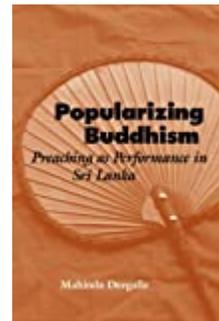




**Mahinda Deegalle.** *Popularizing Buddhism: Preaching as Performance in Sri Lanka.* Albany: SUNY Press, 2006. 241 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-6898-2.



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## Preaching, Sinhala Style: An Important Recent Work on Sri Lankan Buddhism

With regard to recent scholarship on Buddhist societies and cultures in South and Southeast Asia, Mahinda Deegalle's *Popularizing Buddhism* offers an important contribution. Perhaps more than any other recent work in this area, Deegalle's book underscores the significance of preaching in the localization and transmission of Buddhism. Though other recent studies deal with sermons—e.g., Justin Thomas McDaniel's *Gathering Leaves & Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand* (2008), and my own forthcoming *An Ethic of Continuity and Rupture: Shwegyin Monks and the Sāsana in Burma/Myanmar*—Deegalle's work is distinctive in its specific focus on preaching. Though not without interpretive shortcomings, it is engaging and helps point the way for further work concerning Buddhist and other traditions of preaching.

Deegalle frames his discussion with a methodological and conceptual chapter that introduces the basic categories that underpin the book—particularly, “preaching” and “holism.” He also specifies his two-part argument, which concerns the development in eighteenth-century

Sri Lanka of a two-pulpit preaching “ritual drama” that used texts in both the Pali and Sinhala languages, and that was directed at both members of the elite and ordinary members of the laity; and the idea that a study of Sinhala Buddhist preaching can help us develop *preaching* “as an interpretive category in the history of religions” (p. 18). With these introductory elements in place, Deegalle turns to investigate the historical and contemporary landscape of preaching in Sri Lanka.

This investigation begins with a chapter entitled the “Buddha as the Best Preacher,” which traces some of the salient aesthetic ideals (e.g., concerning *sĀrtha*, “content,” and *savyaĀ±jana*, “form”) of Sinhala preaching to ideas about the Buddha's own activities as a preacher. Chapters 3 through 5 then map out an emergent, late medieval *baā'a* (“preaching”) tradition built around such activities as reading aloud Sinhala *baā'apot* (“preaching texts”). Chapter 5 culminates with an analysis of the thematic structure and dynamics of a two-pulpit ritual performance. In two-pulpit preaching, a monk at one pulpit reads or recites aloud a selection from a Pali text, while at

the other pulpit another monk explains and interprets the selection for the audience in Sinhala. Additionally, between the audience (divided by gender) and the pulpits is a space occupied by a lay elder (an *eheyya* or “yes-man”) who responds to the preaching after important points have been made.

In the process of developing his interpretation of two-pulpit preaching as a type of ritual performance, Deegalle suggests that the emergent *baá'a* tradition continued roles of earlier *bhā́'aka* (“reciter”) and *dhammakathika* (“preacher of the doctrine”) systems, even while providing the groundwork for further developments in the nineteenth century and on to the present day. These further developments are explored in chapters 6 through 8, which cover such issues as the impact of the printing press and Christianity; changes fueled by the spread of television and the Internet; preaching as a form of social engagement and critique; and the modern phenomenon of *kavi baá'a*, in which a preacher uses Sinhala poems (which are not part of a traditional sermon) to elucidate Buddhist doctrines and teachings.

Deegalle emphasizes throughout that despite great diversity in content and form, the *baá'a* tradition and its associated vernacular texts have been primary vehicles for the “popularization” of Buddhism. Deegalle employs the notion of popularization broadly, in regard to elite and ordinary Buddhists of all sorts. What he is trying to convey here is the absolutely essential role of preaching in mediating Buddhist ideas and ideals beyond the monastic fold, at all levels of society. It is in this context that some of Deegalle’s historical discussions can be best understood: from the tenth century, Sinhala *baá'a* played a central role in fostering and enhancing an “emerging consciousness of locality” that entailed the use of vernacular languages and literatures among many other elements (p. 63).

