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Recent trends in Sri Lankan Buddhism☆

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Abstract

The South Asian island of Sri Lanka continues to be an important field site for the study of contemporary Buddhism. Numerous scholars in the field of religion base their arguments about the modern rise of Buddhist revivalism and fundamentalism on ethnographic data from Sri Lanka's long tradition of Theravāda Buddhism. This article, based on fieldwork in Colombo during summer 2002, serves to update previous knowledge on Sri Lankan Buddhism by reporting on newer developments in this religious tradition. I argue that many of the recent trends in Sri Lankan Buddhism are linked in part to broader political and economic realities observed in the island today.

1. Introduction

Visitors to the island of Sri Lanka during the summer of 2002 found a number of changes as well as persistent features in the practice and representation of Buddhism. Sri Lankan Buddhists continue to regard themselves as the adherents of 'pure Buddhism', a form of the religion that has existed more or less unchanged from the time that the Buddha and his immediate disciples spread the Dhamma many centuries ago. However, this conservative ethos has continually been tested by events in the same modern period in which a notion of 'pure Buddhism' could first be

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conceived.[1] Most Sri Lankans of all religious and ethnic backgrounds affirm that the country and its citizens are witnessing a period of rapid and dramatic change. As the forces of economic and cultural globalisation pick up speed, particularly in and around Colombo, many people voice a mixture of excitement and anxiety over what lies ahead for Sri Lanka.

It is within this somewhat paradoxical environment of opportunity and anxiety that Sri Lankan Buddhism is now being practised and represented along some new lines. Arguably, the two major developments contributing to the reshaping of Sri Lankan religions and cultures are (1) the political efforts being made to achieve peace between the government and the separatist Tamil rebels after twenty years of civil war and (2) the tremendous economic changes accompanying the globalisation of markets and the attempts of the current United National Front Government to adopt more free market principles and policies. While similar efforts have been made before to achieve these goals, the feeling among many observers in 2002 is that there is more momentum behind these efforts at present and that peace and economic liberalisation may soon become realities. It should be said, however, that both of these goals face numerous challenges that have not yet been overcome. Few people in the Sinhala community feel that they can trust the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a rebel group designated as terrorists by the United States and several other countries, to honour the current cease-fire and to consent to administer a portion of the island within the larger framework of the Sri Lankan state. And there are Tamils who continue to feel threatened by the Sri Lankan military and are unsure whether they will be permitted to earn a living and move freely like other citizens of the state. In addition, the summer of 2002 saw numerous public demonstrations against moves to privatise the insurance board, banks and universities, suggesting that there are many interests which have begun to organise themselves in opposition to economic reforms. The introduction of the ten percent Value Added Tax (VAT) on a variety of goods and services in place of the previous taxes and levies has also caused much concern and confusion among consumers, traders, and manufacturers. Clearly, the most dramatic changes have yet to become permanent features in contemporary Sri Lankan society.

One must take note of the tremendous efforts and impacts associated with these political and economic changes in order to understand some of the causal factors lying behind new developments in Sri Lankan Buddhism. Ever since 1988, when both Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere's *Buddhism Transformed* and George D. Bond's *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka* both appeared, numerous scholars have attempted to account for the changes in contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhism. Several authors have drawn a distinction between 'Protestant Buddhism', a movement derived from the influences of European thought and Protestant missionaries introduced under colonialism, and 'Buddhist Fundamentalism', a revival movement that is frequently castigated for its perceived intolerance of religious and ethnic minorities while trying to institute a state governed by Sinhala Buddhist interests (see, for example, Bond 1988). Scholars often assert that these two movements remain influential in contemporary Sri Lanka and that they can ultimately be traced to the effects of Orientalist and

[1] The notion of a systematic set of doctrines and practices called 'Buddhism' only arose after Orientalist scholars linked the traditions of different Asian cultures together, whereby it then became possible to compare them in an effort to arrive at the allegedly oldest and most orthodox form. For a discussion of how nineteenth-century European scholars posited that the 'Hīnayāna' form of Buddhism, shorn of ritual and based in a simple ethical creed, represented 'original Buddhism', see Lopez 1995, pp. 4–6.

colonial efforts to identify the essence of Buddhism and the essential differences among the various religious and ethnic communities in the island. Although the colonial experience is still routinely recalled in schools and public discourse, one finds other competing factors driving religious change at the beginning of the twenty-first century in Sri Lanka.

Anthony Giddens's work on modernity helps us to recognise some of these other influences behind the most recent developments in Sri Lankan Buddhism. Briefly, according to Giddens, the intensive modernity that characterises our world is marked by radical discontinuities from a way of life where knowledge and social organisation was dispensed by locally transmitted traditions. As a result, traditional social relations have been lifted out, or 'disembedded', from the immediacies of interactions strictly within local contexts and stretched across indefinite spans of space and time, so that persons are freer than ever to disregard local habits and customs and to adopt practices and ideas that have spread across the globe (see Giddens 1990, pp. 20–2). For Giddens, it is the development of modern organisations devoted to controlling capital, information, the environment and the means to violence that are chiefly responsible for reorganising social relations across greater distances in time and space, allowing for more dynamic changes in all aspects of social life. These institutions and processes describe what Giddens means by 'globalisation', namely, the intensification of worldwide social relations linking distant localities in such a way that local events are shaped by other events occurring many miles away (see Giddens 1990, p. 64). It is this concurrent loss of control and predictability that accompanies the globalisation of social relations and cultural forms that allows for dramatic changes in society and that inspires attempts to reinforce the traditional ways of life that are threatened by those very changes.

