

Book Review



***Buddhism Beyond Borders: New Perspectives
on Buddhism in the United States***

A volume in the SUNY Series in Buddhism and American Culture

Edited By Scott A. Mitchell and Natalie E. F. Quli. Albany, NY:

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Reviewed by Ann Gleig, *University of Central Florida*

The front cover of *Buddhism Beyond Borders: New Perspectives on Buddhism in the United States* is decorated with a flag. Not an American flag, as one might assume given the subtitle of the edited collection, but rather the Buddhist flag designed in 1885 by the Colombo Committee, a group of Ceylonese Buddhists, and modified by Henry Steel Olcott, the first “White Buddhist.” Although Olcott and the Protestant Buddhism he produced has generally been dismissed if not reviled by Western Buddhist scholars as inauthentic and diluted, he is still revered by Sri Lankan Buddhists in the U.S. who not only decorate their temples with the flag, but sometimes even include a statue of Olcott himself. The choice to represent the collection with a universal rather than national flag and the contrast in how such a symbol has been received in scholarly and practice communities signifies much of what is explored in *Buddhism Beyond Borders*. The text aims to expand both the geographical boundaries of American Buddhism and the theoretical parameters that have often defined its academic study. Hence it shifts attention from the bounded category of nation to the cultural flows of the transnational and replaces the static binary framework of traditional (authentic) Asian Buddhism vs modern (inauthentic) American Buddhism with a dynamic model that reveals/revels in fluidity, hybridity and multiplicity. In doing so, the collection also makes a compelling case for bringing the subfield out from the margins into the mainstream of Buddhist Studies by showing its subject matter is not a deviant from the norm but, in fact, exemplifies what Buddhism as a living, moving tradition has always done: creatively adapt, absorb and assimilate. As Richard Payne advocates in his Afterword, the text suggests the need to replace a rhetoric of rupture that emphasizes difference and opposition with a narrative of similarity and continuity that is more faithful to the historical complexity of Buddhism’s spatial and temporal movement.

Before reflecting on the text’s conclusions, however, let’s look further into its conception and content. The immediate origin of *Buddhism Beyond Borders* lies in a four-day conference held in March 2010 at the Institute of Buddhist Studies at the Graduate

Corresponding author: Ann Gleig, Assistant Professor of Religion and Cultural Studies, University of Central Florida, Ann.Gleig@ucf.edu



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Theological Union in Berkeley, California, but its editors look back further to a twelve week lecture series titled *Buddhism in America: An Expanding Subfield* held in 1994 at the same place for its inspiration. As Mitchell and Quli note, much had changed in the sixteen years since the scholarship produced from that series—Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka’s edited collection *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (1998) and Prebish’s *Luminous Practice: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (1999)—laid down the foundations for the emerging subfield of Buddhism in America, and the intention of the 2010 conference was to pick up these tracks and to map the many new ones that had appeared in their wake. To do so adequately, they emphasize, requires studying US Buddhism with attention to both transnational flows, accelerated with post-1965 immigration patterns and the spread of Buddhism via the Internet, and the unique expression of these transnational currents within the particular local U.S. context.

To foster this both/and approach, the editors make the wise move of opening the collection with a theory of religion that forefronts it. Chapter one details Thomas Tweed’s application of his “translocative” approach to religion to the study of Buddhism in the United States. Seeing religion as “confluences of organic-cultural flows,” Tweed calls on Buddhist scholars to abandon the standard area study focus on static fixed location in favor of a more fluid dynamic approach that can track both crossings and dwellings. Not only does this shift attention to movement and exchange, it also undoes lingering dichotomies of authentic/inauthentic and pure/impure models of Buddhism.

As well as using Tweed to set the general analytic tone of the collection, Mitchell and Quli also borrow from him to organize the collection into four main sections, each of which highlights one of the rhetorical tropes from his theory of religion. “Boundaries, Borders and Categories” is a reflection on and reconfiguration of core categories in the study of American Buddhism. Following Tweed, Jeff Wilson destabilizes the category of American Buddhism by opening it up not to the external but to the internal. He calls for more attention to the *particular*, here rendered as attention to regional differences in the practice of Buddhism in the US. In his characteristically meticulous manner, Wilson describes five ways in which regional particularity shapes Buddhism. Whilst he offers a comprehensive and nuanced analytic for thinking about difference, more consideration of how interconnections fostered by things such as the Internet, national gatherings for regional centers and networks of visiting teaching would have completed the analysis. One hopes that his thesis might inspire future comparative studies of the same lineages in different states to substantiate his own findings further. The section closes with Wakoh Shannon Hickey’s important analysis of how the core convert/immigrant distinction put forth as “two Buddhisms” and later refined as “three Buddhisms” is not merely descriptive but has functioned to reflect and reproduce white privilege and power. This chapter is an amended version of an earlier piece published in the *Journal of Global Buddhism*¹ but its inclusion here is essential as not only does it problematize another central dichotomy within the study of American Buddhism, it also anticipates and gives an analytic perspective to current emic attempts within predominantly white American Buddhist sanghas to tackle their lack of racial diversity and the white privilege operating within them.

