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Buddhist Meditation Monasteries in Ancient Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This study deals with a specific type of Buddhist architecture found in ancient Sri Lanka. Several groups of ruined structures of this type are found to the west of the city of Anuradhapura, along the modern outer circular road, which made archaeologist to call them —Western Monasteries. The most prominent features of these monastic complexes are the building with two raised platforms, and their positioning on a rock surface, the connecting stone gangway between the two platforms, the moat around the flat forms and lack of decorations and a number of other features. Attempts will be made to explain the characteristics of each feature in this study. Function and the meaning of this monastery type and its individual features are still remaining uncertain. Many scholars have attempted to propose different explanations for this, but due to the weakness of logics behind, these proposals are not promising. So, it is worthwhile to see any correlation between the function and the meaning of this monastery type with asceticism and meditation. For this study, archaeological remains which are in ruined state now, were examined. Some sites were already excavated and conserved. There are large amount of monastery sites which have not been excavated, which give the first-hand information for this study. The chronicles and the canonical literature, particularly the Pali Vinaya (discipline), offer some reference to asceticism, meditation and monastery life in early Buddhist cultures. Help of these literary sources is sought to understand the character of these particular buildings.

Keywords: Architectural Features for Meditation Monastery, Buddhist Art and Architecture, Buddhist Meditation Monastery.

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1.0 Introduction

Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka as a result of missionary activities by the great emperor of India, "Asoka", in the third century BC. He sent his son, *Mahinda* and daughter *Sangamiththa* to Sri Lanka where they were capable to convert the ruler and the people of Sri Lanka to Buddhism. As a result, people of Sri Lanka were under the influence of a new religion and experienced a complete package of new civilization including Buddhist art and architecture. Sri Lanka is one of the few countries that the oldest tradition of Buddhist art and architecture are still in existence. Since the introduction of

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Buddhism the Buddhist art and architecture were developed over the centuries by absorbing local skills, techniques and culture resulting a possession of a great archaeological heritage.

Buddhist monastic art and architecture is a major part of this wonderful archaeological heritage. Archeological remains of this category can be found spread all over the country, but with much concentration in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa regions. The Buddhist monastic architecture in Anuradhapura area is dated back from third century BC to 10th Century AD, while Anuradhapura was the capital for Sri Lanka for nearly sixteen centuries up to 10th century AD, and Polonnaruwa monastic architecture is dated back to 11th century AD.

At the inception of early Buddhist monastery its primary function was to serve as a residential area for ascetics while having facilities to perform ritual practices. Archeological remains of the early Buddhist monastic establishment in Sri Lanka clearly indicate that there were two types of monasteries in geographical aspect. The first type was concentrated on hills, mountains or rock outcrops which had natural or excavated caves. The rock caves converted into dwellings by cleaning inside and building walls on the exposed side. Doors and windows were installed on this wall, a drip-ledge was carved on the cave to reroute the rain water flow into the cave. The second type was the park or grove monasteries which were located in a park or grove close to the villages or cities, and consists of structural buildings. According to “Mahavamsa”, a chronicle written in 6th century AD in Pali, which refers to the history of Sri Lanka from 5th century BC to 4th century AD, the first park or grove monastery was established in Anuradhapura, ancient capital of Sri Lanka. Discovery of ruins of this monastery revealed the details and layout of this type (Mahavamsa (G) 15: 8,9). Both types appeared immediately after the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka. Guidance by Mahinda thero and influences by the Buddhism helped early Sri Lankans to materialize the concept of Buddhist monastery through the aspects of location, layout and arrangement.

There was a debate between two groups of monks in first century BC. One group argued that the discipline was more important while the other group argued that the study was more important. As a result they divided into two professional groups (Rahula, 1956, 159-160): those who were involved in Dharma book writing and Chanting Dharma called “Ganthadhura” group, and those who were devoted to meditation called “Vipassanadura” group (Adikaram, 1953, 78). This division may have contributed to major change in Buddhist Monasticism in Sri Lanka. It may have been the cause of gradual decline in the cave settlements and the rise of large structural monasteries, so that by the second century AD the practice of the donation of caves ceased to exist.

Subsequently, a large monastery type called “Vihara” was evolved under the patronage of Royal and public. These vihara type monasteries were involved in rapid development and become massive monastery complexes where thousands of monks were accommodated in those monasteries.

