

Introduction

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BUDDHISM AND AMERICAN
IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Postwar American writers rebelled in a variety of ways.¹ Writers in the first twenty years after the war struggled against censorship laws and canons of taste, and court cases were fought about books dealing with sex in an explicit manner. Books such as *Lolita* and *Catcher in the Rye* were the site of censorship battles between librarians and church groups, not just because these books brought up sex as a subject, but also because they presented conventional tastes regarding literature, art, and morality as ridiculously provincial or as phony.² Buddhist writers from this period such as J.D. Salinger, Gary Snyder, and Allen Ginsberg, to name some of the most famous Buddhist popularizers of the 1950s, did both. They experimented with a kind of formlessness in which the work took on the qualities of a mind supposed to be freer from delusion than those against which that mind was being defined. The Glass stories, Snyder's mixing of Poundian translation and indigenous song, and Ginsberg's charming and elegant yawp from the rooftop were all forms of complaint against mainstream society, which was felt to be crassly materialistic, a society of people too selfish to appreciate the literary celebration of generosity. In the words of Hettie Jones, the Beats were interested in Buddhism as an "antimaterialist point of view" that was "very attractive to those of us who

were disaffected with the organized religion we were brought up with” (Mortenson 7). Not all of the writing bore the marks of complaint, but, if the First Noble Truth is that everything in life is pervasively unsatisfactory, the writers most interested in Buddhism bore witness, through Buddhist-inflected stories and poems, to the most unsatisfactory dimensions of American life.

To note that Buddhist American literature was rebellious is not very surprising, since this literature was surely born of the same conditions as other well-known works of the period.³ If Buddhism was spread through Asia by royalty and other elites, it served the needs of a different subset in America: the countercultural intelligentsia who found the pleasure palace of America wanting. If Buddhist references and convention-challenging aesthetic notions were a mark of the literary avant-garde, it is also true that literature itself was the avant-garde of the movement of Buddhism into America: ideas discussed by D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts were multiplied tenfold in the work of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Without this literary amplification, it is doubtful that Buddhism would exist as it does in the United States today, a country of three hundred or so metropolitan areas, each of which has practicing Buddhist groups. To say that the Buddhism of the early Beats was merely literary is to underestimate rather drastically the significance of American poetry and fiction in the transmission and transformation of Buddhist beliefs, practices, and institutions.

Against the “poetry-does-nothing” ethos of Modernist literature and criticism, Buddhist writers in America are anything but quiescent. Allen Ginsberg has urged audiences, in his comic-yet-incantatory style, to meditate and to quit smoking. Gary Snyder has envisaged problems and specific, workable (if ignored by everyone in power save Al Gore) solutions to problems such as our over-reliance on fossil fuels. As Michael Davidson has noted, such writers worked with avant-garde poetics and systems of ideas such as Buddhism to develop a sense of community among the alienated. A work of literature provides readers with a shared object so that we may share the most personal of ideas, and so the poems, plays, and fictions have undergirded large identity movements such as the women’s movements, ethnic identity movements, and also the struggle of homosexuals to reconstruct themselves as citizens with full rights and full status. Literary expression itself does not typically lead to direct changes in law, to a reconfiguration of culture away from prejudice, but literature does supplement these struggles in important ways. Such movements often require the invention of a corporate self—an African American or a female or a gay person—who stands for the group, and yet that identity

claim can also work hand-in-hand with the stereotyping that activists in such groups presumably wish to subvert. On the one hand, a significant claim is put forward—for example, black men are seen as dangerous or inferior by a world in which the conscious values or value-laden life-ways of white men prevail; on the other hand, the positive counter-self that is put forward, whether it be the highly productive “race man” or the macho nationalist who forcefully refuses such representations, is just as much of a stick figure as the negative stereotype that is being rejected.

Literature helps out by providing not the assertion of innumerable private differences, but rather a set of shared objects that are composed of representations of the private and personal. To change laws, the agents of a movement must convincingly argue that a typical woman in a professional position makes less money than a man in a similar position; to change minds, the agents need to make people care not about percentages but about people. Books like *Invisible Man* and *The Woman Warrior* make the private agony of the question “Who am I?” something that can be shared, and the author’s effort, the necessary seduction of literature, is in making that painful question attractive. Buddhism, according to its most conservative interpreters, is a way of life in which one turns away from pleasures (perfumes, dancing girls, songs, and so forth), and so the cultivation of aesthetic pleasure could be construed as a distraction. Another foreseeable objection to the idea that literature and Buddhist practice can reinforce each other shifts attention from the effects of literature on readers to the genesis of the work: William Burroughs complained, after sitting through a lengthy meditation retreat, that calmness of mind was of no use to him as a novelist. Insofar as a writer makes *samsara* attractive and all aesthetic objects are by definition more attractive than not, she or he is turning the reader away from the real work of freeing the mind from the shackles of desire. But insofar as the writer is making it possible to understand, compassionately, someone else’s private agony (that she or he may alter conditions and escape *samsara*), then the same literary text could be understood to operate in a “Buddhistic” fashion.

