

*Ways of Knowing and Transmitting Religious Knowledge: Case Studies of Theravāda Buddhist Nuns*, by Nirmala S. Salgado

Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Vol. 19, No. 1 1996

NIRMALA S. SALGADO

Ways of Knowing and  
Transmitting Religious Knowledge:  
Case Studies of Theravāda Buddhist Nuns

Studies of the education and transmission of Buddhist knowledge in the Theravāda tradition have usually focused on formal institutional structures of learning such as those provided by major monastic traditions. Until recently, relatively little attention has been given to informal ways of knowing and transmitting religious knowledge, specifically, those that are created and re-created by groups which are in a constant process of transformation.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the participation of women in such informal systems of knowing has often been ignored. While Bartholomeuz's extensive study of Buddhist nuns discusses the place of religious education for predominantly elite and well-known head-nuns, to date there has been no investigation of changes among the attitudes as well as the composition of the junior nuns in individual hermitages.<sup>2</sup> This is important

---

I am indebted to the International Center for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, for the initial support given for this investigation. I am also grateful to Ananda and Rukmini Kulasuriya as well as Kusuma Devendra who helped me in Sri Lanka. Ven. Deegalle Mahinda and Ananda P. Guruge gave me useful comments on drafts of this article. George Bond, Martie Reineke, and Paul Westman gave me much encouragement and many helpful suggestions throughout my work on this paper. I am also thankful to the editors and readers of the *JIAS* for their insightful suggestions which helped me improve this work.

1. One of the best studies that does discuss this is M. Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka*, (Delhi: OUP, 1983). Other more recent studies are found in G. Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1988) and R. Gombrich and G. Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988).

2. I use the term "nuns" to refer to the ten-precept-mothers or *dasa sil māniyo* who have renounced the household life and live either in communities or alone on a more or less permanent basis. I do not refer here to fully ordained

since it is indicative both of developments within particular groups of nuns and of probable changes affecting the community of female renunciants as a whole.

This essay will focus on two groups of nuns and attempt to explore the religious education that is accessible to contemporary Buddhist women at a grass-roots level. I will draw on interviews conducted with junior as well as head nuns in order to demonstrate the importance of recognizing that established "institutions" of nuns are in a constant state of flux. Additionally, an investigation of religious transmission among contemporary groups of nuns in Sri Lanka will provide a clue as to how women's ways of knowing<sup>3</sup> figure in the on-going process of revival and reform in Sri Lankan Buddhism today.

Initially, this study will examine the nature and content of religious education provided by early monastic centers in Ceylon and discuss how the transmission of religious knowledge affected the status of education in general and that of women in particular. The ways in which the Buddhist revival in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries sparked a renewal of interest in the education of *bhikkhus*, lay children and nuns, illustrates to a certain extent, the tension between the types of knowledge imparted to Buddhist monks and nuns to this day. After examining the more traditionally established systems of knowing, this study focuses on how the lives and ways of knowing of two very different head nuns have defined religious knowledge for their hermitages as well as the lay folk whom they serve. This study will demonstrate that these two head nuns and their hermitages, while representing a marginalized and liminal group,<sup>4</sup> nevertheless, provide centers of cultural transmission that are well within the main stream of the rapidly changing religious scene of Sri Lankan Buddhism today. This investigation will further suggest that in earlier times too, more informal ways of knowing such as those in which the

---

*bhikkhunis*. Similarly, when discussing the "ordination of nuns" I refer not to the higher or lower ordination of *bhikkhunis* but to the ordination of ten-precept-mothers only.

3. I have borrowed the term "women's ways of knowing" from the book of the same title by M. F. Belenkey, et. al., *Women's Ways of Knowing* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). I have not however used it in exactly the same way.

4. For a good discussion of the liminality of Buddhist nuns see K. Devendra, "Establishment of the Order of Buddhist Nuns and its Development in Sri Lanka," *Sakydhitā: Daughters of the Buddha* (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1988) 262-266.

nuns currently participate might have co-existed with the major monastic centers of learning.

## EDUCATION

### *Historical Precedents*

Provision for the formal education of *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhuniīs* has existed almost since the inception of Buddhism in Ceylon.<sup>5</sup> Since written texts were rare or inaccessible, an important part of this education was the memorization of texts for the purpose of transmitting the tradition orally. This was a continuation of the *bhānaka* tradition which flourished in India and became a central means of preserving and teaching the Dhamma after the Buddha's demise. As centers of monastic learning became established, the transmission and character of religious knowledge was debated, redefined and broadened. Learning at the monastic centers came to include that of secular subjects.<sup>6</sup> The teaching of these subjects to the clergy, a practice still hotly debated today, was in keeping with the traditional curriculum at Buddhist monastic centers in India.<sup>7</sup> The inclusion of secular subjects in the curriculum could have been a cause for as well as a consequence of increased involvement with the laity. Since these subjects would have been taught at monastic centers of learning, providing an education for laity such as student physicians and astrologers, it is likely that this would have necessitated an increased demand for teaching facilities and tools. This in turn would have resulted in monasteries' greater dependence on the laity.

