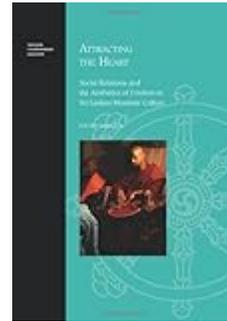




**Jeffrey Samuels.** *Attracting the Heart: Social Relations and the Aesthetics of Emotion in Sri Lankan Monastic Culture.* Topics in Contemporary Buddhism Series. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010. 192 pp. \$36.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-3385-5.



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## Affect and Aesthetics in the Proliferation of Buddhist Communities

The investigation of emotion and affect is a relatively recent turn within the humanities and social sciences, and Jeffrey Samuels's new book represents one of the first gestures in that direction within Buddhist studies. The culmination of a decade's worth of fieldwork, *Attracting the Heart* is a valuable contribution simply due to the wealth of ethnographic information that it presents. The clarity and straightforward style of Samuels's writing helps to ensure that his work is accessible to undergraduates—it would serve well in courses on Buddhism and Asian religions—even as the issues that he engages are surely of interest to specialists. Despite the few criticisms I raise below, Samuels has made an important intervention in Buddhist studies with this book, and his insights will challenge scholars to reevaluate how we conceive of the growth and maintenance of Buddhist communities and their monastic institutions.

As Samuels states clearly in his introduction, the purpose of this book is precisely to examine the types of affective bonds and shared aesthetic sensibilities that draw together groups of monastics and Buddhist laypeo-

pleâ (p. xxii). In particular, he seeks to understand these phenomena in relation to both the recruitment of young boys to the monkhood and the laity's continued support of particular monastic institutions. Samuels focuses on one temple network including eight branch temples, centered at Polgoda Viharaâ in central Sri Lanka, and the monastic and lay communities connected to it. His methodology consists of closely observed accounts of monastic life, person-centered ethnography, and audio-driven photo-elicited interviewsâ (p. xxix). This approach enables Samuels to provide a rich and vivid portrayal of the Polgoda temple complex. Yet the addition of at least a few photographs within the book would have been welcome, especially considering the importance of the photo-elicited interviews to his research.

In describing his analytic focus, Samuels references scholarship on the social construction of emotion, notably work by Owen Lynch and Catherine Lutz, but he is careful to clarify his own approach by stating that he is more concerned with emotional expression and the role that emotion plays in the social arenaâ than debates

on the universality of particular emotive experiences.[1] Likewise, Samuels notes his inspiration from the works of other scholars in Buddhist and religious studies—Stephen Berkwitz, Maria Heim, and Martha Nussbaum—in his choice to investigate how emotions function strategically in influencing and determining the types of bonds and commitments that people make to each other, to particular monastic institutions, and to the Buddhist religion (p. xxvi).[2] Samuels's work offers a fair challenge to models of Buddhist social interaction that stress its economic quality, such as that depicted in Ivan Strenski's notion of "generalized exchange." [3] Unlike such models, Samuels's approach reveals that the cultivation and maintenance of Buddhist communities depends on the (at least) equally important factors of shared aesthetic sensibilities and emotional experiences among the monastics and their lay supporters.

The first chapter discusses the career of Ven. Narada, the head monk of the Polgoda temple network. Samuels follows Margret Trawick's *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family* (1990) in granting primacy to his informant's voice. As he states, "I am interested in how Narada's description of his own life story—the events and social relationships he chooses to discuss and emphasize—is intimately connected to the everyday affairs of being a monastic leader in present-day Sri Lanka" (p. 3). The truth or accuracy of what Narada tells about his life is of less concern to Samuels than the fact that Narada chose to relate these particular episodes in this particular way. Samuels focuses on the emotionally charged language employed and the aesthetic sensibilities revealed by Narada's accounts.

In this initial chapter, Samuels also describes Narada's unique vision that recruitment to the monkhood is socially uplifting. Rather than take well-to-do, upper-caste boys for new recruits—as Narada claims to be the practice of other monastic fraternities—he values bringing less fortunate boys to his temples. Narada's idea is that such boys would benefit from the education and nurturance that he believes his temple provides. As Samuels clarifies, "Narada's use of ordination as a way to effect social and economic change is quite different from other forms of social service proposed by Sri Lankan monastics over the past century, perhaps most notably the 'engaged Buddhism' programs of movements like Sarvodaya (p. 15). Unlike these programs, in which monks and laity render service to other communities in the form of public works projects and educational events, Narada envisions the monastic vocation itself—and the training that accompanies it—as beneficial to so-

ciety. Thus, for him, monastic recruitment is a form of social service. Yet within Narada's accounts there are hints that caste conflict plays a larger role than Samuels considers, and I return to this problem below.

