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Temporary Ordination for Character Transformation: A Diasporic Practice with Transnational Connections

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R e s e a r c h A r t i c l e

Temporary Ordination for Character Transformation: A Diasporic Practice with Transnational Connections

D. Mitra Bhikkhu

Abstract

This essay explores an appropriation of the practice of temporary ordination in Toronto. For the last decade or so, Bangladeshi Buddhists have regularly congregated at a Sri Lankan temple to maintain their Buddhist identity. Their practice of temporary ordination distinguishes them from Sri Lankan Buddhists who are amused with the practice, which is not a part of the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition. In recent times, however, some Sri Lankan monks inspired by diasporic experience in Malaysia, have introduced temporary ordination to Sri Lanka with a new emphasis: character transformation. This has challenged, but not disrupted, the long-held Sri Lankan Buddhist discourse of "ordination for life." Analyzing temporary ordination in Toronto in relation to its counterparts in Sri Lanka and in the Sri Lankan diaspora in Malaysia, this essay argues that temporary ordination, a ritual traditionally practiced for the benefit of others, has been appropriated for the benefit of oneself in the diaspora. This appropriation facilitates the transmission of the Buddhist tradition to the second generation, but it also redefines what Theravada Buddhism is in the context of the Sri Lankan diaspora as well as in their country of origin, Sri Lanka.¹

Introduction

"Temporary ordination" in Theravada Buddhism refers to entering into a monastic life with the intention of going back to lay life, and it is distinguishable from the classical "ordination for life." Both practices are believed to be beneficial for oneself and others. However, temporary ordination is mostly performed for the benefit of living and/or deceased relatives. It is popular among Theravada Buddhists, except Sri Lankans, and it takes different names depending on the ordinand's intention. For example, in the Lao Buddhist tradition, ordination (*Buat*)² is known as *Buat Chua* (in the sense of rite of passage), *Buat Na Phai* (at the funeral service of a close relative), *Buat Uththis* (in memorial service), and *Buat Keaba* (in the sense of individual dedication for a fulfilled wish). Ordination is considered a means of merit-making for particular loved ones (parents, grandparents and ancestors), and it is performed only by

¹ I would like to convey my gratitude to Dr. Kay Koppedraayer (Wilfrid Laurier University) and Dr. Victor Hori (McGill University) for commenting on an earlier draft of this essay. I also appreciate editorial comments received from Dr. Cristina Rocha, Dr. Paul Numrich and two other anonymous referees associated with the *Journal of Global Buddhism*.

² Throughout this essay, the italicized words refer to technical terms related to temporary ordination. They are either in the classical Pali language or in one of the vernacular languages such as Sinhala, Lao, or Bangla depending on the context. Combining transliterations of these languages leads to inconsistency; as such, I avoid using diacritics to avert confusion.

male descendants at special times, i.e., funerals, memorial services, and/or ritually fertile times such as the Buddhist rain retreat (July-September). The concept of temporary ordination is new to Sri Lankan Buddhists, but not the belief in one's ordination benefiting others. They believe that "ordination [with life-long commitment] of one's son or daughter [is] the surest route to a heavenly birth" (Crosby, 2005: 166), and it is beneficial to four successive generations of the ordinand's family to realize nirvana (Wickremeratne, 2006: 201).

Buddhist leaders, influenced and inspired by the Sri Lankan diaspora in Malaysia, have introduced temporary ordination to Sri Lankan Buddhism. However, they have replaced its altruistic intention with self-orientation. Temporary ordination has become a regular program at selected locations under the advocacy and financial sponsorship of the Buddhist Cultural Centre in Colombo.³ It has emphasized the language of education, and unlike its counterpart in Southeast Asia, it has also coupled with another similar program which could be described as "quasi-nun ordination" for female aspirants. The Buddhist Cultural Centre claims that "it helps people (men and women) lead a simple life for 14 days and learn Buddhism, meditation and live like a monk for two weeks" (Dekanduwela Meditation Centre). Its temporary ordination resembles the novitiate program of the Sri Lankan Buddhist diaspora in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The late Venerable K. Sri Dhammānanda, a well-known Sri Lankan monk who served the Sri Lankan Buddhist diaspora in Kuala Lumpur, implemented a novitiate program in 1976 in which multi-ethnic Theravada Buddhists including the Sinhalese took part.

Similarly, for the last decade or so the West End Buddhist Centre, one of four Sri Lankan Buddhist temples in Toronto, has conducted a few temporary ordinations for the Bangladeshi Buddhists in Toronto. These events, specifically the one in July 2007, attracted a significant number of Sri Lankan Buddhists. Similar to its counterparts in Sri Lanka and Kuala Lumpur, temporary ordination in Toronto echoes the emphasis on education for self-enhancement and personal development rather than the procurement of merit for others. Accordingly, I contend that temporary ordination, a ritual traditionally practiced for the benefit of others, has been appropriated for the benefit of oneself in the diaspora; this *diasporic appropriation* facilitates the transmission of Buddhist tradition to the second generation, and it also redefines what Theravada Buddhism is in the context of the Sri Lankan diaspora as well as in their country of origin, Sri Lanka. The saga of temporary ordination for character transformation (positive changes in one's cognitive, affective, and behavioural formations) in three locations, namely Kuala Lumpur, Colombo, and Toronto, echoes Steven Vertovec's (2000) theory that religion in the diaspora evolves within the triadic connections between the country of residence, country of origin, and other diasporic locations of co-ethnoreligious communities.

