BOOK REVIEWS

Rita Langer. *Sermon Studies and Buddhism: A Case Study of Sri Lankan Preaching, (Studia Philologica Buddhica Monograph Series XXX)*, The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, Tokyo, 2013. Pp. vi+238

Asanga Tilakaratne
University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

Referring to Peter Schalk's two studies¹ in the German language on Buddhist sermons the author of this monograph, Rita Langer, says that they "constitute the only attempt to date at working out a methodology of Buddhist sermon studies". In a similar manner, on Langer's work we can say that it is the only work so far in English on Buddhist sermon studies. The work being reviewed is undoubtedly a pioneering effort in this new area in the field of Buddhist studies. It embarks on sermon studies by studying three sermons given in Sinhala language by two local Sri Lankan monks, the first at the funeral of a female devotee, and the next, on the sixth day evening after her death and the last at the seventh day *dana* given in commemoration of her. The fourth and last part of the book includes the transcripts in Sinhala of the three sermons and their English translations, along with the Pali text and the translation of the associated activities such as observing the five precepts, offering Buddha-puja and transferring merits to the deceased which are usually done in Pali language.

The first three parts of the book are meant to provide the reader with the proper academic context for the purpose of understanding the content of the fourth part. The first part, 'Buddhist sermon studies: an overview,' discusses the overall historical background of sermons in India and Sri Lanka, and reviews academic discussions on preaching in Buddhism, concluding with a discussion on the contemporary perspectives on preaching in Sri Lanka. The second part is a summary and discussion of Peter Schalk's two papers

¹ "The message of the peaceful teaching: Introduction to the Buddhist Sermon in Sri Lanka" (1983), *Temenos* 19, pp.68-111; " 'Without thinking about death there is no life': Analysis of a Buddhist death sermon (*mataka bana*) from Sri Lanka" (1988) in *On the meaning of Death: Essays on mortuary rituals and eschatological beliefs*, ed. Cederrroth, S. and Corlin, C., et al. Stockholm, Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology: pp.229-55.

referred to above on sermon studies which are inaccessible to those who do not read German. The third part elaborates on the social and religious context of the three sermons transcribed and translated in the fourth part and discusses their content.

The first part says that many scholars have discussed preaching as a Buddhist religious activity. These studies focus on references in the ancient Pali and Sinhala literature to the preaching of the *Dhamma*, and also on the medieval Sinhala literature meant to serve the purpose of preaching. Both Adikaram² and Walpola Rahula³ discuss preaching in Buddhism (*dhamma-desana*) from a historical point of view. Mahinda Deegalle⁴ and Steven Collins⁵ discuss preaching as a genre of literature. The author discusses the above-mentioned and several other authors in the first part of her book in order to highlight how her work, which discusses the actual sermons both as acts of religious speech and as literature with a specific content, is different from these previous attempts.

The subject matter of the second part is the two papers, mentioned above, by Peter Schalk on sermons in Sri Lanka. The significance of Schalk's work, according to the author, lies in its being the first attempt to establish a methodology for the study of Buddhist sermons, which the other authors who have discussed the phenomenon of sermons/preaching before and after have not done. Schalk's two papers are based on two sermons, one of which is a sermon on a full-moon day, and the other discussed in the more recent paper is one to transfer merits to a dead person - *mataka bana*. In addition to studying the text of the sermon, the first study proposes a definition of Buddhist preaching, and maps out a 'programme' for future studies of Buddhist sermons, which Langer takes to be methodologically significant. The discussion concludes with a study of the preacher, and the structure and the content of the sermon. The second paper focuses on the structure and the context of the sermon and its content, all in so far as it is a *mataka bana*. Langer is basically in agreement with Schalk. But she

²Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon (1946) Reprinted in 1994, Dehiwela: Buddhist Cultural center.

³History of Buddhism in Ceylon (1956) Reprinted in 1996, Dehiwela: Buddhist Cultural center.

⁴Popularizing Buddhism: preaching as performance in Sri Lanka (2006) Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. Several other works of this author are cited and discussed.

⁵Nirvana and Other Buddhist felicities: utopias of the Pali imaginaire (1998) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

improves on him. For example, Langer takes Schalk's definition of the Buddhist sermon, '[a]s a transmission of the Buddha's word, a sermon is an instance of language in the act of public speaking' and scrutinizes its elements such as transmission, Buddha's word, public, act, and speaking, and reveals limitations and ambiguities inherent in these concepts, and finally questions 'whether a definition is the best starting point for a systematic study of sermons⁶'. (More on Schalk's definition later.) In the concluding remarks of her discussion Langer notes that Schalk does not include a complete transcript of the second sermon (as he did in the case of the first study) and that Schalk, since then, has not pursued this genre of study to which he provided a methodological basis.

