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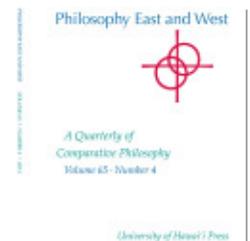
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## **Critical Buddhism: Engaging with Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought by James Mark Shields (review)**

Steven Heine

Philosophy East and West, Volume 65, Number 3, July 2015, pp. 979-981  
(Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press  
DOI: [10.1353/pew.2015.0082](https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2015.0082)



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*Critical Buddhism: Engaging with Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought.* By James Mark Shields. Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011. Pp. 206. Hardcover \$89.95, ISBN 978-1-40-941798-9.



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Critical Buddhism (*hihan bukkō*) is an innovative methodological movement that was formed by a couple of Buddhist scholars at Komazawa University in Tokyo, which houses the largest Buddhist Studies department in Japan and is affiliated with the Sōtō Zen sect. The approach initially developed in the mid-1980s in response to a nexus of sociopolitical issues that were at the time plaguing Sōtō and other Japanese Buddhist schools. James Mark Shields explains in the “Introduction” to his new book, *Critical Buddhism: Engaging with Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought*, how at a major conference on world religions held back in 1979 a representative of the Sōtō sect declared that there was no discrimination against the outcast community of Burakumin by Buddhism in Japan. Because egregious examples of such bias were well documented over many decades, the expression of denial triggered a round of protests. This, in turn, caused Sōtō leaders to respond by commissioning a group of professors to investigate the history of Buddhist teachings and attitudes that may have led to ethical lapses and an uncritical acceptance of societal problems. A related issue examined was the pre-World War II Buddhist backing, or at least a lack of denouncing, of Japanese supernaturalism and imperialism. Why, it was asked, was Buddhism in Japan operating for the most part as a force for supporting and reinforcing the status quo rather than for disputing and attempting to reform social deficiencies?

By 1985, the Critical Buddhist movement had emerged with the writings of Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō, and gained a high degree of sympathy but also some disapproval from colleagues. Hakamaya and Matsumoto were particularly noted for their rather harsh manner of condemning Zen and other forms of Japanese Buddhism for failing to adhere to basic ethical principles. By allowing its moral philosophy to be corrupted over the centuries because of a variety of cultural and historical factors, authentic Buddhist behavior was subverted and lost, the Critical Buddhists claimed. For example, a genuine understanding of the notion of karmic rewards and punishments was turned into an insidious justification for discrimination and nationalism through an outlook that can be characterized as “you get what you deserve.” Shields describes how Critical Buddhism was small in numbers, constituting only a handful of scholars, but with great aspirations in attacking the sanctity of the Japanese Buddhist institution and its multifarious spokespersons. This confrontation was carried out through a critical analysis of the discrepancy between fundamental Buddhist doctrines and current practices in light of modern examples

of critical Western philosophy, especially that of René Descartes and his detractor Giambattista Vico, among others.

Although there is no division mentioned in the table of contents, the structure of *Critical Buddhism* seems to fall naturally into two parts. The first part, consisting of the introduction and the initial three main chapters, which constitutes about 70 percent of the volume, provides a historical overview of the origins and implications of the methodological movement in relation to the diverse social and intellectual developments in Japan. This major section of the book is highly successful in illuminating the central features of Critical Buddhist philosophy and its connections with as well as disconnections from the works of related schools of thought. These range from the writings of the Kyoto School, which Hakamaya and Matsumoto criticize for supporting imperialism, to Rinzai Zen priest Ichikawa Hakugen, known for his condemnation of prewar Buddhist trends. Ichikawa has a great affinity for, as well as differences with, Critical Buddhism, and these are analyzed appropriately here.

