Bernard FAURE, *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality*. vi + 338 pp. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. Cloth $59.50. ISBN 0-691-05998-5. Paper $18.95. ISBN 0-691-05997-7.

IN THE BODY OF HIS BOOK on Buddhism and sexuality, Bernard Faure says Buddhist doctrine may have caused or justified the sexual misbehavior, alcoholism, and embezzlement that have recently scandalized Buddhist communities in North America and Europe (p. 3); he suggests that early Buddhist Vinaya literature with its "unhealthy fascination for the trivial and defiling aspects of human existence" is a literature that equally generates erotic desire as well as controls it (pp. 66–67); he claims that Tantric sexual ideology underlies the Japanese imperial accession ritual in the twelfth century (pp. 128–29); he indicts Japanese Buddhist homosexuality for "its euphemization of exploitation and its glorification of the pederastic relationship as an elevated form of *paideia* (education)" (p. 213); he suggests that the tales of *chigo* (child temple pages) are "a rather crude ideological cover-up for a kind of institutionalized prostitution or rape" (p. 265). Buddhism, he says, is steeped in such sexuality not because outside factors have compromised its original purity but because its own doctrines cause it to subvert its own ideals from inside.

> From the outset the Buddhist tradition has been divided between the most uncompromising rigorism and a subversion of all ideals in the name of a higher truth, transcending good and evil. Mahāyāna

> Buddhism, in particular, argued that the ultimate truth can be discovered only by those who awaken to the reality of desire and are able to transmute it. (p. 4)

Let us call this thesis the "norm/transgression" (p. 284) thesis. As part of this thesis, Faure assumed there was one thing called "Buddhism," a single tradition built around a single norm in different historical and cultural contexts. Sensitive to the charge that he would be reifying Buddhism, he of course qualifies himself:

> for heuristic and didactic purposes, I have assumed here the existence of a generic Buddhism, a singular norm, which many will question. But this norm will, of course, turn out to be irreducibly plural, multivocal, to the point that we may have to speak of Buddhisms in the plural. (p. 11)

But despite all his claims that he is not essentializing Buddhism (p. 9), Faure admits that in "order to reveal enduring common (sometimes cross-cultural) structures, I have wandered freely across geographical borders and historical periods" (p. 11). A generic Buddhism depicted as transgressing its own norms of sexual discipline in different cultural and historical settings—this was his initial vision, says Faure. But in the final chapter "Afterthoughts," he says writing the book caused him to change his mind. What did he write and how did he change his mind?

Chapter One, "The Hermeneutics of Desire," claims that the main problem for Buddhists is desire because it "binds men, as if with a 'red thread,' to human existence" (p. 22), to karmic rebirth in a maternal womb (p. 21). Since the "sexual act is the karmic act par excellence" (p. 33), Buddhism therefore prescribes a regimen of sexual asceticism. Faure however finds Buddhist stories that reveal a counter-theme, "whereas the ascetic denial of sexuality can lead to evil results, apparent transgressions may end well" (p. 25). With the development of the Mahāyāna, this underground transgressive attitude gets official affirmation. Since emptiness implied the non-existence of sin and Two Truths implied the identity of desire and awakening (pp. 40–41), Chan/Zen Buddhism could both repudiate and affirm desire (pp. 44–46) while Tantric Buddhism could claim that "the energy of the passions is the necessary catalyst of awakening" (p. 48). To illustrate his claims, Faure recounts story after story drawn from a wide variety of Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, Korean, and Japanese sources both ancient and modern. Along the way, there is much titillating detail: a monk who castrates himself (p. 35), a lustful woman who suffers the punishment of five days of continuous orgasm and then finds she cannot disengage herself from the rotting corpse of the man who has died upon her (p. 37), the Master dropping semen into a pupil's mouth (p. 51), the "horse-penis samādhi" which likens the arousal of bodhicitta to the arousal of a horse's penis (p. 60).

Chapter Two, "Disciplining Sex, Sexualizing Discipline," focuses on the rules for monastic conduct, both in early Buddhist Vinaya and in later Mahāyāna. Faure says it is naive to interpret the Vinaya rules as merely prescribing the conduct of monastic life according to the dharma (p. 65). Rather we must view the Vinaya as a "literary" document and examine its "performative function" (p. 66). The list of 250 precepts (350 for nuns), containing many sexual prohibitions, was chanted every two weeks by Buddhist monks and nuns. Did the chanting of this text reinforce their conscience to do their duty or did it produce a "cathartic fascination" (p. 66)? "In other words, do we not have here a phenomenon of displacement in the Freudian sense, that is, a displacing of energy that, under the cover of denial, produces intense pleasure?" (p. 66). Faure presents an "orgy" (his word, p. 89) of detail to show that the authors of the Vinaya had an unhealthy interest in things sexual—sex with animals (p. 78), homosexuality (pp. 81–83), autoeroticism, for both monks and nuns (pp. 83–88), and so on. The latter part of the chapter, devoted to Mahāyāna precepts, claims the Mahāyāna created a morality of ambivalence on both a doctrinal level with Two Truths (conventional and ultimate) and a disciplinary level with two types of precepts (proper behavior vs. proper state of mind) (p. 96).

