

# Ways of Enlightenment

*Buddhist Studies  
at Nyingma Institute*

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371 PAGES

In recommending this book for classroom use, I am breaking with an established custom in Western academia. I would like to propose that professors surrender a certainly scholarly distance and actually use a Tibetan survey of Buddhist teachings as the central reading for a Survey of Buddhism course. The book is *Ways of Enlightenment*, an outline of Buddhist philosophy and practice written by American Tibetan Buddhists under the direction of a Nyingma lama, Tarthang Tulku. Although the book was designed for practitioners at American meditation centers, it could as well be used as an introduction to Mahāyāna Buddhist writings in general. It would overcome the cultural gap we usually find between primary and secondary readings in college courses on Buddhism.

Tarthang's students have written an exceptionally clear and straightforward outline. It could be recommended on these grounds alone, but really its strongest point is stylistic. Because it was originally designed for Buddhists, it uses a language akin to that of the Buddhist scriptures and commentaries. It shows forth in its very style the premises upon which the religion is based. Since *Ways of Enlightenment* rhetorically and stylistically embodies the thing it studies, it overcomes the cognitive dissonance between primary and secondary texts which is typical of "Introduction to Buddhism" courses.

That dissonance is not in itself evil—it is simply the price professors pay for presenting the varieties of Buddhist religion scientifically. By using the discourse of the social sciences as the main entrance to Asian scriptures, teachers create, whether they intend to or not, a certain cultural gap—a gap between Buddhist culture and university culture. If you see that gap as a problem, then this book is one way to fix it.

*Ways of Enlightenment*, although as precise and as scholarly as equivalent academic works, assumes a position of utter advocacy. It does not take Buddhism as an object of scholarly examination, nor is it the kind of tailored apology for Buddhist religion exemplified by Daisetz Suzuki's work and the Walpola Rahula's excellent *What the Buddha Taught*.<sup>1</sup> It does not organize its presentation historically or geographically. It does not highlight the kind of comparatist issues found in Religious Studies departments. In fact, it does not reflect the theoretical agendas of any academic field. Rather, it presents Tibetan Buddhism as a personal option, a unified path of spiritual develop-

ment. In this it is, of course, no different than the sūtras themselves. Survey courses are going to present sūtric readings among the primary texts, but usually they first give an overview using modern Western scholarship. Without the overview, it is hard to make sense out of the scriptures.

But each generation Buddhist teachers write overviews for their disciples as well, because the disciples have the same problem as college students—they cannot read the traditional texts without some background and interpretational assistance. I am merely suggesting that college professors use one of those emic, in-tradition overviews. It will lead more directly to the matter of the native readings.

*Ways of Enlightenment* is such an overview. It addresses its readers as if they were already Buddhists—Buddhists who, having begun to practice meditation and perform religious ceremonies, would now like to develop a more intellectual understanding of their path. Therefore, it presents its material in a literary style related to Tibetan poetry and Buddhist discourse-aesthetics. Although written by Westerners, it deploys the figures of Asian Buddhist rhetoric; it purposefully evokes the grand, formal, sweeping, monumental style of Buddhist scriptures.

It may seem paradoxical to say this, but although *Ways of Enlightenment* is full of scholastic erudition, it is in no way an example of academic prowess. It comes from a tradition of learning with a notion of scholarly integrity as rigorous as ours, but altogether different—different rules of proof and evidence, different standards of excellence, different criteria for truth and reliability, a different notion of thoroughness, and most importantly, a different notion of skepticism. Here we do not find the Age of Enlightenment skepticism of the scientist—a skepticism originally designed to free thought from superstition and the arbitrary authority of institutionalized religion. Here, rather, is the characteristically Buddhist skepticism—a skepticism determined not to be fooled by the emotionality of self interest or ontologies associated with materialism. These differences give *Ways of Enlightenment* powers separate from those of Western discourse, but equal in importance and desirable.

## The Multicultural Classroom

I have said that *Ways of Enlightenment* is free from the cognitive dissonance and intellectual tension which exists between scientific introductions to religious works and the works themselves. Of course, not every professor sees this dissonance as a problem. To many, it is a sign of their integrity as scholars that they stand apart from the primary texts they teach. For example, many professors in Religious Studies teach Buddhism as an interesting example of an Asian religion. The point of their courses is to show students something about the nature of religion itself, and Buddhism for them is a fascinating instance, a fruitful point of comparison. Their central concern is the nature of religion, not the nature of Buddhism, and so, for perfectly good reasons, their presentations move at cross-purposes to the works they study.

