

Preaching in the Context of Popular Religion

Buddhist preaching is a popular tradition¹ within Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhism. In the development of preaching tradition, the Buddhist preacher has assumed the role of an entertainer, a performer, and a religious communicator in addition to being a monk. As a popular religious practice, Buddhist preaching is closely associated and linked with vernacular medieval literary practices. While ensuring the continuity and posterity of some early Buddhist practices such as the *bhāṇaka* (reciter) system that Sri Lankan monastics inherited from Indian Buddhism, the Buddhist preacher was innovative in style, so that the pious audience would more readily receive his teaching. In the process, the preacher gave birth to new and more popular preaching practices and performances for the emerging *baṇa* tradition during the medieval period.

This book aims to explore the growth of the *baṇa* tradition as a performance in popularizing Buddhism. During the course of its development, the *baṇa* tradition became increasingly embedded in the popular religion of the Sinhalese and incorporated both devotional and aesthetic dimensions in communicating the teachings of the Buddha through popular Buddhist rites and rituals practiced by average Buddhists. The popular dimensions that developed around the preaching performances of the newly emerging *baṇa* tradition can be witnessed in the late medieval period. Because Buddhist preaching was considered a popular practice, scholars who were familiar with these preaching traditions of Sri Lanka ignored the exploration of preaching and its influence on the popular religion and Buddhist practices. Their preconceived ideas and assumptions, as well as their predilection to

impose artificial disciplinary boundaries, prevented them from careful scholarly investigation of the *baṇa* tradition.

This book aims to fill the vacuum that was created between scholar and preacher. It will demonstrate the growth of the *baṇa* tradition and show the close association between vernacular literature² and popular native religious practices.

Preaching in the History of Religions

As the history of religions has grown as a scholarly discipline, it has distinguished itself from theology by asserting its own *sui generis* and autonomous nature. Michael Meslin (1985: 33–4) explains this distinction as follows:

The young field of the history of religions could not assent to being the humble servant of theology, nor could it assent to being the instrument of a more naïve apologetics. Theology and the history of religions are fundamentally different. In effect, theology is human discourse on God. . . . It is exclusive and unitary. It is precisely this normative character that the history of religions wished to oppose. Out of desire to situate itself at the level of human conduct, the history of religions voluntarily distanced itself from metaphysical speculations and theological systematizations. . . . [I]t declared from the start that it firmly intended to steer a laicizing course. . . . [I]n order to attain complete autonomy from theological discourse, it strove to define its object and its methods of investigation and analysis.

In the process of demarcating the boundaries of the discipline, the definition of terms and categories for scholarly investigation has been an extremely important step. Academic categories, myths, symbols, dreams, notions of the sacred, scripture, and rituals have been used in studying the history of religions from the inception of the discipline in the intellectual atmosphere of the Enlightenment.³ In the nineteenth century, Max Müller (1823–1900)⁴ laid a solid foundation for a *Religionswissenschaft* through his work in comparative mythology. But perhaps because the discipline of the history of religions wished to separate itself from Christianity and theology, historians of religion have ignored preaching as a category in their studies. The fact is that preaching as a category has been and continues to be associated primarily with Christianity.

William A. Graham (1987: 1) notes that in the West before Max Müller, the term ‘scripture’ was “once all but exclusively reserved for

the Christian or Jewish Bible."⁵ Likewise, in academia preaching has been treated almost exclusively as a Christian category, and as such was associated primarily with Christian piety and missionary activities carried out in non-Christian as well as Christian environments.

Limiting academic attention to preaching seems to have been an attempt to ignore preaching's pervasive power as a tool in converting human hearts in a variety of different religious communities. Implicitly at least, this narrow emphasis persuaded scholars to consider preaching as an exclusive domain and peculiar characteristic of Christianity: hence, the vast literature on Christian preaching and the lack of evaluation of preaching in the study of other religious traditions.

Scholarly literature shows a rather hesitant treatment of preaching traditions outside Christianity. The category of preaching is rarely used to study religious instruction in Judaism and Islam.⁶ This becomes even more marked when one turns to the study of non-Judeo-Christian traditions. There has been no significant, detailed scholarly treatment of preaching in Eastern religions, except my own research on Buddhist preaching in Sri Lanka⁷ and one doctoral dissertation on preaching styles in Japanese Buddhism.⁸

Let us examine the way Buddhist preaching has been treated in academia. Historians of religions and Buddhologists seem to have completely ignored and/or underestimated the role of Buddhist preachers and the *baṇa* traditions in Theravāda Buddhism.⁹ The Sinhala term *baṇa* actually means 'preaching.'¹⁰ Even though varieties of preaching traditions are widespread in Buddhist societies, existing scholarly literature contains only scattered, inadequate, and often misleading references to Buddhist preaching.

While carrying out research on Sinhala *baṇapot* (preaching texts), which were produced in the thirteenth century CE, and reflecting on the scholarship of Theravāda Buddhist rituals in Sri Lanka, I discovered that the role of Buddhist preaching was virtually ignored despite evidence of its continuing importance throughout the Buddhist world.¹¹ Despite literary evidence that the Buddhist preaching tradition has been a crucial and important characteristic of Theravāda Buddhism in medieval Sri Lanka, scholars of Theravāda have overlooked the importance of preaching in Buddhist life and have underestimated its importance as a source of inspiration. As a result of this poor treatment, most Westerners—the elite as well as the masses—are astonished to hear about Buddhist preaching traditions, having already concluded that such traditions do not exist.

