

REVIEW ARTICLE

S.J. Tambiah. World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity against a Historical Background. 1976. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. viii, 557 pp. £15.

World Conqueror and World Renouncer will stand, along with Louis Dumont's Homo Hierarchicus, as a classic of anthropology in complex civilizations. As a point d'appui for his programme Tambiah takes this, from Sartre's Search for a Method: 'Do we have the means to constitute a structural, historical anthropology?.. if such a thing as Truth can exist in anthropology, it must be a truth that has become, and it must make itself a totalization' (quoted in Tambiah 1976:5). Tambiah interprets his task in this light as 'the understanding of the "becoming" of Buddhism and its Sangha (order of monks) in their association with the polity as a total social fact...It implies thus the passage of a totality and its "becoming" in its present shape over time.' The programme aspires, that is, to be a structuralist, holistic account while considering two and a half millenia of Buddhist history.

To the extent that Tambiah is successful in this - and I think he is successful - it is because he insists that the enterprise is 'open-ended.' I take this to mean three things. First, he recognizes that his structuralist tactic of setting ideas or images in contrast to each other is provisional and approximate. Second, he recognizes that no single account of history is adequate to its complexity; he can therefore pick his way through Buddhist history carefully, reflectively, and with delight. Third, the 'truth that becomes' is not static, or for that matter, certain; it rather provides a way of seeing new developments or new information in the light of what has gone before. The scholar is pleased, but not surprised, to find new changes rung on old themes in civilization. This is therefore a distinctly anthropological contribution to Oriental studies and history, while, for anthropologists, it suggests an expansive and ambitious way of posing questions and answering them. Yet it remains indissolubly wedded to field work, and draws inspiration from Buddhist theorists themselves. This style grows naturally out of Tambiah's intellectual career, which itself reflects a more general development in anthropology, and it is in the light of that career that World Conqueror and World Renouncer can most fruitfully be read.

Tambiah's first extensive published work was a monograph entitled "Polyandry in Ceylon, with Special Reference to the Laggala Region" (Tambiah:1966). This was the fruit of what might be called a classical piece of anthropological field work, carried out in 1958-9: he chose a particularly isolated and backward area, Laggala; and he chose a problem, polyandry, which could be approached only through field work, for the written sources, which he nevertheless examined thoroughly, were inconclusive. He argued his case clearly, supplied rich field data, and set his conclusions in terms already well laid down by British social anthropological practice. Though he differed from his teacher, Edmund Leach, in the particulars of analysis, he shared with him two presuppositions: first, that kinship arrangements can be explained by reference to economic and inheritance strategy; and second, that this suffices to explain the peculiarly flexible nature of Sinhalese kinship arrangements. "Polyandry in Ceylon" had not yet come to grips with the fact that Ceylon is part of the complex civilization of India; it did, however, establish Tambiah's skill as a field worker, and his ability to draw careful conclusions from field work.

Tambiah then did field work in Thailand from 1960 to 1963, and in his next published work, Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand (1970), he expanded his research programme immensely, aiming at understanding a civilization as a whole.

He begins:

A Thai village is not an island by itself; it is part of a wider network of social relationships and it is embedded in a civilization. Following the method of study usually employed by anthropologists, I describe the religious practices and rituals of the people in a small-scale universe studied at first-hand. But my objective...is to use the particular to say something general.....Insofar as this village is embedded in a civilization and has participated in history and has shared cultural elements with other villages, the structural properties and the processes that characterize its present religious system may reveal features which are of general import (Tambiah 1970:1).

He then devotes most of the book to analyzing four ritual complexes in a synchronic dimension, though he refers constantly to their historical and textual depth.

