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# CONTENTS

## I. ARTICLES

1. A Lajjā Gaurī in a Buddhist Context at Aurangabad  
by *Robert L. Brown* 1
2. Sa-skya Paṇḍita the “Polemicist”: Ancient Debates  
and Modern Interpretations by *David Jackson* 17
3. Vajrayāna Deities in an Illustrated Indian  
Manuscript of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*  
by *John Newman* 117
4. The Mantra “Om maṇi-padme hūṃ” in an Early  
Tibetan Grammatical Treatise by *P. C. Verhagen* 133

## II. BOOK REVIEWS

1. *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*,  
by Richard Gombrich and  
Gananath Obeyesekere (Vijitha Rajapakse) 139
2. *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early  
Indian Mādhyamika*, by C. W. Huntington, Jr.,  
with Geshe Namgyal Wangchen  
(José Ignacio Cabezón) 152

## III. NOTES AND NEWS

1. Notice of *The Buddhist Forum*  
(Roger Jackson) 163

ERRATA 164

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS 165

## II. Book Reviews

*Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*, by Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, pp. xvi, 484.

Recent social scientific investigations of Theravāda practice in South and Southeast Asian countries may have not only brought to the fore interesting information about the character of “popular” Buddhism, but also generated intriguing analyses of the contours, range and roots of the religiosity this Buddhism encompasses. Since the Pali textual corpus—the “Great Tradition” in sociological parlance—has for generations been the mainstay of Theravāda studies, there is good reason to welcome these new focusings on the long neglected “Little Tradition”—the symbolism, rituals and beliefs through which the masses of people in Theravāda countries project their religious commitments on a daily basis. Yet it is difficult to view the many social scientific analyses of “popular” Buddhism with equal enthusiasm. Frequently informed by an insensitivity to the numinous and a regrettable refusal to appreciate the richly diverse ways in which it is apprehended or reified in human life, these analyses can also be faulted for other, more specific, reasons. As they are, for the most part the work of “outsiders,” there is, for one thing, room to doubt the adequacy of the empathetic understanding they incorporate (in particular, connections between Pali canonical positions and living Theravāda practice are often overlooked or misperceived because of this), and for another, they are apt to encompass explanations and assumptions that are on occasion questionable on logical and inductive grounds. Besides, it is possible to recognize in them some unthoughtful applications of those old categories in social scientific studies of religious phenomena—taboo, black magic, white magic and the like.

These are considerations that might usefully be borne in mind in reading *Buddhism Transformed*, a notable investigation of Theravāda practice in Sri Lanka which actually seeks to “describe, analyze and interpret recent changes in the religious life of Sinhala Buddhists.” This book’s factual content is for the most part interesting and instructive, but many reservations are in order about the analyses it offers. One could, in particular, impugn several details in its evaluations of the place and spread of the worship of deities (“spirit religion”) in Sri Lankan Buddhist life, and also take issue with the whole explanatory frame epitomised in the neologism “Protestant Buddhism.” It appears, moreover, that at some levels, sceptical

reductionism tends to assume new shapes here: the authors make unmistakable moves to link meditation to possession, and also seek to interpret certain manifestations of religious observance and prayer as obsessive-compulsive acts of neurotic origin. But, before developing these critical points further, it would be instructive to outline some salient features of the investigation *Buddhism Transformed* presents.

Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka emerges here as an interestingly multi-faceted phenomenon. Organized in four parts, each of which embraces studies on several related topics, the book's initial elucidations serve to place in focus the "new religious orientation" manifested in the country. Traditional Sinhala Buddhism (identified as "the religion of a rice growing peasant society," as is Theravāda elsewhere in Southeast Asia) was, according to the authors, "a system of belief and action with a distinctive ethos." Though the basic structure of Buddhist soteriology is conceded to be still "intact" in Sri Lanka, religious practice here, they maintain, has assumed new characteristics under the impact of mainly social forces (among which population growth is viewed as "the greatest single catalyst of change"). Modernist tendencies innovatively (and conflatedly) designated as "Protestant Buddhism" (encompassing protesting reactions to political and cultural influences generated by Sri Lanka's last colonial rulers, the Protestant Christian Britishers, and also the putative imitative adoption of some of the stances of Protestant Christianity itself on the part of Buddhist leaders) are represented as one complex element in these characteristics. The authors recognize the other (which is no less so) in a range of developments in the "spirit religion"—the religiosity focused on deities seen as flourishing and spreading especially among the less privileged urban classes. These latter developments are held to entail some radical departures from old traditions of belief and, more significant, as tending to move Buddhism away from its rational and humane foundations. Indeed, the book in large part is an attempt to "characterize" this "Post-Protestant" phase in Buddhism: and its title, "Buddhism Transformed," in turn appears to derive its *raison d'être* in some notable respects from a particular estimate of the nature, roots and the spread of the religiousness projected in what is seen as this newly emerged phase in Sri Lankan Buddhist practice.

