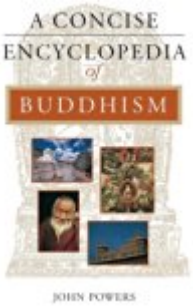
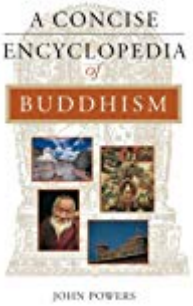
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Soka Gakkai English Buddhist Dictionary Committee. *The Soka Gakkai Dictionary of Buddhism.* Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 2002. xix + 979 pp. $25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-4-412-01205-9.

Damien Keown. *A Dictionary of Buddhism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. ix + 357 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-860560-7.



John Powers. *A Concise Encyclopedia of Buddhism.* Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000. x + 278 pp. $17.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-85168-233-1.

Reviewed by A. Charles Muller

Published on H-Buddhism (July, 2003)

We generally do not see that many reviews on reference works, no doubt because there is usually not that much to say other than some comments regarding extent of coverage, accuracy, special points of strength, and perhaps some observations regarding the usefulness of the work for the purposes of a particular audience. However, with three recently published dictionaries/encyclopedias of Buddhism of similar scope appearing on the H-Buddhism review shelf, at approximately the same time, it seemed that we might be able to take advantage of the situation by reviewing them in a comparative context.

I took on this task assuming that it would be a relatively simple and straightforward one. But in

the course of reading through these three texts, I came to see that their makeup and approaches in compilation revealed some noteworthy facts about trends and values in modern scholarship in our field. Thus, in addition to discussing the relative merits of each of these works individually, I will also take up the discussion of some broader concerns afterward.

A. Some Preliminary Remarks on Evaluating Buddhist Studies Reference Works

We ordinarily assess the value of standard scholarly monographs, as distinguished from reference works, in terms of such categories as originality, timeliness, coherence, and perspicacity in arguing a readily identifiable theme or set of themes. While these factors might also play a role in evaluating reference works, significant attention must also be given here to other factors, including such aspects of the work as accuracy, reliability, and scholarly precision--including the degree to which the work reflects an awareness of recent research; extensiveness of coverage; accessibility and clarity; and organization and balance. Accessibility, for example, could refer to basic writing style as well as the availability and usefulness of auxiliary tools such as indices and tables. Balance, for another example, might be measured from the perspective of consistency in terms of the depth of treatment of entries from clearly distinguished categories, such as geographic and cultural regions, schools and sects, or personages and concepts.

Also, while the specific range of expertise of the projected audience of a regular manuscript is usually clearly and automatically defined, with a reference work this is much greater, further complicating the matter of evaluation. It might also be appropriate to ask, especially with reference works in the area of religious studies, whether the work in question (consciously or unconsciously) attempts to further a special sort of ideological, cultural, or sectarian position, and if so, whether such an orientation is duly acknowledged by its compilers.

B. The Reviews

The *Concise Encyclopedia of Buddhism* by John Powers includes 900 entries in 256 pages. In terms of the Merriam-Webster definition of an "encyclopedia" as a work that "treats comprehensively a particular branch of knowledge," one might argue that the title of this work is to some extent misleading. Even with the modifier "concise," a work of less than 300 pages could certainly not come close to a comprehensive treatment of so vast a field as Buddhism. In this sense, I would say that Rupert Gethin's back-cover endorsement of the book as a "comprehensive handbook" is closer to the mark, except that I am not entirely sure about the appropriateness of the characterization of "comprehensive." This is not to say that the book does not serve a purpose. For example, I could see myself buying a copy for a friend who had recently become interested in Buddhism and wanted to browse a single-volume paperback that offered a balanced overview of mainstream Buddhist concepts, schools, persons (past and present), texts, and so forth.

In terms of accuracy, I have not discovered any significant problems in the main content area. The argument might be made that some issues are presented in an oversimplified manner, but if seen as the contents of a handbook, this tendency need not be viewed as a shortcoming. Powers does a responsible job, in the capacity of a lone scholar, in attempting to cover the vast range of Buddhist themes, texts, issues, personages, and concepts, both past and present, in a reasonably balanced manner, and his efforts at trying to evenly distribute the coverage between cultural traditions, schools, major figures, and so forth are evident. For example, the Tibetan tradition, his main area of expertise, receives the best coverage, yet does not significantly overshadow other areas that he considers to be significant, such as India, China, and Japan (although there are exceptions

here, which will be addressed below). Attention to balance can also be seen in the treatment of the various schools of Buddhism (e.g. Yogaacaara, Madhyamaka, Pure Land, etc.). Looking carefully at the entries within a single category, such as schools, persons, texts, and cultural regions, it is evident that he had a basic principle in mind for the amount of space to be assigned to specific categories.

