

ERIC BAIN-SELBO
Lebanon Valley College

DOUBLE EXPOSURE

A review of *Double Exposure: Cutting Across Buddhist and Western Discourses*, by Bernard Faure, translated by Janet Lloyd. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004. xiv + 194 pp. \$49.50 (cloth); 19.95 (paper).

BERNARD FAURE'S *Double Exposure: Cutting Across Buddhist and Western Discourses* is an important contribution to the dialogue between Western philosophy and Buddhism. At the same time, its shortcomings present central problems that must be avoided as scholars continue to pursue such work.

Faure's stated objective is "to examine the possible relations between Western rationality and Buddhism in its twofold philosophical and religious aspect" (xi). He wants "to pick out from our Western thought certain more or less concealed elements that might render this or that aspect of Buddhism more accessible" and also "to see whether certain Buddhist notions, through the slight shift that they may prompt in our own habitual ways of thinking, might not lead us to reformulate a number of the classical problems of Western thought" (xi). Vague as these objectives are (especially the former), it nevertheless is admirable to seek to make Buddhism more accessible and to gain some clarity about some classical problems in Western thought. Faure attempts to achieve these objectives through the pursuit of at least three other related and more specific objectives.

First, Faure is committed early in the work to refuting neo-Buddhism – that distinctly Westernized Buddhism that fails to attain a comprehensive understanding of the tradition. Faure argues that Buddhism has a double nature, being both a "powerful intellectual system with tendencies both rationalist and abstract, almost structuralist and universalist" as well as a "form of local, pagan, quasi-shamanistic thought" (x). To understand Buddhism as "a living whole," we must understand it as a union of "mythology, metaphysics, and ritual" (65), as both a philosophy and a religion (66). Too often, the religious elements of Buddhism are abridged by neo-Buddhists. For Faure, versions of neo-Buddhism "relate to Buddhism much as the Reader's Digest relates to literature" (ix).

What Faure advocates is an overcoming of Orientalism in this case. Since the end of the 19th century, Buddhism has been the victim of both a primary Orientalism, in which Western scholars have reduced the tradition merely to a form of rationalist thought, and a secondary Orientalism, in which Asian scholars likewise have distorted Buddhism as a consequence of their own encounter with Western discourse. But how can we overcome Orientalism? We can start by overcoming our own dichotomization of philosophy and religious practice. By revealing previously “concealed elements” in Western discourse that point to the religiously symbolic, mythological, and ritualistic character of that discourse (such as the religious and even mystical elements of psychoanalysis), we will see the false dichotomy of religion/rationality in our own “rational” discourses. Acknowledging the dual nature of our own discourses will allow us to gain a clearer understanding of Buddhism because we will be less likely to reduce Buddhism to mere rational thought. Likewise, we also will debunk a number of myths about Buddhism, avoiding its reduction to pacifism (12-13), atheistic humanism (13-14), nihilism (14), individualism (14-15), and a prefiguration of modern science (15).

The second specific objective that Faure has is to question critically the Aristotelian principles of contradiction and the excluded middle. These are basic principles of Western logic, insisting that two contrary statements cannot both be valid about one and the same thing and that if one of the statements is true then the other must be false. Along with these comes the principle of identity, for the thing to which the statements refer is deemed to have a single identity or essence. Thus, it can only be that one thing and not another. But, as Faure notes, the principles may be true for propositions but not for reality. Things are never in contradiction, only statements about them are.

Buddhism is uncomfortable, to say the least, with these principles. The Buddhist doctrine of no-soul or no-self is not only a rejection of some essential nature or spirit of the individual; it also is a rejection of the essential nature of anything. Everything is impermanent. This impermanence is exactly the reason why things can change and develop. It is the reason why a seed can also be a tree. It is the reason why a daughter can also be a mother. There may be logical contradictions here, but it is clear that reality not only exists despite these contradictions but in fact embraces these contradictions. Thus, rather than settling for the restrictive Aristotelian principles, we would be better off orienting our thinking along the lines of the Buddhist tetralemma (A; B; both A and B; neither A nor B). As opposed to the logical dilemma (a thing is either A or B), the Buddhist tetralemma (a thing is A, B, both, and neither) expresses some of the most important conceptual points of Buddhism (no-soul or no-self, impermanence, etc.) and also allows for a more accurate account of the reality in which we live.

