

Book Reviews

Aśvaghoṣa, *Handsome Nanda*. Translated by Linda Covill. Clay Sanskrit Library. New York: New York University Press and JJC Foundation. 2007. 387 pp.

Linda Covill's translation of Aśvaghoṣa's *Handsome Nanda* is a pleasure to read. The different scenes and interactions gave me a sense of sitting right beside the characters and being a listener to their dialogues. Covill is clearly a wordsmith with a natural sense for language and beauty. I feel that she has captured the perfect balance between modern English, which gives the book a realism for the contemporary reader, and a more classical form, which gives it the air of something happening in ancient times. It is written in the Sanskrit *kāvya* or poetic style. More precisely, it is composed in what Kṣemendra in his *Suṃvṛttatilaka* (*On Metres*) calls the *kāvyaśāstra* style. That is, it is meant to be a didactic work that is also poetical. What the reader is supposed to learn from the work is the dangers of erotic love and, especially, the role that women play in these perils.

The story of Nanda is well-known in Buddhism and comes from the *Nanda Sutta* in the *Udāna* of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*. Aśvaghoṣa's version of the story, written in the second century CE, is a captivating one. Nanda is the Buddha's half-brother. He is someone who seems to have everything: he is handsome, well to do, and has, as Covill beautifully puts it, a "kittenish" wife, Sundarī, who fulfils him sexually and emotionally. The Buddha, however, has other plans for Nanda, and seeks to have him leave his seemingly perfect life. With pressure from the Buddha, he is forced to come face to face with attachment to his erotic and romantic desires.

Aśvaghoṣa's rendition is fascinating reading because it is strewn with many twists and turns. These provoke numerous questions, especially of a psychological nature and concerning the purpose behind Aśvaghoṣa's re-writing of the story.

First, reading between the lines (or even the lines themselves) it is quite obvious that the author is someone in a deep conflict. For although he tries to list the perils of sensual pleasure, he is plainly himself besotted with feminine beauty and finds great enjoyment in trying to capture this feeling. He loves to describe “womanly form”, “swelling breasts”, earrings “pushed sideways from her face”, “putting on make-up”, “swaying anklets”, and on and on. Although many of these descriptions are determined by *kāvya* conventions of the *śṛṅgāra-rasa* or “erotic mood”, Aśvaghoṣa is clearly someone who has observed women intensely.

This is why, I feel, he needs to give his infamous “Attack on Women”: he is trying somehow to convince himself that there is something wrong with the feminine beauty he loves so much. He hopes that by orchestrating such an attack he will be able to free himself from his love for women. But the very fact that he makes this attack (along with his beautiful descriptions of those he wants to attack) demonstrates his love for women. The fact that he is in this conflict—even to the very end—is underscored at the conclusion of the book where he tries to assure the reader that “This composition on the subject of liberation is for calming the reader, not for his pleasure” (18.64).

Why does he say this? Because he is aware that like himself, the typical male, and even female, reader will have taken much pleasure in his erotic descriptions of the feminine beings in the book. Thus, at the end of the book, when Nanda has at last left his kittenish wife, a not unnatural thought for the male reader might be, “Now that Nanda’s out of the picture, perhaps I should drop by and see how Sundarī—with the swelling breasts—is getting by on her own.”

There is also a problem with the story that Aśvaghoṣa never deals with. This is the part of the story where the Buddha uses the *apsarases* (erotic nymph-like goddesses) to lure Nanda away from his wife. The problem is this: If Nanda is so deeply in love with his wife, how can he so easily shift his feelings from her to the *apsarases*? Romantic love does not work like that. Love focuses on the personal aspects of the beloved. It seems true that for many people sexual beauty also plays a role, but romantic love is not solely sexual desire. Aśvaghoṣa however tries to make it look like it is.

