

Review of Hsiao-Lan Hu, *This-Worldly Nibbāna: A Buddhist-Feminist Social Ethic for Peacemaking in the Global Community*, Albany: SUNY Press 2011, paperback, xi + 250 pp., ISBN 978-1-4384-3932-7

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The principal aim of *This-Worldly Nibbāna* is to recall and revitalise the socially-engaged ethos of Buddhism, and demonstrate its potential feminist contributions in the larger context of global community-building and peace-making. Hu's discourse is participating in the development of the broad transnational movement known as Engaged Buddhism. The key exegetical move by which Hu develops the book's aim is her cross-reading of Buddhist teachings about ontological contingency and selfhood with Judith Butler's poststructuralist-informed theory of performativity. I outline the key arguments of the book before commenting on Hu's insightful analyses.

In the Introduction, Hu begins from the premise that an ethos of social engagement has always existed in Buddhism. Hu situates her cross-reading of Buddhist teachings with feminist theory within the framework of Buddhist critical-constructive reflection, an approach that seeks mutual enhancement and reciprocal learning between Buddhist understandings and the knowledge-practices of the secular academy. Such an approach based on intellectual hospitality is in keeping with Buddhist ethical principles, and for Hu's project it serves as the methodological framework for constructing a 'non-adversarial engaged Buddhist-feminist social ethics'.

Chapter 2 delves into the socio-ethical dimensions of early Buddhism. A highlight of this chapter is Hu's careful delineation of the multiperspectival and multimodal Buddhist ethical commitment to 'wholesomeness' over 'unwholesomeness' (39–42). In brief, the referents of un/wholesomeness are the actions of body, speech, and mind, which are to be evaluated in both their 'internal' and 'external' conditions and consequences. Hu shows how the 'unique mélange of ethics' in Buddhism cuts across the major branches of Western ethics like deontology, virtue ethics, and utilitarianism, while remaining irreducible to any one of them. She thus opts for the term 'contextual pragmatism' suggested by Gier and Kjellberg to argue that wholesomeness is not cultivated by conforming with some absolute truth, but by 'comprehensively considering things from all angles in the web of interconditionality, including one's own motivations,

the various perspectives of the people involved, and the reverberations of the action in its particular context' (41). With this understanding of Buddhist ethics, Hu is then able to problematise androcentric moral arguments that would absolutise patriarchal hierarchy in Buddhist formations, demonstrating instead that the Buddhist community ideal-praxis of the Sangha in fact offers a way to de-essentialise social hierarchies between male and female monastics and between monastics and laypeople.

Chapter 3 is where Hu draws Buddhist teachings on non-Self (Pāli: *anattā*; Sanskrit: *anātman*) into dialogue with feminist analyses of gender identity and subject formation. This offers an importance corrective to the habitual tendency in traditional Buddhist discourses to ignore the constructedness of gender identity, even as they emphasise the constructedness of the conventional ego. This chapter demonstrates that the doctrine of non-Self does not negate individual existence or social embeddedness as such. This is where Hu evokes Butler's theory of performativity to elucidate how the Buddhist concept of *rupā* (form) does not only refer to material forms but also includes 'the social conventions and prescriptions that strongly suggest, support, impose, and reinforce gendered identities and gendered behaviors through gendered colors, toys, chores, career ambitions, postures, uses of language, etc.' (75). Hu skillfully illustrates this argument with self-reflexive accounts of the ways in which she has had to negotiate gender norms across different cultural and social contexts. This chapter for me is the highlight of the book, and I will return to comment on it below.

In Chapter 4, Hu addresses questions on moral agency and responsibility, showing that the Buddhist doctrine of *kamma* (Sanskrit: *karma*) cannot be understood in a deterministic or fatalistic manner. The Buddhist understanding of *kamma* provides an ethical framework to understand how intentional actions, geared towards wholesomeness or unwholesomeness, generate effects that would set the conditions for future actions; hence, the effects and conditioning force of *kamma* at once constrain our actions and offer the means to steer our actions to become otherwise than before. Again, Hu seeks the help of Butler, drawing her idea of sedimentation into dialogue with *kamma*. Both the Buddhist and post-structuralist perspectives understand that the individual is the sedimentation of repeated actions and socio-cultural conventions, and that repeated individual actions feedback into socio-cultural conventions. Moral agency and responsibility are therefore always conditioned and constrained but not determined. With regard to gender identity, the ways in which individual persons make decisions to cite socio-cultural conventions in habitual ways or to break away from them, can at once reproduce and/or reconfigure them in new and radical ways.

