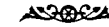


Why Study Indian Buddhism?



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*H*ow historical is the field known as history of religions? How historical can it be? Are religious phenomena susceptible to historical analysis? Is it possible to study religious phenomena without reproducing theological, or crypto-theological, assumptions? Can a scholar approach religion without representing god, salvation, ultimate truth, and other icons of transcendence as historical agents in their own right? Can one situate the disruptive irruptions of transcendence, characteristic of religious discourse, within a homogeneous and secular time? If transcendence is properly not a matter of history, then can a historian talk about transcendence but do so in a way that does not trivialize or wreak violence against religious mentalities?

This essay will look to the study of Indian Buddhism for one possible answer. Indian Buddhism differs from Islam, Judaism, Christianity, even Hinduism, in at least one fundamental way. Those religions possess multiple communities that have long sought to influence and direct scholarly representations of themselves. Accordingly, one might agree with Heinrich von Stietencron that “the term ‘Hinduism’ is a relatively recent one. Not only is the term modern . . . but also the whole concept of the oneness of Hindu religion was introduced by missionaries and scholars from the West.”¹ But, even if Hinduism—term and concept—is acknowledged to be a nineteenth-century construction, Hinduism was nevertheless constructed at that time in a dialogue between British colonialists and Western Orientalists, on the one hand, and Indian nationalists and neo-Hindus, on the other. Indian Buddhism differs here in that there was no equivalent dialogue with Indian Buddhists, for there were none to talk to. By the time the word *Buddhism* first found its way into the title of an English-

language monograph in 1829, Buddhism already had been dead in India for five centuries.²

Unlike Hinduism, therefore, Indian Buddhism was reconstituted in a monologue, scripted by scholars using manuscripts, inscriptions, artifacts, statues, and monuments—remains without a living community of interest. Six principles shaped this monologue. (1) Buddhism is a religion like other religions. (2) Buddhism is pan-Asian in scope. But (3) the sociocultural idiosyncracies found in the national Buddhisms of Japan and China, for instance, or Thailand and Tibet can be cleared away, leaving (4) a residue: Buddhism's transhistorical essence. Indeed, (5) the search for that residue places particular emphasis upon the study of Buddhism in India, the land of its origin, the only place where it would have escaped the taint of cultural and historical accretions. Thus, (6) by mastering authentic Indian Buddhism, a scholar masters Buddhism itself.³ In this way ancient Indian Buddhism is a modern construct, a construction of modernity. This essay's title—"Why Study Indian Buddhism?"—questions the complexities of a past, wholly enveloped within the present, represented as transcending time. The contemporary scholar of Indian Buddhism would seem to be focused on nice matters of antiquarian curiosity. It is a dead religion. But, as such, it rises from the grave, unruly, straining against disciplinary strategies and intellectual boundaries.

In this essay I will tease out several implications of ancient Indian Buddhism's modernity in three steps. First, I will present scholarly stereotypes of Buddhism and Hinduism. Even more than the word *stereotype*, I prefer a notion of scholarly common sense, loosely borrowing Clifford Geertz's observation that common sense "is what the mind filled with presuppositions . . . concludes."⁴ Common sense is that which seems to require the least probing and therefore (of course) requires the most. Buddhism and Hinduism have been common sensically modeled by scholars as two essentially separate socioreligious systems that are almost complete inversions of each other.

Next, I will assess certain ramifications of this categorical system, which relegates Buddhism to the margins of South Asian religiosity. I will explore how this opposition enters into contemporary discourse on the religions of ancient India by referencing a speech given by L. K. Advani, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) minister for home affairs. Advani's characterizations of Buddhism rely upon a post-Reformation definition of religion which equates the practice of religion with the profession of belief.

In the final section I turn to my research on the history of Buddhism in ancient India. If Buddhism is an ancient Indian cultural form and the category *religion* has a modern provenance, how does one mediate this disjunction? To get at an answer, I explore a single example from the Ajanta caves, the fifth-century C.E. Buddhist monastic complex that has served as the empirical focus for my research. Buddhism at Ajanta was constituted through an engagement with manifold discursive centers. For Ajanta's Buddhists religion was a matter

of politics as much as of liberation, as much a matter of instrumental power as of transcendent truth. To comprehend Buddhism in ancient India, one needs a more nuanced notion of religion than that provided by the equation of religion with belief, or else one needs to find a term other than *religion* altogether.

Material Hinduism and Spiritual Buddhism

Let us enter into the imaginal world of contemporary Indology with the paraphrase of a Buddhist text that purports to record a dialogue between Śākyamuni buddha and Kāśyapa, one of his advanced disciples. Śākyamuni is the name of the historical buddha, born circa 488 B.C.E. This dialogue, entitled *Kāśyapaparivarta sūtra* (The Kāśyapa Chapter), was composed some time around the first century C.E., a half-millennium after Śākyamuni's death. *The Kāśyapa Chapter* is highly polemical, exposing deep animosities that divided Buddhist groups of its day. This text's polemic, however, is not apposite to my current discussion. I will return to the polemic in the essay's final section. In this first instance, let me translate two brief passages from *The Kāśyapa Chapter*; leaving aside the Buddhist shibboleths.

[The buddha said:] "Imagine, Kāśyapa, that the chief queen of the anointed king, a *kṣatriya*, commits adultery with a beggar. Imagine that his son is born from that [union]. What's your opinion, Kāśyapa? Should that boy be called the king's son?"

[Kāśyapa] replied, "Certainly not, blessed lord." . . . On that [same subject] it was said:

Suppose that a king's enticing queen has sex with a beggar.

Her son born from that [union] is not a prince, and will not become king.

