

Book Reviews

***Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World.* Hiebert, F. and P. Cambon, eds. (London: The British Museum Press, 2011).**

“Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World” was the title of the British Museum exhibition of objects from the National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul, which was formally opened by President Karzai of Afghanistan on 1 March 2011. The book here reviewed is the catalogue of that exhibition. The objects described and illustrated in the catalogue are beautiful and enigmatic, and the story of their continued preservation in the most difficult of circumstances is fascinating, saddening and ultimately heartening.

Prior to its arrival in London, the exhibition had toured Europe and northern America, having been shown in Paris, Turin, Amsterdam, Washington, San Francisco, Houston, New York, Ottawa and Bonn. A touring exhibition of such priceless, and in some cases extremely fragile, artefacts, could only be the result of active collaboration between politicians, archaeologists, curators and scholars from many countries, and this international collaboration is reflected in the catalogue, which contains essays by scholars based in Afghanistan, France, the United States and Russia, although none by British scholars. After three brief essays that provide contextual information about the National Museum of Afghanistan, the attempts to preserve from destruction the cultural heritage of Afghanistan, and the history and cultures of ancient Afghanistan, the structure of the catalogue follows the structure of the exhibition, which was divided into four sections, each showing objects from one of four key archaeological sites in Afghanistan: Tepe Fullol, Ai Khanum, Begram and Tillya Tepe. Each section is introduced by one or two essays, following which every object that was displayed in that particular section of the exhibition is illustrated and briefly described, a total of 227 objects. Most of these objects were feared to have been stolen, lost or destroyed during

the years of war and unrest between the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the establishment of the present government of Afghanistan in 2002. During this period, the National Museum of Afghanistan was subject to almost continual looting, its buildings hit by rockets on several occasions, and many of the artefacts that still remained in it destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. In 1996 the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture decided to pack for safekeeping the objects that remained in the museum at that time. Those pieces that were placed in the museum's storerooms were destroyed by the Taliban but other pieces that had been transferred to the Hotel Kabul were preserved. Previously in 1988 objects found at Tillya Tepe had been placed for safekeeping in the vaults of the Central Bank of Afghanistan. In 2003 the Afghan government reported that the cases containing the objects were still in the vaults with their seals unbroken. The work of making an inventory of and conserving the surviving objects began in 2004 under the aegis of the National Geographic Society. Over 23,000 objects, 20,587 of them from Tillya Tepe, have now been placed on the inventory. What was on display in the exhibition and described in the catalogue is only a fraction of the surviving treasure of Afghanistan.

By far the oldest artefacts described in the catalogue are a group of three fragmentary gold vessels from a hoard of gold of silver vessels that were cut in pieces by the farmers who discovered them in 1966 at Tepe Fullol, situated in northern Afghanistan to the south of the Oxus. Apparently the three vessels are what remain of a larger collection of vessels from the hoard once in the collection of the National Museum of Afghanistan. Dated to 2200 to 1900 BC, the vessels bear geometrical motifs and depictions of boars, bulls, trees and mountains. Few in number, the objects seem to belong to a bronze-age culture that extended over an area that is now northern Afghanistan, eastern Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Pakistan. They appear to have been made locally but are influenced by a response to wide-ranging cultural contacts. They thus adumbrate the more extensive examples of cultural eclecticism described in the remainder of the catalogue.

Bactria, the area of Afghanistan to the north of the Hindu Kush with its centre around the Oxus river was famed in classical antiquity for its thousand cities, and the following section of the catalogue is devoted to artefacts from one of them, founded by one of the successors of Alexander the Great in circa 300 BC and flourishing as a Hellenistic city complete with theatre and gymnasium until it was overwhelmed by nomadic invaders in circa 145 BC. The site of the city was discovered in 1961 and excavations took place from 1965 until they were interrupted by

the Soviet invasion. The city is situated on a tributary of the Oxus, not far from the present border with Tajikistan. Now known as Ai Khanum, meaning Lady of the Moon, from the name of a neighbouring village, the original Greek name of the city is lost to us. The objects from the site show how in Bactria Hellenistic artistic traditions were mixed and amalgamated with local and other Asian traditions, but the strength of Greek culture at the city can be demonstrated by a fragmentary stele on which one Clearchos, who has been identified by some scholars with a disciple of Aristotle who bore that name, caused to be engraved as a gift to the city a copy of the Delphic precepts, the originals of which were situated at the shrine of Apollo at Delphi and which prescribed the code of ethical conduct for a Greek gentleman. The Greek demi-god Heracles is represented by a bronze statuette probably of local manufacture that shows him naked, bearing a large club in one hand and crowning himself with his other. The catalogue discusses the popularity of the worship of Heracles in the Hellenised East and in central Asia, but does not mention his importance for Buddhist iconography, a theme that I shall briefly mention below. A beautiful and striking example of hybrid Greek and Oriental art is a gilded silver plate once fastened to a wooden disc that shows the goddess Cybele riding in a chariot drawn by two lions. She is accompanied by Nike, the goddess of Victory, and is attended by two priests. Although found in a temple area of the city, it may have been deposited there by nomadic looters. Worthy of note are a selection of small round compartmentalised bowls with lids made from schist, a grey stone found in the mountains of Afghanistan. Although they were primarily used for storing cosmetics and jewellery, the catalogue suggests that such bowls were the prototype for the Buddhist reliquaries produced at a later date in Gandhara.

The third section of the exhibition focused on an astonishing array of objects found in 1937 and 1939 in two sealed rooms at an archaeological site at Begram, situated to the south of the Hindu Kush mountains and in ancient times as now a site of strategic importance. The objects were varied in type and diverse in origin: glassware and objects in plaster, porphyry and alabaster from Roman Egypt and the Mediterranean world, fragments of lacquer from China, and from India carved ivory and bone. They appear to have been deposited in the mid-first century AD. Some of the objects discovered were decidedly odd, such the drinking horn in the shape of a goat's head holding the remains of an ostrich egg and the model aquarium in which bronze fish would float when it was filled with water, neither, however, on display in the exhibition and perhaps lost. The varied ob-

jects seem to share a common novelty which taken with the fact that objects of similar materials appear to have been stored together suggests that they were a merchant's stock and that the rooms they were found in was some kind of emporium, rather than a royal treasure house. A series of ivory plaques, which clearly originated in India, bears carvings of narrative scenes that may be taken from the Jatakas. Among the bronzes are statuettes of the Roman-Egyptian gods Serapis-Heracles and Harpocrates. The most breathtaking objects from Begram are the glass beakers painted with Bacchic scenes of figures harvesting grapes, the glass trellis-worked vases and goblets, and the glass flasks in the shape of fishes. The survival of such fragile objects is almost miraculous. Taken together, the objects from Begram show that the cultural networks which enabled the Mauryan emperor Asoka to send out his ministers of *dhamma* in the third century BC were still in place in the first century AD.

The final section of the catalogue is introduced by the Russian archaeologist Viktor Ivanovich Sarianidi, whose discovery and excavation in 1978 of six graves cut into a mound called Tillya Tepe, situated in northern Afghanistan to the south of the Oxus river. Tillya Tepe means Hill of Gold in the local Uzbek language, and is rightly named, since the splendid treasure that was buried with the bodies, over 20,000 pieces mainly in gold and semi-precious stones, caused a sensation when published in the world's press shortly after its discovery. The decades of war that followed the discovery prevented the excavation of a seventh grave, its contents presumably looted. The bodies in the excavated graves were of one man and five women, members perhaps of the same family, the cause of their death unknown. They were nomads and the dated of their burial appears to have been some time in the second quarter of the first-century AD. They were wealthy people with sophisticated tastes. The artistic quality of their grave goods, that seem mainly to be of manufactured locally, is breathtaking. The collapsible crown buried with one of the females that was cut from sheets of gold which when assembled form trees with birds is exquisite as are the pair of gold pendants set with precious stones portraying the 'dragon master', a man in nomadic dress grasping a dragon in each hand. External contacts are shown by coins from Parthia and the Roman Empire. The most intriguing coin or perhaps medallion is so far unique and of great importance for the study of Buddhist iconography, which I would like to discuss in rather more detail, given the nature of the journal in which this review is being published.