In chapter 2, Samuels presents the career of Ven. Sumedha, a student of Narada's and a key contributor to the growth of the Polgoda temple network. Here, Samuels illustrates the parental relationship that emerges between the monastic recruits and the temple elders who recruit them, and he demonstrates how a shared aesthetic sense of the monastery as a pure, beautiful, and safe space accompanies the growth of these relationships. This chapter seeks to contest a simplistic understanding of the forces behind monastic recruitment, which overemphasizes the importance of economic and educational opportunities available to monks in the decision of families and young boys to join the monastery. The account of Sumedha's career contends that both a monk's physical appearance and his demeanor aid in monastic recruitment. Samuels also argues that the formation of affective bonds between the monk and his potential recruits—such as those that grew among Sumedha and his dharma school students—have an impact on the boys's decision to join the monkhood.

In this second chapter, Samuels compares Sumedha's experiences at two distinct temples where he held residence, Madavala and Mahavela. While both temples serviced economically disadvantaged communities, Mahavela presented unique challenges to the monk's recruitment efforts. This Sumedha attributes to previous, unfavorable experiences with monastics in the area and to "the people's more secular orientation" (p. 33). To build the Mahavela community, Sumedha formed a youth group (*lamā samājaya*) that engaged in a variety of activities—many not expressly Buddhist. Sumedha refers to this as an instance of *upāyā*, which Samuels glosses as "trick." This is a fair translation of the Sinhala use of the term, but it is not clear why Samuels chooses this rendition in lieu of the alternative interpretation of "skillful means," widely used among Buddhist studies scholars (p. 35). Sumedha claims that the strategies used in Madavala, namely, the more traditional dharma schools, would be insufficient in Mahavela. Thus, he initiated different sorts of community-building projects at this temple to suit the community's recent experiences with Buddhist monks and the children's lack of exposure to the wider world around them. In his discussion of Sumedha's different experiences at these two temples, Samuels convincingly shows how the hope for economic opportunity alone does not adequately explain monastic recruit-

ment. The chapter closes with two case studies involving boys recruited to the Mahavela temple by Sumedha. Samuels shows that each of the boys cite such concerns as the availability of companionship, the lack of physical punishment, opportunities for play, and the beauty of monks and the temple grounds, as well as socioeconomic advantages in their decision to enter the monastic life.

In chapter 3, Samuels once again complicates models of monastic recruitment that emphasize the search for socioeconomic gains by revealing the importance of aesthetic-affective factors, particularly the parents' and children's desire to find caring, beautiful, and socially harmonious environments, where children will learn while being treated with a parent-like and sibling-like affection (p. 44). Here, Samuels draws from the work of Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge in explaining the role of social networks and affective ties in recruitment to the monkhood.<sup>[4]</sup> The case studies that Samuels describes offer convincing data for the argument that prospects of socioeconomic improvement are not enough to drive monastic recruitment, and that the parents and prospective monks also consider the aesthetic qualities of a monastery and its incumbents when a decision is reached for a boy to join a particular temple. Additionally, Samuels's case studies reveal the importance of preexisting social networks—a concept borrowed from Stark and Bainbridge—in the successful recruitment of boys to any specific monastery. Not only monks, but also key lay figures—like Mr. Gunasena who figures prominently in this chapter—bring boys to the monastery through channels of communication and social relations that already exist prior to a family's decision to have a son take up the robes.

Chapter 4 derives in large part from Samuels's earlier work on monastic education.<sup>[5]</sup> In this chapter, he argues that novitiate training is not simply a matter of textual study or learning the codified rules of Buddhist monastic life. Rather, novices become socialized within the monastic tradition and come to embody the status of full-fledged monks through a process involving more diffuse pedagogical methods, which Samuels elaborates in this chapter (p. 63). Citing Catherine Bell's notion of the ritualized agent from her work *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992), Samuels contends that engagement in ritual activities—like learning to perform chants, cleaning the temple grounds, and making offerings to Buddha images—serves to mold the novices into what the temple elders and their lay supporters conceive of as an ideal monk. Samuels's discussion of the term *Ākalpa*, and its

use by monks to differentiate themselves from the laity, is particularly useful here and represents an instance in which he provides careful attention to the Sinhala terminology used by his informants.

