This is especially a problem in the chapters presenting extracts of Vedic exegesis (chapter 6) and Dharmaśāstra commentaries (chapters 7, 8, 12, and 13). Here is where readers (both neophytes and experts) really need the guidance that Olivelle provides in the notes, for example to explain what the Hawk sacrifice and the Eighth-Day rite are, and why they come up so much (see p. 344, notes 4 and 7). The argumentation of Visvarupa (i.e., Viśvarūpa) in chapter 7 is particularly complex, and the notes are indispensable at every step.

In spite of these infelicities of format, the book is a precious resource for making accessible to non-specialists India's sophisticated tradition of law and legal thought, spanning antiquity up to about 1200 CE. Many sourcebooks make the mistake of stuffing in too many disparate excerpts that are too short and too briefly introduced to give readers a coherent or comprehensive sense of their import. Instead, Olivelle gives us substantial passages, in clear, accurate, original translation, with ample contextualization, thus conveying the trajectory of the tradition and making it fully accessible for comparative studies.

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BORAYIN LARIOS:
Embodying the Vedas: Traditional Vedic Schools of Contemporary Maharashtra.
xvi, 271 pp. Warsaw and Berlin: De Gruyter Open, 2017. £90.99. ISBN 978 3 11 051731 6.
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With this ethnography on the transmission of religious knowledge in modern India, Borayin Larios invites us to consider how engagement with the Vedas articulates the cultural identity of orthodox Brahmins in Maharashtra. In addition to reporting on *how* these Sanskrit texts from the first millennium BCE are orally transmitted in modern Hindu traditions, *Embodying the Vedas* takes up the more slippery question of *why* the Vedas are transmitted. What's at stake for the teachers and students who devote their lives to learning and performing these ancient texts? What's in it for the parents, politicians, and religious leaders who support these endeavours? In grappling with these questions, Larios pushes beyond the familiar tropes of Vedic learning – a textual corpus of enormous size; precise memorization of every syllable and *mantra*; initiation within venerable lineages; maintenance of ritual purity – to reveal the complexities of what it means "to lead a Vedic life" (160). Through his careful study of more than two dozen boarding schools where Brahmin boys prepare for careers as priests, we discover the religious significance of contemporary Vedic transmission alongside its human and socio-political dimensions: patronage, prestige, secular education, new technologies, job opportunities, marriage prospects, and Hindu nationalism. Beyond illuminating present circumstances, this perspective reminds us that the Vedas – in common with holy scriptures around the world and throughout history – have always taken shape at the intersection of religion and society.

The idealized figure of the Brahmin (*brāhmaṇa*) looms large in this study and in the lives of Larios's interlocutors. Regionally, those Brahmins who have successfully completed the course of Vedic study gain the title of *vedamūrti*, "embodiment

of the Veda", which acknowledges the student's technical mastery of a particular textual recension, earned through thousands of hours of face-to-face instruction and tested through oral exams. But perhaps more significantly, the honorific affirms his capacity "to be a teacher for others and to carry the moral and spiritual authority of the Veda in one's very being" (162). For Larios, this socialization as an educated *brāhmaṇa* is paramount: the knowledge imparted in these schools is a mimetic understanding of what it means to embody tradition, both in the eyes of one's peers and in the more distant gaze of society at large. And yet tradition is a domain of constant negotiation, as each generation of Brahmins rearticulates the ideals espoused in Vedic texts in such a way as to accommodate the "circumstances of modernity" (8), from the rise of mega-cities to the influence of Hindu reform movements to changing gender roles in the Indian family. By critically engaging Vedic transmission through the lens of sociological theory, Larios makes the case for a *brāhmaṇa* identity that is "kaleidoscopic" – that is, yielding a coherent self-image even as it shifts and refracts the "asymmetrical power relations between the glass pieces" (169).

