

CHILDREN WHO SPEAK OF MEMORIES OF A PREVIOUS LIFE AS A BUDDHIST MONK: THREE NEW CASES

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ABSTRACT

In Mahayana Buddhism—especially in Tibetan Buddhism—some children who are chosen to be lamas are considered monks reborn. No such tradition exists in the Theravada Buddhism of Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand, but occasionally a child may appear who claims to have been a monk in a previous life. This report describes an investigation of three cases of children in Sri Lanka who at an early age claimed to remember a life as a Buddhist monk and showed monk-like behavioural traits. In two cases their statements regarding the previous life were recorded before attempts were made to verify them. In two cases a deceased monk was identified who seemed to match their statements about a previous life. The strength and weakness of each case is examined and some interpretations are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In several countries of Asia, as well as in other parts of the world, children can be found who at the age of two to four years start to speak of past events which they or persons around them believe to arise from memories of a previous life. Usually these alleged memories fade away after a few years and seem in most cases to disappear in the early years of primary school (Cook et al., 1983; Stevenson, 1987). In the majority of these cases the child speaks of a life that ended with a violent death, usually through some accident. Most of these children speak of a previous life that they claim to have lived a few years before their present birth. They almost never report having lived in earlier centuries and rarely in foreign countries.

A fairly large number of such cases have been found and some of them have been meticulously investigated, particularly by Stevenson (1975, 1977, 1987, 1997a, 1997b), Mills (Mills, 1989; Mills, Haraldsson & Keil, 1994), Pasricha (1990), Keil (1991), and the authors of the present paper (Haraldsson, 1991, 1995; Stevenson & Samararatne, 1988; Cook et al., 1983). The first author (E.H.) has investigated 60 cases in Sri Lanka in the last nine years with the assistance of the second author (G.S.) and other Sri Lankan associates. G.S. has investigated a large number of cases since the early sixties, in association with Ian Stevenson and Francis Story (1975), and on his own. Two authors have raised strong criticism of the investigations of cases involving alleged memories of previous lives (Edwards, 1996; Wilson, 1981). Regretfully, neither of them has had direct exposure to such cases.

The focus of these investigations has been to ascertain what statements the child has been making by interviewing the child and relatives who live with and daily observe the child, as well as other independent witnesses. Secondly, every effort has been made to search for and find a deceased person whose life seems to correspond—to a greater or lesser degree—to the statements made by the child. When such a person is found (or under consideration as a match) we examine the correctness of each of the child's statements for that person. (For details on the methodology, see Haraldsson, 1991; Stevenson, 1975, 1987).

In about two-thirds of the cases in Sri Lanka it has not been possible to trace a person who fits the description made by the child. We call such cases 'unsolved'. There may be several reasons for this; among them, the statements were too general or too few, or they were found to be incorrect. (For a detailed discussion of unsolved cases, see Cook et al., 1983.) However, in about one-third of the cases some resemblance is found to a person who actually lived. Among these, a fair number show a rather striking correspondence between a child's statements about a previous life and the facts in the life of a particular person who has died.

Sri Lanka is a multi-religious society. Buddhism is the predominant religion, accepted by two-thirds of the population. There are also Hindus (16%), Muslims (8%), and Christians (7%). Cases of the reincarnation type have been found in all these religious communities (Haraldsson, 1991; Stevenson, 1977).

Among the cases of children in Sri Lanka who at an early age speak persistently of another life, we have found three young boys who claim to have been Buddhist monks in the previous life. What makes these three cases particularly interesting is not only the alleged memories but also the behavioural features that the children display. Each child shows behaviour that is considered appropriate and even ideal for monks. At the age of two to three years they began to show an active keen interest in Buddhism. They aspired to live like Buddhist monks, their behaviour seemed to correspond to these aspirations and they often expressed a desire eventually to join a Buddhist order. Such behaviour sometimes caused considerable concern and distress to their parents. In two of the three cases the child was born of Buddhist parents, in one of Roman Catholic Christians.

Reincarnation and Previous-Life Memories in Buddhism

The concept of reincarnation is an important doctrine in Buddhism, both in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Monasticism plays an important role in both traditions. In Theravada as well as in Tibetan (Mahayana) Buddhism children may enter monastic orders at a relatively early age; in Sri Lanka, for example, at the age of 8–10 years, and in the Tibetan orders even earlier.

In the ancient Pali scriptures of Theravada Buddhism which were first recorded in writing in the first century B.C., there are references to a special faculty or knowledge involving the memory of previous lives, through which it is possible directly to verify in one's personal experience the truth of reincarnation and karma (Premasiri, 1995). It is stated that this faculty can be obtained through special training or cultivation of the mind. However, the Pali canon also mentions instances of "scepticism about the Buddhist claim to have super-normal faculties of knowing in general and also the claim that these faculties can be used to verify the truth of rebirth and karma" (ibid, p.8). This sceptical view has generally been rejected throughout the history of Theravada Buddhism.

In the famous, voluminous 5th century *Visuddhimagga* (Buddhagosa, 1991) a special chapter deals with how this faculty of previous-life memories can be developed. In this text no mention is made of spontaneous recall of previous lives, nor of the possibility that children may have such recollections.

Monastic Orders and Cases of the Reincarnation Type in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism

In Mahayana Buddhism many children are admitted into monastic orders. Some of them are considered monks reborn (called tulkus) whereas the majority are not. The tulkus usually rise in time to leading positions within the monastic orders, and in some cases they are 'discovered' as specific reborn personalities, such as in the case of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. There is rather scanty information about the methods used by the monks to determine whether a boy has been a monk in a previous life or not, but there are some interesting descriptions by Tibetan lamas and scholars of Tibetan culture that throw some light on this process (Gould, 1959; Harrer, 1953; Norbu & Turnbull, 1969; Pallis, 1961; Trungpa & Roberts, 1966).

Sometimes a dying lama may give intimations about the manner of his rebirth; oracles may be consulted (e.g. in trance the oracle may give a clue as to the direction in which to search); leading monks may experience omens or have visions; and monks (sometimes in disguise) are sent on searching expeditions with objects that belonged to the deceased lama. The monks then observe whether a potential tulku selects the objects of the deceased lama from a pool of other similar objects. Similarities of physical features may also be taken into account.

Gould (1957) thus describes the search for the present Dalai Lama: "At Jeykundo the party under Kyitsang Tulku received news of three remarkable boys in the direction of Amdo. The Tibetan Government had provided each of the search parties with a number of articles which had belonged to the thirteenth Dalai Lama, and with exact copies. It was anticipated, as had happened at the discovery of former Dalai Lamas, that the genuine reincarnation would pick out the things which had belonged to his predecessor and would show other signs of superhuman intelligence, and that no other child would succeed in these tests. And so it proved. Of the three boys, one was found to have died and the second failed to display any interest in the things that had belonged to the late Dalai Lama and ran away crying. But Kyitsang Tulku, on approaching the home of the third, felt a great uplifting of heart. He found himself in surroundings already familiar from the description that the Regent had given of his vision of the lake. When Kyitsang entered, the child at once went up to him, said 'Lama, Lama', and seized his necklace, which had belonged to the Dalai Lama" (Gould, 1957, p.214). It is added that this child made further correct choices.

