

Introduction

[If a monk] has utterly destroyed every vestige of worldly contamination, if he is not tied to any source of sustenance, if his territory is freedom, then the passing of such a one is hard to trace, like that of birds in the sky.

The idea of total detachment pervading this verse illustrates concisely the fundamental ambience associated with the early Buddhist quest: detachment, freedom from ties, renunciation of the world, celibacy. As both religious attitude and lifestyle practice, adoption of an attitude of total detachment has done much to define the image of the monk throughout the ages since the beginnings of Buddhism. In the world today, and in several recent centuries for which good evidence is available, there is no doubt that the Order of Buddhist monks has had plenty of interaction with society; in many countries it has necessarily been integrated within the pattern of social, cultural and even political systems. A fundamental dichotomy appears then as the monks who received the earliest Buddhist message were expected to live it as homeless mendicants, severing all ties with society in order to devote themselves fully to the search for enlightenment. The problem faced in this book is to explain how, right from the beginning, Buddhism has from a doctrinal viewpoint required of its Order of monks the practical application of an ethic of renunciation and detachment and yet this very same order has remained a vibrant *part* of society, culture or politics wherever Buddhism has flourished.

The present study confronts this problem by focusing on the relationships between Buddhism, understood as its teachings and the activities of the Buddhist Order, and its social context in northern India in about the fifth to third centuries BCE, assuming that these were the centuries during which the Pāli Canon took shape, though its formation could have continued for another two hundred years. Attention is given especially to the social dynamic of the growth of Buddhism, a dynamic understood within the terms of the opposition suggested in the first paragraph. Inevitably

this dynamic must be tested by the material drawn from textual sources which centre above all on interaction between monks, nuns and the broader society, and the archaeological evidence which somewhat contextualizes this. If used with appropriate sensitivity, the available sources can furnish clues to the actual relationships, in all their permutations, between Buddhists and society when it first began to grow. Even the passing of a bird in the sky leaves some sort of trace, and in principle it should be possible to fashion the instruments to detect it.

Much has already been written over the past two centuries about the interaction of the Buddhist Order with society, as one side of the problem, and the implications of Buddhist teachings for social behaviour, as the other side of the problem. On the basis of this line of scholarship certain adumbrated positions have come to be taken as orthodoxy and have subsequently had a more than determinate influence on what scholars expect to find, or hope to defend, when looking at the broad field of early Buddhism and its larger social and economic context. Two of these positions are interrogated in this book and one of the book's aims is to convince those interested in Buddhism of the need to revise progressively the axioms governing our mode of reading the primary sources.

The first of these positions rests on what is virtually a starting point for the present book, the implication, if not proposition, that Buddhism began substantially as one possible response to the changes occurring in northern India in the two centuries from the sixth century BCE onwards. The classic view is given by Bareau:

The most recent body of archaeological and philological works concerning the middle basin of the Ganges seems indeed to show that this region, in the course of the fifth century, underwent some very important and progressive changes: the beginning of urbanization; distinct economic development, notably in commerce and in the class of merchants (*vanij* and *śreṣṭhin*) with their caravans of ox carts; accentuation of political unification. Already in process beforehand and finishing in the following century with the Nanda dynasty, then that of the Mauryas, the latter seems to attain a decisive phase in the period of the Blessed One with the progressive affirmation of Magadha's power. These three kinds of changes – urbanization, economic development and political unification – are also quite probably interlinked.¹

¹ A. Bareau, 'Le Buddha et les rois', *Bulletin De L'École Française D'Extrême-Orient*, 80/1 (1993), p. 17. But cf. also G. von Simson, 'Die zeitgeschichtliche Hintergrund der Entstehung des Buddhismus und seine Bedeutung für die Datierungsfrage,' in H. Bechert (ed.), *The Dating of the Historical Buddha* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1991), part I, pp. 90–9; P. Olivelle, *The Āśrama System* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1993), pp. 55–62. More nuanced is Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism. A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1988), ch. 2.

