



***Buddhism and Cultural Studies: A Profession of Faith***

By Edwin Ng. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xi + 270 pages, ISBN 978-1-137-54990-7 (eBook), 69.99 €, \$79.99; ISBN 978-1-137-54989-1 (hardcover), 84.99 €, \$100.

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In *Buddhism and Cultural Studies: A Profession of Faith*, Edwin Ng sets out to do three things. First, he highlights what he sees as a critical inattentiveness to religion in the discipline of cultural studies, particularly in relation to the intersections of faith and spirituality. He argues that this perceived lack of attention, caused primarily by a conscious or unconscious acceptance of the secularisation thesis in certain academic circles, has propelled cultural studies headlong in a misguided direction. This, Ng asserts, urgently needs to be addressed. His response involves an in-depth negotiation of a ‘dialogical exchange’ between cultural theories and theorists (most notably Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, specifically in relation to concepts of ‘subcultural formations’) and Buddhist teachings, using examples from a Western Buddhist engagement with *vipassana* (2, 20). Secondly—and in response to the first point—Ng draws on the approach of auto-ethnography to write himself back into this dialogical exchange, highlighting that faith is not simply something ‘other’ that scholars might think and write about. Our faith, in particular spiritual and religious practices or even (perhaps, especially) in each other in the broad scholarly project of the academy (or indeed, life) is, for Ng, a site worthy of much deeper, more critical investigation than has been undertaken to date. Throughout Ng’s prose, he weaves in stories of his Singaporean childhood and his connections to Western Buddhist practice following his migration to Australia, and he does this to question the divide between the public scholarly stance and the private faith that we all hold, in various guises. As an exemplification of this, Ng states:

I cannot tell when the spiritual ends and the scholarly begins when I sit on the meditation cushion to cultivate embodied understandings of Buddhist teachings about existential discontent, impermanence and non-self... (2)

Ng’s final overarching theme involves an examination of the faith that each of us, as scholars, brings to academia. Although this receives comparatively less attention than the previous two points, Ng uses the idea of good faith to critique the culture of the neoliberal university and its role in shaping our relationships with each other, our students, our work, and our lives. He explains that he is (like many of us) an academic with precarious long-term employment that has lasted, so far, for nine years in Australia. This has created ‘constant anxiety’ (249) and indeed, it seems, a breakdown in some of the relationships that Ng wants to foster, and a break in

the naïve assumptions that he might once have had about the academy as a space of safe and supportive enquiry. However, he remains hopeful, at least it seems from this text, not necessarily in the neoliberal university institution, but in spiritual friends, both within and outside the secular academy to whom this book, I think, is addressed.

*Buddhism and Cultural Studies* is an ambitious project and each of Ng's key areas of interest could easily have monograph length studies given over to their investigation. They are connected issues, certainly, but sometimes do not always feel like comfortable bedfellows. This by no means negates the value of attempting to bring them together, but the result is not always easy, familiar, or comfortable reading. In fact, although Ng is not explicit about this, this is a book that is written more from a cultural studies than a Buddhist studies perspective. In fact, Ng is even more specifically connected, as he explains in a footnote, to The Birmingham School of cultural studies with its emphasis on an analysis of the power relationships inherent in popular culture. This does not mean that it is not relevant for those of us who work outside this area (as I detail below), but that the tone, approach, and scholarship might feel somewhat unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Yet, ultimately, highlighting these areas of discomfort (and the ways that they might become more comfortable) is the very point of the book and there is something to be learnt from this work for those of us not so invested in the academic project of cultural studies.

After an introduction that sets out the parameters of Ng's approach, chapter two, the first substantive chapter, examines the role that faith has played in cultural studies and, more importantly, the role it might play in future if we allow it satisfactory critical space in our scholarly imaginings. Ng's definition of faith is deliberately broad and he articulates it as

an affective response of trust that necessarily accompanies the performative experience of making decisions to pursue any course of action, including the making of a profession in academia (2)

Faith, therefore, is certainly not wedded to what we might perceive as the traditionally religious, but equally importantly, does not exclude it. Towards the end of the chapter, Ng engages in a brief, yet salient, examination of 'the spirituality of engaged Buddhism', indicating the possibilities of challenge to 'individualistic and capitalist appropriations of Buddhist ideals' that might be unlocked when the personal is engaged with the political (39).

