

Children Claiming Past-Life Memories: Four Cases in Sri Lanka

ERLENDUR HARALDSSON

Department of Psychology, University of Iceland, 101 Reykjavik, Iceland

Abstract-This is a report on an investigation of four children in Sri Lanka who claimed to remember a previous life at the early age of two to three years. Detailed written records were made of the statements of three of the children before any attempt was made to examine their claims. In two cases, these statements made it possible to trace a deceased person whose life history fit to a considerable extent the statements made by the child. In these cases, no prior connection of any kind was found to have existed between the child's family and that of the alleged previous personality. The pattern of these cases resembles those earlier reported by Stevenson: the children are at a preschool age when they start to make claims about a previous life; they usually start to "forget" at about the time they go to school; some of them claim to have died violently earlier; they express the wish to meet their earlier families or visit their homes; and some of them show behavioral idiosyncrasies that seem to differ from what they observe and would be expected to learn from their environment. In Sri Lanka more than half of such cases remain "unsolved," i.e., no person can be traced that roughly matches the child's statements.

Introduction

Well known in psychology are *déjà vu* experiences, those anomalies of recognition that have been defined as "illusions of falsely perceiving a new scene or experience as a familiar one" (Wilkening, 1973, p. 56). Representative national surveys show this experience to be widely reported in the general population, such as by 4 1% of the population in Iceland (Haraldsson, 1975) and 59% in the U.S. (Greeley, 1975). Much more rare is another experience that also involves memory and recognition, if we may assume for a moment that such experiences are being truthfully reported. These are those rare cases in which children, usually at the young age of 2-5 years, report memories of experiences they claim to be from a former life span.

Acknowledgements. The author acknowledges a grant from the Nordic Institute for Asian Studies, and support from the Division of Personality Studies, Department of Behavioral Medicine & Psychiatry, University of Virginia Health Sciences Center, Charlottesville, and from the University of Iceland. Special thanks go to my interpreters A. W. **Ranasinghe**, **Tissa Jayawardane**, **Godwin Samararatne**, and **Hector Samararatne** who assisted me in various ways.

In some parts of the world, one may occasionally learn about children who claim to have such “memories” of having lived before. (For easier reading we will henceforth refer to these claims as memories without quotation marks without in any way prejudging the actual nature of the experiences.) This report describes an attempt to investigate four new cases found within the last few years in Sri Lanka. The emphasis of the investigation is on the veridical aspect, i.e., to determine whether the child’s statements about the life of a person who allegedly once lived can be verified or falsified by using accepted methods of scientific inquiry. Are these statements pure fabrications of fantasy or can there be found in some of them descriptions of characteristics and events in the life of persons who did in fact live before the child started to talk about a previous existence?

Cases of this kind have from time to time appeared in the popular press, particularly in Asia, mostly with sensational accounts of how the child’s claims were verified. **Psychologists**—and scholars in general—have paid almost no attention to these rare cases, with the exception of Ian Stevenson, a psychiatrist at the University of Virginia. Stevenson (1974, 1975, 1977a, 1977b, 1980, 1983, 1987, Stevenson and Samararatne, 1988) has studied cases of this kind for over 30 years and published numerous reports of his thorough and detailed investigations of individual cases in various countries, most of them in Asia. Story (1975), a scholar of Theravada Buddhism, has also investigated some cases in Sri Lanka as well as in India, Burma, and Thailand. The present study can be considered an attempt to replicate Stevenson’s (1977a) work in Sri Lanka.

Stevenson and Story reported cases in which they found a fairly high degree of correspondence between the child’s statements and the life of some deceased individual, without there seeming to be any normal way in which the child might have obtained the information these claimed memories reveal. Several different interpretations have been put forward attempting to explain the cases. They have ranged from chance coincidence, paramnesia, extrasensory perception by the child of life events of a deceased person, to the theory of reincarnation, which is generally accepted by the Buddhists and the Hindus of Sri Lanka.

In this article a detailed description and analyses will be given of four new cases the author has investigated. The cases reported here concern three children brought up in Buddhist families and one in a Christian family. A further 16 cases are in various stages of investigation. One of them concerns a child in a Hindu family, three children in Christian families, and twelve in Buddhist families.

Method

The principal method of inquiry is the interviewing of firsthand witnesses to the child’s statements in order to establish what the child has said about an

alleged previous life. Particularly important are persons who live with the child, such as parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, playmates, etc, as well as the child itself, if it is willing to talk to strangers. Every effort is made to conduct the interviews independently with each witness to avoid further contamination of testimony than what is already likely to have taken place, as most of the witnesses to the child's statements are likely to have discussed their observations extensively among themselves. Furthermore, if possible, the principal witnesses are interviewed on more than one occasion several months apart, to ascertain the consistency, or the lack of it, of the testimony for the child's statements, and also to learn about as many of the child's statements as possible. In our interviews we were particularly careful not to ask leading questions. The interviews were usually hand recorded, and in some instances, they were tape recorded.

When the statements made by the child have been recorded, a search begins for any person that may fit the child's statements. This is usually done by making inquiries at a location indicated or directly stated by the child, which often is the case in Sri Lanka. In some instances, parents, journalists, or relatives have already made such inquiries and in some instances "solved" the case, namely found some deceased person that to them seems to have the characteristics stated by the child. In such instances we examine these correspondences more closely by gathering as much reliable information as possible on the presumed "previous" personality. This is done by interviewing relatives and friends of the deceased, sometimes obtaining written documents, such as birth and death certificates, etc.

An important part of this examination consists of tracing any communication that might have taken place between the family of the child and the family of the "previous" personality, because the child might thus have gathered material for its statements.

In this investigation the methods developed by Stevenson (1974, 1987) have basically been followed. Some further details of methodology will be given in the reports on individual cases.

The Case of Dilukshi G. Nissanka

The case of Dilukshi Geevanie Nissanka is of particular interest because written records were made of the child's statements about a previous life before attempts were made to find a person that might match her statements. We learned about the case through an article in *Weekend*, the weekend edition of *Sun*, a leading newspaper in Sri Lanka.

Dilukshi was born on October 4th, 1984 and is the only child of her parents who live in Rukmalie, Veyangoda, in the Gamphaha district. According to Dilukshi's mother, whom we interviewed in November, 1989, her daughter began to speak about a previous life when she was less than two years old. Briefly stated, she spoke about a life in Peravatte, Dambulla, where

she had drowned in a stream. To her parents' dismay, she refused to call them mother and father and requested to be taken home to her earlier mother. Dilukshi's statements are listed in Table 1.

Dilukshi's parents tried hard to get their girl to stop this talk about a previous life, even by threatening her, but in vain. In the end, when Dilukshi was almost five years old they gave up. They contacted a relative, B. A. Sunil, who made a phone call to the abbot of the Dambulla rock temple, which is famous and one of the most frequented places of pilgrimage in Sri Lanka. The abbot, Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala, an archaeologist, asked Sunil to write a letter listing the statements that the girl had been making, which he did. Ven. Sumangala made enquiries in and around Dambulla and did not find a deceased child that fit Dilukshi's statements. He therefore contacted a journalist he knew, H. W. Abeypala, who quickly made his own investigation of the case. He interviewed the subject's parents and published an account of the case in the Sinhalese and English editions of *Weekend*.

