



Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds. *The Faces of Buddhism in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, viii + 370 pages, ISBN 0-520-21301-7, US \$50 (cloth), \$22 (paper).

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Buddhism in America: what is it? This indispensable volume revolves around that question. Revolving, it sees varied forms of American Buddhism, and sees them from varied perspectives. It is that variety which makes the book so revolutionary. For readers in a rush, let me say right now this book may be the keystone of the nascent literature on American Buddhism. Whether a Buddhist scholar or a Buddhist practitioner, whether a member of the cultural elite or a struggling ethnicity, whether your Buddhism is an exotic import you have just discovered or a cultural institution you take for granted, you will gain from this book. And if, like mine, your own life crosses these borders, you will gain even more from the book. It deserves a place in Dharma center libraries and on practitioners' bookshelves as well as in college libraries and scholars' bookshelves.

Co-editor Charles Prebish makes clear in his introduction that the acculturating religious forms of Asia on the one hand, and the religion or interest which is "literate, urban, upwardly mobile, perhaps even elite in its life orientation" (p. 7) on the other, are quite different. This "bifurcation" in American Buddhism needs study alongside the traditions of American Buddhism. *Voilà* the shape and greatest contribution of *The Faces of Buddhism in America*. I want to begin by addressing that shape.

The book's first part (a bit more than half), entitled "American Bud-

dhist Traditions in Transition,” treats the several main forms of Buddhism present in America now: Chinese, Pure Land, Japanese Zen, Nichiren, Korean, Vietnamese, and Theravāda Buddhism, and insight meditation (evidently the Buddhism that dared not speak its name).

The book’s second part, “Issues in American Buddhism,” explores questions raised by this myriad of Buddhist forms and practices. The chapters here cover who is a Buddhist, “White” versus “Ethnic” Buddhism, the roots of Buddhist Americanization, Buddhism and psychology, women and power in Buddhism, queer Buddhism, and socially engaged Buddhism. Quite a variety pack.

Most of these chapters grow out of a conference on Buddhism held at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, in the fall of 1994, and the divergent chapters retain the diffuse feeling of a conference. But this fits the field, after all. Despite the intervening years, the issues the book raises remain lively — even acrimonious — and vital to the rooting of the Dharma in America. The editors and the University of California Press have given a great gift to scholars and practitioners alike: a book that contains within it the energy, the contradictions, and the sincerity of religion on a new frontier. In a sense it is not just the cutting edge of scholarship on Buddhism in America, it is the cutting edge of that Buddhism itself.

Stuart Chandler sets the book moving briskly with his chapter on Chinese Buddhism in America. He points out the variety of this Buddhism and does us a service by showing how Chinese Buddhism problematizes Prebish and Nattier’s distinctions (see below) of ethnic/baggage and elite/import Buddhism. Indeed, Chandler problematizes the very notion of being Chinese American, effectively integrating Buddhist identity into larger questions of Americanness and Chineseness.

Next comes Alfred Bloom’s chapter detailing the history of Shin Buddhism in America and calling on the tradition to modernize lest it fail and fade. In his *American Buddhism* (1979), Prebish observed that Shin Buddhism was the oldest continuously existing Buddhist tradition in America. Following this up after another twenty years, Bloom writes that Shin is also “the best organized, and endowed with human and financial resources. Yet it has not been able to make the transition to America easily” (p. 45).

Victor Sōgen Hori’s chapter on Japanese Zen ends up focusing mostly on exactly that: Zen in Japan. Hori defends Rinzai traditions of Zen in Japan against perceived antagonism in the West, but this tells us little about Zen as actually practiced here. Indeed, while Hori’s take on the prejudices of American Zen practitioners may be correct, his description of actual practice in this country is so far from my own experience and research it made me question how he has come to his conclusions. Still, the chapter

raises provocative questions about mutual training, hierarchy, and ritual.

In contrast, both Jane Hurst's chapter on Nichiren Shōshū and Soka Gakkai, and Amy Levine's chapter on Vajrayāna, strike a nice balance between questioning the adaptations of the traditions in the West and questioning the rigidity of the traditions in the East. Hurst's chapter is particularly good on history, including the divisive conflict and final split between Nichiren Shōshū and Soka Gakkai. In contrast, Levine is best on the difficulties of establishing new institutions of Vajrayāna authority in this country. These will have to be both instructional and spiritual forms of authority, but in true Vajrayāna form they will reside in *geshes* and *tulkus*, living persons who embody the tradition. Levine sees that this transition from Asian to Western figures is going to be difficult.

Mu Soeng's chapter on Korean Buddhism concentrates on the charismatic monk Seung Sahn. This critical but nuanced portrayal of this pivotal figure is certainly the best I have read. The chapter also briefly treats Samu Sunim, but suggests that the number of Korean American Buddhists is "miniscule compared to those who consider themselves Christian" (p. 128). Living in Los Angeles, a city with a least nine Korean temples advertising in the yellow pages, I wish Soeng had further developed this crucial pronouncement.

