

Book Review – The Splendid Vision, Reading a Buddhist Sutra

Cohen, Richard S. *The Splendid Vision: Reading a Buddhist Sutra by Richard S. Cohen (2012-05-01)*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1869.

Ancient writings are almost always difficult for modern readers. From our perspective, authors from the past use unfamiliar words, unclear sentences, and foreign concepts. Their very ways of looking at life differ greatly from our own. Ancients had community that we can only dream of, and we have dominion over the natural world that they never could have imagined. Everyone who has ever tried to teach the Bible, especially the Old Testament, can testify to the fact that building a bridge between our culture, language, time, space, and that of the ancient Israelites is a challenge.

Reading Buddhist sutras is no exception. In *The Splendid Vision, Reading a Buddhist Sutra*, Richard S. Cohen tries to make this sutra understandable to modern Western readers. Cohen is well qualified for the task, serving as an associate professor of South Asian religious literature and director of the Program for the Study of Religion at the University of California at San Diego.

The Splendid Vision, a Mahayana sutra with six monologues, was composed some 1400 years ago, presumably from earlier teachings of the Buddha himself. *The Splendid Vision* is not considered highly powerful or even influential compared to the Lotus and Diamond Sutras. Manuscripts containing this sutra were discovered buried in a stupa near the town of Gilgit in Pakistan's Himalayas in 1931. There are three extant versions – the Gilgat version, a Chinese translation with one monologue, and a Tibetan translation. The Gilgat version is especially interesting because the names of two people are written in, Shulkshina and Shulivujna, the man and the woman who the incantations in the sutra were supposed to protect. Imagine the two of them sitting in a building, surrounded by friends and neighbors, and listening to a Buddhist monk read this sutra over them in the hopes of curing a disease or meeting whatever other need they had. Would the power conferred by the interplay of the monk, the couple, the observers, and the words of the sutra itself be enough to meet their need? Cohen's translation of *The Splendid Vision* is unremarkable.

The interpretive essay is the interesting part of the book. Cohen discusses the “cool factor”, an indefinable yet real value that he places “somewhere between beauty and truth.”¹ The cool factor differs from person to person about any topic, in part because it is impossible for anyone, religious or secular, to know themselves fully. The cool factor is also similar within individuals over time and also between individuals because humans have inherent needs for self-consistency and for consistency within their groups.

Presentism is reading the present into the past, such as when modern moralists judge ancient actions with modern standards, and modern philosophers put ancient thought into modern categories. Cohen's earlier point, that no man fully knows himself, contradicts with the fundamental tenet of Buddhism, that the Buddha, and his most advanced followers, fully knew themselves; they were enlightened. Cohen suggests that other religions have the same issue,² although Christians don't say that anyone except Jesus, God Himself, was perfect (as in 100% enlightened), Muslims don't say that Mohammad was perfect, and Jews don't say that Moses was perfect. Cohen asks “how does a sutra work?” and then defends his use of this modern question in analyzing *The Splendid Vision*.

To answer the question, “how does a sutra work?” the author considers *The Splendid Vision* as scripture. Using the Protestant Reformation as a reference point, he concludes that scriptures in any religion are regarded in the following ways by the community that holds them:³

¹ Richard S. Cohen, *The Splendid Vision: Reading a Buddhist Sutra by Richard S. Cohen (2012-05-01)* New York: Columbia University Press, 1869), 49.

².Cohen, 56.

³ Cohen, 68-69.

1. Possessed of exceptional, universal, or superhuman value
2. An authoritative source of information about the world. The community will then interpret their scriptures in such a way that maintains the perception of its elemental accuracy.
3. Experientially fraught – the community expects the scriptures to be followed, to be done; not just read or heard.

Having identified what scripture is, Cohen approaches *The Splendid Vision* as scripture in his definition. The sutra begins “thus I have heard”, with the speaker being Ananda, the servant of the Buddha, and the source being the Buddha himself. Thus *The Splendid Vision* claims the authority of the Buddha and thus universal value beyond normal human experience. The phrase “thus I have heard” also suggests that Ananda heard these truths in a specific place and at a specific time; two more requirements for credibility.

The American experience of “challenge authority” notwithstanding, people need authority. They want to believe that what they are doing is morally right and meaningful in some fundamental way. Cohen states that “authority is crucial because, in the long run, might alone does not make right.”⁴ Another key to authority is otherness – being different in a way that is perceived as positive is an important aspect of authority. By definition, religious claims “are the means by which certain objects, places, speakers, and speech-acts are invested with an authority, the source of which lies outside the human.”⁵ Biologically, psychologically, and emotionally, we rely on things outside of ourselves to give us legitimacy and closure. These things are often other people, but can be ideas such as religion. Much as we like to believe that we are autonomous, living our own lives and going our own way, we are not. As social animals, we don’t really want to be. Scriptures provide the metanarrative, the overarching myth, to order human lives.

The final characteristic of any scripture is that the commands therein are supposed to be followed; the play is supposed to be performed in the lives of those who follow that scripture. Unlike classic acting, which requires actors, audience, and script, religious “acting” has no script telling the actors what to do and where to stand at each moment. The religious script only includes general principles and requires the actors to make up their lines and movements on the fly. The audience is not ultimately other people but the deity (or not). Scripture is about doing, not only seeing.

Why do people follow such scriptures? For the reasons noted above, such as personal consistency and legitimacy, but also for personal gain. Buddhists believed that the yakshinis (earthbound deities) in *The Splendid Vision* could make women fertile, harvests abundant, and villages safe from disaster. They acted their part of the sutra for such material benefits. Man will typically do everything he can to accomplish a goal, but will seek help from others when he cannot prevail.

Cohen suggests that *The Splendid Vision* “works” as scripture, and perhaps worked in the lives of Shulkshina and Shulivujna, by being regarded as having exceptional value, by being an authority that governed their lives, and by being a way to accomplish goals that they could not attain on their own.

Conclusion

Richard Cohen’s *The Splendid Vision, Reading a Buddhist Sutra*, is fascinating. The book is a good read for pastors, teachers, and others who are willing to look at religion through the eyes of the non-religious (or at least non-Christian). It has a secular rather than religious viewpoint but intrigues the mind. Cohen implies that Protestant scripture and Buddhist or other scriptures are equivalent; an implication of equivalency that would generate hostility in every religious camp.

Cohen also suggests that the power of scriptures lies only in the attitude of the people who follow them. The Bible, for one, certainly has power because of the attitudes and actions of Christians. However, if God exists, as Christians believe, then His word has power in ways beyond even our most thoughtful understanding. I wonder if Cohen understands, or will accept, that?

⁴ Cohen, 93.

⁵ Cohen, 96.