¹ <http://www.globalbuddhism.org/11/hickey10.pdf>

“Crossing Borders” picks up on Tweed’s notion of crossing by charting how Buddhist practitioners, thought, traditions and material objects have negotiated and moved across spatial, cultural and religious borders. Michiro Ama recovers the neglected life story of Sunya Pratt (1898-1996) who in 1963 the *Los Angeles Times* declared (likely erroneously) to be the “First White Buddhist Priestess Ordained.” Ama uses Pratt’s ministry in Jodo Shinshu to explore how both individuals and institutions cross ethnic and sectarian boundaries out of pragmatic necessity. As a Euro-American in a predominantly Japanese American church, Pratt crossed ethnic boundaries and, in order to attract more white converts like Pratt, the Buddhist Mission of North America bridged sectarian differences to include more Theravadin elements into their Shin Buddhist tradition.

Jeannine Chandler shifts gears to uncover the complex politics of Western crossings into Tibetan Buddhism through a nuanced examination of the ongoing, controversial Dorje Shugden affair. She explores how Western involvement as both direct participation and the adoption of liberal Western discourses such as democracy and religious freedom has “inexorably altered” a longstanding sectarian religious feud. Pro-Shugden Tibetan Lamas, most significantly Kelsang Gyatso, who founded the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), have invited and manipulated Western involvement in the Shugden cause. Anti-Shugden Tibetan Buddhists, however, have come to view Western involvement as an unwelcomed “interference” that has exacerbated the conflict. Yet both sides, Chandler notes, have “co-opted Western ‘foot soldiers’ to support their perspective” (88). Despite detailing this dual manipulation, with her conclusion that Western participation has “intensified and perpetuated” an affair whose resolution is “essential” for the future global development of Tibetan Buddhism, one is left with the feeling that for Chandler a large part of this requires getting rid of these naïve, meddling Westerners. Hence this chapter, as fascinating as it is, seemed somewhat at odds with the main thrust of the collection in appearing to (ultimately) problematize rather than promote boundary-crossings.

The section ends with Helen Baroni’s examination of the distant correspondents of Hawaii-based early American Zen teacher and writer Robert Aitken. Baroni focuses on how Aitken helped to mediate the isolation of those people who lived too far from a local Buddhist group. Although this kind of mediation might appear somewhat quaint in our hyper-connected Internet era, it does speak to a pressing contemporary issue: the accessibility of sanghas. As Baroni notes, whilst the translocal is generally taken as the overcoming of spatial boundaries, there are a multiplicity of borders such as the political, economic, social and religious.

With “Free-Floating Dharma Discourses,” the editors borrow a catchy phrase from Richard Hughes Seager’s section-opening chapter to explore the ways in which Buddhist thought and practice have been “emancipated from their institutional context.” The word choice of “emancipation” suggests a sympathetic approach to the dissemination of Buddhist ideas into non-Buddhist spheres, but the first essay of this section actually leans towards a preference for a more traditional context. Seager compares the different ways that practitioners and creative artists use Dharma images. Whilst noting some overlap, he maintains a clear boundary between the two groups and concludes that “the long-term viability of a uniquely American Buddhism rests with people who practice the

Dharma in strong, disciplined religious communities, whether Asian or Euro-American” (124). Although Seager does show some appreciation for creative art, its ultimate value for him appears to lie in its potential as an entry point into more serious practice.

The following two essays illustrate less a “free floating dharma” and more of a fully re-embedded and re-contextualized American one. Kimberley Beek moves from image to text to discuss the emergent popular fiction genre of “Buddhist literature,” which she defines as “a new form of creative literary discourse that recontextualizes Buddhism in the West” (125). Beek seems generally positive about the legitimacy of such short stories and novels, which substantially engage Buddhist themes, albeit vis-a-vis personal experience rather than the didactic approach of traditional Buddhist stories, and which she concludes provide new routes for experiencing and imagining Buddhism in a globalized context. Finally, Mira Niculescu traces the establishment of “Jewish Mindfulness” which has appropriated Buddhism to form a new tradition or “religion-in-the-making” complete with a lineage of teachers, an institutionalization of practices, and a theology to support both. Rather than “free-floating,” mindfulness is firmly anchored into a Jewish context to such an extent that its original context been completely erased. Rather than denounce this as a complete Western takeover of Buddhism, however, Niculescu concludes unexpectedly with a more “stealth Buddhist” perspective. As she puts it, “Like water, it has conquered the West by becoming all the forms and colors of its new containers. This reminds us that globalization, often conflated with Westernization..., also occurs through a simultaneous Easternization of the West” (159).

