

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

GREG BAILEY and IAN MABBETT, *The Sociology of Early Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2003, vii + 284 p. Index.

With *The Sociology of Early Buddhism*, Greg Bailey and Ian Mabbett have produced a tidy volume of highly readable analysis on the sociology of this religious tradition as it developed in Northern India between the fifth and third centuries BCE. Drawing extensively on texts from the Pali Canon (e.g., the Vinaya and the Dhammapada), the authors are eager to reconcile the incongruity implied in the successful social integration of an ascetic religious order of monks and nuns. To accomplish this, the book unfolds as a well supported exposition of the emerging social roles taken on by members of the Buddhist Order. Arguing that Buddhism developed during a prosperous period characterized by a convergence of urban and rural elements, Bailey and Mabbett credit Buddhism's success to the monks' ideal placement to act as a mediating influence in the areas where these elements overlapped

Helpfully, two key themes which stand in answer to the text's thesis are clearly specified in the titles of the book's parts: "Context" and "Mediation." In the first half, the authors outline the nature of the social, political, religious, and geographical environment in which the Buddha and his followers were operating. In contrast to a leading argument identified in the literature (see, e.g., André Bareau, "Le Buddha et les rois," 1993), they assert that an urban revolution—one which encroached on the wild spaces where the ascetic found retreat—was a thing of the past by the time the scriptures were first recorded. With reference to diverse sources (including authors located in the social sciences, history, and religious studies) as well as archaeological evidence, Bailey and Mabbett also critique what they see as unexamined inconsistencies in this literature (e.g., arguments that Buddhism appealed to both the alienated and the elite of society but which do not justify this apparent contradiction (see, e.g., Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism*, 1979). *The Sociology of Early Buddhism* explains the tradition's broad appeal in terms of the unique position occupied by the Buddhist peripatetic—whose wanderings exposed him or her to different places and people—to supply a culturally, politically, and economically divested insight to a population still reeling from the environmental and cosmological upset which the earlier urban revolution provoked.

The second part, "Mediation," details how the new Order facilitated its own and others' social integration. Owing to their learned reputation and

elite status, early Buddhist monks and nuns were able to assume a social standing comparable to that of the historically privileged brahmanical class. Interestingly, Bailey and Mabbett allude to the impact of the Buddha's own charisma in early conversion efforts, especially among the wealthy and influential. While Buddhism benefitted from the cultural legitimacy and the political and financial support which these associations engendered, those doctrinal differences which distinguish the Buddhist from the brahmanical tradition are strongly emphasised in the Pali Canon. These differences, aside from their intrinsic spiritual value, also helped to establish the new religion. The Buddhist commitment to detachment—the generalised proscribed response to the Three Marks of Existence (dukkha—unsatisfactoriness; anicca—impermanence; annata—not self)—ensured that lay petitioners, whoever they might be, would benefit from the disinterested advice of a monk or nun. While Buddhist teachings typically addressed the ascetic priorities of the renunciant, Buddhist monks and nuns were yet able to represent their relevance to the more worldly concerns of householders and kings.

The link between these two themes—context and mediation—demonstrates the dynamism of early Buddhism and accounts for the multiplicity of different Buddhisms which exist, then and now. The authors assert an interplay between the Buddha, Buddhist monks and nuns, and the lay people whom they serve and on whom they rely, a reciprocity which has shaped the development of the dhamma (teachings), the sangha (religious community), and the broader societies to which Buddhism has since spread.

Overall, I was impressed with the authors' manifestly sociological approach. However, I was disappointed that they neglected to provide much discussion of the differences between monks and nuns in this period. The vocation of the nun and what it may indicate about the status of women at the time would have added an important layer of analysis to this investigation. Although *The Sociology of Early Buddhism* is clearly written in relatively accessible (and occasionally witty) language, the authors do assume a certain basic knowledge of early Indian history and the Buddhist tradition. For Buddhists, scholars, or those simply inspired by His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama's recent Canadian visit, Bailey and Mabbett's book stands as worthwhile supplementary reading on this wonderful tradition.

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