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*A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex,
and the Body in Indian Buddhism*

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A Review of A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism

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A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism. By John Powers. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009, 334 pages, ISBN: 978-0674033290 (hardcover); US \$45.00.

A Bull of a Man is an exceptional contribution to the field of Indian Buddhist Studies. The main argument is simple, and yet scholars in the field have consistently missed it for decades. Powers has managed to put his finger on a central theme in Buddhist literature that has evaded the majority of us. As he says, this consistently missed mark is a remarkable oversight (7).

The main argument behind Powers' new book is that the theme of masculinity pervades Buddhist texts, and yet scholarship has granted it virtually no attention. In his preface, he reminds us that when feminist scholarship first emerged, it was quickly dismissed as marginal and ultimately insignificant. Over time, however, we have come to recognize the pivotal role women's voices play in our interpretations of the tradition. Feminist scholarship brought us, among other things, the category of gender, which has permitted us to re-read Buddhist history via an entirely new and particularly enriching lens. What is striking, however, is that this new category of study has somehow not encouraged a similar exploration of masculinity, and it is not clear why. Many scholars today have made use of the new windows provided by feminist scholarship. Why, then, have questions of masculinity not made their way in as well?

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Why do we continually explore issues having to do with women's bodies but we consistently fail to consider men's bodies? Is it because the male perspective has been accepted as the *de facto* position and therefore does not necessitate its own particular field of inquiry? As Powers has duly demonstrated in this book, the male body in Indian Buddhist history has its own discourse and meaning inscribed upon it; it therefore warrants our attention. The fact that we have failed to notice it all this time obviously says more about Western academic interests, oversights, and concerns, than it does about Indian Buddhist history itself.

The book opens with a discussion of the importance of the Buddha's body in Buddhist sources, with special emphasis placed on the role of the marks of a Great Man. He begins with a reminder that, while Buddhist texts identify both a physical power and a wisdom power associated with the Buddha's person, western scholarship has focused almost exclusively on the wisdom-power element to the expense of his physical presence. The Buddha, however, is described in the sources as having (or at the very least manifesting) a very particular human (and specifically male) body that functions as an expression of his mental/spiritual attainments. Indeed, Powers goes so far as to argue that "there is a pervasive concern with bodies – particularly male bodies – and the Buddha's is held up as the highest development of the male physique" (9). This is rarely mentioned, discussed or considered in most academic works on the Buddha's person, and yet when we consider the vast array of examples provided by Powers to illustrate this "pervasive concern" with his body, we realize what an oversight it truly is.

Powers reminds us that, despite our fascination with his wisdom element, it is precisely his physical body that makes the greatest impact on his audience. The sources repeatedly provide anecdotes in which the Buddha convinces his audience by virtue of his physical presence more than by his words. Asita is convinced of his greatness at birth due to the

marks on his body, which leads directly to the cloistered (albeit splendid) upbringing that was eventually imposed on him. Perception of his marks is often the deciding factor in conversion narratives, and his radiance repeatedly impresses those who encounter him. One narrative that Powers does not mention that has always struck me as a bit peculiar is the story of Upaka's encounter with the Buddha directly after his awakening: according to the Pāli Vinaya, the ascetic Upaka is the first to see the Buddha after he achieves awakening. He is naturally impressed by his extraordinary radiance, and therefore asks him who his teacher is. The Buddha responds predictably with a grand statement about his recent attainments. Upaka listens to the Buddha's declaration and simply responds, "it may be so," shakes his head and walks away (*Mahāvagga I: 6:7-9*). Upaka recognizes the Buddha's glory but is not interested in hearing anything about it. This is in sharp contrast with the many other narratives Powers provides in which conversion is the inevitable outcome.

The most interesting chapter in the book is the second chapter in which Powers re-reads the Buddha's hagiography with special emphasis placed on his physical body and masculinity. I have spent much of my time in Buddhist Studies examining various hagiographies and hagiographical fragments of the Buddha's life, have encountered the hundreds of references to his physique that Powers refers to, and other than the obvious concern with his marks of a Great Man that are striking in their unusualness, I have rarely given his masculinity more than cursory consideration. I was therefore quite surprised to re-read his story with this new insight as its underlying current. It was a completely new story, and yet it has been there all along. It takes a particular kind of insight to be able to see something most of us have so regularly missed.

This insight into the importance placed on masculinity in the Buddha's hagiography is then extended to the Buddha's disciples, to mo-

nastic discipline, to the medical literature, and eventually to the ideal layman and the vajrayanist practitioner. In other words, he takes his one formula and plugs it into a number of Buddhist scenarios, proving its efficiency time and again: Buddhist discourse repeatedly reveals a pervasive preoccupation with the masculinity of its representatives.

The ultimate question behind Powers' book is: Why is the tradition so concerned with the Buddha's (and by extension, all other male representatives') masculinity? What is at stake? On the one hand, Powers argues that the Buddha functions as a bridge between Brahma and Indra, between the brahmin and the *kṣatriya*, between intellectualism and the warrior spirit of India. He also argues that Buddhism developed in an environment in which inner qualities were understood to manifest physically, and therefore the Buddha's magnificence was expected to find expression in a magnificent (and male) form. His most interesting argument, however, connects this emphasis on masculinity with a fear of impotence: "because Buddhism valorizes celibacy, it must contend with critiques from the perspective of those who advocate masculine ideals of sexual performance and physical vigor, and this is one reason why its ideal figures are presented as sexually attractive and as stallions" (188). I would have liked to see Powers unpack this theory a bit more than he has, but raising it as a possible explanation will certainly spark important discussion in the field.

I could not help but be reminded of Liz Wilson's *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (1996) as I read through Powers' book. Wilson brought forward the argument that Buddhist discourse is particularly concerned with female bodies and the temptations they represent for monastic aspirants. Powers provides us with another piece of the puzzle – namely, that it is just as preoccupied with male bodies. Perhaps we are like the blind men and the elephant, always seeing only a part of the story, but never the story

in its entirety and at once. What is clear is that more work needs to be done in this area. Powers has opened the door to a new and exciting field of inquiry for Buddhist Studies; hopefully others will follow, thereby generating further questions, discussion, and insight into the elephant we always only partially see.