Society, philosophy and politics in early Buddhism,

a review of A. K. Warder

By Pattrarat Suwanwatthana (ภัทรารัตน์ สุวรรณวัฒนา), MA Study of Religions 2008,

The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

Introduction

This essay responds to A. K. Warder's 'On the Relationships between Early Buddhism and Other Contemporary Systems', a thought provoking essay written over half a century ago. In the last sentences of this article, the author puts forward a position that philosophy is "not a purely speculative science in which any doctrine may be propounded at any time by the speculative philosopher with what might be called 'eternal' definitions. It is on the contrary, a historical study…"[1] Here Warder is making a plea for a historical approach to philosophy. According to Warder, philosophical ideas do not move around in a totally free atmosphere, but they specifically conditioned by one another and must be studied both in relation to one another and more generally to social and political factors. This essay will assess the role of early Buddhism within the competitive and evolving context of the Sramana movement, with the investigation of socio-economic, philosophical and political implications respectively. It will present and engage with Warder's interpretations.

[1] A. K. Warder, 'On the Relationships between Early Buddhism and Other Contemporary Systems', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (1956), p. 63.

Society

Warder argues that well before the time of Buddha, Mahavira and Makkhali Gosala and other leaders wandering ascetics had been a common feature of Indian society for some time. This movement, known as the Sramana movement, did not have a single idea or set of defined philosophical concepts or religious and ascetic practices. It was not a centrally organised movement and calling it the Sramana movement may give the sense of a single purpose which was not there. Warder also says that the institution of wandering ascetics may have been a survival from pre-Aryan religious practices.[2] This is highly uncertain and would be difficult to prove, as most of the written sources for pre-Aryan religion come from texts written in Indo Aryan languages like Pali Prakrit and Sanskrit. Warder maintains that the oldest and most coherent philosophy among the sramans was Ajivika movement, which had strong fatalist tendencies. The other philosophies grew up slightly later and some, like Jainism, seem to be a splinter from Ajivikism. These religions, Jainism, Ajivikism, Lokayata and Buddhism, were all heterodoxies, meaning they differed from the orthodox Brahmanical religion of the Vedic variety and none accepted the Veda as an authority for knowledge.

In Warder's argument, the sramana movement was threatened by social and political changes in the Gangetic region. The use of iron played a key factor in the social and cultural development of northern India just before the time of the Buddha and other leaders of the heterodox movements. The historian R. S. Sharma has pointed out, however, that the iron was probably not used in agriculture until about 500 BC, later than Warder assumed (Sharma says it was used in warfare only

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[2] Ibid., p. 47.

earlier).[3] Everyone agrees that the use of iron changed life significantly. Sharma says that it allowed the clearing of the forests and the use of more effective ploughs so that the wet rice agriculture emerged, supporting larger cities and a more dense system of urban settlements and the growth of larger cities and even kingdoms. The kingdoms of Kosala and Magadha, particularly were very powerful and emerged into autocratic monarchic states. Eventually Magadha became ruled by the powerful Maurya family and attained the status of an empire. According to Warder, these social, political and economic developments profoundly effected the sramana movement and led to their philosophical and institutional evolution into the heterodox faiths.

The major difference between Warder's approach and that accepted by some historians like Romila Thapar[4] is that Warder sees the sramanas as pre-existing and reacting to the social changes in north India rather than being a product or result of them. This seems to have a great amount of validity, because it is clear that the sramana movement did not emerge overnight and had a longer history in the region. This history is difficult to reconstruct because it is only through the major texts of the later heterodox religions that it can be done. Recently Bronkhorst has argued that the sramana ideologies all descended from a distinctive and unique culture, limited to the region of the eastern Gangetic plain, which he calls "the spiritual culture of Greater Magadha."[5] But the historians argue whether there existed a unique pre-existing culture, or not, is less important because many of the ideas which are common to the heterodox religions (and some even the Upanisads) were also 'new' being a response to a product of the new social environment.

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[3] R. S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, (Delhi, 1983) chapter six.
[4] Romila Thapar, *A History of India* (London 2002), chapter five.
[5] Johannes Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India* (Leiden, 2007), pp. 1-54.

