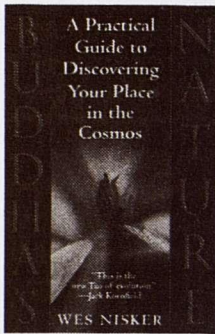
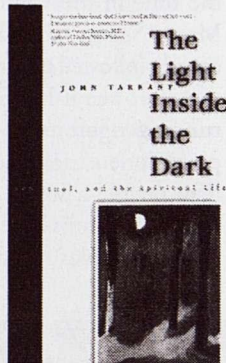


Review: Tony Somlai
Original Root Zen Center



*Buddha's Nature:
A Practical Guide to Discovering
Your Place in Cosmos*
Wes Nisker
Bantam Books, 2000



*Light Inside the Dark:
Zen, Soul, and the Spiritual Life*
John Tarrant
Harper Collins, 1999

Over the last 2500 years Buddhist history reveals innovative constructions of relationships between the Buddha's teachings and the culture of each country it visits. This Buddhist "sociology of religion" is filled with examples of how the "new" belief affected societal aspirations, values, and ideology. For example our school, the Kwan Um School of Zen, has the strong flavor of the Korean people and influences as brought by our founder Zen Master Seung Sahn. To this day, many Korean flavors (like kim chee!) have a positive valuation in defining the identity of our practice.

Unlike our Korean spiritual parents, we Western students are in the infancy of this process of Buddhist acculturation. Two important points need to be addressed as we look at Buddhist teaching through "American" eyes. First, the power of our technological culture translated Buddhist teaching at an incredibly rapid pace. Where Buddhist teaching may have taken centuries to move from one region to the next, in our culture (with the internet, publishing, radio and TV) we are looking at much shorter times. Second, we Americans cannot discuss Buddhism without a focus on contemporary social life. The American field, in which Buddhism is being planted, is deeply entrenched with a strong belief in the power of the social sciences. Thomas Szasz, the eminent American psychologist, once suggested that psychology had become the religion of America and psychologists were now the high priests.

The Light Inside the Dark and *Buddha's Nature* are two of the current genre of books attempting to marry Buddhist teachings with American social life and sciences.

In *The Light Inside the Dark*, John Tarrant brings the Asian tradition of inquiry and experience to the Western method of exploring the life of feeling, thought, and stories. Wes Nisker in *Buddha's Nature* draws on several of the social sciences (neuroscience, evolutionary biology, and psychology). He views the Buddha as a spiritual scientist of the self.

In *Buddha's Nature*, Nisker draws upon the works of other people who have tried to bring science and meditation practice together. He finds that the "modern self lives in a 'culture of narcissism,' with very little sense of being part of either a grand cosmic design, the unfolding processes of nature, or even a communal or historical destiny." Nisker finds the Buddha's Third Noble Truth a significant biological insight where "nature has given us the ability to train our minds to bring us new levels of satisfaction and freedom." The remainder of his book follows four foundations of mindfulness (body and breath, first impression, states of mind, and thinking) as a guide to help "fully realize our human condition and develop its potential."

Perhaps the most interesting insight provided by Nisker is his interpretation of how the Buddha's teaching on the law of karma works in our lives and is related to our current understanding of evolution. He finds that our ignorance of the twelve links of "dependent co-arising" are the root cause of human suffering. For Nisker, the evolutionary process offers a new idea of reincarnation in that the human condition can be seen as "our shared incarnation, part of our common 'evolutionary karma.'" Through the study of life reincarnating "form after form" Nisker believes that we can clearly see the forces that have come together to create this temporary life.

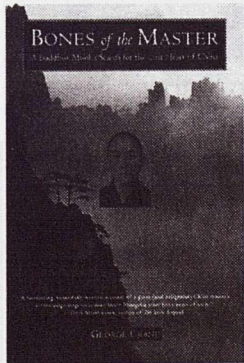
While investigating similar ideas to Nisker, Tarrant in *The Light Inside the Dark* relies more heavily on the field of psychology to provide insights into Buddhist teaching. He finds that human existence at times loses "the upper levels of consciousness," sinking into personal grief. He finds that the inward and outer voyages have a heroic aspect to them in which they both make new connections that help achieve many ends. He begins this journey into "a life of awareness" at the "moment of helplessness." For Tarrant, when life goes well there is not much need to change things. However, the belief in a good life falls apart and breaks away whenever a personal crisis appears. Tarrant believes that this crisis is the "gift" that begins a new life.

