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# Buddhist Ceremonies and Rituals of Sri Lanka

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# **Buddhist Ceremonies and Rituals of Sri Lanka**

by

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# Abbreviations

All PTS editions.

A	Aṅguttara Nikāya
D	Dīgha Nikāya
D-a	Dīgha Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā
Ja	Jātakas
Khp-a	Khuddakapāṭha Aṭṭhakathā
Mhv	Mahāvamsa
Pv-a	Petavatthu Aṭṭhakathā
S	Saṃyutta Nikāya

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## Preface

The theme of this study, Buddhist ceremonies and rituals, may not appeal to the self-styled Buddhist purist who wishes to restrict the designation “Buddhism” exclusively to the teachings of the Buddhist scriptures, which he usually interprets in a narrowly intellectualist manner. The fact

remains, however, that the practices and observances to be described here justly claim an integral place within the stream of living Buddhism as practised by its adherents. Because these practices form an intimate part of the religious life for the vast majority of devout Buddhist followers, they cannot be lightly dismissed as mere secondary appendages of a “pristine” canonical Buddhism.

It has been an inevitable phenomenon in the history of religion that whenever a religion was newly introduced to a culture, its adherents assimilated it and adapted it in ways that harmonised with their own social and cultural needs. In the case of Buddhism this has happened in every country to which it spread, and Sri Lanka is no exception. The core doctrines of Buddhism, such as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, dependent arising, etc., often proved too abstruse and elevated for the ordinary populace to apply to their own religious lives. To satisfy their devotional and emotional needs, they required a system of outward acts, communally shared, by which they could express their devotion to the ideals represented by the Dhamma and absorb these ideals into the texture of their daily experience. This was how the “great tradition” of canonical Buddhism came to be complemented by the “small tradition” of popular Buddhism consisting of the rituals and ceremonies discussed in this booklet.

The purpose of the present study is to highlight this often neglected face of popular Buddhism. Though the study focuses on Buddhism as practised in Sri Lanka, the same

basic round of rituals and ceremonies, with minor variations, can be found in the other countries following Theravada Buddhism, such as Burma and Thailand. I also hope that this survey will demonstrate that the expression of Buddhist piety in devotional forms is a necessity if Buddhism is to survive at the popular level as a vital and vibrant force in the daily life of its adherents. Thus the votaries of a “pristine pure Buddhism” posited on the basis of the canonical texts should not ignore or devalue this aspect of Buddhism as an alien encroachment on the Buddha’s original doctrine. Rather, they should come to recognise the devotional manifestation of Buddhism as an essential feature of the tradition, needed to mediate between its exalted ideals and the everyday concerns of the vast majority of its followers.

A. G. S. Kariyawasam

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## **Introduction**

Sri Lanka is generally regarded as the home of the pure Theravada form of Buddhism, which is based on the Pali Canon. This school of Buddhism emphasises the Four Noble Truths as the framework of Buddhist doctrine and the

Noble Eightfold Path as the direct route to Nibbāna, the final goal of the Teaching. However, side by side with this austere, intellectually sophisticated Buddhism of the texts, we find in Sri Lanka a warm current of devotional Buddhism practised by the general Buddhist populace, who may have only a hazy idea of the Buddhist doctrine. Thus in practical life the gap between the “great tradition” of canonical Buddhism and the average person’s world of everyday experience is bridged by a complex round of ceremonies, rituals, and devotional practices that are hardly visible within the canonical texts themselves.

While the specific forms of ritual and ceremony in Sri Lankan popular Buddhism doubtlessly evolved over the centuries, it seems likely that this devotional approach to the Dhamma has its roots in lay Buddhist practice even during the time of the Buddha himself. Devotion being the intimate inner side of religious worship, it must have had a place in early Buddhism. For Buddhism, devotion does not mean submitting oneself to the will of a God or taking refuge in an external Saviour, but an ardent feeling of love and affection (*pema*) directed towards the Teacher who shows the way to freedom from suffering. Such an attitude inspires the devotee to follow the Master’s teaching faithfully and earnestly through all the hurdles that lie along the way to Nibbāna.

The Buddha often stressed the importance of *saddhā*, faith or confidence in him as the Perfect Teacher and in his Teaching as the vehicle to liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

Unshakeable confidence (*aveccapasāda*) in the Triple Gem—the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—is a mark of the noble disciple, while the Buddha once stated that those who have sufficient confidence in him, sufficient affection for him (*saddhāmatta, pemamatta*) are bound for heaven. Many verses of the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*, poems of the ancient monks and nuns, convey feelings of deep devotion and a high level of emotional elation.

Although the canonical texts do not indicate that this devotional sensibility had yet come to expression in fully formed rituals, it seems plausible that simple ritualistic observances giving vent to feelings of devotion had already begun to take shape even during the Buddha's lifetime. Certainly they would have done so shortly after the Parinibbāna, as is amply demonstrated by the funeral rites themselves, according to the testimony of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta. The Buddha also encouraged a devotional attitude when he recommended pilgrimages to the four places that can inspire a faithful devotee: the places where he was born, attained Enlightenment, preached the first sermon, and attained Parinibbāna (D II 140).

The Buddha did discourage the wrong kind of emotional attachment to himself, as evidenced by the case of Vakkali Thera, who was reprimanded for his obsession with the beauty of the Buddha's physical presence: his was a case of misplaced devotion (S III 119). Ritualistic observances also pose a danger that they might be misapprehended as ends in themselves instead of being employed as means for

channelling the devotional emotions into the correct path. It is when they are wrongly practised that they become impediments rather than aids to the spiritual life. It is to warn against this that the Buddha has categorised them, under the term *sīlabbata-parāmāsa*, as one of the ten fetters (*saṃyojana*) and one of the four types of clinging (*upādāna*). Correctly observed, as means and not as ends, ritualistic practices can serve to generate wholesome states of mind, while certain other rituals collectively performed can serve as a means of strengthening the social solidarity among those who share the same spiritual ideals.

Thus ceremonies and rituals, as external acts which complement inward contemplative exercises, cannot be called alien to or incompatible with canonical Buddhism. To the contrary, they are an integral part of the living tradition of all schools of Buddhism, including the Theravada.

A ritual may be defined here as an outward act performed regularly and consistently in a context that confers upon it a religious significance not immediately evident in the act itself. A composite unity consisting of a number of subordinate ritualistic acts may be called a ceremony. Such observances have become inseparable from all organised religions. And owing to the fear, awe, and respect that characterise man's religious psychology, such acts assume a solemnity and a sanctity of their own.

Ritual acts undertaken and performed by the Buddhists of Sri Lanka may be broadly classified under three heads:

1. Acts performed for the acquisition of merit (e.g. offerings made in the name of the Buddha) calculated to provide a basis for achieving Nibbāna, release from the cycle of becoming (*saṃsāra*); such acts of merit are, at the same time, expected to offer semi-temporal rewards of comfort and happiness here and in the heavenly worlds in future lives. These supplementary forms of religious activity have arisen out of a natural need to augment the more austere way followed by the world-renouncing disciples.
2. Acts directed towards securing worldly prosperity and averting calamities through disease and unseen forces of evil, e.g. *pirit* chanting, *bodhi-pūjā*, etc.
3. Those rituals that have been adopted from folk religion. Hence these are mainly semi-religious in character like the *tovil* ceremonies. They derive their power and authority primarily through the superhuman power of the Buddha and also through the hosts of spirits, who are, as it were, commanded by invoking the power of the Buddha or of the Three Refuges—the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha—as a whole.

Almost all the religious activities that have a ceremonial and a ritualistic significance are regarded as acts for the acquisition of merit (Sinh.: *pinkama*, from Pali: *puññakamma*, Sanskrit: *puṇyakarma*). In this sense, all the religious activities of lay Buddhism can be explained as being oriented towards that end. Accordingly, the first two types

of rituals basically have a merit-generating character and thereby receive religious sanction. For instance, the idea of acquisition of merit through a religious act and its transference to the deities and soliciting their help has the scriptural sanction of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta itself (D II 88–89). Here the Buddha says that wise men, when residing in a particular area, first offer alms to religious recluses and then transfer the merits to the deities of the area, who help them in return. This seems to indicate the early beginning of adoring *vatthu-devatā* or local deities in Buddhism.

Merit (Pali: *puñña*: Sinh.: *pin*) earned by the performance of a wholesome act is regarded as a sure way of obtaining a better life in the future. The performance of these is also a means of expiation in the sense that the meritorious deeds have the effect of countering and hindering the operation of unwholesome *kamma* previously acquired and inherited. Thus the range of merit is very wide.

For the ordinary householder, Nibbāna is a goal to be achieved through a gradual process of evolution extending over many lives, and therefore until he achieves that sublime state at some future date he continues to perform these acts in order to lead a happy life. All merit-generating rituals are performed mainly with this end in view.

## 1. Initiation and Worship

# 1. Initiation

Buddhism lacks any ceremony or ritual of initiation or admission like the *upanayana* in Hinduism or baptism in Christianity. The traditional method of becoming a Buddhist is to repeat the formula of the Three Refuges (*tisarāṇa*) and the Five Precepts (*pañcasīla*), when they are formally administered by a Buddhist monk. The formula of refuge is as follows:

*Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.*

I go to the Buddha as my refuge.

*Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.*

I go to the Dhamma as my refuge.

*Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.*

I go to the Sangha as my refuge.

This avowal of confidence in the Triple Gem (*tiratana*) is repeated for a second time (e.g. *dutiyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi* etc.), and a third time (*tatiyampi*). Next, the convert repeats in the following manner the Five Precepts which are meant to regulate his moral life:

1. *Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*

I undertake the precept to abstain from  
destroying life

2. *Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*

I undertake the precept to abstain from taking things not given.

3. *Kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*

I undertake the precept to abstain from sexual misconduct.

4. *Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*

I undertake the precept to abstain from false speech.

5. *Surāmerayamajjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*

I undertake the precept to abstain from taking distilled and fermented liquors that cause intoxication and heedlessness.

By this method a hitherto non-Buddhist lay person becomes a lay disciple (*upāsaka*) of the Buddha. It has to be noted here that what is meant by taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha is the placing of confidence in the attainments of the Buddha as a Teacher and in the efficacy of the Dhamma as a reliable means to liberation. The term “Sangha” here refers to the *Ariya Sangha*, comprising the four pairs of noble ones, i.e. the four practising for the fruits and the four established in the fruits (*cattāri purisayugāni aṭṭha purisa-puggalā*). In this ceremony of initiation there is no recognition of salvation through the grace of a god or saviour as in theistic religions. One goes for refuge as a way

of expressing one's determination to follow the Buddha's path to liberation, but one must also realise that the task of walking the path is one's own responsibility.

While this is the method of formal admission of a new entrant into Buddhism, there are also certain ritualistic practices observed when a child is born to Buddhist parents. The baby's first outing would be to a temple. When the baby is fit to be taken out of doors the parents would select an auspicious day or a full-moon day and take the child to the nearest temple. [1] They would first place the child on the floor of the shrine room or in front of a statue of the Buddha for the purpose of obtaining the blessings of the Triple Gem. This is a common sight at the Daḷadā Māligāwa—the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic—in Kandy. At the time of the daily religious ceremony (*pūjā*) of the temple, one can observe how mothers hand over their babies to an officiating layman (*kapuva*) inside the shrine room, who in turn keeps it for a few seconds on the floor near the Relic Chamber and hands it back to the mother. The mother accepts the child and gives a small fee to the *kapuva* for the service rendered. This practice too could be described as a ritual of initiation.

## 2. Personal Worship

For the adherent of Buddhism, the ritual of worship is essentially a respectful recognition of the greatness of the Buddha as a spiritual teacher. The ritual also implies an

expression of gratitude to the Buddha for having discovered and revealed to humankind the path leading out of the mass of worldly suffering. Both these factors in combination make this ritual an expression of devotion as well.

The most common daily ritual of the Buddhist is that of personal worship, which many devout Buddhists perform daily in their homes. On the communal level the ritual is observed on the *poya* days at a temple or a monastery. [2]

A distinction may be made between simple respectful salutation (*paṇāma* or *paṇāmana*) and the ritualistic worship (*vandanā*) accompanied by offerings of increasing complexity including food, drink, and clothing. The former type is only an expression of respect and reverence as when a person clasps his hands in the gesture of worship in front of a religious symbol (e.g. a Buddha-stature, a Bodhi-tree, a *dāgaba*, etc.) and recites a simple phrase like the well-known *Namo tassa* formula (see below); nowadays the term *sādhu* has become quite popular with the Sinhala Buddhists for this purpose. [3]

In the ritualistic form of worship the articles of offering (mainly flowers) are first respectfully placed on the altar in front of a statue of the Buddha or a *dāgaba* or any other place of religious significance where such worship is performed. Next, the devotee clasps his hands in the gesture of worship (*añjali-kamma*) and solemnly recites various stanzas and formulas, thereby making the offerings formally valid. Every act of Buddhist worship begins with the well-known

formula of homage to the Buddha, *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa* (“Let my obeisance be to the Blessed One, the Honourable One, the Fully Enlightened One”), which is repeated thrice. This is followed by the Refuge formula and the Five Precepts given earlier.

The next step is paying homage to the Three Gems in three separate formulas, which recount nine virtues of the Buddha, six virtues of the Dhamma, and nine virtues of the Sangha. These formulas are extracted from the Pali Nikāyas and have become the standard formulas with which the Three Gems are worshipped. [4]

The physical posture adopted by the devotees when performing these acts of worship may vary according to the solemnity of the occasion or the degree of the devotion of the worshipper. In the most respectful form of worship, e.g. when worshipping a *dāgaba* in which the relics—a bone, hair, bowl, etc., of the Buddha—are enshrined, one touches the ground with five parts of the body (Sinh.: *pasaṅga pihiṭuvā*, i.e. knees, elbows, and forehead). The two postures of squatting (*ukkuṭika*) and kneeling (with one or both knees) are also popular. The cross-legged posture (*pallaṅka*) and the standing position are also sometimes adopted. Whatever be the posture taken, it should be accompanied with hands clasped together in adoration (Sinh.: *āndilibānda*, Pali: *añjaliṃ paṇāmetvā*).

Of the many articles of offering used at present in this kind of worship in Sri Lanka, flowers have become the most

important and popular. They constitute the minimum requirement at any form of Buddhist worship. One can observe how the devotees arrange the flowers in various patterns on the altar. The colour (*vaṇṇa*), smell (*gandha*), and quality (*guṇa*) of the flowers are taken into account when selecting them for offering. Before being offered, the flowers are “bathed” with filtered water (*pān*). Sometimes they are arranged in a tray (*vaṭṭiya*) and offered. A flower’s blooming upon contact with light is regarded as symbolic of the attainment of Enlightenment, hence flowers become quite a fitting article for offering to the Buddha, the Enlightened One.