Dharmadasa Ranatunga in Dambulla read the account in *Weekend*, wrote a letter to Dilukshi's father, and mailed a photocopy to Ven. Sumangala. A few days later the two fathers met, and soon thereafter Dilukshi was taken by the journalist and her parents to Dambulla, where Ven. Sumangala joined them. According to them, the girl led the way to Ranatunga's house some 4 miles from Dambulla town, where he and his wife accepted her as their former daughter after alleged recognitions of some objects and persons at the

TABLE 1

Statements made by Dilukshi G. Nissanka according to the report in *Weekend* on Sept. 10, 1989

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1. My mother lives in Peravatte in Dambulla.
 2. My brother and I fell into the stream and I came here (died).
 3. A stream with a footbridge over it skirts the paddyfield near the house.
 4. Our house is near Heenkolla's boutique.
 5. We used to buy provisions in Heenkolla's shop.
 6. Roof of their house could be seen from the small Dambulla rock (*punchi* Dambulla gala).
 7. We played on the smaller rock. I played shopkeeper (*mudalali*) in the boutique. There was a little doll in our boutique.
 8. One day I climbed the Dambulla rock and I and my brother fell down.
 9. There is a public drinking cistern (*pinthaliya*) at Dambulla temple.
 10. I went to school by van.
 11. Father took her in the van to school.
 12. I have friends and we have been in Colombo.
 13. My father is owner of a metal quarry.
 14. Father is fair in complexion.
 15. Mother is very fair.
 16. Younger brother (*malle*) is very dark.
 17. She (Dilukshi) was known as Suwanna.
 18. Mother was Swarna. Cannot remember father's name.
 19. My mother wears a housecoat with beautiful buttons.
 20. My brothers, Mahesh (elder) and Thushara (younger) are waiting for me in our play boutique.
 21. Two children fell into the stream while playing near the footbridge.
 22. My mother is not like you, aunt (*choocha*). She loves me very much.
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Ranatunga's home and verifications of statements made by Dilukshi. **Dambulla** is a subdistrict of Anuradhapura; within it is the village of **Kitulhitiyawa** where Ranatunga's family lives. He works as a chief clerk in a tile factory in Anuradhapura, which is 40 miles away, and he only spends the weekends with his family.

The distance from Veyangoda to Dambulla is about 80 miles. Dilukshi's parents had no friends, relatives, or other connections with Dambulla, which is a small town surrounded by a rural area. They had visited Dambulla once in early 1984 on their way back from a pilgrimage to Anuradhapura.

Dilukshi's Statements About a "Previous" Life

We are in the fortunate position of having three documents that recorded Dilukshi's statements about a previous life before any personality was found which would fit Dilukshi's statements. We have copies of these documents upon which we shall primarily base our analyses of the case:

1. letter dated September 6, 1989 written by B. A. Sunil, a relative of Dilukshi, addressed to the abbot of the Dambulla Temple, Ven. **Inamaluwe Sumangala**, describing the subject's statements.
2. Notes by journalist H. W. Abeypala from his interview with Dilukshi's mother.
3. H. W. Abeypala's report in *Weekend* September 10, 1989, describing the girl's claims of a previous life.

Furthermore, we have a letter dated September 15, 1989 from Mr. **D. Ranatunga** of Kitulhitiyawa in Dambulla addressed to Dilukshi's father, with a copy mailed to Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala. In this letter Mr. **Ranatunga** states that he has read the report in *Weekend* and he describes some facts about his daughter who drowned on September 27, 1983 at the age of nine.

Let us now examine individual items as we find them in the two main records of Dilukshi's statements (the *Weekend* article and Sunil's letter) written before any person was found who seemed to correspond to the statements. There are 22 items in the *Weekend* record, some of them essentially the same as the 13 items in Sunil's letter (Table 2). There are slight discrepancies between a few items in the two records. The difference in the number of items is most likely due to unequal thoroughness on the part of the recorders. The *Weekend* account is based on notes taken in an interview with the family, whereas Sunil's statements were written from memory about four weeks after he received the information from Dilukshi's parents, which may have led to some mistakes. Mistakes can also occur while taking notes, and mistakes can of course be made by family members when trying to recall statements of the child taking place over a period of two and half years.

TABLE 2

Statements made by Dilukshi G. Nissanka according to B. A. Sunil's letter

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1. She lived near Dambulla in her previous life.
 2. Near the road where you turn there is a small vegetable boutique. There is a very thin boy there.
 3. She and her younger brother slipped on the big Dambulla rock.
 4. When you climb the stone steps of Dambulla (temple) you can see the roof of her house.
 5. Her father has a large stone quarry in Dodamwatte (orange garden).
 6. On the road near the house the bus runs that goes to Sigiriya.
 7. Father had plenty of money.
 8. Her mother wears a housecoat with big buttons.
 9. She was in the 5th grade.
 10. In the house there are two dogs.
 11. On the two sides of the house are grown two big flowering trees.
 12. She and her two younger brothers go to school in the morning by van.
 13. Her house is near the paddyfield.
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“My mother lives in Perawatte in Dambulla” (Weekend, item 1). “She lived near Dambulla” (Sunil’s letter, item 1). Both statements mention Dambulla, one that she lived *near* Dambulla, the other that she lived in Perawatte in Dambulla. Both statements indicate that she lived not in **Dambulla** town but rather in the Dambulla subdistrict. The fact that Shiromi had lived *near* Dambulla but not in Dambulla town makes for a better fit with Dilukshi’s statements than if the reverse had been the case.

When the Ven. Sumangala discovered that no village existed by the name of Perawatte, he turned the case over to the journalist. Perawatte literally means a gova fruit (**pera**) garden (**watte**). Dilukshi’s mother told us that her deceased daughter had sometimes called her home perawatte (fruit garden) because of the number of **fruit** trees growing there. Mr. Ranatunga explained Perawatte somewhat differently. There are and were a number of gova fruit (**pera**) trees at a house close by and also many other fruit trees around (the location has an abundance of trees and most of them bear fruit). Hence, Dilukshi was by this name describing a characteristic of her previous location, not using a proper name.’

Wimala Amarakone lives in Kaikawala near Colombo and is the sister of Shiromi’s mother. For two years she lived with Shiromi’s family. Although Wimala was 9 years older than Shiromi, they went to the same school, were very close to one another, and used to spend most of their day together. Wimala reported that when the gova trees were bearing fruits, Shiromi always insisted that they go through Perawatte on the way home from school, a place which she called by that name near her home, because of many gova trees. She, and only she, had called this place Perawatte. We visited this place, which is close by, and has many gova trees.

We made several more enquiries about Perawatte. The Dambulla post office told us that there was no village or location by that name, but one residential house in Dambulla town had the name Perawatte. An elderly couple lived there who had lost no child.

Is the name Perawatte a post hoc interpretation because we get somewhat different versions of it from our three witnesses? We cannot be sure, but the fact remains that a garden of gova trees (perawatte) was indeed close by Shiromi's house. Another example of childlike namegiving can be found in the second item on Sunil's list, where Dilukshi states that her father had a large stone quarry in Dodamwatte (garden of oranges). Shiromi's father works in a tile factory in Anuradhapura (where oranges are also grown), but none of our witnesses seemed to remember that Shiromi had used the name Dodamwatte.

My brother and I fell into the stream and I came here (died) (Weekend, item 2). Shiromi died by drowning in a nearby stream or canal that is about three yards wide and a yard and a half or more deep. On that day Wimala Amarakone, her mother's sister, and five or six other children were with her at the canal bathing and washing linen. Later, Wimala noticed that Shiromi had disappeared, and a few hours later she was found drowned at the bottom of the canal. Shiromi knew how to swim and it was assumed that she had fallen on a rock that protrudes into the stream and lost consciousness because an injury was found on her head. Manju Siri, the 3-year-old brother of Shiromi, had been at the canal when she drowned, according to Wimala. Shiromi's parents and neighbors knew of no other child who had drowned in this canal.

A stream with a footbridge over it skirts the paddyfield near the house. (Weekend, item 3). We were shown the rocks from which Shiromi had probably fallen into the stream and which are used by women for washing clothes. Slightly upstream and opposite the paddyfields belonging to Mr. Ranatunga there had been a footbridge across the canal. It was torn down a few years ago, and a concrete footbridge was built some 15–20 yards further down. This item corresponds well with Shiromi's statement of the location.

