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RITUAL OCCASIONS, MERIT, AND THE APPROPRIATION OF POWER

Buddhist rituals can be classified in various ways. Melford Spiro, for example, characterizes Theravāda ritual action in Burma in terms of a fourfold typology: commemorative, expressive, instrumental, and expiatory.²⁷ Commemorative ritual is performed in remembrance of historical, legendary, or mythological events; expressive ritual serves to manifest emotions and sentiments felt toward objects of reverence, such as the Buddha, his teaching (*dhamma*), and the monastic order (*sangha*); instrumental ritual aims to achieve some goal in this life or in future lives; expiatory ritual is performed to atone for misdeeds.²⁸ Like most religious phenomena, rituals can be interpreted on several levels. Melford Spiro's analysis is useful but should not be taken as exhaustive nor should its categories be construed as mutually exclusive. Furthermore, although rituals vary in nature, function, and intent, Theravāda ritual in Southeast Asia often seems calculated to gain access to a wide spectrum of beneficent and malevolent powers.

Broadly speaking, these powers can be defined as either Buddhist or non-Buddhist. The Buddhist symbols operative in various ritual contexts are most often associated with the Buddha himself and include Buddha images, his relics enshrined in reliquary mounds (*cetiya*), and Buddha amulets. Symbols associated with individual Buddhist monks or nuns reputed to be particularly holy are an important extension of these objects. The charismatic power ascribed to individual monks derive, in part, from the power represented by the Buddha because monks follow his *dhamma* (the Buddha's teaching); even more so, monks' charisma stems from their reputed abilities to foresee the future, to heal psychic and physical maladies, and other extraordinary powers associated with trance states (*jhāna*). Consequently, images, relics, and amulets of famous monks are venerated for their own sake.²⁹

At the level of popular cult the nonphysical, nibbanic values and ideals represented by the Buddha, his teachings, and by the Buddhist *sangha* take on specific physical or material characteristics. Even the Buddha's teaching or *dhamma* has a physical representation in the material form of inscribed palm leaf texts. Because of their association with the Buddha's teaching, palm leaf manuscripts become objects of power in their own right. The term *sacred text* in this sense refers not only to its content but to the text as a physical object of sacred power.

Symbols to which special powers are ascribed within ritual contexts which may or may not be overtly Buddhist have been classified as either animist or Brahmanistic.³⁰ These include Brahmanical deities such as Indra (Sakl in the Pali canon) and Viṣṇu invoked to guard the place or occasion of a Buddhist ceremony, a pantheon of Hindu gods in Sri Lanka, such as Kataragama,³¹ and various indigenous deities and spirits such as the *na* in Burma,³² and the *chao* and *phī* in Thailand and Laos.³³

A syncretic flavor imbues most popular festivals, ceremonies, and rituals in Theravāda Southeast Asia. With some, such as the festival of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death (Visākḥā Pūja), the Buddhist element dominates; however, Buddhist monks will also be invited to chant protective Suttas (*paritta*)³⁴ at a variety of rituals, ranging from house dedication to weddings, whose underlying significance seems far afield from the Buddhist ideals of self-transforming knowledge (i.e., *nibbāna*). If religious ritual is interpreted primarily as a system for access to a broad range of powers constituted within a cosmology of human, superhuman, and subhuman realms, then the ritual context itself determines its meaning rather than a predetermined definition of what counts as Buddhist or non-Buddhist (e.g., animistic, Brahmanical).

In gaining access to power, Buddhist ritual in Southeast Asia functions in two primary ways: reciprocal exchange and appropriation. Reciprocal exchange emerges from a donor-donee situation typical of merit-making (*puñña*) rituals. The lay person-donor offers material gifts for the benefit of the monastic order (*sangha*). In return the virtuous power of the *sangha* engenders a spiritual reward of merit (*puñña*), thereby enhancing the donor's balance of *kamma/karma*, which in turn affects the status of the person's rebirth on the cosmic scale. All ritual situations in which presentation is made to the monastic order function in this way. These include as frequent and informal as giving food to monks on their morning alms rounds (*piṇḍapāta*), to the annual and formal presentation of new robes and other gifts to the *sangha* at the end of the monsoon rains retreat (*vas*) after the October full-moon day. Even though the form of merit-making rituals in Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia varies greatly, the structure of reciprocal exchange remains constant.

Merit making links the cosmology of Theravāda Buddhism in graspable and practical terms to peoples' daily lives. We have already referred to the story of the pious monk Phra Malai who taught human beings the heavenly rewards of good deeds and the grim consequences of punishment in hell. Late canonical texts, such as the *Stories of the Heavenly Mansions*



Figure 1.6 Monks on the morning alms rounds (*pindapāta*). Photo by Donald K. Swearer.

(*Vimānavatthu*) and *The Stories of the Departed Ghosts (Petavatthu)*, commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*), and many tales in the vernacular literatures of Southeast Asia reenforce the future negative and positive results of behavior in this life. The following brief selections from the *Petavatthu* provide a sample of the graphic horrors of this realm of punishment. The *petas* are departed spirits who occupy one of the levels of Buddhist hell (*niraya*). Contemplating their condition, often depicted in illustrated manuscripts or temple murals, presumptively encourages (or threatens) a person to positive, moral behavior.

"You have a beautiful, heavenly complexion . . . [said the venerable monk, Narada] . . . Yet worms are devouring your mouth which has a putrid odour; what act did you commit of yore?"

The [male] Peta replied: "A monk I was, wicked and of ill speech; though fitted for austerity, I was unrestrained with my mouth; I obtained my complexion with austerity and a putrid mouth on account of my slander."³⁵

[The venerable monk, Sāriputta, spoke to a female Petī who appeared to him at night] "Naked and of hideous appearance are you, emaciated and with prominent veins. You thin one, with your ribs standing out, now who are you, you who are here?"



Figure 1.7 A Buddhist hell. Punishment for breaking the precepts. Phra Malai mur. Wat Haripūñjaya, Lamphun, Thailand. Photo by Donald K. Swearer.

The Petī [replied]: "I, venerable sir, am a peti, a wretched denizen of Yama's world; since I had done a wicked deed, I went from here to the world of the petas."

Sāriputta [asked]: "... Because of what act have you gone hence to the world of the petas?"

"Reverend sir [she replied], I did not have compassionate relatives, father and mother, or even other kinsmen who would urge me, saying, 'Give, with devotion in your heart, a gift to recluses and brahmans.'"

"From that time for five hundred years in this form I have been wandering, nude, consumed by hunger and thirst; this is the fruit of my wicked deed."³⁶

Other Southeast Asian religious rituals use somewhat different mechanisms for appropriating the power of the religious object. A pilgrimage to a famous *ceṭiya*-reliquary containing a Buddha relic; paying respects to a Buddha image with holy water lustrations during the April lunar New Year celebration; receiving and wearing an amulet containing the charred hair of a holy monk; "calling" spirits at times of crisis or life junctures; making offerings to the deities of the four directions, the zenith, and nadir—a

of these ritual acts aim at appropriating power, whether represented by the Buddha or other kinds of divine or demonic beings. Of course, elements of exchange can be found in these rituals as well. A gift is given, an offering made, a sum of money is donated in the expectation of some kind of return varying from an immediate and practical benefit to a general sense of well-being or even spiritual attainment.³⁷ The structure of these rituals, however, mirrors less clearly the reciprocal nature basic to all merit making exchanges.

In the remainder of this analysis of Buddhist ritual in Southeast Asia we shall examine three different ceremonies that exemplify and justify this interpretation of ritual reciprocal exchange and appropriation of power.³⁸ The first of these ceremonies is the presentation of new robes at the end of the monsoon rains retreat (*vassa*); the second is the consecration of a new Buddha image; and the third is the annual preaching of the *Vessantara Jātaka*.

Kaṭhina Ceremony

(Presentation of Robes at the End of the Rains Retreat)

The presentation of new robes and other gifts at the end of the monastic rains retreat in mid-October takes its name from the robes offered at that occasion, namely, the *kaṭhina*.³⁹ This ceremony takes place during the month immediately following the full moon sabbath (*uposatha*) day in October. According to the *Mahāvagga* of the Theravāda Book of Discipline (*Vinaya Piṭaka*), during a three-month period from mid-July to mid-October monks were required to adopt a settled residence and were allowed to leave this encampment only under special conditions. In this environment the mendicant nature of the Buddhist monkhood began to change. In particular, customs and practices of a collective life gradually emerged including the recitation of a set of disciplinary rules (*paṭimokkha*) and the distribution of robes (*kaṭhina*).⁴⁰ These ceremonies have continued to this day and have evolved from culture to culture as the Theravāda form of Buddhism taught by the Sinhalese Mahāvihāra monastic lineage became dominant not only in Sri Lanka but won the favor of ruling monarchs in Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia from the eleventh and twelfth centuries onward. Today in Buddhist Southeast Asia the *kaṭhina* ceremony provides one of the most popular occasions for merit making. In village society this event usually involves the entire community, and in towns the monastery "parish" participates as a communal group.

The *kaṭhina* ceremony may last from one to three days. Although not every family in the community or parish will be involved in the preparation of food and other material gifts offered to the monks at a particular monastery, the principal donor may come from another village, town or region. This custom stems from the traditional view that greater merit accrues when the identity of the donor is unknown to the *sangha*. In Thailand today this practice may also result from the fact that upcountry monasteries are considered to be closer to the monastic ideal than urban ones. For this reason, affluent patrons from cities often sponsor *kaṭhinas* in rural areas. Most of the *kaṭhina* ceremonies I have witnessed followed this pattern. One of the most memorable of these occasions, a set of robes completely spun and woven at the monastery within a twenty-four hour period presented to the abbot of a rural northern Thai monastery noted for austerity and skill in meditation. Dozens of women were paid to card, spin and weave in temporary quarters built for the occasion. In this case the sponsor was a wealthy business woman from Chiang Mai, the largest city in northern Thailand.

