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Buddhist Disaster Relief

Monks, Networks, and the Politics of Religion

Sri Lankan Buddhist (Theravada) temples in Malaysia have only recently begun actively engaging in international disaster relief. This article explores the reasons for this emerging example of religious relief by examining the diasporic history of social welfare engagements by these temples and their interactions with initiatives by Chinese organizations and other religious aid providers in Malaysia. In doing so, it investigates the politics of religion both within Buddhist relief practices and within wider contexts in which the relief work is located. The discussion focuses on a case study of Mahindarama Temple in Penang and its remarkable mobilization in response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. I argue that the temple's relief work is one element of a wider flourishing involvement in social welfare activities. Previous domestically-oriented practices gave doctrinal and administrative precedent for transnational disaster relief work following the tsunami. Mahindarama's relief activities were linked to a transnational web of religious and ethnic networks in which monks played decisive roles. Both the monks' doctrinal work and their interventions in practical tasks were crucial in facilitating and brokering the relief efforts. While Mahindarama's disaster relief work drew on Buddhist practices, values, and principles, it was also informed by a particular constellation of political, social, and economic concerns that reflect the location of Buddhist patrons in multicultural Malaysia.

On 30 December 2004, four days after the Indian Ocean tsunami devastated parts of South and Southeast Asia, a brief message was posted on the Yahoo group "HeartMindSoul." The author was Chee Seng, a Chinese patron of Mahindarama, an ethnic Sri Lankan Buddhist temple located on the island of Penang, Malaysia. As the organizer of the committee established to provide aid to the victims of the tsunami, Chee Seng appealed to the group's members for help:

> Dear all Dhammafarers,[1]
> Sri Lankan Buddhists need our help.
> Send us clothes, blankets, dry and can food, medical aid, toiletries, etc. that may help to relief [sic] the victims (irrespect [sic] of religion).
> Items shall be distributed through our "AMATA Free Medical Center" there in Colombo.

A follow up message from Chee Seng posted only two days later on "Heart-MindSoul" and other Buddhist blog sites noted that four twenty-foot containers had already been packed and were awaiting shipping. It also noted that a consignee was needed in Banda Aceh (Indonesia) to receive a number of shipping containers from the temple, and that two other twenty-foot containers were being prepared for Colombo. What was perhaps most startling about those follow-up posts was Chee Seng's request that donors temporarily postpone sending clothes to the temple: despite the almost around-the-clock work of over five hundred temple volunteers, additional time was needed to clear the backlog that had accumulated during the previous days.[2]

A similar response to the tsunami disaster came from the other Sri Lankan temples in Malaysia. Buddhist Maha Vihara in Kuala Lumpur, for instance, also shipped containers filled with emergency provisions—including clothes, blankets, body bags, food, medical supplies, diapers, small ovens, tents, and bottled water— to Sri Lanka and to Aceh, the latter being notable as a predominantly Muslim region (Rahman Daros 2005; New Straits Times 2005). Conversations with those present at the temple in the weeks following the disaster, as well as newspaper reports (for example, Fadzil 2005), emphasized the huge crowds that came to the temple in order to donate goods and supplies. Volunteers also worked around the clock in unison to unload donations from cars that formed a line, which I was told,

stretched almost one kilometer down the road from the temple. Temple devotees also collected over MYR 2,000,000 (over $625,000 USD) to aid victims in both Sri Lanka and Indonesia.

As those connected with relief efforts explained to me, it was the temples' Sri Lankan heritage that propelled those religious institutions toward their role of collection and distribution centers, as well as the temple volunteers and monastic leaders toward their role as international aid workers. One volunteer expressed to me in 2012, for example, that donors turned naturally to the Buddhist temples with ethnic and social ties to Sri Lanka as places from which aid should be collected and sent.

In total fourteen shipping containers were sent from Mahindarama Temple to Sri Lanka and another fifty shipping containers were sent to Sri Lanka from the two ethnic Sri Lankan temples in Kuala Lumpur. While such a response to a natural disaster might be expected from well-established professional relief organizations, the magnitude of the temple's response is quite astonishing when we consider not only that this represents a form of "amateur aid," but also that the Indian Ocean tsunami represented the temples' first large-scale response to an international natural disaster. That response, moreover, paved the way for subsequent temple-based international relief efforts, such as in response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and the Great East Japan earthquake in 2011. What were the factors that propelled the Buddhist temples into international aid work and disaster relief? How does the temples' location in Malaysia affect ideas about social service and disaster relief? And what roles do ethnicity and religion play in the process?

In answering these questions, the material I present pays close attention to the politics of religion, a polyvalent phrase which facilitates attention to a number of related themes. First, I attend closely to Malaysia's religious politics. This article places the relief work of Sri Lankan temples in Malaysia within the context of Malaysian government policies on religion and broader intercommunal tensions within Malaysian society, especially the fraught nature of race and religion. In order to ground this discussion I focus particular attention on the history of Mahindarama Temple in Penang and how it developed at the intersection of multiple ethnic, religious, and political interests. Second, I trace the distinctly Buddhist politics informing the temple's relief by examining the dynamic interactions between charismatic monastic leaders and temple patrons and devotees. I argue that monks played crucial roles as brokers and translators in facilitating the relief along transnational Buddhist networks. Third, I examine the politics of shifting understandings of what constitutes "religious work" within the discourse and practice of the temples themselves. The case study of disaster relief that I present here was the outcome of evolving Buddhist practices in Malaysia, shaped as they were by dynamic interactions with fluctuating political, religious, and social influences.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MAHINDARAMA TEMPLE

In order to understand the disaster relief work of Sri Lankan temples in Malaysia it is necessary to know something of the history of these religious actors. In this section I focus on Mahindarama Temple in Penang in order to locate this temple within its Malaysian context and in order to understand why, when the Indian Ocean disaster took place in 2004, the temples became key centers for relief activities for temple patrons and the wider communities.

