# A PARTIAL ENLIGHTENMENT

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book formed through much of the same research as my previous one, *Global Origins of the Modern Self*, and so many of the acknowledgments made there also apply here. I would never have learned what I needed to learn to write this book without a semester spent at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in spring 2005, organized by Tara Doyle of Emory University. It was in those months that I first began to understand how little I knew about Buddhism in the modern world, and how much more I had to learn. The relentlessly patient Geshe Dorje Damdul also answered every conceivable philosophy question that I put to him in those months. I realized that I could actually write a book about modern Buddhism and literature when I taught a seminar on the topic at Rutgers University in 2014. It was my first opportunity to teach a course of my own design, and I could not have been luckier than to have had the group of students we did. We formed a remarkable community that showed me just how much these texts could matter for all of us as we try to make sense of our place in the world. I received generous feedback on parts of this book from Michael Allan, Ben Baer, Wendy Belcher, Billy Galperin, Colin Jager, Priya Joshi, David Kurnick, Justin Neuman, Yi-Ping Ong, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Eileen Reeves, Adam Spanos, Mimi Winick, several anonymous readers who read earlier versions of some of the chapters, and a few others, I'm sure, to whom I must apologize for forgetfulness. Jean-Michel deserves special notice for the sheer volume of pages I've sent him over the years, and his always speedy and generous replies. The Princeton Writing Program hosted a workshop of the chapter on reincarnation, in which my interdisciplinary colleagues helped me see new angles on my argument and how to improve it. The most important moment in the written life of this book was when the Princeton University Center for Human Values sponsored a book workshop with Justin McDaniel, Gauri Viswanathan, and Rebecca Walkowitz. Over one long afternoon they not only broke down the first draft of this book but also helped me see how to rebuild it. I can't thank them enough for the generosity of their time and engagement. It saved this book. And I cannot think of a better editor for this project than Wendy Lochner, who completely understood the argument and what I was trying to do. She offered excellent advice on completing the manuscript and found two wonderful readers to offer feedback and guidance. Her enthusiasm for scholarship and the life of the mind is infectious. The rest of the team at Columbia University Press has made completing this book a very easy and enjoyable process, and I thank them for their diligence.

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Still, as I write these words in May 2020, in the midst of the social upheavals of Covid-19 and the protests against state violence, inaction, and inequality, it would be inappropriate not to acknowledge that all the good fortune I have had to be able to read and write is less because of any particular merit or hard work on my own part, and more because I have benefited from a world that unequally rewards some of us. Modern Buddhism, as I will argue in this book, is far from perfect. But it does importantly insist on the connections between our ruptured social worlds and our damaged psychic lives. Perhaps reckoning with its stories can offer some intellectual resources for our urgent need to move from the acknowledgment of injustice to the actualization of justice.

The sections on Conrad, Kipling, Sarduy, Head, and Salinger appeared in earlier form in the following publications. My thanks to each journal for allowing republication: “Buddhism and the Postmodern Novel: Severo Sarduy’s *Cobra*,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 62, no. 1 (2016): 32–55; “Buddhism Between Worlds: Contested Liberations in Kipling, Salinger, and Head,” *Religion & Literature* 49, no. 3 (2017): 23–47; “Empires of Enlightenment: On Illumination and the Politics of Buddhism in *Heart of Darkness*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 40, no. 2 (2017): 1–21.

# INTRODUCTION

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a revolution in the history of Buddhism occurred. As European and U.S. imperial interests in Asia advanced, Buddhist communities were forced to grapple with both territorial encroachments and the claims to greater rationality that these foreign powers brought with them. Aligned with sympathetic Westerners (Orientalists, anticolonialists, and mystics), Buddhists across Asia began to reinvent Buddhism in response to this epochal shift. Buddhism, they said, was not to be found in the folk practices of ritual, recitation, magic, and worship that visitors were witnessing. The true Buddhism, though perhaps not immediately evident, was to be found in its rich scriptural history. And what would be found there not only was as philosophical and rational as modern Western philosophy but also had achieved these insights millennia earlier. Further still, it had a method—meditation—that could close the gap between our claims to rationality and our still unruly emotional lives. As Buddhism continued to update itself over the century to come, claims would also be made that it was now and had always been pacifist, egalitarian, feminist, democratic, and antiracist.[1]

What is perhaps most remarkable about this reinvention of Buddhism is how well it worked. Based on the strength and eloquence of its supporters as well as the truly powerful insights to be gleaned in the scriptural canon, modern Buddhism became the dominant way of understanding what it meant to be Buddhist. Buddhism went from despised other to universally applauded emancipator in a matter of decades. But its success has recently come under fire. For many critics, this modern global Buddhism is an inauthentic, Westernized invention that ripped Buddhist practices and histories out of their variegated local contexts and denied the power, meaning, and logic of the aspects that did not conform to Western ideals about rational living. In many ways the criticism is true, and this history has resulted in widespread ignorance of Buddhist life and even provided cover for the rise of new, militant Buddhist nationalisms in countries like Sri Lanka and Myanmar.[2]

