

# Padhanaghara as Sacred Space: Ascetic Discipline and Meditative Ideals in Early Sri Lankan Monasticism

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## Abstract

This study explores the religious and ascetic dimensions of *Padhanaghara* architecture in ancient Sri Lanka, with particular emphasis on its function in supporting *Dhutanga* practices as prescribed in the *Theravāda* Buddhist tradition. The *Padhanaghara*, a distinctive form of monastic residence characterized by its seclusion, structural austerity, and emphasis on meditative solitude, is examined not merely as a built environment but as an institutional manifestation of monastic discipline. Drawing upon canonical sources such as the *Visuddhimagga*, *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, and *Dīgha Nikāya*, along with archaeological and historical evidence, this research analyzes how such structures enabled and reflected the *vipassanā-dhura* orientation of forest-dwelling monks (*ārañṇavāsī bhikkhus*). Special attention is given to the roles of *Paṃsukūlika*, *Dhammadhara*, and *Dhamma Kathika* monks who resided in these spaces, and to the socio-religious context that sustained such ascetic ideals during the pre-Christian centuries. The study concludes that the *Padhanaghara* was not simply a meditative cell, but a vital religious space aligned with the ascetic ethos of early Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** *Padhanaghara, Dhutanga, Forest-dwelling monks, Ascetic practice, Theravāda Buddhism*

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## Introduction

The architectural innovation of the *Padhanaghara*, or meditation house, represents a significant development in the evolution of monastic space within early Sri Lankan Buddhism. Far from serving as a mere residential facility, the *Padhanaghara* emerged as a specialized religious structure intimately associated with the ascetic and meditative ideals espoused by forest-dwelling monks (*āraññavāsī*) and practitioners of *Dhutanga* discipline. These austere dwellings, often located in remote or forested environments, functioned as focal points for rigorous meditative training aimed at the complete renunciation of worldly attachments.

The present study situates the *Padhanaghara* within the broader doctrinal and disciplinary context of *Dhutanga* practice (*dhutaṅga vidhīma*), a system of thirteen voluntary ascetic observances (*sāmīcikkhandha*) prescribed in the *Visuddhimagga* and other canonical and commentarial sources of Theravāda Buddhism. These observances such as wearing robes made of discarded cloth (*paṃsukūlikanga*) or dwelling in forest hermitages (*āraññakanga*) were not merely outward expressions of simplicity, but embodied forms of spiritual discipline aimed at facilitating insight (*vipassanā*) and liberation (*vimutti*).

This inquiry also explores the social and doctrinal roles of the monks who occupied *Padhanaghara* settings, particularly those designated as *Paṃsukūlika*, *Dhammakathika*, and *Dhammadhara* bhikkhus. These categories reflect not only levels of ascetic commitment but also intellectual and pedagogical functions within the monastic hierarchy. Drawing on textual evidence from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, *Dīgha Nikāya*, and the *Visuddhimagga*, as well as historical commentary from scholars such as Walpola Rahula, this study aims to shed light on the convergence of meditative praxis, monastic discipline, and architectural form in ancient Sri Lanka. By examining the

*Padhanaghara* as both a physical space and a symbol of ascetic commitment, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how early monastic communities negotiated the ideals of renunciation, scriptural preservation, and spiritual cultivation within the evolving landscape of Buddhist institutional life. The role of *Padhanaghara* structures in supporting *Dhutanga* practices and meditative asceticism in ancient Sri Lanka remains inadequately studied.

This research seeks to examine how these architectural forms functioned as specialized religious spaces for forest-dwelling monks who were committed to early Buddhist ascetic ideals. It further aims to investigate the role of *Padhanaghara* structures in facilitating *Dhutanga* practices and supporting the ascetic-meditative lifestyle of forest-dwelling monks in ancient Sri Lanka.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a **qualitative historical research approach**, focusing on both primary and secondary sources. The primary data set includes canonical texts such as the *Pāli Canon*, together with commentarial literature, notably the *Visuddhimagga* and *Samantapāsādikā*. In addition, epigraphic records and archaeological evidence related to *Padhanaghara* sites are systematically examined to provide direct historical and material insights. Secondary sources comprising modern scholarly analyses, interpretative studies, and comparative research are critically reviewed to contextualize the religious, cultural, and architectural significance of these structures. Through the integration of textual, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence, this methodology ensures a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter within its historical framework.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Dhutanga Practice and the Monastic Status of Meditative Practitioners in Padhanaghara**