Why does he do this? The answer, it seems, is because this would make his attack more credible (though still not successful, I feel). Although few people would agree that being in love is a harmful experience that needs to be overcome, more people would probably agree that being tied solely to sexual attachments (especially at the cost of romantic love) is such an experience. Aśvaghoṣa’s tactic,

therefore, is to try to create guilt by association. In other words, Āśvaghoṣa tries to get the reader to agree with him that purely sexual attachments (for example to the *apsarases*) are bad and then hopes that he or she will not notice the differences between such attachments and romantic love. He then hopes that, consequently, the reader will end up agreeing that romantic love is also bad.

A further problem comes in the story when we see that Ānanda talks “out of affection” to Nanda. For is not affection also a form of attachment? And why is Ānanda’s affection towards Nanda acceptable when Nanda’s affection towards his wife is not acceptable? This is a fascinating question. There are of course numerous answers that could be deployed here. For example, Ānanda’s affection is not sexual affection, it is not a strong affection, it is a compassionate affection, or some such thing. But all of them, I would argue, fail to distinguish the two affections in a way that will allow Āśvaghoṣa to have one, but not the other.

All of this makes me feel that *Handsome Nanda* is based more on a Vedic than a Buddhist philosophy. The various references to things Vedic, Brahmins, soma juice, God, and the attacks on the body, give it the flavour of a Hindu ascetic work, despite its Buddhist trappings. This is plainly evident in the opening of the poem, where the author describes and praises the “ascetics” in their “ashram”. These are elements in Brahmanism, not Buddhism. The Buddha does not praise asceticism; rather he rejects it in favour of the middle way. An attack on women looks out of place for a follower of the middle way. Āśvaghoṣa seems aware of this and accordingly puts his attack on women in the mouth of “a certain ascetic” rather than in the mouth of the Buddha. It would hardly do to have the compassionate Buddha attacking women. There are attacks on women in various purported Buddhist works (*Handsome Nanda* being one such example), but such attacks are at their core very un-Buddhist.

It is noteworthy that in the *Sakkapañha Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the minstrel Pañcasikha sings an erotic love song for the Buddha. In this song the poet refers to his lover’s beautiful breasts and belly, and begs to be wrapped in the “delightful thighs” of his “soft-eyed lady”. When the song is finished the Buddha does not criticize Pañcasikha for his erotic love. Nor does he proceed to attack women. Rather he praises Pañcasikha for the beautiful harmony of his song. This alone suggests that there are difficulties in seeing *Handsome Nanda* as purely a Buddhist work.

Because of all this, *Handsome Nanda* is an excellent source for anyone who is interested in exploring the similarities and differences between Vedic and Bud-

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dhist views of women and eroticism. Linda Covill deserves much praise for making this work available to English readers in such an exquisite form.

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***Buddhism in the Modern World.* Edited by David L. McMahan. London & New York: Routledge, 2012. xiv, 329 pp., 28 illustrations (b/w photos).**

After the editor's short introduction, this book contains 16 chapters by 17 authors (one of them again the editor). The first thing that strikes one about the book is how tightly it is organised. Each chapter is about 20 pages long. (Three near the end are a bit shorter.) First comes the main text, which is sub-divided into several sections and is illustrated by one or more photographs. Then comes a summary, a set of bullet points about half a page long. Next comes a shorter series of bullet points: "Discussion points". Then a short bibliographical section for "Further reading". Finally a longer bibliographical section, "References".

Clearly this is aimed at the undergraduate classroom. Often teachers have to give a course somewhat outside their main area of expertise. Indeed, almost anyone who has to give a course with a range as global as "Modern Developments in Buddhism" (or indeed in any other world religion) can be forgiven for resorting to a publication designed to lighten their task.

Outside the classroom the more sophisticated reader may initially feel alienated by all the bullet points; but if she thinks of the book rather as a reference work, like a set of encyclopaedia articles, she may be reconciled. What really matters, after all, is the quality of the articles. Inevitably, among 17 authors the standard is uneven, but there are many respectable articles here, and – since I cannot review every article – I shall concentrate on pointing out those I have found worthiest of comment.