Nevertheless, as scholars in Buddhist studies have noted, simply discarding global, modern Buddhism as a false accretion is itself a rather inaccurate way to approach the history of Buddhism. After all, it developed as a missionary religion that spread throughout Asia over centuries. In so doing, it was constantly grafted to local traditions, transformed through encounters with other ways of belief, and forced to reform itself as other traditions surged or encroached. By the time Europeans began to really study Buddhism in the nineteenth century, they encountered a history so diverse that most Buddhists would not have even recognized each other as being part of the same tradition.[3] Indeed, in some ways analogous to the rise of Pan-Africanism, it was only in the face of the European onslaught that diverse Buddhists would begin to recognize their connections and develop a Pan-Buddhist, anticolonial, pro-peace, pro-meditation agenda.[4]

This is a book about twentieth-century novels that incorporate this modern global Buddhism. Its argument is that we[5] can learn a lot from the novels about the complexity of this new era in the history of religion, and, more broadly, what that complexity teaches

us about how to structure our desires, relationships, and activities in ways that can best promote human flourishing while still recognizing the inevitable dissatisfactions of human experience. In briefest form, I think that what we learn from this literary history of global Buddhism is that we live in a world where our hopes for some other way of thinking to save us have been destroyed. There is no absolute enlightenment coming from Buddhism or anywhere else. But this is precisely the lesson of modern Buddhism: once we move past the desire for complete resolution, we can begin to appreciate the minor insights and partial enlightenments—what Joseph Conrad called "spectral illuminations"—that light a path to lives of greater liberation and authenticity, even as we know full well that new problems will always arise.

In a sense, this is itself a spectral illumination of classical Buddhism. The canonical teaching was that life was unsatisfactory and that our only path to overcoming it was a course of righteousness that would eventually allow us to escape the cycle of reincarnation. This broad soteriological goal has largely fallen away from modern Buddhism. But a specter of its insight continues to illuminate something about our existence. Samuel Beckett (who picked up a pessimistic strand of Buddhism from the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer) said it succinctly: "You're on earth, there's no cure for that!"[6] Some modern Buddhists had promised something like a cure. They promised that we could live in this world without anxiety or fear, and with tremendous generosity and presence. Modern Buddhist literature contains the spectral illumination of classical Buddhism's response: you cannot live in such a complete way. The world runs beyond you. There is no cure for all the complexity and anxiety of life. But though we cannot fully overcome, we can still ameliorate our condition. Beckett again: "Try again. Fail again. Fail better."[7] Modern literary encounters with Buddhism offer their own spectral illuminations about how to fail better from within this incomplete state.

I began writing this book because, outside of Buddhist studies, recognition of the complexity of what modern Buddhism is has been very slow. For many literary and cultural critics, philosophers, and those generally interested in the humanities, Buddhism is primarily a philosophical and meditative practice.[8] Indeed, one of my concerns here is that critics, theorists, and philosophers have so abstracted Buddhism that a caricatured vision of it now freely circulates among even the most sophisticated critics.[9] In my first draft, I thought of my task as simply disabusing my fellow literary critics of their inaccurate ideas about Buddhism. But after a few colleagues read my several hundred pages of annoying finger-wagging, they encouraged me to think again about the purpose of this book. Through these conversations, I realized that I had something else to say about what we can learn through the study of modern Buddhism in world literature.[10]

This realization began with a simple insight: even modern Buddhism remains "embedded" in complex social systems and ways of life.[11] That is to say, however much we have come to think of modern Buddhism as an abstraction of the lived experience of Buddhists, this abstraction is itself necessarily part of other social fabrics. Literature discloses to us how Buddhist practice has become embedded in global modernity in unpredictable ways. And studying Buddhism from this vantage teaches us that novels are not merely sites displaying the potential realization of philosophical ideas. They are not—or at least not always—moral fables. Rather, they can be social indices of how ideas are unevenly embedded in the world. Or, in simpler words, fiction can show us how ideas whose theoretical meaning we take for granted come to play out in surprising ways in our lived experience.[12]

As we will see, for example, the Buddhist ideal of dedicating one's life to meditation does not mean removing oneself from the social world. Rather, it means creating the conditions in the social world that allow for some to undertake such rigorous meditations. These conditions may be as simple as time off from work or as complex as an entire monastic-political system dedicated to renting land to laypeople, using slaves to grow food, and collecting taxes in order to feed and house the monks. What we find in literary accounts, in turn, is a recognition of this whole interactive system that may escape modernizers, theorists, and meditative enthusiasts. The novels show how the

ideals of Buddhist practice play out in the diverse situations of modern life.

