

“TEXTS MEMORIZED, TEXTS PERFORMED:  
A RECONSIDERATION OF THE ROLE OF *PARITTA* IN  
SRI LANKAN MONASTIC EDUCATION”<sup>1</sup>

JEFFREY SAMUELS

During the past twenty years there has been a growing interest in monastic education within the larger field of Buddhist studies. Within the last ten years in particular, a number of monographs and articles examining the training and education of monks in Korea (Buswell [1992]), Tibet/India (Dreyfus [2003]), Thailand/Laos (Collins [1990], McDaniel [2002, 2003]), and Sri Lanka (Blackburn [1999a, 1999b, 2001] Samuels [2002]), have been published. Many of those works have paid particular attention to the texts used in monastic training, as well as to how the information contained in those very texts is imparted to and embodied by monks and novices.

While the growing attention to Buddhist education and training texts certainly provides us with a more considerable understanding of monastic culture, focusing exclusively on the contents of texts and handbooks used in the training of monks and novices neglects other forms of monastic learning. Indeed, several scholars (Keyes [1983], Blackburn [2001], Dreyfus [2003], Samuels [2004]) have recently begun to explore more diffuse ways in which monastic ideals become transmitted to newcomers to the *saṅgha* as well as to examine how learning in monasteries generates monastic identities.

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Building on these more recent studies, this article considers one such diffuse method of monastic training: ritual performance. Examining the practices and ideas surrounding the performance of *paritta* or protection texts in contemporary Sri Lanka, this article looks at the role that learning *paritta* (or *pirit* in Sinhala) plays in shaping monastic agents. In paying particular attention to how learning to perform *paritta* inside and outside of the monastery instills in novices or *sāmaṇera* ideal images of monastic behavior and deportment, this article not only argues for a more nuanced conception of the place that texts have in monastic training, but also reflects upon how learning Buddhist rituals provides the opportunity for monastics to think about the content of the very texts employed in their education.

Before examining the pedagogical role that *paritta* plays in contemporary monastic culture, I would like to offer two caveats. First, although I contend in this article that learning *paritta* performance is directly related to the training of Buddhist novices in contemporary Sri Lanka, I by no means wish to suggest that *paritta* is the only form of monastic training and education. Despite the fact that this article is focused on *paritta*, learning to perform protection rituals must be understood as comprising only one dimension of a larger pedagogical “tool kit” through which images of ideal monastic behavior, deportment, and attitudes become transmitted to and internalized by *sāmaṇera*<sup>2</sup>.

The second qualification pertains to the source material for this article. Much of the ideas put forth here are derived from fieldwork conducted at one novice training temple (that currently houses over fifty novices) and three branch temples. Whilst one must remain watchful so as not to generalize too widely what novices and monks from one institution say about their own training, the material collected from interviews with them is, by no means, ungrounded. Indeed, conversations with monks and novices from a number of other Sri Lankan temples, monastic colleges (*pirivena*), and training institutions over the past six years makes the relationship drawn between performing *paritta* rituals and generating monastic identities informed, though by no means conclusive.

<sup>2</sup> This idea of culture as a “tool kit” is discussed in Ann Swidler’s (1986) article that examines the ways in which culture influences action.

Before turning directly to an examination of the material derived from numerous interviews with novices, monks, and head monks, it may be helpful to provide a brief background to Buddhist *paritta* in Theravāda Buddhism and in contemporary Sri Lanka practice.

### ***I. Paritta Rituals: Its Meaning, Content, and Practice***

The Pāli word *paritta* is derived from the Sanskrit word *paritrāṇa* which, according to Monier-Williams (1990:595), is derived from *pari* + *√trai* and means to rescue, preserve, deliver, or protect<sup>3</sup>. Moving beyond a simple definition of the term, Lily de Silva (1981:3) has offered three common usages or meanings of “*paritta*” in Sri Lankan culture: “(a) a *sutta* or Buddhist sermon, the recitation of which ensures protection (b), the non-canonical text comprising a collection of such *suttas* and (c), the ritual at which this collection is chanted.”

The idea of “protection” is purported to have been discussed by the Buddha in reference to the prophylactic powers of certain mental qualities such as loving kindness (*metta*) and truth (*sacca*)<sup>4</sup>. An examination of certain post-canonical texts reveals that within several hundred years after the Buddha’s death, ideas surrounding the protective powers of *metta* and *sacca* developed into the notion that the very texts that extol such

<sup>3</sup> According to the *Pāli-English Dictionary* (Rhys Davids and Stede [1989:426]), the Pāli word *paritta* is derived from *pari* + *√trā* and means protection or safeguard.

<sup>4</sup> Within the canonical collection, for instance, we find several discourses in which the Buddha is purported to have mentioned protection. In the *Cullavagga* of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* (II.109f.; see also *Aṅguttara Nikāya* II.72 ), for example, the Buddha is informed about a monk who has died from a snakebite. Responding to the news, the Buddha remarks that were the monk to have cultivated loving-kindness or *metta* toward the four royal families of snakes with his mind, the monk, though bitten by the snake, would not have died (*Sace hi so, bhikkhave, bhikkhu imāni cattāri ahirājakulāni mettena cittena phareyya, na hi so, bhikkhave, bhikkhu ahinā daṭṭho kālaṅkareyya*). The Buddha (II.110) then goes on to suggest that all other monastics cultivate *metta* toward the four families of snakes for the purpose of guarding oneself (*attaguttiyā*), safeguard oneself (*attarakkhāya*), and protecting oneself (*attaparittam*).

In addition to loving-kindness, the quality of truthfulness is also said to have protective powers. In the *Aṅgulimālasutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (II.103), for example, Aṅgulimāla protects a woman and her unborn infant from a difficult labor by merely uttering the truthful statement that since he (Aṅgulimāla) became and arahant, he never intentionally deprived a living being of life.

virtues are prophylactic devices in their own right. By the time of the composition of the *Questions of King Milinda* or the *Milindapañha*, (p. 150ff. [iv.2.15]) for example, we find a list of six texts—the *Ratana-sutta*, *Khandhaparittā*, *Moraparittā*, *Dhajaggaparittā*, *Āṭānāṭiyaparittā*, and *Aṅgulimalaparittā*—that are believed to have protective powers. In the same text (vs. 17), we also read that “when Pirit has been said over a man, a snake, ready to bite, will not bite him, but close his jaws—the club which robbers hold aloft to strike him with will never strike; the enraged elephant rushing at him will suddenly stop, the malignant poison a person has eaten will become harmless, and turn to food,” and so on.

