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Radical Asceticism and the Sinhalese Case

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Source: *Man*, New Series, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Mar., 1980), pp. 195-196

Published by: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2802010>

Accessed: 29/07/2010 06:15

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## CORRESPONDENCE

### Radical asceticism and the Sinhalese case

Michael Carrithers's interesting article raises several points that deserve comment. Let me begin with two items of information. The expression 'domestication' has a long history in Buddhist scholarship, although Carrithers puts it to a new use—to emphasise the *sangha's* historical tendency to settle in villages and abandon ascetic practices. Weber used the word to characterise what he regarded as Asoka's political use of Buddhism for the 'domestication of the masses' (1958: 236). Secondly, Sri Lanka became independent in 1948 (as Carrithers says on p. 299), not in 1947 (as he has it on p. 294).

More to the point, Carrithers interprets Buddhism's role in Sinhalese history in a way that recalls the confusion engendered by the Great Tradition/Little Tradition distinction in the study of Indian society. One moment he talks about the *sangha's* role as laid out in the canon—it is autonomous and 'self-referring,' the next as it is realised sociologically—monks come to acquire responsibilities to laypeople, as well as similar material interests. Although I am unsure of what he means by 'self-referring,' even in the canon the Buddhist monk's role is portrayed in a more complicated way (Tambiah 1976: 14–18). The responsibilities of monks to society are stressed even more strongly in the Sinhalese commentaries. To say that '... the canonical sources offer very little theory of society or Buddhism's place in society' (p. 296) is to ignore considerable recent argument to the contrary (Sarkisyanz 1965; Obeyesekere *et al.* 1972; Tambiah 1976; Smith 1978). It also raises suspicions as to whether this world-fleeing quality—even if dominant in the Great Tradition—is more salient in the lives of Sinhalese Buddhists than the fact that since the first century B.C. the choice of teaching and preaching among the villagers has been given precedence over ascetic practice. In either case, the 'domesticated *sangha*' has its own sources of legitimacy.

The Dhamma has two wheels: One (*dhammacakka*) that envisions a lonely, individual quest and another (*anacakka*) that is hardly 'self-referring' and speaks of political and domestic order. Carrithers uses the expression 'Buddhist king' (p. 299). Unless a historical accident, the role must have come from somewhere. Tambiah's work on the Thai

polity points to Asoka (1976: 47–72). The Sinhalese case obviously invites comparison.

As for the speculation that the *tapasayō* were not so much pulled into the movement by a vision of the other-world as pushed out of a village life by economic difficulties, I would object in principle to the reduction of social movements to economic causes. But, more practically, I would raise this point. If the motive was economic, why didn't these young men join the 'domesticated *sangha*?' As Carrithers doubtlessly knows, the fare there is considerably better than the cow's urine the *tapasayō* drank. If there is a correlation here, I suspect it is to be found between times of economic difficulty and rates of robbing in the legitimate monkhood.

A still more radical reform movement is the Vinaya Vardena Society which represents an attempt to reform Buddhism by practising it without monks altogether. An account of the group appears in Smith (1978: 212–35). In this regard I would suggest that what may explain support of *tapasayō* is not the low caste or poverty of their supporters but the same phenomenon that accounts for the appearance of local chapters of the Vinaya Vardena Society: the presence of a local monastery where a monk has been guilty of a major violation of the monastic rules, most especially, the prohibition on sexual intercourse.

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Obeyesekere, Gananath, Frank Reynolds & Bardwell Smith (eds) 1972. *The two wheels of Dhamma*. Chambersburg, Pa.: American Academy of Religion, 1972.

