The Ascetic
Buddhist Monks of Ceylon

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The Mortification of the Flesh

Tapas, the mortification of the flesh, has always held considerable fascination for religiously inclined people everywhere. Asceticism, the attempt to break the links with the world of men, is one of the approaches to the world of the deities. It is remarkable how the problems confronting all those groping toward the deity, or deities, are similar in essence. The many ascetic orders of Christian monks, the Trappists, the Whirling Dervishes of Islam, and the ascetic hermits and wanderers of India and Ceylon, with all the varieties of doctrinal differences between them, are attempting to devise means of approaching the threshold between men and gods. The flesh ties one down to this side of the threshold (like all other worldly interests). The approach to the “threshold” (which is probably the state of ecstasy so often described by the mystics) requires at least a subordination of the flesh, but the crossing of the doorway must probably be paid for more painfully.

There are startling descriptions of these attempts in India. Carstairs (1957) writes of the Hindu sannyasi who, having withdrawn from the world in most respects for many weeks, announces that he will reach union with the deity at a particular time, sitting under a particular Bo tree. Great crowds of pilgrims are gathered. The holy man exhibits complete tranquillity and dissociation from the world around him. Not a muscle moves as a grave is solemnly dug in front of him and he is lowered—still alive—into the hole and the earth is closed over him for all time.

Less fatal examples of the mortification of the flesh are often to be seen in the annual festivals in Ceylon. In Kataragama, the enigmatic shrine in the eastern jungles of Ceylon, a favorite method of fulfilling vows to the gods is to drive hooks and skewers through the flesh. Tamils in particular, as a result of pledges of fulfilled wishes, will sometimes hang themselves on great trees by large hooks biting into their naked flesh. Those less ardent may join in the fire-walking ceremonies held annually.

The Tapasa Bhikku, who are the subject of this essay, are a group of ascetic Buddhist monks who have reappeared in the last decade in Ceylon (Anagarika Ananda 1955). They profess to practice complete
withdrawal from the world, and in doing so claim to be returning to the original teachings of the Buddha. They reject the established institutionalized forms of monastic and temple life which the ordinary Buddhist priests lead by arguing that this has preserved the form but has extinguished the mystic spirit of true Buddhism.

While working in the eastern provinces of Ceylon in September, 1955, I was told that some pilgrims from Pelmadulla had come to visit a community of Tapasa Bhikku in the vicinity. The monks inhabited some historic caves near Selave, 20 miles south of Pottuvil, on the coast of the Indian Ocean in a very isolated spot. Being interested in the new movement of ascetic monks, and not having realized that they had communities, I decided to visit them.

The locality inhabited by this community of nine monks is grandiose in its beauty. The ancient caves are approached by a long and arduous walk near the ocean, among tall trees which filter the sunlight. Here and there the foliage opens up to reveal huge, dark gray, single rocks sitting in the middle of the jungle like pebbles on grass. One crosses open spaces, sandy, dried-up torrent beds, and meets a great variety of tropical animals—peacocks and flamingos, alligators and huge iguanas.

The first glimpse of the community enhances the impression of strangeness. Immense buffalo skulls with their horns intact hang on trees, making a fence on the path leading to the caves. There are heaps of large elephant bones strewn in various places. The caves themselves have been inhabited, in the first centuries A.D., and contain Prakrit inscriptions. There is even a concession to comfort since the upper parts of the caves have carved "drip ledges" to keep the rain out of the sandy interior. There are lotus ponds here and there among the rocks.

The ascetic monks reject the appellation tapasa for themselves. The term implies the application of extreme pain, hunger, and discomfort to mollify the body. It is recalled that the Buddha, too, tried tapas; according to legend he joined a community who were engaged in painful and extreme practices. He is often depicted in Indian sculpture as a ghostly, shrunken figure at this stage of his career. He rejected these sensational methods for a less frenetic but more balanced and complete withdrawal from the world. But the term is used by the ordinary villagers in referring to these ascetic monks. I shall continue to use the term, but the objection should be recorded.