As was mentioned earlier, an essential part of the ritual of offering flowers is the recital of the following Pali stanza, whereby the offering is made valid:

*Vaṇṇagandhaguṇopetaṃ  
etaṃ kusumasantatiṃ  
pūjayāmi munindassa  
sirīpādasaroruhe.*

*Pūjemi Buddhaṃ kusumena ’nena  
puññena ’metena ca hotu mokkhaṃ  
Pupphaṃ milāyāti yathā idaṃ me  
kāyo tathā yāti vināsa bhāvaṃ.*

This mass of flowers endowed with colour, fragrance, and quality I offer at the lotus-like feet of the King of Sages.

I worship the Buddha with these flowers: by the

merit of this may I attain freedom. Even as these flowers do fade, so does my body come to destruction.”

It is of interest to note that this stanza incorporates the Buddhist idea of the impermanence (*anicca*) of all phenomena. Merit-acquisition is also regarded as contributing towards the attainment of Nibbānic freedom.

Another popular offering of much importance is that of lighted lamps, usually of coconut oil (*dīpa-pūjā* or *pahan-pūja*). As the Buddha is regarded as the dispeller of the darkness of ignorance, when lighted lamps are offered in his name this metaphorical contrast between the light of knowledge and the darkness of ignorance is taken as the theoretical basis for the ritual. This kind of symbolism being too deep for the vast majority of ordinary people, their motive for this ritual is usually the desire to acquire merit or to avert the evil influence of a bad planetary conjunction. However, it is the former idea that is implied in the traditional stanza used by the Buddhists of Sri Lanka for this offering:

*Ghaṇasārappadittena  
dīpena tamadaṃsinā  
tilokadīpaṃ sambuddhaṃ  
pūjayāmi tamonudaṃ.*

“With this lamp lit with camphor that dispels all darkness, I worship the Perfectly Enlightened

One who is a lamp unto the three worlds and is the dispeller of darkness.”

The epithets *tilokadīpa* (“lamp unto the three worlds”) and *tamonuda* (“dispeller of darkness”) as applied to the Buddha are significant in this context. The stanza itself seems to testify to the popularity of the offering of camphor (*ghaṇasāra*) in early times. But nowadays, even when coconut oil has replaced camphor, the stanza has survived without change. [5]

The offering of lighted lamps had been a popular ritual even in ancient times. The Bodhi-tree and the *dāgaba* (also referred to as *stūpa*, *cetiya*, or *caitya*) are the two main objects or places where the ritual is usually performed. The offering of lamps is one of the main aspects of the worship of the Bodhi-tree (*bodhi-pūjā*). As it was under a Bodhi-tree that the Buddha attained Enlightenment, it is quite natural that lamps be lit under that tree, not only in memory of the great event, but also as a ritual whereby the devotee could expect to obtain a ray of that light of wisdom attained by the Great Sage. Thus the entire ritual becomes a spiritual exercise, the merits of which are transferred to all other beings, gods, humans, and spirits (*bhūta*).

*Dāgabas* constitute another place where this popular offering is made. Consequently, along with the flower-altar, the lamp-stand too has become a necessary adjunct of the *dāgabas*. One can also see that the Bodhi-tree in most temples is surrounded by a platform built of brick or stone in which

niches are made to hold lighted oil lamps. The niches are meant to shelter the lamps from wind and rain. In any Buddhist temple there are many other places where lamps can be lit in that way. Sometimes special lamp-stands are constructed for the purpose. Of special significance is the lamp called the *dolosmahe-pahāna* (twelve-month lamp), sometimes found in Buddhist temples and *devālayas*. It is called thus because it is expected to keep burning all-year round.

Special light offerings are also made on auspicious occasions. On full-moon days when devotees flock to the temples, lamps are lit in large numbers, for it is the custom among the Sri Lankan Buddhists invariably to take flowers and coconut oil on their visits to the temple as two indispensable articles of worship. There are also occasions when devotees light and offer a particular large number of lamps for special purposes, such as redeeming a vow (*bāraya*) or on special occasions like Vesak Day. Many Buddhists perform the ritual of light offering (*pahan-pūjā*) to counter evil planetary influences. In order to obtain maximum results from the ritual, the devotees make it a point to purify themselves completely before attending the ceremony by bathing and wearing fresh, clean clothes. Coconut oil used as an illuminant is specially prepared for the purpose and taken separately from the coconut oil used for household purposes. Wicks are prepared from a clean, white, fresh cloth. Sometimes the inhabitants of an entire village co-operate in holding a mass-scale lamp offering. For

instance, they may offer 84,000 lighted lamps in memory of the 84,000 elements of the Dhamma (*dhammakkhanda*) comprising the Buddha's Teaching.

This important Buddhist ritual was practised even in ancient Sri Lanka. King Dutugemunu (2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.) is recorded to have lit one thousand lamps with ghee as the illuminant and with white wicks burning perpetually in twelve sacred places in Anuradhapura (Mhv xxxii,37). King Vasabha (1<sup>st</sup> century AC.) is also said to have lit one thousand oil lamps at Cetiya-pabbata, Thūpārāma, Mahāthūpa (Ruvanveli-dāgaba), and the Bodhi-tree (Mhv xxxvi,80).

Today, this ritual has become so popular and elaborate that the annual Vesak festival commemorating the birth, Enlightenment, and Parinibbāna of the Buddha has become more or less a festival of lights. Vesak lanterns of various kinds and shapes are lit in Buddhist homes on this day. Pandals well illuminated with multi-coloured electric bulbs, depicting various scenes from the Master's life and from the Jātaka stories, also constitute a type of light offering to the Buddha.

Yet another aspect of the ritual of light offering is the burning of camphor near the object of worship like *dāgabas*, Buddha statues, etc. Camphor gives out a fragrant smell as it burns, and is also regarded as having a very pure flame, although its smoke has a strong blackening effect. Camphor-burners have been found in ancient temples,

showing that this was an ancient practice. [6]

The offering of food and drink is still another aspect of the ritual of worship. When food is offered to the Buddha in a religious place it is usually done in front of a Buddha-image. If it is the morning meal that is offered, it would be something suitable for breakfast, usually milk-rice (*kiribat*). If it is lunch, it would be the usual rice-and-curry meal and is invariably offered before noon. At the Daḷadā Māligāwa in Kandy and the S0rī Mahābodhi in Anuradhapura, these rituals are performed regularly and with meticulous care and also somewhat elaborately, accompanied by other subsidiary rituals like the beating of drums. It is an important part of this ritual that whatever food is offered in this manner should be separately prepared with special care and should not be tasted before the offering. The stanza that is popularly used for the offering of food runs as follows:

*Adhivāsetu no bhante  
bhojanaṃ parikappitaṃ  
Anukampaṃ upādāya  
paṭigaṇhātumuttama.*

“O Lord, accept with favour this food which has been ritualistically prepared. Receive it, O Noble One, out of compassion.”

As regards the offering of drinks and beverages, it is customary to offer these prepared from fruit-juices. Unlike the solid foods, these may be offered in the afternoon, in

keeping with the meal habits of the Buddhist monks. Offering of incense generally consists of joss sticks, these being the most easily available. Otherwise this offering is made by putting certain kinds of sweet-smelling powders or incense into glowing charcoal so that it smokes well. A kind of resin, known locally as *sāmbraṇi* is the variety generally used.

The chew of betel (*dāhāt-viṭa*) is yet another item of offering. This is mostly for consumption after meals, and consists of betel leaves, arecanut, and certain other items like cloves, nutmeg, cardamons, etc. which give a pleasant smell and a pungent taste when chewed. For every kind of offering there are separate stanzas like the one quoted earlier for food. These stanzas are composed in Pali which is supposed to be the language in which the Buddha preached his doctrine.

When visiting the temple the object of worship that ranks first is the *dāgaba* enshrining the bone-relics of the Buddha. There are three categories of worshipful objects: (i) bodily relics, consisting of the bones collected after cremation (*sārīrika*); (ii) those articles the Buddha used, e.g. the alms-bowl, Bodhi-tree, etc. (*pāribhogika*); and (iii) those memorials that have been erected on his account as a mark of remembrance (*uddesika*), e.g. images, paintings, etc. The devotee is expected to worship these in due order, reciting the appropriate stanzas and making at least an offering of a few flowers.

An important aspect of the worship of the *dāgaba* and the Bodhi-tree is the custom of circumambulation (*padakkhiṇā*) as a mark of respect. Usually three rounds are done, always keeping the object of worship to the right side and with the hands clasped together in adoration. As regards *dāgaba* worship in Sri Lanka, the local Buddhists have a separate stanza for worshipping each of the sixteen sacred places hallowed by the Lord Buddha on his three visits to the island. There is also a popular stanza that covers in a general manner all the three categories of worshipful objects mentioned above:

*Vandāmi cetiyaṃ sabbaṃ  
sabbathānesu paṭiṭṭhitaṃ,  
sārīrikadhātu mahābodhiṃ  
buddharūpaṃ sakalaṃ sadā.*

“Forever do I worship all the *dāgabas* situated all over, all the bodily relics, the Mahābodhi (tree), and Buddha-images.”

The worship of the *dāgaba* or *stūpa* is an important merit-acquiring act of devotional Buddhism in Sri Lanka as also in other Buddhist lands. The first such *dāgaba* to be constructed after the official introduction of Buddhism into the country by the Arahant Mahinda was the Thūpārāma at Anuradhapura, which enshrines the collar-bone of the Buddha. It was constructed by the first Buddhist ruler of Sri Lanka, King Devānampiya Tissa, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.

Since then *dāgabas* have become so popular among the local Buddhists that almost every village temple has a *dāgaba* as an indispensable feature. A special ritual connected with the *dāgaba* is the enshrining of relics, which is done with much ceremony at a specially selected astrologically auspicious moment called *nākata* (Skt. *naks2atra*). A similar ritual is that of pinnacle-setting (*kot-pāḷandaṅgīma*), which is the concluding stage in the construction of a *dāgaba*.

It should be mentioned here that scriptural sanction for *dāgaba* worship is found in the words of the Buddha himself in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (D II 142), where he has enumerated four categories of individuals worthy of *dāgabas*. These are the Tathāgata, a Paccekabuddha, a disciple of the Tathāgata, and a universal monarch (*rājā cakkaṅgattin*). The worship and offerings made to the Buddha's body after his passing away may also be cited as an instance in this connection.

The most important item that comes within the *uddesika* kind of sacred object is the Buddha-image, which is found in every temple in its image-house (*vihāraṅgē*). In addition to the central image or images, the inside walls of the temple—and sometimes the ceiling as well—are covered with paintings depicting events from the Buddha's life, as well as from his past lives as a Bodhisatta, recorded in the Jātaka stories. An important ceremony associated with the Buddha-image is the ritual of painting its eyes (*netra-pinkama*), which is performed with much care on an auspicious occasion as the last item of its construction. Until this is done the image is

not considered an adequate representation of the Buddha.

### 3. Group Worship

Collective worship of the Buddha is generally performed in a public place of worship so that anyone who wishes may participate: in a temple before the shrine room, at a *dāgaba*, a Bodhi-tree, or any other such place. The devotees stand in a row in front of the place of worship and pass the items of offering from hand to hand towards the shrine room, *dāgaba*, or the Bodhi-tree. These offerings usually consist of bowls or vases of flowers, incense, joss sticks, beverages, fruit drinks, medicinal items, oil-lamps, etc. Here no distinction of age, position, or sex is observed. All participate in a common act of merit (*pinkama*). A bhikkhu or a number of bhikkhus may sometimes head the line.

The commonest of the *Buddha-pūjās* is the one performed in the evening, around 6 p.m., known as the *gilampasa Buddha-pūjā* or the Buddha-offering consisting of medicaments and beverages. If the *Buddha-pūjā* is done in the morning it would be one consisting of milk-rice (*kiri-āhāra*) or any other item of food suitable for breakfast. The mid-day food (*dāna*) also may be offered in this manner. The mid-day meal is offered to the Buddha when lay people bring food to the monastery to offer as alms to the bhikkhus. First, under the guidance of a bhikkhu, they perform the offering to the Buddha, who is represented symbolically by relics and an image; thereafter the food is offered to the resident

bhikkhus. It is the established tradition that in whatever circumstances alms are offered to the bhikkhus, the first portions are offered to the Buddha beforehand. The variations in the kinds of food offered are in keeping with the meal habits of the Buddha and his monk-disciples, who refrain from taking solid food and milk-foods after mid-day.

Once the offerings are placed in the appropriate place, lamps lit, and incense burnt, stanzas are recited for each kind of offering made so that the offerings become valid. This is done by a bhikkhu who first administers the Refuges and Precepts (explained earlier) and then recites the relevant stanzas (in Pali) aloud, while the other participants, with their hands clasped in adoration, repeat them in chorus after the bhikkhu. Sometimes this kind of public *Buddha-pūjā* is accompanied by drumming and horns, called *hevisi-pūjā* or offering of music, which usually accompanies many Buddhist functions. As the final item of the programme, one of the participating bhikkhus delivers a short sermon explaining the significance of the occasion.

It may also be mentioned here that this kind of public *pūjā* is performed as a general act of merit-acquisition on religiously important days such as the full-moon days or in remembrance of important dead personages. In the latter case the ritual is held on the death anniversary of the person concerned. It is believed that the dead person can partake of the merits transferred to him (*pattidāna*) from his new existence and thereby obtain relief from any unfortunate realm in which he might have been born. If the ritual is

performed for such a purpose, the participating monk would specially mention this fact and transfer the merits earned.

Whatever be the purpose for which the ceremony is held, the concluding part is marked by certain features which are of further interest. One is the usual practice of the transference of merit to all beings, including gods and spirits, by reciting the appropriate stanzas. Another is the general aspiration (*patthanā*) that the participants make to the effect that by the merits earned from the ritual they may not be born into the company of foolish and unworthy friends but into the company of wise and virtuous men until they attain Nibbāna. They also do not fail to add the final attainment of Nibbāna to this list (*idaṃ me puññaṃ āsavakkhayāvahaṃ hotu: "May this merit bring about the extinction of defilements in me"*).

Yet another popular aspiration which has a greater social significance is the following:

*Devo vassatu kālena—sāsasampatti hotu ca  
phīto bhavatu loko ca—rājā bhavatu dhammiko.*

“May the rains come in time  
So that the harvests may be abundant:  
May the world be prosperous,  
May the rulers be righteous.”

The ritual is concluded by asking for pardon for whatever lapses may have occurred inadvertently:

*Kāyena vācā cittena pamādena mayā kataṃ  
accayaṃ khama me bhante bhūripañña tathāgata.*

“O Lord, Tathāgata of extensive wisdom, may you excuse me for whatever transgressions might have been done by me through body, speech, or mind due to negligence.”

Sometimes a similar request is made to the Dhamma and the Sangha as well. However, as the idea of pardoning one's sins is foreign to Buddhism, this kind of request would be meaningful only if the devotee does so with full understanding as an expiatory act, as a means of self-reformation, for the Buddha, unlike the God of theistic religions, cannot forgive sins.

