

Stephen F. Teiser. *Reinventing the Wheel: Paintings of Rebirth in Medieval Buddhist Temples.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007. xv + 319 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-295-98649-4.



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Stephen Teiser's new book, *Reinventing the Wheel*, examines representations of the wheel of rebirth as a lived religion of the past, making ample use of illustrations. The wheel of rebirth is a unique iconography in Buddhist art that visually communicates Buddhist cosmology, including the realms of reincarnation, causality, and salvation, in the configuration of a circular diagram. This wheel-shaped diagram is found throughout the Asian Buddhist world.

While most studies on Asian Buddhism tend to focus exclusively on either texts, practices, or visual culture, Teiser's book skillfully treats all three, and examines them through the lenses of Buddhology, sociology, and art history. This book stands at the forefront of the trends of increasing interest in ritual practice and interdisciplinary studies over the last two decades. In this book, Teiser studies images from India, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Tibet, and China. Furthermore, he examines the notion of the wheel of rebirth at the level of specific geographical sites, thus transcending generic cultural and regional concepts. Teiser shows us how meanings of the wheel were engen-

dered in the performative settings at each particular site.

In chapter 1, Teiser analyzes the iconography of the wheel, its different variations, and its textual basis. According to the *vinaya* (monastic rules) of the M^hlasarvâstivâda school, a wheel of rebirth should be painted on a temple's porch, and monks are instructed to use it in order to explain karmic retribution and other Buddhist teachings to the public. Rather than using texts to explain visual representations, as is the practice of art historians, or conceiving of Buddhist ideas as bound to textual embodiment, as Buddhologists sometimes assume, in this study Teiser aims to "imagine social action" through both visual and written evidence (p. 41). Traditionally, pan-Asian iconographies and Buddhist ideas have usually been studied in the paradigm of transmission. However, Teiser instead introduces the notion of "discursive practice," that is, how "the metaphor of the wheel was interpreted in different places" with their specific patrons and viewers (pp. 41-42). He seeks "the meaning of any local example of the wheel in how it combines a reinterpretation of the canon-

cal possibilities with the site-specific construal of meaning and the juggling of political forces" (p. 49).

Chapter 2 focuses on the canonical account of the wheel of rebirth in the *M?lasarvâstiv?din vinaya*. In the study of Buddhist images, scholars usually select a minimum-length passage from a text that is deemed necessary for interpretation. Here, not only does Teiser analyze the text in great detail, he also pays attention to the social history of the *vinaya*. In addition, he examines whether the *vinaya* was available at places where images of the wheel were found, the relationship between the description of the wheel and other stories found in the same section of the *vinaya*, and the possible sectarian affiliation with the *M?lasarvâstiv?da* school. Teiser's compelling study rests solidly upon both his mastery of texts and his thorough understanding of Buddhist schools and *vinaya* texts. However, a more detailed discussion on sectarian affiliations would have been welcome.[1]

Chapters 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9 are dedicated to examination of individual representations of the wheel from specific sites, of which examples are presented below. Chapters 4 and 5 raise different issues which I leave for a separate discussion.

In the sections on individual images, Teiser works with a wide variety of textual sources, especially inscriptions. Recently, scholars have become increasingly aware of the necessity of studying Buddhist images in their original context and this book is an excellent example of this contextualized approach. Teiser places emphasis on locating the image: physically, in the iconographic plan of the temple/cave; historically, in the background of patronage; and functionally, in the experience of the viewers. Chapter 3 is devoted to the earliest extant example of the wheel in Ajanta Cave 17 (fifth century), India. Chapter 7 studies the depiction of the wheel in a tenth-century cave temple at Yulin, China. Chapter 8 discusses the image of the wheel in the eleventh-century Tibetan esoter-

ic temple, Tabo. Since all three sites were patronized by local ruling families, Teiser concludes that the three paintings would have been accessible only to the family members of the patron and a small group of monks.

