

Introduction

John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff

Is it not singular that, while the religious world is gradually picking to pieces its old testaments, here are some coming slowly after, on the seashore, picking up the durable relics of perhaps older books and putting them together again?

—Henry David Thoreau, Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1844

Now that Buddhism has taken root in America—a process characterized by Zen pioneer Sokei-an as “holding the lotus to the rock”—those who have managed to survive their first enthusiasm are busy tending the new growth. The ground has been broken and we are now in a period of cultivation and settlement.

—Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*

In his recently published *North American Buddhists in Social Context* (2008), Paul David Numrich wonders if scholarly research on American Buddhism really constitutes a “field of study.” Although the interest in Buddhism in North America is, as Thomas A. Tweed asserts, much greater currently than in the past (2000, xv),¹ Numrich feels that it is too early to tell whether Buddhist Studies in the United States represents a true field of study. In fact, Numrich equivocates in his judgment, concluding that in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Buddhist study in North America has attained only the status of a “protofield,” not having “progressed beyond the earliest stages of development” (8). In order to evaluate the strength of Buddhist Studies in North America, Numrich devises three criteria:

1. specialization, which includes scholarly training, research questions, and professional commitment;
2. organization, which includes meetings and conferences, academic programs, university departments, and so on; and—perhaps most important
3. publications such as books, refereed articles, and journals (1–13).

Even though Numrich acknowledges that the impressive number of publications in North American Buddhist Studies constitutes the best case for a field-of-study status, he also is concerned that there is yet to be a “high level of cross-disciplinary productivity, sophistication, and integration” on the topic of Buddhists in America. He concludes, “scholars have yet to achieve significant interdisciplinarity” (9).

Our series from the State University of New York Press, *Buddhism and American Culture*, is an important interdisciplinary milestone, for it is the first edited collection on the comprehensive topic of Buddhism in the expressive arts and living styles in the United States. In short, the series answers Numrich’s urgent, timely call for a cross-cultural discussion of Buddhism in the United States. This series attempts to increase understanding of how Buddhism has become an important cultural dimension of America, and it is necessary to look at the contexts of literature, film, visual art, and social thought—to name just four domains—to do this work. The first volume of this series, *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, demonstrates the profound influence of Buddhism on American literature since the beginning of the twentieth century; the eleven essays included in that volume constitute an astute examination of literary work within the context of a decidedly immigrant faith. Indeed, *Emergence* represents the most complete treatment to date of Buddhism in literature, including discussions of seminal writers of High Modernism such as Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound; innovative treatment of the Beats, such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac; and—perhaps groundbreaking for contemporary studies of American Buddhism—analyses of Buddhist principles in literary works by contemporary writers of color, such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Lan Cao, and Charles Johnson.

Our second volume in this series, *American Buddhism as a Way of Life*, explores in wide-ranging essays how Buddhism has been transmitted to America spiritually and materially in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Rather than focus solely on a cultural practice such as literature, however, this volume considers particular social problems as a way to understand the social context of American Buddhism. We have become used to a discourse in which “Buddhism is a philosophy rather than a religion,” but to the degree that this is so, Buddhism is also at variance with traditional approaches to philosophy. We

can think of it as philosophy as a “way of life”—to paraphrase Pierre Hadot, from whose book *Philosophy as a Way of Life* we took our title. American Buddhism is “a way of life, both in its exercise and effort to achieve wisdom, and in its goal, wisdom itself. For real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us ‘be’ in a different way” (Hadot 265). In eleven far-ranging chapters in this volume, authors consider the developing social needs of Americans as they face the new millennium. Contributors explore the ethical challenges posed by contemporary medicine; the special needs of gay persons as they search for refuge in Buddhism; feminism and a Buddhist response to the abortion debate; and the Japanese-Americans as they found solace in Buddhism while experiencing discrimination after Pearl Harbor.

Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American Literature into the Twenty-first Century, the third volume in this series, is meant to re-engage literary scholars. The literary richness characteristic of early Buddhist texts has now become an important part of American literary history in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and literary scholars schooled in Buddhist thought know that to dispense with literary features identifiably Buddhist is to engage in one more futile dualism of ancient, doctrinal texts versus contemporary expressions of the dharma. In the discipline of anthropology, “indigenization” refers to transformations that occur within an imported cultural system, changes that enable it to better fit local customs. And a certain degree of indigenization is only to be expected when Buddhism migrates to America. Buddhism underwent indigenization when it moved from India to Tibet, and when it crossed from India to China and then to Japan. Certainly, Buddhism is undergoing this process as it moves from Asia to the United States. But when any cultural system undergoes indigenization, some people will discover creativity and innovation—as Buddhism finds contemporary expression in literature, film, and life writing—whereas others will bemoan the loss of authenticity as ancient texts, doctrines, and principles are adapted and transformed to an American culture. The study of indigenization as Buddhism engages with America is the project of this series on *Buddhism and American Culture*.

There is much to explain and interpret, despite the resistance to interpretation that some strands of American Buddhist discourse have occasionally foregrounded. This resistance to an analysis of a text is common to Buddhist critical discourse broadly understood—to interpretations, explanations, and ratiocinations generally. The Buddhist reader will remember that near the end of Buddha’s life, he took his disciples to a pond for instruction, and instead of a usual philosophical discussion, Buddha simply reached into the pond, picked a lotus flower, then twirled it in his hand. Although many of his disciples attempted to analyze the gesture, explain the symbolism, and interpret the scene, Buddha approached his follower Mahākāśyapa, who simply smiled in understanding.

Buddha replied to the followers, “What can be said, I have given to you; and what cannot be said, I have given to Mahākāśyapa”—and it was Mahākāśyapa, not the interpreters, who became Buddha’s successor.

In yet another wonderful story, the interpretive endeavor itself is mocked. A visiting monk admits to defeat in a dharma contest by a one-eyed monk. The visiting monk relates the nature of his defeat:

First I held up one finger, representing Buddha, the enlightened one. So he held up two fingers, signifying a Buddha and his teaching. I held up three fingers representing Buddha, his teaching, and his followers, living the harmonious life. Then he shook his clenched fist at my face, indicating that all three come from one realization. Thus, he won.

His interpretive discourse, however, collapses under the testimony of the one-eyed monk, who has an entirely different interpretation of this dharma contest:

The minute he saw me he held up one finger, insulting me by insinuating that I have one eye. Since he was a stranger, I thought I would be polite to him, so I held up two fingers, congratulating him that he has two eyes. Then the impolite wretch held up three fingers, suggesting that between us we have only three eyes. So I got mad and started to punch him, but he ran out and that ended it.

If, as Dōgen tells us, enlightenment cannot be achieved unless the practitioner “ceases to cherish opinions,” literary critics are apparently quite far away from satori; we are much more like the visiting monk or Buddha’s followers at the pond. We *need* to explain.

This volume is composed of chapters written by those who indeed have opinions, but do not “cherish” them, as Dōgen warns us against. Instead, the authors in this volume wrestle with the question of Buddhism’s place in America’s postmodern culture. The volume’s first section, “Widening the Stream: Literature as Transmission,” begins with a study of how America came to Buddhism originally, and how that origination persists into twenty-first century American culture. How is it that America, known for its pragmatism and muscular Christianity, would embrace a religion that seemingly is its opposite, especially given the orientalist stereotypes current at the turn of the century? These early, negative stereotypes of Buddhism are discussed in Jane Falk’s “The Transmission of Zen as Dual Discourse: Shaku Soen and Okakura Kakuzo,” which discovers a major source of postmodern America’s fascination with Zen Buddhism in its transmission by two Japanese, Soen and Kakuzo, whose contributions to the origination of Buddhism in America have heretofore been underestimated. Falk

argues that they presented Zen to America as a “dual discourse,” its duality residing in Zen’s emphasis on both a spiritual and an aesthetic dimension. In Buddhism’s introduction in America (generally considered to be the World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893), the Japanese cultural emphasis on the arts predominated in early twentieth-century America, and this aesthetic aspect of Zen strongly influences American culture even today.

