



Jacob N. Kinnard. *Imaging Wisdom: Seeing and Knowing in the Art of Indian Buddhism*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999, xi + 210 pages, ISBN: 0-7007-1083-3 (cloth), US \$55.00.

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A growing body of recent scholarship has highlighted the problematic character of earlier Euro-American scholarship on Buddhism. These critiques resonate with broad interpretive shifts within the field of religious studies generally and with a diverse set of theoretical issues that have occupied the attention of scholars in the humanities and social sciences for the past several decades, issues often grouped together under the rubrics of postmodernism and postcolonialism. In general, these critiques seek to uncover the cultural assumptions that have often unconsciously guided and limited the ways in which scholars have done their work in order to allow new kinds of scholarship to emerge.

Among the issues that have been brought to the fore within Buddhist studies is the logo-centric character of much scholarship on Buddhism. Logo-centrism here plays upon the multivocality of the Greek word *logos*, which can mean, among other things, both “word” and “reason,” and which, for Christians, came to be identified with Christ’s divinity and the collection of writings that testify to his significance. Put differently, this critique can be seen as simultaneously highlighting the ways in which Western scholarship on Buddhism has tended to rely primarily upon textual sources for representing Buddhism, has tended to highlight the rationality of Buddhism in contrast to traditions that are supposedly more “ritualistic,” and has unwittingly been

shaped by interpretive categories and research agendas that owe much to the history of Christian apologetics, missionary activity, and Western colonialism. Jacob Kinnard's *Imaging Wisdom* fits squarely within this new, more theoretically and culturally self-reflexive Buddhist scholarship, and as such it marks an important contribution both to Buddhist Studies and the study of religion.

Kinnard's book seeks to contribute both theoretically and substantively by calling attention to how scholars go about representing Buddhism and how Pāla-era Buddhists in India went about representing the Buddha and the ideal of wisdom that he embodied. As Kinnard notes on page one, "This is a book about Buddhist images, about why Buddhists at a particular time and in a particular place made images, about why these Buddhists looked at and venerated such images, and about what such Buddhists did with and thought about the images that they made. This is also a book about how we, as students and scholars of religion, deal with religious images; or, to be more precise, it is a book about how we have tended *not* to deal with images."

The book is organized in seven chapters. Chapter one sets the broad theoretical agenda of his study, which includes a critique of how Western scholarship has tended to represent religious images as either idols or symbols, as either ontologically linked to the religious figure that they portray or as symbolic representations that merely call to mind what they represent. In an effort to get beyond this simple dichotomy, Kinnard draws upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and in particular his notion of *habitus*, the "structuring structures" of a given society in the form of enduring dispositions that shape practices and representations in relatively uniform ways, yet which remain largely invisible to the social agents who are guided by them. This notion of *habitus* has the virtue of emphasizing the fluid and strategic character of the interaction of social agents even as it helps tease out the specific discourses and concrete material circumstances that shape actions in relatively predictable ways. For Kinnard, the appeal of this interpretive approach to Buddhist images is that it allows for a diversity of seemingly discordant discourses about the Buddha to operate simultaneously and it leaves open possibilities for ritual agents to reflect on their actions. As he puts it, "Practicing Buddhists are able to maintain *at once* that the Buddha is present in such things as relics, sculptures, and paintings, *and at the same time* able to hold the conflicting (and seemingly contradictory) view that it is only the emblem, or reminder, of the no-longer-present Buddha that they worship. And, what is more, they use sculptural images as a means of reflecting on the tensions between these two simultaneously held positions" (p. 11).

Chapter two provides an overview of how the issue of the Buddha's continued presence after his death in material objects such as relics and

images was addressed in Theravāda and Mahāyāna texts. Kinnard draws upon modern scholars of Buddhism, as well as Christian theological debates over icons, to illuminate tensions between doctrine and practice, tensions that he sees as “overlapping discourses that mutually inform one another.” Mahāyāna Buddhist sculptural images, he argues, can be seen as “in a kind of ‘ontological communion’ with the original Buddha in that the image at once heightens the reality of the *absence* (and therefore graphically embodies *śūnyatā*), while at the same time makes available his presence” (p. 42). Using Thomas Kasulis’ notion of “metapraxis,” he notes that Buddhist images served as “metapractical objects” that allowed Buddhists to work through incongruities and even contradictions between precept and practice by giving rise to reflection (p. 44).