"[Now] imagine, Kāśyapa, that the anointed king, a *kṣatriya*, consorts with a low-caste servant. Imagine that his son is born from that [union]. Kāśyapa, although that boy is born from the womb of a low-caste servant, shouldn't he nevertheless be called the king's son?" . . . On that [same subject] it was said:

Suppose an emperor has sex with a servant, and sires a son.

Though the boy is born of a servant's womb, in the world he is spoken of as the king's son.⁵

Let us now consider. The given data includes a time, approximately the first century C.E., and place, India. From that starting point we see that each boy is destined for a vastly different life, yet the principle determining each boy's fate is the same. In both cases the precise placement of the father within a fixed social hierarchy determines the son's legitimacy and acceptability. The son of a king enters public discourse as a prince; he can become a king, regardless of his mother's lowly status. The son of a beggar has no claim on royal power,

however highborn his mother. Although these vignettes are taken from a Buddhist text, when they are presented like this, stripped of overtly Buddhist terminology, we find them to be an odd hybrid. For clearly there is a social logic at work in these two descriptions. But one could read the corpus of Indian Buddhist legal writings and not find an explanation of, or justification for, that social logic. In fact, as I will show, this logic violates presumptive principles of Buddhist law. To understand what is going on here, one must crack books of Hindu law, the *dharmasāstras*.

The Kāśyapa Chapter, a Buddhist text with a long and important history in India, presents the society of its day as operating according to norms whose explicit articulation can now only be found in the codes of Hindu, *dharmasāstric*, law. While it is noteworthy that *The Kāśyapa Chapter* presupposes *dharmasāstric* norms, it is even more interesting that this text appropriates those norms to articulate a sectarian Buddhist polemic. Again, I will defer my discussion of this point until later. If nothing else, these vignettes make clear that a consideration of common sense about Indian Buddhism cannot be separated from the broader consideration of the social hierarchies explained and legitimated in ostensibly Hindu texts.⁶ So, let me set *The Kāśyapa Chapter* aside and turn now to scholarly representations of Hindu society. This Indological material provides a necessary foundation for my critical analysis of scholarship on Indian Buddhism. To lay this foundation, I will use Ronald Inden's 1992 work *Imaging India*, a cogent and sophisticated analysis of Indological common sense. Inden himself seeks to unpack the Orientalist and imperialist interests inscribed in Indology's categories. I must choose my battles strategically. So, although I borrow Inden's descriptions, I leave his critiques to the side. Inden's caricatures, in their capacity as stereotypes and points of common sense, provide a stable field within which to address my broader concerns about Buddhism and religion.

In a nutshell Inden draws attention to a fundamental chain of associations mobilizing traditional Indology and determining its discourse. "Caste" is called the "main 'pillar' of Indological constructs."⁷ Around caste cluster several other constructs, including the idea of "India," geographically unified as the land of caste, and "Hinduism," as the religion of caste. The word *caste* is of Portuguese origin. The Sanskrit equivalent, *jāti*, literally "birth," says it all: birth alone determines an individual's location within a system of social classifications, graded hierarchically according to purity, prestige, and power. One can critique the naturalization of caste as a totalizing construct; caste certainly does belong to a repertoire of colonial strategies for derationalizing and mechanizing South Asian subjects. Nevertheless, one also cannot deny that *The Kāśyapa Chapter*'s own common sense about parentage and social role relies upon a discourse of *jāti*. *The Kāśyapa Chapter* presupposes the seminal importance of paternal status for fixing a hierarchical social matrix. Thus, this Buddhist sutra seems to lend credence to a common Indological stereotype—that is, that caste is India's essential feature and the irreducible basis for India's uniqueness as a civilization. In

Inden's words, caste is "displaced . . . on to every area of Indian life; it is associated with race and occupation, religion and status, land control, and psychic security, with birth and death, marriage and education."⁸

Caste fills the mind as well, since Indological common sense, which posits caste as Indian civilization's pillar, posits Hinduism as the eternal concomitant of caste. For Indologists, the nexus of caste and Hinduism is a virtually closed system and as a unit defines what is most proper to South Asia. According to Inden, "Historians of religion and Indologists have not only taken their Hinduism to be the essential religion of India; they have viewed it as the exemplification of the mind of India, the mentality that accompanies caste."⁹ To show what is at stake here, let me rephrase two of these statements, replacing *caste* with *jāti*'s literal translation, *birth*: Hinduism is the eternal concomitant of birth; Hinduism is the mentality that accompanies birth. Translated this way, it is clear just how potent these claims really are.¹⁰

Here a deterministic materialism undergirds the caste/Hinduism nexus: social form determines belief system. And, just as births are deployed in a fixed hierarchy, so the religious superstructure, Hinduism, legitimates that hierarchy. That is to say, all Hindus are not created equal. Brahmin priests stand atop the system. The *dharmasāstras* characterize brahmins as "masters of the universe," "lords over all creatures," and "the eternal embodiment of truth."¹¹ This wisdom has been received by Indologists as betokening, in the 1919 words of Vincent Smith, that "essentially Hindu" India is "the land of the Brahmans."¹² Nor is this equation a mere relic of the colonial past. Contemporary scholars still equate Hindu orthodoxy with the acceptance of the brahmins' hegemony, though they do not use that precise phraseology. Instead, the rhetorical burden is placed upon a literary genre, the Vedas, the most ancient of Hindu texts. As one recent textbook put it, "The acceptance of Vedic authority is perhaps the sole formal test of orthodoxy in Hinduism."¹³ But this is no different than defining Hinduism through the acceptance of the brahmins' preeminence, for the Vedas are brahmin texts par excellence. It is precisely because brahmins "preserve the Veda" that they are acclaimed "masters of the universe."¹⁴ The Vedas are a keystone in this complex edifice. On the one hand, the Vedas describe a fourfold social order and privilege brahmins within that order. On the other hand, acceptance of Vedic literature as sacred and authoritative is the single thing that all proper Hindus are expected to have in common.

