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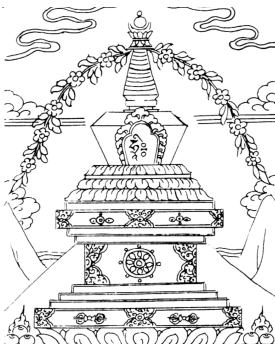
Book Review

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American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship.

Edited by Duncan Ryūken Williams and Christopher S. Queen

Reviewed by
Dan Capper



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Williams, Duncan Ryūken and Christopher S. Queen, eds.

American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship.

Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999. xxxvii + 329 pages. ISBN 0-7007-1081-7, £ 40.00.

The study of Buddhism in the United States has suffered from a great deal of neglect for most of the more than a century that Buddhism has been in America. The last decade has seen this neglect redressed somewhat due to a spate of recent scholarly publications. This volume reflects this trend in incorporating a number of quality essays covering some of the variety of Buddhism to be found in America. It also injects vitality into this trend both through its origins in a high-visibility conference at the Harvard Divinity School in May of 1997 and through the heuristic value of several essays that should reap fruit in future research in terms of both content and method.

The foreword to the volume by Diana Eck aptly sets up a number of issues to be tackled by the contributors as she calls attention to the diversity of Buddhisms in the United States as well as to the need for methodological diversity for their proper study. This is followed by a short preface by Duncan Ryūken Williams. Christopher Queen then provides an ample and sophisticated introduction to the volume. Surveying the contributions, Queen tells us that “recognizable patterns of American Buddhism are emerging in every quarter” (p. xvi). These patterns include democratization, which includes laicization and feminization; pragmatism, or an emphasis on ritual and observance over belief; and engagement, or activism within different levels of social involvement. Queen tells us that the book is entitled “American Buddhism” rather than “Buddhism in America” to reflect these emerging patterns, which appear across the so-called ethnic-convert divide to create specifically American patterns of Buddhist manifestation.

The main section of the book is divided into four parts: Asian American Buddhist Identities, Profiling the New Buddhists, Modes of *Dharma*

Transmission, and The Scholar's Place in American Buddhist Studies. Kenneth Tanaka initiates the first part with an investigation into the Buddhist Churches of America. Through historical analysis complemented by surveys, Tanaka traces the ebb and flow of the importance of Japanese ethnicity for BCA members. According to Tanaka, ethnicity was of crucial importance to the BCA early in the twentieth century in response to xenophobic hostility. More recently, ethnicity has become replaced in importance by the spiritual, rather than purely ethnic, identity it now offers a more diversified membership. With this Tanaka helpfully problematizes the reigning "Two Buddhisms" (ethnic and convert) theory of American Buddhism in two ways. First, Tanaka offers evidence that the BCA is, to some degree, a non-parallel—in Paul Numrich's terms—congregation, as both Asian Americans and Euro-Americans may participate in an identical religious milieu. Even more, Tanaka, in showing the historical shift of the BCA, strikes a blow at the perception that Asian American Buddhism is merely a cultural phenomenon, while convert Buddhism is the home of "real" Buddhist spiritual pursuits.

The next essay by Senryō Asai and Duncan Ryūken Williams intends to reveal that death rituals and maintenance of Japanese culture remain the primary pursuit of major ethnic Japanese Zen temples in Honolulu, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. In contrast to Tanaka's essay, the authors propose a division in American Zen between the "zazenless Zen" of ethnic temples and the earnest pursuit of meditation among convert practitioners. They follow a database sampling method into temple financial records in order to make their point, an approach that is somewhat novel and welcome in the study of American Buddhism. Unfortunately, they fail to make full use of the numerical data that they provide in their analysis, which therefore remains somewhat superficial.