The events that led to the founding and development of Mahindarama Temple in Penang were unique in relation to the founding of the other Sri Lankan temples in Malaysia. While the other Sri Lankan temples in Malaysia were formed by groups of diasporic Sinhalese Buddhists pining for familiar places of worship (SAMUELS 2011), Mahindarama's beginnings were much more haphazard.

On a visit to the Temple of the Tooth (Dalada Maligawa) in Kandy, the Sri Lankan monk Ven. A. Pemaratana encountered and quickly befriended two Thai monks on pilgrimage there. Prior to leaving Sri Lanka, the Thai monks invited Ven. Pemaratana to Thailand. Ven. Pemaratana accepted the invitation and in 1918, travelled from Sri Lanka to Singapore. After a short stay at the shop of a well-known Sri Lankan jeweler and philanthropist, B. P. de Silva, Ven. Pemaratana set off to Thailand to meet up with his Thai friends. On the way, he spent a few days in Penang, a major port city that—with the transfer of the Straits Settlements to the Crown Colony in 1867—had become one of several favored cities (along with Singapore, Melaka, and various ports in Aceh) of Sri Lankan and Chinese traders, goldsmiths, laborers, and confectioners (see ARSECULERATNE 1991; FROST 2003; TAN 2007).

While residing in a small hut in Batu Lanchang Hokkien Cemetery on the island, Ven. Pemaratana gave sermons in English to groups of Chinese and Sri Lankans living in Penang. Impressed with the monk, Chinese, Tamil, and Sinhalese residents encouraged him to stay on by offering to establish a Sri Lankan style temple for him. M. V. Gregory, a Sri Lankan contractor living in Malaysia, purchased a piece of land in Bandar Jelutong for the purpose of building a temple that would serve "the members of the Buddhist community of Penang" as well as function as "a school house for the use of all children of Buddhists to be taught the Buddhist religion [sic] rites and customs."[3] That land was quickly deemed unsuitable, however, as it was too far away from the other residential areas to be of benefit. A new piece of land in Caunter Hall was purchased, also by M. V. Gregory, and offered to Ven. Pemaratana. A dwelling and a shrine hall were soon constructed. In 1921, yet another piece of land was purchased, this time on Kampar Road (where Mahindarama sits today) as the Caunter Hall site frequently flooded during rainy days. The new land was purchased with the financial assistance of M. V. Gregory as well as with the assistance of several Chinese devotees: Lim Boon Chin, Lim Chaen Saeng, Lee Swee Bee, Lim Gaik Kim, Yeah Siew Eam, and Tan Choo Lew. While Ven. P. Pemaratana preached from the Kampar Road temple, his student, Ven. W. Sumanasara, remained at the Caunter Hall site. In 1927 Ven. P. Pemaratana passed away and Ven. Sumanasara took over the Kampar Road temple.

While the physical development of the temple continued under the direction of Ven. W. Sumanasara (who held the position of second chief incumbent from 1927–1933), it was under the temple's third leader, Ven. K. Gunaratana (chief incumbent from 1933–1964) that Mahindarama developed into a popular site for Buddhist activities. Though Sinhalese, Ven. Gunaratana appealed not only to the small community of Sri Lankans but also to the more populous groups of Chinese Buddhists living in Penang. He was able to cross over ethnic lines in large part because of his fluency in Hokkien, one of the most prominent Chinese dialects in Penang and Malaysia. Ven. Gunaratana regularly preached in Hokkien at the Penang Buddhist Association. He also played a key role in advancing the Theravada Buddhist celebration of Vesak (a commemoration of the birth, enlightenment, and death of Guatama Buddha) as a public holiday in Malaysia (LIM n.d.). On account of his active public roles he became increasingly well-known throughout the peninsula and was given the title of Chief Sangha Leader of Malaya and Singapore by the colonial authorities. Under his leadership and guidance, Mahindarama published numerous brochures and books to help propagate Buddhism (for example, *The Mangala Sutta Vannana* and *The Dhamma* [publication information unavailable], and *The Golden Discipline* [GUNARATANA 1967]) and in 1959 the temple established its first Buddhist Sunday School. Starting with his tenure and continuing with the following two incumbent monks, Mahindarama became a key center for the propagation of Buddhism in Malaysia.

Mahindarama and its burgeoning Sunday school were highly prized as centers of Buddhist learning among Penang's English-speaking Chinese communities. While Mandarin-speaking Chinese felt more at home at the many Mahayana Buddhist temples on the island (where Mandarin was widely spoken), English-speaking Chinese were, in the words of Lee Yu Ban (the founder of the Malaysia Theravāda E-group), cut off from sources of information related to Buddhism as a result of being unable to read the Chinese sources found there (interviewed 9 July 2009 in Kuala Lumpur).[4] As Benny LIOW (1989) and Judith NAGATA (1995) point out, one's native language had a significant effect on determining temple patronage during much of the twentieth century: many Chinese-speaking Malaysian Chinese frequented Mahayana temples while English-speaking Malaysian Chinese were more inclined toward Theravada temples.[5]

The energy that was devoted to propagating Buddhism led to the rapid growth in the number of Chinese patrons. With them came deeper pockets that would support the temples' flurry of activities, including the building of new structures. Ven. Gunaratana's two successors, Ven. M. A. Upananda (chief incumbent from 1964–1974) and Ven. P. Pemaratana (chief incumbent from 1974–1995), continued to develop the temple and its Buddhist Sunday school for the next thirty years. Needing assistance with his various building projects, Ven. P. Pemaratana turned to his own student, Ven. Indaratana, who stayed by his teacher's side at Mahindarama for the next twelve years to oversee the temple's growth and development.[6] After Ven. P. Pemaratana's demise in 1995, Ven. Indaratana became the temple's sixth Chief Incumbent.

FROM CENTERS OF RITUAL PRACTICE TO CENTERS OF SOCIAL WELFARE

Although the history of Mahindarama Temple up through Ven. Pema-ratana's tenure was one of temple-building and propagating Buddhism, this changed under the direction of Ven. E. Indaratana when the temple took on an additional role: providing social services to Malaysia's aged, poor, and sick. The shift to becoming centers of social welfare led directly to the temple's involvement in disaster relief, with the latter being seen as an extension of the former. To understand how this change came about, it is necessary to explain, briefly, how Sri Lankan temples are administered.

