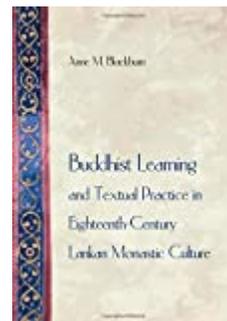




Anne M. Blackburn. *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-Century Lankan Monastic Culture.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001. x + 241 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-07044-5.



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An Eighteenth-Century Reformulation of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka

An Eighteenth-Century Reformulation of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka

Blackburn offers a detailed and insightful study of an important period in the history of Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism. (In order to prevent nationalist appropriations of her work, Blackburn uses “Lanka” rather than “Sri Lanka” when speaking of events prior to the twentieth century.) Under the leadership of the scholar-monk Saranamkara, a new monastic order, called the Siyam Nikaya, emerged in the latter two-thirds of the eighteenth century along with new forms of monastic education, administration, and commentarial literature. Blackburn demonstrates that these events, which profoundly changed “the dominant understandings of what it meant to be Buddhist, a monk, and learned in Lanka” (p. 4), have had a lasting impact on the nature of Buddhism in Sri Lanka to the present day.

The introductory chapter summarizes the central arguments of the book. Chapter two offers a concise overview of religious and political organization in the eighteenth-century central highland kingdom of Kandy, where the events of the book took place. Particular atten-

tion is given to relations between the Kandyan kingdom and Dutch colonial officials, relations with other South Asian and Southeast Asian kingdoms, administration of the Kandyan kingdom, monastic organization prior to the Siyam Nikaya’s emergence, and non-Buddhist religious leadership on the island. In chapter three, Blackburn delineates three stages in the development of the Siyam Nikaya and its educational institutions. These culminate in the formal establishment of the monastic order in 1753, the formation of a newly standardized monastic curriculum, and the reorganization of monastic administration. Blackburn examines how changes in monastic education and administration created the conditions “for the widespread transmission of standardized religious learning in the era of pre-print textuality” (p. 41). She argues convincingly in this chapter, and throughout the book, that the Siyam Nikaya’s ability to attract patrons, including the Kandyan king, was due to the fact that the order was identified with learning.

Chapters four, five, and six examine in greater detail how the Siyam Nikaya became so influential in Sri Lanka. Chapter four focuses on five indigenous histories

of Buddhism written in the eighteenth century by laity and monastics associated with the Siyam Nikaya. These histories create a new discourse on monasticism that depicts “desirable monasticism as learned monasticism” (p. 79). They cast the emergence of the Siyam Nikaya in terms of a narrative of Buddhism’s decline and revival. The new monastic order is heralded as the savior of a degenerate Buddhism because it restores Buddhism to an earlier pristine condition, one characterized by an emphasis on monastic learning (especially of the Pali language), discipline, and meditation. Modern scholars of Buddhism have also adopted the rhetoric of decline and revival to describe the events of this period. Blackburn argues that this rhetoric masks the diversity of precolonial and early colonial Sri Lankan Buddhism as well as the innovative character of this period. She astutely remarks: “That every historian of this period until now has described Saranamkara and his students as revivalists and reformers rather than as innovators attests to the success of the eighteenth-century narratives in their construction of an authoritative lineage” (p. 106).

Chapters five and six focus on a newly popularized Pali and Sinhala bilingual genre of commentarial literature, called the *sutra sannaya*. In a close reading of Saranamkara’s first *sutra sannaya* (the *Sararthadipani*), which became the model for subsequent bilingual commentaries, Blackburn skillfully demonstrates how the language and style of a bilingual commentary enabled Saranamkara to inculcate in Sri Lankan Buddhists a particular vision of desirable monasticism. The *sutra sannayas* served multiple purposes. They trained monks in monastic discipline and also provided useful models for preaching. At the royal court, Siyam Nikaya monks gained prestige by using *sutra sannayas* in public displays of erudition.

Blackburn provides evidence that the Siyam Nikaya’s popularization of the *sutra sannaya* resulted in the creation of a new “textual community” in the eighteenth century. The concept of textual community was first developed in studies of literacy and textuality in Europe (p. 10). Adopting the term for her study, Blackburn defines a textual community as “a group of individuals who think of themselves to at least some degree as a collective, who understand the world and their appropriate place within it in terms significantly influenced by their encounter with a shared set of written texts or oral teachings based on written texts, and who grant special status to literate interpreters of authoritative written texts” (p. 12). Blackburn argues that the *sutra sannayas* created a “shared ‘thought-world’” (p. 194) that made the Siyam Nikaya’s

monastic ideals seem natural and desirable. Because *sutra sannayas* were used in preaching, they reached a wide audience, giving rise to a new textual community that included “men and women at all levels of literacy” (p. 195). In contrast to scholars who have suggested that this elite monastic literature had relatively little impact on lay Buddhists, Blackburn demonstrates that the literature and its preachers profoundly changed Buddhism in Sri Lanka (p. 195).

Blackburn’s analysis of a Sri Lankan textual community contributes to “comparative conversation about the history of textual production, transmission and reception in relation to religious institutions” (p. 20). She urges scholars to pay attention not only to “the circumstances that sustain accepted interpretive strategies within a textual community,” but also to those circumstances that enable “interpretive shifts and challenges” (p. 12). Chapter six is largely devoted to considering how bilingual commentaries do both. Drawing on Dominick LaCapra, she examines the “worklike” aspects of the text, specifically, how the language and form of the bilingual commentary encourage certain kinds of responses in a reader or listener. Focusing on the experience of monastic readers/listeners, Blackburn is attentive to those features of the text that encourage “more constrained monastic readings” as well as to those features of the text that encourage “less constrained monastic readings” and even “resistant readings.”

The book makes arguments of considerable consequence for specialists in Buddhist or Postcolonial Studies. In particular, the book challenges the conventional view that “prior to the intensification of colonialism that occurred in the nineteenth century” Buddhism in Sri Lanka was monolithic and unchanging (p. 5). In place of a rhetoric of decline and revival which hides the extent to which Buddhism changed in the eighteenth century, Blackburn employs the notion of an emerging textual community to analyze how these changes took effect. In her concluding chapter she discusses the impact eighteenth-century innovations in monastic education and administration had on later periods of Sri Lankan history. In doing so she problematizes the notion of “Protestant Buddhism,” a term first coined by Gananath Obeyesekere to describe the ways in which European missionaries and scholars influenced Sri Lankan Buddhist self-understanding in the colonial period. One feature of Protestant Buddhism is the identification of Pali Buddhist canonical and commentarial texts as the most authoritative formulations of Buddhism. Whereas studies of Protestant Buddhism commonly attribute the privileg-

ing of Pali Buddhist texts to the influence of Europeans with an allegedly Protestant predilection for canonical sources, Blackburn argues that such privileging owes as much, if not more, to the Siyam Nikaya's emphasis on Pali learning. Thus according to Blackburn, European fascination with Pali sources is an example of what Charles Hallisey has called "intercultural mimesis" (p. 201). Eighteenth-century changes in monastic education and administration significantly influenced Orientalist constructions of Buddhism. When elite Sri Lankans

embraced Orientalist representations of Buddhism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they did so at least in part because these representations fit their own understanding of what it meant to be a Buddhist (p. 201).

The book is meticulously researched and persuasively argued. The scope of its methodological and theoretical insights makes it valuable reading not only for specialists of Theravada Buddhism, but also for Buddhist historians in general, scholars of Postcolonial Studies, and anyone engaged in research on textual communities.

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