In his introduction, McMahan emphasises that "some of the greatest transformations of Buddhism" are "due to its encounter with the West", and particularly that they have responded "to the negative characterizations of Buddhism by colonists and Christian missionaries ... by selectively adopting elements of Western philosophy, scientific thought, Protestantism, romanticism, and psychology" (p.3). He goes on to balance this by saying that "Buddhism is always deeply embedded in and structured by local social practices, institutions, economics, and political affairs" (p.4). One can label these as respectively more cultural and more sociological approaches; the book has far more to say about the first than the second, and I shall return to this at the end of my review.

The first part of the book is called "Buddhism in its Geographical Contexts" and aims to "give accounts of Buddhist life and recent history ... in places where the tradition is especially prominent or where new forms of Buddhism have

emerged.” This means five chapters on Asia, one on Europe and one on North America. The second, slightly longer, part, “Buddhism and the Challenges of Modernity”, “takes up thematic issues”.

To understand Buddhism in a specific area, some knowledge of the local historical context is indispensable; so a good author of a chapter in the first half of the book will convey such information clearly and succinctly. I find Clark Chilson’s chapter on Japan particularly successful in this regard. In the last 150 years Japan has been through two cataclysms, the Meiji restoration and the defeat in World War Two followed by American occupation. Chilson does well to focus on how Buddhism suffered and adapted in the face of these disasters, and what problems it currently faces. He also (unlike some authors here) writes in normal intelligible English.

In principle, the chapter on China could have followed a very similar pattern, with the fall of the Qing dynasty and the arrival of Mao as the focal points; but Gareth Fisher feels that he has to devote a special (albeit short) section to Buddhism in Taiwan, so that the final impression he leaves is breathless and less clearcut.

The chapter on Tibetan Buddhism, by Sarah Jacoby and Antonio Terrone, inevitably deals entirely with the changes resulting directly from Tibet’s relations with China. Adoption by Tibetans of western cultural features thus plays a rather small part in their story, appearing only where those features have been introduced by the Dalai Lama. The increasing interest of Han Chinese in Tibetan Buddhism is commented on as beneficial to both sides (p.99); I had not realised that this began in the early 1930s (p.90). There is a neat summary of the contrast between Western converts to Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetans: “Non-Tibetan Buddhist converts, the vast majority of whom are non-monastic, tend to focus on meditation practices and Tibetan liturgies that are most often the preserve only of ... full-time religious professionals in Tibet ... [E]thnically Tibetan lay Buddhists tend to focus on accumulating good karma ... via reciting mantras, turning prayer wheels, circumambulating sacred Buddhist sites, maintaining household shrines, making periodic offerings to their family’s lama and his monastery, sponsoring rituals for deceased relatives, and celebrating Tibetan Buddhist holidays” (p.106).

It would be difficult to over-praise Martin Baumann’s potted history of Buddhism in modern Europe. Evidently undismayed by the miracle of compression required of the authors, he manages to give so clear and informative a picture of the many intertwining influences and initiatives that I would recommend this es-

say as a starting point for anyone with the remotest interest in his topic. My only criticism, and it is so tiny as to be almost frivolous, is that his grasp of English idiom sometimes lets him down: “the Koran is the fundament of Islam” (p.114) is unfortunate.

Baumann succinctly summarises how Protestantism influenced the foundation of European Buddhism in the 19th century: “religion was conceived of as text-based, private, personally experienced, and acted out by the mature individual” (p.116). Nearly 40 years ago I became an active member of Shap, a small British organisation founded by Ninian Smart to spread accurate information about world religions, especially through educational institutions. A senior colleague in this “working party” was a well-meaning man who was in charge of how “world religions” were taught in Birmingham schools. I vividly remember arguing against his tenet that Buddhism was entirely unsuitable to be taught to pre-adolescent children. It is strange to reflect how outdated his attitude now seems to us.

Sallie B. King writes on “Socially Engaged Buddhism”, a topic on which she is an acknowledged expert. The next chapter, “Buddhist Ethics: a Critique” is by another acknowledged authority in his field, Damien Keown. McMahan has already pointed out in the “Introduction” that these two contributions are at odds, and I agree with him that this is a strength of the book, not a weakness. I feel bound to say, however, that Keown is not merely thought-provoking but also far more informative.

