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# The contemporary lay meditation movement and lay gurus in Sri Lanka

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**Abstract**

This article examines the lay meditation movement occurring in contemporary Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The lay meditation movement represents a different perspective from the nationalistic Sinhala Buddhism that has dominated the discourse in the wake of the intractable ethnic conflict in the country. The lay meditation movement reflects the contemporary ferment in Buddhist discourse among the laity. One of the key themes in this movement is the privileging of experience because it gives the lay groups authority to challenge contemporary orthodoxy and it has empowered a new class of spiritual leaders, the lay gurus. Paraphrasing Stirrat, we can say that these lay gurus are leading the lay meditation movement towards 'a series of different interpretations of what it means' to be a Buddhist today. In its overall effect the lay meditation movement not only reconstructs what it means to be a Buddhist today but also points in the direction of establishing new forms of sectarianism that could be considered to be 'new religious movements' under the umbrella of Buddhism.


The colonial and post-colonial resurgence of Buddhism, often called the Buddhist revival, which began in the late nineteenth century in Sri Lanka and several other Buddhist countries and reached its peak in the Buddha Jayanti of 1956, proclaimed the goal of 'restoring Buddhism to its proper place'.[1] If we ask today what the legacy of this revival has been in Sri Lanka, we might conclude that the primary legacy has been the rise of a form of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism that has been

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[1] The Buddha Jayanti celebrated the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's entry into *Parinibbāna* or final *Nīrvāna*. This date acquired significance for the Buddhists because of their belief that the Buddha had predicted that his *Dhamma* would last for five thousand years and would undergo a resurgence at the mid-point in the cycle.

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described as 'fundamentalistic Buddhist nationalism' because of the way that it blends chauvinistic elements with a 'simplified core teaching' of Buddhism (see Swearer 1991, p. 649).[2] This expression of Buddhist discourse seems to dominate the contemporary context in the wake of the intractable ethnic conflict. Nationalist statements by militant monks compete with dharmic pronouncements by politicians in the headlines of the government newspapers. Militant monks and government-sponsored Buddhist festivals seem to represent the dominant direction of Buddhism forty years after the Buddha Jayanti. If we look more closely, however, we get a somewhat different idea of the dynamics at work in Buddhism today. R. L. Stirrat has observed that in the present context dominated by Sinhala Buddhist nationalism there is a state of flux concerning the meaning of Catholic identity in Sri Lanka and that 'a series of different interpretations of what it means to be a Catholic have been and are developing' (Stirrat 1995, p. 157). Somewhat paradoxically, perhaps, a similar state of flux can be found among the Buddhists in Sri Lanka whom one might assume would be united behind the banners of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. C.R. de Silva has shown that the apparent unity of the Sangha in Sri Lanka belies the great variety of views that exist among the monks (see de Silva 1998). Among the laity, however, there is possibly even greater variety and some significant departures from what David Scott has termed 'contemporary Buddhist orthodoxy', a designation he uses to denote the dominant forms of Buddhist discourse and practice today.[3] The lay Buddhist meditation movement represents one important expression of the ferment in Buddhism today behind the facade of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and contemporary orthodoxy. If we wish to understand how Buddhists are constructing 'what it means to be a [Buddhist]' at this point in history, we should pay attention to movements such one as this as much as to the more visible Buddhist nationalism.

The resurgence of meditation among the laity represents a somewhat diverse movement that is united by a number of themes and goals. To be sure, it is not a monolithic movement having central organisation, but it comprises numerous meditation teachers and their followers who express in various ways the themes that differentiate this movement from traditional Buddhism. Some of the themes expressed by the current teachers have continuity with themes from the earlier revival, such as individualism and lay Buddhist asceticism; Orientalist rationalism, which rejects the ritualistic and devotional elements of Buddhism in the same way that Olcott and Dharmapala did a century ago, and universalism based on 'spiritual egalitarianism' that criticises and largely rejects the orthodox Sangha.[4] These themes all had pivotal importance in the colonial and post-colonial resurgence and continue to shape the discourse of the meditation movement. Other more recent themes, however, also influence the contemporary movement and have given a new configuration to the current discourse. These themes, most of which are cross-cultural in nature, include economic and political encompassment, globalisation, increased individualism, new roles for women, healing, and social engagement. The privileging of experience represents another key

[2] Tambiah has also referred to this form of 'fundamentalistic Buddhist nationalism' as a 'Sinhala religio-nationalism' which he describes as follows: 'In this changed context, Buddhism in its militant, populist, fetishised form, as espoused by certain groups, seems to some observers to have been emptied of much of its normative and humane ethic, denuded of its story-telling homilies through the Jataka stories, and to function as a marker of crowd and mob identity, as a rhetorical mobiliser of volatile masses, and as an instigator of spurts of violence.' (Tambiah 1992, p. 92).

[3] Scott explains 'contemporary Buddhist orthodoxy' further as 'that complex of religious power organised through the *sangha*' (Scott 1994, p. 190).

[4] For a further summary of the characteristics of the revival, see Sharf 1992, p. 252; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988; and Bond 1988.

theme of the contemporary movement that is, in part, a continuation from the earlier revival that receives new emphasis today. In this way the contemporary meditation movement in Sri Lanka conforms to the pattern delineated by Sharf, who argues that 'the emphasis on meditative experience in Buddhism may well be of recent provenance, a product of twentieth-century reforms inspired in part by Occidental models' (Sharf 1992, p. 259). The privileging of experience constitutes a significant theme for the recent meditation movement because it shapes the movement in several ways. (1) The emphasis on experience serves to rationalise Buddhism further in order to enable it to withstand the secular critique. Sharf comments that through this emphasis on experience 'Buddhist practice is thus rendered a rational attempt to alter our perception and response to the world, rather than a "magical" attempt to alter the world as such' (Sharf 1992, p. 267). (2) Buddhist experience further empowers the groups within this movement to claim authority that they can use to challenge the orthodoxy of the Sangha. This use of experience agrees with the function that Sharf outlines: 'the Buddhist rhetoric of meditative experience would appear to be both informed by, and wielded in, the interests of legitimation, authority, and power' (Sharf 1992, p. 265). And (3) largely through the privileging of experience, this movement has generated a new form of religious leadership within Sinhala Buddhism, the meditation guru. These new gurus lead the movement in challenging contemporary orthodoxy. Taking all of these factors together, one might argue that in its overall effect, the lay meditation movement not only reinterprets what it means to be a Buddhist today but also points in the direction of establishing new forms of sectarianism which might even be considered to be 'new religious movements' under the umbrella of Buddhism.

## 1. Background of the Contemporary Meditation Movement

The lay meditation movement in Sri Lanka began at the height of the post-independence resurgence of Buddhism, around the time of the Buddha Jayanti. This movement, inspired by the renaissance of meditation in Burma (Myanmar), reflected the two major strands of the Burmese movement.[5] The first strand represented what has been called the 'New Burmese Method' originated by U Narada and developed by his pupil, Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–82). This new method of meditation was enjoying great success in Burma around the time of the Buddha Jayanti as Mahasi Sayadaw presided over the government sponsored meditation centre, Thathana Yeiktha, in Rangoon. Since Burma was hosting the Sixth Buddhist Council at this time (1955), Buddhists in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) were attracted to the developments there, including the new lay meditation movement. Individual Sinhala Buddhists went to Burma to learn these new methods of meditation and upon their return they formed a society, the Lanka Vipassanā Bhāvan Samitiya, and invited the leading Burmese monastic meditators including Mahasi Sayadaw to come to Sri Lanka. When the Burmese teachers arrived, the society held classes and retreats that attracted large numbers of laity. Eventually the society went on to establish a large meditation centre outside of Colombo near Kelaniya. This centre, Kanduboda, became the hub of the *vipassanā* movement in Sri Lanka and the source from which the new gospel of lay

[5] Since I have described the origins of this movement in detail elsewhere and others have also, I give only the outlines of it here in order to explain contemporary developments. See Bond 1988, pp. 131–76; also Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, Ch. 6; and Sharf 1992.

meditation would be carried to all parts of the island. Thousands of people came to Kanduboda to learn how to practise meditation in the Burmese style. These people went back to their homes and told their friends about the value of meditation in their daily life. Meditation became a popular topic among the laity and even many traditional temples began offering 'meditation courses' because of Kanduboda's influence.

To understand what was new about the 'new Burmese method', we can note the two features of the method that Sharf highlights (see Sharf 1992, p. 255f.). First, this method claims that the meditator can bypass the stage of *samādhi* or concentration and proceed directly to the practice of *vipassanā*. This change represented a major reinterpretation of the classical teachings about meditation and was vigorously disputed by orthodox Sri Lankan monks who argued for retaining the essential pattern of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*. The orthodox monks, such as the elders from the Vajirārāma temple in Colombo, regarded the new method as a dangerous shortcut because it omitted the stage of concentration, *samādhi*.

The second key feature of the new method was its promise that meditators could attain quick results. Classical Theravada teachings had stressed the remoteness of Nirvana and the necessity of following the gradual path as delineated in the *Visuddhimagga*, and contemporary orthodoxy adhered to this teaching. Mahasi Sayadaw, however, abandoned this gradual path, promising, 'It will not take long to achieve the object, but possibly in a month, or twenty days, or fifteen days; or on rare occasions even in seven days for a selected few with extraordinary Perfection' (Mahasi Sayadaw 1971, preface). As Sharf notes, 'The "object" of which Mahasi speaks is none other than the experience of *nibbāna'* (Sharf 1992, p. 256). Orthodox monks protested this innovation, but Mahasi's followers defended their interpretation by referring to the closing verses of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, which declare that if people practise mindfulness for as little as seven days they can attain the goal. This promise of higher spiritual attainments and even the supreme spiritual experience, became an important feature of the lay meditaion movement in Sri Lanka as ordinary people began to aspire to attain both supramundane goals and mundane benefits through meditation.

The popularity of meditation among the laity received a further boost in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the second major strand of the Burmese meditation revival began to attract attention in Sri Lanka through the teachings of S.N. Goenka, a disciple of U Ba Khin. U Ba Khin ( 1898–1971) was a powerful Burmese civil servant who taught a practical method of meditation that could be followed by lay people living in the world. U Ba Khin had studied vipassanā in the lineage of the monastic scholar and meditator, Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923). S.N. Goenka is an Indian layman who learned vipassanā meditation while living in Burma around the time of the Buddha Jayanti in the 1950s. He first became interested in meditation because he suffered from severe migraine headaches and had heard that vipassanā might provide some relief. In searching for a cure for his problem, he met U Ba Khin whose approach to meditation differed in significant ways from both the classical methods or the 'new Burmese method'. When Goenka was authorised by U Ba Khin in 1959 to teach this method of vipassanā, he left Burma, went to India and began teaching in Bombay. Some Sri Lankans, such as Brindley Ratwatte the leader of Goenka's centre in Sri Lanka, encountered Goenka in India in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ratwatte and others learned Goenka's method of vipassanā and began teaching it in Sri Lanka. The influence of Goenka in Sri Lanka was greatly magnified in 1980 and 1981 when the guru visited the island in person and led vipassanā retreats. After those initial visits, Goenka returned

several times over the next decade to conduct further retreats, and in 1991 he broke ground for a permanent centre, the Dhammakuta, near Hindagala and Peradeniya.

