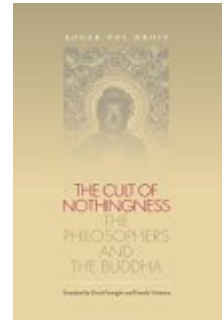




Roger-Pol Droit. *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. 263 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2776-5.



Reviewed by David R. Loy

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In May this year media headlines announced the discovery that Buddhists are happier. Smaller print summarized the results of new research into the effects of meditation on brain activity, behavior, and even immune responses to flu vaccine. Richard Davidson, director of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and a participant in Dharmasala meetings with the Dalai Lama, used new scanning techniques to examine the brain activity of experienced meditators. MRI scanners and EEGs showed dramatic changes in brain function, including high activity in brain centers associated with positive emotions. Similar results were also achieved with new meditators. Although still provisional, these findings led the philosopher Owen Flanagan to comment in *New Scientist* magazine: "The most reasonable hypothesis is that there's something about conscientious Buddhist practice that results in the kind of happiness we all seek." [1]

Such scientific results show a rather different perception of Buddhism than the understanding that horrified Westerners throughout most of the

nineteenth century. Buddhism today is usually seen as a kind of pragmatic therapy that cures or reduces suffering, but from approximately 1820 to 1890--the period of focus for Droit's book--Europe was haunted by the nightmare of an alternative religion that denied existence and recommended annihilation. *The Cult of Nothingness* summarizes and analyzes the history of this (mis)understanding. He concludes that it had less to do with the rudimentary state of Buddhist studies during that period than with Europe's fears about its own incipient nihilism, which would later ripen into the horrors of the twentieth century. "Thinking they were talking about the Buddha, Westerners were talking about themselves" (p. 21).

At the end of the eighteenth century, new translations of Indian texts were exciting European intellectuals, giving rise to hopes for another Renaissance greater than the one that had resulted from the late-medieval rediscovery of Greek texts. But it never happened. About 1820, when scholarly research first clarified the distinction from Brahmanism, "Buddhism" became construct-

ed as a religion that, amazingly, worshiped nothingness, and European commentators reacted in horror.

In their descriptions of nirvana, earlier scholars such as Francis Buchanan and Henry Thomas Colebrooke had been careful to deny that it was equivalent to annihilation. Their influence, however, was overwhelmed by the philosophical impact of Hegel and later the unsurpassed authority of Eugene Burnouf at the Collège de France. Hegel established the strong link with Nichts that would endure throughout most of the century. Instead of benefiting from the best scholarship then available, he relied on earlier sources such as de Guignes and the Abbots Banier and Grosier, evidently because their views of Buddhism fit better into his equation of pure Being with pure Nothingness. In Hegel's system this equation signified the advent of interiority, a "lack of determination" that was not really atheistic or nihilistic in the modern sense--more like the negative theology of Rhineland mystics such as Meister Eckhart. Later, Burnouf's *Introduction a l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien* (1844) was immensely influential because it provided the first rigorous study of the Buddha's teachings, thus taking Buddhist studies to a new level of sophistication, but one which firmly established the nihilistic specter: despite making cautious qualifications due to the West's still-limited knowledge, Burnouf did not hesitate to identify nirvana with total annihilation.

Burnouf's scholarly objectivity was soon supplemented by apologetic and missionary ardor. Catholic preachers such as Ozanam declared that, behind his serene mask, the Buddha was Satan himself in a new incarnation. The Buddha's cult of nothingness aroused in Felix Neve's soul the need to liberate Buddhist peoples from their errors, weakness, and immobility. Victor Cousins, who played a major role in establishing philosophical education in mid-century France, and who proclaimed that Sanskrit texts were worthy of Western philosophical attention, nevertheless followed

Burnouf in reacting against the Buddhist system: it was not only an anti-religion but a counter-world, a threat to order. His follower Barthelemy Saint-Hilaire took a further step and denied that such a "deplorable and absurd" faith could be philosophically relevant, even asking whether such a strange phenomenon meant that human nature in India "is still the same nature we feel within ourselves," since Buddhism's "gloomy meaning" led only to "moral suicide" (pp. 122-23). Ernest Renan called Buddha "the atheistic Christ of India" and attacked his revolting "Gospel of Nihilism" (p. 120).

Schopenhauer discovered in Buddhism many of his favorite themes--renunciation, compassion, negation of the will to live--but relatively late, so, according to Droit, Buddhism had no significant influence on his system. However, his annexation of Buddhist principles brought the Buddhist challenge back to Europe, from missionary conversion to counteracting home-grown nihilism. Ever the philosopher, however, Schopenhauer was careful to say that nirvana could only be nothingness "for us," since the standpoint of our own existence does not allow us to say anything more about it. Would that other commentators had been so sensible!

