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Awakening My Heart: Essays, Articles and Interviews on the Buddhist Life

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ANDREA MILLER, *Awakening My Heart: Essays, Articles and Interviews on the Buddhist Life*. Lawrencetown Beach, Nova Scotia: Pottersfield Press, 2019. 224 pp. CAN $19.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1988286884

Andrea Miller is the deputy editor of a popular American Buddhist magazine known as *Lion's Roar.* In line with the magazine's overall commitment to diversity and inclusion, the content of the book is packed with a variety of perspectives that are not necessarily restricted to Buddhism. This is also reflected in the format of the book, which is an anthology of essays, personal articles, and her interviews with celebrities and renowned figures like Jeff Bridges, Bernie Glassman, Tina Turner, Pema Chödrön, and Thích Nhất Hạnh. While some readers may find this format disjointed, the beauty of this book is that it includes many different flavors to suit various tastes. While specialists in Buddhist Studies do not seem to be the intended audience, this could be a valuable source for case studies. Undergraduate students may find this resource to be more accessible and could benefit from looking for important themes that trace the changes and innovations in American Buddhism. Furthermore, the book can potentially attract various general audiences, such as Buddhist laymen, night-stand Buddhists, sympathizers, Dharma-hoppers, and generally those interested in Eastern spirituality.[1] Miller's writing is personal, eloquent, and down-to-earth. Miller does not claim to be enlightened nor an expert on Buddhism (12). However, she beautifully captures the intricacies of life and the dilemmas we face as human beings. Some significant themes arise

[1] For more information on the various categories, see Thomas A. Tweed, "Who is a Buddhist? Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures," in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia*, eds. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 17-33.

in the book; that love for nature and for others, extends to oneself; that loneliness is a thief of joy; that science and Buddhism are not necessarily in opposition; and that there is suffering, but that "there is joy, too" (13).

The first chapter is an interview with Jeff Bridges, the actor who plays "the Dude" in the cult classic, *The Big Lebowski*, and Bernie Glassman. An engineer and mathematician turned Zen master, Glassman established the Zen Peacemakers Order in 1994. Glassman describes his vision of hungry ghosts or *pretas*. He knew then that this was his calling to feed the hungry. Both Glassman and Bridges are committed to ending world hunger. Bridges, for example, has been involved in social activism for almost as long as his acting career. His affiliation with Zen goes beyond his acting persona in *The Big Lebowski.* He also meditates and incorporates a spiritual mindset while acting, and he is committed to social activism. Although Bridges is "chilled-out," Miller points out that there are many qualities about him that set him apart from "the Dude." As Miller notes, the character "merits his own, All-American religion," known as "Dudeism," and does not require getting grouped with the Buddhist tradition (22).

The next chapter covers the following three novelists: Susan Dunlap, Cary Groner, and Kim Stanley Robinson, and their inspiration by Buddhism. Dunlap finds that the Buddhist concept of *karma* is essential for her murder mystery books. She explains that it is the victim in these novels that has "done something to set in motion the wheel of karma in their lives" (30). Groner, on the other hand, is interested in the intersection of Buddhism and science. This theme is evident in his book, *Exiles,* but his interest in meditation also helps with his writing process. Furthermore, Robinson suggests that the concept of impermanence and writing are interconnected. It is in the present moment, he states, that the writer is writing and the reader is reading.

The third chapter, "The Buddha Was Here: On Pilgrimage in India," takes the reader on a journey with Miller as she writes about her travels to important Buddhist sites in India. In the first few pages of this article, Miller talks about an event where, as she was listening to Theravadin monks singing Pali chants, she suddenly realized that it didn't matter whether the bone fragments at the ceremony actually belonged to the Buddha, but that he lived; he had flesh and bones. Miller then informs the reader about the story of the Buddha's birth and of his enlightenment, when he finally sat under a Bodhi tree. The readers are brought back to Miller's pilgrimage, where she visits the Mahabodhi temple in Bodhgaya, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, where the direct descendent of the Bodhi tree resides. After staying in Bodhgaya, Miller visits Sarnath, the site of the Buddha's first sermon. In this excerpt, we, as readers, catch a glimpse of what it is like to walk the Buddha's steps via reading Miller's descriptions, and she allows her readers to learn about the Buddha's life in a way that is both inviting and accessible.

