

INNOVATIONS IN THERAVĀDA BUDDHIST RITUALS

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Rituals have not been seen as positive religious practices in traditional Theravāda Buddhism. In comparison with other religious practices, rituals were often regarded as inferior and secondary and thereby given a less significant value. For most, rituals were too easy and meant for the ordinary and religiously less developed. A variety of rituals—worshipping the Bodhi, offering alms to monks—for example, were considered as objects for religiously less developed and were meant for people who are more devotional. Devotion and faithful adherence were discouraged giving priority to intellectual and more rigorous austerities. Negative attitudes towards rituals had an impact on the growth of rituals within Theravāda Buddhism.

Professor E.R. Sarachchandra (1914–1996) remarked that the rituals such as two-pulpit preaching (Sin. *āsana dekē baṇa*) “arose mostly at a time when Buddhism began decaying” and maintained that such rituals are conceived “as evidences of the corruption of the *Sāsana* or as attempts to popularize Buddhism” (1966:23). Similar views of Buddhist rituals are very common in the study of Theravāda Buddhism. Though such remarks show that Theravāda Buddhists are concerned with distinctions between pure and impure religion, a study of these issues is not the purpose of this paper. Rather I will examine innovative aspects of Theravāda rituals as can be seen in two-pulpit preaching.

TWO-PULPIT PREACHING

For the historian of religions, an examination of two-pulpit preaching ritual is important for three reasons: (i) it demonstrates the way in

which the *baṇa* tradition, which emerged in thirteenth century Sri Lanka evolved into a fully developed Buddhist preaching ritual in the early part of the eighteenth century (see Deegalle 1995); (ii) it displays the way Buddhist piety, as an affective dimension of religious experience, was incorporated into the preaching ritual. And (iii) it shows an interesting way of using the vernacular language, Sinhala, along with Pāli, the language of scripture.

Two pulpit preaching is an innovation in Theravāda Buddhist rituals. Innovation is here a combination of creative activities of Buddhist monks and lay people in communicating Buddhist doctrines and practices in an attractive and novel way so that the message embedded in teachings gets conveyed to those who are uninitiated to Buddhist practices.

(1) The very idea of giving a sermon by two preachers as a ritual performance is an innovation. The idea of delivering a sermon by two preachers is conceived for the first time in late medieval Sri Lankan Buddhism and becomes a reality with the birth of two-pulpit preaching. Two preachers perform exegetical roles which are mutually beneficial both for the preachers and for listeners.

(2) The very inclusion of *Maitreya Varṇanāva*—a laudatory account of future Buddha Maitreya—in two-pulpit preaching helps locate the development of Theravāda within Sri Lanka; it demonstrates influences that Theravāda had from external sources. Late medieval Sri Lankan Theravāda gradually came to appreciate and embrace some aspects of Mahāyāna Buddhist cults and rituals. As a result of this cross-fertilization, the narration of the account of Maitreya became the culminating event.

TWO PREACHERS: PERFORMATIVE ROLE

Several accounts of two-pulpit preaching have been given by Europeans who visited Sri Lanka in the late nineteenth century. The accounts of Rhys Davids (1843-1922), R.S. Copleston (1845-1925), and J.F. Dickson are useful in understanding the ritual performance (Deegalle 1995:

143-154):

On these occasions, the people from the neighbouring villages, dressed in their holiday attire, attend in great numbers. The priest invites another priest to join him, as two are required for this service. After their evening meal, each is presented with a robe which he puts on, and they are then conducted under a canopy, with music and flags, from their lodgings to the preaching hall, in the middle of which two pulpits are prepared for them. The pulpit is made of four upright posts supporting a platform about four feet square, and a canopy above. The platform is hip-high from the ground. Cushions are placed on the platform. The priests take their places in front of the pulpits, holding their hand-screens before their faces, while the people make obeisance and say, "sādhū! sādhū!"... They are then lifted into their pulpits, on which they sit cross-legged. One priest has with him a copy of a portion of the Sutta Piṭakam, from which he reads, while the other expounds it to the people in Sinhalese. The reader recites the Three Refuges and the Five Commandments, which the people repeat after him, and he then summons the gods to attend and hear the words of the Buddha. The expounder or preacher then says, "Namo tassa... and recites some stanzas in praise of the Three Jewels. He either selects stanzas from Buddhaghosa's or other Commentaries, or sometimes he recites stanzas of his own composition. The reader then reads a few stanzas, and the preacher explains them sentence by sentence in Sinhalese (Dickson 1884: 224-226).

This account records the ritual activities surrounding two-pulpit preaching as it existed at the latter part of the nineteenth century and highlights the devotional participation of the Buddhist laity.

In the middle of the preaching hall, two pulpits are set up for the preachers: one pulpit faces east while the second pulpit is positioned to the right of the first seat but facing north (Chandraratna 1994:xi). While the *padabhaṇṇa* (expounder) sits on the pulpit facing east, the *sarabhaṇṇa* (reciter) sits on the one facing north. This particular seating arrangement seems to have both symbolic and mythological importance in the ritual. The way the two pulpits are ritually positioned in the *āsana dekeḷeḷe*, I believe, has been influenced by the traditional account of the

First Council at Rājagaha as recorded in the Pāli literature. In the First Council, the two pulpits—*dharmāsana* (preacher's pulpit) and *therāsana* (elder's pulpit)—were constructed in the same manner. In the middle of the *maṇḍapa* where the *saṃgīti* was held, the *dharmāsana* was set up facing east; in the south of it, the *therāsana* was constructed facing north (Takakusu 1924:11).