Another kind of *Buddha-pūjā* is the one regularly done in temples and Buddhist *devālayas*. It is the daily offering of food and drink (*murutān pūjā*) made to the Buddha by the temple authorities. At the Daḷadā Māligāwa (Temple of the Tooth) in Kandy and the Śrī Mahābodhi at Anuradhapura offerings of this kind are made on a solemn and grand scale. These two places assume this significance because they are the two most deeply venerated sacred places for the Buddhists of Sri Lanka. The breakfast, noon meal, and the evening drinks are all offered regularly at fixed hours accompanied by drumming and horn playing (*tevāva*). Often, the public also make their own offerings.

Another important Buddhist ritual is the honouring of the

Buddha with what appears to be a relic of the musical performance held in order to revere and pay homage to the sacred memory of the Master. The historical beginning of this form of worship can be traced as far back as the time of the Buddha. A passage in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (D II 159) records that after his passing away, while the body of the Buddha was lying in state for seven days at Kusinārā in the capital of the Mallas, complete musical performances inclusive of dance, song, and orchestration (*nacca, gītā, vādita*) were held in his honour. This undoubtedly was an unreserved expression by the lay patrons of their deep veneration for the Master. Of this kind of offering, all that seems to have survived is drumming and some light dancing engaged in by the drummers themselves to the drum-beat and horns. In Sri Lanka the ritual is performed by the professionals belonging to the drummer (*berava*) caste and as an offering it is popularly known as *sabda-pūjā* or the “offering of sound.”

This orchestration is collectively called *hevisi* and usually consists of two drums (called *davul*), a twin-drum with one face for each and turned upwards (*surappaṭṭuwa* or *tammättama*), and a horn-like instrument called *horanāva* referred to earlier. Drumming of this type, with a bigger number of drummers, is an essential part of Buddhist processions as well. This kind of drumming also takes place at other Buddhist ceremonies, such as *pirit* chanting and alms-giving, to be described below.

At important temples where offerings of food are made to

the Buddha and the deities at meal times, drumming is performed to coincide with the offering and continues until the ritual of offering is over. This kind of regular service is known as *tevāva*. The ritual may also be held on Poya days, especially the full-moon day, in temples as a special offering to the Buddha. An important point to be noted in this *pūjāva* is that while the other kinds of offering are made by the worshipper himself, in this case he hires professionals to make the offering on his behalf. But in big temples like the Daḷadā Māligāwa at Kandy, payments in money are not usually made as the drummers have the hereditary right to the tenure of the temple lands in return for which these services are performed.

## 2. The Bodhi-Pūjā

The veneration of the Bodhi-tree (pipal tree: *ficus religiosa*) has been a popular and a widespread ritual in Sri Lanka from the time a sapling of the original Bodhi-tree at Buddhagayā (under which the Buddha attained Enlightenment) was brought from India by the Therī Sanghamittā and planted at Anuradhapura during the reign of King Devānampiya Tissa in the third century B.C. Since then a Bodhi-tree has become a necessary feature of every Buddhist temple in the island.

The ritualistic worship of trees as abodes of tree deities (*rukkha-devatā*) was widely prevalent in ancient India even before the advent of Buddhism. This is exemplified by the well-known case of Sujātā's offering of milk-rice to the Bodhisatta, who was seated under a banyan tree on the eve of his Enlightenment, in the belief that he was the deity living in that tree. By making offerings to these deities inhabiting trees the devotees expect various forms of help from them. The practice was prevalent in pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka as well. According to the *Mahāvamsa*, King Paṇḍukābhaya (4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) fixed a banyan tree near the western gate of Anuradhapura as the abode of Vessavaṇa, the god of wealth and the regent of the North as well as the king of the *yakkhas*. The same king set apart a palmyra palm as the abode of *vyādha-deva*, the god of the hunt (Mhv x,89, 90).

After the introduction of the Bodhi-tree, this cult took a new turn. While the old practice was not totally abandoned, pride of place was accorded to the worship of the pipal tree, which had become sacred to the Buddhists as the tree under which Gotama Buddha attained Enlightenment. Thus there is a difference between the worship of the Bodhi-tree and that of other trees. To the Buddhists, the Bodhi-tree became a sacred object belonging to the *pāribhogika* group of the threefold division of sacred monuments, [7] while the ordinary veneration of trees, which also exists side-by-side with the former in Sri Lanka, is based on the belief already mentioned, i.e. that there are spirits inhabiting these trees

and that they can help people in exchange for offerings. The Buddhists also have come to believe that powerful Buddhist deities inhabit even the Bodhi-trees that receive worship in the purely Buddhist sense. Hence it becomes clear that the reverence shown to a tree is not addressed to the tree itself. However, it also has to be noted that the Bodhi-tree received veneration in India even before it assumed this Buddhist significance; [8] this practice must have been based on the general principle of tree worship mentioned above.

Once the tree assumed Buddhist significance its sanctity became particularised, while the deities inhabiting it also became associated with Buddhism in some form. At the same time, the tree became a symbol representing the Buddha as well. This symbolism was confirmed by the Buddha himself when he recommended the planting of the Ānanda Bodhi-tree at Jetavana for worship and offerings during his absence (see Jaiv,228f.). Further, the place where the Buddha attained Enlightenment is mentioned by the Buddha as one of the four places of pilgrimage that should cause serene joy in the minds of the faithful (Dii,140). As Ānanda Coomaraswamy points out, every Buddhist temple and monastery in India once had its Bodhi-tree and flower altar as is now the case in Sri Lanka. [9]

King Devānampiya Tissa, the first Buddhist king of Sri Lanka, is said to have bestowed the whole country upon the Bodhi-tree and held a magnificent festival after planting it with great ceremony. The entire country was decorated for the occasion. The *Mahāvamsa* refers to similar ceremonies

held by his successors as well. It is said that the rulers of Sri Lanka performed ceremonies in the tree's honour in every twelfth year of their reign (Mhv xxxviii,57).

King Dutugemunu (2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.) performed such a ceremony at a cost of 100,000 pieces of money (Mhv xxviii,1). King Bhātika Abhaya (1<sup>st</sup> century AC.) held a ceremony of watering the sacred tree, which seems to have been one of many such special *pūjās*. Other kings too, according to the *Mahāvamsa*, expressed their devotion to the Bodhi-tree in various ways (see e.g. Mhv xxxv,30; xxxvI 25, 52, 126).

It is recorded that forty Bodhi-saplings that grew from the seeds of the original Bodhi-tree at Anuradhapura were planted at various places in the island during the time of Devānampiya Tissa himself. The local Buddhists saw to it that every monastery in the island had its own Bodhi-tree, and today the tree has become a familiar sight, all derived, most probably, from the original tree at Anuradhapura through seeds. However, it may be added here that the notion that all the Bodhi-trees in the island are derived from the original tree is only an assumption. The existence of the tree prior to its introduction by the Therī Sanghamittā cannot be proved or disproved.

The ceremony of worshipping this sacred tree, first begun by King Devānampiya Tissa and followed by his successors with unflagging interest, has continued up to the present day. The ceremony is still as popular and meaningful as at

the beginning. It is natural that this should be so, for the veneration of the tree fulfils the emotional and devotional needs of the pious heart in the same way as does the veneration of the Buddha-image and, to a lesser extent, of the *dāgaba*. Moreover, its association with deities dedicated to the cause of Buddhism, who can also aid pious worshippers in their mundane affairs, contributes to the popularity and vitality of Bodhi-worship.

The main centre of devotion in Sri Lanka today is, of course, the ancient tree at Anuradhapura, which, in addition to its religious significance, has an historical importance as well. As the oldest historical tree in the world, it has survived for over 2,200 years, even when the city of Anuradhapura was devastated by foreign enemies. Today it is one of the most sacred and popular places of pilgrimage in the island. The tree itself is very well guarded, the most recent protection being a gold-plated railing around the base (*ranvāta*). Ordinarily, pilgrims are not allowed to go near the foot of the tree in the upper terrace. They have to worship and make their offerings on altars provided on the lower terrace so that no damage is done to the tree by the multitude that throng there. The place is closely guarded by those entrusted with its upkeep and protection, while the daily rituals of cleaning the place, watering the tree, making offerings, etc., are performed by bhikkhus and laymen entrusted with the work. The performance of these rituals is regarded as of great merit and they are performed on a lesser scale at other important Bodhi-trees in the island as

well.

Thus this tree today receives worship and respect as a symbol of the Buddha himself, a tradition which, as stated earlier, could be traced back to the Ānanda Bodhi-tree at Jetavana of the Buddha's own time. The *Vibhaṅga Commentary* (p.349) says that the bhikkhu who enters the courtyard of the Bodhi-tree should venerate the tree, behaving with all humility as if he were in the presence of the Buddha. Thus one of the main items of the daily ritual at the Anuradhapura Bodhi-tree (and at many other places) is the offering of alms as if unto the Buddha himself. A special ritual held annually at the shrine of the Anuradhapura tree is the hanging of gold ornaments on the tree. Pious devotees offer valuables, money, and various other articles during the performance of this ritual.

Another popular ritual connected with the Bodhi-tree is the lighting of coconut-oil lamps as an offering (*paḥan-pūjā*), especially to avert the evil influence of inauspicious planetary conjunctions. When a person passes through a troublesome period in life he may get his horoscope read by an astrologer in order to discover whether he is under bad planetary influences. If so, one of the recommendations would invariably be a *bodhi-pūjā*, one important item of which would be the lighting of a specific number of coconut-oil lamps around a Bodhi-tree in a temple. The other aspects of this ritual consist of the offering of flowers, milk-rice, fruits, betel, medicinal oils, camphor, and coins. These coins (designated *paṇḍuru*) are washed in saffron

water and separated for offering in this manner. The offering of coins as an act of merit-acquisition has assumed ritualistic significance with the Buddhists of the island. Every temple has a charity box (*pin-peṭṭiya*) into which the devotees drop a few coins as a contribution for the maintenance of the monks and the monastery. Offerings at *devālayas* should inevitably be accompanied by such a gift. At many wayside shrines there is provision for the offering of *paṇḍuru* and travellers *en route*, in the hope of a safe and successful journey, rarely fail to make their contribution. While the coins are put into the charity box, all the other offerings would be arranged methodically on an altar near the tree and the appropriate stanzas that make the offering valid are recited. Another part of the ritual is the hanging of flags on the branches of the tree in the expectation of getting one's wishes fulfilled.

Bathing the tree with scented water is also a necessary part of the ritual. So is the burning of incense, camphor, etc. Once all these offerings have been completed, the performers would circumambulate the tree once or thrice reciting an appropriate stanza. The commonest of such stanzas is as follows:

*Yassa mūle nisinno va  
sabbāri vijayaṃ akā  
patto sabbaññutaṃ Satthā  
Vande taṃ bodhipādapaṃ.*

*Ime ete mahābodhi*

*lokanāthena pujitā  
ahampi te namassāmi  
bodhi rājā namatthu te.*

“I worship this Bodhi-tree seated under which the Teacher attained omniscience by overcoming all enemical forces (both subjective and objective). I too worship this great Bodhi-tree which was honoured by the Leader of the World. My homage to thee, O King Bodhi.”

The ritual is concluded by the usual transference of merit to the deities that protect the Buddha’s Dispensation.

### **3. Poya Days**

In their religious observances the Sri Lankan Buddhists have adopted from Indian tradition the use of the lunar calendar. The four phases of the moon are the pre-new-moon day, when the moon is totally invisible, the half-moon of the waxing fortnight, the full moon, and the half-moon of the waning fortnight. Owing to the moon’s fullness of size as well as its effulgence, the full-moon day is treated as the most auspicious of the four phases. Hence the most important religious observances are held on full-moon days and the lesser ones in conjunction with the other phases. In

the Buddhist calendar, the full moon, as the acme of the waxing process, is regarded as the culmination of the month and accordingly the period between two full moons is one lunar month. [10]

The religious observance days are called *poya* days. The Sinhala term *poya* is derived from the Pali and Sanskrit form *uposatha* (from *upa* + *vas*: to fast) primarily signifying “fast day.” Fasting on this day was a pre-Buddhist practice among the religious sects of ancient India. While the monks use the monthly moonless day (called *amāvaka* in Sinhala) and the full-moon day for their confessional ritual and communal recitation of the code of discipline (*Pātimokkha*), the lay devotees observe the day by visiting temples for worship and also by taking upon themselves the observance of the Eight Precepts.

A practising Buddhist observes the *poya* day by visiting a temple for the rituals of worship and, often, by undertaking the Eight Precepts. The Eight Precepts include the Five Precepts (see above, pp.5–6), with the third changed to abstinence from unchastity, and the following three additional rules:

6. to abstain from solid food after mid-day;
7. to abstain from dancing, singing, music, and improper shows, and from ornamenting the body with garlands, scents, unguents, etc.;
8. to abstain from the use of high and luxurious beds and seats.

If one decides to observe the Eight Precepts, one would wake up early, bathe and clad oneself in clean white garments, and go to the nearest temple. The incumbent monk administers the precepts to the entire group assembled for the purpose. Thereafter they would spend the day according to a set timetable which would include sermons, *pūjās*, periods of meditation, and Dhamma discussions. At meditation centres there will be more periods of meditation and fewer sermons and *pūjās*.

The observance of the Eight Precepts is a ritualistic practice of moral discipline quite popular among the Sinhala Buddhists. While the Five Precepts serve as the moral base for ordinary people, the Eight Precepts point to a higher level of training aimed at advancement along the path of liberation. The popular practice is to observe them on full-moon days, and, among a few devout lay Buddhists, on the other phases of the moon as well.

The *poṃa* observance, which is as old as Buddhism itself, has been followed by the Sinhala Buddhists up to the present day, even after the Christian calendar came to be used for secular matters. Owing to its significance in the religious life of the local Buddhists, all the full-moon days have been declared public holidays by the government. Another noteworthy fact about this day is that every full-moon *poṃa* has assumed some ritualistic significance in one way or other.

The first and the foremost of the *poṃa* holy days is the full-

moon day of *Vesak* (May), commemorating the birth, Enlightenment, and passing away of the Buddha. The significance of *Vesak* is further heightened for the Sinhala Buddhists, as Sri Lankan tradition holds that it was on the *Vesak Poya Day*, in the eighth year after his Enlightenment, that the Buddha paid his third visit to Sri Lanka, journeying to Kelaniya on the invitation of the Nāga King Maṇiakkhika (Mhv i,72ff.). Consequently, Kelaniya has become a very popular place of worship and pilgrimage, the centre of worship there being the celebrated *dāgaba*, enshrining the gem-set throne offered to the Buddha by the Nāgas (dragons). An annual procession is held there to commemorate the event.

