

## **Buddhist Education in Sri Lanka at the University Level**

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### **History**

Sri Lanka has millennia long tradition of Buddhist Education dating back to third century B.C. According to historical evidence there had been three main schools of Buddhist education in Sri Lanka disseminating knowledge on a wide variety of disciplines related to Buddhism. These were the Mahavihara (3<sup>rd</sup> Century B.C.), the Abhayagiri Mahavihara (1<sup>st</sup> Century B.C.) and Jetawana Mahavihara (3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.D.) (Mendis et.al 2006). These institutions of higher learning continued for many centuries in Anuradhapura, the ancient kingdom of Sri Lanka until the 11<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. Again from the 12<sup>th</sup> century this continued in Polonnaruwa, the next Kingdom. The archaeological remains indicate that in Polonnaruwa, there had been an elaborately laid out monastic university, the Alahana Pirivena with residential facilities, (Bandaranayake 2006).

However, this ancient monastic education was interrupted by European invasion in the middle of the last millennium. As in many other Asian countries, European invasion, occupation and colonization brought an immense disruption to our culture, economy and society. However, it also helped us to get contact with emerging modern world with new ideas, concepts, economic and political systems, culture and life styles. For the last 150 years, Sri Lanka was continuously finding its own way, own place in this new global system, forming its own structures within national and global frameworks (Bandaranayake 2006).

### **Present situation**

The present university system in Sri Lanka dates back to the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with the establishment of the Medical College, Law College and the Technical College in the period from 1970 to 1983. With this, parallel development of monastic Buddhist Education took place. In 1873 and 1875, two prime institutions of monastic Buddhist education, namely Vidyodaya Pirivena and Vidyalankara Pirivena were established. These institutions headed by scholarly Buddhist priests who excelled in their fields of Philosophy and Linguistics because the two prime seats of higher learning in Buddhist studies. Also, the first Sri Lankan University degrees were offered by the Vidyalankara Pirivena in 1930s. In 1959, these two institutions of higher learning devoted to Buddhist education were converted to the modern day Universities by a Parliamentary Act. Today these two Universities, which have their roots in Buddhist monastic education, are known as the University of Sri Jayawardene pura and the University of Kelaniya.

Today in Sri Lanka there are 15 Universities which have been established under the provisions of the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978 and these come directly under the University Grants Commission (UGC). There are two Buddhist universities established under different Parliamentary Acts which are devoted only for Buddhist studies, namely the Buddhasravaka Bhikku University and the Pali and Buddhist University. These are not under the UGC but come directly under the Ministry of Higher Education. There is another University, namely the Defense University which was established recently with a separate Parliamentary Act which comes under the Ministry of Defense.