



Charles S. Prebish. *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America*. University of California Press, 1999, xi + 334 pages, ISBN: 0-520-21696-2 (cloth), 0-520-21697-0 (paper), US \$45.00 (cloth), \$18.95 (paper).

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This is the monograph on America's Buddhism for which we have waited so long. True, we already have a few new books on the subject, including last year's *Faces of Buddhism in America* (henceforth *Faces*), edited by Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka and reviewed in these pages, a book that works as a kind of companion volume to this one. But no other book matches the depth of this one's research or the cohesiveness of this one's focus. This book lends strength to the others by giving a structural unity to the field. Relying on these works, scholars and practitioners alike now have the foundation on which to build the study of Buddhism in America as it becomes genuinely American Buddhism. To make a long review short, all persons who ought to read *Faces* (and this is everyone in any way involved with contemporary Buddhism or American religion), ought to read *Luminous Passage* (henceforth *Passage*). When I say I feel these books can become the foundation of the field, I mean it.

Does this mean either book is flawless or that either presents a finished picture of what the field should be or what Buddhism should be? Of course not. The books have their weaknesses as well as their strengths; so does American Buddhism, and the field will evolve as Buddhism does. The future is not clear and in neither book does Prebish pretend it is. This is the glory and challenge of practicing and studying Buddhism in transition. Since Prebish does both practice and study, a few words about him are in order

before we move to an overview of the book.

Charles Prebish is Professor of Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University, where he has been teaching for nearly thirty years. His first book in this field, *American Buddhism*, was published in 1979. It and Emma Layman's *Buddhism in America* were the first monographs on contemporary American Buddhism. But while Layman's book capped her contribution to the field, Prebish's formed merely the cornerstone of his. Over these last twenty years, he has labored, sometimes seemingly alone, to remind other scholars that American Buddhism is a valid field of scholarly inquiry. His work has cleared a path for those, like myself, who follow. And he has done this not only as a scholar but as a scholar-practitioner, a mediator for thirty years. Throughout *Passage* Prebish provides vignettes of his experience in both camps, as scholar and as practitioner. These are not just delightful little *entr'actes*; they themselves reveal the complexity, the interconnectedness of the various strands of American Buddhism. The fact that this interconnectedness lies also *in him* makes Prebish the perfect person to shape this field and to write this book treating the growth of American scholarship as well as of American Buddhism. Indeed, waiting for this book built up expectations in me (and no doubt in others) that no one book could fulfill. This book gave me *tanha* (craving). I always wanted *more*, more extended reflection, more personal observation. This is not of course a criticism of what is in the book; instead it reflects my hope that we will not have to wait twenty years for the next full-length installment in Prebish's chronicle of American Buddhism.

Passage contains six chapters. Chapter one provides fifty pages of dense description of the history of Buddhism in America. For those who do not have *Faces* handy, this is something of a substitute. Indeed Prebish frequently refers to and quotes from *Faces* in this chapter. (In the marketing world this would be called "synergy.")

Chapter two delves into the five developmental issues in American Buddhism raised in *Faces*: ethnicity, practice, democratization, engagement, and adaptation. It ends with a sixth issue, ecumenism, which Prebish sees as key for the growth of the tradition in America.

Chapter three gives the reader extended descriptions of seven American *sanghas*. These descriptions concentrate on the institutional and physical character of these *sanghas* (though one of them, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, does not find its locus in one physical *sangha*), but also address their various missions.

Chapter four sets out to examine what Prebish calls the "silent *sangha*," Buddhists within the Academy. Though the chapter ends up devoting most of its attention to Buddhist Studies, rather than Buddhists, it makes contri-

butions to our understanding of both.

Chapter five charts new territory, the cybersangha. In fact this territory is so new it is not clear the cartographic metaphor even works here. But Prebish, undaunted, takes us to the frontiers of Buddhism, where new electronic communities (Prebish rightly calls them *sanghas*) are changing the way all Buddhists define themselves and each other.

Chapter six ties all the issues of the book together in presenting Prebish's views on "The Future of the American Sangha." A true culmination of the book and decades of work, this chapter brings together views, past and present, on the future of Buddhism in America.

I want to give us an orienting point for the remainder of this review. I take this point from the book and from the author's life, since in the book Prebish cites it as the orienting point of his entire career.

