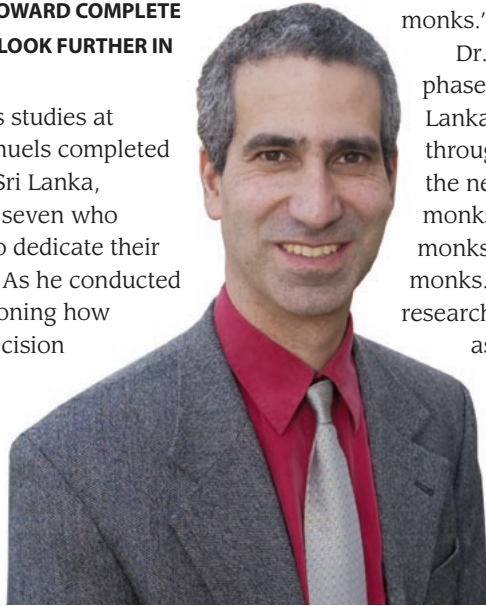


JEFFREY SAMUELS HAS SPENT A GOOD PORTION OF HIS CAREER STUDYING THE SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION OF BUDDHIST MONKS AS THEY COMMIT THEMSELVES FULLY TO MONASTIC LIFE. THERE IS SOMETHING ALMOST HYPNOTIZING ABOUT THE CASUAL OBSERVER'S REACTION TO THE BEAUTIFUL RITUALS AND SOLEMN STEADFASTNESS OF THEIR LIFESTYLE. MOST BUDDHIST MONKS ENTER THE MONASTERY AS CHILDREN, BUT WHAT CAUSES THEM TO MAKE THIS DECISION TOWARD COMPLETE DEDICATION? DR. SAMUELS DECIDED TO LOOK FURTHER IN SEARCH OF THE ANSWER.

An assistant professor of religious studies at Western Kentucky University, Dr. Samuels completed his doctoral dissertation research in Sri Lanka, where he observed boys as young as seven who had made the lifetime commitment to dedicate their career to becoming Buddhist monks. As he conducted his research, he found himself questioning how such young children could make a decision that would require such intellectual capacity and mature understanding. This became the topic of his most recent research, *Children in Robes: Aesthetics, Ritual, and Language*, which has been funded through the Metanexus Institute's Spiritual Transformation Project.



Dr. Jeffrey Samuels

"My initial research has shown there is a real aesthetic dimension to monastic life that children find attractive. For example, a child in our country might see a shiny red fire truck and decide he wants to become a fireman. Likewise, children there see the respect that is shown toward monks and are intrigued by their shaven heads, the mannerisms in which they walk and talk, and their beautiful robes. I found that this influenced children's decisions to become monks."

Dr. Samuels is currently in the middle phase of his research. He spent time in Sri Lanka in the summer of 2003, and his grant through the Metanexus Institute runs through the next two years. He has interviewed head monks, young men in training to become monks, lay devotees, and parents of young monks. One method Dr. Samuels used in his research involved giving children cameras and asking them to take pictures of their lives.

He then interviewed the children about their pictures, with each picture sometimes taking as much as forty-five minutes to describe.

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It is fascinating because these children go back and forth between being boys and being monks. At times they might be having fun playing marbles and cricket, but at other times, when they are observed in their ritual context, they are very much monks.

"As I visited with many of these very young monks, I found that most of them see their decision to enter the monastery as their own decision. I wanted to know why they chose to become monks in the first place," he said.

"In 1999 I went to Sri Lanka with a plan of doing something entirely different with my research," Dr. Samuels continued. "I went to the temple and found many young kids living there. My previous opinion had been that men become monks to overcome suffering. As I saw the children playing and being boys, I realized that it was not simply a textbook phenomenon."