The ascetic monks regard themselves as true Bhikku (lit. "beggars"), in contrast to the orthodox clergy who are described below. The main tenets of all orders are similar and derive from almost the same sources (see Sarma 1930). The goal of Buddha's teaching is the attainment of Nirvana, a state of perfect being without any contradictions or change. To attain Nirvana, the Buddha preached a complete withdrawal of all desire and hence a nonattachment to the world. Without desire there could be no sorrow. There would also be no sin (pau), and merits (pin), which are necessary to
be reborn in a higher state in the next life, would be easier to collect.

The main formulas which express the teaching as it is accepted in Ceylon are contained in the five precepts (pan sil) symbolizing the renunciation of certain forms of desire. All Buddhists are expected to conform to them, and the formula is frequently heard on all occasions involving Buddhist priests. In the five precepts the Buddhist renounces the taking of life, stealing, adultery, lying, and alcoholic drinks. The promise not to take life is more than a denial of murder, for here the protection of the lives of all beings (ahimsa) is implied.

The priests themselves are expected to conform to some additional precepts. One of these enjoins the Bhikku not to eat solid food after twelve o'clock noon. The second, by implication, involves the renunciation of high office and honor, and the third the renunciation of amusement, gratification of the senses, wealth, and the like.

**The Orthodox Clergy**

The ordinary Buddhist priests of Ceylon do conform to these and other rules, but they are not particularly ascetic and live, often in considerable comfort, in their residences (pansala) in temple grounds (vihara).

The priesthood is highly organized. The individual joins one of the various priestly orders in Ceylon. He first remains a novice and is later promoted to full priesthood. He usually receives a living in a village temple about this time and finds himself a member of a very highly respected order and the holder of a secure and definite position in Sinhalese society. His way of life is closely regulated by the rules of the priesthood. There is intense concern with his “purity.” He must avoid all pollution and in particular the pollution of the body. In his initiation he repeats the taco pancake, “a list of the 32 foul and despicable elements of the body” (Coplestone 1892: 457). The ceremony of initiation is similar to the Tapasa (see below), and he formally renounces his family ties and receives a new name. His head and all bodily hair are shaved, and hereafter he may not commit sexual intercourse and may not marry. He will wear the saffron robe and will do some preaching (bana) in Pali. He will often be invited to special services (pirii) in the neighborhood. When he becomes an incumbent of a temple, he will officiate in the daily food offerings to the Buddha (dana) and may play a role in annual celebrations. He will be well taken care of by the people.

A temple often has extensive lands dedicated to it by the villagers. Indeed the desirability of a living is precisely the wealth of the vihara concerned. Some temples are wealthy enough to own cars. Others may have radios, quite elaborate furniture, and even sewing machines. The Bhikkus, however, are supposed to be mendicant monks. In orthodox Buddhist ideology, they should have no possessions other than a robe (siura) and an alms bowl (patara), and they should beg their food. But the usual Bhikku who lives in the ordi-
nary, pleasant villages of the Kandyan districts, leads a life which, with all its solemnity and limitations, is by no means an unpleasant one. In some respects the food supply is more secure than that of the normal villager. In the village of Terutenne (see Yalman 1960: 81), the priest of one of the temples had a considerable amount of cash always available from the sale of the produce of temple lands. He had always been a very shrewd money-lender.

**The Tapasa Bhikku**

In recent years there has been a sudden growth of interest in ascetic monks. I am told by the villagers that their numbers have grown and that they are seen more frequently around villages. The reasons for this revival of interest in asceticism are not entirely clear. Two points may be indicated. First, it is quite possible that the growth of interest is only illusory and that the Tapasas represent simply one of the periodic attempts to return to the pristine, pure, otherworldly, charismatic aspects of Buddha's teaching. Second, if the growth in interest and numbers is genuine, then it may well be related to the increasing economic difficulties that individuals have to face, both in the small villages and in the overcrowded towns, with serious unemployment in Ceylon. In either case, I found considerable interest in these Tapasa Bhikku in 1954-56 in the Kandyan villages in which I worked. The inhabitants of even the distant villages had heard of them. One had come to stay a while in the jungles around Terutenne (Yalman 1960) a few months before I arrived in the village. I used to see them walking through the jungle in single file, looking down at the ground, bedraggled but impressive figures in their brown, humble attire.

