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*Attracting the Heart: Social Relations and the Aesthetics
of Emotion in Sri Lankan Monastic Culture*

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A Review of Attracting the Heart: Social Relations and the Aesthetics of Emotion in Sri Lankan Monastic Culture

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Attracting the Heart: Social Relations and the Aesthetics of Emotion in Sri Lankan Monastic Culture. By Jeffrey Samuels. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010, xxx + 167 pages, ISBN: 978-0824833855 (cloth), US \$36.00.

Attracting the Heart is a beautiful and significant book that challenges and furthers our knowledge of Buddhist monasticism. It is rooted in person-centred ethnography that was carried out over a period of ten years within the central province of Sri Lanka. Its focus is one Rāmañña Nikāya *vihāra* (monastery), Polgoda Vihāra near Kandy, along with its network of branch *vihāras* north of Kandy and in the east of the island. There are a number of 'dramatis personae', but the key figure in the tapestry that Samuels weaves is the founder of the *vihāra*, the charismatic, activist, and people-centred Venerable Narada.

Samuels states that his aim is, "to examine the types of affective bonds and shared aesthetic sensibilities that draw together groups of monastics and Buddhist laypeople" (xxii). His interest, therefore, lies in social processes, narrative, and human relations. In his introduction, he presents four propositions that arise from his fieldwork. Each

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proposition adds either an affective and/or an aesthetic aspect to discourse on Sri Lankan monasticism. The propositions are: 1) that ideas about appropriate monastic behaviour and “good monks” are “determined by and within local communities of monastics and lay Buddhists”; 2) that concepts of reform, decline, and revival should be seen as examples of “strategies of legitimation”—i.e., legitimating distinct visions of the monastic *sangha*; 3) that the bonds that draw lay patrons and members of the *sangha* together involve affective bonds and collectively held aesthetic standards; and 4) that emotions as cultural judgements of people and institutions play a part in the building and maintaining of Buddhist institutions (xxii–xxiv). Each proposition, Samuels argues, has a link with the Sinhala expression, *hita ādaganīma*, which he translates as “attracting the heart.” *Hita ādaganīma* involves the heart and the mind, and can encompass longing, empathy, and compassion.

In presenting these propositions, Samuels challenges several other assumptions that are commonly voiced in classrooms and lecture theatres: that lay people worship the robe and not the individual monk; that the *sangha* is seen by lay people only as a field for the gaining of merit; that the relationship between lay and ordained is dictated by an ethic of mutual exchange; that families who place their sons with the *sangha* are only interested in the economic and educational benefits; that members of the *sangha* are non-engaged with societal issues. Samuels does not argue that these propositions are totally untrue. They contain truth but are incomplete, because they ignore local conjunctures, particularly the shared experiences and emotions that bind lay and ordained together within local communities.

The book is divided into five chapters, which, taken together, illustrate the above four propositions. The first focuses on the biography of Venerable Narada and illustrates Samuels’s first proposition

concerning negotiation on issues connected with monastic behavior, as well as the importance of the affective. Polgoda Vihara was founded because of the perceived arrogance within a neighbouring *vihāra* of the *Siyam Nikāya* towards people of lower caste. Narada, when he arrived there, was able to build ties of affection with the local community and these ties kept him within the *sangha*, even when he was tempted to leave after the JVP (*Janata Vimukti Peramuna*—People’s Liberation Movement) uprising of the late 1980s, when he was forced into hiding because his university studies placed him under suspicion of being a JVP supporter. His local patrons, after all, had protected him from the army and had helped him to complete his studies. These same patrons, up to the present, had also adopted the practice of giving him, his monastic colleagues and his young novices food in the evenings, when they believed that they had not eaten enough during the day. Eating such food was not, in the local situation, deemed inappropriate.

