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# A Review of *Critical Buddhism: Engaging with Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought*

Ronald S. Green<sup>1</sup>

*Critical Buddhism: Engaging with Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought*. By James Mark Shields. Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2011, ISBN: 978-1-4094-1798-9 (hardback), \$119.95.

This book reviews claims from the 1980s and 1990s made by so-called “Critical Buddhists.” It focuses on the idea of “*topos*” they used to denounce Zen principles. James Shields finds such claims to have been short-sighted and biased in that, for example, they failed to consider the broader implications and meanings of such ideas as *topos*. However, Shields argues that it is valuable to apply some form of critique to Buddhism as skillful means, particularly to guard against political discrimination. He suggests that such a critique could be done by incorporating the “Linguistic Turn” of mid-twentieth century philosophy into the analysis of Buddhist ideas. Shields hopes that his analyses and suggestions will spark a “second wave” of Critical Buddhism.

An opening thesis statement similar to the paragraph above would have been welcomed. In the absence of such it is possible to misunderstand until late in the book that the author is not giving approval

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to the ideas of the Critical Buddhists. Instead, he is explaining their claims that Zen and all East Asian Buddhism is not “true” Buddhism and their charges that those traditions promote political elitism and social discrimination. If we are patient readers, we will eventually discover that Shields gives good reasons for rejecting their allegations, even if not entirely.

It is possible that the author intentionally organized his prose to hide most of his conclusion until the end. Such a format certainly allows tension to build through the presentation of one a-historical claim after another so that the conclusion comes as a much sought after relief making a large impression. Although such a style differs from what we are taught to expect from academic writings in English, it is the standard organization of Japanese *ronbun* (academic thesis). Shields spent several years studying at the University of Kyoto in the 1990s and still returns there for research periodically. In this case, however, a foreseeable problem with not having a thesis statement up front and repeated throughout is that some will be unlikely to continue reading what appears to be a lengthy review of a literature of ideas that become at times frankly unpleasant in their contentiousness.

Indeed, we should wonder then who Shields conceives to be the target audience for this book. It will probably not appeal to students of general European-based philosophy or even those focused on twentieth century continental and linguistic philosophy on which Shields relies heavily. This is because his treatment is aimed at a specific argument proposed by a very few Buddhists. Likewise, English speakers broadly interested in Buddhism will not find the book attractive. For, as Shields reiterates, the vast majority of such people are attracted to what they see as Buddhism’s promises of universal love and peace, which Critical Buddhism attacks vehemently. The target audience then may be those who are both concerned with that brief and seeming insignificant commentary on Zen and also interested in a particular development in non-Buddhist philosophy. Yet even those few people are not likely to contin-

ue reading in the absence of a thesis statement promising to refute the harsh arguments being reviewed. Instead they may stop and conclude along with the review published in the *Journal of Japanese Buddhism* about Shields that, “Like most commentators on Critical Buddhism he does not argue against Hakamaya and Matsumoto on the terrain of their study of classical texts, or correct their sweeping judgments by a step back to more patient arts of interpretation. . .”<sup>2</sup> This is an understandable but regrettable interpretation because in the last chapter, although it is the shortest in the book, Shields does correct their judgments, mainly on the basis of being too sweeping. Further, the book is valuable in a number of ways to a potentially wider audience than it will likely reach, especially chapters one and five. This will be demonstrated below through a summary of its sections.

In the introduction, the author describes (a) what prompted the first wave of Critical Buddhism (if we can call it that, given that there has yet to be a second wave), (b) who the Critical Buddhists were and what their main issues were, and (c) the task of the current book. Regarding (a), Critical Buddhism was a response to what its proponents saw as ongoing social discrimination justified and perpetuated by Japanese Buddhists, especially those of the Sōtō Zen tradition. Zen’s connection to discrimination became particularly apparent and intolerable to them when the then-President of the Buddhist Federation of Japan and Secretary General of Sōtō Zen, Machida Muneo, said in 1979 that there was no social discrimination in Japan. Regarding (b), this led to publications in 1985 expressing the dissenting viewpoints of two scholars affiliated with Sōtō Zen, Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō. Thus began Critical Buddhism that expanded its critique to include the very principles of Japanese Buddhism, which the writers consider to be a misinterpretation and perversion of “true” Buddhism. Accordingly, true Buddhism does not reside in Buddhism’s historical developments, but in criticism itself,

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph S. O’Leary, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 399-401.

that is, “criticism alone” is true Buddhism (5) and “Zen is not Buddhism” (7).