Both in importance and in temporal sequence, the next significant *poya* is the full-moon of *Poson* (June), which is specially noteworthy to the Sri Lankan Buddhists as the day on which Emperor Asoka's son, the Arahant Mahinda, officially introduced Buddhism to the island in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. Accordingly, in addition to the normal ritualistic observances undertaken on a *poya* day, on *Poson* day devotees flock to Anuradhapura, the ancient capital city of the country, for it was there that Arahant Mahinda converted the then ruler, King Devānampiya Tissa, and his court to Buddhism, thereby setting in motion a series of events that finally made Sri Lanka the home of Theravada Buddhism. Even today, on *Poson Poya*, Anuradhapura becomes the centre of Buddhist activity. Mihintale, the spot where the momentous encounter between the Elder and the

King took place, accordingly receives the reverential attention of the devotees. The two rituals of pilgrimage and the observance of the Eight Precepts are combined here. Processions commemorative of the event, referred to as Mihundu Peraheras, are held in various parts of the country.

The next *poya* is *Esala* (July), which commemorates several significant events in the history of Buddhism. The most prominent of these is the Buddha's preaching of his First Sermon, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, to the five ascetics at the Deer Park, near Benares, thereby inaugurating his public ministry. The other noteworthy events connected with this day include the conception of the Bodhisatta in the womb of Queen Māyā, his Great Renunciation, the performance of the Twin Miracle (*yamaka-paṭihāriya*), and his preaching the Abhidhamma for the first time in the Tāvatisa heaven. An additional factor that enhances the value of this *poya* to Sri Lanka is the first local ordination of a Sri Lankan, when Prince Ariṭṭha, the nephew of the king, entered the Order at Anuradhapura, under Arahant Mahinda, following the introduction of Buddhism. On this day there also took place the laying of the foundation for the celebrated *dāgaba*, the Mahāthūpa or the Ruwanvelisāya and also its enshrinement of relics by King Dutugemunu. It is owing to the combination of all these events that the Sinhala Buddhists fittingly observe the day ceremonially by holding *Esala* festivals throughout the island, giving pride of place to the internationally famous

## Kandy Esala Perahera.

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The term *perahera*, primarily meaning “procession,” signifies a popular Buddhist ceremony replete with many rituals, commencing and culminating respectively with the *kap*-planting and the water-cutting ceremonies. These two ceremonies are respectively the introductory and the concluding rites of the annual Esala festivals, held in July and August in various parts of the island. They are essentially connected with the Buddhist deities, either to invite their blessings or to give thanks to them for favours received. During this period every year, such religious festivals are held in almost all the religious centres of Sri Lanka where there are abodes dedicated to various Buddhist deities. However, the festival *par excellence* of this category is the Kandy Esala Perahera, which is connected with the Temple of the Tooth and the abodes (*devālayas*) of the four Buddhist deities, Vishnu, Katarāgama, Nātha, and the Goddess Pattini. The main feature of all these festivals held during this period is the elaborate procession held on the lines of the Kandy Esala Perahera.

Both the *kap*-planting and water-cutting ceremonies are performed by the lay officiating priests (*kapurālas*) of the *devālaya* concerned, who are traditionally the experts regarding the details of their performance. These details are generally regarded as secret and are not divulged to the profane public.

The preliminary rite of *kap*-planting consists of planting a shaft, usually fashioned from a felled young jak tree, which must have borne no fruit. When cut, this tree exudes a white sap which is regarded as a symbol of prosperity. Even felling the tree is done with several attendant rituals at an auspicious time: the trunk is divided into four, one for each of the *devālayas*, where it is carried with drums and attendance. On the day of the new moon, at an auspicious hour (*nākata*), the “*kaps*” thus prepared are set up in the ground in a special place decorated with leaves, flowers, and fruits. For five nights small processions are conducted within the *devālaya* precincts around the consecrated *kaps*. Sometimes benedictory stanzas are chanted by monks.

This rite of *kap* is a kind of vow that the Esala festival, consisting mainly of the *perahera*, will be held; it is also an invitation to the deities to be present during the festival, providing the necessary protection for its successful performance. In this sense it is this ritual that inaugurates the festival.

The water-cutting ceremony (*diya-kāpum-maṅgalyaya*), which is the concluding ritual of the Esala festival, is performed in the early hours of the day following the final *perahera*. The officiating lay-priest (*kapurāla*) proceeds on a caparisoned elephant to a selected place along a river bank. He would either go to a selected spot in the river by boat or wade through the water to a particular spot and after drawing a magic circle on the water with the sword he carries, he “cuts” the water and fills the vessel he carried there with

water from that spot. Before doing so he empties the water that he took in this same manner the previous year. He then returns to the *devālaya*, and the vessel of water is kept there until the following year. The ritual is repeated annually in an identical manner. This is believed to be a rain-making ceremony of sympathetic magic, which type of ritual is quite common in agrarian societies the world over. The Buddhists seem to have adopted this to suit their purposes.

\* \* \*

The annual Esala Perahera in Kandy, held in honour of the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha, is the most colourful traditional procession in the country. It is the prototype of the other *peraheras* held elsewhere in the island in such places as Katarāgama, [11] Aluthnuwara, Lankatilaka, Bellanwila, Devinuwara, etc. The Kandy Perahera is itself the latest expression of the annual festival in honour of the Tooth Relic that has been held with state patronage from the time the relic was brought to Sri Lanka from India in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AC. Although periodically there have been intermittent breaks due to unsettled political conditions, the festival was never neglected intentionally. This had been so even during colonial times. Respected as the palladium of Sinhala royalty, the Relic had been accommodated in different parts of the country, depending on the change of the capital city. Ultimately it came to stay in Kandy, which was the last royal seat of the Sinhala people.

Esala Poya assumes prominence for yet another ritual of the

Sri Lankan Buddhists. This is the annual rains retreat of the monks, *Vassa*, which commences on the day following the Esala full moon (discussed in Chap. 8). On the next *poya* day, *Nikini* (August), those monks who failed to commence the normal *Vassa* on the day following Esala Poya, are allowed to enter the “late *Vassa*.”

The *poya* that follows *Nikini* is *Biṇara* (September), which assumes solemnity as marking the inauguration of the Order of Bhikkhunīs (nuns) with the ordination of Queen Mahāpajāpatī and her retinue. Next follows the *Vap Poya* (October), which concludes the final month of the three-month rains retreat. During the following month *kaṭhina* robes are offered to the monks who have duly completed the *Vassa*. The high esteem in which this ritual is held by the Sinhala Buddhists may be gauged from the fact that the month is popularly referred to as the “month of robes” (see Chap. 8). The November full moon, called *Il*, signifies the terminal point for the *kaṭhina* ritual. It is also the day for commemorating such events as the despatch of the first sixty disciples by the Buddha on missionary work, the prospective Buddha Metteyya being declared a sure Buddha-to-be by Gotama Buddha, and the passing away of the Arahant Sāriputta, the Buddha’s foremost disciple.

The *Unduwap Poya* that follows in December is of great moment to Sri Lanka as commemorating two memorable events connected with the visit of Therī Sanghamittā, sister of Arahant Mahinda, from India in the third century B.C. (Mhv.iv,18–19). The first of these events was the arrival at

Anuradhapura of a sapling of the sacred Bodhi-tree at Buddhagayā, brought to Sri Lanka by Sanghamittā. The planting of this tree is the origin of the *Bodhi-pūjā* in the country (see Chap. 4).

The other memorable event commemorated by this *poya* is the establishment of the Order of Nuns (*bhikkhunī-sāsana*) in Sri Lanka by the Therī Sanghamittā when she ordained Queen Anulā and her entourage of 500 women at Anuradhapura. Records indicate that the Bhikkhunī Sangha thus established flourished during the Anuradhapura period (third century B.C. to eleventh century A.C.), but disappeared after the decline of that kingdom. Historical records are silent as to the reasons for its extinction, but they do report how the Sinhala Bhikkhunī Sangha helped in the establishment of the Order of Nuns in China. <sup>[12]</sup> In the 5<sup>th</sup> century a group of Sinhala nuns headed by the Bhikkhunī Devasārā went to China to confer higher ordination there and the Bhikkhunī Sangha thus established survives there to this day.<sup>12</sup> The Sinhala Buddhists commemorate this *poya* day with *peraheras*, observance of the Eight Precepts, and meetings. The day is designated Sanghamittā Day. Nowadays the *dasasil mātās* (ten-precept nuns) take an active part in initiating these commemorative functions.

Next follows the *Durutu Poya* (January) when the Sinhala Buddhists commemorate the first visit of the Buddha to the island. According to the *Mahāvamsa*, nine months after his Enlightenment, the Buddha visited present Mahiyaṅgana in

the Badulla District, where stands the *dāgaba* by that name enshrining the Buddha's hair relics and the collar bone (Mhv.i,197). The Buddhists remember the event by holding an annual *perahera*. This much-venerated *dāgaba* is also of consequence as the first edifice of this type to be constructed here, originating the ritual of *dāgaba* worship in Sri Lanka.

The *poya* that follows, *Navam Poya* (February), celebrates the Buddha's appointment of the two Arahants, Sāriputta and Moggallāna, as his two chief disciples. It also marks the Buddha's decision to attain Parinibbāna in three months' time. The *Medin Poya* in March is hallowed by the Buddha's first visit to his parental home after his Enlightenment, during which he ordained the princes Rāhula, Nanda, and many others as monks. The month that follows is called *Bak* (pronounced like "buck"), which corresponds to April. In this month it is not the full-moon day but the new-moon day that invites attention as signalling the Buddha's second visit to Sri Lanka, when he visited Nāgadīpa [13] on the day preceding the new-moon day (*amāvaka*: Mhv.i,47) in the fifth year after his Enlightenment.

The above brief account of the twelve *poya* days demonstrates how the *poya* day has become intimately connected with the life of the Buddha and consequently with the principal events of early Buddhist history. The Sri Lankan Buddhists, quite accustomed as they are to commemorate such events with rituals and ceremonies in full measure, have maintained these traditions up to the present.

## 4. The Pirit Ceremony

*Pirit* (or *paritta*) is a collective term designating a set of protective chants or runes sanctioned by the Buddha for the use of both laymen and bhikkhus. *Pirit*-chanting is a very popular ceremony among the Buddhists of Sri Lanka. As the term itself implies it means a safety rune (*paritta* = protection), the ceremonial recital of which is regarded as capable of warding off all forms of evil and danger (*vipatti*), including disease, the evil influence of the planets, evil spirits, etc. These may be real dangers to the safety of persons and property as well as superstitiously believed-in calamities. In addition to this curative and positive aspect, *pirit* is also chanted for the attainment of general success (*sampatti siddhi*). In the domestic and social life of the Sri Lankan Buddhist no important function can be considered complete without this ceremony. However, the ceremony may vary from the simple to the highly elaborate, depending on the occasion and the status of the sponsor.

The essence of the *pirit* ceremony consists in the ritualistic chanting of certain Pali texts selected from the canonical scriptures. These extracts are found collected and arranged in a particular order in the Book of Parittas, or *Pirit-Pota*, <sup>[14]</sup> known in Pali as *Catubhāṇavāra*. It contains 27 extracts, including such suttas as the Ratana, Maṅgala, Metta, Āṭānāṭiya, etc.

The use of protective spells—variously known as *paritta*, *rakkhā*, *mantra*, *dhāraṇī*, *kavaca*, etc. [15]—against various dangers has been a common practice among the Indians from very early times. The Buddha himself is said to have adopted the practice on several occasions. The public recitation of the Ratana Sutta at Vesālī is the best known instance. The Khandha Paritta, Āṭānāṭiya Sutta, and the Metta Sutta are some *parittas* that have received the sanction of the Buddha himself. As the *parittas* generally embody statements of truth as taught in Buddhism their recitation is regarded as an “asseveration of truth” (*saccakiriya*) whereby evil can be averted. The Ratana Sutta is a good example of this kind of *paritta*. It draws its power by wishing the listeners safety after affirming the excellent qualities of the Three Gems of Buddhism—the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Sangha. The power of virtue (*sīla*) contained in the Maṅgala Sutta and the power of loving kindness (*mettā*) contained in the Metta Sutta are two other aspects that make *pirit* effective. The power of the sound waves resulting from the sonorous and rhythmic recitation and also from particular combinations of certain letters and syllables also play a part in exercising this beneficial influence. The vibrating sound waves produced by the sonorous and mellifluous chanting adds to the effect of the truths enunciated. The ceremonial recitation with various ritualistic observances (discussed below) and with the presence of the Triple Gem in the form of the relic casket representing the Buddha, the *Pirit-Pota* representing the Dhamma, and the reciting bhikkhus

representing the Sangha, are additional factors that are regarded as increasing the efficacy of *pirit* chanting.

Among the laity of Burma and of Sri Lanka the book of *parittas* is more widely known than any other Pali book. Any Buddhist, educated or not, knows what it is and holds it in honour and respect. Even in ancient times the blessings of the *pirit* ceremony were sought in times of national calamities just as in Vesāli at the time of the Buddha. King Upatissa (4<sup>th</sup> century: Mhv xxxvii,189), Sena II and Kassapa V (ibid, li,80; lii,80) are three such Sinhala monarchs who had the ceremony performed under such circumstances. The incorporation of the item called *dorakada@-asna*, as shall be seen, shows that it is a ritual that has gradually been elaborated in course of time.

The simplest form of the *pirit* ceremony is held when what is called the *mahāpirita* (great or major *pirit*)—the Maṅgala, Ratana, and Metta Suttas and a few benedictory stanzas—is chanted by a few monks, usually three or four, three times with a break in between. The three times may consist of the morning and evening of one day and the morning of the following day, or the evening of one day and the following morning and evening. The monks are conducted to the particular household and the chanting takes place in any room of the house according to choice.

The monks sit around a table on which a clean white cloth is spread and flowers and puffed rice are strewn. A pot of filtered water is also placed in the centre of the table and

one end of a ball of three-stranded thread is twisted around it. The thread then passes through the hands of the reciting monks and is next held by the person or the persons on whose behalf the chanting is being done. These would be seated on a mat on the ground in front of the reciting monks. The water in the pot, designated *pirit-water* (*pirit-pān*), and the sacred thread (*pirit-nūla*), become sanctified through the chanting and are used thereafter as a protection against evil. The thread is used by tying a piece around the arm or the wrist, and the water by drinking it or sprinkling it, according to requirements. In the simplest form, the ceremony is called *varu-pirita* or *vel-pirita* (*varu* or *vel* in Sinhala meaning half-day session) as the ceremony is confined only to a portion of the day and only the *mahāpirita* is chanted.

But the full-fledged *pirit* ceremony is a much more elaborate ritual. This also has two main forms—one lasting for one whole night and the other for one week or even longer. The former is the more usual form as a domestic ceremony while the latter is held on special occasions, especially for public purposes. Whatever the form may be, when this kind of chanting is undertaken, a special pavilion called the *pirit maṇḍapaya* is constructed for the purpose. If the ceremony is to be performed in a private home, this pavilion is put up in a central room of the house. Generally it would measure about twelve by twelve feet and is gaily decorated with tissue paper, tinsel, etc. Its roof is covered with a white canopy from which are hung small cuttings of arecanut

flowers, betel twigs, tender twigs of the iron-wood (*nā*) tree, etc. Two water pots on which opened coconut racemes are kept are placed on either side of the entrance. Two lighted coconut-oil lamps are also placed upon the coconut racemes.

