

# An Introduction to the Waharaka Buddhist Movement of Sri Lanka

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**Abstract:** The traditional Theravada interpretation of the Pali Canon has been challenged by a burgeoning Buddhist movement in Sri Lanka that has gained traction in the past decade. Named eponymously after its late originator, the Buddhist monk Waharaka Abhayaratanālaṅkāra ('Waharaka Thera'), the Waharaka movement claims that they have rediscovered the true teachings of the Buddha that has been corrupted for centuries. Finding legitimacy in the apparent awakened state (*arahattā*) of the Waharaka Thera, this interpretation rejects established etymologies of key Pali terms and redefines them using novel methods loosely based on contemporary Sinhala translations. Despite coming under intense criticism by traditional Buddhists, the movement continues to thrive especially among the educated urban middle class. This paper offers a brief introduction to the Waharaka movement.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Theravada, Pali, Anthropology of Religion

Why should the impermanence of a thing that one does not care about cause suffering? This is the enticing argument against the traditional Theravada interpretation of the core Buddhist tenet of *anicca* put forth by a certain Buddhist faction that is rapidly gaining popularity among the urban middle class in Sri Lanka. The 'Waharaka' movement as it is known, offers an alternative to the traditional Theravada exegesis and claims to have rediscovered the original path expounded by the Buddha that had been corrupted for centuries by Brahmanical influence and Sanskritisation of Pali Buddhist texts. Followers of this interpretation attribute its legitimacy to the apparent arahantship of its

originator, the Buddhist monk Waharaka Abhayaratanālaṅkāra (1950–2017), commonly referred to as Waharaka Thera.<sup>1</sup> Many adherents of the Waharaka movement claim to have (or have bestowed upon them by their teachers) various stages of awakening, after following the way of practice advocated by Waharaka Thera. Despite its growing popularity in the Theravada stronghold of Sri Lanka even in the face of strong criticism from traditional Buddhists, the Waharaka movement seems to have received little attention in academic circles. This paper aims to offer a brief introduction to this burgeoning group, to offer a glimpse into an important way Buddhism is undergoing transformation in Sri Lanka.

## Waharaka Thera: From *Sotāpatti* to *Arahattā*

According to the hagiographic account on the official website,<sup>2</sup> Waharaka Thera, born to a rural Sri Lankan Buddhist family in 1950 as Weerasinghe Arachchige Abeyrathne, was a so-called *jāti-sotāpanna*, one who had already attained *sotāpatti*, the first stage of awakening, in a previous life. However, he was not aware of this attainment until he was in his fifties. Abeyrathne grew up to be a rather popular Buddhist ritual specialist, conducting healing ceremonies using spiritual powers he claims to have obtained through meditation, and his speciality was in composing long poems venerating the Buddha, reciting them in *Buddhapūjā* ceremonies that would go on for hours.<sup>3</sup> The Waharaka hagiography relates how these special powers were results of good deeds and specific determinations he had made in previous lives:

Waharaka Thera’s first determination was made during the time of the Dīpaṅkara Buddha, when ‘our’ Gotama Buddha was the ascetic Sumedha.<sup>4</sup> Waharaka Thera, then a farmer, observed the Bodhisatta Sumedha receiving the prophecy of future Buddhahood from the Dīpaṅkara Buddha.

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<sup>1</sup> Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka have a personal name in Pali, prefixed by a village name, either the birthplace or the main residence prior to ordination. It is common in Sri Lanka to refer to monks by their village names alone, especially when they are well-known. Here, Waharaka is the village of the monk, and Abhayaratanālaṅkāra the personal name. *Thera* is an honorific given to fully ordained (*upasampanna*) monks who have completed a decade in robes, but Sri Lankan Buddhists tend to use it indiscriminately for all monks.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.waharaka.com>

<sup>3</sup> The skills Abeyrathne had honed for years in composing poetry, reciting them, and preaching based on them, may have been as important in his later career as a monk as the purported spiritual powers.

<sup>4</sup> This is the first in the list of twenty-seven former Buddhas listed in the *Buddhavaṃsa* of the Pali canon. Dīpaṅkara Buddha is said to have lived one hundred thousand aeons (*kappa*) before Gotama Buddha.

Gladdened by the sight, the farmer made a meritorious determination himself. The Dīpaṃkara Buddha read the mind of the farmer, and made the prophecy that he will be a ‘special person’ in a future *Buddhasāsana*.