The chief paradox of “Buddhist Literature” is that it helps provide the conditions, as Benedict Anderson has argued newspapers did for modern nations, for the formation of a Buddhist imagined community, though this particular corporate identity forms itself around the idea that identity itself is a delusion.⁴ There is an aesthetic solution to this paradox: If the work of art affirms identity not in terms of a self-existent soul or a chosen people but rather as an impermanent and fully contingent artifact, the identity that is produced by such songs will at least have relative merit over those self-concepts that do not build into themselves assertions of impermanence.

LITERATURE AS VEHICLE

The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature is divided into three sections: "Literature as Vehicle: Transmission and Transformation"; "A Pluralistic Poetics: Zen, Vajrayana, and the Avant-garde"; and "Widening the Circle: Buddhism and American Writers of Color." Essays in the first section, "Literature as Vehicle," focus on the ways in which Asian cultural traditions were inflected and conditioned as they made their way into American culture, as do all the essays in this collection, but essays in this section emphasize especially the ways in which literary embodiment—as it socialized the words into a world of authors, editors, readers, and teachers—exerts a pressure on the transmission of ideas from one culture to another. Whether or not the idealized mind-to-mind transmission of awareness can be traced from Buddha's India through China and Japan to zendos in America, it can hardly be said that an Asian body of thought has been adopted without adaptation.⁵ This body of thought has been scorned as the mere vehicle of transmission rather than the more important transmitted essence, such as in the well-known idea that the finger pointing to the moon should not be mistaken for the moon. Whether there is an unconditioned awareness that can be traced back through a human lineage from someone in, say, San Francisco all the way to Buddha himself is not the sort of question these essays will answer. The essays in this section examine the particular agents involved in the literary transmission of Buddhist practices and values, including poets, scholars, editors, and religious teachers.

"Literature as Vehicle" includes essays about the work of four writers, Ernest Fenollosa, Gary Snyder, John Giorno, and Michael Heller, to show in detail how strands of Buddhism have been conditioned by particular historical and editorial factors as they made their way into American culture. Fenollosa was a Buddhist convert who transmitted Buddhist ideas through influential essays and translations. Snyder is a Buddhist convert who has developed a full *oeuvre* of poetry and prose about the interrelations between Buddhism, poetry, ethnopoetics, deep ecology, and even utopian calls for our return to preindustrial ways of relating to the earth.

In "The Emptiness of Patterned Flux: Ernest Fenollosa's Buddhist Essay 'The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,'" Jonathan Stalling seeks to recover Fenollosa from his position as one of several laborers in Ezra Pound's factory for *Making It New*. Fenollosa's role as an inspirational figure in "the Pound Era" is not to be doubted, but Fenollosa was much more than a footnote to Pound. In looking at the transpacific cultural migration of Buddhism from the Far East to the United States,

it is necessary that we understand the role of particular cultural actors, whose editorial decisions and creative emphases may or may not represent the needs and tastes of a larger cultural system. Stalling attends in particular to Pound's distaste for Buddhism in his treatment of Fenollosa's essay: "While leaving the essay's basic Eastern-philosophy-inspired poetics intact, Pound actively deletes many of the original essay's more Buddhist rhetoric." Our understanding of Fenollosa, and thus of one of the most important figures in the transmission of Buddhism to America, is sharply curtailed first by Pound's anti-Buddhist editorial practices, and secondly by the equation among subsequent readers that Zen Buddhism represents all Buddhism. Stalling looks carefully at the play of ideas in Fenollosa's texts in ways that provide a very fresh introduction to Fenollosa's contributions.

