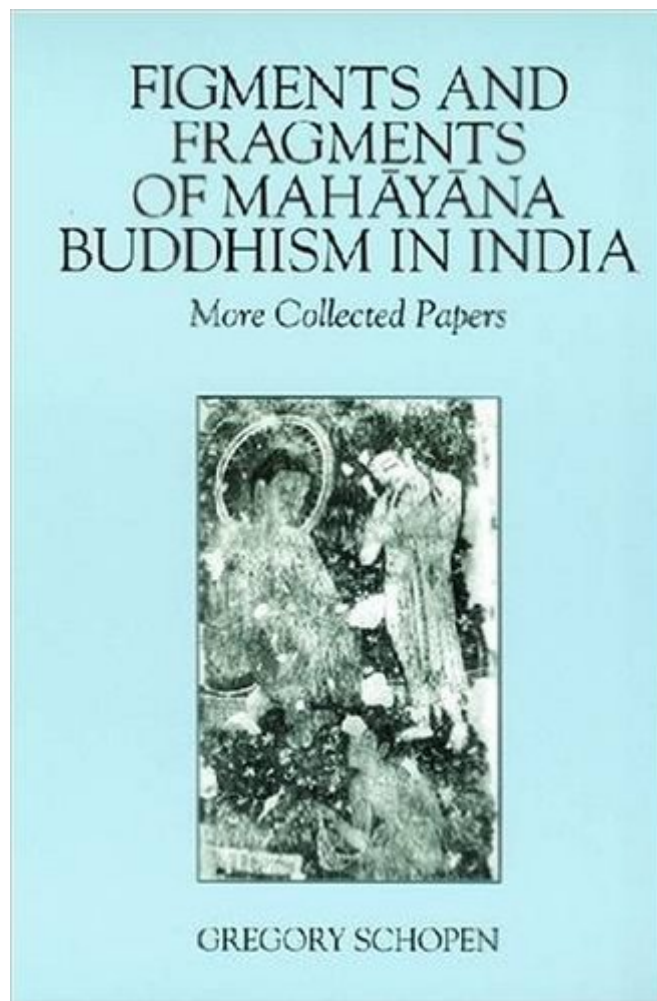


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Figments And Fragments Of Mahayana Buddhism In India: More Collected Papers (Studies In The Buddhist Traditions)



Synopsis

In these articles, Gregory Schopen once again displays the erudition and originality that have contributed to a major shift in the way that Indian Buddhism is perceived, understood, and studied.

Book Information

Series: Studies in the Buddhist Traditions

Paperback: 404 pages

Publisher: University of Hawaii Press (May 1, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0824829174

ISBN-13: 978-0824829179

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.8 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.5 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (3 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #432,619 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #36 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Eastern > Buddhism > Mahayana](#) #83 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Religious Studies > Buddhism](#) #138 in [Books > History > World > Religious > Buddhism](#)

Customer Reviews

Having read and enjoyed Gregory Schopen's prior books ("Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks" and "Buddhist Monks and Business Matters"), I was pretty sure I'd like this one too, and for the most part I wasn't mistaken. Like its predecessors, "Figments and Fragments" again shows Schopen taking prevalent preconceived notions of Buddhism and re-examining them in the light of actual evidence--epigraphical and archaeological as well as textual--and often modifying them drastically if not downright exploding them. And although this usually results in debunking rarefied idealizations of Buddhism and in making some prior scholars look overly careless, this seems less Schopen's primary motivation than a genuine concern at unearthing and reconstructing what real live Buddhists actually thought and did religiously in India. And as usual he does all this with a certain wit, soft sarcasm, and sense of humor unusual and refreshing in scholarly studies of this level. This book is different from the others in that the primary focus is on traces of the Mahayana tradition in India, and one thing that comes through from the different articles is that such traces are pretty elusive--suggesting perhaps that Mahayana Buddhism was a fringe movement for much of Indian Buddhist history--and the fact that they happened to be prolific writers (or ghost-writers for the

Buddha) makes them loom larger to us than their actual institutional presence at the time warrants. This was really interesting. The book is also different in that it seems a bit more focused on texts than before, and I did find myself missing the bones and stones and business matters--especially when bibliographic detail got kind of heavy and thick. But oh well. I never want to warn people away from a book just because it's challenging (all the more reason to read it, I'd say) but anyone interested in this book should be forewarned that this is most decidedly NOT an introduction to Buddhism, Indian or Mahayana or otherwise. A fair amount of specialized knowledge is assumed by the author, and a general picture of Buddhist scholarship in the West is desirable to get what he is implicitly arguing against. Sometimes it seems that he is writing mainly with an audience of his peers and colleagues in mind, and he also has the annoying habit of leaving French and German quotes untranslated...again, as if his readers are assumed to be other high-level scholars for whom at least a reading knowledge of these languages would be required. A few times I even caught him doing this a bit with Sanskrit passages, which is maybe assuming too much on his part (I mean, come on!). The effort is worth it in the end, but one should keep this in mind before tackling this fine book. A few of the articles are here published for the first time (including a really good one analyzing the picture from Ajanta on the cover), but most have appeared before but in rare or hard-to-find journals, so it is great to have them all bundled together in an obtainable, accessible format.

Practices of Buddhism today quite probably bear little resemblance to the past. Scriptures are notoriously unreliable, written centuries after the facts described, written with flourish and re-written hundreds of times. Archaeology is the only way to pin scholarship to real history. Dr. Schopen is providing in his books the foundation for research for decades to come - if not longer.

This book is for the scholar, not the interested reader. It may come in handy some day but I was expecting something different.

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