In this study, I focus on four primary themes—enlightenment, reincarnation, liberation, and authenticity—that predominate in the novels considered. While these ideas have appeared as philosophical concepts removed from everyday concerns or actual histories of Buddhist lives, I show how novelists explore their embeddedness in the difficult details of daily reality. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899/1902), for example, considers the links between the desire for enlightenment and the practice of colonialism. The radical Tibetan secularist Jamyang Norbu, a century later, mines esoteric ideas about reincarnation for material paths to overthrowing Chinese colonization. Across this book, I consider ten novels that explore these themes and relations. The novels I have chosen tell a particular story about the embeddedness of Buddhism in modern literature. In brief form, it is as follows: deciding that total enlightenment is unachievable and personal identity is inescapable, these novelists embrace partial enlightenments as the most one can hope for within the accelerated conditions of global modernity. In so doing, they find themselves condemned to reincarnating failed historical processes, which they in turn seek to appropriate and reclaim for liberatory ends. This leads them to negotiate how their twin aspirations for spiritual and political liberation both coincide with and contradict each other, and how the irremovable suffering of being human requires an authentic way of being that embraces both humanity's hopes and failures.

Part of what I think blinds us to understanding this complexity of Buddhism in the modern world is that the desire for Buddhism to be special is incredibly strong. In a world of terror and suffering, modern Buddhism has presented itself as a realistic possibility for making life better. And modern Buddhists have indeed created new ways of being in the world that align with our highest aspirations. Mindfulness meditation for laypeople, which, as I discuss below, was practically invented in the early twentieth century, has had some documented success in decreasing anxiety and increasing awareness and joy.[13] Engaged Buddhism, meanwhile, is a school of thought that developed in such contexts as Vietnamese responses to French and American colonization and Dalit critiques of caste Hinduism. Leading innovators—Thich Nhat Hanh in Vietnam and B. R. Ambedkar in India—reinterpreted everything in Buddhism, all the way down to the Four Noble Truths themselves. For Nhat Hanh, for example, old age, sickness, and death "are old ways of describing the First Noble Truth." Speaking of suffering today, we should focus on "tension, stress, anxiety, fear, violence, broken families, suicide, war, conflict, terrorism, destruction of the ecosystem, global warming, etc."[14] Ambedkar's version is similarly revolutionary, offering a vision of the ideal Buddhist not as a "perfect man" but as a "social servant."[15] Scholar Christopher Queen offers a synthesis of Ambedkar's four *new* Noble Truths as follows: "For Ambedkar, the *first noble truth* for the present age was the widespread suffering of injustice and poverty; the *second truth* was social, political, and cultural institutions of oppression—the collective expressions of greed, hatred, and delusion; the *third truth* was expressed by the European ideals of 'liberty, equality, and fraternity'; and the *fourth truth* was the threefold path of Ambedkar's famous slogan [taken from the international labor movement], 'Educate! Agitate! Organize!' "[16] As these are ideals that developed in a global matrix of the modern striving for justice, they readily speak to the kind of world that many of us want to see today. And the idea that Buddhism has thousands of years of experience bringing peace, nondomination, and equality into the world gives it an unmatched pedigree.

But while there are certainly brilliant moments of insight and justice in premodern Buddhist history, the idea of an unbroken continuum of Buddhist perfection is simply not true. What we should learn from Buddhism's history is not that it has time-tested ways to overcome suffering and create ideal worlds. Rather, it is that the creation of ideal worlds is an ongoing struggle with the conditions of one's times that must constantly be updated. We run several risks in seeing things otherwise, including stereotyping Buddhists and ignoring the lessons of just how difficult it is to evenly embed our ideals in the foundations of society. And when Buddhists act like other humans and commit atrocities, we risk growing frustrated and abandoning what we can learn from the

historical and modern forms of Buddhism altogether. After all, we should remember that Buddhism's modern global reception was not always so rosy. In *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Philip Almond records one reaction from a little before 1900: "Sirs and ladies, I venture to ask you if any people on the face of the earth seem to be more utterly indifferent to the shedding of blood and to human suffering than the followers of Buddhism."[17] More than a century later, when Buddhist monks were part of the genocidal campaign against the Rohingya in northern Myanmar, it was almost inconceivable to many onlookers that any Buddhists, let alone monks, could have done such a thing.[18] It would be as wrong to think that the original British conception is correct as to hold that Buddhists are uniquely wonderful humans.

