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**Bodhicitta in Theravāda Buddhism with Special Reference to  
the Abhayagiri Fraternity in Ancient Sri Lanka**

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## **Bodhicitta in Theravāda Buddhism with Special Reference to the Abhayagiri Fraternity in Ancient Sri Lanka**

### **Abstract**

It is quite obvious that the Mahāvihāra and the Abhayagiri unanimously accept the Pāli Tipiṭaka as authoritative texts, yet the latter stepped further accepting some non-Theravada teachings including Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, which is completely different from the ideological stance of the Mahāvihāra. Historical evidence clearly shows that Mahāyāna Buddhism had played an extensive role in Sri Lanka during the 3<sup>rd</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. This paper will explore the implications of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva ideal in Sri Lankan Buddhist thought during the late part of the first millennium. The aspiration of individual enlightenment is not a new ideal for Theravāda but the aspiration of supreme enlightenment of all sentient beings is less pronounced in the Theravāda. Our attempt is to highlight this deviation between the Mahāvihāra and the Abhayagiri fraternities. This study is based on lithic inscriptions and some selected liturgical sources. A recently discovered inscription found in the Abhayagiri precincts is extremely important in terms of the religious goal of the Abhayagirivāsins. This paper will try to give a brief account of Bodhisattva ideal before the arrival of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Sri Lanka, in which the Bodhisattva practice on the Island after the arrival of Mahāyāna Buddhism will be discussed.

### **TEXT**

As far as the Buddhism's ultimate liberation is concerned, the Bodhisattva path is recognized with a high esteem as the supreme practice both in Theravāda and Mahāyāna. While Theravāda recommends three entries for the enlightenment, Mahāyāna prefers to advocate only the Bodhisattva practice as the unique path to free from Saṃsāra. Buddhaghosa defines the term Bodhisattva as follows. "**Bodhimā satto bodhisatto, nāṇavā pañṇavā paṇḍitoti attho**"<sup>1</sup>. Bodhisattva means the being, who is attached to the Bodhi (enlightenment) and he is knowledgeable, wise and erudite. Here our attempt is not to make a study of the Bodhisattva ideal in Mahāyāna or Theravāda but to discuss the practice and development of Bodhicitta in Sri Lankan Buddhism with special reference to the Abhayagiri Fraternity.

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<sup>1</sup>Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyānā CD ROM Version 3, See also Sāratthappakāsinī I, PTS, p. 356,

"Bodhi is knowledge; a being endowed with bodhi is a bodhisatta, a knowing one, a wise one, a sagely one. For from the time he forms his aspiration at the feet of former Buddhas, that being is always wise, never a blind fool. Or else, just as a mature lotus that has been risen up above the water and is due to blossom when touched by the sun's rays is called "an awakening lotus", so a being who has obtained the prediction (to future Buddhahood) from the Buddhas and who will inevitably fulfill the perfections (pāramī) and attain enlightenment is called an awakening being (bujjhanasatta); he is a bodhisatta. One who lives yearning for enlightenment – the knowledge of the four paths – is devoted to attached to enlightenment (bodhiyaṃ satto āsatto); he is a bodhisatta." (*Samyutta Nikāya, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha – A New Translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Vol. I, Wisdom Publication, Busto, 2000.*)

Scholars like W. Rahula<sup>2</sup> and Jeffrey Samuel<sup>3</sup> have made their contribution regarding the Bodhisattva ideal in Theravāda Buddhism. Both scholars have referred to Theravāda literature and also Theravāda countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand to highlight their view over the Bodhisattva ideal in Theravāda Buddhism. Even though both scholars have discussed about this particular issue with regard to Sri Lanka, they haven't paid much of their attention to explaining when and how this idea really came into practice and evolved to be a new trend in the Island. It seems that the main attempt of both scholars is to highlight the Bodhisattva Ideal in Theravāda emphasizing the fact that it is a well known and practical notion among Theravādins but not a new concept introduced by Mahāyānists. Samuel has referred to the three great Mahāyāna Masters, namely Nāgārjuna, Aśaṅga and Candrakīrti, who had denied the existence of the Bodhisattva ideology in Theravāda.<sup>4</sup> Samuel observes that the path is opened to any one who desires Buddhahood in Theravāda.<sup>5</sup>

Dohanian, in his work "The Mahāyāna Buddhist Sculpture of Ceylon"<sup>6</sup> has indicated some inscriptions, which refer to the devotional aspiration of Buddhahood by the ancient Sri Lankans as the supportive evidence to show that Mahāyāna Buddhism was practiced on the Island. Ratnayaka<sup>7</sup> has done a comprehensive study, also on the Bodhisattva Ideal of Theravāda. He has scanned a number of primary and secondary sources explaining the Bodhisattva Ideal in Theravāda. His work also seems to be somewhat similar to Samuel's. We are not supposed to reiterate what have already been pointed out in the existing works. Therefore our attempt is somewhat different from previous works as we confine to make a comprehensive study of how this unique practice was gradually came to be injected into Sri Lankan Buddhist thought until it developed to the very same level of Mahāyāna Buddhism with a universally applicable notion of bodhicitta.

