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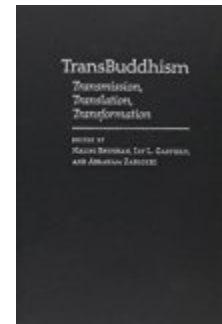


Nalini Bhushan, Jay L. Garfield, Abraham Zablocki, eds. *TransBuddhism: Transmission, Translation, and Transformation*. Collaborations Series. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009. ix + 260 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-708-5; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-707-8.

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TransBuddhism

“TransBuddhism” as defined by the editors of this eclectic, innovative collection is the “intersections of the real and the imagined, and of the Asian and the Western” in “contemporary transnational Buddhism” (p. 4). By definition, this is a very diverse area of research to present in a single work, and any edited book that attempts to do so wrestles with the possibility that it will be as oscillating, and therefore difficult to approach, as its fluctuating subject. In the main, the editors and contributors of this collection have avoided this pitfall and present a collection of diverse approaches to the transmission, translation, and transformation of Buddhism as it goes global. This is a collection of studies that challenges the normal parameters of edited academic books, including writing that crosses not only disciplines and regions, but also styles. It is a collection that includes such diverse topics as an unsuccessful immigrant Japanese Buddhist community in the Northwest of the United States, a discussion of the phenomenon of *différance* with regard to the translation of specific Sanskrit terms, and the influence of Transcendentalism on ecoBuddhism. The historic periods it covers are also diverse, ranging from an analysis of discussions between medieval Japanese monks to the presentation of Buddhism in the film *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999). Yet this diversity is held together by a common theme of movement between cultures, languages, and physical locations. What is more, despite the fact that this variant discussion sometimes jumps from one region to another—and one style of re-

search and writing to another—its collation ultimately represents some of the diversity involved in this transnational movement of ideas and traditions.

To help ease the disparity of these approaches somewhat, the book is divided into three sections: transmission, translation, and transformation. The first section, “Transmission,” looks at the concept of the transmission of authority from traditional, often monastic, paradigms revolving around teacher and student to new paradigms that include the proliferation of written texts and the influence of transnational concepts of Buddhism. Chapter 1, by Judith Snodgrass, is entitled “Discourse, Authority, Demand: The Politics of Early English Publications on Buddhism,” and describes the circumstances by which the idea of the Buddha and Buddhism was created in the Western imagination through the efforts of nineteenth-century Christian missionaries in Sri Lanka (Ceylon). In particular, it looks at the composition, circumstances of publication, contents, and influential readership of two English texts: *Eastern Monachism* (1850) and *Manual of Buddhism* (1853), both written by Reverend Robert Spence Hardy, a Wesleyan missionary to Ceylon from 1825 to 1847. Snodgrass shows the influence of these works on most of the first wave of European Buddhologists, particularly in the way they developed a paradigm of Buddhism that “created” a founding Buddha for Buddhism. She traces the development of this idea as the missionaries’ initial attempts to dismiss the Buddha

as “just a man” without divine inspiration were later embraced by other progressive thinkers who championed his humanity. Snodgrass pays particular attention to the role of texts in this discourse and notes how the Buddhist tradition of oral communication was displaced through their use.

The second chapter in this section, “Transnational *Tulkus*: The Globalization of Tibetan Buddhist Reincarnation,” by Abraham Zablocki, looks at the phenomenon of “tulku envy” among Western practitioners of Buddhism. This is a phenomenon whereby Westerners seek to be recognized, or have their children recognized, as the reincarnations of realized Tibetan lamas, and therefore become not only Tibetan Buddhists, but also essentially Tibetan. As Zablocki explains it, this process allows Western practitioners of Buddhism to claim “an esoteric and exotic ‘secret identity,’ one which parallels heroic narratives found in Western pop culture with a specifically Buddhist religious cast” (p. 44). Zablocki then goes on to give what he sees as an example of a Tibetan making fun of this phenomenon in the novel *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* (1999), by Jamyang Norbu. This is an intriguing chapter, and an intriguing argument, but his argument would have been enriched by providing responses to some of the counterarguments his presentation suggests. Where is the evidence, for example, that those suffering “tulku envy” seek to be specifically Tibetan, as opposed to just “special”? And, likewise, where is the evidence that Norbu is making fun of this tendency rather than, as others have claimed, responding to Western claims on his culture by appropriating an aspect of Western culture, namely Sherlock Holmes? [1]

