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Book Review

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Buddhism and Africa

Edited by Michel Clasquin and Kobus Kruger

Reviewed by
Sharon Smith



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Clasquin, Michel and Kobus Kruger, eds. *Buddhism and Africa*. University of South Africa, Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1999, viii + 133 pages, ISBN: 1-86888-139-3, US \$10.00.

What are the issues for Buddhism as it becomes established in Africa? How does the transmission of Buddhism into Africa resemble and differ from its transmission into other environments? What are the future challenges for Buddhism on the continent? These are some of the questions addressed by this edited set of proceedings of the “Buddhism in Africa” conference that took place in South Africa in 1998.

After Kobus Kruger highlights some of the strategic issues for Buddhism in Africa for deliberation, Darrel Wratten gives us a potted history of convert Buddhism in South Africa. The main focus of Wratten’s history, which makes very interesting reading, is the nineteenth century, and his analysis indicates that the presence of Buddhism in Africa is more long-standing than other histories have suggested. Wratten observes that interest in Buddhism was generated within the context of “colonial expansion and missionary endeavours to understand the Other” and pursued by “South African nonconformists—Unitarians, Spiritualists, and Theosophists” (p. 15). Wratten’s study therefore shows, for South Africa at least, considerable similarities to the transmission of Buddhism in the West during the Victorian era.

Louis Van Loon then gives us another history of South African Buddhism, including its current status and future prospects. Though his analysis of ethnic and convert Buddhist communities and the lack of black involvement in the *Sangha* is informative, it is flawed by the omission of Nichiren Daishonin organizations that have a significant presence not only in South Africa, but also in other regions of the continent. As elsewhere in the world, these organizations have achieved a significant black following. This makes his conclusion, that “Buddhism does not fit all that naturally into the present black social or religious mentality” and

that “[f]or too many it is too foreign to their accustomed ways of thinking: too intellectual, philosophical and introspective” (p. 41), considerably less plausible in my view.

There is a rather cryptic presentation from Heila Downey, JDSPN, of Poep Kwang Sa, a Korean Son temple, about “Zen and the Art of Living,” which gives some brief, yet useful information in the subsequent discussion about the center’s ecumenical activities and socially engaged Buddhist work. Following this is an interesting presentation from Master Hui Li. The master is a member of the Fo Kuang Shan, a Taiwanese Buddhist order that is developing a monastery in South Africa. The project faces several challenges, arising not only from the novel concept of monasticism in Africa, but also reduced support for Taiwanese immigration from the post-apartheid regime, leading to lower support from the laity. The chapter is impressive in terms of Master Li’s clear commitment toward and vision of a strong and effective monastic community in South Africa. It also brings to mind several similarities in terms of the issues involved in bringing Eastern Buddhist monasticism to new cultural settings, particularly the West.

Hugh Laue outlines the lineage of the Kagyu Tibetan Buddhist school, the first to become established in South Africa in the 1970s, and he describes how the traditional teachings of the school have been modified to fit a more “Western” context. It appears that in South Africa, as in many parts of the world, most of those interested in Tibetan Buddhism have been white and middle-class. Apparently, though, there are some connections being made by the Kagyu tradition with black Africans elsewhere in Southern Africa.

In her insightful presentation on “The Role of Buddhist Groups in South Africa,” Alison Smith draws out a range of interesting practical issues involved in leading non-aligned *Dharma* groups without a formal Buddhist teacher. Her points about the strengths and weaknesses of mainstream and independent groups and about maintaining momentum in groups where there are both beginners and more experienced practitioners make useful reading for those involved in such groups.

Two of the remaining chapters are rather disappointing when compared to the promise held by the reader. The first, “African Religion and the Africanisation of Religions: a Panel Discussion,” and the other by Michel Clasquin, “Buddhism and African Thought,” seek to uncover reasons for low involvement by black people in Buddhism in South Africa. This is welcomed, but while there is much speculation on the possible crossovers between “African thought” and Buddhism, there is little attention paid to developments outside of South Africa and in the Nichiren Daishonin sects, sects that have led to significant black involvement in Buddhism. The speculations on “African thought” also tend to simplify what is an extremely diverse and complex set of religious and cultural practices within South Africa, let alone the rest of the continent. At one point in the panel discussion, Georgina Hamilton suggests that “there may be a way in which we could stop conceiving of ourselves as, or stop being so much, the small elitist movement, the elitist and atomised gatherings around Buddhist ideas” (p. 87). Apart from this, it is surprising that, with the impact of the previously long-standing apartheid regime and its effects in segregating faith communities, neither of these presentations consider the potential impact of such segregation. Given the recent focus in the United States on trying to move beyond what Charles Prebish, in *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America*, refers to as “residual insensitivity” around issues of racial and cultural diversity and disadvantage, this is a strange omission to the debate about widening racial diversity within the *Sangha* (1999: 109).

Perhaps this is to be expected given the relative newness of the convert *Sangha* in South Africa. In his presentation, “African Buddhists? Some Issues in Buddhist Transmission Across Cultures,” Raoul Birnbaum considers some of the issues involved based on the experience of Buddhists in the United States. He points to several issues that are similar for Buddhists in the West, including those surrounding monasticism, prostration, and the Buddha image. Although he points out that the history of the United States, like that of South Africa, has been marked by colonialism, it is unfortunate that he does not go into more detail about the potential

challenges and opportunities that this may pose for Buddhism as it meets the diverse populations of the United States and South Africa.

Overall, this book provides an informative picture of meditation-based Buddhist groups in South Africa. It shows that there is very little difference between such communities in South Africa and those in the West, in terms of the people that tend to be attracted to it—mainly white and middle-class—and of the issues involved in translating Buddhism to these new settings. The book also provides photographs of key figures and temples of these groups, and there is a useful bibliography of works relating to Buddhism in South Africa. If someone is looking for a comprehensive picture of Buddhism on the African continent, this book will disappoint him or her. It does, however, give us a snapshot of one of the newer parts of the Buddhist world as it examines itself in its early stages of development, and that is worthwhile in itself.

Reviewed by

Sharon Smith
Department of Historical and Cultural Studies
University of London, Goldsmiths' College
hsp01ses@gold.ac.uk