

Hundred Years of the Siri Vajirarama Library and its Future Prospects

By Venerable Siri Vajiraramaye Ñāṇasīha

The Siri Vajirarama Library needed modernization in order to equip it to cater for the needs of the 21st century and those who wish to learn more of Buddha Dhamma. During a transition period of two years for modernization, the library was closed to its users. On 14th July 2024/2568 the modernized library located in the new three-storied building constructed for that purpose will be officially opened for users, both local and abroad. This article gives a brief description of the hundred years of its existence and its future prospects.

The new building for the library was constructed and offered to the Maha Sangha on 21st June, 2022 and the English translation of the plaque inscribed in Sinhala relating to the new building reads as follows: -

Siri Vajirarama Library
“The historic Siri Vajirarama library that conserved the books and papers of Most Venerable Pelene Siri Vajirañāṇa Mahānāyaka Thera was opened by Hon. Cecil Clement, the Colonial Secretary of Ceylon, on 15 July, 1924.

As an expression of great devotion to the Buddha Sasana, this three-storied library was constructed and offered to the Maha Sangha by
Mr. Ishara Nanayakkara,
Chairman of LOLC and the Browns Group of Companies on
for the good and welfare of both the Buddha Sasana and humanity,
and particularly to offer merit and Nibbanic bliss
to his late father, the philanthropist Raja Mahinda Nanayakkara, and
to wish long life to his mother, Mrs. Indra Nanayakkara,
Honorary Patron of the Siri Vajirarama Sāsana Sāvika Samitiya,”
21st June, 2022/2566

The new building is situated behind the old library that was ceremonially opened on July 15, 1924 as mentioned above. The old library building that is left intact because of its antiquity value, houses the new Relic Chamber or *Dhātu Mandiraya*. It has many new features tailor-made to fit into a hundred-year-old building and is a bountiful gift of Mrs. Kalsa Amarasinghe, immediate past President of the *Siri Vajirarama Sāsana Sāvika Samitiya*.

I have a vivid picture of the old Vajirarama library, which I used for reference work in early 1950s as a university undergraduate. I was in Peradeniya and during my holidays at home in Colombo an invaluable source for reference was the Vajirarama temple library. I met Venerable Piyadassi Maha Thera, who had the keys of the eight cupboards that were neatly placed inside. I still remember how he placed his foot on the lower section of the cupboard and took out the book/s I wanted from the upper shelves.

Just outside, on the verandah leading out of the room of Venerable Narada Maha Thera was a desk with short legs, slightly inclining with a top that could be opened. I used to sit at the desk and do the references. More than the books were the journals and magazines that had the latest information. One such magazine that I still remember was The East. It had the latest information of the excavations made at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa of the Indus valley and it was of great interest to me as I was studying Indian history.

The tall library cupboard (see picture) is unique to the Vajirarama Library. It would have been conceptually designed, undoubtedly, by the Most Venerable Pelene Vajirañāṇa Mahānāyaka Thera and hence, also has a history of over one hundred years. When the library of the Maharagama Dharmāyanaya was planned, it was the wish of Most Venerable Madihe Paññāsīha Mahānāyaka Thera to replicate the Vajirarama Library cupboards. It was done, and I am happy that the first such cupboard was donated by me (when in lay life) in memory of my parents. In like manner, the eight tall book cupboards and the six display cupboards on the ground floor of the new building were all donations. The list of all donors appears elsewhere in this publication.

The valuable collection of books and papers that filled the original eight large cupboards of the Vajirarama Library has its own story. It is best related in the words of its architect, the Most Venerable Pelene Vajirañāṇa Mahānāyaka Thero, in his address at the official opening of the library building by Mr. Cecil Clement, the Colonial Secretary before a distinguished gathering that included Mr. & Mrs. G.J. Silva, the donors, Hon. Mr. James Peiris, Mr. T. Reid, Mayor of Colombo and Mr. L. MacRae, Director of Education.