According to the records by Fa-hein, Chinese traveller in fifth century AD, there were three major Viharas called Abayagiri, Mahavihara and Mihinthale closer to Anuradhapura, where 5000,3000 and 2000 monks resided respectively (Fa-hein, 1998,107).

This information as given by Fa-hein has been scientifically tested in terms of the rice-canoe in the alms-hall of Abhayagiri vihara using the volume of a begging bowl of the fifth century and mathematically emptying the vessel that many times to meet the capacity of the rice-canoe. The result were most convincing as the test was repeated at the Mahavihara that had 3000 monks and at Mihinthale where there were 2000 monks. (Silva, 2004, 17-22)

In General Buddhist monastery complex is consisted of three types of building required for monastic purposes, namely ritual buildings, residential buildings and service buildings. Four main monumental edifices namely Stupa, the image house, the Bodhi tree and the chapter house are for the ritual purposes. Closed type buildings with rectangular or square in ground plan are for the residential purposes. Other than that there is a number of supportive structures for the monastic community to perform their monastic duties. They are walking paths, hot water bath house, refectories and

lavatories, ponds, hospitals, and are grouped as service buildings. Analyzing archaeological remaining of Buddhist monasteries indicates that the gradual development of monastic architecture was achieved over centuries. All stone made architectural features of Buddhist monastery such as pillars, beams, plates, tablets, stairways, guard stones, fences, urinals, doorways, etc. were very high degree of perfection in their finish, strength and decoration. The functionality of Buddhist monastery is mainly for ritual purposes and residential purposes.

On the contrary, a unique Buddhist monastery type can be identified in certain parts of Sri Lanka, which were devoted totally to different functionality compared to previously mentioned monasteries. A few major sites of this special type with highly dense monastery buildings were discovered in west of Anuradhapura, at *Veharabandigala*, *Ritigala*, *Arankele* and *Manakanda*. The site at west of Anuradhapura is in architecturally developed stage whereas the *Veharabandigala* Site is in a primitive stage. The layout, architectural features, and decorations of this monastery type are totally different to the conventional Buddhist monastery.

The function and the purpose of this type of monastery and its individual architectural components are not fully understood yet. Scholars have attempted to give proposals and explanations in this regard, but have not been able to prove them beyond doubts.

In this paper, the functionality of this monastery type is proposed as meditation, and hence they are called meditation monasteries.

The meditation monasteries can be classified into two groups. One residential unit surrounded by all service buildings is the first category, and can be identified as single residential unit monastery. Monastery units found in west of Anuradhapura are the example for this category. The second category is consisted of more than one residential units spread over a larger area, and common service buildings located inside the above residential unit complex. *Ritigala*, *Arankale*, and *Veharabandigala* are some examples.

This monastery type belongs to only Anuradhapura period, the available evidence points to a usage of a different type, the *aranna-senasana* in preference to the above which appears to have gone out of vogue after the collapse of Anuradhapura as the capital of Sri Lanka.

2.0 Historical reference on Meditation monasteries

There are several instances that the ancient literary sources and inscriptions have reference to the word “*Padhanaghara*”. This word is constructed combining two Pali words “*Padhana*” and “*ghara*”. “*Padhana*” means to strive for spiritual gain, which is meditation, and “*Ghara*” means house or hall. This implies that the “*Padhanaghara*” refers “a hall specially made for meditation”. The word “*Pathanagala*” which is a synonym derived from the word “*padhanaghara*”, appears in a few inscriptions in Sri Lanka. It is obvious that the words “*Padhanaghara*” and “*Pathanagala*” used in early literary sources and inscriptions described the meditation monastery.

The earliest reference to monastery type subjected to this paper appeared in *Perimiyankulam* rock inscription by King *Vasaba* (66-110 AD). It refers to a grant of revenues to a meditation monastery named “*Sudasana*” (*Paranavithana, 1983, 63-67*). Recently, structural remains similar to the meditation monastery were unearthed closer to the above inscription.

