

EXTENDED REVIEW ARTICLE

***MAKING SENSE OF BUDDHISM
IN THEORY AND PRACTICE:
TWO RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD***

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Frank E. Reynolds and Jason A. Carbine eds., *The Life of Buddhism*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000, x + 240 pp. ISBN: 0520211057 (hbk); 052022337 (pbk).

Paul Williams (with Anthony Tribe) *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, xii + 324 pp. ISBN: 0415207002 (hbk); 0415207010 (pbk).

Deploring the “Protestant” presuppositions of Buddhist Studies has become commonplace in recent times, and is one expression of the general tendency to critique the textual focus of Religious Studies as a whole. Thus Buddhologists these days are much more sensitised to the now blindingly obvious fact that reading what Buddhists have written does not unlock all the mysteries of their religious tradition. However, it is not at all easy to correct the partial understandings or downright misconceptions generated during the long years of philology’s ascendancy, and nowhere is this more obvious (at least to the specialist) than in introductory surveys. In such works authors must struggle with the task of rendering the manifest richness and complexity of Buddhist thought intelligible to the general reader, while at the same time elucidating the equally rich and complex practices of Buddhists. Since these practices encompass the social, political and economic spheres, and have to do with such diverse matters as institutional life, cult, ritual, art, iconography, meditation and ascetic practices, to mention but a few, the challenge is no small one. It goes without saying that Buddhist practice cannot in fact be understood without reference to Buddhist thought, and thus one can in the end never dispense with the study of texts; the trick, however, is to keep them in their proper place. Thus a recent volume edited by Don Lopez, while entitled *Buddhism in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), turns out to be a collection of translations of texts, admittedly ones relating, for the most part, to practices of one kind or another. What this valuable compendium illustrates, of course, is that the study of Buddhist practice in the past inevitably relies on

scriptures, historical records, biographies, inscriptions and so on, as well as iconographical and archaeological remains, which are also “texts” of a kind. However, even the study of contemporary practice — in other words the anthropology and sociology of present-day Buddhist societies — also depends on textual understandings. The best Buddhist anthropology — here one thinks above all of the work of Stanley Tambiah — proceeds on the basis of a sound grasp of the results of Buddhist philology, and indeed yields results which can be applied back to texts as well, to illuminate the practices and the ideas of the past. However, the researches of Tambiah and others typically focus on Buddhism in a particular place, limiting themselves to this or that localised expression of the religion. How then to rise above these particularities, and to convey an idea of Buddhist practice as a whole? Is this an impossible task, reflective of the fact that Buddhist practice, like Buddhism itself, does not exist as such, is not a unitary phenomenon?

The set of 15 essays edited by Frank Reynolds and Jason Carbine as *The Life of Buddhism* is an attempt to meet this challenge, by providing a series of snapshots, as it were, of Buddhist practice throughout Asia, in the hope that by achieving a reasonable spread a representative picture of Buddhism will emerge. With the exception of the piece by Carbine himself, “*Yaktovil: The Role of the Buddha and Dhamma*,” all the articles or book chapters have been previously published elsewhere, although they have been lightly edited for inclusion here. The book is divided into four sections (Temples, Sacred Objects, and Associated Rituals; Monastic Practices; Lay Practices; Buddhism in the West) and opens with a short but useful general introduction which charts the historical development of Buddhism and provides an essential orientation to the regional varieties of the religion which appear in the essays. Some of these are classics, written by major authorities, and therefore one welcomes their appearance in this context. Of particular interest are the pieces by Donald Swearer on image consecrations, Charles Keyes on the cremation of a senior monk, and Stanley Tambiah on village rituals and ceremonies. All these relate to Thailand, which is more strongly represented in the collection than any other country, despite the effort to achieve broad coverage. Korea, for example, is represented only by Robert Buswell’s description of the processes of monastic ordination. Sri Lanka is covered by the aforementioned piece by Carbine, which deals with a kind of exorcism ritual combining Buddhist and popular religious elements, and by a paper by Richard Gombrich on recent developments in devotional rituals, as exemplified by the Buddha puja performed by the Ven. Ariyadhamma, so the focus there is more on religious change and adaptation, and this is also true of the articles on Myanmar (Burma) by Hiroko Kawanami, who assesses the lower status of female renunciants or thila-shin in that country, and Juliane Schober, who provides a fascinating treatment of the state sponsorship of Buddhist ritual (in this case the visit of a tooth relic from the People’s Republic of China in 1994) by SLORC (the State Law and Order Restoration Council), the military regime which continues to rule Myanmar today, albeit under a different name. In these articles one sees something of the challenges and stresses which Buddhism faces in the modern age, as it attempts to cope with both local and global socio-political forces. In such circumstances its practices continue to be reshaped, taking ever new forms while still preserving significant continuities with the past. The piece by Philip Kapleau on Zen

ritual and liturgy in the United States which concludes the book can also be seen as an illustration of this perennial capacity of Buddhism to adapt itself to new times and new places, which is only what one would expect from a book which addresses itself to Buddhism as it is actually lived in the world, and not to its allegedly timeless teachings.