Though the Bodhisattva ideal was not a new concept for Sri Lankans, the practice of aspiring Buddhahood cannot be seen in the early phase of Sri Lankan Buddhism. Sri Lankan Pāli commentaries and the Mahāvamsa, were composed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Bodhisattva Ideal in Buddhism, Gems of Buddhist Wisdom, pp. 461-471

<sup>3</sup> Philosophy East and West, Volume 47, Number 3, July 1997, P.399-415

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, See Samuel, "Before reevaluating the Bodhisattva-śrāvaka opposition as it is presented by Nāgārjuna, Aśaṅga and Candrakīrti, it is first necessary to ascertain the presence and scope of the bodhisattva ideal in Theravāda Buddhism. This will be accomplished by looking at the presence of the ideal in the Theravāda Buddhist Pāli Canon (theory) as well as by investigating how the same ideal permeates the lives of Theravāda Buddhists (practice)".

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> See "The Mahāyāna Buddhist Sculpture of Ceylon", Diran Kavork Dohanian, Garland Publishing, Inc., New York & London, 1977.

<sup>7</sup> See The Bodhisattva Ideal of Theravāda, JIABS Vol.8, pp. 85-110, 1985

<sup>8</sup> If Bodhisattva practice was prevailed in Sri Lanka before 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. it would have been mentioned there. But we find information about Bodhisattva practice after 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Pāli commentaries are the translations of ancient Sinhalese commentaries. The Mahāvamsa also a translation of Sīhalatthakathā Mahāvamsa. See The Introduction to Vamsatthappakāsinī, The commentary on the Mahāvamsa, Vol. I, by G.P. Malalasekara, Published for the Pāli Text Society, Oxford University Press, London, 1935.

But *Dīpavaṃsa*, the oldest chronicle on the Island is said to be composed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., or earlier<sup>9</sup>. Numerous ancient inscriptions which belong to early Anuradhapura period have been found, but still nowhere can we find any information about Bodhisattva or the aspiration of the Buddhahood. This clearly shows that the practice of Bodhisattva ideal was not popular in ancient Sri Lanka though it was extant in the Theravāda scriptures. With the influence of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Bodhisattva ideal came to be a popular practice both within monastic and lay communities. In order to justify my standpoint in this paper I will utilize some liturgical evidence and epigraphical artifacts as the major sources. Apart from those, inscriptions at the Abhayagiri have been recently discovered, in which one of them is extremely important regarding the practice of universally applicable Bodhicitta.

The following outlines will be scanned in this work.

- i. The Bodhisattva concept in the early phase of Sri Lankan Buddhism
- ii. The development of Bodhisattva ideal in the mid Anuradhapura period
- iii. The Abhayagirivāsins and the practice of the universally applicable Bodhicitta

## I. Bodhisattva Concept in the Early Phase of Sri Lankan Buddhism

If one makes a thorough study of Sri Lankan Buddhist history, he might clearly understand that the Bodhisattva ideal is less pronounced there. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., for the first time, the Maitreya Buddha is mentioned in the *Mahāvāṃsa*.

The Great king *Duṭṭhagāmiṇī*, he who is worthy of the name of king, will be the first disciple of the sublime *Metteiya*, the king's father (will be) his father and the mother his mother. The younger brother *Saddhātissa* will be his second disciple, but *Sāliyarājakumāra*, the king's son, will be the son of the sublime *Metteyya*.<sup>10</sup>

King *Duṭṭhagāmiṇī* is the hero of the *Mahāvāṃsa* and his mother *Vihārāmahādevī* is the heroine there. Therefore, they have been upgraded to a higher position of the lay Buddhist community in Sri Lanka showing that they are worthy of respect. Since none of them has been treated as a Bodhisattva, it is clear that in the early phase of Sri Lankan Buddhism, the practice of Bodhisattva was not popular. But one of the very pious and righteous kings in ancient Sri Lanka named *Sirisamghabodhi* (307-309 A.D.) is treated as a Bodhisattva and the very special epithet 'Mahāsatta' (the great being) is designated for him.<sup>11</sup> He is the first ever Bodhisattva mentioned in Sri Lankan history apart from *Maitreya Bodhisattva*. The word *Mahāsatta* is always used in Theravāda commentaries

