



Todd Lewis, ed. *Buddhists: Understanding Buddhism through the Lives of Practitioners*. Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014. 352 pp. \$44.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-470-65818-5.

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REVIEW> *Buddhists: Understanding Buddhism through the Lives of Practitioners*, reviewed by Mavis Fenn

The primary method of teaching Buddhism in universities up to now has been through the study of Buddhist texts, philosophy, and the history of its transmission. Although alternative approaches to the study of Buddhism were being taken up when I entered graduate school thirty years ago, I was discouraged from investigating them, being advised that such approaches fell outside of the “real” study of Buddhism. While much has changed since I entered graduate school, we continue to place greater emphasis on these facets of Buddhism than Buddhism as a “lived” tradition. This lack of balance in our teaching almost guarantees that we will also pass along long-standing misconceptions about the tradition. While the study of texts, philosophy, philology, and such will always be central to the field, increasingly students want to know about Buddhism as it is lived and understood by practitioners, historical and contemporary, monks and nuns, and the laity. While the anthropology of Buddhism has grown as a field, it does not appear to be well represented in the texts we use to teach. Thus, this volume goes far in filling this lacuna in our teaching resources by presenting a series of biographies of Buddhists that demonstrates the way in which they try and live their lives *as* Buddhists.

The book consists of thirty-three chapters divided into five broad areas: “Buddhists in the Earliest and Medieval Eras” (part 1), “Buddhist Lives in the West” (part 2), “Buddhist Lives in South and Southeast Asia” (part 3), “Buddhist Lives in the Himalayan region” (part 4), and “Buddhist Lives in East Asia” (part 5). The book’s website (www.wiley.com/go/lewisbuddhism) provides three alternative organizational patterns: country of focus; Buddhist tradition or text; and householders, monks, and others. I understand that these alternate tables of content are created so that instructors can quickly find the material they are looking for, and I understand the value of listing articles by tradition and even by specific countries.

Nonetheless, I felt, given that the volume explicitly states that it is primarily devoted to householders, the third category was largely a distraction. The chapters are short (ten to fifteen pages, approximately), which makes assigning one or two to a class manageable. It would also be a good resource for general readers as a means of expanding their knowledge of the variety of ways there are to “be” Buddhist. As well as being geographically balanced, the volume is gender balanced, and provides stories of Buddhists at all social strata. The well-known figures that do appear in the volume do not overwhelm the voices of ordinary Buddhists. Most helpful is the editor’s introduction that precedes each article. The introduction highlights aspects of the biography that connect to the issues raised in the introduction. It also prepares students to recognize other issues at play, for example, class and gender issues. It has been my experience that students frequently have difficulty relating additional readings to textbook material or class lectures. These introductions act as a reminder to them of the connection between the article, the issues, and the tradition.

The introduction provides a good corrective to several misconceptions held by students: that Buddhism is a philosophy, not a religion; that ritual is an accretion to the tradition; that Buddhism is all about enlightenment and not day-to-day life; that the sophisticated meditative practices and philosophical acumen that we find in the texts provides a model for all Buddhists to follow. Lewis uses Buddhaghosa’s presentation of the Eightfold Path and the Gradual Path to impress upon students that the basis of Buddhist life is morality, that until the modern period very few monks practiced meditation, and that wisdom is progressive with meditation, and only when wisdom is perfected does enlightenment result. Thus, most Buddhists—past and present—have focused upon the development of a sound moral foundation, one that may take numerous lifetimes to establish.

Some texts are designed for those who are at the foundational stage (morality), others for those who have progressed beyond that (meditation).

All religion must deal with people's actual daily needs, and the needs of Buddhists do not differ from those of others: to be materially comfortable, to be healthy, to be surrounded by family and friends, to live a long life after which one goes to heaven. In Buddhism, one accomplishes these things through the accumulation of merit. The merit accumulated is acquired by individuals and brings pragmatic and religious benefit to them, but it also benefits society through the redistribution of wealth and merit to family and friends, transfer of merit and rituals performed, and donations to religious specialists. This is the religious path followed by most Buddhists. Buddhism in its lived form is summarized quite nicely when Lewis states, "A historically and sociologically informed overview of how Buddhism is lived in individual lives falls into four interlocking tracks of legitimate Buddhist striving: 1) pragmatic wellbeing, via rituals and merit-making; 2) moral cultivation, via donations, pure conduct, and compassionate acts; 3) better rebirth (human or in a heaven), via merit-making and merit transfer; 4) seeking nirvana, via meditation" (p. 6).

Rather than trying to provide a summary for all thirty-three chapters, I will here just present a sampling of a few representative chapters that stood out for me. "Bhadda Kundalakesa: The Ex Jain" by Alice Collett is the second article in part 1. The editor's introduction makes two important points: that the early tradition assumed the superiority of men but still managed to attract and find room for intelligent women like Bhadda Kundalakesha, and the stories with which we work today must be read critically. They may contain some historically factual material but should not be read literally; they have passed through the hands of numerous unknown editors. Bhadda Kundalakesha herself appears in a wide variety of accounts and may indeed have been a contemporary of the Buddha and one of his disciples but this can never be established definitively. Collett compares the biography found in the later commentary *Manorathapurani* (fifth century CE) to the earlier *Theri-Apadana* (second century BCE) as well as to the *Therigatha* and other Pali commentaries from the same period. Central to Bhadda's biography in both the *Manorathapurani* and the *Theri-Apadana* is the means by which she chooses her husband. The earlier *Theri-Apadana* is short and refers to her becoming infatuated with a thief and being allowed to marry him. The later *Manorathapurani* is extensive and Bhadda's birth is presented in tandem with the birth of the thief. Thus, her later choice of the thief for her hus-

band is perceived to be fated. However, in all the texts examined she makes the choice, a stark contrast to the Brahmanical literature of the time stating that a daughter was to be married to a man of her parents' choosing, preferably before puberty. As well, although the account of Bhadda's conversion to Buddhism in the *Theri-Apadana* differs drastically from that of the *Manorathapurani* (and other accounts), they all make the point that Bhadda was intelligent and quick-witted. These points are suggestive that at least some young women were given choices other than marriage and that intelligent women could be acknowledged for their abilities (Bhadda is first in quick realization/higher knowledge). Students can also learn about scholarly method from Collett's use of numerous texts, historically situated, and the careful reading of them and comparison between them.

