John Holt’s groundbreaking study examines the assimilation, transformation, and subordination of the Hindu deity Viṣṇu within the contexts of Sri Lankan history and Sinhala Buddhist religious culture. Holt argues that political agendas and social forces, as much as doctrinal concerns, have shaped the shifting patterns of the veneration of Viṣṇu in Sri Lanka.

Holt begins with a comparative look at the assimilation of the Buddha in Hinduism. He then explores the role and rationale of medieval Sinhala kings in assimilating Viṣṇu into Sinhala Buddhism. Offering analyses of texts, many of which have never before been translated into English, Holt considers the development of Viṣṇu in Buddhist literature and the changing practices of deity veneration. Shifting to the present, Holt describes the efforts of contemporary Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka to discourage the veneration of Viṣṇu, suggesting that many are motivated by a reactionary fear that their culture and society will soon be overrun by the influences and practices of Hindus, Muslims, and Christians.

“A convincing and timely study of how, outside of monotheistic traditions, religious rejection often follows from religious tolerance and how empathy easily breeds antipathy. . . . In its South Asian focus, the book offers a sophisticated analysis of the impact of Hinduism on Buddhism (and vice versa). And for anyone interested in the interplay between religion and politics, Holt lays bare the nationalist and ethnic subtexts to the continuing debate over the worship of Viṣṇu and other gods in Sri Lanka. As an anthropologist, Holt is honest about the personal conflicts he experienced in his fieldwork; writing as a historian, he never flinches from the complexity and difficulty of his sources. The book is a mature and insightful contribution to many fields of study.”

—Stephen F. Teiser, D. T. Suzuki Professor in Buddhist Studies, Princeton University

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For Sree Padma
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The religious traditions we study are not boxes of texts, commentaries, and interpretations passed from hand to hand through generations, but dynamic traditions, more like rivers, gushing, rolling, converging, and branching out to water and transforming new lands, or sometimes dying out completely in the desert sands. These traditions have always changed, sometimes gradually and sometimes in ways that would be considered quite revolutionary. (Eck 2000:137)

Indeed, religions do change sporadically or dramatically over the course of history, but not always in the same manner as the natural ebb and flow of water. The trajectories of religious change, more precisely, often stand in reflexive relation to dominant social and political forces in play. Moreover, religious change may be carefully engineered or even consciously contrived, in a manner that may serve the political interests of the state. At other times, religious change may be an unintended consequence of other types of evolving social dynamics, such as shifts in demography or reorientations of political economies.

This study demonstrates how the transformation of Visnu, one of the most important deities of Hindu tradition, became manifest within medieval and modern Sri Lankan Buddhist culture and society, and how a transplanted and integrated Visnu came to be understood within emergent Sinhala Buddhist literature and ritual. It illustrates, moreover, how Visnu’s assimilation engendered periodic expressions of resistance. While this resistance may have been a consequence of intermonastic disputes, at least in the contemporary era, such resistance may have been politically inspired. Historically, it is sometimes impossible to separate religion from politics in Sri Lanka. To understand the current controversy in Sri Lanka about whether Buddhists should worship deities, especially deities of Hindu origins, it is important to remember the sometimes incestuous relationship that obtains between religion and politics in this society.
Religions change, and so do the reasons for studying them. The theoretical perspectives that shape our inquiries inevitably vary with the passage of time, eventually becoming historical indices that mark the contingencies of our own intellectual interests. Despite the ebb and flow of often ideologically driven surges and retreats of theory, fundamental patterns of much scholarly practice remain. Thomas Tweed recently described scholarly endeavor this way:

Scholars continually move back and forth between inside and outside, fact and value, evidence and narrative, the living and the dead, here and there, us and them. (Tweed 2002:270)

Tweed has captured something of my own experience while writing this book. My attempts to study the cult of Visnu in Sri Lanka have been thoroughly engaged in the constant dialectical movements he cites. Indeed, attentive readers will see that the types of materials and issues I have encountered often forced me to shift the locations and perspectives of my inquiries.

This effort has produced only some shades and degrees of understanding, which some critical readers will deem more deeply insightful or more accurate than others. Much of what we discover depends on the nature of the questions we formulate, the types of people we meet, how willing they are to speak to us, how carefully we listen to them, and so on. The Introduction to part I delineates the theoretical rationale and thesis of this study, that political forces are often catalysts for religious change.

