




Book Review

Precarious Balance: Sinhala Buddhism and the Forces of Pluralism

By Bardwell L. Smith. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2022, 208 pages, ISBN 9780813945385 (paperback), \$32.50.

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IN what is a “re-presentation” (1) of six earlier essays on Sri Lankan history published between 1972 and 2012, *Precarious Balance* aims to draw lessons for the present from various themes of continuity and upheaval appearing in Sinhalese Buddhism across its lifetime on the island. Published a few months before the author’s death at the age of ninety-seven, Smith’s monograph analyses developments in Sri Lankan Buddhism from its inception during the third century BCE through to the early postcolonial years following independence in 1948. First visiting Sri Lanka in 1965, Smith—a scholar of East and South Asian religion and philosophy—uses his considerable knowledge of the island’s peoples, history, and culture to “imagine the grounds for vision and hope, encompassing both clear-eyed realism and hard-won, fragile optimism” (4). Given the legacies of ethnic and religious tension and conflict in Sri Lanka today, Smith’s work encourages us to reflect on the issues emerging in the history of Sinhalese Buddhism on the island and to consider their implications for contemporary Sri Lanka.

Chapter one explores the components of the “*ideal social order*” (6) which emerge from the narratives and analyses of the Pali language chronicles, the *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvaṃsa*. Smith highlights historic continuities in monastic and royal lineages, despite episodes of invasion and occupation and the emergence of unorthodox institutional forms and devotional practices. He presents moments of disorder and chaos, alongside those of continuity and stability. He presents the notion of the “*symbiotic ideal*” (15) which formed the basis for later imaginings of Sinhalese Buddhist identity. This ideal finds further significance in the relationship between the monarchy and the sangha. The king, as head of the realm, was obliged to maintain a strong and united Buddhist monkhood. The sangha, in turn, had a duty to keep the monarch just, by recording his meritorious deeds and transgressions in equal measures. Smith builds on this theme of symbiosis by stressing the interconnection between societal happenings and occurrences in the wider cosmos. Referring to the consecration stories of Devānampiya Tissa and Parākramabāhu I, Smith emphasizes the role of royal power as “the instrument” (23) of cosmic power and harmonious living.

Chapter two examines ideas of legitimacy with specific reference to the relationship between the monarchy and the sangha during the Anurādhapura period which spanned the third century BCE to the tenth century CE. The potential for disorder, Smith argues, repeatedly necessitated the legitimation of authority to ensure both political continuity and the promotion of Buddhist teaching. Highlighting the importance of the Aśoka model of kingship to understand ideas of legitimate political authority, Smith refers again to the position of



the sangha as a crucial factor in restricting monarchical overreach, with a unified Buddhist order ensuring a cohesive realm and enhancing royal power. In doing this, Smith illustrates how the process of legitimation is always ongoing and requires regular reaffirmation as structures of authority and power cannot entertain challenges to their authenticity without being greatly affected. For such structures to persist as legitimate, considerations of inclusivity become important, and this “notion of inclusivity...has major implications” (49) for Sri Lanka’s present trajectory.

In chapter three, Smith analyses the “theoretical spectrum of stances” (54) taken by Sinhalese Buddhists to accommodate beliefs and practices from other religious traditions. Focusing on early medieval Sri Lanka, from the late Anurādhapura period through the Polonnaruva period (from the tenth to the late thirteenth century), he documents how these influences were assimilated and transformed. Religious assimilation, like processes of legitimation, was a continuous and ongoing phenomenon, the key dilemma being how Sinhalese Buddhists might “be responsive to changing circumstances without losing a sense of [their] own self-identity” (55). Throughout the chapter, Smith highlights how religious syntheses took place not just in scholarly activity but also in popular devotional expression. He documents the introduction of trends into orthodox Sinhalese Buddhism from Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism, and yet reminds us that accommodation had limits, and hierarchies emerged to ensure the continuity of the dominant tradition. From this early medieval Sri Lankan history “the seeds were sown” (74) for developments in subsequent historical periods. Smith suggests that contemporary thinking regarding inclusivity and renewal in Sri Lanka ought to acknowledge and reflect on these events.