Our house is near Heenkolla's boutique. We used to buy provisions in Heenkolla's boutique (Weekend, items 4 and 6). Near the road where you turn there is a small vegetable boutique. There is a very thin boy there (Sunil's item 2). Near Ranatunga's house, just as one leaves the footpath, turns left, and enters the road towards the main road and to the school, there is a house with a small shop. It had been closed down because of insufficient business five months before we first visited the area. A brother of the shopkeeper, Mr. M. G. Jayadara, told us that his younger brother (M. G. Anura Siri) had been called **Heen** (thin) Malle (younger brother) since he was a boy and suggested that Shiromi might have called the shop Heenkolla's (kolla-boy) boutique, or the shop of the thin boy. We were shown the licence for the shop, which was issued on Nov 6, 1977. In it were sold groceries (including vegetables) and it was directly on the road and the only shop that Shiromi would have had to pass on her way to school. It was a few yards from a turn she had to make on her trip. This item seems a rather good if not an excellent and quite specific fit between Dilukshi's statement and Shiromi's circumstances. When the two versions of the items are combined they give fuller information which

more closely fits the facts than either one alone. In 1990 I met **Heen Malle** who at the age of 27 is a slender man, and claimed to remember Shiromi buying in his shop.

The roof of their house could be seen from the small Dambulla rock (punchi Dambulla gala) (Weekend, item 6). Some 30-40 yards from the Ranatunga's house is a large relatively flat rock, less than a yard high from the ground. Shiromi's mother, and independently her sister Wimala, told us that Shiromi had called this rock the small Dambulla rock and often played there with her younger brother. We verified from that rock that the roof of their house could be seen between some trees and bushes. This rock is the only one of its kind near the house.

We played on the smaller rock. I played shopkeeper in our boutique. There was a little doll in our boutique (Weekend, item 7). According to Shiromi's mother her children had often played on the low rock near the house, and also played boutique.

One day I climbed the Dambulla rock and I and my brother fell down (Weekend, item 8). She and her younger brother slipped on the big Dambulla rock (Sunil, item 3). According to Shiromi's parents, this may well have happened because they often visited the Dambulla rock temple and walked up the long footpath and the many steps that lead up to the ancient temple, which is hewn into the slope of the boulder-like rock that can be seen from far away and from which there is a beautiful view of the surrounding countryside. However, it is unlikely that parents would remember whether their children once slipped on these steps many years earlier unless it resulted in some lasting injuries.

There is a public drinking cistern (pinthaliya) at Dambulla temple (Weekend, item 9). According to Shiromi's parents and Ven. Sumangala as well, there was a drinking cistern near the beginning of the way up to the temple, which had been placed there by a family that lived close by. The family moved away a few years ago and since then no drinking cistern is placed at the roadside for thirsty visitors. This item reveals knowledge of a specific fact.

I went to school by van. Father took her in the van to school (Weekend items 10 and 11). Shiromi's father did not own a van. The husband of one sister of Shiromi's mother lives in Kalugala some 100 miles away and owns a van. He and his family visited the Ranatungas from time to time and might have taken Shiromi to school by the van. They would often take the children home with them during school holidays. Shortly before Shiromi drowned they had, according to Wimala, taken her to their home during holidays.

I have friends and we have been to Colombo (Weekend, item 12). According to Shiromi's parents they once went with Shiromi to Colombo when she was 4-5 years old. For the rural inhabitants Colombo is far away, and it seems unlikely that many children of this area have by the age of nine been in Colombo.

My father is owner of a metal quarry (Weekend, item 13). My father has a large stone quarry in Dodamwatte (Sunil, item 5). Shiromi's father is a chief

clerk in tile factory in Anuradhapura. Dilukshi speaks of a stone or metal quarry, but Mr. Ranatunga works in a tile factory, which is a different kind of an enterprise, though for a child the difference might be small or none, depending on how much it would know of both productions. Dilukshi had, according to Sunil, used the words “a place where work is being done on stones” but not the word “quarry,” which was his and her parents interpretation of what she meant.

Father is fair in complexion. Mother was very fair, younger brother (malle) is very dark (Weekend, items 14–16). To the author and his interpreter there is no obvious difference in complexion between Mr. and Mrs. Ranatunga and their son; their complexion seems similar to the average Sinhalese.

She (Dilukshi) was known as Suwanna (Weekend, item 17). The given name to Mr. Ranatunga’s daughter was Shiromi Inoka, which is quite different from Suwanna, although it may be noted that both names start with an s sound.

My mother was Swarna. Cannot remember fathers name. (Weekend, item 18). The name of Shiromi’s mother is Zeila, which obviously is different from Swarna, though again it may be noted that both words begin with an s sound. According to Shiromi’s family, there is no one of that name among the neighbours.

My mother wears housecoat with beautiful buttons (Weekend, item; 19 Sunil, item 8). Shiromi’s mother told us that this was correct. She had used and still uses a dress called a housecoat, which according to my interpreter GS is not commonly worn by women in this area.

My brothers, Mahesh (elder) and Thushara (younger), are waiting for me in our boutique (Weekend, item 20). In this statement we read that she had one elder and one younger brother. Shiromi was the oldest child of the Ranatunga family. She had only one sister six years younger and a brother seven years younger whose name was Manju **Siri**. There were no older siblings. According to Shiromi’s mother, she used to take care of her younger brother and spent much time with him. Dilukshi’s mother stated that Dilukshi mentioned her younger brother more often than anything else.

The name of Shiromi’s brother, Manju **Siri**, was quite different from Mahesh or Thushara. Shiromi’s mother told us that there had been a boy living in the next house by the name of Mahesh, who had moved away; and Shiromi had called him “malle”, which means younger brother. We succeeded in tracing this boy in Rambukkana, some 50 miles away. His given name in fact was **Saman**, and he was usually called Nandalage Malle (aunt’s younger brother). Shiromi had also had a school friend by the name of Thushara, but the family did not know her present whereabouts. Both these names are relatively common.

The Sinhalese people address each other more by relational names than by given names. For example, when my driver asked someone for directions, he addressed him as “malle” if it was a boy or young man. In restaurants, waiters would be addressed as malle if they were younger than the persons addressing them. The Sinhalese make much less use of personal names than

most nations, and sometimes they do not even know the given names of persons rather close to them (Stevenson and Samararatne 1988, p. 227). The fit between Dilukshi's statements and Shiromi's life thus is almost nil as regards personal names, but it depends to some extent on how we assess Shiromi's circumstances and the Sinhalese tradition of using relational names in a liberal fashion.

Two children fell into the stream while playing near the footbridge (*Weekend*, item 2 1). This item is of little significance because many children have probably fallen into the stream over the years, although inhabitants did not recall any drowning there apart from that of Shiromi.

Finally, there are three items of interest that are only mentioned in Sunil's letter:

On the road near the house goes the bus that goes to Sigiriya (item 6). This reveals specific knowledge of the area, for the road to Sigiriya splits off from the main road to Anuradhapura near the home of the Ranatunga family. *Father had plenty of money* (item 7). Shiromi's father was not poor by Sinhalese standards, but certainly he did not have an abundance of money. This item is probably not of much value because a child's assessment of its parents wealth or poverty—unless it is rather extreme—is likely to be inaccurate. *She was in 5th grade* (item 9). Shiromi was in the 3rd grade when she drowned. *In the house there are two dogs* (item 10). According to Shiromi's mother, they had two dogs at this time. *Her house is near the paddyfield* (item 13). A small paddyfield is some 100 yards away from the house and near the stream, as mentioned in *Weekend* (item 3).

In our interview with Dilukshi's mother, some additional statements came up that are not found in the handwritten notes of Abeyपालa, in his article in the *Weekend*, nor in Sunil's letter. One was: "There were dark patches in the stream." We found such dark patches in the canal (stream) due to some almost black looking growth at the bottom. "We used to drink marmite at home." This was verified by Shiromi's mother. "I used to take sunglasses, umbrella, and waterbottle to school" This was also verified by the mother, but would be true for most children, except for the sunglasses. "We had mosquito net in the bedroom" This was verified by the mother and is uncommon in poor households. We were shown mosquito nets hanging in the bedroom. These items are only briefly mentioned because of the possibility of later contamination as we have no written record of them before the two families met.

How Do Dilukshi's Statements Fit the Facts of Shiromi's Life?

