

Gates to Buddhist Practice

Chagdud Tulku

Junction City: Padma Publishing, 1993. Also published by Pilgrims Publishing, Kathmandu, 2001. 290 pp. \$ U.S. 16.95 (paperback)

At first glance, Tibetan Buddhism can appear dauntingly complex, as labyrinthine in its conceptual schemes as it is Byzantine in its cultural expressions. This complexity has much to do with the diversity that had developed within Indian Buddhism by the time of its assimilation in Tibet (circa 8th century C.E). The early Tibetan scholars were faced with the difficult task of reconciling in their practical path summaries the historically and doctrinally divergent *Hīnayāna*, *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* traditions and showing the continuity between them. This continuity only becomes evident when we internalize (*nyams su len*) the teachings, taking them to heart as personal instructions. According to Buddhist tradition, Buddhist teachings (*chos*) comprise both textual transmission (*lung*)—the path as codified by tradition—and realization (*rtogs*)—the path as lived individually. From this perspective, the myriad Buddhist teachings (tradition enumerates as many as 84,000 methods corresponding to the same number of emotional afflictions present in human beings) are distilled into a single path when selectively applied to one's particular life-situation.

Gates of Buddhist Practice, a sequentially arranged collection of oral teachings by the late Chagdud Tulku, presents the distilled quintessence of Tibetan Buddhism. The key points of *Hīnayāna*, *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna*, as well as the distinctively Tibetan *Dzogchen* tradition, are presented in the author's uniquely simple and direct style and enlivened throughout by stories and anecdotes from his life and tradition. Yet the simplicity of his teachings belies a tremendous depth and breadth of knowledge gained from an extraordinary lifetime of study, practice and teaching. This combination of simplicity and profundity makes the book a rare treasure, valuable to new and experienced readers alike. It is a book that merits serious reading and diligent application. As the Preface (p. ix) states: "The depth of these teachings will become increasingly apparent upon repeated readings, but more so through the application of the principles taught."

The first of the book's five parts confronts the primary emotional afflictions—desire, hatred and delusion—that perpetuate the cycle of egocentric deliberations and their consequences and keep us imprisoned in fictitious worlds of our own making. The remaining four parts follow the characteristic structure of the Nyingma *Lam rim* ("Stages of the Path") genre, complementing the detailed treatment of the relevant

subject matter found in scholastic path summaries such as Klong chen pa's *Sems nyid ngal gso*, 'Jigs med gling pa's *Yon tan mdzod* (with their commentaries) and Dpal sprul rin po che's *Kun bzang bla ma zhal lung*. Chagdud Tulku elucidates Buddhist topics and principles in light of their ongoing relevance to the human condition, repeatedly emphasizing the need to apply the teachings in order to derive their benefit. The entire gradation of the path from the four preliminary topics—uniqueness of human existence, impermanence, karma and suffering—to the direct realization of one's natural condition by way of *Vajrayāna* and Dzogchen teachings, is condensed into a series of practical instructions that elucidate the essence and purpose of each stage of the journey. The book gives particularly detailed attention to the so-called preliminaries, repeatedly clarifying their foundational character and relevance to all stages of the path. As Chagdud Tulku states (p. 45):

Many people believe these teachings are for beginners. They want to hurry on to something "profound," beyond what they think of as "kindergarten dharma." But the contemplation of the four thoughts is among the most profound and beneficial practices on the path to enlightenment. For these are the foundational truths that underlie the entire spiritual path.

As a lucid and accessible introduction to the essence of Tibetan Buddhism, *Gates of Buddhist Practice* belongs to the small number of Buddhist classics for westerners such as *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* and *What the Buddha Taught* that reveal the essence and applicability of the teachings in a straightforward, non-academic style. The kaleidoscopic diversity of Tibetan Buddhism can easily distract one from the simplicity that lies at its heart. It is the great merit of *Gates of Buddhist Practice* to remind one that the quintessence of the Buddhist path lies in its earnest application.

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Haunting the Buddha: Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism

Robert DeCaroli

New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 230 pp. \$55.00 (cloth)

The popular and perhaps much of the scholarly view of early Buddhism in India often brings to mind romanticized images of robed monks, the emaciated Buddha, and the four sights—an understanding countered by DeCaroli in his book, *Haunting the Buddha: Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism*, in which he aims to redress this viewpoint by including such decidedly ‘non-Buddhist’ elements as demons and tormented hungry ghosts. As DeCaroli suggests in *Haunting the Buddha*, ignoring these elements of Buddhism leads to a disjunction between what the textbooks define as Buddhism and what Buddhism actually is (4).