The next chapter is a Q&A with the renowned primatologist and anthropologist Jane Goodall. What stands out in this interview is Goodall's insight into spirituality. She says, "It's the opposite of being materialistic . . . I don't know if I can define spirituality—I'm not sure anybody really has—but it's something that you either feel or you don't. It's an awareness of life that's more than just the physical presence" (50). In some ways, this chapter follows the previous one wherein Goodall talks about the spiritual value of trees, which subsequently lead to the discussion of themes such as the importance of love, unity, and action in later chapters.

In her article, "The Wanderer: A profile of Mingyur Rinpoche," Miller weaves in narratives about famous wanderers, such as Milarepa, Dza Patrul Rinpoche, and Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, as she discusses the sudden disappearance of Mingyur Rinpoche. Much like the chapter on her

pilgrimage to India, Miller effectively goes back and forth between legendary narratives and her own experience. Miller also recognizes that renunciation in the current age is less frequent, but wandering yogis are necessary for keeping the tradition fresh, while the monastic tradition is crucial for maintaining continuity.

Miller's profile of Gina Sharpe provides a glimpse into the racial tensions that may subtly arise within Buddhist communities. Gina Sharpe, one of the co-founders of New York Insight, shares her experience as a Buddhist practitioner and a person of color. She remarks, "I didn't realize that when I'm not in a diverse place, there's a certain amount of unconscious tension that I carry" (64). As Ann Gleig argues, "diversity and inclusion work" has led to "the recovery of the sangha, or 'beloved community,' and the need to move from individual to the collective aspects of Buddhist practice."[2] These initiatives include the application of Buddhist principles to address "contemporary forms of Western suffering," such as racism in the United States.[3] Sharpe notes that the visibility of cultural pluralism at the Buddhist Center cannot only be attributed to New York City's diverse population. Sharpe states that it has taken her years to encourage discussions around racism. While many American Buddhists might not want to see racist tendencies within themselves or their group, Sharpe insists that one cannot ignore these issues. In Buddhist philosophy, there is the ultimate truth and the relative truth. The relative truth is that structural racism exists in the United States and that "Racism is a huge part of American suffering. If we're not attending to it, we're being ignorant" (73).

In "Right from the Beginning," the author introduces her readers to Raffi Cavoukian, a Canadian singer-lyricist and the founder of the Raffi

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[2] Ann Gleig, *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 175.

[3] Gleig, *American Dharma,* 175-176.

Foundation for Child Honouring. The “child is the most universal human experience,” and Cavoukian emphasizes the teaching of the Dalai Lama on the importance of the connection between a parent and their child (76). The next chapter is about her dog, Raffi. “Does My Dog Have Buddhanature? Exploring the Dharma of Dogs,” is quirky and appropriately placed in the collection. One of the most endearing qualities of this book is that Miller connects the abstract and theoretical, and brings both aspects to the real world. During her observations about her dog, she realizes that “*we all want love* [sic]” (79). She brings up a famous *koan* to explore the question that she poses in the title. She states that “if a dog’s dog-ness makes it too base for buddhanature, then surely our humanness makes us too base as well” (81).

The next two articles take readers back to popular culture, firstly through Michael Imperioli, an actor from *The Sopranos*. Unlike “the Dude,” who is a supposedly chill Zen guy, Imperioli’s character is a cruel and violent mobster. However, Imperioli is aided in real life by Buddhist teachings. By seeing that there are two sides of life, it enabled him as an actor to better understand the characters that he plays and their motivations. Furthermore, meditation has helped him to become more focused when he is acting and rehearsing. He has also implemented Buddhist virtues into his family life. Compassion, he believes, is the key to a fulfilled life.

The second artist is Tina Turner, the queen of Rock ‘n’ Roll. During their discussion about love, Turner exclaims that she found love in nature. True love, Turner states, “is something that transcends doubt, something that is not judgmental, something that is openhearted and accepting” (100). True love goes beyond what one perceives as romantic or sexual. Furthermore, Tina Turner's involvement in the music album, *Beyond*, speaks volumes about her perspective on prayer and spirituality. She explains that it does not matter what religion one practices or whether one prays in a church or meditates in a Buddhist shrine because, in the end,

whether one identifies as Baptist or Buddhist, they're different words for the same thing. After all, "God is within us and it doesn't matter what your religion is," states Turner (99). Turner's dialogue regarding her practice also highlights the various ways in which people identify with Buddhism. She states that although there may be days when she does not practice at all, Turner knows that she is a Buddhist.

