

# Edward Conze: A Call to Reassess the Man and his Contribution to Prajñāpāramitā Studies

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## Abstract

Edward Conze still dominates the field of *Prajñāpāramitā* Studies, such as it is, forty years after his death in 1979. He continues to draw the highest praise from some quarters for his “meticulous” scholarship and his “pioneering” work on *Prajñāpāramitā*. Does he deserve this praise? As a person, he could be extremely unpleasant shading into something more like malevolence. He was a self-confessed elitist, who hated “blacks” and thought of women as “servants”. As a scholar, Conze was erratic, eccentric, and obscurantist with a *conscious* commitment to magical thinking. His editions, translations, and exegesis of *Prajñāpāramitā* are all unreliable. The argument here, however, is not for summary judgement; rather, I present evidence to establish the case for a thorough reassessment of Conze’s oeuvre.

## Introduction

The eccentric Anglo-German scholar, Eberhard Julius Dietrich Conze (1904–1979), aka Dr Edward Conze, looms large in the study of *Prajñāpāramitā* literature.<sup>1</sup> In an *unfavourable* review of Conze’s *Large Sutra* translation, Leon

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<sup>1</sup> I posted a draft of this essay on academia.edu and received some helpful comments from various people. I would especially like to acknowledge the extensive input from Eric Zsebenyi who took me to task for being unfair on Conze. Although I am unrepentant, Eric’s comments did make me reinforce my case somewhat. Several high-profile academics encouraged me to pursue this aspect

Hurvitz (1923-1992) referred to Conze as “a meticulous scholar” and suggested that alone of Buddhist converts, his scholarship is “above reproach” (Hurvitz 1969: 403-404). Such accolades are not unusual right up to the present and one could be forgiven for thinking that this was a consensus view.

The key historical source for Conze’s life is his *Memoirs of a Modern Gnostic* (1979 I & II), written at the behest of Jan Willem de Jong (see Wiles 2018). It was published in two parts, though these were circulated together in a ring-bound A4 format. Conze alludes to a Part III which contains statements his lawyer deemed open to prosecution for libel or breaching the Race Relations Act. Conze decided to delay publication until after the deaths of the people concerned on the principle that dead men file no lawsuits. After Conze died in 1979, Part III disappeared without a trace. There is a persistent rumour in the Triratna Buddhist Order that Sangharakshita (d. 2018), who had been on good terms with Conze, had a copy of Part III. I asked him about this in 2007 and he denied ever having had a copy of the manuscript and said he thought Muriel had destroyed it after Conze’s death. Paul Williams, who helped to arrange the purchase Conze’s library for Bristol University ca 1980-81, recalls seeing the manuscript but it was not part of the purchase and he also thinks that Muriel destroyed it (personal communication 21 May 2020). It was not amongst the personal papers that later were acquired and archived at Bristol. So it seems unlikely that any copies survive. On balance, this is probably a good thing.

Jan Nattier (2003) noted several principles for extracting historical information from normative texts such as Buddhist sutras, one of which was the *principle of embarrassment*. This states that if something is included in a normative text that reflects poorly on the author, then it is likely to be true, for few authors set out to darken their own reputations. A great deal of what Conze says about himself reflects poorly on him and this has been exacerbated by social changes in the last 10-15 years that have shifted public attitudes. Some may argue that it is unfair to judge him by the standards of our time when the moral boundaries have been redrawn. As we will see, even by the standards of his day, Conze was a rather extreme man. The standards for good scholarship, by contrast, have not changed very much and holding him to these standards needs no justification.

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of my work on the *Heart Sutra* without wanting to be drawn into the inevitable controversy. I’m not entirely comfortable being a lightning rod, but someone had to say something. I thank Eivind Kahrs for discussing this issue with me at length and for reading and critiquing the draft essay.

In the Romantic view, a genius may be forgiven any number of flaws as long as they produce art or literature that appeals to Romantic sensibilities. Historical examples include Mozart's appalling manners, Byron's drug addiction, and Jung's sexual incontinence. Typically, the flaws of the Romantic "genius" are minimized by Romantics because of their contributions to art and letters. True art is thought to transcend such petty concerns as morality. Conze's oeuvre very much appealed to the Romantic sensibilities of the post-War English-speaking world and his class sensibilities likely appealed to the English (though not to some in the British Labour Party). He partly rode the post-war rush to embrace so-called "Eastern Mysticism", so poignantly described in Gita Mehta's book, *Karma Cola*, but he was also fêted by scholars like Hurvitz who seemed to view religious enthusiasm warily.

I approach Conze with the jaundiced eye of Generation-X, having grown up with vocal feminists attacking the patriarchy and the ongoing exposure of church leaders and popular entertainers as sexual predators. I'm also one of a handful of scholars who have published more than one article on the *Heart Sutra*, and one of perhaps a dozen who have had a *sustained* interest in *Prajñāpāramitā* after Conze. In this essay, I try to establish a case for re-evaluating Edward Conze and his contribution. Firstly, I will use his own words to indict him as a snob, a narcissist, a racist, and a misogynist. Worse, I will argue that Conze was a kind of intellectual fraud. Much of his scholarship is tainted by poor attention to detail. The fact that he was very obviously *not meticulous* raises the question of why he is so often credited with such accolades. By far the worst aspect of Conze's contribution, however, has been his confusion of Buddhism with his peculiar personal religion, which mixes Theosophy with a melange of perennial philosophy and mysticism framed in Buddhist technical terms. Having encountered Conze's work over nearly three decades and more recently having reviewed his work on the *Heart Sutra* in forensic detail, my principal response has been to ask, "How did he get away it?"

As we learned in laborious and painful detail watching the political events of American politics in 2019, an indictment is not a trial. An indictment is an argument for the necessity of a trial. And even when that argument is successfully made, a trial may not occur. I will be making the best case I can that Conze deserves to be put on trial, which in this context means being subjected to critical scrutiny. Historian, Carl R. Trueman makes the salient point that objectivity is not neutral or unbiased (2010: 27ff). Objectivity by its very nature excludes the majority of explanations. My aim here is objectivity, not neutrality. The corollary is that scholars have not looked at Conze and *Prajñāpāramitā* objectively and critically. I will offer evidence to all these charges.

## Conze the Man

Reading *Memoirs* we wade through a series of self-absorbed anecdotes full of Conze's trademark contradictions and disparaging remarks. We meet a man who has many of the social attitudes we might expect from his bourgeois European background (concerning class and race for example) but who was also an avowed Communist (at least for a time). He professed to hate warmongering but, because of his intolerance, he harboured lifelong animosities based on perceived faults in others. He was an industrious worker, but a lazy intellectual who preferred magical thinking and mysticism to reason and science. As he says, his "life-long acceptance of magic... has not been so much due to theoretical considerations as to the early acquired intuitive certainty that beyond, or behind, the veil of the deceptive sensory appearances, there lies a reality of magical, or occult, forces" (I 32). And in his view science "...has little cognitive value, but is rather a bag of tricks invented by God-defying people to make life increasingly unbearable on Earth and finally to destroy it" (I 32).