This is one of the areas in which Western thought could benefit from its engagement with Buddhism. Western thought tends to use the principles of logic to reduce physical, social, and psychological reality to nothing but the efficient ordering of propositions. But this is a violation of so much of that reality. At the human level, such rationality cannot hope to account for the irrationality (based on this Western concept of rationality) of imagination, so much of our ritualized behavior, and so much of our art. As Faure concludes:

Western thought (that is to say, rational thought, logical philosophy) asserts itself through confrontation, in accordance with the principle of the excluded middle. By so doing, it casts into outer darkness a number of human realities such as imagination, dreaming, literature, and myth, and – last, but not least – the “thought from/of the outside,” for instance, ritual thought. These various domains, allegedly irrational, are the ones that Buddhist rationality will enable us to explore – without however, entirely leaving our own philosophical “preserve.” (48)

The third specific objective that Faure has is to elucidate the value of the Buddhist theory of two truths. This theory is a consequence of the concept of the impermanence and interdependence of all things. It originated with the Mahayana rejection of the duality between samsara and nirvana, between conventional and ultimate reality, between the profane and the sacred. Religiously speaking, this means that enlightenment or awakening (the spiritual goal of Buddhism) is not a rejection of this world or of our humanity. The spiritual goal (the sacred) is this world (the profane). This clearly is radically different from a Western perspective, where dualities are more prevalent if not central. Philosophically these have worked themselves out into a standard duality between idealism (privileging the transcendent) and materialism (privileging the worldly) (126). Both can lead to negative consequences – the rejection or neglect of the world on the one hand (idealism) or a spiritual or moral nihilism on the other hand (materialism). Faure realizes that Buddhism does not have a perfect solution to this problem.

The notion of twofold truth asserts ontological duality only the better to deny it, using formulas such as “nirvana is samsara,” “passions are awakening,” and so on. But the reverse is equally true: By denying duality, Buddhist discourse already accepted it and contributed to maintaining it. In other words, it is quite possible that its effects are the contrary of what they claim to be. For example, the paradoxical assertion that the ordinary passions themselves constitute awakening leads to a kind of apology for the world of the senses that differs hardly at all from materialism or even from hedonism. Moreover, identification of the two levels of reality leads to their mutual contamination: It implied both that phenomena are absolute and also (and this is something that is usually forgotten) that the absolute itself is somehow “phenomenal” – that is to say,

historically and culturally determined. (140-1)

Faure still makes a compelling case that despite such limitations the Buddhist perspective might provide an impetus that will help Western philosophy work through problems (like that of the duality between idealism and materialism) that lie deep in its history.

Faure does an admirable job grappling with some fundamental differences between Buddhist and Western philosophies and identifying points of contact and future directions for reflection. His work, however, does have its shortcomings. Most generally, there are whole chapters that seem out of place or unnecessary for achieving Faure's purposes. Chapter Three on "Buddhism and Chinese Thought" is an interesting historical account of Buddhism in China and its early study in the West. But much of the chapter does not seem very relevant to the overall project. This is true as well, to a lesser extent, with Chapter Five on "The Major Schools." Within chapters (such as Chapter Six on "Transcendental Concepts") there are whole sections that seem unrelated to one another or to the overall project. Finally, there even are individual paragraphs that are puzzling. For example, early on Faure writes that he should discuss Hegel's claims about absolute knowledge but that "the courage and the will to do so" fail him. He then notes that Hegel's house in Heidelberg is now a "multistory parking garage, a worthy enough symbol of instrumental rationality" (26). Then he writes nothing more about it. Thus, at times the reader might think that he or she is reading a Chan or Zen master. In other words, whether or not he does so consciously, Faure sometimes seems to imitate or illustrate the Buddhist thinkers that he is engaging. While such writing and reading very likely work as a spiritual exercise, they are less helpful as a philosophical exercise (oops, a duality; my bad).

More substantively, Faure's work is problematic in two important areas. First, it does not adequately deal with the problem of Orientalism. Second, its treatment of Western and Buddhist philosophy is, paradoxically, often essentializing in a manner that one would not expect from an opponent of Orientalism.

Besides Western neo-Buddhists, Faure takes a number of figures to task for their Orientalism. For example, he is critical of D.T. Suzuki. According to Faure, "many aspects of the Zen experience, as he [Suzuki] describes it to his American disciples, are simply Japanese adaptations of the Christian 'mystical experience,' which his fascinated interlocutors are unable to recognize beneath its 'Oriental trappings'" (6). He also takes aim at the Dalai Lama, questioning whether or not he is "really representative of traditional Tibetan Buddhism, let alone of other forms of Buddhism" (10). But it is hard to reconcile these criticisms with Faure's

own self-reflection about his position vis-à-vis Orientalism. He recognizes that his own interpretation of Buddhism is “largely subjective” (10) and that “to criticize the Orientalism of others by no means ensures that one is immune to it” (6). In a situation of such indeterminacy, why should we take Faure’s interpretation to be any more reflective of Buddhism than that of Suzuki or the Dalai Lama?