Elsewhere, Deegalle has been praised for the range of relevant sources he covers, his historical perspective, his efforts to engage in conversations with previous scholarship, and his attention to processes of transmission. While such praise is warranted, especially given the relatively small amount of scholarly attention to preaching in the Buddhist contexts of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, a few crucial areas of the book could have been strengthened. To focus on two of these, there is a need for greater clarity about Deegalle’s central categories of “holism” and, even more important, “preaching.”

One of the key methodological principles underpinning the book—the idea of holism—remains superficially

developed. Deegalle opens and closes the book with reference to this idea, and indeed his last sentence expresses the hope “that future scholarship will find this work useful in discovering other possible topics for scholarly debate in understanding Theravāda as a holistic system” (p. 188). Yet the principal clarification of his idea of holism is to be found among the endnotes: “I realize that in some cases holism is contrasted to contextualized historical description. However, I use the term holism simply to indicate that scholars should take into account a whole range of religious expression in many places and as extensively as possible, while also paying attention to each specific historical instance” (p. 191n34). This brief clarification is appreciated, but I remain ambivalent about this aspect of the book. On the one hand, the discussion of holism could have been jettisoned from the book in favor of a more sustained focus on the category of preaching. The basic problem here is that the concept of holism runs deep with methodological and theoretical problems, and there is little overlap between Deegalle’s simplistic usage and something like the far more nuanced usage of a type of holism (the Pali “imaginaire”) that is explored by Steven Collins in his *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (1998). On the other hand, Deegalle could have elaborated on the idea of holism by positioning his idea relative to such (frequently criticized) interpretive categories as “cultural integration,” “total social fact,” and even “Theravāda” itself. Doing this might also have prompted Deegalle to reflect more explicitly on just how far his interpretive holistic net should or could extend. The category of holism appears in part to drive Deegalle’s inclusion of the diverse range of materials discussed in chapters 6 through 8, but I found myself trying to understand just how Deegalle envisions the category and how it motivates the choice of topics he discusses.

Even more central to the book is the concept of “preaching.” With this concept, Deegalle is working from a vantage point of both recovery and exploration; “perhaps because the discipline of the history of religions wished to separate itself from Christianity and theology, historians of religion have ignored preaching as a category in their studies. The fact is that preaching as a category has been and continues to be associated primarily with Christianity” (p. 2). Deegalle’s task in the opening methodological and conceptual chapter of the book is thus to define the nature and significance of “preaching” as a theoretical category. However, despite sections dealing with “Buddhist Preaching in Comparative Contexts,” “Recent Studies Related to Buddhist Preaching,” and “The

*Baá'a* Tradition in Sri Lanka,” and despite emphasizing the point that *baá'a* encompasses four interrelated devotional practices, it is not entirely clear how Deegalle understands the distinctiveness of preaching as a “persuasive strategy” or as a distinctive kind of “performance,” whether in comparison to other Buddhist activities or to activities found within other religious contexts.

Some nuanced attention to theories of ritual or performance may have helped here. Deegalle does occasionally offer flourishes in this regard, suggesting, for instance, that two-pulpit preaching is a “polyvalent Buddhist ritual” that entails “creative and artistic performances by Buddhist monks” and “the artistic hearts of pious Sinhala Buddhists.” This is followed by another statement, with reference to the work of Michael Carithers, that “two-pulpit preaching can be included in the dense tradition of polyvalent meanings and nuances” (p. 107). However, a more sustained and clear consideration of the significance of these points would have been helpful. The lacunas regarding critical reflection especially on the category of preaching are most acutely felt in the last chapter, which is just two pages long. Here, Deegalle misses an opportunity for a longer set of final, “further reflections” that might have brought the book to a more engaging conclusion. Though he invokes the Buddha’s discourse to the KālĀmas to invite challenges to his own approach and his selection of materials, he has done himself a disservice in this goal by leaving some important threads untied. Indeed, there is room for Deegalle to have made stronger Buddhological and other arguments that would have expanded the significance of his work; I would suggest that some possible options for those arguments revolve around the following kinds of thoughts.

