



James Mark Shields, *Critical Buddhism: Engaging with Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought*

Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2011. x + 206 pages. Cloth, £50.00. ISBN 978-1-4094-1798-9.

IN RECENT decades the study of literature and philosophy has been transformed—some would say blighted—by keener attention to the moral and political upshot of great texts and to the moral probity and ideological purity of their authors. This trend is exemplified in Japan in the Critical Buddhism of Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō who, starting from a critique of moral blind spots in their own Sōtō Buddhist community, undertook a radical reassessment of the entire Buddhist tradition, declaring whole swaths of it not to be authentically Buddhist at all. James Shields in turn reassesses this reassessment, in what might be called an exercise in meta-criticism. Like most commentators on Critical Buddhism he does not argue against Hakamaya and Matsumoto on the terrain of their study of classical texts, or correct their sweeping judgments by a step back to more patient arts of interpretation, but instead appraises their methodology by reference to contemporary hermeneutical philosophy (Gadamer, Habermas, Derrida, Rorty) and seeks to renew and expand their work by linking it with other critiques of Buddhist tradition (Brian Victoria, Donald Lopez, Christopher Ives, Bernard Faure, Robert Sharf) and using it as “a philosophical complement or support to recent trends such as Engaged Buddhism and so-called Buddhist theology” (14). He thus hopes to “provoke a second wave of Critical Buddhism, by emphasizing in particular the epistemological and

ethical components of criticalism” and “to extend the streams of this new methodological movement into the broader seas of Buddhist ethics and of critical scholarship in the humanities” (16).

Shields offers judicious and well-informed comments on a large number of Buddhist thinkers, both living and dead, and also on Western philosophers such as Descartes. He assesses all of them from his “criticalist” perspective, and often finds them guilty of epistemological naivety or ethical insensitivity. I fear that this regime of assessment risks repeating the adversarial strategy that caused Critical Buddhism to stall. Installed in the critical mode, it can fail to bring sufficiently into focus the truth and value of the discourses it challenges.

Inevitably, D. T. Suzuki (referred to on twenty-three pages) is treated as a whipping-boy, and in a way that unwittingly shows up the weaknesses of the criticalist approach to Buddhist tradition. Suzuki’s harmless and orthodox comments on the superiority of *prajñā* to *vikalpa* in Buddhism are discussed in “terms favored by modern epistemology” as a championing of “knowledge by acquaintance” over “knowledge by description” (91). We are told that “in the past century serious doubts have been raised as to the very possibility of knowledge by acquaintance” (92), which blithely writes off Husserl’s groundbreaking discovery of a priori structures of intelligibility inscribed in perception that were missed by Hume and Kant. Suzuki is treated as “not the most circumspect interpreter of Buddhism” (89) and his statement that “it is by *prajñā* that all *dharma*s are observable from a unitive point-of-view and acquire a new life and significance” is countered with the objection: “But why, we might ask Suzuki, this desire for ‘significance’—why replace *atman* with something that seems like *atman* under another name?” (90). After taking this potshot, Shields then shifts to some “transcendental platitudes” from one Bernie Glassman as if they were on the same level as Suzuki. Brian Victoria’s onslaught on Suzuki, which has been so effectively countered in recent articles in *The Eastern Buddhist*, is embraced uncritically by Shields. Suzuki’s allegedly “infamous” comments on how Zen provided spiritual discipline to samurai is taken to justify naming him among those who were “quite ready to express their support of the war in terms that were often explicitly religious” (23).

Suzuki’s friend Nishida Kitarō fares little better. Shields connects his cult of “pure experience” with the “anti-rationalist and intuitive slant” of a literary school known as the New Sensationism, led by Yokomitsu Riichi and Kawabata Yasunari (103), and he subjects it to a barrage of criticism from Rorty, Davidson, Merleau-Ponty, and Quine (106). But it turns out that Nishida is in good philosophical company: “The philosophers of the Kyoto School, in their attempt to bridge the divide between East and West, absorbed the worst of both traditions, effectively fusing the *topos* of Zen with the equally topical essentialism of the anti-rational/anti-Cartesian stream of Western philosophy, culminating in the phenomenological work of Husserl and Heidegger” (108). The last two names are unlikely to impress Shields, who associates Heidegger with “the abyssal *Liebestod* that colors the darker side of German

Romanticism—and which crops up in Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* (1918), a work with which the young Heidegger was quite familiar” (113). Here is a remarkably example of “guilt by association”; Heidegger’s only connection with Wagner is that he was German (Jean Beaufret told me that Heidegger dismissed Wagner’s “Nazi music”) and his only connection with Spengler is that he pours scorn on him as a peddler of meretricious *Weltanschauungen*. Such remarks show how the judgmental and doxographical approach to philosophy easily slides into dismissiveness.

Of course, Shields turns his critical acumen on the Critical Buddhists themselves, questioning their stances on many issues, drawing on Sallie King and Jacqueline Stone to show that Buddha Nature and Original Enlightenment are far subtler and more flexible concepts than is grasped by those who characterize them as “metaphysical essentialism.” But he comes back to the ethical charge: “If, however, the notion of universal Buddha-nature has such liberatory potential, why does it not appear to have had such actual effects within Asian Buddhist history?” (72). He discusses Ichikawa Hakugen’s suggestion that this is because it was trumped by the persistence of the notion of karma, used to justify social inequality. He concludes that “Hakamaya’s argument needs to be fleshed out more clearly as to the ‘obvious harm’ of the doctrine of original enlightenment” (76). I would think there is also a need for more attention to the difficulties of measuring the alleged moral harm of philosophical doctrines. He dismisses as “rather naïve” Jacqueline Stone’s proposal that the Tendai slogan “karma is precisely liberation” is to be read in “a strictly ontological fashion,” stressing instead its ethical upshot: it has “the potential benefit of taking away the use of karma as a post-facto (*sic*) justification for discrimination or the blithe acceptance of caste or class hierarchies” but also has “antinomian implications,” losing “the strength of karma as a source for moral responsibility” (80). But the philosophical charm and interest of Tendai thought lies in its ontological depths, informed by Madhyamaka; to focus excessively on moral upshots is to treat Tendai only as a baseless ideology that stands or falls with its social utility, and thus no longer worthy of philosophical study.

I think that a more promising method of carrying forward the project of a Critical Buddhism is one that would focus on awareness rather than morality, and differentiate critically between different layers in the tradition, as Heidegger did for Western philosophy or as Luther did for Christian tradition. This would release anew the illuminating and liberative potential of the ancient texts, which would include a moral dimension but would not be unduly dominated by moral scruple. Shields contests Nishida’s claim that “religion does not gain adequate definition from the moral standpoint” (101), but of course this must be the case; otherwise, religious discourses could be entirely reduced to moral terms and become superfluous.

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