

Editorial

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This edition of JOCBS is the first since Richard Gombrich stepped down as Editor and Academic Director of the OCBS. Another milestone has been reached, in that the OCBS recently became independent from the University of Oxford. Since the OCBS was never funded by the University, independence will not affect any of its current activities; further online courses, in Pali and early Buddhist Studies, will soon be produced, and the journal will still be published. The JOCBS will also continue to publish special editions of the journal. The next volume, a supplement to this volume, is entitled *Buddhist Leadership in Contemporary China*, guest edited by Dr. Carsten Krause of the Numata Center for Buddhist Studies (University of Hamburg).

Anyone who has benefited from the output of the OCBS is deeply indebted to Richard Gombrich; his creation of this journal, which is quite unlike any other in the field, is particularly important. Thanks to the diversity of its contributors, many of whom hail from outside academia, JOCBS covers a broader range of subjects and expresses a far more varied set of opinions than normal. With virtually no subject off limits, and with free-thinking welcomed and debate encouraged, JOCBS could be said to have been crafted in Richard's image. This is exactly what is needed right now.

As Richard has occasionally lamented in his editorials, the horizons of Buddhist Studies seem to be contracting. In particular, the study of early Buddhism has been marginalised, and a strange code of silence prevails with regard to the Buddha. One reason for this is the relatively small world of Buddhist Studies. There being few people with whom to discuss and debate, scholars often work in isolation, and the loudest voices tend to dominate. The resulting herd mentality benefits nobody, especially when it militates against certain opinions and particular areas of enquiry.

Exactly this has happened with regard to the study of the Buddha. To see its effects we need look no further than Richard's editorial to JOCBS 4, which describes how an article of his was rejected because of the 'assumption that we know what the Buddha taught', and because 'of presenting no arguments' for this. Since academic opinion about the Buddha is split – some think the evidence shows that the Buddha existed, others deny this – what is an editor to do? Richard's approach, followed by JOCBS, is that if 'it can be seen that the alleged flaws are matters on which scholars disagree, it is the editor's clear duty to publish what the author wants to say, even if it is not his/her own view, rather than take sides with the reviewer.'

The fact that this simple point is no longer obvious is concerning. Even more worrying, however, is the likelihood of censorship. Since the field of Buddhist Studies is small and Richard's style inimitable, the reviewer(s) would have known whose work they were rejecting. The peer review process is quite easy to corrupt. As Richard noted, it is 'only the referees who are truly anonymous. This demands a high standard of integrity. If a referee misrepresents what is in the article, they can harm the author without fear of redress'.

This state of affairs is alarming, but the moral failure is compounded by the inevitable double standards. A few years ago, the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, the most important journal in the field, published an article entitled 'The Idea of the Historical Buddha'.¹ This paper is thin on argumentation, does not consider any primary textual evidence, and ignores everything which disagrees with it, including important recent studies of early Buddhist texts.² Notions such as that there is 'an industry devoted to the production of sensational claims about the Buddha' reveal the article to be nothing more than a polemic. While provocation can be useful in academia, and in this case a couple of substantial replies have already appeared,³ it is doubtful that the JIABS published the article for this reason.

¹ David Drewes, 'The Idea of the Historical Buddha'. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 40 (2017).

² The most notable omission being *The Authenticity of early Buddhist teaching*, by Bhikkhus Sujato and Brahmali, a special edition of JOCBS from 2015.

³ Oskar von Hinüber, 'The Buddha as a Historical Person', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 42 (2019); A. Wynne, 'Did the Buddha Exist?', *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, 16 (2019).

An insight into the extent of the madness comes from a rather predictable source. In the introduction to Steven Collins' recent book, *Wisdom as a Way of Life: Theravāda Buddhism Reimagined*,⁴ Justin McDaniel refers to Collins' view that academic reconstructions of early Buddhism are 'intellectually dangerous'. While the precise nature of the danger is not stated, it would seem that thinking about the Buddha is now regarded as morally repugnant. But if the Buddha no longer has a place within academia, critical thought about him now seems to be flourishing in the temple. In a strange inversion of perspectives, most of the reasonable voices on the subject are Buddhist monks. Whereas the likes of bhikkhus Analayo, Bodhi, Brahmali and Sujato all consider the evidence carefully and offer balanced arguments (often in the JOCBS), modern sceptics spout their forebodings of doom, and issue their priestly missives, from the ivory towers of academia. The priests would seem to have switched places with the scientists.

Where do we go from here? We should perhaps reflect on the Buddhist truth that suffering is inevitable, and often inflicted by our species' particular capacity for stupidity. A Buddhist analysis of the root cause of this malaise would probably identify ignorance (about what ultimately matters) and desire (to control what people think and say). The remedy for this problem, alas, is unlikely to be found in kindness and compassion. We should instead take a lead from another aspect of early Buddhism, and reflect on the atmosphere of open debate which existed during the life of the Buddha, which is mirrored in our modern tradition of enlightened freedom:

But the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.⁵

It was in this spirit that the JOCBS was founded by Richard Gombrich, and so shall it continue. Submissions from all aspects of opinion are welcome, and any opinion will be considered, in particular anything that is deemed dangerous.

⁴ *Columbia University Press*, 2020.

⁵ J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, chapter 2