King gives us a bland, idealised, “see no evil” survey, apparently writing on the principle that one should portray people as they would wish to be portrayed. However much one may sympathise with Buddhist victims and admire certain Buddhist leaders, to write that the Socially Engaged Buddhist responses to violence are “in each case, uncompromised applications of the ideals of the Buddhist tradition: nonviolence, compassion and loving-kindness, and the search for an outcome that benefits all” (p.196) is in effect just parroting propaganda. I doubt that such noble men as the Dalai Lama and Thích Nhất Han are enhanced by such a presentation.

In writing more analytically, Keown attains a far higher intellectual level. Indeed, this is another contribution that I would recommend to anyone, and I find it worth quoting at some length. Keown clarifies that by “ethics” he means not “the moral teachings attributed to the Buddha, but the systematic study of those teachings from a philosophical perspective” (p.216), and that the Buddhist tradi-

tion contains hardly any such study. As he says, "It can hardly be a coincidence that Buddhist ethics and engaged Buddhism have arisen at roughly the same time as Buddhism encounters the West. ... [A]lthough social and political issues such as kingship, war, crime and poverty are mentioned in the Pali canon and later scriptures ... [we find] little interest in developing moral or political theories ... The concept of justice, for example, is seldom – if ever – mentioned in Buddhist literature ..." (p.217).

He continues: "Sometimes it seems the 'fast forward' button has been pressed too enthusiastically, and Buddhism is depicted as holding 'enlightened' views on any number of contemporary issues, when these have hardly been mentioned in traditional sources, or the evidence is ambiguous or even points in the opposite direction. Thus Buddhism is depicted as eco-friendly, a defender of individual rights, strongly anti-war, and (in the field of sexual ethics) 'pro-choice' and tolerant of same-sex relationships, in a manner that coincides neatly with modern liberal and green agendas. This anachronistic construction of Buddhism ... seems to owe as much to the rejection of certain traditional Western values as it does to the views of Buddhism itself, and if Buddhism is the 'good guy', it is not hard to imagine who the 'bad guy' is. The blame for many of today's problems is often laid at the door of orthodox Western religion, and in particular Christianity ... While these stereotypes of both Western religion and Buddhism contain some truth, the reality is more complex" (p.217). He goes on to consider ecology, human rights and war in some detail.

Richard K. Payne introduces "Buddhism and the Powers of the Mind" with the sentence: "That Buddhism is primarily concerned with healing both of and by the mind appears to be firmly established in the popular conceptions of Buddhism" (p.234). There follows a learned and interesting, albeit terribly condensed, *tour d'horizon* from the end of the 18th century until now, focussed on the interaction between "occultism, psychotherapeutics, and Buddhist modernism" (p. 235). Payne makes many good points about interpretations and uses of Buddhism in Western society and culture. I particularly like the section on "Commodifying Buddhism". Those who present Buddhism as psychotherapeutic self-help tend to employ a "Perennialist rhetoric" which "entails removing Buddhist teachings and practices from their cultural context" (p.248). "The fact that the cultures from which Buddhist thought originated were not psycho-socially configured around the narcissistic polarity of overvaluing and devaluing oneself as is contemporary Western society, creates many opportunities for misunderstanding-

ings” (ibid). Moreover, in “much of the self-help literature [w]e find Buddhism reduced to a set of tools or techniques by which one can attain happiness, tools whose value is judged by how well they help one to be socially adapted – accepting the standards and values of one’s society and operating successfully within [them]” (p.250).

Here Payne makes a good point about the purely instrumental use of Buddhist teachings, and then tries to make another about equating happiness with social conformity. However, the quotation shows how, presumably because he is trying to cram too much into a few pages, Payne himself creates opportunities for misunderstandings: the two points, while both valid, are quite different and not necessarily linked, while the second, which he mentions only here, in passing, requires expansion.