How is this religiousness oriented? What are its inspiring concerns? As is to be expected in a social scientific investigation, the answers provided to these questions are very much predicated on descriptive observations, and so cannot be adequately summarized. However, the main points are clear: deeply penetrated by

devotionalism (*bhakti*) of Hindu inspiration, the recently evolved religion of the Sinhala people is not found to be "rational," and, secondly, actually to incorporate several departures from beliefs and practices as traditionally understood. Evidence to support this conclusion is initially identified in the burgeoning "spirit religion" associated with shrines located in and around Colombo. In Nawala, Lunawa, Bellanwila and other such shrines, the religiousness in vogue is shown to involve the worship and propitiation of deities on the part of cult groups led by priests and priestesses who go into trances or become possessed; "a roaring trade in black magic" is what the authors observe, for instance, in the last place mentioned. They also find much that is striking in the deities central to the new religiousness, such as Huniyam and Kali. With demonic pasts, these increasingly propitiated deities are invested by their believers with greater capacities to help and this, it is argued, reflects the felt social needs of the expanding underprivileged classes. The authors' view of the way this religiousness centered on the worship of gods is transforming traditional Buddhist belief is detailed in especially captivating terms in their account of the practices at Kataragama. The devotionalism and expressions of cultic commitment that are seen here are represented as rather strange developments whose roots are for the most part more Hindu than Buddhist.

However, the transformation of Buddhism brought about through "Protestant Buddhism" is depicted as no less far-reaching. In fact, the authors equate its historical impact at one point to the consequences of Emperor Asoka's missions to Sri Lanka. According to them, "Protestant Buddhism" generated some characteristic attitudes: it abandoned the irenic treatment of other religions traditional to Buddhism and adopted instead a polemical stance, was fundamentalist in outlook, held that Buddhism was not a religion, but a philosophy, and depended on English-language concepts. They find these characteristic attitudes epitomized in the Buddhism preached or interpreted by a variety of Sri Lankan figures ranging from the 19th century monk-debater Gunānanda to the late university teacher of the sixties, K.N. Jayatilleke. Portrayed as a more recent "extreme case" given to chauvinistic accountings of Buddhist thought by Gombrich elsewhere (see *Theravada Buddhism, A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, London and New York, 1988, p. 196), Jayatilleke's attempt to see anticipations of positivism and empiricism in the Buddha's teachings is here taken as a "Protestant" stance (it is interesting to note that the impact of his controversial interpretative positions on certain Sri Lankan academic expositions of Buddhist doctrine is duly observed in Paul Griffiths, *On Being*

*Mindless, Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-Body Problem*, La Salle, Ill., 1986, pp. 139–140). “Protestant Buddhism” in a paradigmatic sense is identified in the life and work of Anagarika Dharmapala: a specifically Calvinist orientation is discerned in the social, moral and religious values he inculcated.

The creation or invention of tradition, it is again pointed out, is yet another source of religious change witnessed in Sri Lanka. *Buddhism Transformed* documents and analyses what are taken as several different manifestations of this notable phenomenon. Beginning with the Buddhist model of social development fostered through the *Sarvodaya* movement, the authors analyze the recent attempt to give a Buddhist orientation to the marriage ceremony, efforts directed towards instituting a female Buddhist Order, the character of the newly evolved temple ceremony, “Bodhi Puja,” and the significance of recent Sinhala myths created to Buddhicize the Kataragama temple complex. These interpretations generally serve to reinforce the book’s informing perspectives centered around “Protestant Buddhism” and “spirit religion.” For instance, the authors consider the *Sarvodaya* movement to be “rooted in the Protestant Buddhism of Dharmapala”; and “Bodhi Puja” is taken as an innovation which “covers every contingency requiring white magic for which it has been customary to use spirit religion.” Not surprisingly, the same perspectives also loom large in the analyses of representative Buddhist leaders, from Ananda Maitreya to the so-called “Sun Buddha.” In the discussions of these and other charismatic personalities a striking connection is made between meditation and possession: the “enlightenment experience” of the “Sun Buddha,” for example, is likened to the “ecstatic trance of possession.” And this, significantly, is a point the authors again broach in their concluding remarks—training in meditation, they think, can lead to “trance states very like possession.”