The data used in this essay derive from my PhD research (from September 2005 to December 2009) on Buddhist practices, particularly those related to the transmission of Buddhism to the second-generation Buddhists at two Sri Lankan Buddhist temples in Toronto, Canada. The

³ The Venerable Kirama Vimalajōthi Thero founded the Buddhist Cultural Centre in 1992 under the patronage of the Venerable K. Sri Dhammānanda Thero. He spent nearly twenty years in the diaspora (Malaysia, Singapore, and the United States) before he returned to Sri Lanka in 1992 to serve Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Among other things, the Buddhist Culture Centre launched two-week long temporary ordination in 2003.

research included observation of participation, group and individual interviews, and two surveys, one for each generation. Surveys were sent out via the temples' email lists, and hard copies of them were also circulated for those who were not on the email lists. I conducted the interviews mainly in English, but also in a few cases in Sinhala and Bangla.

I began the research with Bronisław Malinowski's "participant observation;" however, I could not help but adopt "observation of participation" (Tedlock, 1991: 78) to utilize my role as a monk in the field. The latter enabled me to reflexively observe my own participation in the Buddhist practices under study. I prioritized my role as a researcher in the field. Yet, my relationships with each of the three groups I interviewed were distinctive and complex. With monks I felt a closely tied, intimate, and warm monastic brotherhood; with the first-generation Buddhists, I experienced a typical monk-devotee relationship with a sense of spiritual hierarchy and reservation; with youth participants, I felt a rather honest, formal researcher-researched interaction. I was aware of the complexity of the researcher-researched relationships involved in this research, and I strived to maintain academic standards in the field. In the course of fieldwork, I downplayed my role as a monk by keeping myself away from certain monastic activities such as preaching and teaching within the research community. I constantly reminded the interviewees the importance of honest responses for the research, and I requested that they treat me as a researcher. After all I believe that my role as a monk in the field is a position with its own limitations, blind spots, and perspectives that every researcher is bound to have.

This essay unfolds in three sections. First, I highlight the appropriation of temporary ordination as a means of Buddhist education for laity in Toronto. This educational emphasis in the diaspora, I argue, makes temporary ordination not only an embodied practice, a practice that optimizes the body of the ordinand to induce dispositions, but also a culturally integrated practice that combines both collective and individualistic Buddhist expressions. The language of education also facilitates the transmission of the Buddhist tradition to the second generation. Second, I compare and contrast temporary ordination to the practice of ordination for life. Here I contend that the absence of temporary ordination in Sri Lankan Buddhism is a distinct identity, and it is challenged by diasporic experience. Finally, I delineate the introduction of temporary ordination to Sri Lanka as an illustration of a diasporic religion's contribution to its country of origin. This makes us understand that the connections between religion in the diaspora and its counterpart in the country of origin are at least bidirectional. For sure, Buddhism in Sri Lanka influences Sri Lankan Buddhism in the diaspora, but at the same time, as the saga of temporary ordination illustrates that the latter also induces changes in the former.

Monastic Education for Laity

Bhikkhu Saranapāla, a Bangladeshi by birth and Sri Lankan-trained monk, confirmed that, since 1995, the monks at the West End Buddhist Centre in Toronto have periodically conducted a few temporary ordinations of young men of Bangladeshi ethnic background. The 2007 event was distinguishable from its counterparts in Bangladesh. Temporary ordination in Bangladesh is usually sponsored by a family often in conjunction with memorial services dedicated to family members. In contrast, the 2007 ordination was sponsored by a group of

families with a sense of Buddhist cultural education, an informal means to inculcate Buddhist cultural values in the successive generation. The invitation card of the event introduced the practice "as a training for life, and an important step in the formation of youths." In a follow-up interview, Bhikkhu Saranapāla explained that "it was a monastic education given to lay people. It was also a moral and cultural education they [the ordinands] received." The definition of temporary ordination as a monastic education for lay people derives from the Sri Lankan context. Bhikkhu Saranapāla explains, "in Bangladesh there is no such specific training [for temporary novices], but here I follow the kind of Sri Lankan monastic way of training novice monks." This educational emphasis convinced ordinands and their parents to participate in the practice.

Temporary Ordination as an Embodied Practice

Temporary ordination demonstrates a character transformation or making of a moral agent. At the 2007 ordination, seven young men with shaved heads gave up ordinary dress and donned yellow robes, and observed the Ten Precepts. Their lay names were replaced with monastic names. These illustrate that virtues like obedience, self-discipline, simplicity, humility, and letting go make a Buddhist moral agent. These virtues need to be translated into dispositions such as "tendencies, capacities, propensities, skills, habits, liabilities, proneness" (Asad, 1993: 33) in order for character transformation to take place. According to Talal Asad, the authoritative discourse involved in practice induces virtues as dispositions into one's character (1993: 36). This is where the monastic training that follows the temporary ordination becomes so important.

