

***Hungry Ghosts.* By Andy Rotman. Somerville MA: Wisdom Publications, 2021. 224 pages + 8 color reproductions. \$32.00 (paperback). ISBN 9781614297215.**

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Andy Rotman is an acknowledged expert in Indian Buddhist narrative literature, and his two volumes of translations of Sanskrit stories from the *Divyāvadāna*<sup>1</sup> have broadened and greatly enriched our understanding of early Indian Buddhism. We are lucky to have another set of Rotman’s translated stories in *Hungry Ghosts*.

The genesis of the book project was an invitation to collaborate with other scholars on a translation of the *Avadānaśataka*, or “One Hundred Stories,” an anthology compiled between the second and fourth centuries CE. The *Avadānaśataka* consists of ten sections or “decades,” each decade consisting of ten stories on the following themes: predictions of buddhahood, previous lives of the Buddha (two decades), predictions of becoming a *pratyekabuddha* or solitary buddha, hungry ghosts, rebirth in heaven, Śākya clan men who became *arhats*, women who became *arhats*, persons of irreproachable conduct, and the consequences of evil deeds. Rotman was asked to translate the fifth decade on hungry ghosts—beings who suffer excruciating hunger and thirst and other torments as karmic retribution for faults in their previous lives.<sup>2</sup> While the initial intent was to publish all one hundred stories in one volume, it was ultimately decided that each scholar would publish separately. Rotman’s translations of the ten hungry ghost stories take up only fifty-seven pages, necessitating an expanded introduction of

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1. Andy Rotman, *Divine Stories Divyāvadāna, Parts 1 and II* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2008, 2017).

2. According to Buddhist cosmology, there six realms (five realms in earlier time periods) of rebirth in samsara: the realms of gods, fighting demons, humans, animals, hell, and hungry ghosts.

sixty-eight pages. The section on imagery in the introduction also includes eight full-color reproductions. The glossary, notes, and other end matter take up the remaining seventy-three pages of *Hungry Ghosts*.

The first part of the introduction begins with a sustained discussion of Rotman's decision to translate the Sanskrit term *mātsarya* (Pāli *macchariya*) as "meanness." The *Avadānaśataka* stories in this volume teach that behavior rooted in *mātsarya* is what causes rebirth as a hungry ghost, so finding a word with the right nuance was crucial. Rotman leads the reader through writings on *mātsarya* by the fifth-century Buddhist commentator Buddhaghosa and other sources in the Pāli canon, in which *mātsarya* can be translated as envy, avarice, stinginess, or hoarding. Those English words, however, don't get at the particular nastiness of *mātsarya* as it is conveyed in the *Avadānaśataka* hungry ghost stories. Rather than the contraction or shrinking that Buddhaghosa writes about in connection with *mātsarya*, the characters in the *Avadānaśataka* act out, for example putting shit in a monk's bowl (p. 7). Rotman explores a twelfth-century Pāli commentary by Sumaṅgala that provides an etymology of *mātsarya*, including the definition "the state of one who is mean, or meanness" (p. 13).

Rotman expands the discussion by putting these early and medieval Buddhist thinkers into conversation with the twentieth-century Burmese monks Mahāsi Sayadaw and Ashin Janakābhivamsa. Both monks differentiate between the stinginess of not wanting to give to others (*mātsarya*) and greed or attachment to one's possessions (*lobha*). As Rotman explains, Mahāsi stresses that a person "suffering from *macchariya* proper is simply 'unable to bear' others making use of his things" (p. 14), while Janakābhivamsa takes it a step farther, arguing that *macchariya* is "a fervent and unjust wish that others don't get anything, regardless of whether it is one's own property" or not (p. 15). Anticipating the critique that these are modernist understandings, Rotman points out the congruence between Janakābhivamsa's emphasis on stinginess even with possessions not one's own and *mātsarya* in the *Avadānaśataka* stories. This congruence is evident in the first story of the hungry ghost decade, "Sugar Mill," in which a workman at a sugar mill refuses to give sugarcane juice to a solitary buddha, even though the mill owner instructed him to do so, and the juice does not even belong to the workman (p. 78). Rotman's meticulous consideration of the multivalent connotations of *mātsarya* in Buddhist writings

provides a window into the complex task of translation and highlights the inadequacy of simply relying on dictionary definitions.<sup>3</sup>

In his analysis of the lessons from the stories, Rotman cites an excerpt from the story “Morsel” in which the Buddha explains that charity is the antidote to *mātsarya* (p. 19). Charity in the form of donations to the monastic community is particularly important for cultivating merit that can be transferred to hungry ghosts to lessen their suffering and to help effect their salvation (pp. 20–21). Rotman argues that these lessons on charity were intended for both monastics and the laity, but especially for merchants (*śreṣṭhin*), those whose excess money and possessions could easily lead to the cultivation of *mātsarya* (pp. 26–29). Indeed, many of the hapless protagonists in the stories who are reborn as hungry ghosts were merchants or their underlings in previous lives.

