



Duncan Ryuken Williams and Christopher S. Queen, eds. *American Buddhism. Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*. Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999, xxxvii + 329 pages, ISBN 0–7007–1081–7, £ 40,00 (cloth).

Reviewed by

Martin Baumann
University of Hannover
Germany
martin.baumann@uni-bielefeld.de

Journal of Buddhist Ethics 6 (1999):200-204

Copyright Notice

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to jbe-general@jbe.la.psu.edu.

Buddhists in the United States are vigorously hammering out adapted forms of American Buddhism. A bewildering garden of Buddhist schools and traditions has taken root in North American cities and rural areas. Their adherents are Asian immigrants, some having come recently as Vietnamese or Laotian refugees, others now bringing up a fourth or fifth generation as Chinese or Japanese Buddhists. A second strand is made up of converts from Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, or “non-religious” backgrounds who practice Zen or vipassanā meditation or participate in Tibetan Buddhist liturgical rituals. Only on rare occasions do the strands of convert, “white” Buddhism and family-socialized “ethnic” Buddhism meet and merge. Nevertheless, as the grounding of the Dharma occurs in the United States and Canada, this heterogeneity is subsumed under the label of “American Buddhism.” The book under review is both a stock-taking and a mirror of the work-in-progress of adapting Buddhist teachings and practices to North American society.

American Buddhism assembles thirteen essays of varying lengths and strengths, half of which were presented at a conference on Buddhism in America held at the Harvard Divinity School in 1997. A nicely-written foreword by Diana Eck, a brief preface by co-editor Duncan Williams, and a sophisticated introduction by co-editor Christopher Queen precede

the contributions. As Queen points out, choosing the main title “American Buddhism” instead of the conference’s noncommittal “Buddhism in America,” reflects the findings “that recognizable patterns of American Buddhism are emerging in every quarter” (p. xvi). Queen arranges these “recognizable patterns” into the three broad categories of democratization, pragmatism, and engagement. The range, depth, and emphasis attributed to these three touchstones or “three marks” (Pāli *tilakkhaṇa*) are pointed out by Queen in a clear and very helpful way with regard to the chapters that follow.

The first of the volume’s four parts is devoted to Asian–American Buddhists. Kenneth Tanaka describes and analyzes issues of ethnicity in the Buddhist Churches of America. This Jōdo–Shinshū tradition came to North America from Japan in the last century, taking its current name in 1944, a time when most of its leaders and priests had been placed in internment camps. Based on information gathered from a questionnaire survey, Tanaka interestingly points out that in contrast to prevalent immigrant integration theories, the Japanese–American third generation did not and does not take a deepening interest in its cultural heritage. Instead, a high rate of out–marriage, of dropping–out and abandoning cultural values, is recognizable among the *sansei* (third generation). So far, as presented in the paper, the author’s results methodologically cannot claim representative status and have to be judged as impressionistic, although instructive, hints. In a somewhat similar way, the chapter by Senryō Asai and Duncan Williams on cultural identity and economics in Japanese American Zen temples could be stronger in combining new methodological approaches and interpretation. Whereas the idea of and approach to examining temple economics is innovative with regard to Buddhist temples in the West — though it is not new in other fields and disciplines — the authors in the end make too little use of the multitude of data and figures collected. Unfortunately, the tables with their many numbers and percentage rates are very rarely discussed and interpreted in the text itself. Despite this incompleteness, Asai and Williams’ observations that “a kind of parallel world between Asian–American Buddhism and primarily Euro–American Buddhism” (p. 30) exists, and that “the members of Japanese–American Zen temples expect that the temple will provide them with familial and cultural identity rather than with a space to meditate” (p. 32) underscores the different understandings of Buddhist institutions according to the different strands. The chapter by Stuart Chandler on the Taiwanese Hsi Lai Temple (in California) and its political entanglement in the mid–1990s provides an interesting report on the “donation scandal” and the role of the scholar’s responsibility and involvement as mediator. Penny van Esterik’s essay on the approximately

100,000 Laotians resident in the United States gives a condensed description of a personal ritual and a collective festival, followed by a few thoughts on adapting Laotian Buddhism in the United States.

The book's second part, on convert or "new" Buddhists, is introduced by Thomas Tweed's critical and straightforward reflections on how religious identity and belonging is defined by scholars. Abandoning essentialist definitions of religious identity by way of adherence or non-adherence to a specific religious traditions, Tweed opts to include a third category for scholarly investigation, that of "sympathizer." "Sympathizers are those who have some sympathy for a religion but do not embrace it exclusively or fully" (p. 74). The self-identification of a person as a Buddhist (or as a member of any tradition) should also be taken seriously by scholars. Suffice it to say that this fact alone should alert scholars to pay attention to these people instead of neglecting them in research. Despite the valid critique of the essentialist/normative approach concerning what kind of people have been considered for research, one could ask whether this suggestive nominal approach does not take the opposite one-sided stance. Possibly a middle way (sounds quite Buddhist!) of combining the two approaches might serve best, although on theoretical levels quite a number of problems remain. The next two chapters, by James Coleman and by Philip Hammond and David Machacek respectively, are preliminary presentations of current empirical studies on Buddhist groups and converts in the United States. Although they indicate that research has in no sense come to an end despite the current wave of studies on Buddhism in America, the results presented thus far are not really new or path-breaking.