This contemporary dialectic between innovation and restoration that occurs in religion as well as in other areas of social life is certainly not unique to Sri Lanka. However, it is useful to keep these dynamics in mind as we seek to contextualise some of the recent developments in Sri Lankan Buddhism. It has been noted that the conservative nature of Theravāda orthodoxy in Sri Lanka accommodates changes by claiming that they are only restorations of religious elements that had been forgotten or suppressed over time (see Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, pp. 448, 458). This theme permeates many, but not all, of the contemporary trends and events in Sri Lankan religious life. Nevertheless, as the pace of social and economic change quickens, many Buddhists in Sri Lanka are becoming less concerned with incorporating religious change into a framework of the timeless truth of the Dhamma. After all, as one monk put it to me, religions always change, and it would be silly to expect them not to do so. The Buddhist notion of *anicca*, or 'impermanence', even provides many Sri Lankans with a ready-made concept for rationalising the rapid changes that they are witnessing in religion and society. Thus, while some people continue to resist change and try to reassert traditional cultural forms and patterns of social organisation, others welcome or at least are resigned to innovations in religious and social life.

2. The peace process

The steps beginning in February 2002 to bring a peaceful resolution to the military conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE have profoundly affected the ways that Buddhism is being practised and discussed in contemporary Sri Lanka. For the first time in recent

memory, Sri Lankans throughout the island have enjoyed a prolonged respite from military violence and terrorist attacks. This does not mean that those Buddhist monks who have urged the government to use force to defeat the LTTE have abandoned their calls for a military solution. Nor is it the case that all Sri Lankan Buddhists have stopped advocating for the protection of Buddhism, Sinhala culture, and the nation. However, alongside Buddhist voices in support of 'war for peace', other voices calling for peace as both a means and an end have grown louder.[2] Some religious organisations, business leaders and private institutes have thrown their support over towards efforts to negotiate a peaceful settlement with the LTTE. And while many Sri Lankans feel that the current climate of peace could disappear instantly after a single attack or riot, the lengthy cessation from hostilities has given them a taste of living without fear, and it is the current Government's stated hope that people from all ethnic communities will no longer tolerate violence as a means of gaining power and influence.

Because of the prolonged respite from war, one notes a general mood of both optimism and anxiety throughout the population. The strong efforts by the Norwegian Government to broker a lasting peace agreement, efforts being publicly supported by countries such as the United States and Great Britain, give hope to many that peace will succeed, while causing consternation among others that Western countries are deciding Sri Lanka's future. Currently, there are monastic voices participating on both sides of the debates taking place about the proposed political solution to the country's long-standing civil war. There is certainly no shortage of monks willing to appear on television and speak out either in favour of the peace process or against it. Some of these monks are viewed by the laity and other monastics as merely 'stage props' who throw their support to whichever party is offering them support (see Seneviratne 1999, p. 279). It is important to note, however, that the Sri Lankan Sangha is divided over the issue, with some monks in favour of the latest efforts to achieve peace, other monks warning that the negotiations will merely result in dividing the country, and still other monks refraining from participating in public debates on political matters. Sinhala and English newspapers contain a steady stream of articles and letters to the editor in which monks and laypersons argue in general that Buddhism has a foundation in peace and therefore the current efforts to achieve peace are righteous ones or that Buddhism is an essential part of an embattled Sinhala heritage threatened by the latest moves to appease the LTTE by giving them a large amount of territory in exchange for a lasting peace.[3]

'Buddhism' as concept and an ideal thus continues to occupy a dominant place in discussions over the country's political future. However, it would be an oversimplification to conclude that the peace process has had little affect on other religious communities. Sinhala Catholics are, like the Buddhists, divided over the current attempts to reach a peaceful settlement with the LTTE. Hindus in the north have been portrayed in the media as being receptive to the peace efforts, but some Tamils, most notably the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), have publicly lamented how the cease-fire has allowed the LTTE to extend their power throughout Tamil areas,

[2] For more details on the groups calling for peace through war, see Harris 2001. Abeysekara (2001, pp. 16–19) contributes an important discussion of how monastic voices advocating war to end 'terrorism' arose in the 1980s.