It is, most likely, a continued concern for protection, health, and well-being that is behind the development, growth, and popularity of protection rituals in Sri Lanka. By the time that several commentaries to the canonical collection were composed in Sri Lanka (such as the commentary to the *Khuddakapāṭha* [*Paramatthajotikā*], *Dhammapada* [*Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*], and *Dīgha Nikāya* [*Sumaṅgalavilāsini*]), we find yet a further elaboration on the concept of protection: prophylactic powers associated with the performance of more elaborate rituals during which *paritta* texts are recited. In one such story—the account of “Āyuvaddhamakumāra” or the “Boy Whose Life Was Increased” from the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*—we read how the premature death of a Brahmin boy is averted by the performance of a complex *paritta* ritual lasting seven days<sup>5</sup>. Prior to the actual ceremony, the boy’s father is asked to construct a pavilion or *maṇḍapa* and to place a small seat, where his son will be seated, in the middle. He is then instructed to arrange eight or sixteen chairs around the *maṇḍapa*, have eight or sixteen monks occupy the seats, and have the monastics chant *paritta* for seven days and seven nights. At the conclusion of the story we read that as a result of the *paritta* performance, the untimely death of the boy is averted because the demon Avaruddhaka was no longer able to seize the boy<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Burlingame (1999, Part II, p. 235ff.)

<sup>6</sup> In the commentary to the *Dīgha Nikāya*—the *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* (III.969)—there is yet a further development in terms of *paritta* rituals. There, for example, we find an elaboration in terms of which texts should be recited in which order, which monastics are suitable for reciting *paritta* (e.g., vegetarians and those who do not live in a cemetery), which locations are suitable for the rituals, and who should prepare the ritual space.

The popularity of protection rituals is not only confined to the commentarial and medieval period<sup>7</sup>. In contemporary Sri Lanka, protection rituals are an extremely common sight<sup>8</sup>. It is not unusual to hear *paritta* broadcasted over the loudspeakers of temples in the evening as well as see monks and novices performing protection rituals throughout the island. Most often, *paritta* is sponsored for those about to set off on a journey; about to move into a new house; about to begin a new business or job; about to open a new building, institution, or public place; about to embark on an important undertaking (such as taking an exam or undergoing a transformative rituals such as becoming a member of the Buddhist *saṅgha*), about to give birth, and so on. Several radio and television broadcasts in Sri Lanka, moreover, begin and end their daily programs with *paritta* chanting for ten or fifteen minutes.

The length of protection rituals vary from approximately fifteen minutes to as long as seven days and even sometimes, as Perera (2000:35, 48f.) points out, to three months or one year<sup>9</sup>. Despite the varying lengths, most protection rituals share certain elements in common. First, there is

<sup>7</sup> There are numerous inscriptions from the medieval period pointing to the popularity of *paritta*. The inscription of Kassapa V (Wickremasinghe [1904:Vol. I, p. 48, line 38]), for example, states that knowledge of the *pirit pota* or the *Book of Protection* is a condition for acceptance into the order. In the inscription of Mahinda IV (Wickremasinghe, [1904:Vol. I, p. 91, line 10f.]) as well as in the monastic injunction of Rājādhi Rājasimpha (Ratnapala [1971:180]), monastics are enjoined to recite *paritta* daily. There are also references to *paritta* in the *vaṃsa* literature, such as the *Cūlavāṃsa* (Geiger [1973:Chs. 37, 46, 51, 52, 73, and 87]).

<sup>8</sup> Discussing the popularity of *paritta* rituals in contemporary Sri Lanka has led Lily de Silva (1981:3) to remark that “It is not an exaggeration to say that hardly a day passes without this ceremony being performed in some form or other in almost every locality.” Pertold (1923:744f.) has similarly, yet more generally, remarked that “There are regions where Pirit ceremony is supposed to be more important than other more ancient customs, e.g., *patimokha*. In this way the Pirit ceremony became an essential part of the modern Southern Buddhism, and especially a very important and significant power in the religious as well as secular life of the natives of Ceylon, Burma and Siam as far as they profess Buddhism.”

<sup>9</sup> In shorter *paritta* rituals, three texts are most commonly recited: the *Mahāmaṅgala-sutta* which extols thirty eight forms of auspiciousness, the *Ratanasutta* which is a discourse on the three jewels ([the Buddha, the *dhamma*, and the *saṅgha*), and the *Karaṇīyametta-sutta* which commends the practice of loving-kindness or *metta*. In longer, overnight *paritta* rituals, all twenty-nine *suttas* of the *paritta* collection—the *Pirit Pota* or the *Catubhānavārapaḷi*—are recited.

usually an image of the Buddha and/or relic (*dhātu*) at hand. Also present is the doctrine or *dhamma* of the Buddha, represented in the form of a Buddhist text or manuscript. The most common text used in protection rituals is the *Book of Protection* or *Pirit Pota* which is oftentimes wrapped in a white cloth and placed on a table next to pot(s) of water. Finally, the third Buddhist jewel, the *saṅgha*, may also be present<sup>10</sup>, taking the form of the monastic members charged with chanting the prophylactic texts.

Before beginning most protection rituals, monks and lay sponsors work in setting up the necessary accoutrements. This includes placing the text, Buddha statue, and a pot or pots of water in their appropriate places. To facilitate the flow of protective power from the three jewels to the audience and sponsor, a string or *nula* is used. The *nula* usually travels from the Buddha, to the texts (*dhamma*), to the pot of water, through the palms of the chanting monks (*saṅgha*), to the audience members. After the completion of the ritual, the string is broken into small sections and either tied around the participants wrists or around their necks. For certain longer *paritta* rituals, such as overnight or multi-day ceremonies, a special pavilion or *maṇḍapa* may be constructed to house the chanting novices and monks.

#### A. Conceptions of Paritta Texts and Practices

No study of *paritta* in Sri Lanka would be complete without taking into account Lily de Silva's important study on the history of *paritta*, the content of *paritta* texts, and the performance of the ritual<sup>11</sup>. In her monograph, de Silva posits that *paritta* is a "prophylactic ceremony" whose popularity and development grew out of a compromise that Buddhist

<sup>10</sup> I write that they "may also be present" because protection rituals may be recited by householders (*gihī pirit*). Despite the growing popularity of *gihī pirit*, most lay people mentioned that they would rather invite monastics to perform the ritual as they believed that such rituals would be more efficacious (see below). Most often, the choice of whom to invite is based on economic and geographical factors.

<sup>11</sup> In addition to de Silva's work, this article is informed, in varying degrees, by a number of other scholars who have discussed the history and practice of *paritta* in Sri Lanka. Such scholars and works include Pertold (1923), Yalman (1964), Piyadassi (1975), Lynn de Silva (1980), Saddhatissa (1991), Jackson (1994), and Perera (2000).

monastics had to make with the laity who were, as it were, unable to comprehend the profound doctrines of the Buddha and who found the harsh and inflexible doctrine of karma too overwhelming<sup>12</sup>. She writes (1981:23), for instance, that “according to the theory of *karma*, in Buddhism the burden of responsibility for the tragedies a man has to face in life lies squarely on his own shoulders.... [I]n this set up the common man needs some sort of tangible means of coping with such problems to the best of his ability.” *Paritta* rituals, for her, served and continues to serve this purpose of relieving the burden of responsibility for life’s tragedies and obstacles.

