

A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism,
by John Powers. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. 334pp.,
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The book aims to be a study of masculinity and discourses of masculinity within Indian Buddhism from the time of the Buddha until the eighth century CE, with some recourse to relevant later developments in India. Powers' starting point is interdisciplinary, and discussion within the book attempts to merge Indology with studies of sex and the body and, in what can be considered something of a new subfield, with masculinity studies. As the book may be of use to non-Indologists, Powers attempts to keep technical terms to a minimum, and provides basic broad Indological/Buddhist context as preface for in-depth discussions. The great innovations of the work are in its discussions of masculinity, most particularly in relation to early Indian Buddhism and of the masculine tropes associated with discourses on the historical Buddha. The weakness of the book is that, when discussing women, Powers focuses almost entirely on negative expressions and characterizations of women in early Indian Buddhism, and thereby occludes the full range of representations of women in the early literature.

The book has eight chapters which discuss masculine tropes associated with the historical Buddha, sex and the body, and representations of masculinity within early Indian, Mahāyāna and tantric Buddhism. Chapter one is a discussion of the historical Buddha as the 'ultimate man' (*puruṣottama*) and of representations of him as a 'paragon of masculinity'. In this chapter, Powers employs some comparative analysis, briefly juxtaposing the masculinity in representations of the Buddha with images of Jesus Christ. He also discusses the connection between physical and moral beauty in representations of the Buddha and other figures in Indian Buddhist literature. He further discusses the thirty-two marks of the Buddha, his identity as a *kṣatriya* as part of the discourse of masculinity, and goes on to suggest that some literature appears keen to assert that male renunciation within Buddhism is in no way due to a weak sexuality. He refers back to this point in the concluding chapter when he states that '[t]he trope of masculinity developed in Buddhist texts are part of a larger program of representing the community as vocation of alms and as the best choice for men considering a full-time religious work' (p. 228). There is much in this work as a whole, and in this chapter, that is innovative and represents a new perspective on discourses concerning the historical Buddha. For example, his discussion of accounts in which the phallus of the Buddha — and his ability to manipulate it — are used as examples of his power, provide for an interesting take on passages of text that have otherwise eluded analysis.

Chapter two focuses on life accounts of the historical Buddha, and masculine tropes therein. Whilst his discussion of discourses of masculinity is fresh and original, Powers' broader discussion of differences of sex and gender here are incomplete. Although he states it is not his 'aim to give comprehensive consideration to every event or discrepancy' (p. 23) in the life stories, it is a shame that he

does not, for example, in his analysis of accounts of how Siddhārtha interacts with his wife — his love-making with her, his production of progeny and his abandoning of her — mention that in some accounts of the life there is no wife. Further, in discussing Aśvaghōṣa's account of the departure, Powers talks about how the women cry when Channa returns without Siddhārtha and how Prajāpati 'was so upset that she went blind from crying' (p. 41), but he fails to mention the incidences of lamentation demonstrated by both Channa and the king Śuddhodana, implying instead that it is only women who express extreme emotion.

Chapter three is a discussion of sex and provides an interesting analysis of representations of sexual acts and sexuality. Powers draws out the problems that Buddhists see in the sexual act, detailing passages that illuminate this in some depth. He also notes some inimitable attempts to rid oneself of sexual appetite, recounting how two monks who felt unable to control their desire crushed their penises between two rocks, which provided an opportunity for the Buddha to comment that they crushed the wrong thing; they needed to crush desire (p. 84). In his concentration on the ways in which men are represented as sexual agents and objects, he explores the Indian constructs of women as sexual aggressors with males in a more passive role. Whilst this is pertinent and useful debate, it needs to be set within a context of the fourfold Buddhist communities of the time. In this chapter, Powers claims that 'women are generally given negative characteristics in the Pāli Canon' (p. 74), failing to acknowledge positive portrayals of women in Indian Buddhism, such as those who are, at *Aṅguttara Nikāya* I 25–26, distinguished for pre-eminent qualities of wisdom, skill in meditation or teaching, or the short stories of women in *Samyutta Nikāya*, *Samyutta* 5, whom Māra tries to tempt back to a life of sensual pleasures and sexual desire but who defeat Māra by maintaining abstinence.

Chapter four focuses on attitudes and approaches to the body in Indian Buddhist literature, with recourse to Brahmanic medical models to flesh out the discussion. Powers discusses discourses on the foulness of the human body, set against the pristine purity of the body of an Awakened One, and the requirements for monks to maintain a clean appearance and to discipline, restrain and control their bodies. Other aspects of the body discussed are mindfulness of the body and the sex change motif.

'The Company of Men', chapter five, begins with a survey of the changing lifestyles of the Indian Buddhist monastic community, and the move from peripatetic lives to settled monasticism. This sets the scene for a discussion of male friendship within the early community, in which Powers highlights the ideal of friendship as a cohesive, supportive network in which those with shared ideals become 'like milk and water' (p. 162). This includes discussion of the well-attested male bonds between Śāriputra and Maugalyāyana and the Buddha and Ānanda.

The final two full chapters are on images of masculinity, sex and sexuality in the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna respectively. The masculine tropes in the Mahāyāna are less obvious, as there is a move in it towards experience of and insight into the emptiness of all phenomena, and thus in relation to the body of the Buddha Powers notes that 'people who focus on his body are directed to shift attention to his spiritual attainments, which are the real reason for his designation as Buddha' (p. 177). However, the sexuality of the Buddha-to-be and other *bodhisattvas* is the subject of certain stories within Mahāyāna texts, and Powers highlights how the

Buddha, as a *bodhisattva*, along with other *bodhisattvas*, often through the power of illusion, can appear to be indulging in sexual acts either out of compassion or as part of skilful attempts at teaching and leading others to Awakening. Sex and sexuality in tantra is not uncommonly the subject of academic study and in his chapter on 'Adepts and Sorcerers' Powers covers familiar ground.

Overall, a book that focuses on masculinity within Buddhist studies is a welcome addition to the field, and Powers' encompassing volume provides a fresh perspective on men and masculinity within the Indian tradition. However, although not about women and femininity, Powers' book does include discussion of their sexuality, albeit in relation to men and masculinity'. However, comment on the social construction of femaleness and femininity is, throughout, partial and incomplete. Powers notes (in chapter one) that the discourses of masculinity he discovered were hegemonic, but this is not the case with discourses of femininity, either within early Buddhism, early Brahmanism or early Mahāyāna and tantric Buddhism. The social construction of femaleness and femininity varies greatly according to author(s) and text within traditions of Buddhism and other contemporaneous traditions. It is of great interest to note this difference between the social constructions of maleness and femaleness and of masculinity and femininity; however, that Powers has not observed and explored it appears as an oversight on his part. He does not always seem aware of the range of sources and representations of women in the literature. Within the early corpus we find expression of the best of both men and women; those who are teachers and capable and able in their practice of the Buddha's dispensation, and we also find the worst of men and women; men as ignorant fools and women as manipulative seductresses. Powers unfortunately appears to have gone down a road taken before, and compared the best of men with the worst of women. Nevertheless, I hope the book will be a starting point of a more encompassing range of gender studies within Buddhism.