The actual presentation of robes, money, and other offerings for the livelihood of the monks highlights the *kaṭhina*. It frequently involves a procession varying in size and constituency according to the nature of the community. Included might be musical groups with traditional instruments—drums, cymbals, and horns—or school bands playing Western musical instruments. Traditional dancers may be part of the procession for entertainment and the marchers often wear traditional costume. In addition to the *kaṭhina* robes, symbolically the most important gift presented to the monastic order at this time, is a "wishing tree" with money and other offerings attached occupies a place of honor in the procession. The wishing tree, often in the shape of a palace, represents the hope of the villagers that the merit they accrue in this celebration will enable them to live in a heavenly abode in some future lifetime.⁴¹

The procession wends its way through the streets of the town or village until it comes to the monastery proper. The participants file into the main assembly hall (*vihāra*) bearing robes, the wishing tree, and other palanquins filled with offerings of soap, towels, writing pads, canned food, cigarettes and other material goods used by the monks. The ceremony itself begins as do most meetings of monks and lay persons with the congregation taking refuge in the Buddha, the teaching (*dhamma*), and the renunciant order (*sangha*) and repeating in Pali after the monks the five basic precepts of Buddhist lay life: not to kill, steal, lie, engage in illicit sexual acts, or drink



Figure 1.8 Rains retreat (*kathina*) procession. Chiang Tung, Shan States, Myanmar. Photo by Donald K. Swearer.

intoxicating beverages. Afterward the lay leader of the congregation conducts the ritual of the presentation of gifts to the entire monastic community which are received on their behalf by the abbot. The chief donor then has the privilege of offering the first set of robes to the gathered monks after he/she first symbolically offers them to a large Buddha image that dominates all such assembly rooms. The ceremony concludes after the monks and novices receive their new robes and chant an appropriate blessing:

May all blessings be yours; may all the gods (*deva*) protect you.
 By the power of all the Buddhas, may all happiness be yours forever.
 May all blessings be yours; may all the gods protect you.
 By the power of all the Dhammas; may all happiness be yours forever.
 May all blessings be yours; may all the gods protect you.
 By the power of all the Sanghas; may all happiness be yours forever.⁴²

A reciprocal transaction has taken place. In return for the offerings presented to the monastic order (*sangha*) the laity receive a spiritual blessing. In the calculus of merit making (*puñña*) the participants hope for a reward in a future life brought about by the power of this good act.



Figure 1.9 Monks chanting. Chiang Mai, Thailand. Photo by Donald K. Swearer.

But why is this particular ritual of exchange so important? All merit-making rituals are rooted in the symbolic role of the monastic order as mediator of the power represented by the Buddha, a power not only of supreme enlightenment but of supernatural attainments. On this occasion the *sangha* has a special potency because for three months the monks have followed a somewhat more rigorous regime; for example, restricted travel and intensive study, meditation. In a sense the *kathina* ceremony becomes a means by which the laity gains access to this enhanced potency and power. For this reason the ceremony is especially meritorious and, furthermore, may be one of the explanations why possession of the *kathina* robe itself confers on Burmese monks such privileges as being able to leave the monastery without the abbot's consent.⁴³ In short, the *kathina* robe may be said to represent not only a particular period of tenure and training in the monastic order but also the spiritual power inherent in "wearing the robe."

Consecration of a Buddha Image

A second ceremony⁴⁴ that helps us understand the significance of the transactional nature of Theravāda Buddhist ritual in Southeast Asia is

consecration of a Buddha image.⁴⁵ Nearly all Theravāda rituals that take place at the monastery occur in an assembly hall containing a Buddha image. The image resides on a dias or altar, making it higher in elevation than either the monks who may sit on a raised platform or the laity who sit on the floor. In Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia during most ceremonies, which consist primarily of the chanting of Pali texts and ritual chants composed in Pali or vernacular languages of the area, the monks will hold a sacred thread attached to the Buddha image that functions as a conduit of the power residing in the image and magically released by the chant. In addition to being the visual focus of attention for any congregation performing a ritual act in the hall, the image is also the recipient of offerings of incense, candles, and flowers. When asked about the meaning of the offerings placed before a Buddha image, most informants reply that these objects are given out of respect to the memory of the Buddha of which the image is a reminder; that is, that the offerings are not given to the image itself. Such an interpretation coincides with the orthodox Theravāda view discouraging superhuman or magical interpretations of the Buddha's power. The ceremony in which a Buddha image is consecrated, however, appears to qualify if not to contradict such an interpretation.

In Theravāda Buddhist cultures the Buddha images installed in assembly halls (*vihāra*) must be formally consecrated. Until that act takes place, the statue can be considered merely decorative, that is, of no special sacred consequence. The consecration ceremony figuratively brings the image to life or empowers it, thereby transforming the image from its decorative and inconsequential status to one of spiritual and religious significance. After consecration, an image is worthy of veneration, an object to which offerings are made not simply out of respect to the memory of a religious founder but with the expectation that an efficacious consequence will follow. Although one might theorize on psychological grounds that making an offering before a representation of a divine being or a saint entails the hope of some sort of reward or benefit, firsthand knowledge of an image consecration ritual provides us with specific cultural information regarding the nature of this expectation and its fulfillment.⁴⁶

An image consecration involves two primary elements, training the image and charging it with power. In Thailand and Laos the ceremony proper, which may be part of a larger celebration, generally lasts one full night, beginning at dusk and ending at dawn of the following day with the opening of the eyes of the Buddha image. Because the details of image consecrations differ rather significantly among Theravāda cultures, the following

description comes primarily from a ceremony I witnessed in northern Thailand in 1977 supplemented by others I observed in 1989.

The ceremony was held at a small rural monastery near the town of Lamphun and was the occasion of several days of festivities that served the dual purposes of community celebration and raising money to pay for a new monastery building. The ceremony took place in the assembly hall where the image was to be installed. At dusk the monks and novices of the monastery and distinguished monks and ecclesiastical leaders from the district and province began chanting before a congregation of lay men and women who had filled the hall. After taking refuge (*saraṇam*) in the Three Gems (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) and taking the precepts (*pañca sikkhā*) the evening chanting began with selections from the *paritta* or "protective suttas." These were collected as the core body of ritual texts in the Sinhalese Mahāvihāra monastic tradition of Theravāda Buddhism and have been widely used as the basis of most chanting ceremonies in Southeast Asia since the fourteenth century.

The noted Sinhalese monk Piyadassi Thera suggests that the twenty-four standard *paritta* discourses from the five collections of Pali suttas constitute a *dhamma* handbook for newly ordained novice monks; a practical argument for their prominence as ritual texts, therefore, would be that in the tradition of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka and South Asia this group of texts was the most widely memorized. Beyond a practical point, however, Piyadassi offers four doctrinal explanations of the efficacy of *paritta* texts based on the principle that, "paritta recitation produces mental well-being in those who listen to them with intelligence and have confidence in the truth of the Buddha's words."⁴⁸ He asserts that the texts establish the hearer in the power of the truth (*dhamma*) of the Buddha; that because many of the discourses describe the virtuous life they establish the hearer in a virtuous state of mind; that the monks who chant *paritta* do so reflecting the compassion of the Buddha for all sentient beings thereby establishing the hearers in the power of love; and, finally, that the power of the sound of the chant helps to create both mental and physical harmony.⁴⁹

Piyadassi's modern explanation of the meaning of *paritta* recitation contrasts with the widely held belief among lay people in the efficacy of *paritta* recitation to bring about particular ends, such as curing physical illness. Even in the Pali texts themselves the Buddha is said to have approved chanting the *Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta* to ward off evil spirits and the *Āṅgulimāla Paritta* was specifically sanctioned for a difficult childbirth.



Figure 1.10. Buddha Image Consecration Ritual, Wat San Pa Yang Luang, Lamphun, Thailand. Photo by Donald K. Swearer.

With the exception of the two hours between three and five a.m. when those in attendance rested or slept, the entire ceremony at the village monastery was devoted to continuous chanting, sermons on the life of the Buddha, and meditation. During the night both monks and laity wandered in and out of the hall, an air of relaxed informality characterizing this otherwise serious affair. In addition to the *paritta* the canonical and noncanonical texts chanted and preached for this occasion rehearsed the life of the Prince Siddhattha leading up to his enlightenment with a special emphasis on the supernatural attributes and powers the future Buddha (*bodhisatta*) acquired during the course of his religious quest. The chanting concluded at dawn with the recitation of the Buddha's first teaching (*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*), performed while the head and eyes of the image were being uncovered by a senior monk.

During the entire night the image resided on a raised platform, its head covered with a white cloth and eyes sealed with beeswax. The act of covering the head and closing the eyes and sometimes the nose, mouth, and ear symbolizes the incomplete or unenlightened condition of the image; that is, it had yet to be taught its personal history, imbued with supernatural powers, and taught the *dhamma* ("truth"). The chanting of the monks and the sermons preached both instruct and empower the image even while the life history of the Buddha is being recited. Prior to the ceremony various gifts for the image were placed before it, including the five royal insignia (fan, crown, bowl, staff, sandals), the eight requisites of a monk highlighted by a begging bowl and monastic robes, a small Bodhi tree, and a grass seat. These elements function as visual representations of the story being told by the chanting monks: the tale of the royal prince who renounced the householder's life, gained special powers through his training and ascetic practice, and finally attained enlightenment seated beneath the Bodhi tree.

Two additional aspects of the ceremony deserve special mention. While the Buddha Image Consecration text (*Buddha Abhiseka*) was being chanted a group of nine monks sat in rapt meditation around the image. Before them were placed monks' alms bowls from which sacred cords extended to the Buddha image. It is believed that while the monks meditate they project their own charismatic powers into the image, thereby further enhancing the image's potency.

The second noteworthy element was a ritual reenactment of an event in the legend of the Buddha's spiritual quest that occurred just before his enlightenment. In the early morning hours a sweetened rice gruel was prepared by a group of female renunciants (Thai: *mae chi*) within a specially consecrated area outside the assembly hall. After being divided into forty-nine small bowls, monks, nuns, and lay people offer the mixture to the image. This offering recalls an episode from the legend of the future Buddha's spiritual quest: just before Prince Siddhattha reached enlightenment, Sujātā, a wealthy young married woman, presented to him a special mixture of honey sweetened milk-rice in a golden bowl. The future Buddha consumed the rice after dividing it into forty-nine small balls: "Now this was the only food he had for forty-nine days, during the seven times seven days he spent, after he became a Buddha, at the foot of the Tree of Enlightenment."⁵⁰ In Burma, Sujātā's offering is commemorated in an annual sumptuous merit making feast held on the first full-moon day after the end of the rains retreat. Sir James Scott (Shway Yoe) provides us with an account of the fete as celebrated in the late nineteenth century: "Mountains c

cooked rice send out spurs of beef and pork, with flat lands of dried fish and outlying peaks of roasted ducks and fowls. . . . Chinese patties of sugar and fat pork, plates full of fried silkworms. . . . salt-pickled ginger and fried garlic, and a variety of other dishes beyond the ken of occidental cookery, abound. . . ."⁵¹

As the first rays of dawn reach out from the eastern horizon, a monk removed the white hood and beeswax covering the head and eyes of the image. This act symbolizes the Buddha's enlightenment and also indicates the completion of the training and empowerment of the image itself. Coincident with these acts three small mirrors which had faced the image during the ceremony were turned outward. The mirrors represent the three superordinate knowledges achieved by the Buddha: knowledge of his former lives, knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of all beings, and knowledge of the destruction of the cause of suffering (i.e., the moral intoxicants or *āsava*).⁵² Meanwhile, the monks intoned three chants: the Buddha's victory over suffering, his comprehension of the interdependent and coarising nature of reality (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), and his first teaching, Turning the Wheel of the Law Sutta (*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*). This final sequence of chants begins with the Auspicious Verses of the Buddha Image Consecration (*Buddha-abhiseka Maṅgala Udāna Kathā*):

Through many a birth I wandered in *samsāra*,

Seeing, but not finding, the builder of the house.
Sorrowful is birth again and again.

