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OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
BUDDHIST STUDIES

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Volume 7

1984

Number 2

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Temporary Ordination in Sri Lanka

by *Richard Gombrich*

Theravāda Buddhists have always regarded monks as both the preservers of their tradition and its principal exemplars. Monks are the spiritual élite. Questions surrounding membership of this élite are therefore of the greatest importance.

Full membership is achieved by receiving the higher ordination (*upasampadā*). At this rite the ordinand, who must be at least twenty years old, asks an assembled chapter of monks for ordination; when it is conferred, he is told that for the rest of his life (*yāvajīvam*)¹ he should try to live extremely frugally (the frugality is classified as four “dependencies,” *nissaya*) and must not commit any of the four disbarring offenses (*pārājika*). It is at this point in the ceremony that the prescribed text, which goes back to the beginnings of Buddhist history (probably, as Buddhists claim, to the Buddha himself) explicitly states that the intention of all concerned is that ordination should be for life.

This does not mean that ordination has ever been, in either theory or practice, an irrevocable step. The brahminical renouncer (*saṃnyāsīn*) leaves the lay world by enacting his own post-funerary rites;² he thus dramatizes the conception that he becomes dead to human society. The dead may not rise again: if such a *saṃnyāsīn* lapses, for instance by cohabiting, he becomes an anomaly with no place in the social order and a hazardous future. The Buddha, who did so much to demystify the world, took a more pragmatic view: if an ordained person finds the monastic role too difficult to sustain, far better to leave the Order than to break its rules and so harm both one’s colleagues and oneself. And, indeed, all the evidence, beginning with the *Vinaya Piṭaka* itself, suggests that it has never been particularly rare for members of the Saṅgha voluntarily to revert to lay status.

Before one becomes a monk, one has to become a novice. This is done by the rite of *pabbajjā*, lower ordination. The minimum age for this is that one must be able to shoo crows away,³ which in practice means about seven. According to the canonical text on the subject, the terms *pabbajjā* and *upasampadā* were originally synonymous.⁴ The Buddha initially authorized his monks to ordain recruits by a very simple rite: the candidate was to shave his head, put on yellow robes with the upper robe over one shoulder, touch the feet of the ordaining monk with his head, squat with his hands together in the *añjali*, and simply say three times that he was taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha—the formula of taking refuge which in Theravāda Buddhist societies still begins every rite and religious occasion for the laity. This ordination could be conferred by a single monk with no one else present. The same text goes on to tell⁵ that subsequently the Buddha rescinded the use of this rite as *upasampadā* and substituted the more elaborate rite still in use. However, he did not do away with the earlier, simpler rite as *pabbajjā*—a point which is not clear from Miss Horner's translation.⁶

The original simple *pabbajjā* ordination, conferred by a single monk, survives among Theravādins to this day, with only some minor additions to the wording. The intending novice asks to wear the yellow robe in order to realize nirvāṇa.⁷ But the original identity of *pabbajjā* and *upasampadā* has left an enduring trace in the ritual. When a candidate presents himself for higher ordination, the *upasampadā* ceremony proper has to be preceded by a *pabbajjā* ceremony. Even if—as will invariably be the case, for example, in Sri Lanka—the ordinand has had a previous *pabbajjā* and spent time as a novice, he has to enact a brief reversion to lay status and wear lay clothes in order again to discard them in this *pabbajjā* ceremony which forms a prelude to the *upasampadā*.

In Burma, every boy is supposed to become a novice for a few days (anything up to a month, though often far less). The ceremony, called *shin-byu*, is conducted with great pomp—greater, indeed, than an ordinary adult ordination. Ideally, it takes place at puberty; in Spiro's sample of 60 boys, the mean age was 11 but the range from 2 to 18.⁸ The ritual contains elements which indicate that the practice has a historical link

with the Hindu *upanayana*, an obligatory *rite de passage* for upper-caste males which is performed over a similar age range. (Though the lawbooks prescribe *upanayana* for the top three *varṇa*—brahmin, kṣatriya and vaiśya—in practice only the brahmins tend to observe it punctiliously.) I owe my information on this matter to Mr. G. Houtman.⁹ An essential officiant at a traditional *shin-byu* is someone Houtman calls a “pseudo-brahmin.” Houtman, on the basis of a Burmese printed source, writes¹⁰ that “the following texts are generally considered standard knowledge” of this ritual specialist; he then lists the Burmese names of the *Yajur Veda*, *R̥g Veda* and *Atharva Veda* (in that order). What follows suggests that the “pseudo-brahmin” has no actual knowledge of those texts and needs none, as they are irrelevant to the ritual he performs; but the same could be said of the real brahmin, supposed to be learned in the Vedas, who performs the Indian *upanayana*. After some rituals of explicitly Buddhist character, such as invoking the Buddha, the “pseudo-brahmin” puts a thread, usually referred to as a “mantra thread” (Burmese: *chi-man-gwin*), around the neck of each initiand. Though this thread “derives its efficacy from the recitation of parittas by monks,”¹¹ it is clearly the descendant of the brahminical sacred thread, which has thus been converted to Buddhism. The initiands are then ritually fed, and almost immediately thereafter conducted to the monastery, where they are shaved and ordained.

The Burmese name of the “pseudo-brahmin” is *beitheik saya*, which derives from Sanskrit *abhīṣeka ācārya*, “consecration teacher.” The term suggests to me that in the remote past the ritual was tantric; that would not be surprising, as tantric Buddhism was prevalent in Burma before Theravāda took over in the eleventh century. (After all, the whole of tantric Buddhism can in my view be seen as a Hinduization of Buddhism.) But this hypothetical past is irrelevant¹² to the obvious interpretation of what we can still see: that the *upanayana* has been copied in Burma but legitimized by turning it into a Buddhist novitiate. The original Hindu-derived element has become so unimportant that, as Houtman records, modernizing Burmese Buddhists now dispense with it altogether. Houtman also believes that in the past the novice stayed in the monastery for long enough to receive some real education there; if so, he was

even more like the Hindu "student" (*brahmacārin*). As we shall see, the parallel custom in Thailand is also that the temporary ordinand should stay in robes long enough to learn something of Buddhism.