Nevertheless, I recognize this story of enchantment and disenchantment, this rapture with the possibility of Buddhism that gives way to tremendous disappointment, because it is the story of my own engagement with Buddhism, which began in enthusiastic embrace and suffered a sharp decline in the face of learning this history. Each of these positions was mistaken, because what makes Buddhism worth thinking through is neither its perfection nor its failure, but rather how its remarkable ideals and practices have struggled to confront the everyday realities of human interactions and social orders. As I take the reader through this literary history, I will also share parts of my own story of learning, unlearning, and relearning Buddhism.

This choice may surprise some of my academic colleagues. Personal accounts are not typical in professional literary criticism or exegetical religious studies, which tend to focus more on the texts being explicated than the author writing about them. Even a recent (and very interesting) book on the relationship between modernism and self-help, subtitled "searching for advice in modern literature," does not reflect on the author's own search for advice in what she is reading.[19] Personal accounts are, however, relatively common in scholarly studies of modern Buddhism. Authors like Georges Dreyfus, Ann Gleig, and Evan Thompson weave their own experiences with Buddhism into their scholarly works.[20] Why take this different approach?

Often it is because they, like me, found the gap between the Buddhism they imagined and the Buddhism they encountered to be so remarkable. Thompson relates, for example, that he set out to learn about Buddhism as part of a "transformative path of rational liberation." It promised not only what he had learned from Western philosophy—ideas about the meaning of life and the functions of the mind—but also a dedication to actually embodying that meaning through a meditative practice leading to " 'awakening.' "[21] But while he certainly found elements of this in his study of Buddhism, he also found that meditation communities could be annoying and cliquish, meditation teachers could be sexual harassers, and Buddhist enthusiasts could overlook damning evidence about the history of Buddhism and the limits of meditation to advance its aims.[22] While most scholars have personal narratives about why they got into their scholarship, with Buddhist modernism that narrative often *is* the scholarship: it's the story of why we thought one thing about Buddhism, realized it was something much more complex, and then continued to probe this complexity. Indeed, for the most part, the initial disappointment did not chase people away: it is estimated that up to half of Buddhist studies scholars are also practicing Buddhists.[23] (I am not one of them.) However, it did lead some of them, like Thompson, to become full-on critics of modern Buddhism. Part of my story is about how literature and my own experiences led me in a different direction: from this criticism into a new appreciation of what modern Buddhism offers.

Another reason for the prevalence of personal narrative is that many studies of modern Buddhism come from the anthropology of religion.[24] Anthropologists, much more than other scholars, tend to reflect on their own participation (or lack thereof) in the practices that they write about. As Ann Gleig notes in her ethnography of contemporary Buddhism in the United States, this is part of a tradition within anthropology of identifying with what one is writing about rather than keeping it at a critical distance.[25] I have learned a lot from ethnographies like Gleig's and personal accounts like Thompson's to think about how something that seems so personal and abstract as the ideals of modern Buddhism could become re-embedded in communal practice. They helped me to reflect

on my own experience of embedding myself within diverse Buddhist communities and to see how my experiences connected to the broader narratives of modern Buddhism—in both life and literature.

As with many not born into the Buddhist tradition who have become fascinated by it, my story begins with a mundane feeling of loss and alienation. My interest began when I was a high school student in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Like many intellectually adventurous youths, I felt no sense of identification growing up. The problem was not so much with those around me, who were as hope-worthy and dismaying as any other set of human beings, as with the fact that the world I sought to be a part of—a world of creativity and ideas, of an openness to strangeness and fragility, of a deep and abiding care for social justice—simply did not exist around me. Indeed, I had no language even to express what I was looking for. Like an infant learning vision, I assumed that what I could not see did not exist.

A reaction to this kind of alienation from the options life appears to present to us is, at least for the philosophically inclined, to abstract our feelings onto a metaphysical plane. Mistaking my alienation from the world around me as alienation from the world, I began to wonder if perhaps there was a simple mental cure that could connect me to the flow of things that everyone else seemed to be in.[26] Maybe if I could just stop thinking all the time, analyzing everything all the time, then I could be part of the world. I chanced across a line from Wallace Stevens that spoke to this feeling, and that I have memorized to this day: “It may be the ignorant man, alone, / Has any chance to mate his life with life.” But I wanted a chance to become one with life without falling into ignorance. For a time, I came to believe that Buddhism offered this path.

