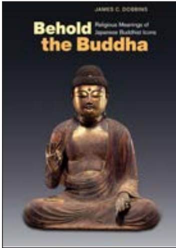
REVIEWS



James C. Dobbins, ***Behold the Buddha: Religious Meanings of Japanese Buddhist Icons***

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020. 288 pages. Paperback, $30.00. ISBN-13 9780824879990.

In *Behold the Buddha*: *Religious Meanings of Japanese Buddhist Icons*, James Dobbins readily celebrates and vigorously embraces museum culture and, as statistics would have it, he is far from the only one. There are approximately 850 million visits each year to American museums, more than the attendance for all major league sporting events and theme parks combined (American Alliance of Museums 2015). The numbers for Japan are equally impressive and the Agency for Cultural Affairs estimates that in 2017 Japan's museums had over 300 million visitors (Agency for Cultural Affairs 2018). American museums contribute a massive $21 billion to the United States economy each year and billions more through indirect spending by their visitors as part of a massive $704 billion arts and cultural production industry.[1]

Religion has played no small part in the historical success and popularity of museums in the United States and Japan, both now and in the past. The most heavily attended exhibition in the world in 2018 was Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art (Borrelli-Persson 2018). Similarly, Buddhist-themed exhibits also frequently prove to be wildly successful. In 2017, the most popular exhibition worldwide was Tokyo National Museum's Kōfukuji Chūkondō Saiken Kinen Tokubetsuten "Unkei" 興福寺中金堂再建記念特別展「運慶」(The Great Master Sculptor Unkei:

1. This accounts for 4.32 percent of the entire United States economy, more than construction ($619 billion) or utilities ($270 billion). Each year 4.7 million museum workers receive $339 billion in compensation. For details see American Alliance of Museums (2015).

Commemorating the Reconstruction of the Kōfukuji Central Golden Hall) (Sharpe 2018). Kūkai to Mikkyō Bijutsuten 空海と密教美術展 (Kūkai's World: The Arts of Esoteric Buddhism) became the most popular exhibit in Japan (number two worldwide) in 2011 (Kelly 2012). But the Kūkai exhibit paled in comparison to the Kokuhō Ashura 国宝阿修羅 (National Treasure Asura) exhibition at Tokyo National Museum in 2009—the most visited exhibition in the world, with nearly sixteen thousand visitors a day (Collett-White 2010). In terms of popularity (and profits), Buddhism and museums seem to be a match made in heaven, but what would happen if one were to bring the experience of the museum exhibition to a book-length publication on the history and landscape of Japanese Buddhism as though it were a single exhibition? In *Behold the Buddha*, James Dobbins attempts to do precisely this.

To my knowledge, Dobbins is the first buddhologist to explicitly single out the museum as his source of inspiration in writing a book on Buddhist iconography and religious experience—an interesting and largely underexplored ground for comparison and cross-fertilization. In the introduction, Dobbins first discusses temples and museums as two largely divergent kinds of spaces. "Museums, with their sophisticated lighting and protective enclosures, allow me to examine closely the things that engage me the most, and discovering their details increases a feeling of intimacy toward them" (1). Where, on the other hand, Dobbins's original impression of "temples was that their Buddhist images were no doubt exceptional but were exhibited less skillfully than in museums… lighting was poor, the access limited, and the surroundings overly embellished and distracting" (2). He continues: "Curiously, the shortcomings I found in the display of icons at Buddhist temples were precisely those that obstructed me from enjoying them as museum pieces" (3). Despite the claim that he hopes to introduce the temple experience to museumgoers, *Behold the Buddha* succeeds in doing the exact opposite—it brings the museum experience to Japanese Buddhism. In much the same vein (and style) as panel-wall text at a museum exhibition, *Behold the Buddha* provides readers with a simple paradigm for understanding all Buddhist iconography designed to explain what is Buddhist about each object, with the hope that, with enough proper knowledge, visitors to Japanese temples will be able to "make sense" of Buddhist icons (part I), replicate Dobbins's own religious experience of Japan's "Buddhist gallery" and "world of images" (parts II and III) and, through encounters with Buddhist icons, have a direct experience of the uncanny just as he did.

The uncanny—in the form of "living images"—has in the past couple of decades taken Buddhist studies by storm. Traditionally, scholars of Buddhism were trained as philologists who primarily engaged with the sacred scriptures of Buddhism. However, with a growing interest in ritual, literary, and art historical source material, their encounter with "living" Buddhist icons has

proved to be as irresistible as it is intractable. It is curious to see how easily "living" icons have so thoroughly captured the attention of the "modern minds" of religious scholars. In addition to serving as an overview of some of Japanese Buddhism's most popular icons and religious trends, *Behold the Buddha* is devoted to assisting the reader in directly experiencing Buddhist icons "simply and plainly as living religious entities" (24). There are reminders throughout the book that this will be a challenge to the "reductionist materialistic" or "secular scientific" mind of the "modern" reader, but reassurances that "premodern Japanese" minds are capable of "a cognitive balancing act" wherein the living quality of icons is, despite the recognition that such icons are made of material, approached "with total acceptance" (49). It would be easy to label such a division between "Western/modern" and "Japanese/premodern" anachronistic and misleading (as it most certainly is), but here it is meant to be instructive and to point out the most significant obstacle to a religious experience of Buddhist iconography. The book's ultimate objective is to assist the reader in crossing over this seemingly insurmountable cultural chasm to taste, for even just a moment, what it might be like to experience an icon as alive as would a Japanese Buddhist. But how might the reader overcome their "modern mind" to achieve such a feat?