*Buddhism Transformed* shows in unmistakable terms the fascinating world of belief and commitment that Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka currently embraces. Though very real, this is a world that is almost wholly disregarded in the course of Pali doctrinal exposition. Hence what is observed and described here retains both significance and value. The authors’ analyses must be recognized as significant, too, for they incorporate some perspectives from which Theravāda practice in Sri Lanka is apt to be understood and judged in certain scholarly circles. Yet, there is little reason to regard these perspectives as wholly valid or sufficient. On the contrary, there are several contestable features in the ways in which what the book so readably documents tends finally to be understood and judged. Since social

scientific explanations of Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka have proliferated over the years with little evidence of serious critical scrutiny, it would be perhaps useful to draw some attention to these contestable features.

In a noteworthy (and still valid) cautionary observation, John Stuart Mill, the pioneer methodologist of the social sciences, emphasized that "social phenomena are those in which a plurality of causes prevails in the utmost possible extent" (*A System of Logic*, VI:7:4). Yet it is questionable whether in their various interpretative commentaries our authors (or for that matter most other investigators of the Theravāda scene in South Asia) have always been guided by a sufficiently scrupulous recognition of the heuristic principle that is articulated here. *Buddhism Transformed*, one might argue, bears witness to several attempts at explaining complex religious behaviours in rather simplistic terms, invariably invoking a narrow range of causes (economic standing, class as determined by the latter, or personal health). This kind of accounting serves to reinforce the view that religious belief is mainly a function of material conditions, and as such it should no doubt warm the hearts of Marxists in particular. But methodological considerations apart, there is reason enough to question its adequacy if one recognizes that there is a transcendent dimension to life, and is withal ready to make some concessions to the "reality of the unseen" as grasped by religious individuals, however depressed their worldly condition might be (cf. W. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York, 1958, Lecture III).

This does not exhaust the methodological reservations that could be entertained about this book. It is also possible to impugn its central thesis that Buddhism in Sri Lanka has of late been "transformed" on account of a burgeoning "spirit religion" (more on this below), and a generalized "flight to the occult." Though the transformation is portrayed as a pervasive phenomenon ("radical shift" and "sea change" are two of the more expressive phrases used to characterize it), one may fairly ask whether things are really so: indigenous observers of the Sri Lankan religious scene who share this assessment in its entirety will be hard to find, and at all events, on a close review of the evidence adduced, there is room to argue that what one encounters here is in the main a vast generalization built on a limited sampling of religious behaviours. Since the field work backing this book's investigation is at many levels not recent, it should be pointed out that as far as the younger Sri Lankans are concerned, the dominant trend currently is perhaps towards secularism—a drifting away from religious attachments of any kind. The violence

attending the country's still uncontained insurgencies (which, significantly, are now engulfing several areas with sacred sites, making travel to them unsafe) might, for all we know, have engendered a wider erosion of belief in supernaturalism focused on deities, creating a general atmosphere more suited to an acceptance of traditional Theravāda emphases on suffering (*dukkha*) and impermanence (*anicca*).

