

## Dhamma Sermon and Popular Buddhism within the Confront of Digitization

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### **Abstract**

*Along with era 4.0 digitalization involves several aspects of modern social context and religion is one of the prominent. When it comes to Sri Lankan popular Buddhism numerous changes can be identified through digital platforms like social media. This research attends to understand the evolutionary patterns of Buddhist Dhamma sermons by applying two cases selected from Facebook. Attaragama Pragyankara Thero, also known as “Kotuwe Podi Hamuduruwo” is a key figure which emphasizes the characteristics of modern popular Buddhism. Two posts regarding his propagation of Dhamma browsed through random Facebook pages applied to understand the characteristics of the modern evolutionary process of Buddhism. The main objective of this study is to introduce a new-found model for digital religious studies by utilizing digital anthropological knowledge to understand the digital behavior of Sri Lankan religious contexts. For the analysis of this phenomenon, the researcher applied the 5th principle of digital anthropology named, ambivalence, and the principle of openness and closure, proposed by Daniel Miller and Heather Horst in 2012 through their work titled, “Digital Anthropology”. Different patterns in language, as well as variations compared to traditional Dhamma sermons identified through literature, were identified from the data collected from the relevant posts. As an examination based on qualitative data, this research considered various literature to fulfill the research gap. One of the key conclusions that arise from the research is that digital anthropological knowledge is a way to understand modern popular Buddhism. Comparing traditional customs with modern-day and analyzing them utilizing digital anthropological principles emphasize the evolutionary patterns of contemporary Dhamma sermons.*

**Keywords:** digital, culture, anthropology, popular Buddhism, Dhamma sermons

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## Introduction

The modern world is dominated by digitization in several aspects. From developing countries to developed countries, this binary coding process contributes to the development of a variety of fields. When it comes to digital anthropology, a field of study that emerged during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century focuses on understanding the behavior of mankind in the digital environment. Digital anthropology is a discipline that fits into the division of cultural anthropology. Considering cultural anthropology, religion plays one of the prominent roles. Buddhism is not only a religion but a unique cultural aspect in Sri Lankan social context. This paper is based on these two prominent factors (digitalization and Buddhism) and seeks to understand the evolutionary process in modern-day popular Buddhism, utilizing the characteristics of the era of 4.0. The main objective of this study is to introduce a new model for digital religious studies by utilizing digital anthropological knowledge to understand the digital behavior of Sri Lankan religious contexts. How to propose a model utilizing digital anthropological knowledge to understand the changes in popular Buddhism? is the existing problem of this research. To fulfill these objectives within a framework, the researcher applied one of the prominent factors in modern popular Buddhism, the propagation of Dhamma to examine the characteristics of the modern evolutionary process of Buddhism.

Gananath Obeyesekere and Richard Gombrich play one of the leading roles when considering the early works which attended to understand the changes in Sri Lankan Buddhism. Their controversial ideas on “Protestant Buddhism” built novel dimensions in religious studies in Sri Lanka and their theoretical aspects are still utilized by scholars for their academic addresses. Obeyesekere and Gombrich (1988) pointed out the change in cosmology and the creation of new religious roles which interconnected matters based on gods and other figures. Although they argued that strictly Buddhist ideas, roles, and institutions have not remained unaffected by the new trends according to that period. Anyhow, their proposed concept called “Protestant Buddhism” caused novelty in the practices of Buddhism and prepared

the field for a new term called “Applied Buddhism”. Sri Lanka has been conventionally considered a fort of Theravada Buddhism. According to Tilakaratne (2020) the organizational aspect of modern Buddhism, the sasana, comprising the four groups of bhikkus, bhikkunis, and upasakas and upasikas, has changed. Pondering the new trends in Buddhism he highlighted concepts like Trans-yanic Buddhism, American Buddhism, and Eco Buddhism (Green Buddhism). Amunugama (2016) underscored the contribution of Anagarika Dharmapala, Piyadasa Sirisena, and John De Silva on the new trends of Sinhala Buddhism as well as the impact of the theosophical society of Olcott.