Cuong Nguyen and A. W. Barber, on the other hand, peremptorily dismiss the careers of Thich Nhat Hanh and Thich Tien An (p. 131) and spend their chapter discussing Vietnamese Buddhism in the Vietnamese American community only. They call Vietnamese Buddhism the least popular form among non-Vietnamese and worry that it might soon be reduced to a relic (p. 146). While their coverage of this Buddhism seems well-researched, their dismissal of the two Vietnamese monks who have reached out to non-Vietnamese is troubling to me. Questioning Thich Nhat Hanh's Dharma transmission as they do (p. 309n) does not mean his work is invalid, spiritually or politically. And wherever Thich Tien An got his training, his memory has certainly not faded away in Los Angeles, where he is remembered at his flourishing Dharma center, rightly or wrongly, as the first patriarch of American Vietnamese Buddhism.

Paul Numrich's rich chapter on Theravāda Buddhism and its prospects here, and Gil Fronsdal's chapter on insight meditation, offer a marvelous contrast. Numrich, working from his deep base of research, demonstrates the extreme difficulty of establishing an American bhikkhu-sangha, and he reminds us that without that there has traditionally been no Theravāda at all. Thus far, Numrich knows of not one American-born ethnically Asian bhikkhu, and if Numrich doesn't know of one, well, they likely do not exist. Without such persons, Numrich asks, how will the sangha

be able to speak in meaningful ways to future generations?

The book then switches chapters to talk about insight meditation. So far the book has treated forms of Buddhism growing from one culture in one chapter. So, for example, Chandler's chapter treats both the Hsi Lai Temple and Sheng Yen's Ch'an centers, both "ethnic" and "elite" forms of Chinese Buddhism. But here, perhaps because the gap between forms is so complete, the editors actually split them into separate chapters, inscribing in the book's very structure the profound schism Prebish referred to in the introduction.

Fronsdal's chapter illustrates this phenomenon by leading off with observations that these meditators have "minimal connection to Theravāda" and as a result, "many more Americans of European descent refer to themselves as vipassanā students than as students of Theravāda Buddhism" (p. 164). Just to repeat: many don't even call themselves Buddhists, let alone Theravāda Buddhists. Fronsdal is sympathetic to the practice, seeing it as inherently open and healthily adaptive, but he does wonder whether, with only orthopraxy and no orthodoxy, the movement will be able to sustain itself.

The volume now turns to more theoretical views of American Buddhism. Appropriately first is Jan Nattier's chapter on who is a Buddhist. Here Nattier updates her work on providing terminology for the distinct types of American Buddhism. She moves from the dual models earlier proposed by Prebish and herself to the tripartite model she now favors. In addition to elite/import Buddhism (practiced mostly by the educated and affluent), and ethnic/baggage Buddhism (practiced mostly by immigrants and their descendents), Nattier adds export Buddhism (practiced by those here seeking to convert others to the practice). While this does indeed help with classifying Soka Gakkai, the deep bifurcation remains. Rick Fields furthers this discussion in his chapter, enticingly titled "Divided Dharma: White Buddhists, Ethnic Buddhists, and Racism." Fields, clearly an especially self-critical "White Buddhist," calls for openness and gratitude for all Buddhist forms. Yet I wish he had made clearer the reasons for his continued adherence to the (to my mind) divisive and embittering distinction between "White" and "Ethnic" Buddhism. There is not yet a perfect solution to the terminology problem, but I cannot accept an anachronistic highlighting of race as the best answer we currently have.

Martin Verhoeven provides a context for current issues of Americanization by describing the work of Paul Carus of a century ago. Ironically, Carus's appropriation of Buddhism as an exact analogue to his "Religion of Science" dovetailed with a Japanese effort to assert superiority over the West in the field of religion. These two culturally conditioned aims for a

time coincided in work of Carus and D. T. Suzuki, but at what cost to the transmission of genuine Buddhism, whatever that might be? A cautionary tale.