Conze was a man who believed in his own genius and seems to have something of a Messianic complex. For example, he says, "From early times onwards it has been my conviction that I have come from a higher realm... and that I was sent to the Western barbarians so as to soften their hearts by teaching them the Holy Prajñāpāramitā" (I 55). On the other hand, he makes it clear that he despises those same barbarians: "Speaking of 'hoi polloi', it has always been a cornerstone of my beliefs that there are two qualitatively distinct kinds of people... 'the Noble ones' and 'the foolish common people'... the elite and the canaille" (I 52). The French word *canaille* means "a pack of dogs". The messiah who hates the people he has been sent to save is not a common trope in storytelling, but messianic delusions are, sadly, all too common.

## Early Life

Conze freely admits that he was a man of his class and age (I iv). His father was from German aristocracy and his mother the daughter of a wealthy industrialist. The Conze family owned textile manufacturing plants in the small but wealthy town of Langenberg near the Ruhr Valley. His mother's family, the Köttgens, were also "textile barons" (Heine 2016: xvii). Conze describes the 1903 marriage of his parents, Dr Ernst Conze (1872–1935) and Adele Louise Charlotte Köttgen (1882–1962) as, "a marriage between two factories" (I 1). Ernst Conze earned a doctorate in law from Bonn University, then joined the *Auswärtigen Amt*

(Foreign Office), where he served in Berlin and Antwerp, before being posted to Britain as a Vice Consul. Eberhard was born in London, in 1904. However, the family soon returned to Langenberg where Ernst became first a magistrate and then the District Court Director in Düsseldorf. He also held the office of President of the *Reich Disciplinary Chamber* from 1924 to 1934 (*Langenberger Kulturlexikon* 2009: 262). Adele was a painter of some talent, even exhibiting her work in 1930 (*Langenberger Kulturlexikon* 2009: 875).

His parents' marriage was unhappy and he did not have a good relationship with his mother (I 4). This seems to have affected his relations with women generally. Conze notes that his mother had great potential but was forced into the life of a small town *hausfrau* with no prospect of escape. As Conze tells the story, she was bored and bitter, and since young Eberhard leaned towards his father, she included him in the enmity she felt for Herr Conze. His younger brother, Wolf, however, was the object of her affections. Conze admits to choosing women like his mother – small and dark. Accused of grooming a young woman employed as a typist he complains that it is ridiculous because she is blond and he “does not even like blonds.” The accusation was not simply random however since he reveals that he repeatedly chose his sexual partners from amongst his female students. He recounts sexually assaulting a female student as though it were an amusing anecdote (II 116-118). He also confesses that his first sexual experiences were with the Conze family's blond maid.

Being born in Britain entitled Conze to British Citizenship and when he visited England in 1924 he took the opportunity to renew his citizenship. Thus, when he fell foul of the Nazis, who he deplored on class grounds as much as anything, he was able to escape to Britain. Conze's attitude toward the Nazis is instructive. He described Hitler as someone literally possessed by demonic forces but he also says that Hitler “illustrates the danger of allowing the lower middle classes to exercise power” (I 9). Hitler was not one of the social elite and thus lacked the upbringing and education to fit him for leadership (I 11). Indeed it is likely that the mocking epithet “Nazi” reflects the same social prejudice. The German bourgeoisie of that time would often tell jokes in which the butt was a Bavarian peasant nicknamed Nazi, short for the popular name, Ignatius (Forsyth 112-3). Conze's stories about the Nazis vary. Early in the *Memoirs*, he says he was warned by Nazis to flee Germany in a rather bland encounter over the flying of a flag from his balcony, but later (I 40, n.1) he seems to suggest that he was being actively pursued by the Gestapo. In any event, Conze left Germany on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1933, six months after Hitler was appointed Chancellor.

Although Conze hated the Nazis he did share some of their views on race, for example, he says, “In due course [Notting Hill] was finished off by the blacks, who slowly moved down from Paddington Station” (I 64). He writes about being “driven out of Notting Hill by the blacks” (I 102), but also notes, “My further comments on the negrification [sic] of Notting Hill Gate manifestly contravene the Race Relations Act of June 1977. They are therefore removed to Part III” (I 65). When mentioned in *Memoirs*, people of African descent are always negatively characterised. Although he writes positively of Jewish people, Conze uses the racial label in an essentialist way. That someone is “a Jew”, for example, is always stated whereas he does not insist on referring to, say, Giuseppe Tucci, as “an Italian” or “a Fascist”, indeed Tucci is characterised as rich and socially superior (Conze admired his gold cutlery). Jewishness is not necessarily disapproved of – Conze’s first wife was Jewish – but it is always *marked*.

Conze recounts that his first contact with Buddhism was aged thirteen when he came across an account of the religion by Lafcadio Hearn (I 6). His interest in Buddhism continued through his university days. At one point he says that shortly after gaining his PhD, he was introduced to Theosophy and astrology by Professor Johannes M. Verweyen (I 9), of Bonn University, who at that time ran the German Theosophical Society and whose special field of research was parapsychology. Later on, Conze says that “the Conze family had always harboured a number of Theosophists though they were usually of the Rudolf Steiner persuasion” (I 31). When he was ill as a child one of his aunts gave him a copy of Annie Besant’s translation and explanation of the *Bhagavadgītā*. He says, “I was terribly excited by it” (I 31). Conze embraced the irrational and rejected science early on. Referring to this encounter with the occult before WWII, he says, “Astrology has set me inwardly free from the claims a technological society can make on my allegiance” (I 32). It is important to keep in mind that astrology and Theosophy were *foundational* to Conze’s worldview and that there was none of the compartmentalisation we might expect from a scholar. Conze had no interest in objectivity. His worldview was only reinforced by his contact with D. T Suzuki.

The family wealth allowed Eberhard to pursue his university education in a desultory fashion, moving around until he found a teacher to his liking. He describes himself as “rebellious”, but I suspect he simply did not like or respect his teachers and lacked the self-control or motivation to hide it. Being unwilling to put up with anyone he judged inferior and having more or less

unlimited funds from his father, he simply moved on when he disliked his teachers. Thus he studied at half a dozen different German universities before he eventually completed the equivalent of a doctorate at the University of Cologne in 1928 (aged 24). Young Eberhard also showed early promise as a linguist, acquiring proficiency in at least a dozen languages although he officially studied philosophy.

We can only presume that it was after arriving in England, in 1933, that Eberhard became Edward, but he does not mention this change. Conze had a variety of teaching jobs during and after the war. It is notable that he never held a permanent academic position, but continued to be peripatetic and often supported himself by teaching night classes. The one academic position he was offered was in the USA but the US government saw him as an undesirable alien because of his involvement in Communism. Late in his life, some bequests made him financially independent.

On fleeing Germany, Conze had married his (pregnant) partner, Dorothea Finklestein, as much as anything to prevent her being sent back to Germany and certain death because she was Jewish. This marriage did not last long. They were briefly reconciled but then separated again, although they did not divorce until much later, partly because Dorothea converted to Catholicism (I 48). On reflection Conze says:

“I did not want a wife at all, but a servant who would look after me while I was doing my scholarly work. If it had not been for the servant shortage which set in after 1918, I would never have had any motive to marry at all” (I 31).