Chapter four again explores these tensions during the Polonnaruva period, with Smith tracking the challenges posed by the growth of pluralistic forces in Sinhalese Buddhist society. He argues that during the existence of the Polonnaruva Kingdom society went from being orthogenetic to increasingly heterogenetic and that the changes of the era brought new vulnerabilities and the death of the “classic, nationwide form of a ceremonial center” (78) on the island. Dynastic struggles, the rise of foreign mercenaries and settlers, and increasing courtly autonomy are all referenced as factors which ended island-wide unity and organizational centralization. The failure to reintegrate competing forces, be they social, political, or religious, caused questioning of the very unity of Sinhalese Buddhist society itself. The dynamic tensions of the period again hold lessons for contemporary Sri Lanka, given the reality that non-Sinhalese peoples and cultures cannot “be wished away by repatriation nor absorbed by conversion” (100).

In chapter five, Smith pivots to the early postcolonial period, examining how Sinhalese Buddhists negotiated the conflicting appeals of tradition and modernity. Noting the communal crises which erupted in the years following independence, he frames the dilemma then (and still) faced by Sinhalese Buddhists as one of identity, and recommends they consider “earlier manifestations” of identity and the relation of its “current and historical forms” (107). Smith stresses the need for religious self-awareness and emphasizes the “indissoluble connection” between Sinhalese Buddhism and what he describes as its “Indian roots” (109) to remind Sinhalese Buddhists that they have nothing to lose by acknowledging and affirming that which is non-traditional. Raising questions of organizational reform and restructuring, he urges Sinhalese Buddhists to fashion a “constructive unity” (117) out of pluralistic elements to ensure meaningful progress for everyone in society.

In the final chapter, Smith offers alternative suggestions to the dangers of fundamentalism by focusing on the shared and interconnected aspects of personal, communal, and national imaginaries in contemporary Sri Lanka. Criticizing the efforts of those who look back to Sri Lanka’s past to fixate upon the roots of Buddhist fundamentalism, he insists that this same past also contains all the necessary ingredients for a vision of an inclusive society. Pluralism, he argues, has long constituted Sri Lankan society and been fundamental to its history from precolonial times right through to the present. Societies across the world, Smith writes, are

self-examining their cultural, ethnic, and religious heritage and roots. Though he concedes that this makes the present confusing and volatile, he asserts that it also “provides the possibility for newly emerging forms of pluralism in which different traditions face each other afresh” (126). There is no path to resolving the dilemmas of identity, Smith concludes, without championing inclusivity and working to make it a reality.

Throughout his monograph, Smith succeeds in drawing attention to the key tensions which have characterized the development of Sinhalese Buddhism since its inception. He convincingly illustrates the historical challenges it faced in balancing unity with diversity, centripetal forces with centrifugal ones, orthodoxy with non-conformism, and continuity with reform. The bulk of Smith’s analyses, however, deal with the Anurādhapura and Polonnaruwa periods and very little material emerges from Sri Lanka’s long period of European colonization, from the arrival of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century to independence from Britain in 1948. While the same themes and tensions undoubtedly remained, it is exceedingly difficult to discuss the developments of the postcolonial period without acknowledging the specific challenges and threats Sinhalese Buddhism faced during colonial times, from the collapse of the monastic order to the loss of kingship.

Nevertheless, Smith’s analysis remains highly relevant today—especially considering the ongoing global challenges facing Sinhalese national Buddhist traditions as they navigate modernization and pluralization. His refrain that Buddhism has historically maintained a precarious balance between its religious and sociopolitical roles provides us with a useful framework for understanding the broader issues confronting national Buddhist traditions in a rapidly changing world. As Smith writes, “the genius of Sinhala-Buddhist culture was expressed through its remarkable inclusivity and assimilations” (130); thus its ongoing attempts to adapt to the forces of modernism and pluralism, while maintaining its cultural and religious integrity, hold several key lessons. Indeed, the precarious balance which Smith reckons with throughout his work exists not just in Sri Lankan Buddhism but also in the Buddhist traditions of other nations across the Buddhist world.