In "Gary Snyder's Selective Way to Cold Mountain: Domesticating Han Shan," Yuemin He provides readers with the most complete account to date not only of Snyder's choices as an editor and a translator; this essay also situates Snyder's groundbreaking work among that of subsequent Han Shan translators such as Burton Watson, Red Pine (Bill Porter), and Robert G. Henricks. Most of the initial readers of Snyder's work would never have heard of Han Shan, and many Chinese students of American literature have been startled at Han Shan's high place in the American version of the Chinese canon. In a 1992 interview Snyder was asked how he discovered Han Shan and how he responded to those who thought he had "made him up." Snyder did not make up this poet, but He points out that Snyder's American Han Shan is in many ways a conditioned construction. Snyder did not, in the manner of Kent Johnson inventing Yasusada and publishing translated poems under that name, make up poems or mistranslate the ones he chose in any egregious way, but He argues that Snyder selected poems and translated them in a way designed to highlight the most bohemian and worldly aspects of the ancient Chinese poet. Whereas, according to He's characterization, Han Shan's poems foreground a renunciation in which "Worldly gains, whether youth or wealth or fame or beauty, are always impermanent and unworthy of pursuing," Snyder "wants to immerse himself deeply in this world." For He, Snyder's romantic portrait of Han Shan was not a window into Chinese culture "but a mirror that gave Americans their own reflections." If one looks at Snyder in an accusatory way, he is part of a larger discourse, to use the word in Michel Foucault's sense, that constructed an Oriental Other precisely in order to craft a particular kind of self through contradistinction. Looked at another way, Snyder's poetic selections, alongside those of subsequent poet-translators, carefully mark the historical encounter between English-speaking readers and an

ancient Chinese poet. These poems—and our commentaries on them—are the flagstones that make the path more walkable.

Marcus Boon's essay "John Giorno: Buddhism, Poetry, and Transgression" presents the work of a poet who insists he is "not a Buddhist poet" while also insisting he is "not a non-Buddhist poet." A *kōan*-like conundrum is presented to the reader in which poetic mosaics, including references to Buddhist practice and Tibetan iconography, is freely mixed with poems about sado-masochistic sex. With titles *Cancer in My Left Ball* and *Shit Piss Blood Pus and Brains*, readers may be forgiven for wondering why the poet is thought to be a "Buddhist poet," but the poems manifest, insistently, a concurrence of carnal desire and a devotion to at least the names and forms associated with Buddhism. Giorno uses Buddhist motifs and images in ways that some readers will find strikingly un-Buddhist, a concern he acknowledges in conversations with Boon. Many Asian Buddhists, already puzzled by America's bohemian modes of transmission, must be puzzled to the point of exasperation by just the title of his book *Balling Buddha*, and the title is clearly meant as a provocation to American readers as well. Perhaps there is a Buddhist /Bohemian pride in saying, through such a title, something like "We do not have to fear charges of blasphemy, as we are nondualistically comfortable with the body-mind in all its richness." One simple solution would be to say that *violent avant-garde imagery* is, if it is "Buddhist," unsuccessfully Buddhist, but one could just as easily say that Giorno's work testifies to the Second Noble Truth, in which craving is found to be the root of all suffering.⁶ Boon examines the formal properties through which Giorno, like many of his non-Buddhist avant-garde associates, develops such shocking conjunctures precisely to throw the reader, via disjunctive and often funny poetry, into a more mindful state.

Finally, Michael Heller's autobiographical essay identifies the eclectic strands that thread through his work and that of many other contemporary writers, making it hard to know what ideas are Buddhist and what are not; influences on his work include Wittgenstein, Objectivist poets and poet-ics, Vajrayana Buddhism, and Phenomenological thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger. These essays together enlarge our understanding of the ways in which Buddhism as a cultural entity has shaped particular poet-transmitters as it came through the custom house of the imagination. The task of understanding the transmission of Buddhism to America requires the careful examination of such documents, however much the most warmly received Buddhist teachings in America have warned against following such indications—the true Way being pathless, a way devoid of marks and traces akin to the path of a bird across the sky. Marks and traces—writings and other self-assertions—are, according to such a rhetoric,

evidence of attachment. Gary Snyder often enjoys referring to the opening lines of the *Tao Te Ching* to show that this paradox is often handled playfully rather than as a vexing contradiction. If “he who speaks does not know,” and if “he who knows does not speak,” then all that follows is a waste of time and the *Tao Te Ching* should be used as tinder. The resolution of this contradiction is simply to acknowledge that there is no contradiction between nonattachment and caring for something, as Gary Snyder argues, against those who take refuge from the responsibility of caring for things, in his poem-with-prose “After Bamiyan”: “Ah yes . . . impermanence. But this is never a reason to let compassion and focus slide, or to pass off the suffering of others because they are merely impermanent beings (*Danger on Peaks* 101).

