

## **Crossing the Ocean in Search of the *Dhamma*: A Minor Contribution to International Relations by The Abhayagiri Fraternity**

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to make a study of the international relations and inter-sectarian interaction of the Abhayagiri Saṅgha in the medieval and the late Anurādhapura period based on the Chinese and Tibetan historical accounts. According to Sri Lankan chronicles, the Abhayagiri School accepted not only the Pāli *Tiṭṭaka* as its authoritative texts, but also non-Theravāda teachings, in marked contrast to the Mahāvihāra orthodoxy. As a result of this new approach, the conventional phase of Sri Lankan Buddhism was gradually changed, specially, with the amalgamation of new practices. This new approach immensely helped to develop the Sri Lankan Buddhist culture in many respects. The first part of this paper discusses the Abhayagiri Saṅgha which went to India and China in search of the *Dhamma* whereas the second part deals with Tantric masters who visited Sri Lanka as *Dharmadūtas* and *Dharmagaveśakas*. References to foreign monks, in this article, are solely based on the Chinese and Tibetan historical records and some related academic works to which sources mention has been made.

### **Text**

In the 'Slab Inscription I' of King Mahinda IV, the great scholars of the Abhayagiri monastery have been highly esteemed as follows: "The Abhayagiri Vihāra... where dwell bands of scholars directing their wisdom to great literary works and adorning the *Abhayuttara maha sā*, just as a flight of *garudas* hovers with widespread wings over rows of serpents on the Himalayan range, which resound with the voices of those versed in the scriptures".<sup>1</sup> This elaborate inscription shows that the Abhayagiri School was not just a breakaway faction but a great Buddhist Institute, which had an innovative and radical view. This well-known academic institute, Abhayagiri, offered both religious and secular subjects. As it is shown by its name,

“The Mahā-lekha” institute, which may be rendered as “The Great Scriptural Archives” of the Abhayagiri, would have been built probably for the purpose of training scholars.<sup>2</sup> “The Abhayagiri... reached international recognition by the first century of this era. Going beyond the orthodox Mahāvihāra, it entertained various shades of Buddhist opinion and thus fostered lively intellectual discussion.”<sup>3</sup> It produced great scholars such as Upatissa,<sup>4</sup> Kavīcakravartī Ānanda,<sup>5</sup> Āryadeva,<sup>6</sup> Āryaśūra,<sup>7</sup> Jayabhadra, and Candramāli,<sup>8</sup> and so on.

Apart from them, the two great poets and scholars in the Kotte period, Venerable Toṭagamuve Rāhula and Vīdāgaṃa Mahāmaitrī also belonged to the two great institutes of the Abhayagiri, namely the Uttaramūla and the Mahānetpāsādamūla respectively.

The popularity of the Abhayagiri fraternity in Anurādhapura period can be confirmed through its multitude of names, which were assigned by both local and foreign sources to designate it. There is no other monastery in Sri Lanka and also perhaps in the Buddhist world, which was known by such a multitude of names as that by which the Abhayagiri monastery was known to the world. It signifies that, even if it was mentioned by any of the names given below, it would have been popular enough in the world to identify it as the Abhayagiri Monastery. Not only in Sri Lanka, it was well known in India, Kāśmīr,<sup>9</sup> Kāliṅga,<sup>10</sup> Jāva<sup>11</sup>, China<sup>12</sup>, Tibet,<sup>13</sup> Myanmar and<sup>14</sup> the Buddhist world in ancient times. Among the different names we found in different sources such as inscriptions, literary works and foreign accounts.

The following names have been used to designate the Abhayagiri monastery. They are: Abhayagiri Vihāra,<sup>15</sup> Abhayācala<sup>16</sup> Abagiri Mahāvihāra,<sup>17</sup> Abāgiri Veherā,<sup>18</sup> Abahaigiri Veherā,<sup>19</sup> Abhāgiri Veher,<sup>20</sup> Abhaya Vihāra,<sup>21</sup> Abhayuttara Vihāra,<sup>22</sup> Abhayaturā Bagiri-vehera,<sup>23</sup> Abhayarāja Vihāra,<sup>24</sup> Bagirinaka,<sup>25</sup> Apayagara-vahāra,<sup>26</sup> Apahayagara-vehera,<sup>27</sup> Apahagara-vehera,<sup>28</sup> Bagiri Vehera,<sup>29</sup> Bhayā-giriya,<sup>30</sup> Bahayigiri,<sup>31</sup> Uttara Vihāra,<sup>32</sup> and so on.