The nihilistic understanding of Buddhism had a significant impact on Arthur de Gobineau's *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853), which would become enormously influential for the Nazis and other twentieth-century racists. For Gobineau, humanity was rushing to perdition and nothingness due to degeneration caused by intermingling of the races. He viewed Buddhism as the effort of an inferior people to overthrow the racially superior Aryan Brahmins. The failure of this attempt--the fact that Buddhism was largely eliminated from India--was somewhat inconsistent with his own historical pessimism, which accepted the inevitability of decline; but it may have encouraged the Nazis to attempt their own pro-

gram of extermination for the sake of racial purity.

Nietzsche, too, accepted the view of Buddhism as aspiring to nothingness, although for him it was the similarity with Christianity, not the difference, that was the problem. Despite the undoubted value of Buddhism as a moderate and hygienic way of living that denied transcendence and viewed the world from more rigorous psychological and physiological perspectives, in the end the choice is between Buddhism, Schopenhauer, India, weakness, and peaceful inactivity, or strength, conflict, Europe, pain, and tragedy. Buddhism's spread in Europe was unfortunate, Nietzsche believed, since "Nostalgia for nothingness is the negation of tragic wisdom, its opposite" (p. 148).

About 1864 the annihilationist view of Buddhism began to decline. Carl F. Koppen's *The Religion of the Buddha* (2 vols., 1857-59), very influential in the 1860s and 70s, emphasized the Buddha's ethical revolution, which affirmed a human deliverance and proclaimed human equality. Although literary fascination with the worship of nothingness continued, by the early 1890s emphasis was on Buddhism as a path of knowledge and wisdom, a "neo-Buddhist" view attacked by a still-active Burnouf. In place of Christian apologetics, there was a growing tendency to think of different religions as converging, as Vivekananda argued at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago (although elsewhere he imagined Buddhism as responsible for various spiritual degenerations). As Droit summarizes: "The cult of nothingness was ending.... The time of wars was soon to come. Another cult of nothingness was beginning" (p. 160).

He argues persuasively that the issue at stake was always Europe's own identity. With "Buddhism" Europe constructed a mirror in which it dared not recognize itself. (Here perhaps Droit could have strengthened his case with some more reflections on Darwin, the death of God, and Eu-

rope's own hopes for/fears of a religion of Reason without transcendence.)

"When the question of the Buddha's atheism arose, it was the atheism of the Europeans that was really in question. No one really believed, and almost no one ever said, that the beliefs of the Buddhists on the other side of the world were going to come and wreak havoc among the souls of the West. It was not a conversion, a corrosion, a 'contamination' of any kind that was threatening, coming from outside. It was in Europe itself that the enemy, and the danger, were to be found." (p. 163)

This was not only a threat to the foundations of one's personal belief-system, but a challenge that threatened to undermine social order. "The nothingness of order corresponded to the nothingness of being. Once again, this nothingness was not the equivalent of a pure and simple absence. It was supposed to undo and disorganize. It was dangerous because it shattered, it leveled, it instigated anarchy" (p. 165).

Tragically, the decline of this nihilistic view of Buddhism was accompanied by the unprecedented triumph of a more active nihilism in the following century, with well over a hundred million war-dead, two-thirds of them civilian non-combatants.

Today, to say it again, Buddhism for us has become a pragmatic and non-metaphysical kind of therapy that reduces suffering. But how confident should we be about this view, given how well it reflects the postmodern West's own pragmatic, anti-metaphysical, therapeutic self-understanding? If we cannot leap over our own shadow, must we resign ourselves to "misinterpretations" of Buddhism that always reflect our own prejudices? Or is "Buddhism" better understood as the still-continuing history of its interpretations? Interpretations that must reflect our prejudices because they reflect our own needs.

The Cult of Nothingness concludes with a 65-page chronological bibliography of Western

works on Buddhism, most of it derived from a more extensive (15,073 titles!) bibliography compiled by Shinsho Hanayama and published by the Hokuseido Press in 1961. Droit claims that his own bibliography is almost complete for 1638-1860, omitting only more specialized works on archaeology, philology, etc. for 1860-1890. The translation is clear and fluent, although I have not compared it with the French original. And, although not a specialist in this field, I do not doubt that this work is indispensable to anyone studying the history of the Western reception of Buddhism.

Note

[1]. The research results are summarized in *Dharma Life* 21 (Autumn 2003): pp. 8-9.

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

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