According to her reading of the historical development of Buddhism, a real tension exists between the original, other-worldly intention/ideas of early Buddhism (as it is portrayed in the Pāli canon) and the subsequent manifestation and development of Buddhist doctrines and practices in the world<sup>13</sup>. She writes (1981:23), for instance, that: “Though Buddhism found no room for ritual and ceremonialism in its lofty ethical framework, it could not altogether ignore the urgent psychological need of the common man for ritual to grapple with life’s crisis.” Despite the fact that, according to de Silva, the Buddha’s teaching eschewed various forms of “magic” referred to as the lower or animal sciences (Pāli: *tiracchānavijjā*), she points out that the “denunciation alone was not effective to keep the lay public away from resorting to them” (ibid.). It was out of this sit-

<sup>12</sup> While I am not attempting, in this article, to write a genealogy of how *paritta* has been understood by scholars of Buddhism, it may be of interest to point out that in a manner similar to Lily de Silva, Melford Spiro’s ethnographic study of Burmese Buddhism (1982: 143f.; see also 263ff.) treats *paritta* as a magical or apotropaic form of Buddhism that arose in response to the common people’s “irrepressible psychological need.” For him, like for de Silva, *paritta* represents an accommodation that monastics living in the lofty world of the so-called primitive Buddhist church—and I am using Spiro’s terminology here—made for the masses who were, as it were, in need of some form of relief against harsh Buddhist doctrines such as the doctrine of retribution or karma.

<sup>13</sup> Otakar Pertold (1923:771) points to a similar tension when he states: “Taking into consideration the facts, that on one side *paritta* is thought as a protective device against misfortunes afflicting the human beings, and on the other side that according to the teaching of Buddha, all misfortunes are result of the human craving ... for life and continuation of the life in the circle of rebirths, which is determined by one’s actions ... we must acknowledge that the *Paritta* is not harmonizing with the very spirit of Buddha’s teaching.”

uation that a “substitute” had to develop; it was *paritta*, de Silva maintains, that arose as a middle-way answer, thus empowering the “common man” to grapple with life’s crises in a way that did not completely deny the “true” spirit of the “philosophy of early Buddhism.”

## **II. *Paritta* as Loci for Knowledge: A Reconsideration of Apotropaic Buddhism**

*Contra* de Silva’s more limited conception of *paritta*, Piyadassi Thera, in his translation of the *Pirit Pota* or *The Book of Protection*, suggests another way of understanding protection rituals. Through a careful analysis of the texts that figure prominently in the *Pirit Pota*, Piyadassi proposes that the *Book of Protection* may have been used as a training manual for newly ordained novices or *sāmaṇera*. He writes (1975:5):

The Book of Protection which is an anthology of selected discourses of the Buddha compiled by the teachers of old, was originally meant as a handbook for the newly ordained novice. The idea was that those novices who are not capable of studying large portions of the “Discourse Collection” (*sutta pitaka*) should at least be conversant with the Book of Protection.... If one patiently and painstakingly studies these discourses, he could gather a good knowledge of the essential and fundamental teaching of the Buddha.

For Piyadassi Thera, then, the *Pirit Pota* has a much larger place in the lives of Theravāda Buddhist monastics; besides its use as a prophylactic device, *paritta* texts may have also functioned as a monastic handbook. Like the *Sāmaṇera Baṇadahaṃ Pota* used widely in contemporary monastic training<sup>14</sup>, Piyadassi suggests that the *Pirit Pota* functioned as a way of distilling key sections of the Buddha’s teachings which may have been too unwieldy to be tackled straight on<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> There are many extant editions of the *Sāmaṇera Baṇadahaṃ Pota* in contemporary Sri Lanka. The versions of the handbook that I recently encountered during my research in Sri Lanka are those edited by Paṇḍita Ranjit Vanaratna (1990) and Dhammatilaka (1997).

<sup>15</sup> This idea of the *Vinaya* being too unwieldy is also raised in Charles Hallisey’s work where he writes, for instance, that as a result of finding the *Vinaya* too unwieldy, Theravādins “wrote diverse summaries and compendiums... to present the *Vinaya*’s practical message in a more manageable fashion” (1990:207).



Building on Piyadassi Thera's proposal, Anne Blackburn's recent work has addressed, at greater lengths, the specific question concerning how *paritta* texts may have been used "outside of the ritual arena to shape novice monks' understanding of monastic life" (1999b:355; emphasis added). Drawing on evidence from monastic injunctions or *katikāvata*<sup>16</sup>, as well as Pāli (*Sāratthasamuccaya*) and Sinhala (*Sārāthadīpanī*) commentaries on texts that figure prominently in *paritta* rituals (such as the *Dasasikkhāpada*, *Dasadhammasutta*, and the *Karaṇīyamettasutta*), Blackburn directs her attention to exploring how texts that figure in the *paritta* collection may be understood as tools "for the inculcation of monastic discipline." In turning to certain Pāli commentaries—such as the *Sāratthasamuccaya* which was written during the Dambadeṇi period—Blackburn focuses on the processes by which *paritta* is appropriated "as a form of religious practice that deserved careful monastic consideration" (1999b:362) and, thereby, illustrates how the "connection between *paritta* recitation and desirable monastic practice" (363) may have been made<sup>17</sup>. Through a close study of Vālivīṭa Saraṇaṅkara's Sinhala *Sārāthadīpanī*, Blackburn reveals how Saraṇaṅkara was also able to transform *paritta* into "a teaching tool for novitiate education" (365). Thus, in lieu of de Silva's more limited conception of *paritta* as "a sop to ill-educated lay people," Blackburn's very careful study of the *Sāratthasamuccaya* and the *Sārāthadīpanī* leads her to deduce that "Through the composition of commentaries for the *paritta* collection, monastic leaders in the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries... transformed the *paritta* texts themselves into evocative and specific guidelines for the formation of distinctive monastic behaviors: disciplined comportment, scholarly inquiry, and meditation" (365).

<sup>16</sup> For a fuller discussion and translation of the monastic injunctions or *katikāvata* in Sri Lanka, see Rātnapala.

<sup>17</sup> Blackburn (1999b:362) writes, for instance, that "Relatively soon after the promulgation of the Dambadeṇi *Katikāvata*, another step was taken to bring the practice of *paritta* tightly within the embrace of systematic and authoritative monastic education. This occurred through the composition of a Pāli commentary on the collection of texts used in *paritta* recitation. The commentary, called *Sāratthasamuccaya* (Collection of essential meaning), ... took a radically new approach to *paritta*,... drawing the practice of *paritta* more clearly into the realm of desirable and ascetic monastic practice."

