



Steven Collins. *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali imaginaire*. Cambridge Studies in Religious Traditions, No. 12. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, xxiv + 684 pages, ISBN 0-521-57054-9, US \$85.00 (cloth).

*Reviewed by*

James P. McDermott  
*Professor of Religious Studies and  
Dean of Arts and Sciences  
Canisius College  
mcdermot@canisius.edu*

*Copyright Notice*

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to [jbe-general@jbe.la.psu.edu](mailto:jbe-general@jbe.la.psu.edu).

The dust jacket of Collins' book proclaims that it "presents a new answer to the question: what is nirvana?" It does. In accomplishing this task, Collins' goal has been to understand nirvana from an "external (etic) point of view which preserves the internal (emic) characterization of it, without simply restating what that is" (p. 188). He is concerned both with what Buddhist systematic thought says nirvana is and with the way in which its meaning is expressed through images and in narrative. Collins considers imagery to be a bridge between systematic and narrative thought, and goes so far as to suggest that the meaning of nirvana is perhaps even better expressed imagistically than through concepts (p. 213). He thus provides extensive treatment of such images of nirvana as fire, the ocean, the further shore, and the City of Nibbāna.

The result of this study, then, is not an update of Guy Welbon's historical survey, *The Buddhist Nirvāṇa and Its Western Interpreters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). Neither is it a mere alternative to the classic interpretations of Louis de la Valleṛ Poussin and Th. Stcherbatsky, nor to the more recent analyses by Rune Johansson and Peter Harvey, although Collins enters into debate with each of them. Rather, Collins' subject matter is much more broadly defined, ranging from consideration of Buddhist utopianism and Buddhist historiography to the question of whether millennialism precisely understood is a category which can

be properly applied to Buddhist phenomena.

In defining the concept of nirvana, Collins explicitly disavows the quest for the “original Buddhism,” “what the Buddha taught,” and “what Buddhism ‘teaches,’ essentially and ahistorically” (p. 418). At the outset he spells out what Buddhist systematic thought says about the concept of nirvana:

It is a real, external and timeless Existent, not merely a concept.... It is the ultimate goal of Buddhist soteriology, to be attained both experientially, in this life...[and] an object of consciousness for those on the Path.... It is also the state or condition (metaphorically, the place) which is the destiny of an Arahant or Buddha after death (but it is not a Destiny within the universe). It is ontologically, but is not the origin of things, the ground of being. For Buddhists, whether practitioners of the Path or ordinary people, the appropriate response is to accept on faith — better, with confidence or trust, *saddhā* — that nirvana exists as described, and to aspire to achieve it, in the shorter or longer term (p. 188).

An important analytic concept around which Collins constructs his thought is what he calls “the Pali imaginaire.” Scholarly use of the term “imaginaire” initially derives, as Collins notes, from French historians and Marxists. Virtually impossible to translate into English precisely, “the noun imaginaire can refer to objects of the imagination, the ensemble of what is imagined, without implying falsity; it can also refer to specific imagined worlds, and so can be used in this sense in the plural” (p. 73). The “Pali imaginaire,” then, may be somewhat loosely said to refer to the world as it is imagined to be in the entire range of extant, premodern Pali texts of which there are Western editions. Among the key interests pursued in this volume is the place of the Pali imaginaire in Southern Asian society and history. Collins’ aim is not to produce “a comprehensive, or somehow uniquely privileged history,” but rather a study that complements other works on Southern Asia (p. 81).

One of the main themes of the book is that “narrative is as important a cognitive function, a mode of culture-making, and a mode of truth-claiming, as is systematic thought” (p. 60). Thus Collins turns to a consideration of nirvana as it relates to time and history. He breaks new ground in attempting to define and understand Buddhist historiography in contradistinction to Western approaches to historiography. In this context he rejects the common dichotomy which sees the “Western” conception of time as linear in contrast to an “Eastern” concept of time which is frequently supposed to be cyclical. His “concern here is with the way the Pali imaginaire textualizes time, and with nirvana as a narrative closure-marker, both in

narrated time and in the time of narration” (p. 234). This discussion is based on a close reading and careful analysis of passages from the *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Mahāvāṃsa*. Collins recognizes the importance of both repetitive and non-repetitive time in these materials. New translations of the relevant sections of these texts are included as appendices one and two.