Taking into consideration the main subject emphasized in this paper, Dhamma sermons played one of a significant roles in Buddhism. “He who acts according to the Dhamma is protected by the Dhamma itself” is a popular quote found in the Buddhist teachings of Buddha. Dhamma affects the transcendental (*lokottara*) life as well as the secular (*laukika*) life of a person. According to Thalpavila Shilavansha Thero (1946), there are seven types of Dhamma sermons such as wedding sermons (*mangala deshana*), funeral sermons (*awamangala deshana*), title sermons (*mathruka deshana*), custom topic sermons (*abhimatha mathruka deshana*), memorable sermons (*mathaka deshana*), demons-based sermons (*bhuthanumodana deshana*), nearby sermons (*āsanna deshana*). Other than these types he proposed more types of Dhamma sermons, sermons to monks, personal sermons, general sermons, sermons for girls, sermons to young people, sermons for the elderly, sermons to men, sermons to women, sermons to the learned, sermons to the ignorant, sermons to the urban people, sermons to the villagers, sermons to worshipers, marriage sermons, sermons to warlords, sermons to prisoners, sermons to patients, sermons on paganism, sermons to free thinkers, sermons to separatists, and missionary sermons. He proposed several factors for becoming a popular monk in Dhamma propagation such as ignoring party affiliation, ignoring highs and lows, ignoring self-interest, ignoring provincial divisions, general knowledge, abandonment of sectarianism, abandonment of caste, and compassion (Shilavansha Thero, 1946, p. 5). When asserting the historical significance of Buddhist Dhamma

sermons, Walpola Rahula Thero (1962) stated the importance of choosing “Chullahaththipadopama Sutta” by Mihindu Thero as the first propagation of Dhamma to King Devanampiyatissa, to explain the basis of Buddhist philosophy and religious background.

In digital anthropology, there are six principles proposed by Daniel Miller and Heather Horst (2012) that underline the characteristics of the concept called digital. (1) Dialectic nature of digital culture, (2) human is not one iota, (3) commitment to holism, (4) cultural relativism and global nature, (5) authenticity of ambivalence, and (6) materiality of digital culture are the respective principles presented by them. As they stated the development of binary code radically simplified information and communication (Miller and Horst, 2012, p. 5). Considering the development of the digitalization era 4.0 or the fourth industrial revolution is a prominent notion proposed by the works of the German government or on the other hand it is the ongoing automation of traditional manufacturing and industrial practices, using modern smart technology (Lasi et al., 2014). Various components come under industry 4.0 such as: cyber security, augmented reality, big data, cloud computing, Internet of things etc. Digitalization is one of the key factors which effected the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution because when it comes to modern day, innovation has come to have an impact on the way of life of individuals of all ages, from children to working individuals to more experienced individuals (Siriwattano et al., 2018). Campbell and Evolvi (2019) illustrate the theoretical background and the methodological aspect based on digital religion. They critically emphasize the how digital religion studies seek to investigate the spirituality religiosity in digital space. Sara Pink, Heather Horst and others (2016) proposing seven key concepts that can utilized to understand and conduct research on digital environment such as, (1) through experiences, (2) practices, (3) things, (4) relationships, (5) social worlds, (6) localities, and (7) events.

Considering the existing gap of this desk research, in Sri Lankan social context various studies on Buddhism were based according to vary of perspectives. Although various studies were conducted on Buddhism and digital era in various

other countries, there is a huge lack of Sri Lankan academics in this field of study, especially in digital anthropology. This study aims to fill this gap based on a digital anthropological perspective and Buddhist practice known as Dhamma sermons and focuses on preparing a primary model to theoretically describe the modern evolutionary process of popular Buddhism from the real world to the virtual world utilizing propagation of Dhamma in the fourth industrial revolution. The researcher of this study mainly focused on the changes; and progression caused in traditional Dhamma sermons due to the development of digital technology in the fourth industrial revolution. The results of this study could be applied to other disciplines like sociology, digital studies, and media studies for their examinations on the mentioned aspects. As a theoretical analysis based on existing literature, the proposed model can be applied to their studies too while understanding a characteristic of a particular religion in an existing culture.