Students, however, do not usually take Survey of Asian Religion courses because they are planning a career in Religious Studies. Their interest is less in the theoretic science than in the thing itself. If the aim of a class is to let students know what Buddhism is like as a religion that people practice, then this book strongly recommends itself. It shows the key features of the religion through its own *eidos*, its own form—in its own person, if you will.

I am using “theoretic” in a special sense, related to its Greek etymology as a word for “observe.” It involves an almost Aristotelian interest in distance and disinterested viewing, a basis for inquiry and general knowledge gathering. *Eidos*, of course, is the Greek word for “form,” and from it we get our word “idea.” But it is also ancestor to the word “video,” for one of its earliest meanings is quite literally “the look of a thing.” To observe Buddhism and follow a theoretic agenda in Buddhological research is one thing, an activity of speculative inquiry native to academia. To get the look of Buddhism is another. It is the “look” of Buddhism in practice, its native form, that is stolen away by the theoretic discourse of the social sciences and could be restored in a pedagogical context by a culturally Buddhist introduction such as this.

In this sense, you could say that *Ways of Enlightenment* possesses the special explanatory advantages of modern multicultural presentations. For it is not an expression of university research culture; it is culturally Buddhist. In this decade positions of advocacy are allowed into the university classroom under the rubric of multiculturalism. Why should this not be, when appropriate, an alternative for Buddhist Studies as well? Other disciplines have absorbed this approach into their pedagogy without destruction to their scientific integrity. Today, when I teach literature, for example, I allow positions of advocacy into the classroom that I would once have considered extraneous. These are situations where it now seems best to let the cultural matrix from which the books arise speak for the books in the person of somebody passionately attached to them.

From one point of view it is very simple: who is qualified to speak on behalf of a religion? Scholars such as myself are there to analyze, to contextualize, to offer a range of perspectives on the material. We have a vast range of educational functions. But we are rarely spokesmen for what we teach. When we take on ourselves the job of presenting a tradition which we admire but in which we do not believe, some sacrifice or tradeoff has been made.

For those who do not wish to make this tradeoff when they teach, this book is an interesting option, an especially useful bridge to translations of Buddhist texts. Its orderly, passionate descriptions can train the ear of the undergraduate who is about to read a sūtra, ameliorating the bothersome disjunction between the styles of primary and secondary literature.

This book addresses a problem with which we are quite familiar in humanities core curricula. Reading an introduction to Plato’s philosophy does not really help a student read Plato. Rather, it helps the stu-

dent understand what a certain dialogue probably meant. But the act of reading itself is not much assisted, because the style of the introduction is unconnected with that of the Platonic dialogue. Actually, secondary literature is generally written in a language nearly as alien to the student as that of the primary literature. When I assign my students a scholarly foreword, I must spend the next class helping them to understand the foreword itself. At that point, Plato’s words have yet to be actually engaged. The class in which we begin to read the actual dialogue requires yet another session of linguistic therapy. My toil has been doubled by the introduction which was meant to simplify it.

The same is true for Buddhist religious discourse. The discontinuity in language between the Western secondary and Asian primary literature can be an obstacle to reading. In fact, that is why *Ways of Enlightenment* had to be written in the first place, because Tarthang Tulku’s students, although they had plenty of scholarly summaries and historiographical surveys available to them, could not read a translation of Mipham Gyatso’s *Khenjug*.

### A Buddhist Manual

*Ways* originated from a project with a very specific goal. In the 1970s, Tarthang Tulku attempted to introduce his students at the Nyingma Institute in Berkeley to Mipham Gyatso’s *Summa Theologica*, the *Khenjug*, or *Gateway to Learning*. Mipham was a nineteenth century encyclopedist and synthesizer. He was a leader in the Ecumenical (*ris-med*) movement, a sudden flowering of new learning which some people have gone so far as to call a “Tibetan Renaissance.” Mipham’s *Khenjug* gave a detailed survey of the formal teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The presentation was organized into what the Tarthang Tulku’s translators call the “Ten Topics of Expert Knowledge” or “The Ten Points of Panditry,” if you will.

