BOOK REVIEWS

Rethinking Meditation: Buddhist Meditative Practices in Ancient and Modern Worlds. By David L. McMahan. Oxford University Press, 2023. 246 pages. $30.99 (hardcover), ISBN 9780197661741.

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Like many Buddhist studies scholars, I am grateful to David McMahan for his excellent previous monograph, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*,[1] which unpacks the scholarly concept of "Buddhist modernism." That book made good scholarship accessible to students and practitioners alike. Now he turns his attention to Buddhist meditation and the assumptions that modern practitioners are likely to bring to its practice. These assumptions coalesce in the concept of the "Standard Version" of meditation (p. 6), that mindfulness is the non-judgmental awareness of the present moment, an assumption about meditation shared by many modern practitioners. McMahan wants to reflect on the nature of this Standard Version and how it relates to traditional forms of Buddhism.

In chapter 1, he explains through an account of his own meditation experience how meditation is not only about more or less profound experiences or states but also should be understood in relation to "how culture informs and interacts with meditative practices" (p. 9). He uses the images of "filters and magnets" to explain this (p. 10). Modern meditators tend to practice forms of meditation filtered out of the vast array of traditional forms, so that the practices fit their preconceptions. Furthermore, some elements of modernity act as magnets, attracting modern meditators to certain traditional forms. These images provide a useful model for the interactions of culture and meditation that he wishes to study.

1. David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

Rethinking Meditation goes further than a practical investigation of modern Buddhist meditation; McMahan also develops more theoretical reflections concerning Buddhist meditation and the ethical concerns of modernity. The book is written in a reader-friendly and accessible style. He explains that he wants to attract scholars of meditation from all disciplines (p. 24). He also admits that his book makes no claim to be systematic, wandering about and delving promiscuously into sociology, philosophy, and history. This makes for a very creative and unusual work of scholarship, with some brilliant and original insights into Buddhist meditation. However, the book is not without some peculiar problems.

In part 1, "Thinking About Meditation," McMahan expands on his main theme, firstly in terms of the assumption that meditation is a matter of brain states, and then more sociologically in terms of the different assumptions about meditation made in ancient India and the modern world. Chapter 2, "Neural Maps and Enlightenment Machines," ponders whether a feedback machine might be able to guide a meditator to an enlightened brain state. McMahan identifies the assumptions involved—the mind as containing thoughts, or as a theatre in which thinking plays. In contrast, McMahan discusses how the philosopher Evan Thompson and others propose an enactive and embodied way of thinking about meditation, as involving someone's own interaction with their subjectivity. He concludes that an Enlightenment Machine is impossible because there is no neutral observation of an enlightened state. In chapter 3, "What Difference Does Context Make?," McMahan goes on to consider the social context for meditation and contrasts the assumptions of a renunciate practitioner in ancient India (karma, samsara, nirvana, and so on) with those of a modern American (individualism, freedom, consumerism, and so on). To make this comparison, he invokes the concept of a *social imaginary*: "a social and cultural context in which people live and make sense of their lives" (p. 55). This concept, which allows us to *contrast* ancient and modern contexts, becomes McMahan's main working context. He also invokes the idea of meditation as a "practice of self-cultivation" (p. 52), but he incorrectly attributes this to Pierre Hadot as well as Michel Foucault (p. 53). Hadot in fact explicitly disavows the Foucauldian idea of "technologies of the

self."[2] The idea that Buddhist practices of self-cultivation are matters of self-formation is central to McMahan's interpretation of them (p. 53), but he perhaps simplifies the philosophical issues involved.

In part 2, "Meditation in Context," McMahan goes into context in more detail. Although few modern American meditators share the social imaginary of ancient Indian ascetics and their ideology of world-renunciation, he argues that the Buddhist idea of *bhāvanā* or "cultivation" involves developing states of mind concerned with life in this world, hence constituting a distinctive Buddhist social imaginary. Now McMahan moves on to mindfulness. He points out that Pāli canonical teachings on mindfulness do not presume a neutral perspective but always involve giving rise to qualities such as joy. Hence, the practice of mindfulness assumes an engagement with teachings about joy and is therefore cognitively more involved than contemporary presentations of mindfulness might suggest. He summarizes the range of mindfulness practices set out in the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* and draws out their significance with the help of phenomenology as well as Daniel Kahneman's distinction of two cognitive processes: the fast, automatic System 1; and the slow, deliberate System 2. In this way, monastic practitioners of mindfulness in the ancient Indian context were creating a monastic *habitus*, a term from Bourdieu meaning "a system of durable dispositions and habits through which one responds to the world spontaneously" (p. 79). Hence, McMahan concludes, meditative practices involve an enactive, embodied process in relation to the world and not simply a sovereign subject detaching from the world (p. 80). This seems obvious once McMahan has written it, but in fact nicely clarifies the meaning of meditation in its traditional Buddhist context, as against modern presentations of a Standard Version of mindfulness meditation.

In chapter 5, "Meditation in the Pāli Social Imaginary II," McMahan continues contrasting the practices described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* with contemporary mindfulness, but now to draw attention to the potential for modern practitioners to misunderstand the ancient teaching. But there are problems. McMahan claims that the modern "body scan," involving a coordinated paying attention to sensations in various parts of the body, has its source in the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta*'s contemplation of body parts (p. 82), which involves a coordinated imagining of

2. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way*, trans. Michael Chase (Blackwell, 1995), 206–213.

the body as made of distinct parts, such as bones and internal organs. I am not convinced that the practices are related, and McMahan does not explain why he believes one is the source of the other. The modern body scan concerns sensations and is effective as a means to ground awareness in a non-discursive and embodied mode. The *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta*'s body parts meditation concerns a deliberate re-imagining of the body as made of various unattractive parts, hence promoting disenchantment with it. Of course, it is possible to *contrast* these two practices, but this makes for the much weaker argument that modern mindfulness practitioners are doing something different from ancient monastic practitioners. Likewise, McMahan goes on to contrast the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta*'s practice of observing stages of decomposition of a corpse with a modern practitioner's practice of contemplating death. He claims that modern practitioners find this contemplation life-affirming, while ancient practitioners understood the practice in terms of the rebirth cosmology and as a prompt to try to overcome it (p. 87). McMahan relies on anecdotes and generalizations to make this contrast, but there seems to be no reason to suppose that contemplating death cannot be both life-affirming and disenchanting, or indeed that different practitioners may respond differently. McMahan finally discusses mindfulness of *dhamma*s (the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*). But he describes them as "momentary events" (p. 90), although this description is true only in later Abhidhamma contexts and not in Pāli discourses. He makes the compelling point that the lists of *dhamma*s create rather than find a taxonomy of experience, so that mindfulness is a "highly constructive, imaginative, goal-oriented, conceptually and emotionally engaged enterprise" (p. 92). However, this point is vitiated by his inattention to Anālayo's (2013) comparative study of the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta*, showing that the many lists of *dhamma*s in the Pāli version are probably not original.[3] McMahan's argument is weaker in the light of such critical research since the addition of lists of *dhamma*s may be as much about recitation traditions as about meditation.

In chapter 6, "Meditation and Cultural Repertoires," McMahan extends his argument in what seem to me quite brilliantly illuminating ways. He makes the point that a contemporary practitioner might suppose that a meditation on, for instance, the five aggregates involves

3. Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna* (Windhorse Publications, 2013).