Stuart Chandler then offers a fine essay that investigates the scandal that erupted in 1996 regarding the Hsi Lai Chinese temple in Hacienda, California, as well as an event attended by Vice President Al Gore that raised \$140,000 for the Democratic National Committee. Chandler, who was fortuitously engaged in fieldwork with the Buddhist organization

when the scandal broke, offers an ethnographic account that attempts to dispel misunderstandings surrounding the participation of Hsi Lai members and leadership. According to his account, motivation by temple members in the scandal less concerned influence peddling for Taiwanese interests than it reflected the Buddhist practices of recognition of gratitude and establishing “friendly relations” (*chieh-yman*). Although scope limited his ability to address methodological issues more fully in this paper, Chandler’s participatory experience remains fertile ground for more fully exploring the role of the researcher in postmodern ethnographic theory and practice. Chandler’s essay is followed by Penny Van Esterik’s lean ethnographic examination of the changed roles of the *Soukhouan* ritual and *That Luang* sacred site in the creation of identity and community among Laotian immigrants in Toronto.

Thomas Tweed begins the section about convert Buddhists by asking the still-seminal question “Who is a Buddhist?” in an essay that has the potential to spark some controversy. Claiming that “essentialist” definitions of Buddhist identity, along with methods that count membership or participation, fail to account for the diversity of Buddhist identity orientations among non-Asian converts, Tweed offers a straightforward solution: self-identification. That is, adherence to Buddhism should be determined by self-report rather than by more experience-distant scholarly methods. For Tweed, this allows examination of Americans who have influenced and been influenced by Buddhism, yet to this date have been excluded by scholars. Included in Tweed’s rather open stance is his proposed comparative religion category of “sympathizers,” that is, people who entertain various degrees of involvement with Buddhism, yet do not self-identify themselves as Buddhists.

James Coleman follows with a useful essay that uses survey data to paint a sociological portrait of convert Buddhists. Although Coleman is careful to indicate the preliminary nature of his research findings, he received return rates between 50% and 90% with N=359 at seven major Buddhist centers, adding methodological strength to his account. While some of the data he presents is unsurprising—such as the preponderance

of educated, middle-class Caucasians in these groups—this pilot essay for a larger study allows dimensions of convert Buddhism to emerge from the shadows of impressionistic, if shared, academic experience and become solid sociological data of value to scholars.

Continuing this survey-based sociological approach, Phillip Hammond and David Machacek explore the appeal of Buddhism to potential converts in terms of both supply, or availability of Buddhist options; and demand, or the sociocultural “pushes” motivating a turn to Buddhism by converts. They pursue this investigation through their own survey of Sōka Gakkai members, a study tailored after and compared with the General Social Survey, which they perceive to represent American public opinion at large. They present some interesting findings, such as the initial attraction to community of converts that declines, but is replaced by, the experience of successful chanting. However, to delineate personality traits typical of converts, they construct a flawed “Transmodernism Index,” a high score on which indicates ripeness for conversion to Sōka Gakkai and presumably for all forms of Buddhism. This index remains problematic because Sōka Gakkai members may not be as representative of all convert Buddhists as the authors would have us believe. Even more, there is very little specifically Buddhist about this index other than the fact that it derives from reports of some Sōka Gakkai members, since Buddhists hardly have a monopoly on affirmative responses to statements like, “Happiness cannot be achieved through things external to the self” (p. 110).

An excellent essay on inter-Buddhist associations by Paul Numrich inaugurates the section on *Dharma* transmission. Numrich enriches this essay, whose sustained focus is on the Buddhist Council of the Midwest, with historical treatments of other regional associations, national associations, international associations, and inter-Buddhist dialogues in Ashokan India, Tantric India, medieval Sri Lanka, and Tokugawa Japan. Methodologically, Numrich presents an insightful understanding of three strategies that such associations might pursue: assimilation to a dominant position, pluralistic tolerance of multiple voices, and fusion of plural

voices into a new synthesis. Using this tripartite model, Numrich's essay reveals assimilation as a dominant strategy in Asian history; pluralism as the most common strategy for contemporary American groups; and fusion resulting in a *Navayana*, or new pan-Buddhist Vehicle, a still-distant goal for those who dream of it.

Charles Strain, curiously lacking from the notes about contributors, tackles the environmental ethics of Gary Snyder through a literary critical approach. Strain contends that Snyder ably synthesizes Mahayana Buddhist, contemporary secular American, and other environmental approaches in his apophatic "practice of the wild." For Strain, this practice creates a powerful new option for environmental ethics that appropriates positive qualities of other perspectives while transcending them.