At this point we can readily make the transition to Buddhism. For, if scholarly common sense posits acceptance of Vedic authority as the baseline of Hindu orthodoxy, then Śākyamuni, the historical buddha, cannot have been Hindu. One uncontested fact—there are not many—is that Śākyamuni rejected all claims of Vedic authority. Thus, Śākyamuni is heterodox. Moreover, this differential logic defines Śākyamuni as heteroprax. By rejecting Vedic authority, Śākyamuni must, according to the binary logic in play, refuse to participate in the system of birth-based legitimation, which has no ideological justification outside the Vedas. Thus,

for instance, one finds the following simile attributed to Śākyamuni: “As great rivers . . . on reaching the great ocean, lose their former names and identities and are reckoned simply as the great ocean, even so, monks, (members of) the four castes . . . having gone forth from home into homelessness . . . lose their former names and clans and are reckoned simply as recluses.”¹⁵ Brahmin claims to social and spiritual supremacy based upon their *jāti* are sucked into an eddy of this hydrological imagery and are washed away. In short, insofar as the caste/Hindu nexus is deemed the essence of South Asian religiosity, Buddhism must be relegated to the status of an internal other.

This differential determination of Buddhism’s place within the South Asian religious scene is complemented by positive representations of Buddhism’s doctrines and practices. Imagery such as that of the rivers becoming one as they flow into the ocean inspired the leader of the Mahar untouchables, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, to convert to Buddhism in 1956, rejecting Hinduism as a system of institutionalized inequality. But Ambedkar did not turn to Buddhism merely because he believed that it rejected inequalities. More important, he looked upon Buddhism as affirming the essential equality of all beings: all have an equal capacity to realize ultimate truth. This truth—called *Dharma* in Sanskrit—is uniform for all, applicable to all, and accessible to all. Highborn and lowborn, male and female, brahmin and outcaste, all beings are stuck in a realm of suffering, called *samsara*. Beings are born again and again because they have not realized the highest truth. Beings do not know truth because they are blinded by passions and are blinded by passions because they do not know truth. By controlling passions and realizing truth, one escapes suffering, ends rebirth, gains nirvana.

One’s ability to pursue this course has nothing to do with the identity of one’s father and everything to do with individual effort. As a well-known verse goes: “Monks, be islands unto yourselves, be a refuge unto yourselves, with no other refuge. Let the Dharma be your island, let the Dharma be your refuge, with no other refuge.”¹⁶ One must be self-reliant as an *individual*. Characterizations of Buddhism as a form of religious individualism often portray Śākyamuni himself as an empiricist, as a pragmatist, even as a scientist, guided by practical reason. Thus, Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund’s popular *History of India* charts the development of religiosity in fifth-century B.C.E. India as “a transition from the magic thought of the *Vedas* and the mystical speculations of the *Upaniṣads* to a new type of rationality . . . the rationally enlightened experience” of Śākyamuni buddha.¹⁷ Buddhism, thus stereotyped, is a religion that even Kant could love.

I think it is worth noting a certain discontinuity between the representations of Buddhism and Hinduism. Scholarly common sense on Hinduism has *materialist* assumptions: a social system determines doctrinal legitimations thereof. By contrast, common sense on Buddhism is fundamentally *idealist*: a universal truth, equal for all, locates meaningful agency in the individual; so-

cial status is a purely contingent factor. Thus, Richard Gombrich has characterized “the Buddha’s message as a pure soteriology,”¹⁸ signifying in his own words that, “for Buddhists, religion is purely a matter of understanding and practicing the Dharma,” the truth.¹⁹ Edward Conze makes this point still more forcefully, using terms that will become more meaningful later in this essay. According to Conze, “There is nothing, or almost nothing, in the Buddhist interpretation of spiritual truth which ties it to any soil or any climate, to any race or tribe.”²⁰ By contrast, Hinduism “is full of tribal taboos,”²¹ for Hinduism is fundamentally a matter of a specific culture tied to a specific place; Hinduism’s concern for spiritual truth is ever only secondary.

Moreover, scholars have displaced this predication of pure Buddhism into representations of the Buddhist social sphere. Their frame is binary: some followers of buddha devote themselves to “pure soteriology,” and some do not. In this view only the former properly deserve to be called “Buddhists.” Earlier I noted that, for caste to work as a system, it is necessary to accept the principle that all Hindus are not created equal. By contrast, for Buddhism we find the common sense on social hierarchy echoed in the writings of George Orwell: all Buddhists are equal, but some Buddhists are more equal than others. Here the social division between lay and monastic is determinative, and the “more equal” Buddhists are the monks. Accordingly, Conze proposes that “in its essence and inner core, Buddhism was and is a movement of monastic ascetics,”²² and that monks “are the only Buddhists in the proper sense of the word.”²³ Monks are more equal than other, lay Buddhists because, freed from the concerns of home and family, they alone are able to devote themselves as individuals to pure soteriology purely.

Advani and the BJP

It is now time to move on to a critique of this scholarly characterization of Buddhism as individualist, rationalist, idealist, antisocial, and purely oriented toward nirvana in its essence. This critique stands at the base of my own attempts to reconceive Buddhism’s place within the landscape of South Asian religiosity. The most obvious tactic here is to begin by marshaling contradictory evidence from Indian Buddhist history, evidence that shows Buddhists were not individualists, rationalists, idealists, antisocial, or purely oriented toward nirvana in their religion. Certainly, I will present such evidence, albeit a little later. Rather than turn immediately to ancient data, I think it crucial to begin with a pragmatic critique. That is to say, before I show how this stereotype is inaccurate as a historical reconstruction, I will first explore how it is problematic as a modern construction. Remember, I have been discussing common sense—what the mind filled with presuppositions concludes. So, I want to get at the presuppositions around which Indian history has been constructed before offering my own alternatives.

