

REVIEW ARTICLE

PROBLEMS WITH PACCEKA-BUDDHAS

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Martin G. Wiltshire, *Ascetic Figures before and in Early Buddhism: the Emergence of Gautama as the Buddha*, Religion and Reason 30, Berlin, New York, Mouton de Gruyter, 1990, pp.xxxvi, 338.

This book follows a well-worn sidetrack in Buddhist studies: the description of a ‘pre-canonical Buddhism’, suppressed by the historical institution of the monastic order, but now unearthed by a modern (Western) scholar from the texts it preserved. The general strategy, which is orientalist in the recent and pejorative sense of the word, recalls to me the book-madness of Peter Kien in Elias Canetti’s *Auto da Fé*; or perhaps better one of Borges’ fantasies, a library-dream induced by juggling with texts so that arcane truths, inaccessible at first sight, are slowly disclosed. Wiltshire’s fantasy goes like this: there was (p.251) a ‘Buddhistic tradition prior to the advent of Sākya-muni’ (spelt thus throughout: it should be either Pali *Sakyamuni* or Sanskrit *Śākyamuni*; I shall use the Pali form *Sakyamuni*). This was a tradition of multiple solitary sages, whose enlightenment consisted in a non-verbal, untransmittable inward peace opposed to doctrines or views, and realized individually. In such a tradition ‘the notion of transmission is inherently problematic’: this is ‘the antinomy of transmitting the untransmittable’ (p.276). ‘The concept of a “teacher” or “instructor” therefore emerged only gradually in this tradition’ (p.294); the historical institution now known as Buddhism is due to the followers of Gotama, the ‘hearers’ (*sāvaka*), who created a ‘cultus’ around him as the unique Teacher (e.g. pp.xviii–xix, 46, 274), claiming that the path to enlightenment was found through his teaching. ‘But in elevating the Buddha to this special status’ — and the final paragraph of the book informs us that we cannot know exactly ‘why it happened to be the person of Siddhattha who was selected out in this way’ (p.297) — the hearers fell ‘into the same trap: [they created] yet another form of doctrine, view, etc. The subsequent history of Buddhism (viz. Mahāyanist [*sic*] forms) is a tale of its attempts to extricate itself from this dilemma, that is, the one of doctrine inhibit-practice’ (pp.277, *sic*).

The key to unlocking all this is a study of the figure of the *pacceka-buddha* (Prakrit *patteya-*, Sanskrit *pratyeke-*), a term which Wiltshire thinks refers to

the solitary sages whose untransmittable inward peace constituted enlightenment in pre-Sakyamuni 'Buddhist' tradition. Various translations of the term are listed on pp.300–1; *pacceka/pratyeka* usually means singly or individually, and the most common Buddhist understanding of the word is that it denotes those who reach enlightenment by themselves, without hearing the teaching of a 'Fully Perfected Buddha' (*sammā-sambuddha*) such as Gotama, but who do not establish a new dispensation (literally teaching, *sāsana*) of their own, as do Fully Perfected Buddhas. The *pacceka-buddha* is certainly a difficult and ambiguous figure, about whom sometimes conflicting things are said in the texts. The only other monograph on the subject is Ria Kloppenborg's *The Paccekabuddha*, Leiden, E. J. Brill 1974; she provided information solely from the Pali sources (but did translate a Sanskrit text in an Appendix), and attempted no account of the origin of the concept. Her work has been strongly criticized (see the reviews by R. F. Gombrich in *Orientalische Literaturzeitung* vol. 74, 1979 and J. W. de Jong in *Indo-Iranian Journal* vol. 18, 1976). Wiltshire, who necessarily covers a lot of the same ground as Kloppenborg, does address the issue of origins, and does deal, albeit rather cursorily, with other than Pali sources. He starts from a remark in Gombrich's review, where he 'suggested that [*pacceka-buddha*-s] have no basis in historical fact but are merely a classificatory abstraction devised by Buddhist doctrine' (p.x). Wiltshire disagrees, and locates them as 'the first renouncers or earliest śramanas [ascetics]' (p.292); the historical origin of ascetic renunciation is traced to Videha (in the Ganges plain), and associated with legends of king-renouncers. (An extensive literature exists on the origins of asceticism in India, all of which is ignored.)