How are the Tapasa distinguished from the orthodox priesthood (sangha)? Why has the priesthood taken a violent stand against them? How do they derive their support from the villagers, and how is the community organized?

The Tapasa are outside the established orthodox Buddhist orders. They wear soiled brown robes, in striking contrast to the resplendent saffron robes of the ordinary priesthood or the brilliant saffron orange colors of the Amarapura order. They cover both shoulders with their robes when walking to prevent the right arm from swinging. They refuse to carry umbrellas or wear sandals as the ordinary priests do. They do not ride in buses and allegedly will only walk four miles a day. They do not carry the traditional alms bowl and, again allegedly, will not request food but will only take seven handfuls in the traditional manner.

The Tapasas have incurred the hostility of the established church in particular on two doctrinal points. The first is that they deny the validity of the formal organization of the orthodox Buddhist orders. They claim that the clergy has no right to live in comfortable temples, to draw secure incomes from the lands dedicated to these temples, and to own worldly objects. In this manner they assert that their
way takes them back to the mystic and otherworldly traditions of Buddhism. In other words, their claim is that the charisma of the Buddha has been lost in the formal edifice of the church. An attempt must therefore be made to return to the original source of charisma, the denial of the world and its institutions.

A second and even more significant doctrinal point which differentiates them from the orthodox clergy is that, while almost all the formal relations between the ordinary Buddhist priests and the laity are conducted in high Pali or Sanskrit—which ordinary people cannot understand—the Tapasa speak normal Sinhalese, and when they preach they attempt to communicate their ideas directly to the villagers. In both respects the intention is to break through the traditional formal channels of the Buddhist church.

The attitude toward the ascetic monks has its roots in the place of the individual in Buddhism. Even though the role of the Bhikku in the community is highly formalized (the villagers will place their heads almost at his feet to salute him), he is not a shepherd. The individual is responsible for his own spiritual efforts. On Poya days (the quarters of the moon), many villagers are seen wearing white, visiting the temple and taking ata sil, that is, following for the day the eight precepts obligatory for Buddhist monks. The Tapasa would, I think, claim that this conscious individual effort to follow the Dharma, the body of the Buddhist code, is the only correct one, and hence ought to be the code of the Buddhist church as well.

The established clergy has repudiated and vigorously denounced the Tapasa. They have even claimed, both in their sermons and in furious letters to the press, that the Tapasa are communists. Considering the highly critical tenor of the Tapasa’s teaching with regard to the orthodox priesthood, this attitude is hardly surprising. The conservative elements in the population have, on the whole, also taken a critical stand toward the Tapasa. But in the villages, interest in the movement persisted in 1954-1956.

The visit of a Tapasa to Terutenne village (Walapane) was related to me with, I suspect, considerable embellishment. The Tapasa in question lived for a few days in a cave near the graveyard. He had not enough food, and the villagers say that they saw him closing his eyes and plucking leaves from the jungle here and there for his morning meal. Large numbers of people from surrounding villages apparently came to see this hermit in the jungle, “worshipped” and respected him. It is said that the reason he stayed in the graveyard was not only to have peace and quiet but also to demonstrate that there are no preteeya (dangerous spirits), yakka (demons), and deviyo (deities) hanging around there. He preached in Sinhalese, speaking very slowly and looking only at the ground.

