

Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand, by Donald K. Swearer. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004. 322 + xviii pp., Hb. \$52.00/£35.95. ISBN-13: 9780691114354. The contents page can be seen at: <http://press.princeton.edu/TOCs/c7753.html>

Donald Swearer, the author of *Becoming the Buddha*, has devoted his entire career to elucidate Buddhism in South East Asia with a focus on Thai Buddhism. His work is extremely important in understanding the rich nuances of Thai Buddhism.

Becoming the Buddha explores a strongly devotional aspect of Thai Theravāda Buddhism, in which the Buddha is seen as somehow present in a consecrated image of him. Such an idea seems to be in tension with the doctrinal position of the Theravāda, in which one cannot say that the Buddha, after his death, either 'is', 'is not', both or neither: this seems to leave no room for the idea that the Buddha has a presence that can somehow be experienced, or that he may even respond to devotion. Nevertheless, even the early texts contain occasional passages which talk of the benefits of contemplations in which the Buddha is so intently thought of that it is *as if* he is present. In the *Sutta-nipāta* (vv.1140–1142), Piṅgiya says:

I cannot be away from him for a moment, brahman, from Gotama of great understanding ... I see him with my mind as if with my eye, being vigilant day and night, brahman. I pass the night revering him. For that very reason, I think there is no staying away from him.

Now while devotion is generally seen as having a less central place in Theravāda Buddhism than in many other religions, it nevertheless has an acknowledged role. *Saddhā* — faith, or trustful confidence — is one of the five spiritual faculties, though it should be balanced by wisdom. All Buddhists 'take refuge' in the three jewels, and a stream-enterer is said to have unwavering confidence in them (SN V 407). Meditative practices include recollection of their qualities, and the practice of any Theravādin will probably include such things as: devotional chanting, including of protective *paritta* texts; bowing and offerings before Buddha-images; circumambulation of *stūpas*; and perhaps watering of *Bodhi*-trees and awed respect for relics. Nevertheless, more text-based Theravādins may still find the idea of the Buddha as present in a consecrated image a step too far; — and scholars of Buddhism who focus mainly on texts may find it surprising.

Yet with Buddhist Studies reaching new depths of sophistication and self-awareness in the works of such scholars as Donald Lopez, many assumptions about the nature of Buddhism need to be questioned, and we need to ask: how are we to accommodate the statements of the texts with the societies in which Buddhism finds expression? How does doctrine find expression in action? Why do Buddhists act as they do, given the nature of their Canon? Swearer's book is a valuable contribution to the exploration of such issues, as in focusing on the consecration or empowerment of the Buddha image (*Buddhābhiseka*) in Northern Thailand, the author challenges some of our most trusted assumptions about Theravāda Buddhism.

Swearer begins by questioning the assumption that there is some form of 'original' Buddhism which, over the centuries, became corrupted. The use of Buddha images, that started to develop from the first century CE, is sometimes seen as a sign of this kind of change. The Buddha, in the 'original Buddhism' the-

sis, is described in terms of his enlightenment, and any supernatural qualities that are attributed to him are explained as the product of popular need accumulated over the centuries (13) (though at least some of these are in the early texts). More strongly devotional aspects of Buddhism, therefore, are seen as due to the needs of an uneducated majority, not the monastic elite. As Gregory Schopen has shown, such an understanding of early Buddhism does not stand up to historical or archaeological scrutiny.

Buddhism cannot simply be explained on simplistic two-tiered models (e.g. Karmic and Nibbānic), even though such models may yield some insights. For Swearer, such an understanding does not reflect the dynamic and multi-faceted nature of religious traditions (13).

Swearer sets out to describe a particular form of the dichotomy between text-based and on-the-ground lived religion. This, in broad terms, is between the supramundane and mundane goals of the religious path and, in particular, the differing focus upon the Buddha as the achiever of *Nirvāṇa* and on him as supernatural and miraculous. The Buddha was, argues Swearer, perceived in a number of different ways from an early point in the Buddhist tradition (13–14). One such way incorporates the idea, so prominent in Indian religions, that the Buddha must, in some way, be seen; so he must be present for the Buddhist community. To this end the Buddha image is not, in fact, to be conceived of as a representation of the Buddha, but as a source of power which makes the Buddha himself present (17). The image of the Buddha is not just a reminder of the Buddha, but represents his presence (18). To make offerings to a Buddha image is not then to make offerings to a likeness of the Buddha, but to the Buddha himself. The image of the Buddha is then a surrogate, a replacement of the Buddha himself (28).

