

REVIEW ARTICLE

ÉLITIST ANTIRATIONALISM
AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTELLECTUALISM:
TWO STYLES IN WRITING THE HISTORY OF BUDDHISM

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RICHARD GOMBRICH, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1988. x, 237 pp., Bibliography, Index. £20 / £7.95.

DAVID SNELGROVE, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan Successors*, London: Serindia Publications 1987. xxiii, 526 pp., Bibliography, Indexes Maps, Plates. £30.00.

THESE two books form a pair of complementary opposites. Both are the result of mature reflection and research over many years. Between the two of them, they cover a large part of the historical and geographical distribution of Buddhism (the main exception is East Asia). One book is thin, the other fat (appropriately the fat one is on Mahayana, 'Buddhism of the Great Way'). Gombrich's slim volume calls itself a social history and adopts a contextual approach, subtly outlining the social factors and other religions which influenced the development of Theravada Buddhism. His presentation of Theravada doctrine is brief and untechnical. Snellgrove's book, by contrast, mentions details of Buddhism's Indian background only in passing (even though it plays a large role in his explanation of religious change), and his exposition of the much more complex Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist doctrine and ritual takes up more than half the book. Unlike Gombrich,

Snellgrove gives many extensive quotations from Buddhist scriptures and other original sources.

Whereas Gombrich's work is inspired by his own anthropological fieldwork in Sri Lanka, Snellgrove, though by no means an armchair scholar, once wrote an attack on Fűrter-Haimendorf's attempt to write about Tibetan Buddhism among the Sherpas while knowing neither the Sherpas' own dialect nor classical Tibetan (Snellgrove 1966). Clearly subsequent work has not impressed Snellgrove either, for no anthropological works are mentioned in his book. None the less, anthropologists will no doubt be happy to endorse his vigorous rejection of humanist, rationalizing interpretations of Buddhism.

Snellgrove's *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* falls into two parts although there is inevitably some overlap between them: the first 300 pages deal with developments of the Buddhist doctrine from its beginnings until the thirteenth century in Tibet, while the following 200 pages describe the historical and institutional development of Buddhism in India, Central Asia, Nepal and Tibet (the rest of the book is taken up with some excellent plates, a bibliography and an index). What is new, unusual and highly welcome in Snellgrove's presentation is that nearly two-thirds of his exposition of doctrine focuses on Tantric Buddhism, which in standard surveys of Buddhism is usually passed over with a few remarks expressing the author's distaste. His numerous quotations are either original translations or else have been checked for accuracy. He does not, however, present Buddhism entirely in its own terms. He quite properly applies historical criticism to the sources to establish chronology and connections, and he deftly separates the anachronisms introduced by later accounts, on which one must rely, from what can be accepted as reliable reporting. There can be no doubt that *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* will remain a standard reference book on an extremely difficult subject for a very long time.

In spite of its virtues, however, I remain somewhat disappointed by the book. The main limitation as I see it is Snellgrove's attitude to the Buddhist laity and to the general context of Buddhist practice. Both Snellgrove and Gombrich might be considered intellectualist in their approach to Buddhism in that they take seriously the ideas expressed in its numerous scriptures. They are, however, intellectualist in very different ways. Snellgrove refers to the 'fundamental mystical experience, which is the *raison d'être* of all later Buddhist developments' (p. 13), and he believes that the 'main tenets of [Buddhism] have remained unchanged over the centuries' (p. 28) in spite of the considerable and obvious differences in the manner of their presentation. In allowing Tantric Buddhism, with its ritual and mysticism, its proper place in the study of Buddhism, Snellgrove has certainly escaped the rationalist bias of so many interpreters of Buddhism. Yet he retains an intellectualist and élitist point of view, since he regards all routinized interpretations of Buddhist texts and all lay or unorthodox practice as uninteresting deviations on the part of the worldly, the simple-minded or the 'eccentric' (his description of the yogin Mar-pa (p. 493)). He remarks that 'to give an account of any world religion within the terms of the limited understanding of the majority of its adherents would be an unrewarding task, leaving little to be said' (p. 511).

Thus although Snellgrove is not intellectualist in his chosen subject-matter (the Tantras) or in the content he ascribes to it, he is deeply so in method. He admits that he has not dealt at all with the way Tibetan Buddhists use their Tantric scriptures as a liturgy (pp. 277, 510), but has instead surveyed their meaning for different elite practitioners in the period of their origination. All developments in Buddhism are ascribed to the endogenous working-out of ideas by spiritual seekers (sometimes under the influence of an unanalysed Indian background). In spite of chapter titles such as 'Political and Social Factors', the wider resonances or functions of religious ideas are not considered. Although we are frequently told that all Tibetan monasteries follow the monastic code of the Mūlasarvāstivādins, nowhere is any indication given of how this works in practice, or how monasteries are organized.