Can any person be identified who corresponds to Dilukshi's statements? So far we have only one candidate and that is Shiromi, who died one year and a week before Dilukshi was born. How well or poorly do the facts about Shiromi's life, as far as we know them, match Dilukshi's statements? Her statements differ widely in potential verifiability. Some concern objective facts and are clearly either right or wrong. Others, such as whether Shiromi

played boutique, had a doll, or slipped on the way up to the Dambulla temple, are either so general that they might fit almost any child or are such minor events that they are unlikely to have been remembered by witnesses. If we assess the 17 items that seem potentially verifiable, we can conclude that 12 (1, 2, 3, 6, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, and 19) correspond at least partially with Shiromi's life, whereas four (15, 16, 18, and 20) are definitely wrong.

Items about location and places seem to fare rather well, whereas the four names of persons are all wrong, unless we accept that the two names for Shiromi's brothers were really meant for playmates, which children in Sri Lanka frequently refer to as brothers and sisters. In that case, two names may possibly be judged right. Two names (Suwana for Shiromi and Swarna for Zeila) start with the correct sound. Unlike some children who report past-life memories, we find in Dilukshi no outstanding behavioral traits or interests that distinguish her from her environment and which correspond to some behavioral characteristics of Shiromi.

As the investigation of this case stands, the number of correspondences between Dilukshi's statements and facts about Shiromi's life seems to exceed the number of discrepancies.

The Case of Prethibha Gunawardana

Prethibha Gunawardana was born on October 4th, 1985, and was four years and two months old when we first met him and his mother in November, 1989, at their home in Pannipitiya, some 20 miles southeast of Colombo. Tissa Jayawardane, my interpreter, had just learned about the case from a friend. It was only after we convinced Prethibha's mother that we would not publicize the case in Sri Lanka that she was willing to talk to us. Prethibha had made his first statements about his previous life after he suffered high fever for a week when he was a little over two years old. Since then he has frequently spoken about his memories of a previous life.

Prethibha is strongly built and healthy looking. He spoke to us without shyness about the memories that he insists he has about his previous life.

Prethibha stated that he had lived in Kandy (using the Sinhalese name, **Maha** Nuwara), the main city of central Sri Lanka. He gave his former name as Santha Megahathenne, and said that he had lived at number 28 Pilagoda Road. His car had caught fire, he had been burnt on his right leg, hand, and mouth, had been taken to a hospital and then he "came here" (died). His mother told us that he mentioned especially often two names: an older brother Samantha and an older sister Seetha. His father later told us that Prethibha often said he wanted to see them. According to his mother, he talked more often about names than events. His 42 statements are listed in Table 3. Prethibha appears to have no unusual behavioral traits that seem related to his statements.

When we asked the boy if he would like to go to Kandy, he was quick to say yes. He said he could find his house, but when we asked him if he knew its

TABLE 3
Statements made by Prethibha Gunawardana about his previous life

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1. Often mentions Samantha aya (elder brother).
 2. Often mentions Seetha akka (elder sister).
 3. Elder sister was married.
 4. Mentions Loku aya and Loku akka (big/elder).
 5. Mentioned Dhamman Sadhu, a relative of father's brother.
 6. They had a car and a bus.
 7. His car had been burned (with much smoke) with him in it.
 8. Right hand, leg, and mouth had been burned.
 9. Admitted to Nuwara hospital, plaster placed on his body.
 10. After that he came to this place (died and was born here).
 11. He had been to India and to a Hindu temple (kovil).
 12. He had a passport.
 13. Mentioned name of Natapati (Nathapathi), visited Natapati Devalaya (kovil) while in India.
 14. Brought from India some items for his mother (sarīs and buttons).
 15. He lived at number 28 Pilagoda Road in Nuwara (Kandy).
 16. He lived upstairs in a house.
 17. His father was old.
 18. His father had a car.
 19. His father wore eyeglasses.
 20. Father had gone abroad and returned.
 21. Mentions a fight between snake and katussa.
 22. He had a girlfriend but did not like to marry that girl.
 23. They had a house with land around it.
 24. He had an uncle.
 25. They had paddyfields.
 26. Balansena worked in the paddyfields.
 27. There was a temple near the house.
 28. **Artworks** of elephants at the temple.
 29. He went to Sunday temple school.
 30. They had a refrigerator.
 31. They had a pettagama (large wooden box).
 32. He had a good wristwatch.
 33. Mentions **punchi amma** (mother's younger sister).
 34. **Punchi amma's** husband had a lorry and was a businessman.
 35. His name was Santha Megahathenne.
 36. He had a friend called Asanga.
 37. Bandara also lived there.
 38. He wore trousers.
 39. He was attending school.
 40. They had a bank account.
 41. His (former) brother looked like the brother of his (present) mother.
 42. Attanayake lived close to our house and had a lorry.
-

whereabouts he replied with no. According to his mother, his father had not been willing to search for the previous personality, and she evidently shared the common fear of mothers of such children that she might lose the child (presumably to the previous family if it were found). Previously, the boy had told his parents that he wanted to go to Kandy to collect his things.

In Kandy we made inquiries about Pilagoda Road and names resembling it. Post office authorities told us that there was no such road in Kandy city nor any village or area by that name in the Kandy district. We also made

inquiries about the name Megahathenne, which Prethibha had given as his former family name. Some Sri Lankans use the name of the village they come from as a family name. A village by the name of Megahathenne is found near Galagedara some 15 miles away from Kandy. Inquiries there yielded no information about any person having the characteristics described by Prethibha, and no Pilagoda Road was found in that village. The name Megahathenne is not found in the 1975 edition of the Kandy telephone directory.

We expressed the wish to take the boy with his family to Kandy, and the parents accepted. With **Godwin** Samararatne as my interpreter, we made the three-hour drive up the scenic road to Kandy, which leads through many villages and towns. As we were approaching the bridge over the Mahaveli river at the other side of which is Kandy city, and were driving through a busy street, the boy became quite animated. He spontaneously said, "There is **Maha Nuwara**," which is the Sinhalese name for Kandy city. As we crossed the bridge (one of a few on the way to Kandy) over the Mahaveli river, he correctly remarked, "This is Mahaveli **Ganga**" (ganga-river). Neither we nor the parents had mentioned this name nor given any indication that we were about to enter Kandy city.

We drove down Peradeniya Road, the main street into Kandy, to the Temple of the Tooth-the chief landmark of Kandy-and around the Lake. Apart from these two statements, there was no response or comment from Prethibha to indicate what might be considered a recognition or knowledge of the area, nor did he express any wish to see a particular spot, though he definitely seemed to enjoy the journey.

Our enquiries in Kandy and Megahathenne and Prethibha's visit to Kandy did not enable us to find any person that fit Prethibha's statements. One further possibility would have been to go through the admission records at Kandy hospital in the hope of finding the name of Santha Megahathenne. This was beyond our means as there are thousands of admissions every year. Without revealing the boy's name or address the main features of the case were publicized with the parent's permission in an interview with me on December 11, 1990, in the widely circulated *Dinamina* and its English edition *Daily News*. No response came from readers.

In spite of considerable efforts no person corresponding to Prethibha **Gunawardane's** statements has been found. Hence we have no evidence that Prethibha's alleged past-life memories correspond to any objective facts.

The Case of Dilupa Damayanthi Nanayakkara

Dilupa Damayanthi Nanayakkara was born on November 19, 1982, as the daughter of a poor laborer and his wife who live in Kadawata village some 16 miles from Colombo. The family is Catholic and has nine children, of which Dilupa is the youngest. She was almost six years old when we met her in

September, 1988. According to her mother, Dilupa was about $3\frac{1}{2}$ years old when she started to speak about a previous life. She stated that she had another mother in Maharagama, which is a town some 25 miles away, and she had not been to see her parents for a long time. Her father had worked in a stone quarry, her brother was tarring roads, and she had a sister by the name of Simetha. She had lived in a small house built of mud, which was located near a school, a dispensary, and a quarry. She had been badly treated, especially when her father was not present; beaten by her previous mother and chased out of her home. She said that her name was Damayanthi (same as her second present name). Her 19 statements are listed in Table 4.

At $4-4\frac{1}{2}$ years of age Dilupa was taken for a special benediction in church and asked not to speak about this any more. After that she did it only twice, and her parents told us that she is now forgetting and no longer speaks about her memories. Earlier, when she spoke of them, she had always been in a sorrowful mood, often cried, and did not eat.