Returning to the present, the book gives us Ryo Imamura's chapter on Buddhist and Western psychotherapies. I have wrestled with myself over how to treat such a chapter. Can I simply maintain a "noble silence" and skip over it? Must I refute its tendentious nonsense, point by point, as I certainly could? If I believe the chapter "wrong speech," I may fall into wrong speech myself by writing of it, yet sometimes severe critique is the duty of a reviewer. Imamura, a Shin priest and professor of psychology, would seem a fine bridging figure between Buddhism and psychotherapy. Instead, he plainly prefers burning bridges already built. In place of practicalities, he puts polemic. He devotes most of the chapter to comparing the worst qualities and even abuses of Western psychotherapies to an idealized and therefore unassailable vision of Buddhism. Crucially, he effaces the gulf between behavioral and drug-based psychotherapies on the one hand, and dynamic psychotherapies on the other. In this way he absurdly attributes the faults of each to *both*. Correspondingly, he avoids all mention of the ways Western psychotherapies compare favorably to Buddhist psychotherapy (the latter so romanticized he cannot critique it in the slightest). When Imamura does say something legitimately applicable to Western psychotherapy he is either misleadingly narrow (for instance, when he asserts that psychotherapy is entirely rational and coercive, [p. 232]) or just plain wrong ("to be unhappy is to be abnormal" [p. 231]. How far from Freud's famous dictum can one get?). After a sustained fusillade of this, the field is sadly battered into unrecognizability. Equally sadly, Imamura distorts Buddhism. For example, he asserts that "Buddhist psychotherapy is not a tool or agent of culture,...the Gautama Buddha [sic] was quite clear in his disapproval of the Indian caste system and his desire to expand the role of women in the religious life" (p. 233). To correct Imamura on this issue, I simply direct the reader to Numrich's (pp. 152–153) and David Rothberg's (pp. 271–272, 275) chapters in this very volume. I had thought scholars had fully gone beyond the agonistic dichotomy of "East" and "West." Imamura's chapter shows that even presumably sincere persons still cleave to that polarizing and inadequate model. No doubt my outrage at Imamura grows partly from my disappointment in us all. As Verhoeven might ask, how far have we really come since 1893? But at least now one must critique the West and glorify the East; if anyone published the inverse of this chapter, it would likely be the end of his public career.

That aberration dispensed with, we now come to Rita Gross's admirable chapter on women and authority in American Buddhism. I do not agree

with Gross' entire argument. In fact I think she is deeply mistaken and strikingly without evidence in her contrast of therapy and practice. Yet even in disagreement there is pleasure in watching her mind work and in admiring the consistency of her thought and her action. Gross ringingly calls for integrity and responsibility in sexual matters, addressing herself both to students and teachers, both sides being moral actors. She ends by wisely advocating the use of what she calls "natural hierarchy" in Dharma centers. As always, her thoughts warrant the widest attention.

Continuing the theme of sexuality, Roger Corless's brief but vivid chapter on homosexually-based Dharma centers provides vignettes of both lives and groups. More than this, it concludes with a page of contacts for the mentioned persons and centers. A very nice touch, in my opinion, underscoring this book's usefulness for practitioners. I should also mention Corless's excellent notes (pp. 328–333). All this helps those who want to follow up his admittedly preliminary work.

The last contributed chapter, by Donald Rothberg, treats the growing variety of socially engaged Buddhism in North America. Rothberg covers quite a lot of ground, including the genealogy of engaged Buddhism, its revisioning of traditional practice, and the challenges and promise of such Buddhism today. The saving of society is an overwhelming task — perhaps an impossible one. Well then, as Rothberg writes, "Such a work is no doubt as demanding as that which is required of the traditional bodhisattva" (p. 284). A worthy thought. As does Corless, Rothberg provides excellent notes; in fact they make up a kind of annotated bibliography on engaged Buddhism. I'm certain I will consult them in the future.

Kenneth Tanaka concludes the book with an epilogue recapping the central themes of ethnicity, democratization, practice, engagement, and adaptation. His final comments echo Prebish's at the book's outset: in hopeful contrast to the failure of American Buddhism a hundred years ago, Buddhism enters the next millennium with optimism and activism. It is an exciting time for the tradition.

I might say the same for study of that tradition. Reading *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, attending the lively session on Buddhism in America at the 1998 American Academy of Religion's Annual Meeting, and knowing several other books on American Buddhism are coming out this year, I have the feeling that — at long last — Buddhist studies has awakened to the reality of the historic transmission and transformation of Buddhism going on right before its eyes. Given the work of scholars who have labored so long to understand the dynamics and importance of the transmission of Buddhism from India to China, or China to Japan (and, more recently, to understand the transmissions from China to Vietnam and Korea), I have

always found it ironic how thoroughly the field has ignored the vital and historical transmission going on right now, from so many Asian countries to the West. Buddhists in America know how important this transmission is. As a senior Zen student told me, his rōshi will one day be seen as “a mountain of Zen” because he established his lineage in America. It is deeply gratifying to me (and must be even more so to Professor Prebish, so long a voice crying in the wilderness) to see the scales fall from the academy’s eyes. *The Faces of Buddhism in America* — powerful, flawed, and vivid as its subject — is only a beginning, but it is a delightful one. We all should welcome it into our libraries, our Dharma centers, and our classes. I hope that the many more books that will follow it will be as good.