For seven days after the ordination, the novices observed the Ten Precepts and underwent monastic training with a daily routine from five o'clock in the morning to ten o'clock at night. The training includes memorization, reading, meditation, and ritualized practices such as group chanting, doing chores, graciously accepting what is offered, and taking food with mindfulness. Monastic training starts with action that implies both following customs (*sirith*) and observances (*virith*). It prevents the ordinands from doing things that go contrary to Buddhist virtues. The ordinands emulated their monastic preceptor, teacher, and other senior monks in handling their bodily actions. Justin McDaniel (2008: 12) argues that "[a] central aspect of a monk's education is to learn to imitate the 'look' of a monk. Physical and aesthetic awareness and discipline are complementary to textual study, memorization, ritual specificity, and concentration." Similarly, Jeffrey Samuels (2004: 966) observes that "[a]ction, in short, functioned to mold the bodies and minds of the novices," and he theorizes the Sri Lankan monastic training as an "action-oriented pedagogy" (2004: 962). More accurately, it is not just action but *mindful action* (derived from the Pali Canonical recommendation of the contemplation of the body (*kāyānupassanā*)) that is emphasized in the monastic training. Mindful action corresponds to the observation of "outward behaviors (e.g., bodily acts, social demeanor) with inward dispositions (e.g., emotional states, thoughts, intensions)" (Mahmood, 2005: 136). The mindful repetition of "virtue-embedded-practices" such as alms round (*pindapātha*) and triple bow (*vandana*) to the Buddha and senior monks penetrates the interiority (mental resistance, arrogance, pride) of the ordinand to induce transformation. The emphasis on the ordinand's body to transform character makes temporary ordination an embodied practice.

According to Saba Mahmood, "an embodied practice is an entire conceptualization of *the role the body plays in the making of the self*, one in which the outward behavior of the body constitutes both the potentiality and the means through which interiority is realized" (2005: 159, emphasis added). Monastic training illustrates that it uses the trainee's body as an effective tool to carry out the disciplinary actions; however, the training aims at not only bodily but also spiritual transformation. Reflecting on monastic training, a young former ordinand said

I guess, after the experience, I became more disciplined. First of all, we trained our bodies by waking up early and having not much food, and we did chores and physical activities...we also disciplined our minds with meditation and prayers. With these practices my discipline grew. (personal interview, 2009)

The preceding testimony also invokes Pierre Hadot's concept of spiritual exercises. Hadot argues that spiritual exercises are "practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but which were all intended to effect a modification and transformation in the subject who practiced them" (2002: 6). The seven-days-long monastic training did include physical, discursive, and intuitive aspects of spiritual exercises.

The ordinands memorized the Pali version of the Five Precepts, the verses on veneration of the Triple Gem, and the Loving Kindness Discourse. Being the language of scripture and liturgy, Pali is intimately connected to the Theravada Buddhist tradition. It is one of the common threads that bind all sub-traditions of Theravada Buddhism. As Hoffman and Mahinda's (1996) book title suggests, *Pali Buddhism* means Theravada Buddhism. In the tradition, Pali is known as a language of chanting; group intoning is celebrated. Chanting Pali in group (*gana sajjhāyana*) not only vocalizes the Theravada tradition but also forges a community. For example, as multiethnic Theravada Buddhists at the West End Buddhist Centre recite Pali chanting together; they find a sense of connection and commonness among themselves. Pali recitation expresses the devotional as well as communal aspects of Theravada Buddhism. Retention of Pali chanting is part and parcel of the retention of Theravada Buddhist identity.

The surveys conducted for this research indicate a dramatic decline in intergenerational appreciation for the Pali chanting. For example, 68% of the first generation expressed that they like Pali chanting a lot, but only 32.5% of the second generation felt the same way. Further, the phonetic disparity between Pali⁴ and Western languages, in this case English, and the dominance of Western cultural individualism increasingly challenge the transmission of Pali chanting to the successive generations. But, temporary monastic training required the ordinands to learn intoning and memorizing the basic Pali chanting. The parents of ordinands were impressed by the synchronized chanting their sons did from memory after the monastic training. In this case, the chanting of Pali by heart is understood not only as a tangible symbol of intergenerational transmission of the tradition but also as an embodiment of the tradition.

⁴ A temporary ordinand once referred to Pali as "tongue twisting" language.

Furthermore, the ordinands also read and discussed certain parts of the Venerable Walpola Rāhula's (1959) *What the Buddha Taught* and the Venerable Nārada's (1964) *The Buddha and His Teachings*. The former underscores philosophical and psychological interpretation of the Buddha's teachings, while the latter presents the Buddha as a historical figure with a religio-philosophy: the Four Noble Truths, kamma and rebirth, and Buddhist cosmology etc. These books simultaneously include modern and premodern impulses of Theravada Buddhism, and were intended to be passed to the ordinands. Thus, temporary ordination in Toronto has become a means to transmit the Buddhist tradition to the second generation. In it two distinctive cultures are integrated.

Temporary Ordination as a Culturally Integrated Practice

In the context of religion, rituals in general refer to the dynamic and bodily actions of religious practitioners. They are an integral part of the Buddhist tradition practiced by the first generation. They are performed individually and collectively at home and/or in the temple. Ritual is the first religious element that Buddhist children are acquainted with, and, ironically, it is also the first aspect of religion that children tend to question and then resist if they receive unconvincing answers, or, worse, if their questions are left unanswered or ignored. Subsequently, ritual becomes a point of difference between how the first and second generations approach Buddhism. A Buddhist youth said, "I guess I practice Buddhism differently than my parents. They are more into actual rituals and stuff like that." Young Buddhists are not anti-ritualistic; instead, they look for meanings in the rituals prior to enacting them. A young woman confirms that "our generation do not want [to] blindly follow, right?"

