

BOOK REVIEWS

Sexuality and Paradox: A Panel Review of Bernard Faure's *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998. 338 pages. Hardcover: \$59.50; paperback: \$18.95.

For the Buddhism Section of the American Academy of Religions, Western Region's 1999 annual conference at the University of San Francisco, a book review panel entitled "Sexuality and Paradox: Buddhist Norms and Practices" was conducted. The discussion was of Bernard Faure's *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality* (Princeton University Press, 1998). The panel participants included Jennifer Dumpert, Bruce Williams, Greg Petropoulos, John Thompson, and Joseph Thometz. Bernard Faure, the author, responded to the discussion. The panel was organized and moderated by Richard K. Payne. The following are written versions of the discussants' comments.

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The Absence of Models for Female Buddhists

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The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality contains an enormous amount of information. It approaches its topic in a style reminiscent of Wendy Doniger's *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*. To navigate texts such as these, one needs a strategy or a particular subject for which one is searching. Reading a text as replete with stories, facts, dates, and ideas as this book without some idea of what one is reading for could lead the reader to feel afloat in a sea of information. My own work focuses on women in modern American Buddhism, and therefore I read the book with that subject in mind. My hope was to gather useful, straightforward information. This was frustrated, however, by Faure's postmodern tendency to not draw clear

conclusions and to perpetually pull the rug out from under the implications of his own evidence. Two postmodern concepts best describe what characterizes my frustration in my particular search: deferral and absence.

Deferral is rooted in the attempt to demonstrate that language is inadequate for truly stating what one means. Thus, some postmodern writers will stop short of clear and concrete conclusions. Instead, evidence that may point to a conclusion will be given, and the reader is left to surmise what it is that the evidence points to.

The concept of absence refers to the importance of what is left unsaid. Amongst others, Foucault, whose work Faure depends on in *The Red Thread*, suggests that absence implies as much as presence. There is a relation between what is concealed and what is made evident, and attention to that relation reveals much about both. For example, the absence of women from history does not merely fail to address women in history, it also implies that women's modes of being in history are of so little importance that they can be passed over in silence.

Faure points out from the outset of the book that woman will be "conspicuously absent" from this text, appearing "inasmuch as she is an element of the Buddhist discourse on sexuality" (p. 14). Instead, Faure promises that gender issues will be the focus of a second volume, to be entitled *Purity and Gender*.

Another issue highlighted by my particular reading of the book involves the nature of desire. I infer from the text that desire in Buddhist history is, as in western history, characterized as male. Numerous instances are given of male desire: Faure points out that "male love" is love of men for men, while "female love" is love of men for women (pp. 233–234). He offers a quotation which clearly states that women are not be allowed into temples because "they arouse deep passion in men's hearts" (p. 170). He tells the story of Eshun (the sister, we are told, of the Zen priest Emyo: defined in terms of men even in the way she is identified) who was considered too attractive to be allowed to enter the Buddhist order and who therefore disfigured herself (p. 20). He clearly states that "the woman—nun or laywoman—remains an object of desire for the monk" (p. 88).

Faure says that women are seen as "Possessed by an inclination to lust that is difficult to control" which makes them "even more dangerous" (p. 88). Further, he lists numerous rules pertaining to the conduct of nuns in relation with other nuns that are clearly meant to discourage sex among women (p. 82). Despite this, he fails to consider female desire in depth. While there are brief references to lesbian sex (women as that which inspires desire, even among other women), Faure points out that this was "at best perceived as a poor imitation of heterosexual relations."

Further, “Sexual relations between women are [considered] . . . insignificant and can be formulated only through male language” (pp. 81–82). Though his evidence produces implications about desire as male and about the double standard applied to gender in the realm of sexuality, I find myself wishing that Faure commented more on female desire, if only to concretely point out some of the implications of its absence from Buddhist literature.

Value judgments about male desire versus female desire can also be implied from the text. There are numerous examples of “the motif of the female bodhisattva who . . . use sexuality to convert men” (p. 130).

Similarly, we are told how the Buddha convinces his half-brother Nanda to stay in the Buddhist order. First, the Buddha shows him that his beautiful bride-to-be, for whom Nanda was pining, was closer in appearance to the ugliest of beings (a dead and disfigured she-monkey) than to a celestial nymph. Second, he promises Nanda one of the nymphs if he remains in the order. Nanda, who stays, finally realizes “the vanity of all desires and the emptiness of beauty” (p. 16). Leaving aside any judgments about the shallowness of a character whose basis for marriage seems to rest solely in the appearance of the bride, these instances clearly demonstrate that men can achieve realization via their desire for women. Furthermore, in the motif of the bodhisattva who converts men via sex or promises of sex (Guanyin, p. 118; Kokuzo, p. 120), and such figures as the “peerless courtesan” Vasumitra “who frees men by fulfilling their carnal desire” (p. 121), we see female characters helping male characters achieve realization by fulfilling male desire.

