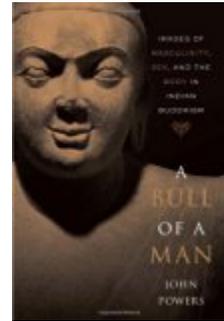


John Powers. *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. 334 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-03329-0.

Reviewed by Susanne Mrozik (Mount Holyoke College)

Published on H-Buddhism (July, 2010)

Commissioned by Daniel A. Arnold



Learning to Think Differently: Buddhism and Masculinity Discourse

Examining “discourses relating to masculinity” in South Asian Buddhist literature, John Powers’s *A Bull of a Man* is a welcome addition to a growing corpus of scholarship on body, gender, and sexuality in Buddhist studies (p. x). Insofar as scholarship on gender in Buddhism has (as Powers rightly observes) largely focused on the construction of feminine, rather than masculine, sex and gender, this broad-scoped study—which encompasses mainstream (including Theravāda), Mahāyāna, and tantric Buddhist sources—represents an advance in gender analysis for the field.

Powers persuasively argues in his first two chapters that, notwithstanding contemporary popular and scholarly representations of the Buddha as “an androgynous, asexual character,” Buddhist literature represents him as the “paragon of masculinity” (p. 1). Among the issues Powers discusses in making a case for this are the Buddha’s thirty-two marks, of which one is the sheathed penis; epithets for the Buddha (e.g., “great man,” “crusher of enemies,” “bull of a man”), which celebrate the Buddha’s “manly qualities, his extraordinarily beautiful body, his superhuman virility and physical strength, his skill in martial arts, and the effect he has on women who see him”; and narrative and scholastic portrayals of these masculine features (pp. 26-27). For example, Powers analyzes the story of the Buddha’s marriage to Yaśodharā, as recounted in the *Lalitavistara*; when Yaśodharā’s father expresses concern that the Buddha is too pampered to be a good warrior, the Buddha’s father holds a martial arts competition in which his son demonstrates his phys-

ical prowess to his future father-in-law. Powers argues that the Buddha thus embodies both the manly ideal of the warrior class, and the “scholarly, gentle, and learned” ideal of the priestly class (p. 65). Although scholars of Indian epic literature might quibble with Powers’s characterization of priests as “gentle,” his point that contemporary popular and scholarly representations of the Buddha have emphasized the priestly ideal at the expense of the warrior ideal is well taken.

Key to the warrior ideal is not only strength but also virility, and Powers provides convincing evidence that literary representations of the Buddha emphasize his “superhuman virility” (p. 1). Readers may, however, find themselves wanting more attention to the variations in masculinity discourse—variations, it should be noted, that may resist reduction to simple sectarian and/or historical frameworks. For example, in marshalling evidence for the Buddha’s superhuman virility, Powers cites the Mūlasarvāstivādin *Vinaya*’s claim that the Buddha gave sexual satisfaction to three wives and sixty thousand courtesans, along with the *Buddhacarita*’s rather different claim that the Buddha’s courtesans were so overwhelmed by the Buddha’s beauty that they became “shy and unable even to approach him” (p. 35). It would have been helpful to have some discussion of how these (and other) narratives reflect a widespread concern with the Buddha’s masculinity in different ways and to different ends.

That said, Powers successfully demonstrates that the

“supremely masculine” concept of Buddhahood met intersecting social and religious expectations of “male beauty and religious mastery” (pp. 2, 228). These include Indian aesthetic ideals as evidenced in both art and literature, in social hierarchies that privilege male sex along with warrior and priestly classes, and in South Asian beliefs to the effect that extraordinary beings may exhibit extraordinary bodies. Powers is especially interested in the thirty-two marks of a “great man” (*mahāpuruṣa*). These include such features as a sheathed penis, enormous tongue, and cranial lump, and are said to adorn all buddhas and universal monarchs—but only buddhas to the most perfect degree. Powers asks why the Buddha’s followers should have attributed such a “bizarre physiognomy” to him (p. 227), particularly since, contrary to the claims of Buddhist texts themselves, these thirty-two marks do not appear to originate in brahmanical sources; while the latter make reference to some of these marks, none contain lists comparable to those in Buddhist sources. Suggesting that the thirty-two marks reflect a broader South Asian expectation that extraordinary beings, human or divine, have extraordinary bodies (as reflected in notions of divine bodies in Hindu mythology), Powers concludes that competition with religious rivals was, in large measure, responsible for the incorporation of an unusual physiognomy into the masculine ideal of Buddhahood; Buddhist literature abounds with stories of the Buddha converting people through the display of his thirty-two marks.

