

Introduction
A Literary Genre and Some Questions
about Self-Transformation

When the moon takes over your heart,
Where does the master of the self go?¹

In 1973, Peter Matthiessen accompanied the biologist George Schaller to Nepal in a study of Himalayan blue sheep and to search for the rare snow leopard. Matthiessen hoped, as well, to meet a revered Tibetan lama at an ancient shrine on Crystal Mountain. Having recently lost his wife to cancer, and facing dangerous winter snowfalls and hazardous mountain terrain, he struggled with grief, regret, and fear while he attempted to better understand and practice Zen and Tibetan Buddhist teachings he had studied for several years. Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* (1978) describes this personal pilgrimage as a search for self-transformation and enlightenment. As he traced his journey toward these geographical and spiritual goals, he portrayed habits that made it difficult to change and intense experiences that disclosed the possibility of a radically different way of being.

The Snow Leopard is the best-known example of a literary genre that I call Western Buddhist travel narratives. These autobiographical stories describe how a journey to a Buddhist culture changed the author; they portray religious experiences and reflections in compelling and insightful ways. What can we learn from autobiographical writing about Buddhism that is obscured or neglected by the more abstract, theoretical, and systematic forms of discourse practiced by Buddhist thinkers and in academic scholarship?

Western Buddhist travel narratives often describe a transformative religious experience. A journey to the original lands of the dharma can

¹ Zen koan in the 2007 Korean film *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?* I heard this translation at an American Academy of Religion presentation in about 2010. In the film, it is translated: "When the moon in your mind waxes beneath the water, where does the master of my being go?" The figure of the moon dancing in the water is a recurring image for the self in Buddhist texts.

change an author's understanding of Buddhism and alter his or her sense of identity in profound ways. Like Christian conversion narratives, the books examined here depict religious transformation as both a matter of new intellectual understanding and a radical reorientation of life that sometimes comes to a climax in a decisive event. In this book, I interpret diverse experiences of "unselfing," moments when a person's sense of self is radically altered. Interpreted in diverse ways, this kind of experience is a central preoccupation of many religious and ethical traditions. Such an event is believed to illuminate a fundamental human quandary: how can a person transcend the problems of narcissism, egotism, and ethical and spiritual blindness that accompany preoccupation with one's self? Western Buddhist travel narratives often address this question by focusing on the Buddhist idea of *anatman* (Sanskrit; in Pali: *anatta*), usually translated as no-self or not-self.² They depend on the concept of no-self to interpret certain crucial experiences, and their ideas about it are a catalyst that provokes and enables these dramatic events.

The Buddhist concept of no-self raises many questions for Westerners trying to understand it and reconcile it with their usual understanding of the self. How does an author who has come to understand the meaning of no-self in an experience of unselfing return to ordinary life, with its demands to be a family member, productive worker, and responsible agent in a society? How does an autobiographer intensely interested in depicting a personal identity portray the Buddhist insight that the self is an illusion? How does an individual's lived experience confirm, complicate, or call into doubt what they have learned about no-self?

Like William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, this book examines closely how particular individuals describe religious experiences. Like James, I propose certain organizing concepts, sketch a working definition of the topic, assess the significance of specific texts, and reflect on what these books reveal about a common issue: in this case, the efforts of Western Buddhists to overcome selfishness and suffering and to find a better way to live.

This Introduction describes the subject matter and approach of this book with remarks on two issues: the characteristics of Western Buddhist travel narratives as a literary genre and source of religious insight and the relationship between Buddhist stories about self-transformation and the idea of no-self.

² When words in ancient languages are used, I have omitted diacritical marks and, depending on context, they are not always in italics.

Western Buddhist Travel Narratives as a Literary Genre

Westerners have described their perceptions of Buddhism for many centuries, and a few sympathetic travelers found personal meaning and value in Buddhist teachings. Until roughly the past half-century, almost all such accounts viewed Buddhism in a rather detached mode as an exotic worldview or a system of ideas abstracted from cultural context and unrelated to the author's own religious questions. Often, too, contemporary Asian Buddhism was viewed as a degenerate or corrupted version of an idealized version of Buddhism located in texts constructed and controlled by Western institutions such as libraries, universities, missionary societies, and government reports. The very few Westerners drawn to Buddhism before the twentieth century adopted this text-based Buddhism as a philosophy but knew little about Buddhism as a living tradition.³ Until the last third of the twentieth century, Western appreciation of Buddhism was theoretical, advocating ideas dissociated from personal experience; or it was a matter of romantic fantasy, having little to do with the history or present condition of Buddhism in Asia. With the ambiguous exception of Alexandra David-Neel, who will be discussed in Chapter 6 on Tibetan journeys, Western authors before the 1960s rarely wrote autobiographically (except in private letters) about their engagements with Buddhism as a source of religious insight and a catalyst for transformation.⁴ Moreover, even those sympathetic to Buddhism were uninterested in or puzzled by

