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New Frontiers in Buddhism:
Three Recent Works on Buddhism in America.

By David L. McMahan



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Seager, Richard Hughes. *Buddhism in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, xviii + 314 pages, ISBN 0-231-10868-0 (cloth), US \$35.

Prebish, Charles S. and Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds. *The Faces of Buddhism in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, viii + 370 pages, ISBN 0-520-21301-7 (paperback), US \$22.

Prebish, Charles S. *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, xi + 334 pages, ISBN 0-520-21697-0 (paperback), US \$18.95.

Scholarship in Buddhism in North America has moved at a surprisingly slow pace in the past twenty-five years. Scholars have tended to be reticent about exploring this field for a number of reasons. A suspicion that American interest in Buddhism may just be a passing trend has, no doubt, kept some academics away from staking their research claims on what they fear might turn out to be a passing fad. Further, the difficulties for the scholar of this subject are many: he or she should ideally have a thorough knowledge of Buddhism as well as American religious history. The traditional scholar of Buddhism will seldom have time between arduous language study and the study of 2,500 years of Buddhist history in over a dozen countries to master yet another field, that of American religious and cultural history. Likewise, the Americanist is seldom an expert in Buddhism outside America and will tend to be suspect among scholars of Asian Buddhism.

Aside from these practical considerations, another factor discouraging researchers is a certain degree of suspicion among scholars of the subject in its own right. Although this may not be the case among Americanists, one senses it among Buddhist Studies scholars. Those who have struggled to master Sanskrit, Classical Chinese, literary Tibetan, or other formidable Asian languages and studied the intricate maze of Buddhist history winding through its many distinct cultures and epochs may find the study of American Buddhism comparatively trifling. Part of this is the tendency

to view American Buddhism as a naive upstart not worthy of scholarly attention. Those who study it may be accused of wasting time on “Buddhism lite.” Of no help are the often superficial representations in popular media. Those of us who teach Buddhism at colleges and universities are by now familiar with the cringe we feel coming on when a student brings in a fashion magazine article entitled “Why Buddhism Is So Cool” or proclaims a newfound appreciation of Stephen Segal movies after learning that he is a *tulku*. The pop culture frenzy surrounding Buddhism in America often evokes rolled eyes of derision from scholars steeped in the long, rich history of Buddhism.

It is just such representations, however, that call for serious scholarship in American Buddhism, and for a number of reasons: first, to explain the current fascination of American pop culture with Buddhism, and second, to expand the discussion of Buddhism as a cultural phenomenon beyond the often trivialized representations of it in the popular press and beyond the more visible profile of largely middle-class, European American converts. For, as scholars of American Buddhism and American religious pluralism have long known, Buddhism in America is far more than one would suspect from a perusal of popular magazine articles or the “Eastern Religions” section of the local Waldenbooks. The prejudice against scholarship in this area is mainly the result of scholars themselves being seduced by these popular images into thinking that American Buddhism is little more than the illegitimate child of the counterculture now become a bourgeois pastime of middle-class, hippie-to-yuppie baby boomers. One of the merits of the works under consideration here is that they show that Buddhism in America has *always* been more than this, not just because the convert caricature is inadequate, but because Buddhism is far more ethnically and culturally diverse and complex than such a picture suggests.

The success of any book lies, in part, with how it is used and what audience is reading it. With this in mind, I should note that I have used two of these volumes, *Luminous Passage* and *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, in a Religious Studies class called “Buddhism in North America”

at Franklin and Marshall College. (Seager's book was not published yet at the time of the class, but I look forward to using it next year.) In this essay, therefore, I will comment on the effectiveness of these works in the classroom, as well as their merits for other readerships.

Richard Seager's book is designed to be an introduction to Buddhism in America, taking a broad, inclusive view of its subject. It carefully guides the novice through the basics of Buddhist history, doctrine, and practice, while discussing a rich variety of traditions, events, institutions, and people. He restricts his study to developments in the continental United States, classifying Buddhists in America into three broad groups: convert Buddhists, immigrant or ethnic Buddhists, and Asian American Buddhists who have practiced in the United States for four or five generations. The book is divided into three parts: "Background," "Major Traditions," and "Selected Issues." Part one begins with a brief introduction to some of the basic issues addressed in the book (chapter one), followed by a useful primer on "very basic Buddhism" (chapter two), and the "three vehicles" (chapter three), which he describes as "three traditions that have structured Buddhist thought and practice for many centuries" (p. 21). Although specialists in Asian Buddhism will find some minor things to quibble about in this presentation of Buddhism's history and major themes, these chapters are on the whole quite effective and generally suffer only from the lack of nuance that must characterize any brief introduction to a complex of traditions as multi-faceted as Buddhism.

