



**Seager, Richard Hughes.** *Buddhism in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, xviii + 314 pages, ISBN: 0-231-10868-0, US \$35.00.

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In recent years, collective volumes like *American Buddhism* (Christopher S. Queen and Duncan Ryūken Williams, 1999, Curzon Press) or *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, 1998, University of California Press) have given a sense of the making of a “subfield” within Buddhist studies: the study of Western Buddhism. Nevertheless, the abundance of publications can also be dazzling. Coming from different fields and with different perspectives, the studies recently published leave the reader uncertain of exactly how those sophisticated researches click together to form the broader picture. In addition, as noted by *Buddhism in America*, the publications “often run at cross-purposes because they come out of different disciplines and lack a set of clearly defined, common questions” (p. xii).

The need for a general review has been met by Charles Prebish, whose own work contributed significantly in making Buddhism in the West a legitimate object of study. *Luminous Passage* has brilliantly presented the issues discussed for the last quarter of century in the field. In contrast, Seager’s book, aimed at a general readership, sets on a modest goal: presenting the basic patterns of the presence of Buddhism on the American soil in a collection dedicated to the history of Religions in America. Just as *Luminous Passage* was clearly emerging from Buddhist studies, this book

is firmly rooted in the study of the American religious past.

It is the present reviewer's opinion that, while attempting to give an accessible—but by no means simplistic—account of a complex process, Professor Seager has provided the “subfield” with a “bird's-eye view” of the territory that will prove helpful to scholars and practitioners alike.

The study is divided into three parts. Part one is on the “Background,” starting with a presentation of the American Buddhist landscape, followed by the tenets of Buddhism and a summary of the history of Buddhism in the USA. Part two, entitled “Major Traditions,” gives an account of six traditions: Jōdo Shinshū, Sōka Gakkai, Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, Theravāda, and the other Pacific Rim traditions present in the United States (namely Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese schools of Buddhism). The last part is devoted to selected issues: gender equity, socially engaged Buddhism, intra-Buddhist and inter-religious dialogue and Americanization. *Buddhism in America* will be a reference book, even for experienced researchers in the field. It compiles seventeen profiles of prominent figures in the transplantation of Buddhism in America. A list of resources that includes print and online journals, videotapes, and Internet sites closes the book. This review will follow the book's chapters (the titles are mine), focusing on the benefits of this approach to the scientific study of Buddhism in the USA.

### **Immigration and Buddhism in America**

The first of the three parts of the book presents the background of Buddhism in America. Seager begins this introductory chapter by outlining three different components of Buddhism in America. The first is the convert communities, which are mainly European, but are also Asian, African, or Native American Buddhists. Those communities are the result of the century-old Western interest in Buddhism. Most of them began in the 1940s and 1950's and experienced a significant growth in the 1960s as young people from the “counterculture” started seeking Asian masters. These groups emphasize practices such as meditation or rituals that were often monastics' prerogatives in Asia. The second component of Buddhism in America distinguished by Seager are the immigrants and refugees who came to the USA in the 1960s after the loosening of restrictions to immigration in the mid-1960s. A third strand that emerges when adapting Buddhism to an American context is composed of Americans from Japanese or Chinese descent who have been practicing Buddhism for four or five generations in the States.

Since Rick Fields wrote his narrative history of Buddhism in the USA, that story has been told a number of times. Nevertheless, Richard Seager

proposes a new perspective when stating that “the importance of immigration to American Buddhism cannot be overestimated” (p. 44). As Fields himself emphasized later (see for instance his chapter in Prebish and Tanaka, 1998), one needs to include “ethnic” Buddhism to understand how Buddhism is being transformed by the American culture. According to *Buddhism in America*, the reason is not only that most first generation teachers, Zen masters, Theravāda *bhikkhus* or Tibetan lamas were immigrants. More importantly, most Buddhist centers and temples still maintain exchanges and contacts with Asia. In a revealing comparison, Seager underlines that just as the arrival of French priests fleeing the revolution has dramatically transformed the predominantly aristocratic English Catholicism in the late eighteenth century, contact with Asian Buddhists is modifying American Buddhist practices. A striking example is the case of a California Japanese Zen center that adopted the Korean practice of full-body prostrations after the visit of a group of Korean monks. This enabled the younger American practitioners to participate in strenuous activities without building a weight room in the temple as they first intended to do.