If such a conspiracy theory of Buddhist history were presented as a religious position, by a (Mahāyāna) Buddhist, it would of course be inappropriate for me to describe it as a fantasy; one would simply say that it could not be justified on academic grounds. But the thesis is presented as historical scholarship, and so it must be judged according to scholarly criteria. Wiltshire's writing style is often clumsy but usually modest: in the Preface he states that 'the book is conceived as a preliminary exploration and the author will be more than satisfied if it spurs others into responding to and following up some of the issues raised here'. I certainly hope that the book will inspire more work on the *pacceka-buddha*. In the space allotted for this review, I cannot attempt thoroughly to disprove Wiltshire's thesis, but I can indicate the kinds of problem and concern which make me find it wholly unpersuasive.

(1) In the first chapter he claims to study texts from 'the early and middle period of the composition of the Pali Nikāyas' as opposed to 'later Buddhist dogma' (p.1). (He abandons this approach explicitly at the start of chapter 2 (p.57), and in fact is happy to use data from any and every text as evidence for his historical reconstruction.) The chronology of the canonical texts is a very

complex and contested issue; his picture of what constitutes our 'earliest sources' is quite speculative and for the most part wholly unargued. The text discussed most is the *Sutta Nipāta*. It is certainly true that parts of this text must be early, since commentarial material on them is itself included in the Canon: just how early, of course, we cannot know. One of Emperor Āśoka's inscriptions, from the 3rd century B.C., mentions the titles of seven texts, some of which have been tentatively identified with portions of the *Sutta Nipāta* as we now have it. But all these judgements are difficult and provisional, and Wiltshire's sweeping characterizations of 'the early Pali sources' are offered with apparently minimal awareness of the real problems in dating early Buddhist texts. He relies heavily throughout the book on his interpretation of a collection of verses in the *Sutta Nipāta*, in which, *inter alia*, solitariness is praised. These verses have a canonical commentary, and so are indeed 'early': at least, they must be earlier than the commentary. Almost every stanza ends with the refrain 'one should live solitary like the (single) horn of the rhinoceros' (*khaggavisāṇa-kappo*, mistranslated by Wiltshire as 'like a rhinoceros'). Later texts, in both Pali and Sanskrit, say that these verses were spoken by various *pacceka-buddha*-s, and they have often been taken to characterize the ethos of those 'Hermit Buddhas' (one of the translations offered for the term). I think that in fact the solitariness in question here is to be understood sociologically as the 'single-ness' of being unmarried, leading the celibate monastic life, rather than the physical solitude of eremitic asceticism, and in that sense it is spiritually applicable to all monks and nuns. But be that as it may, it is quite possible that there is a profound paradox here. The word *pacceka-buddha* is not found in this text, nor in any others which could, on external grounds, be specifically judged to be early. As Wiltshire knows, in some Sanskrit texts, and some Chinese translations, the term appears as *pratyaya-buddha* (Appendix I, pp.301–2). K. R. Norman's article 'The Pratyeka-buddha in Buddhism and Jainism' (in P. Denwood & A. Piatigorsky, *Buddhist Studies Ancient and Modern*, London, Curzon Press 1983) offered philological arguments to suggest that the earliest version of the term was in fact what appears in Sanskrit as *pratyaya*, and that the spellings *pacceka* in Pali and *patteya* in Prakrit could have evolved from it; they were then wrongly backformed into Sanskrit as *pratyeka*, and misunderstood as being from *prati-eka*, 'individually'. *Pratyaya* means 'cause'; Norman, who accepted a modified form of Gombrich's explanation of the origin of the concept, suggested that the term originally meant "one awakened by an (external) cause", as opposed to Gotama or Mahavira [*sic*] who were "self-awakened" without any external cause' (op.cit. p.99). Wiltshire is aware of this work, and even tries to incorporate it, in passing, into his own account (pp.127, 294). But if Norman is right, then the earliest meaning of the term had nothing whatsoever to do with the ideal of the solitary sage, or any of the other aspects of the Rhinoceros Horn verses on

which Wiltshire lays so much stress, and to which he adds so much data of a similar kind; they would have been connected to the idea of the *pacceka-buddha* only by mistake, by later texts which had misunderstood the word. And if this was so, then Wiltshire's entire depiction of a 'Buddhistic' tradition prior to Sakyamuni is connected to the central thread on which the book is woven by a mistake. Of course all this is debatable; but it is nowhere debated in this book.

