

MONASTIC GROVES AND PAINTINGS OF ANCIENT SRI LANKA

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In the history of Buddhism attention has been paid to the establishment of forest groves, gardens and parks as well as paintings of great aesthetic value. Literary evidence reveals that several forest groves had been dedicated by the early Indian Buddhists with emphasis on religious aspects. Particularly, the dedication of Nigrodharama and Jetavanarama represents the concept of wholesome action. *Cullavaggapali* of the *Vinayapitaka* has reference to the significance of paintings in Buddhist aesthetics.

Many devotees of ancient India worshipped and took refuge in forest groves or Aramas. Gradually forest groves and some royal gardens became monasteries of ascetics and religious men. Very often Buddha and his disciples resided in arboreturns, gardens, arboraceous parks and in animal reservations like deer parks (migadaya) and squirrels feeding ground (kalandaka nivapa).

According to the Buddhist concept of merit, dedication of groves is considered as a wholesome action that can lead one to be born in a celestial world. The Vimanavatthu stories introduced to Sri Lanka by Ven. Mahinda largely contributed to the establishment of groves and the adornment of dwelling places of monks with beautiful paintings. According to these stories, people who dedicated groves, received by the power of that meritorious action celestial gardens in the next life. Such action was considered meritorious because gardens provide shade, shelter, food, and medicine on the one hand and aesthetic pleasure on the other.

It must also be emphasized that the attention paid to groves or gardens in the traditional art of Sri Lanka reflects a deep love of nature. These objects of nature lead to serenity and calmness of mind. Some wall paintings depict groves with an abundance of foliage and flowers. (e.g. Foliage painting: Cave 7, boulder garden Sigiriya, Tivanka temple painting at south wall of entrance). They depict gardens with foliage, banana, palm, flowers, bushes and birds. The Anavatatta pond depicted in the Dambulla temple represents a garden with a pond, lotuses, flora, and wild life. Most volutes of the ancient temples resemble the celestial Vimana of the *Vimanavatthupakarana*.

Many rulers of Sri Lanka not only founded a number of gardens but also developed many accounts of royal art due to the influence of Buddhism. Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa chronicles report gardens or groves namely, Mahatittha, Mahanama, Sagara and Mahameghavana. These four were dedicated to the past four Buddhas. Later, king Makalankatissa founded Padmaswara garden, in the city of Anuradhapura. Parakramabahu the Great also followed this tradition.

It is very clear that the establishment of forest groves, gardens and religious dwelling places with beautiful paintings is a characteristic of Buddhist religious culture.