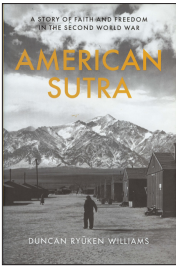


REVIEWS



Duncan Ryūken Williams, *American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War*

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. 400 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95. ISBN 9780674986534.

BUDDHISM BECAME a world religion by adapting to different cultures and times as it moved from India across Asia to Japan, Hawai‘i, and the West. Sometimes Buddhists made changes to its inner core by taking advantage of its liberal willingness to keep the canon open to new sutras purporting to be sermons of the Buddha, himself the subject of reformulations. Mahāyāna Buddhists created innovative theisms, and, in Japan, reformers added some radical interpretations in making new forms of Buddhism. More often, Buddhists adapted by developing new ways of *outward* expressions of an *inner* core doctrinally left largely intact.

In *American Sutra*, Duncan Williams tells the story of “how a new form of Buddhism was forged in the crucible of war—in incarceration camps, under martial law in the Hawaiian islands, and on the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific theater” (4–5). Since a “sutra is a Buddhist scripture, a text that contains Buddhism’s most essential teachings” (5), the title of this book suggests that the new Buddhism was defined by new sutras written in America, just as Mahāyāna scriptures had been written long after the historical Buddha’s life and death. Sutras define and redefine the inner core of teachings, and as such, we might expect that a new form of Buddhism would have arisen from a new American sutra written in the United States.

The prologue opens with a suggested American sutra. Nyogen Senzaki’s “Parting” begins with the classic phrase found at the beginning of most sutras: “Thus have I heard.” What follows, however, is not a statement of teachings, but a plaintive poem expressing Senzaki’s commitment to continue serving the

Japanese who were ordered from their homes into internment camps (1). The epilogue closes the book with another Senzaki poem identifying a “scripture” that allowed Buddhists to forge “a new American Buddhism” out of their war-time experience, but that holy writ was not a Buddhist sutra proper but the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing religious freedom making it possible for people to be “fully Buddhist and fully American” (258).

Real Buddhist sutras figure poignantly in the story of how Japanese tried to protect and preserve Buddhist teachings. Nobuichi Kimura buried his bound edition of Buddhist scriptures handed down through generations of his family, hoping to retrieve them later (12). In 1956, a heavy equipment operator working in the abandoned cemetery at Heart Mountain unearthed a large metal drum containing stones, each of which was inscribed with a Chinese character from the *Lotus Sutra* (255–57). These were all ancient Buddhist sutras that defined the inner core of traditional forms of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism transported to but not born in America.

The persistence of traditional Buddhism manifested itself in other ways. Hisa Aoki, wife of a Higashi Honganji minister, noted in her diary that her incarcerated husband asked her to send books written by the eighteenth-century Zen Master Hakuin, and, after returning home from visiting him, she and her daughters chanted the *Shoshinge*, a basic Honganji ritual text (90). In Camp Livingston, Rev. Seytsū Takahashi drew sustenance from traditional Shingon practices and teachings (95). Williams notes that “this act of reiterating the teachings of Buddha, however hostile the situation, was a way to maintain one’s tradition and simultaneously to inscribe one’s faith onto a new landscape” (96). A few people like Charles Kikuchi argued that the Obon ceremony and Buddhism in general were impediments to the Americanization of the community (105), but most Japanese and Japanese American Buddhists embraced traditional Buddhism as an asset, not an obstacle, in helping them endure injustice and become good Americans. Nyogen Senzaki “viewed the incarceration experience as the unfolding of a Buddhist scripture” (107), presumably a new account for America, but he still practiced Zen meditation, recited old sutras, and studied sacred Buddhist texts (113–14). Tradition prevailed.

Attempts to form a single Buddhist federation mostly failed because people refused to give up their sectarian allegiances (130–32). The inner core remained unchanged, and like a trusty anchor dropped in stormy seas, it tethered Buddhists to traditions, giving them strength to weather exceedingly difficult times. Through an impressive richness of personal accounts collected through research over seventeen years, Williams shows how Japanese and Japanese Americans relied on their faith to endure extreme prejudice, unjust incarceration, loss of personal property, and the horrors of the battlefields in Europe and the Pacific.

