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An American Buddhist Life:
Memoirs of a Modern Dharma Pioneer

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CHARLES S. PREBISH, *An American Buddhist Life: Memoirs of a Modern Dharma Pioneer*. Richmond Hill, Ontario: The Sumeru Press Inc., 2011. 264 pp. CAN \$22.95 (pb) ISBN 978-1-89655-909-4

Charles Prebish recounts hugging Buddha and saying “you know, pal, people would react better if I said I was gay than if I said I was Buddhist” (37). The recipient of the hug is Prebish’s pet beagle named Buddha. The context is the hostile reception that Prebish regularly encountered when self-identifying as a Buddhist while also teaching courses on Buddhism. One of his neighbours in Utah, for example, walked away when he learned that Prebish was “one of *them*,” hardly speaking to Prebish over the next four years (159). Prebish had moved to Utah upon his appointment to the Charles Redd Endowed Chair in Religious Studies at Utah State University. One could view this move as a crowning achievement after serving thirty-five years in the Department of Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University. However, it carried with it demeaning treatment by both Mormons and Buddhists; both seemingly threatened by his self-identification as a Buddhist. The “LDS mentality” at Utah State University censored a Buddhist convert from Mormonism, who was invited to speak at the Religious Studies Club on campus, while the Cache Valley Sangha gossiped about Prebish not being “a *real* Buddhist” (163). Prebish’s Buddhism was viewed as suspect—to insiders, he was a “researcher” and to outsiders, he had “an agenda.”

Prebish’s book is a rich resource for readers interested in American Buddhism and Buddhist Studies. Canadian scholars of Buddhism will find several references to Canada, such as a brief focus on the Buddhist population of Toronto and the Sumeru Directory of Buddhist Organiza-

tions in Canada. Prebish is clear that this book is “not a scholarly work” (12). After four decades of researching Buddhism in North America, Prebish takes a departure from academic publications to write a narrative of his journey as a scholar-practitioner. The book features a testimonial approach and provides the reader with a unique view into the life of an academic negotiating his personal practice of Buddhism within the matrix of university life. Prebish narrates accounts of his conversion, his life as a pre-dental student at Western Reserve University, his marriage to Susan, his children, his dog, and his interactions with colleagues, Buddhist teachers, students, and neighbours.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section (chapters 1-7) features memoirs, and includes photographs of university colleagues and *roshis*. Surprisingly the gallery does not feature the life moments that are showcased in the book, as there are no pictures of his wife and family, or Buddha the beagle. The second section (chapters 8-9) focuses on the discipline of Buddhist Studies, including a chapter on the state of North American Buddhist Studies and a chapter emphasizing changes in American Buddhism. In this section, Prebish provides insightful discussion of typological shifts away from the twofold division of Asian/ethnic Buddhism and Western/convert Buddhism, a lengthy discussion of the “scholar-practitioner,” and engages recent trends in Buddhist Theology, Feminist Buddhist Studies, and Buddhism and Technology.

At various points Prebish describes interactions with students. When one of his students asked him what he thought of the American Zen master Philip Kapleau, Prebish recalls his initial response was to provide an academic assessment of Kapleau’s book *The Three Pillars of Zen*, but the student interrupted him—the student was not interested in Prebish’s academic assessment, but rather in his opinion of Kapleau as a *roshi* (40). This episode provides a glimpse into the challenging task of

discussing Buddhism while being both an academic and a practitioner. In another instance, he learns from a student how some Buddhist families regard the five precepts as impossible to maintain “all at once” (71), suggesting that following one precept per day is reasonable. For Prebish, this attitude towards the precepts flagged the “moral intent lacking in many convert communities” (71), and it was representative of the moral erosion in Buddhism that included liberal use of alcohol, careless use of speech, and permissive sexual behaviour. Near the end of the book, Prebish appears to counter this self-indulgent practice with the fourteen principles of Thich Nhat Hanh’s “engaged Buddhism,” which promotes truthful speech and compassion, while also curbing sensual pleasure and profit-seeking (239-241).

Prebish describes his work with the American Academy of Religion (AAR) as one of his most successful endeavors. In fact, this area of his life and work clearly demonstrates the magnitude of his “pioneer status,” suggested in the title of his book. Prebish describes himself as the “prime mover” (74) who established a new unit in Buddhist Studies at the AAR, a unit that went on to become the Buddhism Section, which he co-chaired. Prebish goes on to describe presentations of the Buddhism Section at the AAR throughout the book. For example, Prebish valued the AAR as a place to present the results of his empirical study of the Buddhist Studies community in North America. He built on this work and eventually published the results in *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (University of California Press, 1999). According to Prebish, the Buddhism Section is now “one of the most influential units in the AAR” (193).

Although Prebish closes the work with the song lyric “I ain’t marching anymore” as both a tribute to American folk singer Phil Ochs and as an effort to capture the spirit of his own journey in America, there is little mention of music in the book. While Prebish refers earlier

to “how some of the recent trends in American folk music captured much of the essence of Buddhism,” (143) the work does not follow up with examples or an explanation to demonstrate his view. What is the essence of Buddhism, who are the American artists that write about it in their music, and which songs does he have in mind? Conspicuous by its absence in Prebish’s discussion of Buddhism’s adaptation to American culture is the influence of Christian hymnody in Jodo Shinshu churches. Prebish uses the words ‘church’ and ‘bishop’ in the context of Jōdo Shinshū congregations but the work does not describe the manner in which Christian titles and polity were embraced in American Buddhism, nor how American Buddhists retain the nomenclature, while Canadian churches have more recently shifted back to adopting the terms ‘temple’ and ‘sensei’. Prebish does clarify that American Buddhism “should not blindly be assumed to be identical with Canadian or Mexican Buddhism” (249).

Throughout his memoirs, Prebish uses the phrase “the *sangha* of one” to describe his lived Buddhism. Despite his efforts, Prebish never found a *sangha* (community) that accepted his hybrid identity as a scholar-practitioner. He found kindred spirits at the AAR, but an annual conference does not a *sangha* make. Instead, Prebish finds the greatest meaning in meditating alone. He describes meditation from the mundane four hours per day to the terrifying instant where he is transported to an ocean and carried by the waves over the horizon to a type of death, leaving him full of sweat and hyperventilating (26). Fifty years since his conversion, Prebish appears less interested in measuring his Buddhism by meditation, which is somewhat countercultural to what he describes as an American interest in quantity over quality (230). Now in his retirement years, Prebish favours integrating Buddhist ideals into the moments that create memoirs, and spending less time on a pillow.