

Tricycle Talks

“The Thousand and One Lives of the Buddha”

Episode #80 with Bernard Faure

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James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Over the course of the past century, many scholars have published historical biographies of the Buddha, attempting to present a simplified, chronological narrative. But according to Bernard Faure, these attempts to uncover the historical Buddha neglect the rich literary, mythological, and ritual elements of the story. Faure, a professor of Japanese religion at Columbia University, believes that the Buddha's life story is one of the great myths of modern times. In his new book, *The Thousand and One Lives of the Buddha*, he traces how the life story of the Buddha has been told across cultures, from early Buddhist texts to contemporary art forms of manga and science fiction. In today's episode of *Tricycle Talks*, I sit down with Bernard to discuss his favorite myths about the Buddha's life, the risks of searching for a historical Buddha, and the creativity of the Buddhist tradition.

James Shaheen: I'm here with Bernard Faure, professor of Japanese religion at Columbia University. Hi Bernard, it's great to be with you.

Bernard Faure: Hi, James. Thank you for having me.

James Shaheen: So we're here to talk about your new book, *The Thousand and One Lives of the Buddha*. You write the life story of the Buddha is one of the great myths of modern times. So first, what do you mean by myth, and what can be gained from treating the life of the Buddha as myth as opposed to some historical fact?

Bernard Faure: A myth is something you take as a model for action, a set of beliefs you have which you don't necessarily need to prove. This is something that influences your daily life. In



the life of the Buddha, there are definitely a lot of things you could call mythical elements, which have to do with this conception of life as was prevalent at that time in India or Asia. It has other elements which people would say look more like legend and might have a real historical element behind them. But over time, those elements have been embellished beyond recognition. So many historians will take this second view to talk about the legend of Buddha, and therefore, if it's a legend, we can probably try to find the historical truth behind it. The word myth, on the other hand, if you talk about Indian deities, like Rama or Krishna—of course, today, some Indian nationalists are trying to claim that Rama and Krishna were historical figures. Behind every myth, you might have historical reality, but basically, when you use the word myth, you're not too concerned with that historical reality, the little grain of sand that gave birth to that pearl we call the myth.

James Shaheen: You point out that there are at least two different approaches to the Buddha's biography: the historical and the hagiographical.

Bernard Faure: Right, hagiography is the sacred history, the life of saints in the Christian tradition. It's from *hagio*, sacred, and *graphy*, description. Hagiography really looks at the legends of the saints. Michel de Certeau once said hagiography looks like a history, but it's more like a composition of places, and when you look at the legend of the saints, you realize that places are very important there. That struck me as being very applicable to the life of Buddha. The only elements of the myth or legend are really focused and centered around places like stupas, for instance. The monumental aspects, if you like, the memorial aspects, and the geographical aspects are very important in hagiography. In history, of course, we deal with events unfolding in time, and we try to understand these events. The problem when you treat hagiography as if it were history is that somehow you try to purge the hagiographical account of its obviously legendary elements and therefore they assume that beyond all that there will be another reality that will finally be found, and that would be the historical Buddha. The problem is



you never really reach that historical moment. So you get all the way back to, let's say, Ashoka's time, supposedly 100 years after the historical Buddha lived, but this is about the best you can do. It's all well and good. But that doesn't satisfy my historian feeling here. I'm a historian in a sense: a historian of religion, but still a historian, but a historian who thinks that symbols and legends matter. They are not just extra stuff that you must get rid of.

James Shaheen: In other words, stripping down the Buddha to his historical existence, you're left basically with very little. But you write that historians of this sort end up creating a myth of their own: the myth of a rational, even humanistic Buddha with a simplified chronological life story. What are some of the dangers of historicism, and what can be gained when we're freed from the historical stance?

