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# BOOK REVIEW

by ULRICH PAGEL

**Heinz BECHERT** [et al.]: *Der Buddhismus I: Der Indische Buddhismus und seine Verzweigungen*, Die Religionen der Menschheit, Band 24.1, Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer 2000, 512 pp.

The book under review constitutes a collaborative effort aimed at surveying the doctrinal and historical developments of Buddhism on the Indian Subcontinent, in Central Asia, Nepal and South-East Asia. It is the first part of a trilogy, within the *Die Religionen der Menschheit* series, specifically devoted to Buddhist thought in Asia and beyond. The series itself, which has so far produced no less than 27 volumes, was conceived in the 1950s and sets out to cover all the major world religions. Two previous publications in this series have dealt with Buddhism in some detail. First, there is André BAREAU's description of mainly Indian Buddhism in *Die Religionen Indiens III, Buddhismus, Jinismus, Primitivvölker*, vol. 13, (Stuttgart 1964), and second, Giuseppe TUCCI and Walter HEISSIG's exposition of Buddhism in Tibet and Mongolia in *Die Religionen Tibets und der Mongolei*, vol. 20, (Stuttgart 1964). Although still valuable works of reference, in important areas the views expressed in these two publications have been superseded by modern research and require therefore urgent revision. However, the new trilogy is not merely designed to provide the necessary adjustments and revision to these previous volumes, but aims to produce "eine neue Gesamtdarstellung, die in erster Linie den inneren Zusammenhang der einzelnen Formen des Buddhismus berücksichtigt" (p. 14). This review will evaluate in particular whether this ambitious goal has been met and examine the extent to which its expositions reflect current research.

Following the conception of previous publications in the series, the editor commissioned several scholars to write separate chapters on the various facets of Buddhism in the regions covered. Mirroring the traditional division of Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha, the first three contributions deal with the Doctrine of the Buddha (Johannes BRONKHORST, pp. 23-213), the Pantheon of Buddhism (Hans-Joachim KLIMKEIT, pp. 215-279) and the Buddhist Community (Petra KIEFFER-PÜLZ, pp. 281-402). The remaining chapters describe Buddhism of Nepal (Siegfried LIENHARD, pp. 403-419), the expansion of Indian Buddhism to Afghanistan and Central Asia (Jens-Uwe HARTMANN, pp. 421-439), Buddhism in mainland South-East Asia (Ian-William MABBETT, pp. 441-470) and the doctrino-historical developments on the Indonesian archipelago and the Malayan peninsular (Jacob ENSINK, pp. 471-500). Since many of the authors are renowned for their expertise in the respective areas, the publisher had reason to assume that the resulting book would become a landmark publication on Buddhism in the German-speaking world.

To be sure, *Der Buddhismus I* contains several excellent contributions that give well-balanced and up-to-date accounts of Buddhism in the regions covered. However, one would be hard-pressed to call it a comprehensive and integrated exposition. First, there appears to have been little effort to coordinate the content of the various chapters. Several topics are covered twice (The Doctrine of the Buddha, pp. 23-213, 231-35),

terminology is not always consistent (e.g., *saṃjñā*: ‘Vorstellung’ (p.98), ‘Wahrnehmung’ (p.233); *mairī*: ‘Güte’ (p.132), ‘Liebe’ (pp.235, 486); *manas*: ‘das Denken’ (pp.50, 84, 99), ‘Geistiger Sinn’ (p.234)) and occasionally the reader is offered variant interpretations of doctrine and historical events (The Date of the Buddha, pp.216, 281). While these flaws did not escape the eye of the editor and are openly acknowledged in the Introduction (p.20), all responsibility is apportioned to the authors “(die) sich im Hinblick auf die Abgrenzung ihres Themas nicht immer an die Planung gehalten (haben) (p.14).” While this may be true, one would think that the task of establishing consistency and conceptual integration falls within the sphere of editorial management. One is also struck by how little attention was given in some of the geographic chapters to the underlying doctrinal, social and historical dynamics that propelled and shaped the spread of Buddhism in these regions. Although the reader is offered much interesting detail about specific historical events that influenced local developments, very little time is spent discussing the factors that rendered Buddhism so attractive to a particular society and/or culture. This would seem a major shortcoming in a publication that purports to be a “Gesamtdarstellung”, focusing on the “inneren Zusammenhänge”. The publication suffers also from a lack of maps. Being replete with references to ancient localities that have long since disappeared from modern cartography, most chapters would have benefited from the inclusion of graphic aids indicating, for example, the location of archæological sites, expanses of kingdoms, etc. In view of the book’s introductory nature, likely to attract expert and general readers alike, these are significant editorial flaws.