James Hastings's *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1908)¹² devotes almost ten pages to a discussion of the preaching traditions of Judaism (one and a half pages), Christianity (five and a half pages),

and Islam (two and a half pages). The encyclopedia's entries thus have, unfortunately, been narrowly limited to a study of preaching traditions in the three major religions of the West.

Apparently, the editor of this leading religious encyclopedia did not consider even the possibility of the existence of preaching traditions in Asian religions. It seems that there is an underlying assumption here that preaching, similar to previous concepts of scripture, is limited to and reserved only for the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions.

This kind of unsatisfactory and inadequate scholarly attention to preaching-related categories can be found even in Sri Lankan publications on Buddhism. The *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* (1961–), founded by G.P. Malalasekera (1899–1973) and published by the Government of Sri Lanka, has no entry on *baṇa*, which is the most relevant Sinhala term for preaching. Ignoring the *baṇa* tradition is all the more striking, considering the fact that *baṇa* is one of the most important and influential religious phenomena in the monastic and lay practice of Sri Lankan Buddhism.

A critical evaluation of the *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* raises the question of why such an important concept of Sri Lankan Theravāda, which clearly has many centuries of linguistic, inscriptional, and historical development, has been omitted from the set of intellectual categories considered to be important by educated Buddhists. Even the related categories, which the founding editor and his successors selected for explication, such as *bhāṇaka* (reciter),¹³ *bhāṇavāra* (portion of scripture),¹⁴ and *desanā* (teaching),¹⁵ have not received adequate attention. The authors of these three entries failed even to mention the term *baṇa*, let alone explore the development of the *baṇa* tradition in relation to these ancillary terms. Furthermore, terms such as *dhammakathika* (preacher of the doctrine) and *dhammabhāṇaka* (reciter of the doctrine)¹⁶ have not been identified as significant despite their interesting pan-Asian development in Buddhist countries and their close relationship to the development of the *baṇa* tradition in Sri Lankan Theravāda.

To cite more recent examples of inadequate scholarly attention to the rich tradition of Buddhist preaching in survey works, I refer to two entries in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. First, Charles L. Rice's entry on "Preaching" (1987: 497) examines Buddhist and Hindu preaching very superficially in just one twenty-one-line paragraph; it does not present anything substantial from the 2,500-year-old Buddhist preaching tradition. According to Rice, "[b]oth Buddhism and Hinduism have a place for the enlightened teacher," yet both traditions give a more exalted position to the withdrawn holy man and admire the spirituality that is "above communication in words." The implication is that

since Buddhists and Hindus do not emphasize verbal communication, they do not have really significant preaching traditions.

Alluding to the Buddha's original idea not to preach the doctrine after his attainment of *sammāsambodhi* (perfect enlightenment), Rice suggests that the Buddha only "condescends" to teach others the saving truth, implying that the Buddha was not a fully committed and effective guide and teacher. By reducing Buddhism to a profound doctrine, difficult to convey in words, and by drawing attention to hair-splitting puzzles and riddles of Zen masters, Rice avoids any serious consideration of Buddhist preaching. One gets the impression that he has overlooked the entire collection of early discourses in the Pāli *Tiṭṭaka* (Three Baskets), wherein the Buddha instructed thousands.

Stating that it is difficult to explain a profound religious experience in words does not necessarily mean that an historical tradition such as Buddhism has ignored or downplayed the practice of verbal religious instruction. Rather, the very geographical expansion of Buddhism throughout Asia demonstrates how widespread and effective Buddhist preaching has been.

Second, Richard F. Gombrich's entry "Buddhist Cultic Life in Southeast Asia" (1987: 466; 1989: 331–3) portrays Buddhist preaching in a thirty-one-line paragraph:

What is common to virtually all public occasions for making merit is that the laity feed monks and the monks respond by preaching. At the very least they preach a short sermon (which may be purely formulaic), instructing the laity to share the merit of this act and expressing the hope that it may help them to good rebirths and finally to attain *nibbāna* under the next Buddha, Maitrī (Metteyya).

This description of preaching is more contextualized and detailed than that of Charles Rice. It presents the way preaching occurs in Theravāda countries today and situates preaching in the context of Buddhist soteriology. More specifically, it describes the motivations of the sponsors: they expect good rebirths and the attainment of *nirvāṇa* at the time of Maitreya. Thus, preaching can be seen as a ritual directed to the attainment of future rewards material and spiritual, divine and human, worldly and otherworldly. Gombrich (1989: 313) also reports that in Theravāda Buddhist countries there are many types of preaching, "including sermons composed for the occasion and delivered in the local language."

Though Gombrich's description of Buddhist preaching is short, still it contains more substantial information than that of Rice. However, Gombrich's description is also very misleading, since it compromises the independent status of *baṇa* by equating it with *paritta* (the recitation for protection).

