



Richard P. Hayes. *Land of No Buddha: Reflections of a Sceptical Buddhist*. Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 1998, ix + 276 pages, ISBN 1-899579-12-5, US \$19.95.

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The self-confessed Buddhist scholar-practitioner seems to be a particularly North American phenomenon. In contrast, most scholars studying Buddhist texts, histories, and social realities in Europe or Australia deliberately avoid admitting publicly that they personally might be Buddhists. One reason for this is the underlying assumption that too close an alignment with the studied object might intrude upon the scholar's so-called "objectivity" and "neutrality." Personal convictions and academic investigation are seen as different spheres which, for scientific creditability, need to remain apart. Having gone beyond such constructed polarities, scholars in the United States and Canada have stepped up and increasingly in recent years have declared quite frankly that they are followers of some Buddhist, Hindu, Baha'i or other religious tradition. The dichotomy of "insider *versus* outsider" has been replaced by the blurring of boundaries to "insider *and* outsider." Of such nature are these "reflections of a skeptical Buddhist."

Land of No Buddha consists of twelve essays of varying length, all written between 1985 and 1989 except for the last. The essays are personal considerations of the Buddhist academic or academic Buddhist Richard Hayes on topics such as rebirth and karma, the impact of Buddhism and North American culture upon one another, friendship, sexuality, and more. Hayes, a professor of Buddhist Studies at McGill University (Montreal),

specialized in systematic Buddhist philosophy, but declares in the preface that “this book is not intended to be a ‘professional’ monograph to be read by other scholars” (p. 8). Rather, the essays were written “off duty” and treat Buddhism with conviction and as the fruits of a practice which the author chose in his early twenties. Most of the essays can be read as the skeptical examination of selected Buddhist doctrines and practices scrutinized after twenty years of Buddhist life in the North American context. This kind of critical reflection by a Buddhist intellectual very well versed in Buddhist literature and history as well as in the ancient and European history of ideas, appears to be one of the main reasons these previously published articles have been assembled into book form ten years after they were written. Why else would Hayes republish more or less outdated essays and lectures, especially since some of the points so uncompromisingly raised in them are not held any longer by the author in their strict sense? This collection of essays is therefore meant to “chronicle a stage [in the author’s] development as a Buddhist, and [to illustrate how] many other Western Buddhists have gone through, or are now going through, a similar stage of development” (p. 2). Furthermore, “If nothing else, the collection might be a record of how at least some North American Buddhists were thinking towards the end of the twentieth century” (p. 2). Western convert Buddhists can read the essays as a help — not necessarily as a solution — in their personal struggle to come to terms with a wide range of topics, be it the comprehensiveness of the concept of rebirth, the role of the monastic order and teacher, and so forth.

These and other general topics are nicely framed within two straightforward autobiographical accounts by Hayes. Whereas in his first essay Hayes recounts his encounter with Buddhist and Stoic teachings in 1967 and the history of his academic studies in Canada and Japan during the 1970s, the concluding essay reports on his experiments with simplicity, his “minimalist meditation sessions” (p. 250) and the failure of this approach. In between, essays two to eleven address topics such as why young Americans “turned East” during the 1960s or which Buddhist teachings “in my experience serve more to impede Westerners than to help them acquire wisdom and become less self-centered” (pp. 60–61). Furthermore, essay four reflects on, among other things, ways and means in which Buddhist teachings “might productively merge into...Protestant North America” (p. 87). Further essays, on Ambedkar’s social reform, on encounters between Christians and Buddhists, on the increasingly consumerized marketability of Buddhist teachers and teachings, and further topics follow. The longest and to my mind best-developed essay is Hayes’ examination and analysis of his break with the Zen Lotus Society (Toronto), of which he was a com-

munity member for several years. Rather than arguing on emotional or personal grounds, Hayes rationalizes his leaving on basis of historic–textual grounds, searching for guidance in the old texts and concepts. Years later, this “little manifesto,” as he himself calls it (p. 251), which had formed the “ideological” basis for his minimalist, experimental approach reported on in the final essay, itself becomes questioned. “It took time to discover that more was necessary than rigorous logic and severe self–discipline. By trying to pare Buddhist practice down to little more than *dhyāna* and rational scepticism, I managed to rediscover what has been obvious to most other Buddhists all along, namely, that something more than that is, if not absolutely necessary, than at least very beneficial and expedient” (p. 262). In Hayes’ case it was the discovery or rediscovery of spiritual friendship and community life (albeit part time).

Hayes’ account is written in an easy, entertaining style, sometimes digressing deep into the history of ancient and European ideas. It is no grand survey or theory, but we are offered personal snapshots of the experience of a very educated, well–read scholar. In view of the intellectual capacity of Hayes, one reservation and one riddle should not go unmentioned: at times Hayes speaks about his objects and topics in a too homogenous, one–sided way; we read about “the North American mind” (p. 51) or “North Americans are on the whole in a great hurry” (p. 70). Whereas such undifferentiated statements might be excusable, especially since the basis of the essay was a public talk, further assumptions about “North American Buddhists” (p. 55) or “Buddhists in the West” (p. 120) should have been rather more differentiated. Here and in all other contexts, Hayes speaks only of one strand of Buddhism, that of American convert Buddhists. The vast majority of Buddhists in the West, in the United States and Canada as much as elsewhere, is, however, composed of Asian migrants and their offspring. Also, discussing teachers and the *sangha* in essay four, only men and monks are referred to — nowhere nuns and female teachers. A more “politically correct” treatment of these topics would be more cautious nowadays. However, as the essays of the mid–1980s have been left unchanged as time–documents, they also mirror such apparent one–sidedness and restrictions.

Secondly, the title *Land of No Buddha* at first sight appears mysterious and fanciful. Hayes explains as two reasons for choosing this title that Buddhism “is relatively foreign to this soil [North America]” (p. 5) and that the Buddhist name he received — Mubul — translates from Korean into English as “no Buddha” or “without a Buddha” (p. 7). Related to the second explanation, the title would underscore Hayes’ strong identification with “his land,” that is, North America, in which he was brought up

and lives, and which in this way becomes the “land of Mubul/Hayes.” The first explanation, however, that “no Buddha” in the sense that no Buddhists and no Buddhists groups and organizations can be found in North America, is an assumption no one would seriously uphold in the late 1990s. Thus, one wonders whether the title also should be taken as a time–document, possibly related to the time of Hayes’ first encounter with Buddhism, as in fact not too many Buddhists abounded in the United States and Canada, or whether it should point to Hayes’ struggle with “his land” and bringing together Buddhism and “Protestant North America.” Or possibly both.