

***Reflections on Buddhist Social Philosophy.* By Laksiri Jayasuriya. 2014. Colombo. S. Godage & Brothers (PVT) Ltd. ISBN 9789553050731.**

This book makes an important contribution to what, as Jayasuriya himself observes, has been a relatively overlooked area of Buddhist studies. In bringing together a collection of essays on Buddhist social questions, such as its relationship to politics, statecraft and war, Jayasuriya indicates how Buddhist thought remains useful for resolving issues generated by the modern world. He argues that questions pertaining to Buddhist social philosophy cannot be adequately answered in isolation from the Buddhist stance on metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and soteriology. The author's long academic career in the social sciences, his sustained intellectual interest in Buddhism, and his Sri Lankan heritage render him well-equipped to evaluate the complexities of the Buddhist attitude to ethics, particularly the ethics of war.

There are five chapters in total. Chapters one and two focus, respectively, on establishing Buddhism's intellectual value in the modern world and on arguing that the methodologies and ethical concerns of secular/ scientific humanism and Buddhist humanism are remarkably similar. The remaining three chapters are concerned with 'engaged' Buddhism: the application of Buddhist principles and values to the resolution of social/ political problems.

In the first chapter Jayasuriya questions the extent to which the more intellectually developed aspects of Buddhist discourse could prove useful in what he terms the 'Asian Century' - i.e. the 21st century, which, he anticipates, will be dominated by the political power and economic growth of China and India. In his opinion, the two dominant features of modern times are: (i) a 'rampant and growing' anti-intellectualism, associated with religious fundamentalism, and (ii) the increase of greed and selfishness. Unfortunately, due to a lack of evidence, his justification for thinking of these vices as *dominant* is not especially clear. While *creationist* theorists may be propagating anti-scientific ideas, more statistical evidence would be needed to show that anti-intellectual trends in general were 'rampant and growing'.

On the other hand, he does provide a robust argument as to why thinking through contemporary social issues from a Buddhist perspective should be helpful. He considers that commitment to rationalism and empiricism is shared by descendants of the European Enlightenment and by Buddhists alike. A further similarity can be found in their unequivocal emphasis on *humanist* values. Jaya-

suriya suggests that the spiritual and social success of the ‘Asian Century’ will depend on the adoption of rational and empirical approaches to the sciences, both physical and social, and of humanist ethical values. With support from canonical sources, such as the *Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta*, MN 27, Jayasuriya argues that the Buddhist tradition has unswervingly advocated empiricism as the means of acquiring knowledge. Although, compared with other religions, the Buddhist epistemological approach may be more attractive in that the Buddha repeatedly advises his followers to test the truth of what he says against experience and evidence, as in the *Kālāma Sutta*,¹ AN 3.65, Jayasuriya over-estimates the extent to which Buddhism and modern science are comparable. For example, he states that “Buddhism stands unique among the mainstream religions of the world in that it sees no [such] qualitative difference between a scientific and religious world view” (p.22).

In concluding his first chapter Jayasuriya claims that the code of ethical conduct arising from a Buddhist view of morality “is both pragmatic and utilitarian” (p.38). This statement is surprising. What does he mean? A distinctive characteristic of Buddhist ethics is that the moral quality of an action can largely, and primarily, be decided by determining the intention (*cetanā*) of the agent. Buddhist ethics, therefore, is not usually described as utilitarian. Whereas the one system evaluates an act by the mental processes preceding it, the other grounds its evaluation in the outcomes achieved. Of course, this is not to say that the importance of securing good consequences is absent in Buddhist thought. Buddhists are not unfamiliar with the idea of negligence (i.e. the possibility of acting from excellent intentions but producing dreadful consequences). To describe Buddhist ethics as utilitarian suggests that an action is right *because* it produces good consequences, but in Buddhism an act is right when motivated by good intention. Actions performed with good intention will *usually* also have good consequences, provided they are combined with intelligence.

Further, it would have been helpful for Jayasuriya to clarify what he means by his use of the word ‘pragmatic’. If he means that the Buddhist ethical code is designed to resolve ‘real world’ problems, then this conclusion is supported by the Pāli texts. However, another, more philosophically technical, meaning of the word is employed by proponents of pragmatism, as developed by such philoso-

¹“Come Kālāmas, do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures... But when, Kālāmas, you know for yourselves ‘These things are unwholesome’... then you should abandon them.”

phers as William James and John Dewey. Those thinkers claim that the truth of a proposition relies upon its functionality. The Buddha, unlike the pragmatists, held a proposition to be true on grounds other than its usefulness. Buddha thought that ascribing to his ethical ideology and believing in his doctrines is useful *because* they are true, and not the other way around.

