
Toward an Action-Oriented Pedagogy: Buddhist Texts and Monastic Education in Contemporary Sri Lanka

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By examining the role that texts play in the early training of Buddhist novices, this article supplements a growing collection of literature examining the role of “canon” in the Theravāda tradition. Drawing on fieldwork recently conducted in Sri Lanka, this article maintains that the majority of young newcomers to the monastic community or *saṅgha* learn about monastic behavior and practices less through learning the content of particular texts and more through doing, performing, and speaking. In the process of exploring the meaning and role of an action-oriented pedagogy in the monastic training of young novices, this article considers how engaging in such activities as eating, walking, chanting, and sweeping creates ritualized monastic agents who are imbued with an understanding of what it means to be a monk and how a monk should act.

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NEAR THE CONCLUSION OF HIS BOOK *Orientalism* Edward Said cautions the reader to remain “on guard against *idées reçues* all too easily handed down in the profession” (326).¹ This article explores one such *idée reçue* that has influenced many early and current studies of Theravāda Buddhism: the belief that the Pāli canon forms the instructional center for monastics. Building on fieldwork recently conducted in the Kandy District of Sri Lanka, this article examines the role that the canon plays in the early training of Buddhist novices, thus contributing to recent work that has begun to question the role and use of “canon” in the Theravāda tradition. Drawing a distinction between texts learned for instructional purposes and texts memorized for performative reasons, this article contends that for the majority of young newcomers to the monastic community or *saṅgha*, learning about normative monastic behavior and practices is not the result of studying what texts actually mean. Instead, this article suggests that monastic training for young novices is largely based on an *action-oriented pedagogy*, a system of learning that is centered around *doing*, *performing*, and *speaking*.² While this article does not maintain that texts have no place in the lives of newcomers to the *saṅgha*, it does assert that the pedagogical function of these texts has more to do with their performance than it does with studying their content.

Before developing further the concept of an action-oriented pedagogy, it may be helpful to situate the ideas contained in this article within larger discourses of the place of texts in the Theravāda tradition in general and within the realm of monastic training in particular. In doing so, I will first consider several challenges that have been made regarding the very idea of a Pāli canon. That will then be followed by examining a recent suggestion that current conversations about “canon” in the Theravāda tradition take into account both a formal and a practical canon. After providing a brief background regarding the place and meaning of “canon” in the Theravāda tradition, I will, in the remainder of this article, not only further refine our understand of canon by introducing a distinction between texts learned for instructional purposes and texts memorized for performative reasons but also begin to move beyond notions of canon by making reference to the pedagogical roles that doing, performing, and speaking play in monastic training.

¹ Charles Hallisey (1995: 31) also makes reference to Said’s cautionary statement in his article assessing the ways in which the Theravāda tradition has been studied historically.

² I would like to thank Anne M. Blackburn for helping to coin this term to describe the process by which monastics learn by doing.

DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE: TEXTUAL IDEALS AND LIVED REALITIES

Several scholars over the past two decades have begun questioning the role that texts—particularly the Pāli canonical texts or the *Tipiṭaka*—have played and continue to play in the Theravāda tradition. In particular, the works of G. D. Wijayawardhana, Philip Almond, Kamala Tiyanich, Charles Keyes, Steven Collins, Charles Hallisey (1990), Gregory Schopen (1997), and Anne Blackburn (1999a) have begun challenging the very idea of a Pāli canon.

Charles Keyes, in an article considering the common practice of merit transference in Theravāda Buddhism, began to question the belief that the Pāli canon forms the doctrinal center of the tradition. Drawing attention to noncanonical texts that have played and continue to play a role in the lives of Theravāda Buddhists living in Southeast Asia, Keyes contends that “there is no single integrated textual tradition based on a ‘canon’ to the exclusion of all other texts” (272). He further suggests (based on evidence gathered from monastic libraries in Laos and Thailand) that the Pāli canon actually plays a minor role for the majority of people learning about what constitutes the Buddhist teachings or *dhamma*: “The evidence from monastery libraries in Laos and Thailand . . . reveal that what constitutes the Theravadin *dhamma* for people in these areas includes only a small portion of the total *Tipiṭaka*, some semi-canonical commentaries such as Buddhaghosa’s *Vissudhimagga*, a large number of pseudo-*jātaka* and other pseudo-canonical works, histories of shrines and other sacred histories, liturgical works, and popular commentaries” (272). Keyes goes on to point out that the relationship between textual formulations and religious dogma is problematic and that in “traditional societies where structured education, formal or informal, was quite limited, the most important way in which religious ideas were communicated was through ritual” (273).