Found in the grave of the man, it is a gold piece 1.6cm in diameter, bearing

on one side a lion walking left with a *nandipada* to its front and on the other a semi-naked male figure holding or turning an eight-spoked wheel. On each side of the piece is a Kharosthi legend. The cataloguer gives the following transliteration and translation of the legend on the side of the piece bearing the lion: *sih[o] vigatabhay[o]* 'the lion has driven away fear'. The legend on the side of the piece bearing the figure and wheel and the figure is given the following transliteration and translation by the cataloguer: *dharmacakrapravarta[ko]* 'he who brings the wheel of law into motion'. These transliterations and translations should be regarded as tentative. The cataloguer states that this figure could be the oldest representation of the Buddha, and this has been the opinion of other scholars such as Brown (2006), who sees in the figure of the 'naked man' a lost prototype for later Gandharan representations of the walking Buddha pushing the Wheel of Law. However, Joe Cribb and other scholars have observed that the figure is not naked but is wearing a lion-skin, its tail hanging between the figure's legs. Consequently, the figure can be none other than Heracles, whose iconography is used to represent Vajrapāṇi in Gandharan art. If the figure can be interpreted as holding and supporting the wheel rather than turning it, it is possible that the imagery represents Vajrapāṇi in his role of upholder and protector of the *dhamma*. However the origins, function of the piece and the interpretation of its imagery remain enigmatic.

The essays in the catalogue were previously published in French, as part of the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition in the earlier stages of its tour. There is some repetition and also some contradictory material in the various essays, the latter serving to underline the continued debate about the origins, chronology, and function of many of the objects on display. Considerations of time, convenience and expense perhaps prevented the addition of material by any of the British scholars involved with the staging of the exhibition of the British Museum. As is often the case with exhibition catalogues, this catalogue provides excellent photographs of the individual items that were on display but does not provide a record of the layout of the exhibition or show how the objects were exhibited in relation to each other. Both these deficiencies are to some extent mitigated by the British Museum website, where the interested reader can find further information about the exhibition and some scholarly articles by its curator, St John Simpson.

The subtitle of the exhibition and its catalogue is not hyperbole: Afghanistan was a major cultural crossroads of the ancient world, and from the perspective of the student of Buddhism, the catalogue is invaluable in that enhances the under-

standing of the material cultures of the societies in which Buddhism developed during the period of its expansion into central Asia and eastern Iran.

Bibliography

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***Taiwan's Tzu Chi as Engaged Buddhism: Origins, Organization, Appeal and Social Impact.* By Yu-Shuang Yao. Foreword by Peter Clarke. Leiden: Global Oriental/Brill. 2012. xviii, 243 pp., 9 illustrations, 23 tables.**

It is many years since I have enjoyed an academic book so much as this one, or benefited so much from reading it. I had the good fortune to be invited by Global Oriental to read a manuscript submitted to them for publication. Since I do not know Chinese, and have no specialist knowledge of Chinese religion, I was disinclined to accept; but I was moved to do so by being told that the author, who lived in Taiwan, had spent nearly ten years looking for a publisher for this, her first book in English. For once, my virtue has been rewarded.

Though the book is closely based on a Ph.D. thesis for the University of London, where it was examined by Professor David Martin and Mrs W.M. Morgan, it is far from being a mere academic exercise. I have no hesitation in describing it as a brilliant achievement.

The book describes and analyses a Buddhist sect or movement which was founded in a remote part of Taiwan in 1966 by a young lady originally called Jin Yun (b.1937). Since her (irregular) ordination in 1963 as a nun, she has been known as Master Cheng Yen. She is still in sole control of the movement. When Dr. Yao began her fieldwork in 1995, the movement had about 3.5 million members, including over 20,000 full time volunteers, and was still dominated by women. Though it had some male members earlier, a formal male section was created only in 1990. By the time her thesis was examined, in 2001, membership

had almost doubled, and about half of the members were men. It has continued to expand, and recently has been permitted to set up a branch in mainland China. Membership is scrupulously documented. Except among student members, the dropout rate appears to be negligible.

It is of course a pity that the book failed to find a publisher for so long, so that the data, and particularly the figures, are not up to date. However, the book is not mere journalistic reportage, but an extremely thoughtful and illuminating analysis, so that it does not lose value over time.

The book is written from a macro-sociological perspective. It stands firmly in the Anglo-American tradition of the sociology of religion, which owes most to Max Weber. More specifically, it studies a new religious movement (NRM) in the spirit and with the methods and techniques of the late Bryan Wilson and his many pupils. Dr Yao was not among them, but acknowledges a particular debt to the monograph on Soka Gakkai in Britain by Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere.¹ She frequently cites and uses the theories and views of sociologists of this school. In particular, a whole chapter near the end of the book is titled "Does Tzu Chi meet the Expectations of Current Sociological Theory?" and looks at whether it meets the ten criteria proposed by Rodney Stark for the success of an NRM.² (Her answer to the question is; "Broadly, yes.") While her analysis is extraordinarily well done, this chapter will mainly interest specialists and may be skipped by the general reader. The rest of the book, on the other hand, is utterly accessible, not least because it is so well organised and clearly written, without a word of waffle or unnecessary jargon. This last virtue is so rare in academic sociology that it must surely be singled out for celebration.

The clarity of expression and organization is already conspicuous in the two introductory chapters. These are *not* to be skipped. The first gives a *tour d'horizon* of Taiwan's religious landscape, gradually narrowing the focus to NRMs. Even someone as completely ignorant of Taiwan as I was is thus taught enough about the context to feel comfortable with the details to come. The next chapter, on the author's methods, could in my view be presented to students as a model. The clarity here serves not merely an aesthetic, or even just an intellectual, purpose, but reflects the author's honesty and total lack of pretentiousness. The section on

¹Wilson, Bryan and Dobbelaere, K., *A Time to Chant, the Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

²Stark, R., 'Why Religious Movements Succeed or Fail: A Revised General Model', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1996, pp. 133-46.

the strengths and weaknesses of the methods employed is particularly admirable. I never thought that I would actually enjoy reading a chapter devoted to matters of method.

Chapters 3 to 8 present the results of the research. Chapter 3 recounts the founder's early life and what led to her founding a movement. She left home in 1960 soon after her father died, and despite her mother's entreaties led an independent and ascetic religious life, at first with an older nun and then by herself. She slowly acquired a few devotees, and even more slowly began to study Buddhist texts.

"In the mid-1960s, three Catholic nuns came to visit Cheng Yen with the intention to try to convert her ... [T]hey told Cheng Yen that most Buddhist disciples only seek to prepare for life after death and do not perform actual deeds that deal with the problems of society. They claimed ... that there were not Buddhists who built schools and hospitals the way that Christians did" (p.66). This made Cheng Yen think, and she studied the compassionate activities of the Bodhisattva Guan Yin. In those days there was no system of state provision or other charitable help for those in medical need. Hospitals regularly required a large deposit before admitting a patient for treatment, and in remote parts, such as down the east coast, where Cheng Yen lived, medical facilities were sadly inadequate. She began by asking her devotees, mostly housewives, to help her raise money to pay for medical deposits for the poor. Initially they did this by knitting baby shoes. They also gave voluntary labour to help the poor and the sick. By 1978, though the movement was still only local, they had raised and spent over a million New Taiwan Dollars (nearly £25,000) and helped over 500 people.

