

Dhamma for the Digital Age: Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's Modern Ministry and the Evolution of Buddhist Preaching in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This article examines the recent transformation of Buddhist preaching (*bana*) in Sri Lanka, with a focus on the contemporary ministry of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero.

Historically, sociologists like Max Weber viewed *bana* as a social compromise—a reciprocal arrangement that allowed the ascetic Sangha to receive material support from the laity in exchange for spiritual merit. Modern scholars, including Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, further refined this by identifying Protestant Buddhism and the shift toward rational, social reform. However, the term was first used by one of Melford Spiro's informants.

To investigate this shift, the present study employs a mixed-methodological approach combining digital ethnography and qualitative content analysis. The researcher analyzed a representative sample of over 100 sermons delivered via YouTube and TikTok between 2022 and 2024, focusing on thematic shifts in rhetoric. Additionally, the study incorporates virtual discourse analysis of user comments and digital testimonials to evaluate the perceived social impact and the changing nature of religious authority among the youth demographic.

The article argues that Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero represents a radical departure from these traditional frameworks. At just 27 years old, he has become a viral spiritual influencer, delivering over 500 sermons annually to massive crowds and millions of digital followers. His ministry has shifted the dhamma from traditional scriptural recitation and nationalist rhetoric towards individualized psychological healing and social rehabilitation. Specifically, his sermons target modern crises such as toxic relationships and the surge of synthetic drug use (primarily methamphetamine) among Sri Lankan youth.

By utilizing digital platforms like YouTube and TikTok, Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero has moved away from the Weberian model of local reciprocity. In its place, he has established a content-consumer dynamic where religious authority is validated not by ritual orthodoxy, but by measurable social impact—such as testimonials of young people abandoning narcotics in order to fulfil their filial duties. Ultimately, the article illustrates how the *dharma salawa* (preaching hall in temples) has migrated to the smartphone, turning ancient wisdom into actionable, bite-sized insights for a globalized, secular age.

Keywords: Buddhist preaching (*bana*), Sri Lanka, digital religion, Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero, Weberian reciprocity, social rehabilitation, anthropology

Methodology

The methodology for this study adopts a multi-dimensional qualitative research design that bridges classical sociological theory with modern digital ethnography. To establish a historical and theoretical baseline, the research begins with a comparative analysis of Max Weber's model of religious reciprocity, which traditionally defines the Sangha-laity relationship in Sri Lanka as a material and spiritual exchange. This framework is further contextualized through the lens of Protestant Buddhism, as defined by Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, to determine whether the ministry of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero represents a linear evolution of rational reform or a distinct 'Post-Protestant' digital phenomenon characterized by a shift from nationalist rhetoric to individualized psychological care.

The core of the empirical data is gathered through netnography, an adaptive ethnographic method designed for the study of online communities. This involves a systematic content analysis of the Thero's extensive digital footprint across platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. By reviewing a representative sample of his 500 annual sermons, the study tracks engagement metrics—including views, shares, and likes—to quantify the scale of his digital authority. Furthermore, the research employs commentary mining to analyze user-generated testimonials, specifically focusing on how followers articulate their recovery from 'toxic relationships' and synthetic drug addiction. This data allows for an assessment of how religious validation has shifted from ritual orthodoxy to measurable social impact.

To understand the specific rhetorical strategies employed by the Thero, the study utilizes thematic coding to categorize sermon topics. This process highlights the transition from traditional scriptural recitation to 'bite-sized' actionable insights tailored for a globalized, secular audience. Linguistic analysis is also applied to examine the use of contemporary vernacular over traditional

Pali-heavy discourse, illustrating how the dhamma is rebranded for the digital age. By mapping the physical architecture of the *dharma salawa* against the digital interface of the smartphone, the methodology illustrates the migration of sacred space into the palm of the hand.

Finally, the research maintains rigorous ethical standards by anonymizing digital data related to sensitive topics, such as narcotics and mental health. The ‘social impact’ claims of the ministry are cross-referenced with broader sociological trends and news reports regarding the youth drug crisis in contemporary Sri Lanka to ensure a balanced perspective. This comprehensive approach ensures that the study captures not only the technological shift in preaching but also the profound transformation in the nature of religious authority and social rehabilitation in the modern era.

Weberian Model of Bana

In his seminal study, *The Religion of India*, Max Weber explored the sociological evolution of Buddhism from a reclusive sect of wandering mendicants into a world religion with a massive lay following. Central to this transformation was the practice of *bana* or preaching. To Weber, *bana* was not merely a tool for spiritual education; it was the essential bridge—the social compromise in Weber’s term—that allowed an asocial, intellectualist religion to survive and thrive within the material world.

Weber characterized early Buddhism as a religion of salvation for intellectuals. In its purest form, the path to Nirvana was a solitary, meditative journey that required the total rejection of worldly social and economic ties. However, this created a sociological dilemma: if the monks (the Sangha) produced no food or wealth, they were entirely dependent on a lay population, that they technically had no religious duty to serve, for *siv pasaya* (*pinda patha* or food; *civara* or robes; *senasana* or shelter /lodging’ and *gilanapaccaya* or health care and medicine). Weber argued that

bana emerged as the solution to this tension. Through preaching, the monk provided a service to members of the laity, justifying the material support they received from them. This exchange thus turned a purely mystical pursuit into a reciprocal social relationship.