Drawing on Keyes’s work, Steven Collins, in an important article questioning the very idea of a Pāli canon, considers the degree to which the *Tipiṭaka* was and is important for monks and laypeople. He suggests that “throughout Theravāda history, up to and including the modern world, many other texts, both written and in oral-ritual form, have been used. The evidence suggests that both in so-called ‘popular’ practice and in the monastic world, even among virtuosos, only parts of the Canonical collection have ever been in wide currency and that other texts have been known and used, sometimes very much more widely” (103).³ According

³ Keyes and Collins’s conclusion is also echoed in the works of Gregory Schopen, who, in challenging the primacy given to texts and a Buddhist canon, writes: “But notice that this position, which gives overriding primacy to textual sources, does not even consider the possibility that the

to his study, it appears not only that the Pāli canon has a more minor place in the lives of laypeople living in Theravāda countries in Southeast Asia but also that its significance for members of the monastic order—even virtuosos—is questionable.

TEXTS COMMUNICATED, TEXTS LEARNED: THE FORMAL AND PRACTICAL CANONS OF THE THERAVĀDA

Building on the work of Collins and Keyes, Anne Blackburn's (1999a, 1999b, 2001) research on Sri Lankan monasticism complicates previous discussions of canon in the Theravāda tradition. In an article published in the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Blackburn (1999a) suggests that conversations about canon in the Theravāda tradition be nuanced with a distinction between two different types of canons—a formal and a practical canon. She further maintains that even though it may be true that the formal canon (i.e., *Tipiṭaka*) is absent from the lives of most Theravāda Buddhists and laypeople, it nonetheless functions as an ultimate source for interpretative authority and for references to discussions about Buddhist monastic history and identity. On the other hand, the practical canon—defined as “the units of text actually employed in the practices of collecting manuscripts, copying them, reading them, commenting on them, listening to them, and preaching sermons based upon them that are understood by their users as part of a *tipiṭaka*-based tradition” (1999a: 284)—plays, according to Blackburn, a more integral part in the actual lives of Buddhist monastics and laypeople.

In her discussion of the role and content of the practical canon in Sri Lankan monasticism, Blackburn examines evidence from the twelfth, thirteenth, and eighteenth centuries and further contends that the monks' encounter with the formal disciplinary canon (i.e., the *Vinaya Piṭaka*) was not at all common. She proposes that monks generally learned about monastic life through “condensations of and commentaries on *parts* of the *Vinaya* which were written in Pāli and Sinhalese” (1999a: 286) rather than an *unwieldy* Pāli *Vinaya*, an idea to which Charles Hallisey also alludes.⁴

texts we are to study to arrive at a knowledge of ‘Buddhism’ may not even have been known to the vast majority of practicing Buddhists—both monk and lay. It is axiomatically assumed that they not only were known but were also important, not only were ‘read,’ but were also fully implemented in actual practice. But no evidence in support of these assumptions, or even arguments for them, is ever presented” (1991: 5, reproduced in 1997: 2).

⁴ Hallisey maintains that Therāvādins found the *Vinaya* “too much in so far as the size of the canonical *Vinaya* made it unwieldy and they consequently wrote diverse summaries and compendiums . . . to present the *Vinaya*'s practical message in a more manageable fashion” (1990: 207).