But let us now turn to the individual contributions. The book opens with a detailed account of the doctrine of the Buddha, spanning more than 200 pages. Its author structures his exposition in three parts: the doctrine as taught by the historical Buddha, its systematisation by the Abhidharma and, finally, Mahāyāna. Before embarking on the exposition proper, BRONKHORST lays down his methodology for stratifying the content of the Nikāya (pp.26-33). In a nutshell, he proceeds on the assumption that all sermons attributed to the Śākyamuni were indeed uttered by the historical Buddha (p.31). Their authenticity is only called into question where contradictions prevail in other canonical statements, or where one meets with enumerative structures which he attributes to the later scholastic tradition (p.32). BRONKHORST, of course, is not the only scholar to adopt this approach even though there are good arguments against it. While he duly refers to publications where variant opinions are expressed, his failure to engage with this knotty problem in detailed fashion somewhat detracts from the persuasiveness of his arguments. BRONKHORST then proceeds to discuss the content and development of early Buddhist doctrines. The most valuable component here is probably the inclusion of non-Buddhist material in the purview of the analysis (pp.187-198). While not all scholars will necessarily agree with his conclusions (e.g., “die Idee einer in Worten (*sic*) gefassten erlösenden Erkenntnis wird kaum als ursprünglich buddhistisch anzusehen sein,” p.73), it is nevertheless interesting and well-informed. He pays particular attention to the roles played by asceticism and meditation in the shaping of early Buddhist thought and practice (pp.63-73). This section is largely derived from BRONKHORST’s controversial earlier work on these topics which has been adequately reviewed elsewhere (e.g., P. OLIVELLE, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115.1 (1995): 162-4; S. COLLINS, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1987: 373-5). In the third part, he proceeds to discuss the systematisation of the

Buddha's teaching as contained in the (Sarvāstivāda) Abhidharma. This is overall the strongest component of the chapter, skilfully bringing together his own findings as well as recent work done by others (Cox, Jaini, Mimaki, Willemen, Dessein and, of course, Frauwallner) on *abhidharma* to produce an account that is well-informed and lucid in presentation. A substantial portion is devoted to the *dharma*-theory and its relationship both to nikāyic materials as well as to non-Buddhist (above all Vaiśeṣika) traditions (pp. 94-118). A word of caution, however, is called for when BRONKHORST ponders the forces that propelled Indian Buddhists towards, as he sees it, the "rationalisation of the Doctrine" (p. 122) in the *abhidharma* (pp. 121-127). This process of rationalisation, he argues, was triggered through contact with the Greek debating traditions in Northwest India (pp. 126-7). As evidence for religio-intellectual interaction between the Greeks and Sarvāstivāda *ābhidhārmikas*, he points to the *Milindapañha*. Implicitly, BRONKHORST considers this text to be a document that reflects historical verifiable trends. It is worth recalling, however, that neither the origin nor the scholastic affiliation of this composite work has been conclusively resolved (G. FUSSMAN: "*Upāyakaūśalya*: l'implantation du Bouddhisme au Gandhāra," *Bouddhisme et cultures locales*, Paris 1994, p. 27 – on the broader question of Greek influence on Buddhist culture, see FUSSMAN, *ibid.*, pp. 25-30). Problematic is also the way in which BRONKHORST presents his Greco-Buddhist hypothesis. Initially, he is careful to qualify his views as speculation ("Es wird wohl nicht möglich sein, diesen Einfluss von Seiten der Griechen endgültig nachzuweisen", p. 125). However, only two pages later, without citing further evidence, he boldly concludes that the Greeks may well have engaged the Sarvāstivāda in debates "who apparently sought to defend themselves against Greek attacks" (p. 127). Eventually, this culminates in the following statement (p. 187): "It was revealed that this school (the Sarvāstivādin), possibly in a decisive manner, was moulded by the Greek culture in Northwest India, especially through its prevailing debating tradition." It would have been preferable if such a claim, uncorroborated, as it is, by hard evidence, would not have found its way into a publication that is likely to become a principal source of reference for Buddhist Studies in the West.

