



The sacred Bo sapling brought to Sri Lanka by Sangamitta Therani (painting at the Kelaniya Rajamaha Vihara)



The Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi, a sacred site for Buddhists the world over

## Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi

# The world's oldest living tree

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There is no spot in Anuradhapura more sacred than the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi. Whenever I visit Anuradhapura, the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi is number one on my list. Worshiping at the Bo tree has continued unbroken for 23 centuries.

The introduction of the Sacred Bodhi Tree, the oldest historical tree in the world and the most venerated, is commemorated by Buddhists in Sri Lanka on Unduwap Poya (full moon) day. Unduwap Poya is popularly known as Sri Sangamitta Day, because it was the missionary bhikkhuni Sangamitta who brought the sacred Bodhi to the country. It was brought as a sapling of the Ficus Religiosa where Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment.

Sangamitta was the sister of the

apostle Mahinda, who introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka. His missionary work during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa (250-210 BC) was singularly successful. Many men and women wanted to be ordained as bhikkhus and bhikkhunis.

### Bhikkhuni order

The rules, however, forbade Ven. Mahinda from ordaining women. Accordingly, Arahata Mahinda advised the King to request Emperor Asoka of India to send his sister, Sangamitta, with a party of bhikkhunis for the purpose.

He also suggested to request the Emperor to send a branch of the Bodhi Tree at Buddha-Gaya to be planted in Sri Lanka as an object of veneration which would always remind the devotees of his teachings.

King Devanampiyatissa appointed his nephew, Aritha, for this job. His mission was successful and Sangamitta duly arrived with a group of bhikkhunis and a branch of the Bodhi

Tree in a golden pot.

The king, who had rushed to the port to meet her, waded neck-deep in the sea to receive the sacred branch, and in a gesture of proud humanity took upon himself the duty of acting as a guard outside its temporary residence on the shore.

From there the sacred sapling was taken in great ceremony to the capital city of Anuradhapura. On the way, the royal party broke the journey at Tivakka Bamunugama at Tantirimale, where a large shrine was later built to mark the occasion.

All that is left of that shrine today are the vandalised 10-metre long reclining image of the Buddha, a seated image of the Buddha on a rocky boulder, and a Bodhi tree on the top of the rocky boulder said to have been raised from a sapling taken from the tree at Anuradhapura. Today, the statue has been restored to its former glory by the Department of Archaeology.

In Anuradhapura, the sacred Bodhi still stands on the spot where it was originally planted in the King's

pleasure garden, although the garden is no more. The Kings who succeeded Devanampiyatissa improved the site with ornamental gateways, a flight of steps and channel systems for watering the tree.

### Protected Bodhi tree

Even after Anuradhapura was no more the capital city and wilderness overtook the dagobas and other monuments, the Bodhi Tree was protected by the villagers.

They lit bonfires around it every night to ward off wild animals. In old Anuradhapura, now declared a sacred city, the once ostentatious buildings are no more today other than an inanimate patchwork of the stone masons' and craftsmen's art.

The only living thing is the sacred Bodhi tree. Propped up on platform upon platform, enclosed by white-washed walls and an iron railing, and surrounded by altars laden with perfumed flowers and oil lamps, it still remains green, a focal point of wor-

IT IS FITTING THAT THE SACRED BODHI, ONCE PART OF THE TREE AT BUDDHA-GAYA, CONTINUES TO GROW IN SRI LANKA WHERE THE TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA, ALMOST FORGOTTEN IN INDIA, CONTINUE TO FLOURISH

ship and pilgrimage once again.

Today, iron crutches support the boughs of this holy tree, which is surprisingly slight for its age. It stands among the younger trees on a special platform, a bodhighara, encircled by a gold-plated railing.

Most Bo trees in Sri Lanka, and some in Burma and Thailand, have sprouted from the Sri Maha Bodhi's seeds. Its leaves are said to have inspired the shape of Sri Lanka's dagobas.

### Oldest trees

It is fitting that the Sacred Bodhi, once part of the tree at Buddha-Gaya, continues to grow in Sri Lanka where the teachings of the Buddha, almost forgotten in India, continue to flourish.

The Sri Maha Bodhi is said to be

2,235 years old. Carbon dating tests have shown other trees to be older: the cedars of Lebanon, some olive groves in Palestine, the baobabs of Africa, and the California Redwoods which are 3,600 years old. But none of these trees had a continuous historical record such as the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi planted in 245 BC and venerated to the present day.

Devout Buddhists listening to the pattering sound of Bodhi leaves are certainly reminded of the Great Enlightenment and no doubt of its momentous consequences to themselves.

Above our heads the pointed leaves of the sacred Bo-tree twisted in the morning breeze, catching the first rays of the sun rising over Anuradhapura – as it has done for 2,300 years. Below us, women attired in white chanted Saddhu, Saddhu.



Buddhist flags wrapped around the Bo tree at the shrine



Pilgrims walk peacefully at the lower terrace at the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi



A Silmatha meditates in the lower terrace