Again, a host of queries, both methodological and otherwise, can be raised about "Protestant Buddhism." The authors of course consider the "double meaning" they have given to it as a pointer to its particular "utility," and it is adopted by other inquirers into religious developments in Sri Lanka without the slightest hint of reservation, let alone criticism (perhaps the latest testimony to this is to be found in George D. Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation and Response*, Columbia, S.C., 1988). Yet readers who are sensitive to the demands of inductive thinking, and, *a fortiori*, many Sri Lankan Buddhists, are likely to take a different view of the neologism and its explanatory scope. Clearly, "Protestant Buddhism" is a "label" under which a very wide range of facts and considerations relating to the transformation of Buddhism in Sri Lanka are identified and interpreted. But can *all* the heterogeneous details highlighted in the process find equally sound or cogent explanation within its framework? Not only is it possible to entertain some serious doubts on this score, but one might even argue that the ways in which "Protestant Buddhism" is applied or invoked in the book's investigation does not reflect a meticulous concern for an established requirement in valid *a posteriori* thinking and inductive generalization, namely, that dissimilar phenomena must not be resolved into or placed under one category. In this connection one could, for instance, question the propriety of treating the efforts of Sri Lankan academics to link Buddhist positions in philosophy and logic to Western thought simply as a manifestation of "Protestant Buddhism." No doubt, the tones of polemical one-upmanship in which Buddhism is related to other systems in some of their writings (cf. K.N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, London, 1963; for a more recent instance see G. Dharmasiri, *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God*, Colombo, 1974) are in large part better understood when the characteristic stances of "Protestant Buddhism" are taken into account. But significant segments of them also deserve to be viewed as contributions to long standing, cross-culturally pursued exegetical and evaluative endeavours associated with the advanced study of Pali Buddhism. Few are likely to grudge that this is very much the case with Jayatilleke's book



(Jayatilleke's researches into rebirth, though admittedly unsophisticated, again merit consideration in larger perspectives: survival, after all, is an issue in both empiricist philosophy and parapsychology, and the case for it has come under scrutiny in the work of British academic philosophers of the calibre of C.D. Broad and H.H. Price).

There is, similarly, scant reason to regard positive estimations of Buddhism accompanied by the view that Buddhism is not a mere religion, but a philosophy with scientific emphases, as a peculiarly "Protestant Buddhist" phenomenon localized in Sri Lanka. Many whose thinking cannot be even remotely connected with "Protestant Buddhism" (or even theosophy) have commented on Buddhism in these as well as much more admiring terms, and what that points to is Buddhism's appeal to people with a certain turn of mind, and also an intrinsic feature in its doctrines. The idea that Buddhism is unique and encompasses an insightful philosophic core, for instance, is notably broached by Huxley (cf. this reviewer's "Buddhism in Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*: A note on a Victorian Evaluation and its Comparativist Dimension," *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 35, 1985). And in some of their comments on the system, the philosophers Nietzsche and Schopenhauer sometimes went still further than that eminent Victorian scientist-thinker. If more recent testimonies to the same effect are needed, one could refer to the evaluative stances in N.P. Jacobson's *The Heart of Buddhist Philosophy* (Carbondale, Ill., 1988) or S.C. Kolm's *Le boheur liberté : Bouddhisme profond et modernité* (Paris, 1984). Buddhism is viewed in this latter study as a philosophy and a value system which can be used to restructure modern civilization.

It also can be argued that the use of "Protestant Buddhism" as an explanatory frame entails other misperceptions and judgments of questionable historicity on the matter of influences in particular. That Sri Lankan Buddhism in the British colonial era interacted with Protestant Christianity is of course a fact (however, influence, it is well to note in passing, was not one-sided: the ambient Sinhala Buddhist culture has affected the Christianity practiced in Sri Lanka, too, as evidenced by such things as the language of the Sinhala Bible, modern church architecture and liturgy, and certain customs of the converts to Christianity). Still, careful consideration of the various details discussed under "Protestant Buddhism" allows room to say that when invoked and used as an explanatory frame, the concept is often distorting in that it (a) leads to an exaggeration of the historical extent of Protestant Christianity's formative influence over Buddhist developments in modern Sri Lanka and (b) serves to deflect attention away from Theravāda Buddhism's very

notable inner doctrinal resources to generate reformist criticism, sustain meliorist social action, motivate lay religiosity, and generally help further the processes of adaptive change. Recognizing parallels is one thing; but ascribing causes is something else. The emphases of Protestant Christianity are no doubt an instructive backdrop against which the developments in the Sri Lankan Buddhist scene can be clarified, especially to a Western readership. However, the extent to which the two—in other words the Protestant emphases and Buddhist developments—admit of being causally related is open to debate because of some distinct considerations about Buddhism which, surprisingly, are well-nigh ignored in this book. Those, put baldly, are, on the one hand, the paradigmatically protestant nature of the Buddha's message, which originated in reaction to Brahmanical Hinduism and, on the other, the existence within its classic sources of many critical viewpoints that can validate much that goes with "protestant" religious behaviour. Indeed, given early Buddhism's innovative critique of religion defined in terms of rites performed by a priestly elite, its valuation of the vernacular in religious instruction (it is a clear recognition in the *Vinaya* texts that the Buddha's word should be studied "each in his own dialect"; cf. *Culavagga*, V:33) and, above all, its doctrinal insistence that as regards spiritual liberation, each should "be a lamp unto himself," taking refuge in "none but the Truth" (cf. *Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta*, *Dīgha Nikaya*, II:100), the invocation of some parallel Christian positions evolved several centuries later to explain or account for Buddhist developments seems quite otiose.