Thai Buddhists have a practice rather like the *shin-byu*: every young man is supposed to enter the Saṅgha for a short time before marriage, ideally for the three months of the liturgical "rains" retreat (*vassa*) from July to October. But there is an interesting difference from the Burmese custom: whereas in Burma the candidates are boys, so that they of course take the lower ordination only, in Thailand the parallel custom is to take the *upasampadā*. This means that the Thai short-term ordinands are usually in their early twenties. Thus, we find that whereas Burmese males have to enter the Saṅgha as boys, and normally stay only for a few days, the Thai have to enter as young men, and are supposed to stay for three months. Since the Thai first received their Buddhism from Burma, there must be a historical link between the two customs; why then are they different? If we survey human societies, the early twenties are not a very common age for a major *rite de passage* other than marriage. If I am right in thinking that the Burmese custom has been decisively influenced by the *upanayana*, a puberty ceremony, it is the Thai variant which remains in need of explanation. I would offer a guess: that since becoming a fully ordained monk is considered by all Buddhists more meritorious than becoming a mere novice, the Thai encouraged their young men to take the *upasampadā* rather than just the *pabbajjā*; but for this the Vinaya regulations compelled them to wait until they were twenty. At this age, the Buddhist character of the custom is then taken seriously, in that the young man stays in the monastery long enough to learn something; the experience thus becomes a vital finishing touch to his education. Perhaps the postponement came more easily to the Thai because their remoteness from India had caused them to lose the sense that it was some kind of puberty ceremony. Thus, my hypothesis is that it is not that Thai males take the *upasampadā* (rather than the *pabbajjā*) because they are over twenty; it is that they are over twenty because they are waiting to take the *upasampadā*.

Short-term novitiates also exist in Thailand; but to become a novice is not to undergo the necessary *rite de passage*. Bunnag

writes: "During the Lenten season the number of novices also increases temporarily; some boys are ordained simply to make merit for senior relatives, both the living and the dead, whilst others become novices or monastery boys in order to accompany their elder brothers who have been ordained for a short time" ¹³ In other words, the temporary novice is primarily serving the needs of others—though to be sure he is thereby earning merit for himself too; the temporary monk, on the other hand, is completing his preparation for adult life. "In former days—and in some country areas to this day—it is said that a young man's prospects for marriage might depend upon whether or not he had spent a season in the *wat*." ¹⁴

Social anthropologists have been struck by the general flexibility of Thai social arrangements, ¹⁵ and this flexibility has also influenced monastic life, in that monks can and frequently do revert to lay status at any time, and such a reversion carries no stigma. However, it would not be right to conclude that Thai Buddhism has quite lost the ideal of a permanent commitment to monkhood, or that all Thai ordinations are envisaged as temporary. Bunnag's account makes it clear that the "temporary" or "short-term" (*chua khrao*) ordination taken by almost every young layman is a distinct institution; other monks do not refer to themselves as *chua khrao*, nor do others so refer to them, even if it should in fact turn out that they leave. ¹⁶

In Sri Lanka, on the other hand, the institution of temporary ordination has been unknown. Sinhalese Buddhism has preserved what seems to have been the position in ancient times: one must enter the Order with the intention of doing so for life, but can leave it one feels one must. Many do leave, but more commonly early in life, often, indeed, while still novices. (That means under the age of twenty, for a Sinhalese monastic career usually begins in youth.) There is normally no stigma attached to leaving before receiving the higher ordination, but some stigma does attach to being an ex-monk; there is an idiomatic term for such a man, *hīraḷuvā*, which is felt to be opprobrious. This stigma does not accord with the Buddha's teaching, but presumably reflects the Hindu view of the lapsed renunciate.

When I say that "the institution of temporary ordination has been unknown" I leave open the possibility that individuals

may have taken ordination intending it to be temporary and done so with the connivance of their ordainers. In fact, I know of a monastery where this has been occurring in recent times. This monastery, Kaṇḍuboḍa, was founded in 1956 as a meditation centre; while itself symptomatic of modern trends in Buddhism, to which we shall return below, it has also been a centre and focus of innovation. Meditators at Kaṇḍuboḍa have occasionally taken the lower ordination for a while; in particular, a layman who styles himself Brahmācārī Āryatilaka and is now a professional meditation teacher, becomes a novice when he goes to Kaṇḍuboḍa for his holidays.¹⁷ However, this is not advertised or widely known. It is, therefore, not directly relevant to the story I am about to tell—though I shall later suggest its indirect relevance.

Our story concerns the public and formal attempt to set up temporary ordination as a new institution in Sri Lanka.¹⁸ On 5 July 1982, the full moon day which marked the beginning of the rains retreat that year, a group of five Buddhist laymen received the lower ordination at a monastery in central Colombo on the public and formally stated understanding that they would revert to lay life after exactly a fortnight. Though the initiator of the event was inspired by the Thai model, there were many differences, of which the two most salient were that the ordinands were far from young, and that they took only the lower ordination. The ensuing controversy, however, entirely ignored these points; in particular, all concerned treated the innovation as one of temporary monkhood. The Sinhala term, *pāvidda*, refers to all membership of the Saṅgha, whether one has taken the higher ordination or not. But curiously enough, the fact that the ordinands took only the lower ordination, a fact which would be of crucial importance in traditional Buddhism, was adduced in argument by neither the opponents nor the defenders of the new practice. Controversy was concerned entirely with the general question whether temporary ordination (*tāvakālika pāvidda*) was a good or a scandalous thing.

Before reporting the controversy, let me relate what actually happened. I write as of January 1983: the present tense refers to that time. The whole affair is the brainchild of the Ven. Galboḍa Nāṇissara¹⁹ of Gaṅgārāma, a monastery in Hunupitiya, Colombo, who has also taken the leading part in the

execution of the project. The actual incumbent of Gaṅgārāma is the Ven. Nāṇissara's teacher, but since he is old and infirm, the Ven. Nāṇissara acts as the executive head of the monastery. He is widely known as "Poḍi Hāmuduruvō," "The Little Monk," not because he is small physically or in any other respect—quite the reverse is the case—but presumably because he is still formally only the *future* incumbent. He was kind enough to grant me an interview and to provide me with photographs and printed materials, as well as introducing me to the temporary ordinands in residence at the time. I am most grateful for his help and friendliness.