Goenka's meditation techniques attracted much attention from the laity and the media. Although Goenka, like the earlier meditation reformers, also appealed primarily to the English educated elite, the courses that he offered outside of the Colombo area—in places like Peradeniya—helped to create a wider interest in meditation among the middle-class laity. Not only was Goenka himself a charismatic teacher who inspired devotion in his followers, but he also brought with him an international aura. The local press described him as 'Guru Goenkaji' who 'hails from the land of the Tathagatha' and has conducted meditation courses 'regularly in India, Nepal, North America, Australia, Europe, New Zealand and Japan'.[6] Goenka's presence and his courses reinforced the earlier movement and paved the way for further expansion of the participant base of the lay meditation movement.

Although Goenka does not have a formal society in Sri Lanka, thousands of persons have attended his lectures and courses, and his visits have been extensively covered by the press and the media. During his 1991 visit Goenka helped the Maha Bodhi Society mark its centenary and commemorate the work of Anagarika Dharmapala. He was entretained during that visit by the president of the country, R. Premadasa. The *Daily News* proclaimed that the meeting with Goenka would 'in no small measure bestow merit on the President and help him in many ways to guide the citizens of this country on the right path'.[7] To be sure, this story in a state-sponsored newspaper undoubtedly had the aim of aggrandising the status of President Premadasa who sought to be regarded as the defender of the faith. Nevertheless, the story can also be seen as evidence of the kind of celebrity-like attention that Goenka received in Sri Lanka. I spoke with countless lay Buddhists who had either attended Goenka's courses and lectures or just remembered his tours of Sri Lanka. As Goenka's visit made quite a stir in the country, various reports circulated about him. Not surprisingly, one report claimed that he was an arahant, but another more interesting report related that Goenka possessed some original and heretofore unknown sutras of the Buddha, which supposedly served as the basis for Goenka's meditation teachings.

Given the popularity of Goenka as a teacher and the media coverage surrounding his visits, it seems clear that Goenka was a major influence on the Sri Lankan meditation movement. Many features of Goenka's teachings resonated with the lay meditation movement in Sri Lanka. He both reinforced some themes from the earlier meditation movement that had begun at Kanduboda and gave new emphasis to others. In the discourse of the meditation gurus of Sri Lanka today one hears echoes of many of the themes Goenka stresses in his teaching and his writings, although we cannot always be sure if these represent direct influences, common borrowings from the Burmese meditation movement or simply harmonious convergences. For example, Goenka argues that *vipassanā* has universal applicability; it is not a religion. He says, 'It is not necessary to call oneself a Buddhist in order to practice this teaching' (Hart 1987, p. 17). He goes on to explain that 'Misery (*dukkha*) is a universal malady. The remedy for this malady cannot be sectarian; it must also be universal' (Goenka 1987, p. 3). In another place Goenka responds to a question of whether his teaching is Mahāyāna or Theravāda by saying that 'For me

[6] *Daily News*, 9/14/91.
[7] *Daily News*, 6/26/91.

the Dhamma is neither Mahāyāna nor Hinayāna, nor any sect' ( Hart 1987, p. 31). This theme, of course, goes back to the origins of the Buddhist Revival and echoes the sentiments of the Theosophists. It also represents a part of the creed of most of the meditation teachers that we survey below. In the wake of this claim of the universal relevance of meditation, Goenka also makes another move that we observe in contemporary Sri Lankan teachers as well: he uses Western psychological terminology to describe the process of meditation. He describes the first stage of vipassanā, for example, as 'breaking the barrier between the conscious and unconscious levels of the mind'. (Goenka 1987, p. 28). This kind of dependence upon Western conceptions of the mind lends credence to Sharf's view that these meditation reforms 'were profoundly influenced by religious developments in the West (Sharf 1992, p. 228).

Another feature of Goenka's teaching that is shared by contemporary Sri Lankan teachers is his stress on the viability of the path and the availabilty of *Nibbāna*. In this he agrees with the 'New Burmese method' of Mahasi Sayadaw. Although the earlier movement in Sri Lanka also touched on these points, Goenka seems to see the Ariya Magga and the ultimate goal as much more readily accessible than did the earlier Sri Lankan teachers. The ease of reaching spiritual attainments represents one clear emphasis that can be observed in the more recent Sri Lankan gurus also, and it is possible that it was Goenka who reinforced and popularised this idea. In answer to a question of how a teacher can discern whether someone has reached *nibbāna*, Goenka replied, 'There are various ways to check at the time when someone is actually experiencing *nibbāna*. For this a teacher must be properly trained' ( Hart 1987, p. 129). Goenka also emphasises the secondary benefits of meditation, such as healing. He himself began meditating in order to cure an illness and he has continued to stress this benefit, even though U Ba Khin told him that 'The purpose of the Dhamma is not to cure physical diseases. … The purpose of the Dhamma is to cure all the miseries of life' (Hart 1987, p. 142). Although Goenka admits that healing is a secondary benefit, he proclaims that it is a real benefit nonetheless. He comments, for example, 'my mother had developed a nervous disease which I knew could be cured by the practice of *Vipassanā*' (Hart 1987, p. 144). In the same way, healing remains an important theme in the contemporary meditation movement in Sri Lanka, with many teachers and many lay practitioners believing, like Goenka, that meditation can cure illness. This belief undoubtedly represents one significant reason for the increased lay interest in meditation. Goenka expresses another closely related reason for the popularity of meditation when he says that its purpose is to teach us 'how to live a happy life here and now'. 'We do not follow the path in the hope of accruing benefits to be enjoyed only in the future or attaining after death a heaven that is known here only by conjecture. The benefits must be concrete, vivid, personal, and experienced here and now' (Hart 1987, p. 17). Both healing and other pragmatic results constitute important elements in the teaching of the lay gurus who have come after Goenka.

The idea of control represents a further, important theme in Goenka's teachings that resonates with the contemporary Sri Lankan movement. He says that one continues to suffer in this life 'because one has no control over the mind' and he describes the ordinary mind as 'out of control'. To remedy this he prescribes 'the training of *Samādhi*, learning to control the mind' (Goenka 1987, pp. 11,14). But the practice of control extends beyond *samādhi* to *vipassanā* itself and might be said to be essential to Goenka's method because he wants to teach people how to control their reactions to life and how to act with insight. Describing this goal further he says, 'No matter what arises, whether within the microcosm of one's own mind and body or in the world outside, one is

able to face it. … Knowing that you are your own master, that nothing can overpower you, that you can accept smilingly whatever life has to offer—this is perfect balance of the mind, this is true liberation. This is what can be attained here and now through the practice of *vipassanā* meditation' ( Hart 1987, p. 125). In my interviews with teachers and meditators in Sri Lanka this theme of control was frequently sounded. In a world that often seems overwhelming, the quest for some sort of control over one's own life represents another important reason for turning to meditation. John Kabat-Zinn, a Western *vipassanā* teacher, expresses this belief shared by many meditators in Sri Lanka, that meditation offers 'a way of being, a way of looking at problems, a way of coming to terms with the full catastrophe that can make life more joyful and rich than it otherwise might be, and a sense also of being somehow more in control' (Kabat-Zinn 1990, p. 19).

Other ideas current in the meditation movement also find expression in Goenka's teachings. His view of the value of meditation for effecting change in the world is expressed in his response to this question: 'Isn't it selfish to forget about the world and just to sit and meditate all day?' He responds, 'It would be if this were an end in itself, but it is a means to an end that is not at all selfish: a healthy mind. You come to a meditation course to gain mental health which you will then use in ordinary life for your good and the good of others' (Hart 1987, p. 19).

If these overall themes about the meaning and goals of meditation resonate with the ideas of many lay teachers and followers in the current Sri Lankan meditation movement, the same cannot be said for Goenka's distinctive approach to the practice of *vipassanā*. Goenka's technique, which he learned from his teacher, U Ba Khin, centres on the practice of 'sweeping the mind through the body, giving special attention to the ever-changing play of sensations that can be perceived' (Kornfield 1977, p. 235). The basic method is said to be derived from the *Satipahāna Sutta*, the *Foundation of Mindfulness Discourse,* but U Ba Khin and Goenka give special attention to the mindfulness of sensations. Goenka describes sensations as the 'crossroads where mind and body meet'. He also says that 'the unique element in the Buddha's teaching' was his identification of sensations as 'the crucial point at which craving and aversion begin, and at which they must be eliminated' (Goenka 1987, p. 41). Goenka's basic meditation technique involves trying to cease generating *sankhāras* or mental reactions to perceived sensations because every reaction sows the seeds for future attachment and suffering. 'We must develop awareness of sensations throughout the body and maintain equanimity toward them' (Hart 1987, p. 105). Ceasing to react to present sensations, however, is only half the battle according to Goenka. The other half involves our 'stock of conditioning, the sum total of our past reactions. Even if we add nothing new to the stock, the accumulated old *sankhāras* will still cause us suffering' (Hart 1987, p. 106). According to this interpretation, if we manage to quiet the present *sankhāras* the old *sankhāras* begin to arise as various bodily sensations tempting us to react to them out of either ignorance, desire or aversion. For example, Goenka explains, 'Perhaps a past *sankhāra* of aversion arises, manifesting itself as particles, which one experiences as an unpleasant burning sensation within the body. If one reacts to that sensation with disliking, fresh aversion is created' and the cycle is reinforced (Hart 1987, p. 108). Therefore, the goal of the sweeping technique in meditation is to enable meditators to experience these 'old' *sankhāras* as they arise as bodily sensations and to neutralise them by not reacting to them. The theory is that 'When all conditioned responses have been eradicated one after another, the mind is totally liberated' (Hart 1987, p. 110).

Although the basic idea behind Goenka's teaching—that it is better to achieve a state of equanimity than to have uncontrolled reactions to sensations—may be shared by most of the

current meditation teachers in Sri Lanka, almost none of the current teachers share either his 'sweeping' technique or his theory about how liberation depends on our eradicating our 'stock' of old reactions, *sankhāras*. Bhikkhu Bodhi explains that the basic problem with Goenka's interpretation is that if we have to wait until all the past *sankhāras* are exhausted 'full liberation would be unobtainable'. He writes, 'For during the beginningless past of samsāra we have each accumulated an immeasurable stock of karmic conditionings. If these can only be eradicated by being contemplated with equanimity when they arise as sensations, we would have to contemplate sensations through an endless future and thus infinite time would be required to gain liberation' (Bodhi 1992, p. 3). Most of the meditation teachers seem to have felt the same way about Goenka's technique because no one that I met seemed to be employing it. To be sure, Goenka's technique of meditation is fairly difficult and requires detailed training such as Goenka received from U Ba Khin; without this training few teachers could be expected either to teach or to understand it. It is also the case, however, that this technique diverges from both the classical Theravāda interpretation of mindfulness meditation and from the interpretation of mindfulness introduced to Sri Lanka by Mahasi Sayadaw, and most meditators today follow some version of one of these two approaches and have been reluctant to adopt Goenka's technique. So it would seem that although Goenka received a royal welcome in Sri Lanka during his visits and managed raise the public's awareness about the significance of meditation, he has not made many converts among the current meditation teachers or their followers. Perhaps Goenka's main contribution to the contemporary movement has been to reinforce the image of the lay guru. During his well publicised visits to Sri Lanka, Goenka, with his charismatic personality, presented the example of an authoritative and powerful lay guru. The force of this example was not lost on contemporary lay meditators and teachers, even though they declined to adopt Goenka's technique of meditation.[8]

## 2. The Emergence of Lay Gurus

The emergence of lay meditation teachers who lead meditation societies and are regarded as gurus by their followers represents one significant way that the meditation movement has evolved. These lay gurus have become the driving forces behind the meditation movement, founding centres and societies that both rival and to some extent supersede the original meditation centres, such as Kanduboda. The leadership of these gurus has become a major factor in shaping the way that many lay Buddhists construct what it means to be a Buddhist today.