Pema Chödrön is a distinguished Buddhist nun, teacher, and author who has touched the hearts of millions of people globally. In her next article, Miller discusses Chödrön's lesson about the "four qualities that are key to waking up" (103). According to Chödrön, these qualities are as follows: stabilizing one's mind, making friends with oneself, becoming free from the fixed mind, and taking care of one another. A deeper understanding of these qualities leads one to realize that humans are interrelated beings. Chödrön suggests that when we feel alone or sad, we should use these emotions as links to others who are also suffering. In this way, we can practice compassion for ourselves and everyone else.

The next excerpt talks about three artists, including Stanford Biggers, who does not consider himself Buddhist. However, he is inspired by the Buddhist teachings on the middle way. Following earlier discussion on racism and Buddhism, Biggers feels that he can relate to these teachings to learn how to "cope with both subtle and overt racism" (115). He explores the experiences of African Americans in his installations and incorporates musical instruments and b-boy dancing into his art. One of the most powerful images from his description is Biggers' installation called *Blossom*, where a tree seems to be growing out of a piano. "It is about lynching," he remarks, "the tree sees everything," both the good and the bad (116). As Miller writes, "it was also under a tree that Siddhartha obtained enlightenment. The tree transcends dualities" (116).

Tom Robbins, an American Novelist, is the subject of the next Q&A session. He claims to be inspired by Sufi saints, Zen rebels, and yogis of the "crazy wisdom" tradition (120). As he defines it,

> crazy wisdom is a philosophical worldview that recommends swimming against the tide, cheerfully seizing the short end of the stick, embracing insecurity, honoring paradox, courting the unexpected, celebrating the unfamiliar, shunning each and every orthodoxy, . . . and perhaps above all else, breaking taboos in order to destroy their power (120-121).

Consequently, Robbins is not bound within the confines of just one tradition. He tells Miller a Sufi story where a man asks the master about God's qualities. The master says, "God? God is a carrot" (122). The next time, the master responds, "God is not a carrot! God is a radish!" (123). The moral of the story is that God is indescribable and beyond words. When asked to define love, Robbins uses the same analogy and states, similarly to Turner, that there's another kind of love besides romantic love. This love is not tethered to another being nor external events.

The next article familiarizes readers with Miller's affiliation with birdwatching. She states, "birding is a form of meditation," and that it reminds her of what Thích Nhất Hạnh calls "a bell of mindfulness" (128). Miller then examines the presence of birds and their symbolic meanings in different Buddhist literature. Near the end of this article, Miller realizes that the first bird that sparked her interest in birdwatching was a European Starling. Even though the author was disappointed by this revelation, she admits that the truth is that they still have the potential to wake her up.

A profile of Matthieu Ricard further explores the relationship between science and Buddhism. Before becoming a Buddhist monk, Ricard, who is French born, earned his doctorate in molecular biology. As many figures have loosely mentioned in the previous chapters, Ricard "never found [himself] in contradiction with the scientific spirit" (138). In 2000, Ricard became involved in research projects analyzing the effects of meditation. Altruism, Ricard insists, is the key to happiness, and it is a skill that people need to cultivate. He suggests that this is a win-win situation because not only do we thrive, we also benefit those around us.

Love, altruism, and compassion are qualities that emerge in "Be Love Now," where Miller interviewed the great Ram Dass, an American spiritual teacher and psychologist. During this Q&A, Dass describes the Hindu *bhakti yoga*, loosely defined as the yoga of the heart or the path of love. This chapter briefly touches on various significant topics, including faith and belief, and the effects of the movements in the 60s and 70s today. For instance, Dass discusses the boomer/hippie legacy and its role in other significant movements for environmental rights, gender rights, and the sexual freedom movement. He also briefly talks about the appropriation of yoga into a "body beautiful" exercise, which neglects to recognize asana as "a conversation with god" (147).