In contrast, we are given the story of the courtesan Mātāṅga, whose attempt to seduce Ānanda is foiled when Ānanda declares “If you want to become my wife, become a nun” (p. 19). Cited as a “moral victory” (p. 19) for Ānanda, this story demonstrates that men help women along the path by foiling their desires. Although rarely mentioned, women’s desire—unlike men’s—clearly constitutes an obstacle that does nobody any good. Yet, while he does make this conclusion via the evidence he offers, Faure fails to resolve the issue with clear commentary. Instead, a reader with my topic in mind is left with a large array of facts and stories that make unpleasant implications but which do not necessarily offer anything new or useful. We are all aware of these kinds of inequities in the realm of sexuality. Rather than having them pointed out, I want to know more about what their existence means.

Addressing desire from the male standpoint is familiar enough. Yet, Faure’s frequent comments on the “shameful inequity” (p. 83) between genders demonstrate that he is clearly aware of the fact that addressing things from women’s perspective would tell a different story. He says, for example, “one could assume that a greater emphasis on women’s viewpoint would bring about some significant change regarding the

classical schema of opposition or reversal between prohibition and transgression . . .” (p. 282). He also is clearly cognizant that this book has looked at sexuality in the traditional way, i.e., from men’s viewpoint. “We can suspect that this schema—reproduced in the present book—is one of the effects of the masculine ideology which has until now predominated in Buddhism” (p. 282). Regardless of his obvious and seemingly feminist-friendly opinions about the way women are viewed in Buddhist history, he has allowed women to remain largely absent in this work, deferring the topic to a future book. Admitting that he has reproduced the norm when examining sexuality is not enough to make that reproduction acceptable. Rather, his awareness of this itself calls for more explicit critical commentary on the sexual norms of the Buddhist tradition throughout the book.

I was frustrated by the absence of women, and by Faure’s frequent unwillingness to draw conclusions from his wealth of evidence. However, I did find some very useful material for women practicing Buddhism in the West. My own work focuses on the effort by American women (and men) to envision, or to revision, a Buddhist history which is “usable for women” (an effort demonstrated, for example, by the recent profusion of books on the topic of women and Buddhism). I have, for example, criticized the tendency to focus on women who gain historical prominence by achieving in male roles. Revising Buddhist history by focusing on women who defeated men in dharma battle, or who managed to become great teachers, simply reproduces current values. A history that implies that women who count were, and therefore are, those who bested men in men’s terms is at best a compensatory history. Despite giving women a place in history and providing feminine role models, such compensation cannot fully succeed. However many women can be discovered who could do what a man did as well as a man, there will always be an overwhelming majority of men in those roles, which will therefore continue to be seen as male roles. Instead, I suggest redefining historical values, focusing on and valorizing the roles women did play. Many modern authors of books about women and Buddhism fail to offer pragmatically useful examples of how this historical revaluation might be constructed. Faure, however, does consider the figure of the courtesan, not just from a male standpoint as in the “role of the evil temptress” (p. 131), i.e., desirable yet repugnant, but also from a standpoint potentially inhabitable by women:

The courtesan is also a woman who, in a sense, has “left the world” and can see through its vanity. She has awakened to the (conventional) truth, because she can see behind appearances, through the veil of illusion. She is no longer bound by ordinary social ties and conventional norms, because she can see through men’s games. She

is not impressed by their social distinctions—priests, commoners, or nobility, all are the same to her—and she can, like a true teacher, manipulate them through their own “skillful means” (p. 131).

Faure soon shifts back into the male viewpoint, however, combining this observation with the motif of the bodhisattvas who help men attain realization by appearing to them as courtesans who seduce men, or at least promise to. He suggests that “such motifs could be read as a legitimization of female transgression . . . and be used by women to justify their own freedom.” Nonetheless, he goes on to state that “the courtesan is, to some extent, recognized as a potential bodhisattva” (p. 136), putting the observation again in terms of the salvation of men. Thus, not only is female desire obscured, but female models are defined in terms of the salvation of men.

Context and Perspective

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This is an important book by an influential scholar of Buddhist Studies. It will be widely read and should be widely read. This will be due not only to the timeliness and interest of the book’s subject matter, but also because the book is quite well written. It is, in fact, a remarkably good read. This may embarrass some scholars who feel that important works of scholarship should not be so much fun to read; it may also embarrass others who might wish they could write as well as Prof. Faure. That the book is well written may also be one of its pitfalls: the reader may often read quickly over passages that deserve more careful attention.

Let me begin my marginal comments with a brief quotation from the “Introduction”:

This work is primarily a study in collective representations, focusing on their inherent dynamics and their social inscription. In order to reveal enduring common (sometimes even cross-cultural) structures, I have wandered freely across geographical borders and historical periods—much to the dismay of some of my historian friends (p. 11).

I am neither a historian nor am I dismayed. Yet as one who has spent much of his time dealing with the negotiated (and often highly local)

nature of the acculturation of Buddhism across cultural/linguistic boundaries (especially with regard to China) and of the development of various forms of Buddhist discourse and practice, I am cautious.