At this point, Cheng Yen announced a project to build a large new hospital. "[T]here was no large hospital in Hualien, only several small ones which were run by Christian missions. A new hospital would, therefore, not only supply income for Tzu Chi but also prevent the loss of potential converts to Christianity, as patients in the Christian hospitals often became Christians themselves. In addition, it was seen as a more efficient way to help the needy by providing medical treatment directly instead of paying for somebody else to supply it. Because Master Cheng Yen regarded sickness as the primary cause of misery and poverty, constructing a hospital seemed to fit perfectly with her philosophy" (pp.72-3). By a lucky chance, at that time "a new railway line which went round the whole island was completed, enabling Cheng Yen to travel frequently to preach in Taipei, and the Movement took root in the capital. ... [M]ost of its members and donations

have since been recruited there”(p.73). The movement caught the attention of prominent citizens, including some influential politicians, and of the media. It has never looked back.

Thus “the motivation for Cheng Yen to become a Buddhist nun came from social reasons rather than religious calling.” She founded her movement, “The Buddhist Compassion Merit Society” as a Buddhist medical charity, virtually a mirror image of the Christian medical charities found almost all over the world; nor has this side of it ever diminished. Some members who were asked why they found Tzu Chi appealing referred to this directly: “I was very glad to hear Tzu Chi was aware of the needs of our society and that one of our Buddhist nuns could do the same things as Christians” (p.182).

In the ‘80s, the movement expanded its aims and ambitions. The Taipei branch became the centre of its “cultural” mission, mainly propagated through print, including free monthly magazines, and over radio and TV. The mission was also extended to educating the rich about the problems in society that they should attend to. This then led to relief work abroad, including (controversially) in mainland China. In 1989 a Nursing College was completed, to be followed by a Medical College, and these have been developed into a whole university. “[S]he has employed three vice-executives to oversee the missions of education, medicine and culture, and reserves only the mission of charity for herself” (p.76).

Over this entire period Tzu Chi has developed its organization. Membership imposes continual duties, above all in raising funds and recruiting more members. Many means have been devised to enhance the spirit of community among members. Moreover, while the Master’s leadership and charisma have never been in question, in some respects her status has approached the superhuman. None of these features are peculiar to religious movements, and the Master constantly stresses the importance of material self-sufficiency (see her speech to new initiates, p.177). So is Tzu Chi in fact a religious movement?

Chapter 4, “Altruism and morality become a way of life”, soon dispels any such doubt. As usual in Buddhism, “morality” here refers to ethical self-control. The chapter introduces the movement’s remarkable ideology. All of it has come, piecemeal, from Cheng Yen, and much of the chapter is culled from her two books, *The Silent Thoughts I* and *II*, which have both been bestsellers in Taiwan.

The movement is indeed unmistakably Buddhist. Its two central Buddhist features are the devotion given to Guan Yin, the embodiment of compassion, and the prominence given to the classical Buddhist teaching of karma. Both of

these features make Tzu Chi's Buddhism predominantly an ethical teaching, one which stresses the practical and is concerned with improving the here and now. Members must "enter the gate of compassion before they can enter the gate of Buddhism". This is obviously consonant with the movement's roots as a medical charity.

Traditional Mahayana recognises a set of six moral qualities which every future Buddha, and thus every devout Buddhist, must strive to bring to perfection; and besides compassion Cheng Yen also lays particular emphasis on three of them: self-restraint through following moral rules; determination; and wisdom/understanding. The whole ethos has a puritanical flavour, and despite some great differences in detail, due to the utterly different historical circumstances, it recalls the flavour of the ethical code for laymen laid down by the Buddha. After all, this is essentially a lay movement, and, as in early Buddhism, each signed up member assumes the responsibility to conform to a specific code of behaviour. For instance, Cheng Yen recommends praying twice a day, but the only true function of prayer is self-scrutiny. Similarly, Tzu Chi and early Buddhism alike reject most of the religious rituals of the society around them. For example, Tzu Chi celebrates the local *secular* festivals, but not the traditional festivals of Chinese Buddhism.

At first blush, it looks as if Cheng Yen's teaching of karma follows the Buddhist mainstream. Nevertheless, some of her views would hardly have met with the Buddha's assent, and probably owe much to the widespread Chinese idea of fate. For example, "a husband's extramarital affair is considered to be the result of the wife's bad karma", and she advises a female disciple, "Don't call it an affair. You should view it as an opportunity..." (p.80). She means, an opportunity to learn how to cope with suffering. The contrast with Buddhist tradition is greater than that with the Buddha himself: even wisdom can be better cultivated by interaction with people than by scriptural study and meditation. Cheng Yen stresses action, not mere intentions, and (as Dr Yao remarks) in this respect follows the *Vinaya* more closely than Buddhist ethics in general.

Indeed, some of her views on death and the afterlife are so unorthodox that karma seems to be deprived of its metaphysical underpinnings and become an ethical teaching pure and simple. Her views on death deserve to be quoted at length.

Tzu Chi has developed a distinctive ritual for the deceased called *zhunian* (assistance chanting). It consists of a group of people reciting the name of a Buddha, A-mi-tuo-fo (the Chinese version of Amitabha

Buddha). When a direct kinsman of a member dies, other members will gather at the home of the deceased immediately to perform *zhunian*...

It is said the function of *zhunian* is to help the dying soul to find the way to heaven. According to Cheng Yen, when death occurs the soul will have to leave the body and go to either hell or heaven in preparation for the next birth. The time between death and rebirth is ... between a few hours and forty-nine days, depending on the karma of the deceased: the better the karma, the sooner will the person be reborn. Cheng Yen says it is a period of transition for the deceased as well as for the surviving kin: the soul may be very confused after departing from the body and may not find the way to heaven, and the living kin may be highly emotional over the loss of the beloved one. The feelings of the living kin, however, can hinder the soul's ability to detach itself from the body and may cause the soul to miss the opportunity for rebirth.

Cheng Yen claims the purpose of *zhunian* is twofold: it directs the soul on its way to heaven, and it creates a peaceful and calm atmosphere for the survivors... *Zhunian* begins as soon as death is announced and is continued for at least eight hours. This is the length of the time which the soul usually takes to depart from its physical body. Cheng Yen advises that *zhunian* is to be performed for seven days but not longer than forty-nine days, the maximum time span before rebirth. Meanwhile the family of the deceased is advised to follow a [Buddhist] vegetarian diet. Cheng Yen said that bad karma would be generated by the killing of an animal and what the mourners had eaten during this period would count against the deceased, and thus reduce the chances for a fortunate rebirth.

Since the function of *zhunian* is merely to guide the departed soul but does not transfer any merit to it, this shows a transient concept of one's relations to one's dead ancestor... Cheng Yen does not mention how to assist the souls which have missed the moment of rebirth or are held in hell. The true function of *zhunian* is best understood as improving life in this world ...

Most importantly, *zhunian* helps people to overcome the traditional negative attitude towards death. Death is traditionally seen as

a kind of pollution and will bring bad luck and illness to the world of the living, so that traditionally only close kin are involved with funerals. For an outsider, it is considered to be extremely unlucky to encounter a funeral. Tzu Chi's practice of death rituals offers the members a more reasonable solution to fit in with their urban modern lives. Not only the relatives of the dead but also Tzu Chi members participate in Tzu Chi funerals, and they are aware that this creates a new form of interpersonal relationship in the cities....