The method used, that of structural analysis, in general follows precedents set by his anthropological predecessors, among whom he mentions Radcliffe-Brown, Leach, Turner, and Levi-Strauss. He links the four ritual complexes, among which he includes the rites centering on the Buddhist clergy, together in a 'total field' (his emphasis). He shows that the field is ordered by two fundamental distinctions: first, that between merit (Pali puñña) and demerit (Pali pāpa); and second, that between the soul as khwan, an indigenous Thai concept, and the soul as winjan (Pali vināna) which is adapted from Buddhism. This construction is persuasive for two reasons. First, it shows precisely the extent to which Buddhism informs and guides village religion, and therefore places village religion clearly in relation to Buddhist civilization as a whole. Second, it retains, at this formidable level of abstraction, the peculiar virtues of a first-hand field study. Tambiah explains that, though no villager would have worked out this total picture, the analyst has, and it is this analysis which allows him to generalize to 'patterns and structural features embedded in the rites which may be unknown to the actors.' He goes on to write:

If a villager is suffering from misfortune, he may conduct a merit-making ritual for the monks and he may, at the same time, go to the diviner and on his instructions propitiate a guardian spirit. This does not mean that he is confusing Buddhist ritual with the spirit cult; it simply means that the misfortune can be interpreted as a consequence of lack of merit or as spirit affliction, or as both...From the point of view of the (villager) there are many strings to his religious bow (ibid:340).

Precisely because his method is eclectic and grows from his field work, Tambiah presents Thai village religion with great clarity. Though he did devote some space to considering Buddhist history as such, it still remained a peripheral concern for most of his presentation.

He does, however, in his final chapter, consider the problems of an anthropologist working in a complex civilization. He concurs with Dumont and Pocock in asserting that the whole cycle of religious

life, which includes elements of both traditions, is the proper field of study in which relationships of significance are to be sought. He takes issue with them, however, on the grounds that they continue to maintain the contrast between anthropology and Indology, the sphere of the Orientalist and historian of religion.

He writes:

I submit that the idea of two levels is an invention of the anthropologist dictated not so much by the reality he studies as by his professional perspective. By definition an anthropologist goes into the field to study live action, and from the observations made over a short period of time he tries to derive a systemic pattern....Because he is already committed to an anthropological level of reality...the anthropologist who works in complex "historical" societies is likely to view the literary culture of that society as constituting another "level" or order equivalent to the level of "live action" he has managed to record (ibid:371).

He then argues, as he had in fact already massively demonstrated, that this simply is not a realistic contrast; not least because monks in Thailand, and Brahmans in India, use and transmit the literary tradition in the village. He then suggests a project which would still lie in the province of participant-observation, but which would resolve the difficulty: the anthropologist should study 'the role of literacy and the traditional networks of learning and the transmission of knowledge', since literary specialists 'in some respects hold the total society together within a common framework.'

Tambiah then returned to kinship studies. If, in Buddhism and the Spirit Cults, he worked out the ideas which constitute 'totalization', in Bridewealth and Dowry (Tambiah: 1973) he adumbrated his approach to 'the truth that has become', under the rubric 'transformation and continuity'. Through a survey of the anthropological literature of India, Ceylon, and Burma, including ancient dharmaśāstric texts, he reveals the significance of different inheritance and marriage practices by contrasting them with each other, in order to grasp their shared principles. The virtue of this approach is that, in the absence of sufficient data to suggest causal links, particular practices may still be explained by placing them in a larger context, either historically or synchronically. Here for the first time he began to deal with Brahmanical India, in all its depth and complexity.

When Tambiah went to Thailand in 1971, then, to do the field work for what became World Conqueror and World Renouncer, his intellectual style was fully formed. It was based on the a priori assumption that 'the piece of reality (the anthropologist) has studied is both an autonomous and a meaningful universe capable of exhibiting order' (Tambiah 1970:371). He had gradually expanded his notion of the scope of the 'relevant piece of reality' until it included the whole of Indian civilization. By the same token, he retained his sense of the compelling vividness of field work, while expanding that sense to encompass the texts with which he increasingly worked.

The problem he set himself was already given by his previous work: the investigation of the network of literary and religious specialists - the monks - who were traditionally responsible for preserving and disseminating knowledge in Thailand. He based himself in Bangkok, where he knew the most able monastic students gathered; and he studied a number of urban monasteries, as well as the monastic

universities and the system of education that reached out into the provinces. He dealt with Thailand as a whole, that is, rather than with a tiny refraction of the whole in the village. But this brought with it another consequence: if in the village he had studied the monks in relation to the laity, in the capital he had to study the relation of the Sangha to the state. In the perspective of his field work this meant that he also investigated the government Department of Religious Affairs; but it also took him further and further into an area he had already reserved for a later volume: 'a macroscopic view of religion's connection with society as a whole, especially in society's aspect as a polity' (Tambiah 1976:3).

