

Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception, by Eviatar Shulman, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 221 pp., ISBN 978 110 706239 9, US\$99.99 (hardcover); ISBN 978 110 769538 2, US\$35.99 (paperback); ISBN 978 113 989971 0, US\$80 (e-book)

Douglas Osto

To cite this article: Douglas Osto (2017) Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception, by Eviatar Shulman, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 221 pp., ISBN 978 110 706239 9, US\$99.99 (hardcover); ISBN 978 110 769538 2, US\$35.99 (paperback); ISBN 978 113 989971 0, US\$80 (e-book), Religion, 47:1, 117-120, DOI: [10.1080/0048721X.2016.1188630](https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1188630)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1188630>



Published online: 24 Jun 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 19




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

asceticism, a core phenomenon of Indian spirituality; however, its often cursory treatment of primary sources and current theories is likely to disappoint experts in the various specialisations within South Asia religions.

Douglas Osto
Massey University, New Zealand
 d.osto@massey.ac.nz

© 2016 Douglas Osto
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1188629>

Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception, by Eviatar Shulman, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 221 pp., ISBN 978 110 706239 9, US\$99.99 (hardcover); ISBN 978 110 769538 2, US\$35.99 (paperback); ISBN 978 113 989971 0, US\$80 (e-book)

In the preface to *Rethinking the Buddha*, Eviatar Shulman makes the provocative claim that ‘the heart of the present study can be defined as an attempt to explain early Buddhist philosophy as a meditative phenomenon’ (p. xii). In order to do this Shulman argues for what he calls ‘philosophical perception’ – that is, early Buddhist philosophy ‘as a form of direct perception that has been practiced to perfection’ and ‘can be *perceived* in *jhāna* [meditative trance]’ (p. xii; *italics his*; *my brackets*). Related to his central argument, Shulman also challenges the prevailing view in scholarship that the historical Buddha taught the ‘four noble truths’ as universal statements about the world. Shulman also asserts that like the four noble truths, other seminal doctrines in Buddhism, such as dependent-origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) and selflessness (*anatta*), ‘were not, originally, universally applicable laws of conditionality and of essencelessness, respectively, but complementary methods of observing mental occurrences in meditation’ (p. x). Thus Shulman’s project in *Rethinking the Buddha* is fundamentally revisionary in that he calls for a ‘fresh reading of the Pāli texts,’ which he believes will lead to ‘fresh insights into the way both philosophy and liberation were envisioned by the authors of the Pāli discourses’ (p. xiv).

Rethinking the Buddha is divided into five chapters. In chapter 1, Shulman addresses the relationship between philosophy and meditation in the early Pāli Buddhist sources. He begins with the assertion that ‘philosophical analysis was used by them [early Buddhists] very differently than the way it most commonly functions today’ (p. 1; *my brackets*). Shulman writes:

For them, philosophical analysis was meant to change the very structure of perception; the most meaningful and valued moments of meditation, those in which liberation took place, were composed of direct perceptions of embodied philosophical understandings. These were, in fact, philosophical perceptions, not philosophical understandings. (p. 1)

Shulman then addresses the issue of liberation, stating that in early Buddhism the chief characteristic of liberation is a connection between the deep, quiet meditation of Buddhist trance states (*jhāna*) attained through concentration (*samādhi*) and specific philosophical understandings. He then points out that existing theories on Buddhist enlightenment fail to demonstrate how philosophical understandings such as ‘this is suffering’ can occur in deep states of meditation. After demonstrating the inadequacy of the theories of a number of scholars (Richard Gombrich, Paul Griffiths, Tilmann Vetter, Alexander Wynne, and Johannes

Bronkhorst), Shulman concludes that ‘we are thus in need of a minimalist definition for Buddhist philosophical vision in *samādhi* that we would be able to accept as part of the meditative experience itself’ (p. 13).

Shulman’s understanding of ‘Buddhist philosophical perception’ is his solution to the problem. Shulman’s central argument focuses on the personal and concrete observations said to have occurred to the Buddha while in the fourth stage of *jhāna* and particularly on the Pāli texts’ use of the word ‘this’ (*idaṃ* / *ayaṃ*) such as in the description of the Buddha’s insight that ‘this is suffering.’ Shulman argues persuasively that the “This” refers to concrete occurrences in the Buddha’s quieted and concentrated mind, to his observation of particular mental contents’ (p. 28). Here we find, Shulman asserts, philosophical knowledge as a form of direct experience.