First, let me state how I view the perspective of the book. To me the title should be understood to read *The Red Thread: A Synoptic Introduction to Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality as Seen from a Largely (Franco-) Japanese Perspective*. Much of the discussion is framed in terms of the (often modern?) Japanese perspectives on the issues discussed. Even the Chinese material used occasionally seems to be framed in ways that are more appropriate to Japan than to China. I do not know if this was by design or not, but I see perhaps a couple of factors that contribute to this impression. First, the absence of historical framework for much of the Indian and Chinese material, coupled with the large amount of space devoted to Japan, “urges” the reader (or at least this reader) to contextualize the Indian and Chinese material in terms of the Japanese (the last half of the book is almost entirely devoted to Japan, and the first half makes liberal use of Japanese materials). At the very least the reader is given a sense that the stories and themes from the Japanese material draw out the relevant implications of the Indian and Chinese examples. They seem to function, as it were, as “capping phrases” to the non-Japanese material. Second, because the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese sources deployed are rarely situated in time (and frequently not in the bibliography), and since the Indian and Chinese material is often followed by a story, or stories, from the Japanese Buddhist traditions, this reader was often left with the impression that the author wanted me, the reader, to view the Indian and Chinese materials as part of a “progression” to the Japanese version of the issue under discussion (e.g., “Ascetic Lust,” pp. 29–31). This is particularly ironic in view of Prof. Faure’s previous publications in which he has frequently broken away from Japano-centric views of Buddhist history, doctrine, and praxis.

Before I move on to a few comments on context, let me raise the issue of who the intended audience for this book is. The author states in the “Introduction” (p. 12) that “this work is meant to be a heuristic device to attract specialist [*sic*] from other areas to Asian materials that may seem at first glance irrelevant.” I suspect strongly, however, that the audience for this book will be much broader. Despite the author’s attempts to inform the reader, especially in the “Introduction”, what he will and will not be doing in the book, and despite his attempts to warn the reader of the complexities of the Buddhist tradition(s), some readers may be tempted to read the book as “Buddhism says . . . ,” or “Indian/Chinese/Tibetan/Japanese Buddhism says” Given the sociology of graduate education in this country, this group may include a significant number of graduate students and scholars. (Note: Given the broad

audience that this book will probably reach, Chinese characters for names, places, terms and book titles should have been inserted discretely into the book, perhaps in a list toward the end. In a number of places relevant English translations should also be noted, e.g., Anthony Y's *Journey to the West* [p. 27], and one of the several translations of Keizan's *Denkōroku* [p. 59]).

Context may be of many types. Let me restrict myself to some brief comments on geographical, temporal, and historical contexts as they relate to the varieties of the Buddhist traditions.

Buddhism began in early India among groups of ascetics engaged in meditative practice and the pursuit of liberation. Without going into the issues of what constituted early Buddhism, the Buddhist traditions evolved to include not only ascetic individuals and communities, but also monastic institutions for monks and nuns and complex relationships among monks, nuns, lay Buddhists and the societies at large. The issue of desire, and more specifically sexuality, was played out somewhat differently in each of these areas. Among those engaged in the practice of the Buddhists path(s) to liberation desire was itself part of a triadic cycle of the three passions (or three poisons), desire, aversion, and ignorance, each feeding the other, but ultimately driven by ignorance. The problem of desire, not just sexuality, but desire for sense gratification (food, clothes, comfortable surroundings, etc.), was not necessarily, or even most importantly, a problem of purity, but of attachment and entanglements. Sex not only increased desire and created impediments to effective meditation, it also operated to reinsert monks/nuns into the very family and social networks they had sought to cut off by becoming monks/nuns (as noted in a number of places, e.g., pp. 33, 65). That liberation was seen by some as complete detachment from all entanglements, a state of no-views with its correlative "paradox of desire", may date from very early in the Buddhist tradition. The contrast between no-view as the result of seeing reality as it is and right views, no matter how exalted, as obstructions is a favorite theme of the Mahayana wisdom literature (*prajñāpāramitā*), including the *Dazhidulun*. This, it seems to me, is the issue in the story from the *Dazhidulun* about the two monks Prasannendriya and Agramati (pp. 4, 44, 98–99; cf. the parallels with the Chinese Chan monk Linji, pp. 46–47), not the "superiority of transgression" or liberation through transmuting the passions (*kleśa*).

Although what I have said in the previous paragraph may be standard fare for some, I would like to emphasize that what may be at stake here is the clash of different paradigms of practice and interpretation, a clash that plays itself out through the corridors of Buddhist practice and history (note Faure's caveat, p. 63, last paragraph). Which paradigms clash, however, and how they play out historically depend also on regional and cultural factors. In India, China, and Japan there

may have been (and may continue to be) very different contexts, motivations, etc. behind apparently similar stories (including stories, e.g., from India, retold in China and Japan, and at different times). In China it took centuries to reconcile the differences among the various versions of the *vinaya*, or monastic code, and to implement it monastically. But today it still provides the framework for clerical practice, both collectively and individually. In Japan, beginning in the 9th century, a version of the Bodhisattva vows was substituted for the traditional *vinaya* in the Tendai tradition. Since Tendai monks were extremely influential in later developments in Japanese Buddhism, this “new code” has been extremely influential in molding Japanese institutions and forms of Japanese religiosity. Many traditional strictures no longer applied; monks (and nuns?) from very early times could, and did, marry.

