

Max Weber and the Sociology of Buddhism¹

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1. Max Weber's Starting Point

For his account of early Buddhism Max Weber was in the fortunate position of being able to use the fundamental studies of Hermann Oldenberg (1854-1920) and Thomas Williams Rhys Davids (1842-1922). The stage of development of the Buddhist religion represented in this work can be termed "the period of early canonical Buddhism". It is true that - at the very time Max Weber's articles on the sociology of religion were appearing - other, newer orientations in Buddhist scholarship were coming to the fore, namely, on the one hand, what was propounded by the Leningrad school (as represented by O. Rosenberg and T. Stcherbatsky), which ascribed a definite philosophical explanation of the world to the original teaching of the Buddha, and, on the other, the tendency to emphasize more strongly those elements incident to the interpretation of early Buddhism that lay at the heart of the later development of Mahāyāna. More recently the situation has again changed, inasmuch as Oldenberg's interpretation of the Buddha's original teaching has, as it were, been rehabilitated; concerning details of this development within the history of scholarship, reference should be made to G. R. Welbon's study². This means that, in its essentials, Weber's view of early Buddhism may be adhered to.

Thus we may surely be allowed to proceed on the basis of Weber's thesis that Buddhism was originally a "quite specific, refined soteriology for intellectuals" (RS II, p. 218), a "specifically unpolitical and antipolitical class

1 This is an English translation of a paper read at the conference "Die Rationalisierungstheorie Max Webers im Verhältnis zum Hinduismus und zum Buddhismus" which was held by the University of Torino and the Centro Piemontese di Studi sur il Medio ed Estremo Oriente in Torino, November 1983. The text was translated by Mr. Philip Pierce (Nepal Research Centre, Kathmandu). It has been published under the title "Zur Buddhismus-Interpretation Max Webers", *Max Weber e l'India, Atti del Colvego Internazionale su: La tesi Weberiana della razionalizzazione in rapporto all'Induismo e al Buddhismo* (Torino 24-25 novembre 1983), Torino 1986 (Pubblicazioni del CESMEO, 1), 23-36. Abbreviations: RS = Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Tübingen 1923.

2 G. R. Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvana and Its Western Interpreters*, Chicago, 1968.

religion, or, more accurately, a religious 'learned teaching' of an itinerant, intellectually schooled mendicant order of monks" (RS II, p. 220). The characteristic environment of the early Buddhists was "the city and the city castle with its elephant-mounted king", and "the dialogue form reflects the emerging urban culture" (RS II, p. 220). Given the untenability of the chronology accepted during Weber's lifetime and still applied today by the majority of historians, according to which the Buddha is supposed to have lived from ca. 560 to 480 B.C. (we must assume the dates were approximately a century later as I have argued elsewhere), the question arises anew of the influence of Greek philosophy on the method the Buddha used to present his teaching, a method Weber himself called a "Socratic dialogue" (RS II, pp. 244f.) an explanation possible now that is better than the simple reference to urban culture.

Weber rightly concludes from the accounts of early Buddhism available to him that "the knowlegde of one's own definitive deliverance [is] not sought in some - interior or exterior - activity, in works of any kind whatsoever, but rather, on the contrary, in a condition alien to activity" (RS II, p. 230). Thus, as he continues to argue, there is "no bridge" from the ideal of one who has achieved deliverance (arhat) to the "world of rational activity" - where rationality has naturally to be taken in Weber's own understanding of the term - and to "social behaviour in an active sense," deliverance being a person's absolutely individual achievement by powers of his own" (RS II, p. 230). To be sure, the prospect of spiritual wealth, and even worldly riches, is held open to laymen for keeping faithfully the commandments of lay piety, but this lay ethic is only a kind of "ethic of inadequacy for the weak, who do not want to seek full deliverance" (RS II, p. 232).

