



Book Review

The Oxford Handbook of American Buddhism

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Introductory

The *Oxford Handbook of American Buddhism*, edited by Ann Gleig and Scott Mitchell, is a timely guide to the increasingly complicated world of Buddhism in the United States. Forty years ago, as an early burst of academic literature first gathered steam, the idea of “American Buddhism” was everywhere in popular culture, in journalism, and even in politics as a result of the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Entry into the exciting, often fashionable, world of American Buddhism could be made through many gates—the Beat poets, drugs, Carl Jung, activism, psychotherapy, film, birthright affiliation, and the increasing immigration from South and East Asia. Dharma centers sprang up seemingly everywhere and monasteries or monastery-like institutions sprouted in new buildings, old churches, or trailers in the Mojave desert. Buddhism was moving in many directions, but American Buddhism, as far as public perception was concerned, was a bright, shiny spirituality—heady, profound, cool, and studded with luminaries from the Dalai Lama to Richard Gere and Tina Turner.

By virtue of my having published on the World’s Parliament of Religions, I was recruited to be one of a relatively small number of scholars who turned their attention to American Buddhism in the 1990s, many of them trained in one or another Asian tradition. As an Americanist, I was a bit of an odd man out and grateful for other scholars’ interpretive insights, particularly Charles Prebish’s basic observation that there were two major forms of Buddhism to be considered: converts and immigrants. Even at the time, these categories were understood to be a bit too neat, but they also signaled that something new was afoot in US religious history. Religion and immigration is a perennial topic in the American field, with extensive scholarship related overwhelmingly to Jews and Catholics—their eras of migration, their varied ethnicities, and their triumphs and travails in the process of adaptation. Never before, however, had a substantial number of native-born Americans flocked to a tradition that was, at the same time, undergoing a highly variegated wave of mass immigration. Prebish’s “two Buddhisms” was a helpful starting point for developing a research plan that could begin to make sense of this fascinatingly complex development, research that involved many site visits, phone and face-to-face interviews, and data-mining the web for background on nascent communities, both Euro-American and immigrant, mostly in Southern California, Chicago, and the Northeast.

It is a personal pleasure in reading these essays to be reminded of Buddhist names, places, and events that had once been so familiar and important to me. Having made a turn East myself in the 1970s, I readily understood



the motives of most converts, so I became more curious about immigrants. I soon learned to differentiate between the older, highly anglicized Buddhist Churches of America Shin community, which at the time had given rise to only a few scholarly treatments of its American history, and the mostly-uncharted new South and East Asian groups, whose stories of coming to the US were still mostly covered by local newspapers. I was particularly fascinated to observe the efforts of first-generation elders to replicate homeland norms of honorific authority, regional aesthetics, and often elaborate practice, while learning in interviews how modifications were already underway under the aegis of a second, US-born generation.

Such developments among Jews and Catholics are extremely well documented, as is the anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic rhetoric of Anglo-Protestants who sought to shut down the Atlantic migrations. That said, I was nevertheless surprised by an almost jingoistic strand that could surface in convert communities. At the time, many converts celebrated the Americanization of the dharma in ways that ranged from the ridiculous—“we eat pizza at the dharma center, rather than tofu and daikon radish”—to the malign—“Americans are freeing Buddhism from the superstitious trammels of Asian civilization.” I recall one afternoon spent in a Vietnamese home temple in Westminster, California, where I had a warm conversation with an 80ish Franco-Vietnamese woman who, to my eyes, epitomized the grace and humility of a seasoned Buddhist. When I recounted this meeting later at a Zen center, one Anglo woman replied sharply, maybe a bit defensively—“She can teach me nothing about my practice!” Questions about American versus Asian practice had other resonances as well. “We meditate but they chant,” and “We do real Buddhism but they do not” were charges levied against immigrants and also against Soka Gakkai, a dynamic Nichiren group of chanters composed mostly of 1960s converts, many of them artists and actors on stage and screen.

