

An Archaeological Study on the Tantrayana Influence in Sri Lanka As Revealed by Antiquities from Jetavana and Abhayagiriya

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Introduction

When examining Sri Lankan Buddhist history, the Maha Vihara functioned as the center of traditional Theravada Buddhism, while the Abhayagiriya and Jetavana monastery complexes acted as liberal centers that embraced various Mahayana and Tantrayana (Vajrayana) religious influences arriving from India. Tantrayana can be introduced as the final evolutionary stage of the Mahayana tradition that spread across Sri Lanka from the 3rd century AD to the 10th century AD. The Tantrayanic influence, which was fundamentally based on the use of mantras, mudras, mandalas, and dharanis, is well established by antiquities found at the Abhayagiri and Jetavana archaeological sites, showing how deeply it was rooted in the socio-political and cultural structure of Sri Lanka (Mudiyanse, 1967). Contextually, this study analyzes antiquities including sculptures, carvings, metal images, inscriptions, and dharani texts to reveal the nature and expansion of Tantrayana Buddhism in Sri Lanka from an archaeological perspective.

Research Objectives

- To identify the Tantrayana characteristics embedded within the antiquities recovered from the Abhayagiriya and Jetavana monastery complexes.
- To compare how Indian Vajrayana/Tantrayana artistic traditions influenced Sri Lankan arts and crafts.
- To analyze the religious practices and beliefs of Tantrayana that existed at the time through clay and metal plates inscribed with dharani texts and mantras.
- To determine the extent to which Tantrayana influence operated on Sri Lankan kingship and society using archaeological evidence.

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Research problem

How do the antiquities including dharani plaques, statues, and mystical symbols discovered from the Jetavana and Abhayagiriya monastery complexes reveal the nature of Tantrayana Buddhism during the Anuradhapura period, and in what ways did it contribute to shaping contemporary Sri Lankan kingship and social structures?

Research Methodology

This study primarily utilizes a qualitative archaeological and historical research methodology. In data collection, primary sources such as antiquities, inscriptions, dharani plaques, metal statues, and stone carvings found during excavations at Jetavana and Abhayagiriya were subjected to direct observation.

As secondary sources, archaeological administrative reports, excavation reports of the Central Cultural Fund, and scholarly books and articles written on this subject were consulted. The gathered data was subjected to a comparative analysis, drawing conclusions by comparing Sri Lankan factors with those found in Indian Tantrayana centers such as Nalanda and Vikramashila.

Results and Discussion

The Tantrayana influence becomes very clearly visible when classifying and analyzing the antiquities found in the excavation sites of Jetavana and Abhayagiriya. The results can be discussed along three main factors.

I. Stone and Clay Plaques Containing Dharanis and Mantras

The most fundamental characteristic of Tantrayana is the use of 'Dharanis' or mantras to fulfill religious and mundane objectives. A large number of dharani texts written in Sanskrit and medieval Sinhala scripts have been found on gold sheets and clay plaques discovered near the Jetavana Stupa (Paranavitana, 1953). These include sections such as the '*Mahapratisara Dharani*' found in Buddhist Tantric texts.

Although the inscription of the stanza '*Ye Dhamma Hetuppabhava...*' in Sanskrit is a common feature on clay seals found in the Abhayagiri complex, the inclusion of Tantrayanic seed syllables (*Beejakshara*) in certain seals indicates that they were used as protective amulets or ritual objects (Schopen, 1982).

II. Bodhisattva and Tantrayana Deity Sculptures

The Bodhisattva statues found at Abhayagiriya and Jetavana exhibit Tantrayana characteristics that go beyond mere Mahayana concepts. Specifically,

multi-armed (possessing several hands) statues and Lokeshvara or Avalokiteshvara sculptures with various mudras are examples of this. Small bronze figures discovered in the Abhayagiri monastery grounds, which can be identified as Goddess '*Kurukulla*' or '*Tara*', confirm that the female shakti worship (*Shakti Cult*) of Tantrayana existed in Sri Lanka (Mudiyanse, 1967).

Furthermore, the depiction of the Vajra (a weapon resembling a thunderbolt) held by the Vajrapani Bodhisattva figures found at Jetavana is a direct representation of the Vajrayana/Tantrayana tradition.

Artifact Type and Significance	Tantrayana Characteristics
Jetavana Gold Sheets Mahayana / Tantrayana Dharani texts	Contains Sanskrit
Abhayagiri Bronze Sculptures	Depictions of Vajrapani, Goddess Tara, and multi-armed Bodhisattvas
Stone Carvings (Ratnaprasada)	Contains protective and mystical symbols, including Vajra marks
Clay Seals and Plaques	Depicts mystical rituals through mantras and seed syllables (Beejakshara)

III. Architectural and Symbolic Factors

When examining the Ratnaprasada of Abhayagiriya and the building foundations of Jetavana, it appears that they were designed according to the '*Mandala*' methodology to center cosmic energies. The Naga Raja (King Cobra) figures and dwarf (Vamana) figures found on the guardstones at the foot of the stairways are not mere decorations; they appear to have been created parallel to Tantrayanic beliefs as '*Bhairavas*' or mystical guardians providing protection to the building (Holt, 1991).

Conclusion

Considering the archaeological evidence, it can be concluded that a strong Tantrayana religious trend existed in Anuradhapura, centered around Abhayagiriya and Jetavana by the 7th–10th centuries AD. This was not a movement completely contradictory to Theravada Buddhism, but a parallel collection of mystical religious rituals used for the mundane protection of society, curing sicknesses, and consolidating royal power.

Arriving in Sri Lanka due to direct relations maintained with Indian universities like Nalanda, this Tantrayana influence succeeded in enriching the carving arts, architecture, and literature of this country. Therefore, this

archaeological study thoroughly confirms that the Buddhist history of Sri Lanka is not solely comprised of Theravada, but is a complex cultural system shaped by diverse religious philosophies such as these.

Key words - *Abhayagiriya, Dharani Plaques, Jetavana, Sri Lankan Archaeology, Tantrayana Buddhism*

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