

Buddhist Values of the Traditional Sinhalese Village

J.B. Disanayaka

1. Introduction

Values, in everyday life, cut across a wide range of interests: monetary values, functional values, utilitarian values and so on. In ethics, the science that deals with morals, the central concern is the concept of 'moral values' or 'ethical values'.

All religions, whether they believe in a God or not, whether they believe in one omnipotent God or many, whether they believe in a permanent soul or not, share in common one element: a code of moral values. There is, thus, an essential corelation between religion and moral values.

Morality is, basically, a matter that relates to the concepts of 'right' and 'wrong'. What is morally right and what is morally wrong are not, however, absolutely objective. Although all religions share a code of moral values, these codes are not always identical. The differences stem from their histories and cultural conditioning.

The cultural milieu that gave birth to religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism vary and as such their codes of moral values also exhibit certain features that are distinctly of one religion or another.

The few moral values that religions share in common may be considered as those having universal validity. However, followers of a particular religion uphold such values not as part of a universal religious order but as part of their own religion. Hence, all moral values, whether of universal validity or not, carry the stamp of a particular religion.

For example: both Christianity and Buddhism share the moral value that it is not morally right to destroy the life of beings, human or animal. However, followers of each religion will consider this value either as a Christian value or as a Buddhist value. The Christians derive its moral validity

from the first of the Ten Commandments: ‘Thou shalt not kill’, and the Buddhists derive its validity from the first of the Five-Precepts (*panca-sīla*)¹ that every Buddhist is expected to observe in daily life: ‘I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from destroying the life of beings’ (*pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*). Buddhist values are, thus, those moral values that are upheld by Buddhists and derive their validity from some specific Buddhist source. It must be noted that these Buddhist sources have drawn their inspiration from several contemporary schools of Indian philosophical thought.

Values are, however, mere abstractions. They exist only at a conceptual level. They become externally manifested only in the form of habits and customs within a specific cultural framework. Hence, the same moral value may find expression in two different cultures in two different ways: by means of different habits and customs.

Cultures change in time and so do the habits and customs that manifest moral values. Values are also subject to change but their rate of change seems to be slower than that of other elements of culture. They are relatively more resistant to change because they provide the moral basis of a culture, and this moral basis is its most distinctive feature.

The aim of this paper is to present a few of the more important moral values of Buddhism and the way they are reflected in the habits and customs of the traditional Sinhalese village. As a preamble to this discussion, attention will be focussed on two preliminary themes: (a) the sources of Buddhist values and (b) the distinctive features that characterize the traditional Sinhalese village.

2. Sources of Buddhist Values

The Buddhist sources in which Buddhist values are embedded are basically of four kinds: (a) the discourses of the Buddha as recorded in the *Suttapīṭaka* of the Pali Canon; (b) the life of the Buddha as recorded in Buddhist literature and art; (c) the life of the Bodhisatta as recorded in the *Jātaka* tales and art, and (d) the codes of moral conduct (*sīla*) prescribed for the use of the Buddhist laity.

The most important discourse (*sutta*) of the Buddha in which his moral values are defined is his very first discourse, “The Discourse that sets in motion the Wheel of the Law,” (*Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta*). In this discourse, the Buddha reveals that the path leading to the cessation of suffering (*dukkha*) is the Middle Path (*majjhimā paṭipadā*) and that it consists of eight stages of moral upliftment. This Eightfold Path (*aṭṭaṅgika magga*) consists of the following: (1) right understanding (*sammā diṭṭhi*), (2) right thought (*sammā sankappa*), (3) right speech (*sammā vācā*), (4) right action (*sammā kammanta*), (5) right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*), (6) right effort (*sammā vāyāma*), (7) right mindfulness

¹ Words within brackets are in Pāli unless otherwise stated. ‘S.’ indicates Sinhala, and ‘Sk.’ indicates Sanskrit.

(*sammā sati*) and (8) right concentration (*sammā samādhi*). In expounding each of these factors, the Buddha and later commentators have set out in detail the fundamental principles that govern the Buddhist way of moral conduct.

Among the other *suttas* that present Buddhist values are the *Sigālovāda-suttanta*,² which enumerates the duties and responsibilities of the householder, the *Mangala-sutta*,³ which enumerates the ideal factors that are conducive to lead a Buddhist way of life, the *Parābhava-sutta*,⁴ which enumerates the factors that cause the downfall of a householder, and the *Karaṇīyametta-sutta*,⁵ which extols the value of universal love (*mettā*).