Initially it is probable that the clerical centers of education would have included the education of both monks and nuns. *Bhikkhuniīs* in Ceylon had access to education when the twofold Sangha still flourished,<sup>8</sup> and it is likely that lay women and girls benefited from this. However, the disappearance of the *Bhikkhuniī* Order around the tenth century<sup>9</sup> would have

5. P. B. J. Hewavasam, "The Buddhist Tradition," Ceylon. Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs. *Education in Ceylon* (Colombo: The Government Press, 1969) 1119.

6. W. Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, 3rd ed. (Dehiwala: Buddhist Cultural Center, 1993) 160-161.

7. A. W. P. Guruge, "Education, Buddhist," *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, vol. 5, fascicle 1. (Sri Lanka: Government of Sri Lanka, 1990) 28.

8. Hewavasam, "The Buddhist Tradition" 1126.

9. Gunawardene shows that the latest evidence we have of Theravāda *bhikkhuniīs* in Sri Lanka dates back to the reign of Mahinda IV, thus indicating that the demise of their lineage in Sri Lanka was around or shortly after the tenth

had a definite impact on the status and education of Buddhist women. Yet, when monastic education became the prerogative of the *bhikkhus* alone, there is no record of post-primary education being offered to girls.<sup>10</sup> While it is possible to attribute this lacuna in our evidence to what Gross calls “androcentric record keeping,”<sup>11</sup> it is more likely that Vinaya restrictions concerning relationships between *bhikkhus* and women did, in actuality, result in the exclusion of female students from monastic institutions of education. How Buddhist women in Ceylon were learning and transmitting religious knowledge between the tenth and nineteenth centuries remains, for the most part, a matter of conjecture. It is possible that Buddhist women then were engaged in religious activities similar to those they are involved in today. These would have included participation in study groups and meditation sessions,<sup>12</sup> involvement in household rituals<sup>13</sup> as well those that will be discussed below.

#### *Education—the contemporary scene*

The Buddhist revival, with its renewal of interest in monastic education, as well as religious education in general, resulted in initiatives to provide a formal education for Buddhist women. Females were now seen as the future mothers and nurturers, and hence the main educators of the generations to come.<sup>14</sup> It was in this climate of revival that the first attempts to establish Buddhist schools for girls transpired.<sup>15</sup> Among the earliest of such schools to be established were those run by Buddhist nuns.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, as time passed and the Buddhist nuns received little or no formal

---

century. R. A. L. H. Gunawardene, *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early and Medieval Sri Lanka* (Arizona: University of Arizona, 1979) 39.

10. Hewavasam, “The Buddhist Tradition” 1126.

11. R. M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (Albany: SUNY, 1993) 49-51.

12. G. Bond, *The Buddhist Revival 177-186*.

13. S. Kiribamune “Religion and Its Relevance to the Lives of Buddhist Women” paper presented at 3rd CENWOR Convention, Colombo, Sri Lanka, March 1992. This study discusses the popularity of domestic worship in the lives of Buddhist laywomen today.

14. T. J. Bartholomeusz, *Women Under the Bo Tree* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 49-50.

15. Bartholomeusz, *Women Under the Bo Tree* 50-53.

16. *Ibid.*, 60-65.

training they were unable, unlike members of the male clergy, to emerge as educational leaders.

The first institution for the formal education of monks to be established in modern times and that was known by the name of *piriveṇa* was the Vidyodaya Piriveṇa, founded in 1873.<sup>17</sup> In the beginning the modern *piriveṇas* were mainly dependent on the support of the laity. By the time Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, *piriveṇas* were being systematically supported by substantial amounts by the government, the precedent for which was established as far back as 1875 when Vidyodaya was given a government grant.<sup>18</sup> Writing in the 1960's, Paññasekhara, mentions that the number of registered *piriveṇas* in Ceylon was 231: 125 were junior *piriveṇas* (the equivalent of junior high), 27 were senior (equivalent of senior high) and 79 were affiliated to universities.<sup>19</sup> The *piriveṇas* basically continued the traditional methods of teaching and were primarily geared to the education of the male monastic community. While they were open to laymen, these institutions generally focused on providing the secondary education for a novice monk from the age of about twelve onwards. Some of them had the facilities to educate a clergyman up to the equivalent of the Bachelor of Arts Degree. In 1966 the Buddha-śrāvaka Dharmapīthaya, a university for monks was established and continues to be funded generously by the state.

The main focus of government policy has been concerned with implementing educational institutions so as to better serve Buddhist monks and laity, and until very recently it had little place on its agenda for the education of nuns. One consequence of this has been that the first Buddhist schools for girls run by lay people have flourished to this day, whereas those run by the nuns (who are generally less educated than laity) have not been so successful. Today men and women have equal access to a secular education but the specifically religious education of women lags behind that of men. The poor institutional structures supporting female renunciants may be caused partially by a reluctance to accept their roles as leaders in Buddhist communities.

