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Buddhism in America: Proceedings of the First Buddhism in America Conference. Compiled by Al Rapoport; edited by Brian D. Hotchkiss. Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Co., Inc., 1998. Pp. xv + 568. ISBN 0-8048-3152-1. \$29.95.

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The front cover of *Buddhism in America* carries the subtitle *Proceedings of the First Buddhism in America Conference*. Considering that a similar conference entitled "The Flowering of Buddhism in America" was held at Syracuse University in April 1977, I am afraid this claim is both overly ambitious and incorrect. In addition, on the back inside cover of the small "Program Guide" distributed at the conference from which this volume emerged, the publisher's advertisement for its forthcoming book on the proceedings of that conference boasts that "this book is destined to be considered a classic in Buddhist publishing." I think this claim, too, will prove overly ambitious and incorrect!

Buddhism in America purports to be a written account of a conference held in Boston on January 17-19, 1997. Edited volumes that are distilled from conference proceedings are almost always extremely difficult to produce, and this book must have been especially difficult for the conference organizer, who also served as "compiler" of the published account. Part of the dilemma stems from the fact that, to some extent, the conference tried to be too many things to too many people and traditions. In the process, it created some confusion about what it was, and what it wasn't. The initial brochures describing the conference identified it as "Buddhism in America: A Landmark Conference on the Future of Buddhist Meditative Practices in the West!" However restrictive the title might appear to some, the brochure left little doubt about the focus of the conference. However, by the time of the actual event, held at the Boston Park Plaza Hotel, the "Program Guide" simply listed the conference title as "Buddhism in America," omitting the previous subtitle, and the introductory program note modestly says "Welcome to the Buddhism in America Conference." This may seem like a small and insignificant shift in emphasis to note, but it isn't.

Al Rapaport notes in his Introduction that "this was not meant to be an academic discussion, as many conferences are, but rather an experiential journey through many of the aspects of Buddhism that have been transmitted from East to West" (p. xiii). The above quotation makes it clear that the conference's organizer did not consider the substantial and growing number of scholar-practitioners to be useful participants in his enterprise (with Robert Thurman and Miranda Shaw being exceptions in this case), or even a significant category on the American Buddhist landscape. In fact, in his opening "Welcome Address" to the attendees, Rapaport mentioned that among the many inquiries he had received about the conference, one had been an e-mail message from a professor who wondered why there were so very few scholars participating in the conference. Amidst the instant, collective laugh from the audience of about 800 attendees, he went on to explain that this was a conference *for practitioners*. The additional implication was clear: by prac-

tioners, he really meant, exclusively, *meditators*. He thus acknowledged having risked much potential attendance, and significant book purchases, by the many North American Buddhists who were *not* meditators—and these non-meditators (most Asian ethnic Buddhists as well as members of Soka Gakkai) are conclusively the vast majority of North American Buddhists. On the other hand, despite the underlying focus of the conference and the volume, they were, after all, commercial enterprises, and it now appears that the book, at least, has been marketed in a fashion that might attract potential sales from the several million North American Buddhists for whom the conference, and its accompanying volume, were clearly not intended.

The above notwithstanding, there were many valuable presentations at the conference which were included in the book, but it would be wrong, I think, to presume that the majority of the presentations were *exclusively* about Buddhist meditative practices in the West. In many cases, the meditational element was peripheral to the major ingredients in the presentation. Additionally, the carnival-like atmosphere of the conference weekend, in which one could purchase everything from Buddha statues to meditation harnesses from the many exhibitors, was necessarily and fortunately eliminated from the printed volume.

Following a series of "Pre-Conference Workshops," the conference itself was organized into an interesting mix of keynote presentations, lectures, and workshops. These were not thematically planned—which provided the conference attendees with a rich and diverse series of choices, but created an editor's dilemma in structuring the book. For the published version, the book was organized into five major sections: (1) "Then and Now: Buddhism Today as Informed by Ancient Asian Practices"; (2) "The Practice: Schools of Buddhism, Methods of Meditation, Monasticism"; (3) "The Path: Buddhist Thought and Practice in Day-to-Day Living and Dying"; (4) "Mindfulness and Compassion: Socially Engaged Buddhism in the West"; and (5) "Buddhism in America." Each presentation included in the book is only a short, edited fragment of the complete lecture given by each participant. For a complete version of each lecture, Sounds True Recordings offered audio-cassette tapes of the first two hours of each presentation. Considering that these tapes ranged in price from \$9.00 to \$54.00, the \$29.95 book is quite a bargain for this nearly 600-page volume.

It would probably be inappropriate to offer an evaluation of each short presentation included in the book, especially since the short portion included in the book often does not do full justice to the on-site exposition. Experienced Buddhist practitioners will probably find the little chapters on Vipassana, Zen, Dzogchen, Shikantaza, Ch'an, and so forth engaging and interesting, often reflective of the insight and wit of the presenter, but with

little material that is new or especially engaging. For beginners and curiosity-seekers, there is much that might be enthralling in these pages—material that could provoke serious additional searching in books and in practice.

