

BOOK REVIEW

JOHN S. STRONG, *Relics of the Buddha*, *Buddhisms: A Princeton University Press Series*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2004, ISBN 0-691-11764-0.

The principal themes of this important new book are, first, the centrality of relics in Buddhism, and second, the function of relics as “expressions and extensions of the Buddha’s biographic process” (p. 5; cf. p. 229) which “embody the biography of the Buddha” (p. 22). The first theme will be familiar and more or less uncontroversial to all Buddhist scholars, but it is developed and applied here in ways that may challenge conventional assumptions about it. For example, in his discussion of the treatment of the Buddha’s corpse as presented in the *Mahā-parinirvāṇa-sūtra* and related texts, Strong asserts that “[r]elics are ... not just a by-product of the Buddha’s cremation and funeral, they are the whole point of it” (p. 23). Bold as this claim may seem, it is amply justified in the relevant chapter (ch. 4, “The Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha”), where the author demonstrates that “[f]ar from being a postscript, these relics are, in fact, the governing motif that helps determine the whole shape and format of the Buddha’s obsequies up to and including his cremation; the Buddha’s funeral rites thus have less to do with the treatment of his body and the mourning of his passing than they have to do with the preparation of his relics” (pp. 98-99).

But it is the second of Strong’s themes, the view of relics as “expressions and extensions” of the biography of the Buddha(s), that presents an especially original and productive way of looking at the phenomenon of the Buddhist relic cult. This theme determines the structural principle of the book, which, in the author’s words, “may be seen as an unpacking and illustration of this thesis” (p. 229). The book is accordingly arranged in terms of the Buddha’s (and the Buddhas’) life, in the extended Buddhist sense of the term. Thus the first chapter concerns the “Relics of Previous Buddhas,” while the next three, “Relics of the Bodhisattva,” “Relics of the Still-Living Buddha: Hairs and Footprints,” and “The Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha,” discuss relics connected with the last lifetime of the Buddha Śākyamuni. Chapters 5 through 7 then analyze the “extensions,” by means of relics, of Śākyamuni’s last life, with regard to “Aśoka and the Buddha Relics,” “Predestined Relics: The Extension of the Buddha’s Life Story in Some Sri Lankan Traditions,” and “Further Extensions of the Buddha’s Life Story: Some Tooth Relic Traditions.” Finally, in the eighth chapter, “Relics and Eschatology,” Strong discusses the linkages, through the bowl and robe relics, between Śākyamuni and Maitreya, the Buddha who is to follow him, so that these relics constitute “bridge[s] between Buddhas” (p. 220). Thus the book comes full cir-

cle, from the first chapter concerning the role of relics in linking Śākyamuni to his predecessors to the last where his relics are in turn shown to connect him to his successors.

In Strong's perspective, a Buddha's relics are functionally analogous to jātakas; just as the former extend his biography into the past, so the latter extend it into the future. Jātakas, as the previous lives of a Buddha, and relics, which serve in effect as his "future" lives, are actually "part of the same continuum" (p. 229). This view, in turn, reflects Strong's broader conceptions of Buddhist eschatology as a "dialectic of continuity and discontinuity, of permanence and impermanence" (p. 227; cf. p. 211). Relics, in his view, address the fundamental problem of the absence of the Buddha(s) through most of cosmic history; they provide a sort of ersatz presence, in an almost infinite variety of manners and degrees, for the mostly absent Buddha (e.g., pp. 151, 234).

Strong develops this dynamic view of Buddhology and Buddhist eschatology in connection with, for example, the many footprint relics of the Buddha found throughout Buddhist lands, which paradoxically "serve to mark both his coming into and going from this world" (p. 86). For the Buddha's feet and footprints mark not only his presence, as in the prints left when he took his first steps after being born, but also his absence, "being traces of where he had once been" (ibid.). This analysis in symbolic terms is reinforced — typically of Strong's multifaceted presentation — by a philological argument, regarding the much-discussed term *tathāgata*. Noting that this can be interpreted either as *tathā+āgata* "Thus-Come-One" or as *tathā+gata* "Thus-Gone-One," he proposes to understand it as having, in effect, both meanings simultaneously, and therefore to translate it as "Thus-Come-and-Gone-One" (p. 230). In Strong's view, this double interpretation is valid and meaningful on several levels. First, it applies to the cosmic/historical sequence of the periodic appearance and disappearance of Buddhas; second, on an ontological level, it reflects the fundamental Buddhist principle of arising and cessation; and third, it relates to the life of an individual Buddha, which can be understood as "a series of 'comings and goings'" (ibid.).