One of the government surveys on general education that was carried out in 1982-1983 indicated that out of a total of 620 nuns who responded

---

17. Kalukondayawe Paññasekhara, "The Pirivenas," Ceylon. Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs. *Education in Ceylon* (Colombo: The Government Press, 1969) 747.

18. Conversation with Ananda Guruge in May 1995.

19. Paññasekhara, "The Pirivenas" 751.

to a nation-wide survey, 129 had received an education of Grade 3-5; 152, an education of Grade 6-8, and 110 had completed their Ordinary Level Examinations.<sup>20</sup> A total of only 17 nuns was recorded as having had further education at any level.<sup>21</sup> The nuns who had received a formal religious education (i. e. one that was geared toward taking the public exams in religion that student monks for example would generally take) were not surprisingly, even fewer than this. At the most, from any one of 18 districts in the country, only a handful of nuns had succeeded in passing public examinations in religion.<sup>22</sup>

Between 1984-1986 the government made various attempts to provide an education for nuns.<sup>23</sup> Classes, which were conducted on a weekly or a daily (5 days a week) basis, were conducted in subjects such as Pāli, Buddhism, English, Sinhalese and Health Science. These classes, conducted by both laypeople and *pirivena* staff, were originally held in and around Colombo. However, since 1988, an education focusing on Oriental Languages has been made available to nuns on a district-wise basis.<sup>24</sup> By 1993 the government was funding daily classes for nuns in a center in eleven districts in the country.<sup>25</sup> To date about 80 nuns have passed the *pracīna paṇḍita* and in the past 5-10 years four or five nuns have com-

---

20. The information from the government surveys is from K. M. L. B. Thamal, "A Study of the Dasa-Sil Māniyo (Consecrated Women) in the Buddhist Society of Sri Lanka," M. A. diss. (University of the Philippines, 1983) 86.

21. Of the seventeen mentioned, nine had passed their Advanced Level Examinations, five had completed Teacher Training and three had passed the Teachers' Final.

22. Thamal, "A Study of the Dasa-Sil-Māniyo" 91.

23. Unless otherwise indicated, the following information on the government sponsored education of nuns was obtained in the course of discussions with Padma Dinapala, Cultural Officer at the Department of Buddhist Affairs and consultations of available government records. Several discussions and consultations of surveys took place between 1984 and 1994.

24. The education provided for nuns who wished to train for the *pracīna paṇḍita*, the final and most difficult of three public examination on Oriental Languages. The Pali, Sanskrit and Sinhala literature studied for these exams include some religious content. It takes about two years to train for each examination. These examinations have recently been considered equivalent in status to B. A. examinations in these subjects.

25. Initially the district-wide classes were held weekly only.

pleted a Bachelor's degree in local universities.<sup>26</sup> These nuns are generally dependent on their parents or relations for financial support up through their tertiary studies unlike the members of the Sangha who are usually supported by established and well-endowed monasteries as well as the State. After graduating the nuns have gone on to teach in schools.

Although some nuns have continued to attend the state sponsored classes, the attrition rate has been high due to others having to make an arduous journey from the remote areas where they live to centers where the classes are held. The transportation problem was exacerbated when government funding for the nuns decreased in 1994. A recently founded international journal devoted to the concerns of Buddhist nuns discusses the Sri Lankan situation:

. . . the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs has cut down the allocation for nuns . . . by fifty percent for 1994. As a result, the nuns do not even have the bus fare to meet in their districts . . . This has proven to be a severe handicap to the nuns and their efforts to improve their education and living conditions.<sup>27</sup>

Some nuns I interviewed were indeed reluctant to attend classes because this entailed a difficult bus journey. Others simply said that there was no such learning facility within traveling distance of their hermitage.

Government efforts to encourage the formal education of the nuns are still in their fledgling stages. While of some consequence to a few individuals, these attempts do not yet significantly impact the population of nuns at large. In 1993 a total of 141 nuns throughout the country were registered in state sponsored classes in religious subjects. The island population of nuns is estimated at about 2500-3000. Thus according to the latest figures less than six percent of the total number of nuns in Sri Lanka are participating in these educational programs.

It is not uncommon for a *bhikkhu* to complete the full course of public examinations in religion and then graduate from a university with an B. A., an M. A. or even a Ph.D., but this would be a rarity for a Theravāda nun today. The nuns who have left school before graduating are in a clear majority.<sup>28</sup> Since many aspiring nuns leave high school before they graduate, and there is often a lapse of some years before they become

---

26. Communications with Padma Dinapala, Dept. of Buddhist Affairs and with Ratna Handurukande, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.

27. "International News," *Sakyadhita* 5.2 (Summer 1994): 4.

