

## Book review

*Journal of Global Buddhism* 13 (2012): 81-85



*Nothing & Everything: The Influence of  
Buddhism on the American Avant-Garde  
1942 - 1962.*

By Ellen Pearlman. Berkeley: Evolver Editions, 2012, 264  
pages, ISBN 978-1583943632 (paperback), \$21.95.

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B o o k   R e v i e w

***Nothing & Everything: The Influence of Buddhism on the American Avant-Garde 1942 - 1962.*** By Ellen Pearlman. Berkeley: Evolver Editions, 2012, 264 pages, ISBN 978-1583943632 (paperback), \$21.95.

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Ellen Pearlman does a pretty bang-up job in a too slim volume on the subject of Buddhism's effect on the American avant-garde from 1942 to 1962. Because of the specificity of the time line, this is mostly the influence of Zen Buddhism as popularized by the writings of premier Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki.

The early chapter on D.T. Suzuki himself may be the gem of the entire book. We have an intimate portrait of a man often seen as basically an academic more than a practitioner of Zen. Here the whole person emerges, and we see how special (and brilliant) he was, and the depth of his actual practice, which includes a description of his *kensho* or flash of enlightenment.

The chapter on John Cage that follows this one is also exceptional, with a similar portrait to Suzuki's of both the man and his music. For those unfamiliar with Cage, his concerts were playful and maddening, using randomness, instruments that could include household items, and even the shifts of the uncomfortable audience in their seats to suggest an almost enforced Zen sitting confrontation with boredom and inattentiveness.

The book ends very nicely with a dovetailing account of Beats Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Peter Orlovsky meeting D.T. Suzuki in 1957. It is a story that has been told elsewhere, but here we also get the memories of Suzuki's then-secretary Mihoko Okamura and her own account of Suzuki's positive summation of the Beats, even as he understood the discipline that was still absent.

As Pearlman gets into considerably denser material with Suzuki's influence beyond and through Cage, it is hard not to sense a need to hurry things up in the limited time she has left. Descriptions of the Fluxus group that came out of Cage, and the influence of Zen on Abstract Expressionist painters such as Jackson Pollock becomes increasingly a laundry list and brief catalog sketch. There is still room to discuss the pre-surrealist movement Dada and the strangely Western karma of Zen-influenced art on a newly secular postwar Japanese avant-garde. There is the intuited if unintentional Zen of presenting a urinal as art (with Marcel Duchamp signing it "R. Mutt") as a natural progression that would eventually yield Andy Warhol's soup cans, both artists likely without awareness of Zen theory of the ordinary and the boring. Besides a secondary influence of Buddhists such as Cage on an artist like Warhol, one might also consider artists naturally arriving (as perhaps Duchamp did) at some

of the same empiric conclusions about mind itself in efforts to deconstruct concept and perception.

By the time we reach the New York collaboration between Saburo Hasegawa, the first Japanese abstract painter, the Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi, and Franz Kline the European-American painter, the absence of good photographs becomes somewhat like listening to a restaurant menu. It is fascinating, important, but very hard to grasp without previous knowledge.

The tidy thesis of Suzuki as prime source works well for the most part, except with its lack of influence on Kerouac, who found his Buddhism elsewhere in the public library and was drawn to different elements closer to Theravada and (at least in spirit) Pure Land Schools of China and Japan, the latter mostly because of his Catholic background and propensity for religious devotion. Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen were clearly influenced by D.T. Suzuki, but Ginsberg's Buddhism is owed primarily to Kerouac, and doesn't really even begin to blossom until his trip to India in 1962, even if he had read D.T. Suzuki prior even to hearing about Buddhism from Kerouac. Kerouac in his book *Dharma Bums* shows he is not all that interested in Zen specifically, even after meeting Snyder and Whalen.

Also seriously missing from a book that purports to be more than Zen-biased, there is no mention of Walter Evans-Wentz, an anthropologist and writer who was a pioneer in the study of Tibetan Buddhism. His *Tibetan Book of the Dead* came out from Oxford University Press in 1927, followed by three other books all the way until 1954, each with its own impact. A piece of his *Milarepa* biography, published in 1951, was included in Dwight Goddard's *Buddhist Bible*, itself one of the most influential books on Kerouac. The *Milarepa* biography that John Cage is supposed to have read according to Pearlman can only be this Evans-Wentz translation.