A more serious opportunity for misunderstanding is a thread running through much of the chapter. He writes: “I initially formulated the thesis [of this chapter] as Buddhism having been interpreted psychologically. Framing the question this way, however, presumes the existence of some object – Buddhism – that is interpreted. The longer I pursued this inquiry, however, the clearer it became that there is no object to be interpreted. That is, this putative object of interpretation has no independent, autonomous existence. It is instead a social construct ... It is a representation, the construction of which is itself a process of interpretation” (p.234).

Here Payne has gone over the top. No one can possibly dispute that interpretations are just that, and themselves liable to interpretation, or that all historians work within a social and intellectual context. But just as he can, and does, write a contribution to the history of ideas, so can others contribute to a better understanding, not perhaps of Buddhism as a whole – that would be almost absurdly ambitious – but of texts, such as those of the Pali Canon, which record basic Buddhist teachings.

Payne writes: “Assertions that the Buddha taught control of the mind for the relief of suffering, for example, construct a certain representation in which the psychotherapeutic interpretation of Buddhism is legitimated as the ‘original’ teaching” (p.237). I wonder whether Payne, or any other reasonable person, has put forward an interpretation of the Buddha in which he did *not* teach control of the mind for the relief of suffering.

Similarly, when Payne writes: “The appeal to personal experience as epistemologically privileged has deep roots in Western religious culture”, it sounds as

if he is proposing a contrast between Western thought and Buddhist or classical Indian epistemology. This would be a real howler, since on the one hand the Buddha in the Pali Canon repeatedly exhorts his listeners to test his teaching on the touchstone of their own experience, and on the other hand Buddhism, like other classical Indian systems of thought, regards personal experience (Sanskrit: *pratyakṣa*) as first and foremost among the means to valid knowledge.

I may have misunderstood Payne: perhaps he only means that the Buddhism he is focusing on, Buddhist modernism, cannot be taken as an “object to be interpreted” – though I think that is what he is in fact doing. However, the issue is surely important, because unless we have some idea of what a set of teachings originally wished to say, the way that modern versions of these teachings relate to the original in terms of contrasts and similarities cannot be assessed.

The same issue arises on the first two pages of the very next chapter, “Buddhism and Gender”. Liz Wilson tells us, for example, that “many early scholars of Buddhism ... idealize[d] the Buddha as a figure whose teachings emphasized instrumental rationality, individualism, gender egalitarianism, and other Western Enlightenment values” (p.258), and that “[t]he common assumption of much Victorian popular writing on Buddhism was that [the Buddha’s] teachings freed those oppressed by gender and caste hierarchies” (p.259); but she writes not a word about whether she thinks these views were right or wrong, let alone why. I find this pointless. Alas, I have to say that this is a shoddy piece of work, with not a few factual inaccuracies. Given her topic, it is ironic that she refers to the female anthropologist Hiroko Kawanami as male (p.268). More serious, because central to her theme, is her failure even to mention Ute Hüsken’s discovery – for so I regard it – that the canonical account of how the Buddha made all nuns hierarchically inferior to all monks contains internal contradictions which show that it must be apocryphal, a later interpolation.¹

It is a pleasure to turn to “Buddhism and Science: Translating and Re-translating Culture” by Francisca Cho. For me this ranks with Keown’s as the most stimulating and original contribution to the book. The title made me approach the chapter with foreboding, but my spirits were immediately lifted by the first sub-heading: “Can Buddhism and science be compared?” Cho proposes that “praxis precedes theory” (p.276). By this she means that “translation is a cul-

¹ Ute Hüsken, “The Legend of the Buddhist Order of Nuns in the Theravāda Vinaya-Piṭaka”, *Journal of the Pali Text Society* xxvi, 2000, pp.42-69. This is a translation of an article which originally was published in German in 1993.

tural process that begins first with the perception of concrete benefit" (ibid). She then offers a splendid example. "The institution of Buddhist monasticism, with its order of celibate monks, seriously clashed with the Chinese concern with ... perpetuating the family line. But in the Buddhist ritual system, supporting the monastic order with economic necessities created merit (good karmic fruit) for the donor that could be transferred to his ancestors, ensuring auspicious circumstances in their new lives. Hence an inherently offensive social institution was brilliantly transformed by the Buddhist cosmology of rebirth into a most potent site for the practice of filial piety." It is a great relief in going through this book at last to come across a historical claim grounding the development of ideas in social and economic realities.