These biases, one heard at the time, had been encouraged by post-war *roshis*, disaffected with monastic routine and seeing the United States as a genuine field of dharmic possibility. Whatever the case, I was soon recruited to publish again, this time on Soka Gakkai International. After deliberation, I said yes to a monograph for a number of reasons, among them my often finding meditators so absorbed in their practice routines that the atmosphere at dharma centers could seem almost unwelcoming. Another reason was that Soka Gakkai is a modernist Japanese movement with an intriguing political history and a global reach, which meant I could think comparatively about modern American Buddhists on a spectrum with co-practitioners in Japan, Singapore, Brazil, and elsewhere overseas.

Contents

Converts/immigrants, meditating/chanting, and the related binary traditional/modern form the interpretive axis of the present *Handbook*, around which a range of critical historical, cultural, and methodological insights are organized in an effort both to uncover long-standing biases in the received narrative about American Buddhism and to argue for its broadening to better reflect the complexity of the community. Thus, this work constitutes a long over-due, much-needed corrective, but I include my reminiscences above to recall how the two Buddhisms model once helped to reveal, in a new and unfamiliar context, a perennial dynamic in American religion. One strength of the *Handbook* is that it sets its sights on Buddhist manifestations of this history and does so in analyses that reflect current sensitivities to race, gender, and coloniality. Another is its focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in an attempt to correct the substantial bias in favor of Euro-American meditators in standard narratives about American Buddhism. Gleig and Mitchell are well-suited for the task. Gleig is an Americanist with a long-standing interest in the intersections among race, gender, and Asian religions coming West, both Hinduism and Buddhism. Mitchell comes out of Buddhist Studies with a focus on modernist and American Buddhism with a particular interest in the Pure Land, an ancient and powerful strand of thought and practice that does not factor greatly in the worldview of most meditators.

After a first reading, I wondered if perhaps little has really changed since the 1990s. Most interpretive categories remain in play: converts/Euro-Americans, immigrants/Asian Americans, etc. Many of the historical players remain the same, from Thich Nhat Hanh and D.T. Suzuki to Natalie Goldberg to Jon Kabat-Zinn. The historical arc is also a familiar one—the 1893 Parliament; Victorian Buddhists; Asian immigration, restriction, and internment; the Beat Poets; new Asian immigrations; and the flourishing of counter-cultural Buddhism. Topics first limned in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Buddhism and psychotherapy, secularism, and Judaism, receive substantive interpretive essays.

On closer examination, however, I also saw change in varied places—in new scholarship on developments in immigrant groups, shifts in institutional priorities among meditators, and the growth of trans-Pacific Buddhist networks. Most conspicuously, the received American Buddhism narrative itself comes under intense scrutiny, and critical assessments of its familiar themes, innovators, etc., many in the air for decades, are given systemic, fully-blown historical treatments that reflect the scholarly work of a generation. Gleig and Mitchell have organized the book into four sections—“Foundations,” “Traditions,” “Practices,” and “Frames”—with substantial overlap between them. Each section contains five to eight essays by authors from a range of disciplines, of a dozen or so pages, most amply footnoted with an accompanying bibliography. As a handbook, the volume is designed to be a state-of-the-art critique, to push the study of Buddhism in the US into new directions, and to provide avenues for further study.

“Foundations” consists of five essays devoted to methodological and historical issues and critical interpretive perspectives that inform, to a degree, the entire book. Christopher Emory-Moore leads off with a survey of the different trajectories followed by Buddhist modernism through West and East, revealing the kind of American Buddhist exceptionalism I observe as a local, somewhat parochial, manifestation of a more complex and pervasive global modernist movement. Thomas Calobrisi complicates the received national narrative by collating the chronologies of Euro-American and Asian American histories. Gleig and Amy Langenberg take on racial and gender identity in two separate essays. Their succinct analyses underscore the whiteness and maleness of the picture of Buddhism circa 1990 and the positions of white women within it, while focusing on empowering reinterpretations of the dharma afforded by the emergence of women, Asians, Blacks and Latinos, and the LGBTQ community. Mitchell’s essay concludes this section by taking up the varied methodological opportunities presented to and positions limned by the “scholar-practitioner,” a perspective first noted by Prebish in the late 1970s. While one could observe elements of all these issues emerging in the 1990s, the five essays bring the discussions up to date, introducing new data on people, institutions, and ideals that have shaped Buddhist communities which, as befitting a handbook and guide to further research, are amply referenced in substantive bibliographies.