In addition, Seager underlines that mass immigration, which constantly reintroduces more traditional elements, is likely to affect Buddhism in America, just as Russian Jewish immigration has challenged the liberal adaptations of German American Jews in the early twentieth century. This leads the volume to contrast the converts and the immigrants. Whereas the former relate to Asian traditions in a “community of discourse,” a distinct literary and philosophical tradition, the latter is best seen as a “diaspora community” that encompasses “familial relations, religious institutions, political convictions and an enduring sense of cultural and ethnic identity” (p. 47). It has been said several times that immigration is of paramount importance for Buddhism in America, but Richard Seager is actually demonstrating just how fruitful that approach can be.

### **Understanding the History of Buddhism in America**

Part two presents the major traditions in America. The chapters follow the same outline: an historical presentation of the main individuals and institutions is followed by a description of the various schools of Buddhism through an index of carefully selected terms. Such an approach is adequate to American Buddhism’s strong pragmatism and provides a very clear frame.

The first chapter gives an account of the century-old Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist Churches of America (BCA). The study highlights, in the long and, at times, difficult history of BCA, the tension inherent in maintaining one’s distinctive cultural identity while adapting to a new social and cultural context, in the midst of national conflicts. The Americanization of the

movement is exemplified by the choice of the denomination Buddhist Churches of America in 1944 (while the Japanese American community was still under suspicion and faced internment measures). The book shows that this process did not take place without generational conflicts, in particular between the *Issei* (first generation) and the *Nisei* (second generation). Nor is this a univocal movement: Richard Seager signals a recent “movement to return to tradition.”

The next chapter describes the history of the Sōka Gakkai International-USA (SGI-USA), alienated since the 1991 schism from the Japanese Nichiren Buddhist movement. Seager starts with a presentation of the Japanese historical background, a prerequisite to understanding this highly evangelistic movement. Numerically important (between 100,000 or 300,000 adherents) and widely propagated (it has a larger proportion of African American and Hispanic American members than other converts groups), the Sōka Gakkai could be viewed as one of the most successful Buddhist groups in America. Seager remarks that “the innovations made since the schism have had different impacts in different countries, but in the United States have helped transform SGI into a form of lay Buddhism quite in keeping with the tenor and values of moderate moral and religious current in the American mainstream” (p. 86). The conclusion underlines the fact that, even though the strong links with Japan could be a source of tension in the organization, the movement’s unambiguous lay orientation and values put it “in a very good position to play an important, ongoing role in the creation of American Buddhism” (p. 88).

Chapter seven is devoted to “Zen and its flagship institution.” His historical approach allows the author to remind us that bringing the teachings to the USA and opening it to lay people was part of a reform movement in Japanese Zen. The institutions selected are those linked to Hakūn Yasutani (1885–1973), Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi (1931–1995), and Shunryu Suzuki (1905–1971). Yasutani heavily influenced the making of Zen in America through Robert Aitken, (founder of the Diamond Sangha, a network of teachers and centers) and Philip Kapleau, author of *The Three Pillars of Zen* and founder of the Rochester Zen Center. Other Rinzai teachers are presented as well, including Joshu Sasaki, founder of the Mount Baldy Zen Center (California), and Eido Shimano, founder of Dai Bosatsu Monastery on Beecher Lake. In the Soto lineages, Seager gives an account of Shunryu Suzuki’s organizations in the San Francisco Area and Taizan Maezumi’s work in Los Angeles. The contrasts between John Daido Looi and Bernard Tetsugen Glassman, both of whom are Maezumi’s *Dharma* heirs, demonstrate “the way Zen is taking different shapes in this country” (p. 105). John Daido Looi has sought to develop “radical conservatism” when

Bernard Tetsugen Glassman has explored practices such as business or social action as means of making Zen at home in the USA. Seager claims that the outcome of these diverging approaches of Japanese Zen interaction with other Buddhist traditions in America remains far from complete.

Chapter eight presents the “Tibetan milieu.” Rather than simply giving accounts of Tibetan Vajrayāna teachers’ work in the USA, Seager gives the whole spectrum of interest, from the entertainment industry’s artists to the efforts to publish and preserve Tibetan religious texts in scholarly circle. At the same time, Seager mentions the political aspects of the support for Tibet as well as the work of famous converts to Buddhism. The last part describes the network and vocabulary of the Kagyu network in the USA, giving a sense of the Tibetan Buddhist practice and worldview.