³ See Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). A rare exception is Henry Steel Olcott, who spent a good deal of time in Ceylon, as described in Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). On other early Western responses to Buddhism, see Thomas Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844–1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

⁴ Books by Western writers sympathetic to Buddhism that hint at the author's religious leanings include Marco Pallis's *Peaks and Lamas* (1949) and Peter Goullart's *Forgotten Kingdom* (1955). In Chapter 8, I discuss three books about mindfulness written in the 1960s by the first Westerners to learn Theravada meditation methods in Burma. Farther in the past are accounts of travels such as, in the case of Tibet, by explorers (e.g. Sven Hedin), diplomats (Charles Bell, who knew the XIII Dalai Lama well), and missionaries such as Ippolito Desideri, an Italian Jesuit Father whose account of a five-year sojourn in Tibet in the early eighteenth century focuses on his desire to refute Buddhist ideas. In *Dispelling the Darkness: A Jesuit's Quest for the Soul of Tibet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), Donald S. Lopez, Jr., and Thupten Jinpa translate and interpret the treatise (written in Tibetan!) with which Desideri attempted to debunk key Buddhist doctrines, including no-self. For a collection of Western portrayals of Buddhism to 1844, most of them quite negative, see Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *Strange Tales of an Oriental Idol: An Anthology of Early European Portrayals of the Buddha* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). These older texts are significant and fascinating, but they are not autobiographical narratives describing a personal engagement with Buddhism, that is, Western Buddhist travel narratives.

ideas about no-self, which they saw as morbidly pessimistic or nihilistic, as well as inconsistent with Buddhist claims about karma and rebirth.

In a succinct typology, Stephen Batchelor proposes that the long relationship of the West with Buddhism has been marked by five attitudes: blind indifference, self-righteous indignation, rational knowledge, romantic fantasy, and existential engagement.⁵ The genre that I call Western Buddhist travel narratives tells stories of existential engagement with Buddhism. The writers of these works are not simply curious about or sympathetic to Buddhism but seriously considering or committed to it as a worldview. While there are undoubtedly elements of fantasy and projection involved in most Westerners' views of Buddhism and Asia, the writers I consider make a concerted effort to understand Buddhism on its own terms, often by textual study and especially as they encounter it during their travels. Their exploration of Buddhism often takes the form of analysis and explication, Batchelor's "rational knowledge," but their encounter is also existential in that it involves not only the intellect but the evidence of their whole being: body, mind, and spirit. These writers embed theoretical exposition and analysis within a narrative that shows what difference these ideas made in their lives.

Every theory of a literary genre is a debatable attempt to define categories of texts that could be organized differently. I will say more in the Conclusion about other texts similar to those I examine here. The point is not to classify books but to better understand them. Taken as a heuristic device, conceptions of genre can help us to discern meaning and creativity and to make illuminating comparisons and contrasts. Thinking about the genre that I call Western Buddhist travel narratives will help us do this with some interesting books that have not been understood in relation to each other or to other ways of describing Buddhism.⁶

The earliest Western Buddhist travel narratives are John Blofeld's *The Wheel of Life* (1959) and Lama Anagarika Govinda's *The Way of the White Clouds* (1966). Blofeld and Govinda were the first to write extended

⁵ Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1994), xi.

⁶ For reflections on other genres, namely Buddhist fiction and poetry in the West, see Kimberly Beck, "Telling Tales Out of School," *Buddhism beyond Borders: New Perspectives on Buddhism in the United States*, ed. Scott A. Mitchell and Natalie E. F. Quli (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015), 125–142; John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff, eds., *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009); and Lawrence Normand and Alison Winch, eds., *Encountering Buddhism in Twentieth Century British and American Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

autobiographical narratives about engagements with Buddhism that focus on experiences of travel. Since the 1970s, this new genre has flourished, most often structured in terms of one journey. These books explain how the author's spiritual development was influenced by encounters with Buddhism. (Such encounters also take place in the West, of course, resulting in texts that are similar to and different in various ways from those examined here.) In contrast to books that explain Buddhist philosophical ideas or the practice of meditation, travel memoirs tell a story about a pilgrimage or religious journey. These narratives do not describe Buddhism from a detached or impersonal perspective; they are introspective accounts of an author's search for religious experience, meaning, and a coherent worldview.