Unlike *baṇa*, *paritta* (Sin. *pirit*) is exclusively a recitation of Pāli canonical *suttas*¹⁷ and postcanonical *gāthās* whose proper recitation is believed to generate prosperity by guarding the listeners from dangers and disease. In Sri Lanka, the collection of *paritta* texts is called the *Mahāpiritpota* (Great Book of Protection).¹⁸ This text consists of *suttas* drawn from the Pāli canon. The recitation of discourses such as the *Ratana Sutta* (*Suttanipāta* vv. 222–38) is believed to generate prosperity and provide protection to the listeners. Highlighting the purpose of *paritta* recitations, Rahula (1956: 278) remarks that the recitation rituals were performed for various purposes such as “exorcizing evil spirits and dispelling disease” as well as for blessings on auspicious occasions such as occupying a new house. While the number of *suttas* recited varies according to the needs of the laity and the occasion, in Sri Lanka one finds short *paritta* recitations as well as recitations that last longer than one day.¹⁹

Gombrich (1989: 313) writes: “The most distinctive form of Theravāda preaching is the recitation of a particular set of Pāli texts called *paritta*.” This statement is not accurate, since *paritta* recitation is purely *recitation* and therefore not *preaching* in the fullest sense of the word. After treating *paritta* as one form of preaching, Gombrich goes on, in the rest of the paragraph, to explain *paritta* rather than Buddhist preaching. Yet, in another place, Gombrich (1971: 274) has recognized that *paritta* is “technically a form of *baṇa*” although “in a class by itself,” and he seems to distinguish preaching (*baṇa*) from the recitation of *paritta*. These conflicting statements by Gombrich may leave the reader somewhat confused.

Buddhist Preaching in Comparative Contexts

Scholars from the Judeo-Christian traditions are seeking a comparative understanding of homiletics. They are looking for comparative insights in the art of preaching from the world religions. They are eager to know preaching as a form of religious activity that reaches to the pious devotees. Here I will provide a brief discussion on Buddhist preaching for their benefit, though more details on the subject are given later in the remainder of the book.

Let me illustrate what is especially unique about Buddhist preaching in comparison to ritual contexts in Judaism, Christianity, and Is-

lam. A close observation on Asian religions shows that there is very little in the way of preaching in Hindu, Taoist, or Confucian religious contexts. Buddhism is one of the Asian religious traditions (apart from Islam) in which preaching has assumed great spiritual and moral significance within the ritual life of Theravāda Buddhist communities. Why is this so? This book will explore this very interesting question in detail with specific reference to Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

It is important to note that Christian preaching has become more and more vigorous and evangelical after the birth of Islam. In the face of threat from Islam, Christian evangelists seem to have used preaching to counter the influence of Islam over Christians: "It was in the reaction from Muhammadanism that the sound of a new era of preaching began to be heard in the atmosphere of Europe. Peter the Hermit 'preached' the first crusade."²⁰

In Christian preaching, there is a common understanding that the preacher is a vehicle for the words of God: "[A] general understanding that the prompting to speak should come from the Spirit of God."²¹ According to Jean Longere, the author of *La predication médiévale*, preaching is a "public discourse based on divine revelation in the framework of an organized society, aiming toward the beginning or to the development of faith and of religious knowledge, and equally to the conversion or to the spiritual progress of the hearers."²² The English word 'preach' derives from Latin *prae-(pre-)+dicāre*, which means, "to proclaim." It is an act of foretelling or announcing in public. It conveys "the idea of making a proclamation on behalf of God." Biblical prophets often urged the acceptance of God's will. Preaching exhorts God, demands compliance with God's will, and provides moral instruction for the believer.

In contrast, a Buddhist preacher communicates his or her experience of the Buddha's words through one's own words. It is not God or the Buddha that directly speaks from his or her mouth. The Buddhist preacher designs, selects, appropriates, innovates, and applies Buddha's teachings to be suitable to a particular audience, time, space, and needs. Buddhist preachers are often instructed to select a teaching that is appropriate to the occasion. The theme that the preacher chooses may be attributed to the Buddha, but the entire elaboration in the sermon is the preacher's creation. Here the Buddhist preacher becomes a free-floating speaker. After accepting basic guidelines, the Buddhist preacher has ample opportunity to innovate and create his or her sermon.

In the early Christian church "[a]t all events the first form of preaching was homilical, a homily being a running commentary on a passage read."²³ One can observe this homilical aspect in Buddhist

preaching, too. If one reads a Sinhala *baṇapot*, one often finds, a Pāli doctrinal stanza is followed by a commentary, which includes the meaning of the verse, its historical context, and its value for a listening audience and how it explains fundamental Buddhist doctrines. Furthermore, if one listens to a Buddhist monk's preaching today, one can observe that the preacher quotes a Pāli verse, often from the *Dhammapada*, or a passage from a *sutta* and narrates its meaning and shows its significance for lay audience and their practice. This homilical aspect shows that to a certain extent early Christian preaching is somewhat similar to modern Buddhist preaching in Theravāda countries in South and Southeast Asia. In both traditions, scriptures form an essential part of the sermon. The preacher's sermon is often woven in and around the themes suggested by the scriptural verse. In the Buddhist case, the selected scriptural verse provides the basic structure and foundation for the preacher to deliver an effective sermon.