Weber's analysis of Buddhist preaching (*bana*) revealed a fundamental split in religious expectations. He distinguished between the ethical frameworks of the monks and of the masses: while monks focused on the rigorous cessation of desire and the pursuit of Nirvana, the message for the laity was simplified into a focus on conduct (*sila*) and generosity (*dana*). This created a two-tier system where the masses were encouraged to accumulate merit (*puñña*) for a better rebirth, rather than seeking immediate enlightenment.

Weber noted that, as Buddhism grew under royal patronage in India and in Sri Lanka, preaching became an institutionalized ritual. King Ashoka's patronage¹ in India turned Buddhism from a small sect of wandering ascetics into a world religion. Weber viewed Sri Lanka as the primary example where royal patronage successfully localized and preserved Buddhism². He famously coined the term Monastic Landlordism to describe the Sri Lankan model creating a church-like structure that was far more politically integrated than the original Indian movement.

The act of listening to the *dhamma* evolved from a quest for knowledge into a merit-earning ceremony. This shifted the monks' role from a silent hermit to a parish preacher, creating what Weber called a bureaucracy of salvation. Weber argued, that, while this allowed Buddhism to compete with Brahmin rituals, it diluted the faith's rational-meditative core, steering it toward a more rationalist worldview.

¹ Pages 233–239: In the chapter 'The Twofold Face of Buddhism', Weber detailed how Emperor Ashoka's patronage transformed Buddhism into a universal religion and a tool for state administration.

² Pages 257–263: In the section regarding the Ceylonese Church, Weber explained how royal land grants led to monastic landlordism and a closer tie between the state and the Sangha (monastic community).

While Weber provided a foundational sociological framework for *bana*, subsequent scholars have moved beyond this view. They have argued that preaching is not just a watered-down version of elite philosophy, but a sophisticated, performative, and politically charged medium that defines Buddhist life.

Richard Gombrich (1995) has been perhaps the most significant scholar of Buddhism to refine and challenge Weber's theories. In his work, *Precept and Practice* (1995), he explored the distinction between what Buddhists know (the cognitive) and what they do (the affective). He argued that *bana* acts as a vital bridge between these two worlds. Rather than seeing merit-making as a dilution of the faith, Gombrich viewed it as a necessary psychological and social tool that maintains the affective bonds of the community, helping the laity manage their spiritual anxieties in a practical way.

Gananath Obeyesekere, often working alongside Gombrich, focused on the evolution of preaching during the colonial era (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988; Obeyesekere, 1970). He coined the term Protestant Buddhism to describe how *bana* was transformed in response to Christian missionary pressure.

Obeyesekere (1988) observed that modern preaching became more focused on social reform, moving away from purely ritualistic merit-making. In his view, the *bana* tradition became the primary site for the development of a Buddhist conscience, shifting the focus from individual rebirth to a collective responsibility for the state of society. Seneviratne (1999) critically analyzed how the role of the monk shifted from a renunciate to a social servant and political actor. He suggested that modern *bana* often serves to reinforce nationalist identities rather than just spiritual merit.

Dhamma for the Digital Age

This article argues that Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's popularity stems from his ability to make *bana* preaching practical for addressing issues like drug abuse, relationship stress, and toxic social circles. Its role can thus be defined as a social servant (Seneviratne, 1999) or a role that is more rational and focused on social reform as defined by Obeyesekere (1970; 1988) although Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's advent to social reform is a much later occurrence.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's *bana* preaching is a public event that usually takes place in a large space such as a sportsground that accommodates many thousands of people. In contrast to the traditional approach described by Weber, the lay people gathered in those places do not usually provide *siv pasaya* for the monk, but the masses reward him with likes and donations, and the *bana* ceremony is not considered as a direct individualized reciprocal act of the monk. The *bana* of Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma creates an entirely different social space, with the presence of a large gathering of young people.

In the modern context of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero, the traditional Weberian concept of reciprocation is arguably dissolving as the dynamics of preaching shift because of three principal factors.

The first of these is the parasocial nature of mass media, where sermons are largely disseminated through public events in spaces like sportsgrounds, which are then broadcast on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook. By transforming the audience into anonymous observers, digital platforms replace Weber's 'physical reciprocity' (the direct giving of robes or food) with likes and emoji comments. Consequently, the deep-rooted community bonds of the village temple are traded for a more detached, consumption-driven model.

The second factor involves the celebrity-preacher phenomenon, where Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero is often viewed as a viral spiritual influencer. When preaching shifts from a local ritual to a mass-marketed event, the monk becomes a provider of content, while the devotee functions as a consumer. In this hierarchy, the laity often perceives themselves as receiving a service, such as emotional relief or entertainment, rather than participating in a reciprocal religious duty. The traditional obligation to sustain the monk is frequently abstracted into large-scale temple donations or digital patronage, which lacks the intimate, face-to-face accountability inherent in Weber's model of reciprocation.