As Falk shows, both Shaku Soen and Okakura Kakuzo were seminal in the creation of this dual discourse. Soen was a Rinzai Zen priest, and Kakuzo was an art historian. Falk’s chapter shows how these two teachers confronted a suspicious American audience, saturated with anti-orientalist religious propaganda that emphasized the inferiority of Zen as compared with Christianity: Zen, as detractors claimed, is passive and contradictory, whereas Christianity represents an engaged spirituality coupled with a confident sense of a secure, absolute Truth. However, both Shaku and Okakura countered this published Western bias by emphatically emphasizing Zen’s aestheticism, both at the Parliament and throughout their careers. In so doing, Falk writes, they performed a kind of *jui jitsu*, a “reverse orientalism” where the seeming deficits of Zen were—within the time’s cultural contexts—seen as its actual strengths. For example, Zen’s nontheism, Shaku emphasized, was much more consistent than Christianity’s monodeism with Western modernity, industrialism, and scientific ideas of the early twentieth century.

But it was on the aesthetic plane, Falk explains, that Shaku and Okakura were the most effective as apologists for Zen, even contributing to the “Japan Craze,” an American fad of collecting Japanese artifacts at the turn of the century. Although a Zen priest, Shaku emphasized his avocation as poet and calligrapher—almost eclipsing a spiritual discourse of Zen in favor of an aesthetic discourse. Most notably, Shaku presents meditation primarily as a relief or refuge from the Western rat race and commercialism—in terms a twenty-first century American would readily recognize. Okakura was likewise emphatic in focusing on the pragmatic and aesthetic as opposed to the religious planes of Buddhist experience. For instance, Okakura wrote an illustrated catalogue for the Exposition, intensifying American collector’s interest not only in traditional Japanese art in Meiji Japan but also in how Zen Buddhism influenced Japanese culture. Okakura’s most famous book, *The Book of Tea* (still read today) recommends the advantages of Eastern thought and life practices in contrast to Western materialism and anxiety-ridden modernity. As Falk demonstrates, the tea ceremony becomes a refuge set against the perceived restlessness and disharmony of the West. For Falk, recognizing the “dual discourse” that informs the early transmission explains “the privileging of the aesthetic [as] a factor in the continuing Americanization of Zen in the 21st century.”

Not all commentators would agree, of course, that Buddhism in America uniformly privileges Buddhism’s aesthetic dimension. The second chapter on

transmission, Linda Furgerson Selzer's "Black American Buddhism: History and Representation," focuses on perhaps the most recent development in the transmission of Buddhism to America: the "Black Dharma"—African Americans who have converted to Buddhism or who are fellow travelers. For African Americans, Selzer argues, Buddhism provides a spiritual but also a political refuge from discrimination and the contemporary subtleties of institutionalized racism. Selzer shows how African Americans were most likely exposed to Buddhism in the mid-nineteenth century through their association with Chinese immigrants who worked on the railroad; however, the most important moment in the transmission process occurred during the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893. In her analysis of the pamphlets and news reports written during that seminal event, Selzer shows that despite the racism and Euro-American ethnocentrism in the discourse, African Americans played an important shaping role in the Parliament in conjunction with Asian Buddhists, advocating for their civil rights within a religious context.

A generating question in Selzer's chapter is why so many African Americans turn to Buddhism rather than conventional Christianity. African Americans must still contend with racial stereotypes in their embrace of Buddhism, but a constant challenge is race-inflected. Is the "Black Dharma" *black* enough? In response to this problem, Selzer demonstrates the importance of Buddhism to African Americans by exploring the depth and breadth of Buddhist commitment among African-American writers such as Charles Johnson, bell hooks, Jan Willis, and others. Selzer shows that their motivations result from the social pressures emerging from racism, but also from their recognition of the wider sense of spiritual resources that became available during and after the Civil Rights Movement. The First Noble Truth—All life is suffering—is especially relevant to African Americans who have faced discrimination; as Selzer writes, "Buddhism resonates deeply with their situated experience as black Americans." Buddhism also provides many of these writers, Selzer shows, with a spiritual but also practical method of dealing with this suffering. Especially important to African Americans is Thich Nhat Hahn's "Engaged Buddhism" movement, which employs Buddhism as means of attaining social and political reform, and Nhat Hahn enhanced Buddhism as a this-worldly tool for attaining human rights, in the United States and the world itself. Nhat Hahn's personal association with Martin Luther King Jr., solidified the importance of Buddhism in the minds of many African Americans.

