

BOOK REVIEWS

Sexuality and Paradox: A Panel Review of Bernard Faure's *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998. 338 pages. Hardcover: \$59.50; paperback: \$18.95.

For the Buddhism Section of the American Academy of Religions, Western Region's 1999 annual conference at the University of San Francisco, a book review panel entitled "Sexuality and Paradox: Buddhist Norms and Practices" was conducted. The discussion was of Bernard Faure's *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality* (Princeton University Press, 1998). The panel participants included Jennifer Dumpert, Bruce Williams, Greg Petropoulos, John Thompson, and Joseph Thometz. Bernard Faure, the author, responded to the discussion. The panel was organized and moderated by Richard K. Payne. The following are written versions of the discussants' comments.

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The Absence of Models for Female Buddhists

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The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality contains an enormous amount of information. It approaches its topic in a style reminiscent of Wendy Doniger's *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*. To navigate texts such as these, one needs a strategy or a particular subject for which one is searching. Reading a text as replete with stories, facts, dates, and ideas as this book without some idea of what one is reading for could lead the reader to feel afloat in a sea of information. My own work focuses on women in modern American Buddhism, and therefore I read the book with that subject in mind. My hope was to gather useful, straightforward information. This was frustrated, however, by Faure's postmodern tendency to not draw clear

conclusions and to perpetually pull the rug out from under the implications of his own evidence. Two postmodern concepts best describe what characterizes my frustration in my particular search: deferral and absence.

Deferral is rooted in the attempt to demonstrate that language is inadequate for truly stating what one means. Thus, some postmodern writers will stop short of clear and concrete conclusions. Instead, evidence that may point to a conclusion will be given, and the reader is left to surmise what it is that the evidence points to.

The concept of absence refers to the importance of what is left unsaid. Amongst others, Foucault, whose work Faure depends on in *The Red Thread*, suggests that absence implies as much as presence. There is a relation between what is concealed and what is made evident, and attention to that relation reveals much about both. For example, the absence of women from history does not merely fail to address women in history, it also implies that women's modes of being in history are of so little importance that they can be passed over in silence.

Faure points out from the outset of the book that woman will be "conspicuously absent" from this text, appearing "inasmuch as she is an element of the Buddhist discourse on sexuality" (p. 14). Instead, Faure promises that gender issues will be the focus of a second volume, to be entitled *Purity and Gender*.

Another issue highlighted by my particular reading of the book involves the nature of desire. I infer from the text that desire in Buddhist history is, as in western history, characterized as male. Numerous instances are given of male desire: Faure points out that "male love" is love of men for men, while "female love" is love of men for women (pp. 233–234). He offers a quotation which clearly states that women are not be allowed into temples because "they arouse deep passion in men's hearts" (p. 170). He tells the story of Eshun (the sister, we are told, of the Zen priest Emyo: defined in terms of men even in the way she is identified) who was considered too attractive to be allowed to enter the Buddhist order and who therefore disfigured herself (p. 20). He clearly states that "the woman—nun or laywoman—remains an object of desire for the monk" (p. 88).

Faure says that women are seen as "Possessed by an inclination to lust that is difficult to control" which makes them "even more dangerous" (p. 88). Further, he lists numerous rules pertaining to the conduct of nuns in relation with other nuns that are clearly meant to discourage sex among women (p. 82). Despite this, he fails to consider female desire in depth. While there are brief references to lesbian sex (women as that which inspires desire, even among other women), Faure points out that this was "at best perceived as a poor imitation of heterosexual relations."

Further, “Sexual relations between women are [considered] . . . insignificant and can be formulated only through male language” (pp. 81–82). Though his evidence produces implications about desire as male and about the double standard applied to gender in the realm of sexuality, I find myself wishing that Faure commented more on female desire, if only to concretely point out some of the implications of its absence from Buddhist literature.

Value judgments about male desire versus female desire can also be implied from the text. There are numerous examples of “the motif of the female bodhisattva who . . . use sexuality to convert men” (p. 130).

Similarly, we are told how the Buddha convinces his half-brother Nanda to stay in the Buddhist order. First, the Buddha shows him that his beautiful bride-to-be, for whom Nanda was pining, was closer in appearance to the ugliest of beings (a dead and disfigured she-monkey) than to a celestial nymph. Second, he promises Nanda one of the nymphs if he remains in the order. Nanda, who stays, finally realizes “the vanity of all desires and the emptiness of beauty” (p. 16). Leaving aside any judgments about the shallowness of a character whose basis for marriage seems to rest solely in the appearance of the bride, these instances clearly demonstrate that men can achieve realization via their desire for women. Furthermore, in the motif of the bodhisattva who converts men via sex or promises of sex (Guanyin, p. 118; Kokuzo, p. 120), and such figures as the “peerless courtesan” Vasumitra “who frees men by fulfilling their carnal desire” (p. 121), we see female characters helping male characters achieve realization by fulfilling male desire.

