

South Asian Buddhism: A Survey, by Stephen C. Berkwitz, Routledge, 2010. xii + 244pp., Hb. \$115/£70, ISBN13: 9780415452496; Pb. \$34.95/£18.99, ISBN-13: 9780415452489

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When I was an undergraduate and post-graduate student in Burma and Sri Lanka, I was looking for a book that contained a precise survey of South Asian Buddhism. No such book was available. Stephen C. Berkwitz felt the same when he was teaching a course on Buddhism at the University of California. To address this lack, Berkwitz's new book looks at not only the intellectual thought of Buddhism, but also the cross-cultural history of South Asia. In the book, Berkwitz seeks to illuminate both the socio-cultural history of South Asian Buddhism of the past and the contemporary Buddhist revival in South Asia. Unlike Southeast Asian Buddhism, which is predominantly Theravāda, the three traditions of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna have all been practised at some point in the history of Buddhism in South Asia.

The book has six chapters, followed by an appendix and a glossary. The first chapter reinvestigates the emergence of asceticism in ancient India and Buddhist monasticism, with sections on the life and foundational teachings of the Buddha. According to Berkwitz, the rationale behind the South Asian expansion of the Buddha's biography was to transform the Buddha into something of a 'superhuman' figure (23). Berkwitz also devotes a substantial section of this chapter to a discussion of veneration of the *stūpa*, which has been a mainstay of ritual practice in all forms of South Asian Buddhism.

In chapter two, Berkwitz surveys the development of early mainstream Buddhist communities and their texts, including the establishment of the *bhikṣuṇī/bhikkhūnī* order. This is followed by the history of the Buddhist councils and the different schools of Buddhism in medieval India. For Berkwitz, the *Pāṭimokkha/Prātimokṣa*, the monastic manual of discipline, played a central role in the early development of Buddhist communities. Also included in this chapter is an interesting discussion of the derivation of the name 'Theravāda', which Berkwitz considers to have come from the Vibhajyavāda Sthavira school (58).

The third chapter explores the origins and development of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and celebrates Mahāyāna literary achievements. Berkwitz comments on the ongoing struggle in Buddhist scholarship to arrive at a definite conclusion about the origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism, citing Akira Hirakawa's work¹ as the

1. Akira Hirakawa. *A History of Indian Buddhism from Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna*. Translated and

basis from which earlier scholars believed that Mahāyāna emerged in India as a lay movement. He further comments on recent scholarship on Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, particularly by Reginald Ray² and Jan Nattier,³ which shows the existence of both lay and monastic practitioners in India. Berkwitz notes that, unlike in East Asia, most of Mahāyāna thought, including the *Tathāgatagarbha* theory and teaching on Amitābha, were never favoured in South Asia. Among other scriptures, Berkwitz mentions the *Ugraparipṛcchā* and *Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā Sūtras* as influential texts in shaping the Mahāyāna Buddhism of South Asia.

In this chapter, Berkwitz also discusses one of the most famous of all lay *bodhisattvas* in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, Vimalakīrti who, with his skillful means (*upāya*), teaches how a *bodhisattva* lives in the world without becoming attached to it, due to the non-dual nature of reality (85). Continuing on the same theme of the nature of reality, he notes how the *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Samdhinirmocana*, *Lañkāvatāra*, and *Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanāda Sūtras* laid the groundwork for the development of the Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and Buddha-nature philosophies and other *sūtras* like the *Sukhāvativyūha* and *Akṣobhavyūha* developed the concept of the heavenly buddhas and *bodhisattvas*, which Berkwitz calls the ‘Mahāyāna Pantheon’ (97).

Chapter four explores the chronological development of Buddhist thought and the later incorporation of Buddhist scholasticism, in which the legacy of Vasubandhu, Buddhaghosa, Dharmakīrti and Śāntideva, and their respective works are briefly described. It also investigates the development of Buddhist Tantra and Vajrayāna.

Perhaps the greatest interest to readers is the last two chapters. In both, Berkwitz surveys the continual developments of Buddhism in South Asia. His overview looks at the Buddhism of Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan, and includes discussion of the monastic institutions, ritual, and local Buddhist literatures in those countries. Among numerous poetic (*kāvya*) and prose texts, the notable Sinhala Buddhist *Baṇapot* (preaching texts), *pūjavalīye* (garland of offering) and *Thūpavaṃsa* are discussed. Although, as part of these chapters, Berkwitz mentions popular ritual practices in Sri Lankan Buddhism, such as the *Pirit* or *Paritta*, the protective chanting for blessing (150), he does not include reference to the important fifth century protective chanting manual, the *Catubhāṇavārapāli*. With reference to Bhutan, he notes that since its introduction from Tibet in the seventh century, Tibetan Buddhism continues to enjoy popularity. Of the four rival Buddhist sects in Tibetan Buddhism, Kagyu and Nyingma have been the dominant sects in Bhutan (165). As well as the continued importance amongst practitioners of rituals to the Buddha and Padmasambhava, veneration of the first Shabdrung (a high Lama with political power), Ngawang Namgyal (1594–1651) — unifier of Bhutan as a nation state — is also a central feature of the Buddhism of Bhutan.