Gaṅgārāma is a temple of the Siyam Nikāya monastic fraternity. Though the Siyam Nikāya is sometimes labelled conservative, not least because it traditionally has ordained only members of the highest (*goyigama*) caste, its general character is of little relevance to setting the tone of Gaṅgārāma compared to the fact that Gaṅgārāma is in central Colombo. Indeed, it is the temple which lies closest to the very heart of Colombo, the Fort; while being close to various headquarters of government and business, it is also near wealthy residences. Both the President and the Prime Minister (who also is the local M.P.) live nearby and are among its patrons. Indeed, the temple is so influentially placed that it receives large donations from businessmen who are not even Buddhists. With such donations it has managed to put up some spectacular buildings, notably the hall called Sīmāmālaka built on a platform projecting into Beira Lake in which this ordination ceremony took place. We shall have something more to say about the innovations of Gaṅgārāma under the Ven. Nāṇissara's leadership near the end of this article.

The Ven. Nāṇissara says that he was inspired to introduce temporary ordination to Sri Lanka by the Ven. Kirindē Dhammānanda, incumbent of the monastery in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), when on a visit to that monastery he witnessed three temporary ordinations. (We should thus note that a Sinhalese monk in Malaysia was already performing such ordinations.)²⁰ According to the Ven. Nāṇissara, it was the aspiration of the late Professor G. P. Malalasekera to introduce such ordination to Sri Lanka, but at the time his proposal was not welcomed, whereas now the time was ripe. (Professor Malalasekera similarly had a scheme to reintroduce the higher ordination for

women from a living Mahāyānist tradition in Taiwan or Vietnam, but that too came to nothing.) The Ven. Ñāṇissara told *Desatiya*:²¹ "This is a good time for the temporary ordination. It is a period when our people are gradually drawing away from a Buddhist life-style. Today Buddhists' religious faith is more sluggish; their knowledge of Buddhism has begun to decline. The devotion of the laity to the Saṅgha has also declined. By means of temporary ordination this unfortunate state of affairs can be remedied." To his reasons for thinking so we shall return below.

The Ven. Ñāṇissara announced the impending availability of temporary ordination through notices in the press. He also prepared form letters to be sent to applicants and forms of application, the latter in both Sinhala and English. Applicants are informed that the temple will meet all their expenses, supplying their monastic requisites. Apart from various personal details, each applicant has to furnish certificates from his local temple and from his *grāma sēvaka*, the local government official who has replaced the traditional village headman. If he is under age (i.e., under 18?) he has also to produce a letter of consent from his guardian. The most striking requirement, however, is a letter of consent to disrobe after 14 days. Should he find after 14 days that he would like to stay in the Saṅgha for longer, Gaṅgārāma cannot help: he must disrobe and then apply to another temple for re-ordination. The rational-bureaucratic approach is evident in the statement: "Your presence is not necessary until called for"; quite a contrast to traditional Indian ideas of religious initiation and teacher-pupil relations. We shall shortly see that this somewhat impersonal approach is also evident in the programme of training which the ordinands receive. But it is worth remarking that one aspect of this comparative impersonality is that the caste of applicants for ordination is no longer a consideration; indeed, it is possible that in some cases it is not even ascertained.

Applicants are also informed that those who do not wish to have their hair shaved off can instead take the ten precepts and wear another form of yellow robe; they then participate in the same programme of training as those ordained. This strikes me as a point of some historical interest. To explain it, I must here lay the groundwork for my analysis.

A layman who takes the ten precepts has made the same

undertakings as any novice. In traditional Sri Lanka, the only men normally to take the ten precepts were elderly people retired from active life. They normally wore white and spent much of their time at their local temples. A century ago Don David Hewavitarne adopted the title and name of *Anagārika Dharmapāla*. *Anagārika* was an invented role: he took vows of abstention like a monk, but remained active in the world—a this-worldly asceticism which made him a founder of what Obeyesekere has dubbed “Protestant Buddhism.” At first, Dharmapāla found few imitators in this role, but more recently, as Protestant Buddhism has spread, other laymen have similarly undertaken a celibate and generally ascetic existence, calling themselves either *anagārika* or *brahmacārī* (the Hindu term for a religious student). Hitherto, it has been normal, so far as I know, for such men to wear white. Here, however, we find introduced a new kind of *anagārika* and a new costume to match. For, at the first temporary ordination ceremony one gentlemen did indeed refrain from being actually ordained but kept his hair and assumed the title of *anagārika* and a new style of yellow robe,²² looking rather like the outer robe of a Chinese Buddhist monk.

What this all amounts to is that the traditional external indicators of the deepest division in Sinhalese society, that between monk and layman, are becoming blurred. Like the temporary ordinand, this new kind of *anagārika* is an interstitial role which is half in and half out of the monastery. Moreover, the Ven. Nāṇissara has other projects which tend in the same direction. He hopes to have groups of schoolboys taking temporary ordination, but that has not yet happened. However, in September 1982 he organized a programme by which a group of schoolboys, aged about 15, took the ten precepts and spent a week learning Buddhism and meditating at Gaṅgārāma: a junior version of the temporary ordination programme. This will no doubt be repeated. For such young people to take the ten precepts—unless they become novices—is wholly untraditional. He says that he also hopes to arrange a similar programme for women—though of course they could not stay at the monastery. (Since this has not yet taken place, we shall not go into the complicated question of what religious statuses for women exist in Sinhalese Buddhism.)

The initial response was overwhelming: the Ven. Nāṇis-

sara received over five hundred applications for temporary ordination. For the first programme, five men were selected to be ordained and one to become an *anagārika*. They ranged in age from 50 to 79. All were well educated, and I believe that they were men of standing; indeed, a newspaper described them as "leading personalities."²³ Despite the initial enthusiasm, however, it was not clear to me whether the flow of suitable applicants would be maintained: when I visited Gaṅgārāma in early January, 1983, there were only two novices on the current course.