In the Protestant Christian traditions, lay preaching has become a dominant and popular feature: "An original step on the part of Wesley and Whitefield was preaching in the open air; and, in the churches founded by them, lay-preaching has been a prominent feature . . ." ²⁴ In the Theravāda Buddhist contexts, one does not often find lay Buddhist preaching. In the Sri Lankan tradition, it is only Anagārika Dharmapāla (1964–1933) who proudly presented himself in public as a lay Buddhist preacher. As discussed in detail in chapter 6, Dharmapāla possessed Protestant outlook and appropriated Protestant strategies in his *dhamma* missions. However, his style of preaching is not the norm for lay Buddhist preaching in Theravāda Buddhist countries. If there are forms of lay Buddhist preaching, they are nowadays rather limited to special occasions such as the full moon days.

Buddhist preaching and perception of it by Buddhist followers seem to differ from that of Christian preaching. In Buddhist contexts, one often finds a loud reading of a religious text in public. For example, a loud reading of the *Jātakapota*, is considered as a form of preaching. Buddhists consider such forms of reading as an important aspect of Buddhist preaching when the texts are rehearsed and performed in a ceremonial fashion. In Buddhist preaching, one does not find a mere reading of a selected religious text but also a musical and rhythmic reading of the scripture. The audience listens to such readings with immense reverence and piety. From their belief perspective, the sermon is a rehearsal of the Buddha's words. It is revered as a 'sacred performance.' The rhythmic styles and musical tones help focus the listeners' attention. In the Christian case, such a loud reading will hardly become a preaching session.

In terms of topics chosen for preaching, there are certain parallels between Christian and Buddhist preaching. *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1908: 10, 216) records that: "Legendary tales concerning the founder . . . his sanctity . . . combats with devil . . . the horrors of purgatory . . . formed the favourite topics of the preachers, and were served up to the people instead of the pure, salutary, and sublime doctrines of the Bible."²⁵ One can find similarities of chosen topics in Buddhist preaching, too.

Sinhala *baṇapota* illustrate that the topics that were selected by preachers for sermons are quite similar. Most accounts given in the sermons are centered on the Buddha, his miraculous birth, his luxurious lay life, his renunciation of royal life, his fasting and asceticism in the forest, his struggle to win over the domain of Māra, to attain enlightenment, his encounter with rivals, his miraculous victory in converting others, lives of hell beings (*preta*), immense pain in hells, lives of his main disciples, the value of taking refuge in the Three Jewels, and the importance of the virtuous practice of giving. A list of this sort can extend to several pages. On the whole, the emphasis in sermons is on avoiding negative actions and in the inculcation of positive thoughts and deeds.

In the Buddhist case, an invitation from an audience is essential for a Buddhist preacher to deliver a sermon. This makes a clear contrast of the role of the Buddhist preacher and the way he or she functions in society. It stands out as a completely different practice from that of a Christian preacher. We often see evangelical Christian preachers deliver sermons at any place where they can attract followers; they also think that it is their duty to spread the Gospel. This aggressive, missionary zeal for preaching is completely absent in the Buddhist preaching traditions. In contrast, Buddhist preachers do not preach in places where there is no public or private invitation. In any Theravāda Buddhist country, one cannot see Buddhists who go from house to house or from street to street to preach the Buddha's words. However, around the world, on many places and occasions, one can witness various Christian groups who visit houses and interrupt people on the street and marketplace to preach the word of God. In the Buddhist countries, these explicit evangelical elements are not visible. Buddhist preaching sessions are held only with an invitation of a lay or monastic person and on a day appointed and agreed on by both parties. Its primary goal is not necessarily to spread the Buddha's words or to increase the number of Buddhists but rather to lead the lay people to righteous and wholesome living. Thus, when one sees from a comparative perspective the role of preaching and preachers in Buddhist

and Christian traditions, there seems to be a great deal of diversity and differentiation.

Recent Studies Related to Buddhist Preaching

There are a few recent studies of Buddhist preaching in several Asian countries, which present both textual and anthropological data. Following review of the literature related to Buddhist preaching will contextualize my own project and will lay the foundation to formulate my own position more straightforwardly. Some of the recent works that have inspired me in this project are: (1) Elizabeth G. Harrison's *Encountering Amida: Jōdo Shinshū Sermons in Eighteenth-century Japan* (1992); (2) Leslie Clifford McTighe's *Mentoring in the Majjhima Nikāya: A Study of the Canonical Buddha's Instruction of the Laity* (1988); (3) Peter Schalk's "Die Botschaft der friedvollen Lehre (*śānta dharmayē paṇiḍāya*): Einführung in die buddhistische Predigt in Sri Lanka" and "Ohne Denken an den Tod ist Kein Leben: Analyse einer buddhistischen Totenpredigt (*mataka baṇa*) aus Sri Lanka" (1983: 68–111; 1988: 229–55); and (4) Gehan Wijeyewardene's "Talking about Merit and Karma: Comments on Religious Discourse in North Thailand" (1984: 314–33).

(1) In understanding the shifts in the constituency of late medieval Sinhala Buddhism and the role Buddhist preachers played in its cultural transformation, a comparative understanding of other Buddhist societies, for example, medieval Japan, would be very useful. Harrison's dissertation (1992) is a study of Buddhist preaching associated with Japanese Pure Land Buddhism in the Tokugawa period (1603–1868). Harrison argues against the position that considers the widespread engagement of Buddhist clerics and populace in Buddhist preaching activities during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to be "merely a matter of entertainment." She posits that "eighteenth-century sermons represent vital, constructive, and eminently religious attempts to rearticulate sectarian doctrine . . . for lay audiences" (1992: 2). In this religious context, she argues, Buddhist preachers, who embodied a Buddhist vision, stood between sectarian organizations and lay people. These preachers and their sermons, rather than the doctrinal tracts of the institutionalized sectarian elite, played the primary role in bringing sectarian Buddhism into the lives of the populace.