So what is a Buddhist writer? Ambivalence about the identity of the Buddhist writer figures in several of the essays collected here. Boon’s essay thus presents readers with a problematic case to further the consideration of the question, “What is a Buddhist writer?” Is this a biographical question, one having to do with a conversion experience or self-description? Perhaps we should look at the literature in a behavioral way to ask whether such poems, typically, produce greater mindfulness, and, if so, whether this makes them different from any other poems. Or is Giorno’s poetry evidence supporting Thanissaro Bhikku’s charge in *Tricycle Magazine* that American Buddhism is a form of “Romantic Buddhism,” a selection of Buddhist ideas that includes ego-sustaining therapy and notions of emptiness that license individual freedom but which has been much less enthusiastic about the idea of renunciation—about the radical suspicion of human desire? Boon’s essay does not come to a conclusion about this question, but these questions will emerge with greater clarity as our understanding of writers like Giorno becomes clearer.

The question “Who is a Buddhist writer?” also arises in Heller’s essay “Buddhadharma and Poetry without Credentials.” Like Giorno, Heller is a practicing poet who has been influenced by the “Crazy Wisdom” teachings of Ven. Chögyam Trungpa, a Tibetan teacher who came to the United States in 1970 and came to influence writers such as Giorno, Heller, Jane Augustine (whose writing is also included in this volume), Allen Ginsberg, Diane di Prima, William Burroughs, and even Joni Mitchell.⁷ As Stalling and He reflect on the ways in which the particular desires of writers such as Pound and Snyder have shaped the transmission of Buddhism to America, those by Giorno and Heller develop the picture of how influential particular teachers such as Chögyam Trungpa have been. Whereas Fenollosa and writers like him went to Asia and learned Asian languages as part of their work as cultural emissaries, writers such as Giorno and Heller read widely

and studied with a particular Tibetan-in-exile, one known for taking great delight in upsetting expectations. (To Burroughs, Trungpa was known as “the whiskey lama,” and the infamous party at which Trungpa demanded that his “Vajra Guards” strip poet W. S. Merwin against his will so that he would lose his ego is recounted in Tom Clark’s *Naropa Poetry Wars*.) Heller’s experiences with Trungpa are set alongside his epistolary apprenticeship with poet George Oppen, his studies of phenomenology, and his own developing practice as a poet. While Heller notes that “the role of the Buddhist-inflected arts” in Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism “are ethical and moral but also philosophically fundamental to human interaction,” the lines between art and religion become quite indistinct: “poetry and a Buddhist outlook or perspective seem nearly identical.” That said, Heller traces a movement toward a set of ideas and references, not all Buddhist, that seem to develop from similar perceptions of human existence and seem to move toward similar solutions to the human predicament (understood from a Buddhist point of view). When Heller refers to “Cézanne’s Doubt” as a “particularly Buddhist piece of writing,” he acknowledges what is common to Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty, his own work, and to poetic ancestors such as Oppen and Zukofsky, namely the “moment of original vision” described by Buddhist scholar Herbert V. Guenther in a book he co-authored with Chögyam Trungpa, *The Dawn of Tantra*.

The common ground between Buddhism and avant-garde forms of art and philosophy will, for some interpreters, signal shifts in the way “the West” thinks, but for others the commonality will engender suspicions that orientalist writers and other kinds of cultural middle-men are selecting images and ideas in order to make, as Heller argues, a picture of the Other designed especially to flatter the self. While Heller embraces a religious path that is poetical, and a poetic path that is religious, both aspects of this engagement are celebrated for their freedom from “credentials,” a word that reeks of bureaucratic licenses and official criteria that have drifted away from the substance of any particular matter. The language of Heller’s description, drawn from Trungpa, is redolent of the freedoms from constraint embraced by all of the dharma bums since Kerouac’s *roman à clef* was first published, but Heller reflects critically on this point: “Poets don’t write to teach, yet it does seem obvious that the poet inclined toward a Buddhist disposition is aware that what he or she writes is a kind of teaching, a sense that the poems one writes will affect others, and therefore have an ethical dimension.” The sentence reveals not so much a fracture between art and religion as a shift in the primary understanding of art. The uselessness of art is one of its typical functions, we might say: If you wear it or use it as a tool, it is less prestigious than if you can only enjoy it “aesthetically.” A Tibetan sacred painting, like older

iconic works in Christian countries, is meant, on the other hand, to be *used*, and when Heller shifts from saying “Poets don’t write to teach” to “what he or she writes is a kind of teaching,” he is moving away from the Modernist conception of art and, perhaps against the grain, toward a didactic notion of art that would resonate more directly with much religious art in the world. One consequence of this shift is the realization that the liberatory dharma bum can only be a stage along such a path rather than a final destination: “What this may also mean then is that the old role of bohemian poet, isolated and estranged from society, is no longer applicable.”