In order to establish a more accurate understanding of early Buddhist development, DeCaroli suggests we widen our lens. Rather than taking the traditional approach of considering only texts in relation to the monastics, in *Haunting the Buddha* DeCaroli compares textual evidence with archeological evidence such as statues, reliefs and *stūpas* as well as their probable relationship with both the monastic and lay communities. DeCaroli focuses specifically on the interaction between local deities and belief systems (termed “spirit religions”) showing how early Buddhism appropriates and re-mythologizes the different spirit deities into a Buddhist context. In other words, Buddhism did not develop out of a vacuum, but amongst a rich corpus of traditions that were adapted to fit the nascent Buddhist needs.

In the chapters “Making Believers” and “Set in Stone,” DeCaroli presents tales of conversion wherein different spirit deities are confronted, defeated, and eventually instructed on the Buddhist path. The status of the newly converted spirit deities was then altered to become protectors of the *dharma* and models of early Buddhist practice. To support his thesis, DeCaroli “cast[s] a wide net in an effort not to exclude any evidence that may potentially provide a more complete view of these practices and their relationship to Buddhism” (36) and cites many supporting stories from legal and political texts, historical accounts, inscriptional evidence, and most prominently, narrative literature from Buddhist, Hindu and Jain literary traditions. While a laudatory goal, this choice nevertheless made sections of *Haunting the Buddha: Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism* come across as forced and unnecessary. DeCaroli, however, does an exceptional job in supplementing these stories with archeological evidence, such as in his discussions of the reliefs at Bharhut, and of *stūpas* in “Ghost Stories.”

In “Politics for Enlightenment” DeCaroli addresses the location of the Buddha’s awakening, suggesting it was a conscious decision due to the level of spiritual activity for which Bodh Gaya was known (115). He presents the story of the Buddha defeating Māra to show that harnessing spirit deities is the paramount example of Buddhist practice which was to be imitated by devout practitioners. DeCaroli states that this is made evident by the carvings surrounding Bodh Gaya, which “served to validate a methodology by which the *saṅgha* could demonstrate their spiritual attainment and attract new followers” (119). It is unclear in this chapter whether or not the evidence presented actually supports the supposition that the enlightenment was as tactical and premeditated as DeCaroli suggests. If this were the case, the question arises as to whether these stories were created by the monastics to convince the laity of the monastics’ value, or whether the monastics themselves believed in their own mythologies. As DeCaroli points out early on in “Coming to Terms,” however, this is not a necessary distinction (10). In “Policing the Monasteries,” he describes how the spirit deities are used to keep the monks, nuns and *saṅgha* practicing proper conduct, reporting to the Buddha poor behavior and posing as supernatural threats to anyone who dare stray too far from the path.

While DeCaroli is skilled at combining the stories with the archeological evidence, it does at times appear overly gratuitous, coming across as cataloguing. Certainly the same conclusions could be made, and perhaps more concisely, were the author to expand on the analysis, thus opening the door for a contextualization of relationships on more than just a literal level. There is no doubt that these spirit deities were and remain considered and honoured by some Buddhist practitioners. Their existence, however, is not solely phenomenal. There are many different layers to every one of these representations. For example, DeCaroli explains that Māra is the “Lord of Desires” (115) but rather than exploring the potential for Māra as a personification, DeCaroli chooses to keep the discussion at a phenomenal level, a problem that can be difficult for the reader to reconcile.

In *Haunting the Buddha*, DeCaroli does exactly what he sets out to do, which is to familiarize the reader with the early Buddhist developments in India and their relationship with the pre-existing spirit traditions. For someone unfamiliar with the different tales (such as the Jātakas), or even for anyone who has not been given the opportunity to explore the colourful stories in Buddhism with regard to *yakṣas*, *nāgas*, and other spirit beings, this book would be a perfect introduction. It is easily accessible, and would be an excellent supplement for any course on early Buddhism.

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Bhakti and Philosophy

R. Raj Singh

Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2006. 113 pp. CAD \$65.00 (hardcover)

The main aim of R. Raj Singh's relatively short text is, as the title implies, to reconnect in the minds of contemporary Indologists the philosophical traditions of India with devotional practice. Singh contends that the intellectual traditions of India have been divorced, in the minds of scholars and those whom they teach, from their lived practice—understood here as encapsulated by the love of wisdom (*philosophia*). He proceeds through five movements. First he gives an overview of the place of *bhakti* in the long sweep of Indian thought. He then considers *bhakti* in early Buddhist and Jain traditions, and subsequently moves to how *bhakti* has been understood and represented in two seminal texts: the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Nārada Bhakti Sutra*. Finally he considers *bhakti* in Indian philosophies of art and theories of *rasa*. The text is written in a fairly accessible style and appears to be aimed at middle-level undergraduates with a reasonable familiarity with texts such as the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Mahāparinibbana Sutta* and the *Nārada Bhakti Sutra*.

