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Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice

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Review of *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice*

Jason A. Carbine *

Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice. Ian Harris.
Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005, xvi + 352
pages, ISBN: 0-8248-2765-1, US \$62.00.

This extremely impressive work has been reviewed several times. Ashley Thompson's discussion in *Buddhist Studies Review* (24, 2 [2007]: 250-56) includes a metaphor for Harris's work that is worth restating here. In synthesizing a truly massive array of materials, Harris provides "a sort of google-earth view of Buddhism in Cambodia, from the smallest details to the biggest picture." Indeed, after a preface that surveys available secondary source material, Harris navigates for his readers the histories and practices of Cambodian Buddhism from the earliest Indic arrivals up through the present day. Harris has been praised (and rightly so) for his success in distilling work in French (especially that of François Bizot on esoteric Buddhist trends) and making it accessible to an English speaking audience, as well as for his success in shedding light on the relations between Buddhism and the traumas of the colonial and post-colonial periods. Thompson herself implies that not since Adhémard Leclère's

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pioneering work *Le Bouddhisme au Cambodge* in 1899 has a scholar attempted such a daunting work concerning Cambodian Buddhism.

Many conceptual threads run throughout Harris's volume. Readers hoping for a clear unifying thesis, theoretical point, or interpretive thread to help guide their efforts may come away from the volume disappointed and at times confused amid the sea of information. Nonetheless, several topics addressed in the volume may be of considerable relevance to those studying Buddhist social ethics.

For example, throughout his text, Harris addresses themes and practices used for explicitly socio-political purposes. In that vein, he discusses a form of Buddhist socialism that developed under Sihanouk and his political movement, the People's Socialist Community (Sangkum Reastr Riyum) (see chapter 6). This type of Buddhist socialism linked "putatively traditional Khmer values" with "a full set of Buddhist principles" (146). Merit making became a basis for the redistribution wealth. Karma became a way of explaining why "natural leaders" were the rich and powerful, and thus also for explaining widespread social and economic inequity. Basic advice attributed to the Buddha became a foundation for articulating a vision of internal social cohesion as well as foreign policy. Activities or developments that contravened these visions were the machinations of Māra, "the Buddhist embodiment of evil." Prince Vessantara, that morally problematic paragon who gave away his children and wife so he could perfect his generosity and move ahead on the path to liberation, was cast as something of a Buddhist Karl Marx (147). Even the ancient Indian monarch Asoka had an ideological role to play, due to his insistence on religious tolerance (148). In the midst of drawing attention to these and other points, Harris informs us that Sihanouk

vigorously rejected the charge that [his political philosophy] was in any way influenced by parallel developments in Burma, where

a Burmese Way to Socialism had been adopted by the government in the early 1960s in what turned out to be a rather ineffective response to the twin challenges of ethnic conflict and communist insurgency (148).

Equally importantly, Harris implies that despite such denial there were formal and informal exchanges between the two countries that could have influenced Buddhist-Marxist developments in Cambodia, and he includes in his assessment a comparative point that both the Cambodian and Burmese forms of socialism constituted a type of “meditation on a social theme” (149). This comparative point appears only to scratch the surface of a possibly more sophisticated set of comparisons and contrasts, especially when one considers Burmese attempts, for example, to synthesize Buddhist Abhidhamma and “Marxist Abhidhamma” (see Sarkisyanz 1965), an attempt echoed by Bizot himself during his own imprisonment (187).

Harris pursues these kinds of analyses at various places in his text. In another example, he explores evidence (e.g., concerning ascetic denial) that suggests the role of a distinctive “crypto-monastic arrangement” in the “Khmer Rouge experiment” (183). He draws attention to the fact that the Khmer Rouge used *paṭiccasamuppāda* (“dependent origination”) to translate “dialectical materialism” (185), and in a note (288, no. 78) refers readers to other such terminology (e.g., *marga* for “policy line”) as well as scholarly writing on the terms. And, given the gruesome developments under the Khmer Rouge, I found myself particularly struck by a comparison made in one document between the structure of a *stūpa* (a monument that houses relics or other sacred objects) and the country’s population: “the progressive masses constitute the base, the core organization the bell, and the party members the tip” (185, citing Communist Part of Kampuchea Central Committee, 1978).

Although a leading reference resource for Buddhist history and practice in Cambodia, Harris's text is not without room for improvement, especially considering its possible utility outside the field of Buddhist studies. The index could be more thorough. Buddhist buzzwords (e.g., Śrāvakayāna and Theravāda) are sometimes used without precision. Transliterations of some words are inconsistent. Some of Harris's arguments seem overly contrived given the available evidence (e.g., his ideas about a re-created "pure land" with "the phantom city of Phnom Penh at its heart" [185]). And, as pointed out in another review, the photo on the cover the book—a damaged and decaying statue of an emaciated Buddha—is never explained to the reader (i.e., its history, who uses it, and so on). The photograph is very provocative given the traumas of Cambodia's recent history, but it is as if it merely functions as something of a metaphoric pointer to an absent thesis running throughout the book as a whole. Does the photograph represent the claim that Buddhism is a "total fact" and that "Buddhists are people never outside history" (188)? Or that "Buddhism can survive even when its institutional forms have been destroyed" (189)? Given the care with which Harris pursued his subject matter, it would be fantastic to hear directly from him more about the photograph and whether he (or the press) specifically intended a connection between it and the many threads in his text. This issue is not of trifling significance, especially given that images can be extremely powerful devices for prompting ethical reflection—reflection not only on one's own moral positions but on those of others.

These relatively minor criticisms aside, readers approaching Harris's work with patience and interest will be more than rewarded for their efforts. The work is a necessary starting point for anyone seriously interested in Cambodian Buddhism, and clearly is also an extremely valuable resource for those exploring Buddhism in other parts of Southeast Asia and beyond. It is, in fact, indispensable for anyone

studying the Buddhist cultures of South and Southeast Asia and, even more importantly, for anyone studying the range of Buddhist-related moral positions articulated within those cultures, even when one may himself or herself find them deeply problematic.