

ONE

Beginnings and Looking Beyond

HOW DOES ONE TRANSLATE amorphous thoughts into the formal language of reason, to make sense? I do not know. I cannot think of sophisticated academic reasons for writing this book. It was a labor of love. I was moved by the simple notion that what I had to say might be of interest to others. In the pages that follow I explain how I came to be interested in the fascinating study of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, a people I love, and what all that has meant to me.

Born in Sri Lanka, I was exposed to culturally diverse experiences. I grew up in a Buddhist home under the influence of my Buddhist mother and participated in traditional Buddhist rituals. I was also influenced by Catholic relatives, who were our care givers. Becoming a part of my husband Ananda's family exposed me to a host of new cultural experiences, giving me opportunities to interact with Buddhist monks and Buddhist society in general. In a simple and unpretentious way, I thought of sharing my experiences with my friends, colleagues, and others. I am bewildered by the variety of experiences I have encountered in my life: living in three continents, studying (if that is the word) in three universities, being a citizen in three countries, involved in the political process of each, and making warm and enduring friends of different hues, inclinations, and modes of thinking. It was as if I were born and reborn in multiple incarnations, each incarnation bringing with it elements of serendipity and joy. I wonder at each mile I have walked, people I have known, books I have read, places I have worked, trees and flowers I have come to know, and beds on which I have slept. I often wonder who am I, where I belong. I have become in a sense homeless. All these things may appear banal, but they overwhelm me.

I am in many ways bicultural. I live between two worlds. America is my adopted country, the "melting pot," a nation that promises to transform all

immigrants into Americans. I wake up to a Starbruck's coffee and a doughnut, drink Evian water, play with Ipods, exchange text messages, visit crowded super malls, and watch television with its endless array of sports and celebrities. *Oprah Winfrey*, *Larry King Live*, the ubiquitous CNN, the spinmeisters of the media, and *Saturday Night Live* are all familiar to me. My other world is very different: the sun rises and sets at the same time every day, with no well-defined climatic variations, the tropical paradise. Buddha is worshipped along with many other gods, and a variety of practices and beliefs, each with their own festivals and holidays. Social inequality is institutionalized in the caste system, authority is respected, cricket is known, loved, and played. This then is the land of my birth, Lanka, a gem in the summer seas. I toggle between the two cultures. I am neither one nor the other. I am both in and in between two contrasting worlds.

Although I have made the United States my home for almost three decades, I have never left Sri Lanka. Some of my family still lives there. I have friends there and a home I visit regularly. I speak the languages of Sri Lanka, and I am much rooted there. My imagination, interests, associations, and thoughts never migrated here.

A young man in London was going through the private papers of his father, a writer, who had recently died. The son had often suggested to his father that he should live elsewhere, in a better place. The father would invariably smile and say that he was happy where he was. The son discovered the reason after his death. Prominently highlighted on the inner cover of a diary the father had diligently kept were these words ascribed to an unknown Buddhist monk: "Make yourself at home wherever you live, but call no place your home." It is an ideal impossible to live up to. Here in this wintry wasteland, it is with a clutch that I hear far away in Sri Lanka the haunting call of the *koba*, one rarely sees but hears vibrantly heralding the dawn of new things, new hopes.

Mine is a chronicle of personal experiences, intended for the general reader. As the phrase goes in popular Buddhist literature, it is *budi janayage pahan sanvegayaya sandaba*, which, in a loose translation means, for "the edification, well-being, and enjoyment of the many." I quote and refer to Buddhist texts and the Buddhist dharma, but do not address the doctrinal aspects of Buddhism and its teachings. Nor do I go into the history or origin of the concepts and practices that I refer to in this work. You will find merely my observations, encounters, and reminiscences of a layperson, a woman. It is a soft treading of the ground.

LIVING IN KANDY

I consider myself fortunate to have met a number of well-known Buddhist monks distinguished for their scholarship and erudition, as well as traditional

monks who in their modest inconspicuous way serve the needs of a large number of Buddhist laypersons, with hardship and sacrifice. I was also fortunate to become connected with Ananda's family in Kandy. That was my good karma. The family was respected and recognized in Kandy for their patronage and support of Buddhist causes. As a member of this household, I was exposed to many interesting experiences, which made deep impressions on me.