“Traditions” consists of nine essays devoted to either national or dharma traditions, which to varying degrees pick up critical lines laid out in “Foundations.” Some cover familiar territory with concise treatments such as Ben Van Overmeire on Zen and Ralph Craig on Nichiren. Erik Braun on Theravada, Holly Gayley and Joshua Brallier on Tibet, and Jesse Lee on Pure Land cover some familiar territory as well but highlight unique aspects in each. Braun takes up the convert/immigrant relationship with a contrast between the psychological worldview of the former and the latter’s more karma-driven cosmological view. Gayley and Brallier limn perennial tensions in the Tibetan community—innovation/preservation, monasticism/laicization, esotericism/celebrity—and conclude with brief notes on an African American appropriation of tantric liturgy. Jesse Lee’s chapter benefits from the substantial scholarly attention given to Shin Buddhism and the BCA over the last several decades, but also points to vitality in other East Asian Pure Land traditions setting down roots in the US.

Due to limited secondary resources at the time and, I think, to sheer exhaustion on my part, I broke out a chapter in my book as “Other Pacific-Rim Migrations,” into which I tucked the Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese immigrant communities only then emerging into prominence on the West Coast but not yet surfacing in the emergent narrative about American Buddhism. Rongdao Lai briefly notes in her Chinese Buddhism essay how exclusion stifled early communities; she focuses instead on the Humanistic Buddhism movement out of Taiwan, which emerged in the US in the 1980s in both formal organizations and in the missions of dedicated individuals such as Man Chu, a modernist Buddhist nun to whom she devotes the bulk of her discussion. Claudia Schippert notes a persistent divide within the Korean American Buddhist community, largely familial and linguistic, between immigrant and convert, but highlights that both are minorities within a larger, overwhelmingly Christian, Korean American community. Todd Roy Perreira takes up the discussion of Vietnamese Buddhism, noting that, while much-studied as an exile or refugee community, they remain apart from the general discussion of American Buddhism. He corrects this by describing rituals adapted to the US at the grassroots, emphasizing temples’ transgenerational communal functions, and developing a discussion of Black Buddhism in relation to the Vietnam War. Somewhat anomalously, it is Jay Michaelson’s essay on Judaism and Buddhism that rounds out “Traditions,” taking a comprehensive look at the varied literature on Jews’ engagement with Buddhism in America and at responses to that engagement referenced to broader attitudes within the Jewish community.

The essays in “Practices” ground discussion of American Buddhists in situations that are specific and concrete and cut across traditions, with authors varying considerably in their critical, interpretive strategies. Luke Clossey and Karen Ferguson present Buddhist monasticism in North America as an institutional extension of the historic Asian sangha, the growth of which was enabled by shifts last century in US immigration law. They briefly describe pioneering non-sectarian, monastic-led temples and institutional networks, but give more attention to the often-fraught translation of monastic/lay reciprocal relations in a variety of urban and rural settings. Melissa Curley begins her “Food in North American Buddhism” with an account of traditional food strategies—feeding monks, food offerings, and congregational eating in home-temples—but proceeds to consider Buddhist cookbooks from local food fairs to commercial, Buddhist-inspired ones such as *The Complete Tassajara Cookbook* (Brown 2009) to the outer reaches of Buddhist mindful-eating programs. Mindfulness meditation has been central to American Buddhism for decades and has a developed, sophisticated bibliography, which Nalika Gajaweera aptly deploys to construct an overview of the movement from its Burmese origins into its current North American iterations. She concludes with a helpful resume of its critics from old school purists to more disruptive critical race theorists. In “American Buddhism and Healthcare,” C. Pierce Salguero argues that the preoccupation with meditation has overshadowed the use of other modes of healing such as compassionate care, diet, health-enhancing rituals, and chanting. Using survey material and a number of approaches to immigrant and convert communities, he attends to practices ranging from enhancing mainstream healthcare with traditional practices to syncretistic blends of Chinese and/or Tibetan Buddhism with New Age ideas in pay-as-you go consultations.