Weber rejects the idea that the Buddha set forth a social-political goal, such as asserted by some modern interpreters of the Buddhist texts. In this connection he points out that the "disregard for class distinctions" was nothing new (RS II, p. 245); previous monastic religions, such as Jainism, had already held the same position. In summary, primitive Buddhism was a "product of quite positively privileged classes" and never attempted to alter the world's social order (RS II, p. 247); it was unable to develop a "rational economic ethic" (RS II, p. 234), - and, it should be added, did not even wish to do so. In view of the fact that, for the Buddha, the cause of the suffering that needs to be overcome lies in the nature of the world itself, such objectives would have no relevance to the sole worthwhile goal, namely, deliverance from the world. Thus as Weber notes, the strength and weakness of primitive Buddhism, the "most harshly consistent of the refined Hindu intellectual soteriologies," lie in its very consistency (RS II, p. 251). Weber's opinion that Nirvana has

"doubtless to be equated with absolute destruction" (RS II, p. 232) was, to be sure, a misunderstanding on the part of many researchers of the previous century; Oldenberg is known to have been more cautious in the matter. In its essentials, Weber's view of primitive Buddhism deserves acceptance even today, at least as regards the influence of its teachings on the structure of the period's Indian culture: Primitive Buddhism was conceived exclusively as a path to deliverance (in particular, the deliverance of the individual) and not as a social movement.

The Buddha did, of course, found the Sangha, an order of monks and nuns, but this order was structured very loosely; Weber even talks in terms of "lack of structure" (RS II, p. 242). The "dioceses" were not exclusive districts. The most important structural elements of the oldest communities, the only important ones in fact, were seniority as determined by the time elapsed from entry into the Sangha as well as the special relations between teacher and disciple (RS II, pp. 242f.).

There is little doubt in my mind that we ought to proceed from the view of primitive Buddhism just sketched. It is in accord, for example, with the account that E. Lamotte gives in his most recent treatment of early Buddhism³ on the basis of the old texts; the author of the present contribution, too, has taken this understanding of the old teaching as the basis for his studies on the more recent development of Buddhism⁴ as well as in the preceding sections of the present volume. On the other hand, some Asian sociologists, and also some Western ones, feel compelled, on the basis of individual passages of the text wrenched, for the most part, arbitrarily out of context, to advance theses, formulated in modish sociological terminology, concerning a "political dimension" of early Buddhism or the like; for this purpose they reinterpret the pertinent passages or read into them propositions that contradict what the Buddha himself repeatedly emphasized, namely, that his teaching had only a single goal, that of deliverance, the end of suffering.

As is well known, the doctrine of karma, that is, of the influence of good and base deeds on the cycle of rebirths, is a central component of Buddhist teaching. The question might be asked whether social activity can be in any way meaningful for a Buddhist, if the destiny of an individual is determined by his karma, that is to say, by his own former actions. Examined more closely, social activity engaged in for the benefit of others can hardly have any effect at all; nevertheless, it is meaningful and called for, as it serves to purify the

3 Étienne Lamotte, "Le bouddhisme de Sakyamuni", *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen*, 1983, no. 4.

4 Heinz Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravada-Buddhismus*, vol 1, Frankfurt, 1966 (repr., Göttingen, 1989), pp. 3-15.

person in search of deliverance, at least for as long as he - particularly while still a layman - has not loosed himself from the world. This holds true, however, only if he acts in a selfless fashion; for were he to do good only in order to be rewarded with good karma, it would profit him little - at least as far as the goal set by the Buddha is concerned, that is, deliverance. He would remain completely trapped in the cycle of existences. In any case, equanimity is superior to engagement - not, of course, egoistic equanimity but the equanimity which comes from the knowledge of the true nature of things, and which is attained only by compassion; in this way the sequence of meditations of the four "divine states of dwelling" (*brahmavihāra*) becomes understandable: kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

2. Max Weber's Sources

It may be expected from the outset that Weber's remarks on the later history of Buddhism should be much more problematic than his thesis concerning the old teaching of Buddhism. The reason for this is that the historical source material he had at his disposal was contradictory, and even flawed. The primary sources were for the most part not yet available or at least not yet translated. In addition, the Indian Buddhists did not keep a systematic record of their history; what we know comes from non-Indian (Ceylonese, Chinese and Tibetan) sources or from other kinds of materials (inscriptions, excavation results, occasional references in religious texts etc.). The evaluation of many of these sources was still in its infancy during Weber's lifetime. *Geschiedenis van het Buddhisme in Indie* by Hendrik Kern (1833-1917) was then the only comprehensive survey of the history of Buddhism; brought out in 1882 and soon translated by Hermann Jacobi into German⁵, the book contains much information, though it is by now to a certain extent outdated. Weber used this work in several places along with Kern's briefer *Manual of Indian Buddhism*, which he saw as the leading "comprehensive scholarly account" (RS II, p. 220, fn. 1)⁶. In fact, this manual was nothing but barely revised excerpts from the older monograph and in many respects already outdated by the time it came out. Weber's second main source was the three small volumes by Heinrich Hackmann (1864-1935) from the popular series *Religionsgeschichtliche Volksbücher*⁷. Hackmann was one of the few speci-

