

Book Reviews

Buddhist Answers to Current Issues

By Ananda W. P. Guruge
AuthorHouse Publications,
Bloomington, Indiana, 2005,
xxvi + 317 pp.
ISBN 1-4208-1642-X

The role of religion in a devotee's personal life is obvious: it provides faith, comfort, and guidance for a virtuous life. In addition to this role, religion has a wider influence on mankind. Human history is full of vast influences, often positive but also at times negative, exerted by – or in the name of – religion. Societies and great civilizations have been built on the basis of various religions. Many bitter and destructive wars have also been fought in the name of religion.

In today's world, many turn to religion for answers to key issues and questions that confront mankind, including warfare, the environment, abortion, genetic modification, social equality, and a host of others. The answers a religion can offer to these wider questions are crucial for its value and relevance in the modern world, over and above its role in the life of individual devotees.

Buddhism has flourished for over two and a half millennia in Asia, and has in more recent times begun to have a wide following in the West as well. What has Buddhism to offer in relation to the burning global questions that concern the present-day society and present-day thinkers? As a major world religion it is legitimate that Buddhism's answers to these questions are explored.

This is precisely what the book under review, which is sub-titled 'Studies in Socially Engaged Humanistic

Buddhism', does. It explores Buddhist answers to a host of issues that are relevant to the present day. These include: Can Buddhism, as a dogma-free humanistic spirituality, replace organized religion? How can Buddhism help in the socialization of children and youth? How can Buddhism help to accomplish the multi-faceted goals of a 'whole person' education? What contribution can Buddhism make to the securing of peace, security and prosperity? In addition, there is a discussion of the Buddhist stance on a range of bioethical issues such as abortion, euthanasia, suicide, genetic engineering and asexual reproduction. Finally, there are chapters that deal specifically with the propagation, preservation and expanding role of Buddhism, and on the value of Sino-Indian Buddhist literature in answering current issues.

Each of the eight chapters is substantial, and gives a comprehensive discussion of the issues it covers. And each chapter stands independently, so a reader can select and read on a topic that interests him. The discussions are balanced, extremely lucid, and well-argued. They are based on Canonical and other authoritative texts. Extensive citations are given where needed. In addition, the structure of the chapters is reader-friendly, with numbered sections and a final succinct set of conclusions.

As for matters of content, much of the material will be of interest not just to Buddhists but to the wider intelligentsia concerned with global issues. The chapter on bioethical questions covers many topics that scientists, politicians and philosophers are currently struggling with, including cloning and euthanasia. The author gives an authoritative account of the Buddhist

position – or, rather, his own well-argued position from the stance of Humanistic Buddhism. The value of the Buddhist input to the development of bioethical principles is emphasized.

The discussion of education is another contribution worth mentioning. The principles of education/instruction implicit in the Buddhist tradition, starting with the Buddha's own statements and practices, are clearly delineated. The Buddha was an exceptionally competent and insightful teacher, and his ideas and methods have guided the teaching traditions of many Asian Buddhist countries for centuries. The author convincingly argues that these have a relevance to the process of 'whole person' education in to-day's world.

Equally important to highlight is the chapter on peace, security and prosperity. Perhaps nothing worries the people of today more than the problem of violence, including warfare and other conflicts. The recent years have given rise to debates and discussions about unconventional warfare, pre-emptive wars, and terrorism. These are matters one can neither avoid nor ignore. This chapter discusses the issues in this domain in much detail. What is the stance of Buddhism with regard to war, to the enforcement of law and order, to ethnic conflict? The author, as the foremost authority on Dharmasoka and on the Sri Lankan Pali chronicle Mahavamsa, is perhaps better equipped to deal with this area than any other contemporary scholar. His discussion of these issues is lucid and informative, and dispels some commonly held misconceptions.

Overall, *Buddhist Answers to Current Issues* is an ambitious work that makes a significant contribution to the literature. It is an authoritative collection of essays, based as much on a fine understanding of current issues as on unsurpassed textual scholarship. The author's

mastery of the material, and the clarity of his thinking, shine through these pages. Buddhist scholars, practising Buddhists, social scientists, ethicists and many others concerned with the range of problems mankind is currently faced with will find the book a most rewarding one to read. In addition to providing information to the readers, it is bound to promote and provoke further discussion, which is the ultimate test of a successful book.

My only criticism of this excellent book is that it lacks an index. The well-structured chapters with headings and sub-headings compensate for this to some extent, but not entirely. Perhaps this could be put right in a future edition.

– Padmal de Silva

Three Mountains and Seven Rivers

By Shoun Hino and Toshihiro Wada
eds. *Prof. Musashi Tachikawa's
felicitation Volume.*
Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, India,
2004, xx+903 pp.
ISBN: 8120824687

This huge book is a conference volume dedicated to the sixtieth birthday of renowned Japanese Buddhologist Musashi Tachikawa, containing thirteenth sections and fifty-six articles which range broad subjects from ancient geography to Tantrism. In addition, it also provides a short version of Prof. Tachikawa's curriculum vitae and a list of his publications. The topics presented in this volume by authors who came from all corners of the world echoes academic fields that Prof. Tachikawa has made significant contribution, in particular Buddhist philosophy, logic, Tantrism, and Tibetan Buddhism. It is