When I moved to Kandy, as a young adult, I did not realize, as I do now, that immigration from Colombo to Kandy amounted to something more than a mere change of scene. It was in Kandy, especially in the environment of the Dalada Maligava (Temple of the Tooth Relic) and the lake, that I felt the living presence of Buddhism. There was in the air certain serenity and ancientness as if the past were whispering to me. The muffled sounds of the *hevishi* drums being beaten at the Dalada Maligava and carried across the placid waters of the lake enhanced this feeling. Indeed, the town of Kandy and the surrounding areas abounded in temples and *viharas* remarkably preserving the ambience of the original structures. A breeze stirred, and the rustling leaves in the garden would whisper tales of Kandy long ago in the days of the fabled kings. It was said that if you walked around the lake late at night (a distance of a little over two miles), you would run into the deranged figure of Ahelepola Kumarihamy, asking whether you had seen her children, all of whom were cruelly killed (regardless of age or innocence), victims of the rage of the last king of Kandy.

I had many Catholic relatives whose belief systems were an integral part of my growing up. I attended Catholic schools in Sri Lanka, studied the Bible with Irish nuns, participated in rituals, and learned to pray using a rosary. Working in a Catholic university here in Chicago gave me the opportunity to attend courses relating to biblical studies and the history of religions. My writings reflect these influences. It is as if I had walked under many arches in my life, each one surpassing its predecessor in the impact it made on me. I have come to realize that what is beautiful about life is its subtle, slow unfolding.

In the following chapters I have referred to Buddhist texts I studied, including popular Buddhist literature and Jataka stories. Jataka stories in particular were part of my upbringing, side by side with Grimm's fairy tales. I have also quoted from writers such as Robert Knox, who among others enhanced my knowledge of the social, religious, and political history of Sri Lanka, which I studied as undergraduates in Peradeniya University.

AN ENGLISH CAPTIVE

Robert Knox was taken into captivity in 1659 by the king of Kandy, who was ruling the near-impregnable and powerful kingdom in the highlands of Ceylon (Sri Lanka). The king had effective control over parts of the seacoast,

although the maritime regions were technically in the hands of the Dutch, who had wrested these areas from their predecessors, the Portuguese. Knox's father, the captain of an ill-fated frigate, was shipwrecked off the coast of Ceylon along with eighteen of his shipmates and died shortly afterward, an event Knox describes with touching and deep-felt affection. Knox and many of his companions spent twenty years of somewhat lax and privileged captivity. They learned to speak Sinhala, dressed in Kandyan clothing, grew their hair like the Kandyan men, and lived like villagers. Unlike many of his fellow captives, Knox did not marry a Sinhala woman. He traveled around meeting a variety of people so that his impressions of Sinhala culture are considered reliable. He escaped to Dutch territory and finally reached England, where he became a legend, and in the spirit of the age, a heroic Christian, whose faith had survived infinite tribulations. In a celebrated account of this remarkable period of his life, *An Historical Relation of Ceylon*, Knox has written an insightful ethnography of the Sinhalese in the Kandyan kingdom, their customs, language, rituals, religious beliefs, and Buddhism. His observations on the last subject are often vitiated by his unbending fealty to his own faith, often attributing the evidence of ethical and moral behavior, which he found among the Sinhalese, to the influence of Christianity.

Living in America meant the evolution in my mind of new perspectives and images, which enriched my understanding of what is loosely described as Buddhist culture. My professional training in information technology in Simmons College, along with my work in university libraries both at Harvard and in Chicago, gave me unique opportunities for accessing a rich wealth of literature on Buddhism and its culture. I met a variety of graduate students and professors working on Buddhism in Sri Lanka, who wanted assistance in finding difficult-to-access materials. In this way too I became familiar with materials relating to Buddhist literature.

THEY ARE BUDDHISTS

The simple fact of having been born into a Buddhist household meant that I was immersed in the culture of Buddhism and that it was deeply ingrained into my system. Due to other influences and experiences I refer to in the text, I was able to acquire a detached perspective, which in some ways helped me to look at Buddhism from the angle of an outsider. In a way I was discovering Buddhism in my adult life.

A reader unfamiliar with the subject of Buddhism may rightly wonder who a "Buddhist" is. To be a Buddhist one has to take refuge in the Buddha, the dharma, and the Sangha, and take *pansil* (Five Precepts), commit oneself to observe them, thereby becoming a Buddhist layman. Five Precepts should be

recited daily and kept always. In addition one takes part in simple ceremonies, goes to the temple on *poya* (full moon) days, and makes ritual offerings of food from time to time to monks, a practice that is called “*dana*.” Above all one lives a spiritual life conscious of the need to be compassionate and generous.