Quote “We highly appreciate the honour of your presence in our midst on this happy occasion; and we thank you sincerely for your kindness in accepting our invitation; and thus, giving encouragement to our present enterprise, which has for its ultimate goal the moral and intellectual development of the country.

Though much might be said on such an occasion I shall avail myself of the opportunity to speak a few words in connection with the library which you are about to declare open. Hitherto these books numbering about 2000, were my private property; but it is my earnest desire now to inaugurate a public library with these books as a nucleus, so that everyone may have access to it and benefit thereby.

When I left the Vidyodaya College, upon the completion of my course, about twenty years ago, though at that time I had not more than 100 books at my disposal, I had an insatiable longing for wide reading and in trying to satisfy the desire I was compelled to borrow extensively from others. Consequently, I was subjected to much hardship and inconvenience. Another difficulty which confronts the eager student in Ceylon is the scarcity of books in temple libraries, other than those on Buddhism. Even when the necessary books are to be found, it is next to impossible to obtain even a glance at them in peace, leaving alone opportunity for quiet study. These circumstances led me to launch upon the task of collecting books.

To us bhikkhus, mendicant members of the Order of the Buddha who live a life of voluntary poverty, entirely supported by the generosity of the Buddhist laity, and bound by religious rules in regards dealing with money, and other worldly matters, this laudable enterprise becomes an exceedingly difficult task. But I was not to be deterred by any obstacles from my resolution. It was my kamma to be able, slowly but steadily, to work towards the accomplishment of my cherished project.

I inherited from my revered father his entire library and consequently I was favoured with many valuable books presented by my mother and brothers. My tiny library thus gradually developed. My relatives, dayakas, and other Buddhist well-wishers, who came to know of the deep interest I took in books, began to help my work by supplying me with books to the best of my ability. Two or three broadminded Christian friends of mine, were kind enough to present me with a series of valuable treatises on Sanskrit Grammar. Nor must I fail to mention the help I received from my brother bhikkhus, who also furnished me with books whenever possible.

I may also mention that the donation of the publications of the Pali Text Society which, of late, is being made to my library by the Hon. the Colonial Secretary, on behalf of the Government of Ceylon, is a royal gift, which I highly prize. So too do I consider the 27 volumes of the commentary of the Tipitaka (printed in Siamese characters) made by His Royal Highness, the crown prince of Siam, a very noble offering. The kind donation of the useful Simon Hewavitarne publication of the Tipitaka commentary have also enhanced the value of the library.

The books thus grew in number and I was pondering how they should be adequately arranged, preserved and safely housed... ” Unquote [Times newspaper, July 16, 1924]

A good library is always a resource centre for learning. Most Venerable Pelene Siri Vajirañāṇa Mahānāyaka Thero developed such a resource centre for the single purpose of learning the Dhamma. Using the library that he developed with love and devotion, he became the ‘last word’ on matters pertaining to the Dhamma and Vinaya during his time.

He had a lineup of pupil monks starting with Venerable Narada Maha Thera (1916), followed by Venerable Kamburugamuwe Mahanāga (1920), Venerable Denipitiye Sumanasiri (1923), Venerable Madihe Paññāsīha (1924), Venerable Piyadassi (1934), Venerable Soma, Venerable Kheminda, Venerable Pamburana Metteyya, Venerable Ampitiye Rāhula (1936), Venerable Naotunne Gunasiri (1937), Venerable Walgama Sugatananda (1939), Venerable Panwila Vipassi (1939), Venerable Urugamuwe Senananda (1939), Venerable Amritananda of Nepal (1940), Venerable Kassapa (1947), Venerable Ñāṇavīra of England (1950) and Venerable Ñāṇamoli of England. None of the erudite monks ordained before 1940 went to a university as an undergraduate or to a pirivena to follow a course of studies in Buddha Dhamma. Their education and training were directed by the Most Venerable Pelene Siri Vajirañāṇa Mahānāyaka Thero and the Vajirarama Library was their resource centre for learning.