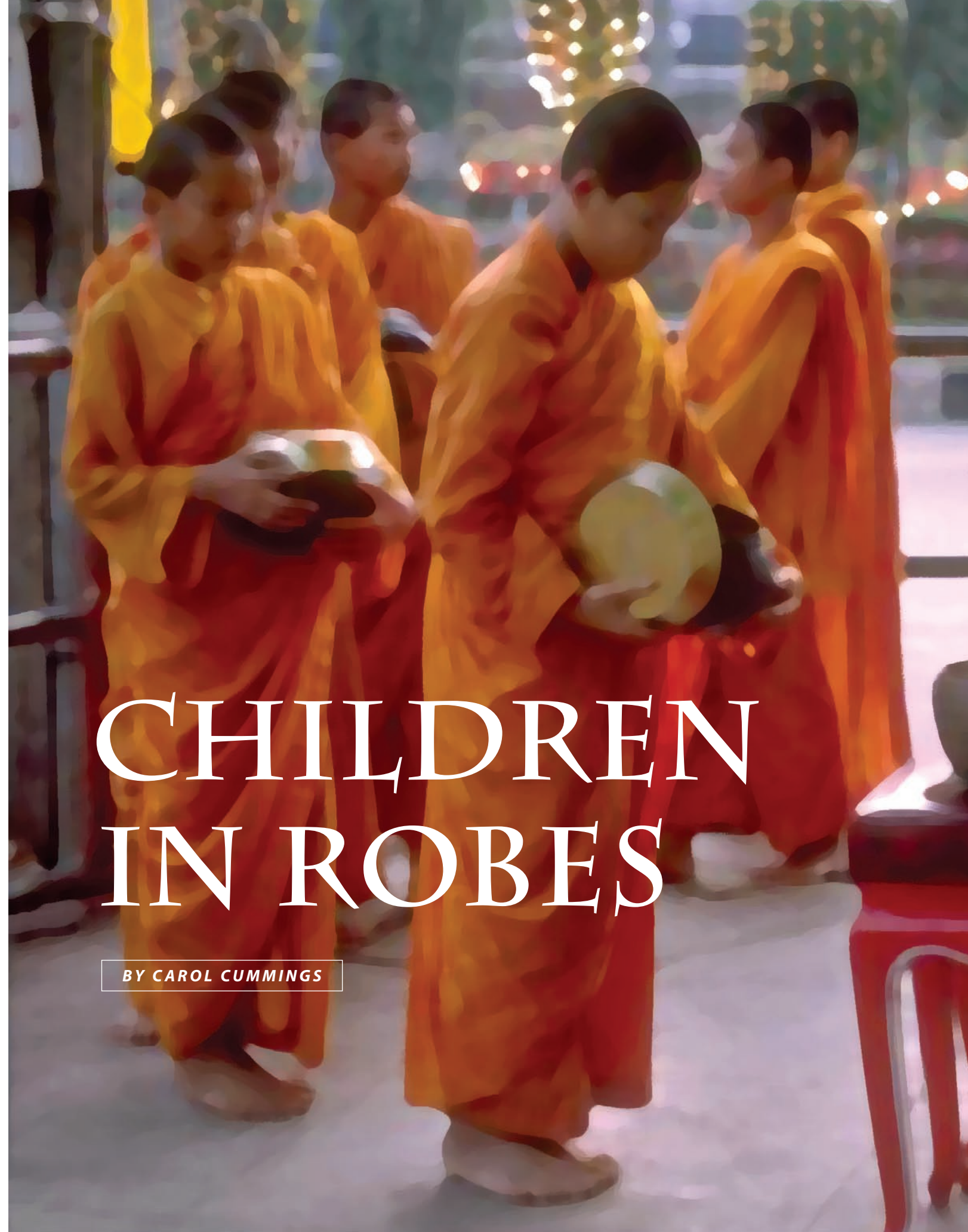
Dr. Samuels said that most research into spiritual transformation and religious conversion assumes the individual undergoing transformation is someone with mature cognitive abilities. How does this differ when the committed individual is a mere child?

"I knew that something else must be happening, so I wanted to figure out what was going on," Dr. Samuels said.

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According to Dr. Samuels, becoming a monk is a two-step process. The first occurs as early as age seven or eight when boys first enter the monastery, and the second occurs at age twenty when they make their final lifetime commitment. "It is a gradual training process," he said. "From society's view, if a boy chooses to leave before the second stage, it is not that big a deal. It is a gradual process of socialization, allowing him to see and understand his role as a lifetime vocation."

Young boys in the monastery go to monastic schools where they are taught religion, languages (Sanskrit, Pali, and English), history, geography, and math. "Buddhist scholars have often argued that monastic disciplinary texts and/or handbooks are important in educating and training Buddhist monks," Dr. Samuels believes. "While the



CHILDREN IN ROBES

BY CAROL CUMMINGS



Photo by Jeffrey Samuels

texts highlighted by many scholars undoubtedly convey to the reader ideal images of monastic behavior and deportment, the actual role of texts in shaping the identities and goals of young monastics may be questioned.”