Prebish describes a seminal meeting with his first Buddhist Studies mentor, Richard Robinson, three decades ago. Robinson advised Prebish to find a scholarly specialty nobody was interested in. Chance dictated that for Prebish it would be the *sangha*. In his way, he has pursued that specialty ever since. "Investigating the *sangha*, in all its manifestations, remains the thread that knits together the various themes of my research into one ideally harmonious fabric" (p. 232). But Prebish adds that "far from being a topic of no interest to scholars and practitioners, the *sangha* has become one of the most exciting and intriguing topics of research and investigation" (p. 232). Why is this? Because around the world, but particularly in the West, Buddhists are reshaping their tradition for the modern world ("postmodern" world, for Gallophiles), reshaping it by fundamentally reconceiving the *sangha*. In fact I would argue that the modern world is itself reshaping the *sangha* and will continue inexorably to do so, regardless of whether Buddhists reconceive it. For this reason, Prebish's lonely specialty now demands attention from scholars and practitioners alike.

The reflections that follow grow from or respond to issues of the *sangha* raised in *Passage*. *Sangha* forms the book's central theme and so a focus on *sangha* here gives us one useful and inclusive way of viewing what is helpful, provocative, or frustrating in Prebish's work. Let me start where he does, asking the question "Who is a Buddhist?"

Prebish asks this question at the opening of chapter two, "Shaping the Sangha: Developmental Issues in American Buddhism" (pp. 51–93). Prebish's answer is that Buddhists are those who call themselves Buddhists and whose Buddhism is etically, not idiosyncratically, so (p. 56). I also favor such an inclusive definition; it responds to the real situation in the field. And what does the field reveal? In this chapter Prebish describes a Buddhism that is etically concerned with developing a *sangha* that responds

to ethnicity, practice, democratization, engagement, adaptation, and ecumenicity.

Ethnicity is intimately tied to Buddhist identity in America, owing to the division between the culturally embedded Buddhism practiced by Asian immigrants, and the culturally eccentric Buddhism practiced by American converts. This topic continues to be the most hotly debated in the field of American Buddhism, both in scholarly and practicing circles. This allows Prebish, who has been there from the start, to give us an especially lively and sharp history of the debate, far the best currently in print (pp. 57–63). In the end he seems to favor Paul Numrich’s scheme of labeling Buddhists, not Buddhism. Thus we have “Asian immigrants” and “American converts” (p. 62). Just to fan the flames a bit, I would add that despite the clarity of Numrich’s terms to describe persons, it has never been hard to categorize persons on a racial or national basis, which this in effect does. Numrich is aware that some persons will defy this categorization; that is fine. But more importantly, this system doesn’t categorize Buddhism but Buddhists. Applying this to Buddhism itself, I am not sure it improves the older scheme of contrasting Asian–American Buddhism and Elite–American Buddhism (especially given the older scheme’s potential addition of “New Buddhism” to describe something like Soka Gakkai). I do know what Numrich’s scheme subtracts, though: the taint of Eurocentrism; this much is good. In the end it is plain that the relationship of these forms of Buddhism is still evolving; as it does, terminology will have to evolve with it. Though Prebish himself allows that his is hardly the final word on the topic, he entertainingly moves the conversation forward.

This chapter continues to work the rich veins of Buddhist development, spending the greatest time (pp. 69–81) on the issue of democratization. This truly cuts to the heart of the *sangha*, both in institutional organization and in how practitioners relate to their teachers. In this sense democratization speaks as well to the first jewel, the Buddha. Further, it is here that Prebish treats the increasing role of women in the *sangha*. This change has itself been seen by at least one influential author (Rita Gross) as the most significant change in modern Buddhism.

I could continue describing the richness of this chapter, but such proximity goes beyond the bounds even of one of *my* reviews. Instead I will limit myself to the observation that chapter six, “The Future of the American Sangha” (pp. 233–269), continues the threads of chapter two.

This brings up a general comment on the structure of the book. The book’s odd-numbered chapters emphasize data, while the even numbered chapters refer to data but engage it more thoughtfully. This means those who are sufficiently prepared will relish the even-numbered chapters more,

as they carry forward the state of the debates on American Buddhism. Those with a sketchier view of American Buddhism will benefit more from a careful reading of the details, especially in chapters one and three. As a critical note, I'll add I wish those chapters gave a better sense of the life that animates the history and the *sanghas* they describe. They read a bit dry, save for the personal moments Prebish allows himself. More of those and more experience–near focus would, I think, have given us a better comprehension of what Buddhism in America has really been about.

Though I've just said that the more informed reader needs the odd-numbered chapters less, it's hard to imagine any reader who would not benefit from a close reading of chapter five, "The Cybersangha: Virtual Communities" (pp. 203–232). Here Prebish not only presents information on new and groundbreaking forms of Buddhism, he also allows himself more space to question the material. The result is a consistently provocative presentation of Buddhism on the Internet, a Buddhism which challenges the very notion of what the *sangha* is and could be. Prebish even grounds this presentation in a brief and helpful treatment of the definition of *sangha*, especially the *sangha* of the four quarters (pp. 204–206). This is Prebish doing what he is uniquely suited to do: open our eyes to the newest developments of the *sangha* — developments that go beyond America — and still tie them to an informed understanding of the *sangha* from its origins.

