

Buddhism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka, by Patrick Grant. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. 146 + xiv pp., (HB) \$60.00, ISBN-13: 978-0791493533.

In writing this book, Patrick Grant's aim is: 'to make some central aspects of the Sri Lankan conflict accessible, especially to Western readers' (x). He attempts to do this in just 120 pages, if the endnotes are omitted.

Grant is a Professor Emeritus of English, whose interest in Sri Lanka was stimulated when he was a student at Queen's University, Belfast and was taught by Sri Lankan lecturer, Gamini Salgado. Much later in his career, in the 1990s, he wrote two books on religion and conflict in Northern Ireland. In *Buddhism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*, he extends his interest in religion and violence, bringing into play his professional interest in how language is used. It is this that makes the book noteworthy.

The book is divided into two main sections. The first focuses on the genesis of Buddhism in India, differences between Buddhism and Vedic religion, and the Buddha's method of communicating with others. The second begins with Sri Lankan historical chronicles such as the *Mahāvamsa* and then concentrates on the writings of three influential Buddhist figures in modern Sri Lanka: the Anagārika Dharmapāla, Walpola Rāhula and J.R. Jayawardene. The link between the three, according to Grant, was their inability to recognize the subtlety of the Buddha's approach to human beings caught within the paradoxes of existence. He accuses the three of 'regressive inversion', namely of re-deploying an unconditional freedom present in the Buddha's teachings to 'supercharge the passions associated with group loyalty' (42).

The first chapter of Part One argues that Buddhism developed from the Vedic tradition, drawing from Sāṃkhya philosophy and extending the vision of the *Upaniṣads*. Whereas the Vedic tradition, Grant argues, used language in a 'conjunctive' way ('expressing how the world is suffused with a divine significance that can be directed and manipulated by sacrifice and other rituals', (3)), Buddhism, with the aim of developing non-attachment, developed a disjunctive use, where there is an awareness of the deceptions of language and a discontinuity between language and its referents.

In the second chapter, by referring to the Theravāda Canon, Grant turns to what the Buddha taught and how. It is not surprising that Grant chooses *suttas* that are concerned with speech and performance. He highlights, for instance, the slapstick humour that is present in the *Kakacūpama Sutta* (MN. 21) and the Buddha's awareness, in a variety of discourses, of human irrationalism and the difference between precept and practice. The Buddha is presented as someone who combined detachment with compassionate involvement in the complexity of the human situation.

The lens Grant throws on the discourses is refreshing. It is evident that he has read the *suttas*, albeit in translation. He is also aware of current scholarship about the dating of the Buddha and the close relationship between the Vedic

tradition and Buddhism. However, there are numerous examples in Part One where complexity is ignored, for instance concerning the relationship between *śramaṇa* and *brāhmaṇa* and the extent of the Buddha's knowledge of the *Upaniṣads*. His representation of the law of *karma* and some other Buddhist concepts leaves much to be desired.

When Grant turns to Sri Lanka in Part Two, a tendency to generalize is present. Distortions of fact result, when describing the events of 1815, for instance, when the Kandyan Kingdom came under British rule (54). His references to Protestant Buddhism and to the 'hybridity of the (Sri Lankan) population during its long evolution' (51), however, are insightful and accurate. As for his three main figures, he poses a question about each: Why was the Anagārika Dharmapāla not aware of the incompatibility between his message that Buddhism proclaims universal brotherhood and his ethno-religious nationalism? Why did Walpola Rāhula not recognize the difference between his representation of Buddhism in *What the Buddha Taught* and the more ethno-nationalist, *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*? Why was J.R. Jayawardene not aware that his actions were betraying both his Buddhist ideals and his hopes for the country?

To throw light on these questions, Grant again employs the use of language. He suggests that the Anagārika Dharmapāla placed too much emphasis on the literalism of science rather than the metaphoric and the dialogical. This blinded him to the complexity involved in mediating between the ideal and the actual. Grant is wrong that Rāhula wrote *What the Buddha Taught* (1959) before *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*, which was published in Sinhala in 1946, but his points are interesting. Comparing Rāhula's writings unfavourably with Gamini Salgado's representation of lived Buddhism in Sri Lanka's villages, he accuses Rāhula of ignoring the complex realities of life on the ground in Sri Lanka.

As for J.R. Jayawardene, Grant notes a statement by J.R. when he was young — that he was not keen on literature. He suggests that J.R.'s inability to empathize with the Tamil people might be due to this, seen for instance in his lamentable lack of empathy with Tamils after the violence of 1983, in spite of his wish for a society governed by *Dhamma*.

Grant is aware that his book does 'not cover the range of Sinhala opinion' or attempt to deal with the Tamil political agenda (113). Rather he attempts to throw light on what he sees as a process through which the empathy, realism and breadth of the Buddha's mode of relating to human beings are lost.

Does he succeed in his aim? He does not make the whole of the Sri Lanka conflict accessible. But he does, quite insightfully, throw light on the question outsiders to the Sri Lankan conflict often ask: Why can a Buddhist people support war and nationalism? He does this by comparing the Buddha's empathy and dialogical sophistication, as represented in the Theravāda Canon, with the Sinhala nationalism of three people who, according to Grant, were unable to make the compromises necessary within a complex, multi-ethnic society. In spite of errors of fact and interpretation, this is a book worth reading.

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