The saga of Richard Sakakida, an intelligence agent serving in the Philippines, is flat-out heroic and deserves to be made into a movie.

The fact that there was no American sutra as scripture defining a new set of essentials makes Williams's book a powerful story about how religious continuity enabled people to deal with one of the worst travesties of justice in American history. Far from needing a new set of teachings, Buddhists relied on readily available sectarian traditions. This is not to say that there was no innovation, but new elaborations took place in the outward expressions of a tenacious inner core. It is in this area of cultural manifestations that the book can lay claim to the appearances of a "new American Buddhism," and in this context, the word "sutra" takes on a different meaning. In addition to scripture, "sutra" can more generally be taken to mean story, in this case, the story of Buddhism in the wartime experiences of Japanese and Japanese Americans. As a story of how the Buddhist core could be dressed in various Americanisms, there is an eloquent American sutra described in *American Sutra*.

Whereas Buddhist temples and activities were significantly curtailed in Hawai'i, the War Relocation Administration (WRA) allowed internees to practice their faith more freely in the U.S. mainland camps. It is in this area that Williams's argument about an emerging American Buddhism is best seen. Sangha groups ran Buddhist Sunday schools, sponsored a wide variety of sporting events, hosted social dances, organized pageants, trained choirs to sing Buddhist hymns such as *Onward Buddhist Soldiers*, experimented with pan-sectarian services, published liturgical books for Sunday services in English, and reached out to Christian congregations. In 1943, the Nishi Honganji officially changed their name from the Buddhist Mission of North America to the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA), which is still in use today. More significantly, the BCA made a clean break from the sect's Kyoto headquarters, established a *nisei* board of directors, and declared English as its official language. Although older *issei* ministers and members opposed these changes, WRA officials encouraged these efforts to redress Buddhism to look more like an American religion.

Lest readers get the impression that these Americanized developments were born during the war years, it should be mentioned, as Williams does in several cases, that sports programs, pageants, choirs, English hymns, liturgical books, and Sunday schools were popular, at least among *nisei* members, in the prewar period. Williams also tells the oft forgotten stories of the so-called white Buddhists like Julius Goldwater, Sunya Pratt, and Ernest Hunt and the contributions they made to the Americanization of Buddhism. Ernest Hunt and his wife Dorothy, for example, published the *Vade Mecum* in 1924, which included an order of service and original compositions of hymns, a good number of which are still sung today in Japanese American temples of various sectarian orientations. Hunt and his disciple Goldwater advocated the development of a nonsectarian

Buddhism, but they never succeeded in persuading Japanese American Buddhists to trade in their sectarian attachments. Here again can be seen the persistence of tradition.

Duncan Williams has performed the literary feat of telling a very large story through a lens sharply focused on Buddhism. There are many other books about the wartime experiences of Japanese Americans, but none have the number and details of the stories Williams tells. Too many academic books lack flesh and blood, but *American Sutra* is an exceptional read. He covers the complex range of tensions between those who were pro-American, pro-Japanese, and confusing mixtures of both. By drawing on extensive documentary research and field interviews, Williams cuts through the complexities with the narrative truth of real-life stories.

This new book already has established a fast track record. It is one of those rare instant classics, widely recognized as a canonical text in the literature of the Japanese incarceration experience and Buddhism in America. In his promotional tour of the book, Williams has been forthright in pointing out our government's current folly of oppressing immigrants, denigrating their religions, and locking them up in camps, and he thereby demonstrates once again the relevance of our historical past to our political present. An ordained Zen priest, Williams was a leader of a wide range of American Buddhists recently gathered at Ft. Sill in Oklahoma, a former detention camp for Japanese internees, to protest the Trump administration's plans to house migrant children there. As part of their strategy, the protesters presented thousands of peace-making paper cranes, some folded with squares cut from the dust jacket of *American Sutra*. Clearly the book has caught the attention and imagination of concerned Buddhists. The administration canceled its plans to incarcerate children at Ft. Sill, and in the light of this outcome, we might add another definition to the term *sutra*, that of truth, especially of the kind spoken to power.

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