History and Gratitude in Theravāda Buddhism

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An inspection of several Buddhist histories (or vamsas) written in the Sinhala language in medieval Sri Lanka encourages us to reevaluate the use of emotions in religious contexts and why people write narratives of the past. This article suggests that the attention given to emotions such as gratitude in Theravāda Buddhist vamsas signals that historical narratives were composed and disseminated to orient the emotional lives of devotees toward the past and to give rise to moral communities in the present. Such texts led “virtuous persons” to understand themselves and their capacity to attain desired religious goals as being enabled by people and events from the past. The Sinhala vamsas that describe how the Buddha’s relics were brought to Sri Lanka illustrate that emotions can be cultural products that are instilled by historical narratives to accomplish a variety of ethical, social, and soteriological ends.

Scholars often note that religious histories have been variously written to explain, commemorate, record, and authorize a host of diverse events from the past and equally diverse interests in the present. A new examination of histories composed by Sri Lankan Buddhists before the island’s colonial encounters from the sixteenth century onward sheds light on how emotions were once used to effect a devotional subjectivity and moral community among medieval Theravāda Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Earlier generations of Orientalist scholars who studied the historical narratives written and preserved by Theravāda Buddhists acknowledged the usefulness of such texts for reconstructing the past while critiquing their

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apparent penchant for exaggeration and distortion of the historical record (see Geiger; Godakumbura; Mendis). Many contemporary scholars are more prone to argue that texts like the fifth-century Mahāvaṃsa reveal attempts to legitimate the privileged position of Buddhism within the Sri Lankan polity (see Kiribamune; Smith). While previous interpretations of ancient and medieval Buddhist histories sometimes offer useful frameworks for studying such texts, they also tend to rely on narrow readings of histories as mere documents for conveying knowledge about the past.¹ The didactic quality of Buddhist history writing certainly cannot be ignored, but to presume that the people who wrote, read, and listened to such texts did so only to learn about the past ignores the emotional and ethical components that informed the production and reception of historical narratives in the Theravāda Buddhist communities of premodern Sri Lanka.

Buddhist “histories,” often called vaṃsas in premodern Sri Lanka, represent a diverse collection of texts, many of which share overlapping narratives yet still contain distinctive emphases and interpretations of previous events that belie notions of invariability and uniformity in Theravāda history writing.² As a consequence, what at first glance might seem like a singular vision of the past in Theravāda Buddhism quickly becomes a plurality of representations and uses of the past. Nevertheless, one finds a few sites of coherence among many of these texts. Aside from what has been recognized as a generally historicist approach to Theravāda literature (see Collins 1981: 94–95), we find repeated evidence in Theravāda vaṃsas of explicit connections being made between the writing of history and the cultivation of particular emotional states deemed both morally and soteriologically productive. In arguing for a consideration of emotions as both a motive for history writing and an effect of encounters with Buddhist histories, I presume a significant distinction between premodern and postcolonial views of history in Sri Lanka. E. Valentine Daniel has advanced a similar claim, whereby he argues that

¹ For the sake of convenience, the term Buddhism in this article should be understood as referring to the Theravāda Buddhist traditions that came to dominate Sri Lanka and peninsular Southeast Asia in the second millennium of the Common Era. Likewise, Buddhist histories will be used here to refer specifically to Theravāda texts, many of which are generically called vaṃsas, written to narrate past events.

² Many scholars have referred to Theravāda Buddhist vaṃsas as “chronicles,” despite the fact that these texts frequently contain the same kind of coherent and causally ordered narratives found in “histories” more generally. Some of the formal differences between chronicles and histories in historical representation are discussed in White: especially chap. 1. In accordance with White’s terminology, I prefer to refer to the medieval relic vaṃsas as “histories,” for the majority of them share a closer formal resemblance to the closed narratives of histories than to the open-ended chronicle form of writing. Of course, not all vaṃsas are “histories” by this definition (e.g., Mahāvaṃsa) and not all histories are labeled vaṃsas (e.g., Pājāvaliya) in Theravāda Buddhist literature.
European colonialism transformed historical consciousness in South Asia, impressing a historiographical method on Sri Lankans and others in the region that privileges writing from a position that effectively transcends the world in order to describe it “objectively” and analytically. Daniel helpfully contrasts the orientations of premodern and postcolonial readings of Buddhist vaṃsas in terms of “ways of being in the world” versus “ways of seeing the world” (43–45). Thus, following Daniel’s argument, modern approaches to Buddhist histories tend to disregard existential concerns arising from a knowledge of the past in favor of epistemological justifications for “seeing” the world so that one can gain knowledge and power over it.\(^3\)

Herein I wish to explore the ways in which a number of medieval Buddhist histories written in the Sinhala language show evidence of having once been preoccupied with transforming how people felt and lived in the world. In such texts we see signs of history being constructed and used to affect how contemporary devotees understood themselves in relation to an idealized past. This subjectivity produced by Buddhist historical narratives was at once devotional and ethical, and, as we will see, it employed certain generalizable emotions to predispose people toward performing rituals to venerate the Buddha. Emotions such as gratitude, serene joy (pasāda), and pious confidence (saddhā) are among those emphasized in the Theravāda vaṃsas and can be described as generalizable inasmuch as they reflect feelings that are not restricted to the sensory experiences of an individual. Rather, in Buddhist histories such emotions are regularly ascribed to devotees both within the narratives and without, and they often are said to result from instances when Buddhist devotees encounter firsthand the power, beauty, and efficacy of the “Triple Gem” or “Three Jewels.”\(^4\) Accordingly, several Theravāda Buddhist vaṃsas written between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Sri Lanka display a deliberate connection forged between recalling history and feeling gratitude. Gratitude is an emotion portrayed among characters in the Buddhist vaṃsas, and it is simultaneously depicted as a product of reciting and recalling the past.

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\(^3\) The relation between acquiring knowledge and gaining power in South Asia has been a topic of increasing attention among scholars working in South Asian studies. Cohn, among others, has argued persuasively that “the conquest of India was a conquest of knowledge” and that a knowledge of history was one tool that provided the British with a means to rule a colonial state (5, 16). In other words, by determining the history of India, British colonialists were able to establish a system to regulate and control the native population based on the administrative systems of previous regimes.

