

Berkwitz, Stephen C., *South Asian Buddhism: A Survey* (London-New York: Routledge, 2009), 244 pp. + xi, £ 65.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 415 45249 6; £ 18.99 (paperback), ISBN 978 0 415 45248 9.

The summary on p. i of the present volume promises the following:

*South Asian Buddhism* presents a comprehensive historical survey of the full range of Buddhist traditions throughout South Asia from the beginnings of the religion up to the present. ... [It] offers a broad, yet detailed perspective on the history, culture, and thought of the various Buddhist traditions that developed in South Asia. Incorporating findings from the latest research on Buddhist texts and cultures, this work provides a critical, historically based survey of South Asian Buddhism that will be useful for students, scholars, and general readers.

Very much the same ideas are echoed in the author's Acknowledgements (x), which speak of "a one-volume survey of the history of South Asian Buddhism" and particularly characterize the resulting volume as a "cultural history of Buddhism in South Asia." The idea of producing a reliable and up-to-date survey of "South Asian Buddhism" is most welcome; at least in English, no such volume exists. What is more, one would be very hard pressed to suggest a reading list of several volumes, or even a list of articles, that would cover, in anything approaching a reliable and up-to-date manner, "the history, culture, and thought of the various Buddhist traditions that developed in South Asia." At the same time, this absence in itself might serve as a stark warning to any scholar who would attempt a "broad yet detailed" survey in the space of a single, relatively small volume. That the author of this volume, then, has been able to fulfill its promise only in part should come as no surprise. It might very well be that no single scholar could accomplish this task. Even beyond the large scale obstacles to such an undertaking, however, this volume displays various shortcomings which could have been avoided, a great many of them simply if the publisher and editor (assuming the publisher still employs such a person) had done their jobs.

Problems appear at the outset. Geographically, the work promises to cover "India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and the ancient region of Gandhāra in parts of modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan." The author does not offer any rationale for this (implicit) definition of South Asia, and it is curious that there is no historical problematization here (or elsewhere) of the nation-state designations of India and so on. (He writes on

p. 163 “Bhutan is formally considered to be part of South Asia,” without further explanation of the nature or source of this formal consideration). Depending on the definition one wishes to adopt for South Asia, a reader might expect some coverage of the Maldives (though little is yet known about Buddhism there) or even of Burma (taking “South Asia” in a British colonial sense) or, from the point of view of Buddhism rather than geo-politics, certainly Sikkim if Bhutan is to be dealt with. The conclusion one may reach from the author’s simple enumeration of nation-states is that he has not thought sufficiently carefully about his definition of South Asia. This might not make much difference to scholars, who among other things automatically translate between terms such as “India,” “South Asia” and “the Indian subcontinent,” even if they themselves have likewise not thought very critically about the unclear edges implicit in these terms. But the volume is aimed, as the author tells us, at a range of readers, for many of whom such a critical starting point would be a welcome revelation.

Who are those readers meant to be? The Acknowledgements speak of “a broad audience of scholars, students, and general readers.” We must evaluate the author’s success at his self-assigned task in light of this avowed aim to meet the needs of this range of readers. This is the second perhaps impossible, and at the very least daunting, challenge the author has set for himself: not only to cover in a single volume a huge set of topics, but to make this coverage meaningful to “scholars, students, and general readers.”

It is a strong point of the book that the author is not content to cease his coverage with the demise of Buddhism on the Indian mainland in roughly the thirteenth century. Instead, he surveys Buddhism from the earliest period until the (near) present, dealing with continuous Buddhist traditions in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and briefly Bangladesh, as well as neo-Buddhism and Tibetan exile Buddhism in India itself. This coverage is laudable. What is more problematic in the overall context of a “one-volume survey of the history of South Asian Buddhism” is the devotion of 32 % (66 of the main text’s 205 pages) to “later developments,” after the twelfth or thirteenth century, including also the brief surveys of Nepal and Bhutan. One would of course have to offer an argument for relative importance, concerning which not everyone would agree, but at least from the point of view of the scholar interested in Buddhism tout court, or for those who are interested in Buddhisms which trace their roots back to India (i.e., all non-Indian Buddhisms), what is most relevant is the foundational phases of the tradition, and therefore Buddhism in India before the 13th century.

