
Book Review

FAURE, Bernard. 2009. *Unmasking Buddhism*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell. vi + 159 pp. ISBN 978 1 40518 065 8 (hbk), ISBN 978 1 40518 064 1 (pbk). £47.50 (hbk), £12.99 (pbk).

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Unmasking Buddhism is an attempt to challenge modern (Western) misunderstandings about the Buddhist tradition. The book is divided into three parts, "Buddhism in History," "Buddhism and Local Cultures" and "Buddhism and Society," and each part contains subsections which take as their starting point a modern misperception. Types of misunderstandings about Buddhism challenged by the book are some of the more gross misrepresentations such as, "Buddhism is a philosophy, not a religion" (in Part I), "The Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of Buddhism" (Part II) and "Buddhism is a kind of therapy" (Part III), as well as some subtler misapprehensions. These include, for example, "Buddhism denies the existence of self" (Part I), "Buddhism teaches the impermanence of all things" (Part I), and "Buddhism is a peaceful religion" (Part III).

Faure begins the first subsection with the sentence, "Many received ideas about Buddhism stem from a refusal to take the diversity of Buddhism as a living tradition seriously" (p. 7). This is the foundation of his approach to challenging the misapprehensions of Buddhism as throughout the work he points out the diversity of the tradition, both historical and in relation to acculturation. The formula of each of the subsections of the book is to firstly identify the nature and parameters of each misperception and challenge it in simple terms, spelling out the ways in which it either represents a falsehood or is based on some truism that has been misconceived. Some brief examples of the type of discussion in each subsection are as follows. In the subsection "All Buddhists are seeking to achieve Awakening" (Part I), Faure establishes the difference between the concepts of nirvana and Awakening and discusses how understanding of these concepts change and details the various ways they are engaged with in different traditions. Following this, he talks about bodhisattvas, focusing more on Mahayana Buddhism, which he does throughout, and then mentions, very briefly, the difference between the ideal of seeking Awakening and the reality of much Buddhist practice as centred around the hope for worldly gain.

In the section "Buddhism is an atheistic religion" (Part II), Faure clarifies the situation with regards to deities and deity worship in various forms of Buddhism, past and present. Beginning with comment on the place of gods in early Buddhist cosmology, he then mentions the deification of the Buddha (and other buddhas and bodhisattvas) in Mahayana and tantra and how the early disciples of the historical Buddha came to be honoured in Sino-Japanese Buddhism, in a reflection of the veneration of Taoist immortals. In this section, he makes it clear that within the span of Buddhist traditions there are both gods that simply inhabit the cosmos, but are non-agentive, and gods and other deities that are powerful and believed to have agency in people's lives.

Overall, the book accomplishes what it sets out to achieve, in providing some clear and simply explained reasons as to how and why certain misperceptions came about and how they relate to the reality of both Buddhism in historical contexts and the modern practice of Buddhism around the globe. There are some well phrased and well observed insights, such as, “Buddhism as we perceive it today is both too Indian and not Indian enough. It is too Indian in the sense that Indian Buddhism has come to be regarded as representing “classic” Buddhism... It is not Indian enough in the sense that “classic” Buddhism has become... independent of its cultural and social background” (p. 21). Another interesting observation (p. 66) is Faure’s noting that Westerners have adopted Buddhism through the *zeitgeist* of the Protestant criticism of ritualism, seemingly unaware that in Asian countries it is first and foremost a form of ritual, often engaged in to ward off evil.

The main weaknesses of the volume are twofold. Firstly, it sets out to achieve a great deal in fewer than 150 pages. In each of the subsections, the task Faure has set himself is to identify the misperception, sometimes setting the historical circumstances for the arising of it, explain the basics of Buddhism relevant to the topic at hand and then provide some form of direct or tempered refutation of it. As he addresses 23 topics overall, this often means all this must be accomplished in only a few pages per topic. In a few instances he remains able to provide some interesting (and humorous) depth to his discussion, such as on pages 77 and 78, when he quotes the ninth-century Rinzai Linji Yixuan’s diatribe against meditation. In many other places there is a tendency towards broad brush strokes rather than such detail.

The second weakness of the book is the lack of thorough referencing throughout. Although at times there is some vague referencing (book title, author and date, but no page number), at other times there are direct quotations with no referencing whatsoever. This may, of course, have been the publisher’s rather than the author’s choice, and may have arisen out of a desire for the book to be accessible to both university and college students and a general readership. If the book was intended for undergraduates, this lack of referencing is a shame, as sometimes students do like to follow up their reading. In this case, if students did want to take a closer look at, for example, the works of some of the Western philosophers mentioned and their perceptions of Buddhism, even though there are direct quotations from some of these philosophers often the particular work from which the quote is taken is not made clear, let alone is a full reference provided.