

Book Review

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The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition

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The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition by James William Coleman. New York: Oxford University Press 2001, 272 pages, ISBN: 0-19-515241-7, (paperback), US \$14.95.

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*T*his book is one of an increasing number of works on Western Buddhism. It differs from many of the others in that it seems to have been written for the express purpose of serving as a text that can be used to teach courses on Western Buddhism to undergraduate students, rather than as a communiqué to fellow academics. The language is commendably clear and the book is well laid-out.

The book starts out with a quick overview of the Asian heritage of Buddhism, moves on to the introduction of Buddhism to the Western world, and concludes with chapters discussing the phenomenon of Western Buddhism with reference to the various forms of practice to be found in it, the thorny issues of sex and power relations that have rocked Western Buddhism in recent decades, and finally with a

reflection on the place Buddhism may take within broader Western society. All this is backed up with reference to Coleman's own empirical research, and indeed the questionnaire used in his research is included as an appendix. This could be very useful to the student unsure of how to proceed with research.

If there is to be a point of criticism, it is just this: the title gives one the impression that we will be reading a general overview of Western Buddhism as a whole. But this does not happen, for the book is tightly focused on Buddhism in the USA. British Buddhism gets a passing mention as the point of origin of Alan Watts; French Buddhism is similarly only engaged with as the home base of Thich Nhat Hanh. Australia? Canada? Germany? If there is Western Buddhism in those countries, one would never guess it from reading this book.

This is not in itself such a bad thing. There certainly is room within this field for a good, focused study of Buddhism in the USA. But when the subtitle of a book announces that it will deal with "The Western Transformation" of Buddhism, one is led to expect more. Does Coleman mean to imply that Western Buddhism worldwide is so uniform that it can be described adequately if we discuss just one part of it? Religion-state relations are quite different elsewhere in the Western world, for example, in Germany and the Netherlands. One would also like to see how the sex scandals that erupted in US Buddhist circles in the 80s and 90s were viewed in other western societies. And so the book seems to fly a false flag. This may not be Coleman's fault at all — one suspects the hidden hand of a commissioning editor here. If we think of this book as "The New Buddhism. The American Transformation of an Ancient Tradition" we get a much clearer picture of the book's contents.

Other criticisms could be raised, but would be minor. A little more

rigorous copy-editing would have been useful at times: for example, the big event in Chicago in 1893 is variously referred to as the "World Congress of Religions" (p. 7, index) or the "World Parliament of Religions" (p. 57-60). Even where two possible terms do exist, in a book of this nature it is generally better to pick a term and stick with it.

I would recommend that university lecturers who are about to offer a course in Western Buddhism give this book serious consideration. It will need to be supplemented with material on Western Buddhism outside the USA, either in the form of lectures or in that of additional reading material. But the ground that Coleman does cover, he covers thoroughly and in an easy-to-read fashion.