

BOOK REVIEWS

Readings of the Lotus Sūtra. Ed. Stephen F. Teiser and Jacqueline I. Stone. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. xi + 284 pages. Hardcover \$79.50/£55.00, paper \$24.50/£17.00.

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As the editors of this volume say in the preface, the *Lotus Sutra* is one of the most well-known texts of Buddhism. Originally composed in India, it became especially influential in China, Japan and other parts of East Asia after the definitive Chinese rendition of this sutra was made by the great translator Kumārajīva in 406. Beginning with Eugène's Burnouf's *Le lotus de la bonne loi* published in 1852, it has been translated into a number of western languages: a list appended to the volume contains no fewer than fifteen English, French and German translations altogether, another sign of the sutra's great popularity.

According to the preface, the aim of the volume under review is "to introduce the ways in which this seminal text has been read in the history of Buddhism and to open up perspectives for new readers of the scripture" (p. ix). Significantly, it is also the inaugural volume of a new series called "Columbia Readings of Buddhist Literature," whose aim is to introduce the whole range of Buddhist literature in a rigorous yet accessible style. True to the aim of this series, *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra* consists of eight informative and jargon-free essays treating various facets of this sutra, including its doctrinal contents, artistic representations and the different ways in which its teachings were put into practice.

The first chapter, "Interpreting the *Lotus Sūtra*" by Stephen F. Teiser and Jacqueline I. Stone, the co-editors of the volume, provides a wide-ranging overview of this sutra covering its Indian background and its development in China and Japan. This lengthy chapter discusses such issues as the origins of the *Lotus Sutra*, its central doctrines of the one vehicle and the primordial Buddha, its Chinese translations, the creation of Chinese doctrinal

systems based on this text (including Zhiyi's influential Tiantai system), and the teachings of Nichiren, arguably the most influential devotee of the *Lotus Sutra* in Buddhist history. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that this chapter attempts to situate the genesis of the *Lotus*, considered to be a relatively early Mahayana sutra, in light of the most recent hypotheses concerning the origin of the Mahayana Buddhist movement. Earlier scholarship has assumed that the Mahayana was a monolithic movement emphasizing the doctrines of emptiness and bodhisattva practice. Recent studies, however, have suggested that the Mahayana consisted of multiple local communities stressing different teachings and soteriological schemes. For example, although the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* stress insight into emptiness, a close reading of the *Lotus Sutra* shows that references to the doctrine of emptiness are minimal. In a similar vein, unlike the *Lotus Sutra*, which maintains that all Buddhist practitioners must follow the bodhisattva path to achieve complete buddhahood, sutras like the *Inquiry of Uṛga* describe the bodhisattva path as a possibility for only the elite few. These examples suggest the existence of multiple streams within the early Mahayana movement and that the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra* were just one of a number of competing strands within Mahayana Buddhism current among the adherents of this movement.

In the second chapter, "Expedient Devices, the One Vehicle and the Life Span of the Buddha," Carl Bielefeldt provides a detailed and useful summary of the contents of the *Lotus Sutra*, focusing in particular on its central doctrines of the one vehicle (and the related notion of expedient devices) and the primordial Buddha (described in the sutra's "Life Span of the Buddha" chapter). Bielefeldt here takes issue with the idea that the *Lotus Sutra* is "a medium without a message—that is, a work that has no message apart from the celebration of its own importance" (p. 65). On this view, the *Lotus Sutra*'s central message is a self-referential one of praising itself and the act of upholding this sutra. While this is certainly an important aspect of the sutra's rhetoric, Bielefeldt convincingly argues that the sutra does have a definite message: the Buddha appeared in the world to teach that all beings can attain complete buddhahood.

Among the chapters in this volume, I found the third chapter, "Gender and Hierarchy in the *Lotus Sūtra*" by Jan Nattier, the most thought-provoking. The issue of gender and hierarchy in the *Lotus Sutra* immediately brings to mind the story of the eight-year-old *nāga* girl, who, challenged by Śāriputra, instantaneously turned herself into a male and attained enlight-

enment. This is a famous story, and its message that a woman must first be transformed into a male in order to achieve buddhahood is frequently cited as a typical expression of the patriarchal bias in Buddhism. Nattier insightfully argues that this narrative is imbedded in a wider network of hierarchies, such as those based on age, caste, religious status (specifically the lay/monk distinction), gender and species (human/nonhuman), inherited from earlier Buddhist texts. But, in spite of the pervasive presence of such hierarchies, Nattier sees the *Lotus Sutra* as a revolutionary text in that it sweeps away the clear distinction, assumed in earlier texts, between the *srāśvaka* and bodhisattva paths of practice to preach that all Buddhist practitioners can attain supreme buddhahood. Indeed, the radical character of the sutra is even more evident in its message that buddhahood is not attained through gradual self-cultivation but faith in the sutra itself. This emphasis on faith undermines all distinctions, even one as fundamental as that of lay people and monastics. But this egalitarian approach to practice does not mean that other hierarchies, most notably the one based on gender, are eliminated from the sutra's discourse. The story of the eight-year-old *nāga* girl is especially ambivalent and conveys multiple messages, inasmuch as it shows that "age, gender, and species are not in and of themselves indications of the spiritual level of a human or nonhuman being" (p. 96), even while maintaining that "however spiritually advanced a female character may be, it is essential that she become a male prior to the final attainment of buddhahood" (p. 97). Nattier concludes that, although not all the hierarchies based on age, caste, gender and so forth are eliminated in the sutra, "the significance of these hierarchies was profoundly weakened when placed in the believer's certainty of eventually attaining this glorious goal" (p. 101) of buddhahood.

