

Theravāda Buddhism: An Anthropological Problem

Introduction

Even ignoring the plethora of popular books on Buddhism, the scholarly works alone comprise a small library.¹ Few of these works, however, treat Buddhism from what might be termed an anthropological point of view. This is not to say that historical and exegetical studies of Buddhist Scripture, philosophic analyses of Buddhist doctrines, or descriptions of the historical career of Buddhism are of no interest to the social scientist. On the contrary, such studies are—or at least ought to be—important grist for the anthropological mill; anthropologists who ignore them are ill-prepared to confront the problems which Buddhism poses for the comparative study of religion. Nevertheless, although relevant for an anthropological treatment of Buddhism, these studies do not in themselves constitute such a treatment. Indeed, so far as Buddhist scholarship is concerned, one might say that the anthropologist takes off where the textual and historical scholar ends, for the anthropologist is not concerned with religious texts per se, but with the interaction between the doctrines found in these texts and conceptions found in the heads of religious devotees, and consequently, with the relation between these religious conceptions and the general ordering of social and cultural life.

Although textual, i.e., normative, Buddhist doctrine poses a serious challenge to most of our generalizations about religion, and ultimately to our very notions about human nature itself, modern anthropologists (and other social scientists) who study the beliefs and rituals of practicing Bud-

¹The best systematic guide to Buddhist scholarship is the excellent annotated bibliography of Gard (1965).

dhist, have with some few exceptions ignored the normative sources from which they derive;² and since frequently the former bear little resemblance to the latter, the challenge posed by normative Buddhism has seldom been confronted.³

This is a pity, for Buddhism after all is not the creation of contemporary Buddhists, but a religion with deep historical roots. Although anthropological studies of nonliterate societies have converted a methodological necessity (the ignoring of history) into a theoretical virtue (the theory of functionalism), to ignore the historical, i.e., normative, roots of contemporary Buddhist belief is to convert this theoretical virtue into a methodological absurdity. Hence the present study, though anthropological in nature, not only does not ignore doctrinal Buddhism, but is especially concerned with the relationship between the beliefs of Buddhist actors and the doctrines of Buddhist texts. Certain of these textual doctrines have become the beliefs (or misbeliefs) of the religious actors; others, even some of the more central doctrines, have been ignored and even rejected by them; still others have been assimilated to nonnormative and even antinormative beliefs, thereby giving them legitimacy. I submit that unless one understands the motivational and cognitive bases for these three types of interaction between religious actors and normative religious doctrines, one cannot understand the role of religious ideas in human affairs.

The present study, then, is an attempt to fill the gap between textual scholarship, which underscores the uniqueness of Buddhism, and anthropological field investigations which place it within the normal cross-cultural range of religious variability. Each of these alternative emphases, although true to some extent, can be misleading when pursued in isolation from the other. Thus to hold, on the one hand, that religion consists of a set of textual doctrines, in which few people in fact believe (and in which few, probably, ever did believe), is to hold a strange notion of "religion," in contrast to theology or philosophy. In the case at hand, it would result in denying that

²Indeed, some social scientists deliberately ignore canonical Buddhism as a self-conscious methodological stance. (Cf. Tambiah 1968:43.) At the other extreme are scientists who, like Max Weber (1958), assume that normative Buddhist doctrine is more or less identical with the beliefs of practicing Buddhists, and then proceed to relate this doctrine to their social behavior and institutions.

³Sometimes, on the contrary, problems are raised when none exist. Thus, numerous students of Burma have professed to see an incompatibility between Buddhism and the Burmese propitiation of spirits (*nat*) on the ground that Buddhism rejects spirit propitiation. Had such critics been acquainted with canonical Buddhism they would have known that canonical Buddhism not only recognizes the existence of numerous forms of spirits, demons, ghosts, and so on, but that it sanctions their propitiation. Hence, this alleged incompatibility could only arise if the Burmese believed—which they don't—that spirit-propitiation is a means to salvation.

Similarly (to cite a personal experience) before I became acquainted with canonical Buddhism, I encountered many forms of Buddhist magic in Burma which (based on my reading of Western rationalistic interpretations of Buddhism) I assumed to be Burmese innovations, when in fact they were found in and sanctioned by Scripture.

millions of Burmese, Cambodians, Laotians, Sinhalese, and Thai, are *Theravāda* Buddhists, despite the fact that this religious system is practiced nowhere else, and never was practiced anywhere else, in the world. To hold, on the other hand, that normative religious doctrine is irrelevant for an understanding of the beliefs of religious actors is to evade one of the most important theoretical problems in the anthropological study of religion (and more especially of the higher religions), viz., the relationship between the real and ideal, the actual and doctrinal, the existential and normative, dimensions of belief systems.