In contrast, we are given the story of the courtesan Mātaṅga, whose attempt to seduce Ānanda is foiled when Ānanda declares “If you want to become my wife, become a nun” (p. 19). Cited as a “moral victory” (p. 19) for Ānanda, this story demonstrates that men help women along the path by foiling their desires. Although rarely mentioned, women’s desire—unlike men’s—clearly constitutes an obstacle that does nobody any good. Yet, while he does make this conclusion via the evidence he offers, Faure fails to resolve the issue with clear commentary. Instead, a reader with my topic in mind is left with a large array of facts and stories that make unpleasant implications but which do not necessarily offer anything new or useful. We are all aware of these kinds of inequities in the realm of sexuality. Rather than having them pointed out, I want to know more about what their existence means.

Addressing desire from the male standpoint is familiar enough. Yet, Faure’s frequent comments on the “shameful inequity” (p. 83) between genders demonstrate that he is clearly aware of the fact that addressing things from women’s perspective would tell a different story. He says, for example, “one could assume that a greater emphasis on women’s viewpoint would bring about some significant change regarding the

classical schema of opposition or reversal between prohibition and transgression . . .” (p. 282). He also is clearly cognizant that this book has looked at sexuality in the traditional way, i.e., from men’s viewpoint. “We can suspect that this schema—reproduced in the present book—is one of the effects of the masculine ideology which has until now predominated in Buddhism” (p. 282). Regardless of his obvious and seemingly feminist-friendly opinions about the way women are viewed in Buddhist history, he has allowed women to remain largely absent in this work, deferring the topic to a future book. Admitting that he has reproduced the norm when examining sexuality is not enough to make that reproduction acceptable. Rather, his awareness of this itself calls for more explicit critical commentary on the sexual norms of the Buddhist tradition throughout the book.

I was frustrated by the absence of women, and by Faure’s frequent unwillingness to draw conclusions from his wealth of evidence. However, I did find some very useful material for women practicing Buddhism in the West. My own work focuses on the effort by American women (and men) to envision, or to revision, a Buddhist history which is “usable for women” (an effort demonstrated, for example, by the recent profusion of books on the topic of women and Buddhism). I have, for example, criticized the tendency to focus on women who gain historical prominence by achieving in male roles. Revising Buddhist history by focusing on women who defeated men in dharma battle, or who managed to become great teachers, simply reproduces current values. A history that implies that women who count were, and therefore are, those who bested men in men’s terms is at best a compensatory history. Despite giving women a place in history and providing feminine role models, such compensation cannot fully succeed. However many women can be discovered who could do what a man did as well as a man, there will always be an overwhelming majority of men in those roles, which will therefore continue to be seen as male roles. Instead, I suggest redefining historical values, focusing on and valorizing the roles women did play. Many modern authors of books about women and Buddhism fail to offer pragmatically useful examples of how this historical revaluation might be constructed. Faure, however, does consider the figure of the courtesan, not just from a male standpoint as in the “role of the evil temptress” (p. 131), i.e., desirable yet repugnant, but also from a standpoint potentially inhabitable by women:

The courtesan is also a woman who, in a sense, has “left the world” and can see through its vanity. She has awakened to the (conventional) truth, because she can see behind appearances, through the veil of illusion. She is no longer bound by ordinary social ties and conventional norms, because she can see through men’s games. She

is not impressed by their social distinctions—priests, commoners, or nobility, all are the same to her—and she can, like a true teacher, manipulate them through their own “skillful means” (p. 131).

Faure soon shifts back into the male viewpoint, however, combining this observation with the motif of the bodhisattvas who help men attain realization by appearing to them as courtesans who seduce men, or at least promise to. He suggests that “such motifs could be read as a legitimization of female transgression . . . and be used by women to justify their own freedom.” Nonetheless, he goes on to state that “the courtesan is, to some extent, recognized as a potential bodhisattva” (p. 136), putting the observation again in terms of the salvation of men. Thus, not only is female desire obscured, but female models are defined in terms of the salvation of men.

Context and Perspective

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This is an important book by an influential scholar of Buddhist Studies. It will be widely read and should be widely read. This will be due not only to the timeliness and interest of the book’s subject matter, but also because the book is quite well written. It is, in fact, a remarkably good read. This may embarrass some scholars who feel that important works of scholarship should not be so much fun to read; it may also embarrass others who might wish they could write as well as Prof. Faure. That the book is well written may also be one of its pitfalls: the reader may often read quickly over passages that deserve more careful attention.

Let me begin my marginal comments with a brief quotation from the “Introduction”:

This work is primarily a study in collective representations, focusing on their inherent dynamics and their social inscription. In order to reveal enduring common (sometimes even cross-cultural) structures, I have wandered freely across geographical borders and historical periods—much to the dismay of some of my historian friends (p. 11).

I am neither a historian nor am I dismayed. Yet as one who has spent much of his time dealing with the negotiated (and often highly local)