Norbu and Turnbull (1969, p.229) write: "Some may go to investigate claims or rumours of wonder children, others may concentrate on an area which various oracles and omens have indicated as being likely."

Some cases in Tibetan Buddhism have features that have some resemblance to the Sri Lankan cases to be reported in this paper but these seem to be few. Norbu and Turnbull (1969, p.228) write: "Sometimes a boy is born with such unmistakable signs of greatness that word reaches the authorities who immediately send delegates to investigate the claim." Of still greater interest is the following: "It has been known for boys to come forward on their own and demand to be returned to their monastery and recognized" (*ibid.*, p.228). It

should be added that among exiled Tibetans there have been disputes about the genuineness of the claims about tulkus and scepticism expressed about their alleged previous identities.

In the Theravada Buddhism of Sri Lanka, Burma (Myannar), and Thailand there is no tradition of selecting child novices through alleged indications that they have been monks in a previous life. Occasionally, however—very rarely in fact—children may appear among Theravada Buddhists who at the age of two to four speak of memories of having been a monk in a previous life, or are interpreted to possess such memories. They express a desire to become a monk again. Their alleged memories and monk-specific behaviour and inclinations may lead them into monastic orders. We present a report on three cases of children that we have found and who claim to have been monks in a previous life.

THE CASE OF DUMINDA BANDARA RATNAYAKE

When Duminda Bandara Ratnayake was about three years old he started to speak about a life as a chief-monk at the Asgiriya monastery in Kandy and often expressed his wish to visit that temple. The Asgiriya monastery is one of the largest monasteries in Sri Lanka, and its monks share with the Malvatta monastery the privilege of guarding the Temple of the Tooth, one of the foremost places of pilgrimage in Theravada Buddhism (Seneviratne, 1978).

Duminda was born on June 16, 1984, of Sinhalese Buddhist parents. He was the second of three sons. He lived with his mother at the farm of her parents, who are small landowners in Thundeniya, a mountainous rural area some 16 miles by road from Kandy.

Duminda's Statements and Behavioural Traits

Table 1

Statements Made by Duminda About his Previous Life

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|---|---|
| 1 | He had been a senior monk (nayake-hamduruvo, loku-hamduruvo, lokusadhu) at Asgiriya temple. |
| 2 | Had pain in chest and fell, was brought to a hospital and died (used the word <i>apawathwuna</i> , which is only used for the death of a monk). |
| 3 | Had owned a red car. |
| 4 | Had been teaching the apprentice monks. |
| 5 | Had an elephant. |
| 6 | Had friends in the Malvatta Temple and used to visit it. |
| 7 | Longed for his money-bag which he had in Asgiriya. |
| 8 | Longed for his radio in Asgiriya. |
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In September 1988 we learnt about the case and interviewed the principal witnesses to the boy's statements; his mother, grandfather and grandmother. They all had heard him say that he had lived in the Asgiriya monastery, had owned a red car, had taught other monks, had suffered a sudden pain in his chest, fallen on the floor and been brought by some monks to a hospital and

died. Duminda mentioned no personal name. His statements are listed in Table 1.

Duminda showed some behavioural features unusual for a boy of his age. He wanted to carry his clothes in the fashion of a monk, wanted to be called 'Podi Sadhu' (little monk), went every morning and evening to a chapel (vihara) close to his house, visited the temple regularly, plucked flowers to bring there and placed them down in the typical Buddhist fashion. Cleanliness was very important to him, he did not want to play with other children, and wanted to become a monk and to wear a monk's robe, which his mother only seldom allowed him to do. He liked to recite stanzas (religious statements, usually short) in the way that monks do. He recited these in Pali, which is the ancient language of Sinhalese Buddhism, used and learnt by monks only.

Table 2

Some of Duminda's Behavioural Traits

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- 1 Often talks about wanting to go to the Asgiriya temple.
 - 2 Expresses early a wish to visit the local temple in Thundeniya.
 - 3 Wants to visit the Malvatta temple.
 - 4 Wears and treats his clothes like a monk.
 - 5 Likes and shows great cleanliness.
 - 6 Goes to vihara (place of worship) every morning and evening.
 - 7 Requests a monk's robe and fan.
 - 8 Wants to wear a monk's robe (only seldom allowed).
 - 9 Wants his family to call him 'podu sadhu' (little monk).
 - 10 Wants to become a monk.
 - 11 Tried to build a vihara (place of worship) at home in the fashion that children build toys, e.g. houses.
 - 12 Plucks flowers and brings to vihara 2-3 times a day on Poya-day (Buddhist monthly holiday) as monks do.
 - 13 Does not like wrong-doings of anyone and killing of insects.
 - 14 Knows a few stanzas in Pali and recites them holding the fan in front of his face as monks do.
 - 15 Once when his mother wanted to help wash his hands he told her "You should not touch my hands" (as women are not supposed to touch a monk's hands).
 - 16 When brought to Asgiriya Temple, he did not want to sit down until given a white cloth to sit on (as is the tradition for monks).
 - 17 Does not like to play with other children.
 - 18 Displays calmness, serenity and detachment rarely found in children of this age.
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Duminda's mother sought advice from the Ven. Iriyagama Jinorasa, a monk residing in a nearby temple. The monk tried to question Duminda, who did not answer. Perhaps he was shy. He asked for a monk's fan and the monk gave him one. He took the fan, held it in the typical fashion in front of his face and recited one of the Buddhist stanzas. On a later visit to the monk, the boy told him that he had been a monk in the Asgiriya Monastery, that he wanted to see the monastery and his car, and that he had had a room in the monastery with

some belongings. This is about all that the monk learnt from this boy who behaved so differently from other boys. When Duminda visited the nearby temple he would go straight to the stupa to worship, and seemed to be very religiously oriented. As we questioned Ven. Jinorasa, he remarked that he did not believe that the boy's parents could have taught him this behaviour. In the end the monk advised Duminda's mother to take her son to the Asgiriya monastery.

In October 1987 Duminda was taken to Asgiriya by his mother and grandparents. A journalist from the newspaper *Island* learnt about the case and was present during Duminda's visit. The boy's mother had ambivalent feelings about the visit as she feared that the boy might later leave her to become a monk.

In November 1989 we visited Duminda's family again, when he was five years and four months old. Duminda's mother reported the same statements from two years earlier. The only new statement the boy had made came up when the death of the mahanayaka (chief-monk) of the Malvatta Monastery had been recently announced over the radio.

Spontaneously the boy said that he had known him. His mother further told us that before the boy had started to talk about a previous life he had wanted to carry a piece of cloth around his shoulder as monks carry their robes. He then asked for a robe and a monk's fan to be used as toys. Once when she had helped him wash his hands, he made the remark that she should not touch his hands (women are not supposed to touch a monk's hands). He had also protested about her calling him 'son'; he wanted to be called 'podi sadhu'. At first when he was brought to pre-school he also protested and did not want to go there because some girls had touched him.

Duminda's maternal grandfather, A. H. Ratnayake, had listened to our interview with his mother. When we had finished that interview and she had left to prepare some refreshments, he told us that two items had not been reported. Duminda's most frequent statements had been that he had lived in Asgiriya, had been a teacher (preacher), and that he missed his red car, and—this was new—that he missed his money bag and radio.