Therefore these wheel images did not serve as public institutions, as instructed in canonical texts. Teiser proposes that the three wheel paintings, all located at the beginning of the iconographic plans of the sites, functioned to lead to and prepare the viewer for the main images, i.e., a Buddha image in Ajanta, paradise scenes in Yulin, and a *tantric mandala* in Tabo. Only the wheel image at Baodingshan (thirteenth century) in Sichuan Province, China, discussed in chapter 9, is accessible to the public. The site was constructed under the direction of a local religious impresario. A native saint figure is situated in the center of the wheel. In terms of the wheel images in Kuntura Cave 75, Kucha, in present-day Xinjiang Province, China, discussed in chapter 6, Teiser proposes that "the commissioners sponsored the cave in order to memorialize the monk (depicted on the main wall) and his specialty of meditation" (p. 162). He also suggests that the paintings of the wheel are associated with meditation in this area and functioned as visual aids in monastic education (p. 161).[2]

Chapters 4 and 5 stand out from the rest of the chapters mentioned above, all of which study images of the wheel at specific sites. Chapter 4 studies the narrative depiction of King Rudraya's painting, which is a portrait of the Buddha inscribed in writing with the Three Refuges, the Five P recepts, and the Twelve Conditions of Dependent Origination. The major literary sources for the wheel of rebirth, the *M?lasarvâstiv?din vinaya* and the *Divyâvad?na*, also contain another tale involving a painting related to the Twelve Conditions. Narrative depictions of this story appear in Kizil Cave 83 (fifth century, Kucha),[3] Barabudur (ninth century, Java), and more recent Tibetan *thankas*. Teiser uses this example to

demonstrate "the variety and efficacious nature of didactic paintings throughout the early medieval world" (p. 104).

Teiser suggests in chapter 5 a hypothetical study of paintings of the *sa?sa?racakra* in temples as they might have been painted in Tang Dynasty (618-907) China. Here Teiser searches for clues within a wide variety of sources: the iconography of the so-called cosmological Buddha (a type of Buddha image in which the Buddhist world system is depicted inside his body);[4] Daoxuan's (596-667) imaginary ground plan of the Jetavana monastery in ?r?vast?; and architectural elements in paintings of paradise scenes from Dunhuang. As these subjects indicate, none of them offer direct evidence for Tang temples. Teiser concludes that paintings of the wheel were "probably painted in walkways or cloisters in the outer precincts" in Tang metropolitan temples (p. 145). In the overall iconographic program of a temple, Teiser is probably correct to locate the wheel in the entrance and precinct areas. However, the hierarchy of the iconographic plan in a temple is multivalent. For example, the four Heavenly Kings, as protective deities, are usually located in the gatehouse. Nevertheless, it would not be surprising if they appeared again at the corners on the central altar in the main hall. In addition, I have seen an image of the six paths of rebirth deriving from the character of *xin*, or "mind," painted on the wall inside the main hall of the Yong'an Temple in Hunyuan, Shanxi.[5] Although this section demonstrates Teiser's wide-ranging knowledge in the field of art history, the book would be more coherent without the problematic assessments made here.

From the perspective of Teiser's concerns about "canonical vs. local," this study appears to be successful. However, I would like to ask further, what exactly are the differences among these representations of the *sa?sa?racakra*? Are they just variations, as it is vaguely suggested in this book? For example, in the descriptions of the

M?lasarvâstiv?da *vinaya*, a moon symbolizing *nirv??a* is depicted outside the wheel. Here, one's own *nirv??a* is perceived as the method of salvation from *sa?sa?ra*. Such emphasis is consistent with H?nay?na beliefs. As Teiser is also aware, in later Tibetan paintings, Amit?bha's paradise is often added into the iconography, occasionally along with other Buddha and bodhisattva figures. In Japanese paintings, the Buddha figure in the center is usually Amit?bha (p. 246). These new elements are derived from the Mah?y?na approach to salvation. In Tibetan paintings, a transformation-Buddha (or transformation-bodhisattva) is usually shown in each realm of rebirth yet this is also absent in the original M?lasarvâstiv?da text. Perceiving the Buddha via a multi-body concept is another fundamental development in Mah?y?na Buddhism. The wheel from Baodingshan and the "Illustration of the Ten Realms of Mind Contemplation" in Japanese Buddhist art express the idea that existence in *sa?sa?ra* is no different from the mind. This notion marks a significant stage in the history of Buddhist teachings. With all of these remarkable changes in the iconography of the wheel of rebirth, how much can we rely on the political force from local patrons to explain the meaning of these images?

