

BOOK REVIEWS

Richard Gombrich & Gananath Obeyesekere, "*Buddhism Transformed*"—*Religious Change in Sri Lanka*, Princeton: University Press, 1988, Pp. 16+484.

"*Buddhism Transformed*" purports to describe, analyse and interpret recent changes in the religious life of Sinhalese Buddhists. The reference of measuring change is with respect to the teaching of Buddha given in Pali canon and interpreted by the commentators culminating in Buddhaghosha (circa 5th cent. A.D) and as preserved and practised by the Sangha (monastic order) of Sinhalese, who hold the authority and responsibility for the purity of the teaching; and as practised today—largely by the laity (=common masses) and by the elite (from materialistic standards) of the society. The claims of the newer clans of Buddhist teachers and preachers is also examined here.

Buddhism was historically introduced in to Ceylon circa 250 B.C. Since then there has been a continuous interaction between Ceylon and India on various fronts; the most important in the present circumstance being that of religious, socio-economic and political ones. The publication of this book in 1988 is based on the field work done in and around 1970 and a later period. This period embryoned the ethnic civil war which erupted in 1983. During the period of survey, the traditional religion of Ceylon—namely Theravada Buddhism has been influenced and undergone a shift from its original position. Radical shifts in practice, completely contrary to the canonical rules have prevailed. Violence has taken roots in Buddhist establishments; while Non-Violence is a cardinal principle. It is noted that in 1983 war, Buddhist monks actively incited and involved themselves in violence. The role of monk, deeply involved in the Socio-Economic-Political arenas of materialistic world—"To Help change material conditions of society (Sarvodaya concept)" is against the canon prescribing "non involvement." Cultural and Religious practices that were intended to put the philosophy of Buddhism in to the common life practices of laity (who constitute the bulk of society) have undergone changes which find no support from the theoretical standpoint.

A highly disturbing feature amongst the data presented in this work belongs to the emergence of the new line of (self proclaimed!) leaders of Buddhism. Some of these leaders' aberrational thinkings know no bound; the Old Canon in Pali is questioned; rejected; misinterpreted with no reference to any linguistic principles; the old canon centuries old is condemned as 'forgery'; new Canonis "Intuitively invented by insight during meditation" though the output in such cases is noticed to be corrupted Sinhalese or Thai language. One of the leaders claims that he is the Buddha; Another leader is on the process of reviving the extinct tradition of 'women monks' comparable to the Order of Nuns in christianity; newer orders of monks are ordained at fanciful terms; newer forms of Buddha worship; creation of new myths; revival of remote past incidents clearly directed for purposes other than aiding' salvation-like Buddhist Flag/Bodhi pooja/ etc. - These are some of the highlights from the detailed bulk of data in the text.

The authors trace out the causes and sources for these changes to the following: 1. The changing conditions of society, with reference to the ancient societies whence these philosophies/religious practices were formulated to meet certain defined human needs. The changes in social conditions, resulting in the newer problems and expectations seek different solutions. The traditional solutions do undergo modifications in their structure and content, as noticed in the present state of Buddhism. Under the modern social circumstances every religion needs to make a self introspection and redefine those practices of value meant for the laity at large. If the institutions / leaders fail to discharge this responsibility, the laity will not wait for this. The changes do take place leaving the leaders to give explanations or ratifications. 2. The development and influence of 'Spirit Religion'. In contrast to philosophy which intellectualises, the emotional needs in relation to individual and social living are to be fulfilled in any religion. This is the major chunk of the religious and cultural practices prescribed for the laity at large. The growth and influence of this (called by the term spirit religion) on the main plank of philosophy is to be carefully watched / guided and controlled by the institution/leader. 3. The failure of Sangha in guiding and enforcing the influence of 'spirit religion' as above; and also the influence and interaction of other religious practices in to the stream of Buddhist practices.

The documentation of the changes in these crucial periods will be of good historic reference for future researchers in this field.