The ceremony on the morning of 5 July was attended by monks from all three Nikāyas, a catholicism normal on secular public occasions but most unusual for a *vinaya-kamma*, a formal act of the Saṅgha.²⁴ But a public occasion it certainly was. The Prime Minister and his wife, Mrs. Premadasa, were among the five eminent laymen who presented the five ordinands with their monastic requisites. The Prime Minister made a speech in which he said that Gaṅgārāma was making history by initiating this programme. "This group who have taken temporary ordination have made a great sacrifice. This programme is an example to the whole country. We must make such a programme effective to steer the people ever more towards Buddhism and to lead successful lives in accordance with the principles of Buddhist conduct. If there is any aid the government can give, it is prepared to give it." The Ven. Nāṇissara also spoke, and expressed the hope that this new institution would make for closer relations between the Saṅgha and the laity.²⁵

On their first afternoon, the Ven. Nāṇissara took the new trainees to the leprosy hospital at Hendala to heighten their awareness, he said, of *sasara duka*, the sadness of life. This might be described as an innovation on a classical theme. Theravādin tradition has two kinds of meditation specifically designed to increase one's distaste for the world and its seeming pleasures. One, still widely practised, is to list the 32 constituents of the body and to analyse oneself in these terms and so realize that one's body is but the sum of these disgusting parts. The other is to watch the putrefaction and disintegration of a corpse; this must have been easier to do in the days when corpses were left exposed in cemeteries; it is little used nowadays, but a few monks (probably only forest-dwellers)²⁶ do visit morgues for the purpose. But I am not aware of a precedent

for observing the physical disintegration of the living as a spiritual exercise.

After this excursion, the novices settled into special quarters (a house called Dhammāloka on Green Path) which belong to Gaṅgārāma and are nearby but quite separate from the monastery. Thus, they did not in fact share the lives of the permanent residents of the monastery. On the wall of their quarters was a neatly printed timetable for twelve days, 6–17 July inclusive; the same programme would in due course be followed by subsequent groups.

In accordance with the traditional formula which sums up the path to enlightenment, the first four days are labelled *sīla* (morality), the next four *samādhi* (concentration) and the last four *paññā* (wisdom). Each day is divided into no less than fifteen sections, with some features common to every day. More than four hours a day are left free for meals and other breaks. The day begins at 6 a.m. with a *Buddha pūjā* and ends at 10:45 p.m., when they “go to sleep with kind thoughts.” Except for this last, every section of the timetable is under the supervision of a specific monk and it is so organized that nine monks participate each day, though never quite the same nine—in all, 32 monks are on the programme. (Incidentally, the Ven. Nāṇissara himself is not one of them.) The majority of the sessions are lectures by monks; every fourth day, however, this pattern is broken with long periods of what is called “doctrinal discussion” (*dharma sākaicchāva*), which probably gives more scope for questions. There is much emphasis on famous scriptures: Jātaka stories (an hour a day), the *Dhammapada*, the *Metta Sutta*, the *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and the *Thera-* and *Therī-gāthā*. Other lectures are on such doctrinal fundamentals as the four noble truths and the three hallmarks (*tri-lakṣaṇa*) of phenomenal existence; and there are four lectures on relations between laity and clergy.

The approach to meditation seems modest. On the first three mornings, there are lectures on *pratyavēkṣā*, and then each day there is time set aside to practise it. The Ven Nāṇissara translated the term “introspection,” but this is a bit misleading; it refers to a specific practice inculcated into all novices, that they should never use their four “requisites” (robes, bowl, lodging and medicine) without awareness that they have them only

for strict necessities—in the case of robes, for instance, that they are worn to avoid extremes of temperature, to ward off insects and to preserve modesty. There are formulae listing these necessary uses, and once a day (normally in the evening) one is to recollect the events of the day and check that one has not exceeded them, for example by trying to look well in one's robes. This form of basic training in awareness (Pali: *sati*) is thus traditionally monastic; in fact, the term *pratyavēkṣā* is not used in the kind of meditation known to and practised by laymen. On the three days of lectures on samādhi and the three days of lectures on *paññā*, there are daily periods called *bhūvanā puhuṇuwa*, "meditation practice"; they form a series of six and a series of three periods. Into the series of six, the Ven Nāṇissara has written on my copy the topics of each day: the first two days are "understanding meditation," the last four are *rāga*, *dosa*, *moha* and *māna* (passion, hatred, delusion and conceit) respectively. This suggests to me that the sessions are primarily lectures.²⁷ On the three days of samādhi lectures, the day ends with a further period of "meditation practice"; these are on *asubha*, the meditation topic which in Sri Lanka traditionally refers to listing the thirty-two constituents of the body. The programme makes no specific mention of the awareness of breathing, which is a favourite meditation exercise at modern meditation centres. Altogether, the content of the course appears to be quite traditional; there is no sign of any attempt at virtuoso religion, at finding a short cut to nirvāṇa.²⁸ On the other hand, the whole style of the programme, and especially the multiplicity of instructors, is reminiscent of a modern institutional course rather than traditional religious discipleship. Monks appear here as specialist teachers rather than as general counsellors and role models.

At the end of their fortnight, the group recorded their sentiments in a kind of visitors' book established for the purpose. I noticed that all this first batch had written in English. All were full of praise and declared themselves enriched by the experience. One of them, acting as spokesman for the group, also said to *Desatiya*: "Even our bodies have begun to feel aware of the advantages of moral restraint. We get the chance to hear new things, to clear up things we have heard about and to resolve our doubts. Some of us have taken fourteen days holi-

day to get this ordination, but to popularize this system the government should consider giving leave for the purpose of ordination. In countries like Thailand people taking temporary ordination are granted paid leave.”

Whether their experience has consequences for the ordinands themselves is a private matter which is not my concern. The main public consequence so far has been the controversy in the press over the pros and cons of the new institution. On the whole, it does not seem to me important to establish just who has expressed himself for or against it, as this is doubtless determined largely by group loyalties and other personal ties; it is the arguments which I find interesting.