### III. Learning *Paritta* and *Paritta* Performance: A Reconsideration of Protection Rituals in Sri Lankan Monastic Education

Building on Piyadassi Thera's and Anne Blackburn's work, the remainder of this article offers yet another way to interpret *paritta* as a tool for the training of Buddhist novices. Through an investigation of how novices are taught about correct *paritta* performance—particularly how to attract the hearts/minds (*hita ādaganna*) of the laity when performing *paritta*—this article suggests one of the ways that monastic learning may be related to texts while, at the same time, not necessarily based on or limited to the information contained in texts. By looking at the contexts in which ideas about correct *paritta* performance become transmitted to novices, this article contends that learning to engage *paritta* texts performatively *within the ritual arena* may be also intimately tied to the formation of distinctive monastic behaviors by providing novices with opportunities and occasions to learn about, reflect on, and embody ideas about appropriate monastic behavior, demeanor, and discipline.

In order to illustrate this process, I will, in the remaining sections, first turn to a brief examination of the practices and settings in which novices are trained in memorization and correct *paritta* performance. That discussion will then be followed by an exploration of the relationship that exists between correct ritual performance and acquiring an understanding of what constitutes ideal monastic demeanor, behavior, and attitudes, or the connection between textual performance and ideas about who is an ideal member of the Theravāda Buddhist *saṅgha* for novices or *sāmaṇera* living in contemporary Sri Lanka.

### IV. Learning *Paritta*: Monastic Settings and Practices

Learning *paritta* and *paritta* performance largely occurs through a two-fold process: A) in monastic schools (*piriveṇa*) and ancillary groups and B) in more informal communities of learning and practice. Through the former, novices work toward memorizing the texts as well as learn how to pronounce the texts' words. Through the latter, novices gradually come to an understanding and appreciation of the *aesthetics* of *paritta* performance, defined in the context of Sri Lanka as “attracting the heart/mind (*hita ādaganīma*).”

### A. Piriveṇa Education

One important component to learning *paritta* texts and their performance is, of course, memorizing the necessary texts. While it is not uncommon to see novices working individually to memorize texts (especially during the morning and evening hours when other monastic commitments are reduced), memorization (*kaṭapādaṃ*) work is often first tackled in monastic schools or *piriveṇas*. In several *piriveṇas* I had the opportunity to spend considerable time in Sri Lanka, the texts and verses were oftentimes recited line by line by a teacher, and repeated, line by line, by the students in unison. Through this more formal method of learning, the students gradually came to memorize the texts. Their pronunciation was also corrected in the process.

Alongside repeating the *paritta* texts with their teachers, novices practiced reciting the texts in smaller groups of similar level students. During these so-called *wat pirit* periods, which usually occurred in the evenings and during the weekend, each novice was given the opportunity to recite large sections of *paritta* texts from memory while having any mispronunciations corrected by the group. Through engaging *paritta* in *piriveṇa* classes and during *wat pirit* periods, effort was not only directed toward memorizing the actual words; novices also learned where to break up Pāli *sandhi* so as to not change the words' meaning, as well as how and when to stretch the Pāli syllables.

### B. Communities of Learning and Practice

Another important dimension of learning *paritta* is acquiring an understanding of how best to perform the texts in a ritual context. Oftentimes, this type of learning occurs in more informal “communities of learners”<sup>18</sup> where novices acquire a growing understanding about what constitutes an aesthetic ritual performance or a performance that attracts the hearts of the audience by peripherally participating in the ritual's performance<sup>19</sup>. While *piriveṇa* classes provide the opportunity for novices to repeat texts line by line, and while *wat pirit* groups allow novices the chance to test

<sup>18</sup> The idea of communities of learning is developed Anna Gade's (2004) recent work on Qur'anic Schools in contemporary Indonesia.

<sup>19</sup> The idea of peripheral participation is discussed by Lave and Wenger (1991) in their text on situated learning.

their memory by reciting large sections of texts in front of their peers, learning about the aesthetics of ritual performance takes place through what Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) have called “legitimate peripheral participation.”

When I asked the head monk and deputy head monk (*anunāyaka*) of one of the temples where I conducted research, for instance, how they teach novices about the various dimensions of proper *paritta* performance, they repeatedly made reference to a type of learning that occurs through peripherally participating in communities of practitioners. By listening to and watching the ritual being performed, they declared, novices become immersed in the complete world of *paritta* performance and, thus, gradually acquire a firsthand understanding what constitutes pleasing *paritta*. In the words of the head monk: “The others are directed to go and listen. They listen to how it is done. From that, they learn.” Participating in such groups was also brought up by one novice who, in discussing how he came to learn *paritta*, said: “Actually I learned those things by watching. After being here for some time, I saw how the others do it. Even when I go out from this temple, I learn by watching the others.”<sup>20</sup> Another novice explained a similar way he learnt to recite *pirit* in recounting his experiences while living in another temple in Sri Lanka: “When I was at Kurunāgala, I learned *pirit* from a layperson who was eighty years old. He recited *gihi pirit* often. There was another monk there too. I learned to recite *pirit* while sitting between both of them. Then they taught me the whole *pirit* book. I got used to reciting the way that they recited. I learnt in that very way. Now I am able [to recite it on my own].”

One important pedagogical tool employed in these practice communities is mimicry. The head monk, for instance, in speaking about the role that imitating plays in learning about the proper performance of *paritta* texts, succinctly said: “They learn by imitating (*abhaśaya*) the others.” The deputy head monk (who is also the principal of the local monastic

<sup>20</sup> It is quite interesting that while the head monk suggested that novices learn by listening, the novice remarked how he learnt by watching. While it may be possible to read too much into this difference, it may be indirectly related to the fact that a large majority of novices trained in *paritta* are unaware of the actual meaning of the Pāli texts. For a further discussion of this, see Samuels (2004:961).

college or *piriveṇa*), raised a similar point when I asked him how he trains new novices in correct *paritta* performance:

We teach those things through practical training. For reciting *pirit*, we don't put two untrained young monks (*poḍi sādhus*) together. We put them together with an older one who is experienced. Then, we send them for about ten *pirit* ceremonies. When one goes, we put him with another one who is at the same level. Those two are trained with the older monks saying "It should be like this. It should be like this." During the practical training period, we stop to allow them to recite alone. After they have had the experience from going to ten *pirit* ceremonies, we might stop reciting altogether saying "we need to get a drink of water." Then they read ten or fifteen pages [alone].

