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Editorial

Richard Gombrich

First, welcome to readers. I hope we shall receive reactions to this new journal, so that future volumes are lively, even controversial. Letters for publication should be sent to me: richard.gombrich@balliol.ox.ac.uk. Setting up book reviews takes time, so that in this volume there are only two of them, but in future I hope to have more. I would also like to publish reactions to such academic events as conferences; I devote most of this editorial to a specimen.

The lopsided state of Buddhist studies

As reported in the September *Newsletter* of the OCBS, I attended the 16th congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies (IABS), held this year in Taiwan on 20-25 June. Our hosts were Dharma Drum Buddhist College (President: Ven. Prof. Hui Min Bhikshu).

To explain my remarks, I have to repeat a few facts which I have already recorded in the Newsletter. There were 102 panels, spread over five and a half days, and some five hundred papers. Obviously no individual could do more than sample so many offerings. Moreover, since only those giving papers were listed, I have to guess the total number of participants. I thus cannot claim comprehensive knowledge of the proceedings. But I believe I know enough for my observations to be well grounded in fact.

In brief, I wish to comment on, and deplore, two phenomena. The first is the eclipse of studies of early Buddhism and of Theravāda. The second is the relative eclipse of what I would call historical studies, at least before the modern period. I believe the second eclipse to be related to the first. In both cases, I am referring to *quantity* and making no judgment about quality, though ultimately I suppose that a decline in quantity cannot but lead to a decline in quality.

While one expected a conference held in Taiwan to emphasise East Asian, especially Chinese, Buddhism, the dearth of papers on early Buddhism and on Theravāda was surprising. No panel was devoted either to Pali or to Theravāda. Less than half a dozen papers used Pali sources, and the few papers on Theravādin topics were mostly on culture (e.g., art history, *Jātaka* performance). Moreover, while I could not identify every name, I believe that no paper was given by anyone who currently teaches in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Laos or Kampuchea; nor did any member of the Thai Sangha speak. India too was poorly represented.

I must make it clear that I am absolutely sure that the organizers had no bias against Theravādin topics or scholars; I believe that they more or less took what they were offered. So how is this startling imbalance is to be explained?

Some have offered me an economic explanation: that scholars from South and Southeast Asia cannot afford long journeys or attendance at relatively costly conferences. There may be some truth in this, and in so far as the explanation lies in practical issues, I think that those who are running this *International* Association must rapidly devise means to mitigate the problem. My concerns here, however, are cultural and intellectual.

Academic life in each of the countries in this region has its own history and its own problems. But well informed and sympathetic friends have given me their view that in SE Asia there is a terrible lack of intellectual curiosity about such matters, even at times amounting to an assumption that Buddhists in those countries have nothing to learn from foreigners, since the local Sangha already knows all that there is to be known. Comment is hardly needed; but I believe that to a large extent this attitude reflects inadequate knowledge of English (and other foreign languages): it assuages feelings of inferiority to assume that foreign language sources could provide neither intellectual nor spiritual benefit, and in particular no new insight into Buddhism. Will the authorities wake up before Theravāda Buddhism disappears from the academic map of the world?

Much is at stake, for the current situation has already descended into absurdity. If we count those who were not in the programme because they did not present papers, and the vast number of attendants and assistants, many of them monks and nuns, there must have been about 750 people at the congress. The great majority of them have built their lives, both personal and professional, on the Buddha – even if some academics would say it is on Buddhist teachings, not on the Buddha as a person. And yet the Buddha was barely mentioned, indeed treated almost as unmentionable.

Can one imagine a conference of 500 papers on Christianity in which no one talked about Jesus? Or a conference of that size on Islam in which Mohammed was passed over in silence? So why is the study of Buddhism in this mess? I am well aware that some people object to taking the Buddha as a historical figure, claiming that we can know nothing about him for sure because he wrote nothing down. But what did Jesus or Mohammed write? Yet no one in their senses has claimed that they did not live and teach, or that we cannot know their ideas.

Of course, we cannot know all the ideas or the whole truth, in any sense, about any of these great figures who have moved the world. Scholars will argue about these matters until the end of time, using evidence and reason. So why does this not apply to the Buddha nowadays?