Referring to Pali chanting, a young man suggested that "Bhante [the monastic teacher] should have emphasized more meanings in *sutta* chanting." These are the same *suttas* many first-generation Buddhists often chant out of memory but barely look for the meanings in them. The young man's suggestion indicates the tendency of young people to look for meaning as they perform the religious practices. What effectively convinces them of the worth of a ritual is a meaning that resonates with a sense of personal and inter-personal well-being. Referring to the change in his attitude toward Buddhist rituals, a teen insisted that "all I can say is that if you understand what you are doing, and how it benefits to you and everyone else it's much easier doing it. Before, that understanding was not there, and now [after temporary ordination] I have a better understanding of the religious activities." The second generation's tendency to emphasize the meanings and reasons behind Buddhist practices prior to actually doing them often distinguishes them from the generation of their parents. The survey data indicate that 80% of the youth informants believe that they look for more meaning than do their parents. This generational disparity expressed in religious impulses, I suggest, derives from two different forms of cultural up-bringing, broadly defined by collectivism and individualism. Collective culture prioritizes communal concerns, values and expectations, where as individualistic culture centres on personal interest, feeling, and reason (Triandis 1995: 2).

The perception of temporary ordination as a form of religious education for laity enables both generations to integrate the aspects of both collective and individualistic cultures. For the

first generation, cultural and moral education means teaching practices (veneration and taking care of elders, sharing with others what one has), values (gratitude, social responsibility), and attitudes (humility, perception of oneself in relation to family and community) that derive from their collective culture. The monastic training that the ordinands received for seven days highlighted those collective cultural norms and personal traits. The ordinands immersed themselves into the collective cultural practices and disciplines; however, the ordinands' reflections and testimonies reveal that they also internalized temporary ordination and monastic training more in an individualistic sense, i.e., inner-experience, self-enhancement, and personal development. Explaining the benefit of his time as novice at the temple, an ordinand said,

I guess I have got in touch with *my spiritual self*...the spiritual experience and getting in touch with *my inner self* was the most valuable thing I gained from the monastic life. And, more importantly, I gained values, good habits, and my perspectives of Buddhism, and *how Buddhism explains the roles of parents, children, monk, and teachers*. (personal interview 2009, emphasis added)

The preceding testimony indicates that the ordinand related to temporary ordination from both individualistic and collective cultural perspectives; however, it is the individualistic expression that is more explicit. In Victor Hori's (1994) words, the testimony speaks loudly to the value of "self-understanding" and "self-realization" of Western Buddhists and less about the "self-examination" that is crucial to Eastern Buddhists. For Hori, both expressions "arise from two different notions of the person, the person as autonomous individual and the person as nexus of social relation" (1994: 48-49). In fact, the second-generation Buddhists embody both notions of personhood, and their cross-cultural integration of Buddhist tradition questions our understanding of Buddhism in North America, which is conceptualized along the line of "two Buddhisms" (Prebish 1993, Numrich 2003).

I have investigated how the second-generation Sri Lankan Buddhists in Toronto perceive the Buddha, the Sangha, the authority of Buddhist scripture and tradition; how they interpret the Buddhist beliefs in deities, karma, heaven and hells, and *Nibbāna*; and how they participate in Buddhist practices such as the Five Precepts, *pūja*, *dāna*, *vandana*, meditation, and social service to the community and humanity. My data suggest that a significant amount (nearly 50%) of the second-generation Sri Lankan Buddhists belong neither to so-called 'ethnic Buddhism' nor to 'convert Buddhism' exclusively. They reclaim their inherited Buddhist identities, and they question and in some cases disassociate themselves from the Buddhist beliefs and practices of their parents. Some of them integrate the intellectual, contemplative, and devotional aspects of the Buddhist tradition. For example, a graduate student in his late twenties explains his position in the Buddhist tradition:

I don't think that I would ever be interested in the ceremonial aspects of Buddhism, the cultural aspects of Buddhism. I think they are catalysts: When we are in situations where our minds are going into unskillful path; they act like catalysts. They remind us where we are right now; they are external phenomena to click our mind...I believe that every person at any moment of time can lose their mindfulness. I think meditators like myself even who are sure of themselves, can completely forget themselves saying that these kinds of ceremonials are not for them, and they can completely isolate themselves from

ceremonial sides and find themselves gone...*only to realize that they have completely gone to a wrong direction.* I think the ceremonial aspects or the show and dance aspects of Buddhism are good to ground us. They bring us to ground zero; they remind the basic lines. *Until the enlightenment, we need the rituals.* (Personal interview 2009, emphasis in original)

The interviewee expresses his ambivalence about the communal aspects of his inherited Buddhist tradition. He identifies himself as a serious meditation practitioner who is less interested in collective expression of Buddhism. But he neither rejects nor devalues the ceremonial or cultural aspects of Buddhism. Instead, he finds them instrumental "to ground" him in contemplative practices to realize the ultimate goal of Buddhism, namely spiritual awakening. He creatively integrates the salient aspects of the so-called "two Buddhisms." Perhaps, more importantly, he also makes us realize the importance of ambient cultural influence in the ways practitioners conceptualize and understand the Buddhist tradition.