In our discussions of approaches to Buddhist sexuality we need also to distinguish carefully what is properly Buddhist from what is Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, Korean, or Japanese. This is an aspect of the book that made me particularly cautious. It may often be difficult, even impossible, in some cases to distinguish which contribution is properly Buddhist and which part is from the local culture. This comment is not meant to raise the specter of a “normative Buddhism”, but to urge researchers to investigate what Buddhism was contextually, in each place and in each time, through a careful comparison of the issues raised in the relevant sources. It is in this area that I see the author’s use of the Japanese perspective operating, not just in those sections that deal directly with Japan, but as a way of interpreting the Indian and Chinese material. For example,

In Japan, certain self-mummified saints were worshiped in order to enhance fertility. In one particular case, the object of devotion was the dried genitals of the saint. This unexpected return of vitality is inscribed in the inner dynamics of Buddhism, in particular in the ritual renunciation (p. 29).

Although I know of no Indian Buddhist examples, mummified saints are known in China from perhaps as early as the seventh century. Cults to certain mummies may date from the eighth century. Devotion to the genitals, however, appears to be a Japanese contribution to this type of cult (compare this with the case of Guangyi, p. 35). What then is the sense of the last sentence of this quotation? How much of this example are we to read back into the whole Buddhist tradition?

This is a rich and provocative book. My brief comments can not even begin to do justice to the vision it embodies. While I do not always agree with what Prof. Faure says in his many books and articles, I always find him and his work thought provoking and honest. The highest compli-

ment I can give to Prof. Faure, as to any scholar, is that I read his work and take it seriously. I urge you to do the same.

The Red Thread: Conceptualizing Buddhist Sexuality Across Time and Place

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Bernard Faure stakes out a vast territory in an attempt to uncover “a Buddhist discourse on sex,” taking the reader on a journey that is limited neither by time or place. Faure surveys myths, stories, doctrines and monastic codes throughout the long history of Buddhism, ranging from Śākyamuni to contemporary America, in an attempt to present a coherent map of Buddhist sexual ideals and practices. Drawing upon the works of Michel Foucault and Georges Bataille, Faure manages to discern some key features in the complex landscape of Buddhist sexuality, leading the reader to a better appreciation of both the continuities and paradoxes presented by Buddhist teachings on sexuality.

Faure invites both the scholar and the practitioner to glean insights from his work. Indeed, it would seem from the introduction that Faure has developed his ideas with an eye toward the relatively young Buddhist communities in the United States which are still seeking a definitive vision of proper Buddhist sexual behavior. That the short history of Buddhism in America is fraught with sexual scandal suggests a deep-seated problem that transcends fallen teachers in the West, and reaches back to the very beginning, and continues throughout the development of the various schools of Buddhism.

But Faure does not neglect the scholar, and in fact, this work is an excellent corrective to the all too often simplistic views of Buddhist sexuality. At a time when discussions of Buddhist sexual practices focus on Tantrism and “crazy wisdom,” with the occasional reference to monastic homosexuality, Faure takes up the challenge to elucidate a more basic, yet more complex, landscape. And while Tantrism and “crazy wisdom” are not neglected, and monastic homosexuality takes up a full third of the book, Faure recognizes that a true discourse on Buddhist sexuality must go beyond these limiting categories and include cultural and political forces impacting both lay and monastic adherents.

A constant theme throughout *The Red Thread* is the dialectic between taboo and transgression. Faure devotes a full chapter to “The Ideology of Transgression,” in which he offers numerous examples of sexual transgressions. At times the reader can feel overwhelmed by the

seemingly endless parade of sinners Faure produces in support of his thesis. In fact, it soon becomes obvious that Faure himself is overwhelmed by the diversity and range of the data he is working with.

Herein lies the difficulty in this work. In attempting to define a Buddhist discourse on sexuality, one is confronted by Buddhisms. Yet it would seem that Faure proceeded with the hope that his method would hold, and a locus for dialogue would emerge. Unfortunately, the scope of this project is too great, and Faure is forced to admit as much in his Afterthoughts:

My initial intention was to describe a complex and heterogeneous cultural phenomenon, the emergence of a Buddhist discourse on sexuality (and gender). Despite the fragmentary and multiple nature of this approach, or because of it, a sometimes uniform and simplistic scenario has tended to impose itself, which fails to do justice to the intricacy of the doctrines and of their sociohistorical contexts. (p. 280)

Yet it would seem that the opposite has occurred. Rather than a “uniform and simplistic scenario” emerging, one is left with contradictions and paradoxes as Buddhism addresses the issue of sexuality in changing cultural milieus. Faure has demonstrated that often social and political factors play a greater role in determining behavior than does religious doctrine. What is missing, however, is a discussion on the permutations doctrines undergo in order to adapt to new conditions. One wonders, for example, how the concept of karmic retribution has been reinterpreted and utilized given the direct connection sexuality has with rebirth.

It is difficult to fault Faure’s efforts since his work provides a wealth of information in a succinct and manageable form. Yet it is clear that a great deal of work remains to be done (Faure promises a second volume, *Purity and Gender*). A good place to begin would seem to be the monastic nature of Buddhism. Faure focuses his attention on the homosexual expressions that arise within Buddhist monasticism. But it seems that the scope of this question must be broadened to include other monastic religions. Inclusion of different monastic traditions may illuminate more basic questions regarding personal, societal, and institutional pressures on sexual behavior.

The Red Thread stands as a pioneering work that, while sometimes becoming lost in the details, provides a useful map of the key landmarks in the discussion of Buddhist sexuality. The overview provided here by Faure is more than adequate to enable both scholar and practitioner to locate specific issues within a broader context, and, with extensive bibliographic resources, aid in further exploration.