To begin with the proponents. The Ven. Nāṇissara himself has several times publicly given his reasons for starting the scheme. He finds Buddhism around him in decline and a growing distance between Saṅgha and laity. Through this institution, he told *Desatiya*, “Monks can improve their knowledge of Buddhism by explaining it to laymen who have taken temporary ordination. And in this way the laymen’s families too can participate in Buddhist work. We have learnt from laymen who are considering this programme that many would like to become monks for life; but for various reasons not everyone can be given lifelong ordination.” He also said: “Some of those who take temporary ordination may conceive the wish to be ordained for life. Thus the number of those ordained for life may even increase.”

A different type of argument deployed in favour of the new institution is precisely the argument that it is *not* new, the argument from precedent—the alleged precedent of Sri Lanka itself as well as of other Theravādin countries. A monk described as a Buddhist missionary (*dhammadūta*) living in London couched his statement to *Desatiya* in these terms. “Sri Lanka is the only Theravāda country to lack temporary ordination. . . . In Siam only people who have taken temporary ordination can be employed in government service. . . . Thai men attach value to spending three months as monks, and schoolchildren there live as monks (*mahaṇa dam purannē*) in their holidays. . . . But can we say that the method of temporary ordination is entirely new to us? King Dhātusena (461–79 A.D.) became a monk (*mahaṇa*) as a child, in General Diksaṇḍa’s monastic school (*piri-*

veṇa). . . . It was the experience he gained while in the Order which enabled him to rule so effectively.”

The article in *Rivirāsa* gives great prominence to this line of argument. “The system of temporary ordination is new neither to Sri Lanka nor to Buddhism. In the great periods when ancient heroes ruled this land as a single kingdom, temporary ordination existed along with the unity of Buddhists and close relations between the laity and the Saṅgha. With the passing of time, in the periods when both government and society declined because of the disunity brought about by foreign invasions, this type of effort disappeared.” It goes on to describe the introduction of temporary ordination as a “rebirth” (*punarjanmaya*). It also quotes “Poḍi Hāmuduruvo” as saying that “if Thailand and Malaysia can use the system of temporary ordination, for Sri Lanka alone to remain aloof is a loss, a deficiency, a failure to care.”

The argument that temporary ordination used to exist in the days of Sri Lanka’s ancient glory so that this is merely a revival does not seem to have originated with the Ven. Nāṇisara. When I asked him about it he accepted it but showed little interest in it. It is, in fact, based on a misunderstanding: King Dhātusena had been ordained as a boy,²⁹ but there is no evidence that that was a temporary ordination and it is extremely unlikely—certainly the alleged source, the *Mahāvamsa*, does not say so.³⁰ The argument is, however, all the more interesting for being false. The argument that temporary ordination exists in the other Theravādin countries, on the other hand, is, as we have seen, broadly correct, though it has been stated in such a way as to ignore the difference between lower and higher ordination and with various exaggerations: even in Thailand, it is not normal for schoolchildren to spend their holidays as novices.

The newspaper *Dinamiṇa* devoted a full page of its issue of 26 July 1982 to a debate on temporary ordination, with five articles (one by a layman) expressing different points of view. Both there and in the *Desatiya* article monks express the need for caution, making such neutral points as that it could go wrong if taken up by the wrong kind of people or from the wrong motives. Others point out that one can leave the Order anyway, and therefore question the need for the new practice.

We turn now to more definite criticisms. In the opinion of

a forest-dwelling monk quoted by *Desatiya*, "it is improper for someone who has asked, 'Please grant me ordination into this yellow robe so that I may destroy all sorrow and experience nirvāṇa' to put the robes on for just a few days. How well does it accord with Buddhist conceptions for someone to undertake the rules for a novice³¹ for just fourteen days? The monastic tradition of Sri Lanka is respected throughout the Buddhist world for its custom of lifelong ordination. Some think that that respect may be forfeited if temporary ordination takes root here. The new custom is something poor monasteries cannot effectively undertake, so it may be restricted to the rich ones" Another monk quoted in the same article expressed the fear that "people who have taken temporary ordination in monasteries may reveal monks' weaknesses to the world."

One of the articles in *Dinamiṇa* is far more negative than is suggested by its title, "Problems may arise in the future." After observing that there is no reference to temporary ordination in the Pāli canon, and that the mere fact that it is done elsewhere is no argument for introducing it to Sri Lanka, the Ven. Pinvatte Devānanda points out that anyone is free to wear the traditional attire of a pious layman (*upāsaka*); he suggests that one can even shave one's head if one pleases. Thus far, his argument is basically that the innovation is unnecessary. But he goes on to argue that those who become good monks conceive a spontaneous desire for monkhood already as children, because of the disposition they have acquired in previous lives (*sasara purudda*). It is therefore unwise to impose monkhood on laymen. Finally, he expresses fears that politicians may exploit the situation, and ends in most traditional fashion by calling for a purification of the Saṅgha.

The most violent attack to have come to my hand is an article by a monk in the newspaper *Divayina*³² headed "Temporary Ordination should be Banned." The author makes five points:

(1) A layman takes the five precepts to regulate his life; if he feels that to be inadequate he can take eight or even ten. Someone who cannot sort himself out even then certainly cannot do so as a monk.

(2) Temporary monks would need to be labelled so as not to mislead the public.

(3) The institution could be a cloak for political activity.

(4) This could become a free holiday for government servants.

(5) (A view attributed to another monk): It could even lead to all monks becoming temporary.

It is not my purpose to pass judgement on all these comments, let alone to come down for or against temporary ordination (a matter on which I am in fact perfectly neutral). But a few remarks of elucidation and analysis may be helpful. Most of the points adduced against temporary ordination, though they might have some validity if the practice were suddenly to spread throughout Sinhalese society, are hardly relevant to what is in fact happening—or likely to happen in the foreseeable future. At Gaṅgārāma there are rigid safeguards. Every applicant has to produce two character certificates. Far more important, the temporary ordinands are in fact virtually segregated, both from the rest of the monastery and from lay society. No novice in his first fortnight would in any case ever be sent out to preach or otherwise to represent the Saṅgha, so there is no question of a temporary ordinand thus misleading the public. On the other hand, the argument that poor monasteries could not afford to introduce temporary ordination is fitted precisely to the present circumstances: Gaṅgārāma can afford to meet all expenses because it has such wealthy support. Yet one could argue that the necessary expenses are quite modest, no greater than people often spend anyway on religious purposes (for example, three months after the death of a relative), so that if the custom were to catch on one would expect the Thai model to prevail and the ordinand's expenses to be met by his family.