Sri Lankan temples lack a hierarchical structure. As a decentralized order, each temple head (or chief incumbent) is given the freedom to shape his own temple, often after considering the needs of his own patrons.[7] This decentralized form of administration is also present among the Sri Lanka temples in Malaysia where—with the arrival of Ven. Indaratana to Mahindarama, Ven. K. Dhammaratana to Buddhist Mahavihara, and Ven. B. Saranamkara to the Sri Lankan Buddhist Temple—we see a shift of attention as the temples, the head monks, and the temple patrons became more focused on a range of social welfare enterprises.

When Ven. Indaratana took over Mahindarama, he saw a temple that had lost some of its earlier vitality. During a conversation in 2012, Ven. Indaratana mentioned to me that while the temple was still busy on Sundays, it was not that crowded on other days; those who came to the temple were there to pray for ill or dying relatives or to seek the monk's ritual services (for example, chanting protective texts) for themselves or other family members. Bearing those experiences in mind, Ven. Indaratana, with the support of his patrons, began turning his attention specifically to helping people, believing, as he explained to me, that "The first thing they need is health, before the *dhamma* [or Buddhist teachings]. They need health. I must promote health. Then they can come to the temple. Then they can maintain [religious] things." This is a clear illustration of the ways in which the understanding of religious work was being renegotiated. It was not that the temple was becoming less Buddhist, but rather that Buddhist practice was being reconceptualised in ways that legitimated and propelled new practices. By locating physical well-being as a precondition for correct practice, Ven. Indaratana sought to actively rework his patron's understandings of what it meant to be a good Buddhist. That reworking also reversed traditional understandings of the roles that Theravada Buddhist temples play in society: from being recipients of lay people's donations in exchange for merit and ritual services to becoming centers from which aid and care could be administered and distributed (HARRIS 2013, 20).

At first, Ven. Indaratana travelled with volunteer doctors to the homes of patients in need of care. In 1996, however, Ven. Indaratana established a clinic which he ran out of the temple every Sunday; its stated aim was, and still is, "to provide free medical services for the poor regardless of race, religion or creed based on the principles of loving kindness and compassion" (INDARATANA et al. 2004, 72).[8] Two years later, Ven. Indaratana established a Buddhist funeral ser-

vice to console grieving family members who were also temple patrons. That same year, he added a diabetes center to the free medical clinic in recognition of the growing presence of the illness in Malaysia. Furthermore, in 1999 Ven. Indaratana celebrated the opening of yet another social service enterprise: Sarana Old Folks Home, which was offered to the temple by a wealthy Chinese donor, Madam Tay Poh Choo. With this, Mahindarama "became the first institution in Penang to have an old folk's home" (*New Straits Times* 2001). Shortly after, new premises were purchased when the old folks home, Amata Free Medical Clinic, and the Diabetic Center were brought under one roof (*New Straits Times* 2001). Finally, in 2005 a cancer counseling center was opened as a response to the perceived growing cases of cancer on the island.

Although Ven. Indaratana turned most of his attention to social service enterprises, it is important to bear in mind that, for him, social work is intimately tied to Buddhist ideals. Serving the poor, aged, sick, dying, and bereaved is an expression of key Buddhist values that are essential to spiritual progress: namely, loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). Moreover, for him, social service work is also connected to propagating the religion; offering people a range of social services indirectly creates, according to Ven. Indaratana, the very possibility of people turning toward the religion.

In describing the shift that took place at Mahindarama, Ven. Indaratana focused mainly on how his own experiences led *him* to reconsider the roles that temples should be playing in contemporary society. What about the perspectives of the temple's patrons? Although it is clear why Ven. Indaratana decided to take the temple in a new direction, why were the patrons of the temple willing to go along with those changes?

There are several factors that informed the development of Mahindarama. From the 1930s to the 1960s, people were drawn toward Ven. Gunaratana, a particularly charismatic monk who was a prominent Buddhist figure throughout the peninsula and who was active in his outreach to multiple ethnic communities. Moreover, the chance for patrons to send their children to an English-speaking Buddhist Sunday school was appealing for those Chinese families who were unable to read Chinese or speak Chinese dialects.

Over subsequent decades other factors also contributed to the temple's popularity. While Mahindarama continued to attract students to the temple through its English-language Sunday school classes, changes in government policy during the 1970s were also important in reshaping the way the temple was seen. For an increasing number of Chinese Malaysians the temple became a key site of identity formation and refuge within the context of their minority status in Malaysian society (GAN 1980, 41; GOMES 2009, 192). In the 1969 federal elections Malaysians cast votes that impacted new state policies on such emotionally-charged issues as education, language, culture, and religion. With each ethnic group claiming particular rights in their own self-interests, the Malay-Indian-Chinese Alliance government—which was viewed as being too accommodating and conciliatory to minorities by some Malays, and not accommodating enough by many ethnic minorities in Malaysia—lost seats

in the national parliament and also lost their majority in the provincial elections in both Selangor and Perak. The outcome of the election was greeted with celebrations by many non-Malay groups who hoped that the election results would lead to greater equality. But the elections also inspired protest marches by Malay Muslim nationalists who rallied against what they believed was their lower "economic position vis-a-vis the Chinese" (Horowitz 1989, 255), as well as what they saw as "'non-Malay' threats and challenges to Malay rights and Malay political primacy" that were sanctified in Malaysia's constitution (Cheah 2002, 106; see also Milne 1967). The resulting street clashes between these groups, known widely as the 13 May 1969 ethnic riots, resulted in violence and the loss of life and property. It was also a decisive event in shaping a pervasive uneasiness about ethnic and religious relations that has persisted in the country ever since.