Just like the "peripheral participation" model that Lave and Wenger (1991) discuss and which is based on relationships made between "newcomers" and "old-timers," training novices in what constitutes pleasing *paritta* is accomplished through establishing learning communities where newcomers to the *saṅgha* are compelled to forge practice-based relationships with older, more experienced monks. It is through these practice communities in which knowledge is transmitted orally/aurally that the distance between the learner and what is learned is narrowed and, in some cases, even collapsed<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> It may even be argued that when learning is approached through a course of reading and studying, the distance between the learning and the object learned is much greater. This point, in fact, is well stated in Susan Schwartz's study of *rasa* theory in Hinduism, particularly how students learn to perform the divine, where she (2004:5) writes:

Accounts regarding the ancient *guru-shisha-parampara* system indicate that the student (*shishya*) lived with the *guru* (teacher) both to serve and to learn the tradition (*parampara*).... Sources often maintain that very little talking was done. Rather, the *guru* would provide, in measured doses, lessons by example, which the student would absorb, copy, and rehearse until the teacher was satisfied. The atmosphere in which teaching and learning took place was oral/aural/kinesthetic.... If we are to understand the performing arts in India, however, this is one aspect that must be grasped. A distancing occurs between the student and the knowledge to be gained when the mode of transmission is the written word. The physical distance between the eye and the page is symbolic of a greater distance between the learning and the learned. However, when the transmission is experienced physically, as sound enters into the body through the ears and movement is physically internalized, it is more active, more engaged, and it is immediate, that is, unmediated. Those who learn physically learn differently, and experience their knowledge differently as well. It becomes ingested, becomes, like food, part of the one's cell structure. When the *guru* *shows*, rather than *tells*, absorption by the student is of a different quality altogether.

## V. Proper Ritual Performance and Proper Monastic Deportment: Generating Monastic Identities through Ritual Performance

The idea that novices learn about *paritta* performance through a more participatory process of watching and mimicking may appear so obvious so as to not need stating. At the same time, however, what is particularly valuable about drawing on Lave and Wenger's idea of legitimate peripheral participation in discussing how novices gain an understanding of pleasing *paritta* performance is not only that it demands a consideration of other ways that monastics learn<sup>22</sup>, but also that it connects one's involvement in practice groups with "full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community" (Lave and Wenger [1991:29]). Put differently, when we examine how newcomers to the *saṅgha* learn about *paritta* performance through a *legitimate peripheral participation* lens or framework, we become better able to appreciate and understand how the very participation in these practice communities (e.g., the community *paritta* practitioners) draws newcomers toward the full participation in the wider spheres of Theravāda Buddhist monastic culture and practice. The remainder of this article will focus on this by exploring how learning *paritta* through observing and mimicking provides novices with a more tangible understanding of, and an effective opportunity to reflect upon, what constitutes A) *proper monastic appearance*, B) *ideal behavior*, C) and *appropriate mental states*.

### A. Physical Appearance

When I asked one fourteen year old novice who had already participated in several short protection (*set pirit*) rituals to describe to me what he considers a good *paritta* performance to be (*honda pirit kiyannē mokadda?*), it was surprising to find that his response largely focused on his appearance and demeanor as a member of the Buddhist *saṅgha*. He said: "According to our lineage (*nikāya*), the robe has to cover both shoul-

<sup>22</sup> For instance, when we take into account the role that these informal yet intentional communities play in the learning process, the focus shifts from "the individual as learner to learning as participating in the social world, and from the concept of cognitive process to the more encompassing view of social activity" Lave and Wenger; cited in Gade (2004:123).

ders. Then, we should speak well to the people. The head and face should be shaven. Then we should walk according to a method/in a straight line. There is a procedure (*pilivāla*)—we have to have a bath, then we have to shave our head and face, then we have to go beautifully in order to attract the people’s *hita*.” What was revealing about his reply was that training in *paritta* had more to do than simply learning how to recite the *suttas*’ words with a proper cadence (*talaya*) and in a melodious/sweet (*mihiri*) manner. Indeed, learning *paritta* presented him with the opportunity to learn about, reflect on, and, eventually, embody the very ideas about what constitutes proper monastic appearance.

One reason why learning how to perform *paritta* may provide novices with an occasion to learn about and reflect upon what constitutes ideal monastic appearance is because of the relationship that was commonly drawn between the ritual’s outcome and the ability of the ritual’s performers to please the hearts/minds of the laity. For many novices who have performed numerous *paritta* rituals or who were in the process of learning to perform the ritual, a good or efficacious ritual was equated with their (the reciters’) ability to attract the hearts/minds of the laity. Discussing with me his vision of how *paritta* works, the novice who took higher ordination or *upasampadā* during the summer of 2004 said: “*Pirit* has to be recited to attract people’s heart/mind (*hita*).... With that, the people’s *hita* becomes pleased. Happiness comes to the people’s *hita*. As the *hita* becomes influenced by everything, blessings and peace (*seta-santiya*) come to the people.”

In addition to this novice who mentioned, in a more general manner, the need for pleasing the laity when performing *paritta*, several other novices and monks made more direct connections between pleasing the hearts and minds of those attending a *paritta* performance and the physical appearance of the reciters. While it is true that several of them made reference to how the *pirit*’s words have an inherent power to them (literally: *vag śaktiya*)<sup>23</sup>, a number of novices focused more specifically on the reciters’ physical appearance in characterizing an efficacious *paritta*. In the words of one eighteen year old novice: “While reciting the *pirit*, if the reciter is not pleasing... then the listener would feel disgusted while

<sup>23</sup> This point will be discussed below.

there [at the ritual]. Then it will not be *pirit* that he is listening to. If one listens to *pirit* with a proper attitude (*ākalpa*), then only will the *pirit* have power. If he is disgusted with the monk, it [i.e., the *pirit*] won't work.”

A number of other novices' and monks' portrayals of efficacious *paritta* performance included discussions about the physical appearance and disciplined comportment of the monk-participants. The novice who took *upasampadā* during the summer of 2004 drew such a relationship when comparing *pirit* chanted by monastics with *gihi pirit* or *pirit* chanted by lay people:

It is more important to see monks chanting *pirit* than lay people. Monks have nicely worn robes. They have shaven heads. With a proper demeanor, a monk becomes a pleasing image. He is beautiful to the eye. He should also have a sweet/melodious (*mihiri*) voice and he should properly pronounce the words<sup>24</sup>. Wearing a robe well, with a shaven head, and a shaven face, one looks like a proper monk. Then, as they listen and see things that are pleasing, their *hita* becomes concentrated/directed (*yomuvenevā*).

As people's hearts/minds (*hita*) are more likely to be attracted to and even “hypnotized/entranced” (*mōhanaya*) by the appearance of members of the *saṅgha* who maintain a proper demeanor, *paritta* recited by monastics is, according to him, more powerful and efficacious than *pirit* recited by lay people.