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In our view the archaeological evidence, substantially filled out by textual evidence from the *Sutta Piṭaka*, is quite clear. Buddhism arose in a period when all these changes identified by Bareau, and assumed by most other scholars, had already occurred. The importance of this qualification – and given the observed differences between periods of great change and relative stability, it is much more significant than it seems – is that our understanding of early Buddhism must be of a religious movement developing within a period of relative prosperity and socio-economic consolidation, and not reacting against a period when change was occurring at breakneck speed. Responses to the latter often take radical forms, whereas survival during a period of slow change should be understood more as accommodation to a particular cultural setting. Buddhist literature reveals very little sign of a consciousness (repressed or otherwise) of a period of dramatic change having been traversed.

The second proposition is ultimately dependent upon the first, since if the situation implied in the first had not occurred, it would be impossible even to countenance the second. There is a view that Buddhism arose because it responded positively to a feeling of profound social malaise that gripped certain sections of the population of North India in the sixth and following centuries BCE. The ascetic tradition represented by Buddhism, the Upaniṣadic sages and the early Jains placed great emphasis on the transitoriness of human existence in any dimension that could be named. It is tempting, if not natural, for scholars to try and read the tone of socio-economic conditions in ancient Indian thought, especially where this is so concentrated chronologically and within a small body of texts, into the empirical conditions of the day. The tone of universal dissatisfaction expressed in the concept of *dukkha* has often been read back into a kind of social *Angst* operating somewhere in the psyche of the residents of the Ganges valley and inducing them to take up the renouncer's path; Buddhism represented such a vocation.

To recognize both these problems is to realize the difficulties of reasoning convincingly from two very central doctrines – *anicca* and *dukkha* – of Buddhism to socio-economic conditions that may have had a formative role in the Buddha's formulation of both doctrines. We see how insecurely founded is the glib notion that the early canonical texts both embody a teaching that must have appealed to the alienated, the disenfranchised, the dispossessed – whatever percentage of the total population these groups comprised – and also reflect a period of social dislocation occurring when they were composed. Not only are the arguments circular, the archaeological and textual evidence goes against them. The teaching of *dukkha* need not go with social distress – however this might be defined; the canonical

texts might reflect any combination of the alienated, etc., and any or none of the times they reflect may have been characterized by either slow or rapid change. For the most part the changes wrought by urbanization and state formation had already occurred in their most far-reaching manifestations by the time the Buddhist texts took the form in which we know them.

Our desire to question these two assumptions means, of course, that we are required to offer alternative solutions to the main problems taken up in this book concerning the interaction between the Buddhist Order and wider society. Such an enterprise is likely to confront similar problems to those of our scholarly predecessors; the shortage of adequate appropriate evidence is conspicuous among them. It is not just the paucity of evidence that creates difficulties, however. Problems attend the way in which we may use the evidence. Even the concepts and presuppositions we bring with us to embark upon the study, as parts of the framework of thought, are fraught with ambiguity. Not the least of such concepts is that of Buddhism itself. It denotes no ready-made atomic reality: it has always meant many different things to different people. This is especially so for the concept of 'early Buddhism', which has itself provoked debate about what it can mean, even in principle. If this is not enough, it is compounded by the temporal disjunction between our literary sources. The Buddha lived in about the fifth century BCE; the texts upon which we must overwhelmingly depend to study the first few centuries of emergent Buddhism were not written down until late in the first century BCE. By then society had doubtless changed a great deal, and what was written down is all too likely to bear the imprint of a later period, an imprint difficult to remove from the earlier material.

We hope we have succeeded in advancing a coherent and plausible account of Buddhism in its social context by cutting away the clutter of unwarranted assumptions that are often made. We have tried to establish in broad outline what is really probable, and pointed to the often indirect evidence yielded by a close reading of the sources, both literary and archaeological.

This book is divided into two parts, which are interrelated in their treatment of particular aspects of Buddhism and its broader social context. Of these the first sets out our own view of the economic and social context within which the Buddha lived and the subsequent Buddhist Order developed, at least for the first two centuries of its existence. We finish roughly at the beginning of the reign of Aśoka, after which source material becomes more abundant and presents a picture of a more extensive Buddhism than

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what is likely for the pre-Aśokan period. It is necessary to set out the economic and social context in some detail because the second section of the book focuses on a specific role of the monk that makes full sense only within a particular view of society and economy. Our principal contention throughout the book is that Buddhism expanded and flourished, ultimately to a greater extent than its śramaṇic rivals, because the monk (and perhaps the nun, though there is little evidence for this) was able to function as an instrument of mediation between the forces – political and economic – benefiting from the changes that had taken place prior to, and perhaps during, the life of the Buddha, on the one hand, and those other groups for whom such changes were difficult to digest, on the other hand.