A unique test was when Venerable Madihe Paññāsīha Thero, still in his late twenties, was desirous of following the *Vidyā Vishāradha* course commenced by Professor G.P.Malalasekera at the University College, Colombo. Although Venerable Paññāsīha Thero did not have the stipulated paper qualifications to gain entry to the course, a letter from Venerable Pelene Mahānāyaka Thero to the University authorities stating that his knowledge of Pali, Sanskrit and the Buddhist texts was more than adequate, enabled him to follow the course, which he completed successfully.

If it would have been possible to maintain as a separate collection the invaluable assortment of books of Most Venerable Pelene Vajirañāṇa Mahānāyaka Thero that formed the nucleus of the Siri Vajirarama Library, it could have been of great historical and holistic value because it would have been complete by itself for a student of Buddhism. However later developments were otherwise.

The demise of Most Venerable Pelene Siri Vajirañāṇa Mahānāyaka Thero in 1955 seems to have had a long-term effect on the evolution of the Vajirarama library. By then, almost all his pupils have become Maha Theras with over twenty years after higher ordination and were leaving the Vajirarama conclave to be of greater service to the Sasana and the community. For example, Venerable Madihe Paññāsīha Maha Thera and Venerable Ampitiye Rāhula Mahā Thera left to fulfil a wish of their teacher to set up the Bhikkhu Training Centre at Maharagama. There were similar developments in other places where branches of Vajiraramaya sprang up like Asokārāmaya at Nuwara Eliya, Bodhigiri Vihāraya at Pælvādiya, Ratnapura, Samarasinghārāmaya at Telijjavila, and Senanayakaramaya at Kandy. No new pupil monks were ordained who could benefit from the temple library. Hence, there seems to be a slow change of the Vajirarama library to become a mere treasure trove of knowledge.

The Buddha has once stated "*Tathāgatappavedito dhammavinayo, bhikkhave, vivaṭo virocati, no paṭicchanno*" (*Anguttara Nikaya, Tika Nipata*). Its meaning is "O Bhikkhus, the teaching and discipline declared by the Tathāgata shines when manifest and not when covered." In the same way, a library shines only when it is used and not when it is simply preserved as a treasure trove of knowledge even if the books, papers and monograms are written on golden leaves.

A new era dawned with the appointment of Venerable Tirikunamale Ananda Maha Thera, a senior pupil of Most Venerable Madihe Paññāsīha Mahānāyaka Thera, as the chief abbot of Vajiraramaya in February, 2009. By then he was also the Anunāyaka or Deputy Chief of the Amarapura Sri Dhammaraksita Nikāya in recognition of his erudition and the monastic qualities he possessed. Comparatively young and bubbling with new ideas, he started with great earnest for the betterment of Vajiraramaya as its new head.

On September 06, 2009, the Vajirarama temple precincts was declared a sacred area by a special gazette notification; an event that occurred with the participation of Hon. Mahinda Rajapaksa, then President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and in the presence of Mr. Dinesh Gunawardhena, then Minister of Urban Development and Sacred Area Development. As a mark of respect to his late revered teacher, Most Venerable Madihe Paññāsīha Mahānāyaka Thera, a lifelike statue of the prelate was unveiled on the same day. The name Vajiraramaya was changed to Siri

Vajiraramaya. Accordingly, Vajirarama Library became Siri Vajirarama Library. It was not only to be a change of name but also a change of perception.

As Siri Vajiraramaya's contribution to commemorate the Sambuddhatva Jayanti that marked the 2600th year of the enlightenment of the Buddha, the decision was taken to improve the facilities of the library. It needed expansion to accommodate the 11 extra cupboards, of which two contained 210 invaluable ola books, that were located on the first floor of the two-storied *Dharma Sala* building. There were no reading room facilities for its users, either. A publication dated 05.10.2011 that was printed on the occasion of the opening of the new reading room provides a good assessment of the condition of the library at that time. (Quote) "The main objective of the current project is to rebuild and restore the Siri Vajirarama Library to take its rightful place among the Buddhist libraries in Sri Lanka for use of local and foreign members of the Maha Sangha and lay researchers". (Unquote) The two words 'rebuild and restore' speak volumes regarding the state of the library that was.