Swearer's main thesis is the following: images of the Buddha were made from an early point in Buddhist history,¹ and the role of the image rests upon the notion of presence; one venerates an image in order to be in the presence of the Buddha. It is not only Buddha images that serve this purpose but *stūpas* also serve to make the Buddha present (36). In fact the Buddhist monastery is the place where the Buddha is present. This is the main idea of the book, which Swearer sets out in his first two chapters, 'Buddha and Buddha image', and 'Meeting the Buddha: temple, image and relic'.

Chapter 3, 'Constructing a Buddha Image', offers a translation of particular Thai texts concerned with the practice of image consecration (*abhiseka*). This is the means by which an image of the Buddha becomes a surrogate: it becomes the Buddha himself. In the context of Thai Buddhism, such descriptions are very welcome. In Thai society the image of the Buddha is pervasive; it is not only a static image representing the Buddha experiencing *Nirvāṇa*: in visiting the temples of, for example, Ayutthaya, one is dumbfounded (if one usually works with texts) by the many images which seem to convey a presence of divinity, a sense of the numinous. One is reminded more of a Catholic Church than a Western Buddhist *Dhamma* Centre. A prominent feature of this chapter is the description of practices performed in Thai temples (Swearer's research is based in Chiang Mai), such as the use of *yantra*, the symbolic diagrams found in taxis, buses and temples.

1. For a history of this phenomenon see Stanley K. Abe's, 'Inside the Wonder House: Buddhist Art and the West', in Donald S. Lopez (ed.), 1995, *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, 63–106, University of Chicago Press.

Chapter 4, 'The ritual: opening the eyes of the Buddha', describes the empowerment ritual itself. Fascinating is the description of the use of mirrors during the ritual, which Swearer alludes to as suggesting one of the ways in which the image becomes the Buddha's double. In the description of the chanting of texts (89) during the consecration, it is clear that while the texts are part of the ritual, their cognitive content is downplayed. The text embodies, in this context, the power of sound. Swearer does not state this, but is this the voice of the Buddha? Questions are raised: is the Buddha absent or present for the Buddhist? More tellingly, did early Buddhists understand the Buddha to be present in their shrines to him? (108–115).

Chapter 5, 'Instructing the image', consists of translations of two Thai texts on the life of the Buddha. Their value is in giving context to the narratives that inform Thai religious practice. The study of the Buddha's biography are complex, and these texts add further material to its development.

Chapter 6, 'Empowering the image', contains two more translations, which describe the biography, qualities and knowledge of the Buddha, and how these are seen to be infused into the image during the consecration ceremony. This is the main point of the ceremony. Through the agency of the monks, the image becomes the Buddha (152–153, 162–164).

Chapter 7, 'The body of the Buddha: popular Buddhism and Buddhological theory', is noteworthy for suggesting that, during the ceremony, the image is seen to be infused with the *dhammakāya* or *Dhamma*-body. Such notions are usually thought to be prominent in non-Theravāda forms of Buddhism, but Swearer makes important observations that suggest that ideas to do with the bodies of the Buddha are used in Theravāda Buddhism.² The point is that, during the ceremony, the image is regarded as becoming the *dhammakāya*, and this theoretical underpinning adds much to Swearer's arguments as a whole. By being a surrogate of the Buddha, the Buddha image is the *dhammakāya* itself: the embodiment of the teachings. Image consecration is given an important, and perhaps essential emphasis in this understanding: one is not venerating the Buddha as a personality (in theory), but the *Dhamma* as the real nature of things. By seeing the Buddha, or his image, which are the same thing according to these rituals, one has a glimpse of the way things really are. In this one sees an interesting echo of the *Sutta* passage, 'who sees me sees the *Dhamma*' (SN III 120).

Chapter 8, 'Consecration traditions in other Buddhist cultures: reassessing Buddhahiseka', places the study in the wider context of Indian religions, in which seeing the image of a deity – experiencing *darśana* – has a liberating effect. Swearer also notes parallels in other Buddhist cultures, in which the completion of the eyes of a Buddha image holds a particular significance.³

En epilogue, 'If you meet the Buddha, kill him!', explores the views on the topic of scholar-monk P.A. Payutto, meditation teacher and re-interpreter of Buddhism Buddhādāsa, and the Santi Asok leader Bodhirak.

In my teaching, I have found *Becoming the Buddha* to be a rich resource that captures the subtle nuances of Thai Buddhism and how the Buddha's teachings are

2. On this, see also F.E. Reynolds, 1977, 'Several Bodies of the Buddha: Reflections on a Neglected Aspect of Theravāda Tradition', *History of Religions*, 16: 374–388.

3. For example for Sri Lanka, Richard Gombrich, 1966, 'The consecration of a Buddha image', *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXVI (1): 23–36.

practised in modern Thai society. It is a valuable and highly informative reading of Buddhist practices for the academic as well as for the non-specialist reader.

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