

Buddhist Scriptures as Literature

Ralph Flores, *Buddhist Scriptures as Literature: Sacred Rhetoric and the Uses of Theory*, New York: SUNY Press, 2008, 223pp, £32.50

reviewed by Will Buckingham

There is, no doubt, something ignoble about the habit of sniggering. Sniggering typically arises when there is a mismatch between a pervading climate of lofty moral seriousness and the infantile imagination of the one who sniggers. Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that there is not a single extant text in which the Buddha is recorded as having sniggered. One can imagine the Buddha chuckling or even chortling (perhaps even guffawing, if it is a good clean guffaw, a guffaw with a measure of restraint), but one cannot imagine him sniggering. The snigger takes its place alongside the snicker and the titter, a half-suppressed laugh that shows the one who laughs to be lacking in culture or refinement.

I confess to being an occasional sniggerer. As a child, I sniggered my way through endless church services. During my student days, I found myself having to suppress snickers and titters in darkened lecture rooms. And when I started to practise Buddhist meditation, I found that meditation halls had much the same effect upon me. I could be sitting there with a look of considerable nobility, whilst all around me were silent, and then a wink from a friend across the other side of the room would start me going, my shoulders heaving silently, desperately suppressing the base, jittery laugh that was trying to escape.

I am not proud to admit it, but there was at least one point in Ralph Flores' *Buddhist Scriptures as Literature: Sacred Rhetoric and the Uses of Theory* that I found myself suppressing a snigger. I will come to that which occasioned the sniggering later, but first it would be worth saying a little more about the book itself, an attempt to rethink what it might be to truly read Buddhist scriptures. Most Buddhists, most of the time, Flores contends, do not really read. They recite their texts, perhaps they treat them with reverence, wrapping them in silks and storing them with care, they discuss them 'in ways soothing to recent mindsets' (2), but the texts are not actually read. What interests Flores is the question of what it might be to approach Buddhist scriptures afresh, not as repositories of timeless truths, nor as mirrors of our own selves and our own preoccupations, neither as philosophy nor as doctrine nor as therapy, but instead as literature. Such an approach, Flores contends, is one that might permit us to apprehend the 'existential pathos behind the texts' formulaic repetitions' (9).

Literary fabrication has always been at the heart of the Buddhist tradition. The Buddha was, as Flores notes, a master of images, a storyteller par

excellence, and many tales from the Pāli Buddhist texts that are often read straight should be better read precisely as stories. The example that Flores gives is that of the well-known tale of Kisa Gotami, the bereaved mother who asks the Buddha to cure her sick child. The Buddha asks her to bring as medicine a mustard seed from a house in which no one has ever died. If she can find such a seed, the Buddha will make a medicine to cure her distress. Kisa Gotami goes from door to door and, as she does so, eventually learns that there is no house in which no one has died, that death is universal, and through this realisation her grief is, if not eradicated, at least diminished. Flores makes clear that the story does not ring true on several levels and points out that it is rather more convincing if understood as itself a kind of medicine, as a form of 'skilful means', rather than as an autobiographical or historical account.

Yet once one admits that, in dealing with a great deal of Buddhist literature, we are dealing not with Gradgrindish facts but instead with stories, Flores is well aware that questions concerning the orthodoxy of interpretation come to the fore, questions about the ways in which the reading of stories is policed. For if the guardians of orthodoxies of all kinds have long recognised that they need stories to do their work, it is also the case that stories are unruly beasts by nature, and that they do not always do their masters' bidding.