In this light some of the choices made by the editors are decidedly puzzling, to say the least. James Bissett Pratt's description of Japanese temples, originally published in 1928, is a real period piece with its patronizing tone and its gratuitous comparisons with China, whose temples allegedly suffer from a confusion of tawdry decoration, cheap votives and dirty floors, after which Japan's temples come "as a revelation." "The whole atmosphere of the place," Pratt says approvingly of Higashi Honganji, prime location for this aesthetic epiphany, "is unmistakably religious; and he who cannot worship his God (whatever that may mean to him) in this shrine of Amida must, I think, be somehow lacking in spiritual susceptibility." With touches like this, Pratt's hymn to "the charm possessed and exhaled [sic!] by the Buddhist temples of Japan" — he seems not to have noticed the charms that they sell — is a better example of Orientalist travelogue than it is of ethnographic description, and, as interesting as it is in its own right, one could have wished for something better. Holmes Welch's treatment of lay practice in China is illuminating, to be sure, but similarly dated, since it describes a situation which ceased to exist in that country after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. Again, one asks why more up-to-date descriptions of Buddhist practice in Taiwan, say, were not included instead, such as can be found, for example, in Charles Brewer Jones' recent study, *Buddhism in Taiwan: Religion and the State, 1660-1990* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999). After all, the "Life of Religion" series in which this volume is the first to appear is explicitly dedicated to describing present-day religious practices. Finally, the essay on cosmology and law in Tibet taken from Rebecca French's *The Golden Yoke: The Legal Cosmology of Tibet* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995) does not sit at all well in a volume devoted to Buddhist practice, since most of it in fact consists in an exposition of Buddhist ideas, in the course of which several anecdotes appear which supposedly illustrate the practical application of the ideas in question. One longs in vain for more specifics and fewer generalities. Indeed, it would seem that this article is a good example of the sort of thing that the book as a whole is designed to counteract: drawing inferences about practice on the basis of religious doctrine, with the implication that the results of this deductive process are somehow descriptive of the situation on the ground. Given that, and in view of the critical reviews French's work has received for its shortcomings both as Tibetology and as legal anthropology (see, e.g., Toni Huber's review article "Foreigner at the Judge's Feet," *Tibet Journal* XXIII, 3 (1998), pp. 78-92, or Leonard van der Kuijp's more trenchant assessment in *Central Asiatic Journal* 43/2 (1999), pp. 266-292), the inclusion of this chapter remains a mystery to this reviewer. Tibet and the purpose of the series are much better served in *The Life of Buddhism* by Hanna Havnevik's biographical sketch of the nun Yeshe Drolma, which at least gives the reader some concrete details of actual Buddhist practice to bite on.

To avoid being reminiscent of a course reader put together (as is often the case) in some haste, a more judicious selection of pieces would have made

this book a better one, but it still represents for the most part a fine effort to convey the diversity and richness of the practical dimensions of Buddhism in recent times. The chief value of *The Life of Buddhism* lies in making available to the general reader authoritative treatments of Buddhist practice which would otherwise remain tucked away out of sight in specialist monographs and scholarly journals. It is just a pity that the quality of the essays chosen for inclusion is not even.