28. This is clear from the information available on surveys conducted by the Dept. of Buddhist Affairs as well as from my interviews.

nuns, it is generally difficult for them to become re-integrated into an institution of education (even if they have access to one).<sup>29</sup> How then might these nuns learn and transmit religious knowledge? What avenues of learning are open to them? To what extent are their ways of knowing and practicing religion defined or restricted by existing norms of how a Buddhist religieuse would behave? These are some of the questions that I tried to address in the course of my associations with two hermitages and their founding nuns.

### WAYS OF KNOWING AND RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES

Traditional education in Theravāda Buddhism has clearly come to focus on the exegesis of religious texts. Such an education, especially when imparted to large numbers, presupposes a variety of basic facilities and tools. Most nuns' hermitages today do not have access to these necessary amenities. As a consequence, nuns have generally departed from these orthodox patterns of learning and developed their own ways of knowing and transmitting religious knowledge. In some cases (e. g. where the government has implemented centers of learning for nuns) nuns may indeed be receiving a traditional education, however the nuns who benefit are a minority and, as I will demonstrate, this education does not influence hermitages where the ethos for such an education is unsupportive.

How nuns, as opposed to monks, are educated impacts not just the content of their knowledge, but also the social and religious activities in which they are engaged. While the majority of monks function as teachers and religious practitioners, nuns are more involved in meditative and social activities. A nun might not be expected to know the details of a particular Buddhist text, but in her capacity as a mother figure and as a woman she might be expected to serve as a counselor to children and abused women.<sup>30</sup> She thus has an affinity for lay women and children not usually shared by monks. Although nuns do not enjoy the same educational privileges as monks, their first hand experiences as mothers, educators and meditators have enabled them to transmit religious knowledge

---

29. One nun spoke of the how taunts she received in school when her school mates learned of her desire to become a nun led her to leave school sooner than she otherwise would have. Even continuing her studies as an aspiring nun had clearly become difficult.

30. This was observed by me during visits to various nunneries. It is also a claim made by several head nuns with whom I spoke.

effectively to women and children. The two pioneering nuns I discuss have been successful largely because of their individual charisma. These nuns are atypical in that they are pathfinders, whose successes have resulted in the establishment of one or more hermitage(s). However, their efforts typify those of most nuns insofar as the support they have received in the earliest stages of their vocation has not come from well-organized lay supporters or the state, but rather from lay folk in the locality.

*Religious Education and the Aligoḍa Hermitage*<sup>31</sup>

Utterā Māṇiyō was in her fifties when I interviewed her along with her four junior nuns in Aligoḍa in 1985.<sup>32</sup> She easily commanded the respect of the nuns under her tutelage and of the lay people she knew because of her gift for teaching and telling stories. She had expressed a pronounced inclination to follow the religious life since her early childhood. Despite her parents' many early protestations, she was ordained as a nun when she was thirteen. Utterā Māṇiyō's early career as a nun shows that she placed a high priority on education.<sup>33</sup> She moved from one hermitage to another with the main objective of pursuing her studies in various schools. Unlike many of the nuns of her generation with whom I spoke, Utterā Māṇiyō had graduated from high school where she told me she had studied the *Tipiṭaka* and Pāli. After graduating, she began teaching and continued to do so for about eight years in different schools throughout the country and her reputation spread afar. Her education was similar to that received by monks and followed orthodox patterns of textual exegesis.

The people of the Aligoḍa neighborhood came to know of her as she traveled and taught in various parts of the country. They invited her to come to Aligoḍa to teach and preach, a rather unusual invitation for a

---

31. Names of places and persons mentioned in regard to the two hermitages I discuss are not authentic. I have chosen to give these nuns the names of *bhikkhunīs* found in the *Therīgāthā*.

32. Unfortunately, 1985 was the first and last time that I was able to have good discussions with her. She died unexpectedly within a few weeks of my second visit to Aligoḍa.

33. Utterā Māṇiyō would have benefited from universal free education that was offered at the time.

nun to receive.<sup>34</sup> These lay people claimed that while the temples in the area provided an adequate education for their sons, there was no similar provision for an education for their daughters.

It was about twenty-five years ago that Utterā Māṇiyō accepted the invitation and came to Aligoḍa. The land where the hermitage was to be situated had been a family burial ground. This was land that villagers had considered infested by ghosts and evil spirits. The owners gladly gave the land to Utterā Māṇiyō and the local villagers contributed towards the building of a shrine, and living quarters. By her very presence, she had purified the impurity and evil associated with the former cemetery. Utterā Māṇiyō spoke of how, prior to her arrival there, the villagers were terrified of even passing this particular cemetery because of its associations with malevolent ghosts. Utterā Māṇiyō began teaching religious subjects at a nearby high school. While initially unwilling to become even more involved with her teaching activities, she was eventually persuaded otherwise by the villagers. Not surprisingly, she was hesitant to do so as she felt that it would detract her from the contemplative life she had sought. Her first Sunday School class held in 1969 had forty children. The Sunday School was successful and twenty-five years later, by the time of my visit in 1985, was being attended by three hundred girls and boys.<sup>35</sup>