In the remainder of his survey, Berkwitz discusses the rise and fall of Christianity and colonialism in South Asia, particularly in Sri Lanka. During the colonial period, Buddhism in Sri Lanka not only suffered considerably from

edited by Paul Groner (Delhi: Matilal Banarsidass, 1993).

2. Reginald A Ray. *Buddhist Saint in India: A Study in Buddhist Value and Orientation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
3. Jan Nattier. *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to Ugra (Ugraparipṛcchā)*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).

political and economical impoverishment but also underwent a process of modernization. Berkwitz notes some memorable events during this period, such as the popularly known 'Panadura Debate', in which a Buddhist monk critically responded to Christian doctrine (168).

The final chapter continues to explore similar themes — the Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh; Buddhist nationalism; the revival of the *bhikṣuṇī/bhikkhūnī* order in Sri Lanka and in Nepal, and so forth. According to Berkwitz, Sri Lankan calls for independence and cultural revival were linked to calls for reforming and reviving the Buddhist religion (175). Through his public speech and writing, particularly in the book *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu (Bhikṣuvagē Urumaya; 1946)*, Walpola Rahula strongly urged the restoration of monks' social responsibility, which directly influenced later generations of monks. After the premature death of the venerable Gangodawila Soma (1948–2003), the country witnessed the emergence of a number of nationalistic monks who, in the spring of 2004, formed a new political party: the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU; = National Sinhala Heritage). Despite the mixed opinions of the monks and laity, in the election on 2nd April 2004, the JHU successfully managed to win nine parliamentary seats.

Berkwitz further discusses how, unlike in Sri Lanka, revival of Buddhism in Nepal came about as a consequence of pressure to adopt Hinduism (170). Lama Kyangtse, an influential Tibetan teacher, and two Theravāda novices, Mahapragya and Pragyānanda, ordained by the Burmese monk Candramani, were important and influential figures in the revival of Buddhism in Nepal. One aspect of the revival Berkwitz's notes is that while Theravāda appears 'modern' and progressive to a growing number of Newar Buddhists, the traditional rites of Vajrayāna in Nepal have become more difficult to maintain (183).

The inclusion of the Buddhist revival in Bangladesh, although it is less than two pages, will contribute considerably to the study of Buddhism in Bangladesh as a vital Buddhist culture and as an emerging field of South Asian Buddhist and Theravāda Studies. Since 1998, Sri Lanka has been the centre of the revival of the *bhikṣuṇī/bhikkhūnī* Order in South Asia. In discussing the place of the *bhikṣuṇī/bhikkhūnī* in Nepal, Berkwitz remarks that some Nepalese nuns have joined the international networks of women striving to develop the *bhikṣuṇī/bhikkhūnī* orders worldwide (191). With a brief survey of Buddhist social activism, such as the Ambedkarite Buddhist movement in India and the Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka, established by A.T. Ariyaratne, Berkwitz further strengthens his survey (192–199). He also includes discussion of a more recent Sri Lankan lay Buddhist activist group, founded in 2004, which claims to be motivated by the Buddhist socio-spiritual philosophy: the Damrivi Foundation. This aims to provide aid to rural development programs, irrigation projects, and help in national provision of scholarships programs for young people, computer training, and also offers free counseling (198).

Overall, Berkwitz's book is a comprehensive survey of Buddhism in South Asia. My only criticism is of some discussion in chapter four, in which Berkwitz explores Buddhist scholasticism. Since Vasubandhu, Buddhaghosa, Dharmakīrti and Śāntideva are well-known in Buddhist Studies, the lesser known scholars such as Sthiramati, Bhāvaviveka, Śāntarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla in the Sanskrit tradition and Buddhapālita, Dhammapāla, Buddhadatta, and Anuruddha of the Pāli tradition, could have been emphasized. Inclusion and remarks on their works

could certainly inspire the younger generation and enhance Buddhist scholarship.

Nevertheless, as a student of South and Southeast Asian Buddhism who is heading into the fuller academic study of South Asian Buddhism, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. I am also certain that students as well as scholars of Buddhist or Asian Studies will also enjoy reading it. I highly recommend this book as the textbook for undergraduate/graduate students in Buddhist and South Asian Studies.