This problem is dictated not only by Tambiah's anthropological curiosity, but also by the peculiar nature of the Western understanding of Buddhism. Through the good offices of the Rhys-Davids', the Pali Text Society, and a number of other scholars, the basic canonical texts of Theravada Buddhism had been translated and, to a great extent, explicated by the early years of this century. These investigators shared, to a greater or lesser extent, two presuppositions: first, that the meaning of Buddhist doctrine was to be sought in its origins, and in its oldest canonical texts; often hidden in this presupposition, however, was a second, less fruitful, bias against all subsequent developments in Buddhism as corruptions of its original purity. In consequence little was known in the West about Buddhist history, and especially about those very ancient developments which had adapted Buddhism to be the state religion in Thailand, Burma, and Ceylon. It is only in recent years that Western scholars have begun to unravel this history. In this perspective, Tambiah had to ask himself the question: if Buddhism was the religion of a handful of salvation-seekers, as embodied in the canonical texts, then how could it possibly become a state religion?

In his introduction he describes the intellectual journey which led him to connect the narrower concerns of his field work in Bangkok with this broader problem. He began, he notes, by writing an analysis of his field data: the Sangha acts of 1941 and 1963, monastic educational institutions, careers of monks, the links between ecclesiastical and political powers. He soon discovered that these only made sense in terms of 19th century Thailand, when the contemporary religious and political hierarchies took shape. Yet 19th century reforms were predicated on values and images stemming from the earlier Ayutthayan and Sukhodayan eras of Thailand, and those in turn were based on the Sinhalese Buddhism of the 12th and 13th centuries. The idea of a Buddhist polity in Ceylon, however, went back to legends of Emperor Asoka of the 3rd Century B.C. in India; and those legends were themselves moulded in accordance with principles already present in very early Buddhism. The book as it finally appeared is divided into two parts: the first begins with early Buddhism in India and carries the argument up to the end of the 19th century in Thailand. The second part is the analysis of field data with which Tambiah began.

The whole book amounts to nearly 300,000 words. This is a testimony both to the richness of the material and to the fact that it has been little explored, especially at this level of assimilation. Recent scholars, notably Heinz Bechert and Michael Mendelson, have been persistently tempted to treat Buddhism in a near encyclopedic fashion; and among these Tambiah's work stands out because it is dense

with reflections and suggestive parallels at every turn. As I have noted, this stems from his intellectual style as an anthropologist, trained to squeeze significance from juxtapositions and oppositions in a synchronic field of data. It makes for difficult reading, however, since Tambiah adapts terms and phrases (total social fact, complementarity, opposition, mediation) from other anthropologists, and he neglects to gloss his usage: indeed, some of them, such as 'mediation', might prove impossible to gloss satisfactorily. I suggest that they be read as rhetorical devices which foster the comparison of ideas.

Yet this very style creates a vision of history different from others, and in many ways more rewarding. Perhaps this can best be seen in contrast to Bechert's three-volume Buddhismus, Staat, und Gesellschaft in den Landern des Theravada Buddhismus. (Bechert 1966-73). Bechert is a more lucid writer than Tambiah, since he uses a vocabulary culled from common historical and political usage. As an Orientalist, he is in the habit of reading early Buddhist material not only as myth, but as history. He therefore presents a history of Buddhism connected where possible by causal links. Like Tambiah, he is sensitive to the influence of early tradition on later developments; and, indeed, because of his training, he is often able to establish clear causal connections where none had been thought to exist. Yet Bechert's view of Theravada history is essentially linear: for him, Buddhist modernism for example, however much inspired by precedent, is a unique phenomenon, a product of our age alone.

