

H-Net Reviews

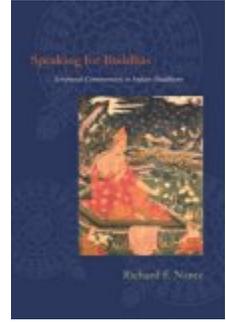
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard F. Nance. *Speaking for Buddhas: Scriptural Commentary in Indian Buddhism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 312 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-15230-3; \$43.99 (digital), ISBN 978-0-231-52667-8.

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Published on H-Buddhism (March, 2013)

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Everyone who has worked with Sanskrit texts has probably spent a good many hours gratefully (if cautiously) soliciting the help of commentators to analyze a compound, disambiguate a polysemous word or an amphibolous phrase, or navigate through a doctrinal labyrinth of tersely stated objections and rejoinders. Trying to read a Sanskrit text without a good commentary is like trying to find one's way around an old city without a decent map. To the modern scholar, a commentary is such an indispensable tool that it is easy to forget that commentators were not necessarily writing their observations with twenty-first century scholars in mind. That they turn out to be providing us an invaluable service does not imply that providing a service to us was their principal goal. Richard Nance's exploration of commentaries, and especially commentaries to canonical texts, offers insightful glimpses into the mentalities of the Indian Buddhists who wrote them and into their view of what the writing of a commentary involved.

While acknowledging that Indian Buddhism was anything but univocal and that there were competing claims to authority that could become, in the words of Robert Sharf, a cacophony, Nance says that "even in this cacophony, one finds a measure of consonance, for the cacophony itself testifies to a generalized need to appropriate authority via acts of speech. These attempts to speak authoritatively were complex discursive events through which Buddhists aimed to speak not only for themselves, but also for Buddhism more generally—and thus to speak for Buddhas" (p. 2). What he aims to do in his book, he goes on to say, is to explore what the attempts of Indian Buddhist scholastics to speak for Buddhas involved. In the same way that Buddhas had pro-

duced oral texts aimed at giving their audiences instructions that, if followed, could liberate them from discontent born of delusional attachments, Buddhist scholastics produced written texts with exactly the same aim. The agendas of the scholastic commentators, then, were no different from the agendas of the Buddhas themselves. In this respect, the goals of erstwhile Buddhist scholastic commentators may have been importantly different from the goals of the modern academic scholars who make use of their commentaries, for few modern scholars working in secular universities would dare say out loud that their principal research goal was to lead deluded sentient beings out of saṃsāra into nirvāṇa. (But who knows what unexpressed aspirations roil in the turbid souls of modern academic scholars of Buddhism?) Acting as interpreters of the words of Buddhas, the Indian Buddhist commentators, observes Nance, were generating *buddhavacana* (the speech of a Buddha) and practicing right speech (*samyagvāc*), which consists of producing words that are, in the words of *Dīghanikāya*, "to be treasured, relevant, reasoned, well-defined, and connected with the goal" (p. 2). The task of the ancient commentator, then, was not only to explain what Buddhas had said but to exemplify through their skillful use of words one of the most important components of Buddhist practice. The four chapters that follow the introduction are entitled "Models of Speaking," "Models of Instruction," "Models of Argument," and "Models of Explanation."

The first of these chapters explores the high standards of right speech found in the canonical literature. First, the speech of the Buddha, as described in poems of praise of the Buddha, is examined, along with the often-

repeated criteria given by the Buddha himself in the *Abhayarājakumāra Sutta*, where he says that he will say only what is true and beneficial and will wait for the right occasion to say it, whether it is agreeable to his audience or not. Here Nance notes that while the Buddha allows that what is true is not necessarily beneficial, he does not allow the possibility that something can be beneficial if it is untrue. The notion of what some have called a “white lie”—a falsehood that spares another from hearing a painful truth—has no place in the Pali literature. Despite that, later writers in the Pali tradition noted that a Buddha had the knack of knowing whether a detailed account or a more simplified account of something would be more beneficial to a particular audience. Given that simplification usually involves some degree of distortion, and that distortion could be seen as a kind of untruth, it appears that the later tradition did make some room for benevolent untruth. The discussion of the Buddha’s speech is followed by a detailed examination of various *vinaya* rules pertaining to the speech of monks, some of which have to do with the content of what is said, and many more of which have to do with matters of speech etiquette. Monks are discouraged, for example, from speaking with a mouth full of food and speaking while standing to someone who is sitting. There are also a large number of rather puzzling proscriptions against talking about the dharma to people who are carrying various kinds of objects (staves, parasols, and the like) or wearing various kinds of headgear or footwear. Nance notes that the rules for monks about speech are numerous and complex, in sharp contrast to the relatively straightforward guidelines set out by the Buddha concerning his own speech. The chapter concludes with an interesting analysis of stories in which monks were reprimanded for misinterpreting the dharma. Nance draws the lesson from these accounts that there was an acknowledged risk involved in a Buddhist (as opposed to the Buddha) preaching the dharma. The Buddhist must speak for the Buddha but never *as* the Buddha, and must give full credit to the Buddha for whatever insight there might be in the teaching of the dharma.

