

## JOURNEYS OF TRANSFORMATION

Western Buddhist travel narratives are autobiographical accounts of a journey to a Buddhist culture. Dozens of such narratives have since the 1970s described treks in Tibet, periods of residence in a Zen monastery, pilgrimages to Buddhist sites and teachers, and other Asian odysseys. The best known of these works is Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*; further reflections emerge from thirty writers, including John Blofeld, Jan van de Wetering, Thomas Merton, Oliver Statler, Robert Thurman, Gretel Ehrlich, and Bill Porter. The Buddhist concept of “no-self” helps these authors interpret certain pivotal experiences of “unselfing” and is also a catalyst that provokes and enables such events. The writers’ spiritual memoirs describe how their journeys brought about a new understanding of Buddhist enlightenment and so transformed their lives. Showing how travel can elicit self-transformation, this book is a compelling exploration of the journeys and religious changes of both individuals and Buddhism itself.

JOHN D. BARBOUR is Professor of Religion Emeritus at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, where he taught from 1982 to 2018 and served as Martin Marty Chair of Religion and the Academy and Boldt Chair in the Humanities. He has written four scholarly books, *Tragedy as a Critique of Virtue* (1984), *The Conscience of the Autobiographer* (1992), *Versions of Deconversion* (1994), and *The Value of Solitude* (2004); he also wrote *Renunciation: A Novel* (2013).

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“John Barbour’s construction of the genre of the modern Western Buddhist travel narrative (that also functions as spiritual autobiography) is brilliant in drawing a circle around empirical facts and making their identity obvious in hindsight. The truth of this literary phenomenon is made unarguable, and the analytical focus on Westerners struggling between their native and Buddhist senses of personhood portrays how a foreign religion is becoming Western in the experiences and examples of actual lives. This book is a big step forward in the study of modern Western Buddhism.”

– *Francisca Cho, Professor of Buddhist Studies,  
Georgetown University*

“Focusing almost exclusively on narratives written in English since WWII, John D. Barbour does an excellent job of comparing the written record of more than thirty writers who visited Asia with the express purpose of deepening an understanding of Buddhist existential matters through hiking, pilgrimage, and other forms of travel. The writers in question are grouped according to thematic relationships, and the flow through and around different parts of Asia is entirely successful. The book will be of great interest to literary scholars interested in religion as well as to religion scholars interested in narrative and individual struggles with the central concepts of Buddhism. The research is of a very high quality and the book is also wonderfully readable. The prose style is always clear, and the flow is just right. Taken as a whole, John Barbour’s book is an extraordinarily rich exploration of Buddhist-oriented travel writing. There is no other book like it.”

– *John Whalen-Bridge, Associate Professor of English  
Language and Literature, National University  
of Singapore*

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*Searching for No-Self in Western Buddhist Travel Narratives*

JOHN D. BARBOUR

*St. Olaf College, Minnesota*



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*For two communities that have oriented my spiritual traveling:  
First United Church of Christ, Northfield, Minnesota  
Northfield Buddhist Meditation Center*



## *Contents*

<i>Acknowledgments and Author's Note</i>	<i>page viii</i>
Introduction: A Literary Genre and Some Questions about Self-Transformation	i
1 The Origins of the Genre: John Blofeld and Lama Govinda	24
2 Peter Matthiessen's <i>The Snow Leopard</i> and <i>Nine-Headed Dragon River</i>	43
3 In a Zen Monastery: Ambiguous Failure and Enlightenment	63
4 Thomas Merton and Christian and Jewish Pilgrims in Buddhist Asia	99
5 Walking the Dharma on Shikoku and in India	123
6 Trekking and Tracking the Self in Tibet	150
7 Life-Changing Travels in the Tibetan Diaspora	179
8 Encounters with Theravada Buddhism	207
9 Searching for Chan Buddhism after Mao	243
Conclusion: Theories of No-Self, Stories of Unselfing, and Transformation	270
<i>Bibliography</i>	314
<i>Index</i>	324

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Many Asian words are transcribed into English in varying ways, for instance, Chan/Ch'an and Daramsala/Dharamsala. Certain authors rely primarily on Pali, which uses the term *anatta* for no-self, while others use Sanskrit, which uses *anatman*. In general, I use the terms and spelling of each author in discussing that book and usually eliminate diacritical marks. I often use italics when a foreign term is introduced but not after that, especially when a term has passed into regular use by Western Buddhists. There are some inconsistencies, especially when I am discussing several authors at once or trying to balance readability with scholarly precision.

In order to reduce the number of notes, I cite page numbers in parentheses within the text when referring to the Western Buddhist travel narrative being discussed. Other references are in the traditional format.