The fear expressed in *Divayina* that the practice could develop into an extra paid holiday for government servants may seem far-fetched, until we recall that the spokesman for the first batch of ordinands did make just this request, and that in his speech at the initial ceremony the Prime Minister promised government help. Perhaps the article in *Divayina* may since have made him pause.

The criticism by the same writer that one who cannot set his life in order as a layman cannot hope to do so as a monk is on a different footing from the others: it attacks individual aspirants rather than the institution as such. One doubts wheth-

er it would cut much ice with those concerned. The same might be said of the argument from the extremely traditional monk in *Dinamiṇa* that monks are born not made; a modern urban layman would probably argue effectively against such an ascriptive view of religious roles.

The main argument of the Ven. Nāṇissara himself addresses what he sees as the broader problem of the state of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and in particular clerical-lay relations. While I agree in seeing this as the nub of the problem, I do not think that this stated argument is the only element in his personal motivation: as will be further illustrated below, he is a man of restless energy who seems to be ever seeking new outlets for his organizing ability. His argument that this opportunity to explain Buddhism will do monks good is at first blush surprising, for one would have thought that they had plenty of opportunity to do that in other contexts. But a visit to Gaṅgārāma gives one a feeling for what he means: he has been so successful at building up his monastery that he has spare capacity in both buildings and manpower which he is longing to put to use. On his card he describes himself as “Director, Sri Gnaneswara University Pirivena, Sri Jinaratana Bhikkhu Training College, Vocational Training Centre and Pre School”; and these institutions (which are all attached to the monastery) have magnificent premises which, like those of most educational institutions, are much of the time unoccupied, and I strongly suspect also staff who are likewise unoccupied for much of the time but who, being monks, are always there. All this in the middle of the modern capital, with the feel of things happening all around. Small wonder if an efficient organizer in such a position has the urge to show that he too can be go-ahead and productive.

For a monk to busy himself in the world may not conform to the original ideal of renunciation; but for a large part of the Saṅgha that ideal was already compromised in ancient Sri Lanka when they decided that the preservation of Buddhism (“book-duty”) should take precedence over the individual quest for salvation (“insight-duty”). These two roles became institutionalized in “village-dwelling” and “forest-dwelling” fraternities. Probably the tension between the two ideals is necessary for the good of Buddhism; it is symptomatic that the monk

quoted in *Desatiya* as raising the purist objection that one requests ordination in order to strive for an end to sorrow, i.e., nirvāṇa, was a forest-dweller. The gulf between the two ideals has widened in the last hundred years, and especially for those “village-dwellers” whose village has become a city—for urbanization has been accompanied by the rise of the “Protestant Buddhism” mentioned above, a current of Buddhism which arose as both a protest against and a reflex of Protestant Christianity.

One of the main criticisms which nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries levelled against the Saṅgha was precisely that they were too little active in the world and did not carry their mission among the laity. They criticized the monks for not behaving as priests—or rather, as Protestant pastors. At the same time, as part of the same climate of opinion, laymen began to feel that they were not to leave religion all to the monks: they too had responsibilities, both for the welfare of Buddhism as a whole and for their own salvation. The modern Buddhist layman, especially if he is urban and educated, has been protestantized: he feels that it is up to him to improve himself spiritually.

Other features of Protestant Buddhism in Sri Lanka have been and are being documented elsewhere. Here, we are concerned only with what the Ven. Nāṇissara sees as the growing gulf between the Saṅgha and the laity. I see this gulf as having two aspects. The social distance between the two parties in Sri Lanka was enormous. (Of this the claim by the Ven. Devānanda that there are, as it were, “natural” monks and “natural” laymen, affords an illustration.) On the other hand, it is true that in a village community the monk or monks at a local temple are bound to be extremely well known to the villagers, their parishioners. In central Colombo, by contrast, even monks and their supporters must be affected by the anonymity typical of social relations in a modern city. A successful temple like Gaṅgārāqma probably has far more supporters than any village monastery; but, by the same token, they are too many to know personally.

The other aspect of the gulf is the confused state of clergy-lay relations brought about by Protestant Buddhism. In an abstract sense, the gulf is being bridged by the creation of intersti-

tial roles like *anagārika*—and temporary ordinand. The Brahmacārī Āryatilaka, who gets ordained for his holidays, is an extreme example but he exemplifies a trend.

What must concretely affect and disturb thoughtful members of the Saṅgha is that the pious laity are increasingly leading their religious lives without any recourse to monks or monasteries. My article “From Monastery to Meditation Centre” discusses this development. In Theravādin tradition, laymen were not expected to meditate in any but the minimal sense of reciting verses and formulae: it was an advanced activity appropriate only to those who had renounced the world. Moreover, it was difficult and even dangerous, so that it could only be properly undertaken under the guidance of an experienced teacher. The social practice of meditation was thus congruent with the hierarchic interpretation of the path to enlightenment as consisting of morality, concentration and wisdom, each stage being a pre-requisite for the next, and reinforced the general view that the monk alone had authority in religious matters. Moreover, monastic control over the essential salvific practice, meditation, is important for the maintenance of doctrinal orthodoxy and even for aspects of orthopraxy. Now, however, it has become common in urban Sri Lanka for people to go on meditation courses for anything from a day up to a few weeks; some of these courses are residential, and some of them do not involve any monks or monasteries at all.

