

Michael Jerryson (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, 2017. (737 pp.)

Reviewed by Richard Gombrich

After the editor's introduction, this book has 41 chapters by as many authors. It is in two sections: the first, of over 400 pages, can be characterised as historical; it is mainly divided geographically and also deals with globalization, international organizations, and diasporic communities. The second part deals with themes, which it also calls "modalities": economics, politics, media technologies, ecology, gender, music, death, etc. There is an index of 23 pages (enough?). Each chapter has a substantial bibliography, which may indeed turn out to be the volume's most useful contribution. There are a very few figures scattered in the text, but, strangely, they do not seem to be listed.

A work of this size and scope cannot but be primarily a work of reference, virtually impossible to judge until one has used it – and even then, one will only venture to judge the sections used. On taking a quick look at a few chapters, I surmise that the volume is unlikely to draw many criticisms for acts of omission. The editor (presumably helped by his team) has seen to that. It is possible – though this is intended only as a suggestion, not as a firm claim – that he might have done better to risk a few such criticisms in favour of a sharper focus here and there: we all know that less can be more. It will be interesting to see within the next few years how many new perspectives on Buddhism will acknowledge their origin in a reading of this volume.

Since this book has tried to be so comprehensive, it has faced some unusual opportunities – which it has missed. Most obviously, why is there not even one chronological table? These could have brought a vast amount of clarity and useful information at the cost of very little space. This point struck me when, very near the beginning of the first article, I read that "Buddhism began in the sixth century BCE." This is just the traditional Theravādin chronology,

nowadays accepted hardly anywhere outside the Theravāda countries. I would have made it a high priority to have an appendix which included a chart of the calendars adopted by the various Buddhist traditions, also perhaps finding room for the most received modern scholarly opinion.

Another efficient way of conveying information, and even of answering questions which one may not have thought to ask, is to have some maps.

Maps could tell us not only about movements of pilgrims, armies, and diaspora communities, but also about the spread of ideas and institutions.

A more unusual but extremely useful contribution to knowledge would be a tabulation of texts regarded as canonical: where and when the translations and editions were created, which Buddhist communities use texts in which languages, and so forth. Gathering the material for this tabulation would be a major enterprise, but the resulting document need not be too large if it made good use of references to the internet. It is not often that a team of people qualified to create such a document are already assembled.