Truth be told, Faure has the kind of credentials that should lead us to grant a certain amount of authority to his interpretations of Buddhism. A well-respected and acknowledged specialist, Faure certainly has insights into the tradition that we are wise to consider. But while he mitigates his own interpretations, he simultaneously seems to posit some ideal or essentialized version of Buddhism (or its various forms) in order to have a measure against which the interpretations of others (e.g., Suzuki, the Dalai Lama) fall short. This, however, runs counter to one of the most central proscriptions of opponents of Orientalism: Never essentialize the other. By avoiding such essentialization, we are able to see Buddhism from multiple perspectives in all its multivariant forms. Faure believes that the work of Suzuki, the Dalai Lama, and neo-Buddhists in general prevent us from seeing Buddhism in this more comprehensive way. Fair enough. But we should be willing to grant that they at least see Buddhism in one possible, valid way. While we might not want to say that Suzuki has exhausted the truth of Zen or that the Dalai Lama has said everything that needs to be said about Tibetan Buddhism (and said it in the right way), we should be willing to grant that they at least are talking about Buddhism and that they might be saying something true about it. The same can be said for Western neo-Buddhists. The fact that they have been influenced by Western thought does not necessarily mean that their presentation of Buddhism is false. What they say about Buddhism may be false, but then that has to be proven (Faure fails here) rather than just asserted. To disregard the neo-Buddhists because they have an abridged version of Buddhism is to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

The second substantive problem area for Faure is his essentializing of Western and Buddhist philosophy. His many points about some of the deep problems within the Western tradition are well taken, but at times he presents more of a caricature of the tradition than anything else. In addition, there is the sense that analytic philosophy stands as the representative of all Western thought. In this way, he comes to essentialize Western thought in a manner that he would object to if applied similarly to Buddhist thought. Yet, strangely, he does the same to Buddhist thought. For example, is Buddhism really devoid of the principle of contradiction and the principle of the excluded middle? Not hardly! Existence is suffering/sorrow or it is not. There is no middle ground. In the development of Mahayana we might move away from such logic, but not in Theravada. Too

frequently Faure uses the term Buddhism in a way consistent with the former tradition but not the latter. He has a tendency to essentialize Buddhism in its Mahayanist form.

The shortcomings of Faure's work are endemic to so much comparative analysis. We necessarily must generalize and reduce traditions in order to highlight and develop central similarities and differences. We must be ever vigilant in recognizing that we are doing this, and wary of pointing fingers at others.

Nevertheless, Faure has made an important contribution to the continuing dialogue between Western thought and Buddhism. In the "Epilogue," Faure concludes:

Now that we have (provisionally) come full circle, it is to be hoped that we will be more wary of falling into the trap set by the logic of the excluded middle and will think twice before accepting dilemmas such as those involving faith and reason, rationality and the irrational, philosophy and religion, intellect and intuition, logic and rhetoric, spirituality and materialism, East and West. Yet at the same time we should not lose all critical sense, either confusing everything in a vague syncretism or rejecting it all as a matter of principle, whether we find ourselves in a mystical darkness in which all cats are gray or amid the brilliance of an Enlightenment in which no cows are sacred. (173)

I think Faure's work will help us make progress in avoiding these dilemmas—dilemmas that (as he indicates) might be overcome through our critical engagement with Buddhism.

ERIC BAIN-SELBO is associate professor and chair of religion and philosophy at Lebanon Valley College (Pennsylvania). His research includes work in comparative religious ethics, methods and theory in the study of religion, comparative philosophy, social criticism, and the study of popular culture. His most recent work is *Mediating the Culture Wars: Dialogical Virtues in Multicultural Education* (Hampton Press, 2003). He currently is finishing his next book, *Judge and Be Judged: Moral Reflection in an Age of Relativism and Fundamentalism* (Lexington Books, 2005). For further information, go to <<http://personal-pages.lvc.edu/~selbo/>>.

©2005 Eric Bain-Selbo. All rights reserved.

Bain-Selbo, Eric. "Double Exposure." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 6 no. 2 (Spring 2005): 95-100. PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/06.2/bain-selbo.pdf>