

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

Robert DeCaroli

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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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