

LAND OF BEAUTIFUL VISION:
MAKING A BUDDHIST SACRED PLACE IN NEW ZEALAND
by Sally McAra

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Reviewed by
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Land of Beautiful Vision (LoBV) is an extraordinary achievement: firstly because it is rare for any New Zealand ethnography to be published by a major international academic publisher and secondly because, rarer still in an age when even the best PhD theses struggle to find a publisher, it is based on an MA thesis (in Anthropology at the University of Auckland). Fortunately it is also a good book, which anyone teaching anthropology in this part of the world would do well to consider as a text for courses in the anthropology of religion, New Zealand ethnography or even introductory anthropology.

It is published as part of a UHP series entitled ‘Topics in Contemporary Buddhism’, in which new developments of Buddhist practice in modern(ising), global(ised) and cosmopolitan settings in a number of countries are examined, often ethnographically. Buddhism is less prone to missionary aspirations than some other ‘world religions’, but it certainly shares with them a universalist vision and claim to universal relevance based on its founder’s core teachings as to the condition of the human mind. While it has ironically almost disappeared in its original home in north India, it spread rapidly north, east, south and southeast to become a major religion in all but the western parts of Asia. The story of this spread is one of adaptation to and accommodation with existing systems of belief and ritual practice. The most famous metaphor for this is in Tibet, where the pioneering Buddhist teachers from India had to ‘subdue’ and make peace with the spirits of the land with which the existing shamanistic religion was concerned, before Buddhism could take root and spread. Contemporary Tibetan Buddhism is still seen as an amalgam of these traditions.

During the colonial period, Buddhism began a second stage of expansion, as western spiritual seekers became interested in its universal messages. In the late twentieth century, this interest blossomed into a major religious export industry as first southern Theravada, then Japanese Zen and finally Tibetan Mahayana teachers were brought to the west by their western disciples where they established communities and teaching centres of various kinds. A major issue in these modern developments has been finding an appropriate and workable balance between maintenance of core traditions and adaptation to new social, linguistic and cultural environments.

LoBV is a local ethnographic study of one such development, during the 1990s, of a rural retreat centre in Coromandel (the title *LoBV* is a translation of the name *Sudarshonaloka*, of the centre), by members of an international, consciously 'western' Buddhist movement. As such it may be read as variously, an ethnography of religion, of globalisation, of rural New Zealand and particularly of how they come together in a specific situation. The main focus of the book is, not surprisingly, the working out in practice of the universalist vision and global history(ies) of Buddhism(s) with very local realities, material and cultural/symbolic, of place, land and community.

It begins with an excellent summary of the twentieth century globalisation of Buddhism, the specific movement Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) and then of both in New Zealand. Extensive endnotes provide useful background and references to these discussions. This leads to the core issues of place, the spiritual meanings of land and the 'indigenisation' of 'foreign' religious traditions. In the New Zealand context these appear in the form of tensions with both tangata whenua relationships with land and emerging Pa-keha land-based spiritualities centred around wilderness, ecological and conservation values. These are introduced in the third chapter 'A Spiritual Home' and explored ethnographically in the following one 'Unsettling Place'. The next chapter focuses on the design and construction of a *stupa* (a distinctive Buddhist monument) which is at once a personification of a founding spiritual preceptor of the movement and a means to 'embed Buddhism into the soil and channel or pacify local "energy"' (p.123). This is followed by an attempt to pull all these threads together into a (somewhat structuralist) theoretical synthesis drawing on sources including Victor Turner, Igor Kopytoff and Sherry Ortner. The final chapter returns to a nice aspect running through the whole text: an understated reflexivity which regularly reminds the reader of the ambivalences of McAra's position both as Buddhist believer and sceptical social scientist as well as her role in the construction of layers of interpretation of the interpretations of her fellow Buddhist/informants.

LoBV is generally well written, in an accessible style, with an easy movement between ethnographic description, wider contextualisation and theoretical reflection. The illustrations, mostly photographs by the author, are well-chosen and clear. Production is up to UHP's usual high standard, with very few typos, a good index, elegant design, sweet-smelling paper and binding that works. The only improvement might be a larger font for those with ageing optics. In summary, Sally McAra and UHP are to be congratulated on a fine book that should be in every library in New Zealand and on many private shelves as well.