

Book review

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***An American Buddhist Life: Memoirs of a
Modern Dharma Pioneer***

By Charles S. Prebish. Richmond Hill, ON: Sumeru Press,
2011, 266 pages, ISBN 978-1-896559-09-4 (paperback)
\$24.95 US/CAN, €17.50 EUR.

Reviewed by Danny Fisher
University of the West
dannyf@uwest.edu



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B o o k R e v i e w

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In the “Member Spotlight” for February 2012 at the American Academy of Religion’s website, Charles S. Prebish notes that, as scholars, “our professional and personal lives are interdependent, and that collectively we can make Buddhist Studies and Religious Studies even more remarkable avenues of inquiry than they already are” (American Academy of Religion, 2012). With this statement, he seemingly hearkens back to issues raised in his book *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America*: in his discussion there of the “scholar-practitioner” (a now-common term that he himself coined) in the field of Buddhist Studies, Prebish weighs the pros and cons of the critically distant scholar, the fully fledged practitioner, and the blended scholar-practitioner. In that book, he cites Luis Gómez, who wrote, crucially, that, regardless of their possible status as practitioners, “Buddhism is an object that makes claims on” the lives of scholars in the field of Buddhist Studies (Prebish, 1999: 182–30). Buddhism has clearly made claims on Prebish’s life, and, according to the telling in his remarkable new book, on the lives of many of his mentors and colleagues. For these reasons, it is no surprise that the now-retired Prebish looks to the future with hopes that the new young generation of scholars will emulate “a [previous] generation of wonderful scholars... who were not only brilliant, but also remarkably kind and compassionate” (American Academy of Religion, 2012).

Prebish offers a roadmap toward this sort of idealized teaching and scholarship in the form of a memoir. In addition to its possibilities in terms of enriching our qualitative experience of the field itself, he points out in the “Membership Spotlight” that more autobiographical work by scholars themselves might also aid in the historiography of Buddhist Studies by providing “great historical insight into the developing North American School of Buddhist Studies.” Indeed, *An American Buddhist Life* demonstrates how this type of writing can bring exciting new dimensions to our understanding of the development of Buddhist Studies in North America, and also inspire up-and-coming young scholars.

This is without question a life and a career that are uniquely rich fodder for memoir. Indeed, Prebish hardly requires an introduction: it was he who firmly established the study of Buddhism in North America as a sub-discipline within academic Buddhist Studies. Now retired as the Charles Redd Chair of Religious Studies at Utah State University (and before that a professor for thirty-five years at Pennsylvania State University), he is the author and/or editor of more than twenty books, as well as the co-founder of this journal as well as *The Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, the Buddhism Section of the American Academy of Religion, and

Routledge's "Critical Studies in Buddhism" series. He was also honored with the festschrift *Buddhist Studies from India to America: Essays in Honor of Charles S. Prebish* in 2005, which acknowledges the field's debt to him for all of his myriad efforts on its behalf.

Honestly (even, at times, surprisingly so) and engagingly written, *An American Buddhist Life* succeeds brilliantly at pioneering memoir as an absolutely essential area for development in Buddhist Studies: with his own earnest stab at it, Prebish effectively conveys by example why it is that we need to see more contributions of this sort from Buddhist scholars, practitioners, and scholar-practitioners. Organized across nine chapters that represent momentous points in his career—sometimes geographic career shifts, other times academic legacies, and also periods and issues of more personal importance—the book “makes history come alive” with the author's reflections on the extraordinary figures (everyone from his mentor Richard H. Robinson to the iconic Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche) and happenings (including the geneses of the various important organizations and projects mentioned above) that have been part of his life. In doing this, the author gives nuance to our understanding of the scope and shape of Buddhism and Buddhist Studies in America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. With what could have been an indulgent exercise in less skillful hands, Prebish provides important teaching moments about how unique interests, personal relationships, timing, luck, and no small amounts of risk and daring have had significant impacts on some of the roads taken in the field.