(2) He repeatedly speaks of 'the alleged uniqueness of the Buddha' (p.x), and of the early Buddhist disciples — the 'hearers' — as a 'movement whose main thrust centred upon the uniqueness of one single figure' (p.46), and even claims that in one context 'the representation of the Buddha's [enlightenment] as a unique, unprecedented experience — the standard interpretation of Nikāya doctrine — is a form of superimposition on the part of the "cultus"' (p.192). As it stands, this is an absurd misreading of Buddhism, whose attitude to the particular significance of its founder is subtle and complex. Buddhism regards its own Truth as universally true, whether or not at any given time there exists a Buddha to discover and preach it. From this follows a quite specific attitude to history and religious authority: unlike what became the dominant tradition of Vedic Hinduism, on the one hand, which holds the Vedas to be a-historical and without any author (either human or divine), (Pali) Buddhism locates its 'revelation' in the experiences and statements of a historical, human person. On the other hand, unlike Christianity and Islam, the historicity of a unique founding figure is not intrinsic to the salvific message: all Buddhas are, in this sense, the same and interchangeable, in that they rediscover the same Truth. Although past and future Buddhas are not often named or discussed in the canonical texts, the idea of a plurality of Buddhas is common, and there would seem to be no logical space anywhere in Buddhist thought for a doctrine of the uniqueness or finality of Gotama's 'revelation' in the Christian or Islamic sense. This attitude to history and truth makes possible the idea that as well as the series of 'Fully Perfected Buddhas', of whom Gotama was the most recent, others might attain by themselves to knowledge of the Truth, but (for whatever reason) not pass it on to others. Wiltshire knows this, no doubt; but his rhetorical exaggerations suggest that he is a kind of academic hooligan intent on 'hearer-bashing'; and to that end he creates the unnecessary phantom of an 'allegedly unique Buddha'. What he means of course is that for the redactors of the texts it was unthinkable that Gotama should be just one amongst many *contemporary* 'teachers' of the untransmittable enlightening experience; or that the stories, poems, sermons, classificatory schemes, etc., etc., which they so carefully preserved should be just dogmatic hindrances to spiritual achievement. But one would not really expect them to think or say this, would one? In fact

canonical texts repeatedly stress that it is the truth rather than its 'prophet' which is important; and they are remarkable both for their constant emphasis on the inadequacy of mere traditional transmission of the Buddha's doctrines, his ideas and ideals, apart from personal experience of them, and for their sophisticated intertwining of the ideas that there is a 'right view' and that the highest levels of religious experience are beyond the holding of such 'views'. But Wiltshire does not want to see any of this; he wants to see through the texts to reveal a hidden truth which their 'doctrine inhibit-practice' has concealed — from all but himself. It is just as well for him that the 'hearers' did have the spiritual backwardness to preserve the texts; for without them, of course, his book would have been wholly impossible. This is biting the hand that feeds you, with a vengeance.

(3) The third chapter is the longest in the book, and is the heart of Wiltshire's *historical* argument about the origins and nature of the earliest ascetic renunciation in Indian religion. In it he considers various stories about kings who renounced the world in both Buddhism and Jainism — very misleadingly referred to as 'Hindu heterodoxies' (p.133). In what he (probably rightly) considers the earliest versions of a story of four kings, four verses in Pali describe each king as '(starting to) live the life of a mendicant' on account of their seeing four different events; the Jain version simply says that they became ascetics (cited pp.120–2). Later texts identify the ascetic-kings as *pacceka-buddha*-s. But nothing in these stories, early or late, suggests that this was 'the origin' of renunciation, as Wiltshire assumes without argument. Indeed, the brevity of the mention of their taking up asceticism would seem rather strongly to argue that the narratives simply take it for granted as an existing phenomenon, which needed no explanation. In fact he admits that it is not possible to say 'whether there is any historical basis for this legend or whether it was purely a contrivance to further the cause of the śramaṇa movement' (p.166). One of the kings was called Nimi or Nami, from Videha, and this then leads him into a long discussion of a large number of stories which feature either 'the name Nimi or some variant of it' or 'some king of Videha who renounces his kingdom' (p.138). These legends are taken from all sorts of texts, Buddhist, Jain and Brahmanical, from widely different historical periods. One of them does not fit the mold: it is about a previous life of the Buddha Gotama as one of the kings, who clearly could not have been a *pacceka-buddha*. Undismayed, Wiltshire promptly sets out to show, in a tenuous and forced argument, that there are 'anomalies and inconsistencies' in the story which suggest that it was originally a *pacceka-buddha* story on which the figure of the Buddha in a past life 'has been superimposed' (pp.153–9). When a scholar has to start changing the texts to fit his theory, you know he is in trouble. In the next chapter he admits that the stories are legendary, but