Although the family tried to keep the case secret, gradually some neighbors, the village headman, and then a local journalist learned about the case.

A report on it was published in the newspaper *Devaina* on October 15, 1986.

Dilupa expressed a wish to see her family in Maharagama again but when her parents offered to take her there she did not want to go. She said she feared her former mother. Dilupa started to cry when we asked her if we might take her to Maharagama.

The nature of Dilupa's statements make it difficult to search for a family that might match her statements. The item about her father working in a

TABLE 4
Statements made by Dilupa Damayanthi Nanayakkara

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-
1. I have not been able to see my father and mother for a long time.
 2. Dilupa cried and asked sister to take her to her previous parents.
 3. My home is at Maharagama.
 4. I lived in a small house built of mud with **cowdung** applied on floor. It had 2-3 small rooms.
 5. The house had its own well.
 6. My father is working in a quarry.
 7. A school, a dispensary, and the quarry is close to our house.
 8. My brother is working tarring roads.
 9. My sister's name is Simetha.
 10. My name was Damayanthi.
 11. I was chased out of home. Oil cakes were prepared for function and kept under the bed. I ate some of the cakes and was badly beaten by my mother and cried the whole day.
 12. I had a black gown and black shoes and want to bring them to my present home.
 13. I had a stomachache. My mother took me to the Maharagama dispenser-y and brought me back home after treatment.
 14. When my father was not present I was fed very poorly.
 15. My mother was fair and tall, wore a frock and jacket, and had a knot in her hair.
 16. My previous mother is a bad woman.
 17. My mother injured my leg while chopping food. Three stitches had to be made.
 18. My father was also chased out of the home.
 19. My grandmother lived in Kadawatta.
-

stone quarry seemed most likely to lead us somewhere. Several enquiries in Maharagama revealed that there is no quarry in or around that town. Maharagama is located on flat land and no granite boulders are visible in the area. It seems that we have no further ways of attempting to verify/falsify Dilupa's claims.

The Case of Duminda Bandara Ratnayake

In May or June, 1987, when Duminda was about 3 years old, he started to speak about a life as an abbot at the Asgiriya temple and monastery in Kandy and often expressed his wish to visit that temple. The Asgiriya temple is one of the largest and most ancient temples in Sri Lanka, and its monks share with the Malwatta temple the privilege of guarding the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, one of the foremost places of pilgrimage in Theravada Buddhism (Seneviratne, 1978).

Duminda Bandara Ratnayake was born on June 16, 1984, of Sinhalese Buddhist parents, Mr. H. B. Ratnayake, a former bus driver who runs a small poultry farm, and his wife Mrs. R. M. Swarna Latha. Duminda's mother lives with her son at the farm of her parents who are small landowners in Thundeniya, Gampola, a mountainous rural area some 16 miles by road from the city of Kandy. Duminda is the second youngest of three sons of this couple.

In September, 1988, I first interviewed the principal witnesses to the boy's statements and several monks in the Asgiriya temple. In November, 1989, I again interviewed most of the witnesses, made further enquiries and profited by Godwin Samararatne's intimate knowledge of Buddhism and monks in Sri Lanka. In June and November-December 1990, I made my last enquiries about the case.

Duminda's Statements About a "Previous" Life and his Behavioural Traits

Apart from stating that he had lived in the Asgiriya temple, Duminda had, according to his mother, also claimed that he had owned a red car, had taught other monks, had suffered a sudden pain in his chest, fallen on the floor, and had been taken by some monks to a hospital and died. Duminda mentioned no personal name. His statements are listed in Table 5.

Duminda showed some behavioral features that were 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 Buddhist chapel (vihara) close to his house, visited the temple regularly, plucked flowers to bring there, and placed them down in the typical Buddhist fashion. He observed great cleanliness, 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 (sentences or verses on religion) in the way that monks do and in the Pali language,

TABLE 5
 Statements made by Duminda Bandara Ratnayake about a previous life
 and a list of some of his behavioral traits

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. He had been a senior monk (nayake-humduruwo, loku-humduruwo, loku-sadhu) at Asgeriya temple. 2. Had pain in chest and fell, was brought to a hospital and died (used the word apawathwuna 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 Malwatha Temple and used to visit it. 7. Longed for his moneybag which he had in Asgeriya. 8. Longed for his radio in Asgeriya.

List of behavioral traits:

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Often talks about wanting to go to the Asgeriya temple. 2. Expresses early a wish to visit the temple in Thundeniya. 3. Wants to visit the Malwatha 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. Requested a monk's robe and fan. 8. Wants to wear a monk's robe (only seldom allowed). 9. Wants his family to call him "podi sadhu" (small 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 wrongdoings 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 monk's hands). 16. When brought to Asgeriya temple, he did not want to sit down until given white cloth to sit on (as is the tradition in the case of monks). 17. Does not like to play with other children. 18. Displays calm and serenity seldom found in children.

which is the ancient language of Sinhalese Buddhism and is still learned by monks.

Duminda's mother sought advice from Ven. Iriyagama Jinasara, a monk residing in a nearby temple. We interviewed him about his observations of the boy. Duminda's mother had told the monk what the boy was saying at home before she brought the boy to him, namely, that he had been a monk and wanted to go to the Asgeriya temple. The boy was first brought to the monk in July or August 1987 when he was a little over three years old. The monk tried to question him, but Duminda did not answer, perhaps because he was shy. The monk asked him what he would like to have. The boy then asked for a fan that monks use (an important part of some monk's **paraphernalia**²) and the monk gave him one. The boy then took the fan, held it in the typical fashion in front of his face and recited one of the Buddhist stanzas.

According to Ven. Iriyagama Jinasara, the boy could not have learned this stanza from him.

On a later visit, the boy told the monk that he had been a monk in the Asgiriya temple, that he wanted to see the temple and his car, and that he had had a room in the temple with some belongings. This is about all that the monk learned from the boy who behaved so differently from other boys. When he visited the temple he would go straight to the stupa to worship, he kept himself alone and did not play with other boys, and he seemed to be very religiously oriented. As we questioned the monk, he remarked that he did not believe that the boy's parents could have taught him this behavior. In the end, the monk advised Duminda's mother to take her son to the Asgiriya monastery.

On a Sunday in early October, 1987, Duminda was taken to Asgiriya by his mother and grandparents. D. Oliver Silva, a journalist from the newspaper *Island*, learned about the case and was present during Duminda's visit. It seems that the boy's mother had ambivalent feelings about the visit, fearing that the boy might later leave her family to become a monk.

In November, 1989, we visited Duminda's family again. The boy was then 5 years and 4 months old, or about the age most children who report remembering a previous life stop talking about it (Stevenson, 1987). We were indeed told by his family that he seemed to be beginning to forget the Asgiriya side of his life. He less frequently plucks flowers and goes to temple, but still does it much more frequently than other children or adults. When we met the family again in November 1990 his mother had yielded to his wish and he was going to enter the monastery in a year's time, which was the earliest permissible age.

The only new statement the boy made came up in June 1990, when the death of the abbot of the Malwatta Temple was announced over the radio. Spontaneously, the boy said that he had known him. (Our enquiries showed that the abbot had entered Malwatta in 1916 so this is a possibility). 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 like monks carry their robes. He then asked for a robe and a fan as kinds of toys. (Fans of this kind are only used by monks and not even by all of them, and will not be found in a layman's house). 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 monk's hands). He had also protested about her calling him son. He wanted to be called small monk ("podi sadhu"). When he was first brought to preschool he also protested and did not want to go there because some girls had touched him.

Duminda still liked to be alone and walked home alone from school. Recently there had also been some change in his eating habits that were in line with some fading of his memories. As monks do, he earlier had taken no meal after noon till the next morning, but now he was taking a meal with the family in the evenings. However, he is still much more interested in religion

than the other children and has kept much of the unchildlike calm and dignity that people around him have found so charming.

Duminda's maternal grandfather, A. H. Ratnayake, had listened to our interview with his mother. When we had finished the 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 what was new to us, that he also missed his money bag and radio.

When we asked Duminda's mother about the money bag and the radio, she confirmed them somewhat embarrassedly because these items are not considered especially appropriate for a monk to have.