Cheng Yen sees death from the point of view of reincarnation (rebirth). Since the soul will re-enter the circle of reincarnation, the relationship between the deceased and his/her living kin will soon be terminated. It is consequently impossible to maintain any bond between the deceased and his/her surviving relatives, and they no longer share a common collective karma after the forty-nine day period. Against the traditional belief, in Cheng Yen's view dead ancestors will not have any influence on the living descendants beyond this period...

Cremation and preservation of the ashes in a Buddhist funeral parlour are encouraged by Cheng Yen. Tzu Chi regards death as a rather cheerful event, an equivalent to a new beginning of the next life. The funeral is like a farewell party for the dead, so not only relatives but also people from the Movement are invited...(pp.94-6)

Dr Yao then provides a fascinating account of a Tzu Chi funeral. But perhaps the most striking details come last:

Although Tzu Chi provides free funeral services, relatives of the deceased usually donate afterwards to the Movement's funeral fund. Funeral services therefore become an important source of income for Tzu Chi... Cheng Yen asserts that the merit from the donation to the funeral fund cannot be credited to the deceased but accrues to the living donor; and that the only way for the dead to generate merit for him/herself is to donate their body for the public good, e.g. for medical research. The donated bodies usually go to the Movement's hospital.

In Tzu Chi's teachings there is no mention of transferring merit to a dead ancestor or past relatives. The relationship with dead ances-

tors has been de-emphasized by Cheng Yen, not only in her notion of death but also by her view on performing ancestral rites. For example, in her reply to a devotee's question about performing memorial rites for a dead ancestor, the Master says, 'You should sincerely do something for the dead. Then both the doer and the dead will be blessed, and the doer will obtain a reward for the meritorious deed, while the deceased will contribute to the world by motivating you to become a Buddhist.' It may thus be seen that the emphasis is on the work of the living and not on the deceased ancestors (pp.97-8).

To deny that Tzu Chi is a religion would be perverse; but it hardly qualifies as a soteriology.

The next four chapters, comprising most of the second half of the book, are built on the data Dr Yao collected by means of thirty in-depth interviews and 769 questionnaires. Of the latter she handed out 1,214, and the return rate was 66

Chapter 5 discusses the social composition of the membership, chapter 6 the recruiting strategy, chapter 7 the organizational structure and the process of socialisation into the Movement, and chapter 8 analyses the Movement's appeal. There are a lot of tables in chapters 5 and 6, but the text is rarely dry. The material in chapter 7 on affective bonding, indoctrination and initiation strikes me as ethnography at its best.

The general picture of the Membership that emerges is of upward mobility into the middle and even the upper middle class. A very high proportion of members have moved into the city from the countryside. If we leave aside the category of College Student Members, the average age, educational level and (especially) economic standing of members are somewhat higher than those of the general population, so that the Movement's socio-economic profile is much what one would expect when one thinks of Weber's early Protestant bourgeoisie in Europe or, for that matter, the Buddha's following in ancient India.

The author makes it clear that she is particularly interested in why people join and then stay in the movement, and is not content to leave Weber's "elective affinity" to provide all the answers. Chapter 8, packed with quotations from interviews, allows the members to speak for themselves. While motives are diverse, a clear picture emerges. Joining Tzu Chi gives a sense of meaning and purpose to life: members find fulfilment through the self-respect that comes from a life of service to the community. That the demands made on members in terms of both time and money are so heavy only enhances this effect, for it serves to bond members

into a new community in which new affective ties can replace those left behind in the countryside or a lower social class, and makes the appeal self-reinforcing.

A constantly recurring theme is the role played by the Master and the way that her disciples see her and relate to her. It is hard not to admire the balance she manages to strike between authority and humanity, between hard-headed practicality and the re-iteration of ideals. It seems that increasing numbers of members express the hope to be reborn with her in life after life.

The interesting “Afterword” gives an idea of recent trends, particularly the drift towards deification of the Master. (Does that await her after death?) It also considers in what sense Tzu Chi can be classed as secular. Finally the “Afterword” picks up a theme adverted to in Chapter 1 and ascribes Tzu Chi’s success partly to its being the only Buddhist movement to use Hokkien rather than Mandarin Chinese, thus marking itself out as intended for Taiwanese, not Mainlanders. This prompts the thought that successful social movements are often characterised by an ability to meet almost contradictory needs. Tzu Chi has a universalist ideology and has even begun to operate overseas, and yet at the same time is ostentatiously parochial as a movement by and for a little regarded cultural minority in a corner of greater China.

Long though it is, this review has only been able to give a sample of the riches this book contains. It is sad to have to conclude by reporting that while its preparation was in its final stages, Global Orient was taken over by Brill, and then at the last minute Brill decided that it should only be produced by Print on Demand, so that few people are likely even to hear of it, let alone see a copy. That this nowadays can pass for “publishing” makes one despair for the traditional values of academic life.

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***Tibet: a History.* By Sam van Schaik (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), xxiii + 324 pp. ISBN 978 0 300 15404 7.**

The work under review is not a social, political, cultural, or religious history of Tibet. It is, as the title suggests, a general history. Writing such a history is an ambitious endeavour. The author, Sam van Schaik, is well known for his work on early Tibetan history and his excellent blog www.earlytibet.com. With this book, the author is apparently ambitious to counter misconceptions about Tibetan history and culture and to supersede earlier propagandist works that claim to give a complete picture of Tibet's past. At the same time, van Schaik does not claim this work to be complete or impartial, but considers it to be a narrative, and "any narrative is limited to the point of view of particular people and events" (p. xvii). With this admitted limitation in mind, the author explores the narratives of figures in Tibetan history who have played a major role in the creation of Tibet, Tibetan culture and identity, or who at least left their mark on later lore, be it as historiographers or story-tellers.

Let me consider the intended audience of this general history of Tibet, presented as a narrative. The title will surely appeal to those who desire a quick fix of Tibetan history. That this book is unburdened by copious endnotes, Tibetan language terms, or references to Tibetan primary sources is attractive for the neophyte in Tibetan studies. This approach suits those who want to learn about the background to the Sino-Tibetan conundrum and the current status of the Tibetan people, without being impregnated with propaganda from either side of the political spectrum. The style of the book is accessible, which also makes it an enjoyable read for "armchair historians", or just those who wish to educate themselves about Tibet in general. Another audience perhaps intended by the author is university students. Those who teach Tibetan studies acknowledge the dearth of suitable literature that they can assign. Works that are not overtly biased, outdated or too specialised are few. Many university course syllabi on Tibetan history contain (chapters from) Snellgrove and Richardson's *A Cultural History of Tibet* (1968), Stein's *Tibetan Civilization* (1972 [1962]) or the more recent *The Tibetans* (2006) by Kapstein. All of these expertly deal with issues of Tibetan culture and religion, but lack a comprehensive and comprehensible account of the history of Tibet as a nation. The question is whether van Schaik's narrative history is able to fill the gap.

The book by no means follows traditional Tibetan accounts of history, although it often makes use of them in order to assess the later influence they had on Tibetan culture and national identity formation. Following tradition, however, Tibet's history here starts in the seventh century and ends with "the present" (I fear that this may age the work before its time). In the first chapter the perspective of Songtsen Gampo (no Tibetan spelling is provided and he is called "Songtsen" for short) takes centre stage. The reader is introduced to Songtsen's thoughts and feelings, which provide a sense of the heritage that the Tibetan Imperial royal house was purported to have had. Throughout the book, van Schaik continues to provide "insight" into the ruminations of Tibetan historical figures. This, some may say, makes history come alive, and in all likelihood this is why the author opted to write a narrative history.