5 Hendrik Kern, *Der Buddhismus und seine Geschichte in Indien*, tr. Hermann Jacobi, 2 vols., Leipzig, 1882-84. Dr. Golzio has brought to my attention several passages in which Weber cites the work rather literally.

6 Hendrik Kern, *Manual of Indian Buddhism*, Strassburg, 1896.

7 Heinrich Hackmann, *Der Buddhismus*, 3 vols., Tübingen, 1905-06 (frequently reissued).

alists at the time able to form an impression for himself in the Buddhist countries of Asia; in his account the accent is markedly on contemporary Buddhism. The inscriptions of King Aśoka, already known of at the time, were available to Weber in translation. In addition, he occasionally used a variety of other sources, though his work was naturally adversely affected by the lack of a useful scholarly account of the history of Buddhism comprehensive in scope.

Since 1916, of course, huge progress has been made in the field of Buddhist studies. Still, even today there is only one general, comprehensive account covering a broad period, namely, the monumental work by Étienne Lamotte⁸. A. K. Warder⁹ deals with the whole of the history of Indian Buddhism in a less thorough but nevertheless very helpful reference work. Of the more recent publications, the survey by Hajime Nakamura should be mentioned as particularly useful¹⁰. Up to now no one has ventured to attempt a comprehensive treatment of the entire history of Buddhism, so that the information for the remaining periods still must be sought, often quite tediously, from a host of separate works.

Thus the job, during Weber's lifetime, of portraying the history of Buddhism was fraught from the beginning with many pitfalls, especially for one who had not specialized in Buddhist studies, and who was confined to material that was readily accessible; we are not surprised to find one, and often several, factual errors on almost every page of the sections of Weber's book that are discussed in the following; such errors he inherited, to a certain extent, directly from his sources, but they are also due to his inexact formulation of such sources or to careless excerpting. It would be senseless to discuss them all here or to go into the details of misspellings and misunderstandings. It will suffice for the following discussion of Weber's understanding to comment upon his main theses and to view them in light of the state of modern scholarship; erroneous factual information found in Weber's work will therefore only be mentioned if it is directly relevant to conclusions of interest from our modern-day perspective .

3. Max Weber on the Spread of Early Buddhism in India

Max Weber treats this complex of questions chiefly in the sections "General Reasons for the Transformation of Early Buddhism" and "King Aśoka" (RS

8 Étienne Lamotte, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien des origines à l'ère śaka*, Louvain, 1958.

9 A. K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, Delhi, 1970.

10 Hajime Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism, A Survey with Bibliographical Notes*, Tokyo, 1980.

II, pp. 251-264), though he had already gone into a number of related problems in the section on "old Buddhism" (RS II, pp. 219-250). His inquiry is aimed at determining, on the one hand, the influence of altered social and political conditions on the further development of the religion and, on the other, the consequences of these changes for economic development. The thrust of his thesis is that Buddhism, for the rulers, was particularly "useful as a means of mass domestication" (RS II, p. 260).

Of central importance from the sociological point of view is the relation between the monastic and lay community. Weber ascertained that the later decay of Buddhism in India had to do with the lack of a lay organization (RS II, p. 251). He refers to the example of Jainism (otherwise closely related to Buddhism), which commanded a communal lay organization; later the Indologists Ludwig Alsdorf and Frank-Richard Hamm further established the importance of this factor for the preservation of Jainism¹¹.