Buddhist Sexualities: Discipline and Transgression

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It is a rare treat to find a scholarly work that is both insightful and fun to read. Such is the case with Bernard Faure's most recent work *The Red Thread*. *The Red Thread* is an engaging, albeit twisted tale of the strange, often contradictory attitudes towards sex and desire within Buddhism. While not without its problems, *The Red Thread*, like sex itself, will entangle many readers.

As with Faure's previous works (*The Rhetoric of Immediacy*, *Chan Insights and Oversights*, and *The Will to Orthodoxy*), so also in *The Red Thread* Faure takes a distinctly iconoclastic approach to Buddhist history. The irony of this should not be lost since Chan/Zen, usually considered the most iconoclastic Buddhist tradition, is the focus of much of Faure's scholarship. Of all Faure's works, *The Red Thread* perhaps shares the most with *The Rhetoric of Immediacy* in that both books rely heavily on French postmodern thinkers, notably Michel Foucault and George Bataille. *The Red Thread* also shows the influence of Derrida, having liberal sprinklings of puns and *bon mots*.

The Red Thread raises the question of whether or not there is a uniquely Buddhist rhetoric of sexuality, surveying Buddhist history from its beginning in India through medieval China ending in Japan in the early modern period. Faure begins in chapter one with an overview of desire itself in Buddhism, going on to discuss the Vinaya (chapter two), and the notion of transgression (chapter three). With chapter four, "Clerical Vices and Vicissitudes," the book makes a noticeable shift from a more general theoretical tone to a discussion of actual (and alleged) historical cases. Finally, chapters five and six together deal with homosexuality in Buddhism, especially the practices of "male love" (J. *nanshoku*) and its accompanying cult of the novice (J. *chigo*) in monastic circles in Japan. Faure rounds out the book with a short section of "afterthoughts" which contains some interesting and amusing musings on his part.

The Red Thread, like Faure's previous works, is filled with insights, some troubling but all interesting. One of Faure's basic points is that Buddhism is, in fact, a multivocal tradition—a collection of "buddhisms" really. This point is well taken. His discussion of the Vinaya and of Japanese sexual discourse amply illustrates the fact that Buddhism has been exceedingly androcentric in orientation, and unfortunately continues to be so. In light of this fact Faure's promise of another work specifically dealing with gender issues is most tantalizing. This will form

a companion to *The Red Thread*, and is to be entitled *Purity and Gender*. Faure also does a good job in depicting Buddhist tradition, particularly Mahāyāna, as being caught in an uneasy tension between the opposing ideals of transgression and rigor. Perhaps *The Red Thread's* greatest strength, though, is that after reading it, one can never look at Buddhism in quite the same way. For instance, the profile of the Vinaya that emerges in the second chapter does incline one to agree with Faure's assessment of it as "displaying an unhealthy fascination for the trivial and defiling aspects of human existence" (pp. 66–67). Moreover, Faure discusses the dynamics involved in the large-scale idealization and sexual exploitation of the *chigo* throughout Japanese monastic communities in detail. He does not shy away from calling this "massive child abuse" (p. 278)—despite the possibility that some of the priests involved may have sincerely believed in the religious efficacy of such practices. Such a typification cannot but encourage a critical view of certain religious institutions, whatever their cultural context, despite Faure's stated intentions to do otherwise.

Faure tends to move rather easily across historical, cultural, and lineage boundaries in his discussion. For example, chapter one moves from early Buddhism to tantra to China to Zen. Those who have already read *The Rhetoric of Immediacy* will find certain sections repetitious, the result of *The Red Thread* having originally been written for a French audience, and therefore used materials from *The Rhetoric of Immediacy* with which that audience would have not been familiar. In addition, *The Red Thread* focuses overwhelmingly on medieval and early modern Japan, and this inevitably presents an unbalanced (though not necessarily false) picture. Most of my criticisms, however, concern Faure's discussion of transgression (mainly chapter three, though it is a recurrent motif throughout the book). Transgression has become something of a stock theme in postmodern academic circles (witness the "valorization" of De Sade and Celine in the past decade among literary theorists) and I am unsure that Faure's discussion in the context of Buddhism furthers our understanding. Indeed, it strikes me as rather "faddish." More to the point, in dwelling on the constant movement towards transgression within Mahāyāna Faure conveniently glosses over the fact that it is enlightenment after all which allows Buddhas and bodhisattvas to transgress. They are no longer attached, hence they generate no new karma. In turn, they use their freedom in the service of helping other sentient beings. This amounts to a very different kind of transgression from basic moral laxity or ego-centric misbehavior, though I readily admit it may be hard for us unenlightened folk to tell the difference.

Methodological Reflections on Bernard Faure's *The Red Thread*

Joseph Michael Thometz

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Conscripting Foucault and Bataille into the service of Buddhist studies, Bernard Faure's *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality* offers a well-written collection of tales, mostly of Japanese origin. These tales illustrate his effort to uncover, reconstruct, or imagine what a Buddhist discourse on sexuality might be like, with a more plausible picture of an as-yet-to-be-understood typology of polymorphous discourses subsumed under the aegis of Buddhism.