A PLURALISTIC POETICS

The notion of the bohemian poet does not go away in the works discussed in the second section of this collection, but the idea that the writer must be “isolated and estranged from society” is an idea that these poets seem to be working against in their literary creations. It is not the case that any of these writers identify with middle America—Gary Snyder is careful to say that he could *almost* love this America in his poem “Maverick Bar.” Perhaps it could be said that the bohemian rebellion of these early Buddhist writings is not evidence of Buddhism’s so-called quietism, meaning the idea that the world is fallen, that one should turn away from it, and that one should avoid associating with those who are still attached to the world. There has been a world movement, spearheaded by the exiled Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, called “Engaged Buddhism,” which stipulates that social action is a proper field of practice: Mahayana Buddhists pledge to place the enlightenment of others before that of self, and so a mindful (rather than aggressive and hateful) mode of political action is discussed as a positive form of engagement. If one kind of bohemian is analogous to the sage who is too wise to be caught in the snare of worldly problems, another might be the cynic who is only too happy to live among other people so as to sap resources from them. The Buddhist bohemian of these essays is something different. The motto from Thomas Pynchon—“keep cool, but care,” captures the idea, as the figures who walk through the work by Philip Whalen, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder very much care about the society they criticize and its members.

The essays in this volume examine the movement from literary text to embodied practice, which we could term the “inward movement,” and they also examine the movement from the solitary body to the world’s body, which we could call the “outward movement.” Jane Falk’s “Finger Pointing at the Moon: Zen and the Poetry of Philip Whalen” exemplifies the inward movement, which Falk traces through developing patterns in

Whalen's verse. The earlier Zen-inspired writings "can be seen as proof of his avant-garde status and as a way of distancing himself from identities available to mainstream American writers in the 1950s," but the poems that appeared in the 1958 *Chicago Review* reveal Whalen the reader rather than Whalen the practitioner. Significantly, that issue also contained writings by D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and Jack Kerouac, as well as Gary Snyder. As Falk demonstrates with reference to Whalen's letters to Ginsberg and Snyder, Whalen hungered to move from a Buddhism that was primarily a matter of clever allusion to one that involved touching "Enlightenment" or the "Real." In his poetry-as-practice, Whalen drew on the ideas associated primarily with Suzuki, such as the notion that "a more evolved understanding of emptiness . . . includes seeing things as they are." Buddhism, then, allowed for a kind of quirky, quotidian realism, one in which the Real, correctly understood, is most efficiently gestured toward by something like a William Carlos Williams poem. For Falk, "Whalen . . . narrows the gap between spirituality and ordinary life, one of Zen's goals."

Falk finds a shift in Whalen's work as a result of his stay in Japan in the late 1960s, at which time, Whalen told David Meltzer, he first began to "sit seriously." But the inward movement is in no sense a movement away from the social and political realities we mean when we refer to "worldliness," as Falk points out in her discussion of "The War Poem for Diane di Prima," which Whalen concludes by saying, "Nobody wants the war only the money/ fights on, alone." The social commentary on a war fought for money is at once a generalization about war as a hypostasized greed, acting through people. The poem nudges us away from the idea that the inside and the outside are different, so conditioned is our sense of the world by our inner greed and aggression. Or, as Whalen said to Leslie Scalapino, "You can't say there's something out there. It's all inside." The desire to battle the war itself is, wittily and warmly, converted into a gift of sorts, since the war poem is an offering to Diane di Prima. As Whalen develops as a Zen priest (eventually becoming abbot at the Hartford Street Zendo), his poems become more spare. The Buddhist vocabulary drops away, and Whalen mysteriously writes less and less. Whalen described poetry as a "graph of a mind moving"; Falk finds in Whalen's poems a graph of his mind's motion. In a famous Zen *kōan* that Whalen retells in a poem, two monks argue about whether the flag is moving, or whether the wind is moving. In the *kōan's* punchline, the mind is moving. Readers of Whalen, in thinking through the interrelations between Zen practice and poetry, will need to think more about the quiet of Whalen's later years. Was it evidence of a stilled mind, or is that just a nice way to describe writer's block?

Eric Mortenson describes a different sort of movement in his essay on the Buddhist “stillpoint.” Rather than present the visionary moment uncritically in the writers’ own terms as has been the critical practice to date, Mortenson urges a more critical approach and to that end compares the role of visionary representation in the work of Kerouac and Ginsberg. For Mortenson, these two writers had opposite difficulties that had identical effects. Ginsberg was overly attached to a vision from the past, which arrested his work. Kerouac hungered for a visionary moment in the future, and so his quest for this visionary moment became an end rather than a means. Drawing on the writings of Robert Aitkin and Shunryu Suzuki, Mortenson proposes a vision of “the visionary” in which one temporarily makes contact with one’s deepest mind not to stay in that mindset permanently but rather so as to return to the world with an altered relation to it. According to Michael Mohr, the meditative path through visionary stillpoints is not an escape from quotidian turmoil but, rather, involves “constantly going beyond first awareness of nonduality and aiming at integrating this insight into daily life until no trace of transient exalted states remain.” In this startling formulation, the purpose of meditation is to move *beyond* the stillpoint.