The ancient Buddhist *dharmadesanā* (Skt. *dharmadēśanā*) style had two aspects: the intoning of a scriptural text as a form of 'recitation,' and the presentation of the meaning (P. *attha*; Skt. *artha*) of the scripture through detailed explanations. The two preachers were known as the *sarabhañña* and the *padabhañña*. The *sarabhañña* chants portions of the scripture (P. *dharmapāṭa*) beautifully in a musical tone according to a recognized meter; the *padabhañña* provides a word for word explanation of the chanting. When the preaching activity is understood as excellence in both content (Skt. *sārtha*) and form (Skt. *śaṣṭhāna*), the role which the *sarabhañña* plays becomes extremely important. The *sarabhañña* is responsible for making the ritual rich in form (*śaṣṭhāna*), while excellence in content is achieved through the expounding ability of the *padabhañña*. At times, one person may have performed both activities; on other occasions, however, two persons seem to have simultaneously performed the two roles of the *desanā*. Since these two *desanā* roles existed in the early tradition (Rhys Davids 1986:408,697), I argue that they provided the basic performative role models followed and emulated by the two preachers in two-pulpit preaching. In two-pulpit preaching, the *sarabhañña* reads out the *dharmapāṭa* from the original Pāli manuscript, while the *padabhañña* provides detailed explanations with innovative interpretations of his own as a Sinhala commentary on the sermon. The presence of these performative roles led Professor Sarachchandra to remark that two-pulpit preaching has "something of the dramatic" in the way it is ritually performed in Sri Lanka (1966:23).

Maitreya Varṇanāva:

The *Maitreya Varṇanāva* marks the climatic conclusion of two-pulpit preaching. Incorporating the traditional narrative of the future Buddha Maitreya, two-pulpit preachings heightens the possible benefits of participating in preaching-related activities. Using the ideology and sacred narrative of Maitreya, good works of Buddhists are extended to the future. Unlike the early Buddhist goal of attaining *nirvāṇa* in this very life, in practice Sinhala Buddhists postpone the attainment of *nirvāṇa* to a future time when the Buddha Maitreya will appear with the glory of a fully awakened Buddha.

In late medieval Sri Lanka, in the two-pulpit preaching ritual, Maitreya as a powerful spiritual symbol becomes a 'realized ontology' with Buddhological justifications; in that context, Maitreya is, not out there but right here, concerned with spiritual progress in the immediate future. He is the most efficacious spiritual power who gives immediate access to spiritual knowledge and makes it possible to realize and attain the Theravāda Buddhist ideal. All present spiritual activities culminate in aspirations of seeing him and reaching his presence in the future.

Those virtuous people who were instrumental in reading this *sūtranta dharma-deśanā* and those who gathered here to listen to it have acquired immeasurable skillful meritorious actions. Except the Buddha Maitreya, others cannot fully state the benefits of those immeasurable skillful meritorious actions. In the future, the Buddha Maitreya will proclaim in the fourfold assembly: "Long ago, ...these people constructed temples, dining halls, preaching halls, sponsored the preaching of *baṇa*... Thereafter, they have enjoyed this sort and that sort of human and divine prosperity and thus have approached me today (Mallikōvāda Sūtraya 1894:35).

This introductory portion highlights meritorious deeds associated with preaching activities. The entire section of those **who will and will not see the Buddha** Maitreya serves a purpose in Sinhala Buddhist context. While emphasizing certain practical concerns of Sinhala society, it

encourages Buddhists to do social work and community activities:

Who will and will not see the Buddha Maitreya?

Those who committed the five grave offenses *will not* indeed see the Buddha Maitreya; Those who live in remote provinces (Deegalle 1997:206-7) and those who ate that which belong to the Buddha will not see the Maitreya Buddha.

Those who offer alms to beggars and bhikkhus will see the Buddha Maitreya. Those who observed the Five Precepts, constructed *thūpas*, planted Bodhi trees, constructed flower alters, fruit altars, gardens, pools, dining halls, wells will see the Buddha Maitreya.

Those who donated preaching pulpits, covers for preaching seats and fans for preachers, those who put canopies in the halls where preaching is given, those who hung flowers on canopies; those who lighted oil-lamps in the preaching hall; those who carried the preachers to preach, those who washed the feet of preachers, and those who have done all the above mentioned customs with due respect and caused the preachers to preach baṇa and listened to it will indeed see the Buddha Maitreya (Mallikōvāda Sūtraya 1894:37-38; Piyaṛatana 1965:247-249).

The presence and influence of Maitreya in Sinhala Buddhist religious practices is not a historical accident. In Sinhala literary sources, there is ample evidence which shows the influence of Maitreya. Buddhist monks and lay people of late medieval Sri Lanka seem to have aspired to see the Buddha Maitreya and receive *vivaraṇa* from him in order to become fully awakened Buddhas in the future. For example, the author of *Pūjāvaliya* (c.1266 CE) wishes to be a fully awakened Buddha after seeing Maitreya:

May I be reborn in the Tusita heaven and listen to the *dharmadeśanā* of the Bodhisattva Maitreya... As long as I will be a Buddha so long will I perfect all perfections (Buddhaputra Thera 1965:808).

I have given here a brief description of ancient preaching styles and the two-pulpit preaching. The two preachers who recited and expounded performed the hermeneutical role of interpreting Buddhist teachings in the vernacular while maintaining the integrity of Theravāda Buddhism by emphasizing the equal importance of Pāli. The use of Pāli recitation

and the *vṛttagandhi* style of Sinhala prose provided a pleasant form (*vyañjana*) for the audience to enjoy while not neglecting content (*artha*). In this context, the belief in the future Buddha Maitreya provided a strong basis to encourage and persuade Buddhists to adopt virtuous practices.

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