

Book Reviews

Arahant Mahinda - Redactor of the Buddhapūjāva in Sinhala Buddhism,
by Suwanda H J Sugunasiri, PhD (Nalanda Publishing Canada, 2012
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Professor Sugunasiri has written a book with many levels and which will appeal to a diverse audience. In the first place he was given us an annotated and complete translation of the *Buddhapūjāva*, one of the most important of ritual texts in the Sinhala Buddhist tradition. Therefore anyone interested in the growing field of intercultural ritual studies will be richly rewarded by this work.

Sugunasiri writes about this famous ritual text both as a scholar of Buddhism and as a practicing Buddhist, for whom this text is both of scholarly fascination and personal devotion. He is, as the fine scholar he is, always careful to make sure we are aware of which voice he is using. But it is refreshing to glimpse how a Buddhist scholar has as a committed Buddhist lived with the *Buddhapūjāva* both as a scholarly puzzle and as part of his own ritual life. Scholars of ritual studies will be delighted with the work and Buddhologists will likewise find both Sugunasiri's annotated translation and comprehensive study of the question of authorship stimulating. For the more general reader, one can only be impressed with the depth of his learning and the richness of his speculations.

Students of comparative ritual studies will be fascinated by the richness of this fairly short ritual in teaching so much about the Buddhadharma. As a student of the Chinese Neo-Confucian tradition, I am always fascinated by how different philosophical traditions make use of ritual. This is certainly the case for Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism, and it is instructive to see how the Sinhala tradition has gone about the business of ritual instruction for its large non-monastic community of followers.

There are many intriguing features of the text. One I found especially interesting was the possibility at the end of the ritual, an opportunity, for a homily by a learned monk to those taking part in the ritual. This points to something that has always struck me about the Buddhist tradition, namely that it is a tradition dedicated to teaching – of

how to overcome our foundational ignorance of the world in order to find liberation from the rounds of suffering and rebirth.

The second main feature of the work is equally probing. Sugunasiri asks the question of who could have composed such a vital ritual text. His answer will surely be contested in that he claims that the author of the text (the earliest version if not the version in use today) was none other than Arahant Mahinda. This theory honors the great teacher as the person revered as bringing the Buddhadharma to Sri Lanka. Hence, who better than Arahant Mahinda to consider as the author of the text?

The scholarly prefaces to the book agree that this is a plausible theory. But it does remain a theory *per se*. But what if we are not convinced that Arahant Mahinda is actually the author of the *Buddhapūjāva*? One would suspect that Sugunasiri would feel some remorse that his long and detailed defense of Mahinda's authorship was not absolutely compelling. But on another level, even if one is not convinced by his argument about the authorship of the text, we can still deeply appreciate the care with which the argument is mounted.

But we can also appreciate that this discussion also teaches us more about what is necessary for such a ritual to become such a revered teaching tool. The ritual itself bespeaks of the genius of its composition as a ritual and profound teaching tool for the Buddhadharma. So we can appreciate this second aim of Sugunasiri's project even if we are now completely convinced that Arahant Mahinda was the author – for Sugunasiri does demonstrate that the text demands an author of the learning, piety and quality of Arahant Mahinda.

Every reader will be the richer and the wiser for appreciating both aspects of Sugunasiri's achievement.