

## Book Review

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***The State of Buddhist Studies in the World 1972-1997.***

Edited by Donald K. Swearer and Somparn Promta.  
Bangkok: Center for Buddhist Studies, Chulalongkorn  
University, 2000, xxv + 239 pages, ISBN: 974-346-371-2  
(cloth), US \$29.00.

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## Book Review

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*I*n any academic field, it is useful to take stock from time to time and evaluate the state of research. In the field of Buddhist Studies, there have been several such evaluations, including Edward Conze's "Recent Progress in Buddhist Studies" (1959), Hajime Nakamura's "A Brief Survey of Japanese Studies on the Philosophical Schools of the Mahaayaana" (1960), Nakamura's *Indian Buddhism* (1980), and J. W. deJong's *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America* (1997), which ends with works published in 1990. Each of these provided a survey of certain aspects of the field, but each was also limited in scope. Conze's study reflected his own interest in Indic materials and was focused on European scholarship. Nakamura's studies were also concerned mainly with Indic materials, and only surveyed Japanese works. Although now dated, they remain excellent sources for buddhologists who do not read Japanese because they provide an insight into the wealth of high quality scholarship being done in Japan. DeJong's work is the most comprehensive overview of the field to date, but at the beginning of the book he indicates that he is primarily interested in Indic materials and has given less attention to studies of East Asian Buddhism, and has not even attempted to overview Japanese scholarship.

It is now almost a decade since the publication of deJong's book, and in the intervening

years a huge amount of scholarship has been produced in the field, so it is certainly timely that another publication has appeared that overviews Buddhist Studies and that attempts to provide an indication of the current state of scholarship. This work also avoids one of the major shortcomings of previous surveys in that it covers a range of countries. When I first looked over the table of contents, I was excited to see the breadth of the coverage, and hoped to glean new insights into current scholarship in countries with which I am not familiar. Unfortunately, these hopes were mostly not fulfilled by the book. The quality of the articles varies wildly, ranging from Eli Franco's excellent overview of German and Austrian Buddhist Studies to several uninformative and tedious pieces dealing with the field in Southeast Asia.

This is a strange and perplexing book. As I read through it, I found myself wondering at a number of very odd editorial decisions. One pervasive problem is that most of the contributors are not native English speakers; consequently, grammatical mistakes abound. In some cases the prose is virtually unintelligible. Although one can forgive a foreign writer for making mistakes with the English language, I wondered why the editors did not get a native English speaker to correct the grammar. This would have been a relatively simple task and would have greatly improved the readability of the text. Another oddity is the relative space assigned to each author. I can see no reason to devote thirty-eight pages of text to Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka but only six to Japan. Given the fact that there is far more important buddhological scholarship being done in Japan than in Sri Lanka, one would expect that the reverse would be the case. Similarly, Thailand has twenty-seven pages of text, while France, Belgium, and Switzerland combined only have eight. The editors provide no clues as to why they chose to organize the book in this way, and I wished for much more on Japan and much less on Thailand and Sri Lanka — neither of which appears to be particularly significant in terms of buddhological scholarship, judging from what the authors of these chapters have to say.

Another omission in my opinion is that the book mentions a major divide in the field in some places, but never really explores it. This is the methodological divide between several European countries and Japan on the one hand and the United States and Canada on the other. In Germany, France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Japan, the central methodological paradigm is classical philology, which focuses on classical texts in Asian languages. Most Buddhist Studies scholars in these countries place a great deal of emphasis on technical expertise in Asian languages and commonly criticize North American scholars for placing

too much emphasis on methodology and not enough on the sort of scholarship they value. This ideological dispute surfaces over and over again at professional meetings and in academic journals, but is seldom directly addressed. One outcome of the divide is that book reviews are often less about the quality of a given work than whether or not the reviewer happens to approve of the author's approach. Given the importance of this methodological chasm, a book like this — which surveys scholarship in various countries — could be expected to tackle these issues head on and discuss their ramifications for the field, but aside from some brief mentions no author seriously considers them.