Powers's strategy for listing major Buddhist terms and concepts is to arrange them, wherever possible, by their original Sanskrit. As a specialist in Buddhist studies, I personally had no problem finding the terms I was looking for. But to whatever extent the work is intended to serve as a handbook for beginners who lack familiarity with Sanskrit, there may occasionally be difficulty in locating information. Nonetheless, since most terms are cross-referenced with a common English equivalent, this is not overly problematic.

No doubt the most distinctive characteristic of this work (and that which most gives it the feel of a handbook) is its attempt to provide the reader with some sense of the modern Buddhological landscape by offering information on recent and living teachers and scholars, and even publication houses, of Buddhism. Thus we find entries on Robert Aitken, Andre Bareau, Kenneth Ch'en, Charles Prebish, Richard Hayes, Robert Thurman, Jeffrey Hopkins, Dharma Publications, Wisdom Publications, the ***Journal of Buddhist Ethics***, and the International Association of Buddhist Studies. Being a relatively junior member of this same field, I was a bit curious as to who would be included and who would not as well as the type of criteria the compiler used to select these people. For example, where, I wondered, are Gomez, Lancaster, Schmithausen, Weinstein...?

The ***Concise Encyclopedia*** also includes in its introduction a brief overview of the history of Buddhism, which will appeal to newcomers. The thematic index, which divides the content into such categories as texts, terms, persons, places, and the like, is very useful for pinpointing specific kinds of information, and the survey bibliography is also a welcome addition.

The ***Soka Gakkai Dictionary of Buddhism*** (hereafter ***SG*** dictionary) includes 2,700 entries in 837 pages. This constitutes a far more extensive work, at almost 1,000 pages (including the extensive back matter), representing the efforts of Soka Gakkai's English Buddhist Dictionary Committee. As is explained in the front matter, the work was compiled for the primary purpose of providing background for those who are interested in reading the works of Nichiren translated into English, which means that we should be prepared to abandon any expectation of cultural or sectarian balance that we would look for in a publication from an academic press. On the other hand, there is information provided on several Japanese traditions beyond Nichiren Buddhism and Tendai, including Zen, Shingon, Pure Land, and other Japanese forms of Buddhism. There is also a considerable amount of information on basic Indian Buddhist concepts, persons, deities, and so forth, which held continued influence in the schools of Buddhism that made their way into Japan.

There is, of course, a strong emphasis on the delivery of information on Nichiren and Tendai Buddhism, with technical terms being defined with high frequency in the context of their usage in the ***Lotus Sutra***. In this sense, to call it a "dictionary of Buddhism" is somewhat misleading, given the fact that representation of the Buddhist tradition as a whole is not even a consideration. I assume that most potential buyers of the dictionary should be sufficiently forewarned about this sectarian slant based on the title alone. Nonetheless, the point should not go unmentioned.

As compared with the broad approach seen in the ***Concise Encyclopedia***, this work focuses almost exclusively on historical and doctrinal matters, in a style informed by the standard Japanese ***bukkyou jiten*** tradition. In the context of this historical and doctrinal emphasis, there is extensive

coverage of basic Indian terms and concepts, names of celestials, bodhisattvas, realms, heavens, mandalas, mudras, and so forth, that are likely to be met by the reader of scriptures and treatises from the Lotus, Shingon, or Pure Land traditions. For the same reasons, there is extensive coverage of historical figures in Japanese Buddhism--mostly from these same traditions.

Leaving the matter of balance aside, the most noticeable shortcoming for the trained scholar resides in the information given regarding the main schools, texts, and so forth, which is largely a repetition of that found in nineteenth-century Japanese reference works and, as such, is unreflective of the significant developments in the historical research carried out in these areas during the past several decades. Hiinayaana is still depicted as an actual distinct historical sect that competed with Mahaayaana; the history of Chan is told according to the standard myth of the six patriarchs; Tz'u-en "founded" the "Dharma Characteristics school"; and in the process of the transmission of all the schools from China to Japan, Korea and the Koreans were non-existent. Given the obvious expense in time and energy that went into this compilation, it is a pity that its editors did not take the extra trouble to hire a non-sectarian scholar (or two) of good standing to read through and amend these glaring oversights. A few simple corrections here and there could have done much to enhance the overall impression of the work, and make it much more commendable.

