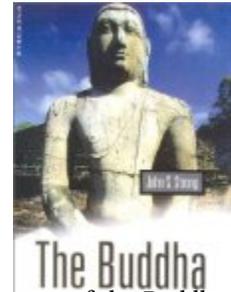


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John S. Strong. *The Buddha: A Short Biography*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001. xv + 203 pp. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85168-256-0.

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John Strong's *The Buddha* stands out among literary and academic works on the life of Sakyamuni Buddha. Strong targets non-specialists and assumes little or no background knowledge. He provides a road map through the literature on sacred biography within Buddhist studies. This makes his analysis of the Buddha's life strikingly different from the many other popular biographies, such as Karen Armstrong's *Buddha* (2001). Strong's prose is smooth, which enables him not only to explain clearly the difficult imagery and concepts embedded in the many biographies of the Buddha but also to introduce technical information of interest to academics.

This book's target is "the 'student' rather than the 'scholar'" (p. xiii). Even though it is a challenging introductory text for a first-year college or university course on Buddhism, it convinced me that biography and narrative can be powerful teaching tools.

Strong begins with a concise description of the history of scholarship on the Buddha's life that stretches from the late nineteenth century to the present. Then, he contrasts these academic portraits of the Buddha with "tales that have been remembered and revered, repeated and reformulated" (pp. 1-3) by practitioners of Buddhism throughout its history. Avoiding a strictly factual search for the "historical Buddha," Strong provides "a middle way between remythologizing and demythologizing, between myth-making and history-making" (p. 3). He discusses the human, contextual, and rooted parts of the Buddha's life as well as the supernatural and mythical ones.

Next, Strong shows how the Buddha's biography simultaneously reveals and reinforces the wider dimensions of Buddhist artistic production, ritual, doctrine, and history. In a series of brief sections, he describes the re-

ciprocal relations that link the life story of the Buddha, the practice of pilgrimage, and the worship of relics (pp. 6-10). Strong describes the ways in which sacred biography, art, and ritual reinforce each other. These sections orient readers toward specific events in the stories themselves: gathering the Buddha's future relics after his extreme austerities, such as his milk-rice bowl, hair, and throne (p. 68); the symbols and chronology of the ordination ritual, which are reflected when young prince Siddhartha leaves behind his ornaments, undergoes tonsure, and exchanges his ornate clothes for austere robes (p. 60); the earth goddess's wringing her hair and creating a flood as mirrored by the water-pouring rituals of Southeast Asia (p. 72); and the later growth of monasticism and monastic rules of conduct as prefigured in the Buddha's teachings about the proper use of "bowls, robes, and rooms" (p. 102). Events in the story explain the ritual, and ritual invokes events in the story.

Although doctrine is not his central focus, Strong is able to explain some difficult Buddhist ones by examining these stories. The Buddha himself, in his second sermon, directly and systematically explains the *skandhas*, arguing that they are not the self and, indeed, that there is no permanent and unchanging self at all (p. 84). Characters demonstrate the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth (pp. 16-19). Events epitomize the ten perfections (p. 27). Moreover, Strong shows how the very nature of the Buddha's biography might itself suggest doctrine. The "blueprint" of the Buddha life stories—the structure and sequence of events that all Buddhas adhere to—transcends and encompasses any historical individual, becoming a common journey to awakening. According to Strong, the Mahayana doctrine of the *dharmakaya* is analogous to this impersonal and abstracted blueprint and might even have been suggested by it (p. 14).

Strong makes a serious attempt to expand biography beyond the one-life paradigm. He includes material about both what preceded the Buddha's birth as Prince Siddhartha, and what followed his death as the Awakened One. The Buddha expands the linear and authoritative style of biography, moreover, by presenting parallel versions as summaries and excerpts. Beginning with the Jataka tales in "Previous Lives of the Buddha," Strong covers the Buddha's "Ancestry, Birth, and Youth," "Quest and Enlightenment," "Teachings and Community," "Daily Routines, Miracles, and Distant Journeys," and ends with his "Final Days, The *Parinirvana*, and the *Nirvana* of the Relics."

All of Strong's discussions—the history of scholarship, the ritualistic and historical dimensions of the Buddha biography, and the diverse stories themselves—are complemented by a thorough index and glossary of Pali and Sanskrit terms along with an excellent annotated bibliography. The latter makes this book very useful to scholars of sacred biography and Buddhist studies.

It is apparent throughout that Strong effectively marshals the results of earlier scholarly projects, and makes them accessible to students.[1] Particularly important is the sophisticated collaborative volume *Buddhist Sacred Biography in South and Southeast Asia*, edited by Juliane Schober, to which Strong contributed "A Family Quest: Rahula, Yasodhara and the Bodhisattva in the *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya* and Related Traditions." *The Buddha* builds on this volume as a whole, cleverly distilling many of its important scholarly and methodological contributions. I would like to point out two of these contributions: one on previous lives of the Buddha (*Jatakas*) and the other on the many versions of his biography.

