

on the subject of *Buddhism Betrayed?* a rejoinder

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It is fortunate that *Buddhism Betrayed?* (Tambiah 1992) was reviewed in *American Ethnologist* (Perera 1996) more than four years after its publication in 1992, because the book had already been constructively and perceptively reviewed in other places—for example, by Steven Kemper (1993) in *Man*, at greater length and more comprehensively by Bruce Kapferer (1994) in *American Anthropologist*, and by Jonathan Spencer (1995) in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*.

Ordinarily I would not care to respond to Sasanka Perera's review. But considering that my book has been banned in Sri Lanka, or at least, that it has been prevented from being imported for sale in the island at the instigation of extreme chauvinist elements, many of whom have not read the book but have misrepresented its contents, and realizing that Perera's review may unwittingly feed the aforesaid vilification, I have decided to write a reply.

In the introduction I clearly state that except for the long epilogue, which should be of interest to specialists as well, the book is "written not for Sri Lankan specialists, but for general readers . . . who have a certain standard conception of Buddhism as . . . dedicated to nonviolence . . . and are puzzled by the present-day violence in Sri Lanka in which many Buddhists seem to be participating" (1992:3). Perera takes note of this authorial intent but then illogically states that "the fundamental [surely a misplaced and inflated word] question" he would pose is what my book "offers students of South Asia politics and society and Sri Lanka specialists" (1996:905). On the contrary, the first relevant question for the reviewer to ask, and answer, is whether the author has achieved his own objective.

Early in the book I describe the explicit task that I set myself (and that is accorded no recognition in the review), namely the description in terms of their intentions and their objectives of what recent and modern-day actors, both monks and laity, had defined as "Buddhist issues," and of how, in espousing these "Buddhist causes," they contributed to the outbreaks of collective violence (Tambiah 1992:3). I urge readers of the book to bear this theme in mind.

The line between what are deemed to be "primary sources" and what are "secondary sources" is

not always clear-cut in the abstract but has to be drawn in relation to the subject matter, themes, and issues an author addresses. Although I freely acknowledge that my book uses many secondary sources, I do want to indicate that it also deals with texts that comprise primary sources for my project. Examples include Rahula's text (*The Heritage of the Buddha* 1974), Gurugé's edition (1965) of Dharmapala's writings (*Return to Righteousness*), the report of the Committee of Inquiry (*The Betrayal of Buddhism* 1956), the unpublished English translation of a text by Gnanasiha Thero (n.d.) made available to me by Steven Kemper, and Bruce Kapferer's *Legends of People, Myths of State* (1988). I mention these textual examples, not so much to resist the reviewer's remark "that much of the material in the book is based on secondary sources" (Perera 1996:905) but to criticize his ungenerous verdict on my work. He notes that "the extensive use of secondary material is one of the strong points of the book" (1996:905) but goes on to criticize "its excessive dependence on secondary material" (1996:905). Thus, in Perera's estimation, my primary success—and failure?—is that I merely "effectively summarize . . . recent and important materials" (1996:905). In fact, guided by certain questions in mind, I have engaged in textual analysis and critically commented on and evaluated important submissions made in them. I have also posed and given an answer to the question as to why, after a gap free of riots from 1960–77, a spate of riots occurred subsequently, culminating in the riots of 1983. In the epilogue I have tried to evaluate and mediate the controversy between the noted historian R. A. L. H. Gunawardena and K. N. O. Dharmadasa on the origins and continuity of Sinhalese and Sinhala Buddhist identities. While the information is widely known, I pose the puzzle regarding the amnesia of and/or willful suppression by a number of chauvinists who insist on their uninterrupted lineal descent from Dutthagamani of Mahāvamsa fame in the face of the numerous migrations from South India in medieval times (and earlier), and the of processes by which they were incorporated and included in Sinhala society. This problematic question regarding Sinhala consciousness of identity through time is not a settled issue and invites further inquiry. I have

also offered the suggestion, which I owe to no previous author, that there are devolutionary and pluralistic precedents and arrangements in precolonial Sri Lankan politics that indicate positive pathways out of the current situation.

