

Roger-Pol Droit. *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha*. Translated by David Streight and Pamela Vohnson. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. Pp. xii + 263.

Reviewed by **A. J. Nicholson** University of Chicago

Roger-Pol Droit's recently translated study, *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha*, is not a book about Buddhism per se. Rather, it is a rich and theoretically sophisticated overview of the reception of Buddhism in Europe that deserves shelf space alongside Wilhelm Halbfass' *India and Europe* and Raymond Schwab's *The Oriental Renaissance*. But while some of the figures Droit covers may be familiar from these other studies in the history of orientalism, Droit's book has its own unique narrative thread. Specifically, Droit wishes to examine the once widespread notion that Buddhism is a nihilistic religion, a religion that worships nothingness. His central thesis is that this conception of a nihilistic religion really wasn't about Buddhism at all, but "that Europe . . . was speaking only of herself." Droit sees in the cult of nothingness the subconscious expression of a crisis of foundations among nineteenth-century European intellectuals, as well as a "hidden laboratory for the theoretical development of European nihilism."

Along the way to illustrating this thesis, Droit leads a masterful and extremely entertaining tour of the opinions of early Buddhologists and Eastward-looking philosophers, some of whom have seldom been documented elsewhere. He also provides an enormous bibliography of European writings on Buddhism from 1638 to 1890. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Buddha was often identified as one of many gods belonging to an inchoate and primitive world of mythical concordances. Thus, George Stanley Farber wrote in 1816 that "the primeval Buddha . . . is the same as Vishnu, or Shiva, or Osiris." Writers in this genre were especially fond of identifying the Buddha with the god Mercury. The sole reason, it seems, was simple linguistic confusion—the word for the planet Mercury in Sanskrit is *budha*, one letter short of *buddha*. Furthermore, the preeminent Indologist Sir William Jones posited the identity of the Norse god Woden and Buddha; this was later taken up by A. W. Schlegel in his *Indische Bibliothek*, and eventually influenced the publication of such unforgettable titles as Holmboe's *Traces du Bouddhisme en Norvège avant l'introduction du Christianisme*. Jones elsewhere hinted that the Buddha might have been of Ethiopian, rather than Indian origin, and this set off another wave of speculation. To reconcile theories of a primordial god named Buddha with new evidence that the Buddha had been a man who had lived at a relatively recent date, for a short time a theory of two Buddhas emerged, first suggested by Antione Augustin Giorgi, and later taken up by Jones himself.

Droit sees Hegel as the single figure most responsible for establishing the link between Buddhism and nothingness that endured in the nineteenth-century philosophical imagination. Droit painstakingly charts Hegel's changing attitudes toward Buddhism over the course of his lectures from 1822 to 1831. In spite of, or perhaps because of, Hegel's familiarity with all of the most recent secondary works on Buddhism, he had great difficulty in integrating Buddhism into his philosophical grand

narrative. But his most enduring interpretation of Buddhism came in 1827, when he asserted that for Buddhism, "Saintliness consists in man uniting himself with God, with nothingness, with the absolute in this destruction, in this silence. . . . Man must make himself nothing." Hegel did not get this idea from his contemporaries, but from an earlier stratum of writing on Buddhism, that of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jesuit missionaries. After this portrayal of Buddhism became prevalent in European philosophical circles, an extraordinary debate developed. The notion of a religion that worships nothingness was so contrary to common sense that it threatened the Enlightenment conviction that there existed a single, universal human nature. Jules Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire summed it up quite clearly: "In the presence of a phenomenon so curious and so deplorable . . . one might ask . . . if, in those climates where life is so horrific and nothingness is worshiped instead of God, human nature is still that same nature we feel within ourselves." While Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire insisted throughout his lifetime that Buddhists do worship nothingness, others, such as Adolphe Franck and Adolphe Garnier, denied on purely a priori grounds that such a human practice could exist.

Droit's treatment of Nietzsche is representative of the nuanced depth of his scholarship in European intellectual history. He scans the entirety of Nietzsche's corpus to show just how complex Nietzsche's attitudes were toward Buddhism. For an entire generation of thinkers, the Buddha's teachings and Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy were virtually synonymous. Therefore, the early Nietzsche's break with Schopenhauer and his embrace of life and all of its attendant suffering included the rejection of "the Buddhistic negation of the will." And yet for all of Buddhism's apparent pessimism in the face of life, Nietzsche also saw much to admire. It held out a special attraction to Nietzsche as an "atheistic religion" that was concerned with this world instead of the next in a way that Christianity was not. Nietzsche even reinterpreted the monastic rules of Buddhism as hygienic rather than moral prescriptions, and the Buddhist monastery as a sanatorium for those suffering enervation and depression—maladies to which the ancient Indians had been particularly prone. Another of Droit's favorite characters is Eugène Burnouf, chair of Sanskrit at the Collège de France in Paris and teacher of F. Max Müller. Burnouf gave philological legitimacy to advocates of the annihilationist interpretation of Buddhism when he wrote in 1844 that the Buddhist *nirvāṇa* is "complete destruction, where, according to the most ancient school, the definitive destruction of both the body and the soul takes place." Although Burnouf elsewhere tempered this statement with cautions that the meaning of *nirvāṇa* in the Buddha's teachings was really quite uncertain, the damage had been done. For the rest of the nineteenth century, the philosophers understood *nirvāṇa* as the complete destruction of body and soul.