This is a study of a dimension of Buddhist religious culture that is not familiar to many readers in the western academy, because the issues, materials, and practices I have studied have not been accessible or examined in depth. The religion of common people is often ignored, its study sometimes sacrificed at the altar of great religious figures, and their lives and writings. Unfortunately, this means that we remain somewhat ignorant of how Buddhist practices and ideals are processed and valued among the vast majority of people who profess to be followers of the Buddha’s dharma. Many of us in the field of Buddhist studies, especially in the West, have been adept at dealing with the issues William LaFleur describes in the first of the following paragraphs. However, we have not attended very well to the matters he discusses in the second:

Early Buddhist doctrinal formulation had usually looked at raw facts of life and death with impassion. In its earliest Indian forms, Buddhism comes across even to the modern readers of texts as a dry-eyed, largely detached and philosophical assessment and acceptance of change, death and decay as inescapable. The three distinguishing marks of all existent things, according to the most basic of Buddhist teachings, is put in a pithy way: “All
things are characterized by impermanence, suffering and the absence of self. . .”

Common people, however, were not ascetic monks or adept at making such a cold-eye accounting of reality. Their approach to Buddhism was not through a point-by-point analysis of the “constituents of being.” Their Buddhism, which had to make sense of life’s crises in order to be of any use to them, was a Buddhism that had to mediate the old doctrines through a rich and adaptable store of images and practices connected with folklore. Their concern was not so much to have an objective analysis of “being” as to find, from within the Buddhist tradition, comfort and consolation in their often desperate and miserable lives. (La Fleur 1992:28)

This study aims to show how the cult of Visnu was valorized in Sinhala Buddhist religious culture: how it occupied a revered space with regard to conceptions of political power wielded by elites, how it operated within a field of moral economy (the ethics of social consciousness) understood and articulated especially by Sinhala Buddhistic folk, and how it affected the dynamics of soteriology (religious quest) for the practicing Buddhists who have constituted the vast bulk of the buddhasasana (dispensation).

I have severely imposed on many people’s time and attention to complete this project. On more than one occasion, I have felt like the conductor of an orchestra because there were so many others contributing simultaneously to the effort. Several people gave of themselves generously at my bidding and accomplished a very significant amount of translation work crucial for the formulation of the manuscript. P. B. Meegaskumbura was a major inspiration of this study. He translated from the original literary Sinhala a number of texts germane to the cults of Visnu, Dadimunda and Mala Raja; these texts appear in chapters 4, 6, and 7, in addition to the Algama Sannasa, which appears in chapter 5. He also read through an early version of the manuscript, provided helpful comments, and patiently prepared indices for places mentioned and texts translated or referred to in the final draft; and he was of enormous help to me in understanding the valiyaka mangalya, the focus of chapter 6.

Udaya P. Meddegama also provided invaluable assistance. He translated the yatikas I collected at the Visnu devalayas at up-country and low-country Visnu shrines and also translated significant segments of sandesaya literature that have been included in chapter 4. He also translated an important tape recording from the incumbent monk at the Ran Gal Lena Rajamaha Viharaya in Aluthnuvara. Vindya Eriyagama and Kanchuka Dharmasiri were savvy, reliable, and hardworking fieldwork assistants at the Kandy Maha (Visnu) and Aluthnuvara devalayas as well as at other up-country and low-country sites.
Vindya Eriyagama translated numerous interviews that were conducted in Sinhala, as well as the “case histories” recorded in chapters 5 and 6. She also translated significant portions of Mudiyanse Dissanayake’s *Vimal Valiyak Mangalya* included in chapter 6. Her own experience as a field-worker and her nuanced knowledge of Kandyan culture and society were an enormous help. Kanchuka Dharmasiri also translated interviews from Sinhala to English, as well as portions of secondary historical studies written in Sinhala, and is the talented artist of the drawings found throughout this book. Sunil Goonasekera, Jonathan Walters, Sree Padma, and Gunapala Dharmasiri read through an early draft of the manuscript and each offered constructive comments and advice. As I said, I imposed this project on a lot of very generous people. I sincerely thank each of them.

I am also grateful to Denis Ratwatte, *basnayake nilame* of the Maha Devalaya in Kandy, and the Aluthnuvara Devalaya in Aluthnuvara, who more than tolerated our presence in 2000 and 2001. On many occasions, the *basantaya nilame* took time out from the demands of his busy schedule to answer what must have seemed to him an endless series of tedious questions, and trusted us with the run of the devalayas. I also thank I. G. Sumanasena, who has helped me with my work in Sri Lanka since 1983 and remains a true friend; Rosemary Chunchie, a wonderful support since 1992; and Violet and Maya Perera, for making life in Kandy such a pleasurable and productive experience while I toiled away on this project. Gerald Peiris prepared the map.

A National Endowment of the Humanities Fellowship for College Teachers, a semester appointment as the Numata Chair of Buddhist Studies at the University of Calgary, and a faculty-leave supplement along with a faculty research grant from the Freeman Fund from Bowdoin College provided time and funds for me to undertake the research from 1999 through 2002 leading to this publication. A further grant from Bowdoin College’s Faculty Research Fund provided a subvention to help offset publication costs.