### **Materials and methods**

This research was based on one of the key principles in digital anthropology “authenticity of ambivalence” proposed by Daniel Miller and Heather Horst in 2012 in their paper titled, “The Digital and the Human: A Prospectus for Digital Anthropology”. To examine the validity of this theoretical aspect this paper applies two cases regarding present-day Dhamma sermons based on digital platforms, especially social media which underlines the characteristics of popular Buddhism. These three cases were based on the sermons of Attaragama Pragyalankara Thero, also known as “Kotuwe Podi Hamuduruwo”. Both posts were publicly uploaded by different Facebook pages, and they have been selected purposively to accomplish the objectives of the research. The main justification for applying this page was the widespread audience and the content of its posts, also they have a vast number of comments and reactions. The method used in this research was descriptive qualitative and to align with the research objectives, the researcher did not consider the comments of the public on these posts. Focus was regarded with the statements of the Thero and critically analyzed with the literature that was utilized for the

research and compared the differentiations in these sermons and traditional Dhamma sermons. After collecting the underlined sayings of the respective monk, the researcher theoretically examined the validity of the previously mentioned principle of Digital anthropology and attended to highlight the evolutionary changes caused by traditional Dhamma sermons in the Sri Lankan popular Buddhism context. Qualitative data obtained from secondary sources (books and digital media) were applied for this research.

## **Results and discussion**

It is quite complicated to state precisely when and where the concept of popular Buddhism was established in Sri Lankan academic context. This concept can be assumed to be a residual concept that emerged from popular culture. Though, there is hardly any other religion in the Sri Lankan social structure that is as time and space shaped as Buddhism. Martin Wickramasinghe had mentioned about this cultural formation as, that the independence and spirituality of Sinhala culture was preserved due to Buddhism (Wickramasinghe, 1972, p. 74). According to Daya Amarasekara (2019) contemporary Sinhala Buddhism shows that it affects the coexistence as well as the conflict between social and worldly tendencies socially. That complex religious face can be identified only by popular Buddhism. Walpopla Rahula Thero (1956) once stated, from the time Buddhism became the state religion, it began to change and his statement indicated that since of that politicization, Buddhism achieved the perfect establishment for long period in Sri Lankan social context. There is no doubt to state that digitization is affecting every aspect of the world, including the cultural factors like religion. The study of pre-literature was a confirmation of the extent to which cultural diffusion has influenced the existing Sri Lankan cultural context. This study does not examine whether that socio-cultural change is good or not, although focuses on the impact of the diffuse influence of digital culture on Buddhism in the so-called era 4.0. which known as 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution.

### 3.1 Post 01: Fight like WWF to solve family problems



**Figure 2:** first video selected from Facebook (Gota samaga anduwak hadamu 2020, 2020)

This video has 55 minutes of duration, and more than thousands of audiences were engaged with it. In order to prove the trustworthiness of this post on existing research, the statements can be considered to the comparison of traditional Dhamma sermons and modern ones. Following table contains the statements which underlines the different aspects of modern Dhamma sermons, and the way digitalization affected. Relevant time in the video for these sayings is also mentioned here. Considering his propagation of Dhamma through a particular digital platform, the researcher underlined the significant features (For example: language, and content) that describe the current objective of the study. Popular Buddhism, Dhamma sermons, impact of digital culture can be identified considerably through the following statements collected from the first post.