In one sense the above set of discrepancies may be seen as posing a traditional anthropological problem in culture change—that is, to what extent and under what conditions does (religious) change occur over (historical) time? In another sense, however, but with equal cogency, the problem may be phrased as one in cultural conservatism: How and why do the great revolutionary religions, like Buddhism, revert ultimately to the religious status quo ante? The latter, of course, is a much more interesting problem; and since the Buddhist revolution was perhaps the most novel in religious history, the answers to this problem have important implications for our understanding of human nature and of the parameters of human emotional and cognitive plasticity.

This emphasis on the interaction between a normative tradition and the social actors who have acquired—or at least have been exposed to—that tradition is, of course, far from innovative. Fourteen years ago, Robert Redfield (1956: ch. 3) introduced the notion of the “great tradition” into the comparative study of civilizations, a notion which he contrasted with that of the “little tradition”—the refraction of the great tradition through a village lens. Although I do not fully accept the great-tradition–little-tradition dichotomy, I am not only in agreement with the notion of the great tradition but have borrowed the term for the subtitle of this book. In this case the interaction, specifically, is between the great tradition of *Theravāda* Buddhism and the people of Burma—hence its “*Burmese vicissitudes*.”

If I seem unduly to stress beliefs and ideas, it is not because this study is not concerned with religious behavior, but because, in the last analysis, even religious behavior is dependent on religious ideas: the performance of a rite or ceremony depends on certain conceptions of how and why they work, how much power they have or can harness, under what conditions they are relevant, and so on. A large part of this study, therefore, is concerned with religious doctrine and religious ideas, both as dependent variables (why do people hold them?) and independent variables (what are the consequences of holding them?).

I should emphasize, however, that this concern with ideas is far removed from the current anthropological interest in the theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and is even further removed from those current interests that are

variously called by such terms as ethnoscience, ethnosemantics, etc. I do not subscribe to the notion that people are primarily interested in cultural ideas because (as Lévi-Strauss once said about totemic ideas) they are “good to think”; and in the case of religious ideas I reject this notion out of hand. I also reject the thesis that seems to dominate much of the current interest in cognitive anthropology that cultural (including religious) systems are primarily classification systems. Of course people must classify and order their natural and social worlds if they are to find their way through them, and of course religion is one of the cultural systems which serves this function. But this, surely, is not the primary function either of cultural ideas or of the subset—religious ideas—with which we are concerned in this volume.

In my view, which informed this entire research project, religious ideas are not so much used to think about, or classify with, as to live by. That is, they are used to provide hopes, to satisfy wishes, to resolve conflict, to cope with tragedy, to rationalize failure, to find meaning in suffering. In short, religious ideas deal with the very guts of life, not with its bland surface. This instrumental conception of ideas (a conception which is derived from Dewey, Freud, and Weber) is abundantly supported, I believe, by the vicissitudes of the Buddhist ideas examined in the following chapters.

The Problem: The Uniqueness of Buddhism

Normative Buddhism, as is well known, is currently expressed in two major forms: *Mahāyāna* and *Theravāda*. Itself divided into various denominations—or, as they are usually termed, sects—the former is found, for the most part, in northern and eastern Asia. With its numerous saints and saviors, its masses for the dead, its elaborate and ornate rituals, *Mahāyāna* Buddhism—the Buddhism of the Greater Vehicle—is related to *Theravāda* Buddhism—the Buddhism of the Elders—much as Catholicism is related to Protestantism.⁴ Lacking saints and saviors, and possessing a few simple rituals, the latter form of Buddhism is found primarily in Southeast Asia, most notably in Burma, Cambodia, Ceylon, Laos, and Thailand. It is with *Theravāda* Buddhism, in both its normative and its more recent historical expressions, and on both the lay and the monastic levels, that we shall be concerned.

