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Book Reviews

Indian Buddhist Philosophy, by Amber D. Carpenter. Acumen, 2014. 313pp. Hb. £50, ISBN-13: 9781844652976. Pb. £16.86, ISBN-13: 9781844652983.

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It is difficult to know how adequately to assess Amber Carpenter's new book on early Buddhist philosophy, since, like a *winkie* that alternates images depending upon how you turn it in your hands, it can be both astoundingly brilliant and deeply frustrating. For a start, the title is rather misleading. Certainly, the author not only *engages* with the topic of Indian Buddhism, she positively wrestles it to the ground. This review is written by a post-graduate student of Buddhist studies, and those like myself expecting to find a structured introductory analysis of the various positions of early Buddhist schools may struggle with the book's erratic choreography, convoluted syntax, and assumption of knowledge. Although some such background finds its way into the appendices, this book requires a fairly solid grounding in the history of Buddhist doctrine.

Carpenter, a lecturer of philosophy at York University, aims to offer some sense of the 'sorts of concerns' with which Indian Buddhists grappled. This she does admirably, though not without some heavy lifting on the part of the reader. She attests that all philosophy must in the end connect with 'real' life, but throughout the book, 'real life' examples are rarely offered up to ground the abstract in the everyday. This is a shame, since when such examples are given they are most illuminating. With its hyper-hyphenated run-on sentences, and more than a fair share of abstruse phraseology peppered with unexplained Pāli and Sanskrit terms that beg for a glossary, this book communicates almost entirely in what Griffiths describes 'a dialect comprehensible only to the initiate.'

Perhaps in part due to the fact that some of the material was first presented as talks, the organizational structure appears unsystematic. It may be that this is intentional. For, as the author points out, although it is tempting to view the early Buddhist schools of the subcontinent as being as defined and contained as their later offshoots, the setting was more likely to have been, an 'assortment of views in the process of being clarified and distinguished, and set alongside and against each other' (p. 142). This, in fact, is quite an accurate description of the book's arrangement.

But it is her second stated ambition — to give the modern reader a sense of what it might be like to 'do philosophy' with the early Buddhists — which proves to be the most successful, and ultimately the most satisfying. For we do not just get to 'do philosophy' Buddhist-on-Buddhist, but are invited to think through these debates as if they had been joined by philosophers from other times and spaces, such as Aristotle, Socrates, Nietzsche and Kant.

And when Carpenter succeeds, she does so with astonishing aplomb. In no other aspect is this truer than when she is mapping out the 'dynamic and contested space' in which Buddhism found itself in the early centuries of the first millennium, and how Buddhism's philosophical expositions were honed and adapted in response to the positions and counter-positions lobbied from the great Buddhist and non-Buddhist minds of the time. A prime example is her presentation of the extraordinary career of Vasubandhu, whose epistemological development through Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntrika and Yogācāra was assisted by critique from the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas.

Carpenter's daring epistemological inquiry clears an arena fit to challenge such heavyweights as Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu and the non-Buddhist logicians Uddyotakara and Vātsyāyana, with essential and well-articulated questions of moral relevance, epistemological consistency, ontological coherence and metaphysical satisfaction. The positions and objections of non-Buddhist streams, for example the Jains, the Nyāyas and Vaiśeṣikas, are treated with as much respect as those of the Abhidharmikas, Yogācārans, and Mādhyamikans. Treating each position on its own merits is one of the book's most refreshing characteristics, avoiding the over-simplification or stereotyping that can lead to careless dismissal. As the author comments; 'It is tempting to caricature the self-view (a temptation not every *anātmavādin* avoids), depicting it as the belief in some strange, inner appendage, gratuitously added alongside all the other, more respectable, items in one's ontology. Such a view is easily dismissed as ridiculous' (p. 122).

Although she does not say as much, Carpenter establishes a solid case for all involved in the study of Buddhism to engage sincerely with the philosophical context within which Buddhism both emerged and developed. Through providing several viewpoints and perspectives on each argument, she emphasizes that Buddhism developed in conversation with competing philosophies. To *only* consider a single Buddhist position is rather like trying to understand this conversation through familiarity with the comments of a single party. Attending to the sophistication and subtlety of the arguments that informed debate *on each side* (and there were generally more than two), helps us to come to grips with the lines of Buddhist reasoning, which were substantially informed by the content of these debates. It is this openness and mental flexibility, or *epoché* (to borrow a term from ancient Greece), which feels true to the spirit of Buddhist inquiry.

Throughout the book, the author views Buddhism in the context of philosophic endeavour in general, rather than just looking at variations of itself. Her knowledge of Greek philosophy leads to fascinating comparisons between the views of Plato and Aristotle and the Indian philosophers, who were all engaged in a similar exercise — investigating questions about what is real, what reality means, and how we should act in light of the answers we discover. The author encourages us to not merely understand the questions that were asked in ancient

India, but to develop questions of our own (and to brush up on our Kant and Nietzsche in the process).

'In the end', writes Carpenter, 'the whole exercise ... should reflect us back to ourselves, throwing into sharper relief our own categories, presuppositions and structures of thought, as well as illuminating new options for which we had not yet seen space' (p. 4). For those with the persistence her book demands, this is the promise on which Carpenter most diligently delivers.