Journal of Buddhist Ethics
ISSN 1076-9005
http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics
Volume 33, 2026

Buddhism and the Senses: A Guide to the Good and Bad

Reviewed by Haolun Sun

Freie Universität Berlin
haolun.sun@fu-berlin.de

A Review of *Buddhism and the Senses: A Guide to the Good and Bad*

Haolun Sun[1]

Buddhism and the Senses: A Guide to the Good and Bad. Edited by Robert DeCaroli and Donald S. Lopez Jr. New York: Wisdom Publications, 2024, xviii+240 pages, ISBN 978-1-61429-890-8 (hardcover), $39.95; ISBN 978-1-61429-903-5 (ebook), $26.99.

Buddhism and the Senses: A Guide to the Good and Bad is the first Buddhist Studies book to systematically focus on sensory issues. Over the course of its ten chapters, this volume grounds the five human senses in the vibrant and diverse Buddhist landscapes across Asia, successfully bringing scholarly attention to an under-researched field. As the volume editors Robert DeCaroli and Donald S. Lopez Jr. point out, the research topic of sense experience has long remained marginal for scholars of Buddhism (16). Even this book may not have been possible without a timely exhibition project that raised sensory questions for Buddhist curation: *Encountering the Buddha: Art and Practice across Asia* at the National Museum of Asian Art.

The book thus starts with insights from the organizers of this exhibition. Chase F. Robinson states that the exhibition inspired curators to convene an academic conference on Buddhism and the senses, leading to the essays in this volume from ten prominent scholars (ix). Then, Debra Diamond reviews the exhibition on behalf of the curation team.

[1] Freie Universität Berlin. haolun.sun@fu-berlin.de.

Spanning various regions and periods, *Encountering the Buddha* emphasized the embeddedness of Buddhist material cultures in their specific contexts through a multisensory, immersive design. It used sound, video, installations that invited visitors' bodily engagement, and even darkness and shadows to purposefully unsettle the decontextualizing effects of visual priority in art museums (xii).

Correspondingly, contextualization becomes a key task throughout the book. The introduction by Robert DeCaroli and Donald S. Lopez Jr. provides a general overview of the senses in Buddhism. They address the whole sensorium before later chapters focus on each sensation separately. From the technical definitions in the Abhidharma to the more well-known narratives, rules, and practices across different Buddhist landscapes, DeCaroli and Lopez identify the binary opposition of "good" and "bad" as the fundamental and recurring theme regarding the senses in Buddhism (15). However, this bifurcation is full of tensions and is always case-specific. For instance, its simple association with another dualistic pair, delusion and enlightenment, can be ambiguous. Pleasant sensory experiences may lead to desire and attachment but can also result from devotion. Yet unpleasant experiences can be "good" for encouraging an escape from indulgence. One purpose of this volume is to therefore contextualize and nuance such ambiguity beyond the existing research trend that represses the senses and implicitly follows a not-unproblematic idealization of monastic codes (16).

Sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, in the order of the descending locations of sense organs in the body according to Abhidharma literature, get two articles each. The first part, sight, starts with Robert DeCaroli's examination of the Buddha's eyes in fourth-century South Asian images and details how the Mathurān-style large and widely opened eyes changed to partially closed with heavy eyelids, as typically seen in Gandhāra (28–29). With rich visual evidence, DeCaroli argues that this change was a reaction to the institutionalization of *darśana*—the devotional eye contact between worshippers and the embodied gods as im-

ages—in the royally-supported, temple-based Hinduism in the Gupta period. As a response, Buddhist images purposefully avoided eye contact to reconfirm *nirvāṇa* as "a permanent state" and the images' limited agency, two Buddhist consensuses at that time (35).

Broader tendencies behind this argument, such as monastics' control of public images, visual inducements to moral conduct, and flexible attitudes to imagery, are also illustrated in the following chapter by Melody Rod-ari on the moral economy of merit-making in Thai Buddhism. Rod-ari emphasizes that witnessing karma every day contributes to people's internalization of *Dharma* and their merited acts of *dāna* (44–45). Both positive visual effects, such as the legends of the sandalwood Buddha, and negative ones, like the hell scenes in the story of Phra Malai, are "good" encouragement of practicing *Dharma*.