The underlying premise of the arguments contained in this book is relatively simple to state: *philosophia* must be taken as a whole, that is *philia* (love) cannot be divorced from *sophia* (wisdom) and the two together are necessary elements in what we have come to think of as the hard-headed rationality at the centre of philosophy. It is at least noteworthy that the author very often connects his readings of Hindu and Buddhist texts to those of Plato. As Singh is at pains to remind us, in Indian thought, as in the *Phaedo*, the aim of philosophy is right living, or rather a way of life through which one might apprehend the true nature of the universe, the good, the just and the beautiful. Such comparisons—while not the aim of the text—betray a tendency in the book towards over-generalisation. One is struck early on (p. 7), for instance, by a reference to “the Eastern mind,” and later (p. 13) by the author's comment that both Buddhism and Jainism inherit not only the basic concepts of karma, *mokṣa* and rebirth, but also the ‘spiritual ethos of *bhakti*.’ Such sweeping statements are found in abundance in the text, regularly tripping up the careful student and generally obscuring the more central points Singh tries to make.

Chief among these, Singh argues, is the expansion of the idea of *bhakti* from its relatively narrow connection with the medieval theistic *bhakti* sects of southern India, to encompass secular and religious devotional love including *guru-bhakti*, the general reverence felt towards elders and sages, as well as *karuṇā* or compassion towards all living beings. “*Bhakti*” in this wider sense derives from the root

bhaj-, which Singh suggests connotes *partaking, participating, sharing* etc., and hence *bhakti* came to include the feelings towards others with whom one was sharing, partaking and participating. Thus the synonyms of *bhakti* are also the synonyms of *prema* or love.

Of course a term's various definitions come down to its use in a context and Singh provides a number of case studies to support his thesis, the key ones pertaining to early Buddhism, the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Nārada Bhakti Sutra*. In each case Singh provides contextual support for his reading. In the Buddhist context these come primarily from the *Mahāparinibbanna Sutta* (MPS); however, before isolating and elucidating the understanding of *Bhakti* in this text, Singh first argues that *bhakti* was:

...already in vogue in religious circles when the Buddha appeared on the Indian religious scene. This ancient form of *bhakti* was not only the catalyst in the formation of the Buddha's new worldview, but *bhakti* continues to pervade the dharma of the Buddha in its early doctrinal period as well as in its Mahayana developments. In order to identify the pervasive but subtle presence of *bhakti* in the earliest statements of the Buddha dharma, both *bhakti* and dharma need to be precisely defined in terms of their essential as well as relevant philosophical meanings and implications. (p. 24)

It seems we are in murky waters here since to identify what was "in vogue" at the time of the Buddha would be highly speculative at best. Of course we are dealing with a period during which oral traditions predominate and many, if not most, of the traditions that would have contributed to the prevalent modes of thought are now lost to us. This should cause the reader to exercise some scepticism towards the brief historical overview of the historical context of the Buddha, which Singh then provides, as well as to Singh's interpretation of the MPS.

With respect to this important text, my main criticism is neither of Singh's contextualisations nor his translations of the MPS, but rather his interpretations, which, at times, seem rather forced. For instance, Singh seems to read *bhakti* into the text when he considers the Buddha's admonishment of Ananda, in chapter 2 of the MPS, not to look for external authority after the Buddha's death. The text can be read rather straightforwardly as the *Tathāgata* advising his followers to carry on in the way they have been taught for over forty-five years. Singh, however, argues that the real meaning of the text is to preach a movement from *saguna bhakti* to *nirguna bhakti*, that is, from devotion to deities to devotion to dharma itself. (p. 42) While Singh's reading is not entirely without merit, it is not, I suggest, the most parsimonious

interpretation. Singh may be overstretching somewhat to justify his thesis, a feeling one has regarding many of his conclusions.