My opening remarks might have given the impression that the principal challenge currently facing Buddhist Studies is elucidating the practice of the religion, and that we have somehow gone as far as we can in our attempts to study Buddhist texts or explore Buddhist thought. In fact, we have barely begun. There is still an enormous amount of literature that has not been edited, translated and studied, and many aspects of Buddhist thought are as yet imperfectly understood. Thus the excessive concentration on Buddhist philosophy in the past has not always resulted in clarity or understanding, and there is still plenty of scope for fresh treatments. In this light Paul Williams and Anthony Tribe are to be commended for attempting to provide a new introduction to Indian Buddhist thought, which was of course the foundation on which the considerable edifices of Buddhist philosophy (and practice) elsewhere in Asia were erected. Tribe has contributed the final chapter on Tantric Buddhism in India, the rest of the book being the work of Williams, a Bristol University scholar well-known for his *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London: Routledge, 1989), an ambitious and long overdue study of the theoretical aspects of Mahāyāna (and much else besides). Whereas the 1989 book dealt with Mahāyāna Buddhism not only in India, but also in its later East Asian manifestations, *Buddhist Thought* is restricted to India, and covers the whole Buddhist tradition, from Mainstream Buddhism (also called Śāvakayāna, non-Mahāyāna Buddhism, Hīnayāna, etc.) through to Vajrayāna. Like the earlier volume, it is based on a wide reading of the most recent work in the field, and critiques received opinions rather than recycling them. Thus there are extended discussions of issues over which Buddhologists are still in disagreement, such as whether we can actually know what the Buddha taught, or how the Mahāyāna began, which will give the non-specialist some idea of the active state of ferment in which the field of Buddhist Studies finds itself. Throughout the book Williams takes great pains to convey the findings of current scholarship, as for example in his lucid discussions of Buddhist sectarianism and the relationship between the Mahāyāna and the traditional nikāyas, all of which is sorely needed, given the refusal of the “Theravāda/Mahāyāna split” model of Buddhist history to lie down and die, despite the efforts of André Bareau, Heinz Bechert and others to assist its passing. All this is done with a sure touch and a determined effort to engage with the ideas as ideas, except perhaps Chapter 6 (“The Buddha in Mahāyāna Buddhism”), which gives the impression of being a grab-bag of topics, rather like the final chapters of Williams’s *Mahāyāna Buddhism*. Perhaps this reflects the fact that the later Indian phases of Mahāyāna Buddhism are no easier to understand than the earlier, but, being more diverse, are harder to make sense of in terms of a coherent framework. In any case a complete history of the movement, as promised by Edward Conze and Étienne Lamotte, is still to be

written, which is no doubt because we do not yet have the materials for such a task. In the meantime Williams's work remains among the best available.

Similarly daunting is the challenge of describing Tantric Buddhism, but Anthony Tribe rises to it admirably. His lengthy treatment of the subject, which forms the last chapter of the book, is wide-ranging and comprehensive, and takes account of the latest scholarship in this difficult field by authorities like Alexis Sanderson, David Snellgrove, Shin'ichi Tsuda and others. Given the primacy of ritual in this variety of Buddhism it is not surprising that a fair amount of space is devoted to the practice of Tantra as well as to its doctrine, which is as it should be. Tribe also succeeds in keeping Tibetan material out of the picture, i.e., in producing a faithful sketch of the Indian Tantric Buddhism which the Tibetans subsequently made their own, without viewing it through Tibetan lenses. As is customary, he spends much time discussing the various classes of tantras, the scriptural texts on which this movement is based. My only quibble is that the general reader might have appreciated more guidance as to why these classificatory systems are so important, although an attempt is made to explain their purpose on p. 204. However, readers will certainly appreciate the care with which Tribe sets Tantric Buddhism and its later phase Vajrayāna — these two terms nicely distinguished from each other — in their historical context and clarifies their relationship with Mahāyāna Buddhism. This is consistent with the way in which Williams illuminates the connections between Mahāyāna and Mainstream Buddhism, or, in the first chapter, between Buddhism in its formative phases and the wider Indian context in which it arose.

All in all, the authors have done an excellent job here, and have successfully realized the intention with which they set out, to enable students “to reach as quickly as possible a familiarity with the basic ideas of Buddhist philosophical and religious thought, and the results of some of the latest research in the field.” The same readers will also find the bibliography of secondary studies very useful, that of primary texts even more so, and specialists will profit from these too. *Buddhist Thought* is thus a welcome addition to the plethora of introductory books on Buddhism which have been published in the last decade, although, unlike most of them, it addresses itself primarily to doctrine. Thus it is a worthy successor to such classics as Edward Thomas's 1933 *The History of Buddhist Thought* or Edward Conze's 1967 *Buddhist Thought in India*, surpassing them in its ability to render the complexities of Buddhist philosophy accessible to the general public in readable and lucid prose. As the authors say in their preface, it is impossible to understand the practice of Buddhism without some grasp of its ideas (the reverse can also be argued), and so the more clearly the latter are presented, the easier it will be to comprehend Buddhism as a whole. And the task of comprehending Buddhism as a whole can only be accomplished by combining the approaches taken by the two volumes under review here. Although one book is certainly stronger than the other, both may profitably be read together.