In his fifth and final chapter, Samuels discusses the role of affective bonds in the temple-building process through two case studies of branch temples of the Polgoda network. In each case, Samuels's informants describe attempts to bring head monks to temples on the fringes of the Polgoda network. The initial attempts meet with little success because, according to the informants, those monks failed to establish the necessary relationships with the patrons. Samuels notes that both cases illustrate how harmonious ties between a temple and its patrons occur through a dynamic process of negotiation and renegotiation that is, itself, driven by a whole range of emotions (p. 88). The monks who eventually came to reside at these temples exhibited a strong commitment to the local lay community, compassion, and a paternal nature. These qualities, more so than a strict adherence to canonical rules of deportment, scholarly acumen, or meditative prowess informed the patrons's desire to keep these monks at their temples.

Samuels highlights four propositions that emerge from his research: images of good monks, ideal Buddhist temples, and appropriate monastic roles are sketched on people's minds and hearts through a variety of mediums—not merely text-based or canonical avenues; notions of revival and reform function as strategies of legitimation,<sup>[6]</sup> which are used to validate distinct visions of the *sangha*, monastic vocation, and particular aesthetic standards; the forces that bring and hold together groups of Buddhists ... include affective bonds that are, themselves, deepened by common histories, similar values, shared sentiments, and collectively held aesthetic standards; and finally despite the problematic nature of emotions in Buddhist thought and practice, on the ground, emotions serve as cultural judgments of people and institutions that play a significant role in institution building (pp. xxiii, xxiv). Samuels's work succeeds in demonstrating the importance of affective bonds and aesthetic sensibilities to monastic recruitment, the creation of community, and temple building. His work complicates simplistic understandings of the monastic-lay relationship as one of economic exchange, and it encourages scholars to look more carefully at the personal and emotive side of socioreligious networks and their reproduction over time and space.

Yet there are at least three considerations that

Samuels might have taken to his work that would have strengthened it. For one, he does not always reference Sinhala terminology employed for the affective states being described. For instance, in chapter 1 when retelling Narada's story about the growing bonds between himself and the laity at Polgoda temple, Samuels highlights Narada's statement, "I developed sincere connections with the donors," but he does not tell us the Sinhala terms that Narada uses for "sincere connections," which could be helpful if we are to understand how Narada himself conceives of the affective bonds that interest Samuels (p. 12). Relying solely on the English translation here weakens his interpretation of his informant's account. Earlier in the same narrative, Samuels provides the Sinhala terms for "alms food," "difficult," and "donors" parenthetically (p. 11); thus, his choice to refrain from providing us with terms for the emphasized statement is puzzling. The book would certainly have benefited from a more detailed discussion of the relevant Sinhala aesthetic and emotional lexicon and it might have served as a means of linking some of the various narratives presented by the Sinhala-speaking informants. I raise this criticism in part because Samuels notes in his fourth chapter on monastic pedagogy, following Pierre Bourdieu (in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, translated by Richard Nice [1977]), that "behavioral patterns are then correlated to a specialized vocabulary," and "words that contain whole cosmologies and their utterance instill in the mind of their referents a whole way of being, acting, thinking, and relating" (pp. 75-76). I appreciate this discussion of words, pedagogy, and the production of ritualized agents, but it would be helpful if Samuels extended this attention to Sinhala terminology to his investigation of monastic recruitment and temple building as well.