<sup>9</sup> See Introduction of the *Dīpavaṃsa* by Herman Oldenberg, Third AES Reprint, Asian Educational Service, New Delhi, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> MV XXXII, 81-83, p.227

<sup>11</sup> Later period in the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D., a chronicle named *Hatthavanagalla-vihāravāṃsa* (The history of Attanagalla Monastery) was composed to explain about this king's Bodhisattva life. See *Hatthavanagalla-vihāravāṃsa*, A. Hazelwood, 1986, PTS

to signify a Bodhisattva. It is significant in the sense that this epithet was used for king Saṅghabodhi lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. That is a unique occurrence in the Mahāvamsa. In Mahāyāna<sup>12</sup> Buddhism, the two words ‘Bodhisattva Mahāsattva’ are used together in relation to the Bodhisattva. It is the only occasion that this special usage has been used in Theravāda Pāli commentaries. One reference is to the commentary to the Buddhavaṃsa<sup>13</sup> (Madhurattavilāsini), which was composed at Kāvīrapaṭṭanam, India where Mahāyāna Buddhism was dominated, by Buddhadatta, who was a contemporaneous commentator to Buddhaghosa. The Venerable Saṅghamitra, the champion of Sri Lankan Mahāyāna movement, also came to Sri Lanka from Kāvīrapaṭṭanam.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, this particular usage of ‘Mahāsatta’ in the Mahāvamsa could possibly be a result of the influence of the Mahāyāna practice of Bodhisattva at the Abhayagiri.

In the fifth century A.D. the great Pāli commentator, Buddhaghosa arrived in Sri Lanka, where his first work, the Visuddhimagga was composed. The Mahāvihāra monks were extremely happy about this great work and shouted that definitely he must be the Maitreya Bodhisattva. The Cūlavamsa reports: “then the community satisfied and exceedingly well pleased, cried again and again: “without doubt this is Metteyya!”<sup>15</sup> But Buddhaghosa has made a vow to become an arahant in the Sāsana of Maitreya Buddha.<sup>16</sup> However, the abovementioned story tells us something about the view of the Mahāvihāra towards the Bodhisattva Ideal. That means the aspiration of Bodhisattvahood is for those who wise and well educated people. Buddhaghosa’s own definition of Bodhisattva<sup>17</sup>, too, signifies that Bodhisattva is a rare type of being (mahāsatto). But when we turn to the Bodhisattva Ideal in Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is apparent that this has been oversimplified.

## II. The development of the Bodhisattva Ideal in the mid Anuradhapura period

After Mahāyāna Buddhism had been introduced to Sri Lanka, the Bodhisattva ideal fostered rapidly in the Sri Lankan culture. Many Bodhisattva statues were constructed in various places in the land and the people were fascinated by the Bodhisattva ideal. The Mahāyāna Bodhisattva worship amalgamated into the Sri Lankan Buddhist culture in the

<sup>12</sup> According to the Mahāvamsa, the Mahāyāna Buddhism came to Sri Lanka during the time of king Vohārikatissa (209-223 A.D.) The Mahāvamsa named this teaching as Vetullavāda (Skt. Vaitullyavāda). Buddhaghosa used the term ‘Mahāsuññavāda’ to identify it. Dīpavaṃsa called it ‘Vitaṇḍavāda. Scholars like Paranavitana, Kern and Rahula accept Vaitullyavāda means nothing but Mahāyāna Buddhism. According to the Abhidharmasamuccaya, Vaidalya and Vaitullya denote the same thing. Vaipullya is defined by him [Asaṅga] as Bodhisattva Piṭaka. [Abhidharmasamuccaya, ed. Pradhan, Santiniketan, 1950, p.79]. See History of Buddhism in Ceylon.

<sup>13</sup> Buddhavaṃsa is a Theravāda canonical text belongs to the Khuddaka Nikāya. In this text the Theravāda Bodhisattva Ideal was developed to the greatest extent.

<sup>14</sup> Ceylon Bhikkhūs who were in exile in Kāveri became intimately connected with a powerful and able young monk named Saṅghamitra, who later became the champion of Mahāyānism in Ceylon, See. History of Buddhism in Ceylon, p.94

<sup>15</sup> CV 37, 242-243, p.26

<sup>16</sup> See Visuddhimagga, ... “And having in my last life seen Metteyya, Lord of Sages, Highest of persons in the world ...” p.838. See also Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon, p.153

<sup>17</sup> Refer to footnote 1

mid Anurādhapura period. The inscription found in Tiriyāi and the Mahāyāna Trikāyastava inscription at Mihintale are very important regarding this practice. Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśī (Mañjuḥṣa) and some other Bodhisattvas are venerated there by their names in the Tiriyāi inscription.<sup>18</sup> Mihintale Trikāyastava inscription clearly shows the worship of the Three Bodies of the Buddha.