It should be emphasized at the outset that by “normative *Theravāda* Buddhism” I mean the doctrines contained in the *Theravāda* canon, which

⁴Designating itself as the Greater Vehicle—because through it everyone can eventually attain nirvana, especially by the assistance of those saints (*Bodhisattvas*) who, before attaining salvation, remain in the world to help save others—the *Mahāyāna* school designates the *Theravāda* school as Hinayāna Buddhism—the Lesser Vehicle—because it offers nirvana only to those few who can attain it through their own efforts. Rejecting this pejorative term, the latter school designates itself by the term *Theravāda*—the school which represents the teachings of the Elders (of Buddhism).

may or may not correspond with the teachings of the historical Buddha. Even if Buddhist historical scholarship were unequivocally successful in distinguishing the teachings of the Buddha Himself from those which represent later additions and emendations to Buddhism, this "quest for the historical Buddha" is irrelevant to the aims of our inquiry because the distinction itself is foreign to believing Buddhists. For them, *all* the words which the canon attributes to the Buddha are, indeed, His words. For them, all the doctrines contained in the canon represent the teachings of the Buddha. Hence, when I refer to nonnormative beliefs and practices, I do not mean those which diverge from "what the Buddha taught," but those which diverge from canonical doctrine.

Normative *Theravāda* Buddhism comprises a complex of doctrines and attitudes which, in their totality, render it unique in the religious annals of mankind. Indeed, its uniqueness has led a number of religious scholars to question whether it can legitimately be designated a religion at all. Without prejudging this issue (I shall return to it in later chapters), we may at least agree that normative *Theravāda* Buddhism—which for simplicity I shall henceforth designate merely as "Buddhism"—is sufficiently unique to pose an array of problems for the social scientist. Before exploring some of them, however, we must briefly examine in what ways this religion is truly unique.

In his discussion of the Buddhist creed, J. H. Bateson (1911) summarizes the teachings of Buddhism in the following five concepts: materialism, atheism, pessimism, nihilism, and egoism. To this conceptual set, I would add one more concept, viz., world-renunciation, the attitudinal and behavioral consequence of subscribing to the above set. Even a brief discussion of these doctrines will indicate how unusual they are when taken as the defining doctrines of a *religious* tradition.

Materialism. Contrary to almost every other religion, one of the foundation stones of Buddhism is the doctrine of nonsoul. Man is an aggregate of five material factors and processes which, at death, disintegrate without residue. The belief that behind these material processes there exists some spiritual or incorporeal essence—a soul—which guides and directs behavior and which survives the dissolution of the physical body, is a Buddhist heresy. The building block of the world, and of man, is the atom. Man, like the rest of the world, consists of atoms in motion.

Atheism. Buddhism is a religion without a God. Just as the body has no soul which guides and directs its action, so the universe has no Creator who brought it into being, who guides its course, or who presides over the destiny of man. More important, there is no Being—no savior God—to whom man can turn for salvation. Each man, as it were, must save himself. Durkheim (1954:29-32), it will be recalled, was so impressed with the Buddhist example that he argued that the belief in God could not be used as a defining characteristic of "religion." Other scholars, themselves the products of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and of nineteenth-century rationalism,

found the precursor of these latter movements in Buddhism. Believing that it denied souls and God(s), and that it adjured reliance on mysterious forces and supernatural powers, Buddhism was viewed by many of its Western interpreters as an essentially ethical religion, akin to modern Humanism or ethical culture.

Nihilism. The doctrine of no-soul is intimately associated with a second building stone—the doctrine of impermanence. According to Buddhism everything in the universe, including the universe itself, is impermanent. There can be no supreme reality because anything that is “real”—anything that exists—is in a perpetual flux, in a constant state of creation and dissolution, of coming into and passing out of existence. But Buddhism makes an even more radical claim—and this is a second meaning of Buddhist nihilism: even if there were some permanent reality, perhaps some condition of immortality, it is not a condition to which man ought aspire. Rather than aspiring to an eternal existence, the Buddhist (in theory) aspires to the extinction of existence (at least, as we ordinarily understand “existence”). Like all Indian religions, the aim of Buddhism is to bring the otherwise endless cycle of rebirth to an end. Stevenson’s characterization of the orientation of all Indian religions applies, *pari passu*, to Buddhism.

The desire of India is to be freed from the cycle of rebirths, and the dread of India is reincarnation. The rest that most of the spiritual seek through their faith is a state of profound and deathlike trance, in which all their powers shall have ceased to move or live, and from which they shall never again be awakened to undergo rebirth in this toilsome and troubled world.