"simply penetrating through the illusions of a fixed, permanent self to discover lying beneath it, five aggregates waiting to be apprehended" (p. 94). McMahan calls this "the ontological view" (p. 94) and in contrast depicts what he believes is a more accurate account in which meditation instructions are comparable to a map that in fact directs a meditator's attention, fostering and constraining their experience, and leading to an imagining of self and world in specific ways. Contrasting an ancient Indian monk and a contemporary *vipassanā* practitioner, he imagines the monk recreating experience through an active deployment of meditative categories; he draws out the ways in which the modern meditator actively engages in a practice that is presented as simple acknowledging and letting go. McMahan's rich descriptions of fictional meditators draw out subtle differences relevant to any understanding of the meditative process. The analysis up to this point has been concerned with "constructive" ways of re-imagining experience, but in chapter 7, "Deconstructive Meditation and the Search for the Buddha Within," McMahan now turns to "deconstructive" meditation practices. This chapter rehearses the *dharma* analysis of Abhidharma and then the concept of emptiness in Mahāyāna philosophy, but these ideas, so well-known through histories of Buddhist thought, take on new shades of meaning in the context of McMahan's attention to meditation as an active engagement in social imaginaries. For instance, the conception of a "Buddha within" in the *Tathāgata-garbha sūtra* changes how Buddhists conceive of meditation, from cultivating awakened qualities to realizing one already has or is them (p. 115).

In part 3, "Meditation and the Ethical Subject," McMahan turns his attention to some specific features of modern secularized Buddhism and its relation to secular culture. He begins by inquiring into the relation of meditation to ethics and draws out the potential for moral pluralism, such that Buddhists might take up social justice issues, but also take up anti-Muslim rhetoric, leading to ethnic cleansing. Both are "deploying Buddhist meditative techniques for discerning moral truths" (p. 128). Ethical deliberation interacts with cultural repertoires of concepts and narratives, rather than through accessing an inner source of ethical truth—an insight that seems to me particularly illuminating for properly understanding the diversity of modern Buddhist ethical attitudes. McMahan goes on to study ethical attitudes connected specifically to contemporary secularized meditation practices. Having discussed the meaning of "secular," he begins with an account

of the positive value of meditation in relation to an "ethic of appreciation" for the world and one's life. He does this by discussing a story in Paul Reps's *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* of a man suspended halfway down a cliff between tigers. "The man saw a luscious strawberry near him . . . he plucked the strawberry. . . . How sweet it tasted!" (p. 136). McMahan takes it that a modern reader would read this story as meaning *carpe diem*—seize the day! Enjoy life while it lasts! He contrasts this interpretation with the version of the story told in the fourth-century Indian text, the *Lalitavistara*, where the man's plight is a vivid reminder of samsara and a prompt to renunciation. McMahan goes on to trace "the story of how this tale migrates from the world-weary ethos of ancient ascetic communities in India to the back pockets of world-affirming, strawberry-eating seekers in the 1960s" (p. 137). But I could not help thinking as I read all this that McMahan is reading the Zen story oddly. The way Reps tells it is perfectly compatible with an ascetic reading; this reviewer certainly never read it as meaning *carpe diem*, enjoy your life. It more obviously seems to suggest the laughable human tendency to keep on valuing pleasure amid disaster. So, it seems possible that McMahan has read far too much into a Zen story to create a context for his account of an ethics of appreciation.

In chapter 9, "Meditation and the Ethic of Authenticity," McMahan explores the background to the ethical ideal of authenticity in Western philosophy and culture, how this idea has found its way into presentations of the Dharma, and the tensions that it produces. I was unclear, however, on exactly how a *philosophical* ideal might have influenced the practicalities of meditation; McMahan seems to acknowledge this by discussing a quite different sort of "authenticity" sought by some Western Buddhists. He gives the example of an American Zen monk who went to Japan to practice the "real thing"—authentic Zen—though he eventually came home again, in a nice Zen story of authentic disillusionment (p. 158). But the story seems to show that McMahan's discussion of authenticity is stuck in equivocation. Chapter 10, "Meditation and the Ethic of Autonomy," explores themes of autonomy and freedom. Again, McMahan switches between sociological and philosophical abstraction and practical issues. He concludes by defending a "Situated Autonomy" model of the kind of freedom that meditation encourages (p. 180). This discussion of freedom leads to the rather more theoretical topic of chapter 11, "Affordances, Disruption, and Activism." He takes up the concept of "affordances" or "potentials for activity" (p.

181) from psychology and uses it to theorize how meditation extends opportunities for new narratives, emotions, ethics, and activities. McMahan's reflections here illuminate certain aspects of how meditation is presented in the contemporary US in terms of activism, but his analysis is more at the level of abstract theory than in relation to the stories of practice (the "dispatches from the worlds of meditation") in earlier sections of the book.

In chapter 12, "Individualism and Fragmentation in the Mirrors of Secularism," McMahan shifts his attention to the topic of individualism and how contemporary meditators navigate Buddhist themes of non-self (*anātman*) and dependent origination or interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*). To open his discussion, McMahan contrasts two images: a British print from 1751, showing "a man looking into a small hand mirror, which reflects his puffy visage and buoyantly coiffed hair" (p. 200); and an interactive work by the contemporary Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Mirrored Room*, in which a viewer "stands in a room whose walls are mirrors reflecting uncountable numbers of lights receding in all directions" (p. 200). The former image, to McMahan, is "an apt emblem of the European Enlightenment," since it is "an accurate representation of the autonomous, independent individual" (p. 201). The latter, to him, prompts "consciousness of the vastness of the cosmos" (p. 201) and a hope for significance. McMahan states these images illustrate "competing versions of secular subjectivity," and he goes on to discuss the tension between the sense of self as "singular, independent, and autonomous" and the "sense of fragmentation of the self into multiple identities" (p. 203). However, McMahan's discussion is again vitiated by his over-reading, this time of that eighteenth-century image of a young man. It shows an image of a face, but the inscription at the bottom of the print clearly explains that this young man, William Taylor, used to be blind but in October 1751 was restored to sight by a certain occultist. The print, therefore, depicts not a singular individual as an emblem of the Enlightenment, but rather a young man who can now see himself in a mirror rather than not being able to do so when he was blind. McMahan seems to be blind to the obvious meaning of the print, preferring his own reading over what is actually right there. Likewise, he writes that "Enlightenment thinkers proposed that rationality was the essence of the self, and that through stepping away from the emotions and relying solely on reason, one could make moral choices and live a good life" (p. 203). Of course, *certain* Enlightenment

thinkers (such as Kant) proposed this or something like it, but what about David Hume, very much an Enlightenment thinker, who explicitly *rejected* exactly this unrealistic picture of rationality, proposing that "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions"?[4] This chapter shows McMahan circling around a fantasy cultural history that allows the proliferation of all sorts of possibly meaningless nuance.

The book ends with a short "Postscript: The Iron Age and the Anthropocene," in which McMahan wonders about ancient Indian meditation methods in a human-dominated world of authoritarianism and climate change. But he concludes with equivocation: "We shall see whether Iron-Age tools [i.e., Buddhist teachings on meditation] are able not only to bring personal calm but also to contribute to the transformation of the Anthropocene into a more livable age" (p. 219). Of course, this equivocation, and even doubt, is perfectly reasonable. It also aptly ends a book that, for all its occasional brilliant insights and originality, meanders along via some problematic readings to something of a non-conclusion.