I would also like to record my appreciation to Ms. Wendy Lochner, Senior Editor at Columbia University Press for religion, philosophy, and anthropology, for her interest in and support of this project.

Every book of this nature requires a unique and sustained inspiration. Mine has come from the person to whom this book is dedicated: Sree Padma.

The vast bulk of this manuscript was prepared in Sri Lanka on a word-processing program that did not support diacritics. My intention was to add all diacritics by hand when the manuscript moved through the copyediting process. However, I was informed by the Press at that time that the expense of adding the diacritical marks would be prohibitive. I apologize to my readers for their absence. The formally correct *bodhisatva* rather than the conventionally used *bodhisattva* has been used throughout.

Harpowell, Maine
The Buddhist Visnu
PART 1
THE HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL PROBLEMS

“Only unprogressive nations, to hide the sterility of their souls, seek indigenous or supernatural origins for their institutions and culture. Progressive nations borrow cultural elements from everywhere and assert their virile genius in remoulding and re-creating them.”
—Martin Wickramasinghe

In many chapters of the history of religions, there are clear and frequent instances in which the myths, rituals, ethics, gods, metaphysics, or symbolism of one religious culture are assimilated, transformed, and subordinated by the devotees of another. In a previous study published a decade ago, I sought to understand how and why the Mahayana Buddhist bodhisatva Avalokitesvara had been absorbed into the predominantly Theravadan Sinhala Buddhist religious culture of Sri Lanka. In that study, I found that many centuries after Avalokitesvara’s Mahayana cult had been introduced into Sri Lanka, the bodhisatva had come to be regarded by Sinhala Buddhists as Natha Deviyo, the tutelary god par excellence of up-country Kandyan Theravada Buddhist kingship. Natha’s identity, in turn, was then further transformed. After his original identity as Avalokitesvara had been forgotten, he came to be regarded by many as the next Buddha-in-the-making, the bodhisatva Maitreya.2 My principal thesis in that study of the shifting identities of Avalokitesvara was this: that migrating forms of religious culture are often assimilated into another if they are perceived as functionally efficacious. Moreover, the staying power of such assimilations depends upon the manner in which they can be legitimated convincingly in relation to the telos, or ultimate end, of the incorporating religious culture.

In the present study of how the Hindu deity Visnu was incorporated within Sinhala Buddhist religious culture, I am still interested in examining the nuances of this particular pattern of religious change. Much of what follows in this book aims at determining how Visnu’s cult has become religiously mean-
ingful for different types of Sinhala Buddhists at various times historically. However, in this current study, additional issues come into play that extend the nature of the theoretical problem: It is often the case that, once elements of a given religious culture are assimilated, transformed, and legitimated by another, counterrereactions in relation to these assimilations may occur. These counterreactions often stimulate attempts to purge or reject precisely what has been previously assimilated. That is, cultural flows leading to the process of assimilation or adaptation may generate significant waves of resistance or patterns of ambivalence in relation to what has been previously absorbed.

Although such reactions belie the means by which a religious culture is engaged in an ongoing process of redefinition, this process of redefinition is often linked to a realpolitik. That is, many assimilations, transformations, or “purifications” occur not only because they are deemed, in general, to be functionally efficacious and soteriologically congenial, but because they are motivated, more precisely, by considerations of political expediency. Religious change occurs not only for religious reasons or rationales per se, but often in relation to the interests of contemporary political forces. Indeed, it is often difficult to separate religious and political forces within the context of social history or in the minds of individual historical players. They are often embedded in one another. This is especially true in the case of Buddhist Sri Lanka.

In pondering this problem theoretically and comparatively, it becomes apparent that this pattern has surfaced in any number of important historical circumstances in relation to a variety of religious and cultural contexts. Ambivalence in reaction to assimilation is often its by-product. Students of East Asian religions, for instance, know how important conceptions of Mahayana Buddhist thought, including dharma and emptiness (sunyata), exercised a profound influence upon neo-Confucian thinkers such as Ch’u Hsi and Wang Yang Ming during the tenth and fifteenth centuries C.E. in China, so that understandings of the principle of order and the nature of self-awareness were fundamentally changed.3

