



Book Review

## Buddhism Under Capitalism

Edited by Richard. K. Payne and Fabio Rambelli. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, viii + 269 pages, ISBN 978-1-3502-2833-7 (paperback), \$29.95; ISBN 978-1-3502-2832-0 (cloth)

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**F**EW of us can deny the daily effects of global capitalism on our lives, for better or worse. That we live in a condition of global-interdependency is a Durkheimian social fact. Scholars of Buddhist histories, in any of their historical conditions, for the most part intuitively understand this—given how Buddhist doctrine works. That is, we are all empty of independent existence and conversely full of interdependent existence. We learn this in the Heart Sutra and so many other canonic teachings. In this edited volume, two highly regarded scholars in the field of Buddhist studies, Richard Payne and Fabio Rambelli, bring together a collection of essays, which, though diverse in goal and aim, all reflect this interdependency.

The book begins with a compelling introduction by Payne and Rambelli. The rest of the edited volume is divided into three parts: part 1, “Historical Perspective,” part 2, “Contemporary Studies,” and part 3, “Theoretical Reflections.” In their introduction, Payne and Rambelli begin by arguing that the dynamics of power relations that have up until recently shaped the field of Buddhist Studies—imperialism and colonialism, as well as less obvious forms of social control—have now been deeply influenced by neoliberal philosophies, to the point where “economic relations are the predominant ways in which power is exercised.” (1) Capitalism, then, is precisely what needs to be investigated in conjunction with Buddhist institutionalism, whether in lineages, monasteries, temples, or the variety of socioeconomic activities they engage in. Doing this investigation, we can immediately recognize that Buddhism has never been a world-denying phenomenon (one of the most persistent stereotypes of Buddhism). Rather, through their institutions, Buddhists have always engaged economically and politically with the world, past and present. Payne and Rambelli see global capitalism as the most urgent force to be reckoned with, as opposed to what they refer to as the previous global socioeconomic system, namely, colonialism. The editors carefully delineate the two primary areas of inquiry in this volume. First, the process of how the capitalist formation of Buddhism as an institution becomes commodified and then represented and marketed in capitalist society. Second, the ways in which capitalism has influenced the very conception of Buddhism as an object of academic inquiry. This book goes a long way in exploring both these critical avenues.

Many of the authors in this volume, including the editors, rightly cite Jacques Gernet (1995) as the first scholar to directly tackle the complexities of economics and Buddhism. Gernet’s study, however, is polemical. Gernet argues that Buddhists were broadly dangerous for the Chinese economy, without acknowledging their contributions to that economy. Gernet is adamant that Buddhists in medieval China were primarily consumers and so, ultimately, treats Buddhist practices as wasteful activities. In the end, Gernet fails to

understand that Buddhist monasteries establishing and socially reproducing their monastic spaces required strategic economic action. In this regard, Buddhist monasteries were much like the rest of society, and, as Marx explained long ago, a society can no more cease to produce than it can cease to consume. People do not just live *in* society; they *produce* society in order to live. Payne and Rambelli recognize that Buddhists were no exception to this rule and move on to note and briefly describe the work of five scholars who have deepened our understanding of the economic history of Buddhism well beyond Gernet's work. They are Gregory Schopen, Michael J. Walsh (myself), Johan Elverskog, Alex John Catanese, and Tansen Sen.

Schopen's extensive body of work underscores the Protestant presuppositions of Buddhist studies, specifically in India. He looks extensively at monastic economies, focusing on money lending, debt, property ownership, and inheritance practices, making a compelling case that medieval Indian Buddhist monasteries were economic institutions. Walsh's (my) work focuses on a network of Chinese Buddhist monastic institutions (with Tiantong Monastery as a primary exemplum) to determine the relationship between institutional longevity and the land-merit exchange as the foundation of monastic wealth. Here, merit comes to be understood as commodified labor as well as an object of labor that can be exchanged for land. Elverskog's work explores the environmental impacts of the spread of Buddhist monastic institutions across Asia. Catanese looks at the commodification of Buddhist objects, specifically in Tibet, but also with a historical overview of Buddhist property and ownership. Sen explores the broad range of exchange of Buddhist goods between India and China, particularly from the fourth to the early eighth centuries. While these authors have deepened our understandings of Buddhism and economics, and the complex interplays therein, the editors point out that there is still much work to be done.

Payne and Rambelli go on to make the case that we ought to distinguish between Buddhist economics as an ethical project and the economics of Buddhism as primarily an academic project. They write convincingly and importantly that an "economics of Buddhism will need to see both the social dynamics evidenced in economic relations and individual Buddhists as socially and historically located agents." (9) They then describe each of the eleven essays that comprise the book. They conclude their introduction by calling for more historical, anthropological, and theoretical studies, and listing ten critical issues at stake—too many to list in this review—needed to broaden and deepen our knowledge of the multiple dimensions of, and the interactions between, Buddhists and various forms of capitalism. These seem to me to be essential subjects in future work on Buddhism and economics. I now provide a few sentences describing each chapter, not by any means doing full justice to these complex essays, but at least providing a modicum of content.