Harrison, in her dissertation, shows the way in which the sectarian preachers configured the religious geography of medieval Japan. During the medieval era (twelfth through fifteenth centuries), she identifies six interrelated aspects of Buddhist teaching that mark a "shift in emphasis, a formalization and appropriation on a broad scale

of elements" that were outside the Japanese Buddhist field of vision in earlier periods. During the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, she observes the emergence of a "more informal, literary, personal voice" in Japanese Buddhism (1992: 11); and she traces the development of that voice to its high point in the eighteenth century.

The first of the six interrelated aspects that Harrison mentions, is the change in religious constituency, a transition from the upper classes to the general populace (1992: 13–37). In this transition, Buddhist practices were simplified, and strong efforts were made to seek the engagement of the common people in religious activities.

The second aspect is the shift in content and language. Early sermons were straightforward explications of Buddhist *sūtras*. But in the medieval period, preachers increasingly employed tales to illustrate the working of karma, the cultivation of the benevolence of the *bodhisattva* Kannon, and the soteriological availability of Amida and his Pure Land. Specifically, in the religious atmosphere of the Kamakura Period (1185–1333), she discovers two strands of sermon styles: (i) *shōdo* (to chant and guide), and (ii) *wasan*, a more personal expression of faith through hymns, *hōgo* (tales of the *dhamma*), and *ofumi* (letters).

The third aspect is a change in focus from the ritual and the clergy to the audience. Earlier, rituals were clergy centered, and the performance of ritual was perceived as a vehicle for deepening perception and conveying prayers from the laity through the intercession of the priests. However, in the medieval period, there emerged recognition that the audience was an important part of the ritual and that the ritual itself constituted a teaching situation.

The fourth aspect of the Buddhist preaching tradition in medieval Japan that Harrison identifies is a change in mode from presentational to performative. Earlier sermons were presentational because they "stressed content rather than the audience in the manner in which they were conveyed" (1992: 23). In the medieval period, Buddhist preaching became a verbal or vocal art. *Nembutsu* chanting, or invocation of Buddha's name, gave vocalization a new role. For example, the much earlier Tendai sermons of the Heian period (794–1185) had three parts: (i) *hōdi* (the introduction of the theme of the sermon), (ii) *hiyu* (allegories and parables as examples of the theme), and (iii) *innen* (tales illustrating the working of karma in relation to the central theme). To this sermon style, the Agui school of the medieval period added another two: (iv) *sandai* (a short, chanted introduction at the beginning), and (v) *kekkan* (a conclusion at the end). Harrison states: "As performance rather than presentation, *enzetsutai* sermons held the

potential to touch the emotions, the heart, of those who took part" (1992: 25).

The fifth aspect is a change from the rhetorical to the literary. This movement occurred as the process of preaching became more and more informal and less ritualized. The use of stories with strong narrative lines facilitated this process.

The sixth and last aspect is the emergence of performative methods of teaching. While the Buddhist tradition had already introduced a whole set of liturgies to Japan by the medieval period, many new performances emerged such as *kūyō* at Buddhist services, *shōmyō* (stylized singing with musical accompaniment performed by Buddhist priests), *dengaku* and *sarugaku* (the precursors of Kabuki theater), and *etoki* (oral narrations of pictorial images that illustrate Buddhist cosmology and tenets). These performative media became crucial in teaching the populace.

(2) Leslie Clifford McTighe's *Mentoring in the Majjhima Nikāya: A Study of the Canonical Buddha's Instruction of the Laity* is an examination of the content and methods of the Buddha's religious instruction to lay groups as represented in the *Majjhimanikāya*. It is the only study that I am aware of that has devoted considerable attention to preaching in early Buddhism. McTighe's study makes a useful contribution; however, his unclear explanations and justifications of 'mentoring' as a better basis for discussing the Buddha's religious instruction are both fuzzy and highly problematic.

McTighe hesitates to call the Buddha's instruction in the *Majjhimanikāya* 'teaching' or 'preaching.' He maintains that scholars have used these two terms interchangeably and imprecisely (1988: 3) to refer to the Buddha's religious instruction, and that they are both extremely inadequate.²⁶ Thus, his preference for a term such as 'mentoring' to describe the religious communication attributed to the Buddha in the Pāli *Tipiṭaka*. According to McTighe (1988: 4), mentoring "more accurately and elegantly bridges the gap between ancient Pāli textual communication and modern English usage in religious studies than does either 'preaching' or 'teaching.'" He identifies mentoring as a precise and textually compatible term for the Buddha's teaching method (1988: iv): "the act and the content of the Buddha's religious instruction of lay people" (1988: 4).

Since McTighe's project is more concerned with material that deals with the teaching of individuals, 'mentoring' perhaps may be an adequate concept for his own purposes. However, the way in which he discusses the categories of teaching and preaching is highly unsatisfactory. Questioning the distinction between preaching and teach-

ing, at one point, McTighe asks: "Did the canonical Buddha preach to groups and teach individuals? The distinction might have served me well if the Buddha had not employed exhortation and other non-traditional magisterial rhetoric in his individual sermons" (1988: 7).