The villagers of Terutenne appeared unanimous in claiming that the movement was started as a reaction against the established clergy. It was said that the first Tapasa was the son of a rich businessman who left his home, wife, and children and became a monk all by himself. There are now, they claimed, more than 500 Tapasas.
The story is no doubt apocryphal, and the figure exaggerated, yet to those who know the mythology of the life of the Buddha—how as prince Siddharta he left his home, wife, and children—the modern reinterpretation of the story may sound familiar.7

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE ASCETIC COMMUNITY

I turn now to a description of the community of Tapasas at Selave. The original site of this ascetic group was in Ambalantota, near Hambantota, in the Low Country. The originator of the movement is now respected as a Nayaka (head priest in the Selave group). They had moved to a new site for greater isolation. Their numbers in the community were nine, of whom two were novices. There were apparently others who were on their own or in small groups of two or three in other parts of the island. Even though the Tapasa criticized the orthodox clergy for their formalism, the economic aspects of the ascetic community were well taken care of. A lay benefactors’ society (dayakaya samitiya) has been organized with connections in the Low Country as well as in the small villages around Selave. Contributions were made to the society, but the food of the community was provided by the villagers in the vicinity.

The community was rigidly and hierarchically ranked. Seniority went according to order of ordination. The hierarchy was manifested every day at mealtime. Food would be passed along from the junior members to the next senior, and the junior would ceremonially “worship” (salute) the senior. The two novices did all the menial work of the community; they swept the grounds, cooked, and cleaned the pots for the entire group. Apart from the reading of hallowed Pali texts on Poya nights, there was no collective activity in the community. The monks each had a separate cave and spent most of their time meditating in the cave or in the jungle around. Some would go down to the deserted seashore for their meditations. It was expected that they would be completely silent three weeks in the month. This was, apparently, not a rigid rule, but an ideal to be lived up to. They were also expected to be silent during most of the day, but allowed themselves to communicate with each other and with visitors briefly after midday.

The Nayaka head priest, who had the largest cave, was an impressive person. A handsome man of about 35, he appeared highly intelligent, serious, and obviously better read and educated than the ordinary Bhikku or the other members of his community. He had a heap of books in one corner of the cave, an alms bowl, a sleeping mat, and two twigs used as toothbrushes; this seemed the extent of his possessions.

In front of each cave there was a path a hundred paces long, traced out with pebbles around it. At either end of the path bones of large animals had been heaped. Some skulls had been placed on top. Around these paths, too, horned buffalo skulls were hung upon trees as somewhat eerie ornaments. Sometimes, during meditation,
the monks would pace up and down this path marked by bones at either end.

**The Symbolism of Bones**

I was told that the bones were intended to remind the monk of death. For, it was said, everything loses its importance when faced with this inescapable fact. If one keeps thinking about death, all social customs, all objects and people who are thought important in ordinary life, all desires become meaningless. And when every aspect of human society becomes unimportant, one loses one's attachment to worldly matters. This is why one loses desires and hence banishes all sorrow. And again, it was claimed, this is why, when someone asked the Buddha for his wife and children, he readily gave them away. He also cut a piece of his body for food for a hungry person who was Maraya—his enemy, the symbol of death—testing his strength.

Even though the heaps of bones and skulls around the community were explained consciously in this manner, one must draw attention to the symbolism of bones (attp bone, also seed, also testicle) in other contexts among the Sinhalese. I think bones are associated with the body (sarira) of the Buddha. It is well known that all the most important shrines in Ceylon contain one or another of Buddha's "relics." The most famous of these are the danta dhatu (tooth relic), the nyepata dhatu (nail relic), the khesa dhatu (hair relic), as well as the forehead (lalata dhatu) and the jaw bone (hakuru dhatu) of the Buddha. These are the dhatu, "small pieces of bone like seeds" (informant) which remained behind after the Buddha was cremated. The relics are thought to be powerful (saraya). The tooth relic in Kandy produces rain when shaken. All relics increase the fertility of the lands around them. The supernatural potency of bones was probably uppermost in the minds of the ascetics since, when asked about them, they emphasized that they had collected the bones of dangerous and powerful leopards and wild elephants for their heaps.

