SACRAMENTAL ASPECTS OF THERAVĀDA
Buddhist Meditation

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This is written with full appreciation of the difficulties intrinsic
to making cross-cultural comparisons and applying the categories
of one religious tradition to another. For here there is no such thing
as a totally “objective, scientific” method of dealing with cultural
entities. The very attempt to be “scientific and objective” betokens
both a personal set of values and a culture-bound perspective, that
is, a particular personal-cultural set of lenses through which one
does the viewing. Indeed even a translation from another language
into one’s own, particularly that of a non-cognate language, is in
reality an interpretation. And every attempt to “understand”
another culture and religion, even to portray it penetratingly and
sympathetically, is somewhat distorted by the difference endemic to
the situation.

Nevertheless such difficulties must be faced and dealt with as well
as we are able—unless we are satisfied to remain in cultural solips-
sism. For all inter-cultural scholarship, to say nothing of the inter-
national necessities of every sort, compels us to undertake the
impossible, strictly speaking; and in doing so we cannot avoid view-
ing our subject matter through some set of perspectival lenses—there
is no escape from this. Indeed we can understand what any other
person, in any culture, including our own, is saying or doing, only
by means of our own personal, or personal-cultural,
perspectives—or else shut up housekeeping as a human being.

This is all by way of introducing the following subject-matter:
The application of a very specifically, peculiarly Christian
category, sacrament, to a very different religious entity—
Theravāda Buddhist meditation. There is scarcely any need of a
reminder how very different these religious traditions are: Chris-
tianity is theistic, full of the language of sin and redeeming grace;
Theravāda Buddhism is radically non-theistic, full of the language
of salvation gained by enlightening introspective knowledge of the
self—or the lack of self—to be gained by self-effort. The basic question then is: Can the term “sacramental” have any meaning whatsoever when applied to Theravāda Buddhist meditation?

The contention here is that it can. Sacramental may be initially defined as having the character of “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace”, to use a classic definition. And in classical Christianity the ordained sacraments were considered to be the only valid or “appointed means of receiving salvific grace.”

The quintessential, though not only, form of the Christian sacraments is the eucharist by which the divine is tangibly and directly mediated to the human, the supernatural embodied in the natural.

Most of the Theravāda structure of religious belief and practice will be bypassed here in order to concentrate on what may be called the quintessence of orthodox Theravāda Buddhism, around which the rest of Buddhism is gathered as around its sacred heart and core, that which makes Buddhism Buddhist, namely its central discipline of salvation. This is the meditational technique. For no matter how far off anyone who considers him or herself a Theravāda Buddhist, in any sense of the word, may be from the hope of the attainment of final Nibbāna—or even in no special hurry to reach it as one of my Burmese friends declared himself to be—everyone knows that the unavoidable strait and narrow road leading to salvation is the meditational discipline. Sooner or later in one’s repeated embodiments it must be embraced if rebirth is to be escaped.

That being the case we here consider the proposed application of the term “sacramental” to this meditative discipline. Of course it can scarcely be called a sacrament in a narrow ritualistic sense. There is no highly ritualized ceremony performed by an authorized priest, for example, though as we shall see there is the functional near-equivalent of a priest. Nor is meditation a once-for-always action such as baptism, confirmation, or extreme unction; nor is it exactly a repeated act such as the eucharist but rather an ongoing process. Hence I use the term “sacramental aspects” rather than the full-bodied “sacrament.”

We turn now to our main thesis. In what sense then can Theravāda meditation be said to have “sacramental aspects?”