It is in particular questionable whether it is really necessary to go far afield to Christian Protestantism to elucidate the roots of many characteristic stances in Dharmapala's reformist thinking: quite in keeping with the "Principle of Parsimony" (to which social scientific investigation of religion must needs defer), these can in large part be traced to that widely accessible compendium of Buddhist teachings Dharmapala must surely have read, namely, the *Dhammapada*. Thus, his criticisms of monks, for instance, can be directly related to several stanzas there which stress that many who wear the yellow robe are not worthy of it since they lack moral and religious virtues (cf. *Dhammapada*, stanzas 9,10; cf. 264, 266, 307). The personal religiousness founded on discipline and focused on moral practice that Dharmapala favoured is discussed in the *Dhammapada* section devoted to the "Just or the Righteous" (*Dhammatthavagga*), and could well have been an inspiration to him and others after him. Long available in Sinhala and English (and frequently cited in sermons and the popular press), the *Dhammapada* is in some ways the

veritable “Bible” of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Its opening statement that mind is focal to everything, and ordains and determines every condition (*manopubbaṅgamā dhammā manosethā manomayā*) is indeed the probable source of much popular enthusiasm for meditation and the associated view that Buddhism’s core concern is the mind, though this enthusiasm is also supported by purely Sinhala sources such as the medieval *Lovadasangarāva* (verse 127), where *bhavanā* (meditation) is projected as the best field of merit. Finally, if one goes to the *Nikāya* texts, even Dharmapala’s economic meliorism and associated social mores can be given a sure Theravāda footing: the Buddha’s discourses addressed to the “house father” Anāthapindikā, for instance, as set forth in the *Āṅguttara-Nikāya* carry explicit references to the “Ariyan disciple” who, “with wealth acquired by energetic striving, amassed by sweat, lawful, and lawfully gotten” generates happiness for both himself and all around him (see *Gradual Sayings*, trans. F.L. Woodward, London, 1982, vol. II, p. 75 ff. and “On Getting Rich,” vol. III, p. 37ff.). That worldly self-improvement, wise fiscal management and moral commitment are informing considerations in the lives of lay Buddhists is clearly indicated here.

When viewed in the light of canonical teachings and the discernible theoretical underpinnings of modern Buddhist practice, the interpretations in *Buddhism Transformed* can be said to incorporate still other questionable positions. Evidently, the Weberian distinction between virtuoso religious specialists and ordinary people tends to condition many of the authors’ analyses of the roles of monks and the laity. Yet it could be argued that the applicability of the above distinction to a Buddhist society is limited, for account must be taken of the fact that Theravāda thinking stresses the unity of Buddhist religious life through the inclusive notion of *caturparisā* (or the “four assemblies,” encompassing monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen; cf. *Gradual Sayings*, vol. I, pp. 16ff.). In this connection there is also good reason to pay some attention to a point that Peter Mansfield (*Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism*, London, 1986, chap. I) has made recently: it is a mistake to assume that the social division between monks and laymen is also the spiritual division of the Buddhist world (the latter, Mansfield rightly insists, is found in the distinction between *sāvaka* and *puṭhujjana*, those who actually pursue the Buddhist religious way, and those who do not). Then again, anyone who is religiously sensitive, and withal willing to extend some recognition to the numinous, must be critical of the narrow perspectives from which the newly emerged “Bodhi Puja” practice is considered in the book. Once a modicum of empathetic understanding is brought to bear on this practice, what is most characteristic in it should strike many as

a new endeavour to generate an anciently acknowledged form of religious feeling best epitomised in the Pali term *pasādasamvega* (cf. *Mahāvamsa*, I:3–4). To turn to some other matters, whether so critical a portrayal of the *Sarvodaya* movement as here provided is entirely warranted is likewise open to question (the evaluations projected in Bond, *op. cit.* chap. 7, on this score are sometimes more understanding, and merit perusal for balance). In any event, it is well to remember that “profit, happiness and welfare of many-folk” being a consideration that is aired rather frequently in Pali canonical texts (and the Sri Lankan chronicles as well; cf. *Dīpavamsa*, 12:29... “*bahujanahitāya... bahujanasukhāya lokanukampāya atthaya hitāya sukhāya...*”), it is possible to explain the inspiring principles of that movement in traditional frames. Indeed, service-oriented social activism on the part of Sri Lankan monks is increasingly justified locally now through appeals to the above anciently articulated phrases.