I worship that incomparable Dharmakāya of the  
Buddhas which, though not one is also not many...  
I here do worship that Sambhogakāya of the Buddhas  
which is transcendental and unthinkable...  
I worship, by all sorts of means, that Nirmanakāya of  
the Buddhas which, for the purpose of ripening [the  
intellect of] beings...<sup>19</sup>

In order to shorten my presentation, I will explain Bodhisattva practice in ancient Sri Lanka in brief. Prince Jeṭṭhatissa II, the younger son of king Mahāsenā<sup>20\*</sup> (334-362 A.D.), who was said to be the first Mahāyāna king<sup>21</sup> in Sri Lanka, carved a fascinating Bodhisattva image from ivory. “At his father’s request he made a beautiful charming figure representing the Bodhisattva, as beautiful as if it had been produced by miraculous power”<sup>22</sup> This story is very important for us in terms of constructing Bodhisattva images in Sri Lanka. It happened about 500 years after the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka. From the beginning there was no such kind of practice in Sri Lankan Buddhist culture but it later became a newly adopted practice. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century king Dhātusena (455 -473) built several Bodhisattva figures at the Bahumaṅgalacetiya of the Abhayagiri Monastery.

<sup>18</sup> Śīlālekhaṇa Saṃgraha V, pp. 110-111

Makuṭa manai kṛta sphuṭa mahāmuni bimbadhara - Nivasati yatra siddha sura kinnara pūjyatamaḥ  
*Guruvaralokiteśvara* iti prathito *bhagavān* – Tadahaḥharā namāmi girikaṇḍika caityamaham

*Munirapi Mañjuvāḥ* madanadoṣa viśādaharaḥ - Kaṇaka vibhūṣaṇo (jva) la vicitragātra rucir  
Niyatamupeti yatra sukumāra tanurbhagavān – tadahamapi pranau girikaṇḍika caityamvaram

<sup>19</sup> Nivan Maga , (Mahāyāna Vādya), Vol. 26, p.54

... Vande pratyātama-vedaṃ taṃ ahaṃ anupamam dharmakāyaṃ jinānām  
... Vande sambhogakāyaṃ taṃ ahaṃ iha mahā-dharma-rājyā-pratiṣṭhāṃ  
... Vande nirmāna-kāyaṃ-daśa-dig-anu-gatan taṃ mahārtthaṃ munī-nāṃ

\*King Mahāsenā openly accepted Mahāyāna Buddhism. According to one of his inscriptions found at Jetavana monastery, which was built by him, the Mahāvihāra monks have been accused for splitting the Saṅgha and also for not accepting Vaitullyavāda (the word used here for Mahāyāna Buddhism is *Vayatuḍalaka*). The inscription reveals that the king had tried to say that Mahāyāna Buddhism teaches the true teaching. See, Epigraphia Zeylanica, Vol. IV, pp. 273-285. As the result of king’s enforce for Mahāvihāravāsins to accept the new teaching, they left the Mahāvihāra and then the monastery was a deserted place for nine years. See, The Mahāvamsa XXXVII

<sup>21</sup> Abhayagiri Saṃpradāya by Chandra Wickramagama, Ape Saṃskṛitika Urumaya, p.113

<sup>22</sup> CV 37, 102 – 102 , p.9

He erected Bodhisatta figures and ... also he had the ornament described above made for the Buddha image known as Abhiṣeka and Bodhisatta temple on the left side of the Bodhi Tree. For the (Metteyya) Bodhisattva he had the complete equipment of a king prepared and ordained a guard...<sup>23</sup>

Nandasena Mudiyanse affirms that these Bodhisttva images must be Mahāyānist. “Theravādins reckon Maitreya as the only Bodhisattva and therefore these images of Bodhisattva might have been of Mahāyānist origin to a large extent.”<sup>24</sup> Commenting on the Abhiṣeka Buddha K. Vanaratana says that this image is a representation of Vajragarbha Bodhisattva who is mentioned in Daśabhūmika Sūtra of the Mahāsaṃghikas.<sup>25</sup>

The construction of the Bodhisattva images became a popular practice as colossal images were built in the same way as constructing massive Sthūpas on the Island. A Maitreya Bodhisattva statue 15 cubits tall was erected by King Aggabodhi IV.<sup>26</sup> Again we find several Bodhisattva images made by king Sena II (853-887 A.D.) who is also accredited to have built the building named Maṇimekhalā-pāsāda and together with several Bodhisattva images and a shrine.<sup>27</sup>