When we again visited the family in June 1990 the boy was adjusting well to school, and his calm, detachment, and dignity were evident when we compared his behavior 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 temple. None of them had ever visited the temple 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 who was a monk.

Even before this 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 lesser importance in our investigation than Duminda's statements and his behavioral traits as it proved difficult to reconstruct reliably what had taken place. Duminda's statements are also more important to us because they were repeatedly uttered over a period of more than two years. We will describe the visit to Asgiriya later.

The Search for a Personality Matching Duminda's Statements

Are we dealing with a child's fantasy or do some of Duminda's statements correspond with events in the life of one or more monks who did in fact live in Asgiriya? We made extensive enquiries among the monks who live there now.

Oliver D. Silva, the journalist from *Island* who first reported on the case, quickly concluded that the boy had been referring to Ven. Rathanapala, a senior monk who had died of a heart attack in 1975 in Galagedara town outside of Asgiriya. We learned from three monks who had known him that Ven. Rathanapala had not owned a car or an elephant, had no personal income (hence no moneybag), did not preach (hence did not use the fan), had no connection with the Malwatta temple, and had been known for his interest in politics. Thus, Rathanapala was excluded as a candidate for **Duminda's** statements.

If Duminda's statements are in fact referring to a certain monk who had lived in Asgiriya, answers to the following questions would seem pertinent in attempting to distinguish him from other monks:

Which monks: (a) had income from the temple (money-bag), (b) had connections with the Malwatta Temple and the Temple of the Tooth, had frequent occasions to visit these places, and had friends there, (c) had preached sermons and had to get laymen to recite the Buddhist precepts, thus using a monk's fan, (d) had taught young monks, (e) had travelled and often used a red car, (f) had a heart condition, fell down and died in a hospital, (g) had often performed rituals offering flowers, (h) had owned a radio, and (i) had had an elephant?

Furthermore, it is possible to conjecture that the monk we sought had lived long in the clergy, had not been a vegetarian because he did not reject nonvegetarian food at his home, was not a "meditating" monk, since his emphasis was more on external things, ceremonies and behavior, and had been quite virtuous, or at least had strictly obeyed the rules.

Duminda clearly stated that he had been a senior or chief monk, though he never explicitly mentioned that he was head (mahanayaka) of the Asgiriya chapter. We asked separately and independently 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-hum-duru**," meaning abbot, and less frequently "loku-sadhu" or "**loku-hum-duru**," meaning "big" monk. The red car and the money bag also clearly indicated either a senior monk who had died quite recently, or an abbot (mahanayaka) of Asgiriya who had lived not earlier than right after the First World War. The Asgiriya temple has only one abbot (mahanayaka), and he is elected by the monks. In the 1920s the abbot started to own a car, and only in the 1980s had monks other than the abbots come to own cars. The same can be said about possessing moneybags; now a few of them may have some personal income, but that is a quite recent development.

After careful enquiries we learned from various monks that no monk who had died in the 70s or 80s could match Duminda's statements. His description could only fit an abbot, if anyone at all.

We obtained a list of all the abbots in Asgiriya since the beginning of the 1920s (when the first car came to Asgiriya) to 1975, when the present abbot took office. This list of abbots is given in Table 6 along with the principal statements made by Duminda, and it is recorded how each of them fit each abbot. We gathered this information from various monks in Asgiriya.

Duminda claimed to have *owned a red car*. In Table 6, we see that only two abbots had owned cars. Godmunne who died in 1975 owned a white Mercedes. Gunnepana Saranankara, who died in 1929, also owned a car. In 1988, we interviewed independently two old monks who recognized **Gunnepana** in a group photograph to be described below. According to Ven. **Kappitiwalana Sumangala**, then aged 82 (now deceased), Gunnepana **Saranana-**

TABLE 6
List of abbots of Asgiriya temple from 1921 to 1975

Name	Years	Car	Cause of death	Place of death	Radio	Preached	Elephant
Gunnepana	'21-'29	red/brownish	sudden heart attack	Asgiriya	gramophone	much	had one?
Mullegrama	'29-'47	no car	paralysis	Asgiriya	no radio	famous for it	none
Yatawatte	'47-'66	no car	paralysis	Asgiriya	no radio	no preaching	had one
Udugama	'66-'70	uncertain	old age	hospital	no radio	no preaching	none
Godmunne	'70-'75	white Mercedes	sudden heart attack	Asgiriya	no radio	no preaching	none

kara had owned a car. When we asked if he could remember its color, the monk said brownish. The same day we independently met with Ven. Thoradeniya Piyarathana, who also recognized Gunnepana Sarananakara in the same group photograph. He remembered the color of his car as red or brownish. In 1990, we learned through Ven. Murudeniya Dharmarathana, who had become a monk in the village of Gunnepana, that Mr. Sedarama who was born in 1914, had known Gunnepana Saranankara since Sedarama was 12 years of age, as he had lived in the village of Gunnepana. He and his father used to drum at festivals for the abbot. Mr. Sedarama told us that all those years that he knew Gunnepana he had owned a red car with a folding roof. In his red car the abbot had often visited the village Gunnepana, where he was born and where he had previously lived in the local temple. Our conclusion is that only one abbot, Gunnepana Saranankara, had owned a red (or brownish) car.

Two of the mahanayakas, Gunnepana and Godmunne, *had died of heart attacks*. This item excludes the other mahanayakas. Duminda had stated that he *had died in a hospital*. However, Ven. Thoradeniya Piyarathana and Mr. Sedarama both stated that abbot Gunnepana died in the Asgiriya temple after a physician had been summoned to him, and not in a hospital. A death certificate would contain place as well as cause of death, but the authorities were not able to trace it for us. Apparently only abbot Udugama had died in a hospital.

Did any of the abbots *have a radio*? None, according to Ven. T. Piyarathana, 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 because he had never seen a gramophone? If this is the case, the evidence again points towards Ven. Gunnepana. Furthermore, according to Mr. Sedarama, abbot Gunnepana had been particularly fond of religious music, especially drumming and chanting used in Buddhist ceremonies. There was more music played in Asgiriya during his time than

either before or after his term in office. (The village of Gunnepana is still known for its musicians, drummers and dancers). Sedarama and his father had become close to Gunnepana as musicians because they had often drummed for the abbot in the temples in Gunnepana and Asgiriya. This musical interest is likely to have caused Ven. Gunnepana to obtain a gramophone. Mr. Sedarama, however, did not know if Gunnepana had owned a gramophone, but stated that he might have had one without his knowledge.

Every abbot *taught apprentice monks* so this item is of no value in distinguishing between them.

The holding of the fan and reciting of the stanzas is done at the beginning of any formal sermon. Using a fan indicates that a monk preaches, and only a minority of Buddhist monks do. Which of the abbots *did preach*? According to Ven. T. Piyarathana, Mullegama was famous for his preaching. Gunnepana did much preaching. Yatawatte, Udugama, and Godmunne did no preaching. Again we have two candidates, Gunnepana and Mullegama, the latter, however, had no car and died by paralysis.

One of Duminda's claims is that *he had an elephant*. Ven. Piyarathana was not sure if Gunnepana had owned an elephant, but was sure that Yatawatte had owned one. Again, Mr. Sedarama's testimony proved informative. According to him, Ven. Gunananda, the chief disciple of Gunnepana, had caught an elephant and had it brought to Gunnepana village where Gunnepana Saranankara was a frequent visitor as he was born there. (We saw a portrait of him hanging in the local temple when we visited the village and interviewed Mr. Sedarama and some of the monks). Abbot Gunnepana had taken an interest in this elephant, which died shortly before he himself died.

According to this testimony, we may infer that two of the abbots took some interest in elephants, Gunnepana and Yatawatte. The latter, however, had no car or radio, died of paralysis, and did no preaching.

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

Abbot Gunnepana matches five of the six principal statements listed in our table. Only one statement is wrong, namely that he died in Asgiriya and not in a hospital. Only one statement fits each of the other abbots. Gunnepana is clearly the primary candidate to fit Duminda's description.

