

BOOK REVIEW

Lambert Schmithausen, *Maitrī and Magic: Aspects of the Buddhist Attitude toward the Dangerous in Nature*. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, Sitzungsberichte, 652. Band. Vienna 1997. 76 pp.

This charming small monograph is as consummate a production as one would expect from Professor Schmithausen. While it is written with current concerns about the environment in mind, it in no way deviates from the highest standards of philological scholarship. If this is “socially engaged” Buddhism, let us have more of it.

The book is extremely “reader-friendly”, in that the author concludes with a two-page summary which surely no reviewer could improve on. He examines a small group of texts, mainly the *Upasenasūtra* (originally Sanskrit) and the Pāli *Khandha-paritta*, to explore Buddhist attitudes to dangerous wild animals, particularly snakes; he also looks at Vedic antecedents, to elucidate the distinction between making (or seeking) a pact with an animal and treating it with a kindness which is completely disinterested. The latter is a Buddhist innovation.

However, Buddhist attitudes are varied and complex. “Meditators may take the dangers of the wilderness as a chance to explore the roots of fear” and “intensify their spiritual practice” (p. 67). On the other hand, their wish to preserve their lives may be met by resorting to the older tradition of making a pact of mutual non-violence. “Though . . . friendliness tends to become regarded as an autonomous means of protection, irrespective of the reaction of the other side . . . there is . . . some doubt about its protective effectivity. At any rate, it is often supplemented or even replaced by other protective devices like commemoration of the Buddha or the Three Jewels, or appealing to their (or other powerful beings’) protective power, or ‘tapping’ this power by means of truth magic” (ibid.) The magic in “(proto-)Tantric” texts may also revert to the Vedic use of magical violence. Luckily Prof. Schmithausen reassures us, such magic is “of questionable efficacy”.

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