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# Disciplining Devotion: Buddha Representations and Ideologies of Materiality in Sri Lankan Buddhism

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**Abstract:** This article revisits the theologically problematic nature of representations of the Buddha (statues and pictures) that serve as focal points for meditation, devotional respect (*bhaktiya*) and worship (*pūjā*) for Sri Lankan Buddhists. It shows how Sri Lankan Buddhist institutional authorities highlight the metaphysical distance between such representations and their enlightened referent, the Buddha, by means of disciplinary technologies that maintain a physical and tactile distance between devotee and representation. While devotees do seem to avoid identification of the Buddha with his likenesses, this does not mean that they treat such representations as mere symbols. Rather, Buddha representations become understood as powerful objects – materialisations of the karmic merit (*pin*) and sin (*pau*) attendant on the histories of their devotion.

**Keywords:** anthropology of religion, materialism, representation, visual culture, Buddhism, Sri Lanka

**Résumé :** Cet article réexamine la nature théologiquement problématique des représentations du Bouddha (statues et images) qui servent de points de focalisation pour la méditation, la dévotion (*bhakti*) et l'offrande (*puja*) chez les bouddhistes sri-lankais. Il montre comment les autorités bouddhistes sri-lankaises mettent en avant la distance métaphysique entre ces représentations et leur référent éclairé, le Bouddha, au moyen de technologies disciplinaires qui maintiennent une distance physique et tactile entre le fidèle et la représentation. Si les fidèles semblent éviter d'identifier le Bouddha à ses portraits, cela ne signifie pas pour autant qu'ils traitent ces représentations comme de simples symboles. Au contraire, les représentations du Bouddha sont comprises comme des objets puissants – comme des matérialisations du mérite (*pin*) et du péché (*pau*) karmiques qui accompagnent l'histoire de leur dévotion.

**Mots-clés :** Anthropologie de la religion, matérialité, représentation, culture visuelle, bouddhisme, Sri Lanka

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## Introduction

In the mid-1990s, in central Sri Lanka, an incident reported to have occurred at cave number four of the 2000-year old Dambulla temple complex resulted in the banning of photography at the World Heritage Site for several years afterward. A French tourist allegedly climbed onto a statue of the meditating Buddha and sat in the statue's lap to pose for a photograph. The notorious incident caused an uproar memorialised in its frequent invocation by guides giving tours of the caves and signage that seeks to pre-emptively discipline overly casual sightseers. The tourist's photo faux pas resulted in a prolonged closure of cave number four; the Buddha statue had to be repainted and reconsecrated before the cave was reopened to the public several months later. While the ban on photography of Buddhist artifacts at the caves has now come to an end, the practices and kinds of photography that are permitted are highly circumscribed. Signs placed next to Buddha statues throughout the caves warn visitors not to engage in photography or behaviour that shows "disrespect" to Buddhism, examples of which appear in [Figure 1](#). In particular, tourists are advised not to pose for photographs with their backs turned toward the statues, striating canonical practices of tourist photography where the visitor faces the camera with the object of interest framed in the background.

The moral panic surrounding the foreign tourist's impropriety with a twelfth-century Buddha statue provides an opening onto the complex status of Buddhist sacred objects in contemporary Sri Lanka. Although it is clear that the tourist's behaviour caused an uproar, articulating why, and in which respects, her action was understood as transgressive, even iconoclastic, by Sri Lankan Buddhists is not a simple proposition. While Buddha representations in museum spaces and historical sites in Sri Lanka are clearly distinct from the consecrated *pīḷi-maya* or statues actively employed in temple rituals, they still enjoy a special status – one deserving of displays of

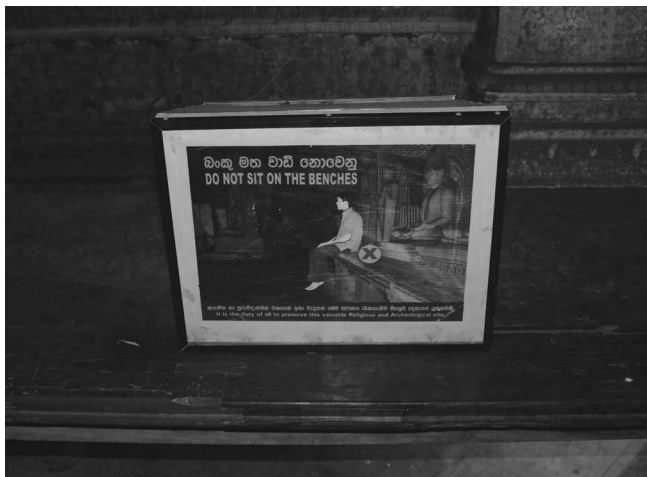


Figure 1: Signage at Dambulla Temple, advising visitors as to proper conduct in relation to Buddha statues.

“devotion” and “respect” or *bhaktiya*. As with Buddha statues in active places of worship, the Buddha statues at Dambulla require a particular respectful orientation of the viewer. Buddhist objects in museum contexts, such as Dambulla, straddle the putatively secular domain of the museum and the sacred space of the *pansala* or Buddhist temple. As I hope to show, this slippage is so seamless because the ontological status of Buddhist objects is always already ambiguous.

In this article – based on field research conducted in Colombo, Sri Lanka, during 2011 and 2013 – I offer an ethnographic study of the presentation and treatment of Buddhist objects in temples and in private homes, but also in putatively secular spaces such as museums and national historical sites in contemporary Sri Lanka. Where Buddha representations are presented with an aura of historical artifactuality, as at Dambulla, the symbolic distancing of the figure of the Buddha from his (would-be) devotees is accomplished by the literal cordoning off of Buddha representations and the disciplining (Foucault 1975)

of religious and secular bodies alike through policies that mandate a bodily comportment characterised by control, composure, proper bodily orientation and respectful distance when in the presence of Buddha statues. Such ritual practices were explicitly described by Sinhalese Buddhist informants (laity and monks alike) as being in direct contradistinction from those employed by their prototypical ethno-religious Other, Tamil Hindus. Whereas Hindu idols are directly manipulated in the course of *pūjā* or rituals of worship, Buddha statues – including those in temples, museums and homes and on street corners – require a respectful distance.

I argue that museum etiquette centring on Buddhist artifacts is continuous with temple-based practices of Sri Lankan Buddhist *bhaktiya* – indeed, in some ways, the conventions of viewing and interacting with objects characteristic of museum spaces offer ideal conditions for the treatment of Buddhist objects as properly historical, “merely” symbolic, artifacts, and thus of the Buddha, by extension, as metaphysically inaccessible and bounded off from the present. (Buddha has, after all, attained *nibbāna* – an extinguishing, a literal “going out” [Gombrich 2011, xv] – and as such is unable to intervene in the lives of his devotees.) However, this constructed semiotic distance between Buddha representations and those who find themselves in their presence is not without its contradictions and ironies. As we will see, the very same disciplinary strategies that are employed by temple caretakers to distance Buddhists from would-be “idols” – in the manner of Hindu or Buddhist gods (Sinhalese *deviyo*) – ironically end up having the (unintended) consequence of reifying Buddha representations as powerful objects. That is, they ultimately contribute to a rematerialisation of the Buddha image as one that has the ability to act directly upon its viewers.