To devote only two thirds of an already brief book to this topic suggests something about the author's priorities.

The volume's treatment of early Mahāyāna, being based on recent scholarship, is an advance on what we find in many other textbooks. To my mind, however, it still suffers from an undue emphasis on texts which represent historically Japanese interests (filtered through Max Müller and others) as much or more than traditional Indian foci. The author relies closely on recent publications, which allows him to take brief account of several scriptures often ignored by scholars. However, given the task he has undertaken, it would have been better had he sought to define the ground for himself. As it is, for the most part the view of the terrain offered here continues to ignore the bulk of scriptures which Indian sources themselves suggest to have been the most important and influential, works such as the *Tathāgataḡuhyaka*, *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa*, *Samāḡhirāja*, *Kāśyapapriḡvarta*, *Adhyāśayasamcodana*, and so on. The author is therefore, in this sense, a victim of the immaturity of the field in general. This cannot be helped. What could have been done, however, is to highlight for the reader the inherent bias of such an approach. (Another question is how the author on p. 92 knows that the *Samḡbhīnirmocana*, *Avatamsaka* [the whole thing?] and the *Laṅkāvatāra* date to around the third century CE. Since the author is not likely to have reached this conclusion on his own, this stands as an example of his uncritical reliance on the publications of others).

In his survey of ancient Indian Buddhism the author deals, as any survey must, with both the logical/epistemological tradition and tantric traditions. I am not competent to critique his treatments of either of these topics, and would point out in this respect only that any book which attempts to do justice to objects such as maṅḡalas deserves better reproductions than the plate on page 137, which is so dark and obscure as to be useless.

Much as I would like to welcome this book for its strengths of breadth, if nothing else, there are so many basic problems that it is hard to see how it could fully satisfy any of the three groups it professes to target, students, scholars or general readers. While each of these communities expects and needs different things, all of them have a right to expect reliable, consistent information. On this basic criterion, I am afraid that this book, and its editing, leave a great deal to be desired. To begin with the basics, the treatment of the various languages is problematic: here those who prepared the book for publication have simply not done their jobs. The map of India facing the first page of the first section has "Maharashtra" alongside "Kasmira" alongside "Rajagrha." Throughout the book, Pāli and Sanskrit alternate in a

fashion that defies explanation. Sometimes both forms are given, sometimes one, without any discernible reason. We find together the Prātimokṣa and bhikkhus (p. 36), a therā named Moggaliputtatissa presiding over monks versed in the Tripiṭaka (p. 45), Abhidharma texts delivered in the Tāvātimsa heaven (p. 47), and so on. Both languages are handled cavalierly. Neither *anitya* nor *anicca* (p. 12) mean “impermanence,” but rather “impermanence”; the Pāli equivalent of Skt. *karmavācanā* is not *kammavācanā* but rather *kammavācā* (p. 37); *aṭṭhagarudharmā* is a hybrid monster (pp. 38, 40); there is no such thing as Karoṣṭhī (p. 42, correctly Kharoṣṭhī on p. 50); we find inconsistently Kāśmīra (p. 45) and Kaśmīra (p. 60); *Mahāvibhāṣā* (p. 45) is translated “Great Options,” but a few pages later (p. 57) correctly “Great Commentary”; *Trīṃśatikā* (p. 108) is elsewhere (pp. 92, 111) correctly *Trīṃśikā*; the scholar Atīśa’s name is to be so spelt (as on p. 138), not Atīśa (p. 107); it is not explained that Vibhajyavāda and Vibhajavāda are the same thing; *kalyāṇamitra* (122) can hardly mean ‘beautiful friend’; the form (p. 143) Dhammarucis must be Dhammarucikas; we find *sāsana* (without definition, as far as I noticed) even when the context otherwise calls for Sanskrit; *Pañcarakṣa* (p. 162) must be *Pañcarakṣā*.

