

BOOK REVIEW

Indian Buddhist Philosophy. BY AMBER CARPENTER. (Durham: Acumen Publishers Ltd, 2014. Pp. xvii + 313. Price £50.00 hardback, £16.99 paperback.)

Asian philosophical traditions have, for too long, been written off and marginalized in the West. In her book, Carpenter shows how misguided this attitude is. Her topic is one part of one Asian tradition: Buddhist philosophy, as it developed in India from the historical Buddha (c. 500 BCE) to the end of the first millennium, CE; and she shows this to be rich and profound in philosophical thought. Good texts showing to western philosophers the depth and importance of the Asian philosophical traditions are still hard to find. Carpenter's book, though by no means unique in the enterprise, succeeds admirably. I would recommend it to any philosopher who knows nothing of Buddhism but who wants to learn. (I would that there were a comparable book on Chinese Buddhism.)

The first chapter deals with the teaching of the historical Buddha, notably the four noble truths. The second deals with no-self (*anātman*) and other central parts of the Abhidharma tradition. Chapter 3 concerns what Carpenter calls the Nietzsche objection—more of this below; ch. 4 covers the basis of Mahāyāna Buddhism, in the shape of Nāgārjuna and Madhyamaka. The next chapter takes us into the world of *karma*, and the following one into debates with Hindu philosophers, mainly Nyāya. Chapter 7 deals with the Yogācāra version of Mahāyāna, focused on Vasubandhu, and the long eighth chapter takes us through developments in the sixth and seventh centuries, covering the epistemology of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, debates around Candrakīrti, and the work of Śāntideva. A very brief epilogue concerns the later years of the great Buddhist university of Nālandā, the syncretism of Śāntrākṣita and the movement of Buddhism into Tibet. There are helpful appendices, including one on Pāli and Sanskrit, and very helpful mud-maps of the development of Indian Buddhism (pp. xvii–xviii).

Carpenter's book is distinctive in many ways. First, though there is metaphysics and epistemology aplenty, she puts ethics at centre stage. The core of Buddhism is about how to live. Secondly, there are frequent comparisons to Ancient Greek thought (another of Carpenter's fortes). Thirdly, this book

skilfully blends together a historical narrative of the development of Indian Buddhism, textual exegesis and, above all, philosophical analysis. The analysis is both sympathetic and critical. She works hard to defend Buddhism in the face of the Nietzsche objection (ch. 3), but does not shrink from naming bits of Buddhist philosophy a failure, such as the muddle in which she takes Candrakīrti to end up (ch. 8). The analysis is sensitive and insightful (though the *on the one hand* and *on the other hand* nature of the discussions did sometimes leave me wondering what the final upshot was supposed to be). Moreover, this is no simple text book: there is plenty of original thought in this book—e.g., in the discussion of the nature of *duḥkha* (suffering) as lack of control and, again, the Nietzsche objection. This is a book from which even those seasoned in Buddhist philosophy will find many things of interest.

So now let me turn to the Nietzsche objection. In a nutshell, it is this. All Buddhists hold that *duḥkha* is bad, that it is caused by *tṛṣṇā* (desire)—an affective attitude of attachment and aversion—and so recommends giving this up. This, of course, is not easy to do. So they recommend various practices involving the development of compassion and mindfulness, which will help to do this. The problem is that, initially, this may not itself appear a good thing aim at: a full life requires one to throw oneself into it, to engage, be attached to things—and sometimes fail, and so suffer.

Carpenter's solution is essentially: *allez en avant; la foi vous viendra* (as d'Alembert said concerning the mastering of the infinitesimal calculus). When one undertakes the recommended practices, it changes the sort of person one is; the attraction of the things that might have seemed so alluring in the first place will fade, and one will come to appreciate the Buddhist goals. Now, I, personally, do not find this a satisfactory answer. You don't have to be a Marxist to understand that changing one's material practices can affect how one thinks—in the profoundest of ways. The problem is that this fact can hardly be used to motivate the practice in the first place. No doubt, many of the Germans in the 1930s who engaged in the various Nazi practices, even if they had doubts in the first place, came to find the Nazi goals and values genuinely desirable.

What I think is the right answer to the question is that it is a mistake to think that Buddhism is incompatible with throwing oneself into life. One can indeed do so, provided that what one throws oneself into is not based on greed, anger, hatred, etc. (Indeed, there are certainly things that one *should* throw oneself in to, such as being compassionate.) The crucial point is that one should do this *without* attachment to it. So when things go wrong—as they certainly will—this is not a cause of *duḥkha*. Indeed, the throwing is actually the better for this. Buddhism—as Jay Garfield once put it to me—does not free you *from* life; it frees you *for* life. And one can come to appreciate *this* fact intellectually right

from the start—though to fully understand it emotionally may indeed require appropriate practices.

Carpenter considers what is, in effect, this suggestion, and rejects it, as taking us ‘only so far’ (p. 69):

It can only reflect on what following the Buddhist path may do for someone still seeking some version of happiness as the solution to suffering. Once one has reconceived non-suffering as *nirvāṇa*. . . one can no longer consistently affirm the intrinsic value of having any worldly experience at all.

Nirvāṇa is the extinction of *tr̥ṣṇa* and its corresponding *dukkha*, and the thought expressed in this quotation seems to me just wrong. One can still appreciate the value of a Verdi opera, a good wine, the joys of friendship, even if the *attachment* has been extinguished—perhaps even more so. (In what sense the value is intrinsic, we might debate, but that does not seem germane to the issue here.)

Perhaps, Buddhist renunciants will disagree with me. That’s fine. Buddhism is not a monolithic tradition, and there can certainly be disagreements over these things. But as a philosopher engaging in Buddhist ideas, one is required to figure out whether they are coherent—and if they do not stand up to critical appraisal, one can hardly subscribe to them. (Of course, the same is true about any topic of philosophical engagement.) This is exactly the central philosophical project that Carpenter is engaged with in her book. And the engagement is a significant one. This book is not just for those who know nothing of Buddhist philosophy; nor is it just for those who are already interested in Buddhist philosophy. Any philosopher who is engaging with the question of how to live should read this book.

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