Video time	Statement in Sinhala	Translation
2.23	බිච්චන් සුපිරි පොරක්...	Although he was drunk, he is a super person
5.27	අර අග ඉදං අර රත්තරං දායකයෝ පඩුරු දානවා. අද මං අරං යනවා බේසමක් පුරෝලා... දානන කියන්න පඩුරු...	From that end on, those doners make endowments. Today I am taking a basin full... Tell them to make offerings...
6.21	වූටි පුතාල සෙටි එක නැගිටින්න. මැද ඉන්න සෙටි එක...	Get up the set of little children. The set in the middle...
8.46	මං කාටවත් කඩේ යන්නැ...	I am not steadfast to anyone...
8.56	දේශපාලනේ නෑ මගේ...	There is no politics in me...
9.18	ඊළඟ ජනාධිපතිවරණය නෙවෙයි ටාර්ගට් වෙන්න ඕන. අගමැතිකම. අගමැතියි පවර්ෆුල් වෙන්න ඕන...	The next presidential election should not be the target, but the Prime Minister. Prime Minister should be powerful...
10.27	ප්‍රශ්නට උත්තරයක් තියෙනවා. ළමයි ඉස්කෝලේ යවන්න. ගෙදර දොර-ජනෙල් හොඳට වහන්න. ජේන්නෙ නැති වෙන්න. ගෙදර මේට්ටෙ ගෙනැල්ලා ඉස්කෝප්පුවෙන් දාන්න. අම්මත් ෂෝටක් දාලා ටී ෂර්ට් එකක් දාගන්න. තාත්තත් ෂෝටක් දාලා ටී ෂර්ට් එකක් දාගන්න. පැය	There is an answer to the question. Send children to school. Close the door-windows of the house well. Don't be seen. Bring the mattress to the living room and put it on the veranda. Mom also put on a shorts and a T-shirt. Dad, put on a shorts and a T-shirt. Two or three hours of fight like W.W.F. Then it's over. The hatred is over. No problems

	දෙකක් තුනක් ඩබ්ලිව්.ඩබ්ලිව්.එස්. වගේ හොඳට ගහගන්න. එතකොට ඕක ඉවරයි. වෛරය ඉවරයි. ප්‍රශ්න මුකුත් නැහැ...	
11.51	මේ පිරිමි පනින කොටුවක් පරිස්සමෙන්. සේඟ්ට්වලට පනින්න. ආ කොහොම ද සියගෙ හිනාව සේඟ්ට් පනින්න කිවහම...	These men should be misbehaving with a safe set. Safety must be prominent. How come that grandfather's smile when I talked about the misbehave and safety?
15.59	කාමේසුමිච්චාවාරා වේරමනී සික්ඛා පදං සමාදියාමි. ආදරය සුන්දර වරදකි. ඒ එදා. මේදා අලුත් එකක් ඇවිල්ලා. ආදරේ අහස තරම්. කැඩුණා ම පොළොවේ පස් කන තරම්...	<i>Kāmesumicchācāra veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.</i> (I undertake the training-precept to abstain from misconduct concerning sense- pleasures). Adaraya Sundara Waradaki (a popular song). That was then. A new one has arrived today. Adare Ahasa Tharam (another popular song). As soon as love is broken, people behave insanely...
17.40	දැන් එස්.එම්.එස්. එකක් දැමීම ද? මං බණට යනවා කියලා? මං කියනවා ඔයාට ගැනු ලමෙක් ඉන්නවා...	Now SMS Put one on as I am going to the Dhamma sermon? I say you have a girlfriend...
20.58	අම්මත් හැඩ හින්දා සුපර් මාම් ගියා නම් නටන්න පුළුවන්...	If Super Mom went because of her mother's shape, she could dance...
22.40	මුතුකුඩ ටෙලිනාට්‍යය බැලුවා නම් උඩරට කාන්තාවගේ හයිය	If you watch the teledrama Muthukuda it shows the strength of the Kandyan

	පෙනෙනවා. ඒවා බලන්න නෑන. බලන්න ජ්‍යෙෂ්ඨ දඩයම...	woman. Don't look at them. Looking at the Prema Dadayama (popular teledrama dubbed to Sinhala from Hindi)...
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*Table 1: Relevant statements selected from the post.*

Contemplating the selected sayings of him, researcher underline the different nature in Dhamma sermons comparing to early periods. Not only with his language, according to the content too there is a significant diversity. Comparing with the existing literature, a monk should not be considered about his self-interest. When it comes to the above-mentioned statements there is a quite different pattern in the sermon. Language is one of the prominent factors in traditional Dhamma sermons. Due to various changes in present society language also shifted to various aspects. According to Shilavansha Thero (1946), a monk must advise his people on the importance of Dhamma sermons instead of conquering his own advantages. This phenomenon can be identified in 5.27-time duration, there is a huge variation displayed comparing to early doctrines of Dhamma sermons.