Not all problems can be attributed to editing, however. A number of statements require, at the very least, some careful qualification. When the chain of causation (*pratītyasamutpāda* is not ‘Dependent Co-arising’ but simply Dependent Arising; the *sam*<sup>o</sup> is pleonastic) is discussed (pp. 7–8), no indication is given that the final form of twelve members resulted from a process which saw several other versions considered. Therefore, assuming for the moment that something can be said about the historical Buddha at all, it is not true to state that he meditated on this system, unless the author wishes to claim that the twelve member classical form is the ‘original,’ and alternatives later mistakes. It is another question why a detailed description of a twelve member chain of causation should find a place within such a book. Or why, if this topic is to be discussed, some accessible example such as that of the *bhavaçakra* is not deployed. As another example of the same, on p. 63 we read that “The matrices tend to group the different *dharma*s according to other characteristics, such as whether they are wholesome (*kuśala*), unwholesome (*akuśala*), or morally neutral (*avyākṛta*); whether they are with-outflow (*sāsrava*) or are outflow-free (*anāsrava*); and whether they are conditioned or unconditioned.” It is nearly impossible to see this as meaningful in the context of a short volume on the entirety of South Asian Buddhism. Likewise, an 11 page appendix is devoted to “Numerical lists of Buddhist concepts,” with such items as the “four perverted views” (seeing

permanence where there is impermanence, purity where there is impurity, pleasure where there is suffering, Self where there is No-Self) or the “Nine aesthetic sentiments (*rasa*),” the latter of which is particularly hard to understand here. Even granting the importance of such lists in Buddhist scholasticism, without a context and an elaboration of their significance within a system, they are essentially devoid of meaning.

The historicity of traditional themes causes trouble elsewhere as well. The presentation of the development of the hagiography of the Buddha (pp. 8–9) suggests that there was a non-mythological core to which “details were added over time to stress the saintly nature of the Buddha and to express the religious interests of the Buddhist community.” This seems to me dangerously close to suggesting that the ‘original’ picture of the Buddha was one of a man who was later divinized. I see no reason to believe that the earliest tellings of the hagiography were not thoroughly ‘mythologized.’ In a discussion of previous Buddhas (p. 26), it is stated that “The previous Buddhas ... are important chiefly for confirming that the Bodhisattva in some of his previous lifetimes would one day become a Buddha named Gotama.” Without specifying to whom they would have been important in this way this statement is not meaningful. It also implies what seems unlikely, namely that there was no serious cult of previous Buddhas, something which is contradicted by an inscription of Aśoka.

Sometimes obvious conclusions are presented too tentatively. On p. 29 the author writes that “one scholar has suggested that the auspicious symbols actually served to influence the Buddha’s life story, wherein an ancient Buddhist visual culture led to particular elaborations on the narrative itself.” The wording implies that this is unexpected, but it seems hardly tenable that there was not mutual influence between different traditions of articulating stories, verbal and visual. In other places, the author might have profited by greater familiarity with recent research. On p. 36 we read that “Each order’s *Prātimokṣa* begins by listing four *pārājika* offences, which are violations or ‘defeats’ deemed serious enough to warrant expulsion from the order.” As Shayne Clarke has shown, this is not an entirely correct understanding of the *pārājikas*, which only in repeated cases sanction expulsion, otherwise placing the offender into a liminal category neither monk nor lay. This may also stand as an example of the author’s tendency toward (over) reliance of what has been written about Buddhism based on Pāli sources. As another example, on p. 43 the author writes that “a number of different *Vinayas* contain accounts of this [first] council, which was held after a monk named Subhadra happily stated that since the Buddha had died, it

was then possible for the monks to abandon the regulations he enforced.” Only the Pāli Vinaya names this monk Subhadra.