**The Priestly Robe**

If the bones were associated with death and kept the concept alive in the minds of the Tapasa, their robes had a similar implication. The traditional form of the elegant garment (siura or chivaraya) has not altered, probably, since the sixth century B.C. The robe is a large, square piece of cloth made up of smaller squares sewn together. The traditional view is that the priests acquire their robes from cloth they find in graveyards. Indeed it is significant that at the end of the Sinhalese funeral ceremony a white piece of cloth is ceremonially left over the grave. I say ceremonially because the act is associated with the recitation of pansakulaya and is intended as the offering of an earth-soiled cloth to the priesthood.

This is not the only explanation of the special patches of the siura. Another explanation is that the Buddha on his way to the
sky saw the paddy fields of his father from above. He liked their pattern (they are, in the plains, often formed of rectangular patches—liyadda—with ridges—niyara—around them) and wanted his robe to look like them. Hence the traditional rectangles and the stitched ridges on the Buddhist robe. The saffron color of the ordinary robe, too, invites association with the ripened paddy fields. If this kind of statement is meaningful, one might also draw attention to the dark, soiled brown of the ascetic monks in contrast to the splendid saffron of the ordinary clergy. The villagers do assert that the ascetics wear “mud-soiled robes,” and I would hazard the suggestion that the robe, too, associates the Tapasa with death. There is clearly an ambivalence in the symbolism of the sacred robe. For just as it is to some extent associated with graveyards and pollution, and yet also stands for the paddy field, so also the explanation of its patches is that it is made in 108 pieces like the 108 kinds of sin (dos). I have argued elsewhere (Yalman 1962b, 1962c) that this ambivalence is a reflection of the positive and negative aspects of the Buddhist priest.

Initiation

The initiation of Tapasas appears to be similar to the ordination of orthodox Buddhist priests. I was told that it would be possible for an ordinary person to take to the Tapasa way of life alone, without a community. But since there is a community, those who are interested in the life of ascetics prefer to go through the period of training with other Tapasa groups. They therefore become novices for a time before turning into full monks.

The initiation ceremony is intended to break the initiate's connections with his immediate position in society. Three important ritual acts take place. First, the person is completely shaved, including the eyebrows. Second, he is smeared with mud for the gihiganda (lit. gihi: lay householders; ganda: smell, explained as “human smell”) to disappear. Third, he is given a ritual bath. Only after this is he dressed—to the singing of the gata scriptures—in the siura.

The initiation of the monk is thought of as a rebirth. Perhaps the most explicit evidence of rebirth is the assumption of a new name and the renunciation of all kinship connections. One ex-ascetic told me that he was known as Herat Mudiyanselage Hinguruwela Uda Gedara Punchi Banda when he was a man (mintha), but that when he became a priest he received the name Punyananda Thero (thero, priest). After he has taken the robe, his parents and kinsmen would never speak to the priest by kinship terms. He would always be spoken of respectfully as hamuduruvo. When his parents and kinsmen meet him, they do not fail to salute him in the customary humble manner, prostrating themselves on the ground and raising their arms, palms joined, above their heads.

The initiation effects a complete break in the social relations of the priest. He moves sharply from the world of ordinary men to the realm of sacred beings. Social distance between men and priests is
wide, and contacts between them follow formal channels. While such is the theory, the practice does not always attain these standards. In the Walapane village of Terutenne, a Tapasa who had come on a visit to the Maluvelgoda temple turned out, upon investigation, to be the son of the wily old priest who was the temple’s incumbent. Before taking the robe, the Tapasa himself had had three wives and numerous children. When the chief priest of Walapane discovered that a Tapasa was staying in a Siam Nikaya temple, he swooped down one day and, after remonstrations, initiated him into the Siam Nikaya order. Thus it happened that, during my stay in this village, one temple had a father and his son as incumbents. I was assured by the priests in question that they never used kinship terms between themselves but always referred to each other as *swamin vahanse* (learned priest).

