FILIAL PIETY AND THE MONK IN THE PRACTICE OF INDIAN BUDDHISM: A QUESTION OF ‘SINICIZATION’ VIEWED FROM THE OTHER SIDE

BY

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In Memory of my Father-in-Law, V.L. Thorpe

Shizutani Masao in his catalog of Indian Buddhist epigraphical material, the final version of which was published in Kyoto in 1979, lists more than two thousand separate inscriptions. These inscriptions come, of course, from all periods and virtually every part of India and have been thoroughly mined by historians, but not—unfortunately—by Buddhist scholars. Buddhist scholars, in fact, have shown very little interest in this material, especially those scholars writing on the development of Buddhist doctrine—this, in spite of the fact that this material contains considerable information in regard to such important matters as the conception of the Buddha or Buddhas, the conception or conceptions of merit and religious acts, and the nature of the actual, as opposed to the ideal ‘goal’ of religious activity among practicing Indian Buddhists. In fact this epigraphical material has—as I have said elsewhere—at least two distinct advantages. First of all, much of it predates by several centuries our earliest actually datable literary sources. Secondly, it tells us what a fairly large number of Indian Buddhists actually did, as opposed to what—according to our literary sources—they might or should have done. But in addition to these two advantages there is a third: this material, in a considerable number of cases, tells us what the individuals themselves—whether laymen or monks—hoped to accomplish by those religious acts which they chose to record.

The failure of Buddhist scholars to take this epigraphical material into account has generated a number of distortions both within the realm of Indian studies and beyond. One particular example will concern us here.

1 Shizutani Masao 静谷正雄, Indo bukkyo himei mokuroku インド佛教碑銘目録 (Kyoto: 1979)

Kenneth Ch'en in his deservedly well known book on Buddhism in China says, in reference to the Lung-men inscriptions which date from the very end of the 5th and the beginning of the 6th Century, that

"... the frequent references to filial piety in the inscriptions testify to the change that had taken place in Buddhism after its introduction into China. Buddhism started as a religion renouncing all family and social ties; yet in the inscriptions one meets again and again with prayers for the well-being of deceased ancestors, uttered even by monks and nuns. These expressions of piety indicate that although the monks and nuns had joined the monastic order, their ties to family and ancestors still remained strong and enduring. This is a specific example of how Buddhism had adapted itself to contemporary social conditions in China.\(^3\)

It should be noted here that I have not cited Professor Ch'en's remarks because they are in any way unique. Quite the contrary. I cite them because they are a particularly clear formulation of a very widely held notion concerning the "transformation" of Indian Buddhism in China,\(^4\) and because they so clearly reflect the conception of the Indian Buddhist monk which is presented by even our best modern authorities. The implications of Professor Ch'en's remarks are clear: there is not supposed to be in Indian Buddhism anything like the kind of 'filial piety' he finds expressed in the Lung-men inscriptions; and even if there were, Indian Buddhist monks most certainly would not be involved in it. This second point, of course, accords very well with the accepted view of the Indian Buddhist monk. The Indian monk is rather consistently presented as a radical ascetic who had severed all ties with his family and who was not involved in cult activity, and especially not in religious giving. This, according to the accepted view, was the province of the laity.\(^5\) The

