

Book Review

Journal of Global Buddhism 10 (2009): 1 - 4



British Buddhism: Teachings, practice and development. By Robert Bluck. Abingdon, Routledge. 2006, xvii + 215 pages, ISBN 0-415-39515-1 (cloth), \$149.95; ISBN 978-0-415-48308-7 (paper), \$39.95.

Reviewed by Simon G. Smith
Co-Director
Subject Centre for Philosophical and
Religious Studies
University of Leeds

s.g.smith@leeds.ac.uk

Copyright Notes: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to:

<http://www.globalbuddhism.org>

Book Review

British Buddhism: Teachings, practice and development.

By Robert Bluck. Abingdon, Routledge. 2006, xvii + 215 pages, ISBN 0-415-39515-1 (cloth), \$149.95; ISBN 978-0-415-48308-7 (paper), \$39.95.

Reviewed by Simon G. Smith

Co-Director

Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies

University of Leeds

s.g.smith@leeds.ac.uk

One only has to go into one's local library, community center, health food store, college or university etc. to find a plethora of posters for "Buddhism meditation classes." These advertisements very often, usually in fact, do not tell those looking at them much about the group who are running the classes; nor would they be likely to be aware that there were different forms of Buddhism unless they had read more widely on the subject. Like many other world religions, Buddhism is usually presented as something of a monolithic entity by the media.

Yet behind these posters lie an ever growing number of Buddhist groups, both independent and belonging to larger organizations, many of whom have been around in Britain for forty years or more. In his book, Robert Bluck sets out to look behind the posters and provide an overview of British Buddhism through an examination of seven Buddhism organisations currently active in Britain. The seven — the Forest Sangha, Samatha Trust, Serene Reflection Meditation, Soka Gakkai, Karma Kagyu, New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) — are well chosen,

providing a good cross-section of contemporary Buddhist activity in Britain representing most of the principal traditions of Buddhism (including Theravada, Tibetan, and Zen), as well as allowing him to plot the historical development of specifically British forms of Buddhism.

In doing this, Bluck uses a method that will be familiar to most students of Religious Studies, namely Ninian Smart's "dimensional analysis of worldviews," a classic way of considering the nature of religious traditions also providing a very good checklist for both the author and reader. Each Buddhist group is considered according to seven dimensions (ritual/practical, doctrinal/philosophical, mythic/narrative, experiential/emotional, ethical/legal, organizational/social and material/artistic) and this helps the reader construct a broader picture of Buddhism in Britain. Indeed, this book could not only be read chapter by chapter according to organization, but also by going through successive sections in each chapter to look at the character of a particular dimension. In addition, the relative length spent on each dimension for a group can also tell one something about that particular group. As such this would be useful not only for those teaching Buddhism to introduce Smart's approach, but would also provide those who are teaching more methodological courses with an excellent case study of how to put Smart's ideas into practice in contemporary religious experience.

The chapters on the specific groups are without exception well-written and well researched, and placed in an order that makes sense (from the conservative Forest Sangha to the self-consciously Western FWBO) allowing the reader to make their own connections. These chapters provide a good descriptive, and on occasions critical, overview of the organizations, one that would be helpful for both students and those looking to find the right group with

whom to practice.

Around the seven chapters on specific groups are sections respectively providing an historical context to British Buddhism and bringing the analysis of the different groups together by dimension. I found these sections to be disappointingly short and would have welcomed further analysis that would have provided the reader with a more comprehensive sense of how these groups relate to other forms of Buddhism. In addition, I would have welcomed a more detailed cultural examination of why Buddhism has proliferated in Britain in the way it has.

These reservations aside, this is a well-written book that provides the reader with a great deal of useful information and insightful analysis. This is not, however, a volume for someone new to Buddhism, as a great deal of prior knowledge is assumed with specific terms and scriptural references appearing without explanation. This is not a criticism, rather a recommendation for the reader to consider one of the excellent introductions to Buddhism to get the most out of this volume. As such I would not recommend this book for those teaching at undergraduate entry level, although it would certainly be of use to those who are taking more specialized undergraduate courses upwards. Indeed I would say that it is an essential resource for anyone studying and/or teaching Buddhism in Britain at this level or higher, and a very important resource for those looking at Buddhism as a Western religious phenomenon more broadly, although this will need to be done in concert with additional research of the context in which Western Buddhism has developed, given the paucity of this in this volume.

Buddhism has historically spread initially as an intellectual tradition that gradually develops practices appropriate to the culture into which it has moved, rather

than through migration or conquest, finally becoming a populist religion. As Bluck shows, this process has thus far shown the same tendency in Britain, with even the most conservative groups now developing practices particular to the Western milieu, with other groups developing more radically populist Buddhist visions. Overall, Bluck paints British Buddhism as a vibrant and diverse phenomenon that is growing and changing as it develops; only time will tell whether it will grow beyond the current stage of acceptance and, largely, middle class practice, to become a religion of popular dimensions. What is incontrovertible is that Buddhism continues to grow and develop in Britain, and Bluck's book is an important step in understanding its progress in terms of the individual groups discussed, although it is a missed opportunity that he did not examine the broader background to their development.