Chapter two develops the idea that Buddhist humanism, like secular humanism, constitutes a powerful force against the emergent trends of anti-intellectualism and selfishness. The writings of Bertrand Russell, a pioneering figure in the revision of social/ ethical norms in the 20th century, are cited extensively. The aim of the chapter is to assess how far these two varieties of humanism are congruent, asking whether Russell's criticisms of Abrahamic religions apply to Buddhism. Russell's philosophical objections to religions purporting to prove the existence of God (through cosmological, teleological and moral arguments) are not applicable to Buddhism for the obvious reason that the Buddhist *religion* does not posit the existence of a supreme deity. Russell's objection to belief in the afterlife takes two forms: an intellectual and a moral. In the first place, he argues that there is insufficient evidence susceptible to reasoned scrutiny in support of the belief. On this count the Buddhist theory of rebirth is also subject to Russell's criticism. Secondly, Russell holds that belief in the afterlife has resulted in a pre-occupation with personal virtue at the expense of acting for the social good. Are the Saṅgha guilty of neglecting society by living a life orientated towards the goal of securing personal spiritual liberation? In brief, Jayasuriya's answer is *no*. He argues that concern for one's own liberation and concern for the good of society are mutually dependent. He relies on the *Sallekha Sutta*, MN 8, for canonical support of this view: it is stated "that one who is himself sinking in the mud should pull out another who is sinking in the mud is impossible; that one who is not himself sinking in the mud should pull out another who is sinking in the mud is possible". In other words, concern for one's own spiritual development is a pre-requisite for anyone wishing to assist the spiritual growth of others. Russell disagreed. Instead, he was convinced that "the Buddhist priesthood – as it exists, for example, in Tibet – has been obscurantist, tyrannous, and cruel in the highest degree".²

Although Jayasuriya's strategy of comparing Buddhist social ethics with Russell's humanism may initially perplex the reader (why *justify* Buddhism thus?), it is helpful to remember that as a champion for thinking through social ethics

²Bertrand Russell, *Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?* (Routledge: Oxon, 2005), 21.

without recourse to religion, Russell succeeded. Perhaps, therefore, Jayasuriya's pouring of Buddhist humanism into the mould of Russell's secular humanism should be interpreted as illustrating that the revision of social/ ethical norms is possible and is now needed, given the growth of selfishness for which he holds 'post-industrial capitalism' responsible.

In chapter three Jayasuriya notes that the emphasis placed on understanding the causes of things is common to both Buddhism and the scientific West. From this, Jayasuriya draws a very interesting, and provocative, conclusion: "What this signifies is that there is no qualitative difference between the rational empiricism of the western scientific discourse and the Buddhist metaphysic" (p.60). Whether such a conclusion is warranted is highly questionable. The fact that both Buddhism and modern science share an interest in causes does not render them qualitatively identical. Much more by way of argument would need to be added to make this view convincing. Also, how would the Buddhist use of the Tetralemma (affirmation, negation, both affirmation and negation and neither affirmation nor negation of a proposition) in answering metaphysical questions square with modern scientific discourse?

The purpose of this chapter is to refute the suggestion, made by Toynbee, Weber and others, that Buddhism, because it is world-renouncing, is steeped in individualism and is divorced from the realities of social life. Instead, the social dimensions of Buddhist ethics are shown to have been present from the time of the Buddha himself. 'Engaged' Buddhism, he argues, is not a new phenomenon. Rather, the principles, and even some of the practices, of engaged Buddhism are *latent* in all forms of Buddhism. Each part of the eight-fold path attests to the idea that an individual has moral duties towards the community. For although it is by following the eight-fold path and internalizing the truth of impermanence, suffering and insubstantiality that the *individual* is liberated, it should not be forgotten that following the eight-fold path necessitates some *social* interaction. Where the content of the eight-fold path indicates that the Saṅgha has social responsibilities, there are canonical texts (e.g. *Sigālovāda Sutta*, DN 31) which confirm that the laity should fulfil their social/ ethical duties for the sake of human welfare.

Unsurprisingly, Jayasuriya focuses on the Theravāda conception of the relationship between the individual and society. It is, however, worth remembering that the figure of the bodhisattva in the Mahāyāna traditions can play an important role in challenging the idea that Buddhism, as a religion, is exclusively inward-looking and egocentric. Although the notion of altruism may, strictly

speaking, be precluded in a system which denies the ultimate reality of the self, because the very concept relies on the validity of distinguishing between *self* and *other*, Mahāyāna thinkers have persistently stressed the need to extend compassion (e.g. Śāntideva).

Chapter four uses the foregoing conclusions to investigate Buddhism's relationship to politics and statecraft. Jayasuriya confines his enquiry to an historical and text-based analysis of the Buddhist attitude to politics, rather than undertaking case studies. The Buddha's rejection of the traditional ordering of society (in the caste system) and his preference for smaller tribal oligarchies over large monarchical kingdoms is, Jayasuriya argues, partly explained by the fact that the Buddha was living through a period of considerable social and economic change. Such change was made possible by agricultural developments, urbanization and the emergence of a new mercantile community. Some have interpreted the Buddha's rejection of the caste system as indicating a *specific* political agenda on his part. This interpretation, Jayasuriya thinks, lacks sufficient support.