If a non-Buddhist attachment to an essentially Buddhist stillpoint is the paradoxical problem faced by Kerouac and Ginsberg, Gary Snyder’s work has consistently avoided privileging Buddhist vocabularies of transformation in ways that might marginalize other ways of framing the problems of contemporary life. Tom Lavazzi proposes in “Illumination Through the Cracks: The Melting Down of Conventional Socio-Religious Thought and Practice in the Work of Gary Snyder” that we have to be more cognizant of the resourcefulness of writers like Snyder, who drew not only on Buddhism but also Native American shamanism, developing fields like ethnopoetics and performance theory, and other emerging social practices that provided an alternative, oppositional standpoint from which to critique conventional society. All this has been noted by many Snyder critics; Lavazzi focuses on Snyder’s dialogic engagements with various approaches (as does Snyder critic Patrick Murphy), but Lavazzi also brings Snyder’s writings into dialogue with an interlocutor not typically associated with the greenest of poets, namely philosopher Jacques Derrida. Working carefully through Snyder’s incorporation of various “technologies of the sacred” in his work, Lavazzi draws connections between Snyder’s work and Continental theory via the work of deconstructive eco-theologians. As many readers have noted, Snyder’s poems subvert their own status as self-existent texts: “The texts, once we move beyond the idea that the printed page is the *real* text, become collaborations between writer and reader.”

As Snyder demonstrates so beautifully in his descriptions of Chinese landscape paintings of Chinese landscape paintings in the opening poem of *Mountains and Rivers without End*, the seals impressed on the painting are part of the painting: Our comments about the world are part of the world. *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, as a work of art, does not end so long as we continue to talk about it, and literary criticism is our equivalent of the seals printed on the painting. Lavazzi notes how Snyder crosses “French” attempts to “take the Word apart” with Thoreau’s own recommendations regarding a “tawny grammar” and allows readers to see the ways in which Snyder anticipates the post-structuralist affinities of the LANGUAGE poets. Alongside nonanthropocentric eco-theologians and deep ecologists, Snyder mixes disciplines and vocabularies in poem and essay to point a way out of “taxonomic, hierarchic, dualistic thinking.” All of these mixtures and alliances are of course aligned against something—it is not a case of mixing all the cultures of the rainbow together to make an undifferentiated mud—but Snyder draws on the thought of a wide variety of human cultures and disciplines in order to fashion his description of a “practice of the wild.” The idea of Buddhism as a special knowledge of the elect is effectively displaced by the subtle alliances among an array of voices.

The idea that a Buddhist essence of a pure, unconditioned, uninflected sort survives its literary transmission from Asia to America is a surprisingly durable idea, and so one cannot say too quickly that its time has come and gone: the often-orientalist notion of a special access to an ideal way of knowing from an ideal (or idealized) culture is born out of a desire for superiority to others that is not easily quashed, and so the idea continues to reincarnate in poems, stories, essays, and interview. Nevertheless, Jane Augustine’s “The American Poetic Diamond Vehicle: Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman Re-work Vajrayana Buddhism,” in looking carefully at the ways in which Trungpa shaped his teachings for the sake of his students and at the ways poets Ginsberg and Waldman “re-work” Vajrayana reference represent a movement beyond the idea that Buddhism can be the new Puritanism that will displace all the wrong views about the world that hold sway. The eclecticism of Ginsberg’s and Waldman’s poetic songs represents a movement beyond what Heller’s “isolated and estranged” Bohemian vision, giving way not to a “square” Zen in place of a “Beat” Buddhism but rather giving way to a generous inclusion of the world and its objects. Such a taking-into-oneself is certainly one of the more remarkable characteristics of both Ginsberg and Waldman’s poems. The practices of travel, of walking meditation, of Indonesian gamelan, of repetitive and shamanistic speech-poem are set beside Tibetan *mamo* chants and *mantra* practice, as the essay traces the rearrangements of Tibetan Buddhist ritual into

postmodern American poetry: “Waldman’s poem is such a ritual, designed to invoke powers that work to expose, pacify, and transmute the energy of aggression. Her method is pure Vajrayana: use poison as medicine. Fight fire with fire”.