I must state at the outset that I am neither an expert on medieval Japanese Buddhisms, nor do I locate myself within the community of scholars who interpret history through the lens of Foucault's thought. Rather, I approach Professor Faure's work with a background in Modern Western epistemology, Greek and Christian apophatic thought, and Indian Mahāyāna philosophy, especially the epistemological views of the Indian Mādhyamika schools. In short, epistemology, the critique of language and its capacity to express religious (understood functionally as liberative) truth assumes the centerpiece of my comparative studies. With this philosophical background I broach the subject of interpretive method in Faure's book. I believe that method necessarily colors content, and therefore questions pertaining to method should be granted almost equal weight as that accorded to content itself.

My few comments will center on potential contradictions in praxis, specifically, the methodological dilemma of simultaneously calling for abandoning the image of an atemporal and unlocalized Buddhism, while advancing claims that presuppose and, moreover, require some norms and atemporal laws upon which arguments can be made, and through which norms and laws may be set up for later commentary or dismissal. Clearly, Bernard Faure seems to recognize this potential contradiction in praxis. A caveat in his introduction speaks to this: "for heuristic and didactic purposes, I have assumed here the existence of a generic Buddhism, a singular norm But this norm will, of course, turn out to be irreducibly plural, multivocal, to the point that we may have to speak of Buddhisms in the plural, or rather, of Buddhist norms and sexualities, of Buddhist approaches to sexuality" (p. 11).

In adopting norms for heuristic purposes one might be led to ask about the status accorded to the interpretations and theories generated. What guides and allows one to discriminate between more or less

plausible interpretations? In his Afterthoughts, Faure suggests, "Once we reject the notion of a pure, atemporal, and changeless doctrine, we are able to appreciate as a positive characteristic of Buddhism its flexibility, its singular capacity to adapt to the multiplicity of times and cultures" (p. 279). But what is signified by this which is singular in its capacity? If doctrine is, in fact, exclusively determined by culture and history, how can one even identify a referent for this singular capacity? What allows for recognition of temporally discrete teachings to qualify as Buddhist? Could not one suggest that this capacity to admit change has a certain atemporal compulsion, epistemologically speaking? Is this not one of the three marks of existence, *anitya*, impermanence?

Moreover, by employing insights gleaned from Foucault's theories—for instance, from Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis—in reading medieval Japanese Buddhism (through the lens of these insights), some atemporal status, if not accorded to reason itself, is surely accorded to the heuristic value of Foucault's theoretical framework. The method itself appears to enjoy some atemporal status, *even* as a heuristic device. In the act of applying it back over the centuries, and across linguistic and cultural divides, the temporal/atemporal dichotomy becomes blurred. One is left to wonder how, having abandoned the idea of a changeless doctrine, one might come to discriminate between changing Buddhist doctrines and doctrines of non-Buddhist expression.

As Faure states in his Afterthoughts, "Foucault rejects the notion of the Law, but the Law is ideologically the source, the starting point, of Buddhist thought. There is no way around it, but this necessary stage is what allows us to question its primacy and relevance later on" (p. 286). But in calling for abandoning an atemporal status to doctrine and law, how does one proceed in making intelligible that which was local and temporal 2500 years ago? Again, if one proceeds heuristically, what is the value of insights and theories generated? For it would appear that in this sense of a starting point, early Buddhist doctrine or law assumes the role of a straw man—a *sannyasin* eagerly in search of a world to reject.

The temporal dilemma appears only a few pages later from the call to abandon the notion of an atemporal, unlocalized Buddhist doctrine. Faure raises a point that he intends to develop further in his *Purity and Gender*, a companion volume to *The Red Thread*. His claim is that a consistent feminist critique could well shatter Buddhism in its foundations. He adds, "It is indeed clear that not only the basic dogmas of Buddhism but the symbolic economy in which they are inscribed as well derive from masculine ideology" (p. 281). No doubt, patriarchal powers have historically mediated the presentation of, and spin put upon. . . put upon what? Is not something first furnished, albeit in a manner perhaps disclosed in relation to power? In this respect, I'm curious to understand

how the three marks of existence: *duḥkha*, *anitya*, and *anātman* might be reducible to masculine ideologies, strictly speaking; and moreover, how might this claim be advanced without according some atemporal status to a masculine ideology that reaches back to the foundations of Buddhism? Why claim that a consistent feminist critique could well shatter Buddhism in its foundations unless such a questionable foundation could doctrinally be accessed for criticism? Access seems to presuppose some atemporal value judgment, either assigned to rationality or to the feminist critique. This situation, I believe, again points to a recurring question about the status accorded to theories generated from a rejection of any atemporal notion of doctrine.

It appears that this methodological issue was acknowledged by Foucault. In his *History of Sexuality* he admits,

... in an obstinately confused way, I sometimes spoke, as though I were dealing with equivalent notions, of representation, and sometimes of law, of prohibition or censorship. Through stubbornness or neglect, I failed to consider everything that can distinguish their theoretical implications. And I grant that one might justifiably say to me: By constantly referring to positive technologies of power, you are playing a double game where you hope to win on all counts; you confuse your adversaries by appearing to take the weaker position, and, discussing repression alone, you would have us believe, wrongly, that you have rid yourself of the problem of law; and yet you keep the essential practical consequence of the principle of power-as-law, namely the fact that there is no escaping from power, that it is always-already present, constituting that very thing which one attempts to count it with. (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 [New York: Vintage Books, 1978], p. 82.)