The same can be said of his reading of the *Bhagavadgītā*. Singh argues that the *Gita* has been interpreted in too theistic a way such that *bhakti* loses its proper place in the text and becomes elevated as the "religion" of the *Gita*. (p. 69) *Bhakti*, according to Singh, should be understood as a necessary concomitant to *jñāna* and *karma mārgas*, rather than a full-fledged *mārga* of its own. While one might agree that the *Bhagavadgītā* has been interpreted in very theistic ways, particularly after the Hindu reform movements of the 19th century, the text itself does have strongly theistic elements. In this context *Krishna-bhakti* reaches the level of a religious tradition, at least in practice if not on a more formal level. Moreover, the tying of *bhakti* to *jñāna* and *karma mārgas* turns out to be little more than acknowledging that the *Gita* asks us to pursue both knowledge and action with utmost seriousness. Again it seems a stretch to label this *bhakti* while at the same time denying the theistic devotion seen in *Gita*.

Despite this critical commentary, Singh's text contains some useful material. The range and diversity of the term's use is well illustrated and, while not as critical an analysis as one might hope, as an extended essay on the idea of *philo-sophia* in Indian thought, the book is interesting. Indeed the text would be a good introduction to more finely-grained studies such as K. Sharma's *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement* or a helpful addendum to more ambitious comparisons such as McEvilley's *The Shape of Ancient Thought*.

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Embryo as Person: Buddhism, Bioethics and Society

Dr. Suwanda H.J. Sugunasiri

Toronto: Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies, 2005.

You're What You Sense: A Buddhian-Scientific Dialogue on Mindbody

Dr. Suwanda H.J. Sugunasiri

Toronto: Village Publishing House, 2001

For readers of *The Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies*, Dr. Suwanda Sugunasiri's history and qualifications need little or no introduction. He is this journal's editor, a widely published writer on Buddhism, as well as the founder and head of the Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies in Toronto. He is also a tireless promoter of the Buddhist teaching to both Buddhists and non-Buddhists in Canada and elsewhere. The two books under review, *Embryo as Person: Buddhism, Bioethics and Society* (2005) and *You're What You Sense: A Buddhian-Scientific Dialogue on Mindbody* (2001), are part of that outreach. The two books, however, are not equally successful in achieving Sugunasiri's objective. *Embryo as Person* is a compilation of columns written by Dr. Sugunasiri for the *Toronto Star* newspaper, and the book is, therefore, intended to inform primarily non-Buddhists of the Buddhist approach to life. Buddhists, too, however, will find it a useful handbook on some of the trickier ethical issues that Buddhism has always addressed, such as murder. Just as importantly, the book offers a Buddhist perspective on the *new* moral conundrums created by the spectacular advances of medicine and biogenetics, including the possibilities of genetic cloning, organ donation, and extension of the human lifespan. Are these desirable? Ethical? This book provides a valuable perspective.

The title of the book and the third and ninth chapters deal with abortion, an issue that is perhaps particularly urgent in Canada as one of the few nations in the developed world that lacks legislation regulating abortion. Is abortion acceptable from a Buddhist viewpoint? The Buddhist position, as Dr. Sugunasiri rightly points out, is that abortion is killing, i.e., that the fetus is a person from the moment of conception since the being-to-be-born contains, as it were, the spirit (more accurately, the karmic force) of a deceased being. Buddhism sets the following five conditions for deliberate killing, all of which are met by abortion: a living being, knowledge that the being is alive, the intent to take life (the desire for an abortion), the actual attempt to kill (the abortion), and the death of the being (the result).

For Buddhists, killing is not solely an ethical and social issue; it involves karmic consequences in this and future lives that may be unpleasant or perhaps even disastrous, including the possibility of

rebirth in a lower, non-human form. And yet, Buddhism, as presented by Dr. Sugunasiri, remains tolerant: all that it asks is that a woman make this choice fully aware that abortion may be, in fact, killing and that there may be karmic consequences. After that, the decision is, and must be, hers and her family's. Dr. Sugunasiri writes: "Allowing the woman to reach an informed decision is to help her gain liberational maturity" (p. 9). Other helpful factors might include meditation before making this decision and the support of compassionate (*karuṇā*) thoughts and actions from family and friends. In other words, Buddhism says that abortion is wrong, but does not absolutely forbid it as an option. As always in Buddhism, personal responsibility for one's actions is key.

Another example of an ethical dilemma examined in the book is as follows: is it the right of a woman to go about bare-breasted in public, if she wishes? Those who embrace this "right" say that people offended by this sight do not have to continue looking. As Dr. Sugunasiri points out, however, Buddhism teaches that consciousness arises from contact with a sense object, so one look is all that it takes to put a sight into mind where it could stimulate craving that otherwise would not have been present. The same is true, Dr. Sugunasiri suggests, of violence in the media. Contact with violent images puts violence into the mind whether the viewer wishes this or not—by the time she turns away, the damage is done. At this point, Buddhism offers two possible solutions: Avoid contact entirely (which is difficult in a media-saturated culture), or follow the Buddha's advice to his chief attendant Ananda when faced with lust-inducing situations: "Be mindful!" This kind of firm but tolerant guidance is found throughout *Embryo as Person*. The book is filled with useful and clearly presented insights on the sometimes-puzzling ethical issues faced by modern men and women, Buddhist and non-Buddhist.