Actually, it is unfair to call this work a *Summa*, because it does not, like Thomas Aquinas, engage church controversies or adjudicate them to single conclusions. Rather, it introduces the range of teachings of Mahāyāna in such a way as to connect them all together in a new whole—a whole which can be a doctrinal ground not just for the Nyingma sect, but for all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The *Gateway to Learning* is actually what its title indicates, an introduction to the higher realms of Buddhist erudition.

*Ways of Enlightenment* is thus an introduction to an introduction, and its engendering is typical of the vicissitudes of the modern Buddhist pedagogy in the West. It seems that in the late 1950s, Tarthang attempted to have his Western disciples study the Ten Topics of the *Khenjug*. It turned out, however, that they simply lacked the sort of informational and cultural background necessary to undertake Mipham’s text, which was written in the high style of Indian *Abhidharma* and scholastic metaphysics. And so, during the following decade an introduction to Mipham’s work was written by Tarthang Rinpoche’s students at Dharma Press.

The result was a survey of Mahāyāna theology and cosmology so

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useful that it was published for the general public as well. Each of the ten topics received a brief, almost telegraphic treatment—a treatment that combined good Western prose styling with a certain Tibetan poetic flourish. The presentations were adorned with an elegant selection of elucidating quotes from Buddhist scriptures. The quotes themselves sketched out a kind of mini-canon of Buddhist literature. The whole was presented in the order in which the Ten Topics occur in the *Khenjug*.

Actually, in this volume only the first seven topics are covered. The hardest part, Buddhist philosophical dialectics, are left for a second volume which will appear in the next two years.

### Culturally Buddhist Discourse

The chapters in this book are organized like lessons in a course—pithy, compact, and extremely clear, with suggested readings at the end—but they are written in the passionate, almost romantic tone of voice of traditional Tibetan Buddhist scholars. Let us take a close look at the expressive style of one passage. You will see that there is no particular sense of empiricism or gesture towards scientific objectivity, no evocation of the discourse of social science. Students who read this introduction find themselves face-to-face with a Buddhist persona. These lines are from the introduction:

*Ways of Enlightenment* can only hint at the vast ocean of wisdom that the teachings contain—each of Lama Mipham’s Ten Topics would require a whole book to discuss in detail. If the seed of Dharma is to take root and flourish in Western culture, the ground must be well prepared. Preparation includes the study of philosophy and history, combined with regular meditation practice and the application of the teachings directly in everyday life. In the Nyingma tradition, such a many-sided approach is considered vital. [p. xxi]

This passage shows quite clearly the slant of the book. It assumes that the reader is sympathetic with the desire that “the Dharma take root and flourish in Western culture.” It evokes the Nyingma Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism as if association of a method with this sect is an automatic positive recommendation. The missionary agenda is utterly explicit.

In this passage the praxis of Buddhism—meditation and meditation in action—is confidently prescribed, along with something Western readers should, but do not usually expect from Buddhists—analytical study of the teachings—“philosophy and history.”

This missionary and proselytizing voice has a certain advantage over the usual discourse of Religious Studies. It gives the sense of emphasis of an adherent. It shows forth in its structure and style the way of thinking of traditional Tibetan Buddhist disciples. Thus, it prepares us in two ways for the primary readings which would presumably follow in a university course: (1) it explains the content of

the scriptures as a practitioner would understand them, and (2) it gives a sense of the traditional reader’s response to that content.

For example, this passage says that “the study of history and philosophy [must be] joined with regular meditation practice.” Imagine then that the student’s next reading were one of Nāgārjuna’s texts of philosophical dialectic or a selection from the corpus of the *Abhidharma*, scriptures on cosmology and Buddhist analytical psychology! These texts, although incredibly intellectual, would be seen as an accompaniment to meditation practice, not as free-standing philosophical speculations. This would be a practitioner’s way of organizing the content—not as formal metaphysical inquiry, but as a set of contemplative objects.

And the traditional reader’s reception of the texts is quite different, for where a Western intellectual might seek food for thought in the writings of Buddhist philosophers, the fervent adherent will seek experiences of awakening or sacred outlook. These disjunctions are not simply differences in view. They indicate a fundamentally different act of reading.

