

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 Jhānas 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 *jhānas*. She advocates for a deep phenomenological reading of the *jhānas*, and explicitly critiques traditional interpretations that divide Buddhist meditation practice into two distinct processes: calming (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*). In this traditional taxonomy, the *jhānas* 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 *jhānas* through a close phenomenological reading of their descriptions in the Pali Nikāyas. Such an analysis allows us, she suggests, to discern that the *jhānas* 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 *jhānas* 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.

Arbel takes this aspect of the earliest Buddhist sources as a textual anchor in a methodological approach that advocates for reading the Pali Nikāyas as a *unity* – and thereby a single text – in the Gadamerian sense (p. 13). This approach ostensibly allows her to construct a single coherent “Buddhist” vision of metaphysics and meditative practice while at the same time engaging a wide range of diverse materials contained in these early textual sources. In this way Arbel explicitly distinguishes Buddhism from other contemporaneous traditions of spiritual practice and goes on to show how these distinguishing characteristics are instantiated practically and phenomenologically in the descriptions of the *jhānas*.

Chapters 2 to 6 form the core of the book. Arbel takes the reader through a close analysis of the four *jhānas*, focusing on how the phenomenology of the *jhānas* appears to overlap with that of the factors of awakening. She is here indebted to the important earlier work of Rupert Gethin (*The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, Leiden: Brill, 1992). Arbel’s close analysis of the phenomenology of the *jhānas* in these chapters provides readers with an insightful treatment of a wide range of early textual material and an invitation to examine afresh the role of awareness (*sati*) in these key meditative states.

In chapters 7 and 8 Arbel brings her phenomenological analysis of the *jhānas* to bear on broader conceptions of the Buddhist path, showing that the *jhānas* cannot be understood outside of a context in which morality forms a basis and “wisdom-awareness” is actualized. The main argument of chapter 7 is that the liberating insight (*paññā*) of the early Buddhist tradition can only be properly conceptualized as emerging from the kind of awareness that the *jhānas* allegedly engender. In chapter 8, Arbel returns to her primary argument, suggesting that the development of the classical theory of the *jhānas* emerged from a narrow intellectualism of settled scholastic monastics unfamiliar with the true phenomenology of meditative practice.

I am sympathetic to Arbel’s project, and her arguments – in their broadest contours – are not unreasonable. At the same time, there are a number of insurmountable methodological problems in her approach. These problems point to the intractability of any attempt to (re)construct a straightforward picture of early “Buddhist” meditation based on the sources currently at the disposal of scholars.

Bhikkhu Anālayo (“On the supposedly liberating function of the first absorption”, *Buddhist Studies Review*, 2016) has already touched on some of the more basic philological problems in Arbel’s work. For me, the fundamental issue with the book is Arbel’s claim that she reads the Nikāyas as a unity, when in fact she consistently takes recourse to decidedly dis-unified historicist readings when the unity approach does not support the argument.

One example of this is Arbel’s treatment of Buddhist *āsava* theory. While the most common “stereotyped” description of liberation by way of the *jhānas* has as its final stage the knowledge of the destruction of the *āsavas* (*āsavakkhaya*), Arbel argues that the *āsava* theory is un-Buddhist (p. 35), and later follows some of the more epistemologically violent philological readings of Lambert Schmithausen and Johannes Bronkhorst to suggest that the classical destruction of the *āsava* formula is not “a psychologically plausible process” (p. 163).

Similarly, Arbel accepts Alexander Wynne’s speculations about the non-Buddhist origins of meditation on the elements (p. 11) and then goes on to use the descriptions of the mental factor of *upekkhā* in the *Dhātuvibhaṅgasutta* – where *jhāna* is never mentioned – as paradigmatic of Buddhist *jhānic* experience (pp. 135–7). It is problematic to claim that one is “not concerned with Buddhism as a religious phenomenon or with what Buddhists really did ‘on the ground’” (p. 6) and at the same time justify any problematic aspect of one’s argument with “on the ground” reasons of a speculative philology.

These problems aside, this book is a valuable contribution to the field of early Buddhist meditation studies, and should open up many avenues of debate for those invested in understanding the complex world of early Buddhist practice.

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SUSAN VERMA MISHRA and HIMANSHU PRABHA RAY:

The Archaeology of Sacred Spaces: The Temple in Western India, 2nd century BCE–8th century CE.

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The western Indian state of Gujarat has a distinctive history with a strong Jain presence (p. 184), an important role in literature such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Skanda Purana* (p. 199) and a long coastline that has provided a strong maritime influence. Yet studies of the region's history have often "served as a mere adjunct to those in the rest of the country" (p. 161). Ray's work in other regions of India has broken down unilinear, pan-South Asian models (e.g. H.P. Ray, *Monastery and Guild*, Delhi, 1986) and this volume traces the trajectory of Gujarat's religious development on its own terms. The book aims to map the temporal and chronological development of the Hindu, Jain and Buddhist religions from the second century BCE to eighth century CE. The volume and diversity of historical, archaeological and art-historical material summarized by Ray and Mishra is admirable. The first chapter outlines monumental religious remains, the second archaeological and other evidence of settlement, and the third, sculptures. These chapters summarize previous scholarship and will prove invaluable to anyone studying the history of Gujarat, particularly due to the inclusion of scholarly resources such as tables of sculptures (pp. 114–24).

Unfortunately, the utility of the opening chapters is affected by significant shortcomings in the presentation of data. The discussion of rock-cut caves on pp. 24–35 will serve as an example of these inaccuracies. The Bahrot caves are not located in Saurashtra but close to Sanjan in South Gujarat (p. 24) and have possibly been confused with another group of caves at Ranpar in the north-eastern foothills of the Barda hills. The caves in Nakhtrana taluka (Desalpar near Gunthli) are located in Kachchh, not South Gujarat (p. 34, personal communication with Ken Ishikawa). Caves at Barda and Bawa Pyara in the Barda hills at Ghumli (Ranpar) and at Bawa Pyara (Junagadh) are dated to the Mauryan period on the basis of scholarship from the 1960s and 70s and this unexpected date requires justification (p. 24). On occasion, the tone of the book is questionable, and it could have been edited more closely. For example, conclusions regarding the long-term history of trade at Shamlaji drawn from a "booklet available at the site" (p. 88); and the postulation that Arabs were responsible for the decline of the importance of Valabhi as a sacred site without date, citation or any corroborating evidence (p. 178). Finally, the use of maps is unsatisfactory: several more maps should have been included with a depiction of the division of Gujarat into three geographical areas particularly required. Those maps that are included are missing information and on occasion use several symbols to represent