

THE BUDDHIST MONASTERY OF SRI LANKA- MEDITATION SPACE OF THERAVADA BUDDHISM

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In spite of being strongly influenced by the large country of India, the island country of Sri Lanka, that floats along its southern tip, has continued to set a high value on its distinction from India as its own identity. This can be observed in the country's religion also. Sri Lanka imported Buddhism from India in the 3rd century BC, and while in mainland India, Buddhism continued to transform and finally fell to decline, Sri Lanka assiduously retained the classical Theravada Buddhism of the early period to the present day.

The original form of Theravada Buddhism (a Hinayana sect) is to practice ascetic exercises in the forest for enlightenment. This form has been handed down to the present day. Within the ruins of the ancient capital, Anuradhapura, which prospered from the 3rd century BC, for 1200 years, here and there still remain primary spaces = caves, where monks of those times practiced meditative training (photograph 1).

The caves, without any wall between their inside and outside, any equipment within, or any carved statue, are utterly bare. The monks here had negated any anxiety about everything concerning food, house and clothing. Even for meditative training, not relying on iconography, with fervent introspective training, they pursued enlightenment. Hence, space for the monks are these bare caves.

But monasteries for meditative training are not limited to caves alone. There are more positive spaces for meditation represented in architecture. The ruins popularly called 'Western Monastery' (photograph 3, old name unidentified), excavated in the western outskirts of Anuradhapura, are thought to be monasteries built around 7~10th century for monks practicing classical Theravada Buddhism in the forests. They were invited to the city by kings fearing the degradation of various temples in advanced cities. There are a total of 14 monasteries in Western Monastery and during the initial phase of excavation, their forms were so distinctive as to be mistaken for palaces. None of the monasteries have stupas or sanctuaries for Buddha's image for their worship. What they do have are some monks' residential buildings and open terraces for meditation. As if built in the mountains, they are built on a mass of exposed rock and as if along a river or lake, they are surrounded by ponds and water channels. Such an expression may be considered an abstraction of the training environment of mountains and forests of ancient monks, but at the same time it may be thought to be a symbolization of their practice of classical Theravada Buddhism itself.

In most of the Western Monastery's architecture there is no kind of sculpture or wall painting, but strangely, urinals alone are decorated with architectural sculpture and holy animals, Buddhist symbols etc (photograph 2). In no splendid temple anywhere in the capital can such profusely decorated urinals be found. Probably, so that the monks are not seduced by the splendor of various temples in the capital, to cultivate a spirit of denial towards them, their impure urinals was made gorgeous. In the 'Western Monastery', the toilet was not just a place for excretion, but also a place for meditative training, a place for establishing the identity of one's own sect to oneself.

There were many forms of Buddhist temple building in ancient and modern times in Sri Lanka. A monastery for meditation, of course, is rare and may be considered special. But in this way, having eliminated various elements and relating to the Nature outside, spaces of monastic architecture are being appreciated by a few modern architects and are being adopted in their residential and other works.

(English text translated by Vasanti Menon Nii)



❖ Photograph 1: Looking out from the cave monastery, Abhayagirivihara



❖ Photograph 2: The decorated urinal, Western Monastery

❖ Photograph 3: One example of Western Monastery