The life story of the Buddha, the historical figure who lived in India in the seventh century BC provides the second source that exemplifies the moral values of the Buddhists. The most important biography of the Buddha Gotama in Pali is the *Nidānakathā*, which forms a part of the *Jātakatṭhakathā*. The *Nidānakathā* is “the earliest attempt in Pali to give a connected life-story of the Buddha.”⁶

In the life story of the Buddha Gotama, there are many episodes that exemplify the values of moral principles. For instance, the Buddha has shown, by example, that the ministering of the sick (*gilāna upatṭhāna*) is a moral value of the highest order. In the *Mahāvagga*, the Buddha has said: “Let him who would look after me look after the one who is sick.”⁷ He has also shown, by spending one whole week gazing unwinking at the bodhi tree, under which he attained enlightenment, that gratitude (*kataññutā*) is a value to be cultivated in one’s heart.⁸

The third source is the collection of *Jātaka* tales, which narrate the life stories of the Buddha in his previous births as a Bodhisatta. The *Jātakatṭhakathā* contains two kinds of tales: first, the stories of the Bodhisatta performing the perfections (*pāramitā*), the conditions necessary for the attainment of Buddhahood, and second, the five hundred odd stories, each embodying a moral of practical significance.

The perfections, which are ten in number, are: (1) generosity (*dāna*), (2) morality (*sīla*), (3) renunciation (*nekkhamma*), (4) wisdom (*paññā*), (5) effort (*virīya*), (6) patience (*khanti*), (7) truth (*sacca*), (8) resolution (*adhiṭṭhāna*), (9) amity (*mettā*) and (10) equanimity (*upekkhā*).⁹

² *Dīghanikāya*, PTS, vol. III, 180–93.

³ *Khuddakapāṭha*, PTS, pp. 2–3.

⁴ *Suttanipāta*, PTS, 18–20.

⁵ *Khuddakapāṭha*, PTS, 8-9.

⁶ *The Story of Gotama Buddha (Jātaka-Nidāna)*, tr. N.A. Jayawickrama, PTS, xii.

⁷ *Mahāvagga*, *Khandaka* 8.

⁸ Bhikku Nāṇamoli, *The Life of the Buddha*, Kandy, Buddhist Publications Society, 1978, 30.

⁹ *The Story of Gotama Buddha*, 25–31.

The life of the Buddha as well as of the Bodhisatta has become the perennial source of inspiration for the Buddhist painter and sculptor. The last of the *Jātaka* stories, the *Vessantara Jātaka*, which extols the values of generosity and sacrifice, is one of the commonest themes of Buddhist art.

Finally, the codes of moral conduct provide the Buddhist with a practical guide to Buddhist values. For the Buddhist laity, the most important code is that known as the Five-Precepts (*panca-sīla*), which makes the Buddhists undertake to observe daily the precepts of abstaining from (1) destroying the life of beings (*pāṇātipātā*), (2) taking things not given (*adinnādānā*), (3) sexual misconduct (*kāmesu micchācārā*), (4) speaking falsehood (*musāvādā*) and (5) taking *spirituous* drinks, malt liquors and wines—foundations for heedlessness (*surā-meraya-majjapamādaṭṭhānā*).

On days of religious significance (*uposatha*, *S. pōya*), Buddhists observe the Eight-Precepts (*aṭṭanga sīla*). These include the Five-Precepts and three additional ones: to abstain from (6) taking food at an unseasonable time, (*vikāla bhojanā*), (7) dancing, singing, music and unseemly shows; the use of garlands, perfumes and unguents; things that tend to beautify and adorn the person (*nacca gīta vādita visūka dassana mālā gandha vilepana dhāraṇa maṇḍana vibhūsanatṭhānā*) and (8) using high and luxurious beds (*uccā sayana mahāsayana*). The Ten-Precepts (*dasa sīla*) are observed by those men and women who have committed themselves to lead a saintly life, outside the order of monks and nuns. The Ten-Precepts are made by dividing the seventh precept of the Eight-Precepts into two separate ones, and adding a new one: to abstain from accepting gold and silver (*jātarūpa rajata paṭiggahaṇā*). When the third of the Five-Precepts forms part of the other two sets, it is changed from ‘sexual misconduct’ to ‘all unchastity’ (*abrahmacariyā*).

The difference between the Five-Precepts, on the one hand, and the Eight-Precepts and the Ten-Precepts, on the other, is not merely a matter of number but a matter of scope. The former aims to promote harmony between oneself and others, and the latter aims to establish harmony with oneself, through self-discipline.

The Buddhist monks and laity who had access to these Buddhist sources transformed the moral values enshrined in them into action by evolving a repository of habits and customs peculiar to their own cultures. The present paper seeks to study the relationship between Buddhist values and the habits and customs of the traditional Sinhalese village in Sri Lanka.