Bernard Faure: You are left with very little. What can you say about the Buddha? You can really say the whole thing in one paragraph. And it's not very inspiring. No traditional Buddhist would recognize himself or himself in that definition if all you're left with is that sometime in the sixth century or fifth century, a man lives named Gautama or Shakyamuni, who later on came to be called the Buddha because he was at one point enlightened. He was born a prince, he left his family, he went to practice austerities in the jungle or in the mountains, and eventually reaches this peak experience, which everyone would like to reach someday, and after that, started teaching, let's say, which became a religion, and eventually died at advanced age of 80 or something. This is it. This is five lines or ten lines, maybe. It's boring as hell, and it's generic. You have stripped this story from all its juice, all its elements that would compel someone to become a Buddhist. If there had only been that, there would be no Buddhism today. Buddhism would have long been dead because it's just not attractive at all. No, you need something much better than that, a model, a figure that somehow brings some love, should I say, so that people want to believe him and to follow him and think he has refound the truth. So there's something



else. What is something else which historians have dropped? And in doing so they have done a disservice to the cause.

James Shaheen: So we tend to think of a founder nonetheless as somebody who founds a religion. On the other side of that, does the religion create the founder?

Bernard Faure: You do have founders. You do have people historically recorded in the modern time or in the past, someone like Luther, let's say, Calvin, or others, who do found a religion, Muhammad in Islam, Christ is already a little bit more problematic, but we can still go so far. But in the case of the Buddha, we don't have that. We don't have any record close to the time of when he supposedly lived. What seems to have happened is really that at some point in time in India, there were many groups of religious people, and one of them called themselves Buddhist. They looked back to this figure they call the Buddha, and they started really writing about him and telling stories about him. The Buddhist order developed around the stories.

James Shaheen: Where does the emphasis on the actual or historical existence of the Buddha and piecing together his story, where do you think that impulse is coming from, to say this was the original Buddha, this is what he originally taught, this is the person who went from here to there on foot, this sort of thing?

Bernard Faure: Well, of course, any religion needs a founder. But as Lévi-Strauss once said, often, this founder is a virtual focus, like when you see an image reflected in the water, you seem to believe that the source of this image comes from the place that you see inside the water, but it actually comes from a different place. In that sense, the Buddha is a virtual focus, a virtual source. Nevertheless, it is real in that sense. Saying it's virtual doesn't mean that there's nothing there. First, on the origin side, people need a founder. They need to somehow believe that there was someone there at the beginning of things. That doesn't necessarily have to be a historical



figure, but often that's the case. Then, as Western discourse developed in the 17th, 18th, and 19th century, this tendency to historicism and the historical method became really the dominant form of study in the field of humanities, philology, and history. So it became the dominant paradigm, the idea that through the study of text, you could get back to the author behind the text and therefore to the historical figure who founded this movement. That was a kind of natural development in a sense. There was a reaction in the 19th century, of course, and Donald Lopez and others have written about this. This was a reaction against Christianity and religion perceived as really an obscurantist movement. Now we had a religion which supposedly had a founder who looked very reasonable, was not walking on water, was not doing all the crazy things that we're used to, so a religion with a philosopher as a founder, that was very attractive to 19th-century scholars for understandable reasons. But in doing so, they threw the baby with the bathwater, if I might say,

James Shaheen: Right, we seem to value literal truth or scientific truth over mythical truths. Obviously, we need both. But in this case, your emphasis has been on the myth of the Buddha because, like you say, that's where the juice is. Is that fair to say?

Bernard Faure: It's a reaction against what I see as the pendulum that has really swung to the other extreme. Historical study is really important. I'm not really denying that. I'm a historian myself. But history is not historicism. Historicism is a tendency to really deny anything that is not purely material or physical, anything that cannot be proved or solved by documents, and the idea that somehow the more authentic documents should be the simplest ones because if something is very simple, it means it didn't have time to get elaborated and developed and so on, so we might be closest to the origin. And this is to forget that actually, very often, stories are going to be embellished with legends and other things through time. But sometimes just the opposite happens. This is exactly what's happening now with historicism and also with modern Buddhism. We want to simplify the story to make it fit our agenda or our desire. So stories can



go both ways. It can become more complex or more simple. To think that because you have simple texts and this simple text will be, let's say, the Pali, and that will be therefore much closer to the original Buddha, that's a very strong presupposition.