My own investigation of American Buddhism focuses on five major issues: ethnicity, practice, democratization, engagement, and adaptation (or acculturation). The chapters therefore that impressed me most in this volume were ones which confronted aspects of those issues as they struggle to find meaningful application to the American Buddhist situation. Questions of Buddhist lifestyle in America were deftly examined in Dai-en Bennage Roshi's "Watering from the Deep Well: Looking at Perceptions of Monasticism" and Tsultrim Allione's "Relationship and Intimacy as Path," the latter of which was not only kind, honest, and insightful, but brilliantly applicable to questions all American Buddhists confront regularly whether they acknowledge it or not! Mu Soeng's chapter on "Buddhist Wisdom in the Light of Quantum Theory" is a lucid exposition on the application of Buddhist principles to a world dominated by science and deconstruction. Joan Halifax's chapter on "Being with Dying" is profoundly appropriate and necessary reading for the large portion of the American Buddhist population which discovered Buddhism in the 1960s and 1970s, and now finds an immediacy in confronting the end of life.

It is this reviewer's opinion that there are chapters in this volume which, because the printed word can never capture the mood and temperament of the oral presentation, distort the sense of what actually transpired during some of the conference presentations. The results are not always positive. Glassman Roshi's chapter, "Instructions to the Cook: Zen Lessons in Living a Life that Matters," *reads* far better than it seemed to me as a member of the live audience. Without questioning the marvelously important work Glassman Roshi has done in his projects of social engagement, I felt that little of the program's description of his lecture had been delivered, and that he was inexplicably rude and evasive to many members of his audience in a way that went far beyond even a roshi's sometimes seemingly odd behavior. No doubt his disciples thought he was brilliant, but there were equally as many listeners who found him profoundly disappointing.

For me, the most important chapters in the book are Robert Thurman's "Toward an American Buddhism" and Lama Surya Das's "Emergent Trends in Western Dharma." They are important because they confront the issue of where American Buddhism stands at the turn of the millennium and speculate creatively about the shape that American Buddhism might take in the next century. With his usual flair, even from the outset, Thurman doesn't equivocate:

First let me give a preview of my overall thesis here. I worked on this subject and did four lectures in San Francisco early last year, which is where I first got to the thought, and I startled myself in the middle of that series of lectures because I came to the idea that Buddhism will not actually be able to succeed in its mission here in America, unless it is able to perform that mission without being Buddhism. That's sort of the short form; that's a preview of my thesis. In other words, Buddhism has to go beyond being Buddhism in order to do the work that Buddhism wants to do wherever it is. Okay, so it's Buddhism without Buddhism. That's my title. Very Zen, don't you think?" (p. 451)

Thurman goes on to describe Buddhism as a therapy for demented human beings, but he elaborates that it was a therapy designed to cope with selfishness, with the Four Noble Truths serving as a "therapeutic recipe." He then recounts a story about the visit of the famous Buddhologist Gadjin Nagao to the Mt. Baldy Zen Center about twenty years previous, noting that Nagao titled his talk "The Five Peaks," but only mentioned four such peaks in Buddhist history. Finally, Nagao says, "There will be no fifth peak, unless it happens here in America. This is the only place where there could be a fifth peak in the history of Buddhism, a fifth great renaissance in Buddhism, and it can only be created by you" (p. 460). To counterbalance the obvious optimism of this statement, Thurman cautions against taking Buddhism for granted, noting that it can also *disappear*, just as it has in the land of its birth. Nonetheless, much of Thurman's chapter explains how to achieve that "fifth peak" in Buddhist history. And, lest he not live up to Jeffrey Hopkins's suggestion that he is "the Red Skelton of Tibetan Buddhism," Thurman concludes by saying, "I'm very honored to have addressed you, as you go out and accumulate another million hours of meditation time and rack it up on your rosary or your scoreboard or wherever you keep it— and you should keep score, by the way" (p. 468).

Surya Das's chapter appropriately concludes the volume, just as it did the Boston conference. More than any of the other participants, Surya Das is explicit in defining ten trends in the American Buddhism he sees in the next century:

1. dharma without dogma;
2. a lay-oriented *sangha*;
3. a meditation-based and experiential tradition;
4. gender equality;
5. a non-sectarian, eclectic, ecumenical tradition;
6. an essentialized and simplified tradition;

7. an egalitarian, democratic, and non-hierarchical tradition;
8. a psychologically astute and rational tradition;
9. an experimental, innovating, inquiry-based tradition;
10. a socially informed and engaged tradition.

Each of these ten trends is explained in some detail. The text of Surya Das's chapter concludes with the chant *Om Mani Padme Hum*. The volume ends with a brief glossary and wholly incomplete list of selected readings.

Buddhism in America is not a book for scholars and it doesn't try to be. It will never be like the other books on American Buddhism to emerge from conferences, such as *The Faces of Buddhism in America* from the 1994 conference at the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley, or *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship* from the 1997 Harvard Buddhist Studies Forum, but this doesn't minimize its importance or usefulness as a vehicle which provides meaningful dialogue about the American Buddhism that is developing at the end of this century. It also happens to be a fun book to read. It doesn't employ esoteric vocabulary, and isn't loaded with footnotes. It races from beginning to end, with nary a slack moment, and despite its length, leaves the reader eager for more. One would presume that more will indeed be forthcoming, too. The second Buddhism in America Conference, with an equally engaging cast of American Buddhist superstars, was recently held in San Diego, California. A quick perusal of publications like *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* suggests that other programs and conferences like this one are on the rise. My only fear is that soon this enterprise will become its own cottage industry, a "Pro Tour" for Buddhists, as it were.