**The Place of Asceticism in a Rigid Society**

The main theme in the sermons of the priests of all orders is that ordinary life is full of sorrow (*duka*). Buddhist ideology is an attempt to escape from sorrow. Its solution, as we have suggested, is negative—the renunciation of desire—for desire attaches one to the world. It is worth pausing here to inquire: Why must one detach oneself from the world? Why is this world full of sorrow? Why should the individual renounce worldly attempts to remedy the situation?

Let us admit that some individuals who find it difficult to lead and organize their lives may well take this attitude. Let us also admit that all attempts to revive religious feeling must of logical necessity take the form of detaching the soul from its connections in this world to allow it to come closer to the “other world.” Hence the receptacle of the soul must be broken—or mortified. All mystics at all times must face the dilemma that, while the soul may be thirsty for what lies across the threshold, the body cannot be taken across as well. A logical solution is provided by the trance states and the forms of religious possession which are often used as devices by Whirling Dervishes, European and Eastern mystics and prophets, and certain types of priests (*kapurala*) in Ceylon. The prevalence of trances and possession for a heightened religious experience in the rituals of many peoples probably springs from this logical necessity of a threshold between the world of humans and the world of sacred beings. The temporary loss of consciousness in heightened mental states, and the visions and hallucinations which appear to mystics in these trance states or states of ecstasy, probably support the impression that one is on the threshold between this world and another (see Huxley 1954; Wirz 1954). It should be observed that communication between the two realms takes two forms. In some cases spirits and deities come down and actively “possess” the intermediary; in other cases, with mystics and prophets, deliberately
controlled "meditation" brings the person nearer to the "other world" (see Yalman 1962c).

Even if these points are accepted, it is still significant that certain societies accord great prestige to those who do turn in otherworldly directions, whereas other societies do not do so. It is also noteworthy that those societies which are highly and rigidly stratified appear to accord greater prestige to asceticism and otherworldliness in their religious ideology, whereas this does not appear to be so in societies with considerable mobility. Such hypotheses would be difficult to prove but the evidence is worth considering.

In India and Ceylon, although a rise in ritual status is sometimes possible in the caste system (Yalman 1960: 108), in fact the only legitimate path open to the individual is the shedding of all social affiliations—caste, kinship, and others—the breaking of all social bonds to assume the "high status" of a sannyasi (mendicant ascetic). Hence mobility is allowed, but only with a complete denial of all secular interests. In both societies a rise in economic status, though theoretically possible, does not necessarily bring in its train a rise in social status and it is the latter which is relevant. It must also be said that in most of the traditional communities in India and Ceylon, the number who can successfully rise in economic terms must still remain extremely small.

If the emphasis on otherworldliness is associated with rigidly stratified societies, medieval Europe and its great elaboration of ascetic orders becomes highly relevant. Here again society was rigidly divided into strata, into orders in which membership was acquired by birth. And here again the emphasis was on the other world. The Protestant ethic appears on the scene and is elaborated only after the feudal superstructure is already broken up.

We may well note that the Protestant ethic with its emphasis upon acquisition here and now would be a threat to a rigidly organized and stratified society. It preaches high individual mobility, which must in the end break through the traditional patterns. Conversely, emphasis on the other world turns attention away from the society in which the individual lives. Much more hardship can be accepted and those who are ambitious or sensitive or both can fulfill their cravings by rising in status and becoming ascetic monks.

We cannot claim, of course, that no other outlets are provided. Even in the Middle Ages, humble men could rise in the church and elsewhere, but the practice was difficult and was kept to a minimum. The safety valve of the "other world" was, in contrast, utilized to the full.

Note also in this connection that even members of the lowest castes are accepted both as ascetics and as ordinary priests in modern Ceylon. In no other respect in Sinhalese society would the individual be able to escape from the strictures imposed upon him by birth. While the Tapasa leave the door fully open to the lowest caste, the acceptability of low-caste persons into the orthodox orders does have an acrimonious history behind it (Coplestone 1897; Ryan 1953: 39-45).
Some orders, like the Amarapura, were created to accept the low castes. But it is evident that caste still looms large in the well-established orders like the Siam Nikaya, and even this single factor may well account for the interest and significance of the Tapasa order of ascetics.