The most significant religious structure of the Abhayagiri monastery, the Abhayagiri *Stūpa* was also known by several names such as Utaramahaceta,<sup>33</sup>

Abhaya Gamiṇi Utara Mahaceta,<sup>34</sup> Abhayuttara-cetiya,<sup>35</sup> Abhayuttara Mahātūpa,<sup>36</sup> Abahaigirisā,<sup>37</sup> Abayaturā Mahasā,<sup>38</sup> Abhayasundara Mahāthūpa,<sup>39</sup> Abhayagiri Caitya,<sup>40</sup> Abhayagiri Dāgāba,<sup>41</sup> and so on. The monks of this fraternity were also known by several names such as Abhayagirivāsino,<sup>42</sup> Abhayagiri vāsīn,<sup>43</sup> Abhayagiri vāsīyan<sup>44</sup>, Abhayagiri bhīkṣūn,<sup>45</sup> Dhammarucikā,<sup>46</sup> Dammaruci,<sup>47</sup> Dahamrusi,<sup>48</sup> Bagirīyan,<sup>49</sup> Uttaravihāravāsino.<sup>50</sup> From these instances we can see how popular this particular monastery was in Sri Lanka and also in other countries during the ancient period.

The Abhayagiri was always ready to accept and provide shelter to foreign scholars and visitors. Kulatunga says: "While other such institutions operated within a narrow sectarian theological framework, Abhayagiri opened itself up to the world for universal knowledge, pioneering in the ancient world the modern concept of University".<sup>51</sup> Hettiarachchi thinks that the Abhayagiri was the only one University in the ancient world which consisted of four faculties same as in a modern University.

Except Sri Lanka, in the ancient world there was no University, which consisted of four faculties similar to the modern University system. This University was located in the Abhayagiri monastery exceeding 500 acres of its vicinity and these four great faculties were known as Uttarolha Mūla, Vahadu Mūla, Mahanetpā Mūla and Kapārāmūla. Some information of these four faculties can be found in historical records and inscriptions. For example, in one inscription it is recorded that these four great faculties located centering the Ratnaprāsāda in the same way that four great continents located centering the Mount Semeru.<sup>52</sup>

Hettiarachchi's view seems to be a new interpretation regarding the four institutes or *mūlas* of the Abhayagiri, but we are not sure whether these four *mūlas* really represented faculties, which are similar to the modern University system. Thus, the aforementioned inscription clearly proves without a doubt that the Abhayagiri was a great seat of learning.

With the introduction of Mahāyāna Buddhism and Tantric Buddhism, non-

Theravāda ideas gradually amalgamated with Sri Lankan Buddhism. According to the records of Fa-Xian and Xuan-Zang, it is very clear that the Abhayagiri had taught non-Theravāda teachings. Fa-Xian lived two years in Sri Lanka and collected at the Abhayagiri some Sanskrit *Tripitaka* texts belonging to different Schools of Buddhism. Among them were the *Vinaya Piṭaka* of the *Mahīśāsaka* (school); the *Dīrghāgama* and *Samyuktāgama* (*Sūtras*); and also the *Samyukta-saṅchayapitaka*, which were not available in the land of Han.<sup>53</sup>

Xuan-Zang clearly records that the curriculum at the Abhayagiri School included both *yānas*, the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna and that it contributed immensely to the spread of Buddhism in the county.