<sup>24</sup> This idea of the need for *pirit* to be recited with a melodious voice is something that this monk returned to in a later conversation; he said:

When *pirit* is recited with a sweet (*mihiri*) voice and the reciters stop in the correct places and properly pronounce the words, then the listener becomes hypnotized/seduced/fascinated (*mōhanaya*) and keeps listening.... Our heart becomes particularly concentrated to it (i.e., the *pirit*) through hearing (*āsīma*), looking (*bālīma*), and thinking (*siīma*). We are listening to something beautiful. We can see the image (*pratirūpaya*) of a *bhikkhu* which is placed in the heart. The thing that we are listening to is beautiful (*lassana*) and sweet (*mihiri*). The thing that we are seeing is also sweet and beautiful and pleasing/attractive/delightful (*piyakaru*). These things gather into the *hita* through listening and seeing.... The other thing is that *pirit* is famous in the world as something good. If everything is good and pleasing, then our *hita* becomes focused in that direction. That is what seduced/fascinated/hypnotized (*mōhanaya*) means. Once it is recited in a way that is smooth and soft, we listen because it is sweet. We ignore a crow that caws a lot yet we listen to the cuckoo bird singing.

Although this novice made reference to the sweetness of the reciters' voices, it is important to note that he and many other novices and monks correlated a sweet voice to one that is harsh/coarse (*gorōsu*) and deep (*gāmburu*), rather than one that is more musical.



Just as novices may come to learn about the importance of wearing their under and upper robes evenly around them (*parimaṇḍalaṃ nivāses-sāmi/pārupissāmi'ti*), of traveling in inhabited areas well-covered (*supaṭicchanno antaraghare gamissāmi'ti*), and of sitting in inhabited areas well-covered (*supaṭicchanno antaraghare nisīdissāmi'ti*) by studying the seventy-five training or *sekhiya* rules and other texts (such as the *Dasadhammasutta*)<sup>25</sup> commonly used in the training of novices in contemporary Sri Lanka, so too do novices gain an understanding of what constitutes proper monastic appearance through learning *paritta*. As a result of the connection expressed between pleasing the hearts/minds of the laity, the monastics' physical appearance and demeanor, and the ritual's power or outcome, *paritta* becomes a powerful pedagogical tool in, and important complement to, a novice's training. While it is true that novices also come to learn about appropriate appearance by reading texts, attending *piriveṇa* classes, and participating in the nightly instructional (*avavāda*) sessions with the temple's head monk, the seriousness with which *paritta* performance is approached provides those very same students with a more pressing need to reflect upon ideal images of monastic deportment, thus enabling them to acquire a more tangible and immediate understanding of what constitutes perfect monastic appearance.

### B. Proper Monastic Behavior

Another issue sometimes raised in conjunction with discussions about *paritta* is monastic behavior. Conversations with novices and head monks revealed a profound appreciation of how their own behavior as members

<sup>25</sup> In the *Dasadhammasutta*, monastics are encouraged to reflect on how their appearance and behavior differs from the appearance and behavior of lay people. The third of the ten *dhamma* listed in the *Dasadhammasutta* is "*añño me ākappo karaṇīyo ti pabbajitena abhiṇṇaṃ paccavekkhitabba*" which translates as "One who has gone forth should continually reflect 'for me there are other actions/duties and appearance/deportment'" (translation mine). According to Saraṇaṃkara's commentary on this text, the Buddha intended the study and recitation of this *sutta* as a way of preventing regression in Buddhist practice. Making reference to Saraṇaṃkara's commentary on the *Dasadhammasutta*, Anne Blackburn (1999b:370) writes: "With these thoughts in mind the monk is pushed to investigate carefully the state of his internal and external conduct, keeping in view the distinctive demands of the monastic life and the challenge to move beyond the experience of karma, rebirth, and suffering."

of the *saṅgha* affects the attendees of the ritual and, in turn, the ritual's outcome. One eighteen year old novice often called upon to perform shorter (*set pirit*) and longer (*mahāpirit*) protection rituals expressed to me the need for monastics to act appropriately. Describing what he considers proper monastic behavior to be, he explained:

He has to recite it by only looking at the *pirit* text. He should not look around. He should not look at the people. People will be displeased if they see that the monk is looking around. The monk has to work in a way that pleases them.... When we go to recite *pirit*, if the householder is not displeased with us, his *hita* will be attracted to the *pirit*. If the *pirit* is chanted to bless the householder and his house, we should think, 'may the householder receive peace.' Then, the householder will be grabbed by us.

A fifteen year old novice who had already participated in several shorter *pirit* rituals used our discussion of the ritual as an opportunity to reflect in a more tangible manner upon what he understood ideal monastic behavior to be:

When *pirit* is recited, there has to be a sense of calm. When our teacher is seated, he doesn't shake even his legs. Seated like that, one has to recite it with an appropriate cadence (*talaya*), that means, recite it in a normal way and beautifully....

If we behave in an agitated way among the people, they might feel disgusted.... We have to be restrained (*saṅvaraya*) when the exhortation (*anuśāsanaya*) is made. During that time, we should not be chatting with the other monks... [and] we should not be resting our heads on our palms or fall asleep. That is a mistake. The people will become fed up.... They will be fed up with listening to *pirit* too.

By talking about the ideal *paritta* behavior exhibited by his own teacher and by comparing those images with less pleasing reflections of monastic behavior, this novice was able to reflect upon in a very concrete manner how monastics should act. What was particularly salient about his discussion is how pressing the need for monastics to act appropriately became when viewed through the lens of *paritta* performance. As a result of the connection that both novices drew between "grabbing (*allāganavā*)" the laity, the ritual's success, and the reciters' behavior, *paritta* became a useful staging ground where ideas about how monastics should conduct themselves were communicated to, learned by, reflected upon, and embodied by the ritual's participants.

It is worthwhile to note that many of the novices' reflections on appropriate and pleasing *paritta* behavior are very similar to canonical portrayals of ideal monastic conduct. In the training or *sekhiya* rules that are familiar to monks (*bhikkhu*) and novices (*sāmaṇera*)<sup>26</sup>, for example, we read that monastics should go about with downcast eyes (*okkhītacakkhu antaraghare gamissāmi'ti*), should sit with downcast eyes (*okkhītacakkhu antaraghare nisīdissāmi'ti*), should sit with little sounds (*appasaddo antaraghare nisīdissāmi'ti*), should not sit while shaking the body (*na kāyappacālakam antaraghare nisīdissāmi'ti*) or swaying the arms (*bāhuppacālakam*), should not sit while shaking or bobbing one's head (*na sīsappacālakam antaraghare nisīdissāmi'ti*), and so on. Just as monks and novices are able to arrive at understandings of proper monastic behavior through reading texts (such as the *sekhiya* rules) that provide specific instructions on how to act, so too do newcomers to the *saṅgha* learn about ideal behavior through more diffuse processes such as learning and performing *paritta*. By observing, mimicking, and performing, *paritta* becomes a useful device whereby images of ideal monastic behavior and appearance are transmitted to and instilled in newcomers to the *saṅgha*. In the words of one novice who recently attended his first *pirit*: "If we behave in an agitated way among the people, they will feel disgusted. When we recite *pirit*, we should behave in a pleasing way that generates the attitudes that we are monastics" (emphasis mine).

