

Editorial

Richard Gombrich

In my Editorial to vol. 2, I pointed out that “more than half the pages are written by people who do not hold academic posts.” The same turns out to be true of vol. 4. (I trust that Rey-Sheng Her will forgive me for massaging away the fact that he holds a part-time position at Tzu Chi University: it is not what he mainly does.) Here I wish to draw particular attention to three contributions, all of which say something new and important, making real additions to our knowledge of Buddhism.

I think that any reader can see for themselves that “The Silent Mentors of Tzu Chi” is a remarkable article. It is remarkable firstly in being both a primary and a secondary source. It records the historical background to donating one’s body for dissection by medical students; I should record that I had to shorten this first part of the article. It then gives us a full and vivid account, much enriched by interview material, of how this practice has been developed in Tzu Chi; and the whole is further enhanced by the comments of the author, himself a prominent member of Tzu Chi.

Rey’s article is uplifting. That by Suren Rāghavan is deeply depressing. Here we overlap with journalism – and Suren has indeed worked as a journalist – for he is recording the activities of a new movement which 3 months ago, when he started writing, hardly anyone outside Sri Lanka had heard of, while now more news, much of it lurid, is appearing on the Internet every day. But his article is far from ephemeral. He adds to his report of ongoing events a profound analysis of their background and current context, leading to a chilling warning of where they seem to be heading.

The article by Brett Shults could hardly be more different, for it deals in painstaking detail with facts which have been available for over two thousand years – but not adequately understood. “Hidden in plain sight”, as he says, in a famous text in

the Pali Canon, is evidence that the composer of the text was able to record what two young brahmins said to the Buddha, using technical vocabulary of professional sacrificial priests. On the back cover of my book *What the Buddha Thought* I wrote: "Since many of the Buddha's allusions can only be traced in the Pali versions of surviving texts, the book establishes the importance of the Pali Canon as evidence." Here is as striking and convincing a case as any yet recorded.

Much of my Editorial to the first volume of this journal was devoted to deploring the current lack of scholarly work on the Buddha himself, a lack which is largely due to the dogma that we cannot know anything about him. I explained how stupid this is, and I would urge readers to look again at what I wrote. But I now think that perhaps I understated my case!

I have recently had an article rejected by a well known learned journal on the recommendation of an anonymous reviewer. Standard procedure. I have however been sent the whole of the reviewer's report and it gives high praise to much of the article. It is evident that the recommendation to reject it is mainly based on my assumption that we know what the Buddha taught, for which the reviewer accuses me of presenting no arguments (he/she presents no arguments either), though I do in fact refer the reader to *What the Buddha Thought*.

This lazy, slapdash scepticism has alas become common in Buddhist studies. It has reached the level of censorship: anything that talks about the Buddha's ideas as really his must if possible be denied publication; the contrary evidence is never considered. The many whose minds are closed will not read Brett Shults' article; but this will not prevent its value from being recognized long after we are all dead.

This incident raises even wider issues. In order to gain official recognition (and hence funding), academic journals must now use "double blind refereeing": in theory, both authors and referees are anonymous. Very often it is obvious who has written an article, particularly in a small field like ours, so it is only the referees who are truly anonymous. This demands a high standard of integrity. If a referee misrepresents what is in the article, they can harm the author without fear of redress – for it is most unlikely that anyone will ever check what they have written.

While editors cannot check everything, they too bear a responsibility. If the article is said to have great merits but some flaws, the editor should see what can be done to remedy the flaws, not throw out the baby with the bathwater. But there is also something more fundamental. If it can be seen that the alleged flaws are matters on which scholars disagree, it is the editor's clear duty to publish what the

author wants to say, even if it is not his/her own view, rather than take sides with the reviewer.

Unless unfashionable or unorthodox views can be published where they can be widely read and criticized, a field will stagnate. It will also be extremely dull. Nowadays governments, at least in the West, are constantly cutting support for Buddhist studies, and the field is shrinking so much that it is hard to recruit new blood. Some areas, notably Pali studies, could even be called moribund. Yet intellectual standards are so low that it is hard to argue that they deserve better.

In the unlikely event that I ever have a tombstone, I hope it will read: “The best available hypothesis is that the body of Richard Gombrich lies here, but if anyone has evidence or argument to contest this, let them make it known.”