Finally, there is a significant shift from a moral community to individualized healing. While Weber's concept of reciprocation relied on a moral community where preaching guided centralized social behavior. Contemporary preaching often aligns with popular Buddhism by focusing on individual psychological well-being and mindfulness to address daily stress. When the focus shifts to the personal utility of a sermon for mental health, the act of listening becomes an end in itself. Consequently, the reciprocation becomes internal, as the listener simply feels better, rather than social, where the listener actively supports the Sangha as a collective institution.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero has emerged as a transformative figure in Sri Lankan Buddhism, bridging the gap between ancient scripture and modern social crises. Immensely popular, particularly among the youth, he delivers enormous number of sermons annually in Sri Lanka and abroad, that tackle contemporary issues like drug addiction, emotional distress, and workplace toxicity. By translating the *dhamma* into practical, relatable guidance, he has created a spiritual bulwark that helps followers navigate the complexities of 21st-century life with resilience and discipline. He is a preacher of social purification, which is why he stands out

from the other prominent Buddhist preachers who have lived and preached in the past three decades.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero is a 27-year-old monk who was ordained at a young age. After entering the University of Peradeniya through a *pirivena* (a traditional monastic college) education system, he completed a four-year special honors degree in 2023. He has since returned to his native temple in Kathnoruwa, located within the Kurunegala District in the Northwestern Province of Sri Lanka. where he leads the temple, serves at the Sri Palita Vidyayathana Pirivena, a monastic college, and has gained prominence as a gifted preacher. He has achieved iconic status in Sri Lanka over a short period of time, primarily due to the high demand for his *bana* preaching. He is remarkably prolific, delivering approximately 500 *bana* sermons of at least 45 minutes each, every year. His overwhelming popularity is evident in his schedule, as his booking calendar is completely full until the end of the year 2028. A significant characteristic of his following is his appeal to the younger generation: most of his followers and devotees are young people. However, his influence is not limited to this demographic, as many people in different age groups and of different ethnicities are strongly attracted to his preaching. The locations where his *bana* preaching takes place are very crowded with people often spilling out the actual venues.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's sermons are characterized by their ability to translate profound Buddhist teachings into simple, practical advice for modern living, which is the key to his immense appeal and popularity, particularly among young people. He focuses on themes of mental health problems and drug abuse which are very significant social problems in present-day Sri Lanka. He offers clear guidance on how to navigate everyday stress, narcotic addiction, emotional distress, and relationship challenges by applying core Buddhist principles.

His talks often address the specific pressures faced by various groups, including students, professionals, and families, using an emotionally resonant and engaging delivery style that makes the ancient wisdom of the dhamma directly relevant and accessible to a contemporary audience seeking peace and purpose.

A search for specific sermons by Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero on dealing with ‘difficult people’ confirms his practical focus, revealing titles such as ‘It is the person next to you who is squeezing your neck’ and ‘Do this for those who are hostile, and no one can defeat you’. These titles suggest he teaches listeners to protect their inner peace by handling people who create negative influences, jealousy, or obstructions, often through a blend of patience, compassion, and non-retaliation, a central theme in Buddhist teaching. He guides devotees on how to maintain their spiritual and emotional progress by managing external negativity and choosing not to be victims of others’ actions, reinforcing the common thread of self-management and mental resilience that makes his sermons so popular.

The emphasis on inspiring change among the young population suggests that the Thero recognizes the vulnerability of youth to drug abuse and its potential long-term impact on the nation’s future. His efforts seek to instill discipline, ethical conduct, and a clear understanding of the consequences of addiction, aligned with the foundational Buddhist principles of temperance and right livelihood. This community-focused campaign acts as a spiritual and ethical bulwark against the drug menace, contributing to a broader national effort to safeguard citizens from harm. Online videos of his preaching show *dhamma* sermons, which illustrate the kind of spiritual guidance he offers to his followers.

In the ministry of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero, the traditional sociological exchange described by Weber is often replaced by a modern form of personal and social validation.

The Thero frequently highlights deeply encouraging testimonials from his followers as a primary measure of his success. Specifically, he shares accounts of many youths who, moved by his powerful preaching style, have approached him to confess their previous involvement in the sale and use of narcotics. These testimonials suggest that his messages resonate with a demographic often considered difficult to reach through traditional temple rituals, providing him with a unique form of religious authority based on tangible life changes rather than just ritual reciprocation.

Beyond the cessation of drug use, these youths reportedly shift their focus toward fulfilling traditional filial duties, dedicating themselves to the care and support of their parents. This transformation serves as a potent validation of the Thero's ministry, offering evidence of a direct and measurable social impact within the community. While the physical reciprocation of material gifts might be less central in the digital and mass-event context of his work, this feedback loop of moral reform creates a new kind of spiritual currency. It positions his preaching as a transformative tool for social rehabilitation, effectively bridging the gap between ancient Buddhist ethics and the contemporary crises facing modern youth. The Thero does not merely preach abstract morality; he delivers a message that achieves real-world, transformative results, pulling young individuals out of the destructive cycle of drug trade and addiction and re-integrating them into family and productive life.

One of the main areas that Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero pays attention to in his sermons is the narcotic problem among young people in Sri Lanka, which is a new subject for dhamma sermons in Buddhism. Methamphetamine first came to widespread attention in Sri Lanka around 2008, when the authorities discovered the first clandestine production laboratory. Sri Lankas narcotic landscape is now characterized by a dramatic surge in synthetic drugs, with crystal methamphetamine (Ice) arrests in 2025 increasing by 161% compared to the

previous year, reaching 68,132 arrests in 2024—a figure that now rivals traditional staples like cannabis (75,602 arrests) and heroin (75,097 arrests). (NDDCB 2025). This shift is manifested in the discovery of local methamphetamine production labs and accompanied by a disturbing trend of traffickers targeting schools with drug-laced sweets. Prisons are currently operating at high capacity, with roughly 65% of inmates held for drug-related offences, most of them young people.