3. The Traditional Sinhalese Village

The term Sinhalese denotes both an ethnic group as well as a language. There is today a tendency among some writers to make a stylistic distinction between Sinhalese and Sinhala, the former referring to the ethnic group and the latter, to

the language they speak. Broadly, then, the Sinhalese are those who speak Sinhala as their first language.

The Sinhalese form one of the four ethnic groups that constitute Sri Lanka's population of sixteen million, the other three being Tamils, Muslims and Burghers, the descendants of the Portuguese and the Dutch. The Sinhalese are predominantly Buddhist, the Tamils are predominantly Hindu, all Muslims are followers of Islam, and the Burghers are Christian. The Sinhalese Buddhists and the Tamil Hindus share a cultural core, the source of which can be found in their Indian origins.

The origin of the Sinhalese Buddhist culture goes as far back as the third century B.C., when the Indian emperor Asoka sent his son Mahinda and daughter Sanghamittā to the island to establish Buddhism. The fact that Asoka sent his own children to Lanka shows the special regard he had for this island and its ruler, Tissa, who was given the title *Devānampiya*, Beloved of the Gods, a title which Emperor Asoka himself used in his famous edicts.¹⁰

In spite of the influence of three European colonial powers and their religions since the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Sinhalese culture has succeeded in retaining its essential Buddhist ethos.

Except for a few urban centres such as Colombo, the capital, Kandy, Galle and Jaffna, Sri Lanka is basically a land of villages (*gāma*, S. *gama*, Sk. *grāma*). The difficulty in defining the concept of the 'village' has been discussed in recent anthropological literature.¹¹ Although the precise boundaries of villages are not very sharp, every Sinhalese claims that he or she belongs to a specific village, the village that has his or her ancestral home (S. *mul gedara*). Even those who are born and bred in the cities will claim a particular village as his or her own, and it is a common social custom among the Sinhalese to begin a conversation with a stranger by inquiring "*gama koheda?*"—"Where is your village?" During the holidays for the national new year in April, Colombo becomes almost a ghost city because almost all its dwellers leave for their villages in order to pay respects to their parents and grandparents who live in their ancestral homes.

The traditional Sinhalese village, for the purpose of the present discussion, is a hypothetical construct. It does not refer to any particular village with a specific name or geographical location, such as Leach's Pul Eliya,¹² Yalman's

¹⁰ R. Mookerji, *Men and Thought in Ancient India*, London, Macmillan, 1924, 139.

¹¹ R. Pieris, *Sinhalese Social Organization: The Kandyan Period*, Colombo, Ceylon University Press, 1956.

¹² E.R. Leach, *Pul Eliya: A Village in Ceylon*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971.

Terutenna,¹³ Obeyesekere's Madagama¹⁴ or Gombrich's Migala.¹⁵ As a hypothetical construct, it represents an ideal, and in reconstructing such an ideal, I have been influenced by my training in comparative linguistics.

Comparative linguists reconstruct, on the basis of actually available data extracted from different languages of the same family, hypothetical forms of their parent language, which does not exist any longer. Although all these hypothetical forms do not actually occur in any single daughter language, they succeed in explaining the interrelationship among the daughter languages and their relationship with the parent language. On the basis of such hypothetical forms, linguists reconstruct what they have termed proto-languages, such as Proto-Indo-European, Proto-Dravidian and so on. Proto-Indo-European is considered the parent language of Greek, Latin and Sanskrit, and Proto-Dravidian is considered the parent language of Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada.

On the same methodological basis, one may be able to reconstruct a proto-village based on actual, extant data, collected from different villages of a given culture. No actual village has all the elements of the proto-village, but each element of the proto-village is found in some village or another. My traditional Sinhalese village is such a proto-village. In a Buddhistic sense, it is there and it is not there!

The traditional Sinhalese village is basically agrarian, with rice as its main sustenance crop. Yalman distinguishes four types of villages among Sinhalese agricultural settlements:

- a. the tank-villages (S. *vaev gam*) of the Northern Dry Zone,
- b. the tank-villages of the Central Highlands,
- c. the rain-dependent villages of the Eastern Province, and
- d. the *chena* villages—villages on highland with no irrigation facilities.¹⁶

The traditional Sinhalese village is essentially Buddhist. Most of the villages have temples (S. *pansal*) of their own, and smaller villages owe their allegiance to these temples. Temples that had the patronage of kings (S. *raja*) were named 'Great Royal Monasteries' (S. *raja maha vihāra*). Clusters of villages over which the temple has jurisdiction in religious matters are called 'subsistence-villages' (S. *goduru gam*).

¹³ N. Yalman, *Under the Bo Tree*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967.

¹⁴ Obeyesekere, Gananath, *Land Tenure in Village Ceylon*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1967.

¹⁵ R. Gombrich, *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Ceylon*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971.