Let me enter into this pragmatic critique with a practical example. On 6 November 1998 the BJP, the political party then running India's central government, sponsored a seminar called "World Unity in the Buddha's Trinity," in Sarnath, the village in which Śākyamuni buddha is said to have given his first religious discourse nearly twenty-five centuries ago. L. K. Advani, the minister for home affairs, second only to the prime minister in power, opened the seminar with a speech. Advani is an ideologue and master of political theater—I know about this conference because Reuters picked up the story. For its part Reuters deemed this little meeting newsworthy because Advani caused an uproar when he said: "The Buddha did not announce any new religion. He was only restating with a new emphasis the ancient ideals of the Indo-Aryan civilisation."²⁴ Here is a quick and dirty translation: Buddhism is a skewed derivative of Hinduism.

This line from Advani's speech resonates with the binary oppositions I just outlined, which it both appropriates and violates. Advani has been a longtime proponent and theorist of Hindutva, the BJP's regnant ideology. The term *Hindutva* translates literally as "Hinduness." For Advani, Hinduness—what he called in Sarnath, "the ancient ideals of the Indo-Aryan civilisation"—is a given fundamental fact. Thus, for Advani, Buddhism in India has always been encompassed within the Hindu fold. This is not because he holds Hinduism to be necessarily more valid than Buddhism from a spiritual perspective (though, doubtless, he does). Rather, it is because for Advani the Indian subcontinent is an *essentially* Hindu land. For the radical Hindutva all cultural formations on the subcontinent must necessarily be acknowledged as forms of Hinduism, or they must be eliminated. The 1999 murder of Stewart Staines and his two sons in Bhubaneswar—incinerated while sleeping in their jeep; guilty in their murderers' minds of proselytizing Christianity—and other incidents like it are terrifying expressions of this principle. Less physical, less desperate, but no less problematic is a statement Advani made in 1993 to the effect that "Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs living in India should be referred to as 'Mohammadi Hindus,' 'Christian Hindus,' and 'Sikh Hindus.'" ²⁵

For Advani, Hinduness is far more than a matter of religion, if by *religion* we mean what Gombrich meant when he described Buddhism as "pure soteriology." In the words of another Hindu nationalist author, the religious dimension of Hinduism "is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva," of what it means to be Hindu.²⁶ Indeed, the BJP's official website glosses the term *Hindutva* as "cultural nationalism." This website informs us that "Hindutva is a nationalist, and not a religious or theocratic, concept."²⁷ By contrast, for the proponents of Hindutva, Buddhism is definitively and solely religious in nature. Another Hindutva publication chides India's Buddhists by claiming that Buddhism and Jainism "never made any contribution to social and political thought as such. We have not inherited any arthashastras (politics and economics) or dharmashastras (social laws) from them." With a dismissive sweep of the hand,

this author continues: "All we have from them are various moksha-shastras pertaining to the supreme salvation of the individual soul."²⁸

What is surprising and ultimately troubling is that this phrase *the supreme salvation of the individual soul* sounds a great deal like Gombrich's phrase *pure soteriology*. It seems that the proponents of Hindutva have learned their lessons well from traditional Buddhology. They have learned that Buddhism is individualist, rationalist, idealist, antisocial, and purely oriented toward nirvana in its essence. Even criticisms levied against Advani by his audience in Sarnath only serve to confirm the Hindutva position. The director of a Buddhist university reacted to Advani by saying, "He is making a political statement that is 100 percent wrong, I may call it 101 percent wrong." By castigating Advani's words as "political," this scholar reserves the highroad of the nonpolitical, and nonsocial, for Buddhists' own self-representations. A second member of the audience, a teacher of Buddhist meditation, disputed Advani's specific association of Buddhism with Indo-Aryan civilization by insisting that "the original teachings of the Buddha are totally universal and nonsectarian." But this criticism recapitulates the very same common sense that the Hindutva plays upon. Again to cite Gombrich, "Buddhism was attached neither to community nor to locality, neither to shrine nor to hearth, but resided in the hearts of its adherents."²⁹ The proponents of Hindutva turn this logic on its head. If Buddhism really is just a matter of religious truth, then because the buddha's beating heart was located in India, and because all discourses on truth articulated within India are definitively Hindu, Buddhism is just one path to truth among Hinduism's many paths to truth.

Here, then, we reach the crux of the matter. These two groups agree over where to locate the essence of Buddhism. And at the heart of that agreement there is a shared understanding of the term *religion*. For both, Buddhism is a religion in the contemporary sense of this word, where *religion* is interchangeable with other terms, such as *faith* and *belief*. It is a matter of the heart. This, of course, is not all that surprising, since in modern usage "*belief* is the defining characteristic of religion,"³⁰ not ritual practice, not social organization or political advocacy. Here I concur with claims that Talal Asad makes in his *Genealogies of Religion*, echoed in a more recent interview, in which he says: "Belief has now become a purely inner, private state of mind, a particular state of mind detached from everyday practices. But, although it is in this sense 'internal,' belief has also become the object of systematic discourse, such that the system of statements about belief is now held to constitute the essence of 'religion.'" ³¹

The proponents of Hindutva refuse to call Hinduism a religion precisely because they want to emphasize that Hinduism is more than mere internalized beliefs. It is social, political, economic, and familial in nature. Only thus can India the secular state become interchangeable with India the Hindu homeland. Similarly, as I noted earlier, we find scholarship on Buddhism stating that

political, economic, and familial considerations are not essential to Buddhism. They are “mere tribal taboos,” in Conze’s words. Insofar as these social formations affect the religion, they come from outside Buddhism proper; their importance can be dismissed through a rhetoric of contagion and influence. It would seem that when the scholars say that “for Buddhists, religion is purely a matter of understanding and practicing religious truths,” they may be taking their own presuppositions as conclusions and articulating a tautology as a truth.