Contestable views of a no less far reaching nature can be identified in the book’s interpretations of the role played by gods and meditation in Sinhala Buddhism. As regards the former, it must first be pointed out that the position that Sinhala Buddhism confers authority in the universe upon the “warrant gods” referred to in the *Mahāvamsa*, though axiomatic for the discussion here, will nevertheless not pass muster in wider thought frames: there is good reason to argue that for this form of Buddhism even at the popular level (as for Theravāda Buddhism generally), *dhamma*, is the fount of authority in the universe, gods being helpers and protectors of limited power who function within the limits of the *dhamma*. That this was a particularly Sinhala recognition seems to be borne out by a poignant remark carried in the latter part of the *Mahāvamsa*, in the course of its account of the destruction wrought by South Indian invaders of Sri Lanka led by Māgha (see *Cūlavamsa*, II, 80:55–56). There, it is said that the deities entrusted with the protection of the island failed to discharge their functions on that occasion because of the “various evil deeds” of its people. As already indicated, it is possible to entertain misgivings about the authors’ estimate of the spread of “spirit religion”; but it is equally important to point out that there is room to wonder whether beliefs associated with gods that Sri Lankans have come to embrace recently should be viewed as developments in Buddhist practice that are entirely at odds with tradition. True, new gods and new styles of devotion have evolved; but one must also remember that belief in gods and spirits is as old as Buddhism itself, as evidenced by the contents of such ancient Pali texts as the *Petavatthu*, *Vimānavatthu* and their commentaries (cf. M.M.J. Marasinghe,

*Gods in Early Buddhism*, Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, 1974; Mōhan Wijayaratana, *Le culte des dieux chez les bouddhistes singhalais*, Paris, 1987). In the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (see *Gradual Sayings*, vol. III, p. 37) the Buddha himself seems to refer approvingly to oblations to spirits (*petas*) and deities (*devas*) and even characterize the offering of such oblations as duties of the successful lay disciple. Besides, though little taken account of in this book, the propitiation of deities is very much legitimized in contemporary Sri Lankan thinking as *śāntikarma*, in other words, religious exercises performed to ward off evil and better one's material conditions (cf. W.S. Karaunatillake, "The Religiousness of Buddhists in Sri Lanka Through Belief and Practice," in John Ross Carter, ed., *Religiousness in Sri Lanka*, Colombo, 1979, p. 19ff.).

To turn, finally, to meditation, the perspectives from which this age-old concern of Buddhist (and indeed Eastern) religiosity are approached here are likely to disappoint many, for they tend to reflect (a) a scant regard for the possibilities of human spiritual development and (b) a disinclination to extend even a passing recognition to the fact that several sciences (psychology, physiology and even clinical medicine) have studied meditational experiences and actually amassed data that attest to the changes (both mental and physical) that they often accompany (cf. C. Tart, *Altered States of Consciousness*, New York, 1969; C. Naranjo and R.E. Ornstein, *On the Psychology of Meditation*, New York, 1971). The altogether striking move made to link meditation and possession might make sense within the perspectives adopted; but it appears to be a move that is in great measure pivoted on a tacit (behaviouristic) presumption that outer observation is an infallible guide to inner states, which everyone cannot concede. Besides, given the widespread recognition that there are several levels of meditational experience and training (cf. Christmas Humphreys, *Concentration and Meditation: A Manual of Mind Development*, Baltimore, 1973; J. Hamilton-Merritt, *A Meditator's Diary*, New York, 1979), it is doubtful whether an attempt to reductively explain meditation as possession should be taken seriously in the absence of clarifications as to the level of meditational achievement considered; in its analyses of charismatics in particular, the book often treats meditation as a simple, undifferentiated phenomenon. In any event, it is well to observe that the basic religious experiences of the "Sun Buddha" reported and analysed here with several references to Protestant Christianity, but little regard for the inner springs and the historical manifestations of Buddhist spirituality, seem actually to parallel those of Zen masters in some striking ways. The setting and suddenness of his illumination, and the very charac-

