

A review of
**The Best Buddhist
Writing 2011**

Book Review by Sarah Conover

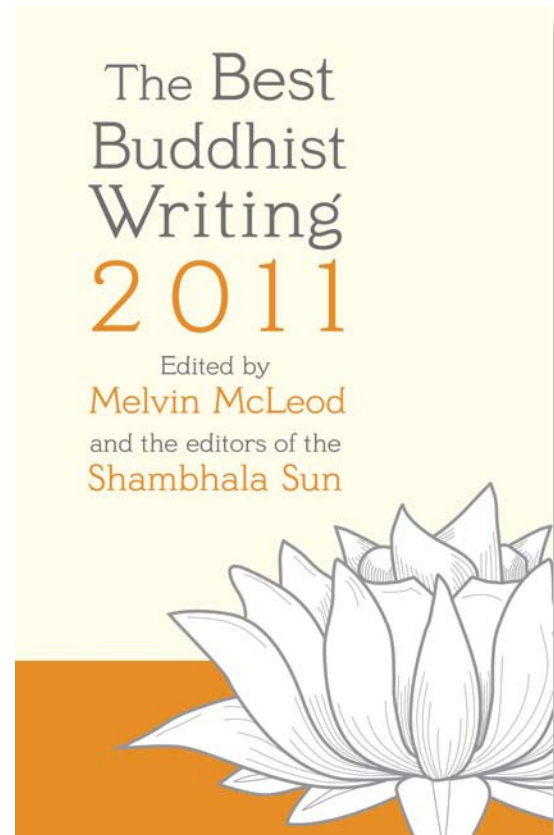
Like a daily sitting practice, my journey through this anthology was both deeply rewarding and a bit troubling. Troubling in a good way, the kind of troubling that pushes one, like it or not, toward enquiry.

On the very rewarding side, the book delivers fully on the first half of its promise in the introduction: “These writings reflect an increasingly natural integration of Buddhist practice and philosophy into modern life.” The collection wavers in delivering on its second aim stated in the same sentence: “...while remaining true to the depth and integrity of Buddhist tradition.”

The title alone—The Best Buddhist Writing 2011—presents a koan worth puzzling over. What makes a piece of writing Buddhist? Must it have several terms of Sanskrit, Tibetan or Pali in it? Must it have a sub-narrative of East meets West? Should it be a dharma talk? What if a personal narrative makes no reference at all to the dharma, can it still be Buddhist? Should the editor of a book wielding such a title proceed cautiously, not congealing all traditions into one? The book reveals a microcosm of issues for its readers that, reflected upon, may catalyze some growing pains for Buddhist practitioners, writers and publishers.

The anthology showcases a rich arc of essays—personal narratives by lay practitioners as well as teachers, straight-up dharma lectures, and a few essays offering panoramic views by well-known figures in contemporary Buddhism. My favorite personal essays proved funny as well as dear, deflating any pretentiousness in the cultural ideal of the Perfect Buddhist. You can hear it among the titles: “Dead Like Me,” by Ira Sukrungruang; “This is Getting Old,” by Susan Moon; “Rustbelt Dharma,” by Richard Eskow; “I’m Loving It,” by Genine Lentine.

As the introduction promises, we’re returned again and again to the thick stew of contemporary life: broken hearts, work, cars, money, aging, washing dishes, adoptions, sex, marriage, and children. In truth, my copy of The Best Buddhist Writing 2011 is a mess of penciled-in underlines, exclamation points and stars. Almost all of the personal narratives found a way to utilize the unique light of the dharma explicitly; Seven essays managed to do it implicitly, without



once mentioning the author’s tradition nor using any of the foreign terms so familiar to sangha circles. In both cases, bravo for the normalizing of Buddhism!

I would have gleaned much from these essays years ago, but reading them now, after decades of practice, my appreciation is more nuanced. In her essay “Hand Wash Cold,” Karen Maezen Miller ponders the stealthy ways in which fear taints relationships: “When we think we know someone, you see, we are already half-way to disappointment, and no one needs a head start on that.” A newbie to Buddhism could benefit from that statement as much as the practitioner who ties it to construction of self and other. In Lentine’s “I’m Loving It,” she remembers taking orders at a fast-food chain and reflects: “In these quick encounters, I could feel the palpable difference between seeing the person before me and just looking through them to the next transaction; I learned the trick that paying attention doesn’t take extra time, it actually gives you more time.” Again, although that directive might be found in a collection of Buddhist kitchen wisdom, there’s no stopping a serious practitioner from working with it for a year. I know when today’s provisional truths are superseded by deeper understandings, I could happily read the anthology again.

