



Donald S. Lopez, ed., *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*

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THOSE INTERESTED in the philosophical dimensions of Buddhism may fear that the list of topics treated in the present work concern only empirical *realia*, shunning the great standard themes taken up in another 2005 publication, the eight volumes of *Buddhism: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies* edited by Paul Williams (Routledge). How can such concepts as “art,” “economy,” “history,” “institution,” “pedagogy,” “sex,” or “modernity” take us to the heart of Buddhism or to what is most distinctive about it? Much space is given to a general discussion of these concepts as they figure in contemporary critical theory, raising the fear that the Buddhist material will be ransacked for merely illustrative purposes. In reality, however, Donald Lopez and his team represent a valuable and fresh approach to the tradition, which puts it in anthropological perspective. No doubt Buddhism, like Christianity, is a reality that cannot be fully grasped if one views it only in the categories it has itself created. The more comprehensive categories of anthropology may offer a social and behavioral explanation of much religious theory and practice, while helping to bring out what is irreducibly distinctive about the religion.

Perhaps the most pregnant such category today is that of the gift, treated here by Reiko Ohnuma. This concept stands at the crossroads of philosophy and theology, Buddhism and Christianity, anthropology and social history, literary criticism, and Classical studies, and it requires all of these perspectives to be properly understood. Building on an embarrassed footnote of Marcel Mauss, Ohnuma shows how complex is the logic of the gift in Buddhist thought. Among the scenarios of selfless giving imagined are (1) “those who give even though they exist beyond the enjoyment of either worldly or karmic rewards,” namely arhats; (2) bodhisattvas “who *explicitly reject* such rewards, even if they might be able to enjoy them”—quickly passing on the rewards as if they were a “hot potato,” and seeking to “out-gift the gift itself” by rejecting its penchant for repayment and reciprocity; (3) those such as buddhas, whose compassionate gift “produces no rewards of any kind” (112–14). Such ideals need to be measured against actual practice for a full assessment of their anthropological significance. Ohnuma notes a “frenzied or desperate” tone about the dialectic of pure giving, which in any case is possible “only for Buddhism’s most exceptional beings” (116). The theory contains instructive paradoxes and inconsistencies, and is stretched to accommodate less ideal forms of giving. In Southeast Asia, the cult of gods allows a worldly reciprocal exchange, leaving to the Buddha his higher, non-transactional status. The “merit account books” kept by Burmese villagers reveal how

much self-interest pervades the practice of Buddhist giving in real life (111). Ohnuma's final pages draw Buddhist giving perhaps too neatly back within a Maussian theory of the gift as always informed by the logic of self-interest.

Turning to the closely related category of "Economy," as discussed by Gustavo Benevides, we meet a Buddha who has a serene and penetrating grasp of socio-economic reality and whose teaching "can be understood as a meditation on the process of deferral and the new approach to labor" (82), both justification and critique of the new urban economy. "An affinity exists between the analytical attitude of early Buddhism and the detachment needed in business transactions" (84). The sociological significance of many aspects of Buddhism is pointed up in this somewhat speculative discussion, which anchors spirituality in the dense give and take of social interaction, probably at the expense of doing justice to its autonomous concerns. Paradoxically, the ideology of giving, as impurely understood, causes social inequality, as those who can contribute the most accumulate the most prestige, while poor peasants have to spend proportionally more in order to keep up (90). Buddhist talk of compassion can be a skillful means for clerical exactions and dispossession of the laity, notably in Tibet (94). Benevides does not reflect on the spiritual significance of such side effects, for he seems to see religion as nothing more than a symbolic system for thinking through the stresses of societal existence.

Deconstructing Buddhist self-idealization and the text-based constructions of western scholarship, Timothy Brook, social historian of Ming China, focuses on Buddhism as an institutional religion. He contests the approach of Holmes Welch, who tended to measure the institutional realization against a utopian conception of the Buddhist project. "We might instead consider the inconsistency and incompleteness of an institution's capacity to exemplify doctrine as actually integral to its functioning, not evidence of deviation from something absent that is 'true'" (146). Brook finds this confirmed by Qiu Lian (1644–1729), a lay patron, for whom "property provides the base of Buddhism" (149), and by the admired monastery-builder Zhuhong (1535–1615), who tackled the tension between institution and spirituality in his institutional foundation stories and by invoking two-truths theory. It is interesting to see how lofty Buddhist concepts can percolate down into the most mundane activities of Buddhists, just as church-building clergy in the West can invoke the doctrines of the Incarnation, etc. Perhaps fuller implications of this tense interaction between the "theological" and the practical could be brought out if the perspective of social history was in turn brought into tense interaction with that of "theology." The scholarly methodologies of the present volume are ancillaries to the understanding of Buddhism, but need not have the "last word" on the subject.