### Images of *bhaktiya*: On the Veneration of Buddhist Objects

Because a critique of materiality is central to Buddhist theology, a focus on the social life of Buddhist objects may at first blush seem counterintuitive. And while core theological tenets of Buddhism and Hinduism hold that material form is impermanent, a distraction, or an “illusion” (*maya*), even these religious traditions ultimately depend upon material signs to express religious meanings (Miller 2005,1). Recent scholarship on Buddhist traditions has therefore moved away from what had previously been a focus almost exclusively on texts (Schopen 1997) in an effort to “rematerialize” (in the words of Trainor 1997) Buddhist traditions (Kieschnik 2003; Lopez 2013; Rambelli 2007; Rambelli and Reinders 2012; Sharf and Sharf 2002; and Tambiah 1984). Scholars have

debated the place of relic worship in Buddhism and what role likenesses of the Buddha should play in Buddha *pūjā* or worship (Werner 2013), and scholars still debate when anthropomorphic images of the Buddha entered the tradition. It is clear, however, that forms of worship centred on aniconic representations of the Buddha have been central to Buddhist practice since the beginning of the religious tradition,<sup>1</sup> and reverence for the bodily relics of the Buddha has been central to Buddhist ritual since its earliest days (Werner 2013).

In contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhism, problems of materiality and representation surface with respect to *cetiya* or “remembrances” of the historical Buddha. Theravāda Buddhists generally recognise three types of *cetiya*: the corporeal relics (*sāṅgīka*), the relics of “use” (*pāribhogika*), such as the Bodhi tree, or other religious sites where the Buddha is said to have visited, and those relics that remind us of the Buddha, including statues and images (*uddesika*) (Trainor 2013, 516). In Sri Lanka, monks and laity alike hold that one should show reverence for the Buddha, but that his images – *uddesika cetiya* – are not to be treated as powerful in their own right. There is nevertheless an ever-present tension reflected in Sri Lankan Buddhist practice; one shows love and respect for the Buddha by ritual devotion to his images; still, because he has experienced *nibbāna*, he is not “present” in these representations, in the manner of Hindu gods or Buddhist *deviyo*. In worshipping his image, devotees do not expect the Buddha’s direct intervention in their daily affairs but only the positive karmic effects that accrue to any and all acts of respecting the Buddha’s memory and teachings.

In keeping with the earliest conventions, Theravāda Buddhists<sup>2</sup> treat the material traces indexically linked to the body of the Buddha – that is, corporeal relics or *dhātu* of the Buddha – as inherently sacred objects, but not sculptures or other iconic likenesses (Strong 2004; Trainor 1997). Monks I spoke with continually singled out Buddha relics, or *Buddhu dhātu*, as partaking of a different substance and as demanding different forms of devotion.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, *buddhu dhātu* have traditionally been of central religious and political significance. They have often been enshrined in stupas that serve as centres for meditation, contemplation, worship and political power. And control over the most important relic in Sri Lanka, the *Dalada Maligawa* or “tooth relic,” was the basis for divine kingship from the Anuradhapura period, in the fourth century, until the purported destruction of the tooth by the Portuguese in 1561 (Strong 2010).

*Dhātu*, monks told me, *should* be worshipped. In fact, they must be worshipped. I heard narratives of the miraculous abilities of *dhātu* from lay Buddhists, monks

and *kapumahattea*<sup>4</sup> alike: *dhātu* can miraculously appear if the devotion or *bhaktiya* of devotees is strong; but they can also levitate and fly away (*irdi wenewa*) if they are not properly worshipped. (Like the arhats, *dhātu* are understood to possess superhuman abilities, such as the ability to levitate and to fly [Gombrich 1991, 125].) Relics are often housed within other devotional forms, such as stupas or behind the eyes of Buddha statues enshrined in temples. But unlike these structures that contain them and to which acts of worship are oriented, *dhātu* are understood to possess unique qualities. As one chief monk put it, “We must put *dhātu* inside the stupas, otherwise we would just be worshipping a pile of bricks.” Another monk told me that the emanations from the *dhātu* encased within stupas acted upon circumambulating devotees like an “invisible medicine.” *Dhātu* are a material remainder of the Buddha that can act and have real effects on the devotees who worship them, and as such it is they alone that imply a metaphysics of the Buddha’s presence as opposed to the theme, elsewhere ubiquitous, of his absence.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas bodily relics of the Buddha hold a privileged place in Buddhist practice, representations of the Buddha (usually statues, *rupa* or *piḷimaya* in Sinhala) occupy a prominent place in Buddhist ritual. Every *pan-sala* in Sri Lanka contains at least one statue (*piḷimaya*) of the Buddha, and these statues are the focus of daily worship, or *Buddha pūjā*. As part of *Buddha pūjā*, worshippers burn incense and lamps in front of Buddha statues and make offerings of flowers (*mal*) and of food and beverages such as tea and water (*gilampasa*). But while these offerings appear similar to those that are made to deities in nearby Tamil Hindu temples, the conceit here is that the offerings made to the Buddha are “merely” symbolic;<sup>6</sup> the Buddha, unlike Hindu gods, cannot imbibe these offerings because he is not present, in any real sense, in his representations.<sup>7</sup> As one worshiper put it, she “makes offerings” (*pūjā karaneva*) to the Buddha just as his disciples gave him food and drink when he was meditating and teaching his disciples. The action of giving food is an act of supplication that fosters respect for the “triple gem” – the Buddha, the *dhamma* (“teachings”), and the *sangha* (“clergy”). Rather than actually providing sustenance to the Buddha in any “real” sense, practitioners make offerings of food and drink and flowers out of an intense feeling of *bhaktiya* or devotion.

For Sinhalese Buddhists, the practice and ideology of *bhaktiya* (a respectful “devotion”) helps mediate the dialectical tension that arises when revering images of the Buddha – refiguring the worship of Buddha representations as symbolic enactments of respect toward the Buddha’s memory, and as distinct from the worship

of gods who are able to intervene in human affairs. When I asked lay Sri Lankan Buddhists why they made offerings to the Buddha, their answer was many times simply “*bhaktiya*.” “*Loku bhaktiya tiyewewā*” (“I have a lot of devotion”) was an explanation I frequently heard. Sinhala speakers used *bhaktiya* alongside words like *viśvāsaya* (“faith”) and *gauravaya* (“respect” and “deference”) to describe their personal motivations for performing *pūjā*. This framing contrasts sharply with the Hindu experience of *bhakti*, which is understood to be an embodied practice (Holdrege 2015; Prentiss 2000), at times erotic and ecstatic (Dimock and Levertov 1981; Ramanujan 1973; 1993) and the very embodiment of love and devotion (Martin 2008, 183–184). Buddhist displays of *bhaktiya*, meanwhile, are highly ordered and restrained and emphasise the values of deference, respect and hierarchy. The Buddha is made offerings in the manner of royalty, and although he does not consume them (they will be consumed by the crows and thus accrue karmic merit to those who offer them), the offerings convey a sense of faith and devotion or *bhaktiya* on the part of the devotee offering them. For Sri Lankan Buddhists, *bhaktiya* suggests strong feelings of devotion on the part of devotees, but the display of such devotion is controlled (rather than emotional), distant (rather than intimate), and respectful in the manner of someone showing deference to an authority figure. As Gombrich and Obeyesekere point out, “the state of mind induced by Buddhist devotional exercises is a serene joy,

a tranquility the very opposite of ecstasy” (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 29). The non-ecstatic *bhaktiya* of Sri Lankan Buddhism emphasises the symbolic and conventional nature of *pūjā* to emphasise and make explicit the ontological gulf between the worshiper (who is present, still trapped in the cycle of rebirth) and the Buddha (who is absent, having attained *nibbāna*). It is important to see that the controlled nature of Buddha *bhaktiya* has a double nature. On one hand, offerings illustrate a staid respect for the Buddha (and by extension his teachings). On the other hand, the controlled and intentional manner in which, for instance, devotees lay out flower petals in front of Buddha *pīḷimaya* (as shown in Figure 2) foregrounds the act of *pūjā* as a practice of meditation in which the state of mind of the devotee is more important than the materiality of the gift given.