Following the discussion of *vinaya* rules for monks about speaking in general at the end of chapter 1, Nance transitions into a discussion in chapter 2 of specific guidelines for those who explicate the dharma. Here we find an account of the theory and the practice of preaching in a wide expanse of Buddhist literature from the Pali canon to the Lotus Sutra and the writings of Śāntideva. In this chapter, Nance explores what he sees as a tension between the two principal responsibilities of a teacher,

preacher, or commentator. The first responsibility is to report as accurately as possible what the Buddha taught, or at least the tradition’s reports of what the Buddha taught. The second responsibility is to explain what was meant by what the Buddha taught, what the implications of the Buddha’s teachings are for particular situations in which people might find themselves. The tension lies in the risk of misinterpretation, which had been mentioned in chapter 1. In addition, observes Nance, there is the tension that arises from the very possibility that the traditional accounts of what the Buddha taught may themselves have become corrupted. Simply to repeat uncritically what tradition reports may lead to a failure to carry out the responsibility of teaching the dharma, which by definition is true and beneficial. (It is tempting to see a Buddhist counterpart here of the observation in verse 6 of chapter 3 of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians.)

Given that the Buddhist tradition, apparently from the beginning, contained within itself a warning not to accept anything as true simply because it was spoken by someone who is eloquent and reports what has traditionally been taught, it is natural that Buddhism had a robust tradition of trying to establish non-canonical criteria of what qualifies as true. That tradition, the tradition of the logicians and epistemologists who explored *pramāṇa* theory, is taken up in chapter 3, where we find a discussion of the contributions of Dharmakīrti, Śāntarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla to the exploration of what qualifies as good argumentation and good interpretation. In this chapter Nance offers an interestingly critical account of the claim that interpretation is strictly a matter of inference. This claim, which was articulated at some length by Dharmakīrti, was that speech serves as a sign not of what is the case but of what a speaker hopes someone will believe is the case. On this account, if the speaker can, again through inference, be deemed a person who has no reason to deceive and whose testimony has been invariably reliable on matters that can be checked independently, then it is not unreasonable to place confidence in the speaker’s words on matters that one is not in a position to test independently. Nance argues convincingly that interpretation is a task far more rich than this rather flat Buddhist account allows for. More is involved than inferences based on observations of how the person one is interpreting uses language, and inferences about the character of the person whose words one is interpreting. A more complex combination of philosophical analysis, the interpreter’s own observations of everyday life, and the interpreter’s insights gained through contemplative exercises is involved in the act of interpretation. The art

of interpretation, in other words, is arguably far more interesting than the account of it that the Indian Buddhists offered.

The fourth chapter deals in general with Buddhist works that offered guidelines to commentators and in particular with Vasubandhu's *Vyākhyāyukti*. Nance's book is furnished with three appendices that contain annotated translations of excerpts of this and two other works that offer guidance to commentators. In the fourth chapter itself, Nance guides the reader through Vasubandhu's account of what the ideal commentary on a canonical text (or any text) should provide. The ideal commentary, says Vasubandhu, provides a clear statement of the purpose of the work being commented upon, a summary of the argument of the work, notes on the meanings of words and phrases that could be misunderstood, the way that parts of the work relate to one an-

other, and an anticipation of possible objections, with responses to them. Someone writing an article or book today could not go wrong by trying to provide those features. Nance's book, incidentally, provides all those features and thus itself exemplifies the desiderata it discusses as coming down from Vasubandhu (who was in turn passing down a well-established general Indian tradition of commentarial writing).

Richard Nance's book provides information about how traditional Indian Buddhist commentators saw themselves and critical discussions of some of the presuppositions that the traditional authors made in doing their work. It is a scholarly work but never a pedantic one. The writing is clear and lively, showing that the author has one of the most important qualities of a Buddhist commentator: a sense of his audience and, above all, compassion for his reader.

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Citation: Richard P. Hayes. Review of Nance, Richard F., *Speaking for Buddhas: Scriptural Commentary in Indian Buddhism*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.

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