We are beginning to understand the significance of this cultural difference in academia. Partly this is because the Tibetan diaspora has brought scholars such as Tarthang Tulku into our midst, and their students are beginning to teach in American universities. Another reason is because anthropological and ethnological approaches now exert a greater influence on American Buddhism. Some of these influences are homegrown. Others are the result of the translation and importation of European Buddhist structuralist studies. And of course there is the immense pressure of multiculturalist movements towards diversity.

The teaching of Asian Studies is keeping step with these changes in interesting ways. There is, for example, a new series of textbooks entitled *Princeton Readings in Religions*. The centerpiece of this series is a collection of anthologies edited by Don Lopez, entitled *Buddhism in Practice*, *Religions of India in Practice*, *Chinese Religion in Practice*, and soon to appear, *Tibetan Buddhism in Practice*. The aim of this series is “better to represent the range of religious practices, placing particular emphasis on the ways in which texts are used in different contexts.”<sup>2</sup> Dr. Lopez contrasts the selections he has made with “source books used by the last generation of students [which] placed a heavy emphasis on philosophy and on the religious expressions of elite groups in what were deemed the “classical” civilizations of Asia and the Middle East.” Here the practitioner’s view is honored by offering the student an array of writings more like what a normal Buddhist disciple might actually read. It is a perilous attempt, because the result suggests a vast, unkempt, culturally diverse, inclusivist canon. It is more heterogeneous and disorganized than the refined set of classics and narrow choice of genres claimed by traditional Western scholars.

The disadvantage of these anthologies—their unkempt diversity—is offset by the fact that, like *Ways of Enlightenment*, the Princeton series points directly to the way the religion is actually practiced, rather than

to the uses Western scholars have made of Asian textuality.

The passage I quoted above is stylistically quite different as well. The language of Buddhist texts is evoked through use of traditional Buddhist imagery and metaphors. We see, “the vast ocean of wisdom” and we should imagine the uncultivated Western land which must be ploughed and planted (“if the seed of the Dharma is to take root and flourish the ground must be well prepared.”) And the subtle, other worldly humor of Buddhist discourse is hidden here as well. “Vast ocean of wisdom” is a pun, for the Gyatso in Mipham Gyatso’s name is “ocean”—a bi-syllable which in Tibetan contains the word for vast.

Structurally, this simple passage is quite Buddhist as well. One typical way that Buddhist rhetoric shapes a cadence and sense of ending is by moving to a more sweeping and florid language as we move to the close of a discourse or a chapter. This passage, being at the end of the introduction, is at such a point. This is one place in a Buddhist text where the strongest, most over-generalized, or most controversial statements tend to occur. For example, the Tibetan Buddhist approach to study is given here concisely, but symphonically:

When joined together from the outset, study and practice foster a deep experiential appreciation for the potential of our human existence. Intellectual understanding based on study and experiential understanding based on practice support one another; together they illuminate the structure of the path. When students of the Dharma can verify the teachings through direct experience, confidence in their own understanding and in the Dharma both develop naturally. Confidence in turn generates the sustained engagement necessary for effort to bear fruit, and the taste of this fruit helps knowledge to deepen into complete certainty. [p. xxi]

It is quite typical of Tibetan pandity to say that uniting study with meditation practice leads eventually to the experience of “complete certainty.” For American college students, this is brightly promising something they do not desire. This kind of faith, however, is central to the Tibetan Buddhist learning experience and it is constantly mentioned in traditional discourse. To “resolve the mind” or “settle the mind” (*rten la babs*) is essential for the advanced practitioner. But it is mainly practitioners who foreground this idea at the outset.

Until quite recently, however, this point was often underplayed in the writings of academic apologists who would rather see Buddhism as a religion of reason than of faith. To this end, they placed the philosophical works of the great medieval Indian Buddhist “Charioteers” (Nāgārjuna, Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, etc.) at the center of their understanding. This made the elements of faith, magic, and mystery in the religion seem almost

adventitious. The problem is that, while the works of Buddhist scholastic writers can be, and deserve to be, compared with our best speculative philosophers, that is not the way Tibetan pandits read them. Traditional Buddhists read Nāgārjuna and his successors as if they were faithful commentators on a scriptural tradition in which we must have faith. They are not seen as superbly rational and self-reliant thinkers, but as continuers of an ancient lineage.

