

## Book Review

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***The New Buddhism: A Rough Guide to a New Way of Life***

By David Brazier New York: Palgrave, 2nd edition, 2002,  
288 pages, ISBN 0-312-29518-9 (paperback), U.S. \$16.95.

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*H*as the time come for a Buddhist Reformation? In a sure to be controversial new book, *The New Buddhism: A Rough Guide to a New Way of Life*, author David Brazier maintains that it has, for in the absence of such a reformation it will be impossible for Buddhism to "dig itself out from under the accretions of history" (p. 64).

Given the judgmental character of his thesis, it is not surprising that Brazier admits at the outset that his book is "intentionally partisan" and "makes no effort at academic dispassion." He does, however, challenge those who disagree with his views to advance their own claims as long as such claims "are well put and accord with the real world" (p. 13). One of the most interesting aspects of this book will surely be just how much disagreement it provokes.

Brazier clearly and repeatedly identifies nationalism in particular and *Sangha*-State relations in general as the key element behind what he perceives to be Buddhism's historic failure to "advance the radical social implications of some of its central teachings more effectively" (p. 66). In claiming this, Brazier is clearly a part of the engaged Buddhist movement.

This said, Brazier is unlike many of this latter movement's leaders who maintain that Buddhism need do little more than transcend its historic monastic setting and engage more effectively with the secular world. Instead, Brazier recognizes that much of the problem lies within Buddhist doctrine and practice. Specifically, Brazier's maintains that Buddhism must "jettison much of its own conservative baggage acquired during centuries when the original message was buried under a series of compromises —some chosen, some coerced— with oppressive political systems in India, China, Japan, and elsewhere." It must abandon baggage from times when it was used in these countries as "an instrument of state policy for subduing rather than liberating the population" (p. 66).

This is a very harsh critique indeed and, needless to say, it falls to scholars to determine the merit (or demerit) of broad generalizations of this kind. Some readers might even detect an element of "Asia-bashing" in Brazier's remarks, complete with the suggestion of moral superiority on the part of the West. Yet Brazier is equally critical of what he identifies as the modern equivalent of the traditional four-tiered Indian caste system. He means by this the contemporary concentration of wealth in the hands of the "white caste" as compared with those of yellow, brown, and black skin colors.

Brazier notes that whites enjoy more than three-quarters of the wealth of the planet while making up only a quarter of its population. Because of their relative wealth, white Buddhists tend to look to Buddhism for "tantalizing spiritual experiences," bringing with it the serious danger that Western Buddhism will degenerate into a "narrow, sectarian, small-minded and irrelevant pursuit of personal euphoria" (p. 26). This head-in-the-sand spirituality is, according to Brazier, "extremely remote from what the Buddha was concerned with" (p. 5).

But what, exactly, is this "New Buddhism" that Brazier advocates? Brazier's defines New Buddhism as "Buddhism finally liberated from the age-old demoralizing effects of having long ago become part of monolithic state apparatuses" (p. 70). The key to such liberation, Brazier asserts, is deciding what is "truly Buddhist" (p. 70).

In making this latter claim, Brazier reveals the degree to which his thinking has

been informed by the "Critical Buddhism" movement. In fact, two chapters of the book (Nine and Ten) are devoted to an explanation of this movement. Because he does not claim that his is a scholarly analysis, Brazier is able to take this movement beyond the confines of scholarly debate and assist the general reader in appreciating why the points it raises are important to our understanding of Buddhism, East and West.

In the end, Brazier does not take a position in support of, or in opposition to, the positions of such Critical Buddhist scholars as Matsumoto Shiro or Hakamaya Noriaki. Instead, he regards this movement as functioning more in the nature of a "warning bell," revealing the way in which doctrinal tenets concerning Buddha Nature and inherent enlightenment can, depending on the context, readily become allies of socially repressive forces. This leads him to conclude:

If concepts like Buddha Nature and tathagata-garbha are used to mean that everybody can become enlightened, then they are Buddhist. If they are used as substitute words for soul, god, divine essence and so on, then they are not. The message of Critical Buddhism is usefully disturbing and should not be ignored (p. 160).