There are several hundreds of monasteries with more than twenty thousand monks who follow the teachings of both the Mahāyāna and the Sthavīra schools. More than two hundred years after the arrival of the *Buddha-dharma*, they were divided into two separate sects, each specializing in its own theories. One was the Mahāvihāra sect, which refitted the Mahāyāna teachings and advocated Hīnayāna tenets. The other one was the Abhayagiri sect, which studied the teachings of both *yānas* (vehicles) and propagated the *Tripitaka*.<sup>54</sup>

Xuan-Zang met 300 monks at Kañcipura (Kañcīvaram- golden robe) in South India and he learnt from those monks that Sri Lanka was not a secure state to visit during that time. The king of Sri Lanka had passed away and the country was in chaos. Xuan-Zang was very anxious to go there and learn Buddhism but he had to be contented with the information that he received from Sri Lankan monks whom he met in Kāñcipura. Xuan-Zang had heard that Sri Lankan *Mahātheras* were well versed in the Yogācāra Buddhism. Therefore, he was curious to know more about the *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra*. Having selected some passages from long and short sections of the *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra*, Xuan-Zang put some questions to two eminent Sinhalese monks, out of 300, named Abhayadaṃṣṭā and Bodhimegheśvara, who claimed that there are no other monks in their country who can surpass their knowledge.

“The Master of the Law [Xuan-Zang] then gave examples of choice passages of the *Yoga-sūtra*, both long and short sections, but they were not able to explain any of them as Śīlabhadra<sup>55</sup> did.”<sup>56</sup> However, it does not mean that those monks couldn't answer his questions but their answer could not satisfy Xuan-Zang. What is important here is that it apparently shows that the *Abhayagirivāsīns* studied the *Yogācārabhūmisāstra* and the Mahāyāna texts. Actually, according to the *Mahāvamsa*, Mahāyāna Buddhism came to Sri Lanka during the third century C.E. This was the time that Yogācāra master Asaṅga spread his teaching in India. Therefore, Xuan-Zang's records about the study of *Yogācāra* in China even during the 10<sup>th</sup> century C. E. Ennin in Sri Lanka could be considered as true and correct.

Another interesting story is found in the Chinese *Tripitaka*. Chinese monk Fazang, in the “*Biography of Those who Recited Avataṃsaka-sūtra*”, records that a monk from Siṃhaladvīpa, named Śakyamitra, who was also known to Chinese people as “Competent Friend” (śakya+ mitra), came to China during the time of the Emperor Gao Zhong (664-666). Śakyamitra was a reciter of *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*. The Emperor greatly respected him and provided all necessities and also invited him to stay in the Royal Palace together with a Taoist follower, who was also said to be a General of the Emperor. Mitra (Śakyamitra) asked Emperor's permission to go on a pilgrimage to visit sacred mountains in China, and then visited Ching-Liang-Shan, which is today called Wu-Tai-Shan, where *Bodhisattva* Mañjuśrī resided. Having paid respect to *Bodhisattva* Mañjuśrī, Mitra visited Tai Yuang monastery, which was located to the western part of the Capital. Therein Mitra found some monks, who were reciting a *Sūtra*. He asked those monks the name of the *Sūtra* that they recited. They explained that it was the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*. Mitra was excited and exclaimed with joined palms that he did not know that *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* existed in China. Mitra respected the *Sūtra* and said that this *Vaipulya-sūtra* contains immeasurable merit and in the West (such as Oḍḍiyāna, Yākānd, Khotān, and so on), people believed that this *Sūtra* consists of a great power. If one recites this *Sūtra* having some water in one's hands and sprinkle the water over insects and ants, after death all of them will be reborn in heaven. So, how much is the merit that one can obtain reciting this? It is immeasurable.<sup>57</sup>

There is a similar story too related to Śakyamitra. Once a group of divine beings

appeared to a king. Then the king asked who they were. They explained to the king that they were divine beings but in the previous birth they were the ants who lived in the monastery. The monks who recited *Avatamsaka-sūtra* sprinkled purified water on them and by the power of the immeasurable merit of the *Avatamsaka-sūtra*, after death, they appeared in the divine world.<sup>58</sup> Even though these records contain exaggerations, still they are very important sources regarding Sinhalese monks who followed and studied Mahāyāna Buddhism and also visited China. Since Fa-Xian had paved the way for a close Sino-Sinhala relationship and Sri Lankan *Bhikṣuṇīs* had visited Nankin in 433 C.E. and established the Chinese *Bhikṣuṇī* Order,<sup>59</sup> Śakyamitra's story can also be accepted as authoritative.