While further research may substantiate the association between asceticism and highly stratified societies, it seems unlikely that monasteries can also be correlated with similar social conditions. In some respects monasteries are organized groups of ascetics, and we would expect to find them in the same context, but the presence of elaborate monasteries in Burma and Thailand—societies which are not particularly stratified—suggests that a distinction should be drawn between individual asceticism and monasticism. It is still true that even monasticism assumes a fairly elaborate social structure in which there is some hierarchical dimension—hence monasteries are conspicuous by their absence in Africa—but individual asceticism may be a response to particularly rigid structures. India is a good example in this respect. The caste system of India is more elaborate and rigid than in Ceylon, and, although in contrast to Buddhist countries monasteries are not common, individual ascetics, sannyasis, and yogis continue to flourish.

**Motives for Entering the Ascetic Community**

For the mystic who turns to the other world, or for the individual who hankers after the protection and certainty of the deities, the bonds that tie him to society become irksome. The Buddhist priests in Ceylon do not specifically mention caste as a source of sorrow in their sermons. But one's position in Sinhalese society and one's status in the caste are determined by kinship. Hence it is kinship, with the attendant troubles between kinsmen, the difficulties which beset the family, and the uncertainty of getting a living, which is always emphasized in the religious utterances of the priests. The theme of King Vessantara giving away his wife and children and of Prince Siddharta leaving his palace and sensual pleasures reflects the present.

The villagers also speak in this vein. They emphasize the delight of cutting oneself off from all relatives and turning to the peace of the life of the Buddha. I recall, when speaking to some educated villagers, being impressed by how dangerous they considered the world in which they lived to be. The discussion concerned the subject of horoscopes. I wanted to know why they considered it so important to know the future. The answer was that the future had to be known so that the dangers it contained could be averted. These dangers were partly supernatural—you could be killed by yakkas—and partly social—the girl you marry might turn out to be low caste—or they might be economic—the world was an insecure place (cf. Wirz 1954: 1 et passim). The formal denial of emotional attachments by the assumption of the robe was, in Sinhalese villages, acceptable both as
orthodox theology and as a practical insurance against sorrow.

The question arises: Why do individuals take to the robe, and how do they choose between the orthodox priesthood and the ascetic orders? Most of the membership of the orthodox orders is drawn from boys who have been handed over to the church from an early age. The giving up of children to the church earns merit (pin) for their parents and reduces the number of mouths to feed in the family. In these circumstances there is little point in seeking ulterior emotional motives behind the recruitment of children to the Buddhist order.

Those who join in later life are in a different predicament. Many appear to be somewhat more unstable types of individuals. The incumbent of the Maluwegoda temple mentioned above had twice given up the priesthood to return to his ordinary existence, and this was his third attempt. Another ex-priest I came to know in the Monaragala area had taken the robe as the result of a family quarrel but had returned to his village after five years. For this type of individual, the priesthood is a socially approved method of escape from family obligations.

The members of the ascetic Tapasa community were also men who had made a deliberate decision to become medicant monks. One of them had been an engine driver in the Ceylon railways. Another had been a shopkeeper in the Low Country and had left his wife and children to join the order. Yet another had been a mason in Kandy and had enough money to start a shop himself. He heard of the Tapasa and made his choice to join them. In this fashion the Tapasa community provided an acceptable outlet for these persons and one which at the same time gave them great prestige among their people.

Conclusions

The first point to be made is that the Tapasa, much to the chagrin of the established clergy, are a revivalist sect and express some of the dissatisfaction with the state of the Buddhist church. It has also been suggested that the renewal of interest in the more ascetic forms of monasticism could be related to the increasing economic difficulties on the island.