There seems to be some political correctness at work on pp. 38–39, when the author refers to “the Buddha’s apparent reluctance to ordain women.” In so far as there is any evidence at all, the tradition is unanimous in its reporting of the Buddha’s serial refusal to ordain women. The author seeks to explain away his discomfort by appealing to “an anxiety about transgressing cultural norms about a woman’s place in society” or a “[mere concern] to assist the monks in upholding the demands of celibacy,” or again by raising the possibility that “it is unlikely that these rules were imposed by the Buddha himself, but rather they were the results of efforts undertaken by later writers to subordinate nuns to monks.” To be sure, it is absolutely essential to question the tradition(s), but to do so in this manner as a justification for the existence of stories or myths that moderns find unhappy is not good historical method (though it may be good theology). It is true that, based on first principles, conclusions may be reached that differ from those reached by those within the tradition itself. Therefore, for instance, one may be well able to argue that Buddhist notions of non-self or the like make gender discrimination incoherent, and that such discrimination arose in a particular social context. This cannot, however, give license to suggest that therefore the Buddha did not mean to say x, y or z. Any such claims belong to the realm of theology. This gender sensitivity has affected the author’s historical presentation in other ways as well. In the following paragraph, the author states that female renunciants “flourished in large numbers in ancient South Asia. Many of these women became renowned for their spiritual attainments and for their donations of Buddha images and monastic dwellings.” Indeed, Schopen has shown that nuns donated images and so on to the monastic communities, but as far as I know there is no evidence that women were ordained in great numbers (and what are “great numbers?”), not to mention that “many” became famous for their spiritual attainments. Such a suggestion at least requires support with some sort of reference, lacking here. Another example of the same trend is found in the author’s discussion of misogynistic depictions of women (p. 41), wherein he states that these “may represent either an innate gender bias or a tool for male monastics to control their passions.” Indeed, both are possible. But is it not equally likely that a karma-driven ideology which sees women as less good than men played some part? Such a view has the added advantage of reinforcing the emic Buddhist worldview approach over etic explanations.

Some issues arise due to a particular emphasis, or the absence of relevant definitions. On p. 46, we read that “while it is possible to speak of a Theravāda Canon and a Sarvāstivāda Canon, among others, it is necessary to recall that such textual corpuses were the products of centuries of the transmission, revision, and at times even the loss of texts.” This is true, though it might have been better to indicate that in the case of the ‘Sarvāstivāda Canon’ the loss of text is extensive (although recent discoveries appear to be improving the situation). A few sentences later the author, in speaking of the sūtra piṭaka, states that “In theory this material, like the rest of the canonical texts, originates with discourses preached by the Buddha. However, it is likely that only a measure of the texts as we now have them can be directly linked with the Buddha himself.” I am unaware that anything whatsoever we have now can be “directly linked with the Buddha himself” through academically sound arguments based on any sort of evidence.

In the generally good treatment of important aspects of the Mahāyāna, some things cause trouble. On p. 52 it is stated the Mahāyāna was “never deemed large or significant enough to be formally addressed and refuted in a text from a Mainstream school.” Since the key terms here are not defined, it is hard to know precisely what is meant, but it could perhaps have been mentioned that the *Abhidharmadīpa* does explicitly refer to the Mahāyāna, and that Vaitulya(vāda) is elsewhere referred to. On p. 75, we read that “Their preferences for meditation and wilderness dwelling notwithstanding, the early proponents of the Great Vehicle appear to have privileged textual study over other forms of Buddhist practice.” There is no indication of how the author knows this. Moreover, it seems to me at least a reasonable hypothesis that since almost all the evidence we have which might bear on this question comes from texts, the means available to us to adjudicate such a claim are seriously skewed to begin with. On the same page the author refers to “The texts privileged by Mahāyāna proponents,” but nowhere does he tell us when this took place, or where, or quite what he means by this expression. In his discussion of the existential status of the Mahāyāna (pp. 104–105), the author writes “Even the apparently vast collection of Mahāyāna sūtras beginning from around the first century CE is deceiving, since few of these titles have appeared in the earliest manuscript finds along the Silk Route before the fifth century.” I am unable to understand this logic. First of all, of course, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Secondly, the existence of Chinese translations of Mahāyāna texts from the first century, as well as the growing number of

fragments of such texts identified among recent discoveries in Gāndhārī, prove the existence of these texts in the first century. What is deceptive about this?