A small example of this unconcern with the wider context occurs in his discussion of the cult of Avalokiteśvara in Nepal (pp. 373-4). He remarks that 'later Nepalese tradition confused the cult of Avalokiteśvara with that of the Nāth Yogin Matsyendra'. He fails to note that this 'confusion' was a natural theological connection to make (Avalokiteśvara has been closely related to Śiva, of whom Matsyendra is considered an incarnation, from the moment he appeared in South Asian history). Not only that: this identification had very obvious political purposes, relating to the rise of the Hindu dynasty of Gorkha, whose tutelary saint, Gorakhnāth, was the guru of Matsyendra.

A second example of a lack of sociological thinking is more central. This refers to the important question of the place of monasticism and celibacy in Tantric Buddhism. Snellgrove himself insists on regarding as unorthodox those teachers who place little importance on celibacy. This is somewhat paradoxical. While he rejects the later monastic traditions' liturgical and routinized use of the Tantric scriptures, he accepts their attitude to the *practice* of the wandering *yogins* who produced them and took them seriously. Thus he regards those who followed the Tantras literally as unorthodox, while those who came later, accepted them as their highest scriptures and reinterpreted them as 'merely symbolic', he considers misguided.

Although some Buddhologists have been reluctant to accept this, it now seems clear that the latest Buddhist Tantras were Hindu (more precisely Śaivite) in origin (see Sanderson 1985: 214 n. 106 and 216 n. 134). None the less, the important point is that they were and are accepted as authentically Buddhist by all Tibetan Buddhists and (traditionally) all Nepalese Buddhists. What Buddhist teachers in India had argued about was who could practise them, and what that practice involved (for example, whether sexual yoga was to be taken literally or simply visualized). Very briefly, one can imagine that powerful institutions at the centre of Tibet favoured monastic celibacy and chastity and its concomitant discipline as a method of increasing control, whereas the institutions of kin-based and more peripheral areas were more tolerant of married lamas and of the more literal interpretations of Tantras which justified them. Snellgrove dismisses the term 'married monk' as a contradiction in terms. In doing so, he is taking up a

Buddhist position, albeit a common and often dominant one, and he prejudices what particular Buddhists themselves might have to say on the matter.

If one posits a perpetual tension between wandering teachers and a more central, controlled monastic hierarchy in this way, one can perhaps answer the question why there are so many Tantric scriptures. Snellgrove raises this question at the end of his book, in wondering why the Tibetan translators of Indian Buddhism should not have been satisfied with one Tantra alone. He can only answer that numerous Tantras 'happened to exist' (p. 509). The politically acephalous conditions of the periphery, both in India and later in Tibet, were perfect breeding grounds for new scriptures precisely because there was no effective authority to prevent them being composed and propagated. Perhaps this picture is too simple, but the point is that Snellgrove never even attempts to pose it in terms such as these.

Snellgrove's book thus raises the difficult question of whether Tantric Buddhism can be understood by concentrating purely on the Tantras themselves. These scriptures do not relate moral tales or exemplary prophecies. They often comprise an ill-organized assortment of ritual and yogic speculations and visualizations which legitimate meditational, ritual and mystic traditions. One might well argue that the real heart of the tradition can only be approached by texts which are closer to actual practice, namely ritual digests and handbooks; these Snellgrove never discusses.

It is perhaps unfair to criticize Snellgrove for not doing something he did not set out to do. It has to be said, however, that in presenting a vast compendium he has not made it easy for his readers. The crucial fact that Tantric Buddhism did not replace Mahayana Buddhism but became an esoteric and privileged path *within* it, is hidden away by Snellgrove in an *en passant* remark at the bottom of page 283.

Gombrich's *Theravada Buddhism* is a very different book: short, non-technical, a pleasure to read, but none the less scholarly. His view of the heart of Buddhism is rather different to Snellgrove's: 'a painstaking practicality training a sensibility to understand suffering and thus to escape it' (p. 89). Gombrich does not treat Buddhism as a disembodied idea or mystical insight but asks how it was institutionalized and reproduced, and how those forms changed over millennia. He puts the Buddha himself in context in a chapter entitled 'Gotama Buddha's Problem Situation'; and in the following chapter the Buddha's critique of Brahmanical religion is presented in a genuinely original way.

Theravada Buddhism jumps from the ancient India of Asoka to medieval and modern Sri Lanka. No attempt is made to describe the coexistence of Theravada with other schools and with Mahayana Buddhism in India; nor is any attempt made to cover Theravada countries other than Sri Lanka, to assess, for example, whether the same kinds of relationships between king, laity and monks existed there. What Gombrich has sought to explain—and this he does admirably—is religious change: the changes involved in establishing Buddhism as a going concern after the death of the Buddha himself, the changes consequent on Buddhism being established in

Sri Lanka, and the changes occurring in the modern period. For the latter he draws on his own joint fieldwork with Gananath Obeyesekere (reviewed above by Jonathan Spencer) and describes the emergence of what he calls Protestant Buddhism with its three Sri Lankan characteristics of fundamentalism, rationalism and the use of English. He also provides an anthropological analysis of why some Sinhalese have adopted the Western stance on their own religion, the rejection of which Snellgrove takes as his starting-point.

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