THE MONK IN THE PĀLI VINAYA: PRIEST OR WEDDING GUEST?

I recently attended a meeting of a committee controlling a charity at which the treasurer was supposed to present a report. However, he did not turn up. He was attending his daughter's graduation ceremony. Inconvenient though his absence was, no one present thought it improper. Everyone recognised that parents are normally under an obligation to attend their children's graduations. On the other hand, no one thought that the proud father was officiating at the ceremony, or that it could not have been carried out without him. The event centred on a ritual, but the father's obligation to attend was a social, not a ritual obligation.

Not only in South Asia, but in many (or all?) traditional societies the world over, when a family solemnises an important event in the life of one or more of its members, everyone associated with that family is expected to attend. Legally, technically, a Hindu couple are married if they have had the correct ritual performed by a qualified officiant. But they will feel bad about it unless their relatives, friends and acquaintances come to the festivities and accept food from them. Conversely, it is offensively rude not to attend a wedding feast to which one has been invited and to eat at least a token amount.

Since the guests are felt to be an essential component of such occasions, one might perhaps very loosely speak of them as part of the ritual, in so far as one can describe almost any set social occasion as a ritual. But every participant understands the difference in role performance between an officiant at such a ritual – a marriage, for instance – and a guest, and therefore understands the difference (in whatever language it may be expressed) between the ritual obligation and

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the social obligation to attend. To blur this distinction where it is relevant casts darkness where there was light.

In a recent number of this journal Gregory Schopen, who is recognised as a leading historian of early Buddhism, published an article entitled "The Ritual Obligations and Donor Roles of Monks in the Pāli Vinaya".[1] The donor roles are fine; but I dispute the ritual obligations. Moreover, I think maybe it falls to me to reply, because his article begins with the sentence: "More than once recently it has again been suggested that Buddhist monks had little or no role in life-cycle ceremonies in early India"; and to this is keyed a footnote with two references to words published by me. Let me here reproduce those words.

> "Monks preserve Buddhism; but it is not their function to provide religious services to the laity. The life crises of Buddhists (birth, puberty, marriage) are mostly either treated as secular events or solemnized by specialists in the religious systems which co-exist locally with Buddhism. There are however quite a few exceptions to this general principle. The major one is death: Buddhist monks everywhere officiate at funerals."[2]

That passage attempts to generalise about Buddhism as a whole. The other one which Schopen cites has the same focus as his article.

> "The Theravāda Buddhist monk hardly ever acts as what we would call a priest. He officiates at no life-cycle crisis rituals except funerals – and even then he can claim to be present as preacher and consoler, not as officiant. We do not know whether the monk assumed this funerary role for Buddhists in ancient India, but it is quite logical for him to do so."[3]

[1] *JPTS* XVI, 1992, pp.87-107.
[2] H. Bechert and R. Gombrich (edd.), *The World of Buddhism*, (London, 1984), p.14.

Schopen calls this the "received wisdom", and disagrees. His reasoning is as follows. The Pāli *Vinaya* gives a long list of occasions on which a monk should interrupt his rains retreat. Many of them are invitations from lay supporters. In some cases the lay supporter wants to make a donation, e.g. of a building, to the Sangha. In other cases the layman merely wishes to celebrate the construction of a building or something similar for himself. In yet other cases, the invitation may be occasioned by illness, or by the wedding of one of the layman's children. The monk is supposed to accept these invitations.

Schopen argues that the invitations are "ritual obligations". Of the passage which includes wedding invitations, he says that it "presupposes something like a 'client relationship' between monks and lay brothers", a relationship which entailed "a sense of obligation" (p.91). With the latter remarks I agree; but again point out that a farmer's tenants, for example, play quite a different role at his family's weddings from the officiant.

When any guest comes to an Indian home, he has to be fed; in fact, for the visitor not to be fed is unthinkable. This holds true for monks too. Besides, the very relationship between a monk and his lay patron/supporter revolves around feeding: in return for "raw flesh" (*āmisa*), i.e., material support, the monk bestows the greater gift of the Teaching. Since ancient times, this transaction has been conventionalised into set forms. On p.101 Schopen cites a text which shows how the monk's formulae of teaching while accepting food (or other material gifts) are to be adapted to the occasion. What is appropriate to a happy occasion, says the text, will

[3] R. Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, (London, 1988), p.124.

not fit a death. One can call that stereotyped exchange of food for teaching a ritual; but the fact that a monk who has responded to an invitation is ritually fed does not mean that his feeding is a part of the actual ceremony to which he is invited.

Schopen suggests (p. 92, fn.) that his quotations from the Pāli *Vinaya* cast doubt on what Obeyesekere and I have written about recent Buddhist weddings in Sri Lanka, but this shows the same confusion: it is the role of the monks (or other Buddhist sacralia) in the wedding rites which we claim to be an innovation.

In the second passage cited above, I wrote that we do not know whether monks officiated at funerals in ancient India, but that they may well have done so, and Schopen seems to agree with both points. As he says, we do know that they were sometimes invited to weddings. But how regularly? Impossible to say. But I offer the following reflection.

In traditional Sinhala Buddhist society there is an ambivalence about monks. They are associated with death. To see a monk first thing when you leave your house in the morning used to be considered a bad omen. Similarly, many laity do not wish monks to attend an auspicious occasion, such as a wedding. It is fine for the couple to invite or visit a monk shortly before or soon after the wedding to receive some moral instruction and blessings, but another matter to bring the monk into the wedding ceremony itself. However, this view of monks as inauspicious is strictly a lay view; I do not remember hearing it voiced by a monk, and indeed some monks argue that it is quite wrong. Naturally, monks see themselves positively. The *Vinaya* texts cited by Schopen were composed by monks and are indeed invaluable evidence for ancient Indian social history, but one would expect them somewhat to exaggerate how popular monks were as guests at weddings, house-warming parties, or other lay celebrations.

The texts do not show that the presence of monks on such occasions was a regular occurrence; nor do they show that it was not. However, that is subsidiary to my main point: that they had no ritual role at life crises (except perhaps death). Had they had such ritual duties, the *Vinaya* would surely have had to prescribe just how those duties were to be performed. Instead, we find the *Vinaya* almost devoid of liturgy but full of prescriptions for table manners.

I suggest that for anyone familiar with traditional Indian culture it is easy to envisage what the texts in question are about. When a high-caste Hindu family celebrates such a happy occasion, it is customary for them to feed brahmins. This feeding (*brāhmaṇa-bhojanam*) always takes place away from the arena of the ceremony itself. The brahmins would indeed take umbrage at being closely associated with the officiant, because the very fact of his being there as an officiant means that he is doing a paid job and so lowers his status below theirs. They have no duties; they are gracing the occasion. If, ideally, they demonstrate the kind of people they are supposed to be by debating some abstruse topic, the host will be particularly gratified.[4] Here, as so often in ancient Buddhist theory and practice, the monk is the Buddhist answer to the brahmin – but to the ideal brahmin, not to the priest.

Schopen calls the paragraphs I wrote on this topic "received wisdom". They are surely not wisdom, and it is far more fun to overturn accepted ideas – as Schopen often succeeds in doing – than to reiterate them. But these just happen to be right.

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[4] I am indebted for this picture to my wife, Dr. Sanjukta Gupta Gombrich.