Learning from the West, Learning from the East: The Emergence of the Study of Buddhism in Japan and Europe Before 1900. Edited by Stephen Kigensan Licha and Hans Martin Kräme. Brill, 2023. 368 pages. $128 (hardcover), ISBN 9789004679542.

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The study of Buddhism in modern Japan and Europe has long been narrated as a story of one-way influence. Western scholars "discovered" Buddhism through Orientalist categories; meanwhile, Japanese Buddhists either resisted or adapted these impositions (p. 3). However, the recent historiographic scholarship complicates this existing myopic picture by emphasizing the flows of knowledge, the agency of Asian intellectuals, and hybrid traditions. *Learning from the West, Learning from the East* appears as the ninth volume in Brill's Studies on East Asian Religions series and is situated squarely within this historiographic

4. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford University Press, 1978 [1739–40]), 415, 2.3.3.

turn. The series itself is devoted to examining the historical, intellectual, and ritual dimensions of East Asian religions from a transnational perspective.

In recent decades, Buddhist studies has departed from earlier concerns with philology and messianic narratives to embrace a nuanced interest in transnational flows of knowledge, religious practices, and intellectual networks. Yet, the nineteenth century remains crucial as the epoch in which Buddhist studies consolidated itself both as an academic discipline in Europe and as a radically reconfigured form of self-reflection within Japan. The editors, Stephen Kigensan Licha and Hans Martin Kräme, engage with these formative moments of the discipline to foreground the entangled knowledge production about Buddhism. They reveal that European philologists relied on Asian collaborators for texts, translations, and interpretations, whereas Japanese Buddhist reformers crafted a "common Buddhism" designed to stand alongside the Western notion of the religion. At the same time, Chinese revivalists such as Yang Wenhui reasserted their traditions in dialogue with both Japan and Europe.

The editors open the book with an introduction that sketches the conventional backstory of Buddhist studies while also highlighting the gaps in the Eurocentric origin narrative. They frame their work as a corrective contribution in the genealogy of the discipline. Buddhism became a specialized academic field in the nineteenth century, initially within Oriental studies and later through journals, conferences, and university chairs. Unlike other emerging disciplines, the study of Buddhism was shaped by the fact that its object was a living religion. Academic inquiry was entangled with missionary competition, artistic fascination, and spiritual curiosity in Europe while being shaped by the demands placed on Buddhist institutions in Japan.

The editors highlight the three key reasons behind the emergence and development of modern Buddhist studies. First, non-academic interest in Buddhism outside Asia, from Jesuit polemics to Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Gauguin, profoundly influenced scholarship. Second, in Japan, Buddhist studies had to negotiate the tension between secular academic standards and sectarian commitments, exemplified by Murakami Senshō's struggle with orthodoxy. Finally, Buddhist studies became institutionalized in Japan earlier than the West, with regular courses and journals emerging before their European counterpart.

The volume is structured in three main parts to help readers navigate the intricate evolution of the field. Each part addresses a distinct historical and geographical context that shaped modern Buddhist studies. Part 1, titled "Meiji Japan," examines the internal transformation of Japanese Buddhism. Part 2, titled "East-West Contact," highlights the interactions between Japanese reformers and European scholarship. Lastly, part 3, entitled "European Orientalism," traces how Western scholars engaged with Buddhism and how Japanese Buddhists influenced their work. Each section further contains three chapters, which employ case studies, intellectual portraits of prominent figures, and analyses of cross-cultural encounters to illustrate how Buddhist studies emerged through networks of exchange rather than unilateral influence.

The first chapter, "The Institute for the Defense of the Dharma and the Study of Christianity in a Japanese Buddhist Context, 1858–1872" by Micah Auerbach, initiates the volume's exploration of Meiji-era Buddhist responses to foreign religious and intellectual influences. Focusing on Kōzan'in (Higuchi) Ryūon (1800–1885), Auerbach observes how the political and cultural transformations of the late Tokugawa and early Meiji periods compelled Japanese Buddhists to engage critically with Christianity. Ryūon, tasked with defending Pure Land orthodoxy, founded the Gohōjō (Institute for the Defense of the Dharma) in 1868. There, he taught not only doctrinal refutations but also subjects like astronomy. Crucially, he recognized Protestantism as distinct from Catholicism and began framing Buddhism as a "religion" comparable to Christianity. Thus, he emphasized Pure Land traits like faith, laity, and inner-worldly spirituality because they resonated with Protestant ideals. Buddhists' focus shifted from resisting to competing with missionaries after the legalization of Christianity in 1871. This chapter positions Ryūon as a pivotal figure who bridged the gap between older apologetics and the reformist strategies of the Meiji era.

In the second chapter, Mick Deneckere advances the exploration by shifting focus to Ishikawa Shuntai, a disciple of Ryūon and a Jōdo Shinshū cleric who traveled to Europe in 1872 and established the "academic study of religion in Japan" (p. 28). Deneckere challenges the assumption that Max Müller coined the concept of religion and shows that Ishikawa relied on Émile-Louis Burnouf, who had already used the term *shūkyōgaku* ("study of religion") as early as 1875. Ishikawa employed this framework to counter claims of Buddhism's inferiority,

exposing the Christian judgments as biased and unscientific, and mediating the tension between religion and modern science. His translations of Western texts and innovations in clerical training demonstrated how the new discipline of religious studies was entwined with sectarian interests and apologetic needs.

Chapter 3, "Hara Tanzan, Yoshitani Kakuju, and the Academization of Buddhist Studies" by Stephan Kigensan Licha, examines how Buddhism was first institutionalized as an academic subject in Japan through the careers of the Sōtō Zen monk Hara Tanzan 原坦山 (1819–1892) and the Jōdo Shinshū cleric Yoshitani Kakuju 吉谷覚寿 (1843–1923) (p. 31). Both thinkers abandoned sectarian scholastic models and pursued new methodologies to confront the challenge of presenting "Buddhism" as a unified tradition under Westernized secular academic standards. On one hand, Hara sought to reinterpret Buddhist concepts through physiological and quasi-scientific explanations. On the other hand, Yoshitani distilled a rational core principle of "thusness origination" to organize Buddhist thought systematically. In their efforts to construct a rational and demythologized "common Buddhism," they bridged the gap between Buddhist scholastic traditions and modern academic expectations. As Licha argues, their work laid the foundation for Buddhist studies as a secular discipline in Japan.

The fourth chapter, and first chapter of part 2, "Mahayana in Europe: Friedrich Max Müller and His Japanese Interlocutors" by Hans Matin Krämer, reassesses the role of Mahāyāna Buddhism in nineteenth-century European scholarship through the relationship between Max Müller and Nanjō Bun'yū. Whereas standard histories depict early Buddhist studies as predominantly influenced by Sanskrit and Pāli sources, with minimal contribution from East Asia, Krämer illustrates that Mahāyāna was both textually and personally present in Europe due to the endeavors of Japanese Jōdo Shinshū priests and scholars, particularly Nanjō Bun'yū. Nanjō, educated in stringent academic traditions akin to those of the contemporary academy, served as both Müller's apprentice and a knowledge intermediary, generating esteemed scholarly works, including his *Catalogue*. Krämer demonstrates that Japanese interlocutors persuaded Müller to incorporate Mahāyāna texts into the *Sacred Books of the East*. In doing so, the chapter highlights the co-creation of Buddhist studies by European scholars

and Japanese clerics and reframes the Shin tradition as an important, though often overlooked, driver of Buddhism's global academic reception.