The book will be of interest to all those practitioners and preachers of religion as a vocation and for those interested in the area of education dealing with the "Place of religion and traditional/religious authority in modern society where materialistic affluence, solutions and success is the singular cause, effect and yardstick of measure" even for religious success. This book documenting the structural changes and adoptions made by the Ceylonese Theravada Buddhists in those religious practices at the mass level of society, under the interactive influence and coexistence of the Tamil Saivite Hindus from India, who constitute about 25% of the Sinhalese population, and at present involved in the ethnic war.

The authors conclude on the following lines; There is a compartmentalized coexistence of Buddhist ethical principles and religious emotions - which has a precedent in India. A severely abstract view of ultimate reality - a view that can be realised only by meditation coexisting with a belief in loving Gods. Therefore if the psychological compatibility we see between Buddhism with its ascetic quest for 'NIRVANA' and an emotional devotion to colourful Indian gods seem paradoxical, the paradox is not new. The Sinhalese saying aptly summarises the situation - "The Buddha for Refuge; the gods for Help."

Dr. B.V. Venkatakrishna

Peter N Gregory, *Sudden and the gradual - Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese thought*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1991, Pp. 474.

The present work containing ten excellent essays by scholars on the topic of *Sudden and Gradual* approaches to the concept of enlightenment in Chinese Buddhist thought, is the result of a conference in 1981.

Buddhism moved from India to China. By 1st century, the transmission had been in all earnestness. The early Buddhists at China had to understand and then adapt the Indian Buddhist doctrine in to their own ways of living and thinking. Buddhism was slowly undergoing a transmutation in to Chinese ways of thinking. On the heels of the doctrine, the practical steps which were available in the form of Indian contemplative techniques also was on the process of signification.

Chaan school took on itself the most protracted experiments at adapting Indian meditative techniques to China.

The goal being clear—Enlightenment or Buddhahood, the theories relating to the path of achieving it and the nature of experience became a topic of intellectual discourse. Sudden and Gradual were the terms that were applied not only to the nature of the experience (Enlightenment), but also used to distinguish between two different methods of training employed by the Buddha. The basic issues here relate to the following: 1. Nature of enlightenment. 2. Nature of delusion. 3. Nature of ethical and religious practices. 4. Nature of religious language. 5. Nature of expediency (upāya)

It is held that all sentient beings are already Buddhas; and, thus inherently enlightened. Therefore, Buddhahood could occur in the present life without requiring to abandon life. Sudden enlightenment means there is a more direct means of awakening this experience complex. Some hold that very complicate, individually suited intricate series of steps along a path under the guidance of a master and a series of do's and don't's are directed towards taking the individual on his journey towards the goal. This is the gradual path. The merits of each path are discussed vigorously since 8th cent. in China to this day.

The sudden teaching presented the Buddha enlightenment from the point of view of Ultimate truth; whereas the gradual teaching approached the Buddhist enlightenment in terms of conventional path.

Enlightenment is an experience of breaking through all barriers/ suddenly or slowly; and for that reason, it is, precisely ineffable. To say anything about enlightenment, is to impose structural linguistic limitation on it; Language is only one powerful, yet most inadequate means to approach it; Silence—though useful can only be interpreted within the context of a given discourse. The process to experience the enlightenment prepares; but the experience is direct and sudden. It can never be predicted or anticipated; the sense of suddenness is inevitable. This suggests that the sudden—gradual distinction is more of an intellectual terminology and pedagogy; the distinction is not particularly significant in the actual process leading to the enlightened experience.

In a world, where, the natural reality is the inequalities and differences in capabilities, both the paths are necessary. Both stances are needed to balance; that a one sided subitism can subvert practice, just as a one sided gradualism can stifle realisation; and what is crucial is the vitality of the tension generated between the two thought forces.

The above work is divided in to three parts – first part covering more of the technical discussions; the second part about the Chinese thinkers' textual presentations; the third part dealing with analogies for the above from the cultural sphere of China from the painting poetry and literary criticism. The third part is more interesting for its close commonalities – of experience of arts and of enlightenment.