One of the major objectives of this study is to examine who were supposed to see these images and their actual function in relation to these visitors. In the construction of Buddhist temples, rulers at various levels, state or local, have always been important patrons. Teiser concludes that paintings in temples, such as Tabo, and caves, such as Ajanta Cave 17, were only available to the patron's family and a few select monks. My second question is, can we assume that temples (not just caves) throughout the Buddhist world are all private spaces available only to their patrons, and not open to public? More evidence is needed here in order to support his argument.[6]

Images of the *sa?sa?racakra* have not raised major interest until recently. Monika Zin and Di-

eter Schlingloff have also published a book on the subject, *Saṃsāracakra: Das Rad der Wiedergeburt in der indischen Überlieferung* (2007). Thanks to these studies, representations of the wheel throughout Asia are now becoming better understood. This book is innovative in the way that it studies Buddhist images as part of social and ritual practice as well as in how it approaches religious practice at the local level. Teiser's study is informed by the best of contemporary methodology, which is eloquently expressed through his lucid writing. Therefore, it will not only appeal to scholars, but to anyone interested in Buddhist culture. Any serious student in Buddhism-related fields cannot afford to neglect this study. Because of the wide coverage, this book can also serve as a reading for a broad range of courses in Asian studies, from college lectures to graduate seminars.

Notes

[1]. Teiser dedicates one paragraph to the subject of sectarian affiliation, in which he recognizes that the Sarvâstivâdin/ Mâlasarvâstivâdin "theory about personal continuity from one rebirth to the next" was "perfectly consistent with the school's interest in the wheel of life and death" (p. 75). Since all Buddhist schools believe in rebirth and causality, one wonders how the Sarvâstivâdins might have differed on these questions. Further issues of exploration also arise from this topic. For example, Sarvâstivâdins maintain that the basic entities, *dharmas*, always exist through the past, present, and future whereas the Sthaviras and Sautrantikas are inclined more towards the doctrine of transience. (Shwe Zan Aung and C.A. F. Rhys Davids, *Points of Controversy, Being a Translation of the Kathavatthu* [London: Pali Text Society, 1915], 87-88). This position determines the Sarvâstivâdins' emphasis on the *karmic* relationship between cause and effect, which explains the connection between the past and future. The Sarvâstivâdins further developed a very complex system of the Six Causes (*hetu*), the Four Condi-

tions (*pratyaya*), and the Five Effects (*phala*) to explain the workings of causality in their *Abhidharma*. With respect to the function of the chain of causality, phenomenal events were analyzed in terms of interactions among infinitesimal *dharma*s (David Bastow, "The Mahāvibhanga Arguments for Sarvāstivāda," *Philosophy East & West* 44 [July 1994]: 489-500.) The whole theory of causality was so crucial and unique to the Sarvāstivāda that this school was also called the "Hetuvadin," or the causalists. (Vasumitra, *Samayabhedoparacanacakra* T 2033.49.22c.) In short, the design of the *saṃsāracakra* diagram was consistent with the fundamental doctrine, near-scientific attitude, and the strong interest in causation of this particular school.

[2]. From what is known about the cave, Teiser's identification has to be considered speculation. I have doubts about his argument on the identity of the main monk-like figure and the function of the cave.

[3]. I am not convinced by Teiser's identification of the Kizil painting. Without solid proof or exclusive identifiable attributes, perhaps, the subject of this painting is better left to remain uncertain. If Teiser had left this out, it would not have undermined his major arguments.

[4]. In his discussion of the cosmological Buddha, Teiser basically follows Angela Howard's identification (Angela Falco Howard, *The Imagery of the Cosmological Buddha* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986]). However, cosmological Buddha is not a traditional Buddhist term, but is instead Howard's creation. Since Howard's study, three images with this same iconography but inscribed as Vairocana Buddha have been published.

[5]. The temple was built in the Jin Dynasty (1115-1234) and was remodeled many times. The precise date of the mural is unknown. As with those of many other small temples from the later periods in China, the paintings in this temple have not been published.

[6]. Zhang Yanyuan (815-76) in his *Lidai minghua ji* discusses the appreciation for the paintings in temples located in the two Tang capitals among the public. Many of these temples were patronized by royal members, yet there is no evidence in his book that shows that access to those temples was reserved only for the patron's family. In addition, temples in Thailand can provide living examples. While the temple inside the palace is probably a private space of the king, other temples patronized by kings in the past are open to all even today.

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