BRONKHORST's contribution concludes with a description of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Like the preceding sections, although based on a rather limited selection of primary sources and bereft of any major new ideas, it is well-written and incorporates many references to recent work in the field. However, even though he is obviously aware of the current state of research, he does not appear to assimilate fully its impact. For example, like many scholars before him, BRONKHORST continues to associate Mahāsaṅghika doctrines with the origin of the Mahāyāna (p. 127). Elsewhere, he argues, apparently ignoring the persuasive arguments of Harrison, Schopen and others, that we may still have to look for the origin of the Mahāyāna among the laity (p. 128). Equally perplexing, in particular against the well-documented efflorescence of abhidharmic scholarship around the beginning of the Christian era, is his claim that the Mahāyāna emerged "at a time when the development of the Buddhist doctrine beyond the Mahāyāna had largely lost its impulse" (p. 131). His proposition that, in the context of early *prajñāpāramitā* texts, the concept of Inconceivability should be interpreted as a reference to the Highest Reality ('das höchste Sein') and, inspired by Upaniṣadic thought, is to be identified with space (*ākāśa*) (p. 147) is also problematic. Neither is the term "highest reality" attested in the passages quoted, nor would it seem advisable

to characterise *ākāśa* as complete Nothingness (‘das völlige Nichts’) in a Buddhist context (p. 147). For the role of meditation in the conception of the Mahāyāna (p. 131-2), see Florin DELEANU’s fine recent study: “A Preliminary Study on Meditation and the Beginnings of Mahāyāna Buddhism,” *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University for the Academic Year 1999*, Tokyo 2000, pp. 65-123. BRONKHORST moves to more secure ground when he turns to the doctrines of the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra schools, even though he has little new to add to the discussion. But here too we meet with sweeping statements that are difficult to uphold. For example, in his conclusion we learn that “die Anhänger des Śrāvakayāna kritisierten natürlich die neuen Lehrreden des Mahāyāna” (p. 186) without being told where such critiques could be found. Broad, unsubstantiated statements of that kind render BRONKHORST’s portrayal of (Mahāyāna) Buddhism, in spite of his fine and imaginative scholarship, often insufficiently nuanced and mono-dimensional. To illustrate this point, I shall quote a statement with which he introduces his final concluding remarks (p. 184): “Man könnte sich tatsächlich kaum grössere Unterschiede vorstellen als die zwischen bestimmten im Mahāyāna gängigen Ideen und Praktiken, und denen, die den Abhidharma-Buddhismus kennzeichnen. Und beide unterscheiden sich grundsätzlich von dem, was der historische Buddha gepredigt hat.” Clearly, such simplistic evaluations – located here in a pivotal position at the end of the exposition – ignore the underlying doctrinal continuity that has connected the various phases and manifestations of Buddhism for centuries and are therefore hardly conducive to promote a more finely-calibrated and sophisticated perception of Buddhism.

The second chapter describes the Buddhist pantheon. It begins with an account of the life of the historical Buddha and then proceeds to portray the roles, attributes and iconographic manifestations of the most important buddhas and bodhisattvas. For many reasons, this contribution is by far the weakest component of the publication. KLIMKEIT’s account of Śākyamuni’s life reads as if it was composed in the 1950s. His description is largely based on publications produced in the first half of the 20th century (eg., Beal (1875), Windish (1908) Thomas (1931)) and fails to take into account the monumental studies on this topic carried out by André BAREAU. As a result, his description is dated, largely uncritical and ill-balanced. The debate surrounding the date of the Buddha, for example, is dealt with in a single paragraph (p. 216) and does not even allude to the multifarious complexities that surround this issue. To make matters worse, his contribution contains a number of factual inaccuracies. In his introduction, for example, we read that: “Jeder Kanon (der buddhistischen Schulen) umfasst drei Körbe” (p. 215) or, further below, without qualification, that the *Lalitavistara* is to be considered a Mahāyāna work (p. 220). Equally problematic are his sweeping cross-references to Christianity. He calls Devadatta the “späteren Judas der buddhistischen Gemeinde” (p. 224) and refers repeatedly to ‘parallels’ in the accounts of the life of Christ (pp. 223-4), presumably suggesting that they belong to a shared narrative tradition. (For an early, but still authoritative treatment of this question, see É. LAMOTTE, *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*, Louvain 1958, pp. 739-48). KLIMKEIT concludes his summary of Śākyamuni’s biography with a three-page account of the doctrine of the Buddha. I do not understand why this section was allowed to feature in the published version of this chapter. Not only is BRONKHORST’s treatment infinitely superior, but his presentation also contains some questionable interpretations (see, for

