

*Visions of the Buddha: Creative Dimensions of Early Buddhist Scripture*, by Eviatar Shulman. Oxford University Press, 2021. 274pp. Hb £64.00. ISBN-13: 9780197587867.

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Pāli suttas have great literary power: with their magnificent declamatory appeal, strong underlying narrative momentum, and richly interweaving rhetorical devices that repeat, complement, or reinforce the drama and rhetoric of encounters with the Buddha and his followers, they cannot fail to impress as literary products. Despite these obvious features of Pāli suttas, their simple aesthetic effectiveness is sometimes overlooked. It is tempting for all of us who work and teach with the canon to see the suttas as carefully wrapped parcels, suitable for bringing us treasure: information about the historical Buddha, Buddhist doctrinal principle, instructions on meditation and individual paragraphs that act as repositories of the kernels of teachings of particular philosophical interest. We do not often see the shape and form of the sutta, however, as organically related to other aspects of content.

So, it is a welcome addition to our understanding of these great texts that Eviatar Shulman does consider suttas with the appreciation we normally accord to great works of literature. Acknowledging the necessity and importance of exploring historical events and philosophical argumentation within suttas, Shulman's purpose is otherwise: how can we explore the dramatic integrity and literary creativity of any one text as a way of helping us to read them and understand their purpose? Can it even tell us about the process of composition?

In his new book, *Visions of the Buddha*, Shulman explains both the content and the form of the text as facets of the same treasure. The sutta itself is part of the whole. With a challenging and innovative approach, he treats both the method and the content of the suttas with the care and literary precision one would accord to great epics or narrative poems—and thereby demonstrates that such a methodology can provide us with a far deeper and more rounded appreciation of the suttas' philosophical, rhetorical, doctrinal, and devotional features as well.

How is the figure of the Buddha, presented in Pāli literature, perceived as a “character,” in the sense we would apply to the hero of a primary epic or a Romance poem? How does repetition, that staple of oral literatures, work in practice within individual suttas? Is the construction of a given text a creative reflection of its meaning? Shulman addresses such questions with a wide understanding of modern trends in literary criticism while making, in addition, an adventurous excursion into textual historical analysis of a kind that, Shulman says, has more recently been associated with attempting to find an original version amidst parallel texts concerning the same incident, or accounts of that incident in other recensions. As Shulman argues:

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The early discourses attributed by the tradition to the historical Buddha, the texts that purport to reveal his words, ideas, and instructions, are no less a creative act of the Buddhist textual tradition and imagination than an attempt to preserve his words or to relate the historical events of his life (ix).

He sees the formulae that are often moved from one sutta to another, and often repeated within any one sutta, as crucial to an understanding of the text involved, as well as to the larger picture of Buddhist teachings. As one reader, I have always felt, as he does, that the subtle blending and rearranging of formulae in any one text are integral aspects of the creative play and inherent construction of the suttas: they do not feel like counters moved around from text to text in a somewhat arbitrary or, perhaps, overtly logical manner. It is very satisfying that Shulman does indeed demonstrate the power and beauty of such patterns within individual texts. He goes, however, one step further. He suggests that in some, indeed many suttas, it is these very repetitive formulae that form the core element of the text involved. Rather than being “add-ons,” they offer the carefully worded and designed basis from which the rest of any given sutta can grow:

I argue that formulas are the fundamental textual element, and discourses are products of formulas, not only in the sense that they are composed of formulas, but also in that a basic practice of early Buddhist textuality was combining formulas in different ways to produce ever more Buddhist discourses (37).

Shulman’s arguments compel and arouse a fresh interest in the means of construction, so contested in contemporary debate. Critical though he is of some modern scholarship in this area, one feels overall that his interest is primarily in opening the discourse to more adventurous and probing areas of analysis; his motivation is far larger than the ‘point-scoring’ that can accompany scrutiny of this highly problematic field. What if...? Shulman is not frightened of asking this question and produces some arrestingly interesting conclusions. The ‘what if’ in question, which turns the usual assessment of the chronology of composition around completely, is truly challenging: so, what if we were to think of these formulae and pericopes, usually thought to be later insertions in so many cases, rather as the core elements of any one Pāli sutta, eliciting a composition suitable for a particular place and time? Could the formulas offer us the key to the ways each sutta is composed?

The purpose of this argument, as Shulman demonstrates in each section of the book, is to show that the purpose of the teachings is not just doctrinal, but manifold in intent, with a particular emphasis on highlighting the figure of the Buddha as the centre of the texts. Certainly he is a historical figure, but also a teacher, inspirer, guide and, primarily, a focus of meditation, in the *Buddhānussati* recollection that the texts so frequently enjoin, for lay people and monastics. It is his teaching that is being described and repeated. The impact of this figure, his teaching, and the mirror of these that can be seen in the people around the Buddha and his Sangha, are the most important features to which all other elements in a discourse lead. Historical elements and features such as location, associated historical figures and the chronology of events in suttas are certainly of interest and are not devalued, but they

too are seen to serve the feature that is the most important in these early texts: that the teacher was one who inspired others, guiding them, and leading them. It is his presence and teaching that irradiated the lives of those that followed him.