At the outset of the meditation movement in the 1950s, there were many lay meditators but few lay teachers and almost no lay meditation gurus. For the most part, meditation was taught by monks connected with the major meditation centres. The most important of these monastic teachers of meditation were accorded guru status: the Burmese founders of the Vipassanā movement, such as Mahasi Sayadaw, as well as his Sri Lankan disciple, the head of the Kanduboda meditation centre, Venerable Sumathipala, certainly were accorded this kind of status. Since Sri Lankan culture defers to the South Asian archetype of the guru and people tend to regard all teachers with great respect, other figures in recent times have also been given what

[8] One wonders if the report about Goenka being in possession of previously unknown sutras might have originated because the Sri Lankan meditators could not imagine where he was getting his unorthodox teachings otherwise.

we could call guru status. For example, some traditional lay teachers of *Dhamma* and meditation such as Dr. E.W. Adikaram, who had a small but devoted following in the 1960s and 1970s, could be regarded in this way. What is different today, however, is the number of lay gurus in the meditation movement and their increasing autonomy from contemporary Buddhist orthodoxy. At the present time there can be said to be a kind of 'emerging market' of meditation gurus in Sri Lanka, with many prominent gurus attracting large numbers of followers and new gurus arising both independently and as the disciples of established gurus. These lay meditation gurus are almost all lay persons who have come up through the meditation movement in Sri Lanka. The rise of these new gurus can be explained in part by noting their privileging of experience. These gurus have attained their authority because they and their followers believe that the gurus have experienced the advanced states of the Buddhist marga. In one sense this increase in the number of gurus may be seen as a natural development for the lay meditation movement. Since this movement has proclaimed that lay persons can attain the goal, it was inevitable that as people went on practicing meditation for almost five decades some would come to be regarded as both virtuosos who had mastered the spiritual path and as gurus who could lead others on the path.

The claims to inner experience enable these new gurus establish their own authority as religious leaders and, in many cases, empower them to challenge the authority of the Sangha. As Sharf has said about the vipassanā movement, 'The guarantee of orthodoxy was no longer a rigorous adherence to the monastic code (*vinaya*) but rather a firsthand experience of the fruit of meditation—*nirvāna'* (Sharf 1992, p. 258). As we shall see, most of these new lay gurus declare that they have this firsthand experience and thus have greater wisdom than the sangha and, accordingly, most of them have little regard for orthodox practices such as textual study and the rituals of merit making. Their followers would wholeheartedly agree with the view that a 'living master is preferable to a dead text' (Sharf 1992, p. 235). In Burma (Myanmar) and Thailand, lay Buddhists regularly attribute arahantship to revered monks. Buddhists in contemporary Sri Lanka, however, have seldom regarded living monks in this way, but, surprisingly, now the lay meditators are willing to attribute guru status and, in some cases, arahantship to these lay gurus. This indicates the extent to which these gurus rival the authority of the sangha for their followers. This challenge to the Sangha's authority, however, varies from guru to guru and from group to group and does not amount to a sweeping rejection of traditional Buddhism but is more on the order of a lay reinterpretation of the religion that assigns the central place to meditation and experience.

This emergence of lay gurus can also be related to globalisation and syncretism, for today's lay meditators are much more aware of events in other countries, especially in the neighboring Asian countries. Seeing the prominence of gurus in India and in Thailand, the Sri Lankan meditators have naturally tended to employ those models to understand their own teachers. As we have noted, the popularity and influence of a teacher such as 'Guru Goenka' in Sri Lanka undoubtedly helped to set the stage for other lay gurus to emerge. Many of these Sri Lankan gurus as well as their followers have themselves traveled to India, to Southeast Asia and the West where they witnessed the power of the guru phenomenon in these places.

Not only do these gurus break with 'contemporary Buddhist orthodoxy' but they are also drifting away from the earlier unity of the meditation movement in Sri Lanka. With their tremendous authority they proclaim their own paths. In the following sections, we survey the teachings and meditation societies of some of the leading gurus, all but one of whom are laymen,

to show how they employ some of the themes mentioned above to construct distinctive definitions of the path and the goal. In some cases these definitions push toward what can be called forms of sectarianism within Buddhism. This survey of the meditation movement examines these contemporary Sri Lankan meditation gurus by considering them along a continuum beginning with those teaching more classical meditation practices and goals—teachings more consistent with the Sri Lankan Theravada heritage—and ending with those whose teaching becomes increasingly autonomous or sectarian. This survey of these teachers represents a sampling of the larger meditation movement's direction and diversity.

## 3. The Sri Lankan Gurus

### *3.1. Guru A*[9]

The first of these Sri Lankan gurus to discuss is Guru A, a leading meditation teacher who was relatively 'orthodox'. He identified his own teachers as Venerable Sumathipala, the monk who founded the Burmese-inspired Kanduboda meditation centre near Colombo and Venerable Nyanaponika, the German monk who ran the Buddhist Publication Society from his forest retreat in Kandy. From this lineage it is clear that Guru A had ties to both the Burmese revival of meditation and the Orientalist influences that founded the B.P.S. A further influence came from Mr D.C.P. Ratnakara, another important lay guru whom we shall discuss below.

Guru A's official status as a guru came from his being the head of a major meditation centre near Kandy. But he also led various meditation groups around Kandy and Peradeniya and made frequent trips abroad to teach meditation. He was highly respected by his followers although he did not insist on his guru status and preferred to be regarded as a spiritual friend or Kalyani Mitta. His low key style of teaching was consistent with this image of a spiritual friend. Nevertheless, his followers clearly regarded him as their guru and deferred to him as an authority on the spiritual path.

His authority came from both his knowledge of the texts and his own experience in meditation. He employed the texts himself and also encouraged followers to study them. This dependence on the texts was a sign of his relative orthodoxy since many of the contemporary gurus, as we shall see, claim not to use the texts. While his *dhamma* sermons and meditation teachings reflected this relative orthodoxy, the teachings of this guru also exhibited the influences of a number of foreign teachers, such as Ajahn Chah, some of the Zen teachers and Goenka. Being an avid reader, he absorbed ideas from various sources and also collected ideas during his travels abroad. So although he was fairly orthodox he was also somewhat syncretistic, and his followers did not object to these syncretic elements in his teaching.

He explained that his approach was based on using meditation to help people overcome suffering. Although he gave it a somewhat contemporary twist, this is, of course, a very orthodox

[9] I employ alphabetic pseudonyms for these gurus because some of them might not desire this kind of publicity for their groups, although all of them readily agreed to interviews and were very generous in sharing information about their teachings and their groups. Since this article was written, however, two of these gurus have died, therefore I would like to identify them by name as a tribute to their work. 'Guru A' was Godwin Samararatne and 'Guru E' was D. C. P. Ratnakara. Both were outstanding teachers and wonderful human beings who were revered by their followers and friends and will be greatly missed.

goal recalling the Four Noble Truths and the central teachings of Buddhism. To reach this goal he stressed the meditation techniques of *mettā (*loving kindness) and ā*nāpānasati* (mindfulness of breathing). In his meditation classes he employed a kind of guided meditation and discussion approach, trying to help his followers use these meditations to address their concrete problems. In this way, his meditation sessions often resembled a kind of group therapy session.

Another form of mindfulness (*sati*) meditation that Guru A employed to eliminate suffering involved teaching his pupils to be mindful of thoughts and emotions and their arising. He asked the meditators to recall something that someone did that made them angry. When they remember this incident the anger may arise again. The goal is to try to observe this incident now without reacting to it, to observe the anger with an awareness of *anicca*, impermanence. The meditator should observe it as not 'my' anger, but should see it objectively, as a case of anger arising from a certain cause. If people can deal with remembered anger, then they can also deal with anger in the present, the key being to see what caused the anger. When you see that the cause of your anger is an expectation that you have had, then you see that the cause of suffering is with you and not with the other person. The point, he said, is not whether we react emotionally, but how quickly we recover. We are bound to have emotions, but we should not allow them to control us. This focus on the meditator's reactions recalls the teachings of Goenka, although Guru A did not adopt either Goenka's complete theory about the centrality of reactions (*sankhāras*) or his technique for getting rid of past reactions. Guru A did, however, give a more or less popular explanation of how reactions affect our karma if we are not mindful of them. He represents a good example of the kind of influence that Goenka has had on the current generation of meditation teachers. To document his point about reactions, Guru A used the same sutta illustration that Goenka employs in the book, *The Art of Living*. This sutta contains a teaching from the Buddha which says that anger—or other emotional reactions—in the mind can be of three kinds: like letters written on the surface of water, like letters written on sand or like letters written in stone. The goal advocated by both Goenka and Guru A, of course, is that our reactions to events should be like 'letters written on water'.[10]

Guru A also instructed his pupils to observe current thoughts, feelings and emotions to see how they develop and create our suffering. This he regarded as the core of the Four Noble Truths. He explained that we cause our own suffering because we have desires and expectations for the way things should be, and that when they do not work out in the way we want, we suffer. But if we could just accept the present without imposing desires, then we could avoid much of the present suffering. This approach does not amount to merely accepting suffering, but it removes suffering because suffering is a construct that we impose on top of the real events that are happening.

Guru A's followers report that these teachings were very helpful. He did not emphasise the higher attainments (*ariya puggala*), but had a very practical approach that taught people to use meditation to relieve their problems and suffering. In all of this, he was, as we have said, relatively orthodox. He could not be described as anti-Sangha, although he clearly seemed to have more respect for the forest-dwelling meditating monks and had little interest in the rituals commonly practised by contemporary Buddhism.

[10] Goenka cites as the source of this quote, the 'Lekha Sutta', *Anguttara Nikaya* III.xiii, 130 (Hart 1987, p. 38; Goenka 1987, p. 28).

Despite his relative orthodoxy, Guru A had some very innovative elements to his work. He incorporated yoga in his teaching of meditation, something not done by many teachers in Sri Lanka today. He probably was influenced in this by Guru Ratnakara, who has included yoga in his practice for many years. Guru A also employed meditation as a means of healing illness, which he saw as a more explicit form of suffering. This also reflects a possible influence from Goenka's teachings. Guru A worked with doctors and medical students to help them understand the intention of meditation and he also went directly to the cancer wards of the hospitals to teach the patients. He instructed these patients to radiate thoughts of *mettā*, loving kindness, onto their body at the place of illness. Another emphasis in this work involved helping the patients deal with feelings about themselves because he found that they usually 'did not like themselves' and had a sense of self pity. In such cases, the meditation on loving kindness could be very useful.

Another method of healing involved using *Mettā* to try to relieve pain. He taught patients to simply be with the pain and see how they could view it. He instructed them to try to observe the pain without desiring the pain to go away because the pain becomes suffering when there is resistance and dislike concerning it. But if a meditator can 'be with the pain' for a few minutes then it may be possible to reduce or eliminate the feeling of suffering. He recalled a woman who used this technique saying, 'the pain is there but I am not there'. He explained that 'She had a kind of *anattā*, or not-self, experience by focusing on the pain'. But he admitted that it is not easy for many patients to do this because the emotion that really bothers these patients is self pity. 'Why me?' He saw this as related to self hatred and wanted to help them deal with their psychological 'wounds' as a step toward healing their bodies.

