

Peter D. Hershock, *Buddhism in the Public Sphere: Reorienting Global Interdependence*. London: Routledge, 2006. x + 229 pages.

Since the 1990s, Peter Hershock, coordinator of the Asian Studies Development Program at the East–West Center in Honolulu, Hawai‘i, has been developing a Chan Buddhist response to important elements of contemporary life in an increasingly interdependent world. In works such as *Liberating Intimacy* (1996), *Reinventing the Wheel* (1999), his edited volume *Changing Education* (2008), and various essays published in the *Journal of Buddhist*

Ethics and Philosophy East and West, Hershock, true to both his Buddhist and philosophical trainings, has addressed the pressing issues of technology, education, ecology, and authority.¹ In doing so, his primary purpose has been not only to engage in cross-cultural philosophizing but also to show how suffering and trouble can be effectively responded to by availing ourselves of the ancient teachings of Buddhism.

In his essay “Hope for the Future,” His Holiness the Dalai Lama claimed that “each of us has the responsibility for all humankind. It is time for us to think of other people as true brothers and sisters and to be concerned with their welfare, with lessening their suffering.”² It is apparent that Hershock shares the Dalai Lama’s viewpoint when he claims that this “book emerged out of twin concerns”: “The first is that globally deepening interdependence has been meaning greater inequity and manifestly less-sustainable practices across a wide range of sectors—from the social and economic to the political and cultural—both within and among societies. The second is that our predominant means for critically engaging global interdependence seem not to be up to the task, and are actually at considerable odds with the emerging twenty-first century realities of truly complex relationality and accelerating change” (p. 1).

The Buddhist themes of interdependence, critical engagement, complex relationality, and impermanence are directly relevant today. Complex interdependence, however, calls for a complex response. Hershock’s approach is to “clarify the values, intentions, and practices animating prevailing ways of thinking about and responding to these emergent realities, and to reflect on what it would mean to engender a value coordinating redirection of the interdependencies constitutive of both the public sphere and of our lived experiences within it” (p. 1). In so doing, Hershock wants us to understand that this is neither a book of Buddhist apologetics nor an argument for why we should become Buddhists. In this work, he writes that “no particular vision of the good or any particular set of corrective societal structures and institutions will be forwarded” (p. 4). Herein Hershock follows ancient Buddhist teachings elucidated in specific texts from the Pali canon and Mahāyāna tradition, especially Chan.

Hershock is careful to note that the global challenges facing us today also pose challenges to Buddhist practitioners. That is, there are “no traditional Buddhist discourses on environmental protection, institutional health care, technological change, media ethics, global economics, human rights, or the privatization and commodification of education” (p. 2). His task, then, is a hermeneutic one: improvisational interpretation of ancient Buddhist texts in the light of contemporary situations. *Buddhism in the Public Sphere*, then, is “a book of improvisations, in a Buddhist key, on issues of immediate and substantial significance” (p. 2).

Instead of offering a Buddhist plan that will direct us toward a preconceived destination, Hershock applies Buddhist thought to reflect on the challenges to the public good created by emerging social, economic, and political realities associated with increasingly complex global interdependence. In addressing eight significant junctures of global interdependence—the environment, health, media, trade and development, the interplay of politics and religion, international relations, terror and security, and education—Hershock proposes what a Buddhist alternative might look like, given its emphasis on impermanence, emptiness, and interdependence. His goal, in a manner of speaking, is “to intimate new means and meanings of virtuosity” (p. 4). Relational virtuosity depends upon our establishing and maintaining an improvisational flexibility that allows us to see each moment as it has come to be in the moment of its arising and to enable us to respond with skill, thereby adding value to our circumstances.

Part of Hershock’s on-going project has also been to show how the Western project of modernity—with “its core values of universalism, certainty, autonomy, and control, and its claims of global validity for such central and explicitly hierarchic oppositions” (p. 5)—has created our current sedimented matrix of values, intentions, and practices. Although it can be argued persuasively that the values, intentions, and practices arising in western Europe between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries—from Renaissance to Enlightenment—were a godsend to the people of those times, Hershock demonstrates how these same values, intentions, and practices are *no longer* producing beneficent eventualities but are, in fact, the direct contributing factors to the declining viability of the public good. In other words, the values, intentions, and practices of the Age of Reason are failing to develop, establish, and sustain differences that truly make a difference. In his chapter “Health and Healing: Relating the Personal and the Public,” for instance, Hershock shows how “the prevailing mainstream conceptions of health in health policy” have been locked into the binary opposition of “disease or of well-being” (p. 40). On the former and quantitatively biased account, health “is simply the absence of disease or abnormality” (p. 41). Conceiving of health as well-being is a qualitatively biased perspective that sees health as “healthy functioning” (p. 41). Barely more than restating the phenomenon without explaining it, health-as-well-being is conceived by the World Health Organization as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not simply the absence of disease or infirmity” (p. 41). Hershock shows us that each aspect of contemporary Western life is marked by this “is” versus “is-not” opposition. A Buddhist response to this cultural opposition consists “of calling to critical account the *entire spectrum* of beliefs and practices arrayed between any such opposed positions” (p. 105; original emphasis). Such practice, according to Hershock, engages both ends of the continuum by going crosswise to reveal the middle ground.

