

## Vinayaless priests

### Where are the Sinhala monks heading?

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It's always a delight to read a well-written scholarly paper on early Buddhism. Good scholars keep to the rules of clear writing, supported by reasoning and citations, elaborating on difficult ideas, discussing overlooked but significant aspects of Buddhism, even challenging some long-held notions. The scholarly approach is a refreshingly enlightening way of understanding Buddhism as history, theory and culture, even as some sort of "quality control" exercise.

Budding scholars are well aware that they have to **publish** if they are to prosper in the narrow field of **Buddhist studies** (a broad term covering Buddhist history, Buddhology, Buddhist languages, Buddhist meditation, Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist psychology, Buddhist art, Buddhist society, and related fields.)

### Watching the Buddhists

Scholars of Buddhism—not all are "Buddhist" scholars—are well aware that they have to keep to the middle way between the Scylla of writing as they see and feel (such as writing about the Vinayaless monks of Sri Lanka or Business Priests of Singapore), and writing a paper that is little more than polite critical analyses of Buddhism, rightly or wrongly, so that their peers may respond with reviews or rebuttals.

Either way keeps their names alive in academia and so will further their career. Scholars need not be right, as long as they write. Theirs is a **profession** in the modern sense, not in the premodern or early Buddhism sense.

Good scholars are also painfully aware that some of their views, no matter how true, radical or bizarre, would probably not last beyond their own life. However, it is sufficient to get their names in print like a yantra on the hallowed pages of some journal that does not commercialize their works (like selling their papers of a dozen pages for the prize of a small textbook). Indeed, very few scholars are widely or often quoted posthumously. One reason is that either that neck of Buddhist studies is no more in vogue or that their ideas have become outdated.

### Of geese and hands

Respectable scholars who are more likely to produce revealing works on Buddhism are usually anthropologists, sociologists or ethnographers (a fashionable word for an "all-round" scholar). Unlike the young scholars who neither want to kill the golden goose or bite the hands that feed them, these ethnographic studies are, as a rule, carefully documented exposes on darker but real aspects of Buddhism.

Of such works, two classics are especially well known. The first is S J Tambiah's *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, politics, and violence in Sri Lanka* (1992), on Sinhala monks who have

violent political engagements. In 1959, for example, a Buddhist monk (in disguise) assassinated the Prime Minister SWRD Bandaranaike.

The other book is H L Seneviratne's *The Work of Kings: The new Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (1999), whose surveys include those of caste-based Buddhism and Vinaya-less career monks of Sri Lanka we often see today. In short, Buddhism has become a kind of business and a religious market for them; we are seen as customers and clients who are given teachings that make us dependent on them instead of being self-reliant.

### **Watch and learn**

Jeffrey Samuels (an ethnographer specializing in Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Malaysia) spent some years "going native" as a monastic hand to have a first-hand observation of the private lives of Sinhala monastics. He writes his experiences in *Attracting the Heart* (2010).

One passage records how well trusted he was with the Sinhala monastics. Once, he happened to go into the kitchen while the monks were preparing a clandestine dinner. At first the hungry monks were apprehensive. Seeing him, one of the novices said: "It's all right, he's one of us!"

### **Private behaviour**

Vinayaless monastics have their own "code" of **private behaviour**. In western viharas and centres, for example, no one else would enter the kitchen in the evening when the kitchen light is on. The idea is not to intrude into an inmate who is having an extra-Vinaya meal. Amongst the Thai monks, this seems to be a "confessable" offence.

In other words, before reciting the fortnightly Patimokkha (where it is recited), they would "confess" their "sins" (this unbuddhist term seems to apply here) and they are technically purified. This is, of course, a recidivism to the Brahminical idea of ritual recitation. The Sinhala monks keep it even simpler: they rarely, if ever, recite the Patimokkha at all.

### **Salaried priests**

Non-observance of the Vinaya clearly puts the monastics on the level of **the laity**, or even below them, since the laity (with their humble but potent 5 precepts) do not live double lives. Technically, we cannot call these Vinayaless monks **bhikkhus**, or even "monks": they are certainly not renunciants anymore.

A lay temple hand, upon questioning a Sinhala monk about masturbation, was told that "It's all right to do it!" Hence, it is not surprising to see now, in the US especially, that such priests find it a pleasure, even meritorious perhaps, to hug women, and for other men to be intimate with the priests.

## "Yellownecks"

Hence, the term **priest** applies to such “yellownecks” (a sutta term) rather than “monks.” The term is a warning of a time when the monastic robes would be modified to look more like lay clothes (we can actually see this today), except perhaps for the colour, “yellow” to mark their status.

Psychologically, these priests seem to “compensate” for such deleterious adjustments by excelling in academic studies, working for a degree (usually a PhD), and then as salaried lecturers, or as Buddhist Centre employees as resident priests (like the brahminical purohit), or get their own houses as “Buddhist Centre” to work as “house-priests.”

## Laicization process

The laicization of the Sinhala sangha started centuries ago, even in the times when Sinhala kings protected the monks who had to obey the kings. However, in colonial times, partly to counter Christian conversion, partly to emulate the perceived “superior” western or Christian religious culture, well known Sinhala reformers like Anagarika Dharmapala, and more recently, Walpola Rahula, preached worldly ideologies that the Sinhala priests should make themselves “relevant” to modern society by “engaging” themselves in social work, even taking salaried posts as teachers, administrators, and own businesses.

A good idea of such a **laicization** process can be gleaned, for example, from Natalie E F Quli’s dissertation, *Laicization in Four Sri Lankan Buddhist Temples in Northern California* (2010). This scholar discusses various well known ideological models of Sinhala Buddhism, such as “Buddhist modernism” and “Protestant Buddhism.” According to her, Sinhala priestly Buddhism is rooted in centuries of laicization, the symptoms of which we see today.

## Go back to the Buddha

Clearly these Vinayaless priests have rejected Buddhism but are merely using it for their worldly benefits. Without moral virtue, these modern priests have neither the goodness nor the “power” to bless us or pray for us or our dead. When we support them, we are only creating the same on-going bad karma that surely leads us to subhuman suffering for a long time to come.

Moreover, we have a better choice of going straight to the Buddha’s teaching ourself without boarding a badly run sinking ship heading for a very bad storm in rough seas.



PHOTO:

Wat Pa Nana Chat in conclave, listening to the Pātimokkha recitation.

R706 Revisioning Buddhism 289

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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