Examining closely the monastic injunctions or *katikāvatas* written in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as well as compendia and commentaries of eighteenth-century monastic figures, Blackburn concludes that “most monks were expected to learn a great deal about disciplined monasticism through a set of three *suttas* [i.e., the *Anumāna Sutta*, the *Dasadhamma Sutta*, and the *Karaṇīyametta Sutta*] which they sometimes encountered with commentary written in Pāli and/or Sinhala” (1999a: 286).⁵

There is little doubt that the *suttas*, sections of texts, and monastic injunctions discussed in the writings of eighteenth-century monks (such as Vāliṅga Saramaṅkara) contain vivid portrayals of monastic life. At the same time, however, it is important to question the degree to which these texts that depict life in the *saṅgha* were read as descriptions of monastic life. Could these texts that contain descriptions of monastic practice have been read and memorized for other “nontextual” purposes, such as for performing them *in* ritual contexts?

In the remainder of this article I will first refine the idea of a “practical canon” by drawing a distinction between a practical canon that describes monastic life and a practical canon that is used nontextually. Second, I will explore ways of expanding our understandings of canon by introducing a whole host of atextual, body-oriented activities employed in the contemporary training of newcomers to the *saṅgha*. Even though this article focuses on the pedagogical role of “doing,” I do not intend to imply that texts have no place in monastic training; rather, I hope to complement current understandings about monastic training with pedagogical techniques that have less to do with learning texts and more do to with doing and speaking.

CONTEMPORARY SRI LANKAN MONASTIC TRAINING AND THE PRACTICAL CANON

Initial discussions about contemporary monastic training with head monks in Sri Lanka have pointed not only to an absent “formal” Pāli canon but also to a present “practical” canon. When I asked the head monks from three Kandyan temples about the texts employed in the training of newcomers to the *saṅgha*, all of them mentioned the *Sāmaṇera*

⁵ The *katikāvatas* that Blackburn refers to have been collected and translated by Nandasena Ratnapala. The evidence from the *katikāvata* also indicates that prior to being admitted to the *saṅgha*, initiates were expected to learn the alphabet, brief accounts of the Buddha’s life, and the *Dhammapada*, as well as the content of the injunctions themselves (Ratnapala: 48, 50); once admitted, the newcomers were expected to memorize the *Heranāsikha*, the training rules (*sekhiya*) contained in the *Pāṭimokkha*, as well as the guidelines for meditation and accounts of various conduct. For a discussion of the *Heranāsikha*, see Godakumbura.

Bañadahaṃ Pota, a monastic handbook specifically directed to novices or *sāmañera*.⁶ While the *Sāmañera Bañadahaṃ Pota* is in many ways a condensation of parts of the *Vinaya*, it is interesting to note that the head monks even regarded that text as containing *too* much information for young novices; as a result, only a portion of the text was assigned to the young monks. When I asked the head monks about which texts are actually employed in the training of young novices, they mentioned the *Maṅgala Sutta*, the *Karaṇīyametta Sutta*, and the *Ratana Sutta*, as well as referencing the *Dasadhamma Sutta* and the seventy-five *sekhiya* or rules of monastic etiquette. Speaking specifically about the *Dasadhamma Sutta*, Venerable Vālaṃṭiyyāvē Kusaladhamma, the vice-chancellor of Kelaniya University and head monk of Vidyālaṅkāra monastic college in Colombo, said that it is a key source of information for monastics regarding “who is a monk and how a monk should act.”⁷ Discussing the seventy-five *sekhiya* that form the penultimate section of the *Pāṭimokkha*, the head monk from one training temple in Kandy remarked:

The *sekhiya* are the monks’ *vinaya* [discipline]. They explain how to do daily activities such as eating, walking, talking, wearing robes, sleeping, cleaning, and so on. One example is not making noise when drinking or

⁶ There are three sections of the *Sāmañera Bañadahaṃ Pota*: (1) a background section that contains histories of Buddhism in India and Sri Lanka, an outline of the *pabbajjā* ceremony, and details about the meaning and purpose of monastic life; (2) a section on protection (*pirit*) verses and *suttas*; and (3) a section on worshipping and making offerings (*pūjā*). There are numerous editions of this handbook in Sri Lanka, though the content of the text does not vary greatly between editions. The versions that are most commonly used in the temples where I conducted research are the ones edited by Paṇḍita Ranjit Vanaratna and Dhammatilaka.