James Shaheen: How would you describe your approach to the life of the Buddha?

Bernard Faure: My approach is that I like stories. I always liked stories. I study religion: Japanese religion, Chinese religion, Buddhism in East Asia. It's mostly stories. And sometimes they're not so great, sometimes they are really fascinating. There is a sheer pleasure in reading about these stories. Reading the life of Buddha is a great experience for many people, including myself. So that would be my approach, saying I don't want to somehow deprive through my scholarly work the readers from that pleasure. And if I find someone who is doing just that, I thought, OK, there is a program there.

James Shaheen: So why don't we turn to the life of the Buddha? You identify four key moments in his biography, which you describe as acts in a play. Can you talk about each of these moments?

Bernard Faure: First, the word “biography” here I would put in quotation marks. The biographical drive is something that we Westerners have. We want the biography to be that someone is born, goes through life, and dies. But it's really not the case in the life of Buddha, and I use the word Life with a capital letter to show that it's not just regular life but legendary or mythical life. Therefore, it's more like a drama that unfolds. The four main moments have been the birth, the awakening—I prefer the word awakening to enlightenment because enlightenment, which is a common term used in English, means that there is light, and of course, in some traditions, like the Tibetan tradition, it's an experience where light is important. But in most Buddhist traditions, it's more like waking up from slumber or ignorance. So it's compared to the



dreaming state, and therefore you awaken. You just wake up, literally. So that was the second moment, of course, and this is the crucial point. The story could have ended there because when Gautama awakens, he has reached a higher transcendental level, whatever we call it. So basically, he's no longer there anymore. What goes on is really just the workings of karma, the physical being of a Buddha. But the story didn't end there. The Buddha continued to teach selflessly for 50 years or so. And eventually there was another crucial moment, which is nirvana. Historical scholars would say just death, but basically, for the Buddhists it's something different. He again enters finally into that higher state. For Buddhists, there are two forms of nirvana. There's nirvana with remainder, which is what happened at the time of awakening. He has reached that state, but because of his past karma, he still goes on living. And then the final nirvana, the great nirvana, *parinirvana*, which is really the final exit. After that, he is no longer there, except that he still remains in one way, which is his relics, which are still seen not as remainders but as really another form of presence, which has exactly the same kind of power that the living Buddha had.

James Shaheen: You mentioned earlier places associated with the Buddha, and you write that the moments you just spoke of are more rooted in place than in time. Can you say more about geography and the legends and pilgrimages associated with these four moments? What do you mean that they're more rooted in place than in time?

Bernard Faure: Well, what we know is that definitely at some point in early India, there were pilgrimage centers that developed around the stupas where, supposedly, the relics of the Buddha had been buried. Some of them were just memorials, but most of them really were believed to have some kind of remains, some kind of relic of the Buddha in them. So they became really important. The religion developed almost piecemeal around these centers. Each center was trying to make a point that it's better than all the others. They developed all these stories. You can see this really happening. So yes, we have this early development of the Buddha's legend or myth in



this northern part of India. Then you get stories that say that actually, the Buddha went to the northeast to what is now Gandhara, what is now Afghanistan. And then you have a second wave like that where early Buddhism spread toward the northeast and then also spread towards southern India to the south and then eventually spread to Southeast Asia, with stories of relics being exported there, and then, as we know, through China and all the way to Japan.

Geographical expansion seems to correspond also to the development of the legend of the Buddha. Actually, one of the historians, I like him because of his style, Alfred Foucher, explained that if the Buddha, after he was awakened, had gone west instead of east in his peregrinations, the whole nature of Buddhism would have changed because he went east where he met local people who were more like vegetarians and all that, so his teaching became what we know: the nonviolence and so on. If he had gone the other way, and we're talking about very short distances here, like 500 kilometers, then probably he would have met with more like a warrior type. His religion would have been much more full of muscle, let's say. Now, of course, that's a very simplistic, reductionistic interpretation. But the point is still that the way that Buddhism expanded geographically did play a role in what became of it.