*Ennin's Diary* further supported the fact that Sri Lankan monks had lived in China even during the 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Ennin (Jap. *Jikaku Daishi* 794-864 C.E.), a Japanese monk who went to China to learn Tantrism, gives accounts of foreign monks, who lived in China during the ninth century. He records about a Sinhalese monk who was among the foreign monks who had gathered at Tzu-en-ssu monastery prior to leaving for their countries.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, Ennin doesn't give any more information about him. However, this story tells us that by the 10<sup>th</sup> century, some Sinhalese monks had lived in China.

According to Chinese sources Vajrayāna masters such as Vajrabodhi (Chin: *Ching-kang-chih*) and Amoghavajra (Chin: *Pu-k'ung-chin-kang*) visited Sri Lanka and lived at Abhayagiri. The former had lived six months there and taught Tantric Buddhism in Rohaṇa kingdom.<sup>61</sup> After visiting Sri Lanka, Vajrabodhi sailed with Persian merchants and went to twenty countries. Bhoja is one of them. Gunawardana thinks that Bhoja would be Kāamboja [Cambodia].<sup>62</sup> But Chou Yi-ling says that Bhoja is the present Palembang in Sumatra. It is also called Śrī Bhoja. Yi-ling's view seems to be more convincing than the view of Gunawardana, considering the close relations that the Abhayagiri *vāsīs* shared with Indonesia. On the other hand, Yi Jing, the Chinese traveler who went to India visited Śrī Bhoja twice and lived there for some time on his way to India and also on his way back to China.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, Śrī Bhoja used to be a very popular place among travelers of that time. Amoghavajra acted as a royal preceptor of the Tang Dynasty Court.<sup>64</sup> The aim of Amoghavajra's visit to Sri Lanka was to collect Tantric Buddhist books to be taken

to China. This story is very important as it tells us that many Tantric Buddhist books were extant in Sri Lanka. Yuan-chao and some others record that Amoghavajra was a native of Sri Lanka but Chou Yi-liang quoting from Tango Shoum says: "due to misinterpretation of Liang-pen's work, which calls him "*chi-shi-tzu-kuo kuan-ting san tsang*", meaning 'a monk who received *abhiṣeka* in Ceylon', not a native of Ceylon."<sup>65</sup> Amoghavajra had a great reputation in China, India and Sri Lanka as well. He arrived in Sri Lanka during the time of king Silāmeghavaṇṇa (727-766 C.E.).<sup>66</sup>

When he arrived in Ceylon, the king sent a deputy to welcome him. The guardsmen on foot and horse were stationed in ranks along the street when he entered the city. The king, having made obeisance at his feet, invited him to stay in the palace to be entertained for seven days. The king himself bathed Amoghavajra daily, using golden barrel full of fragrant waters. The crown prince, the queens, and the ministers acted similarly.<sup>67</sup>

Above cited passage explains the great reputation and honor that Amoghavajra enjoyed. While he was in Sri Lanka, the Indian king invited him to return to India in order that the king may receive his blessings to rid the country of the chaos prevailing at the time. Another important fact we find in the story of Amoghavajra is that he had a teacher in Sri Lanka. He had studied not only from Vajrabodhi but from Samantabhadra as well who is also called Nāgabodhi or Nāgañña, and probably lived at the Abhayagiri. According to some scholars he was a disciple of Nāgārjuna.<sup>68</sup>

His virtues were well known in South India. Perhaps he went to the Land of the Lions (Siṃhala = Ceylon) to preach esoterism. He is the same person who under name of Dharmagupta lived in the monastery of Nālanda and under the same name of Fugen Ajari (Samantabhadra-ācārya?) visited Ceylon.<sup>69</sup>

However, Tāranātha too gives an account about a monk named Nāgabodhi who was an immediate disciple of Ācāryanāgārjunapāda. This Nāgabodhi practiced meditation in a cave at Śrī Parvata and attained the *Mahāmudrā-siddhi*. As a result

he could live as long as the Sun and the Moon exist. It shows that Tibetan and Japanese sources share the same view of Nāgabodhi.