The author begins his discussion of Yogācāra by stating (p. 92): “Within the elite circles of Buddhist philosophy, there were apparently many individuals who concluded that Madhyamaka thought, if not nihilistic, was overly intellectual and rested too firmly on abstract reasoning.” The basis for this claim is unclear, and I find it highly unlikely that the scholars he goes on to name, Aśaṅga and Vasubandhu, lived in a world in which the ideas ‘overly intellectual’ or ‘resting too firmly on abstract reasoning’ made sense at all. In the discussion on the same page, only in a traditional sense can Aśaṅga be said to have “authored ... the *Yogācārabhūmi*,” which is characterized as “a lengthy compendium of Buddhist doctrine and terminology intended to serve as a guide for practice.” While perhaps not strictly untrue, this is simultaneously true in the sense that the same may be said of almost any such text. The Yogācāra stance(s) on the question of the existence of an external world invite(s) controversy. However, it is clearly too simple to say (as on p. 95) that “Although the totality of all experience is dependent on mind, one should not conclude that there is nothing outside of the mind. the mind simply filters all experience and conditions one’s views and responses.” At the very least, this is not the position of the *Vimśikā*.

In speaking of the tantric *siddha* and *vidyādhara* (p. 126), the author virtually quotes Ron Davidson saying that such “persons made themselves necessary to militaristic rulers by offering them a means to gain power and by providing ethically dubious services—such as prophecy, spirit possession, demonic control, love potions, wealth generation, and magical killing—to influence worldly affairs.” It is not clear from what point of view or to whom such services appear as “ethically dubious” (Davidson’s judgement adopted here without comment or attribution), but to label them as such seems to, at best, miss the opportunity to understand how such relations work and what they might have meant to self-professed Buddhist practitioners. In his discussion of “Tantric Buddhist ritual,” the author begins by referring to “The great variety of esoteric Buddhist *tantras*, numbering several thousand texts by some reckonings.” What he must mean is ‘tantric texts,’ since *tantra* denotes a class of text which, while large, is not to be numbered in the thousands.

The author begins his treatment of “Later developments in the South Asian Buddhist world” (p. 139) with the good observation that “in addi-

tion to rehearsing the theories for the disappearance of Buddhism in India, it is necessary to describe how the tradition was maintained and developed throughout the second millennium in other parts of South Asia.” When he states, however, (p. 142) that “The discovery of Buddhist bronzes in the southeastern coastal town of Nagapattinam, including images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, indicates that Buddhism persisted there for centuries later than in most parts of India,” we are entitled to ask just what “Buddhism” means here, and how we might know. It is well known that images now identified (iconographically or even on the basis of inscriptions) as Buddhist were long worshipped in India as (depicting) Hindu deities; is it not therefore at least possible that “images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas” continued to be produced with some understanding of their identity or role different from one we might arrive at today? It is also curious that in his discussion of the continuation of Buddhism in India the author makes no mention of the Bauls, who at least have been suggested to represent one of the few survivals of Buddhism in India itself.

The author appears to be rather at home in Sri Lanka. However, when (p. 143) he speaks of the Abhayagiri monks, he says: “However, scarcely any of their writings survived the late medieval period, which was marked by frequent invasions by foreign armies.” This appears to imply that the loss of Abhayagiri texts is due to these invasions, when it is much more likely that it occurred thanks to the opposition, at times violent, of the Mahāvihāra.