The next chapter, “Buddhism in American Prisons,” by Constance Kassor, is, as its title implies, a report on the way Buddhism is practiced in prisons in the United States. As the number of prisoners practicing Buddhism is relatively small—in contrast to the disturbing 2,245,189 population of U.S. prisons and jails—the sources for this study are necessarily anecdotal. This does not, however, detract from their impact, and the example they provide of Buddhism adapting to another, complicated social situation. Kassor’s writing combines a general sketch of the conditions that prisoners experience and the obstacles to their practice of Buddhist meditation and ethics, with detailed, personal accounts that exemplify this situation. Interestingly, she also remarks on the deviation from the ideal set out in Buddhist texts as it adapts to these conditions, particularly with regard to the Buddhist ethical injunctions against harsh speech and stealing, and their solitary relationship to texts without the aid of an

oral tradition.

In contrast to these explorations of qualified success in the adaptive transmission of Buddhism, the last chapter in the section, which is entitled “Incense at a Funeral: The Rise and Fall of an American Shingon Temple,” describes the collapse of a Japanese Shingon temple in Oregon, in northwestern United States. This temple was founded by the author Elizabeth Eastman’s great-grandparents, and in her personal, engaging description of its decline Eastman speculates that its main failing was its inability to adapt to American cultural norms. Coincidentally, however, and unmentioned by the author, this chapter also highlights the role academic studies of Buddhism have played in influencing its transmission in the United States. For while Eastman’s great-grandparents’ temple may have failed, their great-granddaughter approached this failure after reconnecting with their traditions in a globalized world that enabled her to study Buddhism in an American university and encounter it through a student exchange program in Thailand.

The next section of the book, part 2, looks at the process of translation, both of texts and ideas, again from a variety of perspectives. It begins with a contribution from the eminent philosopher and Buddhist scholar Jay L. Garfield, entitled “Translation as Transmission and Transformation,” which examines the translation of Buddhist texts and argues convincingly that this process is also a form of adaptive transmission that has changed their use. Garfield begins by outlining the history of these translations; he describes how they began as an exercise in philology with a limited philologically inclined audience, then expanded to include the translations of non-philologically inclined scholars, and eventually grew further to include translations by practicing Buddhists. In this process, he also explains, there has not only been a transformation of signified meaning necessitated by translation, but also a transformation of the “text” from an aid to oral teachings into a stand alone source of knowledge, in which the translated text is supported by introductory materials and footnotes. Garfield then goes on to argue that this presentation of knowledge has in turn influenced indigenous Asian readings of Buddhism with more and more Buddhists in Asia relying on the English translations.

It would also have been interesting, however, if Garfield had provided more varied evidence for this claim, apart from references to one Tibetan colleague at a university in India, and the sight of young people who were also Tibetans in exile in India reading from

English translations at a tantric ceremony. This would have been especially helpful given that Garfield goes on to claim that the English translations are “creating, in the act of translation, a new Buddhism, both in the West and in traditionally Buddhist Asian cultures” (p. 98). While this may be true within some parts of the English-speaking Tibetan exile scholarly community, given that the largest Buddhist print runs in Asia are in Chinese and not English, it seems a difficult claim to make more broadly. It also implies a passivity on the side of writers and publishers in other source languages, like Tibetan, Thai, Burmese, and so forth, which, given the contemporary output of (at least introduced and commented, if only rarely footnoted) publications in these languages, is clearly not the case.