This prescribed stance of the devotee toward the Buddha implies an ideology of religious representation. Because the self-evidence of the Perfect One is precisely predicated upon his absence, representations of him must necessarily fail to capture, embody or manifest his presence. Statues or pictures of the Buddha should “stand for” him and his accomplishments in an abstract sense, but they should not be mistaken for or identified with their referent in the manner of a Hindu idol. In the view of members of the Buddhist clergy whom I interviewed in and around Colombo, Buddha representations are – unlike corporeal relics or *dhātu* – not to be treated as inherently sacred or powerful objects. I asked similar



Figure 2: Neatly arranged flowers placed as offerings around the Bodhi tree.

questions of Sri Lankan Buddhist laity, who ultimately conceded that the Buddha statues themselves were not inherently powerful. The question of whether or not Buddha statues possessed “power” (Sinhala *balaya*) did not make sense to informants because they did not consider their sincere expressions of *bhaktiya* to be at all dependent on a notion of the statue having an inherent “power,” nor of the Buddha intervening as a result of their worship. Grimes (1992) notes that statues of the Buddha are sacred not only by virtue of their resemblance to the man Gautama, but also “because prostrations are done before it. In other words, sacredness is also a function of ritual use, not just of form or of reference” (Grimes, 423, emphasis mine). Following Grimes, we might consider that Buddha statues are not necessarily worshipped because they are inherently sacred, but become sacred by virtue of their being worshipped.

To summarise, within the category of *cetiya*, or “remembrances,” corporeal relics or *dhātu* have an overriding importance. Relics, as opposed to likenesses, embody the Buddha and his agency because they alone have a direct indexical connection to his person. But if Sri Lankan Buddhists make a clear distinction between relics, on one hand, and other classes of *cetiya*, on the other, it is nevertheless clear that for lay practitioners the materiality of *dhātu* serves as a master metaphor and as a medium for making intelligible other *cetiya* (through the literal incorporation of *dhātu* into Buddha statues, for example [see Gombrich 1966, 36]), providing a materiality-centred model of how even iconic representations, such as images and statues, can have effects on devotees.

### Buddhas in Boxes: On Keeping Buddhist Objects at a Distance

Although Buddha statues are sites for meditation, prayer and contemplation at the Colombo temple complexes where I conducted field research, the ways in which devotees interacted with such figures were explicitly defined and the possibilities of interfacing with them were highly circumscribed. In case worshippers do not know the proper way to orient to Buddha representations at the *pansala*, temple authorities take care to position signs around the premises advising attendants as to correct conduct. These instructions are not all that different from the signage that instructs visitors in museum etiquette at the Colombo National Museum or at national heritage sites such as Dambulla. At Belanwila temple, worshippers are instructed not to touch Buddha statues, as can be seen in Figure 3. Other signs instruct worshippers not to stand with their backs to Buddha statues, as shown in Figure 4. At Kelaniya temple, visitors are cautioned not



Figure 3: Sign at foot of Buddha statue advising worshippers not to touch: *pillima allana eppa* [“Do not touch the statue”]. Belanwila temple, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

to put milk rice or light lamps in front of the four Buddha statues situated around the *cetiya* or stupa,<sup>8</sup> and not to light incense or sprinkle puffed rice, a common offering, in the shrine room of the reclining Buddha. These spaces should be free of any offerings or decoration; they should be neat, ordered, even sterile.

At Isapathana temple in Colombo, signage next to Buddha *pillimaya* directs worshippers not to burn camphor, which, according to the worshippers whom I asked, might blacken and thus mark up representational objects. I asked an elderly woman who volunteers at the temple by cleaning up food, flowers and other offerings – one of a suite of practices that are thought to accrue *pin* or “merit”—why the sign was there. She said that it was designed to “keep the statues from getting dark”; burning camphor, she added, is “something that Hindus do.” Here the prohibition on burning camphor serves two functions – it seeks to keep the Buddha statues clean and in a pristine state (an ideal in both temple and domestic displays of Buddha statues), but it also implicitly disciplines worshippers in the “proper” way to revere the Buddha, one diametrically opposed to the sensuous idol worship emblematised by the ethnoreligious “other,” Tamil Hindus.

Even when signage is absent, disciplinary technologies that physically forestall direct contact between



Figure 4: Sign near the arm of the reclining Buddha at Belanwila advising worshippers not to turn their backs to the statue: *buddhu pillime valata pittupa jayarupa ganimen walakinna* ["Do not turn your back to the Buddha statue and take photographs"]. Belanwila temple, Colombo, Sri Lanka.



Figure 5: Buddha in glass box. Wellewatte, Colombo.

devotee and representation are conspicuous. One of the most common ways to reinforce the proscription on physical interaction with Buddha statues is the placement of Buddha statues in glass boxes (an example of which is shown in Figure 5) – a common sight in the city of Colombo, found especially on street corners, but in temples as well.

Behind these sealed-off glass walls there may be sewn or plastic flower offerings positioned in front of the Buddha. Such staged Buddha *pilimaya* with offerings all set behind glass thus represent – in a freeze frame not unlike an installation in a shop window – the organic flower offerings laid in front of the Buddha *pilimaya* that typically surround the Bodhi trees that serve as foundational anchor and central axis of the *pansala* or temple complex.

As with the publicly displayed *pilimaya* in glass boxes, Buddha *rupa* (statuettes) sold for domestic consumption are typically hermetically sealed. Buddha statues for purchase are always encased in clear plastic coverings, and these coverings are often kept on the statues even after they are brought home and put on display. Even the *pilimaya* placed in temples are sometimes kept not only behind glass, but wrapped in plastic, as shown in Figure 6.

By restricting and deflecting a direct and dialogic interaction between viewer and representation, devotee and figure, such partitioning reinforces the principle that the Buddha is not a god susceptible to dialogic worship,



Figure 6: Buddha statue covered in plastic, for sale at Buddhist Cultural Center. In Colombo, Sri Lanka.

that he is not present. Like Magritte's own metasemiotic instructions to his viewers ("Ceci n'est pas une pipe"), the disciplinary technologies employed by temple authorities to entomb Buddha statues and pictures remind the viewer that "this is not [a] Buddha."

And yet, while these institutionalised practices of distancing set worshippers physically apart from Buddha images, and by extension, make them practically distinct from the practices of Tamil Hindus, the folk rationalisations of religious practitioners tend to frame these acts in a very different light. Informants consistently told me that these plastic and glass coverings were placed there to prevent any dust from collecting on the statue, or damage from occurring to it. The partitions that are used to discipline overly affectionate acts of worship are reanalysed by the worshippers themselves as the means by which damage to the representational material object is prevented. The physical partitions of glass and plastic that, along with censorious signage, serve as disciplinary technologies that maintain a distance between the devotee and Buddha representations become reconceptualised as modes of honouring the Buddha by protecting his representations from disrepair.