Part of the difference in interpretation may be when Warder was writing, in the 1950s. Since that time archaeology has revealed a lot of new discoveries and made many advances of our understanding of urbanization in the Gangetic plains in what is called the Early Historic Period. The results of these discoveries suggest that urbanisation was a longer and slower process which had been slowly developing from 1000 BCE, and greatly accelerated from 600 BCE. I think this means that the entire sramana movement must be seen in light of the gradual rise of urban societies and slow outdating and reform of the Vedic religion. The rapid changes in social life as a result of the growth of urban centers created new relationships and social identities. These included break up of the clan societies of the Vedic order, social stratification, and the growth of individual property ownership. Property was no longer owned by the collective clan but instead the householder. Urban settlements and then cities also created much greater accumulation of wealth and the evolution of a ruling class and state structures. Money and coins were introduced for the first time. These developments were far more intense particularly in the eastern Gangetic plain, the exact area where the sramana movement evolved into the organised heterodox religions of Ajivikism, Buddhism, Jainism and Lokayatism.

The householder became the symbol of the age. He was the head of large household but held wealth not as part of his membership in a clan or chiefdom, but in his own name as head of the household. Although the individual household as a unit of economic production had been evolving for some time (see even the *Grhyasutras* of the *Smriti* literature), it was around the period of 600 BC onwards that it gained greater power and the *Gahapati* or householder became the important figure.[6] The property owning householder was wealthy and needs to be distinguished from

[6] Uma Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism (*Delhi, 1987), pp. 7-64.

poorer people who did not own their own properties who depended or served the wealthier property owning householders. The defining feature of mendicant orders within the sramana movement was that they defined themselves as property-less and celibate. These were the two defining features of the householder, owning a household and procreating a family. So in this way, the sramana movement is closely related and even dependent on the existence of the householder. After all, the very idea of renunciation meant giving up something — implying the existence of individual property owning units which could be let go. This was not only true in the sense that the renouncer defined himself as the very opposite of the householder. The organised renouncers, particularly Buddhism, depended very heavily on the support of the householders to pursue their spiritual quests. Since they were not working themselves, they needed others to give wealth and materials to them and in this sense were actually dependent upon the elements of society producing surplus wealth. In this sense it may be more accurate to say that the sramana movement, as well as Buddhism and the other heterodox groups, were strongly influenced and produced by these social changes rather than that they pre-existed from non-Aryan religions and then reacted to the new social changes.

Philosophy

I will now examine the philosophical aspects of Warder's article, and for this a comparison with the recent book by J. Bronkhorst on the ideologies of Greater Magadha will be made. In treating the philosophical developments within the Sramana movements, A. K. Warder makes many interesting and important observations. He notes that all of the sramanas and the heterodox movements that

emerge from them were united in their rejection of the Veda and Brahmanical knowledge. More than other accounts Warder gives special significance to the Ajivikas who he sees as closer to Jainism. He also links the Lokayatas in some ways with Buddhism. What seems to unite all of the movements philosophically, despite their very different conclusions, was that they were quite concerned with analyzing the phenomena of the experienced world, and all believed that the universe was governed by natural laws which had to be unlocked and understood. Warder believes this to be therefore an age of rational and scientific enquiry, and compares it to the Greek world.

Bronkhorst has also made an argument for a pre-existing and underlying problem and concept behind the sramanic religions of Buddhism, Ajivikism and Jainism. As mentioned already, he says that this religious basis was peculiar culture to the region: "The fact that this ideology manifests itself in several otherwise distinct movements allows us to infer that these movements had inherited it from an earlier period".[7] He says that the key idea behind these religions was rebirth and karmic retribution. Like Warder, he relates Jainism and Ajivikism, but points a difference between them by saying that whereas in Jainism, the belief that the effects of past actions could be countered by ascetic behavior as well as the non-performance of acts which could prevent future bad effects, the Ajivikas argue that past acts could not be cancelled by any ascetic behavior, though future bad effects could be. This explains why even though they were somehow fatalist the Ajivikas still practiced asceticism.[8]

The philosophical uniqueness of Buddhism for Warder came from a combination of several points together which he gives at the end of his essay. These are the non acceptance of traditional authority as a means to truth and reliance on

[7] Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha,* p. 53.
[8] Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha,* p. 45.

oneself; opposition to the idea of fatalism and belief in efficacy of human action; release being achieved through the middle way; theory of impermanence (*anicca*) and no-soul (*anatta*); acceptance of the theories of elements; a dualistic theory of knowledge; theories of universal causational; and the four indeterminates.[9] While some of these ideas are shared with some groups (like the belief in the efficacy of human action being held by Jains and Buddhists), others link Buddhism to very different groups. An example of this is the argument of Warder that Buddhism is linked conceptually with the Lokayatas and their hedonism because they define release as release from pain (i.e. feeling ease) — so that their original problem is not so different, though they eventually go beyond this in higher levels.[10] The uniqueness of Buddhism then lies in the particular combination of differences and similarities it has to other religions.