The 1969 ethnic riots revealed powerful fissures that existed between Malaysia's ethnic groups, as well as among members of each of the ethnic groups (for example, between more conciliatory Malays and Malay nationalists). The so-called "unifying" policies that followed the riots actually served to broaden those inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic fissures into chasms. Based on the belief that "the Malays are the original or indigenous people of Malaya" (Mahathir 1970, 133), new economic (Shamsul 1992; Milne 1986; Gomez and Saravanamuttu 2012; Khoo 1995; Tan Chee-Beng 1988), educational (Gomez and Premdas 2013; Lee 2005; Nelson 2008), language (Tham 1979), and cultural (Mandal 2008) policies that increased Malay dominance were enacted and, in the process, fostered a growing sense of mistrust among minority groups. Intercommunal tensions were further stoked by an Islamic revitalization (*dacwa*) movement which, along with the changed government policies, resulted in the growth of non-Islamic religious movements in part because they were seen as providing adherents with a source of "psychological refuge" (Gan 1980, 41; Gomes 2009, 192; Lee 1988, 405; Othman 2008; Ackerman and Lee 1988).

While the Malay ethnocracy helped foster a new sense of urgency among many non-Muslims with regard to their respective religions, it was developments in Christianity in Malaysia during the same period that provided a particularly important context for the temple's new social service enterprises that were introduced during the 1990s. Tang Chew Peng (2010, 174), for instance, has argued that Christianity attracted a significant number of converts because of the extensive educational, welfare, and charity activities, including the running of orphanages, old folks home, and schools. According to Tang, these activities "improved their social image" which helped attract a large number of followers. Three Chinese Buddhist lay people who have played a central role in propagating Buddhism in Malaysia since the 1970s also discussed with me in 2009 how Christian charity work inadvertently impacted Buddhists during the 1990s. After noting, for instance, that many English-speaking Chinese Malaysians had become Christian around the middle of the twentieth century, one informant explained that the English-speaking Chinese communities "…started to look at them and saw what they were doing. We picked up many ideas from the Christians: their study groups,

their outreach methods. The [social service organizations] are a direct response." By establishing temple-based welfare programs, Buddhists sought to respond directly to criticisms that were being leveled against their tradition: that Buddhists are too inwardly focused and, thus, not doing enough to help those in need.[9]

Closely related to this is yet another reason why Chinese Malaysians were increasingly inclined to engage themselves and their resources in social welfare work. During my conversation with a Buddhist involved in the growth and development of Buddhism in Malaysia, I expressed my surprise at the range of welfare projects carried out in Malaysia at Buddhist temples in general, and at Sri Lankan temples in particular. In responding to my comments, he felt the need to provide some necessary background. He explained: "As immigrants here, we [Chinese] have been ingrained to take care of ourselves. No one will take care of us. When we came here, we worked in the tin mines and tapped rubber. We established clan halls, *kongsi*s. Those *kongsi*s helped set up schools. They set up clinics [where] traditional medicine [was practiced]. We helped each other. It is ingrained [in us]." With Malaysia's rapid economic growth and greater cosmopolitanism that were the result of economic liberalization policies enacted following the economic collapse of the early to mid-1980s, people had more disposable wealth (Gomez 1999, chapter 4). Given the Chinese communities' traditions of mutual aid, as well as the connection between charitable giving and social capital (DeBernardi 2004, 178; see also Ong 1993, 767), it is not surprising that Chinese Malaysians were not only willing to go along with their temples' new roles, but also encouraged an expansion of the temples' welfare enterprises by setting up additional charity organizations that, although run alongside the temple organizations, had the temples' head monks as their spiritual advisors.

Whereas the inclination to "help each other out" was confined to specific groups or clans through the *kongsi* system (Yen 1981 and Wang 1994), to specific dialect groups through the various language associations, and to specific religious communities through Chinese religious associations (Topley 1961), the recipients of aid broadened during the 1980s. In a similar vein to the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism—which sought to promote unity, harmony, and understanding amongst people of different religions—the social service projects undertaken through Buddhist temples were not limited to a specific religion or ethnic group.

By referencing such universalizing qualities as compassion (*karuṇā*), loving kindness (*mettā*), giving (*dāna*), and merit (*puñña*), Ven. Indaratana and other head monks were implicitly engaged in a process of translation (see Mosse and Lewis 2006) through which they were able to connect their own welfare projects with the values and concerns of their donors and patrons. With the growth of international networks of giving as well as international forms of aid, community becomes no longer defined by state boundaries or language group but rather could be creatively be set, adjusted, and readjusted in ways that are most meaningful to people at particular points in time.

There was an additional impetus driving the temples and patrons toward social services. Several Theravada-affiliated Malaysian Buddhists mentioned to me dur-

ing my fieldwork in Malaysia how Mahayana Buddhist organizations such as the Phor Tay Institute (which had been involved in caring for orphans and providing education to the less fortunate since 1935) and the Mahayana-affiliated Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi (which was founded in Melaka in 1992)[10] affected Theravada Buddhists and their institutions. As several informants indicated to me, with the establishment and growth of Mahayana welfare organizations, Theravada Buddhists began feeling an even greater need to engage in Buddhist social service projects; by doing so, they could indirectly respond to criticisms that the Theravada tradition is too self-centered.

Internationalizing social welfare: responding to times of crisis

During the 1990s, Ven. Indaratana was concerned with aiding people living in Penang and other parts of Malaysia. At the turn of the new millennium, he set his sights further afield. Focusing, at first, on the needy in his own country of origin, Ven. Indaratana founded a Sri Lankan branch of Amata Free Medical clinic at Gangaramaya Temple in Kohalwila, Kelaniya, located just outside of Colombo (est. 2001). Like Amata Free Clinic initially run out of his Penang temple, the goal for the clinic in Sri Lanka is to provide free medical treatment to sick and poor Sri Lankans, irrespective of their religious affiliation. Serving the poor also led Ven. Indaratana, in the following year, to set up a school scholarship program through which patrons of Mahindarama could, through a donation of approximately RM182.50 or $60.00 USD per year, sponsor a child's annual education expenses (for example, books, clothing, writing materials, shoes, and so on).

