

Essential Reading

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Modern Buddhism^[1]

Readings for the Unenlightened

ed. Donald Lopez,

Penguin Books, London, 2002, \$16.00/£8.99 p/b, pp. 263

US: Published as:

A Modern Buddhist Bible

Readings for the Unenlightened

ed. Donald Lopez,

Beacon Press, 2002, \$16.00 p/b pp. 304.

Westward Dharma

Buddhism Beyond Asia

ed. Charles Prebish and Martin Baumann,

University of California Press; Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2002, \$54.95/£37.95 h/b, \$21.95/£15.95 p/b pp. 312.

One Dharma

The Emerging Western Buddhism

Joseph Goldstein,

Rider; London, 2002, £9.99 p/b, pp. 214

US: Harper San Francisco; San Francisco, 2002, \$24.95 h/b \$14.95 p/b pp. 224.

A few years ago Sangharakshita asked me to go to the Buddhist Society in London to look for some of his earliest published poems in past copies of *The Middle Way*. Sitting in the library of the Society's grand Georgian residence, with its book-lined walls, musty volumes and Victorian furniture, and leafing through old copies of the magazine, I felt the ghosts of Britain's Buddhist past. Once, that building in Eccleston Square was the heart of Britain's germinal Buddhist movement, the focus for its explorations and intrigues. No more. A world of western Buddhist practice has grown up over the last three decades in which the Society has only a minor role.

Western Buddhism now has a history substantial enough to have passed through a number of phases, and a rising tide of books is addressing the complex phenomenon it has become. Of the three volumes under review it is roughly accurate to say that Donald Lopez's *Modern Buddhism* concerns the past, offering a series of readings from individuals influential in western Buddhism's development. Charles Prebish and Martin Baumann's *Westward Dharma* mostly concerns the present, offering a substantial collection of academic papers on 'Buddhism Beyond Asia'. And Joseph Goldstein's *One Dharma*, subtitled 'the Emerging Western Buddhism', offers one prominent western Buddhist teacher's view of the trends that are forming its future. In reading them I reflected on the influence that western Buddhist past has on the present in which I live my own life, and what that means for the future.

Searching through *The Middle Way*, I located the poems Sangharakshita had asked for, and while I was at it I also discovered his earliest published articles. The theme of the very first, dated 1942, when Sangharakshita was just eighteen, was 'The Unity of Buddhism'. I found this striking because the notion that Buddhism is a unity has remained a key concern throughout Sangharakshita's intellectual development. To start with he located Buddhism's unity in the doctrinal core common to Buddhist schools. Then, in *A Survey of Buddhism* (first published in 1957), feeling that doctrines alone missed Buddhism's spirit, he wrote of the 'transcendental unity of Buddhism' that grows from the shared orientation of the various schools towards Enlightenment.^[2] Finally, he came to regard the act of going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, through which Buddhists affirm and reaffirm their faith, as containing, in germinal form, the whole of the Buddhist path.^[3] Sangharakshita embodied his approach in the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), the movement he founded in 1967, which stresses core Buddhist teachings and fleshes them out by drawing eclectically on texts and practices from across the Buddhist tradition.

In distinction to the genteel 'society Buddhism' that had hitherto prevailed in Britain, the FWBO's emphasised commitment and practice. It identified itself with the spirit of 'going for Refuge' which, Sangharakshita believed, animated the forms and doctrines of Asian Buddhism and was the true essence and unifying principle of the Buddhist tradition. And yet, despite the FWBO's radicalising rhetoric and non-denominational stance, Sangharakshita's appeal to a transcendental core within the Buddhist tradition was closer to its precursor, the Buddhist Society, than was perhaps apparent at the time of the FWBO's foundation. Christmas Humphreys, for many years the Society's leading light, was himself guided by 'interest in world Buddhism, as distinct from any of its various schools,' and, like Sangharakshita, he too believed that 'only in the combination of all schools can the full grandeur of Buddhist thought be found.'^[4]

There is a significant difference between these positions, but their unacknowledged similarities suggest the extent to which the beliefs of Humphreys and Sangharakshita grew from the same cultural soil. What, then, are Buddhists (such as members of the FWBO) who avow a transcendent essence to the Buddhist tradition

that is apart from culture and history to make of the suggestion that their faith in this essence is itself historically conditioned? Or alternatively, can an understanding of the conditions from which western Buddhism grew inform their our attempts to address the issues they we face in their our personal Dharma practice and in their our sanghas?

