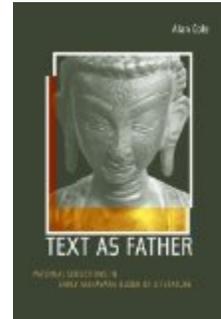


Alan Cole. *Text as Father: Paternal Seductions in Early Mahayana Buddhist Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xiii + 356 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-24276-0.

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## Seductive Fathers and Wily Rhetoric: Literary Persuasion in Alan Cole's *Text as Father*

The standard way of analyzing Mahāyāna texts has been, until quite recently, to focus on their doctrines and philosophical components almost exclusively, seeing the ample narrative, visionary, and literary elements as mere furniture. Alan Cole's book, *Text as Father: Paternal Seductions in Early Mahāyāna Buddhist Literature*, is one among a number of recent works that move away from this focus to issues that may at first glance seem peripheral, but that provide historians of religion essential clues to how these texts functioned for their intended audience.

In *Text as Father*, Cole examines four familiar Mahāyāna sūtras—the *Lotus*, *Diamond*, *Tathāgata-garbha*, and *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*—treating them not as gems of philosophical or mystical truths nestled in gauzy wrappings of irrelevant narrative, metaphor, and symbolism, but as stories that introduce new ways of being Buddhist that are centered on the authority of these texts themselves. The narrative elements, symbols, and literary devices are, according to Cole, essential to the texts' meaning and function. They create “images of authority” and legitimacy that locate the essential truth of the dharma in these new sūtras themselves rather than in received tradition. The most important device for constructing this authority, claims Cole, is the recurring image of paternal figures—usually the Buddha himself—who “speak to the legitimacy of the textual medium that contains them and, within this circle of self-confirmation, draw the reader into complex realignments with the Buddhist tradition and prior representation of truth and authority” (p. 1). Cole locates this trope of fatherhood

within a wider sphere of antagonism between the early Mahāyāna movement and the more orthodox tradition, and within the context of the emerging movement's attempts to supersede that orthodoxy.

In his detailed close readings of these sūtras, Cole lingers on various techniques by which they authorize and legitimize themselves, “seducing” readers into a new way of construing the Buddha and his relationship to them. In Cole's hands, these texts become not repositories of wisdom but “wily” and “clever” tools by which promulgators of new iterations of the dharma attempted to assert the emerging Mahāyāna tradition's authority. These texts seduce readers, especially “Hīnayānist,” into seeing themselves in the Mahāyāna “plot” that casts the Buddha as father and Hīnayāna readers as errant sons who fail to recognize their sonship. Cole, therefore, takes these works seriously as texts, not only in applying to them methods of literary criticism, but also in addressing the status Mahāyāna texts claimed for themselves as unique and perfect embodiments of the dharma—and this not only in terms of their content, but also their physical presence as artifacts.

We can imagine how a text like the *Lotus* would be easy quarry for Cole's hunting for hyperbolic claims of authority, images of fathers and sons, polemics against non-Mahāyāna schools, and strategies of legitimation. He has to stretch a bit to make the same argument for the sparser *Diamond Sūtra*, but his treatment of this text demonstrates the far-reaching nature of his claims. Contrary to most interpretations of Prajñāpāramitā dialectic

tics, Cole insists that this *s? tra* is, like the other texts he examines, “dedicated to producing closure” (p. 163) through a “rhetoric of authority-and-presence-through-negation” (p. 165). In Cole’s hands, the *Diamond S? tra*’s multiple negations amount neither to a philosophical doctrine of anti-essentialism, a deconstruction of personal identity, a free-wheeling rejection of authority, nor a textual meditation designed to produce a mystical apprehension beyond language. Rather, they establish a new kind of personal (Buddhist) identity and a novel modality of paternal authority, cleverly establishing a kind of metaphysics of presence that strives to fashion unassailable authority for itself. The text, he insists, “is not merely an inert container or storehouse for Mah? y? na wisdom—wisdom that supposedly exists apart from language and literature—but rather [it] is the tool for creating the image of such a self-standing wisdom and, more important, creating desire for that wisdom and the partisan Mah? y? na identity that claims to own it” (p. 167). Cole goes so far as to call it and the other *s? tras* he addresses “exquisite forms of reification—diametrically opposed to what modern readers, and at least some traditional readers [i.e., N? g? rjuna and Candrak? rti] took emptiness to mean” (p. 331).