The second part of this volume, "The New Lamp: Buddhism and Contemporary Writers," examines Buddhism's aesthetic principles in recent American literature. One exemplary Buddhist writer is Gary Snyder, and Allan Johnston's far-ranging essay "Some of the Dharma: The Human, the Heavenly, and the 'Real Work' in the Writings of Gary Snyder" (Chapter 3) explores Buddhist doctrines in Snyder's entire career. What, asks Johnston, is the generating

principle in Snyder's oeuvre? This Johnston discovers in Snyder's conception of the "real work"—a term that Snyder has consistently used in his poetry and in interviews. Although Snyder's "real work" has been considered by other critics primarily in terms of its political and artistic dimensions, Johnston's argument is that the term *real work* is more comprehensive and stratified than has been previously considered, as it refers to Snyder's attempt to intensify human awareness of reality on *all* levels—certainly the political and aesthetic planes, but also the mundane and quotidian, as well as the spiritual and religious. In this way, Johnston argues, Snyder engages his reader at all dimensions of life, and Johnston's chapter is a study of the various forms "real work" assume in Snyder's career. Johnston argues that it is critical for a Snyder reader to distinguish the heavenly from human action in nature and culture. This distinction has been a theme, according to Johnston, throughout Snyder's career. Meditation is used by Snyder to pass into a sense of "overwhelming nature" that transcends human reason.

A conception of the *dharmā* is central to Johnston's argument. He carefully considers the variety of definitions of the *dharmā*, then demonstrates how throughout Snyder's career, Snyder has made "real work" correspond to the *dharmā*. Johnston isolates a passage from Chuang-Tzu's Autumn Flood's section, which Snyder taught in his "Wilderness and Literature" class at UC Davis in 1986:

Jo of the North Sea said, "Horses and oxen have four feet—this is what I mean by the Heavenly. Putting a halter on the horse's head, piercing the ox's nose—this is what I mean by the human."

In this depiction of the nature–culture division, culture cannot rule out nature; to approach an issue through the heavenly as opposed to the human bespeaks a different *aim*, not a different *object*. In this way, Johnston tactfully works through Snyder's career in ways that invite an interrelation among political, poetic, and spiritual levels. To achieve this ambitious goal, Johnston also must situate Snyder's religious vision within American culture; and adjunctive to this abstract enterprise is Johnston's explanation of how Snyder resists the dualistic self–object split, an understanding of the world that underlies American individualism. Snyder instead adopts the Buddhist doctrine of no-self (*anātman*). For Snyder, the self–object split divides the human being not only from nature but also from heaven. For Johnston, the challenge of Snyder's poetry resides in exposing the reader to "heavenly nature" through poetic discourse, and meditation, as an analogue for "real work," assists the reader in achieving spiritual as well as political liberation.

In distinguishing his chapter from earlier Snyder criticism, Johnston supports his argument with imaginative, technical readings from selected works, largely atypical heretofore in Snyder's criticism. He demonstrates that Snyder's

poetry—whose previous critics treat almost exclusively for its themes—evinces an aesthetic self-consciousness and a deliberate attention to poetic detail: a marshalling of imagery, syntax, tone, diction, meter, and rhyme to shape the reader's response. Johnston's analyses of such poems as "Mid August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout," "Piute Creek," "Fire in the Hole," "Milton by Firelight," and "Toward Climax" increase our respect for Snyder's careful construction of poetic elements and the beauty of his work.