Simultaneously, however, Buddhist schools of monasticism and their institutions of practice were regarded warily by many Confucian literati and political officials, and sometimes eyed as an intruding or “foreign” presence, never to be fully considered as genuinely Chinese. In the literary circles of the Confucian Chinese elite, Buddhist ideas and institutions, however creative their impact upon Chinese thought and culture, often evoked just such an ambivalent response. Charles Wei-hsyn Fu has put the matter this way: “The neo-Confucian confrontation with Sinitic Mahayana is perhaps the most interesting and significant case of ideological ‘love and hate’ in the whole history of Chinese philosophy and religion.”4
A second example is very familiar to students of Islam. This concerns the problem of how Jesus came to be regarded within the context of the Qur’an and later Sufi traditions. Again, the response is profoundly ambivalent. Although the divinity of Jesus as the Son of God, as well as the doctrine of the Trinity, was emphatically repudiated, the virgin birth or immaculate conception of Jesus was reasserted. Such textual ambivalence contains the seeds of what later developed as a historical theory of Islam in which the religions of Moses and Jesus were enfolded into an understanding of a prophetic tradition that commenced with Abraham, and thus antedated the origins of the two rival religious traditions. Such was Islam’s own “totalizing” response to the presence of other religious cultures within the regions that came under Muslim political control. Both Moses and Jesus were perceived as genuine prophets who had experienced divine revelations, but their followers were chastised for misunderstanding the truth of their messages. The ambivalence reflected in this interpretation left room for the possibility of valorizing Jesus in subsequent Sufi traditions. Marshall Hodgson (I:402) has described how a prophetic place was preserved for Jesus, but how he was simultaneously subordinated to Muhammad:

Indeed, many Sufis allotted a special holy place to Jesus as the prophet of the inward life, of the gospel of Love. For among Sufis, as among other mystics, Love of God, and hence tenderness to all His creatures, came to be seen as the heart of inward life, just as reverence for God and justice to all His creatures was the heart of outward life, of the Shari’ah. There remained no doubt, of course, in most Sufis’ minds that the revelation to Muhammad was the greatest and purest of the revelations. Sometimes it was put thus: that Moses revealed the majesty of God, and the Law which we must respect out of respect to Him; Jesus revealed the beauty of God, and the Love which we must bear Him when we catch a glimpse of His Reality; but Muhammad came with both Love and Law together, revealing both His majesty and beauty.

A third example, this one more pertinent to the study that follows, is the sometimes intimate and sometimes antagonistic complex of attitudes obtaining between Hindus and Buddhists in India, specifically in relation to how the figure of the Buddha was to be understood. Because this is a massive topic, I am compelled to look specifically, and yet only very briefly and superficially, within the introductory chapter of this book, at the changing manner in which some Hindus have reluctantly absorbed, cleverly subordinated, and then enthusiastically reclaimed the figure of the Buddha for Hinduism. A consideration of this relevant example of the theoretical problem at hand will also help
to give some symmetry to a study that is primarily concerned with the Sinhala Buddhist incorporation of Visnu, which is the subject of the chapters that follow. A brief overview of how the Buddha has been regarded in India’s Hindu religious culture also provides an opportunity to discuss various dimensions of the religious significance of Visnu within the Hindu context, before observing the nature of his assimilation and transformation among the Sinhala Buddhists of Sri Lanka.

In the study which follows, I will also discuss how Visnu’s incorporation into Sinhala Buddhist religious culture has met with various degrees of resistance in late medieval and especially in contemporary times. In particular, I will focus on the significance of a contemporary movement in Sri Lanka led by Theravada monks that aims to discourage Buddhists from venerating the now thoroughly “Buddhist” Visnu. I will discuss the religious and political reasons for why this attempt to remove Visnu from veneration by Buddhists is now taking place.

This, then, is my thesis: that the manner in which deities or prominent sacred aspects of one religious culture are appropriated, legitimated, transformed and/or rejected by another may be, in part, the articulation of carefully considered theological or soteriological innovations invoked by reflective and erudite ecclesiastics; but often, however, some assimilations, and the resistances they frequently engender, are a refraction of social and political dynamics occasioned by a heightened awareness of communal, national, or ethnic consciousness. In the most abstract sense, I am suggesting that social, economic, and political conditions are often refracted in the substance and dynamics of movements for religious reform or innovation, even though the ostensible rationales for these reforms and innovations are usually more formally presented within doctrinal frameworks.

To be clear about my contention: I am not arguing that all religious assimilations or religious changes are always or purely politically inspired or politically expedient. But I am suggesting that many of them are at least partially so, and that we need to explore this possibility historically whenever we attempt to determine why it is that assimilations take place. In the case of the Sinhala Buddhist assimilation and transformation of Visnu, it will be seen in what follows that kingship, both Hindu and Buddhist, played a decisive role in making assimilations and purifications occur. In the contemporary context, Buddhist monks, as successors to the Sinhala kings who understood their own roles as the protectors of the Buddha’s sasana (dispensation), are playing a similarly protective role. What will be seen is that while kings tend to assimilate, monks more often purge.