For sound, Kurtis R. Schaeffer's chapter presents the electroacoustic work *Le Voyage* by the French composer Pierre Henry as an insightful adaptation, analysis, and interpretation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. As Schaeffer writes, *Le Voyage* illustrates the Buddhist idea of "bewilderment" (*'khrul pa*; *bhrānti*) by making audible *The Book*'s rich descriptions of sounds of the bardo, the intermediate state between death and rebirth. In the bardo, sounds are primary and mark reality itself, and its visual aspects, although highlighted in *The Book* as well, arise *through* sound. These sounds can lead to enlightenment, but the traveler in the *bardo* tends to feel confused and hostile about them due to their bad karma when living (67). *Le Voyage* not only uses specific sonic effects to convey the traveler's "bewilderment" that hinders liberation but is also considered by Schaeffer to embody "bewilderment" directly: its usage of acousmatic sounds purposely makes their sources unknown to listeners' experience, thus arousing reflections on aural experience as an "enigma" itself (84).

In the next chapter, Donald S. Lopez Jr. examines sound and music in Buddhist texts more extensively, mentioning themes like the Buddha's voice, the term "voice" (*ghoṣa*) in famous Buddhists' names, the

power of sound in mantras, and chanting in monastic codes. In the chapter's second part, Lopez turns to three Tibetan sūtras that highlight important ways we can understand sound in Buddhism and, in turn, understand Buddhism through sound. Lopez argues that, to belittle the earlier tradition, Mahāyāna texts may use both sounds and silence to let famous *arhats* "play the fool" (97). By contrast, records about specific sound-making objects can allow a nuanced observation of historical monastic life (102).

The two chapters on smell respectively focus on bad smells, by Lina Verchery in Chinese contexts, and good smells, by John S. Strong on the Buddha's fragrance. Verchery understands smell as cosmologically relational and social through the olfactory sense's liminality between "past and present, contact and distance, matter and immateriality" (109). In Chinese Buddhist understandings, a person's bad smell reflects immorality, especially meat-eating, "perhaps the most extreme" violence that turns another's subjectivity and smell into oneself (114). Meanwhile, smelling bad can attract other stinky beings like hungry ghosts and thus reproduce harmful relations. Bad smells can, however, be positive and can inspire insights into the nature of reality, as shown ethnographically by a lay Buddhist who became a vegetarian due to the same smell between meat foods and his deceased child during their autopsy (118).

In turn, Strong emphasizes "liminality" in another context: the Buddha's fragrance was prominent in his crucial life moments of transition, from his birth to his *parinirvāṇa* (127). The Buddha's good smell also reflects karma, or his "aromatic offerings" in earlier lifetimes (129). As a result, his fragrance is powerful enough to eliminate bad smells and remains permanent after death through and as relics. Such permanence is the basis for the placemaking of "aromatic arenas," where devotees and monastics make fragrant offerings to mark, update, and contact the Buddha's presence (134).

The chapters on taste dive deeply into the topic of food. James Robson's chapter mainly concerns bad tastes and disgust in Buddhism.

From the doctrinal perspective of greed and desire, disgust is positive and can be used as a reminder of one's rampant desire. Yet, it is also an unwelcome sign of contamination and can be viewed as "the decline of the Dharma" (151). Thus, monastics may still defend their pursuit of good flavors, and this is reflected by the rules on food quality in monastic codes. Nevertheless, the five pungent vegetables (*wǔxīn* or *wǔhūn*), including garlic, onions, and other alliums, are mainly seen as negative in East Asian traditions and monastically forbidden. Robson provides a helpful review of extant Chinese texts to show the long-standing interest in these vegetables. This opens further explorations into the circumvention of monastic codes and the "miraculous sacred food" which is consumed by the accomplished and transcends categories for normal food (159–160).

The next chapter by D. Max Moerman pays tribute to Sidney Mintz and discusses "sweetness and power" in Buddhist contexts (167). Moerman emphasizes sweetness, especially in metaphors like *amṛta* (translated as "sweet dew" in East Asia), as a description of the "supreme quality of the Buddhist teachings and the goal of Buddhist liberation" (169). This relates to the power of the Buddha (specifically his sense of taste) and the monastic *saṅgha* to transform the laity's food offerings into tasty, meritorious, and beneficial sustenance (172). Such power is documented across traditions. For example, from Thailand to China and Japan, rice porridge is valued as a symbol of the Buddha's enlightenment (173–174), and one may find monastic ritual mechanisms to turn the food of the living into edible offerings for the dead not only in Pāli contexts but also in the festivals, rituals, and paintings in East Asia (176–178).