As Sri Lanka rapidly becomes more urban, the Saṅgha certainly has a problem in maintaining its religious leadership. I see this as connected, as both cause and effect, with its relative failure to recruit city-dwellers. Nobody, so far as I know, has yet studied this, though it would be easy to do, as the first part of the name of a Sinhalese monk is his birthplace. One can tell at a glance that the proportion of monks born in large towns is far below the proportion of the Sinhalese population who live in those towns. The Sinhalese Saṅgha seems always to have recruited predominantly from the upper strata of society, whether in terms of caste or class, so it would not be surprising to find that the Saṅgha now recruits very few slum-dwellers. A generation ago, a few members of the urban-educated, professional classes joined the Saṅgha; Vajirārāma in Baṁbalapitiya, Colombo 4, was famous for having such monks, and accordingly

attracted educated, professional Buddhist laity to its functions. It seemed, therefore, that the Saṅgha was successfully adapting to social change. However, it is my impression that the trickle of recruits from the professional classes has not increased but, on the contrary, more or less dried up; such people are now pursuing their Buddhist activities, both organizing and meditating, as laymen. Thirty years ago, the Saṅgha might well have expected the highly educated elderly gentlemen who recently took temporary ordination to become monks, that being the traditional and still the obvious way in which to pursue Buddhist religious goals. Now, half a loaf seems better than no bread.

Thus, the most important element in my interpretation of the introduction of temporary ordination into Sri Lanka is that it is a clerical counter-attack against modern lay Protestant Buddhism, and in particular against the meditation centre. This counter-attack is not fully conscious, and I am sure that the Ven. Nāṇissara and his colleagues would never issue a blanket condemnation of meditation centres. But the message of their new institution, as I read it, is addressed to the modern urban laity and reads, "By all means devote yourselves to the study of Buddhism and even—in moderation—try some meditation; but do so under the direction and control of us monks."

The other arguments both for and against the innovation are interesting to me as instances of how the contemporary Sinhalese Saṅgha is thinking, but are—if I am right—mostly beside the point. This is certainly not a revival of a fine old Sinhalese custom, evoked by *Rivirāsa* in the style of Dharmapāla; but neither is it a daring modernism which marks a further irreversible step in that decline of the Teaching which traditional Buddhists believe in.⁴³ I see it, rather, as a conservative move. In the interests of conservatism it has had to compromise with modernity in such features as the veneer of bureaucratically efficient procedures and also the multiplication of interstitial roles. But the groups of devout men firmly penned into their quarters and lectured daily on the Jātakas pose no threat to traditional Buddhist order; they rather reaffirm it.

Thus, I see the Thai precedent as a red herring. It gave the Ven. Nāṇissara the idea and the pretext for his innovation. But

quite apart from the actual differences in practice, on which I need not expatiate, the custom of temporary ordination has a completely different function in Thai (and other Theravādin) society from that which I see it as having in Sri Lanka. Even if the Gaṅgārāma experiment is successful, even if it spreads to some other monasteries—and we have yet to see either development—we can be sure that temporary ordination will never be a *rite de passage* in village Sri Lanka, if only because village Sri Lanka is disappearing so fast that it will no longer exist by the time that such a change could happen.

Colourful and imaginative as the present scheme may be, it is not likely to make a great impact as a counter-attack on modernism, as the latter is rooted in widespread trends in society. A colleague of the Ven. Nāṇissara, explaining that the new custom could lead men to lead a better lay life, said, “If you take an example, the precept of celibacy is observed better or can be observed better once one goes back to lay life after going through the experience of ordained life. Abstinence is viewed as more practicable. . . .” In traditional Buddhist society a married man was not supposed to abstain from having sexual relations with his wife, merely to be chaste within marriage—as in the Hindu tradition. I have plenty of data to confirm that educated Sinhalese laymen are coming to regard complete sexual abstinence as an ideal appropriate to their own lay lives. Insofar as they succeed in attaining it, they cease to consider it a special accomplishment and cause for admiration of the Saṅgha—a “sacrifice,” as the Prime Minister said in his speech.

Another and rather different hallmark of modernism is to consider religious progress as (*inter alia*) useful for secular ends. It is quite contrary to Sinhalese Buddhist tradition to regard meditation, for example, as an instrument for worldly success. Maybe this is what is meant by those monks who fear that temporary ordination will be abused. But I catch resonances of this very attitude in the statements of its lay supporters. “In a society distorted by the spread of western commercialism,” writes the *Rivirāsa* reporter, “temporary ordination will help people to understand and approach their aim in life.” And the Prime Minister in his address said, “We must make such a programme effective to steer the people ever more towards Buddhism and to make them lead successful lives in accordance

with the principles of Buddhist conduct.” Of course, both statements are perfectly unexceptionable; but I find it significant that there is at least an ambiguity about whether the “aim in life” and the “successful lives” are to be measured in purely religious terms.

To conclude, let me mention (as did the Prime Minister in that address) another innovation by the Ven. Nāṇissara, because it affords interesting parallels. Under his leadership, Gaṅgārāma invented in 1979 a brand new annual religious festival,³⁴ the Navam Perahāra (“Navam Procession”). The Āsaḷa Perahāra is a world-renowned annual pageant³⁵ which takes place in Kandy; members of the Kandyan nobility, with musicians, dancers and elephants, escort the Buddha’s tooth in procession around the city. Āsaḷa and Navam are months in the Sinhalese lunar calendar; the Āsaḷa Perahāra usually falls in August; Navam is six months away, in February—a blank spot in the liturgical calendar. While the Kandy *perahāra* grew up to convey an elaborate symbolic message, the Navam Perahāra has no particular point,³⁶ let alone symbolism: the object carried on the largest elephant as the climax of the procession is a Buddha image recently brought from Thailand for the purpose. It has been founded frankly very much as a tourist attraction in the dead season. Seats for viewing the *perahāra* are put up by the monastery and sold for its benefit. The large and excellently produced souvenir programme in both Sinhala and English carries many advertisements and a tear-out form for anyone who would like to become a benefactor of the temple. The 81 people who have provided elephants are also listed.

The Ven. Nāṇissara is keen to stress that his *perahāra* is even bigger than the Kandy one. However, what he stressed to me most of all was its efficiency. Like all such traditional events, the timing of the Kandy procession is uncertain; even though it sets out at an auspicious moment it is invariably later than advertised. His *perahāra*, the Ven. Nāṇissara stressed to us, was *punctual to the minute*; and that was because he himself had twice paced out the whole route.

The Navam Perahāra is modern, efficient, even commercial; just what one would expect, perhaps, of the modern capital, Colombo, asserting its superiority to the old capital, Kandy. But this new procession has one quite remarkable feature:

monks not only organize it and watch it, both slightly dubious features for a traditional purist; they even walk in it! They are themselves part of the spectacle, featured on the programme as a tourist attraction.