Like the Critical Buddhists, Brazier wants to identify, and rectify, those aspects of Buddhism that he regards as having harmed or even contradicted its original message of both individual spiritual growth and radical social change. Furthermore, nationalism is not the only barrier to restoring Buddhism to its revolutionary beginnings. Brazier identifies a whole series of impediments to such a restoration, not the least of which is the "cult of anti-intellectualism" (p. 12).

Brazier asserts that those schools of Buddhism which eschew healthy debate and deride intellect are dangerous or hypocritical and sometimes both. "Criticism of intellect provides a smokescreen," he claims, "behind which the ills of the world at large can be ignored and malpractice can flourish, and no school that really advances the dharma can afford that" (p. 13). Coming from someone trained in the Zen tradition, as Brazier is, this is a drastic critique, no less so than his

warning that "we must not allow principles like 'no-mind' to degenerate into sheer mindlessness" (p. 79).

Closely connected to the above, is the question of reforming the master-disciple relationship. Brazier castigates as "complete nonsense" the idea that the enlightened master is a know-all who can never be gainsaid (p. 76). Instead, a master is in the nature of a teacher who provides an example for the disciple as well as instruction. The relationship between master and disciple can best be described as the relationship between a sports person and his or her coach. "At the end of the day, it is the disciple's performance in life that matters, not the coach's rightness or reputation, and finally the player is responsible for that herself (p. 188).

In what are surely the most controversial sections of his book, chapters Six and Seven, Brazier takes an iconoclastic look at what he considers to be the eight "varieties of enlightenment." Some varieties, such as "enlightenment as faith" in the Pure Land tradition or enlightenment through ritual empowerment in the Tantric tradition, will be familiar to readers. Others, however, such as "enlightenment as eternal life," something Brazier attributes to followers of the *Lotus Sutra*, may come as a surprise. While Brazier does not give a definitive answer to which, if any, of these types of enlightenment is the "correct" one, he nevertheless criticizes what he finds to be dangerous elements in many of them, e.g. the doctrines of non-duality and original enlightenment, both of which he finds to be Taoist in origin. Brazier is especially critical of a closely related corollary to these Taoist doctrines that promotes "enlightenment as impassivity." He notes that especially in Japan imperturbability in the midst of turmoil had a strong appeal for the military man, for it enabled him "to be a more effective killer" (p. 112).

In conclusion, it is certainly possible to dismiss Brazier's book as the idiosyncratic musings of a lone Buddhist practitioner, albeit a knowledgeable one. To do that, however, would be to miss the book's real purpose which is not to provide all the "answers" to the questions it raises but, rather, to "encourage the reader to clarify what she or he does actually believe and practice" (p. 82). Here lies the true value of this book for the serious Buddhist practitioner.

For the scholarly community, Brazier's book will be of interest to those studying the ongoing development of Buddhism in the West. This is especially so inasmuch as Brazier is currently putting his reform proposals into practice as spiritual leader of a small socially engaged Buddhist movement, the Order of Amida Buddha, headquartered in the U.K. (details at: [www.amidatrust.com](http://www.amidatrust.com)). To what degree Brazier's vision prospers within and beyond this organization should make an interesting topic of research.

More importantly, Brazier's work represents an ongoing challenge to the scholarly community, i.e., to what degree, if any, should scholars, whose research remains overwhelmingly "descriptive" in nature, become involved in "prescriptive" pursuits, e.g. formulating proposals for the "reform" of Buddhism? Is it appropriate for scholars to employ their knowledge and research skills in creating, or helping to create, forms of Buddhism that may have never existed before? Or, on the contrary, should "true" scholars limit themselves to the role of dispassionate, objective observers of the actions of others? In short, in addition to scholarship on "engaged Buddhism," is there a place for "engaged Buddhist scholarship"?