Secondly, the issue of caste conflict, and by extension interfraternity conflict, looms in the background of Samuels's work. He is clearly aware of this, yet I wonder whether the book would have been stronger if Samuels treated the problems of caste division and prejudice more openly while remaining within the parameters of his methodological focus on emotion and affect. The choice to avoid delving into caste conflict too deeply may be due in part to fears that such a discussion would detract from his emphasis on affective states. Yet a fuller history of intercaste dynamics may very well complement Samuels's informants's emotive responses in several of the narratives that he presents in this work. For example, Narada's rationalization for recruiting poor children to the monastery may be read in light of his fraternity's competition with the prestigious Siyam Nikāya, in

which only high-caste males may fully ordain. The Rama's fraternity, to which Narada belongs, has an interesting historical tension with the Siyam Nikāya, and at least a brief sketch of this history would have enabled a more nuanced interpretation of the emotive states that Narada expresses in his narrative. Likewise, in Sumedha's explanation of the power of monastic deportment and appearance to attract people, he references the distinction between his Rama's Nikāya monks and the habits of the Siyam Nikāya. I wonder how taking into account a competitive aesthetics might enhance Samuels's work; since his informants express caste concerns throughout, including in reference to temple building and community-wide rituals. Such attention to competitive aesthetics would also necessitate a more careful discussion of the relationship between aesthetics and affective states since the more beautiful monks and monasteries might not directly equate with the most pleasant emotional experiences of many of Samuels's informants. In other words, well-groomed Siyam Nikāya monks and aesthetically stunning Siyam Nikāya temples might not elicit the same sorts of affective states as would their Amarapura and Rama's Nikāya counterparts.

Finally, the reference to family, or familial sentiment, appears often in informants's discussions of monastic recruitment, particularly in the third chapter. Parents seek monks who are gentle and loving. Boys are attracted to paternal monks. Samuels could have gone further by exploring the emotive states accompanying relatively young boys who leave their families behind, enter an ascetic lifestyle, and live within a new community. The concern for compassion and safety on the part of the parents might be due to the experiences that they know their sons will endure as they leave behind their familial lives, which is all that they have known up to this point. In many ways, the monastery serves as a surrogate family to the novices, and it would have been intriguing for Samuels to explore how the young boys undergo such a transition emotionally. As it stands, Samuels emphasizes the brighter side of monastic recruitment, but surely there are darker emotional struggles. One also wonders about the harsh realities of physical punishment, sexual and emotional abuse, and other sorts of violence and trauma that can occur in monasteries. Such things may not have transpired within the monasteries that Samuels studies, but if scholars of Buddhism are aware of these problems, surely the parents of novice monks are well acquainted with them too.

These few areas for potential improvement aside, Samuels's work makes a significant step in a novel di-

rection for the field of Buddhist studies. Scholars of religion and affect will surely want to engage this work, as will those working on the recruitment of religious professionals and the growth of religious communities. This work enriches our understanding of the complex ways by which Buddhist institutions sustain themselves, and it offers a helpful corrective to the more simplistic and economic model of social interaction within such communities. Samuels's book will provide students a vivid account of Buddhist monastic recruitment and temple life, and will therefore serve well on the syllabi of courses designed to introduce students to Buddhism as a lived tradition. It is accessible to a broad audience, and his ethnographic accounts provide a stimulating read. There is more that could be done regarding the study of affect and Buddhist monastic culture, and this work takes the first steps toward what will no doubt be a prolific arena for future studies.

#### Notes

[1]. Owen Lynch, ed., *Divine Passions: The Social Construction of Emotion in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Catherine Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll and Their Challenge to Western Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[2]. Stephen Berkwitz, "History and Gratitude in Theravada Buddhism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 3 (2003): 579-604; Stephen Berkwitz, "Emotions and Ethics in Buddhist History: The Sinhala Thupavamsa and the Work of Virtue," *Religion* 31, no.

2 (2001): 155-173; Maria Heim, "Buddhism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*, ed. John Corrigan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Maria Heim, "The Aesthetics of Excess," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 3 (2003): 531-554; Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[3]. Ivan Strenski, "On Generalized Exchange and the Domestication of the Sangha," *Man* 18, no. 3 (1983): 463-477.

[4]. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, "Networks of Faith: Interpersonal Bonds and Recruitment to Cults and Sects," in *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation*, ed. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 307-324.

[5]. Jeffrey Samuels, "Texts Memorized, Texts Performed: A Reconsideration of the Role of *Paritta* in Sri Lankan Monastic Education," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 28, no. 2 (2005): 339-367; and Jeffrey Samuels, "Becoming Novices: Buddhist Education, Monastic Identity, and Social Service in 20th- and 21st-Century Sri Lanka" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2002).

[6]. Steven Collins, "On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 15 (1990): 89.

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