There is a remarkable difference in these two readings. The culturally Buddhist reception imagines a religion that has existed primordially, taught by an endless succession of Buddhas appearing in cyclic time. The traditional American version, however, projects a religion almost with no credo, a religion that is actually not a religion at all, a religion that is pure honesty and truth and rationality with no premises or presuppositions.

Tibetan Buddhists we meet, on the other hand, are true believers in their religion. They accept the efficacy of its rituals, the soundness of its cosmology, and the correctness of its philosophies. They are hoarders of relics and amulets and have been so since the first centuries of the religion, and they rely on the development of faith and commitment as a pathway to final success. Even though the absolute authority of the Buddha’s word is a point of controversy in medieval Buddhist scholasticism, nevertheless, in practice, throughout history his scriptures have been taken to be as authoritative as the Bible or the Koran for their respective religions.

That is why there is a particular richness of imagery in the passage cited above. It expresses its position on the relationship between faith and learning with an extended metaphor suggesting the lush figures of *kavya*, Sanskrit Court Poetry: “the sustained engagement necessary for effort to bear fruit, and the taste of this fruit helps knowledge to deepen into complete certainty.” We are adjured to grow this fruit, ripen it, pluck it, eat it and savor the taste. This tropical language has roots in *kavya*, and other Indic forms of florid art language. It matches the scriptural quotes seeded throughout the book.

Western academic treatments, on the other hand, use another language. Perhaps it is because they tend to focus on Buddhism as an ascetic religion, and their vision of its asceticism is matched by the asceticism of the professorial prose style. But this style is subtly in conflict with the peculiarly sensuous nature of Buddhist discourse, which has never shaken itself free from a metaphorical language originally designed for love lyrics and ecstatic devotional verse.

The passage I am using as an example is good for its choice of Buddhist positions and language representative of Mahāyāna writings. One can imagine college students being “turned off” by the crusading quality of this discourse, which one of my colleagues called, not without reason, “overwrought.” Still, perhaps it is best that they realize in advance the fervidness of Buddhist practitioners, who have paid a cost of discipleship as high as in other religions and have given up some bit of autonomy and personal freedom in pursuit of religious goals. No matter how rational and skeptical Buddhist

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philosophy may be, the primary scriptures are full of religious summonings to an agonized personal engagement. This is particularly true in Tibetan Buddhism, where, whether it is always true or not, a certain mind is said to be necessary at a certain point, going hand-in-hand with commitment to a specific lineage:

This certainty forms the link to the lineage of light—at once the inner wisdom of the Dharma and our own deepest truth. The Western heart cherishes individual freedom, but it is only through such direct knowledge that the freedom to choose becomes meaningful.

In Tibet, transmission of the lineage of enlightened knowledge depended on making a particular kind of connection to a teacher who possessed realization of the inner meaning of the texts. [p. xxi]

In university classrooms this is a dangerous and controversial point. Commitment to a lineage and commitment to a human authority figure—submission, in effect, to some teacher—is a hugely important issue in Tibetan Buddhism and is hotly contested among American Buddhists. The student in an introductory class is naturally uncomfortable, for the religion described by traditional Asian voices seems hierarchical, undemocratic, and absolutistic. It is far from the egalitarian relativism of the post modernist college student. Ironically, I am arguing that this very hierarchical view should be allowed into classrooms in the name of that most democratic of principles, cultural diversity. Pulling no punches, *Ways of Enlightenment* takes a strong position on this point. For better or worse, it is a good representation of the authoritarian voice in the Tibetan tradition.

### A Suitable Hybrid

Of course, these passages are not really the language of Tibetan scholars. Tarthang Tulku's students write in a kind of sermon language developed by Buddhist teachers in the West. This is the shape words of Buddhist advocacy and adherence have taken here. They are influenced by the language of sūtras and śāstras; they are an interpretation of it in modern English. Take, for example, "When joined together from the outset, study and practice foster a deep experiential appreciation for the potential of our human existence." Buddhist scriptures do not talk about "potential." "Potential" is a word from popular Western psychology which can explain the idea of "buddha nature" or *tathāgathagarbha*. It evokes the last twenty-five years of New Age religious movements. It also has a sort of American progressivist tang.