Conze started a relationship with Muriel Green, the sister of one of his students, in 1948 (WWII did not improve the servant shortage), though of course Conze was still married to Dorothea and so he and Muriel could not marry. The two lived together as a married couple and Muriel changed her name to Conze by deed poll. Conze credits Muriel with providing the “material stability” that enabled him to continue his work. He was, in the manner of bourgeois men, incapable of any domestic task. However, before he met Muriel, Conze went through a crisis.

As a student, Conze also became infatuated with Communism and helped to organise political activities, particularly once the Nazis rose to prominence, and wrote books on Marxism. He continued his involvement in radical politics on

moving to Britain and made connections in the British Labour party, particularly with “Red” Ellen Wilkinson with whom he wrote anti-fascist pamphlets and two short books. Conze visited Spain (I 18-20) just before the Spanish Civil war, under the auspices of the publisher Warburg. He was disgusted with the Spanish communists and the piece he published on return outraged many on the Left (I 20). After a series of vituperous clashes with the “Stalinists” in the Labour Party, Conze completely abandoned politics in Britain. He nonetheless remained committed to communism throughout his life. In a letter to Herbert Elbrecht dated 23.10.76, Conze wrote: “In contrast to the ‘Our God has failed’ school, I have never lost my devotion for the Soviet Union and consider most of what one reads in the capitalist press as despicable warmongering for world war three.”<sup>2</sup> However, his break with the Labour Party resulted in a broader crisis. In his memorial for D. T. Suzuki, Conze (1967) says:

“My political faith had collapsed under the impact of Stalinism and of what I had observed in Spain, my marriage had failed, my job seemed distinctly bleak, I had even started to consult psychoanalysts, and there seemed nothing left that I could live for”

It was at this point, around 1937, that Conze (re)turned to Buddhism. He credits this to his acquaintance with three men: D. T. Suzuki, Har Dayal, and Graham Howe, but Suzuki seems to have been the pivotal figure, so it is worth spending some time on him.

## D. T. Suzuki

Daisetz Teitarō Suzuki (1870–1966)<sup>3</sup> was for some decades the face of Zen Buddhism outside of Japan. After university and his period of Rinzai Zen training at Engaku Temple (1892-1897), Suzuki spent several years in the US working for the theologian and author, Paul Carus. Here he came into contact with various occult ideas including the work of Emmanuel Swedenborg. Between 1909 and 1915, Suzuki translated several of Swedenborg’s books

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<sup>2</sup> “Zum Unterschied von der ‘Our God has failed’ Schule habe ich nie meine Hingabe an die Sovietunion verloren und betrachte das meiste was man in der kapitalistischen Presse liest als verächtliche Kriegshetze für den dritten Weltkrieg” (Conze 1976). My thanks to Eivind Kahrs for translating the German.

<sup>3</sup> The Kanji for his name are: 鈴木 大拙 貞太郎. He adopted the name Daisetsu or Daisetz during his Zen training at Engakuji in Kamakura (1892-1897).



into Japanese and composed a biography of him (Mulder 2016: 5). Another source for Suzuki may have been Theosophy which seems to adopt many of the same ideas, especially a fascination with the Neoplatonic idea of “The One” or “The Absolute”. Such ideas became part of the vocabulary of Western Buddhist discourse despite having no traditional equivalents. For example, Conze says at one point: “‘Truth’ should here be understood as the One in contrast to the manifold variety of error” (1975: 105). Suzuki’s wife, Beatrice Lane, was a major figure in the US Theosophical world.

Suzuki called his approach to *Prajñāpāramitā* “the logic of sokuhi”. The Japanese term *sokuhi* (即非 Ch. *ji fēi*) translates roughly as “is/not”. As Suzuki formulated it, the logic runs: “That A is A means that A is not A, and therefore A is A” (1964: 59-60). This derives from a series of apparent negations in the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā*. Conze cites a version of this formula in his commentary on the *Heart Sutra* (1958: 84). Michiko Yusa quotes Suzuki referring to this as “the logic of spiritual intuition... If you understand what it means, you will understand not only the *Diamond Sutra* but also the entire *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* of 600 scrolls” (Yusa 2019: 590).

This expression of “logic” was influential on the Kyoto School of Japanese philosophy via Suzuki’s lifelong friend, Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945). The Kyoto School were implicated in the nationalistic aggression of Japan in the 20th Century and have come in for much criticism in the 21st Century. The adoption of the logic of sokuhi by members of the Kyoto School can also be seen in the light of nationalism. On learning the way Suzuki was thinking, Nishida wrote an encouraging letter to him, saying, “We must construct it logically so that it can stand on its own to face Western logic” (Yusa 2019: 590). The scandal of Orientalism, in which the attitudes of European scholars studying the people and cultures of the Middle East and Asia were exposed as racist fantasies (Said 1978) led to a major shift in academia. Suzuki came to be seen as an Asian who adopted the forms of Orientalist exoticism in his presentation of Zen to Americans and Europeans. Bernard Faure (1995) has referred to this in relation to the Kyoto School as “reverse Orientalism”.

The idea of the Kyoto School was to find a native Japanese approach to logic that could be positively contrasted with “Western” logic. Suzuki’s “reverse Orientalism” presentation of Buddhism emphatically contrasted an idealised, but fundamentally corrupt (dualistic and discriminative) Western society with an idealised and fundamentally pure (non-dualistic and non-discriminative) Eastern society epitomised by the Japanese, and within Japan by the Zen Monk.

However, Suzuki's nationalism went a little deeper than just pro-Japanese sentiments.

In his meticulous studies of Meiji Japanese militarism, Brian Victoria (1997, 2003) has shown that the Zen Buddhist establishment was complicit in and actively supportive of the Meiji wars of aggression and associated atrocities as well as institutionalised domestic terrorism (2019).

“Suzuki addresses all of the criticisms levelled at the Nazis, i.e., their oppression of the Jews, their totalitarianism, their regimentation of youth, their fanatical hatred of Soviet Communism and ultimately supplies a convincing rationale for all of their extremist stances within the context of the times.” (Victoria 2013a: 14)

D. T. Suzuki was perhaps not the worst offender, but in a series of articles Victoria demonstrates that Suzuki had close personal contacts with Nazis in Japan, was sympathetic to their policies in Europe, and sought to recast Zen Buddhism as a “death cult” so that Japanese soldiers would kill (and die) without hesitation or remorse (Victoria 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b). Suzuki himself made much of his *kenshō* or “insight” experience. However, as Victoria notes this doesn't seem to have made him any more compassionate:

“As Suzuki's subsequent statements make clear, his *kenshō* experience did not alter his view of “religion during a [national] emergency.” Again, this is hardly surprising in light of the fact that Suzuki's own Rinzai Zen master, Shaku Sōen ... was also a strong supporter of Japan's war efforts.” (2013b: 4).

