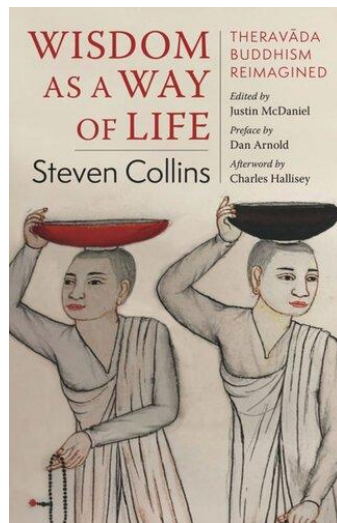


Book Review

Wisdom as a Way of Life: Theravāda Buddhism Reimagined

By Steven Collins, lxii + 236 P, 17.38 \$. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020

ISBN: 978-023119207



Rahul Yadav

Research scholar, Department of Philosophy, University of Dehi

Steven Collins' *Wisdom as a Way of Life: Theravāda Buddhism Reimagined* offers an innovative and comprehensive exploration of Theravāda Buddhist thought through the narrative lens of the Jātaka tales. Collins, a distinguished scholar in Buddhist studies, expertly navigates the complexities of wisdom (*paññā*) as expressed in these tales, arguing that they provide a richer, more human-centered understanding of Buddhist ethics than the systematic doctrinal works often emphasized in modern scholarship. The book is organized into two main parts: "Wisdom" and "Practices of Self," with each section building on the central argument that narrative texts form the heart of the Pali tradition (Collins, 2020, p. 85-198).



© The Author(s). Published by The Philosophy and Religion Society of Thailand

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International License.

Analyzing Arguments

In *Wisdom as a Way of Life: Theravāda Buddhism Reimagined*, Steven Collins introduces the concepts of "Dhamma 1" and "Dhamma 2" as two critical modes of thought that together provide a fuller understanding of Theravāda Buddhism. Dhamma 1, or systematic thought, is represented by the Abhidhamma literature, which offers a synchronic, doctrinally pure view of Buddhist teachings. This mode provides a rigorous and philosophical analysis of reality, time, and self, seeking to offer a complete and coherent understanding of Buddhist principles. Through texts like Vinaya Pitaka and Abhidhamma Pitaka, Dhamma 1 delves into the impersonal factors (dhammas) that constitute existence. It presents a timeless perspective of the Buddha's teachings that is both detailed and systematic. On the other hand, Dhamma 2, or narrative thought, is explored through the Jātaka stories, which are diachronic in nature, focusing on sequences of events and the lived experiences of individuals. Dhamma 2 highlights the role of "actants" — characters in stories that fill narrative functions — and emphasizes the interplay between Buddhist ideals and the practical realities of life. It dramatizes the tensions between the renunciant quest for Nirvana and the demands of everyday life, offering insight into how Theravāda Buddhists relate to their ideals. This mode often incorporates elements of comedy, romance, and animal fables, making the Buddhist teachings more relatable and accessible. Collins argues that these two modes of thought are not separate but complementary, each offering a different but necessary perspective on Buddhist wisdom. By studying both Dhamma 1 and Dhamma 2 together, one gains a more nuanced and holistic understanding of Theravāda Buddhism, encompassing both its philosophical depth and practical application in daily life.

Methodology

Collins employs a multifaceted methodology that encompasses philological analysis, literary criticism, and comparative religious studies. This interdisciplinary approach effectively unpacks the nuanced meanings of key Pali terms related to wisdom, such as *paññā* and *paññā* (Collins, 2020, p. 8-10). For example, his discussion of the translation challenges surrounding these terms reflects a deep engagement with both linguistic and conceptual aspects of the texts, enabling a richer understanding of their implications. By closely reading and contextualizing

specific Jātaka tales, Collins provides concrete examples that bolster his broader arguments about the nature of Buddhist wisdom.