Johnston's chapter reveals, then, not only Snyder's profound political principles—a consensus of Snyder criticism is his politically radical stance—but also his careful attention to poetics. Yet in Chapter 4, Jonathan Stalling shows that few poets even come close to the radicalism of Jackson Mac Low. Stalling's chapter, "Listen and Relate: Buddhism, Daoism, and Chance in the Poetry and Poetics of Jackson Mac Low," demonstrates conclusively that well before post-modernist theory had taken hold in America, Mac Low was at the vanguard of experimental poets by employing Asian philosophy in his avant-garde work, especially in his undermining of a Western substantialist self. Stalling explains how in Mac Low's early career, Mac Low was influenced primarily by the Daoist conception of *wuwei*—meaning human *non*intervention in allowing a being to become itself, including a poet's refusal to interfere in allowing a poem take its own poetic form. As Stalling writes, "he was the first American poet to explore the dynamic possibilities of chance operations in the composition of poetry." Stalling explains how Daoism leads Mac Low to "stand out of the way" of the performer/reader, or of the role of chance in his poetry.

As Mac Low studied Buddhist principles under D. T. Suzuki, the direction of his work shifted from "getting out of the way" of his poetry—and permitting chance to become a sole poetic principle—toward a more inclusive investigation of *anātman*, the Buddhist belief in the illusory nature of the ego. Nevertheless, the concept *wuwei* did not entirely disappear in his work either, since he attempted in a nondualist way to bring together *wuwei* and *anātman* in his admonition to his audience to "listen and relate: 'Listen' to bring non-judgmental attention to phenomena, and 'relate' without interfering with the *zirzan* [the mysterious unfolding of the other]." Stalling analyzes in detail Mac Low's "Mani Mani Gatha" to demonstrate how Mac Low's work nondualistically unifies Daoist and Buddhist principles. Because the performance of "Mani Mani Gatha" at least partly is shaped by the performers in their unpredictable choices of movements and intonations, the work is to a large extent aleatoric; because the performers' choices are to pay close attention to what happens around them, the performance could never be self-determined, leading to a sense of the evacuation of the self—a "non-egoic," or non-ego reinforcing composition. Like the performer of Mac Low's poetry, the audience is urged to "listen and relate," and Mac Low hoped, work "through what each of us thinks of as 'my self.'"

Archie J. Bahm argued many years ago for a “Buddhist aesthetics,” and the next chapter expands and clarifies what a Buddhist aesthetic might look like. To what extent does a Buddhist aesthetic help illuminate the texts of postmodernist writers who do not necessarily self-identify as Buddhists? Gary Storhoff begins this discussion with his chapter, “‘A Deeper Kind of Truth’: Buddhist Themes in Don DeLillo’s *Libra*,” (Chapter 5), in which he considers DeLillo’s characters in relation to Buddhist ideas about selfhood. DeLillo does not overtly acknowledge his affinity for Buddhist thought, and has in humility acknowledged that the Buddhist inflections in his work do not imply his profound understanding of that religion. Yet there is a persistent pattern of references to Buddhism (and other spiritual disciplines and religions) in his novels—this pattern created by an author who avows that he is a “spiritual person.” Are these merely parodic allusions to Orientalist culture, or does DeLillo disclose a deeper affinity to Buddhism? In previous scholarship on DeLillo, a perpetual debate is the extent and depth of the spiritual dimension in his work, and Storhoff’s discussion of Buddhist ideas that emerge in *Libra* contributes to that debate, especially because many of DeLillo’s aesthetic obsessions—the materialist craving of contemporary America, the emotional sterility of Americans after Kennedy’s assassination, the potentially nihilistic vision of postmodern media, and the deconstruction of a Western ideal of individualism and self-identity—offer a spiritual resolution for the reader. For Storhoff, DeLillo’s purpose in *Libra* is therapeutic in nature, leading his reader toward an understanding of self and its interrelationship with all things. As Storhoff writes, “If we see DeLillo’s fiction within a Buddhist framework, we add another dimension to the view that literature expresses fundamental truths about how we live.”