Suzuki's support for the Nazis did not come to light after the Japanese surrender, so he was free to spread his message untainted by his close association with them. Suzuki's cachet in Buddhist, especially Zen, circles remained intact. His brand of mystical anti-intellectualism had fuelled the imagination of the baby boomer generation, meshing with and amplified by the psychedelic counter-culture in the 1960s. And it continues to be influential. However, Robert Sharf is emphatic that despite the influence of Suzuki and other Japanese intellectuals on the conception and practice of Zen in America and Europe, they did not represent the Japanese monastic tradition of Zen nor did they have influence in that sphere. Rather, Sharf says, “the style of Zen training most familiar to Western Zen practitioners can be traced to relatively recent and sociologically

marginal Japanese lay movements.” (1993: 40). It seems that the Zen monk at the heart of Suzuki’s utopia simply does not exist. Arthur Koestler was perhaps the only public intellectual who was not taken in by Suzuki’s hand waving at the time:

“There is one redeeming possibility: that all this drivel is deliberately intended to confuse the reader, since one of the avowed aims of Zen is to perplex and unhinge the rational mind. If this hypothesis were correct, Professor Suzuki’s voluminous oeuvre of at least a million words, specially written for this purpose, would represent a hoax of truly heroic dimensions, and the laugh would be on the Western intellectuals who fell for it” (from the essay “A Stink of Zen”, cited in Sharf 1993: 41).<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, Paul Harrison has shown that Suzuki’s understanding of the *Vajracchedikā* was based on a misconception (2006: 136-140). The Tibetan translations reflect the correct reading of the compounds involved in the negations of the *Vajracchedikā*. To take his principle example, Conze (1957: 75) translated Section 13c into Buddhist Hybrid English: “And that which as a world system was taught by the Tathagata, as a no-system that has been taught by the Tathagata. Therefore it is called a ‘world system’” (138).<sup>5</sup> Harrison argues that while “no-system” is a grammatically possible reading, it is not philosophically cogent. Rather the phrase should be read “Any world-system there is has been preached by the Realised Ones as systemless. Thus it is called a world system.” (138). Harrison concludes:

“The Vaj is not therefore an expression of some kind of mystical paradoxicality, but is rather analogous to the standpoint taken by Nāgārjuna, in asserting that conventional language only makes sense because of the ultimate emptiness of the things it names, embedded as they are in a network of causal relationships” (140).

If Harrison is correct, and I think he is, then Suzuki’s whole approach to *Prajñāpāramitā* is discredited as is Conze’s. Although Harrison has published

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<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere Sharf (1995: 158 n.98) records some of the retorts that Koestler’s comments drew from apologists including Christmas Humphries and Carl Jung as well as Suzuki himself.

<sup>5</sup> *yo ‘pyasau lokadhātustathāgatena bhāṣitaḥ, adhātuḥ sa tathāgatena bhāṣitaḥ | tenocyate lokadhāturiti ||*

this argument, it is only available to date in an obscure and expensive Norwegian monograph (Harrison 2006). Harrison's forthcoming book on the *Vajracchedikā* is long overdue, but it should be more accessible and we can anticipate that it will do much to clear up the confusion surrounding this text.

Despite being a Nazi sympathiser, an Orientalist, misrepresenting Japanese Zen Buddhism and monasticism, and despite having misunderstood the core text of his philosophy Suzuki was enormously influential. Something about his message struck a chord amongst his audience. And in particular, he was a seminal influence on Conze and his approach to *Prajñāpāramitā*. Faure, Sharf, and Victoria are leading figures in a general reappraisal of D. T. Suzuki's life and work in the light of Meiji Japanese politics and culture. No such movement yet exists for the reappraisal of Edward Conze. Conze's naïve encounter with Suzuki—for whom he expressed “unlimited admiration, little short of idolatry” (I 78)—was to prove decisive in his life.

### Midlife Crisis

In Suzuki's series of essays on Zen, Conze found a framework for rationalising his rejection of a world and an affirmation of his idiosyncratic, not to say syncretic, worldview, which I will refer to as his *idiodoxy*. In Suzuki's idiodoxy, the mythical Zen monk, perhaps an idealised memory of Suzuki's own time at Engaku Temple, was the focus. Conze was drawn to the ideal that Suzuki described and initially sought to emulate it. With the zeal of the new religious convert he threw himself into what he imagined an ideal Buddhist life to be:

“In 1937, at the age of 33... Under the impulse of D. T. Suzuki's message I then withdrew into a private wood belonging to a Quaker friend of mine in the New Forest, and practised as much meditation as can be practised in this evil age” (1967a).

This was the wood called Sandy Balls, near Godshill Village, Hampshire, owned by Aubrey Westlake. In the *Memoirs* Conze recalls living there for several years (I 38). However, he also says that he moved there because the outbreak of war (in Sept 1939) had interrupted his night classes and deprived him of an income (with no mention of Suzuki or meditation). The chronology of this period seems particularly confused in Conze's account. Also for several pages (starting on I 41), he details his difficulties finding work while living at Sandy Balls, so he was hardly in retreat.

Of this period of meditating, he says that he “experienced a great elation of spirit” (I 45). Later in *Memoirs*, he mentions that in his book *Buddhist Meditation* he mainly covered meditation practices drawn from Buddhaghosa. It seems to have been these that he practised in Sandy Balls.<sup>6</sup> Living an ascetic life, combined with his bourgeois domestic incapacity left Conze with symptoms of malnutrition such as chronic diarrhoea and degeneration of the gums leading to the loss of all his teeth (I 47). The combination of malnutrition, the cold of winter, sleep deprivation, and long periods of meditation probably all contributed to the delusions he apparently experienced: “Unbidden, several psychic faculties came my way” (I 46). As already noted, magical thinking was foundational to Conze’s worldview so that he interpreted any unusual experiences that he might have had in line with his existing beliefs (as we all do).

Conze does not say how long this period of meditation was. He decided to end his retreat: “I also felt that I had gained as much insight as I could bear in my present body or realise in our present social circumstances” (I 47). Conze later refers to the effects of “years of meditation on *mettā*” (II 79) but it’s unclear from *Memoirs* to what extent he continued to pursue meditation. He blames his failure at Sandy Balls on “this evil age” or “our present social circumstances” but the severe discomfort caused by malnutrition is the more obvious immediate cause of ending his retreat. At about the same time his wife, Dorothea, asked him to move back in with her for the sake of their daughter. So he moved to Oxford and was assigned a job in the wartime Ministry of Agriculture. This led him back into the orbit of academia.

## Scholarship

Living in Oxford with a wife to attend to his domestic needs and an undemanding government job gave Conze leisure to study and access to research materials in the Bodleian Library and the India Institute Library. He took Sanskrit lessons from Thomas Burrow (1909 – 1986). He also met Frederick W. Thomas (1867 – 1956) and collaborated with him on a translation of a Jain text from Sanskrit. Academic connections led to further literary ventures and, after 1945, to invitations to teach abroad, including in Germany and the USA.

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<sup>6</sup> Sangharakshita confirms: “and he practised meditation, following very seriously the instructions given by Buddhaghosa in the *Visuddhimagga*, and achieving some degree of meditative experience” (1996: 20).

