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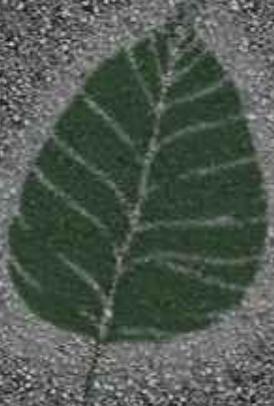

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Painting the Buddha's Eyes

by

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Painting the Buddha's Eyes

Buddhist iconography is both simple and complex. Its simplicity comes from the fact that it divides into three phases separated each by roughly six centuries: simple, colossal, and profuse.

Its complexity comes from the fact that by now it is a rich blend of the spirit of the Buddha Gotama's original teachings with Mahāyana and Tantric influences, gods from the Hindu pantheon, folk deities, and legends from the 547 literary tales describing the Buddha's past lives called *Jātakas*.

For the first two or three centuries after his last breath and passage into *parinibbāna* in the fifth century B.C., Buddhist monks paid homage to the Bodhi tree under which he had attained Enlightenment and whose cuttings were the source of many sacred commemorative Bodhi trees all over Asia.

Eventually more permanent monuments began to be constructed. The first were architectural, notably the *stupa.* The earliest stupas were simple mounds of earth with a wood pole sticking out the top. This has

been interpreted as a symbolic representation of Mount Meru, the cosmic mountain at the centre of the universe as described in South Asian legends that long predate Buddhism. Over the next three centuries the stupa acquired more and more symbolic meanings and in ancient Lanka became formalised as the dagobas one sees all over the island today. The original mound of earth came to be called the "paddy heap" design because its shape was the same as a pile of rice grains poured onto the ground. Very few of these are left; one is at Kelaniya just outside Colombo, and another in Anuradhapura.

Over time six dagoba shapes evolved: the paddy heap, the "bubble" which one sees at Ruwanweli Seya in Anuradhapura and at Kirivehara in Polonnaruwa, the elongated "bell" shape of the Thuparama at Anuradhapura and thousands of other dagobas in Sri Lanka, and three shapes for which there now exist no examples: the "water pot," "lotus," and "*amalaka* bell."

The conical spire of the dagoba represents the umbrella which early worshippers affixed atop the poles of their stupas to protect them from the shrine from sun and rain. The umbrella is an ancient symbol of royalty. The paddy heap stupa was also enclosed in a ring of stones to keep the earth from washing away. These became stylized into a spire of concentric rings called the *kotkarella* and a three-tiered masonry base

called a *pesavalalu*. The terraces of the *pesavalalu* are piled thick with flower offerings on full-moon poya days, which are national holidays devoted to almsgiving, learning the Dhamma, and good works.

Buried at the centre of every dagoba is a chamber which contains a relic of the Buddha or an especially renowned holy man, plus treasures donated by lay people. Often these treasures take the form of gold or bejewelled statues of the Buddha, pious inscriptions on gold sheets, and so on. The pyx in which they are enclosed is a thick square slab of stone into which boxlike chambers (usually nine) have been cut, the whole being a miniature model of the universe as described in ancient Buddhist and Brahmanic texts. As the dagoba is made of solid brick, these enclosed treasures are considered art never again to be seen by the eye.

The first sculptural images carved to remind monks of the Buddha were pairs of footprints cut shallowly into stone at the monks' retreats. As dagobas evolved into their present form, these pairs of footprints came to be included in the overall iconography of the shrine. Sometimes they are carved into the lowest tier of the *pesavalalu;* most often they are set into the immense flat plain of stone slabs which serves as an ambulatory for multitudes of the faithful during poya and other religious festivals. Along the slab-cut stone walkway

circling the Ruwanweli Seya in Anuradhapura one finds several of these abstracted footprints, completely unadorned by any texture but the plain surface of cut stone. It is a breathtaking experience to stand atop one of these and realise your footprints have been added to those of visiting pilgrims who walked here as far back as 2,200 years ago. Sri Lanka is full of reminders that there is a single invisible thread binding the past with the present and the future, in which every human being is part of a continuity.

Over time statuary began to be carved. The first were simple, unadorned images of the Buddha seated in meditation—a reminder that he had achieved Enlightenment seated in meditation under the Bodhi tree near Gaya, about two hundred miles from Varaṇasi (Benares) in India. Some of these early carvings of the Buddha in seated *samādhi* (deep meditation) bring tears to one's eyes with their depiction of serenity combined with beauty.

