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Dischords on Human Rights

Buddhist Approaches to Human Rights: Dissonances and Resonances. By Carmen Meinert and Hans-Bernd Zöllner (eds.). Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2010.

Buddhist Approaches to Human Rights: Dissonances and Resonances is an admirable attempt to deal with a difficult subject. From the beginning, the subtitle, *Dissonances and Resonances* seems to forewarn the reader of the type of problems that lie ahead. The subtitle has a dual meaning. It refers to both the dissonances and resonances between the chapters of this edited volume as well as the dissonances and resonances between the abstract concept of human rights and ways of being in the world that we tend to categorize as Buddhist. In addition to a useful introduction from the editors, *Buddhist Approaches to Human Rights* includes nine chapters from authors who embody a variety of perspectives on Buddhism. The first chapter considers Buddhism in relation to human rights generally. The rest of the chapters each have a regional focus with three on Thailand, two on China, and three on Tibet.

In the first chapter, Alfred Hirsch takes a philosophical and historical-hermeneutical perspective on how to reconcile relativism and universalism. Hirsch explores how the Islamic world might have developed an aversion to human rights discourse as a form of Orientalism and Western hegemony. However, despite Hirsch's warning, the other chapters make it clear that Buddhist institutions, if not the secular governments of Asia, appear more interested in engaging with Western discourses on human rights in a mutually beneficial way.

The subtitle of the volume derives from the second chapter, where Perry Schmidt-Leukel points out resonances and dissonances between Buddhist concepts and the idea of human rights. On the one hand, he finds a positive affirmation of human rights within Buddhist concepts because of a 'Golden Rule' basis in Buddhism. On the other hand, following the eminent Thai Buddhist reformer Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa, Schmidt-Leukel finds justification for the argument that the needs of the individual are secondary in Buddhist doctrine to the needs of the community.

The Thai theme continues in a deeper way in the third and fourth chapters, as Martin Seeger compares internal politics within Thai Buddhism, such as nun ordination and the emergence of two controversial subjects, with human rights, and Kenneth Fleming looks at human rights in Thai Buddhism from a Christian theological point of view. Instead of Buddhādāsa, Seeger focuses on the writings of Phra Payutto, a Thai scholar-monk critical of human rights concepts. Seeger's article is a thoughtful introduction to Thai discourses on human rights.

The fifth and sixth chapters repeat earlier themes in a Chinese context. Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer finds that despite the attraction of the bodhisattva ideal in Mahāyāna Buddhism as a place to situate human rights, Buddhist discourses against the existence of autonomous ego-centered individuals make a Western conception of human rights nearly incompatible with Chinese Buddhism. Shi Zhiru, a scholar-nun from Singapore, employs a methodology similar to Schmidt-Leukel and Seeger, as she investigates modern Chinese Buddhist discourses related to human rights found in the most famous Chinese monastic reformer, Taixu (1890-1947). This reader

would have liked to have seen these authors put the ideas of the monastic reformers of their choice more in direct dialogue with each other. Without that more explicit comparison, the potential synergy of having experts on Buddhādāsa, Payutto, and Taixu in one volume is partly lost.

Likewise, the final chapters on human rights in relation to Tibetan Buddhism and Vajrayāna Buddhism would have benefitted from considering some of the questions explored in early chapters. For example, Jan-Ulrich Sobisch and Trine Brox's co-edited chapter, while appropriately critical of attempts to translate Western concepts of human rights into a Tibetan context, does not consider the relationship between Buddhist doctrine in Tibet and secular rule, a major theme of *Buddhist Approaches to Human Rights*. What role did the Vinaya play in Tibet? What about actual legal codes used in Tibet before 1951? And how did Buddhist doctrine relate to the formation of Tibetan legal codes? Stephanie Römer's contribution addresses head-on Tibetan discourses on human rights among Tibetan exile associations such as the Tibetan Youth Congress, the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy, and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. She shows that the Government-in-Exile actively promotes Tibetan concerns through the use of international human rights language, and that Tibetans in China have adopted this language for themselves as well. On the question of Tibet, in order for *Buddhist Approaches to Human Rights* to address one of the historical situations that inspired its origin, this reader would have liked to have seen a detailed ethnography of how Tibetans in China first adopted the language of human rights and how it has come to be used today. Likewise, the lack of chapters on Myanmar and Sri Lanka is noticeably felt.

Inspired by recent human rights abuses in Tibet, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, *Buddhist Approaches to Human Rights* attempts the very difficult task of providing a defense of basic human rights from a Buddhist point of view. The editors, Carmen Meinert and Hans-Bernd Zöllner, thankfully address some major issues in their introduction to the volume. For example, they carefully consider the normative basis for defining human rights and consider what human rights might look like from a Buddhist point of view. They avoid a related trap of essentializing Buddhism, through openly questioning who and what ought to serve as representative of Buddhism: philosophical and doctrinal texts or monastic leaders? (This reader would have liked to have seen more attention paid to the voices of lay people.) They also identify the very complicated relationship between Buddhist doctrine and secular law in relation to human rights, and the obvious fact that the traditionally Buddhist countries of Asia do not share the same modern history nor secular legal tradition. Some of these challenges are epistemological and present in any attempt to produce "*Buddhist Approaches to* _____." As a whole the volume does an excellent job of exposing the problems inherent in any endeavor of this nature, but it does not go quite as far in proposing solutions. Future research should continue the best of what is found here--careful ethnographic fieldwork which reconstructs our preconceived notions of Buddhism, through careful portraits of how particular Buddhist persons, texts or practices interact with human rights in a historically contextualized manner.

Cameron David Warner
Aarhus Universitet