Prebish also devotes much of the book at looking carefully at where things have not always gone right in terms of both his own career and the field at large. This is likely the material that will be read with the most interest, and it is also the material that does the most in terms of making Prebish's point about the importance of memoirs in Buddhist Studies. In what is likely to be the most discussed chapter of the book, “The Two Buddhisms Legacy,” for example, the author adds something new to an issue that has already been dissected and discussed *ad nauseam*. While musing on the history of the typology that is popularly attributed to him, he writes, “I never imagined I had given birth to what would become a two decade maelstrom of controversy.” (Prebish, 2011: 225). Elsewhere in the book, he characterizes the ongoing conversation about the categorizations from within the academy as “one of the most aggressive, enduring, and unpleasant debates that has appeared in Buddhist Studies over the last quarter-century” (Prebish, 2011: 106). Given his hopes for the future, it's hardly a surprise that, in addition to expressing hope that young scholars will propose new typologies rather than simply continue to lambast the “Two Buddhisms” theory in new ways, Prebish also cautions those same young scholars to “make sure that in their own careers they [pursue] not only academic and pedagogic brilliance, but also human kindness and compassion” (American Academy of Religion, 2012).

But Prebish also goes a step further by reflecting significantly on how he himself has negotiated the interdependence of the professional and the personal in this particular case. In addition to putting the “Two Buddhisms” theory into historical context, clarifying what he feels are the misunderstandings about it, going out of his way to synthesize critical feedback and engage new scholarship on Buddhism in North America, and looking to the future, Prebish takes care to articulate the ways in which he has tried to imbue his responses to and participation in this discourse with wisdom and compassion. In chronicling and mulling over his approaches to teaching and discourse amidst the “maelstrom of controversy” over the

“Two Buddhisms” theory, Prebish manages to come through with noteworthy new approaches to and ideas about pedagogy and dialogue in the academic study of Buddhism generally, but also particularly when one’s theoretical work is the subject of so much discussion. In addition, he offers examples of the interdependence of professional and personal lives that speak convincingly to his argument that such interdependence can “make Buddhist Studies and Religious Studies even more remarkable avenues of inquiry than they already are.” His work on the “Two Buddhisms” typology in *An American Buddhist Life* also offers possibilities for the field in terms of how we as individual scholars might navigate and honor what Gómez refers to as the way Buddhism “makes claims” on our lives, whether we are practitioners or not.

If there is any shortcoming in the book, it is probably apparent at this point: *An American Buddhist Life* has arguably more to say to scholars and scholar-practitioners than practitioners. At least, it will almost certainly be more appealing to those with a foot firmly planted in the world of academia than those without. Prebish writes directly, humorously, and often movingly about his own practice at various points throughout the book, but much more of the content here will undoubtedly resonate with Buddhologists. Whether this is a problem of the book, or the Buddhist world at large is certainly an open question. Rita Gross, for example, has written eloquently on the need for practitioners to “know their Buddhist history”; indeed, it is often the case that practitioners demonstrate a limited interest in the work of critical scholars on Buddhist history and subjects. That said, the book is currently being reviewed and discussed in various corners of the “Buddhist blogosphere”—a realm which gets one of its first serious treatments here, and, on that score as well the many others discussed, the book is noteworthy—so perhaps it will transcend any perceived limitations in terms of its audience. In addition, this reviewer’s suspicion is that if scholars, practitioners, and scholar-practitioners are going to better communicate with and understand the work of one another, tools like memoirs will likely prove to be the most effective.

At the memorial service at last year’s Annual Meeting of the AAR for the late Leslie Kawamura (who is written about at length in the book), Prebish expressed hope that others will write memoirs similar to his, and the greatest compliment that I think can be paid to *An American Buddhist Life* is that it is a shining example of why this is a tremendously good idea. More memoirs from scholars (or perhaps even efforts to record something of their lives by students) will certainly add necessary and eminently useful layers of meaning and understanding as we work to educate future generations about the development of our field. It might also help to ensure that, like many of the people discussed in the book, the most brilliant minds to come are also our most generous hearts to come.

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