You're What You Sense is less successful, perhaps because it is more ambitious. It aims to present the key points of *abhidhamma*, the higher teachings of Buddhism, which is a daunting task under any circumstances. The book takes the form of a Socratic dialogue between a "student of Buddhism" (who is called M) and an earnest enquirer (called E). This type of dialogue has a long and honored history in Buddhist teaching. Many of the Buddhist sutras take the form of a dialogue between the Buddha (or one of his chief disciples) and a serious enquirer or even skeptic. Another famous example is the debate between the second-century Buddhist teacher Nagasena and King Milinda, an Indo-Greek ruler in Northern India. In more recent times, *The Monk and the Philosopher* is an often-charged verbal joust between French rationalist philosopher Jean-François Revel and his son Matthieu Ricard, who had taken Tibetan Buddhist orders under the Dalai Lama.

Common to these dialogues are highly intelligent, sometimes highly skeptical questioners who are seeking, in many cases, to find holes in the Buddhist teachings. E, on the other hand, is not of a skeptical frame of mind; rather, he is presented as clay willing to be molded by the teacher M. Therefore, the result is not a “Buddhian-scientific” dialogue in the true sense since E has neither the life experience, nor the philosophical or scientific training to seriously challenge what he is hearing as, say, Revel does with his Tibetan monk son. This absence of conflict robs the debate of some of the drama it might otherwise have offered.

Another problem: In a conscious attempt to create a dialogue that is “lighthearted,” E sounds like an enthusiastic teenager and M sometimes speaks as if he were an overindulgent uncle. The result is dialogue like this: “M: Wow! Your powers of observations are phenomenal!” [Note: since they are talking about sense contact, there is also a bad pun here.] “E: Well, I don’t want to flag it...” “M: Yes, I can see humility written all over your face.” “E: What can I say?” The “gee whiz” quality of the dialogue is a distraction rather than a help.

That said, anyone looking for an easy-to-follow guide to Abhidhamma will find this book helpful and accurate, although Dr. Sugunasiri’s definition of *bhavanga sota*, the stream of being, as “life continuum consciousness” is questionable. In Abhidhamma, consciousness is strictly defined as awareness of an object, and *bhavanga sota* is mind *before* sensory or mental contact. This distinction of terms is important because the nature of consciousness is central to the Buddhist teaching of non-self (*anatta*). The average, untrained person (*puthujjana*) tends to think of consciousness as self. Yet, as Dr. Suganasiri explains, any true “self” must be permanent and unchanging. Consciousness arises and passes away based on contact with objects from the five senses or mental objects; therefore, the popular idea of consciousness as self, as a permanent, stable core, cannot be true.

The same is, of course, true of the other four constituents of “mindbody”: body, feeling, perception, and volitional elements. These five are *all* that can be experienced, and all are transient (*anicca*). Therefore, M asks E, “Is there anything or something behind the process other than the process itself?” (p. 131). The answer, based on close analysis and observation of mind and body, can only be no. To understand this truth is to penetrate what T.R.V. Murti has called the central philosophy of Buddhism in his book of that name.

There are many works on Buddhism on the market; some are of dubious value because they do not fully understand *anatta*. Some Western Buddhist writers, for example, re-interpret Buddhism to include what can only be called the Christian idea of a “soul” or perfect self. This perfected self has no place in Buddhism because, while there can be perfection (*samma*)—such as perfect or right view, perfect action,

and so on—there is no concept of an essential self. This central philosophy of Buddhism is in full view in both of Dr. Sugunasiri's books. They are, therefore, valuable additions to the library of Buddhists and non-Buddhists, alike. *You're What You Sense* could, however, do with some revision to be more true to its subtitle: A *Buddhian-Scientific Dialogue*. More science, more actual debate, and less "gee whiz" would make for a more satisfying read.

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Nalanda News

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 Clinical Psychologist; formerly Director of the Stress, Pain and Chronic Disease Clinic at Toronto General Hospital.</p> |
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 Resident Scholar at Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, Mass., USA. Author: <i>Trust in Mind; Heart Sutra: Ancient Buddhism in the Light of Quantum Reality, etc.</i></p> |