[3] To this end, Tessa Bartholomeusz argues that debates over how to balance demands of non-violence with the protection of the entire island have persisted in the political and religious rhetoric of Sri Lanka since at least the 1890s. See Bartholomeusz 1999, p. 4.

conscripting youths into their army and extorting money from people in the north and east of the country.[4]

However, one community that many observers have generally overlooked is the Sri Lankan Muslim community, a group that makes up a large percentage of the population in the Eastern province. The role of Sri Lanka's Muslims in the peace process has yet to be determined, but all signs point to their participation as critical to any chance of its succeeding. Whereas in the past many politicians and scholars approached the peace process in Sri Lanka as a two-party affair between Sinhalas and Tamils, recent events suggest that the Muslim community will also have an influential role to play. In July 2002 bands of Muslims and Tamils in villages in the Ampara district in the East rioted and attacked properties belonging to each other. A curfew was imposed, and the violence was quelled after a few days. However, these riots precipitated a political crisis that threatened to derail the peace process. Tamil politicians blamed Muslims for inciting the violence, and the Muslims blamed the LTTE for provoking the riots and criticised the Sinhala-dominated government for not protecting Sri Lankan Muslims.

The managed neutrality of Muslims living and working in areas under both Sinhala and LTTE control had previously been a difficult proposition (see de Munck 1998, pp. 112–13). With the conflicting interests between the LTTE, which is seeking to assume control over the North and East as part of an interim administration ratified through peace talks, and the sizable Muslim community in the East, which has long been suspicious and resentful of LTTE power, we might expect to see further disagreements between these parties in the future. It is telling that rumours of a fledgling Muslim 'jihad' in the East are beginning to circulate in newspapers and on television talk shows. The degree of truth to these reports is yet to be established, and it may be that anti-Muslim interests are exaggerating the responses of Sri Lankan Muslims to signs of increasing Tamil influence in the East. Still, the possibility remains that if Muslims find themselves subject to extortion and intimidation by the LTTE, while being generally neglected by the Sinhala-dominated Government, they may turn to transnational Islamic groups for support and advocacy.[5]

The moves to achieve a lasting peace in Sri Lanka are having profound effects on the ways that Sri Lankans depict and discuss religion. As long as debates are taking place on the desirability of peace and the means to achieve it, persons will continue to invoke religious ideals to argue both in support of and against current efforts to solve the long-running conflict between the government and the LTTE. For Buddhism, this means that some monastic and lay followers of the Buddha will continue to cite textual sources to advance arguments in favour of defending the Buddha's 'dispensation' (*sāsana*) by force if necessary, where others make appeals to promoting non-violence as a specifically Buddhist virtue. Beyond the ideological level, however, the peace process is also affecting the practice of religion in Sri Lanka on the ground.

[4] The UTHR(Jaffna) maintains a web site at *www.uthr.org*, wherein they regularly post informative bulletins updating the human rights situation among the Tamil population in and around the Jaffna area.

[5] de Munck (1998, pp. 124–12) has written earlier of recent moves among pan-Islamic groups to establish a new Islamic orthodoxy among Sri Lankan Muslims. Specifically, he notes that the Tablighi Jama'at has increased its activities in Sri Lankan Muslim villages to foster support for a reformed Islamic identity that is worldwide in scope. One might reasonably conclude that a transnational Islamic identity will become even more popular among Muslims in Sri Lanka if they feel deprived of their rights under Tamil or Sinhala rule.

One of the major consequences of the cease-fire that remained in effect through the summer of 2002 was a marked increase in pilgrimage and religious tourism in general. For the first time in about two decades of intermittent warfare and the ongoing threat of state-sponsored or terrorist violence, persons of all religious and ethnic background were enjoying the freedom to travel safely throughout the island. As a result, the numbers of pilgrims and other domestic tourists traveling to distant sites of religious importance increased dramatically. Sinhalas who had not traveled to Jaffna in the north or Trincomalee in the east for over a decade or more began to visit places where it had long been unsafe for them to travel. Likewise Tamils in the North and East have begun to travel into Government-controlled areas to make pilgrimages to the shrines of gods in Kataragama after a long interval. News reports related that nearly half a million Sinhala and Tamil Catholics journeyed to a church in LTTE-controlled territory to celebrate the annual festival at the Madhu shrine near Mannar in the Northwest. According to one source, the thousands of Sinhalas who attended this festival in mid-August did so for the first time since the fighting began in 1983 (see Samath 2002).[6]

The huge numbers of pilgrims and tourists traveling inside the island has rightly been described as an important factor for peace. Observers remark that the more that persons get used to peace and the ability to move freely, the more they will demand it from their elected leaders. The increased travel also carries a substantial economic effect on the communities surrounding religious shrines, where enterprising locals can earn a decent income by operating food stalls, selling various goods and offering services to visitors. Many of the shrines themselves are now attracting more visitors and financial donations than they had for many years. One effect of the noticeable increase in pilgrimage among Buddhists is that persons are expanding their vision of what constitutes Buddhist territory within the island. Pictures of Buddhist sites located in areas controlled by the LTTE, such as the Kadurugoda monastic complex and the Nagadeepa Vihāra in the Jaffna Peninsula, regularly appear in newspapers. Such photos and captions serve to generate interest in religious tourism and evoke the desire to restore Buddhist sites that had long been neglected because of the war. Likewise Buddhist pilgrimage sites in the East, such as Dighavapi, Buddhangala, Seruvavila and Somavati, are welcoming large numbers of devotees for the first time in many years. Travelers are able to visit with monks living in areas that were subject to the threat of warfare earlier and are encouraged to help fund major rebuilding projects taking place at those sites.