Tarrant investigates the mysterious, that place where nothing is said directly. Yet he believes that this is a place where everyday, "we move into it and through it and are sustained by its graces." He finds that in not-knowing we begin to trust our blindness and therefore are not blocked

by seeing. He finds this ability to let go as important so that “we can embrace whatever comes.” This is one of the many ways that Tarrant attempts to help the reader find the light inside the dark.

It is important to remember that these two authors did not write definitive text books on Buddhism or science. Instead, they brought together several fields and theories reflecting their own individual beliefs. These two books, as well as the genres they represent, attempt to enlarge the reader’s understanding of these fields rather than provide valid explanations for them. Both books have a sense of urgency, of hurrying us through the marriage of Buddhism and American social science, never giving us a complete picture. At times, their stories lack precision and depth in translating Buddhist teaching and practice.

Buddhism in America is a baby in the first few moments following birth. It arrived in the delivery room of the behavioral sciences. However, we are still left with a simple question: has the marriage of Buddhism and the social sciences given birth to a healthy baby? Yes, or no? In some ways it’s like trying to solve a problem—how does it fit? All generations have believed that theirs is the one in greatest crisis. This generation has added Buddhism to its repertoire of responses to the crisis of mind suffering. For Americans today the puzzle pieces of life’s suffering fit into a Buddhist social science paradigm. *The Light Inside the Dark* and *Buddha’s Nature* will help future American Buddhists understand how the baby took its first steps.



Review: Ted Mehl
Kansas Zen Center

*Bones of the Master:
A Buddhist Monk’s Search
for the Lost Heart of China*
George Crane
Bantam Doubleday Dell, 2000

This is a wonderful book, in the sense of *wonderful* used by Zen Master Seung Sahn in his letters when someone is practicing hard in the right direction. This is the story of Tsung Tsai, a Chinese ch’an monk, teacher, healer, and more, who left his monastery in Inner Mongolia in 1959 fleeing from the Red Army troops. Tsung Tsai meets George Crane, a poet, and serious sensualist and hedonist, in Woodstock, New York in 1987—at one point when considering sexuality and lust, George declares “Desire is all

that I am, maybe all that I will ever be.” These unlikely friends travel to Mongolia in search of Tsung Tsai’s master’s grave and the cave where he lived; Tsung Tsai wants to honor his master, conduct a proper funeral ceremony and build a shrine. I can’t adequately describe the poignant suffering, the profound teaching, the sagacious poetry, the haunting shamanism, the endearing humor, and engaging characters in this ch’an adventure story.

In October of 1959, the translated names of Tsung Tsai’s brother monks are Ancestor Vigilance, Joy, Dharma, Reality, Aspiration, Dignity, Greatness, Witness, Work, Practice, and Miracle; he is Ancestor Wisdom, the third son of a third son, a mystical incarnation according to his father. All but Tsung Tsai escape toward Nepal and India; he heads south through the heart of China, and witnesses enough horror to break the mind of many. His Master, too old to go along, told him as he left, “Everywhere are hungry ghosts. Go quickly. Keep a strong mind.”

When George, affectionately called Georgie, wonders how Tsung Tsai had found the will to survive, he is told, “Ch’an is like mountain. Does not move. Ch’an you cannot move.”

Tsung Tsai’s meditation instruction is plain and to the point, “Sit or walk. Natural and simple. Don’t think too much. Attachment very strong. Don’t worry. When you go away, just come back. Stand up. Walk a little. Sit again.

“Meditation have mind and emotion mixed. Emotion is every human being’s roots. Difficult to control. Very good monk have deepest heart. So very sad for world. Highest pity. Buddha nature, so kindness.”

When George fails to complete a frightening climb to the Master’s grave and frantically apologizes, Tsung Tsai cuts him off, “No talking. Talking doesn’t work.”

George finds it difficult to practice and when he explains himself at one point, Tsung Tsai replies, “Doesn’t matter. Buddhism, the real Buddhism is practice. Any moment must be practice. Any moment must be true.”

After a near impossible ten hour climb to the Master’s cave, Tsung Tsai sits in meditation, very sick, but fulfilled, and George sees a white light emanating from his head; George shoots two rolls of film and when Tsung Tsai is finished exclaims, “A white light, like a flashlight, came from your head.”

“Ahh, that’s Buddha’s light. Actually everybody have that light. Natural. Nothing special.”

The book is filled with such unhindered teaching. George struggles with desire and fear, practices some, and is a loyal friend. Tsung Tsai shows us what he calls monk-power, don’t-know-mind in each moment of everyday life: clear mind, open heart, strong center. This book will take you beyond what you think Zen is and inspire you to practice. You’ll see the ch’an monastic within yourself. Natural and simple.