Introduction
Buddhism and Social Relations in Contemporary Sri Lanka

One evening in late May 2004, I made yet another of countless ascents to Polgoda Vihara: a hilltop village temple in upcountry Sri Lanka. Because of some unforeseen car problems, it was already dark by the time I arrived. Leaving my car by the side of the driveway leading to the temple, I began a brief but tiring uphill walk. As I came around the bend in the road, the temple came dimly into view. To my left, I could see the shadows of about ten to fifteen young novices. They were sitting on the steps that lead up to the temple’s large preaching hall. I could also make out the figure of Upali, one of the principal donors of the temple, seated with the group. As I approached them, I could see that several novices were holding Upali’s arm, a mark of affection that one commonly sees among close friends of the same gender in South Asia. The conversation was light and jovial. They were laughing as Upali was sharing some of his personal stories.

I spent some time listening in on the conversation before continuing my rounds. I meandered around the temple’s large living quarters and ran into another key donor chatting amiably with the temple’s head monk, Venerable Narada. Although the atmosphere was relaxed and their conversation informal, their encounter was marked by a greater degree of deference than between Upali and the novices: Venerable Narada was seated on a chair, while the donor, Perera, was seated on a straw mat placed on the ground. Another frequent visitor to the temple—a mildly autistic teenage boy from the village—was next to Perera. He was massaging Narada’s feet with some locally made Ayurvedic oil. Narada’s legs had become quite swollen after a brief, but serious, bout of dengue fever.

After paying my respects to Narada and a quick exchange with Perera, I continued my rounds, this time with several young novices in tow. Similar to the young monastics clinging to Upali, these novices held on to my arm as we made our way through the main living quarters. Out back, a small fire was burning and a large covered pot sat on the makeshift hearth. Nearby, a few young novices were playing a game of marbles. A couple other monastics were there, including Suvata—an older man who became a novice a year earlier—and Piyanatana, the temple’s deputy head monk, who was tending to the fire. As I approached the group, Suvata, not wanting to reveal the fact that he and the other novices at Polgoda Vihara were about to break the sixth Buddhist precept—prohibiting
the eating of solid food after midday—fidgetingly told me that they were boiling water for tea. One of the novices holding my arm quickly recanted, to the smiles and laughter of the other monks assembled there, “No we are not. We are cooking rice.” After several long seconds of awkward silence, the deputy head monk reassuringly told Suvata “Don’t worry. He knows us. He is close to us.”

After spending another hour or so at the temple, I began to say my goodbyes. Before leaving I confirmed with Narada my intention of returning the following day to conduct interviews. He nodded and said, “No problem at all.” I paid my respects to Narada as he wished me well.

It was such visits that caused me to pause and compelled me to reflect on the types of social bonds that exist among members of the Buddhist monastic community (Pali: saṅgha, hereafter sangha) as well as between monastics and laypeople. Although other more ritualized interactions between monastics and their patrons are colored by a greater degree of respect and what might be perceived as “emotional distance,” the laughter and fatherly affection shared between Upali and the novices assembled on the steps to the preaching hall, the amiable and easygoing conversation between Perera and Venerable Narada, the loving behavior of the teenage boy as he massaged Narada’s swollen feet, and the parent-like concern and compassion of the deputy head monk as he stooped over the hot fire and cooked rice for the temple’s hungry novices were all examples of behaviors that are, I came to realize, reflective of complex bonds and affective ties that permeate Buddhist monastic life.

The purpose of this book is precisely to examine the types of affective bonds and shared aesthetic sensibilities that draw together groups of monastics and Buddhist laypeople. Turning to numerous conversations I had over the past ten years with head monks, novices, and laypeople associated with eight separate branch temples, as well as with recent recruits and their parents, I present a detailed, ethnographic study of one temple complex as it adapts itself to the needs of local and more distant lay patrons. Of particular importance to this book are the social processes associated with monastic culture in Sri Lanka, especially how monastics and laypeople relate to and affect one another in regard to recruitment, monastic training, and temple building. Focusing on the manner in which Buddhists describe their own histories, experiences, and encounters that relate to the formation and continuation of Buddhist monastic culture in contemporary Sri Lanka, I am specially interested in the role that affective states play in informing and shaping human relationships as well as the aesthetics of emotion: how emotions influence people’s aesthetic sensibilities and how shared aesthetic standards make certain emotions and bonds possible.
I present four basic propositions throughout this book. The first one concerns how ideas about proper behavior, preferred monastic roles, and ideal appearance are formed. Although canonical norms have provided monastics and laypeople with a view of ideal monasticism, I maintain that images of good monks, ideal Buddhist temples, and appropriate monastic roles are sketched on people’s minds and hearts through a variety of mediums. Viewing Buddhism, as Steven Collins (1998:57) does, not as a phenomenon deriving “from one or more ideal individuals from mythic antiquity but from actual, historical collectivities,” I explore how concepts such as monastic, Buddhist temple, and pleasing appearance are shaped and determined by and within local communities of monastics and lay Buddhists. Although individuals from the past—especially the Buddha as depicted in texts, art, and architecture—inform modern-day images of an ideal monk, local social experiences and affective needs also shape the process of selection and interpretation as individual Buddhists develop a sense of what kind of monastic to have access to or what kind of monastic to become.