“The Buddhist Sculptures of Sri Lanka”<sup>28</sup> shows several hundreds of Bodhisattva statues in Sri Lanka, specially the images of the most popular Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. Together with a colossal Buddha image of Amitābha Buddha,<sup>29</sup> which is the tallest Buddha image in Sri Lanka (50 feet), there are six Mahāyāna figures at Buduruvagala<sup>30</sup> in Wellavāya, Southern Sri Lanka and the world’s highest lithic Bodhisattva image (33 feet) at Dambegoda<sup>31</sup> and a well preserved colossal Avalokiteśvara image of Kuṣṭarājagala (12 feet)<sup>32</sup> also from Southern Sri Lanka, provide sufficient evidence to understand the popularity of the Bodhisattva practice in medieval Lanka. A very special Bodhisattva image is found in northern Sri Lanka, Tiriyāi where Vajrayāna Buddhism had been widely practiced. The image represents **Ādibuddha or Vajradhara**. “The elaborately worked jaṭāmakuṭa is decorated with a representation of the five Tathāgatas:

<sup>23</sup> CV 38, 65 – 69, p.36

<sup>24</sup> Mahāyāna Monuments in Ceylon, p.55

<sup>25</sup> Lakdiva Budupīḷimaya, p.85

<sup>26</sup> CV 45, 62, p.95

<sup>27</sup> CV 48, 77, p.154, (Sinhalese tr.) Geiger’s tr. for this stanza is different from the Sinhalese

<sup>28</sup> See Buddhist Sculptures of Sri Lanka by Ulrich Von Schroeder

<sup>29</sup> Lakdiva Budupīḷimaya, p.176

<sup>30</sup> There are two sets of Bodhisttva images each set consists of three figures. One set represents Avalokiteśvara with his śakti Tārā and his attendant Sudhanakumāra. The other set represents Avalokiteśvara, Maitreya and Vajrapāni.

<sup>31</sup> See Buddhist Sculptures in Ceylon by Ulrich Von Schroeder

<sup>32</sup> In the headdress of this image four miniature Dhyāni Buddhas can be seen, two images in front (one above the other) and two on left and right. See A search for Mahāyāna in Sri Lanka, JIABS, Vol.22, Number 2, 1999.

**Akṣobhya, Amitābha, Amoghasiddhi, Rattnasambhava and Vairocana.**<sup>33</sup> According to our discussion we can understand that by the time of mid-Anuradhapura period the Bodhisattva Ideal had become more popular among the islanders and naturally the Bodhicitta practice amalgamated into Sri Lankan culture as a new trend.

### **III. The Abhayagirivāsins and the practice of the universally applicable Bodhicitta**

#### **a. Bodhisattva Kings in Sri Lanka**

One of the main objectives of Sri Lankan Chronicles was to explain about the great dynasties in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the chroniclers paid special attention to the royal families and their activities. For this, regarding our study, the Mahāvamsa is extremely important as it provides accounts on the aspiration of the Buddhahood by ancient Sri Lankan kings. If we inquire this in greater details it seems that this practice was particularly adopted by many Sri Lankan kings like Nissamkamalla (1187-1196 A.D.), who openly declared that he wished to attain the Buddhahood.

**I will show myself in my [true] body which is endowed  
with benevolent regard for and attachment to the  
virtuous qualities of a bodhisattva king, who like a  
parent, protects the world and the religion**<sup>34</sup>

Later on a new idea came to prevail in Sri Lanka, which emphasized that **“non but the Bodhisattvas would become kings of prosperous Lanka.”**<sup>35</sup> Referring to this special statement Dohanian expressed his view as follows. “By the tenth century, the monks of the Abhayagirivihāra had come to hold as an idea of faith to notion that every king of Ceylon was a Bodhisattva.<sup>36</sup> Definitely he came to this view because the aforementioned inscription was found at the Abhayagiri precincts. Ulrich also has expressed his view similar to Dohanian’s. He says that: “It has to be realized that not all rulers were considered worthy of the Bodhisattva status, which was restricted to those who endorsed in particular the Abhayagirivāsins.”<sup>37</sup>

King Upatissa (367-409 A.D.) is said to have practiced the ten pāramitās and other wholesome deeds. Pāramitās or perfections are practiced by Bodhisattvas. Therefore, he should be a Bodhisattva whose aspiration was the Buddhahood. “... He practiced the ten meritorious works; the king fulfilled the ten royal duties and the ten pāramitās”<sup>38\*</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Buddhist Sculptures in Sri Lanka, p.232

<sup>34</sup> Quoted from Samuel, The Bodhisattva Ideal in Theravāda, See also Epigraphia Zeylanica 2:76

<sup>35</sup> Being a Bodhisattva King Mahinda made this statement in the inscription which has been found in the precinct of the Abhayagiri Monastery.