Perera is not concerned with these submissions and, ignoring most of the book's substantive contents, disproportionately devotes the major portion of his review to commenting on a single sentence of my text:

In the chapter dealing with monks' participation in violence, Tambiah observes that "with some notable exceptions, the majority of monks explicitly or privately supported and condoned the Sinhalese army's killing of Tamil guerrillas and had not felt the imperative to object to the tribulations imposed on Tamil civilians" (p. 95). [Perera 1996:905]

Perera continues:

One wonders who these notable exceptions are. I personally know of no well-known monks who spoke against the killings . . . although there were some who braved severe criticism in Sinhala society and visited Jaffna . . . to "seek a solution." But none of these monks belonged to the mainstream of the Buddhist clerical hierarchy. [Perera 1996:905]

On the one hand Perera absolves neither "well-known monks" nor those monks "who belonged to the mainstream of the Buddhist clerical hierarchy" from my attribution (1996:905). He is welcome to pronounce that blanket incrimination—which, if true, only strengthens my case. On the other hand, deliberately changing my intentionally weaker words "explicitly or privately supported and condoned" (1992:95) to the stronger "advocated or justified violence" (Perera 1996:905), he remarks that my sentence is "a problematic generalization" (1996:905) if I go beyond the articulate and mostly urban-based monks "to include monks resident in villages and small towns . . . who generally have less or no access to the mass media" (1996:905). He then turns the distorting screw some notches higher by commenting thus "Reading the passage above one would assume that the *sangha* in Sri Lanka had defected to the military or violent political groups in massive numbers" (1996:905). This is plainly mischievous and unjustified, and plays into the hands of those chauvinist extremist elements in Sri Lanka whom I mention above. I would request readers of Perera's review to consult my six-page chapter 11 ("Monks and Violence Face to Face" [1992:95–101]) to understand the context of the sentence Perera quotes and to decide whether he is reading me fairly.

Insofar as the book as a whole is concerned with monks—I must emphasize it is much concerned with lay actors as well—it highlights in chapter after chapter those monks who have actively participated in politics in the 20th century and whom the eminent Bhikkhu Rahula himself identified as "Political Bhikkhu(s)" engaged in "Bhikkhu Politics" in the English translation of his Sinhala text *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu* (1974). Throughout my book, these politically engaged lay Buddhists and monks

have been identified and are the focus of attention; chapter 11 itself opens with this sentence:

The politically active monks of the 1980s, consisting of many established leaders known for their orthodox adherence to rules pertaining to the monastic life, and even more, the young monks, a great number of whom were at the universities and *pirivenas* or had recently left them, were, by virtue of their political commitments, confronted with the manner of having to come to terms with the violence generated by the Tamil-Sinhala conflict, and later by the civil war unleashed within the Sinhala society itself by the JVP. [Tambiah 1992:95]

I allude to the fact that, in the late 1980s, popular movements composed of politicians, lay enthusiasts, and activist monks were increasingly formed to protest against the so-called murderous Tamil Eelamism, and I then outline the story of these monks' involvement with militant politics until the end of the year 1989 in terms of their connections with the JVP (Tambiah 1992:96–99).

Finally I want to make clear the kind of dilemma I posed in the context of political violence. On the one hand, "to many of us who live in the glow of the classical Buddhist heritage, witnessing the increasing participation of monks, especially young monks . . . in violence . . . is a disturbing experience" (1992:101). But I immediately make the counterpoint that there are precedents for the participation of monks in rebellious and millennial movements and anti-imperialistic struggles in colonial times in Burma and Sri Lanka (I have written elsewhere about similar movements in Thailand against Thai political regimes [Tambiah 1984]), and I remark that those "Pali text puritans" who proffer only sanitized accounts of Buddhism in Sri Lanka would prefer to ignore, even in modern times, the *sangha's* involvement in politics, an involvement that "bears testimony to the vital concerns monks have in national political, educational, and social issues," and to their wanting "to be involved in causes and issues that [they see] are relevant to the place of Buddhism—as religion, civilization, and way of life—in the life of its adherents, both lay and clerical" (Tambiah 1992:101).