The two concluding essays in “Practices” stand out for their unblinking look at two key issues: the emphasis on meditation in American Buddhism and the unexamined roots of engaged Buddhism. Deploying his expertise in both traditional tantra and modern Buddhism, Richard Payne takes a historical-philosophical approach to his critique of the preeminence given to meditation in his essay, “Rituals, Ritual, and Ritualizing in American Buddhism.” He begins with an anti-ritual bias in US religious practice traced to the Protestant Reformation, developing this into methodological reflections on ritual processes. He grounds his discussion in specifics by suggesting that zazen is “meditation as ritual” and compares it to “ritual as meditation,” exemplified by the

visualization of hungry ghosts in a Shingon temple in Sacramento and an Avalokitesvara *sadhana* available online to Mahayana practitioners across the United States.

With a diverse background in education, activism, and critical theory, Funie Hsu/Chhi is well-placed to mount an analysis of systemic race and ethnicity issues at the foundation of an American dharma flagship in her “Engaged Buddhism in the United States.” In doing so, she both meets the critical race-ethnicity bar set in “Foundations” and, in a subculture where nomenclature is prone to rapidly change, adds a new wrinkle with “white settler Christian nationalism.” This designation provides her/them with leverage to tease out racial and cultural assumptions that structure normative American engaged Buddhist attitudes, ideas, and programs. She/they concludes with theoretically-informed commentary on efforts by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship to undo the complex weave of orientalism, nationalism, and ethno-racial presumption that deeply informs the meanings of both “Buddhist” and “engagement.”

“Frames” is somewhat of a miscellany and consists of eight essays, the first two providing critical assessments of perennialism and parallel positions advocated by meditators: the apparent fit between Buddhism and secularism and between the dharma and psychotherapy. Kin Cheung builds a nuanced argument that race implicitly structures discourses about Buddhist secularism. It both undergirds the appropriation of diasporic traditions by American secular culture and contributes to their erasure. Conceding both the historicity and ubiquity of psychologically-inflected discussions of Buddhism, Ira Helderman isolates ten different ways in which this relationship is framed. He concludes by noting that the psychologist-as-dharma-teacher retains a position of preeminence and that these models of and for psychologizing Buddhism remain, largely among white meditators, the subject of considerable debate.

The next three chapters cover various disciplinary interpretive realms. Gregory Grieve and Daniel Veidlinger take a broad approach to questions of Buddhism and technology, including ships that brought Chinese to work on railroads; telegraphy and spiritualism; film, television, and drugs construed as technologies of the mind. The remainder of their chapter charts the role of digital media today in propagation and practice, both institutionally and via commercial apps, and how digital dharma updates a century-old discourse about the compatibility of Buddhism and modern science. Judith Zimmer-Brown and Jitsujo Gauthier take up aspects of how Buddhism intersects with education. Zimmer-Brown discusses efforts to inculcate Buddhist/American values in both immigrant and non-immigrant communities, the role of pedagogy in building monastic lineages, the higher education of congregationally-oriented clergy, and Buddhist universities’ commitments to social transformation. Gauthier focuses on the opportunities and challenges that face Buddhist chaplains both in chaplaincy education in Buddhist-sponsored or more old-line divinity schools, as well as in professional setting such as hospices, hospitals, and the military.

The last three essays share a commonality insofar as they address broadly cultural questions related to the arts. Peter Romaskiewicz charts changes in material culture from early Japanese and Chinese temples on the West Coast and colonial curios and collectibles on the East to the burgeoning of Buddhist material culture post-World War II. He concludes with Tibet as a case study in the ambiguities in sacred, as opposed to fine, arts representation and notes resistance to the migration of Buddhist images into consumer-oriented advertising. Winston Kyan gives a synoptic historical review of mass media, community devotional images, film and television, and curated museum exhibits in a way that juxtaposes majoritarian orientalist sensibilities with those of immigrants, women, and Black persons within the Buddhist community. Kimberley Beek reviews the field of literature from early Anglo literary encounters with the East—the Transcendentalists, Whitman, Arnold, etc.—to Ezra Pound and Pearl Buck. She then addresses subsequent developments—roughly Suzuki and the Beats to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey* (Kingston 1989) and Charles Johnson, whom she characterizes as expressing an Afro-Orientalist solidarity. In the current era, she sees

Buddhist history, identities, narratives, and practices permeating, in creative, often oblique ways, a diverse range of award-winning poets and novelists who have garnered increasing attention.