<sup>36</sup> The Mahāyāna Sculptures of Ceylon, p.25

<sup>37</sup> Buddhist Sculptures of Sri Lanka, p.209

<sup>38</sup> CV 37, 179-180, p.17 \* “The ten “meritorious works” (puññakiriya) are dāna “giving of alms”, sīla “leading a moral life”, bhāvanā “spiritual discipline”, apaciti “reverence”, veyyāvacca “diligence”, pattianuppadāna “transference of one’s own merits to another”, abbhanumodanā “gratitude”, desanā “instruction”, savana “hearkening (to sermons)”, diṭṭhujukamma “right views”.

The Ruler lived openly before the people the life that Bodhisattas lead and had pity filled the wishes of the poor by gifts of money, those of the rich by protecting their property and their life. Great in discernment he treated the good with winning friendliness, the wicked with sternness, the sick with remedies.<sup>39</sup>

Those qualities attributed to king Buddhadāsa (460-478 A.D.) are somewhat similar to the wishes of Śāntideva in Bodhicaryāvatāra.<sup>40</sup> King Dhātusena too aspired Buddhahood according to the Sinhalese translation of the Mahāvamsa. With the aspiration for the Buddhahood he instituted a special Bodhipūjā festival as conducted by King Devānampiyatissa.<sup>41</sup> It is said that King Aggabodhi I (568-601 A.D.) also aspired Buddhahood and behaved as a Bodhisattva. Since his life was full of good human qualities, the author of the Cūlavamsa seemed to have been very much inspired by his character. Therefore from the very beginning of this king's practice, the Cūlavamsa credited him as follows.

Aggabodhi the highly favoured of fortune, sisters son of King Mahānāga, now became king whose **aspiration was the attainment of the highest enlightenment**. In splendour imitating the sun, in charm the moon with full disk, in steadfastness the Sumeru mountain, in depth the ocean, in firmness the earth, in impartially the wind, in insight the magician among gods, in purity the autumn heavens, in the enjoyment of wishes fulfilled the King of the gods, in wealth the commander of treasures, in justice the upright Vasetṭha, in courage the king of beasts, in royal virtues a ruler of the world, in generosity a Vessantara, it was thus his people knew him<sup>42</sup>

King Sena I was another Bodhisattva in Sri Lanka, whose aspiration was directed to the Buddha step.<sup>43</sup> Here the word "Buddha step (Budhabhūmi)" is very significant. According to Geiger, this particular word is very significant in Mahāyāna Buddhism.<sup>44</sup>

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The ten pāramitā ((perfections) which must be attained by each future Buddha (bodhisatta) are dāna, sīla, nekkhamma "renunciation", paññā "knowledge", viriya "manliness", khanti "patience", sacca "uprightness" adhiṭṭhāna "will power", metta "love", upekkhā "serenity". (See CV notes, p.17) The ten royal duties (dasarājadhama) dāna, sīla, pariccāga "liberality", ajjāva "fair dealing", maddava "gentleness", tapas "self-discipline", akkodha "without warth", avihiMsā "not wounding", khanti "patience", avirodha "peaceableness". See CV notes, p.10

<sup>39</sup> CV 37, 109-111, p.10

<sup>40</sup> See Bodhicaryāvatāra, chapter 3

<sup>41</sup> CV 38, 55-56, p.14 (Sinhalese tr.) Geiger's tr. is different from Sinhalese, CV 38, 55-56, P.34.

<sup>42</sup> Cūlavamsa 42, 1-5, p.65, Also refer to Geiger's comments on this passage.

<sup>43</sup> Cūlavamsa 50, 65-66, p.143

<sup>44</sup> Geiger says: "Note the Mahāyānist idea of striving after the attainment of future Buddhahood. It occurs here for the first time in the Mahāvamsa."

**Parakkamabāhu II also seems to have wished to become a Buddha and one of his ministers named Devapatirāja also aspired Buddhahood and gave his wives and children<sup>45</sup> to a poor man.**

Unidentified people also have made vows to become Buddha. For instance, we can quote some inscriptions which were found at temples which belonged to the Abhayagiri such as Kapārārāma and Mihintale. **One inscription which has been excavated from Kapārārāma, refers to an inspiration of a devotee to attain supreme Enlightenment in order to quench the thirst of all beings.**<sup>46</sup> One of the ancient Bodhigharas which has been preserved in Sri Lanka is Nillakkagama of Anuradhapura District. Here the donor has made a vow to become a Buddha.<sup>47</sup> The Abhayagiri Sthūpa encircled with a stone-paved terrace. The Cūlavaṃsa records that king Sena III (938-946) paved this stone terrace. One monk named Baduvarika has offered a stone slab for the construction of the terrace. While offering his stone slab, he didn't forget to inscribe his aspiration on the stone. It is read thus: "This is the stone slab offered by bhikkhu Baduvarika Abhaya. **By the power of this meritorious act, may I become a Buddha**".<sup>48</sup> The most important message we find within this kind of statement is that people have wished to attain the Buddhahood even doing a slight meritorious act. It clearly shows that common people had been inspired by the teaching of the Abhayagiri. One Bodhisattva poet tells us in one of the Abhayagiri poetic inscriptions that the life is impermanent. Therefore, no sooner one should strive for the Buddhahood.

