
As Buddhism’s engagement with the West deepens, its need to adapt and change is sometimes pertinent. Traditional understandings and practices around gender, ritual and superstition can sometimes be met with rather spectacular scepticism in the West (and often justifiably so), but many of the core principles of the Buddhist tradition – which are less about belief and more about practice – are being embraced by Westerners like Lesley Synge.

Synge’s latest publication, *Mountains Belong to the People Who Love Them*, is a personal testament to the Buddhist tradition of walking, dwelling, and being in the forest. This backdrop of the natural world is important in the context of Buddhist practice, for whatever truth the Buddha found in meditation, it was a truth rooted in the real. An image we may recall of the Buddha in this context is that of him seated cross-legged with one hand touching the ground, calling the earth to witness. In its own way, *Mountains Belong to the People Who Love Them* is an extension of the same project. It is a captivating, thoughtful and thought-provoking read. The mountains of the title are more than metaphors; the writer’s engagement with them is physical and spiritual, singular and collective, emotional and intellectual.

The first half of the book is presented as a combination of free-form poetry and haiku, and provides an account of a journey Synge took to South Korea to teach conversational English in 2002. She took her then twelve-year-old son with her, and the two experience a degree of alienation and culture shock, the result of their having very little language in common with members of their host community. The boy retreats to the forest to play, and his mother to her teaching and her meditation practice. Yet the landscape has its influence on them, and it is a long-lasting one.

Synge observes the South Korean land and its people with the sharp eye of the outsider, paying gentle and good-humoured attention to the unavoidable riddles that arise through cultural difference. At the same time, she is only too aware of her own limitations, especially linguistically:

Korean poets - I see your dilemma:
rice is too beautiful for words and barley
won’t stop dancing (24)

The area in which Synge and her son stay is an isolated rural district in the far south, dwarfed by Duncheol Mountain, which they traverse each day. Synge tucks into her minimal teaching duties with good spirit, and engages best she can with the traditional Buddhism practised in the region, but the boy is recalcitrant:

My assistant’s on strike. Day after day he spends
spread-eagled on the High School’s entrance boulder
and won’t budge –
unless to tramp under new-leafed oaks
plotting squirrel taming and bear capture, heroic and alone.
The mountain is his mother now (26)

At the mid-term break, Synge’s son joins a school tour to the beach, while she opts to climb a peak in Jiri San, one of Korea’s oldest mountain-based national parks. The trek is crowded with Korean pilgrims travelling by moonlight to witness sunrise at the peak of Chonwangbong and the poem which describes this journey – ‘Excursion to Jiri San before the mid-term holiday’ – contains some extraordinary lines (‘Here under slow swirling stars is / a lunar movie of countless human shadows’ [34]). And yet, I couldn’t help but feel the writing in this piece was a little too prosaic, the language lacking in specificity. This, and some of the other lengthier poems in this section of the book need to surprise us more as readers. Synge’s skills with rhythm can sag, her use of enjambment sometimes needs more careful attention.

When her son flies back to Australia, Synge’s solitude in Korea is underlined, her evenings spent reading and writing in her room. The monsoon brings plenty of rain, and after the barley is harvested, the poems improve. They are more focussed, the language more concise, the images effective in their simplicity. Synge’s nod to the tradition of Zen poetry is apparent and rewarding here:

Do the insects scream
for a typhoon
or against? (46)

And

Water
moving mountain.
Mountain
moving water. (47)

The second half of Mountains Belong to the People Who Love Them is in the form of a personal essay, illustrated by quality photography and punctuated with occasional haiku. It relays Synge’s experience of joining an Australian Dharma Yatra, an annual long walk organised by a Buddhist group and following a sacred journey tradition inspired by ancient India. This particular walk traverses the Tweed Caldera in the coastal border ranges that link Queensland and New South Wales. Synge is clearly more at home in this landscape, and amongst this group of forty walkers, and her writing is immediately more assured and purposeful than in the first half of the book.

The essay blends personal observation and reflection with appropriate background research. The result is a work with emotional depth and a perceptive sense of verisimilitude. At the same time it is a form of haibun, blending prose and haiku, although in this case the prose is very much the central driver. Declan, the son we met in the Korea is now twenty, and he accompanies Synge, now fifty-seven, on the seven-day walk, at her request, helping to set up her tent and spur her along. Synge is concerned about her stamina (my boots / always the last find the campsite’ [59]) and one of the points of narrative tension in the essay is the question of whether she has the physical capacity to complete the journey. The connection between the first half of the book and the second is close and rewarding. Although the two halves may be read as stand-alone works, in many ways the full meaning of the first half of the book cannot be fully realised until the second half is complete. The recalcitrant assistant

of the Korean journey, for example, has now blossomed into a young adult. Declan’s awareness of Buddhist principles and respect for the forest is different but no less complex than his mother’s. One of the slow journeys referred to in the book’s title is surely the journey of parenting Declan.

Synge effortlessly combines personal reflection on meditation and her own wry observations of fellow walkers with some useful history of the beautiful Gold Coast Hinterland region. Her acknowledgement of indigenous history and the Yugambeh people’s connection to land in the area is respectful and forms an interesting aspect to the essay, particularly as she and her fellow walkers move through and respond (through meditation) to some key sacred sites. At the same time, the experiences of the early Europeans are thoughtfully considered. The influence of the mountains, their sheer scale in relation to a single walker, is clearly profound. And, again, the ability of language to capture such relationships and experiences is called into question: ‘All this projection of human thought onto a natural phenomenon – is it a help or a hindrance?’ (90)

The ‘Eastern Australia’ chapter of Mountains Belong to the People Who Love Them is, in my view, an outstanding contribution to Australian nature writing. At the same time, it also makes a worthwhile contribution to literature about the contemporary Western Buddhist experience. The book bears witness to the way Australians have embraced Buddhism, and in turn demonstrates how Buddhist ethics and practices might enable us to engage with our own landscapes more meaningfully.

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