O house-builder! Thou art seen.

Thou shalt build no house again. All thy rafters are broken,
thy ridge-pole is shattered.

My mind has attained the unconditioned,
achieved is the end of craving.⁵³

The image consecration ceremony not only dramatizes one of the fundamental polarities in Theravāda Buddhism but also provides insight into the meaning of the syncretic reciprocity that characterizes Theravāda merit making rituals. The polarity is between virtuous wisdom and power. The Buddha embodies wisdom and virtuous perfections (*pāramī*), but he is also endowed with supernatural powers such as the divine eye and divine ear. This polarity manifests itself in a variety of ways throughout the Buddhist tradition. For example, the Theravāda chronicles of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia tell of numerous miraculous feats of the Buddha, among the most important being his supernatural travel to these

countries, an event that prepares the way for the suzerainty of subsequent Buddhist monarchs. Yet, in seeming contrast to such miraculous stories in other texts the Buddha cautions his followers against displays of super natural power even as he triumphs over yogic miracle workers with his *dhamma* or teaching. In Theravāda countries such as Thailand these paradoxical qualities applied to the Buddha are embodied in the couplet the Buddha's "power and virtue." The consecration of a Buddha image provides a particularly rich context for understanding the nature of the interrelationship between these two qualities, especially within the context of Buddhist ritual.

Let us return to the question of the intentionality behind the offering of incense, flowers, and candles made to a Buddha image on ritual occasion. Although we do an injustice to the tradition to minimize the claim that such offerings honor the memory of the teacher-founder, the expectation of receiving some sort of boon or benefit reflects the belief that the image itself has a special power to grant the wishes of the devotee. A similar dynamic lies behind all merit making rituals. By making an offering, especially a lavish and costly one, the donor hopes to effect a reciprocal response from the power infused into the Buddha image. Knowledge of the consecration ritual gives us insight into the contextual meaning of the Buddha image and, hence, helps us to understand that virtually all Theravāda Buddhist rituals conducted in front of a Buddha image, such as the *kathina* ceremony, are mechanisms of reciprocity and appropriation of power.

We now have a much better comprehension of the richly textured, multivalent nature of Theravāda Buddhist ritual. For example, the *kathina* ceremony can be understood for what it literally appears to be—an annual renewal and replenishment of the clothing and other material requisites of the monastic order. Such an interpretation, however, ignores other levels of meaning that include the *sangha*'s mediatorial role between the Buddha and the laity, the special sanctity ascribed to the monastic order following the rains retreat period, and as we have seen in our analysis of the Buddha image consecration ceremony, the place of Buddha images in the reciprocal transfer and appropriation of power constitutive of merit making rituals.

Our discussion thus far has not focused on the syncretic nature of Theravāda Buddhist ritual in Southeast Asia, as such. Some rituals, like the presentation of *kathina* robes may be relatively free of specific non-Buddhist elements. Others such as the image consecration ceremony traditionally include offerings to the guardians of the four quarters, the zenith, and nadir. A. K. Coomaraswamy has argued, moreover, that t

ritual associated with opening the eyes of a Buddha image in Sri Lanka is fundamentally Hindu in character.⁵⁴ Other rites like those performed at such auspicious occasions as a career change, fifth cycle birthday celebration (sixty years), or a wedding (see the Rites of Passage section in this chapter) appear fundamentally animistic in nature despite the role Buddhist monks may play in the ceremony.⁵⁵ These rituals are designed to appeal to and appease protective spirits or deities (*deva*) that constitute part of an animistic or Brahmanical religious subculture rather than Theravāda Buddhism per se. The presence of Buddhist monks at these passage rites, often to chant *paritta* texts, adds to but does not negate the varied cultural meanings of the event.

Preaching the Vessantara Jātaka (*Desanā Mahājāti*)

Throughout Theravāda Southeast Asian cultures the story of Prince Vessantara (see Ideal Action) rivals in popularity that of Prince Siddhattha's journey to Buddhahood. It has been translated into the major Southeast Asian vernacular languages with minor changes in the text; virtually all monastery libraries contain one or more copies in their palm leaf manuscript collection. How can we account for the enduring popularity of this legend? Explanations might include the following: Vessantara culminates the collection of 547 canonical *jātaka* stories, the penultimate appearance of the *bodhisatta* as Prince Siddhattha; the generous prince embodies the virtue of *dāna* (giving, charity) that completes the list of ten *bodhisatta* virtues (*pāramī*) represented in the last ten *jātaka* stories; Vessantara represents not only a positive moral virtue central to the Theravāda ethical tradition but is also the paradigm of the meritorious consequence of giving, especially when generosity is directed toward the *bhikkhu sangha*. These explanations omit the possibility that the story's popularity developed, at least in part, because in many Theravāda cultures Vessantara's life came to be honored in an elaborate, ritualized preaching of the *jātaka* tale (*desanā mahājāti*). Indeed, in Northeast Thailand the *Desanā Mahājāti* has traditionally been the "grandest merit-making ceremony in the village."⁵⁶ The ceremony commemorating Prince Vessantara, not unlike the Buddha image consecration ritual, synthesizes the highest moral-spiritual ideals of Theravāda Buddhism with the practical theory of merit making and the consequentialist view of the efficacy of ritual action.⁵⁷

Because we have already reviewed the general outline of the legend of Prince Vessantara's journey from the capital city of Sivi to a forest hermitage

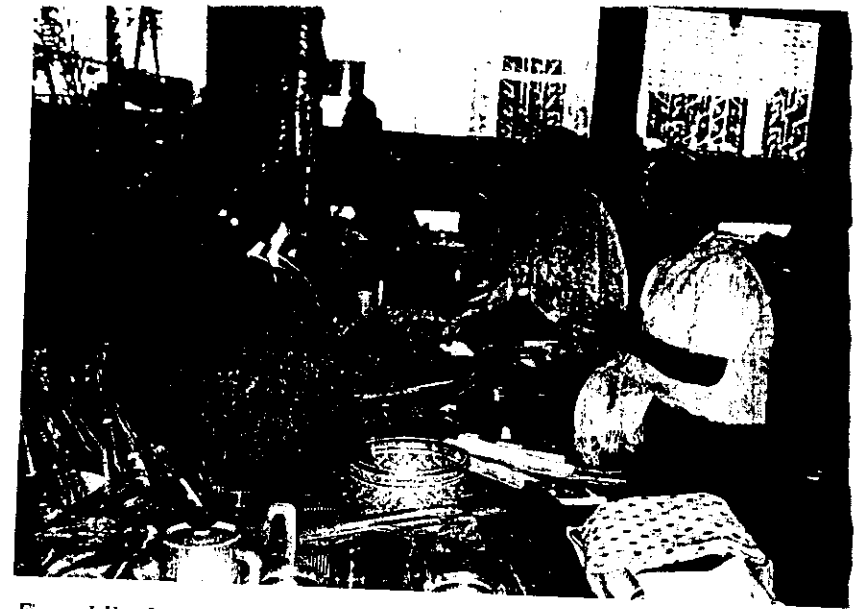


Figure 1.11. Lay devotees listening to the preaching of the Vessantara Jātaka. Wat Lu: monastery. Pakse, Champassak Province, Laos PDR. Photo by Donald K. Swearer.

and his subsequent return and reward for his selfless generosity, we shall now look briefly at the ceremony itself. Although favorite chapters sections of the *Vessantara Jātaka* might be preached for special occasions throughout the year, the *Desanā Mahājāti* usually occurs sometime at the end of the monastic rains retreat, a relatively slack time in the traditional village agricultural cycle between rice planting and harvest.

In northern Thailand the occasion customarily encompasses two or three days during the twelfth lunar month (early November).⁵⁸ The first day focuses on merit making on behalf of deceased teachers, parents, and other relatives. The story of Phra Malai's visit to the hells and heavens and his subsequent moral admonitions to lay devotees is traditionally preached on this day. The throngs of people crowding the monasteries to hear the sermon mill about the monastery compound, circumambulating the assembly hall (*vihāra*) and reliquary (*cetiya*). They may carry small "boats" made of banana leaves containing incense, flowers, small candles, grains of sticky rice, and a coin or two. After spending some time at the monastery they then find their way to a nearby river or pond. There, lighting the incense and candles, young and old, men and women, set their small boats afloat

as an offering to the spirits of deceased relatives and friends (see the section "Festival of the Floating Boats").

The second day of the celebration focuses on preaching the *Vessantara Jātaka*. At the entrance to the monastery lay devotees construct a forest gateway from banana tree stalks. They may also demarcate a path to the assembly hall with a "royal fence" named for the mountain where Prince Vessantara had his hermitage. The pathway may be constructed in the form of a maze or labyrinth, suggesting that (1) Vessantara's selfless generosity confounds ordinary sensibilities or (2) concentration and effort are required to attain such moral perfection (*pāramī*). The pillars of the assembly hall itself will be decorated with the stalks of banana trees and sugar cane in an attempt to create the atmosphere of a forest. Thirteen scenes from the *jātaka* tale identifying each chapter are painted on the walls or will be hung as cloth banners especially for this occasion.

Beginning with the recitation of a 1,000-verse summary of the tale in Pali, monks expressly trained to chant one of the thirteen chapters of the Thai version of the *Jātaka* continue the ritual preaching of the story. Each chapter may end with a musical interlude or the preacher may punctuate his recitation with a distinctive ornamented vocalization at the beginning, middle, and end followed by a summary of that part of the text and words of homage to his teachers and the Triple Gem. This section varies according to each monk's preaching ability and is the part where he can display his own creative distinctive style. If the listeners are impressed, they may pass around a silver bowl to collect an additional offering for the monk.⁵⁹ The audience may request encores, particularly when a skilled, charismatic preacher recites the fifth chapter with its ribald description of the aged Brahman Jūjaka and his young, shrewish wife.