Most of the chapter concerns the "dialogue between Buddhism and western science", particularly psychotherapy, and inevitably there is some overlap with Payne. I do not agree with Cho's every word. On the one hand, she has a very Mahayanist (even Chinese?) view of Buddhist doctrine; on the other, when she analyses the concepts of secularity and science, she is subtle on the western side but inadequate on the Buddhist side. Early Buddhism certainly uses words which can be translated as "secular" and "transcendent": *laukika* and *lokottara* do literally mean "mundane" and "supramundane". The point is, however, that they would never be applied in most of the contexts in which we use "secular". This is grist to Cho's mill, and I am only urging her to push her critical analysis further. But whether she and I agree or not, this is certainly a fine contribution.

The final two chapters, on "Buddhism and Globalization" and "Buddhism, Media and Popular Culture" do not seem to add anything of value to our understanding of the field, and there is considerable overlap between them, including excessive enthusiasm for the jargon introduced by Arjun Appadurai, which I regard as verbiage masquerading as thought. (He has already been called in aid to provide obscurity in chapter 1.)

Looking back at the volume as a whole, one has to say that the problem of overlap has not been entirely overcome. I have quoted some cases of it, and could have mentioned more. In particular, it may seem strange that I have not commented on the editor's own chapter "Buddhist Modernism", which begins the latter half of the book. Of course, the editor has already broached the topic as a whole in his "Introduction", and both pieces are sensible and informative. But I wonder whether it was a good idea for him to take two bites at the cherry. If his chapter stood alone, one would recommend students to read it. But as it is, it contains al-

most nothing which cannot be found, often with more context, elsewhere in the book.

Granted, to get perfect co-ordination in coverage from a team of 17 authors would not be practically possible. Nevertheless, the problem of how well a vast topic like “Buddhism in the Modern World” can be dealt with by a volume organised like this one is surely worth discussing.

It is not that repetition is at all costs to be avoided. Repetition is an important pedagogic device, and every good teacher repeats points to emphasise them. But live teaching and oral communication have different rules from presenting a subject in print. Moreover, repetition has less value when it is accompanied by fragmentation.

Let me give just a couple of examples. The modern Taiwanese Buddhist movement Tzu Chi (also spelled Ci Ji) gets three lines on p.2, a fairly long paragraph followed by a paragraph shared with another movement on pp.74-5, a mention on p.81, another mention, this time by name only, on p.145, and about half a page on pp.205-6. There is quite a bit of repetition between these mentions. Nevertheless, I would be surprised if many people remembered anything about Tzu Chi after going through the book. But it is a distinctive and colourful movement, and if they read one good three-page account of it, including a brief theory of why it has been so successful, I would be surprised if people did *not* remember it.

A bigger example is nationalism. When one has read the sequence of five chapters on Buddhist countries in Asia, one cannot avoid feeling that there is an elephant in the room, a massive but unacknowledged presence: nationalism. However, one has to wait for any discussion of nationalism till the second part of the book, on “thematic issues”. It is here that the intellectual and pedagogic hazards entailed by the book’s rigid format become most obvious. No doubt one can argue that nationalism became a major force in world history before the 20th century, which is roughly when this book begins; but it certainly played no part in earlier Buddhist teachings or practices. It surely has more influence over people than any other of the factors that McMahan has listed in his introduction – perhaps more, indeed, than all of them together. To fail to notice this would be a case of not seeing the wood for the trees.