As one study (Nishshanka, et al. 2025) shows, the majority of methamphetamine users, mainly of male gender, resided in urban (57.8%) or semi-urban (36.1%) areas. Most (65.3%) initiated methamphetamine use between 21 and 30 years. The most cited physical impacts were weight loss (38.9%) and loss of appetite (37.2%), while irritability (28.8%) and interpersonal relationship problems (50.8%) were cited as common mental and social impacts respectively. Findings reveal that young urban males are predominantly affected by Methamphetamine addiction, with moderate to severe dependence common. By incorporating anti-narcotics messages into his core teachings, Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero is directly engaging with a widespread problem, aiming to provide moral guidance, raise awareness, and inspire change among the young population to mitigate this pervasive danger.

By moving away from traditional institutional reciprocation, the Thero achieves real-world, transformative results that provide a potent validation of his ministry's social impact. He often shares deeply encouraging testimonials from youths who, moved by his powerful preaching, have abandoned the destructive cycles of the narcotics trade and addiction, dedicating themselves instead to supporting their parents and re-integrating into productive family life.

This personal feedback serves as a modern form of validation, proving that his message transcends abstract morality to deliver tangible social reform, even as the traditional structures of communal reciprocation evolve into individualized digital interactions. Venerable Kathanaruwe

Siri Dhamma Thero uses these success stories to defend his unconventional preaching style against traditionalist critics, arguing that the true measure of a monk's influence should be found in his ability to rehabilitate the most vulnerable members of society. By emphasizing these narratives of youth reform, he shifts the focus of religious authority away from ritual orthodoxy toward measurable social intervention.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's digital footprint is immense, with his collective likes across various platforms reaching well into the millions. As his sermons are broadcast through major media networks like Sirasa and Hiru TV, as well as hundreds of independent *dhamma* channels, no single total is readily available; however, a look at his top-performing videos reveals the scale of his reach. For instance, single viral sermons frequently amass over one million views and upwards of 25,000 likes, while his recent 2026 New Year addresses and youth-focused programs like *Thurunu Sitha* (Youthful Mind) drew thousands of engagements by young people within days of being uploaded. This high level of interaction, driven by his practical and direct approach to modern life, positions him as one of the most influential and widely-supported religious figures on social media in Sri Lanka today.

His counsel to these youths is strikingly direct and compassionate, focusing on restoring their physical health and he uses vivid, relatable language. He tells them, you are like persons who have lost virility and muscle mass, you are so thin, highlighting the devastating physical toll of their former life. This is immediately followed by a powerful, motivational command: give up this bad habit, and start earning money, buy good clothes: trousers, jeans, and wear a bracelet. This encouragement is not just about material gain; it is a symbolic call to embrace a life of self-respect, confidence, and visible success. The act of buying new clothes and wearing a bracelet represents the shedding of the stigmatized, marginalized identity of a drug user/dealer and adopting the

respectable, dignified image of a responsible individual who can contribute positively to society and their family. It is a clear, tangible blueprint for their moral and financial rehabilitation that the monk is advocating through his preaching.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's sermons are fresh and popular because they discuss how to solve the problems of everyday life through his sermons. This method is different from the sermons preached by other monks. Usually, monks who preach explain the Buddha's teachings and sutras. Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero does not preach based directly on the Buddha's teachings. For example, in a sermon delivered in Monaragala, he stated that one should not say a word that hurts anyone. He went on to tell all young people, stop using drugs from tomorrow. Wash and clean the Buddha statue at home and offer it some water in the morning. From tomorrow every young child should do this. Do this for a week as I told you. Then you will understand that you will not even want to smoke a cigarette. Offer one spoon of the food you cook to the Buddha every day. Do this Buddha *vata* with everyone in the family. You will never go astray.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's sermons have gained widespread popularity because of their fresh and practical focus on solving the challenges of daily life. His approach differs significantly from that of many other monks, who typically concentrate their preaching on the formal explanation of the Buddha's sutras and traditional doctrines. Instead of relying solely on scriptural analysis, Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero provides direct, actionable guidance tailored to the modern listener.

Furthermore, he encourages a shared sense of spirituality within the household by inviting every family member to participate in Buddha *vata*. This includes a daily practice of offering a single spoonful of the food they have cooked to the Buddha. By integrating these small but

consistent acts of discipline into their daily routines, he asserts that individuals and families will find a reliable path toward a better life and will never go wrong.

The Evolution of Bana Tradition

The evolution of *bana* preaching in Sri Lanka represents a significant transition from localized, ritualistic traditions to a modernized system of public consumption. Historically, *bana* was conducted through a traditional framework that centered on specific community events. This included temple-based preaching on poya days, monks being invited to private homes for *dana* ceremonies, and *mataka bana*, which is performed following a death in the family to invoke blessings for the deceased. These practices required the physical presence of both the clergy and the laity in specific, sacred, or domestic settings.

The first major transformative shift in this practice occurred with the institutionalization of the radio system. Initially introduced in 1923, radio was formally incorporated as a government department in 1949 and later converted into a broadcasting corporation in the 1970s. This development introduced a modernized framework for public *bana* programs, moving the practice beyond traditional, localized boundaries. For the first time, listeners were able to engage with preaching from the convenience of their own environments, breaking the requirement for physical attendance at a temple or home ceremony.

This process of modernization was further accelerated by the establishment of television channels in Sri Lanka. Television allowed for the telecasting of *bana* programs at specific times, particularly on poya days, making it even more convenient for families to watch these programs from their homes. In the contemporary era, the system has expanded into digital spaces; public *bana* events are now frequently telecast on TV and recorded on YouTube for global dissemination.

