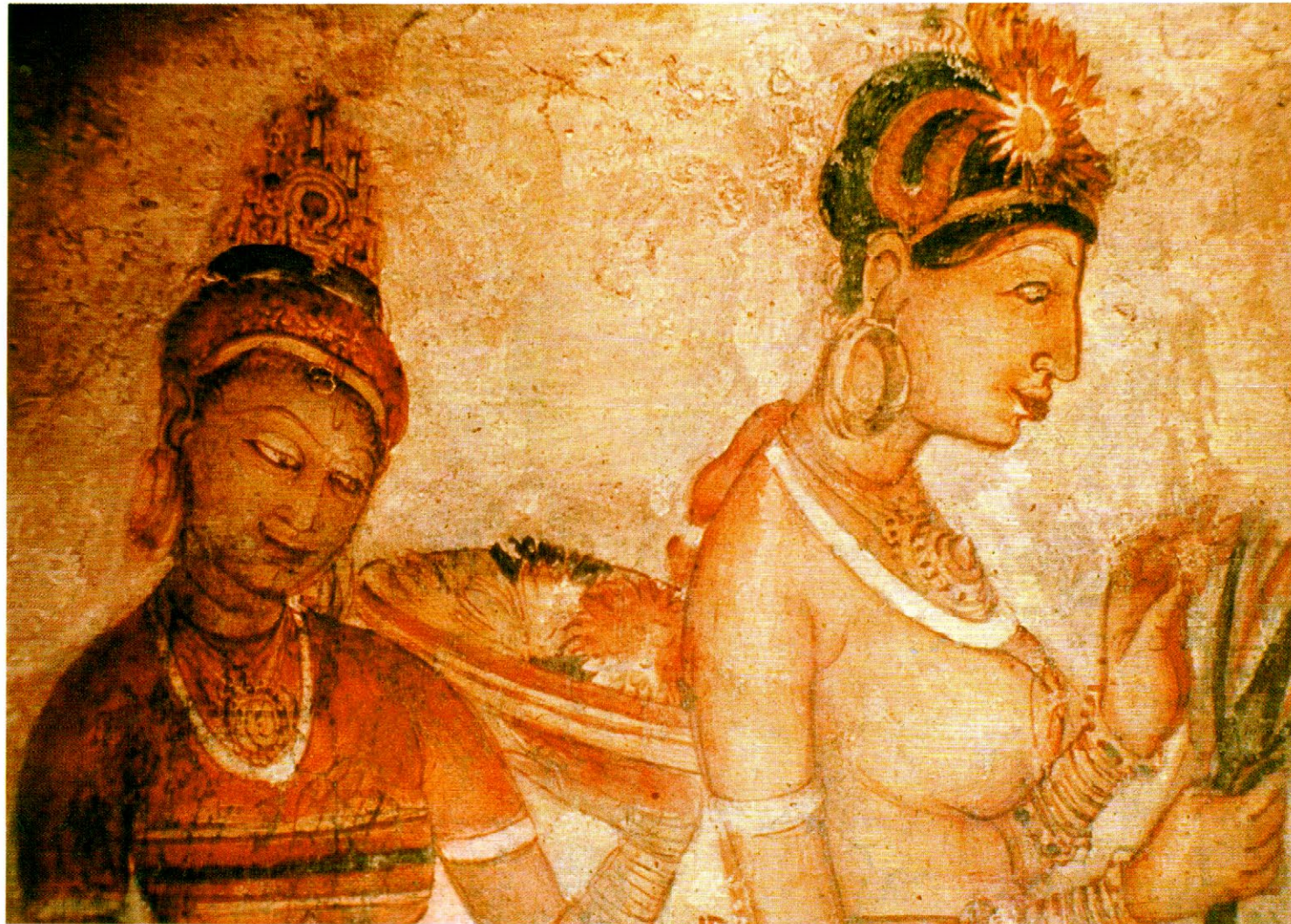
Various opinions have been expressed about the subject of the Sigiriya paintings. According to H.C.P. Bell the paintings depicted Kassapa's queens and their handmaids wending their way to the temple at Pidurangala. Ananda Coomaraswamy thought that they represent heavenly damsels (*apsarās*) and Paranavitana thought that the dark and fair damsels represent rain clouds and lightning.⁴⁶

All these arguments contribute to one idea: Sigiriya is in the *ākāsa* (sky) above the human world and that King himself lived as a god in the heavens. In that context, it is believed that King Kassapa structured his Sigiriya abode to suit the description of the cosmology available to him at the time. The pleasure garden at Sigiriya with its ponds and sprouts is one of the oldest of its kind in the world. The lakes found there can be regarded as a feature of *ālakamandā*. The main gate to the palace of Kassapa at the summit also faces north like the gate of Kuvera.

The term *loka* has been understood in early Buddhism as the world of living beings or as the habitat of gods and men. Buddha as *loka-vidū* or world knower had an insight into the nature of living beings in relation to the world. Therefore, we find various descriptions of the cosmos in the Canon. Thus, the word *loka* in the widest sense used in the *nikāya* texts describes the entire cosmos (*avakāsa*) including all the imaginable and the unimaginable substantiality as well as unsubstantiality.⁴⁷ The word *lokadhātu* seems to indicate a smaller unit within the *loka* and it could extend as far as the moon and the sun move in their course and light up the quarters with their radiance.⁴⁸ Such a *lokadhātu* consists of the moon and the sun, mount Sineru, the four Continents, the four great oceans, the four great kings and the seven heavenly spheres. Thus, in its immensity *loka* is unlimited. The description of the different spheres or realms of the diverse types of beings is also explained in places like *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*.⁴⁹ Five destinies (*gatiyo*) are explained therein and they are niraya (purgatory), tiracchānayoni (animal birth), pithivisaya (realm of the petas), manussa (realm of the human beings) and deva (realm of the devas).⁵⁰ They are further explained in detail. For an example the *Mahāniraya* is described as “a quadrangular space, one hundred leagues each way, four-doored, walled all round and above with steel and with floor of incandescent molten steel.”⁵¹

The inner space is limited. The outer space whether in the form of *ākāsa*, *avakāsa* or *ajatakāsa* is a limitless area in which all material things, whether with life or without life, exist and move. It is also the measurable part of this boundless area, a part marked off in some way, distance, area, or volume as the space between hills and valleys. The whole is taken to be one unit and is called *loka*, the universe or cosmos. It is in this space that man creates everything according to his understanding and nature. It is in this process that man ploughs his field, builds his dam, performs his ritual dance and magic; it is in this space he builds his house, develops his city and erects his temple. All within his limited and limitless *ākāsa* and *anantākāsa*.

CP. XXXVI 8. Plate of circular shrine from Madirigiriya.



CP. XXXVI 9. Frescoes, Sigiriya, 5th Century A.D.

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