In terms of organizing principles, one problematic aspect found in using the dictionary is the rigid policy of translating (often idiosyncratically) all terms, all titles of canonical works, and most schools into English throughout the text. Romanized Japanese and ***kanji*** glosses are given in the case of head words, but the explanatory bodies of the entries are filled with translations of text names and terms that are often unrecognizable: Abhidharma is always "Dharma Analysis Treasury school," while the "[ten] abodes" (***zhu***) are the "[ten] securities." And I have to wonder who would think to look for a term under the heading "major world system dust particle kalpas."

In trying to mitigate these difficulties of locating information, the editors have provided an array of cross-indices in the appendix of the book, including indices that map proper Chinese names (in Wade-Giles) to ***kanji*** and Pinyin, English text names to ***kanji*** and Japanese romanization (but not to Sanskrit and Chinese originals), Sanskrit titles to ***kanji*** and English renderings, and Chinese titles to ***kanji*** and English renderings, all adding up to ten indices. These are helpful, but it is painstaking (or even annoying) to have to go to these all the time, especially when the term one is looking for is not always properly cross-referenced. To whatever extent this dictionary is intended as a tool for the serious researcher, it would have been far better if all translated terms were glossed in the main text with their Chinese originals, or at least their Chinese or Japanese romanization. Also, I would think that for translators, a most valuable index would be one that keyed off of the Chinese logographs (***kanji***) in radical-stroke, or total-stroke order. This type of index is not included.

Despite these shortcomings, I think that specialists in Nichiren, Tendai, and other forms of Japanese Buddhism will greatly appreciate the inclusion in this dictionary of detailed biographies, as well as data on texts, temples, and places that are specific to these traditions. As such, I would imagine that such researchers would want to have a copy of this dictionary on hand--especially at the price of 2700 yen for a hardcover volume. Specialists of other forms of Buddhism who have enough expertise to avoid using the problematic areas might also want to have this reference work at their disposal. I would not, however, recommend it for beginning students without proper guidance, due to its unevenness in degree of historical precision.

A Dictionary of Buddhism, published by Oxford, is edited by Damien Keown along with a team of recognized scholars and contains 2,000 entries in 346 pages. I came to this dictionary with the bar raised, as it were, in comparison to the first two works--especially with the expectation of seeing a reflection of more recent approaches to the interpretation of the Buddhist tradition. In some respects, these expectations were more than adequately met, but there are other cases where questions may be raised. As with the prior two works, the evaluation one makes will be greatly determined by assessment of the intended audience of the work.

Since Damien Keown is known for his work in the area of Buddhist ethics and engaged Buddhism, it should not be surprising to see that this dictionary breaks important new ground by providing entries that contain discussions on such relevant social issues as marriage, homosexuality, stem-cell research, abortion, marriage, and euthanasia. All of these areas concern issues on which modern students want to hear answers from the Buddhist tradition, answers that have not been forthcoming in previous works of this type. There is also interesting information provided on other topics where Buddhism intersects with secular life, such as health, diet, and the martial arts. Beyond this are discussions on the reception of Buddhism in such Western countries as America and Britain (but, as far as I can tell, no other Western countries).

Professor Keown was assisted in the compilation of this work by three scholars from areas of expertise different from his own and so, as one might expect, the dictionary exhibits a measure of depth and nuanced articulation not to be found in Powers's work, and shows, in general, greater reflection of awareness of the findings of modern scholarship than the *SG* dictionary. There are a number of entries, such as those on schools (e.g., Hua-yen, Maadhyamaka, Yogaacaara), or those on concepts (e.g., four noble truths, ***pratiitya-samutpaada***) where the explanation gets to the core of the doctrinal point in a lucid and accurate manner without being burdensomely long. Entries on many areas, such as these, tend to be precise, fresh in style, and to the best of my knowledge, reflective of the findings of recent scholarship.

While the general level of precision and sophistication surpasses that seen in the *SG* dictionary, I did find ambiguities, clumsily worded passages, and outright errors fairly early on in areas that I know enough about to spot at a glance. Some examples include the ***Awakening of Faith*** (for some reason listed under its apocryphal Indian title), which first seems to be an actual translation, and then not. Second, the Chogye "order" (for some reason not a "school" like the other schools) is labeled as one of the original Korean Nine Mountain schools, which it is not. Third, under martial arts, the legendary Bodhidharma story is given without mention of the fact that most Chan historians consider this to be a complete fabrication, stating further that "within Buddhist history, the martial arts have been closely identified with Chan and Zen from an early period." In China? From what period? Chan specialists that I have spoken to on this point have, without exception, told me that they have found almost nothing concrete in this regard in the historical records until a much later period. I also felt that the treatment of Chan historical figures in general (especially the "patriarchs") did not place enough emphasis on the problems of historicity. Hopefully, specialists in other areas will find this dictionary's coverage in their domains to be more precise, in which case there will be no need to condemn the work as a whole.

