

Book Review

Birth in Buddhism: The Suffering Fetus and Female Freedom

By Amy Paris Langenberg. Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2017, ISBN 978113820123 (hardback), \$160.00; ISBN 9780367890018 (paperback), \$47.95.

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What we know as “Buddhist studies” reflects a complex, multifaceted collection of sometimes disparate and segmented subject areas, concerned with very different methods, theories, approaches and interests. As José Cabezón (1995: 238) argued in 1995, perhaps “Buddhist studies is not a discipline, because it contains disciplines as parts...we seem to share less and less by way of method, or even subject matter.” Whilst there are a number of spaces (including scholarly associations and conferences) where these “different parts” are usefully fused, I think it remains the case that there is a divide between those of us focused on studies of contemporary Buddhism (which typically draw on anthropological or sociological, ethnographic-learning approaches), and those who are specialists in the study of texts and histories. Here I do not wish to paint too simplistic a picture—a rounded study of contemporary practice is not complete without awareness of historical patterns and trajectories, and philology has undergone a number of changes as a method and practice (as Langenberg herself highlights in her book). Yet more often than not our companions on our intellectual journeys are likely to be bound by our disciplinary affiliations (be they anthropological, sociological, or historical). This shapes, at least in my experience, which books we read (and which books we think we should read).

With this in mind, I was a little worried when I was asked to review Langenberg’s marvelous book—what do I know about philology, or studies of ancient texts? I am a sociologist of contemporary Buddhism, with a particular interest in women’s practices of Buddhism in the West. Yet, as I discovered, this book offers a great deal to the scholar of the contemporary world. Over half a century ago, D. Seyfort Ruegg (1962: 321) questioned the way Tibetan studies had developed, arguing “such a compartmentalisation into a ‘philosopher’s Tibetology’,—or a historian’s, a sociologist’s etc.,—may ultimately have to be dearly paid for if it remains unchecked, since at the present time at least, it can scarcely lead to anything but stultification.”



This comment rings true in my experience, and I am reminded of how important it is to cross out of our disciplinary comfort zones when I consider Langenberg's book, and how fruitful these crossovers may be. In the review that follows, I will outline the purpose of *Birth in Buddhism*, as articulated by the author, with a more detailed introduction to each of the chapters' arguments. Throughout this review, I aim to draw attention to what her arguments and evidence offer to contemporary scholars of Buddhism, as well as to the important questions that she raises, questions that our demand attention, particularly in relation to understanding Buddhism and the spaces that are created by, and for, women.

The fundamental aim of Langenberg's monograph, published in 2017, is an examination and a repositioning of a little-studied early-first-millennium Sanskrit text, the *Garbhāvākṛānti Sūtra* (GS), translated by Langenberg as the *Descent of the Embryo Scripture*. This text describes, in graphic detail, the process of reproduction and birth, including the different stages of human embryonic development and their effect. Significantly for the book, the GS, as Langenberg writes, contains "stomach-churning descriptions of the female body's inner loathsomeness" (3). The longer version of the text is situated within an *avadāna* of Nanda, a Sakya prince, as it relates his journey towards ordination and the concern he has about giving up his wife and becoming a celibate monastic. Indeed, demonstrated by excerpts that Langenberg includes throughout the book, this text is not for the fainthearted (or weak-stomached!). It is gory, and grisly, and, ultimately, fascinating. The GS reveals early Buddhist attitudes to birth and reproduction (including everything from conception to the physical delivery of a human infant), and Langenberg argues from the start how central these ideas are within this cultural milieu. Underpinning the text is the use of birth from the female body as a metaphor for *dukkha* (suffering, dissatisfaction). As she cites, "abiding (in the womb) is sickness. Emerging (from the womb) is old age and death" (38). And it is within *women's* bodies that this sickness, old age, and death originate. Yet the core argument of Langenberg's book is that whilst the GS appears to posit women's connection to birth as suffering in entirely negative ways, it may not be so detrimental as might be assumed from our (liberal, secular) vantage point. In fact, the text "offers alternative modes of freedom and personhood to the women who engaged this discursive world through its disciplinary traditions" (21). Langenberg draws on Foucault to argue that "like sex, birth has a history" and it is this history and its potential social effects that drive this work (3).

After introducing the parameters of her work and her theoretical framework, in chapter one Langenberg examines the key metaphor—"suffering is birth"—and makes her case for its centrality in early Indian Buddhist thought. This is her most descriptive chapter, and those descriptions are necessary in order to help explore the narrative aspects of the text, particularly for those readers who are unfamiliar with it. Langenberg immediately dismisses the idea that the GS is just "an offbeat, quasi medical text" and argues for the work's relevance in understanding central concepts in, but also beyond, Indian Buddhism (3). She examines the idea of metaphors and how they might function in Buddhist texts, and describes in clear detail how birth is "a portal onto the landscape of human suffering" (49). Although Langenberg argues