Theoretical Framework

In constructing his analysis, Collins draws on various theoretical perspectives, including narrative theory, civilizational analysis, and comparative philosophy. His engagement with scholars like Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault enhances the discussion of "practices of the self," illuminating aspects of Buddhist ascetic and contemplative traditions. The theoretical framework employed in this book is particularly innovative, as it bridges the gap between textual studies and lived religious practice. In *Wisdom as a Way of Life*, Collins delves into the "Pali imaginaire"—the rich, imaginative framework in which Pali narratives like the Jātakas are situated, arguing that these stories serve as both mirrors and molders of Theravāda cultural values. Through compelling analysis, Collins illustrates how these texts go beyond mere didactic tales to become vehicles for profound ethical reflection (Collins, 2020, p. 171-196). One standout example is the Vessantara Jātaka, where Prince Vessantara embodies radical generosity, giving away his wealth, his kingdom, and even his children. This story doesn't simply teach charity as a basic virtue but elevates it to a supererogatory ideal, encouraging audiences to see extreme acts of selflessness as aspirational, even sacred. Collins contends that such narratives are essential in fostering a shared moral identity, as they not only celebrate compassion, generosity, and renunciation but invite both laypeople and monastics to explore these virtues as personal and societal ideals (Collins, 2020, p. 25-83). Through his framework, Collins reveals how the "Pali imaginaire" is central to understanding how Theravāda Buddhism communicates its core values, inspiring practitioners to embody them in transformative ways.

Comparing to Other Works

Collins' *Wisdom as a Way of Life* builds on his earlier works, particularly *Selfless Persons* (1982) and *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (1998). While these previous volumes focused more on systematic Buddhist thought, the current book represents a notable shift toward emphasizing narrative and literary aspects of the tradition. In comparison to other

influential works, such as Richard Gombrich's *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History*, Collins' text adopts a more literary and imaginative approach to understanding Buddhist ethics and practice. Unlike studies that primarily emphasize doctrinal texts, *Wisdom as a Way of Life* highlights the importance of stories in shaping Buddhist culture and values.

Evaluating Strengths and Weaknesses

One of the primary strengths of Collins' work lies in its nuanced and multifaceted approach to Buddhist wisdom. He successfully demonstrates the richness and complexity of Theravāda thought as articulated in the Jātaka tales, providing vivid illustrations of how wisdom operates in various contexts. The author's ability to navigate the ethical ambiguities present in these narratives contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of Buddhist ethics. However, a potential weakness is the book's focus on elite textual traditions, which may not fully capture the diversity of Buddhist practice across different social strata. Additionally, Critics might argue that by overemphasizing the social, political, and cultural contexts of early Buddhism, Collins risks obscuring its broader, universal teachings, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. These core principles, while influenced by their historical setting, possess philosophical universality. Focusing too much on context may fragment Buddhism, making it harder to appreciate its enduring spiritual and ethical teachings.

Personal Reflection

Collins' work challenges readers to reconsider their understanding of Buddhist ethics and practice. His emphasis on the significance of narrative in shaping religious thought and culture provides a valuable perspective for anyone studying comparative religion or philosophy. The insights offered regarding the intricate relationship between ideal and practical ethics are particularly thought-provoking and resonate beyond the confines of Buddhist studies. By illustrating how narratives inform ethical decision-making, Collins encourages readers to reflect on the broader implications of storytelling in various cultural contexts.

Recommendations

Wisdom as a Way of Life is highly recommended for scholars and advanced students of Buddhist studies, comparative religion, and Asian philosophy. It is particularly valuable for those interested in narrative approaches to religious ethics and the relationship between textual traditions and living practices. While some background knowledge of Buddhism is helpful, Collins' clear and engaging writing style renders the book accessible to a broader academic audience interested in the intersections of literature, ethics, and religious thought. The insights gleaned from Collins' analysis offer fertile ground for further exploration of the role of narrative in shaping moral values across diverse cultural landscapes.

In conclusion, Steven Collins' *Wisdom as a Way of Life: Theravāda Buddhism Reimagined* is an enlightening contribution to the field of Buddhist studies. By illuminating the richness of the Jātaka tales and their implications for understanding wisdom in the Theravāda tradition, Collins not only enhances our comprehension of Buddhist ethics but also invites us to appreciate the transformative power of narrative in shaping human experience and aspiration.