Weber talks of a "transformation" of Buddhism, or of a number of "transformations," that led to great changes in the main tendencies of the Buddhist tradition - to much greater changes than in Jainism. The most important factors for this were determined by Weber to be the following:

1. "The institutionalization of benefices" (RS II, pp. 249f.); this led to the "transformation" of the old communities of itinerant monks into communities of monks permanently residing in monasteries, to the formation of a "fixed organization of the monastic community and thus also to fixed beneficiary interests on the part of the monks themselves."
2. The interest on the part of the rulers in levelling: The "patrimonialism" of the emperors of the Mauryan dynasty, a policy that took the place of the old petty kingships, was served by the attempt "to give the lower classes the opportunity to rise socially." The "disregard for class barriers in Buddhist soteriological doctrine" catered to this interest. Thus the decision to become a Buddhist taken by Emperor Aśoka of the Mauryan dynasty, "who was the first to succeed in uniting the whole cultural area of India into a single state," appears to Weber as a calculated political act (RS II, p. 253). This is, of course, a wilful interpretation of the sources; according to Aśoka's own testimony, the conversion leading to his becoming a Buddhist layman was the outgrowth of a very personal act of conscience. Weber's characterization of Aśoka as a "member of the order" (RS II, p. 253) for whom a "guru" is supposed to have granted a dispensation from his vows (RS II, p. 261), is in the realm of fantasy; it is based on a false

11 Frank R. Hamm, "Buddhismus und Jinizismus: Zwei Typen indischer Religiosität und ihr Weg in der Geschichte", *Saeculum* 15 (1964), pp. 53 and 56.

translation by Kern already contradicted at the time, of the phrase *samghe upete*¹².

Weber supposed that the Buddhist interpretation of the karma theory as "a specifically levelling and, properly speaking, democratic religiosity" (RS II, p. 261) that largely disregarded natal caste barriers favoured the concentration of absolute power free of class conventions in the hands of individual rulers, as it liberated the rulers from the necessity of having to attend to caste laws. This, of course, is only a theory; Weber left owing us proof that things in India actually came about in this way.

Much seems to suggest, in fact, that the actual development was different. The Mauryan empire was built at a time when Buddhism enjoyed no special encouragement by the rulers, nor did it long survive as an empire the death of the Buddhist monarch Aśoka.

3. "Accommodation to the conditions of existence in the world," that is, "the interests of the laity" (RS II, p. 252), in particular, the laity from classes that primitive Buddhism scarcely appealed to. It was a religion of the masses in "an epoch geared to satisfying plebeian religious needs" (RS II, p. 254). Weber's conception of this "accommodation" is especially clear from his thesis that the new ruling class regretted the lack of "means for domesticating the masses," as the classes that needed to be appealed to at the time - "humble citizens and farmers" - were unable to do anything "with the products of the soteriology of the refined upper class" (and thus with the "old Buddhist soteriology") (RS II, p. 254); these classes, in other words, had no interest at all in attaining Nirvana as a goal of deliverance. Weber overlooks, however, the "graded character" of the Buddhist ethic, in which the existence of the Sangha and the possibility, open to everyone, of joining it provided by itself the means of entering upon the path to Nirvana - for the monk the direct path, and for the layman the path of acquiring good karma by meritorious acts and of taking the direct path sometime in the future. Moreover, Weber's thesis must be characterized as at least questionable in view of the previously mentioned rapid decay of the Mauryan empire after Aśoka's death.

Nevertheless, Weber is right in seeing in the accommodation to the masses' religious needs a determining factor in the transformation of Buddhism; as is generally assumed today, it was only Aśoka's support of Buddhism that led to the latter's spreading over the entire subcontinent and even into the neighbouring countries of India. By this means some of the preconditions were met for further changes, which later promoted the rise of the popular forms of the Mahāyāna cult.

