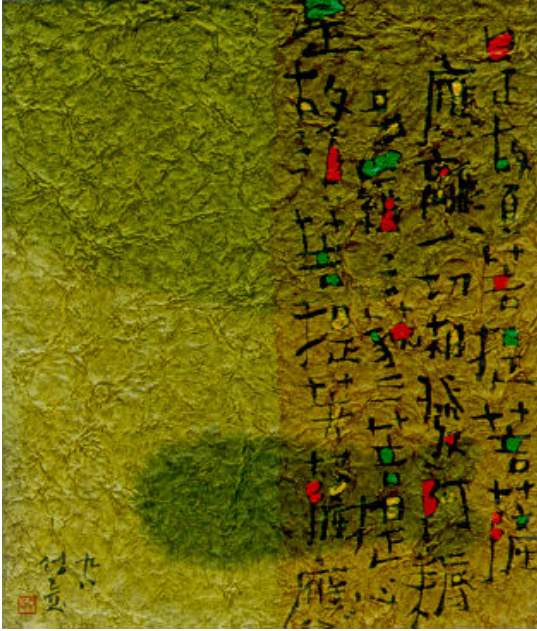


## Book Review

*Journal of Global Buddhism 6 (2005): 36 -*



*Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahayana Buddhism.*  
By David L. McMahan. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002, x + 227 pages,  
ISBN 0-7007-1489-8 (hardcover), £65.00.

Reviewed by

Natalie Gummer

*Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies*

*Mouat Professor of International Studies*

Beloit College

[gummern@beloit.edu](mailto:gummern@beloit.edu)

**Copyright Notes:** Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to: <http://www.globalbuddhism.org>

## Book Review

*Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahayana Buddhism.* By David L. McMahan. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002, x + 227 pages, ISBN 0-7007-1489-8 (hardcover), £65.00.

Reviewed by

Natalie Gummer

*Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies*

*Mouat Professor of International Studies*

Beloit College

[gummern@beloit.edu](mailto:gummern@beloit.edu)

In this tremendously ambitious and wide-ranging textual study, David McMahan argues for the centrality of vision in Buddhist thought, literature, and practice, with particular focus on South Asian Mahayana. McMahan proposes that vision is the "root metaphor" for knowledge, a metaphor that lies at the heart of numerous discursive and meditative practices of Mahayana Buddhist communities. He seeks thereby not only to illuminate the ways in which this metaphor is both constitutive and generative of Buddhist thought and practice, but also to contribute a Buddhist perspective to contemporary conversations about ocularcentrism, which focus on the modern West.

The central argument is developed in five quite distinct chapters, each of which examines a different context in which the predominance of the visual, McMahan argues, is clearly manifest. The first chapter, "The Devaluation of Language and the Privileging of Perception," posits a rupture between the Vedic conception of the tremendous power of language and subsequent Indic conceptions of language, especially Buddhist conceptions. From the earliest period, the Buddhist tradition evinced an extreme skepticism about language, viewing it as "constitutive of a falsely constructed lifeworld" (p. 22). McMahan traces the development of this negative conception of language through Abhidharma literature and into the early Mahayana. Of particular significance to the larger argument of the book is McMahan's examination of the use of dialectical paradox in Perfection of Wisdom texts. In its most simple form, the paradox is constituted first by asserting a (linguistic) category, then negating it, and finally reasserting it qua category, a dialectic that McMahan encapsulates in the formula "A, ~A, 'A'" (p. 38). This dialectic serves both to negate the apparent reality of merely linguistic distinctions, and to reestablish the utility of language in the much more restricted sphere of conventional designation. As McMahan notes, the function of this paradox is primarily performative, attempting to evoke through language a recognition of the linguistic construction of the illusory world. The chapter concludes by contrasting the devaluation of language with the valorization of direct perception — a form of perception that McMahan argues is fundamentally visual.

The second chapter, "Buddhist Visuality in History and Metaphor," drawing on the work of cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, argues for the central role of the root metaphor "knowing is seeing" in Mahayana literature. McMahan begins by surveying the strong association of knowledge with vision in Indo-European languages and history, then turns to examine the range of visual metaphors for knowing in Buddhist literature, drawing primarily, but not exclusively, on Mahayana texts. From the root metaphor "knowing is seeing," he derives a

number of subsidiary metaphors that depend upon it for their power and significance. Of these, McMahan examines in greatest depth "knowledge is space" (p. 73-81). Again he contrasts the spatial realm of vision with the temporal realm of (oral/aural) language. Despite Buddhist teachings on impermanence (more obviously manifest in the evanescence of sound than in the stasis enabled by vision), McMahan argues, Buddhist literature privileges space, even to the extent that time itself is represented in spatial terms. Since metaphors not only express but also constitute the cognitive resources for interpreting phenomena, the representation of knowledge in visual terms shapes "the primary possibilities and most likely choices for construing various phenomena" (p. 82).