Most Venerable Tirikunamale Ananda Mahānāyaka Thero contacted former Archivist Dr. K.D.G. Wimalaratne and on his initiative a team consisting of Professor Piyadasa Ranasinghe, Professor W.A. Weerasuriya, and Mrs. Priyanwada Wanigasooriya of the faculty of Library and Information Science of the University of Kelaniya visited Siri Vajiraramaya and after inspection of the library a comprehensive project report was prepared for the improvement of facilities of the library in stages. It included the following.

1. Rearranging and classification of books;
2. Physical extensions to the library to have reading room and reference facilities and to accommodate all books of the library in one location;
3. Restoring books and ola leaf books that were in a dilapidated condition;
4. Computerization of the Library.

A library committee was formed to implement the Project under the chairmanship of the *Vihārādhipati* with four members of the Vajirarama Karyasadhaka Samitiya, namely, *Desabandhu* Olcott Gunasekera (Senior Vice-Patron), Sandun Abeygunawardena (Hony. Secretary) Mr. Chamara Kulasinghe (Asst. Treasurer) and Mr. Senaka A. Samarasinghe (Member and Convener). Dr. W.A. Weerasuriya, Head of the Library and Information Science Faculty of the University of Kelaniya was a member by invitation and adviser to the committee.

The physical extensions were completed with the financial assistance provided by the N.U. Jayawardena Trust on the initiative of Mr. Milinda Moragoda and the plaque unveiled recorded the event as follows: -

Yuñjatha Buddhasāṣane
In honour of
the late Venerable Aggamahapandita Madihe Paññāsīha Mahānāyaka Thera,
'*Deshamanya N.U. Jayawardena Reading Room*'
was gifted to the Siri Vajirarama Library
by the
N.U. Jayawardena Trust
in commemoration of the 2600 Sambuddhatva Jayanti Year.
2555/2011 Oct. 05

This was an important milestone in the history of the Siri Vajirarama library. Work commenced also on items 1, 3 and 4 of the Project with the assistance of the Library and Information Science department of the Kelaniya University. For the first time, the books were classified according to the Dewey Decimal Classification and entered in an Accession Register. The necessary data were fed into a computer that was gifted to the library. Much of this work was done by the students of the Kelaniya University under the supervision of Dr. W.A. Weerasuriya, its head, and the students were made a payment according to an agreed scheme. A lay librarian was appointed to co-ordinate the work.

In 2014, after the demise of Most Venerable Weligama Ñāṇaratana Mahānāyaka Thera, Venerable Tirikunamale Ananda Anunāyaka Thera, the Viharadhipati or Abbot of Siri Vajiraramaya, was unanimously elected the Mahānāyaka Thera or head of the Amarapura Sri Dharmarakshitha Nikāya. For better management and greater efficiency, some functions were devolved and following earlier tradition, in 2016, the Most Venerable Tirikunamale Ananda Mahānāyaka Thera appointed a bhikkhu from Siri Vajiraramaya as the Librarian-in-charge of the library. Along with that appointment a Library Committee was formed. The members of the committee were Venerable Kurunegala Caranadhamma, the appointed bhikkhu-in-charge of the library, Venerable Siri Vajiraramaye Ñāṇasīha and Messrs. Tungasiri Gamage, who was appointed the Secretary and Rapporteur to the Siri Vajirarama Karyasadhaka Samitiya, Sandun Abeygunawardhana, Lionel Gunasekera and Jithendra Gunatileka. Venerable Bandarawela Ñāṇaruci was appointed the bhikkhu-in-charge in 2019.