Van Schaik is very familiar with the most up to date research on the history of Tibet, and as he is able to read Tibetan well, he has not been limited to secondary sources. One can safely say that all conditions for writing this history were in place. Nevertheless, I think that his choice of narrative history was unfortunate. The book interweaves three different threads: historical "facts", traditional historiographical accounts, and the aforementioned thoughts and aspirations of historical figures. What the book critically fails to do is to make the reader able to distinguish between these three. This may be partly due to the scarcity of source references, a limitation perhaps imposed by the publisher. Admittedly, requiring the reader to consider the available sources would – presumably – break up the narrative.

Another reason why the narrative structure is of limited value is because it fails to enter into a conversation with its reader: it presents the audience with a polished "closed" version of Tibetan history. The reader is not prompted to question the sources or their interpretations; he is not inspired to further educate himself on a particular topic. Crucially, the book mostly ignores what is not (yet) known, what the sources are silent about, and what questions remain largely unanswered. I believe that giving a sense of the open-endedness of history is a major inspiration for inquisitive people to become involved in research, or perhaps merely to engage in thought. If, as Piet Geyl says, history is "a discussion without end", why not let readers participate in that discussion?

For these reasons *Tibet: a History* is not to be recommended as a textbook for university students without considerable framing: a lecturer of Tibetan history wants students not just to know about Tibet's history but also to think about

it. This reservation comes in spite of the work's up to date and mostly sound (although often unverifiable) research. Nonetheless, this book is likely to offer interesting and previously unknown nuggets of information to scholars of Tibetan history and culture. However, to verify and further pursue the information provided is made very difficult by the lack of references.

As is to be expected, there are also a few minor omissions and inconsistencies. Here are some examples: There are a couple of works missing from the bibliography: *The Enquiry of Vimalaprabha* (p. 18) is referenced in a footnote as 'Q.835: 271' but is absent in the bibliography. The same goes for a nameless work by Ramble published in 2007 (p. 272, n. 7), and for the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* referred to on the same page (n. 18). For those interested in the primary sources that van Schaik uses, it is frustrating to find that references to (mainly Dunhuang) texts are listed in inaccessible formats, for example: IOL Tib J 1746 (p. 273, n. 20). This – unless one already knows about the source – does not provide any concrete information on how to get to it, mainly because any complete bibliographic reference is missing. For the senior scholar of old Tibetan texts these references may suffice; for the eager newcomer this may be thoroughly disheartening. On the rare occasions that Tibetan texts or words are mentioned (predominantly in the notes) there are further minor inconsistencies: sometimes Wylie is used to transliterate (e.g. shel phreng lu gu rgyud: p. 274, n. 22; chos rtsigs: p. 275, n. 28) and at other times the words are merely transcribed (e.g. labrang; podrang: p. 277, n. 3). Some points that are presented as incontrovertible befuddle me, although this may be because I do not have access to the sources that van Schaik had. For example, the second part of the name of the “inventor” of the Tibetan script, Thonmi Sambhota (tib. thon mi/ thu mi sambhoṭa) is explained as a nickname given to him in India, meaning “the Good Tibetan” (p. 12). The latter part of the name, “bhoṭa”, is likely to refer to his “nationality”, but there are no conclusive linguistic arguments for the whole name to mean “the Good Tibetan”, although I find it plausible that later Tibetan historiographers gave it that gloss. Elsewhere van Schaik juxtaposes the early lifestyle of agriculturalists bound to the land with that of nomads who “moved about freely” (p. 13). According to my knowledge, there is no evidence that either confirms or refutes the supposition that nomads had no restrictions on their movement, but it is more than plausible that even as early as the 7th century, Tibetan nomadic groups had a certain extent of territoriality and were bound to using specific pastures at specific times of the year (as they did in later times).

Above, I applauded van Schaik's efforts to connect the past with the present, but sometimes the links he makes are not entirely convincing: he mentions for example that the battle flags on long straight poles carried by 7th century Tibetan soldiers, described in "some accounts", were "ancestors of the peaceful prayer flags that adorn Buddhist sites in Tibet today" (p. 17). Furthermore, even though the book keeps issues pertaining to doctrinal Buddhism at bay, some references to it must have been seen as unavoidable. In the context of the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet, van Schaik notes that karma literally means "actions" and that the doctrine of karma was a "radical contradiction of the Tibetan belief" that the way to avoid suffering and to achieve happiness was to placate the gods and spirits (p. 32). He is right in asserting that doctrinal Buddhism did not integrate instantaneously and effortlessly with existing Tibetan beliefs, but I doubt whether the notion of karma was ever perceived or presented as a contradiction, let alone a radical one.

These criticisms do not, however, detract from the fact that this book is a major contribution, not because it presents Tibetan history in a radically new light but because it fills a gap in the market. Prior to the publication of this book, no "complete" history of Tibet was readable, accessible and without a political or ideological axe to grind. As mentioned above, the work gives an unbiased overview that strikes a balance between religio-cultural and political history. The book repeatedly links events in the past with current Tibetan cultural practices and political quandaries, by which the author expertly shows the relevance of history to current-day issues. Van Schaik furthermore has succeeded in debunking the bunk that is Tibetan history in the general consciousness. He convincingly shows, for example, that the Tibetans have been a warlike people; that Buddhist Tibetans have not eschewed resorting to violence and would even fight each other; and that Tibet was neither a hell on earth nor a Shangri-la prior to the Chinese takeover. Even though van Schaik has not succeeded in writing the new academic standard work I had hoped for, this extremely erudite book comes fully recommended to readers who want to understand the background of a nation and a people, without being burdened by academic minutiae or too many open ends. Because this book helps a general audience develop a balanced view of Tibet and its history, I can only hope that *Tibet: a History* will soon be published as a cheap paperback, available at all major bookstores, supermarkets, and airports.

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***Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka.* By Anne M. Blackburn (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010). xxii + 237 pp. ISBN: 978-0-226-05507-7.**

Professor Anne Blackburn is a scholar with specialist expertise on the Theravādin Saṅgha of Sri Lanka. While some of her previous work, such as *Approaching Dhamma* (Pariyatti 2003) and *Religions, Reasons and Gods: Essays in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge 2006), has dealt with Buddhism/religion from a universal point of view, with her new work she has returned to her original passion, the life and work of Sinhala *bhikkhus*. This was the focus of her PhD Thesis and her early book *Buddhist learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-Century Lankan Monastic Culture* (Princeton 2001).

Negotiating with religious leaders in order to understand peace and war in a given society has become the focus of many academic disciplines. The post 9/11 political discourse has generated a new vigour and a new approach which tries to understand, unlock and perhaps collaborate with these traditional powers in order to usher democratic stability into many otherwise fragile states.

After a protracted ethnic war of 30 years, Sri Lanka is looking for ways to create democratic recovery. Internal and international power brokers will benefit from understanding the transformed role of *bhikkhus* in defining and reshaping the politics of the contemporary Sinhala majority – as they have done throughout history.

The Venerable Hikkaḍuvē Sri Sumaṅgala (1827-1911) was an important contributor to the process of intellectualizing and domesticating Sinhala Buddhism during the colonial era. In this semi-biographical work Blackburn analyses the socio-political context in which the monk became an influential player in defining the role of the *bhikkhus* and preserving Buddhism under a colonial rule that actively supported Christian missionary work. Hikkaḍuvē produced commentaries in Sinhala, the majority vernacular language, on ancient texts such as the *Tripitakaya*. I call this “domesticating the dhamma” with reference to its use, and Sinhalizing Buddhism in its political relevance. The author declares: “... [T]he aims of this book are not solely biographical. Rather, this study aims to address some of the pressing problems in the study of religion under colonialism, and the study of the impact of colonialism on the thoughts and social worlds of colonized South Asians” (p. XI). I find this book valuable because it elucidates not just the

colonial impact on religion, but also reveals how religion and its traditional power agents reacted and re-cast their roles under aggressive colonial rule.

