

Richard Gombrich

Ven Dr Anil Sakya, aka Phra Sugandho, spent a month this term as Visiting Professor at the OCBS. Dr Anil, as he likes to be known, is a Newar who was ordained in Thailand and since then has mainly lived in Wat Bovoranives in Bangkok, where he has for many years been assistant secretary to the Supreme Patriarch of the Thai Sangha. He also holds teaching positions at 3 Bangkok universities: Mahamakut, Mahidol and Kasetsart.

Dr Anil gave two lectures on the distinctive features of Thai Buddhism in our weekly lecture series, and also spoke on the Nepali diaspora in Thailand to a group of anthropologists. All of these lectures were extremely informative and greatly appreciated.

Because he has an unusually wide range of knowledge and experience of Theravada Buddhism in several countries, and also because he is exceptionally open-minded, I invited him to initiate a discussion on *The Broken Buddha*, a document of 80 pages which has for several years been publicly available on the web and has now also been published as a booklet. This paper is by an Australian Theravada monk, Ven S. Dhammika, and consists of a trenchant criticism of the way in which Theravada Buddhism is currently practised in Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka, and particularly of the behaviour of the Sangha.

Dr Sondra Hausner, Lecturer in Religious Studies in Oxford's Theology Faculty, kindly arranged to hold the event on 2 June in her college, St Peter's, and took the chair. The event was open to the public and about two dozen people attended.

Dr Anil began with a presentation of nearly half an hour. He told us about the Ven Dhammika, with whom he has had several discussions. Dhammika now lives in Singapore at the Buddha Dharma Mandala Society (www.bdms.org.sg).

Dr Anil felt that the anecdotes of bad behaviour by monks were likely to be accurate. Indeed, he had in front of him a book published in Thai by a group of Thai intellectuals which, he said, had many stories of the same kind but even more discreditable. In fact, mechanisms in Thai Buddhism for controlling renegade monks were generally weak and ineffective. Even so, he felt that for Thai Buddhism taken as a whole this was not an issue of central importance. Most Thai Buddhists well knew that many monks were far from perfect, but this had hardly any effect on their feelings for Buddhism: for them it was not a matter of doctrine (of which they tended to know very little) but of deep respect for the Buddha, and of the benefits to be gained in this life and the next by generosity. While it was true that monks preached endlessly about giving, which was of course to their own advantage, giving was at the same time an antidote to greed and thus a foundation for morality. Moreover, though Buddhism was indeed full of ritual, that was not a sign of rigid conservatism; ritual was in constant flux, and served to draw people in and prepare them for spiritual progress.

Dr Anil also said that, while many monks in Thailand do now work for social welfare, one had to question whether this was necessarily inherent in their role. (To be fair, Dhammika does make the same point.)

At first the discussion tended to be strongly critical of Dhammika and even to speculate about what had made him so one-sided and partisan; but it was then accepted that ad hominem attacks on him were beside the point, and we should rather examine whether what he said carried any useful lessons. I ventured a comparison which seemed to find general acceptance. I said that in recent years the Roman Catholic church had been beset by revelations that in several countries some priests had been paedophiles and that the church authorities had failed to react appropriately. I suggested that no sensible person believed either that more than a small minority of priests were paedophiles, or that this meant that the issue could be ignored. One had to examine how the system was flawed and could be improved. This, I said, was how anyone who had the interests of Buddhism at heart should react to Dhammika's book. It did seem to me to be true that

Theravada had recently been rather unsuccessful in the West, being far outstripped by Tibetan Buddhism, and some issues raised by Dhammika, such as the attitude to female ordination, were surely relevant.

Dr Anil referred to Dhammika's proposal that a new Buddhayana be founded, particularly by and largely for Westerners. He found the suggestion that Asians were too stupid to reform Buddhism themselves offensively imperialistic. There was some agreement, but some also felt that here Dhammika had been addressing himself not so much to the Buddhists of Asia as to Western people who wanted to find a way forward for their own practice.

The discussion reached no conclusions, but that was not to be expected. I for one found it very interesting and valuable.