claims that one can know from them, in connexion with other (non-geographical) evidence, that 'this nexus of beliefs and practices originated in the region of Videha' (p.255). But there is no reason why the region in which a legendary story takes place should be any more historically reliable than the names of the kings. For Wiltshire the fact that the stories all concern kings, and the sacrificing king was 'the ultimate attainment possible [for non-Brahmins] within the brāhmaṇa "cultus"' suggests that the rejection of that attainment 'therefore gave birth to the very concept of "renunciation" itself' (p.151). The logic is obviously faulty: as before, the kings can just as easily be imagined to have taken to an already existing tradition of renunciatory asceticism. But perhaps even more important, Wiltshire must be aware that in the extensive discussions of the origin of renunciation, a common position has held that it was a pre-Brahmanical, non-Aryan practice which was introduced, perhaps by the kingly class, into Brahmanical religion, where it became, as is well-known, a central, indeed for Louis Dumont *the* central phenomenon of Brahmanical religion. It is hardly satisfactory to ignore all this and simply announce that the origin of renunciation lay in the rejection of Brahmanism.

(4) The book was produced from camera-ready copy, which explains some strange forms of lay-out, and the otherwise bizarre appearance of two notes obviously made by Wiltshire to himself on a word-processor, and which he has forgotten to do anything about: 'Mahāvamsa-ṭikā — cite Cooray' (p.xxxiv n.3), and 'Cite Stutley sv ahimsā' (p.114 n.86). It perhaps also explains the rather large number of errors and omissions in spelling and the provision of diacritics. The spelling *Agāṇṇa* (for *Aggaṇṇa*) must, however, be a straight-forward mistake, since it appears on every occasion (pp.44, 179ff.). In general Wiltshire seems to have consulted primary sources, although he states in the Preface that he uses for the most part the translations (not always reliable) of the Pali Text Society, and in the discussion of Jainism openly refrains from a detailed study of one the relevant Jaina texts, which has not been translated (pp.xxx-xxxi). There are some flagrant mistakes. I will cite two:

(i) On pp.273ff. he announces that he will 'now draw together the different strands of evidence throughout this study into a final, concerted interpretation'. The very next paragraph deals with the four *āsava*-s (roughly, 'corruptions'), translated as those of sense-desire, desire for existence, views, and ignorance. We are told that mostly the Nikāyas mention only the first three, and that this suggests that ignorance was added later; and that since the ignorance involved is that of the Four Noble Truths, 'it can be seen that its inclusion alongside the other āsavas introduced the 'cultic' element into the system of practice; for the four noble truths represent the essential teaching of the Buddha'. The addition of ignorance was made 'in order to accomodate the notion of the [hearer]'. The previous three are alleged to 'form a natural

counterpart to the three restraints . . . which distinguish the [solitary pre-Sakyamuni sage]: 'control of body' is related to sense-desire, 'restraint of mind' to 'the desire to persist as an individual', and 'restraint of speech' is 'cessation of the imbalanced dominance of the intellect' (this last is his elaboration of the corruption of views). These 'counterparts' are overly schematic and *ad hoc*; but the real problem is that Wiltshire has not been careful enough with his sources. His one reference in this discussion is a footnote which states 'See Nyanatiloka, sv *āsava*' (p.290 n.125). (This is a reference to Nyanatiloka's *Buddhist Dictionary*, Colombo, Frewin 1972, which appears in the Bibliography only under its title.) But Nyanatiloka's entry cautiously and correctly states that 'a list of *three*, omitting the [corruption] of Views, is possibly older and is more frequent in the Suttas' (op.cit. p.23, italics in original). So a moment's inattention in reading a dictionary, and evident unfamiliarity with the texts themselves, produces a grand theory based on a simple error about which of the four is sometimes omitted.