In this book there is scarcely any treatment of North India as it appears in middle and late Vedic literature. Details of the socio-economic conditions of this period are largely absent from the literature, but they would be relevant to this study only to the extent that it would be possible to locate a repressed memory of them (or nostalgia for them) in the consciousness of the early Buddhists. It is not possible to locate such a consciousness. Nevertheless, change there was. Erdosy summarizes it with great brevity:

The emergence of what may be termed simple chiefdoms, datable to c. BC 1000, was the culmination of this process [of the reappearance of stable political structures following the collapse of Harappan urbanism]. They were characterized in material culture by an agricultural economy making limited use of iron, by low population density and by a two-tier settlement hierarchy whose central place coordinated the procurement, processing and distribution of vital raw materials . . .

. . . By contrast, the next three centuries [after 550 BCE] witnessed dramatic growth in population size and agglomeration, the colonization of fertile but forested tracts away from the principal watercourses (facilitated by the introduction of iron into agricultural production) and the re-emergence of long-distance trade, of a monetary economy and – sometime before BC 250 – of writing . . .²

The first section of the book fills in with considerable detail the changes noted in the final paragraph of Erdosy's summary. Here we are concerned especially to define the principal elements of the environment of Buddhism in its early centuries and not so much to trace the process of transformation which had already occurred by the time of the Buddha.

This leads into the second section of the book where we analyse the role of the monk as mediator. Both sections are thematically interrelated. If in the first section one of the sub-texts is the emergence of the Buddhist movement

² G. Erdosy, 'City states of North India and Pakistan at the time of the Buddha', in F. R. Allchin (ed.), *The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995), p. 99; cf. p. 107.

conceived as a response to already changed socio-economic conditions, the second section focuses on how members of the Buddhist Order helped other social groups deal with the on-going changes occurring as a result of the large-scale transformation outlined by Erdosy. As a form of interaction, mediation can take many different forms and operates with a range of goals. But it makes sense only within an environment where communication between certain groups has broken down, where there is a need to incorporate culturally diverse elements beneath a single umbrella and where unavoidable change must be explained.

The growth of Buddhism up until the time of Aśoka must be understood as the partially opportunistic response to large-scale urbanism, the presence of expanding state-based organizations and the rapid diversification of the economy. How should this be understood? Half the battle is to take a clear look at the way scholarship has so far treated the rise of Buddhism, and in this we observe a paradox.

In the first place, many writings on Buddhism focus on the needs of disadvantaged classes in society and support the view, without rigorous examination of the premises of the argument, that Buddhism appealed because of its message of *dukkha*, a concept defining a totalistic view of the ultimate incapacity of human existence to produce any possibility of permanent happiness. Social dislocation and alienation, it is argued, had caused distress; people heeded the message that life is *dukkha*. Working from this assumption Buddhism offered an alternative set of values, which must have been tightly defined to enable them to appear to be conspicuously different from other values with which they may have conflicted. This interpretation, however, leaves too many questions unanswered. Buddhism grew in an age of economic expansion, and although no doubt there were pockets of distress and poverty, there is nothing to suggest that the times and places which saw Buddhism thrive were more afflicted by socio-economic malaise than other times and places.

In the second place, many writings focus on the needs of the dominant classes – economic, political and religious – in society and sustain the view that Buddhism in some way reflected the values of the new rising kingdoms and provided their elites with an appropriate ideology. Some of the arguments here are appealing, except that they all presuppose Buddhism to have been something which, in its origin, it was not. In its origin it was a message for those who wished to forsake society, abandoning everything. It was not a rationale for the ambitions of holders of power and magnates. The gap between the austere ascetic impulse and the needs of expanding urban kingdoms is great indeed.

