

Malcolm Voyce. *Foucault, Buddhism and Disciplinary Rules*. Routledge 2016. 182 pp. \$149.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781409410805).

The Abrahamic religions rest on an implicit metaphysics of presence: the presence (‘existence’) of God, the presence of the eternal individual soul, the presence of a unified, legible meaning of founding texts (the Torah, the Koran, the New Testament), the presence of knowable, God-given moral laws, and so forth. Buddhism, however, openly embraces a metaphysics of absence: the absence of a canonical founding text, the absence of a permanent self or soul, the absence of all stability in a universe in flux, constantly being roiled by the inexorable law of cause and effect (*karma*, in Sanskrit), the absence of a blissful otherworldly afterlife that would promise relief from the wheel of birth and rebirth (*samsāra*), etc. And if Judaism, Islam and Christianity all stress the desirability and emancipatory potential of faith in God and submission to His will, then Buddhism merely promises relief from suffering in *this* world (*nirvāṇa*) via enlightenment (*bodhi*): the condition of having overcome craving, desire, and attachment to form through a rational understanding of the world just as it is in all its unadorned thusness (*tathātā*).

If, *per impossibile*, secular postmodernism espoused a religion, it would probably be Buddhism. Jean-François Lyotard famously defined the situation of knowledge in the so-called ‘postmodern’ world as an ‘end of grand narratives.’ The metaphysics of constant presence and universality in Western religion, philosophy, psychology, law and ethics is undoubtedly the grandest narrative of them all. And perhaps no thinker of the twentieth century was more effective at subverting that narrative than Michel Foucault. Although Foucault had very little to say about Buddhism or any other Eastern religion, his rejection of the ‘traditional [Western] goal of ultimate, fundamental truth’ in favor of the goal of tracing multiple discourses of truth back to ‘countless lost events, without a landmark or point of reference,’ almost begs to be compared to the theoretical foundations of Buddhism’s *karma-samsara* complex. Likewise, his oft-quoted thesis that power relations are circular, since the individual subject should not be regarded as a natural entity, but rather as both an effect and a cause of those relations, bears an uncanny resemblance to the Buddha’s doctrine of ‘no-self’ (*anātman*) adrift in a karmic universe.

In *Foucault, Buddhism and Disciplinary Rules*, Malcolm Voyce does readers the great service of drawing attention to the close affinity between Buddhism and Foucault’s thought on the formation and meaning of subjectivity. At a more general level, the book is a rare, but welcome, attempt to achieve genuine cross-cultural understanding on terms that do not assume that the West’s preference (or fetish) for a discourse of universal categories is indispensable to rationality.

The foregoing paragraphs speak of Buddhism as if it were a monolithic unity, but in truth there have been at least as many different schools and sects of Buddhism as there have been different schools and sects of Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism. The religion’s major branches include Theravāda (or ‘Teaching of the Elders’), predominant in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Burma and Laos; Mahāyāna (or ‘Great Way’), predominant in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam; and Vajrayāna (or ‘Diamond Way’) practiced in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Mongolia. Differences among Buddhist denominations aside, it is also important to distinguish, *within* each tradition, between what the sociologist of religion Peter Berger calls the ‘syncretistic Buddhism of the masses’ and the Buddhism of monastic intellectuals who consider themselves to be the ‘carriers’ of the authentic teachings of the Buddha.

The various Buddhism(s) of the masses include many irrational elements, such as belief in gods, ghosts, and demons, the efficacy of prayers, and so forth. In contrast, the typical Sangha (‘community,’ from the Sanskrit *saṃgha*) of Buddhist monks or nuns banishes all religious attitudes

except the rational understanding of the world as it is, together with an ongoing personal commitment to rational action aimed at achieving such understanding. For these monastic intellectuals, the question of God's existence is not so much answered as transcended, or rather, is put aside as being irrelevant to the individual quest for enlightenment.

Voyce wisely avoids selecting any one strand of Buddhist thought as representative of 'Buddhism in general.' Instead, his analysis bypasses popular forms of Buddhism and assumes, 'for heuristic purposes,' the existence of a *generic* form of Buddhist Sangha (15). Sanghas are voluntary associations bound together by a regulatory framework called the *Vinaya* (the Pāli and Sanskrit word for 'discipline'). Originally passed down orally from the Buddha to his disciples, the *Vinaya* contains a set of rules known as *Prātimokṣa*. These rules regulate nearly every aspect of monastic life, from the morally or socially significant (e.g., prohibitions against killing, theft and sexual activity) to the seemingly trivial (e.g., the correct size of a toothpick) (13).

