

John R. McRae: An Appreciation

Richard K. Payne

Institute of Buddhist Studies

I only knew John as a friend for all too short a time. I'd known and been impressed by his work on the Northern School of Chan, and it was therefore quite a pleasant surprise to find that he was more than gracious when we met at professional meetings, such as the American Academy of Religions.

Other contributors to this collection will have their own judgments regarding the contribution that John made to the field of Buddhist studies. For this introduction, instead of trying to summarize his entire body of work, I have chosen to raise up a few methodological points from some of his lesser known works, such as his "Translator's Introductions" to three items in the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai Translation Series.

In his introduction to the *Vimalakīrti nirdeśa*, John talks about the sutra's presentation of some of the key doctrinal points of Mahayana teaching. He makes the point, however, that although we as moderns may be tempted to ignore the "frequent irruptions of the miraculous" in order to privilege our own fascination with the doctrinal, we shouldn't.¹ In this case, we might say, "the miraculous is the message"—the full meaning of the doctrine of nonduality for example is to be savored not only in abstruse philosophic formulae, but also in visions of impossible events taking place in Vimalakīrti's small hut.

The malleability of doctrine is a theme John highlights in his introduction to the *Śūraṅgama samādhi sūtra*. The Mahayana view regarding three separate vehicles having distinct ends led to the conclusion that

1. John R. McRae, "Introduction," in *The Sutra of Queen Śrīmālā of the Lion's Roar: The Vimalakīrti Sutra*, trans. John R. McRae (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2004).

arhats and *pratyekabuddhas* wound up in lesser levels of awakening, if not total extinction. Instead, the sutra

simply cannot allow the Hinayana follower to remain in such a spiritual void, and it does not stop with merely saying that they are to be retrieved from their extinctions but goes on to describe a religious world in which personal identity may be adopted and manifested at will for teaching purposes. Given such thoroughgoing fluidity of identity, the earlier doctrinal conventions about the distinctiveness and irreversibility of different spiritual paths are not only rejected but thoroughly transformed.²

Not only is personal identity indefinitely malleable, but doctrine is as well.

When introducing the *Platform Sutra*, John points out that its status as a work of literature means that all of its characters and events are fictions. However, he says, “It would be unfair to discount the *Platform Sutra* in this fashion; rather, it is the fictional quality of the text that renders it important, that makes it true.”³ The power of fiction, myth, legend to convey truth is not to be underestimated by thinking of truth in the most minimal way as many “moderns” do.

One contribution that is unique in John’s oeuvre is his essay “Oriental Verities on the American Frontier.” Much of what John had to say in this essay is important for an understanding of the development of Buddhist studies, Buddhism in the West, and the study of Buddhism in the frame of religious studies. One particularly valuable insight is the constructed nature not only of Hinduism and Buddhism as objects of study, but also of the category of religion itself. He comments that

It is a truism within the field of religious studies that “Hinduism” did not exist until it was created within Orientalist scholarship on behalf of British colonialists, and it may even be said that Hinduism comprised much of the template for what a religion should be, in all its breadth and detail. We should recognize that Buddhism is also an invented tradition, different from and greater than any description

2. John R. McRae, “Introduction,” *The Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sutra / The Śūraṅgama Samādhi Sutra*, trans. Paul Harrison and John R. McRae (Moraga, CA: BDK America, 1998), 113.

3. “Introduction,” *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2000), xiv.

or set of descriptions of the Buddhadharma, created on behalf of the modern world.⁴

Perhaps our gravest responsibility as scholars is realizing that we are the ones creating the image of our subject matter. We must remind ourselves that we are making mosaics out of broken pieces of tile, a trencadis, and that we are the ones responsible for the image that emerges. John's image of Buddhism was both expansive and inspiring. He is missed.

4. "Oriental Verities on the American Frontier: The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions and the Thought of Masao Abe," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 11 (1991): 31.