WIDENING THE CIRCLE

Perhaps one of the most interesting cultural phenomena of the last quarter-century in America has been the emergence of writers of color who have embraced Buddhism as a source of inspiration for their work, and the final section attends to this further transmission—and transformation—of Buddhist ideas. In describing the transmutation of Buddhism in contemporary America, James William Coleman makes the highly dubious claim that the “new Western Buddhism is overwhelmingly white” (192); nevertheless, as “Widening the Circle: Buddhism and American Writers of Color” shows, the literary influence of Buddhists of color must not be underestimated. Indeed, many of the leading writers of color today, as Charles Johnson points out in his Afterword, have committed themselves to Buddhist practice—including Johnson himself, and many other African Americans who are not artists. John Whalen-Bridge begins this section with his revelatory interview with Maxine Hong Kingston. Beyond the informal and humorous tone of the interview—accurately reflecting Kingston’s own personal charm and charisma—this interview is important because it is the first time Kingston has discussed her Buddhism explicitly. Raised by Confucian parents, Kingston says she first felt a strong connection to Buddhism by reading the Beats. Yet she herself cannot call herself a Buddhist because “it all seems so narrow, even Buddhism.” Presumably, in resisting a too-hasty religious identification, Kingston (in the words of Maxine in *The Woman Warrior*) “makes [her] mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes” (*The Woman Warrior* 29). Nevertheless, Whalen-Bridge’s ground-breaking interview will inevitably call for a reexamination of Buddhist themes and traces in *The Woman Warrior*, *Tripmaster Monkey*, and *The Fifth Book of Peace*, among her other works.

If Whalen-Bridge’s interview with Kingston is marked by charm, wit, and jocularly, Hanh Nguyen and R.C. Lutz’s analysis of Lan Cao’s seldom discussed *Monkey Bridge* is redolent with a sense of tragedy, grief, and loss. “A Bridge between Two Worlds: Crossing to America” explores the Buddhist idea of karma in the life of a Vietnamese immigrant, Thanh, as she attempts to adjust to American life after the end of the Vietnam War. Cao’s beautifully lyrical, semi-autobiographical novel is narrated by Mai, Thanh’s daughter, who—partly because of her immersion in American

culture—cannot understand or sympathize with her mother’s mysterious convictions about karma. Nguyen and Lutz demonstrate that Thanh’s conception of karma, grounded both in Buddhist doctrine and Vietnamese folklore and mythology, is extraordinarily complex: at once, it is Thanh’s burden and her liberation. Thanh’s excruciating pain from her memories of Vietnam is compounded by Mai’s facile assumptions about the past, presumably absorbed from her adopted American culture—that the past invariably frees the self to a greater sense of possibilities in the present and future. Mai and the reader both learn that the harsh truth is much different. One of the many strengths of Nguyen and Lutz’s essay is that it will call attention to this remarkable, powerful novel.

The section concludes with Gary Storhoff’s “‘Opening the Hand of Thought’: The Meditative Mind in Charles Johnson’s *Dr. King’s Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories*.” Meditation, of course, is central to Buddhism, yet as any author knows, sitting meditation is notoriously difficult to render in a fictional narrative meant to entertain since the character is supposedly not to *do* anything beyond a subjective “letting go” of thought. Yet as Storhoff shows, Johnson finds creative solutions to this artistic problem in his short stories through subtle representation of meditation that reveal the transformative power of meditation in the character’s world. Mark Epstein, a psychoanalyst with experience in Buddhism, has written that “meditation is not world denying; the slowing down that it requires is in service of closer examination of the day to day mind” (3). These stories are definitely not “world-denying”; instead, Johnson’s work is very much in line with Thich Nhat Hahn’s “Engaged Buddhism.” Johnson’s stories in *Dr. King’s Refrigerator*, as Storhoff demonstrates, emphasizes how the meditative mind, while examining day-to-day phenomena, is also capable of transcending the quotidian world to imagine and promote wider political change.

The National Book Award winner Charles Johnson supplies the Afterword for *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*. Even though Johnson has arguably become the leading spokesperson for Buddhism and literature in America today, he has said that his publication of *Turning the Wheel: Essays in Buddhism and Writing* surprised many of his readers and not a few of his friends. His passion for his subjects—Buddhism and literature—are nowhere more evident than in this deeply moving reflection upon his remarkable career. In his far-ranging essay, Johnson considers how he came upon Buddhism as an inspiration for his work and as a ballast for his personal life—how he discovers in writing and in Buddhism, the passion of his life, and finally, how these two intertwine in his achievements throughout his career. As Johnson writes, “So a passion for art based on the Dharma led me to first practice meditation when I was fourteen-years-old; to write the novel *Oxherding Tale* when I was in my twenties; and

to embrace the life of a lay Buddhist, an *upasaka*, in my thirties. And *that* passion segued into the joy that comes from translating works that have meant so much to me for forty years.” As we read Johnson’s Afterword, we realize we are in the hands of a writer who has himself been transformed by his religion, so that the beauty of his world is almost overwhelming to him: “After I complete each new story, essay, or lecture, I marvel at and I am thankful for the strangeness and beauty of a bottomless passion that leads to work across so many related disciplines.” Johnson’s essay is a forceful and eloquent conclusion to a volume that, we hope, will open new paths for discovering Buddhism in American literature.