When pondering the impact of digitalization to these types of Dhamma sermons, various terms and occasions can be recognized. As in 10.27 he is giving examples from popular global entertainment event called WWF (World Wrestling Federation, aka World Wrestling Entertainment), an American integrated media and entertainment company that is primarily known for professional wrestling for solve family problems, especially between husband and wife. This could be humor, although researcher highlight the influence of digital media to absorb these types of patterns into traditional Dhamma sermons. Not only that he describes various other things like SMS, teledramas, reality shows, digital medias during his sermon. As Rahula thero (1956) stated about the politicization of Sinhala Buddhism in early eras, in 2020 also there is a significant impact of political parties on Buddhism. As in 8.46, 8.56, and 9.18 researcher draw attention to the statements based on Sri

Lankan political parties. This also a prominent shift compared to traditional Buddhist sermons.

From digital anthropological perspective, this event can be examined applying the 5<sup>th</sup> principle named authenticity of ambivalence or ambivalence and the principle of openness and closure. It emphasize the contradictions of openness and closure arise in digital domains. Considering Internet, there is a novel openness for the public as well as a limited freedom. This phenomenon can be identified in political as well as the religious context. Digital concept or the digital culture underlines the capacity of production through the openness and accessibility. On the other hand, there is a solid closure and restriction emerged as a tension in digital. Due to these characteristics more than idealized communities, there are cross-cutting affiliations of groups utilizing the internet to think through new opportunities.

This new openness was significantly utilized by popular Buddhism, and the falseness or the idealized thinking are not considered as important conceptions due to these new groups which highlight different perspectives and ideas or opportunities of Buddhism. As highlighted early table particular monk's novel statements/ sayings are some of the characteristics that emphasize the tension of this so-called openness of digital. These sayings can be defined as unsuitable or inappropriate statements for a Buddhist monk according to someone's point of view. Although these types of things widely spread due to the support of digitalization and the considerable influence for this trend is the openness of the Internet.

### 3.2 Post 02: people become couples at Dhamma sermons



Figure 3: second video selected from Facebook (Black & White, 2021)

This video consisted with 14 minutes of duration and was found from a Facebook page which shares different types of posts and not considered as a religious page. Pondering the engagement of the audience clearly identify thousands of reactions and comments. As the first post selected earlier, following are the statements and sayings regarding this post align with the research.

Video time	Statement in Sinhala	Translation
0.20	කාමේසුමිච්චාවාරා චේරමනී සික්ඛා පදං සමාදියාමි. ආදරය සුන්දර වරදකි. ජ්‍යෙෂ්ඨ නම් මනරංජිත වේ. නන්දිත වේ. ඒ එදා. මෙදා අලුතින් එකක් ඇවිල්ලා. ආදරේ අහස තරම්. කැවුණා ම පොළොවේ පස් කන තරම්...	<i>Kāmesumicchācāra veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.</i> (I undertake the training-precept to abstain from misconduct concerning sense-pleasures). Adaraya sundara waradaki (popular Sinhala song). Premaya nam manaranjitha we nanditha we (another popular Sinhala song). That was then. A new one has arrived today. Adare Ahasa Tharam (another popular song). As soon as love is broken, people behave insanely...
0.56	බණේ දී යාළු වෙනවා. සංඥා පුවත්වලින් නම්බරේ දෙන්නෙ...	Become friends in the Bana (Dhamma sermon). Sharing the number just like the signal news.

1.10	උදේ ජී.එම්. ගුඩ් මෝනින් යැව්වා එක යි.	In the morning send the message GM, which means the short form of good morning...
1.30	දින නවසියක් යාළු වෙලා හිටියොත් දින අටසියක් මේ පෝන් එකේ. මුන්ට වෙන වැඩක් නැහැ වෙන. අලි මදිවට කොටි කියලා හව් එකෙන් දෙසියයේ පැකේජ් එහෙකුත් දිලා. මාසෙට ම දෙසිය යි...	If have been friends for nine hundred days, will have eight hundred days in this phone. They have no other choice. Hutch also gave 200 packages to fulfil their desire. Only two hundred rupees for a month ...
7.11	පෙරේතයි අප්පා බිමින් නියන්නත්. ගිලන්පස තමයි අංක එක. හාමුදුරුවෝ දන්නවා මගෙ ජීවිතේ...	I'm very greedy for Gilanpasa (permissible food and drinks for the Bhikkus), monk knows my life...
9.10	මං අද මේ හරි දුකෙන් ඉන්නෙ. අර කුරුණෑගල පැත්තෙ දුවෙක් අපේ එල්ලිලා මළා නේ? ජේස්බ්‍රැක් එකේ. ඒ විදුහල්පතිනිය සම්පූර්ණ වැරදියි. මං බය නැතුව කියනවා... මං හරි ආදරෙයි ගුරුවරුන්ට. මේ	Today I'm very sad. A girl from the Kurunegala area hanged herself. On Facebook. That principle is completely incorrect. I say without fear ... I really love teachers. This video is going to the world. Do you know why? That kid is not on Facebook, gentlemen. A boy took a photo of that child and