In chapter 2, Shulman argues that early Buddhist philosophy was primarily focused on explaining human subjectivity in relation to conscious experience and mental events and much less concerned about the external world or abstract notions of existence. This is not to say that early Buddhists were not concerned with metaphysics. Shulman points out that liberation from the cycle of rebirth, the primary goal of Buddhism, is a profoundly metaphysical notion. Thus, early Buddhism seeks ‘to remedy a metaphysical illness by psychological means’ (p. 62). In relation to these observations, Shulman maintains that the Buddhist notion of selflessness (*anatta*) was ‘essentially an approach to human experience, which is implemented in the mind in real time as part of the path of liberation. The theoretical aspect of this doctrine is secondary and derives from the primary practical significance’ (p. 77). Likewise, Shulman maintains that dependent-origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) was originally not concerned with a general theory of relativity or conditionality, but rather only ‘conditionality as (1) the most basic feature of mental life and (2) the main determining factor in the process of rebirth’ (p. 89). Moreover, implicit within this view according to Shulman is ‘a powerful metaphysical assumption, which gives mental life priority over physical reality’ (p. 97). It is this philosophical stance in early Buddhism that allows for a psychological solution to the metaphysical problem of continued rebirth in the painful cycle of existence.

In chapter 3 Shulman addresses the issue of mindfulness, which he views as the means in which philosophy becomes perception in early Buddhism. The two central claims of this chapter are that mindfulness (*sati*) as found in the Pāli *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* is a method of meditation designed ‘to patiently teach the mind to spontaneously experience reality in accord with Buddhist philosophical positions’ (p. 112) and that this method is closely related to the practice of *jhāna* (p. 112). Here Shulman argues that early sources maintain a connection between *sati* and *jhāna* whereby the progressive practice of mindfulness was believed to lead to profound states of concentration (*samādhi*) culminating in the attainment of *jhāna*. In *jhāna* it was thought that the practitioner could intensify the philosophical perceptions of Buddhist truths arrived at from the development of mindfulness. This process would ultimately culminate in the four truths leading to liberation from rebirth.

Chapter 4 examines the Buddhist four noble truths as a form of meditative perception. Shulman makes his most significant argument here:

In stark contrast to the picture of the doctrine as a set of universal truths, the Pāli texts describe the cultivation and realization of the 4NTs [four noble truths] almost ubiquitously in terms that suggest a personal, even an intimate, perception of particular, current conscious events. (p. 139; my brackets)

This is evident in the literal wording of the *suttas* that state the Buddha’s realization as ‘*this* is suffering ... , *this* is the arising of suffering ... , *this* is the cessation of suffering ... , *this* is the path that leads to the cessation of suffering’ (p. 139; italics his). Drawing on the previous scholarship of K. R. Norman and careful textual analysis, Shulman maintains that the earliest


formulations of these philosophical perceptions were not referred to as ‘noble truths’ (*ariya-saccam*) and that this designation was in fact attached to these insights at a later date. Shulman also points out that the ‘four noble truths,’ like dependent-origination and selflessness, were originally more like four observations based on a concrete perception of impermanence. He writes: ‘The reading offered here suggests that the central doctrines of the Nikāyas betray a close affinity by relying on the perception of arising and cessation’ (p. 171). In a similar move, Shulman maintains that ‘the path’ in the four observations originally is not a reference to the ‘noble eightfold path,’ but should be understood as the mental stance or attitude (‘the internalized path’) that allows one to realize ‘the cessation of suffering’ (p. 175).

In his conclusion Shulman states: ‘I would go so far as to guess that the Buddha himself was not familiar with the concept of the four noble truths’ (p. 188). By this Shulman means that the original teaching of the Buddha (or at least the earliest reconstruction possible based on the Pāli texts) was about meditative observations rather than universal ‘truths.’ He claims that a ramification of this position is that it is able to make sense of a central theory of Buddhist liberation in the early sources that is both trustworthy and reasonable (p. 199). Moreover, a further ramification of this position is that the three seminal teachings of early Buddhism – the four truths, dependent-origination, and selflessness – may be viewed as ‘all emerging from one, core meditative apprehension regarding the arising and passing away of mental events’ (p. 189). In this regard, Shulman views Buddhist meditation and mindfulness as means of re-conditioning the mind to perceive phenomena through a Buddhist philosophical lens, rather than as processes of deconditioning the mind to view things ‘as they are’ (p. 191). Thus, for Shulman Buddhist wisdom is attained through a practiced effort to see all objects as ‘dangerous, fleeting, and as potential referents for self-grasping’ (p. 191). According to this view, as one internalized this perception with further concentration (*samādhi*), one could enter refined states of *jhāna*, wherein one would directly perceive the realities described by Buddhist philosophy, gain emotional detachment, and thereby attain the ultimate goal of liberation.