After the initial discussion in chapter 1 that analyzes how Hindus have incorporated the Buddha—a discussion that also introduces the major parame-
ters of the cult of the “Buddhist Visnu” and the problems inherent in a study of deity veneration within the Theravada tradition—I shall proceed, in chapter 2, to an overview of how and why elements of Hindu religious culture exercised such a profound influence on aspects of Sinhala Buddhist political history, literature, and architecture from the twelfth through the sixteenth centuries C.E. This is followed by a discussion, in chapter 3, of how the identity of the Sinhala deity Upulvan, variously interpreted by many previous scholars, has come to constitute one of the major aspects of the transformed “Buddhist Visnu”’s mythic profile. In turn, chapter 4 examines late medieval Sinhala Buddhist liturgical poetry and myth to probe further into the evolution of Visnu’s religious valorization.

Thus, part 1 of this book is primarily a study that is loosely diachronic in nature, examining mythic and cultic expressions of Sinhala religious culture as they have been evinced in a variety of literary sources: chronicles, inscriptions, poetry, and folk songs.

Part 2 is an examination of the contemporary cult of Visnu in Sri Lanka at the most important venues of its ritualistic expression; and it is a study of a recent movement to purge Buddhism of deity veneration.
“Any alien trait can be absorbed and integrated by another culture if it is elastic enough to adjust the new element to its basic pattern.”
—Martin Wickramasinghe

This chapter explores very briefly the problem of how Hindus have enfolded the Buddha into their changing religious culture in various historical contexts, as an especially relevant example of the theoretical problem I sketched in the introduction to part 1. The chapter also indicates how some Hindus have adopted a critical stance toward Buddhists and Buddhism. This discussion also provides an opportunity to outline some of the salient features of the cult of Visnu within Hindu religious culture, so that, in later chapters, the nature and significance of Visnu’s assimilation into the Buddhist religious culture of Sri Lanka can be more readily understood. The second half of this chapter also introduces the salience of Visnu’s cult for Sinhala Buddhists in Theravadan Sri Lanka while noting some of the general issues encountered in a study of deity veneration.

The “Hindu Buddha”

Hindu views of the Buddha and Buddhism have not been constant, nor have they been consistent. Indeed, it is quite artificial to speak of a Hindu view per se, because determining exactly what is “Hindu,” in the first place, would be inherently problematic. As with all religious cultures, Hindu practice and Hindu religious ideas have been ever-transforming phenomena, not static entities, throughout a very long history spanning at least three millennia. As such, there is no single, normative view of Hinduism to be ascertained historically, though it is possible to collect various “snapshots” derived from textual distillations generated at a particular moment in history.
Furthermore, it can be quite misleading to refer to “Hinduism” in the ancient period of Indian history as evolving through several centuries into the common era, simply because important characteristics of ritual, mythic, and theological scope, in what is now normally referred to as “Hindu” tradition (a post-Puranic phenomenon), had yet to evolve. When the deities, cultic rites of propitiation, meditative practices, ethical proscriptions, and philosophical or theological schools of thought of what now predominantly constitutes the fundamental structures of Hindu religious culture did finally emerge in the latter half of the first millennium C.E., it was only after Buddhism had exercised a profound influence upon many of them, with Buddhist notions pertaining to karma, the practice of meditation, the nature of the self or nonself, the problematic nature of existence, and the solution to the existential condition, having been incorporated into the ongoing dynamic process. Even the development of what became modern Hindu monasticism, usually traced to the eighth-century activities of the great Hindu philosopher Sankara, was affected by Buddhism.

Yet the historical legacy of Buddhism in India is not limited to its influences upon or its incorporation into the developing tradition we have come to call Hinduism. Buddhism and other sramana or heterodox schools were fundamentally distinctive in their origins and remained independent and serious, sustaining challenges to Brahmanical orthodoxy throughout their respective Indian histories. Indeed, it was precisely because they mounted such serious challenges to the Brahmanical tradition that the nature and significance of their teachings had to be contested or reconciled.

Though the accounts of the Pali suttas and Vinaya usually cast priestly brahmanas as spiritual seekers who became enlightened and converted by the Buddha’s sermons, these priestly followers of Vedic tradition, both ancient and medieval, must have been generally quite wary of the teachings of the historical Sakyamuni Gautama Buddha from about the sixth century B.C.E., for the Buddha apparently had not been an Aryan kinsman, not a Vedic rsi or “seer,” nor had he been born into their priestly brahmin varna, or caste. If we take the portrayals of early Pali canonical literature seriously, moreover, the Buddha could have been regarded in many circles as an inveterate opponent of Brahmanical public rites, a religious teacher who had opened the ranks of his followers to people of many different castes or ranks, who challenged the verity of Brahmanical metaphysical speculations pertaining to the self (atman) and the absolute unchanging ontological reality principle (Brahman) while declaring the efficacy of the sacred gods (devas) as irrelevant to the ultimate religious quest.

