

Book Review



Buddhists: Understanding Buddhism through the Lives of Practitioners

Edited by Todd Lewis. Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014, xv + 329 pages. \$44.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-470-65818-5

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In the “Preface,” Todd Lewis indicates that the purpose of this book is to provide people who teach courses on Buddhism with an alternative resource, one that focuses on the lives of Buddhist practitioners rather than textual sources, philosophical debates, or history. He characterizes the subjects as “typical Buddhists” (xiii) and indicates that the practices in which they engage and their understandings of Buddhism are representative of particular approaches to being Buddhist that are commonly ignored by scholars. The main focus is not the virtuosi who are most often studied as exemplars of the tradition, but rather ordinary people who identify as Buddhists and who seek to incorporate its ideals into their lives.

This is an interesting way to introduce students to Buddhism, and it challenges standard approaches, which tend to focus on normative doctrines and practices and on outstanding individuals who are regarded by Buddhist traditions as uniquely representative of their respective ideals. The book consists of thirty-three chapters divided into five broad categories: “Buddhists in the Earliest and Medieval Eras,” “Buddhist Lives in the West,” “Buddhist Lives in South and Southeast Asia,” “Buddhist Lives in the Himalayan Region,” and “Buddhist Lives in East Asia.”

The chapters are described as “short life histories” (xiii), but it would be more accurate to think of them as biographical sketches. Most are seven to ten pages in length, and they generally focus on how a particular person views his or her participation in and commitment to Buddhism. There are thirty-three chapters, and the subjects are divided evenly between men and women (seventeen each [one chapter has two subjects, a man and a woman]). Sixteen chapters are about monastics, and seventeen are about laypeople. As the section headings indicate, there is a broad geographical spread, representative of the Buddhist world today and in the past. Most of the subjects are contemporary, and they come from various social strata.

The introduction seeks to correct some common notions about Buddhism: that it is a philosophy or way of life, rather than a religion; that ritual is an accretion that diluted

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the purity of the Buddha's original message and is peripheral to normative practice; that Buddhists are mainly concerned with attaining nirvana or buddhahood and devote most of their time to meditation practice; and that being a Buddhist requires detailed knowledge of doctrines. As Lewis notes, philosophical texts and doctrinal disputations, as well as advanced meditation training, are the preserve of a tiny elite that is not representative of the vast majority of people who identify as Buddhists, either today or in the past.

There are a number of difficulties in the conception of this volume, and Lewis is aware of them. The first is defining its scope: what is Buddhism, and who should be included within its purview? Prior to the "discovery" of a religion termed "Buddhism" by 19th century European scholars, most people who were involved in practices they believed derived ultimately from the Buddha and his teachings were unaware of traditions in other parts of the world that followed often very different scriptural and teaching lineages but also conceived themselves as adhering to a dispensation that could be traced back to him and his community. Mahāyāna Buddhists commonly characterize Mainstream Buddhist schools as an "Inferior Vehicle" (Hīnayāna), and Theravāda regards Mahāyāna sūtras as spurious texts that are not the "word of the Buddha." Nichiren (1222–1282) famously argued that other sects were dangerously wrong and should be suppressed by Japanese authorities. Sectarianism has a long and vigorous history in all areas in which Buddhism flourished, and rejection of the authenticity of other traditions is far more common than an ecumenical approach to the Dharma.

This raises questions of inclusion and exclusion: who should be regarded as Buddhist? What sort of criteria might apply? Many contemporary scholars adopt a principle of self-identification: anyone who claims to be a Buddhist has a right to do so, regardless of what texts or doctrines they regard as authoritative or what practices they adopt. This appears to have been implicitly adopted in this volume, but there are some odd inclusions. The strangest is probably "Uncle Donpa" (A khu sTon pa), a fictional figure often described as a "trickster," who seduces nuns and pokes fun at the Buddhist establishment. Characterizing him as a Buddhist is highly problematic because, unlike the others in this book, he is a literary character, and he is not regarded as a normative Buddhist by Tibetans. Uncle Donpa is an interesting example of Tibetan storytelling, and his transgressive exploits highlight hypocrisies among Buddhist elites, but no explanation is provided for why he was included as a representative of the tradition.

Equally puzzling is the decision to portray I. B. Horner (1896–1981), one of the most influential scholars of Pāli literature and translator of the Vinaya, as a representative Buddhist. As this chapter notes, she explicitly denied that she was a Buddhist (p. 77). Her funeral included Buddhist ritual elements, and this appears to be a reason for her inclusion in this volume, along with the fact that she devoted much of her life to editing and translating Pāli texts and was a leading figure in the Pāli Text Society for decades. Among traditional Buddhists, study and propagation of texts is a core activity, one that is believed to generate vast amounts of merit, but there is no evidence that Horner herself regarded her work in these terms. She stated on several occasions that she did not meditate and that she viewed this as fundamental to participation in Buddhism. She was deeply committed to study, translation, and editing of Buddhist texts, but if she did not

understand such activities as constituting a Buddhist identity, her inclusion in this volume raises issues that are not sufficiently addressed, in my opinion.

Most of the other subjects of this book are less problematic. Some, like the “great philosopher” Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250), are widely regarded by various Buddhist traditions as exemplary figures. Most of the people in this volume, however, are distinguished by their ordinariness. They run small businesses, they are married and have children, they are involved in local activism, and those who are monastics are mainly not widely known or particularly notable for their contributions to Buddhist literature or practice. While reading through their stories, I considered how this book might be used in an introductory course on Buddhism, which is its main stated goal. Some of the stories are interesting, and taken as a whole the book provides insights into how ordinary Buddhists attempt to integrate the norms of their religion into their daily lives, but my overall impression was that most only have a rudimentary understanding of Buddhist doctrine or of their textual traditions. “Being Buddhist” for many is associated with good parenting, making donations to monks and nuns, adhering to social norms, and engaging in ritual practices designed to produce merit that will lead to success in the present life and improved rebirth situations in the future. The reader is only provided with brief sketches of their lives and receives little information regarding what texts they read, what knowledge they might have of the doctrines of their respective traditions, what religious training they may have received, or even what they actually do aside from brief mentions of rituals or merit-making activities.

As Lewis notes in his introduction and as the contributors stress throughout the volume, such attitudes and practices are the norm for most people around the world who identify as Buddhists, and this book is a corrective to the tendency to focus on unrepresentative virtuosi and doctrines that are unknown to most practitioners. However, the pervasive similarities in these biographical sketches would make it difficult to use them in an introductory course. Notable figures make interesting subjects precisely because they are unusual, and discussions of doctrinal issues can lead students to better understanding of the implications of truth claims made by Buddhists of various traditions. This volume serves as a reminder that famous people and philosophical innovators may be a tiny percentage of Buddhists worldwide, but they are also interesting precisely for that reason. They are the models that others within their traditions seek to emulate, and their contributions to developments in doctrine and practice affect how others think and live.

The same is unlikely to be true of most of the subjects of this book; several came to the notice of a particular researcher as a result of a chance personal contact, and their stories were included because they are representative of a particular type of person who identifies as Buddhist, not because their views on the Dharma or their practices had any significant effect on others. It would be difficult to structure a course on this book because these chapters provide so little detail or background information. It might be interesting to select a few chapters as a corrective to standard accounts of doctrines, histories, and biographies of major figures, but I doubt that by itself it could supplant such materials. Still, this is a new approach to introducing Buddhism, and the editor and authors deserve credit for providing it.