When we asked Duminda's mother about the money bag and the radio, she confirmed that he had mentioned them but was somewhat embarrassed, because these items are not considered appropriate for a monk to have.

When we again visited the family in June 1990 not much had changed. Duminda was adjusting well to school, and his calm detachment and dignity were evident when we compared his behaviour with that of his brothers, who, like normal healthy boys, would never be quiet or still for long.

As far as we could ascertain from Duminda's family there existed no ties of any kind between any member of the family and the Asgiriya monastery. None of them had visited the monastery until they took the boy there, and the name Asgiriya had never come up at his home as far as they could remember. The family had no relative or neighbor who was a monk.

Even before the visit to Asgiriya the family had apparently become convinced that the boy had in fact been a monk at Asgiriya. They found their conviction further strengthened during that visit. This visit is of less importance in our investigation than Duminda's statements because it proved difficult to reliably reconstruct what had taken place. Duminda's statements are more important to us because he repeatedly uttered them over a period of more than two years.

The Search for a Personality Matching Duminda's Statements

Oliver D. Silva, the journalist from *Island* who first reported on the case, quickly concluded that the boy had been referring to Ven. Ratanapala, a senior monk who had died of a heart attack in 1975 in Galatera outside of Asgiriya. We learnt from three monks who had known him that Ven. Ratanapala had not owned a car or an elephant, had no personal income (hence no money bag), did not preach (hence did not use the fan), had no connection with the Malvatta monastery, and had been known for his interest in politics. Thus he was excluded as a candidate whose life might correspond to Duminda's statements.

If Duminda's statements did in fact refer to a certain monk who had lived in Asgiriya, answers to the following questions would seem pertinent in attempting to distinguish him from other candidate monks: Which monks had income from the temple (money bag), had connections with the Malvatta monastery and the Temple of the Tooth, had frequent occasions to visit these places and had friends there? Which monks had preached sermons and exhorted laymen to recite the Buddhist precepts, thus using a monk's fan? Which monks travelled and often used a red car? Which monks had a heart condition, fell down and died in a hospital? Which monks owned a radio? Which monks owned an elephant?

Furthermore, it seemed likely that the monk we sought had lived many years in the Sangha (the Buddhist clergy) since he had been a senior monk, had not been a vegetarian (Duminda did not reject non-vegetarian food at home), had not been a 'meditating' monk (Duminda's emphasis was on ceremonies and behaviour), and had been virtuous and strictly obeyed the rules.

Duminda had clearly stated that he had been a senior monk though he never explicitly mentioned the title 'mahanayaka'. We independently asked his mother, grandmother and grandfather about which Sinhalese word Duminda had used to describe his position. They agreed that he had referred to himself as 'nayaka-hamduruvo' meaning chief-monk, and less frequently 'loku-sadu' or 'loku hamduruvo' meaning 'big' monk. The red car and the money bag also indicated either a senior monk who had died quite recently, or a mahanayaka (chief-monk) of Asgiriya who had lived not earlier than right after the first World War. The Asgiriya monastery has only one mahanayaka, and he is elected by the monks. Not until the twenties had a mahanayaka owned a car, and only in the eighties had other monks than mahanayakas owned cars. The same can be said about possessing money bags; now a few of them may have some personal income but that is quite a recent development.

After detailed and careful inquiries we learnt from various monks in Asgiriya that no monk who had died in the seventies or eighties seemed to match the statements made by Duminda. His description therefore could only fit a previous mahanayaka, if anyone at all.

From an 83-year-old senior monk in Asgiriya, Ven. Thoradeniya Piyaratana, we obtained a list of all the mahanayakas in Asgiriya from the beginning of the 1920s (when the first car came to Asgiriya) to 1975, when the present mahanayaka, Ven. Gunaratna Chandananda, took office. This list is in Table

3 with the principal statements made by Duminda, and how each of them fits each mahanayaka. We gathered this information from various monks in Asgiriya during visits in 1988 and 1989 but mainly from Ven. Thoradeniya Piyaratana, who knew no details about Duminda's statements.

Table 3

List of Abbots of Asgiriya Temple from 1921 to 1975

Name	Years	Car	Cause of death	Radio	Preached	Elephant
Gunnepana	1921-29	red/brownish	sudden heart attack	gramophone	frequently	had one?
Mullegama	1929-47	no car	paralysis	no radio	famous for it	none
Yatawatte	1947-66	no car	paralysis	no radio	no preaching	had one
Udugama	1966-70	uncertain	old age	no radio	no preaching	none
Godmunne	1970-75	white Mercedes	sudden heart attack	no radio	no preaching	none

Duminda claimed to have owned a red car. In Table 3, we see that only two mahanayakas had owned cars. Ven. Godmunne, who died in 1975, owned a white Mercedes car. Ven. Gunnepana Saranankara, who had died in 1929, owned a car. In 1988 we interviewed independently two old monks who recognized Ven. Gunnepana in a group-photo to be described below. According to the Ven. Kappitivalana Sumangala, then aged 82 (now deceased), Ven. Gunnepana Saranankara had owned a car. When we asked if he could remember its colour, the monk said brownish. The same day we independently met for the first time with Ven. Thoradeniya Piyaratana, who also recognized Gunnepana Saranankara in the same group photo. He remembered the colour of his car as red or brownish.

In 1990 we learnt through the Ven. Molagoda Dharmaratana, who had become a resident monk in the village of Gunnepana, that an old man, Mr Sedaraman (born in 1914), had known Mahanayaka Gunnepana Saranankara since he was 12 years of age as he had lived in the village of Gunnepana. He and his father used to drum at festivals for Mahanayaka Gunnepana Saranankara. Mr Sedaraman told us that all these years when he knew Gunnepana he had owned a red car with a folding roof.¹ In his red car he had often visited his home village Gunnepana where he was born and where he had previously lived in the local monastery. Conclusion: only one mahanayaka, Gunnepana Saranankara, had owned a red (or brownish) car.

Two of the mahanayakas, Gunnepana and Godmunne, had died from heart attacks. This item excludes the other mahanayakas. Duminda had stated that he had died in a hospital. However, Ven. Thoradeniya Piyaratana and Mr Sedaraman stated that Mahanayaka Gunnepana died in the Asgiriya Monastery after a physician had been summoned to him. Gunnepana's death certificate could not be traced, but this information seems reliable.

¹ As always we conducted our interviews in an open-ended fashion and refrained from asking leading questions. Mr Sedaraman volunteered the information about the red car.

Did any of the mahanayakas have a radio? None, according to Ven. T. Piyaratana, but Gunnepana, and he alone, had owned a gramophone, and had records made of Buddhist chanting and recitations which he often played. At Duminda's home there was no gramophone, and Duminda has apparently never seen one, as far as we can ascertain from his family. Gramophones and radios have in common that they play sound. Could it be that Duminda did not recognize the difference since he had never seen a gramophone? If this is the case the evidence again points towards Ven. Gunnepana. Furthermore, according to Mr Sedaraman, Mahanayaka Gunnepana had been particularly fond of music (drumming and trumpeting) and chanting, and there was more music played in Asgiriya during his time than either before or after his term in office. Sedaraman and his father had become close to Gunnepana as musicians because they had often drummed for the mahanayaka in the monasteries in Gunnepana and Asgiriya. This musical interest is likely to have caused Ven. Gunnepana to obtain a gramophone. Mr Sedaraman did not know that Gunnepana had owned a gramophone, but stated that he might have had one without his knowledge.