The next two chapters "The *Lotus Sūtra* and Self-Immolation" by James A. Benn and "Buddhist Practice and the *Lotus Sūtra* in China" by Daniel B. Stevenson, deal with the question of how the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra* were put into practice. The shocking self-immolation of the Vietnamese monk Thich Quang Duc in 1963 focused the world's attention on this Buddhist practice, but its *locus classicus* is to be found in the story of the bodhisattva Medicine King in the *Lotus Sutra*. After recounting this story, Benn describes how self-immolation was performed in medieval China and discusses how Mahayana texts and exegetes sought to justify this practice, which seemingly contravenes the precept against killing oneself. The next chapter by Daniel Stevenson discusses the ways in which Chinese Buddhists

used the *Lotus Sutra* in their daily practices, focusing on the “five practices of the dharma preacher”: the practice of upholding, reading, reciting, explaining, copying the *Lotus Sutra*.

The sixth chapter, “Art of the *Lotus Sūtra*” by Willa Jane Tanabe, is a fascinating guide to the wide range of artwork associated with the *Lotus Sutra*, including illustrated copies of the sutra, the *Lotus* frontispiece paintings, the jeweled stupa mandalas which literally turn the sutra’s text into a jeweled stupa described in the sutra’s “Apparition of the Jeweled Stupa” chapter and the transformation tableaux depicting scenes from the *Lotus Sutra*. Finally, the last two chapters take up the aspects of Nichiren’s thought, “Bodily Reading of the *Lotus Sūtra*” by Ruben L. F. Habito and “Realizing this World as the Buddha Land” by Jacqueline I. Stone, and focus on distinctive aspects of Nichiren’s thought: the “bodily reading” of the *Lotus Sutra* in the former, and the notion that this world is Śākyamuni’s buddha-land in the latter.

The eight essays in this volume provide us with a balanced guide to the *Lotus Sutra* and its place in Buddhist thought and practice. Owing to its immense impact on Buddhist thought, however, the potential number of topics that could have been taken up in a book like this is enormous. Presumably the editors had to make a number of hard decisions as to what to include and exclude. One such example was their decision to focus on the role played by the *Lotus Sutra* in East Asia, made for the understandable (though perhaps debatable) reason that the sutra was far more important there than in South Asia or Tibet (p. 1). But, inevitably, every reader will have his or her list of additional topics that should have been included. To list some of my pet items, I felt that the chapter by Daniel Stevenson would have benefited greatly from a discussion of Huisi’s (515–577) distinctive *Lotus samādhi* practice, especially since Stevenson had written (jointly with Hiroshi Kanno) an excellent study on this topic (Daniel B. Stevenson and Hiroshi Kanno, *The Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra’s Course of Ease and Bliss: An Annotated Translation and Study of Nanyue Huisi’s (515–577) Fahua jing anlexing yi*. Tokyo: The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University, 2006). Moreover, I thought it strange that, even though there are two Nichiren-inspired chapters, there was none on Saichō, the founder of the Japanese Tendai school. It was, after all, his acrimonious debate with the Hossō monk Tokuitsu that firmly established the one vehicle doctrine as the reigning soteriological paradigm in Japan.

But it is ungracious to quibble over such things because *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra* is an excellent companion to anyone interested in this sutra. The essays are all of high standard, yet written in a clear style that are a pleasure to read. Students will find this volume a concise summary of the salient points of this sutra's teachings and its development, while advanced scholars will discover much that will provoke them to think about this sutra in a new light. It is required reading for everyone interested in Buddhism.

Imperial-Way Zen: Ichikawa Hakugen's Critique and Lingering Questions for Buddhist Ethics. By Christopher Ives. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009. x+275 pages. Hardcover \$52.00.

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In the last decade or so, scholars have been effectively debunking the idealized, ahistorical portrayal of Zen as a non-violent religion epitomizing traditional Japanese culture. Some have pointed out how the works of advocates like D. T. Suzuki and Nishida Kitarō were as nationalistic as they were spiritual. Others have challenged the stereotyped image of Zen monks in seated meditation in exquisitely aesthetic surroundings by chronicling the mundane religious lives of followers. Yet others have explored how certain Japanese cultural practices and icons, like archery and the Ryōanji rock garden, have become spuriously associated with Zen. And finally, some have chronicled Zen's active and enthusiastic support of modern Japanese militarism and imperialism.

Christopher Ives has provided us with a refinement of this final category in an excellent and original study of Ichikawa Hakugen (1902–1986), a “priest, professor and activist” who was “almost single-handedly” responsible for launching postwar critiques of Buddhist war responsibility. In contrast with the condemnatory attitude of scholars like Brian Victoria and Ichikawa himself, the author's nuanced and scholarly approach foregoes negative judgment of Zen complicity with the state, even-handedly examining the philosophical and political underpinnings of Imperial-Way Zen. He seeks to move beyond the questions of *how* and *in what ways* Zen was co-opted by the imperial state, beginning to answer *why* Zen did not resist this trend asking “why Zen, a religious tradition purportedly effective at