Drawing on the performance theory of Pierre Bourdieu and Judith Butler, Powers casts Buddhahood as an embodied performance of masculine social and religious ideals. It is important to note that he is not making claims about Buddhahood per se, but rather about *literary representations* thereof. According to Powers, these representations were intended to substantiate claims that the Buddha belonged at the top of social and religious hierarchies. Central to his case is an argument that I have also advanced—one to the effect that body and morality are inextricably linked in the South Asian context.[1] Discussing some of the same material I have addressed—notably, Pāli and Sanskrit stories about Vakkali, Jyotis, Priyamkara, Candrottara, Sadāprarudita, and Devadatta—Powers similarly argues that bodies served as powerful markers of moral and spiritual progress, and consequently, served frequently to convert others to the Buddhist faith.

Powers carries these arguments forward into his third chapter, where he analyzes literary representations of monks. Here, too, he argues persuasively that monks

exhibit an “exemplary masculinity,” appearing as “physically attractive, virile, athletic men, often young and in their sexual prime, whose comportment and dignity stimulate women to thoughts of lust” (pp. 100, 74). The chapter primarily examines matters of sexual activity, particularly focusing on stories about women’s attempts to seduce monks and on monastic regulations prohibiting sexual activity. Powers’s consideration of the latter includes extremely helpful analysis of Sanskrit terminology for various kinds of male (but not female) “sexual deviancy” (pp. 82-84). As I have before, Powers argues that monastic rules, in general, served to ensure the proper public performance of monks, which was key to securing alms and new monastic recruits.[2] Powers additionally argues that the extensive cataloging of prohibited sex acts, in particular, was intended to “undermine the sexual drive” by teaching monks the dire consequences of any imaginable variant of sexual activity (p. 99). However correct this argument is, it might have been nuanced by adopting the insights of Bernard Faure and Janet Gyatso, who illumine a broader range of effects produced by these rules;[3] objecting, instead, only to one of Gyatso’s minor points (also made by Faure)—that the more bizarre rules must have produced a “monastic giggle” (pp. 97-98)—Powers settles for a rather simplistic reading that is not informed by Gyatso’s many other insights.

All criticisms aside, the first three chapters of Powers’s book are a must-read for anyone working on body, gender, and/or sexuality in South Asian Buddhism; further, these chapters could be profitably excerpted for teaching purposes. The remaining chapters are not as strong, but still provide useful information. Chapter 4 discusses bodies in general, addressing such topics as meditation on the foulness of bodies—surprisingly, without reference to Liz Wilson’s 1996 *Charming Cadavers*—recollection of the Buddha, mindfulness meditations on the body, bodily impermanence, Āyurvedic views of conception, the sex faculties (*indriya*), and narratives of sex change. Chapter 5 discusses male monastic friendship, the historical development of settled monasticism in ancient India, monastic regulations ensuring communal harmony, famous monastic friendships (such as that of Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana), and the ways in which this “semiotics of solidarity” was used to attract new recruits (p. 161). Although interesting, chapters 4 and 5 do not clearly fit into the overall argument of the book, frequently deviating from the topic of masculinity. Additionally, Powers sometimes too quickly assumes that narratives involving male figures are ultimately about masculinity. For instance, why limit a discussion of

monastic friendship to male monastic communities? The Mūlasarvāstivādin *Vinaya*, for example, also provides evidence of a female “semiotics of solidarity,” working hard to convince women, as well as men, to ordain.[4] Are stories about male monastic friendship, then, about masculinity, or are they really about the benefits of monasticism more broadly? Perhaps they are both, but greater attention to the different kinds of rhetorical work narratives perform is desirable.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn to Mahāyāna and tantric literature, respectively. Topics covered are too numerous to summarize here, ranging from changing concepts of the Buddha’s body to tantric physiology. Most pertinent to Powers’s focus on masculinity is his discussion of Mahāyāna stories (illustrating “skill in means”) in which bodhisattvas engage in sex in order to convert women. Powers demonstrates that such stories cast bodhisattvas as virile figures, just as mainstream Buddhist stories had done for the Buddha and arhats. Also pertinent is his discussion of barriers to women attaining Buddhahood in the Mahāyāna, although this discussion could have been strengthened by recourse to recent scholarship on the topic by Faure and Jan Nattier.[5] The chapter on tantra introduces new male paradigms—notably, fearsome and powerful tantric adepts and deities—and Powers makes the oft-repeated argument that tantric literature on sexual yoga is written “by men and for men” (p. 215).

Although Powers’s book is not without its limitations, it importantly illumines “the pervasiveness of ultramasculine images in Indian Buddhist texts”; it thus tries to merge “traditional Indology with contemporary studies of body and sex,” drawing especially on Bourdieu, Butler, Michel Foucault, Thomas Laqueur, and R. W. Connell (pp. 3, x). Throughout the book, Powers displays an encyclopedic knowledge of South Asian Buddhist history and literature. This scope may represent, however, at once a strength and a weakness; what the book gains in breadth, it loses in depth, and while Powers excels at documenting broad changes in concepts of masculinity and body across Buddhist sects, he is less attentive to the possibility of variant discourses within sects—or even independent of sectarian divisions.