Closely related to the first proposition is the concept of decline and revival and its role in people’s discourses about Buddhist monasticism. Notions of decline and revival are most commonly understood in terms of the ability of monastics to follow early Buddhist norms or in regard to the processes of domestication and reform. Although envisioning reform and revival in such a manner provides scholars and students of Buddhist monasticism with an interpretative framework through which to understand the monastic order and its ties to the state and society over the longue durée, such an understanding runs the risk of masking moments of profound changes in Lankan Buddhism (Blackburn 2001:9 and 76). Thus, instead of treating the notion of revival and reform as examples of Buddhism’s continuity with the past, I consider the terms as important “strategies of legitimation.” Paying attention to conversations about decline and revival that I had with monastic leaders, monks, novices, lay Buddhists, and parents, I examine the innovative ways in which the concepts are used to validate distinct visions of the sangha, monastic vocation, and particular aesthetic standards.

The third proposition concerns the relationship between members of the sangha and their lay patrons. The bonds that draw lay Buddhists and monastics together are sometimes described in a utilitarian manner: using a model of generalized exchange, the lay-monastic relationship is sometimes portrayed as one in which the former provide the sangha with the four requisites (food, clothing, shelter, and medicine) in exchange for religious instruction, ritual performance, and the opportunity to make merit. Although a close reading of the monastic
disciplinary texts supports such a conclusion (e.g., the rules that pertain to food and accepting the laity’s requests for preaching), and even though there is ethnographic evidence to suggest that laypeople are driven to support Buddhist monastics out of their own ritual needs (Abeysekara 2002) and a desire for merit (Seneviratne 1999), I contend that conceiving the monk-patron relationship exclusively in this manner discounts other factors that hold together monastics and laypeople. In this book, I propose that, along with the sangha’s need for material support and the laity’s desire for merit and ritual performance, the forces that bring and hold together groups of Buddhists—monastic and lay—include affective bonds that are, themselves, deepened by common histories, similar values, shared sentiments, and collectively held aesthetic standards.

The final proposition pertains to the topic of emotions. In examining the place and role of emotions in contemporary Sri Lanka, I must be very clear in my purpose. Despite the existence of Buddhist texts that portray certain emotions as problematic, stories of the Buddha that portray him as an embodiment of the quality of affective detachment, and other facets of the tradition that suggest that emotions are antithetical to the Buddhist path, it is difficult to uphold the view that emotions have no place in Buddhism. Thus, in examining how Buddhists perceive and express emotion in the contexts of recruitment, training, vocation, and patronage, my purpose is not to state the obvious: that Buddhists have or experience emotions. Instead, by considering the social aspects of emotions my aim is to assess how emotions, as cultural judgments of people and institutions, not only determine and influence people’s social relationships and their aesthetic sensibilities but also function expressively and strategically in the contexts of building new Buddhist institutions and maintaining existing ones. Like Errol Bedford (1986:30), who contends that in “using emotion words we are able . . . to relate behavior to the complex background in which it is enacted, and so to make human actions intelligible,” and similar to John Corrigan (2008:8), who states that “the study of religion and emotion provides a way to discuss religion as a human activity that is embedded in everyday life in the felt relations individuals experiences with other persons, nature, and the holy personages to whom they are devoted,” I propose that examining the emotional and aesthetic responses that relate to and are articulated within the context of institution building and monastic vocation is central to a more complete understanding of the actions of monks and laypeople in regard to recruitment, training, and the formation and continuation of Buddhist communities.
ATTRACTING THE HEART AND THE FORMATION OF BUDDHIST COMMUNITIES