\(^4\) The “Triple Gem” of Buddhism refers to the Buddha, his teaching or the Dhamma, and the monastic community or the Sangha. These three entities represent the main focal points for Buddhist devotion.
The narratives in Buddhist history writing work to create a “past” that fashions emotional and moral dispositions in the people who read them or listen to them read aloud. By ostensibly helping devotees to remember events from the past, the texts give rise to certain kinds of morally valued emotions and behavior. Thus, Buddhist vaṁsas contain explicit suggestions that they can transform people ethically by, among other things, generating feelings of gratitude that define how one relates to virtuous agents from the past and to other beings in the present. Recognizing the efforts made in Buddhist history writing to fashion the emotional lives of those devotees who encounter narratives of the past is to acknowledge that historical texts were imagined and designed to have real effects on contemporary devotees. Narratives that “record” the past were also seen to re-create the present. Yet an important distinction must be drawn here at the outset. I am not merely suggesting that historical narratives “evoked” or “elicited” feelings of gratitude from within the “hearts” of medieval Buddhist devotees. Rather, I argue that gratitude is a cultural disposition instilled by historical narratives and then embodied in a moral subjectivity that is understood to condition devotional acts of making offerings (pūja) to the Buddha’s relics.

There are two critical points to be made within the broader context of this analysis of a handful of medieval Buddhist histories composed in the literary Sinhala language. The first point concerns the views and values ascribed to the writing of history as a diverse but nonetheless coherent genre of Theravāda Buddhist literature. It is here that Daniel’s observation that the postcolonial transformation of history in Sri Lanka resulted in a shift from existential to epistemological concerns assumes further significance. A closer examination of several medieval vaṁsas that describe the transfer of the Buddha’s relics from India to Sri Lanka highlights the use of tropes related to the beneficence of past actors and the subsequent reliance of contemporary devotees on those who have come before them. In other words, the subjects used to frame and analyze the past—relics, vows, and predictions, among others—reveal the extent to which the writing of history in medieval Sri Lanka was focused on imparting a moral subjectivity on those in the present in relation to a narrative presentation of the past. The ethical concerns that appear to underlie much of Thera-

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5 It should be noted that although Sinhala retains the status of a vernacular language spoken by approximately two-thirds of the population of Sri Lanka, the form of Sinhala used in literary composition has long differed substantially from the spoken variety used in everyday conversation. As such it would be inaccurate and misleading to refer to the medieval vaṁsas as “vernacular” texts in the strict sense of the word. For a useful discussion of the morphological and syntactical differences that distinguish “literary Sinhala” from “spoken Sinhala,” see Gair: 213–236.
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vāda history writing lead us to the second major argument in this study. The transparent efforts of Buddhist history writing to transform devotees into “virtuous persons” (Pāli: sappurisās; Sinhala: satpurusās)—which is to say, grateful devotees who understand themselves as the beneficiaries of what others have done earlier—underscore the degree to which certain emotions were conceived as morally productive in Theravāda Buddhism. The austere, monastic vision of Theravāda found in many scholarly textbooks on Buddhism would seem to make a discussion of the positive appraisal of emotions appear somewhat incongruous. Yet even a preliminary assessment of Theravāda Buddhist vaṇṇas reveals how emotions such as serene joy and gratitude (Pāli: kataññu; Sinhala: kelehī) were conceived to have a crucial role in the process whereby the production, transmission, and reception of historical narratives marked sites for the ethical transformation and moral development of Buddhist devotees.

**NARRATIVE AND EMOTIONS**

Scholars who work in the field of ethics might immediately recognize that the above theoretical framework that links emotional and moral dispositions bears some resemblance to Aristotelian thought on moral virtues. Indeed, like many who currently write on the subject of Theravāda Buddhist ethics, I acknowledge the potential for fruitful comparisons between Buddhist and Aristotelian concerns for cultivating a moral character that is disposed toward performing virtuous acts (see Hallisey; Keown; Swearer). The focus on developing a virtuous character in a wide variety of Theravāda works lends support to recent efforts whereby scholarship in Buddhist studies draws selectively from the work of Aristotle in order to outline new contours in Buddhist ethics. The argument that the writing of Theravāda Buddhist histories in medieval Sri Lanka was intimately related to the cultivation of emotions—particularly gratitude—and devotional practice invites comparisons to Aristotelian ideas in which moral virtue is depicted as concerned with both action (praxis) and affect (pathos). Yet, as Nancy Sherman (235–238) points out, Aristotle articulated a need in moral actors for their nonrational emotions to be moderated and controlled by rational operations of cognitive thinking. This move to identify virtue with controlling and channeling emotions appears again with great clarity in the work of Thomas Aquinas.⁶ According to Aquinas (203), emotions must be subjected to reason lest they cloud a person’s judgment and lessen the worth of one’s actions. Emotions along

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⁶ I wish to acknowledge Lee Chiaramonte for bringing the comparison with Aquinas to my attention.
with will are said to belong to the faculties of desire, and thus they need to be regulated by reason so that a human being can live a moral life and move toward God (Aquinas: 437).

The role of emotions in fostering the moral life has therefore been developed in one major line of western ethical thought wherein feelings are ultimately subjugated to reason. As seen in Aquinas’s use of Aristotle, and reiterated in a number of traditions of religious asceticism throughout the world, moral virtue is marked by, among other things, subdued passions and emotional control. When controlled by and subordinated to rational thought, emotions are seen to be conducive to the moral life. Yet emotions that are allowed to arise uncontrolled constitute a risk to ethical reflection and moral conduct. It is in this light that the conception and use of emotions in Theravāda history writing reflect a somewhat more optimistic evaluation in some expressions of Buddhist ethics. According to the image of a virtuous person in several medieval vaṃsaś, a person who encounters narratives of the past is overcome by certain emotions that are deemed to contribute directly to moral reflection and devotional practice. This shift, whereby emotions are valued more positively irrespective of one’s rational faculties, appears more as a subtle change in emphasis rather than a dramatic reversal of statements found in Aristotelian ethics and elsewhere in Buddhist works that emphasize physical austerities and the disciplined control over one’s feelings. Indeed, as outlined throughout the Dhammapada, for example, some Theravāda Buddhist texts have long extolled the virtues of awareness and equanimity that together work to curb emotional excess.7 What is striking about the narratives of medieval Sri Lankan histories, however, is the lengths to which they go to foster certain emotions in order to transform the subjectivity and conduct of Buddhist devotees. “Virtuous persons” are consistently depicted and fashioned by medieval Sri Lankan Buddhist histories as individuals who are compelled by emotions such as gratitude to engage in ethical reflection and ritualized acts of making offerings to relic shrines. Far from being counterproductive or risky and, therefore, something to be suppressed, certain emotions are rendered in Theravāda histories as crucial to one’s moral development.