### **Interacting with Gods: Buddha *bhaktiya* and *deviyo* Worship Compared**

In my interviews with Sri Lankan Buddhists, both lay individuals and monks explicitly contrasted the ritual treatment of Buddha representations with those of

Tamil Hindus, as well as other Sinhalese devotional practices – specifically the worship of gods. While the Hindu pantheon is well known, god worship is not typically associated with Buddhism. In Sri Lanka, however, Buddhist deities – referred to as *deviyo* in Sinhala – are very popular and worshipped by most lay Sinhalese Buddhists (see Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988; Holt 2004; Obeyesekere 1984), and many Sinhalese frequent Hindu religious sites for the purposes of making *bāra* or vows to Hindu gods. Although *dēvālaya* (or god shrines) are housed within nearly all Buddhist temple grounds, the treatment of *deviyo* representations stands in stark contrast to that of Buddha representations. The *devi rupa* (icons of *deviyo*, or go idols) and *devi pintūra* (god pictures) of Buddhist *deviyo*, like Hindu gods, are typically festooned with flower offerings, dressed in silk vestments offered by devotees, and sanctified through the application of animating substances such as ash, vermilion and sandalwood, as shown in Figure 7. The difference in treatment of these images from that of Buddha statues, notable for the conspicuous absence of anthropomorphic coverings, could not be more marked.

While the icons of both Hindu gods and Sinhalese *deviyo* are heavily ornamented, Buddha statues in Sri Lanka stand more or less unadorned. When I asked a young Buddhist artist who paints temples and makes Buddha statues why there is no clothing covering them, he said, "that is something that Hindus do." Hindu devotees place dots (Tamil *poṭṭu*) of vermilion and



Figure 7: Statue of Vishnu Deviyo, covered in garlands and flowers. At small devale in Wellawatte, Sri Lanka.

sandalwood on the foreheads of idols; Buddha statues have no application of any sort of auspicious or blessed materials or external ornamentation on the body of the statue. Hindu idols are dressed wrapped in cloth and covered in flowers and sometimes jewels, while Buddha statues in Sri Lanka are never covered with clothing. (I noted one exception in the form of a statue of a golden Buddha statue in the museum room [but not shrine room] of the famous Gangaramaya temple in Colombo. Its body was wrapped in ochre fabric, and when I asked why, one of the monks explained to me that this adornment of the statue was done by Thai devotees and tourists, but not by Sri Lankan Buddhists.) The artist whom I interviewed was the chief artist employed by the Maharagama temple in Colombo, and he was in the midst of carving god statues for a new *dēvālaya* at the temple. When I further pressed him for an explanation for why clothing is not put on the Buddha statues, he explained to me that Buddha statues already have the measurements for clothing built in to their design, and the grooves for the clothing are carved into the stone itself. The artist's explanation serves as a kind of secondary rationalisation for the primary justification for the taboo of clothing Buddha statues that he had articulated earlier: a desire to avoid a ritual treatment of sacred images that resembles that of Hindus. While it is true that Buddha statues do bear lines that are suggestive of clothing, this is also the case for Hindu icons, which are nevertheless festooned and clothed with actual fabrics. The conceptualisation of Buddha representations and their

ritual treatment often finds itself articulated in relation to a characterisation of Hindu devotional practice, often becoming articulated in explicitly ethnoreligious terms.<sup>9</sup>

In Hindu and Buddhist god worship alike, the application of auspicious bodily markings using vermilion and sandalwood, like the application of clothing, serves to anthropomorphise and to animate idols. Keeping likenesses of the Buddha free of ornamentation again heightens and highlights the distance between the devotee and the referent of the representation, forestalling modalities of intimate relationality between devotee and god characteristic of Tamil Hindu worship found, for instance, in the dressing, feeding and bathing of gods. The Buddha is free of ornamentation because he is not lacking anything, nor could he benefit, in any real way, from such gifts. The statue is always already complete, but also, in a sense, sterile.

The way that Buddha statues are placed and installed in Sri Lankan homes and temples further communicates a sense of distance, both physical and ontological, between statue and devotee, indexing their inertness. Buddha statues or pictures, when installed in the home, are kept as high up as possible, ideally above the heads of people in the house.<sup>10</sup> Informants insisted that Buddha statues should never be kept down low and certainly never on the floor, that they must always be higher than those of the *deviyo* or gods. Keeping Buddhas out of reach again has a double reading. It is interpreted as a sign of respect, the order of display in vertical space a diagram of the hierarchical relationships between



the Buddha, an enlightened being, gods (who have not passed into *nibbāna* and thus can be petitioned), and human beings. But the avoidance of physical contact with Buddha statues – the fact that worshippers do not manipulate the likenesses of the Buddha in the course of making *pūjā* – is also an emblem of the Buddha’s inaccessibility, of his ontic alterity from both gods and humans.

Differential ritual restrictions that apply to the treatment and display of Buddhist gods (*deviyo*) and Buddha statues also highlight the ontological divide between the two. While menstruating women, sexual intercourse, and the cooking of meat are all states and acts that may potentially profane and anger *deviyo*, one need not abstain from cooking meat in one’s house because of the presence of a Buddha shrine, or from lighting the lamp in front of the Buddha if one is menstruating. Otherwise *kiliya* or “ritually polluting” activities do not affect the Buddha, because the Buddha is not present to be defiled or angered by such actions, just as he not present in his representations. *Deviyo*, however, are said to be angered by such transgressions; as many informants told me, gods will “punish” those who subject their images to ritual pollution. Those who disregard such taboos are courting disaster, as evidenced by the experience of the neighbours of one of my primary informants, Avanthi.<sup>11</sup> Avanthi explained that her neighbours kept *deviyo* statues in their home despite the dangers, and the husband in the family suffered a grievous accident and everyone

in the family kept getting sick. This was all due to their subjecting the *deviyo* to ritual pollution (*kili*), for which they were “punished,” she said. Avanthi, however, maintained that Buddha statues were exempt from such restrictions, however, as “Buddha does not punish.”

The way that Buddha statues are designed similarly communicates that they are not built for facilitating an interaction with the would-be idol, as in the modality of god worship, but instead for commemorating and otherwise symbolising the Buddha and his teachings. While the eyes of Hindu images are often the exaggerated focal point of a sacred image designed to reciprocally see and be seen – think here of Vishnu as Jagannath, or images of the Kalighat Kali, in which the eyes are exaggeratedly large – Buddha representations do not presuppose or facilitate such an exchange between devotee and sacred object. The eyes of Buddha statues are typically half-closed and their gaze is oriented downward, as shown in Figure 8.

In the case of representations of Buddha in *para-nibbāna* (on his deathbed) or of the Buddha in a meditative pose, the eyes are often closed entirely. With representations of these types, devotees cannot make eye contact with the Buddha. Contrast this to the reciprocal, interactive and intersubjective gaze of devotees with Hindu gods, or *darśan*. The downcast, half-opened or closed eyes of the Buddha, which refuse to meet those of the devotee, cut off a specific type of interaction, that of petitioning a god, who, in the Hindu case, is believed to be very much present and active in the world.



Figure 8: Buddha statue covered in plastic, encased in a glass box, and with eyes half-closed. Near Dambulla.

The Buddha statue's lack of eye contact disciplines the faithful, reflecting and reproducing Sri Lankan Buddhist ideologies of religious representation as symbolisation rather than manifestation.

