

Safeguarding the Heart: A Buddhist Response to Suffering and September 11

By Venerable Yifa

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In this clear and concise book Venerable Yifa analyzes and evaluates the tragic events of September 11, 2001 from a Buddhist perspective. It is an excellent and thought provoking work that both outlines the basic beliefs of Buddhism and places these beliefs within a very real and topical context. Anyone who wants to understand Buddhism as a contemporary living and breathing religion would do well to read this book. It is often the case that books that describe religious faiths do so within a void that fails to relate these faiths to modern life and concerns. Contemporary political, social and economic topics are rarely discussed and the reader is left wondering how particular teachings and beliefs apply to the world he or she deals with on a daily basis. In contrast, Venerable Yifa's book presents Buddhism as a living and vibrant religion that has important things to say about the terrorist attacks that left such a scar on the American psyche. Anyone who reads her book will not only learn a lot about Buddhism, but will also find himself or herself thinking about September 11 in new and possibly unexpected ways.

The work is divided into two parts. Part I describes how basic Buddhism teachings of impermanence, cause and effect and karma may be applied to the events of September 11. It is, however, her applications of the second doctrine, cause and effect, which may prove most challenging to American readers. She does not believe "that simply the wealth and power of the United States were the reasons why the country was attacked." (p. 15) The causes were more than jealousy and envy. In order to correctly understand why September 11 took place Americans must be willing to explore at a much

deeper the level the causes and conditions that led people to commit such horrendous acts. Because everything and everyone are interrelated, nobody is completely innocent when bad things happen. The correct response to September 11 is not revenge, but an honest search for understanding. This requires Americans to engage in the difficult task of exploring the role their own country has played in creating the conditions for terrorism. Indeed, Venerable Yifa points out that we do not just need healing, but also understanding. This leads her to present an understanding of justice which many Americans would do well to heed. Justice for September 11 is usually understood to mean the capturing and punishing of terrorists and their supporters, but Venerable Yifa insists that killing bad people does not remove the conditions that made them bad. True justice will only be achieved when people become aware of causes and effects that lead to terrorism and actively work to minimize them. We must learn that "we cannot say that we bear no responsibility" for the actions of others. (p. 63) In connection with this argument Venerable Yifa offers an interpretation of the idea of freedom that may take some Americans by surprise. Freedom is not simply the right to do what you want free from interference; freedom includes responsibility, and with this responsibility comes the requirement to put ourselves in the others' shoes so that we can understand from where they are coming and the effect we have had on their lives. Only then will we begin to see how our actions can improve the lives of others and minimize the growth of hate and violence. This reviewer could not agree more.

Part II of the book summarizes Buddhism's Four Noble Truths and offers an analysis of the causes of suffering. According to Buddhism there are eight kinds of suffering: (1) suffering caused by birth, (2) suffering caused by aging, (3) suffering caused by sickness and disease, (4) suffering caused by death, (5) suffering caused by departing from people we love, (6) suffering caused by being with people we hate, (7) suffering caused by not having

what we want, and (8) suffering caused by our awareness of being in a body that makes it inevitable that we will experience the first seven causes. While more theoretical, this second section dovetails very well with the first. Venerable Yifa shows how these different forms of suffering are fed by the emotions of anger, frustration and fear. These not only cause mental anguish for the individual, but also lead to actions that cause suffering for others. As long as we allow these emotions to rule our behavior, suffering will continue to spiral out of control. Thus Venerable Yifa admonishes us all to "know our state of mind." (p. 104) She outlines the Four Diligences that help us overcome these negative emotions and also offers a short lesson on meditation. This ties in nicely with Part I, for in doing so she provides the reader with a practical guide for implementing the quest for understanding emphasized in the first section. The result is a well crafted and coherent work on Buddhism and September 11 that brings very constructive and important perspectives to the question of terrorism and America's role in the world.

– Kenneth A. Locke

Mind over Matter: Reflections on Buddhism in the West

By Tarthang Tulku

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Mind over Matter is a collection of essays originally written for Annals of the Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center. The author, Tarthang Tulku is a Tibetan Buddhist monk living in America propagating Buddhism. The essays were first published in 1977 as the fifth volume of the Annals of the Nyingma Meditation Center.

The present work is divided into two parts: Part One is 'Reflections on Buddhism in the West' and Part Two 'Conversation with Tarthang Tulku.' The corpus of the

work which consists of forty three essays has been arranged under ten main topics.

'Questions of Transmission' is opening remarks in which the author has given a brief description of his own background and his involvement in spreading the Dharma in the West. Under the heading, 'Tibetan Buddhism in the World Today,' four essays have been included. This section begins with a remark regarding the Communist takeover of the country and Tibetan diaspora. Then the author explains the condition of Buddhism and its cultural heritage under Communist rule. The author mentions that instead of traditional Buddhist values and Buddhist way of thinking, Chinese culture shaped by the Communist way of thinking is being inculcated upon people.

The essay, 'Tibetan Dharma in Exile,' is a description of hard conditions faced by Tibetan migrants in the new land of India. Referring to the annual Nyingma Monlam Chenmo in Bodh Gaya, author remarks that the Tibetan Dharma and practice have been reestablished.

'Beyond the Borders of Tibet' is an account of Tibetan Buddhist activities in the lands of Ladakh, Lahul, Spiti, Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal where the Tibetan form of Buddhism is practiced. Also mentioned is that the Dhamma is fast spreading around the globe.

The section, 'Communicating the Blessings' includes four essays: 'Preparing for Transmission,' 'Relying on the Tradition,' 'The Place of Initiation and Rituals,' and 'Placing Ritual in Perspective.' The first essay mentions the Buddhist teaching of the nature of Samsāra and how to bring about a lasting change in our lives by following the Buddha's teaching. The author has emphasized in these essays the importance of traditional interpretation and learning of Buddhism. The essay on 'Place of Initiation and Rituals' is a description of the importance of Tantric initiation in Tibetan Buddhism.