If the peace negotiations ultimately succeed, we can expect that these upward trends in religious tourism will continue for years to come in Sri Lanka. The increased traffic in pilgrims and tourists may prove beneficial in some ways to sites that have fallen into disrepair during the long period of fighting. New buildings and large-scale restoration projects have begun to arise as more donations pour in from devotees who were previously unable to visit these sites. In fact, there are large building projects already underway in Dighavapi, the site of an ancient *stūpa*, or relic shrine, said to have historical significance. However, increased tourism also carries risks of commercial exploitation and environmental degradation. Buddhist monks residing at temples that are attracting huge numbers of visitors are being challenged to accommodate many more devotees than they did in past decades. Officials and some pilgrims themselves are already lamenting the

[6] Note, however, that reports coming just weeks after this event have claimed that the LTTE have again shut down the main road used by pilgrims from the south to travel to this Catholic shrine.

leftover polythene bags and other garbage marring religious sites. The relatively pristine surroundings that attract pilgrims to these sites will be even more difficult to maintain in the future. Furthermore, as more Buddhists flock to shrines located in predominantly Tamil and Muslim areas, there will be more chances for conflicts to erupt at and around these pilgrimage areas.[7] As a case in point, Dighavapi's location in the midst of several Muslim villages has generated resentment among those Buddhists who associate the site with what they take to be the island's Buddhist heritage and who are offended at the presence of several slaughterhouses by the road leading up to the temple complex.

3. Buddhism and the media

Other recent developments in Sri Lankan Buddhism are related to newer uses of media coverage and technologies in the promotion of Buddhism on an island-wide scale. Previously, a 'supra-local' Buddhist Sangha came into existence in Sri Lanka through the use of colonial technologies, especially the print media, which served to endow local village temples with a larger, national significance (see Seneviratne 1999, p. 17). This process of disembedding Buddhist practices and institutions from strictly localised contexts and restructuring them across broader distances continues to effect some of the more conspicuous changes in the tradition. Television and newspaper coverage of large-scale devotional offerings, or *pūjā*s, have turned these events into ritual spectacles attracting huge crowds and further media attention. The summer of 2002 in Sri Lanka witnessed a number of ritual spectacles that drew record crowds of devotees due to the increased freedom to travel without fear in the island. The 'Great Jasmine Flower Offering' (*mahā picca mal pūjāva*) held at the Śrī Mahā Bodhi shrine in Anuradhapura was said to have attracted hundreds of thousands of devotees to the sacred bodhi tree, which is considered to be a relic once used by the Buddha. This annual event culminated in the offering of approximately two million jasmine flower buds that were ceremonially carried in procession through the masses of ritual participants up to the foot of the bodhi tree and offered by selected monks and lay sponsors while television cameras transmitted the entire event live over several hours. In the days leading up to the event, newspapers carried stories of the preparations being made for the *pūjā* and informed visitors that they would be required to pay a charge to enter the sacred cities in order to offset the costs of sanitation and clean-up. The publicity surrounding the 'Great Jasmine Flower Offering' turned this ritual offering into an island-wide event, and the media that covered it ensured that Buddhist piety would be prominently showcased to a national audience.

Likewise the media coverage surrounding another religious event transformed it into a ritual spectacle for devotees who traveled to the site in person and for those who remained home and watched the process unfold on television. A large-scale *pūjā* was organised at the *stūpa* located at Somavati, a Buddhist site in the Northeast that had long been neglected by pilgrims because of the

[7] The contributors of the volume edited by Eade and Sallnow (1991) describe within specific locations how conflicts can erupt over the management of pilgrimage sites and the competing interests among those seeking spiritual and material benefits therein. While the concepts and circumstances often differ from Christian shrines found outside of Sri Lanka, it is not difficult to imagine analogous conflicts at shrines experiencing tremendous growth in the number of pilgrims and traders in Sri Lanka.

war. The organisers of this event, which was held to coincide with a Buddhist holiday known as the Poson Full Moon Day, clearly collaborated with the television network covering the *pūjā* in generating interest and publicity. The offerings planned for Somavati were given the name 'New Life' (*punarjīvanaya*) to evoke the enthusiasm surrounding efforts to reclaim Buddhist sites located in areas of LTTE activity. Television spots promoting this offering ran several days before it began, and they succeeded in drawing thousands of pilgrims and a large television audience for the day's events.