Changing pace a little, the following chapter, “Two Monks and the Mountain Village Ideal,” by Thomas H. Rohlich, contextualizes and translates a series of poetic exchanges between two twelfth-century Japanese monks, Jakuzen, who lives in a village, and Saigyō, who lives on a mountain. As Rohlich explains, these two monks were involved in a literary innovation that developed a tradition of Buddhist nature based poetry, which contrasted markedly with the prevalent courtly poetry of the time. In examining the poetry of these two monks, this chapter exemplifies many of the points made by Garfield’s previous chapter. Rohlich explains how much poetry is lost in translation through the necessary presentation of meaning and juxtaposes his attempts to translate this meaning with the cultural shifts the two monks experienced. Rohlich also makes the interesting observation that translations of texts are often accompanied by aesthetics and literary translations, which expands the concept of translation to artistic endeavors and leads neatly into the subject matter of the next two chapters.

In the first of these, Mario d’Amato reflects on the role of Buddhism, and particularly the eighteenth-century Japanese text *Hagakure* by the samurai Tashiro Tsuramoto in Jim Jarmusch’s 1999 film *Ghost Dog*. In an engaging examination of this artistic translation, transmission, and transformation of a Buddhist tradition, d’Amato shows the innovative ways TransBuddhism has been presented through Western art, in this case both in film and its accompanying soundtrack. He also examines in detail the intersections the film portrays between Tsuramoto’s text and the world of an African American assassin who is working for the Italian mafia.

In the next chapter, “Eastern Influences on Western

Sport: Appropriating Buddhism in the Name of Golf,” Jane M. Stangl looks at an even more diffuse transmission of Buddhism, its use in the popular media and self-help books associated with golf. As Stangl explains, Buddhism, particularly Zen Buddhism, has become a popular conduit for “the growing interest in incorporating some form of mindful practice into our everyday being and physical activity” (p. 137). Yet, as Stangl also explains, much of Buddhism’s incorporation into this endeavor has been conducted using pop culture and stereotypical images of Buddhism, rather than Buddhist practice or philosophy. In a telling irony reflecting the problems associated with this appropriation, she also quotes a 1996 *Sports Illustrated* interview with Tiger Woods in which he explains that he “liked Buddhism because ... it’s based on discipline and respect and personal responsibility” (p. 147).

The final section of the book, “Transformation,” continues the themes developed in the previous two sections. It begins with a chapter by another eminent Buddhist scholar and renowned advocate for Buddhist nuns, Karma Lekshe Tsomo. In a chapter entitled “Global Exchange: Women in the Transmission and Transformation of Buddhism,” this American professor and fully ordained nun looks at the processes of interaction in international Buddhism that have enabled women from different cultural backgrounds to work together toward the restoration of full ordination for Buddhist nuns. In examining this process, she highlights the role played by Asian women and provides an overview of most of the obstacles still facing those working toward this goal. I say “most” because there are two obstacles that she does not mention: namely, Asian Buddhist women and Western Buddhist monks who resist the move toward full ordination for women. Given Lekshe Tsomo’s obvious and deep knowledge of the subject, and her ability to explain the complicated issues clearly, it would have been very interesting to read her assessment of their views.

While Lekshe Tsomo’s chapter describes a process of transmission, the next chapter by Nalini Bhushan, entitled “Toward an Anatomy of Mourning: Discipline, Devotion, and Liberation in a Freudian-Buddhist Framework,” seems more an instance than a descriptor of TransBuddhism. Bhushan’s analysis takes as its starting points Sigmund Freud’s work *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) and the tale of Kisagotami from the life-stories of the Buddha’s students. Freud’s work examines the process by which mourning people often deal with the pain of loss by pretending that the one they loved is still around, then gradually relinquish this claim. And

as Bhushan explains, Kisagotami was a young woman who lost her only son, but was still determined to find medicine to cure him. After meeting the Buddha, she was told that the medicine for her son was mustard seeds from a house “that had never experienced the death of a daughter or son,” an impossible task that enables her to heal. As an instance of transformation, Bhushan’s work shows both the promise and the problems of Buddhist transformation across cultures. On the one hand, on the positive side, by comparing these two approaches it provides helpful insights into the living (and dying) experience of mourning. On the other hand, however, it shows the inherent problems in the sifting and sorting of transmission. Why, for instance, has she chosen an un-commentated Buddhist morality tale to contrast with a fully developed Freudian dissertation? On balance, it seems that in this instance the insights Bhushan provides may outweigh the problems, but it is an interesting problem for TransBuddhist practice in general that the author did not address.