In the fifth chapter, Ōmi Toshihiro scrutinizes the formative career of Takakusu Junjirō, a lay Buddhist scholar whose engagement with Western methods diverged from earlier clerics like Nanjō. Takakusu, without a conventional academic background, adeptly utilized Western notions, such as "temperance," to reinterpret Buddhist ethics for contemporary society. He employed philological comparisons of Pāli and Chinese sources to advocate for Mahāyāna's validity, occasionally conflating textual histories to enhance the scholarly legitimacy of East Asian Buddhism. His Taishō canon project exemplified this method by integrating early and Mahāyāna literature to illustrate their continuity. In contrast to previous apologetics, Takakusu's methodology aimed to rehabilitate Japanese Buddhism in the West's perception while concurrently reforming it domestically.

In chapter 6, "Yang Wenhui and Nanjō Bun'yū: A Sino-Japanese Perspective on Modern Buddhist Studies to East Asia," Jakub Zamorski shifts the focus to Sino-Japanese relations instead of East-West relations. He explores the friendship and tensions between Nanjō Bun'yū and Chinese reformer Yang Wenhui (1837–1911). Both pursued Buddhist reform but varied in their approaches to Western scholarship. Nanjō used philology to retrieve Sanskrit originals and affirm Japan's autonomy from Chinese influence, whereas Yang opposed what he perceived as a "de-sinicizing" paradigm of modernity. Yang advocated for the revitalization of Chinese Buddhist tradition by recovering lost Chinese scriptures, Sinitic doctrinal interpretations, and Yogācāra philosophy. He delineated a unique Chinese trajectory towards Buddhist modernity by examining Nanjō and Yang's correspondence, discussions with Japanese missionaries, and doctrinal conflicts. So, the chapter rejects linear reform narratives and uncovers a rich genealogy of Buddhist enlightenment in East Asia.

Suzanne Marchand's chapter, "Buddhist Studies in Nineteenth-Century Germany," which opens part 3, situates the study of Buddhism within the cultural and intellectual landscape of German Orientalism. In contrast to the philological emphasis on the Vedic tradition, Buddhism occupied a peripheral position in German academia, frequently explored by outsiders and countercultural individuals rather than by mainstream Orientalists. Marchand analyses figures like Carl

Friedrich Koeppen and Carl Josias von Bunsen. Their divergent opinions sparked controversies, especially during the Kulturkampf, when proponents of Christianity condemned Buddhism as atheistic and amoral. The author asserts that German discussions over Buddhism hardly pertained to Buddhism itself; instead, they mirrored their own confessional conflicts, cultural critiques, and searches for alternative spiritual paradigms.

In chapter 8, Martin Baumann traces the nineteenth-century scholarly turn to Pāli sources and "Southern Buddhism." He contends that European intellectuals, keen to identify the fundamental essence of Buddhism, referred to the Pāli canon to reconstruct the historical figure of Siddhattha Gotama as a logical, ethical instructor devoid of ceremony and myth. Baumann emphasizes the contributions of Spence Hardy, Thomas William Rhys Davids, Caroline Augusta Foley Rhys Davids, and Hermann Oldenberg. These thinkers characterized early Buddhism as a rationalist alternative to ritualism. Thomas Rhys Davids, for example, compared Siddhattha Gotama with the Scottish empiricist philosopher David Hume. These academic endeavors relied on collaboration with Buddhist monastics from South and Southeast Asia, who contributed texts, guidance, and access to manuscripts. However, there emerged disagreements about editorial methods and reformist intentions, illustrating how Pāli studies were influenced by both European intellectual objectives and the tactics of Asian counterparts.

In the ninth and final chapter, Catherine Fhima and Roland Lardinois examine the distinctive trajectory of French Buddhist studies through the career of Sylvain Lévi. Unlike Germany and Britain, France established chairs in Chinese and Sanskrit as early as 1814 and created a conducive environment for Lévi's involvement with Buddhism. His interactions with Japanese Buddhists, notably Fujishima Ryōon and Fujieda Takutsū, were pivotal in shifting his focus from Vedic and Brahmanical traditions to Buddhism as a global faith. For Lévi, India became a cultural crossroad that links Indo-European philology with Asian religious traditions. Buddhism soon became a vehicle for articulating "Asian humanism" for him. Importantly, Lévi's Jewish identity shaped his orientation: Marginalized within racialized Vedic studies, he turned to Buddhism as a universalist alternative. Through these scholarly exchanges, mediated by Japanese interlocutors, Lévi contributed to repositioning Buddhism at the center of French Orientalism and integrating Asia into a broader history of civilization.

The editors and contributors of this volume have done a tremendous job in reshaping our understanding of the history of Buddhist studies. One of its greatest merits is that it does not simply provide new case studies but also acknowledges many unresolved conceptual and methodological questions, thereby opening avenues for further research. In the introduction itself, the editors carefully highlight the persistent tensions within the domain: the uneasy negotiation between secular academic standards and religious authority, the privileging of textual analysis over lived knowledge, and the historically asymmetrical flows of intellectual exchange between East and West. By bringing these issues to the surface, the book situates itself at the forefront of twenty-first-century debates in global intellectual history and the sociology of knowledge. Its methodological shift away from judging past scholarship as "true or false" towards examining how knowledge has been validated in context is both fresh and analytically sharp. Equally important, the volume avoids the Anglo-centric tendency of prior scholarship and provides a balanced treatment to both European and Japanese trajectories in the making of Buddhist studies.

Despite these solid merits, a few limitations remain, which in turn prompt scholars to further explore the subject. The most obvious is its geographical scope. Although the editors do note the importance of Chinese and South Asian actors, the core focus remains on the Japan-Europe nexus. As a result, the broader Asian dimensions of Buddhist modernism, like Sri Lanka, Tibet, and Southeast Asia, remain peripheral. Yet, rather than a shortcoming alone, this focus can be read as an invitation: The framework advanced here could inspire comparable studies that extend the analysis across other Asian contexts.

Another weakness lies in the relative neglect of "lived religion." The emphasis throughout the volume is on texts, institutions, and elite intellectuals. While this makes sense given its disciplinary focus, it sidelines the role of ritual communities, lay practitioners, and popular forms of Buddhism in shaping modern understanding of the tradition. Readers encounter glimpses of everyday practices, although they are largely refracted through the interpretive lens of reformist elites. Lastly, the volume suffers slightly from structural challenges. Despite the editors' careful framing, some chapters are more tightly integrated into the overall argument than others. Thus, novice scholars or general readers might come away with the sense of a mosaic rather than

a single narrative. However, the diversity of perspective is also part of its strength, as it offers a panoramic view of the field's complex origins.