If, therefore, we would try reverently and sympathetically to grasp the inner meaning of an Indian faith, we must put aside all thought of the perfectly developed personality which is our ideal, and of the joy and zest that come from progress made and powers exercised, and, turning our thoughts backwards, face for a while another goal, in which death, not life, is the prize, cessation not development the ideal. [Stevenson 1915:1]

Notice, then, the Buddhist inversion of the typical attitude to life and death. For the Westerner, for example, death, which is inevitable, is the ultimate tragedy; and all three Western religions hold out the hope of averting this tragedy by offering eternal life (in the next world). For Buddhism, it is the continuation of life across an almost endless cycle of rebirths which is inevitable, and it is this possibility which is the ultimate tragedy. The extinction of life, which others might lament as man’s automatic and inevitable fate, is viewed by Buddhism as neither inevitable nor lamentable. On the contrary, for Buddhism, it is not the extinction but the persistence of life that is automatic and—but for the practice of Buddhist discipline—inevitable. It is only through incredible effort, requiring a staggering amount of cosmological time, that the Buddhist can achieve that state which the Westerner achieves effortlessly, however much he tries to avoid it.

Pessimism. Buddhist nihilism is reasoned, not capricious. Just as Calvinism teaches that there is no conceivable act of even the most righteous man which is not sinful (in the sight of God), so Buddhism teaches that there is no conceivable act of even the happiest man which is not painful (when analyzed in the crucible of Buddhist meditation). Associated with the doctrines of no-soul and impermanence, the doctrine of suffering forms the third of the famous Buddhist trinity. From the lowest hell to the highest heaven suffering is an inescapable and essential attribute of life. Since so long as there is life there is suffering, the only reasonable goal to aspire to, according to Buddhism, is the extinction of life as we ordinarily understand it.

Renunciation. Religions not only take different attitudes to the world, but these attitudes vary systematically with their basic doctrines, and especially with their doctrines of salvation. Thus, religion may accept the world, viewing it as not incompatible with its soteriological goal; it may be indifferent to the world, viewing it as irrelevant to that goal; it may reject the world, viewing the latter as the major obstacle to attainment of that goal. The last attitude, the rejection of the world, may lead, as Weber has shown, to such diverse responses as innerworldly asceticism, mysticism, and otherworldly asceticism. (Weber 1946:323-58.) Buddhism is a religion, par excellence, of otherworldly asceticism. Viewing attachment to the world as the cause of suffering, and hence as an irreducible obstacle to salvation, Buddhism insists that suffering can only be escaped through detachment from and renunciation of the world. By renouncing the world, the Buddhist aspires to detachment from persons, from material possessions, and even from himself (his sensations, his desires, his self).

Here, then, is a religion which challenges some of our fundamental notions about religion and about man. It denies the existence of God and souls; it views all human experience as caught up in suffering; it denigrates the world, valuing rather detachment from it and stressing the extinction of all worldly desires; as its ultimate goal, it offers the hope of the cessation of life (i.e., of rebirth); finally, it teaches that man must achieve salvation, unaided, without any supernatural assistance. These doctrines, moreover, do not constitute the philosophy of a solitary thinker, nor are they even the teachings of an austere philosophic school. They are, on the contrary, the message of a world religion, the official religion, moreover, of most of the societies of South and Southeast Asia.

It is this latter fact that poses the intellectual challenge to the anthropologist. For, although anthropology is profoundly aware of the great diversity and wide variability in human culture (including religion), the Buddhist doctrines and attitudes summarized above are so far outside the normal range of cross-cultural expectations as to constitute a profound exception to most of our generalizations about society, religion, and culture. Thus *Theravāda* Buddhism is atheistic, where the devotees of other reli-

gions turn to supernatural assistance in their quest for salvation. *Theravāda* Buddhism rejects the belief in a soul, where other religionists believe in one soul at the very least. *Theravāda* Buddhism teaches that all experience entails suffering, where most people agree that many experiences afford pleasure and even true happiness. *Theravāda* Buddhism insists that the extinction of desire is a requisite for salvation, where most people believe that the satisfaction of desire is one of the marks of salvation. *Theravāda* Buddhism demands emotional detachment and the renunciation of the world, where most people seek attachment to friends and loved ones, power and position, self and possessions.

But these doctrines and attitudes of Buddhism not only constitute exceptions to what we know about society, religion, and culture; their alleged internalization as the personal beliefs and attitudes of millions of people—most of them simple peasants at that—challenges most of our conceptions of human behavior and human nature. Thus, before embarking on this study, I expected (on the basis of anthropological and psychoanalytic theory) that everywhere people would believe in supernatural helpers; that everywhere people would seek to maximize rather than extinguish physical pleasure; that nowhere, except in a clinical population of depressives, would people believe that life is suffering; and that everywhere the attachment to self, and of persons and objects associated with the self, would be the normal and necessary mode of human psychological functioning.