Chapter three, "Orality, Writing, and Authority: Visionary Literature and the Struggle for Legitimacy in the Mahayana," an earlier version of which was published in *History of Religions*, examines how the shift from oral to written modes of text production, preservation, and dissemination shaped the legitimizing strategies employed in Mahayana Buddhist sutra literature. McMahan maps the previously posited hierarchical dichotomy between language and vision onto the distinction between orality and writing, arguing not only that writing functioned to perpetuate and legitimate Mahayana Buddhism and to foster devotional practices focused on the sutra as material object, but also that "writing contributed to a restructuring of knowledge in such a way that vision, rather than hearing, became a significant mode of access to knowledge" (p. 89). The latter claim, bolstered by the theories regarding orality and literacy set forth by scholars like Walter Ong and Jack Goody, is of greatest relevance to the larger argument of the book. This writing-induced shift in modes of knowing in turn is represented as contributing to the development of visual metaphor and visionary imagery introduced in the preceding chapter.

The central argument of the book, loosely traced through these quite disparate "case studies," begins to cohere in the fourth chapter, "Realms of the Senses: Buddha Fields and Fields of Vision in the *Ga.n.davyuuha Suutra*." This chapter explores the instantiation in the *Ga.n.davyuuha Suutra* of the dialectical paradox examined in chapter one and the visual metaphors identified in chapter two. McMahan argues that the verbal dialectic employed in the Perfection of Wisdom sutras (A, ~A, "A") "informs the recurrent imagistic pattern of the interpenetration of part and whole in the *Ga.n.davyuuha*, but not so much in a verbal as a visual mode" (p. 136). In other words, visual images rather than words are manipulated so as to provoke a recognition of the constructed, conventional nature of phenomena. Moreover, the *Ga.n.davyuuha* concretizes the metaphors that represent knowing as seeing in its description of fantastic visionary realms. Thus, McMahan concludes, "the increasing emphasis on vision in the Mahayana played a formative role in the development of new doctrinal positions insofar as it entailed attempts to envision key ideas and metaphors and to illustrate them in visionary episodes — attempts that produced shifts in the significance and meaning of such ideas and metaphors" (p. 141).

The fifth chapter, "The Optics of Buddhist Meditation and Devotion," explores the role of vision in Mahayana praxis, especially visualization. McMahan traces such practices from non-Mahayana Buddhist meditations through devotional practices and Tantric visualizations. The primary focus of the chapter is a study of the role of vision in *saadhana* practices, which McMahan suggests "could be considered ritual enactments of [the] visionary episodes recounted in the sutras" (p. 171). The *saadhana* involves not only visualizing awakened beings situated in mandalas, but also entering the mandala and merging oneself with the deity, thereby coming to embody enlightened wisdom through the manipulation of meditative vision. McMahan relates this practice to image consecration, in which the deity comes to be embodied in the external image — but *saadhana* practices involve instead a self-consecration, in which the practitioner herself comes to embody the deity before finally dissolving into emptiness. This Tantric "'somaticization' of Buddhist doctrines and themes" (p. 175) represents "a culmination of the

visual orientation of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism" (p. 177).

In "Conclusions and Occlusions," McMahan presents an appropriately cautious yet thought-provoking assessment of the contribution that the primacy of vision in Mahayana Buddhism might make to broader discussions of ocularcentrism in the academy. While scholars have generally viewed the ocularcentrism of the Modern West in a rather negative light, ascribing to this sensory predilection the tendency toward objectification of the other that underlies Enlightenment thought and imperialism, McMahan sees in Buddhist ocularcentrism more positive potential. While comparable claims to universal knowledge can also be discerned in Buddhist traditions, "the refusal of most Buddhist schools in India to attempt to ground philosophical discourse in supposed ontological foundations may have averted some of the problems inherent in modern Western ocularcentrism" (p. 191). Thus, McMahan concludes, we should avoid generalizing about ocularcentric orientations in different cultural and historical configurations.

As should be evident from the preceding description, McMahan seeks to weave together a number of seemingly distinct issues and theoretical orientations in a creative and provocative manner in order to illuminate historical and conceptual connections among a wide range of texts and practices. In the vast scope of this project lies both the strength and the weakness of *Empty Vision*. McMahan's study offers significant insight into visual metaphors for knowledge and their generative applications. His attention to the possible relationships among the paradoxical dialectic employed in Perfection of Wisdom sutras, the visionary literature of the Mahayana, and Tantric visualization practices enable us to see significant and mutually illuminating continuities among doctrinal, textual, and ritual practices. McMahan constructs an interpretive lens through which numerous Buddhist texts can be read, and provokes a much keener awareness of the presence and potential soteriological function of visual metaphors and imagery. McMahan's argument that visual metaphors become concretized in devotional and visualization practices is especially productive in its potential to enrich scholarly appreciation both of the ritual aspects of literature, and of the literary aspects of ritual practices.