Utterā Māṇiyō's mission did not stop with teaching in the local schools and the Sunday school. She had founded a hermitage for nuns (no simple task as I discovered in the course of my field work), was training junior nuns and had helped establish three branch hermitages that are all currently managed by nuns who were once trained by her at the Aligoḍa hermitage. One of these branch hermitages also runs a Sunday School which has about 200 students.<sup>36</sup>

Utterā Māṇiyō's ways of transmitting knowledge extended beyond a providing a formal religious education for women.<sup>37</sup> She was also

---

34. Such invitations were especially rare at the time, given the generally low status attributed to Buddhist nuns, viz., nuns then were considered uneducated and usually incapable of exercising leadership.

35. About two-thirds of the students here are girls.

36. The branch hermitages are supported entirely by donations given by the local villagers and relations of the nuns who live there. The Sunday school and its students are however given some support by the government.

37. What I refer to here is the more established type of training that a present day *bhikkhu* or a *bhikkhuni* of the past might have received. By her example as a strong role model and a pioneer, she influenced her junior nuns. In the

training nuns to manage and run a nunnery, nuns who would be capable of continuing what she had begun. The daily activities of cooking, cleaning and sweeping at the hermitage, were according to her, meditative activities. Additionally, her skillful use of imagery and story-telling in her discussions of religious ideas (whether taken from texts or from real life-experiences), enhanced her teaching methods. Utterā Māṇiyō was a pioneering nun because she had gone through a formal training and had used this in addition to alternative ways of knowing and transmitting knowledge for the benefit of other nuns as well as lay folk. At the time of our last discussion, Utterā Māṇiyō spoke enthusiastically of her plans to establish a *piriveṇa* near the hermitage. Negotiations with the state concerning the funding and building plans for the institution were already under way. However, she died before she could see the completion of her plans. It is likely that if her plans had reached fruition, the proposed Aligoḍa *piriveṇa*, albeit a grass-roots institution in its origins, would have provided a traditional education for nuns. This education would have been similar to that given at the state sponsored classes to nuns today.

When I last visited the Aligoḍa hermitage in 1994 some clearly definable changes had taken place. Although the Sunday school was still flourishing and attendance had not dropped, the new head nun placed more emphasis on meditation. The building that was to have become a *piriveṇa* had instead become a meditation center for lay women. Additionally, only one of the four junior nuns whom I had formerly known to be attending daily classes in Buddhism and related subjects was now continuing her studies. The changes had clearly been a result of Utterā Māṇiyō's demise and the attitudes of the new head nun, Vimalā Māṇiyō. When I asked Vimalā Māṇiyō about the previous plans for the *piriveṇa*, she conveyed to me that running such an institution would be "too much trouble." She also did not see any point in formal education itself and spoke depreciatingly of Cittā Māṇiyō, a junior nun, who stubbornly persisted in pursuing her education. This nun is now attending one of the government sponsored programs. Two of the four nuns I had known previously had temporarily left the hermitage to join a meditation center and help train laity there. One of the two remaining junior nuns had

---

context of a more established institution of education, the students would seldom have the example of a pioneer to learn from and their education would be focused on textual religious knowledge, largely to the exclusion of learning how to found and manage young hermitage.

stopped attending classes after completing her preliminary exams in religion. She found the bus journey too tiring. She also maintained that someone after all should be present to help with the running of the hermitage and to look after the head nun who was elderly and not in the best of health. In any case, she claimed that education was not as important as meditation because it was *vipassanā* meditation alone that was necessary for realizing *nibbāna*.<sup>38</sup> She too spoke chastisingly of Cittā Māṇiyō indicating that she was not carrying out her responsibilities since she was “always studying.” Cittā Māṇiyō informed me that she was awaiting the result of the second of the three public exams in Oriental Languages. She was well aware that she lived in an environment that was not supportive of her studies, but she intended nevertheless to pursue them. While agreeing with the other nuns that meditation was soteriologically essential, she thought that studying was also necessary since it taught one how to relate to society at large. Moreover, she said, her goal was to “be like Utterā Māṇiyō.”

The account of Utterā Māṇiyō and the Aligoḍa hermitage underscores certain features concerning the rapidly changing status of nuns' hermitages today.<sup>39</sup> It also throws light on attitudes to a traditional Buddhist education. In the course of my field-work I found that these hermitages have usually emerged and developed primarily because of the enthusiasm and efforts of an outstanding pioneering nun.<sup>40</sup> The formal education that Utterā Māṇiyō gained and imparted to her junior nuns clearly played an important part in the establishment of a Sunday school (where all the nuns were teachers.) Today the hermitage continues to be respected and supported by the locality but its renown is not the same. With the new importance given to meditation in this remote hermitage, the hermitage has turned away from orthodox patterns of learning and has consequently become more peripheral in the community. As one lay donor put it “in earlier times, when Utterā Māṇiyō was alive, the long distance buses

---

38. I have noticed that when asking nuns about studying, there usually is a very practical reason—in addition to a soteriological one—that they give me for not wanting to study.