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The two schools of thought contradict each other about the rise of Buddhism in its social context, and once the contradictions are clearly seen, it is easier to focus on the assumptions underlying such contradictions and ultimately to recognize how the Buddhist Order interacted with its social context and what the reciprocal relation of influence and borrowing might have been between Buddhist teachings and this environment. The texts certainly offer no reason for disputing that the earliest form of the Buddhist message was indeed the ascetic mendicant one, however rapidly differing responses to it effectively created new versions of it when it had attracted recruits and lay support. One obvious question arises from this. How could the original ascetic impulse play a positive part in the first place, attracting recruits and the support of a laity who could never practise the stringent eremitic lifestyle of the first monks? Our answer to this forms another sub-text of this book. The dynamics of society at the time are not best understood by analysing the needs of horizontal social classes, the precursors of what might have become castes, even though this approach has usually seemed overwhelmingly appealing. On the contrary, it is our contention that it is better to consider the tensions between groups in different geographical locations in relation to an urban/non-urban configuration of the landscape. When dominant core groups such as urban-based kingdoms were expanding rapidly, they encroached upon outlying communities which did not share any significant elements of culture with them. In this situation, there were clashes of cultures which manifested themselves in varying degrees of severity, and there was also a crisis of identity because of the clashes of culture and the mode of enforcement used by the dominant culture. The people being encroached upon needed to reconceptualize their culture, but they lacked an appropriate vocabulary to do so. It was here, precisely, that the wandering holy man, deliberately shunning society, could play an important role as middleman between the two incommensurable cultures, interpreting each to the other and trusted by both sides.

Initially this process took place as a result of the activities of the expanding states of Kośala and Magadha when their rulers and bureaucracies sought to institutionalize state rule and were required to deal with a patchwork of existing cultures and social forms. But expansion, though it may continue for some time, is a dynamic condition. Eventually outlying communities become more or less integrated within the ruling values of metropolitan societies: brahmins took on the mediating role, and there was less need for the figure of the wandering holy man. Where there were Buddhist monks, they settled in monasteries and became familiar components in the local scene with priest-like functions. This was probably an inevitable process,

reaching some kind of mature development about 250 years after the founding of Buddhism. The texts of the *Vinaya*, concerned with monastic discipline, are often treated indiscriminately along with the books of the *Sutta Piṭaka* (narratives embodying the Buddha's preaching) as evidence of early Buddhism. However, it seems better to treat the *Vinaya*, and this concurs with archaeological findings relating to the earliest *stūpas* and monasteries, as generally representing a later stage of development, when the monks were not typically wandering virtuosi seeking enlightenment but domesticated within society. Even so, the *Vinaya* does preserve for us some traces of the ways in which these monastic monks could play the mediating role within a narrowly defined locality.

But if the role of the monk as mediator is to be identified as one of the reasons why Buddhism survived amongst countless other śramaṇic groups, what are we to make of the postulated original role of the wandering ascetic, seeking to avoid social entanglements but increasingly drawn in because he was needed as middleman between expanding state and isolated village? That is, the capacity of the monk to act as mediator rests as much on his perceived detachment as it does on his capacity to operate at different levels of society and between various value systems. Can the transformation between social detachment in isolation from society to social detachment in society be detected from the sources as a historical change in the early centuries of Buddhism? The *Dhammapada*, one of the early books of condensed teachings, is taken as a case-study; an examination of it suggests ways in which it can reflect the different orientations of monks towards their ascetic calling, towards the local folk culture, and towards the political sphere. In addition, we also present our analysis of the *Sutta Nipāta*, one of the oldest texts of the canon, which lays great stress on the monk as renunciant ascetic being totally detached from all of his surroundings. In the many short texts collected here, the classic conditions for the monk as mediator are laid down.

BUDDHISM AS PROCESS: THREE VERSIONS OF BUDDHISM

If the role of monk as mediator dominates the second part of this book, the first part is mainly taken up with setting the context in which this role makes sense. Thus in some sense this book is about context. Especially it is about the social and economic context defining the fledgling Buddhist movement during the first three or four centuries of its existence. A focus on the context and the social aspects of Buddhism confirms our view that the best way to understand early Buddhism is to see it as a dynamic process

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dependent upon, and perhaps shaping, the societies in which it develops. Of course, it is necessary to reduce this process to specifics, which we have tried to do by dividing the book into two parts, one dealing with extra-Buddhist social roles, the other with the interaction between monks and society. This produces an impression of Buddhism as being many different things.