The theoretically sophisticated and stimulating final section “Modernity and Modernities” tackles the lingering dichotomy of traditional versus modern Buddhism head-on. Eric Braun examines the rise in popularity of traditional jhana meditation in the insight meditation community and concludes that an interest in jhanas disrupts the linear developmental narrative of an increasing modernization or secularization of Buddhism in the West. David McMahan nuances the category of Buddhism modernism with a comparative perspective that considers the Buddhist-science encounter from the perspective of the Tibetan diaspora community. He demonstrates different cultural expressions of modernity and draws on Charles Taylor to advance a pluralistic understanding of “multiple modernities.” Continuing along the same trajectory, the final chapter co-written by Mitchell and Quli, provides further indisputable evidence for multiple modernities vis-a-vis a comparative study of Zen and Jodo Shinshu Buddhism in the US. Like McMahan, they show that creative and strategic activity within Buddhist communities disrupts any monolithic or acultural notion of modernity. Hence they suggest re-defining modernity as “a set of narratives, which when selectively appropriated and embedded in a larger set of narratives, produces a variety of configurations of “modern” and “traditional,” yielding multiple Buddhist modernities” (198). From a variety of angles, therefore, the closing section demolishes any linear and static notion of modernity and illuminates the multiple ways that modernity and tradition are culturally constructed and context dependent.

The collection is brought to a satisfying close with Richard K. Payne’s erudite Afterword, which displays a breadth of knowledge not just about border crossings of Buddhism in America but also Buddhism in Asia. As well as offering reflections on individual

contributions that both highlight their strengths and push their findings further, Payne ties up the collection with some wider theoretical stitches. The latter continue the texts' disruption of dichotomies by adding embedded/disembedded to traditional/modern, authentic/inauthentic. Payne also adds to the texts' privileging of fluidity over stasis with his argument that Buddhism has always been in motion. These observations are framed within a call to replace the "rhetoric of rupture" that dramatically separates the traditional and modern with a more complex narrative of continuity, which not only allows him to invite the "unloved stepchild" of Western Buddhism in from the cold, but also to get in one of his characteristic digs at the Romanticism that he sees as responsible for such a rhetoric.

With *Buddhism Beyond Borders*, Mitchell and Quli had the challenging task of organizing a variety of essays that span not only a spatial but also a temporal range as well as a wide array of topics. Their choice to open the collection with Tweed's fluid approach to religion and then draw from different elements of his theory of crossings and dwellings to frame each section was a helpful one as it brings both theoretical and stylistic coherency to what could have otherwise read as a series of related yet disparate threads. The editors' short introductions to each section function in a similar manner: orienting the reader and making the implicit continuity between sections more explicit. Given that flows are much messier and harder to follow than straight lines, this is no small feat and the editors are to be congratulated for keeping the reader on theoretical track whilst allowing for plenty of interesting sightseeing en route.

The ultimate destination and main analytic strength of the collection is its multileveled interrogation of several categories that have served as foundational models in the study of Buddhism in the United States, but have become, as multiple chapters indicate, increasingly redundant and problematic. To begin with, as Braun and Ama show, divisions such as traditional/modern and immigrant/convert are inadequate on a descriptive level and do not capture the multiplicity and hybridity of Buddhism in America. Further, as McMahan and Mitchell and Quli illustrate, not only the content, but also the very categories themselves are fluid, relative, and contextually constituted. Moreover, as Hickey reveals, these categories have rarely been applied neutrally but have been positioned rather as binary opposites in a hierarchical relationship in which various forms of power and privilege have operated. In the case of "traditional" and "modern," these have too often been code for authentic/pure versus inauthentic/impure Buddhism. As Tweed states, however, "What we have come to call 'Buddhism' was always becoming, being made and remade over and over again in contact and exchange, as it was carried along in the flow of things. Buddhist leaders have the right—even the role-specific obligation—to determine what constitutes 'authentic' Buddhism, but scholars—and practitioners as they contribute to academic conversations—have another duty, I suggest: *to follow the flows wherever they lead*" (11, italics mine).