Modern trends rear their head in various ways. As one example, speaking of “Orientalism,” the author says: “For our purposes, what is relevant here is that the very idea of ‘Buddhism’ as a distinctive world religion originating in South Asia but spreading far beyond the region took shape largely as a result of the scholarly investigations that accompanied efforts to extend colonial knowledge and authority over South Asian lands.” One could make an argument that this is true, but it would have to be an indirect one, and moreover ignore some of the foundational history of the process. Much of what came to be ‘known’ about Buddhism in Europe arose, for example, from the pioneering work of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös, Isak Jacob Schmidt and Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat, none of whom had anything directly to do with the colonialism referred to here. And while Eugène Burnouf contributed his massively influential study of Indian Buddhism based in great part on the manuscripts sent him from Nepal by the British agent Brian Houghton Hodgson, his studies can consequently be said to have “accompanied efforts to extend colonial knowledge and authority over

South Asian lands” only in the most indirect fashion. It is thus not true that studies of Buddhism were inexorably linked to colonialism, much less ‘Orientalism.’

Pages 185–191 are devoted to a discussion of the revival of the order of nuns in Sri Lanka and Nepal. Although no doubt an issue of growing contemporary interest, given the scope of the book and its length, this seems a rather large discussion of what is, overall, a historically marginal topic. We find here also a few errors, such as the reference (p. 188) that “the ordination of new *bhikkhunīs* depended on the presence of older *bhikkhunīs*.” The important point is monastic seniority, that is, time since ordination, not chronological age. Another difficult point is the claim (p. 189) that “The numbers of Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* continues to grow steadily, with around a few hundred *bhikkhunīs* recognized in Sri Lanka by the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century.” The author does not specify who recognizes these women as *bhikkhunīs*, and more interestingly, who does not.

The book contains a number of minor but annoying grammatical mistakes that, again, should have been caught by an attentive editor: “The period roughly corresponding with between 1800 BCE and 600 BCE ...” (p. 2); “Therefore, the performance of the sacrifice tended to increase the status and importance of the priests who performed them ...” (p. 3); “Images where the Buddha is depicted with both hands held in front of his chest with the right thumb and forefinger making a circle forms the *dharmacakra mudrā*, which represents him preaching the Dharma. When he is seated with both hands resting palms up on his lap signifies the *dhyāna mudrā* of meditative repose.” (p. 32); “These recitals were mandated in the *poṣadha* ... ceremonies ... wherein all Saṅgha members were required to attend.” (p. 36). The bibliography, as is too often the case these days, does not distinguish reprints from original publications, such that Oldenberg edited the *Vinaya* in 1997 and it was translated by “Davids, T.W.R.” (correctly Rhys Davids, T.W.) and Oldenberg in 1990, Geiger translated the *Mahāvamsa* in 2001, and Mus published his *Barabadur* in 1978; even when a reprint is noted, the original date is lacking (or the whole is inverted, as with Rāhula’s *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, which was apparently published in 1993, but reprinted in 1956). Almost all the cited literature is very new, as if the fundamental classics have lost their importance (and when several important French works are cited, they appear in relatively recent English translations, dated as such, again obscuring the history of the discipline).

It is far from unheard of that those who have never dared to attempt to write a book by themselves are quick to critique—sometimes viciously—the products of those who do try, and yet produce less than perfect results. It is even less unusual that a reviewer assumes as a starting point the ‘perfect’ book he would have written had he taken up the topic, proceeding to criticize an author for not doing as perfect a job as the reviewer would have done (but of course, did not do). It is well to keep this in mind, and work as hard as one can to remove from one’s mind the temptation to read and critique from such an imaginary point of view. That said, the fact remains that the absence of any up-to-date book in English dealing with Buddhism in ‘South Asia’ is certainly an important gap, as the author rightly realized (p. x). It is therefore with regret that I conclude that this volume does not fill this gap. It may indeed not be possible at present for it to be filled by a single volume of single authorship, and perhaps the next to attempt the task should think rather of a team effort, such as that represented by the *New History of Asian Buddhism* (*Shin Ajia Bukkyōshi* 新アジア仏教史, Kōsei, 2010). If this publication and its review here would give even a small impetus to the organization of such a project, I would count that as a very positive outcome indeed.

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