¹⁶ N. Yalman, *op. cit.*, 21.

A typical Buddhist temple consists of three main objects of worship: (a) the hemispherical structure which enshrines some sacred relic of the Buddha or of some other sacred personage (S. *dāgaba*, *vehera*, *vehera vahanse*), (b) the tree which botanists have termed *ficus religiosa* (S. *bōdiya*, *bōdinnānse*) and (c) the shrine which houses the images of the Buddha and other religious personages, and contain mural paintings and sculptures depicting the life of the Buddha and Bodhisatta (S. *budu gē*, *vihāre*).

In addition, the temple has a sermon-hall (S. *bana gē*, *bana maḍuva*), a small library (S. *pot gula*), a bell-tower (S. *gantāre*) and the residential quarters of the monks (S. *āvāse*, *ārāme*). Large temples run an educational institution where both monks and laity study (*parivena*, S. *pirivena*), and maintain a house where monks assemble to perform certain religious rites such as the recitation of *Pātimokkha* (*uposathāgāra*, S. *pōya gē*).

The monks follow the Theravāda tradition, and remain celibate. A temple has three kinds of monks: (a) novices (*sāmaṇera*), (b) monks who have attained higher ordination (*bhikkhu*), and (c) monks who have spent more than ten years after higher ordination (*thera*).

There is a special link between the village and the monk; for when a Sinhalese enters the order of monks (*saṅgha*), he gives up his personal name and takes a new name consisting of two parts: (a) a religious name such as Rahula or Saddhatissa and (b) the name of the village of his birth, such as Walpola or Hammalawa. The monks will bear names such as Walpola Rahula and Hammalawa Saddhātissa, which reveal their village links.

The temple which is located either in the centre of village or in the highest point overlooking the village served as the most important link in the communication network. The temple was the school 'without walls', where the laity received their education in living. It is at the temple that the monks and laity learned, both in precept and practice, the moral values of Buddhism.

4. Buddhist Values and Sinhalese Customs

The Buddhist values that underlie the customs of the traditional Sinhalese village may be classified, for the convenience of analysis, into two broad categories: (a) values that are related to others, and (b) values that are related to oneself.

Among values that relate to others are values such as (a) respect for the life of others, (b) respect for the property of others, (c) respect for the knowledge of others, (d) respect for the wisdom of others, and (e) respect for the well-being of others.

Among values that relate to oneself are values such as (a) humility, (b) contentment, (c) generosity, (d) self-discipline relating to one's body and (e) self-discipline relating to one's mind. Since it is not possible to deal with all

these values in a single paper, I propose to select one from each category and discuss it in some detail, so that it gives a general picture of the impact of Buddhist values on the traditional Sinhalese village.

The two values selected for discussion are: (a) respect for the life of others, from the first category, and (b) humility, from the second category. Customs embrace both verbal and non-verbal modes of behaviour.

4.1 Respect for the Life of Others

Life (*pāṇa*), in a Buddhistic sense, encompasses not merely the life of human beings (*manussa*), but also that of animals (*tiracchāna*), gods and godlings (*deva*) and the departed (*peta*). The Buddhistic Pali terms *sabbe sattā*, *sabbe bhūtā* and *sabbapāṇi* denote life in all realms of existence in the cycle of rebirths (*samsāra*).

Since life is a continuum through *samsāra*, the boundaries between certain forms of life are not always sharp for the Buddhist. For instance, the Sinhalese Buddhist peasant does not kill or harm a snake (S. *nayā*) that visits his house frequently because he thinks that it is one of his dead relatives (S. *nāyēyā*), that keeps on visiting its old family because it has been unable to give up its craving for the family and household even after being reborn as an animal in the next birth. The peasant thus speaks to the snake in Sinhala, politely and respectfully, as if it were a human being, addressing it as “*nay hāmi*,” (Mr. Snake) and requesting it to carry itself away with respect, “*yahapat venda*”.

Respect for the life of others means basically the recognition of the right of others to live. The Buddhist’s recognition of this right finds expression in two complementary modes of action: negatively, by avoiding the wilful destruction of life (*pāṇa-atipāta*, *pāṇa-ghāta*, *pāṇa-vadha*, or *pāṇa-hara*), and positively, by cherishing the life of others.

The right of human beings to live, of course, has been recognized by all religions, at least in their original forms. Buddhism takes it further by recognizing the right of even non-human beings to live and to be protected. The Buddhist’s wish is: “May all beings be happy,” (*sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā*).

The most common Buddhist formula that guarantees the life of all beings is the first of the Five-Precepts, which persuades the Buddhist, whether monk or peasant, to undertake to observe (*samādiyāmi*) the precept (*sikkhāpadam*) to abstain (*veramaṇī*) from the destruction (*atipāta*) of life (*pāṇa*).

