

STUDIA ORIENTALIA
EDITED BY THE FINNISH ORIENTAL SOCIETY

52

MODES OF LIFE OF THERAVĀDA MONKS
A Case Study of Buddhist Monasticism in Sri Lanka

By

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HELSINKI 1982

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ISSN 0039-3282
ISBN 951-95076-0-4
Offset Oy 1982

"To learn to understand one another
is the great art of life,
and to 'agree to differ'
is the best lesson of the
comparative science of religion"

Max Müller

*To my grandfather
Nils Reinhold Gothóni
16 July 1891 - 17 May 1943
whom I never met, but who
nevertheless was the
inspiration for this study*

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ABSTRACT

MODES OF LIFE OF THERAVĀDA MONKS:

A Case Study of Buddhist Monasticism in Sri Lanka

Gothóni, René

1982, University of Helsinki, SF

267 pages (Dissertation)

(Studia Orientalia vol. 52)

In this dissertation Buddhist monasticism is viewed as a complex religious-social phenomenon, which has changed in regard of practical arrangements since the days of its appearance in Sri Lanka. Through various processes of adaptation and interaction it has assumed its present shape.

The sources of research consist of canonical scriptures, document texts and field material. Personal fieldwork was conducted in one particular monastery in the up-country of Sri Lanka from October 1974 to April 1975. The field material was collected by means of guided interviews and participant observation.

The primary aim has been to point out how changes in the cultural and social constellations surrounding one so-called principal monastery are *reflected* in the mode of life of the Theravāda monks and how these factors influence the interaction between the monastery and society. The analysis concerns the level of society, the level of organization and the level of the individual monk. Moreover, these levels of analysis are intersected by such viewpoints of analysis as the social patterns as well as the values, attitudes and norms of the monks concerned. One part of the study concentrates on the *circumstances of life* within a principal monastery, the other on the *dynamic life* within it. The second part of the dissertation is a case study of nine monks.

Societal reflections onto monastic life were noticed on all three levels of analysis. On the level of society, the institutionalized "merit-making" reflected the frequent and indispensable interaction between monks and laity. Moreover, the restriction of recruitment of novices solely to the *Goyigama* caste was a reflection of the historical, ecological and social circumstances of the up-country region. On the level of organization, the system of pupillary succession proved to be a reflection of the Sinhalese

kinship system with its principles of transmission of property. On the level of the individual, reflections were noticed by means of an analysis of the micro-social configurations. The dyadic social contacts reflected a social tension. Because the monastery had opened up new channels of interaction, particularly towards university education, the awareness of the gap between traditional and modern has resulted in various individual and institutional dilemmas. Yet a new vitality and a reinforced continuity of the monastic tradition seems to emerge from this currently tense situation. The open triads reflect the marginal position of the monks and the closed triads their centrality.

The strong tendency of the pupils to avoid social interaction with their teachers (Chief Monks) reflects an estrangement in the traditional relationship. It reflects the dilemma between upbringing and the process of acquiring independence. To sum up, the dilemmas of monkhood are in various ways a result of the ongoing changes in the surrounding society and the encounter with new life situations. For the Theravāda monks, as for other mortals, *involvement creates dilemmas.*

PREFACE

Buddhism is no longer a religion that is practised solely in Asia. Ever since Buddhism was "discovered" by the westerners in the middle of the 19th century, it has gained ground outside the traditional Buddhist countries. During this century, Buddhist societies and monasteries have been founded both in America and in Europe. Nowadays there are two Buddhist societies in Finland as well. The older one was established within the Finnish Theosophical Society in the middle of the 1940's, while the younger one was founded in the beginning of the 1970's.

From the viewpoint of religion, many of the larger cities of today in England, France, Germany and the other European countries as well as in Finland are what has been called pluralistic societies. Side by side we find a number of religious movements and organizations, many of which have their roots in the culture and religions of India. Finland, which traditionally has been a Christian country, provides nowadays a fertile soil for more than fifty different religious movements. From the viewpoint of religious education, many young people therefore appear to stand at a crossroads. Quite a number of young people as well as their seniors have made a personal choice as regards world-view and religious practices.

My interest in Buddhism awakened already in the 1960's when, in my middle teens, I came across my late grandfather's old and dusty books on Buddhism. I remember being especially fond of Sir Edwin Arnold's delightful poem "The Light of Asia". Consequently, I opted for a major in Buddhism when I matriculated in the Department of Comparative Religion, which is a part of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Helsinki.

During my first years as a student in the early 1970's I was mainly occupied with Buddhism from the viewpoint of history, apart from other studies in the Faculty of Theology. Attention was devoted to the Pāli Canon (*Ti-piṭaka*) in general and the monastic rules known as *Pātimokkha* in particular. Hence, the aspect which I treated in my postgraduate thesis (Lic.Theol.) entitled "The Oral Phasis of the Tradition of *Pātimokkha*" (*Pātimokkha-traditionens orala skeden*) concerned the structural patterns of the monastic rules and I used structural analysis (mainly as presented by Propp and

Dundes) to make a distinction between the older and the younger strata in the collection of the rules. In the conclusion I presented a hypothetical system of how compilation of the collection could have been made at the time it took form.

It was during these years of endless hours spent in the libraries in Finland as well as in England and Scotland that a longing for fieldwork awakened. Having studied Theravāda Buddhism from the historical point of view during my undergraduate period my interest shifted towards the current Buddhist movements in Finland. It proved, however, to be difficult to study the Finnish Buddhist groups in Helsinki as many of their religious ideas and practices had been adopted from both Sri Lanka and other Buddhist countries. When given the opportunity, I considered it appropriate to carry out fieldwork first in Sri Lanka, the country from which the movements in one way or another originated, before undertaking an in-depth study of the groups in Finland.