Every mahanayaka taught apprentice monks so this item is of no value in distinguishing between them. Which of the mahanayakas preached? According to Ven. T. Piyaratana, Ven. Mullegama was famous for his preaching. Ven. Gunnepana did quite a bit of preaching. Ven. Yatavatte, Ven. Udugama and Ven. Godmunne did no preaching. Again we have two candidates, Ven. Gunnepana and Ven. Mullegama; the latter, however, had no car and died by paralysis, not of a heart attack. The fan used by monks in Sri Lanka is a part of every monk's paraphernalia; however, it is only used by monks who preach and only some monks do that. The holding of the fan and reciting of stanzas, so important to Duminda, is done at the beginning of any formal sermon.

Duminda spoke of having had an elephant. Ven. Piyaratana was not sure whether Ven. Gunnepana had owned an elephant, but he was sure that Ven. Yatavatte had owned one. Again, Mr Sedaraman's testimony proved informative. According to him, Ven. Gunananda, the chief disciple of Ven. Gunnepana, had caught an elephant and had it brought to Gunnepana village where Ven. Gunnepana Saranankara was a frequent visitor (he had been born there and had lived in the local monastery). Ven. Gunnepana had taken much interest in this elephant, which died shortly before he himself died.

According to this testimony, we may infer that two of the mahanayakas had owned or taken particular interest in elephants, Ven. Gunnepana and Ven. Yatavatte. The latter, however, had no car, died of paralysis and did no preaching. Once more Ven. Gunnepana is the most likely person to match Duminda's statements. Besides, the Asgiriya Monastery owned several elephants which were used on festive occasions.

Mr Sedaraman did not reveal much to us about Ven. Gunnepana's personality except that he had always been gentle, kind and friendly towards everyone, was very calm and never got excited. He had come from a poor family and the lay-people liked him. Ven. Piyaratana, who also knew Ven. Gunnepana, remembered him as a very virtuous monk who strictly observed all the rules.

Only one mahanayaka, Ven. Gunnepana, matches the five principal state-

ments listed in Table 3. Three (Mullegama, Yatavatte and Godmunne) fit one statement, and one (Udugama) none at all. Ven. Gunnepana is clearly the primary candidate to fit Duminda's description.

Possible Effects of Contamination in Duminda's Statements

One of the principal difficulties in investigating cases of children who claim to remember a previous life is to get the child's statements before they may have become contaminated by knowledge of some person that people around the child come to believe to have been his previous personality. One must attempt to distinguish the child's original statements from whatever the child or those around him may have later added or substituted. In this case the possibilities for such contamination were smaller than usual, since the original investigation by the journalist was superficial and the child's statements only to a small extent matched the monk whom the journalist picked as the supposed previous personality. Duminda's family never came to know the family or friends of that monk (or any monk), nor did they seem interested in knowing any details about the personalities whom Duminda might have been. For example, when we asked Duminda's grandfather which monk he thought the boy had been he did not know. For the family, it was enough to know that he had been a monk in Asgiriya.

Hence possible contamination is more likely to be of a general nature, involving the assumed or idealised characteristics of monks in general. Duminda lived in a rural area, and he might have seen a monk on the road and seen how they dress and fold their robes. Also puzzling is his clear and correct recitation of stanzas at three years of age (in Pali, not his native Sinhalese), and the fact that he did it with a fan in a monk-like fashion.

We made many inquiries about how Duminda might have learnt these stanzas. Duminda's grandmother knew most of these stanzas but denied having taught them to Duminda. Another normal explanation was the fact that at five o'clock each morning a monk recites some stanzas on the Sri Lanka radio. The boy was an early riser and may have heard them. This, however, might not explain it all. E.H.'s first interpreter, Mr Ranasinghe, commented, when we were pondering about this, that his grandchildren of similar age also were sometimes up early but had never learnt any stanza, nor had he heard of any child, in his family or elsewhere, who had learnt these stanzas, which are in the dead language, Pali. However, we were not able to ascertain that he understood the meaning of individual Pali words.

In the case of Duminda Bandara Ratnayake we find many behavioural features unusual in a three- or four-year-old child and which correspond to the behaviour of monks in general, and, it seems, in particular to the life of Mahanayaka Gunnepana. In addition, the testimony that we were able to gather from witnesses who knew the Ven. Gunnepana Saranankara indicates that Duminda's statements for the most part match what we have found out about the life of the Ven. Gunnepana Saranankara, who was chief monk of the Asgiriya monastery from 1921 to 1929.

THE CASE OF SANDIKA THARANGA

Sandika was born on May 20, 1979 of middle-class Roman Catholic parents

in one of the suburbs of Colombo. Our associate, Tissa Jayawardane, interviewed the family on June 20, 1985, when the boy was six years old. At the age of three Sandika² had started to talk about a previous life as a monk in a monastery which he did not further identify. According to his parents, he frequently spoke of the chief monk who lived in the monastery. He stated that one day he was going to attend an almsgiving with some other monks, and then heard a big noise, shot, or explosion, and this is the last thing he remembers. An almsgiving is a common religious ceremony where monks are invited for a midday meal by lay-people.

Sandika showed a great fear of crackers and sudden noises. When he heard sounds of explosions he instinctively placed his hands in fear on the left side of his chest. His parents' explanation was that this fearful behaviour was caused by a shot he had received in his chest and which led to his death in the previous life. There is a small dark birthmark on his chest slightly to the left of the midline, and we were told it was more prominent when he was younger. His parents know of no monk in the area who has died from a gunshot wound. Sandika further stated that four or five monks had lived in his monastery. A list of his statements is given in Table 4. Sandika's statements brings to mind that Sri Lanka has been through periods of violent political turmoil, particularly the Insurgency of 1971, in which a number of monks were killed.

Table 4

Sandika's Statements about his Previous Life as Reported by his Mother

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- 1 The chief monk lived at the temple.
 - 2 The chief monk had a big bowl.
 - 3 One day he went away for almsgiving with some other monks.
 - 4 Then there was an explosion with much noise.
 - 5 There was a little monk (child monk) in the temple.
 - 6 Four or five monks lived in the temple.
 - 7 There was a jack-fruit tree there.
 - 8 The temple where he lived was close to his present home.
 - 9 He had a brother who was of fair complexion.
 - 10 His younger brother wore no shirt
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E.H. first met Sandika in 1988 when he was nine years of age. At this time his memories were fading, as is generally the case with subjects as old as that. His main interests were visiting temples and his school work. He was very religious from the time he started to speak of his previous life, and had tried to convert his parents to Buddhism by requesting them to become Buddhists but they did not comply. He was eager to find the monastery where he had lived. At his request Sandika's father took him to 6-7 temples in their wider area when he was 3-4 years old, in the hope that he would find his temple. He did not recognize any of them as his old monastery.

One day his mother took the boy to a temple some two miles away where

² At the request of Sandika's parents only personal names are used.

there lived a pious monk. She told him about the boy. The monk plucked some flowers, gave them to him, and observed what he did. He climbed the steps to the vihara (shrine room) and worshipped there, which is an appropriate response for a devout Buddhist. After Sandika was taken to some temples and he became acquainted with the monk, he gradually stopped talking about his previous life unless he was asked to do so.