In addition to these open challenges to Brahmanical conceptions of self, society and cosmos, the Buddha’s own ksatrya or royal origins made it somewhat
difficult, if not impossible, to accommodate him as a teacher in any of the accepted Brahmanical schools (Vaidika, Vedantika, Srauta, Smarta, etc.) or theological orientations (Saiva, Vaisnava, sakta, or bhakti) that developed formally within the later, more fully evolved, Hindu religious culture. Thus, it is not very surprising, in light of the antithetical stance assumed by the Buddha toward Brahmanical thought and institutions, that in one early medieval Brahmanical text, it is declared that “a brahmana who enters a Buddhist temple even in a time of great calamity cannot get rid of the sin by means of hundreds of expiations, since the Buddhists are heretical critics of the sacred Vedas.”

Vehement rejoinders to the Buddhist critiques of Brahmanical traditions also abound. It is not uncommon to find Buddhists referred to in many other medieval Brahmanical contexts as “outcastes” (vasalaka), “devils,” or “demons” (daitya, danava). Moreover, the fact that the modern Telugu words lanja dibbahu, which refer to mounds of earth containing Buddhist archaeological ruins, literally mean “prostitute hill,” indicates the degree of hostility and ridicule which Buddhism elicited in some sections of the medieval Hindu community. In light of the Buddha’s critique of Brahmanism and the consequent hostility that it provoked, it is remarkable that the image of the Buddha was eventually rehabilitated and incorporated into many Hindu normative constructions, that the Buddha was eventually embraced by some modern Hindus as one of the greatest teachers of humankind, and that some other Hindus would go so far as to say that the Buddha was, in fact, even born a Hindu.

This last claim is frequently asserted in contemporary India, but it has been effectively rebutted by scholars like the late Lal Mani Joshi, a particularly insightful modern Indian historian of religions, who has bluntly rejected the assertion:

To say that Gautama [the Buddha] was born a Hindu [as some contemporary Hindus and Western observers have claimed] is entirely nonsensical. There is no evidence to think that [Vedic religion] was prevalent among the Sakyas, Mallas, or Licchavis [the pertinent political republics] in the days of the Buddha and Mahavira [the so-called “founder” of Jainism]. On the contrary, there is evidence of the progress and influence of several varieties of Sramanic religion and philosophy which had nothing in common with Brahmanic theism, sacrificialism, and world-affirmation. The ideologies of the sramanas cannot be traced to Indo-Aryans . . . Buddhism and numerous other forms of ascetically-oriented soteriologies propounded by munis and sramanas together with some outstanding teachers of scepticism, materialism, realism, nihilism and eternalism flourished in that small area of modern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar at a time when it had
not been fully aryанизed and brahmanized. It is not insignificant that the
anti-Vedic and ascetic tendency of a few Upanisadic texts was inspired by
the teachings of these east Indian *sramanas*.4 [brackets mine]

Joshi’s observation is particularly significant, not only in rebuffing the pop-
ular view that the Buddha was born a Hindu and that Buddhism is an offshoot
of Hindu tradition, but it is also important insofar as he is signaling just how
early it was (mid–first millennium B.C.E.) that Buddhist thought seems to have
influenced what are later regarded by many as thoroughly classic Hindu for-
mulations. Specifically, he is referring to passages in several Upanisads that
champion the life of internal meditation over external ritual performance, of
the eremitic wandering ascetic over the domestic priest, and the ethicization
(rather than the ritual mechanization) of the doctrine of karma and its conse-
quences for explaining a theory of rebirth. What Joshi suggests runs against the
grain of speculation offered by many Indian and Western scholars: that Bud-
dhism somehow grew out of Hindu or Brahmanical antecedents that had been
first articulated in the Upanisads. Conversely, what he suggests is that Bud-
dhism may have been a fundamental influence on many Upanisadic discourses
regarding an emergent religious alternative to the sacrificial focus of the *Rg
Veda*.

Buddhistic notions (concentrated meditation, selfless asceticism, and the
ethicization of karma, etc.) were eventually incorporated, in elegant and philo-
sophically precise language, within the poetic syntheses of the *Bhagavad Gita*,
perhaps the most highly revered of all Hindu sacred texts.5 Within the *Gita*,
Krsna’s famous discourse to Arjuna, teaching him the ethic of becoming de-
tached from the fruit of his efforts through the conquering of desire, remains
a classic moment in the history of Indian religions, one that is, no doubt, of
Buddhist inspiration.6