Despite his animus towards so many people, Conze had several productive working relationships, for example with Jan Willem de Jong, Giuseppe Tucci, Isaline B. Horner, and Lewis Lancaster. That Tucci was a supporter of Italian Fascism and Benito Mussolini does not seem to have deterred Conze. In turn, and despite his abrasive personality and sloppy and distorted work, many scholars of the day idolised Conze and he is still the subject of effusive and obsequious praise from many quarters.

Conze set himself the task of translating all of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts into English. In some cases, as with the *Heart Sutra*, this involved establishing a critical edition of the Sanskrit texts. Without the burden of a permanent academic position, Conze could stay largely focused on editing and translation work and he published many editions and translations as well as other books on Buddhism and meditation, with a focus on *Prajñāpāramitā*. Amongst these were a long essay outlining the extent and history of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature (1960) and a lexicon which was intended to be expanded into a dictionary of *Prajñāpāramitā* but never completed (1967b).

Conze approached Mahāyāna Buddhism with enthusiasm and industry. The great shame is that so much of what he did was careless, flawed, and coloured by his idiodoxy. It all needs to be done again. At the same time, there seems to be little interest in *Prajñāpāramitā* in academia in the present day and no appetite for critical editions or translations. A handful of scholars struggle away, year after year.<sup>7</sup> The “publish or perish” mentality means that even those with nothing to say must continue to publish several times per year. However, I think the nonsensical interpretation of *Prajñāpāramitā* fostered by Suzuki and uncritically repeated in universities around the world, as well as the bizarre translations and interpretations by Conze, combine to put most students off pursuing research in this area.<sup>8</sup>

The first *Prajñāpāramitā* text Conze worked on was one of the best known and most widely read texts in all of Buddhism, i.e. the *Heart Sutra*. And he

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<sup>7</sup> About a dozen scholars publish serious work on *Prajñāpāramitā* in English. More work is done in Japan, but it is seldom translated. From what little of the Japanese *Heart Sutra* research that I have access to it seems to be largely in the service of religious orthodoxy. *Prajñāpāramitā* scholarship has been severely diminished by the deaths of Karashima Seishi in 2019 and Stefano Zacchetti in 2020.

<sup>8</sup> This observation is partly based on informal comments by several academics who did not wish to go on record. Most academics seem to be *very* guarded about making public comments on Conze.

returned to it repeatedly. Just as the *Heart Sutra* is a representative microcosm of the *Prajñāpāramitā* macrocosm, Conze's work on this text reflects trends in his oeuvre more generally and thus we can use it as a window on his scholarship. Before this, however, we need to draw out more detail of Conze's approach to *Prajñāpāramitā*: his idiodoxy. One place to start is his 1953 article entitled "The Ontology of the *Prajñāpāramitā*" published in *Philosophy East and West*.

### Conze-ism

Conze begins his exposition on *Prajñāpāramitā* ontology by stating that *Prajñāpāramitā* texts do not make reasoned arguments (1953: 117) and then proceeds to exemplify this. Conze sees *prajñā* as "a special virtue, or force" (118). Buddhism, he argues, uses this special virtue to arrive at a non-rational understanding of "the ultimate facts of reality" (*dharmas*) (118). The special virtue of wisdom is that it allows us to see that the "own being" (*svabhāva*) of *dharmas* is "emptiness". Reflecting his commentary on the *Heart Sutra*, Conze says that "*dharmas*, when viewed with perfected gnosis, reveal an own-being which is identical with emptiness, i.e. in their own-being they are empty" (120). Conze bends this around to a more conventional Madhyamaka view so that it means that *dharmas* do not have *svabhāva*.

Conze outlines three approaches to the abstract noun "emptiness". Firstly he sums up the "ontology" of *dharmas* in a series of mutually contradictory propositions: "*dharmas* are nonexistent" and "*dharmas* have a purely nominal existence" and "*dharmas* have no characteristics", "*dharmas* are not related to each other", "*dharmas* have never left the original emptiness" (though "original emptiness" is not defined). In short, Conze's ultimate facts of reality are like the old quip about the Holy Roman Empire, not Holy, not Roman, and not an Empire. Still, ignorance of these facts is, according to Conze (126), the root of all evil. However, we should (or must) *ignore these facts* and disbelieve them (124). This should be relatively easy because *we ourselves do not exist* (125). If we can only extinguish our non-existent "self" then we will see this because it is precisely the existence of our non-existent self that prevents us from seeing (and ignoring) the true nature of ultimate reality. The (nonexistent) saint has no opinion or anything to say about any of this or anything. At this point, Conze turns to the "logic" of *Prajñāpāramitā*.

After all this heavy-duty dualism, Conze precedes without irony to tell us that the heart of this logic is *non-duality*. However, sometimes, when they make distinctions between dharmas, then nonexistent people do exist and they make distinctions between dharmas (126). Still, absolute knowledge abolishes them (whether nonexistent people or nonexistent distinctions are abolished is unclear). This is because: “It is the same to be as not to be” (126). And this, according to Conze is the important point: despite the facts of ultimate reality being nonexistent, merely by saying this, we confirm that they *do exist*. And by saying that they do exist we confirm that they *do not exist*. And *this is wisdom*.

Charitably, Conze admits that “this kind of philosophy gives little comfort to common sense” (128), but he assures us that it is “perfectly consistent with itself”. His final word is that “The ontology of the *Prajñāpāramitā* is a description of the world as it appears to those whose self is extinct. That is its justification, and the source of both its strength and of its limitations.” (129).

Since this drivel was published in a prestigious, peer-reviewed journal, and because it is still accepted as gospel by religious and scholars alike, I need to add a few words of commentary. The Emperor is not wearing any clothes. This not only seems like nonsense, it genuinely *is nonsense* completely lacking in scholarly objectivity and critical thinking. What was editor, Charles A. Moore, thinking when he published this? Did this article really survive anonymous peer-review? Conze is obsessed with nonexistence, magic, and metaphysics while the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts are concerned with the absence of sense experience and epistemology. *Prajñā* is a word that fundamentally refers to some form of *knowledge*, not to some “special virtue or force”. It is something that one *learns* from applying meditative techniques in which sense experience ceases and leaves one in a state of absence (*sūnyatā*) of experience or “contentless awareness”.

With this, let us turn our attention to the *Heart Sutra*.

## Heart Sutra

Conze first published a translation of the Sanskrit *Heart Sutra* in 1946, along with some background in a series of three articles in *The Middle Way*, the journal of the Buddhist Society. His critical edition of the Sanskrit text appeared in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1948 and was subsequently revised in 1967. He published a four-part essay entitled “The Heart Sutra explained” in *The Middle Way* in 1955-56. The *Middle Way* articles were collated and



published as *Buddhist Wisdom Books* (1958), which contained a translation of and commentary on the *Vajracchedikā* and a version of the Sanskrit text of the *Heart Sutra* along with a translation and commentary. A second edition of *Buddhist Wisdom Books* was published in 1975. Another translation of the *Heart Sutra* was published in *Perfect Wisdom: The Short Prajñāpāramitā Texts* (1973). Conze tinkered with his edition, his translation, and his interpretation over several decades.