Throughout his dissertation, McTighe (1988: 7, 167) strongly suggests 'preaching' to be a public discourse rather than an individual one, yet it is ironic to see that he resists and rebels against Peter Schalk's remark that "preaching is always a public act" (1988: 79f). In Sinhala Buddhist communities, when a preacher gives religious instruction either to an individual layperson or a monk, it is not *baṇa* but rather *anusāsanāva* (advice). In such a religious setting, *anusāsanāva* could be better rendered as 'spiritual counseling,' 'mentoring,' or 'advising.'²⁷ An *Anusāsanā Vaṭṭoruva* written by Vāliviṭa Saraṇaṅkara Saṅgharāja (1698–1778) in 1730 (Or.6603[265]) states that each monk should make a copy of the *vaṭṭoruva*, should retain it in his possession, and should read it at the end of *baṇa* preaching in each *pōya* day.²⁸ In such individual religious instruction sessions, the act of the monk will not be identified as preaching. Though Schalk is correct in noting that *baṇa* is usually identified as a *public act*, this is not always the case in the Sinhalese context.²⁹ The term *baṇa* is used to designate not only sermons that are given to the general public but also sermons that are addressed to individual persons. Certainly, with reference to the *baṇa* tradition in Sri Lanka, 'preaching' would be a much more appropriate word than mentoring.

In Sri Lanka, *baṇa* functions as a public act and a public performance. That type of religious instruction can most appropriately be called preaching. However, since the term 'preaching' is a conceptually loaded one, I advise the reader to be aware that it is used here in a way that includes activities that might, in some other contexts (including some Christian contexts familiar to many English readers), be categorized as 'religious instruction,' 'religious teaching,' or even 'spiritual guidance.'

(3) Peter Schalk's "*Die Botschaft der friedvollen Lehre (śānta dharmayē paṇivoḍaya): Einführung in die buddhistische Predigt in Sri Lanka*" is a study of Buddhist preaching that is focused exclusively on modern Sri Lanka. He centers his attention on several printed preaching texts,³⁰ which included actual sermons of popular preachers who were active in the religious setting of the 1970s.

Schalk has also published another piece, "*Ohne Denken an den Tod ist Kein Leben: Analyse einer buddhistischen Totenpredigt (mataka baṇa) aus Sri Lanka*," which is a study of modern Sri Lankan preaching associated with funerals. Here, he focuses on *mataka baṇa*³¹ sermons given by monk-preachers on the seventh day after the death of a person to

console the mourning relatives and show the ways in which the living relatives can help the dead spiritually.

In Sri Lankan religious context, the *mataka baṇa* functions as a meditation on death (*maraṇasati*). The preacher asserts that human life cannot be fully understood without reflecting on death. In fact, this is a further reflection of the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence. These modern *mataka baṇa* rituals seem to have had an historical growth.³² As a result, religious practices such as transference of merit to the deceased came into being within the Buddhist tradition.³³

Both of Schalk's studies are very interesting, but neither of them describes or analyzes the historical background and growth of the *baṇa* traditions as a distinctive form of religious practice. Therefore, for this book, their usefulness is limited.

(4) There have been a few studies carried out of traditional and modern Theravāda Buddhist communities that have some relevance to the study of preaching. For example, the way preaching is performed among Thai Buddhists can be fruitfully studied through the works of Frank Reynolds and Gehen Wijeyewardene.

Reynolds's textual studies seem to provide a solid background for the arguments made by Wijeyewardene in his paper. The *Three Worlds According to King Ruang* (1345), an important Thai text with vivid portrayals of Buddhist cosmology, may have been used for centuries in constructing popular sermons in Thailand. The Reynolds (1982: 28) point out the way in which classical images of various heavens and hells are evoked as persuasive strategies to encourage the performance of virtuous deeds:

What is more, Phya Lithai presents his description of the various cosmic realms and beings in a form and sequence carefully designed to *evoke a positive moral and religious response*. On the one hand he always keeps the Buddhist emphasis on the negative effects of human sinfulness and the positive results of man's meritorious activities very close to the center of his attention. On the other hand he structures his sermon in such a way that its readers are finally confronted with the impermanence that is believed to characterize all worldly, samsaric existence, and with the ultimate Theravāda ideal of life on the path and the realization of Final Release. (emphasis added)

This particular understanding of the way preaching is carried out in a fourteenth-century Thai Buddhist context is extremely valuable as an ideological framework common to Theravāda Buddhist communi-

ties; in the following centuries, this understanding of preaching may have helped preachers to formulate their sermons in Thailand. In addition, this fourteenth-century notion of preaching is valuable here in the hermeneutics of understanding the *baṇa* tradition in Sri Lanka.