Support for Ven. Indaratana's social service enterprises in Sri Lanka comes largely from the Chinese patrons of Mahindarama Temple in Penang, as well as other Chinese Buddhists across Peninsular Malaysia, whom—as I discussed above—were inclined to contribute to the temple's charity organizations. Alongside those local forms of support, Ven. Indaratana began receiving money from donors in other countries. In 2002, for instance, Ven. Indaratana established a non-profit branch of Amata Foundation in Japan, through which donations could be given to Amata in Malaysia or Sri Lanka. To understand how that branch came to be established, we have to go back several years to when Ven. Indaratana paid a visit to Japan at the invitation of a long-time Sri Lankan friend of his living there, Mr. Pala Madampe.

After Ven. Indaratana returned to Penang, a Japanese businessman by the name of Mr. Suzuki paid a visit to Mahindarama upon Mr. Madampe's urging. During Mr. Suzuki's visit to Malaysia, Ven. Indaratana began speaking to him, like he did to me, about his various social service enterprises. Impressed by the monk, Mr. Suzuki offered to help. Ven. Indaratana immediately discussed with him the need for securing a mobile medical unit for the Sri Lankan Amata clinic. Ven. Indaratana explained to Mr. Suzuki that if an ambulance could be gifted from Japan, it could be converted into a mobile unit that could provide medical care to poor

villagers unable to travel to the Amata clinic in Colombo. In response, Mr. Suzuki suggested that they set up a non-profit Amata Foundation in Japan through which such a donation could be gifted. With the foundation in place, Mr. Suzuki invited Ven. Indaratana to Japan and handed the ambulance over to him (Indaratana, interviewed on 14 July 2012; see also INDARATANA et. al. 2004, 80).

What was initially a personal visit to Japan paved the way for the establishment of trans-Asian welfare networks through which disparate Buddhist actors across Asia could be brought and held together by a common Buddhist identity and purpose (such as acting on the principles of loving kindness and compassion). With Ven. Indaratana and his Penang welfare organizations functioning as the network's center, the Mahindarama Temple soon became a modern social service *entrepôt* through which charitable donations could flow between Japan, Southeast Asia (including Thailand and Myanmar), and Sri Lanka. Those international aid networks played a part in the establishment of a second Amata branch in February 2004. Not forgetting his own institutional roots, Ven. Indaratana established the clinic at the temple where he first donned saffron robes: Purāṇa Rājamahāvihāra at Elgiriya (Matara District) in Sri Lanka. The clinic mirrored the work being done by Amata in Kelaniya; the mobile clinic was shared between the two Amata clinics in Sri Lanka to further widen the reach of the temples' services.

The Amata clinics in Sri Lanka were established to provide free medical aid to Sri Lanka's poor. On the days following the Indian Ocean tsunami, the clinics adopted a different role: through Amata and Mahindarama in Penang, which were linked to Amata Japan, the Amata branches at the Elgiriya and Kelaniya temples became distribution centers for aid sent from Penang to Colombo. Information gleaned during my conversations with those running the relief aid programs at Mahindarama as well as at the two Sri Lankan temples in Kuala Lumpur suggest that having institutions and people in place in Colombo and in the areas directly affected by the tsunami proved to be helpful in the efficient and proper distribution of aid. Moreover, given the status of Buddhist monastics in Sri Lanka, the presence of monks on the ground in Sri Lanka was particularly indispensible in ensuring that aid was distributed in an effective and timely manner.

Buddhist monks are generally regarded highly in South and Southeast Asia. In Sri Lanka, for instance, it is considered impolite for a non-monastic to sit higher than a monk; moreover, the vocabulary that is used in the presence of monastics and in reference to monastics is quite specialized, containing highly honorific and flourished words, including a specific second person pronoun (and its accompanying verbal imperative) that clearly mark the status of monastics as the highest in society (SAMUELS 2010, 117, note 26; see also SAMUELS 2007). Sri Lankan monks, moreover, sometimes use their social status and capital to get things done, whether helping a patron's son get into a prestigious school, soliciting donations, or cutting through red tape.

Given the social status of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka—a country in which Buddhism is recognized as the state religion (BOND 1988)—it is no wonder that Buddhist monks were able to play key roles as brokers and mediators in post-

tsunami Sri Lanka.[11] According to Ven. Indaratana, the monks associated with the temples in which the Amata clinics were located were able not only to procure rapid government clearance for the fourteen shipping containers, but also to have their contents distributed to those deemed most needy. As a monk who had extensive experience abroad (for example, Singapore, Japan, the United States, Thailand, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, and Australia) and was awarded honorary titles (for example, Paryatti Visaradha [one who has mastered the Buddha's teachings]) and degrees (such as a PhD from the University of Ruhunu), Ven. Indaratana was able to use his social status and state recognition to, in his words, "get things done."

My conversations with a patron from Buddhist Maha Vihara who was heavily involved in the relief efforts following the Indian Ocean tsunami echoed Ven. Indarantana's experiences. As the informant indicated to me in 2012, working with Ven. Vimala in Sri Lanka ensured that the shipping containers sent from the Kuala Lumpur temple cleared Sri Lankan customs rapidly. As a monk who carries the title of Chief Sangha Leader of usa and Canada, Ven. Vimala's prestige contributed to his ability to mobilize large webs of resources in Sri Lanka. The networks in Sri Lanka, including the Sri Lankan Army, provided Ven. Vimala access to all of the affected areas in Sri Lanka, including the Eastern provinces, which were, at the time, affected by the ongoing civil war.

Closely related to the monks' abilities to mobilize aid in Sri Lanka are the recent concerns about non-Buddhist charity organizations there. Sri Lankan Buddhists have been voicing their concerns about Christian charity organizations for a number of years, believing that the ultimate motives behind aid work sponsored by Christian organizations is religious conversion. This belief has led to several attempts at passing anti-conversion bills in parliament, though none have yet become law (Mahadev 2014; Harris 2013; Samuels 2010; Wanigaratne 1997; Hertzberg 2015).

