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American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity

Reviewed by John Pickens

University of California, Berkeley
johnpickens@berkeley.edu

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A Review of *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity*

John Pickens¹

American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity. By Ann Gleig. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019, 362 + xii pp., ISBN 978-0-300-21580-9 (Hard Cover), \$35.00.

In *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (2008), David L. McMahan traces the intellectual currents that led to an emphasis on individualism, meditative experience, and universalism in twentieth and twenty-first century Asian and Western Buddhist communities. In the final chapter of the book, “From Modern to Postmodern?”, McMahan highlights tentative signs of a postmodern turn. In *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity*, Ann Gleig picks up this thread: characterizing the more recent shifts in North American meditation-based convert communities through a postmodern lens. The multi-site, ethnographic research is the strongest aspect of *American Dharma*, as it gives voice to a wide range of perspectives on the current Buddhist scene. Gleig revisits certain interviewees multiple times, and their shifting approaches to Buddhism provide a lived sense of how different groups have responded to crucial issues such as racial justice and technology. The book is oriented to readers interested in contemporary Buddhism in the United States, and the thematic analysis provided in each

¹ Department of South & Southeast Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley.
Email: johnpickens@berkeley.edu.

chapter also makes it more broadly relevant to scholars of American culture and religion.

One of the principal claims of *American Dharma* is that postmodern Buddhism is marked by the intensification of modernist trends and the selective valorization of elements from traditional Buddhism. For example, while early modernist authors cherry-picked textual passages to portray Buddhism as compatible with gender equality and democratic ideals, contemporary groups are increasingly advocating for the enactment of these values at the social and institutional level. In this process, hierarchy and ritual practice are often rejected. In response to modernist trends, however, other groups valorize elements that they see as congruent with traditional Buddhism. In a postmodern environment, “tradition appears alongside an acceleration of secularization and various hybrid combinations of the traditional and modern” (5). The subtitle of the book, *Buddhism Beyond Modernity*, thus designates a period shaped by renewed interest in traditional forms of Buddhism *and* a sense that we are no longer beholden to ancient cosmologies, ethical systems, or meta-narratives. After providing an introduction to modernism in chapter one, “Buddhist Modernism from Asia to America,” chapters two to four show how the legitimization of Buddhist practices in contemporary communities brings the traditional and modern together in a way that is characteristic of the postmodern.

In chapter two, “Mindfulness Revolution to the Mindfulness Wars,” Gleig examines the rapid growth of secularized mindfulness techniques. Advocates of these practices typically take a pragmatic approach, supplementing anecdotal evidence (“it works”) with scientific studies that justify the use of Buddhist forms of practice in new contexts (69–70). Buddhists have responded that these forms of mindfulness are irresponsibly stripped of ethical and soteriological frameworks (56–62) and, alternatively, that the doctrine of skillful means (*upāya*) legitimizes the promotion of these techniques in the secular sphere (64–72). In chapter three, “Sex, Scandal, and the Shadow of the Roshi,” Gleig provides an overview of the recurring sex scandals in Zen communities, noting as well their

prevalence in Tibetan Buddhist communities (86). In trying to understand such events, traditional perspectives (“the teacher knows best”) are brought into conversation with emotional and psychotherapeutic discourses (94–99). The validity of using therapeutic tools in a Buddhist context is controversial, as Buddhism and therapy are seen by some to serve different ends. In these two chapters, the blending of scientific, psychological, and Buddhist discourses exemplifies the postmodern interplay between the modern and traditional.

Chapter four, “Meditation and Awakening in the American Vipassana Network,” examines the various approaches to meditation in contemporary Vipassana communities. Gleig interviews teachers who question the goal of a final, transcendent enlightenment and instead advocate for a more gentle, embodied approach to meditation (118–120). In this view, austere practice may lead to the “spiritual bypassing” of unresolved emotional issues, especially for those who have suffered trauma (120–123). Teachers have promoted relational forms of practice as a corrective to what is seen as an overly individualized approach to Buddhism (123–126). In other Vipassana communities, however, there has been a renewed focus on extraordinary meditative experiences and nirvana. The valorization of the *jhānas* and supernormal powers, for example, “reintroduces elements that were initially discarded in the modernist process” (138). Teachers who promote a “hardcore” method of meditation practice invoke Buddhist categories, personal experience, and scientific discourses when describing their attainments (132). In this chapter, meditation practice itself is the complex nexus of various rhetorical strategies that draw from modern and traditional perspectives. Unlike earlier attempts to harmonize Buddhism with modernity in the face of colonialism and globalization, Buddhist legitimations in a postmodern milieu are often strategic responses meant to counter alternative paradigms.

