

## RITUALS AND BENEFITS OF THE STŪPA WORSHIP

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### Introduction

The Stūpa worship was not first begun by Buddhists. Its history goes back to the Vedic period. In the pre-Buddhist era, Stūpas were built in the places where great kings and spiritual leaders were cremated. The Buddhist attitude is consistent with this. While the Buddha was alive, his two greatest disciples passed away. Then the Buddha advised other monks to build Stūpas. Then, they cremated the bodies and built Stūpas enshrining the remaining relics. In the Mahā Parinibbānasutta the Buddha says that one should visit the places where the Buddha was born, became enlightened, delivered his first sermon, and passed away to develop their devoutness. The Buddha further mentions Stūpas to be built for the Buddha, Pacceka Buddha, Tathāgatasāvaka, and Cakkavatti kings. In the same sutta the Buddha says that those who worship Stūpas go to heaven as a result of this practice. These statements give an incentive for Stūpa worship. Although scriptural sanction for Stūpa worship is found in the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta it is very important to seek the early Buddhist standpoint of the rituals. It is questionable that the Buddha advised his disciples to perform rituals regarding Stūpa worship because early Buddhism generally does not advocate rituals. However, after some time, rituals were also introduced regarding Stūpa worship, as it was believed to be a meritorious activity. Buddhists abundantly engage in the Stūpa worship and rituals connected with it. This paper seeks to explore the benefits of Stūpa worship and rituals performed in ancient Sri Lanka.

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## Methodology

This study is primarily based on a literary survey. Canonical texts, commentaries and chronicles are used to show benefits of Stūpa worship and the rituals connected with it with a glimpse at the Sinhalese Buddhist culture.

## Discussion

Buddhists adamantly believe that Stūpa worship is an important merit-acquiring act. As a result the Stūpa has become one of the places where rituals are usually performed. The Buddha says that those who worship Stūpas go to heaven as a result. The stories of the Apadānapāli, show the benefits of Stūpa worship. Apart from that the Thera & Therīgāthā, the Buddhvamsa, the Vimānavatthu and commentaries are rich with facts about Stūpa worship. According to them, some of benefits of this action are fortunate rebirths (specially in heaven), becoming universal king, king of the heavens, having a beautiful body, a mellifluous voice, being attractive, being able to bring happiness to others, freedom from skin diseases and having a long life and happy life and also the abilities to attain enlightenment quickly.

An important aspect of the worship of Stūpas is the custom of circumambulation (*padakkhina*) as a mark of respect. It differs from the large and small Stūpas as mentioned in the Sumangalavilāsinī. The Mahāvamsa accounts for some of the rituals performed in Sri Lanka by different kings with the people during different periods. In the Anuradhapura period kings tended to build giant Stūpas because Stūpas were mostly worshiped by people before the construction of the Buddha's statues. A number of Stūpas built in Anuradhapura prove this fact. Among the rituals connected with the Stūpa, the first one is linked with the establishment of the first stone. One of the special rituals was the enshrining of relics, which was done with much ceremony at a specially selected astrologically auspicious time. A similar ritual is that of pinnacle

setting (*kot-palandavīma*), which is the concluding stage in the construction of a Stūpa. Many other rituals are also included in these events.

The *Giribhanda Pūjā* was one of the special rituals performed by king Mahādāthika. It was a ritual done ceremonially with the participation of many people. The main offering was lighting of lamps as mentioned in the accounts. Among these rituals, offering flowers and lighting lamps was usual. Another incident is reported in the *Eluattanugala Vamsa*. It is said that the King Sirisangabo during a period of drought went to the Ruwanveliseya, lying on the compound he wished to be free from the drought and his wish came true.

At present Stūpa shave become so popular among the local Buddhists that almost every village temple has a Stūpa as an indispensable feature. Therefore, Stūpa worship has been developed with new rituals and the use of modern technological systems such as being covered with the Buddhist flag and being lighted with bulbs.

### Conclusion

Although the purposes behind the building of Stūpas were different people hoped for merits and worldly gains as a blessing of Stūpa worship. Rituals are performed from the very beginning of the construction of a Stūpa, placing relics, opening and worship after finishing the construction. It is very clear that Stūpa worship and the rituals connected is a feature of later Buddhism.

**Keywords:** Stūpa worship, benefits, rituals, relics

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