"Becoming a Theravada Modernist Buddhist," by Lauren Leve (part 3, #19), is the biography of Sujata. It is not, the editor informs us, a typical story of a Newari Buddhist. It is, however, a fascinating and complex story of how a Newari Buddhist woman of a lower caste became a Theravada devotee and finally a *vipassana* practitioner. Newar Buddhism is ritually Mahayana-Vajrayana and the rituals are carried out by married tantric masters/priests. Society is caste-based and advanced knowledge and Vajrayana practice are limited to the upper castes. Sujata's parents were a mixed-caste couple and so they were considered ritually inferior. Disillusioned, Sujata was attracted to modernist, reformist Theravada Buddhism. Introduced to Theravada at Anandakuti, she liked the simple rituals, teachings on morality, the equality, and the monastic adherence to rules and willingness to teach anyone. Having become part of the Theravada community, Sujata began to attend a youth study group at Dharmakirti Vihara (a nunnery) engaging in serious study, thus confirming her new identity as a Theravadin. Inspired by the nuns, she held off on marriage. It was through the study group that she learned about meditation and eventually took a ten-day *vipassana* course through a S. N. Goenka center. With *vipassana*, she came to the end of her religious quest. As Leve notes, Sujata saw her development as a journey from a corrupted form of Buddhism, through an understanding of what Buddhism is, to the essence of Buddhism, "pure" Buddhism, *vipassana* as taught by the Buddha. Having rejected her earlier thought of becoming a nun, she married. The ceremony was a hybrid one that incorporated traditional Newari rituals, although Sujata refused to partake of meat and alcohol. Married life and being a mother have limited her ability to pursue *vipassana* intensely but as her daughter grows she plans to devote more time

to meditation. This article is valuable in the issues and patterns it presents for students to consider: the role of caste in religion and community practice; the imprints of a colonial past and ideas of what is considered “modern” and “pure”; the widespread acceptance of a formerly specialist practice (*vipassana*) by lay people; the difficulty of maintaining such practice, especially for women, throughout the arc of one’s life.

The final biography presented here is “Seno’o Giro: The Life and Thought of a Radical Buddhist” by James Mark Shields. This biography is a corrective for those students who believe that Buddhism is inherently conservative or nonpolitical. Seno’o Giro, like many influential Buddhist thinkers in Asia during the twentieth century, felt that Buddhism and socialism were compatible (U Nu of Burma also comes to mind). He also believed, like Nichiren, that the religious salvation of both individuals and the nation, were intertwined and could only occur through the re-creation of society according to the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*. Born in 1889, the same year a new constitution and the Imperial Rescript on Education were proclaimed, Seno’o would live through the period of Japanese nationalism and imperialism, the Second World War, and restoration, dying in 1961 at the age of 71. Seno’o was plagued by ill health all his life. During these periods of illness and convalescence he expanded his knowledge of Nichiren, joining the priesthood at Myohonji in 1915. His life’s passion was to create a just and compassionate society as evidenced in the creation (1931) of the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism. Of the ideals of the organization, Shields states: “[It was] an experiment in Buddhist social activism that set itself up as a vanguard of socialist protest against poverty, injustice, colonialism, and imperialism” (p. 281).

The foundation of the League also represents the union of Seno’o’s Buddhist and political thought. While his stay at Ichiro was brief, he was exposed to Western ideals such as equality and individual dignity. Later, after spending time with tenant farmers and factory workers, he immersed himself in the writings of both Western and

Japanese socialist thinkers. The Youth League had been founded as a means of responding to the labor struggles of the late 1920s, the belief that capitalism was creating suffering, and the disengagement of institutional Buddhism from these struggles. The League grew quickly and held a series of conferences that opposed many of the growing trends in Japanese society and politics such as imperialism and nationalism. It also wanted to unite all the Buddhist sects and challenge “reactionary religious sects” (p. 286). Seno’o also participated in several leftist and labor organizations, leading to his arrest for treason in 1936 as the government increased its suppression of leftist and liberal thought. In May 1937, he “finally confessed his crimes and pledged loyalty to the emperor,” an act he regretted to the end of his life (p. 287). Sentenced to five years’ hard labor, he was released after three due to ill health. After the war he continued to be active in leftist politics and social justice movements. In Seno’o Giro’s biography students encounter two major intellectual tensions, that between the individual and society, and that between religion and politics. They also learn that religion can be a powerful social force for change.

These biographies, only three of thirty-three, are just an example of the range of disciplinary approaches that are utilized in the study of Buddhism: textual, anthropological, and historical. Other biographies include I. B. Horner, Noah Levine, and Alan Ginsberg as well as Machig Lab-dronm, and Mayasi Sayadaw, among others.

I hope that the volume will sell well and be available for some time to come. My concern is that the cost may be a deterrent. This is a companion text. With the average text costing about \$50.00, the addition of this one brings the total course cost close to \$100.00. This is sufficient to deter students who are interested in Buddhism but do not intend to specialize in its study. This may be an unrealistic concern. In any case, it is clear that *Buddhists: Understanding Buddhism Through the Lives of Practitioners* makes a valuable contribution to the teaching of Buddhism.

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