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Editorial

Richard Gombrich

During my lifetime two publications stand out as contributions to our understanding of early Buddhism which in my opinion will for all time rank as milestones. One is the article by Joanna Jurewicz “Playing with fire: the *pratīyasamutpāda* from the perspective of Vedic thought” (*Journal of the Pali Text Society* 26, 2000, pp.77-103); the other is a book which came out earlier this year, *The Foundation History of the Nuns’ Order* by Anālayo (*Hamburg Buddhist Studies* 6, 2016). Jurewicz’s article was preceded by relevant articles on Vedic ideas and followed by a book, *Fire and Cognition in the R̥gveda* (Warsaw 2010). Though the book is not about Buddhism, the review by László Fórizs, published below, both starts and ends by indicating its importance for Buddhology, while Jurewicz’s discoveries have rarely been reviewed or taken into account by scholars of Buddhism, so I have thought it sensible to publicise them through this journal.

Jurewicz’s work deserves to be understood and followed up by a wide public; Anālayo’s new book is aimed at an even wider audience, and since it is less technical it may achieve the fame it deserves. One can hardly deny that one of the Buddha’s greatest achievements was to preach human equality. One can argue that through his doctrine of rebirth he preached the equality -- in the sense of equal value -- of all living beings, and the capacity of every one of them to attain Enlightenment. However, what is bound to concern us humans most is that he preached the equality of all human beings, regardless of social status (e.g., caste), age or gender. (In those more innocent days, nationality or ethnicity he never even mentioned.) The Buddha’s followers are justly proud of his egalitarianism; and historians can observe how it has indeed played a considerable part in allowing Buddhism to spread across the globe and to capture and retain the allegiance of a wide range of populations.

However, there is one conspicuous fly in the ointment. According to the ancient texts – specifically to the canonical Vinaya – the Buddha was extremely reluctant to permit the foundation of an Order of Nuns, and when he had finally been persuaded to allow it, he did so on condition that nuns follow some extra disciplinary rules which made clear their subordination to monks; he also predicted that as a result of this concession, his teaching (the Sāsana) would endure on earth for only half as long as would otherwise have been the case. Even though he said nothing to suggest that women were less capable than men of attaining Enlightenment, he thus seemed not to be exempt from the view, so widespread in human societies, that males must retain the upper hand -- even within the Saṅgha.

Even though there are many passages in the Canon (as Anālayo has often pointed out) in which the Buddha has said that the community of Buddhists must include nuns and laywomen just as it does monks and laymen, Buddhist traditions throughout the world have followed the principle, which they claim goes back to the Buddha himself, that nuns have less authority than monks. Indeed, in the Theravāda tradition and in Tibet they have so interpreted the rules for the ritual of ordination that for many centuries now there can be no Buddhist nuns at all, in the strict sense, and conservative opinion remains that none can be created – a view which in some countries is even enforced by the state. In taking this view they not only rely on the misogynistic tradition just mentioned, but also ignore the Buddha’s clear admonition that clinging to ritual forms (*sīla-bbata-parāmāso*) is one of the three main fetters that bind us to *saṃsāra*. This denial of equal religious rights to women is an enormous handicap to Theravāda Buddhism in the modern world, where many women are no longer prepared to put up with this kind of nonsense. It goes very far towards explaining why in most of the world Theravāda is lagging ever further behind the other Buddhist traditions; it also gives the whole of Buddhism a bad name. It has always been the case that people’s behaviour often fails to live up to their stated ideals, but in today’s conditions hypocrisy and outmoded prejudices are widely publicised, so that anyone who cares about the condition of Buddhism has to admit that the Buddhist treatment of women is often a disgrace.

Anālayo’s book proves once and for all that for anyone who claims to follow the Buddha there is no justification for this failure to treat women as men’s equals. The book offers a lifeline to those who say that if Buddhism is to have a future, it must have a change of heart and allow women to play a major part, perhaps even the leading part, in its reform. He shows that the texts betray

a gradual building up of a narrative which belittles the role of nuns, and in particular creates an account of the foundation of their Saṅgha which cannot reflect historical reality, because it conflicts with other, persuasive, evidence.

This is not the place to attempt a detailed summary of Anālayo's arguments; I intend to publish a proper review of the book in the next number of this journal. In his brief "Introduction" Anālayo says that he has "critically examined theories proposed by other scholars", "concluding that their failure to provide a satisfactory explanation is in part due to not taking into account all relevant canonical accounts." What this mainly means is that while Anālayo is first and foremost an expert on the Pali Canon (in my opinion surely as great an expert as anyone alive), he has also mastered the Chinese into which the early Buddhist texts were translated from Indian languages, so that he has at his command the many variant versions of texts which most of us can read only in Pali – or indeed in modern translations from the Pali. By scrupulously reading all variant versions of an account, and drawing conclusions from the differences between them, he builds up his story of how misogynists tampered with the original material.

I have stated the matter more bluntly than he does: misogyny does not appear in his index. Besides, he is careful to state: "[M]y intention is not to reconstruct what actually happened on the ground in ancient India, which in view of the limitation of the source material at our disposal would anyway be a questionable undertaking. Instead, my intention is to reconstruct what happened during the transmission of the texts that report this event. In short, I am not trying to construct a history. I am trying to study the construction of a story."

He is being too modest; no one should be misled by this disclaimer. His research shows that what the texts claim cannot be true, and that its incompatibility with what else we know about the Buddha makes it utterly implausible. Besides this, the precise details (unknowable as they are) of what actually happened pale into insignificance. In sum: there is no convincing evidence that the Buddha was reluctant to have a *bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, but quite the contrary.