According to Buddhism, life comes into being in four ways: (a) *andaja*, to be born from an egg, (b) *jalābuja*, to be born from a womb, (c) *sansedaja*, to be born from moisture and (d) *opapātika*, to be born spontaneously.¹⁷ Any attempt to obstruct these ways of birth are avoided by the Sinhalese peasant.

¹⁷ *Majjhima Nikāya*, PTS, vol.1, 73.

The Sinhalese peasant avoids eating eggs because he is aware that they have life in the making. Even urbanites who eat eggs avoid eating eggs on *pōya* days. Others refuse to break an egg on a *pōya* day, even for the sake of someone else. Poultry was not practised in the traditional village because neither eggs nor fowl formed a part of the day's meal. Recently, when steps were taken by the government to introduce poultry farming into traditional villages as part of their development-programme they were met with resistance by the Buddhists.

Abortion was not tolerated in the traditional village. The dangers of abortion were described in vivid terms in a story named *Kāli Yakinnagē Katā Vastuva*—the tale of the female demon, Kāli—in one of the most popular works of Sinhala literature, the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya*.¹⁸ According to this tale, a woman aborts another woman in one life, and the latter aborts the former in the next life, and this goes on until one woman was born a female demon (S. *yakinna*) during the lifetime of the Buddha and the other a daughter of a noble family. When the demon was getting ready to avenge, the Buddha saw her with his divine-eye and advised both that “hatred never ceases through hatred,” and that it can be overcome only through love. Buddhist women are very familiar with this tale and shun abortion as an evil means.

Killing harmless animals irritated the peasant the most. Among the animals that are considered harmless are the rat-snakes (S. *gaerandi*) and ants (S. *kurā kūmbi*). Hence, the proverbs: “Do not commit sin by killing rat-snakes,” (S. *gaerandi marala pav ganḍa epā*) and “Do not kill even an ant,” (S. *kurā kūmbiyek vat maraṇḍa epā*). An innocent man, according to the Sinhalese, is one who does not harm even an ant (S. *kurā kūmbiyekuṭa vat hinsāvaka naeti minihēka*).

When little children play with ants, they are always reminded that it is a sin (*pav*) to do so because the ants might get killed in the process. On the other hand, if a child sees an ant or any other insect in water, struggling to survive, he will do everything possible to save it, because he has been told that saving the life of animals is a meritorious activity (S. *pinaka*).

The animals that come closest to the peasant's life are cattle (S. *haraka, gavayo*). The possession of cattle (S. *gava sampat*) is considered a blessing, like that of having children (S. *daru sampat*). The bull (S. *gonā*) and the cow (S. *eladena*) are given names such as Handaya—The Moon-faced One, Pohori—The Spotted One, or Ratti—The Red One, and they are addressed by a kinship term *duvē* (daughter) or *putē* (son), as the case may be. In folk songs sung during agricultural activities, cattle are addressed as *mage vahu daruvanē* (my cattle children), and their forgiveness is sought for making them work in the fields.

¹⁸ *Saddharmaratnāvaliya*, ed., D.B. Jayatilaka, Columbo, Svadesha Mitraya Press, 1930, 86–94.

When a bull becomes old and is unable to work, it is never taken to any slaughter-house. Instead it is allowed to roam freely in the village and is called *pin gonā* (merit-bull), meaning, the one who depends on the kindness of others. No peasant ate beef (*harak mas*) and when the Sinhalese spoke in derogatory terms of beef they called it *geri mas*. A Sinhala commentary of the thirteenth century says “*geri mas kat nam bera gasat nam ū beravāyō yi,*”¹⁹ meaning if any one eats beef and beats the drum, he is a drummer, and a drummer is one who is considered as belonging to a low caste.

The Sinhalese peasant follows the custom of releasing a bull or a cow that is taken to a slaughter-house in order to acquire merit that can then be transferred to a person who is critically ill in his or her death-bed. It is believed that the life so saved will help the person in the death-bed to live for a longer period. This rite of releasing cattle is called in Sinhala *gō dāne* (cattle-offering).

Agriculture involves, invariably, the death of certain animals such as worms that subsist on soil. The peasant is aware of this and in order to clear his conscience of this guilt, as it were, he refuses to till his field on *pōya* days. Most interestingly, even those Buddhists who live in fishing villages by the sea, do not go fishing on *pōya* days to save, at least, a few fish from death.

The peasant handles the problem of pests that attack his crops in a Buddhist way, by resorting to certain magical practices known in Sinhala as *kem*. *Kem*, in general, refers to a form of magical practice performed by ordinary peasants to cure certain simple ailments, such as tooth-ache, stomach-ache or sprains.