⁷ The *Dasadhamma Sutta*, which is sometimes called a monastic handbook in itself, is found in the fifth section of *The Aṅguttara Nikāya* (V:87–88 [Hardy]). This *sutta* contains a list of ten (*dasa*) qualities/attributes (*dhamma*) that must be reflected upon (*abhiñhaṃ paccavekkhitabbaṃ*) by those who have “gone forth” (*pabbajitena*). They are (1) that they have now come to the state of having a different color (or appearance); (2) that they are dependent on others for their sustenance; (3) that their appearance and deportment must be different; (4) whether or not they censure their own selves as a result of a lapse of virtue; (5) that change and separation will befall everything that is dear and pleasant to them; (6) that they are responsible for their actions, heirs of their action, and the source of the results of action; (7) that whatever they do, they will reap the results; (8) that they are not wasting their nights and days; (9) whether or not they take delight in their dwelling places; and (10) whether or not they have experienced any superhuman powers or knowledge.

The seventy-five *sekhiya* rules to which the head monks refer make up the penultimate section of the *Pāṭimokkha*, a list of 227 rules that are recited (or supposed to be recited) by fully ordained monks during the full and new moons (*uposatha* day). These seventy-five rules, which focus on deportment and appearance, may be divided into eight categories or groups: rules that govern (1) dress, (2) bodily movements, (3) use of speech, (4) posture, (5) ways to receive food, (6) eating, (7) preaching, and (8) using the toilet. Taken as a whole, the *sekhiya* rules fashion a monk who is externally tempered, disciplined, and serene in terms of the way in which he dresses, walks, speaks, eats, and drinks. For instance, in regard to the first category of the *sekhiya* rules, we read: “I shall wear (the under robe) even all around,” “I shall put on (the upper robe) even all around,” and “I shall go well covered in inhabited areas.”

eating. You have to be very mindful when you eat. You should not show your tongue or lick the plate or your mouth or your fingers. The idea behind these *sekhiya* is that Lord Buddha wanted to keep his group of monks from various backgrounds in a single group through unifying their actions.

While the novices undoubtedly learn and memorize a number of the texts from their “practical canon,” a closer examination of the process of training and of the reflections of a number of young monastics about their early experiences as novices reveals that the texts themselves did not form a key ingredient to their monastic training. One reason for the limited role that the monastic handbook plays in their training is that the very texts of this practical canon are inaccessible to many novices. While it is true texts such as the *Dasadhamma Sutta*, the *Karaniyametta Sutta*, the *Maṅgala Sutta*, and the *Ratana Sutta* have a place in the early training of the novices, it became evident that the texts are not, in fact, studied for their content. Indeed, the language in which the texts appeared in the handbook is Pāli. Not only is the novices’ ability to understand Pāli quite low or even nonexistent in the first several years of their training, but their Sinhala abilities are too low to allow them access to the texts through written Sinhala commentaries. Moreover, conversations with novices about the texts themselves suggest that most (if not all) of the novices are unaware of what the texts are actually saying, despite the novices’ ability to recite the texts from memory. Thus, rather than being approached as a means to acquire an understanding of monastic behavior and practice, the texts are approached as something to be performed in a variety of rituals, such as the very important protection (*pirit* or *paritta*) rituals that are quite common in the Theravāda world.⁸

If the practical canon is not studied as a means to learn about the content and meaning of monastic life, how do the newcomers learn about their new roles and what constitutes normative monastic behavior? By exploring in the remainder of this article the views of head monks and the experiences of the young novices regarding monastic training, I will argue that contemporary monastic training for young newcomers to the *saṅgha* in Sri Lanka has less to do with learning the content of particular “key” texts and more to do with “doing.”⁹ Paying attention to this

⁸ The importance of protection ceremonies and their accompanying texts in Sri Lanka is described in Lily de Silva’s and Piyadassi Thera’s monographs. It is worth noting that all of the key texts that the head monks highlighted in reference to monastic training play an important role in a number of protection rituals.

⁹ Keyes suggests that doing is closely related to learning when he writes: “Although individuals may be able to evolve their own personal religious worldviews through the study in private of esoteric texts, popular religion depends upon the public display and communication of religious messages” (273).

action-oriented pedagogy in monastic training is essential, I believe, for arriving at a more complete understanding of the roles that texts play in Theravāda monastic culture.