Members of the Saṅgha reacted to colonial rule in at least three ways.. Some led resistance; some withdrew or became passive collaborators; and some engaged creatively and intellectually with both the indigenous society and the colonial masters. Hikkaḍuvē took the last path and thus gave a new direction to modern Buddhism in Lanka.

The structure of the book is novel. Rather than raise a fundamental question at the beginning and take the readers through an analysis to reach an answer, Blackburn does the opposite. She gives detailed and little known information about non-religious, largely academic, activities of Hikkaḍuvē. She thus unearths the socio-political dynamics that were governing the power relations between the prominent *bhikkhus* and their colonial rulers on the one hand, and between the Saṅgha and the emerging merchant class of Southern Sinhalas on the other. This locates the life and work of Hikkaḍuvē in a changing society with its political anxieties. The conventional way of writing about a historical individual. is to investigate their life to determine their personality and the psychological trends which make the subject noteworthy. However, in this book Blackburn is investigating the structure of a life as a basis for understanding a whole society, or a part of it. Locating Buddhism thus becomes a kind of “religious geography”. This is a methodological novelty.

In her first chapter, Blackburn describes a key historical transition that was set in motion by the Sangha of the southern provinces of Lanka when they challenged the Kandy high caste (Goyigama) monks. The Kandy fraternity, even after their reform as the Siyam Nikāya under Venerable Vāliṇi Saramkara, continued their hegemony over the southern Sangha (Malalgoda 1976: 82,128 and 139). Hikkaḍuvē was the first Southern monk to be appointed to the post of Saṅgha Nāyaka (chief monk) at the historic mountain temple of Sṛī Pāda. This was a direct challenge to Kandyan control. The appointment, validated by the English rulers, was a symbol of political transition; it marked the beginning of the end of the Kandyan kingdom and its religio-political authority.

Unlike Malalgoda, who in his unmatched research of this period was the first to investigate these changes, Blackburn is not interested in the fractional divisions amongst the Sangha based on region and caste, a subterranean dynamic that fuels identity politics. Her focus is on human relations and the careful social negotiation by a southern monk whose primary role was intellectualizing Buddhism so

that it would survive colonial oppression. She bases her analysis on “life history”, avoiding the much travelled “colonial history” path. She questions the validity and popular use of the concepts of “modernity” and “colonialism” and attempts to redefine them.

The second chapter deals with Hikkaḍuvē’s popularity as a scholar, and his move to the suburb of Colombo where he worked to establish the Vidyodaya Pirivena. In many ways, the Vidyodaya project was a reaction to the missionary led education that had replaced the once influential Pirivenas. Blackburn traces how Hikkaḍuvē, instead of following the traditional Saṅgha inclination to confront the colonial rule, found gaps within the colonial administration in which he could cultivate support and recognition. He did this while keeping the colonial administration out of the daily running of the institute: diplomatic in manner, he was in effect subversive. Hikkaḍuvē displayed what Blackburn terms “locative pluralism”. “Rather than assuming a single dominant affiliation or “identity” as the hermeneutical key to social action, it is more revealing to assume that the person we study exemplifies locative pluralism, acting simultaneously in relation to plural and shifting collectives of belonging to which they feel a sense of responsibility and emotional investment” (p 210). While challenging the missionaries, colonial masters and local collaborators, Hikkaḍuvē restored the importance of the Saṅgha in defining and teaching Buddhism. However, Blackburn shows a tendency to treat Hikkaḍuvē as apolitical, a controversial position to say the least.

Hikkaḍuvē was in many ways a strong defender of the faith and of the tradition that governs it. In 1831, Venerable Bentara Atthadassī, (1790-1862) a pupil of the rebellious reformist southern monk Karatoṭa Dhammārāma (1737-1827), proposed three key ideas to reform and revive the role of the Saṅgha. While his proposals were aimed at the entire Saṅgha, they posed a direct challenge to the Kandian Siyam Nikāya. In his first point, Bentara challenged the practice of inviting a selected group of monks for the Sāṅghika dāna (meal provided to the Monastic Community). He claimed that this was against the *Dakkhinā Vibhanga Sutta*. He argued that inviting monks by name to a Dāna makes the event *pudgalika* (personal) rather than *Sāṅghika* (communal). This promoted a sharp debate and wide division in the Saṅgha as well as among the learned laity, as Dāna in Theravāda Buddhism is an important rite, central to lay accumulation of merit.. Bentara’s other two proposals for reform dealt with timing: when exactly to observe the *Pōya* days (full moon, new moon and the two mid-points between) on which fully ordained monks recite their code of conduct and the

vassāna (three months of rains retreat). Bentara argued that neither the Siyam monks nor the leading monks of the Amarapura Nikāya held these important rituals according to the correct calendar. His campaign gained notice, and in 1837 he was invited to present his case and debate with Valagedara Dhammadassī, a learned Siyam monk. Bentara's challenges appeared as important and based on sound historical evidence. Yet the Siyam Nikāya and those who were loyal to Kandyan authority opposed Bentara's reformist proposals. The debate continued for years. It took key turns in 1850, 1854 and 1855. At all these notable points, it was young Hikkaḍuvē who, despite his southern roots, acted on behalf of the Kandyan monks to argue against Bentara and block the proposed reforms. These debates eventually led to division and the forming of a new Nikāya, the *Srī Kalyāṇi Sāmagrīdharma Saṅgha Sabhā*. According to the Vinaya (the monastic code), contributing to the splitting of the Saṅgha is a *garukāpatti* – an offense of the utmost seriousness.. We do not know the motives of Hikkaḍuvē, but his willingness to uphold the tradition even when it seemed to contradict the Vinaya is fully demonstrated.¹ In Blackburn's narrative this side of Hikkaḍuvē gets buried in the details of his academic work. She seems to justify the dichotomy as "locative pluralism".

Chapters three, four and five of the book largely deal with important stages in Hikkaḍuvē's reforms. Superficially these reforms appear "modern" in the wider context of South and Southeast Asian Buddhist societies; however, they mainly served to concretize the central role of the Saṅgha in determining the socio-politics of the Sinhala as a people and Lanka as a state. His diplomatic handling of the highly sensitive issue of caste within the Saṅgha was typical.. Blackburn traces the struggles Hikkaḍuvē faced in balancing his intellectual understanding with the traditional practice: "We see Hikkaḍuvē inhabited an entangled world of discourse and social practices." Beside the caste issue, Hikkaḍuvē launched into the controversial topic of the Vinaya, especially in relation to monastic dress.

Attempting to "reform" the Sāsana so that it could withstand the pressures of the "modern" world, Hikkaḍuvē became the symbol of tradition in the Sinhala Saṅgha. His keen interest in institutionalizing the practice of Shishyanu-Shishya (teacher-pupil) lineages illustrates this. Among the many influenced by his reforms was Don David Hewavitharane, later known as Anagārika Dharmapāla, the leading Sinhala Buddhist nationalist campaigner, who promoted the ethnore-

¹ For detailed discussion of this and many other points concerning division in the Sinhala Saṅgha see chapters four and five of Malalgoda's *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750-1900* (1976).

ligious concept of “Sinhala-Bauddhaya” (a Sinhala who essentially is a Buddhist). Chapter five details these changing political dynamics and how Hikkaḍuvē became a constant negotiator between tradition and modernity.

However, most details of chapters four and five concern issues that have already earned much attention from historians such as K. M De Silva (1986) and from sociologist Kitsiri Malalgoda.