Chapters three through six apply the theoretical foundation set out in the first two chapters to Buddhism in northeastern India during the Pāla dynasty of the eighth through the twelfth centuries. Kinnard is concerned here with what he calls “mainstream Mahāyāna,” defined by the *Prajñāpāramitā* textual genre and the ritual and artistic traditions associated with it. He is critical of the view that Pāla-era Buddhism was primarily defined by the influence of tantrism and the Vajrayāna, and maintains instead that the debate over the presence/absence of the Buddha found in the earlier Pāli textual tradition continued to define the conceptions of and responses to images during the Pāla period. Chapter four argues for the centrality of the notion of *prajñā* (“wisdom”) to early and Pāla-era Buddhism, and emphasizes the close connection between the wisdom that gave rise to the Buddha’s enlightenment and the value given to seeing the Buddha as a basis for developing wisdom. Chapter five surveys the devotional shift from relics to the text of the *Prajñāpāramitā* advocated in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, clarifies the rationale for this shift, and examines images of three female embodiments of *prajñā*. Regarding these images, Kinnard concludes: “not only do such images *emphasize prajñā*, but they are also part of an ongoing discourse—a metapractical discourse—about the efficacy of this *prajñā* and the dual importance of the relationship between both *vision* and *wisdom*: to *see* the book is to *know* the book, just as the *vision* of the Buddha could lead to the *understanding* of the *dharma*.” (p. 146). Chapter six examines what Kinnard calls an “iconographic explosion” of books across northeastern India beginning in the tenth century, a phenomenon in which the author sees the full amalgamation of the Buddha’s *rūpa*- and *dharmakāyas*. In this context the book no longer contains the *Dharma*; it is its embodiment, and seeing and venerating the physical book become a central focus of practice, activities that themselves receive sculptural representation. Again, such representations are not simply guides to action, but

also provide the occasion for thought about how such action leads to the realization of wisdom.

Chapter seven provides a brief assessment of the argument advanced in the earlier chapters. Kinnard notes that our knowledge of the actual mechanisms for the production and control of Buddhist images during the Pāla period is quite limited, and suggests that further research may help to illuminate how these images actually functioned in specific ritual settings. In keeping with an interpretive model that stresses the open-endedness of social process, he emphasizes that changing social contexts and new audiences would necessarily have enabled new interpretations of these images to emerge. The book concludes with an extensive bibliography and an index, and includes 16 black and white photographs of images discussed in the text.

Kinnard's *Imaging Wisdom* provides a very clearly and elegantly written introduction to current scholarly debates over the role of physical representations of the Buddha and their relation to Buddhist practice. He convincingly demonstrates what a theoretically informed examination of Pāla-era Buddhist images can contribute to the ongoing activity of reimagining Indian Buddhism and religion more generally. I find his use of recent work in ritual studies and, in particular, his use of Bourdieu very illuminating. If his work is to be faulted, it is in its failure to go far enough in applying the insights that ritual studies offers. In the absence of detailed archeological information about the physical configuration of ritual sites and specific historical evidence for understanding the social institutions that supported them, one is left with rather broad generalizations about the roles that images played in Buddhist communities. In particular, I find that his repeated emphasis on the role of images in giving rise to thought and his stress on the primacy of the Buddha's absence in accordance with the doctrine of *śūnyatā* tend to obscure his theoretical position that the *habitus* of Pāla Buddhism was complex and allowed for significant contestation. It is not clear to me, for example, that ritual practices centered on physical representations of the Buddha should be seen as effectively controlled by the doctrinal assertion of the Buddha's absence. For example, Kinnard tends to conflate the dynamic of presence/absence with that of proximity/distance. The former, I would argue, lends itself to a kind of philosophizing that the latter does not. A sense of physical distance from a material representation of the Buddha is not equivalent to a doctrinal assertion that ultimately the Buddha is beyond material form. It can be argued, moreover, that one of the salient features of ritual performance is precisely that it forestalls thought, at least while the agent is engaged in performing the ritual. Kinnard's theoretical orientation would tend to highlight these sorts of differences, but his analysis of the function of Pāla-period Buddhist images tends, as I read it,

to emphasize the hegemony of intellectual activity. These criticisms do not, however, diminish the study's many substantial contributions. I highly recommend this book to scholars and advanced students in Buddhist Studies and the study of religion.