(ii) At the outset of the book he says that 'the status of the paccekabuddha within Early Buddhism can best be summarized in the form of three distinct but interconnected propositions' (pp.xi-xii). The texts he cites in the notes are, with one exception, from the late-canonical *Apadāna* and from commentaries edited in their present form in Sri Lanka from c.500-1000 A.D.. so it is odd to describe them as 'Early Buddhism'. The third proposition is that 'the paccekabuddha cannot co-exist with a sammāsambuddha and therefore belongs to a different era'. In the appended note (p.xxxiv n.4) he cites a phrase from the *Apadāna* and one from the commentary to the *Sutta Nipāta*. The translations offered are close to those given by Kloppenborg (op.cit. pp.13, 19); both are wrong, and both have been specifically dealt with by Gombrich (op.cit p.80) and de Jong (op. cit. p.323) respectively. The first is *ye sabbabuddhesu katādhikārā aladdhamokkhā jinasāsanesu*. Wiltshire translates: 'those who honoured all buddhas without attaining liberation during the dispensation of a Jina'. Gombrich showed that the first three words should be rendered 'who acquired the moral qualifications under all Buddhas'. The translation 'qualification(s)' for *adhikāra* not only catches echoes of the extensive use of this term in an analogous sense in Brahmanical Sanskrit, but also of the fact that it appears, in texts which Wiltshire claims to know, in a list of qualifying conditions for both *pacceka-buddha*-hood (where there are five) and for full Buddha-hood (where there are eight). In this context it is often rendered 'service', and is taken to refer to a willingness to do anything for a Buddha, to the extent of sacrificing one's life. The last two words are to be rendered 'without having attained liberation in the Dispensations of (those) Conquerors'. In itself, of course, this sentence does not quite make the point Wiltshire wishes to make; it merely says that *pacceka-buddha*-s have fulfilled at least one of the necessary conditions without attaining *nirvāṇa*. The second

phrase is *paccekabuddhā buddhe appatvā buddhānaṃ uppajjanakāle yeva uppajjanti* (mis-spelt *uppajanti*); he translates 'paccekabuddhas are those who do not become buddhas in the time of the appearance of buddhas [i.e. sammāsambuddhas]'. The correct rendering, given by de Jong, is '*paccekabuddhas* arise without having met *buddhas* and only at the time of the birth of *buddhas*'. As is evident, this is exactly the opposite of Wiltshire's version. It is a puzzling phrase, certainly, which seems to contradict what is said elsewhere. The Pali Text Society's edition of the text cites a variant reading, which it might be possible to emend or interpret in a different sense. The parallel commentary to the *Apadāna* (p.142) gives a different and 'more orthodox' version. (Wiltshire dismisses the — untranslated — *Apadāna* and its commentary by saying that the version of the Rhinoceros Horn verses found there 'has one more stanza than the Sutta-nipāta version, but in all other respects is identical. Accordingly, for the sake of simplicity, we shall confine all further discussion to the Sutta-nipāta version only', pp.18–9). After saying, as does the *Sutta Nipāta* commentary, that Fully Perfected Buddhas only occur in periods when the world is evolving, not devolving, it adds *tathā paccekabuddhā, te pana buddhānaṃ uppajjanakāle n' ūpajjanti*, 'so too are *paccekabuddha*-s, but they do not arise at a time when Buddhas are born'. It is not certain who wrote or edited either of these commentarial texts, but almost certainly the *Apadāna* commentary is later than that on the *Sutta Nipāta* (see K. R. Norman, *Pali Literature*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz 1983, pp.121, 129, 146). So perhaps the later text preserves a better reading, or corrects what it saw as a mistake in the earlier text; or perhaps there is some other explanation. But clearly the resolution of this issue, like so many others concerning the *paccekabuddha*, will require more careful and detailed scholarship than that provided by Wiltshire.

Buddhist Studies is still very much in the dark about the mysterious figure of the *paccekabuddha*. It is unfortunate that both recent monographs on the subject should be so unreliable. What is needed is a careful collocation, translation and discussion of all the available relevant texts, without presuppositions about what they mean or whether they all contain the same understanding, and certainly not in the service of an historical romance produced by the artificial patterning of data, in the manner of Hesse's *Glass Bead Game*.

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