Chapter four, "The American Setting," traces the history of Buddhism in North America by identifying particular people and events crucial to its introduction into this country, and by briefly addressing the importance of Asian immigration in shaping American religious life. Seager emphasizes the World Parliament of Religions as one of the important events introducing Buddhism to America and setting forth the first Buddhist missions. He also discusses the "Zen boom" of the 1950s and the countercultural appropriation of Buddhism in the 1960s. Despite the visibility of these movements, though, he insists that "the importance of immigration to American Buddhism cannot be overstated" (p. 44).

Part two outlines the major traditions of Buddhism that have been transplanted to the United States, with chapters on Jōdo Shinshū, Sōka Gakkai, Zen, Tibetan traditions, Theravāda, and “other Pacific rim migrations,” including Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese Buddhist communities. The chapters take the reader through the history of these communities in the United States, discuss some developmental issues related to each, and introduce important terms necessary for a basic understanding of each tradition. For instance, in the chapter on Zen, Seager discusses some of the prominent Asian and Western teachers, such as Hakūn Yasutani, Shunryū Suzuki, and Phillip Kapleau, along with important developments at their Zen centers, such as how abuses of power led the San Francisco Zen Center to institute an innovative policy of rotating leadership, something seen as a “turning point in the Americanization of Zen” (p. 100). After surveying some of the teachers and developments important to Zen in America, Seager introduces the terms *rōshi*, *sensei*, *oryōki*, *jukai*, *zazen*, *kinhin*, *koan*, and others (pp. 106-112), conveying how they have come to be used in American Zen circles. Such organization is effective, and Seager’s treatment of thematic and historical issues is always evenhanded and sensitive when dealing with controversial matters, such as the scandals involving a number of Buddhist teachers (which he, in fact, downplays somewhat) and the rift between Sōka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood.

Throughout these chapters, Seager is generally careful not to let the history of convert Buddhism overshadow the Buddhism of immigrant communities. For instance, in the chapter on Theravāda Buddhism, he makes careful distinctions between what he sees as “at least three distinct tiers” to these Buddhists in America: the more conservative immigrant communities, who are trying to preserve elements of their traditional Asian cultures while adapting to life in America; the Insight or *Vipassanā* meditation movement, consisting primarily of European American converts mainly interested in meditation; and the “monastic-led middle range,” that often blurs the lines between these groups, such as European American converts who study and practice with monks at traditional temples, or

university-educated Asian American monks who serve both immigrant and Western communities.

Part three moves beyond the primarily descriptive focus of the previous parts, selecting a few themes that illustrate how Buddhism is becoming Americanized. They include gender equity, socially engaged Buddhism, intra-Buddhist and inter-religious dialogue, and some further reflections on Americanization. Seventeen profiles of prominent Buddhist figures in the United States follow, along with a chronology of important events in the development of American Buddhism.

Chapter eleven traces the burgeoning concern with gender equity to scandals and leadership crises in the 1980s involving Buddhist teachers' affairs with their students. Seager discusses how these events, combined with the growing influence of feminism in the wider culture of America, served to put gender issues in the forefront of the convert community's concerns. It also prompted an increasing number of women teachers to develop their own styles of Buddhist practice. He then reviews some of the recent literature, both popular and academic, on Buddhism and women, sexuality, and gender.

In chapter twelve, Seager traces the roots of socially engaged Buddhism to social concerns inherited from the 1960s, Asian social reform movements, and the reforming spirit of American Protestantism. Then he provides a historical narrative of influential groups, such as the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement, and the Zen Peacemaker Order. Chapter thirteen discusses the efforts—and lack thereof—of the widely diverse Buddhists in America to communicate with each other and with non-Buddhist religious traditions. Again taking a historical approach, Seager relates some of the important events in these efforts, such as a 1993 meeting in Dharamsala, India, of a number of prominent Buddhist teachers from various traditions and their attempts to address and come to consensus on pan-Buddhist issues. This chapter also deals with important events in the recent history of Buddhism's relation to other religions, especially Christianity and Judaism. Seager discusses Thomas Merton's dialogue with Buddhism, the 1996

“Gethsemani Encounter,” a gathering of over 200 prominent Buddhists and Christians, and some individuals who combine Buddhism and Christianity in their own religious practice, such as Robert E. Kennedy, a Jesuit priest, and teacher of Zen. The distinctive relationship of Buddhism to American Jews concludes this chapter, including a brief review of a few popular books by Jewish authors (for example, Roger Kamenetz and Sylvia Boorstein) working out their religious identity as Jewish practitioners of Buddhism, as well as the Dalai Lama’s interest in Jewish mysticism and the survival of the Jewish diaspora community.

