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Metaphor and Literalism in Buddhism: The Doctrinal History of Nirvana. By Soonil Hwang. London: Routledge, 2006. Pp. xv + 160.

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The brevity of *Metaphor and Literalism in Buddhism: The Doctrinal History of Nirvana* seems to belie the potentially immense nature of the title. However, halfway through the brief Introduction to his first major-length publication, Soonil Hwang offers his rationale for limiting the scope of the work by opting to ignore (p. 3), or rather postpone (p. 4), the Mahāyāna interpretations of nirvana (*nirvāṇa*). This sets up the much less daunting challenge of tracing the history of nirvana by confining the study to non-Mahāyāna India. Thus, “Southern” is used to designate the Theravāda and “Northern” to refer to the two other major Indian non-Mahāyāna schools, the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika and the Sautrāntika. The reader should also be warned that, while it adds intrigue to the history, the author’s insistence on calling Buddhaghosa a “northerner” (pp. 46, 74) often blurs the just-mentioned distinction.

There are those who might believe that lexicographers ought to stay well clear of ‘nirvana,’ a word to be left on the “indefinable” shelf along with its ineffable relatives, such as ‘satori’ and ‘God.’ But Soonil Hwang is convinced that his mentor, Richard Gombrich, is on to something in tracing the meaning back to the sacred fires of early Brahmanism, supplying the Buddha with an analogy for the ‘blowing out’ of the three ‘fires’: passion, hatred, and delusion. In classic Gombrich style, the hypothesis is at once historical and culturally embedded, and, at least from a Buddhological point of view, textually justifiable. However, in tracing the meaning of the word ‘nirvana,’ one cannot but sense a gaping omission in pre-Buddhist Indian history (p. 9), and though likely due to lack of data rather than lack of research, the omission restricts the scope of the analysis equally as much as the omission of the Mahāyāna.

Of course this book was originally a Ph.D. thesis at the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, so the author may well be forgiven if the scholarship here were found to be essentially Buddhology. And Richard Gombrich’s presence ensures that the scholarship follows a certain format, the approach being historical and linguistic. The aim is to trace concepts, not experiences. Allegiance to origin is to be found in the wording of texts, not in people. Hwang is thus true to his mentor when he begins by separating “scholars” from “Buddhists” (p. 9), as if they were mutually exclusive categories.

As one might expect, then, the analysis is immediately technical, and the first two chapters basically limit the readership to those with some grasp of Pali and/or Sanskrit. The author appears equally at home in Chinese, though less is expected of the reader here. And with a number of complex Buddhist terms left without explanation, this is a book for specialists only.

While chapter 1 focuses on the meaning of the word ‘nirvana,’ chapter 2 examines the implications of there being two types of nirvana: ‘with remainder’ and ‘without remainder.’ What this ‘remainder’ might be is shown to be a linguistic question, with the author tracing the ambiguity surrounding the etymology of the Sanskrit terms ‘*upādi*’ (with long ‘a’ and short ‘d’) and ‘*upadhi*’ (with short ‘a’ and long ‘dh’).

The argument revolves around interpreting the 'remainder' either as the 'aggregates' or else as 'attachment'/'clinging.' Hwang seems to favor Gombrich's position that '*upādi*' refers to the concept of 'fuel,' which metaphorically denotes 'the aggregates' (pp. 6, 20). Hwang goes on to make the interesting point that, while Jainism focused on nirvana at death, Buddhism focused on nirvana in life (p. 23).

Hwang now turns to the question of whether nirvana with remainder might apply to a noble person other than an *arahant*. Scholars, including Hermann Oldenberg and Peter Masfield, had earlier argued that the term must refer to a non-returner, for an *arahant* (by definition) could not have attachment. But Soonil Hwang sides with Peter Harvey's interpretation (p. 28) that both nirvana with and without remainder refer to the *arahant*, and that without remainder appeals to the moment of death when the aggregates are set to fall off. Prior to this moment of death, the *arahant* may live without grasping, but must continue to live with/as the aggregates, which are the result of past grasping.