Bronkhorst has a much more reduced argument. He finds the uniqueness of Buddhism rooted in a single difference in its perspective from the other sramana faiths. He says that while Buddhism shares the problem of rebirth and karmic retribution with the other religions coming from the Sramana traditions, its solution is extremely different, so different that it recasts the problem. If the Jains and Ajivikas and others all maintain that human actions have karmic consequences, and that avoiding these consequences is achieved through either not acting or realising that one doesn't really act, the early Buddhists deny the very premise of all human actions having karmic consequence because they only hold that only intentional acts have karmic consequences. This means that stopping all human action through extreme asceticism resulting in death was also pointless. The early Buddhists were interested in intentions not acts and believed karmic retribution only applied to acts performed

[9] Warder, 'On the Relationships between Early Buddhism and Other Contemporary Systems', pp. 61-63.
[10] Ibid., pp 57-58.

from desire or thirst (*trisna*).[11] In Bronkhorst, early Buddhism shares with the other sramana faiths only the fact that it begins from the same problem — that of rebirth and karmic retribution — but its formulation is so different that it is not very telling for the overall philosophical environment.

In comparing Warder and Bronkhorst, I feel that Bronkhorst has the strength of clarity and simplicity, capturing an essence of Buddhist philosophy. But Bronkhorst is also somewhat reductivist, as all other aspects are removed from comparison after this observation is made. Warder, however, tries to treat many different aspects of the early Buddhist positions and their different relations with other sramana faiths rather than arguing for a single essence. I find this approach more informative and useful because it tells about more aspects of early Buddhism. The overall roots and commonalities in the sramanic religions are also seen very differently in Warder and Bronkhorst. Warder sees the 'spirit of the age' as a kind of rationalism and scientific enquiry into the structures of the universe and compares it to classical Greece. Bronkhorst sees this as linked to a specific culture which he argues is unique to the region of Magadha and not simply a response to Vedism. On this level I find Bronkhorst's ideas more interesting because although he is more simplifying, he has the ancient Indian as focus rather than the model of classical Greece.

[11] Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha,*pp. 53-53.

Polotics

The political evolution of northern India in the time of the sramana movements was complicated and geographically uneven, with the western regions of the Gangetic plains undergoing different political evolutions than the eastern Gangetic plains.[12] In this final part of the essay I will focus on the role of the sramana movements in the political development of the eastern gangetic plain as treated by Warder. The overall transition in this region over the course of the first millennium BCE was from local tribal groups to monarchical kingdoms finally to an empire, which emerged in Magadha under the Mauryas in the fourth century BCE.

For Warder the sramana movement pre-existed the rise of monarchies and had to interact with them. In fact, the rise of autocratic monarchies which eroded the communal power of the tribes was a very important historical process which affected the society at large and the sramana movements in particular. Each of the sramana movements in some way or other made its 'peace' with the evolving political institutions. According to Warder, in the end the heretical sects, in fact, "provided the necessary ideological armoury for this social revolution".[13] The sramana movements were seen as very useful by the emerging monarchy and there was direct interaction between the sramanas and kings at a number of levels. Many sramana ideologies could be seen to justify the new political hierarchy. The idea of karma accepted by all the sramana movements, the great ideology of Magadha for Bronkhorst, justified the social hierarchy of kingship in the sense that the power and majesty of the king was thought to derive from his meritorious actions in previous lives. Not all sramana ideas supported monarchies in a direct way, but they also could do so by psychologically

[12] Romila Thapar, *A History of Early India*, Chapter Four.
[13] Warder 'On the Relationships Between Early Buddhism and Other Contemporary Systems', p. 60.

preparing people to accept a larger state. For example the fatalism of the Ajivikas, according to Warder, helped the rise of autocratic states by rationalising the loss of freedom of tribal and communal groups as being beyond human control. This spread apathy by making people feel that their actions made no difference in their lives, making them easier to govern.[14] The remainder of this section will look at the relationship of kings and early Buddhism.