This evolution allows people to listen to *bana* at their absolute convenience, whether they are traveling, in personal environments, or at home during the night.

Despite the significant institutional and processual developments in how it was delivered, the actual content of *bana* did not initially undergo much change. These programs primarily aimed to simplify the Buddhist *dhamma* to ensure it was easily apprehensible by the laity. To achieve this, preachers relied heavily on explaining *jataka* stories, which are the birth stories of the Buddha, as well as various sermons delivered by the Buddha himself.

A shift in this traditional focus began with Venerable Kathnoruwe Siri Dhamma Thero, who introduced more mundane and contemporary themes into his preaching. He started addressing practical life challenges, such as relationship issues and social problems like drug abuse. By encouraging people to refrain from harmful behaviors and strive to become good citizens of the country, he moved the discourse toward a more socially relevant application of religious teachings.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's *bana* preaching is unique and different from influential monks who lived in the last two decades. Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thero was a highly influential Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and social reformer who lived from 1948 to 2003. Recognized as an iconic preacher of *bana*, he and other well-known theros of national repute, such as Venerable Panadure Ariyadhamma Thero, did not focus their sermons on current social problems. Instead, Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thero's teachings focused on Sinhala nationalism. He described a trend where the Muslim population was increasing at the expense of Sinhalese Buddhists and, as a result, he preached that Sinhalese parents should produce more children as a method to counter this trend. Building on the work of Seneviratne et al. (1980), as he highlights how Venerable Panadure Ariyadhamma Thero revitalized the *bodhi puja* ritual, drawing massive participation from the Buddhist laity in the 1970s. Venerable Panadure Ariyadhamma

Thero revitalized the *bodhi puja* by transforming it from a solitary ritual into a communal, emotional experience that offered psychological refuge. By introducing melodic Sinhala poetry and atmospheric ceremonies, he made merit-making and invoking the blessings of the *bodhi* tree accessible to the masses. However, his movement remained primarily devotional; unlike the reformist approach of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero, Ariyadhamma Thero did not specifically focus on addressing social issues such as the drug menace or the behavioral problems of the laity. The shift by Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero successfully bridged the gap between complex doctrine and popular piety, establishing the standardized format for contemporary Sri Lankan religious life. The success of such rituals suggests that Buddhism has dynamically evolved to address the practical and popular religious needs of its followers. This evolution, paralleling modern developments like the digital *bana* program, emphasizes the pursuit of divine intervention and the accumulation of merit (*pin*) to ensure more favorable future rebirths.

Conclusion

The traditional practice of Buddhist preaching in Sri Lanka has become a dynamic system of national construction. The monks of the *sangha* are the vital conduits, employing the tradition of *bana* and the rich tapestry of Jataka stories to clarify and reinforce the essence of the *dharma*. This process ensures that the fundamental truths—the causes and the potential end of suffering—are not confined to scholarly texts but are actively absorbed and lived by the Sri Lankan populace, thereby preserving a unique cultural and spiritual identity that continues to thrive. Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's use of the preaching method does not affiliate to the traditional core of *bana* preaching. Thero's approach to *dhamma* propagation represents a significant departure from the formal, ritualistic constraints of traditional Sri Lankan *bana* preaching. While conventional sermons often adhere to a rigid structure—beginning with a formal Pali stanza,

maintaining a rhythmic and somber vocal delivery, and focusing on the literal interpretation of sutras—the Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero prioritizes a highly conversational and psychologically driven style. He shifts the focus from scholarly recitation to a pragmatic, ‘street-level’ application of the Buddha’s teachings, often stripping away the esoteric language that can create a barrier between the clergy and the layperson. By utilizing modern analogies, addressing contemporary social anxieties directly, and abandoning the stylized *anusasana* (advising) tone, his method favors immediate emotional resonance and cognitive clarity over the preservation of centuries-old liturgical aesthetics. This evolution suggests that while the essence of the message remains rooted in the *dhamma*, the delivery mechanism has been re-engineered to survive in a fast-paced, secularized media landscape where traditional formats might struggle to hold the attention of younger or more skeptical audiences.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero’s is different from the traditional method of preaching. In the traditional heart of Sri Lanka, the spiritual atmosphere was once defined by the sensory richness of the *dharma salawa*, where the heavy scent of coconut oil merged with the steady, hypnotic cadence of Pali stanzas to draw devotees into a deep meditative trance. This ancient ritual was governed by a strict, centuries-old formality: a monk, perched upon a high, ornate pulpit and obscured by a ceremonial fan to maintain detachment, would deliver sermons that stretched through the moonlit hours until dawn.

However, the digital age—as demonstrated by Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero—has fundamentally restructured this sacred geometry, shifting the experience from village temples to the palm of the hand or large gatherings. The physical pulpit has been supplanted by the YouTube algorithm, and the traditional fan has given way to the discreet precision of the lapel microphone. In this new landscape, the marathon overnight session has been distilled into a 15-45

minute, high-definition clip, optimized for virality and shared instantly across global WhatsApp networks, transforming a communal, night-long vigil into a Bite-sized insights on-demand spiritual insight.