As Prebish says at chapter five's conclusion, "Perhaps the most consequential impact of the aggressive spread of Buddhism into cyberspace, along with the creation of a new kind of American Buddhist *sangha* never imagined by the Buddha, is the uniting of all the Buddhist communities or *sanghas* described above into one universal *sangha* that can communicate effectively in an attempt to eliminate the suffering of individuals throughout the world" (p. 232). This is Prebish at his best: the wise scholar and the compassionate Buddhist speaking together to remind us of the import of what is happening right before our eyes.

To avoid sounding overly enthusiastic, I want to follow that paean with my biggest critique of the book. I was frustrated by chapter four, "The Silent Sangha: Buddhism in the Academy" (pp. 173–202). The title promises to focus on the "silent *sangha*," meaning Buddhists in the Academy. The chapter, though, spends the vast majority of its time examining Buddhologists — or, even worse, Buddhist Studies — in the Academy. It loses focus on the tensions and the opportunities for Buddhologists who are also Buddhists. Though Prebish marshals a great deal of data showing the scholarly activity of Buddhologists, he does not present his data (one imagines he has a good deal of it) addressing the silence of the Buddhists

among them and what that silence means for other *sanghas*. Since Prebish is such a long term scholar and practitioner, he is, again, uniquely suited to explore these issues. He does begin this exploration (on pages 180–183 and 196–202), but I was left wanting more. For example, he writes: “In the absence of the traditional ‘scholar–monks’ so prevalent in Asia, it may well be that the ‘scholar–practitioners’ of today’s American Buddhism will fulfill the role of ‘quasi–monastics,’ or at least of treasure troves of Buddhist literacy and information, functioning as guides through whom one’s understanding of the Dharma may be sharpened” (p. 199). This remarkable insight has profound implications for the many *sanghas*, but Prebish does not develop the idea. Such were the promises that frustrated me.

I’ll conclude where the book does, with “The Future of the American Sangha” (pp. 233–269). Here Prebish reviews past predictions on the future of American Buddhism, and brings predictions up to date with a few thoughts of his own at the eve of the millennium. He sets this all in the frame of descriptions of two conferences on Buddhism in America (descriptions that pull no punches, I’m glad to say). In the first third of the chapter Prebish critiques the predictions of Layman and himself, made in the late 1970s. He is much more critical of himself than I would be, citing “an unfortunate sense of urgency on my part for the acculturation of all Buddhist groups to an American framework” (p. 246), and claiming that no Buddhist groups acculturated toward harmony with American civil religion. I think some groups have indeed acculturated creatively, including Zen Center of Los Angeles, where I did my own fieldwork. There the *sangha* has consciously evolved to embrace aspects of American culture, even American civil religion. Since a yardstick measuring that embrace helps us understand at least one *sangha*, I don’t think Prebish needs to break the stick over his head, just yet! Still, I do agree with the root of Prebish’s self–critique: his present awareness of his previous parochial assumption. The sense that Buddhism *must* acculturate lies close to an unquestioning Americentrism and the kind of religious narcissism for which Robert Sharf has censured Western Buddhist enthusiasts.

In the book’s final pages, Prebish weaves together the concerns of Layman, his own earlier book, Rick Fields, Jack Kornfield, Robert Thurman, Lama Surya Das, Martin Baumann, and others so that their common threads reinforce each other. Despite the breadth of his sources and studies, Prebish concludes very modestly. (Too modestly for me. I wish he had given himself more rope in this final chapter, but no doubt he doesn’t relish the idea of having to critique himself again in 2019.) He generally agrees with the themes of these authors, but he himself adds two new ones. First, that “it is within the expanding inclusiveness of the American *sangha*” that new Bud-

dhist possibilities will open up, even those of monasticism (p. 267). Prebish himself welcomes this enduring diversity, as should we all. Second, he sees in that inclusiveness an increasing ecumenicity, an increasing cooperation among the differentiating forms of Buddhism (p. 268). Whether that ecumenism follows the organized path suggested in Baumann's studies of Buddhism in Europe, or whether it follows more Borgesian forking paths (as I expect it to in fragmented America), Prebish alerts us that "The globalization of Buddhism is surely at hand" (p. 269).

Let me add, as a coda, how lucky we are to at last have this monograph. It demonstrates the continuing vital presence of Prebish. Not only that, but coming out twenty years after his first book on the subject, it symbolizes (I hope) the coming of age of a whole generation of young scholars ready to treat the redefining of the *sangha* with the attention it has long deserved and seldom gotten. And as with the *sangha*, so with the Buddha and the Dharma. Global Buddhism is going to redefine them all; we should be ready. Reading this book will prove an immeasurable aid.