The final chapter, “Making Some Sense of Americanization,” addresses the divide between immigrant and convert Buddhists, how each group interprets and constructs the *Dharma* quite differently, and what significance this divide may have for the future of Buddhism in America. Seager observes that

[t]he Buddhism of most immigrants tends to remain informed by the rich cosmological worldviews of Buddhist Asia. Rebirth and karma are often treated as existential fact, bodhisattvas as dynamic personalized forces or cosmic entities. Liberation and awakening are essentially religious aspirations and rituals often retain an unambiguous sense of being efficacious. For many converts, however, the dharma is becoming integrated with a more secular outlook on life. Many have implicitly or explicitly abandoned the idea of rebirth. Cosmic bodhisattvas tend to be regarded as metaphors, rituals as personal and collective means of expression. Traditional doctrine and philosophy often take a back seat to inspiration and creativity. The transcendental goal of practice is itself often psychologized or reoriented to social transformation (p. 234).

These differences run deep and are intimately connected with the social worlds of their adherents. For example, many immigrant Buddhists in North America, Seager reminds us, are refugees and displaced people. One function of their Buddhism is to conserve a way of life that, for some, has vanished or is under siege in their homelands. Quite different forces are operative in convert Buddhism, which tends to interpret the *Dharma* primarily in terms of meditation, therapy, and transcendence. For most converts, it has little to do with conservation of culture—often

little to do with Asian culture *per se* at all. Rather, it is associated with an impulse toward radical change on both personal and social levels.

In this final chapter, Seager analyzes the development of both immigrant and convert Buddhism and makes some cautious predictions of the future, forecasting, for instance, successive generational waves of traditionalism and innovation in immigrant communities and concerns about balancing authenticity with innovation in convert Buddhism. Finally, Seager convincingly argues that, although convert Buddhists have often claimed the right to define what Buddhism is and is to become in America, immigration has been, and remains, “the single most important force at work” in American Buddhism (p. 247).

Seager is, throughout the book, wisely cautious about making sweeping pronouncements on the future of Buddhism in America or about the existence of a distinctly American form of Buddhism. Rather, he emphasizes its complexity, plurality, and multicultural character. His insistence on the importance of Asian immigrants corrects previous accounts that have tended to see converts as the most (or only) important force in Buddhist America.

Given Seager’s assertion that Asian immigration has been the most significant factor in the development of Buddhism in America, the last section of the book, concerned as it is with issues that have arisen primarily in convert communities, works somewhat against one of his most important points. This, he admits, is due mainly to his lack of Asian language skills (p. xv). The omission of thematic developments dealing with immigrant communities in a book arguing for the redressing of such neglect again highlights the difficulties inherent in such a project and in scholarship on Buddhist America in general. Fortunately Seager balances his limited treatment of issues in immigrant communities with his ability to understand the development of Buddhism against the background of the last two centuries of American cultural and religious history and his skill in drawing parallels with other American communities to help analyze and predict developments in American Buddhism.

Oddly, Seager’s delineation of three kinds of Buddhism—those of

converts, immigrants, and Asian American descendants of immigrants—fades from his analysis after his initial mention of them, such that the last two categories effectively collapse into “immigrant Buddhism.” Although he does discuss generational shifts in Asian American communities, I had hoped to read more about the distinctions in the ways these two groups practice and understand Buddhism.

One further point worth noting is that the choices Seager makes in his subject matter often lead him to consider the Americanization of Buddhism at the expense of reciprocal trends. This creates the impression that Buddhism is always adapting to America—which, of course, it is; but, indeed, elements of American life are also being transformed by Buddhism and by the multiple reflections of Buddhism in the eyes of native-born Americans who reinterpret it and appropriate it in a multitude of ways, from self-help literature to music and aesthetics, from philosophy to advertising and movies.

Despite these limitations—and they are limitations more than weaknesses—Seager’s work offers a wealth of information in this impressively researched and lucidly written volume. It will serve as a much-needed text in the classroom, a repository of knowledge for the general reader, and, hopefully, a welcome foreshadowing of further research. It is truly an excellent book.