In sum, the strengths of the book far outweigh its limitations. Its historiographic innovation, methodological clarity, and detailed case studies make it a landmark contribution not only to Buddhist studies but also to global intellectual histories. The volume might feel daunting for early-career scholars due to its dense historiographic details, but for contemporary scholars interested in how disciplines are formed, how knowledge travels, and how religious traditions are reconfigured in global contexts, *Learning from the West, Learning from the East* is both relevant and indispensable.

Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism. By Aaron P. Proffitt. Pure Land Buddhist Studies series. University of Hawai'i Press, 2023. 445 pages. $70 (hardcover), ISBN 9780824893613.

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Pure Land Buddhism in an Esoteric Buddhist or Vajrayāna context will not strike anyone with experience in those traditions as unusual. My earliest exposure to Tibetan Buddhism, as a teenager, was the practice of *'pho ba* (Skt. *saṃkrānti*), wherein one rehearses transferring one's consciousness to Amitābha's buddha-field, Sukhāvatī. As I began my academic study of Newar Buddhism (the Sanskritic Vajrayāna tradition of the Kathmandu Valley), my first conversations with tantric priests (Skt. *vajrācārya*) were also about *saṃkrānti*, *utkrānti* (general transference of consciousness), and Sukhāvatī-related beliefs and practices. Todd Lewis addressed Newar Buddhist beliefs and practices regarding Sukhāvatī in a 1996 article,[1] and the fact that Sukhāvatī came to be seen as a "generalized religious goal" in Sanskrit Mahāyāna literature was made common Buddhological knowledge by Gregory Schopen and Fujita Kotatsu in their publications from the 1970s.[2] It is

1. Todd Lewis, "Sukhāvatī Traditions in Newar Buddhism," *South Asia Research* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 1–30.

2. Gregory Schopen, "Sukhāvatī as a Generalized Religious Goal in Sanskrit Mahāyāna Sūtra Literature," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 19 (1977): 177–210; and Fujita

therefore remarkable that a perceived divide persists in some scholarship on Japanese Buddhism, informed by "modern Japanese Buddhist sectarianism" (p. 5). Thus, *Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism* by Aaron Proffitt (Associate Professor of Japanese studies at the University at Albany, State University of New York) is a welcome contribution to the literature on the topic.

Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism is published by the University of Hawai'i Press as part of the Pure Land Buddhist Studies series, associated with the Institute of Buddhist Studies. This series has published similar work, such as Georgios T. Halkias' *Luminous Bliss*[3] and the comprehensive and accessible overview, *Chinese Pure Land Buddhism* by Charles B. Jones.[4] Unlike Jones's work, Proffitt's contribution to the series is highly technical and likely only to be accessible to fellow scholars with an academic background in Buddhism or Japanese Buddhism. Having developed this monograph from his 2015 University of Michigan doctoral dissertation, "Mysteries of Speech and Breath: Dōhan's 道範 (1179–1252) *Himitsu nenbutsu shō* 祕密念佛抄 and Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism,"[5] the book is a definite refinement on the dissertation, featuring a new preface, an index, and an expansion of the translation of Dōhan's *Himitsu nenbutsu shō* from only fascicle 1 to all three fascicles, but it does not pare down or simplify in a manner common to dissertation-to-monograph works. This makes *Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism* heavy reading. Nonetheless, it is a masterful and encyclopedic work that will likely serve as an invaluable resource for many years. In what follows, I shall first go over Proffitt's work and arguments, followed by a few critical considerations, most of which will concern the editorial choices of the publication.

The work's title, *Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism*, frames the work as a broader treatment of several heuristic categories. While the title of the dissertation identified it as a study of Dōhan's *Himitsu nenbutsu shō*,

Kotatsu, *Genshi Jōdo shisō no kenkyū* 原始浄土思想の研究 (Iwanami Shoten, 1970), 141–161.

3. Georgios T. Halkias, *Luminous Bliss: A Religious History of Pure Land Literature in Tibet* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2012).

4. Charles B. Jones, *Chinese Pure Land Buddhism: Understanding a Tradition of Practice* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2020).

5. Aaron P. Proffitt, "Mysteries of Speech and Breath: Dōhan's 道範 (1179–1252) *Himitsu Nenbutsu Shō* 祕密念佛抄 and Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2015).

Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism represents the work as a broader treatment of a widespread approach of using "'esoteric' ritual techniques and doctrinal interpretations derived from the tantras" to achieve the soteriological goal of rebirth in a pure land, primarily Amitābha's land of Sukhāvatī (p. 2). Therein, he uses the term "Esoteric Buddhism," a translation of the Japanese *mikkyō* (Jpn. 密教), to refer to "the East Asian reception of the tantras and related material and doctrinal culture"; in contrast, Indo-Tibetan Buddhism is more commonly referred to by the term "Vajrayāna" (pp. 57–58). Moving historically from early *dhāraṇī* literature to tantras and Esoteric Buddhist treatises in China and Japan, he shows how securing rebirth in Sukhāvatī was a common goal of the esoteric practices of mantra, *mudrā*, and visualization. It focuses on Dōhan (1179–1252) and his *Himitsu nenbutsu shō* (Compendium on the secret contemplation of the Buddha) as its central "vantage point" for understanding this tradition (p. xiv). In presenting the work and thought of Esoteric Buddhism and Dōhan concerning birth in Sukhāvatī, Proffitt uses the material as the basis for various significant theoretical contributions by challenging various long-held assumptions about Japanese Buddhism. Firstly, he attempts to establish Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism as a field while challenging the siloed anachronistic categories of Buddhist schools as discrete "species" and the "taxonomic/phylogenetic approach to Buddhism" rooted in modern sectarianism (p. xiii). Secondly, he argues for a more fluid model of premodern Buddhism where practices and doctrines now often assumed to belong to separate schools were present within different traditions that functioned as "heterogeneous and mutually informative spheres of inquiry" (p. 4), pointing out that the term now used to define "sects" or "schools" (Jpn. *shū* 宗) was initially used in a sense that meant something closer to an "area of focus" (p. 11). In addition, using Dōhan as an example, a relatively unknown figure in Western Buddhist studies, he shows how the traditional "string of pearls" narrative (p. 289), wherein one patriarch is presented as following another within discrete lineages, is not defensible—with figures like Dōhan quoting "Pure Land patriarchs" like Shandao (p. 310) and responding to advocates of single-practice schools like Hōnen (e.g., p. 348). Proffitt shows how we must treat religious figures and texts in their broader, fluid, and interconnected environments, suggesting, for instance, to understand a figure like Shinran, "you must also read what Shinran read" (p. xii).

In chapter 1, "An Introduction to Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism" (pp. 1–53), Proffitt mounts a well-argued critique of the field's anachronistic binaries and separation of traditions, suggesting that it is a modern distortion stemming from state-mandated separation of sects in Tokugawa Japan and nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Orientalism (p. xii). In chapter 2, "Sukhāvatī in the Secret *Piṭaka*" (pp. 54–99), Proffitt establishes the historical precedent for his theses on Japanese Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism in China, focusing on *dhāraṇī* and tantric literature popular in China, as well as the systematic works of Tang masters like Amoghavajra. He argues that the presence of either esotericism or pure land aspirations is not evidence of "syncretism" or "overlaps" between traditions but a continuation of pervasive practices and goals universal to Mahāyāna Buddhism. In chapter 3, "Early Japanese Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism" (pp. 100–133), Proffitt shows how a more general elite Japanese *dhāraṇī* and tantric culture were systematized by figures like Kūkai, Kakuban, and Eikan, but points out as well that in so doing, Mt. Kōya (one of the centers of Shingon Buddhism) was promoted as a cultic site where Kūkai, in eternal *samādhi*, could guide devotees to Sukhāvatī, suggesting that from an early era, Mt. Kōya's esotericism was a Pure Land-oriented tradition.