FROM PERFORMED TEXT TO MONASTIC PERFORMANCE: TOWARD AN ACTION-ORIENTED PEDAGOGY

Charles Hallisey, in an article on ethical particularism in the Theravāda tradition, observes that while scholars “cherish the truism that some questions are better than others . . . we do not ask often enough what makes one question better than another” (1996: 34). He goes on to suggest that what makes one question better than another is that “it promises to yield an answer that is better within the framework of a specific purpose” (1996: 34).

When I asked the head monks about which texts are employed in monastic training, I did not think, at the time, that my questions were ill-suited for the particular framework and purpose of my research. As I progressed in my study of the monastic training of novices, I came to understand that my very questions that centered on learning texts was more appropriate for older monks who already had a working understanding of the texts’ languages and an ability to reflect on the texts’ content and meaning. As I began changing my questions to those that were more fitting to young novices and not based on my own biases regarding texts in the Theravāda tradition, new conversations about a whole host of atextual, body-oriented ritualized activities emerged. For example, when discussing various pedagogical approaches to the monastic training of young newcomers with the head monks, several of them eloquently explained how ritual performance and ritualized activities shape a novice’s outlook and demeanor. According to the head monk from a training temple in Ampitiya: “Worshipping the Buddha three times a day influences the way that monks think. By doing these activities, monks begin to think differently. We have given the monks a timetable and that too helps them think about how to work together, how to work peacefully, and how to work without disturbing others. They are assigned to pluck flowers for *pūjā* and offer them to Lord Buddha. All that affects their way of thinking (*cintanaya*).”

Similarly, when I began asking the novices about their own training, they rarely made reference to texts.¹⁰ Instead, a number of them began discussing how learning about monastic life is intimately related to *doing*.

¹⁰ While almost none of the monks made reference to texts and monastic learning, one of the older and more intellectually inclined monks suggested that he learned a great deal about monasticism through reading: “What helped me learn about being a monk was reading, especially the *Sāsanāvataranaya*. I was alone a lot and read a lot in my room. The sections that helped me the most

For instance, when I asked Silananda, a fifteen-year-old novice, regarding what helped him learn about being a monastic, he replied:

Doing religious rituals is very important to the process of becoming a monk. You have to learn these activities for your whole life. The two activities in particular that affected my thoughts were worshipping the Buddha and cleaning the temple. I found cleaning the temple to be closely related to keeping the precepts [*śīl*]. By worshipping the Buddha every day, I got used to being a monastic and began to think like a monastic. . . . Those who do not do the temple activities correctly are not following the [monastic] precepts well. By worshipping the Buddha you begin to develop your faith, and that helps you acquire more feelings [or understanding] about being a monastic.

For Silananda, as well as many other young newcomers to the *saṅgha*, learning about how to be a novice did not occur through studying the content of certain texts that portray monastic life. It occurred through doing. It was by worshipping the Buddha and performing other types of ritualized activities (such as eating or sweeping in a ritually prescribed way) that novices began to understand the meaning and content of monastic life.

The views of Silananda were echoed by another newcomer to the *saṅgha*, Tanhankara, who within several months of becoming a novice pointed out the role that activities such as worshipping the Buddha and ritualized action such as cleaning and sweeping play in the training process: “I started feeling like a monastic the day after the head monk advised us to think that we are monastics. What helped cause that change was doing the work of monastics that the head monk assigned to me. For example, when I was a layperson, I was not asked to sweep (*atugānava*). Now, I have to do it methodically.”¹¹ He continued: “Now we can help with the activities in the alms hall such as organizing the alms food. Also, now we worship the Buddha with the other novices. I feel ready to accept

were the *pravijya* [going forth] section, the section on how to be a monk, and the section describing the differences between a monk and a layman.” Despite the importance that he gave to monastic handbooks, this monk did mention how the head monk’s teachings about how to behave and act played an important part in his monastic training: “Another important part that helped me a lot was the training of the head monk. He taught me how to behave and he explained to me the passages from the *Śāsanāvatarapaṇaya* and *Sāmaṇera Baṇadahaṃ Pota*. He taught me general things such as how to talk and how to walk.”