It is inevitable that these questions will arise as the soil out of which western Buddhism has grown is excavated by scholars such as Donald Lopez, whose main project has been to deconstruct westerners' normative images of Buddhism. Curators of the Buddha^[5] (1995) was a critical history of the presentation and interpretation of Buddhism by westerner scholars; and Prisoners of Shangri-La^[6] (1999) considered how romanticised images of Tibet and Tibetans have distorted western study and practice of its traditions. Modern Buddhism is a lesser volume than its predecessors, but it builds upon them and continues Lopez's deconstructive agenda.

Like some other recent commentators, Lopez qualifies the view that the arrival of Buddhism in the West is a simple matter of the transposition of traditional Asian schools to western countries. He observes that the forms of Asian Buddhism that have proved most congenial to westerners were the product of reform movements in Asia itself that were inspired by contact with the West and especially by westerners' response to Buddhism. On the one hand westerners were excited by the congruence of what they saw as Buddhism's ideals of 'reason, empiricism, science, universalism, individualism, tolerance, freedom and rejection of religious orthodoxy' (p.xi) with their own European Enlightenment values. On the other, they regarded the Buddha's modern-day successors as fallible and degenerate.

Thus they sought the 'true', 'pure', 'essential' or 'original' Buddhism that had been taught by the Buddha but lost as the Buddhist tradition wandered through history's wilderness, forgetting its unity as it divided into sects, and losing its animating purpose as it disguised itself in the strange clothes of various Asian cultures. Westerners desired to return Buddhism to its origins, strip it of embellishment, restore its unity, and unleash its transforming power. Asian reformers accepted this view of their tradition, adapted their own practice accordingly, and exported their modernised Buddhism back to the West, where it was considered the authentic article. Consequently, Lopez suggests, 'what we regard as Buddhism today, especially the common portrayal of the Buddhism of the Buddha, is in fact a creation of modern Buddhism'. (p.xii)

Lopez argues that, just as we may speak of Japanese or Thai Buddhism (while admitting the variety that each contains), so we may also speak of 'modern Buddhism' as a distinct – though not an exclusive – form of the religion. He regards it as a new school that possesses 'its own lineage, its own doctrines, its own practices'. (p.xli), and this volume – entitled A Modern Buddhist Bible in the American edition – comprises readings from thirty-one figures in this 'lineage'. These start with the late-Victorians, Madame Blavatsky and Edwin Arnold, and conclude with individuals who brought Buddhism into popular awareness in the 1970s, such as Fritjof Capra and Chogyam Trungpa. For the sake of allowing sufficient hindsight to

perceive an individual's true significance, he includes only those who came to prominence in the West before 1980. Sangharakshita is number twenty-two, alongside figures who influenced him, like Dhammapala and T'ai Hsu, and others who were personal friends and collaborators, like Lama Govinda, Dr Ambedkar and Allen Ginsberg.

Lopez's overt intention is not to disparage modern Buddhism, but to celebrate it. However, in regarding belief in pure, original or essential Buddhism as something that modern Buddhists have themselves constructed, he challenges their ideas of identity and the basis of authority within their faith. Those who associate the value of their tradition with the authorising power of continuity (through lineage and transmission, for example) or of priority (through textual sources or analogues in early Buddhism) are especially likely to feel their hackles rising. A member of the New Kadampa Tradition might consider themselves a Vajrayana practitioner in the lineage of Tsongkhapa who follows a path that has been purified of Tibetan cultural accretions yet remains uncontaminated by western biases. But Lopez would presumably regard them as a follower of a school that has reformed Gelug practice in line with modern Buddhism.

Others may object that Lopez's historical description of how their beliefs came into being does not prove that they are wrong. While we cannot escape being products of our age, we may still be in contact with something that transcends it. We cannot help viewing this transcendent truth through the lenses of our cultural conditioning, but that does not mean that we have created it.