The use of media technologies to turn acts of Buddhist piety into large-scale ritual spectacles sometimes accompanies attempts by Sri Lankan leaders to gain political capital while they earn merit by venerating Buddhist shrines. The 'New Life' ceremonies were highlighted by the appearance of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe, who unveiled the rebuilt pinnacle at the top of the Somavati *stūpa* before the camera lenses of various media outlets. Newspapers carried photographs of this event and reported how an air force helicopter poured down white flowers on the devotees while the pinnacle was being unveiled.[8] On the same day Mr Wickremasinghe appeared with a handful of ministers at Mihintale, where he switched on the lights offered as part of the annual 'Light Offering' (*āloka pūjā*) that was sponsored by a major newspaper publisher and the Ceylon Electricity Board. The appearance of the Prime Minister and other members of his political party at such rituals attracted more media attention and permitted Mr Wickremasinghe to issue statements quoting the Buddha in support of the peace process his government has undertaken. Media coverage of such events serves to provide politicians with 'photo-ops', but it also works to sustain the belief popular among Sinhala Buddhists that Sri Lanka is at root a Buddhist nation governed by Buddhist leaders.

Of course, media coverage of Buddhist activities has been a regular feature of Sri Lankan life for many years. What seems to be changing is that some events are now being jointly coordinated with media outlets to promote these celebrations rather than simply report about them. If this trend continues and peace becomes a permanent condition in the island, one may expect to see ritual spectacles become regular occurrences throughout the year in Sri Lanka. The huge crowds of pilgrims drawn to such events could decline if Buddhist sites in the North and East remain largely accessible to Sinhala Buddhists and the novelty of traveling to them during major festivals wears off in the future.

Another factor concerning the media's influence in contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhism is the noticeable expansion of media outlets serving Buddhist interests in the island today. Various monasteries and lay organisations have embraced some of the new opportunities available for promoting Buddhism throughout the island and the world. New websites are springing up containing resources for students and devotees of Buddhism. For example, the Buddhist monastery at Tantirimale, northeast of Anuradhapura, was for years largely cut off from most Sinhala Buddhists due to its location in an area of LTTE activity. Now as devotees begin to return to visit this historic monastery, one can retrieve information about the temple's economic

[8] A photograph of the Prime Minister pulling on a rope presumably connected to a cloth covering the *stūpa*'s pinnacle was juxtaposed with another photograph of a seemingly endless crowd of devotees and appears prominently on the front page of the Sri Lankan *Daily News* paper on Tuesday, 25 June 2002. See the accompanying story, 'Reconciliation [is the] need of the hour', by Rodney Martinesz for additional information about the Prime Minister's appearance and comments regarding the event.

development activities over the World Wide Web.[9] One can safely predict that more monasteries, meditation centres and Buddhist Studies institutes will expand their presence on the internet, and it is conceivable that some enterprising temples will figure out a way to accept donations via the internet from devotees abroad.

Sri Lankan Buddhists are also employing more traditional forms of media to promote their religion in contemporary society. Cassette tapes of monks chanting protective *pirit* (Pāli: *paritta*) verses are widely available for those people who wish to listen to recitals of Pāli texts at home. News reports in the summer of 2002 also related a story on efforts being made to launch a new television channel devoted to Buddhist programming. Whether these efforts will succeed and whether the programmers can find enough material to fill up a weekly television schedule remain open questions. Another notable development is the establishment of some new monthly newspapers devoted to Buddhism. An English-language newspaper called the *Buddhist Times* has appeared monthly since May 2002, and it is making a strong attempt to court readers and subscribers. Its first few issues signal an attempt to publish both academic articles by local scholars and reports detailing how the country's Buddhist heritage is being threatened by foreign evangelists, corrupt politicians and the LTTE.[10] In addition to listing the various Christian evangelist organisations registered to operate in Sri Lanka and offering advice on how to confound their efforts to convert Sri Lankans, the newspaper has recently published a piece describing 'Buddhist Jaffna' and the many historical shrines located in the Northern province. While it is too soon to predict how the *Buddhist Times* will develop as a monthly newspaper, its appearance during the peace negotiations and the highly critical tone it takes against those deemed antithetical to Buddhist interests exemplifies a concerted attempt to call for the reassertion of Buddhism as centre of political and social life in the island.

Another specifically Buddhist newspaper that was launched in 2002 is the Sinhala monthly called *Janavijaya*, or 'The Victory of the People'. This monthly paper is produced at the Siri Vajirañāṇa Dharmāyatana monastery in Maharagama, a suburb south of Colombo. Like the *Buddhist Times*, *Janavijaya* represents a new initiative based within the Colombo area, although it is not the first Buddhist paper to be published in Sinhala. This paper serves as a mouthpiece for the monks affiliated with this particular monastery, also known as 'Bhikṣu Mādhyasthānaya', or 'The Monastic Headquarters', which is connected with the Vajirārāma temple in Colombo. This newspaper contains a wide variety of articles, sermons, editorials, and devotional verses written for the Sinhala lay Buddhist community. The advent of *Janavijaya* is evidence of a continuing commitment on the part of Vajirārāma monks to social service and the propagation of a form of Buddhist ethics appropriate for day-to-day living in a modern urban environment (see Seneviratne 1999, pp. 53–5). The paper often combines instruction on more traditional Buddhist topics like meditation with essays that advance political views. The publication of *Janavijaya* testifies to renewed attempts to make Buddhism more relevant to persons' daily lives, as well as

[9] The website containing information on the development activities and aims led by the monks of the Tantirimale monastery is found at *http://www.yuthukama.org*. This site also contains a request for financial donations to assist the monks in their efforts to support the economic regeneration of the villages in the surrounding areas.