Educational emphasis placed on temporary ordination has more or less marginalized the interpersonal and familial aspect of the practice. In Theravada societies and communities in Asia, temporary ordination is undertaken not only to confirm one's belongingness to the Buddhist community but also to express familial gratitude to parents and ancestors. A couple whose sons were ordained in 2007 disclosed that their sons will be re-ordained in Bangladesh simply because all their close relatives are there. If the idea of temporary ordination for the benefit of others was not completely forgotten,⁵ it definitely was submerged as the intention and discourse of personal growth and character transformation dominated the 2007 temporary ordination in Toronto. This shift in emphasis resonates with Ronald Grimes's observations on cross-cultural re-appropriation of aboriginal initiation. Grimes complains that "among many disaffiliated North Americans of European descent...initiation does not require solidarity with the ancestors or increased social responsibility; it is rather a means of personal growth and self-enhancement" (2000: 112). This trend is noticeable with temporary ordination in Toronto for cultural and geographical reasons as migration has disrupted the ties with ancestors and extended family.

The appropriation of temporary ordination as a religious education in the diaspora enables the practitioners to tackle new challenges: cross-cultural tension, intergenerational misunderstanding, and the transmission of Buddhist tradition. The first-generation parents often want their children to follow the religious practices as they do, but when the second generation asks for the deeper meanings of the practices the parents often become helpless. Relating to the effects of ordination on ordinands, a father revealed,

In terms of religious practices, now they go with rhythm. They used to resist with why they have to do this and that. I used to answer them like *you have to do this and that, and that is our tradition and culture.* That is how I answered them because I didn't have a clear answer to satisfy them. (personal interview 2009, emphasis in original)

This confession of a father of two teenage ordinands alludes to the intergenerational difference in internalizing Buddhism. The first generation's responses of this nature do not

⁵ Like after every merit-making ceremony, the parents poured water symbolizing sharing merit with their ancestors.

convince the second generation; instead, they increase misunderstanding on religious matters between them. The father implied that his sons had participated in Buddhist practices prior to the ordination, but he had noticed that after the ordination they are more engaged or more receptive to their parents' religious tradition. The father's observation is confirmed by the following statement of one of his sons:

I guess before we were forced to do, right? We didn't really understand why we do certain things...when we were forced to do it, we would do it, but we won't be that happy. But after the [monastic] experience, we are accepting more...we say this is our culture. (personal interview, 2009)

The preceding statement echoes a significant trend of what Paul Bramadat calls "the creative reclamation of South Asian cultural and religious traditions" (2005: 5) in Toronto. It also reminds us that it is the self-experiential practices like temporary ordination that facilitate the second generation to embrace their parental religious tradition not just as an inheritance but more as an individual choice. Similarly, Cynthia Mahmood observes that *amritdhari* ("baptized") young Canadian Sikhs internalize the Sikh identity "as a conscious and deliberate adult decision" (2005: 53). Another Buddhist ordinand admitted that "I always thought that my parents were pushing me to do what I did not want to do. But then after the monastic experience, I came to realize that they are doing this for my sake. They would never want me do bad things for me." Fascinated with such positive changes in behaviour and attitudes of her sons, a mother suggested that temporary ordination should be performed not only once for life but should be repeated every few years.

The reflections on temporary ordination of both ordinands and parents alike allude to the difference between rituals or rites in general on the one hand, and rites of passage specifically on the other. According to Grimes, rituals and rites of passage are two different things with distinct functions. He explains,

Ritual practices such as daily meditation and weekly worship are responses to recurring needs. These rites move but do not transform. By contrast, when effective rites of passage are enacted, they carry us from here to there in such a way that we are unable to return to square one. To enact any kind of rite is to *perform*, but to enact a rite of passage is also to *transform*. (2000: 7)

To limit rituals to the performance of the action with no transformative effects on the performer, and to say that ritual practice like meditation does not transform the meditator, are both debatable. For example, the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition does not necessarily rely on rites of passage to discipline and train lay Buddhists. Instead, it employs a variety of means such as precept observation, meditation, giving, and worship (according to Grimes all of them are rituals) to gradually transform its adherents. Perhaps, Grimes overplays the distinction between rituals in general and rites of passage. Nevertheless, Grimes's distinction is still important as it highlights the concentrated efficacy of rites of passage like temporary ordination in transforming character, an overlooked practice among Sri Lankan lay Buddhists.

Introduction of Temporary Ordination to Sri Lankan Buddhism

I suggest that the ambivalence toward temporary ordination in Sri Lankan Buddhism distinguishes itself from the other Theravada Buddhist traditions. Talal Asad (1986: 14) contends that an established practice intimately relates to the identity of a tradition. Similarly, I would suggest that the absence of a common established practice, available in other co-traditions, also constitutes the identity of a particular tradition. Richard Gombrich (1984: 45) argues that temporary ordination is a "distinct institution" in the Thai Buddhist tradition, and it has been unknown in Sri Lanka. The 2007 temporary ordination in Toronto introduces the practice as "a popular religious exercise in Buddhist traditions of Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Bangladesh." The omission of Sri Lanka in the list of Theravada societies implies that the institution of temporary ordination differentiates Sri Lankan Buddhism from the other Theravada Buddhist traditions.

The absence of temporary ordination within Sri Lankan Buddhism is often understood as the continuation of the tradition from the Buddha's time. Gombrich observes that "Sinhalese Buddhism has preserved what seems to have been the position in ancient times: one must enter the Order with the intention of doing so for life" (1984: 45). In the Pali Canon, the term *pabbajjā* literally means going forth from household life to homelessness with the implied intention of experiencing *Nibbāna*. This ideal goal of monasticism is still maintained. Ordinands including the temporary ones in Toronto symbolically ask for ordination "to end all suffering and to realize *nibbāna*"⁶. Although the concept and practice of *pabbajjā* in the Pali Canon echoed the ideal of *sansyasin* (renouncer), the fourth stage of life in Brahmanism, *pabbajjā* has never been considered "an irrevocable step" (Gombrich, 1984: 41). In the Pali Canon, the evidence of voluntarily disrobing or leaving monastic life behind is unknown; nevertheless, the conception of it was well formed. For instance, the Venerable Mālunkyaputta demanded from the Buddha direct answers to ten speculations, and he challenged the Buddha: if the Buddha "does not declare these to me, then I will abandon the training and return to the low life" (Nanamoli, 1995: 533).