Most of the ancient statues were rather small three to five feet tall. Virtually from the beginning they depicted *mudras*—positions of the hands which indicated a particular meaning. The *dhyana* mudra with both hands crossed in the lap is most often used to indicate *samādhi* meditation; one famed *samādhi* statue in Anuradhapura is so serene it comforted Jawaharlal Nehru for seventeen years during his

imprisonment by the British.

An often-used mudra is *vitarka* (teaching or discourse): the right hand is upraised and the thumb and forefinger encircled, with the other three fingers pointing straight up-signifying "Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha." Another mudra is *abhaya:* one hand is raised palm out, signifying "have no fear."

Two mudras are used only with seated Buddhas. *Bhumisparsha* ("earth-touching") has the back of the hand facing the viewer with the fingers touching the ground; this is reputed to have been used by the Buddha while being tormented by the demon Māra as he was seated beneath the Bodhi tree prior to Enlightenment. In this mudra the future Buddha calls upon the Earth to witness that he has met the requirements for Buddhahood; at this, Māra's troupe of demons and temptress daughters went away. The *varada* ("wish-granting") mudra rests the Buddha's right hand on his knee with the palm facing the viewer; it may be interpreted as a gesture of blessing.

The next innovation was the standing Buddha, at first about human size, carved of stone or built up from brick. Most often these depict the *vitarka* and *abhaya* mudras, but there are five known examples of an unexplained mudra in which the Buddha's arms are crossed over one another on his chest. Some

scholars believe this is simply the very human gesture meaning that the Buddha is tired.

The human-sized sculptures were free-standing, but then kings and monks began to colossalize them by cutting larger and larger versions out of the solid rock of cliff faces. Soon they reached forty feet or more in height, often with absolutely exquisite modelling of the Buddha's robe.

The image at Aukana in north-central Sri Lanka is a study in the beauty and the iconography of the colossal standing Buddha. The image is 42–1/2 feet high and was carved in the fifth century A.D. "Aukana" means "to eat the sun," and the statue faces due east. The statue seems to have been carved at the same time the great Kalawewa Reservoir was being built by King Dhātusena, perhaps as a permanent protector of his great reservoir. Consider for a moment what combination of religious sophistication and stonecutting skills it took to carve a freestanding 42–1/2 foot statue with exquisitely flowing robes out of solid rock in the middle to late 400s, the same era when Rome fell, Christianity was being riven with schisms, and Northern Europe was still semi-barbaric.

It is carved in the "thrice-bent" pose, meaning that one shoulder is cocked a little higher than the other, the waist is bent slightly to one side, and one leg is

relaxed and a bit bent at the knee while the other is upright. Many large outdoor Buddhas are carved this way, in part so to indicate a sense of relaxation, but also for the purely practical reason that the flow of rains would be more even down the body and wear the stone uniformly. The rains that drip from the nose fall precisely between the Buddha's feet. In the Aukana statue, the Buddha's right hand is raised in the *abhaya* mudra, and the left curled in toward the body. Some say this gesture means, "comes from within"; others aver he is merely holding his robe. Surmounting the head is a five-petalled flower called the *sarispota* which symbolises the *pañca bala* or Five Powers of confidence, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

The next development was the reclining Buddha. This form lends itself well to colossal sizes. Some are indeed immense. The largest, at Polonnaruwa, is 46 feet long and carved from a serpentine schist whose striations make it look like a gigantic marble cake shaped of spun crystals. The statue's feet are parallel, and there is a look of utter serenity on the face, which indicates he is meditating in repose. If a reclining Buddha's feet are slightly offset it symbolises the moment of the Buddha's passage into *parinibbāna.* Hence you come to understand that life is as impermanent as the position of the Buddha's feet.

Not all locations possessed such marvellous expanses of unfissured stone, so reclining (and some large standing) Buddhas were often made by mortaring piles of brick into the rough shape of the eventual Buddha, plastering it thickly in six to ten applications, carving the plaster to the exact shape, and finally, painting it.

Early statues have a "Bump of Wisdom" at the top of Buddha's crown, which is said to symbolise the thatch of hair remaining after he sheared his own locks at the Great Renunciation when he left his princely life behind and went into the world searching for wisdom. By the time of the Aukana colossus this had become a five-petalled *siraspota* flower.

For some reason the people in southern Sri Lanka have taken the most liberties with Buddhist imagery. In the popular statuary there the *siraspota* has evolved into a stylized flame spirally painted in the five colours of the Buddha's aureole. Tourists liken it to a multihued ice-cream cone.