It had an immediate impact and many issues were brought up by the bhikkhu-in-charge of the library at the first meeting itself that was held on July 08, 2016. The most serious was the disfunction of the computer where all entries in regard to the books in the library were stored as a part of the earlier project. Leaking of the roof of the library and water seeping in whenever there was a heavy rain, especially where the rare and permanent reference books were placed, were also reported as a perennial problem. Lack of space for expansion, too, was becoming an acute problem.

After much deliberation the decision was taken to demolish the rear section of the old building, whilst keeping intact the section in front, which included the two rooms that were occupied by Most Venerable Narada Maha Thera and Venerable Kassapa Thera and the section that housed the original Vajirarama Library that was opened in 1924. Initially, the plan was to construct the new three-storied building as an extension but later it was decided to have it as an independent unit but

connected to the old building by a broad verandah, which was a feature of the old structure. The section that housed the original library was converted, adding new features to be the *Dhatu Mandiraya* of Siri Vajirarama Temple and was opened on June 21, 2024 for public veneration.

The task of drawing the plans for the new building for the Siri Vajirarama Library was assigned to Chartered Architect Ranga Dayasena, a *dayaka* of the temple. He was overjoyed to undertake the assignment as a deed of merit. Blue prints of the proposed three-storied building were provided by his Architectural firm Axis Chartered Architects and approved after several rounds of discussion. The section of the old building that housed the extended library had to be handed to the contractors for demolition after shifting the books, cupboards, and all other furniture and paraphernalia by March 2021. It was possible to keep to the target date because of team work and dedication of all concerned. Temporary shelter for the 26 cupboards was given in a section of the *Dāna Sālāva* and the corridors of the *Sanghāvāsa*.

One hundred years is a long period comparatively. Only few survive for hundred years. On the other hand, knowledge constantly grows and a library could become obsolete if the new knowledge does not gain access to a library, for which funds are required.

During the formative period of the Siri Vajirarama Library the love for books of the late Venerable Pelene Siri Vajirañāṇa Mahānāyaka Thera was the driving force that made it one of the best collections of books that was even used by erudite persons like Sir D.B.Jayatilaka, Professor G.P. Malasekera and Mr. W.A. Silva. Vajirarama library ranked third, next to the Museum Library and the Vidyodaya Pirivena Library, which were the foremost libraries at the time. The library grew in size depending mostly on donations of books received. There were no purposeful acquisitions of books and/or journals with allocated funds to make its clientele better equipped with new knowledge. It took some time to turn the tables but not as fast and convincing as one would like it to be. A change in mindset is a *sine qua non* for the future growth of the Siri Vajirarama Library and to maintain the present momentum in its development.

Learning from the past, certain steps were taken with the blessings and approval of the Most Venerable Mahānāyaka Thera in his capacity as the Viharadhipati. Siri Vajirarama Library was given a separate identity. With the new developments, the library has its own vision and mission statement and its own logo, which are all incorporated in the constitution drawn up for the library for the first time. The new constitution provides the broad framework for future operation of the library within an approved organizational structure. It has provisions to determine policies in respect of acquisition, expansion of the library collection, weeding of books, maintenance and management. Siri Vajirarama Library committee was renamed Siri Vajirarama Library Development Committee and reformulated with Mr. N.K. Ilangakoon, a senior vice president of the Siri Vajirarama Karyasadhaka Samitiya, as President. Other members were Venerable Siri Vajiraramaye Ñāṇasiha (adviser), Venerable Batuwatte Dhammananda (bhikkhu-in-charge of the library), Mr. Tungasiri Gamage (Hon. Secretary and Rapporteur), Mr. Kusum Jayatilaka, Mr. Dhitta de Alwis, Mr. Sandun Abeygunawardena, Professor Priyantha Hewagamage, Mrs. Muditha Madanayaka, Mrs. Upekha Siriwardhana, and Mrs. Rukmani Kumarajiva. Later Mrs. Chandrani Gamage and Mrs. Wayala Katuvandeniya were co-opted to form the Siri Vajirarama Library centenary celebration committee.