Each chapter of the *Jātaka* has one or more lay sponsors. They invite one of their favorite monks to preach and are responsible for preparing an appropriate donatory honorarium at the end of his chapter. These will be carried on decorated offering trays in procession through the forest gate and labyrinth pathway up to the assembly hall, sometimes to the accompaniment of drum, horn, and cymbal. The lay sponsors place their gifts before the monk while he chants a blessing. This sequence repeats itself until all thirteen chapters have been completed, a process beginning early in the morning and ending late at night. Because the story of Prince Vessantara prefigures the birth of Siddhattha Gotama, the Buddha, the third day of the *Desanā Mahājāti* ceremony may include the preaching of a Thai version of the legendary life of the Buddha (the *Pathamasambodhi*) and

the Buddha's first discourse. The latter contains the most familiar doctrinal formulae of the Theravāda tradition, the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.

The ritual preaching of the *Vessantara Jātaka* in northern Thailand does more than merely celebrate a popular story. It links the living and the dead, laity and monk, merit making and nibbanic ideals. Although doctrinal the rituals of Theravāda Buddhism are appropriately interpreted in terms of the metaphysics of action (*kamma*), rebirth (*samsāra*), and merit (*puñña*) they can also be interpreted as ways to access power in terms of reciprocal exchange and appropriation. Furthermore, in the case of the ritual consecration of Buddha images, the end of the monastic rains retreat, and in the celebration of Prince Vessantara, we encounter a curious paradox: within these ritual contexts, the surrender of worldly power by Siddhattha Gotama, Buddhist ordinands, and Prince Vessantara becomes the basis for the appropriation of power by the lay ritual participants. The operation and agency of Theravāda rituals in Southeast Asia should be understood from these varying and sometimes seemingly contradictory perspectives.

FESTIVALS

The festival cycle of Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia features two closely connected patterns, one seasonal, the other Buddhist. The former reflects the rhythm of the agricultural year that moves from the rainy season and the planting of paddy rice through the cool harvest season to the hot and dry fallow season. The second pattern is fashioned around a Buddhist calendar calculated in terms of seminal events in the tradition. Of particular significance are the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha (*Visākha Pūja*); the occasion of the Buddha's First Discourse (*Āsālahā Pūja*); and the *Māgha Pūja*, the gathering of 1,250 *arahant* disciples at the Veluvāra monastery where the Buddha preached the summary of his teaching. The summary concludes the *paṭimokkha* (i.e., the 227 rules of the monk discipline): "The non-doing of evil / the full performance of what is wholesome / the total purification of the mind." These three celebrations represent the triple gem of Theravāda Buddhism; that is, the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Other important occasions in the religious year include the beginning and end of the monastic rains retreat period (*vassa*) and the Buddha's appearance as Prince Vessantara, the perfect exemplification of the moral perfection of charity or generosity (*dāna pāramī*). Rituals relevant to these two occasions—the giving of *kaṭhina* robes and the *Desanā Mahājāti*—were discussed in the previous section.



Figure 1.12. Māgha Pūjā pilgrims. Wat Phra Thāt Doi Tung monastery. Chiang Rai Province, Thailand. Photo by Donald K. Swearer.

Scholars have observed that the religious festival calendar bears a striking articulation with the phases of nature that define the agricultural cycle.⁶⁰ We note, for example, that *Visākhā Pūjā* occurs in May at the beginning of the Southeast Asian rice planting season; *Āsālahā Pūjā*, in July during the growing season; and *Māgha Pūjā*, after the harvest in February. To be sure, the intertwining of the defining events of a religious tradition with the natural cyclical pattern of a community is not unique to Southeast Asian Buddhism. A similar integration is found in both Christianity and Judaism, as well as other religious traditions. For example, Christmas anticipates the dawn of a new year with longer and brighter days, and Easter signals the renewal of spring.

The New Year Festival

In the Buddhist Era lunar calendar of Theravāda Southeast Asia, the end of the hot, dry season and the onset of the monsoon rains marks the beginning of a new year. It is celebrated during the month of April (in Burma the month of Tagu) for a period of three to four days. In Thailand the New Year festival is referred to as *songkrān* (Sanskrit: *sankrānta*), signaling the

change from one season to another or, in astrological terms, when the leaves the sign of Pisces in the zodiac and enters Aries. The celebration was probably adapted from South Indian Brahmanism to Buddhism in Lanka and brought from there to mainland Southeast Asia by Buddhist monks.

It is to be expected that all New Year festivals focus on the transition from the old year to the new. Certain aspects of the celebration are born in the home. They include a special house cleaning and the purification of furnishings and clothing. Traditionally the New Year is a time to settle debts and seek forgiveness, especially from respected elders in the family and community. Water-cleansing rites and ceremonies occupy the central stage of New Year festivals. These include various activities ranging from the lustrating of Buddha images, Buddha relics, and Bodhi trees in monasteries, to paying respects to elders with a water blessing, unrestrained water fights with buckets and hoses. A late nineteenth century observer in Mandalay provides the following description: "There is water everywhere. . . . Some zealous people go down to the river or creek, wading into the water knee-deep, and splash water at one another till they are tired. . . . No one escapes. . . . A clerk comes up to his master, [pays respects] to him, and gravely pours the contents of a silver cup down the back of his neck, saying ye-kadaw mi, 'I will do homage to you with water.'

A contemporary anthropologist suggests that water throwing during the Burmese New Year provides a socially approved mechanism to flaunt mores, conventions and social distinctions: "An integral part of the frivolity of the . . . insulting remarks leveled by the water-throwers. . . at public figures, politicians, officials, businessmen, and so on. Both sexes seize this opportunity to douse each other, and the physical and verbal encounters that accompany the dousing border. . . on the obscene. In general, the clowning, the disrespect for authority, the aggression, the transvestism, the sexual banter. . . mark the urban celebration of the Water Festival. . ." ⁶² In the 1950s, Laotian provincial governors were even occasionally pitched into the Mekong River as part of the New Year festival.

A folk legend of the Tai Lue of Yunnan, China, offers an engaging etiology of the New Year custom of throwing or sprinkling water.⁶³ Once upon a time, goes the tale, the region of Balanaxi in Yunnan was plagued by a ferocious devil with an enormous mouth and tongue who created fire whenever he breathed. He captured seven beautiful girls from the village and made them his wives. Yidanhan, the youngest, cleverest, and most beautiful, devised a plot to avenge the catastrophes caused by the devil. After

preparing a sumptuous feast for him with an abundance of whiskey she praised the now inebriated devil, "You are really great, my master. . . You can be the conqueror of the world."⁶⁴ Drunk and flattered, the devil confided to Yidanhan that, in fact, he had a fatal weakness; if someone took a hair from his head and tightened it around his neck his head would come off and he would die. After the devil fell fast asleep, Yidanhan pulled out a hair from his head and wound it around his neck until the devil's head fell to the ground like a huge pumpkin. Unfortunately, wherever the head rolled it set everything ablaze, burning houses and crops, and killing cattle and people. Undaunted, Yidanhan grabbed the huge head while the six other women sprinkled her and the devil's head with water brought from the river. The fire was extinguished and, thereafter, the people led happy and peaceful lives: "To commemorate the seven girls who eliminated the terrible scourge from the region, the Dai people celebrate the Water-Sprinkling Festival every New Year. . . They sprinkle water over one another, hoping thus to get rid of the sufferings and calamities of the past and to ensure favourable weather, abundant harvests and good health in the coming year."⁶⁵

New Year's celebrations in Theravāda Buddhist Southeast Asia are particularly syncretic. In Burma the New Year marks the descent to earth of the Brahmanical god Indra (the Buddhist Sakka; Burmese: Thagya Min). He takes up residence during the last two days of the old year where he records the names of the doers of good and evil deeds. On the third day he returns to his abode in Tāvātimsa Heaven. Similarly, in other Theravāda countries the mythology surrounding the New Year is Brahmanical, not Buddhist. The first two days of the celebration, furthermore, have very little to do with Buddhism. Water blessings, settling debts, paying respects to elders and so on represent the variety of ways in which the demerits or wrongdoings of the past year are eliminated.

The monastery becomes the focus of New Year activities on the third and fourth days of the celebration. In Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia lay devotees bring special food offerings to the monks early in the morning of the third day, that is, the first day of the New Year. They will observe the precepts, listen to sermons, lustrate Buddha images, and perform other meritorious acts such as freeing birds and fish often sold at the entrance to the monastery. Because of the day's auspicious character, ordinations and house dedications also may be performed. In northern Thailand men and women, young and old devote part of the day to building a sand "mountain" (*cetiya*) in the monastery compound.⁶⁶



Figure 1.13. Celebrating Thai New Year. Lustrating Buddha images and relics. Chetuphon monastery, Chiang Mai, Thailand. Photo by Donald K. Swearer.

The sand mound serves both practical and symbolic purposes. Practical the sand can be used to level and clean the monastery compound. Symbolically, the mountain represents new beginnings, reconnecting the sacred and mundane levels of existence. Northern Thai legend offers the following Buddhist interpretation of the origin of the sand mountain: a previous existence the Buddha was a poor man who made his living gathering firewood. Even though he was poor he was very virtuous. One day while walking in the forest in search of dead tree limbs he came across a place covered with clean sand. There he built a sand mountain, put a small flag made from a torn piece of cloth on top of it, and then prayed that he might be reborn a Buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings.

The New Year festival in Chiang Mai, Thailand, climaxes with the procession of the Phra Singha Buddha image through the city streets. According to legendary account, the image was made 700 years after the death of the Buddha in Sri Lanka by a *nāga* king who had seen the Buddha when the Blessed One had visited the island.⁶⁸ Perhaps because of its water origin, devout Buddhists ascribe rain-making powers to the image; hence in an act of sympathetic magic, the Phra Singha Buddha image is removed from the temple and processed around the city as a herald of the monsoon.



Figure 1.14. Sand cetiya (Thai: *cedi*). Wat Wō Kut monastery. Chiang Tung, Shan States, Myanmar. Photo by Donald K. Swearer.

rains. In the weeks following this event, offerings are also made to the god Indra whose power is enshrined in the city pillar located on the compound of a historically prominent monastery, and a buffalo is sacrificed to the autochthonous guardian spirits of the city. In short, Buddhist celebrations associated with the beginning of the new year anticipate subsequent Brahmanical and animistic rites honoring the founding of the city.