Duminda's Visits to Asgiriya and Possible Recognitions

Duminda was taken to Asgiriya by his mother and grandparents in early October, 1987. The Asgiriya temple and monastery is located within the city limits of Kandy. It owns temples also in other parts of the country. On its compound are several buildings that serve as places of worship or offices.

Seventeen houses are residences for the 38 monks presently living in the monastery.

It is difficult to reconstruct exactly what happened when Duminda visited Asgiriya and what clues may have been given to him from those around him. A crowd soon gathered around the boy as he walked within the compound. According to his mother, he went up the road through the center of Asgiriya and up to the main temple where there is a stupa and a vihara, all of which are situated at the opposite end of the compound from where the boy had entered and not in view from there. At the stupa he worshipped in the traditional Buddhist fashion and also walked up the steps to the Bodhi tree, which is on a steep slope behind the stupa.

A monk in his twenties, Ven. Mailpitiye Wimalakeerthi, met the boy at the main temple and talked to him. Duminda told him that he had worshipped here. He then asked the boy where the Bodhi tree was (one Bodhi tree is to be found on every temple compound), which was only partly in sight, and the boy then ran up the steps to the tree. Duminda then went into the residence building next to the temple ground (vihara) and stated that he had lived in it. Two other young monks, Ven. Lenawa **Mangala** and Ven. Molagoda Dhammarathana, and a ten-year-old child monk were present inside this building. They invited Duminda to sit down but he waited to take his seat until they had placed a white cloth on his chair which by tradition is required by monks when they are offered a seat.

When the three monks were interviewed individually, they gave somewhat different versions of what had happened but all agreed that the boy had entered the building next to the vihara, that he stated that he had lived in this house, and that he had gone upstairs to a large room and stated that a bed in one corner of the large room had been his bed. On the corridor in front of this room was an old large wooden box, which the boy claimed was there when he lived in the building but without the lock which was on it now.

Duminda was shown some large portraits of monks who had lived in the building, but did not recognize any of them as himself. According to journalist Oliver Silva, the boy had not recognized a photo of Ven. Rathanapala whom the journalist had concluded was the previous personality of **Duminda** and who had died of a heart attack not too long before. He had lived in the building where the boy claimed to have lived.

Duminda was also shown an old group photograph with 12 monks and two other persons. According to Ven. Wimalakeerthi, he pointed to one monk and said that he had known him. The three monks who were present did not know the identity of that monk nor of any other person in the photograph. Another monk who had been present told us that Duminda had pointed to a different monk on the photograph. There seemed to be some confusion about which monk Duminda had pointed to and what he had said about that monk, i.e., if that monk was someone he had known or himself.

We decided to let Duminda examine the photograph again. In the pres-

ence of the author and his interpreter, Mr. Ranasinghe, Duminda was again faced with the old tom group photograph at his home. He pointed to one monk and said "This was me." At that time we did not know the identity of any person on the photograph.

Later, we brought the group photograph to two old monks in Asgiriya. Ven. Kappitiwalana Sumangala, 82-83 years old, told us that the monk that Duminda had pointed to was abbot Gunnepana Saranankara who expired in 1929. Later the same day, we independently interviewed Ven. Thoradeniya Piyarathana. He also identified this monk as Gunnepana Saranankara, whom he remembered well. On this day we first heard about Ven. Gunnepana Saranankara.

The monk that Duminda had pointed at was in the center of the group photograph. We therefore made another test. We gathered six portrait photographs of different monks, one of which was Ven. Gunnepana, placed them in a row and then asked a person who did not know the identity of the monks to ask Duminda if he had been any of these persons, and if so, who. Duminda pointed to one of the photos but it was not of Ven. Gunnepana.

Duminda's mother agreed to allow Duminda to visit the Asgiriya temple again. On September 19, 1989, we drove him to the main temple. He ran up the steps to the stupa, took his shoes off and bowed like a monk, and seemed to worship. On his first visit he was reported to have said, "Here I worshipped." From the stupa, Duminda ran up the many steep winding steps to the Bodhi tree. He again entered the residence house next to the temple, went upstairs to a room and said, as on his earlier visit, "This was my bed," and pointed to the same bed as earlier. On the way out he stopped at the large wooden trunk and said that he had kept things in it, "plates." An old servant in the house told us afterwards that the box had long ago been used to keep plates. It is not known by the present inhabitants of the house (all relatively young) that any ordained monk has lived upstairs in the room where Duminda pointed at the bed. Ven. Ratanapala had lived in a room downstairs.

We took Duminda to the next building. We had learned that Ven. Gunnepana had lived in it, at least in his later years. Duminda had not entered it before. He made no comment about anything. The two houses are of similar size and structure. The house closer to the temple where Duminda claimed to have lived was renovated in 1971; a new facade and entrance was built and some other changes were made.

In the company of Ven. Mailpitiye Wimalakeerthi, who was most helpful in this investigation, we took Duminda to the Temple of the Tooth. He evidently enjoyed himself but made no comment relating to a previous life.

From Duminda's visits to Asgiriya there is clear consensus of those present on the following items. He chose as his former place of worship the central temple area. He stated that he had lived in the house closest to the temple, that he had lived in a room upstairs, and he pointed to the figure of mahayanayaka Gunnepana on an old group photograph. Of these recognitions—

if they indeed are **recognitions**—two fit the life of Gunnepana, i.e., that he worshipped at the main temple, and that he was the figure that Duminda pointed at on the group picture. Gunnepana, however—as far as we can ascertain—lived in the next building. Seventeen buildings in Asgiriya serve as residences for monks. The building picked by Duminda is closest to and adjacent to the one in which Gunnepana resided in the latter part of his life.

Effects of Possible Contaminations in Duminda's Statements

One of the principal difficulties in investigating cases of children claiming past-life memories is to get the child's statements before they may have become contaminated by knowledge of some personality that people around the child come to believe to have been his previous personality. One must attempt to separate the child's true original statements from whatever the child or those around him may have later added or changed. In this case, the possibilities for such contamination were fewer than usual, because the original investigation was superficial and the child's statements only to a small extent matched the person whom the journalist picked as the previous personality. Besides, 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 persons who were associated with Duminda's statements. For example, when we asked Duminda's grandfather which monk the boy had been, he did not know. For the family, it sufficed that he had been a monk in Asgiriya. However, Duminda's mother sometimes seemed to embellish the case, especially regarding the behavioral traits.

Hence, whatever contamination there might be, it is more likely to be of a general nature, i.e., towards characteristics of monks in general. The boy lived in a rural area, and even there he might have seen a monk on the road and seen how they dress and fold their cloths.

More puzzling may be his recitation of stanzas at three years of age, and doing it with a fan in a monkish fashion. We made many inquiries about how Duminda might have learned these stanzas. One normal explanation was the fact that at 5 o'clock each morning a monk recites some stanzas on the Sri Lanka radio. The boy might have heard them. However, Duminda knew one stanza (Worship of the Tooth Relic) which the director of the religious program told me had never been broadcasted. We learned that Duminda's grandmother and mother knew that stanza, although they affirmed that Duminda could not have learned it or any other stanza from them. They claimed to have learned one stanza from him. Then, as my interpreter Mr. Ranasinghe once commented when we were pondering about this, his grandchildren of similar age were up early but had never learned any stanza, nor had he ever heard of any child, in his family or elsewhere, who had learned these stanzas, which are in a foreign language, **Pali**, which in Buddhism corresponds to Latin in Christianity.

At the age of five Duminda knows the letters of the Sinhalese alphabet and

can only read elementary words and does not seem to have any unusual memorizing abilities. His performance in school is not outstanding in any way. P. D. Premasiri, professor of Buddhist philosophy at Peradeniya University, who assisted me in this investigation, was impressed when he heard the boy chant in clear and faultless **Pali**.

In the case of Duminda Ratnayake, we find many behavioral features unusual in a 3- or 4-year old child and which correspond to the behavior of monks in general. The testimony that we have been able to gather from witnesses, who knew Ven. Gunnepana Saranankara, indicates that **Duminda's** statements about a previous life for the most part match what we can gather about the life of Ven. Gunnepana Saranankara, who was abbot of the Asgiriya temple from 1921 to 1929.