Powers’s analysis of Mahāyāna Buddhism is telling. Powers asserts that Mahāyāna literature evinces “no hint of a crisis of masculinity or any serious doubts regarding the appropriateness of excluding women from Buddhahood” (p. 201). Although Mahāyāna literature does indeed portray the bodhisattva path as “largely the preserve of men” (as Faure, Nattier, and Paul Harrison have

also observed) (p. 201), I have argued elsewhere that this literature is neither uniformly misogynist nor uniformly egalitarian.[6] A case in point is Powers’s proof text: the *Lotus Sūtra*’s story of a *nāga* girl who becomes male before becoming a buddha. Recent work in Buddhist studies suggests a range of possible interpretations of this story. For example, one could argue, following Karen Derris’s gender analysis of the Pāli *Soṭṭhakkimāhānidāna*, that the *Lotus Sūtra* story questions the tradition’s exclusion of women from Buddhahood without altogether rejecting the authority of that tradition; while she had to become a man first, readers are nevertheless here permitted to see a girl become a buddha. As Derris says to similar effect, “while technically staying within traditional rules, this narrative contests the gendered vision of the bodhisattva path.”[7] Additionally, a close reading of the Sanskrit text raises questions about exactly when the *nāga* girl attains Buddhahood, since she proclaims her awakening (*saṃbodhi*) already before her sex change.[8] Neither of these interpretive strategies excludes other interpretations, such as one to the effect that the story’s ultimate aim is to assert the power of the *Lotus Sūtra* by demonstrating (as Nattier has argued) that it can awaken anyone—even nonhuman, underage females.[9] More could be said, but this should suffice to challenge any monolithic reading of the story, let alone of the entire Mahāyāna corpus.

My criticisms of Powers’s book are not intended to diminish its value; rather, they are intended to help shape the research on Buddhist masculinity discourses that surely will follow in the wake of Powers’s book. Future research will benefit from a more substantive engagement with two concerns of contemporary masculinity studies: to illumine the heterogeneity of masculinity discourses, including “subordinate variants of hegemonic masculinities”;^[10] and to deconstruct normative views of masculinity in order to make possible the construction of new and more diverse expressions of masculinity as well as femininity. As Foucault suggests, the point of such scholarship is “to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently.”^[11] Without taking these concerns seriously, future research on Buddhist masculinity discourses risks producing scholarship that simply reinforces the hegemony of a normative heterosexual masculine point of view. If future research can live up to the liberating promise of masculinity studies, then the field of Buddhist studies will owe Powers its gratitude.

Notes

- [1]. Susanne Mrozik, "The Relationship between Morality and the Body in Monastic Training According to the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1998); Susanne Mrozik, "The Value of Human Differences: South Asian Buddhist Contributions Toward an Embodied Virtue Theory," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 9 (2002): 1-33; Susanne Mrozik, "Cooking Living Beings: The Transformative Effects of Encounters with Bodhisattva Bodies," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32, no. 1 (2004): 175-194; Susanne Mrozik, "Materializations of Virtue: Buddhist Discourses on Bodies," in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 15-47; and Susanne Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies: The Physical Dimensions of Morality in Buddhist Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- [2]. In addition to my work, see also Steven Collins, "The Body in Theravāda Buddhist Monasticism," in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 198-199.
- [3]. Bernard Faure, *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Janet Gyatso, "One Plus One Makes Three: Buddhist Gender, Monasticism, and the Law of the Non-Excluded Middle," *History of Religions* 43, no. 2 (November 2003): 89-115; Janet Gyatso, "Sex," in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 271-272.
- [4]. See Damchö Diana Finnegan, "For the Sake of Women, Too: Ethics and Gender in the Narratives of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2009).
- [5]. See Bernard Faure, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity, and Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); and Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to The Inquiry of Ugra (Ugraparipṛcchā)* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).
- [6]. See Faure, *The Power of Denial*; Nattier, *A Few Good Men*; Paul Harrison, "Who Gets to Ride in the Great Vehicle? Self-Image and Identity among the Followers of the Early Mahāyāna," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 10, no. 1 (1987): 67-89; and Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies*, 126.
- [7]. Karen Derris, "When the Buddha Was a Woman: Reimagining Tradition in the Theravāda," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 2 (2008): 41.
- [8]. H. Kern and Bunyiu Nanjio, ed., *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, Bibliotheca Buddhica X (1908-1912; repr., Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1970), 264.5.
- [9]. See Jan Nattier, "Gender and Hierarchy in the *Lotus Sūtra*," in *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra*, ed. Stephen F. Teiser and Jacqueline I. Stone (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 95-97.
- [10]. Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne, "Dislocating Masculinity: Gender, Power, and Anthropology," in *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies*, ed. Cornwall and Lindisfarne (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 45.
- [11]. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 9.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

Citation: Susanne Mrozik. Review of Powers, John, *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. July, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25536>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.