Tambiah, on the other hand, preserves the rich ambivalence that informs Buddhist theorists themselves. He writes in his conclusion:

what to a...modernization theorist looks like a conscious reformism and reinterpretation of traditional religious ideas in order to face present-day tasks [this would not fairly represent Bechert's position] may look like still another version of purification of religion and renovation of the kingdom to the historically minded analyst who sees in the unfolding of the Buddhist polities of Asia several recurrences of an Asokan precedent closely linked to the pulsations of political process. It is not necessary to choose between the two but to combine imaginatively the study of continuities and transformations, prospective and retrospective analyses in the 'becoming' of societies that are patently historical and have rich literary traditions (Tambiah 1976:530).

In fact, Tambiah's work is imbued with an empathy for, and a delight in, the religious and cosmological thought of the Thais. The pulsations of political process refer to a tendency for central control in the empires of South-East Asia to wax and wane. This in itself is attributable to the accidents of power, and so is wholly explicable in familiar terms. He describes in these pulsations, however, the peculiarly flexible relationships between king and provincial governors, and shows that these relationships are formed on a view of the state as a mandala, with peripheral and relatively autonomous nodes arrayed around a central node. This galactic polity (originally explained by other scholars) is patterned on the macrocosm, or on the heavens, with the king at the axis mundi. Though the driving force behind change was therefore political or economic, the form of that change was largely dictated by a cosmological vision.

So far there is nothing particularly Buddhist about this theory, which is drawn ultimately from Indian Tantra. However, when the galactic polity waxes, when strong central control is re-established, it is incumbent on the king as a Buddhist dhammarāja, a 'ruler through righteousness', to purify and re-organize the Buddhist Sangha. This leads Tambiah back to the Sinhalese sources of Buddhist polity: there are at least fifteen such royal purifications recorded in the Sinhalese national chronicle, the Mahāvamsa, and these are in turn predicated on the purification carried out by the Indian emperor Asoka.

Here I shall take up the threads of an argument which Tambiah has to a large extent neglected. This notion of purification (Pali visodhana) is founded on a more pervasive principle of moral purity (Pali sīla, sīlavissuddhi) which lies at the heart of Theravāda Buddhism both as a system of spiritual training and as an elaborated world religion. The path to Nirvana, for a monk, or to better rebirth, for a layman, begins with moral purity, which is conceived as the eschewal of immoral behaviour, such as lying, stealing, improper sexual conduct, etc. The fundamental role of the Sangha in this light is to provide moral guidance - monks advise and exhort (Pali ovadanti anusāsanti) the laity, including the king. This role is moreover predicated on the Sangha's moral purity itself, as renouncers of (immoral) involvement with the world. Hence the principle of moral purity is, for Theravāda cultures, a notion autonomous and effective in its own right.

Despite this, Tambiah tends to treat purification of the Sangha rather as a restoration of the Sangha's worldly appurtenances: the reconstruction of monasteries after a war, etc. To be sure, this ambiguity, between the Sangha as a morally pure body of world renouncers and the Sangha as a national clergy, is fully present in the sources, chiefly the Sinhalese chronicle, the Mahāvamsa. Indeed, most of the Sinhalese purifications were demonstrably ineffective with respect to monastic discipline, and could be viewed as mere expressions of the king's accession to power. There is nothing to prevent an autonomous moral principle from being used to ornament the exercise of sovereignty.

I would argue, however, that the most effective reforms of Theravāda history unambiguously display the autonomy of the principle of moral purity, not because of the king's necessity to order the polity, but because of demands for moral purification that sprang from within the Sangha itself. These demands in turn originate with a fundamental difference of opinion between two parties inherently present in the Sangha. On one side stand the ascetics, for whom the moral discipline is all-important; on the other stand the clergy, the literary specialists of society, whose affections naturally lie with their lay constituency and with the needs of the polity. This distinction is enshrined in Buddhist historiography in two ways. First, the commentaries distinguish between 'book-duty' (ganthadhura) and 'meditation-duty' (vipassanādhura) as monastic careers. Second, they distinguish between 'village-dwelling' (gāmvāsī) and 'forest-dwelling' (vanavāsī) monks - the forest-dwellers being the party of meditators and ascetics. These distinctions may not apply neatly in any given case, but they identify a fundamental difference over the monks' role.