For centuries Zen Buddhists have been saying that their teachings are beyond words and all discrimination which, the Critical Buddhists point out, is anti-critical. Further, Zen and much of Mahāyāna Buddhism have been teaching about “Buddha-nature” and its related concept “original enlightenment.” According to the Critical Buddhists, these are examples of “*topicalism*” which oppose criticalism and are thereby anti-Buddhist. In this conception, *topos* or *topicalism* is an idealist belief that there exists an unchanging essence of some kind. Critical Buddhists contrast this to what they see as the most widespread tenant of Buddhism across the traditions of the world, dependent co-arising (*pratītya-samutpāta*). While other religious traditions claim the existence of an unchanging entity (*atman*, the soul, God, etc.), “true” Buddhism, they argue, rejects this in favor of the view that all things are interdependent and always changing. For Critical Buddhists, the underlying import of teaching about a *topical* entity such as Buddha-nature, is that such beliefs have been used by those in power to discriminate against others. Critical Buddhists insist that true Buddhism must be doctrinally correct in accepting *pratītya-samutpāta*, ethically correct in acting selflessly to benefit others, and pragmatically correct in critically rejecting doctrines that claim there is an unchanging essence. Hakamaya goes as far as to reject the notion that the goal of Buddhism is awakening, asserting instead that the goal is “the clear discrimination of phenomena” (14). These propositions and a number of responses to them were published in English in 1997 in *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm Over Critical Buddhism*.

Regarding the third thing (c) that the author describes in the introduction, Shields states his goal to be “to provoke a second wave of Critical Buddhism by emphasizing in particular the epistemological and ethical components of criticism, in order to ‘more fully release the transformative energies of [Buddhist] tradition and of scholarly questioning

of tradition” (16; Shields quotes Joseph S. O’Leary, “The Hermeneutics of Critical Buddhism” in *Eastern Buddhist*). He says he will treat Critical Buddhism as skillful means (*upāya-kausālya*), as medicine for “curing a particular illness affecting modern Buddhism and circumventing a more fully developed Buddhist socio-ethical praxis in the contemporary world” (14). Although he says this much, which sounds like strong support for the writers, he does not mention that he will actually oppose the Critical Buddhists or how he will do so.

Chapter One, “Buddhism, Criticism, and Postwar Japan” is easily one of the best summaries available of Buddhism and violence focusing on Japan. Shields has organized several panels on Socially Engaged Buddhism and has been an active scholar in this area for years. It is not surprising, then, that Chapter One is perfect for exposing students to this. The purpose of the chapter in the broader context of the book is to provide the historical and religious background that gave rise to Critical Buddhism. The chapter begins with a discussion of the reshaping of modern Japan during the U.S. occupation, the U.S. reversal of its early policy of liberal reform, and the reimagining by some Japanese of their country’s cultural mythology in a way that views criticism itself as foreign to them. The chapter then discusses violence in general Buddhist history, pointing out via American anthropologist Marvin Harris (1927-2001) that so-called “religions of love” have had no clearly visible impact on incidences of war. Shields reviews the literature on Buddhism and violence concisely, criticizing (sometimes with a biting sense of humor as in the case of the writings of David Loy) those who have idealized Buddhism as less violent than other religions. He then turns toward instances of cooperation between Japanese Buddhism and nationalism, militarism, and “Imperial Way fascism” as expressed (correctly or not) in a number of books, including *Zen at War* by Brian Victoria. He likewise describes criticisms leveled at the Kyoto School, the famous Japanese philosophical movement centered at Kyoto University that incorporates European philosophy in their analysis of Buddhism and allegedly the



language of Hegelian metaphysics to promote nationalism and aggression (25).

