

THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF THE FLOWER IN BUDDHISM

by

M M J Marasinghe
Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies
University of Kelaniya

It is difficult to determine when the flower first came to be used in Buddhism as an item of offering, though it is not the first and religiously the most important purpose for which it was used in Buddhism.

The evidence in the Pali Canonical sources seems to support the view that long before the flower came to be used as an item of offering, it was used as an object of meditation.

Meditation in Buddhism starts with *Samatha* (mental concentration) and progresses through *Vipassanā* (insight) to *Vimukti* (final emancipation) or *Bodhi* (realization). For *Samatha* the aspirant uses one of forty objects of meditation to achieve complete and uninterrupted unification of mind in order to equip him with the basic technical skill to embark on the next phase of development which is *Vipassanā*.

Of the forty objects of concentration the first ten are known as *Kasinas* and among them four are based on colour. The four colour *Kasinas* are blue (*nīla*), yellow (*pīṭa*), red (*lohita*), and white (*odāta*).¹ Each *Kasiṇa* - object is usually made in the shape of a round piece of board, stone or ground divided by depressions and is known as the *Kasiṇa maṇḍala* which is covered with flowers of the relevant colour.

The aspirant should select the colour appropriate to his character and make the *Kasiṇa maṇḍala* with flowers of the relevant colour. The selection of the colour seems to have been inherited by the Buddhists from a system of human analysis following which Buddhism classified human beings into six character groupings, as follows:

- i. *Rāga-carita* : those whose predominant temperament is that of lust (*Rāga*).
- ii. *Dosa-carita* : those whose predominant temperament is that of hate (*Dosa*).
- iii. *Moha-carita* : those whose predominant temperament is that of delusion (*Moha*).
- iv. *Saddhā-carita* : those whose predominant temperament is that of faith (*Saddhā*).
- v. *Buddhi-carita* : those whose predominant temperament is that of intellectuality (*Buddhi*).
- vi. *Vitakka-carita* : those whose predominant temperament is that of speculation (*Vitakka*).