Chapter three is concerned with method, specifically Ng's desire to contribute to a process of 'Buddhist critical constructive reflection', which attempts to balance both Buddhist traditions and critical discourses of power and authority, moving aside from theological engagement (46). It is here that Ng outlines his auto-ethnographic approach and his desire to give attention to the liminal spaces in-between that shape and guide our perceptions. On several occasions, Ng explains that being explicit, in academia, about the boundaries of our own faith and spirituality is uncomfortable territory for him (and others). Even though the insider-outsider debate is a well-trodden path for religious studies, and many of us are used to writing and thinking

more reflexively, Ng has a point. It is one thing to write a heavily edited selective reflexive paragraph in an introduction to a thesis or monograph, but it is quite another to really, deeply, engage your own spiritual positioning throughout your work. I wonder if this is particularly the case for Buddhist studies, which has not yet, as far as I am aware, encouraged a sufficient reflexive personal space particularly within the studies of Buddhist texts. Even as a third-culture kid, myself, who, like Ng, connects personal Buddhist practice with scholarly endeavour and feels most comfortable in the liminal in-between cultural spaces in the countries we have adopted in adulthood, what Ng is calling for is somehow too painfully intimate for the academy, at least the academy I know. Yet, maybe as a result of my ethnographic academic training, I scoured Ng's book for the dark type-set italic writing which marked out his auto-ethnographic reflections. I wanted to know more, more about his passage to Australia and the cultural connections and disconnections he felt when encountering Western Buddhism, more about his childhood with his Buddhist grandmother and Christian parents, and more about his marrying of the scholarly and personal. For, although it may be uncomfortable academically to write and have published, it is by no means uncomfortable to read.

However, *Buddhism and Cultural Studies* is not a straightforward book. It bears stating that for me, as an academic who has always preferred the 'thick description' of ethnography (Geertz, 1973), Ng's focus on cultural theorists such as Foucault and Derrida and his attempts to engage them to construct a theoretical positioning for faith and spirituality is both confronting and challenging. Ng writes dense prose, playing with words and phrases in a way that calls for space and effort to fully digest and appreciate. He is concerned with weaving Derrida and deconstruction into Buddhist modes of thought (chapter four), and engaging Foucauldian ideas of experience and selfhood (chapters five and six). Ng looks to undertake a Foucauldian analysis of *vipassana* (chapter seven) and to unpack and reconstruct ideas of the politics of unbecoming into the burgeoning area of Buddhist social theory as pioneered by Ken Jones, Robert Hattam, and David Loy (chapter eight). Whilst giving oneself space to engage with wide-ranging and complex theoretical accounts of cultures through Ng's work might challenge those of us not schooled in the language-play more common to cultural studies, it is worth our putting the intellectual effort into this engagement, primarily because this work is, at times, unsettling and for many of us in Buddhist studies and beyond, might provide a fresh approach.

Ng's examination of Goenka's *vipassana* through a Foucauldian lens (chapter seven) is a particular case in point. Whilst he highlights a number of places in this chapter where he sees similarities and concordances between the two approaches, Ng's attention to the Buddhist parable of the raft in the conclusion of chapter seven—one of the most famous allegorical stories, at least in British Buddhist circles—is particularly intriguing. Ng states that this parable (which sees the Buddha advising a man to abandon his precious raft when it was no longer necessary, paralleling the advice to abandon teachings when they no longer serve their purpose) might effectively be read through Foucault's term *experience*, meaning 'experiment' or 'test' (174). Instead of one fixed moment of change, Foucault's perspective can help us to view Buddhist commitment as on-going and dynamic and, as Ng puts it, 'the process

of becoming as the force for unbecoming' (173). This re-focusing of understanding meditation as a test or experiment (rather than, in my view, the somewhat more fixed term of 'practice') made me re-think the testimonies that I have collected from British Buddhists and the way that some of them narrated their experiences of meditation as trying, failing, sitting, being present, failing again, trying, failing again, being present, and on and on. Seeing the Buddhist meditative experiment through Foucault's and Ng's eyes adds a worthy nuance that helps to explain why and how we/they continue on the paths that we/they do.