The Pali commentator Buddhaghōsa refers to the practice of repeat ordinations in his *Samanthapāsādikā*, a Vinaya commentary written in the fifth century A.D. in Sri Lanka. Emphasizing the need of parental consent, specifically with respect to a minor's ordination, the Venerable Buddhaghōsa says "a boy is granted permission by his parents, but after his ordination he leaves the order again. Even if he is ordained and leaves a hundred times, his parents must be consulted again each time before he is ordained" (in Crosby, 2005: 161). This indicates that repeat ordination was possibly in practice in Sri Lanka in the time of Buddhaghōsa. The historical accounts of Sri Lanka also sporadically make references to certain individuals who regressed from the monastic life. Referring to Buddhist nationalism, Walpola Rāhula notes that "Bhikkhus were encouraged even to leave their robes and join the army for the sake of religion and the nation" (1956: 80). In modern Sri Lanka, disrobing is not uncommon, but it is rarely disclosed in public. It is true that those who disrobed, whose number is not insignificant, had entered monasticism with the conviction and expectation that they would remain monks for the rest of their lives. It means that temporary ordination

⁶ Although one hardly believes that *nibbana* is realizable within a short period of ordination, it is a common belief that every religious action contributes to and it is often dedicated to the realization of the supreme goal in the course of many lives to come.

never evolved as an institutional practice in Sri Lanka, and its absence is a distinct feature of Sri Lankan Buddhism. This identity of tradition, however, is recently challenged by the introduction of temporary ordination to Sri Lanka.

In 1982, the Colombo Hunupitiya Gangārāmaya, a well-known Buddhist temple with political clout conducted a publicized temporary ordination (Gombrich, 1984). In more recent years, a systematic effort has been undertaken by the Buddhist Cultural Centre to popularize temporary ordination for two weeks throughout Sri Lanka. The Cultural Centre established a separate institution, namely the Dekanduwela Meditation Centre at Horana, a suburb approximately 20-25 k.m. away from the capital Colombo, and it announced that "we would like to establish at least 20 such centers for promoting temporary ordinations" (Anonymous, 2004: 11).

These initiatives of temporary ordination in Sri Lanka have attracted both praise and criticism. The main recurring objections are that temporary ordination may trivialize ordination and its aspiration, and it may induce the loss of distinction between monks and laity. However, those who support the practice argue that temporary ordination "would make for closer relations between the Sangha and the laity" (Gombrich, 1984: 50). Bhante Punnaji, a highly respected Sinhalese monk in Toronto, echoes both pros and cons of temporary ordination. He says,

During the time of the Buddha, there was not such a thing what is called temporary ordination. There is not real benefit, but there is a benefit in the sense...every layman becomes a monk so he has experienced the difficulties of being a monk. Those who do not have experienced monastic life, they do not know how difficult it is. In a way it is good to have the temporary ordination because it gives much appreciation of monastic life. (personal interview, 2009)

He believes that the practice would encourage better attitudes or a more sympathetic understanding of the monastic life among the laity. Nevertheless, Gombrich interprets the 1982 effort to introduce temporary ordination in Sri Lanka in terms of tension between monks and laity, and conservatism and modernism. For him "it is a clerical counter-attack against modern lay Protestant Buddhism, and in particular against the meditation centre," and he further asserts that "I see it, rather, as a conservative move" (1984: 60). However, it challenges the tradition-defining discourse that seeks to "instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice" (Asad, 1986: 14). The discourse that has been challenged by temporary ordination is: *ordination is for one's entire life, not for a short period of time, and it is for the realization of Nibbāna*. This discourse shapes Sri Lankan Buddhists' assumptions, expectations, and responses toward Buddhist monkhood.

Monastic initiation in Sri Lanka is a carefully screened process. Whether a boy is worthy of ordination also depends on his horoscope (*keindare*) which contains the configuration of planets at the time of his birth. Since birth is believed to be karmically determined, the horoscope is interpreted as footprints of one's karma associated with previous lives. Generally, Buddhists in Sri Lanka believe that past karma conditions (for some it even determines) the present life. Accordingly, an astrologist reads the horoscope and predicts whether the boy would make an acceptable monk. The horoscope is examined for monastic

tendency (*mahana yōga*) which is more or less expressed in the form of "absence of stars in four critical position[s] where they ought to be" for worldly life (Wickremeratne, 2006: 202). A person with such a horoscope (*hatarapālu kendara*) is considered to be an ideal candidate for initiation, and he would be taken to the temple, where he will eventually be given the initiation after necessary training. In some cases, young boys are ordained to avoid life-threatening risks (*jīvita anaturu*) predicted in horoscope readings. The practice of examination of one's horoscope prior to ordination relates to two assumptions. First, it reinforces the Buddhist understanding that monastic life does not correspond to lay life, that they are two distinct paths. Second, it also indicates a general assumption held by Sri Lankan Buddhists that monasticism is not for everyone, but only for those with inherent monastic dispositions from previous lives (*sasara purudda*). Accordingly, for many Sri Lankan Buddhists, monks are born as much as they are made.