Table 5

Prominent Behavioural Traits with Sandika, as Reported by his Mother

-
- 1 Asks to be taken to his previous temple.
 - 2 Expressed a wish to visit the temple to see the chief monk.
 - 3 Asks to be taken to his previous mothers' place.
 - 4 Picks flowers to place on bed or chair before worshipping.
 - 5 Wanted a Buddha image in the house for his worship.
 - 6 Requests family to give alms to monks.
 - 7 On Poya day (full moon, important Buddhist public holiday in Sri Lanka) he requests his father to take him to temple.
 - 8 Requests family to invite monks for alms-giving which they did.
 - 9 His family became more sympathetic to Buddhism because of his behaviour.
 - 10 Does not eat meat.
 - 11 Gets specially high school marks in Buddhism (91 of 100 possible).
 - 12 His main interests are to visit temples and do his schoolwork.
 - 13 Is fearful of crackers and sudden noises, then places his hand on the left side of his chest, as if in defence.
 - 14 Is particularly clean in everything he does.
 - 15 Requests his parents not to cut his hair (as his hair was always cut in the previous life when he was a monk, and he does not want that now).
-

What most impressed his Roman Catholic parents, however, was not so much that he spoke of a previous life but his unusual behavioural traits and exemplary behaviour as well as his interests, which differed radically from the religious life and background of his family. The family did not force him to go to church since he only wanted to visit temples.

Like many children who speak of a previous life, Sandika told his mother that she was not his real mother. He asked to be taken to his monastery and to his previous mother's place. Another unusual behavioural trait was that he would at certain times pick flowers and place them on his bed as long as there was no altar or shrine room in the house for him to place them. Placing flowers on an altar is common practice among Buddhists. Furthermore, he chanted religious stanzas (in Pali, his parents thought) and worshipped as Buddhists do. What verses or stanzas he chanted his parents did not know or could not remember as they had not paid much attention to it or understood the words. Sandika had stopped chanting when E.H. first met him. As a child he stammered but he chanted without stammering, according to his mother.

From the age of three Sandika would worship two to three times a day. At the age of six he was still offering flowers to a picture of Lord Buddha, which

at his request was put up for him. Later he was given a small statue of the Buddha. A small shelf was placed on the wall in one room to serve as an altar for Sandika. When we visited the family in April 1996, there was one image of the Buddha displayed in a prominent place in the house, another had been placed elsewhere by Sandika only recently. We noticed no Christian pictures or images in the house. According to his mother, some which they had earlier had been removed at the request of Sandika. The family did not seem particularly religious or seriously committed to Christianity, and Sandika's mother would sometimes visit temples as well as churches, apparently due to Sandika's influence.

As stated in Table 4, Sandika requested his family to give alms to monks and to get monks to have a ceremony in their house (common in Buddhist households) which in the end they did. On the full moon day he requested his father to take him to a temple, in line with a common tradition among Buddhists. From the time he was a small child he abstained from eating meat. He showed unusual concern for cleanliness and was a very pious, gentle and obedient boy. Through his pious behaviour his parents became more sympathetic to Buddhism than they had been previously as they were deeply impressed by their son. He became an outstanding pupil after entering school. His highest grades were in his favourite subject, Buddhism. He also attended from an early age the optional Buddhist Sunday School.

From early childhood Sandika has only gone to the local Buddhist temple. His parents did not take him to church because he refused to go. When he grew old enough, he went alone every Sunday to the temple's Sunday School. He is still in close contact with the monk who is his teacher in the temple school.

Sandika's mother and father believe that their son was a monk in a previous life. In 1988 the mother was still afraid that he might go back to the temple and become a monk. Sandika, however, has never expressed a desire to become a monk. When we met him in 1996 he was still deeply interested in Buddhism, and would often visit temples, but he had no intention of becoming a monk. He had received a scholarship for outstanding school performance and continued to be a very gentle and modest boy. In a class of 40 he had always been among the top three, and had recently been admitted to Ananda College, the most prestigious Buddhist college in Sri Lanka, where he plans to study mathematics and science.

THE CASE OF GAMAGE RUVAN THARANGA PERERA

Ruvan, as we shall refer to him, was born in August 1987 and was eight years old when we met him and his parents at their home in the Kalutara district. Ruvan looked a normal boy for his age. He was quiet in our presence but attentive. He had a younger sister and was attending school.

According to his father Ruvan started to speak of a previous life when he was 2 years old. He stated that he had been a monk living in the Pitumpe monastery. The name Pitumpe was unknown to his parents. Ruvan said that this monastery was in Padukka, which is some 20 miles to the south of their home. Ruvan also stated that there was a monkey in the temple, and two weeks later he added that the monkey was made of clay. The name Pitumpe led to the identification of a particular monastery. The unexpected verification

of his very specific statement, that there was in the Pitumpe temple a monkey made of clay, was seen as evidence that Ruvan had lived in this place.

Ruvan's mother stated that he had been talking about a Pitumpe monastery almost from the time he started to speak, and was keen to become a monk. He did not ask for toys, only for pictures of the Buddha, which he collected lovingly. Furthermore, she described some unusual behaviour that still persists; Ruvan sits in a lotus position when they go to the temple, although no one had taught him to do so; he wants to wear a robe like a monk and knows how to put it on; and he knows how to hold a fan when chanting; he does not want to eat at night and discourages his family from doing so (monks are not supposed to have meals from noon until next morning); and he does not eat fish or meat (a few monks do not); he recites the Buddha's first sermon; can read the book of chants (Gatha pota); and wants the family to perform a puja (prayer-like ceremony of worship with recitations and offerings such as of flowers and incense) in the evening and scolds them for not doing so; he does not like to sleep with his mother, tells her that monks do not sleep with women; once when his father brought some liquor into the house with some friends, he protested vehemently.

Furthermore Ruvan would chant stanzas in Pali. His parents recognize Pali from hearing it in the temple and sometimes on radio and television. Ruvan may have learnt the stanzas by listening to radio or television broadcasts but his parents reject that explanation.

Table 6

Ruvan's Statements as Reported in Lankadeepa Newspaper

1	I lived as a monk in the Pitumpe temple in Padukka.
2	There was a statue of a monkey in the temple.
3	There were six monks living in the temple.
4	I led the flower offering ceremonies in the temple.
5	I organized religious processions in the temple.
6	I motivated many people towards meritorious living.
7	My father and mother were very much devoted to religion.
8	There were frescoes and wall-paintings in the temple.

A local reporter, Laksman Vithana, learnt about the case, interviewed Ruvan and his parents, and published a report in the newspaper *Lankadeepa* on November 3, 1993, when Ruvan was six years old. In this report some of Ruvan's statements were published (see Table 6). They are particularly important as they were published before attempts were made to learn whether his statements regarding the Pitumpe monastery could be verified.

A monk in the Pitumpe monastery and some laymen associated with the temple read the report in *Lankadeepa*. A few days after its publication they made the 20-mile trip to visit the boy and learn at first hand about the case. They questioned Ruvan about his alleged previous-life memories, and tested him to see if he recognized any of them. Some members of the group became convinced that Ruvan was the previous abbot of the monastery, Ven.