example, the Noble Eightfold Path (p. 232) and Dependent Co-origination (p. 234). The next section, devoted to the predecessors of the historical Buddha, is also disappointing. Essentially, it is an uncritical summary of von SIMSON's article "Die Buddhas der Vorzeit: Versuch einer astralmythologischen Deutung", *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 7 (1981) which correlates the seven Buddhas from Vipassin to Gotama with the days of the week and their associated seven planets (p. 237). In a sense, this approach sets a pattern for what is to follow: the majority of the remaining sections are little more than synopses of previously published work. Somewhat surprisingly, KLIMKEIT felt particularly inspired by the *Encyclopedia of Religion*. In total, he develops seven sections from the entries of this publication, which itself is not exactly renowned as an authoritative source. Those sections that are not derived from the *Encyclopedia of Religion* are largely taken from Günther GRÖNBOLD's "Die Mythologie des indischen Buddhismus" (*Götter und Mythen des indischen Subkontinents*, Stuttgart 1984), to which he makes no less than 34 references. I do not think it necessary to dwell any longer on this rather disheartening contribution. It will have become clear that KLIMKEIT was hardly the ideal choice for this potentially interesting and certainly important topic that has attracted so much competent scholarship over the past 30 years.

The third chapter of *Der Buddhismus I* is devoted to the Buddhist community in India and Sri Lanka. KIEFFER-PÜLZ's exposition covers practically all aspects of Buddhist monastic life, including the origin and spread of the schools, the geographic location of the individual Saṅghas, a sketch of the factors that distinguished Mahāyāna from non-Mahāyāna communities as well as a detailed description of the internal communal structures, administration, maintenance, legal proceedings and organisation, including an account of the principal religious activities and ceremonies conducted in the monasteries themselves. Bringing together the latest archæological, textual and anthropological findings, her treatment is replete with interesting observations about the evolution of the Saṅgha that are skilfully woven into a insightful portrayal of Buddhist monastic life in South Asia. If there is any flaw in KIEFFER-PÜLZ's presentation, it is perhaps that she gives only scant attention to the spiritual motives that inspired monastic life, at least in its early phase, and their interaction with the more formal aspects of the proceedings of the Saṅgha. On the whole, one is told little about the religious inspirations underlying the adaptation of the specific ceremonies and practices and their impact on monastic training. This, however, being outside the purview of her analysis, does not distract significantly from what is otherwise an extremely well-researched and carefully formulated account of the development, manifestations and day-to-day management of monastic affairs, one which will remain valuable for many years to come.

The remaining chapters in the book cover the Buddhist traditions of Nepal, Central Asia and South-East Asia. Although offering only bare outlines of the manifestation and historical events that led to the conversion of these regions, they are informative and contain, in the main, very accessible synopses of key developments.

LIENHARD's exposition of Buddhism in Nepal centres on the features of Buddhist monasteries (*bahī/bahā*) and the socio-religious roles of their inhabitants (Śākya-bhikṣu/Vajracārya). Although only 20 pages in length, it gives a coherent and well-balanced account of the principal features of the Newarī Buddhist communities.

HARTMANN's treatment of Central Asian Buddhism is chiefly based on Indian literary sources found in the oasis towns along the Silk Roads. While it covers many interesting historical processes, including the spread of the Buddhist schools in Central Asia, the linguistic developments in the region and the interaction between the various communities, it contains disappointingly little insight about the life, practices and beliefs adopted by Central Asian Buddhists. His analysis would have particularly benefited from a greater inclusion of art historical, architectural and Chinese literary evidence as this contains important clues about the features of religious life in Central Asia. Although it is occasionally slightly off the mark (e.g., "Werke in Khotanisch sind ausschliesslich an der Südroute bewahrt" (p. 433), see: O. SKJAERVØ: "Khotan: An Early Center of Buddhism in Chinese Turkestan," *Buddhism across Boundaries*, ed. J.R. MACREA & J. NATTIER, Taipei 1999, p. 288) or fails to convey the full historical complexity (e.g., "Die Sogder hatten ... ein Netzwerk von Handelsposten von Sarmarkand bis weit nach China hinein aufgebaut" (p. 434), see N. SIMS-WILLIAMS: "Sogdian Merchants in China and India", *Cina e Iran*, ed. A. CADONNA & L. LANCIOTTI, Firenze 1996, p. 56), HARTMANN's presentation is nevertheless a most welcome synopsis of that particular avenue of text-based research.