Such suspicions were behind the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress's investigation into whether post-tsunami aid workers were trying to convert Buddhists. They found, for instance, not only that "conversion was one of the biggest issues after the tsunami" but also that "Buddhists had to become involved in social action to counter it" (Harris 2013, 4, 6). While the Sri Lankan head monks and aid workers I spoke with in Malaysia insisted that their aid was distributed to the needy irrespective of ethnicity and religious affiliation, and that aid also went to the construction of Buddhist temples, mosques, churches, and Hindu temples, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the Malaysian monks' ability to ship and distribute goods in Sri Lanka with little hindrance was partially the result of the reservations and attitudes expressed toward Christian ngos in Sri Lanka.

In addition to medical supplies, clothing, food, and other goods, the Mahindarama Temple in Penang, and the two Sri Lankan temples in Kuala Lumpur, raised money that was used in a variety of building projects. Some of the money that Ven. Indaratana raised, for instance, was used to build, from the ground up, an entire village—referred to as the "tsunami village"—on a plot of land donated by the

Sri Lankan government. The village, now complete, consists of fifty single-family detached homes, each with a garden plot so their residents can grow their own vegetables; a community hall where the residents can celebrate birthdays, funerals, and other events; and a Buddhist Sunday school for the children.[12] In addition, Ven. Indaratana arranged for monks living nearby the village to help the residents fulfill their religious needs at no charge. While there are other, perhaps more ambitious, examples of village construction in post-tsunami Sri Lanka—such as the scheme built in Hambantota that consisted of one hundred and fifty houses and was partially financed through the Red Cross of Singapore[13]—Ven. Indaratana's tsunami village ended up costing a substantial USD $350,000.

Ties that bind: pilgrimage and international aid

Most foreign monks who move to new countries do not completely break ties with their countries of origin. Sri Lankan monks who moved to Malaysia are no exception. Many Sri Lankan monks in Malaysia travel to Sri Lanka at least once a year; head monks generally travel multiple times. While some of the visits are personal (for example, seeing family members, teachers, and friends), others are more public events such as when monks receive recognition from the Sri Lankan government or their own monastic chapter, as well as when they share Buddhist artifacts (such as relics or images of the Buddha) between the two countries.[14]

On some of their trips to Sri Lanka, head monks may be accompanied by their temple patrons. Such excursions usually include pilgrimages to key Buddhist archaeological sites (for example, Aluvihara, Anuradhapura, Pollonaruwa, the Temple of the Tooth, and so on) as well as visits to the head monks' natal villages, branch institutions, and training temples. What I have found interesting about such excursions is the role that they may play in establishing cultural and emotional ties between the visitors and specific communities of Buddhists in Sri Lanka; these ties may, in turn, help in the increase and distribution of aid. To better understand how such pilgrimages affect social welfare work, I will focus on two temporary ordination events that Ven. Indaratana organized in 2011 and 2012.

Since the 1970s, Sri Lankan monks in Malaysia have been holding temporary ordination ceremonies in which lay people could learn more about Buddhism and monastic life by becoming Buddhist monastics for a week or two. While temporary ordinations were generally held at the Sri Lankan temples in Malaysia, the ones that Ven. Indaratana held in 2011 and 2012 were quite different. From 27 May to 7 June 2011, for instance, Ven. Indaratana organized the first temporary ordination of Chinese Malaysians in Sri Lanka.[15] The program—which included regular lectures on Buddhism, morning meditation (both sitting and walking), Buddhist chanting and worship rituals, and collecting food through alms-rounds—was conducted by a group of monks, both local and from Malaysia. These "temple" activities, which actually took place in the comfort of upscale hotels rather than temples, were complemented by pilgrimages to various religious sites in the ancient capitals of Polonnaruva, Anuradhapura, and Kandy as well as the cave temples at

Dambulla. In 2011, sixty people attended the program (twenty men and forty women). Their ages ranged from twelve to seventy; the majority hailed from Penang.

Ven. Indaratana organized a second temporary ordination ritual in Sri Lanka on 27 May the following year. This was held at the Tree of Life Hotel, just outside of Kandy. Eighty-two participants, all ethnic Chinese, attended. The majority came from Penang; several others were from Australia, Hong Kong, and Japan. Similar to the previous year, the participants studied Buddhism, practiced meditation led by a monk from Kanduboda Meditation Centre outside of Colombo, chanted Pali texts, performed worship rituals, went on alms rounds, and visited several ancient temples in the area. The participants were also invited to a lunch hosted by the Sri Lankan President at the time, Mahinda Rajapakse. Although Mr. Rajapakse was unable to attend the alms-giving himself, his wife and several chief ministers were present.

What I found quite fascinating about the temporary ordination programs is how they contributed to Ven. Indaratana's social welfare programs in Sri Lanka.[16] Alongside learning about such Buddhist concepts as equanimity and practicing loving kindness meditation (*metta bhavana*) in a retreat setting, the participants of the ten-day retreat were able to put their theoretical understanding into further practice. In addition to donating school supplies to poor children through local temple networks, several of those who participated in the ten-day program in 2011 gave money to support Ven. Indaratana's social work in Sri Lanka, including approximately LKR 650,000 (RMI6,000 or USD$4500) to the Amata clinics alone. Similarly, the temporary ordination ritual that took place in 2012 resulted in sizeable donations to support various social enterprises in Sri Lanka: Amata free medical clinic received LKRI00,000; Amata elderly home, which was completed in the years following the temporary ordination event, received money as well. Finally, amounts of material aid equivalent to LKRI00,000, including food supplies, were donated to the government's army camp hospital for injured soldiers.

While donating to an army hospital might not have been a central concern of the participants in the temporary ordination program in 2012, the fact that a significant sum of money was given to such a cause highlights the importance that "brokerage" plays in the process of development. As MOSSE and LEWIS point out, "brokerage is required by the co-existence of different rationalities, interests, and meanings, so as to produce order, legitimacy, and 'success' and to maintain fund flows" (2006, 16). By acting as brokers, then, monks such as Ven. Indaratana, are able to provide meaning to different actors for particular projects and to accomplish specific goals.