For me, then, *Theravāda* Buddhism seemed to present the anthropologist with at once a stunning problem and some remarkable opportunities—the chance to uncover those social and cultural conditions that lead to the acquisition of beliefs and attitudes which constitute dramatic exceptions to our empirical knowledge and our theoretical expectations concerning human nature and religion (thereby leading to their amendment), and the opportunity to discover the consequences—more especially the cultural and social consequences—attendant upon their acquisition.

Unfortunately, these opportunities were never realized because the problem turned out to be a pseudo problem. In the first place, some of the doctrines adumbrated above are not normative Buddhist doctrines; the secondary sources from which I had derived my knowledge of Buddhism had—through both under- and overemphasis—often distorted some of the important normative doctrines. More significant, my research in Burma, and concurrent research by anthropologists in other societies of Southeast Asia, revealed that although *Theravāda* Buddhism is indeed the normative religion in these societies, many of its doctrines are only rarely internalized by the members of these societies, because they are either ignored or rejected by the faithful. In short, unlike the conclusions which might have been deduced from textual Buddhism or books on Buddhism, anthropological studies of living Buddhism have shown that Buddhists differ very little from people in general. The study of the beliefs and behavior of Buddhists

(in contrast to the normative doctrines, actual or alleged, of canonical Buddhism) serves to confirm rather than challenge our empirical generalization and theoretical expectations concerning human nature and human behavior. It should be noted, incidentally, that the very fact that Buddhists do not subscribe to all the doctrines of normative Buddhism is itself an indication of how similar they are to other people—Christians or Jews, for example, who reject many normative doctrines of Christianity or Judaism while still claiming to be “Christians” or “Jews.”

But I was studying Buddhism, not Christianity or Judaism; and having discovered in my Burmese research that the doctrines of normative Buddhism only rarely constitute the Buddhism of the faithful, I also discovered that the latter have acquired other additional forms of Buddhism which for them are equally, or nearly equally, normative. Although these forms are discussed in detail in the chapters that follow, it is necessary to adumbrate them here so as to point up some of the problems to which this research was addressed.

The Problem Confounded: The Three Systems of *Theravāda* Buddhism

In his perceptive essay on ancient Indian culture, a noted Sanskrit scholar observed that ancient India was characterized by two radically different religious systems, or (as he preferred to call them) “norms of conduct” (Edgerton 1942). One system—the “ordinary norm”—was intended for the religious majority; the other—the “extraordinary norm”—was confined to a much smaller group, those whose primary concern was with salvation. Since, in all Indian religions, salvation refers to release (*mokṣa*) from the continuous round of rebirths, the doctrines comprising this system provided the means for release from the Wheel of Life, while those comprising the former system provided the means for enhancing one’s position within the Wheel. Although the goal of the ordinary norm was regarded as religiously inferior to that of the extraordinary norm, both were equally normative, in that both were rooted in the classical literature of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., and hence represented traditional ideals; and both contained specific rules of conduct which were prescribed for their respective devotees.

Normative Buddhism, a child of ancient Indian culture, was one of a number of Indian religious systems purporting to have discovered the way to Release; and, almost without change, it persists even today as the religion of those Buddhists who aspire to this soteriological goal. From its very inception, however, Buddhism (like Hinduism) realized that Release cannot be the goal of ordinary men, and therefore it, too, developed an ordinary as well as an extraordinary norm. Viewing the cycle of rebirths which constitutes any individual’s career as a kind of religious pilgrimage, in which one becomes progressively sensitized to its soteriological message, Bud-

dhism holds that until they reach the end of that pilgrimage, ordinary men need only follow its ordinary norm. Insofar as these worldlings (as they are called) accept the latter, attending to its message and complying with its discipline, they are viewed as having reached, as it were, a halfway house or a way station to normative Buddhism.

To the outside observer, however, the worldling is not so much a halfway Buddhist as another kind—a radically different kind—of Buddhist; the one aspires to Release from the Wheel, the other remains tied to it. Stemming, however, from a common tradition and holding many doctrines in common, both may be called Buddhists, although the one is an adherent of a normative, the other of a nonnormative Buddhist soteriology.

