

***Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism.*** Edited by Jamie Hubbard & Paul L. Swanson. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997. 515 pages. Hardcover: \$45.00; paperback: \$22.95.

**John M. Thompson**

Graduate Theological Union

*Pruning the Bodhi Tree: the Storm over Critical Buddhism* explores serious issues regarding the understanding of Buddhism in the academy, the role of the scholar, and the possibility of objective scholarship. It thus is part of the recent self-critical trend in Buddhist Studies exemplified in other works such as *Curators of the Buddha* and *Rude Awakenings*. *Pruning the Bodhi Tree* focuses on a contemporary movement in Japanese Buddhist Studies led by Matsumoto Shirō and Hakamaya Noriaki, scholars and practitioners of Sōtō Zen. Matsumoto and Hakamaya call into question basic tenets of much of East Asian Buddhism, especially the doctrines of *tathāgata-garbha* ("womb/embryo of Buddhahood") and "original enlightenment" (*hongaku*). According to both scholars, these doctrines are "un-Buddhist." They claim such teachings promote sloppy thinking, embrace "no-thought" at the expense of logical rigor and all-too easily dismiss language's capacity to convey truth. Matsumoto and Hakamaya call this type of thinking "topical" and argue that it leads to a naive tolerance that often masks discriminatory, totalitarian, and ethnocentric agendas. In its stead, they advocate a "Critical Buddhism" based on the doctrines of *anatta* (no-self) and *pratītya-samutpāda* (dependent origination) that stresses clear thinking and compassionate action. A distinctly political agenda informs both Matsumoto and Hakamaya's work, one running counter to the prevailing *Nihonjinron* atmosphere in Japan during the 1980s and '90s. Their work also echoes Western Postmodern discourse in questioning the possibility of objective, "value-free" scholarship.

*Pruning the Bodhi Tree* is divided into three sections, each containing essays by Matsumoto and Hakamaya with responses from other scholars. Part One, "The What and Why of Critical Buddhism," centers on the distinction between "critical" and "topical" thinking, a division Hakamaya traces to 17th century scholar Giambattista Vico and his "debate" with Rene Descartes (pp. 56–63). [N.B., this debate never actually occurred since Descartes died 18 years before Vico's birth]. Part Two, "In Search of True Buddhism," concerns Matsumoto and Hakamaya's extensive critique of the *tathāgata-garbha* tradition. Matsumoto terms this teaching "*dhātu vāda*," equating it with "original enlightenment" thought so prevalent in Japanese Buddhism. Matsumoto is adamant that this teaching is not "true Buddhism" (pp. 165–173). Part Three, "Social Criticism," highlights the

political aspects of "Critical Buddhism." The authors show how the theory of "original enlightenment" works to maintain the status quo, and argue that *hongaku* promotes strong ethnocentric sentiments glorifying the unique Japanese "essence," a notion that has often served to support totalitarianism and militarism.

Each of the essays in *Pruning the Bodhi Tree* has something to recommend it. Matsumoto and Hakamaya's essays are insightful and show both scholars' vast erudition to good avail (both studied with Yamaguchi Zuihō, Japan's leading Tibetologist). Hakamaya's "Critical Philosophy versus Topical Philosophy" and "Scholarship as Criticism," along with Matsumoto's "The Doctrine of *Tathagata-garbha* Is Not Buddhist" and "Buddhism and the Kami: Against Japanism" present both scholars' main points clearly and strongly. These essays make clear that "Critical Buddhism" is not a search for an "original Buddhism" (pace Rhys Davids) and draw a sharp contrast between "critical" and "topical" thought. Perhaps most importantly, they highlight disturbing aspects of Japanese politics that "Critical Buddhism" is protesting.

Most of the essays by other contributors to *Pruning the Bodhi Tree* take Matsumoto and Hakamaya to task for their claims. Among the best of these are Sallie King's "Buddha Nature is Impeccably Buddhist" (pp. 174–192), in which she argues that "Buddha Nature" thought may not imply a monistic ontology, and that its teachings can have positive social repercussions, and Peter Gregory's "Is Critical Buddhism Really Critical?" (pp. 286–297), in which Gregory notes that Hakamaya's account greatly oversimplifies doctrinal and historical developments. Other contributions are equally worthy, however; Paul Swanson's "Why They Say Zen Is Not Buddhism" (pp. 3–29) is highly recommended for the balanced overview it gives of the whole Critical Buddhist movement.

*Pruning the Bodhi Tree* encourages critical responses so it is no surprise that I have many of my own. I will be brief due to constraints of space. First, is Critical Buddhism really new? It seems to me that a "critical" spirit consistently appears in the history of Buddhism and many contributors to *Pruning the Bodhi Tree* argue the same point. Second, why favor Critical over Topical Buddhism? Hakamaya's assertions that "Topical philosophy" is morally impoverished and irrational may hit the mark in some cases, but I doubt "Critical philosophy" will always be better. Third, must "original enlightenment" thought lead to social discrimination? Although Matsumoto and Hakamaya are justifiably outraged at social problems in Japan (and Buddhism's supporting role in their formation), they nowhere make a convincing case that Topical Buddhism will always lead to institutionalized social discrimination. Finally, I doubt that either Matsumoto or Hakamaya have an adequate understanding of "religion" since both stress that "True Buddhism" entails belief in basic teachings rather than ritual participation or community membership. Frankly, such uncritical accep-

tance of nineteenth century Protestant notions of “religions” are no longer viable in Religious Studies these days.

All such criticisms aside, *Pruning the Bodhi Tree* is an important book for bringing major issues in Japanese Buddhist scholarship to a greater audience. The book’s dialogical structure, thought-provoking analyses and controversial claims promote active engagement on the reader’s part. For these reasons it is excellent even if problematic. Matsumoto and Hakamaya are to be commended for forcing us to consider how Buddhist discourse may be shaped by political agendas. At the very least the last section of Matsumoto’s essay “The *Lotus Sutra* and Japanese Culture” (pp. 388–403) should be required reading in all courses on East Asian Religions if only to counter overly romanticized views such as Suzuki presents in *Zen and Japanese Culture*.

On a final note, the provocative tone both Matsumoto and Hakamaya assume (it comes through even in translation and recalls the style of Neo-Pragmatist Richard Rorty) makes for an entertaining read. Although some readers might be offended, I often found their comments amazingly trenchant. I think my favorite is Hakamaya’s likening of Sino-Japanese Buddhism to a parasite feeding off a lion. As he puts it, “In China and Japan the parasite fattened and grew strong by taking the form of the philosophy of original enlightenment, debilitating the lion almost to the point of killing it.” (p. 136) However, Matsumoto’s characterization of a particular Japanese scholar—“From beneath the flutter of the monk’s robes the glint of polished armor quickly catches the eye” (p. 358)—runs a close second. Such remarks are sure to arouse a variety of responses from their readers. I leave it to others to decide whether these passages are instances of *upāya* designed to further our own understanding of Dharma or just nasty jibes tossed out by a couple of irascible academics.

***Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism.* Edited by James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo. (Nanzan Studies in Religion and Culture.) Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994. 390 pages. Hardcover: \$ 42.00; paperback: \$ 21.95.**

**Taline Goorjian**

University of California, Santa Barbara

*Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism* is an important contribution to contemporary trends in Critical Buddhism. This text is a product of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and