William K. Dewey's chapter, "Monastic Capitalism? On the Inclusiveness of Tibetan Monastic Institutions," examines the roles of monks and monasteries in the political economy of Tibet, focusing specifically on commerce, investment, and landholdings. Some monastic rules (*vinaya*) are discussed with an understanding that many of these rules take a pragmatic approach when dealing with Buddhist accumulation and wealth. Dewey also looks at extractive practices of Tibetan monasteries, as well as inclusive institutions, and how both came to shape Tibetan Buddhism.

Candy Gunther Brown's "Selling Buddhism by Branding Mindfulness and Reiki as Valuable, Secular Services: Three Interacting Economic Models," raises the challenge of how and when mindfulness and Reiki enter the marketplace as ostensibly secular commodities and yet still can function to spread Buddhist values. What are the implications of this? According to Brown, in three economic models (fee-for-service, philanthropic giving, and investment) we in fact see manifestations of Buddhist-inspired practices thriving under capitalism. Jon Kabat-Zinn's MBSR is among the more well-known cases that Brown explores.

Ira Helderma, in “Consciousness Raising, False Consciousness, and Freud: Buddhist Traditions in Contemporary Mental Health Economies in the United States” begins by asserting that “the healing capacities of Buddhist teachings and practices have played a central role in the contemporary assimilation of Buddhism in the United States” (63). Helderma then goes on to examine both sides of the coin as regards the use of centuries-old Buddhist practices that are then commodified into biomedical techniques, as well as scholars who have pointed out that this is precisely how Buddhists have employed medical practices for centuries. Ultimately, Helderma argues that both positions are tenable, and, indeed, that multiple identities —psychotherapist, practitioner, scholar—are simultaneously possible. In addition to the essay in this volume, Helderma also has explored this in more detail in a recent book (Helderma 2019).

Courtney Bruntz’s “Buddhist Technoscapes: Interrogating ‘Skillful Means’ in East Asian Monasteries” covers a wide range of technologies employed by monks, nuns, and Buddhist institutions in their efforts to spread the dharma, such as social media, websites, various digital technologies, animated cartoons, and ritual offerings. All are justified by *upāya*, the Buddhist notion of “skillful means.” Bruntz explores some of the economic ramifications of this use of *upāya* through specific case studies at Longquan Temple, China, and Kōdaiji Temple, Japan. Bruntz concludes that the respective abbots of these two monastic institutions do employ *upāya* to justify some of their outreach via technology, especially when it pertains to spreading the dharma to a younger generation.

Kendall Marchman’s “Perceiving Authenticity: Online Tourism Reviews of Buddhist Tourist Destinations” explores the blurry line between tourists and pilgrims, something long discussed in Buddhist studies. Marchman goes to the source, so to speak, to further complicate the line. That source is Tripadvisor with its more than 885 million reviews. In particular, Marchman develops three case studies: the classic Chinese Buddhist sites of Mt. Emei and Mt. Wutai, and the third site being the “Nanshan Scenic Spot,” a Buddhist theme park in Shandong province. In doing this, Marchman also tackles a longstanding and all-too familiar stereotype, that a “deeper assumption hides beneath concerns about the entangling of Buddhism and the economy, which is that Buddhist institutions that participate in the economy cannot be truly Buddhist.” (99) Marchman deftly debunks this through a detailed analysis of the data, and by exploring the whole idea of authenticity to begin with.

In Mark Speece and Jitnisa Roenjun’s essay, “Ethics in Small Business Capitalism of Women Kuan Im Followers in Thailand,” the authors focus on a highly devout group of women who follow Kuan Im (Ch. Guanyin) bodhisattva and who also run small businesses. The authors are clear that these are “small business capitalists who have a strong sense of ethics.” (117) This contrasts with big-business capitalism in Thailand which usually upholds the country’s power structures. These devout women effectively apply their understandings of Kuan Im’s ethics to their own business practices, making for a very different business model. The group requires no formal membership, nor is it text-based. Part of its uniqueness is that Kuan Im bodhisattva is not strictly speaking part of Thai Buddhism, and applying bodhisattva ethics to business practices is, in Thailand, unique to this decentralized group of women.

Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg, in her “The Business of Buddhism: Creating Karmic Connections in Ladakh and Europe,” begins by describing how, in the spring of 2017, a group of Buddhist monks and artisans from the Ladakh region travelled to Europe on a goodwill tour of sorts. Their goal was to promote Buddhist values, but also to raise donations to build a school and library. Williams-Oerberg uses the term “connectionwork” to establish a theoretical framework through which to better understand the relationship between Buddhist economic aspirations and spreading the dharma. As the author puts it, this “takes a closer look at *how* Buddhists engage with Buddhist ethics within economic actions and relations, rather than how they *should*

engage economically.” (134) This essay is a fascinating case study of how Buddhists can choose to create a brand, employ market dynamics, and proselytize, all at the same time.