In Sri Lanka, Buddhist iconography adapted modest amounts of imagery based on local deities, Hindu, Mahāyana, and some Tantric motifs into temple architecture. But by and large its complexity tended to develop more along the lines of increasingly complex artistic embellishment as motifs were added by one

era of artists onto the ideas of the preceding generation. The Christian parallel is the difference between a totally unadorned twelfth century Carthusian chapel and Westminster Abbey.

The visual richness of Buddhist art reached its apogee in the rock caves at Dambulla, in the centre of Sri Lanka. With over 360 statues of the Buddha and 11,000 square feet of painted wall and ceiling, it makes the Sistine Chapel look like a mere sketch. The painted images on the ceiling alone number into the thousands, and the walls add many many more. Every possible manifestation of Buddhist iconography is represented. As Dambulla represents a single line of Buddhist iconography from the first century B.C. through the eighteenth century, and depicts every known manifestation of iconography, it is an absolute must-see for anyone visiting Sri Lanka today.

As Buddhist art became more complex, so also did the conventions surrounding its creation. One rule which seems to have arisen in the nineteenth century was that painting the Buddha's eyes—a ritual named *netra maṅgalaya* was the last act in decorating a new image, and there was a special *pirit* or protective chant of passages from the Dhamma that accompanied the act. What's more, certain artists specialised in the task, and they alone, must be employed.

Hence, when I learned that a Buddha image was to have its eyes painted at the Makandura Vihāra near Negombo, I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

I awoke spontaneously at four-thirty. The room was so dark I could see the glowing hands on my wristwatch at arm's length. I got dressed as quietly as I could and made my way past the dog, growling so lowly I knew he was terrified that I might growl back. Out the door, down the path, onto the road bordered with paddies on one side and a lotus-filled lake on the other. Above, Jupiter, Mars, and Saturn were strung along the ecliptic from Taurus through Virgo. The Southern Cross was up, forty degrees south of Scorpio, and near it the faint glow of Omega Centauri, a globular cluster of a quarter million stars each brighter than the sun yet so faint with distance I couldn't see it by looking directly but instead had to glimpse it from the corners of my eyes.

Looming in faint whites amid the dawn-still air and a lumino-phorescent horizon-low moon, the vihāra was Buddhism at its most mystic. The temple complex grounds were spacious even by the standards of the generous rural Buddhist faithful. A large three-tiered arch opened onto two acres of sandy promenade which felt deliciously cool on my bare feet in the predawn—although sensory tranquillity probably takes a little more meditative willpower at noon in the

middle of July.

Ahead was the image house, its great doors still closed. I could hear the bhikkhus stirring in the *pansala* (monks' quarters) behind, washing themselves, sneezing, speaking lowly. I wanted to find an inconspicuous place where I could observe yet not be a distracting centre of attention when the people arrived. Light-skinned foreigners are rare enough in places like Makandura, but later the chief bhikkhu told me I was only the third foreigner ever to have visited his temple; the other two were scholars looking over the monks' collection of ola-leaf manuscripts.

To the shrine room's left was a rickety reinforcing rod tower that looked like Dali let loose in the Bronze Age. Its seven ascending wheels were each festooned with dozens of coloured streamers and flags in the Buddha's five colours—*neela* (blue), *peetha* (yellow), *lohita* (red), *oojata* (white), and *mañjestra* (orange), in that order. These are the colours of the Buddhist flag. They represent the radiant colours of the aureole that surrounds the Buddha's head in all sanctuaries. That they are aureoles *around* the Buddha implies that they are united in the Buddha, and indeed their chromatic unity is a never-seen colour that always exists within the Buddha, named *prahbashwara*.

To the immediate right was the dagoba, the bosomy

structure containing a relic of the Buddha. This dagoba was built in 1945 to commemorate the end of World War II. The Japanese had tried to take Sri Lanka but the British Navy based in Trincomalee drove them away, losing the aircraft carrier *Hermes* in the process. The funds came from a wealthy widow who, just before her death, had all her jewels demounted from their gold and the gold melted down into a statue of the Buddha. This went into the central relic chamber of the dagoba. The jewels paid for its construction.

