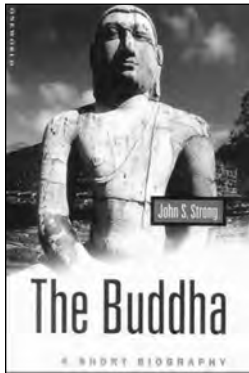


The Buddha

A Short Biography

BY JOHN S. STRONG

OXFORD: ONEWORLD PUBLICATIONS, 2001
224 PAGES, PAPERBACK: ISBN 185-168-256-2



John Strong's *The Buddha: A Short Biography* is an excellent introduction to the Sanskrit and Pali narratives describing the Awakened One. The author introduces us to the primary events in the life of the Buddha from his birth through his awakening, the growth of the early community, and his *parinirvana* (the end of the cycle of death and rebirth). Holding the reader's attention, Strong deepens this linear approach by using

descriptions from various texts to provide a more nuanced picture of the Buddha. Buddhist communities in different historical periods recounted the Buddha's life and teachings in ways that reflected their own concerns and perspectives. The tapestry of these narratives presents the Buddha's life with a richness and depth often lacking in Buddhist texts written for American students.

Strong explains that his purpose is to present the life of the Buddha as Buddhists tell it, not as scholars or historians of religion have described this religious teacher. His sources are the layers of stories told in early Indian texts and the later biographies composed throughout Asia. Respecting these narratives as significant parts of a larger whole, Strong aims to "respect the extraordinary supernatural elements in the tales told about him, to understand them without explaining them away," and to "honor the ordinary down-to-earth elements that root him in humanity" (p. 3). Tales associated with events in the Buddha's life create what Strong calls a sacred biography and offer insight into the teachings of the tradition.

"[Buddhists] narrate many tales that have been remembered . . . and reformulated over the centuries and whose episodes have been accepted as inspiring and worth recalling, whatever their grounding in history. Together these stories make up a sacred biography, or rather, several sacred biographies for . . . there are many versions of tales about the Buddha. These narrations may contain "fictions" about the Buddha . . . but these "fictions" are in many ways "truer," or at least religiously more meaningful, than the "facts." They are certainly more plentiful . . . and more revelatory of the ongoing concerns of Buddhists. We may know very little about the "Buddha of history," but we know a great deal about the "Buddha of story," and the purpose of this book is to present the life of this Buddha of story" (p. 2).

Indeed, the real strength of The Buddha is Strong's use of traditional stories to stress the humanness of the Buddha's eighty-year existence.

These stories are well known in Asia, but not usually included in Western presentations of the life of the Buddha.

Beautifully written for general readers and for specialists who will enjoy the narrative construction, the text helps the reader with Pali and Sanskrit terms by translating the titles of major works into English. The *Lalitavistara* becomes *Living out of the Game*, the *Buddhavamsa*, the *Buddha-Chronicle*, and the *Mahavadana-sūtrā*, the "Discourse on the Great Legend." These English titles make the Buddhist texts more accessible to readers who find the Sanskrit and Pali titles confusing.

Mirroring the language of the original narrations, Strong acts as a storyteller, drawing the reader into the action so that the religious teachings are readily apparent. In the following example, Strong tells the tale of the Buddha's encounter with the ogress Kuntī to demonstrate how he subdued demonic forces.

When the Buddha arrives in the Northwestern town of Kuntīnagara, he learns of the fierce ogress named Kuntī who lives there. She is in the habit of devouring all the children born to local Brahmin householders. As a group, these Brahmins appeal to the Buddha, asking him to do something about her. The Buddha's approach is simply to confront Kuntī and to broker a deal between her and the townspeople: if she agrees to stop eating their children, they will agree to build a Buddhist monastery in her honor. There, . . . her hunger can ritually be assuaged. Where previously she ate children, she will now receive worship and offerings. (p. 118)

This tale portrays the Buddha as a man responsive to human suffering, but also lets us know that even demons can be transformed by the Dharma. Strong's clear retelling allows us to experience the same directness and simplicity of expression that flow through the original tales.