The sheer size of most Buddha images installed in temples helps create a further distancing between devotee and representation. Most Buddha statues installed in the *pansala* – the ones that are in the main shrine rooms and that receive Buddha *pūjā* (“offerings”) from monks each day – are larger than life, many times taller than an average person. Reclining Buddhas are often ten metres in length, and seated or standing Buddhas are just as imposing. The magnitude of such statues, which often completely fill the spaces of the temple rooms into which they are installed, reminds viewers of the larger-than-life achievements of the Buddha, as an enlightened being and world teacher. But it also metacommunicates the great distance – both real and metaphorical – between the Buddhist practitioner and the Buddha himself. The enormous size of such statues serves to signify the Buddha's exalted status, but it also serves to distance the Buddha from the practitioner. The smaller-than-life size of most Hindu temple icons and festival icons (*ursava mūrtti*), on the other hand, facilitates a kind of intimate, even nurturing, relationship between the devotee and the divine.

### Disfigured Buddhas and the *karma* of *bhaktiya*

As I have argued thus far, the genres of representation, presentation and display of Buddha statues and institutionalised Sri Lankan Buddhist disciplinary regimes that explicitly instruct and implicitly constrain “proper” Buddhist devotional practice frame likenesses of the Buddha as inert and merely conventional representations of their referent. The highlighted conventionality of Buddha likenesses should not imply, however, a rationalisation of the representational object that would remove it from the realm of supernatural cause and effect. For lay practitioners in particular, the ritual treatment of likenesses of the Buddha implies a supernatural dimension that is undergirded not by the agency of the Buddha (which would be to reinvest likeness with essence), but by the principle of *karma*. These concerns are most clearly revealed in the anxieties Sinhalese Buddhists feel in their engagements with incomplete, damaged or otherwise imperfect representational objects.

While most Buddhists keep Buddha statuettes in their homes, should these statuettes become broken or even slightly damaged they are quickly removed from the premises. Informants were adamant that broken or damaged Buddha statues must not be kept in the home, lest deleterious karmic consequences befall the

household in which they are kept. The linkage made here between damage to the representation and karmic effects for its owners is an important one, and reveals the mismatch between Theravāda Buddhist understandings of *karma* and its everyday practice. While Buddhist orthodoxy sees karmic consequence as a function of the intention (*cetanā*) that stands behind action (Gombrich 1971: 204), there is a slippage in lay practice – broken Buddha statues threaten the household regardless the circumstances of their injury. An “incomplete” Buddha likeness – whether a broken statue or one that is not finished – is highly inauspicious, an unstable object capable of bringing bad luck to the person, family or temple that houses it.<sup>12</sup>

But neither are broken and damaged Buddha statues simply thrown away in the trash, which would be to doubly disrespect the Buddha. (Some of the most pious Buddhists would burn newspaper that pictured the Buddha rather than throw it away in the trash – a practice also shared by Hindus and Christians whom I interviewed.) Blemished Buddha statues are instead taken to the temple *cetiya* (“stupa”; see note 10), where they are deposited by the dozens, as shown in Figure 9.

I was told by a number of different individuals – including lay practitioners, the chief *kapumahattea* (*dēvālaya* priest) at a Colombo temple, and a chief monk at another Colombo temple – that these damaged statues are ultimately incorporated into the mortar and brick of newly constructed stupas. Here the supernatural power of Buddha representations qua material objects is recycled and harnessed to sacralise collective objects of worship – the stupas in which they are entombed. Note again the parallel drawn between Buddha representations and relics. Corporeal relics of the Buddha are also placed within stupas. Stupas are centripetal ritual nodes incorporating the objects of individuals' and families' religious worship into collectively constituted objects of communal worship.<sup>13</sup> The logic of material incorporation again highlights an ideology of representation that understands likenesses of the Buddha as having a power inherent in their materiality, whether or not their representational qualities are apparent and perceptible. To be sure, the auratic power of broken Buddhas, in particular, is itself reflective of merit-accruing, and thus karmic, histories of devotional acts oriented to them as signs for their referent. Nevertheless, such objects are conceptualised as literally materialising those histories, and consequently as having an inherent sacrality – independent of their role in mediating events of worship – that must be contained, controlled and properly channeled.

Incompleteness poses a problem at all points in the life-cycle of Buddha “remembrances.” As we saw in the



Figure 9: Old and damaged Buddha statues deposited at Bodhi tree. Temple of the Tooth, Kandy, Sri Lanka.

previous section, Buddha statues are not dressed up as Buddhist and Hindu gods are. They are, however, robed when only partially completed. But here, the saffron robes of monks that are placed on them are used to conceal rather than anthropomorphically clothe the statue. Notably, other *cetiya* of the Buddha are clothed when damaged. Saffron robes are also used to cover the ends of limbs of the Bodhi tree where branches have broken off, and to cover stupas only partially constructed. In all of these cases, covering masks and marks something incomplete, injured, imperfect. Covering the signs of the Buddha is required only for those forms that are not completed; completion and concomitant absence of marks is here an icon of enlightenment, and thus of absence.

To display Buddha representations in an incomplete state is thus potentially disrespectful. Informants told me that this is one reason that Buddha statues in temple contexts are kept covered while they are awaiting the *netra pūjā*, or the eye-opening ceremony (Swearer 2004) that signals their completion and readiness for worship. In the temple context as opposed to the domestic sphere, the imperfect or incomplete condition of the representation endangers the viewer rather than the owner. At the Maharagama temple in Colombo, a new annex under construction featured a number of Buddha statues that were covered with saffron drapes, as shown in Figure 10.

When I inquired as to why these statues were covered, an elderly lay woman who volunteers at the temple, and was collecting funds for its expansion, told me, “You

might see the unfinished statue and say, ‘that doesn’t look good.’ This is *pau* [sin].” The coverings, then, are designed for the protection of the viewer – if one were to see an incomplete Buddha statue, one might remark on its being “ugly” or “unattractive” and accrue *pau* or “sin” – the antithesis of karmic merit or *pin* – from that thought or utterance.

Aesthetically displeasing Buddha statues are similarly problematic, as they are liable to bad-karma-inducing thoughts and comments from onlookers. I encountered one such dangerously ugly Buddha statue in a village near Awissawella. It had been commissioned for a secondary school, but the artist who made it was not very experienced, and the face – the eyes in particular – bore a very unattractive appearance. As one local informant explained, the ugly Buddha posed a catch-22. On one hand, it was unpleasant to look at, and thus potentially dangerous due to the affective reactions toward the Buddha that it might provoke. On the other hand, it was a completed likeness of the Buddha that could not simply be discarded or destroyed. It had to be handled respectfully, yet it needed to be out of sight. The first solution arrived at was moving the statue away from the well-trafficked school to the side of a small dirt road, off of the main road, that leads to a historic *dēvālaya*. But the lay leader of the temple was aghast that this statue had been placed there, on the path to the temple, so he had a curtain placed over the front of the shrine so that it could not be seen.



Figure 10: Buddha under construction, Mahamaya temple, Colombo.