Chapter 5 argues for the indispensability of geographical or spiritual communities in supporting such a life practice. Hu returns to an argument raised in Chapter 2 that Buddhist practice does not seek innate value in solitude, but is rather to be cultivated *relationally* with *kalyāna mittas*, good friends or admirable spiritual friends. What is important is not to seek uniformity in collectives but mutual appreciation (153). Rather than 'community' Hu gives emphasis to 'community-building' (157). This argument about community-building is an important one, as the widespread interest in an individualistic, meditation-centric approach to Buddhism in the West has led to an implicit devaluing of the Sangha. More importantly, as Hu underscores in the Conclusion, the work of community-building must be open to difference, a willingness to seek

relationality with others of different backgrounds with incommensurable differences, but with whom we should nevertheless seek solidarity as part of the ongoing work of peace-making.

This-Worldly Nibbana makes an important contribution to the broader development of Engaged Buddhism with its thoughtful cross-readings of Buddhist teachings and feminist theory and its timely reminder of the Buddha's advice that *kalyāna mittatā*, admirable spiritual friendship, is 'the whole of the holy life'. It is in the spirit of *kalyāna mittatā* that I make the following observations in response to Hu and for other readers who may be developing similar lines of inquiry.

Hu's feminist exegesis of the Buddhist doctrine of non-Self has largely focused on the workings of language, even though she underscores the importance of understanding the reciprocal Buddhist concepts of *rupā* (form) and *sankhāra* (volitional formations) in both their symbolic and material dimensions. I wonder if this perhaps points to certain limitations in Butler's conceptualisation of performativity. I am thinking in particular of theoretical physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad's inventive reconceptualisation of performativity. For Barad, Butler's conceptualisation of performativity inadvertently reproduces a binary between discursivity and materiality. Drawing on the insights of quantum mechanics, Barad tweaks the theory of performativity with the methodology of agential realism to offer a more nuanced understanding of the world as an ongoing process of becoming, which is performatively materialised from moment to moment via entanglements of phenomena that are agentic but without essential individuality. I am very curious as to how Hu (or others) might relate Barad's thinking to the arguments of *This-Worldly Nibbāna*.

Another aspect of Hu's feminist reading of Buddhist understandings that resonates strongly with me is the way she illustrates her points by reflecting on her cross-cultural experiences across the Taiwanese and Western contexts. Like Hu, my experience of Buddhism and academia straddles cultural heritages. Despite growing up in Singapore where Buddhism was a part of my diasporic 'Chinese' ancestral heritage, I was brought up a Christian and only took an interest in Buddhism when I migrated to Australia in my early twenties and discovered Western translations of Buddhist teachings along with a passion for academia. In this regard, I really appreciate how Hu thoughtfully problematises the patriarchal norms of Chinese culture, whilst recognising the specificities of and differences between Chinese and Western heritages that would prevent any straightforward translation of feminist ideals from one context to the other. In recognition of this, I wonder how Hu (or others) might further unpack the criticism raised in Chapter 3, of the ways in which leading Buddhist figures in Taiwan (including the nun and founder of Tzu Chi, Cheng Yen) unquestioningly reproduce stereotypical thinking about femininity (73–74). Whilst I appreciate the need to interrogate unrecognised androcentrism, in the case of Tzu Chi at least I am also reminded of the work of anthropologist Julia Huang who has shown through primary research that even within the confines of received gender norms, women followers of Cheng Yen have been able to attain modes of social mobility that would otherwise have been denied to them.

I raise these questions with the ethos of *kalyāna mittatā* and contextual pragmatism that Hu has so cogently argued for in this admirable and important contribution to both the feminist cause and Engaged Buddhism.