Chapters five to eight focus on how shifting demographics and the organization of Buddhist groups challenge key facets of modernism. In chapter five, “The Dukkha of Racism: Racial Diversity, Inclusion, and

Justice Work,” Gleig charts a growing acknowledgement that Buddhist communities must address their own racial biases. People of color share how Buddhist ideals like “we are all the same,” no-self, and the repudiation of anger have all been used to shut down the emotionally difficult topic of racism (155). North American teachers increasingly address the dynamics of racism through a Buddhist lens (152–154), such that inclusion and equity are seen as “an inherent expression of Buddhism rather than an external concern brought into conversation with it” (156). Buddhist communities across the United States have also instituted training programs meant to unpack white privilege and ensure more people of color are in positions of power. The emphasis on racial diversity and inclusion challenges the “naive sociocultural universalism” of modernism, including “the ‘essential’ versus ‘cultural’ Buddhist distinction, liberalism, and individualism” (173). The ability of Buddhist racial justice movements to draw from postmodern and postcolonial perspectives highlights an important shift away from Buddhist modernism.

In chapter six, “Buddhism Unbundled: From Buddhist Geeks to Meditate.io,” Gleig examines the pervasive impact of new technologies on the formation and structure of Buddhist communities. As the Internet provides a wide variety of platforms, *choice* itself becomes a source of legitimation, aggregated in the sheer number of downloads or visits to a given site (180). Innovative online communities often grapple with the sustainable balance between democratic structures and effective leadership (185–186, 190–191). The question of how “Buddhist” an online group should be also reflects postmodern tensions between the traditional and modern (203–204).

Chapter seven, “From the Boomers to Generation X,” focuses on generational differences among Buddhist teachers. First-generation teachers (usually boomers who spent a significant amount of time in Asia) tend to maintain hierarchical pedagogical approaches, while Gen X teachers typically favor horizontal relationships, feedback, and peer accountability (221–223). As Gleig acknowledges, it would have been helpful to have

more interviews with first-generation teachers in this chapter (213). The transition to a younger generation of Buddhist teachers in North America has coincided with an increased focus on social issues.

In chapter eight, “Critical, Collective, and Contextual Turns,” Gleig examines the intersection of Buddhism with racial-justice action (250–258) and LGBTQI activism (254), as well as critiques of neoliberal, white Buddhism from sites such as the *Angry Asian Buddhist* blog (259–263). At times, various modes of exploring “Post-Buddhist” identity (263–266) overlap with the development of secular forms of Buddhism (266–277). Gleig is successful at weaving together a plethora of viewpoints, and yet—to fully account for “American” dharma—future research will need to focus on the roles of Tibetan Buddhist communities in North America and groups that are not convert or meditation-based.

In *American Dharma* we see the various ways the postmodern turn is predicated on an interplay between the modern and traditional. It is not always easy, however, to make a clear distinction between these relational categories; most of the traditional elements that have been valorized by contemporary communities are largely consonant with modernism (137). Gleig rightly notes instances when the term “tradition” is also inaccurately used as a signifier for modernist forms of practice (184) and refers to academic studies, such as Erik Braun’s *The Birth of Insight* (2013), that have caused some Buddhist practitioners to realize that what they thought were ancient forms of Buddhism “are in fact not so traditional after all” (Gleig 16). The interviewees in *American Dharma* make numerous references to traditions that harken back further in time, including the communal, ethical, and ritual practices delineated by the “Buddha’s original teachings” (80). These statements tend to present the reader with an oversimplified picture of a singular tradition effected by the Buddha and perpetuated until the advent of modernism. At times, it is hard to distinguish these viewpoints and the role of “tradition” in Gleig’s analysis. A brief overview of foundational works, such as *Tradition* by Edward Shils (1981) and Eric Hobsbawm’s “Introduction: Inventing Traditions” from

The Invention of Tradition (1983), would have helped the non-specialist understand the emergence and maintenance of traditions from broader historical and theoretical perspectives. The assorted traditions under discussion are, of course, now understood under the name “Buddhism” and a brief examination of this term would have also supported Gleig’s thesis that we are witnessing a postmodern turn. Initially a product of the world-religions discourse, Buddhism has accumulated a mind-boggling diversity of associations over the last century. Its use in contemporary parlance is at times jarring from a historical point of view, but, following *American Dharma*, this is just another sign that “Buddhism” is now a quintessentially postmodern term. As Buddhism too comes with an arsenal of anti-essentialist arguments and metaphors of illusion, we can look ahead and wonder at the tantalizing possibility that, in turn, its own philosophical perspectives will play a creative role in shaping the twenty-first century post-modern landscape.

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