for the centrality of the birth metaphor, what is most appealing about her work is that she acknowledges the messiness of texts (as well as the practices that accompany them). She is influenced, perhaps, by the “lived religion” approach, where human behaviour is accepted as contradictory, multifaceted, and far from neat and regimented. For Langenberg, historical texts are not divorced from living beings and power (here, the Foucauldian influence shines through), and in chapter two she explores the ways in which “sense-making” occurs through narrative texts. As she argues, “it is possible to tell the same story in two very different ways” (63) and this appears to drive her analysis. With this in mind, Langenberg offers an alternative rationale as to why the impressions of female impurity exist—not as a result of “cultural factors” or the needs of ascetic (male) monastics to view women as impure, but instead, whilst legal and philosophical Buddhist scholars accepted women’s equal claim to Buddhist goals with men, they remain “set apart” for “social and moral” reasons, as well as institutional ones (70–71). Here Langenberg constructs a middle argument, balancing the contradictory impressions of women within text and practice: able to take ordination, but still presented as inferior. I enjoyed both the subtlety and the complexity of the picture she presents. Texts reflect, present, and shape culture, and culture is complex, and in the remainder of the book she examines this in more detail, using a variety of different lenses.

One of these lenses, found in chapter three, is the idea of disgust. This is the most graphic of the book’s chapters, and in it Langenberg examines the role disgust plays in the text through the lens of “aesthetics.” It is common in Buddhist texts, as the author explains, to present a picture of the body as foul, disgusting, diseased, rotting, putrid, as a means by which to separate “the human from the inhuman,...the Self from the Other” (80). As Langenberg states, texts that use disgust metaphors “invite their audiences to respond to them bodily with closing throat, ringing ears, queasy stomach, wrinkling nose, as well as an inner turning away which belies fascination” (75). As in other chapters, Langenberg here draws on theoretical framings from psychoanalysis and from European philosophy (for example, the work of Kristeva and Sartre) in examining how this idea of disgust functions in the GS. Specially, she calls for us to move beyond the existing explanations or justifications for poetics of disgust in Buddhist texts, which relate to a pedagogical description of the body as impermanent, or the idea that the male monastic is the sole embodiment of purity and achievement (81). Although she is clear that women’s bodies, particularly with their links to birth as a result of negative karma, are troublesome in relation to Indian Buddhist discourse, she calls instead for a much closer examination of the emotive effects of disgust, and its links to embodied praxis. And, as seen in the examples she presents, the GS is certainly an emotive text. In places I found myself physically wincing and squirming in response to what I was reading. Yet housed within this short chapter is the idea that, whilst this disgust cannot be overlooked, it does not mean that women are damned to mire in it, but rather that *awareness* of this true foulness can be a mark of someone on the path to enlightenment.

In her fourth chapter Langenberg shifts her focus to the idea of auspiciousness within Buddhist birth narratives. She demonstrates that “ordinary birth is never auspicious” (111) and,

more so, “birth is dark, gruesome, frightful and ugly, and closely linked to death and destruction” (112). Those of us who have been through the process of giving birth, will (even if the experience was a positive one) attest to this: it is painful, guttural, fluid-filled, and sometimes downright frightening (and that is before we even undertake child-rearing). What is most interesting in this chapter is Langenberg’s analysis of the Buddha’s birth, and its interpretation using the GS for comparison. Whilst I had always assumed that the auspicious signs about the Buddha’s birth were important markers, Langenberg argues that, in light of the GS, the Buddha’s birth is “neither inauspicious nor auspicious” (113), it transcends this human binary, and it is distinctly different from ordinary birth in terms of Brahmanical ideas (both in length and experience, including in relation to Maya’s pregnancy and delivery). Langenberg looks beyond the GS to make this case, drawing on texts such as the *Lalitavistara*. This can be a little challenging for those of us not versed in these other scriptural traditions/sutras, and a full engagement with Langenberg’s argument requires some extra reading. Yet I found this was worth-while, for it allows the reader to contextualise and situate the GS in its broadest context. Texts, as Langenberg would no doubt argue, should not be read in a vacuum. This chapter ends with the introduction of a key point, central to the monograph. If birth (and not auspiciousness) is at the heart of GS birth narratives, then this opens up “the possibility of new types of femaleness” (126) that are not so intimately connected to reproduction as they might be in Brahmanic praxis and ideals. While she acknowledges that this possibility might not be applicable in practice for the average woman, for nuns this opens up social and spiritual possibilities that had not hitherto been options.

In her thought-provoking fifth chapter, “Auspicious Ascetics,” Langenberg relates the material she has presented so far about the GS to the seemingly contradictory behaviour of religious professionals, or Buddhist “adepts,” who, she argues, have to balance Buddhist ideas around birth and suffering with the performance of fertility rituals for lay people. Langenberg terms this type of practitioner an “auspicious ascetic” (134), and in this chapter she journeys with them, metaphorically and philosophically. Important to the chapter’s argument is the discussion of the child-eating (yet eventually remorseful) goddess Hariti, and the story of Sujata, a laywoman who pledges to support the Buddha if she is granted a son. When this happens, she provides the sustenance which the Buddha uses before gaining enlightenment. Using these two story cycles, Langenberg shows the rationale for monastic engagement with rituals relating to fertility and birth, and she highlights how this rationale exposes tensions between renunciant values, and living, breathing cultural realities (147). She describes the complex and (sometimes) contradictory relationships between text, doctrine, interpretation, and practice writ large in the example of monks who perform childbirth rituals whilst also distancing themselves from birth as a social and spiritual reality. In my experience of contemporary practices and practitioners, we hold seemingly contradictory beliefs and practices together—it is what makes us complex and human. Why, I began to ask while reading *Birth in Buddhism*, should this be any different in earlier historical periods?