Buddha's Day (*Visākhā Pūja*)

Within the yearly rhythm of Theravāda Buddhism as a historical tradition, *Visākhā Pūja* stands as the most sacred of all anniversary occasions for the obvious reason that it honors the life of the Buddha.⁶⁹ From the perspective of the tradition, the day itself is miraculous for on the full-moon day of the month of *Visākhā* (April–May) in separate years the Buddha was born, attained enlightenment, and died. In short, *Visākhā Pūja* celebrates the entire story of the Buddha from its beginning to its final conclusion. Although in countries like Thailand this triple anniversary was once celebrated for three days, at the present time only one day is set aside as a national holiday.

The manner of its observance varies among different Theravāda cultures. In Sri Lanka night processions with Vesak (i.e., *Visākhā*) lanterns mark the occasion. In Thailand and Burma evening activities also predominate. Instead of festive processions crowds of people holding lighted candles and glowing incense gather in monastery compounds to circumambulate three times around the sacred precincts and to place elaborate flower arrangements in the shape of lotus buds before the Buddha altar. The faithful then enter the assembly hall to hear a discourse on the life of the Buddha which may last most of the night. In Thailand one of the scriptures that might be preached on this night is the *Pathamasambodhi* written in twenty-nine chapters or sections. This text fills in the details of the Buddha's life story highlighted by the three events *Visākhā Pūja* incorporates. Because the sight and sounds of the festival itself may divert us from the doctrinal significance of this event, we enter the assembly hall for an all-night reading of the story of Prince Siddhattha's life from his birth and enlightenment to his death and the distribution of his relics, a story in which myth, legend, and history intermingle. The following is an outline of the story:

- (1) the wedding of Suddhodana and Mahāmāyā, the Buddha's parents;
- (2) the Buddha in Tusita heaven, beseeched by the gods to help humankind, enters the womb of Mahāmāyā, (3) the birth of the Buddha and the miraculous appearance on the same day of his future wife, Yāsodharā, his beloved disciple, Ānanda, his horse, Kanthaka, and his charioteer, Channa, and the Bodhi tree; (4) two predictions by Brahmins, one that he will become either a world ruler or a Buddha and secondly that he is destined to become fully enlightened because he possesses the thirty-two marks of the great man (*mahāpurisa*); (5) the Buddha is given the name, Siddhattha, his mother dies after seven days, Siddhattha marries Yāsodharā at age sixteen; (6) the four encounters—an aged person, sick person, corpse, and mendicant—prompt the Buddha to follow the mendicant path, (7) Siddhattha follows an ascetic way for six years, e.g., abstaining from food, restraining his breath, then adopts a middle path as more appropriate to mind development; his five followers desert him; (8) Sujātā makes a food offering to the Buddha, mistaking him for a tree spirit; the offering bowl miraculously floats upstream as a sign he will become enlightened; the Buddha determines not to move from his seat under the Bodhi tree until he realizes his highest goal; (9) Māra and his forces attack the Buddha; he successfully wards them off by calling the Goddess

of Earth (Thai, Nang Thoraṇī) to witness on his behalf; the Goddess of Earth drowns the forces of Māra by wringing the water from her hair that she had collected every time the Buddha performed an act of virtuous generosity (*dāna*); (10) attainments immediately prior to the Buddha's enlightenment—the eight trance states, knowledge of his previous births, clairvoyance (seeing all beings as they are reborn in accordance with their *kamma*); perceiving the cycle of interdependent coarising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*); the Buddha's enlightenment; (11) the Buddha spends seven days each at seven places after his enlightenment, e.g., the Bodhi tree; the location where he reviews the Abhidhamma; the place where Mucalinda, the serpent king, protects him from the rain; the spot where Indra and the Buddha's first two lay followers make offerings to him; (12) the Buddha worries whether or not people will be able to comprehend his teaching; the gods of *brahmaloka* perceive his concern and send messengers to assure him that there are persons capable of grasping his message; (13) the Buddha teaches the First Discourse (*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*); (14) the five former followers of the Buddha to whom his first teaching was given become saints (*arahants*); more people become disciples; (15) the Buddha's activities in Uruvela where he converts 1,000 fire-worshipping ascetics; the Buddha impresses King Bimbisāra of Rājagaha; (16) Sāriputta and Moggallāna become followers of the Buddha; (17) Siddhodana requests that the Buddha come to Kapilavatthu; his people become the Buddha's disciples; (18) Yāsodharā's sorrow over her husband's rejection of the princely role; (19) Devadatta, the Buddha's cousin, attempts to kill the Buddha and then create dissension in the Sangha; he is punished by the earth swallowing him up; (20) the Buddha predicts the coming of the future Buddha, Metteyya, and tells Ānanda that the monk with the lowest seniority will be reborn as Metteyya; (21) the Buddha visits his ill father who becomes an *arahant* before his death; an order of nuns is established on Ānanda's request but with a lower social status than the *bhikkhu sangha*; (22) the Buddha performs several miracles but forbids his disciples to do so without seeking permission; (23) the Buddha travels to Tāvātimsa heaven and preaches the *Abhidhamma* to his mother; (24) the Buddha descends from Tāvātimsa heaven on a crystal ladder provided by Indra; the Buddha ascends to the top of Mount Sineru (Meru) where he performs a miracle witnessed by everyone from the hells (*petaloka*) to the heavens (*brahmaloka*); (25) the death of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, (26) the



Figure 1.15. The Buddha's *parinibbāna*. Wat Thāt Čhom Doi, Chiang Tung, Shan State, Myanmar. Photo by Donald K. Swearer.

Buddha's death (*parinibbāna*); (27) the Buddha's funeral; collecting the Buddha relics; the rulers of the major petty kingdoms of northern India come to request relics; (28) Mahākassapa buries the remainder of the relics which are not unearthed until the time of Asoka who divides them among various cities in India; (29) reasons for the decline of Buddhism in India.⁷⁰

In northern Thailand the celebration of *Visākhā* may coincide with an annual anniversary of the founding of a major temple. When this occurs the length and extent of the festivities will be significantly increased. One such occasion that included traditional northern Thai lantern parades, drum and hot air balloon competitions as well as numerous temple processions and a lustration of the monastery's Buddha relics.⁷¹ Such festivities become a blending of the normative events of Theravāda Buddhism, namely the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha, with non-Buddhist culturally relative customs; hence, they celebrate both a particular Buddhist community within a given cultural and social context, and also that community's identity as part of a universal tradition stretching back over 2,500 years.

Our study of *Visākhā Pūja*, the Buddha image consecration ritual, and the *kathina* ceremony complement one another. The transactional nature of the *kathina* as a merit making ritual depends for its meaning on an understanding of the Buddha as a person of special power, a power embodied by the image itself. *Visākhā Pūja* demonstrates the significance of the Buddha's life story as a historical paradigm from which the Buddhist tradition takes its definition. The Buddha story is a constant referent for the tradition. Neither the Buddha's teaching (*dhamma*) nor his power can be abstracted from his person. For Theravāda Buddhism, his person is revealed in the episodic history of a text like the *Pathamasambodhi* rather than in metaphysical claims about the Buddha's absolute and universal nature.

Festival of the Floating Boats (*Loi Krathong*)

Religious festivals serve many functions, some more central than others to the so-called great religious tradition within a given culture. Whereas *Visākhā Pūja* provides an example of a celebration close to the core of Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia, the Festival of Lights or the Festival of the Floating Boats⁷² (Thai: *loi krathong*) has little to do with Buddhism as a doctrinal system. Although the Festival of Lights seems animistic or Brahmanical in nature, it has become at least partially assimilated into the Theravāda Buddhist cultural traditions of countries in Southeast Asia.

Loi Krathong is celebrated on the full moon day of November, one month after the end of the monastic rains retreat (*vassa*). As we have seen, in many parts of Thailand the celebration traditionally coincides with a specifically Buddhist ceremony, the preaching of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, the Buddha's last existence before his rebirth as Siddhattha Gotama. By this time the rainy season has come to an end, the rice crops have been planted, and the temperature turns pleasantly cool in the evenings. The farmers have more than a month before the rice is harvested. During this season of maturing crops and moderate climate, people traditionally take time to enjoy themselves at the Festival of the Floating Boats. The celebration is a very simple one with no apparent connection to either Buddhist or Brahmanical ritual. Small boats are made either from natural materials like banana stalks and leaves or, in recent years, from polystyrene foam and crepe paper, and are floated on rivers or ponds. Lighted candles, incense, and coins of small denominations will be placed on the boats. Everyone participates, elders watching the bobbing lights on the water and the children often swimming out to retrieve the most beautiful *krathongs* (leaf cup) or

the coins that might be found on them. Couples picnic nearby and you and old alike enjoy fireworks. In northern Thailand houses may be decorated and in the provincial capital city of Chiang Mai the *Loi Krathong* festival has become a major tourist event including a parade of large floats through the city.

The historical roots and meaning of *Loi Krathong* are ambiguous. It may derive from the Indian festival of lights, *dīpavali*, or from a traditional Chinese custom of floating lotus flower lamps to guide the spirits of people drowned in rivers and lakes. The earliest evidence of the celebration in Thailand comes from the Sukhothai period when the second queen of King Phra Ruang (circa 1300 C.E.), the daughter of a Brahman family attached to the court, began the custom to please the king. Such an explanation suggests an Indian Brahmanical origin for *Loi Krathong*. Two Buddhist explanations of a mythological nature have been advanced: that the *krathong* carry offerings to the Buddha's footprint on the sandy shore of the Nammac River in the Deccan by the king of the *nāga* (serpents) who wanted to worship the Lord after his death;⁷³ or that the river festival is an expression of gratitude to Phra Upagutta who as a *nāga* foiled Māra's attempt to destroy the 84,000 *cetiyas* built by King Asoka.⁷⁴ Although these two etiologies differ, they both point to the popular devotionism that characterizes much of lay Theravāda Buddhist practice in Southeast Asia.