In the centre of the pavilion is a table (usually a round one) on which a clean white cloth is spread. Upon it are strewn puffed rice (*vilanda*), broken rice (*sun-sāl*), white mustard (*sudu-aba*), jasmine buds (*saman kākulu*), and panic grass (*ītana*). These five varieties, known as *lada-pas-mal*, are regarded as having a sanctifying and purifying power in combination and are hence used for ritualistic purposes at Buddhist ceremonies. In the centre of the table is the filtered water pot around which the three-stranded sacred thread is twisted. This thread is drawn round the interior of the pavilion and when the chanting commences it is held by the chanting monks and given over to be held by the person or persons for whose benefit the ceremony is held. A palm-leaf copy of the *Pirit-Pota*, regarded as more sanctified than the printed one, occupies a significant place on the table, representing the Dhamma, the second member of the Buddhist Trinity. Consequently, while the printed copy is used for the legibility of its script, the palm-leaf copy is regarded as indispensable on the table. The other important item that is brought inside the pavilion is the casket containing the bone-relics of the Buddha (*dhātu-karaṇḍuwa*), representing the Buddha. This is placed on a separate decorated table on a side within the pavilion.

In the seating arrangement for the monks, two chairs, centrally placed near the table, are referred to as *yuga-āsana* or “seats for the duel.” During a greater part of the all-night recital, two monks occupying these two seats continue the chanting, taking it in relays, instead of the full assembly. A post called *indra-khīla* or *raja-gaha* is planted securely and fastened between these twin chairs. This post, resembling a mace in more ways than one, is attractively decorated and serves as a symbol of authority and protection for the officiating monks. This is generally erected only when the ceremony lasts for a week (*sati piritā*) or longer.

Even when the ceremony is held in a private home, the temple is inevitably connected with every stage of the ritual. The temple authorities are responsible for assigning the required number of monks. On the evening of the day on which the chanting takes place, a few members from the particular household go to the temple in order to conduct the monks. The monks would come in a procession in single file in order of seniority, attended by drumming. At the head of the procession is carried the relic casket, borne on the head of a layman, under an umbrella or a canopy. The beating of drums continues throughout. As the monks enter the home, a layman washes their feet while another wipes them. They walk to the pavilion on a carpet of white cloth (*pāvāḍa*) and take their seats around the table. The relic casket, *Pirit-Pota*, and the bhikkhus thus come together, representing the Triple Gem, the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, respectively.

Before the commencement of the ceremony proper, the usual time of which is around 9 p.m., the monks are welcomed and requested to perform the ceremony by being offered a tray in which betel leaves, arecanut, cardamons, nutmeg, etc., are nicely arranged, the ingredients being those taken for the chew of betel. This invitation is usually extended by the chief householder if it is in a private home. Otherwise some leading lay devotee would do it. One of the senior monks present would accept the invitation on behalf of the entire Sangha and, in order to make the invitation formally valid, he would get the lay devotee to repeat after him the following Pali stanza requesting the monks to begin the ceremony:

*Vipattiṭṭhāyā—sabbasampattisiddhiyā  
sabbadukkhavināśāyā—parittaṃ brūtha uttamaṃ*

“Please recite the noble *pirit* for the avoidance of all misfortune, for the attainment of all success, and for the destruction of all suffering.”

Next he would explain the significance of the occasion in a short address. This is followed by ceremonial drumming (*magulbera vādana*), as a ritualistic preamble to the ceremony, serving both as an invitation to the gods and an offering of sound (*sadda-pūjā*). The monks too commence the chanting by reciting a stanza that invites all the divine beings of the universe to the ceremony:

*Samantā cakkavālesu*

*Atrāgacchantu devatā*  
*Saddhammaṃ Munirājassa*  
*Sunantu saggamokkhadaṃ*

“May the divine beings of the entire universe come here to hear the good doctrine of the King of Sages that confers both heavenly happiness and the freedom of Nibbāna.”

From the commencement of the chanting until its conclusion the following morning, the pavilion is not vacated. The *mahāpirita* (explained earlier), with which the chanting begins, is chanted in a rhythmic manner by all the monks, numbering about ten or twelve, seated in order of seniority. The rest of the discourses are chanted by two or four monks. The ceremony is concluded the following morning with the recital, once again, of the *mahāpirita* at which ceremonial drumming takes place once more. This drumming is also performed at the recital of important discourses like the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta and the Āṭānāṭiya Sutta. Once the chanting is concluded, convenient lengths of the thread, sanctified by the chanting, are snapped off and tied around the wrists or the arms of those assembled. A little of the sanctified water is given to everyone for drinking.

When the ceremony continues for several days (e.g. one week: *sati-pirita*), the chanting must continue night and day without a break. When the set of suttas constituting *pirit* is completed, chanting is recommenced from the beginning

and in this manner they are recited over and over again until the session is concluded. Both to begin and to end the session, the *mahāpirita* is recited in chorus by all the monks on each day at sunrise and sunset.

An important ceremony connected with the seven-day (and longer) *pirit* ceremony is known as *dorakaḍa-asna*, which seems to have entered the *pirit* ceremony during the Kandyan period (18<sup>th</sup> century). <sup>[16]</sup> The theme of this ritual is to invite all the deities residing in the vicinity and request them to partake of the merits derived from the *pirit* ceremony and to help dispel all evil and bring about prosperity to everybody.

This ritual involves several stages commencing from the morning of the last day of the *pirit* ceremony, i.e. the seventh day if it is a seven-day ceremony. The first stage is the preparation of the message to be taken to the neighbouring temple where the abodes of the gods (*devālayas*) are also found. For this purpose several palm leaves (talipot), on which the message is to be written, are brought to the chanting pavilion in a ceremonial procession and handed over to a monk who has been previously selected to write the message. Next, this particular monk writes down the auspicious time for the messenger of the gods (*deva-dūtaya*) to set out to the *devālaya* and reads it aloud, to be sanctioned by the assembled monks. Once this is done another monk, also previously selected, reads aloud a text written in a highly ornate stilted style, enumerating

the temples and *devālayas* at which the deities are requested to be present at the *pirit* chanting that evening. This text is called the *vihāra-asna*. Until these preliminaries are gone through, the other monks keep holding the sacred thread. After this, the monk who was appointed to write the message begins to write it while the other monks retire.

The message contains the invitation—which is a command from the Sangha (*saṅghāñatti*) and hence not to be turned down—addressed to all the deities residing at the religious places enumerated in the *vihāra-asna* to come and partake of the merits of the week's *pirit* chanting. The message is prepared in quadruplicate. These are then hung on a pole and handed over to a young boy, specially selected for the task and richly attired as befits a messenger of the gods. Mounted on a caparisoned elephant and escorted by men with swords, he carries the message in a procession to the *devālaya*. This procession is called the *devadūta-perahera*, “the procession of the gods' messenger,” and has many features like dancers, drummers, mask-dancers, stilt-walkers, etc.

At the *devālaya*, the bhikkhus and the *deva-dūtaya* first go near a Buddha-statue and pay homage, after which they proceed to the building where the statues of the gods are and chant the Metta Sutta. The gods concerned are usually Vishnu and Katarāgama (Skanda). This is followed by ceremonial drumming (*magul bera*) as an invitation to the gods, and next a monk reads out the message aloud. The four messages are given to the lay officiating priest of the *devālaya* (known as *kapurāla*) to be hung in the four cardinal

directions inside the *devālaya*. These are meant for the Regents of the Four Quarters—Dataratṭha (east), Virūḍa (south), Virūpakkha (west), and Vessavaṇa (north)—who are requested to come to the ceremony with their assemblies. The procession now returns.

Until the monks arrive for the *pirit* chanting, the *devadūtaya* is kept confined and guarded. Once the monks arrive and take their seats inside the pavilion, a dialogue takes place between the *devadūtaya* and a monk, the purpose of which is to reveal to the assembled gathering that the task of the messenger, which was to invite the gods to partake of the merits, has been done and that all the gods have arrived. The *devadūtaya* makes this statement standing and guarded by the swordsmen, at the entrance (*dorakaḍa*) to the chanting pavilion within which the monks have taken their seats. It is this statement of the *devadūtaya* which thus comes to be called the *dorakaḍa-asna*, meaning “the message read at the threshold.” The gist of this statement, written in the same kind of stilted language as the *vihāra-asna* referred to earlier, is that all the gods invited have arrived for the *pirit* ceremony so that they may dispel all misfortune and bring about prosperity to all.

After the *dorakaḍa-asna*, another monk, standing within the pavilion, reads out a similar text called the *anusāsanā-asna*, wherein all the gods assembled are requested to rejoice in the merits of the entire ceremony. This monk holds in his hand a round-handled fan made of the talipot leaf, elaborately decorated, a symbol of authority and high

ecclesiastical position. These three ritualistic texts mentioned in the foregoing account (i.e. *vihāra-asna*, *dorakaḍa-asna*, and the *anusāsanā-asna*) were all composed during the Kandyan period (18<sup>th</sup> century) when ceremonies and rituals, especially those connected with the gods, became more popular than during the earlier periods. [17]

It is also worth noting, that this ceremony of *dorakaḍa-asna* has, in addition to its religious and ritualistic significance, considerable dramatic and theatrical value as well, for the whole event, from the preliminaries of the morning to the grand finale of the *anusāsanā* in the evening, contains much impersonation, mime, and dialogue. In this connection we may note that as early as the time of Buddhaghosa (5<sup>th</sup> century AC.) there were Buddhist rituals with such theatrical features as is shown by the exorcist ritual of reading the *Āṭṭānāṭiya Sutta* described in the *Dīgha Nikāya Commentary* (III 969–70). [18]

The recital of the *Jayamaṅgala Gāthā*, a set of eight benedictory stanzas extolling the virtues of the Buddha, may also be cited as a popular custom partly related to the chanting of *pirit*. This is usually done on important occasions like a marriage ceremony, when setting out on an important journey, or when inaugurating any venture of significance. This custom is inevitably observed at what is called the *Poruva* ceremony when, after a couple to be married ascends a small decorated platform (*poruva*), they are blessed for future prosperity. The recital is usually done

by an elderly person who, for the occasion, assumes the position of an officiating priest. At public functions a bevy of young girls clad in white uniforms also do the recital. The contents of the stanzas recited clearly show that the ritual is intended to bring happiness and prosperity to the persons concerned or the successful completion of the project. Accordingly these verses have come to be called "the stanzas of success and prosperity," *Jayamaṅgala Gāthā*, and have become quite popular among all sections of the Buddhists. While the origin of these stanzas is shrouded in mystery, it can be stated with certainty that they were composed in Sri Lanka by a devoted Buddhist poet. The earliest available reference to them is during the Kandyan period when they are given in a list of subjects that a monk should study. This shows that they had become well established during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries; hence they must have been composed at least a century earlier. These stanzas are regarded as efficacious because they relate eight occasions, each based on a beautiful story, when the Buddha triumphed over his powerful opponents.

The chanting of what is called *set-pirit* by a few bhikkhus at the inauguration of new ventures or at receptions and farewells to important public personages has also become quite common. The chanting usually consists of a sutta like the Maṅgala, Ratana, or Metta Sutta, and a few benedictory stanzas. *Set-pirit* is broadcast by the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation every morning as the first item of its programme.

# 5. Almsgiving and Funerals

## 1. The Almsgiving

The ceremony of *pirit*-chanting is very often accompanied by another important ceremony, that of almsgiving. It is generally known as *saṅghika-dāna*, meaning “the alms given to the community of monks.” Such a ceremonial almsgiving is often preceded by an all-night *pirit* ceremony. Even otherwise this ceremony too is usually performed on important occasions in the same way as the *pirit* ceremony, associated with such events as house-warming, setting out on a long journey, a marriage, birth, or death anniversaries, and so forth.

At least four monks who have obtained higher ordination (*upasampadā*) must participate for the *dāna* to become valid as a full-fledged *saṅghika-dāna*. Such *dānas* were held even during the Buddha’s time, the Buddha himself participating in very many of them.

Of the many items of offering that *dāna* or the act of generosity could include, food is usually regarded as the most important and the formal meal offering accordingly is done with much ceremony and ritual. The monks are conducted from the temple in procession with drumming as in the case of *pirit*. A layman leads the procession, with the relic casket (*dhātu-karaṇḍuva*), representing the Buddha,

borne on his head under an umbrella or canopy. As they approach the particular household they are received by the host. As the monks step into the house, one person washes their feet, while another wipes them. This part of the ceremony is the same as in the case of the *pirit* ceremony. The monks are then conducted to the cushioned seats arranged on the floor against the wall. Alms are first offered to the Buddha in a separate bowl, and are placed on a separate table on which the relic casket, containing a bone-relic of the Buddha, has been set. All the items of food are served in plates and placed on mats or low tables before the seated monks. A senior monk administers the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts (see pp. 5–6) to the assembled gathering, as this has become the established custom with which any Buddhist function commences. After he has given a short address on the significance of the occasion, the food is formally presented by getting the chief householder to repeat a Pali statement: *imaṃ bhikkhaṃ saparikkhāraṃ bhikkhusaṅghassa dema* (“These alms, along with other requisites, we offer to the whole community of monks”). Next, the food is served and once the monks have finished eating (which should be before noon) the other requisites (*parikkhāra*), referred to in the statement quoted, are also offered.

The most important item among these offerings is what is traditionally known as “the eight monastic requisites” (*aṭṭa-pirikara*): the alms-bowl, three robes, belt, razor, water-strainer, and sewing needle. This offering is regarded as

especially meritorious. As it is an expensive item and therefore difficult to offer to all the monks, generally one *aṭa-pirikara* is offered to the chief monk and other items such as books, towels, pillow-cases, umbrellas, etc., are presented to the other monks.

Once this is over, another monk administers what is called *puññānumodanā* or “thanks-giving” wherein all those who were connected with the ceremony are requested to partake of the merits (*puñña*) for their future good. The participants are also called upon to transfer the merits they have thus acquired for the well-being of their dead kinsmen and friends as well as for the sustenance of beings in the *deva* worlds, i.e. the deities, who are expected to protect the donors out of gratitude. The relic casket and the monks are conducted back to the temple in the same manner as they were brought and the proceedings are concluded.

A related ritual that cannot be ignored as regards the ceremony of almsgiving is the custom of getting the neighbours and friends also to serve into the alms-bowl that is offered to the Buddha. On the morning of the day on which the almsgiving takes place a separate bowl is kept on a table for this purpose. This is called the *Buddha-pāttare*, or the Buddha’s alms-bowl. Alms served into it are regarded as offered to the Buddha himself. The neighbours would come with plates of rice prepared in their homes and serve into it. This rice is also taken when the bowl of food is prepared for offering to the Buddha, near the relic casket at the time of the *dāna* proper, the purpose here being to get

the neighbours and outsiders also to participate in this merit-making ceremony.