The constitutive elements of American literary Buddhism include the teachings spread by Asian scholars and teachers such as D.T. Suzuki, Shunryu Suzuki, and Chögyam Trungpa, the incisive essays of American Zen teachers such as Robert Aitken, the work of poet-scholars like Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa, the popularization of Buddhist myths and texts by American writers such as Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Anne Waldman, Maxine Hong Kingston, Lan Cao, and Charles Johnson. Very important as well are the descriptions of those students of American culture who have spent years finding the ox in and around the poems and stories offered by these first-contact cultural emissaries. Jonathan Stalling, Yuemin He, Marcus Boon, Michael Heller, Jane Falk, Erik Mortenson, Tom Lavazzi, Jane Augustine, Hahn Nguyen, R.C. Lutz, John Whalen-Bridge, and Gary Storhoff have each, in the face of so many warnings within Buddhist discourse about mere scholasticism and the futility of fingers pointing to the moon, attempted to communicate through words the problems faced by writers and the achievements that have resulted from their struggles. The work of literature is not done, we remember, when the poem is published or even when it has been read. As Eihei Dōgen has written: “only a Buddha and a Buddha can see a Buddha.” (See Takahashi, *Moon in a Dewdrop*, pp. 161–167). The most important values are not individual experiences, the logic might go, but are rather connections between beings.

NOTES

1. Brunner complicates but does not contest the idea that “Only poets who had been driven underground were capable of producing interesting work.” Edward Brunner, *Cold War Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), ix.

2. See Pamela Hunt Steinle’s *In Cold Fear* for a detailed overview of the censorship battles surrounding texts such as *Lolita* and *Catcher in the Rye*.

3. John Lardas, like Pamela Steinle, argues that the introduction of the possibility of atomic warfare inspired apocalyptic imaginings, but Lardas finds a

utopian effect. America's fight-or-flight syndrome during the cold war may even have had a religious dimension, argues Lardas: "[s]uch flights, whether toward the safety of backyard bomb shelters or to the 'core of your building,' were not merely retreats from the bomb's deathly radiance. On the contrary, they were acts of immersion—imaginative confrontations with a world enveloped by the shadow of apocalypse and suffused with the absurd rhetoric of civil defense" (4).

4. Buddhism makes a distinction between relative truth (that admits personal identity) and absolute truth (which does not). For a discussion of the "Two Truths" doctrine within Buddhism, see Thich Nhat Hanh, 121–31.

5. Buddhism in Asia has often been affiliated with progressive causes but more often is associated with conservative cultural values, and so the "yab yum" scene in *The Dharma Bums* must be an astonishing moment for Asian readers, who, if my teaching in Singapore is a measure, generalize from this text and see all of American Buddhism as a branch of the Orientalist discourse described by Edward Said. A book such as *The Dharma Bums*, even with Ray Smith's ascetic misgivings, will seem more like an attack on Buddhism than a celebration. In 1999 the National University of Singapore held an American Studies conference at which a documentary made by a Buddhist American writer/filmmaker about American Buddhism was played. One of the speakers in the film was a professor at Naropa University who reported that, during a moment of spiritual crisis, she considered shooting a man. This scene was found to be highly objectionable by a leading Singaporean Buddhist in the audience, who said that Christians in Singapore would use such a film to show how crazy Buddhists are. The open, confessional-inclusive approach to emotional affliction and other worldly problems that American Buddhism has cultivated was, according to the Singaporean Buddhist speaker, entirely out of place in the Singaporean/Asian context. The conference title was "Asia and America at Century's End Cultures of Interdependence"—our concern with interdependence should not obscure the precise ways in which cultures construct themselves out of differences.

6. One could take the "Buddhist defense" of Giorno's work further, as Boon does, by comparing poetic effect with Tantric practice. Paradoxically, Giorno celebrates desire in a way that should make readers more mindful. In doing so, he adapts techniques of tantric Buddhism for what may or may not be recognized as a Buddhist outcome.

7. Mitchell's song "Refuge of the Road" is about her experience with Trungpa, and one can see her oil portrait of him at <http://www.jonimitchell.com/artwork/view.cfm?id=339> (date of access: June 6, 2006).

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