For example, in a Buddhological vein, one could possibly argue that, in many premodern and modern Sri Lankan and Southeast Asian Buddhist contexts, unstable or malleable preaching rituals are primary contexts for mediating between the relatively stable and consistent Pali imaginaire and the day-to-day and often very “messy” lives of Buddhists. If this is true, why, in some cases, should the rituals change so much and the doctrine so little? Possibly because at the level of preaching, orthopraxy is not important, and as a result preaching has provided an extremely significant component in the creative expansion and development of the Buddhist tradition, even in the “TheravĀda,” which at times places so much stress on both orthodox and orthoprax components of the tradition.

In another Buddhological vein, further comparative attention could have been given to features of Sinhala Buddhist preaching in relation to Buddhist preaching elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Deegalle does make some gestures in this vein (e.g., his mentioning of a Thai performance of *Thet MahĀ ChĀt*), but there are further avenues of exploration in addition to those he has suggested. While hardly exhaustive, three such avenues, for my purposes here focusing only Sri Lanka and Burma, immediately come to mind. First, I am struck by the virtual absence of any reference by Deegalle to the Abhidhamma literature, which is an important part of Burmese Buddhist traditions, preaching and otherwise. What, if any, is the cultural significance of this absence of Abhidhamma in the case of Sinhala preaching? Second, I also find intriguing the amount of open humor and laughter often found in contemporary Burmese preaching rituals, especially concerning, from what I have observed, issues of wealth and attachment. To what degree have these sorts of humor been present or absent in the case of Sri Lankan *baá'a* discourse? Finally, given the kinds of poetic issues Deegalle raises in chapter 8 (where he considers, e.g., views on whether rhythmical recitation increases attachment), it would be fascinating to know how the Sri Lankan framing of these considerations compares to phenomena like the sometimes emotionally over-the-top recitation of rhythmical Burmese *saá'vega gĀthĀs* (verses used to cultivate existential angst). Insofar as these verses may be used in preaching at once to *evoke* and *undermine* attachment, it becomes reasonable to wonder how “holistically” preaching traditions span the Buddhist cultures of Sri Lanka and Burma.

In the vein of the history of religions, some further comparative discussion with Christian traditions of preaching seems to be in order in Deegalle’s work, in the service of further developing preaching as a category of understanding and analysis across religious traditions. Here I am thinking of preaching in terms of providing a distinctive context for the deployment of certain activities that may not be culturally acceptable or ordinary in other contexts. The two-pulpit preaching Deegalle highlights is an example of what I have in mind here. So, too, are Protestant Christian uses of two liturgical pulpits—a smaller pulpit where a text is read by a liturgist, and a second larger pulpit where a sermon, usually built off of the read text, is preached by a pastor. While it may be true that different relations of power and authority operate in each case, one might observe that both cases involve preaching rituals that mediate between texts and

wider audiences, in ways dependent on particular rhetorical and aesthetic preferences of preachers and audiences. And, given what I have observed in several Christian contexts, Christian preaching seems to be as malleable an art form as Buddhist preaching; though a liturgical ritual, it is readily open to change and adaptation, so as to increase audience interaction with texts. These, then, would seem to be areas open to interested scholars for further development.

Interpretive shortcomings aside, this book is a very welcome addition to other recent work on Buddhist cultures and societies of South and Southeast Asia. Deegalle's work moves the state of the field forward by bring-

ing to light underappreciated elements of Sinhala Buddhism, by drawing attention to the need for further studies of preaching in other Buddhist contexts, and by drawing a scholarly eye to the additional need for scholars who focus on South or Southeast Asia to push the comparative envelope. Finally, it seems to me that some of the material in the book could potentially be developed into an undergraduate source book (or part of such a book), perhaps with an accompanying CD-ROM, to facilitate student awareness and appreciation of the aesthetics of Buddhist preaching. Especially useful for this might be materials like the *namaskĀragĀthĀs* (verses praising the Three Refuges), as represented by Deegalle on page 110.

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