39. Here I refer to the those hermitages where four or more nuns live on a more or less permanent basis, and also those which have known at least two generations of nuns. There are many nuns who live alone and it is often the case that for various reasons, a hermitage having one or more nuns does not survive for even one generation.

40. Also see E. Nissan, “Recovering Practice: Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka,” *South Asia Research* 4.1 (May 1984): 42-44.

would know of this hermitage. Today they would not know where to stop if you asked them.”

The events leading up to the founding and the growth of the Aligoḍa hermitage present an interesting case study in interpretations of modern Buddhism on the microcosmic level. The present tension between proponents of formal education and those who emphasize meditation partially represents a change that has been effected by the demise of one head nun and her replacement by another but could also reflect a tension between *gantha-dhura* (the burden of written or oral texts) and *vipassanā-dhura* (the burden of meditation). In the context of changes in modern Buddhism, this may also be interpreted as a difference between “traditional” and “reform” Buddhism.<sup>41</sup> This difference in ways of knowing had been given new meaning in the context of the modern Buddhist revival. While the renewal of interest in the formal education of Buddhist women at the government conducted classes for nuns is clearly a part of the Buddhist revival, the proliferation of *vipassanā* meditation centers and the accompanying disdain for a more formalized *piriveṇa*-type education are also a part of “reform Buddhism.”

An investigation of a very different hermitage whose leadership focuses on cultivating meditation will provide another, more controversial interpretation of Buddhism. The head nun of this hermitage encourages her junior nuns to practice *samathā* or concentration meditation. This meditation, unlike the *vipassanā* meditation of “reformist” Buddhists, has for the meditator, the objective of seeking a better rebirth rather than of realizing immediate soteriological goals. For *samathā* meditators, *nibbāna* remains a thousand lives away.

#### *Meditation and communications at Delgahawatte*

Sumanā Māṇiyō, like Utterā Māṇiyō, was in her mid-fifties when I first stayed at her hermitage in 1984. I have since visited her thrice in the past decade.<sup>42</sup> The hermitage has expanded. Attitudes to religious practices and beliefs among the junior nuns as well as the composition of the hermitage itself have also changed considerably. Sumanā Māṇiyō’s story

41. By reform Buddhism I mean the Buddhism that has been closely associated with the *vipassanā* meditation movement and reforms. This is the type of Buddhism, that unlike “traditional Buddhism” encourages all Buddhists to meditate for the purpose of realizing Nibbāna in the present lifetime. See Bond, *Buddhist Revival* 136-173.

42. I stayed at her hermitage in April 1984, October 1985, and August 1994. I also paid a very brief visit to her hermitage in 1993.

presents a good explanation for the initial founding and later attraction of her hermitage particularly because her experiences were not dissimilar to those of most of her junior nuns whom I met in 1984.

Sumanā Māṇiyō left school before graduating when she was fifteen years old and had an arranged marriage to a store owner two years later.<sup>43</sup> Shortly after her marriage, she desired to become a nun. When Sumanā Māṇiyō was in her late thirties or early forties she began to go into trances and hear messages from various supernatural beings.<sup>44</sup> She would throw crockery on to the floor, chant prayers and engage in conversations with invisible persons. She would occasionally lose consciousness and often repeated her intention to leave home and visit a holy place called Delgahawatte. Her family members, unable to explain her behavior, believed she had gone insane. She eventually left her husband and family and went alone to Delgahawatte in the early 'seventies. There was no hermitage for nuns there at that time but she made Delgahawatte her new home, founded a hermitage, and is based there to this day.

Sumanā Māṇiyō arrived at Delgahawatte, unknown and determined. She spent her time meditating there while living on alms brought by charitable lay folk. People who had apparently incurable maladies began to seek her advice. She was capable of curing them through the use of herbal concoctions and oils and the recitation of *pirit*. Her reputation as a religious healer spread locally. Sumanā Māṇiyō would often diagnose an illness that she claimed was caused by the spirit of a dead relative (*ñāti*) who wanted the living to perform meritorious actions (*pina*) that would then enable the *ñāti* to enter a happier rebirth. Sumanā Māṇiyō continued to live in this manner, meditating and healing others for a period of about eight years.

In the early 'eighties, Sumanā Māṇiyō eventually acquired some land on which to build a hermitage. Shrines and separate living quarters for nuns and laity were constructed. Several lay women with a variety of illnesses and psycho-somatic disorders continued to seek her for her healing powers and have stayed at the hermitage itself, some of these remained there to be ordained. Sumanā Māṇiyō continues to attract laity

---

43. The information on Sumanā Māṇiyō's story was obtained through discussions with her as well as with a niece of hers and a relative of her ex-husband. Sumanā Māṇiyō spoke freely of her experiences since she became a renunciant, but I had to rely on the other informants for information on her life prior to renunciation.

