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Choosing Buddhism: The Life Stories of Eight Canadians

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MAURO PERESSINI, *Choosing Buddhism: The Life Stories of Eight Canadians*. Ottawa: Canadian Museum of History and the University of Ottawa Press, 2016. XVIII, 446 pp. \$54.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-7766-2331-3

There can be little question that with this volume Peressini offers (part of)¹ a rich body of data which scholars with various interests might employ to their respective ends: Buddhism in Canada; spiritual autobiography; global Buddhism; what have you. All eight stories are interesting accounts of the journeys taken by Westerners/Canadians who landed at one time or another within a certain Buddhist tradition (or more than one tradition) in Canada/North America. Yet, given the author's desire to reach, not just a specialist audience, but a "wider" one as well, I find the curation of these eight life stories problematic in certain respects. On the one hand, it overwhelms them when they are intended, for the most part, to speak for themselves. On the other hand, it occludes or withholds more than it reveals or discloses by failing to penetrate a number of historical and doctrinal issues arising from the narratives. Thus, the following remarks are concerned primarily with the curator's own contributions; in due course, I will make specific reference to (some of) the life stories in order to draw attention to certain issues that bear upon the curator's project.

To begin with, the book is very long at some 450 pages. While this is hardly a matter to judge it by alone, subtracting the Introduction, odd potted Buddhism primer, light history of Buddhism in Canada, text boxes meant to elucidate more Buddhism, illustrations, and author's commen-

¹ Peressini indicates that he has collected a total of thirty-six such life stories in total thus far.

taries, as well as typical concluding material (glossary, bibliography, and index) the life stories themselves form less than half of the text. Of course, such ancillary material is to be expected if not welcomed; however, I find much of it to be a massive distraction from the substance of the narrators' relationship to Buddhism and the very historicity of that relationship.

Not only is there much repetition in this material (the introduction to Buddhism in Chapter 1 versus the text boxes) but the distillation of his sources (collegiate textbooks and reference works) result in the reiteration of numerous *idées reçues* ("We must not forget that the Buddha rose up against the caste system in India," 65; "Zen, for example, is one of the traditions where intellectual understanding, although not totally absent, remains relatively limited, especially compared to meditation," 37). Armed with a glossary of such Buddhist ideas, the curator often attempts to read many of the accounts through its lenses, as if the narrators hadn't purposefully constructed their lives in such terms.

Additionally, certain Buddhist concepts are given odd treatment: the *skandhas* are discussed—confusingly as usual—over a couple of pages in the introductory Buddhism chapter; yet, the *skandhas* and allied concepts are not revisited where they figure, for instance, into Jim Bedard's life story, and his "conversion" from (Sanbōkyōdan) Zen to Theravada. (Incidentally, the *skandhas/khandhas/aggregates* are not even indexed.) Particularly emblematic of the author's presentation of Buddhism and at large, is the introduction of *pratītyasamutpāda* (22): the author indicates that it must be set aside, even though it explains rebirth and will be explained in other terms—though those are never made clear—and yet in indicating that the concept is not to be discussed, he chooses to name all twelve of its links!

With the addition of the chapter on Buddhism in Canada, an image of Buddhism is completed which is in equal parts: naturalized—a ra-

tional technique for self-examination and self-realization; mystified—a path to the realization of Ultimate Reality which is beyond intellectual examination; normative—consisting of particular concepts, values and practices which define Buddhist identity; special—in its liberal conception of commitment; and consequently, a World Religion—a self-contained entity comparable to others (here Christianity almost exclusively).² Hence, rather than illuminate the narratives in terms of the Western invention of Buddhism (see Almond, 1988) the curator adopts such a Buddhism as normative.³ The absence of a critical stance here really calls into question a project constructed entirely out of the lives of “white Buddhists.”⁴

The curator’s commentaries on each of the narratives (some 30 pages in total) equally suffer from his heavy hand and his imagined Buddhism. They ask very little of the material, insofar as they are largely composed of much paraphrasing of what one has just read, as well as substantial quotation of the same. To the extent that they do offer interpretation, this is often little more than some light psychologizing. Occasionally though, they view the narratives in particular Buddhist terms. For example, the curator is tempted to view Zengetsu Myōkyō’s uniquely impersonal autobiography (Chapter 7) in terms of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and *karuṇā* (compassion). Here he’s attempting to discover the implied values of the narrator, given that so many others’ values are made explicit. Yet, in this particular case, the curator was offered much to work with, for Zengetsu Myōkyō, a woman who has much to say with respect

² Of the Chinese who came to Canada in the nineteenth century, “The Buddhist traditions they brought with them often had elements of Confucianism and Taoism” (53).