Less compelling, however, is McMahan's insistence throughout the study that the devaluation of language is concomitant with the privileging of vision. He contrasts the Vedic valorization of the word with Buddhist denigration: "Early Buddhist reflection on language... allowed a much smaller scope to the power of words, and this represented a significant break with what we know of the dominant ideas on language in ancient South Asia" (p. 18). McMahan supports this thesis by drawing on the considerable body of Buddhist writings that present language and conceptualization as the foundation of samsaric entrapment. Language generates the illusion of discrete and permanent entities, of the distinction between self and other, and thus leads to attachment, craving, and suffering. Undoubtedly, this negative conception of language is of critical and pervasive significance in Buddhist thought and practice — but note that this view by no means ascribes "a much smaller scope to the power of words." Indeed, if language is the very basis of delusion, surely it is accorded tremendous power: language, in a very fundamental sense, creates the illusory world of the unawakened. What could be more powerful? And what could be more central to Buddhist thought and practice?

Granted, that power is portrayed in many doctrinal texts as profoundly negative; the potential of language to delude is a central *problem* to be overcome in most Buddhist soteriologies. The hegemony of the word is to be subverted in the quest for ineffable truth, truth that McMahan convincingly argues is figured in fundamentally visual terms. But McMahan's argument conflates a negative conception of conventional language with a devaluation of the power of language. Moreover, McMahan assumes an opposition between language and image belied by

the very texts he cites. These are, after all, linguistic works. *The Ga.n.davyuuha* is assuredly a text obsessed with vision and visions, but it remains a text; higher knowledge may well be represented through visual metaphors, but metaphors remain linguistic devices — devices that, according to McMahan's own argument, not only reflect but also help to constitute cognition. One could argue that, far from devaluing language, the *Ga.n.davyuuha* is a testament to the power of language to create alternative realities, visionary realms. If the power of language is such that it generates the illusion of samsara, then it can also create alternative visions — visions that have the potential to liberate rather than obfuscate. Which is dominant in such texts: language or vision? Their relationship, it seems to me, is extremely complex, and cannot be easily generalized as either oppositional or hierarchical.

McMahan's third chapter on "orality and literacy" might in part be an attempt to address the problem posed by the linguistic nature of his sources, although he never makes this point fully explicit. By positing "a shift from oral/aural to the literate/visual" (p. 109), McMahan represents the (written) text as predominantly visual, requiring a mode of accessing and organizing knowledge fundamentally different from that of (spoken) language. One major problem with this theory (a problem both for McMahan and for the theorists on whose work he draws) is that it assumes an audience of (silent) readers — an audience that one would be highly unlikely to find in the manuscript cultures to which McMahan refers. A manuscript culture, in which both written texts and the ability to read them are generally quite rare, is not in any clear-cut sense a culture based on writing.

Moreover, some of the sutras in which McMahan identifies visionary tendencies, such as the *Saddharmapu.n.dariika* and the *Suvar.nabhaasottama*, are also exceedingly articulate regarding their own tremendous oral/aural potency and the critical role of the spoken sutra in generating visionary, olfactory, and tactile experiences of the highest order. The transformative power explicitly accorded to the language, oral or written, of these sutras is too crucial to be overlooked. While the *Ga.n.davyuuha* provides an especially vivid and compelling example of the visionary tendencies of Mahayana literature, it is also a misleading example with respect to McMahan's claims about the devaluation of the word, because it lacks the explicit and repeated claims of linguistic potency so characteristic of other Mahayana sutras — sutras that are similarly rife with vivid visual imagery. McMahan's study of visual imagery and the concretization of metaphors for knowledge thus elides the critical generative role that, according to several sutras as well as McMahan's own theory of metaphor, verbalization plays in making such imagery manifest.

My point is not to call into question McMahan's many insights regarding the articulation and function of visuality in Buddhist literature and practice, but rather to suggest that these insights are neither dependent upon nor in any way necessitate the concomitant denigration of the word on which he appears to found his argument. Indeed, a greater appreciation of the complexity of the relationship between sight and sound, between vision and language, would only enhance his study of visual metaphor and imagery. I wonder whether the works on modern Western ocularcentrism on which McMahan draws have not led him somewhat astray in this respect, since they appear to assume the necessary supremacy of one sense modality over the others. Perhaps the Buddhist materials that McMahan examines could not only contribute to a more nuanced understanding of visuality, but could also help to articulate an alternative framework for understanding the relationship among the senses.

It is extremely difficult in attempting so wide-ranging a study to avoid a degree of misrepresentation and reductivism, and (despite McMahan's careful hedging) *Empty Vision* can be critiqued on these grounds. At the same time, the field of Buddhist Studies would be greatly

impoverished without scholars like McMahan who are willing to take the risk of thinking broadly and comparatively. While I take issue with some aspects of McMahan's argument, especially his representation of the role of language in Buddhist thought and practice, *Empty Vision* is extremely "good to think with." I would recommend it over many more specialized studies that assiduously avoid examination of their broader implications. We can dispute some of McMahan's findings, but when we do so, we are simply working to advance an area of inquiry that his work has opened up. *Empty Vision* helps us to understand and relate a whole spectrum of doctrinal, literary, and ritual practices in terms of their visual orientation — and in that sense, like the metaphors it explores, the book not only explicates but also generates different modes of perception.