

## Book Review

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*Land of Beautiful Vision: Making a Buddhist*

*Sacred Place in New Zealand.* By Sally McAra.

University of Hawai'i Press: Honolulu, 2007, xiv

+ 208 pages, ISBN 978-0-8248-2996-4 (cloth),

\$45.00.

Reviewed by

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*Land of Beautiful Vision: Making a Buddhist Sacred Place in New Zealand* takes the reader on a journey focused on the construction of a *stupa* in New Zealand by the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO). The journey is one of transformation, and McAra uses the central theme of transculturality to explore a much wider range of issues including sacred space, identity, liminality, healing and flux. In fact, the book's multilayered construction is reminiscent of a *stupa* itselfxxxso laden with richness that it provokes different ideas on each encounter.

Chapter one explores the historical evolution of the academic field of Buddhism in the West to explain the book's use of transculturality as the central theoretical frame. As McAra explains, transculturality examines how contemporary cultures intermix, highlighting the distinction that can emerge between local differences and global universalities in a globalized world. This is highly relevant to Buddhism in the West because studies in this area tend to focus on how overarching Buddhist beliefs and practices are translated into different contexts in a wide variety of ways. Chapter one then explains the history of FWBO internationally amongst studies of transcultural processes on Buddhism in the West, allowing effective situation of FWBO in contemporary Buddhism. This includes elucidation of FWBO's perspective on transculturation issues

and McAra highlights how the building of a *stupa* in New Zealand ties in with the FWBO's emphasis on localization strategies.

Chapter two orients readers to the geographic and religious landscape in which the transformations occurring around the building of the *stupa* take place. The site of the *stupa* construction is Sudarshanaloka (Land of Beautiful Vision), a FWBO retreat centre located in the Tararu Valley on the Coromandel Peninsula in the north of New Zealand. *Land of Beautiful Vision* focuses heavily on themes of physical and sacred space; hence McAra's narration of her impressions of Sudarshanaloka is an important part of the journey, with the local landmarks being particularly integral to this tale. Chapter two also examines the religious landscape of New Zealand as backdrop to understanding the story of both FWBO's and Sudarshanaloka's beginnings in New Zealand.

Chapter three continues to expand on this background by exploring the impacts of the local culture, focusing on the interplay of Pakeha (the Maori term for European settlers, who were mainly British) and the indigenous Maori cultures in New Zealand. There has been little research on Buddhism in New Zealand; consequently McAra's work is a welcome addition to the field for its exploration of this cultural sphere, and as such its inclusion in the Topics in Contemporary Buddhism series is highly appropriate. In exploring the adaptation of Buddhism to the New Zealand cultural milieu, McAra highlights identity and land as important themes as both Maori and FWBO hold sacred space to be important in their respective belief systems.

While chapters one, two, and three focus on exploring the theoretical frames necessary for understanding the prelude to the transformations occurring around the *stupa* construction, chapters four, five, and six focus more on the building of the *stupa*. This is achieved by the use of a variety of perspectives: of people, of the lands, and across time. *Land of Beautiful Vision* is a story of three key people involved in Sudarshanaloka, of four events in the early period of the history of Tararu (a death, an unsettling encounter, the

dedication of the *stupa*, and a ritual), of three landmarks (the puriri tree, the kauri log and the *stupa*), and of three phases in the history of the Tararu valley. Some of these stories are interwoven throughout the book while others stand alone. Chapter four evidences the latter, explaining events that result in a redefining of the relationship with the land on which the *stupa* is to be situated as a friendship with the land, through emphasis on healing past events.

Chapter five follows the development of the *stupa* at Sudarshanaloka from design through to consecration. To explore some of the *stupa's* effects, the design and agency of *stupas* is explained in some detail. The importance of the location of a *stupa* in New Zealand is explored for both local and international FWBO members, illuminating themes of group identity construction and local adaptation. Chapter six redefines place through bricolage by discussing three key landmarks, their stories, and their role in the creation of a sense of place that links FWBO members to the *stupa* and the land.

Chapter seven explores how this very rich ethnography contributes to understanding transculturality. McAra concludes that the construction of this transcultural religious bricolage has answered questions regarding the role of a FWBO *stupa* in New Zealand within a variety of frames. In my view, McAra's contribution is not only the study of Buddhism in a new cultural context, but is significant in the field as McAra's combination of theoretical frames continues in the vein of Cristina Rocha's study (*Zen in Brazil: The Quest for Cosmopolitan Modernity*, University of Hawai'i Press: Honolulu, 2006) to advance concepts of transculturality beyond problematic dichotomies such as the distinction between ethnic and convert Buddhists.

McAra's work is fascinating in that—like a *stupa*—it points to something beyond itself, by moving beyond the advancement of theoretical constructs. While McAra's work is successful in its aim of understanding a series of events from the viewpoint of transculturality, it also achieves something more. For example, McAra's identification of her role in this research as

that of an anthropologist results in her approaching Buddhism as a "cultural phenomenon" rather than "as a source of spiritual insight" (p. 32), although she notes that she believes the two viewpoints can be fruitfully combined. In my view, McAra not only demonstrates how these two approaches can inform each other, but moves beyond this by actually representing and analysing the cultural events occurring around the building of the *stupa* in a manner that invokes religious inspiration. Key to this inspiration is McAra's own emphasis that the cohesion of her work is fleeting: "for those who would create typologies depicting adaptive phases of cross-cultural religious transmission, this is an apposite reminder that we are concerned with processes that are living, contingent, and fluid" (p. 5). McAra has succeeded in viewing this cultural phenomenon through an anthropological lens that also transcends itself by recognising its own over-changing nature. *Land of Beautiful Vision* is a book about a point frozen in a time that has now passed, yet it is a landmark in its self-positioning as just that.