



Review of John Powers, *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), xii-320 pp.

Björn Krondorfer

John Powers, who teaches Asian studies at the Australian National University, investigates early Buddhist discourses on masculinity, especially as they relate to the Buddha himself and to those who follow the path toward buddhahood. It is “a hybrid study,” Powers writes in the Preface, “merging traditional Indology with contemporary studies of the body and sex” (p. x). The book gathers an abundance of material from Buddhist textual sources that illustrate the predominance of a male-centered universe, whether this pertains to the Buddha’s ideal physiognomy, monastic rules, culture-bound social hierarchies, soteriological expectations, or gendered advice to male and female disciples dispensed by the Buddha or by his biographers and interpreters.

Powers, who has steeped himself in the study of Buddhism, admits that for a long time he “overlooked the tropes” of masculinity and that he lacked an “interpretive grip” to situate “Indian Buddhist notions of gender and the body,” which seem so “foreign to contemporary understandings” (p. 226). Those tropes, however, are plentiful and obvious. “Despite the fact that the vast majority of Buddhist texts were written by, for, and about men, and [that] these texts contain a wealth of material on cultural notions of normative manhood, the body, sexuality, and male sociality,” Powers writes, “there has been surprisingly little interest to date in discourses relating to masculinity” (p. x). The works by Michel Foucault (on discursive regimes), R. W. Connell (on hegemonic masculinity), Thomas Laqueur (on the cultural history of sex), Pierre Bourdieu (on habitus), and Judith Butler (on the performative nature of gender) offer Powers a conceptual framework for acknowledging the preponderance of masculine images and normative gender prescriptions in sacred texts. Thus, *A Bull of a Man* is the first book-length contribution to a critical study of men and masculinities in Buddhism.

Perhaps one should say what the book is *not* in order to guide a reader’s expectation in the right direction. It is not a book about contemporary Buddhism or about Buddhist cultures around the globe. Rather, it is a study of texts from a limited geographic area (India) and a defined historical period, namely from the Buddha’s life in the fifth century BCE to the eighth century CE, with a concluding chapter on Tantric Buddhism up until the twelfth century and the eventual disappearance of Indian Buddhism with the Muslim invasion of Northern India.

The book is also *not* an introduction to either Indian Buddhism or to the study of gender in religion. Yet, a wide audience will benefit from reading it. Those interested in questions of religion and gender without a particular background in Buddhism can easily follow the wealth of material gathered in this book (Powers’ use of English equivalents for the Pāli and Sanskrit terminology is of great help in this

regard). Experts in Buddhist studies and Indology, on the other hand, will find an opening for a fruitful discussion about a neglected topic, namely the issue of masculinity in historical Buddhism, which Powers embeds in the current debate on women in Buddhism. References to gender theory and to the original Pāli and Sanskrit texts are amply footnoted, so that scholars can trace the primary sources as well as secondary literature in order to crosscheck the material or deepen one's knowledge about a particular topic.

Finally, *A Bull of a Man* is neither a philosophical essay on Buddhism nor a meta-historical discussion of gender theory. Rather, the bulk of the work consists of summaries and retellings of collected materials from a variety of Indian Buddhist texts that speak to the "core themes of masculinity, sex, and the body" (p. 229). Although Powers situates these texts within their cultural histories and occasionally offers theoretical and comparative suggestions, his work is best understood as a source book on images, stories, anecdotes, discourses, rules, medical treatises, ritual techniques, mythological biographies, and cosmologies relating to masculinity in Indian Buddhism. While soaking in the abundance of stories and indulging in the exuberance of the religious imagination (especially by the time one reaches the Mahāyāna tradition), readers might get lost in the details. But the point always remains the same: masculine tropes are ubiquitous! "The tropes highlighted," Powers states, "could be multiplied many times over, and the reason for drawing them from a wide variety of texts is ... to demonstrate how widespread and pervasive they are in literature relating to the figure of the Buddha" (p. 66).

Besides the brief Preface and Conclusion, the seven chapters are organized chronologically and thematically. Chapter 1 introduces the general attributes to the body of the Buddha, a body described as beautiful, virile, perfected, skilled in martial arts, strong, and transcendent. Physical beauty and noble family origins were seen as befitting a Buddha (as a result of karma), and so was the fact of his manly nature, since women were seen as inferior and the female body a result of negative conduct in previous lives. Hence, studying images of Buddha's manliness is studying cultural views of normative masculinity. What is considered a beautiful male body, however, might be quite different from Western expectations: a retracted, sheathed penis with the testicles hidden, a disproportionately large tongue (the Buddha can insert his tongue into his ears), a large cranial lump, a long curl of hair on top of his head, eyelashes like a cow, a mouth like a *bimba* fruit ... and so the list continues with a total of 32 major physical characteristics and 80 minor characteristics. To most Westerners today, Powers cautions, "a person with such a body would appear like a freak" (p. 10). Yet, this non-muscular body with its "flaring hips" (p. 10)—which nevertheless is stronger than any human warrior—reflects the manly beauty ideal in Indian Buddhist texts. Such attributes are, of course, not descriptions of the historical Buddha (which are not available to us) but of the literary character of Buddha as *mahāpurusa* (great man) that he becomes in the tradition that begins with the "first council" of the five hundred perfected monks (*arhats*).