The Faces of Buddhism in America is a different kind of work, but one that addresses some of the same issues as Seager’s. An edited volume, *Faces* contains sixteen essays by different authors, along with an introduction by Charles Prebish and an epilogue by Kenneth Tanaka. The essays are divided into two parts, the first designed to provide general information about Buddhist traditions in America and the second addressing thematic issues. The first part, “American Buddhist Traditions in Transition,” contains separate essays on the main forms of Buddhism in America: Chinese, Shin, Zen, Nichiren Shōshū and Sōka Gakkai, Tibetan, Korean, Vietnamese, Theravāda, and the Insight Meditation movement. Although the introductions to traditions in Seager’s book are more consistent, some of these essays offer the more focused perspective

of authors who are writing on their specific area of expertise.

A few essays in this first, largely descriptive, section are especially noteworthy. G. Victor Sogen Hori's "Japanese Zen in America: Americanizing the Face in the Mirror" offers reflections from his perspective as a scholar, as well as someone trained in a traditional Rinzai Zen monastic setting. This essay presents glimpses into the social and institutional dynamics of this traditional setting, showing some of the rather substantive differences between Japanese Zen and Americanized forms of Zen. This essay is not so much about how Zen is practiced in America as about how Americans perceive—and more often, misperceive—Japanese Zen. Hori questions what he sees as Americans' easy dismissal of certain elements of the traditional monastic social environment—especially those thought of as authoritarian and hierarchical—and attempts to show the complex functionality of these elements. If Hori's defense of such structures will not convince most democratically-minded Americans, it nevertheless shows some of the great differences between American and Japanese practice and understanding of Zen. Hori suggests that even fundamental ideas and practices, such as *satori* and *sanzen*, are often construed in quite different ways in Japanese and American communities. Further, Hori insists, it is the very attempt of Americans to get at "authentic" Japanese Zen that sets in motion all sorts of very American presuppositions that are then reflected back as this authentic Zen. He acknowledges that Buddhism always has and always will be understood and practiced from a particular cultural location, reinventing itself in terms of local indigenous culture—Hori does not lament the inevitable reinterpretation and reformulation of the *Dharma* in America. He insists, though, that caution is in order regarding strident calls for the Americanization of Buddhism; for if Buddhism becomes just one more embodiment of American cultural values, it may "prevent people from understanding just what it is that is unfamiliar about Buddhism" (p. 77), thereby preventing it from being a true alternative to traditional American ways of life.

The gulf between converts and Asian, or Asian American, Buddhists

is implicit in other essays in this section also—as well as in the very structure of the book. Specifically, Insight (Vipassanā) meditation has its own chapter by Gil Fronsdal, “Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” separate from the chapter on Theravāda Buddhism. In the former, Fronsdal claims that in the Insight Meditation community “practice [is] offered independent of much of its traditional Theravāda Buddhist religious context” with “minimal remaining connection to Theravāda Buddhism” (p. 164). Fronsdal argues that Vipassanā, as practiced in America, represents the most Americanized version of Buddhist practice, drawing freely from the language and techniques of psychotherapy and differing significantly from traditional Theravāda. Taken together with Paul Numrich’s chapter on Theravāda in America, this becomes quite clear. Numrich discusses the importance of monasticism to traditional Theravāda and its implicit challenges in America, where few are interested in putting on the robe, be they second generation Asian Americans or European American Vipassanā enthusiasts. He also offers informative discussions of issues involving the reestablishment of the order of nuns and the challenges of implementing the *Vinaya* in America, where, for example, traditionally required monastic attire is inadequate in cold climates and injunctions against monks’ having contact with women can be seen as offensive. Lacking in this essay is much discussion of the vast majority of Theravāda Buddhists in America—the laity.

