



***Buddhism in America: Global Religion,
Local Contexts***

By Scott A. Mitchell. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016, 320 pages, ISBN 9781472581921 (hardcover) \$114; ISBN 9781472581938 (paperback) \$29.95; ISBN 9781472581945 (eBook), \$26.95.

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Developing a coherent account of Buddhism in America is no small feat. Compiling a comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of both the history of the religion in the US and relevant contemporary issues is an even greater challenge. With *Buddhism in America: Global Religion, Local Contexts*, Scott Mitchell has provided a well-organized, compelling, and accessible overview of the landscape of what he refers to as “US Buddhism” (8). Sectioned into three parts, the textbook presents the major developments of Buddhism in America with regard to “histories,” “traditions,” and “frames.” Through this tripartite structure, Mitchell breaks down what could easily be an unwieldy terrain of practices into concise and digestible segments. Each chapter opens with a summary and outline, providing a clear and helpful structure for mapping the information that lies ahead.

Part one begins with a brief introduction to Buddhism and its historic spread through Asia to the United States, highlighting the dynamics of colonial conquest in the European “discovery” and construction of Buddhism. The section continues by tracing foundational moments of Buddhist interactions in the US during the nineteenth century, including the growth of the spiritualist movement, the immigration of the first Asians to America, and, with them, the first significant community of practicing Buddhists. Part one provides an important description of the influence of structural racism (such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and WWII incarceration of Japanese Americans) in shaping and restricting Buddhist practice for the Asian immigrant population in the US, whose embodied forms of Buddhism were rendered markers of their racialization as perpetually foreign “others.” The initial section of the book concludes with a chapter detailing the growth of different forms of Buddhisms in America that emerged during the postwar period, especially as a result of demographic shifts brought on by the watershed immigration reforms introduced by the Hart-Celler Act of 1965.

Part two delves into an exploration of the main traditions in Buddhism. Each chapter begins with three vignettes, interwoven scenes that illustrate major developments in the tradition and provide a nuanced portrait of the interconnected nature of Buddhist practices in Asia and the US. Mitchell begins with the Theravada tradition,

detailing its rise across Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia and discussing the development of the insight meditation movement and its impact in America. The next two chapters follow a similar format, describing the historical spread of Mahayana and Vajrayana from India to other parts of Asia and tracing how processes of immigration and political exile have fueled the growth of these traditions in the US. The final chapter in the section investigates the postmodern turn in US Buddhism and focuses on contemporary developments. Here, Mitchell examines the emergence of non- and pan-sectarian communities, secular Buddhism, and the digital realm of online practice and contestation. In this latter field, Mitchell highlights the ways that the discourse on Buddhism in the US, which has proliferated on the internet via blogs, podcasts, social media, etc., has been mediated by technology. In doing so, he illuminates how Buddhist communities and conversations have expanded into virtual spaces, creating sangha, discussion, and dissent in the other-worldly “location” of the internet (165).

The final part of the book provides an overview of the theoretical conversations that are shaping contemporary Buddhist engagement in the US. The first chapter in this section explores various forms of Buddhist media and provides an important foundation for understanding the debates around questions of representation, appropriation, and authority while highlighting the racial implications of media portrayals for Asian American Buddhists. The chapter that follows transitions into a discussion of the convergence of US Buddhist practice with pressing social issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Mitchell draws on pertinent social theory and concepts—including white privilege, Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s notion of “racialization,” and queer theory—to detail how notions of identity have both been contested and acknowledged by various US Buddhist communities. The discussion flows logically into a chapter on Buddhist engagement in the realm of environmental and social concerns. It locates the origins of engaged Buddhist practice in Asia and discusses its various forms in the US, highlighting the work of organizations such as the Buddhist Peace Fellowship that apply Buddhist principles and practices in attending to urgent matters of social suffering. The concluding chapter of the book contextualizes US Buddhism within the theoretical and political-economic frames of modernity and globalization. Mitchell provides a rich description of the academic conversation on Buddhist modernism and offers modernity as a hermeneutic to understand how concepts of, and challenges to, modernity have been applied to the development of different Buddhisms in the US in the contemporary climate of globalization. The book ends with a call for further research to explore the multifaceted dimensions and questions of US Buddhism.

Buddhism in America presents an important update to the literature that describes the development of Buddhism in the United States. Referencing Thomas Tweed’s notion of a “translocal analysis,” Mitchell provides theoretical grounding for the broad spatial and temporal scope of the topic. In doing so, he situates “US Buddhism as a set of practices and traditions that emerge as a result of local circumstances within global cultural networks” (3). In doing so, he moves beyond categorization through typology, and the resulting conversation centers discussions of Asian and Asian American Buddhists in refreshing ways, bringing much needed attention to

the role religion has played in the racialization of this broadly conceived group in the United States. Mitchell's attentiveness to the role of Asian American Buddhists in the history of US Buddhism is no doubt influenced by his appointment at the Jodo Shinshu-based Institute of Buddhist Studies, which uniquely situates him to illuminate previous misconceptions about the place of Asian Americans in the development of US Buddhism.

