



Michel Clasquin and Jacobus S. Krueger, eds. *Buddhism and Africa*. Pretoria, South Africa: University of South Africa Press, 1999, 133 pages, ISBN 1-86888-139-3 (paper), Rand 35.00, US \$10.00.

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**B**uddhism in Africa is starting to gain a footing. The appearance of Buddhism in the vast African continent is, however, geographically and politically more or less confined to Africa's southernmost part, that of South Africa. Although a not-easily-defined number of Sōka Gakkai Buddhist followers are assumed to live in Ghana, according to some claims, there are several tens of thousands of adherents (see Wratten 1995, p. 235) and small informal Buddhist groups in the sub-Saharan countries; the past and contemporary midpoint of Buddhist appearance and growth unambiguously is located in Southern Africa. Not only did three Thai *bhikkhus* already stay in Cape Town in 1686, albeit involuntarily due to a shipwreck, but also low-caste Hindus in the province of Kwazulu-Natal converted to Buddhism in the 1920s and 1930s. It is South Africa where small Buddhist groups started to arise in the various cities in the 1970s and where a proliferation of distinct Buddhist traditions has taken place since the mid-1980s. The contemporary spectrum of Buddhist options runs the gamut from Theravāda (Burmese and Vipassanā) to Zen (the Kwan Um school and others), Nichiren (especially Sōka Gakkai) to Tibetan groups (Kagyupa and Gelugpa). Last, but not least, the Taiwanese Fo Kuan Shang Order (Pure Land) has been in the process of erecting a huge Buddhist monastery in the outskirts of Johannesburg/Pretoria since 1992, exceeding

all other South African Buddhist groups in terms of financial contribution to Buddhism in South Africa thus far.

In light of Buddhism's dynamic development during the recent two decades in South Africa, academics and Buddhist practitioners were invited to meet at a conference in 1998 that was organized by the department of Religious Studies at the University of South Africa (Pretoria). The small volume under review consists of the edited proceedings of this conference, the first ever to take place on African ground focusing on Buddhism. This volume contains ten brief contributions, rounded off by a bibliography on South African works on Buddhism (some fifty titles) and a few pictures.

In his introduction, coeditor Kobus Krueger sketches strategies and means by which Buddhism might—and, in the near future, more effectively will—form roots in an African context. Darrel Wratten provides a concise and highly informed account of how Buddhism was imagined early on in South Africa, noting images of fears and projections before and around the turn of the century. Louis van Loon, cofounder of the important Buddhist Retreat Center near Ixopo created in 1980, continues sketching the history of Buddhism from the conversion movement among the Indian Tamils of the 1920s up to the present day. The various Buddhist schools and traditions have been able to secure a following among the urban white middle class. Numbers vary between 2,400, according to the 1994 census, and an estimated 30,000 Buddhists (pp. 3, 40). An interest in Buddhism among black people is almost totally missing, however.

The following four contributions contain impressions and snapshots from South African Buddhist teachers and “practitioners of the *Dharma*.” Heila Downey, cofounder of the Dharma Center in Somerset West in 1982 and now Zen master within the Korean Kwan Um school, provides a demonstration of “Zen and the Art of Living.” Fo Kuang Shan master Hui Li gives an account of the beginnings and plans of the order's activities in South Africa, concentrating on the African Buddhist College at the monastery. Hugh Laue, spokesperson for Kagyu Africa, provides a portrait of the Kagyu tradition and its history in South Africa since 1972. Alison Smith aims to order and systematize the various Buddhist groups and institutions in South Africa. This brief account is followed by the transcript of a somewhat general panel discussion entitled “African Religion and the Africanisation of Religions,” which in turn is followed by a rather general paper by Raoul Birnbaum (the only non-African, from the University of California) on issues of transmitting Buddhism across cultures. In the final contribution, coeditor Michel Clasquin from the University of South Africa traces points of similarities and convergences of Buddhism and African thought. For example, Chinese Mahāyāna concepts of filial piety fit

well with African respect for the elders; likewise, the idea of Buddhist interconnectedness works well with that of African communalism (popularly called *ubuntu*, from a Zulu proverb).

The book is nicely designed, and the contributions read well. This text can be taken as a general starting point for academically treating and acknowledging the emerging topic of Buddhism in Africa. Although the papers show different strengths and degrees of quality, issues discussed such as those of adapting and indigenizing Buddhist ideas and practices, those of images and projections on Buddhism, and those of proposing convergence points of Buddhism and local culture sound quite familiar to scholars and practitioners in non-Asian settings. Thus, further studies from the African context are highly welcome and will prove to be of much value in the general study of globalized Buddhism.

#### Reference

Wratten, Darrel, 1995, *Buddhism in South Africa: From Textual Imagination to Contextual Innovation*, Ph.D. thesis, Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town, 441 pp.