Rotman also highlights “modern parallels in language, art, and life” (p. 29) to the *mātsarya* in the hungry ghost stories through an exploration of modern films, novels, and other writings. He draws the reader’s attention to the greed that motivates Wall Street and the selfish attitudes of those who denigrate welfare recipients as freeloaders, likening their attitudes to those of the people who are reborn as hungry ghosts in the *Avadānaśataka* stories (pp. 38–41). To deepen awareness of the *mātsarya* that pervades contemporary life, Rotman invites the reader to reflect on the stories. It is worth quoting in full his views on the multiple functions of the stories:

They can be read as karma stories, demonstrating action and its consequences; as phenomenological treatises, connecting thought, action, and judgment; as psychological accounts, explicating profound truths about human cupidity; as poetic tales, conjuring vivid images and intense feelings; as legal tracts, schooling us in a code of communal conduct; as moral texts, offering insight into the complexities of human action; as apocalyptic texts, chronicling the torments that untold humans will inevitably endure; as ideological texts, chronicling the pettiness and struggles of everyday life; as divine texts, guiding us to a more compassionate, charitable, and joyful existence; and so on. (pp. 41–42)

Rotman seems to be hinting that the stories function as expedient means (*upāya*), a technique employed by bodhisattvas whose wisdom

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3. For example, the *Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899) just gives “envy” and “jealousy” for *mātsarya*.

and compassion allow them to tailor Buddhist teachings according to the capacity of the listener or reader for their soteriological benefit. Rotman's conviction that the stories can be life-changing continues a theme from his earlier work.

In the introduction to his first volume of translations from the *Divyāvadāna*, Rotman frames the stories as primarily historical for their insight into the complexity of the Buddhist moral universe in the early centuries of the common era in India.<sup>4</sup> In his second volume of translations, however, Rotman shifts the emphasis by making the “provocative claim [that] these stories can be life-changing”<sup>5</sup> and “can facilitate one's own ethical transformation.”<sup>6</sup> Rotman thus proposes that the *Divyāvadāna* be read as “an ethical practice.”<sup>7</sup> By making the same claims in *Hungry Ghosts*, Rotman widens the appeal of his work to include practitioners as well as scholarly and general audiences.

In the second part of the introduction to *Hungry Ghosts*, Rotman introduces eight images. This section would have been stronger, in the view of this reviewer, with an explanation of how these images relate to the *Avadānaśataka* stories, aside from showing how artists from China, Tibet, Thailand, India, and the USA depicted hungry ghosts in time periods ranging from the fifth to the twenty-first century. One of the images (Plate 7) does not even depict hungry ghosts but is rather a pictorial depiction of karmic consequences (p. 63). The actual discussion of the images themselves is uneven, and only Plates 3 and 4 receive detailed analysis (pp. 55–61). Rotman is not an art historian, and he graciously acknowledges the help he received from other scholars in analyzing the images. It is perhaps unfair, therefore, to be too critical. I would, however, like to add the following points.

Rotman clarifies that there are no extant images of hungry ghosts from ancient India, and he asks why hungry ghost images proliferated in other time periods and cultural areas (p. 43). We could begin to answer that fascinating question by exploring the absorption of pre-existing ideas in China, including notions about orphan souls (*guhun*

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4. Rotman, *Divine Stories, Part 1*, 1–3.

5. Rotman, *Divine Stories, Part 2*, ix–x.

6. Sara McClintock, “Ethical Reading and the Ethics of Forgetting and Remembering,” in *A Mirror Is for Reflection: Understanding Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Jake H. Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), cited in Rotman, *Divine Stories, Part 2*, x.

7. Rotman, *Divine Stories, Part 2*, x.

孤魂) and a bureaucratic hell, into the schema of Buddhist cosmology. We find evidence of this absorption in a Ming dynasty painting preserved at Baoning si 宝寧寺 in Shanxi Province that is very similar to the “Flaming-mouth Ghost King” in *Hungry Ghosts* (Plate 4). The hungry ghosts in the Baoning si version, however, are identified as orphan souls.<sup>8</sup> Joseon dynasty artists in Korea also developed hungry ghost imagery in paintings known as nectar scrolls that depict the salvation of hungry ghosts and orphan souls through ritual feeding with nectar or sweet dew (Ch. *ganlou* 甘露; Kor. *gamlo*).<sup>9</sup> These images help to shed light on the circulation in East Asia of notions about hungry ghosts and the rituals that were developed to alleviate their suffering.