12 Kern, *Manual*, p. 113; cf. also *ibid.*, p. 115.

4. A "patronship" of the ruler over the Sangha, or as Weber says, Aśoka "felt himself as the lord and patron of the Buddhist church in the same manner that the Byzantine monarchs did with respect to the Christian church" (RS II, p. 260). Weber is alluding to the so-called Schism Edict, in which the king concerned himself with the unity of the Buddhist order. Here, too, a more cautious interpretation is necessary, as I have shown in a relevant study. Aśoka hardly felt himself to be the lord of the Buddhist religion, but rather its protector, and fully respected the independence of the religious domain. The reform of the Sangha occasioned by Aśoka became a model and served as the legitimation for similar acts on the part of later Buddhist monarchs. What E. Sarkisyanz calls the "self-ecclesiasticizing" of later Buddhist states had its roots in this patronship by Aśoka over the Sangha, but it was far from being fact in Aśoka's lifetime.
5. "Emotional mass religiosity" introduced itself into the Buddhist world (RS II, p. 255). Weber rightly notes that the Buddha himself wished to block such developments, particularly by prohibiting glorification of superhuman abilities. Weber's assertion regarding a "reliably transmitted" prohibition on the part of the Buddha to make figurative representations of him is, like much in the chapter, a piece of fantasy; nothing has been handed down concerning the raising of such a question. Another fancy of Weber is his thesis of the puritanism in "ecclesiastical art" (RS II, p. 255). What is obviously true, however, is that, from the time of Aśoka on, magic thought (at first in the form of Paritta or guardian magic) and the notions of a saviour gained increasing entry into the conceptual world of Buddhists.
6. Weber is of the opinion that "the greatest innovation in formal terms, however, one that most probably derives from the first king to make the change-over to a systematical clerical administration [namely, Aśoka] and from the ecclesiastical council held under him" was "the fixing in writing of the tradition that until then had been handed down only orally" (RS II, p. 260). Here and in the following remarks, Weber is obviously the victim of inexact notes he had made. None of the works in question contains this false information; even in Kern¹³ the correct statement of fact is found: The texts were written down at least a hundred years later, and for Indians of that early period oral tradition was a more dependable means than the written word of keeping sacred lore alive. According to our sources, the first reported record of sacred Buddhist writings, which - as expressly stated in the chronicles of Ceylon - had until then been transmitted orally, occurred in Ceylon under king Vaṭṭagāmaṇi Abhaya in the first century of

13 Kern, *Manual*, p. 120.

the Christian era; this surely was an important impulse for the further development of Buddhism.

7. According to Weber, Aśoka is supposed "to have also probably founded the Buddhist educational system" (RS II, p. 262). This supposition is an anachronism. The taking on of this function by the monks must certainly be dated much later; it is a good example of the Sangha's "new" social role, which continued to expand in the course of Buddhism's later development.
8. Aśoka was responsible for creating the ideal of the Buddhist "welfare state." In the king's inscriptions, this political ideal is not formulated as expressly Buddhist, being rather a general "dharma" acceptable to all confessions of faith; in substance, though, it is essentially inspired by Buddhist thought (cf. RS II, pp. 256-259). Weber even talks in terms of an "ethical syncretism" (RS II, p. 259); but it is clear that the memory of Aśoka's ideals remained alive mainly in the Buddhist world.
9. Finally, Aśoka's "patronship" of the beginnings of the Buddhist world mission may be mentioned (RS II, pp. 260f.).

It makes a great deal of sense to assume that these factors contributed in a fundamental way to the "transformation" of primitive Buddhism from a "soteriology for intellectuals," one catering to a spiritual elite, into a mass movement. Much remains unclear in view of the previously described difficulties with regard to sources. Today Weber's account appears as a mixture of facts, unprovable or undisprovable suppositions and fanciful claims, and yet it can set in motion useful chains of thought, as often it is only historical details that we have a different view of today.

The key problem remains, on the one hand, the dating of many of these "transformations" and, on the other, the particular character of King Aśoka's conversion, which we are familiar with from his own pieces of testimony and from much later sources, but not from independent contemporary documents. Weber's assumptions are not free of contradictions. Thus he opines at first that it was "a historical accident" that Aśoka became a Buddhist (RS II, p. 250), but the reader of the following sections of his books comes away with the impression that he viewed it in fact not so but as a historical necessity. Today we are uncommonly better informed about the ruling states of ancient India. Although Weber was already aware of the old Indian political manual, the *Arthśāstra* of Kautilya, in translated excerpts (cf. RS II, p. 69 with fn. 4 and *passim*), the complete work became available only at a late stage of his investigations. In his studies he was unable to make full use of the work, which was completely translated for the first time in 1915. To be sure, it is still disputed whether it actually dates to the Mauryan period; in any case, it offers

a quite credible picture of the state and power structures in ancient India. It is on the basis of this very knowledge that we tend today, as noted, to regard Aśoka's conversion to Buddhism as a personal decision, one that was able to alter the political structure of the ancient Indian empire only for a limited period of time, not permanently. Aśoka's religious policies and ideas of a welfare state did not become, in any case, the basis of political rule for later Indian potentates, which would have been expected had his conversion, as Weber's remarks suggest, come about primarily as a result of political necessity or expediency. We shall have to view much of what Weber writes about Aśoka in more relative terms, including the thesis that Aśoka made Buddhism the "officially dominant confession in all of India" (RS II, p. 251); that, if anything, would have run counter to Aśoka's Buddhist conception of tolerance.

