



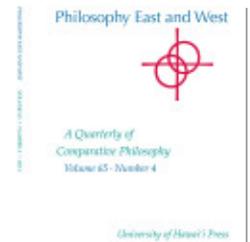
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Indian Buddhist Philosophy by Amber D. Carpenter (review)

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Indian Buddhist Philosophy. By Amber D. Carpenter. Durham, UK: Acumen Publishing, 2014. Pp. v–xvii + 313. ISBN 978-1-84-465298-3.



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Authors generally take one of two approaches to surveying Buddhist philosophy. There is the historically oriented introduction, which charts the development from early Abhidharma to later Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. Examples of this style include David Kalupahana's *A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities* (1992) and Paul Williams and Anthony Tribe's *Buddhist Thought* (2000). Then there is the topic-oriented introduction, which focuses on major questions under discussion (What is suffering and how do we end it? What is the theory of no-self? How does the concept of emptiness square with the doctrine of rebirth?). Mark Gowan's *Philosophy of the Buddha: An Introduction* (2003) and Mark Siderits' *Buddhism as Philosophy* (2007) are two instances of this approach.

The risk in focusing on historical development is losing the philosophical thread in a morass of texts and commentaries, schools and sub-schools. On the other hand, isolating topics from their historical context runs the risk of misrepresentation and oversimplification. An excellent survey, using either method, will be attentive to the situatedness of philosophical claims without losing sight of the overarching conversation. This enables a reader to engage in the conversation from within her own philosophical tradition, equipped with an awareness of how it relates to Indian Buddhism, so that she might, in Gadamerian terms, aim toward a fusion of horizons.

In her recent book, *Indian Buddhist Philosophy*, Amber D. Carpenter marries both historical and topical approaches in an excellent introduction to the themes and texts of Indian Buddhist philosophy. If the book leans toward one of the two styles, it is toward the topical (despite the book copy advertising it as “roughly chronological”). However, she doesn't fall into historical oversimplification for the sake of philosophical dialectic. Carpenter's aim is to unfold the development of Indian Buddhist thought with a particular focus on ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics. Since her goal is to orient the reader only to Indian *Buddhist* philosophy, she does not emphasize non-Buddhist interlocutors. Nor, since she focuses on *Indian* philosophy, does she continue much beyond the seventh century, since, by this point in history, Buddhism was making inroads into Tibet through Śāntarākṣita and others.

Carpenter organizes *Indian Buddhist Philosophy* into eight chapters, which take the reader from the auspicious birth of Siddhartha Gautama in the fifth century B.C.E. up to the Mādhyamika Śāntideva's miraculously levitating recitation of the *Bodhicāryāvātāra* in the eighth century C.E. Chapter 1 introduces the history and legends of the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths, and the Eightfold Path. In this chapter, Carpenter explores different ways to frame suffering, concluding that it is best under-

stood as mutually dependent origination, or *pratīyasamutpāda*. With the concept of “metaphysical suffering,” the fact that everything is conditioned by something else, she begins chapter 2 with a focus on the theory of no-self. This chapter introduces readers to the Abhidharma, the *puḍgalavādins* (Buddhists who believe that there are persons), and the famous chariot metaphor found in the *Milindapañhā*. Along the way she draws some connections with Greek and Christian accounts of suffering and self as well as the Vedic background against which early Buddhists defined themselves.

Carpenter makes another cross-cultural connection in chapter 3, this time with Friedrich Nietzsche, who rejected Buddhism (at least Schopenhauer’s version of it) as being a nihilistic, world-denying way of life. She uses Nietzsche as a foil with which to introduce the Theravāda-Mahāyāna dispute, to identify precisely in what sense *nirvāṇa* is a cessation of desire, and to explain how Buddhism can motivate ethical activity without internal contradiction, given that desire seems necessary for action and yet is also the very thing that Buddhists seek to dismantle.

Carpenter then shifts to Mahāyāna Buddhism, using chapter 4 to focus on the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and the *Ratnāvalī*, and she explains how Nāgārjuna moves beyond and yet maintains continuity with the earlier Ābhidharmikas. The doctrine of emptiness, or *śūnyatā*, gets treated here, as does the role of language in conceptualizing reality, though this latter topic is more fully explored in her discussion of Dīnāga and Dharmakīrti’s *apoha* theories in chapter 8. After concluding chapter 4 with the problem that Nāgārjuna’s equating *nirvāṇa* with *saṃsāra* might yield a quietistic moral nihilism, Carpenter transitions to a wider discussion of *karma*, or action. In chapter 5 she returns to early Buddhist thinkers such as Buddhaghōṣa, along with later ones like Candrakīrti, to survey the role of *karma* in the Buddhist solution to the problem of suffering. She focuses on whether the no-self position is consistent with *karma*, as *karma* seems to require a “self” that acts and is reborn. In this chapter she also considers how *karma* might be recontextualized in a modern era in which the notion of rebirth is generally rejected.

Chapter 6 introduces the Naiyāyikas by way of Vatsyāyana and Uddyotakara, who challenge the Buddhist account of no-self. They argue that knowledge and memory cannot be explained without diachronic temporal unity of the self, nor can action be explained without synchronic unity of mental processes like cognition, desire, perception, et cetera. Carpenter looks at Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* as one possible reply, arguing that the synchronic unity worry, made sharpest in Uddyotakara, is the more difficult challenge to the Buddhist. The last two chapters continue to draw upon Vasubandhu, but emphasize his Yogācāra works (*Twenty Verses*, *Thirty Verses*, *Treatise on the Three Natures*) to develop the Yogācāra-Madhyamaka debate and the relationship between phenomenology and metaphysics. Chapter 7 explores whether, as the Mādhyamikas allege, the Yogācārin has reintroduced a “self” with the claim that apparently external reality is constructed by a consciousness whose own nature (*sva-bhāva*) is also constructed. Finally, in chapter 8, the longest chapter of the text, Carpenter continues the Yogācāra-Madhyamaka dispute in the context of epistemology and *pramāṇa* theory, introduces Dīnāga

and Dharmakīrti and their respective theories of language—*apoha*—and concludes with a discussion of Śāntideva’s Madhyamaka philosophy in the service of ethical practice. An epilogue follows, with a brief roadmap of the historical development of Buddhism in India after this time, ranging from tenth-century Śāntarakṣita to Mokṣākaragupta in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries C.E.