In "Instructions for the Home Cook: Dogen & My Galley Kitchen," the author introduces her audience to Dogen's *Instructions for the Cook*. She emphasizes that this is not merely a cookbook but "a set of instructions for how to live" (148). The chapter beautifully weaves the cookbook's instructions with Miller's musings as a tired mother preparing a meal for her family. One of the many strengths of the book is its relatability to everyday life. Miller shows an awareness of the struggles many parents face while raising their children, and she admits that it may not be possible to focus on cooking while dealing with other distractions. An important in-

sight in this chapter is her realization that while she appreciates the quality of ingredients she uses to cook, she needs to work on the "ingredients of [her] life," which include managing her stress and the lack of time (151).

"Love – It's What Really Makes Us Happy: A Profile of Robert Waldinger" is a great addition to the discourse on science and religion, although it does not follow the previous chapter immediately. This profile talks about Waldinger, a clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard University who conducted one of the longest-running studies of adults. Although there are a few issues with the study, such as a lack of racial diversity that would be hard to rectify later in the longitudinal study, Waldinger provides valuable insights about what keeps us healthy and happy. There are three key points that Waldinger makes, as follows: 1) "loneliness is fatal," 2) "it's the quality of your relationships that counts," and 3) "good relationships are good for your brain" (155-157). One of the most powerful tools for improving our relationships, according to Waldinger, is meditation. As the author has shown in her articles and interviews, when we understand ourselves, we can understand others better.

The next section features psychiatrist and author Robert Jay Lifton, a scholar who studies genocide, totalitarianism, and other atrocities. He researches these subjects as an activist and "as an act of hope" (160). The author learns that Lifton admired the ethics of anti-war and anti-nuclear Catholics, Protestants, and Jews with whom he worked. He found commonality between them and himself, as they all worked to prevent destruction and suffering. As a result, his research is secular and spiritual. The inclusion of this chapter reveals the breadth of the author's overall work and interest that transcends traditional Buddhist works, and which is important for understanding even the worst parts of human nature.

Her chapter, "Deer to the Heart: Why the Deer Listened to the Buddha" is similar as she discusses her travel to Nara, Japan. Here, she tells the story of Nigrodha and Sakha. She wonders why deer had listened to the Buddha's teachings and states, "Deer know suffering intimately and so perhaps it was that knowledge that drew them to listen when the Buddha taught" (168). Finally, she examines herself as the hurting deer, the hunter fueled by his ignorance, and as a little girl who felt no connection to her dad's hunting.

"Feminine Principal: Trudy Goodman, Pat Enkyo O'Hara, and Palden Drolma – Three Women Buddhist Teachers," profiles three female teachers and gets to the heart of the gendered hierarchy in Buddhist communities. Trudy Goodman is the founder and guiding teacher of InsightLA, which offers weekend retreats, daily sitting groups, and numerous Buddhist and mindfulness classes. Goodman believes in making meditation practice available to people with busy lives. Although Goodman was grateful for her male teachers, she did not feel fully connected to their teachings. Her male teachers did not address issues related to the domestic sphere, like relationships, family, and work-life balance. Furthermore, Goodman found teachings about sexuality and desire to be quite problematic. In many cases, women were portrayed as sinful or impure as a way to help monks maintain their celibacy. Goodman believes that sexuality and relationships should be incorporated into dharma practice. O'Hara, the abbot of the Village Zendo located in Manhattan, felt that many Buddhist centers were too hierarchical and restricted. In addition to addressing the gendering of the sangha, O'Hara works with other marginalized groups, including senior citizens and kids who are battling addiction. Finally, Drolma differentiates between highly realized rinpoches, unbound by hierarchical, traditional practices, and the "middle management lamas" (181). Like Sharpe's examination of the universal and relative truths, Drolma insists that as long as we are on "the ground level - there *are* women and there *are* men [sic]" (181).

The Q&A with Simon Critchley is short and sweet. He discusses his book, *The Book of Dead Philosophers*, and various perspectives on death. For a good death, “Dignity is key,” he states (183). He suggests that most of all, and ironically so, our (western) culture, particularly in the United States, is in denial of death. This is particularly interesting because the culture is predominantly Christian, and the concept of longevity is not prominent in this tradition. He also provides an anecdote about the Daoist philosopher Chuang Tzu’s reaction to his wife’s death. He laughed because he felt that his wife had moved on without him. The Confucians, alarmed by this behavior, interpreted his reaction as being disrespectful. He compares comedy to philosophy, as they both have the potential to free us from our prejudices. Although the content in this excerpt does not directly link to Buddhist teachings, it’s an important piece to understand the various ways in which people deal with mortality and the concept of impermanence.

