

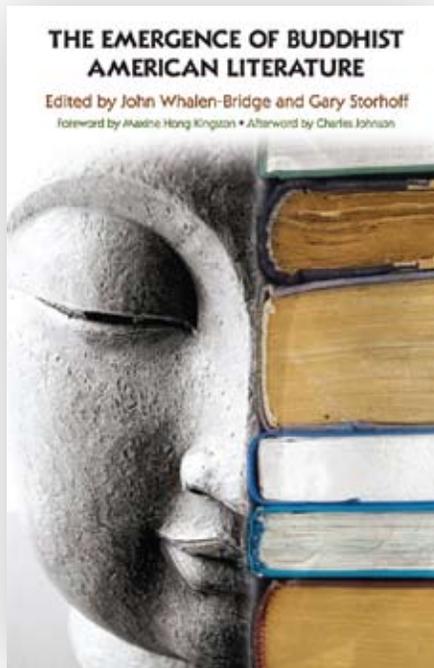
AMERICAN BUDDHISM'S LITERARY WAY

Dharma is everywhere, but sometimes it takes an adroit finger to point it out to us. This is an art, which is one of many possible translations for the Sanskrit term *upaya*, or skillful means. Consider the ox-herding sequence from twelfth-century China, equally a cultural masterpiece and a timeless tool for teaching dharma. As the Japanese saying goes, “The Buddha Way is no different than the Art Way.” Now comes a groundbreaking anthology of critical writings making vital new connections between buddhadharma and American literature, bringing the ox home.

Who is a Buddhist writer? What paradoxes and stereotypes might the Buddhist American writer encounter and transcend? How has Buddhism influenced American literature—and vice versa? The dozen or so contributors to *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* address such matters as these, which naturally resonate with readers and students of the Way, as well as academics.

Editors John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff have carved out a varied selection of well-crafted materials, using three broad themes to guide their arrangement. First, there's the recognition that there's no adoption of Buddhism by any culture without adaptation. Buddhism isn't some free-ranging abstraction floating around in the ether.

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THE EMERGENCE OF BUDDHIST AMERICAN LITERATURE

Edited by John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff

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Reviewed by Gary Gach

Second, the exchange is mutual. Just as American literature has been enriched by our encounter with Buddhism, so too has literature facilitated how Americans have perceived and received Buddhism. The literature of the Beats, for example, helped to spread the ideas taught by D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts to an even wider audience.

And, third, the scope of the American experience is by definition diverse, which is acknowledged here in a section highlighting Buddhist American literature by people of color. In the immigrant experience and with racial identity, “experience” and “identity” are ultimately provisional concepts, as with all things. But just as literature can inspire or embody inner practice, so too can it look outward to the individual's mindful engagement in the world, providing helpful insights along the way.

These three themes, quickly summed up

here, naturally aren't isolated and watertight. Yuemin He, for instance, touches on all of them as she looks deeply at Gary Snyder's translation in the late 1950s of a then relatively obscure Tang dynasty poet, Han Shan (Cold Mountain). She unfolds a thesis showing how his selection and rendering of poems provided “a mirror that gave Americans their own reflections,” rather different from how Chinese perceive him. Her analysis offers up critical tools that we as dharma practitioners could employ to avoid getting trapped in the mirror of orientalism, exoticizing an other to establish a flattering position for ourselves. Indeed, *Emergence* is admirably rich throughout in such unflinching, provocative relevancies. (Snyder also is featured later in the book in Tom Lavazzi's appreciation of the iconoclastic but vital intertwining of a poet's deep reading of ecology and anthropology, in tandem with Eastern sources.)

Emergence doesn't favor any one approach. Some contributions are sharply focused topics, such as Jane Falk's study of Zen in the poetry of Philip Whalen; Jane Augustine's essay on Vajrayana in the poetry of Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman; and Marcus Boon's discussion of the transgressive poetry of John Giorno. Hanh Nguyen and R.C. Lutz, on the other hand, collaborate to unlock multiple dimensions of karma layered in Lan Cao's under-recognized novel, *Monkey Bridge*.

Other pieces are free-form. Poet Michael Heller, for example, surveys Vajrayana, phenomenology, and the Objectivist poets as mutual influences on his own poetry. He maintains that awakening can occur equally through poetry or meditation—and without need of credentials.

Maxine Hong Kingston and Charles Johnson also speak experientially about their own work. In addition to the insights in her pithy foreword, Kingston is revealing in a 2004 interview with editor Whalen-Bridge, in which she speaks publicly for the first time about her Buddhist influences. Whalen-Bridge hails her first book, *The Woman Warrior* (1976), as “one of the four or five most influential books in postwar American writing. In a creative, genre-bending form, it achieves three kinds of liberation at once: women's liberation, Asian-American imaginative empowerment, and the insistence that personal utterance has a rightful place in the open world.” This reviewer would add that her two most recent works remain largely under-appreciated: *The Fifth Book of Peace* (which took her fifteen years to write), and her subsequent anthology, *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*.

The editors are no less laudatory about Charles Johnson, praising him as “the leading spokesperson for Buddhism and literature in America today.” In support of this, Gary Storhoff offers close readings of the many meditation resonances in Johnson's *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Stories*. In the title story,

for instance, Johnson imagines King, in 1954, raiding the icebox for a midnight snack before working on what would become one of his most famous sermons. And, lo!, he discovers the whole universe inside his refrigerator. Storhoff uncovers the more serious subtexts beneath this humorously treated revelation, and its deeply profound implications. Johnson's own fourteen-page afterword, also well worth the read, testifies to the ample range and plainspoken depth of his insight, and his graceful, freely associative, nuanced but incisive style.

The authors of these critical essays may keep office hours in English departments, but the scope of an English major has changed quite a bit since I was a lad. It now spans a Swiss Army knife of multiple disciplines: cultural studies, critical theory, comparative literature, literary translation studies, post colonialism, etc. Be prepared for challenging yet rewarding reading, expanding the horizons of the Humanities (what it means to be human) as well as American Buddhism.

The pages of *Emergence* contain but a handful of leaves from a vast continent, yet together they reflect the viable field of criticism emerging alongside Buddhist American literature. As literary critics help to open our eyes and minds and hearts, we may come to see them as a vital part of the dharma too. In so doing, we acknowledge what our best critics always do, in any field—assist us in renewing and sharpening our vision, so that we may learn to cultivate for ourselves the art of discernment, also known as deep seeing.

As further cause for celebration, this title is the first of a new series on Buddhism and American culture from SUNY Press. Judging from this initial entry, we can look forward to further illumination along the trail. And if you happen to see a big blue ox named Babe, you might ask him if Paul Bunyan has considered trying Manjushri's nondual sword of awakened wisdom in place of his axe. BD