The last two chapters in this section on transformation look at the environment, but they do this from differing perspectives. Susan M. Darlington’s chapter, entitled “Translating Modernity: Buddhist Response to the Thai Environmental Crisis,” records the process by which Thai monks involved in the environmental movement have developed new Buddhist ceremonies to protect forests and rehabilitate rivers. These ceremonies include the “ordination” of trees and long life ceremonies for rivers through what the author calls “a careful Buddhist interpretation” (p. 204). In her analysis, Darlington notes that the monks’ position of authority within society makes them one of the most effective tools for introducing environmentalism into Thai villages, and she also explains how, in yet another example of TransBuddhism, some of their strategies have been taken up by environmentalist groups in the United States.

In the last chapter of the collection, “The Transcendentalist Ghost in ecoBuddhism,” Mark Blum examines the role that he perceives the American tradition of Transcendentalism has played in the development of what he calls the “ecoBuddhist” movement. He begins this thoughtful and thought-provoking piece by examining the state of ecoBuddhism and statements by ecoBuddhists, before questioning just how “Buddhist” these movements and statements are in reference to first the Theravāda Abhidharma tradition and then medieval Japanese Buddhism. In these examinations, he shows how rather than presenting the world as a source of knowledge and spirituality Theravāda Abhidharma

presents it as a source of suffering, and medieval Japanese Buddhism—the source, he says, of many ecoBuddhist ideas—only refers to nature as positive in relation to the ontologically universalistic principles of *tathāgathagarbha* doctrines. After outlining the problems associated with “Buddhist environmentalism” in this way, he then proceeds to discuss a much more likely source for American ecoBuddhism, the Transcendental movement exemplified in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

This section of the argument is easy to follow and thought provoking. The only part I found difficult to accept was his argument that this form of American ecoBuddhism has been reexported to Asian Buddhists, including the monks in Thailand who were referred to in the previous chapter. He makes this argument by referring to quotes from two Asian ecoBuddhists, Padmini de Silva and Daisaku Ikeda, that indicate they have been influenced by Transcendentalism. It seems a stretch, however, to suggest that because these two writers—one an American-trained scholar and the other the head of an international organization—are representative of all Asian ecoBuddhists. Is it not possible that the monks have adapted ecoBuddhist strategies to stop sentient beings’ suffering as a result of environmental destruction, and have therefore stayed within the framework of the Abhidharma, rather than completely reconceiving the environment according to an American form of ecoBuddhism, as Blum suggests? And given the historic and modern interactions between India, China, and Thailand, how can we be certain that they were not influenced by Hindu and Daoist thought?

Despite this quibble, it is quite possibly in these last essays that the collection seems to me to be at its strongest, not because they are individually stronger than the other contributions to the collection (all of the chapters are of a high standard), but because of the way they interact with each other; they are two views of the topic in conversation with each other. This enables the topic to be pursued in more depth and with more resolution than the other areas of research this volume represents. It may have perhaps been more useful if there was more of this interaction.

It would also have been helpful for readers if the editors, and sometimes the contributors, were clearer in defining the parameters of their work. The volume, for example, states in its introduction that it is using the example of the interactions between “Asian cultures” (a term that is not defined) and the United States as an in-

indicator for what is happening globally. This strategy is problematic, first in its implicit assumption that this relationship is the central axis of TransBuddhism, but also in the way that it sets up a bilateral relationship that sidelines other interactions and sometimes relies on tenuous links to show this link. This foregrounding of the United States generally is also problematic given that many of the chapters include references to more multilateral interactions, and at least one of them—Snodgrass’s opening chapter—is not concerned with the United States at all.

Relative to the achievements of this volume, how-

ever, these are minor problems that would be difficult to track and examine within the confines of single chapters. Overall, this volume of work marks what is hopefully the beginning of a new area of Buddhist studies, examining not only the discrete manifestations of Buddhism in disparate cultures, but also the modern and contemporary journeys that it has, is, and will take between them.

Note

[1].See, for example, Steven J. Venturino, “Where Is Tibet in World Literature?” *World Literature Today* 78, no. 1 (2004).

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