## 2. Funerals

Among Buddhists death is regarded as an occasion of major religious significance, both for the deceased and for the survivors. For the deceased it marks the moment when the transition begins to a new mode of existence within the round of rebirths. When death occurs all the kammic forces that the dead person accumulated during the course of his or her lifetime become activated and set about determining the next rebirth. For the living, death is a powerful reminder of the Buddha's teaching on impermanence; it also provides an opportunity to assist the deceased person as he or she fares on to the new existence.

Both aspects of death—the message of impermanence, and the opportunity to help the departed loved one—find expression in the Buddhist funeral rites of Sri Lanka. Naturally, the monastic Sangha plays a prominent role in the funeral proceedings. One of the most important parts of the funeral rites is the ritual called “offering of cloth on behalf of the dead” (*mataka-vastra-pūjā*). This is done prior to the cremation or the burial of the body. Monks are assembled in the home of the dead person or in the cemetery. The proceedings begin with the administration of the Five Precepts to the assembled crowd by one of the monks. This is followed by the recitation in chorus of the

well-known stanza:

*Aniccā vata saṅkhārā, uppādavayadhammino.  
Uppajjitvā nirujjhānti tesaṃ vūpasamo sukho.*

Impermanent alas are formations, subject to rise and fall. Having arisen, they cease; their subsiding is bliss.

Next follows this ritual, which consists of the offering of a length of new white cloth to the monks. The cloth, called a *paṃsukūla*—literally, a dust-heap cloth—is intended to be cut into pieces and then stitched into a robe.

After offering it, the close relatives of the deceased sit together on a mat, assume a reverential posture, and together they pour water from a vessel into a cup placed within a plate until the cup overflows. While the water is being poured, the monks intone in unison the following stanzas extracted from the Tirokuḍḍha Sutta of the Khuddakapāṭha:

*Unname udakaṃ vaṭṭaṃ yathā ninnaṃ pavattati  
evameva ito dinnaṃ petānaṃ upakappati.*

*Yathā vārivahā pūrā paripūrenti sāgaraṃ  
evameva ito dinnaṃ petānaṃ upakappati.*

Just as the water fallen on high ground flows to a lower level, Even so what is given from here accrues to the departed.

Just as the full flowing rivers fill the ocean, Even so

what is given from here accrues to the departed.

The context shows that the pouring of water in this manner is a ritualistic act belonging to the field of sympathetic magic, symbolising the beneficial inheritance of the merit transferred by the living to the dead, as a kind of *dakkhiṇā* or offering. The entire ritual is hence an act of grace whereby merit is transferred to the departed so that they may find relief from any unhappy realm wherein they might have been born.

Another funeral rite is *mataka-baṇa* or “preaching for the benefit of the dead.” The usual practice is to conduct a monk to the house of the dead person, generally on the third day (or occasionally on any day within a week) after the funeral and to request him to preach a sermon suited to the occasion. Accordingly he preaches a suitable sermon for about an hour’s duration to the assembled audience, which inevitably consists of the deceased’s relatives and the neighbours of the household. At the end of the sermon, the monk gets the relatives to recite the necessary stanzas to transfer to the deceased the merits acquired by organising the event. Following this, a gift is offered to the monk, and the invitees are also served with refreshments.

Three months from the date of death, it is customary to hold an almsgiving (*saṅghika dāna*) in memory of the deceased and thence to repeat it annually. As in the case of the rituals mentioned earlier, here too the purpose is to impart merit to the deceased. Hence it is called the offering in the name of

the dead (*mataka-dāna*). The basis of the practice is the belief that if the dead relative has been reborn in an unhappy existence (i.e. as a *peta* or unhappy spirit), he or she would expect his or her living relatives to transfer merit in this manner as these departed spirits or *petas* are incapable of performing any meritorious deed on their own. Even their hunger and thirst, which is perpetual, subside only in this manner. Hence they are referred to as “living on what is given by others” (*paradatta-upajīvī*). This custom can be traced to the Buddha’s own time when King Bimbisāra was harassed by a group of his departed kinsmen, reborn as *petas*, because the king had failed to give alms to the Buddha in their name. Once this was fulfilled as requested by the Buddha, the *petas* became happy and ceased to give any more trouble (Khp-a 202f; Pv-a19ff). This was the occasion on which the Buddha preached the Tirokuḍḍha Sutta referred to earlier, which further says that once these rites are performed, these contented spirits bless the donors in return.

These rites, it may be mentioned here, resemble the *srāddha* ceremonies of the Hindus in some ways. And it is also significant that, according to the Buddha himself, only the dead relatives who have been reborn as *petas* are capable of receiving this benefit (AV 269ff.).

## 6. Monastic Ceremonies

# 1. Vassa and Kaṭhina

The *Vassa*, a three-month rains retreat, was instituted by the Buddha himself and was made obligatory for all fully ordained bhikkhus; the details are laid down in the Mahāvagga of the Vinaya Piṭaka (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> chapters). The retreat extends over a period corresponding to the North Indian rainy season, from the day following the full moon of July until the full-moon day of October; those who cannot enter the regular *Vassa* are permitted to observe the retreat for three months beginning with the day following the August full moon. From the time Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka by the Arahant Mahinda, the observance of *Vassa*—*Vas* in Sinhala—has been one of the mainstays of monastic life in the island. During the *Vas* the monks are expected to dwell permanently in their temples and suspend all travelling. If unavoidable circumstances necessitate travelling, they are allowed to leave their residences on the promise that they will return within a week (*sattāhakaraṇīya*). On the first day of the retreat the monks have to formally declare that they will dwell in that manner in the selected monastery or dwelling.

The *Vassa* is also a time for the lay Buddhists to express their devotion to the cause of Buddhism by supporting the Sangha with special diligence, which task they regard as a potent source of merit. It is customary for prominent persons to invite monks to spend the *Vas* with them in dwellings specially prepared for the purpose. In this latter

case the host would go and invite the monk or monks formally. If the monks accept the invitation, the hosts would prepare a special temporary dwelling in a suitable place with a refectory and a shrine room. On the first day of the *Vas* they would go with drummers and dancers to the monastery where the invitees reside and conduct them thence in procession. The hosts would assume responsibility for providing all the needs of the monk or monks during this period, and they attend to this work quite willingly as they regard it as highly meritorious. If no special construction is put up, the lay supporters would invite the monks to observe the retreat in the temple itself.

At the close of the *Vas* season, the monks have to perform the *pavāraṇa* ceremony. At this ceremony, held in place of the Pātimokkha recitation, each monk invites his fellows to point out to him any faults he has committed during the *Vas* period. On any day following the day of *pavāraṇa* in the period terminating with the next full-moon day, the *kaṭhina* ceremony is held. Different monasteries will hold the *kaṭhina* on different days within this month, though any given monastery may hold only one *kaṭhina* ceremony. The main event in this ceremony is the offering of the special robe known as the *kaṭhina-cīvara* to the Sangha, who in turn present it to one monk who has observed the retreat. The laity traditionally offer unsewn cloth to the monks. Before the offering takes place, the robe is generally taken, with drumming, etc., around the village in the early hours of the morning. Once the robe is given to the Sangha, certain

monks are selected to do the cutting, sewing, and dying of the robe—all in a single day. Public contributions are very often solicited to buy the robe if it is not a personal offering.

This ceremony, which is performed with keen interest and devotion, has today become an important occasion of great social and religious significance for the Buddhist laity. This seems to have been so even in historical times when many Sinhala kings made this offering with much interest and devotion (e.g. Mhv xlv,48, xcI etc).

## 2. Monastic Ordination

There is deep ritualistic significance in the two stages of monastic ordination called *pabbajjā* and *upsampadā*. The former is the initial admission into the homeless life as a novice or *sāmaṇera*, which can be granted to any male over the age of seven or eight, provided certain conditions are satisfied. The ritual proper consists in shaving the hair and beard, donning the dyed robes, whose colour ranges from yellow to brown, and then taking from the selected preceptor (*upajjhāya*) the Three Refuges in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, and the Ten Precepts (*dasa sikkhāpada*): abstinence from (i) destroying life, (ii) theft, (iii) unchastity, (iv) lying, (v) fermented liquor, spirits, and strong drinks which cause intoxication and heedlessness, (vi) eating solid food after midday, (vii) dancing, singing, music, and improper shows, etc., (viii) adorning and beautifying the person by the use of garlands, scents, and

unguents, (ix) using high and luxurious beds and seats, and (x) receiving gold and silver, i.e. money. The ceremony is performed on an auspicious day at the monastery where the ordination is sought. Thus the postulant becomes a novice.

The full or higher ordination (*upasampadā*) is more formal and difficult. The higher ordination ceremony should be conducted in a prescribed and duly consecrated “chapter house” (*sīmā*, or Sinh.: *poya-ge*), without which the ritual is not valid. If the candidate possesses the necessary qualifications like knowledge and intelligence and he is above twenty years of age, he may formally apply for admission and appear before a chapter of bhikkhus. Before admission he is made to put away the yellow robes and wear the clothes of a householder and face an interview at which he would be thoroughly examined as to his fitness for admission. If he successfully passes the test, he is led aside, reclothed in mendicant robes, and called back. Bearing his alms-bowl, he once again appears before the Sangha and goes through certain formalities after which, if all the monks agree, he is declared admitted. [19]

### **3. Uposatha Observance**

This refers to the ritual of confession performed by the monks on the new-moon and the full-moon days, when the Disciplinary Code, the Pātimokkha, is recited. This is a set of 227 rules, to be observed by the members of the Buddhist Order. When each of the seven sections of the rules is

recited amidst the assembled Order, if any among those present has infringed any of those rules, he should confess and undergo any punishment prescribed. Silence implies absence of guilt.

## 7. Bali and Tovil Ceremonies

### 1. Bali

*Bali* is the ceremony wherein the presiding deities of the planets (*graha*) are invoked and placated in order to ward off their evil influences. The belief in the good and evil influence of the planets according to the time and place of one's birth is quite widespread in Sri Lanka. The first thing done at the birth of a child is to cast the horoscope, which has to be consulted subsequently at all the important events of his or her life. When a calamity like a serious illness comes upon such a person, the horoscope would inevitably be consulted, and if the person is under a bad planetary influence, the astrologer would recommend some kind of propitiatory ritual. This could be a minor one like the lime-cutting ritual (*dehi-käpīma*) <sup>[20]</sup> or a major one like a *bali* ceremony, depending on the seriousness of the case. If it is a *bali* ceremony, he might also recommend the specific kind of *bali* suitable for the occasion.

The term *bali* signifies both the ritual in general and also the clay representations of the planetary deities which are made in relief on frameworks of bamboo and painted in appropriate colours. The ritual consists of dancing and drumming in front of the *bali* figures by the *bali* artist (*bali-ādura*), who continuously recites propitiatory stanzas calling for protection and redress. The patient (*āturaya*) sits by the side of the *bali* figures.

The *bali* artist is helped by a number of assistants working under him. The knowledge and art of performing the ritual are handed down in traditional families. The retentive power of these artists is remarkable, for they can continue to recite the appropriate formulas and verses from memory for days.

The *bali* ceremony is a mixture of Buddhism and folk religion. This cult of the planets and the allied deities has become an important element in the popular living Buddhism of the island. The origins of this type of *bali* ritual have to be traced to the Kotte Period of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, when it was introduced into the island from South India by some Hindu brahmins from that region. However, mainly owing to the efforts of the celebrated Buddhist monk of the period, Ven. Vīdāgama Maitreya Thera, this ritual was recast with a Buddhist significance, both in form and content, in that all the verses and formulas used in the ritual are those extolling the virtues of the Triple Gem—the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha—and of the

Buddhist deities. It is these spiritual qualities that are invoked to bring redress. The entire ritual is thus made subservient to Buddhism.

The ceremony begins after paying homage to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Even during the course of the ceremony this homage is paid at important junctures. The majority of the stanzas recited as benedictory verses by the artist extol the virtues of the Triple Gem or refer to the Buddha's previous existences as a Bodhisatta. The verbal part of the entire ritual consists mainly of the recitation of these verses and the pronouncement of the blessing: "By the power of those virtues let the evil influence of the planets disappear." It is believed that this kind of pronouncement of blessings becomes effective only if they are made at such an elaborate ceremony like *bali*. As in the case of the *pirit* ceremony described earlier, the spiritual qualities of the Buddha are regarded as superior to any worldly powers like those of the planets and stars as in the present instance, and consequently the ceremonial and ritualistic pronouncement of those qualities is believed to counteract those evil forces. Those propitiatory recitations also include the panegyrics (*stotras*) praising those planetary deities.

The preparation for the *bali* ceremony takes a day or two. Plantain stems, tender coconut leaves, coconut and arecanut racemes, powdered resin, limes, betel, torches made by wrapping clean rags around dry reeds (*vilakku* and *pandam*), [21] coconut oil, flowers of different colours, and burnt offerings are among the main items needed. Plastic

clay and reeds will be needed in large quantities to cast the *bali* figures. Life-size images of the planetary deities are moulded from these and painted beautifully in bright colours. Each planetary deity has its own dress, colours, diagram (*maṇḍala*), support (*vāhana*), weapon, etc. It is the nine planets (*navagraha*) that are generally propitiated: the sun (*ravi*), moon (*candra*), Mars (*kuja*), Mercury (*budha*), Jupiter (*guru*), Venus (*soukra*), Saturn (*s0ani*), and Rāhu and Ketu, the ascending and the descending nodes of the moon respectively.

When everything is ready, with the *bali* figures propped up leaning against a wall and the patient seated by a side facing the figures, the chief *bali* artist starts the proceedings by taking the Five Precepts and reciting a few benedictory stanzas while the drummers start drumming. This takes place in the evening. After these preliminaries it is more or less customary for the chief artist to retire to the side, while one or two of his assistants would appear on the scene to perform the more vigorous part of the ritual, consisting mainly of dancing and reciting.

The dancing artist wears an attractive and colourful dress consisting of white tights, a red jacket adorned with white beads, anklets, pads of jingling bells around his calves, and an elaborate headdress. In one hand he takes a *pandama* or lighted torch adequately fed with coconut oil. While reciting formulas and dancing to the beat of the drum, he throws handfuls of powdered resin into the burning *pandama*, setting up flares of flames which are regarded as very

powerful in driving away the invisible evil spirits (*bhūta*). In addition to the virtues of the Triple Gem, his recitation would also include legends and anecdotes taken from the Buddha's and Bodhisatta's lives. Sometimes references to previous Buddhas are also made. Planetary deities are eulogised and requested to stop troubling the patient.

