

Foreword

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Social scientists are fond of characterizing the major difference between Eastern and Western cultures in terms of collectivism and individualism. While Eastern cultures are said to place a high value on the groups to which one belongs, Western cultures prize individual freedom. To be sure, cultural differences are always more complex than our characterizations, but most would agree that there is more than a grain of truth in such views. It is precisely this grain of truth that is magnified in the ways in which Buddhist practices have been absorbed by practitioners and devotees in the West. For example, in the mental health arena, there has been a longstanding assumption that one's problems are essentially psychological nature. Thus, therapy is variously oriented toward removing repression, enhancing self-acceptance, reshaping individual cognition, and so on. Buddhist practices could congenially be folded into this tradition, as they could be viewed as bringing about mental transformation. Thus, where Zen Buddhists saw meditation as entering a state of "no mind," Western therapists and researchers focus on the individual's state of "mindfulness." In the popular realm, the Western public has long embraced practices of self-improvement. The popular press provides daily doses of advice on self-help, boosting self-esteem, developing a winning personality, and so on. Buddhist practices can again be folded into this tradition, as they seem to provide means of improving self-control, reducing anxiety, and inviting tranquility. Yet, in the Eastern tradition, it is precisely this preoccupation with the self that such practices are designed to discourage. Seldom do we find in the Western literature on Buddhist practices an emphasis on inter-being, inter-dependent arising, or Indra's net of infinite connection. Nor is there pervasive interest in the relational outcomes of Buddhist practices, namely a tolerant, nurturing, and compassionate orientation toward others.

It is precisely this door to a more relational conception of Buddhist practice that the present volume begins to open. This relational emphasis takes several forms. For some contributors to this volume it is a concern with the way in which Buddhist practices contribute to the social good. Pressing beyond self-improvement, the interest is in the ramifications of Buddhist traditions and practices for communal life. One essentially practices "for others." For other authors, the interest is in the ways in which Buddhist practices grow out of cultural traditions. Thus, rather than "a pill to be swallowed" for self-benefit, entering such practices is more promisingly viewed as participation in a tradition of relationships. Still others focus on the relationships between teacher and student or clinician and client, and the dialogic participation required to bring about effective practice. One may appear to practice meditation alone, but such practice always carries with it the traces of those from whom one has learned. One is never alone.

Finally, we find various authors emphasizing the more cosmological implications of

Buddhist practices. Especially important is the sense of an ultimate interdependence of all beings. This sensitivity is expressed in many ways. On a small scale it is there in the various chapters that speak of the unity of mind/emotion/body/action. Segmenting these elements off, and treating them as causally related (as often done in the Western tradition) is viewed as misleading and possibly harmful to a fully engaged practice. There are also chapters exploring the ways in which engaging in Buddhist practices is an immersion in relations and preparing an entry into relations, and thus gives expression to an overarching sense of connectivity. Or as Dr. Haruki expresses it in his Preface, “The self... is inseparable from the world’s dynamics.”

We must also be grateful for the wisdom and talents of Maurits G.T. Kwee, the master orchestrator of this work. Above all, he is acutely aware of these dynamics and what this might mean for the future of Buddhism. Any body of theory or practice that becomes solidified – completed in itself – is endangered. It cuts itself away from the continuous, emergent process of relationship that sustains vitality and engagement. And so it is that Dr. Kwee has presciently created links between this ancient tradition and cutting edge ideas in the contemporary intellectual world. Slowly the world’s peoples are becoming conscious of the massive anguish spawned by competing claims to superiority – whether in matters of spirit, morality, rationality, or objectivity. And there is a simultaneous realization of the potentials inherent in newly emerging conceptions of multiple truths, dialogue, and collaborative practice. By exploring the strands of Buddhism that resonate with these developments, not only is the Buddhist tradition revitalized, but the wisdom and insights contribute more fully to contemporary debates and developments on human well-being. We owe to Dr. Kwee an appreciation for his fostering this precious synergy.

It is my personal hope that through this blending of pursuits we move at least one small step toward a world in which all traditions may share these joys of mutual exploration. This would indeed be a world in which tolerance, nurturance and compassion would prevail, and thus, cherished goals of Buddhism would be realized.

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