Indeed, the real strength of *The Buddha* is Strong's use of traditional stories to stress the humanness of the Buddha's eighty-year existence. These stories are well known in Asia, but not usually included in Western presentations of the life of the Buddha. One such story from the Thai tradition recounts the Buddha's first meeting with his wife, Yaśodharā, after abandoning her years earlier to seek enlightenment. Returning to the city of his birth, the Buddha visits his father but not Yaśodharā. Making her sentiments known, Yasodhara refuses an invitation from the palace, saying that the Buddha should come to her. Then when he does not come, Yaśodharā laments to her young son, Rahula, "O, my beloved, Rahula. You were a misfortune for your father from the very beginning. . . .

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you and I, having been abandoned, are persons of no account. . . . Everyone accuses you of being illegitimate, and people look down on me as a widow. My suffering brings only tears. How can I continue to live?" (p. 97) According to another text, when the Buddha does visit her, he instructs his disciples to allow Yaśodharā to greet him in whatever manner she chooses. He understands her suffering even though beyond it himself. Such tales allow us to know the Buddha, his disciples, and his family as people like ourselves, even twenty-five centuries later.

When presenting the former lives of the Buddha as told in the *jataka* tales, the author again presents a more balanced image of the Buddha-to-be. Although the most familiar jatakas portray him as a saint, Strong narrates less familiar jatakas in which the bodhisattva commits evil deeds and generates the karma that propels him into subsequent rebirths. Subject to desire and anger, this human Buddha-to-be reflects basic human struggles. To grasp the significance of the Buddha's life as teaching, it is essential to know him as a human being before seeing him as the invincible Enlightened One. By identifying the Buddha as completely human, these narratives describe a man who offers the possibility of awakening to all beings. For students and scholars who want to pursue a particular text or teaching in more depth, Strong provides an extensive section of "Sources and Further Reading," as well as a helpful glossary of Sanskrit names and terms, and a general bibliography. Also useful are the tables summarizing several of the lists popular in the Indian Buddhist tradition, such as the thirty-two marks of the great man, the forty-five locations of the Buddha's rain retreats, and the Buddha's negative karma as found in specific jatakas.

Telling the tales as a good storyteller, Strong presents primary source narratives that capture the simplicity and depth of the life of the Buddha. An excellent resource for undergraduate students, as well as some high school students, *The Buddha* by John Strong retains the nuanced complexity of the mythological dimension, the humanness of the personal, and the intellectual acumen of the philosophical. ■

CATHY BENTON has taught Asian Religion and Literature for seventeen years at Lake Forest College. Her research interests include Indian religious story literature in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim communities in India. Her book, *God of Desire, Tales of Kamadeva in Sanskrit Story Literature*, will be published by SUNY Press in 2005.

Asian Cultural Traditions

BY CAROLYN BROWN HEINZ

PROSPECT HEIGHTS, ILL.: WAVELAND PRESS, 1999
416 PAGES, PAPERBACK: ISBN 57766-043-9


After nearly two decades of research on Asia, I was surprised to find a book that offered a truly new approach to teaching Asia: Carolyn Brown Heinz's *Asian Cultural Traditions*. While there are many excellent books on individual Asian countries, books that treat all of Asia are relatively uncommon. This is understandable since covering all of Asia in a single book is a daunting task given Asia's diversity. Various authors cope with this by simplistic overviews or leaving large gaps by focusing on aspects of Asia familiar to them. While these are useful and informative, I have been vaguely dissatisfied—particularly for teaching—because the end result has been jumbled. Brown avoids the fallacy of finding a unity in Asia (or "The Orient") that does not exist, as many writers did in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Brown points out that she is not intent on covering countries one at a time. Indeed, she reminds us that the current legal boundaries of all Asian nation states (with the single possible exception of Japan) did not exist one hundred years ago.

Using a truly novel interdisciplinary approach, Brown tells us she organizes her book about "all of Asia" around a number of major themes.

First, Brown considers Asia spatially and deals with its underlying geography, focusing on the importance of the geological movement of the South Asian (or Indian) subcontinent from the coast of Africa to Asia. Not only did this create the world's highest mountains (the Himalayas and Tibetan plateau), it also created the river valleys that drain the southern portion of East Asia.

Second, she considers Asia in terms of cultural evolution. Recognizing that Chinese and Indian civilizations are the two main




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