In the chronicle *Mahavamsa* has a reference to a “*Padhanabumi*” (*Mahavamsa (G) 36,105*) built by the king *Meghavannabhaya* (253-266 AD). It says the king laid a tract in a monastery for monks to walk, who are striving to attain *arahatship*, which implies for the monks practicing meditation. Again *Mahavamsa* referred to a structure called “*Mahapadhanaghara*” translated as “Great Meditation monastery”, where the chief monk of *Mahavihara* lived. *Buddhagosha* who wrote another chronicle “*Visuddhimagga*” (He wrote *visuddhimagga* in fifth century AD, with referring to old commentary – literature on the canonical writing of the Buddhists, *The Anguththara, Majjhima and Samyutta nikayas*),

met the chief monk at “Mahapadhanaghara” within Mahavihara in 438 AD. (Culavamsa (G) 37,233- The later parts of the Mahavamsa were collectively named as Culavamsa by W. Geiger who translated whole Mahavamsa in three volumes between 1912 and 1927.)

King Aggabodhi IV (673-689) had a padhanagara built and named after him and donated it to Thera Dathasiva who dwelt in Nagasala. (Culavamsa (G) 46,11)

“Padhanaghara” is again appeared in an inscription by king Parakkramabahu the 1st (1153-1186 AD). This says “..... not to disturb monks in padhanaghara” (Ez. Vol. iii, 277).

3.0 Previous studies

Burrows was the first to excavate several meditation monasteries in the west of Anuradhapura in 1885, now called western monasteries. He published his findings in 1886, and wrongly describes these buildings are palaces of king Dutugamunu (2nd century BC). However, he confirmed that front platform has no pillars whereas the rear platform has pillars indicating residential type. (Burrows 1886, 3-4)

Bell (1890-1912) prepared sketches, site plans, detailed drawings and photographs of meditation monastery sites at Ritigala (ASCAR 1893, 8-10), Manakanda(ASCAR 1894,6), Nuwaragalakanda (ASCAR 1911, 50-52) and Veherabandigala (ASCM II, 22-30)

Ayrton (1912) carried out excavations on most of the monasteries in western monastery group. He was the first to suggest that these monasteries are dwelled by an ascetic group called “Pamsukulika” who was a group of practicing ascetic practice of wearing dusty rags collected from cemeteries. Their final aim is spiritual uplift by meditation (ASCM1 1924, 43).

Hocart (1923) added further comments to Ayrton’s explanations and suggested that two platform building being on a rock outcrop is due to religious influences. He further added that the positioning religious building on an elevated form was to uplift the spiritual qualities, practiced by the ancient Sri Lankans (ASCM1 1924, 56).

Paranavitana, in 1957, was the first Sri Lankan commissioner of the dept. of Archaeology, in his articles highlighted that these monasteries are with two raised platforms, positioned on rock outcrops, connecting stone gangway between platforms, moat around the platforms, lack of decorations etc. He related these buildings to another ascetic group known as Arannika (forest dwellers). Further, he related the term “Padhanaghara” to these double platform buildings and proposed that these buildings were used by this group Arannika. (Paranavitana, 1957, 8-22)

Bandaranayake (1974) agreed the Ayrton’s suggestions that the front platform is without permanent roof and the rear platform is with a roof and used for residential purposes. He proposed to call front platform as “malaka” or terrace and the rear platform as “pasada”, where in Buddhist history.

“The word “malaka” is a place for performance of the acts or order, such as admitting new monks to the samgha. They must have been raised tee of earth held in position by retaining walls of bricks or rubble, with possibly an open pavilion of wooden construction” (Paranvitana, 1959, 257).

He defines *pasada* as a general term applied in Buddhist literature to divine, royal or substantial monastic residences and used here to donate the characteristics of rectangular monastic dwelling. (Bandaranayake, 1974, 102-133).

Wijesuriya (1998) has done a comprehensive data collection and interpretation on this type of monastic architecture, and ascribed these buildings for meditation purposes. He fully agreed with Ayrton regarding the rear platform is residential type. He proposed the function of the front platform is the same as the function of “Angana” in the Buddhist history which explains it is for meditation and

preaching. (Wijesuriya, 1998, 98). However, positioning of the residential structure on a rock outcrop and the positioning lavatories in different places are kept open for further studies. (Wijesuriya, 1998,18)

4.0 Architectural features

A *Vipassanadura* group emerged in first century AD wanted to follow the Lord Buddha's original teaching and practices. They thought meditation was the prime function of their monastic living. A suitable monastic architecture had to be re-designed by the patronage of royal architects. Information on location, layout and architecture illustrated in Buddhist teaching must have been followed by the architects on the instruction of monks. The *Visuddhimagga* written in Pali by Buddagosha in the beginning of the 5th century AD describes 18 undesirable qualities and 05 desirable qualities of a monastery for meditation (*Visuddhimagga*, 1975, 118-204).