After eighth century (circa), when Buddhism was almost waning in the Indian philosophical and social scenario, and new philosophical movements came in to fore, they had to address the same questions – about the enlightenment–sudden or gradual. The answers to these have also been given – in theory, in the life of many saints and sages of the period. Mysticism has its own solutions to these questions. In any case, in the Indian context, the solutions offered are supported on the authority of the Vedic and Upanishadic texts and the practices coming from the Yoga schools. This background was common for Buddha when he made his preachings and his disciples built pedantic śāstraic works to substantiate that theory. The commonality of society for Buddhism in Indian soil and the Chinese soil was the importance of the 'Family' as the most important social unit. Buddhism by its recommendations of the monastic order attacked the roots of family. So a solution to the coexistence of both orders was a concern. The Gradual Path was one of the solutions that was already well established (even at Buddha's times) in the Indian Bramhinal society by way of graduated living styles through the system of *āshramas*. This system even to this day is a living solution in India. The book with good references and index is an excellent work.

Dr. B. V. Venkatakrishna

Anne Hunt Overzee, *The Body Divine - The Symbol of the Body in the works of Teilhard de Chardin and Ramanuja*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1992, pp. xv + 218, \$ 49.95.

Anne Hunt Overzee's masterly work *The Body Divine* is a careful study of the "symbol of the body in the works of Teilhard de Chardin and Ramanuja". In the contemporary situation of dialogue between religions and comparative religious studies this work is a timely contribution of both in the field of inter-religious dialogue and comparative theology. Anne clearly says that Ramanuja is a theologian and her comparison of the body-concept in both these authors is certainly theological. Both these theologians "drew upon symbols to model their worldmaking, symbols which have a rich heritage in their respective tradition" (p. 1). This initial statement made in the introduction is well vindicated through the work.

Ramanuja and Teilhard were philosophical or theological justifications of certain lived experiences of Religion and the deep rooted convictions thereof. Ramanuja hails from a Tamil *bhakti* tradition of Alvares who sang loveliest songs about the love a personal God. Hence Ramanuja's was an attempt to defend *bhakti* (loving devotion) against the advaidic position of the supremacy of *Jnana* (wisdom) over *bhakti*. The Jesuit theologian Teilhard de Chardin was a well known paleontologist, a scientist belonging to the French Academy, deeply buried in the past history of creatures we see in flora and fauna and looking forward to their future course of evolution and its culmination in Christ. Chardin's was an attempt to synthesize religion with the world of science, especially his world of paleontology. The "body divine" becomes a meeting point of the evolutionary dynamics of matter and the display of the operation of the dynamism of the hidden spirit, a justification of his life-experience. The work focusses on the way the symbol of the divine body functions as a model of consciousness in the world views of these two authors. "In seeking to understand what 'the body of the divine' meant to Teilhard de Chardin and Ramanuja respectively, I have been involvovd in relating their use of symbolic language to their theological worldviews, and also to their didactic purposes" (p. 2). Both these authors see the 'divine body' "as a metaphor to disclose an apprehension of reality" and "as an analogical model of an integrated worldview" (p. 146).

Divided in two parts, Dr. Hunt Overzee introduces the theme of the body in the first part both in the tradition of Teilhard and Ramanuja

(chs. 1 & 2) and in their own writings (chs. 3 & 4). In the second part the author highlights the functions of the body symbol in both these authors (ch. 5). The body symbol is then portrayed as "a model of integration of consciousness" (ch. 6) and "a model for transformation of consciousness" (ch. 7). In the concluding chapter (ch. 8) the body symbol is presented as "a paradigm of a conscious cosmos". It is to be noted that in this concluding chapter a brief but praiseworthy attempt is made to explain the religious insight which is often "inaccessible to the Western science until the discovery of the hologram . . ." namely : 'the whole is in the part'.