The authors of Western Buddhist travel narratives have diverse religious orientations. Some of them are committed Buddhists, while others are curious about Buddhism in its Asian homelands after an initial encounter with a teacher, text, or experience of meditation in Europe or America. Some writers are seekers who are sometimes called "spiritual but not religious": individuals looking for meaning and purpose in life or for contact with a holy person or place but who are unaffiliated with and often suspicious of all organized communities and institutional traditions. Since the 1970s, in dozens of book-length narratives and innumerable essays and short pieces (see the Bibliography), Western writers have described journeys to places of historic Buddhist importance, including India, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Bhutan, China, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia, especially Thailand. This body of literature forms a fascinating genre of religious memoir with recurring themes and preoccupations and a variety of creative literary strategies for exploring them. I focus on book-length narratives, with occasional references to essays about travel. There is considerable variety within the group of texts that I consider. Several books take the form of a diary or anecdotal travel journal rather than offering a retrospective perspective on a journey. Two works are jointly authored. A few narratives cover several journeys or an extended portion of the author's life rather than the more common focus on a single journey.

For all of these writers, a basic theme and recurring metaphor in their memoir is the analogy between an outer or geographical journey and an inner or spiritual one. Like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, and Muslim accounts of pilgrimage to Mecca, these texts rely on one of the most basic metaphors with which humans interpret their experience of the sacred. Getting closer to God, what is holy, or enlightenment as to the nature of ultimate reality is like moving toward – or, sometimes, arrival at – a destination in space. These

stories compare religious development to travel, with a departure, various obstacles and adversities to overcome along the way, periods of feeling lost or disoriented, perhaps a pivotal decision at a fork in the road or turning point, and a final arrival at a destination, which is sometimes imagined as an open road. Using a journey as a metaphor gives a coherent shape and overarching plot to the often-confusing process of religious searching and striving. In a retrospective account of travel, a reader can compare the author at the start of and during the journey (the autobiographical writer in the role of character or protagonist) with the author who looks back on and interprets the journey (the writer as narrator) and consider how this person has changed. A somewhat different perspective is offered by a travel diary or journal, which provides a day-by-day account of the stages of a journey without a unifying retrospective view and lets us witness the incremental process of change. Like a compelling autobiography, a travel narrative shows how religious ideas and insights develop in time and make a significant difference in a person's life, portraying this in a vivid and gripping way and revealing the psychological dimensions and cultural contexts of ideas. Autobiography also discloses tensions and discrepancies between a religious tradition's normative ideals and expectations and an individual's doubts, idiosyncratic experiences, and failure to live up to the ideal.

Autobiographical accounts of Buddhist experiences are different in several ways from traditional Buddhist literature, and this is one reason why they are valuable for contemporary readers and Buddhist practitioners. In classical Buddhist texts, enlightenment is usually described as the attainment of a list of desirable attributes and the understanding of certain doctrinal truths. Such conceptual clarification is important, but it cannot do what a story does, especially an introspective first-person account. Although Buddhist tradition preserved many narratives about bodhisattvas, these figures are portrayed as beyond ordinary human limitations. Another traditional Buddhist genre is *jataka* tales, which describe how, in previous lives of the Buddha, he realized the ten perfections or demonstrated a particular virtue.⁷ Some of these tales show animals or people giving up everything, including their wife and children, for the sake of enlightenment or to save others from suffering. In a past life as a rabbit, the Buddha throws himself into a fire to feed a starving wise man; as a prince, he commits suicide so that a hungry tiger can feed her cubs. In contrast with Western Buddhist travel narratives, the heroes of

⁷ A collection of *jataka* tales is Edward B. Cowell, ed., *The Jataka or Stories of The Buddha's Former Births* (London: Pali Text Society, 1957).

these tales show little emotion, conflicted motivation, or hesitation; they practice the ideal of self-giving effortlessly. These charming didactic stories present models of virtue that demonstrate the meaning of selfless action. However, most contemporary readers will not recognize in them their own struggles along the way to enlightenment.

In Zen stories about the striking personalities of early masters, according to Dale Wright, a “focus on the distinctively human character of enlightened beings is rare ... since as Buddhism developed into the Mahayana period, characters represented in the sutras tended to take on transhuman powers.”⁸ When bodhisattvas resemble divine beings and don’t show the characteristics of human finitude, they lose their capacity to serve as helpful models for ordinary people. It is therefore of great significance that, in the past half-century, various media, including fiction, biography, and film, have provided detailed accounts of recognizably human individuals seeking enlightenment: “Through these modern media, we now have at our disposal what traditional Buddhists could not have had—fictional and historically descriptive narratives that attempt to articulate in vivid detail what a quest for awakening would mean for actual human beings in earlier histories and in our times and places.”⁹ I think that for several reasons autobiographical narratives are especially valuable for exploring in depth the nature of Buddhist experience and the meaning of Buddhist ideas and insights.