The third part is a study of the context of the three sermons and the actual content of those sermons. Langer provides meticulous details of the surroundings of the venue, preparations, people involved, both the preachers and their listeners. Langer discusses in detail the monastic life, education and religious activities of the preachers, the Buddhist culture, rites and rituals surrounding the lives of the ordinary people, and the conceptual, psychological and religious significance of the sermon. In the analysis of sermons, the author seems to follow the methodological guide provided by Schalk. The fact that the sermons chosen by the author for her study are connected to death may be owing to her earlier studies on Buddhist rituals of death⁷. As the author is well aware, the sermons are by no means limited to death and funerals, but constitute a very important aspect of the rich and varied Buddhist religious life. Thus, the present study could be considered an initial effort to introduce this new field to Buddhist studies.

A difficulty encountered by those who venture into Buddhist sermon studies is that there are no transcripts of sermons preserved⁸, at least in Sri Lanka, as in the Christian tradition which

⁶ Although providing an Aristotelian type definition with reference to essence could be problematic, Langer could have tried a later Wittgensteinian type definition highlighting family resemblance. A 'definition' of this sort would not only avoid usual difficulties associated with 'essential' definitions but also will agree with the *anatma* way of Buddhist thinking.

⁷ *Buddhist Rituals of Death and Rebirth: A study of contemporary Sri Lankan practice and its origins* (2007), Abingdon: RoutledgeCurzon.

⁸ This assertion, which I borrow from Schalk and Langer, is problematic if we are to take into account the *Sutta-piṭaka* of the Pali canon, in particular its first four *nikayas*, wherein the discourses/sermons of the Buddha are recorded. If sermon

seems have a reservoir of such transcripts dating from the medieval times. The available transcripts of Buddhist sermons do not go back beyond the second quarter of the last century. It does not seem that there was a need for Sri Lankan Buddhist monks to write their sermons before they delivered them for, as the author herself notes, the monks who usually receive training in public speech at a very early stage in their monastic life had developed this ability as a part of their 'on the job' training. There are no records regarding the existence of 'sermon writers' in the Buddhist tradition as in the case of medieval Christianity. Currently, thanks to the public media such as internet, radio and TV, transcripts of *Dhamma* sermons are available in their numbers in audio, video and printed forms. In other words, there is enough raw material for Buddhist sermon studies.

There, however, seems to exist an ambiguity in what a sermon is. Earlier we referred to Schalk's definition of 'sermon' as "an instance of language in the act of public speaking". Although a sermon, first and foremost, is an act of speech, it has its own life as an object among many other objects. Surely it does not exist as a material object. But we refer to it as an object, and it is how the Sinhala equivalent of sermon, *bana*, is used in Sinhala language, which is no different from the use of 'sermon' in English language. At the same time, the sense of *bana* as a speech act is inseparable from this objective sense. Therefore there is a need to make a distinction between sermon and preaching. In her critique of Schalk's definition Langer notices this deficiency:

"It is not clear whether Schalk's definition at this point implies that a sermon is necessarily an oral transmission. If taken as an aspect of a general definition of sermon it would exclude large parts of Christian sermon literature. If taken as part of the definition of Buddhists sermon, it would exclude the published model sermon, which Schalk analyses in his later study (p.59)."

Nevertheless, in her own study the reader can see that Langer moves with ease from sermon as a (written) text to the sermon as preaching. Perhaps this is unavoidable. But a clearer sense of this demarcation would have been helpful. Langer does notice the multiform and multi-purpose character of preaching when she says that it is "performance, re-enactment, ritual act, social occasion,

studies have to begin with the discourses of the Buddha it is bound to have some significant implications on the very project of sermon studies.

inspiration entertainment and many more things' (p.125). But she does not pursue this line of thinking. If she had this distinction clearly before her, she would not have asserted that sermon studies are in its infancy (p.3) for, almost all authors whom she refers to in part I of the book can be understood as doing Buddhist sermon studies, though not studies of Buddhist preaching.