Part two of the volume deals with what Collins has broadly termed “other Buddhist felicities” — that is, the wide range of things which can be seen as forms of salvation. As he understands them, “Buddhist felicities are not a random collection of good things, but a coherent imaginaire structured and completed by narratively unimaginable nirvana” (p. 116). In this part of the study, one finds extensive treatment of Buddhist utopias — both in the sense of eu-topias (good places) and ou-topias (no-places). The theoretical issues raised in this discussion are related comparatively to Western utopian writing and its study. Chapter four deals with Buddhist cosmogony — particularly its various heavens — and the “celestial pleasures of meditation.” These are related to the Western concepts of Arcadia and the Land of Cockaigne. Chapter five deals with the future Buddha Metteyya, and the possibility of multiple Buddhas, past and future. This discussion raises the theoretical issue of Buddhist millennialism. In formulating his thinking on this topic, Collins begins with the useful typologies proposed by Jan Nattier’s “The Meanings of the Maitreya Myth: A Typological Analysis,” in *Maitreya, the Future Buddha* (A. Sponberg and H. Hardacre, eds. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988]) and N. Cohn’s “Medieval Millenarism: Its Bearing on the Comparative Study of Millenarian Movements,” in *Millennial Dreams in Action* (S. Thrupp, ed. [The Hague: Mouton, 1962]). This theoretical discussion, then, is concretized with reference to both premodern ideas and modern movements in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand. In chapter six Collins discusses kingship and the perfect moral commonwealth, focusing on the concept of the Wheel-turning King (*cakkavatti*). Collins argues that “the closest the Pali imaginaire comes to a social utopia is in the image of the Wheel-turning King, whose beneficent guidance maximizes mundane felicity for all and the possibility of the ultimate felicity of nirvana for some” (p. 562). In addition to proposing new interpretations for well known *sutta* texts from the *Dīgha Nikāya*, for example, Collins’ analysis makes extensive use of narratives from the *Jātaka* collection, as well as the much more rarely utilized *nīti* texts, which played a central role in traditional monastic education. The *nīti* texts are “collections of aphoristic verses of practical wisdom...which together [with the *Jātaka*] constitute the largest and most widespread fund of practical advice and *exempla* in Buddhism” (p. 419). He shows how these texts were used by the sangha at times to justify and at

others to contest military and political power.

A close reading and original textual analysis of the *Cakkavatti-sīhanāda Sutta*, or *The Discourse (Containing) a Lion's Roar on the Wheel-turning King* serves as a foundation for and supplement to this discussion. In his reading of this sutta, as well as in his understanding of the *Kūṭadanta* and *Mahāśudassana Suttas* Collins, like Richard Gombrich, recognizes moments of comedy and satire not admitted by other interpreters. Collins sees these “as giving voice to a transcendentalist wisdom oriented towards trans-temporal (and/or timeless) values of asceticism...” (p. 496).

An extensive analysis of the highly popular *Vessantara Jātaka* concludes part two of the book. Collins sees the *Vessantara* as both a realist drama and as an allegory. The story “highlights and insists on conflicts of value” (p. 500). He characterizes the *Vessantara* as “a tragedy as well as a utopian fantasy (or better, a concatenation of utopian fantasies)” (p. 529), “a *summa felicitatum*” (p. 500).

In his conclusions, Collins addresses both “narrower issues concerning the typology of ideal societies” (p. 555) and broader theoretical issues related to the transferability of categories and concepts from one culture to another.

The concluding scholarly apparatus includes an extensive bibliography, a glossary and index of Pali and Sanskrit words, and name and subject indexes.

Every once in a while a book comes along that deserves a lasting scholarly reputation. This is one of those masterful books. In many ways it is a treasure trove. It breaks new theoretical ground in its consideration of such matters as Buddhist utopianism and Buddhist millennialism, as well as the comparative study of cultures. It offers perceptive new interpretations of both popular and seldom considered Pali texts. In passing it drops enticing suggestions for possible future research agendas. Even those with whose ideas Collins argues will find here stimulation to further thought and possibly (or rather, likely) on-going debate. This is a book to read, to savor, to reflect upon, and to return to as a source of ideas.