

REVIEW:

Living Buddhism: Mind, Self, and Emotion in a Thai Community

Julia Cassaniti

Joanna Cook
University College London

Living Buddhism: Mind, Self, and Emotion in a Thai Community weaves the threads of formalized research methods, participant observation and personal relationships in a beautifully written argument for local psychological models of health and well-being. The book focuses on cultural psychology in Mae Jaeng, a town of approximately fifty households, north of Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand. The core research themes of emotion, attachment and causality are brought vividly to life through Cassaniti's account of the community.

In its totality, *Living Buddhism* is an argument for the value of good participant observation. The findings of a thorough and complex formalized research methodology, which occupied the bulk of the fieldwork, stand as structural support for research insights revealed through the human drama of the lives in which Cassaniti participated. In order to investigate the nature of emotion, responsibility and 'heart' in Thailand, Cassaniti established an extensive interview schedule with Buddhist and Christian communities. In so doing she is able to develop a theory of a local psychological model of health and well-being, revealing that attitudes and emotions in Mae Jaeng are socially constructed and embedded. However, the social values of acceptance, cultivating a cool heart, and 'making the heart' that she extrapolates from formalized research methods are writ large in an account of emotional struggles of the two families as they engage with everyday life. In the development of this narrative, Cassaniti elegantly draws out a model of personal agency informed by local religious ideas, that is, a 'living Buddhism'.

Through our introduction to the families of Goy, Gaew and Sen, and the author's own pedagogic development as a neophyte fieldworker we learn about the Buddhist concept of impermanence (*anicca*). Cassaniti argues that people incorporate teachings of impermanence into their everyday lives, and that these teachings take on a positive emotional tone, relayed through socially valued patterns of emotional calmness, and pointing to what she refers to as 'moralized affective orientations' (p. 31). In the first chapter, we learn that 'cool-heartedness' (*jai yen*) is a central component of a 'local lexicon of emotion' (p. 43). Cool-heartedness is a recurring theme in interview responses and, for people in Mae Jaeng, religious activity is often associated with its cultivation and practice. The focus on the metaphoric temperature of the heart is extended in the following chapter, in a consideration of prevalent and valued emotions. Cassaniti makes a persuasive case for a theory of practice-based affect and provides examples of an emotional orientation to coolness, which, when lacking, may lead to social discomfort. In a comparison between different registers of emotional display, cool-heartedness is revealed to be a religiously and culturally specific psychological orientation to emotion. Rather than a form of coldness, distance or denial, coolness is shown to be a practice of 'crafting a calm affective equilibrium' (p. 78).

In the next chapter, the positive effects of acceptance, nonattachment and awareness of impermanence are elaborated through the idiom of 'making the heart' (*tham jai*). Through a well written ethnographic account of the lives of Goy, Gaew and Sen, 'making the heart' is framed as a practice of emotional acceptance in active affective cultivation. Cassaniti considers the affective and intentional dynamics of merit making practices, locating emotional experience in gendered hierarchies. She argues that 'the process of crafting calmness through the letting go of attachments is a way that people in Mae

Jaeng practice training the mind' (p. 115). Nonattachment is ethnographically represented as a practical orientation that cultivates and reflects attention to impermanence. This is emphasized in the following chapter, in which Sen's relationship with alcohol and withdrawal from social interaction are related explicitly to his inability to 'make his heart' and his desire 'to stay, for things to be the ways they were' (p. 122) following the death of his grandmother. He appears as the perfect and tragic antithesis of the cultural value of cool-heartedness. As the narrative progresses, Sen becomes increasingly withdrawn and bleary, drinking bags of cheap rice-wine in place of food, while those around him work to 'make their hearts' in the face of his decline. In the final substantive chapter, Sen's mental and physical circumstances are desolate. Cassaniti finds him an emaciated recluse huddled in his room with purple, swollen legs and a bloated stomach. In the familial engagement with Sen's bleak prognosis, practices of letting go and making the heart are poignantly associated with karma and causality as Sen and those around him make sense of and respond to his illness. This highly descriptive account of personal struggle with alcohol dependency, emotional intimacy, and familial responsibility provides a compelling narrative bed for the author's theoretical focus on emotion. It is a powerfully written, indeed 'heart-wrenching', account.

In crafting this portrait, Cassaniti pitches the work as offering an alternative scholarship to abstract doctrinal readings of religious ideals. Her argument, by which I am wholly persuaded, is that scholars might fruitfully attend to lived practices and the ways that people make sense of religious ideas in personal and cultural ways. However, in making this argument she sets herself in opposition to two related positions. First, she highlights the fact that distinctions between 'high' and 'low' Buddhism structured much early scholarship in the anthropology of Buddhism, and suggests that scholarly portrayals of Buddhism are 'lacking the nuances of what it means to live ideas in practice' (p.24). And, second, she seeks to move away from an idea of authority residing in religious virtuosi and focus instead on ordinary people as a source of knowledge about religious tradition (p. 182). This emphasis is understandable as part of a narrative which seeks to account for the significance of Buddhist ideas in daily life but it rather does a disservice to the anthropological literature, which in theoretical and ethnographic focus is significantly more heterogeneous and nuanced than this representation suggests.

Nonetheless, one of the striking achievements of the book is the multiple ways in which its core themes are addressed. Cassaniti's comparative account based on participant observation and ethnographically oriented interviews in Buddhist and Christian communities, makes a strong argument for culturally specific psychological orientations to emotions and health. Reflections on her own emotional responses to the unfolding drama of personal relationships act as a tool for leading the reader into the ambivalent nature of a lived experience of emotion, impermanence and responsibility. However, to my mind, the clearest insight into the ways in which the complexities of 'making the heart' are articulated in the 'culturally complicated psychology of everyday life' (p. 32) comes through a powerful ethnographic account of 'moralised affective engagement' in the lives of people in Mae Jaeng. *Living Buddhism* is a significant contribution to the anthropology of Thailand, medical anthropology and cross-cultural psychology. It is a moving ethnography with a lot of heart.