



Book Review

Near Light We Shine: Buddhist Charity in Urban Vietnam

By Sara Ann Swenson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025, 238 pages, ISBN: 978-0197811863 (hardcover) \$99.00; ISBN: 978-0197811870 (ebook) \$88.99.

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IN *Near Light We Shine*, Sara Ann Swenson provides a luminous ethnography of Buddhist-based charities in Hồ Chí Minh City, a metropolis defined by the relentless speed of global capitalism and the moral anxieties accompanying rapid urbanization. The title, drawn from the Vietnamese proverb *gần đèn thì sáng*, serves as the book's central metaphor: in a city where social ties are frayed and the state has withdrawn social support, participating in charity becomes a way for individuals to “shine” as moral actors. Swenson's work is a vital addition to the study of global Buddhism, shifting the analytical lens from institutionalized monasticism to the fluid, sometimes competitive, and often spontaneous world of lay-led philanthropy.

Swenson's primary contribution lies in her analysis of how people repurpose Buddhist discourses, specifically karma and merit, as practical tools for navigating contemporary Vietnamese life. Based on extended fieldwork between 2015 and 2019 with twenty-five different charities, she argues that they are not merely a revival of dormant traditions. Instead, they represent a contemporary response to the neoliberal responsibility imposed on citizens by a state that no longer provides a comprehensive social safety net. Charity, moreover, takes many forms. People gather to distribute free meals in front of an oncology hospital. They organize bus trips to donate school supplies. They sponsor infrastructure projects such as concrete bridges spanning the many waterways in the Mekong Delta. They draw on their training as social workers and nurses to combat the stigmas of childhood cancer and HIV/AIDS.

The book excels in demonstrating the capaciousness of the category, “Buddhist charity,” showing how different groups invoke different practices and cosmologies. For instance, the older women of the Bridge of Love Foundation (chapter six) blend revolutionary collectivism with ghost propitiation, while the Sunshine Volunteer Club (chapter two) employ social media-driven community building, and Buddhist Youth Service Association (chapter four) offer young people an opportunity to meet potential spouses. By showing this quest to find other good people in a city of strangers, Swenson reveals that charity is as much about self-fashioning and community-building as it is about the accumulation of merit.

Swenson's work makes several significant interventions in the field. First, she challenges the racial and geographic hierarchies often found in Western theories of humanitarianism. By focusing on Vietnamese-led groups serving Vietnamese recipients, she shows how volunteers maintain distance from recipients to avoid creating karmic ties across “ten thousand lifetimes” (*vạn kiếp*), a nuance often missed in secular humanitarian discourse. Some believe these ties could be caused by careless giving, thereby worsening collective karma



which others sought to avoid in the reciprocal obligations entailed by social relationships. By contrast, she shows how volunteers with the Cherished Children Fund (chapter seven) embraced both karmic and social relationships with recipients to effect change.

Second, Swenson shows how people invoke Buddhist discourses in ways that sideline both the monastic sangha, the dharma, and even religious spaces. Buddhist charity, as Swenson describes, exceeds institutionalized religion, in part because volunteers are mistrustful of both Buddhist and state authorities. One volunteer had even turned to a Tibetan monk as an authentic purveyor of Buddhist teachings. But this skepticism also drives volunteers to judge others' worthiness or sincerity in their charity. Swenson notes that, given the competition for people's time and resources, these charities must continually differentiate themselves.

Given the author's focus on charities and their founders, the book spends little time describing what might otherwise be regarded as ritual or symbolic action. On the one hand, relegating these practices to the background allows Swenson to emphasize not just the effort of these volunteers, but also their reasoning as they draw on Buddhist discourses. Swenson focuses, for example, on how volunteers see their actions as combating the negative collective karma from the city's rapid development driven by global capitalism. On the other hand, not all volunteers embrace the identity of "Buddhist," raising the question of how meaningful this label is across the different charities.

Third, the book provides an empathetic look at the tensions that drive a wedge among participants. One such wedge lies at the intersection of Buddhism and LGBTQ+ identity in Vietnam. In chapter two, Swenson describes how two volunteers left the Sunshine Volunteer Corps when the founder announced his engagement, not to the mother of his son, but to another man. Yet newcomers to the group discovered in this action a sense of belonging after having been marginalized by traditional family structures. This analysis aligns Swenson's work with global trends in socially engaged Buddhism and the development of queer sanghas.

Throughout her study, Swenson is mindful of how she describes these charitable activities and her own participation. Her portraits of migrants, grandmothers, university students, and social workers are rendered with loving details, humanizing their efforts to make meaning by engaging in charitable activities. She is frank with the effort it takes to sustain this commitment and the hesitancy that people express about the efficacy of their actions. Her honesty regarding her own positionality, a Norwegian American raised in a Christian household, adds a layer of intellectual honesty that strengthens the book's methodological claims. Ultimately, she successfully demonstrates how the slow-paced, patchworked methods of ethnography yield an understanding about Buddhist moral discourses that theological analysis alone cannot reach.

While *Near Light We Shine* is an exemplary study, it opens several avenues for further inquiry that are critical in understanding Vietnam's contemporary religious landscape. Most notably, Swenson's focus on volunteers could be complemented by a deeper analysis of the institutional and monastic structures that these groups ostensibly bypass. While she notes that these groups operate outside institutionalized Buddhism, she does not fully address why lay Buddhists in Vietnam have been afforded such significant agency. This emphasis on charity outside institutional structures resonates with the importance of the bodhisattva figure, Quán Thế Âm, a ubiquitous figure in Vietnamese Buddhism. While this figure appears throughout the book, there is little sustained discussion of their importance. As another example, from a comparative angle, Swenson's analysis of how these organizers are afforded freedom to carry out their charity could benefit from attention to studies of female monastics in Thailand who have been instrumental in teaching meditation to lay Buddhists.

The latitude of Vietnamese volunteers raises the question of how recipients view their charity. Is it regarded as any less efficacious because the activities are not led or organized by monks? We learn that Fun for All Club (chapter five) organizes events only in places where officials did not misappropriate donations or request

donations (91). Yet even in these places, recipients jumped the line or claimed more than their fair share. The flow of goods that pass through these charities raises questions. Do recipients ever refuse charity without the efficaciousness associated with the sangha? Have monastics or city officials attempted to regulate these groups? These questions matter, or else it is not clear how these Buddhist-based charities differ from other charities, or indeed, if such differences even matter.

Finally, there is a question of survivor bias in the ethnography. Swenson provides a sympathetic portrayal of group founders and active participants, but the perspectives of those who have ceased participating are largely absent. Understanding why individuals walk away from these moral communities or how recipients resist the karmic framing of the aid they receive would have enhanced our understanding of the tensions inherent in these competitive philanthropic spaces.

Ultimately, Sara Ann Swenson has produced a work that is both academically rigorous and deeply human. *Near Light We Shine* is essential reading for scholars of Southeast Asia and global Buddhism. It provides a needed counterpoint to studies of Buddhism in northern Vietnam, such as those by Alexander Soucy and Laurel Kendall, by highlighting the urban and lay-driven dynamics of Vietnam's south. Its emphasis on how residents respond to rapid urbanization by drawing on Buddhist discourses provides a useful complement to Philip Taylor's analysis of Khmer monasteries and myths in the Mekong Delta. Ultimately, Swenson successfully demonstrates that, in the face of capitalism's indifference, the act of giving remains a powerful way to shine light in the modern city.