When *kem* magic is used to control pests, it is believed that it prevents birds and insects from coming to the fields. In one form of *kem* magic, the peasant goes to the temple on a Sunday, makes some wicks from an old discarded robe (S. *sivura*), takes them to the paddy field and lights three oil lamps with the wicks, places them facing three directions on three spots at sunset, and hoots three times. The peasant strongly believes that this will keep the birds and other pests away from his field.

In another form of *kem*, the impact of Buddhism is strikingly conspicuous. The peasant takes a tender coconut leaf (S. *gokkolē*) and inscribes on it a Pali stanza, which has now assumed the status of a magical formula. The Pali stanza, which is used in many other instances of magic, is one that sums up the essence of the Buddha’s teaching:

*Sabba pāpassa akaraṇam
Kusalassa upasampadā
Sacitta pariyodapanam
Etam Buddhānasāsanam.*

¹⁹ *Jātaka Aṭṭvā Gaetapadaya*, Chapter 59, *Bherivāda Jātaka*.

“Not to do any evil,
To cultivate good,
To purify one’s mind,
This is the teaching of the Buddha”.²⁰

The leaf is then placed at a central spot in the field.

Some of the pre-Buddhist rituals that were assimilated into the fold of the traditional Sinhalese village have also undergone certain changes as a result of the Buddhist value of protecting the life of animals. In some of the healing rituals (S. *tovil pavil*) performed in the South even today, the devils (S. *yakku*) have to be appeased by offering them the food that they relish. In pre-Buddhist folk religion, this was done by offering an animal as a sacrifice (S. *billa*). However, since Buddhists cannot sacrifice animals, this is replaced today by the offering of some blood taken from a fowl.²¹

Positively, the Sinhalese Buddhist follows many customs that tend to cherish animal life. Birds (S. *kurullo*) that are found in abundance in this tropical setting, are among the animals that are looked after well by the peasants. In the village, an entire tract of land, bordering the stretch of paddy fields, is set apart for the exclusive use of birds, and this land is called in Sinhala *kurulu pāluva*.

Individual varieties of birds, such as paddy-birds (*vī kurullo*) and sparrows (*gē kurullo*) are provided with dwellings inside houses, by placing on the wall, just below the roof, a clay pot with an opening. The birds build their nests inside these pots and tend their little ones without any fear from the human presence. The Sinhala word for sparrows, *gē kurullo*, means literally, house-birds.

Birds often get fed with human food because of a certain custom followed at the offering of alms (*dāne*) to monks either at the temple or at a household. Just before the monks begin to partake of the food, the chief householder goes from monk to monk with a small plantain-leaf (S. *pat kolē*) collecting into it the first handful of rice from each plate offered to the monks. This rice is then placed outside the house for the use of birds and other animals, like dogs.

The common crow (S. *kapuṭa*) is, in the belief of the Sinhalese, an animal that is eternally hungry. Thus, feeding such an animal is considered a highly meritorious act. To achieve this, the peasant performs a special offering of food to the crows and the dogs, and this is called *balu kapuṭu dāne*. This rite is done specially when someone is afflicted with certain diseases which the villagers think are caused by planetary-gods. Ghee (S. *gitel*), in particular, is mixed with rice on this day because it is believed that the crow relishes ghee.

²⁰ *Dhammapada*, tr. Ven. Narada, verse 183.

²¹ E.R. Sarathchandra, *The Sinhalese Folk Play and the Modern Stage*, Columbo, The Ceylon University Press Board, 1983.

In certain jungle (S. *vanni*) villages of the Northern Central Province the peasant sets apart a small paddy field for the exclusive use of cattle, and this is also called in Sinhala *gō dāne* (cattle-offerings). When cattle are used at the threshing floor (S. *kamata*) to thresh paddy, they are never prevented from eating the corn even though this certainly leads to a slight reduction in the yield! In order to encourage the peasant to allow the cattle to be fed on the corn, it is said that if cattle ate corn on the threshing floor, it increases the yield!

Although the peasant finds his cattle very helpful in his activities, it is the custom to allow the cattle to rest at certain times of the day. For instance, the pair of buffaloes that are tied to the plough is let loose at midday when the peasant retires for his meal. This allows the animals to wander about grazing along the ridges (S. *niyara*) while the peasant himself enjoys his meal. Forcing cattle to work at midday, particularly under the tropical sun, is considered by the peasant as a grave offence that calls for severe punishment. There is, in the Southern Province, some interesting folklore relating to an incident when a peasant forced his buffaloes to plough his field even at midday. This folklore concerns the mountain known as Gon-gala-Kanda near Deniyaya in the South. Folklore has it that it was so named because its peak resembles a buffalo and a man, and that they were placed there by the Lord of the Gods, Sakra, in order to punish the farmer who was ploughing his field at midday. Sinhalese peasants say that the farmer and his bull were transformed into stone and were placed on this peak so that the whole world would not forget the message: that even animals need the love of human beings.

