

JOURNEY TO SRI LANKA

& THREE POEMS

by **Paul M. Pearson**

July 19th 1989. Flying into Colombo Airport, Sri Lanka. A country that I have always been attracted to and here at last, as part of my pre-novitiate holiday, the lush green of Sri Lanka's vegetation was opening up below us as the Thai Air plane came in to land. The purpose of my visit to Sri Lanka was mainly to visit a country I had always wanted to see, but this also involved me to a certain extent in following in the footsteps of Thomas Merton — unavoidable in such a small country.

On advice from friends I had decided to make Kandy in the Hill Country the base for my stay. This was Asia — the bus from the airport solidly packed with dark brown Sinhalese skin and black-haired, fine-featured people — along with one pale Western face. Colombo Fort Railway Station, in torrential rain, a rush to find the correct ticket booth for the Kandy Express due to depart any minute. Merton's description of Sri Lanka and of the Kandy Express has not changed, it is like stepping back in time. The train itself was in use when Merton traveled on this line over two decades ago, perhaps it is the very train he traveled on, just a little more dilapidated, a little more run down. The train moves out of the station off through the lush green countryside to begin the climb up into the Hill Country. Arriving in Kandy in the humid, busy darkness of an Asian night. A rush to find a bed for the night and some food after a long day of traveling.

Next morning I had decided to head straight for Polonnaruwa to make sure that I would get there and then I could continue from there on to other ancient cities and tourist attractions. Travel in Sri Lanka, as in India, is chaotic at the best of times. This day was no exception. It was, in fact, worse than usual. Government buses were on strike so the only way to get to Polonnaruwa was by a twenty-five seater private bus. In good Sri Lankan style the conductor fitted over fifty people onto the bus and a half hour trip to Polonnaruwa. Again I was the solitary pale face.

In the first twelve hours or so Sri Lanka had appeared a beautiful, peaceful country — that image was shattered a few minutes outside Kandy as we passed a bus at the roadside that had been shot at that morning and which had now become the center of a Sri Lankan army operation. "It was the first time I had felt the cold steel of the war scare in my vitals" — those words of Merton's from *The Seven Storey Mountain* came immediately to mind along with a fear of what the next few days would hold.

The bus arrived at Polonnaruwa mid-afternoon. After booking into a rest house I decided to visit the ancient sites that afternoon and to move on the next day because, due to the troubles, there was no electricity and a curfew was in operation.

□ **Paul M. Pearson** is a member of the community at Worth Abbey in Crawley, Sussex, England. His reviews of Merton have appeared in *The Catholic Herald*, *The Clergy Review*, *The Merton Seasonal*, and *Priests & People*. He is a member of *The International Thomas Merton Society* and went on the "pilgrimage" recorded here after attending the First General Meeting in May 1989.

Anuradhapura had been the ancient capital of Sri Lanka, but when it became too vulnerable to attack from South India the capital was moved to Polonnaruwa in the twelfth century. Polonnaruwa reached its height under Parakramabahu I (1153-1186) who erected many of its huge buildings, laid out its parks, and built a tank or lake covering some 5,950 acres. But Polonnaruwa soon proved susceptible to invasion from India and, after two centuries, the capital was moved to the south of the island. During the following centuries Sri Lanka's ancient cities were reclaimed by the jungle until they were effectively excavated during the late nineteenth century.

The ancient sites at Polonnaruwa are spread out over the distance of a few kilometers so to get back and forth between them I hired a rickety old bone-shaker of a bicycle and cycled off in the late afternoon sunlight. The jungle preserved many of the buildings remarkably well and one could imagine the glory of the city in its heyday. There were many buildings to visit — a royal palace and audience hall, a bathing pool, relic houses, dagobas, and finally at the northern end of the city Parakramabahu's northern monastery which includes the *Gal Vihara*, the most famous carvings of the Buddha in Sri Lanka.

The *Gal Vihara* consists of four separate carvings, all cut from one piece of granite. The image of the reclining Buddha entering nirvana is the most impressive of the carvings, fourteen meters long and with a most beautiful grain to the stone. Then, next to the reclining Buddha, there is a seven meter high standing image of the Buddha. In *The Asian Journal* Merton, presumably following an older guide book, says it is an image of Ananda, the Buddha's disciple, mourning the Buddha's departure for nirvana. But with more recent discoveries of other images with the same unusual arm positions, it is now accepted that this is also an image of the Buddha. The other two carvings are of the Buddha seated, one, set back in a cave, is an inferior carving while the other seated Buddha is set out in the open like the standing and reclining carvings.

How does one feel on seeing these images? Merton's attempt to describe his own experience at Polonnaruwa has become a standard quote in almost every book ever written about him: "Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with *dharmakaya* everything is emptiness and everything is compassion."