Wijewardene describes, from an anthropological perspective, the way in which the doctrines of merit and karma permeate the preaching of Buddhist monks in northern Thailand. At the outset, Wijewardene remarks that the ritual behavior associated with preaching is not the kind of sophisticated preaching activity that the Buddha might have performed. Rather, the ritual behaviors that he observed were the “products of essentially ordinary men and women designed for the ears of other ordinary men and women” (1984: 315). According to Wijewardene, the most salient characteristic of these sermons (those that could be generalized to preaching in other Theravāda Buddhist countries) is the presence of a this-worldly orientation, embodying a kind of pragmatism quite different from the teachings of the Buddha (1984: 317). He claims that while in early Buddhism, *dhamma* is judged in terms of a certain kind of ultimate soteriological orientation, in the Thai Buddhist communities he studied, the maintenance of Buddhism through the giving of gifts to the Buddhist monastic community (the *saṅgha*) became the primary good for the laity. The end result of material success comes to be seen as the ability to give gifts as acts of devotion. Sermons are no longer focused on soteriological ends; they are “not about salvation, but about life” (1984: 317).

It is appropriate here to reflect on the following observation of James Fernandez (1986: 23), who interprets sermons preached among the Bwiti in West Africa. He notes that religious metaphors and rhetoric are ways of fulfilling psychological needs of human beings:

People undertake religious experiences because they desire to change the way they feel about themselves and the world in which they live. They come into their particular cult with some constellation of feelings— isolation, disengagement, powerlessness . . . from which they need to move away. Metaphors put forth in these movements accomplish that. By persuasion and performance they operate upon the member allowing him eventually to exit from the ritual incorporated, empowered, activated, euphoric. They allow him eventually to exist better situated in quality space.

For Wijewardene, this structural framework moves the rhetoric and metaphors of Buddhist preaching away from ultimate

soteriological concerns and toward more immediate needs and goals. Thus, Buddhist preaching has become a vehicle for teaching lessons on karma and has come to involve methods of persuasion designed to encourage virtuous acts.

Wijeyewardene's analysis of preaching as an instrument for teaching karma, a religious rhetoric for assuring that the material needs of the *saṅgha* will be met, and for persuading listeners to perform virtuous acts, is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the role of preaching in Buddhist communities. What Wijeyewardene says about Buddhist preaching in relation to metaphor seems to resonate with what Fernandez (1986: 8) calls a "strategic predication upon an inchoate pronoun." Metaphors used in religious discourse are strategic predications that act as tools of persuasion and motivate by leading to the performance, in the Buddhist case, of good deeds. In this light, Buddhist preaching can be seen as a composite of 'strategies' for converting the hearts of ordinary people and for transforming their personalities by persuading them to engage in good works. What Fernandez suggests about preaching in Africa, Wijeyewardene illustrates in the complex way metaphors act as tools of persuasion in Buddhist discourse in Thailand.

The *Baṇa* Tradition in Sri Lanka

There are only a very few critical, academic writings either in English or Sinhala on Buddhist preaching in Sri Lanka. When I began this research project on Buddhist preaching in 1990, I found only Peter Schalk's two articles (1983, 1988). Right after my doctoral work at The University of Chicago, I began disseminating the new knowledge of Buddhist preaching that I had gathered by publishing several journal articles (Deegalle 1996a, 1997abc, 1998ab, 1999, 2003). Recently, H. L. Seneviratne (1999: 42–55) and Anne M. Blackburn (2001: 171–194) also have added some useful knowledge in understanding the dynamic facets of Buddhist preaching in contemporary Sri Lanka. Seneviratne's work discusses some aspects of Buddhist preaching in relation to economic development programs initiated by Sri Lankan monks, and Blackburn's study examines preaching in relation to a specific textual and liturgical context in which the Buddhist monks of the Siyam Nikāya used the eighteenth century *sūtra sannayas* (Sinhala commentaries for Pāli *suttas*). While Schalk's (1983, 1988) analysis is exclusively concerned with modern Buddhist practices of preaching and the specific preaching style of Venerable Mādūḷuvāvē Sōbhita, my publications (Deegalle 1996a, 1997abc, 1998ab, 1999, 2003) place the development of Buddhist preaching in a broader context of vernacular Buddhist

literature of medieval Sri Lanka. Other than these studies, it is hard to come across any detailed English publication on the subject of Buddhist preaching. Unfortunately, preaching is not an area of study that has been adequately explored even in the Sinhala language. Other published material is limited to scattered references and allusions in books and encyclopedias. The current status of Theravāda scholarship on this subject is unfortunate. A study that highlights the Sinhala contribution to the Buddhist preaching tradition and examines the growth of *baṇa* as a religious movement of popularizers in the religio-historical milieu of Sinhala Buddhism is very much needed in order to understand Sinhala Buddhism holistically. The holism that I propose here is to be understood as the “contextualized historical description” of Buddhist preaching in Sinhala Buddhism.³⁴

In the definition of *baṇa* as preaching, I have emphasized ‘public speaking’ and have given priority to the aspect of ‘religious instruction.’ In other words, *baṇa* is an educational method in traditional communities and a tool in converting human hearts in a variety of different religious communities, persuading both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. However, the emphasis on religious instruction and public speaking in this definition of *baṇa* does not exclude or undermine the important religious dimensions that *baṇa* contributes to Sinhala Buddhism. The definition of *baṇa* as ‘preaching’ is obviously very narrow, since *baṇa* includes more than just preaching. In Sinhala Buddhist ritual contexts, *baṇa* encompasses four interrelated devotional activities, and within each preaching is paramount: (1) giving religious instruction; (2) rhythmic reading of a religious text in public; (3) reading a religious text aloud and explicating its content in the vernacular; and (4) narrating *Jātaka* stories with or without explanations.

In Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhist devotional contexts, ‘reading *baṇapota* (preaching texts) aloud’ is a form of preaching. The texts, which are read aloud, are written in Sinhala; Pāli texts are not read in the same way as Sinhala *baṇapota*.³⁵ Two most commonly read *baṇapota* are the *Jātakapota*³⁶ and the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* (reading the former is more common than the latter). Sinhala Buddhists would identify such reading activities associated with *baṇapota* as *baṇa*.³⁷ Sinhala *baṇapota* writers (for example, Buddhaputra in the *Pūjāvaliya*) claim that they composed *baṇapota* for just such reading purposes.³⁸ Since *baṇa* includes devotional activities as an important part of preaching, *baṇa* is a ‘fluid’ rather than a fixed category in the sense that preaching is often understood in the West.

When a *baṇapota* is read rhythmically, it attracts the attention of the listeners and enables them to understand the story and draw a moral lesson from it. In this context, *baṇa* is not purely an entertainment

or an expression of Buddhist faith but an active engagement with religion with a desire to know the Buddha's teachings. The extent to which the listeners will understand what is heard in the *baṇa* depends on their spiritual and intellectual abilities. In this context, the role of the *baṇa* preacher is to provide necessary resources for expanding the understanding of the listeners.

By examining the growth of the *baṇa* tradition as a distinctive, 'persuasive strategy' within the late medieval period in Sri Lanka, my aim is to present a more specific and comprehensive portrayal of Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhist practices through a religio-historical study of the Buddhist preaching tradition. The *baṇa* tradition developed and grew in the context of Sinhala *baṇapot*, most of which were written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.³⁹ Some of the *baṇapot* had been used in preaching rituals, and by the beginning of the eighteenth century, this tradition had given birth to the fully developed Sinhala ritual of two-pulpit preaching (*āsana dekēbaṇa*).⁴⁰ The main themes highlighted in this preaching ritual focused on the desire to attain Buddhahood: to see the Buddha Maitreya in the future, to enjoy happiness in heaven, to lead a righteous life free from the sufferings of *saṃsāra*, and to avoid hell through discouragement of bad actions. With such worldly and future-centered orientations, these highly developed preaching rituals functioned as a rich cultural, educational, and religious resource for the inspiration and guidance of Theravāda Buddhists in Sri Lanka.

My thesis is that the Theravāda Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka possesses a rich, complex, and historically changing preaching tradition within which there developed in the eighteenth century a two-pulpit ritual drama in which both Pāli (the sacred language of Theravāda) and Sinhala (the vernacular language in Sri Lanka) were used to inspire and inform Buddhist audiences that included members of the elite on the one hand and ordinary villagers on the other. In addition, I will argue that the study of this Theravāda preaching tradition, and especially the study of the ritual drama of two-pulpit preaching, can creatively extend our understanding of preaching as an interpretive category in the history of religions.

Methodology and Sources

Adopting a religio-historical methodology, which aims to take into account a comprehensive understanding of late medieval Buddhist society, I have used both historical and literary sources.⁴¹ Epigraphical sources that are used to demonstrate the development of an emerging Buddhist preaching tradition come from the *Epigraphia Zeylanica*.⁴²

Literary sources come from a wide range of historical periods, the majority, for example, Sinhala *baṇapot* (preaching texts), deriving from the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries.

Within a little over a century, six important *baṇapot* were produced for the use of Sinhala-speaking Buddhists of the island. Though these major texts are available in printed editions in Sinhala, none of them so far has been translated into English in its entirety.⁴³ These vernacular texts will be used as the primary material for arguing in favor of a growing Sinhala style of Buddhist preaching. Since Vidyācakravartī's *Butsaraṇa* played a special role in expressing and facilitating the growth of the *baṇa* tradition, it will receive particular attention.

In examining two-pulpit preaching as a performative ritual, I have consulted both the palm-leaf manuscripts of the Hugh Nevill collection of The British Library⁴⁴ and a number of printed texts published since 1894.⁴⁵

I have attempted to treat literary materials chronologically as much as possible. However, I may sometimes fail because of uncertainties in the dating of most Sinhala manuscripts. I have used the University of Ceylon's *History of Ceylon* (1960) to date the reigns of various kings, but this source is not particularly useful for dating specific Sinhala manuscripts.⁴⁶ Many scholars question the dates that Hugh Nevill (1848–1897) gives for the manuscripts kept in the Hugh Nevill collection, including many manuscripts that are very important for my study.⁴⁷ In determining the dates that I give for Sinhala manuscripts, I have made a critical comparison of those given in three authorities: (1) *Catalogue of the Hugh Nevill Collection of Sinhalese Manuscripts in the British Library* (Somadasa 1987–1995); (2) C. E. Godakumbura's, *Sinhalese Literature* (1955); and (3) P. B. Sannasgala's, *History of Sinhala Literature* (1964).

In this chapter, I have exposed the superficial way in which previous scholars have studied Buddhist preaching traditions. I have also pointed out the importance of paying attention to 'preaching' in developing a holistic understanding of Sinhala Buddhism. In chapter 2, I will examine the preaching methods associated with the Buddha in the *Tipiṭaka* in order to show the background out of which the Sinhala *baṇa* tradition developed.