I arrived at this belief through a series of coincidences, or at least what seemed like coincidences.[27] In the late 1990s, my mother, a rabbi, had gone on a meditation retreat held at Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts. She went there because of a wave of Jewish interest in Buddhism spurred by the publication of Roger Kamenetz’s 1994 best-seller, *The Jew in the Lotus*, which first coined the term “JUBU” (now more commonly rendered as JewBu). Kamenetz’s book is about accompanying eight Jewish spiritual leaders on a trip to meet the Dalai Lama in exile in Dharamsala, India. Kamenetz popularized a phenomenon that had begun at least a century earlier, when in 1893 a man named Charles Strauss became the first U.S. Jew to convert to Buddhism. The engagement between the religious traditions really took off, however, in the late 1960s and ’70s, when a group of young, alienated Jews (perhaps not too dissimilar from my teenage self) made their own discovery of Buddhism through study and trips to Southeast Asia. The principal four—Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield, Jacqueline Mandell (neé Schwartz), and Joseph Goldstein—would go on to found IMS.[28]

While as a healthy skeptic my mother remained somewhat aloof from this trend, she still found the experience quite meaningful. I remember her telling me on her return how food had never tasted so good as when one had been silently meditating for days, since you finally were present enough to focus on it. This description of thinking less and feeling more intrigued me. She paid for me to go on a four-day youth retreat as a high school graduation present.

During the very first “Dharma talk,” the leader of the retreat told us about an experience she had had meditating. One day while walking silently through the woods she stopped to look at the scenery around her. As she looked up to see the tree leaves in the sunlight, she realized that she had never *really* seen leaves before. She had always seen them with a million other thoughts in her mind. But that day, through the focus gained in her years of meditation, she was finally seeing the trees as they were, without the cloud of words and concerns. I was listening to someone describe the experience I had always sought but never knew was possible—the feeling of absolute, unmediated connection.

After leaving the retreat, I began to devour popular works in Buddhism, especially by D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and Nhat Hanh. When I read Watts’s claim that there was a moment in meditative practice when “the peculiar anxiety which Kierkegaard has rightly seen to lie at the very roots of the ordinary man’s soul is no longer there,” I became

convinced not only that Buddhism was the path to the experience of the world I wanted but also that that experience would be linked to my liberation from alienated anxiety.[29] Buddhism, through its techniques of meditative practice, would be the thread to suture me to the world. I never thought to "take refuge" in (convert to) Buddhism, but I did think of meditation and Buddhist philosophy as keys to the way of being I most cherished.

Once in university, however, I largely delayed academic study of Buddhism until a planned third-year semester abroad in Dharamsala. By the time I left, I had read a fair amount of postcolonial criticism. I was familiar with the idea that Western scholars had a long-standing fascination with an "unchanging East," whose lived complexity was masked by Orientalist fantasy. And like many people caught in an ideological trap, I could see perfectly well how it applied to others but not to myself. The idea that my vision of Buddhism might be distorted by Orientalist desire never crossed my mind. Buddhism was the true path, and I was finally about to encounter it in the real world.

On that point, at least, I was right: in Dharamsala I did encounter Buddhism in the real world. But that did not mean that I somehow found a community of enlightened people who *really* saw trees, had dissolved their false sense of self, and didn't experience anxiety. Instead I met Tibetan laypeople who struggled day by day to make a living, monks who had been dropped off in the monastery as toddlers because their families couldn't afford to feed them, and a whole trove of Westerners like myself, who were asking this people in exile to show them spiritual truth. I felt wretched in my ignorance and ashamed of my desires. How had I been so wrong? How had I not seen that the suffering of the world was political, not just spiritual?

Perhaps, I thought, it was the Chinese colonization of Tibet and the resulting condition of exile that was at fault. But as I began to read about the history of Buddhism, I discovered I had been misled there, as well. The Buddhist philosophical system was as full of disagreement about nitpicky issues as the Western one I thought I was fleeing. I had wanted Buddhism to free me from the anxieties of self-consciousness, but of course "anxiety" was hardly a canonical topic in Buddhist history, which was more concerned with the problem of how to end the cycle of transmigration. The focus was more (though not exclusively by any means) on how to get out of living, not how to be peaceful while living. And although there were certainly exemplars of progressive Buddhist communities, the direct link to liberation I had read about in writers like Thich Nhat Hanh turned out to be another modern invention. Historically, Buddhists have been about as prone to war, slavery, and domination as any other people.[30]

But at least, I thought, the technique was pure; meditation would work. And in some ways, it does. As I mentioned above, the anecdotal evidence for meditation's capacity to help us be more present and less anxious is relatively strong. Meditation, however, is not really an ancient Buddhist technique cultivated for these purposes. Before the twentieth century, in fact, there were almost no lay Buddhists who meditated and very few monks who did. Most monks spent their time in daily monastery upkeep and the performance of rituals. The reason that laypeople and monks began meditating was, in large part, British colonialism. As monasteries and texts were destroyed and Buddhism persecuted, an innovative group of Burmese Buddhist leaders found a new way to protect the Dharma: by embodying it in the general population. Similar movements sprang up in Thailand. It was the second generation of teachers—most prominently S. N. Goenka—who would welcome the first generation of JewBus to Southeast Asia.[31] As I was leaving Dharamsala, however, I was not aware of this particularly anticolonial history of meditation. All I could see was that I had become part of a group of Orientalizers who were seeking their own spiritual salvation at the price of another people's political devastation.