In the mountain villages of the Central Highlands, there is a custom known as *haetapum arinava*, whereby bulls are not made to work every day but only every other day, allowing them to rest (S. *haetapum*) in between. When cattle fall ill, they are looked after by a physician specially trained in the treatment of cattle diseases. He is called *harak-vedā* (cattle-physician). Even though Buddhists do not consider the cow a sacred animal, as do the Hindus, they care for it, as if it were a member of their family. Every year the mountain villages in the upper reaches of the Mahavaeli river also perform a ritual for the well-being of their cattle. It is called in Sinhala *mēsa maḍuva*, the word *mēsa* being perhaps a derivative from the Pali word *mahisa* denoting buffalo. This is a folk ritual performed all night invoking the blessings of gods, such as *Gopalu dēvatāvunnānse* (God of the Cow-herd) to protect cattle. The ritual comes to an end with the rite known as *kiri itiravīma*, the over-flowing of milk by boiling a pot of milk. Milk, taken from the cow, is a symbol of fertility and its over-flowing suggests abundance and well-being.

Among the non-human beings that arouse the concern of the Sinhalese peasant are the departed ones (*peta*, S. *malagiya aetto*, *malagiya prānakārayo*).

According to Buddhist belief, the departed ones may be born in certain realms of miserable existence, such as *spirits* and ghosts. These beings cannot perform meritorious acts and as such cannot improve their lot. They thus depend on the kindness of human beings to seek release from that realm of existence. In order to help such beings, the Buddhist follows the custom known as the transference of merit to the departed (S. *pin denavā*). The peasant who visits the temple engages himself in several meritorious acts and at the end says the following stanza in Pali to transfer some of his merits to the departed ones:

*Idam vo ñātīnam hotu
Sukhitā hontu ñātayo.*
“Let this merit accrue to our relatives
And may they be happy.”

Merit is transferred to the departed on other occasions as well, particularly, at the end of an alms-giving held in remembrance of a dead relative. A pitcher of water and an empty bowl are kept beside the monks who are seated on the floor. The relatives of the dead come together and begin to pour water from the pitcher into the bowl slowly, as the monks chant the following stanzas in Pali:

*Yathā vāri vahā pūrā
paripūrenti sāgaram
Evameva ito dinnam
Petānam upakappati.*
“As the full water-bearing rivers fill the ocean
So indeed does what is given here benefit the dead”.
*Unname udakam vaṭṭam
Yathā ninnam pavattati
Evameva ito dinnam
Petānam upakappati.*
“As water rained on a height reaches the low land
So indeed does what is given here benefit the dead.”

The monks chant these verses until the water overflows the bowl.

In the view of the Buddhist, animals and the dead are not the only beings whose life has to be protected. The gods and godlings who live in the heavens are also dependent on human beings for their well-being. From a Buddhist point of view, the heavens are just another realm of existence, and their dwellers cannot acquire merit on their own, although they can enjoy pleasures. Thus, the Buddhist feels that it is his duty to transfer merit to these divine beings (*deva*, S. *deviyo*) too. This rite involves the recitation of the following Pali stanza:

*Ākāsaṭṭhā ca bhummaṭṭhā
Devā nāgā mahiddhikā*

*Puññantam anumodivā
Cīram rakkhantu sāsānam.*
“May beings inhabiting space and earth
Devas and Nagas of mighty power share this merit.
May they long protect the Dispensation.”²²

Thus the Buddhist value that protects and cherishes the life of other beings at all levels of existence has given the traditional Sinhalese village one of its most pervasive features: its Buddhist ethos.

4.2 Humility

Humility (*nihatamānatā*) is one of the Buddhist values that relates to oneself. Even though the Sinhalese Buddhist uses Sinhala words such as *mama* (I), *mage* (my, mine) and *tamā* (oneself) in everyday communication, he is told that a belief in a permanent self (*atta*, S. *ātmaya*) is unrealistic. Hence any effort to exhibit one’s attainments or possessions is, in the ultimate analysis, futile.

On the other hand, the Buddhist is taught to feel humble in spite of any such attainments or possessions, because beings are, after all, equal when it comes to the basic nature of life: its unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and impermanence (*anicca*). Every human being, of whatever station in social life, is subject to decay (*jarā*), sickness (*vyādhi*), death (*maraṇa*) and so on.