Other chapters in part one give historical and thematic overviews of different traditions, each illustrating its tradition with interesting case studies. Stuart Chandler offers testimony to the complexity and ambiguity of Chinese American Buddhist identity, such that it challenges reigning concepts of Asian American Buddhist identity in general. Alfred Bloom presents the difficulties that Shin Buddhism, the oldest Buddhist school in America, has had in maintaining its vitality in the United States (in contrast, incidentally, to Seager, who sees this school as offering a model for understanding and negotiating the challenges of Americanization). Jane Hurst offers the benefits of her fieldwork with a Sōka Gakkai

community and traces some important points in the development of Nichiren Shōshū from the time of Nichiren through the tumultuous split between Sōka Gakkai and the Nichiren priesthood. Amy Lavine provides an informative discussion of Tibetan Buddhism in America through treatment of the institutions of *tulkus* and *geshes* and how authority is transmitted through these institutions in America. Mu Soeng writes on Korean Buddhism in the United States, concentrating on the Kuan Um Zen School, established in America by Seung Sahn. Cuong Tu and A. W. Barber present Vietnamese Buddhism as an eclectic and rather amorphous mix of a number of Buddhist traditions. The authors underline the roles of monks, the importance of merit, the functions of the temple, and the challenges of acculturation to this newest group of Buddhists to come to America. They rather pointedly de-emphasize what most native-born Americans associate with Vietnamese Buddhism, namely the work of Thich Thien An, whose “memory has faded away” in the Vietnamese community, and Thich Nhat Hanh, whom the authors practically dismiss as a practitioner of “New Age-style Zen” with no “affinity or foundation in traditional Vietnamese Buddhist Practices” (p. 131). Given the short time that Vietnamese Buddhism has existed in America, it seems premature to discount these prominent figures as unimportant to the development of Vietnamese American Buddhism, though their connection to the history of Buddhism in Vietnam is atypical.

Jan Nattier opens the second section, “Issues in American Buddhism,” with an attempt to delineate just who in America can be considered a Buddhist, given the diversity of groups and, more problematic, the vague sense of religious identity in convert communities. Dissatisfied with a “two Buddhisms” model, which she claims “fails to account for the full spectrum of racial and ethnic diversity in America” (p. 189), she suggests a new typology consisting of (1) “Import” or “Elite Buddhism,” which is brought to America because it is sought out by middle-class, mostly European Americans who are interested in meditation and have time and money to buy books, go on retreats, and attend lectures; (2) “Export” or “Evangelical Buddhism,” exemplified by Sōka Gakkai, which actively

proselytizes its faith in America, rather than bringing it as a result of initial demand on the part of Americans; and (3) “Baggage” or “Ethnic Buddhism,” which is brought to America as a part of the culture of immigrants. Nattier then makes some interesting comparisons between the transmission of Buddhism in China and its transmission to North America. Nattier’s typology is a modest improvement over the “two Buddhisms” model, yet I wonder how much more fruitful a “two Buddhisms, plus Sōka Gakkai” model will be in further research. Recall a similar issue in Seager’s typology, which initially delineates three Buddhisms, as well, but whose three Buddhisms collapse into two for most of his discussion. Nattier’s chapter shows considerable insight into Buddhist adaptation in new places, but how much it really represents a change in thinking that could shape future research remains to be seen.

Rick Fields’s essay, “White Buddhists, Ethnic Buddhists, and Racism,” also addresses the difficult problem of typology, beginning with an attempt to find an adequate name for the group roughly equivalent to Nattier’s “elite Buddhists.” Unfortunately, his attempt fails, as he settles, with admitted discomfort, on “White Buddhist,” after discarding “missionary Buddhism,” “Western Buddhism,” and “Euro-American Buddhism”—the last because it “leaves out African Americans and Asian Americans,” something that, presumably, “white Buddhism” does not (p. 197). Despite the false start, he goes on to give a decent historical description of this group, along with its conflicted, and sometimes racist, attitudes toward “ethnic Buddhism.”

Martin Verhoeven’s chapter on Paul Carus is a perceptive look at how one figure in American Buddhist history attempted to adapt Buddhism to Western culture and modern science by purging it of its “mythological” elements. Carus, as Verhoeven elucidates, is an instructive case study and cautionary tale regarding European and American attempts to make Buddhism “fit” with modern intellectual, scientific, and democratic values by overzealous comparison and demythologization. Again, the question of who represents and constructs American Buddhism emerges as an important issue in the development of Buddhism in the West.

Ryo Imamura, in his rather muddled discussion of “Buddhist and Western Psychotherapies,” addresses differences he sees between these two systems of dealing with the mind. Although this is an important topic, Imamura’s treatment of it is often too packed with generalizations and rather facile representations of both Buddhism and psychotherapy to be illuminating. Here we learn that Western psychology “has an obsession with happiness,” “tends to be highly judgmental,” and is “a highly politicized and coercive process,” while “Buddhist psychotherapy” (a term never adequately explained) is an idealized system of psychological therapy and social critique that transcends all these problems. This simplistic “East good, West bad” argument echoes the naïve romantic fantasies of the East that many scholars and lay people have had throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and which persist today in much popular literature. Such simplistic binary oppositions, as many scholars have demonstrated, make a poor framework for elucidating the intricacies of relations between Asia and the West.

