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The Accidental Buddhist: Mindfulness, Enlightenment, and Sitting Still. By Dinty W. Moore. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1997. Pp. 208. ISBN: 1565121422, US \$19.95.

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In the past year, there has been a spate of publications in the form of first person accounts by American men about their encounters with Buddhism. Most prominent have been Lawrence Shainberg's *Ambivalent Zen: A Memoir*, Eric Storlie's *Nothing on my Mind: Berkeley, LSD, Two Zen Masters, and a Life on the Dharma Trail*, and Stephen T. Butterfield's *The Double Mirror: A Skeptical Journey into Buddhist Tantra*. All three give readers a probing look into the social worlds and inner experiences of American Buddhists and do so with a substantial degree of style, critical insight, and emotional complexity. At first glance, Dinty Moore's *The Accidental Buddhist: Mindfulness, Enlightenment and Sitting Still* would appear to be another contribution to this exciting and valuable genre of literature on American Buddhism. This is not the case.

Moore is a popular journalist, and he makes no claim to present the book as a product of a decade or more of earnest searching, hard-won insights and spiritual discipline. He presents it instead as a serio-comic, upbeat and off-the-cuff exploration of the current American Buddhist scene. He begins by reporting that years ago he had read Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. More recently, he found *Being Peace* by Thich Nhat Hanh, which inspired him to set out, "like Ponce de Leon," on what he calls an "American Buddhist Project," which resulted in visits to a series of Buddhist practice sites across the United States.

Moore did a good bit of homework. In the course of his travels, the reader sees him participate in an introductory practice weekend at Zen Mountain Monastery, attend a retreat in Atlanta sponsored by Losel Shendrup Ling, spend several days at Henepola Gunaratana's Bhavana Society in West Virginia and visit New York City for *Tricycle's* "Change Your Mind Day." He also devoted a weekend to the Dalai Lama's visit to Bloomington, Indiana, where His Holiness dedicated a shrine, made a public address at the university, and conducted an empowerment ceremony. Moore pays no attention to immigrant Buddhist communities but takes the reader where he or she needs to go to see a variety of Western Buddhists in action. In this regard, *The Accidental Buddhist* is an interesting, often engaging, travelogue of some American Buddhist places.

The text is also nicely structured. It carries the reader from Moore's discovery of his "monkey mind" to his learning and then ruminating about ahimsa, non-dualism, and the inter-connectedness of all phenomena. Throughout the book, Moore supports his own observations with comments by such well-known Buddhists as Natalie Goldberg, John Daido Looi, and Helen Tworlov, and by more obscure practitioners, such as a woman who struggles to make a decent income through right livelihood by sewing zafus. Moore covers a good bit of territory and offers useful vignettes of a dozen or so American Buddhists and Buddhist groups. One is allowed into the dokusan room with Abbott Looi and

is given a sense of the atmosphere at a Tibetan retreat held in the recreation room of an upscale condominium complex.

Yet I ultimately found the book disappointing. It is promoted as an insightful look at the complex processes at work in the Americanization of Buddhism, a task at which it only partially succeeds. Most of Moore's discussion of Americanization comes in the form of descriptions of places, people, and situations, which are often too thinly limned to convey much information. We learn that Americans are turning to Buddhism because our society is too hectic and our received religious traditions too pallid, but the same reasons could be cited to account for our consumption of alcohol and Prozac. I found it hard not to see in the book a series of missed opportunities. For instance, one of its major themes involves Moore as a lapsed Catholic on a search for spiritual meaning. I kept hoping he would develop this in a way comparable to the reflections of Sylvia Boorstein, Norman Fisher, and others on being Buddhist and Jewish. But despite the fact that Moore interviews Robert Kennedy, a Jesuit priest and dharma heir of Bernard Glassman, and discusses the role of Thomas Merton in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, he never grounds his discussion in much more than stock reminiscences about parochial schools.

While *The Accidental Buddhist* is fairly comprehensive and ambitious in scope, it seems deliberately superficial. Given the timing of its publication, it is hard not to associate it with the current wave of pop interest in Buddhism, which has resulted in marketing ploys from saffron-colored designer dresses to Om perfume. Moore seems to be targeting an audience whose awareness of Buddhism is limited to *Seven Years in Tibet*, the Beastie Boys, and *Time* magazine. For such readers, the book will teach more about the dharma and introduce them to some of the basic contours of the American Buddhist landscape. Perhaps this ought to be considered skillful means on Moore's part. But I sensed a certain disingenuousness in the book, a result of Moore reflecting on spiritual quests, Buddhism, American culture, and Catholicism, while sustaining a tone that seems consistently flip. His humor occasionally descends to the unabashedly sophomoric.

It may be, however, that *The Accidental Buddhism* is of historical and critical interest, accidentally. Moore and his "American Buddhist Project" provide a window on the way some Americans currently dabble in things Buddhist: a dose of Pirsig, a taste of Thich Nhat Hanh, a bit of affection for the Dalai Lama, together with some hit and miss practice and generic reflections on mindfulness and non-violence. At the conclusion of the book, Moore describes himself as "a fairly lousy Buddhist." But that's okay, he seems to suggest, because most Buddhists in Asia are lousy Buddhists, too.

Moore concludes on an unexpectedly Christian note when he writes that

his tour of American Buddhism restored and transformed the theism taught to him as a child by Catholic monks and nuns. This seems to have called for no great soul searching on Moore's part. He conveys little sense of having wrestled with the claims of two great faiths. Buddhist meditation simply helped him to discover a calmer, kinder, and more mindful God; He may not really exist but is at least worthy of a late-twentieth-century version of Pascal's wager, with which Moore brings to a close both his "American Buddhist Project" and *The Accidental Buddhist*.

Moore's book contains none of the passion, angst, and edgy realism found in the accounts by Shainberg, Butterfield, and Storlie, whose intense commitments made to Buddhism during the revolutionary 1970s hit the wall a decade or more later. His more jolly book better reflects the '90s search for a sentimental, user-friendly spirituality, well-suited to the catch-as-catch-can religious lives of many seekers in the American middle class. Such accidental Buddhism is not likely to be stout enough to form the foundation of a genuinely American Buddhism, but there is no doubt that it is playing an important role of its own in the Americanization of the dharma.