It is worth noting that even though the donations received from the temporary ordination programs were not used for relief related to a specific natural disaster, they indirectly contributed to potential future relief programs by increasing the size of the coffers at the Amata clinics as well as by expanding the reach of Ven. Indaratana's aid networks. In other words, just as Ven. Indaratana's ties with Japan played both an indirect and direct role in relief efforts following the Indian Ocean tsunami, it is not difficult to imagine that the ties he established with the citizens of Australia, Hong Kong, and Japan who took part in the 2012 temporary ordination

ritual would become a resource into which Ven. Indaratana and the Sri Lankan state could tap in the event of another disaster.

CONCLUSION: BUDDHIST DISASTER RELIEF

Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhist temples in Malaysia have only recently begun actively engaging in international disaster relief. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami proved a watershed for temples such as Mahindarama in providing the impetus for remarkable communal and collective efforts to engage in disaster relief. Opposing an essentialist interpretation that would locate Mahindarama as having some imagined "natural" proclivity for relief and charitable activities, I have argued that religious relief work must be historicized. It is necessary to attend to the ways in which particular models and understandings of relief evolve as well as to trace the dynamic interactions through which particular forms of ethical action became imaginable and practicable.

The disaster relief activities of Mahindarama Temple emerged out of the efforts of a number of key figures and as a consequence of a certain constellation of doctrinal, economic, social, and political concerns. Importantly, Mahindarama's innovative practice of disaster relief was closely related with the existing, yet also relatively recent, priority given to social welfare by the temple and its patrons. The temple's transnational relief work drew directly on this earlier domestic precedent such that, as I have argued, the two activities—and their conjoined evolution—must be analyzed together. In considering the temple's involvement in disaster relief, three key themes emerge which broaden and nuance our understandings of the ways in which religion and disaster relief intersect. Each concerns what I have called the politics of religion.

First, while it is clear that the temple's relief work came out of, and was legitimated by, traditions of Buddhist doctrine and practice, these traditions themselves were actively being renegotiated by the monks and the temple's patrons through what MOSSE and LEWIS refer to as a "process of translation" (2006, 13).[17] That is, the very understanding of what counts as religious work remains in flux. The changing sense of what counts as Buddhist practice both shape the possibilities open to the temple for engaging in disaster relief work and are also (re)shaped by the temple's involvement in disaster relief activities.

Mahindarama's disaster relief and social welfare work evolved out of a long tradition of charitable activity undertaken by *kongsi*s during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The innovation of the temple was to greatly expand the range of potential recipients by referencing Buddhist qualities such as compassion, loving kindness, and equanimity. Notable, of course, is that while this move is by no means unique within contemporary Buddhism, it is nevertheless the case that these same doctrinal precepts do not always result in such broad-ranging engagements in social welfare and relief. Certainly, my previous research on Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka provided me with a comparative series of examples in which social welfare and relief work was by no means such a dominant feature of temple life.

But the innovation of including relief and social welfare work within the ambit of temple practice concerned more than just the kinds of activities that were undertaken by the temple. In many ways the welfare projects carried out by Mahindarama and the other Sri Lankan temples in Malaysia do not seek to draw attention to their Buddhist identity. In fact, the public performance of identifiably Buddhist practices is frequently muted or relegated to the background. For example, when I joined a group from the Sri Lankan Buddhist Temple in Kuala Lumpur on one of their free mobile medical care events, I was surprised at the complete absence of Buddhist rituals and symbols. In contrast to my experience of numerous other Buddhist events and practices in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, the clinic's activities did not begin with chanting or worship practices. As a result, most of the recipients of this medical aid did not even seem aware of the mobile clinic's association with a Buddhist temple. Here, as in the relief work itself, there were concerted attempts to distance the relief efforts from practices that would appear "too Buddhist."

This approach to downplaying Buddhist ritual and practice could be interpreted as a direct outcome of the doctrinal emphases of all three head monks—Ven. Indaratana, Ven. Saranankara, and Ven. Dhammaratana—who each stressed to their patrons the ways in which "material" and "spiritual" concerns depended on each other. All three monks discussed with me how important they thought it was to care for a person's physical needs, and how satisfying those basic needs was a necessary precondition for spiritual development. Accordingly, Ven. Indaratana stated to me that the first thing that people need is health, even before they need teachings or before they come to the temple to undertake ritual practice. Such an emphasis directly shaped the priority given to social welfare and relief activities within these temples. This maneuver was not, however, a matter of a secular de-Buddhisation. Indeed, despite the absence of Buddhist symbols or rituals, both the monks and the volunteers themselves saw Buddhism and charity as intimately connected. Relief and charity had come to be seen as particular kinds of religious work. The politics of religion in this instance concerns this process of shifting understandings of what, exactly, counted as religious.

These developments, and this is the second point, did not take place in a political vacuum. The politics of religious relations in the Malaysian context is of crucial importance. The fraught nature of Malaysian intercommunal relations is such that key social fractures take place along ethnic and religious lines. These divisions have arisen due to a range of reasons that include a history of conflictual events (such as the 1969 ethnic riots) and the effects of government policy.

Malaysian race and religious politics was crucial for the origins and growth of Mahindarama's disaster relief work. The dynamic interaction of Malaysian Buddhists in Penang with other groups informed developments in temple doctrine, organisation, and public social action. The temple's Buddhist relief was not only an attempt to cultivate a more clearly delineated identity in response to politically-dominant Muslim Malay movements, but it was also an attempt to outflank the perceived threat of incursions from Christian churches which have long engaged in a wide array of social service activities in Malaysia. With the perceived threat

of Christianity, Buddhist monks and key lay figures decided that they needed to be more proactive in presenting their religion as one that is not removed from society and the concerns of everyday, ordinary people. The examples provided by Christian charities provided some of the models and patterns of service that were adopted and adapted for temple purposes. By emulating the charity work done at Christian churches and organizations, Buddhists sought to make their tradition more appealing and, in the process, curtail the temptation for conversion to Christianity among Buddhists.