However, it is argued that "the Buddhist approach to social philosophy and political governance derive from the principles and practices governing the organization of the monastic community" (p.82). In other words, we should look to the structure of the Saṅgha in attempting to gauge the Buddhist view on social and political issues. The notions of brotherhood, equality and mutual respect should be at the heart of the religious community. When disagreement arises within the community, a combination of intelligence and compassion should be used to achieve resolution. The Buddha's eventual agreement to admit women into the community indicates his commitment to equality. To argue that the Buddha advocated *democracy*, as the term is now used in the West, would be misleading. Yet, he certainly maintained that a ruler's authority was not *absolute*. Indeed, in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, DN 2, the assumption of the divine right of kings is questioned. Other texts, such as the *Aggañña Sutta*, DN 27, make clear the Buddha's belief that a healthy relationship between subjects and sovereign depends on the reciprocal fulfilment of duties.

The chapter closes by remarking that the Asokan *welfare state* (promoting the values of compassion, liberty, justice, non-aggression and tolerance) might be seen as the manifestation of an ideal Buddhist state. The legacy of Emperor Asoka has left its mark on Buddhist social theory and remains important today as an *ideal* to be striven after. The principles endorsed by Asoka perhaps influenced Nāgārjuna's *Jewel Garland of Royal Counsel* and the Ambedkar Buddhist

movement alike.

The final chapter addresses the Buddhist attitude to the ethics of war. Jayasuriya introduces the distinction made in Christian *just war* theory between *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* (i.e. the distinction between the principles governing the right to go to war and those governing the conduct of war). In contrast with Christianity, for which the idea of a Holy war can be legitimated, Buddhism cannot justify acts of organized aggression for the purposes of proselytizing. The principle of non-violence, a basic tenet of Buddhism, is expressed in the first precept. The foundational role that this principle plays in the Buddhist ethical system explains the anti-war attitude of Buddhism. The doctrine of *ahimsā* is integral to the practices of engaged Buddhists, e.g. Thich Nhat Hanh and Ghosananda.³

Jayasuriya first turns his attention to the *jus in bello* aspect of the *just war* theory, arguing that, due to the emphasis on individual responsibility resulting from the doctrine of karma, a soldier at war must bear the full responsibility for his actions. He claims that, “moral responsibility is not overridden by any notion of ‘military necessity’ which could seriously impinge on the morality of conduct” (p.107). Therefore a soldier cannot justify the mistreatment of prisoners or the deliberate killing of innocent civilians. A soldier’s belief that he is personally accountable for his conduct in war may prevent him from inflicting disproportionate harm, but if the war has been waged by a democratically elected government, then to some degree those elected are also responsible for the methods used to secure victory.

Jayasuriya dedicates a large portion of the final chapter to assessing Buddhist *just war* thinking through the lens of the recently concluded civil war in Sri Lanka. This is certainly one of the most interesting sections in the book. Many Buddhists perceived the tactics of the Tamil rebels as constituting an “attack on the integrity of the Sinhalese nation and [this was] taken to be the just cause of the civil war” (p. 117). Rendering such an outlook compatible with the first precept is difficult, but Jayasuriya suggests that it was uncertainty about whether priority should be given to the prescription to protect the dharma, on the one hand, or, on the other, to the prohibition of violence which caused many Buddhists in Sri Lanka, including monks, to support the civil war. Sometimes, particularly in Mahāyāna traditions where the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* is used for support, Buddhists attempt to justify

³http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preah_Maha_Ghosananda Accessed 13/10/2014.

the non-observance of the precepts for the sake of dharma protection.⁴ However, the natural question to be asked is, how far can one go for the preservation of the dharma? Further, if the precepts are, in some sense, foundational to the dharma, how can one hope to protect it through contradicting it?

This book addresses key issues in engaged Buddhism and demonstrates the value of intellectual Buddhist discourse for the modern world. It is certainly an important contribution to the field, not least because it surveys the issues from a wide range of perspectives, backing up the arguments with contributions from modern scholarship and canonical sources alike. Unfortunately the book is marred by numerous typographical errors (at least five per page). There are no diacritics to indicate the correct Pāli and Sanskrit spellings. This affects the quality of the reader's experience and will undoubtedly inhibit the distribution of the work. A further point is that, though Jayasuriya does state in the preface that these essays were originally published elsewhere, the editorial work undertaken to make them suitable for publication alongside each other is of a low standard. For example, at several points the reader experiences what feels like *déjà vu*: in fact it is a case of 'copy and paste'. However, these imperfections do not detract from the fact that this is a thought-provoking book which is well worth reading.

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⁴The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* should not be confused with the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, DN 16. It is a Mahāyāna *sūtra*, preserved in an expanded version in Chinese. In Chapter 19 are told that "The Bodhisattva may have occasion to transgress against the precepts if he knows he can indeed make others possess the Mahāyāna *sūtras*... on such an occasion he may transgress the precepts" without fear of the Avīci Hell.