Chapter nine studies Theravāda Buddhism, differentiating the various Asian American communities and the converts communities. In the former, lay people’s practices are mostly ritual and devotional. Lay people earn merit through serving the monastic community that follows the monastic rules (*Vinaya*). In convert communities, this model is mostly abandoned, and instead, lay people meditate, not necessarily professing a Buddhist faith. This chapter illustrates the differences in the issues faced by those communities. To the immigrants, Americanization is the process, at times difficult, of adapting themselves and their practices in a new society. Among converts, Americanization means the involvement of lay people in monastic practices, which raises the issue of “what American Protestants have long called *declusion* the gradual loosening of doctrine and practice over successive generations” (p. 151).

Chapter ten describes Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese Buddhism in America. The sample of Chinese Buddhism organizations is particularly rich and detailed, underlining “the complexity of forms of Chinese Buddhism currently thriving [in the USA]” (p. 160). Seager’s attention to differences within Chinese groups and classes helps to avoid gross generalizations about “Asian Buddhism.” The account of Korean Buddhist groups in the USA also points out that national differences within Asian Buddhism are not to be underestimated. Similarly, the pages on Vietnamese Buddhism in America distinguish the issues related to the refugee situation—first surviving, then thriving to maintain ethnic identity—and the effect of leaders like Thich Nhat Hanh on the mainstream culture. Seager points out that “despite Nhat Hanh’s importance in this country, he is more the patriot in exile familiar from the anticolonial struggles of European history than an Americanizing Buddhist leader” (p. 179).

Those carefully written historical accounts help the reader realize that the Americanization of Buddhism is far from a simple linear process. It

comes from a number of players whose backgrounds and definitions of what it means to be a Buddhist in America are quite different.

### **Issues in Buddhism in America**

The third part is devoted to selected issues, including gender equity, socially engaged Buddhism, intra-Buddhist and interreligious dialogue. The author argues that examination of those elements “gives a sense of some of the forces at work in the creation of New World Buddhism in the last decades of the twentieth century” (p. 185). This is most likely where the limitations of the format have proved most demanding: constructing a fair summary of ongoing debates without flattening out the issues is quite a challenge. Richard Seager’s careful prose here is some of his best, constantly putting historical perspective to debates, often adding new visions of well-known facts. For instance, on “gender equity” (chapter eleven), Seager takes the scandals that broke up in different centers at the turn of the 1980s as the starting point of his exposition. On these touchy issues, Seager’s historical approach and analysis do wonders. Those scandals are described as “leadership crises that occurred as the free-wheeling, no holds-barred spirit of the 1960’s and ‘70’s ran aground on the conservative mood of the Reagan years” (p. 186), thus relating local communities’ conflicts with issues in the American society at large.

The volume then indicates that the 1980s crisis did not only dash away romantic assumptions on Asian religions; it also triggered institutional changes and acted as “wake up call for women.” Seager lists key publications and authors challenging the male-dominating aspects of Buddhism. This chapter includes an account of the debate on homosexuality and Buddhism, brought to public attention by the much publicized meeting held in June 1997 between gay and lesbian Buddhist activists and the Dalai Lama. Those developments are linked to changes in the monastic institutions, as illustrated by the work of women like Karma Lekshe Tsomo, cofounder of Sakyadhita (“daughters of the Buddha,” an international association of Buddhist women), a scholar, and a monastic. A nun in the Fo Kuang order (quoted p. 200) suggests that the preponderant impact of women in Buddhism is not without Asian parallels. This short summary does no justice to the careful look at those issues of power, gender equality, and spiritual authority as fascinating examples of how “tradition and innovation mingle in complex and often unexpected ways” (p. 200).

Chapter twelve is devoted to “Socially Engaged Buddhism.” After underlining the variety of forms taken by the application of Buddhist principles to social issues, *Buddhism in America* summons the different views on socially engaged Buddhism. Three different inspirations in this

movement are outlined. First is the liberal-left social concerns of the 1960s (Robert Aitken would come to mind as an example of this); second, the Buddhist social movements in Asia (Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese master who started his action during the Vietnam war would be a good example here); and third, the reform-minded American religious ethos. Socially engaged American Buddhist organizations described are Thich Nhat Hanh's "Order of Interbeing," the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (founded by a group of converts including Robert Aitken, Gary Snyder, and Joanna Macy in 1978), and the Zen Peacemaker Order (founded by Bernard Glassman and Sandra Jishu Holmes in 1997).