³ See Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁴ See Víctor Sōgen G. Hori, “How Do We Study Buddhism in Canada?,” in *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada*, ed. by J.S. Harding, V.S. Hori, and A. Soucy (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010).

to gender. This obfuscation through Buddhist terms—as well as the failure to acknowledge gender elsewhere—makes it clear that the curator is not particularly sensitive to some of the basic social facts that locate his narrators.

All of this is to say that while Peressini has done us a service by heeding Hori's call for the documentation of Buddhist lives in Canada (28-29), he has not been as sensitive to the issues of taxonomy that Hori and others have raised.⁵ I do not intend to revisit the question of "Asian/ethnic vs Western/convert" Buddhists, or expound further on the matter of gender (or race, or what have you) although these are very important. Rather, I wish to continue by pointing out particular ways in which the curator's modern phenomenological image of Buddhism loses sight of important sectarian distinctions revealed in the life stories.

In summary, insofar as the curator assumes a theory of autobiography according to which the reporters either might not be fully aware of the meaning of their reportage, and construct it in particular Buddhist terms, his analyses reiterate a certain model of Buddhist *spiritual* life. What they lack is a recognition of the particular *religious* shape that his subjects give to their life stories. Arguably, many of the stories take the shape of the life of the Buddha, with their reports of dissatisfaction in childhood, which were mitigated by some fleeting experiences of equanimity, presaging their completion in later practice (see, for example, the autobiographies of Ajahn Viradhammo, Bedard, Low, Kelsang Drenpa). Alternatively, some stories seem to represent Buddhified accounts of Christian salvation wherein lives of sin and aimless wandering were resolved through Buddhist practice (see Henderson). These interpretations are, admittedly, casual and speculative. However, a closer examination of the autobiographies of the students of Sanbōkyōdan Zen

⁵ Hori, "How Do We Study Buddhism."

included in the volume undoubtedly demonstrate that membership within this modern sect, which has evolved to satisfy the needs of its New World adherents, colours these reports. To conclude, I examine something of the history and doctrine of this sect which is ignored by Peressini's book.

The beatings will continue until morale improves

While the curator finds most of the value in the autobiographies in their very subjectivity, what I find particularly remarkable, which goes virtually unnoticed, is the history of the politics of and within particular Buddhist institutions (and these seem to be inseparable from North American developments in doctrine and practice). Several of the narrators were close to significant scandals or crises which changed the course of these institutions. My aim is not to dredge up any ugly past, but to acknowledge something of Peressini's motivation, that early Canadian converts to Buddhism are "getting older or already passed away" (5). Any honest future history of Buddhism in Canada will have to grapple with this material.

It will take little effort for readers to discover that several narrators had close relationships with the following controversial North American teachers: Tsultrim Palmo with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche; Zengetsu Myōkyō with Jōshū Sasaki Roshi; and Jim Bedard and Albert Low with Philip Kapleau. This is not the place to revisit the controversies around these teachers and their organizations, but scholars interested in these histories will want to study this material.

Controversy worth detailing a little more, concerns the Toronto Zen Centre (TZC), for two of the narrators offer accounts that are worth comparing. Taigen Henderson relates the fullest account of the series of crises at the TZC from the early eighties: the schism caused by Toni Packer's renunciation of "Buddhism;" the tenure of her replacement

Zenson Gifford, which ended when it was discovered that he was having sex with some of his students; and the rebuilding under Roshi Sunyana Graef, and the subsequent succession of Henderson himself. Jim Bedard relates a similar history, though without mention of any schism or scandal, but with other interesting variations in emphasis. Where the two accounts intersect we can see other problems at the TZC in which both narrators played a central role. Both report that after Graef took over the Centre, the use of the *kyōsaku*, the so-called “encouragement stick,” was eliminated. Both speak positively about receiving blows from the stick. Both also admit that, in the period before Graef arrived, they liberally applied it to other members of the Centre. And finally, both, somewhat grudgingly, acknowledge that many at the TZC really didn’t care for this encouragement at all.

It’s hard not to find all of this a bit cultish. Perhaps it is, but what is especially notable here is the extent to which these narratives—and the rest of the material about Zen—exclusively reflect Sanbōkyōdan Zen, and the many ways this modern sect diverges from historical tradition. Of course, this can’t be considered a real problem with respect to the narratives; however, I think that some attention needs to be paid to the ways in which their curator normativizes and naturalizes this Zen.