In exploring the role that shared emotions and aesthetic sensibilities play in shaping and determining the types of social bonds that are so essential to the formation and maintenance of Buddhist monastic culture in contemporary Sri Lanka, I turn to the Sinhalese expression “attracting the heart” that I heard on numerous occasions. The English phrase I translate as “attracting the heart” is from the Sinhala expression hita ädaganīma (literary Sinhala leṅgatu). The second term in the expression is the gerund form of the verb ädagannavā, which literally means “to draw, pull, attract, or absorb.” The term hita (or sita), which I translate as “heart” in this and subsequent chapters, however, is slightly more problematic as it—like shin in Chinese, kokoro in Japanese, and citta in Pali—refers to one’s cognitive, volitional, and emotional centers. Although such a definition might warrant translating hita as “heart-mind” in the pages that follow, I have chosen to translate hita simply as “heart,” partly because the mind is sometimes conceived as residing in the heart, and partly for aesthetic reasons.

Throughout this book I turn to the phrase “attracting the heart” to identify and analyze patterns of action of Buddhist monastics and laypeople that relate to institution building and monastic vocation. Although this expression usually has very positive connotations, I turn to a whole range of concomitant affective states—both positive (pleasure, joy, love, and affection) and negative (anger, disgust, sadness, distrust, jealousy, and shame)—to assess the role of emotional perception and expression in determining social relationships and the types of commitments that laypeople make in regard to their families, their communities, and the Buddhist monastic order.

In developing a methodological tool for interpreting the perception and expression of emotion, I turn to literature on the social construction of emotion. In an introduction to an edited collection of articles on emotion in India and Hinduism, Owen Lynch (1990b:8f.) highlights six propositions related to the social construction of emotion: (1) emotions are basically appraisals of situations that are predicated upon particular cultural beliefs and values; (2) as appraisals, emotions are “constitutive for the individual and deeply involve, even move the self in its relationships to social others, things, or events”; (3) “emotions are learned or acquired in society rather than given naturally”; (4) they involve agent responsibility, that is action on the part of the person experiencing the emotion (even if that action is to do nothing at all); (5) they “involve moral judgments about prescribed or expected responses to social situations”; and, finally,
(6) emotions have certain functions, such as coloring and shaping how people relate to one another.

Indebted to Catherine Lutz’s (1988) and Lynch’s work, I am less interested, however, in engaging the debate concerning whether emotion or the emotional life is consistent across cultures or whether a universal situation would trigger the same emotion in different people. Instead, drawn to the highly relational quality of apprehending and experiencing Buddhism in contemporary Sri Lanka, I am more concerned with emotional expression and the role that emotion plays in the social arena. Although I would agree with Charlotte Hardman (2000) and William Reddy (1997) that emotions are only partly constructed in culture, I remain interested in examining how particular emotions and aesthetic sensibilities originate through people’s relationships with others and are shaped by people’s shared histories, present needs, and future aspirations. Finally, intrigued by Lynch’s (1990a), Stephen Berkwitz’s (2003, 2001), Maria Heim’s (2003, 2008), and Martha Nussbaum’s (1990; 2001) work on the connection between emotion, cognition, and action, I consider how emotions—as sites of reason and judgment—function strategically in influencing and determining the types of bonds and commitments that people make to each other, to particular monastic institutions, and to the Buddhist religion. I also explore the performative dimension of emotional expression, not in the sense of how phrases such as “I am ashamed” or “I am angry” actually make one ashamed or angry but in regard to how emotional expression functions to legitimates one’s actions—past, present, and future.

This book contributes to a recent trend within the field of Buddhist studies examining local manifestations of Buddhist practice. Indeed, Gregory Schopen’s critique of approaches to the study of Indian Buddhism (1991), Charles Hal-halisey’s provocative article on the effects that interactions between Europeans and non-Europeans had on the study of Theravāda Buddhism (1995), and Philip Almond’s account of the textualist approach of early British scholars of Buddhism (1988) have heralded a number of subsequent publications that have begun to assess the ways in which Buddhism has been previously approached. Although not all scholars have endorsed this trend of turning to other, nonclassical sources in the construction of Buddhism, it has accelerated in the past ten to fifteen years, especially with the publication of such edited volumes as Buddhism in Practice (1995). Such a reorientation within the field, which by no means implies a complete abandoning of canonical sources, is perhaps best described in Donald Lopez’s introductory text, Buddhism, where he writes (2001:14), “In the history of Buddhist scholarship, this is a period in which there is less interest in Buddhist philosophy and more emphasis on Buddhist practice, less interest in Buddhism...
as a global entity and more interest in its local manifestations, less interest in the practices of élites, especially monastics, and more interest in the practices of ordinary monks, nuns and laypeople. There is less interest in scholastic debates and more interest in social history. There is less interest in doctrine and more interest in ritual." The present book—which focuses on the social histories, concerns, and practices of “ordinary” monks and laypeople as they seek out meaningful experiences and emotionally salient relationships in the face of economic and social challenges—examines the evaluations and negotiations that form an integral part to the social processes related to Buddhist institution building and the social construction of monastic vocation.

