

# Book reviews

## **Teachings of a Buddhist Monk**

Ajahn Sumedho

Buddhist Publishing Group, Devon, England, 1990

*Reviewed by Mu Soeng Sunim*

This small book, a collection of talks by the well-known Western Buddhist monk Ajahn Sumedho, is a precious gem. Ajahn Sumedho is the abbot of the Amravati Buddhist Centre in England, which he established in 1977 after ten years of training in Thailand under the tutelage of Ajahn Chah, the great Buddhist meditation master. Amravati Centre has become perhaps the most authentic place in the West for Westerners to have a taste of Buddhist monastic life of the Theravada tradition. Ajahn Sumedho's tireless efforts and clear vision made this training facility a reality, and this book reacquaints us with that effort and vision.

A bonus for the reader of this book is a wonderful foreword by Jack Kornfield. Kornfield says of Ajahn Sumedho, "As a teacher, he brings a spontaneity, wonderful humor and warmth, a terrible, self-revealing honesty, and a clear and uncompromising wisdom." The collection of talks in this book confirm this assessment. There's an intimacy, an inviting warmth to these talks, and at some point Ajahn Sumedho's monastic life and his vision of the Buddha-dharma blend to give us a glimpse into how Buddha's teachings can find roots in the West. It's not an easy book to quote from; any such attempt would do less than justice to the overall quality of the book. A reader would be well advised to let Ajahn Sumedho's wisdom wash over him or her gently.

## **Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry**

Edited by Kent Johnson and Craig Paulenich, with an introduction by Gary Snyder  
Shambhala Publications, 1991

*Reviewed by Judy Roitman*

There's a lot of stuff in here — 45 poets, which, as the editors admit, doesn't begin to scratch the surface of American-poetry-influenced-by-Buddhism. Most of the people you'd expect to see are here, such as Cage, di

Prima, Ginsberg, Snyder, Waldman, Whalen. But also there are many poets not so well-known, and some well-known poets whose affinities with Buddhism are not widely advertised (not necessarily hidden, just not a big part of their public persona).

What is "Buddhism in contemporary American poetry?" Well, just about anything you want, as it turns out. This volume works well as a general introduction to late twentieth century American poetry: from standard first-person lyrics to Chinese-influenced clarity to the formal experiments of Cage and MacLow to the post-modern urgencies of Scalapino to the largeness and largess of Whalen and Ginsberg. There are short lines and long lines, heightened rhetoric and the rhythms of natural speech. There are short poems, long lists, nature, cities, relationships, sex, life and death (of course), and even some very explicit poems about practice (a hard genre to pull off). Not much explicitly political poetry, and maybe more haiku-type poetry than a random sample of literary magazines would produce. Other than that, a good representation of what's going on in American poetry right now.

So what makes it Buddhist? It is a kind of skewing of attention: attention to attention, attention to the mind which pays attention, and attention to whether the mind which pays attention is any different from whatever it is paying attention to. And there are terrific little essays in which the poets get a chance to say whatever they want to say about Buddhism in their life/poetry/world. Not everyone gets one, and not everyone who could have had one chose to have one, but there are enough of them to give a good sense of the richness, variety, and depth of American Buddhist practice and the influence of Buddhist thought even on those who don't practice.

The standard thing to do at this point is to give a couple of quotes, a sense of the book. But no short selection of quotes could do justice to the variety here. So, wish-I'd-been student of Cage that I am, I'll just flip it open and — what luck! we're looking at Jackson MacLow, one of the great contemplators of language/mind/world in contemporary poetry. Here is what he's saying:

"THE MOSSES TURN TOWARD THE LIGHT.  
THE FLOWERS TURN TOWARD THE LIGHT.  
THE TREES TURN TOWARD THE LIGHT."

Exactly. ☉