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7 See, for example, statements in the Dhammapada, edited by von Hinüber and Norman, that praise those whose sense faculties have reached a state of calm (v. 94), the one who does not take delight even in divine sensual pleasures (v. 187), and the wise one who, having nothing, rejects sensual pleasures to purify the self (v. 88). One of the key themes encountered throughout this influential, ancient Buddhist text is the development of mental control to restrain the desire for sensual enjoyment and the often unwholesome actions that result from seeking to satisfy one’s passions.
I am interested in the emotional and ritual effects of medieval Buddhist vaṃsas because they begin to speak to the larger ethical implications of history writing and the cultural force of religious narratives about the past. This focus on emotions in Buddhist history represents an attempt to theorize how historical narratives could impact and transform the cultures in which they were produced. The difficulties in discerning the real effects of such texts in premodern Sri Lanka notwithstanding, attention to the hints given in several vaṃsas yields insights into how historical texts could be conceived as instruments that could act on people and transform the ways they thought, felt, and acted in the world. If we look closer at what the texts claim to be doing to their audiences and note the rhetorical and aesthetic uses of language designed to accomplish those goals, then we can see how certain kinds of literary activity functioned in the communities that used these texts and were simultaneously constituted by them. In other words, I wish to know what gives a number of medieval Buddhist vaṃsas the power to influence or reshape the cultural contexts out of which they arose. To this end, the narratives of Buddhist history work to prefigure emotions such as gratitude that are held to condition the meritorious act of making offerings to the relics of the Buddha. Thus, in the discursive logic of the medieval Theravāda vaṃsas, historical narratives are thought to fashion devotees into more virtuous ritual actors, people whose feelings and actions are structured in morally beneficial ways as a result of being directly implicated in the acts performed by the Buddha many centuries (and even aeons) ago.8

The interest that a number of Sinhala vaṃsas show in emotions is evident in the composition of their respective narratives. In reading such texts one finds numerous tropes that cast historical events as occurrences for which latter-day devotees ought to feel grateful. My reading of several medieval relic vaṃsas as narratives that prefigure feelings of gratitude and a moral subjectivity of dependence on the past arises from two observations made of several Buddhist histories written in Sinhala between roughly the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Sri Lanka. First, in several Buddhist vaṃsas, accounts of the bodhisattva (Pāli: bodhisatta) taken from the legendary stories of the Buddha's previous lives appear integral to recalling the past.9 In the Sinhala Thūpavamsa, for example, there is a

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8 Despite the scholarly consensus stating that the historical Buddha lived in India sometime between the sixth and the fourth centuries before the Common Era, the Buddhist tradition traces his biography back much earlier to include several hundred of his previous lifetimes that are said to have occurred many aeons ago. For a discussion of the biographical genre in Theravāda Buddhism, see the chapters in Schober.

9 Steven Collins (1992: 245) has also noted that many Theravāda vaṃsas begin with a description of the bodhisattva Sumedha's initial vow to attain Buddhahood.
long interpolation wherein the Ten Perfections (Pāli: pārami; Sinhala: pāramitā) are personified into warriors who protect Siddhārtha from the army of Māra, the divine personification of death, and, while doing so, narrate summaries of select Jātaka stories from the bodhisattva’s former lives. The appearance of this episode, which covers nineteen printed pages in one modern edition of the text, appears to highlight the great sacrifices that the Buddha made in order to attain Enlightenment and teach all beings how to ameliorate and ultimately put an end to pain and suffering (Karunatillake: 34–53). Moreover, in the thirteenth-century historical text known as Pūjāvaliya, accounts of the Buddha’s previous lives precede several lengthy chapters devoted to specific incidents in his lifetime as the Buddha before segueing into an account of how his relics and teachings were brought to Sri Lanka after his death. Statements in this text in which the narrator extols the Buddha for having given up his eyes, head, flesh, blood, and family in one lifetime after another while journeying through saṁsāra as the bodhisattva in order to become a buddha reinforce the message that his unimaginably difficult and painful efforts were undertaken for the sake of those persons who are reading or listening to this account (Nāṇavimala: 51–53).

Second, emotions are turned into subjects for reflection in Theravāda histories by the insertion of statements that speak directly to the emotional states of characters in the narratives and the ideal readers who are anticipated by the texts. Sinhala vaṃsas typically give considerable attention to the ways that people felt in the past and the ways that people encountering these texts in the present might reasonably be expected to feel as a result of learning what happened long ago. Words referring to generalized emotions of “serene joy,” “pious confidence,” and sometimes “profound disquiet” (saṃvega) are found liberally throughout many Buddhist histories. Elsewhere in these texts, people are said to have felt happiness, pity, and gratitude, among other feelings, in response to a variety of events that preceded them. The attention paid to emotions in Theravāda Buddhist histories is too consistent and conspicuous to be judged as inconsequential. The authors of these Buddhist histories clearly wished to convey not only what people did in the past but also how they felt. Thus, in thinking about these features of Buddhist vaṃsas and particularly those that were composed in Sinhala during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, I have come to conclude that a number of Theravāda narratives about the past were designed to exercise the emotional lives of Buddhist devotees, structuring the ways people think, feel, and act with respect to what happened previously. In other words, far from being frivolous or morally suspect, certain emotions such as gratitude appear to have been valued as aids for fashioning devotees into virtuous persons who are predisposed to venerate the Buddha.
To emphasize an emotion like gratitude in Buddhist vaṃsas is to recognize and highlight the ethical implications of history writing. Of course, the political ramifications of texts that structure a vision of the world and a way of acting within it are undeniable. Numerous scholars have analyzed the Sri Lankan vaṃsas in terms of their political expediency to monks and kings who sought to legitimate their privileged positions in premodern society. However persuasive such arguments can sometimes be, the question of how these Buddhist narratives commanded the authority and persuasion to legitimate political and social forms is rarely asked. Thus, before such arguments can even begin to be sustained, it is necessary to map out how Buddhist histories acquired the cultural force required to legitimate the present status quo or, as I would argue, advance an ethical ideal wherein pious devotees flourish and work toward greater happiness in the future. In discussing how Buddhist histories can predispose people toward certain ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in the first place, we can lay the groundwork for subsequent inquiries into what historical texts contributed to medieval political and social formations based on the aesthetic and moral imaginations of premodern Buddhist writers. But from the points of view found in the medieval relic vaṃsas of Theravāda Buddhism, the power of histories to transform people and effect change in the world is consistently envisioned in ethical terms. And, arguably, the most ethically significant accomplishment of such texts is to supply people with a subjective self-awareness of having benefited from what the Buddha and others did in the past.

It is the recurring theme of having benefited from what others have done before that makes gratitude a central component in the narration of Theravāda Buddhist history. As an emotion predicated on one’s relationship to another, whether that other is found in the past or present, gratitude involves making ethical judgments about what one owes to another who has rendered service or help to oneself. It is thus particularly fitting that the Pāli word for gratitude—kataññū—literally means “knowing what was done.” And although it tends to be overshadowed by the specific references to pasāda, saddhā, and saṃvega in the Buddhist vaṃsas, gratitude is depicted as the result of learning what was done in the past and how those events carry direct and immediate benefits for people in the present.