Two chapters follow on issues of gender and sexuality by two rather creative and provocative voices in Buddhist scholarship, Rita Gross and Roger Corless. Gross considers the abuses of power—especially sexual misconduct by male teachers—in American Buddhist centers, then suggests a model for authority appropriate for Western Buddhism. Because Gross is a disciple of the late Chogyam Trungpa, as well as one of the most notable scholars of women and Buddhism, she is well-suited for taking on such a subject. Gross is reluctant to condemn all sexual interactions between teacher and student, as long as they are not coercive or abusive. She cautions against expecting gurus to be perfect, to be authorities on all issues, or to be models for the student in all aspects of his or her life. Further, she argues, women who have been in sexual relationships with their male teachers should not be seen as victims, but as agents and adults making their own moral decisions. The model of authority that she proposes is one in which a community operates according to a “natural hierarchy,” with each person fulfilling different roles that seem suited to him or her and functioning at different levels in the hierarchy at different times.

How such an idea would work in concrete situations and how roles are determined to be “naturally” suitable to particular individuals—something that could be quite sensitive in any community—is left somewhat vague; nevertheless, this is a potentially productive model for a more egalitarian *sangha* structure.

Roger Corless provides the anthology with a highly informative discussion of issues involving homosexuality and what he terms the “queer Buddhist community.” He argues that most classical Buddhist sources do not problematize homosexuality in any specific way and that “traditional Buddhism has been largely neutral on issues of sexual preference” (p. 256). Many contemporary teachers, pressed to take an explicit stand, have been quite tolerant and supportive. Corless addresses a number of issues facing the queer Buddhist community in the United States and how a few gay and lesbian teachers have approached these issues.

The last thematic essay, Donald Rothberg’s “Responding to the Cries of the World: Socially Engaged Buddhism in North America,” gives a highly competent overview of this increasingly important movement. One valuable component of this essay is its discussion of the movement’s origins in the complex social and political upheavals of South and Southeast Asia, redressing perceptions that socially engaged Buddhism is primarily a product of left-liberal European American Buddhists. Rothberg interprets socially engaged Buddhism as a “powerful response to the core structural problems of modernity” that resists the typical Western understanding of Buddhism as primarily concerned with personal, private realization (p. 281).

The volume concludes with an epilogue by Kenneth Tanaka that could just as easily serve as a prologue to Charles Prebish’s *Luminous Passage* (which, indeed, is to be considered a companion volume), outlining the issues that both authors believe are the most important for the continuing development of Buddhism in America: ethnicity, democratization, practice, engagement, and adaptation.

Faces is undoubtedly a valuable contribution to the burgeoning scholarship in North American Buddhism. Like Seager’s book, it does

justice to the diversity and complexity of its subject, while still indicating certain recurring themes in this rich mixture of cultures and traditions. The advantage of any multi-authored work is that it contains multiple perspectives—some at odds with each other, some complementary, and some going out on a limb more than an introductory survey would. *Faces* covers a striking array of issues from a number of different points of view. Although this can make it richer and more varied in style and content, it also makes the quality more uneven. For a general introduction to the subject, Seager's book is more satisfying because of its continuity and coherence, but many of these essays are quite useful in pinpointing specific themes emerging on the Buddhist landscape of North America. Moreover, I have found some of them highly valuable in the classroom. Also noteworthy is the fact that the authors are drawn both from the academic and Buddhist communities—and combinations of both. As far as I can discern from the author notes and from my own knowledge of some of the contributors, most are practitioners of Buddhism in some way or another. The “scholar-practitioner” is in fact a very common creature in the world of academic Buddhist Studies, a topic that Charles Prebish addresses more specifically in *Luminous Passage*, to which we now turn.

Prebish is singularly qualified for authoritative commentary on Buddhism in America, having published one of the first academic books on the subject over twenty years ago and having become the foremost authority on the subject in the intervening years. In *Luminous Passage* we get a unique vision of *Dharma* in America that only Prebish could provide. The work contains a wide variety of research methods, from theoretical reflection to fieldwork, statistical research to personal anecdote. With much scholarship in this area coming from newer scholars attracted to an up-and-coming field, Prebish gives us not only the mature thought of someone who has been on this road awhile, but also plenty of narrative into the history and progressive re-envisioning of his own understanding of the subject. This book does not attempt systematically to survey the entire scope of Buddhist America, as does Seager's; rather, it takes on

selected issues, personalities, and communities illustrative of the history and development of Buddhism in America. Moreover, this is not a general introduction; familiarity with Buddhist schools and terms is assumed.

