



Absence of the Buddha Image in Early Buddhist Art: Towards its Significance in Comparative Religion. By Kanoko Tanaka. New Delhi: D. K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 1998 [Emerging Perceptions in Buddhist Studies, No. 8], 148 pages plus illustrations, ISBN 8124600902, US \$66.70.

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In 1839, Robert Spence Hardy, Methodist missionary to what was then Ceylon, wrote *The British Government and the Idolatry of Ceylon*, a polemical pamphlet which accused the ruling British authorities of supporting a religion abhorrent to the mind of God because of its idolatry and “gross superstitions” (Hardy, 1839, p. 46). He was talking of Buddhism.

That the image of the Buddha has been seen as an idol by the Abrahamic religions is one point of departure for Tanaka in her study of the absence of the Buddha image in the early years of Buddhism. It leads her to look at the significance of this for contemporary inter-faith relations. If the image of the Buddha could be shown to be peripheral to Buddhism, and if it could even be argued that there was greater creativity in early Buddhism because of its absence, would the door be opened, she asks, to greater understanding between the major world faiths, particularly between Buddhism and monotheism?

With this in mind, she seeks to explore what devotion might have been like for Buddhists without the image. She condemns approaches which have projected immaturity or naiveté onto early Buddhist art and claims that an empathetic, imaginative leap into a Buddhism without any visual representation of the Buddha might enable an “original form of Buddhist faith” to emerge (p. 3), one with greater spiritual freedom for the devotee.

The book is divided into three main sections. The first looks at the absence of the Buddha image in the *stūpa* art of Sanchi through the lens of both fine art and drama. The second offers religious, artistic and political reasons for the lack of the image and in the third the author asks whether the absence of the Buddha image has parallels in other faiths which could encourage greater inter-faith understanding.

In the first section, Tanaka shows a thorough knowledge of the early Buddhist art of Sanchi. The function of the panels on the gateways was not to present narratives distant in time from the pilgrim who walked towards the *stūpa*, she claims, but to open up a theatrical space to draw the pilgrim in, enabling a dynamic interplay between the devotion depicted in the panels and devotion in the present. It was an art, she suggests, which placed lay devotees at the heart of the picture and gave them more freedom of expression than when the image took center stage, resulting in the lay practitioner being thrown away from the center into a more static periphery.

That the presence of the image could have stultified creative spirituality is suggested again in the second part. For instance, the author makes the rather unoriginal observation that from a doctrinal point of view the essence of *nirvāṇa* is better communicated in the absence of the Buddha than in his presence, but follows that up with the more significant point that this absence potentially offered greater contemplative space to the devotee (p. 52). Moving to the artistic, she takes further examples of early Buddhist art as performance, asking the reader to see that “the scene itself is not a ‘story-teller’ but a ‘technician’ who is good at making the viewers tell a story in their own words” (p. 73), encouraging action rather than passivity. Moving to the political, she suggests that absence of the Buddha image fitted the genius of Asoka’s mission far better than the image would have done, with its potential for creating sectarian strife and competition. Absence was a more conciliatory political tool than presence.

Taking the motif of the “empty throne” from early Buddhist art, Tanaka argues in the last section that it is a more flexible, universal and indeed authentic symbol of spirituality than the Buddha image: “the emptiness is much more realistic than any other thing made by human hands” (p. 92). She finds parallels to the empty throne in several major faiths: the prohibition of images in Islam, the fire altar of Zoroastrianism, the lack of any depiction of God in Jewish art, the empty tomb in Christianity and the empty throne to be occupied by Christ at the end of the world, the emptiness of the Sikh sanctuary where a book rather than a person is enshrined. It is through the empty throne, she therefore suggests, that Buddhism can dialogue with monotheistic faiths and people of different religions can unite in joint action and exploration. It is the empty throne rather than the Bud-

dha image that is relevant to modernity.

Tanaka writes with the passion and poetry of the campaigner and the believer. The text is littered with poetic gems, which reveal sensitivity and commitment to the subject, yet it is not without academic underpinning. The chapters are well-referenced and are accompanied by an impressive collection of illustrations. However, the imaginative at times outstrips the academic and notable weaknesses can be detected in her depiction of non-Buddhist religions. The text is not a smooth ride, mainly because it is painfully obvious both that Tanaka is not writing in her first language and that the editors of the book have not done enough to remove errors in grammar, style and vocabulary. The result is repetitiveness and stylistic awkwardness. However, it is on content and methodology rather than style that the book should be judged.

Tanaka's emphasis on the absence of the Buddha image as a window onto early Buddhist spirituality is refreshing and thought-provoking, although inevitably speculative and conditioned by the eye of the researcher, as Tanaka herself realizes. It merits a place alongside other research which seeks to probe the links between religious art, religious freedom and structures of power. It is a pity that the political factors she touches on were not developed further. Her implication that the Buddha image has the potential to repress creative religious practice rather than liberate it and to create division between religions in the political arena may go against the experience of many devout Buddhists but it should not be ignored. The history of religion is replete with examples of the religious symbol, icon, or image used to create division or to subjugate.

In this context, Tanaka's thesis that it is through the symbol of the empty throne that triumphalism can die, humility in the face of mystery enter, and inter-faith cooperation and understanding be born, is intellectually and emotionally appealing. Yet I fear it is rather utopian. When religions meet, touching points are inevitably discovered, particularly in the realm of ethics. This is an invaluable part of inter-faith encounter. That there is an "emptiness" in the Buddhist sanctuary is therefore important, and the way Tanaka develops this through the tools of comparative religion is fascinating, but I have difficulty with models of inter-faith understanding which depend on the discovery of commonality and open this up using one key. For instance, to say that the empty throne of Buddhism touches the empty tomb of Christianity is valid but so are the studies which have compared the development of the Buddha image and the depiction of Christ. More important, though, is that both risk ignoring the difference which exists between the significance of the risen Christ to Christians and the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* to Buddhists. Inter-faith understanding today

demands both affirmation of commonality and coexistence with difference. The latter involves the willingness to appreciate the “other” as “other” and to enter unfamiliar constructions of meaning. One of the challenges for non-Buddhists who seek to understand Buddhism, therefore, involves letting go of the long discredited link between the Buddha image and idolatry in order to appreciate what the image continues to mean today to millions of Buddhists worldwide.

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