[10] The editorial 'Why a *Buddhist Times*?' appearing in the first issue of the newspaper details the 'multiple threats' eroding Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Among the most evident concerns mentioned here are activities of foreign missionaries to 'buy' people's souls through the cynical distribution of aid and the perceived indifference of the country's leaders in protecting the island's Buddhist shrines and ensuring fair coverage for Buddhism in the nation's media.

to growing fears among many Sinhalas that the religion is becoming marginalised by transnational events and forces that reduce its influence in Sri Lanka. There are compelling motives for socially minded monastic and lay Buddhists to promote a Buddhist 'way of life' in the face of changes ushered in by the globalisation of economic markets and cultural forms.

4. The Sangha in Sri Lanka

Depending on whom one asks, it is possible to get wildly different assessments of the condition of the monkhood in contemporary Sri Lanka. Buddhist monks have their defenders and their critics, who are sometimes one in the same, but they remain pivotal figures for the practice of Theravāda Buddhism in the island. The observations of recent authors on the proclivity of monks to engage in politics and social service (see Seneviratne 1999) while at the same time maintaining a plurality of views regarding the proper roles of a monk (see de Silva 1998, pp. 56–8) remain valid. Many monks are still involved in the politics of the island, but the ways they become involved can differ dramatically. Notable monks regularly appear on television programs discussing a variety of political issues with laypersons. Many leading monks still enjoy great opportunities to present their views to the public and to politicians on subjects ranging from public health campaigns to the devolution of power to ethnic minorities in the north and east of the island. However, Western scholars often overlook the fact that the contemporary Sangha does not speak with one, unified voice, and they are likewise slow to recognise that the degree of monastic influence over social and political affairs in the island waxes and wanes.

Ironically, some of the most powerful monks in the monastic hierarchy have surprisingly little impact on the ways that persons understand and practice Buddhism. The heads of important temples attract media attention, but their administrative duties and the time they spend in participating in political discussions tend to constrain their influence on Buddhist society as a whole. Instead, one finds a handful of younger, charismatic monks whose gifts as preachers have earned them positions of influence and large followings in and around Colombo. The media has once again contributed to this phenomenon, as the monks who begin to attract a supralocal audience are often embraced by newspapers and television, which serve to broaden their respective audiences even further. An early example of this was seen in the figure of Ven. Pānadurē Ariyadhamma, the monk credited with instituting the *bōdhi pūjā* ritual, where Buddhist devotees bathe the roots of a *bōdhi tree* with water, occasionally adding verses that are sung in Sinhala (see Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, pp. 389–90). Ariyadhamma is said to have popularised this innovative form of worship in the late 1970s. His early death in the mid-1980s prevented him from building upon his charisma and influence, but stripped-down versions of offering water to *bōdhi* trees constitutes an exceedingly common act of contemporary Buddhist piety in Sri Lanka. Ariyadhamma remains well known to those old enough to remember him.

Of course, not every monk who earns a wide following has a lasting influence on Buddhist practice. For many monks, fame and attention are short-lived and dissipate if rumours of a scandal arise to tarnish their reputation or if another charismatic monk arrives on the scene. Today's group of charismatic monks seem to appeal to different persons for different reasons. What they all have in common, however, is that their popularity extends far beyond the immediate neighborhoods of their temples, and they are frequently invited to deliver guest

sermons at other temples before large audiences. One such popular preacher is Ven. Kolonnawē Śrī Sumaṅgala. Sumaṅgala is well known throughout the Colombo metropolis and enjoys a reputation as a monk who possesses extraordinary psychic powers. For those attracted to figures who are said to display miraculous powers, Sumaṅgala represents a Buddhist version of someone like Sathya Sai Baba, the 'living god' of India whose popularity in Sri Lanka not coincidentally appears to have begun to ebb.[11] Sumaṅgala is said to have claimed that his body emits Buddha-rays like a Fully Enlightened Buddha, and he has himself introduced some innovations to Buddhist practice such as bathing images of the Buddha in milk. While not everyone approves of what Sumaṅgala says and does, he continues to attract a large following of devotees who are fascinated by his alleged powers and hopeful that his rituals will have a beneficial effect on their lives.