What is important to note here is that the curtain covering the ugly Buddha of Awissawella was not just the reflection of a negative aesthetic judgment but a form of prophylactic protection for its would-be viewers. Incomplete Buddha statues are covered to protect the viewer, not from the image itself, but from his or her own affective response to the image, which could have negative karmic effects. Although Buddha *pūjā* may, from the point of view of Buddhist clergy, be entirely “symbolic” in nature, the aesthetic and affective reactions that devotees have to Buddha representations have karmic consequences. This suggests that interactions with Buddha statues are always operating at more than one level. Broken and damaged Buddhas are inauspicious because they elicit negative thoughts in the viewer that, in turn, can lead to undesirable karmic outcomes. It is important to note that the precise mechanism by which negative thoughts about broken or damaged Buddha statues bring harm to their viewers is not articulated by informants, nor is such an understanding necessary for the system to maintain its coherence (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1976, 24).

If Sri Lankan Buddhists do not consider that Buddha statues have an inherent power (*balaya*) to act, what, then, is the function of ritually consecrating Buddha images? Why open the eyes of an image that cannot “see”? The nature and function of the eye-opening ritual (Sinhalese, *nētra pūjā* or *nētra pinkama*, “eye ceremony”), has long been a point of debate amongst scholars of Buddhism.<sup>14</sup> I do not have the space here to detail

their debates, but I would like to offer a possible interpretation of this ritual within the Sri Lankan context. In the Hindu case, eye-opening renders an idol “awakened” and imbues it with “livelihood” (Davis 1997, 36), making it able to participate in the mutual exchange of glances through the ritual act of *darśan* (Babb 1981; Eck 1998; Fuller 2004; cf. Gell 1998, 116–121). However, there is no sense that the eye-opening ritual is understood to “animate” Buddha statues in any way. As I was consistently told by informants, Buddha statues cannot “see.” Nevertheless, the eyes of these statues are opened, and the ritual itself is fraught with taboos (Coomaraswamy 1908; Gombrich 1966). That the artist who sets the eyes is at risk of serious harm during and after the ritual holds a clue to interpreting its significance. He cannot look at the statue directly during the ritual process, nor immediately afterward. Before viewing the image, the artist must perform a purification ritual to protect him from any supernatural harm generated as a result of his efforts (Coomaraswamy 1908; Gombrich 1966). Only then is he free to view the Buddha image safely. I contend that this is continuous with other practices of avoiding seeing incomplete or broken Buddha statues, lest the viewer come to harm. Until the statue is completed (the eyes are ritually set), seeing it is dangerous. If the Buddha image has the power to act upon its viewer, it is before the ritual of consecration is completed, not after. And it is at the end of the image’s lifespan, when it becomes damaged or broken, that it is again able to act upon those who see it.

The relationships that devotees have with Buddha statues are complex, as are the ontological statuses of the Buddha representations themselves. There is in all of this a theme of corporeal and material imperfection as a sign of an incomplete path toward enlightenment. While the danger of broken Buddhas is invariably framed as one for its owners, it is notable that disfigurement in other guises is seen as a negative reflection of the karmic history of the person. This came through for me in a particularly vivid manner when I visited a small *pansala* in Havelock Town, Colombo, in the company of my research assistant, a lower-class and lower-caste woman from the outskirts of Colombo. When we inquired about the construction of a new *dhātu mandiraya* or “relic house” we were taken to speak with the head monk at the residential quarters at the back of the temple complex. After our interview she expressed shock that the man we had spoken with, who was missing a forearm, could be a member of the *sangha* (“clergy”), who are understood as being necessarily further along the path to enlightenment than lay devotees. She reasoned that he must have lost the arm after ordination. Since monks should not be disfigured, certainly an amputee would not be accepted into the monastery.<sup>15</sup> This story left me wondering if the concerns over damaged, incomplete or ugly Buddhas – while explicitly thematised in terms of their potential dangers for devotees – might not be a cause of such concern in part because they suggest, within the logic of disfigurement, that the Buddha himself is imperfect; that this might be the blasphemy of the broken Buddha that must be repressed by its concealment and containment.

### Discipline in the Museum

Bruno Latour has noted that the iconoclast’s hammer may break idols, but in seeking to destroy them, such actions only end up making them stronger (Latour 1997). Latour suggests that those taboos that would have us refrain from touching or interacting with sacred objects for fear of breaking or defiling them can have the ironic effect of further investing them with power. In the Sri Lankan Buddhist case, some of the very same strategies of physical distancing that Buddhist authorities employ to prevent a direct transactional relationship between devotee and object, one that would consecrate it as a sacred image or idol in the mode of Hindu gods or Buddhist *deviyo*, themselves become reconceptualised within a materialist ideology that understands supernatural consequentiality as adhering in Buddha representational objects. Glass boxes and plastic coverings encasing Buddha statues are read by devotees, not only as icons of the Buddha’s absence, but as prophylactic technologies that would protect against the karmic problems caused

by damaged, disfigured or incomplete Buddha representation. And within this frame of reference, they are seen as a sign of respect (*gauraveya*) and devotion (*bhaktiya*). Precisely because damage to and disrespect of such objects can result in karmic consequences for offending parties, Buddha statues and pictures cannot escape the aura of the “idol.”

Here we can begin to understand perhaps better the “sin” (*paṇi*) of the French tourist at Dambulla Caves. There are important parallels between the ontology of Buddhist objects fostered by Sri Lankan Buddhist institutions and the nature of historical artifacts in the archaeological or museum spaces of the modern Sri Lankan nation. The museum as a privileged space of secular Western modernity is one that serves to control, even neutralise, the ritual efficacy of objects in and through their display (Miller 2005).<sup>16</sup> Objects are separated from their histories of use, but they are also separated from the museumgoer by a physical space that must be respected. Prohibitions on touching or physically engaging with the objects on display are a primary way that representations are constituted as “nonritual” objects. There are resonances, then, between the treatment of objects in museums and the treatment of Buddhist objects – both are appreciated, even revered, but set apart, inaccessible. As Grimes (1992, 423) notes, museums, particularly those that display sacred objects, are never neutral arbiters. The process of curation itself belies particular cultural values and orientations toward the objects that are presented in museum spaces. At sites of historical and religious value at Sri Lanka, such as Dambulla, the disciplined, respectful distance of *bhaktiya* helps mediate the tensions laid bare when sacred objects – in this case, Buddha statues – become museum objects.

The sympathies between these would-be secular and sacred genres of attending to objects are so profound that the separation between them is liable to collapse. The line between temple, museum and reliquary becomes very fine in Sri Lanka; historical sites and museums are treated as temples, and temples often house museums of their own. Just as relics have traditionally been given to temples for safekeeping, other objects find their way to temples as donations. Such donated objects are not necessarily saliently religious in nature. One of the largest and most well-known temple museums is that of the politically important Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo. The objects held in the temple museum – an idiosyncratic and seemingly endless collection of everything from watches and old typewriters to vintage Rolls Royces and farm tractors – attract a stream of ticketed visitors. Here, curios and curiosities are placed side by side with

the Buddha representations and relics that are the loci of daily worship.

Temple museums are extensions of relic houses, or *dhātu mandiraya*. Access to relic houses, typically rooms elevated on stilts, is generally restricted, being accessible only to monks and the donors who have given the costly and precious objects, such as elephant tusks and jewels, that frame the corporeal relics. Just as likenesses of the Buddha are treated in analogy to relics – that is, their supernaturality is experienced in an objecthood that embodies an indexical history of use rather than in their iconic resemblance to the Buddha – so too are the objects in temple museums viewed within a logic determined by the figure of the relic. As with the broken Buddhas deposited at the temple *cetiya*, temple museums incorporate the objects of individuals and families, creating a collectively constituted object and site for communal experience. Whereas individuals deposit damaged and broken Buddhas at the temple *cetiya* to rid themselves of the possibility of supernatural contagion, they donate their old and unused objects to the temple museum. One of the chief monks at the Gangaramaya temple whom I interviewed told me that devotees give these objects to the temple to gain merit (*pin*). The temple museum is thus the materialisation of the *bhaktiya* or faith and devotion of its patrons.