Chapter 2 traces biographic-hagiographic portrayals of Buddha's life, from his birth to his upbringing in the royal palace, from his ascetic training to his awakening in Bodh Gaya, from his various defeats of the demon Māra to his son Rāhula's induction into the monastic order. In sum, "Buddha was constructed as a man ... whose entire life demonstrated his complete and effortless mastery of all possible

desirable masculine traits” (p. 65). Chapter 3 describes the rules and expectations of celibate monks and the strong disciplinary codes by which monastic men had to abide. Neither intercourse nor penetration were permissible: if the penis entered a woman “even for the width of the seed of a sesame plant,” it was considered “sexual indulgence” (p. 72). Similar to the early Christian monastic culture, public confessions were required of monks who had violated any of the rules. Another similarity between the medical-spiritual literature in Western antiquity and ancient India concerns male semen. Since semen is perceived as life energy, celibacy is a practice of retention of vitality and heat (*tapas*). Of interest to the reader might also be the characterization of sexual deviance (*pandaka*) in Buddhist texts. Sexually deviant behavior covers a wide range but astoundingly little is said about homosexuality. According to Powers, such silence should not be mistaken for permissibility but interpreted as a sign for heterosexuality occupying the “default position” for monks (p. 94).

Chapter 4 addresses the Buddhist ambivalence toward the body. Uncontrolled bodies and excreting fluids were a source of disgust which, however, could be “closed off through meditative practice” (p. 114). A dry body was a sign of self-composure and mindfulness (usually ascribed to the Buddha), while an oozing and sweating body was one of defilement and anxiety. Meditative practices in the face of decomposing bodies were developed in order to conquer sensual attachment and pleasure. Male monks were admonished to meditate on male corpses, lest they were tempted by decomposing female flesh. Not surprisingly, women’s bodies were seen as naturally prone to impurity (which served as further proof of their “deficient karma” [p. 125]). According to classical medical texts, like the *Caraka’s Medical Compendium*, women desired “copious amounts of semen” (p. 129) for sexual satisfaction, while a man was advised to ejaculate quickly so as not to waste his vital energies and, hence, live longer. Similar to Christian treatises on celibacy, Buddhist texts regulating the lives of celibate men do not consider involuntary nocturnal emissions as “offenses against the monastic code” (p. 131). Further sources on monastic sociality are gathered in chapter 5. Central is the issue of male-male friendships. Monks aspired lifelong friendships, among them the exemplary couple of Sāriputra and Maudgalyāyana. “Male company,” Powers sums up, “is conceived as comparatively problem-free,” and the monastic lifestyle is described as lacking “the emotional entanglement and interpersonal difficulties of worldly affairs” (p. 161-62).

Chapter 6 moves to the *sūtras* of the Mahāyāna tradition (“Greater Vehicle”), beginning in the first century CE. There is a shift from the uniqueness of the one Buddha in the earlier texts to the “incalculable number of beings who have reached buddhahood” (p. 169) in Mahāyāna, from the “superhuman figure” (p. 166) of Buddha in the Pāli canon to the nonmaterial body of a cosmic Buddha, from the earlier “bull of a man” (p. 26) to the new masculine ideals of bodhisattvas. The bodies of the bodhisattvas are “hard, diamondlike, real, infallible, and indestructible” (p. 182). The teachers of Mahāyāna claim, like the Gnostics in Christianity, to have access to true wisdom taught by Buddha only to his “advanced disciples” (p. 169). No longer grounded in any kind of historical realism, the religious imagination becomes unbounded, verging on the truly fantasmatical. The large tongue of the Buddha, for example, now extends not only to his ears but to the Brahma heavens, and from his tongue “innumerable bodhisattvas” emanate, each sending “their tongues into the

farthest reaches of the cosmos” (p. 178). From the seventh century onward, Tantric Buddhism further expands such religious imaginings (chapter 7): here, buddhas are depicted as “wrathful deities” (p. 204) with multiple legs, arms, and heads. Tantric techniques deliberately flaunt ideas of purity and celibacy on the basis of the teaching of emptiness. Its logic declares that true practitioners cannot be derailed when engaging in sexual activities or other socially constructed taboos. Tantric rituals are about channeling energy: with the right mind and attitude, all activities, even those that are socially forbidden, can be rechanneled into “not only harmless but soteriologically beneficial” energies (p. 209). Such libertine energy channeling is, however, not free from gendered assumptions. “All of the tantras I have studied,” Powers concludes, “assume a male perspective, were written by men for men, and assumed that males would be performing their rituals ... Female consorts are not described as deriving any spiritual benefit from their participation” (p. 215).

These are some of the images and stories retold and collected in Powers’ study on Indian Buddhism. In the Conclusion, aptly titled “Oversight and Insights,” the author reminds the reader that “ancient Indian” ideas about “masculine perfection ha[ve] not resonated with Buddhists in other countries, and these characteristics are rarely even mentioned by contemporary Buddhists, particularly in the West” (p. 227). This statement sums up both the boundaries of this particular study—with hopefully more studies on male gender to emerge from other Buddhist locations—as well as Powers’ challenge to contemporary Western perceptions of Buddhism to begin investigating the unapologetically masculinist views in the canon. In this sense, it is hoped that *A Bull of a Man* will not be the first and last critical study of men in Buddhism but only an opening salvo.

Björn Krondorfer
St. Mary’s College of Maryland/USA
e: bhkrondorfer@smcm.edu