The contradiction in praxis, the tension between temporality and atemporal notions, is perhaps resolved as a false or fantastic dichotomy that cannot be maintained in practice. To borrow Heidegger's insight, are we "always already" engaged in a manner that undercuts both temporal and atemporal notions in methodology? If so, the methodological question about the contradiction in praxis resolves itself as nonsensical.

The story of Prasannendriya and Agramati, which Faure raises in his introduction, is illustrative of perhaps a more Buddhist solution: the theory of Two Truths (*satyadvaya*), ultimate and conventional. Faure reminds us, "Ultimate truth is the truth that transcends all limited viewpoints, sublating conventional truth, that is the truth perceived from a limited, all-too-human perspective" (p. 5). These two truths circumscribe the parameters of meaningful speech as applied to the religious truth of the Buddhist Middle Path. The second truth of

emptiness (*śūnyatā*) eludes the reaches of the first truth of conventional existence (*saṃvṛtisatya*); nevertheless, the first truth must be employed in conveying the higher truth (*paramārthasatya*) of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Nāgārjuna writes,

Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,
Liberation is not achieved.

(*MMK* 24:10, Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995]).

Is not the postulation of *paramārthasatya* as the more accurate rendering of *saṃvṛtisatya*, itself, an atemporal doctrine, epistemologically speaking?

One ends where one begins. I return to the question of the straw man and the value assigned to theories generated out of a heuristic adoption of norms and laws. A kind of procreative intellectual security is afforded theories predicated upon some atemporal notion of doctrine and law; regardless of the particular cultural or socio-economic epoch into which the scholar is born, she is then permitted to boldly go where no scholar has circumscribed before. But without resolving the methodological dilemma of temporal distance, and if the dichotomy is not resolved as a matter of Heidegger's always-already, or if solace is not found in the Two Truths (*satyadvaya*), then one must ask again whether Buddhism is not reduced to a straw man who, albeit fertile and tumescent for heuristic purposes, waits with baited breath in the clinic for word that he is no longer fertile with *bījas* (seminal or karmic seeds). In other words, how does one discriminate between viable and weak interpretative progeny? On what grounds is a theoretical triage to be performed? Still, with probable assurance most would confess, in spite of these methodological concerns, this procreative undertaking is both creative and stimulating.

Bernard Faure's *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality*, with its seductive prose and provocative perspectives, reads so well that I had to force myself to slow down and dwell in the text. Throughout Faure's presentation, I continued to ask what are the interpretive presuppositions brought to bear on the discussion. In particular I think students of Buddhism would benefit from asking the same, especially with respect to Faure's discussion of the ideology of transgression. What is the Buddhist meaning of transgression outside of its putatively atemporal liberative end, i.e. correcting perception and seeing reality (*tattva*) as it truly is (*pratityasamutpāda*)? But setting such substantive questions aside, I would encourage scholars of Buddhism to read *The Red Thread* as a novel application of method in Buddhism.

***Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sutra.* By Donald S. Lopez, Jr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. xii., 264 pp. Hardcover: \$39.50; paperback: \$15.95.**

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“Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.” As everyone knows, this old childhood rhyme is far from the truth. Anyone who has carried a compliment or rebuke days or even weeks beyond when it was given knows only too well the power words have, both to heal and to hurt. This point is beautifully illustrated by the story Donald Lopez recalls in the introduction to his book, *Elaborations on Emptiness*. He tells the Japanese story, “Miminashi Hōichi,” the story of a blind boy who is threatened by a family of ghosts. He is protected by the monks of the local monastery, who inscribe the words of the *Heart Sūtra* all over his body, which renders him invisible. They forget his ears, however, and though he lives, his ears are torn off by the ghosts. This visceral, somatic example begins Lopez’s latest book on the *Heart Sūtra*, and while the other uses of words and language are not as graphically concrete, they all deal with the same basic questions: how does language function, and how is it efficacious in ritual performance? In short, how is language *used*? While Lopez uses one of the most popular Buddhist *sūtras* to illustrate his arguments, the questions he raises are of concern not only to Buddhist scholars, but those in many other areas of study as well, such as comparative philosophy, linguistics, and ritual performance. This fact makes this book valuable not only for the experts, but also for those with more general interests in language and religion.

Elaborations on Emptiness, a sequel of sorts to his earlier book, *The Heart Sūtra Explained*, offers full translations of eight different Indian and Tibetan commentaries of the *Heart Sūtra*, organized thematically and paired with detailed, insightful essays by Lopez. The commentaries include those of Vimalamitra, Atīśa, Kamalaśīla, Śrisimha, Jñānamitra, Praśāstrasena, Mahājāna, and Vajrapāni. In his introduction, Lopez states his intention to balance the commentaries with essays of his own, in order to provide an introduction into some of the larger questions that are then explored in detail in the specific commentaries themselves.