And yet, while temple and museum are importantly linked, there are covert but important differences. Sacred objects on display in Western museums – Orthodox Church icons or Medieval Christian art – are viewed as if deconsecrated, as if ritually inert (though of course this framing frequently fails to achieve this bracketing of ritual function; see Miller 2005 for examples). Certainly this is the case for sacred Hindu objects. Within the Hindu tradition, just as there are elaborate rituals for the consecration of divine images, there are rituals also for the deconsecration of sacred images and temples. Such rituals of return allow the placement of once sacred objects in museums and other nonritual contexts without fear that they will be ritually polluted or otherwise defiled. Although Theravāda Buddhist tradition prescribes elaborate rituals for the consecration of temples (through ground-breaking ceremonies known as *bhumi pūjā*) and Buddha representations (the eye-opening ceremony, as we saw earlier), there are not established rituals within the Theravāda tradition for the deconsecration of temples or Buddha images (Byrne 2007, 152). Once a Buddhist temple or Buddha image has been consecrated within the Theravāda tradition, it remains so.

The fact that Buddha representations cannot be deconsecrated returns us to the problem of what we

might call “supernatural waste.” Old and damaged or broken Buddha statues, as we have seen, are inauspicious and unstable, and for this reason they cannot be kept in the home. Because Buddhist objects and sacred spaces cannot be desanctified, the treatment of Buddhist objects within archaeological and historical sites (for example, World Heritage Sites such as Dambulla) becomes potentially problematic. One must take great care with the objects and the space itself – not simply because of their historical value, but because they are sacred objects that must be protected from offence. The same rules of respect and decorum apply in sites such as the Dambulla cave temple complex as in popular, active sites of worship from Kelaniya and Belanwila to ordinary urban temples in Colombo. Buddha representations found in these museum spaces (broadly construed) are simultaneously “artifacts” preserved for their historical value and objects deserving of displays of *bhaktiya*. Indeed, at Dambulla (where the French tourist’s photo op went wrong), visitors are mainly Buddhist pilgrims.

It is in this frame that we must understand the disciplining of would-be tourists. What may at first seem nothing more than a museum guard asking the children not to touch the Van Gogh can also be read, in a Sinhalese ethnonationalist and religious frame, as a defence of the Buddha and of Buddhism itself. At Dambulla, ubiquitous signage in the caves instructs visitors on how to properly comport themselves with respect around the imposing Buddha statues. Signs are placed on the offering benches in front of the statues. They show a white, featureless male figure engaged in a series of disallowed and disrespectful behaviours, such as sitting on the benches (with his back to the Buddha statues), or posing for a photograph with his arm around the shoulders of the Buddha, or posing for a photograph while touching the Buddha’s feet. The various signs posted throughout the caves advise visitors “Do not touch the images” and “Do not sit on the benches” (as shown in Figure 1). On these signs are also written another set of guidelines that advise visitors how best to comport themselves in a respectful manner, while also warning of punishment should this decorum be breached: “It is the duty of all to preserve this valuable Religious and Archaeological site.” “Meddling with the images and paintings will lead to punishment according to the Archaeological Act.” “It is a good quality to respect all religions regardless of the religion.” “Photography which brings disrepute to Buddhism will be a great offence.” It should be noted that such signs in temples, museums, and historical sites prescribing the correct decorum and comportment of worshippers are printed in Sinhalese and English (Figure 1).<sup>17</sup> The intended audience for

these signs is not Tamil Hindus, but rather Buddhists and foreign tourists.

The disciplining of tourists and pilgrims at museums and national heritage sites in Sri Lanka is continuous with the disciplining of lay worship in Buddhist temples. To outsiders, museum etiquette may seem just another trapping of secular modernity, but the moral panics surrounding breaches of etiquette belie a deeper ethno-religious motivation. There is a nationalist undercurrent in these signs of protection – whether of the memory of the Buddha or of his flesh-and-blood *sangha*. This element is all the more salient where state authorities literally police and safeguard Buddhist historical sites. Take, for instance, the site of Mathagal, just outside of Jaffna, where Ashoka's daughter is said to have brought the first Bodhi tree sapling to Sri Lanka. When I visited the site in 2011, soon after the end of the civil war, there were busloads of pilgrims clad in the white dress characteristic of *poya* (full moon) day at the Buddhist temple, who had come from the south to visit the newly accessible site. Signage at the site commemorated the historical event of the sapling's arrival alongside pictures memorialising Sri Lankan soldiers who had died fighting the LTTE.

In both Buddhist temples and secular museums, at sites of simultaneously religious and historical importance, Buddhist objects are treated as historically significant artifacts, while still accorded the respect that is befitting them as relics of the Buddha. The disciplining of worshippers in the Buddhist temple is continuous with practices of disciplining and distancing the viewer common to the Western museum context. In the Sri Lankan case, however, museum etiquette can be read as an important sign of devotion and faith, or *bhaktiya*.

### Relics: Trace Objects and Their Materialisation

Of the three *cetiya* or “remembrances” of the Buddha – corporeal relics, relics of “use” and relics of “resemblance” – it is the corporeal relics, or *dhātu*, that are most important in the Theravāda tradition. The notion of the relic involves precisely the concept of the historical artifact, an object whose value lies in its indexical connections to the past. The corporeal relics of the body of the Buddha not only are the most esteemed of Buddhist objects, but also serve as the master metaphor for the other types of relics. The relics of use – again, think here of the Bodhi tree – are conceptualised within a similar frame; the value of Bodhi trees rests in their literal genealogical link to the original tree under which the Buddha meditated. Thus Mathagal, near Jaffna, is a pilgrimage site because it is there that the first sapling of the “original” tree from Bodh Gaya entered Sri Lanka. At the

same time, the relics of likeness, inasmuch as they have power, have that power as a karmic effect determined by a history of their devotional use or abuse, not by virtue of an iconic likeness that might make the Buddha present. If Buddhist – but especially Hindu – god statues and pictures have their power and potential as a function of their iconic making present of their referents, *dhātu* or relics (broadly construed) have an auratic essence in an indexical historicity that traces the absence of the Buddha.