As I have argued elsewhere (Carrithers, in press) the conditions of life for the literary specialists inevitably set them at odds with the ascetics. Because of their social responsibility as teachers and as parish priests, they must live in close proximity to their constituency. They live in the village - or capital - and are of the village. This in itself tends to compromise

their strict observance of moral discipline; but furthermore they tend to become custodians or even outright owners of temple property, a circumstance which contradicts the ascetic ideal of homelessness. These conditions create a climate of opinion proper to what I have designated the village Sangha. The monks of the village Sangha are educated for a ceremonial and educational role in the village, and in fact they draw their social legitimation from that role. They therefore comprise a class of specialists in society, rather than a monastic order.

The ascetics, on the other hand, draw legitimation from their moral purity, and attempt - par excellence by withdrawing to the forest - to retain that purity as a monastic order. The precedent is fully explicit in the canon, particularly in the Cullavagga (Vin. II. IX. I.). Here the Buddha convenes a meeting of the Sangha to recite the code of discipline, which is the chief recurring ceremony of the Sangha as an order. He refuses to proceed, however, because of the presence of an 'impure monk, of filthy habits, etc.' The monk Moggallāna discovers the culprit, ejects him, and shoots the bolt behind him. It is precisely this gathering in moral purity, and the ejection of the impure, that ascetics demand at a royal purification.

The three most effective purifications, in which this vision of purity played a significant part in the motivation and shape of events, were those of Parakkamabāhu the Great of 12th century Ceylon, King Dhammaceti of 15th century Burma, and King Mongkut of 19th century Thailand. In the case of Parakkamabāhu, he purified the Sangha after consolidating his hegemony over the entire island, and the purification was part of a larger programme which included a great deal of pious building. The sources are ambiguous as to who actually initiated the reform, but it is clear that the monk Mahākassapa was responsible for its design and implementation within the Sangha. Most important, from my point of view, were Mahākassapa's associations: he was the chief elder at the noted forest hermitage Udumbaragiri. While it is impossible to reconstruct the actual climate of opinion at that hermitage, he certainly stood in a lineage of particularly strict monks, among whom many were meditators and ascetics. The reform itself had particular reference to monastic discipline, education, and property: it was aimed, in short, at correcting those abuses I have attributed to the village Sangha.

The case is even clearer for Dhammaceti of Burma. He was for many years a career monk himself before he ascended the throne. 'The Vinaya (the code of discipline) pervades Dhammaceti's.... programme for the Sangha. A reading of his Kalyani Inscription itself is necessary in order to appreciate the relentless thoroughness with which the king thought out and organized his purification'. Dhammaceti insisted on the re-ordination of the entire Sangha in the Sinhalese tradition, which was associated at that time in Burma with moral discipline and strictness and in fact with the tradition of the 'lone forest-dweller' (Ibid.:49).

King Mongkut of 19th century Thailand - a key figure in Tambiah's presentation - also began his career as a monk, at Wat Samorai in Bangkok, which was noted for its moral strictness and the pursuit of meditation. He left it to study Buddhist doctrine elsewhere, but returned to live there for seven years before he became king. His subsequent reform extended most effectively only to what became known as the Dhammayuttika Nikāya, the relatively small, strict group to which Wat Samorai belonged; but at first he attempted to apply it to the entire Sangha (See, for example, Bechert 1966-73. vol. II:189). Tambiah shows that Mongkut's concern for the proper editing and use of texts was in fact related to 'the achievement of religious purity and merit' (Tambiah 1976:211).

So far I have suggested that Tambiah's argument must be expanded to account for the reforming presence, either in the flesh, as at Wat Samorai, or as an ideal in the texts, of the morally pure ascetic Order. Yet this in fact implies a re-interpretation of his argument from the beginning. In his first chapter he founds his analysis of the relationship between Sangha and polity on the Agganna Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya in the Pali canon. Following the (superb) translators, the Rhys-Davids', he construes this as a 'Book of Genesis' - that is, as an origin myth, which present 'the Buddhist version of the origins of the world, society, and kingship.' He is clear that this myth is ironical in relation to Brahmanical theory, yet he holds that it is a serious presentation of a rival cosmology. I argue, however, that it is not only ironical, but a sustained and brilliant satire; that it is a satire not only of Brahmanical cosmology, but of Brahmanical society, including kingship; and that it expresses, in a radical form, the views of the original Sangha of world-renouncers, who are concerned entirely with moral purity and spiritual cultivation.