<p>වීඩියෝ එක ලෝකෙට යනවා. ඇයි දන්නව ද? ඒ ළමයා පේස්බුක් එකේ නැහැ මහත්තයෝ. ඒ ළමයගේ පොටෝ එක කොල්ලෙක් අරං පේස්බුක් දාලා තියෙන්නේ...</p>	<p>posted it on Facebook ...</p>
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*Table 2: Relevant statements according to 2<sup>nd</sup> post.*

When it comes to the second case of the study, researcher underlines the repetition of the statements. The sayings in 0.20 and 13.11 of this video is similar to the statements of previous video's 11.51 and 15.19. Both stating about the misbehavior of sense-pleasures. Considering the five percepts (Pansil) third percept is *Kāmesumicchācāra veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*, which means I undertake the training-precept to abstain from misconduct concerning sense-pleasures. During Dhamma sermons taking five percepts as example is a prominent custom. Considering the relevant monk's sayings there is a huge difference of explaining this third percept to Buddhist laymen.

One of the significant characteristics identified in his sayings are the taking digital cultural terms and concepts. As he states about the mobile package of Hutch, a Sri Lankan telecommunication service provider, and the country's third largest mobile network operator during his Dhamma sermons while explaining five percepts, it clearly highlights the possible impact of digital culture. Likewise, the way he argues about a suicide case connected with Facebook, it comprehensively determines the effects of digital platforms to traditional Buddhist Dhamma sermons.

In the principle of openness and closure of digital concept, underlines the capability and the capacity of the production in digital platforms. Since digitalization affects Buddhism, changes and evolutionary features arise and there is no limitation for new ideologies. On the other hand, closure, and restriction too discussed through the

5<sup>th</sup> principle. When it comes to Buddhism in digital media there is clear negative and positive feedback from different audiences. This phenomenon is quite similar to the first principle of digital anthropology, the dialectic nature of digital culture. Wijayarathna, Abhayasundere, and Jayaweera (2021) stated this principle by utilizing the significant characteristics of Siri Sadaham Ashramaya and its teachings. The way people react to those sayings highlights the closure and restriction of digital.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Sri Lankan Buddhism is adapted to time and space. Various scholarly works have shown that Sri Lankan Buddhism has shifted over time. Protestant Buddhism, Sinhala Buddhism, Militant Buddhism are some of the prominent terms emerged among that research. This research is a initial step in ensuring that Sri Lanka's current popular Buddhism can be brought into the innovative conceptual framework called “Digital Buddhism”.

One of the key points that can be deduced from this research is that the revolution that digitalization brought about in the global arena during the fourth industrial revolution had an impact on the religious context and can analyze from a digital anthropological point of view. Such a digital revolution had not taken place during the time of many scholars who had conducted social and anthropological research on religion, especially Buddhism. The present Sri Lankan anthropologist should launch a study on its complementary digitization and Buddhism by identifying and utilizing the new dimensions in anthropology correctly. The modern anthropologist is recognizing that anthropology is not just a study of indigenous peoples.

The model presented by this research is that the theories of digital anthropology can be applied to religious practices to identify the digital cultural change that has taken place through them. This research confirmed the diffuse influence that digital cultural elements have had on deviating from the features of traditional Buddhist preaching. This research holds the holistic nature of traditional anthropology into

the modern social context and analyzes facts deviating from an ethnocentric perspective.

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