Autobiography’s first-person perspective offers an “inside” view of religious experience that contrasts with the descriptions of outside observers, including exalted claims about a master made by devout followers. Autobiographical writing discloses more of the full range of human emotions and struggles rather than a sanitized portrait that removes any trait deemed inconsistent with the ideal. Personal narratives reveal the larger temporal context of pivotal religious experiences: all that led up to and prepared for a moment of insight and transcendence and what followed. This contrasts markedly with the narrow focus of traditional Buddhist literature on the sudden and dramatic moment of enlightenment. Contemporary autobiographies are valuable because they give us a first-person subjective account of events, show the larger temporal context of pivotal events, and disclose not only an ideal of enlightenment but also the messy, inconclusive, and confusing aspects of transformative religious experience.

⁸ Dale Wright, *What Is Buddhist Enlightenment?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31. Wright analyses the 1981 Korean film *Mandala* as one such contemporary account of the search for awakening.

Although Asian Buddhist autobiographical texts, especially in the Tibetan and Zen traditions, are becoming better known and studied, such works remain very challenging for most Western readers other than advanced scholars.¹⁰ Few of the writers studied in this book were aware of Buddhist autobiographical writing, and they were influenced greatly by Western examples of first-person writing. For Western readers today who seek ways to translate Buddhism into their own cultural idiom, the example of these contemporary travel writers has both great value and warns of potential dangers. An analogy is when psychologists turn to vipassana meditation as a source of strategies for improved mental health.¹¹ Translation across cultures brings ambiguous transformations, but it is inevitable and necessary when religious ideas travel. Buddhism changed greatly when it journeyed from India and Sri Lanka throughout Asia and to the rest of the world. It continues to be transformed, and recognizing this cultural continuity-in-change sometimes helps a writer understand how the self, too, can be at once the same and different as it is transformed. This book contributes to the burgeoning scholarship on Buddhist Modernism and Buddhism in the West.¹² I offer a fresh perspective, ask new questions, and explore a neglected source of insights: travel narratives.

¹⁰ On autobiography in traditional Buddhist cultures, see Janet Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary – A Translation and Study of Jigme Lingpa’s Dancing Moon in the Water and Dakki’s Grand Secret-talk* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), especially chapter 1; Norman Waddell, “Translator’s Introduction” to *Wild Ivy: The Spiritual Autobiography of Zen Master Hakuin* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), vii–xlix; Miriam Levering, “Was There Religious Autobiography in China before the Thirteenth Century? – The Ch’an Master Ta-hui Tsung-kaio (1089–1163) as Autobiographer,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 30 (2002), 97–122; and Sarah Jacoby, *Love and Liberation: Autobiographical Writings of the Tibetan Visionary Sera Khandro* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). See also the anthology compiled by Zenshin Florence Caplow and Reigetsu Susan Moon, eds., *The Hidden Lamp: Stories from Twenty-five Centuries of Awakened Women* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2013).

¹¹ For a critique of mindfulness-based psychotherapy, see C. W. Huntington, Jr., “The Triumph of Narcissism: Theravada Buddhist Meditation in the Marketplace,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83 (2015), 624–648. See also Eric Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) and, for a more positive assessment, Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 2014).

¹² Scholarship on Buddhism in the West includes Charles Prebish and Martin Baumann, *Western Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Jeffrey Paine, *Re-Enchantment: Tibetan Buddhism Comes to the West* (New York: Norton, 2004); Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*; Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka, *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Paine, *Re-enchantment*; David McMahon, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and, proposing that a postmodern Buddhism is emerging, Ann Gleig, *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

Other Western literary genres besides autobiography offer insights into Buddhist self-transformation. Gary Snyder uses Buddhist imagery and ideas in poetry such as “Smokey the Bear Sutra” and *Mountains and Rivers without End*. Allen Ginsberg’s poetry and diaries reflect his deep appreciation for Buddhism and Hinduism as he encountered them in India. Fiction such as Jack Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums* or Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale*, films such as *Mandala* and *Kundun*, and biographies of Buddhist teachers like the XIV Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh all depict how Buddhist ideas influence particular lives. Here, I consider only autobiographical narratives: books that claim to represent in prose the author’s own experience. All the works discussed were published in English by persons of American or European background. I focus on a particular kind of autobiographical text, memoirs of travel to Asia, bypassing works about Buddhism by authors who describe, for instance, how in the United States or Europe they encountered a teacher or participated in a meditation retreat. The group of texts discussed here is further circumscribed in that they all explore the meaning of no-self. Not every travel writer returning from Asia is concerned with how this idea transformed their sense of identity.