Dagobas always contain such valuables—and often a relic of the Buddha or holy man as well. They are constructed of solid brick which is then plastered into a smooth dome. The Makandura dagoba was thirty feet high and fifteen feet around at the base, built atop a four-foot-thick twenty-foot-in-diameter octagonal foundation decorated with elephant heads with their tusks facing out, and a frieze of cherub-like spirit figures holding up a plinth of plaster lotus blossoms whose petals curved up and out as they tapered to a tip. The relic chamber sealed forever inside was a metal box about a foot on each side painted with images of the Buddha. One need not see them to know the images are there, any more than, upon seeing a white feather floating on the water, one need see the egret to know that it has been there.

This dagoba was a mere thirty feet high. The great

solid dagobas of Anuradhapura built 2000 to 1500 years ago are 300 feet in diameter and 400 feet high—the third and fourth largest solid structures on earth after the first two pyramids at Giza.

Next to the dagoba was the sacred Bodhi tree, this one at least 100 years old, shading an area a quarter of the size of a football field. It was planted as a cutting from the Bodhi tree at Anuradhapura, which is itself nearly 2200 years old, and was grown from a cutting of the original Bodhi tree under which the Buddha achieved Enlightenment three centuries before that.

In front of the tree was a small vihāra (veneration shrine) with a two-foot pure white seated Buddha behind glass-panelled doors. Ironically, in every temple I have ever visited, the tiny shrine before the Bodhi tree attracts more worshippers than the profusely decorated "image house"—a much larger building which contains at a minimum images of the Buddha in the meditation, standing, and reclining forms. At Makandura there is also an eighty-foot long ambulatory with dozens of life-size statues illustrating events in the Buddha's life, plus wall paintings depicting lotuses by the hundreds and even more imagery from Buddhist legends. The overall effect reminded me of what the Church of Notre Dame in Poitiers must have looked like at the height of its glory in the thirteenth century.

Given the profusion of imagery in the image house I could understand why most people choose to worship before the small vihāra under the Bodhi tree. For the same reason, in every Catholic church in Europe, there are more candles in the side chapels than at the main altar.

People arrive at these Bodhi tree shrines at all hours of the day or night. The ritual is always the same. They clasp their hands together and touch them to their foreheads in a prayer-like gesture Zen Buddhists call *gassho* and the Theravadans of Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand call *añjali.* Then they bow low in the *vandinawa* gesture of veneration, and finally kneel into the *pasaṅga* (five-touch) position in which the toes, knees, elbows, palms, and forehead simultaneously touch the earth.

Then they rise to place jasmine and lotus flowers inside the glass doors, and light a lamp made of a little earthen saucer with a wick out one end, filled with coconut oil. Then they recite phrases from the Dhamma. Meditating near one of these little vihāras, especially on poya day when billowing clouds of incense float out of the tiny enclosure along with the coconut-oil scent, is olefactory heaven.

Surrounding the base of this particular Bodhi tree was a square enclosure containing twenty-eight

identical Buddha statues, all painted pure white except for the pupils of the eyes. Each was seated in meditation inside individual glass-fronted shrines. These miniature viharas have been donated by the villagers over the years since the dagoba was built.

The builders thought out the square enclosure so well that rain falling on its roof drains into a funnel connected to a pipe perforated with holes which runs directly beneath the periphery of the square of shrines, thus returning the rain to its intended recipient, the Bodhi tree. I thought of the great webwork of rice-watering tanks and irrigation flumes spread by the thousands all across Sri Lanka and the country's 2000–year history of water management, and realised that here in this rain diverter at Makandura is life in Sri Lanka as described by the proverb, "As the great is small the small is great."

The stars were beginning to fade although there was not yet the loom of light that hinted the day. People arrived in ones and twos. Soon, without it quite seeming to happen, there was a crowd of dozens. Streamers bearing Buddha flags and foot-long strips of yellow raffia radiated from the entrance of the assembly hall out to every tree in the garden. The entrance to the still-locked image house was decorated with arches of palm frond lashed to posts of bamboo. The fronds hung down like a raffia bridal veil.

Everyone wore white—saris for the women, skirts and socks for the girls, shorts for the boys, and for the men sarongs surmounted by a cape that looked like the fondest dream of an archbishop. Seventy-five percent of the people were women and girls, and of the males, not one was a teenager.

A young girl moved amid them with a large copper tray. Out from sari sleeves and waist pouches came flowers in the Buddha's five colours—blue gentian, red hibiscus, orange marigold, yellow gardenia, white jasmine. These went on the tray to be placed before the Buddha.

Now, as the first birds began to sing, there came from the refectory the long low opening chant of homage to the Buddha:

> *Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhasa*
>
> Homage to Him, the Blessed One,
> the Worthy One, the Fully Enlightened One.