Discussion

Sri Lanka is one of the countries where some children can be found every year who claim to remember a previous life. Nothing is known with certainty about the frequency of such cases in Sri Lanka but during a period of 3 to 4 years the author and his associates were able to trace 20 new cases. The four cases reported on in this paper reveal a little of the diversity of these cases, and also some of the similarities among them. The cases differ in the number of statements that the child usually repeatedly makes during those two or so years in which the child generally speaks about a previous life. The number of statements vary from 8 to 42. The cases also differ widely in the specificity, hence potential verifiability/falsifiability, of the statements made by each child.

It is noteworthy that in all the cases reported here, written records were made of the statements of the child before a serious attempt was made to find a person who corresponded to the description in the statements. Hence, we have reliable evidence from several witnesses that the children did in fact make the statements that we have listed, and also that they repeatedly and consistently made these statements.

As far as we can ascertain, none of these children appear to have been, at least to begin with, reinforced for their claims of past-life memories. In the case of Dilukshi, the family tried for a long time to suppress any talk of the child about a previous life, and the mother of Duminda was initially quite concerned that she might lose her son to a monastery because of his claims about a previous life as a monk and his wish to become a monk again. The family of Prethibha wanted their case to remain a secret within the family and so did the Catholic family of Dilupa Nanayakkara, who in the end was taken for a special benediction in church and asked not to speak about her memories any more. The anthropologist Antonia Mills (1989) found, after investigating several cases of children in India, that cultural acceptance of

the idea of reincarnation does not seem to adequately explain the claims of these young children.

Our sample of four cases is too small for any meaningful comparison with the patterns Stevenson (1974, 1987) has found among the cases he has investigated. Still, some trends may be mentioned, such as the young age at which children start to make statements of this kind, usually 2 to 3 years. Also, that the children start to speak less or stop talking about their "previous" life around 5 years of age. Another characteristic is also evident; the high percentage of "previous" personalities which, according to the statements of the children, have died violent deaths. In two of our four cases the "previous" personality is reported to have died in an accident.

One of the interesting features commonly found in cases of children claiming memories of a previous life (Stevenson, 1977b) are phobias or **phili-**as (strong interests or appetites) of early childhood that their parents cannot account for. A clear case of a phobia is not found in our sample. However, in the case of Duminda, we find strong features common in subjects of cases of the reincarnation type who show special interests, habits, appetites, or even skills in childhood which differ widely from those of their families or their environment and which may not be satisfactorily explainable through usual learning processes. Duminda, who had no access to monks in his early childhood, wanted to wear monk's clothing and treated his clothes in the way that monks do, showed great religious interest and monk-like behavior at a very early age, such as going to a place of worship every morning and evening, plucking flowers and placing them as offerings, as monks do, two to three times a day on religious holidays, reciting Buddhist stanzas in **Pali** and doing it in the way that monks do, etc. His very notable detachment, serenity and dignity, his lack of interest in childlike play, his cleanliness, and his disdain of wrongdoings, makes his behavior rather strikingly different from that of other children his age. This difference corresponds to the life of the kind of person he claims to have been. How did Duminda learn this behavior so unusual in children? How did he develop these attitudes at this early age? We could not discover satisfactory evidence to show that this child used normal information channels to construct these memories and behavior patterns.

Do the contents of the statements by our subjects fit the characteristics of any persons dead or alive? That is our central question. In the cases of Prethibha Gunawardane and Dilupa Nanayakkara, we were not able to trace any person resembling the given description, and some of their statements seemed definitely wrong. In the case of Prethibha, we had only one promising lead, namely that he had lived at Pilagoda Road 28, in Kandy. Because a road by that name does not exist in Kandy, we found no way to identify any person to whom the rest of the statements might fit. In the case of Dilupa there was only one statement that was likely to lead us to a potential personality, and that was the statement about her father working in a quarry in Maharagama. No such quarry exists in that town, hence we had no way to

test the rest of the items which were of a more general and personal nature, as can be seen in Table 4.

In two of the cases, those of Dilukshi Nissanka and Duminda Ratnayake, persons were identified, both deceased, who showed rather striking resemblances to the characteristics of the person who the child had claimed to have been. In both cases, we found no evidence suggesting that there existed a previous connection between the family of the child and the potential "previous" person that might have helped or caused the child to form statements or fantasies about that person's life. Hence, it seems that we may with reasonable certainty exclude any normal means on behalf of the child to obtain the revealed information about that person.

However, for each of these cases, we may ask about the probability of finding by chance a person that fits the majority of the statements made by each child. Unfortunately, we still have not developed any means of statistically assessing such a probability. It seems, though, that the odds against chance are fairly high in both cases. In the Dilukshi case, let us just mention two items: "Our house is near Heenkolla's (the thin boy's) boutique. Near the road where you turn there is a small vegetable boutique. There is a very thin boy there." Also "The roof of our house could be seen from the small Dambulla rock." In both cases, however, there are also items that do not match. In the Duminda case most of the items fit only one of the last five successive abbots, besides the striking behavioral features consistent with the statements, which the boy displayed at a very early age.

Behavioral features of cases of this kind, often quite distinct from persons around the child, have led Stevenson (1977b) to speculate about the explanatory value of the concept of reincarnation concerning the striking idiosyncrasies observed in some of these children at a very early age.

After carefully investigating several cases in Sri Lanka, four of which I have reported here in detail, I doubt that we can satisfactorily explain the veridical aspect of some of the cases as being the result of childish fantasy and the prevalence of the belief in reincarnation among the Buddhists of Sri Lanka.

The main objective of this study was to get well acquainted with cases of children in Sri Lanka who claim to remember a previous life by studying them in a traditional way, by investigating the veridical aspect of their claims. In so far this was an attempt to replicate Stevenson's work. The methodological and practical difficulties of this project were greater than I had anticipated. So were the number of cases that remain "unsolved" in spite of considerable efforts to find a person that matches the statements made by a child. Of our 20 cases, five had been "solved" by people around the child as we came to the scene, sometimes on the basis of rather slight and superficial correspondence between statements and facts. In 15 cases either no or almost no attempts had been made to find a match, or such attempts had been in vain. We found a fairly satisfactory match for four of these 15

cases, among them Duminda and Dilukshi. However, eleven cases have remained unsolved (among them Prethibha and Dilupa) although it must be stated that the investigation of some of the cases is not completed, and in some cases the statements were either so few or so general that it seemed unreasonable to expect to find a match or correspondence that would be counted as impressive by any standard. It should also be added that Sri Lanka has by far the highest incidence of unsolved cases of all the countries in Asia, or 68% in a review made by Cook, Pasricha, Samararatne, Maung and Stevenson (1983a, 1983b). This may be related to the fact that in relatively few cases in Sri Lanka (in our sample there is only one) do we find children claiming to have been a member of their own family in the previous life. Such cases are usually quickly "solved" by the family but rarely have any evidential value.

Still, in spite of this, the overall impression is that we have something here worth investigating further. Having become familiar with the general environment of the cases, and the difficulties involved in investigating them, I feel ready to attempt a long overdue psychological assessment of these children. Extensive investigations have been made on the veridical aspect by Stevenson, and more recently by Mills (1989), Keil (1991) and myself. Now it seems essential for further understanding of these subjects to obtain a richer knowledge of cognitive development, fantasy proneness, suggestibility, etc., of these children. We need to know, through more than mere observation, what may distinguish them psychologically from other children. There are considerable difficulties and limitations in conducting such a study, such as foreign language and culture, no psychological tests available in the language spoken by the children, and hence no norms, etc., which would only make a peer comparison possible. Such a study is in preparation.

Endnotes

¹ This area has a luscious vegetation mostly covered by trees and is divided into small lots where families cultivate various crops, mostly fruits and vegetables and some rice. These lots seem too small for them to live on the products, hence most of the men work somewhere outside, like Mr. Ranatunga who works in distant Anuradhapura and rents part of his lot to another cultivator.

² The particular type of fan used by Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka is a part of every monk's paraphernalia, but it is in fact only used by monks who preach (and only some monks do that).

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