Building on this foundation, Proffitt then brings the readers into the Kamakura period, with a treatment of Dōhan's lineage connections, his role in the factional conflicts on Mt. Kōya, and his devotional life centered on Kūkai in chapter 4, "Dōhan and the Esoteric Pure Land Culture of Kōyasan" (pp. 134–161) and chapter 5, "Dōhan's Major Works and Kamakura Buddhism" (pp. 162–196). He then provides an overview of Dōhan's entire corpus of writings, effectively showing how he had a broad engagement with Tendai, Zen, and Yogācāra thought, as well as how he treated the main scholarly paradigms of Kamakura Buddhism, such as exoteric-esoteric (Jpn. *kenmitsu* 顕密) and original enlightenment (Jpn. *hongaku* 本覚) thought. This chapter also makes clear that the *Himitsu nenbutsu shō* is far from Dōhan's *magnum opus* but was a "relatively minor" (p. 197) work that nonetheless demonstrates Dōhan's broad range of reference.

Chapter 6, "Toward an Introduction to the *Himitsu nenbutsu shō*" (pp. 197–217), is a straightforward, fascicle-by-fascicle summary of the work in question. The presentation is an effective and practical approach, separating the textual summary from the deeper thematic

analysis of the following three chapters. Chapter 7, "The Buddha Amitābha in the *Himitsu nenbutsu shō*" (pp. 218–235), presents Dōhan's "fourfold secret explanation," explaining how Dōhan suggests that one can understand Amitābha at a shallow level, as a temporally located figure in a particular direction, progressively moving through levels of "deep secret," "secret within the secret," and "deepest secret," wherein one comes to see Amitābha as the very "body-mind of all sentient beings" (p. 223). Chapter 8, "*Buddhānusmṛti* in the *Himitsu nenbutsu shō*" (pp. 236–277), argues that Dōhan understands the *nenbutsu* not as a simple recitation but as a mantra nondual with the "vital breath" of life and consciousness, making all existence an uninterrupted form of buddha contemplation (Skt. *buddhānusmṛti*). Chapter 9, "Sukhāvatī in the *Himitsu nenbutsu shō*" (pp. 278–288), presents Dōhan's view of the Pure Land as nondual with one's own purified mind and explores how he interprets affairs like deathbed visions of rebirth (Jpn. *raigō* 来迎) as being the same as attaining buddhahood in this very body (Jpn. *sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏). The main content of the work is capped off by his conclusion (pp. 289–292) and the "Appendix: *Himitsu nenbutsu shō*" (pp. 293–384), which presents the complete translation of all three fascicles of the work.

Very few books in Buddhist studies provide such an in-depth treatment of a work, especially a short and "minor" work. *Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism* stands as a great example of how one can perform an explication that sheds light fully on a text, its author, and that author's influences and tradition. While it could be considered an effective treatment specifically of Dōhan's work, I think it will stand as *the* essential and comprehensive reference work for the topic of Esoteric Pure Land in East Asia. Proffitt shows how, in the study of East Asian Buddhism, we must follow through with the broader practice in Buddhist studies of reading broadly, identifying influences, and avoiding simplistic paradigms of sectarian divisions and narratives of "overlaps" and "syncretism."

Proffitt treats the subject matter of his study with erudition and effectiveness. As such, I have very little to criticize about the content of his work. However, as an overall concern, the title of the work, "Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism," and the use of the term throughout the book, confused me. Proffitt very effectively argues that the sectarian terms "Esoteric Buddhism" and "Pure Land Buddhism" are anachronisms that obscure the very messy and fluid nature of pre-historical

Buddhism. While he calls this a "heuristic construct" for his analysis (p. 55), I feel like the hard work he spends in deconstructing categories is ill-spent when it results in the establishment of another term, used throughout the work, which feels like a concrete "thing" serving to make these texts and practices seem more ordered and systematic than the "messy, tangled web" that they were (p. xv). Whether it was the choice of the author or the publisher is impossible for me to know as a reader. Still, I find the dissertation title, "Mysteries of Speech and Breath," to be more effective—though I understand that the author (rightly) wanted to emphasize the broader nature of this work. Proffitt is a very self-aware author and puts effort into criticizing the traditional "string of pearls" historiography (p. 118), yet he presents a largely elite-centered narrative with various sections focused on enumerating texts and masters (especially chapters 2 and 5). In fairness, he does this very effectively, and I can see myself frequently returning to this book as a reference for these figures and works in the future.

My primary substantive concerns with the book relate to editorial decisions. Whether these decisions were made by the publisher, the series editors, the copy editors, or the author is impossible to know as a reader. Still, they need to be sorted out before the work is sent to the press. Conventions regarding quotations from source materials are inconsistent. In chapters 2 and 3, there are extensive block quotations from Chinese with the source text given in full (pp. 63, 76, 78, 103), whereas all other chapters do not have the source text. A similar issue is why and when some titles are translated, Sanskritized, or transliterated—an explanation on this would be helpful, and consistency (particularly when various conventions are used within the same quotation) would be beneficial. For example, "The *Sokushin jobutsugi* says: 'The word *adhiṣṭhāna* [expressed in Chinese as *jiachi* (加持), meaning "adding and holding"]. . . ." Here, we have the Japanese title of a work, followed by the Sanskritized version of 加持, and then an explanation in square brackets (without indication as to whether this is the author's insertion or a comment in the original; on this issue, see below), together with the pinyin transcription (which of course refers to modern Mandarin). Otherwise, straightforward Sino-Japanese transliterations of Sanskrit are used; for example, 羯磨 (Hepburn: *katsuma*), i.e., Skt. *karma,* is given on three pages as *katsuma* (pp. 280, 339, & 365), but elsewhere we see "karma-body" (p. 306). This is not a significant issue, but it should be noted so that the reader knows if the author is referring to

something special—why *katsuma* here but *adhiṣṭhāna* in the earlier situation? As for Sanskrit words, some get diacritics, whereas some do not. Japanese Hepburn transliterations get macrons for long ō, but Pinyin does not get accent marks. The appendix has several typos (e.g., "the nature of the union Buddha and all beings" rather than "the nature of the union of the Buddha and all beings" on p. 311). The gender of Avalokiteśvara is not satisfactorily treated; on page 71, Proffitt notes that "Avalokiteśvara is often depicted as female in East Asia." Still, if this issue is raised, then the historical background of this identity[6] and when it became widespread in Japan should be discussed. When Dōhan was writing, was he viewing Avalokiteśvara as female, male, or androgynous? The appendix, within the same section, first uses the female pronoun ("holds in her hand," p. 322), followed by the masculine ("his beautiful appearance," p. 324), and then the plural pronoun ("holds the lotus in their hand," p. 325).