Rotman also asks what it tells us about contemporary Japan that two twelfth-century hungry ghost handscrolls (*gaki zōshi* 餓鬼草紙) are held in National Museums and recognized as national treasures (*kokuhō* 国宝) (p. 43). There are specific art historical criteria for designating works as national treasures, but far more telling about contemporary Japan than the national treasure designation of the handscrolls is the *segaki* 施餓鬼 hungry ghost feeding ritual, which is one of the most popular Buddhist rituals in contemporary Japan,<sup>10</sup> performed annually at Buddhist temples throughout the country.<sup>11</sup> The canonical basis for the *segaki* ritual is the tale of a hungry ghost appearing to Ānanda that Rotman recounts in connection with Plate 4 as the basis of the Chinese *Yuqie yankou* 瑜伽焰口 hungry ghost feeding ritual (pp. 59–61). A study on the development of hungry ghost feeding rituals and the images connected to them would warrant a separate monograph, but clarification in *Hungry Ghosts* of how people in cultural areas outside of India responded to transmitted teachings about hungry ghosts would help readers understand the significance of the images in relation to

8. Nakano Teruo, “Zuhan kaisetsu: Enku gaki zu (Chiba Kannonkyōji shozō),” *Bijutsu kenkyū* 376 (2002): 390–391 (36–37).

9. Hattori Yoshio, *Segakizu o yomitoku: Hanto ni tareshi mono e no chinkonfu* (Nagoya: Hattori Yoshio, 2000).

10. For example, temple patrons attend the annual *segaki* ritual at Myōshinji in Kyoto in significantly higher numbers than for all other annual rituals. See Jørn Borup, *Japanese Rinzai Zen Buddhism: Myōshinji, a Living Religion* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008), 231.

11. Priests from all Buddhist sects in Japan perform *segaki*, except those from the True Pure Land sect (Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗), which does not acknowledge the efficacy of any ritual.

narrative literature. These are minor caveats, however, that do not detract from the overall excellence of this book.

The translations of stories 41–50 of the *Avadānaśataka* are the centerpiece of *Hungry Ghosts*. Rotman’s intimate familiarity with early Indian narrative tales is immediately apparent in the flow of the translations that draw the reader effortlessly into the long-ago time of the Buddha. One could skip the Introduction and dive straight into the translations, but the stories are greatly enhanced by Rotman’s analysis that alerts the reader to important points in many of the stories and explains Buddhist concepts. Each story opens with the formulaic phrase, “The Buddha was respected, honored, revered,” etc., and provides the location of the Buddha and his community. The stories all follow a similar pattern in which members of the Buddha’s community meet hungry ghosts. The hungry ghosts are hideous. Some look like “burned-out tree stump[s], naked and totally covered with hair, with a mouth like the eye of a needle and a stomach like a mountain ... ablaze, alight, aflame, a single fiery mass, a perpetual cremation” (p. 89). Others “vomited and excreted what they ate, dwelled in a muck of bile and urine, and [their] only food was pus-filled blood and shit” (p. 121). These horrifying details describe the ontological status of beings who were real to people in early India (and are real to many Buddhists today), generating both fear of being reborn as a hungry ghost and compassion for the suffering of other sentient beings. We learn the details of how each hungry ghost’s acting out from *mātsarya* in their previous lives led to their current suffering. The Buddha then offers teachings on the workings of karma and exhorts his followers to rid themselves of *mātsarya*. Each story ends with another formulaic phrase: “This was said by the Blessed One. With their minds uplifted, the monks and those other gods, antigods, ... and so on rejoiced at the words of the Blessed One.” Rotman reminds the reader that these stories are more than windows into beliefs and practice in early India but are relevant to us today (p. 42).

The end matter includes a very useful glossary (pp. 133–143) with Sanskrit for all English entries, for example *coral tree* (*māndāraka*). Most of the entries are short, but Rotman lists all the thirty-two marks of a great man (p. 142), the eighty minor marks (pp. 135–136), and the ten powers (pp. 141–142). The glossary as a whole, and these lists in particular, will be an invaluable reference for both instructors and students of courses on Buddhism.

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This book will make excellent reading for undergraduate courses on Buddhism, non-Western ethics, and South Asian cultural studies. It is also an excellent source for early Indian Buddhist primary source material that will be useful to specialists as well as graduate and undergraduate students. Rotman's very accessible writing and his reflections on the moral and ethical ramifications of greed in today's society will appeal to non-specialists with an interest in Buddhism and to Buddhist practitioners. May we all rejoice in the publication of *Hungry Ghosts*.