Barbara Clayton and Della Duncan, in their “Gross National Happiness: Capitalism Under Buddhism in The Kingdom of Bhutan” explore Buddhism under capitalism vis-à-vis Bhutan’s unique Gross National Happiness (GNH) index. They employ the phrase “capitalism under Buddhism” as a potential countermeasure against the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. As the authors put it, “We argue that as a sufficiency-based economic model that challenges the growth imperative, encourages government intervention, and values nature, GNH does offer a bridge toward a postcapitalist future.” (148) In a real sense, GNH can be viewed as the Buddhist practice of the Middle Way, rejecting extremes on both ends of a global capitalist spectrum.

In the first few line of his essay, “Drawing Blood: At the Intersection of Knowledge Economies and Buddhist Economies,” Scott A. Mitchell writes “it doesn’t matter whether or not we, as scholars of Buddhism, identify as Buddhists. In a sense we are all Buddhists.” (169) Mitchell explains that this means any of us in the field of Buddhist studies—whatever our roles may be—are already part of the Buddhist tradition. Mitchell continues by arguing that—precisely because we are implicated in direct and indirect ways within Buddhist traditions—whether one personally identifies as Buddhist is irrelevant. Further, Mitchell strongly argues that Buddhism is an abstract concept dreamt up by scholars and Buddhists alike. Like any “ism,” it is just that: a fabrication. As scholars of Buddhists (that is, people), we are accountable to those whom we study. This reminds me of Jonathan Z. Smith’s long-held argument that religion, in part, is a creation of the scholar’s study, to which the late, great historian of religion Charles Long would always emphatically reply, to “which scholar’s study, and for what purposes?” Long (and Mitchell) are asking what are you trying to know and why do you want to know about it? Mitchell raises all these questions and more. For him, the question is not “Are you a Buddhist?” Instead, it is “What are you doing with your rights and privileges?” This question is critical to the knowledge economy we all are working within, and as Payne and Rambelli rightly point out in their introduction, this question is itself “subsumed within the system of neoliberal globalized capitalism.” (19)

Lionel Obadia, in “A Part of or Apart from Globalization? The Ambivalent Relationship between Buddhism and Modern Capitalism,” uses two ethnographic cases studies: *Knowing the Buddha Organization* (KBO) and the Buddha-Bar company, to explore the ambiguities of Buddhism’s relationship to global capitalism. KBO, in Thailand, rejects using any Buddhist imagery for marketing purposes. By contrast, the Buddha-Bar (a restaurant-bar), first located in Paris, now a global franchise, appropriates any Buddhist themes it feels will enhance its brand. Obadia suggests that Buddhist practices and Buddhist ideas were already globalized soon after the Buddha’s death. Here, we can think of the silk roads and the ubiquity of Buddhists in central Asia, China, and on to the rest of East and Southeast Asia. With the arrival of these practices and ideas in Euroamerica, cultural appropriation becomes a fraught affair. But Obadia makes clear how they were never simply just appropriated: Buddhists, while seeking propagation to be sure, also pushed back against globalization and modernity. Close economic studies need to be undertaken to further understand these “push-backs.” Obadia concludes, “It is not senseless to see in this paradox an invitation to think about the complexity of an interesting situation, where the same religion can be both, once again, ‘a part of’ and ‘apart from’ globalization.” (196)

In “Prolegomena to a Buddhist(ic) Critique of Capitalism,” James Mark Shields argues that a Buddhist critique of capitalism goes back to the nineteenth century, asserting “a basic framework for Buddhist anti-capitalism, one that directly addresses neoliberalism as a set of ideas and habits of mind and body.” (197) Treating capitalism more broadly as a social system (not just as an economic system), Shields proposes that Buddhist critiques can indeed transform society. As Buddhists historically have never been apolitical, they can engage in the political with the purpose of changing society. Shields suggests that “the Dharmic texts and practices

that make up what we call ‘Buddhism’ provide unique and fruitful insights into fundamental concepts such as agency, autonomy, freedom, and power—all of which can contribute to an anti-capitalist, ‘realistic utopian’ compass for the twenty-first century.” (213) Shields concludes with a brilliant reimagining of the Four Noble Truths, too long to examine here, but which goes a long way toward what we might think of as social justice for all sentient beings.

In compiling these above essays, and in their engaging and astute introductory essay, Payne and Rambelli have initiated the first steps of not only reevaluating and redefining our understandings of Buddhist entanglements with the neo-liberal socioeconomic order of today, but also with the interplay of Buddhists and a whole range of economic historic interests and practices over the last 2500 years. Earlier, I pointed out how Payne and Rambelli see global capitalism as the most urgent force to be reckoned with, as opposed to colonialism. My only criticism is that I do not see the two as separate systems, but rather as coexisting ones. If this is the case, then not all the essays in this volume recognize this coexistence. Regardless, this book breaks new ground and sets new expectations for future research. At least now we have an outlined path going forward.

### References

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