Some of the meditation steps that he set out for the patients to follow in doing *Mettā* meditation on pain are outlined here:

1. Pain is not mine. It is of the body and does not belong to me.
2. Accept it in a friendly way, without reproach. do not escape from it or run away from it. Be with it with confidence. Have control and power over it.
3. If the mind is tranquil, the body will be also, and vice versa.
4. Pain should not induce *dukkha*, suffering.
5. Take the pain as a point of meditation. Reflect on it with awareness, observation, understanding.
6. Dealing with emotions with equanimity is essential. To get rid of repressed emotions, one should observe and understand the causes for them.

### *3.2. Summary*

Guru A's approach to meditation represents an interesting combination of orthodox and post-modern themes. He did not stress the attainments or promise instant enlightenment, rather his approach was pragmatic in helping people cope with suffering. He taught that meditation has practical benefits that people can access. This theme seems to reflect the 'new Burmese method' which would not be surprising since Guru A was a pupil at Kanduboda. He explained that this is what liberation or enlightenment really means in Buddhism: the overcoming of *dukkha*, suffering, in practical ways. In this way, he regarded his approach as very textual, based on his comprehensive understanding of the Buddhist scriptures. He also read widely in the literature of

contemporary Buddhism, and reflected global influences from sources such as Ajahn Cha, Goenka and other Burmese meditation teachers. Somewhat surprisingly, he expressed little interest in socially engaged Buddhism which he viewed as largely a Western import. In defense of this view, he pointed out that none of the (Sri Lankan) forest dwelling monks have ever taught that meditation could coexist with social activism. Although in some ways Guru A was relatively orthodox, he clearly reflected the themes of the meditation revival including the privileging of experience. Guru A dressed and behaved as one who was on the path; his followers respected him both for his learning and for the aura of experience that surrounded him. Guru A was, until his recent, untimely death, a teacher who was greatly revered by his followers and friends.

### *3.3. Guru B*

Guru B, like Guru A, also teaches meditation in a way that is relatively textual and orthodox: focusing on *Mettā* and *Satipaṭṭhāna.* Of course, to call this orthodox is somewhat ironic since the very idea of either lay teachers or lay practitioners of meditation runs counter to classical Theravadan orthodoxy. But within the parameters of the Buddhist revival and contemporary Buddhism, he could be considered relatively orthodox. Guru B differs, however, from Guru A in several other key respects and represents some of the other forces shaping contemporary Buddhism. Guru B is a successful businessman in Colombo who now devotes most of his time to teaching the *dhamma* and meditation. Many of his followers also come from the business community.

Born into a prominent family in Colombo, Guru B attended the best schools in the country and excelled as an athlete. His teachers were his father, who wrote books on Buddhism, and a forest dwelling monk, Venerable Ñānarāma. Guru B also has ties to the early meditation centres such as Kanduboda.

Today he teaches meditation and *dhamma* to the business people and the middle class in Colombo and elsewhere in the island. Although he does not have a formal society or organisation he has a large number of followers who attend his lectures and courses. He also serves as guru to small groups of businessmen who practise meditation under his tutelage. For several years he has had a television program on *dhamma* and meditation and recently he established an internet web site on these topics. He wears the white national dress—white sarong and long white shirt—which represents the traditional Sri Lankan attire for a Buddhist layman but which today is worn mostly by either politicians or ardent lay Buddhists. This guru has a very authoritative presence and commands considerable veneration from his followers who regard him as a particularly powerful guru. Some followers claim that he has a distinctive cosmic and karmic status—possibly as an arahant or a future Buddha. They also believe he has miraculous powers, such as the ability to spontaneously produce relics of the Buddha which he then presents to his followers. For these reasons, when lecturing in Colombo or other areas of the country he attracts large crowds.

In my interviews with him, Guru B downplayed these miraculous elements and, instead, explained how he adapts the *dhamma* to business. He does this by teaching something he calls the '*dhamma* method of employment' which he described as a method of demonstrating compassion for one's employees. He has lectured on this topic to business organisations in Colombo and has

used the method in his own business. He says that compassion and generosity are two key Buddhist virtues that apply to business. The gist of the '*dhamma* method of employment' is that the employer must show the employees that their employer has their welfare at heart.

Another way that he tries to assist people is by teaching the *Dasa Rāja Dhamma*, or the Ten Royal Rules, which he sees as important for laymen because they teach values such as austerity that apply to life in the world. These ten teachings were given in the Buddhist scriptures as the guidelines for rulers, but he sees them as important today for business people. In addition to providing these ethical guidelines, Guru B shows the business leaders how meditation can not only help their businesses but also help them in their personal lives. He finds that there is great interest in meditation among business leaders and others because there is now more competition and stress in the present economic context. He has given lectures on meditation and management from a dhammic perspective for groups such as the Rotary Club and government agencies. He uses *Dasa Rāja Dhamma* as his text for all these groups. He says that this *dhamma* is what is missing today in business and government and he is very critical of the current government and business leaders who act in ways that run counter to it.

I asked him whether there is an inherent conflict between Buddhist ideas and the ethos of the business world. Guru B said that there is a potential for conflict since business is about power acquisition and Buddhism is about power relinquishment. But even in acquisition one can practise relinquishment. In his own business he does not try to heap gain upon gain but rather cultivates non-attachment by practicing a substantial amount of dāna or generosity. He also finds that business gives him an opportunity to test the fruits of his meditation practice: can he remain calm and tranquil when business does not go well? Ultimately, he finds that meditation helps his business; if he can remain calm, then he can help others to do so. Business also contributes to the attainment of wisdom because in business one sees impermanence and uncertainty very clearly. Recognising that things change and are beyond one's control can produce a sense of detachment that is a great asset. He says that his greatest experience in business has been to see how powerful his detachment has become.

Being detached from his business, Guru B now devotes most of his time to teaching the *dhamma* and meditation. He feels that people are more interested in meditation today because they are seeking relief from the various stresses of life. In this sense, people today seek what Buddhists have always sought, a solution to *dukkha*, suffering. To meet this need, Guru B conducts meditation retreats all over the island. Usually holding them in the preaching halls of Buddhist temples, he attracts large crowds. Despite his following among the business community, more women than men come for his formal meditation courses, as they do for the meditation courses of most of the other gurus. He explains this fact by pointing out that men generally drink and eat to excess but women do not. Women experience *dukkha* because of these habits of the men. Concerned that alcoholism is a major problem in Sri Lanka and the root of much of the decadence in the country. he explains to his audiences that Sri Lanka has the highest per capita consumption of alcohol of any country and notes that alcohol destroys any mindfulness that a person might have.

Although one of his own teachers was a monk, Guru B breaks with the contemporary orthodoxy of the *sangha*. He has no use for the ordinary temple rituals and *pūjas* even though he holds many of his meditation courses in temple buildings. He says that he feels pity for people who trust in these rituals rather than trying to find liberation through meditation.

One other significant feature of Guru B's career should be noted here: in recent years he has expressed an interest in politics by drafting and promoting a proposal for a new constitution for the nation. The essence of his proposal for a new constitution is that Sri Lanka should have a new government that is not based on party politics but is based on the *dhamma*. Guru B feels that the competition between the political parties in Sri Lanka has been the ruin of the country. To replace the current system, he proposes a new democratic government that employs the *dhamma* as its standpoint. Specifically, he would base it on the Buddha's teaching of the '*Dasa Rāja Dhamma*' or Ten Royal Rules, and the 'Seven Dhammas To Prevent Decadence Of Society'.[11] Guru B explained that he had this idea about three years ago but now people have encouraged him to come forward with the proposal.

Based on dhammic principles, his constitution proposes to attain three primary objectives: the welfare of the people; the unity of the people; and unity for the country. These objectives are to be achieved by following what he calls four principles, although some of these so-called principles sound more like further objectives. The four principles state that government '(1) should safeguard the democratic rights of the people, (2) should not be a burden to the people, (3) should ensure that the rulers gather in harmony, conduct affairs in harmony and disperse in harmony, and (4) should ensure that suitable and worthy citizens emerge as the nation's rulers'. These principles extend the ideas of *Dasa Rāja Dhamma*; although it is important to note that the proposed constitution does not mention Buddhist teachings too prominently because Guru B seeks to respect the ethnic and religious diversity in the country as much as possible. The proposal simply sets out these four principles, which he sees as democratic and neutral, despite some clear connections to Buddhism.[12] However, Guru B's constitution does contain an item explicitly proclaiming that 'the State is obliged to safeguard and foster the Buddha *sāsana*' while also protecting the 'existing places of worship of other religions'. The inclusion of this statement echoes previous Sri Lankan constitutions and the concerns of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, and demonstrates that this new constitution would not be a complete break with the past.

This new government would be a democracy with independent executive, legislative and judicial branches. One significant difference from the present system in Sri Lanka would be that the legislators would serve without pay in honorary but elected positions. He hopes that this feature would help to eliminate both corruption and competition, which he regards as two of the most destructive aspects of the democratic system. The Guru explained that the people are ready for such a system because 'they are fed up with the exploitation by the present system'.

### *3.4. Summary*

Guru B is of interest because he exemplifies several of the themes shaping both the meditation movement and contemporary Buddhism. In him we see some of the ways that the theme of economic encompassment affects the meditation movement. Through his appeal to the upper and middle classes and business people, he addresses problems that have been created by the global economy and the related changes in society. He recognises that people who have been buffeted by

[11] *Dasa Rāja Dhamma* is discussed in the canon in various places, including J.i.260 and J.iii.274.

[12] The third of these objectives, for example, represents a paraphrase of a portion of the teaching that the Buddha gave concerning how the sangha should be governed in order to have peace and harmony. See *Dīgha Nikāya* ii. 76ff.

the ups and downs of the open market economy want to find ways to 'fight back' in order to retain or regain their Buddhist orientation. By applying the *dhamma* to these issues, Guru B has come to be seen as an important guru. His authority seems to derive somewhat from his ability to keep one foot in each of the two contrasting worlds, Buddhism and business. But there can be no doubt that his authority is based ultimately on his followers' beliefs about Guru B's attainments in meditation. As I noted above, some of his followers believe Guru B to be an arahant or a future Buddha and such beliefs translate directly into power and authority. Without this power and authority, Guru B could never have ventured into the realm of politics and constitutional reform; he represents a clear example of someone who has privileged spiritual experience to gain power and support.

His constitutional proposal demonstrates also the political encompassment of the meditation movement. The idea of a no-party system has been espoused by various people in Sri Lanka for some time. In recent years it has been proposed by A.T. Ariyaratne of Sarvodaya also. What is interesting about Guru B's championing the idea is that it represents a case of a meditation guru being interested in stepping into politics. Although most of the contemporary gurus seem to be apolitical and the meditation movement has had no explicit ties to 'political Buddhism', Guru B's entry into politics reveals some possible implicit connections between the larger meditation movement and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. Clearly the lingering ethnic conflict has provided a significant part of the motivation for Guru B to venture into the political realm at this time, but whatever the motivation, this venture demonstrates that the meditation movement cannot be totally separated from Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. The constitution that Guru B proposes is very much oriented toward Sinhala Buddhism, even though he is careful in his draft not to stress this point because he hopes that the Tamils and other minorities will accept the principles of this new constitution.