44. These supernatural beings could include both gods as well as dead relations (*ñāti*).

who have a special relationship with gods and spirits. Although communicating with the gods is not considered undesirable in Buddhism, communicating with and being affected by a dead relative is regarded differently since this results in the individual's physical and emotional instability, and is ultimately detrimental to the cultivation of meditative practices.<sup>45</sup> At the time of my first visit to Delgahawatte in 1984, all of the six junior nuns there had at some time experienced communications with a *nāti* and / or deity. Of these six nuns, five had been severely incapacitated by an illness that was related to these communications.<sup>46</sup> At that time there were also three lay women who were awaiting their ordination and claimed to receive communications from dead relations. The nuns and lay women spoke to me wide-eyed and enthusiastically of these unusual experiences. During my stay with them in 1984, the morning and evening worship around the Bōdhi tree would be fraught with anticipation since among the participants there would be daily occurrences of trances and conversations with supernatural beings. This would usually happen while *pirit* was being chanted.<sup>47</sup>

By the time of my second visit in 1985 there had been a turnover of some of the junior nuns. (Three had left). There were five new junior nuns, only one of whom had experienced communications with supernatural powers. Three elderly nuns who had joined not only denied any such communications but they were openly critical of these. They did not see such communications as an intrinsic or necessary part of Buddhism. In fact, by this time communications with supernatural beings occurred rarely. When I talked to Sumanā Māṇiyō in 1993, she was proud to tell me that the hermitage was now free of any such "undesirable" communication with the dead.

---

45. This is the traditional Buddhist interpretation, it is also the interpretation given by Sumanā Māṇiyō herself.

46. The lives of these nuns and the symptoms of their maladies were very similar to those of the women described in G. Obeyesekere's, *Medusa's Hair* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

47. Usually Sumanā Māṇiyō would request the spirit to identify itself and cease taking over the bodies of human beings. She would agree to transfer merit to the spirit and help it enter a better state. Then she would scold the spirit for its behavior and demand that it leave. Sometimes two or three spirits would be talking simultaneously through various nuns. Due to the dramatic nature of the conversations these sessions often proved entertaining for all involved.

In 1994, there were only five junior nuns staying “permanently”<sup>48</sup> at the hermitage, and as Sumanā Māṇiyō indicated, none of them have communications with spirits now. Nevertheless Sumanā Māṇiyō continues to help people who are afflicted with trances and communications with supernatural beings. When I last visited her in 1994, three major sessions were held at her hermitage within a period of five days in order to help a young man overcome an affliction. There were about 35–40 lay people (mostly friends and relations of the afflicted man) staying at lay people’s quarters by the hermitage.

Ways of knowing and transmitting knowledge at the Delgahawatte hermitage present an interesting contrast to both the formal education and the type of meditation that have developed at the Aligoḍa hermitage. Unlike Utterā Māṇiyō, Sumanā Māṇiyō speaks disparagingly of any provision for a traditional education for nuns since this, according to her, would detract from what should be the true Buddhist vocation—that of realizing higher spiritual states through meditation. She actively discourages book learning and none of the junior nuns currently at Delgahawatte attend classes on Buddhism.<sup>49</sup>

Sumanā Māṇiyō’s ways of knowing come from spiritual powers associated with absorption in meditative states that allow her to communicate directly with the gods. The stories that this nun relates carry with them a divine authority. This is what Sumanā Māṇiyō claims and this is why her many lay followers and junior nuns consider her unique. Messages that come to her from the deities often concern past events that transpired in the time of Gautama Buddha and these may correct falsities found in the texts that, according to her, have been changed by monks and are not always accurate. For her, religious texts were, after all, written by fallible human beings. In addition to explanations of past events, messages from the deities provide interpretations for crises of both a personal as well as a communal nature. Hence divine communications have not only helped Sumanā Māṇiyō recommend remedies for the sick, but they have

---

48. It is difficult to determine how permanent “permanently” really means. Some of the nuns I spoke to in 1994 had been there for 8–10 years. They expressed no intention of leaving the hermitage. However, it is often the case that nuns move around from one hermitage to another for various reasons.

49. This has been some cause for frustration among some nuns under her tutelage. Two of the junior nuns I spoke with in 1985 subsequently left to pursue their studies elsewhere. One nun who is still there also expressed a keen desire to study and read. She was obviously unhappy about not being allowed to do this.

also aided her in answering questions concerning the civil strife and bloodshed endemic in the country in the mid and late 'eighties.