As a scholar whose research focuses upon Buddhism in ancient India, I find this complex of ideas, beginning with the fundamental equation between religion and belief, vexing and confused. First, at a broad level it threatens to make the study of religion irrelevant. If religion is held really to be a matter of beliefs and essences—in a word, of the sacred—then the scholar of religion has little of value to contribute to the broader scholarly conversation on profane matters of politics, economics, and families.

More problematic, if religious action is “the execution of a ‘script’ of doctrines, beliefs, and traditions,”³² then the historian of religion takes on the mantle of a conservator of religious normativity and a judge of religious action. He looks down from on high: do these religious actors obey their divine script, or are they guilty of transgressive improvisation? Thus, Ashis Nandy suggests that religion can be “misused”³³—for instance, when a secular grab for power is cloaked strategically in religious garb. The BJP comes to mind, of course. (In fact, Nandy calls the BJP one of “the most secular parties in India,” because he sees its “use” of religion as wholly instrumental.) But George W. Bush comes to mind as well. Asked to name his favorite “political philosopher or thinker” while campaigning for the Republican nomination in late 1999, Bush named Jesus Christ, saying that Jesus was his choice, “because he changed my heart.” Was Bush misusing religion when he gave this answer? Or was Bush, by giving an answer with his heart when asked for an answer with his head, letting us in on an open secret: a man running for president of the United States cannot afford to know the difference between a political philosopher and a religious teacher? Did Henry Hyde, chair of the House Judiciary Committee during the Clinton impeachment debacle, misuse religion when, in answer to criticism over his unpopular course of action, he quipped, “If Jesus Christ had taken a poll, he never would have preached the Gospel”? Although I would say that there is something “religious” here, I certainly do not mean to imply that Hyde has privileged access to a sacred sphere. Rather, there is some factor in Hyde’s expression of his convictions which violates the ideally uniform rationality of the secular sphere, which interrupts it, resists it, transcends it, and yet is fully at home within it. (Writing these words, I recognize that there is something deeply troubling about any suggestion that George W. Bush and Henry Hyde could be looked upon as figures of resistance. But, for me to be able to articulate why this is so troubling, I must be willing to investigate why it even seems possible. And I cannot do that until

I forgo the reduction of religion to belief, and belief to mere ideology or false consciousness.)

Here is the proper province for religious studies: this point of contact between transcendence perceived and worldliness perceived; this rupture, in which worldly order opens onto cosmic order. We cannot grasp Henry Hyde’s politics without getting at this religious element. And we cannot grasp George W. Bush’s religion if our focus rests solely upon the deep core and kernel of his beliefs, if religion is held to be a matter of essences.

Religion at Ajanta

This then brings me to my own historical work on Buddhism in ancient India. For in that work I have sought to retheorize Buddhism as a religion by looking beyond enlightenment to the activities of Buddhists as worldly/religious performances. Rather than treating religious identity as the personal expression of translocal, transhistorical doctrinal truths, I attempt to explore how mundane activities create culture, authority, and transcendence. Naturally, such performances invoke and play off an inherited corpus of terms, values, and rituals. But the point is, the significance of religious performance cannot be reduced to that corpus of terms, values, and rituals. Religious identity is constructed in a dynamic process that includes so-called religious belief but which also includes familial micropolitics, storms, crops, babies, and kings as well as sprites and demons seemingly without number. In this way religion percolates upwards from all realms of human existence.

Let me now turn to my research. In particular, I want to focus upon one detail from my study of the Ajanta caves, a set of Buddhist caves—monasteries and shrines—carved into a sheer 250-foot-high wall of rock about two hundred miles east of Bombay. Ajanta is a rich source for archaeological evidence, including epigraphs, architectural programs, paintings, and sculptures. But Ajanta’s true wealth does not lie in its material artifacts alone. Rather, this site is unparalleled as a source for Indian Buddhist social history because we can contextualize its materials with remarkable precision. Indeed, one of the most intractable problems confronting every scholar of Indian Buddhism is the lack of adequate sources through which to reconstruct the religious lives of Buddhists as members of an actual, historical community. I cannot overemphasize how little good, localizable evidence exists for ancient India. Ajanta is an exception. One of the reasons for Ajanta’s singularity is that the majority of the site’s artifacts can be dated with close precision to between approximately 460 and 480 c.e., the major patrons from this century all owing allegiance to the court of a single king, the Vākāṭaka overlord Hariṣeṇa. This grand project was closely associated with Hariṣeṇa’s reign. It was begun soon after Hariṣeṇa’s ascension, a public display of the Vākāṭakas’ power, wealth, and piety (the monasteries also likely served

as military garrisons and way stations for merchants and pilgrims). But Hariṣeṇa's family fell from power before the site was finished. Ajanta's caves were swiftly abandoned by artisans and monks alike, resulting in their singular state of preservation.

Ajanta is of interest not because it represents a singularly authentic form of Buddhism but because its particularly rich data allows for the writing of a micro-history, with all the specificity and antinormativity that term can evoke. Micro-studies and micro-histories provide localized and richly contextual representations of historical moments, revealing the on-the-ground complexities of religion as lived by real people. They furnish evidence for what Eduardo Grendi has called "normal exceptions."³⁴ That is to say, micro-histories provide a check against the ideological representations of elite texts; they support the investigation of hegemonic structures; they draw the scholar's attention to the possibility of generalized alternatives to accepted master narratives. So, it is not my claim that ancient India never was graced by the feet of individual Buddhists who dedicated their bodies and minds to realizing the injunction "Be islands unto yourselves, be a refuge unto yourselves, with no other refuge," in accord with nomological texts. Rather, my aim is to destabilize claims that such people were more properly "buddhist" than other Buddhists. Historians of religion have no business placing adjectives such as *essential* or *authentic* or *real* or *proper* or *genuine* in front of the noun *Buddhist*. Accordingly, I am also not making a counterclaim that Ajanta's Buddhism should somehow be viewed as normative or essential. Ajanta is a "normal exception." In India Buddhism possessed myriad strands, none of which possesses an intrinsic claim to the historian's attention. Buddhism as it was practiced at Ajanta represents one of those strands.