A number of important kings took keen interest in Buddhism. According to Buddhist sources, the king Bimbisara was noted for his following of Buddhist doctrine. The Buddhist texts say Bimbisara was a close friend of Suddhodana, Siddhartha Gautama's father, and admired the prince Gautama's personality before he became the Buddha. It is also mentioned that after King Bimbisara listened to a sermon of the Buddha, he attained *Sotapatti-Phala*[15] and donated *Veluvana* to the Buddha. When Bimbisara endured imprisonment by his son, Ajatashatru, he used a Buddhist walking meditation as a survival technique.[16] Eventually the Buddha even convinced king Ajatashatru of the benefits of Buddhist practices over trade and gained his support.[17] Though they depict royal interest in Buddhism, because these stories were told by Buddhists they can also be understood as reflecting the Buddhist need and desire to interact with kings. The Buddhists were attracted to kings because they could provide support for the Sangha. They were also very keen to show that they had the support of the king because this would help them gain more popularity in general.

A number of Buddhist policies were designed to accommodate kingship. There was a strict condition in the Vinaya, for example, which prevented members of

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[14] Ibid., p.44

[15] Tipiṭaka (Mūla) Suttapiṭaka Khuddakanikāya Khuddakapāṭhapā 7. Tirokuṭṭasuttaṃ (online) Available at : http://www.tipitaka.org/romn/

[16] Varma, C.B.,*The Illustrated Jataka & Other Stories of the Buddha*, 092 - *Bimbisara*. (online) Available at : http://igncа.nic.in/jatak092.htm

[17] Basham, A.L., *History and Doctrines of the Ajivikas: A Vanish Indian Religion*, p.11-12

royal armed forces from being ordained into the Sangha.[18] Warder mentions that it was possible that the Buddha introduced these regulations from sympathy for his fellow ksatriyas[19], but it is more likely, the regulations were a product of compromise and negotiation between monarchies and the Sangha. From the Sangha's point of view it was necessary to ensure people did not become ordained for the wrong reason.[20] On the other hand, as restrictions against ordaining children and diseased people indicate, the Sangha's policies may have also been motivated by trying to either protect itself or reach agreements with other institutions over possible conflict of interests. In this case, the prohibition was probably an attempt to avoid conflict with the monarchy.

Buddhism developed a number of ideas which kings found very useful to build up their authority. The most important ideology in this regard was the idea of the ideal buddhist emperor or cakravartin. The Buddhists created the idea of he cakrvartin as a moral king who ruled through dharma and made the world prosper. According to the Lakkhana sutta, the cakravrtin was a 'great being' like the Buddha himself, and could be known by 32 special marks on his body each of which was earned by good deeds in his past lives and implied certain enjoyments.[21] The idea of the chakravartin was a very attractive to monarchy and shows that Buddhism was able to develop very strong political ideology which reinforced the institution of kingship during its early existence. Later on in the time of the Mauryas the king Asoka tried to adopt this role in his public face.

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[18] Warder, 'On the Relationships Between Early Buddhism and Other Contemporary Systems'. p. 45

[19] ibid., p.45 : "…Whether the attitude of acceptance of monarchy was original in Buddhism or not(and probably it was original- it seems quite likely that the Buddha had some sympathy with his fellow Ksatriyas and similar aim of the king for cakravartinship..."

[20] Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, p.54.

[21] Tipiṭaka (Mūla) Suttapiṭaka Dīghanikāya Pāthikavaggapā Lakkhaṇasutta : Available at: http://www.tipitaka.org/romn/

The emphasis on the ethical 'enlightened' monarch raises the question also of what the purpose of the Buddhist royal ideology was about. Warder suggests that Buddhism was trying to soften the impact of the autocracy on the lives of the people by introducing compassionate ideas and models for the king.[22] This argument slightly goes against the idea of Buddhism providing the "ideological armoury" for the rise of empire. But perhaps the role of Buddhism was both to facilitate monarchical power but also to soften it and make it less harsh and thus more acceptable to the people. The Buddhist engagement

Conclusion

Overall, Warder's approach, even more than fifty years after its publication, makes important points for understanding Buddhism. I find that besides his attempt to present the sraman age as a rationalist and scientific one, which seems to be based on a comparison with ancient Greece, most of his interpretations are convincing even in light of more recent studies.

[22] Warder, 'On the Relationships Between Early Buddhism and Other Contemporary Systems', p. 44.

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