¹¹ What Tanhankara is referring to in this statement is how newcomers to the *saṅgha* are taught to complete various temple duties in a specific, even ritualized, manner.

everything. I am learning to be a novice.”¹² Another novice expressed a similar perspective about monastic training by noting that he began to understand what it means to be a novice when he started actually doing certain temple rituals, such as *bodhipūjā*,¹³ *Buddhapūjā*, and other types of temple activities: “The activities done in the shrine room made me closer to being a monastic. Cleaning the temple and making offerings to the Buddha made me closer to a monastic’s role.” Yet another novice, when asked about the processes of monastic training, noted that doing took precedence over studying the content of texts: “It was not what we studied. It was the way we were supposed to act in the temples, such as standing up when the teacher came in, cleaning the temple, and talking properly to our teacher.” Despite the fact that all of the novices had to memorize key texts and verses from their “practical canon” (i.e., the *Sāmañera Baṇadaham Pota*) prior to and following their ordination, learning the content of the texts was not emphasized. Instead, the novices’ early training appears to be more centered on completing temple activities as well as on performing rituals in which the memorized texts are recited.

Even though previous conversations about monastic training in Buddhism have paid little or no attention to the pedagogical role of the body and bodily action, the field of ritual studies has explored this important dimension, particularly in discussions of how ritualization creates “ritualized agents.” Drawing on the works of ritual theorist Pierre Bourdieu, Catherine Bell, in her *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, discusses the interrelatedness between mind and body by noting how ritual participation inscribes dominant symbols, structures, and beliefs of a particular community on a ritualized agent. She states:

The molding of the body within a highly structured environment does not simply express inner states. Rather, it primarily acts to restructure bodies in the very doing of the acts themselves. . . . [W]hat we see in ritualization is not the mere display of subjective states or corporate values. Rather, we see an act of production—the production of a ritualized

¹² Implied in Tanhankara’s comment is the communal nature of monastic life and the communal nature of the action-oriented pedagogy. This particular point was highlighted by one of the head monks, who offered this comment: “The most important aspect of their training is not my advice. It is not my advice that is important. The thing I do here is put them into a group. The newcomer does not know what to do, but by being in a group he automatically learns. . . . If you want to catch an elephant, you have to go to the jungle with two tamed elephants. The tamed elephants hit the wild elephants and through that control him. They do it themselves. The method that I am using here is like that. It is more important than the advice I give them. My advice is secondary.”

¹³ The *bodhipūjā* ritual, which has gained in popularity in Sri Lanka during the past thirty years, consists of Pāli and Sinhala chants celebrating the twenty-four or twenty-eight previous Buddhas. This ritual has been discussed in Gombrich, Gombrich and Obeyesekere, and Seneviratne and Wickremaratne.

agent. . . . Hence, ritualization, as the production of a ritualized agent via the interaction of a body within a structured and structuring environment, always takes place within a larger and very immediate sociocultural situation. (99–100)

What is notable about this process of ritualization is how performing and participating in rituals restructure the bodies and minds of the actors themselves, enabling them to imbibe a certain ideal and worldview. For Bell, ritualization “is nothing other than the production of ritualized agents, persons who have an instinctive knowledge of these schemes embedded in their bodies, in their sense of reality, and in their understanding of how to act in ways that both maintain and qualify the complex microrelations of power” (221).

Drawing on the works of Bell, Kevin Trainor—in his recent work on Buddhist relics—points out that “the performance of the respective rituals serves as a process of inscription through which distinctive patterns of meaningful practice become embodied in the participants, or, in other words, ritualized agents are created” (140).¹⁴ It is this creation of an agent through ritualized activities that Bourdieu also alludes to when he says that a whole cosmology is instilled in the command “Stand up straight” (94) or Talal Asad implies when he says that “in the monastic programme it was clearly recognized that the learning of *appropriate* forms was important because it was essential to the disciplined development of the self” (167).

