



SPIRITUAL GRANDEUR OF RUWANWELI MAHA SEYA



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Stupas in Sri Lanka are monumental structures built to honour the noble Buddha. A Stupa is an indispensable feature of any Buddhist temple, and architecturally the Stupa is the most important Buddhist structure. Stupas house Sacred Relics of the Buddha, or mark the sacred spots at which some important event connected with the religion had taken place, and they are venerated by the Buddhists. The most venerated Stupa in Sri Lanka is Ruwanweli Seya at Anuradhapura, because it enshrines the most amounts of the Sacred Corporal Relics of the noble Buddha. The Ruwanweli Seya is also known as Maha Thupa standing at 340 feet. The colossal Ruwanweli Seya was built by King Dutugemunu and completed by his brother King Saddhatissa. These pinnacles of Buddhist pride dominated our ancient kingdoms.

Amazing Stupas

Due to foreign invasions and the shifting of the capitals from one place to another, the ancient Stupas were neglected and became increasingly dilapidated. Various Kings driven by religious zeal carried out reconstruction and restoration of Stupas built by their predecessors, increasing their size and grandeur. The dome is the biggest component of a Stupa and it contains the Relics in a Relic Chamber, either at the level of the basal rings at the bottom, or in the square chamber at the top. Several shapes have been used for the dome, described as the bell, bubble, paddy heap, pot, and lotus. The bell and bubble shapes are the most common. Sadly by the turn of the nineteenth century all the amazing Stupas from ancient Sri Lanka were left in ruins.

The oldest Stupa in Sri Lanka is Thuparama built by King Devanampiyatissa (250-210 BC) in the magnificent and historic capital of Anuradhapura. With the passage of time more Stupas were built by the wise kings, notable ones being Ruwanweli Seya by King Dutugemunu (161-137 BC), Abhayagiri by King Valagamba (89-77 BC), and Jetavana by King Mahasen (276-303 AD). The colossal Jetavana Stupa, which attained a full height of 121 metres, was at one time the third tallest structure in the world surpassed only by the two great pyramids in Giza. The Stupas' imposing appearance supplemented by a religious aura give us

a feeling of stability, strength, nobility, and grandeur. Ancient Stupas in Sri Lanka are solid structures, built mostly of burnt clay bricks. The Stupa dome has one, two or three cylindrical terraces or basal rings at the bottom, which sometimes form a plinth. At its top, the dome carries the square chamber, which is a solid structure having a square plan.

According to oral tradition there is a story of a forest deity named Swarnamali. She occupied a large tree, which was in the desired construction site of the Stupa. The tree was a *raan thelamu gaha* which is believed to correspond to the Java olive tree (*sterculia foetida*). King Dutugemunu had kindly asked her to relocate saying he desired to build a Stupa here. She obliged the king's request and wanted the Stupa named after her as Swarnamali Seya.

The historical chronicle Mahavamsa (Geiger 1950), describes how the foundation of the Ruwanweli Stupa was laid. "First the land was dug out to a depth of seven cubits (5.3 metres) and then crushed stones were stamped down by elephants whose feet were bound in leather. Then butter clay was spread over the stones and bricks were laid over the clay. Over this mixture, a rough cement and a network of iron was laid. Finally a sheet of copper and a sheet of silver were laid". This system gives a reinforced concrete foundation with damp proofing. The prudent system of using both human labour and assistance from trained elephants is an endorsement of the engineering genius of our wise kings and architects.

The main building block of a Stupa is the burnt clay brick, and different sizes of bricks have been used in different components of the Stupa. The Dome, the most bulky component of the Stupa, has an outer layer of high quality bricks of large size. According to Mahavamsa material used in Stupa construction was subjected to strict quality

control. King Dutugemunu employed the master builder who said that "he will pound the sand in a mortar and then shift it so that no grass or any such thing will grow on the Stupa". The king also appointed a committee to supervise the construction work. The mortar used in the brickwork of ancient Stupas is a clay type called "butter clay" - with an adhesive from a tree and a solvent of sweetened water (Mahavamsa Geiger 1950). This was spread between different courses of bricks in very thin layers, to fill the cavities between bricks.

The four frontispieces at Ruwanweli Seya are supposed to be built by King Lanji Tissa. The frontispiece is known as *vahalkada*. Here we see carvings of lions, cattle, tuskers, horses and lotus. The image house here is called *paspillimagae* - consisting of five statues. They are supposed to be that of Kakusanda, Konagama, Kashappa, Gautama (Sakyamuni Buddha) and for *Maitreya Buddha* who is prophesied to come. Near the main entrance we can see statues of King Dutugemunu, his mother Queen Viharamahadevi and King Bathikabaya in worship. Devotees offered lotus flowers, as we walked in awe of this giant Stupa. A stone slab inscription near the shrine room proclaims the royal patronage bestowed on the Stupa. There was an ancient tradition at this Stupa when people gathered to paint it with lime. This was said to be an annual event.

Golden Age of Anuradhapura

We see that the Mahavamsa copiously describes the building of the Maha Thupa (Ruwanweli Seya). At the top of the conical spire the *koth kerella*, rests the *chudamanikya*. It mentions copper and silver being used in the foundation of the Stupa. The silver was obtained from Ridhigama - the Sinhalese term for silver is *ridhi*. The ancient builders of Sri Lankan Stupas knew about electricity charges even before electricity was invented in the present understanding of the word. Our vintage engineers studied and observed weather patterns in Anuradhapura, which had low humidity. This area was prone to lightning strikes. The ancient calendar months for intense rain were March, April and October. This is

why copper and silver were infused into the final layer of the foundation. Another lesser known ingredient was added by the wise builders - Cinnabar, a mercury sulfide mineral to ward off burrowing insects.

Figures of 338 elephants adorn the Tusker Wall around the Stupa, augmenting its appeal. This grand Stupa during its glorious era was visited by thousands of foreign monks as it evoked reverence. History reveals to us that at the end of the Golden Age of Anuradhapura, the majestic Stupas faded into time. The Ruwanweli Seya was "rediscovered" by British Army Major Skinner. The once marvelous Buddhist edifice was covered with vegetation. Later measurements of the compound and drawings were done in detail by J.G. Smither. In 1872 Ven. Naranwita Sumanasara Thera was able to initiate the clean up and restoration of this amazing edifice. In 1940 the restoration was duly completed. The imposing Ruwanweli Seya is visited by thousands of pilgrims every month. This great Buddhist edifice with remarkable architecture will stand for centuries after us, as a magnificent monument for all Sri Lankans.

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