

Lopez, Donald S., Jr. Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 2008. 264pp. \$25.00 (Cloth)

Instead of *A Guide for the Perplexed*, Donald Lopez's *Buddhism and Science* would more aptly be subtitled *A Cautionary Tale*. Surveying the prehistory of Western Buddhology and its confusion of the ancient Buddhist and modern European enlightenments, the book is more a warning for Buddhist scholars than a guide for readers perplexed by the dialogue between these traditions. In his eagerness to expose past scholarly blunders, Lopez sidesteps the question of whether or not there *is* any real basis for comparing these disparate traditions. While he corrects any simplistic equation of the preference for reason over authority in Buddhism versus that in the modern West, he omits the commitment of traditional scholars to rationalizing Buddha's teachings and the mundane knowledge systems or sciences (*vidyāsthāna*) of their host cultures. Given the tradition of incorporating systems of logic, linguistics, psychology, medicine and engineering within the wisdom curriculum prescribed by the multidisciplinary framework of all Buddhist learning, one would expect modern Buddhist scholar-translators, Asian and Western, to grapple with how such systems compare with modern sciences, as their predecessors grappled with novel scientific developments and traditions.

Like Lopez's prior offerings, this book's strengths and weaknesses reflect those of the deconstructive method he so ably employs. The book is a great read. An intellectual's morality tale, replete with historical detective work, peppered with scholarly arcana and laced with exposés of the human failings of its dramatic actors. After masterfully exposing the hubris of

those who would confound Buddhism with modern science, however, the book would be stronger if it turned to address the larger intellectual questions raised by their missteps. Questions like: what in the culture of the modern West left its scholars so hungry for a spiritual tradition compatible with modern science that they would craft an “original Buddhism” out of the whole cloth of ancient texts? Was their humanized vision of Shakyamūni’s life and teaching pure projection, or did it simply distort a kernel of truth about a world religion that in fact approaches mundane and spiritual knowledge quite differently from the religions of the West? It is so absurd to ask whether the Buddha had insights that vaguely anticipated modern discoveries, when modern science traces its origins to the insights and methods of his Greek contemporaries? Finally, from the standpoint of the historian of religion, how does the cross-cultural dialogue between Asian Buddhism and Western science reflect that between Western religious traditions and modern science?

One must respect the modest care with which this work is crafted. All too sensitive to the excesses of Orientalism, Lopez stays well within the niche he has carved for himself, as the deconstructive critic of Western Buddhist scholarship. The main problem I think readers will have with the book is that its lens is too microscopic to take in the wide-angle intellectual and cultural shifts which provide the context for the encounter between Western physical science and Buddhist contemplative science. While the post-modern West continues to divorce scientific knowledge and expertise from religious disciplines of experience and action like meditation and ethics, people around the world caught in the dehumanizing grip of globalization feel a growing need to preserve contemplative ways of knowing and being that can help them meet the human

challenges of life on a shrinking planet. Shakyamūni's intent to end human suffering combined with his introspective analysis of its causal origins and cessation within his own life gave his tradition a universal appeal and personal utility it seems to have retained. Its accessibility to people of both scientific and spiritual bent, and its ability to engage both popular and professional interest seem to hold real promise for helping heal the split between mundane science and spiritual wisdom that plagues the West. So it is disappointing that someone of Lopez's expertise missed this opportunity to help us understand this truly perplexing cross-cultural encounter in real time. The disappointment is most palpable in the short shrift he gives the dialogue between the Dalai Lama and Western scientists. His presentation of the clash between laboratory research on meditation and its culturally specific human experience is rhetorically brilliant, but barely scratches the surface of what may be the most intellectually rich and strange development in the scientific study of religious experience to date. More disturbing, Lopez completely omits the work of Western clinicians integrating Buddhist insights and methods into psychotherapy and mind/body medicine, a work of practical translation well received by Asian scholars because it resonates with the healing aims and introspective methods of Buddhist teaching and practice. Of course, the cautionary note he sounds by citing the Dalai Lama's concerns about natural selection is good for us to hear. Yet what could be a move to deepen the discussion ends up being the *coup de grace* in a straw man argument. Over a century after the mistakes Lopez dwells on, we surely know that Buddhism need not be reconstructed in Western libraries, engaged as we are in conversing with His Holiness and a new generation of scholars, Asian and Western, fluent in both academic traditions. In one of the book's most pregnant passages, Lopez records an exchange between his graduate students and the Dalai Lama,

in which the Tibetan shares the traditional Buddhist critique of our modern Western mania for historicizing spiritual figures and traditions. “It’s something to know,” he says, implying that the historical and mechanistic details which absorb us as moderns are of little epistemic value compared to those which make the wisdom Shakyamūni derived from his contemplative experience a matter of ultimate import for Buddhists, namely: how it continues to help people, regardless of background, place and time, overcome suffering in their own minds and lives. Unfortunately, despite Lopez’s deferential close, a nod to His Holiness’ insistence that the historical Buddha was decidedly not “just a nice person,” I’m afraid that traditionally trained Buddhist scholars will still leave *Buddhism and Science* echoing the Dalai Lama’s faint praise for the historicist research of the author’s best and brightest students: “It’s something to know.”

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