I chose to study Ajanta in part in order to discover which categories, precepts, images, and stories were important to Indian Buddhists, outside the academy as it were. One of the facts I discovered was that this Vākāṭaka monastic site was peopled with self-described Śākyabhikṣus. This epithet *Śākyabhikṣu* has two components: *Śākya* is the name of the buddha's family (*Śākyamuni* is a "sage of the Śākya clan"), and *bhikṣu* is Sanskrit for "monk." *Śākyabhikṣu* is a title, not a proper name. It describes a formal religious identity, but, unfortunately, there are no independent literary records to tell us which doctrines were held by Ajanta's Śākyabhikṣus or where they fit within the broadloom of Indian Buddhist institutions. Nevertheless, a thick, site-specific analysis of Ajanta's Śākyabhikṣus suggests that this epithet encapsulates a complex strategy for manufacturing a Buddhist identity that is also a local Vākāṭaka identity. The epithet patently emphasizes a monk's identification with the family of Śākyamuni buddha, the Śākya family. This is not to say that Ajanta's Śākyabhikṣus were Śākyamuni buddha's blood descendants. We have no evidence of that. Rather, this epithet brings together an index of spiritual status with a declaration of familial affiliation. It is a representation of religious kinship articulated in the language of blood kinship. When a monk at Ajanta called himself a Śākyabhikṣu,

he was telling the world, in effect, that it should know him to belong to a superior spiritual lineage because he could claim affiliation with a superior blood lineage.

While one level of Buddhist doctrine proposes that the successful pursuit of Dharma has nothing to do with the identity of one's father and everything to do with individual effort, at Ajanta, it would seem, individual effort was best expended toward having the correct father.

For a Śākyabhikṣu at Ajanta the spiritual was not to be disentangled from the social as determined by family and lineage; social worth was always already at stake in claims of spiritual supremacy. And social worth here was gauged by how well a Buddhist fulfilled duties and responsibilities imposed by birth. A monk who publicly represented himself as a Śākya, in other words, was signaling that he would willingly accept the concrete duties associated with membership in the Śākya family. The Śākyas were an ancient warrior clan, with a proud noble history. As the family's head, Śākyamuni was imagined regally, as the king of Dharma, the *Dharmarāja*; monks who were his kinfolk were represented suitably through martial imagery as well, as the Dharmarāja's army. These characterizations were not mere metaphors, or the reduction of transcendental realities to worldly tropes. At Ajanta, Śākyabhikṣus acted as warriors—not by taking up arms (thus "peacekeepers" might be the better characterization) but, rather, by forming an alliance with the Vākāṭaka lord, Hariṣeṇa. Through their presence and through their rituals Ajanta's Śākyabhikṣus protected a strategic mountain pass from enemies, both human and inhuman. They played a vital role in the Vākāṭaka's political order, a role directly imbricated with their adopted family name. Status as a Śākyabhikṣu was as much a political identity as it was a religious identity. As a political identity, it did not violate local Buddhist principles; it expressed them.

There is no way to understand Ajanta's Śākyabhikṣus as Buddhists unless one also concretely approaches Ajanta's Śākyabhikṣus as Vākāṭaka subjects. And there is no way to approach them as Vākāṭaka subjects as long as one equates religion with belief or considers practice to be the execution of a script of mystical doctrines and antisocial traditions. This, finally, leads us back to the two vignettes from the Buddhist text *The Kāśyapa Chapter*. That text asks us to imagine a queen and a king, both of whom conceive sons with lowborn partners. In the case of the queen the resulting issue is an outcaste pariah. In the case of the king, his liaison with a servant produces a prince in line for the throne. Earlier, when I presented these vignettes, I left out the explicitly Buddhist content. Let us now see how well these two sons fit into the common sense on Buddhism. Think of this as a freeze-dried meal, here to be reconstituted with the boiling water of religious polemic.

Suppose that a king's enticing queen has sex with a beggar.

Her son born from that [union] is not a prince, and will not become king.

Similarly, disciples [*śrāvaka*], free of passion, should never be legitimated as my sons.

For, [*śrāvakas*] focus on their own welfare,
[While] the buddha's sons work to benefit others as well as themselves.

Suppose an emperor has sex with a servant and sires a son.
Though the [boy] is born of a servant's womb, in the world he is spoken of as the king's son.

Similarly a bodhisattva, who has just set out toward buddhahood, is powerless.

[But] because of his generosity and clever ploys to discipline beings who wander through the three realms,

He is spoken of as the buddha's son. He is a holy person.³⁵

In the full telling of *The Kāśyapa Chapter* the outcaste son of the adulterous queen is equated with what Buddhists call a *śrāvaka*, literally an auditor or disciple. The significance of this term is highly contested within Buddhist traditions—that, after all, is the point of polemic. But within *The Kāśyapa Chapter's* lexicon, a *śrāvaka* is individualist, antisocial, and purely oriented toward his own nirvana. And that's bad. In other words, *The Kāśyapa Chapter* describes an illegitimate bastard, a Buddhist failure, a follower of buddha who does not deserve the name “son of buddha,” by deploying the same set of predicates that scholars have commonly used to stereotype normative, good Buddhism.