### ***Sanskrit Edition***

In his book on the Tibetan editions of the *Heart Sutra*, Jonathan Silk refers to Conze's Sanskrit edition as "chaotic" (1994: 32) and comments that "... due to the lack of anything approaching a complete and reliable [Sanskrit] edition, nothing can be said about the possible affiliations of any of our Tibetan recensions or sub-recensions with any given Sanskrit tradition" (1994: 40). Conze's edition, such as it was, contained several simple grammatical errors that were not repaired in the 1967 revised edition (Attwood 2015, 2018b). This was not unusual. Greg Schopen notes many errors in Conze's edition of the *Vajracchedikā*. He says, for example: "The edition of the late Edward Conze... is of very dubious value from a text-critical point of view... In regard more specifically to the Gilgit text it should be noted that Conze's notes to his edition reproduce all the errors in Chakravarti's edition, and that there are a number of cases in which Conze's notations in regard to the Gilgit text are wrong or misleading" (Schopen 1989: 96-97). Conze acknowledges this problem with his work:

"I am constitutionally incapable of registering meaningless details correctly (that is the price of being an intuition type). Even when reading proofs I miss most of the misprints, because I automatically read not what is there, but what ought to be there. In addition, both my interest and my training in grammar leave much to be desired..." (1979: I 92)

Unfortunately, the details that Conze misses are not "meaningless" but have quite major implications for how we understand the *Heart Sutra*. It is a curious fact that Conze's mistakes stood for around 70 years, despite the scrutiny of some competent Sanskritists, some of who were renowned for acerbic comments on other people's work (more on this in my concluding remarks).

In the first sentence, Conze gave the phrase *pañca skandhāḥ* in the nominative plural case, stranding it without any clear relation to the rest of the sentence and depriving the transitive verb *vyavalokayati sma* of an object. Attwood (2015) showed that Conze’s witnesses include some that give the word in the accusative plural and that this resolves the problem through the simple addition of *anusvāra* (*ṃ*) to the *dhā-akṣara*. This allows us to read *pañca skandhāṃ* as the object of the verb and to make a coherent sentence out of it, i.e. “Avalokiteśvara... examined the five branches of experience...”. The addition or elision of *anusvāra* is one of the most common scribal errors in Sanskrit manuscripts. The solution also allows us to remove extraneous modern punctuation that Conze added since the Sanskrit is now fully parsable and has clear clause boundaries. Note also that Conze insists on translating *vyavalokayati* as “looks down” when in fact it means “inspect, examine”. He seems to be concerned tie the name of Avalokiteśvara to the legend of the thousand-armed figure who “looks down” on the world in compassion, but falters and splits into many parts that are reassembled into the thousand-armed, eleven-headed form by Amitābha. In this he may have been influenced by commentaries preserved in Tibetan, see for example Donald Lopez’s translation of Vimalamitra’s commentary (1996: 52). Although note also Joel Gruber’s comment:

“After noting that Vimalamitra’s composition is the “first” and “longest” among the Indian commentaries, Conze disparages the commentary with a string of analysis unrelated to the actual content of the text he lambastes. His critiques are strange enough that those familiar with the work might wonder whether he has mistakenly analyzed an entirely different text.” (2016: 51-52).

Later, in the section he labels VI, Conze inserts a full stop after the word *acittāvaraṇaḥ*, and in doing so he creates a sentence with one connecting qualifier (*cittāvaraṇa-nāstitvād*) and three adjectives but no verb and no noun or pronoun for the adjectives to relate to (Attwood 2018a). Since the adjectives (self-evidently) relate to the subject of the previous sentence—i.e. *bodhisattvaḥ*—the obvious solution is simply to remove the full stop. In turn, this resolves the ambivalence that Conze apparently experienced over the case ending of *bodhisattva*: in his 1948 edition he gives the case as genitive (*bodhisatvasya*) leaving the sentence without a subject. In the 1967 revision, he switches to the nominative (*bodhisattvaḥ*). The popular text and exegesis (1958,

1975) leave the case as genitive. The fact that the *bodhisattva* is the subject of the sentence and that adjectives which relate to him are all in the masculine nominative singular tells us that *bodhisattvaḥ* must be correct.<sup>9</sup> Attwood (2020) shows, on the basis of Huifeng (2014), that there are deeper problems with this sentence that can be explained by the Sanskrit text being a translation from Chinese. A more idiomatic Sanskrit translation of the Chinese text looks very different indeed. Conze seems not to have registered the extremely odd features of the Sanskrit text itself or the fact that the second sentence is not a properly constructed Sanskrit sentence. The many scholars and religieus who published translations of the text also failed to notice these things.

These are admittedly simple errors. We might have written them off as typographical errors had they not persisted through multiple revisions and editions. In both cases, however, they result in garbling of the text. Two long sentences that don't make sense in a very short text is rather a lot.

### ***Translation and Exegesis***

It is widely assumed that Conze knew what he was talking about, just as it is assumed that he was a competent editor. For these reasons, summing up Conze's exegesis of the text is a more complex task. As yet, there is no critical study of Conze's interpretation of the *Heart Sutra*. An assessment is made all the more difficult because Conze is still considered an authority on the wider *Prajñāpāramitā* literature and his idiodoxy has influenced most writing on the subject since the mid-twentieth century. Conze's commentary on the *Heart Sutra* is eclectic and associative, with Conze making connections far and wide:

“The *Prajñāpāramitā* texts are so elusive to our understanding not only because they presuppose a high degree of disinterested spirituality, but also because they are full of hidden hints, allusions, and indirect references...” (1975: 101)

As we have already seen, one reason the texts are elusive is that they were full of mistakes. His translations are also unhelpful at times: *vyavalokayati sma* does not mean “looked down”; “nonattainmentness” is not a word; “thought coverings” is a poor translation of *āvaraṇa* (Huifeng 2014). Paul Griffiths (1981: 29-30) used a random paragraph from Conze's *Large Sutra* translation,

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<sup>9</sup> This might be the only text in which the neuter past participle *nirvāṇa* is used adjectivally and declined in the masculine.

to illustrate what he meant by “Buddhist Hybrid English”, saying, “Dr. Conze’s translation bears only the most tenuous relationship to the English language in terms of syntax, and is full of unexplained technical terminology;” (29) The translation cannot be understood at all without reference to the Sanskrit text, and those who can read Sanskrit do not need a translation. However, Griffiths adds

“I chose this example not because Dr. Conze’s translations are worse than anyone else’s; in fact they are better than most. Rather, it illustrates with a concrete example *the kind of gibberish* that is all too often produced by the Buddhological community in the sacred name of translation” (1981: 30. Emphasis added)

Part of Griffiths’ argument is that the Buddhological community, more specifically *Sanskritists* in the Buddhological community, are not served at all by a “barbaric translation” of a “barbaric Sanskrit text” (29). The hermeneutical task of making his understanding available to others would have been better served by producing a critical edition and a critical study of the structure of the text and its relations to the other *Prajñāpāramitā* texts. An unreadable translation serves no one. Of course, there is no guarantee that Conze could have pulled off such a task. His editions of the much shorter texts of the *Hṛdaya* and *Vajracchedikā* leave much to be desired. What’s more, his critical study of the *Heart Sutra* takes us in some very strange directions.