Coconut-oil lamps, an incense burner, water pots with full-blown coconut racemes (*pun-kalas*) are among the items inevitably found on the scene. Offerings done on altars made of plantain trunks and tender coconut leaves will also be found. A number of such altars called *pideni-taṭu* may be set up; these are for the departed kinsmen of the family (*ñāti-peta*) who are expected to stop harassing the living after receiving these offerings, which generally consist of rice, seven selected curries cooked together (*hat-māluwa*), burnt offerings (*puluṭu*), coloured flowers, betel leaves, five kinds of seeds, etc. A live cock, with its legs tied together so that it cannot run about, is placed in a corner as an offering to the evil spirits. This is a kind of scapegoat, for all the evil influences of the patient are supposed to be transferred to this bird, which is released on the following morning.

The ceremonies actually end early in the morning when the artists carry the clay images (*bali* figures) and the altars of offerings or *pideni-taṭu* and leave them at the cross-roads that the evil spirits who give trouble are believed to frequent.

## 2. Tovil

*Tovil* or “devil-dancing” is another ritualistic healing ceremony that primarily belongs to folk religion. As in the case of the *bali* ceremony, here too many Buddhist elements have crept in and it has become a ceremony purporting to fulfil, at the popular level, the socio-religious needs of the simple rural Buddhists.

*Tovil* is essentially a demonic ritual mainly exorcistic in character, and hence a healing ceremony. In its exorcist form it is meant to curb and drive away any one or several of the innumerable hosts of malevolent spirits, known as *yakkhas*, who are capable of bringing about pathological states of body and mind. *Petas* or departed spirits of the malevolent type, referred to as *mala-yakku* (*mala* = dead) or *mala-peta*, are also brought under the exorcist power of *tovil*. While some of these could be subdued by the chanting of *pirit* (described earlier), there are some for whom methods of a more drastic type have to be adopted. The most popular of such methods is the *tovil* ceremony. [22]

As was pointed out earlier in relation to rituals in general, *tovil* is also an important aspect of folk religion that has been adopted by the Sinhala Buddhists. In the case of *tovil* too, religious sanction is conferred on folk-religious elements that have crept into normative Buddhism, supplementing, as it were, whatever is lacking in it to satisfy the religious needs of the masses. The Buddha is the chief of living beings, who include the *yakkhas* and other related non-

human beings that figure in *tovil*. Although they have the power to make their victims ill in various ways—such as by possession, gaze, etc.—they have to leave them once propitiatory offerings of food, drink, etc., are made to them. Even the mere mention of the Buddha’s virtues is enough to frighten them. Moreover, the chief of the *yakkhas*, Vessavaṇa (*Vesamuni*), is one of the four regents of the universe (*mahārāja*) and as such a devoted follower of the Buddha. The ordinary *yakkhas* that trouble human beings have to obey his commands. Thus, in all rituals connected with *tovil*, it is in the name of the Buddha and Vessavaṇa that the *yakkhas* are commanded to obey the orders of the exorcist. And in the rich folklore that deals with *tovil*, there are many anecdotes that connect every ritual or character with some Buddha of the past or with some Buddhist deity.

### 3. The Āṭānāṭiya Ritual

It is of interest to find a purely Buddhist form of an exorcist ritual that has been practised by the Buddhists of Sri Lanka from very early times. This is the recital of the Āṭānāṭiya Sutta (of the Dīgha Nikāya) in order to exorcise an evil spirit that has taken possession of a person. The commentary to the sutta (D-a III 969), dating at least as far back as the time of Buddhaghosa (c. 6<sup>th</sup> century AC.) or even earlier, gives a detailed description of how and when to recite it. According to this description, first the Metta, Dhajagga, and Ratana Suttas should be recited. If the spirit does not leave by such

recital, the Āṭānāṭiya Sutta is to be recited. The bhikkhu who performs the recital should not eat meat or preparations of flour. He should not live in a cemetery, lest the evil spirits get an opportunity to harass him. From the monastery to the patient's house, he should be conducted under an armed guard. [23] The recitation of the *paritta* should not be done in the open. Thoughts of love for the patient should be foremost in the reciter's mind. During the recital too he should be under armed guard. If the spirit still refuses to leave, the patient should be taken to the monastery and the recital performed in the courtyard of the *dāgaba*.

Many preliminary rites are recommended before such a recital. These include getting the patient to offer a seat to the bhikkhu who is to recite the *paritta*, the offering of flowers and lamps to the *dāgaba*, and the recitation by the bhikkhu of a set of benedictory stanzas, called (*Mahā*)-*maṅgala-gāthā*. [24] A full assembly of the deities should also be summoned. The person possessed should be questioned as to his name, by which is implied the identity of the spirit who has taken possession of him. Once the name is given, the spirit, but visibly the patient, should be addressed by that name. It should be told that the merits of offering incense, flowers, alms, etc. are all transferred to him and that the *maṅgala-gāthā* just referred to have been recited in order to appease him (*paññāharatthāya*: as a gift) and that he should therefore leave the patient in deference to the Sangha (*bhikkhusaṅgha-gāravena*). If the spirit still refuses to leave, the deities should be informed of his obstinacy and

the Āṭānāṭiya Paritta should be recited after declaring that as the spirit does not obey them, they are carrying out the order of the Buddha.

It is significant that this is a purely Buddhist ritual of considerable antiquity performed on lines similar to those in *tovil*. But the difference between the two should also be noted. When *tovil* is performed to cure a person possessed by a spirit, the spirit is ordered to leave the patient after accepting the offering of food and drink (*dola-pideni*). But in the case of the Āṭānāṭiya ritual, it is the merits earned by making offerings to the Buddha that are transferred to the spirit. Another significant difference is that the Āṭānāṭiya recital, in keeping with its purely Buddhist spirit, is much milder and more restrained than its *tovil* counterpart. The latter, however, is much more colourful and theatrical owing to its complex and essentially secular character. From the purely curative aspect, too, there is another attractive feature in *tovil*: when the spirit leaves the patient it does so leaving a sign of its departure, like breaking a branch of a tree, making a sound like a hoot, etc. It is perhaps because of these attractive features that *tovil* has become more popular in the island, replacing the truly Buddhist ceremony of the Āṭānāṭiya recital.

Nowadays in Sri Lanka, *tovil* has become the most popular form of cure adopted for spirit possession as well as other pathological conditions consequent on this. When a person is ill and medical treatment does not respond, the suspicion arises that it is due to some influence of an evil spirit. The

person to be consulted in such a case is the exorcist known as *kaṭṭadiyā* or *yakādurā* or *yaddressā* [25] who would discover and identify the particular evil spirit causing the disease and perform the appropriate *tovil*. There are also certain forms of *tovil* performed as pregnancy rituals (e.g. *raṭa-yakuma*) and others as means of eradicating various forms of evil influences like the evil eye, evil mouth, etc. (e.g. *garā-yakuma*).

The devil-dancers start their ceremony by first worshipping the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, as in the case of the *bali* ceremony. The *yakkhas*—who constitute one of the main classes of malevolent spirits placated in devil-dancing—are believed to become satisfied with the offerings made by people through *tovil* and cease harassing them. The *yakkhas* like Rīri Sanni Kalukumāraya, Sūniyan, Mahāsohon, Maru, etc. are some of the main spirits placated. There are eighteen main *yakkhas* in this category, each representing a particular kind of illness, and in *tovil* these demons are represented by the devil-dancers themselves, who wear their specific masks and other apparel in keeping with the traditional forms ascribed to these spirits. It is believed that by dancing, chanting, and acting the part of the demons after assuming their likenesses through masks and other paraphernalia, the demons possessing the patient would leave him. The sound waves created by the drum-beat and the chanting of stanzas accompanied by rhythmic dancing in keeping with these sounds are all performed to a set pattern traditionally laid down.

The collective effect of the ceremony is believed to cure the patient's illness. Thus this dancing in *tovil* is a therapeutic ritual. The impersonation of the demon by the dancer is regarded as tantamount to the actual presence of the demon who becomes placated through offerings, recitations, chanting, miming, etc. When the spirits are threatened and asked to leave the patient, they are asked to do so under the command and in the name of the Buddha.

The ceremony known as *raṭa-yakuma* is performed to make barren women conceive, or for the pre-natal care of pregnant women, and to ensure the safe delivery of children. One of the episodes mimetically performed by the exorcist in this ceremony shows how barren women, according to a Buddhist legend preserved among the Sinhala people, offer cloths to the past Buddha Dīpaṅkara, the fourth in the line of twenty-eight Buddhas accepted by Theravada Buddhists; they obtain children through the merits of the act. [26] Among the rituals specially connected with women may be mentioned those devil-dancing ceremonies that invoke the *yakkha* called Kalukumāraya in Sinhala. He is very often associated with another group of *yakkhas* called *raṭa-yakku*, whose leader is a female named Riddi-bisava. Another pregnancy ritual that deserves mention here is the one known as *kalas-tābīma* (lit. setting apart a pot). When the first signs of pregnancy appear in a woman, a new clay pot is filled with certain ingredients and kept apart with the solemn promise that once the child is safely delivered a *tovil* will be performed. The ritual known

as *hat-aḍiya* (seven steps) in the *tovil* ceremony called *sūniyam-kāpīma*, signifies the seven steps the Bodhisatta Siddhattha is said to have taken just after he was born.

Two important facts that emerge from this brief description of *tovil* is the theatrical value present in these rituals and the way in which religious sanction has been obtained for their adoption by the Buddhists.

## 4. Goddess Pattini

The large number of rituals and ceremonies connected with the goddess Pattini also come under Buddhist practices. This goddess, believed to be of South Indian origin, has become the most popular female deity of the Sinhala Buddhists (see below, pp. 65–66). While Hindu goddesses like Lakshmī, Sarasvati,<sup>#</sup> and Kālī are also worshipped by the Buddhists, only Pattini has separate abodes among the Buddhists. The most important of the rituals connected with Pattini is the *gam-maḍuwa*, which is an all-purpose ceremony. As this ceremony is usually held after the harvest by offering the first portion of paddy harvested, this is also a ceremony of first-fruit offerings. [27] A *gam-maḍuwa* has many interludes dramatised mainly from rich legendary lore about the goddess Pattini. [28] *Kohomba-kankāriya*, or the ritual of the god Kohomba, is a ceremony similar to the *gam-maḍuwa* but performed more as an expiatory ritual.

Two other ceremonies of this type are *pān-maḍu* and *pūnā-maḍu*. All these are different forms of the same type of ritual

with slight differences. They are generally referred to as *devol-maḍu* or occasions for the propitiation of the gods. [29] The general purpose of such *devol-maḍu* is the attainment of immunity from disease and evil influences and the achievement of success, especially agricultural, for the entire village. A point that is sociologically important is that as they are big communal gatherings they also fulfil the social needs of the village folk. As they are performed in public places to bless the community as a whole and turn out to be social get-togethers, they bear a corporate character. When it is decided that such a ceremony should be held, all the village folk would forget their differences and work together to make it a success. Further, while it mainly serves as a ritual to propitiate the deities, it is a form of entertainment as well. Serving as it does the socio-religious needs of the masses, it becomes a big social event for the entire village.

## 5. Garā-demons

*Garā*-demons (*garā-yakku* (plural); *-yakā* (singular)) are a group of demons twelve in number whose female aspects are called the *Giri* goddesses. Their chief is called *Daḷa-rājā* who is represented as having three hooded cobras over his head, ear-ornaments, two protruding tusks, and a torch in each hand. When referred to in the singular as *garā-yakā* it is he that is intended and when performing the ritual it is the mask pertaining to him that is generally used as

representing the group. These demons are not inimical to humans but are regarded as removing various kinds of uncleanness and evil influences. Accordingly it is customary among the Sinhala Buddhists to perform the ritual called *garā-yak-nāṭuma* (dance of the *garā-yakku*) at the end of religious ceremonies like annual *peraheras*, *tovil* ceremonies, etc. This is to ward off what is called *vas-dos* in the terminology of the folk religion, the effects of evil-eye, evil mouth, evil thoughts, etc. The malicious influences of these evil forces have to be eliminated before the participants return to their normal activities. And for this it is these demons that have to be propitiated. Accordingly, they are invited to come and take away their prey, promising not to harm the participants thereafter. A dancer impersonates the *garā-yakā* by wearing the appropriate mask just referred to and in the dialogue that takes place between him and another dancer, he promises to comply with the request if certain things are given to him. These include drinks, food, sweets, and money. These items are given and he departs in peace. The ceremony is held annually at the Vishnu Devālaya in Kandy after the annual Esala Perahera. It goes on for one week from the last day of the Perahera and is referred to as *vali-yak-nāṭuma*.

## 8. Worship of Devas

# 1. Deva Worship

Besides the ceremonies and rituals like *pirit*, *saṅghika-dāna*, *kaṭhina*, etc., that can be traced in their origin to the time of the Buddha himself, there is another popular practice resorted to by the average Sri Lankan Buddhist which cannot be traced to early Buddhism so easily. This is *deva*-worship, the worship of deities, in what are popularly called *devālayas* or abodes dedicated to these deities. This practice cannot be described as totally un-Buddhistic, yet at the same time it does not fall into the category of folk religious practices like *bali* and *tovil* adopted by popular Buddhism.

The word *deva*, meaning “god” or “deity” in this context, signifies various classes of superhuman beings who in some respects are superior to ordinary human beings through their birth in a higher plane. As such, they are capable of helping human beings in times of difficulty. There is also another class of such superior beings who were originally extraordinary human beings. After their death, they have been raised to the level of gods and are worshipped and supplicated as capable of helping in times of need. These are the gods by convention (*sammuti-deva*) or glorified human heroes like the Minneriya Deviyo, who was glorified in this manner in recognition of his construction of the great Minneriya Tank at Polonnaruwa, or God Vibhīṣhaṇa, one of the four guardian deities of Sri Lanka. Both these categories of deities are, however, subject to the saṃsāric laws pertaining to birth and death. Thus it is seen that *deva*-

worship is based on the theory that a superior being can help an inferior being when the latter needs such help.

In addition to their role as helpers in need, an additional duty ascribed to the *devas* is the safeguarding of the Buddha-sāsana, i.e. the Buddhist religion. This also has its origin in the story of the Buddha himself when the four divine regents of the universe mounted guard over him and helped on various occasions of the Bodhisatta's life from his conception onwards. The benevolence of the deities is also extended to the protection of the faithful followers of the Buddha's teachings as exemplified by Sakka, the good Samaritan in many Buddhist stories.

In Sri Lanka there are four deities regarded as the guardians of the Buddha-sāsana in the island: Vishnu, Saman, Katarāgama, and Vibhīṣaṇa. Although Vishnu is originally a Hindu god, the Buddhists have taken him over as a Buddhist deity, referring to him also by the localised designation Uppalavaṇṇa. And so are Siva, specially under the name Ívara, and Gaṇesha under the name Gaṇapati or the more popular appellation Gaṇa-deviyo.