Their voices bent to the wheel of *The Mirror of the Dhamma,* an hour-long circle of song in *pirit* tones of a droning tonic line with a microtone immediately above and below, coupled with a second tone a quarter octave above and below each of these. They began with the Three Refuges:

Buddhaṃ saraṇam gacchāmi.
Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.
Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

To the Buddha I go for refuge.
To the Dhamma I go for refuge.
To the Sangha I go for refuge.

Then the Five Precepts for the guidance of the laity:

Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.
Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.
Kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇi sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.
Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.
Surā-meraya-majja-pamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.

I undertake the rule to abstain from killing.
I undertake the rule to abstain from taking what is not given.
I undertake the rule to abstain from wrong conduct in sexual desires.
I undertake the rule to abstain from false speech.
I undertake the rule to abstain from intoxicants.

They chanted the Homage to the Triple Gem, the Flower Offering, the Offering of Light, the Offering of Perfume, the Offering of Incense, Recitation at the

Bodhi Tree, Homage to the Three Symbols, and the Dedication of Good Kamma:

May beings who dwell in space, on Earth,
Devas and Nāgas of wondrous delight,
Rejoice now with this merit made,
And long protect the Teaching.

Thence through the Recollection of the Unattractiveness of the Body, the Recollection of Death, the Recollection on No-Self, and the Recollection and Loving Kindness:

May I be free of enmity.
May I be free from hurtfulness.
May I be free of troubles of mind and body.
May I be able to protect my happiness.
Whatever beings there are,
May they be free from enmity.
May they be free from hurtfulness.
May they be free from troubles of mind and body.
May they be able to protect their happiness.
Whatever beings there are,
They are the owners of their kamma,
Heirs to their kamma,
Born of their kamma,
Related to their kamma,
Abide and are supported by their kamma.
Whatever kamma they do,

Whether good or evil,
Of that they will be heirs.

Onward through the predawn, birds making lace in the sky above the slow wave of the bhikkhus' *pirit* of the Recollection on Equanimity, the Mindfulness of Breathing, the Recollection of the Ten Perfecting Qualities, the Recollection of Dependent Origination, the Peaceful Victory Verses, the Discourse on Blessings, the Discourse on jewels, the Discourse on Loving Kindness, and finally, in a long exhaling sigh like our last breath on Earth:

Sabbe Sattā Sukhitā Hontu!

May All Beings Be Happy!

The image house bell rang thrice as its great carved wooden doors opened. Coconut oil lamps flickered dimly inside and I could see faintly the red robes of the great reclining Buddha within.

A woman unwrapped a paper that covered a dish full of sweet cakes made with rice and coconut milk and went to the Bodhi tree vihara to offer them to the Buddha. She opened the vihara doors and lay the food before the statue, then lit an incense stick and stuck it in a sand-filled cup. A little dog navigated the cloth canyons above him, bewildered by all the activity.

Women knelt in the sand, lifted their hands to their foreheads in the *añjali* then sat side-saddle-style on folded newspapers to keep their saris clean. The older ones had swept their hair straight back into a tight bun; the girls wore long braids.

A man emerged from the image house with a cloth-covered tray. He walked among the people, who reached out to touch its edge with their fingertips. The peace after the end of the chants was replaced by crows, songbirds, nightingales, distant roosters.

Then an elderly bhikkhu stood before the image house entrance in his robes the colour of yellow mixed with orange. He uttered a few words and the people responded like altar boys at a mass. The invocation was the reverse of our lilted uplift at the end of a phrase; he began with a low first syllable, then rose into the monotone of the rest of the phrase. Sounds of leaves trembled from the Bodhi tree. Three cormorants thrust up in their steep climb of flight, wings whistling furiously and their necks craned out. The bhikkhu then turned to the opened image house doors and shouted "*Sabbe sattā sukhita hontu!*—May all beings be happy!"

With that, the newly-painted but eyeless Buddha, about four feet tall and made of plaster, was borne out from the image house on a platform resting on the

shoulders of six of the temple's laymen. Carefully they lowered it to the ground facing the assembled audience, which by now numbered in the hundreds.

At this, a man, who had hitherto been totally anonymous within the crowd, rose, went to the Buddha, prostrated himself before the statue, turned and sat facing the crowd. The man who had come from the image house came and knelt alongside him, holding on the tray the cloth everyone in the crowd had touched. The bhikkhu came before them and placed a bowl filled with milk and a tray with betel leaf and ash in front of the two.