For the young newcomers to the *saṅgha* too, embodying a religious ideal led to the creation of a ritualized “monastic” agent; many of them gradually became identified with their new roles by performing temple activities and monastic rituals.¹⁵ Despite the fact that novices memorized texts and verses, their learning about what it means to be a monastic and how a monastic should act did not necessarily come from learning the content of the texts; instead, their training largely occurred in a

¹⁴ Charles Keyes makes a similar point when he suggests that “texts are invested by a people with a timelessness whose message becomes translated in ritual into meanings that inform ongoing social experience” (273).

¹⁵ This idea is very much echoed by Roy Rappaport, who, in discussing the effects of kneeling in the context of a religious ritual, writes: “I would now propose that the use of the body defines the self of the performer for himself and for others. In kneeling, for instance, he is not merely sending a message to the effect that he submits in ephemeral words that flutter away from his mouth. He identifies his inseparable, indispensable, and enduring body with his subordination. The subordinated self is neither a creature of insubstantial words from which he may separate himself without loss of blood, nor some insubstantial essence or soul that cannot be located in space or confined in time. It is his visible, present, living substance that he ‘puts on the line,’ that ‘stands up (or kneels down) to be counted.’ As ‘saying’ may be ‘doing,’ ‘doing’ may also be an especially powerful—or substantial—way of ‘saying’” (200).

more fluid manner in which doing and acting resulted in learning and knowing. Action, in short, functioned to mold the bodies of the novices within the monastic environment by restructuring the bodies and minds of the novices “in the very doing of the acts themselves” (Bell: 100).

DOING AND SAYING: SPEECH AND THE MAKING OF MONASTIC IDENTITIES

Closely related to the roles that “doing” and the body play in monastic training is the place of language and speech. In Sinhala, as in Thai, a different vocabulary is used when addressing or speaking about members of the *saṅgha*. The different vocabularies, as W. S. Karunatilake (4) has pointed out, shapes understandings about the monastic order just as it creates a distinction between the *saṅgha* and the laity.¹⁶ Charles Hallisey raises a similar idea of how language shapes attitudes and ways of being in the world. Drawing on the concept of performative utterances developed by Tambiah, Sesonke, and Austin, Hallisey discusses how language has a performative dimension: how *saying* is closely interconnected with *doing* and *being*. In a manner closest to Sesonke’s notion of performative utterances, Hallisey (1988: 82–88) suggests that particular utterances may alter formal relationships, such as the relationship between a Buddhist devotee and the Buddha.

Besides shaping one’s relationships with others (whether between the *saṅgha* and the laity or between a devotee and the Buddha), language also has a pedagogical function in monastic training. Conversations with novices and head monks have suggested that just as newcomers may learn about monastic life through doing, they may also learn about their own “monkness” (*mahaṅkama*) through the use of particular words and language. Discussing the role that language plays in the training of novices, one head monk remarked about the different vocabularies used in reference to laypeople and to members of the *saṅgha*: “There is a method or a process in training the novices. When the boys come to the temple, they leave their home environment. Here we train the boys by changing the words they use. Laypeople say *yanava* [go] or *enava* [come]. In the temples, we use the term *vaḍḍinava*. By using the different words, they begin to change.” When I asked the head monk to explain further how different vocabularies function pedagogically, he pointed out that

¹⁶ Examples of the different speech provided by Karunatilake (4n2) include such commonly used verbs as “be/exist,” “eat,” “drink,” “sleep,” “go,” “come,” and so on. One specific example of the differences in the language is “to eat,” which is *kanava* for laypeople and *vaḷaṅḍanava* for members of the *saṅgha*. B. J. Terwiel raises a similar point in his discussion of Thai Buddhism.

newcomers must first be taught what the particular words or verbs (such as *vadinava*) mean as well as the modes of action and behavior that are associated with them. Once the newcomer knows what particular actions are associated with each verb, he begins to learn about what is expected of him as well as how to act in accordance with the monastic rules:

Hearing a word, one might have a kind of change in one's mind because of the discipline (*śikṣaṇaya*) that the word contains. *Yanava* is the common word for going. *Vadinava* has a completely different meaning because it is associated with discipline (*śikṣaṇaya*). Automatically, when the monks hear the word *vadinava*, a tranquil walk is understood. . . . When you take *kanava*, it can refer to any type of eating. If you take *valaṇḍanava*, it is very slow and methodical and associated with thinking about eating and the minor rules (*sekhiya*) associated with eating.