Had nationalism already been discussed, one would read Paul David Numrich’s chapter, “The North American Buddhist Experience”, with different eyes. But here too the word “nationalism” is not mentioned, even though immigration issues loom large, both past American hostility to certain nationalities and how

immigrant groups of Buddhists have tended not to meld. Then at the end of the chapter we read: “Robert Thurman cited the Japanese Buddhist scholar Gadjin Nagao’s division of Buddhist history into four ‘peaks’, the last occurring in the mediaeval period”, saying “There will be no fifth peak, unless it happens in America ... Then, if you did it, it will reverberate back in Asia ...” Nagao was no doubt being polite, but Numrich gives me no clue why he thinks that this judgment is to be taken seriously. Surely, however, his whole presentation shows how important American nationalism is to understanding America’s encounter with Buddhism.

Nationalism becomes an explicit theme only in Ian Harris’s chapter “Buddhism, Politics and Nationalism”. I am a great admirer of Harris’s research; but I have to admit that the vastness and complexity of this theme has defeated him. Since his remit includes not just nationalism but Buddhist politics in general, it is inevitable that his contribution overlaps heavily with the following chapter, on “Socially Engaged Buddhism” (already discussed above). He provides many interesting nuggets of information, but hardly ventures beyond that. Similarly, while he is the only author to write about Buddhism’s encounter with Marxism (as against just mentioning communist governments), he has no space to deal with the subject. Being an expert on modern Cambodia, he has most to say about SE Asia. But he makes no mention of Heinz Bechert’s superb three-volume *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravada Buddhismus* (*Buddhism, State and Society in the Countries of Theravada Buddhism*). Quite rightly, he mentions documents written in Burmese, etc; but evidently German is considered too exotic for mention even in a bibliography. I would say that for almost half a century English-language writings on relations between Theravada Buddhism on the one hand and nationalism or communism on the other have hardly even approached what Bechert achieved, adding little more than updating. This is an opportunity missed in the present volume.

In sum, I would say that this book is to be welcomed for its wide array of information and many sensible observations, even if in my opinion only Keown and Cho achieve real intellectual distinction; Baumann and Chilson are hardly less admirable, but at a more pedestrian level. The book’s main shortcoming is its heavy bias towards “cultural studies” at the expense of history and sociology. We are shown the encounter between Buddhism and various ideas and personalities, but there is a dearth of attempts to explain why those ideas and personalities made their influence felt: on whom, when and under what conditions.

The topic is Buddhism during the past century. But even today, the beliefs,

practices and institutions of the majority of Buddhists in the world owe more to the past, even to the distant past, than they do to modernity. So why are Buddhist traditions barely described, except in the chapter on Tibet? Would that not clarify what is new? I may have overlooked something, but I don't think that apart from Keown's piece the volume contains any reference to a traditional Buddhist text. Thus for students who have not learnt about the past, the entire topic must hang in mid air, as context-free as the "Il Buddino pudding molds on display in a San Francisco gift shop", illustrated on p.318.

I could complain that this is all due to the fact that most of what is on offer in this book can be studied through the English language, whereas to get to know the older stuff requires learning foreign languages. But I do not espouse the perfectionist position that every text must be studied in the original; nowadays there are plenty of translations quite good enough to convey a fair picture of the tradition to people who are not professional scholars.

I think the main culprit must be a facile post-modernism, which decries any attempt to "reify" Buddhism or to claim that we know what Buddhists have thought and practised. I have mentioned above Payne's bizarre statement about "assertions that the Buddha taught control of the mind for the relief of suffering"; his use of the word "assertions" seems intended to cast doubt on whether this interpretation, based on many clear texts and accepted by countless Buddhists for over two millennia, has any more validity than anything else one might say about the Buddha. I find it hard to believe that a distinguished scholar like Payne could really mean this, so I shall not base my case on this example. But the book goes even further when on p. 313 it is claimed that "Buddhism" (yes, the word is in scare quotes) is something constructed by European colonisers. If "modernity" can be taken as the opposite of "tradition", I do not see how one could get any more modern than this!

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