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10 For examples of scholarly interpretations of Buddhist vaṃsas that emphasize their role in promoting the nationalist and communal interests of monks and kings, see Smith, Tambiah, and Obeyesekere.

11 For a useful discussion of how select narratives from ancient Theravāda vaṃsas were put to specific political uses, see Gunawardana 1976.

12 For examples of brief canonical statements extolling gratitude, see Hardy: 43, Feer: 272, and Andersen and Smith: 47, v. 265.
THE EFFECTS OF GRATITUDE

The apparent interests of Theravāda history writing in making people feel grateful for past events may well depend on a view wherein gratitude is seen to prefigure ethical reflection and devotional acts. Indeed, the presumption that historical narratives give rise to feelings of dependence on past actors and to ritualized acts of making offerings to the relics of the Buddha is illustrated in descriptions of historical figures and in statements that directly admonish the audience to feel and act in certain ways. Accordingly, there are at least two prominent themes designed to give rise to gratitude in those who encounter medieval Sinhala vaṃsas. The first theme deals with the struggles and sacrifices endured by the bodhisattva on his way to attaining Buddhahood. The second theme deals with resolutions made by the living Buddha to leave relics behind for other beings to venerate after his death. Both of these topics are inserted and elaborated on in Sinhala Buddhist histories to cultivate grateful dispositions in readers and listeners. As an emotional response prefigured by historical narratives, gratitude is thereby implicated in efforts to transform Buddhist devotees into virtuous persons who recognize and act on their ascribed status as beneficiaries of the past.

This expectation that learning about the past conditions our ethical responses is clearly depicted in the portrayal of King Duṭṭhagāmanī in the Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa. This renowned warrior-king, whose reign has been estimated as 161–137 B.C.E., is widely credited in the vaṃsas with having overthrown South Indian invaders, bringing the island under one rule, and constructing important Buddhist sites such as the Mahāthūpa relic shrine. In the Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa Duṭṭhagāmanī’s martial prowess is balanced by his exemplary piety, a piety established in relation to the past. A lengthy statement summarizing Duṭṭhagāmanī’s generosity toward the Triple Gem praises the king for “knowing the virtue of gratitude” (kelehi guṇa dannā), which is then connected directly with the numerous, invaluable offerings he made to the Triple Gem (Karunatillake: 143). The Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa goes on to confirm that Duṭṭhagāmanī’s encounters with narratives written in the past sparked his efforts to initiate large building projects to glorify the Buddha’s Dispensation (sāsana), which comprises the body of his teachings and the institutional apparatus (e.g., the monastic order and relic shrines) developed to preserve and promote them. Hence, this king is described as responding to a written inscription, containing the earlier prediction of an enlightened Buddhist monk, stating that “a king named Duṭṭhagāmanī” would build a great monastery immediately before he set out to build the nine-story monastery called the “Brazen Palace” (Pāli: Lohapatāṇa; Sinhala: Lövāmahāpāya)
to house the monks (Karunatillake: 144). Subsequently, Duṭugamunu is moved to build the monumental Mahāthupa relic shrine after seeing another inscription wherein he was predicted to do so (Karunatillake: 146). Thus, by reading inscriptions that represent written accounts of the past—that is, “history”—Duṭugamunu is said to feel grateful and compelled to make offerings to the Triple Gem.

The depiction of King Duṭugamunu in the Sinhala Thūpavamsa supplies important hints for acknowledging the capacity of historical narratives to fashion emotions deemed productive for engaging in meritorious acts of Buddhist devotion. Before illustrating this idea with additional examples of how historical narratives work to instill grateful dispositions in their audiences, it is necessary to rethink some commonly held assumptions about emotions. Modern western culture frequently describes emotions as passive, involuntary responses that are objectified as elements of our psychophysical existence. Emotions are generally taken to be natural characteristics of one’s individuality and consist of latent feelings that arise from within. Catherine Lutz (5) contests this view and argues that emotions are defined, negotiated, and enacted among people within broader cultural settings. Thus, particular cultures structure how feelings are appraised, discussed, and ultimately felt within the conventions of social interaction. By taking emotions to be social products, rather than “natural” ones, Lutz succeeds in bringing them out from the sphere of private, psychological events and into the realm of cognitive ideas developed in one’s relationships within a larger cultural group.13 We can similarly interpret the emotions implicated in the vamsas as being defined by cultural norms and constructed out of narrative depictions of past events. In other words, Buddhist histories do not stir up latent feelings of gratitude as much as they instill this emotion through narrating a past through which people learn (1) why they ought to feel gratitude and (2) how to express this emotion in rituals of relic veneration.

Once we conceive of gratitude as an emotion that can be instilled or conditioned by historical narratives, we can begin to ask how this occurs. According to scholars like Lutz who argue that emotions are culturally constructed, various cultural sources supply the cognitive information

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13 Similarly, Martha Nussbaum argues for a cognitive component of emotions but adds to Lutz’s discussion by singling out the capacity of literature to give rise to them. For Nussbaum (287), emotions are social constructs that are taught through stories and then internalized by readers to shape the ways their lives look and feel. While such experiences are rooted in literary works, they still depend on sets of beliefs and judgments about the world that enable certain emotions to be felt in particular situations. See also Alison M. Jaggar, who argues that a person’s emotions, conditioned in part by social location, represent a critical faculty in the process of knowing and thus should not be subordinated or opposed to reason.
used by people to appraise a given event and determine how they feel about it. Many Theravāda histories, written in Pāli as well as Sinhala, present the requisite information for feeling gratitude by showing their audiences that they were anticipated in the past and that the means to maximize their happiness has been provided to them by historical actors. As such, Sinhala relic vamsas typically begin their narratives by focusing on the life story of the Buddha. When this story begins with his bodhisattva career, the various efforts that the Buddha made during his former lifetimes become evidence of how he was constantly “working for the welfare of the world.”

As the bodhisattva, he is regularly depicted as seeking enlightenment not for his own sake but, rather, for the sake of helping humankind “cross the ocean of saṁsāra” by teaching the Dhamma as a Buddha. In a view typical of the Theravāda vamsas, the struggles undertaken to attain Buddhahood were gladly accepted by the bodhisattva with the benefit of other beings in mind.