In the preface, the editors indicate that the intent of the book is to "enable us to conceptualize the entire picture" of the field of Buddhist Studies. This will "help direct what should be done and where we should go as a discipline" because "now is the time when Buddhist studies, formerly done separately in different parts of the world, should be merged into one stream, the international stream in which cooperation and mutual exchange is found" (p. vi). They indicate that the intended audience includes both scholars and the general public, but I seriously doubt that any nonspecialist would have much interest in these articles. The book is the result of a conference on the state of Buddhist Studies held at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok in 1997. The conference participants were asked to survey scholarship in their respective countries in the twenty-five year period from 1972-1997 and to indicate the most significant work in the field.

In his introduction, Donald Swearer divides the field into three main groups: (1) "the study of Buddhism as an empirical, objective, critical, scientific field of inquiry grounded in the texts, languages, and traditions of a particular, historical field of study"; (2) "Buddhist studies as an examination of Buddhist texts and traditions by adherents of the tradition or scholars who approach the study of Buddhism primarily from the perspective of its normative truth claims"; and (3) "Buddhist studies as a dynamic, methodologically eclectic, and context-sensitive field that includes normative, descriptive, analytical, and comparative approaches to a broad range of subjects" (p. ix). The first is mainly associated with scholarship in Germany and Britain, the second with Asian Buddhist countries, and the third with North America. Swearer makes a number of cogent points about the state of the field and the range of methodological paradigms that underlie current scholarship, although in several cases he only briefly mentions an important development but does not discuss it in detail. Examples include the upsurge of personal interest in Buddhism in Western countries and the emerging use of computer technology in the field.

Somporn Promta's chapter, "Buddhist Studies in Thailand" (twenty-seven pages of text), is an example of Swearer's third group. Near the beginning, Promta indicates that traditionally the study of Buddhism in Thailand was conducted by scholar-monks, and he states that much of the important scholarship in the country is still confined to monastic settings. He discusses the work of Payutto Bhikkhu, Phra Dhammapitaka, and Buddhadaasa Bhikkhu at length, and appears to consider them to be at the forefront of Buddhist scholarship in Thailand. A striking aspect of Promta's article is the pervasive notion that Thai scholars strive to discover the "essence of Buddhism" (p. 5) and "the original spirit of Buddhism as taught by the Buddha himself" (p. 22). He appears to sincerely believe that there is in fact an "essence" of Buddhism, that this is contained in the Paali canon, and that this can be discerned by scholars who are properly trained in Pāli. Given these methodological presuppositions, it is difficult to see how Swearer's stated goal of merging various traditions of Buddhist Studies could be accomplished. Few Western scholars would agree that the "essence" of the Buddha's teachings is contained in the Pāli canon, or even that Buddhism has an "essence." Since at least the time of Ernst Troeltsch's seminal article "What Does 'Essence of Christianity' Mean?" (1903), it has become widely accepted in religious studies circles that attempting to define the "essence" of a religion is a futile exercise and that such language is incoherent. Each religion has different interpretive communities, and there is no single paradigm that has a unique claim on truth and no authority that is competent to prescribe the correct interpretation of either a text or a tradition. Merging Promta's traditional Theravaada-biased vision of Buddhist scholarship with most of the work being done in the West — given that the guiding paradigms appear to be entirely mutually exclusive — does not seem to be feasible. Nor is there any indication in the book regarding how this might be facilitated or what form the resulting paradigm might take.

Easily the worst article in the book is Asanga Tilakaratne's "Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka" (thirty-eight pages of text). Despite the editor's instructions that discussion of the field be confined to the period between 1972-1997, Tilakaratne chose to begin with the legend of Asoka's mission to Sri Lanka and trace the development of Buddhist Studies up to the present day. There is nothing particularly useful in his survey, and my overall impression was that there does not appear to be much of significance in Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka. He states that much of the effort of buddhological scholars in Sri Lanka is being devoted to the production of Sinhala translations of Paali works and general surveys of key Buddhist concepts. Given that there does not appear to be much original scholarship being

done in the country, there is no justification for the fact that he appears to list every academic in every department of Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka with at least a passing interest in some aspect of the field. He provides little indication of what sort of work they have produced (if any), or of the relative merits of such work. It is also not clear why he decided to discuss work by Western scholars such as Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, since the focus is supposed to be on Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka, and not Buddhist Studies about Sri Lanka.

Jae-Ryong Shim's article "Buddhist Studies in Korea" (fifteen pages of text) is useful in that he provides some insights into the current state of Buddhist Studies in Korea and how the field is affected by political and nationalist considerations. Unfortunately, he does not give any reason to think that much of value is being produced in Korea.