OUR COLONIAL MASTERS

I give a glimpse of the way Buddhists practice their religion, or a lived Buddhism. I have attempted to put together the ancient rituals and practices of Buddhists, their extrareligious belief systems, and how Buddhism influenced these and how these have in turn become part of Buddhist practice. I have tried to show the role of temples and Buddhist monks in Sri Lankan society. Temples in Sri Lanka are not only places of worship but serve multiple purposes. They are also repositories of knowledge, schools imparting knowledge, sanctuaries for the ill, both in mind and body and serve a host of other functions. As in other religions, there is a difference between the precept and the practice of Buddhism. Sri Lankan Buddhism is unique, perhaps because Sri Lanka was occupied and ruled by foreigners for five centuries. The Portuguese made a great effort to convert the natives to Catholicism, especially in the regions bordering the sea, which were dominated by them. The Dutch who followed them were Protestants and in turn carried out their missionary activities of conversion by giving the natives material rewards and positions in the administration, a policy that greatly facilitated their conversion.

The trend continued when the British displaced the Dutch to become the undisputed colonial masters of the island until Sri Lanka became an independent country in 1948. Some Sri Lankans tempted by official favors became Christians, but the vast majority remained Buddhists and maintained connections with the temple and the monks. The first-generation converts were mostly Christian by name, but the missionaries focused on the generation to come, who eventually became faithful Christians. In contrast to the time of the Portuguese when Sri Lankans who were converted to Christianity became Catholics, under the British, the converts became Protestants, Anglicans, Wesleyans, or Baptists. In spite of the bitter sectarian rivalry in England, in the colonies the Christian missionaries made common cause against Buddhism, in what they thought was a benighted heathen land.

TWO CULTURES THEN AND NOW

For centuries Buddhism and the Buddhist monks had received great support from the state. The traditional function of a king in a Buddhist country was to protect Buddhism. He was given the epithet *dharmaraja*, which means “the

lord who rules righteously.” It was his duty to give patronage to Buddhism and refrain from doing anything that would be detrimental to its interests. However, with foreign rule, Buddhist temples and the monks lost the traditional patronage from the state. Moreover, as an inducement to adopt the new religion—Christianity—natives were given many forms of material incentives. There were many temptations in the form of the granting of honorific titles that appealed to a people, still immersed in the ethos of feudal thinking, inducements of a monetary nature, grants of land, government jobs, tax exemptions, and policies of covert persecution. In spite of all enticements, the majority of the Sinhala people remained Buddhists.

The European presence (from 1505 until 1948) together with Christianity confronted Buddhism with a challenge with far-reaching consequences, which outlasted the periods of foreign domination. The legislative changes brought about by the European rulers had an adverse impact on existing Buddhist institutions (primarily Buddhist monasteries). More far-reaching though less visible were the changes within the Buddhist community. Uneven economic opportunities that arose out of policies of the British led to the rise of an anglicized elite class of Sri Lankans who, though comparatively few in number, wielded enormous influence. They saw themselves as the representatives of the people and were regarded as such by the British rulers. The urban-centered elite could be clearly differentiated from the mass of the Sri Lankans. The British reached out to the latter by reviving traditional institutions of governance such as *gamsabas* (village councils) and by restoring irrigational facilities, the twin institutions on which the rural agrarian system had been based. The well-intended policies had the effect of reinforcing the village ethos and further perpetuating the cultural gap between the two forms of Buddhists, which I have sought to identify.

The duality marked the final emergence of mutually separate Sri Lankan cultures. Some of the elite elements in Sri Lankan society became Christians, a change that clearly enhanced their mobility. The majority remained nominally Buddhists. But in a self-conscious way they distanced themselves (with increased Anglicanization) from the traditional forms and rituals, which were associated with Buddhism. In time they became the progenitors of a new form of urban Buddhism, choosing to relate to Buddhism largely in an intellectual way in terms of its attractive ideology. Pioneer Western books on Buddhism created in their minds, as the ideal norm, a textualist-based vision of what a Buddhist society ought to be. A class divide that originally arose from the impact of economic factors was legitimized by religion and culture. When the dust cleared, in Sri Lanka there were two forms of Buddhism with the potential for future differentiation. Sri Lanka for all the differences that prevail is a mix of things, a pastiche of sorts. The overall phenomenon I have described has the potential to create a sense of unease among Sri Lankan Buddhists as to whom they really are.