Accordingly, Theravāda histories often include some account of the bodhisattva Sumedha near the beginning of their narratives. Sumedha is the name of the ascetic who first resolved to become a buddha later known as Gotama “four incalculable world-periods and 100,000 aeons ago.” Mentioned first in the Buddhavamsa (see Jayawickrama 1995: 9–21), the figure of Sumedha appears in the vamsas as a literary device highlighting how the past efforts of the bodhisattva and, subsequently, the Buddha ultimately were done to benefit those in the present. The bodhisattva’s sympathetic impulse toward sacrificing his own goals and comforts for the sake of others is illustrated in a scene in the Sinhala Thūpavamsa where Sumedha compares himself with Dpankara Buddha: “When a resolute person like me, who is able to follow the Buddha as an arahant . . . , enters the city of Nirvana, leaving behind the mass of sentient beings who experience the sorrow of saṁsāra, who else will help the forlorn world? I will become a Buddha like this Buddha and deliver twenty-four incalculable numbers of beings” (Karunatillake: 5). Sumedha’s initial vow to attain Buddhahood and help an otherwise helpless world depicts the past as a series of events that occurred to help subsequent generations attain the varied felicities connected with Buddhist practice. More specifically,

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14 Pāli and Sinhala vamsas typically emphasize the selflessness of the Buddha’s efforts by noting, among other things, that when he first vowed to take up the long and arduous path of becoming a Buddha, his “mind was stirred with sympathy towards people” as he entered the path toward the “Highest Wisdom” in an effort to remove their suffering. See, for example, Davids and Morris: 111, v. 21.

15 A few statements from the Pūjavaliya serve to illustrate this idea, as it is said therein that, aside from the great efforts he undertook, the bodhisattva did not experience great “suffering” (Pāli: dukkha; Sinhala: duk) in saṁsāra, as he gave happiness to all beings and eventually obtained nirvana himself (Nāṇavimala: 54).
worldly comfort, fortunate rebirths, and ultimately nirvana are all mentioned as attainable goals in the *vamsas* thanks to what the Buddha did and taught previously. In this sense, the bodhisattva is important for depicting Theravāda history because he serves to frame the past in terms of future-oriented and other-directed acts. These include acts undertaken to develop the Ten Perfections in order to attain Buddhahood as well as acts understood to provide the means to help other beings attain the Buddhist felicities of human happiness, heavenly rebirths, and nirvana.

Moreover, as several of the Sinhala *vamsas* show, the bodhisattva’s achievements leading up to and culminating in Buddhahood came with an unimaginably heavy price. Such texts regularly stress the physical and emotional suffering that the bodhisattva endured for the sakes of other beings. For instance, at one point in the *Sinhala Thūpavamsa* the newly awakened Buddha reflects back on some of his many sacrifices as a bodhisattva: “Innumerable are the times when I plucked out and gave my eyes, which shone with the five colors, excelling the stars in the sky. Innumerable are these many births in which, having split open my own chest, giving over my heart, falling down and moistening my eyes with tears that poured forth with joy, I died from a death of happiness” (Karunatillake: 56).16 The joy said to have been felt by the bodhisattva when he gave up life and limb on innumerable occasions stands in ironic contrast to the often painful efforts he is said to have made in order to alleviate the pain of others. The figure of the bodhisattva thus becomes a focal point for feelings of gratitude because he is portrayed by Buddhist histories as having repeatedly forsaken his own comfort in order to offer the possibility of comfort to others.17 The *Daḷada Sirita*, a fourteenth-century Sinhala text that recounts the history of the Buddha’s tooth relic, presents such a notion when it refers to how the bodhisattva Sumedha rejected the attainment of nirvana and, in an act of “loving-kindness to the entire world,” he “dove and entered into the terrifying and dangerous ocean of existence and fulfilled the Perfections for attaining Buddhahood while giving away such things as his heads, eyes, flesh, blood, daughters, sons, wives, and hearts” (Sorata: 3).

The sacrifice of daughters, sons, and wives immediately evokes the popular tale of Vessantara, a bodhisattva who is called on to give away the family he loves in order to perfect the virtue of generosity. Yet there are two other instances in the *Sinhala Thūpavamsa* where the bodhisattva’s

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16 Compare the similar sentiments expressed by the young bodhisattva Vessantara in Fausboll: 486.

17 For example, in recounting the Nigrodhamiga Jātaka, the personification of the Perfection of Loving-Kindness describes the bodhisattva as one who, “giving your own comfort to others, [takes] the suffering experienced by others upon yourself” (Karunatillake: 52).
renunciation of his family suggests that the Buddha is like a parent to all beings. In doing so, the text extends the metaphor of parental love that is felt exclusively for one’s child to an omnipartial love directed to all beings equally. As King Cullasutasa and later as Prince Siddhārtha, the bodhisattva reacts similarly when confronted by the choice of remaining home to care for his own son or renouncing household life to advance toward Buddhahood. When King Cullasutasa’s young son embraces the bodhisattva in an effort to keep him from leaving, the bodhisattva reflects: “I cannot remove the two arms of my young, tender, affectionate child that have fallen around my neck against his will. [But] if I remain out of affection towards this one son, how then will I release about twenty-four incalculable numbers of children who will experience suffering in saṃsāra in the future?” (Karunatillake: 35). 18 This episode is inserted into the narrative to show that the bodhisattva’s efforts toward Buddhahood were made to assist other beings—beings who are affectionately portrayed as the future Buddha’s children. The readers and listeners of such accounts are led to conclude that the bodhisattva and Buddha made many personal sacrifices, including abandoning the sons he loved in different lifetimes, for their sakes too because they also experience suffering in saṃsāra. Depicted as a parent who puts the interest of one’s children before oneself, the bodhisattva, and by extension the Buddha, is understood as a benefactor for whom all beings—his “children”—are obliged to feel grateful. 19

THE OBLIGATIONS OF BUDDHIST HISTORIES

Generally speaking, gratitude results from learning that one has benefited from what someone else has done. Yet it also compels a formal response to acknowledge one’s benefactor. Inasmuch as medieval Sinhala valmās stress past events that are narrated to instill feelings of gratitude and dependence in those who read and listen to them, these texts make ethical demands on their audiences and prefigure devotional responses. The Sinhala Thīpavaṃsa repeatedly suggests that the beneficiaries of the selfless acts of the Buddha feel obliged to do something for him in return. This is seen, for instance, in the narrative that describes how personifications of the Ten Perfections protect Siddhārtha from the attacks of the god of death Māra and his army. These “warriors” are said to run to the bodhisattva’s aid in part because of his extraordinary efforts to cultivate

18 For a similar account of Siddhārtha’s renunciation, see also Karunatillake: 26.
19 Compare a similar idea that appears in the Itivuttaka (Windisch: 110–111), wherein one’s mother and father are said to be “worthy of veneration” (ahuneyyā) because of their compassionate care for their children. The following verses go on to say that the wise one ought to honor and respect one’s parents and can expect to rejoice in heaven later for doing so.
the Perfections previously.20 Thus, before driving off one battalion of Māra’s army, the warrior named the “Perfection of Morality” explains his obligation to assist the bodhisattva, who refrained from harming a snake charmer who battered and maimed the bodhisattva when he was a nāga king long ago:

Having seized your tail, Sir, thrashing your length on the earth as if the Heavenly River were to fall on the ground, squeezing you with a forked stick like a goat’s hoof, . . . he broke your fangs having put a soft stick in your mouth. Your mouth filled with blood like the affection that arose [in you] for him. When you suffered that much pain, not being seized by or looking with even a little anger towards him, you did not think of anything else. You did not perceive any decrease in me, the Perfection of Morality. Would I not perform an act of service now for the Lord who helped [me] like that? (Karunatillake: 35)21

In this quotation, the Perfection of Morality recalls what the bodhisattva did for him earlier and signals an impulse to try to reciprocate. Likewise, the text’s audience is led to conclude that the bodhisattva endured such suffering for a result—namely, Buddhahood—that directly benefits them too. Feelings of gratitude that are prefigured by Theravāda narratives about the bodhisattva may thus have been designed to lead devotees to do something for the Buddha, such as venerating his relics.

While stories of the bodhisattva’s selfless and often painful efforts to “rescue” all beings initially serve to instill feelings of gratitude and an obligation to reciprocate, the subsequent attention given to the dispersal of the Buddha’s relics in many medieval vaññas reinforces this emotional and ethical conditioning. Several Theravāda vaññas describe the resolutions that the Buddha allegedly made for his relics to be spread out and enshrined in various places far beyond northern India. Such accounts mark another crucial place in the vaññas where history is cast in terms of what the Buddha did for the sake of the world. The narrator of the Sinhala Thīpavṭaṃsa relates one of these determined resolutions (Pāli: adhiṭṭhāna; Sinhala: adhiṣṭhāna) thus:

Because our Buddha did not remain for much time, desiring the welfare of the world and thinking, “My Dispensation has not been spread into every place. Taking the relics that measure even a mustard seed from me when I have passed away in complete Nirvana, making relic shrines in

20 In this text, as well as in other Theravāda accounts more generally, the Ten Perfections of the Bodhisattva comprise the virtues of generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, effort, patience, truth, resolution, loving-kindness, and equanimity.

21 The nāga refers to a mythical, cobra-like creature mentioned frequently in ancient Indic literature.
the places where people dwell, and enshrining the relics in caskets, the many beings who make offerings will enjoy the happiness of the divine world, the brahma world, and the human world, he thus made a resolution for the dispersal of the relics. (Karunatillake: 72–73)\(^2\)

Significantly, this account of an event from the past represents the spread of relics as resulting from the caring and sympathetic concern felt by the Buddha for those beings left behind in saṃsāra after his final nirvana. The Buddha’s resolution to have his relics spread and venerated after his death not only legitimates the devotional practice of relic veneration; it also suggests that he had the foresight to provide a means for subsequent generations of beings to attain Buddhist felicities. In this way the people who have come after him are fashioned into a community of beneficiaries who were cared for by the Buddha and owe him their gratitude and reverence in return.

We find similar accounts of the Buddha’s resolutions to distribute his relics in other medieval vaṃsas. For instance, the Sinhala Bōdhivāraṅśaya describes how the Buddha resolved that various miracles involving the relics of the Bodhi tree, his right collarbone, and a sizable portion of his other corporeal remains would occur in the process of being transported to and enshrined in Sri Lanka (Senadh;ra: 220). The Sinhala Dhātuvaṅśaya expands on this theme further by claiming that the Buddha predicted that two of his tooth relics, his right collarbone relic, the forehead bone relic, a mass of relics obtained at the initial dividing of his remains, hair relics, and many others would all be established in the island of Lāṅkā in the future (Pranandr: 10). These predictions serve to demonstrate that the Buddha anticipated and met the needs of those who would survive or come after him, arranging for his relics to be available for devotees to venerate and thereby improve their current and future lives.\(^2\) By narrating a past wherein the bodhisattva and Buddha are depicted as having acted for the benefit of all beings, Theravāda vaṃsas make their audiences see themselves as the beneficiaries of history and feel grateful for that fact.

Medieval relic vaṃsas in Theravāda Buddhism narrate numerous examples of virtuous persons displaying gratitude for the past, causing an audience to witness and internalize this emotional disposition at the same time. The moral obligation to respect one’s benefactor—whether it is the Buddha, bodhisattva, or someone else—also entails acknowledging one’s

\(^2\) This excerpt is also quoted and discussed briefly in Berkowitz: 161.

\(^2\) As noted by Kevin Trainor (77–78), such predictions also create a “pedigree” linking particular relics established in Sri Lanka back to the Buddha in India and thus give the sense that the founding of relic shrines in Sri Lanka was destined to occur.
status as a beneficiary. In the vaṃsas this obligation is usually manifested in the form of making offerings, or pūjā, to the relics of the Buddha. The Sinhala Thūpavamsa illustrates this idea in an account in which the newly enlightened Buddha describes his gratitude to the Bodhi tree that assisted him in his final efforts to attain Buddhahood in the face of attempts by Māra to obstruct his goal:

Having shaken the hundred-league parasatsu tree of the gods and the palol tree of the asuras, I am able to offer endless flowers to the Bodhi Tree, which did not abandon me when Vasavarti Māra came charging, while all the gods and brahmās were fleeing. Having completely drained the great ocean, scooping out the seven riches [therein], I am able to offer and spread them over the entire world. . . . But these are not suitable offerings for me. I will make an offering with my eyes to this Bodhi Tree, which has supplied the eye—namely, omniscience—to me. (Karunatillake: 57)

This passage vividly illustrates the virtue of gratitude as well as the moral imperative to display it through acts of pūjā. Even the Buddha is compelled to acknowledge the special debt he feels toward the Bodhi tree by gazing on it, for it quite literally stood by him when he resisted the attempts of Māra to dissuade him from his goal of Buddhahood. 24

Again, in the Sinhala Dhatuvamśaya, the Buddha acts on feelings of gratitude by remembering the help given to him by the “Group of Five Monks” (pavagama mahanun vahansē) before he attained enlightenment and deciding to preach the basis for his newly found wisdom to them first (Pranāndu: 6). Remarks such as these underscore a general expectation that virtuous persons acknowledge those who have helped them to become virtuous. In this way, readers and listeners of several medieval vaṃsas are conditioned to react with gratitude and devotion to the Buddha, a figure whom the texts depict as the great benefactor of all beings past, present, and future.