The idea of standing at a crossroads, viewing different modes of life, continued, however, to occupy my mind. This study gradually grew to provide a picture of the modes of life of Theravāda monks as practised in one particular type of monastery in Sri Lanka.

I chose Sri Lanka and Buddhist monasticism as the subject of my research for several reasons. First, language was an important factor. Having already studied Pāli and handbooks on the Sinhalese language, the choice seemed quite natural. Secondly, I had had the opportunity to meet Rev. Mahāthera Nyana-ponika in Turku, Finland in 1973 and to discuss with him my planned fieldwork. Thirdly, Buddhism in the Sinhalese culture and society seemed to me particularly interesting as an object for research since there were in Finland two Buddhist societies, both of which go back in part to Theravāda Buddhism as practised in Sri Lanka. Thus, I arrived on the island in autumn 1974 for a six months intensive period of fieldwork. This monograph is the result of that sojourn.

Although I lead the life of a western scholar - so far - this study represents the fulfilment of a personal aim in the sense that I realized the mode of life of a Theravāda monk in Sri Lanka during the process of research.

Now that I have finished this long and time-consuming project, I wish to thank, in the first place, all those Sinhalese, both monks and laymen, who by participating in the study contributed to my understanding of their culture and religion as practised today. I am particularly grateful to my two

key-informants (see § 8.1.) who proved to be indispensable during the period of fieldwork.

My fieldwork was supported by grants from the World Council of Churches, the Finnish Academy, Centralinstitutet for Nordisk Asienforskning and Donnerska Institutet för religionshistorisk och kulturhistorisk forskning. The fieldwork material was analyzed and this dissertation written principally during the years 1974-1979, when I had a research assistantship at the Finnish Academy. I am deeply grateful for this research opportunity. The final revision of this dissertation was supported by grants from the Leo and Regina Wainstein Foundation.

Since the very beginning of my studies and this project Professor Juha Pentikäinen, head of the Department of Comparative Religion at the University of Helsinki, has been my esteemed teacher and tutor. I express my sincere gratitude for his continuous encouragement to study Buddhism, a field which has so far been largely ignored in Finland. Of those working at the Department I would especially like to mention Mr. Leo Väyrynen, M.D., Miss. Tuula Juurikka, B.A., Dr. Raimo Harjula, Mr. Seppo Syrjänen, Lic.Theol., Mr. Veikko Anttonen, M.A. and Mrs. Riitta Kuusisto, who have contributed to the study through many valuable discussions in the seminars and lecture halls as well as by providing a proper academic atmosphere at the department.

During the period of research I have been variously associated with the Department of Folklore and Comparative Religion in Turku, Donnerska Institutet in Turku, the Institute of History of Religion of the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University and the Institute of Comparative Philology of the Faculty of Art at Uppsala University. I want to thank the heads and the members and students of those departments — especially Professor Lauri Honko, Professor Haralds Biezais, Professor Jan Bergman and Lecturer Gunilla Hägg respectively for many stimulating discussions.

Moreover, I owe a particular debt of gratitude to my friends, colleagues and mentors Dr. Kirsti Suolinna, Mr. Tore Ahlbäck, Lic.Phil., Mr. Harry Halén, Lic.Phil., Professor Nils G. Holm and Mr. Henrik Stenius, Lic.Phil., who in several ways have encouraged me to finish the project. A special vote of thanks goes to Dr. Kirsti Suolinna, who for several years has given me advice and constructive criticism.

At various symposiums I have also been able to discuss my ideas with Professor Heinz Bechert (Göttingen), Professor Richard F. Gombrich (Oxford), Professor Per Kvaerne (Oslo) and Dr. Peter Schalk (Göteborg). I am most indebted for their advice.

The practical progress of the study and the text was facilitated by the following institutes and persons. Throughout the period of research the Helsinki University Library and the Ethnological Library of the Finnish Literature Society have fulfilled my numerous requests for books and articles with both proficiency and patience. Mr. Peter Jones, B.A. and Mr. Robert Goebel, M.A. have revised my English text several times and consulted with me on questions of exposition. Mrs. and Mr. S. Chandrasekeram assisted me in compiling the biographies of the nine monks added in the appendix. Dr. Asko Parpola read an early manuscript of this study and recommended it to the Finnish Oriental Society to be published in *Studia Orientalia*. I am deeply grateful to the Finnish Oriental Society for accepting this study to be published in their series. The front cover drawing was made by my friend, the artist and scholar Mr. Juha Vilja, M.A.. To all these persons I am very much indebted.

Finally, I wish to thank my parents, who have encouraged me to continue my studies to this stage and my beloved wife Raili, who apart from showing sincere interest in my study, have also helped me in many practical ways ever since the start of the project. My wife Raili has provided me a spiritual environment which has been highly conducive to creativity. Our three children Anthony, Annette and André have in their own way made the project meaningful. After all everything we do remains to be judged by the new generation.

With gratitude for the privilege of being a scholar,

Villa Alfa

July 1982

René Gothóni

SPELLING AND TRANSLITERATION

This study contains numerous Sinhalese, Pāli and Sanskrit words. As we are here concerned with Theravāda Buddhism I have preferred to use the Pāli form of the Buddhist technical terms, while supplying the Sanskrit form in parentheses.

Romanization of the Sinhalese terms follows the standard system of transliteration, which is used in scholarly literature (Bechert, Evers, Gombrich, Malalgoda and others) and principally derived from the system used by Wilhelm Geiger, *A Grammar of the Sinhalese Language*, Colombo: Royal Asiatic Society, 1931. The terms are usually given in their singular form.