Some of the “hidden hints and illusions” exist only in Conze’s mind. For example, Conze presented the *Heart Sutra* as a Mahāyāna version of the four noble truths (or “holy Truths” as he calls them), going to elaborate lengths to make this seem plausible (1975: 90, 100-1). The idea is based on the commentary in the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*. Conze’s arguments for this interpretation are *prima facie* unconvincing. When we look at his “barbaric” translation of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* (Conze 1975) we note two things. The *Heart Sutra* does indeed quote from the section associated by the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* with the noble truths, however the quoted passage begins with the last few lines of the paragraph that supposedly outlines the second truth (*samudaya*) and ends halfway through the section on the third truth (*nirodha*). The *Heart Sutra* includes nothing from the paragraphs on the first (*duḥkha*) or fourth (*marga*) truths. Whether the author of the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* has made a plausible argument that these lines in the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* represent the four noble truths is moot, but having read these lines in Sanskrit and Conze’s translation I can say that I do not find them remotely suggestive of the four noble truths.

Similarly, Conze stated that “this mantra has the traditional attributes of the Buddha” (1975: 102). In fact, “Of the terms in the *Heart Sutra*, only *anuttara* ‘unexcelled’ has an actual parallel and it is a rather common superlative applied to any and all Buddhist ideals” (Attwood (2017: 29). And they are not applied to the mantra, but to *Prajñāpāramitā*.

When the text says that “there are no four noble truths” Conze gets around the apparent contradiction by denying that “no” means “no”. It cannot be an ordinary negation, he says, “because it is used in a proposition of which one term, i.e. ‘emptiness’, is itself a self-contradictory unity of Yes and No” (1958: 90). Unsurprisingly, Conze goes on to admit that this kind of rhetoric confused everyone. Without any trace of irony, he refers to the confusion engendered by his self-contradictions as his readers being “dazed by so much splendour” (1975: 90).

Despite his admiration for Suzuki, the two men did not always agree. Suzuki was not happy about the presence of a mantra in the text that was so important to Zen Buddhism.

“This [mantra] is apparently a degradation of degeneration... Why this nonsense, so to speak... What has this ejaculation to do with disciplining oneself in deep Prajnaparamita? A Mantram or Dharani is generally supposed, *when uttered, to effect wonders*... Can we say, then, that the end of the Buddhist disciplines can be attained by means of a mere mystic phrase?” (1934: 210. Emphasis added).

Suzuki spent fully half of his essay on the *Heart Sutra* decrying the presence of the mantra and trying to explain it away. He concludes that “taken in itself [it] has no meaning, and its vital relation to the *Prajñāpāramitā* is unintelligible” (Suzuki 1934: 217). Conze takes the opposite view and appears to quote Suzuki when he says: “Mantras are incantations which effect wonders when uttered” (1975: 102). Again, Conze is engaged in magical thinking: “It is... not the fault of mantras that in this present age they run up against the general incomprehension of magical forces which the vulgarisation of science has fostered amongst town-dwellers” (1975: 103).

Conze’s contempt for ordinary people is evident throughout his commentary on the *Heart Sutra*:

“This Sutra is not meant for the stupid, the emotional, or the uninformed. Other means will assure their salvation. Everything that is at all worth knowing is contained in the [*Heart Sutra*]. But it

can be found there only if spiritual insight is married to intellectual ability, and coupled with a delighting in the use of the intellect.” (1958: 99).

As noted above, Conze sees himself as a member of an elite who have special knowledge not available to the “stupid, the emotional, or the uninformed”. Passages like this reek of narcissism.

The “intellectual” influence of Theosophy can be seen in statements such as “‘Emptiness’ is our word for the beyond, for transcendental reality... this is the mystical identity of opposites” (1958: 83). Recall that by “the beyond” Conze refers to a magical reality he is convinced exists beyond the phenomenal world. He also says things like, “[The bodhisatva] is able to bear the absolute aloneness of his solitary Spirit” (1958: 94). Other examples include:

“The series of negations... does not add up to nothingness, but points the way to a unique ultimate reality” (1958: 95)

“When viewed from the subject-side, the transcendental reality is known as ‘thought only’, because, one and simple, free from duality and multiplicity, it is without a separate object. This Thought, or Spirit, forms the very centre of our being” (1958: 96)

Decades later, what can we say about passages like these? Foremost in my mind is the question of how he got away with so blatantly misrepresenting Buddhism. The language is such a mishmash that teasing out the origins would be impossible, but if it were a cheap perfume then we would detect notes of Neoplatonism and Vedanta, on a base of Theosophy.

## **Conclusion**

In my introduction, I said that this essay would be an indictment of Edward Conze, i.e. a call to objectively assess Edward Conze and his contribution to Buddhism and Buddhist Studies. That Conze deserves a place in the history of Buddhist Studies is undisputed. The general view of Conze seems to be that he was a curmudgeon but that he made an invaluable contribution through his editions, translations, and exegesis. With so many curmudgeons in the field (including, some would say, the present author), we could not afford to judge Buddhist Studies on this criterion. I have tried to show that this view of Conze is understated on one hand and overstated on the other. Conze’s personality was

abrasive, his manner acerbic, and his commentary on other people brutal. These flaws are less serious than his open racism, misogyny, and misanthropy. In light of this, his messianic delusion seems tragically funny. That his Buddhist idol Suzuki was a Nazi sympathiser fits this picture perfectly. Still, he was enormously influential. Like the Danish physicist Niels Bohr, Conze seems to have had the kind charisma that made for sycophantic converts. Physicist and philosopher of science, David Albert describes the effect that Bohr had on other physicists:

“... there was just this long string of brilliant people who would spend an hour with Bohr, their entire lives would be changed. And one of the ways in which their lives were changed is that they were *spouting gibberish that was completely beneath them about the foundations of quantum mechanics for the rest of their lives...* And they revered him. There’s a quote from [John] Wheeler saying, “The thing that made me convinced that there were people like Jesus and Moses and Buddha was meeting Niels Bohr” (emphasis added).<sup>10</sup>

Conze openly acknowledged his character flaws in the *Memoirs*, but nonetheless maintained the delusion that he came from a “higher realm” to save humanity; even though he found that he could not love humanity. Conze says of himself, “Throughout my life I have been a stranger on this earth and never felt at home anywhere. Nor have I ever found anyone who was completely congenial or whom I could trust altogether” (1979: I 54). Muriel Conze referred to him as “the old man who hates everybody” (II 75). A more tragic epitaph for a Buddhist Messiah or bodhisattva can hardly be imagined.