The values, practices, and aspirations associated with the king's princely son, by contrast, come very close to those articulated and participated in by Ajanta's Śākyabhikṣus. *The Kāśyapa Chapter*, however, does not use the particular term *Śākyabhikṣu*. Rather, this text calls the king's son a bodhisattva, literally someone who is *sakta*, attached, to *bodhi*, awakening. The term *bodhisattva* is used for someone who vows to become a buddha and who practices rituals of generosity, worship, and meditation toward that end. *The Kāśyapa Chapter* asserts that *śrāvakas* “focus on their own welfare, [while bodhisattvas,] the buddha's sons, work to benefit others as well as themselves.” Similarly, another text, *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra* (The Amazing Revelation), claims that bodhisattvas, no matter how callow, no matter how inexperienced, are always superior to *śrāvakas*. no matter how advanced, no matter how wise.³⁶ Like *The Kāśyapa Chapter*, like the epithet *Śākyabhikṣu*, this latter text invokes images of kinship. According to *The Amazing Revelation*, bodhisattvas surpass *śrāvakas* because bodhisattvas are the buddha's sons. In fact, *The Amazing Revelation* is even more explicit. A bodhisattva is a bodhisattva because he has been born into the buddha's family; a bodhisattva is spiritually superior to the *śrāvaka* because of his superior *jāti*, his birth.

Indological common sense holds that Hinduism is the concomitant of *jāti* in India; Hinduism is the mentality that accompanies birth in India. Yet here *The Kāśyapa Chapter* and *The Amazing Revelation*—texts attributed by some Bud-

dhist to the buddha himself—both endorse hierarchical kinship structures. Both texts play upon the discourse of royal genealogy, familial prerogative, and social ascendancy in order to represent bodhisattvas' superiority over *śrāvakas*. Both texts emphasize the bodhisattva as a beneficial social figure. Both texts find confirmation of the bodhisattva's superiority within the common fund of Indian social values—social values whose explanation requires a scholar to read Hindu law books. Thus, I have argued in a recent article that, at Ajanta, the epithet *Śākyabhikṣu* is a complex synonym for *bodhisattva*.³⁷ This epithet is a critical datum for reconstructing Indian Buddhism's social history because it shows that, when Indian bodhisattvas sought to present themselves publicly as bodhisattvas, they articulated their status as such, not by taking recourse to an abstract language of the interior heart but by infusing characteristically Buddhist terms with characteristically Indian meanings.

Conclusion

In conclusion I wish to return to the question “Why study Indian Buddhism?” Earlier I demonstrated how scholarly common sense has constructed Buddhism and Hinduism as rough, binary opposites. I then offered a practical example for how this opposition enters into contemporary discourse on the religions of ancient India, by reference to a speech that L. K. Advani gave in Sarnath. As a figment of the Hindutva imagination, Buddhism is an Indian religion that focuses exclusively on absolute truths and thus is contained within the broader sociocultural ambit of Hinduness. Advani's audience in Sarnath disputed his characterization of history. But the criticisms levied by this audience merely recapitulate the same common sense that the Hindutva plays upon: Buddhism is totally universal; it is not a matter of politics or sectarian institutions but of the heart. I then came to the fulcrum of my argument—namely, that such stereotypes of Buddhism presuppose a modern discourse in which systematic statements about belief are held to constitute the essence of religion. The obvious question, therefore, is whether religion thus constituted is an adequate category through which to reconstruct ancient Indian Buddhism. I suggested that it is not, referring to my own work on the Śākyabhikṣus at Ajanta. To summarize: stereotypes of Indian Buddhism represent Dharma as an abstract truth equally accessible to all, regardless of parentage. But evidence from Ajanta demonstrates that some fifth-century Buddhist monks were very concerned to let people know the identity of their “father.” Ajanta's Śākyabhikṣus perceived their association with the Śākya family as giving them a privileged relationship to Dharma at the same time that it gave them specific social obligations. Members of Ajanta's community conceived of their identities as Buddhists in filial terms and performed their roles as sons in a complex manner that relied as much upon Hindu as on Buddhist norms. Ajanta's data allows the historian of religion to complicate the simplistic claim that the pursuit of supermundane liberation was, and is, singularly

essential to Buddhism. But Ajanta is a normal exception; the Buddhism found there should also not be regarded as essential or normative.

An interesting enough point, perhaps, but why study Indian Buddhism? In a word, borrowed from Jacob Neusner, "modulation." The study of ancient Indian Buddhism provides a platform through which to modulate the category "religion," to alter it, expand it, problematize it, historicize it. Buddhism, especially Indian Buddhism, was practically unknown before the nineteenth century. As a figure in the scholarly imagination, Buddhism has never not been gazed upon by eyes that also looked upon religion in the guise of belief. There are no Indian Buddhists claiming to preserve an unbroken tradition from Śākyamuni's own time; scholars have met little or no native resistance as they have reconstructed the details of Indian Buddhism in their own image, upon a framework of religion as belief. And so Buddhism has become a religion par excellence. The study of religion is less than central to the modern academy, in part because we lack an adequate vocabulary through which to articulate religion's worldliness and therefore to represent it as a vital, integral factor in the secular, profane sphere. By recovering the history of Buddhist practice, we might develop a conceptual vocabulary through which to represent religion as a mundane phenomenon, without essentializing it or reducing it.

We also lack a vocabulary adequate enough to articulate the contemporary world's religiosity. Gauri Viswanathan has spoken of religious belief as modernity's "estranged self."³⁸ Insofar as Buddhism is construed as pure religion or pure soteriology, Buddhism becomes a receptacle for everything not modern. Buddhism becomes a natural refuge for those moderns who find themselves estranged; those moderns who, alienated from their own time, seek a truth beyond time. In this way the study of ancient Indian Buddhism can become a field within which to explore constructions of modernity. How do scholars and religious seekers alike work to bridge the gap between ancient India, suffused with religion, and the modern secular world? How do they appropriate ancient Buddhism and through that gesture serve the construction of modernity? How does this appropriation simultaneously expose and conceal modernity's own religiosity, its estranged self? Indeed, by addressing such questions, the scholar of Indian Buddhism can add his voice to all those that would sully, smear, confound, and disrupt all pretensions to purity. Whether it is sacred purity or secular purity, the leviathan of pure Hindutva or the essenceless essence of pure Buddhism: it is purity that is the danger.

