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The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations. John S. Strong.
Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 1995, pp. xv + 367, \$22.95 (paper).

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Strong's *The Experience of Buddhism in The Religious Life in History Series* (formerly *The Religious Life of Man Series*) published by Wadsworth of Belmont, California (formerly Dickenson of Encino but, even more formerly, of Belmont—the series has been through its own series of Hollywood-style divorces and remarriages) is designed as a companion for *The Buddhist Religion* (originally by Richard Robinson but, after his death, revised and doubled in size by Willard Johnson *et alii*) and announces itself as a replacement for Stephen Beyer's *The Buddhist Experience*. If you are still with me, it presumably means that you are familiar with this book and its ancestors and, indeed, are probably using it in your courses, so that you don't need to read this review at all. If I have already lost you, let me catch you up on some of the background. ("Yes, your honor, it's relevant to my case, as I intend to show." "Objection overruled. You may proceed.")

Back in the 1960s, when no-one thought to question our use of the term "religion" (and people wrote "man" to mean "people" and no-one thought to question that either—so long ago was it) Dickenson was putting together its series on world religions, and it engaged Fred Streng as general editor. Fred wrote *Understanding Religious Man* (1969: known in subsequent revisions as *Understanding Religious Life*—a more "PC" but less precise reference to *Homo religiosus*), which turned out to be not only a textbook but a significant contribution to the notion of *religion* as a viable topic of study.

Richard was then in full flight as *auctor et consummator* of the Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, the first and (it unfortunately appears) the last fully integrated program to present Buddhism as Buddhism rather than as a religion (read: a variant of Christianity¹) or a bunch of stuff that happens to be in Pali or Tibetan or Chinese or something. Richard structured *The Buddhist Religion* to parallel, more or less, the program he had invented at Madison, in which we ("Yes, your honor, I admit my personal involvement in all this, but I claim it does not involve a conflict of interest...") started with the "background" (which would have looked more like the foreground at the time) to the life of Śākyamuni, i.e., the Upaniṣads and the rise of the *śramaṇa* movement, spent some considerable time on Śākyamuni's life as legend and history, and then unrolled the historical development of Buddhism in three major blocks, corresponding to the student's chosen linguistic competence in Pali, Tibetan, or Chinese.

The best thing that could be said about Richard's book was that it made more sense than *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (Oxford: Cassirer, 1951), the idiosyncratic introduction by the vinegary Edward

Conze, which at that time held sway as the survey of choice. Richard's mastery of the whole field of Buddhist Studies was unrivaled (whereas it was an open secret that Conze fudged on the Chinese) and he made a concerted effort to uncover what was *Buddhist* about Buddhism by dealing with it trans-historically and trans-culturally rather than, as was (and often still is) customary, as an aspect of a particular time and a particular culture. However, he knew his effort was preliminary and, had he lived, he would certainly have made major changes, possibly not excluding the complete abandonment of historical-critical methodology. In the event, of course, he did not survive more than a few more years. When Dickenson (or was it Wadsworth by then?) decided to look for an editor for the revisions, they contacted me, but I had become convinced that the whole historical-critical approach was suspect, and was engaged in producing my alternative methodological suggestion as *The Vision of Buddhism* (New York: Paragon, 1989), so I turned them down. Subsequently, Willard Johnson and his assistants appended and emended Richard's text, but did not significantly change its structure.

Then, out of left field, the incorrigible Steve Beyer roared with his exiting, exasperating, brilliant, and lunatic *The Buddhist Experience*, a scholarly *tour-de-force* in that not only were all the translations original (and his own), including the magnificent concrete poetry rendering of Basho and the disastrous reduction of Nāgārjuna into off-off-Broadway gibberish, but even the selections were new, so that there was practically nothing recognizable to non-specialists. Living Buddhism (of a sort) had suddenly thrust itself upon the Academy. But it was hushed and told to sit quietly and listen, or Security would be called. Thus, Beyer was buried and Strong was built on his bones.

What, then, do we now have? A competent scholar has produced an anthology that is everything that Beyer's is not—it is more useful as a course text, but it does not challenge us to re-think Buddhism.

Beyer blissfully ignored Robinson's historical structure and grouped his selections synchronically under the headings of the Triple Training (*trīśikṣā*). This forced students and teachers alike to ask "What is *Buddhist* about Buddhism?" but, by choosing passages for their shock value (e.g., the Vinaya debate on masturbation rather than on the Rains Retreat) and omitting so many documents that most scholars and practitioners would consider central (such as the First Teaching and the Heart Sūtra) Beyer frustrated our palates with too many spices and insufficient food.

Strong makes as if to correct the deficiencies in Beyer's treatment by, in part two ("The Development of Buddhism outside India"—let us rather say "outside the Indian Subcontinent"), sticking fairly closely to the

Robinson Johnson Tsai and Young structure, although he organizes the material within each geographically-oriented chapter into nine topics (allowing, as he says, for a thematic, cross-cultural reading—an interesting classroom exercise) whose utility is, however, not explained. (Why these nine? Why, for example, “Mythic History”?—what indeed *is* Mythic History?—is it like a squarish circle? And how is “Ritual” different from “Meditational Endeavors”?—surely the *maṇḍala* offering (page 272-274), which is classified as Ritual, is also a Meditational Endeavor?—especially when one endeavors to do it 100,000 times). In part one (“The Experience of Buddhism in South Asia”) he uses a combination of a historical-critical and a practice oriented (*Triratna*) framework that I found confusing—e.g., Tibet appears in part one as well as in part two, but I’m not sure why. Strong improves upon Beyer’s anthology by including the mainline texts which Beyer omits, as well as a few strange pieces ported from Beyer. The addition of selections on contemporary Buddhism and the place of women in Buddhism is especially valuable and, at the present time, unique. However, Korea and Vietnam still get short shrift.

So, in the end, what do we in fact have? On the one hand, a very serviceable course book, that “sort of” goes with “Robinson Plus”, and one that can certainly, as I have found, be mined for significant texts as the focus of productive classroom discussions. But on the other hand, we must ask whether we do not have another anthology that, to parody Dylan Thomas, tells us everything about Buddhism except why?² Why is History given a privileged place as the sure-fire way to introduce Buddhism to undergraduates? Because they’re comfortable with it? Sure they are, but isn’t the professor’s job to shake the foundations by asking uncomfortable questions? How much Buddhism do we lose by worshiping History (in the sense of a secular, supposedly objective and impartial, academic discipline)? The Strong and Robinson Plus twin-pack does not help us to answer these questions.

NOTES

¹ For my reflections on crypto-theology masquerading as History of Religions, see “After Eliade, What?” Review article of *The Eliade Guide to World Religions* by Mircea Eliade and Ioan P. Couliano with Hillary S. Wiesner (HarperCollins, 1991) and *Essential Sacred Writings from Around the World* by Mircea Eliade (HarperCollins, 1991, re-issue of *From Primitives to Zen*, Harper and Row, 1967). *Religion* 23 (1993) 373-377.

² Dylan Thomas complained that, as a child, he received, amongst his Christmas gifts, “...books that told me / everything about the wasp, except why.”

A Child's Christmas in Wales by Dylan Thomas (New York: New Directions, 1954), no pagination.