As we have seen, feelings of gratitude toward the Buddha’s struggles as a bodhisattva and his resolution to disperse his relics create a debt that cannot be erased. The Buddha as conceived by Theravāda Buddhists does not need or enjoy the offerings made to him by devotees. The Dhamma he discovered and transmitted is traditionally described as a priceless gift that can never be matched. Still, these texts work to condition a devotional attitude of reverence and outward displays of piety among those who read or listen to historical accounts narrating what the Buddha did in the past.

24 The offering of the newly awakened Buddha’s “eyes” to the Bodhi tree represents how during the second week after attaining his “Enlightenment,” the Buddha is said to have gazed on the tree for a week. See, for example, the passage from the Pāli Jātaka nidāna-kathā in Jayawickrama 1990: 103–104.
for those who would survive him. In other words, such references to the Buddha’s bodhisattva career represent less an exemplary model to be imitated than sites for the narrative fashioning of a moral subjectivity in the readers and listeners of history.25 Indeed, the sense of oneself as a direct beneficiary of what the bodhisattva and the Buddha did is crafted and elaborated on in Buddhist histories composed in Sinhala. By presenting historical narratives that detail the enshrining and worshiping of relics in Sri Lanka, the Theravāda relic vaṁsas make literary and social worlds coalesce, enabling written works to fashion the self-awareness and acts of contemporary devotees.

Learning that one has benefited from the deeds of the bodhisattva and the Buddha results in both gratitude and a sense of dependency. Thus, the medieval Sinhala vaṁsas help to construct a form of Buddhism that stresses a reliance on others for help in accomplishing one’s own welfare, whether it be understood in terms of happiness in this world, a fortunate rebirth, or nirvana. The resounding message of several medieval relic vaṁsas is that the Buddha’s efforts to attain Buddhahood and provide his Dhamma and relics to all beings have made various felicities attainable. This very idea is stated negatively in the Daḷadā Sirīta:

Any Buddha, having given offerings of various treasures such as hands, eyes, and flesh for the comfort of all beings, having fulfilled the full Thirty Perfections, having vanquished the ten battalions of the fearsome army of Māra, having realized completely everything that is to be known by the virtue of unobstructed knowledge, making all beings reach the further shore across the ocean of saṁsāra, and while directing them to the excellent “City of Nirvana,” the beings who do not recognize the distinctive virtues of that Omniscient One are certainly distanced from worldly and transcendent happiness. (Sorata: 19)

In other words, those who do not recall what the Buddha achieved as a bodhisattva and subsequently as a Fully Enlightened Buddha are, by this fact alone, disadvantaged in the round of rebirth. Conversely, those who do recognize the distinctive virtues of the Buddha when recalling his past deeds find worldly and world-transcending happiness brought closer within their reach. The narratives of Theravāda histories reinforce an eth-

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25 The bodhisattva literature of Mahāyāna Buddhism, including for example Śāntideva’s Bodhi-
caryāvatāra, often speaks of bodhisattvas in generalized terms, providing technical instructions on
how readers can undertake the bodhisattva path themselves. In contrast, Theravāda texts concern-
ing the bodhisattva typically focus on revering a particular figure—the “historical” bodhisattva who
struggled to perfect the constituent factors of Enlightenment over many lifetimes and eventually
became Gotama Buddha. An atypical example of a Theravāda manual for becoming a bodhisattva
is found in the “miscellaneous discourse” (paṇḍuṇḍu-kathā) of the Pāli commentary to the Cariyāpi-
taka (see the abridged translation of this section in Dhammapāla).
ics of dependency, whereby people are made to feel grateful for being cared for by the Buddha, who is often depicted like a parent caring and providing for a child. As such, feelings of dependency and gratitude that are constituted by historical narratives also reinforce a sense of vulnerability among Buddhist devotees, who are led to conclude that the inescapable woes of *saṃsāra* would overwhelm them had it not been for the Buddha’s intervention long ago.

**CONSTRUCTING A MORAL COMMUNITY**

By instilling a sense of oneself as a beneficiary of the Buddha’s acts, the Sinhala *vamsas* mentioned above work to fashion grateful devotees who understand that helping others and acknowledging the help one has received constitute ethical obligations. For example, if we return to the passage in the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* in which the newly enlightened Buddha makes an offering of his sight to the Bodhi tree, we find a stunning example of how these medieval relic *vamsas* support a notion of social ethics. Despite the traditional claim that the bodhisattva made incomparable efforts by himself to develop the Ten Perfections over countless lives, when he finally attains Buddhahood, he initially signals his gratitude to the Bodhi tree for helping him obtain his goal. Although his struggles as the bodhisattva would seem to make him a model for moral self-cultivation, the Buddha is depicted in the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* as acknowledging that he too was dependent to some degree on others. For those who understand the Buddha to be the paradigmatic symbol of self-effort, such a description may seem incongruous. Yet the scene with the Bodhi tree underscores the idea that progress along the Buddhist path is made in conjunction with the support of others. Importantly, this recognition of one’s dependence on others has not led Theravāda Buddhists to devalue self-effort and moral responsibility. Instead it signals a vision of a moral community wherein one stands to benefit from what others have done and feels obligated to respect one’s benefactors and to try to reciprocate by displaying one’s gratitude in the form of offerings.

Highlighting the role of gratitude in Theravāda history writing allows us to recognize the emotional and ethical entailments of narrating a “Buddhist past,” that is, a past in which virtuous Buddhist agents are said to have taken actions that directly affect later generations of devotees. Unlike our common view of history as a craft devoted to “reconstructing” or “recovering” the past as it really occurred, these Theravāda *vamsas* reflect a view of history writing as a practice that fashions the present with respect to a past that has been artistically (re-)presented. Buddhist *vamsas* thus reverse the typical direction of vision with respect to historiography.
In the contemporary view of history we conceive of ourselves as looking back from the present to the past. We effectively control the past by claiming the knowledge and power to discover and present it anew. In contrast, the *vaṃsas* depict the past as looking ahead to the future. The capacity of Buddhist devotees to attain worldly and world-transcending felicities is depicted in the Sinhala relic *vaṃsas* as having been arranged and enabled by the Buddha and others long ago. This sentiment is confirmed by a group of Sri Lankan kings who, in speaking of the positive effects of venerating a relic in the *Sinhala Dhātuvamsāya*, exclaim, “It is a great benefit for us. The Forehead-Bone Relic of the Buddha, who is the leader of the world, will be established in our kingdom. This relic will accomplish the acts of the Buddha [buddhakṛtyaya] for many people” (Pranāndu: 48). Thus, according to this text, because pious figures in history enshrined a relic of the Buddha (as the Buddha himself earlier predicted), devotees in Sri Lanka stand to benefit from venerating this relic in efforts to obtain the felicities that the Buddha made available to them previously. In other words, one learns from reading Sinhala *vaṃsas* that the past has made certain felicitous futures possible.