Even though the political ideal Aśoka formulated in his inscriptions would not be conceivable without the foundation of Buddhist modes of thought, he nevertheless made a clear distinction between his personal religious convictions and the universal dharma, or moral law, he propagated in his empire¹⁴. Thus comparison between Aśoka and Byzantine rulers (RS II, p. 256) is entirely inadmissible, and much in Weber's observations on Aśoka's religious policies baseless.

4. Max Weber's View of Theravada Buddhism

Weber deals on pp. 279-286 with the countries of Theravada (in Weber's terms: "Hinayanism"), that is, with Ceylon and "Further India"; he calls this form of Buddhism a "direct institutionalization of Hinayanism perhaps more accurately: of the preschismatic orthodoxy of primitive Buddhism" (RS II, p. 279). Here one needs to mention the Ceylonese or, more exactly, Sinhalese "Buddhist church", whose origin goes back to the mission activities on the island carried out by Aśoka's son Mahinda. Later the core areas of continental "Further India" (with the exception of Vietnam) were converted to the same form of Buddhism. Much of what Weber had to say in the previous section about Aśoka that was, as we had to conclude, inapplicable to the latter's time holds true to all intents and purposes for the high and late middle-age kingdoms in these Theravada countries. For this period we have the corresponding source material; care must merely be taken not to extrapolate the situation back to the Mauryan period. In the historical writing of Theravada Buddhists, however, Aśoka has been made the model for all later

14 Cf. Lamotte, *Histoire*, p. 261.

Buddhist kings. The starting point must be, of course, not the historical Aśoka but the account that Sinhalese chronicles give of his rule - an account adapted to altered conditions of long standing. Thus the following sentence of Weber's, which occurs in the chapter on Aśoka, scarcely befits the Mauryan period, though it suits quite well as a description of the basic ideas behind the monarchies of the Theravada countries: "The might of the world monarch (*cakravartin*) must supplement the spiritual might of the Buddha, which necessarily leads away from all worldly activity" (RS II, p. 256).¹⁵

From Kern's *Manual* Weber adopts the terms "orthodox" (which he uses to characterize Theravada Buddhism) and "heterodox" (which he uses to characterize all other forms of Buddhism); this naturally produces a slanted picture. When he talks about Theravada, or "Hinayanism," in Ceylon and Further India, however, then for this still living tradition he has available on the whole somewhat better source material than for the long gone Buddhism of its Indian birthplace in the period following Aśoka. For Ceylon he relied above all on Hackmann's previously mentioned account as well as on the then famous book *Eastern Monachism* by Robert Spence Hardy (1850); further, on an official government report on the application of the *Buddhist Temporalities ordinance* of 1894; and of course on the pertinent pages in Kern's book. For Further India he principally drew on, besides Hackmann, the great opus on Siam by Lucien Fournereau.¹⁶

According to Weber the main factors influencing the further development of Buddhism into medieval Theravada are:

1. The legitimation of the ruler as *cakravartin*, that is, as a world ruler as understood in Buddhist mythology (RS II, p. 283 and *passim*);
2. The regulating of relations between Sangha and state, by means of which both became dependent on one another, and in tandem with which an ordered spiritual hierarchy arose (cf. RS II, pp. 261, 283 and *passim*);
3. The relaxing of the Sangha's "strict world-renouncing character" together with "far-reaching concessions to the limits of the average monk" as well as to the new tasks taken on by the monasteries as "centres of religious mission and culture" (cf. RS II, p. 263). This promoted the concentration of religious planning on the needs of lay piety (RS II, pp. 263, 281 and *passim*) and thus, naturally, on the gaining of religious merit (cf. RS II, pp. 285 and *passim*), which for its part guaranteed rebirth in a good family (RS II, 286 and *passim*).