Amoghavajra received his *abhiṣeka* under Nāgabodhi's guidance.<sup>70</sup> It is said that Amoghavajra helped his master Vajrobodhi with translation of Sanskrit works into Chinese. After the latter's death he went to Sri Lanka in search of Tantric books there. It is very significant and interesting to know that he went to Sri Lanka but not to India where Tantrism originated. Amoghavajra was thoroughly trained by Ācārya Samantabhadra in the doctrine of *Yoga* of the *Chin-kang-ting ching* [*Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha*] and the method of erecting altar in accordance with the *Mahākaruṇāgarbhadhātu-maṇḍala* in the *Vairocana-sūtra*.<sup>71</sup> Before leaving he had collected more than five hundred *Sūtras* and commentaries of esoteric Buddhism in Sri Lanka.<sup>72</sup> Being one of the most important Esoteric Buddhist masters in China, Amoghavajra translated Sanskrit Tantric texts into Chinese.

It is certain, in any case, that Amoghavajra returned to China in 746, bringing back with him a large number of texts which he had obtained in Ceylon with the help of the king, and of which more than eighty were translated under his supervision before his death in 774.<sup>73</sup>

Amoghavajra is considered as the most capable and energetic personage among Indian Buddhist masters who propagated Buddhism there and his name can be found in several hundred books in the Chinese canon. Not only did he translate Esoteric Buddhist books into Chinese, but he also acted as the Royal Preceptor (*Rājaguru*) for three emperors namely Hsua-tsung (712-756), Su-tsung (756-762) and Tai-tsung (762-779).<sup>74</sup> Therefore, regarding Sri Lankan Esotericism, Amoghavajra's role cannot be taken as that of a mere visitor. His contribution to Sri Lankan Vajrayāna practices must be far more significant.

Beside the Chinese sources, some Tibetan sources also explain certain important stories relating to Tantric Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Tāranātha (Tib. *Kn dga' snying poin* 1575 C.E.), a Tibetan Buddhist monk who lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century C.E. in Tibet wrote his well known history records called Tāranātha's *History of Buddhism in India*. Another interesting work we come across is *Buddha's Lions or Eighty Four*

*Siddhas*. According to the accounts of *Eighty Four Siddhas*, among the six door-keeper Buddhist scholars (*Dvārapaṇḍitas*), the eastern door-keeper Ācārya Ratnākaraśānti or otherwise known as Śāntipā arrived in Sri Lanka on state invitation by a Sri Lankan king, whose name has been given in the text as Kabina.<sup>75</sup> Even though some information in this work regarding Sri Lankan Buddhism seems to be incorrect, it explains how the Sri Lankan king and people received Śāntipā and his delegation with great honour.<sup>76</sup> Guru Śāntipā lived in Sri Lanka for years and he taught Tantric Buddhism to the Islanders and then he left for Vikramaśilā.<sup>77</sup> Gunawardana quotes Grünwedel and says Tāranātha has recorded the visit of a prominent Buddhist scholar Ratnākaraśānti, who was the abbot of Somapuri monastery during that time. He came to Sri Lanka with an envoy dispatched by the Sri Lankan king. On his arrival he had brought two hundred Mahāyāna texts. He taught for seven years in Sri Lanka and it is recorded that he maintained the *Sūtra* schools. Śāntipā returned to India keeping five hundred Mahāyāna disciples in Sri Lanka.<sup>78</sup> However, in the English translation of Tāranātha's account we do not find information on Śāntipā's visit to Sri Lanka. Gunawardana Further says:

The silence of the chronicles of Sri Lanka does not invalidate the evidence of Tāranātha since it is only very rarely that they concern themselves with the affairs of the "heretics," and hence it would be unwise to reject this testimony as a mere legend in a late chronicle. The visit of a famous teacher like Ratnā-karaśānti, if it did in fact take place, must have greatly strengthened the position of the Mahāyāna schools in the island.<sup>79</sup>

Another Vajrayāna monk named Vanaratana also had visited Sri Lanka according to Tibetan sources.

The precious Great Paṇḍita was born [in 1384 A.D. Roerich n] as the son of king in the town of Sadnagara in eastern India [Chittagong District, East Bengal]. At the age of eight, he received the novitiate from one named Buddhaghōṣa. At the age of 20, he received the final monastic ordination under Buddhaghōṣa and Sujātaratna. Then having become an ascetic he journeyed to Ceylon. He spent six years there.<sup>80</sup>