In some Mahāyāna Buddhist schools buddhas and bodhisattvas are frequently depicted as “savior beings” who exist in heavenly realms and dispense blessings to the devotees who call on them. In Theravāda literature, however, one usually finds the buddhas and bodhisattvas who assist devotees existing not in heaven but in history.26 The distance between the Theravāda devotee and the Buddha is conceived of temporally rather than spatially. By supplying Buddhist devotees with the historical knowledge needed to make them feel grateful for the past, the Theravāda *vaṃsas* work to fashion virtuous persons who become disposed to recognizing in formalized displays of relic veneration that the Buddha has helped them.27 Aiming not for a literal representation of the past but, rather, for a *literary* one, the Theravāda relic *vaṃsas* suggest to us that historical narratives were once used to structure the emotional and ethical dispositions of a medieval Buddhist audience.28 The capacity of Theravāda Buddhist...

26 The Theravāda view wherein the future Buddha Maitreya (Pāli: Metteyya) is seen as existing in the Tusita heaven is a notable exception to this general rule. On the presence of heavenly bodhisattvas in the Theravāda religious culture of Sri Lanka, see Holt.

27 Furthermore, within the perspective of Buddhist ethics, gratitude is profitably viewed in terms of developing a virtuous character. As Donald Swearer (96–98) has noted, “virtue” in Buddhism is typically measured in terms of developing a disposition toward caring and moral acts that is acquired through practice, example, and life in a community. Therefore, in order for gratitude to constitute a Buddhist virtue, it must be consistently felt and demonstrated in one’s interaction with others.

28 I have adopted the distinction between “literal” and “literary” views with respect to Buddhist literature from Gómez: 51–52.
histories to reshape the present by narrating the past depends in large part on the extent of their success in implicating their audiences in their narratives. By exercising the emotion of gratitude, these texts work to fashion devotees who are endowed with a heightened sense of obligation to revere those who have helped them previously.

Furthermore, the emotional conditioning seen to result from the narration of some Theravāda histories offers a glimpse into how activities connected with the writing and reciting of texts were used to create and reinvigorate particular social formations in medieval Sri Lanka. By revising our view of Buddhist histories as texts that, at times, were used to configure the emotional and moral subjectivity of Buddhist devotees, we are enabled to see how narratives of the past could accomplish something more than simply documenting and cataloging earlier events. In this sense, the “past” for medieval Sri Lankan Buddhists served not only as a subject to be remembered and learned; it was also constructed as a resource for engendering morally productive emotions that could transform individual devotees into a community of moral actors who, in turn, were expected to respond jointly to the obligations that history has placed on them. The Sinhala vamsas tend to address their audiences collectively, giving shape to a social identity whereby individual differences are collapsed into a larger unit of people who have benefited from the past and are expected to reciprocate in kind.

Among the many emotions that Buddhist devotees are supposed to feel when encountering narratives of the past, gratitude stands out as one of the emotions that several Sinhala relic vamsas appear designed to produce. Starting with accounts of the bodhisattva, whose selfless actions are said to have been done for the benefit of all beings, through episodes in which the Buddha shows his gratitude to those who assisted him, and up to accounts where later Buddhist kings enshrine and venerate relics of the Buddha out of joy and gratitude, the audiences of Buddhist vamsas are repeatedly conditioned to feel grateful for having had their welfare facilitated by others. Thus, having been implicated in the narratives of Buddhist history, contemporary readers and listeners are grouped together into a moral community that shares the distinction of having been acted on by virtuous Buddhist agents in the past. This identity as the collective beneficiaries of what the Buddha and others did before appears to trump other regional, caste, and family identities that could be expected to dominate in premodern Sri Lanka.29

29 A few scholars have attempted to map out religious and ethnic identities in premodern Sri Lanka (see especially Gunawardana 1995), and this issue is too large and complex to be addressed adequately here. Yet it may be the case that medieval Sinhala vamsas, which appeared during a period of political instability, exhibit an interest in promoting and supporting an island-wide identity of people united in their status as having benefited directly from what the Buddha and other virtuous
In addition to being grouped together as the collective recipients of historical deeds, medieval Sinhala-speaking devotees of the Buddha were bound together by the transmission of relic vāṃsas in sermons composed out of their narratives. Literary sources suggest that monks began to employ Sinhala prose works in preaching to the Sri Lankan Buddhist public from the thirteenth century onward (Deegalle: 186–187). It is during this same period that historical narratives began to be translated and written anew in a literary form of the vernacular Sinhala language. Thus, inscriptive evidence of a ceremony held at the Mahāthūpa in Anurādhapura, Sri Lanka, where the Thūpavāṃsa was read aloud to those in attendance suggests that such texts could be used to create communities of devotees implicated in a relationship with the past and expected to feel gratitude and venerate the Buddha’s relics together (see Paranavitana: 254–260). In this way, Sinhala vāṃsas were empowered to instill emotions and ascribe collective identities on devotees who listened to the recital of historical narratives in social groups.

Inasmuch as the Sinhala vāṃsas composed in medieval Sri Lanka employ narrative accounts and rhetorical strategies to make their audiences feel grateful for what the Buddha and others did in the past, it is reasonable to infer that these texts were copied and disseminated to create and revivify specific social formations in those times and places. Buddhist histories that fashion emotions could also be used to give rise to communities of people united by feelings of gratitude and dependence on the past, leading to a shared obligation to acknowledge one’s benefactors by venerating the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Social formations united by the emotional force of Buddhist histories could then be mobilized to respond and act in accordance with other sociopolitical ends. Yet works such as Sinhala Thūpavāṃsa, Daḷada Sirīta, and Sinhala Dhātuvaṇīsya: appear written primarily as tools for instilling morally productive emotions among Buddhist devotees. Together, these texts reflect distinctive treatments of the past that are focused on various relics of the Buddha who passed away in nirvāṇa at another time and place. And in describing what the Buddha and others once did to make the attainments of worldly comfort, heavenly rebirth, and nirvāṇa available to people living after him, the narratives of Sinhala vāṃsas have worked to create virtuous persons whose knowledge of the past and corresponding emotions jointly effected ritualized acts of devotion and reconfigured social identities. In this

agents did previously. The use of a literary dialect of the vernacular Sinhala language and the imaginative grouping together of the island’s Buddhist inhabitants in medieval vāṃsas appear to represent moves toward fashioning a translocal social formation following the periodic invasions of foreign armies and the initial development of a Sinhala literary culture in the preceding centuries.
way a number of Theravāda Buddhist histories offer evidence of how emotions could render narratives of the past into textual instruments for conditioning how people think, feel, and act in the present.

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