The most disappointing article from my perspective is Kiyotaka Kimura's and Kazutaka Iwagami's "Buddhist Studies in Japan." Given the wealth of important and ground-breaking research being done in Japan and the fact that much of this is inaccessible to Western scholars who do not read Japanese, this was the article for which I had the highest expectations. At only six pages of text, this is the shortest article in the book, and it only hints at some of the work being done in Japan. The authors make some important points, such as the statement that Indian Buddhist Studies continue to be the main focus of buddhological scholarship in Japan and that Mahāyāna dominates current research. They briefly mention some important Japanese scholars, but fail to provide much useful information regarding what sort of research they conducted or are conducting and what contributions their work makes to the field. The lead author's own primary interest is in Chinese Buddhism, and most of the article is devoted to studies in this area.

Tang Yijie's "Buddhist Studies in China" (eleven pages of text) unconsciously reflects current Chinese attitudes regarding Chinese culture. His main concern is the impact of Buddhism on Chinese culture and China's impact on other parts of the world, rather than Buddhist Studies per se. His use of overblown rhetoric reflects an apparent desire to convince readers of the seminal importance of current scholarship in China. For example, on page 99 he asserts that, regarding a collection of Buddhist canons entitled *Zhonghua Complete Books of Buddhist Canons*, "there is universal agreement that the new edition is incomparably perfect in its precision." Most of the work he describes is either collections of existing work or general surveys of Buddhism. None of it appears to be either original or

particularly insightful.

Frank Reynolds's "Buddhist Studies in the United States" (twenty-eight pages of text) is refreshingly well-written and informative. As he indicates, the past several decades have seen remarkable progress in Buddhist Studies in America, and the field has become highly diverse and wide-ranging in its interests. Reynolds mentions the influence of Asian immigrants, the sponsorship of Asian philanthropic groups, the U.S. government's funding of language programs, and the dramatic increase in the number of university positions around the country as factors in the upsurge of interest in the field. He provides an even-handed and comprehensive overview of work in Southeast Asia, Tibet, East Asia, and the West, but probably due to his own focus on Southeast Asia this tends to dominate the survey.

"Buddhist Studies in Canada" by Bruce Matthews (twenty-two pages of text) is also a useful and well-written survey. Matthews provides an insightful overview of the recent history of the field in Canada and how it has been influenced by government funding and the arrival of Asian immigrants in Canada. His discussions of the leading programs in the country and some of the leading figures in the field are useful, and his survey of current work is both comprehensive and illuminating. Although not one of the leading countries in the field, Canada has produced an impressive amount of excellent buddhological scholarship, and Matthews does a fine job of presenting it.

After reading the articles by Reynolds and Matthews, I was disappointed by Richard Gombrich's "Buddhist Studies in Britain" (fifteen pages of text). Because British scholars have been at the forefront of buddhological research since the eighteenth century and continue to be highly influential today, one would expect that this would be a lengthy article filled with citations of important studies by a range of scholars. Unfortunately, this is not the case. This is a highly self-indulgent article, and a reader unfamiliar with the field would be left with the impression that Gombrich is the only truly significant British exponent of Buddhist Studies. We learn, for example, that "the single British contribution to Buddhist studies during our period which is likely to prove the most lasting significance may well be my discovery of the date of the Buddha" (p. 181). He argues that other scholars have mostly failed to take much notice of his seminal contribution and that this oversight ought to be corrected. Most of the article is devoted to his work, and while no one would deny the importance of his published studies, there are a number of other British scholars whose

work is at least equally important. Two examples are Paul Williams and Steven Collins, both of whom are only briefly mentioned. Collins's superb *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities* — in my opinion the best work to date on this important topic — is not mentioned at all. None of Collins's works are listed in the bibliography.

Gombrich begins with an impassioned critique of British government funding policies toward universities and indicates that this has eviscerated Buddhist Studies scholarship in Britain and has led to many of its best academics taking employment overseas. Despite his vivid description of the deplorable state of current scholarship in the field, he also mentions a number of important works produced by British scholars. When these are put together with the numerous excellent studies that he does not mention, the state of Buddhist Studies in the UK does not seem to be as bad as he believes it to be. Instead of a conclusion, at the end of the article Gombrich returns to his own work (pp. 184-185), and readers are again informed about the seminal significance of his contributions to the field. In this article, one learns a great deal about Gombrich and his work, his views about the current state of British universities, but surprisingly little about the purported topic of the chapter, Buddhist Studies in Britain.