The distinction between parentheses and square brackets is unclear and inconsistent. There is no section on "translator's conventions" to clarify why and when one is used over the other, which would clearly resolve the matter. For example, the beginning of the appendix (p. 293) has an insertion from a different edition in parentheses marked by a note, with insertions by the author in square brackets (as one would expect). However, elsewhere there are many insertions in parentheses without notes—e.g., "the single unadulterated taste (of camphor?)" (p. 330), where it is unclear whether this is a note to mark that the author is unsure of the meaning, or this is a note in the original, or from an alternate edition. Insertions corresponding to Dōhan's words using square brackets are combined with an asterisk (p. 341), and even two insertions, one following the other, from the same page of a different edition, with one using parentheses and the other using square brackets, each with a note to the source (p. 358). To compound the issue with square brackets and parentheses further, one term inserted with an opening square bracket is closed by a single parenthesis, and there is a single opening square bracket that is not closed at the end of the same page (p. 341). Finally, italicization of works is inconsistent, e.g., *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* is italicized on page 332 but not on page 334.

6. E.g., the work of Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (Columbia University Press, 2000).

None of these editorial matters are substantive concerns that affect the quality of the contents of Proffitt's work or writing, which are among the most transparent and rigorous. I can only wholeheartedly recommend this work to all colleagues working on Pure Land and Esoteric Buddhism—those working on the former may thereby come to see the latter in their work and vice versa.

The Buddhist Tantras: A Guide. By David B. Gray. Oxford University Press, 2023. vii + 277 pages. Includes 2 maps, notes, bibliography, and index. $110 (hardcover), ISBN 9780197623831; $25.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780197623848.

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From the end of the 1960s to the early 1970s, the study of the tantras started with a few scholars willing to face into the headwinds of disapproval that treated tantric Buddhism as decadent, disgusting, unseemly, primitive, superstitious, and wholly unworthy of serious academic study. Early instances include such works as Shinichi Tsuda's study of the *Saṃvarodaya tantra* and Christopher S. George's study of the *Candamahārosana tantra*, both dating from 1974.[1] By the mid-1970s several Tibetan lamas had moved to the West, which, together with the legitimacy of the Dalai Lama, made the study of tantric Buddhism both more accessible and more acceptable.[2]

1. Shinichi Tsuda, *The Saṁvarodaya-tantra: Selected Chapters* (Hokuseido Press, 1974); and Christopher S. George, *The Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa Tantra, Chapters I–VII: A Critical Edition and English Translation* (The American Oriental Society, 1974).
2. An aside in the form of a nostalgic reminiscence: The scope of the Tibetan Buddhist canon was made evident to me in the early 1980s each time that students gathered in Dr. Lewis Lancaster's office at the University of California, Berkeley, for a seminar. Two very large bookcases lined one wall, floor to ceiling, probably eight feet wide, filled with the Tokyo reprint of the Peking edition of the canon, which despite the bulk was a photomechanical reproduction in reduced size with five folios per page. And once, as a kind of special treat, Dr. Lancaster took us to the basement of the building where in an entire room specially equipped with a dry fire suppression system was devoted to the version of the canon collected by Evans-Wentz. These were the

The historical importance of the tantras for Buddhist history is clearly evident when we consider that both the Chinese and Tibetan canons contain large sections devoted to tantric texts. The esoteric section (密教部) of the Taishō canon (vols. 18, 19, 20, 21) contains 573 texts (T. 848–1420).[3] Likewise, the tantra section (རྒྱུད་སྡེ།) of the Kangyur contains 468 texts (Toh. 360–827).[4] Beyond those specific sections, both canons contain additional tantric texts in the form of commentaries, ritual manuals, *dhāraṇī* texts, and so on.[5] The extent and complexity of the tantric literature, both primary and secondary, in just these two canonic languages is both overwhelming and confusing. Making the situation even more difficult to untangle, there are also a number of different category systems that are used. It is, in my experience at least, easy to feel overwhelmed by the extent and complexity of the tantric Buddhist canon.

We are fortunate, therefore, to have the guidance of a master scholar, David B. Gray, one of the most accomplished figures in the study of the Buddhist tantras. His translation and editing of the *Cakrasamvara tantra* are exemplary instances of careful and systematic

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traditional bindings of folios between boards, with beautiful brocade covers wrapping each volume.

3. For a summary of the contents of these volumes, see Rolf W. Giebel, "*Taishō* Volumes 18–21," in *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, ed. Charles D. Orzech, Henrik H. Sørensen, and Richard K. Payne (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011).

4. These counts for both canons are actually approximations. The Taishō canon includes variants (such as T. 864a and 864b) that increase the number of actual texts, bringing the total to 618 (Gray, *The Buddhist Tantras*, 163). Likewise the Kanjur contains appended texts (such as Toh. 505 and 505a), as well as the same text appearing in different sections, such as tantra and *dhāraṇī* (Toh. 518 is also Toh. 857). While the Kangyur contains seventeen texts from the rNyingma rgyud bum (Toh. 828–844), there are several rNyingma tantric texts outside the Kangyur collection. The Tibetan and Himalayan Library "Master Edition" counts 965 texts in the rNyingma rgyud bum, https://thlib.org/classical-literature/#/catalog/ngb/eds.

5. For a summary of texts outside the four volumes discussed by Giebel, see Henrik H. Sørensen, "Textual Material Relating to Esoteric Buddhism in China Outside the *Taishō*, Vols. 18–21," in *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, ed. Charles D. Orzech, Henrik H. Sørensen, and Richard K. Payne (Brill, 2011).

textual studies.[6] An important and still valuable summary of the history of the tantric canon is Gray's "On the Very Idea of a Tantric Canon," which I regularly assign as reading for seminars on methods in the study of Buddhism.[7] Gray has also published many important scholarly essays that focus on various aspects of the tantric tradition. Gray's expertise informs his work in this volume.

The volume comprises an introduction and five numbered chapters. "Introducing the Buddhist Tantras" is a brief overview of the volume's goals and structure. The first chapter, "Dates, Authorship, and Historical Context," is the most specifically textually oriented. While a great deal has been written attempting to define "tantra," Gray here provides a succinct explanation of the Buddhist tantric traditions as those which "take as their central scriptures the 'tantras,' a term that includes those texts that are called tantras, and which by extension should include closely related, ritually focused texts, such as the esoteric sutras, *dhāraṇī* collections, and *kalpa* ritual texts" (p. 8). This is not an uncontroversial approach to defining the tradition, as several figures in the field have dismissed and even disparaged a textually based approach for understanding the landscape of Buddhist tantra. It is, however, elegant in its simplicity and clarity—there is a definite body of texts, identified as "tantras" by members of the tradition for more than a millennium. That provides a clear starting point that lists of characteristics, idiosyncratically compiled by different scholars working in different contexts and toward different goals, do not provide. Gray does then go on to sketch out several other important dimensions of the tradition, indicative of topics further expanded later in his work.

This introductory chapter then goes on to explain what is known about the early history of the tantras and how it is known. The early influences formative for the tantras are also introduced, along with

6. David B. Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra (The Discourse of Śrī Heruka): A Study and Annotated Translation* (Columbia University Press, 2007), and idem, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra (The Discourse of Śrī Heruka): Editions of the Sanskrit and Tibetan Texts* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

7. David B. Gray, "On the Very Idea of a Tantric Canon: Myth, Politics and the Formation of the Bka' 'gyur," *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies*, no. 5 (2009): 1–37, https://old.thlib.org/collections/texts/jiats/#!jiats=/05/gray/. As a kind of matching bookend to Gray's essay, I also regularly assign Steven Collins, "On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 15 (1990): 89–126.

the historical settings in which they were created. Key to understanding how the tantras have been understood within the tradition are the myths of origin—myths concerning the rediscovery, or recovery, of texts, and myths regarding the conversion—sometimes violent—of Śaivite deities to the path of the buddhas.