What is missing in Blackburn’s narrative is a much-needed analysis of the political impact of Hikkaḍuvē’s projects, because it is their political implications that dictated the Sangha-State relationship. Blackburn chooses to avoid discussing the dichotomy Hikkaḍuvē constantly displayed. In public, he was a scholar monk whom the colonists treated with respect. However, in private, he often held entrenched traditional views that supported radical agitation against the colonists. Hikkaḍuvē managed to hide those views, and even willingly accepted colonial gifts and positions (Seneviratne 1999: 133).

It is in the sixth and last chapter, after a brief survey of the influential literature on modern Buddhism in Lanka, that Blackburn presents her concluding arguments and most sustained theoretical analysis. She argues against our established understanding of the colonial era of Lanka and the rest of South Asia. Blackburn maintains that individuals like Hikkaḍuvē symbolize a transition from the traditional role of *bhikkhus* to a modernist path: a path that encouraged a new level of intellectualizing the religion by internationalizing the local as well as localizing the international (or transnational) ideas of Buddhism. She writes: “This study of Hikkaḍuvē thus reminds us to remain alert to domains of Buddhist intellectual expression and to arguments for the rectification of problems understood in some sense as social and collective, that occurred in periods or conditions we may call ‘modern’ or ‘colonial modern’ but not in a historicist or developmentalist vein” (pp. 212).

Building on her 2009a work, she questions the current analyses of Sinhala Buddhism as it evolved during the late 19th and early 20th century. She maintains that sorting modern Buddhism into categories such as “Protestant Buddhism”, “Buddhist Revivalism” and “Buddhist Modernism” is of limited use in deconstructing traditional monastic power in Sinhala Buddhism. Blackburn contests the use of terms such as “traditional” versus “modern” in identifying a trend in history. She argues that often these are empty, unless they are used in the discursive form of understanding “oneself” and “other”.

This position moves the rest of the project in a different direction. “Tradition”, as the term is used in political science, is not mere absence of technology, democracy or forms of economic distribution. It refers to a dynamic that brings the past into the present – a particular constructed past as defined by certain texts and individuals. Hikkaḍuvē was a continuum of that “past” who felt challenged by the “modern” times introduced by English colonialists. Yet he was a clever manipulator of his modern “present” to promote his agenda. That his agenda was to renew the past is a point that Blackburn seems to have avoided analyzing.

She is right in arguing for the unchanged influence of monastic authority. Yet the thematic categorizations and analyses of Buddhism in Lanka with which she takes issue have been created to show how during different periods the Saṅgha and the laity engaged with each other as well with the political authority in different ways. Blackburn’s claim that “Protestant Buddhism” did not produce any continuum is debatable. Protestant Buddhism is a term introduced by anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere (1970;1975) and later adopted by Richard Gombrich (1988) to characterize a type of social transformation that Buddhism as a faith underwent, and the dynamic of such “Protestantism” continues in Lanka until today. In fact, this version of Buddhism is more powerful in contemporary Lankan society than the monastic tradition. Indeed, a new generation of young southern monks who were exposed to Protestant Buddhism became key leaders of Saṅgha involvements in the 1971 and 1988 anti-state revolts led by the *Janatā Vimukti Peramuna*. Thus Protestant Buddhism was not a short-lived phenomenon, as Blackburn argues, but a dynamic socio-political response of Buddhism to its challenges. Stanley Tambiah (1986), a known anthropologist, asked whether “protestant Buddhism” became the reason for which *Buddhism* was *Betrayed*? It was indeed, for its resistance to the state and the “non-Buddhist” forces deepened and took a “jihadist” turn in the discourse of war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The major weakness of Blackburn’s argument lies not only in her limited appreciation of the “protestant” dynamics of Buddhism and the politics they generated in Lanka, but also in her preference for probing intellectual, social and institutional lives and practices of the Saṅgha as a superior way of understanding or “locating” Buddhism in Lanka.

Research on “life history” is an area with immense importance for understanding the survival, political influence and defining ideology of Buddhism in Lanka. Recent social discourses and their influence as mobilized by Venerable Gangodawila Soma (Berkwitz 2004) and Venerable Walpola Rahula (Raghavan

2011) confirm this fact. Our understanding of individual Sangha members promises to provide insight into the socio-political dynamic that motivates them and brings them into public life. However, analysis of certain individual lives alone will not be enough to make us understand the historic role and relation of *bhikkhus* to Sinhala society. Buddhism in Lanka is not only a religion, but also the hegemonic framework that defines “self” and “other”, as well as the socio-politics arising from those definitions.

Despite this limitation, and a rather dull cover design, Blackburn’s book is a scholarly intervention and an enjoyable read. It promises to be a landmark text for any student of Buddhism and of Sinhala Buddhism in particular. Her work should challenge the modern native scholars of Sinhala Buddhism to find new methodological and conceptual frameworks to understand Buddhism and its inseparable relationship to Sinhala and their politics.

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The Ego Trick: What Does It Mean To Be You?. By Julian Baggini (London: Granta Publications, 2011). 304 pp., ISBN 978-1847081926 (paperback).

This book, based on the author's PhD thesis, "Psychological Reductionism about Persons – A Critical Development", is about the perplexing subject of the self. He rejects the "pearl" view which presupposes that the self is an essence, an unchanging core, and favours the "bundle theory", which goes back to the Buddha – that the self is a collection of sensations, thoughts and perception. The strong sense of unity and singleness of the self which arises from this messy, fragmented sequence of experiences and memories in a brain which has no control centre is the result of the Ego Trick.

The first part (Chapter 1-6) of the book supports four main claims. First, there is nothing and no part of you which contains your essence. Second, you have no immortal soul. Third the sense of self must in some way be a construction. Fourth, this unity of sense of self is in some ways fragile, and in others robust.

In Chapter 7, Baggini makes three main claims: (i) the unity of the self is psychological, (ii) we are no more than, but more than just matter [*sic*] and (iii) identity is not what matters.

The unity of the self is psychological

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*,
I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold,
light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure, colour or sound, etc.
I never catch *myself*, distinct from such perception.
David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*,
Book 1, Part 4, Section 6

Baggini describes the “self” as a collection or bundle of emotions, thoughts and perceptions. You, the person, are not separate from these thoughts. The self is not a substance or thing; it’s a function of what this collection does. In this sense, the “I” seems to be a verb dressed as a noun.

The unity of experience – what we call the “self” or “I” – is the result of the Ego Trick, the remarkable way in which the collection of mental events, made possible by the brain, constructs a singular self without a singular *thing* underlying it. While it seems as if there is an unchanging core, there is actually none. According to Baggini, while we do not understand how this trick works, the point is that it does.

This fits well with the Buddhist concept of five aggregates: body, feeling, perception, mental construction and consciousness; and each of these, according to the Buddha, is not-self, *anatta* (SN 22.59).

We are no more than, but more than just matter [sic]

They [*dualists*] started from the correct idea that thoughts, feelings and sensations were not physical things. The category mistake was to conclude that they must therefore be a different *kind of thing*, a non-physical thing. But there is another, more plausible alternative: they are not *things* at all. Rather thinking and feeling are what brains and bodies *do*. Mind should not be thought of a substance, but as a kind of activity. (p.63)

Baggini mentioned that there are three seemingly obvious truths. The first is that thoughts, feelings, emotions and so on are real. The second truth is that whatever thoughts and feelings are, they are not straightforwardly physical. The third is that the universe has within it only the physical things described by physics equations. According to Baggini, the only way to make sense of these three facts

is that mental events *emerge* from physical ones, without being strictly identical with them.

While Baggini describes consciousness as an emergent property, he notes that he is not trying to explain consciousness; to do so would require an explanation of *how* it emerges, the mechanism of its emergence. He emphasizes that even if we don't know *how* it does so, consciousness does indeed emerge from complex physical events in the brain. We have feelings and thoughts because of the brain that works, not because there is something else. The evidence is that if you alter the brain, you alter the consciousness.