Although Jataka literature is very important in the vernacular storytelling traditions of Buddhist Asia, it is unusual to find it in biographies of the Buddha. Strong includes a discussion of many of the Buddha's previous lives: the Buddha as King Dasaratha in a reworking of the *Ramayana* (p. 16), as the perceptive boy Somanassa (p. 17), as the Brahmin Sumedha (pp. 21-23), as the princess Purana (p. 26), and as the prince Vessantara (pp. 29-31). The Buddha's previous lives explain how an individual begins on the path to Buddhahood. They show the spiritual heights of his life before being born as the prince Siddhartha, and the meritorious acts and immoral deeds committed in the incalculable interim. In the Jataka stories, events do not always unfold the way that they did during the life of Sakyamuni Buddha, nor are all characters at the same stage of spiritual development. Strong

shows how the past lives of the Buddha give his present life "karmic depth" (p. 17), adding complexity to relationships between the Buddha and his mother, his son, and his cousin, Devadatta. The *Jatakas*, Strong argues, demonstrate the arduous process of spiritual perfection that a bodhisattva must undertake to become a Buddha. But they also demonstrate the Bodhisattva's imperfections. Strong describes these as a list of the Buddha's unwholesome deeds in his previous lives (pp. 33-34). The balanced treatment and interesting contrasts make *The Buddha* highly readable as a middle path between historical and mythical descriptions of the Buddha.

In contrast to academic bibliographies based on Sanskrit and Pali sources or creative biographies by ancient and modern Buddhists, Strong's book is not linear. He successfully interweaves many versions of the Buddha's biography in order to expose "the complexities of the biographical process" (pp. xii-xiii).[2] Strong describes the sacred biography of the Buddha in three layers: fragments, autonomous scriptural stories, and vernacular traditions (pp. 4-5). These layers are given equal weight throughout the text, as Strong consciously avoids favoring one side of the dichotomy between either early and late or canonical and vernacular. The particular sources of his alternative versions are not clearly noted (although they are carefully referenced in the notes), which might at first appear to be a weakness in his book. But this creates seamless movement from one version to the next, bringing a richness to the stories. And this approach allows Strong to bring forward poignant narratives that are markedly different from the linear, canonical accounts most often read by students of Buddhism. Good examples of these are the stories in which Yasodhara parallels the Buddha's ascetic progress (p. 58) or Queen Maya thinks that her son is dead (p. 64). By refusing to identify his sources explicitly at every occurrence, Strong allows his narrative to flow more smoothly than a rigorously documented text—a tactic appropriate both for readability and for his method. Readers are not given a chance to categorize each story before reading it. Overall, it is a very refreshing effect.

My critiques of this work are minor, dealing with terminology and the use of this book in a classroom setting. Strong creates several terms. Some, such as "centripetal Buddha" and "centrifugal Buddha" (pp. 121-122), are highly successful, interesting, and easy to remember. But others are controversial, confusing, or obscure. For example, he uses the term "collective karma," which has acquired a loaded meaning among modern Buddhists in connection with the karma of a "society" or "nation" as

a whole. Other terms, such as “nexus,” might better capture the karmic depth across lives and karmic relations among lives (p. 18).

Strong uses the words “karmalogical,” “cosmological,” and “dharmalogical” to describe knowledges of the awakened Buddha (pp. 74-75). “Dharmalogical” knowledge refers to reality as-it-is. There are three doctrinal possibilities that describe reality as-it-is, depending on each version of the story: cutting off the influxes (*asravas*), the four noble truths, or dependent origination (p. 75). “Karmalogical” knowledge refers to the Buddha’s insight into his own previous lives. And “cosmological” knowledge refers to his insight into the previous lives of all other beings. These words, however, are easily confused with the three important and necessary super-knowledges that he discusses immediately before them (p. 73). Strong’s use of language, here, adds nothing to clarity.

As I have already observed, Strong suggests the word “rupalogical” for the physical dimension of the Buddha’s relics (p. 147). The use of this word is just one of many ways in which he brings out “somatic”—the bodily, physical, or embodied—parts of the Buddha story. For example, Strong talks about three *nirvanas*: the extinction of the *asravas*, of the body (*parinirvana*), and of the relics (p. 126). His premise that *nirvana* has a strongly physical dimension is seldom encountered in Buddhist studies. Instead, the latter stresses knowledge or insight of enlightenment. Strong’s focus on somatic expressions of the Buddha’s enlightenment is interesting but obscure; more important features are myth, ritual, and art (pp. 63-64, 141).

In using Strong’s work in a classroom setting, I foresee some obstacles. I have already noted that his presentation of many stories is a great strength of *The Buddha*; unfortunately, this approach assumes some general knowledge of Buddhism. If students need lectures and additional reading material to benefit from *The Buddha*, this decreases its usefulness as an introductory text. On the other hand, if Strong responds to this difficulty by

prefacing his work with a basic outline of the life story—a brief summary of the stories discussed under “Quest and Enlightenment” for example—it would defeat his stated aim of presenting parallel life stories in all their richness and variety. Although a simple linear preface would enable first-time students to enter the historical, academic, and methodological complexities and comparisons discussed in Strong’s introduction, it would defeat his purpose of presenting the complexities of the Buddha’s narrative. This is a perennial problem in teaching religions. How can teachers provide a sophisticated and nuanced view of Buddhism from the very beginning? Strong’s work does not solve this problem, but it does offer us a new choice. Although both teachers and students might have more difficulties at first, Strong’s nuanced and complex work is preferable to a single linear story.

To conclude, introducing students to Buddhism through story could be quite effective. Strong’s book presents an excellent and academically rigorous portrait of the Buddha, which is nonetheless accessible and highly readable. His method, the “middle way,” is successful. And his treatment retains the complexity of the many versions of the Buddha’s life story. Strong balances early and late stories, canonical and vernacular sources, and describes both the historical and the supernatural character of the Buddha. This book, though within the popular genre of biography, has far greater depth than its competitors.

Notes

[1]. For example, *Guide to Buddhist Religion* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981); *The Experience of Buddhism* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1994 and 2001); and several contributions in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 1987).

[2]. Strong refers to Alfred Foucher’s *The Life of the Buddha According to the Ancient Texts and Monuments of India* (1963); and E. J. Thomas’s *The Life of the Buddha as Legend and History* (1927).

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