Much anthropological study of religion has been galvanized in recent years by a new awareness of *The Destructive Power of Religion*, title of a four-volume collection edited by J. Harold Ellens (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004). The entries on Buddhism in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and War* (ed. Gabriel Palmer-Fernandez, Routledge, 2004) show Buddhist involvement in honorable and dishonorable warfare, and in insurrection and resistance. The present work scarcely touches on these themes.

Craig J. Reynolds (“Power”) indicates how the potency of sacred objects and persons can shore up political sovereignty even today, as seen in Thailand in the career of General Chamlong Srimuang. Buddhist models correct Michel Foucault’s conception of power, which is “about domination rather than capacity” (125). Anthropologist Marilyn Ivy (“Modernity”) meditates on the paradox whereby Buddhism, treated as backward in the Meiji Restoration, later became the showpiece of Japan as “a world-class religion appropriate for a world-class power;” its foreign taint now an asset; “virtually concocted in the Meiji period, . . . modernized Zen essentialized the wisdom of the East in an exportable form”; it was “the empty signifier of last resort, that which would ensure the final ineffability of the Japanese sensibility” (324). Ceding to fashionable snideness, Ivy pours scorn on D. T. Suzuki and the Kyoto School as apologists of fascism, and blithely declares that Zen nothingness “eliminates the I-Thou distinction” and “led straight as an arrow to the logic of total war” (325). It is even made responsible for Hiroshima and Nagasaki! (Ironically, the author’s university had links with the Manhattan Project.)

Carl Bielefeldt (“Practice”) seems unhappy with the deflating effect of current academic approaches to Buddhism. He notes that despite the shift in interest from Buddhist theology to social history what counts as Buddhist practice still largely rests on theological assumptions about the centrality of meditation, which would entail that “the great majority of Buddhists throughout history have never practiced their religion” (230–31). Looking at the social context of path-ideologies, we find Buddhists “doing more or less the sorts of things that other people do” (241). But the demystificatory analysis that shows this is marked by postcolonial irony, as we use our outsiders’ notions of what Buddhists ought to be in order “to liberate the Asian masses from the hegemonic discourse of their Buddhist masters”; we had better “ask of our own academic orthopraxy some of the same questions we now ask of Buddhists” (243–44). This challenge might apply to Robert H. Scharf’s declaration that “insofar as the ritual constitution of buddhahood in play can be said to have discursive content, it is precisely that all social forms of life are play” (267). Ritual, for the peasant as for the Chan master, alters the world “through the modification of meta-linguistic framing cues” (267–68). Buddhist ritual deconstructs Hindu prototypes in light of two-truth theory; the tantric deities, for instance, are reduced to skillful means. Ritual brings the understanding that “the Buddha is constituted through ritual performance” (259), content resolves into the emptiness of form. Conversely, “Chan enlightenment is constituted in and through Chan ritual.” This does not entail behaviorist reductionism, for the public ritualized lifestyle instantiates doctrines concerning “the constructed nature of all phenomena, the identity of form and emptiness, and the original enlightenment of all sentient beings” (261). Nonetheless, the emphasis on ritual could favor an outsider’s demystification of the Chan master’s authority at the expense of a fuller hermeneutic response to what Chan says about itself.

Janet Gyatso milks the unprepossessing Vinaya discourse on sex for anthropological insight. Precise regulations in this domain are strategic in defining the identity

of the monastic community and instilling “respect for the principle of law *as such*” (288). Tantric ideas of sex also retain a concern with boundaries and ethical control. Buddhism is more enlightening on the topic of death, as Jacqueline Stone shows, but here too questions of control are uppermost. The “promise of mastery over death” (57) entailed in Tibet such refinements as an “elaborate science” of divining the time of death’s approach and a capacity, on recognizing the propitious moment, literally to relocate one’s consciousness in a pure land (62). In Japan, Genshin’s Pure Land “ideal of a death with right mindfulness” was developed by Shingon masters such as Kakuban who “reinterpreted ‘birth in the pure land’ to mean, in the deepest sense, a liberative realization in one’s last moments of unity with the cosmic Buddha Dainichi” (66). People became obsessed with the liminal last moments, calling on “a ritual specialist able to assume full control of the death process if one’s own concentration should falter” (67), and to ward off evil spirits. Another Shingon monk, Kakugai, denounced this effort to control one’s posthumous fate as arising from self-attachment (72). Shinran, too, stressed that salvation comes not at death but with the arising of faith in one’s heart. Yet even this is a form of control, “the negation of death’s significance within a larger soteriological resolution” (73), and the rituals continued to be practiced even by those who subscribed to the enlightened critique of them. This medieval critique accepted the magical thinking behind death rituals, whereas Buddhist modernism draws on different epistemological assumptions, making it doubtful if control over death will retain its legitimating role for Buddhism and its clergy (unless customary practice trumps theory again). One is left wondering how Buddhist consciousness can be brought to bear today, in an enlightening and healing way, on the riddles of sex and of death. Perhaps the urge to control will need to be toned down.