In my book *What the Buddha Thought* I have tackled these questions head on. In chapter 6, "Assessing the Evidence", I have explained how absurd it is to claim that because we cannot finally prove anything about the Buddha we do not "know" anything about him. Not only is this true of all historical knowledge; it is true of *all* empirical knowledge, knowledge about the world. When we say that we know something, what that means is that that is *the best hypothesis available*. It is always possible that discovery of new evidence or of a flaw in the reasoning will falsify that knowledge and replace it by a better hypothesis; but the quest for knowledge, i.e., for better hypotheses, must forever continue, if intellectual life is not to die out.

Alas, postmodernism has quite misunderstood this situation. It casts doubt on whether there is such a thing as objective knowledge. To remind us that much depends on the point of view can be a useful corrective; but to say that a historical date, for example, is not an objective fact is to throw out the baby with the bath-water. That the twin towers in Manhattan were destroyed on 11 September 2001 is not just a matter of subjective opinion.

To apply this to the Buddha, the fact that a man who had a certain specific set of ideas lived at a certain specific time is not falsified by the fact that we can (and should) argue about what exactly those ideas were or when exactly he was born and died. It is helpful to consider this negative angle, and recall that there are a huge number of ideas that we can be rather sure that he did *not* have, and many years during which we can be sure that he was *not* alive. So to say that we can know nothing about him – even whether such a man existed – is ridiculous. And yet postmodernism has become so fashionable, particularly in North America, that it has undermined Buddhist historical studies.

Let me amplify this. In the *Preface* to my book I argue "that we can know far more about the Buddha than it is fashionable among scholars to admit, and that his thought has a greater coherence than is usually recognized." In fact, I argue that he "was one of the most brilliant and original thinkers of all time." (p. vii) Whether one agrees with this valuation is not the point: the point is that he was undoubtedly original and that his ideas form a coherent system. I summarise that system in the final chapter, and comment: "…according to the fashionable [postmodernist] view … Buddhism … is a ball which was set rolling by someone whose ideas are not known and … can never be known. So the intellectual edifice which I have described came together by a process of accumulation, rather like an avalanche." (p. 194)

I defy anyone to point to an ideology, philosophy or system of ideas which has made its mark on human history and culture and cannot be attributed to an individual, however much it may have been modified later. Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hume, Marx – to name just a few of the greatest – all of them, whether right or wrong, for better or for worse, were creative thinkers, who though indebted to predecessors put forward coherent visions of the world for which they were individually responsible.

Not to recognise the Buddha as belonging to that company seems to me to be not just a stupid error. It has at least two effects which I find disastrous for our field of study. The first, as I say in my book, is that since so much of the evidence for the Buddha's thought comes from the Pali Canon (and not from later sources), the current (comparative) neglect of Pali studies is unfortunate, to say the least.

But this point can be subsumed within an even larger one. If we insist that we cannot know what the Buddha thought and taught, we have no baseline for the history of Buddhist ideas. The history of ideas is, surely, to trace influences, which must go in hand with trying to locate ideas in time and space. In my view there was far too little history at the congress and too much pure description. It is OK to be told about the content of a text; but if it is really interesting I can go and read it myself. What I want to know from the scholar who has studied it is where it can be placed in a chain of development, and (if possible) why. That includes, *inter alia*, discussing where the author has misrepresented inherited material, whether intentionally or not; where he has himself been misrepresented by later authors; and where, if anywhere, he has dared to be original.

The Buddha pointed out that all things in this world undergo change: that history is a process, or rather a set of processes, neither entirely determined nor

entirely random. I would like the study of Buddhism to focus more on this insight, and also to remember that by definition our subject must begin with the Buddha himself.

Two Notes to Readers

Our editorial policy is set out on the web site www.ocbs.org. I need to add something. Our normal word limit for articles is ten thousand words, though we would be prepared to consider publishing a longer piece in two parts. We are also, however, glad to publish new primary sources – of which the article by Paola Tinti in this volume offers an example – and in this case there is no word limit.

Finally, I must apologise for the last minute change of this journal's title. We were informed on 3 October that the title "The Oxford Journal of … " is reserved (presumably by copyright) for publications of the Oxford University Press.