The artist, still facing the crowd with his back to the Buddha, drew a small box from under his robes, and then a mirror. From the box he took an artist's paintbrush and a small pot of black paint.

Then, holding the mirror and painting over his shoulder because it would be presumptuous to gaze directly on the Buddha while creating his eyes, with half a dozen strokes each he painted the Buddha's eyes.

Immediately the other man placed the cloth over the artist's head so his face was hidden from view.

The artist said some phrases I couldn't hear, then leaned forward and washed his face in the milk and rubbed his eyes with the betel leaf and ash. Only then,

thus purified, did he lift the cloth away and look upon the crowd.

I looked at the Buddha's eyes. It was uncanny-the artist had managed to capture perfectly the serenity of looking into eternity without a worldly thing distracting the vision, in twelve strokes with a paintbrush. Now I knew why it was such a specialised profession.

The people sat quietly while the bhikkhu repeated the invocation, *"Sabbe sattā sukhitā hontu!"* From the garden surrounding the vihāra came jasmine and hibiscus and gardenia smells. Some women were so moved they dabbed their eyes dry with the hems of their saris.

Then the bhikkhu delivered a sermon facing them. Off to one side, beyond the crenellated concrete wall of the inner sanctuary, a little boy in a white shirt and blue shorts looked on, afraid to come in because he was late. The bhikkhu ended the sermon, rang the bell thrice, and the six laymen shouldered the platform and returned it to the image house. It disappeared within and the bell rang three times again. The crowd sat with their heads bowed in silent worship. From the Bodhi tree came the sharp kewing cry of the Seven Sisters, and beyond them the fields were alive with the caws of crows.

The bell rang again, only once this time. The people bowed a last time, rose, greeted one another, smiled, began to talk excitedly. Some laughed. Children looked out from behind their mothers' saris. They all moved toward the assembly hall for the ritual feast.

The ritual feast was the one enjoyed at all special temple events; if in the morning the feast is called *heeldane* and if before noon, *davaldane.* The man who had placed the towel over the artist's head now used it to wash the feet of the temple's thera (chief elder) and the other two bhikkhus in residence. A casket of the temple's most precious relics was brought from the monks' living quarters (which doubled as the treasury house) on the head of a layman. It was blessed, then placed on a dias at the head of the hall on a simple white cloth. The casket was offered *Buddha puja,* a small portion of the foods everyone was about to enjoy, plus narcissus, frangipani, hibiscus, marigold, gardenia, gentian-more colours than even the Buddha's five. The hall smelled of cumin, ginger, garlic, coriander, nutmeg, and the oddly musky rice travellers find only in Sri Lanka. The monks sat on low seats, also covered with a white cloth. The thera dedicated the food to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha with a ritual formula named *sanghika karaṇava.* They began. The first food was offered to the thera and his bhikkhus. Then curries were served to the

monks on plates; the people ate theirs from packets made of banana leaves which, moist from the heat and steam of the food, now acted as smooth plates. Everyone ate with their fingers, mixing all the ingredients into a mass. Then came the sweets, the fruit, the pudding and buffalo milk yoghurt called curd.

The final event was the presenting of gifts to the thera and his bhikkhus. The thera received an *atapirikara,* a wrapped package which is given to a young monk upon ordination—no other gifts are allowed. The package looked like a pillow surmounted by a helmet, wrapped all around with brown paper and tied with string. It contained three sets of robes, a sash, a begging bowl, a razor, a needle, thread, and a water strainer.

The other monks received a new robe and small gifts of use to them. One of the bhikkhus had broken the thermos he used to take water with him on his rounds to instruct the temple's children; he received a new one. Another received a special pillow to support his ageing back as he read before retiring. They received toothpaste, soap, milk powder, sweet cakes, and other foods that wouldn't spoil. All these were given, each by each, by people as they finished eating and made ready to depart.

At the end the thera gave a short sermon on the *dāna*, the practise of almsgiving. He conferred blessings on each mother and each head of the extended family—great uncles and grandfathers and cousins of in-laws' sisters.

It was 8:00 A.M. The sun was already warm on the paddy fields surrounding the temple on all sides. The people were beginning to get anxious to be on with their day. It was the middle of the growing season. They had to weed the fields today. They would throw the weeds off to the edge, where children would collect them into rough-woven sacks, to be taken home that night for the cows. Sky-high and cloud perfect, a flock of birds winged out from the eaves of the image house into the day of thin blue.

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