But perhaps contemporary scholars also need to be wary of their urge to control. To put Buddhism in anthropological and historical perspective can easily become an exercise of hegemony, ensuring that Buddhism stays in its place and cannot challenge Western academic orthodoxy. When Timothy Barrett seeks “a framework that can encompass the history of Buddhism” (135) and declares that “the project of anchoring the Buddha in human history, albeit somewhat loosely, is not entirely beyond the wit of humanity” (136), one wonders if the categories of Buddhism itself will be allowed to play a determining role in the project. Similarly, William Pietz, a specialist in hypnosis, discusses the modern Western problematization of the notion of “person,” a category chosen not for Buddhist reasons but because “it is indispensable in the cause of universal human rights” (189), and presents this as a mandatory context for rethinking non-self and critiquing the doctrine of karma.

The literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (“Pedagogy”) notes that Western Buddhism has been a hypostatized version created in Europe, suited to European control, and marked by “a narrative of decline that delegitimizes the modern and the vernacular in Buddhist studies; an eagerness to attribute Western roots to Asian Buddhist interpretations; histories of complicity with nativist and colonialist projects in Japan as well as fascist ones in Italy; arrogant and ignorant claims, such as

Jung's, to speak for an exotic Oriental psyche; and a double-binding enlistment of Asian Buddhists in the incompatible roles of informant and guru" (164). However, none of these distortions are now fashionable, and contemporary scholars may fail to perceive a certain bland reductionism in their own approach. It is not clear that they are better versed in the Buddhist tradition than their predecessors, and a mastery of sophisticated critical theory cannot make up for that. Sedgwick came to Buddhist literature in English when faced with a health crisis, and she found herself identifying with "pedagogical passions and antinomies that recur throughout the Māhāyana traditions" (165). She recognized that the Buddhist texts were the work of bodhisattvas working skillfully as her teachers. She notes that Buddhism was received by Westerners already "as mad for pedagogy as the dramatis personae of the sūtras" (170), such as the Boston Transcendentalists, steeped in the Romantic ideology of *Bildung*. Yet American popularizers of Zen have stressed "radical doubt that a basic realization can be communicated at all" (179). The notion of emptiness took a pedagogical cast from Alan Watts to Philip Kapleau, and it became a mark of a cloudy spiritual heroism, worthy of the Transcendentalists, to recognize that "there is nothing in particular to realize" (179). The age of AIDS has brought a cultivation of "conscious dying" in which the lore of reincarnation, even without belief in it, has "rearranged the landscape of consciousness" (184). Sedgwick rejects Stephen Bachelor's empiricist disdain for such teachings, finding in their very elusiveness and multi-facetedness a release from constricting obsession. Her existential embrace of Buddhist teachings cuts a path through the unresolved issues in the contemporary reception of the tradition both at the popular and the academic level. She has developed a brand of critical awareness that does not neutralize the spiritual force of Buddhism but actually enables an opening-up to its impact at many levels.

Sedgwick's essay partly allays a misgiving I have about works such as this, namely, the fear that by rubbing our noses in the muddy vesture of Buddhism as a social and institutional formation they undermine the potent impact of the Idea of Buddhism, which goes far beyond the empirical presence of Buddhist denominations. It is as if Christianity were reduced to the dismal vagaries of church history. There is a touch of condescension in the editor's irony about notions of Buddhism as "a religion of the individual, free from the constraints of ritual, institution, and a creator deity" and the Dalai Lama's "compelling blend of the spiritual and the political" that appeals to "college students and movie stars" (1). Such visions motivated the Western study of Buddhism, and it is not clear that sophisticated revisioning will permit an equally vital connection with the heart of the tradition. The volume is the inaugural one in a series on Buddhism and Modernity, and it queries the perception that Buddhism is "ever modern" or "a preemptive and eternally trenchant critique of the modern" (11). This may court the peril of reducing Buddhism to one archaic set of cults alongside many others, blocking access to its distinctive radicality, which forestalls and surpasses whatever displays of critical insight modern scholars can bring to bear on it.

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