For some years, overwhelmed by disenchantment, I abandoned my study of Buddhism, or at least directly. I continued studying philosophy, especially Jean-Paul Sartre and his critical descendants in French thought (Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and others). But while mostly focused on unpacking these difficult writings, I often thought about their connections to modern Buddhism. So much of what I read at that time was asking what struck me as very similar questions to those the Buddhists were asking:

How can one be an authentic individual in the midst of an inauthentic world? How can we understand a world that lacks essence and is constantly transforming? How can we develop and ground an ethical system if there are no normative values given to us? How can individuals flourish in a world of such intense misery? And should they even aspire to happiness while others are so miserable?

This overlap is not surprising. In part that is because these are generally perplexing human questions that can be found across global philosophy. And in part it is because of mutual influences across philosophical traditions that span the centuries. But perhaps most significantly, modern Buddhist thought was partly shaped by the horizon of existentialism. This often meant showing how philosophers like Kierkegaard or Sartre had correctly seen the existential anguish of life but not understood the path out of it that Buddhist meditation offered. We can see this, for example, in the citation from Watts above, in which he says that Buddhism helps us overcome the anxiety that Kierkegaard only diagnosed. D. T. Suzuki similarly suggested that Buddhism went beyond what existentialism could offer: "The existentialist looks into the abyss of *tathatā* [suchness] and trembles, and is seized with inexpressible fear. Zen would tell him: Why not plunge right into the abyss and see what is there? The idea of individualism fatally holds him back from throwing himself into the devil's maw."[32] Modern Buddhist luminaries were not above scholarly one-upmanship!

There is something interesting about this particular relation between Buddhism and existentialism, however, beyond a standard debate about truth claims. Two of the watchwords of existentialism in this era were "anxiety" and "authenticity." Part of what made Kierkegaard, Sartre, and others so appealing was the relation that they drew between them. The authentic self was not the calm individual who managed to function day by day. Nor was it the fearless subject who had overcome their anxiety. Rather, it was the existential hero who had understood that there was no life beyond anxiety. To be authentic was to come to terms with the fact that our life was absurd and full of despair, that we were hopeless and abandoned, a paltry figure in an uncaring universe, *and yet* to still be able to make meaning, take stances, and passionately engage with this very indifferent universe.

What Watts and Suzuki were basically saying was, to put it colloquially, "Nice try, pal." Existentialism tore through the idea that we could be authentic according to god-given or nature-given ideals, and it forced us to reconcile the fact that any beliefs we had were solely the product of the human imagination. This was a good start, Watts and Suzuki responded, but it missed the final step. The flux of the universe does not render it meaningless; flux itself is the meaning. Zen offered a different kind of authenticity: one that found a path to overcome anxiety by seeking out an experience on the other side of this realization about flux. When we let go of the self, when we let go of all the language and concepts and strivings we use to try to make sense of the world, *then* we pierce through our personal anxiety into the impersonal experience of enlightenment.[33] To be authentic in this sense is to have had an experience of enlightenment, and then to radiate that experience in everything one does.

The irony of the whole situation is that while Suzuki and Watts gained an edge on the question of authenticity, they would eventually lose it on the same grounds. They claimed a path to authenticity that could itself be authenticated through the experiences of adherents and historical figures. The trouble was that as scholars began to do ethnographies and dig through Buddhist archives, they did not find much of anything like what Suzuki described. You could, to be sure, read admonitions to achieve perfected states, but if you actually spent time with monks, you found that many of them did not put much effort into trying to surpass anxiety and reach enlightenment. Instead they often breezed through the texts as part of elaborate rituals, not attempts at liberation. This was the devastating claim made by Robert Sharf in his landmark essay, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience" (1995): "scholars read ideological prescription as phenomenological description."[34] In other words, the texts that Suzuki relied on to define his version of Zen were about not what was authentically achieved, but what was textually imagined.

Essays like Sharf's had seemed to settle the matter for me. But as I kept progressing through French thought, I eventually arrived at the late lectures of Michel Foucault. These lectures, I was surprised to see, more or less repeated Suzuki's thoughts about medieval Japan with respect to ancient Greece and Rome. According to Foucault, modern Western thought had lost its way because it divorced truth claims from the actual practices that might help one realize the truth. We might, for example, think that the truth of ethics was generosity, but what methods did we have to actually make ourselves be more generous, beyond will power? Foucault argued that this separation lay at the heart of many impasses in modern life and thought. We had become helplessly inauthentic because we kept holding ideas we had no methods to enable ourselves to actually practice. He called these missing elements "practices" or "techniques of the self," and he worked to excavate them from writers like Seneca and Aurelius.[35]

I thought it surprising that Foucault was starting to sound a lot like Suzuki. And then I discovered that this was no coincidence: Foucault had been reading works on Zen—including one with an important introduction by Suzuki—while he was working on these lectures.[36] It suddenly seemed as if my journey away from Suzuki had come full circle. And it made me begin to wonder: How much did it really matter if his Zen was not "authentic"? He had certainly made incorrect claims—and we owe a lot to Sharf and others for shaking up the hagiographic picture of him—but it was still the case that he, Foucault, and others were doing something very interesting with the archives that they were, in a sense, inventing. As the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has written, maybe it's time we move beyond noting that traditions are invented and begin to think about "the inventiveness of tradition."[37] If we accept that modern Buddhism is an invention, then what can we learn from its inventiveness?