Throughout the book Langenberg investigates the complex, rich narrative of birth-centralising suffering, suffering through birth, and in the female form. In her final substantive chapter, she discusses the difficulties in squaring these types of seemingly detrimental (for women) and negative narratives with the existence of thriving communities of nuns. Is it, she asks, because texts such as the GS don't reflect the words of the Buddha, or are Buddhist narratives just contradictory? Here, Foucault makes another appearance, and Langenberg argues that the "negative" portrayals of the female body function as a discipline: a discipline to help overcome *samsara* and cycles of birth, death, and rebirth. This aspect of Langenberg's work should be viewed as an important contribution to more recent bodies of postcolonial scholarship on gender and religion (for example, the work of Saba Mahmood, and those who have followed her), which seek to challenge our assumptions about what it means to be socially and spiritually agentic. Langenberg argues that separating women, through their bodies and connections to birth, actually creates the conditions for female monastic communities to develop and thrive. The principal argument here is that these negative portrayals of female bodies can have positive social and spiritual outcomes. Like Mahmood, and Nirmala Salgado in relation to Buddhism, Langenberg provides evidence that challenges our liberal assumptions about representations of women in religious traditions, not only in the contemporary world, but also in the past and within texts. This is a key contribution to scholarship on gender and religion, and she argues further that Buddhist monasticism, even though possibly flawed to a liberal mindset, is "a rare opportunity for ancient women" (175). By travelling in the slipstream of radically new ideas about birth, women were able to move beyond its confines, in both their social and spiritual roles. Here Langenberg sees agency within those texts which are more likely to be condemned for misogyny. She argues that "even in its denigration of female embodiment, the Buddhist discourse of birth is...constitutive of female ascetic agency" (8). Of course, this is where contemporary scholars (or historians) might need to step in to supplement these arguments. Whether a text enables agency in practical terms depends on many things: how it is taught, its context, its interpretation, and its companions; it does not stand alone. Of course Langenberg is aware of this, and the book is not intended to answer these empirical questions, particularly in relation to contemporary practices. However, this does leave the reader to connect the dots between textual analysis and lived realities for themselves, in order to think about the effects of the GS on women, contemporary or otherwise.

Overall, this book has a wide-ranging appeal, and Langenberg has deftly woven together historical interpretation and careful textual exegesis, whilst also being mindful of potential contemporary implications of her arguments. It is not a simple or straight-forward book, but it does contain a number of gleaming gems that will appeal to a variety of scholars across the divides within Buddhist studies and beyond. Langenberg works in a three-dimensional way. She does not just present the text; she reads around, aside, underneath and through it. For those not used to philology (and I include myself in this category), there are places where the book was challenging. Some of the textual exegesis was fine-grained, which does not always make for easy reading for a novice, despite Langenberg's compelling prose. Yet in the end I found this

to be a good thing, as with effort it is easy to see the potential for threads and relationships between Langenberg's GS and our own studies of contemporary practices and concerns.

I find it telling that the opening paragraphs of *Birth in Buddhism* are not focused on philology or historical interpretation. In fact, Langenberg begins her analysis with the present day, and the situation that nuns find themselves in in relation to the debates about full bhikkhuni/bhikṣuṇī ordination (1). I would have liked this example eventually to have been fleshed out in more detail in light of her textual analysis, with the author indicating where (and how) her arguments about the creation of specific spaces for female liberation within ancient texts might shape the lived realities for contemporary women. Langenberg has begun to address concepts of agency in contemporary Buddhist nuns communities in other work (see, for example, Langenberg 2018), and reading both this book and her later work closely together, is helpful in filling in some of the sociological or anthropological gaps left by this text-focused work, albeit one that raises implicit and explicit questions about the social and spiritual effects of texts. This point aside, this remains a highly relatable book for contemporary scholars, even if its central text is understudied. Indeed, connections between this text and contemporary praxis remain an exciting area for further investigation. There were times when I wanted to rush out and test Langenberg's theories about birth and suffering (and its theoretical effects) with contemporary practitioners. The book most certainly opens up many questions that we, as ethnographers, anthropologists, and sociologists, would do well to consider. For example, how do contemporary practitioners in different Buddhist communities interpret textually-driven ideas of birth and suffering? Do contemporary nuns' movements see these as positive or negative? And what are the ways one might intellectually balance what appear to be anti-women discourses of disgust around the female form, on the one hand, and the realities of nuns' spiritual commitment and soteriological success, on the other? Langenberg's argument is careful and subtle, but remains radical. *Birth in Buddhism* works to reclaim a potentially problematic text, restoring its potential to create a space for spiritual opportunity.

References

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