In the *devāla*-worship the devotees make offerings to these deities and solicit their help for special purposes, especially in their day-to-day problems. A noteworthy feature in this practice is the presence of a mediator between the deity and the devotee, a priest called *kapurāla*, or *kapu-mahattaya* or simply *kapuva*, the equivalent of the Hindu *pūsāri*. This figure has been copied from South Indian Hindu practices,

for even in North India the devotees appeal directly to these higher powers without the help of such an intermediary.

By *devāla* offering is meant the offering of food and drink as well as gifts of cloth, coins, gold, and silver often accompanied by eulogies addressed to the particular resident deity and recited by the *kapurāla*. In many Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka there are *devālayas* dedicated to various deities. *Devāla*-worship of this type is a ritual that has gained popularity among the local Buddhists since the Polonnaruwa period (12<sup>th</sup> century). In the present day it has acquired a vital place in the religious life of the Buddhist masses. This is one of the aspects by which the “great tradition” of Nikāya Buddhism has been supplemented by popular elements. This shows that if Buddhism is to prevail as a living force among all classes of its adherents, it has to make provision for the popular demands related to the day-to-day life of the common populace.

It is customary for many Sri Lankan Buddhists to visit a *devālaya* of one of the deities and make a vow that if the problem at hand (i.e. illness, enemies, etc.) is solved, they will make an offering to the deity concerned. Offerings are made even without such a special request. Whatever the case may be, this practice has become a ritual of propitiation through the *kapurālas*.

The main duties of the *kapurālas* are to look after the *devālayas* in their charge, to perform the prescribed rituals, and to offer in the inner shrine the offerings brought by

devotees. The *kapurāla* is given a fee for his services. Once the ritual is over, a part of the offerings is given back to the devotee for him to take home and partake of as having a sacramental value. The offerings normally consist of milk-rice, coconuts, betel, camphor, joss-sticks, fruits, along with flowers, garlands, flags, etc. All these are arranged in an orderly manner in a basket or tray and handed over respectfully to the *kapurāla*, who takes it inside and offers it at the statue of the main deity inside the inner room. The devotees wait outside with clasped hands while the *kapurāla* makes his pleadings on their behalf.

The statement he recites, called *yātikāva* in Sinhala, is a panegyric of the deity concerned and it constitutes a humble and respectful request to bring succour to the devotee in his particular predicament. After this the *kapurāla* emerges from the inner shrine room and blesses the devotees by using his thumb to place on their forehead a mark of a paste made from saffron, sandalwood, and other ingredients. This mark, the symbol of sanctification, is known as the *tilaka*.

This form of ritualistic propitiation of deities is a clear adaptation of the Hindu system where the very same method is followed, though more elaborately.

## 2. The Gods

**Katarāgama.** *Devālayas* dedicated to the different deities are scattered all over the island. God Katarāgama (Skanda) in southern Sri Lanka is by far the most popular, as he is

considered to be the most powerful deity capable of granting the requests of the worshipper. It is for this reason that he has acquired territorial rights throughout the island. *Devālayas* dedicated to him are found in many places in the island, some of which are maintained by the Hindus.

**Gaṇeśha.** The elephant-shaped god Gaṇeśha, regarded as the god of wisdom and the remover of obstacles, is also very popular among the Buddhists under the names Gaṇapati or Gaṇa-deviyo. He is worshipped as the chief of obstacles (Vighnesvara) because it is believed that he is responsible for creating and removing obstacles. He does this through troops of inferior deities or demi-gods considered as attendants of Siva, present almost everywhere, who are under his command. It is in this sense that he is called Gaṇapati (chief of hosts), which is the epithet popular among the Buddhists. The *devālayas* dedicated to him are mostly run by the Hindus. The Buddhists worship him either through his statues, found in many Buddhist temples, or by visiting the Hindu *kovils* dedicated to him. As the god of wisdom and of learning, he is propitiated at the time a child first reads the alphabet. As the chief of obstacles, as their creator as well as remover, the Hindus begin their *devāla*-ritual by making the first offering to him.

Another popular aspect of his worship in some parts of Sri Lanka can be observed along the main roads, especially in the North-Central Province, where his statue is placed near trees and propitiated by travellers so that they may have a safe journey. The propitiation usually consists of breaking a

coconut in his name, offering a coin (*paṇḍura*), etc.

**Nātha.** Nātha is purely a Buddhist god, apparently the local counterpart of the all-compassionate Mahāyāna Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. He is referred to in Sri Lanka by the abbreviated form Nātha. His cult, as that of Nātha, had become quite popular during the Kotte period (14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries), while references to him are found as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries as shown by archaeological evidence. The centre of the cult was Totagamuwa near Hikkaduwa in the Galle District. Two of the more ancient *devālayas* dedicated to this deity are found at Kandy and at Vāgiriya. The premises of the Kandy *devālaya*, opposite the Temple of the Tooth, are considered especially lucky and sacred, for the important royal rites like choosing a name for the king, putting on the royal sword, etc., were held there. It was Nātha's all-pervāding compassion that seems to have been appealed to by the local devotees. [30]

**Vishnu.** The important Hindu god Vishnu has also assumed a special Buddhist significance in the island. He is identified with the god Uppalavaṇṇa of the *Mahāvamsa*, to whom Sakka, the king of the gods, is said to have entrusted the guardianship of Sri Lanka at the request of the Buddha before his passing away. This god is said to have arrived in the island to fulfil this mission. The name Uppalavaṇṇa means "the colour of the blue water-lily." As Vishnu is of the same colour, Uppalavaṇṇa became identified with Vishnu, and in the wake of the Mahāvamsa tradition, he

became, as Vishnu, the protector of the Buddha-sāsana in Sri Lanka. The calculated omission of the name Vishnu in the *Mahāvamsa* in this connection may be viewed as an attempt at total localization of the divinity with a view to harmonise him with the cultural fabric of the island. His main shrine is at Devinuwara (Dondra), at the southern tip of the island, where an annual Esala (July-August) festival is held in his honour. If the identification is correct his cult can be traced to the earliest phase of the history of the island and has been popular up to the present day.

**Pattini.** Goddess Pattinī referred to above (see p.59), is prominent as the most popular female Buddhist divinity; she has her *devālayas* scattered throughout the country. Her cult goes back at least to the second century AC. The then ruler, King Gajabāhu, is said to have introduced the worship of this divinity into the island from South India. [31] The legend about her life is told in the Tamil poem *sīlappadikāram*. According to the myths current in the island about her, she had seven incarnations, being born seven times from water, the tusk of an elephant, a flower, a rock, a fire (or peak), cloth, and a mango. Hence she is designated as *sat-pattinī sat* meaning seven.

There are colourful stories woven around these births. The story about her unswerving fidelity to her fickle husband Kovalan (or Pālaṅga) in her birth as Kannagī, is quite popular among the local Buddhists as attested by the existence of many Sinhala literary works dealing with the story (e.g. *Vayantimālaya*, *Pattinihālla*, *Pālaṅga-hālla*, etc.).

Her favours are sought especially at times of pestilences like chicken pox, measles, etc. and also by women who desire children. It is customary for the Sri Lankan Buddhists to visit her *devālaya* and worship her with offerings after recovery from infectious diseases. The banishment of evil influences and the attainment of prosperity in general and good harvests are other purposes behind the ceremonies performed in her honour. She also plays an important part in the ceremonies connected with the offering of first fruits. [32]

*Devālayas* dedicated to her are found in many parts of the island, the one at Navagamuwa, about fifteen miles from Colombo on the old Avissavella Road, being the most important. The sanctity of this place seems to go back to the time of King Gajabāhu. [33]

**Sakka.** Sakka, the king of the gods, has been an important figure in the Buddhist affairs of Sri Lanka. Tradition connects him with the Buddha himself in connection with the landing of Vijaya and his followers in the island in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. On this occasion, at the Buddha's request, Sakka is said to have entrusted Vishnu with the guardianship of Buddhism in the island. It was Sakka too who sought Arahant Mahinda and requested him to come over to the island when the time became opportune for its conversion (Mhv xiii,15,16,17).

**Saman.** Another important deity in the island is Mahāsumana, Sumana or Saman, the guardian or the

presiding deity of Sri Pāda mountain or Sumanakūṭa (Adam's Peak), which the Buddhists treat as sacred on account of its bearing the impression of the Buddha's left foot, which he left on his third visit to the island. (Mhv.i,77ff.).

God Saman is recorded as having met the Buddha on the latter's first visit to the island when he visited Mahiyaṅgana to drive away the *yakkhas*. Saman became a stream-entrant (*sotāpanna*) after listening to the Buddha, who gave him a handful of hairs with which he erected the *dāgaba* at Mahiyaṅgana (Mhv.i,33). He is regarded as the chief deity of the area surrounding the sacred mountain as well as of the hill-country in general. Accordingly his main shrine is at Ratnapura, where an annual festival is held in his honour.

**Vibhīshaṇa.** Another deity, somewhat similar to Saman, is Vibhīshaṇa, who is regarded as the brother of the pre-historic King Rāvaṇa of Sri Lanka. His main shrine is at Kelaniya, as a part of the famous Buddhist temple there.

**Dāḍimuṇḍa.** Another deity who likewise came into prominence during the Kandyan period (17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) is Dāḍi@muṇḍa (Devatā Bandāra) who, according to the prevalent tradition, landed at Dondra (Devinuvara) in South Sri Lanka from South India. He proceeded to Alutnuvara in the Kegalla District, taking up permanent residence there in a temple, which he himself got constructed. This is the chief shrine of this deity and here too an annual festival is held. He is regarded as a general of

Vishnu and accordingly, at the main Vishnu shrines in the island, he also has his shrine on a side (e.g. Dondra, Kandy, etc.). Another interesting tradition says that he was the only deity who did not run away in fear at the time of Bodhisatta Siddhattha's struggle with Māra. While all the other deities took flight in fright, he alone remained fearless as the Bodhisatta's only guardian. He is portrayed in the attire of a Kandyan chief with his special attribute, a walking stick (*soluva*). His Kandyan dress symbolises his suzerainty over the Kandyan area.

**Hūniyan Deviyo.** The patron deity of the sorcerers in Sri Lanka is Hūniyan or Sūniyan, who has been promoted from the status of a demon to that of a deity. He is also regarded as the deity presiding over a village area bounded by its boundaries (*gam-koṭuwa*), in which role he is designated as *gambhāra-deviyo* (deity in charge of the village). In many of the composite *devālayas* he too has his shrine, the one at Lunāva, about seven miles from Colombo close to the Galle Road, near the Lunāva railway station, being his chief *devālaya*.

Besides these deities so far enumerated there are many other minor figures who are too numerous to be mentioned here. What is important is that in the case of all these deities, the method of propitiation and worship is the same as explained earlier and every such deity is in charge of a particular aspect of life. And all of them are faithful Buddhists, extending their respective powers not only to the Buddha-sāsana but also to those who follow it faithfully.

As Buddhists, none of these is regarded as superior or even remotely equal to the Buddha. They all are followers of the Buddha, who has transcended the round of rebirth (*saṃsāra*), while they are still within *saṃsāra*, hoping to achieve release from it by following the Buddha's Teaching.

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## Notes

1. On the significance of the phases of the moon in Buddhism see Ch. 3.
2. The *poya* day routine will be described below, pp.24–31
3. This term has become a very common means of expressing religious devotion; usually it is repeated about three times and the clasp of hands in the gesture of worship inevitably accompanies it.
4. These formulas may be found in *The Mirror of the Dhamma* (BPS **Wheel No. 54**), pp.5–8.
5. Authoritative opinion holds that there is nothing irregular in its continuation now as its long usage has invested it with the necessary validity.
6. Ānanda K. Coomaraswamy, *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*

(New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), plate X55

7. See above, p.13.
8. E.W. Adikaram, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon* (Migoda, Sri Lanka, 1946), p.140.
9. *Ibid.*
10. It may be mentioned here that in astrology the month begins with the new moon and all calculations are done accordingly between two new moons as one month.
11. This *perahera* is held in honour of God Katarāgama (see below, p.64).
12. On this problem see NIBWA: Newsletter on International Buddhist Women's Activities, Vol. 11, No. 1, Oct.-Dec. 1994, pp.3ff.
13. At present Nāgadīpa is taken to refer to a small island about twelve miles off the western coast of Jaffna, where a Buddhist temple is identified as the place the Buddha visited. However, in historical times, Nāgadīpa referred to the modern Jaffna peninsula and the northwest of Sri Lanka. (See Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, II p.42.)
14. The *Pirit-Pota* is also known by the more honorific designation *Piruvānā-Potvahanse*. For an English translation of the most important texts from this work, see Piyadassi Thera, *The Book of Protection* (BPS, 1981).
15. The protective spells represented by each of these terms

slightly differ from one another as regards their form.

16. Kotāgama Vacissara Thera, *Saraṇankara Sangharāja Samāya*, pp.118–19.
17. *Ibid.*
18. For details of the Āṭānāṭiya recital see below, pp.55–57.
19. For details see *Ordination in Theravāda Buddhism* (BPS Wheel No. 56).
20. This is a ritual lasting for about an hour in which the exorcist, using an arecanut cutter, cuts a certain number of charmed limes over the head of the patient. A tray is placed before the patient holding flowers of various colours, burnt offerings, betel, etc. Waving a mango-twig over the patient's head, the exorcist utters incantations and recites benedictory stanzas. The mango twig is regarded as having power to drive away evil spirits.
21. *Vilakku* are the small reeds, about a foot long and half an inch in diameter, while *pandam* signify the larger ones, about 18 inches long and 2 inches in diameter.
22. The choice between these two depends perhaps also to some extent on the socio-religious maturity of the patrons.
23. All these are precautionary measures meant to immunize the reciting bhikkhu against the influence of evil spirits, which phenomenon is referred to as *tani-vīma* ("becoming alone") in a very general sense.

24. The reference most probably is to the set of benedictory stanzas beginning: “*Mahā kāruṇiko nātho,*” which is found at the end of the local edition of the *Catubhāṇavāra* text. See too *Mirror of the Dhamma*, pp.30–34.
25. When this person is addressed directly the common term used is *gurunnānse* (the honorific suffix *unnānse* is added to the term *guru*—teacher).
26. E.R. Sarachchandra, *The Folk Drama of Ceylon*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Sri Lanka Government, Dept. of Cultural Affairs, 1966), p.40.
27. First-fruit offerings are annual rituals held at important Buddhist temples and *devālayas*. Almost every province of the island has an important temple where it is held. The ritual is generally known as *alut-sahal-maṅgalyaya* (the ritual of offering new rice), rice being the staple food of Sri Lanka.
28. E.R. Sarachchandra, *The Folk Drama of Ceylon*, pp. 25, 26, 47f.
29. *Ibid.*, p.26.
30. See *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, II pp.413–14.
31. C.W. Nicholas and S Paraṇavitana, *A Concise History of Ceylon* (Ceylon University Press, Colombo, 1961), pp. 79–80.
32. E.R. Sarachchandra, *The Folk Drama of Ceylon*, p.47.
33. *The Ceylon National Museum Mss. Series*. Vol. 9—

Ethnology-4, p.III para. 5.

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