The 18 undesirable qualities are:

- Largeness : Too many people of varying taste are in large monasteries
- Newness : Too much new work to keep up
- Dilapidation : Too much work to repair
- Dependence on a road : Closer to a highway , too many people assemble day and night
- Having a pool : Too many people come to use water
- Proximity to a plantation of herbs : People come to collect herbs
- Proximity to a plantation of flowers : People come to collect flowers
- Proximity to a plantation of fruits : People come to collect fruits
- Desirableness : Too many people gather and disturb
- Dependence on a town : In appropriate atmosphere disturbs the monastery
- Dependence on a wood: People come to collect building materials
- Dependence on a field: People come to do agriculture and disturb
- Presence of persons of dissimilar views: Frequent quarrels and disturbances
- Dependence on a port : Too many people come by boats and disturb
- Dependence on a border town: People have no faith in Buddha
- at boundaries of kingdoms: Rulers of kingdoms suspect , neglect and disturb
- Unsuitableness : Many risks of encountering opposite sex and other unsuitable things

The five desirable qualities are:

- Neither too far nor too near to the village and easy to access
- Not crowded and with little sound or noise at night
- Scarcely exposed to gnats, mosquitos, wind, heat and crawling creatures
- Easy access to alms, robes, food, medicine and lodging
- Possibility of living with senior monks, learned monks, observers of Dhamma, Vinaya and codes

The above recommendations in Buddha's teaching must have been the guidance for the monks and the architects so that mental concentration of monks on meditation shall not be disturbed while living in such a monastery.

One noticeable feature is non-existence of structures like Bodhi tree shrine, Stupa and Image house within the monastery complex, contrary to the conventional Buddhist monastery. As these structures are for ritual purposes, these must have been omitted from the layout plan to avoid attention and interference by devotees. Another reason is that the monks who follow the meditation should not require any ritual aids to achieve spiritual uplift.

The buildings inside this monastery, in general, are residential buildings, service buildings, terraces, walkways, and service buildings such as lavatories, urinals, hot and cold water bath house and ponds.

4.1 Double platform structure

The main architectural feature of this type of monastery is a double platform structure in the center of monastery unit. These two platforms are elevated structures, front being mostly rectangular in shape without a roof or a superstructure. Front platform is filled with soil or gravel and surrounded by faced stone slabs. The evidences to consider the front platform is open to the sky are the lack of stone pillars or columns on the front terrace and introduction of gargoyles across the side walls of the terrace to drain off the rain water. The rear platform is also a raised structure, generally on an outcrop of a rock. There is archaeological evidence in some sites that the rear structure, rectangular or square in shape, had a superstructure probably a roof. Stone pillars are apparent inside the rear platform and during excavation in a site by Ayrton. He found a remains of room partitions and doorways (ASCM 1 1924,20-23).



Plate 1: Well preserved meditation monastery in western monastery complex

4.2 Moat

Moat is an outstanding characteristic in most of the monastery buildings in Western Monastery complex in Anuradapura, where as it is not widely used in other sites. A moat is created artificially around the rear terrace by removing stone volumes from the rock outcrop. Sometimes natural rock dips create at least a part of the moat. Hocart (ASCM 1 1924, 58) proposed that the moat is consequence of attempting to build the residential building on raised rock surface. Paranavithana suggests the moat as a defense to the residential building from wild beast and other possible threats (Paranavithana, 1959, 399). Further he considers this as a projection of proto type. This idea is not promising as the moat is not a common characteristic in all sites, and there is a strong boundary wall around the monastery if the protection is required against wild beast, but a moat is still created around the residential unit.



Plate 2: Connecting gangway between rear and front platforms

Bndaranayake rejected the idea that it was for defensive purpose and fully backed the idea of Hocart saying it is “constructional expedient” (Bandaranayake, 1974,132).