James Shaheen: I was wondering if you could say more about the legends that surround the Buddha's birth and his relationship with his mother, Maya, which you touch on in the book.

Bernard Faure: Yes, so of course, it's a beautiful, immaculate conception. And here again, the historians of religion cannot help noticing some superficial resemblances with some other immaculate conceptions. Here's the story. The Buddha has been living through many, many earlier former lives. He's now in heaven, in Tushita Heaven. He's preparing to be reborn. And of course, he has to be reborn in a proper setting, so it takes him a long time to find the right person who would become his father and mother. They have to be perfectly virtuous and so on and so forth. At first, he is conferring with other gods. He's kind of a god, he's in heaven at this point, and he's conferring with the other gods, the so-called 33 gods of Indra's paradise, and he wants to



take an animal form to be reborn at first. It's kind of funny because he's considering animals like a rabbit or things like that. Eventually, on the advice of one of his colleagues, he chooses a white elephant. So you have this famous story where he descends and literally penetrates Maya's bosom. So Maya has a dream in which this white elephant comes into her, and she realizes it's really an auspicious dream. She tells it to her husband the next morning, and they know something's going to happen. Sure enough, she gets pregnant after the dream—and not from her husband. They have purified themselves, so there is no doubt about who could be the father. It's a supernatural event.

Eventually, after nine months or so, she feels the time has come, so she goes to this park of Lumbini, and then she's going to give birth standing and holding a tree branch. Here again, of course, this element is very mythical. The cult of trees in India is very important. Tree spirits are also important. She gives birth, and right away, two gods Brahma and Indra, come here to take the child, and the child walks seven steps and declares that he is the ultimate being on Earth and under heaven. It's a miraculous birth.

What is interesting there is that the child then remembers all his past lives. He's all omniscient, all-knowing. However, as he grows up, he's going to forget about that. He has almost a normal youth. He's in the palace, he's a prince, and his father has heard that somehow this child is not an ordinary being. A diviner told him that he could easily become a supreme monarch or a religious leader of mankind. So of course, the king wants him to be a monarch because it's his own kingdom that's at stake here, so he decides to keep the Buddha protected from any kind of external influence to turn to religion. But of course, that doesn't work, as we know. At one point, the Buddha gets out of the place where he has been sequestered and makes four ominous encounters. He first meets an old man, and he has never seen an old man before, apparently, and then a sick man and then the corpse. So those three encounters make him realize life is not as pretty as he thought it was, having been sheltered from all that. Eventually, in the fourth encounter, he meets a monk, and he realizes that there is a way out of his misery and therefore he decides to follow the lead to become an ascetic and find the truth for himself.



Before the four encounters, the Buddha had totally lost the knowledge he had when he was born about life. He seems to rediscover the basic truth of life, which everyone knows. But then, of course, this was necessary, maybe, for him so that the shock would be such that he would actually leave the palace, leave his family, and become the Buddha.

James Shaheen: Another central figure in the Buddha's biography is a very interesting one, Mara, the demon king. You write that Western biographies of the Buddha often minimize Mara's role or leave him out altogether.

Bernard Faure: Good old Mara, yes, I like this guy. Every good story needs a villain, so that's Mara. Historians have ignored him, even though the awakening would not have taken place without the Buddha to be first defeating Mara. So Mara is the king of this world. For better or worse, he's really the power that governs and rules over everything, even over the other gods, and he wants this to continue. He's not attacking the Buddha at first. He first gets dreams that the Buddha sends him telling him that his time has come. Eventually, he decides, "OK, this cannot happen like that. I'm going to confront this young usurper, someone who wants to be the king of this world, literally." As you know, in the story, like in any good tale, it takes three times. You have to knock three times at the door for it to happen in most legends. First, Mara sends his army. Then he sends his daughters. He has three beautiful daughters to tempt the Buddha. And eventually he himself appears. And when he tries himself to confront the Buddha, telling him, "Who are you? You are an usurper. I'm the king of this world," the Buddha says, "Well, you know, I've gained all this merit over huge periods of time." And he takes the earth to witness. There's this famous image where he touches the ground, and the earth goddess appears to say yes. Out of this, the earth goddess sends water, and that washes away and drowns Mara's armies. This aspect is not really developed in Asian Buddhism except in Southeast Asia, where you go to any temple in Bangkok, let's say, and you'll see images of the earth goddess touching her hair,



and all the water that she has received from over millions of years of time now flows from her and washes away and drowns Mara's armies.