As mentioned, Pearlman knows her American avant-garde very well for the most part, and her collecting together of John Cage, his off-shoot influence on the art group Fluxus, and the Abstract Expressionists is a major feat and clear exposition of how two decades' artistic explorations beyond rational mind found a territory that Zen had already charted with mastery.

Strangely, the history of American avant-garde film is totally ignored. According to *American Magus*, Harry Smith read the Evans-Wentz *Tibetan Book of the Dead* in the 1950s and one can see its influence in some of his short films including *Early Abstractions, Pt. 4*, finished in 1957. Jordan Belson made a number of Eastern related films, including *Mandala* in 1953. Stan Brakhage met John Cage in 1954 and used his music in a film (*In Between*, 1955). This would just be a very partial start in connecting Buddhism to experimental film.

Pearlman knows her Beat material with less authority. Part of the problem is not her lack of primary source material, but her choice of source material. She quotes Allen Ginsberg remembering Jack Kerouac singing Buddhist refuge vows in 1952. Since she goes on in a few short paragraphs to describe Kerouac's accidental discovery of Buddhism through his readings of Thoreau in 1953, and then checking out Dwight Goddard's *Buddhist Bible* in 1954, Ginsberg's memory is suspect. Closer study of Ginsberg's timelines as given in interviews will often yield contradictions, like meeting his main teacher Chogyam Trungpa in either 1970 or

1971 (1971 seems more likely). He forgot for years that he'd already met Trungpa in 1962 in India until he saw a photo Gary Snyder took—a photo included in this book. Pearlman credits Ginsberg with the famous poetic mind training slogan “First Thought, Best Thought” but in a footnote declares there are two points of view about its origin. The other source is given as Chogyam Trungpa. But a slightly more in-depth investigation will show that there is a third view, that it came out of a mutual conversation between them, as Ginsberg mentions in an interview in the book *Big Sky Mind*. Clearly the “formula” came from more than one source for Ginsberg, Kerouac being the primary one, but it is even mentioned in William Blake. The slogan itself, however, was likely cooked up by Ginsberg and his guru. To Pearlman's credit, she does unearth a particularly obscure late remark from Ginsberg, “do ‘first thought, no thought,’ and see what comes from that” or arises (141). It would seem Ginsberg was actually presenting meditation instructions to get at what a fresh thought is, the thought that arises after a gap. One can imagine with all his poetry students, he had finally formulated a way to explain it simply, that a fresh uncontrived thought was the one to notice, and how it occurred.

Likewise, Pearlman states that Kerouac was done with Buddhism “for good” by 1960. But she neglects his *Satori in Paris* novella that was published in 1966, based on his trip the previous year. In one of Kerouac's most famous interviews by Ted Berrigan, published in *Paris Review* 1968, and conducted in 1967, Kerouac has quite a bit to say about the influence of Mahayana Buddhism on his work. He quotes the Buddha—“I cannot use your abuse, you may have it back,” a paraphrase from the Akkosa Sutta—a line he uses again when he appears on William F. Buckley's *Firing Line* in 1968, less than a year before his death.

In all fairness, Kerouac declares himself a Catholic as well in that last TV appearance, and though he asked Ginsberg to see the taping from the audience, he puts him down from the stage. This is a portrait of an emotionally confused man in the final depths of alcoholism. I have no doubt that Pearlman found declarations from Kerouac of being done “for good” with Buddhism not only in 1960, but all the way to his death. Kerouac also condemned Ginsberg on many occasions, but clearly reverses it again and again. If we go with the sentiments of Gelek Rinpoche and Gary Snyder quoted at the beginning of this section, American Buddhism's establishment may owe more to Jack Kerouac than any other name mentioned in this book's two decade timeline. Thus, it's important to get his timeline right as well.