Another charismatic monk and popular preacher is Ven. Gangodawila Sōma, a resident at Bhikṣu Mādhyasthānaya and the abbot of a Sri Lankan temple in Australia. The reasons for Sōma's popularity differ greatly from those that explain Sumaṅgala's. Sōma is an outspoken monk who is highly critical of monastic innovations like Sumaṅgala's, the immoral activities of laypersons, and the alleged failure of Buddhist politicians to protect and promote the religion in modern times. He calls for persons to embrace right views and good conduct, to stop seeking the divine assistance of 'non-Buddhist' deities, and to reject the erroneous 'religious' accretions that have become attached to the Dhamma over time (see Sōma 2001, pp. 17–21). Sōma's public profile has risen dramatically since the late 1990s, as he regularly appears on a television program called 'The Lamp of Knowledge' (*Näṇa Pahaṇa*) and select newspapers have carried his essays and serial features about his life-story. The popularity of this monk was evident during the Vesak and Poson Full Moon Days in the summer of 2002. According to officials at Bhikṣu Mādhyasthānaya, between fifteen and twenty-five thousand devotees attended the temple's religious program on those days, in large part drawn by the sermons preached by Sōma.

More recently, however, Sōma has turned his attention to political issues in the island. He has spoken out on the need for Sinhala Buddhists to preserve their religious and cultural heritage, and he has publicly castigated politicians for neglecting their duties in protecting the country, the Sinhala nation, and the Buddhist religion. It is in the context of ongoing discussions over the devolution of political authority to the Tamil minority community in the North and East to end the twenty-year old civil war that Sōma's public rhetoric has grown more political in nature. In his latest collection of essays, entitled 'The Golden Sword Protecting the Country' (*Dēśaya Surakina Ran Asipata*), Sōma argues forcefully that greedy politicians are to blame for the country's current political crisis, and that a divided rule over Sri Lanka will only break up the country and further weaken Buddhist resistance to false views (*mithyā dṛṣṭi*), wicked conduct (*durācara*) and conversion to Christianity (see Sōma 2002, pp. 66–70). While his harsh criticisms of greedy politicians who act to fulfill their lust for power rather than to promote the welfare of the country resonates widely within Sinhala society, his overt calls to strengthen the position of an embattled and shrinking Sinhala community can alienate some of his sympathisers, who think that he is

[11] Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988, pp. 53–4) have discussed elsewhere the features and conditions that supported the rise of Sai Baba worship among Sinhala Buddhists. While trends in worship are difficult to quantify, I can state that I saw noticeably fewer pictures of Sai Baba in homes, shops and businesses in 2002 than in visits to Sri Lanka between 1995 and 2000. Whether or not there is actually a decline now in Sai Baba devotionalism among Sri Lankan Buddhists requires further examination.

becoming too ideological and extreme.[12] Nevertheless, the various criticisms that this monk makes of the misguided actions and beliefs of Sri Lankan Buddhists, and especially those of so-called 'Buddhist politicians', continues to find a broad and receptive audience among those who lament the direction in which their country is moving.

A newer arrival to the relatively small group of popular urban monks is Ven. Uduwē Dhammāloka. Like Sumaṅgala and Sōma, this monk is gaining a wide following because of his charismatic preaching style. Dhammāloka's sermons are starting to be televised during the Buddhist programming on Full Moon Days. Furthermore, his Dharma sermons attract large crowds of Buddhist devotees. The specific reasons for his popularity in the Colombo area, however, have differed up till now from the reasons that have made Sumaṅgala and Sōma household names. Dhammāloka has the reputation of being an extremely handsome monk, and people joke that this is the reason female Buddhists in particular are attracted to his sermons. His followers speak of him admiringly as having a beautiful face and voice like the Buddha. People also say that his fair skin represents a meritorious complexion (*piṅ pāṭa*), the result of having done merit in previous lifetimes. In time, Dhammāloka may develop his own particular message that earns him a large following in Sri Lanka. But for now, his popularity seems the result more of his person than of the content of his sermons.

Apart from the existence of charismatic monks whose reputations spread by television and word of mouth across urban Sri Lanka and likely into many villages as well, other recent trends in the Sangha are related to the economics of traditional Buddhist practices. It is customary for Sri Lankan Buddhists to hold an alms giving (*dāna*) on important occasions such as the building of a new home, on a child's first birthday, prior to a marriage, and on the death anniversary of a loved one. A household will ordinarily invite a number of monks from the local temple to come to its home, partake in a meal, and chant Pāli *pirit* verses of blessing and protection. This practice continues in Sri Lanka, but there have been some changes lately. First, the rising costs of food from inflation make *dāna*s an increasingly expensive rite. A household can easily spend an entire month's income or more for the several courses of a meal given to monks and then to the guests who have come to share in the merit of the *dāna*. The gifts given to the monks (*pirikara*), often consisting of robes, bowls and food items such as sugar and milk, have also become too expensive for most persons to hold lavish alms givings on regular occasions. As a result, many households are giving *dāna*s less frequently, and inviting fewer monks when they do so. The *varu pirit*, a ceremony where the monks come to chant an hour at a time during three or more sessions, is becoming a popular alternative to the more costly all-night *pirit* ritual.

