

Book Review

American Dharma: Buddhism beyond Modernity

By Ann Gleig. Yale University Press, 2019. ISBN 978-0-300-21580-9, hardcover, xiv + 362 pages, \$35.00.

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Bringing together case studies based on interviews, podcasts, websites, magazines, blogs, and other materials, *American Dharma: Buddhism beyond Modernity* offers scholars new research on “meditation-based convert Buddhist” lineages (6, *passim*), including Zen, Insight, and nonsectarian groups, while weaving together complex theoretical arguments throughout. Gleig asks: what key developments have occurred in the contemporary lineages of these groups, and how can we contextualize these changes as we shift from the modern to postmodern periods (5)?

Chapter One lays out Gleig’s narrative of the development of modernity in Buddhist contexts, from Asia to the United States. Drawing heavily on David McMahan’s *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (2008), she details modernist narratives and developments appearing in the white-majority (but increasingly diverse) communities under consideration.

In Chapter Two, “From the Mindfulness Revolution to the Mindfulness Wars,” Gleig reveals tensions in her communities of study regarding how Buddhist mindfulness is best understood, offering an overview of the varying attitudes. While some Buddhists in her chosen groups see no inherent conflict in the domestication and secularization of mindfulness, others critique the mindfulness movement as an example of the neoliberal project of corporatization and commodification, leading to what one of her subjects describes as “a degradation of the whole Buddhist tradition” (57). Gleig’s strength here and elsewhere is her ability to dispassionately summarize a cacophony of voices, distilling their central arguments and allowing the reader to grasp their subtleties as well.

The third chapter, “Sex, Scandal, and the Shadow of the Roshi,” looks at trends toward the psychologization of Buddhism as seen through the lens of white-majority, American, mostly-Zen communities grappling with sexual abuse scandals. Employing a methodology borrowed from psychology, and highlighting issues of power, Gleig presents tensions between

advocates of psychologization and those who critique it, giving ample space to the voices of her participants.

Perhaps the most engaging chapter for this reader, “Meditation in the American Vipassana Network,” explores various iterations of authority in the process of legitimizing innovation. Gleig’s theoretical model presented here may prove valuable in the analysis of a variety of Buddhist contexts beyond her chosen communities. Less an organizational examination than an investigation into the operation of power through analysis of discursive activities (interviews, magazines, online posts, podcasts), the chapter identifies modern and postmodern ideas among case study participants and puts them into dialogue with one another. In the process, Gleig is able to identify trends that support her conclusions regarding emerging postmodern sensibilities and generational differences presented in Chapter Six and the conclusion.

Chapter Five, “The Dukkha of Racism,” offers important insights into organizational attempts to address racism (as well as attempts to avoid such work), highlighting the structures of authority that dominate these organizations—for example, their boards of directors and how those boards are chosen. As in other chapters, Gleig notes tendencies toward bricolage through, for example, the eclectic combination of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Tantric discourses that practitioners use to legitimize their ideas. Noting the white supremacist underpinnings that guided the development of her communities, she demonstrates that some groups are working particularly hard to cultivate diversity (with the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland offering a success story). While diversity is a laudable goal, I am led to wonder: are these groups also seeking to dismantle their Orientalist attitudes (which are but another form of white supremacy) about Asian and Asian American-majority Buddhist communities that have led to scapegoating, exclusion, and invisibility? (See Quli, 2009; Hsu, 2016; Cheah, 2011)

Chapter Six similarly considers community building, but this time in the context of less organized, loosely affiliated communities made possible through technology and digital culture. Gleig notes the “rebundling” of Buddhist ideas from diverse traditions and their integration into contemporary non-Buddhist ideas.

Chapter Seven further develops Gleig’s observations regarding the different approaches to Buddhism used by Baby Boomers and Generation X populations. As in previous chapters, she notes significant shifts in attitudes between these generations, this time drawing her conclusions based on interviews with thirty-three GenX teachers. Using Weber’s notion of “ideal types,” she pulls narrative strands from her interviews that demonstrate a complicated understanding of modernity, one that reveals how interviewees are “simultaneously continuing and countering the modernization process” (211). Gleig continues to query processes of legitimation and constructions of authority in her communities; such queries mark her analyses throughout the book.