In my opinion, the best article in this book is Eli Franco's "Buddhist Studies in Germany and Austria" (thirty-two pages of text on Germany, five on Austria). This well-written and comprehensive overview provides a solid insight into the current state of the field in these two countries. Franco makes clear his own biases and emphases (p. 191) and indicates that "my perspective has been throughout Indo-centric." He justifies this by indicating that Indological studies have dominated German Buddhist scholarship and continue to do so. East Asia has received comparatively little attention, but he provides some useful information on current work in the area. Unlike most of the other articles in this book, Franco not only discusses the topics of various studies but also evaluates their quality and importance. Most specialists in a particular area would probably already be familiar with German work in the field because most graduate programs in non-German speaking countries require a reading knowledge of German for Ph.D. students, but there will no doubt be much of interest to buddhologists in terms of German studies in areas outside of their primary fields of research. Franco's coverage is thorough: he discusses a range of works, divided into such categories as dictionaries, series, journals, catalogues, etc. He also discusses several groundbreaking German research initiatives, such as the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project. Most of the work he mentions will specially interest



people who work on Indic materials in Central Asia. I was particularly impressed by the fact that Franco mentions a number of apparently significant unpublished DPhil dissertations. This information will no doubt be of interest to scholars working in these areas. The overall impression Franco leaves is that Buddhist Studies are flourishing in Germany and Austria, that a great deal of groundbreaking work is being done by German and Austrian scholars, but that most of this is highly technical and only of interest to specialists.

Louis Gabaude's "Buddhist Studies in France, Belgium, and Switzerland" (eight pages of text) was a disappointment after reading Franco's chapter. France and Belgium have been at the forefront of Buddhist Studies for a long time, and the legacy of such towering figures as Louis de la Vallée Poussin and Étienne Lamotte continues in these countries today. Although there is probably no one of their stature today, a great deal of important work is being produced by French-speaking scholars, but Gabaude fails to indicate this fact. He begins by stating that few French institutions provide undergraduate courses on religion, but he does add that religious studies often takes place in other departments, such as anthropology or sociology. The overall impression of his article is that there is very little of significance in the field in France, as when he states that "the universities, relying mainly on state funds, are not going to create positions and courses for eastern religions while most of their students are flocking to more conventional courses on sociology, law, or Western languages" (p. 232). This impression is further enhanced by the few scholars he discusses at any length: Lamotte, André Bareau, Gérard Fussmann, and François Bizot. Lamotte passed away in 1983, and Bareau died in 1993. They are two of the leading figures of the golden age of French language studies of Buddhism, and Bizot and Fussmann have also published important buddhological work, but there are other francophone scholars whose work is also worthy of discussion. Gabaude only mentions these four by name and ultimately fails to provide an accurate account of the state of the field and the important work that is being produced by French-speaking scholars. In addition, despite the fact that the coverage of the chapter includes Switzerland, he does not mention any current work being done there or the fact that there is a major center for Buddhist Studies at Université de Lausanne.

All in all, this book is a very mixed bag of articles. Some, as indicated above, are informative and well-researched. Others are self-indulgent, vague, and uninformative. Some chapters are much too long and stray far from the purported topic, while the chapter on Japan is far too brief and fails to indicate the state of the field in that country. I also wondered at some of the omissions: Australia and New Zealand, for example, may not be

among the major centers of buddhological scholarship, but I believe that there is enough significant work being done in both countries to merit at least a short chapter. Similarly, the Netherlands has become an important source of scholarship in the field, as have a number of other European countries, and I fail to see why the editors chose to devote thirty-eight pages to Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka while ignoring these other countries. As mentioned above, the quality of the articles varies greatly, and while some are well written and informative, others are tedious and unenlightening. The quality of the articles appears to coincide with the relative quality of research being carried out in each country, and given the huge discrepancy between the sophisticated work described by Franco, Reynolds, Matthews, and others and the apparently unimaginative, derivative, and methodologically naive work described by Promta, Tilakaratne, Shim, and Tang, it is difficult to imagine any possibility of a productive cross-fertilization of research of the sort Swearer proposes in his introduction. Although I applaud the attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of the field up to the present, one can only hope that another and better effort will be made sometime soon.

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