

THE KELANIYA RAJA MAHA VIHARAYA IN CEYLON

By Ven Talewela Vijitha Dhammarakkhita Thera

The Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya is one of the most important and highly revered places of Buddhist worship in Ceylon. Built on the banks of the Kelaniya River, it is situated about six and a half miles away from Colombo, the Capital of Ceylon, in a north-easterly direction.

The history of Kelaniya dates back to about five thousand years. According to Valmiki's Ramayana, Kelaniya was the Kingdom of Vibhishana, a brother of Emperor Ravana. Rama defeated Ravana in a battle and having made Vibhishana the King of Ceylon returned to India with Sita, the wife of Rama. Vibhishana who was an extremely benevolent and kind ruler endeared himself to the people of Ceylon, so much so that after his demise they deified him. Even to-day he is remembered and there exists a devalaya in front of the ancient dagoba to perpetuate his memory, at which people make vows and pay their respects.

Kelaniya became an important place of Buddhist worship with the visit of the Lord Buddha, eight years after his enlightenment. Lord Buddha paid altogether three visits to Ceylon. The first visit was to a place called Mahianganaya on a Durutha full moon day, nine months after his enlightenment. According to the chronicles of Ceylon, it was overrun by people with demon like characters at the time of the Buddha's first visit, and when he preached the Dhamma, they were transformed into new persons who were rid of their demonical qualities such as anger and hatred and who had experienced a change for the better after being infused with a calm and tolerance which would preserve the teachings of the Lord Buddha for a period of five thousand years in its pure form. This scene however has been painted on the eastern wall of the Relic Chamber of the Vihare, as showing the Lord Buddha chasing away demons by his miraculous power which among other things caused flames to issue from his seat. The second visit was a prelude to the third. It was a visit to Nagadeepa, an island off the northern coast of Ceylon during a dispute which had taken place between King Chulodara and King Mahodara with regard to an extremely valuable gem studded throne. These two Kings unable to solve the controversy that there existed in an amicable manner, declared war on each other. With the commencement of hostilities much life was lost and other disastrous consequences ensued. On his arrival in the Island, Lord Buddha proceeded to mediate between the belligerent kings and preached the Dhamma. Listening to the Dhamma, these kings realised the futility of their actions and settled the dispute in a noble manner. They presented the very valuable gem studded throne which they treasured so much to the Lord Buddha. This scene is painted

on the southern wall of the Relic chamber. At the time of the settlement, King Maniakkhika was assisting one of the kings in battle and saw for himself the same manner in which this dispute was solved and extended an invitation to the Lord Buddha to visit Kelaniya, where he reigned. Lord Buddha accepted this invitation and visited Kelaniya one full moon day, in the company of five hundred Arahantas, eight years after his enlightenment. At first he shared the alms that had been offered with the Arahantas and after meditating for a while he preached the Dhamma, to a large gathering of people who had assembled before him where the present large dagoba stands. From Kelaniya, Lord Buddha proceeded to several places in Ceylon amongst which was Mount Samanola where the imprint of his foot could be seen. This with the visit of the Lord Buddha, Kelaniya became a place of great religious importance to the Buddhists of this country and remained so up-to-date. Royalty as well as commoner recognized this fact. Throughout the centuries they took an interest in the Vihare which was so sacred to them, and Kelaniya prospered under their rule. For instance, during the reign of King Dutugemunu (161-137 B.C.) there were five hundred monks residing at Kelaniya. Queen Vihara Maha Devi, his mother was the daughter of King Kelanitissa who reigned in Kelaniya. Kelaniya was at one time in imminent danger of being swallowed up by the sea and the beautiful princess was offered to the sea gods to appease their anger which was believed to be the cause of their afflictions. They therefore put the princess into a small boat and sent her down the Kelani River into the sea. She was rescued by the people of Magama when she landed on the southern shores of this Island and she was rewarded by the fact that King Kavantissa who reigned in that part of the Island took her as his bride. There is also an inscription to the effect that in the 14th century A.D. there were many hundreds of monks and laymen studying subjects like Buddhist philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and other similar subjects, under the Sangharaja of Willgammulla. Then for instance, during the reign of Parakramabahu VI, King Ramadhipathy of Burma, with the desire of establishing the higher ordination of Buddhist monks in his country, sent a large number of Burmese novices to be ordained at Kelaniya in a specially made Udakukkhepa Seema in the Kelaniya River, where it is believed that Lord Buddha had once bathed. Then again, King Maniakkhika's dagoba was renovated by Prince Uttiya, the younger brother of King Devanampiyatissa, a contemporary of Asoka the Great of India. Prince Yatalatissa also took a keen interest in the Vihare. He not only enlarged the Dagoba by constructing a brick cover for it and built a five storied vihare but also made the Vihare a hive of activity. With the advent of the Portuguese and other foreign powers in Ceylon, the Viharaya like all others in the Maritime Provinces suffered much. It's almost completely destroyed, plundered and desecrated. Many of its priests and loyal supporters met with a cruel fate at the hands of military marshals cum religious missionaries who brandished their weapons for their country and in the name of their God. The Viharaya no

longer was a respected place in the eyes of the rulers. Monks and laymen who remained faithful and refused to embrace a faith which was foreign to them passed away into obscurity and were watched with suspicion. The Viharaya's lands were handed to the missionaries for their churches and schools and then temple and its schools became dangerous and *infra dignitatem* to attend. No help could be obtained from the administration as its officials were deeply indebted and obliged to the missionaries for the help they rendered to them in various forms, and did their utmost to help them in their conversions so that the loyalty of the converted could be depended upon. The converted consisting mostly of unprincipled and profligate persons bereft of all patriotism increased the afflictions of the faithful by their actions which were motivated to carry favour of the foreign conquerors. Little did the missionaries realise that if it was their faith they wanted to propagate, all the misery and brutality they inflicted on the helpless and peace-loving people of Ceylon was totally unnecessary. Religious intolerance which existed in the countries they came from was completely absent in this country. Perhaps they should be excused for they did not know what they did. Any attempt to repair a Buddhist Viharaya or organise a Buddhist ceremony on a large scale was frowned upon as a threat to the Christian faith and an attempt to bring back the Sinhalese monarchy to power. The Dutch who had been assisted by the King of Kandy, King Kirthisri Rajasinghe (1749-1782) in the defeat of the Portuguese and who were more interested in trade permitted the Chaitiya to be renovated and a small vihare to be built. The British who succeeded them continued the religious persecution but with a fair amount of tolerance towards the end of their rule. It was during their regime that the Viharaya profitted much by benevolence, generosity and good work of the much respected and loved lady, the late Mrs. Helena Wijewardene, who out of her personal funds, at a cost of several lakhs of rupees constructed the new wing of the Viharaya and modelled it on the lines of the ancient Sinhalese architecture. To beautify it, she engaged the service of a talented artist, Soylias of Madampe in Ceylon, who continues to receive even from well-known foreign artists, praise for his wonderful works of art.

Kelaniya has now been restored to its prestige position. Pilgrims particularly on Poya days flock by the thousands to the Viharaya from all parts of the Island. On account of its proximity to Colombo seldom does a tourist leave Ceylon without visiting it. The main event is of course the annual Duruthu Perahera which is a very colourful spectacle and attracts several lakhs of people of all faiths and races.