Another marked change that Sri Lankans claim is of recent origin is found in the sequence of practices associated with *dāna*s given in people's homes. These days monks routinely instruct the lay donors to hold the *dāna* first and then the *pirit* ceremony later that same night. Traditionally, in all-night *pirit* ceremonies, where groups of monks continuously chant protective Pāli verses in a temporary pavilion constructed inside a home, the donors give a mid-day offering of alms to the monks (see de Silva 1981, p. 42). The recent inversion in the order of these events so that the *dāna* comes before the *pirit* chanting has puzzled many laypersons. While some monks explain that it is preferable to hold the *dāna* first because one should invite the incorporeal beings (*bhūta*s) to

[12] I have heard occasional criticism of Sōma from both his critics and supporters in Sri Lanka consistent with Seneviratne's position (Seneviratne 1999, p. 339) that monks are by and large unfit to act as political advisors to the government.

partake in the merit of the alms giving before expelling them from the home through the Pali chants, sceptical laypersons often remark that this change is designed simply to permit the monks to finish the ceremony early. What is most significant about this development perhaps is the suddenness with which it has spread throughout temples in the Colombo area and the fact that it has been instituted solely according to the wishes of the monks themselves. Such a dramatic change in the sequence of the ritual tends to reinforce the cynicism many laypersons have about the virtue of monks. Accordingly, many devotees are becoming more inclined to invite older lay Buddhists, whose virtue is more evident than that of some monks, to come and chant *pirit* in their homes.

Sri Lankans have witnessed another change in the way that members of the Buddhist Sangha administer temple lands. The country's poor economy of recent years appears to have inspired some chief monks to lease out monastic buildings to private individuals offering 'tuition classes' to young students who are busy preparing to take their 'A-Level' national examinations. The limited number of spaces for admission to the national universities makes the competition to score well on A-Levels intense. In the past several years, many educated persons have elected to offer courses in which students pay a fee to attend lectures designed to supplement the free public education they receive. Enterprising monks have thus discovered that it can be highly profitable to earn rent from individuals who lecture to large numbers of young Sri Lankans on subjects such as economics, accounting and business studies in temple properties. While the sight of placards offering such instruction at some temples certainly would seem incongruous to most Sri Lankans, many laypersons are coming to accept this practice as a necessary method of temple fundraising in difficult financial times.

5. Conclusion

Many of these recent trends in Sri Lankan Buddhism illustrate the continuing efforts and abilities of people to adapt their traditions to fit new political and economic circumstances. The permanent cease-fire, which at the time of this writing remains in place, has had conspicuous effects on contemporary Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka. A greater freedom of movement is causing Buddhists to visit and in effect reclaim ancient sites, expanding upon their conceptions of their religious and cultural heritages. The increase in Buddhist pilgrimage is bringing Sinhalas in the South into closer contact with Tamils and Muslims in the North and East, providing more opportunities for direct communication and exchange, which serves mainly to bridge cultural gaps but also can exacerbate divisions if community leaders allow it to happen. Talk of peace also structures much of public discourse about religion in contemporary Sri Lanka. While peace is universally welcomed, there are often dramatic differences of opinion on how to establish a lasting peace in the country and on the ways that Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity traditionally value peace. Whether the island slips back into civil war or succeeds in maintaining a peaceful society for the first time in two decades, questions about violence and peace will likely remain important topics of discussion for Sri Lankan Buddhists for years to come. The ability for members of the island's different religious traditions to supply compelling religious reasons to embrace and maintain peace will be an important component of any permanent solution to the conflict.

We can also expect that the effects of economic and cultural globalisation will continue to have a substantial impact upon the shape of contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhism. The spread of new technologies such as the internet and satellite television are contributing to the sense that Sri Lankan Buddhists have a variety of cultural and even religious options open to them. The practices and ideas defined as 'traditional' in the Theravāda Buddhism of Sri Lanka possess strong significance and a certain attraction from within the conservative ethos of the island's form of Buddhism. However, the justification of such religious traditions—for example, relic veneration, Dhamma sermons alms giving—must be done on the basis of new forms of knowledge that are global in nature. As Giddens points out, one of the consequences of modernity is that all social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of new, incoming information about those same practices, thus constitutively altering their character as 'traditional' (Giddens 1990, p. 38). In short, the more that Buddhists try to reassert their traditions in the modern world, the less 'traditional' these traditions become, since they are necessarily altered to fit new contexts and answer new challenges to their authority.

The disembedding of Buddhist traditions from strictly Sri Lankan locales enables them to be stretched across greater distances and take on distinctively new forms in the process. The mass media transforms Buddhist ceremonies held at particular places into supralocal ritual spectacles witnessed by many thousands of persons. Select monks who possess a gift for public preaching can become religious celebrities who enjoy broad followings that are not limited just to the local community around their respective temples of residence. Evidently, numerous people have undertaken steps to represent and promote Buddhism throughout not only Sri Lanka but also the world. These efforts have not resulted in a homogenised form of the Buddhist religion, in which the same basic understandings and practices are found in a uniform manner across great distances of space. Rather, one finds a multiplicity of representations competing with one another and with 'non-Buddhist' alternatives to win the support of expansive audiences. Collectively, the many trends found within Buddhist social formations in Sri Lanka illustrate the tradition's vibrancy in response to events and factors that are viewed as increasingly beyond the control of Sri Lankan actors themselves.

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