The dharma astonishes in its ability to be a forward-leading investigation. A great piece in the book, “The Power of an Open Question,” by Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel hones in on this specifically—the dharma as an open, questioning encounter with experience. Perhaps one requisite of popular, “Buddhist Writing” is life reflected upon through this exploratory lens,

the practice of the Eightfold path as a dialogue with experience.

One of my favorite essayists inside or outside of Buddhist circles, Pico Iyer, gives us a grounded sense of the Dalai Lama through their decades-long relationship as teacher and student. The book also offers plenty of expository essays and teachings by some of Buddhism's rock stars: Matthieu Riccard, Jack Kornfield, and Thich Nhat Hanh among them. The Dalai Lama's "Toward a Kinship of Faiths," an essay about religious pluralism, is dazzling in its thesis and precision of language and should be required reading for every person on the planet.

So, what troubled me about this rich and varied anthology entitled, *The Best Buddhist Writing of 2011*? (A pardon to our Buddhist academic friends: may the best of your good work also find such popular venues). A quote from Nanavira Thera, a Theravadan monk and author of *Clearing the Path* summarizes some of what I stumbled over. The terms Buddhism and Buddhist had for him "A slightly displeasing air about them—they are too much like labels one sticks on the outside of packages regardless of what the packages contain."

When I read the first paragraph in the introduction to *The Best Buddhist Writing of 2011*, I knew I was in for a ride. The opening paragraph, the setup for the tone and context of all the writing to follow, featured a Vajrayana doctrine—albeit a beautiful one. Unfortunately for me and my fellow Theravadans, many essays were also introduced with the same slant. I also counted the provenance of the essays: twenty from Mahayana traditions (including Vajrayana, Zen and Tibetan), seven—as I mentioned above—not identifiable, and two from the Theravadan camp.

All Buddhisms are not identical and perhaps these writings would be better off not contextualized from a particular slant. Let each author speak for herself or himself. In the Dalai Lama's essay in the anthology, "Toward a True Kinship of Faiths," he speaks of three key aspects of religions: 1) ethical teachings 2) doctrines and metaphysics 3) culture-specific attitudes and images. The three overlap generously in Buddhism, but the view of reality—the sticky metaphysics and philosophy aspect—differ significantly. One might argue that cultivating the Eightfold Path, which blurs these distinctions between Buddhist denominations, remains central to all. Yes. And yet...

After more than six decades of weaving into Western culture, Buddhism can come out of the closet and dialogue with our reading audience about differences—we can do this as discernment, and even celebration—not judgment. Our "packages" do contain dissimilar items: various schools promise and believe a number of contradictory, and sometimes incompatible things. There. I've said it.

In that same essay, the Dalai Lama declares: "The possibility of genuine interreligious understanding and harmony should not be, and need not be, contingent upon proving the ultimate oneness of all religions." It's true in the macrocosm of world faiths, and true in the microcosm of Buddhism. Let's discern

the variations and learn from them, not try and present a homogenized, idealized public face. In fact, one of the purposes of *Present Magazine* is to bring to light some of those differences and disagreements, especially those that curb the aspirations of female monastics.

Along the same vein, some of the essays in the anthology make sweeping claims, and this too, can have a blender effect. One piece offers to summarize all of Buddhism in one phrase; another asks and answers what is the ultimate of all realizations. In the famous sutta addressing the Kalamas, the Buddha refuses to answer such a query: he hands it right back to the questioner, and sets them on a path of self-reflection and investigation.

I recommend *The Best Buddhist Writing of 2011* to you whole-heartedly. I'm looking forward to reading it many times in the future. I also encourage the Fourfold Sangha—nuns and monks, laywomen and laymen—to attend to the public face of Buddhism with a rigor that is fundamental to the path of the dharma. Doing so might sell fewer books, and it might find fewer people drawn to certain sanghas, but Buddhism, for now at least, seems firmly planted in the West. As our practices move forward, we have the ability to dialogue with practitioners of various denominations, to learn about and celebrate our remarkable differences as well as our similarities, and to ensure that the Eightfold Path matures as a creative act of inquiry.



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