Chapter 1 provides the temporal and theoretical starting point for a discussion of recruitment, monastic training, and institution building. Discussing the life events of one monk, Venerable Narada, from his decision to become a monastic to his choice to remain in the sangha for life, I examine how social bonds influence the decisions that people—monastic and lay—make about their role in society and their commitment to the sangha. By assessing carefully the factors that contributed to Narada’s decision to serve people’s social and economic needs, I maintain that the model of generalized economic exchange that is sometimes used to describe Buddhist monasticism as a social institution limits our ability to understand and appreciate how groups of monastics and laypeople interact on a regular basis. Although it may correctly be asserted—as it has in a number of introductions to Buddhism (Gethin 1998; Wijayaratna 1990; Harvey 1990; Gombrich 2006) as well as in more focused studies (Southwold 1983; Abeysekara 2002; Seneviratne 1999)—that both monastics’ material needs and the laity’s ritual wants and their desire for merit are central factors that draw and hold together groups of monastics and laypeople, I posit in this and subsequent chapters that social ties based on shared emotions and collective histories play a central role in the formation and continuation of Buddhist monastic communities.

The two chapters that follow examine monastic recruitment, the first from the perspective of one monastic leader who has been very active in drawing newcomers to the sangha, and the second from the perspective of child monastics and their families. Building on the material presented in chapter 1, chapter 2 examines the roles that aesthetics and affective bonds play in influencing and determining the kinds of lifelong choices that people make toward the sangha and society. I posit that seeing and hearing have the potential to trigger particular religious responses, including the desire to become a full-fledged member of the Buddhist sangha. In addition to complementing existing scholarship that
assesses why young children become novices, my effort in drawing attention to
the language of emotion relating to monastic recruitment leads me to make two
key theoretical points. First, I maintain that, far from being understood as blind
surges of affect, emotions are part of a system of ethical reasoning (Nussbaum
2001:1; see also Lutz 1988; Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990; Lynch 1990b; and Heim
2008:18f.). I further contend that affective states, as judgments of value about
people and things in this world, have an instrumental function: emotions are not
merely internal subjective states but also serve to inform and determine the types
of lifestyle choices that families and young children make.

Chapter 3 builds on the previous one by focusing more specifically on
the place of social networks in monastic recruitment. Examining the role that
lay temple advocates and parents of Buddhist novices play in guiding potential
recruits to certain temples, I posit that monastic recruitment should not be
understood solely in terms of an individual's or family's desire for upward mobi-
licity. Instead, interpreting the manner in which parents and children describe the
recruitment process (including the factors that shaped their own decisions) using
several sociological theories of recruitment (Lofland and Stark 1965; Lofland
and Skonovd 1981; Stark and Bainbridge 1985), I maintain that, along with the
promise of a good education and greater financial security, monastic recruitment
is driven by a range of aesthetic-affective-social factors that extend well beyond
the needs and wants of a single individual or family. Finally, in exploring the
social and emotive dimensions of monastic recruitment, I assess the degree to
which people's articulated appraisal of monks and temples shape local concep-
tions of ideal Buddhist institutions and monastic leaders.