In his first chapter, Prebish surveys some of the important historical developments, institutions, and communities of American Buddhism, from its inauspicious beginnings among Chinese immigrants in California to the current situation in which “learning about the Dharma has become a cottage industry in the United States” (p. 50). Veterans of the subject will find the familiar staples of such overviews, plus some interesting, updated perspectives and figures. Novices will find it a jumble of unpronounceable names and less-than-meaningful events—at least that is what my students who had no prior exposure to contemporary Buddhism told me when I assigned this chapter as the first reading in the “Buddhism in North America” class. The lesson: beginners should take the time to go through Seager first, then move on to Prebish for more in-depth treatment of selected topics.

If some may find chapter one cumbersome, chapter two, “Shaping the Sangha: Developmental Issues in American Buddhism,” is masterful in its deft exploration of the issues facing contemporary Buddhist communities in North America. Here Prebish explicates his understanding of the five overlapping categories introduced in *Faces*: ethnicity, practice, democratization, engagement, and adaptation. He reviews a number of theoretical models for understanding these issues and discusses interactions between Buddhists of different ethnic backgrounds, sexual and gender issues, changing patterns of authority in American *sanghas*, different modes of socially engaged Buddhism, and a number of theories addressing the multi-faceted adaptation of Buddhism to America.

In chapter three, Prebish turns his attention to the diverse Buddhist communities in North America, often taking the reader along on some of the many visits he has made to Buddhist centers of various kinds and combining phenomenological description with personal commentary. Prebish focuses on Zen Mountain Monastery, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Sōka Gakkai International-USA, the Buddhist Churches of

America, Hsi Lai Temple, the Insight Meditation Society, Spirit Rock Meditation Center, and Shambhala International.

The fourth and fifth chapters explore two rarely discussed Buddhist communities: those of academics involved in both the scholarship on and practice of Buddhism and the “cybersangha,” the amorphous community of Buddhists whose main contact is through the Internet. Prebish first notes that the boundaries between scholar and practitioner of Buddhism have broken down considerably since he was himself a graduate student, and that the “scholar-practitioner” is a quite common, though still somewhat controversial, figure. Tracing the development of this figure gives Prebish the opportunity to review some of the history of Buddhist Studies as a field and to comment on its state today, complete with statistics on Buddhist Studies scholars in North America. Prebish suggests that these “scholar-practitioners” may function as Western analogs to traditional scholar-monks as guides to the laity in understanding the *Dharma*. This is an excellent chapter for assessing the current state of the field, though with the chapter title of “The Silent Sangha: Buddhism in the Academy,” I would have expected more about the tensions between scholarship and practice and the contention within the Buddhist Studies community on this issue, such that some Buddhists in the academy feel compelled to be “silent.”

Another rather idiosyncratic *sangha* is the network of individuals, often quite isolated from each other by geography, whose primary communication is via the Internet. In his chapter, “The Cybersangha: Virtual Communities,” Prebish guides his reader through the plethora of Buddhist web sites, discussion groups, e-journals, and cyber-communities on the World Wide Web. More than just a useful e-Buddhist manual, this chapter evokes reflection on the very notion of a *sangha*, when some *sanghas* have no location, no temples, no shrines, and no physical meetings between members. (Indeed, such descriptions start to sound like Perfection of Wisdom literature!) Although Prebish’s claim that the incursion of Buddhism into cyberspace constitutes “the uniting of all the Buddhist communities . . . into one universal *sangha* that can communicate

effectively” (p. 232) is a bit of an overstatement—it is likely that fewer than one percent of Buddhists worldwide have access to the Internet—he ably demonstrates the importance of this development in the history of Buddhism, and is aware of its potential dangers, that is, “loss of face-to-face encounter, personal support, and shared practice in a real space” (p. 231).

Prebish concludes his work by hazarding predictions about the future of Buddhism in America, a task that he admits he attempted inadequately in his previous book on the subject. Much of the chapter narrates two important conferences on the matter, further exploring themes such as the globalization of Buddhism, inclusivity, ecumenism, and transformation.