The transition from the overnight vigil to the digital clip as in *bana* preached by Venerable Kathnoruwe Siri Dhamma has necessitated a shift in the very architecture of Buddhist rhetoric. In the traditional *dharma salawa*, the monks' language was heavily ornamental, relying on *gatha* (verses) and high-literary Sinhala to evoke a sense of Spirituality. Today, however, the digital preacher must compete with a sea of secular content, leading to the rise of a conversational and pragmatic register. The objective is no longer to transport the listener to a higher plane through rhythmic repetition, but to provide actionable insights that can be applied to the stresses of modern life. This has resulted in the psychologization of the *dhamma*, where classical concepts like *dukkha* (suffering) are increasingly framed as clinical anxiety or workplace burnout.

This evolution is perhaps most visible in the thematic focus on scientific Buddhism and rationalism. To appeal to a globalized, tech-savvy audience, many modern sermons strip away the folkloric and supernatural elements that once defined village Buddhism. The traditional emphasis on *karma* as a cosmic ledger of merit and demerit is often replaced by a focus on mindfulness and neuroplasticity. By framing the Buddha's teachings as a precursor to modern psychology, these digital sermons bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and the modern preference for empirical evidence making the teachings more sharable in a secular, globalized context.

In the digitized system of *bana* of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero empiricism manifests through a deliberate rebranding of the Buddha's teachings to align with the rigors of the scientific method. This evolution shifts the focus away from the village Buddhism model, which relies on ritual, faith, and the supernatural, toward a scientific Buddhism that treats the *dhamma*

as a laboratory for the mind. In digital sermons, the Buddha is no longer presented merely as a transcendent figure to be worshipped, but as a scientist of the mind or a proto-psychologist whose insights into human suffering are framed as early discoveries of cognitive behavioral principles. This framing appeals to a globalized, tech-savvy audience that demands empirical evidence and practical utility over metaphysical dogma.

The language used in these digital spaces further reinforces this empirical shift by replacing traditional cosmological concepts with modern biological and psychological terms. For instance, the traditional understanding of *karma* as a cosmic ledger of merit and demerit is often sidelined in favor of neuroplasticity. Within this digital framework, the consequences of one's actions are described not as a mysterious force governing future life, but as the physical rewiring of the brain's neural pathways. This allows the listener to view spiritual practice through a lens of cause and effect that is observable and 'testable' within a single lifetime, effectively turning the practice of mindfulness into a data-driven self-improvement tool.

Furthermore, the structure and delivery of digitized *bana* emphasize immediate, measurable results, such as stress reduction and enhanced focus, rather than the long-term goal of *Nirvana*. By stripping away folkloric elements, such as deities or supernatural realms, digital platforms present a sanitized version of the *dhamma* that fits neatly into the secular world of mental health and productivity. The authority of the sermon shifts from the weight of scriptural tradition to the validity of personal experience and scientific alignment. This transformation makes the ancient wisdom of *bana* accessible to a modern preference for empiricism, essentially marketing the path to enlightenment as a verifiable psychological breakthrough.

Furthermore, the social aspect of the sermon has been entirely redefined by the logic of the comment section: in the physical temple, the sermon was a one-way transmission where the

audience remained silent and receptive, whereas, in the digital space, the sermon becomes a starting point for debate, interpretation, and even controversy. The themes chosen by modern monks are often those that trigger engagement—social issues, political crises, or relationship dramas. This makes the dhamma more immediate and relevant, but it also risks turning the spiritual teacher into a content creator whose success is measured by likes, shares, and the ability to stay trending within the volatile digital ecosystem.

The transition of a spiritual teacher into a digital content creator introduces a significant risk because success becomes tethered to the metrics of the volatile digital ecosystem. When a monk's influence is measured by likes, shares, and the ability to stay trending, the primary objective of *bana* may shift from delivering authentic *dhamma* to maximizing audience engagement. This creates a fundamental tension where the monk must compete for attention against secular entertainment, potentially compromising the depth of the message to suit the fast-paced nature of social media algorithms.

This evolution raises several critical issues regarding the integrity of the spiritual path. First, the selection of themes based on what triggers engagement—such as social issues, political crises, or relationship dramas—can lead to a sensationalized version of the *dhamma*. While these topics make the teachings feel immediate and relevant, they risk overshadowing the core spiritual goals of detachment and inner peace with worldly controversy. The monk, as the spiritual teacher, may feel pressured to adopt a personality-driven brand, focusing on optics and virality rather than the traditionally humble and selfless role of a monk.

Furthermore, relying on digital metrics can distort the monk and laity relationship. Instead of a traditional hierarchy based on wisdom and monastic discipline, the relationship becomes one of creator and consumer. This consumerist model encourages cherry-picking the most palatable

aspects of Buddhism—like mindfulness for productivity—while discarding the more challenging, less shareable moral and ethical requirements of the faith. Ultimately, this raises the concern that the *dhamma* may be diluted into a commodity, designed more to satisfy the cravings of the digital audience than to provide a path for the cessation of suffering.

The shift towards a digital *dhamma* has fundamentally reconfigured the economic and spiritual contract between the monk and the laity. Traditionally, the act of Dana (giving) was a physical, ritualized event: a family would visit the temple to offer alms, robes, or medicine, receiving a personal blessing in return. This created a localized ecosystem where the temple's survival was tied to its immediate community. Today, however, digital merit-making has decentralized this economy.

However, this electronic economy of faith introduces new complexities regarding monastic identity and discipline. As monks become digital content creators, like Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero they enter the attention economy, where financial support is often driven by viral engagement and algorithmic visibility. This can create a tension between the traditional monastic vow of renunciation and the modern need to manage digital branding and financial transparency.