The use of the phrase “live engagement” by Hershock is meant to convey both a response to the Enlightenment matrix of values, intentions, and actions and a revision of preconceived notions we may hold concerning Buddhism’s history of social engagement. The phrase “Engaged Buddhism” is often invoked today to signify a recent development in the social ethics of Buddhism, a movement from the monastery to the world. Hershock, however, argues—by referencing early Buddhist texts such as the *Digha Nikaya*, *Sutta Nipata*, and *Majjhima Nikaya*—that the Buddha’s public teaching was often directed to the suffering pervasive in governance and other social practices. Indeed, he notes that “Buddhism throughout its history has been ‘socially engaged’ and intimately attuned to what we now refer to as issues of public good” (p. 7). The Buddha’s Middle Way, applied to the public good, took the form of “facing the world, going crosswise,” which “means demonstrating appreciative and contributory virtuosity in the opening of new and ever more liberating paths of shared meaning-making” (p. 11). The Buddha’s method of going crosswise to prevailing oppositions was not a denial of sociality but an improvisational virtuosity meant to shift human activities and eventualities from unwholesome (*akusala*) to wholesome (*kusala*) outcomes. Thus, Hershock focuses on karma as the central concern of a Buddhist response to suffering and trouble in the world today.

Not simply reducing karma to a pattern of causality obtained in mind-body activity, Hershock instead shows how karma is a complex interaction among our values, intentions, and actions. Hershock notes that “most Western Buddhists (and many contemporary Buddhists outside the West) do not take karma with the seriousness it deserves” (p. 9). The focus on karma in bringing about difference that can truly make a difference is the strength of this work. Whether he is writing about the environment, trade, development, governance, or education, Hershock shows that subtle shifts in our karma can make a huge difference in the way we relate to others and the world we live in. Hershock insists that

we live in a karmic world in which our interdependence is irreducibly meaningful and in which responding effectively to experienced troubles or difficulties—whether in the realm of the private or the public—ultimately entails recognizing their roots in competing or conflicting values, intentions, and practices. Succinctly stated: seeing our world as karmic is seeing that *all experienced eventualities arise as outcomes/opportunities that are meticulously consonant with patterns of our own values-intentions-actions*. . . . In a karmically ordered world importantly and fundamentally shaped by values and intentions, no situation—regardless of appearances to the contrary—is finally intractable. A world and a life shaped by karma are continuously open to meaningful revision. Indeed, in such a world, it is the *differences* in our karma that enable us each to *make a difference*. (p. 9, original emphases)

From this view we can conclude that interdependence is both a coordinated and coordinating relationality based not on sameness but on differ-

ence. Enlightenment virtues of tolerance and cooperation, though, insist—however inadvertently or ironically—on a certain level of sameness, usually the sameness indicative of the dominant powers.

Upon reading *Buddhism in the Public Sphere*, one will notice that as Hershock rehearses his Buddhist conceptions of cross-cultural concepts such as improvisational virtuosity, effective relationality, appreciative and contributory virtuosity, and dramatic maturity, much repetition and playful variations of these terms and phrases occur. What might be construed as a weakness, though, turns out to be a strength because it allows Hershock to show how the shift from one area of concern, say, the environment, to another area, such as education, also entails a certain amount of nuance and flexibility—*skillfulness*—on the part of one concerned with acting for the public good. Such a conclusion certainly sets a high standard for anyone active in the public sphere; but, then again, Hershock makes no promises that acting for the common good will be easy or quick. He points out that Buddhist education or training, “a three-part system comprising wisdom (*prajñā*), attentive mastery (*samādhi*), and moral clarity (*śīla*)” (p. 195), is an open-ended and dynamic process that is neither “amenable to analysis into basic competencies that can be acquired in a standard sequence” nor “something that one might hurry up and finish” (p. 194). Buddhist education thus stands as a challenge to conventional forms of Western education.

Does Hershock’s presentation imply that he thinks the only way to alter the destructive course we are on is to become a Buddhist practitioner? No; but there is, indeed, a sticking point that Hershock admits when he notes that questions about faring well in responding effectively to suffering and trouble have been traditionally responded to in terms of establishing and maintaining one’s appreciative and contributory virtuosity: “find and enter into [a] horizonless, trusting relationship with an enlightened master” (p. 201).

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Notes

¹Peter D. Hershock, *Liberating Intimacy: Enlightenment and Social Virtuosity in Ch’an Buddhism* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1996); Peter D. Hershock, *Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1999); Peter D. Hershock, Mark Mason, and John N. Hawkins, eds., *Changing Education: Leadership, Innovation and Development in a Globalizing Asia Pacific* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008).

²Dalai Lama, “Hope for the Future,” in *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley, CA: Parallax & The Buddhist Peace Fellowship, 1988), 3–8: 8.