In spite of Droit's virtuoso presentation of European intellectual history, I have one major reservation with his book. It is clear that he has very little acquaintance with the primary sources of Buddhist and Hindu philosophy, the very objects of speculation around which these fevered and imaginative debates arose. At times this leads him into error. Droit writes, for instance, that "Brahmans appear to have almost completely lost any recollection of their long argument with Buddhism." A cursory

reading of Indian philosophical texts shows that this is clearly false, since the Buddhist philosophical systems were among the opposing points of view most commonly presented by Hindu philosophers. They were so deeply ingrained in Indian intellectual culture that Hindu philosophers still felt the need to respond to Buddhist doctrines up through the seventeenth century, long after Buddhism had ceased to be a living religion in India. Widely read texts in the mainstream Advaita Vedānta and Nyāya traditions represent Buddhist *pūrvapakṣas* in ways often extremely faithful to the complexity and depth of the doctrines presented in the Buddhists' own texts (e.g., Śaṅkara's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, Mādhava's *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*, Jayanta Bhaṭṭa's *Nyāyamañjari*, and Uddyotakara's *Nyāyavārttika*).

It may seem that this criticism of Droit misses the point. After all, he claims not to be writing about Buddhism but rather about Western interpretations of Buddhism. However, I believe there is a larger issue here, relevant to current debates about the nature of orientalism. Were these authors, as Droit seems to suggest, simply creating an imaginary Buddhism that reflected the dark side of European rationalism and progress, with no real resemblance to Buddhism at all? Obviously, such a claim requires that one knows what Buddhism really is. In contrast to Droit's formulation, Charles Hallisey and Sheldon Pollock have independently observed that something more was going on in many orientalist texts. Hallisey coins the phrase "intercultural mimesis" to describe a process in which thinkers appropriated certain concepts or symbols they found in non-Western traditions and then recontextualized these concepts or symbols for ideological reasons quite specific to the European cultural sphere.<sup>1</sup> Many of the writings of early Buddhologists are about Buddhism, albeit in a systematically distorted form. For example, it is clearly an overstatement for Droit to claim that Buddhism "has nothing to do with annihilation." Buddhism does have something to do with annihilation; the fundamental mistake of these orientalists was the misidentification of that which is annihilated. Clearly, it is not the self (*ātman*) that is annihilated in Buddhism, since something that has never existed cannot be destroyed. But other things are annihilated—perhaps, most notably, the five aggregates (*skandhas*) that make up what is often mistaken to be the self. This is a simple point, but one of many related to specific Buddhist doctrines that Droit fails to make.

In spite of this limitation, however, *The Cult of Nothingness* is a highly readable and deeply researched book, one that intellectual historians and philosophers interested in the volatile mix of Buddhology and European philosophy in the nineteenth century should not ignore.

Note

1 – See Sheldon Pollock, "Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj," in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, ed. Carol Breckenridge and Peter Van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), and Charles Hallisey, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism," in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). To understand fully the process of conceptual (mis)-

translation and recontextualization that went on among these early Indologists, it is essential to know precisely what texts they were reading, and how they understood what they read. One painstaking study along these lines is Dorothy M. Figueira's *Translating the Orient: The Reception of Sakuntala in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

David R. Loy. *A Buddhist History of the West: Studies in Lack*. SUNY Series in Religious Studies. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002. Pp. vii + 244.

Reviewed by **Gereon Kopf** Nanzan University

David Loy's most recent work, *A Buddhist History of the West: Studies in Lack*, constitutes an intellectual history of Europe from what he calls a "Buddhist perspective." His obvious goals in this book are (1) to develop a heuristic device, if not a mature methodology, out of the Buddhist intellectual tradition and to apply it to matters that are not necessarily related to the Buddhist tradition, and (2) to reread European history from a new standpoint. I have to confess that I am not a historian and thus cannot evaluate Loy's historical claims; however, from my perspective as a scholar of Buddhist and comparative philosophy, it seems to me that not only does Loy succeed on both counts but his study of European history from what he calls the perspective of lack reveals astonishing yet previously barely highlighted insights into European thought. It also undermines, in a methodological slight of hand that at times evokes Michel Foucault's approach, the conventional assumptions about the dominant paradigms of the generally accepted periods of European history. I do not want to claim that Loy's methodology resembles Foucault's "archaeology" in any way; however, it does demonstrate that discourses and time periods are fluid rather than static and that their paradigm depends on, and changes in accordance with, the perspective of the historian.

For example, seen from Loy's perspective of lack, the central and most formative event of European history was neither the Renaissance nor the Enlightenment, but the Papal Revolution of the late eleventh century. In general, Loy's book is filled with observations and indictments of common myths that are not only provocative in nature but sure to challenge many of the presuppositions that the proponents of the so-called Western World hold dear. In concrete terms, Loy seems to focus on and examine not so much European intellectual history but the myths that are used to argue for the superiority of the "West": freedom, progress, romantic love, the sanctity of the nation-state, and free-market capitalism.

Loy chooses as his standpoint "a Buddhist perspective," namely the "perspective of lack." He takes as his basic assumption the dictum he borrows from early Buddhism and, as he adds, psychotherapy, namely that humans have to live with the basic frustration—Loy's translation of *dukkha*, which is usually rendered as "suffering"—that reality does not conform to our innermost desires. We desire immortality but cannot avoid the impermanence of all living beings. The awareness of our impermanence not only shatters our sense of and quest for a self, but it also

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