Ganihigama Pannasekhara (1902-1986), reborn. In particular they were impressed with his monk-like demeanor and the way he carried his robes. Ruvan's statements published in *Lankadeepa* about his leading and organizing of religious ceremonies and processions could only refer to a senior monk or abbot. However, the incumbent monk and former disciple of the abbot remained sceptical, because Ruvan did not recognize him, and did not know the former abbot's name.

Another disciple of the deceased abbot, Ven. Nawagamuwe Revata, visited Ruvan somewhat later with Ven. Mahagama Tillaka and Ven. Kanugala Medhankara. The late Ven. Ganihigama Pannasekhara had been his uncle and he and Ven. Pannasekhara were disciples of the same high priest. Also accompanying them was Nimal Weerenayaka, Ven. Pannasekhara's sister's daughter's son. All were quite familiar with Ven. Pannasekhara. Ruvan did not recognize any of them and hence they remained sceptical. He told them that he was the reincarnation of a lesser monk who attended on the 'loku hamduruvo', i. e. the chief monk. Ven. Revata began to wonder if Ruvan was referring to the life of a young monk from Pitumpe (Ven. Pannagula Nanavasa), who died around 1986. More about him later.

Ruvan's Statements and his Personality

Our inquiries revealed that Ruvan's parents had shown little interest in what Ruvan was saying and tried to keep the case a family secret. Had it not been for the journalist, Laksman Vithana, who learnt about Ruvan accidentally from a woman neighbour, the case might never have become publicly known. When we arrived at the scene in December 1995 Ruvan's parents were co-operative.

A next-door neighbour, Mrs Karuna Wijeman, knew Ruvan from his birth. According to her, he started at the age of two to speak of a life as a monk but she no longer remembered details of his statements. She was primarily impressed with his monk-like behaviour, his serenity and peacefulness, his wish to be dressed like a monk, and how he frequented the shrine room in her house to sit there quietly alone. Mrs Wijeman told us that Ruvan's father had a drinking problem and the family had little interest in religion. Through Ruvan's influence his father in due time stopped drinking and the family even became vegetarians. This was later confirmed by Ruvan's mother.

Another neighbour, Mrs Puspa Ranjani, also knew Ruvan from early childhood. He then talked about having lived in Pitumpe, and about being a monk. Mrs Ranjani was a teacher in a nearby Montessori school. Ruvan was later admitted to this school and then she came to know him better. He was a very good pupil. There his monkish behaviour became more evident. He did not play with other children. When he was asked to draw he would always draw incidents in the life of the Buddha. He wanted to dress like a monk, and expressed a wish to become a monk. He wanted to eat only vegetarian food.

Sometimes Ruvan would insist that the other children in his class stand as a mark of respect as when a monk is brought in a procession to preach a sermon. He would get them to imitate that they were beating drums, then he would walk into the classroom and sit cross-legged on a chair laid with white cloth. In place of a fan he would take a large leaf and hold it as a fan, then preach for about 15 minutes, ending the session by 'offering merit' as monks do when

they preach a sermon. There is a special chant for offering merits and Ruvan would chant it in Pali. Mrs Ranjani knew this chant. The other children accepted his behaviour, listened attentively and gave him due respect. Among the children he came to be known as 'Ruvan sadhu' (monk).

The Montessori pre-school was on the compound of the Dombagoda temple. There Ruvan had his first contact with monks, and became particularly attracted to Ven. Omatte Hemarama, who soon learnt about Ruvan's memories. Ruvan liked their robes, the pictures of Lord Buddha, and liked to go to their books and handle them. He liked to sketch pictures of the Buddha on the floor, and one day, he spoke of a monkey. When asked what monkey he was talking about, he replied, "the monkey in Pitumpe". Ruvan stated that he had been a monk in Pitumpe, that there were 3-4 monks in his temple and that he wanted to become a monk.

Ven. Hemarama knew there was a temple in Pitumpe and suggested to Ruvan's parents that they make inquiries and take him to Pitumpe. His parents were against this and no inquiries were made. It was not until two years later, after Ruvan had entered primary school, that the journalist published his report and the first contact was made with Pitumpe.

At the beginning of our investigation we expected that Ruvan might have learnt about Pitumpe from the monks in Dombagoda. However, several witnesses asserted that Ruvan had mentioned Pitumpe before entering pre-school where he came to know the monks. The Dombagoda monastery belongs to a different sect than the Pitumpe monastery, the Siam Nikaya sect. Their monks come from a higher cast and are affluent (Gombrich, 1971). There was no connection between the two monasteries, which were over 30 miles apart. We learnt from an old, invalid monk in Dombagoda, Ven. Somaloka, that many years ago he casually met Ven. Pannasekhara at functions but never visited his temple. The old monk looked very frail and complained of lack of memory from which he had suffered for a number of years. Ven. Revata told us at a later date that he remembered that in the late fifties when he lived in Pitumpe, Ven. Somaloka who at this time lived at a temple much closer to Pitumpe, did visit the Pitumpe temple. At this stage we have no way of verifying either of their statements. Assuming that the old monk did visit the Pitumpe temple, the question arises of whether or not he influenced Ruvan's memories.

According to both monks Ruvan's connection at the Dombagoda monastery had been almost solely with Ven. Hemarama. If that is true, it is unlikely that Ruvan obtained any information about Pitumpe from Ven. Somaloka. Ven. Hemarama, probably in his forties, stated that he never knew about or met any monk from Pitumpe.

Shortly after the visit of the group from Pitumpe Ruvan's family went to the Pitumpe monastery with the *Lankadeepa* reporter, Ven. Hemarama, and several other persons. Ruvan's father said that he instructed the party not to tell his son anything or give him any leads in order better to test whether he could recognize something. According to the *Lankadeepa* report Ruvan helped in locating the Pitumpe monastery after they arrived in the vicinity. The memories of those who made the trip to Pitumpe had become vague about details by the time we interviewed them. It proved impossible to reconstruct reliably what happened there.

Table 7

List of Ruvan's Behavioural Features as Reported in Lankadeepa Before the Case was 'Solved'

-
- 1 Does not eat at night (monks do not).
 - 2 Does not want to sleep with his mother (monks do not sleep with women).
 - 3 Recites in Pali part of Buddha's first sermon.
 - 4 Does not ask for toys, only pictures of Buddha, which he collects lovingly.
 - 5 Wants to become a monk.
 - 6 Sits in a lotus position when he goes with his parents to the temple.
 - 7 Likes to wear monk's robes when he is at home.
 - 8 Asks his family not to eat at night and only take refreshments as monks do.
 - 9 Does not eat fish or meat.
 - 10 Likes to read the 'pirithpotha' (Buddhist texts for protection).
 - 11 Ask his mother to make offering to Buddha in the evenings. He scolds her if she does not.
 - 12 Takes offence when he learns that his father has taken liquor.
 - 13 Knows how to wear a robe as monks do.
 - 14 Plays some tunes on a drum that was given to him at his request (drums were used in Pitumpe temple as in many other temples).
-

According to a second article by the reporter the group visited the shrine room and there Ruvan pointed to the statue of the monkey made of clay, which is not prominently placed. He said: "That is the monkey I told you about". In the room of the present chief monk at the Pitumpe monastery, the Ven. Mahagama Hematillaka, there were two large framed photographs, each of one monk. Without being asked Ruvan pointed at one of them and said: "This was the chief monk." That photograph was of Ven. Ganihigama Pannasekhara, the former abbot of Pitumpe monastery. This impressed Ven. Hematillaka. The other photograph was of Pannasekhara's teacher who previously had also been a chief monk.

