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*An American Buddhist Life:
Memoirs of a Modern Dharma Pioneer*

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A Review of *An American Buddhist Life: Memoirs of a Modern Dharma Pioneer*

Nicole Heather Libin¹

An American Buddhist Life: Memoirs of a Modern Dharma Pioneer. By Charles S. Prebish. Toronto: Sumeru, 2011, 266 pages, ISBN 978-1-896559-09-4 (pbk), \$24.95 US/CAD; £17.50.

Charles Prebish begins *An American Buddhist Life* by confessing that the book is not intended to be a scholarly treatise. And it is not. It's much better. Prebish may be "pushy, prickly, and aggressive" (168) but he is also a talented storyteller, a gifted wordsmith, and an insightful and perceptive scholar. From Pennsylvania to Utah, from rejection to promotion, from the heartbreaking loss of his father and the abrupt end of his Jewish identification to his embrace of his own sangha of one, through practically every Buddhist center in the country (and beyond), Prebish takes the reader on a remarkably detailed and intimate journey through the (at first relatively non-existent and then blossoming) American Buddhist landscape.

The book, sub-titled *Memoirs of a Modern Dharma Pioneer*, does more than relate Prebish's autobiography. By following Prebish's memoirs, the reader also gets a first-hand account of both American Buddhist studies and American Buddhism itself. In many ways, the text reads as a who's who of American Buddhology, complete with detailed

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anecdotes, character portraits, and even pictures. From newly minted PhDs to seasoned veterans, if an individual is involved in American Buddhist studies, it is clear that Prebish has not only met them, but also knows something about their research. He is quick to give credit to others and to introduce the key players in the study of Buddhism in America. Through Prebish's own journey, the reader becomes privy to the intricacies, growing pains, and successes of one of the fastest growing religions in America.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section, encompassing the bulk of the text, proceeds historically, beginning with Prebish's discovery of Buddhism as a pre-dental student at Western Reserve University and continuing as his career unfolds. It is here the reader meets Buddha, the Prebishes' beagle; learns about the many obstacles Prebish faced as he worked towards full professorship; discovers his alternate life as a wrestling coach; and watches Prebish and fellow scholar Damien Keown as they launch the very journal in which this review appears.

The penultimate two chapters constitute the second section of the book, one centered on reflection. In these chapters, Prebish's narrative is de-emphasized as he turns his focus to current issues at hand. The first chapter is a retrospective on American Buddhist studies including a detailed discourse on the scholar-practitioner issue (see below). The second chapter, entitled "American Buddhism: Looking Backward-Looking Forward" is, at least in part, a re-working of a keynote address Prebish gave at a 2010 Buddhism in Canada conference at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Prebish offers his view of the present state and the future of Buddhism in America and the study thereof. As a means to organize the chapter, Prebish expands on his five-fold typology (found in his book *Luminous Passage*) for understanding Buddhism in America. In this chapter he focuses on regionalism, ethnicity, practice, democratization, engagement, adaptation, and global Buddhist dialogue. This reflection section offers

the reader a sense of Prebish's comprehensive understanding of the field and an indication of the acuity of his insights.

While Prebish is still generous with his compliments and credit to other scholars, the tone in this section seems to change somewhat. He appears to be offering a challenge (almost throwing down the gauntlet) to the new generation of scholars, daring them to meet his exacting standards.

The book may not be a scholarly work, but it does offer insight into many of the major scholarly issues Western Buddhism and Buddhist studies have faced over the past few decades. Prebish reviews many of the challenges of navigating the terrain in an emerging field, including his frustration with the various typologies of Buddhism, disparate approaches to Buddhist studies by both scholars and practitioners, as well as some of the nastier skirmishes that took place. One of the highlights for this reviewer is the discussion of the challenges of being a scholar-practitioner (a term coined by Prebish in 1990) and the difficulty of "coming out" as a Buddhist without losing credibility as a scholar of Buddhism. As he notes, "the development [of the academic study of Buddhism in America] has affected the personal lives of those scholars who have made formal religious commitments to the Buddhist tradition" (206). This discussion delves into the methodological debate all-too common in religious studies where the tension between the etic and emic approaches continues seemingly unabated. The scholar-practitioner topic as presented by Prebish is a useful and finely illustrated case study for this issue.

Prebish's memoir may not be a Buddhist book specifically but it does offer a living account of the four noble truths. The reader shares in his experiences of suffering, his coming to terms with attachment, his exploration of the Buddhist path, and his continued focus on living the life of a Buddhist, one particularly concentrated on following the Buddhist precepts.

While reading the book, one can practically hear Prebish's voice and almost see him gesticulating energetically as he weaves his tales. He is certainly not one to mince words. His assertion that a particular sangha had its priorities wrong when they cared solely about his hours logged in meditation without inquiring if said meditation involved being "simply engaged in quiet masturbatory fantasies" demonstrates Prebish's frank approach to writing. It is a refreshing departure from what might otherwise be an overly scholarly "academese" treatment of this material.

Reading Prebish's memoir can be overwhelming. The man, it would seem, has done everything. Just when the reader thinks she can get over the fact that Prebish once published seven books within the span of a decade, we learn that he was also running 70 miles a week. If nothing else, the sheer volume of detail in this narrative is astonishing.

What becomes clear from this text is that Prebish cares. He cares about his family, his dogs, his career, and his work. He also really cares about the study of American Buddhism, its flourishing, and its scholars. It is the focus on "compassionate scholarship" (152) that stands out in the mind of this reader. Prebish summarily rejects the lead of former authorities in the discipline who, as he describes, preferred to humiliate rather than encourage students.

Of critiques of the text, I can offer very few. The reflections sections do not flow as well as the rest of the text and Prebish's repetition (the same issues and names appear here and are mentioned as if new in other sections of the text) leads me to believe that these sections were written separately. My primary issue stems from the gulf between the knowledge of the author and that of his readers. There are some parts where even those of us in the field would like a bit more clarification. For example, Prebish speaks twice about Louis Nordstrom's path and scenery distinction (62, 63, 218) and, though he disagrees with Nordstrom's conclusion, expresses the view that many of the most well known books on Buddhism still fall into the scenery category. Lacking

requisite background knowledge, it is not altogether clear what Nordstrom's typology is, exactly, and whether the characterization as "scenery" is meant to be derogatory or simply descriptive. For a reader who is not familiar with the texts Prebish names, this type of detail might prove frustrating.

For primarily this reason, I would say this book is not for everyone. Those without any interest in Buddhism or American Buddhism will find Prebish's prose entertaining but the detailed description without prior context might leave them feeling alienated and lost. For those with a modicum of interest in either of these topics, this book is a gem.

I strongly recommend *American Buddhist Pioneer* as a learning tool. Prebish, it seems, has seen it all and is more than willing to share his lessons with the reader. He offers keen insights into the field of American Buddhist studies, the challenges of academic life, and the difficulties of pursuing one's passion as a scholar, a practitioner, and a husband and father. Prebish shows that the road to academic success is neither straight nor without its own share of suffering, but he does so with wit, humor, and intelligence. This memoir is informative without being overly didactic, entertaining without losing its focus, and an example of both passionate and compassionate scholarship.