The life is like a water drop on a lotus leaf. Having thought that, the mundane pleasure such as universal kingship is impermanent. The life is easily subjected to age and death in the same way a filament like wildflower (Imperata arundinacea) which is caught by the wildfire. Youth is constantly changing and also instantly disappears as a design of fungus in the water. There is no refuge here and hereafter except good deeds. Sewing paddy, you will reap paddy. **Therefore, I strive for Samyaḥ sambodhi.**<sup>49</sup>

One devotee had made a vow to become a Buddha in a Sanskrit inscription which has been discovered at Kucchaveli in Trincomale District.

By this merit, may I be able in every succeeding rebirth, to relieve all the suffering of the world and to bestow complete happiness [on humanity]. [May I also always] be full of forbearance and compassion.

<sup>45</sup> "Once when he beheld a poor man he to whom mercy was the highest, gave him all possessions together with children and wives and uttered the wish: I will become a Buddha." See Geiger's translation of Cūlavaṃsa, Chapter 86 – 1-9, p.171

<sup>46</sup> Archeological Survey of Ceylon, pp.11-30

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.27

<sup>48</sup> "Baduvarika abahimiyan tābū pahaṇai – mehi belen buduvelvai" See, Abhayagiri Paryeṣaṇa, p.107

<sup>49</sup> Abhayagiri Paryeṣaṇa, p.101

By this merit, may I vanquish the foes, Māra . . . . and sin;  
having attained to that supreme state of Buddhahood, may I,  
with my hand of great compassion, deliver suffering  
humanity from the extensive quagmire of *samsāra*.<sup>50</sup>

### **b. The Practice of Universally Applicable Bodhicitta**

According to Theravāda practice, transferring merit (*pattānumodanā*) is one of the ten wholesome deeds<sup>51</sup> (*dasapuṇyakriyā*). This practice had been widely prevailing in Sri Lanka since Buddhism had been introduced to the Island. People from different categories had offered caves and a number of offerings to the Triple Gem but it is hard to see an inscription belonging to the early period of Anurādhapura which explains about the practice of transferring merit. But in the inscriptions which have been inscribed after mid Anurādhapura period, that is around 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., a special phrase “**sava satanata pati**”<sup>52</sup> which means ‘**may it (merit) be with all beings**’ was found. In the eight inscriptions found in the Abhayagiri near the Baros Pavilion, the aforesaid special phrase can be located too.<sup>53</sup>

Later on this idea further expanded not only to transfer merit but also to wish the Buddhahood for all beings as well. This practice is a Mahāyānist one completely. Even though the Theravāda does not deny the possibility of the Buddhahood for anybody, yet it never emphasizes the Bodhisattva path is the unique practice for attaining enlightenment. The Theravāda idea is that the universally applicable Bodhicitta is something impracticable. Regarding this practice W.Rahula expresses his view as follows. “Although the Theravāda holds that anybody can be a Bodhisattva, it does not stipulate or insist that all must be Bodhisattvas which is considered not practicable.” Any Theravādins in the past or in the living traditions do not say that all beings can become Buddhas. Ratnayaka represents the very Theravāda orthodox view on the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva Ideal.

Everyone is a Bodhisattva. If everyone waits till everyone else attains nirvāṇa, no one will attain nirvāṇa. So, this principle of bodhisattvahood is unpracticable [impracticable]. If it is practiced totally, all beings will remain in *samsāra*. And *samsāra* is not the Goal of Buddhist Path<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> See Epigraphia Zylanica III, p.161

Aneka dukkhaṃ vyapanīya sarvaṃ - puṇyena lokasya sukhaṃ samagram  
Dātuṃ prabhūrjjanmani janmani syāṃ - sadā kṣamāvī karuṇānvito ’haṃ  
Puṇyena māra ... doṣa ripūn anena - jītvā parāṃ samadhigamya jinendratāṃ tām  
Samsāra-paṃka-visarād-anam-uddhareyyaṃ - ārttaṃ jagan mama mahā-karuṇā kareṇa

<sup>51</sup> See PTS Pāli Dictionary on *puñña*

<sup>52</sup> See *Śilālekhaṇa Saṃgrahaya V*

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, pp. 93-99

<sup>54</sup> supra, JIABS Vol.8, pp. 85-110, 1985

But here the case is the very Mahāyāna Bodhisattva Ideal had been widely practiced in ancient Sri Lanka. If it had not practiced, it wouldn't have been recorded in the inscriptions. It does not necessarily mean that all ancient Sri Lankans practiced Bodhicitta, but definitely it had much influence on Sri Lankan Buddhist practices in the late Anurādhapura period.