I conclude chapter 11 with this statement:

It is necessary to realize that *many Buddhists among the ranks of the laity as well as the sectarian communities of monks* must necessarily experience a profound misgiving, even consternation, when monks become caught up in political violence, and this must tug at their moral sensibility. [1992:101, emphasis added]

To these many people for whom the violence is "distasteful" I gladly add Perera's exceptions. I have nowhere in my book explicitly described the majority of monks resident in villages and small towns as "advocating or justifying violence," and if Perera talked to monks who were troubled by the escalating violence but maintained a "self-imposed silence" and "did not want to talk about such issues in public" (1996:905), I thank him for this information about the silent ones. This does not, however, affect my account of the principal actors and the

force of their actions that have effectively shaped Sri Lanka's recent politics in regard to the themes I have addressed.

As close readers of my book (as well of my other writings) will find, I have persistently held that I am critical of the view that "has essentialized Buddhism in terms of its 'pristine' teachings and has viewed all subsequent historical developments, especially those of a political kind, as deviations and distortions from the canonical form" (1992:3). I have a larger civilizational view of Buddhism as a lived religion in different times, contexts, and places that is integrally interwoven with cultural, political, economic, and social issues and interests. I therefore find strange and incoherent Perera's view that to understand "Buddhism's association with political violence . . . we have to go far beyond religion to find the reasons for such phenomena," and that "[t]his is the reality that Buddhist history and myth in Sri Lanka clearly indicates" (1996: 905-906). It will come as news to scholars that going this "far beyond religion" to understand events is the message communicated by the *Mahavamsa* and a host of subsequent Sinhala chronicles and myths as well as by many recent authors, scholars, and propagandists who write as committed Buddhists and have advocated what they identify as Buddhist causes.

As someone who did fieldwork in Sri Lanka in the 1950s and extensive fieldwork in Thailand over the years, I do place much value on fieldwork. Although *Buddhism Betrayed?* does not report information derived from my own fieldwork, it is certainly informed by "such insights [as] can only be gained from serious fieldwork" (Perrera 1996:905). I did, however, gather first-hand information regarding the 1956 and 1983 riots and have conducted some investigations in the post-1983 refugee camps in and around Colombo, now dismantled). Perera concludes in magisterial tones that "Tambiah's book is a historical narrative not supplemented by essential ethnographic information and insights" (1996:906). (In turn, given Perera's criticisms of my book, one wonders about his fieldwork: how many monks did he interview and what was their proportion is to all such rural and small town monks, let alone to the entire sangha, in Sri Lanka?)

Once again Perera treats us to his eccentric dichotomies. The book does contain ethnographic information culled from other authors and it also deals with "current" events up to 1990, the year the text was completed and sent to the press. By labeling my book "a historical narrative" Perera seems unwilling to recognize it also as a work of anthropology. He seems to be significantly behind the times in his failure to recognize the recent efflorescence of the genre of "historical anthropology" and "historical ethnography": distinguished examples come from the pens of Marshall Sahlins, Clifford Geertz, Eric Wolf, Bernard Cohn, and other senior and junior scholars too numerous to name. Who would dispute today that one cannot fruitfully talk of the present without synthesizing it with the past, and without building time, process, continuity, and transformation into our accounts?

Finally, Perera charges that in my "abstract" treatment there is "the almost total absence of ordinary Sinhala Buddhists" (1996:906). Who are these non-abstract, concrete, ordinary persons that Perera's extensive fieldwork has uncovered from among Sri Lanka's socially differentiated inhabitants and diaspora? What are their ages, sex, residence, education, occupation, and ordinary feelings about being Sinhalese Buddhists? And why are the monks and laity on whom I have focused excluded from this nebulous label?

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