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The Vision of Buddhism

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The Vision of Buddhism. By Roger J. Corless. New York: Paragon House, 1989. xxi-329 pp. Paperback. \$12.95.

This book attempts to provide a comprehensive introduction to the Buddhist religion in lay terms. Using a style that combines information with anecdote, Corless presents a sweeping survey of Buddhist traditions, organized according to the twelve major "acts of the Buddha" that are used to characterize the biography of Siddhartha Gautama. For instance, when dealing with the regal aspect of the future Buddha's life, Corless surveys the impact that Buddhism has had on the political life of several Asian countries. Similarly, Corless establishes a correlation between the Buddha's death and several different approaches to death found in Buddhism.

In many ways, this book helps overcome the splintering that has characterized both the Buddhist tradition and consequent Buddhist scholarship. Too often, students of Buddhism have been taught that Hinayanists are "selfish." Rather than isolating strands of Buddhism based on such doubtful doctrinal distinctions, Corless lets his own themes drive and organize the material in the book. The Buddha's birth allows him to set out an alternative to Western historical-chronological method. Siddhartha's acquisition of worldly skills serves as the basis for Corless's discussion of Buddhism and the martial and aesthetic arts. Siddhartha's renunciation provides the occasion for examining various modes of Buddhist monasticism. Corless matches Buddha's entry into nirvana with his own analysis of the tantric and Pure Land traditions.

In some ways, this book successfully accomplishes what it sets out to do. It provides a very readable, wide-ranging introduction to the Buddhist tradition that conveys some basic principles and practices. However, it is important to note that this book is not attempting to

present new original research on Buddhism, nor does it attempt to provide a totally new hermeneutic for understanding Buddhism.

If one is fastidious about the study of Buddhism, some caution perhaps should be exerted. Corless's distinction between Hinayana and Theravada needs more clarification and scholarly support. Several editorial and production problems make the book somewhat difficult to use. For instance, the page headings merely repeat the name of the book and do not help the reader by identifying each chapter. On page 169, six types of antidotes to attachment are promised, but only five are given. On page 145, the text breaks off and picks up again on page 148, with some material in between that belongs to a different section. Each of the chapters is supposed to refer to one or more of the twelve acts of the Buddha, but it is not until the beginning of chapter seven that the author provides a helpful synopsis to remind the reader with which act of the Buddha the chapter is supposed to correlate. An editorial decision was made not to include diacritical marks except within the partial glossary at the end of the book. The Wheel of Life illustration on page 147 is poorly printed.

Despite these problems, this book has several strengths: the discussion of Buddhist precepts and perfections is the best I have seen, as is the summary description of the Tantric tradition. However, this author's stated desire to transcend history as an "explanatory framework" has not been totally fulfilled; the author relies heavily on anecdotal and historical accounts to make his thematic points. The treatment of some issues becomes somewhat diluted due to the great breadth of material surveyed. On the topic of Buddhism and politics, Asoka, Nichiren Shoshu, and Ambedkar Buddhism are mentioned, but the strong role that Buddhism has played in the politics of Southeast and Central Asia is overlooked. One is also left hungry for a more fully developed philosophical or theological analysis, though Corless's Derridean application of "erasure" at the conclusion works particularly well.

On balance, *The Vision of Buddhism* succeeds in providing a new prism through which the many hues of Buddhism may be viewed.

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