Stupas, Buddha statues, and even home shrines can, through the intense and pious displays of the *bhaktiya* of the faithful, come to unexpectedly, and miraculously, gain *dhātu*. The chief monk of a newly constructed temple complex dedicated to Ravana, whom I interviewed, made the claim that the tooth relic, the “original” *Dalada Maligawa*, had appeared at his temple.<sup>18</sup> (Although the presence of *dhātu* is a sign of felicitous devotion, it does not in itself represent the full apotheosis of such remains. A popular belief is that in the end times the coming of the Maitreya Buddha will be signaled when all Buddha *dhātu* join together above the stupa at Anuradhapura, before ultimately self-destructing in fire and vanishing forever.)<sup>19</sup> A lack of proper and true worship – a lack of true and sincere *bhaktiya*, he claimed – had made the tooth relic “*irdi wenewa*” or “fly away” from the Temple of the Tooth and suddenly come into being in his temple. This is exemplary of a common narrative genre of *dhātu*, which are said to fly away when they are not worshiped or when they do not receive the proper treatment and authentic displays of *bhaktiya*.<sup>20</sup> As if a supernatural allusion to Schrödinger's cat, one family with whom I conducted an interview about their *dhātu* became curious if it was really there inside its case; after decades of inattention they opened the case, only to find it empty. The Buddha *dhātu* had been given to the now-deceased father of the family as a gift, and the case containing the relic had not been opened in years. A young man who worked as a servant for the family reasoned that the *dhātu* had probably flown away from lack of devotional attention. In the myth genre of the disappearing–appearing *dhātu* there is a reversal of subject–object relations. Refashioning the object as dependent upon the subject may circumvent the tension inherent between a “merely” symbolic and a fetishistic reading of Buddhist objects. It only achieves this, however, by means of a circular logic in which devotional respect for the object – that is, *bhaktiya* – is the source of that which makes the object deserving of respect in the first place.

Through the examples of Sri Lankan Buddhist practices I have examined in this article, I have tried to show how discourses regarding the ritual treatment

of Buddha representations operate on multiple levels simultaneously. One on level, there are rules and regulations made explicit in temples and historical sites regarding the proper orientation toward Buddha images. On another level, Sri Lankan Buddhist understandings about sacred objects and their materiality take cues from other domains of Sinhalese Buddhist ritual – in particular, the role of the symbol of “completeness” as auspiciousness-raising. Finally, the ritual practices of Tamil Hindus serve as ever-present points of comparison and departure for Sinhalese Buddhists, both lay and ordained, who seek to distance their own ritual practices from those of Hindus – particularly when it comes to the treatment of representations. As Holt (1991, 11) has rightly noted, Buddhism and Hinduism in Sri Lanka have been “defining and redefining themselves in relation to one another” over the centuries. But syncretism is not necessarily valued by all practitioners, and some Sri Lankan Buddhist monks have called for a return to a “pure” Buddhism, devoid of Hindu influence (Berkwitz 2018, 110–111). We have seen how Sri Lankan Buddhist institutional authorities, monks and lay people, and even the artists who create Buddha representations, seek to maintain a physical and tactile distance between devotee and representation, and, in so doing, to reinforce a distinction between representations (Buddha statues) and their referent (the Buddha), which they assume to be collapsed for Hindus. However, while Sri Lankan Buddhist devotees do seem to avoid the identification of the Buddha with his likenesses, this does not mean that they treat such representations as mere symbols. Rather, Buddha representations become understood as powerful objects – materialisations of the karmic merit (*pin*) and sin (*pau*) attendant on the histories of their devotion.

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## Notes

- 1 Foucher (1911) and Coomaraswamy (1927) see these early Buddhist representational forms as aniconic representations of the Buddha. Huntington (1990), however, has argued that these were not aniconic representations of

- the Buddha, but instead objects of devotion treated as inherently powerful in and of themselves (for more on this debate see Dehejia 1991 and the reply in Huntington 1992).
- 2 Theravāda Buddhism, as a world-historical religious tradition, is far from monolithic (Schober and Collins 2018: 3–16). Nevertheless, “Theravāda Buddhism” is a category that has been reified through Western colonial and academic discourse (Almond 1988; Schober and Collins 2018, 1–2; Scott 1994, 187–188). While there is much diversity in terms of belief and practice within the umbrella category of Theravāda Buddhism, one core theme remains constant for Theravādins across time and space: the central importance of bodily relics of the Buddha – both as the material means by which the Buddha can be “seen” (Collins 1998: 247) by his devotees, and as objects that have been crucial for state formation and the consolidation of power over centuries in South and South-east Asia (Blackburn 2010).
- 3 Strong notes that the *dhātu*, unlike the “relic,” is not understood to be “left over,” as with the Latin-derived relic, but rather “an essence that is extracted from the dead, cremated body” (Gombrich 1971, 106; Schopen 1998, 257, as cited in Strong 2004, xvi). Strong cites Monier-Williams’ definition of *dhātu* as that which is the “constituent element of [an] essential ingredient” (Monier-Williams 1899, 513).
- 4 A respectful term for *kapurāḷa*, hereditary priests attending god shrines.
- 5 It is notable that relics have long represented a sticking point in the Western “rationalist” rapprochement with the Theravāda Buddhist tradition. The Buddhist reformer Dharmapala parted company with the Theosophist “patron” of “Protestant Buddhism,” Henry James Olcott, over the issue of the ontological status of relics when Olcott rather infamously referred to the sacred tooth relic in Kandy as an “animal bone” (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 205–206; McMahan 2008, 95).
- 6 Cf. Rahula on Buddha *pūjā* as “paying homage to the Master who showed the way” and not to be likened to “prayer in theistic religions” (Rahula 1959, 81)
- 7 Whereas in the Hindu case food and drink offered in *pūjā* are taken as an auspicious, blessed food offering or *prasād*, in the Buddhist case, these food items are considered the property of the temple (cf. Gombrich 1991: 142).
- 8 In popular Sinhalese, the term *ceṭiya* is used to refer to the stupas found in Buddhist temple complexes, and I also employ this usage at various points in this paper.
- 9 See Holt 2004 on the long history of syncretism and reactionary movements against Hindu influences in the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism.
- 10 See Lempert 2012 on relative position in vertical space as an icon of religiously determined social hierarchy in Tibetan Buddhism.
- 11 All names of informants that appear in this article are pseudonyms.
- 12 The notion of “completeness” as auspiciousness-raising – and conversely, of brokenness or incompleteness as inauspicious – is reflected across multiple domains of Sri Lankan Buddhist ritual. As a *kapumahattea* from Narahenpita in Colombo explained to me, broken objects should not be kept in the home, as these are *adupadu* – imperfect, deficient, flawed – and they can become a vector for a form of



inauspiciousness known as *vas dos* (cf. Nanayakkara 2001) to enter the home.

- 13 Cf. Gell 1998 on the analysis of “collective agency” in idols.
- 14 See Reulius’s critique of Gombrich (Reulius 1978) and Gombrich’s reply (Gombrich 1978). Tambiah later lodged a critique against Gombrich in his study of Buddhist amulets (Tambiah 1984, 255–257). See Swearer (2004, 213–215) for a succinct overview of the terms of these particular debates.
- 15 See Mary Douglas (1966, 52) on physical perfection (characterised by the symbols of “wholeness” and “completeness”) as prerequisite for ancient Israelites to enter the Temple.
- 16 See also Richard Davis’s rich investigation of the ways Hindu icons and their meanings are transformed as they move between various contexts, from sacred spaces to those of museums (Davis 1997).
- 17 I never saw Tamil as a language included on these types of signs. While Hindus do not typically worship at Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka, Sinhalese Buddhists do frequently visit Hindu religious sites, and they are regular patrons of Hindu temples, where they make vows, or *bāra*, to goddesses such as Kali.
- 18 As Trainor has shown, relic worship has been highly integrative in Sri Lanka, but it can also be a highly contested domain in which there are “competing claims for access and control” of certain relics and religious sites (Trainor 2013, 519).
- 19 See Collins on this “nirvāṇa” of the relics, or dhātu-nibbāna (Collins 1992, 238).
- 20 Richard Davis’s historical examples from Hindu India bear a striking resemblance to this Sri Lankan Buddhist myth genre of the vanishing and reappearing relic (Davis 1997, 109–110).

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