After an excellent introduction which is not to be skipped, Lopez begins his work with the essay “Who Heard the Heart *Sūtra*?” In this essay, Lopez examines the debate surrounding the question of the identity of the hearer of the *sūtra*, the “I” in the “Thus have I heard.” This issue is important, in that it goes directly to heart (so to speak) of

the credibility of the *sūtra* as a whole. If the *Heart Sūtra* is to be attributed to the Buddha, then it is of the utmost importance that the one reciting the *sūtra* have the necessary credentials. Also of concern here is the question of the implied audience of the *sūtra*—who is qualified to hear it, which in turn raises the issue of orality. What is the relationship between sound and meaning in the *Heart Sūtra*, and what are the changes that occur when something that is to be heard can now be seen and read? Lopez engages all these issues in a lucid, intriguing presentation. This essay is followed by the commentaries of Vimalamitra and Atīśa, both of which deal with the *samgītikartr* question in the most detail.

The second essay is titled “The *Heart Sūtra* as Tantra,” and here Lopez discusses the debate surrounding the categorization of the *Heart Sūtra* as *sūtra* or *tantra*. He notes that it has been classed in various canons under both headings. By necessity, this raises the vexing question of how to define *tantra*, and Lopez’s discussion in this section, which begins with quotes by Levi-Strauss and Wittgenstein, is quite interesting. He observes how the definitions of *sūtra* and *tantra* have actually played off one another, and that it is the context in which a text functions that plays the critical role in assigning the words a definition. In other words, to use Wittgensteinian language, a definition of *tantra* cannot be found apart from the language game in which it functions. The two commentaries that follow this chapter, those of Kamalaśīla and Vairocana, reflect this *sūtra-tantra* debate.

The next essay, “The *Heart Sūtra* as Sādhana,” continues this conversation, with a twist. Lopez argues that the question of whether the *Heart Sūtra* is to be categorized as a *sūtra* or *tantra* is complicated by the fact that there are two *sādhanas* (“means of achievement”) in the Tibetan canon which are based on the *Heart Sūtra*. This is significant, for, as Lopez writes, “the *Heart Sūtra* may be the only *sūtra* (if it be a *sūtra*) to have a *sādhana* associated with it.” (p. 14). After a brief discussion of the function of mandalas and visualization, he details at length the visualization sequence in Dārikapa’s *sādhana*, and uses a heavy dose of Freudian psychoanalysis to interpret it. In this chapter he also introduces the issue of *mantra*, which is the subject of the next essay. The two commentaries that follow this chapter are those of Jñānamitra and Praśātrasena.

The next essay deals perhaps most directly with the issues of language potency and use raised at the beginning of this review. Lopez opens this essay, “The *Heart Sūtra*’s Mantra,” with a question: “How are we to understand ritual speech?” (p. 165), and uses the popular *mantra* that ends the *Heart Sūtra*—[om] *gate gate pāragate pārasamgate bodhi svāhā*—as his example. In this chapter, he takes up the question of how

a *mantra* functions, and suggests that several aspects of this *mantra* in the *Heart Sūtra* violate some of the key characteristics a *mantra* supposedly typifies. For example, the *Heart Sūtra's* *mantra* contains no instruction as to how it is to be used, no deity who is to be propitiated, no specific end at which it is aimed. (pp. 166-167). Furthermore, there is the complication that, although the *mantra* was written down, contrary to traditional Indian practice, it was not translated but transliterated, in order to “duplicate and preserve” (p. 172) the original sound of the speaker’s voice. Again, then, we are back to the question of understanding/meaning versus use/function. Lopez’s use of Austin’s analysis in *How to Do Things with Words* is helpful here. The commentaries that follow this chapter are the final two, those of Mahājana and Vajrapāni.

The last category in which Lopez treats the *Heart Sūtra* is that of exorcism (“The *Heart Sūtra* as Exorcism”). He begins with a personal experience of his own unwitting participation in an exorcism rite, which is the most common use to which the *Heart Sūtra* is put in Tibet. From this personal account, he goes on to give a detailed explanation of one such ritual. After the ritual has been described, Lopez raises some important issues latent in the performance of the ritual, including the questions of sacrifice, mimesis, and sorcery. He ends the chapter with a treatment of “Lamaism” in relationship to Buddhism.

The last chapter is a gem. It wraps up the whole preceding dialogue by introducing the larger question of what the commentators were trying to accomplish, and what methods they employed, specifically their use of folk etymology. This leads him to a discussion of comparative philosophy, and the way in which Asian texts have often been treated by Western scholars. His whole discussion here is extremely insightful, and I want to quote just one passage from the chapter. In his treatment of comparative philosophy he notes the pitfall that often occurs by interpreters who try to lift out a “crude ideology” from complex texts. He writes, “Even the most abstract systems (with which Buddhism is replete) cannot be regarded merely as bodies of propositions. They must also be treated as located utterances, the rhetorical purposes of which one must seek to determine if they are to be understood.” (p. 254). He then lays out three requirements that must be fulfilled for genuine understanding to take place, and ends the book with a hopeful theory about the function of commentaries, and the way in which they contribute to and create new meaning.

This book is worth reading on a number of levels. Those who are serious scholars of Buddhist texts will appreciate the thoughtful, well-noted translations Lopez has made of the various commentaries. Those who are lovers of the *Heart Sūtra* will appreciate all the nuances of the text Lopez elucidates, and the different functions it has in various

traditions. Finally, anyone who has an interest in the function of language, the different methodologies guiding textual commentary, or the possibilities of cross-cultural interpretation will enjoy the conversation Lopez begins, and most likely carry his ideas long after the book itself has been put down.