That's clearly a very, very mythical story, but it's been left out. It's only after he has defeated Mara that now the Buddha can proceed to the so-called Bodhi tree. The tree is said to be at the center of the world, so it's already a throne, in a sense. Eventually, according to the normal stories, if he had not cleared the way with Mara, he could not have reached the enlightenment he's now going to reach. So the story of awakening has two sides: one side is Mara, and the other side is awakening itself. Historians have completely dropped the Mara stories. Mara himself, as I say, is the king of this world. What he wants is life to continue, life with procreation, children being born, life growing. So he's kind of a nature god, as it were. The early Buddha thinks the world is a place of suffering. He wants to get out of it, and he wants everyone that he can convert to follow him. So Mara is saying, "If I let this guy do what he wants, my world, this world, is going to go to pieces, is going to just be emptied of its population literally." So in a sense, Mara is like a good king trying to protect his kingdom from a young aggressor seen from that point of view. In East Asia, you find this view often well represented. For instance, in Japan, Mara represents the local cults or local people who are feeling threatened by the power of the emperor and the Buddhists who are working together, trying to really extend their control. So Mara takes the side of the oppressed in this sense. So that's a very different view of Mara, but I think it's an interesting one.

James Shaheen: To quote you about Mara, you say, "Without Mara, the Buddha's personality loses all its relief and much of its fascination. This repression of the demon aspects of religion cannot hide the fact that Buddhism cannot be understood without the presence in the shadows of the great tempter, who is at the same time the great awakener."

Bernard Faure: Right, so Mara is a sting in a sense, like in some versions of Christianity, where Judas and the Christ were seen as being two actors in the play. There's this notion that somehow



it's a play, the good cop, bad cop, basically. You need a villain, and Mara plays the role of villain. But actually, in some corners, at least, we see Mara as working hand in hand with the Buddha to somehow create a good story. So Mara is like the evil twin of the Buddha in that sense. The idea is that somehow this thing we call enlightenment is not just looking at the good side of things. It encompasses all aspects of reality, including the evil side, so that the Buddha, if he's really the Buddha, encompasses both good and evil, both Shakyamuni and Mara, and that's really the view that developed later on in Mahayana, the Great Vehicle.

James Shaheen: We typically think of Mara as having been defeated, and while many narratives refer to his defeat, you point out that Mara may actually prove victorious in the end. Can you say more about Mara's return just before the Buddha's extinction and entrance into parinirvana?

Bernard Faure: If Mara had been defeated, we would be happy. There would be no problem. But obviously, as we know, evil still looms large. He's returning maybe in the form of some political figures we talk about every day now. Who knows? But yes, in the Buddha's story, you see him even after the Buddha's awakening. He still returns to haunt the Buddha. He doesn't accept defeat in this sense. After Buddha's nirvana, he returns and often deludes and leads the Buddhist monks into more delusion. He even can take the shape and the form of the Buddha. So the Buddha, if he had really won, he would have converted Mara. But he didn't. The Buddhists realize later on that there was a prime there that left some job so someone should have done it. And this is really what my friend John Strong has written about in his very beautiful book on Upagupta, one of the disciples of Buddha, who eventually converts Mara, we're told. But that's only one story among others. In most stories, Mara remains undefeated and still very active in our world today, supposedly.



James Shaheen: You also discuss how the life of the Buddha has been presented as a paradigm of Buddhist practice and that the Buddhist ideal is a kind of *imitatio Buddhaei*, like we think of the imitation of Christ. How does the life story of the Buddha become a model for practitioners?