The culture in which the individual grows up contributes many things to make him what he is: his family, house and property, dress and ornaments, social status, skills and so on. These things cannot be helped as long as the individual lives as a member of his social organization.

Society also uses these elements as symbols of social status to indicate that an individual is relatively higher or lower than another in a social scale that is purely subjective. The Buddhist is made to realize that such evaluations are futile because they have absolutely no bearing on human suffering in the world.

The traditional Sinhalese village maintains certain customs to show the importance of being humble. These apply both to monks and peasants, men and women.

In Sinhalese culture, the family name of an individual is an index of his or her social background, because the name betrays certain caste connotations. As such, the layman who enters the order of Buddhist monks is made to give up his family name in preference to a Buddhist name, which is not caste-bound.

The monk, of whatever social background, is trained to beg for his daily food once he enters the order. At the same time, the monk is made to visit all

²² Ven. Narada, *The Mirror of the Dhamma*, Singapore, Singapore Buddhist Meditation Centre, 1991, 29.

households of the village, irrespective of their caste and social rank, to collect his food and take part in other religious rites.

The life of the laity is also influenced by this value. Firstly, every devotee is made to part with all the symbols of social identification as he or she enters the sacred precincts of the temple, where secular symbols cease to function. In terms of dress, one is encouraged to wear something simple, preferably in white. On *pōya* days, when devotees observe the Eight-Precepts, they are made to wear a dress that is completely white, so that all devotees, of whatever social background, tend to look alike.

Laymen and lay women are made to remove, as they enter the temple, their head-gear and foot-wear, because they also serve to identify the social background of the user. Women do not wear jewellery to the temple. Stripped of all symbols of social identity, the laity who gather at the temple begin to look alike, which makes them feel that they are, after all, equal as human beings.

Secondly, the laymen are made to respect the monks at the temple by making them touch the feet of the monks. When monks enter a lay household for an alms-giving, or a *pirit* chanting ceremony, it is the custom to wash the feet of the monks by the chief householder, at the main doorstep. The main purpose of this custom is not so much to clean the feet of the monks in a physical sense as to make the chief householder humble enough to touch the feet of the monks, an act which only a person who has suppressed his pride and vanity can do; for, touching the feet of another in secular life implies that one is lower in status than the other. However, in the presence of the Buddhist monks, who are themselves humble, this secular rule ceases to operate, since no layman is higher than a monk, in terms of morality.

When Buddhist monks are offered alms at the temple or in a household, laymen are also made to carry and hold the spittoon (S. *paḍikkama*) for monks to pour water to wash their hands and mouths. The spittoon is a lowly thing, and no one who is proud would ever hold it for others in secular life. But the Buddhist monks make the laymen hold it for them, and the laymen hold it, suppressing their feelings of pride, if any.

Outside the temple, men and women sit on high chairs or low chairs, depending on their social status for it is the custom among the Sinhalese that only people of the same caste or social rank can sit together as equals, on high chairs. However, the temple provides no high chairs for anyone. All devotees, irrespective of social rank, sit on the floor, usually on mats, to listen to the sermons (S. *bana*) or the chanting of *pirit*.

The pilgrimage (S. *vandanāva*) is another Buddhist custom that is designed to teach the value of humility to the laity. In fact, the Buddhist pilgrimage is less of a tour to visit a place than a period of training to live an ascetic and humble life.

The food the pilgrims eat, the dress they wear, the words they speak, while on a pilgrimage, reflect that they are, in the last analysis, humble men and women who are on a common mission to visit a pilgrim-centre to pay homage to the Buddha.

To make the laity feel that they are equal at the temple, the monk also addresses them with special words in place of the usual secular words, such as ladies (S. *nōnāvaruni*) and gentlemen (S. *mahatvaruni*). The words the monk uses recognizes only one factor: that the laity is endowed with merit (S. *pin*). Thus, laymen are called *pinvatuni* and lay women *pinvatiyani* (those blessed with merit). Merit, not social rank, is all that matters to the monk.

What these customs aim to achieve is to make the laity less conscious of their differences of social standing, and to make them more conscious of their similarities as human beings who are, from a Buddhist point of view, caught up in the wheel of rebirths, characterized by impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and selflessness (*anattā*).

5. Conclusion

Some of the habits and customs discussed in this paper are gradually being replaced by others, making the Sinhalese village less traditional. This cannot be helped in the face of social forces such as westernization, modernization, technological advancement and so on. For the Buddhist, who understands that everything is in a state of flux, this causes no alarm.

From a Buddhist point of view, what is important is not to hold on to old customs uncritically but to hold on to the values they express. If, however, Buddhist values begin to change, modify or disappear completely, then, it will be a matter of grave concern since Buddhist values have a great relevance for mankind, and its survival on this planet in the future.