At least Pearlman usually cites the sources that confuse her history of the Beats. Her sources on Buddhism when it wanders from journalism to interpretation are rarely cited. Her exposition of the five *skandhas* or “heaps” of mental cognition (form, feeling, sensation-impulse, concept and consciousness) that establish the illusion of a self goes according to classic Abhidharma text except for the first, the *skandha* of form, where she refers to the freshness of awareness rising from primordial ground prior to splitting into a sense of self and other, but she refers to the split itself in the *skandha* of feeling. In this book she equates the first *skandha* with *thatatha*, “suchness,” then does not name this first *skandha* at all. Why would Abhidharma make the distinction if this were the case? See Chogyam Trungpa's commentary in his *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism* for a lively yet more traditional teaching on the five *skandhas*.

It is Tibetan Buddhism that gets some of the shakiest exposition. For example, Yamantaka is called here the Lord of Death. Actually the name means The Terminator of the Lord of Death, Yama. Here Yamantaka is also called a Mahakala, which means "Great Black Male" and refers to the class of protectors that share this quality. Yamantaka, generally not black, is usually identified as a *yidam*, or "tutelary deity." This is in reference to what Ginsberg later said about his own non-drug psychedelic experiences of the late 1940s, which included hearing the voice of Blake.

We can surmise that any artists getting their hands on peyote, or coming into contact with beginning experiments with mushrooms and LSD that both the CIA and Timothy Leary were conducting even before the book's cut-off of 1962, would be curious about Eastern religions and occultism and would read what they could about these religions. Why? Because the effect of these drugs was primarily to show an essentially materialistic culture that mind seemed to be the source of all phenomena. Pearlman discusses this repeatedly, but also does not distinguish where drugs and Buddhism depart from each other.

The biggest issues are unstated. Is there a reference point in true illumination? Is mind the perceiver of all phenomena and therefore a self or soul? Is a pantheistic oneness the same as *satori*? Buddha declared *anatta*, no *atman*, i.e., that there is perceiving without a perceiver. This is critical, standard Buddhism, and what sets it apart from most other philosophies. It seems that Pearlman, without meaning to, equates the stillness of calm abiding as the end, rather than the springboard into this insight, even on a Theravada level. An LSD trip that a then-young poet Anne Waldman later called "the mind tracking the grammar of mind" is referred to by Pearlman as being akin to "insight meditation" (*vipassana*). Her choice to use this common American Buddhist buzz phrase for what is not only essential to *zazen*, but is common to all forms of basic Buddhist practice, even Tibetan, might confuse the uninitiated. Yes, Waldman's experience does suggest some establishing of mindfulness, but only the most basic where a witness seems to solidly remain. Pearlman's proposed Zen response (106) to Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, "I created Thou in my perception of Thou" (rather than "who is this 'I' who perceives a 'Thou'?"") only strengthens this interpretation.

Because of her implication that visions (drug-induced or otherwise) might mirror *satori*, she seems confused by Ginsberg's 1963 poem "The Change," which scholar Gordon Ball called a rejection of Blakean visionary grasping for "Zen Buddhist ordinary mind set in everyday reality" (Ball, *East Hill Farm: Seasons with Allen Ginsberg*, Counterpoint, 2011: 77). Though Ball's description is generous to a fault, this poem is generally considered to be the "first shot fired" in Ginsberg's eventual complete embracing of Buddhism. Pearlman, though understanding Ginsberg's rejection of his Blake visions, simply says that Ginsberg was worn out and discouraged in his quest after India. True enough, but most Buddhists know the value of disappointment as a springboard to realization, which Ginsberg himself seemed to understand in some embryonic form in this poem. That was why he called it "The Change," as in "getting real." In fact, biographer Bill Morgan quotes Ginsberg as having composed "The Change" in an "exalted open state" (Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself*, Penguin Books, 2007: 376).

Still, Pearlman has presented an immensely readable work that succeeds at least seventy-five percent of the time and, if anything, is simply not long enough. It is an important work that will serve as a primary source certainly on John Cage, Fluxus, and the Abstract Expressionists

for future investigations into the establishing of American Buddhism and its profound influence on the arts.