To illustrate what we intend by this, let us look at three Buddhisms. It comes all too naturally to think of Buddhism, just one noun, as just one thing, with a consistent character of its own. In reality, of course, any widespread movement must be many things to many people; an ideally complete history of Buddhism would identify a large number of often inconsistent Buddhisms representing the many images it has had for different sorts of people. The present study does two things – it insists upon the validity of multiple different versions of Buddhism in history, and for the purpose of understanding the Dharma's rise it focuses on the ascetic, other-worldly and asocial version as the most likely content of the original message. This can be contrasted with the various social versions according to which it played an active part in the community. Here, to exhibit the main different images of Buddhism both in history and among scholars, we can subdivide the 'social' version into two, roughly corresponding to the 'Great Tradition' and the 'Little Tradition' – political involvement and folk culture. Thus we can describe three Buddhisms.

The first represents (the original 'asocial') Buddhism as an ascetic quest embodied in a form of practice. It is exemplified above all in the *Sutta Nipāta*. It can be called 'ascetic' because of its rejection of the world, but of course the Buddha, unlike some of his contemporaries, rejected deliberate self-mortification, or extreme asceticism; his is a middle way, espousing calm detachment. In this view monks wander constantly, rejecting all social ties. Their object is to obtain a transcendent vision of the way things really are, abandoning all attachments in every sphere. In the absence of attachment and ignorance, one will cease generating *karma*, and thereby become enlightened and escape the unending frustration and distress inseparable from worldly existence. The aspirant is seen as being self-centred and dogged, as paradoxical as this might seem in the light of Buddhist doctrine.

The second version emphasizes the public (and frequently political) involvement of the *dhamma* and the *saṅgha*. In this view Buddhism becomes a system of teachings accessible to all. It offers a rich array of ethical precepts for the committed laity. Monks may seek salvation directly; laymen may set themselves the more modest goal of accumulating merit, which might help

them gain enlightenment in a future life. Merit may be gained by supplying the needs of monks among other things. This is easier to achieve if there are settled permanent communities of monks with which the laity can live in symbiosis. Monks can provide education, give counsel to the laity, and even represent the local community to government. Buddhist teaching on this view is a practical system, one which can influence, if not regulate, the dealings individuals have with each other and rulers with their subjects.

The third approach relates Buddhism to the wide context of folk religion and deliberately leaves out the soteriological concepts and the ethical teachings codified in books. Such high-flown ideas, it is argued, are irrelevant to ordinary Buddhists. Real Buddhism must be sought in concrete manifestations in particular times and places, such as rituals to propitiate spirits, the building of *stūpas*, healing and divination, and miscellaneous dealings between monks and laity. Such evidences belong to the lifetime of the Buddha only by implication, working from the many passages evincing lay reverence to the person of the Buddha. It is therefore impossible directly to reconstruct original Buddhism (if it ever were a unitary thing) by direct evidence, but the analogy of later historical sources and modern anthropological studies points persuasively to the presence of a religion of immanent spiritual powers tapped by ascetic power or appropriate ritual, a religion also reflected in Hindu literature. Monks acquired powers that could be integrated within folk ritual and belief. It was believed they could acquire super-normal powers, and they taught devotion to the Buddha, whose presence or whose relics generated a field of communicable spiritual strength capable of guarding against harmful spirits. Buddhism was on this reading a source of talismans, amulets and apotropaic magic, and the monks were an elite of experts considered capable of concentrating and manipulating spiritual forces for the benefit of others.³

THE INCOMMENSURABILITY OF DIFFERENT VERSIONS

Each of these interpretations offers a coherent account of a postulated historical reality labelled 'Buddhism'. Each overlaps the others in many details, but each has its own patterned thematic structure and rationale which make it different from the others. All such interpretations treat Buddhism as an

³ Cf. the three levels described by Melford Spiro in *Buddhism and Society: a Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes* (Harper and Row, New York, 1970), pp. 11–13: nibbānic, kammic and apotropaic. The present descriptions though are of ways of interpreting Buddhism as a whole, not of elements within a local system. Cf. G. Samuel, *Civilized Shamans* (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London, 1993), ch. 2.