In northern Thailand a historical explanation for the origin of *Loi Krathong* prevails. During the reign of King Kamala of Haripuñjaya in the tenth century C.E. (modern day Lamphun, twenty-six kilometers to the south of Chiang Mai), a severe cholera epidemic forced the populace to evacuate the city. Eventually they found their way to present day Pegu in Burma, where they stayed for six years until the epidemic subsided. After the majority of the people returned to Haripuñjaya they sent gifts of food and clothing down the river to their relatives who remained in Pegu.⁷⁵ The festival of *Loi Krathong* celebrates this event, or we might say that it becomes an annual offering to the spirits of departed ancestors. Another explanation is that the *krathongs* are offerings to the Goddess of the *Mae Khongkhā* (i.e., Ganges), the Mother of Waters.⁷⁶

Whatever the historical explanation of the festival of *Loi Krathong*, it remains one of the most picturesque celebrations in Thailand. To be sure, its connections with doctrinal Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia are tenuous. Buddhist rationalizations have been provided for it, and where Buddhist temples are located near rivers, people take their leaf boats into the temple compound to be blessed or to circumambulate the sacred precincts before placing the *krathong* in the water; however, *Loi Krathong* represents

one of those festivals that defies ready identification as Buddhist. Perhaps for this reason both in the past and at the present time some Thai Buddhist monasteries choose this night to preach the *Vessantara Jātaka*, thereby appropriating this celebratory occasion for their own purposes.

RITES OF PASSAGE

Buddhism in Southeast Asia has not only integrated into its own sacred history a community's seasonal, agricultural rhythm, but has marked and celebrated important junctures in the life cycle of the individual as well. These life passage rituals integrate various cultural elements. Birth rites have traditionally had little or no connection with Theravāda Buddhism⁷⁷ but adolescent, early adulthood, old age, and death rites have been assimilated into a Buddhist scheme of life passage or transition rituals. Male adolescent or puberty initiatory rites take the form of temporary ordination into the monastic order (*sangha*); in some Theravāda societies, such as Burma, ear boring rituals may be held for girls at the same time; marriage constitutes a major young adult passage rite in which Buddhist monks may play a minor role, primarily to chant *suttas* for the protection and well-being of the couple or to preach a sermon and act as recipients of merit making gifts. Buddhism has been especially associated with death rites or funeral observances throughout greater Asia.

Life passage rites are open to several interpretations: to ensure safe transition to another stage of life; to integrate the life cycle of the individual into the ongoing life pattern of the community; to place the individual within a cosmological structure governed by various unseen and relatively unpredictable powers (e.g., *kamma*, *chao*, *phī*, *nat*); or to relate the life of the individual and the community to the ethical and spiritual teachings of Buddhism. The remainder of this section will examine the rituals associated with four life passage periods: adolescence, young adulthood, aging, and death. We shall focus on the first and the last of these two rites, novitiate ordination and the funeral ceremony. Regarding the latter S. J. Tambiah observed, "In no other rites of passage . . . is Buddhism so directly concerned with a human event."⁷⁸

Joining the *Sangha*

Ordination into the Theravāda Buddhist monkhood can be interpreted on a variety of levels. From a doctrinal perspective, the monk is a "religious

virtuoso, that is, in seeking ordination monks commit themselves to a lifetime pursuit of the highest goal in Buddhism, *nibbāna*, within the framework of the monastic order. The Pali term *bhikkhu/bhikkhuni*⁷⁹ means "one who gives up ordinary pursuits of livelihood for a higher goal to become a mendicant or "almsperson." Monks' alms seeking "is not just a means of subsistence, but an outward token that . . . [they] have renounced their worldly and all its goods and have thrown . . . [themselves] for bare living and the chances of public charity."⁸⁰ The *Dhammapāda*, probably the best known of all the Theravāda texts characterizes the doctrinal ideal of the monk as follows: "the true monk is one whose senses are restrained and controlled in body and speech; he is contented with what he receives and is not envious of others and has no thought of himself. Such a monk is firmly rooted in the Buddha's truth (*dhamma*), and the monk who dwells in the truth meditates on the *dhamma* is firmly established in the Truth (*saddha*). Such a being is suffused with loving kindness (*mettā*), possesses the cardinal virtues, is refined in conduct, and is filled with a transcendent confidence in the Buddha's teachings, having attained peace and bliss, the monk 'illuminates this world like the moon from a cloud.'"

In short, ideal monks are those who seek and attain the truth. Having reached this goal they become morally and spiritually transformed, radiating the Buddha's *dhamma* for the benefit of humankind.

In all Theravāda countries meditation monasteries maintain an environment of peaceful tranquility where men and women pursue the Buddhist ideal of *nibbāna*: the overcoming of suffering, the attainment of equanimity, and insight into the true nature of reality. Although some enter the monastic life to seek *nibbāna*, others fall short of this ideal. Melford Spiro analyzes Burmese men's reasons for entering the monkhood into three conscious types—religious motives, the desire to escape the difficulties and miseries of human life, the wish to obtain an easier living⁸²—and three unconscious motives—dependency, narcissism, and emotional timidity.⁸³ Other, somewhat more socially descriptive reasons for entering the monastery include acquiring an education, achieving a higher social status, a response to social custom and pressure, and repayment of a filial debt, especially to one's mother. Before analyzing the ordination ceremony itself, we shall briefly examine some of these motives.

In Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia monastic tenure varies greatly in length, depending upon the motivation for ordination. Unlike the novitiate in Western Christianity, becoming a monk may not involve a lifetime

commitment, although many noted meditation teachers and scholar-monks may spend their adult life in robes.

In Thailand one of the principal reasons for being ordained is to acquire an education.⁸⁴ Among poorer families often children cannot afford to attend school. Ordination as a novice provides for their material needs as well as a basic education. Indeed, if a boy is bright and highly motivated he may complete secondary school as a novice or a monk, graduate from a monastic college, and then earn an advanced degree from a university in another country, such as India. After teaching in a monastery school for several years or serving as an administrator in a larger provincial monastery he will probably disrobe and take a responsible and respected secular job. Although such exploitation of the monastic educational structure siphons off able leadership, it has become standard practice and bears little or no social stigma.

Undoubtedly this pattern of being educated in monastic schools only to leave the order reflects an earlier practice where a young man would be ordained as a novice near the age of puberty, remain in the monastery for one or more years, and then return to lay society.⁸⁵ During this period he would receive a rudimentary education, learn the fundamentals of Buddhism, and prepare to lead a responsible life as a lay Buddhist supporter of the monastic order. This particular pattern, still followed in some areas of Southeast Asia, resembles a rite of passage into adulthood. In this sense, the Western parallel to ordination as a Buddhist novice, customarily between the ages of twelve and nineteen, is the rite of confirmation in the Christian tradition and bar and bas mitzvah in the Jewish. Traditionally these ceremonies symbolize full participation in their respective religio-social communities, just as having been ordained a Buddhist monk is considered an essential stage in the passage to mature male adulthood in Thai, Lao, Burmese, or Cambodian society and culture.

The monk takes a vow of celibacy and is expected to minimize material attachments, however, ordinarily monastic tenure does not involve excessive ascetic practice. Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia consistently upholds the time-honored tradition of the Middle Way. In practice, the monk lives a reasonably comfortable life and occupies a respected status in the community. For children of poorer families, in particular, becoming a monk represents a definite improvement in social, and often economic status. For this reason it is not surprising to find that the majority of Theravāda monks in Southeast Asia do, in fact, come from backgrounds of modest means. For instance, at the two monastic colleges in Bangkok, a high percentage

of the students were born in northeastern Thailand, the most economically disadvantaged region of the country.

Finally, it should be noted that ordination is perceived as a way of repaying a debt to one's parents, especially one's mother.⁸⁶ That one has come into the world, survived infancy, and become a youth results primarily from her care. Within the calculus of meritorious action (*puñña*), one's ordination gains a spiritual benefit for one's parents. The mutual reciprocity characterizing merit making rituals thus becomes part of ordination into a monastic order. A young man survives infancy due to the material benefits provided by his mother and father, by being ordained he returns to them a spiritual boon.

A village ordination in northern Thailand will customarily be held over one or two days and consists of two parts. The first is an animistic ceremony called propitiating the spirits or calling the spirits; the second is ordination into the novitiate (*pabbajjā*) or, if the candidate is twenty or older, "higher ordination (*upasampadā*). The first part of the ceremony may be held at the ordinand's home and will be the occasion for village-wide festivity with as much feasting, drinking, and general merrymaking as the young man's family can afford. The spirit-calling ceremony is conducted by a layman who performs similar roles at weddings, house dedications, and other auspicious or crisis occasions. His earlier life as an ordained monk has prepared him for learning the protocols for these rituals as well as the methods of chanting and preaching. His ritual role differs from that of a monk but rivals it in importance. He often functions as a ritual mediator between the *sangha* and the laity.⁸⁷

During the ceremony the lay leader performs a ritual in which he "calls the ordinand's thirty-two spirits (Thai: *khwan*) away from all previous attachment to the pleasures of lay life so the youth will be unswayed and undivided in his pursuit of the monastic life, especially the trials of celibacy. To attract the *khwan* a special offering bowl is prepared. It may be a relatively simple food offering in a lacquer bowl or a much more elaborate symbolic reconstruction of a cosmic tree symbolizing an axial connection between the human and spirit realms. At the conclusion of the ritual, a sacred thread is then tied around the wrists of the ordinand representing the tying of the *khwan* into his body after they have been "called."

Before the spirit-calling ritual begins, the ordinand will be properly prepared for his ordination. His monastic instructor will shave his head and clothe him in a white robe. These acts symbolize the liminality of the life passage ritual, a transition from householder to monk, a neutering

Figure 1.16. Novitiate ordination. Young boy dressed as Prince Siddhattha. Wat Yang Khuang monastery, Chiang Tung, Shan States, Myanmar. Photo by Donald K. Swearer.



one's previous identity prior to beginning a new life with a new monastic name. They also represent the monk's disregard for the things of this world, including the vanities of personal appearance. At the conclusion of the spirit-calling ritual, the ordinand, his family, friends, and well-wishers form a procession to the monastery compound. In some instances, the young man will be dressed as Prince Siddhattha and will ride a horse to the monastery reenacting the great renunciation of the Lord Buddha. The procession circles the ordination hall (*uposatha*) three times. Before entering it the ordinand bows before the boundary stone (*sīmā*) at the front entrance, invoking the Buddha to forgive his sins and to grant him blessings. The sacrality of the ordination hall and, hence, the significance of the ordination ceremony, is indicated by the nine boundary stones buried in the ground marking its center and the eight directional points around its perimeter.