The second chapter examines monastic recruitment and illustrates, through moving examples, the importance of ‘longing’ in a boy’s decision to become a novice—longing for the aesthetic and emotional life embodied by members of the *sangha*. The focus here is Sumedha, a monastic colleague of Narada. His method of recruitment in one area close to Anuradhapura involved embodying an aesthetic ideal in his deportment and appearance, and building up affectionate bonds with young people through a dhamma school that taught poetry, identity-creating songs and ritual. It was most successful. In another *vihāra*, he recruited through a youth group. Samuels interviewed several monastics recruited by Sumedha and found that it was not the promise of education that had drawn them but a longing for beauty, affection and clean living.

The third chapter concentrates on the role of local, lay advocates in recruitment. Two case studies are given, Ampara, in the east, and

Madavala, Venerable Sumedha's village near Anuradhapura. Again, Samuels's fieldwork convinced him that the reasons key lay advocates were able to recommend Polgoda and its branch temples lay within the realm of the affective and the aesthetic. More important than whether members of the *sangha* kept every rule of discipline was whether the *vihāra* treated novices with compassion, and whether the chief incumbent was humble and appealing in his monastic deportment. He quotes Sujata, who explained that what had drawn him to ordination after he had arrived at Polgoda as a lay boarder was, "They live here looking after each other. They speak in ways that attracts everyone's heart. As they treat others like their own younger brothers, we feel like treating them back as if they are our older brothers" (52).

Monastic education and the construction of vocation as practised at Polgoda is the subject of the next chapter. Here, Samuels stresses, in line with the book's focus, that the affective runs alongside the formal. New recruits are encouraged to make strong social bonds with other novices, older monks and lay patrons. Narada himself takes them on outings and allows them to play. Formal training, in fact, only starts after several "spontaneous" months, in which the novices learn through observation and socialising. This formal training is then described. The insights given are fascinating. There is an emphasis on good preaching material, which includes material from the Pāli texts, and the rituals performed by the *sangha*. Only in years three to five are the Four Noble Truths learnt. The importance to the novices of performance and appearance is stressed, for instance that the novices were more likely to feel that they were true monastics through sweeping the shrine room and correctly reciting *paritta* than by studying texts.

The last chapter links temple building with social service. Samuels has already made clear that Narada's interests lie not only in the establishment of *vihāras* but also in the education of the poor and the

material wellbeing of lay people. Indeed, Narada's conviction is that the survival of the *sangha* is dependent on a form of social service. Among other things, it prevents Buddhists turning to other religious traditions. In this chapter, temple building and development is presented as a social service that is dependent on a positive and affective relationship between lay and ordained. Examples are given of *vihāras* that experienced inappropriate chief incumbents, where lay patrons were not content simply to honor any robe. Narada was brought into these situations and transformed them. The point that arises from Samuels's fieldwork is that *vihāras* flourish and duplicate when they become sources of "longing" for lay people (103). When monastic *sangha* and lay patrons are able to negotiate and re-negotiate with each other in a relationship characterized by affection and compassion, communities can flourish, and improve themselves spiritually and materially.

I would strongly recommend this book. Samuels's ethnography is situated within and supported by a sound academic framework. His narrative style is both scholarly and accessible, enabling readers both to touch in their imagination the Sri Lankan contexts described and to explore their significance for Buddhist Studies. I would suggest that this significance is considerable. Venerable Narada is a remarkable monk. Not all chief incumbents in Sri Lanka have his vision, his compassion or his administrative skill. Therefore, Polgoda Vihāra, in its expansion and influence, should not be seen as representative of the Rāmañña Nikāya or Sri Lankan monasticism as a whole, although it is a significant part of it. However, this does not negate Samuels's findings concerning the affective and the aesthetic within monastic discipline, monastic recruitment, monastic training, and the building/development of *vihāras*. These rang utterly true for me. They accord with my own experience of Sri Lankan Buddhism and are a necessary corrective to representations of Buddhist monasticism that stress detachment from

society and a clearly defined contractual relationship between the ordained and lay realms.