After this, Shields asks, “was Buddhism being used—i.e., misused—in the service of an all-powerful nationalist ideology? Or, as Critical Buddhism and some others suggest, was the connection deeper than one of pure expediency, perhaps traceable to certain elements within Buddhism, specifically Buddhist doctrine itself?” (26). He pursues this question by providing numerous examples of soldier monks and the reimagining of *bushidō* through films such as *The Last Samurai*, which portrayed it as a wider spread Buddhist influenced phenomenon than it had actually been and spread this image throughout the country. Accordingly, in these cases and others, Buddhists used the idea of original enlightenment as an excuse to break precepts. To provide examples of this, Shields quotes sources such as the scholar-priest Inoue Enryō (1858-1919), who said, “Buddhism is a teaching of compassion, a teaching for living human beings. Therefore, fighting on behalf of living human beings is in accord with the spirit of compassion” (36).

One of the most interesting observations the author makes in this chapter is that such ideology means the Asian Pacific War can be understood as a Shintō-Buddhist holy war or at least a “just war.” He gives evidence of this by using James Turner Johnson’s criteria: (1) That the war was given a transcendental authority; (2) Its purpose was associated with religion; and (3) It was waged by people who set themselves apart morally from their enemy (38). This is an interesting suggestion in light of the prevalent belief that Buddhists have only been violent in a small number of isolated incidences, unlike adherents of Abrahamic religions who have waged extensive holy wars in the Middle East and Europe. Shields points out in this chapter that Japanese Buddhists have likewise discriminated against individuals and groups, in particular the *burakumin*, who have been at the bottom of the Japanese social order historically. Buddhists have done so by using doctrine as a justification and have thereby instituted a type of systemic violence.

While this chapter is abundant with examples, inevitably it is not exhaustive. It could have, for example, included cases of Japanese Buddhist imperialistic “reforms” of indigenous Buddhist practices and teachings during the period of occupation in Korea and Taiwan. At that time Japanese Buddhists, most prominently those affiliated with Rinzai Zen, taught that their doctrine and practices were ethically superior to that of their “primitive” protectorates. Such examples of Japanese Buddhists forcing their interpretations of Dharma on others might serve to show why there may be many who are reluctant to mind the dictates of this new fundamentalist form of cultural imperialism proposed by Japanese Critical Buddhists once again under the guise of true Buddhism.

Chapter Two, “The Roots of “Topicalism”” explores Critical Buddhists’ objections to Buddha-nature, describes various counter arguments, and offers suggestions for reorienting discriminatory doctrine. In this chapter we start to hear Shields’s own voice, if only a bit more distinctly. He begins by describing Matsumoto’s view that Buddha-nature is a type of “*dhātu-vāda*,” a new word formed from Sanskrit roots meaning a way (*vāda*) that relies on a substantial place or realm (*dhātu*), which they further say is expressed through mysticism rather than reason or criticism. Critical Buddhists argue that *dhātu-vāda* is a dualistic and hierarchical conception of the world with a greater and lesser realm and this translates to social discrimination. In short, they believe that there is a universal “conflict between *topica* and *critica*” (52).

Shields next spends some time considering the argument from Critical Buddhists that Japanese Buddhism is not true Buddhism but that it borrows from Daoism, Confucianism, and Shintō. He suggests, however, that even if an “original” Buddhism could be gleaned, which it cannot, it might not be relevant to the modern world (54). Shields argues that to deny the syncretism of history and insist on a sort of “essence” to Buddhism goes against the Critical Buddhists’ own resolve to observe the principles of dependent co-arising and emptiness fastidiously. Furthermore, as Sallie King argues in *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*, one so-called *topical*

idea opposed by Critical Buddhists, namely *tathāgata-garbha* theory, was actually used in history to inspire social criticism (65). As Shields puts it, “what becomes clear, if it were not already obvious, is that Buddha-nature has no single meaning and is conditioned by its various interpretations, which are themselves contingent on historical, psychological, institutional, economic, and political factors. . .” (66). In fact, Shields suggests, *topicalism* and Buddha-nature may be less a threat to social equality than a particularly popular understanding of *karma* theory, which has been used in Japan and elsewhere to explain why social inequality is just and fitting. Against this, the author presents numerous contrary readings of the meaning of *karma*, for example, that it can be resisted and that not everything is *karmically* determined (79). Shields concludes by stating “The task of a truly Critical Buddhism in this case is to work out, by looking critically at the traditions, a version of *karma* that may best fit with the most significant Buddhist ideas and ethical teachings” (80).