Moving the bar up a bit further, I would have high expectations for a recent academic work such as this in terms of its attempt to offer something like a balanced cultural and sectarian treatment of the Buddhist tradition as a whole. While one would not expect ***exhaustive*** coverage of such a vast tradition in a single volume of 350 pages,

one might well look for the sort of coverage that reflects the recent concerns in humanities scholarship regarding the marginalization of the cultural manifestations or sects of any given religious tradition. This is especially important if the book is perceived by its publishers to be written for newcomers to Buddhism. From this perspective, in terms of the East Asian region that I know best, we can see a striking and unexplained disparity in the amount of attention paid to Japan and Japanese formulations, wherein the Japanese manifestations of Buddhism are foregrounded at the expense of equally important traditions, reflecting an overall take on East Asian Buddhist history which closely corresponds--intended or not--to dated and prejudiced Japanese historiography.

As one example, it is hard to understand why Pure Land receives a treatment of eight pages under the titles of Chinese Pure Land and Japanese Pure Land, and then, one more time, extensively under *Jodou shuu* as well as *Jodou shinshuu*, without any mention of Pure Land in Korea or Vietnam. Yet a vast and complicated system such as Yogaacaara, which had such deep impact on all forms of Buddhism, only gets a page and a half; the entire regions of Tibet and Thailand receive a page and a half-page, respectively; and, even worse, the Korean Chogye "Order," the central tradition in Korea for over eight centuries, gets only a small paragraph. These are not isolated cases, as there are numerous other such disparities in the treatment of major figures and texts, again and again disproportionately weighted toward Japanese manifestations.

Taken as a whole, the historical accounts of the East Asian sects seem as if they were modeled directly on the lines of transmission espoused by the thirteenth-century Japanese historiographer Gyounen, who told the story of the transmission of the Chinese Buddhist sects going directly to Japan from the mainland, completely ignoring the fact that the eight Nara sects were all introduced directly from the schools established in Silla. Exhibiting the same pattern, in the Oxford dictionary we have Hua-yen and Kegon, but no Hwaeom; Fa-hsiang and Hossou, but no Beopsang; Lu-tsung and Ritsu (Vinaya schools) but no Gyeyul. I am aware that there are, relatively speaking, difficulties in finding English-language resources for Korea, but the situation is not so bad that it has to come to this extreme, and if anything, at this point in our history, there should be some recognition of the fact that extra effort is needed to avoid marginalization.

The Japanese centrism goes further, extending to the practice of the registering of common pan-Buddhist technical terms under their Japanese rendering, despite the fact that they have neither Japanese origins nor any special Japanese relevance (e.g., *juujuukai* for "ten grave precepts," *jukai* for "conferring precepts," and *kaimyou* for "ordination name"). If the editors of an academically oriented dictionary of Buddhism in the twenty-first century are going to provide this kind of privileging (or even preeminence) to a certain tradition, should there not be some sort of explanation as to the reasons for this decision? What kind of impression does this give to the new student regarding the makeup of the Buddhist tradition as a whole? While the presentation of Korea is fully overwhelmed by Japan-related materials, at least there is something there.[1] Vietnamese Buddhism gets an entry, but there is nothing that treats its numerous important thinkers from its Meditation and Pure Land traditions.

Let me conclude the formal evaluation of the Oxford dictionary by reiterating that I am, from the outset, approaching it with a greater degree of criticality than the first two works, and if we retreat from my qualms over the matter of balance, it still ranks fairly strong in terms of its precision and attempts to cover new ground in areas relevant to modern society. The depth and sophistication of its coverage exceeds the *Concise Encyclopedia*, and is a far more nuanced compilation

than the *SG* dictionary. If a student were to ask about the worth of purchasing a copy, at $35.00, I might approve it depending on the specific interests of the student, but only after giving due warning regarding the problems with its skewed presentation of East Asian Buddhist history.