The second determination was made during the time of the Siddhattha Buddha,<sup>5</sup> when Waharaka Thera was a wealthy merchant. Having observed the great benefit rendered by the Buddha and his disciples to the world, he desired to be able to be of such benefit as well in the future. Wishing to be one who resurrects the true teachings when a future Buddha’s dispensation would be in decline, he prepared a meal of one hundred thousand pieces of milk-rice cut in the shape of lotuses and scented with lotuses, and offered to the Buddha and the Sangha. He made this offering for seven days, always with his wish in mind. At the end of the seventh day, as he venerated the Siddhattha Buddha at the end of the meal, he received the following blessing: “My child, there will be a day when your wish will be fulfilled. When you strive forth, the mind will be so inclined.”

The account then goes on to say how, during his career as a ritual specialist in this life, Abeyrathne had a vision of four keys appearing in his hands while in meditation.<sup>6</sup> This apparently was a sign that four special powers had been unleashed in him, fulfilling the ancient prophecy: he had gained (1) the ability to see how the world evolves, from the past to the present and to the future, (2) the ability to see the transition of beings from past lives to future lives, (3) the ability to heal beings with medicines discovered in *samādhi*,<sup>7</sup> and (4) the ability to see the karmic causes for illnesses. After eighteen years spent as a ritual specialist conducting healing ceremonies with these powers, in 2004, at the age of fifty-four, Abeyrathne came to be aware of his already-attained *sotāpatti* state. At that point he decided to ordain as a Buddhist monk, and his wife, son and daughter also

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<sup>5</sup> The sixteenth Buddha mentioned in the Buddhavaṃsa.

<sup>6</sup> The logo of the Waharaka organisation (Sinhala: *Waharaka Ariya Cintāśrama Baudha Vihāraya*) shows four keys arranged in a square around the *Dhammacakka*, Wheel of Dhamma, in a visual reference to this incident.

<sup>7</sup> The Waharaka organisation continues to produce medicines under the brand Waharaka *Hela Osu* (Sinhalese medicines) using recipes taught by Waharaka Thera. Their *Uṇa Peniya* (fever syrup), for example, is supposed to be effective against any illness that causes fever, including COVID-19. The Sinhala word for both fever and bamboo is *Uṇa*, and the main ingredient in the *Uṇa Peniya* is the sap of the bamboo tree. Thus, in Sinhala, it is quite literally an *Uṇa Peniya*.

followed suit. They donated their property in the Waharaka village to the *sāsana*, and on those grounds now stand the headquarters of the Waharaka organisation.

## The Waharaka Interpretation

The Waharaka movement holds that Waharaka Thera attained arahantship with the four analytical knowledges (*paṭisambhidhā-ñāṇa*)<sup>8</sup>. This, they say, allowed him to elucidate the long-lost, correct interpretation of the Buddha’s teaching contained in the Pali Canon. The Waharaka interpretation gives new meanings to familiar Pali words, relying heavily on their contemporary Sinhala pronunciation<sup>9</sup> while paying almost no heed to actual etymology, Pali or Sinhala. They refer to this method by a Sinhala term of their own invention: *pada nirukti* (‘etymology of terms’), which Waharaka Thera had access to with his *niruttipaṭisambhidhā-ñāṇa* (analytical knowledge of language), as opposed to conventional linguistics, which they refer to as *bhaṣā nirukti*. Alluding to a commentarial story where the Buddha wills that a listener understands the Dhamma while forgetting the words,<sup>10</sup> in his magnum opus in Sinhala, *Saṅgavunu Bodu Maga Kalaeli Dakī* (‘The Hidden Buddhist Path Sees the Light of Day’), Waharaka Thera instructs the reader to not pay much attention to the terms he uses or their etymologies but to the message he is trying to convey.

Waharaka Thera further claims that the Buddhist traditions have adopted a language that the Buddha explicitly advised not to use, resulting in the confusions he is now correcting. He finds support for this in the Vinaya incident of monks Yameḷu and Tekula, “born into a brahmin family, who were well-spoken and had good voices” (*brāhmaṇajātikā kalyāṇavācā kalyāṇavākkaraṇā*), who requested the teachings of the Buddha to be put into *chandas*. The Buddha denied their request, rebuked them, and established a Vinaya rule against doing so.<sup>11</sup> According to

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<sup>8</sup> The 2017 March edition of *Hela Bodu Piyuma* (Sinhala Buddhist Lotus), the monthly magazine published by the Waharaka organisation, is an extended eulogy for the late Waharaka Thera. Among other things, it mentions how Waharaka Thera declared that there will be no rebirth for himself.

<sup>9</sup> The Sinhala alphabet, as with Pali, has aspirated consonants, but modern Sinhala sounds are rarely aspirated in common use. Thus, layman Sinhala pronunciations of Pali *anicca* and *aniccha* sound identical. The Waharaka approach assumes the interchangeability of such pairs of words with aspirated and non-aspirated consonants, at least when convenient, as discussed later in this paper.