Is this draft constitution a means by which Guru B seeks to attain political office himself? I asked him whether he was interested in serving as president under this new form of government. He replied that he would not compete for the presidency under this system, however, if the people came to him and invited him to serve as president, that would be different and he would be glad to make the necessary sacrifices and serve. He views this move as consistent with his career as a *dhamma* teacher and meditation teacher because it would enable him to put the *dhamma* into practical effect. This would be his 'one big final *dhamma dāna* (gift)'. Guru B explains that this kind of government could bring peace and that if such a system were in place, people would find it much easier to practise meditation. The authority and power that claims about experience bring are, in the case of Guru B, being translated directly into secular power, but with a dhammic platform.

### *3.5. Guru C*

The third guru I will consider is, like the first two, also relatively orthodox in that he is well versed in the *dhamma* and teaches the classical path of Vipassanā meditation. This guru, however, differs from the first two in that he has founded his own society which moves toward a sectarian identity. To the members of his society, Guru C is a teacher who has reached an advanced stage of spiritual perfection. This teacher and his society provide good illustrations of the evolution of

the meditation movement in Sri Lanka: he is a guru who teaches a distinctive version of the *dhamma* and leads a society of followers who clearly see their identity as not being within 'contemporary Buddhist orthodoxy'. This guru and his followers not only break with orthodox Buddhism, but also break with some of the teachings and emphases of the meditation movement in its original form as introduced by the Burmese and established at Kanduboda.

Guru C is a retired educator who has built up a society that has, according to the leader, about 2000 members in some twenty-one chapters across the island. Most of the members are either middle-aged or retired, although the society is making attempts to get young people to join also. Guru C leads the society by teaching them both the *dhamma* and meditation. Although most meditation teachers emphasise their experiential knowledge rather than textual knowledge, Guru C emphasises studying the texts as well, but from an experiential perspective. He has an extensive knowledge of the *Tripiṭaka* and the commentaries which he cites heavily in his teaching. On several occasions when I interviewed him at his home in Kandy, he brought out large stacks of texts to cite and interpret for me. He does not, however, rely only on the textual version of the *dhamma*. Combining experience with study, he says that we have to know the '*dhamma* of the mind', which is the experiential *dhamma* that the Buddha taught. This *dhamma* is essential because, in Guru C's view, the textual *dhamma* cannot be trusted completely because the Buddha's followers may have added or subtracted ideas while the texts were being formed. Thus, Guru C has some doubts about many of the texts and urges caution when using them. In good Buddhist fashion, he says that we cannot simply learn the Buddha's *dhamma*, but we have to find the *dhamma* for ourselves. 'Buddha did not ask people to accept.' 'We have to study the way, but that is not enough, you have to go on to experience the mind inside.'[13]

These pragmatic Buddhist disclaimers notwithstanding, Guru C devotes considerable energy to teaching his interpretation of the *dhamma*, and could be classified as a *dhamma* teacher as well as a meditation teacher. He has written some seventeen small books that expound his understanding of the *dhamma*. For his followers, the *dhamma* teaching and the meditation go together and both are taken as explanations of the path as it is constructed by their guru. Perhaps the best explanation of where the authority of this guru lies comes from one of his followers who said that she 'respects Guru C as a man who has a perfect knowledge of Pāli and the texts. He has attained the "advanced state" (*ariya magga*) because he knows the *dhamma* so well and is able to preach it for 10 or 11 hours straight. Something that an ordinary person could not do.'[14]

One of Guru C's main teaching themes is that the world is inside the mind but we mistakenly look for it outside. By observing how the mind arises and passes away one can see the real nature of the *dhamma*. He relates a story about a monk who had acquired the miraculous power to travel through the air and asked the Buddha if he could go to the end of the world. Buddha, however, told him that he could not go by that means for the world is in the mind. Guru C teaches his followers to actualise the *dhamma* by practicing *ānāpānasati*. He does not stress the jhānas or samādhi but he does teach that immediate benefits are possible. He cautions his followers, however, not to desire nibbāna, instead, he tells them just to live in the present and to be mindful of it. Both the *dhamma* and meditation receive emphasis in his teachings, their relation is revealed when he says that people should 'first realise the *dhamma* and then get into vipassanā'.

[13] Statement made during interview, Kandy, 14 August 1997.
[14] Comments made during an interview in Kandy on 12 November 1998.

Up to this point Guru C and his society might seem to be fairly orthodox Buddhists. But their relation to the prevailing Buddhism in Sri Lanka is complex. Possibly the best explanation of the relation between Guru C, his society and Buddhism is found in the following statement which he made in one of our interviews. 'We have to understand what Buddhism is, and having gotten that knowledge, we then have to break that knowledge.' A great admirer of Krishnamurti, Guru C made a significant comment about him. He explained that Krishnamurti said that he went to Buddha, was with the Buddha, and then left the Buddha to find his own truth. This statement might be seen as a parable of the way that Guru C views his own teaching and his society. Another statement of his relation to Buddhism is given in this comment made during another interview, 'The Buddha never expected his teaching to turn into Buddhism. Religion is the most harmful thing in the world. Because of religion people are fighting. But what the Buddha gave is not a religion, it is a teaching about how to live in the world, how to live in this impermanent world satisfactorily. That is the Buddha's teaching.'[15] Leading his followers toward this truth, Guru C is extremely critical of contemporary Buddhist orthodoxy on a number of counts. He declares that, 'Today in Sri Lanka we do not have Buddhism. Buddhism only exists in books, not in the minds of the people.' His comments reflect his criticism of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and the ethnic conflict. He blames the *Sangha* for promoting racial tensions that keep the fires of war burning in Sri Lanka and prevent a peaceful resolution of the ethnic conflict. He also criticises the way that average Buddhists practise the rituals in hopes of being reborn in the time of the next Buddha, Maitreya, to seek liberation. They could find the truth now, he says, if they would look inside the mind instead of looking outside with their pujas. He lays the blame for the lack of guidance squarely at the door of the Sangha. The Buddha, he says, taught a clear path, but the Sangha has distorted it and led the people astray. The Sangha, for example, is responsible for the recent Sinhala translation of the *Tripiṭaka* which ought to have made the *dhamma* more accessible to the people. Instead, however, he argues, the Sinhala translation uses a form of literary Sinhala that is more complex than the original *Pāli* and is inaccessible to the average person.

Guru C's interest in social engagement evokes another criticism of the Sangha and contemporary Buddhism. The temples, he says, waste huge sums of money in the performance of elaborate pujas 'that do no good'. He pointed out that the Temple of the Tooth, the chief temple in the country, spends over ten thousand rupees per day on pūjas. About this he says flatly, 'This is not Buddhism'. He argues that his society could build simple housing for poor people for the same ten thousand rupees. This kind of social service is central to his vision of what the *dhamma* requires. He cited the Buddha's commissioning of his first disciples and his sending them out for the 'welfare of the people'. His society has sought to help all kinds of people—Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims—by building houses and providing food and clothing for them. In his view the *dhamma* has no ethnic boundaries for all are human beings and can improve their minds. The society has also engaged in projects to preserve the environment as well as human beings. Guru C says that when one knows the *dhamma* one will want to serve others; social service is consistent with the *dhamma*.

[15] Comment made during my interview with him on 16 July 1997 in Kandy, Sri Lanka.

### 3.6. Summary

Guru C and his followers regard themselves as reformers who seek to recover the central meaning of the *dhamma*. Guru C has written that 'Ancient Buddhism is a superior educational system. Modern Buddhism is a chain of offerings that leads nowhere.'[16] This view echoes the earlier Theosophists and reformers. The dichotomy that Guru C draws between texts and experience represents a theme that appears in the teachings of other gurus also and seems somewhat problematic. The distinction that he makes between the 'textual *dhamma*' and the '*dhamma* of the mind' raises the question of the relation between these two *dhamma*s. It could be argued that the 'textual *dhamma*' represents the necessary context or source for any experience of *dhamma* that the lay meditators might have. Just as studies of mystical experience have debated whether or to what extent the experiences of the mystics are shaped by the doctrines of their tradition, so it would seem that similar questions could be raised about the relations between the meditators and Buddhist doctrine.[17] Guru C, and other gurus, for their part, prefer to view the 'textual *dhamma*' as an imperfect representation of the truth that can be replaced by the direct experience of the truth in meditation, and in some ways this represents a classical Buddhist viewpoint affirmed in both Theravada and Mahayana.

His society members follow Guru C's teachings as a way to cope with their daily lives and also as a way to address the larger problems around them. Guru C and his followers place emphasis on social service, something that few of the other meditators emphasise. In following this path they may be seen to be moving toward a kind of sectarian status. Their own guru clearly has more authority for them than the sangha and they prefer to study his *dhamma* rather than the canonical dhamma of Theravada. We shall see that this represents a mild step toward sectarianism and that more dramatic steps are being taken by other gurus.

### 3.7. Guru D

The fourth guru in our study provides a further example of both the way that the meditation movement has evolved and the kind of flux that exists in the contemporary Buddhism of the laity. Guru D, like Guru A and some of the other teachers we will consider, was in the first generation of lay persons who learned meditation at the Kanduboda meditation centre. After practicing and teaching for many years as a layman, Guru D took ordination as a monk and now serves as the leader of his own meditation centre and has a large following. His society exemplifies the way that the rhetoric of experience facilitates 'legitimation, authority and power' and how these forces move this group toward sectarianism.

The most striking feature of this group is the power and authority that the followers accord the guru. Guru D personifies the guru role and its significance in the contemporary context in Sri Lanka. Guru D is an English-educated man who for most of his life held an important government position in Colombo. Becoming interested in meditation after the Burmese inspired revival of it in the 1950s, he went to the Kanduboda meditation centre and studied under the

[16] Stated in his printed lectures on the *Dhamma*, Vols 1–3, p. 25.

[17] A full discussion of the debate about mysticism is beyond the scope of this article. I refer the reader to Katz 1978; King 1988; Smart 1977; and Sharf 1992.

teachers there. He also studied meditation in India with Anagarika Munidraji. After practicing meditation for some time, he began to teach meditation in Colombo and continued to be a lay teacher for almost three decades until he retired from his government job in the late 1980s and took ordination as a monk. He remains a monk today, although he seems to have few ties to the orthodox sangha. The new meditation movement has been his primary concern from the time he began, so that even though he became ordained, he never accommodated to the 'contemporary Buddhist orthodoxy', a fact that comes out in his teachings and guidelines for his followers. For example, when I asked Guru D who his teachers had been, he proclaimed that his only teacher was the Buddha, thereby refusing to acknowledge any of his teachers in the contemporary sangha.