Concluding Observations

The *Handbook* does a fine job of bringing the reader up to date on the multifaceted worlds of American Buddhism—extending discussion of Asians/immigrants, complicating convert communities, and locating both groups together within the trajectory of modern/modernist history. And it does so in a timely fashion by articulating a critical bar in tune with current standards regarding ethnicity/race/gender and practice issues in ways that clarify what has been at stake in debates within and around American Buddhism for the last half century. Individual essays reference these issues in sometimes explicit, often implicit, ways as suits the topic, its historiography, and each author's disposition. Issues are argued, not put to rest, but elucidated in concise, comprehensible essays that point in the direction of further research.

That said, a few questions bear on the design of the volume. For a book largely driven by sociological interpretive concerns, there is a surprising dearth of statistics. The reader learns of a massive spike in attendance at a West Coast *O-bon* festival over the course of a decade, some figures on health care professionals, and the huge download count of Buddhist podcasts, but there is no essay or even a section of one that models the actual size of the American Buddhist community, however speculative that model must be. One gathers that American Buddhism is becoming increasingly diversified and that one or another program is burgeoning but, aside from a claim that Asians constitute two-thirds of Buddhists in the country, the reader is offered no substantive quantitative information or insight.

A second question bears on the overall picture conveyed of the community writ large. Readers glean many insights into Asian American Buddhism from treatments of modernist movements in Asia, the distinctive modernism of Chinese nuns in Southern California, pan-Asian American ceremonialism, and other such detail. But the overall tenor of the volume retains a focus on meditators. The reader learns a great deal about the ins and outs of the mindfulness movement, the ideals of engaged Buddhism, and the cast of characters behind the psychologizing and secularizing of the dharma, most often subject to race/gender and post-colonial criticism. But, by and large, we are still talking about meditating Buddhists. In this case, critical methodologies devoted to disrupting the received narrative seem, ironically, to have underscored the importance of that narrative itself.

On the other hand, the *Handbook* succeeds in its goals of race/gender inclusion and conveys a great deal about advances in equity in practice and public presence across the board, but again most specifically in the meditating community. Taken as a whole, the volume does yeoman's service in deconstructing an outmoded version of American Buddhism, making room for a new narrative to take shape, even if it falls short of re-centering American Buddhism around Asian Americans' experiences.

Sensitive to the nuance of category and placement within the Buddhist community, the *Handbook* is sure to raise eyebrows in the broader field of American religion for its treatment of Christians and Jews. As far as Christianity is concerned, the reader is exposed to Protestant Buddhism as the unwitting progenitor of Buddhist modernism, to Korean Christians, and to an occasional reference to Christian nationalism. But no critical resumé is offered of the histories of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, monastic exchanges, Thomas Merton or Richard Rohr, or the ongoing migration of Buddhist-like ideas into churches and the resultant evangelical reaction. In sharp contrast, the hundred-some years of Jewish-Buddhism is elevated into a fully-blown tradition alongside Theravada, Tibetan, and East Asian Mahayana. That most Jewish Buddhists also tend to be white, secularizing, psychologically-informed meditators seemingly underscores the fact that the *Handbook* remains, to a noticeable degree, under the sway of the old narrative. To my mind, Jewish Buddhism would

have been better placed within “Frames,” alongside a chapter devoted to Buddhism and Christianity, the two providing parallel insights based on developments within older immigrant communities.

All that said, the *Handbook* is a volume that will engage concerned parties and set the critical standard for several decades. Its shortcomings, as well as its strengths, are related to its timeliness; as one would expect, its race/gender preoccupations reflect the priorities set by the current generation of academics. It also deeply reflects the highly uneven quality of the historiographies: compare the masses of smart commentary on mainstream topics such as mindfulness or psychology to the paucity on monastics be they Asian or Anglo or to communities such as the Vietnamese. But overall, the *Handbook* has cleared the boards of old assumptions about practice, race, and gender in American Buddhism and has pointed to where more research is needed to craft a new, more complex, and fully-throated narrative of the phenomenon. Although it is unlikely that the two Buddhisms/two communities rhetoric and dynamic will ever entirely go away, the *Handbook* provides the critical tools needed to guide a next generation to devise a more equitable and synoptic telling of the story of Buddhism in the USA.

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