4.3 Connecting gangway

The connecting gangway between two platforms is a solid rock slab or a couple of slabs projected as a bridge or placed on a solid construction from the ground. There are two side steps on both sides. This connecting gangway acts as a link between front and rear platforms and a landing space for the side steps which make a separate entrance to the rear platform as well. The connecting gangway is common to almost all meditation monastery sites. This facilitates the access to the rear platform from the front platform and from the side entrance without disturbing the front platform activities in case.



Plate 3: Connecting gangway

4.4 Boundary wall

Most of the monastery buildings have boundary walls which are rectangular in ground plan. Construction defers place to pace from the range of simple rubble wall to highly finished stone slab



Plate 4: Boundary wall and main entrance

construction. There is a main entrance, in line with the double platform building central axis, in front of the front platform. In some cases in Western monasteries, there are two side entrances in line with the side steps of the connecting gangway. These smaller side entrances give access to service buildings where they are located outside the boundary walls. In the most developed stages, main entrance and side entrance have porches.

4.5 Meditative walkways

A leveled walkway attached to the boundary walls can be identified in most monasteries in western monastery sites. This is allocated for the meditative walk. In multiple monastery complexes like Ritigala, Arankale, Maligatanna and Manakanda have separate meditative walkway as a common to all monastery units in the complex. Generally, walkways have two side borders made of stone slabs and space between them is rectangular flat surface (about 4'x64') on which stone slabs are laid. At the two ends of the pathway, there are stone slabs indicating the end of the path. Along the border stone slabs, a series of holes is visible, which must have been used to mount wooden poles to support the roof above the walkway.



Plate 5: Meditative walkway

Buddhist literature (*Culavagga*, 1885,164) gives accounts that Lord Buddha advised monks to have a regular walk as an exercise in a walkway. This was due to some monks fell sick after regular comfortable meals offered by devotees. But walkways in meditation monasteries are for the meditation practices while walking.

4.6 Hot-water bath

Hot water bath is a regular building type in Meditation monasteries. Single unit monasteries have rectangular shape smaller enclosed structure, and circular water containers located inside. Multiple monastery complex has a common bath house which is designed for larger number of monks. Hot water bath house has a fire place, seats for bathers and hot water bath.



Plate 6: Bathhouse in a single monastery at Anuradhapura

4.7 Lavatories

Three different types of lavatories are associated with meditation monasteries. First one is the smaller urinal located near the residential building within the boundary wall. This has two highly decorated slabs: horizontal one has a wide depression with a narrow hole. Either side of the depression, there are two steps carved in relief. This slab is decorated with carved figure of a building in relief.



Plate 10: Bath house in a multiple monastery complex at Veherabandigala



Plate 9: Decorated stone urinal



Plate 8: Urinal outside the monastery premises



Plate 7: Decorations of a Urinal

Vertical slab has ornamental decorations too. Several steps are made to reach the urinal as it is located above the ground level (ASCM 1-1924, 56).

The second type is a closed type structure bigger than the above. Usually it is located just outside the boundary wall. Again, a carved horizontal slab with a depression and a narrow drain which is going outside the building are visible. Just above the depression there is a decorated circular depression probably to rest a water pot.

Third type is located away from the residential unit. It consists of latrine and in some cases an urinal too. It is a closed type building, but unlike above two groups this does not have any decorations.



Plate 11: Latrine outside the monastery

The reasons to decorate urinal stones while all other architectural features remain in low profile in ornamentation are not clear. Many scholars proposed suggestions, but suggestion by Bandaranayake “a symbolic and cynical rejection of conventional architectural forms and motifs” (Bandaranayake, 1974,133) is promising.

4.8 Ponds

In early Buddhist monasteries ponds were built to collect water for consumption, to cool the atmosphere and to collect the flood water. In multiple unit meditation monasteries like Veherabandigala, Ritigala and Manakanda have big ponds for common use of all monastery units in the complex. There are instances that small single monasteries have small ponds build within the boundary walls.



Plate 12: Small pond within the

5.0 Function of the monastery

Scholars propose that one purpose of the front platform is to receive alms (mid-day meal) from devotees and usher them with spiritual blessings. Wijesuriya argues that the front platform is to facilitate meditation or to receive visitors. (Wijesuriya, 1998, 96) There are several references in early Buddhist literature that the monks on meditation should go out for receiving alms.