It is hard not to appreciate the breadth and depth of experience with the Buddhist world in North America that Prebish brings to this book. This is a groundbreaking work that will serve as an essential source of data, theoretical reflection, and sociological analysis for years to come. It is, quite simply, the most compelling portrait of Buddhism in America to date.

To compare these three books on a linear scale, though, is not as useful as understanding them in terms of their purposes and intended readership. Seager’s book is extraordinarily successful in presenting either the novice or expert with a densely-packed overview of the dazzling diversity of Buddhist America. As such it is *the* new and definitive introductory work. It is also likely the most usable in the classroom. *Luminous Passage* is a very different kind of work. A richly textured portrait of Buddhist scholarship and practice in North America, it will be fascinating and invaluable to scholars, graduate students, and many practitioners of Buddhism, but is too much of an “insider’s” book for novices or undergraduates without previous exposure to Buddhism. The specter of Richard Robinson “munching his way through his third bratwurst sandwich,” (p. 231) and Edward Conze bluntly claiming to have achieved the “first trance state” in Buddhist meditation are likely to tickle Buddhists Studies scholars more than undergraduates. Still, *Luminous Passage* can be quite useful for undergraduate seminars with students who have some

prior exposure to Buddhism. Prebish's book is also the most lively in style, using the first person often, but only in ways that illustrate important aspects of his topic and allow the reader to benefit from his years of interaction with and participation in various Buddhist communities.

Another distinction between these books is evident in the background of the authors. Seager, being an Americanist, is capable of broad comparative reflections on the immigrant experience in America and the place of Buddhism in it. Prebish, with his early background in Indian Buddhism, brings a richer understanding of Buddhism in Asia to his subject. *Faces* is useful for a wide variety of readers, from novice to scholar. Although it has a few more overt flaws than the other two, it also has some unique gems. With its diverse collection of contributors from many walks of Buddhist life and scholarship, it functions as an excellent multi-vocal complement to either of the other two works.

A final note of caution on a trend that I see running throughout these works: Many of the descriptions of convert Buddhists in America (see, for example, Fields in *Faces*) describe a largely secularized community of Buddhists who usually reject faith, ritual, and beliefs based on Asian cosmological views. As further research on specific communities emerges, I believe this perception will be exposed as an overgeneralization. Many Americans do prefer the "Buddhism Without Beliefs" approach exemplified by Stephen Batchelor, seeing the *Dharma* as a path of meditative practice where the "trappings of religion" are largely irrelevant. Studies of, for example, some American groups following Tibetan Buddhist traditions will, on the contrary, find a great deal of "religious" practice and belief. I have heard one professor of Buddhism complain that some of his students are quite critical of Western religious traditions, denouncing their "superstition," "ritualism," and "mythological beliefs," only to embrace similar things quite uncritically in Buddhist traditions. This is not to weigh in on whether Western Buddhists should or should not embrace such views and practices; it is rather to suggest that the image of the convert community as a group that, on the whole, rejects them is probably inadequate. Images of American disciples scurrying to collect

hair and fingernail clippings from a *lama*, chanting mantras for the accruing of merit, and attending empowerments invoking protector deities—all of which can be seen among American practitioners—invite a more complex view of adaptation and reinterpretation of Buddhism than that of simply dropping ideas and practices that do not appeal to American sensibilities and keeping ones that do.

This example, however, points to a happy situation: these books, like good books should, raise some questions while answering others and invite further research while being reservoirs of fine research themselves. Anyone doing serious study of American Buddhism in the next decade will, as a matter of course, consult these pivotal works. They represent a welcome watershed in the study of Buddhism in North America. As a collection, these works aptly illustrate the fact that, far from dismissing American Buddhism as an unworthy or uninteresting topic, scholars should celebrate the rare historical opportunity presented to them: to explore emergent forms of Buddhism in a new land. With these three books, Buddhism in America takes an unambiguous step forward as a challenging and exciting subject in itself, as worthy of rigorous scholarly study as Buddhism anywhere else—and as fraught with its own unique difficulties. Although many scholars want to avoid the “tyranny of the near-at-hand,” in this case they may be ignoring a valuable opportunity to study a variety of issues that emerge when traditions are transplanted and take root in a new cultural and geographical setting. Each with its strengths and weaknesses, these volumes take scholarship on Buddhism in North America to a new level of maturity and provide a fresh standard for scholarship in this area.

Reviewed by
David L. McMahan
Assistant Professor of Religious Studies
Franklin and Marshall College
d_mcmahan@acad.fandm.edu