One need only consult Robert Sharf’s 1995 article, “Sanbōkyōdan: Zen and the Way of the New Religions” to realize that the Zen autobiographies of Bedard, Low, and Henderson (among the longest in the book) hew closely in form and content to a pattern encouraged by the sect since its inception. Sharf refers to numerous matters of doctrine and practice that are discussed by the narrators, all of which encourage us to heed his warning that “Kapleau’s Zen [*i.e.* Sanbōkyōdan] can be misleading if used uncritically as a model of traditional Zen monastic training” (419). I confine these remarks to a couple of related matters, which are prominent in the volume, and indeed, are misleading.

Kenshō came like a stranger in the night: Experience deemed Zen and other extraordinary claims

First, recall that Peressini repeats the *idée reçue* that “Zen, for example, is one of the traditions where intellectual understanding . . . remains relatively limited.” This he does many times throughout the book. Sharf argues that “the Sanbōkyōdan has taken the antinomian and iconoclastic rhetoric of Zen literally” (427). This anti-intellectualism informs Sanbōkyōdan kōan practice (see Sharf, 429) and more importantly, the Sanbōkyōdan emphasis on the experience of *kenshō*. According to Sharf, “Sanbōkyōdan insists that ‘true Zen’ is no more and no less than the experience of *kenshō*—a personal and profound realization of the essential non-duality of all phenomenal existence” (427), and yet, “while notions such as *satori* and *kenshō* may play an important role in the mythology and ideology of Zen, their role in the day-to-day training of [Japanese] Zen monks is not as central as some contemporary writings might lead one to believe” (418).

Two matters here are significant with respect to the evaluation of this book. First, the reports of *kenshō* experiences—ineffable Buddhist realizations—and other claims even more extraordinary go virtually unremarked upon by the curator. *Kenshō* in particular seems to be regarded as an incontestable product of Buddhist (Zen) practice. This is demonstrated in Appendix 1 by the inclusion of “Albert Low’s First *Kenshō* at the Rochester Zen Center,” the complete version of which appeared in the Center’s magazine *Zen Bow* (I return to such *autobiographical* fact below). To *Kenshō*, I add reports of telekinetic abilities by Jim Bedard (129), and the claims by Cormier (312) and Kelsang Drengpa (345) that Geshe Khenrab Gajam remained “in meditation” for three days after he ceased to breath and his heart had stopped. Again, I appreciate that Peressini attempts to apply as light a hand as possible to the material he has gath-

ered, but surely claims like these cannot be left to stand as matters of fact.

But an issue that bears more fundamentally on the book concerns the form of the autobiographies, particularly those of Bedard, Low, and Henderson. For these are not the subaltern, personal, varied, and freeform reports that Peressini thinks makes them particularly valuable (4-5). According to Sharf: "Upon attaining *kenshō* students are publicly lauded in the *jahai* ceremony,⁶ and encouraged to write a report of their experience for publication in *Kyōshō* [the magazine of Japanese Sanbōkyōdan]" (431); furthermore, "Sanbōkyōdan *kenshōki* frequently chronicle the suffering, personal tragedy, or feelings of loneliness and anomie that led to the student's interest in Zen" (442). The first point is demonstrated, not only by the autobiographies, but by the previous publications of these three narrators (not to mention, again, Appendix 1).⁷ The ways in which the latter point is expressed in the narratives of Bedard—the Christian heretic, Low, the disillusioned Scientologist, and Henderson, the drunkard, are too numerous to relate here.

Again, there can be no question that Peressini has offered up a body of data which scholars can make great use of. But the fact remains that it is not the bare personal elucidation of Buddhist life in Canada it is purported to be. Furthermore, whatever that Buddhism might be, it is conditioned by a context which has made it possible for Peressini to imagine a Buddhism, a Buddhism in Canada, as well as Buddhist experience,

⁶ A kind of Sanbōkyōdan commencement, which is "understood as an expression of thanks on behalf of the celebrants to all those who aided their practice." Robert Sharf, "Sanbōkyōdan: Zen and the Way of the New Religions," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22, no. 3-4 (1995): 430.

⁷ See the bibliography for the works of Bedard and Low. Taigen Henderson, for his part, maintains a public presence in social media and traditional sources such as the *Globe & Mail*.

and Buddhist experience in Canada. To the degree that these issues need to be interrogated, Peressini has presented a bit of interference, by the way he's limited the data he's chosen to present, and by the way he's structured it.