First, I will summarize Tambiah's argument concerning the myth. It describes the gradual decay of mankind from pure undifferentiated beings living on radiance, to sexually differentiated toilers in the fields. Every step in this gradual decay is brought about by a moral fault. The first fault was greed: the surface of the earth congealed from the primeval chaos, and it formed a substance as tasty as butter and honey. A being tasted it, and conceived greed. This brought about the decay of the beings' self-luminance. Later, they began to be differentiated in physical beauty, and the earth became solid. Eventually fragrant rice appeared in unlimited supply; but sexual differentiation appeared, and with it, lust. The lazy began to hoard rice, and it no longer appeared spontaneously, but had to be planted. With this land ownership appeared, and therefore crime. So the people selected the 'handsomest, the best favoured, the most attractive, the most capable' and asked him to be king. This is the foundation of society. Then the castes formed: first the khattiyas (nobles), then the Brahmins, and so forth.

In contrast stand the monks, who, out of contempt for the world go into homelessness, thus, in Tambiah's diagram, returning to the moral purity whence mankind had evolved. [The concluding statement of the myth', he writes, 'confirms that (the king and the monks) are the two central personages. The king is the mediator between social disorder and the social order; the [monk] is the mediator between home and homelessness.....(ibid:15). The concluding statement is this:

The Khattiya is best among this folk
Who put their trust in lineage.
But one in wisdom and in virtue clothed
Is best of all among spirits and men.

Tambiah therefore identifies the khattiya with the king. He goes on to write: 'In a nutshell this is what Buddhism as a "total social fact" is largely about...'

My analysis, on the other hand, is based on a closer view of the context of this origin myth. A full literary analysis would be too lengthy, but I will present the salient points. The sermon begins with a circumstantial account of two Brahman youths, in training to be monks, who approach the Buddha for some advice.

They are therefore leaving Brahmanical society and entering the circle of ascetics, and the sermon is particularly addressed to their station. The Buddha asks them whether they are not censured by their fellow Brahmans for joining the Sangha, and they reply that they are censured, on the grounds that Brahmans are the noblest caste, born from the mouth of the god Brahmā, while the monks are 'an inferior class...menials...the off-scourings of our kinsmen's heels.' The Buddha replies on a satirical note which sets the tone for the rest of the sermon: he says that the women of the Brahmans are known to bear children, and the Brahmans are in fact 'born from the womb' (or the sexual parts: yonijā). He then makes a point which appears throughout the canon, but which here has particular force: people of whatever caste who commit immoral deeds are to be censured by the wise, so there is no true ground on which Brahmans can be considered the best. The order of society, in short, is irrelevant to the pre-eminent moral order.

He then goes on to instance King Pasenadi of Kosala, who had lately extended his hegemony over the khattiya clan of Sakyans, the Buddha's own people. He mentions that the Sakyans must now do obeisance to the king, but that the king does obeisance to the Buddha, because the Buddha represents the moral order (dhamma). The satirical tone is maintained. The king, in doing obeisance, thinks: 'Is not the Buddha well born? I am not well born; the Buddha is strong, I am weak; he is attractive, I am not comely...' Not only does this re-iterate the pre-eminence of the moral order, but it pokes fun at the king, who, unlike the king of the myth, is ugly. It also adduces the conflict between the king and the aristocratic republic (or oligarchy) of the Sakyans, who are elsewhere said to have agreed to send a princess to marry the king, but sent instead a slave woman. The satire therefore glorifies the khattiyas (this is clearer elsewhere in the sermon). It may also adumbrate the resistance of the khattiya republics to the rising forces of monarchy, which were perhaps at this time already provided with a Brahmanical theory of the divine origins of kingship.

The Buddha then points out to the ex-Brahman aspirants that they may consider themselves born of the Buddha's mouth, insofar as they follow his teaching. He turns then to the myth, which is full of false etymologies or, better, puns. For example, when the savoury scum on the earth disappears in the course of evolution, the beings wailed: 'alas for the savour, also for the savour.' (aho rasam! aho rasam!) In these days therefore, when men taste a good flavour, they cry, 'Ah the savour of it, the savour of it!' (Also aho rasam.) 'They do but follow an ancient primordial saying, not recognizing the significance thereof.' This probably reflects on Brahmanical tastes for constructing etymologies to bolster their cosmology; and it may also imply the monks' wise renunciation of sensual pleasures.