The final section on touch includes two focused case studies. Bryan J. Cuevas analyzes and translates the Tibetan *dhāraṇī* scripture, the *Noble "Seven Zombies" Spell* (*'phags pa ro langs bdun pa zhes bya ba'i gzungs*; *saptavetāḍakadhāraṇī*), in which Ānanda was touched by zombies, became severely sick, and taught spells by the Buddha to relieve both himself

and future sufferers. Cuevas also articulates how the sense of touch was understood in the more general context of Buddhism and medicine, where "infection" and "contagion" can be carefully distinguished (185). Cuevas also takes up the perspective of Buddhist demonology to suggest that this scripture may call extra attention to how tantric rituals and manuals highlight touch as a method to revive corpses as harmful zombies (189).

Finally, Reiko Ohnuma's chapter explores sexual touch in the *Vinaya*. Ohnuma argues that although most rules are prohibitions, they can be read "in reverse" to analyze how redactors of the *Vinaya* perceive and understand sexual touch in the first place (209). *Vinaya* texts tend to exhaustively list specific sex-pleasure-inducing actions and quantify their degree of contact and desire through the language of measurement and geometry. Beyond the motivation of strict regulation that is clearly underlying these tendencies, Ohnuma further points out their formal parallel to the third-century *Kāma Sūtra*, a manual serving to *maximize* sexual pleasure (214; 218). She argues that "the celibate Buddhist monk" (*bhikṣu*) and "the wealthy urban householder" (*nāgaraka*), two opposing social categories emerging after the Vedic period, actually shared similar social status and symbol-value systems to develop parallel forms of "technologies of the self," although with very different goals (219).

Together, the ten articles show how the topic of Buddhism and the senses is one with huge research potential. It can accommodate the multilayered diversities within Buddhist Studies, as exemplified by this volume's inclusion of different Buddhist traditions, historical contexts, research methods, types of sources, units of analysis, and even ways of writing. Despite their diversity, all chapters echo one another to analyze and problematize the sensorial good-bad dualism highlighted by the volume editors, presenting its complexities, tensions, and even contradictions for each sense faculty. Beyond this task, the authors also locate numerous promising research directions for Buddhism and the senses in the future. For example, DeCaroli and Schaeffer turn our attention to the

underemphasized sensory dimensions of Buddhist artworks in both their original image traditions and contemporary multisensory artistic experiments. One could also follow Robson and Ohnuma, among others, to reconsider the sensory logic behind monastic codes and the effects of their institutionalization. The balance between these profound visions and the simple, albeit thought-provoking, motif of the good and the bad makes *Buddhism and the Senses* a reading material of moderate difficulty. As such, while invaluable to established scholars, it can also be used for teaching at the graduate level and for undergraduates with a strong background in Buddhism. It also comes with the unique advantage of being able to be creatively used with a sensory experience design in the classroom.

As this volume pioneers exploring the senses in Buddhist Studies, I consider the more critical questions arising from my reading as less the book's shortcomings than my humble attempts to complement its agenda-setting. First, separating each sensation produces a neat book structure, but I wonder if this undervalues the intersensory entanglement in Buddhism. For example, the chapters on sound, smell, and taste each partially analyze *gandharva*s, the "odor eaters" who live on smells and play beautiful music, but they do not provide a holistic portrait of *gandharva*s and their synesthetic dimensions. Another issue is that the mind, the sixth sense faculty in Buddhism, *remains almost untouched*. It is perhaps not unreasonable to exclude the mind from such an edited volume, for contextualizing the similarities, differences, and connections between the mind and the five physical sensations requires great effort and much more space. However, as a longer-term goal, future researchers should pay attention to the mind as a sensory organ in Buddhist scenarios and explore its relationship with the other sense faculties. Finally, since this book was inspired by the editors' participation in a modern exhibition project, I was expecting to see more phenomenological accounts from lived sensory experiences in a Buddhist temple, ritual, or museum. All of the articles deeply demonstrate the massive value of premodern sources in producing insights into the senses in Buddhism,

but it seems like a pity to see little mention of anthropological works already on this topic in contemporary contexts, such as the influential *Sensory Biographies: Lives and Deaths among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists* by Robert Desjarlais.

Of course, this is not to say there exists a "best" way to approach sensory experience. Instead, the academic inquiries into the senses are still ongoing and evolving, demanding us to stay open to broader interdisciplinary dialogues, methodological innovations, and public engagements. Overall, *Buddhism and the Senses* takes the lead in confirming the vast prospects of the intersections between Buddhist Studies and Sensory Studies. This book has laid a solid foundation for further research and will work as a powerful reference point for future possibilities.

Works Cited

Desjarlais, Robert R. *Sensory Biographies: Lives and Deaths Among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists*. University of California Press, 2003.