Ultimately, these technological changes have birthed a hybrid mode of religious life for monks and for lay people. While the core principle of earning merit remains, the delivery of that merit has moved from the temple hall to the cloud. This evolution allows for greater accessibility, especially for the Sri Lankan diaspora, but it also risks distancing the devotee from the physical, disciplined life of the Sangha. The relationship is no longer just about the proximity of a village temple, but about a networked connection where faith is increasingly mediated by the same screens and systems that govern our secular, financial lives.

While these traditional forms were deeply revered, they often struggled to engage individuals, mainly young people, who found the complex doctrine inaccessible. The focus frequently remained on ritualistic elements, such as *mataka bana* or all-night chanting, which emphasized tradition over practical, everyday application. However, the advent of mass media through Radio Ceylon initiated a significant transformation. Radio and television removed the visual anonymity of the preacher, forcing monks to become effective communicators.

The transition that stripped away the visual anonymity of the preacher in Sri Lanka was catalyzed by the nationwide launch of television in 1982. Before this milestone, religious broadcasting was dominated by radio, a medium where monks existed only as disembodied voices. In the radio era, which began in the 1930s, the monk could remain detached and stoic, relying entirely on the rhythmic chanting of Pali and formal Sinhala to convey authority. Because the audience could not see the speaker, there was no pressure for the monk to manage his physical appearance, facial expressions, or the setting in which he spoke.

The arrival of the Independent Television Network (ITN) and the Rupavahini Corporation altered this dynamic by placing the monk directly within the public's visual field. This shift forced a new generation of monks to become effective, charismatic communicators who could command attention on a screen. No longer shielded by the invisibility of the radio booth, they had to develop a 'screen presence,' using gestures and more emotive delivery styles to engage viewers who were now accustomed to the visual stimulation of modern media. This era marked the beginning of a move away from the traditional, rigid sermon toward a more performance-oriented style of preaching.

As the media landscape expanded with private channels in the 1990s, this evolution accelerated. Monks began to abandon the high-register, academic language of the past in favor of

colloquial Sinhala and relatable anecdotes to compete for audience ratings. This ‘mediatization’ of the *dhamma* meant that the monk’s success was increasingly measured by his ability to connect emotionally with a mass audience. By the time dedicated religious channels like the Buddhist TV were established in the mid-2000s, the monk had been fully transformed from a remote ritual figure into a highly visible and sophisticated public communicator.

Reformist monks often paved the way, but Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero carved out a unique niche by introducing a deeply intellectual, almost clinical new perspective that challenged the emotionalism of his peers. While many monks of the television era leaned into charismatic performance or sentimental storytelling to win over the masses, Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero utilized the medium to restore a sense of analytical rigor and doctrinal purity, often focusing on the deep philosophical mechanics of the mind rather than mere ritual or devotion. He viewed the visual platform not as a stage for personality, but as a classroom for ‘*Yonisomanasikara*’ (systematic attention), stripping away the traditional, often flowery *bhakti* (devotional) veneer to present the *dhamma* as a logical, verifiable science. By doing so, he added a perspective that appealed to the intellectual skeptic—a growing demographic of the urban middle class who sought a Buddhism that was both cognitively demanding and practically applicable to modern psychological stresses, effectively bridging the gap between traditional monastic scholarship and contemporary secular inquiry.

As Sri Lanka transitioned into the 21st century, the traditional landscape of religious practice underwent a profound transformation, moving away from merit-making as a primary spiritual goal toward a more pragmatic, therapeutic engagement with Buddhism. In the pre-modern and early post-colonial eras, listening to *bana* (sermons) was largely viewed as an act of *punna*—the accumulation of spiritual merit to ensure a better rebirth. However, the rapid urbanization of

the late 1990s and early 2000s broke down the traditional village-temple structures, replacing the communal, ritualistic atmosphere with the isolated, high-pressure environment of the city. As families transitioned into nuclear units and lost the support systems of the extended village network, they began to view religious practice through a problem-solving lens, seeking immediate psychological relief from the anxieties of urban competition and economic volatility.

The economic instability of the era, exacerbated by the closing stages of the civil war and the subsequent global market shifts, created a populace burdened by ‘modern life’s stresses,’ ranging from career burnout to financial insecurity. This shift in demand for religious content meant that listeners no longer wanted long, esoteric recitations of scripture in a language they couldn’t apply and understand to their daily struggles. Instead, they sought *dhamma* counseling—teachings that provided emotional regulation, mindfulness techniques for stress, and moral guidance on navigating complex modern relationships. This shift compelled the monk to assume the role of a spiritual therapist or life coach, adapting the ancient doctrine into a contemporary guide for mental well-being. The sermon evolved from a passive ritual meant for the ‘next life’ into an active, psychological tool designed to survive the ‘current life.’

The evolution of the ‘preacher-counselor’ in Sri Lanka was not a sudden rupture, but a deliberate progression built upon the foundations laid by the previous generation of reformist monks, like Walpola Rahula. In the late 20th century, figures like Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thero broke the traditional mold of the stoic, passive monk by addressing socio-political issues and the perceived ‘moral decay’ of society directly. He proved that a monk could be a public figure with a massive television following, effectively shifting the sermon from a temple ritual to a broadcast event. This paved the way for the current generation to move a step further, transitioning from the ‘social reformer’ role of their predecessors to a ‘psychological healer’ role. While the

previous generation focused on national identity and outward discipline, today's charismatic monks focus on the inner landscape, recognizing that their audience is more likely to be suffering from clinical depression than from a lack of ritual knowledge.