Although Sumanā Māṇiyō, like Vimalā Māṇiyō, the current head nun at Aligoḍa, focuses on meditation, she encourages her nuns to practice *samathā* rather than *vipassanā* meditation. It is *samathā* meditation that allows for communication with deities. The nuns in this hermitage do not practice *vipassanā* meditation as it is considered "too difficult." They do not expect to realize *nibbāna* in their present lifetime, but hope to improve their chances of doing so in a future life. Despite the different foci of meditative practice in the two hermitages, practitioners of both seem to agree that meditation is an essential ingredient in the routine activities performed at the hermitage such as cooking, cleaning etc. This once again underlines a difference between religious activities performed by nuns and monks. For the monks, especially those who are attached to large, well-endowed monasteries where the focus is on textual studies, the daily business of obtaining food and maintaining the temple etc., is in the hands of lay people. For these monks, meditation would not be as closely intertwined with their daily activities in the running of the temple in the way that it is for the nuns.

#### WOMEN'S WAYS OF KNOWING: TRANSITIONS IN CONTEXT

This investigation has examined a diversity of Buddhist ways of knowing and has shown how certain informal ways of knowing are central to the on-going processes of revival and reform in modern Buddhism. Further, Bloss's claim that the study of the nuns ". . . provides clues to major changes in Sri Lankan Buddhism and it should be an interesting tool for analysis of the continuities and changes of Sri Lankan Buddhism in the future"<sup>50</sup> supports the findings of this study. The changes that are clearly evident in the Aligoḍa and Delgahawatte hermitages are also intimately related to how women act as cultural transmitters of religion.

The Aligoḍa hermitage, which initially attempted to develop a more traditional form of knowledge by establishing a *piriveṇa*-type of institution, eventually turned to focusing on *vipassanā* meditation and thus modern reformist Buddhism. The tension there between traditional and reformist Buddhism remains presently unresolved. The Delgahawatte hermitage, on the other hand, reflects a "neo-traditionalist" orientation.

---

50. L. Bloss, "The Female Renunciants of Sri Lanka" *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 101 (1987): 28.

Neo-traditionalist Buddhism is the Buddhism which emphasizes the gradual path to *nibbāna* and embraces ritualism and devotion to the gods.<sup>51</sup> Although the nuns at Delgahawatte have been criticized by some for engaging in communications with spirits, as the process of routinization takes place, they themselves claim that these communications are undesirable and need to be eradicated.

Some scholars have suggested that the resurgence of Buddhist nuns is a part of a wider transformation of Theravādā Buddhism termed "Protestant Buddhism." Thus Bloss and Bartholomeusz both indicate that some of the nuns they discuss follow the Protestant Buddhist model (Bloss, 14, Bartholomeusz, 12). Although there is some debate as to what exactly "Protestant Buddhism" is,<sup>52</sup> (and I do not wish to explore the many ways in which it may be defined in this essay), it would not be inaccurate to incorporate some nunneries, at a certain point in time, under the Protestant Buddhist umbrella. However, I think it would be simplistic to identify the apparent resurgence of nuns as a whole with the development of Protestant Buddhism. Gombrich and Obeyesekere indicate that it is necessary ". . . to probe deeper, not into village or Protestant Buddhism, but the nature of Theravāda Buddhism, be it of the village or reformist variety" (288). This supports my suggestion that a simple categorization of all nuns ignores the diversity of their roles in the changing religious scene of Theravāda Buddhism today.<sup>53</sup>

My research suggests that the situation of the nuns who are neither strictly lay, nor monastic, allows for a variety of ways of learning and conveying Buddhisms - ways that are both molded by and in turn define contemporary religious changes. These are also ways that might not have been expressed by nuns had they not been marginal but rather a part of a more strictly controlled Sangha.<sup>54</sup> While these marginalized groups evi-

---

51. Bond, *Buddhist Revival* 113.

52. J. C. Holt, "Protestant Buddhism?," *Religious Studies Review* 17.4 (October 1991).

53. I would also venture to indicate that the distinction between "urban" and "rural" suggested by some scholars as a means of categorizing Buddhists in general and monks and nuns in particular is not as clear cut as it might seem. Often a nunnery (while situated in an urban or rural area) includes nuns from both urban and rural parts of the country. Additionally, the junior nuns in particular tend to move around from one nunnery to another, thus defying attempts to identify them permanently with any one place.

54. In *Buddhism Transformed*, 45-48, Gombrich and Obeyesekere refer to an interesting case of an unorthodox monk who communicates with spirits and

dently speak to changes in Sri Lankan Buddhism today, it is not inconceivable that such groups existed and functioned similarly in previous times. Only then, there were no researchers who investigated them and recorded their stories.<sup>55</sup>

---

helps people who also wish to do so. Such communications are considered very unusual for a fully ordained monk and are generally frowned upon.

55. While oral and written records themselves might not provide data of previous and nuns and their hermitages, this does not rule out the possibility of their presence in earlier times. It is noteworthy that some nuns do not claim to belong to a lineage but would consider themselves ordained (in the ten precepts) by a monk or self-ordained. This indicates the possibility that other similarly ordained nuns might have been present prior to the nineteenth century revival of Buddhism when the lineage of nuns is generally thought to have first been established in Sri Lanka.