<sup>10</sup> The commentary to Dhammapada verse 178.

<sup>11</sup> Khuddakavatthukkhandhaka at Vin 2.139: *Na, bhikkhave, buddhavacanaṃ chandaso āropetabbam. Yo āropeyya, āpatti dukkaṭassa.* (Monks, you should not give metrical form to the word of the Buddha. If you do, you commit an offense of wrong conduct.)

Waharaka Thera, *chandās* here means the Sanskrit language itself, not ‘metrical form’ as it is usually translated. Thus, he denies any similarity between Pali and Sanskrit terms such as *anicca* and *anitya*, and bases his expositions on Sinhala translations that supposedly have no Sanskrit influence to derive the meaning of the Pali.

Waharaka followers have taken this to heart. In Dhamma discussions, it is virtually impossible to challenge their interpretation by referring to Early Buddhist texts of various traditions, not all of which is in Pali, or resorting to linguistics or text-critical studies. According to them, the corruption righted by their *arahant* teacher predates the time of committing the Buddha’s teaching into writing—at least in instances where the texts seem to contradict the Waharaka interpretation. The only source for this grand conspiracy theory is its declaration by Waharaka Thera, but this circular logic offers a convenient refuge for the Waharaka movement against all scholarly criticism.

## Some Waharaka Definitions

Waharaka Thera’s re-interpretations of Pali Buddhist terms are as numerous as his output has been prolific.<sup>12</sup> While it is impractical to discuss any significant amount of them in a brief paper such as this, two key terms are worth highlighting first: *anicca* and *anatta*. The Pali commentarial interpretation of *anicca*, based on the Theravada Abhidhamma tradition, can seem utterly objective, devoid of any affective quality. It can beg the question “so what?” about things that are not grasped as ‘mine’.<sup>13</sup> Waharaka Thera not only asks this question but also invents a way out by declaring *aniccha* to be the correct term, originating from *na + iccha*, supposedly meaning ‘not as one desires’.<sup>14</sup> He finds support for this explanation in *sabbasaṅkhāresu anicchasaññā* (perception of dispassion for all preparations) in *Girimānandasutta*,<sup>15</sup> even though the same sutta also mentions *aniccasaññā*

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<sup>12</sup> There are hundreds of hours of recorded Dhamma talks, ten books and one hundred volumes of the monthly magazine made available on the Waharaka website and official social media channels. All of these are in Sinhala.

<sup>13</sup> That there is nothing *not* grasped as ‘mine’ by the *puṭhujjana* (unawakened worldling) according to Early Buddhist teachings (MN 1 at MN I 1) and that *aniccatā* is entirely subjective for a self that feels (AN 3.61 at AN I 174), is a discussion beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>14</sup> In conventional Pali, *aniccha* is an adjective that means ‘without desire’, which does not quite support the Waharaka reading, but the Waharaka interpretation has managed to brush aside bigger obstacles than this.

<sup>15</sup> AN 10.60 at AN V 109

(perception of impermanence) as the first of ten perceptions to be developed. Since this new definition conflates *anicca* with not-self, *anatta* has been given a new meaning as well: apparently the correct term there is *anatta*, originating from *na* + *atta*, supposedly meaning ‘meaningless’ and identical to *asāra* (insubstantial).

In many other instances, Waharaka definitions do not appear to have any direct relation to conventional linguistics. The following are a few such notable terms (the conventional Pali meanings are in brackets).

*Sam* (prefix, implying conjunction & completeness): Collections, or things that are created from fundamental ingredients (*dhātu*), which together comprise existence. This is not a mere prefix but a pivotal, independent term in the Waharaka interpretation, and used to define all words that begin with *saṁ/saṅ/saṅ/san/sam*. Some Waharaka examples of *saṁ* definitions are:

*Saṁsāra* (wandering): *saṁ* + *sāra* (substance), collecting assuming things are substantial

*Sammā* (wholesome, right): *saṁ* + *mā* (‘free of’ instead of the usual ‘do not’), free of collections

*Sandiṭṭhika* (visible, actual): *saṁ* + *diṭṭhika* (seeing), able to see collections, awakened

*Sañcetanā* (intentions): *saṁ* + *cetanā*, intentions about collections/collecting

*Samphassa* (contact): *saṁ* + *phassa*, sense contact that causes collections

*Patīcasamuppāda* (Dependent co-arising): The arising of collecting by being bound to desire. The Waharaka etymology for this critical term is: *pati* + *iccha* + *saṁ* + *uppāda*, where *pati* is the Sinhala word meaning straps or belts.