My return to Suzuki led me to ask questions about the general dismissal of modern Buddhism. Could it really be the case that so many people were wrong about Buddhism for so long? If meditation really worked, did it matter that none of the monks I met in Dharamsala did it? And what were we to make of all those modern writers from Asia—D. T. Suzuki, Anagarika Dharmapala, Taixu, the Dalai Lama, B. R. Ambedkar, and many others—who were arguing as vociferously for modern Buddhism as the Western Orientalists? And especially, how did it matter that some of them, like Nhat Hanh and Ambedkar, were so committed to equality and justice through Buddhism? Indeed, this has long been one of the main critical concerns about Orientalism: that in its fascination with what is wrong about Western knowledge of the East, it allowed very little room for how thinkers in other parts of the world thought about themselves.[38]

Why, then, is this not a book that explains the globalist, Buddhist worldview via the Asian philosophers who outlined it? Because, while I think such an account of modern, global Buddhist philosophy would be useful, the overwhelming focus on Buddhism as a philosophy was what got me—and most Orientalists—into trouble in the first place. Buddhism first appeared in the West in primarily two ways: as an exalted philosophy and as a degraded practice. Western writers upheld the marvelous philosophical insights of Buddhism at the same time that they excoriated its present condition in Asian countries.[39] I learned in Dharamsala that this division was precisely what was occluding our understanding of Buddhist actuality. One cannot understand Buddhism as a pure philosophy or as a specific set of practices; one has to understand it, like most things, as part of an articulated and socially embedded web of relationships among different actors, ideas, and historical facts. And one of the best ways to do this is and has always been through stories.

Donald Lopez, one of the main critics of our impoverished understanding of Buddhism, puts the point precisely in his *The Story of Buddhism*:

> Most Buddhists throughout history have not engaged in meditation. Many monks have not known the four noble truths. But everyone, monk and nun, layman and laywoman, knows stories about the Buddha, about the bodhisattvas, about famous monks and nuns. These stories, sometimes miraculous, sometimes humorous, sometimes both, have provided the most enduring means for the transmission of the dharma, more enduring even than grand

> images carved in stone. Each retelling of a story is slightly different from the one before, with embellishments and omissions, yet always able to be told again, its plot providing a coherence to the myriad constituents of experience, from which we may derive both instruction and delight.[40]

What I have set out to do in this book is to show how modern novelists from around the world—from Botswana, Cuba, Japan, South Africa, Tibet, the United Kingdom, and the United States—have told the story of modern Buddhism. I have tried to understand and rearticulate the instruction they provide, the ways they have used Buddhism to make sense of the world around them and their place in it.

I argue that one of the most intriguing things we learn from this study of Buddhism in world literature is that no attempt to extract Buddhism from the complexity of its life-worlds is possible or even meaningful. It is not possible, as I have already mentioned, because every attempt to do so has inevitably found that even the most abstracted claims can only be based on and respondent to material frameworks. And even if it were possible, it would not be meaningful because to have a philosophy, as Foucault argued, is not to have a simple vision of the way the world works that may or may not be liveable. It is to think through how our ideas about the world succeed or fail to coincide with what we are able to make possible. It is thus equally about how we create the practices and institutions in which to effectively embed our ideals. My literary history of global Buddhism is the story of this ongoing dynamic between the promised ideals of Buddhism and their embedded histories.

Here's a story, for example. At the turn of the twentieth century, a powerful and well-connected Tibetan monk leaves his home on what appears to be a religious pilgrimage. The timing is somewhat suspicious, since there is no particularly good reason for him to be on pilgrimage now, especially since it is an extremely intense moment for his country. It is, after all, the height of the "Great Game" of empire, and Tibet is being threatened by both Russia to the north and Britain, via India, from the south. Tibet's fraught relationships with Mongolia and China—whose patronage powerful Tibetan religiopolitical figures have sought for centuries—also continues.[41] Along the way, the monk has a surprising number of contacts with the British and their imperial agents, and an outside observer—at least one savvy enough to know that monks are political figures—might begin to wonder if his trip is indeed just a religious pilgrimage, or somehow a covert excursion related to geopolitics.