After taking ordination he founded his meditation centre in the hill country of the island in the early 1990s. At this centre, Guru D presides in a way that clearly demonstrates how experience leverages power and authority. His followers, both the thousands that come to the centre on Poya days and other occasions and the hundred or so who reside at the centre for a longer term, regard Guru D as an arahant and accord him absolute authority. Guru D informs people, without saying it explicitly, that he has attained the goal. He describes a long path of meditation that involved encountering Māra and developing what he called in English 'the third eye' and explained using Pāli terms as the *dibba cakkhu,* which was one of the Buddha's attainments upon reaching *Nibbāna*.[18] One suspects that this may be the reason that he became ordained: he believed that he had become an *arahant* and, knowing the Theravada teaching that a person could not remain a layman after he attained *Nibbāna*, he became a monk. Now he is the absolute authority at his centre, and—compared to the gurus we have considered thus far—has a much more commanding and dominating manner as a guru. Whenever any questions come up at his centre his followers refer them to 'the priest'. He takes full responsibility for both the teachings and the organisational details at his centre. Although he has a number of meditation teachers under him at the centre, there is no doubt about where the authority rests. Once, for example, when I was interviewing one of his bhikkhuni teachers, some of his other followers interrupted the interview twice to ask if 'the priest' had given permission for it. Everyone in his centre defers to the authority of this guru; indeed there seems to be both a fear of the guru as well as a desire to please him. In keeping with his guru status, his teaching style is simple and authoritative. On *Poya* days about one thousand of his followers come to the centre to hear him preach on the *dhamma* and to be instructed in meditation. Accepting and even reveling in his power and status, Guru D declares, 'It is a great thing that I can lead people to liberation'.

When I asked Guru D whether he and his assistants studied the Buddhist texts, he said that they taught on the basis of the guru's experience. He tells his followers that it is not necessary to study the texts because if one meditates, one will learn it all firsthand as he has. He also told me that 'Books are the ruin of Buddhism'. By which he meant that there are too many books written about Buddhism by people who have no personal experience with these truths. A teacher on his staff confirmed this when she told me that 'books are discouraged' because they represent worldly wisdom. Somewhat paradoxically, although he shuns the texts and books, his teaching and that of his assistants seems very textual. This exemplifies the kind of problematic dichotomy of experience and texts that we see also in the teachings of some of the other gurus. While purportedly based on his own experience, his *dhamma* teachings and meditation instructions

[18] Comments made during an earlier interview, Colombo, 23 July 1983.

follow the textual tradition of meditation very closely, although simplifying it somewhat. The primary text to which he refers is the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta,* which seems to serve as the basis of his method, as it does for most meditators in the wake of the 'new Burmese school'. He is fond of saying that 'the path is very clear', and in keeping with this he sets out a fairly simple explanation of the *dhamma* and a basic technique of meditation consistent with this *sutta*. One *Poya* day when I visited his centre, he delivered a *dhamma* sermon that summarised his fairly orthodox message. He said that one must realise that 'all is within this fathom-long body'. Although we think that reality is outside, it is actually inside, controlled by the mind. The mind creates the body and our attachment to the body. Most suffering is caused by our ignorance of this process which leads to attachment and aversion. This message seems to constitute a common theme among the contemporary gurus; a theme we noted in Guru C's teaching also and which will recur in other gurus below.

Although his teaching about meditation follows the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta for the most part, it breaks with the 'new Burmese method' on some key points. The most important form of meditation for this group is *ānāpānasati* which the guru prescribes for everyone. In addition, however, unlike Mahasi Sayadaw's method, he also stresses the importance of the *jhānas* as a part of the path through *samādhi* to *vipassanā*. He explains that *samādhi* is essential because it enables the meditator to close off the sense doors. The technique is simple, he said: One does *sīla*, then *samādhi* by developing the *jhānas* and the *jhāna* factors, and then one can come to *vipassanā* by observing the wisdom of mindfulness which empowers one to see the reality of the world.[19] Although this technique sounds like classical Theravada meditation from the *Visuddhimagga*, Guru D is also critical of the *Visuddhimagga*, saying that the lists of meditation topics from the *Visuddhimagga* are not important and represent a scholasticism that is divorced from practice. He also does not require his followers to adhere to any special rules beyond the normal *sīla.*

A second key feature of Guru D's group is the emphasis that he places on the availability of the goals of meditation. This feature undoubtedly has much to with both the status of the guru and the popularity of this group with the laity. If Guru D's teachings about the *dhamma* and meditation are more or less conventional, his ideas about the possibility of attaining the goals are fairly radical, although they clearly follow from the kind of emphasis that Mahasi Sayadaw and his followers placed on these attainments. The only important goal of meditation, he says, is enlightenment and the stages of the noble persons or *ariya puggla*. He does not teach meditation to help people with secondary goals or problems such as stress. He feels that lay people can easily attain the main goal. 'Why not?' he says, 'The technique is simple and the path is very clear. All that is needed is for people to be keen enough.' He discusses the relevant 'mileposts' for attainments—meaning the Four Noble persons—and declares that these mileposts have been reached by his followers. He explains that reaching these goals is not difficult, people have only to eliminate the hindrances and develop other positive factors. 'It can be done', he said. In fact he claims that many of his followers have already attained all of these stages. When I pressed him a bit about these goals, he said that the stage of Streamenterer 'is a simple thing' that any of his followers can attain. Again using an explanation that resonates with the texts despite his ban on books, he said that this stage only requires one to overcome three hindrances: doubt, attachment

[19] Comments made during an interview, Kandy, 8 August 1997.

to rituals and rules (*sīla*), and self view. Lowering the bar about as far as possible, Guru D emphasised how simple this process is by saying 'Any layman can do it'.

On a *Poya* when I visited Guru D's centre I saw how far he carries this belief about the availability of the goal. After he had delivered a lengthy *dhamma* sermon, he instructed the audience (numbering about 800 people) to divide up into three groups for discussion and meditation: beginners, intermediates, and *ariya puggalas*. Although most of the people in the audience gravitated toward one of the first two groups, a significant number of people reported to the group for the *ariya puggalas* which was appropriately sub-divided into four sections, one for each of the higher stages from Streamenterer to Arahant. Holding breakout groups for *ariya puggalas* surely sets this movement apart from contemporary Buddhist orthodoxy and shows how far it has gone toward a sectarian or emergent religion status.

All of these breakout groups were led by nuns, and I spoke to two of these teachers, the one in charge of the *arahants* (who had about four or five people in her group) and another nun who was teaching the foreign meditators. Both of them said that the higher stages of the path are perfectly attainable, even by foreigners and non-Buddhists. The second teacher supported this claim by referring to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* teaching that if one practises diligently the goal can be reached in seven days. This nun also said that many of the nuns had gone far beyond the stage of Stream Enterer, and that the guru had also.

Clearly this belief about the higher attainments of the guru and the possibility of reaching them for oneself represents a central reason many people are attracted to this group. I found evidence, however, that these claims also work against the group at times and lead some people to doubt the guru. For example, I met one man who had formerly been an ardent supporter of Guru D but now had ceased going to hear him because this man thought that it was not right for Guru D to make these claims. The man felt that if a person were enlightened he would not boast about it, and he also thought that Guru D had made the goals too easy. A second informant, a woman, echoed these sentiments and expressed her serious reservations about both Guru D and his group. She had been a strong supporter of the guru, giving large donations to help develop his centre because she thought that the guru led good meditation programmes that made her feel happy and well. But while attending one meditation session in which they practised the meditation on the parts of the body, she began to have some strange sensations. She experienced pains in her body and saw bright lights. When she discussed these experiences with the chief nun, who was the main teacher for the session, the nun told her that she was getting close to attaining arahantship. The nun sent her to meet with the guru who told her the same thing. He also instructed her in the *jhānas* and showed her how she should work her way through the *jhānic* states on her way to arahantship. She felt that she did achieve some of these jhānic stages and attained some of their powers. Guru D and his nuns soon began to tell her that she had attained arahantship and she felt very happy. After a few months, however, she began to have doubts about her attainments: it seemed too good to be true that she had reached the ultimate goal because she did not feel that she was enlightened. So she began going to another meditation teacher, Guru C, who gave her some *suttas* to study along with some of his own writings. Through following Guru C's teaching she has come to believe that what she attained before was only the *samādhi* associated with the *jhānas*, not the *ariya magga* and its fruits. She now has serious doubts about Guru D and his teachings and does not believe that he has reached the goal or that he is correct in his claims of bringing so

many others to the goal. She still hopes to attain *Nibbāna* and end *dukkha*, but she now follows a more conventional and gradual path.

A final distinctive feature of Guru D's group is the role it accords to women. Guru D says that about eighty per cent of his followers are women, and my observations of his meetings would seem to confirm his estimate. When asked why women are so interested in his meditation, he says what many people in Sri Lanka say to explain women's interest in religion: women are more interested in liberation because women suffer more than men. According to Guru D, some women obtain results very quickly if they have experienced extensive suffering since suffering represents the first Noble Truth and acquaintance with it facilitates the realisation of the other truths.

But in addition to having mostly female followers, a distincitve feature of this group is that Guru D also has a staff of 'nuns' who serve as the primary meditation teachers at his centre and he has embarked on a campaign to 'ordain' more women as '*bhikkhunīs*'. When I spoke with him in 1998, he had sixteen nuns in his group and said that he planned to ordain about 60 women and build a forest hermitage for them. Since *bhikkhunī* ordination has been a controversial topic recently in Sri Lanka, I asked him whether he thought that the Sangha should officially reestablish it and whether he saw any problems associated with his performing these ordinations. Surprisingly, he said that it was neither possible nor necessary for the Sangha to reestablish *bhikkhunī* ordination officially, but he also said that he did not care whether it was officially approved or not. He intends to provide ordination for women and 'boost them along the path to become *ariya puggalas',* the stages of Noble Persons culminating in Arahantship. He feels that what is important is not the external orders but the internal development of these women. Giving expression to the power of experience, he said that once these women attain arahantship, no one can dispute their status as *bhikkhunīs*. He further implied that most of the women that he has ordained have already reached this goal.

### *3.8. Summary*

This combination of a powerful guru's authority, a promise of higher attainments for followers and a willingness to create new roles for women who wish to become nuns sets Guru D's movement apart from contemporary Buddhist orthodoxy. These factors also indicate that his movement also may be moving toward a kind of sectarianism. The emphasis on easy attainment of the goals represents a form of commodification of religion which relates to the economic context in the country. The middle class lay people who constitute Guru D's followers have attained many things and now look to meditation to give them these spiritual attainments that will make life both manageable and satisfactory (*sukha*). Finally, although this guru and his followers claim higher spiritual goals, they do not have any interest in socially engaged Buddhism or social service. When I asked Guru D whether he does any social service, he replied that the most important social service is to share the *dhamma* with others as he does.

### *3.9. Guru E (Mr D. C. P. Ratnakara)*

Our fifth example was the founder of a well-organised society that exhibits many of the themes we outlined in the introduction. His is one of the oldest meditation societies in Sri Lanka and until

his death in 2000 he was one of the senior meditation teachers in the country. In the teachings of this guru and the life of his society, we see how far the lay meditation movement has gone toward sectarianism. Since I have written about this guru elsewhere and knew him well before his untimely death, I will use his real name and the name of his society.[20]

### *3.10. The Guru*

D. C. P. Ratnakara was the 'lay Patron and Founder' of the Society of the Friends of the Dhamma (*Sadaham Mithuru Samuluwa*). Before his retirement in the early 1980s, Mr Ratnakara was a lecturer in educational psychology at the Peradeniya Teachers Training College near Kandy. He too was in the first generation of lay meditators during the 1950s revival of meditation and studied with several teachers including some forest monks. As a youth he was very interested in Theosophy and also read many books by Indian teachers such as Vivekananda and Krishnamurti. For almost four decades, the members of his society accorded him great respect as a guru who had reached an advanced stage of the spiritual path. But guru Ratnakara was not the sole authority for this society, Mrs Ratnakara also has had a key role.