Neither the appeal to the authority of texts or lineage, nor the appeal to transcendence, seems a satisfactory response to Lopez because each depends upon faith. But does his sweeping characterisation of modern Buddhism really hold up when one considers what some of these figures actually believed? If modern Buddhism really exists, then Sangharakshita would surely fit within it. He certainly does postulate a unifying essence within the Buddhist tradition and he developed an approach to Dharma practice that was concerned with that essence rather than with a particular Asian school. But do Sangharakshita's teachings match Lopez's account of modern Buddhism, which, he says, 'rejects many of the ritual and magical elements of previous forms of Buddhism ... stresses equality over hierarchy, the universal over the local, and often exalts the individual over the community'.(xi). From Sangharakshita's perspective these are false antitheses, and his teaching often explores ways beyond them in the light of a wide reading of Buddhist texts.

As well as over-simplifying the beliefs of western Buddhists Lopez also over-simplifies the conditions from which they grew. He emphasises the rationalising tendency to construct a Buddhism that is compatible with science and the values of the European Enlightenment. However, the very different influence of Romantic anti-rationalism is just as important in western responses to Zen, and in conjunction with western occultism it has moulded westerners' engagement with Tibetan Buddhism. Indeed, Lopez has little to say about this last subject, which is so important to the encounter between Buddhism and the West.

The readings from the thirty-one members of Lopez's modern Buddhist lineage also do not obviously support his thesis that they are teachers of the same form of Buddhism, and this makes it hard to see how he really understands these authors. Perhaps he should have spent longer arguing for the existence of modern Buddhism before celebrating it. I wonder if Lopez's tongue is in his cheek as he proclaims this new religion, and yet it seems ironic that while Lopez deconstructs the notion that our images of Buddhism are true to the original dispensation, he also constructs a new category, 'modern Buddhist', within which he yokes together disparate teachers.

The language of 'construction' suggests something more mechanistic, bounded and definable than the observable reality of western Buddhist practice. That much is clear from *Westward Dharma*, which gathers contributions from leading scholars in the new field of studying 'Buddhism Beyond Asia'. On balance, it is the strongest of the scholarly surveys of non-Asian Buddhism to have appeared in recent years. A repeated theme among contributors such as Thomas Tweed, B. Alan Wallace, Christopher Queen and Martin Baumann is the diversity and indeterminacy of their subject. Who are these Buddhists? What about the Asians who practise Buddhism in the West? What about those who do not affiliate to a Buddhist organisation or identify themselves as 'Buddhists' but are none the less 'sympathisers'? One useful section of *Westward Dharma* offers diverse histories of Buddhist practice in various countries outside Asia. And another includes accounts by practitioners of the differing issues facing their communities, including 'the Challenge of Community' in the Amaravati/Chithurst Bhikkhu Sangha, and 'Ethics in the Insight Meditation Society'. No general conclusions can be drawn from *Westward Dharma*, and none are intended.

In place of a mechanistic explanation of the forces at work in western Buddhism I suggest that we need something more organic. This means considering, on one side of the equation, the issues that arise when teachers try to communicate Buddhism to westerners. Might it not be that the figures in Lopez's lineage share the common challenge of applying their Buddhist beliefs within modernity, rather than sharing a modernist agenda for how this should be done? At the start of *One Dharma*, Joseph Goldstein cites with approval a story about the Tibetan pandit, Atisha: 'At one point Atisha met one of the renowned translators of Buddhist texts, who asked him how best to practise. Atisha replied, "You should find the essential point in common to all the teachings and practise that way."' (p.12) The search for the essence of Buddhism is not new, therefore, and neither is it specifically western or necessarily freighted with cultural or metaphysical assumptions. It arises inevitably when people are exposed to varied traditions and need to reconcile them, or when they apply old forms of practice in new contexts.

One Dharma could undoubtedly be cited as a modern Buddhist text in its delineation of what the author calls, in the book's subtitle, 'the Emerging Western Buddhism', but its ideas are more pragmatic and flexible than Lopez's framework would imply. Goldstein is a founder and prominent teacher within the insight meditation movement, which has emerged in the last decade as perhaps the most vital current within

American Buddhism, and the most important focus for the growing Buddhist influence on mainstream US society. But since 1992 he has also practised dzogchen with Tibetan teachers, as well as engaging in extensive dialogue with his Zen Buddhist peers. In such an encounter sectarian categories break down: can he really be described as a Theravaadin engaged in dialogue with Zen when his meditation employs Tibetan practices and his interlocutors are fellow Americans of his own age and background whose own practice has diversified to include vipassanaa?