At the end of the myth the origins of society are explained in a rash of puns. The name of a legendary king, Mahāsammata, who was appointed by divine choice in Brahmanical accounts, is glossed as 'elected by the people' (mahājana sammato). The second expression to arise was khattiya, glossed as 'lord of the fields' (khettānam pati). The Brahmans fare very poorly. They went to the forest to meditate, and 'put away' (bāhenti) evil and immoral customs. So far they are praised: but many were unable to stand it, so they came to the villages and began writing books - the Vedas. Hence village-dwelling Brahman scholars, called ajjhayakā, originated as 'non-meditators' - a-jhayakā.

At the end of the sermon the Buddha praises the person, of whatever caste, who leaves the lay life, practices the Buddha's advice, and attains Nirvana. There are thus two objects of satire in the sermon, which are contrasted with the ideal of the spiritual

life. The first is the Brahmins, who are replaced by the khattiyas at the head of society. The second is the Brahmanical social order itself, including kingship, which is irrelevant to the chief Buddhist principle of human life, morality based on wisdom. The concluding verse is therefore to be glossed: 'Of those who put their confidence merely in social distinctions (gotta-patisarino) the Khattiya is best; but one replete with wisdom and virtue is truly best among gods and men.'

This argument by no means refutes the bulk of Tambiah's work. It does show, however, that the insistence on moral purity is both chronologically and logically prior. It is chronologically prior in that it emanated from a circle of committed world-renouncers - I see no reason to doubt that it is basically the Buddha's word - which must have preceded the circle, closer to the seats of power, which began to forge a positive Buddhist theory of the polity. It is logically prior, in that the infusion of moral responsibility into notions of kingship is only one case of what Gananath Obeyesekere has called 'ethicization' in Buddhist cultures. Tambiah's own material in Buddhism and the Spirit Cults, for example, demonstrates that moral dualism, in the form of merit and demerit, is the primary axis around which Thai village religion is organized. Indeed, it is the simplicity and general applicability of this principle which created Buddhism's success as a proselytizing world religion.

It is nevertheless important to bear in mind the extent to which the idea of monastic purity actually informs Buddhist life. Present-day Ceylon affords a fine test case. After national independence in 1947, and in the light of the 2500th anniversary of Buddhism in 1956-7, cries for Sangha reform went up throughout the island. In the pluralistic, democratic society which was the legacy of the British, however, there was no legitimating authority which could carry out such a reform, so the parties of reform monks withdrew into relative obscurity, and they do not now play a very active part in religious politics. Walpola Rahula, a distinguished monk with experience of both asceticism (his teacher was a remarkably strict figure) and public religious life in Ceylon, said, 'I suppose the forest monks might have some effect of society' (his emphasis; in a talk at Oxford in 1976). This studied pessimism reveals how limited an effect the passive religious ideal of moral discipline might have.

The forest-dwelling monks are nevertheless the object of considerable lay piety, and are supported by laymen throughout the island. They retain some optimism as to their effect on society, though they perhaps influence the quality of private behaviour rather than the conduct of public life. Their case was put to me by one of their leading lights, a monk who had founded a group of meditating monks, and had guided them firmly toward spiritual cultivation and renunciation of the world. My field notes record that he was lying in hospital in the city of Galle one evening when one of his chief lay supporters came to visit him. The layman averred that he was very happy to support the hermit monks, but he supposed that they did not do much for society. The monk raised himself up on one elbow, pointed out the window at a street lamp, and said: 'Do you see that street-lamp, sir? What does it do? It goes nowhere, does nothing, it merely stands there. But would you say we need it or not, sir? We need it. You can't walk in the street without it. We monks are like that street-lamp. We shed light in the world. The world, you know, is a dark place. It is difficult to know which way to turn. But the monks are there to show the world which way to turn. If we behave well, sir, if we keep our moral discipline, then the world can go along in our light.'

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