The discourse of ordination as a life-long commitment has made initiation an entry into a religious vocation. The candidate becomes a temple attendant (*abiththayā*) and has to undergo monastic training for a few weeks, months, or even a year or so. He is trained in Buddhist knowledge, attitudes, and values. The training as *abiththayā* also seeks to verify the candidates' commitment to monasticism, and, in fact, during its course some leave the training. Like in other Theravada societies, ordination with no prior monastic training is unheard of in Sri Lanka. It also not associated with commemoration of deceased relatives, although it is believed to be karmically beneficial to the families of the ordinand.

Horoscope reading and training prior to ordination increases not only the ordinand's conviction in monastic life but also the laity's expectation that those who enter the order would remain as monks for the rest of their lives. With that personal conviction and communal expectation, novice (*sāmaṇēra*) monks, in general, attract relatively more respect from the laity in Sri Lanka than their counterparts in other Theravada countries, where temporary ordination is widely practiced. In Sri Lanka *sāmaṇēras* and *bhikkhus* (fully ordained monks) are treated with less distinction in public ceremonies. For instance, the laity in Sri Lanka pays equal respect to *sāmaṇēras* and *bhikkhus*, and they allot equal shares of offerings to both, which is rare in other Theravada countries where the status of *sāmaṇēra* is often related to temporary ordination. *Sāmaṇēra* ordination, not being readily available in Sri Lanka, entails greater wonder and enchantment than in other Theravada countries.

Unlike in Thailand, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia, leaving the monastic order in Sri Lanka is associated with social stigma. Being an ex-monk attracts social disgrace. Swarna Wickremeratne (2006: 182) explains the reason behind the social response:

The lay attitude of veneration to monks is a tacit recognition of the rigors of monkhood. Correspondingly a monk who leaves the order tends to be stigmatized...It is interesting that in both Burma and Thailand relinquishing the robes does not carry the same sense of muted censure, because of the widespread tradition of temporary ordination in those countries.

An interviewee in Toronto recalls that ex-monks are traditionally compared to shards of pottery (*walankatu*), which belong neither to pottery nor to the earth, implying that ex-monks, too, fit neither in monastic nor lay lives. Social disgrace associated with leaving

monasticism derives from a combination of factors: belief in astrological pre-dispositions, pre-ordination practices, the communal expectation and honour toward monkhood, and the absence of temporary ordination. All these factors strengthen the traditional discourse that defines ordination as an initiation into a religious vocation available only for a few "chosen" individuals with life-long commitments.

Temporary ordination challenges the assumption of ordination prevalent in Sri Lanka. However, it does not disrupt but develops in parallel to the life-long ordination with a different focus. In non-Sri Lankan Theravada communities, temporary ordination often leads to life-long monastic commitment. Many monks in non-Sri Lankan Theravada communities initially enter the order temporarily. As their skills and discipline mature, they remain monks permanently. This common transition from temporary ordination to permanent monkhood is not recommended in Sri Lanka. Gombrich observes,

The most striking requirement, however, is a letter of consent to disrobe after 14 days. Should he [the ordinand] find after 14 days that he would like to stay in the Sangha for longer, Gangarama [the temple which organized the temporary ordination] cannot help: *he must disrobe and then apply to another temple for re-ordination.* (1984: 48, emphasis added)

The letter of consent to disrobe preauthorizes the temporary ordinand's obligatory exit from monasticism. Temporary ordination is distinguished from the ordination for permanent monastic membership. The former trains the ordinand for lay life, while the latter initiates the ordinand into monastic membership. Temporary ordinands eventually return to lay society, while permanent ordinands progressively claim permanent membership in the monastic community. Thus, temporary ordination conceptually challenges what ordination traditionally stands for, but so far it does not compromise the existing practice of ordination for life in Sri Lanka. In other words, an ordination of temporary commitment does not overlap with that of permanent commitment.

Instead, the contemporary advocacy of temporary ordination in Sri Lanka stresses the efficacy of the practice as religious education. Temporary ordination is recommended as an embodied practice geared toward the ordinand's character transformation. The Buddhist Cultural Centre, which sponsors and popularizes the practice, hopes that "if this attempt [the introduction of temporary ordination] is successful we can expect to reap the benefits, that is producing exemplary citizens, bringing down crime, violence, hatred and jealousy, and...producing citizens full of loving kindness, whom all Sri Lankans can be proud of" (Anonymous, 2004: 11). Thus temporary ordination is expected to bring affective and behavioural changes in ordinands' lives. This emphasis of character transformation has not been the primary intention of the practice in its traditional form. As noted in the case of Bangladeshi Buddhists in Toronto, the character transformation is a diasporic appropriation that replaces the ancestral veneration associated with the practice.