In contrast to this, the contribution by Paul Numrich on local inter-Buddhist associations in North America breaks new ground, both with regard to the scope of research and analysis. Starting from the description of the Buddhist Council of the Midwest, Numrich develops the types of pluralist, fusionist, and assimilationist models of inter-Buddhist relations. Whereas the first type acknowledges the diversity of Buddhist schools and traditions, gathered under the umbrella of the council, the second model aims to fuse the heterogeneity into one larger body. The assimilationist model attempts to synthesize the diversity further according to the dominant or leading voice in the council. Rather than confining himself to the Midwest or to North America, Numrich treats inter-Buddhist associations in other regions, such as Australia and Germany. In addition, he also sets such inter-Buddhist activities in historical perspective, referring to instances in Buddhist history such as the reign of the Indian emperor Ashoka (third century B.C.E.) or Buddhist universities in North India (300–1200 C.E.). He convincingly analyzes these early instances of inter-Buddhist meetings

according to the models developed in his essay. Charles Strain then offers an interpretation of Gary Snyder's environmental ethics and Richard Hayes provides impressions from Internet and e-mail discussion groups gained during his many years of involvement. These three papers form the section on "Modes of Dharma Transmission."

The fourth and last section of the book considers the scholar's place in American Buddhist studies. In a detailed and rich paper, Charles Prebish reconstructs and documents the development of the discipline of Buddhist Studies in America. He not only surveys the current state of affairs, but through the use of a questionnaire provides a painstaking analysis of the field. In a manner similar to Numrich's heuristically fruitful method, Prebish reverts back to Buddhism's early times from a historical perspective and compares the "scholar-monks" (*gantha-dhura*) of the past with the contemporary Buddhist "scholar-practitioner": "In the absence of the traditional 'scholar-monk' 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 treasure-troves of Buddhist literacy and information, functioning as guides through whom one's understanding of the Dharma may be sharpened" (p. 208). This point is also echoed by Hayes earlier in the volume when he urges that "we have a duty not only to study American Buddhists but also to inform them" (p. 177). Although the idea of an "impartial, neutral" observer and scholar itself is a fiction, one nevertheless should be cautious of not throwing the baby out with the bath water, that is, engaging in proselytizing and missionary activities. The line to be drawn is also considered in the paper by Robert Goss, who discusses the Naropa Institute. The Institute was founded by Chogyam Trungpa in 1974, and offers courses on Asian languages, Buddhist Studies, "Contemplative Psychology," and quite a number of other subjects. Whereas there is no doubt that a normative Buddhist point of view is basic to the institute, Goss does not shy away from comparing the Institute with long-established divinity schools (p. 233). While attributing similar functions, roles, and aims to the establishment of the Institute as "non-exceptional," he indicates to what extent Buddhism has gone mainstream in contemporary North America. The final contribution by Richard Seager is a strategically well-placed concluding chapter. This sophisticated American historian not only looks back on existing studies of Buddhism in the United States but also surveys the "Buddhist worlds in the U.S.A." From a bird's eye view the reader again is presented with the plurality of Buddhist expressions and traditions current in North America. Once again, as Numrich and Prebish did by delineating the developments and "Americanization" of American Buddhism's development in historical perspective, Seager concludes his

chapter by stating that “it is too early to make a call on what American Buddhism is. And historical precedents in Asia suggest that there is a great deal more yet to come” (p. 253). Finally, Seager’s references and notes provide a welcome list of existing studies and a multitude of specific internet addresses of respective Buddhist organizations and centers.

The volume’s appendix contains a list of North American dissertations and theses on American Buddhism (77 of them up to 1997) and on topics related to Buddhism in general (some 850 up to 1997). This is an admirable compilation undertaken by co-editor Duncan Williams. Notes on the contributors and an index round out the book.

The book is clearly arranged. Queen’s introduction is reinforced by Seager’s concluding chapter, the two papers providing a frame within which a kaleidoscope of varied studies, projects, and observations is presented. Outsiders rarely become aware of the reasons why papers given at a specific conference were not accepted and why certain others had been solicited, and at times I wondered why condensed ritual descriptions or preliminary project reports had been included. On the other hand, as indicated at the beginning of this review, the book thus becomes a reflection and mirror of current developments and works-in-progress and suggests new methods being applied in Buddhist Studies and to studies of Buddhism in America in particular. For example, database sampling and survey-based studies are proven to “work” in relation to this “object” and thus suggest fruitful ideas for further related research. However, set in a broader sociological and anthropological perspective, these are in no way new and innovative methods, as pointed out by some of the contributors. Nevertheless, the editors have assembled a collection of interesting — a few even superb — papers which provide rich insights into the current state of a new sub-discipline in the making: American Buddhism.