Chapter Three, "The Ideology of Transgression," begins with discussion of the personification of transgression in the name of a higher ideal, the holy madman, as found in several Buddhist cultures (pp. 103–18). A major portion of this chapter examines the topic of sublimation, halfway between norm and its transgression (pp. 118–24). Here iconic figures from the normative tradition act in transgressive ways: the bodhisattva "Guanyin with the Fishbasket" has sex with men to lead them to salvation (pp. 118–19), Sudhana in the *Gandavyuha Sūtra* receives teaching from the courtesan bodhisattva Vasumitra (p. 122), Bodhisattva Kannon appears to Shinran in a dream offering to have sex with him (pp. 122–23), and so. The last part of this chapter discusses ritual whose symbolic meaning is transgressive. In one form of Tantric meditation, the ascetic must visualize himself as spermatic fluid emerging from Aksobhya and entering Mamaki's organ; then he must emerge and kill the father Aksobhya with a sword and make love to the mother Mamaki (pp. 124–25). Faure claims that through the Tachikawa School other forms of Tantric symbolism became part of royal consecration ritual in Japan (pp. 126–29).

In Chapter Four, "Clerical Vices and Vicissitudes," Faure surveys the anticlerical literature directed against Buddhism in China and Japan, a literature which depicts Buddhist monasteries as virtual brothels (p. 147) populated by lustful wine-drinking and meat-eating monks (pp. 151–53). The historical section of this chapter describes the efforts of state legislation in Japan to get monks and nuns to maintain proper Buddhist conduct. Then the Kamakura Bakufu in 1232 put offenses committed by monks and nuns under secular law for the first time and punished them accordingly (pp. 172–81). State posture toward Buddhism changed with the new Meiji government which, in its attempt to disestablish Buddhism in favor of Shinto, issued an edict in 1872 allowing monks to do what was previously prohibited: eat meat, marry, leave their hair uncut, and forgo wearing Buddhist robes (p. 181).

Chapters Five and Six, "Buddhist Homosexualities" and "Boys to Men," explore in detail the topic of *nanshoku* (J. "male love"). Chapter Five begins with recounting the moral horror of Jesuit missionaries who sent letters back to Europe describing the widespread practice of "sodomy" in Buddhist monasteries in China and Japan (pp. 207–10). Jesuits were biased, of course, so Faure finds other documents to draw a picture of Japanese Buddhist monasteries as rife with homosexual behavior: edicts forbidding *kasshiki* (temple novices) from wearing silk robes and lipstick; the vow of Shūshō, whose notion of ascetic discipline was to not go beyond 100 partners (he has already had 95); ambiguous poetry by Ikkyū, which Faure chooses to read as sexual (pp. 210–12). He says Japanese Buddhist homosexuality uniquely euphemized the exploitation of young boys by making sex with them into a "way" and glorified pederasty as a form of education (p. 213). Chapter Six, "Boys to Men," focuses on the *chigo*, around which an entire sub-genre of literature, *chigo monogatari*, has developed. Rather than see these stories as Buddhist sermons or love stories, he says, "We may also see them as a rather crude ideological cover-up for a kind of institutionalized prostitution or rape" (p. 265).

Unequivocally, one of this book's positive features is that it presents a huge amount of material, some of it previously unavailable or unexamined, dealing with Buddhism and sex. But it is not obvious that this mass of material supports Faure's thesis that the inner logic of Buddhism causes it to transgress its own sexual norms, nor is it obvious that there is even such a thing as "Buddhist sexuality" in the way he describes.

