Purifying the Pure: The Visuddhimagga, Forest-Dwellers and the Dynamics of Individual and Collective Prestige in Theravāda Buddhism

Sven Bretfeld

1 Introduction

In Buddhist semantic systems concepts that can be translated as “purity” have many candidates and fields of semantic and pragmatic application. In Sanskrit and related Indian languages the relevant terms are derived mainly from the verbal roots śudh and śuc, both meaning “to become clean or pure” and “to cleanse, to purify” in their causative forms. Numerous nominal forms—with or without a modifying prefix—can be found in Buddhist literature, some of which denote special meanings, others vary from having generic and technical meanings. Of these nominal derivatives the Pāli term visuddhi has made a unique career as a soteriological term in so-called Theravāda Buddhism. The commentator Buddhaghosa used this term as a key concept in his famous Visuddhimagga, the “Path to Purity,” which presents the disciplinary and mental training leading to liberation as a series of gradually achieved stages of purity. Apart from soteriology purity plays a key role in the highly disputed question of the condition of the Sāsana, i. e. the institutions of Buddhist religion. In this discourse the metaphor of purity provides a central epistemology for the evaluation of religious culture as the potentially unstable basis of social welfare. The criteria for the purity of the Sāsana include most prominently the question whether the Samgha, the collective of monks and nuns, is firmly established in monastic discipline, lineage affiliation and adherence to an authentic textual transmission. The notion of a naturally progressing decadence of the Sāsana has been instrumental in this discourse. By extension, canonization,1 orthopraxy and orthodoxy were shaped by the question of who represents the authority of the pure Sāsana.

In this article I will examine some of the social dynamics resulting from the concept of purity. I will argue that both semantic fields—soteriological and institutional purity—have far-reaching social consequences due to their mutual entanglement. The production and distribution of religious prestige is an

important result deriving from this "knowledge regime". Purity in both semantic fields is a concern that encodes social distinction and leads to political action. In this respect it is vital that purity as a value-system is not a binary category but a scale. A person, group or institution is not either pure or impure. Hence, purifying or polluting activity can improve or corrupt the degree of purity.

2 Purity of Mind

Achieving purity of mind is an ancient expression for the goal of the path revealed by the Buddha. Applying the metaphor of cleansing to describe the effect of ascetic practice seems to have been common in the East-Indian Śramaṇa movement around the time of Siddhārtha Gautama. One group of this ascetic movement, the Jains, imagined the soul (jīva) to be polluted by the dirt of Karma or by the deeds collected through countless former rebirths. This filth (kleśa) burdens the soul and ties it to the lower realms of rebirth. But the kleśa can be removed by burning it through harsh ascetic practices which allows the soul to ascend to higher states of rebirth and, in the end, to Nirvāṇa which is located at the peak of the world.

Buddhists borrowed this term but interpreted the kleśas more psychologically as “polluting” mental factors that shaped the processes of consciousness. They can be removed by a mental training which culminates in a form of supernatural knowledge. The notion of pollution and purity of mind was preserved as a central metaphor in Buddhist soteriological terminology. Utmost purity is ascribed to Arhats and especially to the Buddha himself. Many attributes and epithets of the Buddha associate him with purity, which not only qualifies his moral conduct and mental constitution but also his physical appearance, since he was “born in the world, grew up in the world, dwelt—having overcome the world—undefiled by the world.”

2 sn iii, 140.

3 Illustrative of the different ideas about the Buddha’s physical purity virulent among the early Buddhist communities is a notion refuted in the Kathāvatthu. It is ascribed to the Andhaka and Uttarapātha schools by the commentary: Buddhassa Bhagavato uccārapassāvo ativīya aṇṇe gandhajāte adhigaṅhātīti “Even the excrement and urine of the Buddha, the Exalted One, excelled all other well-smelling (things).” This is refuted by the author of the Kathāvatthu with hardly hidden irony: Bhagavā gandhabhōjīti? . . . Nanu Bhagavā odanakummasaṃ bhuṅjaṭṭīti? . . . Atthi keci Buddhassa Bhagavato uccārapassāvaṃ nahāyanti vilimpenti uccārenti pelāya patisāmenti karaṇḍāya nikkhiṃenti āpāne pasārenti, tena ca gandhena gandhakaraṇiyāṃ karontīti? “Did the Exalted One feed on perfumes? . . . Is it not that