In May 1997 we visited Ruvan's former primary school. It was early morning and a group of children were waiting for the school to open. Some of them had been class mates with Ruvan, who had left school the year before to join a monastery. We asked them about Ruvan, whom they remembered well. He had been a class leader all his three and a half years in primary school, appointed by the teacher. Would they have liked another pupil as a class leader? No, they said, they liked Ruvan as class leader.

On occasions Ruvan got his fellow pupils to recite the Five Precepts (which compare roughly to the Lord's Prayer in Christianity), and he preached to his fellow pupils. He sat in an elevated position, but they sat on the floor (according to tradition). In his sermons Ruvan had taught them the importance of behaving well.

Did Ruvan ever get angry? No, three of them replied, he did not get angry, was always calm. What did they think of his becoming a monk? It was a good thing, and they evidently were not surprised by it.

In Sri Lanka a class leader is traditionally the best pupil in the class (usually of 30 to 40 pupils). The principal of Keselhenewa Junior School, Milton Dharmasinghe, allowed us to examine the grade books. Ruwan had completed his studies in grade 1 to 3. The first two years he ranked first in his mean school performance, and in the third year another pupil shared with him the first rank. In his fourth year he left the school for the 'pirivena' (school for child novices living in monasteries).

According to the principal Ruwan had been a very talented pupil and popular with the other children, a true class leader, although he did not move much with them. He had a keen memory, and even remembered what he heard only once. He was obedient to his teachers, quiet, and peaceful. He did not like to be with girls, not even his sister.

In his early years in primary school Ruwan started to give frequent public pujas (Bodhi-pujas) at the request of various persons, and his fame started to spread, also through several articles in the newspapers. We were told that he conducted these ceremonies, which consist mostly of chanting, with the dignity of a senior monk.

On August 9, 1996, Ruwan was ordained into the ancient Pushparamaya Pathawatta temple in Rajgama. The monks there had heard about Ruwan, and happened to know some people where he regularly went for meditation. One day Ruwan's family had visited the temple to discuss the possibility of his entering as a monk novice. Then he told his parents: "I wish to stay here; you can go home." Ruwan told us he is happy in the temple, does not miss home, has time to meditate and that there is much to study. The abbot, Ven. Dhammarama, told us that Ruwan is different from the other child novices, is more calm and composed, and gets on well with them, has a better memory and much greater knowledge of Buddhism. On the last full moon day he had performed the Bodhi-puja and did that very well.

Attempts at Verification of the Case

One of the interesting features of this case is that some of Ruwan's statements were published before an attempt was made to find a person who fitted Ruwan's story. Hence it is of crucial importance to find out whether Ruwan might in normal ways have acquired knowledge about the Pitumpe monastery and the clay monkey in the temple. We failed to find such a normal way, both for the name of Pitumpe temple, and for the fact that there was a monkey made of clay in this temple. The monkey was in a scene that depicted Buddha's passing away. Statues of monkeys are almost never found in temples, as far as we have been able to ascertain.

The statement that there were frescoes and wall-paintings in the Pitumpe temple is also correct. However, such wall-paintings and frescoes are not uncommon in temples but those in Pitumpe are of unusual beauty for a temple of such a small size. They were built and painted at the initiative of Ven. Pannasekhara.

The statements about leading the flower offering ceremonies, organizing processions in the temple, and motivating people towards meritorious living, would fit the life of any abbot who is actively engaged in promoting Buddhism among the public, which some (but far from all) abbots do.

We were able to trace a younger sister of Ven. Pannasekhara, now 91. She had been a vegetarian all her life. Furthermore, she told us that her parents had been very religious; they had also been vegetarians for religious reasons, which is rare in Sri Lanka. They had been in close contact with a nearby temple, Sri Pushparamaya (the family still is), and had given her brother to that monastery when he was ten years old. Her brother, at least as long as he lived with his family, had also been a vegetarian.

Of Ruvan's eight statements (see Table 6) one is incorrect.³ There were 3-4 and not six monks living in the Pitumpe temple, not counting the child novices. If the child monks are included Ruvan may have been right. At present there are four child novices in Pitumpe and one monk.

The Abbot Ganihigama Pannasekhara

The monk that Ruvan is believed to be referring to is Ven. Ganihigama Pannasekhara. He was born in April 1902, became a monk in the Amarapura sect and lived in the latter part of his life in the small and unimportant Pitumpe monastery. In 1972 he was appointed sanghanayaka (chief abbot) over the whole Colombo district. This was a great honour and recognition by the authorities of his spiritual and leadership qualities. Thus he came to participate in many important official functions, religious and otherwise, where he was bound to meet other leading clerics of the nation. Ruvan's statements that he led flower pujas and processions and motivated people towards a meritorious life seem a fitting description. Ganihigama Pannasekhara died January 9, 1986. Ruvan was born 17 months later, August 2, 1987.

The Ven. Pannagula Nanavasa

The Ven. Pannasekhara is not the only candidate for Ruvan's previous personality. Some monks involved with the case have considered the possibility that Ruvan is referring to Ven. Nanavasa, who stayed in Pitumpe for two years, disrobed and died two years later in January 1986, then still a young man. However, his personality differed widely from Ven. Pannasekhara. His relatives described him as shy, an average pupil in school, and not particularly good at chanting. In addition he does not seem to have been deeply committed to Buddhism (as Ruvan is) as he abandoned his life as a monk.

Summary of the Case

Ruvan displayed no recognitions of persons, and his statements are few and not specific enough to point clearly to any previous personality. Only by the method of exclusion does Ven. Pannasekhara become a better fit for Ruvan's statements than other monks who have lived in Pitumpe in recent times. Ruvan's personality resembles Ven. Pannasekhara in that his life is strongly oriented towards Buddhism; he has distinct leadership qualities (even in school he organized religious services) and he also enjoys chanting in public and does it with ease.

³ It should be noted that we are here only considering statements that were definitely made before the case was considered 'solved' by Ruvan's parents. There are also further statements that fit Pannasekhara, but we exclude them as they may have arisen out of contamination with knowledge of Pannasekhara's life by persons around Ruvan or by Ruvan himself, after he became associated with Pannasekhara.

Table 8

Chronology of the Case of Ruwan Perera

Ven. Ganihigama Pannasekhara

1902	Born in Ganihigama as I. D. Julis.
1912	Entered a monastery as novice.
1972	Appointed sanghanayaka at Pitumpe temple.
January 9, 1986	Died at Pitumpe temple.

Gamage Ruwan Tharanga Perera

August 2, 1987	Born in Horana.
Late 1989	Starts talk of previous life.
January 1991	Enters pre-school in Dombagoda.
January 1993	Enters Keselhenewa Junior School.
November 3, 1993	Case published in <i>Lankadeepa</i> .
November 7, 1993	Monks from Pitumpe visit Ruwan. Case 'solved'.
November 10, 1993	Second report in <i>Lankadeepa</i> .
December 1, 1995	First investigation by EH & GS.
August 9, 1996	Enters the Raigama P. S. Pushparamaya Vihara (monastery).