Nevertheless, Brahmanical incorporation of Buddhist ideas—what Arnold
Toynbee once called “the philosophical plunder of Buddhism”—was also ac-
companied later, as I have indicated above, by mean-spirited ridicule. While
the Buddha and some of his selected ideas were eventually regarded most con-
genially, it can also be said that Buddhism as an institution and community
were rarely accorded the same hospitality from within the Brahmanical ranks,
especially after the eighth century C.E. The Indian cultural historian P.V. Kane
has argued that the assimilation of Buddhist ideas was not a consequence of
Hindu tolerance, nor reflective of a Hindu proclivity for philosophical syn-
cretism.7 Rather, because institutional Buddhism had become, since the third
century B.C.E., and the days of the emperor Asoka, a pan-Indian, politically sig-
nificant presence, and Asoka’s Buddhistic interpretation of dharma apparently
had become, for a time at least, a matter of implemented public policy, the
Brahmanical community, as a matter of its own survival, had little choice but to adopt a dual strategy: on the one hand, to be congenial to those Buddhist ideas which had become accepted as almost matters of religious common sense, but also, on the other, to undermine, condemn, or chastise rival Buddhists and their institutional communities.

The second part of this strategy became explicit after the eighth century C.E. when the theories and ideologies of kingship in India shifted from Buddhist to Vaisnava and Saiva rationales. Kane’s reading of the sociopolitical dynamic between the Brahmanical and Buddhist communities in earlier phases of Indian political history is in accordance with the analyses recently offered by Ronald Inden, which are germane to later medieval historical periods. With reference to the shifting ideology of kingship, Inden writes (1998:67) that before the eighth century, the Buddha was accorded the position of universal deity and ceremonies by which a king attained to imperial status were elaborate donative ceremonies entailing gifts to Buddhist monks and the installation of a symbolic Buddha in a stupa. . . . This pattern changed in the eighth century. The Buddha was replaced as the supreme, imperial deity by one of the Hindu gods (except under the Palas of eastern India, the Buddha’s homeland) and the performance of srauta rites as separate ceremonies was largely abandoned.

The replacement of the Buddha as the “cosmic person” within the mythic ideology of Indian kingship, as we shall see shortly, occurred at about the same time that the Buddha was incorporated and subordinated within the Brahmanical cult of Visnu. That is, before the eighth century, the Buddha and Buddhism enjoyed a sociopolitical status that the Brahmanical community simply could not ignore, and its attacks upon Buddhist institutions were more tempered or muted in fashion as a result. While Buddhism would not disappear from India for several centuries after the eighth, it is clear that royal proclivities for the cults of Visnu and Siva weakened its position within the sociopolitical context and helped to make possible its eventual eclipse and absorption by the priestly Brahmanical community. Inden (55) has elaborated historically on the specific nature and putative significance of this shift:

The first imperial dynasties that elevate either Visnu or Siva (or Surya, the Sun) to the status of supreme deity (paramesvara, mahesvara), equivalent to the Cosmic Man and relegate the Buddha to a secondary position are the short-lived Karkota dynasty of Kashmir and the Gurjara-Pratihara at Kanyakubja in northern India, the Rastrakuta in the Deccan, and the Pallava in south India. This change takes place in the eighth century and is
marked by the building of the first monumental Hindu temples. Previously the Buddha had been accorded imperial-style worship (*puja*). Now as one of the Hindu gods replaced the Buddha at the imperial centre and pinnacle of the cosmo-political system, the image or symbol of the Hindu god comes to be housed in a monumental temple and given increasingly elaborate imperial-style *puja* worship.8

In its *Vaisnava* dress, the developing ideology of Indian theories of kingship was undergoing a decisive turn which would also generate a major change in the manner in which the Buddha and Buddhism would be regarded from within a newly regenerated Brahmanical and bhakti (devotional) framework. Within this emergent “full blown” Hindu tradition dominated by the bhakti cults of Visnu (and in some cases Siva), the king was considered a “partial descent” (*amsa*) of the great god Visnu, the preserver of dharma, the natural and moral order, and himself a form of the Cosmic Overlord. Visnu’s wife, Laksmi or Sri, the goddess of wealth, prosperity, and good fortune, who worshipfully accompanies her husband in different forms when he descends (*ava-tr*) to earth in one of his various forms, was also considered the consort of the king parallel to and obviously closely connected to the land (Inden 46).