Although fundamentally a salvation religion, even normative Buddhism is not disinterested in man's fate in this world. Hence, in addition to two types of soteriological Buddhism, we may distinguish still a third type of Buddhism, one which is concerned with man's worldly welfare: the curing of illness, protection from demons, the prevention of droughts, and so on. This being so, Buddhism is best viewed as comprising not one, but three separate if interlocking systems: two soteriological systems (one normative and one nonnormative) and one nonsoteriological system. Since the latter is primarily concerned with protection from danger, I shall call it *apotropaic* Buddhism. The two soteriological systems may be called *nibbanic* and *kammatic* Buddhism, respectively. Since its major concern is with release from the Wheel, or nirvana (*nibbāna*), nibbanic Buddhism is an appropriate term for normative soteriological Buddhism. Nonnormative soteriological Buddhism, concerned with improving one's position on the Wheel by improving one's karma (*kamma*), is appropriately termed kammatic Buddhism.⁵

Having delineated three distinctive Buddhist systems, I do not wish to suggest that living Buddhism presents itself as packaged into three neat bundles of belief and practice. On the contrary, when first encountered, living Buddhism appears as a bewildering hodgepodge of beliefs and practices, some canonical and some noncanonical, which it is difficult to distinguish from those comprising the non-Buddhist religious systems found in all Buddhist societies (Spiro 1967:ch. 14), let alone from each other. Nevertheless, within this hodgepodge one can discern systems and even subsystems.

In one sense, of course, these systems are analytic constructs abstracted by the investigator, but in another they reflect and designate the "native category system." Thus, although the Burmese, for example, may not be aware of all the distinguishing features of the three systems alluded to above, they are certainly aware of, and can distinguish, their major features.

⁵These latter two systems have been previously distinguished by King in an illuminating discussion (1964:161-75).

Further, although they don't use these terms, they know precisely how nibbanic differs from kammatic Buddhism, in both aim and technique. If they follow the latter system, it is not from ignorance of the former, nor from a confusion of the two; it is, rather, because they have knowingly chosen the one and rejected the other. Moreover, they usually justify their choice by recourse to a perfectly valid normative explanation, i.e., that they are not yet spiritually qualified to practice nibbanic Buddhism.

But to say that there are three systems of Buddhism in Burma (or in Thailand or Ceylon) does not mean that there are three kinds of Buddhists in these societies; rather, all three systems are found in varying degrees in all Buddhists. Still, as I have already observed, most Buddhists (being "worldlings") have little to do with nibbanic Buddhism, though they are aware of and genuinely believe that they ought to aspire to it; and even that small band of pious monks who are genuinely devoted to that system hold doctrines and attitudes appropriate to the other two.

The anthropologist learns two difficult lessons—one bearing on human nature, the other on religion—from this defection from otherworldliness, detachment, asceticism, nihilism, and other doctrines of nibbanic Buddhism adumbrated in the foregoing section. Confronted with the dramatic variability inherent in the cross-cultural record, we anthropologists have frequently proposed that there are almost no limits to human plasticity; human nature, we have argued, is a product of culture, and culture can mold human nature in almost any shape or form it chooses. Human nature no doubt, *is* a product of culture, at least to some extent, but our experience with Buddhism announces clearly and loudly that there are limits to its plasticity, beyond which culture is impotent to mold it. Indeed, on the basis of the Buddhist data, I would argue that these limits are dramatically narrower than we have traditionally conceded them to be. After approximately a thousand years of Buddhism, the Burmese and the Cambodians, the Sinhalese and the Thai, appear to me to exhibit (more or less) the same human nature as, say, the Americans or the British, the Germans or the Russians. Attachment, not detachment; persistence, not annihilation; drive-satisfaction, not drive extinction—these and many other attributes allegedly restricted to "Western" man are as pronounced in the former group as in the latter.

Related to anthropology's rather extravagant claims concerning the plasticity of human nature has been its equally extravagant claims concerning the variability of human culture. For almost any cultural norm, value, or practice to be found in one society, its opposite—so we have claimed—can be found in another. This claim may perhaps be supported in other cultural domains, but the Buddhist data teach us that, in the religious domain at least, variability is again restricted to rather narrow limits. Though I came to this conclusion thirty years ago. "It is sometimes suggested," he wrote in a little-known work (1940:5),

that the original message of all religious leaders is at bottom the same. The truer view is, I think, that different religious leaders have taught very different messages; it is in what men do to those messages in the process of forming religious institutions that there is essential similarity. One religious leader teaches that God is the Father of all men, and that their salvation comes from doing the will of God; another teaches that no god can save man from his own weakness, but that it is by his own mental effort that man's salvation must come. From these conflicting and irreconcilable messages, men have created religious institutions which are in many ways remarkably alike.