In order to understand the complex verbal acts involved in the act of preaching the author could have used the traditional Buddhist classifications of actions into physical acts (*kaya kamma*), verbal acts (*vaci kamma*) and mental acts (*mano kamma*), the detailed analysis of which are found in the Buddhist literature. The Buddhist verbal acts have certain interesting affinities with J.L. Austin's idea of doing things with words which Langer could have used in her analysis of sermon as speech act. Austin proposes a basic classification of acts as constative and performative (pp.3-6⁹), the first of which is what corresponds to what is usually named as statements by philosophers, and the second being doing things with words. A further elaboration of this classification is Austin's analysis of speech acts into three categories, locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary, a useful set of tools to analyse sermons as acts of speech. A sermon may be all these three acts simultaneously or in parts. A sermon is locutionary (or an utterance "with a certain 'meaning' in the favourite philosophical sense of that word, i.e. with a certain sense with a certain reference" *ibid.* p.94) in so far it expresses a set of statements which are either true or false and which are meaningful and refer to certain states of affairs. It is illocutionary in so far as it does things such as advising, instructing, transferring merits etc. A sermon is perlocutionary in so far it arouses faith, convinces, and encourages listeners in merit making etc.

The last two instances are clearly doing things with words, and it is clear that a preacher of a sermon does these and many other things in his act of preaching. Austin has described how an illocutionary act if performed without really meaning it, without relevant intention, can be empty or false. This can happen also with a sermon if the preacher merely repeats what he has learned without really meaning it, which could be the case with many sermons, both on the part of preacher as well as the listener. The preacher of a Buddhist sermon starts his sermon by paying homage to the

⁹ Austin, J.L. (1975) *How to do things with words*, ed. J.O. Urmson & Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press).

Buddha, by inviting divine beings to gather to listen to the *Dhamma* and by announcing to his listeners that it is the time for listening to the *Dhamma*. He does these things by uttering relevant Pali stanzas. But it is quite possible that the preacher merely recites these stanzas as a habit and people just listen to those stanzas or just pretend to listen. But even then it does not cease to be a verbal action, hollow verbal action in that, although not exactly a sermon in its proper sense. What Langer discusses in her book, a sermon on the sixth day night in commemoration of the deceased person could serve as a good example. This particular form of sermon is almost universally practiced by all Sri Lanka Buddhists mainly as fulfilling a social need although the expressed idea of this rite is to transfer merit to the departed. Although there are exceptions, very often this sermon is not seriously listened to by people. Particularly, during this activity, the immediate relatives of the deceased, 'home people', are busy with receiving visitors, attending to the usual chores and so forth. This situation has become so normal now, in some instances several elderly people are invited especially for the sake of listening to the sermon! Nevertheless, this act of preaching fulfils a social need, provides solace to the grieved, among many other things. This manner of analysis may be extended to all types of *Dhamma* sermons as acts of preaching.

If sermons are studied as spoken words [namely, preaching] the best way to study them would be to listen to them. This does not happen usually. At least it is not how the sermons are studied in the book under review. In both Schalk and Langer, the sermons are transcribed in roman letters and translated into another language through which the study is done. Now the sermon becomes a written piece of work and, like any text, it is read silently and not heard. But unlike the usual written texts which follow the form of written language, transcribed sermons are neither properly written texts; nor are they sermons to be heard: they seem to occupy an in-between position. It is only a truism that a transcribed text of an oral presentation does not retain its original vibrancy, dynamicity or performative character. A sermon transcribed is no different from the most beautiful song written down on a piece of paper. I consider this as an initial handicap in sermon studies which does not seem easily overcome. As the author notes, one could make some effort to "restore some of the immediacy of the original preaching event.." (p.51) but it is beset with difficulties.

The matter becomes worse when a sermon given in one language, in this case, in the Sinhala language, is transliterated in Roman letters which makes for an imperfect and cumbersome reading. If the intended English reader does not know Sinhala, this effort becomes meaningless (if she does than it is of no use!). A translation provided for such readers may succeed in conveying the basic ideas expressed; but will hardly be able to convey the 'life' of the original with unstated but implied meanings, in the absence of which a sermon as a sermon loses its most important oral character. Perhaps this could be the reason why Schalk does not give the complete translation of the sermon he discusses in his second study?