The challenge of maintaining a cohesive identity in the face of religious diversity is as pressing in contemporary Sri Lanka as it was during the Anurādhapura and Polonnaruwa periods. While the experiences of the civil war and the anti-government *Aragalaya* protests of 2022 have seen moves toward the accommodation of religious minorities, the ongoing association of Sinhalese Buddhism with Sinhalese nationalism has continued to complicate this process. For instance, contestations over archaeological sites between Buddhist groups and Hindu and Muslim communities continue to make national headlines and threaten inter-communal harmony.

In Myanmar, too, the mainly Muslim Rohingya minority have remained subject to widespread violence from both Myanmar’s armed forces and the various separatist groups in Rakhine state who challenge the national authority of the ruling military junta. Similarly, in Thailand, continued conflict and instability with the Muslim minority in the southern provinces follow from the frustrations of southern Muslims in finding appropriate accommodations within an overwhelmingly Buddhist Thai state. Smith suggests that expanding the limits of self-identity “helps to foster...a greater capacity for openness, appreciation of diversity, and engagement with a process of inclusivity” (133). As these examples from contemporary Buddhist societies demonstrate, however, practical implementation of inclusivity is much easier said than done.

Buddhists in these societies can perhaps take lessons from the rise of *global* Buddhism—especially in the West—which has challenged the traditional understanding of national Buddhist identities tied to any specific region, ethnicity, or tradition. Religious identity, as Smith highlights throughout his monograph, is an evolving phenomenon. Though he does not dwell extensively on this in his analysis, evolving pluralization allows for innovations and a vibrant exchange of ideas and practices. Through the efforts of missionary organizations, such as the Soka Gakkai and the Triratna Community, and academic studies of Buddhism at non-monastic institutions, Buddhism has experienced novel interpretations in new cultural and religious environments. Smith laments that a “model of pluralism that fosters harmony and well-being, not divisiveness” may at

present “seem impossibly remote” (132) to many Sri Lankan Buddhists, yet they only need to observe the rise of Buddhism in the West to see the benefits of such a model. Despite association with racial privilege and gender discrimination, currents of global Buddhism have managed to emphasize personal awareness and social responsibility ahead of religious orthodoxy and national concerns. This contrasts with national/communal identifications one often finds in Buddhism in its homelands across South and Southeast Asia. Buddhist communities are no longer confined to the boundaries they experienced in pre-colonial and colonial periods, and the global interconnectedness of the modern world should naturally force a reevaluation of Buddhist identities more generally.

Smith also emphasizes the continuing tensions that have arisen as conservative and reformist factions have struggled over the future direction of Sinhalese Buddhism. The transformation of the Sri Lankan economy toward market-orientated values—a trend which began under the Jayawardene government in the late 1970s—and the rise of secularism have gradually eroded traditional ways of life for Buddhists in Sri Lanka. The drive to attract tourism and foreign investment to revive the flagging economy has placed the Sri Lankan state in a difficult position as it seeks to balance the demands of economic development with the need to preserve traditional values rooted in Sinhalese Buddhism. The leadership of secular civic organizations (rather than Buddhist groups) in driving the *Aragalaya* protests of 2022 has also placed renewed focus on the role and relevance of Buddhism in public life, especially among Sri Lankan youth. Such tensions between cosmopolitan elites who embrace modern and secular values and traditionalists who cherish established religious ideals and practices remain a fixture of societies across the Buddhist world. Indeed, they remain central for societies responding to modernizing developments in other, and even larger, religions.

In sum, Smith’s monograph, though heavily focused on pre-colonial Sri Lanka, provides a valuable base from which to frame the challenges facing national Buddhist traditions in the modern world. Smith’s work is, however, exceedingly abstract and theoretical, focusing more on conceptual analyses than evaluations of particular historical moments, and is strongly oriented toward readers already familiar with historical developments in Sinhalese Buddhism. Nevertheless, his monograph will surely become an important reference point for those seeking to understand changes in contemporary Sri Lankan society and to draw parallels with the past. Jerri Hurlbutt mentions (in the book’s epilogue) that Smith aims to trace the history of pluralistic roots in Sri Lanka “with the hope that they can again be a resource for resolving conflicts on a larger scale that encompasses social, political, historical, and religious differences and experiences” (136). Within the context of larger pluralizing and modernizing impulses affecting national Buddhist traditions today, Buddhists perhaps need to look beyond their respective cultures—as well as within them—to forge societies based on tolerance and mutual respect.