A BUDDHIST CULTURAL IDIOM

I have tried in the pages that follow to share with the reader my impressions of Buddhist society as it exists in Sri Lanka today. By interweaving my own personal experiences and impressions with what I describe, I hope that I have succeeded in giving the text authenticity and meaning. I tried to deal with the trends of a culture influenced largely by Buddhism, which has existed in Sri Lanka for well over two thousand years. I am aware that culture is an amorphous term and one hard to define with any degree of precision. It may, however, be sensed or appropriated by its manifestations. I refer to modalities of thinking, idioms of speech, syntactical forms of grammar with a partiality for impersonal speech, and preference for the passive voice focusing on action rather than an author. These may be related to the matrix of Buddhism and its *weltanschauung*, or as the world view was popularly understood at ground level by Sri Lankan Buddhists themselves. I found it fascinating that numerous Catholic friends and relatives in Sri Lanka carry on in their everyday conversations and actions as if they themselves were part of a Buddhist matrix but of course being unaware of it. It was for example not uncommon for Sri Lankan Catholics to refer to bad karma or to see the effects of some situation in terms of not doing the right thing in previous lives, and so on. Even after the lapse of many generations of being Catholic in a predominantly Buddhist country, they have been unable to completely shed cultural affinity to Buddhists and Buddhism.

A WORD ABOUT THE TEXT

To get down to more practical matters, I have divided the text into themes. In the first section I deal with the overall cultural setting of Sri Lankan society, its hierarchical nature based on the structures of caste and underlying ideological assumptions pertaining to caste. I have traced belief systems, transgenerational modes of thinking, and finally the overall pervasive influence of Buddhism in Sri Lankan culture. Within the cultural dimension I have not neglected the significant role played by indigenous medicine and its therapeutic systems.

In the second section I have concentrated on seminal Buddhist theories pertaining to karma, rebirth, and the significant Buddhist tradition of giving (*dana*) and how Buddhists deal with death. In doing so I have taken care to move away from doctrinal and theological perspectives, focusing instead on these very themes as they are realized in actual religious practice as the reality of living sociological Buddhism in Sri Lanka. I have written about the significance of healing rites, *pirit* (ceremonies), pilgrimages, *bana* preaching, and perennially popular Bodhi *pujas* as part and parcel of the Buddhist popular culture.

Whichever way we look at Buddhist culture, its core integral element in recent times has been the institution of the Sangha (order of monks) in Sri

Lanka. I have treated the order of Buddhist monks in my narration not as it is widely perceived as an undifferentiated monolith but as a vibrant diversity: the traditional monks and a new facet of monks who are sensitive to the changing needs of the Buddhist laity and have creatively adapted strategies and forms of interactivity with the lay community to meet broader social needs. In the process, I have highlighted the personalities of prominent monks who belong to both genres. On the whole, in the narration of my text, I have seen the new developments as evidence of the resilience and dynamism of the monkhood. This sensitivity to change might well be a key principle in understanding the successful survival of the institution of Buddhist monkhood well over two millennia.

Last, as a segment in its own right, I have brought together into a single focus the widely practiced extra-Buddhist religious forms of worship, some traditional, and others innovatively novel, which is a significant feature in the newly emerging topography of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. I have drawn attention to the virtual rejuvenation and resurrection of the traditional pantheon of gods associated with popular Buddhism and newer and innovative forms of worship. As part of my overview I have encompassed the widespread resort to propitiation of spirits and godlings, traditionally associated with healing, enmity, and wrecking vengeance on enemies.

Since all of the foregoing is about the structure of the text, in originally conceiving in my mind what should and should not constitute its main themes, I was aware of the feminist dimension or what is colloquially called "feminist issues." It is these days *de riguer* to explicitly touch on feminism in the unraveling of broad sociological issues, so why not in a study such as mine, which purports to be a survey of popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka viewed in the prism of continuing personal recollections and first hand experiences? I was also very much aware that the harp in feminist-biased studies is played primarily on two strings, namely, drawing attention to total negligence of feminist issues and emphasizing discrimination.

Buddhism in Sri Lanka is a mixed bag. First in Buddhist theory, and indeed as it is consciously practiced, there is no gender differentiation when it comes to the overarching schema of the dharma. In the rituals I refer to in the text extensively—namely Buddhist prayer, homage, taking the precepts, lighting lamps at sacred localities, Bodhi *pujas*, pilgrimages, and so on, or in the initiation and execution of each ritual—women are key players, or put in another way, women in Sri Lanka are not ritually excluded as in Hinduism. In a sense one has to scratch hard to see evidence of institutionalized discrimination.