Readers of British literature may recognize the plot I've described as more or less that of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1900/1901), and in a sense, it is. But it's also a description of a 1905 journey by the Panchen Lama (the second most powerful figure, after the Dalai Lama, in the Geluk sect of Tibetan Buddhism) who went to India on a pilgrimage to Buddhist holy sites. The trip was certainly in part a genuine pilgrimage for the lama, who by all accounts found it profound and moving, but it also functioned as " 'religious cover' " for covert political meetings with the British.[42] That such a political context for the lama of *Kim* might underlie his trip to India has not, so far as I know, been broached by another literary critic, although, as I will argue in chapter 1, there is ample evidence for this within the text of *Kim* itself. Indeed, the lama figure in *Kim* is based on this very lama.

Such a critical lapse has occurred because we take the lama to represent only our own ideas about Buddhism. Because literary critics assume Buddhism to be otherworldly, they take it at face value that the sole purpose of his journey is to find a mystical "river of the Buddha's arrow," where he will find salvation. Because they assume that Buddhism and politics don't mix, they take it that the interesting political plot of the novel has to do with British imperialism in India, and ignore the obvious Tibetan context. If we change such assumptions, we learn something about both modern Buddhism and modern literature. We learn that modern Buddhism has never been otherworldly or removed from everyday concerns, but has always been embedded in the politics of its time. And we learn that literature, far from simply representing Orientalist fantasies, in fact often registers a complexity that the critics have tended to ignore. This

is even the case, as we will see, with Edward Said's own writing on *Kim*.[43]

This is the kind of reading I do throughout this book. I want to show how what we have taken for Buddhist abstraction is in fact embedded in modern life-worlds, and to discuss the lessons that begin to emerge once we pay attention to this. While I will primarily focus on the thematic lessons we may learn, I will also discuss what this teaches us about the formal aspects of these novels in greater detail in each of the chapters that follow. It includes, for example: the meaning of the frame story in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; the way literary language and characters are reincarnated in Jamyang Norbu's *Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* and J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*; the interpretation of seemingly nonsensical phrases or plot twists in Severo Sarduy's *Cobra*; and the structuring power of parables in Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*. In these and other instances, the application of vague ideas about what Buddhism is stops us from understanding how these novels formally operate. Once we know how Buddhism has informed these novels at a complex, formal level, we will see their composition in a new light.

Like all stories, my global literary history of global modern Buddhism has to begin and end somewhere. This is *a* literary history; not *the* literary history. Some of the choices I have made in telling this story may surprise readers. You will not find in what follows a discussion of Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, the stories of Jorge Luis Borges, or any other fictions generally associated with modern forms of Buddhism. Part of the reason for this is precisely that they are expected, and I have tried to discuss Buddhism in authors and countries generally less associated with it. This includes Buddhism's often unremarked appearance in canonical works like *Heart of Darkness* and writers like Coetzee. And it also includes a greater diversity of writers than are often considered in studies of Buddhism and literature: novels like Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*—a novel about founding a new kind of Buddhism in the midst of insanity and domestic abuse—and Severy Sarduy's *Cobra*—a wild narrative about magic potions, sex changes, and drug dealers spending time with Tibetan monks in India.

The diversity of these selections matters a great deal for the literary history I am telling here. Too often, it is presumed that modern Buddhism is mostly for middle-class, bourgeois white people who have time to meditate and possessions to abandon. There is some truth to this. But focusing on it too heavily erases the many experiences with Buddhism that we find across lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality.[44] And factoring in these experiences presents us with a richer tapestry of modern Buddhist novels. It allows us to understand how seemingly abstract themes like authenticity, liberation, and enlightenment become embedded differently depending on the subject and their identity (or identities). At the same time, it helps us understand how such themes are shared in spite of the remarkable diversity of the authors. That's why I have grouped these novels by their shared themes. Across their diversity, they help to illustrate a singular history of global Buddhism: one in which we give up the hope for total salvation and instead focus on spectral illuminations that can help us work through the burdens of history and identity in our quests for liberation and authenticity.

In each chapter I will also relate the novels to chapters from my own story of learning, unlearning, and relearning global Buddhist history. While some academic readers may be less interested in my personal story, some general readers may find these sections more entertaining than the literary criticism. I have done my best to make the criticism as available and interesting as possible, within the conditions of scholarship, to readers coming from different backgrounds. I situate each novel's encounter with Buddhism at the nexus of authorial intentions, linguistic and narrative choices, and historical and philosophical contexts. I believe this methodological pluralism better explores the complexity of what Buddhism does in these novels than any particular school of interpretation.[45] One tip to readers who do not frequently engage with literary criticism: it is much more enjoyable to read about novels that you have read, so I encourage you to read as many of these wonderful books as you can.

Whatever your background, I hope this book leads you to take critical Buddhist