

Review

Creating the Universe: Depictions of the Cosmos in Himalayan Buddhism, by Eric Huntington. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019. xx + 283 pp., \$65 (hb). ISBN 9780295744063.

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Eric Huntington's book is an original and creative work, opening up dimensions of Himalayan Buddhist visual, performative and textual culture that have received little attention from earlier scholars. Most visitors to Tibetan monasteries and temples will have seen depictions of the cosmos with Mount Meru at the centre, commonly at temple entrances or inside on temple walls. However, Buddhist textual scholars, anthropologists and art historians have rarely found them of interest. Likewise the *maṇḍala*-offering rituals to deities or lamas, based on cosmological ideas, or the constant referencing of Buddhist cosmology in art and architecture. In this inviting book, with numerous excellent and beautifully reproduced colour photographs, Buddhist cosmology is centre stage, particularly in its visual and performative aspects. The core of Huntington's argument is that cosmology is a key part of Himalayan Buddhist cultures, and deserves our serious attention.

One reaction might well be, why has it taken so long for such a book to appear? Perhaps, Huntington suggests, the pre-scientific nature of Buddhist cosmology was unattractive to earlier Western scholars who wanted to see Buddhism as a 'rational alternative to religions of the West' (p. 13). But, as he notes, we have moved on from those days, and Western scholarship has become more willing to accept other religions and cultures in their own terms rather than ours. At the same time, the largely textual focus of much early work in Buddhist studies and in the study of other religions has been expanded through a wealth of work in art history, anthropology, ritual studies and other fields, providing much of the essential material for a study such as this, and new disciplinary approaches have illuminated the importance of how humans locate themselves in place and space.

'Himalayan' in the book's title means Tibetan (including some Bhutanese material) and Newar, and an attractive feature of the book is its frequent counterpointing of Newar art and ritual with better-known Tibetan versions.

The book has four main chapters with an introduction and conclusion. Chapter 1 deals mainly with the Meru-centred (or 'Cakravāla') cosmos. There is no single version of this scheme, even within Buddhism (the Hindu and Jain versions are quite different again). Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* is usually cited as the source, though it is only one possibility (the *Kālacakra Tantra* has a quite different scheme). In any case, the *Abhidharmakośa* fails to specify critical details and contains internal inconsistencies, and portrayals differ widely. The Cakravāla cosmos is not a fixed scheme but a creative resource which can be employed in a variety of ways. Huntington argues that these differences make sense in terms of the contexts and purposes of specific depictions.

The second chapter moves to the Tantric *maṇḍala*, also a cosmogram and interwoven in various ways with the Meru scheme. *Maṇḍalas* may contain depictions of elements of the Cakravāla cosmos, in particular because the *maṇḍala* represents the awakened Buddha and so is naturally situated on Meru. But things become more complex, because Buddhahood implies movement between states and that is also something that can be described in cosmological terms. Symbolically, Buddhahood can be seen as an ascent to the peak of Meru, the highest point on earth. However, when a Buddha appears at the start of a Tantric text (the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha*) in the Akaniṣṭha heaven, the highest of the heavenly realms, and the story then continues with the consecration of another Buddha on the top of Mount Meru, this implies a double 'translocation': a descent of Buddhahood from the celestial to the physical realm, and an ascent from ordinary life on earth to Buddhahood. Likewise, the mountaintop location of Buddhahood at Mount Meru references and is reinforced by the existence of other divine mountaintop abodes, such as those of Avalokiteśvara or Padmasambhava. This allows for further 'translocations', as with the implicit relocation of Meru to Nepal in the *Svayambhū Purāṇa*. These spatial shifts provide a way to refer to relationships that cannot easily be handled in logical terms. 'By ritually transcending one's sense of place (from Jambudvīpa to Meru and Akaniṣṭha), one also surpasses the limits of the ordinary mind' (p. 233).

Chapter 3 discusses ritual offerings of the universe (here referred to as *maṇḍala*). Huntington discusses the differences between Newar and Tibetan versions; these differences, he argues, 'are not simply arbitrary variations in idiom. Rather, they represent key moments of mediation between conception, practice, and representation that reveal a new perspective on cosmological thinking in Buddhist ritual' (p. 110). Chapter 4 looks at how cosmology is expressed in architecture, in ground plans and structures of temples and monasteries, in surface decoration and the placing of offerings, through a series of examples from Ajantā through to contemporary Bhutan.

Huntington notes that his book 'may very well provoke more questions than it answers', and his final pages offer 'not a conclusion but rather an introduction (or invitation) to further inquiry' (p. 234). This is surely right, in particular because the analytic side of the work is relatively undeveloped.

Huntington says near the start that ‘this book does not actually ask what individual people in history believed. Rather, it tries to identify thematic and structural connections across wide swaths of Buddhist culture and history that reveal something deeper about religious activity than the convictions of any single person or group’ (p. 15). He sees his approach as closest to structuralism, primarily meaning Paul Mus and Mircea Eliade (pp. 15–16). But he does not really engage with either. While he is aware of the controversies surrounding Eliade, he chooses not to discuss his work directly, and references to Mus are limited to occasional invocations of Mus’s mesocosm concept. Huntington’s choice to present his argument through a series of ‘deeply contextualized examples’ (p. 16) has its own integrity, but I would have liked more on how he himself made sense of the material. There are suggestive ideas, such as the ‘translocations’ in Chapter 2, but they seem little more than glimpses and hints towards an interpretive strategy.

The conscious exclusion of ‘individual people’ does not help. It goes along with a near-total absence of social or cultural anthropology (as distinct from the use of ethnographic data sourced from anthropological works). Anthropology has plenty to say about the questions discussed here. It is striking that Robert Levy’s remarkable synthetic account of the ritual life of the Newar city of Bhaktapur is dismissed in a footnote (‘For another approach to the geography of Nepal as a mesocosm, see Levy, *Mesocosm*’, p. 248 n. 111). Levy’s work has its limitations, but it is a study not just of structures but of the people who inhabit those structures and who bring the cosmology to life. Maybe Huntington might allow himself too to go further down that path in his future work.

We should be grateful, though, for this attractive book, which effectively demonstrates the extent and richness of the weaving of cosmological themes throughout Buddhist cultures. Its invitation to enter deeply into the multicoloured world of Himalayan Buddhist cosmology is both enticing and timely, and it deserves a wide readership.