Shields' introductory essay explains that Critical Buddhism sets up a contrast between its approach to criticism (or "criticalism"), inspired in large part by the Cartesian tradition in the West, and topicalism, or a substantive (Skt. *dhātu-vāda*) philosophical outlook that undermines the Buddhist doctrines of impermanence and emptiness and detracts from a reliance on the ethical principles of causality and karmic retribution. Following this, chapter 1 on "Buddhism, Criticism, and Postwar Japan" provides a survey of a variety of societal and political issues as well as ideological responses over the course of a century since the Meiji era that helped give rise to Critical Buddhism and related approaches, offering a sometimes devastating cultural criticism of Japanese modernity. In these chapters, Shields points out that the movement's method, based on a philological analysis of texts that emerged out of the discipline of Buddhology, tends to weaken in its arguments regarding the extent of collective injustice in Japan, which probably requires a more sophisticated social scientific examination.

The next chapter, the "Roots of Topicalism," investigates Critical Buddhism's major philosophical argument for understanding the basis of problems with contemporary Buddhism's conceptions of self and reality, which have been intruded upon by Japanese nativist trends and other indigenous ideologies. This critique is seen in comparison to similar observations made by Ichikawa, although postwar Buddhist reformer Inaga Saburō probably should have been mentioned in this context. Chapter 3, "Problems of Modern Zen Thought," delivers a sustained examination of Critical Buddhism's analysis of unintended topical conceptions of the absolute that support the nationalism of the Kyoto School philosophers, including Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani Keiji, and Watsuji Tetsurō. According to Shields' assessment of the conclusions of Hakamaya and Matsumoto, Kyoto School representatives must be seen as "complicit in the devastation wrought by Japan on its own and other peoples during the first half of this [sic] century" (p. 123).

While the discussion in the main part of the book is insightful and compelling, I am more skeptical of the final two chapters. This section embarks on the ambitious aim of constructively situating and critically reflecting on the role of Critical

Buddhism in terms of contemporary Western philosophy. Chapter 4, "Criticism as Anamnesis," makes a very promising start by engaging a wide variety of modern Japanese and Western thinkers ranging from Hisamatsu Shin'ichi to Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jacques Derrida in relation to the goal of developing a "truly critical Buddhist hermeneutics" (p. 144), although that objective remains undefined.

In chapter 5, "Radical Contingency and Compassion," some problematic scholarly tendencies undercut Shields' arguments. Shortcomings include a lack of familiarity with some of the Buddhist sources, including misleading references to the Huayan and Madhyamaka schools on pages 172 and 173 (where the latter's doctrine is conflated with Zen), as well as a letdown in choosing to use the best translations available, such as citing Dōgen via Thomas Cleary's *Rational Zen* (Cleary has a lot of reliable renderings, but this is not one of them). There is also an overreliance on the early writings, up through the mid-1990s, of both Hakamaya and Matsumoto without referencing their more recent works. Newer studies by both thinkers on Kamakura-era Buddhist leaders, including Hōnen, Shinran, and Myōe, who continue to exert great influence, shed much light on the underlying views of Critical Buddhism regarding modern Japanese religiosity.

Nevertheless, many of the philosophical musings in the second part of Shields' book are rich in ideas and reflections on the role of Critical Buddhism as a mode of thought that has worldwide significance, especially in trying to link a decentered metaphysics with a commitment to ethical behavior. Given the strengths of the opening chapters, his work overall has much of value to offer readers seeking to relate current Buddhist conceptual trends to the complex challenges of the sociopolitical context in modern Japan, and it can be highly recommended for its many interesting and perceptive discussions of this and related comparative philosophical topics.

*Gandhi's Ascetic Activism: Renunciation and Social Action.* By Veena R. Howard. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013. Pp. xx + 289. ISBN 978-1-43-844557-1.



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Veena R. Howard's *Gandhi's Ascetic Activism: Renunciation and Social Action* is an impressive example of meticulous scholarship. Well written and well documented, it offers innovative interpretations that will both inform and challenge the views of most readers. It is an important contribution to our understanding of Gandhi's theory and practice of truthfulness, nonviolence, and ascetic renunciation and of how Gandhi regarded religious asceticism as necessary for his worldly, political, and social