Diasporic Influence in the Country of Origin

The urge to introduce temporary ordination to Sri Lanka derives from the Sri Lankan Buddhist diaspora in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The Venerable Nānissara, who took initiative in

the 1982 temporary ordination in Colombo, says that "he was inspired to introduce temporary ordination to Sri Lanka by the Venerable K. Sri Dhammānanda, incumbent of the monastery in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia)" (Gombrich, 1984: 47). Similarly the Venerable Kirama Vimalajōti, the founder and director of the Buddhist Cultural Centre, expressed that he is influenced by his mentor, namely the Venerable K. Sri Dhammānanda, who also served as the religious advisor of the centre until his recent death.⁷

From 1952 until his death in 2006, the Venerable K. Sri Dhammānanda served the Buddhist Mahavihāra (initially known as the Brickfield Buddhist Temple) in Kuala Lumpur, which was founded by the Sri Lankan Buddhist diaspora in 1894 (Buddhist Mahavihara Malaysia). His service was not limited to the Sinhalese community. He reached out to other Buddhists, representing Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions (The Late Ven. Dr. K. Sri Dhammānanda). Within this context, he initiated the first temporary ordination in December 1976. As his online biography explains,

The objective of the novitiate programme is to provide the Malaysian Buddhists an opportunity to experience life as a monk. It has since become an annual affair where the Novitiate programme runs for about two weeks during the end-of-year school holidays.... Lady devotees are also encouraged to join in the annual programme by observing the 10 precepts of a lay disciple. (The Late Ven. Dr. K. Sri Dhammānanda)

These programs are conducted during school holidays, so that school students could take part in a type of complementary education. Female aspirants are also accommodated not by extending novicehood to them but by popularizing a lay-oriented version of the Ten Precepts. The Buddhist Cultural Centre promotes the same program in Sri Lanka.

This influence and inspiration from a diasporic location to the country of origin makes us re-think our conceptualization of the connections between the two localities. The connections between a diasporic community and its country of origin have never been a one-way process. The flows of people, ideas, commodities, influence, and cultural practices have not been confined between a particular diasporic community and its country of origin; rather, they have also been extended to co-ethnic communities who are globally dispersed (Vertovec, 2000). Diasporic communities do not always receive, but they also give or send things, ideas, and even practices to their countries of origin. Their constant monetary and material gifts and donations to their countries of origin are widely known. Many expatriates simultaneously participate in the politics of their countries of origin and their current residence. For instance, Indian Muslims and Hindus in the diaspora regularly influence the politics in India (Kurien, 2001, 2007).

Although many scholars (Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2002; Lavitt, 2007; McLellan, 1999) note the transnational connections of religion, only a few (Kurien, 2007; Froystad, 2009) demonstrate how exactly religions in the diaspora shape the religious landscape in the country of origin. For example, Kathinka Froystad (2009) illustrates that Swāmi Yōgānanda's Kriya Yōga, an exported religious practice, has returned to its country of origin, India with a set of new features added to it. She names this phenomenon as "return globalization." Froystad argues

⁷ A personal conversation with Ven. Kirama Vimalajōti on December 6, 2008 at the Buddhist Cultural Centre Dehiwala, Sri Lanka.

"the return globalization of Kriya Yōga involved a double mutation rather than a rollback of the changes brought about by its first export" (2009: 292). Similarly, the saga of temporary ordination in relation to Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition demonstrates *diasporic initiatives* not only in appropriating a religious practice that was not part of the original tradition, but also in transporting it to the country of origin. It illustrates that "once global channels are open, the flow of religious phenomena—symbols, ideas, practices, moods, motivations—is at least bidirectional, more likely multi-directional" (Csordas, 2009: 3–4).

Conclusion

I have analyzed temporary ordination from two different perspectives. First, I have discussed how the practice has been appropriated as a means of religious education for laity in Toronto. This diasporic appropriation, I argued, has transformed temporary ordination (a merit making ceremony dedicated to loved ones) to be an embodied practice that seeks to transform characters by transmitting knowledge, changing attitudes, and instilling values. Temporary ordination in the diaspora has also become a culturally integrated practice that facilitates intergenerational transmission of the Buddhist tradition. Second, I have highlighted temporary ordination as an institutional practice in Theravada Buddhism, except in Sri Lanka. I argued that its absence stands out as a distinct identifier of the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition. This distinct identity has been challenged as temporary ordination has been introduced to Sri Lanka in recent times. Interestingly enough, the introduction was initiated by the Sri Lankan Buddhist diaspora in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia.

The introduction of temporary ordination relates to historically developed ordination as a life-long religious commitment. Temporary ordination with obligatory retirement demonstrates how a discursive tradition evolves and redefines itself within its own reasonings. While opponents resist temporary ordination as trivialization of the life-long monastic commitment, proponents in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora validate the practice in the role of religious education for laity. The emphasis on education has diverted the intention of temporary ordination from the procurement of merit for others to the development of Buddhist dispositions for the purpose of self-transformation. This shift in focus renews the old Buddhist debate between self-benefit (*attahitāya*) and other-benefit (*parahitāya*).

In the context of Buddhist ethics, the *Anguttaranikāya* identifies four categories of people: (1) those who live neither for their own good nor for the good of others; (2) those who live for the good of others but not for their own good; (3) those who live for their own good but not for the good of others; and (4) those who live for both their own good and for the good of others (Thera, 2000: 104). Theravada Buddhism ranks them in sequence; the first is condemned and the fourth is highly appreciated as being the most morally superior (Mahinda, 1996: 115). According to the preceding ethical categories and moral hierarchy, temporary ordination for the benefit of oneself stands out as a "better" option than temporary ordination for the benefit of others. In practice, temporary ordination incorporates both self- and other-benefits; however, the discourse of self-benefit comes to the surface more than its counterpart. This shift indicates the individualist cultural influence on the Buddhist tradition not only in Toronto but also in Kuala Lumpur and Colombo.

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