I am not suggesting that temporary ordination affords any parallel to this lapse from dignity. But what the Navam Perahāra illustrates is that while the Saṅgha can perhaps successfully innovate to rival or even surpass lay institutions, the element of imitation in such enterprises may put the Saṅgha's traditionally distinctive character at risk.

The parallel dilemma for the Christian clergy in the West today is well known. Both because they are themselves members of society subject, even unconsciously, to its influences, and because they fear that an image of the Church as old-fashioned may lose them support, many clergymen try to move with the times. Yet the "up-to-date" is inevitably transient, and the fashionable clergyman risks the displeasure of those who look to religious professionals to represent "timeless" values. It will be interesting to see whether and in what form this dilemma will affect the Saṅgha.

NOTES

1. *Vinaya Piṭaka*, (ed. Oldenberg), vol. 1, p. 58 = *Mahāvagga* 1, 30, 4.
2. P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra* (Poona, 1941), II, 958.
3. *Mahāvagga* 1, 51.
4. *Mahāvagga* 1, 12.
5. *Mahāvagga* 1, 28, 3.
6. *The Book of the Discipline*, vol. IV, p. 72: "I abolish that ordination . . ."
7. He says: "*Sabbadukkhanissaraṇanibbānasacchikaraṇatthaṃ imam kāsāvaṃ davā pabbājetha maṃ bhante anukampam upādāya.*" This formula is not in the Canon, and Dr. the Ven. Walpola Rahula thinks it could be as late as the Poḷonnaruva period (9th to 12th centuries).
8. Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society* (New York, etc., 1970), p. 235. Two would however appear to be exceptionally young, not quite "the done thing"; Houtman (see next note) reports the minimum age as five.
9. "Lay-Meditation and Monastic Initiation in Burma: a Shift in Burmese Discourse about Buddhism," seminar paper given in Oxford, May 1983; also personal communication.
10. Personal communication.
11. Personal communication.

12. Another matter irrelevant to the purpose of this paper calls for passing comment. If I understand correctly, the Hindu sacred thread appears twice in this ceremony, though under different Burmese names. The boys go through the whole first part of the ceremony, up to the actual ordination, clad in a kind of "royal attire," which includes the *sa-lwe*, defined in Judson's *Burmese-English Dictionary* (Rangoon 1966) as "a thread of distinction, worn over the left shoulder and under the right arm, as the Brahmanical thread (*chi sa-lwe*)." A proper Indian noble (*kṣatriya*) would himself have received the *upanayana* and been invested with the sacred thread, so it would be part of his costume. Hence the duplication.

13. Jane Bunnag, *Buddhist Monk, Buddhist Layman* (Cambridge 1973), p. 89. By "Lenten season" she means *vassa*.

14. Bunnag, p. 37. *Wat* means "monastery."

15. See Bunnag, Chapter 6, "The loosely structured social system: red herring or *rara avis*?"

16. Bunnag, p. 37.

17. I owe this information to my friend Mr. Godwin Samararatne. For Kaṇḍubodā, see my article "From Monastery to Meditation Centre" in *Buddhist Studies Ancient and Modern*, ed. Philip Denwood and Alexander Piatigorsky (London 1983), pp. 28–9 and references there cited. For Brahmācāri Aryatilaka see pp. 29–30 of that article.

18. My attention was drawn to the event by my old friend and patron Col. Ananda de Alwis; without his initiative, this article would not exist. I am no less grateful to Mrs. Chitra Wijesekera, who collected for me many articles about temporary ordination which appeared in the Sinhalese press soon after its first occurrence, helped me to translate them, and herself interviewed one of the monks at Gaṅgārāma.

19. In English, he spells his name Gnanissara. I am transliterating from the Sinhala form.

20. According to *Rivirāsa*, 11.7.1982, p. 12, he began it in about 1978; but this seems to conflict with the statement in the same article that the Ven. Nāṅissara learnt about temporary ordination when visiting him in about 1976.

21. Vincent Periyapperuma, "Maṇḍakaṭṭa hō abinikmanaka yedimē aramunin," *Desatiya*, 30 July 1982, pp. 13–14. *Desatiya* is a periodical issued by the Sri Lankan Department of State.

22. The *Rivirāsa* article notes "a special yellow garment."

23. *Daily News*, Tuesday, July 6, 1982.

24. One could however argue that this occasion, a lower ordination, was not really a *vinaya-kamma* either.

25. *Davasa*, 7 July 1982, p. 3.

26. These are professional meditators; see p. below.

27. The reader may be irritated at my speculating about such details and wonder why I did not ask. Experience tells me that to ask what goes on in religious instruction is usually pointless; one can only find out by being there.

28. This is an allusion to recent developments; see my article "From Monastery to Meditation Centre" cited in note 14 above; also p. below.

29. *Cūlavamsa* 38, 17.

30. Similarly, King Silākāla (524–37) had when young been a monk in India at Bodh Gaya. But again there is no evidence, or likelihood, that his ordination was intended to be temporary.

31. This is the only reference in my material to the precise status of the ordinands as novices (*sāmaṇera*).

32. Issue of 26.8.1972, p. 6, "Tāvakālika pāvidda tahanam kaḷa yutuyi," by Doḍampē Siddhārtha Himi (the Ven. D. Siddhārtha).

33. See my *Precept and Practice* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 284–293. The Hindu belief that we are living in the *kali-yuga* is similar and, no doubt, historically connected.

34. It is amusing and instructive to note that a Japanese periodical has already called it a "typical" Buddhist festival of Sri Lanka. *Kawaguchi*, no. 66, 1982, cover-caption to a photograph of the Ven. Nāṇissara at a microphone with the President of Sri Lanka in reverent posture immediately behind him.

35. See H. L. Seneviratne, *Rituals of the Kandyan State* (Cambridge, 1978).

36. The printed programme carries this note: "On this Navam full-moon day, Sariputtha and Moggallana became the Chief Disciples of Lord Buddha. The first Buddhist Council was also held on this day. The Navam Procession is being held to commemorate this event." Which of the two events?



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