### C. Positive Mental States and Attitudes

Yet a third way in which training in *paritta* and *paritta* performance may be understood as tool for monastic education concerns ideas about what constitutes appropriate attitudes and mental states. When I asked the head monk from one of the temples where I conducted research how *paritta* works, he began with a short discussion of the power inherent in

<sup>26</sup> Although the seventy-five *sekhiya* make up part of the 227 rules that apply to fully ordained monks, novices in Sri Lanka are taught the *sekhiya* rules as part of their novitiate training. This is not only evidenced in the inclusion of the rules in the most commonly-used monastic handbooks for novices in Sri Lanka—the *Sāmaṇera Baṇadham Pota* (Vanaratna 1990 and Dhammatilaka 1997)—but also in the inclusion of these rules as part of the second grade curriculum undertaken in primary monastic schools or *mūlika pīrivenṇa* (Hettiaracci 1994).

words (*vāg śaktiya*): “There is a power in words (*vāg śaktiya*). It is scientifically accepted by the world. There is the power in words. Power in words means that we have been saying ‘May you be well, may you be well, may you be well (*suvaṇṇat vāvā*)’ for a long time. We do it without a bad heart/mind (*hita*). We say *suvaṇṇat vāvā* even when someone who hates us worships us. It is more powerful for us to say *suvaṇṇat vaevā* than just an ordinary person.” Continuing his point about *vāg śaktiya*, the head monk went on to draw a distinction between *paritta* recited by monks and by lay people (*gihi pirit*):

Lay people’s minds are inclined toward secular things. They are weighed toward secular things. Though a *bhikkhu* may be worldly, he is not as inclined toward the secular. He is slightly away from it. That means that lack of desire is there....

Now, let’s say that one has built a new house and lay people were invited to recite *pirit*. Now, the lay people may think “Wow (*sha*)! They built such a beautiful house. My house is not that good. How did he build [such a beautiful house].” For them, jealousy arises. Thirst (*taṇhā*) also arises.

When we go there, we feel happy thinking “Oh (*anē*). Our patron (*dāyaka mahattayā*) has built a good house. It is great. May he develop more in the future.” We bless him. We don’t have a wish of owning that house or of living in that house. We feel happy in that situation. We bless him with compassion (*karuṇāva*) and friendliness (*maitrī*) and wish him to develop further.

While acknowledging that a type of power (*śaktiya*)—or “current” as another head monk described while pointing to the florescent lamps over our heads—exists in the *paritta*’s words, the head monk nonetheless went on to relate his notion of *vāg śaktiya* to the mental states of the *paritta*’s reciters<sup>27</sup>. By vocalizing such a connection, the head monk transformed

<sup>27</sup> This is quite different from the conclusion that Christopher Pinney (1997:166-67; quoted in Rotman [2003:559]) arrives at based on a discussion he had with one of his informants (Tiware) about the efficacy of a six-sentence mantra invoking Paramahamsji:

The great appeal of the technique—and this is what Tiware continually stresses—is that faith or belief is not necessary, desires will be fulfilled without belief (*bina vishvas*). The analogies that tumble forth from Tiware’s lips are all grounded in a technological world in which all that matters is effect: “Suppose that you want to use some electric power—you make a connection, fit your tube light, lay the wiring, provide a switch, connect this to the overhead wires. If the power is available, the tube is fine, the wiring is fine, the switch is fine, the tube light will come on—(*chalega!*)—with belief or without belief”—he flicked his thumb to and fro as though switching the current on and off.

*paritta* into a potent tool for teaching novices about what constitutes positive mental states for members of the Buddhist *saṅgha*: compassion, friendliness, desirelessness, and non-jealousy or sympathetic joy (*muditā*).

This understanding of the relationship between efficacious *paritta* and the reciters' mental states was, not surprisingly, echoed by a number of novices training in or trained in proper *paritta* performance. One such novice, sharing with me his characterization of powerful *paritta*, said: "The reciter should have compassion (*karuṇāva*), loving kindness/friendliness (*maitrī*), sympathy (*dayāva*), and pity (*anukampāva*). The reciter should have the thought: 'I am reciting this [*pirit*] to make him well. May the listener be well through my recitation. May he be well.' Those kinds of feelings must certainly be there. They have to be there when reciting [*pirit*] in order to give power to him (i.e., the recipient of the *pirit*)." The novice who recently took higher ordination mentioned a similar point when he related the mental states of the reciters to the power of the ritual: "If he is a monk, he should feel compassion (*karuṇāva*) and sympathy (*dayāva*) toward the people. Monks should have a kind heart and bless the people thinking 'may people get blessing and peace from the power of the *pirit*.' Then the people will receive positive results."

Similar to learning about what constitutes positive mental states for members of the *saṅgha* through reading such texts as the *Dasadhammasutta*, the *Karanīyamettasutta*, the *Mangalasutta*, and the *Ratanasutta*, learning *paritta* provides novices with the opportunity to learn about and internalize ideal mental states. By linking understandings of successful *paritta* to the mental states of the ritual's performers, the need to cultivate such qualities as compassion, selflessness, friendliness, sympathy, and desirelessness takes on an added salience. As one novice currently training to perform *paritta* noted: "There are some monks who receive money; it is not good to think about receiving money while reciting *pirit*. Without greed and hatred, [but rather] with thoughts of bringing good to the

To produce surges of electricity in one's own life all that was required was the utterance of six sentences.

In using Pinney's example in discussing the role of *prasāda* (faith, graciousness, or serene joy) in making merit, Andy Rotman (2003) places more importance on the mental states of the actors in determining the efficacy of an act than is suggested in Pinney's description.

people, they should recite [*pirit*] without expecting money. It has to be done with a good *hita*. It is not good to recite it with a bad *hita*. Then, it would have no value.... Then the people would not receive any blessings.”<sup>28</sup>

## VI. Generating Identities through Textual Performance: A Reevaluation of *Paritta* in Sri Lankan Monastic Life

The foregoing discussion provides a glimpse into how learning *paritta* instills in novices the very information contained in monastic disciplinary texts and handbooks. Although much of the conversations with novices and monks about successful protection rituals pertained to the ritual itself—i.e., how they dressed, behaved, and thought while performing *paritta*—exchanges with several novices also intimated how the ideals learned through *paritta* performance shape and affect other dimensions of their lives as members of the *saṅgha*, including, possibly, their reading and interpretation of the very texts employed in their monastic education<sup>29</sup>.