Chapter Three, “Problems in Modern Zen Thought” is a consideration of allegations of Zen-like *topical* thought in Japanese literature and Japanese philosophy that promoted cultural discrimination. Shields points to Karatani Kōjin who charged, “much of the ‘collaboration’ of writers and intellectuals with wartime militarism and ‘imperial way fascism’ can be attributed to this proclivity towards aesthetics as a general principle or foundation for thought and culture” (88). Although Shields also references critics who disagreed with this assessment, as in previous sections of this book he spends most of the chapter looking at what writers might have done this with an alleged predilection for *prajñā*, insightful wisdom, over *vijñāna*, consciousness, which is one of the five aggregates understood, according to Shields, as analytical (89).

As exemplars, Shields points to Kawabata Yasunari and others who created with him the journal *Bungei jidai* (Literary Age), spotlighting the “neo-sensationism” also called “neo-Impressionism” (*shinkankakuha*) of these writers. According to his analysis, this group attempted to con-

vey sensations through suggestion, promoting “perception beyond conception, and in which there is a merger of subject and object” (102). Even if this were true, it should be noted that this is a small group among the numerous famous and diverse writers of the times including Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Mori Ōgai, Hayashi Fumiko, Dazai Osamu, Abe Kōbō, and a plethora of later writers, motifs, and styles, including those known worldwide such as Ōe Kenzaburō and Murakami Haruki. It might also be said that many Japanese writers were imprisoned and killed for their anti-imperialist efforts. Kawabata’s collaboration of writers was itself anti-Confucian and skirted dangerously close to government censorship and worse. Significantly, the criticism of Japanese writers as anti-rational is the very charge leveled for centuries against East Asian writers and Buddhists by Confucian bureaucrats in power. The fight against such authoritarianism is exactly what was behind *Bungei jidai*. Likewise, the literary writers cited in this chapter as having the same worldview, had vastly different ones.

Most importantly, it is a misinterpretation that Kawabata “transcends the mundane” in order to “point toward” a supra-mundane essence. This description is more aptly applied to Plato’s forms and British transcendentalist writers. In contrast, when in *Oku no hosomichi* (Narrow Road to the Deep Interior) Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), who Kawabata cites as one of his literary role models, describes climbing a rocky embankment on hands and knees and then hearing a cicada’s voice penetrate the very rocks, this is not transcendence but an awareness of his connection with other things around him, that is, none other than dependent co-arising. Both Bashō and Kawabata find *samsara* equals *nirvāṇa*, locating all there is in the changing here and now. *Mono no aware*, criticized in this chapter as *topicism*, is exactly the aesthetic expression of the recognition of *mujō*, transience. It is the inseparable experience and realization that all things are constantly in the process of dependently co-arising and passing away. There is no sense that this reality of nature can be transcended to a permanent realm. Thus it is not *dhātu-vāda* (a way that relies on a substantial realm). *Prajña* (insightful wisdom)

comes directly from *vijñāna* (consciousness) and is intrinsic to it. When Kawabata writes of his character Shimamura hearing the bell in the tea kettle in *Snow Country* and names his book *Sound of the Mountain*, it is likewise related to dependent co-arising conveyed as synesthesia. We may not understand this easily, but that does not mean it is irrational. In a similar way, in *Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism*, John McRae effectively shows that what has widely been read as the anti-rational component of the Zen *kōan*, also central in Shields's presentation, is again not at all anti-rational, just not easily understood, particularly from the vantage point of today's critics. When in the *kōan* the answer to "What is Buddha" is "Three pounds of hemp," this is not a mystical or nonsensical answer but locates Buddhahood in the actions of monkhood, three pound of hemp being the weight of monastic robes. When Zhaozhou answers "No" to "Does a dog have Buddha-nature," he is really answering "No," representing a collective decision by his monastic tradition (McRae 75). Again, in this there is no *dhātu-vāda* that would mean transcendence. Rather, there is inseparable *prajñā* and *vijñāna*, insight and consciousness.