Goldstein believes that, as the categories of Asian Buddhism collapse in this manner, the practice of westerners in various Buddhist traditions is converging. The West, he suggests, has come into contact with the Buddhist tradition as a whole, not just one strand of it, so westerners who encounter Buddhism face a dilemma. On the one hand it is artificial to engage with a single Asian tradition to the exclusion of the others. On the other hand, an eclectic sampling of numerous traditions risks superficiality and misunderstanding. Goldstein suggests that the resolution of this dilemma has been achieved in the actual experience of western practitioners such as himself, who have individually worked through the encounter between ‘the diversity and depth of the ancient Buddhist culture ... [and] the openness and pragmatism of our contemporary western culture.’ (p.192)

Pragmatism is perhaps a distinctively American way of authorising religious truth that privileges personal experience over revelation, lineage or logic. But the appeal of Buddhism to westerners lies precisely in its experiential character. Goldstein connects western pragmatism with the Buddhist pragmatism expressed in the traditional notion that Buddhist methods and teachings are ‘skilful means’, and not to be clung to with sectarian disregard for alternative viewpoints. In bringing together these two pragmatic traditions, Goldstein suggests, ‘we are giving birth to a skilful form for our times’ (ibid). This form is ‘One Dharma’:

‘Its defining characteristic is neither an elaborate philosophical system, nor an attachment to a particular sectarian viewpoint. Rather, it is a simple pragmatism that harkens back to the Buddha himself, who pointedly questioned the tenets of ancient Indian thought. It is an allegiance to a very simple question: “what works?” What works to free the mind from suffering? What works to engender a heart of compassion? What works to awaken?’ (pp.1–2)

This leads Goldstein to emphasise the qualities that Buddhism promotes – which he regards as both the method and the result of Buddhist practice – rather than its doctrinal formulations, institutional forms, or metaphysical ideals: ‘The method is mindfulness, the expression is compassion, the essence is wisdom.’ (p.13) These three qualities are the core of Goldstein’s book and he draws on diverse Buddhist (and occasionally non-Buddhist) sources in elaborating them. He considers that the task in which western Buddhists are engaged boils down to developing these qualities:

‘The One Dharma of Western Buddhists emerges as a grand tapestry, weaving together from different traditions the methods of mindfulness, the motivation of compassion, and the liberating wisdom of non-clinging. These three pillars – mindfulness, compassion and wisdom – are not Indian or Burmese, Japanese or Tibetan; they are qualities in our own minds. Multiple paths illuminate these qualities and many practices enhance their growth.’ (p.192)

While Goldstein’s pragmatism avoids the need to construct a ‘real’ Buddhism apart from and superior to its living embodiments, it cannot wholly avoid the alternative danger of obscuring important differences between the traditions. Goldstein is commendably wary of the danger that the openness he advocates will collapse into an easy synthesis, an eclectic sampling of diverse practices, or perplexity; and he proposes that rather than diving into a sea of myriad Buddhist practices, students proceed methodically. They require firstly a ‘foundation of basic understanding’, and, once their practice is ripe, they may add to this ‘openness to diverse views and willingness to learn from diverse perspectives’ (p.13). However, Goldstein concludes, perhaps a little weakly, that the dangers of a synthetic approach cannot be avoided:

‘Is the path of One Dharma a melting pot approach that is simply making for a thin soup? Or is a synthesis of traditions occurring that is vitalising and strengthening our understanding? The answer is, in fact, either of these, depending on how we practise.’ (p.184)

At first sight Goldstein’s One Dharma looks like a new version of the old search for the tradition’s essence. But his pragmatism makes a difference. Half a century ago the various Buddhist traditions were available in the West principally in the form of books. From the 1960s onwards they were also embodied in Asian teachers who travelled to the West, or were accessible to western students who travelled to Asia. But Goldstein can now also appeal to westerners’ experience of practising these traditions, and suggest that the One Dharma has emerged pragmatically from it. Rather than needing to argue polemically for his position, Goldstein simply announces with an almost-Marxist flourish that ‘Western Buddhism will inevitably be a synthesis of these great wisdom traditions. It is already happening.’ (p.26)

As a member of the Western Buddhist Order, which Sangharakshita founded in 1968, I cannot read these books dispassionately. Their subject is the forces at work in the development of western Buddhism, and, by extension, in my life. I want to conclude by considering the implication of their ideas for the FWBO, in the knowledge that I am writing at a crucial phase in its history. Sangharakshita has retired and the movement he founded is in a period of considerable flux. It needs to reinvent itself in a changed world, and the only shared values it can invoke in seeking collective renewal are those expressed in its founding principles. But do these principles hold good thirty-five years after its foundation?