Storhoff shows that DeLillo’s novel is about the various forms of craving in the novel, the most important being the obsession over a substantialist self. Like David Loy, whose writing recommends *anātman* as a relief for the radical anxiety about self in western civilization, DeLillo offers no sense of an anchor in a solid identity. Indeed, *Libra*, in Storhoff’s words, “enacts key Buddhist themes that clarify the nonexistence of the self.” As Storhoff demonstrates, throughout the novel DeLillo “employs the *memento mori* theme common to both Christianity and Buddhism so as to reveal where reality may be truly found.” Yet the novel offers a refuge from death and the radical loss of self. In a way that passes the understanding of many of these characters, to be “a zero in the system” is in actuality the therapy that DeLillo (and Buddhism) recommends as relief from suffering. This therapy, ironically, is dramatized not by any of the male characters—in this very masculine book—but by the female characters, who seem through their actions to intuit a more profound conception of the self. Storhoff’s chapter, then, suggests a way of looking at DeLillo that rescues him from the category of postmodernist, nihilist writers.

This volume ends with the section “Speaking as Enlightenment: Interviews with Buddhist Writers.” Buddhism in America is more than occasionally seen as enigmatic, even disturbing, to Asians who grew up in established Buddhist traditions. One Asian-American student who took my (Storhoff’s) course in Buddhism and American literature at the University of Connecticut cautioned me to be sure to have at least one Asian Buddhist in my class to assure other students that Buddhism is “real” for practitioners, although she took considerable pride that an entire semester was devoted to an acceptance of her faith in a secular, public university. This section demonstrates conclusively that Buddhism is indeed a heart-felt religion among contemporary writers, although there is little doubt that America presents a new model of Buddhist practice to meet the demands of American postmodern culture.

The section begins with Chapter 6 by Julia Martin, “The Present Moment Happening: A Conversation with Gary Snyder.” Snyder’s most influential books of poetry often are paired with a collection of prose—for example, *Mountains and Rivers without End* (1996) with *Practice of the Wild* (1990). Martin catches Snyder between his poetic collection *Danger on the Peaks* (2004) and its prose partner *Back on the Fire* (2007) to interview him about developments in his views on the interrelationships between poetry and environmentalism. As a serious devotee of Buddhism since the “Buddha Boom” of the 1950s and an originary figure of Buddhist American literature, Snyder has persevered in his vow, made when he was only fifteen years old, to offer therapy to the planet that has become increasingly threatened by ecological destruction, despite the end of the Cold War and nuclear brinkmanship. Returning from his first ascent of Mt. St. Helens in 1945, Snyder read newspaper accounts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and then he vowed to fight against the destructive powers of the world. How, asks Martin, does Snyder now reconcile himself to an apparently even more precarious world, where nature itself is endangered by, in Snyder’s words, “the half-million-year long slow explosion of human impact”?

In response, Snyder discusses the relationship between human value and nature in terms framed by Robinson Jeffers, and Jeffers’ distinction between “Inhumanism” and anti-humanism. No “anti-humanist,” Snyder stresses that the personal and the human have their place in the world and in an artist’s representations of the world, but as an Inhumanist, Snyder avoids the egotistical inflation of the human element on the planet. The profundity of Snyder’s commitment is obvious in the interview; but so too is his good cheer and humor—this interview is not a testimony of gloom from one of America’s foremost poets, and his laughter throughout the interview leavens his description of his “despair at how the human world goes down.” More than sixty years after his vow, Snyder is still speaking out against the forces of commercialism and overdevelopment, but he also understands the “limits of who we are, and the limits of what our world is. . . . I had to learn what is actually possible in the world.” Perhaps

his most moving statement in this interview is his admonition to “honor the dust,” a statement that registers his courageous resignation combined with his devotion to the seemingly mundane and nonhuman features of earth.

Buddhism in American literature has evolved considerably since Kerouac’s 1958 *Dharma Bums*, and Whalen-Bridge’s interview in Chapter 7 with Charles Johnson and Maxine Hong Kingston, “Embodied Mindfulness: A Discussion with Charles Johnson and Maxine Hong Kingston,” reveals this artistic development. Both National Book Award winners, Johnson and Kingston have commented in their literary work on Buddhist American writing after the Beat period. Johnson is perhaps the most explicit writer who distances himself from the Beats, as evidenced in the chandoo episode in *Oxherding Tale*, and in Chaym Smith’s representation of the black dharma bum in *Dreamer*. For Johnson, the bohemian path forged by the Beats toward freedom is a first step but never a resting place. In comparison, Kingston’s characters, such as Wittman Ah Sing in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, often look back not necessarily in anger but in disappointment at the orientalism and misunderstanding of such predecessors as Jack Kerouac.