First of all, Faure does not attempt to deal with the root question: does Mahāyāna (and Buddhism, in general) actually cause the transgression of its own norms of sexual conduct? To me, the entire book is based on the standard *mis*interpretation of Mahāyāna, that ultimate truth is basically an antinomian destruction of conventional truth. Antinomianism merely reverses the false dichotomies of conventional truth and does not overcome them. This is necessarily so because the operation of negation is itself dualistic. Thus logically the negation of conventional truth is not ultimate truth but still more conventional truth, even though culturally it may be antinomian. An antinomian transgressor is no more nondual, no more ultimate, no more awakened, than a rule-following monk, although the transgressor may claim to transcend the monk's attachment to following precepts. Such misinterpretation of Buddhist Two Truths can be used by transgressors seeking a convenient excuse for immoral behavior (as Buddhist teachers have constantly warned), but that is far from saying Buddhism itself has an internal dynamic that causes it to transgress its own norms. Nowhere in Faure's book is there clear exploration of the idea that ultimate truth both transcends and also affirms conventional truth, that nonduality is both different from and also identical to duality. So long as Faure leaves the question of the correct understanding of the Mahāyāna unexamined, the central thesis of this book—that the internal logic of Buddhism causes and justifies sexual transgression—lies unproved.

But does not the wealth of material that Faure assemble "prove" that the internal logic of Buddhism justifies sexual transgression? Faure does indeed amass a huge volume of stories from sūtra texts, Vinaya texts, popular folk stories, fantasy tales (*otogizōshi*), mythical and legendary narratives, medieval novels and poetry, Jesuit letters and anticlerical criticism, nō dramas, and modern movies, from India, China, Tibet, Korea, and Japan. But—and this is a second criticism of his book—he treats these texts as if they were all undoctored snapshots of monks caught in the act taken by unbiased bystanders. If we had gathered a comparable set of modern documents—say, for example, Hollywood images of Buddhism, *Time* magazine articles on Buddhism, a Zen center's journal about itself, the Vatican's statement on Buddhism, newspaper accounts of the Dalai Lama, Internet sites and urban legends about Buddhism, etc.—we would analyze all such documents to identify factuality of information content, underlying agendas, autonomous stereotypes, dynamics of story-telling, etc. In several places, Faure acknowledges that anti-clerical literature was politically motivated by the enemies of Buddhism, Confucianists in China, and state government in Japan (pp. 197–206); that Jesuits regularly depicted the "other" as sodomizers (p. 209); that modernist reformers trying to emancipate themselves from tradition depict the past as decadent (p. 204); that the repeated retelling of stories in folk legend and mythology follows its own logic (p. 243); that historians "hunt" for facts and do not merely "gather" them (p. 197). Instead of concluding that therefore one cannot read these many texts as transparent historical documents, Faure concludes just the opposite. For example, while acknowledging the criticism that the fictional tales of *chigo* cannot be simply read as documents reporting social reality ("Only a naive historicism could take them at face value" [p. 243]), he nevertheless proceeds to do just that: "Even if their referentiality cannot be taken for granted, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the social reality of the time was not significantly different" (p. 244). In self-defense he says, "Texts are not mere transparencies through which one could see reality, but neither are they mere opacities" (p. 244) and offers the excuse that this is "the story as it has been told to us" (p. 282). Instead of sifting out texts likely to misrepresent actual practice and custom of the time, Faure prefers to use his texts at face value, and then tack on an apology to scholars afterward. One gets the distinct impression that Faure first made up his mind to tell a story of Buddhist sexual transgression and that he selects and twists his many texts to provide the evidence. Since Vinaya texts do not depict Buddhist monks and nuns as sexual transgressors, Faure reads Vinaya texts as if he were Freud in order to claim that in the act of ritual repentance, monks and nuns indulged in the sexual urges that the precepts prohibited. He claims that Vinaya texts display an "unhealthy fascination for the trivial and defiling aspects of human existence" (pp. 66–67), ignoring the fact that the Vinaya, as all legal texts do, show a lawyer's obsession with detail and that of the four *parajika* offences (sexual intercourse, theft, taking life, falsely proclaiming superhuman faculties), the section on sexuality is the shortest.

About an annex law forbidding nonvegetarian banquets in monasteries, Faure appends a footnote:

> Note in the text of that law the presence of children at these banquets—which evokes the pederasty of monks. The expression "to replace meat with fish" might be a veiled allusion to heterosexual and homosexual practices—because if the point was only to prohibit meat eating, the mention of children would be superfluous. (p. 179, n. 122)

Why should the presence of children immediately evoke the pederasty of monks? What evidence is there that meat and fish "might be" a veiled allusion to heterosexual and homosexual practices? (Several of Faure's interpretations rest on "might be" speculations offered without evidence.) Such is self-evident only to an overly empathetic imagination.