Voyce constructs what amounts to a Weberian ideal-typical community of Buddhist monks to dispel the claim often made in traditional Western scholarship that the *Vinaya*'s rules constitute 'a rational and self-sufficient code that required obedience and conformity of behaviour' (37). This other scholarship he calls 'Buddhist Legal Rationalism' (38). In chapter 3, Voyce ably demonstrates that most previous Western interpretations of the *Vinaya* are biased by a dogmatic tendency to interpret all non-Western social phenomena through a positivistic European framework of reference that distorts and conceals more than it reveals.

The book's project unfolds at two different levels: the narrowly historiographical or exemplary, and the universally valid. At the first level, Voyce's primary concern is to establish an alternative, non-legalistic interpretation of the *Vinaya* in which its rules operated historically as elements of 'a "training scheme" that shaped monastics by forming their subjectivity through a degree of freedom' (1). Crucial to this thesis is chapter 7's comparison between Western Christianity's attitude towards the practice of confession and that of the Buddhist Sangha. In the former context, especially in Catholicism, the confessional operates as a sort of juridical venue for bearing witness against oneself because of one's sins, which are regarded as morally 'bad' and hence in need of expiation. Whereas in monastic Buddhism, confession in the face of the community is regarded as a 'spiritual' exercise in the sense of that word used by Michel Foucault in his lectures on the *Hermeneutics of the Subject*: 'the search, practice and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth' (6).

In the Buddhist practice of confession in the Sangha, the self reflects on the extent to which (if at all) its own transgressions of the *Vinaya* are merely 'unskillful [not bad] behavior' that distracts from its own quest for enlightenment (107-08). Indeed, chapter 8's discussion of 'rules and transgressions' correctly points out that slavish attachment to the text of moral rules (including even those in the *Vinaya*) is regarded as an impediment to enlightenment, so much so that for some people transgression itself constitutes an alternative path to the goal of spiritual development (119). Voyce even cites stories of fully enlightened individuals (so-called 'mad monks') for whom transgressions of the rules became routine occurrences (114). It is as if the *Vinaya*, instead of announcing an eternal code imposing sacred duties, such as the Ten Commandments, were merely a ladder to be thrown away, *à la* Wittgenstein, after one has used it to climb up to enlightenment.

Passing from the level of ethical anthropology to that of metaethics, Voyce rightly observes that the standard Western interpretation of the *Vinaya* as a binding legal or ethical text elides the extremely important distinction between the general and the particular. The Western tradition is legalistic: it tends to make universal statements about ethically charged situations, enclosing each situation within the abstraction of a 'type of case' governed by a general moral law. But ethical discourse in Buddhism is quite different. To the extent that it has an ethical theory at all, Western

scholars are inclined to reduce Buddhism to a mere instance of the categories ‘consequentialism’ or ‘virtue ethics’ (87-88). Voyce persuasively rebuts these claims as Western-centric distortions. The book asserts instead that Buddhism can be characterized as adopting ‘ethical particularism,’ which ‘follows a case-by-case approach to ethical reasoning [that is] context-sensitive and [has] no deontic consequences independent of different contexts’ (129). On this view, the *Vinaya* is merely a record of ‘particular choices made at previous moments in time and space as regards particular situations and character needs’ (49) – a record to be consulted, to be sure, but not ‘followed’ in the manner of a binding set of laws or even common law precedents.

Akin to the Western concept of ‘situational ethics,’ Voyce’s concept of ethical particularism implies that in Buddhism every single moment is, ethically speaking, a tub standing on its own contextual bottom. With the assistance of Foucault’s distinction between ‘morals,’ having to do with norms, rules, values and injunctions, and ‘ethics,’ having to do with ‘practices, techniques and discourses by which an individual may transform themselves through freedom’ (81), chapter 6 shows that the *Vinaya* constitutes but one element in a typical Buddhist monk’s essentially aesthetic development of himself into an enlightened, compassionate being (*bodhisattva*). On this question, Voyce does well to demonstrate a strong analogy between the Buddhist Sangha and Foucault’s analysis of the ancient Greek and Roman practice of ‘taking care of the self,’ in the sense of the ethico-aesthetic transformation of the self through the exercise of freedom and *parrhēsia* (Greek for frank and truthful speech) (7-8).

Although one might have wished for more explanatory material about certain obscure Buddhist terms and historical narratives, there is no question that *Foucault, Buddhism and Disciplinary Rules* makes an important contribution to Buddhist studies, Foucault studies, and the small but growing practice of cross-cultural philosophizing. Given the burgeoning complex of seemingly irreversible factors and tendencies that go under the name ‘globalism’ these days, the philosophical world—which should include the concerns and work of *all* philosophers, East and West, North and South—needs more books of this sort.

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