The second chapter considers "Structure and Contents," including the important issue of what makes the tantras authoritative. The connection back to a buddha, whether Śākyamuni or another awakened one, provides the lineage relation that authenticates a tantra's teachings. Such lineages also frame the issues of secrecy and initiation, and although all lineage claims are social constructs rather than reliably historical relationships, as Gray says what is important to understand is the constraints and conventions within which such claims were created (p. 56).[8] One way of understanding the narrative setting of the tantras is suggested by Asaṅga, who indicates three questions: Who spoke the teaching, to whom was the teaching addressed, and where did the teaching take place (p. 56)? Famously, many of the tantras are taught by figures other than the Buddha Śākyamuni to audiences that include countless deities and communities beyond the fourfold sangha (monks, nuns, and male and female lay adherents) and in locations outside the landscape of ancient India.

Gray gives a cogent summary of the history and developmental motivation of the tantras, saying that "While the Buddhist tantras seem to have originated as extracanonical collections of magical rituals drawn from diverse sources, by the seventh century the idea developed that these works were the textual basis for a distinct tradition that claimed to have preserved special teachings for rapidly achieving awakening" (p. 57). This process of transformation from collections of rituals to scripture adds nuance to the distinction made by Anne Blackburn between formal and practical canons.[9] Blackburn has elaborated on the

8. One is reminded here of John McRae's four rules for the study of Zen: (1) It's not true, therefore it's more important; (2) lineage assertions are as wrong as they are strong; (3) precision implies inaccuracy; and (4) Romanticism breeds cynicism. John McRae, *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (University of California Press, 2004), xix–xx.

9. Anne Blackburn, "Looking for the *Vinaya*: Monastic Discipline in the Practical Canons of the Theravāda," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 22, no. 2 (1999): 281–309.

phrase "practical canon" to indicate the collection of works, whether formally canonic, paracanonic, or non-canonic, that are actually used by Buddhist monastics in conducting their activities, such as rituals for the lay community.[10]

The chapter goes on to consider the language of the tantras, both the language in which they were recorded and the use of a system of codes (*sandhyābhāṣa*), as well as doctrines and practices of the texts. Thus moving beyond the strictly textual, Gray discusses some of the key concepts of the tantras. Of particular import is the practice of "deity yoga" (p. 80). Also called *buddhayoga*, both terms refer to the meaning of yoga as "union" rather than as the system of bodily postures and breathing exercises often associated with the term in contemporary popular religious discourse. The union involved here is the identification of the practitioner and the deity that constitutes the central action in many tantric rituals. Gray clearly explicates the basis of such practices in the Mahāyāna teaching of emptiness (*śunyatā*) and skillful means (*upāya*) (p. 82).

In his third chapter Gray considers the "Dissemination and Reception of the Tantras." During the seventh and eighth centuries tantric texts were rapidly transmitted across Buddhist Asia—including Southeast Asia, an area still often associated only with the texts of the Pāli canon—and the map on p. 108 indicates the pattern of this spread. At the same time, the transgressive practices taught in many of these texts also created resistance. Beyond the early spread, Gray goes on to discuss the establishment of tantric Buddhism across the tenth through nineteenth centuries. This period saw not only ongoing transmission of teachings and texts, but also the establishment of tantric Buddhist institutions in different forms in Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, Southeast Asia, and Japan. Much of this institutionalization was linked to state formation, which, however, also made it subject to sudden changes—and indeed destruction—when royal affiliations were switched from one form of Buddhism to another or from Buddhist to

10. This idea can be expanded to include texts employed by lay Buddhist adherents engaged in living forms of Buddhism. At perhaps its most expansive this understanding would also incorporate texts that would not classically be considered "Buddhist" but which form a regular part of living Buddhism. Some contemporary Buddhist meditation teachers feel free to quote the poetry of Rumi or Mary Oliver, or draw on the sayings of Albert Einstein or Marin Luther King, Jr., or cite fragments of Plato or Wittgenstein.

Hindu forms. Into the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries, tantric forms of Buddhism continue to play institutional forms in Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, Mongolia, and Japan (see map p. 135). Japanese immigrants from the early twentieth century, and then refugee Tibetan lamas in the second half of the twentieth century, have brought tantric practices, teachings, and institutions to the West.

"Canonical Status of the Tantras," the fourth chapter, examines the variety of different kinds of tantric texts, such as root tantras and explanatory tantras—the latter not being simply commentaries as that term is used in modern Western religious studies, but rather further revelations of tantric teachings that are related to each other as part of a practice lineage. In addition, there are texts by masters that are more explicitly commentarial in nature.

Further complicating the textual landscape are the variety of different classificatory systems, some originating in India and Tibet and others in East Asia. The compilation of canonic collections of tantric texts began in the seventh century with the "Wizard Collection," collections held by individual temples such as those in Nepal, and similarly with the early Nyingma tantras translated in Tibet in the eighth to tenth century. Compilations continued with the integration of tantras into the comprehensive canons, such as Tibetan and Chinese (but excluding, of course, the Pāli).

"Transgression, Censorship, and Interpretation" is the title of Gray's fifth and final chapter. Transgression opens up issues related to both the translation of the tantras and censorship of them. In some cases the sponsors of translation, such as the royal courts in Tibet and China, were judged by translators to not be receptive of transgressive teachings and seem to have self-censored which texts or which sections of texts to translate. In Tang China, Amoghavajra for example emphasized positive and protective functions of ritual practices (p. 171). Consequently, different strategies were brought into play in the process of translation, such that for example what might seem to have been a mistaken translation may have been purposely bowdlerized. Different translation strategies help us to understand differences between Tibetan and Chinese translations of the same text. Additionally,

texts in India did not remain static,[11] such that the Tibetan and Chinese may have translated different versions of the same text.

Adding to the variety created by differing translation strategies are different strategies for explaining the meaning of texts. This is relevant both historically and in the present day. Contemporary apologists have, for example, given doctrinally sophisticated interpretations of texts while ignoring or glossing over transgressive understandings that seem just as valid—a process of "sanitizing" the tradition.

Clearly this work is much more than a strictly textual study of tantric texts. Gray does that but also helps us to understand the complex origins of these texts, the way in which ritual and yogic practices inform the texts, the transmission of the texts and consequently of tantric Buddhism across the entirety of the Buddhist world, the ways in which historical contexts have influenced the translation, and interpretation of these texts. This work is, in fact, an excellent overview of the tantric Buddhist tradition as seen through the texts that provide a fundamental grounding for delineating what that tradition is.

11. One has at times encountered the presumption that "sacred" texts must be held by members of a tradition in veneration such that no one would presume to change a text. This idea conforms to notions of religion as concerned with eternal and immutable teachings—a presumption that is in no way supported as being universally true. Therefore, it is necessary that religious studies not presume that there is a single category of text as revelation.