Dr. Samuels’ new research builds on his previous study on the training and socialization of children monastics in Sri Lanka. Funded through a Fulbright Fellowship between the years of 1998 and 2000, his earlier research explored the effects that monastic life had on the short- and long-term goals of thirty-eight novice monks, as well as the role that relationships played in shaping their identities and their ideas of monastic service. While it may be true that some who enter the monastery to devote themselves to Buddhism might do so out of a direct experience of suffering, Dr. Samuels said many

of the children decided to become monks as a result of other factors.

In fact, of Dr. Samuels’ original thirty-eight subjects, the majority pointed out that their decision to become monks was the direct result of “witnessing monks performing rituals, observing the lives of other monks in Buddhist temples, hearing monks chat, seeing monks walk and speak in a prescribed manner, watching other boys become ordained, and so on.”

Dr. Samuels writes: “One such monk, when asked about the factors leading up to his decision to become a monastic, said, ‘At my village, I saw the ordination of two boys. They were dressed like princes and rode on elephants. Seeing them dressed so beautifully and all the glory surrounding the event, I decided to become a monk myself. I went home and asked my mother. She later

agreed.’” For that boy and others involved in Dr. Samuels’ study, the decision to become a monk was not the result of either intellectual understanding of religious doctrines or the result of experiencing suffering. It was the result of an “aesthetical experience of Buddhism.”

“More than seventy percent of the monks who were part of that study expressed how eating, speaking, drinking, walking, and wearing the monastic robe in an aesthetically prescribed manner were important in the process of ‘becoming monks,’” Dr. Samuels writes. “One monk remarked, ‘The head monk advised us not to run, that we should not eat like before, that we should not dance and whistle, and that we should play less. He taught us how to be disciplined. Listening to that and practicing it, I learned about being a monk.’”

Dr. Samuels said that by further investigating the role of aesthetics in these lifetime decisions to become monks, his project would greatly contribute to our understandings of spiritual transformation, especially among children. “Even though this project will focus on the Buddhist religion, the results of this study will enable scholars interested in spiritual transformation to look at the effects of aesthetics on people’s orientation toward the sacred in other religious traditions.”

Closely related to aesthetics is the role that performing rituals plays in shaping perspectives and commitment toward the sacred. “The function that performing rituals play in spiritual transformation is something that was initially revealed during my previous research project in Sri Lanka,” he said. “When speaking about their lives and goals as religious clergy and the processes by which they became subjectively transformed, many children monks mentioned the importance of performing rituals, such as honoring or worshipping the Buddha through various postures and chants, performing Buddhist protection rituals, and even sweeping the temple in a ritually prescribed manner.

He continued: “For them, becoming monks was not so much the result of reading inspiring accounts of the lives of famous Buddhist monks, or learning about religious doctrines so as to make sense of the world; rather, it was something that happened gradually

through involving themselves in everyday temple activities.”

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The third area Dr. Samuels will investigate relates to the role that language plays in spiritual transformation. “For many, the experience of religion is often intertwined with language,” he writes. “Attending a Jewish prayer service in Hebrew, hearing and reciting Gregorian chants, chanting Buddhist texts in Pali or Sanskrit play an undoubtedly important role in religious conversion and spiritual transformation. However studies on spiritual transformation have paid little attention to language and speech. This study will overcome this little-researched topic.

“While scholars studying the Buddhist tradition may believe that people who enter the monkhood for reasons unrelated to an experience of a crisis are often less committed to the religious life, the initial evidence surrounding the spiritual transformation of children monks in Sri Lanka belies their views,” he concluded. “This project will investigate the relationship that may or may not exist between initial motivating factors leading one to adopt the life of a Buddhist monk

and commitment to the sacred by addressing the following questions: Are males who become monks due to a profound crisis more committed to the religious life than those who have not experienced a crisis? What role does monastic life play in shaping and transforming a monk’s religious commitment?”

“Asking these questions in the context of children monks in Sri Lanka will not only help scholars to arrive at better understandings of the factors prompting spiritual transformation, but also will help change scholars’ focus from factors prompting initial transformation to factors that deepen one’s perspectives and attitudes toward the sacred.”

Dr. Samuels completed his bachelor’s degree at the University of California at Berkeley, his master’s degrees at both the University of Colorado in Boulder and the University of Virginia, and his doctorate at the University of Virginia. He currently teaches Asian Religious Traditions, Buddhist Religious Traditions, Hindu Religious Traditions, Buddhism in America, Buddhist-Christian Monasticism, Sanskrit, and Pali I and II at Western.