### *3.11. The Society*

The Ratnakaras founded their society in 1962, and since that time it has grown to have almost one thousand members and many local branches. The story of the founding of the society reveals some key facts about the nature of this movement. Mr Ratnakara explained that it was not his idea to found a society, but it became necessary to do so because of the 'revelations' that he and his wife were receiving and the demands of their 'teachers'. To abbreviate a long narrative which I have given in full elsewhere,[21] Mr and Mrs Ratnakara began receiving transcendental messages through a medium. Mrs Ratnakara was especially receptive to these messages and served as the chief contact with the spiritual beings whom they believed to be the authors of the messages. The messages consisted of comprehensive *dhamma* teachings about such topics as cosmology, ethics, meditation and healing. The Ratnakaras came to believe that these *dhamma* teachings emanated from a pantheon of higher beings, including 'masters', yogis, gods and goddesses. Especially important in this pantheon were the goddess Saraswati and a 'Buddha from another planet'. Eventually, these higher beings told the Ratnakaras to form a society to study and follow these teachings, which is how S.M.S. came about. The charter of the S.M.S. states that 'Masters or Spiritual Teachers mentioned in the Buddhist Theosophical Literature … do even now exist, and one could communicate with them by developing certain meditative states of consciousness … or through a trained medium'. Today the society continues to follow these teachers and to be interested in some more recent cross-traditional influences such as the teachings of the Indian gurus Vimala Thakar and Sai Baba.

The members of the society study and live by the *dhamma* given by the spiritual teachers rather than the *dhamma* of the *Tipiṭaka.* The charter of the society explains that 'the oral teachings of the

[20] For a more extensive discussion of the early period of this guru and his society, see Buddhist Revival in *Sri Lanka*, ch. 6.

[21] See Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka, ch. 6.

Great Sage were committed to writing long years after the Parinibbāna of the Founder. By that time interested parties changed the original teachings and one can hardly ascertain how much.' So the written canon is not to be trusted, but this *dhamma* mediated by the deities is pure. Accordingly, the members do not study the traditional texts but instead study the teachings given by the deities to the Ratnakaras.[22]

The content of this celestial *dhamma* is too voluminous to explain fully here, but we can mention some of the chief categories. There are elaborate teachings on the nature of the pantheon of deities which is extremely complex. For example, one of their main deity teachers is described as the 42nd assistant to the goddess Saraswati. One aspect of this *dhamma* prescribes new forms of *sīla* or ethical conduct, therefore the society lives by a number of special regulations, such as rules concerning simplicity in dress and lifestyle. Members are advised to arise at 4 a.m., to observe a vegetarian diet and to avoid people who engage in 'wrong activities'.

A major topic in this *dhamma* is the path of meditation. Ratnakara explained that having these spiritual beings as teachers is a great help since *saṃsāra* is like a prison and the *devas* are like beings who, having liberated themselves from the prison, can now show others the way out. So they have revealed the path of meditation to the Ratnakaras. The form of meditation that Ratnakara's society teaches, however, seems—despite the esoteric source of the teachings—relatively conventional. They stress concentration (*samādhi*) and mindfulness (*sati*). The teachings received from the spirit beings, however, provide some new explanations of the nature of the meditation process. One such idea that they teach is that nature, '*jīvitindriya',* can be described as a force that seeks to elicit karmic reactions in order to keep human beings trapped in *saṃsāra*. The goal of meditators, therefore, must be to recognise nature's scheme and not get caught in it any further. Through these teachings Ratnakara attempted to show his followers how to overcome suffering in this life. S.M.S. holds meditation retreats and camps for the members and encourages them to meditate daily. They seek to attain *Nibbāna* in this life. Or as one S.M.S. member explained, 'We cannot visualise or even hope for *Nibbāna*. But if we can be peaceful, not in conflict and not reacting, then that must be *Nibbāna*, or at least a glimpse of it.' Ratnakara claimed that people in S.M.S. have attained higher states, but he did not put as much emphasis on this fact as Guru D does. Rather Ratnakara stressed that the idea of reaching *Nibbāna* in this life really means that one can come to understand reality as it is or the dhammic nature of all things.

With this celestial *dhamma* as its guide, S.M.S. breaks sharply with the Sangha and contemporary Buddhist orthodoxy. The members who began the society were not content with the *dhamma* given by monks 'which stressed going to heaven or the Brahma realms'. Ratnakara said, 'the common Buddhism practiced today, with its innumerable rituals, ceremonies and alms feasts has drowned the real practical aspects of the sublime *dhamma*'. Needless to say, the S.M.S. members do not go to the temples or seek the services of the monks. They do, however, perform some rituals of their own, such as a form of *Pirit* chanting done by lay persons as well as *pūjās* to the deities who are the guardians of their society.

Other significant features of this society include its emphasis on healing and its interest in social engagement. Mrs Ratnakara explains that she has had the power to heal for about 10 years. She attributes this power to her contact with the *devas*, *rishis* and other spiritual beings, including

[22] This distrust of the scriptures preserved by the Sangha represents another common theme among many of the contemporary meditation teachers. It probably reflects, to some extent, Orientalist influences from an earlier period as well as the privileging of the experience of the guru.

Hippocrates, who, according to their revelations, is now living as a deity. She also received ayurvedic advice from other spiritual sources such as a 'Rishi Doctor' from India who had been the doctor for Mahatma Gandhi. He would tell her how to make ayurvedic potions to heal people and she would prepare the mixtures and plants that he prescribed. This 'guru Doctor' had various means for healing that went beyond those of ordinary medicine, for example he could see a person's '*saṃsāra*' and take that into account in healing them. She seems to have worked with the medium and this 'Guru Doctor' for about 10 years. During this time, she says that she healed many people. She even tried to heal some cancer patients, but they were too ill to respond to the treatments. She related a story about working with a Muslim couple who were unable to have children. The husband's mother was threatening to force the couple to divorce unless the woman could conceive. Mrs Ratnakara called on the medium to communicate with the deities to get an answer for this problem. After the medium and Mrs Ratnakara met with the woman and conveyed the deities' instructions, the woman conceived and the couple had 3 children in 5 years and were very happy.

In addition to this emphasis on healing, the society also has had a socially engaged focus. It carries out social relief work on a small scale and has some environmental projects. These are not major aspects of the society but neither are they insignificant. The younger members of the society are especially interested in the ecology projects and other kinds of outreach that they have undertaken.

### *3.12. Summary*

This society clearly demonstrates the privileging of experience and the way that this is related to earlier reforms with Western roots such as Theosophy. The earlier Western influences are now mingled with more global influences to support the authority of experience and enable the group to challenge contemporary Buddhism. With the role of the guru and the new ideas about the deities, it appears that S.M.S. is moving toward sectarianism more clearly than any of the other groups we have examined thus far. The formal structure of the society with its charter and by-laws suggests that they recognise and accept a sectarian status. To attend the monthly meetings of this group is to see that it has a sectarian appearance in that whole families attend the sessions that include 'Sunday school' type programmes for the children and youth and a strong sense of fellowship and identity by all of the members. The current leaders of the society explicitly say that S.M.S. is not Theravada Buddhism, but because of the source of its teachings it has ties to Mahayana and Vajrayana. The charter of the society reads, 'The S.M.S. does not differentiate between Mahayana and Theravada teachings. Senior members study both with an open mind and accept what is true irrespective of the label'.[23]

### *3.13. Guru F*

Our final example concerns a guru who presents another interesting case that further delineates the evolution of the meditation movement. Guru F is a retired government clerk who also has

[23] Charter of Incorporation for *Sadaham Mithuru Samuluwa*, Sri Lanka, p. 4.

been involved in the meditation revival from an early period. He studied at the Kanduboda and Nilambe meditation centres and was a friend of Guru A, Guru D and Guru Ratnakara. One of my informants showed me a photo of Guru F along with Guru A, Guru D and Guru Ratnakara at a meditation retreat in the forest (Sithulpahuwa) in the early 1970s. Now, over thirty years later, Guru F has become an extremely popular guru with a large following. In some ways he has followed a similar path to that of his old meditation companions but in other ways he has broken a new path.

Guru F resembles these other gurus in his critique of orthodox Buddhism. Like Guru Ratnakara and gurus C and D, he notes that the *Tipiṭaka* was not written until at least 200 years after the time of the Buddha and so does not reflect the pure *dhamma*. He also opposes the Sangha and challenges the monks and nuns who come to his meetings. Some monks come to see him intending to debate with him, but he says that after they hear him talk they leave quietly because they realise that he is speaking the true *dhamma*. When Buddhist nuns come to meet him, he tells them that they are 'going in the wrong path'. Other aspects of contemporary orthodoxy such as the rituals and *pujas* are also contested by this guru for the same reasons that the other gurus oppose them.

Guru F goes beyond the other gurus, however, in that he also rejects the value of meditation itself. 'Meditation is a mistaken path', he charges. He teaches his followers that meditation is a difficult and disappointing practice.[24] Although people follow it blindly, it will not lead them to wisdom or salvation. Meditation only brings suffering from long hours of sitting, and the Buddha opposed suffering. According to Guru F, Gotama attained enlightenment under the Bo-tree only after he had given up meditating. Guru F's followers, convinced by these teachings, have ceased to follow the path of meditation. One woman follower whom I interviewed said that she used to meditate regularly but now sees that it is pointless and has 'stopped wasting her time doing meditation'.[25]

What has replaced the path of meditation for this group is the power of the guru to produce enlightenment directly. The followers of Guru F believe that he has great power and authority, with some declaring that he is a Buddha and others that he is the reincarnation of Anagarika Dharmapala living his last birth. Still other followers whom I met said that Guru F had reached arahantship. One follower thought he was clearly in an advanced state and compared him to Ajahn Cha, the late Thai monk whom Thai Buddhists regarded as an arahant.

To document his authority, Guru F and his followers recount events that occurred during a trip to India in 1992. Guru F and about 250 followers went to Bodh Gaya and there Guru F 're-delivered the Buddha's *Dhammacakka Sutta*' at the site of the original Bo-tree. The followers say that while Guru F was preaching, miraculous cosmic phenomena occurred: first, the sky went dark, then there was a very bright light and the sounds of 'celestial drums'. While this was happening, bright colored rays were emanating from Guru F's body. Other disciples tell of a similar miraculous event that occurred when Guru F was preaching in front of the great Bo-tree in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka.[26]

For his part, Guru F says that he has attained the ability 'to see all of the powers and wisdom up to the *arahant* stage', although he is 'currently abiding in the *Sotāpanna* stage'. He

[24] Comments made during a meeting with him in Kandy, 16 August 1997.
[25] Interviewed in Kandy, 20 August 1997.
[26] Followers interviewed at one of his meetings in Kandy, 16 August 1997.

acknowledges no teacher, but says that his authority comes from an experience in which he saw the truth of the *dhamma* directly while witnessing a *Vesak* drama featuring a skeleton. He does not study the texts of the *Tipiṭaka* or any books, but says that he has attained the true power of the Buddha and the *dhamma*. He has the ability to know the original suttas at 'the necessary moment'. Guru F claims that although he has not read any *suttas* or books he now has the ability to see the true *dhamma* perfectly. Therefore, he instructs people that they should follow the *dhamma* that he has directly received because it is more trustworthy than the orthodox *dhamma* of the texts.