In a similar tone, the Buddha described “all” as the eye and forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and odours, the tongue and tastes, the body and tactile objects, the mind and mental phenomena (SN 36.23).

Identity is not what matters

To illustrate this, Baggini uses the Ship of Theseus Paradox. Consider a wooden ship which has had all the parts replaced over time. Is it still the same ship? Hobbes added another puzzle: if all the old parts are reassembled, does it have a stronger claim to being the original ship?

Baggini remarked that we need only to think of early childhood and dementia to realise that we are not strictly identical with our past selves.

This concept is remarkably similar to a passage in the *Milindapañha*. King Menander asked Nāgasena whether he who is reborn remains the same or becomes another. “Neither the same nor another,” was the answer he received. Nāgasena gave the examples of a baby, the lighting of a lamp and the derivatives of milk (curds, butter and ghee) to illustrate his answer.

Critical review

Suzanne Segal's depersonalizing experience (p.26)

To answer Baggini, what she was feeling, as described, is not *anatta*. The experience of *anatta* is *not* a case of the self that one used to have ceasing to exist (SN 44.10).

Descriptions like “vastness”, “infinite”, “no one and everyone, nothing but everything”, do indeed sound like the Hindu idea of *brahman*, as Baggini has correctly identified. In fact, Segal (1998, p.53) herself mentioned that her experience

could be the state of Cosmic Consciousness described by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. This concept is also strikingly similar to, perhaps the same as, the Buddhist concept of formless absorptions or *jhānas* – described as “infinite space”, “infinite consciousness”, etc.

We read that Segal had a massive brain tumour. Her “spiritual” experience seems very likely to be a result of her cerebral pathology. While we will never know the true cause of her experience, according to Baggini, the most likely explanation is neurological. We also learn that Segal eventually recovered memories of abuse during her childhood. (Segal, 1998, pp.174-175)

Simeon and Abugel (2006, pp.142-146) suggest that she was probably having a depersonalization disorder. Waugaman (2010, p.1506) suggests in his review of Simeon and Abugel (2006) that Segal’s experience could possibly be a dissociative disorder, rather than simply depersonalization.

Baggini’s self

For Baggini, the sense of self is really there, but it is not a single, solid thing. The simplest analogy is with a cloud. For him, the solidity of self is an illusion; the self itself is not.

Although the Buddha did not deny the person or the individual (SN 22.22), he did not call the process, what Baggini calls the Ego Trick, the *self*. For the Buddha, all phenomena are not-self (*Dhammapada* 279).

The Buddha considered the following as inherently misleading:

I have a self.....I have no self.....It is precisely by means of self that I perceive self.....It is precisely by means of self that I perceive not-self..... It is precisely by means of not-self that I perceive self.....This very self of mine – the knower that is sensitive here & there to the ripening of good & bad actions — is the self of mine that is constant, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and will stay just as it is for eternity. (MN 2, translated from Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu)

Self-identification is described by the Buddha as the five aggregates affected by clinging (MN 44). When one is stuck, tightly stuck, in desire, lust, delight and craving for the five aggregates, therefore one is called a being (SN 23.2). But if one doesn’t have an underlying tendency towards the five aggregates, then one is

not measured in accordance with it; if one is not measured in accordance with it, then one is not reckoned in terms of it (SN 22.96).

Split-brain thought experiment (p.65)

In the split-brain thought experiment, Baggini asks us to imagine that the two hemispheres of his brain are surgically divided and placed into two bodies whose brains have been destroyed. The right is called Rightian, and the other Leftian. Both awake and claim to be Baggini, remember as much about Baggini's past as each other and have identical personalities. Baggini asks which, if any, is Baggini?

Baggini says that both can't be Baggini. He reasons that if both are himself, then both must be the same person, but clearly they aren't. Both will now be having different experiences and acquire different memories.

I disagree with Baggini's conclusion. Here it is interesting to note that some spiritual adepts in the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism are able to manifest multiple *tulkus* (incarnations) simultaneously. There are also *tulkus* who incarnate before the previous incarnation has died (Thondup, 1998, p.19). So, both, Rightian and Leftian could be Baggini. In the case of these *tulkus*, a mental process is utilized, and in the case of this thought experiment, a physical process, splitting the brain, is utilized.

Baggini on Reincarnation (pp.187-188)

Baggini writes that the case against reincarnation is already solid; hence no such evidence is needed. One would naturally expect him to elaborate further, but disappointingly he doesn't. He also mentions that there is simply no good reason to believe it. However, this does not presume its non-occurrence. For example, there is no good reason for the universe to exist, but it does exist.

Baggini has interviewed Akong Tulku Rinpoche and Ringu Tulku Rinpoche. We read that both do not remember things from their past lives. This may not be surprising, considering that we can't even remember our early childhood. This condition of childhood amnesia is probably due to how the brain develops from infancy to adulthood. Children who remember past lives also tend to lose these memories as they grow older. It would then be strange if people were normally to remember past lives.

Baggini writes, “If someone had really remembered a detail from past life which could be verified and they could not have otherwise known, that would be an astonishing recovery.....” (pp.185-186). Here I would like to refer Baggini to the work of Ian Stevenson, whose extensive research on reincarnation was based on children who claimed to remember previous lives. Also, to Jim Tucker, who took over Stevenson’s work on his retirement.

Now if the mind is an activity, and, as the old dictum goes, “every action has an equal and opposite reaction”, then *karma* or action is what makes the world go round. Rebirth takes place because of *karma*. And the universe exists because of *karma*. This would not be surprising if we consider matter and mind to be interdependent. This could be the cause for spontaneous creation described in *The Grand Design* (Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010, p.180).

Transformative powers (pp .223-224)

While Baggini agrees that the bundle view in some ways radically changes how we view life and self, he feels that it leaves more as it is than it changes. He writes about the attachment to his partner and the terrible distress if one were to die before the other. He also mentions Susan Blackmore, a psychologist and Zen practitioner, saying she will be devastated if her husband dies. However, he himself provides two responses by quoting Paul Broks, a clinical neuropsychologist and Derek Parfit, a philosopher. He writes that Broks says “that despite his intellectual convictions, he lives as a ‘soul theorist’ or ‘ego theorist’ who persists with the belief in a fixed core of self”.

We have this deep intuition that there is a core, an essence there, and it’s hard to shake off, probably impossible to shake off, I suspect. But neuroscience shows that there is no centre in the brain where things do all come together. Paul Broks (p.28)

I wouldn’t expect acceptance of “the true view” to have great transformative powers, chiefly because the true view is so hard to accept. Derek Parfit (p.234)

Intellectual understanding and mere acceptance of *anatta* is not enough. The great transformative powers lie in the experience, realization and insight into *anatta*, usually through meditative practice.

The death of a loved one need not necessarily be a negative experience. Sometimes love means letting go. Death could be an inspiring and uplifting experience. I am particularly reminded of one of Ajahn Brahm's talks in which he recounted the death of his father with the simile of a concert:

As I walked out of the crematorium in Mortlake, West London, after his funeral service, I clearly remember that it was drizzling and very cold. Yet I never felt sad at all. I felt inspired, uplifted and deeply moved. "Dad, that was a wonderful performance. That was a tremendous concert that you played in front of your son. I will never forget those fugues and cadenzas and the deep feeling that you gave to your symphony. You were a maestro of life. How lucky I was to have been at your concert." I was inspired, not sad. I felt deep gratitude, not grief. I felt I had witnessed one of the great lives of my era.

I strongly recommend *The Ego Trick*. It has certainly clarified and deepens my understanding of the Buddhist concept of not-self.

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