15 Concerning this topic see also Heinz Bechert, *Weltflucht und Weltveränderung*, Göttingen, 1976.

16 Lucien Fournereau, *Le Siam ancien*, 2 vols., Paris, 1895-1908.

4. The "admittance into the monastic community on a temporary basis (RS II, pp. 262, 279, 284, 285), a custom practised in Further India but not in Ceylon.¹⁷
5. The role of the Sangha as provider of a general education (RS II, pp. 262, 279, 285).

Central to Weber's assessment of the development of Theravada Buddhism is the thesis that Buddhism was used as a tool of power politics for the "domestication" of the subjects (RS II, p. 280, 1. 8; p. 281, 1. 36f. etc.). On the other hand, the influence of the monks, too, is characterized as "quite significant politically" (RS II, p. 281), and even as an "almost unchecked clerical rule" (RS II, p. 265). These and other far-reaching general conclusions were drawn on the basis of material that on the whole is quite fragmentary; thus Weber claims that "the significance of the old clan connections was heavily downgraded by the power of the hierocracy" (RS II, p. 284). Further, Weber argues that the might of kings found an obstacle only in the might of monks, as the "power of the monastic priesthood over the population" was "almost absolute" even in political affairs (*ibid.*); it is probably due to this that "the growing princely power" attempted to free itself from the "chains of Buddhist plebeian hierocracy" (RS II, p. 318). This is not likely to have been so; it is quite certain that the monks were not a "plebeian hierocracy" but rather the leading educated and literary class, among whom members of the royal family, in particular, played a considerable role (even as they still do today in Thailand). Weber was not unaware of this, but in the haste of writing these essays such contradictions within his account must have slipped his attention.

Tensions between rulers and the Sangha did in fact frequently occur in the course of the history of Theravada Buddhism, and on the whole this topic has not yet been sufficiently researched, especially in view of the fact that a tendency to harmonize and gloss over these differences prevails in the sources.

A greater advance in the way Weber viewed things consists in his stressing the importance of the monasterial estates for the history of Buddhism in Ceylon; as far as I know, Weber was the first to make very clear reference to this fact. In Further India such estates played a considerably smaller role. Still, much remains one-sided in the picture Weber draws of the Buddhism in Sri Lanka, though this is for the most part due to the nature of his source material. He scarcely touched on the contradictions between ordinances and

17 On the effects of his custom on the relations between Sangha and laity see Heinz Bechert, "Einige Fragen der Religionssoziologie und Struktur des südasiatischen Buddhismus", *Internationales Jahrbuch für Religionssoziologie*, 4 (1968), pp. 287-290.

religious practice; the Buddhist reform movement, which was already very influential in Weber's lifetime remains unmentioned, as does so-called Buddhist modernism. Changes in the organization of the monasteries, for which Weber consulted the *Final Report on the Buddhist Temporalities ordinance* of 1894, go unnoticed; in fact, this law, passed in 1889, aimed at wide-ranging reforms in the administration of monastery property.¹⁸

Within his particular line of inquiry Weber comes to the conclusion that the rule of Theravada occasioned an "overemphasis on traditional agriculture" and, compared with Hinduized India, a less degree of technical and commercial development, as "the Buddhist monasteries were to no greater extent places of rational pursuit than any other monasteries in Asia" (RS II, p. 284); the incentives embedded in the Hindu caste system to remain "faithful to one's profession" were gone, "the mere theoretical praise of the faithful worker" being unable to provide an incentive corresponding to the "emanipatory caste order" (RS II, p. 285). "True Hinayana Buddhism by its very nature probably could assume no other stance than an adversarial or, at most, a tolerant one towards commerce" (ibid.).

Here the concept of a welfare state may once again be considered. Although certain attempts in that direction were made in the empire ruled by Bimbisara, the king of Magadha the Buddha himself converted, one is surely justified in assigning responsibility for developing the ideal of the Buddhist welfare state to Aśoka. "Welfare," according to Weber, is "understood in part spiritually (as promoting deliverance), and in part in terms of charity, but not in rationally economic terms." He thinks, too, that the "huge irrigation works of the Ceylonese kings had a quite fiscal orientation, one geared to increasing the numbers of taxpayers and tax receipts," but "not a political one of promoting general welfare" (RS II, p. 262). Here we must cease, I believe, to go along with Weber; a look into the "Great Chronicle" of Ceylon, the *Mahāvamsa*, teaches that the Theravada tradition justified these large state-planned construction measures not in fiscal terms but ideologically, through the concept of the welfare state, and that - particularly in the great period of the medieval irrigation-based culture - the Sinhalese themselves were quite aware of the inseparable connection between this economic factor and general welfare; once the irrigation-based culture collapsed, as it later did, the entire welfare state followed suit. The monasterial estates, however, which arose in this period, have remained as an institution up to the present.