A wholly native Tibetan presentation would evoke Mahāyāna textuality with talk of power and the Family (*gotra*), Element (*dhatu*), and Nature of the Buddha. But here in this passage, we are seeing a cultural cross-current between Tibetan Buddhism and American psy-

chology. This is a felicitous way of presenting the tradition, for it uses the kind of linguistic contexting Asian Buddhist teachers have judged fitting over the last few decades.

That strategy of adaptation manifests in every paragraph. The passage we cited mentioned "experiential appreciation for the potential of our human existence." It said that "*Intellectual* understanding based on study and *experiential* understanding based on practice support one another." The terms I have placed in italics are, of course, not technical words from *Abhidharma*. They are roughly parallel to the native Buddhist terms "what is heard" and "what is experienced." But this distinction between the "experiential" and the "intellectual" was really developed to explain to Westerners something that Asian philosophers once took utterly for granted: the existence of a distinctly contemplative kind of understanding.

The hybridization of popular Western discourse and Tibetan religious language gradually drops away as the reader penetrates more deeply into the technicalities of Buddhist metaphysics. I believe this is a good idea. By the time students have worked their way through the ideas of Asanga and Nāgārjuna in the second volume, it will no longer be necessary to find parallel Western ideas for purposes of translation. In the most philosophical parts of *Ways of Enlightenment*, the terms will be defined by the book itself.

### A Compendium of Lists

One interesting and very traditional aspect of *Ways of Enlightenment* is the fact that it is organized into lists and enumerations. The Western surveys are usually organized into narrations. That is to say, they are historical in their orientation, or else they come in the form of neat and well-organized essays. But Buddhist pedagogic discourse is usually ordered into nested lists of topics and categories. This is in part for purposes of memorization. It may, in fact, be a relic of the time when sūtras and śāstras did not have a written form and had to be learned by heart.

In any case, it is always a problem for Western students to read these lists. They do not have the knack, and we academics do not train them to have the knack. We have removed that sort of exercise from the educational system. For example, paradigm memorization has been excised from most language courses—although it was a precious tool to teach students to memorize lists.

In fact, we are currently moving in the other direction. We are even beginning to design CD-ROM pedagogical tools that make study an arcade game. These interactive educational tools are okay in themselves, but like the essay style of textbooks they replace, they move counter to the flow of discourse in the primary texts.

The problem is present throughout the humanities. There is a sense of cold splash when one moves from the textbook or the realm of theory to primary sources. In this case, the shock comes from suddenly entering the frigid waters of Buddhist list-oriented pedagogy. *Ways of Enlightenment* eases us in this pedagogical North Sea with a graduated

program of lists. First, there is the biography of the Buddha which is given as a list of twelve "acts," to fit some of the ancient biographies.

This section raises the question of historical dating in an interesting way. The traditional Tibetan date for the life of the Buddha is given along with current academic conventions of dating. The Tibetan approach takes the Buddha's predictions of the decline of the Dharma as authoritative, and establishes the time of the life of the Buddha by counting backwards from the present "dark age." This is a good lesson in religious epistemology, for, as the book admits, this method of dating places the birth of the Buddha at least four hundred years earlier than modern science would.

We then have the Three Turnings, the Three Baskets, and the Three Disciplines (śīla). This is followed by the Seven Patriarchs, the First Turning, and the Eighteen Schools. These three chapters, then, turn out to have been the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha (community). And so the chapters continue, going step by step through all the major categories of Buddhist learning. These are actually the kind of lists a Buddhist teacher would use as a basis for his or her Dharma lectures. Knowing these lists, one can read Buddhist sermon literature with easy comprehension. Buddhist songs and poetry, which mention the names of these lists recurrently, become intelligible. Just as Sanskrit court poetry is a basis for poetic figures, so these didactic lists are a primary basis for allusion in Indic Mahāyāna literature. The gateway to panditry has indeed been opened. ■

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#### NOTES

1. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, foreword by Paul Demieville (Bedford, [England]: G. Fraser, 1959).
2. Don Lopez, ed., *Indian Religions in Practices* (Princeton: University Press, 1996), vii.

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