Dhutanga–Dhūta means wisdom. It is said in the *Visuddhimagga* that it becomes a characteristic of those monks (bhikkhus) (*Visuddhimagga*, I.2000:89). In examining the meditative function of *Padhanaghara* structures, it is equally important to consider the religious identity and ascetic discipline of the monks who resided in them. These monks were not merely residents but practitioners engaged in a rigorous form of ascetic meditation known in Theravāda Buddhism as *Dhutanga Vidhīma* a disciplined path aimed at the renunciation of worldly attachments and the attainment of spiritual liberation. This practice necessitated an appropriate environment, one that was conducive to seclusion, simplicity, and uninterrupted contemplation. The relationship between *Dhutanga*-observing monks (*Dhutanga Dhārī*) and their natural surroundings is elaborated in the *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification), where environmental austerity is emphasized as central to ascetic practice.

According to canonical Theravāda teachings, the Buddha prescribed thirteen *Dhutanga* practices (Visuddhi Margaya, I.2000:65-66,68-69; Samantapasadika, III.2005:132 ). Which are voluntary ascetic disciplines designed to aid monks in their quest for liberation by eliminating craving and fostering detachment. The term *Dhutanga* itself denotes "that which shakes off defilements." Here, attention will be focused solely on the dhutanga practices that were most commonly observed and popular among monks in ancient Sri Lanka. The first of these disciplines is *Pamsukūlikanga* the practice of wearing robes made from discarded cloth. *Pamsu* means soil, referring to cloth retrieved from places such as cremation grounds, garbage heaps, or roadside refuse. These cloths, once cleaned and stitched, were used to make robes by monks committed to the ideal of extreme simplicity (Visuddhi Margaya, I.2000:65-66,68-69). Evidence from ancient Sri Lankan records indicates that as early as the 2nd century BC, there were monks who followed the dhutanga practice of wearing robes made from discarded cloth collected

from rubbish heaps and marketplaces (Gunawardena, 1993:41, note 187). The term *Arannakanga* (derived from *aranya*, meaning “forest” or “wilderness”) refers to the ascetic observance of residing in remote, forested areas for meditative purposes. In Sinhala usage, the term is rendered as *aranya* (*Sanskrit-Sinhala Dictionary*, 74). *Arannakanga* is one of the thirteen *Dhutanga* practices enjoined upon monks who seek spiritual advancement through detachment from society and seclusion in nature.

According to the *Anguttara Nikāya* (II.2006:28) and its commentarial literature (*ibid*, I.300), several categories of cloth are considered unsuitable for monastic robes (*akappa cīvara*) due to their impure, coarse, or defiling nature. These include: *Pāṃsukūlāni* cloth discarded in cemeteries or charnel grounds; *Sānāni* cloth obtained from bathing places or washermen; *Masānāti* mixed or patchwork cloth gathered from various sources; *Chava-dussāni* cloth made from materials such as bark, straw, or similar plant matter; *Tirīṭakāni* garments produced from the bark of the *tirīṭaka* tree; *Ajinaṃ* robes made from animal hide or fur; *Ajinakkhipaṃ* animal hide garments that have been cut or stitched in the middle; *Kusacīvara* robes woven from *kusa* grass; and *Kambiliya* garments woven from human hair, all of which are regarded as repulsive and unfit for proper use by monks. Of these, twelve types are specifically categorized as unfit robes, further divided into two groups: six *kamu*-type robes (composed of defiled or improper materials) and six *duhula*-type robes (made from rough materials that are still formally aligned with disciplinary expectations). These distinctions highlight the early monastic concern for both physical purity and symbolic appropriateness in the use of robe materials.