Whalen-Bridge’s interview is useful to scholars of contemporary literature because Johnson and Kingston cover so much ground—*anātman* (the no-self doctrine), Christianity, phenomenology, karma, and reincarnation. Johnson acknowledges his emotional commitment to Christianity—the religion that was firmly grounded in his own family-of-origin, and is now practiced by his wife and children. But Johnson elaborates on his Christian background by discussing the importance of Thich Nhat Hahn’s Order of Interbeing in his work. Nhat Hahn’s statement that “a good Buddhist is a good Christian, and a good Christian is a good Buddhist” seems central to Johnson’s worldview; Johnson is consequently not disturbed by Buddhist ideas that to the casual observer seem antithetical to orthodox Christian theology, the most important of these ideas, perhaps, being *anātman*. For Johnson, seeing an opposition between Christianity and Buddhism is only one more perceptual dualism that must be overcome. Johnson’s commentary is important to an understanding of all his fiction, and Whalen-Bridge probes him on his dramatization of enlightenment in such works as his *Oxherding Tale* and his short story “Dr. King’s Refrigerator.” For Johnson, enlightenment almost solely resides in emotional and intellectual acceptance of *anātman*: from that acceptance flows an understanding of the interrelatedness of all things (Nhat Hahn’s concept of interbeing). Yet perhaps because of American culture’s tradition of individualism, Johnson recognizes that this acceptance is difficult—hence, the resistance of even renowned philosophers like Paul Tillich to *anātman*.

Maxine Hong Kingston also comments on her treatment of enlightenment in her work, but her representation of Buddhism is considerably more circumspect and tentative than is the somewhat “muscular” passages of the Beats

that pronounce on enlightenment. In contrast to writers such as Kerouac, the dramatic representation of enlightenment for Kingston is the epitome of her art, yet she will only venture to depict enlightenment imagistically, not with Kerouac's blustering confidence, didacticism, or overheated philosophy. The image of a firefly, for Kingston, summarizes the precarious and evanescent moment of enlightenment: flickering, beautiful, but gone in an instant. Although enlightenment is central to her art, she will only present enlightenment briefly and with utmost subtlety, in keeping with her understanding of that experience. In her interview with Whalen-Bridge published in *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, "Buddhism and the Ceremony of Writing," Kingston goes into further detail about her relationship to Buddhism, where she also discusses her less well-known works such as *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake-Book* and *The Fifth Book of Peace*. The interview with Kingston in this section and in *Emergence* together should be of considerable help to any scholar interested in her Buddhist references, and how Buddhism partly shapes her aesthetic and spiritual aims.

Whalen-Bridge's (Chapter 8) interviews with writers affiliated with Naropa University, "Poetry and Practice at Naropa University," concludes this volume. The institutional center for American literary Buddhism—although the name of the writing program at once asserts and dismisses the importance of institutional embodiment—has been Naropa University's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. The program was created in 1974 when Trungpa asked Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, Diane di Prima, and musician John Cage to develop a writing program, to which the quasi-Beat assemblage gave a fruitfully ironic and iconoclastic name. Despite its considerable accomplishments, Naropa is more often remembered in the context of Tom Clark's *Great Naropa Poetry Wars* (1980), an account of events that occurred at a Halloween party in 1975. During one of Trungpa's three-month Buddhist seminars, poet W. S. Merwin and his girlfriend Dana Naone refused to attend this party and behaved in other ways that offended Trungpa, who ordered his "Vajra guards" to force them to participate. This involved stripping them naked against their will. Trungpa's defenders argued that the guru was attempting, out of compassion and a radical teaching mode called "crazy wisdom," to peel away the delusions of ego. Kenneth Rexroth felt otherwise, comparing Trungpa to Buddhism's Judas-figure, Devadatta: "Many believe Chögyam Trungpa has unquestionably done more harm to Buddhism in the United States than any man living."²

It may seem as if the Poetry Wars crystalize the clash between Asian traditions (of asceticism, collectivism, and respect for teachers) and an American emphasis on sexual expression, democracy, and egalitarianism. The interviews in this chapter expose the apparent clash between Asian traditions and American values, and this collision is not going to be avoided by simply ignoring the many cultural traditions inherited from Asia. But it is far from clear what conclusions should be drawn.