Despite the dramatic differences in the teachings of religious founders, religions are "remarkably alike"—so Thouless argues—because of the tendency, which he calls "conventionalization," for all religions

. . . to lose more or less what is characteristically different about the teachings of their founders and to become, therefore, more like the religious systems from which their founders reacted and more like other religious systems in general. . . . This process tends to make all religious systems become much more alike than were the original teachings of their founders. [*Ibid.*:35]

There is little question but that this has taken place in the case of Buddhism. As it is lived and practiced, Buddhism has not only reverted to many of the Indian beliefs against which its founder rebelled, but in so doing, it has recreated most of the other attributes usually associated with religion. Souls and gods, rituals and festivals, heavens and hells—these and many more have all been reincorporated into Buddhism as we know it. If religion is viewed, as I view it, as a symbolic expression of a restricted set of needs, fantasies, wishes, conflicts, aspirations, and so on which are deeply rooted in a universal human nature, we need hardly be surprised that Buddhism has come to reveal most of the defining characteristics of religion in general. This is not to say, of course, that Buddhism, even as we now know it, is not "different." It would be absurd to claim otherwise. But, as I have already indicated, since nowhere is Buddhism an exclusive religion, since wherever found, it is associated with at least one other (primitive or high), their combined attributes render the religion(s) of Buddhist societies very similar to the religion(s) of other societies.

It would seem, then, that man has certain universal needs which will not for long be frustrated, and that ideas and doctrines—like some of the ideas and doctrines of normative Buddhism—which frustrate or violate these needs will eventually be modified or replaced. This at least is what has happened to *Theravāda* Buddhism in every society in which it has put down roots. Having discovered this in the society where I was conducting field work, I found a new array of problems commanding my attention. Before turning to them, however, it will be well to describe the social and cultural contexts in which this work was conducted.

Field Work: The Burmese Setting

If religion is to be studied as a living system rather than exclusively as a body of canonical doctrines, it must be studied in its historical and cultural contexts. Hence, although when I first embarked on this study I was interested in *Theravāda* Buddhism in its generic expression (and not specifically in Thai, or Burmese, or Sinhalese Buddhism), it was in Burma that I conducted my field work. Moreover, within that country my research was focused on one village in Upper Burma, which I have called "Yeigyī."

I chose to study Buddhism within a village setting, not because I was interested either in village Burma or in village Buddhism per se, but because—in Southeast Asia at least—the village is at once the maximal manageable sociocultural unit within which religion can be studied, and the minimal sociocultural context within which its basic cultural—though not social—patterns are known, if not always found. That Southeast Asia happens to be 85 per cent rural, and that village Buddhism therefore happens to be the most typical living expression of *Theravāda* Buddhism, lends credence to the generalizations I often draw (below) from my own limited data, but this—it must be admitted—is a fortunate happenstance of an essentially methodological decision rather than the basis for it.

To repeat, then, the village of Yeigyī was the locale of this study rather than its subject; but since I could not know initially how typical its Buddhism was, it was necessary to obtain comparative data from other contexts, which differ from the Yeigyī on four dimensions—spatial, ecological, cultural, and temporal. Hence, in addition to the *intensive* data collected during the nine months in which I lived and worked in Yeigyī, another three months were devoted to collecting *extensive* data from a range of villages in Upper Burma. Moreover, throughout this entire period I made biweekly excursions to Mandalay, the former capital of Burma, where I was able to collect material on urban Buddhism. Since, however, Mandalay is a traditional city, an additional two months were spent in Rangoon, the modern capital, collecting data from westernized government officials and Buddhist intellectuals especially. In addition, all available documentary and firsthand accounts of Burmese Buddhism were consulted for both historical and regional comparisons. Finally, my own firsthand but superficial observations in Thailand and Ceylon—for three months and one month, respectively—were supplemented by firsthand descriptions of Buddhism in those and other *Theravāda* countries of Southeast Asia.

To the extent, then, permitted by the limitations of these data, it was possible to make a four-way comparison of Buddhist belief and practice: rural-rural, rural-urban, Burmese-non-Burmese, contemporary-historical. Although these comparisons yielded some interesting differences, most of which are noted below in the appropriate chapters, they are differences

primarily in detail rather than in fundamental patterns. In general, Buddhism in Rangoon differs little from Buddhism in Yeigyí, and neither is very different from the Buddhism of traditional Burma. In short, with some few exceptions, the Buddhism practiced in Yeigyí seems to be a typical expression of Buddhism anywhere in Burma.

