

Book review

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American Buddhism as a Way of Life.

Edited by Gary Storhoff and John Whalen-Bridge. SUNY Series in Buddhism and American Culture. Albany: SUNY Press, 2010, xii + 217 pages, ISBN 978-1-4384-3093-5 (hardcover), \$75.00; ISBN 978-1-4384-3094-2 (paperback), \$24.95.

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B o o k R e v i e w

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American Buddhism as a Way of Life is a multi-author collection of articles divided into three sections Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Editors Gary Storhoff and John Whalen-Bridge present it as the second volume in a SUNY Press series devoted to American Buddhism. The first, *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, examined the influence of Buddhism in modernist authors such as Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, and writers of color such as Maxine Hong Kingston. This volume takes its inspiration from Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life* and views Buddhism, to quote Hadot, "both in its exercise and effort to achieve wisdom."

Part I, "Buddha: The Teacher as Immigrant" is devoted to Great Britain's Alan Watts and Japan's D.T. Suzuki, both of whom played important roles in the formative decades of Euro-American Buddhism. David L. Smith's "The Authenticity of Alan Watts" takes on the rehabilitation of Watts's reputation as a significant spiritual teacher, which recalls, in the process, the eclectic orientation of many in the beat/hip generations who made Eastward turns in the course of the 1960s cultural revolution. In a similar vein, Carl T. Jackson's "D.T. Suzuki, Suzuki Zen, and the American Reception of Zen Buddhism" revisits the contributions made to the dharma by the pioneer in light of scholarship published in the 1990s devoted to the Kyoto school and the reshaping of Japanese Buddhism in the course of the lead-up to World War II. Jackson's defense of Suzuki against charges of nationalism, proselytizing, and undue essentialism is augmented by Ellen Perlman's brief account of her interview with Mihoko Okamura, Suzuki's secretary during the last fifteen years of his life.

Part II, "Dharma: Doctrine, Belief, and Practice in America" offers varied perspectives on the contribution of Buddhist values to American social discourse. Michael C. Brannigan describes how Theravada ideas about no-self and interconnectedness can recast bioethical debates about both medical futility and aging. Rita M. Gross turns the Buddhist value of not taking life on its head to explore ways in which it can contribute to the pro-choice position in the abortion debate. Judy D. Whipps limns the parallel terrain shared by Mahayana engaged Buddhism and American pragmatism. While these three essays address concrete ways in which Buddhist values can be made operant in contemporary American society, John Kitterman takes a different, more intellectualist, tack that draws upon Jacques Lacan, Frederic Jameson, Slavoj Žižek, and Jürgen

Habermas. He describes the pursuit of enlightenment in contemporary America in post-modernist terms as a praxis directly engaged with what he provocatively calls “identity theft”—the crisis of selfhood and widespread alienation generated by late capitalist consumerism, the commodification of spiritual concepts such as nirvana, and the proliferation of media technologies.

Part III, “Sangha, Who Is an American Buddhist?” offers various perspectives on American Buddhist identity. Charles S. Prebish covers the “two Buddhisms” question then redirects his attention to Asian norms regarding the role of the laity in the traditional four-fold sangha as a starting point for a look at ways in which the dharma is being inculcated within some American Buddhist families. Lori Pierce takes a new look at how Buddhism functioned as an identity marker among *nisei* (second-generation) Japanese-Americans. Roger Corless discusses how reified, often unconscious, heterosexist norms undermine the non-dualistic spiritual ideals of both Christianity and Buddhism, and he suggests ways in which gay consciousness and male-on-male symbolic relatedness may offer both a corrective and remedy. In a different vein, Jeff Wilson expands upon typical notions of Buddhist practice by examining the role of the Zen garden at the Rochester Zen Center. Temple gardens are important not only because of their aesthetic and contemplative appeal. They also serve social functions such as picnicking and are venues for Zen practice such as mindful sweeping, raking, pruning, and planting.

With its evocation of Buddhism as a way of life and its organization in terms of Buddha, dharma, and sangha, this collection seems to promise a fairly comprehensive view of the wildly complex terrain of America’s emerging Buddhism. It reads, however, more like a series of snapshots of Euro-American Buddhism in the 1980s when many of the standards current in the community were first taking shape. While the quality of the essays is generally high, some cover familiar ground while others seem dated insofar as the Buddhist community continues to evolve today in many different social and philosophical directions. To my mind, the strongest essay is Smith’s on Alan Watts whose contributions to American spiritual culture in the 1970s need to be reappreciated, but I think he overestimates Watts’s long term contribution to American Buddhism per se. Treating him as immigrant teacher along with Suzuki, moreover, only serves to point to other important immigrant teachers who had an immense early influence (such as Shunryū Suzuki, Taizan Maezumi, and Chōgyam Trungpa), not to mention the raft of immigrant teachers still at work in American Buddhist communities today. Aside from the consideration of *nisei* identity issues, Asian-American Buddhists make little appearance in the volume, a glaring oversight, but one consistently made by authors who think about the dharma exclusively in Euro-Americans terms.

But, taken as a whole, *American Buddhism as a Way of Life* provides readers with insightful presentations of critical interpretations of the dharma in the United States. It should be of interest to recent arrivals in the Buddhist community in that it provides an orientation to some of the social and religious norms widely accepted among Euro-American Buddhists today. Veterans preoccupied with the hands-on issues of long-term Buddhist practice may also appreciate being reminded of some of the foundational issues that give a distinctly western and American cast to their community. At the same time, the volume could have been presented as a series of essays concerned with historical perspectives on the

Euro-American dharma in the United States because it does little to capture the complexity of the Buddhist community today and breaks little if any significant new ground.