The final three chapters of the book chronicle the three retreats that the author attended with Thích Nhất Hạnh, known as Thầy (teacher) by his disciples. The first part of this series describes the retreat known as “Awakening the Heart Retreat,” held in Vancouver at the University of British Columbia in 2017. Sister Chan Khong, who has worked with Thầy for over five decades, led the first meditation where participants practiced “touching the earth” and meditated on three roots inherent among all beings, namely “blood (or genetic) ancestors, environment (or land) ancestors, and spiritual ancestors” (188). These ancestors are sources of strength, but they can also plant seeds of pain. In this chapter, the author opens up to readers about her own suffering, as she talks about her relationship with her father. The painful memory of her father passing away is heartbreaking, as she expresses her opinion that despite Sister Chan Khong’s explanation that “we are the continuation of our father and our mother,” she struggled to see herself as a continuation of her father (191).

However, she comes to a realization that "we all inter-are" as she meditates on Thích Nhất Hạnh's concept of *interbeing,* "which states that all phenomena arise together in a mutually interdependent web of cause and effect" (195). Like many others, she recognizes that her father was also wounded and was only trying to fill a void by succumbing to his desires. She vows to heal her wounds, and in turn, heal her father's wounds, and to end this cycle at once.

The next retreat takes place at Plum Village, located in Southwestern France. Following the last lesson on interbeing from the previous retreat, Thích Nhất Hạnh or Thầy, states that mindfulness is the tool with which "you can touch the nature of inter-being" (198). As the various scholars, artists, celebrities, and religious figures have also stated throughout the book, Thầy suggests that we should consider our happiness as others' happiness and their sorrow as our sorrow. A human being, he remarks, "cannot be by herself alone. She has to inter-be with everything else in the cosmos" (200). This philosophy extends to dualities, like good and evil, and suffering and happiness. Since mindfulness is an essential part of this practice, Thầy has created the Five Mindfulness Trainings, which are free of any dogma or religious references, and are available to everybody, whether they are Buddhists or not. As Miller observes, Thích Nhất Hạnh "has a gift for presenting Buddhist teachings in very human, very personal terms" (195). This is also true for Miller's writing as she describes her personal insights and discoveries in her writing. Near the end of the article, Miller narrates the loss of a watch that she wanted to take home as a memory of her time in Plum Village, and that is when she concluded that "if you are in the present moment, you are in Plum Village," regardless of place and time (210-211).

The last piece in this anthology details the author's third retreat with Thích Nhất Hạnh. This retreat takes place at the Blue Cliff Monastery in Pine Bush, New York. In this chapter, Thích Nhất Hạnh emphasizes the

importance of community and advises that without it, we cannot accomplish much. He details his experiences during the Vietnam war when he found himself cut off from his sangha. Currently, his community amasses tens of thousands of practitioners around the world. As the author looks around, she observes that the retreatants were divided into dharma families. Family, of course, is an essential part of the community, and Thầy recommends that every family should have a bell to bring awareness back to oneself, to focus on breathing in and breathing out. Moreover, mindfulness practice and a sense of belonging to a community can help bring peace and harmony to others. Although Thầy agrees with Martin Luther King Jr. about the significance of community, and he admires King's fight for civil rights, he believes that more must be done. Finally, the author remarks that together, perhaps we can overcome the seemingly endless suffering of this world.

Andrea Miller's writing is raw and refreshingly honest. The diverse nature of the book lends itself to attracting all sorts of readers. For the general audience, there may be sections that require more explanation. However, this can further encourage general non-academic readers to learn more about Buddhist principles and teachings. Miller's rendition of lived experiences is humble, but not without its research. She includes primary sources, significant Buddhist concepts, and well-known figures and symbols from Buddhist and other East Asian texts. The following are relevant topics in American Buddhist Studies covered in this book: pop culture, racism, gender, the relationship between science and religion, social activism, and mindfulness. This is especially effective for understanding the various colors of American Buddhism, and students of Buddhist Studies may find value in this text's ability to make the abstract more relatable. *Awakening my Heart: Essays, Articles and Interviews on the Buddhist Life* serves as an accessible and eclectic collection of stories, guidance, and insights into the Buddhist world and beyond.

Notes on the Contributor

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