The old concept of the Theravada welfare state served three goals: 1. to enable as many people as possible to tread the path of the religious (i.e. monastic) life, 2. to store up a maximum number of "meritorious" deeds

18 Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft*, vol. 1, pp. 236-239.

(*punya*karman) for the good of all members of the community, and 3. to put into practice a socially bound ethic in the sense formulated in the tradition surrounding Aśoka. If the construction of irrigation works is expressly described as a "meritorious act," then it also becomes a motivation for a way of conduct that leads to economic progress, as "meritorious" acts naturally bring about a good rebirth.

Here, therefore, against Weber's way of viewing these phenomena, the criticism must be made that he fashioned his concept of "rational work" so narrowly and one-sidedly that he was unable to account for important aspects of the culture of Buddhist countries with it or to explain adequately the development of these cultures; thus he is unable to make sense of the "virtually universal" education of the people by the monks (RS II, p. 262) and the "learned activities" in the monasteries (which became customary after the "establishment of benefices"; cf. RS II, p. 250). With regard to the development of artistic tradition he comes to the erroneous conclusion that, after the 14th century, "the pursuit of art that was incited by Buddhist influences was unable to produce anything of truly equal value [to the older works of art]" (RS II, p. 285); anyone who has ever seen the temples of Luang Prabang in Laos knows that in them we have the product of one of the greatest periods of flowering of Asian art, one that took place between the 17th and 19th centuries. Thus Weber still lacked the appropriate means for understanding the development of these cultures, his thinking, as his terminology shows, being too centred on Europe.

5. Some Additional Remarks on Weber's Assessment of Buddhism

That Weber's understanding of the development of Buddhism after Aśoka in India, the land of its birth, necessarily remained unsatisfactory is no surprise in view of the insufficiently advanced stage of research at the time and the previously described problem with sources. What is still interesting today is his discussion of the reasons for the aforementioned "transformation" of primitive Buddhism into its later forms. What can be read in Weber about Buddhist sects in particular, on the contrary, is largely outdated and in places mingled with errors resulting from an inaccurate assessment of the sources, and so may here be overlooked. In his account of the origin and spread of Mahāyāna Buddhism can be found a number of perceptive treatments of philosophical standpoints and soteriology, but also numerous misconceptions. Thus everything Weber wrote is by no means no longer current, but the mixture - somewhat confusing for the present-day reader - of factuality, mis-

conception and obsolescence makes a detailed and necessarily lengthy discussion of it seem purposeless. We can hardly expect to gain any fundamental religious-sociological understanding that would take us significantly beyond what has previously been said. One widespread misconception, incidentally, consisted in viewing Mahāyāna Buddhism simply as a continuation of the Mahāsāṅghika orientation (RS II, p. 264). Kern and his contemporaries were themselves unable to describe the relation between Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna accurately, so that a clear picture is not to be expected in Weber's treatment.

Summing up, we may state that Weber's assessment of primitive Buddhism proves on the whole, as seen from the present day perspective, to have been surprisingly correct. It is therefore able to serve as the starting point for our survey. Also largely still pertinent today is Weber's description of the factors that caused the "transformation" of an old "soteriology for intellectuals" confined to a spiritual élite into a religion of the masses. His assessment of the person and position of Aśoka is basically accurate, though details need to be revised; he does not differentiate between the historical Aśoka and the one portrayed in the later Theravada tradition. Several important lines of inquiry can be followed up from Weber's account. On the other hand, his treatment of the later development of Buddhism in the land of its birth, India, remained - true to the state of research at the time - rather tentative and unsatisfying. On the whole, however, the need to refine terminology becomes clear, something that might meaningfully occur on the basis of Weber's work.