

The Buddha's Visits to Sri Lanka in Sri Lankan Literary Sources

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Introduction

The narratives of the Buddha's visits to Sri Lanka occupy a prominent place in Sri Lankan Buddhist literature. According to the traditional narratives recorded in the Pāli literature of Sri Lanka, the Buddha had visited the island on three different occasions throughout his life time. These narratives have played a crucial role in shaping Sri Lanka's religious identity by portraying the island as a sacred land personally sanctified by the Buddha and destined to become a center for the preservation and propagation of Buddhism. Among the three main Buddhist texts containing these narratives, one can name the *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvāṃsa*, and *Samantapāsādikā*. While all the three narratives describe the three different visits of the Buddha to Sri Lanka, there is a number of differences between them. Furthermore, the narratives serve not merely as historical accounts but as religious and ideological constructs that legitimize Sri Lanka's status as a chosen land of Buddhism and establish a sacred geography associated with the Buddha's physical presence. Despite their significance in Sri Lankan Buddhist historiography, comparatively little scholarly attention has been given to a systematic analysis of the similarities, variations, and underlying purposes of these narratives across the three texts. Therefore, this study undertakes a comparative examination of these narratives to explore how they contributed to the construction of Sri Lanka as a sacred Buddhist land. In doing so, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the role of Buddhist chronicles in shaping collective memory, religious identity, and the concept of sacred space in Sri Lankan Buddhism.

Research Problem

The research problem of this study is to investigate how the narratives of the Buddha's visits to Sri Lanka are represented in major Sri Lankan literary sources, particularly the *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvāṃsa*, and *Samantapāsādikā*, and to examine how their similarities, differences, and underlying religious, cultural, and

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ideological dimensions contributed to the construction of Sri Lankan Buddhist identity and sacred geography.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to comparatively examine the narratives of the Buddha's visits to Sri Lanka as presented in the *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvaṃsa*, and *Samantapāsādikā*, to identify their similarities and differences and to analyse their historical, religious, literary, and ideological significance in shaping Sri Lanka's sacred Buddhist identity.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative textual and comparative methodology. The primary sources of the study are the *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvaṃsa*, and *Samantapāsādikā*, while relevant secondary literature on Buddhist historiography, sacred geography, and Sri Lankan Buddhist traditions is consulted to support the analysis. The study comparatively examines the particular attention to their chronology, content, religious symbolism, and historiographical functions. Particular attention is given to the descriptions of the three visits, their narrative development, and their role in constructing sacred space and religious memory.

Discussion

The *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvaṃsa*, and *Samantapāsādikā* record “Unanimously recognize” implies agreement as historical witnesses, whereas they are literary sources implies three visits made by the Buddha to Sri Lanka. The first visit is said to have occurred during the ninth month after the Enlightenment. According to the narratives, the Buddha visited *Mahiyangana* to subdue the *Yakkhas* inhabiting the island. This incident was recorded as the first time when the island received blessings from the Buddha, which would prepare the island for the establishment of Buddhism in the future. The *Dīpavaṃsa* presents the event briefly, whereas the *Mahāvaṃsa* elaborates on its significance by depicting it as the purification of the island for the future Buddhist dispensation. The *Samantapāsādikā*, even though its purpose is more explanatory and doctrinal than historical, further interprets the visit as evidence of the Buddha's foresight regarding the future role of Sri Lanka in preserving the Dhamma.

The second visit is recorded as having taken place during the fifth year after the Enlightenment. The Buddha is described as making his journey to *Nāgadīpa* for mediating a fight that existed between the two *Nāga* kings *Mahodara* and *Cūḷodara* over a jeweled throne. All three sources present this event as an example of the Buddha's role as a peacemaker and mediator. The

narratives emphasize the Buddha's ability to transform conflict into harmony through wisdom and compassion. While the *Dīpavaṃsa* offers a concise account, the *Mahāvaṃsa* provides a more elaborate description of the conflict and its resolution. The *Samantapāsādikā* focuses on the moral and religious implications of the Buddha's intervention.

The third visit of the Buddha to Sri Lanka, said to have occurred in the eighth year after his Enlightenment at the invitation of the *Nāga* king *Maṇiakkhika*. The *Dīpavaṃsa* provides only a brief reference to the Buddha's visit to Kelaniya and his preaching of the Dhamma. The *Samantapāsādikā* offers a slightly expanded account, emphasizing the invitation of *Maṇiakkhika* and the establishment of faith among the *Nāgas*. In contrast, the *Mahāvaṃsa* presents the most elaborate narrative, describing not only the Buddha's visit to Kelaniya but also his consecration of significant sites such as *Samantakūṭa* (Sri Pāda), thereby creating a sacred geography that links Sri Lanka directly to the Buddha and underscores the island's special role in the preservation of Buddhism.

The comparative analysis reveals substantial similarities among the three sources. All of them preserve the same chronological sequence of visits: *Mahiyangana* in the ninth month after Enlightenment, *Nāgadīpa* in the fifth year, and Kelaniya in the eighth year. In addition, all three texts highlight the Buddha's activities of sanctifying the island, settling disputes, and preparing Sri Lanka for Buddhist development.

However, important differences are also evident. The *Dīpavaṃsa* primarily serves as an early chronicle and therefore presents the narratives concisely and straightforwardly. The *Mahāvaṃsa*, on the other hand, significantly expands the accounts and integrates them into a broader national and religious history. It explicitly links the Buddha's visits with the later introduction of Buddhism by Arahant Mahinda, thereby legitimizing Sri Lanka's role as the guardian of Theravāda Buddhism. In contrast, the *Samantapāsādikā* approaches the narratives from a commentarial perspective and emphasizes their doctrinal, moral, and symbolic significance rather than their historical details.

The study further demonstrates that these narratives functioned as powerful instruments in the construction of sacred space and collective religious memory. By portraying the Buddha as personally visiting and blessing the island, the texts establish Sri Lanka as a uniquely privileged land within the Buddhist world. The narratives thus served not only religious purposes but also cultural and political functions, reinforcing the legitimacy of Buddhist institutions and strengthening the island's Buddhist identity.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the narratives of the Buddha's visits to Sri Lanka found in the *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvāṃsa*, and *Samantapāsādikā* represent a shared literary tradition that evolved through different historical and religious contexts. While all three sources preserve the same fundamental chronology and themes, they differ in narrative elaboration, historiographical purpose, and theological interpretation. The *Dīpavaṃsa* provides the earliest and most concise account, the *Mahāvāṃsa* develops the narratives within a national-historical framework, and the *Samantapāsādikā* interprets them through a doctrinal and commentarial lens. Collectively, these texts played a vital role in constructing Sri Lanka as a sacred Buddhist land and contributed significantly to the formation of Sri Lankan Buddhist historiography, religious memory, and cultural identity.

Keywords - Buddha, Chronicals, *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvāṃsa*, Narratives, *Samantapāsādikā*

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