The essay on Buddhism in mainland South-East Asia is predominantly historical in character, tracing its spread from the 3rd to the 13th century among the Pyu, Mon, Cham and Khmer people in Burma, Thailand, South Vietnam and Cambodia. Like the preceding geographic chapters, it abounds with a wealth of insightful observations, offering a balanced and informed summary of key developments. While I am not in a position to evaluate the detail of MABBETT's account, it possesses the hallmarks of a well-researched, reliable treatment, where data from a wide variety of sources, including archæological, epigraphical, historical and literary, is circumspectively woven together, to produce an account that is both perceptive and thoughtfully argued. In spite of the contribution's predominantly historical perspective, MABBETT also managed to include a sizable amount of information about prevailing Buddhist beliefs and practices in the region. His bibliographical references are generally up-to-date and reflect current research. I would only recommend the following articles, recently published by Peter SKILLING, for inclusion: "The Advent of Theravāda Buddhism to Mainland South-east Asia", *JIABS* 20.1 (1997): 93-107; "A Buddhist inscription from Go Xoai, Southern Vietnam and notes towards a classification of *ye dharmā* inscriptions", *80 pi śāstrācārya dr. prahsert na nagara: ruam pada khwam vijākāra dan charūk lae ekasāraporāṇa* [80 Years: A collection of articles on epigraphy and ancient documents published on the occasion of the celebration of the 80th birthday of Prof. Dr. Prasert Na Nagara], Bangkok, 21 March 2542 [1999], 1999, pp. 171-87; "New Pāli Inscriptions from South-east Asia", *Journal of the Pali Text Society* XXIII (1997): 123-57.

The final chapter deals with Buddhism on the Indonesian archipelago and Malayan peninsula. It covers four major aspects: Buddhist monuments of Central Java (pp. 475-8), Śivaism and Buddhism from the 10th to 16th century (pp. 479-84), Buddhist doctrines and beliefs (pp. 484-91) and Buddhism in Bali (492-6). Although ENSINK has gone to some lengths to provide an overview of historical, doctrinal and architectural developments in the region, his contribution suffers from structural imbalances and the reliance on dated research. Repeatedly, he supplies (sometimes in astonishing detail) information that is peripheral to developments while certain key data

is insufficiently explored. For example, almost three pages are devoted to the iconographic detail of Borobudur (pp.475-78), but no chronological framework of its construction is proffered. Also his analysis of the relationship between Śivaism and Buddhism in Java (based on an article published by ENSINK in 1978) is needlessly detailed, taking up almost a third of the chapter. On the other hand, local Buddhist beliefs, containing several variant concepts, should have been examined in greater depth (e.g., the correspondence between the *apramāṇa* and a set of *catur pāramitā* (p.487) or the Javanese perception of liberating insight (p.487)). In its present form, this section is unsatisfactory since it raises potentially interesting issues without context or explanation. ENSINK's bibliographic references cover mainly research published in the 1960s and 1970s, although some more recent materials are also included. In sum, while containing much useful information, because it is disjointed, unbalanced and somewhat dated in its presentation, this chapter fails to convince as a piece of scholarly research.

Finally, I wish to offer a few remarks about the overall production of the book. Although more than 500 pages in length, and replete with technical terms from a range of different languages, it is virtually free from typographical errors. It is however tainted by a series of mistakes in the internal page-referencing, particular notable in KIEFFER-PÜLZ's contribution. This was probably brought about by last-minute adjustments in the running pagination, since the discrepancy amounts invariably to three pages. The volume concludes with a ten-page Index prepared by K.H. GOLZIO. While useful as a general navigating tool, a publication of this breadth and depth would have deserved a more sophisticated point of access. For example, the index tells us that the Buddha is referred to on more than 100 pages (which is hardly surprising in a book on Buddhism) while many technical terms and a few key texts are not listed at all (e.g., *paratantra*, *śarīrapūjā*, *apramāṇa*, *Kāśyapaparivarta*, *Pratyutpannabuddhasammukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra*, etc). Nor has the content of the footnotes (almost 1000 in number) been included. Some technical terms are listed separately purely on the basis of spelling errors in the main body of the text (e.g., *saṃvṛtti(satya)* (*sic*) and *saṃvṛtisatya*).

If we now take stock and examine whether *Der Buddhismus I* has met its objective and provides "eine neue Gesamtdarstellung, die in erster Linie den inneren Zusammenhang der einzelnen Formen des Buddhismus berücksichtigt" we are left with very mixed feelings. On the one hand, the book is a clear advance over the previous publications in the series since it contains many sophisticated contributions that convey not only a good picture of modern research but also introduce several new ideas. While some of these ideas are controversial and unlikely to withstand the test of time, others may well receive general recognition. In this sense, it is a valuable addition to German-language publications on Buddhism. On the other hand, due to weak editorial management, occasionally accentuated by an overly narrow focus by the authors, the integrative objective to extrapolate the connections between the various forms of Buddhism remains largely unfulfilled. The individual chapters, obviously conceived in isolation from each other, contain few traces of intellectual cooperation and, as a result, fail to bring out the religio-cultural dynamics that propelled Buddhism across Asia for almost two millennia.