Moreover, Buddhist relief provided an opportunity for Chinese Malaysians to enhance their social status and prestige not only among co-religionists but also within the wider Malaysian public. The performance of Buddhist relief, furthermore, enables practitioners and followers to display Buddhism in a particular light to Malaysian others. The public displays of Buddhist generosity after the Indian Ocean tsunami, as noted in my introduction, can therefore be seen as a means of communication with and to multicultural Malaysian society. While, as the example of the mobile clinic highlighted above, this performance was not always seen by others as definitively Buddhist; nevertheless, the temples' social welfare and relief work always worked in dynamic relation with this wider political context.

The third key theme is the importance of relational dynamics operating *within* religious communities. In the case of Mahindarama, a central dynamic shaping relief and welfare work was the relationship between the monastic leadership and their lay constituencies. Mahindarama Temple was founded on a particular set of relationships, actively cultivated by all parties, between Sinhalese monks and a thoroughly multicultural temple constituency which included Sri Lankan, Indian, Japanese, and Chinese patrons, all of whom were drawn to the temple for a variety of reasons. The relationship between the monks and the laity, and the different roles that each carried out in the relief work, was distinctively Buddhist in the ways in which authority and transnational networking were practiced.

The possibility of active involvement of the temple in charity and disaster relief was directly dependent on Mahindarama Temple attracting a sufficiently large pool of temple patrons who were willing to be involved through volunteering their time and gifting donations. A key dynamic in this case was the presence of monks who cultivated active participation and who legitimated innovative practices. Buddhist monks tend to be highly regarded within Buddhist communities, although of course some monks gain greater prestige and respect than others. This social authority can be utilized in a range of forms and for a diverse set of purposes, and can frequently extend well beyond the temple itself. Some monks—particularly those who are seen by their followers as having a particularly compelling magnetism[18]—are particularly capable of translating their charisma into considerable social power. This was certainly the case with Ven. Indaratana and his predecessors at Mahindarama. Importantly, this charisma is not constrained to local spaces, but rather it can be deployed along Buddhist networks and thereby extend transnationally.

In terms of the disaster relief operations, the monks' social status and power enabled them to play key roles as mediators and brokers. By virtue of their high

social status, the Buddhist monks based in Malaysia were able to influence government policy and practice in Sri Lanka (Jordt 2007). The monks were able to obtain government clearance for donations even before the shipments arrived, as well as use government (including the military) infrastructure to distribute aid more efficiently. They were able to move across large parts of Sri Lanka as well as work with and alongside the government and military in collecting and distributing aid. This authority was further enhanced in the months following the tsunami when Christian-based charities and foreign nongovernment aid organizations became suspect, once again, of unethical religious conversions and of promoting foreign interests (Mahadev 2014; Harris 2013; Samuels 2010; Wanigaratne 1997; Hertzberg 2015). In this context of heightened suspicion of the religious other, Buddhist authorities in Sri Lanka sought to further facilitate and expedite Buddhist channels of relief. The response of these Buddhist temples to the tsunami disaster took place on the back of monastic social power. The politics of religion is therefore also a matter of how Buddhist communities configure their internal political relationships.

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Notes

1. The term "*dhamma*" or "dharma" refers to the teachings of the Buddha. A "Dhamma-farer" is a term used to denote practitioners of Buddhism.

2. This same request was made at the other two Sri Lankan temples in Kuala Lumpur as well as at other Sri Lankan temples outside Malaysia and Sri Lanka (see, for instance, Harris 2013, 17).

3. From the original trust deed of the temple signed on 21 October 1922; reproduced in Indaratana et al. (2004, 27).

4. For all interviewees personal names are used with permission.

5. Although the growth of Chinese schools in Malaysia as well as the number of Chinese-speaking Malaysians during the past several decades has diminished the role of language in determining temple affiliation, most English-speaking Chinese still tend to patronize Burmese and Sinhalese Theravada temples where English is more widely spoken.

6. After spending twelve years at the temple, Ven. Indaratana spent time in Singapore, the United States, and Sri Lanka before returning to Mahindarama and taking on the role of the temple's sixth chief incumbent. While living in Singapore, Ven. Indaratana was also appointed the chief incumbent of a temple in Galapata, Sri Lanka.

7. This will be discussed further in the following section.

8. In 2000, the temple's clinic moved to larger premises to accommodate the growing number of patients.

9. Personal conversation with Benny Liow, 10 July 2011, Kuala Lumpur.

10. The international Tzi Chi organization, including its roots in Malaysia, is the focus of Huang's study (Huang 2009)

11. See Mosse and Lewis (2006) for a discussion of the roles of brokers and mediators in development work more generally.

12. For a comparative example of village reconstruction, see Simpson's (2014) rich ethnographic analysis of relief in Gujarat, India.

13. See Harris (2013, 17) for two examples of other tsunami villages, including the one in Hambantota.

14. In 2013, for instance, Ven. Indaratana traveled to Sri Lanka to procure relics from Galagoda Purana Temple for a pagoda in Penang. See https://lspeng1951.wordpress.com/tag/chief-monk-of-mahindarama-buddhist-temple/ (accessed 3 March 2014).

15. Although this was the first temporary ordination ceremony that was organized in Malaysia and held in Sri Lanka, this is not the first temporary ordination held abroad. In 2009, Ven. Mahinda, a Chinese Malaysian Theravada Buddhist monk trained under Ven. K. Sri Dhammananda, conducted a temporary ordination ritual at various Buddhist holy sites in India and Nepal (personal communication, Ven. Mahinda, 1 July 2009, Kuala Lumpur).

16. Similarly, when Ven. Saranankara, Chief Incumbent of the Sri Lankan Buddhist Temple in Kuala Lumpur, takes his patrons to Sri Lanka for pilgrimage, he reserves at least one day for charity work (personal communication, 14 July 2012, Kuala Lumpur).

17. According to Mosse and Lewis's study on development work (2006, 13), development projects or, in our case, disaster relief efforts, "become real through the work of generating and translating interests" through which disparate actors' interests and visions become mutually-shared.

18. See also Huang's (2009) discussion of the importance of charismatic leadership for Taiwan's Buddhist Relief Tzu Chi Foundation.

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