In chapter 3, Hwang draws out the different concepts of nirvana to be found in the Pali *abhidhamma* and the Chinese *abhidharma*, and contrasts each with the concept of cessation found in the early canon (p. 42). He then goes on to show how the concept of 'vitality' (*āyu*) was introduced by both the Northern and Southern traditions in order to further distinguish 'nirvana with remainder' from 'nirvana without remainder.'

In chapter 4, the author tackles the famous 'unanswered questions,' with specific interest in the postmortem state of the Tathāgata. He follows Steven Collins in noting how it is not so much that the 'fires' are 'blown out,' but that the fires must automatically come to an end when there is no more fuel (pp. 57–58). However, the question as to whether this 'fuel' is to be interpreted as 'clinging' (here 'thirst') or the 'aggregates' once again arises. Hwang here also redeems himself of the accusation that he may be attempting to study Buddhism in a vacuum, and in fact takes a rather close look at the question of fire as interpreted in the Upaniṣads. He seems justified in seeing a self (*ātman*) behind the image of an extinguished fire, and may well be correct in believing the Buddha to be refusing to say anything about nirvana that might go beyond the cause-effect of *dharmas* (p. 60). The author thus offers a less positive interpretation of nirvana than that of Peter Harvey, as introduced at the beginning of the chapter (p. 50). It will be interesting to see if Hwang ever returns to this question in light of Mahāyāna interpretations of the postmortem Buddha-consciousness, especially that of the Yogācāra. Such a path would surely force the author to go further into the philosophical implications of the debate, building on his solid philological groundwork.

What in fact follows is a discussion about nirvana as the unconditioned, and the varying categorizations of space. And as Hwang adopts his subtle analytical skills to tease out the manner in which the Theravādins maintained a minimal distinction between nirvana and space, and yet came so close to regarding space as equally unconditioned (p. 70), one cannot help but again wonder whether the author will extend his research into the Mahāyāna and especially Tantric rhetoric of the likeness of the enlightened mind to space. The author ends the chapter by showing how the

(later) Theravādins cleverly left the door open for a non-negative interpretation of postmortem nirvana (pp. 74–76), implying that nirvana had location.

Hwang begins chapter 5 by arguing for a possible Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika position on ‘nirvana without remainder’ as one of non-existence of a self, with merely the existence of the *dharmas* that made up the person in ‘nirvana with remainder’ (p. 86). As the author points out, this theory relies on the concept of real existents in the three times—past, present, and future. Nirvana, then, is a series of *dharmas*, whose basis is right knowledge, which act as a continuous antidote to defilements (p. 98). This is contrasted with the Sautrāntika view that nirvana is not in fact a real existent, but a mere designation. When latent defilements (seeds) no longer arise, that is ‘nirvana with remainder’. When the ‘life’ in this series is extinguished, that is ‘nirvana without remainder’ (p. 91). With a lack of surviving Sautrāntika texts, the core text being used here for the Sautrāntika view is Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*. And when Vasubandhu uses the word ‘life’ (*janman*), Hwang takes him to mean ‘vitality’ (*āyu*), which he justifiably relates to Vasubandhu’s use of the word ‘momentum’ (*āvedha*) (p. 97). A vital point is made that the theory of momentariness shifted the meaning of nirvana away from cessation and toward non-arising (p. 99). Chapter 5 closes with a very useful table summarizing the doctrinal development of nirvana.

With part 2 of the book essentially being an Appendix of textual extracts, chapter 6 is the main conclusion. And Hwang truly offers a wonderfully clear conclusion, summarizing the essential points so well that it could almost be read as an article in itself. Nothing of any substance is included that was absent from the preceding chapters. One might have expected a more in-depth discussion of which school actually kept to the “original” meaning of nirvana. However, as the argument for any real “original” meaning was rather weak, based on a rather dubious interpretation of the physical nature of fire, and as there was a lack of textual evidence within the Sautrāntika School, the Conclusion comes across as clear, but lacking a punch. The author ends by briefly discussing Vasubandhu’s later views, both pre- and post-Mahāyāna, and leaves open the possibility of further study on a more complete history of nirvana. I am sure such a book would be well received.