

Popularizing Buddhism: Preaching as Performance in Sri Lanka, by Mahinda Deegalle.
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Popularizing Buddhism fills an important lacuna in our understanding of Buddhist sermons and preaching as performance. As an historian of religion, Mahinda Deegalle is particularly interested in the growth and development of preaching traditions within Sri Lankan Buddhism. Not solely content with describing various types of sermons, Ven. Deegalle (hereafter Deegalle) is interested in illustrating how social and historical changes affect the forms and contents of Buddhist sermons and preaching over the *longue durée*. In illustrating the relative dearth of material on Buddhist preaching (*baṇa*), in the first chapter, Deegalle goes on to argue for the need to understand ‘preaching’s pervasive power as a tool in converting human hearts in a variety of different religious communities’ (3). That power, he argues, is not merely limited to providing religious instruction; it also includes rhythmically reading Buddhist texts in public, reading religious texts aloud while explaining their meaning and content in the vernacular, and narrating stories of the Buddha and his past lives with or without explanation.

Chapter 2 sets the stage, so to speak, by turning to the starting point of Buddhist sermons: the Buddha. As *the* paradigmatic preacher, Deegalle maintains that the Buddha’s physical, oral, and emotional appeal played a crucial role in drawing people around him. In highlighting the Pāli canon’s description of the Buddha’s ability to select sermons best suited for his audiences, Deegalle provides an important foundation for his subsequent discussion regarding the range of sermons and preaching performances that developed over time, as monks and laypeople sought to adapt Buddhism to their own circumstances and needs.

In chapter 3, Deegalle discusses the background out of which the preaching (*baṇa*) tradition grew. Examining the usages and meanings of two terms — reciters of the doctrine (*dhammabhāṇaka*) and preachers of the doctrine (*dhammakathika*) — Deegalle links the sermon-giving or *baṇa* tradition that began to emerge after the tenth century in Sri Lanka with the earlier *dhammabhāṇaka* and *dhammakathika* traditions of India and Sri Lanka. With the writing of *baṇa* books (*baṇapot*) in the thirteenth century, Deegalle documents how preaching became tied to a variety of rituals, ceremonies, and practices.

Chapter 4 looks at several social and historical factors that led to the composition and dissemination of vernacular preaching books (*baṇapot*) in Sri Lanka. Buddhist scholarship, prior to the thirteenth century, primarily centered on the composition of Pāli commentaries and Buddhist manuals (e.g., the *Visuddhimagga*) and had, according to Deegalle, adverse results on the development of the Sinhala language and Sinhalese literature (e.g., doing away with Sinhala idioms and extracting Buddhist teachings from their Sri Lankan contexts in the hopes of returning to the ‘original teachings’). Deegalle also highlights how the Chola invasions of 981 and 1017, as well as subsequent ones, forced a shift away from the

translocal language of Pāli to Sinhala. Focusing more narrowly on a select group of preaching texts composed in Sinhalese — such as Gurulugōmi’s *Amāvatura*, Buddhaputra Thera’s *Pūjāvāliya*, and Vidyācakravartī’s *Butsarāṇa* — Deegalle illustrates how such texts shifted Buddhism in Sri Lanka from a more cosmopolitan outlook to one that was more attentive to the religious and social needs of local Buddhists. The growing awareness of Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite devotionalism at the time also affected the content of Buddhist sermons, as the authors of the *baṇapot* sought to instil, in the hearts and minds of the books’ readers and listeners, devotional attitudes toward the Buddha (*Buddhabhakti*).

Chapter 5 draws on the author’s long-standing work on the two-pulpit preaching (*āsana dekē baṇa*) ritual that emerged in eighteenth-century Sri Lanka, out of the changes that had already begun during the thirteenth century. In showing how ritualized singing, chanting, and dramatic performances instilled feelings of religious piety within the laity, Deegalle is careful not to disassociate aesthetics from the inculcation of Buddhist mores and doctrines. Besides seeking to provide an historical overview for the development of the ritual and the sources that describe its performance, Deegalle meticulously examines four segments of the ritual — from the verses of homage praising the Buddha to narration of the story of the future Buddha — that encourage the audience’s participation in preaching-related activities and other virtuous practices.