Apart from a description of the organization of the ascetics of Selave, we have also considered the motivations of the individuals for entering the community. Two categories of explanations were suggested. First, we noted that asceticism and otherworldly communities provide alternative safety valves to compensate for the rigidity of the social order. In a lesser sense, the monasteries of the modern world still provide havens for individuals in difficulty, but they no longer enjoy the prestige or the general interest which is expressed in societies where otherworldliness is made the central tenet of the religion. Lastly, we noted that the breaking of kinship ties is an essential aspect of turning to the other world, providing an explanation for the presence of some of the monks in the ascetic order.
NOTES

1. The field work on which this essay is based was carried out in the Dry Zone of Ceylon between August, 1954, and January, 1956. It was supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the University of Cambridge. I am indebted to Dr. E. R. Leach for many suggestive discussions on Sinhalese Buddhism and would also like to record my gratitude to the Director and staff of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California, where the essay was written.

2. Siam Nikaya, Amarapura Nikaya, and Ramanya Nikaya. For a further discussion of these orders see Ryan 1953: 32ff.; Coplestone 1892: 427ff.

3. Sometimes villagers in their irreligious moods will refer to the Buddhist priest as a mudu mahana (bald priest) who “kills rice” (bat maravand), i.e., is useless.

4. In a study of 89 sibling groups in Terutenne, a Walapane village, I found that 25 per cent out of a total of 217 men had left the village to migrate to towns and tea estates for work, and that 10.6 per cent of the 228 women had done likewise. In the other two villages, which were more remote from towns, the exodus was less: 3 out of 47 men and none out of 59 women in 28 sibling groups in the village of Udumulla in the Wellassa jungles, and 3 out of 54 men and none out of 54 women in 29 sibling groups in Vilawa in the Wanni Hatpattuva.

5. In speaking to a Tapasa on these topics, I asked why the arm should not be swung. He replied that this gave sensual pleasure. I am not sure whether this was an oblique reference to masturbation, which can be referred to as “shaking the arm.” The covering of the right shoulder is an important doctrinal point which differentiates the Amarapura and Ramanya orders from the Siam Nikaya order, which does not cover the right shoulder.

6. For a brilliant analysis of this point see Weber 1947: 358ff.

7. In fact, the structure of the modern story and the ancient myths appears the same (see Lévi-Strauss 1955). Note also that, as King Wessantra, the Buddha gives his wife and children to be servants to a beggar who asks for them. The theme of renouncing the family reappears in many myths.

8. In contrast to the monks who are reminded of death, the explanation for the food offerings to the Buddha is that they remind him of “life.” For an analysis of the two aspects of the Buddha and the priests, see Yalman 1962b.

9. The word dhatu also has other important conscious associations in the minds of the Sinhalese peasants. It means life force, or semen or seed, as well as relic. The peasants speak about rikura dhatu, the “semen” associated with rikura grahayo, one of the planets in the horoscope which controls sexual life. They also speak about dijna dhatu (life semen). For further elaborations of this concept, see Yalman 1962a.

10. The siura is named after the number of vertical lines of rectangles, known as atta (branches), of which it is composed. Each line has about three rectangular patches (mandala) along it. Thus there are siuras with five, seven, nine, eleven, and thirteen “branches.” The dividing lines are referred to as gaba. The central “branch” is always named ras attu (i.e., “rain” or “poison” [?] branch); on either side are ela attu (i.e., “leaning” or “adjacent” branches); next, in a “five-branch” siura, are the nava attu (last branches). The mandala are said to be the same as liyadda squares of the paddy fields, and the dividing gaba lines are believed to be water lines of the fields.

11. This, again, is a doctrinal point which is disputed among the orders. The Siam Nikaya order, in contrast to the rest, do not shave their eyebrows.

12. The mechanism of breaking all social bonds is utilized not only in the legitimate pursuit of asceticism but also in illegitimate attempts to falsify and alter one’s birth station in life (Yalman 1960).


14. In the three villages I studied the numbers who had taken the robe were as follows: Terutenne (Walagane): 6 (or 2.9 per cent) out of 217 men; Udumulla (Wellassa): 1 out of 47 men; Vilawa (Wanni Hatpattuva): 1 out of 54 men.
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