Walpola Rahula clarifies that *Ārañṇavāsī* monks those who dwell in forest hermitages were not part of a separate sect but emerged as a distinctive ascetic orientation within all three major monastic fraternities of ancient Sri Lanka

(Rahula, 1999: 195–197, 159). At this point, it is important to identify the characteristics of *āraññavāsī* monks, or forest-dwelling ascetics. According to the *Majjhima Nikāya* (I.2008:290), the Buddha himself resided as a forest-dweller in a delightful woodland area located on solitary ground with access to water, specifically in the region of Kammāsa known as Dhammanāma within the Kurū country. This account indicates that both water availability and proximity to a nearby village are essential conditions for forest dwellers. Consequently, a forest hermitage (*ārañña*, or woodland retreat) should not be situated too far from, nor too close to, a rural settlement. The entire village is regarded as a *grāmānta senāsana* a village-edge monastic residence while the *ārañña senāsana*, or forest dwelling, is defined as a monastery located beyond the bounds of that village area (*Samantapāsādikā*, II.2004:82).

The study of the activities of *āraññavāsī* monks largely depends on attention to the definitions of *ārañña* (forest) itself. According to the *Visuddhimagga*, all places that lie beyond the *indrakhīla* a boundary line are considered *ārañña* (*Visuddhimagga*, I.2000:292). The *indrakhīla* is explained in the *Vibhaṅga Aṭṭhakathā* as the boundary at the edge of a village (*Vibhaṅga Aṭṭhakathā*, 2007:303). The term *vanapattaṇ* denotes a tract of land beyond the village boundary that is not owned, settled, or cultivated by humans, essentially a wild and uninhabited area. Meanwhile, *pattāni* means ‘distant’ or ‘remote’ (*Aṅguttara Nikāya*, I.2003:419–420).

The *Visuddhimagga* stipulates that an *āraññakaṅga* (forest dwelling) should be located at least a throw of a stone away from a village-edge monastery (*grāmānta senāsana*) (*Visuddhimagga*, I.2000:79). Furthermore, the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* explains that if there is a monastic residence situated at such a distance from a village monastery, it may properly be classified as a forest

dwelling (*āraññaka senāsana*) (Aṅguttara Nikāya, I.2003:419–420). According to the *Visuddhimagga*, the entire village is regarded as a *grāmānta senāsana* (Visuddhimagga, I.2000:79). The text also clearly defines the boundary marking the beginning of the forest area beyond the village, specifying the initial and final signals to identify a stone’s throw distance (ibid, 79).

However, this measurement defined as a “stone’s throw” distance is problematized by the *Dīgha Nikāya*, which explicitly mentions the distance as “a throw of a spear” (*duṇu sī*), suggesting a much greater length (Dīgha Nikāya, I.2008:190). This discrepancy indicates that Buddhaghosa, the author of the *Visuddhimagga*, had considerably relaxed the distance requirement mentioned in earlier texts.

Rahula thero distinguishes between two general orientations among monks: *Vipassanā-dhura* (those dedicated to meditative practice) and *Gantha-dhura* (those devoted to scriptural study), noting that the ascetic lifestyle attracted monks from both groups. The term *vipassanā dhūra* refers to those who contemplate the impermanent nature of the five aggregates, as explained in the *Dampiya Atuwa Gatapadaya* (1960:161). Notable monks renowned for their practice of *vipassanā dhūra* in ancient Sri Lanka during the pre-Christian era include Situlpavva Tissa Thera, Thalangara Vāsi Dhammadinna Thera, Grāmānta Pabbhāra Vāsi Maha Siva Thera, and Malaya Vāsi Maha Saṅgharakkhita Thera (Aṅguttara Nikāya, I.2003:31–34). According to the *Dampiya Atuwa*, the term *grantha dhūra* or *ganthadhūra* denotes those engaged in the transcription or recording of the Buddha’s teachings (Dampiya Atuwa Gatapadaya, 1960:161). The *Aṅguttara Nikāya* states that healthy monks fulfill both the roles of *vipassanā dhūra* and *grantha dhūra* (Aṅguttara

Nikāya, I.2003:363).