As patently absurd as this will sound to some scholars—it is a lot to ask us to believe that N? g? rjuna’s interpretation of emptiness, for example, is substantially different from, or a later maturing of, what started out as pure rhetorical seduction—his overall argument deserves a serious hearing. Some of Cole’s assertions are, in my view, overstatements—but they are overstatements of a sound point, and one that he demonstrates ably: that these *s? tras* have polemical content that is deeply interwoven with doctrinal themes, and that the latter are often used in service of the former. Cole is rigorously focused on the ways in which the texts construct their own authority and legitimacy. He deftly sleuths out power-plays, tricky rhetoric, and strategies of legitimation so that all of the words of these *s? tras* tend to fall into a pattern, gravitating, like iron filings toward a magnet, around these (for Cole) central issues. It is an approach at which he often succeeds brilliantly, but it also risks (despite its nuances) becoming a one-dimensional strategy that neglects important aspects of the texts that don’t necessarily fit the pattern. While his analysis does convince that more is going on in these texts than a straightforward reading with an eye towards explicit doctrines would yield, Cole risks reducing the complexity of authorial motivation, intention, and desire to a singular plane. By viewing emptiness, compassion, buddha nature, and

expedient means merely as tools in service of rhetorical seduction—by assuming that rhetorical strategies of legitimation are always essentially in charge, with everything else lining up behind them—Cole is inevitably led to the across-the-board conclusion that the authors of these *s? tras* wrote in “bad faith,” using “trickery, subterfuge, and deception ... in an altogether steady and committed manner” (p. 342). The scholar, of course, need not shrink from conclusions that may set him or her at odds with devotees or reverent academics. Nor is he or she obliged to choose the most charitable interpretations of the data. Nevertheless, the “bad faith” conclusion cuts off other interesting possibilities at the root. That these authors quite likely considered themselves to be acting in *good* faith raises perhaps more stimulating questions. How, for example, can these rhetorical and even deceptive elements in Mah? y? na *s? tras* co-exist with the ontological and ethical elements without having been perceived by their authors and their intended readers as incompatible?

Perhaps this underlines the very tricky nature of what Cole is trying to do: essentially he is attempting to recover the intentions of the original authors, as well as the experiences they produced in their intended readers. Cole often discusses the effects of various moments, rhetorical techniques, and metaphors on “the reader.” For instance, his highly original reading of the *Diamond S? tra* yields the declaration that this text has “less to do with the need for cultivating compassion for all beings and much more to do with unusual topics such as destabilizing and aggrandizing the reading subject by making him party to the rejection of the old law, recovering the image and presence of the master through the thrill of negation, and the hysteria of being intimate with the Law in a potentially illegal manner” (p. 166). And elsewhere, Cole writes of the “desires” that various moves in the texts produce in the reader: desire for certain kinds of identity and fatherhood, for example. Though he does not use such terminology, he seems intent on saying something about the *psychology*—even the subjective states—of the reader in the moment of reading. It is a fascinating, audacious, and perhaps inescapable task, but one that invites the question of who “the reader” is. At times Cole’s analysis creates the impression—one I doubt he would want to embrace—of a universal, ahistorical “reader.” What evidence—commentarial or otherwise—is there that the *Diamond S? tra*’s negative dialectics produced a sense of “hysterical self-aggrandizement” in any particular Buddhist in any particular community? Because his evidence is largely internal to the texts them-

selves, such claims sometimes seem dangerously speculative and subjective, and Cole's detailed commentary on the effects of these texts on the reader, we suspect, are more a commentary on their effects on Cole himself. Of course, we cannot avoid the hermeneutic circle, but perhaps more attention to evidence regarding particular communities of interpretation might help to shrink it a bit.

I do not, however, want to give the impression that there is anything fuzzy or naïve about Cole's book. To the contrary, his work is theoretically sophisticated, intellectually stimulating, and thoughtfully creative. In Cole's overall treatment of his subject, there is much in common with the work of scholars such as Gregory Schopen and Bernard Faure, yet his more explicit use of literary critical methods and his detailed close readings of his sources make his approach unique and open up interesting new ways of looking at familiar texts. His methodology successfully extracts meanings previously unconsidered by modern scholars.

Perhaps a note on Cole's writing itself is in order here. His lively and fluid style rises above the usual boring academic prose, offering surprising metaphors, humorous asides, and vivid examples, as well as irony and occasional sarcasm. This style will no doubt prove enlivening and entertaining to some, irreverent and flippant to

others. His writing could not be considered concise: he allows himself the luxury of exploring byways and alleys of subargument and microanalysis that might prove tiring to the casual reader or undergraduate student. The specialist, however, will be rewarded by a highly nuanced exploration of Mahāyāna sources that addresses the many questions that will arise for the careful reader of these texts. The more casual reader will wonder why he couldn't have made his point in half the space.

Pious admirers of these sūtras will feel that Cole treats their texts too roughly, reducing them to power dynamics and squeezing them dry of wisdom, leaving only the wily. It would be a mistake, however, to neglect Cole's work for reasons either of style or substance. *Text as Father* introduces new possibilities for exploring suppressed dimensions of Mahāyāna literature, displays first-rate analytic prowess, and deftly raises questions that must be addressed in any serious thinking about Mahāyāna sūtras. It shows that literary analysis of sūtras can be as fruitful as the more traditional philosophical treatments and can demonstrate the limitations of the latter. Even if one has reservations about various details of this book, or if its overall conclusions are discomfiting, it is an important and rewarding work that merits the attention of any serious scholar or student of Buddhist literature.

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