C. Some Additional Comments on Buddhological Reference Compilation

I came away with a further unexpected impression after reading these three texts regarding a discrepancy that I have perceived between the standards we expect from the writers of reference works as compared with other forms of scholarly publication, such as refereed articles and research monographs. It has been my observation, based on my own experience in dictionary-making, that most dictionaries start out around the development of a body of information derived from one's personal research. But in order to flesh the compilation out into a full-fledged reference resource, one needs either to bring in specialists from other areas, or to consult a body of other reference works that contain information on materials outside one's own specialty, and try to adapt these in a way to fit one's own work. In the case of most larger compilations, one probably needs to do both.

In the case of articles and monographs, it is standard practice to provide a detailed description of sources in the front or back matter of the work, along with footnotes which give credit for ideas and findings. In none of these works do we find significant accreditation of material in the front or back matter. Nor is there any notation or encoding attached to the entries themselves that offer a clue as to their sources or derivation, or, in the case of the *SG* and Oxford dictionaries, an indication of who was responsible for the entry. In the case where entries are composed based directly on original research, it would be a joy to know who is responsible, and in the case of borrowed or derivative materials, it would be fair to give proper attribution to sources. This is, of course, what we would do if writing an article for an academic journal, so I am moved to wonder how it has come to pass that reference works are exempted from this requirement.[2]

I have in mind different models for providing attribution depending on the nature of the particular compilation and the particular entry. In the case of a work such as the ***Concise Encyclopedia***, we can imagine that much of the Tibet-related material came directly from the author's own mastery of the tradition or directly from his own research. But there also had to be much other material in other areas that was either borrowed or, at least, derived from pre-existent reference works. What were these? In a work that has so many shorter entries, it may not be practical to attach a reference to each one, but there could still be a general explanation regarding what sources were used. The ***Encyclopedia*** contains a bibliography, but this seems to be for another purpose.

It is also readily evident, to anyone familiar with Japanese ***bukkyou jiten*** sources, that many entries in the ***Soka Gakkai*** dictionary are derived or directly translated from common reference works. It may well be the case that the general reader is not interested in where these materials come from, but the specialist may be, for the sake of being ensured of reliability or finding further information. And the authors of the original sources of these materials should get due credit, wherever possible. If notations cannot be provided after each entry (although I do not see why not), then at least some sort of general description of sources could be given in the front matter.

The usefulness of the practice of full attribution and accountability becomes even more evident in the case of the Oxford dictionary. Here we have a work that we are told has been compiled by four people. I am a Korean specialist, yet I do not see a Korean specialist on the team, causing me to wonder who wrote these entries. What sources did she or he use? Concerning the dictionary as a whole, was one area covered by one of

the scholars, and another area by a different scholar? Or were most entries multi-authored? This information could be provided generally in the introduction and specifically by codes attached to the entries. As someone who does this kind of work extensively, I often see quite readily when a certain passage has been derived from a certain source (especially if it is my own). Much of this kind of borrowing goes on in the production of reference works, so it is acceptable to a certain extent. But why not cite the source? We demand this kind of accountability and rigor in other aspects of our work, so why not here, as well?

Notes

[1]. While John Powers does make an effort to include Korean personages in his book (seven entries), this is less than a fourth of the numbers of Japanese figures (thirty entries). The imbalance is more extreme in the Oxford dictionary, which has some 180 entries treating Japanese texts, terms, and concepts, plus about 70 articles (many of them a page or more in length) on Japanese persons. By comparison, there are eight Korea-related terms, and a mere ten monks listed, mostly in very brief paragraphs--an overall ratio of over thirteen-to-one in terms of entry numbers, and probably at least another factor of ten in terms of prose volume. While dozens of Japanese personages of middling historical relevance are included (especially from the Tendai tradition), such major figures in the Korean tradition as Muyeom, Hyesim, Gihwa, and Gyunyeo are not even mentioned. To represent the entire Vietnamese tradition, I was only able to find a single monk.

[2]. It has not always been this way, as we have a clear precedent for standard academic accountability and rigor in Buddhological lexicography in the form of the ***Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*** completed by Soothill and Hodous in 1934 (see http://www.hm.tyg.jp/~acmuller/soothill/soothill-hodous.html). In the introduction to this work, they provide a detailed explanation of all their classical and modern East Asian sources. When, in the entries themselves they use a line from Monier-Williams, Eitel, Eliot, Wylie, Suzuki, et al., it is clearly attributed.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism

Citation: A. Charles Muller. Review of Committee, Soka Gakkai English Buddhist Dictionary. *The Soka Gakkai Dictionary of Buddhism.* ; Keown, Damien. *A Dictionary of Buddhism.* ; Powers, John. *A Concise Encyclopedia of Buddhism.* H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. July, 2003.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7936