Modern Buddhist journeys may seek traditional pilgrimage destinations or follow a unique personal itinerary. Traditional Buddhist pilgrimages include journeys to four sites in India and Nepal: Lumbini, where the Buddha was born; Bodh Gaya, where he attained Enlightenment; Sarnath, where he first taught; and Kushinagar, where the Buddha died.¹³ Pilgrimages may be made to famous stupas (monuments honoring a relic of the Buddha), statues, monasteries, or temples. Some journeys involve arduous hiking to circle a sacred mountain, such as Kailash in Tibet, or to climb a mountain in China, where one of the two terms closest to the English word “pilgrimage” is *ch’ao-shan*, “to pay obeisances to a mountain.”¹⁴ Several writers retrace the route of Xuanzang (Hsuan Tsang), the Chinese Buddhist monk who, in the seventh century, spent seventeen years journeying overland to India, returning with hundreds of Sanskrit and Buddhist texts that he translated into Chinese.¹⁵

¹³ A collection of accounts of visits to these places is Molly Emma Aitken, ed., *Meeting the Buddha: On Pilgrimage in Buddhist India* (New York: Riverhead, 1995).

¹⁴ Pei-yi Wu, in “An Ambivalent Pilgrim to Tai Shan in the Seventeenth Century,” *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China* edited by Susan Naquin and Chun-gang Yu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 65.

¹⁵ For instance, see Mishi Saran, *Chasing the Monk’s Shadow* (New York: Penguin, 2005) and Richard Bernstein, *Ultimate Journey: Retracing the Path of an Ancient Buddhist Monk Who Crossed Asia in Search of Enlightenment* (New York: Knopf, 2001). These books are interesting and compelling travel narratives, but their authors do not interpret their lives in light of the Buddhist idea of no-self.

Another form of traditional Buddhist pilgrimage is circumambulation of the Japanese island of Shikoku, with its eighty-eight-temple circuit and historical association with the ninth-century figure Kobo Daishi, who brought Shingon Buddhism from China to Japan. This pilgrimage, like Spain's Camino de Santiago de Compostela, attracts many walkers who are religiously unaffiliated, although unlike Santiago it has no endpoint and is conceived of as a circle that can begin and end at any point. Nontraditional pilgrimages take diverse forms and have many motivations and purposes. Like Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*, many accounts of journeys to Buddhist holy places merge a traditional pilgrimage with a personal quest for meaning that the author gradually discloses as he approaches a sacred mountain or temple. Like the author, the reader slowly comes to understand how traditional pilgrimage routes and rituals come to have unique personal significance for the author. Some travel memoirs describe quests for living exemplars of Buddhist wisdom. Several works depict an author's attempt to discover whether any Buddhist teachers or sages survived Communist China's relentless and brutal persecution of religion in the years since 1949, especially during the Cultural Revolution.

Certain narratives recount how the author settled into a Buddhist culture for an extended stay. Such stories explore challenges for a Westerner of putting Buddhist wisdom into practice in daily living, such as integrating ideas about no-self with ethical responsibilities and personal relationships. Works of this type include four accounts of training in a Japanese Zen monastery and Jamie Zeppa's memoir *Beyond the Sky and the Earth*, which describes two years she spent teaching in a remote village in Bhutan. Stephen Asma's *The Gods Drink Whiskey* is a collection of essays about his experiences while teaching in Cambodia and Thailand. These accounts of a lengthy residence in Asia offer a deeper understanding of a specific Buddhist culture than travel narratives that describe brief encounters during a fast-paced itinerary. Rather than extensive geographical movement, another dimension of travel is prominent in these books: a sustained encounter with a foreign culture that raises basic questions about the author's identity, values, and the self that seems at different moments so obdurate and so malleable in various environments. Still another set of books describes encounters with several religious traditions, comparing and contrasting a journey to a Buddhist destination with other "adventures from the pilgrimage trail," as Nicholas Shrady subtitles his work *Sacred Roads*. Additional examples of this kind of travel narrative include Phil Cousineau's *The Art of Pilgrimage* and Sara McDonald's *Holy*