As an introduction to the philosophical concerns driving Buddhism in India, Carpenter’s book is excellent. She deftly moves from the analysis of particular texts to formulate general philosophical positions, along the way pointing the reader to relevant secondary literature (mostly in the form of footnotes, though sometimes within the body of the text). For instance, the eighth chapter, “The Long Sixth to Seventh Century: Epistemology as Ethics,” manages to cover significant territory in a manner both perspicuous and fecund. Her introduction to *pramāṇa* theory in Indian philosophy in general and in the Nyāya and Buddhists in particular is accessible to philosophers unfamiliar with the tradition. At the same time, she raises important questions about what Dīnāga’s epistemological project is in the *Pramāṇa-samuccaya*. Should he be seen as trying to solve what contemporary philosophers would recognize as the problem of induction? In what way is it accurate to call his view “skeptical”? Carpenter’s strength is her ability to introduce readers to the complex historical dialectic of Buddhist philosophy while keeping the implications for contemporary philosophers (in the European tradition especially) at the forefront. We get the sense that we are being drawn into a living conversation, whose questions are just as urgent today as they were fifteen hundred years ago.

There are two ways in which the book falls short of its goals as an introduction to Indian Buddhist philosophy, however. The first is that the topical approach can leave the reader new to Buddhism confused at key junctures. For instance, Carpenter introduces Vasubandhu and Nāgārjuna in her discussion of *kleśas* in chapter 2 before she discusses Yogācāra and Madhyamaka. A novice reader would assume that they are both Abhidharmika, since that’s all that has been discussed so far. Similarly, she mentions the Nyāya off-handedly in chapter 5 before introducing them as important interlocutors in chapter 6. On this latter point: while beginning with the legend of Siddhartha Gautama rather than a dry survey of the philosophical terrain makes sense as an opening for the book, one wishes Carpenter had spent a bit more time situating the Buddhist philosophical project into the context of existing *āstika* points of view (for instance, the Mīmāṃsā are all but absent in the book, meriting no mention in the index, despite their importance in shaping debates in epistemology and language). Finally, while she mentions the *Upaniṣads* and the Vedas in her first chapter she presumes the reader is familiar with them, or at least that they will find their way to the (very brief) discussion of the Indian intellectual context in Appendix 2.

The second problem is that the sensitivity that Carpenter shows to Indian Buddhist philosophy—neglecting neither its historical situatedness nor its continuity with other philosophical traditions—is lacking in many places where she does comparative work. While her discussion of the “Nietzschean Objection” in chapter 3 is an exception, frequently Carpenter will make comparative remarks that over-generalize Western interlocutors. For example, very early in the book (p. 3) she says

that while for the Buddhists and the Greeks “metaphysics matters” because of its impact on our ethical practice, this is “strikingly at odds with contemporary academic philosophy.” Given contemporary interest in the metaphysics of action and personal identity, this seems like an overstatement, one that could be nuanced. Or, contrasting Buddhist views with Christian, she says that the latter “seem to think that suffering *ennobles* a soul” (italics hers) but does not clarify whether the Christian sense of “suffering” is the same as the metaphysical sense she’s addressing, or which Christian (theologian? philosopher?) makes such a claim. In a similar vein, she claims that the Christian concept of Christ’s love is “hardly distinguishable” from Buddhist virtues (p. 67) without noting the fact that the relationship between these concepts is the subject of significant comparative work.

Other small issues are related to style and proofreading. Carpenter moves between Sanskrit and Pāli throughout the text without alerting the reader, which could be confusing to some readers, given the languages’ similarities (is it “*nibbana*” or “*nirvāṇa*,” “*kamma*” or “*karma*”?). As well, typographical errors are scattered throughout the text: for example, “*Bohicāryāvatāra*” for “*Bodhicāryāvatāra*” (p. xiii), “*Upadhyaya*” for “*Upādhyāya*” (p. xvii), “*Śankaramisra*” for “*Śaṅkaramiśra*” (p. xvii), “*prajña-paramitā*” for “*prajña-pāramitā*” (p. 72), “*sūnya*” for “*śūnya*” (p. 74), “*śravaka*” for “*śrāvaka*” (p. 77), “*sūnyatā*” for “*śūnyatā*” (p. 81), and “*vijñaptimatra*” for “*vijñaptimātra*” (pp. 145 and 147).

Apart from these concerns, the text is a valuable introduction to the core disputes in Indian Buddhist philosophy. It will be useful for those trained in Western philosophy who are curious about Buddhist philosophy, as Carpenter is skilled at distilling complex dialectic into clear and accessible terms. Those just embarking on a study of Indian Buddhism will also benefit from this book as a roadmap that prepares the reader to pursue her study further. The bibliography and footnotes (which go into further detail about disputes in the secondary literature) add to the value of this book for scholars interested in Buddhist philosophy. One hopes to find *Indian Buddhist Philosophy* on many bookshelves belonging to Western and non-Western philosophers alike.