Whilst Ng does state, in his introduction, that what this type of analysis does is to shine a light on the 'cultural translation of Western Buddhism' (3), aside from the example given above, I felt that this was the least explored aspect of Ng's monograph. Perhaps because, with the space needed to open out a reciprocal exchange between Buddhism and cultural studies, there is just not sufficient time, intellectually or practically. I was left with more questions—how does an approach like Ng's help me, as a scholar of contemporary Buddhism in Britain, understand the lives and experiences of my participants? Perhaps that is not the intention of the book, but it does highlight some of the difficulties inherent in starting to bring together cultural studies theories and sociological or anthropological inquiry.

Yet, Ng's deep attention to *who* he is and *what* propelled him to where he is now does facilitate and enable an intellectual place of sanctuary (or 'good faith' as he terms it) that could allow us to understand our own (and others') spiritual or faith imaginings more fully. Maintaining good faith with our participants' stories (and, indeed, sharing mine with them) is what I consider to be the hallmark of good ethnography and strong relationship building that can last beyond the remits of particular academic projects. Ng is a self-professed Buddhist connected to the Forest Sangha lineage of Ajahn Chah, which is popular in the West (68), and he also details his personal experiences of *vipassana* meditation retreats. Yet, in many ways it seems that what Ng *actually* believes is irrelevant to his project at hand. It is not about us, as Buddhists/scholars, connecting with each other (although it can, and perhaps should include this) instead, what he asks for is for us all to have good faith in each other, in the collective, which he calls in some places 'friendly intellectual hospitality' (73) and in others 'unconditional unconditionality unconditionally' (2). Whilst it takes time to feel even a modicum of comfort with the tongue-twisting phrase, what Ng is arguing for is a place of deep trust and reciprocity between human beings. He strives to open this space between Buddhism and cultural studies, but also between all individuals within the academy and beyond. Of course, facilitating this space demands a significant amount of awareness of what it is that has brought us to our own investigations into Buddhism and, indeed, the blind-spots that we might have that are shaped by our own experiences and limitations. This did not stop me wanting to know more, however, about his on-going connections to the Ajahn Chah lineage in Australia (and beyond) and indeed, highlighted to me that the things that we choose to omit or gloss over in our biographies are perhaps as interesting as the things we choose to include. This wouldn't necessarily change the monograph, or alter any of Ng's arguments, but highlights that a complex work that aims to weave

auto-ethnography into deep critical theoretical analysis might never leave sufficient space for adequate biographical detail.

However, what is most compelling is that Ng intentionally shines a light on liminal identities and in-between spaces both within ourselves as academics and within the institutions and relationships in which we operate. For Victor Turner (1969), the liminal space is one of transformation, egalitarianism, power, and connectivity. Allowing and participating in liminal spaces has a collective function that ultimately binds individuals together in the transmission of ideas through the life-course and generationally. Whilst Ng doesn't draw deeply on Turner, *Buddhism and Cultural Studies* embodies this scholarly/communal ideal. One leaves Ng's book hoping to be part of an intellectual and social space that he imagines, unsure of how this might work within the structures of the academy as they are, but ultimately emboldened to attend to the 'spiritual-scholarly' (1) in a deeper way in future. Ng indicates, in his conclusion, that he had been somewhat afraid of 'ridicule' or 'disapproval' in the publication of a work of this ilk (247). He shouldn't be—it is fascinating, confronting, and challenging and has made me think deeply about scholarly relationships and positions and the overarching project of thinking and being that we are all engaged in.

## References

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