Though several studies on Ramanuja and Teilhard de Chardin individually and in comparison with one philosopher/theologian of the other cultural background have seen light of the day, yet Dr. Hunt Overzee's insight into the experiential concept of the 'body divine' in these two authors is certainly original in its approach and findings. When moved by Christian faith Teilhard sees only "one dynamism in this world, that which gathers all things to Christ" (p. 12), Ramanuja sees the Highest Person (*purusothama*), the Lord of all seated within all things and in the human heart" (p. 34). According to their respective religious vision the world becomes the body of the Word for Teilhard and of the *purushotama* for Ramanuja. "Ramanuja refers to the world being seen as the divine realm (*vibhuti*) and to Teilhard, the world becomes the divine milieu" (p. 147). For both of them it denotes "an en-lightened consciousness". The divine and the world is inextricably united. "The world is shown to belong to the divine, and the Lord to possess a universal form" (p. 93).

Smoothly weaving the expressions of the author into the text of the argument Hunt quite convincingly portrays the trend of his thinking. Here is an example: "So collectively we are making Christ' in our lives... The goal of humankind is to attain Heaven by bringing Earth to its fulfillment.' As a 'monad' of the universe, each person can become 'a function of a cosmic stream', divinising the cosmos and 'completing' God through completing the universe. (p. 52).

The book is dedicated to Klaas (Anne's husband) and all who want to 'see'. In India the sages are called *rsi*, one who sees. Ramanuja was certainly a great sage, a *maha-rsi*, and Teilhard a great visionary.

Hence the book will not only be understood but better relished if read by the awakened third eye. It is not simply the result of a rational analysis but also the outflow of a synthesizing experience of reality.

V.F. Vineeth

Bhikshu Thich Minh Chau, *The Chinese Madhyama Agama and The Pali Majjhima Nikaya – A comparative study*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasi-das, 1991, Pp. 388.

Chinese Madhyama Agama (CMA) is the Chinese translation version of the Madhyama Agama – the canon of the Sarvastivadin school of Buddhism. It is a historic fact that, about one century after Lord Buddha's parinibbana, the buddhist community was split into eighteen schools or more; Out of which the Sarvastivadin and Theravadin schools are most important. These schools have preserved a bulk of the canon.

Historically, during Lord Buddha's period, Pali and Sanskrit were the most extensively adopted languages – in society and religion. Unfortunately, the almost major part of Buddhism enshrined in sanskrit is lost. As Buddhism travelled widely away from India, the canonical teachings had to be adopted in the languages of the places wherever it spread – Chinese, Tibetan, Burmese etc; and also the interaction of the religions and customs of that locality had to be absorbed into the fold of buddhist practices.

Looking back at the original conditions from which the religion and philosophy of Buddhism emerged and it's travel in the historic times, it is extremely difficult to assert what could have been the original 'wordings and context and purport of the Master'. The shades of the meanings the words have accrued over a period of time coupled to the present conditions in which the languages of Pali and/or Sanskrit have given away their place to English as a common international and scholastic media of exchange, complicate any impartial view on the topic. Added to this, the commentators and compilers have their hand displayed clearly in complicating the situation.

It is in this background, the above work, which has the detailed scholastic comparative study of the Chinese and Pali texts is useful in enhancing our knowledge about the various phases of the development of buddhist schools. After a detailed study, the authors have very forcefully established that the Chinese madhyama agama belongs to the Sarvastivadin school of buddhism. And the Pali version belongs to the Theravadin school.

This comparative study is also of value in explaining the sources of differences in the practices of the followers of these two schools of thought which could be traced down to good old historic times – especially in significant areas like – Vegetarian food habits, monastic rules and disciplines, achievement of miraculous powers, fate... etc.

The comparative study here also yields one more interesting point – about the role played by the Worldly power, prosperity, human fallible nature in perpetuating what is liked and suppressing what is not liked – even in the spiritual realms and related practices.

The work is of reference value for the scholars wanting to know more about the Chinese Buddhism.

Dr. B. V. Venkatakrisna