Mitchell's thoughtful consideration of time, space, and race in relation to US Buddhism is also evident in the section on internet practices in his chapter "Postmodern Horizons?" He points out that it is precisely in this digital space of expansiveness and borderlessness that perspectives which were once deemed inconsequential—and therefore, excluded—in hegemonic constructions of American Buddhism have been able to mark their formidable existence and reach wide audiences. In citing the work of arunlikhati (the late Aaron J. Lee) and his *Angry Asian Buddhist* blog, Mitchell illuminates how the digital realm has functioned as a critical location of resistance for marginalized perspectives, especially for Asian American Buddhists who have long been disavowed by mainstream American Buddhist outlets and publications. I would add that such online spaces of dissent serve an important purpose not just in amplifying such perspectives, but also in archiving the legacy of Asian American Buddhist labor in the construction of US Buddhism. Recovering the historical and continued contributions of Asian American Buddhists in the face of hegemonic denial is a profound philosophical maneuver and political act, one made possible in large part by the participatory potentiality of the internet. Thus, Mitchell sheds light on a significant mode in which conversations about race, Asian Americans, and Buddhism in America are being shaped.

Relatedly, one of the foundational analytic strengths of the book is its close consideration of the very term "America." Mitchell does not take for granted any idea of America or Americanness. Instead, he finds "American culture" to be "as diverse and complex as Buddhism itself" and argues that it "is best understood as a network of discursive realms with both contested boundaries and microlevel regional variation" (2-3). It is within such a framework that Mitchell embarks on his exploration of US Buddhism, noting, "how 'American Buddhism' is enacted will depend very much on which 'America' one is referring to" (3). In a similar vein, his integration of key moments of American history (such as immigration laws, incarceration, and wars abroad) coupled with strong references to relevant social theory, contributes a comprehensive and interdisciplinary view of the factors that have shaped US Buddhism. For this reason, the book also lends itself well to application in courses outside the discipline of religion. One can imagine the book being used in American studies and ethnic studies courses, for example.

There are a few areas of the book that could have provided further consideration of important perspectives in regard to race and engaged Buddhist practices. First, while Mitchell pays careful attention to his use of terms and provides a section at the end of his introduction explaining his choices in terminology, he refers to the incarceration of Japanese and Japanese Americans using the term "internment." While this once served as the historic standard, the historiography has recently been shifting to reflect the growing consensus amongst Japanese American activists

and scholars in Asian American Studies who have established that the accurate term for the unlawful imprisonment of Japanese American citizens—who represented two-thirds of the prisoners—is “incarceration,” as “internment” is applied to the confinement of so called enemy aliens. Employing the term incarceration and providing an explanation of the difference could have served to further illuminate the systemic oppression and unconstitutional treatment of a particular segment of American citizens by the US government on the basis of race and Buddhist affiliation.

Though Mitchell pays careful attention to the position of Asian and Asian American Buddhists, the conversation around other Buddhists of color in the US could have been enhanced to provide more insight into the historical moments in American culture that influenced their participation in different Buddhisms in the US. In the chapter on Mahayana Buddhism, Mitchell discusses the growth of SGI-USA and notes that it is one of the most racially diverse Buddhist communities in the US. He rightfully calls attention to the dearth of literature on this form of US Buddhism and urges for future research in this area (129–130). One could imagine expanding this discussion about non-Asian Buddhists of color to include more detail about racial diversity by revisiting this topic in part three where Mitchell discusses the work of Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* (183) or in the chapter on Buddhist identities. The condensed conversation around non-Asian Buddhists of color might be, as Mitchell points out, a consequence of the lack of established research in this area. Still, recent developments and work, especially in engaged Buddhist practices addressing racial justice in the twenty-first century, offer important perspectives that could deepen our understanding of US Buddhism.

Finally, in relation to the discussion of engaged Buddhism in the US, attention could be drawn to the conversation around humanistic Buddhism as developed in the major Taiwanese traditions (which Mitchell details in chapter six) as a form of social engagement. Relatedly, Mitchell’s critique of engaged Buddhism as a romanticized vision of nonviolence (216) could be paired with a critique of engaged practices in the US as privileging a particular discourse of protest and action that is tied to leftist politics. While such politics have been of historical significance in the US (e.g. through the Civil Rights Movement), an unconscious privileging of this mode of engagement can serve to deter the possibility of conceptualizing other forms of engagement (such as those represented by some of the humanistic Buddhist practices) or imagining new forms of engagement as powerful contributions to a collective practice of alleviating social suffering.

Those critiques aside, *Buddhism in America* presents a significant contribution to the literature on Buddhism in the US and to the field of Buddhism more broadly. Through his careful scholarly consideration and integration of important historical and social concerns relating to the dynamics of power that have shaped US Buddhism, Scott Mitchell has given us a substantial textbook that will be of great benefit to students, scholars, and practitioners of Buddhism alike.