As for the book's structure, Larios begins by introducing the traditional system of Vedic education as it has existed in India for many centuries, characterized by orality, memorization, and hereditary transmission; and then explains his own methodological stance, which blends classical Indology with cultural anthropology. The next chapter frames the material with respect to contemporary Maharashtra, furnishing a historical sketch of Brahmins and Vedic learning in the region and making the case for the ways that colonialism and urbanization have altered the social and religious constructions of the *brāhmaṇa*'s role. Making up the core of the book, chapters 3 and 4 address the schools (*vedapāṭhaśāla*) themselves: funding, demographics, religious and political entanglements, pedagogy, and the rhythms of daily life. Of particular interest are the detailed accounts of the curricula of various schools, reflecting a revivalist spirit in Maharashtra that has favoured the resuscitation of rare textual recensions (including those imported from other regions of India) alongside the normative transmission of texts along family lines. Even more compelling, however, are Larios's sensitive accounts of student life, showing how teenaged boys balance the intellectually and physically demanding regimen of Vedic studentship with extracurricular activities from ice cream to cricket to social media. These stories are brought vividly to life by the author's photographs of several students (156–7), which convey both the austere pride of tradition and the gleeful spirit of adolescence.

As discussed above, chapters 5 and 6 take the honorific "embodiment of the Veda" (*vedamūrti*) as a point of departure for the critical engagement of Vedic transmission in terms of tradition, modernity, and identity. Of note here are three case studies that speak to the intersection of elite Brahmanical culture and Hindu religious life in the public sphere: the performance of the elaborate *rājasūya* sacrifice with the backing of Hindutvā politicians, which implicates Vedic revivalism in Hindu nationalist discourses; the diffusion of a temple cult of the "venerable Lord Veda" (*Bhagavān Ved*), featuring a white marble statue of the Vedas as a bound book that is worshipped in the manner of a Hindu deity; and finally a multi-day "great sacrifice for Lord Rāma" (*Śrī Rāma Mahāyajña*) that integrates Vedic ritual praxis with popular devotional practices. These decidedly contemporary religious forms exemplify the hybridity of Vedic traditions in Maharashtra, blending the oral tradition with media such as print, statuary, and sonic amplification, as well as courting the patronage and participation of non-Brahmins.

A key theme running throughout the book resurfaces in the concluding chapter: how anxieties over the erosion of the Brahmins' religious authority and social status

have shaped the transmission of the Vedas and the negotiation of *brāhmaṇa* identity. In the end, Larios emphasizes the "ambivalence" (203) of his interlocutors, who occupy a space between orality and literacy, tradition and modernity, caste and social mobility, patriarchy and egalitarianism. In this respect, we perceive the humanity of the young men he writes about, impressed as much by their aspirations and doubts as by their command of ancient texts and rituals. Overall, this is a highly readable and informative study that should interest anthropologists, historians of religion, Indologists, and scholars of orality, literacy, and knowledge systems in South Asia.

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KEREN ARBEL:
Early Buddhist Meditation: The Four Jhāna*s as the Actualization of Insight*.
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One very old question continues to dominate research on early Buddhist meditation: exactly what kind of practice(s) do the cryptic early texts prescribe? Keren Arbel's *Early Buddhist Meditation* is an ambitious attempt to take on this difficult question. Arbel argues that early Buddhist meditation was oriented primarily towards the cultivation of the four *jhāna*s. She advocates for a deep phenomenological reading of the *jhāna*s, and explicitly critiques traditional interpretations that divide Buddhist meditation practice into two distinct processes: calming (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*). In this traditional taxonomy, the *jhāna*s get classed under the category of *samatha* and thereby come to be considered less essential for Buddhist liberation than they appear to have been in the earliest period of Buddhism.

Arbel argues that we can recover the original importance of the *jhāna*s through a close phenomenological reading of their descriptions in the Pali Nikāyas. Such an analysis allows us, she suggests, to discern that the *jhāna*s are not states of one-pointed absorption of only instrumental value for liberation, as later tradition presents them. Rather, they are states of open awareness that constitute the liberating "actualization of wisdom-awareness" (p. 120).

The book consists of eight main chapters accompanied by an introductory methodological chapter and concluding reflections. Arbel first lays out a classical problem, common to many South Asian religious traditions: how is it that particular states within the realm of the conditioned world can lead to the unconditioned? She argues that the development of a "polarized model of the meditative path" (p. 4) is the result of an associated problem: the question of whether liberating wisdom in early South Asia was understood to be discursive or non-discursive. If liberating wisdom is discursive, then the non-discursive higher *jhāna*s cannot in and of themselves be soteriologically efficacious. Yet our earliest sources for understanding the teachings of the Buddha – the Nikāyas and Āgamas of mainstream South Asian Buddhism – contain a wide variety of approaches to meditation, many of which appear to prioritize the practice of *jhāna* as liberatory in and of itself.