Shulman’s thesis in *Rethinking the Buddha* employs three main components. The first rests on sophisticated textual analysis by other scholars such as K. R. Norman and Bhikkhu Anālayo, who attempt to discern earlier layers of the Pāli canon in order to recover the most primitive Buddhist teachings. The second is Shulman’s own close reading of these Pāli sources deemed earliest. And the third is Shulman’s analysis based on his view of Buddhist philosophy as meditative perception. Overall, Shulman’s approach is sound and his understanding of philosophical perception has much to offer Buddhist studies in that it challenges a number of existing views, provides a new coherence to an early Buddhist view of liberation, and highlights an important aspect of Indian philosophy in general. Indian philosophy was always meant to be a *lived philosophy*, or a praxis leading to liberation from suffering. Thus the various Indian philosophies (such as Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Advaita) each attempt to internalize their philosophical understandings to the extent that such internalization would lead to shifts in perception or new ‘philosophical perceptions’ based on the truths propounded by their particular system. Otherwise, such philosophy remains speculation and is unable to transform the person into a liberated being. This said, however, Shulman’s dichotomy between concrete, personal, and subjective versus abstract and universal may be overstated. Yes, the Buddha might have said, ‘This is suffering,’ but was not the point that everything that arose to his awareness (barring *nibbāna*) fit into this category? Moreover, if for early Buddhists ‘the world’ meant the subjective human experience of the world, and if everything that appeared to the Buddha in *samādhi* was viewed as impermanent, suffering, selfless, and conditioned, do not these characteristics have universal applicability? If they do not, and they only represent particular, subjective assessments of mental events arising in the meditations of one particular renouncer, then the Buddha has

nothing to teach others (what was true for him might not be true for anyone else), nor would Buddhists have any grounds to enter into debate with other Indian philosophers (which they most definitely did). Thus the four truths need to be both particular philosophical perceptions in meditation and also understood as having universal applicability if Buddhism is going to be considered to have any soteriological efficacy for anyone besides the Buddha. Similarly, for early Buddhists, wisdom attained through mindfulness and deep concentration is liberative because it is training in restructuring experience to see things as ‘they really are’ (*yathābhūtaṃ* / *tathātā*). If Buddhist philosophical perception did not lead to realizing reality, it would be just another form of delusion – a kind of autohypnosis. Thus without at least some minimal implication of universal truth, early Buddhist philosophy would fail to offer anything relevant for the seeker of liberation.

In sum, *Rethinking the Buddha* is a thought-provoking study, which challenges current theories by proposing that early Buddhist philosophy may be best understood as a form of philosophical perception. Through his close scrutiny of primary sources and critical engagement with the most recent scholarship, Shulman provides his readers with an analytically precise and innovative thesis, which doubtlessly will stimulate serious reflection and debate among scholars and students of early Buddhist philosophy.

Douglas Osto
Massey University, New Zealand
 d.osto@massey.ac.nz

© 2016 Douglas Osto
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1188630>

American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism, by Matthew Avery Sutton, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014, 480 pp., ISBN 978 0674048362, US\$35 (hardcover)

In *American Apocalypse*, Matthew Sutton ambitiously tasks himself with accounting for the history of American evangelicalism in the long 20th century. The payoff is nothing less than a story of what makes America so very American. Sutton’s telling, then, is the making of a contemporary national characteristic, a ‘Christian nation,’ as it were. And the defining feature of it all, he claims, is a public, political concern with the biblical end-times interpretation of history and culture – a ‘politics of apocalypse’ (p. 6). For Sutton, to be an ‘evangelical’ is to be politically invested in the end, here and now. Ways of being religious and ways of being civic therefore merge. No mere ‘subculture,’ modern evangelicalism marks the creation and advancement of conservative American politics. Amid a movement that now claims about 30 percent of the U.S. population, Sutton writes, we ‘live in a world shaped by evangelicals’ apocalyptic hopes, dreams, and nightmares’ (p. 372). Sutton provides us with a long and detailed history of how this came to be so.

Sutton begins with the late 19th- and early 20th-century prophetic rumblings of the end. With books like William Blackstone’s *Jesus is Coming* (1878) – which Sutton lists as ‘one of the most influential books of the twentieth century’ – and the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) – which Sutton lists as ‘the best-selling book in the history of Oxford University Press’ – Sutton finds a wealth of publications that spoke to a burgeoning interest in extraordinary events and their significance for ushering in the end of times (pp. 9, 28). For the evangelicals whom Sutton highlights, economic problems, railroad strikes, populist revolts, and the