

Book Review

Journal of Global Buddhism 6 (2005): 7 - 11



Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada

Buddhism in America. By Wendy Cadge. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004. x + 268 pages, ISBN: 0-226-08900-2 (paperback), US \$22.50.

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ISSN 1527-6457

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*H*earthwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in

America is arguably the most significant publication on American Buddhism in several years. While experts such as Charles Prebish, Duncan Williams, and Kenneth Tanaka have edited a number of excellent anthologies on Western Buddhism, and some notable book-length overviews of the phenomenon have appeared (such as Richard Seager's *Buddhism in America*, 1999), not since Paul Numrich's path-breaking *Old Wisdom in the New World* (1996) has such a substantial, in-depth ethnography of multiple Buddhist temples in America been produced.

The heart of this book is Cadge's fieldwork at two Theravada-associated Buddhist congregations on the East Coast. Wat Mongkoltepmunee (a.k.a. Wat Phila) is a Thai-dominated temple in

Philadelphia in the Dhammakaya lineage, while Cambridge Insight Meditation Center (CIMC) is a primarily white convert center focused on Vipassana meditation as taught in a number of twentieth century lineages. Preparing food, serving the monks, meditating, chanting, teaching English, and participating in other aspects of the lives of these groups, Cadge presents a richly textured portrait of two thriving communities of American Buddhists. In the process we learn many details about how each was set up, the activities and viewpoints of the attendees, the roles of laypeople and teachers, and how Buddhist identities are asserted, reformulated, and disputed.

What is perhaps most interesting about Cadge's account are the similarities she discerns between Wat Phila and CIMC. Prevailing narratives about Buddhism in America have tended to highlight differences between so-called "ethnic" and "white" or "cradle" and "convert" Buddhisms. While Cadge is sensitive to the many ways in which her two groups of consultants imagine and enact Buddhism differently, she also demonstrates that similar attitudes and practices can be found in both communities. Rather than poles, the Thai temple and the white meditation center are positions on a shared spectrum, with individual practitioners falling in a wide range of points with significant overlap. The dual focus of her work allows Cadge to avoid the mistakes made when focusing on just a single type of temple, and she is thus able to resist making claims of uniqueness for either of her two communities.

In the course of her ethnography, Cadge tackles and partially deconstructs many assumptions about Buddhism in America. As it turns out, the largest portion of the Asian-American community is not simply holding on to Old World traditions. Rather, most participants at Wat Phila have achieved their Buddhist identities as adults through a

process of re-conversion, consciously re-inventing themselves on American soil through a process of deeper dedication and active searching that goes well beyond ideas of “baggage Buddhism.” Meanwhile, Cadge deftly demonstrates that superficial notions of white convert Buddhism as individualistic overlook the informal but real networks of relationships that are established at meditation centers, which many practitioners come to value deeply. Cadge’s work builds on but also goes beyond the common ideas of “two Buddhisms” in America; she doesn’t seek to reject such typologies, but instead complicates them by offering a variety of other possible categorizations, most notably a three-part scheme based on where the founders of a temple were born, where the attendees of a temple were born, or what lineage a temple associates itself with. None of these categorizations actively discards the two or three Buddhisms approaches advocated in earlier studies. Instead, they cut across the grain in creative ways that offer new possibilities for conceptualizing and organizing American Buddhism. And by offering multiple possible typologies and refusing to commit to any single one, Cadge highlights the diversity of American Buddhism that makes any attempt at a final systemization futile.

Heartwood is a study in how to do ethnography in America right, and new researchers preparing to go into the field will find a useful model to emulate in its pages. Cadge pays careful attention to the roles of material culture, gender, ethnicity, food, cosmology, sectarian identity, and other issues that recur in the stories of Wat Phila and CIMC, and she adeptly situates herself without becoming the center of the story. She is particularly good at teasing out the nuances in how different people describe their faith and their understanding of Buddhism, showing how both communities include a considerable range of ideas and orientations that would be overlooked by more superficial

treatments. One of the most interesting phenomena she perceives is the relationship between sound and silence in each community. The Asian-American temple is considerably louder than the hushed atmosphere of the meditation community. Though she doesn't explore this possibility, it may be that a further connection can be made between the orality of the Thai temple, where teachings and traditions are passed down through families and talks by monks, and the greater textuality of the converts, many of whom first encounter Buddhism through books and continue to seek wisdom as much through written works as from their peers at the center.

While *Heartwood* is overall a very strong work, there are a few areas of relative weakness. For one, Cadge doesn't adequately inform the reader that the Dhammakaya lineage of Wat Phila is a small minority strain within Thai Buddhism that is viewed by some researchers as a New Religious Movement. While certainly sharing much in common with the more representative Mahanikaya and Dhammayut lineages, some aspects of this Dhammakaya temple may not apply to other forms of Thai Buddhism in the United States, and Cadge might have made this point more explicitly. Also, Cadge uncritically accepts the rejection of ritual by her CIMC consultants even while telling us that silent seated meditation forms the backbone of the community. In doing so she misses the highly ritualistic nature of meditation practice, an activity that is performed in repetitious, stereotyped patterns, according to clear rules about posture and process. A religious activity doesn't have to be "smells and bells" to be ritual.

Cadge's book is important not only because it provides such a competent view into the workings of two American Buddhist communities and expands on previous work in the study of Buddhism in the West, but also because it contributes to such other fields as

American religion, transnational religion, and Asian-American studies. She is comfortable discussing and even refuting major ideas from these other fields; for instance, Cadge points out how her communities clearly violate the claims about clear boundaries and growth propounded by Christian Smith in his work on American evangelical Christians. If *Heartwood* is any indication of the health of the field, then Buddhism in America continues to be a fit area of study that is both building on its past and producing new ways to approach its subject.