Just as it may be the case that a specialized language may signal and mark off ritual performance from nonritual types of action, so too does it appear that language marks off ordinary ways of acting in the world from how monastics are supposed to act.¹⁷ Rather than learning about what is expected of them by reading the list of the seventy-five *sekhiya*, monks are physically taught the content and meaning of particular words associated with proper monastic behavior and demeanor. When they hear the words, they begin internalizing a particular way of being that is different from the ways of being that pertain to lay life.

Through the discussions with the head monks, it became apparent that the relationship between language and ways of conducting oneself in the world is based on a multistep process in which the novices are first taught about the different discipline patterns suitable for novices. These patterns are then correlated to particular terms or a specialized vocabulary. As this process becomes continually reinforced over time, the words become automatically associated with certain actions. In the words of a head monk from another training temple:

You have to develop your behavior pattern like a monk. . . . There should be a difference between a layman and a monk. For a simple example, take food. Everybody says "eat." For laymen it is *kāma kanava*, but for monks it is *dāna valaṇḍanava*. The words *kanava* and *valaṇḍanava* are different. They do not mean the same thing. It is the same act but two different actions. You can eat (*kanava*) when you walk, talk, or even

¹⁷ In summarizing Gregory Bateman's notion of ritual framing, Catherine Bell remarks: "There is some consensus that ritual performances are signaled, at least in part, by a way of speaking that contrasts everyday talk with more ceremonial styles of speech" (74).

stand. There are no limitations. *Valaṇḍanava*, on the other hand, is completely different. You have to think about the food, you have to sit properly, and you have to do it with manners. You have to do it while thinking that you are a monk. That is how the novices are trained.

According to the head monks, speech does more than communicate or represent; it shapes. By using a specific vocabulary and language, the minds and bodies of the newcomers to the *saṅgha* become shaped to a particular monastic ideal, which through further reinforcement becomes internalized.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

In expanding our knowledge of monastic training in contemporary Sri Lanka, this article explored an *idée reçue* that has influenced previous studies on the Theravāda tradition: the view that the Pāli canon forms the instructional center of the Theravāda tradition. Drawing on recent works that have begun to question the place of the Pāli canon for Theravāda laypeople and monastics, this article looked at the place of canon—both formal and practical—in the monastic training of young novices in Sri Lanka.

In looking at the idea of two canons, this article went on to refine further the notion of a practical canon by drawing a distinction between texts studied for learning about doctrine and monastic roles and texts memorized for performative purposes. Introducing such a distinction within the idea of a practical canon would provide scholars not only with a more nuanced understanding of the uses of canon in the Buddhist tradition but also with the tools for understanding and appreciating other, sometimes nontextual, uses for texts.

In addition to refining the idea of a practical canon, this article suggested ways of moving away from the idea that the canon—formal or practical—forms the pedagogical center of the tradition. Despite the fact that novices studied and learned a host of texts, the examination of firsthand accounts of monastic training in this article revealed the roles that the body and doing play in learning. Specifically, this article suggested that in addition to performing texts in ritual contexts, certain ritualized activities such as eating, walking, and sweeping formed an integral component to the training of newcomers to the *saṅgha* and provided them with a growing understanding of monastic life.

¹⁸ Talal Asad makes a similar remark in his discussion of medieval Christian monasticism when he writes that “speech is not simply a mode of communication or of conventional representation. It is not an instrument of ‘social control.’ Speech in this context is a dialogical process by which the self makes (or fails to make) itself in a disciplined way” (174).

Drawing on previous discussions of the performative dimension of speech, the final section of this article explored the relationship that exists between speech and action. In that section I suggested that in addition to communicating and representing ideas, specialized vocabularies and words employed by the young novices functioned to shape their own identities as monastics as well as taught them about proper monastic behavior and roles. Through a multistep process, particular ways of acting and doing become correlated to a specialized vocabulary that, when repeated over time, reinforces the novices' understanding of the content and meaning of monastic life.

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