John Stevens argues in *Lust for Enlightenment: Buddhism and Sex* that there has never been one simple message of sexual repression within Buddhist discourse, and psychologist Mark Epstein provocatively presents Buddhist as a path toward greater intimacy in *Open to Desire: the Truth about What the Buddha Taught*. Is this pro-sex Buddhism an American projection? Is Tantric transgression an alibi for countercultural, antinomian lack of discipline? Marcus Boon's essay "John Giorno: Buddhism, Poetry, and Transgression," in *Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, juxtaposes transgressive elements that are from the Tibet of one-thousand years ago with transgressive sex of post-Stonewall America—images of the Tibetan saint Padmasambhava are juxtaposed shockingly with the poetic lines "when you shoot your load/ up/ my ass" (*Emergence* 65). Boon glosses philosophical emptiness with scholarly references to canonical texts of Tibetan Buddhism, but readers might object that there is no "queer dharma" in medieval Tibet. The tradition of veiled, highly metaphorical "twilight language" allows for the expression of actions that would have been flatly transgressive if understood plainly, and we look forward to the possibility that scholars in decades to come will better be able to work with the stormy ground of "Comparative Transgressive Studies." This is a complicated issue that warrants its own separate volume of essays, and it must be remarked that what follows in this volume is, hopefully, a set of initial forays into what will develop into a rich vein of writing. We are in the middle of this story.

Whalen-Bridge's interviews with Joanne Kyger, Reed Bye, Keith Abbott, Andrew Schelling, and Elizabeth Robinson concern such topics as the evolution of contemplative poetics at Naropa, attempts to develop a pedagogy that balanced the Beat and Buddhist inspirations behind the program, and the grueling difficulties faced by devout practitioners as they attempt to accommodate their faith with their committed American values such as freedom of expression, democracy, and self-reliance.

Probing, tentative, and provisional—these chapters look for ways to open up new approaches to the complex interaction between Asian Buddhism, that of second-generation American teachers, and American writers from the mid-1970s through the new millennium. It is in this spirit that each of the contributors to this volume—Falk, Selzer, Johnston, Stalling, Storhoff, Martin, and Whalen-Bridge—studies the dynamic and hybrid philosophical traditions of Buddhism and how Buddhism partly shapes the forms and meanings of American literature. This volume is yet another episode in the evolution of a genuinely global mixture of discourses and practices, an exchange that is transforming life on both sides of the Pacific.

One more Zen story—and the cultural echo-locution around such telling and retellings humbles anyone who would say it is an "Asian" or an "American" story too quickly. It is said that Tokusan, one of the great interpreters of the Diamond Sutra, met an old woman, who asked about a huge bundle he

carried on his back, and he answered that it was his interpretative writings on the Diamond Sutra, compiled after many laborious years of study. The old woman then reminded him of a passage in the Sutra: “The past mind cannot be held, the present mind cannot be held, and the future mind cannot be held.” Astounded at the old woman’s astuteness, Tokusan returned to his study under a Zen master, and it is said that he later burned his commentaries.³

We hope the reader will enjoy these chapters. If they must be burned, may they give you light!

Notes

1. Tweed has stipulated in a different essay that Buddhism is a “new subfield of Asian religions in America” (1997, 190), enfolded in the domain of American religious history. Charles S. Prebish also points out that there are more academic hirings of professors specializing in Buddhist Studies than in the past (74–78).

2. Rexroth’s words appear on the back cover of Clark’s book as an endorsement.

3. The Zen stories are paraphrased from *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*.

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