Bernard Faure: I think maybe that's one of the most interesting aspects of this life of the Buddha, the fact that somehow it served as a template, as a model for later Buddhists. So all these moments we discuss in the life of Buddha became an essential source of rituals all over Asia. On the day of the birth of the Buddha, you have rituals where the baby Buddha is being washed. In China in the 14th century, there were really large-scale rituals with all kinds of automata. The enlightenment of Buddha, of course, is something that you find being rehearsed in every Buddhist temple. What they're trying to do is really imitate the life of Buddha. For instance, when we talk about sitting meditation, someone like Dogen in Kamakura, Japan, is saying, "Why do we sit cross legged? We are simply ritually imitating what the Buddha did. This is the way the Buddha sits. This is the best position for the Buddha." So it's not just to say it's convenient. No, it's really just a ritual limitation. That's why that position is so important. It's a ritual. Today in the West, we can sit on the armchair and meditate. In traditional views, this is not the right meditation.

Ordination is a replay of the Buddha leaving his family. In Southeast Asia today, when a kid wants to join the Buddhist order, it's played by his parents, and you have some people who play Mara who try to prevent him. He goes to the temple, he rides a horse, just like the Buddha did, and eventually cuts his hair just like the Buddha did, and so on. So all is being replayed. And of course, you have nirvana, as I describe in the later Japanese versions of nirvana, people who stage their death as a replay of the nirvana. Practically all the events of Buddha can find some kind of ritual replica. Any Buddhist ritual, for example, is replaying Mara's attack. The first thing a monk does in medieval Japan, in esoteric Buddhism, for example, Shingon, or Tendai, you draw an area of protection. You recite some mantras in order to protect yourself because you are basically going to be attacked by Mara. That's really the ritual before the real ritual. It's a



preliminary ritual. If you don't do that, you might lose your mind. They do believe that somehow you are taking a risk. It's like going out on the beach and dropping some acid. You don't know if you're going to come back. You need to be protected somehow. The life of the Buddha and the story of Mara give you this kind of prediction.

James Shaheen: So far, we've focused on the biography of the historical Buddha or the story of the Buddha, but with the rise of Mahayana, the focus shifts toward metaphysical buddhas. Can you say more about the development of this transcendental or posthuman Buddha?

Bernard Faure: The Buddha is one of the first posthumans: the true human, the perfected human, or the posthuman. The idea that the Buddha was not an ordinary being came to prevail. The idea that he had died from diarrhea, from indigestion, as some stories tell us, stories which actually historians saw as proof that he was a historical figure. They would have extricated that, but somehow they didn't, and now we know this is really what happened. Of course, it could also have been produced by people who wanted to make the Buddha look more human, more historical. This image of the Buddha didn't please people, so they started really saying it wasn't a real death. There's the same thing in some currents of Christianity, that Christ didn't really die on the cross, that was just again the play stage for the benefit of people. The real Buddha doesn't suffer like that. The real Buddha is no longer subject to karma. You had all these stories where the Buddha, because of his past karma, had to go through nine torments—very minor, but still, you don't expect the Buddha to suffer from such human failings.

Gradually, the idea of a suprahuman Buddha developed very early on in India. But later on, with the development of Mahayana from the 1st to 5th century of the Common Era, this Buddha was just a manifestation of a higher Buddha. This was a Buddha for our world, but there are many other such Buddhas, and then you start seeing other Buddhas appear like Amitabha or Amida in Japan, the healing Buddha, Bhaisajyaguru, and so on and so forth. And then in esoteric Buddhism, now, the "historical Buddha" is only the lower manifestation of a power called the



Buddha which is said to have three bodies: a transcendental body, an intermediary body, which is Buddha as we see in Mahayana, and then the physical body, which is then the historical Buddha. That perception increased more and more as Mahayana developed into Vajrayana, or esoteric Buddhism, and then we have all kinds of Buddhas, definitely. So now the Buddha is no longer someone who has disappeared from the world in the distant past. He can always be present in our world. He can appear, and his manifestations often take the form of what we call bodhisattvas, like Guan Yin, Avalokiteshvara, in Sanskrit, or Kannon in Japanese, or Manjushri and others.