Chapter 4 considers the processes by which lay children become social-
ized as Buddhist novices. Along with examining the monastic curriculum that
novices follow in the first five years of their studies, I investigate the role that
relationships play monastic training. Returning to a point I raise in chapters 1
and 2—that conceptions of acceptable monastic behavior are influenced by local
concerns and interest—I posit that more diffuse training methods such as com-
pleting temple duties, performing rituals, and using a specialized vocabulary are
more attuned not only to the ways in which some young novices learn about
proper deportment and behavior but also to local notions of aesthetics. Finally, I
turn to one of Narada's senior students who, in 1999, became the head monk of
another temple and consider how affective bonds that developed between him
and his teacher, as well as between him and his patrons, influenced his own self-
identity, his understanding of monastic vocation, and his levels of commitment
and devotion to society and the sangha.
Finally, chapter 5 investigates the enterprise of temple building as a form of social service. Focusing on two temples that were reestablished in 2003 and 2004, I maintain that, far from being founded on a belief that any properly ordained monastic would suffice or on the laity’s religious needs, temple building is driven by a desire for establishing close, affective bonds with monastics as well by the need to locate aesthetically pleasing experiences. I also posit that aesthetic sensibilities and ideas about ideal monastic deportment are the outcome of dynamic, emotional interactions that exist between monastics and laypeople. Sharing Ananda Abeysekara’s and Yukio Hayashi’s suggestion that we examine local contexts or “minute contingent conjunctures” within which ideas such as proper monks, ideal Buddhist institution, and pleasing demeanor and deportment are dynamically debated and formed, I posit that the establishment of temples and their successful running are grounded in the experiences of the temple’s patrons and monastics whose own religious values and social histories continue to shape their understandings of what constitutes an ideal Buddhist monastic and temple.

THE FIELD SETTING AND FIELD METHOD

As an ethnographic study, this book is largely derived from interviews conducted over a ten-year period with more than sixty novices and monks connected to Polgoda Vihara and eight of its fifteen branch institutions. It also relies on interviews with sixteen lay patrons along with twenty-two parents whose children are in robes. Although the majority of the material on which this book is based pertains largely to the Rāmañña Nikāya—the smallest of three monastic fraternities in Sri Lanka—it also provides a larger perspective on Theravāda Buddhist society, particularly in relation to emotion, recruitment, monastic life, patronage, and institution building. Thus, apart from a close study of this temple network which now includes about 175 Buddhist monks and novices, I also include material collected from visits to more than a dozen other, non-Rāmañña Nikāya, temples as well as from conversations with their monastic leaders and residents. Finally, to situate the many voices presented in this study within wider discourses on Buddhism, monks, and monastic institutions, this study draws on a variety of written and visual sources, including Sinhalese and English newspaper articles, editorials, monastic histories, government reports, a Sinhalese historical novel, and a recently popular Sri Lankan film.

A large portion of the material contained in this book was collected using three principal field methods: closely observed accounts of monastic life, person-centered ethnography, and autodriven photo-elicited interviews. My decision to
use a person-centered ethnographic approach is predicated on the belief that any understanding of Buddhist monastic culture and temple building must begin with specific, in-depth descriptions of human experiences and human subjectivity. Starting with the “individual’s perspective on culture and experience rather than that of a collective system or external observer” (LeVine 1982:293), I believe that a person-centered ethnography is better suited to arriving at descriptions of “human behavior and subjective experience from the point of view of the acting, intending, and attentive subject, [as well as] to actively explore the emotional saliency and motivational force of cultural beliefs and symbols” (Hollan 1997:220).

While assessing the content and method of interviews carried out since 1999, in 2003 I began conducting autodriven photo-elicited interviews in 2003.22 By allowing interviewees the opportunity to frame and photograph various aspects of their lives—e.g., a very important temple activity, an ideal Buddhist monastic, what is important to you as a monastic, and so on—I have found this particular research method to be an invaluable tool for providing monks and young novices the ability to illustrate and discuss their experiences of temple life in a way that is particularly meaningful to them. As I have discussed elsewhere (Samuels 2004a and 2007b; see also Collier 1957, as well as Collier and Collier 1986), the power of photographs to trigger rich, emotional responses from the interviewees has made this particular field method useful in collecting material that highlights, as much as possible, the affective, aesthetic, and social dimension of monastic life for ordinands, novices, and Buddhist monastics.

I understand that the manner in which laypeople speak about monastics or younger students speak about their teachers is highly idealized at times; I am also aware that people’s accounts and descriptions may mask other concerns. Although I believe that conducting multiple interviews with many of my informants over a ten-year period, as well as using multiple field methods, would uncover a number of underlying agendas and interests, my approach to the material is not necessarily to interrogate what people say and how they describe their experiences. Instead, it is to examine how people’s descriptions of their experiences and relationships—including their more stylized and sometimes inflated vocabulary—shape their social and emotional lives as well their understandings of and approach to religious praxis. Thus, throughout this book I have allowed the voices of my informants to come through as much as possible by evoking the categories and terms that ordinands, novices, monks, parents of monastics, and laypeople use as they speak about their experience of Buddhism.