Richard Hayes offers impressions gleaned from e-mails from Buddhists as part of the "Buddhist" and "Buddha-L" internet discussion groups that he has moderated for several years. For Hayes, the "intimacy, immediacy, and anonymity" of these discussion groups allow scholars and practitioners of Buddhism to reveal their Jungian "shadows" in a way that they would not to their *Lama* or *Rōshi*. Hayes' descriptions of the contours of the collective shadow of American Buddhists that he has encountered reveal several themes, including the emotional intensity of differing beliefs about the necessity for a spiritual teacher and the doctrines of karma and rebirth; the tendency to see "Right View" of the Fourth Noble Truth in terms of a Christian-like creed; general agreement about the need for keeping some ethical precepts with resulting disagreement about the nature of the precepts; vegetarianism and its discontents; and his surprise at the number of Buddhists who supported the Gulf War despite ostensible Buddhist pacifism. Hayes closes his essay by remarking that convert Buddhists usually have a dim knowledge of Buddhist institutional and intellectual history and that it is the duty of scholars of Buddhism to rectify this problem.

The final section of the book discusses the role of Buddhism in American higher education. Echoing his recent work *Luminous Passage*, Charles Prebish offers an interesting essay regarding the role of personal

Buddhist commitments in the development of American Buddhist Studies. Prebish courageously states what some shy away from publicly: to reveal a personal commitment to Buddhism within the academy is to invite doubts about one's scholarly abilities, yet to hide such involvement obscures essential data regarding Buddhism, the object of study. Through a general survey within the American Academy of Religion and two surveys that he personally undertook, Prebish describes the historical contours of the development of Buddhist Studies over the last few decades. With this data, Prebish proposes a greater visibility and participation of academics in non-academic American Buddhist realms in the late twentieth century. What this means for Prebish is that convert scholar-practitioners increasingly come to fill the role of the *gantha-dhura*, or scholar-monk, who has had a profound pedagogical history in Asia yet is relatively lacking in the United States.

The role of religion in American higher education represents the theme of the essay contributed by Robert Goss. Goss provides context for his exploration of the contemplative education programs at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, through a review of literature concerning Christian higher education and its apparent demise. This literature laments the loss of moral and spiritual values from American society arising from pressures for accreditation and an educational nonsectarian approach. Goss offers Naropa, with its spiritual yet pluralist approach to education, as a model path for navigating the Scylla of a return to sectarian Protestant hegemony and the Charybdis of an amoral higher education orientation.

Richard Seager rounds out the collection of essays with his description of his personal scholarly turns from Eastern religions to Western religions in the United States to writing a new textbook on Buddhism in America. In his essay, Seager offers a valuable review of important literature pertaining to the study of Buddhism in the United States and a quite helpful bibliography. Interestingly, Seager ends with the claim that "It is too early to make a call on what American Buddhism is" (p. 253). This is ironic in light of the "recognizable patterns" delineated by Queen's introduction to the volume. Yet rather than representing a simple

contradiction, this disagreement instead might be taken to represent the positive, vigorous ferment of American Buddhism and its interpreters.

The book finishes with two appendices that are a bibliographic *tour de force*. Compiled by Duncan Ryūken Williams, these appendices present lists of American theses and dissertations concerning American Buddhism and topics related to Buddhism, respectively.

In their contributions, Prebish, Chandler, and Hayes discuss the roles of the scholar of Buddhism in American Buddhist worlds outside of the academy. As I described above, Prebish descriptively presents the lay scholar-practitioner as holding the structural position that scholar-monks have held in Asian cultures. Chandler and Hayes are more normative, finding it the duty of the scholar to correct misunderstandings of Buddhism by non-academics in the public sphere. Leaving aside the dangers of such approaches for lapsing into an advocacy unbecoming the image of the “objective” Western scholar, the attention paid to the activist role of the scholar in non-academic realms is intriguing. If these writers are correct, what we see emerging here is a unique spin on the issue of scholarly participation in the object of study, a tacit formation of “applied Buddhist Studies.” In this light, perhaps the sequels to this volume will recognize scholar activism as an essential pattern in Buddhism in the United States as it develops even more into “American Buddhism.”

Reviewed by

Dan Capper
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Hartwick College
capperd@hartwick.edu