If Conze were merely an unpleasant person and a bigot, this would be incongruous with his religious profession, but it would not invalidate his claim to being a great scholar. However, his combativeness had a rather deleterious effect on Buddhist Studies. As Charles Prebish reminisces,

“I was convinced that Buddhist Studies, as it was developing in North America, was misguided. In the first place, most of the role models for this blooming discipline: Edward Conze, Leon Hurvitz,

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<sup>10</sup> The quote is from an interview with David Albert by Sean Carroll on his podcast *Mindscape*. From the online transcript (starting at 41:40): <https://www.preposterousuniverse.com/podcast/2019/03/04/episode-36-david-albert-on-quantum-measurement-and-the-problems-with-many-worlds/>.

Alex Wayman, and a few others, were amongst the meanest individuals in academe [sic]. While they were utterly brilliant scholars, they seemed to take real delight in humiliating students rather than encouraging them.” (Prebish 2019).

As far back as 1979, Edward Bastian was hoping that a reissue of Conze’s survey of *Prajñāpāramitā Literature* would help “to rekindle interest in this crucial aspect of Buddhist Studies (1979: 99. Emphasis added). Bastian’s review is the only example of a critique of Conze’s views on *Prajñāpāramitā* that I have seen.<sup>11</sup> Summing up his scholarly contribution, Eric Zsebenyi—who has been working on a biography of Conze for some years—says, “Conze’s pioneering accomplishment is still hailed as a model of meticulous scholarship, and he ranks among the greatest and most prolific modern translators of the Buddhist tradition” (2004: unpaginated). Effusive praise such as “utterly brilliant”, “pioneering contribution”, and “meticulous” is *de rigueur* for Conze. Having worked on the *Heart Sutra* for eight years I simply cannot understand it. His editions are “chaotic” and “unreliable”, his translations are “barbaric” and all too often “gibberish”, and his exegesis seems to bear only a tenuous relationship to Buddhism as I understand it.

It is interesting that Prebish brackets Conze with Hurvitz (1923–1992) and Wayman (1921–2004). The two younger men might have turned their critical eye to Conze’s work and saved us a lot of trouble. Hurvitz (1975, 1977) and Wayman (1977, 1984) both published articles on the *Heart Sutra*, but neither noticed crucial mistakes in Conze’s Sanskrit edition or expressed doubts about his idiosyncratic translation and interpretation of it. Even when he was being critical of Conze’s botched *Large Sutra* translation, Hurvitz could still say that Conze’s scholarship was “above reproach” (Hurvitz 1969: 404). All of the published reviews of the *Large Sutra* translation that I can find are complimentary to Conze at the same time as being sharply critical of the work. David Seyfort Rugg (1977) praises Conze but spends most of his short review pointing out unfortunate translation choices. Even the often combative Greg Schopen (1977), who spends most of his *seventeen-page* review pointing out mistakes and infelicitous translation choices, gives Conze the benefit of the doubt at the end of this catalogue of blunders: “There is both much to be criticized and much to be praised.” (151). The wonder

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<sup>11</sup> In the same issue Bastian wrote a short obituary, promising a longer review of Conze that never emerged.



is that Conze was on the friendliest of terms with Jan de Jong. Charles Prebish again: “De Jong was famous for his book reviews, which regularly tore apart the research publications of even the greatest scholars of the discipline, while rarely publishing anything original of his own” (2019).

In his *Heart Sutra* commentary, Conze wrote: “It is not the function of a commentary to make this paradoxical doctrine plausible, to guard it against misunderstandings, or to show up its manifold theoretical, spiritual and practical consequences.” (1975: 84). On the contrary, this is *exactly* the function of a commentary or at least in Paul Griffiths’ (1981: 30) words, the “hermeneutical task” of the commentator. And concerning Conze’s translation of the *Large Sutra*, Griffiths says that “he failed signally in his hermeneutical task” (30). Nattier (1992), Huifeng (2014), and Attwood (2015, 2018a) show that Conze also failed in the case of the *Heart Sutra*. Schopen (1989) and Harrison (2006) have shown he failed in the case of the *Vajracchedikā* as well.

Conze’s oeuvre is an example of what Carl R. Trueman calls the *atheistic fallacy*, which can be summarised as: “if it looks convincing, it is convincing” or applied to the world of scholarship: “if it looks scholarly, then, agree or disagree with it, it is scholarly and must be taken seriously and allowed a place at the scholarly table” (2010: 45). Conze’s aberrant scholarship looked convincing to me until I began to try to parse his Sanskrit *Heart Sutra* and tried to understand his English translation of the text. The appearance of scholarship fell apart and left me wondering how his faulty work had ever passed scrutiny, especially in the light of my own sometimes bruising encounters with Buddhist Studies journal editors and anonymous reviewers. The likes of Hurvitz, Wayman, and de Jong could be brutally critical of others and yet they gave Conze a free ride.

The indictment is that while Conze adopted the forms and methods of scholarship, he was not a skilled editor (by his own admission) and rather than being a Buddhologist, he was primarily a theologian of Conze-ism: a syncretic mishmash of Theosophy, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Mysticism, framed in the technical jargon of Buddhism but unrelated to any form of Buddhism traditional or modern. He convinced more or less everyone that Conze-ism was synonymous with *Prajñāpāramitā* largely because the only other commentator of note was Suzuki who was equally flaky. Hurvitz and Wayman might have exposed the hoax but merely helped to normalise Conze-ism. This situation in which aggressive (white) men dominated the field of Buddhist Studies for decades and normalised complete nonsense would be an ideal target for a Feminist or a Foucauldian critique.

Edward Conze came to the study of *Prajñāpāramitā* with many preconceptions that caused him to misunderstand what he was looking at. These were not the unexamined biases of the uneducated. Conze had a PhD in *philosophy* and had consciously adopted an anti-intellectual pose and embraced magical thinking. He was not misled by D. T. Suzuki, but simply changed the brand of obscurantism he endorsed from Marxism to Buddhism. The tragedy is that Conze's idiodoxy became orthodoxy in academia and some Buddhist circles. *Prajñāpāramitā* has never produced the kind of critical scholarship that makes the study of Pāli texts so stimulating because of the likes of Dines Anderson, Richard Gombrich, Oscar von Hinüber, Roy Norman, Helmer Smith, and a long list of others all involved in a creative dialogue and bringing unique points of view. The study of early Mahāyāna via the Chinese and Tibetan translations has also been fruitful (see Drewes 2010 for a summary and assessment of this field). *Prajñāpāramitā* studies, by contrast, are still dominated by Conze and have made little progress since Conze's death 40 years ago, largely because almost no one wants to work on these texts. Conze might have pioneered *Prajñāpāramitā* Studies, but he also murdered them at birth.

Edward Conze thought of himself in messianic terms, but in the immortal words of Mandy Cohen, "there's no messiah in here, there's a mess alright but no messiah."<sup>12</sup> We would do well to stop idolising Edward Conze and to start paying critical attention to what he said and did because he was neither a gentleman nor a scholar and the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts really are some of the most important Buddhist texts.

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<sup>12</sup> For the uninitiated, this line is from the Monty Python film *Life of Brian*. One of the most insightful satires of British society and politics ever produced.

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