terization of the informing principle in his religiousness as a “knowing by seeing” (*dākīma dānīma* in Sinhala) are very reminiscent of *satori* in Zen Buddhism, with its extra-rational seeing into the nature and essence of things (*kenshō* in Japanese, *chien-hsing* in Chinese), a seeing that opens revolutionary new vistas within which “life assumes a fresher, deeper, more satisfying aspect” (D.T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, ed. by W. Barrett, New York, 1956, p. 83; cf. S. Park, *Buddhist Faith and Sudden Enlightenment*, New York, 1984). Spiritually illuminative processes juxtaposable with the above are not unknown within the Theravāda tradition itself: consider, for example, the accession to “saving knowledge” (*vimutti nānadassana*) through an acquisition of the “divine eye” (*dibbacakkhu*) as celebrated in some verses of the *Thera-Theri Gāthā*.

To sum up, *Buddhism Transformed* is a book that holds a mirror on a rich variety of details relating to modern religious practice in Sri Lanka, and can be said to exhibit both the strengths and the limitations of social scientific investigations conducted on the “popular Buddhism” of Theravāda societies. That the analyses provided could be controversial among Sri Lankan Buddhists is of course acknowledged by the authors themselves; but, as has been shown in the foregoing, they are also vulnerable to certain technical and scholarly criticisms. The emergence of new forms of belief and practice in Sri Lanka’s Buddhist milieu is a notable fact which merits study, and the authors must indeed be commended for focusing attention on it in a systematic manner. Still, few informed observers who review the nature and diffusion of those innovations against a background of the traditional emphases of Theravāda Buddhism are likely to go so far as to conclude that Buddhism in Sri Lanka has of late been transformed by them or because of them: considered in this light, the book’s title seems hyperbolic. On the other hand, the authors’ perception that popular practices in Sri Lankan-Buddhism are often at odds with the “rational and humane” spirit of canonical doctrines is not without some validity. However, this is not a circumstance that should unduly worry Buddhists (or, for that matter, puzzle students of Buddhism) very much: that the “fear-stricken” are apt “betake themselves to hills, woods, gardens, trees, and shrines” is an ancient doctrinal recognition (underscored in *Dhammapada* stanzas 188–189) which, significantly, also add that no such refuge is “safe or supreme”), and going by the book’s own accountings, it appears that it is in the main people who are “fear-stricken” in various ways who have come to embrace practices that display irrational and superstitious characteristics. Besides, it is a further doctrinal recognition that the receptivity to the *dhamma* on the part of people is

uneven and subject to change, and in any case, tolerance being an important aspect of Buddhism, Buddhists are likely to view new cults, however bizarre, with equanimity, as long as they do not contravene moral norms (*sīla*).

Those students of Buddhism who bring to bear some philosophical perspectives on their study of the new manifestations of popular practice in Sri Lanka have even less reason for feeling disturbed. Insightful philosophers of religion, such as Hume, have long insisted that given the facts of human nature, the reign of reason over religion at the popular level in particular is and indeed has to be precariously weak: the gulf between "precept and practice" observed in Sri Lanka would, in Hume's thought, be just a projection of the natural history of religion witnessed in all places and at all times. The ordinary individual, he held, is not only little attuned to deal with the abstruse principles of doctrinal religion, but is also prone to leave them aside and evolve beliefs more suited to his or her own genius and concrete concerns. Irrationality, no doubt, is a corrupting influence on religion; but reflective thinking will have to recognize that it is an influence that cannot be shaken off altogether (in this connection it is well to remember that irrational cultic practices of many sorts, including satanism accompanied by ritual sacrifices, persist even in advanced Western societies). Taking due account of the practical realities encountered in religious life, Hume actually cautioned against judging "the civility or wisdom of any people or even of single persons, by the grossness or refinement of their theological principles" ("Of the Standard of Taste," *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, Oxford, 1963, p. 253). However, notwithstanding its apparent failure to pay attention to these and other considerations, *Buddhism Transformed*, it is well to reiterate, remains a very readable and factually instructive book. Though they deserve to be regarded in a critical light for reasons indicated, even the explanatory frames it uses to interpret the many new developments in Sri Lankan Buddhist practice are not without meaning and value: they are certainly a means of integrating those developments for purposes of study, and also, after a manner, of accounting for their inner springs and grounding causes.

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