The next chapter, “Critical, Collective, and Contextual Turns,” is devoted to exploring insider critiques of white-majority, meditation-centric, American convert Buddhism. Arguably Gleig has already touched on insider critiques (e.g., psychologization), but here the critiques

are more sweeping, intellectual, and activist-oriented. What draws these three strands of discourse together is their “reaction against core modernist characteristics” (279). The contextual turn seeks to place Buddhist history and practice in cultural context; the collective turn centers on social activism and community-building; and the critical turn is dominated by academics who reject Boomer Buddhism’s essentialist approach and hegemonic structures.

In her final chapter, Gleig presents various academic models to account for the non-modernist features of emergent convert American, white-majority, meditation-centric Buddhism. Evaluating ideas such as Anna Halafoff’s “ultramodernity” (285ff) and Martin Bauman’s “global Buddhism” (283ff), Gleig settles on what she sees as the most suitable name for these forms: postmodern Buddhism. Recognizing the limitations of this term, she nevertheless finds “postmodern Buddhism” useful in its semantic consonance with postcolonialism and postsecularism (291).

Through her case studies Gleig develops a forceful argument for the development of new responses to the process of modernization, ones that move beyond notions of universalism. Gleig accounts for features in her communities that exemplify the heterogeneous excess that has always challenged the universalist notion of a singular modernity. These features, and Gleig’s highlighting of them, point toward a more complex understanding of diverse religious trends in the contemporary world. She finesses her way through complex academic theory, providing solid case studies and skillful analysis of secondary materials that together produce an engaging, rich, and sophisticated study. Scholars of Buddhist-American studies will rejoice at the wealth of new materials presented in a coherent, readable set of studies.

There is little to criticize in this study, but three issues arose in my reading. First, while Gleig is generally careful not to describe her mostly-white communities as representative of “American” or “Western” Buddhism (e.g., 7, citing Cheah, 2011), the title of the book itself reinforces that idea. “American Dharma” as a descriptor of mostly-white, meditation-centric communities carries a different valence than, say, the title of Duncan Ryūken Williams’ (2019) *American Sutra*; the first subtly universalizes these mostly-white communities as quintessentially American, while the second pushes back against this idea to insist that Japanese Americans are just as American as anyone else. Gleig occasionally employs the term “American Zen” to refer to white-majority Zen, and in so doing erases Zen communities with non-white, non-convert majorities (passim, esp. 85, 87; c.f. Asai and Ryūken Williams, 1999). Such language matters as scholarship flows into the non-academic community, where it is taken up in a less critical manner. A second issue is the adoption of a common scholarly periodization of Buddhism that includes the category of “traditional” Buddhism, which flattens the constantly shifting, dynamic, diverse nature of Asian Buddhist traditions in the two-thousand plus years prior to colonial contact. Third, while Gleig quite rightly privileges some of the meditation practices found in Myanmar and Thailand for their central roles in her communities, there are problematic generalizations about Asian Theravāda traditions, for example resulting in the conclusion that “traditional” Buddhist meditation had “died out” prior

to the reformist *vipassanā* movement (53; for a corrective see Crosby, 2013 as well as the work of François Bizot).

These caveats aside, Gleig's work is exciting, groundbreaking, and sure to stimulate interested non-academics, advanced undergraduates, and experts alike. Because chapters are largely stand-alone studies (even while building upon one another in support of Gleig's amply supported thesis), they lend themselves to excerpting in the classroom when book-length works are unsuitable. *American Dharma*, with its strong theoretical foundation and primary-materials based analysis, is sure to become a classic in the field. This is essential reading for all Buddhist-American studies scholars and will be of interest to those in related fields, such as American studies, religious studies, and Buddhist studies.

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