*Jātipi dukkhā* (birth, too, is suffering): Things that are unpleasant are suffering. This tautological statement is derived from Sinhala *jāti* (meaning ‘categories’) + *api*, somehow from Sinhala *apriya* (meaning ‘unpleasant’).

The meditation practice in the Waharaka tradition has many peculiarities too. Firstly, there are certain differences in the way canonical meditation instructions are interpreted. For example, the following are the conventional versus Waharaka translations<sup>16</sup> of a few excerpts from the *Ānāpānāpabba* of the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*,<sup>17</sup> where the instructions for breath meditation are explained:

*Arañṇagato* (having gone to a forest): Having become one who is not in conflict, by realising the Dhamma (based on an invented antonym *araṇa* to the Sinhala word *raṇa*, which means war).

*Rukkhamūlagato* (having gone to a foot of a tree): Having made the mind like a strong tree trunk unshaken by wind, i.e., a mind not disturbed by external objects.

*Suñṇāgāragato* (having gone to an empty hut): Having made the mind like an empty hut, keeping only those things that are conducive to awakening and having expunged things that are not.

*Nisīdati pallāṅkaṃ ābhujitvā* (sits down cross-legged): Having brought one's number lower, i.e., become humble. Based on the Sinhala words *pahala* (low, below) and *aṅka* (number).

*Ujūṃ kāyaṃ paṇidhāya* (with the body straight): Having straightened one's conduct, i.e., abstaining from wrong conduct.

*Parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā* (having established mindfulness): Establishing mindfulness thoroughly on those Dhammas that lead to *Nibbāna*. According to Waharaka, *pari* is said to mean grasping (etymology unclear), and *mukha* is from Sinhala *pramukha* (leading).

*So satova assasati* (Mindful, they breathe in): They restrain themselves with the awareness that one should engage in physical, verbal and mental

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<sup>16</sup> As found in the Waharaka meditation guidebook '*Karmasthāna Thulin Nivana Karā*' (To Nibbāna Through Objects of Meditation) (pp. 5–7).

<sup>17</sup> MN 10 at MN I 56

acts that are conducive to *Nibbāna* (the method of arriving at this meaning is unclear).

*Satova passasati* (Mindful, breathe out): They restrain themselves with the awareness that one should not engage in physical, verbal and mental acts that are not conducive to *Nibbāna* (as above, method unclear).

Secondly, their actual meditation practice is mainly based on the poetry recitations that have their origins in Abeyrathne's ritual specialist days. These poems are called *paṭibhāna kavi*. In Sinhala, *kavi* means poems, and *paṭibhāna* usually means illumination, so one would expect these to be 'illuminating poems.' However, according to the Waharaka *pada nirukti* etymology, *paṭibhāna* has a different meaning: *paṭi* (bonds in Sinhala) + *bhāna* (supposedly means 'destroy', the method of derivation is unclear). Thus, these are poems that help destroy the bonds that keep beings attached to existence. Waharaka followers meditate by reciting these *paṭibhāna kavi*, often in group settings.

Meditation in the Waharaka tradition, however, is for those who have already entered the stream (*sotāpanna*) or have achieved a higher state of awakening. According to Waharaka Thera, *sotāpatti* can only be achieved by—and while—listening to the Dhamma, and no other means. 'Listening' here is taken quite literally: it is to happen in person in front of a teacher who is expounding the Dhamma, supposedly the Waharaka variant. Reading a book, for example, does not count as *paratoghosa* (utterance of another).<sup>18</sup> There are apparently hundreds of awakened disciples in the Waharaka tradition who are now qualified to meditate.

## Conclusion

In a monastic career spanning twelve years, Waharaka Thera has managed to give rise to a dynamic movement which follows his unique approach to the Pali Canon for spiritual guidance, even after his supposed *parinibbāna*. With the invention of the very idea of *pada nirukti*, further strengthened by its copious use, he has

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<sup>18</sup> This is one of the two conditions for the arising of right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*), the other being proper attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) (MN 43 at MN I 294).

offered the Waharaka movement a tool to insulate their interpretation from criticism based on linguistics. By focusing on the affective nature of *anicca*, even if by giving it an unwarranted aspirated twist as ‘*aniccha*,’ the Waharaka interpretation challenges the impersonal ‘impermanence’ of Theravada Abhidhamma, thus appealing to the ‘common sense’ of the educated urban middle class. It remains to be seen how long the Waharaka movement can last beyond its charismatic originator, and how successfully the Sri Lankan Theravada tradition can stave off this new challenge.

### **Abbreviations**

References to Pali texts are to the section and sutta number, and the volume and page number of the editions of the Pali Text Society (PTS).

AN	Aṅguttaranikāya
MN	Majjhimanikāya
Vin	Vinaya Piṭaka