

Essentials of Buddhist Scriptures: A Guide to the Major Sutras and Sacred Writings

Essentials of Buddhist Manners and Rituals

New Perspective: Living Our Lives the Buddhist Way

By Kodo Matsunami
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Here are three more publications of Kodo Matsunami in English. The translation of his invaluable treatises from Japanese and publishing them in well got-up handy volumes is a remarkable contribution to the worldwide study of Japanese Buddhism. Japanese scholars have been as well grounded in research and prolific in their writings. But they had not been accessible to scholars to the degree that their originality and relevance deserve. The recent efforts of this scholar-cum-religious leader is indeed praiseworthy.

“Essentials of Buddhist Scriptures” with the subtitle “A guide to the Major Sutras and Sacred Writings” is an anthology of texts drawn from (a) earliest Buddhist texts in Pali, (b) Mahāyāna Sūtras, (c) Buddhist Treatises, (d) Chinese Buddhist Texts and (e) Japanese Buddhist Texts. While an introductory chapter outlines the origins of Buddhist texts in different traditions and their transmission from country to country, the concluding chapter is an insightful analysis of the “Meaning and Value of Buddhist texts today.” The texts which Kodo Matsunami has selected for presentation are not only representative

of the diversity of traditions but also illustrative of the wisdom and value which Buddhism sought to inculcate. Prof. Alfred Bloom calls such texts as “the most famous, popular or edifying”. There is no doubt much thought has been given to identifying these texts.

The second work “Essentials of Buddhist Manners and Rituals” is called “A Practical Guide.” Beginning with an introduction on Buddhism in Japan, it deals with in detail the topics of Priests and Temples, including services and rituals, Ordination, religious services, and pilgrimages, Death and Funerals and the memorialization of the dead. Much of the information has been drawn from field observation and critical examination of rationale behind religious practices and ritual.

Kodo Matsunami does emphasize the impact that Buddhism has had on Japanese society. He says, “By the sixth century, the Mahayana form of Buddhism had arrived in Japan, via the Korean peninsula, together with the high culture of China. It came to be accepted by the ruling class, and was used as a device to unify the then-expanding state, centered on the Yamato court...Mahayana Buddhism teaches that all living beings possess an inherent ability to attain buddhahood (or enlightenment), called the “Buddha-nature,” and that their salvation is based upon the compassion of the bodhisattva, an enlightened being who delays his own enjoyment of nirvana in order to ensure that all may gain it with him. In Japan, this idea of an inherent buddha-nature fused with native beliefs that a person becomes a *kami* upon death, and so down to the present the Japanese believe that if a person receives ordination as the Buddha’s disciple, even after death, he or she can reach the other shore of enlightenment and attain buddhahood.”

“The New Perspective: Living Our Lives the Buddhist Way” is characterized by the

titles Kodo Matsunami has chosen for his Preface and Epilogue:

- My desire to impart a teaching of harmonious co-existence;
- I want to spend my life with a quiet smile on my face.

Divided into five parts, this book deals with fifty-seven subjects grouped under:

- Overcoming birth anxiety
- Overcoming the anxiety of old age
- Overcoming the anxiety of sickness and disease
- Overcoming the anxiety of death
- Heal our hearts when we are tired of life.

Each of the fifty-seven chapters in an insightful essay, highlighting the Buddhist view of life to provide advice on how to cope with day-to-day problems of life. Drawing on his own personal experiences, he offers solutions to issues which cause anxiety and confusion. It is a masterful interpretation of Buddhist values as applicable to life here and now.

Kodo Matsunami, the seventy-four year old veteran educator, had been a Professor of International Cultural Studies at Ueno Gakuen University and is a councilor of the World Buddhist University. As head priest of his own Jodo Buddhist Temple, holding the rank of Bishop, he takes care of the spiritual progress of a large congregation. It is indeed a source of immense satisfaction that his erudition and experience is being made available to benefit a widening audience. We ask him for more.

– Ananda W.P. Guruge

Buddha in Sri Lanka

By Swarna Wickremeratne
State University of New York Press,
Albany, 2006.
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There is an old debate in the study of religion and culture concerning who understands the subject best: the insider or the outsider. Some have argued the only the insiders can truly understand a religion, for they participate in it and see its inner meanings. Others, however, have argued that the outsider has a distinct advantage. The classic statement of this position was offered by Durkheim, who held that the outside observer had a better opportunity to understand the structure and meaning of religious experience. Durkheim noted, “Merely because there exists a ‘religious experience’...it by no means follows that the reality which grounds it should conform objectively with the idea the believers have of it” (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. K. Fields [New York: Free Press, 1995, 420]). Thus, the debate between the insiders and outsiders has raged over the years. Historians of religion have tended to gravitate toward a more dialogical position, one that accepts that the truth in this debate lies somewhere in the middle. Wilfred C. Smith in his book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, suggested that the study of religion should focus not on artifacts or texts but on persons. The outsider should try to understand the viewpoint of the insiders and should dialogue with the insiders to appreciate their perspective on the meaning of the religion. This same wisdom has been given by anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard and Mary Douglas, who emphasized the need to focus on the people rather than the texts or the beliefs of a religion and culture. The field of Buddhist studies has also stressed the importance of dialogue with the insiders and has urged an appreciation of not only the texts but also the people and their