...one of the ordinand's friends may play the role of tempter Māra, pretending to prevent his entrance, or the ordinand may give a last handful of coins to the well-wishers who have followed him. As he approaches the chapter of ten monks seated on the floor in a semicircle in front of a large Buddha image resting on a raised altar at the far end, bowing to the floor three times before his preceptor (*upajjhāya*), a senior monk who will conduct the ordination ceremony, the ordinand presents to him gifts of candles, incense, and robes. Professing the Buddha's teaching (*dhamma*), and the monastic order (*sangha*) to be his refuge, he requests permission three times to enter "the priesthood in the Vinaya of the Blessed One."⁸⁸ The preceptor receives the robes, instructs the ordinand in the Three Gems (i.e., Buddha, *dhamma*, and *sangha*), and meditates on the impermanence of the five aggregates of bodily existence until another monk designated as the young man's instructor (*ācariya*) formally instructs him in the Ten Precepts upheld by all monastic novices: to refrain from taking life, stealing, sexual intercourse, lying, intoxicating eating at forbidden times, entertainments, bodily adornments, sleeping on comfortable beds, and receiving money. Having taken the precepts, or after again the ordinand approaches the preceptor. Now he is assigned to a senior monk as an instructor and given a Pali name. The instructor hangs a begging bowl over his left shoulder, has the young man identify his robes, and three monastic robes, and then questions him on behalf of the entire chapter. His formal queries include "Do you have leprosy?" "Are you a human?" "Are you free of debt?" "Do you have permission from your parents?" Finding him free of impediments, the instructor then presents the ordinand to the *sangha*, requesting that they admit him into the monastic order. Acknowledging their consent by a collective silence, the assembled monks receive the young man into the order as a novice. The ceremony concludes with the preceptor instructing him in the responsibilities of being a monk.⁸⁹

Among the Southeast Asian Theravāda Buddhist countries, only Burma affords a parallel adolescent life passage ritual for women. The *shinbyu* ceremony includes not only young boys being ordained into the monastic order for a temporary period, but adolescent girls as well. An all-day *shinbyu* I witnessed in Mandalay in 1990 included a morning devoted to entertainment. Men, women, and children crowd into a pavillion constructed to resemble a palace. Over a dozen boys and girls dressed in costumes of princes and princesses sit on a center stage watching several storytellers and mimes entertain the audience. At the conclusion of the entertainment

the girls' ears are pierced and the boys' heads are shaved. Afterwards the boys take the vows of a novice monk. Pierced ears symbolize entrance into adult female roles; temporary novitiate ordination represents a similar preparation for a young boy to assume an adult male role in society. Only in Burma do these adolescent life passage rites include both sexes.

Can women in Theravāda Buddhist cultures enter the monastic order and pursue the same spiritual quest as men? The answer is complex.⁹⁰ As texts such as the *Therīgathā* (*Songs of the Nuns*) indicate, from a doctrinal perspective both women and men may attain the goal of *nibbāna*. Historically, however, the rules of discipline make clear that the order of women monks is subordinant to that of men. Furthermore, the order of nuns (*bhikkhūnī*) endured in India only until circa 456 C.E. and the order may never have reached mainland Southeast Asia.⁹¹ Today orders of renunciant women flourish in Southeast Asia, although technically they are not *bhikkhūnī*.⁹² In comparison to Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, women renunciants in Burma enjoy a higher social and spiritual status. Referred to in Burmese as *thilashin*, ("one who bears the burden of *sīla* or virtue"), they manage their own monasteries and pursue higher Buddhist studies including Pali. Like male monks, the *thilashin* may collect morning alms donations (*pinḍapāta*) and may also undergo temporary novitiate ordination similar to their male counterparts. These two practices indicate that in Burma female as well as male renunciants are perceived to represent a religious field of merit. That *thilashin* enjoy a relatively high social and spiritual status is reflected in the participation of girls in the Burmese *shinbyu*. That is, women in Burma have more opportunities to participate in religio-cultural institutions and practices from which they are virtually excluded in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.

The ordination ceremony provides an extraordinary opportunity to understand the richness of Theravāda Buddhism as a cultural institution in its Southeast Asian context. Doctrinally, it represents the highest ideals of the tradition; symbolically, it offers a reenactment of the most dramatic event of the Buddha's life narrative; structurally, it illustrates the threshold transition fundamental to the meaning of rites of passage; anthropologically, it provides evidence for the syncretic nature of Southeast Asian Buddhism even in its most essential expressions.

Weddings and Aging Ceremonies

Whereas adolescent life passage rituals mark a youth's entrance into adulthood, marriage signals the beginning of a new adult stage of life, one in

which young men and women assume responsibility for a family and broad social obligations within their community. In all cultures weddings mark a crucial transitional stage in the lives of individuals, families, and communities. A decline in religiously based wedding rituals raises questions not only about the waning role of religion in defining cultural identity but also suggests profound changes in the way individuals perceive themselves in relationship to communities. One of the challenges of our own day is the creation of rites of passage symbolizing the assumption of adult responsibilities for the maintenance of communities that reflect social realities.

From a doctrinal or normative perspective, the Buddhist *sangha* has little to do with weddings and aging rites, the latter being a ritual marking the sixtieth birthday or end of the fifth astrological cycle (one cycle equals twelve years). As Sir James Scott observed in regard to nineteenth century Burmese wedding customs, "The ritual is very simple and has nothing whatever of a religious character about it; in fact the celibate *pongyis* [monks] would be grossly scandalised if they were asked to take any part in it."⁹³ Scott's observation fails to take into account the animistic religious dimension of marriage rites and the fact that today Theravāda monks may be invited to participate in wedding ceremonies. From a historical perspective one can justifiably argue that the presence of monks at a marriage rite reflects the influence of Western Christian custom; however, as we shall see, the Theravāda tradition legitimates such a practice on its own terms. The following descriptions of a wedding and an "entering old age" rite rely on observations of ceremonies in Lamphun Province, northern Thailand in the 1970s and 1980s. Customs in other regions of Theravāda Southeast Asia may differ.

As a religious ritual, a traditional Thai wedding reflects both animistic and Brahmanical influences. Traditionally village weddings are usually held in the home of the bride. The day is one of celebration and feasting, often straining the financial means of the couple's families. The main ritual officiant is a layman called a "spirit doctor" (Thai, *mō riak khwan*) or one who calls the spirits. In addition, monks may also be invited to participate.

The wedding is usually held in the morning, especially when monks are invited. The day begins early in the morning with the preparation of the wedding feast. Gradually relatives, friends and guests arrive filling the central room of the house. About 10 A.M. a group of five, seven, or nine monks arrive and take their place along the outside wall next to a carved

gilded altar on which a single, crystal Buddha image is placed. A white cord extends from the image to a silver bowl in which are placed offerings for the spirits of the bride and groom: two eggs, two balls of sticky rice, two bananas, two small glasses of rice wine. The lay officiant leads those assembled in paying respects to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha and taking the five precepts. He then requests the monks to chant the *paritta*. For a wedding, monks often chant the *Maṅgala Sutta* and the *Mettā Sutta*, two of the most widely used *paritta*. The following selections from the *Maṅgala Sutta* illustrate its appropriateness for such an occasion in a traditional Buddhist culture. In the text some of the responses to the question what constitutes the highest "blessings" (*maṅgala*) are:

- Not to associate with the foolish, but to associate with the wise.
- To reside in a suitable locality. . . and to set oneself in the right direction.
- Vast learning, skill in handicraft, well-grounded in discipline, pleasant speech.
- To support one's father and mother, to cherish one's wife and children, and to be engaged in peaceful occupations.
- Liberality, righteous conduct, rendering assistance to relatives.
- To cease and abstain from evil, to abstain from intoxicating drinks, being diligent in performing righteous acts.
- Reverence, humility, contentment, gratitude, and the timely hearing of the teaching of the Buddha.
- Patience, obedience, meeting with holy monks for discussions.
- Self-control, chastity, comprehension of the Noble Truths, and the realization of Nibbāna.⁹⁴

Following the *paritta* the lay officiant then offers a lengthy sermon, speaking in a colorful, charismatic style, his vocal cadence moving between high falsetto and low resonant pitches. His speech incorporates many different elements: calling the spirits, a lesson in Buddhist morality, humor. He cajoles the spirits away from previous romantic attachments, enticing them by his artful vocal skills and by the offerings prepared for them. At the conclusion of the sermon the officiant takes a piece of the string extending from the Buddha altar to the offering bowl and ties it around the wrists of the bride and the groom. Relatives and honored guests follow suit. Whereas we might interpret this act as an unusual cultural expression of "tying the knot," within the animistic context of his northern Thai ritual it represents emplanting the spiritual elements of the wedded couple into

the couple. This act of calling the spirits represents the union of the and groom on both spiritual and physical planes. The participati relatives and friends in this act of "tying the spirits" emphasize communal significance of marriage.

The ceremony ends with the presentation of food offerings and appropriate gifts to the monks, who then depart. In the case of a wed the meritorious transaction represented by this offering supplement thereby reinforces the spirit calling rite as a means to ensure the su and well-being of the new family. With the formal portion of the cerer completed, the wedding festivities begin. After an elaborate lunch, g spend the remainder of the afternoon meeting old friends who retu for the wedding, gossiping, and wandering in and out of the comp of the bride's parents' house where the ceremony took place. Eve festivities might include another elaborate meal, music played by a i northern Thai orchestra, and general merrymaking. About 9:00 P.M. couple are led by grandparents, aunts and uncles to the bedroom w they will spend the night. Along their path from the outside of the h up the stairs to the bedroom young boys and girls attempt to obstruct t progress. Only by distributing gifts of small coins and sweets are the b and groom allowed to proceed on their way. Because the festivities c continue for several hours, the newly married couple has virtually n of the romantic privacy we associate with a honeymoon.

Like a wedding ceremony, an aging ritual or sixtieth birthday celebrat incorporates both Buddhist and animistic elements to ensure blessings this life, in this instance, a long and healthy old age. In the northern T cultural context, the ritual marking old age is called a life-extension life-enhancement (Thai: *su'bchatā*) ritual.⁹⁵ *Su'bchatā* rites may be h on behalf of an individual, a family, or a community for the general purpo of warding off evil and engendering good luck, prosperity, and a long li In addition to being a ritual marking the end of the fifth life cycle, t *su'bchatā* may be performed to cure an illness, to escape from bad lu predicted by a fortune teller, to bless a new home, to celebrate a monk elevation in rank, or to protect a village from natural disaster.