Sarkisyanz, E. 1965. *Buddhist backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff,

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The most useful way to reply to Dr Kemper's letter is, I think, to explain what I meant by the telescopic remark that '... the canonical sources offer very little theory of

society or Buddhism's place in society.' What I meant was this: that the canonical discourses and monastic rules (of the *Sutta* and *Vinaya Piṭakas*) deal in exhaustive and vivid detail with the ideals and organisation of the Sangha, the Buddhist order of renunciators, but only in a sketchy way with the organisation or charter of society as a whole. This is quite in contrast to the work of Brahmanical theorists, who relied on the excellent and integral charter myth of the *puruṣasūta* (the hymn of the cosmic person), elaborated in the *varṇāśrama-dharma* (the law of estates and stations of life), to view society as an articulated whole. In the face of this the Buddha and his successors espoused a unitary standard based on ethical judgement, before which kings and brahmins stood equal with everyone else. This was a profound and revolutionary step, but does not in itself replace the global Brahmanical theory. And indeed Buddhism has never quite known what to do with caste, though it did in time deal very well with kings.

But, Kemper might very justly retort, what of the work of Tambiah (1976), who discovers, right in the midst of that canonical material I call to my defence, a discourse, the *Aggañña Sutta*, which seems to provide a charter myth for society rivalling that of the *puruṣasūta*? I disagree, however, with Tambiah's interpretation of that discourse (and he with mine). He holds that the *Aggañña Sutta* satirises brahmins and the Brahmanical theory, but sets in their place an alternate theory, one of ethical Buddhist kingship. I hold (Carrithers 1977), to the contrary, that the discourse satirises not only brahmins and their myths, but kingship and most of the institutions of lay society. In other words, it represents the viewpoint of a radical world renouncer: a world renouncer who, far from prescribing for each estate, invited his monks elsewhere to preach, out of compassion for the world and for the welfare of the many, the completely pure and perfect life of renunciant celibacy.

To be fair, this is not the whole story. There is adumbrated in the *Aggañña Sutta* a further view, more fully developed in another discourse, the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, and that view might reasonably be said to comprehend a whole political society, that of the gerontocratic, oligarchic republics, in one of which the Buddha was born. A good deal of the satire on brahmins and kings is on their account, and it seems that the Buddha patterned the Sangha partly on their model. But soon after the Buddha's death the last of these republics was conquered by a monarchy, and they disappeared forever from Indian history and Buddhist political theory. (One figure in the *Aggañña Sutta* was later resurrected, in all earnestness, to provide a precedent for Buddh-

ist kingship, and that was Mahāsammata, 'The Great Elect'.)

So with the canon, Buddhists inherited a complete and detailed model for a part of society, the order of renunciators, and the raw materials, ethical and legendary, from which they would fashion a more comprehensive view of Buddhist society, and the role of the Sangha in that society. I have treated these developments in some detail elsewhere (Carrithers in press). While the evolution had already begun in the canonical period, the conception of the Sangha's role in society, as it is now received in Theravāda Countries, was not finally complete until the late Anurādhapura period in Ceylon (roughly tenth century A.D.): and the conception of the Buddhist polity was not complete until King Parakkamabāhu the Great had made his contribution in the twelfth century A.D.

The question which underlies my *Man* article is this: what is the relationship between that Buddhism of the renunciators, whose final form was achieved so early, and the more slowly matured doctrines and practices of national, political and social Buddhism? This is the fundamental question of Theravāda sociology, and in asking it—I cannot emphasise this too strongly—we must resolutely put from our minds any suggestion of the Great and Little Traditions. For the values and images of renunciant Buddhism are alive and active, as a part of every Buddhist's religious education; as the monastic rule of the nearly 800 forest-dwelling monks now living in Sri Lanka; as the chief purpose of such institutions as the Maharagama Bhikkhu's Training Centre; and as a viewpoint in the continual debates over the Sangha's mission which occupy so much of the Buddhist press.

And in the article I have suggested, and illustrated from a particular case, an answer to the question. The relationship between renunciant Buddhism and the social mission of Buddhism is difficult and often mutually contradictory. These contradictions have been endlessly productive of history. The *tapasa* movement was one small chapter in that history, and Kemper's Vinayavardhana movement was another.

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