- “For while he (monk) lives thus, should there arise a doubt or confusion in any detail of the subject, he should in time do his duties in the monastery, go seeking alms on the way and after , after meal, go to the dwelling places of the teacher, and on the very day he should salute the teacher and take his departure, and seeking alms on the way would be able to return to his own abode without fatigue” (Visuddimagga, 118)
- “A monk, who has served the minor impediments and on return from the alms gathering, after his meal (Visuddimagga, 123)
- A minister named *Tissa* offered alms to a monk from Sudassana Padhanaghra (meditation monastery) on the way the monk was searching for alms (Rasavahini, 1983, 9-10)



Plate 13: Large pond in multiple monastery complex at Veherabandigala

But no reference can be found to explain devotees offered alms within the meditation monastery. It is proposed that no outsiders other than monks on meditation were allowed within the boundary wall. Further, the front platform can function as the meeting point for the younger monks with their teacher lived here, to discuss and resolve any confusion, doubts on the Buddha’s teaching and resolve any

confusions and return to their dwelling. Visuddimagga records that monks came to visit their teacher for the above purpose. (*Visuddimangga*, 118).

The front structure may have been used as an assembly point for the monks within the monastery for the fortnightly conclave of the residence monks, to collectively recite the *Patimokkha* or the litany of probable ways of sinning to be recited once every fortnight, and thereby, cleans themselves of any omissions in their spiritual life (*Silva*, 2006, 156). This is acceptable for single monasteries where separate hall (*Uposathagara*) is not available for this purpose.

But major function of this front platform is meditation. Monks residing inside the residential compartments shall come out and probably sit down on the front platform and practice meditation as a group. This group consists of one to 6 or 7 members depending on the number of rooms in the residential compartment in a monastery unit.

In some cases there are one or two ancillary building by the sides of the double platform building. Real purpose of these building are not understood, but it is proposed that when younger monks who came to visit their teacher could stay overnight in these structures without disturbing their teachers or senior monks residing in the main residential building, in the rear platform.

6.0 Conclusion

As previously mentioned, the rear platform has the evidence of a roof, partitions for rooms and doorways. Obviously this structure is the residence for monks. Well preserved monastery unit in the western monastery complex in Anuradhapura has evidence of six small rooms (7'x9') in the residential structure (in the rear platform). It is proposed that the six monks were residing in this monastery unit. But some monastery units have small rear platform which would allow only two or three monks to reside.

The residential building is the key element in these monasteries. It was observed that the development and the growth as well as the characteristic of this structure suit the meditative life. Its architectural form provided a strong spatial organization for those who occupied these buildings, seeking for the liberation of their minds. The other buildings found in these monasteries seem to have been restricted to certain types, which are mentioned in the *Vinaya*. Archaeological evidence has been able to indicate the character of the buildings, which seems to have followed the prescriptions of the *Vinaya* closely.

Evidence described above can show that the type of buildings found in meditation monasteries as a group constitutes a monastery within the definition of the Buddhist teaching. In fact, it is a type monastery which is described in the *Vinaya*, which we therefore designated as classical Buddhist monastery.

The life style of the residence monks who lived in this type of monastery is fully devoted to meditation. As many hours as possible, they shall practice meditation. Visuddimagga explains 40 meditation devices or subjects out of which monks can select and follow during meditation. (*Visuddimangga*, 1975, 129).

They are:

- Ten Devices or spiritual exercises
- Ten kind of foulness
- Ten recollections
- Four divine states
- Four formless states
- One perception
- One defining or specification

The monks in meditation monasteries must have practiced above all or some subjects. For this purposes they need all available space inside the monastery. Presence of visitors within the building

premises disturbs their concentration. Many scholars propose that the front platform is for multi task or all-purpose central hall, and meant to receive mid-day meal too, even occasionally. As explained in the previous chapter, receiving mid-day meals from devotees and preaching them spiritually inside the meditation monastery are rejected as a function of the monastery.

Many scholars agree that main purpose of this monastery type is meditation. In this paper it is suggested that whole purpose of the monastery is meditation.

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