These modern preachers have successfully integrated contemporary psychology into their delivery, often stripping away the intimidating Pali terminology to explain the mechanics of the mind in a way that resonates with a secularized audience. By using humor and storytelling, they bridge the gap between the ancient texts and the digital age, making the monk an approachable figure rather than a distant deity. For example, instead of explaining *karma* through abstract rebirth cycles, a modern monk might use a recent viral news story or a relatable anecdote about workplace politics to show how one's current mental state dictates their immediate reality. This relatable approach allows them to tackle sensitive topics like marital conflict and professional burnout with a level of nuance that traditional sermons lacked, effectively rebranding the temple as a mental health resource for a stressed-out population.

The success of this new generation lies in their ability to maintain the 'saffron-robed' authority of their predecessors while speaking the language of the modern world. They have mastered the visual medium that their mentors first navigated in the 1980s, using high-quality production, relatable humor, and empathetic counseling techniques to ensure the *dhamma* remains a vital, living tool for survival in the 21st century.

Despite its popularity, this modern shift has not been without its critics. Traditionalists express concern that the increasing emphasis on entertainment value sometimes supersedes the depth of core teachings like the Four Noble Truths. They argue that this trend risks turning the monk into a performer rather than a spiritual guide, marking a controversial yet undeniable new chapter in the history of the *dharma*. The preaching style of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma

Thero serves as a modern embodiment of the historical and sociological shifts. There has been a notable transition in the history of the *dharma* where early sermons, once focused on practical understanding and intellectual liberation, shifted toward the act of acquiring merit. Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's approach aligns with this by emphasizing the emotional core of Buddhism, utilizing a rhythmic and melodic delivery akin to *kavi bana* that allows the teachings to reach laypeople who may lack a scholarly background. By prioritizing the narrative and devotional aspects of the faith—such as the *jataka* tales—this style of preaching transforms the sermon into a participatory ritual of faith rather than a dry academic exercise. However, this popularity brings the performer aspect to the forefront, echoing the concerns of traditionalists who argue that an increasing emphasis on entertainment value risks superseding the depth of core teachings like the Four Noble Truths. Consequently, Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's *bana* stands as a controversial yet undeniable new chapter in Buddhist practice, where the monk is sometimes viewed more as a performer than a traditional spiritual guide, marking the ongoing tension between making the dhamma accessible and maintaining its philosophical rigor.

Figure 1

The Shift from a Traditional Weberian Model of Buddhist Practice to a Modern Digital Ministry

Feature	Traditional Weberian Model	Modern Digital Ministry
Primary Goal of what??	Merit-making (<i>puñña</i>) for better rebirth.	Practical problem-solving and mental well-being.
The Exchange	Physical reciprocity (Food/Robes for <i>dhamma</i>).	Digital engagement (Likes/Shares/Donations).
Setting	Local village temple (<i>dharma salawa</i>).	Massive public arenas and social media apps.

Communication	Ornamental, ritualistic, and scriptural.	Conversational, snackable, and influencer-led.
Focus Area	Ritual orthodoxy and community bonds.	Individualized healing (e.g., drug rehabilitation).

The provided chart illustrates the shift from a Traditional Weberian Model of Buddhist practice to a Modern Digital Ministry, highlighting a fundamental change in the religious objective from merit-making (*puñña*) for a better rebirth to practical problem-solving and mental well-being. In the traditional model, the spiritual exchange is based on physical reciprocity, such as offering food or robes in return for the *dhamma*, whereas the modern model operates through digital engagement, including likes, and shares. The setting has similarly expanded from the local village temple or *dharma salawa* to massive public arenas and social media platforms. Furthermore, communication has evolved from an ornamental, ritualistic, and scriptural style toward a conversational, bite-sized insights, and influencer-led approach. Finally, the focus area has transitioned from a commitment to ritual orthodoxy and community bonds to a new emphasis on individualized healing, such as addressing specific social issues like drug rehabilitation.

The New Frontier of the Dhamma

The emergence of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero signals a profound paradigm shift in the history of Sri Lankan Buddhist preaching. While Max Weber once defined *bana* as a ritualized bridge of material and spiritual reciprocity, the digital age has effectively de-territorialized the sermon. The transition from the smoke-filled village *dharma salawa* to the high-definition smartphone screen has transformed the monk from a specialist in ritual into a social clinician and digital influencer.

This evolution represents more than just a change in medium; it is a change in the moral economy of Buddhism. By centering his ministry on the narcotic landscape and the psychological pressures of the 21st century, Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero has moved the *dhamma* away from the abstract pursuit of *Nirvana* or the nationalist agendas of his predecessors. Instead, he offers a rationalized Buddhism that functions as a pragmatic toolkit for survival. His success is measured not by the density of scriptural citation, but by the spiritual currency of rehabilitated lives—youths returning to their families and addicts reclaiming their health.

Ultimately, this digital *dharma* highlights a new form of religious authority based on utility and virality. As the traditional bonds of reciprocity in local temples dissolve, they are replaced by a globalized, individualistic consumption of spirituality. Whether this content-driven Buddhism dilutes the faith's meditative core or revitalizes its social relevance remains a subject of scholarly debate, but one thing is certain: the ministry of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero has successfully bridged the gap between ancient ethics and the modern digital age, ensuring that the *dhamma* remains a living, breathing force in the lives of the contemporary generation.

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