In chapter 2, Dobbins suggests that the answer is as simple as knowing the historical Buddha's biography and being prepared to see elements of that biography in every single icon. "Without the story of the Buddha's life, the power and significance of Buddhist icons becomes elusive. Cut off from it, the image exudes mystery but seems to withhold its meaning from the human gaze. Once suffused with his story, the icon's meaning breaks forth and the viewer is placed in a dynamic relationship with the Buddha" (50). From this description, it is hard to tell if the biography of the Buddha does more to enliven an icon or to suppress those elements of mystery that might serve to facilitate an experience with the uncanny. Nevertheless, Dobbins argues that this is the means by which Buddhists themselves experience the Buddha as a living presence. "Not all Buddhists know every detail of Śākyamuni's life, but even the bare rudiments—quest, enlightenment, and compassion—are enough for the icon to come alive" (50). Having created this "Buddhist paradigm" for animating objects, Dobbins suggests that the quest, enlightenment, and compassion of the sacred *ur*-narrative of Śākyamuni's awakening are simultaneously the "subliminal backdrop" out of which every icon emerges and the very thing that every icon is intended to overtly express.

Drawing on the rich history of Japanese Buddhist material culture, *Behold the Buddha* includes many beautiful illustrations and introduces a diverse set of Buddhist icons ranging from sculpture, painting, calligraphy, relics, temples, and graves, but this variety in subject matter stands in stark contrast to the

tyrannical imposition of the singular "archetypal prototype" of quest, enlightenment, and compassion designed to explain every object to life. Dobbins pays occasional lip service to the fact that "[p]articular cultures and individual artists have sometimes added features to icons apart from what the Buddha's story says" (51). The sheer variety of icons is ultimately explained only as "natural diversification" over time, a mere extension of Mahāyāna doctrines that preach a multitude of divinities in a multitude of forms or, on occasion, expressions of sectarian identity among the Zen, Nichiren, Shingon, and Pure Land sects. However, even these explanations are quickly scuttled aside to reassert the supremacy of the "Buddhist paradigm" of quest, enlightenment, and compassion, where variation is explained as a dialing up, a dialing down, or a focus on one of these three elements, often with peculiar results. For example, the iconography of Dainichi is different in each of the Mandalas of the Two Worlds, but Dobbins argues that both represent the same thing. "These two poses thus express the awakening power of wisdom and the interpretation of all things, and they highlight the enlightenment dimension of Buddhahood more than the quest and compassion dimensions" (92). This is one place where quest and compassion may actually have something to say about specific iconographical differences as the Diamond Mandala represents enlightenment from the perspective of the practitioner (quest) and the Womb Mandala from the perspective of the Dainichi's salvation (compassion), but in the assessment here the differences are irrelevant in the face of the larger "religious truth" of Dainichi's enlightened state.

Not for the first time in a work written by a Buddologist, the materiality and iconography of Buddhist visual culture is relegated to a marginal position—almost, indeed, a position of inconsequence. In *Behold the Buddha*, one will find no discussion of material or technique and very little social contextualization for any specific icon. I would argue that the material and social dimensions are, in fact, often the hardest things to see about an object—usually much harder than experiencing something uncanny—but frequently of decisive iconographic and religious importance. How something looks or is made matters in ways that are irreducible to doctrine or narrative and not easily appreciated even if one manages to experience the uncanny in their "presence." One cannot help but wonder if *Behold the Buddha* would even exist had the portrait of Shinran looked different on that fateful day at the Cleveland Museum in 1998 (214). What if Shinran had been painted with his eyes closed? What if it was damaged so it was unable to "look" at Dobbins? If all Buddhist icons embody the same story, why don't all icons feel alive? What does Dobbins's experience with Shinran's portrait have to do with Mahāyāna doctrine or quest, enlightenment, and compassion? Dobbins's own religious experience seems to have little to do with the interpretative system he has urged upon his readers in regard to

icons. Museums collect and exhibit the most impressive objects in the world with the express intent of achieving the effect Dobbins describes as religious and, although scholars of Buddhist Studies have yet to pay much attention to the fact, museums profoundly shape our perception of religious experience, especially as related to objects.

In the afterword, the reader finally sees that much of Dobbins's concern over the "Western gaze"—a way of looking that refuses to consider an object as anything but material—is just as fanciful a proposition as a "Japanese" or "premodern" mind that is willing to do such with "absolute acceptance." In fact, as the beloved face of the Kōfukuji Asura attests, the living Buddhist icon is as much a feature of modern museum culture as it is of the past (to what extent these are similar remains a subject of important debate). The religious experience Dobbins describes is his own and, it would be misleading to discuss it (as he does) as the basis for two ways of looking at the world held by two different ethnohistorical religious groups: one modern, Western, and museum-based, and one premodern, Japanese, and temple-based. However, it would not be inaccurate to say that it was a religious experience quite consistent with that which the museum environment encourages (and profits from). I do not know if the museum offers an opportunity for modern visitors to directly sample for a brief moment what a premodern religious believer might have experienced on a more consistent basis, but perhaps it is a question worth asking and exploring. It could tell us just as much about ourselves as it does about those in different times and places. *Behold the Buddha* invites scholars of Buddhist studies to explore how the museum as an educational and religious space has impacted us all—unconsciously and consciously—and is therefore of tremendous value.

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