Bearing all this in mind, Flores sets out to re-read (and perhaps to deliberately misread) Buddhist texts, from the *Nikāyas* and the Heart Sūtra to the 'Final Emergency Reading' of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, aware that he may along the way be treading on a few orthodox toes. His approach to reading is eclectic, drawing from such thickets of difficulty as rhetorical analysis, Russian formalism, reader-response theory, and psychoanalysis, as well as literary texts that are more familiar to western readers such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and the works of Kafka and Conrad, in an attempt to 'discern in Buddhist texts the cross-culturally understandable work of literary figures, storytellers, dramatists, rhetoricians, and poets' (9). There is much in the discussion that follows that is stimulating and provocative, for example his exploration of the mania for 'joyous negations' in the Heart Sūtra, and his somewhat sceptical reading of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* as a form of 'utopian subversiveness'. Yet whilst there is arguably a lot to be gained from reading texts in contexts that are far from those of the texts themselves, this sole reliance upon the high seriousness of western models of literary criticism is not without problems. Indeed, it is at this point, when veering into the tangled theoretical undergrowth, that I found myself suppressing an ignoble snigger.

The breaking point came when Flores cited the scholar Donald Lopez, who suggests that the Tibetan version (but not the Sanskrit version) of the Heart Sūtra can be read in Oedipal terms, with the Buddha uniting with the mother goddess Prajñāpāramitā, and Śāriputra witnessing a 'primal scene of parental intercourse' leading to his castration, as symbolised, naturally enough, by his

shaven head. Once the sniggering had died down, I found myself asking the following question: precisely what kind of story is being told here about the story that is being told in the text? And when one starts to ask this kind of question, it seems that much of Flores' own rhetoric is both strangely circumscribed and also curiously familiar, at least to readers of that nebulous body of work that is sometimes referred to as 'theory' (or, as some of its proponents may prefer, 'Theory'): mimetic violence (36), the Derridean tropes of the pharmakon (81), the work of mourning (84), and so on. At this point it is no longer clear whether Flores has been successful in discerning in these texts the work of storytellers, poets, and other similarly disreputable characters, or whether he has simply used the texts to mirror another set of orthodoxies, this time those of the relatively recent traditions of western literary criticism.

Nevertheless, Flores' conclusion is resounding, singing the praises of literary images as 'the stuff of imagining, of dreams, of wishes, of terrors... sparks to creativity and vision' (183). I couldn't agree more. But it may be that Flores' own readings are in the end too reverent and too tentative for such sparks to truly catch fire. To read Buddhist texts as literature, indeed to read any texts as literature, we cannot ignore the ignoble, the infantile, the sniggering and snickering and tittering that the high seriousness of scholarship leaves out. To take leave of such high seriousness is to admit that stories and other forms of literary writing, in their refusal to be reducible to doctrine, are always to some extent subversive; the consequence of this is that we cannot guarantee that they will be improving or will be used for edifying or morally useful ends. This is why, of course, in times gone by, young ladies of good breeding were recommended to steer clear of books altogether for the harm they can do to their soft and pliant minds, a trope that appears everywhere from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* to Ian McEwan's *Atonement*.

Flores is perhaps aware that his scholarly approach to the reading of Buddhist texts as literature does not – indeed cannot – go far enough, when he writes close to the end of his book that a handful of images is worth more 'than a truckload of arguments' (184). The admission is telling and makes one suspect that this work of re-reading is not a scholar's job after all. Might such readings be better undertaken by those who are immersed in the ebb and flow of the sea of stories, the poets and the novelists? After all, if we desire to liberate Buddhist scriptures from their own worst enemies – which is to say, the scholars and the Buddhists – perhaps Buddhism does not need armies of literary scholars so much as its own Salman Rushdie, a writer willing to throw everything in the air, committed only to the play of ideas and images, to the stuff of imagination, a writer willing, if necessary, to snigger at those things that should not be sniggered at, to titter and snicker, to chortle, to chuckle, and to guffaw.

Such a job, we now know, is one that can come at a high price, and the guardians of orthodoxy are not to be trifled with too readily. But if we are

genuinely passionate, as Flores clearly is, about the possibilities provided by re-reading the extraordinarily rich heritage of Buddhist texts that has come down to us, it is a job worth doing. Any volunteers?

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