The *dhamma* that he teaches is in some ways similar to the classical Buddhist *dhamma* in its emphasis on ideas such as impermanence and the power of cause and effect in human life. In other ways, however, the *dhamma* that he teaches revises the landscape of contemporary Buddhism considerably. For example, he teaches that although the *Tipiṭaka* says that the Buddha's mother died one week after he was born, this is not correct. Through his power, Guru F can see into the past and relate what actually happened. He says that she did not die after one week, but rather she was transformed into a man at that time. This occurred because the infant Siddhartha refused to drink her milk. After becoming a man, she/he lived incognito for 62 years until she/he was taught *Abhidhamma* by the Buddha and achieved liberation. In a similar fashion he gives novel interpretations to other parts of the *dhamma*, saying that the words of the *suttas* as we have them now should be regarded as symbols.

Instead of following the traditional path of *Sīla, Samādhi,* and *Paññā*, Guru F teaches that the path consists of *Paññā, Sīla,* and *Samādhi*. He says that *Sīla* (moral conduct) is not important as a precursor to the realisation of truth, but will follow automatically after one attains wisdom. When monks and nuns come to hear his talks, this guru tells them that they too should abandon the focus on *Sīla* and concentrate on *Paññā* (wisdom) as the path to the goal. This, of course, runs directly counter to the whole teaching of Theravāda, classical or contemporary.

The biggest change, however, comes when he discounts the value of meditation as the means to attaining *Paññā.* Instructing his followers not to meditate, he explains that *Paññā* and the goal can be realised if people simply listen to him preach the *dhamma*. He maintains that if a person hears at least four *dhamma* sermons by him, then that person will automatically become a Streamenterer. Guru F claims to be able to preach in such a way that everyone in an audience as large as 3000 people can hear him plainly, just as if he were speaking to them alone. Accordingly, Guru F refuses to use microphones or loudspeakers to amplify his voice because he believes that this would interfere with the effectiveness of the guru's power and block his *dhamma*.

By emphasising the power of the guru's *dhamma* sermons, this society accents the authority of the guru. But another somewhat mystical element also receives emphasis in their accounts of the guru. Guru F and his followers attribute the effectiveness of his *dhamma* sermons to something they call the 'Universal Power'. This Universal Power is what enables large numbers of people to hear and understand the *dhamma*. The guru says that it is because of the Universal Power that people are interested in the *dhamma* today and it is this power that can correct the false teaching and bring people to the truth. This Universal Power seems to be some kind of ultimate force that operates through the guru and can be realised by others. It is not entirely clear whether this force is truly universal and can be found everywhere or whether it represents a power of this guru that he can manifest as he wills. Through this power Guru F claims to be able to perform miraculous works such as healing and divination. For example, Guru F claims that when people come to him with questions and problems, he knows and gives the answers before they ask their questions. This

guru also claims to have healed people through his Universal Power. He says that people have come to him after their doctors had given up and he has sent them home cured of their illnesses. His words have healing power and the people are cured as they listen to his sermons or discuss their problems with him.

### *3.14. Summary*

In many ways, Guru F resembles the other gurus we have examined. His *dhamma* teaching is not too unusual, stressing, for example, the need to awaken one's mind and recognise the cause and effect of mental states, or the need to recognise that the world is not real as it appears. His followers, like the followers of the other gurus, find these teachings helpful in coping with life today. Exemplifying the same problematic distinction between texts and experience that we have noted above, Guru F claims that his teachings come not from the texts, however much they resemble the textual teachings, but from his transcendental experiences. Correspondingly, what attracts the huge crowds to Guru F is not his psychological Buddhist teachings alone, but rather the guru himself and the beliefs about his wisdom and his powers. His followers have faith that they can be enlightened simply by hearing this guru preach his *dhamma*. This belief causes people to flock to hear him by the thousands everywhere he goes in the country. His meetings, advertised only by word of mouth and held in large halls without air conditioning or loud speakers, are jammed with people who sit for hours in oppressive conditions to hear their guru. One of his disciples expressed the sentiment of many when she described how she had been to various teachers and centres and even thought she had attained some higher spiritual states but now sees that was all false because she has found a 'great master' in Guru F who has brought her to the true realisation. Now although she does not study the texts, read books or meditate, she too has become a teacher through the Universal Power that he manifests.[27]

With Guru F we reach the end of the continuum of the meditation movement. He represents a classic case of the privileging of experience to gain authority and power. With this authority he makes a complete break with contemporary orthodoxy and its texts, Sangha and rituals. But the authority of this guru is such that he also breaks with the meditation movement itself, declaring that he has the power to convey wisdom and healing directly. Once an ardent meditator, Guru F now supplants the path of meditation with the power of the guru; he even preaches against the other meditation teachers and seeks to convert their followers by showing that they are pursuing the wrong path.

## 4. Conclusion

The lay meditation movement clearly reflects the ferment in contemporary Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Although the proponents of this movement may contend that they are seeking classical Buddhist goals such as wisdom and the elimination of *dukkha*, their construction of these goals and the path to them is complex and represents discourse that has developed in a post-modern context. This discourse is shaped by the blend of revivalist and more recent themes that we

[27] Female disciple interviewed on 20 August 1997.

mentioned at the outset. The theme of individualism, an idea that sparked the earlier revival, continues to inspire the meditation movement and has taken on new meaning with an emphasis on the power of women. An important contemporary theme running through this movement is economic and political encompassment. Economic encompassment is explicit in the work of Guru B who teaches meditation to the business community, but it is implicit in the work of many of the other gurus who seek to help people cope with the problems created in their lives by the changing and open market economy. Political encompassment is similarly explicit in the work of Guru B but implicit in the way that the interest in meditation as a whole may be seen as a response to the political problems and ethnic conflict in the country. The classical Buddhist theme of compassion also receives a new construction under this movement as some gurus use meditation for healing and others stress the importance of social engagement. Social engagement also serves to link this movement to larger cross-cultural movements today. The global and cross-traditional nature of these themes becomes most clear when we see that these Sri Lankan gurus read and invoke gurus and philosophers from various traditions in both the West and the East. Indian teachers, such as Goenka, Krishnamurti, Vimala Thakar, and Sai Baba, tend to be the most frequently cited, but Thai teachers such as Ajahn Chah as well as Tibetan and Zen teachers also exert considerable influence.

As I have noted, the privileging of experience represents a key theme that sets this movement apart from both traditional and contemporary Theravada orthodoxy. It is clear that the gurus' claims of inner experience have a certain rhetorical utility for the meditation movement. These claims give the movement new authority to break with both the Sangha and the rituals of the temples and they have empowered a new class of lay gurus. In figures such as Guru D or Guru F one sees clearly the way that claims to experience authorise the gurus. As Sharf has noted, 'In the end, the Buddhist rhetoric of meditative experience would appear to be both informed by and wielded in the interests of legitimation, authority and power' (p. 265) The gurus' claims to experience also serve another purpose that has been noted in the Western discussion of religious experience, they help to insulate the meditation movement from secular critique while assisting the meditators to cope with the contemporary world (see Sharf 1992, p. 231f.). Although the claims to experience function as the pillars of this movement, it is also interesting to observe the amount of disagreement about the exact nature of the meditative states. As I have noted above, some teachers raise questions about the explanations given by other teachers of their accomplishments on the path and there have been cases of pupils leaving one teacher to go to another because they doubted what they were told about their (the pupils') attainments. This debate continues, to some extent, the earlier debate about the meditation techniques that arose when the Burmese meditators first introduced them to Sri Lanka in the 1950s and it heightens our questions about the rhetorical utility of experience.[28] Although there is no doubt that the meditation movement is characterised by many common themes, these differences of interpretation point up the increased diversity of the movement in recent years. Employing the rhetoric of experience for power and authority, some of the new gurus have asserted their autonomy and developed their own paths in this the fifth decade of the lay meditation movement. Paraphrasing Stirrat, we can say that these

[28] On this point see Sharf 1992, p. 262 and see also my discussion of the earlier meditation controversy in Sri Lanka, in Bond 1988, ch. 4.

lay gurus are leading the lay meditation movement toward 'a series of different interpretations of what it means' to be a Buddhist today (see Stirrat 1995).

If these gurus and their meditation societies were located in Japan or America, people might regard them as forms of what are called 'new religions'. Sharf has compared the modern Zen movement in Japan with the *vipassanā* revival in Southeast Asia. He notes that the new Zen movement 'has all the makings of a Japanese "new religion" ' including 'disdain for scriptural study, its shrill polemics against the orthodox Zen establishment' and its 'promise of rapid spiritual progress' (Sharf 1992, p. 250). The lay meditation movement in Sri Lanka exhibits many of the same features and might also be usefully compared with the new religions. As Mary Douglas notes, these new religious groups have arisen in contradiction to Weber's view that 'the conditions of modern life … [are] antipathetic to religion' (Douglas 1983, p. 25). In the Sri Lankan context, these meditation groups seem to have proliferated as the society modernised.

Although this comparison with the paradigm of new religions in Japan is instructive, since these movements occur in Sri Lanka it may be more appropriate to view them as what Obeyesekere and others have termed 'new religious movements'.[29] Sharma has described 'New Hindu Religious Movements in India', and many of the features of the movements that he notes are similar to the meditation movement in Sri Lanka (Sharma 1986, p. 197). For example he says that the Indian movements (a) are patronised by the urban middle classes, (b) have given women a greater role and induced 'an upward revision of the status of women', and (c) usually have a social service component. Many of these Indian movements that Sharma discusses are meditation movements led by a guru figure. His description of Ramana Maharshi and his group seems very similar to the Sri Lankan meditation groups. Sharma writes, 'Ramana Maharshi is the typical, even archetypal, figure of the master … who teaches a highly rarefied spirituality to … disciples who seek him out and cluster around him, who instructs them on the basis of his own experience rather than through scriptural lore, and whose concern centres on the achievement of salvation by the individual' (Sharma 1986, p. 199). The cross-cultural dynamics of these new religious movements, especially the Indian models, have almost certainly exerted an influence on the guru-led movements in Sri Lanka.

Obeyesekere observes that, 'In countries like Sri Lanka, "new religious movements" never become "new religions," since the new movements are accommodated into a framework of old and continuing "principles" ' (Obeyesekere 1986, p. 197). This may also be the case with these guru-led movements, but being accommodated into a framework of principles does not necessarily mean being accommodated into and reconciled with contemporary orthodoxy and the hierarchy of the Sangha. These movements do not seek accommodation with contemporary orthodoxy and it seems unlikely that they will accept it in the near future since they appear to be moving toward greater sectarianism under the umbrella of Buddhism. A measure of these gurus' break with orthodox Buddhism can be seen in their rejection of the classical or orthodox version of the Three Gems or Three Refuges (*ti saraṇa*): the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the Sangha. The overall effect of the meditation movement has been to reinterpret all three of these refuges: The Buddha no longer represents the sole source of the teachings—there are other Buddhas in the

[29] Obeyesekere 1986. Another category that might be employed here is that of 'emergent religions'. Robert Ellwood has discussed 'emergent religions' as movements that adopt a more eclectic approach toward belief and practice from established religions (Ellwood 1988, p. 17).

past, some gurus are regarded as Buddhas in the present and—according to one group—there are Buddhas on other planets; the *Dhamma* does not derive from the written canonical texts but from devas and the experience of gurus who can ensure its purity; and the authority of the Sangha has been challenged and in some cases supplanted by that of the gurus. These gurus now play familiar cross-cultural roles, as seen in India and the West, as prophets of meditation in a context of social change and globalisation. Although they move in somewhat autonomous directions, taken as a whole, these gurus and their movement represent significant statements of what it means to be a Buddhist today.

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