If, as Donald Lopez argues, the notion of an essential, core Buddhism is a fiction that was constructed by

westerners, then it seems inevitable that it will come to seem artificial and implausible as western engagement with Buddhism broadens and deepens. So if, close up, the FWBO is based on such a construction, will it inevitably be set apart from the mainstream of western engagement with Buddhism – and therefore destined to dwindle into lassitude – as that engagement moves beyond the narrow concerns of the modern Buddhists? Sangharakshita's view is that, on the contrary, what is artificial is for westerners to engage with only one school of Asian Buddhism. But does this hold true now that many Asian traditions have been successfully established in the West?

If Lopez's model of modern Buddhism really was an accurate portrait of the FWBO then I think there would be little future for it. I have suggested some of the ways in which Lopez's model is too narrow an account of either western Buddhism in general or the FWBO in particular, whereas Goldstein's appeal to pragmatism offers an additional perspective on the model's limitations. In speaking of Buddhism's essence Sangharakshita has been careful to avoid metaphysical reification. The unity of Buddhism's many forms that he identified in *A Survey of Buddhism* resided in their shared function of offering methods of progressing towards Enlightenment. In this regard Sangharakshita precisely adumbrates Goldstein's invocation of skilful means. The FWBO's renewal is possible because all of its own forms are similarly conceived as contingent means. If they cease to be effective, then the FWBO's own principles suggest that they should be discarded.

And yet, although Goldstein and Sangharakshita have much in common, the divergences are just as striking. By Sangharakshita's standards Goldstein's version of pragmatism, within which doctrine comes a poor second to method, lacks intellectual rigour. The criterion 'what works' depends upon what one is trying to achieve – the purposes and goals that inform engagement with the Dharma. Without doctrinal clarity, how can one discern the culturally constructed assumptions that westerners bring to Buddhism, and without that, where is the safeguard against the arbitrary conflation of disparate concepts and practices that is likely to accompany a non-denominational approach?

Goldstein's approach, in other words, is much looser than Sangharakshita's. And yet this carries a certain pathos. Where Goldstein breezily declares his confidence that non-sectarian practice is the necessary expression of western Buddhism, Sangharakshita's characteristic tone is more embattled – at the time of his seminal writing and the foundation of the FWBO he was isolated and much criticised. He was an intense, visionary figure who felt that, virtually alone, he must transmute Asian Buddhism into the language and archetypes of the West. And where Goldstein is content to leave to individual practitioners the task of navigating the varied Buddhist traditions, Sangharakshita felt impelled to offer his students a path of practice through the entire Buddhist tradition in a bounded organisational framework that was separated from the wider Buddhist world.

The real choice facing the FWBO is whether to stick with this autonomous development or to find a place

within the future western Buddhist world that Goldstein invokes – I think accurately, though also rather blithely – a future that is based on shared values and orientations but is exclusively associated neither with particular Asian schools nor with particular western organisations. The FWBO needs to consider seriously whether it can survive as a vital spiritual community outside of that world and, alternatively, whether it can avoid simply dissolving if it becomes more fully integrated with it.

In *The Book of Enlightened Masters* (1997), Andrew Rawlinson suggests that ‘If non-denominational Buddhism continues in the West it will largely be due to Ven. Sangharakshita’s efforts.’^[7] The shared message of the books under review is that the non-denominational approach is not marginal to western Buddhism, but a central issue in its history, a pressing concern in its variegated present, and a possible, perhaps necessary direction in its future. But whether Sangharakshita and the FWBO will have a role to play in that future remains to be seen.

Notes

[1]. In the case of each book page references are to the editions available in the UK.

[2]. Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism* (ninth edition) Windhorse Publications, Birmingham, 2001 .

[3]. Sangharakshita, *The History of My Going for Refuge*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1988.

[4]. Humphreys, Christmas, *Buddhism* (third edition), Penguin Books, London, 1963.

[5]. *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, Chicago Univ. Press, Chicago, 1995.

[6]. *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, University Of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999.

[7]. Rawlinson, Andrew, *The Book of Enlightened Masters*, Open Court, Chicago and La Salle Illinois, 1997, p.507.