Although some traditionalists may be uncomfortable with this sort of "fuzzy" interpretation, it is in fact completely justified within the logic of Strong's framework, where Buddhology and eschatology operate as a dynamic tension between presence and absence, coming and going, arising and decaying. Such multi-layered and multi-disciplinary interpretations of relics and relic practices are typical of Strong's approach to his subject. For example, we see this once again in connection with his discussion of the symbolism of footprint relics, this time concerning the legend of the footprints which the Buddha left on the bank of the Nammadā River. Depending on the level of water in the river at any given time, these footprints were said to be sometimes accessible to human beings, and sometimes to the nāgas. This duality has, in Strong's interpretation, three levels of significance. First, this arrangement has the beneficial effect of motivating the nāgas to promote good rains, which will raise the level of the river and give them

more access to the footprint relics. Second, the “intermediate position of these relics points to their liminal status,” so that they “may be seen as meeting points between worlds” (p. 96). And finally, “the periodic visibility and invisibility” of the Nammadā River footprint relics “reinforces the notion that buddhas come and go” (ibid.).

This last point brings us back to the one discussed previously, and such complex interlinkages of argumentation made for a rich and rewarding, if somewhat challenging experience on the part of the reader. This is a book both that needs and deserves to be read with careful attention. Massive amounts of information are presented from diverse sources, and themes appear, re-appear, and link up periodically, so that the closer attention one pays, the more one gets out of this book. This remark, I hasten to add, is not intended in any way as a criticism of the organization of the book; on the contrary, the author has done an exemplary job of structuring his complex and abundant material. Perhaps all that the reader could ask for in this regard would be a bit more in the way of specific paged-linked cross-references, instead of general reminders like “as we have seen” (e.g., p. 177). While troublesome for the author (and editor), such cross-references are appreciated by the careful reader.

This quibble aside, Strong’s observations are always interesting and often no less than brilliant. To mention but one more example, from among a great many which could be cited, of symbolic interpretations of textual and legendary materials, Strong notes that the four methods by which, according to the Dāṭhavaṃsa, a hostile king tried to destroy the Buddha’s tooth relic, namely fire, crushing, water, and burial, correspond exactly to the four methods of disposing of dead bodies that were used in the Indian world. Thus the attempted destruction of the relic was meant as a symbolic funeral for it, but one which was of course “doomed to failure since the relic, by its very nature, has already emerged from a funeral” (p. 193).

Here, as throughout, Strong’s interpretation is creative and even imaginative, yet disciplined and well-documented. He has collected an enormous body of data, spanning the entire history of Buddhism from the beginning up to the contemporary world, primarily from Buddhist literature in Pali, Sanskrit and Chinese but also including epigraphic, archaeological, historical, and ethnographic material, all handled skillfully and capably. But, in view of the vastness of his subject, he has also wisely placed limits on the topics to be treated, for example focusing on bodily (*śārīraka*) relics and minimizing discussion of “commemorative” (*uddeśīka*) relics and relics of “use” (*paribhoga*; pp. 20-21). As a result of this combination of judicious selection and detailed scrutiny, Strong has succeeded in presenting his rich and complex subject matter in a way that will be illuminating for readers from any and all branches of Buddhist studies. Most impressively of all, he has produced a study which should appeal equally to those who approach Buddhism primarily from a textual/philological point of view and those who favor comparativist or “history of religions” methods. These two camps (here,

for purposes of discussion, rather broadly cast) are all too often perceived, or even perceive themselves, as at odds, so that a spirit of rivalry or polemic sometimes prevails over one of cooperation. In this book, Strong has demonstrated how textualist and comparativist approaches at their best can be meaningfully combined, and the result is exemplary; he has given us the best of both worlds.

In closing, I would offer only one substantive suggestion for improvement: the inclusion of some — or many — illustrations would have further enriched this book, as the subject is one which is ideally suited to visual presentation. But considering what is there, this absence is a minor matter, and of the final verdict there can be no doubt: a very fine book indeed.

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