The *Saddharmaratnākaraya* records that at Kekulentiya Vihāra, located near the Mahaweli River in Ruhuna, monks fulfilled both the *grantha dhūra* and *vipassanā dhūra* roles (Saddharmaratnākaraya, 1955:397–398). This vihāra was a village monastery (*grāma vihāra*). Moreover, the great monks Mahānāga and Chūlanāga Theras, who resided at Situlpavva, are also documented to have simultaneously fulfilled the duties of *grantha dhūra* and *vipassanā dhūra* (ibid, 398). The so-called “earthen monks,” or *Paṃsukūlika* monks, often resided in peripheral monastic settings such as suburban retreats, forest monasteries, and mountain hermitages locations compatible with *Dhutanga* practice.

By the end of the first century BC, other identifiable groups known as the *Dhamma Kathikas* and *Dhamma Dharas* appear in the historical records (Vibhaga Attakata, 2007:375; Deghanikaya, I.2008:492). While they were not a distinct sect, they represented two categories within the broader *Paṃsukūlika* community. The term *Dhamma Kathika* translates as “preacher of the Dhamma,” and according to Rahula, this group included monks who functioned as teachers and expounders of Buddhist doctrine (Rahula, 1999: 203). During the pre-Christian era, the Dīghavāpiya was renowned for its prominent monks such as the great Jātaka preacher Thera and the Dīgha preacher Maha Abhaya Thera, who were celebrated dhamma orators (Aṅguttara Nikāya, I.2003:519–520). In the second century BCE, a period marked by the spread of Brahmanical influence and Saṅgha reform, it is recorded that among the Paṃsukūlik and dhamma-preaching monks gathered at the Mandalāma Vihāra in the village of Khalla, the presence of skilled dhamma preachers ensured the continuation of the Sasana (ibid, 71–72).

The term *Dhammadharas* refers to a monastic group distinguished by their expertise in the Tripiṭaka and its teachings. These monks were adept in preserving and transmitting the Dhamma through extensive learning and practice, thus earning the title *Dhammadharas* ‘bearers of the Dhamma.’ They were characterized by both sufficiency and resilience in upholding the Dhamma (Dīgha Nikāya, I.2008:492). One such Tripiṭaka Dhammadhara, the venerable Wattambaka Nigrodha Bhikkhu, is noted for having paid homage during the reign of King Valagamba in the second century BCE to the Sri Maha Bodhi at Anuradhapura, the Ruwanwelisaya stupa, and the Thuparama (ibid, 375).

During the reign of King Śrāddhātissa (137–119 BCE), prominent monks such as Mahānāga Thera of the Kalavalli Mandapa in Ruhuna and Maṅgana Vesi Khujjatisso Thera were recognized as celebrated Dhammadharas, whose influence extended even to India (Aṅguttara Nikāya, I.2003:517–518).

In this context, the *Padhanaghara* can be understood not merely as an architectural form, but as a specialized religious space intimately connected with the practice of *Dhutanga*, particularly supporting monks who pursued meditative austerities in alignment with the original ascetic ideals of the early Buddhist saṅgha.

## **Conclusion**

The *Padhanaghara* represents more than a monastic architectural innovation; it embodies the ascetic ideals and meditative commitments of the early Buddhist *Saṅgha* in Sri Lanka. Closely associated with *Dhutanga* practice, these structures served as secluded and disciplined spaces that nurtured the spiritual aspirations of forest-dwelling monks (*ārañṇavāsī*), especially those

devoted to *vipassanā-dhura* and *paṃsukūlikāṅga* practices. The evidence from canonical texts and historical records demonstrates that such monks were not peripheral figures but integral to the preservation of the *Sāsana*, often playing dual roles as meditative practitioners and transmitters of the *Dhamma*. The architectural form of the *Padhanaghara* its isolation, simplicity, and functionality thus reflected and reinforced the values of renunciation, austerity, and inner cultivation central to Theravāda monasticism. Ultimately, the study affirms that the *Padhanaghara* functioned as both a physical and symbolic space of liberation, aligned with the doctrinal and practical heritage of early Sri Lankan Buddhism.

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