The fourteen year old novice who defined successful *paritta* as one that is performed by monastics wearing their robe in a way that covers both shoulders, speaking well to the people, and shaving their heads and faces, began to reflect further with me about how his very ideas of proper

<sup>28</sup> One eighteen year old *sāmaṇera* made reference to the quality of equanimity or *upekkha* when he discussed with me how monastics reciting *pirit* should remain unaffected by the physical surroundings of the place where the *paritta* is being performed: “Recently, we went for a *pirit* to the village of Ambavatta. It was near a place where pigs were slaughtered. It stank. We were not upset, though. My heart/mind (*hita*) was not upset.... If I am asked to recite *pirit*, I do it regardless of the sponsor or the place.”

<sup>29</sup> Anne Blackburn, in fact, raised a similar point about the circularity of monastic training, particularly how other facets of monastic training impinge upon how novices read texts, when she wrote (2001:148): “These characteristics of monastic life inevitably affected the manner in which monastic students read and interpreted the texts before them, and especially those which touched on matters of monastic discipline. Although it is impossible to write with complete assurance on such matters, it seems reasonable to suspect that monastic students responded more sharply to images of proper and improper monasticism because they already participated in a lifestyle designed to discipline themselves” (emphasis added).

*paritta* apply more widely to his life as a Buddhist monastic. After noting, for example, how important it is for monks and novices to please the laity by their appearance and behavior while reciting *paritta*, he went on to add: “Monks should go everywhere with shaven heads, with shaven beards, and with a clean physical appearance. Then only will people be pleased about monks. Then only will people listen to monks with accompanying feelings of trust.” For him, ideas about how to attract or please the hearts/minds of the laity as well as the urgent need to do so was not solely confined to the performance of *paritta*; instead, they affected and impinged upon the very manner in which he understood his role and place in society as a member of the *saṅgha*.

Conversations with other novices pointed to a similar connection made between proper appearance and behavior while performing *paritta* and their lives as Buddhist monastics outside of the ritual arena. After discussing how those performing a *paritta* ritual should “grab the heart” by their proper behavior and appearance, one novice went on to draw a relationship between appropriate ritual behavior and life in the temple:

First, the householder comes to the temple and invites the monks. The *poḍi sādhus* (young novices) in the temple should behave well when the householder comes to invite us. They should not be playing at that time.... When we go to recite *pirit*, if the householder is not displeased with us, his heart/mind (*hita*) will be attracted to the *pirit*.... When he comes to invite us, we should behave well. At that time, some monks from other temples ask for cigarettes. We should not think and act like that. When we go for an [overnight] *pirit*, all we need are some drinks [*gilanpasa*] and a place to rest.

For this eighteen year old novice, the behavior and mental states of monastics in the temple are closely tied to the total experience of the audience and householder. The laity’s experiences are not simply confined to the actual performance of the ritual itself; instead, they include much wider circles wherein lay people and monastics interact. According to his understanding, monastics not acting appropriately or living with desire for such things as cigarettes in the temple may adversely affect the laity’s experience of Buddhism and, thus, impinge upon the outcome of the ritual itself. For him, monastics should always work toward acting and think-

ing in ways that are conducive to the state of being a monk (*maha-ṇakama*)<sup>30</sup>.

## VII. Conclusion

In learning to perform *paritta* texts in their appropriate ritual context, novices come to understand much more than simply how to recite texts melodiously, how to break up the Pāli *sandhi*, and how to stretch the Pāli syllables. Through engaging *paritta* texts in *piriveṇa* classes and in more informal communities of learning and practice, novices gradually arrive at an understanding of how *paritta* works, what constitutes an efficacious *paritta*, and how to attract or please the hearts/minds of the laity inside and outside of the ritual arena.

In teaching novices about what constitutes an ideal, successful, and pleasing protection ritual, *paritta* becomes much more than a sop to ill-

<sup>30</sup> Despite the fact that several novices mentioned how learning *paritta* affects their lives beyond the ritual space, it is important, nonetheless, to bear in mind that acquiring an understanding of what constitutes ideal appearance, behavior, and mental states in no way transformed the novices into monastic robots or passive “cultural dopes” whose lives are solely and statically modeled upon textual (*Vinaya*) and/or cultural images ideal monastic behavior. While it may be true that a number of novices gained a greater understanding about appropriate behavior, speech, attire, and mental states through learning to perform *paritta*, many of the same novices were also able to intuit and vocalize how acceptable behavior and dress are oftentimes based on particular contexts as well as on the dynamic relationship that exists between monks, novices, and lay people.

The notion of “cultural dopes” is drawn from Ann Swidler’s discussion of strategies of action (see also Garfinkel [1967] and Wrong [1961]). In discussing how ritual provides its performers with a variety of strategies of action, Swidler (1986:284) remarked: “Strategies of action are cultural products; the symbolic experiences, mythic lore, and *ritual practices of a group or society create moods and motivations, ways of organizing experience and evaluating reality, modes of regulating conduct, and ways of forming social bonds, which provide resources for constructing strategies of action*” (emphasis added). Despite her reference to moods and motivations which, I believe, is drawn from Clifford Geertz’s work on “Religion As a Cultural System,” Swidler’s conception of culture, myth, and symbol is much more dynamic than that proposed by Geertz when he writes (1973:112):

It is in some sort of ceremonial form—even if that form be hardly more than the recitation of a myth, the consultation of an oracle, or the decoration of a grave—that the moods and motivations which sacred symbols induce in men and the general conceptions of the order of existence which they formulate for men meet and reinforce one another. In ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world, producing thus that idiosyncratic transformation in one’s sense of reality.



educated lay people or a coping device for the common layman or laywoman seeking relief from the harsh doctrine of karma. By drawing connections between pleasing the hearts/minds of the laity, the monastics' physical appearance and behavior, and the ritual's power, *paritta* becomes transformed into a powerful pedagogical tool in, and important complement to, a novice's training. To put it somewhat differently and to restate and slightly modify Anne Blackburn's thesis mentioned in section II, through a process of watching, mimicking, and performing, monastic leaders are able to transform *paritta* into powerful pedagogical tools oriented toward the socialization and training of young monastics.

As I have argued above, *paritta* is not the only component to novitiate training in contemporary Sri Lanka. Indeed, monastics come to learn about what constitutes ideal behavior, deportment, and mental states through engaging a whole repertoire of monastic practices and duties (e.g., textual study, attending evening advice sessions, and so on). Despite the fact that learning *paritta* comprises only one dimension of a much larger pedagogical tool kit, its role in monastic educational culture is by no means insignificant. By paying attention to the pedagogical role that *paritta* plays in contemporary Sri Lanka, we become not only more appreciative of other ways in which images of ideal monasticism become transmitted to and embodied by novices, but also more aware of how rituals provide novices with the occasions, tools, and capacity to reflect on the content of the very texts employed in their training, including the texts found in the *Pirit Pota* or *Book of Protection*.

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