Review

Der Buddha und der 'Andere': Zur religiösen Differenzreflexion und narrativen Darstellung des 'Anderen' im Majjhima-Nikāya, by Caroline Widmer. Zurich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015. 434 pp., €140 (hb). ISBN 978-3-525-54038-1 (hb).

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Scholarship on early Buddhism, the religions of South Asia, and religion more generally in recent years has shown an increasing interest in the formation, reformation, and maintenance of religious identity. Caroline Widmer makes an important contribution to such scholarship in this volume on the construction of Buddhist identity vis-à-vis 'the other' ('der Andere') in the Pali Canon. In this book, Widmer performs a narratological analysis of *suttas* in the *Majjhima Nikāya* in order to explore the ways in which 'others', including householders, non-Buddhist ascetics, and Brahmins, are portrayed and constructed in relation to the Buddhist self, usually but not always represented by the Buddha. The result is an innovative and fruitful marriage between narrative analysis and theorizing of religious identity that will surely point a path for future research.

The book is divided into nine chapters. The first four can be considered introductory. After a general introduction in Chapter 1, Widmer discusses in Chapter 2 the work that has been done in History of Religions relevant to any discussion of early Buddhism. She then discusses relevant scholarship on the Pali Canon in Chapter 3 and gives a general description of the narrative structure of *suttas* in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, her chosen focus of research, in Chapter 4. The meat of the research and argument is found in Chapters 5–7. In Chapter 5, Widmer constructs a theoretical language for analysing her sources, which consists of an opposition between a Buddhist 'self' ('Eigene') and various 'others' ('Anderen'), including householders, non-Buddhist ascetics, and Brahmins. In Chapter 6, she then uses this language to analyse the typical narrative structure of *suttas* in the *Majjhima Nikāya*. She delineates a general structure consisting of four stages: introduction ('Einleitung'), encounter ('Begegnung'), instruction ('Belehrung'), and reaction ('Reaktion') of the

‘other’ to the teaching. Finally, in Chapter 7, Widmer applies this analysis to four specific *suttas* in the *Majjhima Nikāya* to show how it works in specific contexts. The final two chapters summarize Widmer’s conclusions. Here, Widmer in particular delineates a process that she calls ‘Othering’, a process, that is, through which the ‘other’ is constructed, but which paradoxically includes as a part of it a process of ‘Selfing’. Simply put, the way in which the *suttas* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* often narratively construct the ‘other’ is through stories in which ‘others’ become part of the Buddhist ‘self’, either by ordaining or by becoming lay followers.

The strength of Widmer’s research in this book is that it brings together two trends in scholarship in an extremely useful way. On the one hand, it engages in the very close analysis of narrative that has a long history in Biblical scholarship and has also been applied fruitfully by several scholars to the early Buddhist literature. But it is not content with simply understanding that narrative structure as such. Widmer applies this detailed narrative analysis to the broader theoretical goal, which has also been pursued by various scholars, of theorizing the construction of religious identity. It is encouraging to see such a fruitful combination of deep philological skill and theoretical sensitivity.

If there is any major weakness that I see, it is one that Widmer herself admits to. Given that we do not have a full understanding of when, where, and by whom the *suttas* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* and the early Buddhist literature in general were created, it is difficult to know how widely applicable any conclusions drawn from philological analysis thereof is. Widmer sees in her evidence a narrative construction of the ‘other’ through stories in which the ‘other’ becomes the ‘self’. Surely this narrative process does not perfectly reflect a sociological process. Whose interests, then, does it reflect? Are they elite, in some sense sectarian, or geographically specific? What relationship does the narrative project bear to the actual Buddhist community and communities of ancient India? What, in other words, did it accomplish ‘on the ground’? These questions should be seen, however, as important directions for future research, rather than as obviating in any way the value of Widmer’s work.