Sri Lankan Buddhists have a fairly distinct image of the characteristics of the ideal monk; serenity, composure, and harmlessness (in extreme cases this is exemplified by vegetarianism). Some monks are committed to serve the public, conduct religious activities and encourage people to meritorious living. Even as a child Ruwan seems to have these characteristics. Some persons were also impressed by how well he knew how to carry monks' robes. The behavioural features are prominent in this case and they are what primarily lead laymen and some monks to accept Ruwan as a reincarnation of a monk.

Is there another obvious explanation of how Ruwan's behavioural characteristics could have developed at such an early age? Where could he have picked up and identified with the image of the ideal monk? He was not brought up in a religious family, nor were there monks in his extended family or among his neighbours. He apparently received no support (and perhaps even resistance) from his family, but early on found his way to people who shared his religious commitment. We find no easy explanation for his unusual and distinct behavioural characteristics which are so atypical for a child.

DISCUSSION

We have described three cases of children who claim memories of having been monks in a previous life, and our attempts to verify their claims. These are the only cases concerning monks that we have found among over two hundred cases that have been recorded in Sri Lanka.

The majority of children in Sri Lanka and elsewhere who claim previous-life memories speak of an untimely violent death. The cases of Duminda and Ruwan differ for they claim to have lived as senior monks until they died as relatively old men. Sandika's case is more typical, as he speaks of a death in a bomb blast

and apparently at a relatively young age. The crucial question remains, how did these children come to utter their claims of having previously been monks? How did they develop ideas or images which they spoke of as they would of any other memories? We have no way of directly experiencing the images that may go through their minds, or directly testing whether they are making these stories up. We can only test their accounts against objective realities in the lives of some persons who lived recently, and we can compare their behavioural characteristics and interests with those of these past personalities. In the case of Duminda we find that his statements fit important facts in the life of the abbot Gunnepana. In the case of Ruvan the behavioural features are dominant. Of the memory items his statement about the clay monkey in Pitumbe, his very religious parents and his statements of leading the flower offerings, organizing religious processions, and motivating people towards meritorious living fit the life of Pannasekhara. The behavioural traits and interests of Duminda and Ruvan show a good deal of resemblance with the respective abbots.

No normal physical connection or interaction could be traced between these children's families and the abbots. If we tentatively assume that these children have in their mind genuine images or memories of real events or of someone's past subjective experiences, this must have taken place through some unknown processes. An alternative interpretation would be that, by chance, the statements of the children correspond with the life histories of the abbots concerned. If these cases only consisted of alleged memories, we might find such explanation a reasonable solution.

What complicates this hypothesis is that these three boys have deep-seated, unusual behavioural features, which unfolded at a very early age. They display behaviour that would fit dedicated monks who might be found worthy to be elected to high positions by their peers. From a young age these boys displayed a religious commitment and life-style of devoted Buddhist monks. For example, witnesses unanimously agree that they expressed calmness, dignity and devotion rarely found in young children. Also at a very early age they wanted to dress as monks; furthermore they quickly knew the Pali words and phrases used in some religious ceremonies, and they knew the general behaviour appropriate in the setting in which monks live. Not only that; two of the three persistently requested that they be allowed to become monks again. Grudgingly, their parents gradually accepted their wishes, and they have now joined Buddhist monasteries at the earliest age possible. Apparently the children did not show any emotion when they left their parents, whereas the parents were sad.

We have described one way to approach these cases. One should also explore more natural explanations. For example, some boys at an early age want to enter a particular profession, such as that of a policeman or a pilot, when they grow up. For such an idea to develop the child needs some exposure to the profession of their choice. Perhaps such children may sometimes express behaviours and characteristics that are typical for such professions, but they definitely do not claim that they have been policemen or pilots before they were born, nor would they identify with particular individuals of the past or express knowledge of their histories.

The sagas of these boys might lead us to describe them—perhaps a bit too dramatically—as heroically resisting and fighting the constraints they found in their respective families. They apparently developed, quite early, ideals and goals of a possessive strength, which was not in line with life in their families (particularly in the case of Ruvan and Sandika). In addition, they had no immediate familiarity with monks with whom they might have identified.

There are many pitfalls to guard against when investigating and interpreting cases of this kind. Researchers, however vigilant they may try to be, look through their particular mental glasses. Witnesses may have biases that distort their perception of things, they may not tell the whole truth, they may embellish or exaggerate, their memories may be distorted, and so on. These potential distortions we have tried to minimize by interviewing many witnesses, and the crucial ones on more than one occasion, and by avoiding at all times leading questions. Our research work has been extensive and in each case we carried out our investigation over a period of three years. For example, in the case of Ruvan, we conducted 29 interviews with 21 persons.

There are different interpretations of the data once they have been collected as objectively as possible. Some favour reincarnation, others do not. In Sri Lanka there are differing assumptions among those who are open to the possibility of reincarnation about what may constitute evidence for reincarnation of a particular personality. For example, the monks who knew Ven. Pannasekhara best did not consider Ruvan to be his reincarnation because he did not recognize any of them. For them Ruvan's behavioural features and some correct statements that would fit Pannasekhara were not sufficient evidence, although the same evidence was sufficient for most laymen who knew Ven. Pannasekhara and for some other monks.

Obviously our conclusion can only be very tentative. If we assume for a moment that a reincarnation process is involved in some cases of children who claim previous-life memories, it seems likely that the number and qualities of memories, behavioural features, etc. that come through, would vary widely among the children. These could range from distant echoes and unclear shimmerings to full-blown images/memories and stable behavioural and motivational characteristics that emerge at an early age. Perhaps our cases are a mixture of these.

The case of Duminda is among the best cases but the other two fall well behind the best cases that have been investigated in Sri Lanka (Haraldsson, 1991; Mills, Haraldsson, and Keil, 1994; Stevenson, 1977; Stevenson and Samararatne, 1988). They all, however, have strong behavioural features. The memory aspect is rather poor in all of them. Only one of our cases fulfils the requirement that the statements of the child are recorded before the case is 'solved', namely the case of Ruvan. The case of Sandika is not specific enough to allow any attempt of verification although it includes the most common feature of cases of the reincarnation type, i.e. alleged memories of a violent death. None of these cases includes personal names, only place names, but that is common in Sri Lankan cases.

In all Buddhist traditions reincarnation is taken for granted, also that some persons may have previous-life memories. In Theravada Buddhism there exists considerable literature on the theoretical aspects of reincarnation, in

ancient Pali texts and in books and articles written in this century (Gunaratne, 1971; Premasiri, 1995; Story, 1975). However, there have been no systematic studies — using empirical methods — of children who are considered monks reborn, or who make such claims.⁴ Ours is the first in-depth study and attempt at verification.

We do not claim that our cases contribute greatly to the issues of this debate but the questions raised by them are an invitation to the reader, the investigators and the critics to speculate and ponder.

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⁴ In this connection it is interesting that there have been some Buddhist scholars who have emphasized the relationship between empiricism and Buddhism (Jayatillaka 1963, Kalupahana, 1976).

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