It would have been nice to read from Shields the same statement about these assumptions about Japanese literature that he makes about Byron Earhart's view of Japanese religions in his next chapter, that insistence on harmony among them is too strong (133). After all, multiple views and meanings become central to his argument. We should also note that since Shields's goal is tied to skillful means in the service of equality if not Buddhist soteriology, the writings of Bashō and Kawabata may prove to be vastly more effective for this than those of Critical Buddhists. Likewise, from a Marxist perspective, criticizing literature's influence on the political economic structure is putting the horse before the cart. Shields has already made a similar observation about Critical Buddhists' view of Buddha-nature (see page 66 referenced above).

In Chapter Four, "Criticism as Anamnesis," Shields develops his own argument that *topos* has multiple meanings that should be taken in-

to consideration. Among those meanings is one that is nearly the opposite of the Critical Buddhists' use of the term. Readers who, up until this point, felt that Shields was simply supporting the Critical Buddhists by reviewing literature in a very selective way, will now see that he is building an alternate view and something of a defense of Zen, if not quite of D. T. Suzuki himself. He does this with *topos* as Sallie King did with Buddha-nature.

He begins by rebutting the claim that Dōgen and other past masters, as often assumed about Buddhism generally, believed in complete tolerance of other religions. Shields shows that in his writings, Dōgen criticized the view that Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism were the same. While this is important in setting the record straight, Shields might have also noted that, perhaps like Dōgen, today's advocates of ecumenicism or interfaith dialogue do not attempt to reconcile all the religions of the world. Nor do adherents to these ideas judge other religions as having the same truth-value as their own. At most, like the *Lotus Sūtra*, they see the ideas of other religions as helpful for some people because of their historical (i.e., "karmic") situations. That is to say, criticism of a view does not necessarily mean intolerance, unless maybe you are a Critical Buddhist.

The most important part of this chapter in terms of the book's stated goal is a revisiting of Descartes, who the Critical Buddhists especially lauded for his "Mind-Body Dualism." In a way somewhat similar to Husserl, Shields argues that the being that Descartes posits in his *cogito ergo sum* is not purely rational as the Critical Buddhists would have it but also imagines and feels (139). Shields says that a human being for Descartes is "somewhere between pure mind and pure body" (139). This "in-between" is important for Shields in establishing that Kant and other analytic philosophers are not as one-dimensional as they have been recently imagined. The singular image is similar to that which Critical Buddhists apply to Buddha-nature and *topos*. Shields points out the interesting note that although Critical Buddhists revere Descartes and re-

ject Giambattista Vico's critique of him as *topical*, as Jamie Hubbard said in *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*, "there is much about [Vico's] position that resonates well with Critical Buddhism, just as there is much about Descartes's criticism that seems rather odd in the Buddhist context" (150). Shields supports this position on the basis of there being multiple meanings to ideas by invoking the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Emmanuel Lévinas, and, to a lesser degree, Jacques Derrida.

In Chapter Five, "Radical Contingency and Compassion," Shields solidifies his argument that we had hoped to hear in the first part of the book. Here he uses Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of language to show the interconnectivity of what was previously discussed as dualistic, that is, experience and reason. He points to Paul Ricoeur's critical hermeneutics to argue for simultaneous multiple meanings, and the interaction among the ideas of Habermas and Gadamer to argue, "selfhood is itself constructed and mediated vis-à-vis language, myths, metaphors, and symbols" (167-168). Shields writes, "Here the "self" that is constructed, shaped, and reformed through our encounters with the past, present, and especially in the face of others may be nothing more or less than what has elsewhere been called Buddha-nature, or perhaps, *kuśala dharma*" (169). In the end Shields rejects the notion forwarded by Richard Rorty that striving for perfection is at odds with a sense of community. It will be remembered that a goal of the book is to harmonize a sense of community by negating discrimination through Critical Buddhism. Shields suggests that this is not possible within the framework of Critical Buddhism as previously conceived. Instead, he says that Buddhism should make the "Linguistic Turn" by incorporating new ideas about language into its critical analysis, as he did in this chapter.

If scholars are inclined in this direction and answer Shields's call for a second wave of Critical Buddhism they might consider that the Buddha's critique of *prapancha*, conceptual elaborations that perpetuate dissatisfaction (*dukkha*), may be seen as a kind of Linguistic Turn. In

terms of skillful means, the second wave should also guard against the consequences of its own potential *prapancha*, intentional or not.

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