The book explores how this works—and so introduces fresh and illuminating perspectives on many traditional texts on the way. He approaches the question from several different angles. After an Introduction that highlights the *Udumbarika Sutta* as a prime example of the thesis (Chapter 1), in Part 1 the literary character of the four major Nikāyas is examined. It is demonstrated that the compilation of the canon was a primarily creative exercise, going far beyond the simple communication of historical information and the summary of basic theory (Chapter 2). In Part 2, “Inner and Other Worlds of Literary Expression,” Chapter 3 makes the figure and presence of the Buddha and his relinquishment of the human body that has served as a vehicle for his attainment of the awakening the subject of one full chapter. The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* is seen as, in effect, an extended exercise in *Buddhānussati* meditation, presenting the Buddha through multiple, inter-reflecting lenses with the purpose of ensuring that his teaching, its effects and its many aspects, may be known by each individual for themselves. In this great sutta, Shulman sees the enactment of the dynamics involved in a crucial creative paradox: the physical completion of a life in which the deathless has been found and taught. The sutta demonstrates “the movement between the personal and the devotional, the concrete and the metaphysical,” both “fundamental” aspects of the achievement of Buddhahood (Chapter 3; 111). The next chapter explores the performative aspects of suttas, emphasising the playfulness and creative play that characterises texts such as the *Paṭika Sutta*, the Jātakas and other aspects of “folklore” in the Buddhist canon: expressions of a self-generating creativity, renewed by performance, and evidence that, as Shulman argues, the impetus and inspiration for originality within the transmission of Buddhism started from its inception, shaping some of its most influential and seminal texts of the tradition (Chapter 4).

The third part of the book explores the notion of the play of formulas more deeply, attempting to find a middle ground between the notion “of a theory of composition in performance and the idea that the texts are only recited in full, unchanged, from memory” (193). After reassessing the Lord-Parry understanding of oral literature, Shulman applies new analysis to the tension between rehearsed and pre-arranged, communal and single, the “authentic” and the creative. He suggests that the formulas were the validated “building blocks” of the early Buddhists. Carefully worded to ensure precision, they provided the support for original interpretations and experimentation that furthered Buddhism as a tradition expressing an agreed ideology—but also offered new pathways for creative redevelopment. Chapter 6 deals with the highly varied presentation of the Buddha’s enlightenment in the major Nikāyas and tests the play of formulas within them. Shulman argues that richly complementary accounts of the enlightenment attest not to inconsistency, nor the requirement for one to be the “right” one, but rather to the enjoyment of slightly different perspectives on the same events. These are all validated, all further the narrative and all give new expression, in different ways, to the tra-

dition's basic tenets, teachings and meditations. As the last chapter argues, such variations show that "the texts, and the meditations, delved into the idea of the Buddha, experimented with it, and engaged with traditional materials in generative and creative ways" (232).

The book provides a new perspective on some apparently irreconcilable anomalies about the early composition and transmission of the texts. It makes for interesting and thought-provoking reading. I notice his arguments have already ruffled a few scholarly feathers. But this is not a bad sign: he introduces a radically different dimension into the appreciation of suttas, which challenges parameters by which assessments of dating, composition, and intent can be made. Whatever one feels about the strength of his claims, which read convincingly, his powers of analysis and palpable appreciation of the texts involved make reading this book worth the exercise. I thoroughly recommend it to anyone who wants an adventurous and probing appraisal of some of the Pāli literary excellence displayed in the texts. The greatness of this, as Shulman shows, supports, and enhances the effect of the more usually obvious doctrinal, philosophical, and didactic elements that usually excite scholarly attention and interest. Throughout, there is one constant: the figure of the Buddha is seen as a living, dramatic being, illuminating the suttas with different facets of his presence, skilfully evoked through the play of formulas so thoroughly explained.

New approaches such as this are essential to our deeper understanding of how doctrinal elements are enacted in practice. As Shulman shows, Pāli suttas are performative, dramatic, and often moving embodiments of Buddhist theory; their content reflects their meaning. Shulman's analysis of the very features frequently underplayed or treated as mnemonic ballast—the pericopes, formulae and repetitions that annoy publishers, anxious to save space, and readers, wanting quick distillations of Buddhist principle—is compelling. His theory of the play of formulas is, refreshingly, itself more generative than literalist. His book provides us with a new understanding of the complexity of technique, the craft, and the sense of pioneering adventure with which these subtle, dramatic, and often moving texts were composed.