Chapter 6 examines the effects that ‘rational Buddhism’ had on the content and form of Buddhist sermons during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Deegalle documents the inclination, at the time, to replace ritualized, dramatic preaching performances with more sober, condensed, and less emotionally stimulating sermons. By investigating the writings of Anagārika Dharmapāla as well as by exploring other innovations (e.g., the use of the printing press to disseminate Buddhist doctrine) and influences (e.g., Christian preaching styles) of the period, Deegalle illustrates how the new preaching style grew out of a growing awareness that sermons should be used as instruments for social regeneration and growth. By also turning to other types of preaching performances that were present during the same period (such as the *Sūvisi Vivaraṇaya*, reenactments of King Milinda’s questions to Venerable Nagasena, and the performance of Demon Ālavaka’s conversion to Buddhism), Deegalle carefully avoids the tendency to overstate the effects that Dharmapāla and other reformers had on Buddhist practices in Sri Lanka.

Building on the previous chapter’s discussion of rational Buddhism, chapter 7 turns to the effects that other means of communication — radio, television, and the internet — had on Buddhist preaching. Beginning with the Vajirārāma style of preaching, that is, preaching short sermons focusing on contemporary concerns, Deegalle aptly shows how a sermon’s intended audience affected its form and content. With the change of sermon came a new type of preacher: someone who, freed from the burden of elaborate preaching performances, could now communicate — multiple times a day through several mediums — short *Dhamma* messages concerning examples of backwardness within society. The popularity of the Vajirārāma style, however, did not mean that everyone was content to do away with more elaborate, aesthetic sermons. It was out of this need that new types of performances arose, such as Venerable Pānadurē Ariyadhamma’s *Aṭavisi Buddhapūjā* (also known, more popularly, as *Bodhipūjā*).

Finally, chapter 8 deals with another important performance: poetic preaching or *kavi baṇa*. Deegalle begins the chapter by positing that this new form of Buddhist preaching, which combines poetry and music, is driven by the belief that ‘virtues learned in the temple through religious instruction actually have very little influence on cultivating virtues and shaping the conduct and character of the people’ (171). After a brief examination of precursors of modern *kavi baṇa* — from the Anurādhapura Period (301–1029) to the Kōṭṭē Period (1411–1597) — Deegalle discusses the founder of the modern poetic genre of preaching, Siyambalagamuvē Guṇaratana. Along with illustrating how effective Guṇaratana’s poetic preaching was in keeping the audience focused on the content of the sermons and in filling the attendees’ hearts and minds with both faith and devotion, Deegalle uses the example of Guṇaratana to highlight the dynamism that underlies Sri Lanka’s tradition of preaching by discussing the tensions that existed between Guṇaratana’s *kavi baṇa* and the more sober Vajirārāma style created by Venerable Pāḷānē Vajirañāna.

Popularizing Buddhism does a remarkable job situating various forms of preaching within particular social and religious contexts. Deegalle’s attention to the relationship between message and form enables the reader to appreciate Buddhist preaching as performance as well as the effects that such performances have had and continue to have on popular religion and Buddhist practice. The range of sermons that Deegalle covers in his book is nothing short of remarkable; his knowledge and use of a plethora of Pāli and Sinhala sources is quite astounding. At the same time, however, although Deegalle sets the stage by analyzing various components of the rituals themselves, it would have been even more helpful to the reader if the author had expanded his analyses to the content of the actual sermons themselves. Providing the reader (whether in the chapters or in an appendix) with actual translations — of several sermons culled from the *baṇapot*, from the palm-leaf manuscripts that were used in two pulpits, from more modern sermons reflecting the Vajirārāma style, and from Guṇaratana’s own *kavi baṇa* — would have enabled the reader to appreciate and ascertain more completely how changing historical and social contexts have affected the content of Buddhist sermons.

In addition, Deegalle aptly illustrates throughout his book the effects that different forms of sermons have on the audience. While I would agree with the author that by embodying a particular aesthetic or modeling a particular work ethic (151) monastics are able to inculcate particular values among ‘average Buddhists’, I cannot help but wonder about the degree to which learning the contents of Buddhist sermons as well as how to best perform them instills, in the hearts and minds of monks and novices themselves, ideas about proper monastic appearance, vocation, and deportment.

These minor shortcomings aside, *Popularizing Buddhism* is an invaluable resource for scholars and students of Buddhism interested not only in Buddhist preaching, but also in how social and historical changes continuously affect and shape Buddhist monastic culture.

Jeffrey Samuels

jeffrey.samuels@wku.edu

Western Kentucky University, USA