Through Mr. Ilangakoon, very close links were developed with the National Library and Documentation Centre (NLDC).

A formal letter dated 21.03.2023 signed by the Most Venerable Tirikunamale Ananda Mahānāyaka Thera was sent to Professor Nanda Dharmaratne, Chairman of the National Library and Documentation Centre, seeking his assistance for the modernization of the Siri Vajirarama Library to cater for the current needs, especially at a time when great interest is noticeable the world over to know more of the sublime teachings of the Buddha. In the letter, assistance was requested specifically to provide training, library automation, and preparing relevant policies for library management.

In response to the letter sent, a status report was received from NLDC after a visit to the library by NLDC staff. Training was given to four persons that comprised of two resident bhikkhus of Siri Vajiraramaya and two nominees of the Vajirarama Dhamma school. The latter had its own mini library to meet the needs of the teaching staff and students. Much of the liaising work with NLDC was done by Dr. Ratnapala Wickremasinghe, a board member of NLDC. A formal meeting was held at Siri Vajiraramaya on 18th September, 2023 chaired by the Most Venerable Tirikunamale Ananda Mahānāyaka Thera and attended by the Chairman of NLDC and his senior staff, at which meeting the future plan of action was finalized. The developments that followed are pictorially presented in the article of Bhikkhu Batuwatte Dhammananda, the bhikkhu-in-charge, published elsewhere in this journal.

Because of the regretful experiences that nullified the good work done previously in 2011, a strategic change was made in implementing the new programme of work. The responsibility of implementing was not given to an outside organization but to the newly trained bhikkhu-in-charge, who was designated the librarian. It augurs well that he has shown much dedication and competence in his new role. Siri Vajirarama Library was fortunate also to get the services of Mr. Preethi Liyange as Consultant Librarian. He has retired from the post of librarian of the Arthur C Clarke Centre in December, 2023 and was available for employment. He served a period of seven months in that capacity commencing April, 2023 with funds donated by the Dharmavijaya Foundation. Mr. Liyanage is currently the President of the Library Association of Sri Lanka and always available on call.

Another significant change was to get the voluntary services of the members of the Sāsana Sāvīkā Samitiya for all non-technical but essential work pertaining to the library, such as, preparing fact sheets in regard to all books of the library, entering books in the Accession Register *ab novo*, and preparation of all books to be kept in the book-shelves by entering barcodes etc. The importance is that the experience so gained is available on call for all future maintenance work of the library. On the last occasion it was done by University of Kelaniya students who were following the library science course, and was an *ad hoc* arrangement. The constitution of the Siri Vajirarama Library provides for the registration and maintenance of a volunteer group.

Concluding Remarks

With the emergence of new technology and increased digitalization the average person has access to a vast amount of information and resources online. For example, whole of the Tipitaka consisting

of 52 volumes in the Buddha Jayanti series is digitalized and could be carried in a single pen drive. Traditional libraries also face competition from other institutions, which have their own websites. This means that the survival of libraries in the future is extremely challenging. Hence, rather than a passive role where well-maintained libraries are kept with wide open doors expecting clientele to come in, there has to be an aggressive active role to bring knowledge to the doorsteps of future users.

The clarion call of the Buddha after gaining enlightenment was *Apārutā tesam amatassa dvārā – ye sotavanto pamuñcantu saddham’*, which means ‘Open are the doors to the Deathless – Let those who have ears repose trust’. The first line of the utterance of the Buddha was taken to be the logo of the restored Siri Vajirarama Library. The Buddha after his clarion call did not wait passively for people to come to him. Instead, He with his disciples took the message of peace and eternal bliss to the people by treading the highways and byways of Northern India. It was very strenuous. Following the footsteps of the Buddha, the challenge before the Siri Vajirarama Library is to make it a resource centre for Buddhist studies and using modern technology to make accessible the message of the Buddha Dhamma to each and every one who wishes to benefit.

Mā nivatta abhikkhama!!!