James Shaheen: He also continues his existence through relics. You write about the central role that relics played in Buddhism and its spread through Asia. So how did relics figure into the Buddha's posthumous biography or story, and how do they function as eternally living Buddhas?

Bernard Faure: Right, that's an interesting topic. We usually associate relics in Christianity with relics of Christ or relics of the cross and things like that. They're supposed to have magical powers. Peter Brown many years ago wrote this book on the cult of the saints showing why people wanted to be buried near the graves of Christian saints because they believed that these graves had power because of their remains. Same thing in Islam, of course. You have cults of the saints. So Buddhism was not so different at first, but soon, the relics developed into something very strange, you would say. They are seen as the manifestations of a Buddha in a different form. It's not just his remains, but they are still the Buddha in the capsule, as it were, in a nutshell, literally. So these relics then started attracting pilgrims, of course, believers and so on and so forth, and eventually the relics became associated with another symbol, which is very predominant in Mahayana Buddhism from Tibet to Japan, namely the so-called wish-fulfilling jewel, the *cintamani*. So we find texts attributed to Nagarjuna around the 3rd century saying clearly that the relics of Buddha are the *cintamani* jewel.

From then on, the belief that the relics equaled the jewel developed, and it really reached its most extreme development in medieval Japan. And now we don't actually need to see real



relics anymore. Relics or the jewel become a purely imaginary reality. We're told that some jewels or some relics have been buried in some cave, and these places became important pilgrimage centers. The cintamani jewel and the relics became in a sense seen as a symbol of fecundity. The relics are found when you burn a corpse. Not any corpse—my corpse will probably leave no relics at all. But the relics of Buddha first but also Buddhist saints later on, and this is still very much believed today in East Asia, will leave little bits of fragments, which cannot be destroyed for some reason, harder than diamonds, and having magic powers. So these relics then became the symbol of procreation and fertility, life. They became the source of life. It's what overcomes death. This is what is left after death, and it's still alive, as it were. It is seen as creating endless life. And this, for instance, in medieval Japan became incredibly central, and you have many Buddhist deities developing around the cult of relics and the cult of the jewel. If you look at the Buddhist iconography from Tibet to Japan, you'll see this jewel everywhere. Of course, Buddhism itself is called the three jewels, the Buddha's teaching, but this image of the jewel and of the relics is incredibly prevalent in most of his teachings. The Buddha survives in a different form.

James Shaheen: The form he took in Europe in the 19th century was what you call the scientific Buddha. Can you say more about the development of this particular myth of the Buddha?

Bernard Faure: Don Lopez has this really interesting tongue-in-cheek explanation, saying the old Buddha was replaced by a young Buddha. The young Buddha, which we believe to be the same but is actually a very different kind of being, was born around the mid-19th century, which was when the first Buddhist texts were translated by Burnouf and others. This Buddha, we are told, is a rational man. He's a philosopher. He's a kind of British gentleman, really. He has all these qualities that we would attribute to the British gentlemen. He knows everything. And he practices meditation in order to find the truth behind the veil of appearance. So basically, this is what scientists do, and Lopez has very well described this. So from thereon, we have this



discourse, which, as we know, has taken very modern forms not long ago with the Dalai Lama, a dialogue between Buddhists and scientists. Interestingly enough, what Lopez shows is that at first Buddhism was not seen like that. The main interlocutor of Western science was first seen in Hinduism. But for some reason Hinduism lost its seat there and was replaced by Buddhism. Buddhism became a scientific religion, and the Buddha became a scientific Buddha, and he still is and probably has a long life ahead of him.

James Shaheen: He seems to have other manifestations too, for instance, depictions of the Buddha as they continue to evolve and expand into new art forms. You talk about manga and science fiction in this regard.