> [I]t is precisely because the *chigo* has become ritually identified with Kannon that he can be "forced."... False consciousness or not, the fact remains that the identity between the *chigo* and Kannon or other bodhisattvas and kamis had become part of the medieval Japanese imaginary.... [T]he *chigo* whom the priest rapes is at the same time a potential savior, and the priest rapes him while worshipping him as an avatar and a double of the emperor. Surely, this heightened sense of transgression must have increased the pleasure. (p. 261)

One reads this book with a feeling of uneasiness in the face of Faure's relentless need to find sexual transgression in his texts and his heightened sense of pleasure at finding it.

Buddhism is not a single monolith stretching across India, China, Tibet, Korean, and Japan through 2500 years of history. But Faure has heard this—a third criticism of his book—before, and in his "Afterthoughts" he says,

> Clearly we must abandon the image of an atemporal and unlocalized Buddhism, of a radically otherworldly teaching.... Once we reject the notion of a "pure," atemporal, and changeless doctrine, we are able to appreciate as a positive characteristic of Buddhism its flexibility, its singular capacity to adapt to the multiplicity of times and cultures. (p. 279)

Though he intended to describe "a complex and heterogeneous cultural phenomenon, the emergence of a Buddhist discourse on sexuality (and gender)," he admits "a sometimes uniform and simplistic scenario has tended to impose itself" (p. 280). He says he now realizes that things are more complex.

> As it shifted from otherworldly asceticism to mundane asceticism, from a world-renouncing to a world-conquering ideology, Buddhism encountered sex in three major forms: as the principle of the world of individual and collective becoming; as one of the cardinal functions of local gods and religious specialists; and as the basis of sovereignty and kingship. Therefore, the Buddhist discourse on sexuality emerged in response to several different yet interrelated dynamics: as a partial explanation of the mechanism of individual karma; as a discourse on familial prosperity, which had been the preserve of Confucian ideology; as a way of taking into account the popular association of Buddhist deities and local gods, and the cosmological system derived from the yin-yang theories; and as a response to local strategies of power, most visible at courts, but recurring at every level of society. (p. 285)

This is more like common sense and more like scholarship—Buddhism not as a generic monolith but as multi-faceted and changing in response to culture and history, sexuality not built around a single norm/transgression dynamic but around several interrelated dynamics of karma, Confucianism, local gods and local politics. But—and this is an important point—he outlines this more complex vision of Buddhist sexuality only in "Afterthoughts." It is not the vision of Buddhist sexuality that actually structures the main text of the book.

If he had to rewrite this book, he would do things differently, Faure says (p. 287). A rewritten book, one assumes, would restructure the entire argument, nuance the generic and simplistic images, interrogate the many texts he cites. It would become much less provocative, much less simplistic, much less sensational. How ought we to take his claim that he would like to rewrite this book? With a large grain of salt, I suggest. This book is already a rewritten book. It first appeared in 1994 in French under the title *Sexualités bouddhiques: Entre désirs et réalitées.* This present English version appeared in 1998, four years later. Faure did in fact rewrite the book and again he produced a "rough draft." Could it be that this "rough draft" format is itself the finished product? This format allows Faure to make the most provocative and sensational accusations against Buddhism (unrevised main body) while allowing himself the maximum possible protection from scholarly criticism (apologetic afterword). One can only guess at his motives, but we all know that readers will quote, not the scholarly qualifications in the "Afterthoughts," but the sensational statements made in his unrevised chapters, and he will gain a reputation as a fierce and bold critic of established Buddhism.

One more point: the moral stance of the book inadvertently raises a good question, though it is not one Faure intended to raise. Faure depicts Buddhist monks as engaging in sexual degeneracy and then justifying it with Buddhist doctrine. His stance is quite similar to Brian Victoria's recent book, *Zen At War* (Weatherhill, 1998), accusing Zen monks in Japan of willingly supporting military imperialism prior to, and during, World War II and justifying it with Zen doctrine. What can we say of these books? On the one hand, we can observe once again that modern writers, who often think that Buddhism teaches (or ought to teach) individual rights, democracy, racial and sexual equality, nonviolence, etc., will be morally horrified to find that Buddhists in the past did not practice what (we) moderns preach and will accuse them of compromising (their own) Buddhist principles. Both these books make moral judgements about the behavior of Buddhists in the (Asian) past and neither explains on what grounds they make their judgements. On the other hand, in defense of these books, one can ask, is it unjust to impose modern moral standards on Buddhists of the past, where can one take a moral stance? What is the Middle Way between moral eternalism and moral annihilationalism?

Finally, on a technical level, the book is dotted with spelling errors, numerous stories without citation of source, and references to texts that are not listed in the bibliography, and it needs a Chinese character index.

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