

**Richard K. Payne**

---

# **PUTTING NOTHING IN BOXES AND SELLING IT**

---

**SNB Magazin 21**

# Putting Nothing in Boxes and Selling It

By Richard K. Payne

**SNB Magazin 21**



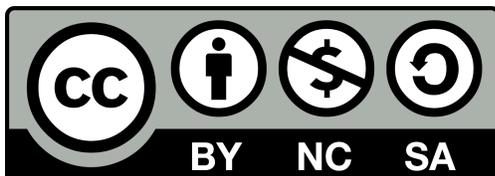
First published 2012 at [www.speculativenonbuddhism.com](http://www.speculativenonbuddhism.com)

*Anti-copyright 2019*

Share ideas freely.

Have integrity.

Give credit where credit is due.



CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 (Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International). This license permits you to remix, tweak, and build on this work even for commercial purposes, as long as you credit it and license your new creations under the identical terms. This license is often compared to “copyleft” free and open source software licenses. All new works based on yours will carry the same license, so any derivatives will also allow commercial use.

*This essay was written in response to Matthias Steingass's [Aggressive Buddhist Appeasement](#).*

Matthias Steingass' discussion suggests an additional issue, rooted in the very nature of "Buddhism as religion." As part of almost any society engaged in economic exchange of one kind or another (i.e., not limited to late Capitalism), the attempt to commodify the intangible moves to the realm of brand-identification ("liking" as Steingass says) and avoids critical evaluation. "Brand-claims" can include indistinguishably meaningful and meaningless ones (one of the things that makes it hard to talk about "religion" as a general category).

The consumer is motivated in the case of intangibles to make purchases (as distinct from making critical and informed judgements) according to qualities attributed to the product by its promoter. What, for example, distinguishes Fiji Water from Great Value Purified Water (sold via Walmart)? One is reminded here of Bourdieu's concept of "distinction." Which would the trendy person prefer to be seen consuming? Which would the thrifty person prefer to be seen consuming? Product as reflection of self-image, rather than evaluation of any objective characteristic of the product itself—because the objective characteristics of the product itself are intangibles related to consumer concerns other than the product itself, such as quenching thirst. (Personally I think Voss has groovier bottling, while I like the level of carbonation of Pellegrino and Perrier, the latter also having pretty groovy bottling.)

Awakening may be considered to be the perfect product, even better than experiences. It is entirely intangible, yet infinitely reproducible—constituted as it is by the aspirant/customer. It is the aspirant/consumer who constitutes the product in their own conception and self-understanding. (Note here that I am specifically referring to "awakening" in all of its myriad forms, and not to

meditation. In my own opinion, meditation is a skill that can in fact be taught. The marketing of meditation is sometimes tied to tangible consequences, such as lowered blood pressure, stress reduction, and so on, or it can be tied to intangible consequences, such as awakening, fulfillment, self-realization, and so on—depending on the brand-claims made by different kinds of meditation trainings.)

Perhaps it is just exactly the intangible character of the goal that makes authority such an important part of brand-claims. What constitutes a set of teachings as authoritative—as the teachings of the Buddha, or of a buddha—has been a long-debated topic in Buddhism: how do we know *buddhavacana*, the speech of a/the buddha? Similarly, the role of other founders following after Śākyamuni for brand-claims is legitimation: these are the authoritative teachings of founder XYZ, I'm here to tell you so, and to make them available to you.

Fundamentally it seems that when products are intangible in the way in which awakening is, there is an additional dynamic involved in the creation of institutions to promote those intangibles, that is, mastery of a form of discourse—the accomplished practitioner of the intangible comes to control a way of speaking that demonstrates mastery of the tradition's discourse, and mastery of a discourse is to be distinguished from attainment of the intangible goal. This is, of course, not limited to Buddhism by any means, but is a dynamic of any institution dealing in intangibles, such as literary criticism. This is not to say that such discourses are meaningless or without import (consider the significance of mastery of legal discourse), but rather that mastery of such discourses works within their own otherwise intangible frames of reference rather than in the realm of the tangible.

An instance of this comes to mind as I reflect on possible reactions to the above, including the criticism that I don't believe in awakening. My initial response is to say, well, I was trained in those strains of Zen, Dzogschen and tantra that describe the mind as fundamentally already awakened, so there is no distinction between ordinary mind and awakened mind. Then I rear back in horror realizing that this is the

discourse that I have myself mastered. Is there anything tangibly there to allow a critical evaluation of the claims regarding the original purity of mind? Am I a better, happier person? Not that I know of. Perhaps that is why for myself I avoid any claims of religious authority (other than performing weddings and giving an occasional dharma talk).

---

## Author

**Richard K. Payne** is Dean and Yehan Numata Professor of Japanese Buddhist Studies at the Institute of Buddhist Studies, in Berkeley, California. He is also founder of the blog [\*Critical Reflections on Buddhist Thought: Contemporary and Classical\*](#). Payne is the author or co-editor of numerous books and articles on Buddhism, including, most recently, *Discourse and Ideology in Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (London: Routledge, 2006), and *Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitabha* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004). (Additional publications [here](#).) Richard Payne is also the editor of the highly regarded journal *Pacific World - Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*. Visit the journal's site [here](#). You can find further information at Payne's [faculty website](#).

## Online Discussion