Standing in front of these images I was certainly impressed by the standard of the carvings. I had seen many images of the Buddha throughout Asia but these, especially the reclining Buddha, were by far the best — the faces really were sublime. While I was standing there looking up at the carvings, a Buddhist monk came up to me for alms. I was amused that after giving him some rupees, he commented before he turned away: "They are good carvings, but it is the sacred Bo-tree that I



THE RECLINING BUDDHA

Photo by Paul M. Pearson (20 July 1989)

worship.” In front of the carvings, carefully fenced off, was a cutting taken from the sacred Bo-tree at Anuradhapura. That tree in turn was grown from a sapling brought from Bodh Gaya in India by Princess Sangamitta, sister of Mahinda who introduced the Buddha’s teachings to Sri Lanka and it is the oldest historically authenticated tree in the world, having been tended for over two thousand years by an uninterrupted succession of guardians.

Early that evening, after the tropical night had fallen and before the curfew came into force, I went for a walk by the side of the tank. A strong, cool breeze was blowing in off the tank so I sat there for a while to find some relief from the heat and humidity of an Asian summer’s day. At regular intervals patrols of Sri Lankan soldiers passed by on the road behind me, hopefully my pale European skin was clearly visible in the glare of their headlights. Across from the tank where I was sitting sporadic flares lit up an army operation.

Sitting there in a beautiful country so sadly torn apart by violence I felt a great and deep peace. As has happened before in my life in the quiet of the evening, with the breeze coming in off the tank, God passed me by as he had done for Elijah three thousand years ago at Mount Horeb. It reflected one of the most valuable lessons that I have learned in my study of Merton, and that is perseverance in my own search for God. Merton encourages the desire for God within me, but I do not, and must not, look to replicate his experiences of God. Merton has provided a map and spiritual nourishment for the journey in his writings, but each one of us has to make our own journey towards God.

Next day I had hoped to continue northeast to Trincomalee but was told it would be virtually impossible to get there and very foolish to try. So instead I made my way to Anuradhapura to visit the ancient sites there. The situation there was worse than at Polonnaruwa, as along with the curfew and no electricity supply, there was no regular supply of water either. And so after quickly seeing the ruins at Anuradhapura I headed back down south to Kandy.

In a short time the political situation had deteriorated rapidly. The same day that I left Polonnaruwa a police jeep was blown off the road south of Polonnaruwa by a mine, killing six people. Returning to Kandy our bus was stopped three times by soldiers. We were made to get down and to walk along the road in single file while our identity cards and luggage were checked and then we were picked up further along the road by the bus. Back in Kandy there were army road blocks, soldiers and armored cars patrolling the streets. Two bombs exploded in Kandy that night. With the press censorship by the government it was impossible to know exactly what was happening, and so it was with a great feeling of relief that I flew out of Colombo on July 26th.

Since the explosion of violence between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in the early 1980s the situation in Sri Lanka has not really improved at all but steadily deteriorated. Maybe news coverage of the student uprisings in China earlier in the year had obscured the reporting of events in Sri Lanka at that stage. On my return to the West it was clearly in the news again, with three days of general strikes later in the week that I left with over one hundred people killed by violence in one day.

In many ways Sri Lanka had not changed from the Sri Lanka that Merton described in *The Asian Journal* in late 1968. But now there was the constant threat of violence, the fear created by armed soldiers patrolling the streets, buses, trains and all public places, and the obvious lack of foreign visitors to a country that is an island paradise. Sri Lanka is much in need of the peace that Merton found in the carved images of the Buddha at Polonnaruwa: “The peace not of emotional resignation but of *Madhyamika*, of *sunyata*, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything — without refutation — without establishing some other argument. For the doctrinaire, the mind that needs well-established positions, such peace, such silence, can be frightening.”

1. Dancing round, round hermit monk,
bright eyes hidden among the trees
waiting the return of peace to his bunk.

Rolling round, round with delight,
laughing heavenly hermit monk,
when they stop they'll come round right.

2. Grain, fall, fallen, harvested.
End and fullness join forces.
How the paradox hurts —
the pain of it, the deceit.

Traveling a well used road,
where so many have gone before.
Seeking a fullness without end
the unreachable goal.

To grasp, and to lose.
Sisyphus's eternal cry.

3. **CONCRETE PRAYER**

Yahweh - Ya - hw- eh.
Lord - Lo - rd.
Ya - Lo - hw - rd - eh.
eh - rd - hw - Lo - Ya.

he - dr - wh - oL - aY.
aY - oL - wh - dr - he.
dr - oL - droL.
he - wh - aY - hewhaY.