Like the king, the Buddha would also be accorded the status of an avatar within this developing Brahmanical ideological scheme. Inden (71) describes how the new Hindu consecration ceremony, the *abhiseka*, transformed the king into a this-worldly Visnu, an ideal human being of cosmic significance:

The golden water jar, anthropomorphically adorned and dressed, honored and empowered, has itself been made into a microcosmic, immanent image of the Cosmic Man. The waters it contains have in them, by virtue of this act of transubstantiation, the powers of all the gods, beings, and substances that exist in the cosmos. All of these have been generated out of the body of the Cosmic overlord at the beginning of the present cycle of creation. Now, these have all been reconverged and concentrated themselves in the “body” of the water jar, in symbolic reality the microcosm of the Cosmic Man. By transferring its waters—the symbolic ‘blood’ of the Cosmic Man—or, more precisely, the radiant energy (*tejas*) of Visnu—to the head and body of the king from the jar, the sovereign Visnu, through the agency of the royal astrologer, transmits the ‘kingship over kings’ to the king and transforms him into a microcosmic and immanent form of the macrocosmic and transcendent Purusa. The ritual enactment of Purusa’s creation of the king by drawing together portions of the gods is now completed. The recipient had earlier been made into an independent, regional king by the *vaidika* segment of the rite, the *rajasuhya*; here he has been
made into an imperial, universal king, a replica of Visnu, the Cosmic Man. . . . Transformed by the abhiseka into the image of this Cosmic Sovereign, the king-elect is now ready to be installed (as is the image of a deity in a temple) in his actual kingdom. As a partial avatara or descent of Visnu, he is ready to descend from the transcendent plane to the immanent world of his kingdom, to take his place as the microcosmic Purusa, the axis mundi of his domain.

I have quoted at length what Inden has described in detail because this ritual making-of-a-king provides an excellent portrayal of not only the emergent “god-king” construction, but also how an avatar was regarded in relation to the fundamental cosmic being (Visnu). The Buddha’s Vaisnava avatar profile was molded much in the same fashion. Further, this Vaisnava model of kingship was to exert a concerted impact upon Sinhala Buddhist kingship in Sri Lanka by the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Polonnaruva (the capital city and imperial ritual center), and with it, curiously, a special accommodation for Visnu within Buddhist constructions of divine hierarchy.

Haldar has noted a number of structural and substantial similarities between the mythic profiles of Visnu and the Buddha which, he maintains, may have abetted the assimilation and subordination of the Buddha as an avatar of Visnu in the Hindu Puranas. Noting the Visuddhimagga and Dhammapada commentaries as classic Theravadan sources of cosmogony and cosmology, Haldar points out that “the Buddha covered the distance of 6,800,000 yojanas in three strides, from the earth to the Tavatimsa Devaloka, and reached there (Tavatimsa), setting his right foot down on the top of the Yugandhara and his left one on Sineru” (Haldar 1970:2–3). He notes how reminiscent this is of the three strides by which Visnu, in the Rg Veda, marks off the cosmic spheres.

Another significant similarity, he notes, may be seen in the fact that Buddhas seem never to be born in the early phases of a kalpa, but only after a critical period of decline has set in and there is a need for dharma to be known among humankind. Haldar sees this as an indication of why “the Buddha may be regarded as an avatara” (Haldar 129) insofar as he functions in the same way as Visnu—appearing in a period of decline in order to uphold dharma. (It would be difficult, in fact, to establish the origins of these shared attributes found within both of the mythic profiles of the Buddha and Visnu, whether they have evolved from a common source or have their origins exclusively in one tradition or the other.)

Whatever the origins of these shared attributes, Hindu ambivalence towards the Buddha and Buddhism is no more clearly seen than in the Hindu assimilation and subordination which I wish most to emphasize in this brief portrayal: By the time of the eighth century C.E., when the political transfor-
mations from Buddhist to Hindu ideology noted above were occurring, the Buddha was being declared an avatar, or an incarnation of Visnu, in not only one Sanskrit Purana, but in no less than four.9 By this time too, inscriptions in the south, in what is today modern Tamilnadu, at Mahabalipuram, were declaring that the Buddha was the ninth of Visnu’s ten incarnations.10 Eventually, sculpted images of Visnu’s ten avatars, including the Buddha, would adorn the columns of the most renowned Visnu temples in South India, with Tiruchchappalli’s famous Sri Rangam (Visnu) temple being perhaps the most conspicuous example.11 The legacy of this formulation was so widespread and enduring that even today in contemporary Sinhala Buddhist Sri Lanka, one can see temple paintings produced in the 1950s at the Visnu devalaya in Devinuvara on the southern tip of the island, in which the Buddha is depicted as the ninth avatar of Visnu (see fig. 1.1). Thus the notion gained widespread currency even beyond Hindu India, where one can still hear it enthusiastically asserted by many Hindus even today.

So, what exactly does it mean to be an avatar of Visnu within the context of the Puranas? The Puranas are sometimes referred to as the “fifth veda” on account of their great popularity, and hence authority, among common Brahman priests and Hindu devotees of bhakti orientations.12 Unlike the Vedas, the Brahmanas, and the Upanisads, texts which are substantially sacrificial hymns,

FIGURE 1.1 Painting of the Buddha as the ninth avatar of Visnu, from the 1950s, on the wall of the sanctum sanctorum of the Visnu devalaya at Devinuvara