Tweed's approach, which the editors advocate and the majority of chapters illustrate, is long overdue in the study of Buddhism in the West, which has all too often been stymied by the specter of illegitimacy produced in large part by the general conservatism of Buddhist Studies as a field and its allegiance to Asian over Western examples and to textual studies over those of lived expressions of Buddhism. These issues have been

previously discussed in a brilliant, incisive 2009 article by co-editor Quli, “Western Self, Asian Other: Modernity, Authenticity, and Nostalgia for ‘Tradition’ in Buddhist Studies,” which should be read alongside this collection.²

My only reservation with the re-orientation promised by this collection is that it does not *follow the flows far enough*. Despite several reflections on the inadequacy of the category of Buddhist modernism to capture emerging trends, such as the revalorization of forms of traditional Buddhism, the authors remain faithful to theories of modernity and advocate the concept of “multiple modernities” and “cultural rather than acultural modernity” as alternatives. Why not, however, think beyond the borders of modernity and entertain the possibility that current developments in Buddhism in the United States reflect the wider cultural shift from the modern to the postmodern? Here I must confess to some self-interest as my own current research on contemporary American “convert” Buddhism builds on Martin Bauman’s argument that Buddhism has entered a new phase and is displaying characteristics such as plurality, hybridity, and globality that are associated more with the postmodern than the modern. Bauman flirts with the term postmodern but ultimately settles on global Buddhism to denote this phrase.

The notoriously slippery and multivalent signifier “postmodernity” has been the source of much confusion and dissent and it is understandable why Buddhist scholars might want to steer clear of it. However, the crucial point is not the term but what the term *points to*, and sociologists of religion have recognized that religious expression has taken new and distinctive forms in the cultural period that has followed modernity. Central to these patterns is the simultaneous appearance of traditional and modern forms of religion and the dissemination of religion beyond traditional spaces, both of which are amply documented in this collection. Whether this period is denoted as postmodernity, as David Lyon opts for, or the post-secular, as others like Courtney Bender prefer, more dialogue with current sociological theory would not only bring a fresh perspective on the rapid developments that are occurring in contemporary American Buddhism, but would also allow for more nuanced analyses about another binary opposition—religious versus secular—that has come to dominate recent discussions about the movement of Buddhist practices in non-Buddhist contexts, most amplified in polemic debates about the secular mindfulness movement.

Buddhism Beyond Borders is at its strongest when exerting analytic pressure on the theoretical foundations of American Buddhism and Buddhist Studies and widening the parameters of both. Perhaps unavoidably, given space restrictions, this comes at the cost of giving less attention to the particular. In other words, the emphasis on the *beyond* means that the *within* is not as well attended to as the former. This is certainly not a complaint of the quality of the individual chapters, many of which will surely find places independently if not together on future Buddhist syllabi, but rather of the topics covered by them. Because the editors open the collection with the stated aim of catching up with developments since the first round of scholarship on American Buddhism, I was expecting more on present day developments, particularly pertaining to how generational shifts are affecting different communities. For example, as well as tracking

² <http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2010/05/quli-article.pdf>

currents within the insight community, what about the many offshoots that have developed from it such as Pragmatic Dharma, Dharma Punx, and Buddhist Geeks? Similarly, what changes are we seeing as a second generation of South Asian American Buddhists grow up? And how about the new kids on the (American) block: the Humanistic Buddhism of Fo Guang Shan? Its integration of Chan and Pure Land Buddhisms would have made a perfect fit for a collection on crossings.

Other areas underrepresented in the book are pressing contemporary issues such as the rapid growth of and backlash against the “secular” mindfulness movement, the tremendous impact that the Internet and new social media are having on Buddhism in the U.S., and growing Buddhist involvement in social and political issues such as racial justice and climate change. Whilst chapters by Niculescu and Chandler glance at the first two of these topics, they do not give them the full attention that they need. Much of this is likely due to the accelerated speed of developments in Buddhism in the U.S., meaning that much has happened since the 2010—let alone the 1994—conference.

From a related angle, because Mitchell and Quli forefront the link between the 1994 and 2010 Buddhism in America conferences, it would have been helpful to have, in the place of a Preface, a longer introduction with a clearer summary of earlier findings, which would have helped locate and map the patterns that emerge in the chapters. For example, just as Braun disrupts the notion of a linear progression of demythologization in Buddhist meditation, it would have been instructive to see how other major themes such as gender equality, democratization, and psychologization have unfolded since the first round of scholarship identified them as characteristic of Buddhism in America.

In continuity with its own rhetoric of continuity and flows rather than difference and boundaries, *Buddhism Beyond Borders* is best approached as a major eddy in a moving stream rather than as the definitive starting or landing point. To fully appreciate its theoretical punch, some familiarity with previous scholarship is helpful, and, to fully unfold its theoretical promise, ongoing dialogue with rapidly evolving shifts will be necessary. Neither of these concerns, however, should take away from its considerable and significant achievement in re-setting the study of Buddhism in the United States on a new and long overdue course.