But I would go further. On the basis of the Burmese-non-Burmese comparisons, I believe it is fair to say that wherever it is found, *Theravāda* Buddhism is remarkably similar to the Buddhism I observed in Burma. Hence, although there is no denying that this is a study of *Theravāda* Buddhism primarily in Burmese garb, the justification for entitling this book "*Theravāda* Buddhism" is that its Burmese garb differs from its Thai or Sinhalese garb in only minor ways. The differences are variations on a common set of themes. Indeed, rather than its [Buddhism's] "*Burmese* vicissitudes," the subtitle of the book might just as well have referred to its "*historical* vicissitudes."

I have stressed this ecumenical character of Buddhism, not only to argue for the generalizability of my findings, but to underscore the thesis that the weakness of nibbanic Buddhism is a characteristic not of Burmese Buddhism in particular, but of *Theravāda* Buddhism in general. Indeed, if anything, Buddhism, on the peasant level at least, appears to be stronger in Burma than in Ceylon, and much stronger than in Thailand (let alone Laos and Cambodia, where it seems to be the weakest).

We may now return to the village of Yeigyí and briefly describe this sociocultural context in which most of the Buddhist data to be explored below are embedded. (With some minor changes, the following paragraphs are taken from Spiro 1967:9-12.) With a population of approximately five hundred people, Yeigyí is situated on a central irrigation canal, irrigation being indispensable for the wet rice cultivation which is the dominant economic activity of the entire region. The village comprises 119 houses, each of which is typically inhabited by a nuclear family. Although a few families, mostly basket makers and loggers (who emigrated from a district about forty miles northwest of Mandalay), are relatively recent arrivals in the village, most of its inhabitants were born and raised in Yeigyí or in one of its neighboring villages.

Surrounded on three sides by paddy fields—blue with water during the transplanting season and golden in the growing season—and by the foothills of the purplish Shan Mountains on the fourth, and protected from the cruel tropical sun by clumps of shade trees, the village offers a most attractive approach. Like most villages in Upper Burma, however, Yeigyí is reached only after traveling for four or five miles on a dirt road, which in this case connects with the highway leading to Mandalay.

Although the oxcart is the main means of transportation (a few wealthy inhabitants own bicycles), a bus stop about four miles from the village makes Mandalay easily accessible. The city's main bazaar is used by the villagers

for important shopping, its famous pagodas beckon to them on Buddhist holydays and pagoda festivals, and its moneylenders and rice merchants are important mainstays of their agricultural economy. This, then, is not an isolated village, remote from outside contacts or influence. On the other hand, although the British conquered Upper Burma in 1885 and administered it (except for the brief interlude of the Japanese occupation) until Burmese independence in 1948, Yeigyi and its environs show much less British cultural influence than villages in Lower Burma. As far back as the early nineteenth century, the Mandalay region was, and continues to be, the heartland of traditional Burmese culture.

From very early times Yeigyi and its neighboring villages were caught up in the economic and cultural orbits of the various royal courts of Burma, and especially of the last court at Mandalay. Prior to the British conquest of Upper Burma, Yeigyi performed services of various kinds for the court, and after the conquest it was affected by the insurgency and unrest that attended the exile of Burma's last king, King Thibaw. Despite their minimal contact with the British Raj during the fifty-year period before the Japanese occupation, the villagers certainly felt the British political presence, and in retrospect at least respected and appreciated it.

World War II ushered in a long period of tension and unrest, which continues to the present. The Japanese occupation, harsh and brutal, was experienced directly by the village, as were the series of insurrections against the central government which, following the achievement of independence, sprang up in many parts of Burma. The area around Yeigyi witnessed numerous battles between government and insurgent troops, and as late as 1959 Yeigyi itself was occupied and reoccupied by at least two of the insurgent groups. Indeed, a small number of men, and a few women as well, joined one or another of these groups for short periods. The most recent upheaval to impinge on the village was the coup of 1962, which replaced the civilian with the present military government. Since that government has practiced a strict exclusionary policy, scholars have been unable to work in Burma since 1962. Hence my description does not take account of changes that may have taken place since that time.

Despite all these changes and upheavals, there were few differences between the basic social and cultural patterns which I encountered in Yeigyi in 1961-62 and those described in early—indeed, the earliest—published reports on Burmese life. Paddy cultivation continues to be the basic economic and subsistence activity. The nuclear family household, related through bilateral kin ties to other households both within and outside the village, remains the basic social unit. The village continues to be governed by a village headman—who, however, is now an elected rather than a hereditary official—and a council of village elders. It is to them, rather than to government courts or magistrates, that most intravillage disputes are brought. Buddhism continues to be the single most important cultural force