In the concluding discussion, Langer refers to the disadvantages of presenting an oral sermon in written form, and admits that the translated sermons do not make good reading. This is equally applicable to transcribed sermons in the same language. Such sermons are "rather repetitive, do not appear to cover much ground, and merely present anything the audience would not already be familiar with, while at the same time 'leaving out' interesting aspects found in the Pali sutras and texts used" (p.223). That the translated/transcribed sermons lose their original rhetorical appeal once reduced to writing has been noted also by others who have studied different Buddhist oral traditions¹⁰. But the defects Langer identifies in oral sermons are not really defects. All those features including repetitions can well be virtues in a sermon delivered orally. The problem here is something connected to what I have referred to already, namely, not making a sufficient distinction between a sermon as an oral act and sermon as a written text.

Already there are indications of the shortcomings of sermon studies based on languages far from one's own. I will cite a few examples. The translation of *banapot* as 'preaching books' (p.1, pp. 66-67) betrays a lack of knowledge in the usage of language. Although *bana* could mean preaching or, more properly, a sermon, *bana-pota* as it is understood today, and most probably as understood in the classical Sinhala literature, simply means a *dhamma* book', a book containing or discussing the dhamma, the teaching of the Buddha. It is true that these texts in the pre-modern period were not meant to be read but to be heard. That is not because they were meant to be

¹⁰ Per Caaerne (1986), *An Anthology of Buddhist Tantric Songs* (Bangkok: White Orchid Press), p. 279.

'preaching books' but because, at a time when writing was an arduous task and, consequently, texts were scarce, not only these books, but all books were meant to be heard. This explains why a learned person was described as 'one who has heard much' (*bahusruta*: Sanskrit and Sinhala; *bahussuta*: Pali). Schalk rejects translation of *punna* (Pali)/*pin* (Sinhala) as merit due to its Protestant theological implications and prefers 'act of/leading to success' (p.68). Although I can see his point in rejecting 'merit' as the proper rendering of *punna*, I do not see how he gets this ideas of success instead. The Brahmanic concept of *punya* (Sanskrit) from where Buddhism seems to adopt this concept seems to convey such nuances as pure, fortunate, gifted, etc. A similar error is to understand *matrka* in a *Dhamma* sermon as list or table (p.76). Although the term has those meanings, in the context of a *Dhamma* sermon it simply means the theme or the topic. The overall problem we witness here is what happens when translations are made based on a dictionary without adequate care for the context.

This, however, does not mean that sermon studies are doomed. The sermons, as distinguished from acts of preaching, may be studied from many different perspectives. They may be studied for the *Dhamma* presented in them, and then it becomes a conceptual, or a philosophical study. If sermons are studied as instances of performing meritorious deeds then sermon studies become a sub-category of Buddhist religious studies or Buddhist cultural studies. If one were to inquire as to why certain concepts, teachings or themes have been preferred to certain others, or as to who are the preachers and listeners, and as to what are the contexts of these events or human social behaviours, the study could be social, historical or anthropological. Even with the difficulties outlined above, a sermon may be studied from a linguistic or socio-linguistic point of view. In any of these cases, it is inevitable that the sermon is reduced to a transcribed text or a document, thus becoming a sub-category of literature. Furthermore, as an act requiring preachers and listeners and many others who attend to numerous associated activities, a sermon becomes essentially a form of human behaviour, a study of which belongs to social studies to be done following the relevant research methods. Either sermon studies will have to be distributed among several fields of studies, in which case the need to speak of methodology for sermon studies does not arise, or there must be a combination of religious, philosophical, linguistic, rhetorical and sociological methods to study this phenomenon. Both Schalk and Langer seem to have adhered in

their sermon studies to something akin to this second approach. But still there is a certain lack of clarity about the method, which is clear from what Langer says in her concluding remarks:

Working with the sermons raised many questions, most of them to do with the dynamic of preaching, the relationship between the different parts (chanting, offering, preaching), the perceived importance of the status of the preacher, the appreciation of the audience to name but few (p.222).

The questions Langer refers to pertain to the rhetoric and sociology of the Buddhist sermons. There are many other questions one could raise on sermons, such as the content of the sermons and as to why a particular content was chosen, social, cultural and religious occasions of sermons, styles of sermons and so forth. Thus it seems useful to have a clearer idea of methods to be followed in studying the Buddhist sermons, although this methodological question is not meant to undermine the important contribution Langer makes to the field of Buddhist studies by analysing sermons and introducing a new area of studies. Nor is it to devalue the vast potential that the study of sermons has in understanding living Buddhism during any period of time in any Buddhist society.