

Nirvana: Concept, Imagery and Narrative, by Steven Collins, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 204pp., HB £40.00/US\$70.00, ISBN-13: 9780521881982; PB £16.99/ US\$24.99, ISBN-13: 9780521708340

Reviewed by Elizabeth J. Harris, Liverpool Hope University, harrise@hope.ac.uk

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This book, Collins states on his first page, is a re-written version of Part One of his 1998 book, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (Cambridge University Press). His aim is to offer its content in an accessible and cheaper form for undergraduate and graduate students, and their teachers. To this end, each chapter has only a handful of endnotes and Collins' translations from the Pāli texts are not referenced. Readers wanting more detail are referred to the longer work.

The focus of the book is what Collins terms here and in *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, the Pali imaginaire — 'the non-material, imaginative world constituted by texts, especially works of art and literature' (p.4). So the Pāli texts feature prominently. He divides his material into five chapters. The first four follow the structure of Part One within the earlier work: 'Systematic and narrative thought: eternity and closure in structure and story'; 'Nirvana as a concept'; 'Nirvana as an image'; 'Nirvana, time, and narrative'. A final chapter digresses from the earlier work in its discussion of 'Past and future Buddhas'.

The first chapter draws the distinction between systematic and narrative thought within the Pali imaginaire that is crucial to Collins' argument in both books. Systematic thought utilizes interlocking and overlapping lists that form the seed from which the creative evolves, the beginning and end points of which can differ without a change to the meaning. Narrative thought, in contrast, is sequential, dependent for meaning on the beginning and the end. Both, Collins argues, are forms of 'Buddhist soteriology' (p.15). When utilized in the service of Collins' theme, *nirvāṇa*, within systematic thought, becomes 'the unconditioned, timeless complement of conditioned life-in-time', whilst, within narrative thought, it plays 'the syntactic role of the full-stop', the end-point (pp.19–20).

When discussing *nirvāṇa* as a concept, Collins begins with brahminical thought, before teasing out continuities and differences between Buddhism and brahminism in areas such as theories of time, *karma* and rebirth (or re-death p. 38). The distinction between *nirvāṇa* and *parinirvāṇa* is analyzed and problematised. *Nirvāṇa* is presented as 'a real Existent' in Theravāda thought but simplistic equations with Upaniṣadic or theistic thought are rejected. Most importantly, Collins stresses that the westerners should not try to fill in the silences that are present in the texts. They are there for a purpose.

'Nirvana as an image' focuses on the poetic evocation of *nirvāṇa* and begins with synonyms present in the tradition. To 'nirvanize' is offered as closer to the Pāli than the phrase 'attaining or entering *nirvāṇa*' (p.64). Two 'aporias' present in textual imagery are then examined: that '*nirvāṇa* is the cessation of the consciousness Aggregate, but that is not the equivalent to becoming non-existent' (p. 70); that *nirvāṇa* is said to be the highest happiness or bliss but must be without the feeling of happiness. Contesting that *bodhi* or *nirvāṇa* is about 'light' as such

(etymologically *bodhi* concerns awakening and not enlightenment), four main images are eventually examined: *nirvāṇa* as the quenching of a fire; *nirvāṇa* as an unfathomable ocean; *nirvāṇa* as the escape from an ocean to the further shore; *nirvāṇa* as a city. All of this is present in the earlier book.

When Collins moves, in the next chapter, to narrative and time, he rejects the hackneyed cliché that time within the religions of the East is cyclic. Non-repetitive and repetitive time, he stresses, are complementary to one another universally. Within Buddhism, rebirth is beginningless and history has no end, but there is closure for the individual in *nirvāṇa*. Buddhahood is repeated but each Buddha has an ending in non-repetitive time. Each Buddha *sāsana* (dispensation) is a repetition of the last but has a beginning and an end (when the relics of a Buddha nirvanize). So the narratives surrounding *nirvāṇa* embody both repetitive and non-repetitive time.

The last chapter turns to 'those special people for whom *Buddha* is not merely an adjective but a name' (p.126) and offers a fascinating textual exploration of the interweaving of non-repetitive and repetitive time in the Theravāda tradition, in which an infinity of Buddhas happen in a series (p.127). Among the texts cited are the *Mahāpadāna Sutta*, the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta* and the *Buddhavamsa*, selections from which are given in an appendix.

Does this version of Collins' thought on *nirvāṇa* work? Omitting the last chapter of *Nirvana: Concept, Imagery and Narrative*, 164 pages of *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* have been cut down to 113 pages. Personally, I found that my enjoyment of the book increased as it progressed. The first chapters on systematic and narrative thought, and *nirvāṇa* as concept are foundational to Collins' argument but they were quite hard-going, in both books. For me the chapters on imagery, narrative and the Buddhas were more lucid and compelling. I would, therefore, question whether the first part of this book is more accessible than Collins' earlier work. The chapter on 'Nirvana as a concept' might have been better placed after he had introduced the topic through imagery and narrative.

I also detect a contradiction in Collins' method. Key to Collins aim is this: 'to find a way to understand *nirvāṇa* from the external (etic) point of view that preserves the internal (emic) characterization of it, without simply restating what that is' (p. 59). To this end, his use of the Pāli texts is creative and detailed, although I personally would have preferred to have seen them referenced. He also, rightfully I believe, criticizes western attempts to define *nirvāṇa* more clearly than the texts do, linking this with a form of imperialism. Yet, few eastern sources in addition to the texts are used. He is quicker to draw on western philosophy, poetry and thought in an attempt to translate *nirvāṇa* to the West. Tennyson, Thomas More, Dante, Sigmund Freud and T.S. Eliot are all cited but very few eastern thinkers, save for the Pāli texts and commentaries themselves.

Having said this, I nevertheless recommend this book. I shall certainly use it in my teaching. It is an academically thorough and, I would dare to say, passionate exploration into a concept that invites description and evocation but is beyond both.