THE PERILS OF A BUDDHIST EVE

Within the Buddhist historical tradition we have Buddha's reluctance, in spite of the importunities of his disciple Ananda, and the dramatic *pada yatra* of

Buddha's foster mother Prajapathi Gotami, to establish a feminist order. We see too the failure of such an order to take root in all Buddhist countries, notwithstanding the moderate success achieved in Sri Lanka by Bhikkhuni Kusuma to establish such an order. Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka are hesitant to give it recognition and accept the Bhikkhuni order as equal in status. Last summer when I was researching in Thailand on popular Buddhism, for a period of several weeks, the Bangkok news media dramatically highlighted the controversies concerning the issue of feminism. In northern Thailand a Buddhist patriarch of a famous monastery excluded women from entering the inner sanctum of his monastery, which hitherto they had freely done, on the grounds of menstruation and pollution. The patriarch of Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai followed suit. All over Thailand educated elitist Buddhist women were in uproar and agitated for the removal of the prohibition. When I left, a sensible compromise, which is the hallmark of Buddhism in Thailand and accounts for its enviable resilience, was being worked out.

Then again, in popular Buddhist belief, women are born to the unfortunate state of being women presumptively because of bad karma from past lives. Its corollary is that in their present lives if they live up to Buddhist standards and consciously do good karma, they will be rewarded by being born as a man in their next life. There is a practice in traditional homes, Buddhist, Hindu, and even converted Christians, of the wife worshipping her spouse. That the husband is the theoretical head of the household is rarely questioned. His authority prevails even where the wife is more educated than the husband. These ideas and practices, among a host of others, have become a part of the Sri Lankan culture and are transmitted to newer generations as an integral part of the Sri Lankan popular culture. It is, however, possible that the old ways of thinking may soon disappear given the catalyst of rapid economic change in Sri Lanka.

In this text a running motif points to the failure of Buddhism in Sri Lanka to undermine, let alone eradicate, the preexistence of male domination and male chauvinism, both derivatives of an older anthropology of things. With all the negative attitudes toward women it is paradoxical that Sri Lanka had the first woman prime minister and then a woman president. All this fit into our complex and cosmopolitan culture. There is a popular saying in Sinhala culture that women possess sixty-four *mayams* (tricks) designed to attract, seduce, deceive, and lead men astray. These *mayams* are hyperbolic and imaginary. They have never been categorized, listed, or defined. They may take the form of laughter, anger, crying, affection, flirting, or any other form of simulated behavior. It is also lyrically expressed in a popular song that Bhrahma—the god of creation, created the woman by mixing together the most venomous poison of every variety of poisonous snake and added honey and milk to it. So beware; the mix may appear sweet as honey, but it may also contains deadly poison!

SIGMUND FREUD DRIVES A THREE WHEELER

Reading the text one may get the idea that the author is foreign to the culture about which she writes. I am much a part of this culture, and I interact with it as a native should. My long years of living abroad have not removed me from being a native in my own land. But evidently I do not pass muster in the eyes of the casual observer, the omniscient three-wheeler driver. Last summer in Colombo, I got into a three wheeler, the "Baja" it is called, the universal, affordable and popular means of transport in modern Sri Lanka and in the East, the local counterpart of a taxicab in Chicago. After the initial protocols of speech with the driver, our conversation flowed freely. It so happened that the Baja driver was a dropout from a prominent local university who announced that he knew psychology and impressively dropped the name of Freud. Much to my private amusement he added that he was a shrewd observer of human behavior and never missed a trick, all the time looking at me in his small rear mirror. He told me during the short ride of his ambitions of collecting money to go to Dubai for a job to earn real money. The Baja was swerving dangerously around other larger vehicles to get to our destination, and I was getting nervous and told the driver that I was in no hurry. I was surprised at how good he was at his job and how he could avoid being run over. He remarked on how fluently I spoke the native language and idiom but also thought I might be living in some other country. He asked me where I was from. I said that I was from Kandy and gave him the local street name. He repeated his question with a ring of irritation, and I repeated my answer. To continue the conversation, I told him that I live in Chicago. At that he exclaimed, "Oh that is where love is." I asked him to explain. He replied, "When young lovers waiting for a bus hold hands, we say it is love like in Chicago."