Chapter thirteen examines how Buddhism is changed by "Intra-Buddhist and Interreligious Dialogue." Those two aspects are clearly related in the modern era where dialogue among different schools of Buddhism took place in a general context of religious dialogues. An example of cross-fertilization would be Henry Steel Olcott's drafting a "Common Platform upon which all Buddhists Can Agree" (1891). It did start a pan-Buddhist movement. However, the results greatly resemble a "Buddhist catechism," demonstrating the predominance of Christian terms in this new understanding of Buddhism. Efforts to create cooperation and dialogue between different Buddhist schools in America through formal meetings are presented. Seager points out another level of inter-Buddhist contacts: the American Buddhist trend of "mixing" traditions or "shared practices" (as coined by Jack Kornfield, quoted on p. 218). The historian reminds that the American religious approach does, by and large "value personal religious experience but have little use for doctrinal consistency or patience with traditional orthodoxy" (p. 218). Such an innovative approach to Buddhism has been supported by Buddhist leaders who stated in a 1993 "Open letter to the Buddhist community" that teachers should not be above ethical norms and underscored the freedom to "draw upon the insights of other religious traditions and secular forms of thought and practice, such as therapy" (p. 221) in adapting Buddhism. The next section describes the Christian and Buddhist dialogue.

The complex relationship between "Jews, Buddhists and Jewish Buddhists" are presented separately. The conclusion states that some of this "cross fertilization among different religions occurring in many different quarters and in a wide variety of ways" will shape a uniquely American form in the long term (p. 231).

### **Americanization is far from completed**

The author's vision of long-term issues in the history of Buddhism in America is discussed in the last chapter, "Making some sense of

Americanization.” Pulling together the threads of this book, this chapter gives the general conclusions of this historical approach. Seager notes that the phrase “American Buddhism” was meant “to convey the idea that converts’ innovations could claim normative status to be understood as the wave of the future” (p. 235). Others used the phrase “Buddhism in America” to “convey that there are many expressions of the Dharma in this country, some associated with converts, others with immigrants, but none that can be characterized as normative.” The historian’s use of the latter phrase might be the main theme in the book: “it is premature to announce the establishment of a unique, authentic form of American Buddhism” (p. 236).

All of the groups selected have managed to establish institutions, but face new challenges to their survival over the long haul: “economic considerations, leadership and succession issues, or keeping and replenishing their membership” (p. 236). As for the issues faced by the various immigrant communities, Seager points out that one should not consider it as exclusively religious, because in most immigration situations “religion, along with political, commercial and other social concerns, becomes an element in a powerful, if somewhat amorphous sense of ethnic identity” (p. 238). Hence, more attention should be given to political and social functions of Buddhism, as a second and sometimes third generation come of age in America. The author suggests that this influence will exert itself, even though the Roman Catholic Church example would suggest that the diversity of Buddhism is likely to remain predominant in Asian circles.

The issues faced by convert communities are those typical of second-generation devotees. There are only two ways to overcome the aging of the present baby-boomer converts: natural filiation or attraction of younger members. Will those groups pass on their Buddhism to their children or rejuvenate their membership is a question that remains to be answered by further developments and new research. Another issue faced by converts is related to the present ambiguous status of most American converts, not quite monastics and not quite lay people. Some observers have pointed out that this could impede the transmission of authentic Buddhism because it has been historically transmitted solely by monastic institutions.

The author argues that American Buddhists, immigrants and converts alike, are in the “heroic age” of their founding. In this context, immigration remains the main force at work. The theorizing about American Buddhism in the 1980s could then be seen as an example of the second generation’s efforts to distinguish itself from first generation immigrants. Because historical examples suggest a trend toward reversion, a move back to Asian sources and teachers remains likely.

In my opinion, this book is not only a great introduction to the topic of

Buddhism in America. It provides perspectives that are not necessarily new (for example, Martin Baumann has already strongly advocated the use of immigration methodology in the study of Western Buddhism), but have rarely been expressed so clearly, and most certainly never in such an accessible and enjoyable format.