At the fifth cycle birthday ritual the celebrant sits beneath a tripod constructed of stalks of bamboo placed in front of a Buddha altar. A whi cord extending from a Buddha image is tied to the bamboo tripod an wrapped three times around the head of the celebrant. A candle the heig of the celebrant stands to one side of the altar. At the base of each leg c the tripod are placed sugar cane, coconuts, bananas, clay pots filled wit

water, and trays heaped with various food offerings each numbering 108. These include sticky rice, betel nuts, husked and unhusked rice. Behind the celebrant stands a treelike structure made out of a bamboo stalk adorned with sixty small flags.

Together these objects create a sacred space, an axial locus of power uniting the celebrant with various levels of divine and cosmic powers. The sacred number 108 symbolizes the sum of the power valencies of the basic constituents of the cosmos—earth, water, fire, air—and also the numerical sum of the equally potent spiritual power of the Buddha, his teaching (*dhamma*), and the monastic order (*sangha*).⁹⁶ The celebrant begins the ceremony by first lighting small candles on the Buddha altar and then a large candle the height of the celebrant. In doing so he or she not only announces the beginning of the ceremony but activates all the divine and spiritual powers in the universe. As the celebrant sits in the middle of this ritually constructed center of the world, the monks chant *paritta* or protection *suttas*, thereby empowering the celebrant with the power of the Buddha and his teachings as well as the potency of all the *devatā* (divine beings). After the monks have chanted for approximately an hour, they are presented food for their noon meal. The blessing they chant after their meal concludes the formal part of the ceremony. A generous luncheon for all of the guests concludes the festivities.

Funeral Rites

Entrance into the monastic order represents a passage into an altered mode of being, ideally one dedicated to the pursuit of a goal that will free the monk from the power of determinative actions (*kamma*) and subsequent rebirth (*samsāra*) and the generally unsatisfactory condition (*dukkha*) of mundane (*lokiya*) existence. Marriage and old age rituals reaffirm individuals within the life of a community at times of major personal and social transition.

Death signals another kind of passage, one fraught with ambiguity for the deceased as well as for the living. Consequently, death is marked by rites that assure the survivors of their own well-being as well as for the benefit of the departed.⁹⁷ To modern Western eyes a traditional funeral rite in Southeast Asia may appear unusually festive. One must keep in mind, however, that the funeral not only honors the deceased and mourns his or her loss but also affirms the continued existence of the family and the community and of the deceased in a new life. Funerals then not only acknowledge the fact of death; they also celebrate life.



Figure 1.17. Monks chanting before a funeral casket. Lamphun Province, Thailand. P by Donald K. Swearer.

Funerary rites in Theravāda Buddhist Southeast Asia may be held in home or at the temple and will vary in many details depending on the time and circumstances of death (from old age or accident), the status of the deceased (rich or poor, lay or ordained), and the local customs of a particular area. The main ritual officiants will be Buddhist monks; the ritual chanting will be from such highly revered Buddhist texts as the *Abhidhamma* (“high teaching”); and the traditional funeral sermon will deal with the themes of punishment and reward, the impermanence of life (*anicca*), and the ultimate goal (*nibbāna*) beyond the duality of life and death. The rites themselves, however, incorporate many animistic elements designed to dispell the threatening powers of evil associated with death and are even more thoroughly syncretic than the ordination ceremony.

Several good descriptions of Buddhist funerals in Southeast Asia are available.⁹⁸ The following account is based on my own observations of funerals in central and northern Thailand as well as several ethnographies. Near the moment of death Buddhist *mantras* may be whispered into the ear of the dying, possibly “*Buddho*” or the four syllables symbolizing the structure of the *Abhidhamma*—*ci*, *ce*, *ru*, and *ni* (mind, mental concept, body, and *nibbāna*)—or written on a piece of paper and put into the deceased’s mouth.¹⁰⁰ At death there may be an extended period of lo-

wailing, in part to announce to the village community that a death has occurred. After removing the deceased's clothes the body will be washed. This can be interpreted as cleansing the soul in preparation for its passage to heaven. The hands will be clasped together over the chest and a thread will be passed three times around the hands, toes, and neck symbolizing the bonds of passion, anger, and ignorance. Before cremation these will be removed representing the release from these bonds by the power of charity, kindness, and meditation.¹⁰¹

Several items are placed at the head of the corpse. These may include food and water for the person's spirit to eat and drink, a kerosene lamp to light its way to the other world, and a three-tailed white flag representing the Three Gems. Flowers and incense are put in the deceased's hands. Traditionally offered before Buddha images they represent the Buddha's teachings. Finally, a coin may be put in the corpse's mouth or a small set of silver and golden flags placed near the body to pay the demons who demand payment for not obstructing the soul's journey to heaven.

After the body is put in a coffin the cremation may take place immediately or be deferred a week or even longer depending on such circumstances as the availability of time, return of relatives from long distances, and so on. In the case of distinguished monks the period between death and cremation may extend up to a year. The coffin, itself, will be made from plain wood planks. The three forming the bottom are said to represent the three levels of the Buddhist cosmology: the realm of desire, form, and the formless realm. When the coffin is taken from the house, the head will be pointed to the west, the direction of death, symbolizing the reversal of life by death.¹⁰² Often a new set of temporary stairs will be set up at a different part of the house. The coffin will then be taken down these stairs, and spun around several times on the way to the pyre to disorient the spirit. Customarily the temporary stairs will have only three steps representing the tripartite cosmological structure of Theravāda Buddhism.¹⁰³ When the temporary stairs have been removed and the body cremated, it is hoped that the now freed spirit will reach *nibbāna*.

The days between the actual death and the funeral and cremation are ones of busy activity. In the case of a normal death of a moderately well-to-do villager, the family of the deceased is joined by relatives and friends to prepare for evening festivities. Local orchestras entertain guests, and there will be extraordinary feasting, drinking, and even gambling. During the day monks are invited to the home for funeral chants, and gifts will be presented to them to earn merit for the deceased. Although the noisy

activities may be interpreted as a means of encouragement to the dead person's ghost, their primary function appears to be a reenforcement of community solidarity and integration in the face of the threat of

On the day of the funeral, selected for its auspicious signs for the deceased, the coffin is taken in procession from the home to the temple or cremation grounds. The size and extent of the procession varies according to the wealth and status of the deceased. I witnessed a funeral procession in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, of a distinguished abbot whose body was borne on an elaborate funeral car in the form of a mythological elephant in a procession in which thousands of people wound their way through the streets of the city. For this event distinguished monks from various regions of the country were invited and 108 young men were ordained as novices as an act of merit making.

Prior to a cremation a final preaching service will be held, the monks will chant, and a sermon will be delivered. A typical rural northern sermon might include remarks such as the following recorded by Kingshill at the village of Ku Daeng near the city of Chiang Mai:

Dear friends, I was invited to deliver a speech to you who are attending this merit-making for the dead Mr. Khiow. A good Buddha presents his guests with two things, good food and accommodation and a sermon by a priest to take back home with them. Today I will preach to you about death.

Death is a common event that will come to everyone without exception. Nobody can live forever, but everybody must die sooner or later. Some people say that a dead person is only trouble to his relatives and friends who stay behind. Dead animals are more useful to us than dead people because we can use their hide, bones, and meat. The only things left by a dead person are his good deeds, which you can remember.

We go to the funeral of a dead person just as if we were going to see off a good friend when he is leaving for another country. Now we have come to see Mr. Khiow off to another world. We do not like to see him go, but when his time came he had to leave. Nobody could stop him, all we are able to do is to make merit and transfer merit to him. . . .

Everybody must remember that we all have to die, not only the person whose funeral we are attending today. Before death comes we must prepare ourselves for it. The Lord Buddha did not cry when

Buddha.

The Lord Buddha said, "Death is the change of the name and the body of a spirit from one form to another." Nothing in the world, even life or matter, can vanish; it only changes.

To the question where the spirit of a dead person goes, we can say that it is reborn. In Buddhism we say that a person with an unclean spirit of covetousness, anger, and ill temper will be reborn again, but he who has a clean spirit will go straight to Nibbana. The Lord Buddha had a clean spirit; so after his death, his spirit went straight to Nibbana without being reborn again. . . .

I cannot speak any longer because I have already taken a long time. Before ending, I shall suggest again that death is not a strange event; it does not belong to any particular person, but to all of us. We will die when our time comes, the time being scheduled by. . . [Mara], who is the chief of death.

If I should receive any merit for this preaching, I beg to dedicate it to Mr. Khio. I ask that this merit may help and support him in the right place, or give him a chance to be reborn in a good place. If his spirit should still be wandering around some place, because of his attachment to his family or his property, I beg that this merit lead him from these earthly attachments to some other place.

Finally, I beg for the blessings of the Lord Buddha to come upon you and bring you long life, a light complexion, happiness, and good health.¹⁰⁴

The cremation itself may take several forms: the wooden coffin may be burned on a pyre of wood; the coffin and funeral car may be burned through an elaborate process of igniting rockets and firecrackers; or the coffin may be burned in a crematorium. Prior to the cremation, the monks attending the funeral approach the coffin and remove sets of robes that lay donors have placed on it to earn special merit for the deceased. While picking up the robes the monks chant the following Pali stanza:

All conditioned things are impermanent;
Their nature is to arise and decay.
Having arisen they cease;
In their stilling is happiness. (*Dīgha Nikāya. Sutta 16*)

... comprise the funeral rite in Southeast Asian place and the interpretations given vary considerably from such Theravāda doctrines as not-self (*anattā*). In particular, the spirit (*viññāna*) of the deceased is perceived as a powerful agent that treated properly in a ritual sense to ensure its future well-being and retribution on the surviving family and friends. In Buddhist terminology the funeral a significant merit making event for the deceased and the living. Merit making and protective magic comprise one another in mortuary rites. Death rites, furthermore, celebrate the continuance of a social group—family, community, village—thereby mitigating the threat of death to social cohesion and solidarity.

In this chapter we have examined selected facets of Buddhism and Southeast Asia on the level of popular belief and practice. We explore the centrality of paradigmatic tales as the medium for conveying normative values of the tradition. We also studied rituals, festivals and of passage from three varied perspectives: as examples of the syncretic nature of popular Buddhism, as contexts for merit making and the appropriation of sacred power, and as expressions of the way in which the people of Theravāda Southeast Asian cultures ascribe meaning to their lives through the ritualization of Buddhist history, the natural cycles of an agricultural community, and the life transitions of individuals. Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia is truly complex, defying simple definitions and characterizations. It uplifts a nibbanically defined master narrative pursued by monk meditators living in tranquil, forested retreats; but, as we have seen, the story of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia is a richly nuanced epic tale with many subplots.