

REVIEW

Peter Flügel, Renate Söhnen-Thieme and Heleen De Jonckheere (eds): *Pure Soul: The Jaina Spiritual Traditions*

London: Centre of Jaina Studies, 2023. ISBN 978 | 39994686 5.

Seema K. Chauhan

School of Religion, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

Email: seema.chauhan@tcd.ie

In Spring 2023, the Centre for Jaina Studies collaborated with the Kanji Swami Society to create an exhibition about Jainism in the Brunei Gallery at SOAS (14 April–24 June 2023). This exhibition, entitled “Pure Soul: The Jaina Spiritual Traditions”, introduced the wider public to the history of Jainism through visual media. How does a religion whose primary goal is to realize the immutable soul convey this soteriology through visual culture? Equally, how can the history of Jaina debates about the soul be charted through visual culture? Beyond these aims, the exhibition commemorated the twentieth anniversary of the Centre for Jaina Studies at SOAS, creating an immersive experience that is as stimulating for the academic scholar as it is for the wider public. A well-illustrated volume bearing the same title, *Pure Soul: The Jaina Spiritual Traditions*, accompanies this exhibition. *Pure Soul* collates 22 entries from academics who contextualize the artefacts on display in the exhibition and historicize the key philosophies, debates, and thinkers that the collection showcases.

The 22 contributions to *Pure Soul* can be divided into four themes. Following Flügel’s opening chapter, which introduces Jaina ontologies of the soul – the debate that provokes diverse philosophical, textual, and material representations of the soul – the volume segues into entries on the following topics: 1) The history of Jaina texts (Balbir; Sheth; Cort (a)); 2) History and narrative (De Jonckheere; Söhnen-Thieme); 3) Visual culture (Barnard; Detige; Bothra; Villalobos; Flügel, Krüger and Shah; Pratibhāprajñā (a)); 4) Traditions that pertain to Kundakunda’s understanding of the soul (Balcerowicz; Cort (b); Petit; Fynes; Shah; Smith; Pratibhāprajñā (b); Flügel (b)). Taken together, these entries traverse the material history of Jainism from its inception in South Asia in the sixth century BCE to its articulation by communities across the world today. Each entry is richly adorned with photos of the items on display at the exhibition or from the writer’s private collection, making cutting-edge research both visually and intellectually accessible to the wider public.

That said, this intended audience of the volume should not deter the scholar of Jainism. Certain entries in *Pure Soul* synthesize findings from current research projects. In particular, the exhibition and accompanying volume forefront ideologies and traditions that pertain to Kundakunda. Kundakunda is a Digambara writer who remains an outlier in the history of Jaina philosophy because he understands the pure soul (*jīva*) as inactive and intrinsically distinct from karmic residue. This ontology leads to what scholars have dubbed a “mystical” approach to Jainism because it does not prescribe austere ascetic practices that are typically seen to hallmark Jainism. Rather, in Kundakunda’s eyes, if

the soul is already intrinsically karma-free, one should focus on realizing this pure point of view (*niścaya naya*) through gnosticism and devotion. Despite the uniqueness of Kundakunda's thought, little is known about the historical figure of Kundakunda. Even less is known of the ways in which Kundakunda's ideas inspired Jainas almost one thousand years later from the fifteenth century up until the present day. Therefore, the fact that *Pure Soul* dedicates seven entries to Kundakunda and thinkers who read Kundakunda's works comes as a welcome contribution to the field of Jaina studies.

Among the most notable contributions to Jaina mysticism in this volume is Piotr Balcerowicz's entry on Kundakunda himself – or more accurately, themselves. In “Kundakunda a ‘collective author’: Deconstruction of a myth” (pp. 118–25) Balcerowicz outlines the evidence we have for reconstructing the historical life and philosophical position of Kundakunda. Such evidence suggests that “Kundakunda” is not a single person, much less one whose texts expound a consistent philosophical position. Rather, Balcerowicz suggests, we ought to understand “Kundakunda” as a “collective author”, a name under which multiple Jaina authors wrote. Balcerowicz's entry revises current scholarship on Kundakunda while introducing an author(s) who is mythologized and built upon in later centuries.

The chapters that follow Balcerowicz's entry explore the history of writers who either drew upon Kundakunda's ideology or similar ideologies of the pure soul from the fifteenth century onwards: Tāraṇ Svāmī Panth, Banārasīdās, Ṭoḍarmal, Śrīmad Rājachandra, Kānjī Svāmī, and the Akrama Vijñāna Mārga. Flügel's study of the Akrama Vijñāna Mārga constitutes a particularly interesting case study. The movement emerged in 1960s Gujarat after its founder, a businessman named Ambalāl Mūljibhāi Paṭel, had a direct experience of the pure soul through contact with the Jina Sīmandhara Svāmī while standing on a train platform. Paṭel's immediate, experiential knowledge of the soul led him to promulgate ritual techniques that he believed would transmit this experience to others. What is especially interesting about this case study is the implication Paṭel's experience of the self has on his understanding of identity. Paṭel denies the validity of identifiers such as “sect”, “Hindu” and even “Jaina” because such labels belie the fact that the experience of the soul is, in Paṭel's eyes, direct, mediated neither by the sectarian labels that are conventionally constructed nor by material phenomena distinct from the pure soul. This trans-sectarian outlook became inscribed into material culture when Paṭel began to construct tripartite temples dedicated to the Jina Sīmandhara alongside the “Hindu” deities, Kṛṣṇa and Śiva, to direct the worshipper to the experience of the self. Flügel's analysis of Akrama Vijñāna Mārga introduces specialists and non-specialists alike to this new religious movement and raises larger questions about the conceptual and material representation of religious identity in the present day.

In sum, *Pure Soul* is a recommended purchase for anyone interested in the Pure Soul exhibition at SOAS whether they were able to attend or not. The 22 entries adorned with pictures of the exhibition provide accessible and concise introductions to key themes in the history of Jaina thought and material culture. Relevant for the scholar of Jainism are the specialist entries written about artefacts on display in the exhibition as well as the entries on mystical traditions because these chapters outline upcoming projects in the study of Jainism.