Some inscriptions found in Vessagiri monastery<sup>55</sup> of Anurādhapura are very important regarding our studies. The second inscription<sup>56</sup> of Vessagiri explains thus: “Siddhirastu, the merit acquired from offerings to the monastery by children of mason Boyagonu, be it with all beings. **May all beings attain to the Supreme Enlightenment which they desire for.**”<sup>57</sup> The number third inscription also found in the same monastery, describes the donor's vision in the same manner. “The child of Patisalalami who lives in the Abhaya Village, offered dāna to the monastery. **May all beings rejoice with this merit and may they attain the Supreme enlightenment, which they desire for**”<sup>58</sup> Another Abhayagiri inscription which refers to making a granite rice bowl for the Community by a novice monk named Gonnā, is also very important regarding the wishing of the Buddhahood for all beings. “Svasti, I am novice Gonna. I transferred the merit to the all beings, that I have acquired making a rice bowl. **Having rejoiced with this merit, may all beings attain to the Supreme Enlightenment.**”<sup>59</sup>

In the year of 1995 a very important inscription has been discovered at the Abhayagiri monastery which is still unknown for many scholars. This inscription has been made in Sinhalese characters belonging to the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The current Director of the Abhayagiri project, Prof. Kulatunga endeavored to explain the meaning of this extremely important inscription.<sup>60</sup> As he did not want to explain the Bodhisattva practice, he hasn't paid much attention to the hidden meaning of the epigraphy. If one observes the meaning of this inscription it gives us a clue that all the Abhayagiri monks have practiced Bodhicitta. The inscription explains as follows. “*Budu viyāṭi kenekun me nisavattehi lā suṇu behet pala me kisi kavariḍāyak n(o)vaṭavanu.*”<sup>61</sup> The meaning goes thus: **Anyone who aspires to attain the Supreme Enlightenment should not grind any kind of paste, medicine, and berries and so on, on this stone pavement** [which is set up for keeping alms bowls for ventilation].

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<sup>55</sup> This is one of the most ancient temples in Sri Lanka, where 500 Vaiśya monks renounced together. The founder of the Abhayagiri Monastery, Māhātissa Thera earlier lived at this temple before he became the constant companion of king Vaṭṭagāmiṇī, who built the Abhayagiri and granted to the former after the king's second succession to the throne. It is something strange to believe that no more information found in the Mahāvamsa about this monastery afterward.

<sup>56</sup> According to the sequence given in the Śīlālekhaṇa Saṃgrahaya V

<sup>57</sup> Śīlālekhaṇa Saṃgrahaya V, pp. 90-91

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, pp. 92-93

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, pp. 105-106

<sup>60</sup> See Abhayagiri Paryeṣaṇa. Kulatunga had reserved a long part in his work ‘Abhayagiri Paryeṣaṇa’ to elaborate the real meaning of the word ‘nisavatta’ which is mentioned in the inscription. With the support of sufficient evidence he has come to a conclusion that ‘nisavatta’ means a special place where monks' alms bowls were kept for ventilation.

<sup>61</sup> Abhayagiri Paryeṣaṇa, p.103

Let's examine the idea hidden behind this order. If any rule or regulation is set up at a monastery, that is common to all members of the Community there. The phrase, which is inscribed here 'anyone who aspires to attain the Supreme Enlightenment', implies that all the Abhayagiri monks without exception, aspired the Supreme Enlightenment (Samyaḥsambodhi) as their final liberation. Not only from this inscription but also from the three inscriptions referred to above, it is evident that all the Abhayagiri monks seem to have had this great expectation to get rid of Saṃsāra by attaining Supreme Enlightenment.

## **Conclusion**

In the first part of my presentation I have made a short literature review about the previous works on the Bodhisattva Ideal of Theravāda Buddhism together with a brief introduction to the subject of my study. This was followed by a study under the following themes: the Bodhisattva concept in the early phase of Sri Lankan Buddhism, the gradual development of Bodhisattva ideal in Sri Lanka after the arrival of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and the practice of universally applicable bodhicitta in ancient Sri Lanka with particular reference to the Abhayagirivāsins. Even though the universally applicable bodhicitta is not treated by Therāvāda Buddhism, the sources we illustrated in this paper, evidently show that the propensity of the Abhayagirivāsins and their adherents to follow the Bodhisattva path for their liberation.

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