Notes

1. Heinrich von Stietencron, "Religious Configurations of Pre-Muslim India and the Modern Concept of Hinduism," in *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*, ed. Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron (New Delhi, India: Sage Publications, 1995), 51.
2. In *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press,

1988) Philip Almond claims that "the first book in English to include the world 'Buddhism' in its title" was Edward Upham's *The History and Doctrine of Buddhism* (London: R. Ackermann, 1829). See Almond's work for an extended discussion of the early history of Buddhism as a figment of the modern imagination.

3. This chain of associations is inspired by the argument in Donald S. Lopez, ed., *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 7–8.
4. Clifford Geertz, "Common Sense as a Cultural System," *Antioch Review* 33 (1975): 16–17.
5. Baron A. von Staël-Holstein, ed., *The Kāśyapa parivarta: A Mahāyānasūtra of the Ratnakūṭa Class* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1926), 116–118.
6. I have rushed through this point. To find cogent arguments for why Buddhism cannot be considered apart from a brahmanical milieu, see Paul Mus, *Barabudur: Sketch of a History of Buddhism Based on Archaeological Criticism of the Texts* (New Delhi, India: Sterling Publishers, 1998); and Peter Masefield, *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism* (Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 1986).
7. Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1992), 4.
8. Inden, *Imagining India*, 83.
9. Inden, *Imagining India*, 4.
10. Kancha Ilaiah confirms the on-the-ground reality of this Indological equation at the same time that he puts an ironic twist on it, in his book *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture, and Political Economy* (Calcutta, India: Samya, 1996). Ilaiah identifies the all-enveloping nature of caste identity as the reason for his *not* being a Hindu: "I was not born a Hindu for the simple reason that my parents did not know that they were Hindus. . . . My parents had only one identity and that was their caste" (1).
11. *Manusmṛti*, vv. 1.93, 1.99, 1.98. My translations are based upon the electronic edition: Jost Gippert, "TITUS Texts: Manu Smṛti," 1 June 2000 <<http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/ind/a/ind/ved/postved/dhs/manu/manu.htm>> (19 May 2001).
12. Cited in Inden, *Imagining India*, 86.
13. Arvind Sharma, *Our Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 5.
14. *Manusmṛti*, v. 1.93.
15. I. B. Horner, trans., *The Book of Discipline*, vol. 5: *Cullavagga* (Oxford, U.K.: Pali Text Society, 1988), 334.
16. Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 395.
17. Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, *A History of India* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 54.
18. Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988), 29.
19. Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 24.
20. Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 76–77.
21. Conze, *Buddhism*, 77.
22. Conze, *Buddhism*, 70.
23. Conze, *Buddhism*, 53.
24. In November 1998 I found a report on Advani's speech from the Reuters News Service

- on the Internet at <<http://www.infobeat.com/stories/cgi/story.cgi?id=2556965151-bd6>>. Unfortunately, this URL has become inactive. Advani's remarks can now be found in Praful Bidwai, "Hindutva's Fallacies and Fantasies," *Frontline*, 21 November 1998, <<http://www.frontlineonline.com/fl1524/15241040.htm>> (19 May 2001). In making this claim, Advani was borrowing the words of India's past president Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who wrote: "The Buddha did not feel that he was announcing a new religion. He was born, grew up, and died a Hindu. He was restating with a new emphasis the ancient ideals of the Indo-Aryan civilization" ("Foreword," in *2500 Years of Buddhism*, ed. P. V. Bapat [Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1971], ix).
25. "Identify with Hindutva: Advani," *Times of India*, 30 January 1993.
 26. V. D. Savarkar, *Hindutva* (Poona City, India: S. R. Date, 1942), 3.
 27. "BJP Philosophy," <<http://www.bjp.org/philo.htm>> (21 May 2001). To reach this quote, click on the icon for "Hindutva."
 28. *Organiser*, 10 June 1963. Cited in Partha Banerjee, *In the Belly of the Beast: The Hindu Supremacist RSS and BJP of India, an Insider's Story* (Delhi, India: Ajanta Press, 1998), 140.
 29. Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 77.
 30. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religious, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 271.
 31. Talal Asad, "Interview: Modern Power and the Reconfiguration of Religious Traditions," *Stanford Electronic Humanities Review* 5, 27 February 1996, <<http://www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/asad.html>> (19 May 2001).
 32. Catherine Bell, "Performance," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 207.
 33. Ashis Nandy, "The Twilight of Certitudes: Secularism, Hindu Nationalism, and Other Masks of Deculturation," *Alternatives* 22 (1997): 159.
 34. Eduardo Grendi is cited in Edward Muir, "Introduction: Observing Trifles," in *Micro History and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), xiv.
 35. Von Staël-Holstein, *The Kāśyapa parivarta*, 116–118.
 36. "It is like this: a newborn prince surpasses all senior ministers at the pinnacle [of their careers] through the power of [his] birth into the [royal] family. Similarly, a novice bodhisattva, who has just conceived the aspiration for awakening, is reborn into the family of the tathāgata, the Dharma king. Through the power [of his] aspiration for awakening and great compassion, this [bodhisattva] surpasses advanced śrāvakas who have followed the religious life for a long time" (Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki and Hokei Idzumi, eds., *The Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* [Kyoto: Sanskrit Buddhist Texts Publishing Society, 1936], 506).
 37. Richard S. Cohen, "Kinsmen of the Son: Śākyabhīksus and the Institutionalization of the Bodhisattva Ideal," *History of Religions* 40 (August 2000): 1–31.
 38. Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), xiv.