Bernard Faure: It's a little bit iconoclastic, maybe, from some people's point of view, but once you admit that somehow the life of the Buddha is a kind of construction, a kind of story, there is no reason to privilege, therefore, some stories over others. That was my main point in my critique of historicism: the idea that if we're trying to get back to the real Buddha, then we want to get to the earliest text, the simplest texts, and therefore that's in India. But if we admit it's essentially a story, then other stories in other places and other cultures might be just as interesting. So the story of the Buddha in Southeast Asia or in China or in Japan, or in Korea might just have to tell us as much. And if you continue that line of thought, why limit ourselves to Buddhist texts? The Buddhists were faithfully, genuinely inventing stories. Now, imagination is not the privilege of the Buddhists. Everyone can imagine stories. And if there are values conveyed by such stories, then the stories are good. So for example, even manga, like *Buddha* by Tezuka Osamu, the Japanese manga writer, gives you a sense of the real values of Buddhism and compassion and so on and so forth. That, to me, is much more interesting than a very dry scholarly account of the life of a Buddha as historical reality because that kind of literary genre of manga, fiction, or science fiction conveys ideas and values and principles that are really at the

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heart of Buddhism. So there's no reason to shun them because they are not the truly orthodox authenticated stories of the Buddhist tradition itself.

James Shaheen: I guess the stories have been told throughout the history of Buddhism, and that teaches us something about the creativity of the Buddhist tradition.

Bernard Faure: Every tradition, of course, is creative, and that's what makes it alive. But Buddhism has definitely been very creative in that respect, and that's what makes it also so appealing to most of the people around the world who call themselves Buddhists. I do find that this is really the main value through literature. Literary genres, and not just high literature, can really convey really interesting ideas about Buddhism. I mentioned this book by Roger Zelazny, *Lord of Light*, which puts the life of the Buddha in the context of future civilization on a different planet, but the story is still basically the same, and it conveys the same ideas.

James Shaheen: I'm not comparing the *Lotus Sutra* to manga or contemporary science fiction, but it is this imaginative explosion. This is a real takeoff from the ground when we read the *Lotus Sutra*. It's a real Baroque unfolding of this wild imagination. So this has been going on all along.

Bernard Faure: Right, exactly.

James Shaheen: Throughout the book, you resist easy interpretations or reductions to simple morals, and you write, "Is it possible to avoid all reductionism and to preserve the story's disturbing strangeness? Can we simply savor it rather than hasten to interpret it?" Can you say more about how you came to savor these stories and linger in their ambiguity and mystery?

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Bernard Faure: First, I don't think it's possible to avoid reductionism. I don't claim to be like the objective scholar who finally comes with the truth about this. At least I don't take this as being the ultimate. I do like to read a good story. Buddhism has a lot of good stories to tell. Many stories that I don't find so interesting in Buddhism are those that are usually put forward by scholars. They have this moralistic tone, right? They are didactic, and the Buddha often ends up being so boringly didactic. But sometimes you find there's something else going on there, and the stories, you don't know why it attracts you. The *Lotus Sutra* is a good example. On the face of it, the stories are rather ridiculous. You have the Buddha coming to places, a stupa comes out like a rocket from the earth, and the door opens and there's a Buddha waiting in it, and Buddha gets in it, and then they take off for outer space. What is this? Is this some kind of science fiction story? But for some reason, these stories work, and they have worked for centuries. So that's enough for me. As a historian, I want to understand what made people really find this interesting, and now because we have become so smart and rational and Westernized, we have a hard time understanding that. It seems like the first step towards some kind of awakening would be to try and understand what people in the past have felt like and seen already in the stories, and the first thing to do is to somehow get nonjudgmental and just take the story at face value.

James Shaheen: Bernard Faure, it's been a pleasure. Thank you so much for joining us. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of Bernard's book, *The Thousand and One Lives of the Buddha*. Thank you, Bernard.

Bernard Faure: Thank you so much.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Bernard Faure. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is

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produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening.