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Book Review

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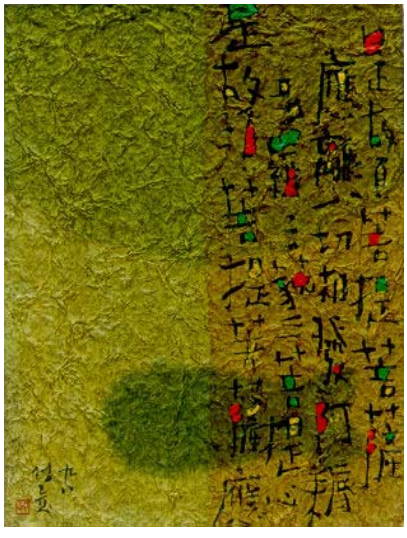

Buddhism in the Public Sphere: Reorienting Global Interdependence. By Peter D. Hershock. London & New York: Routledge, 2006, 229 pages. ISBN 978-0-415-77052-1 (cloth) $150.

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This dense book, divided into eight chapters focused on specific predicaments in the public sphere (healthcare, media, the environment, etc.), attempts to provide a Buddhist theoretical orientation to the world's problems. It does so by suggesting a particular set of Buddhist orientations for enacting ethically-based courses of action, which can thereby revise the karma of the reader and the world.

The analysis relies heavily on two key orientations. First, Hershock identifies relationships and interdependence as vital to his examination, particularly in light of increasing globalization. He insists that the world's problems must be approached with the aim of cultivating "liberating relationships," ones that will increase all actors' contributions to the well-being of all others. Second, he identifies the concept of karma as fundamental to addressing current predicaments, adding that Western Buddhists have largely neglected this essential aspect of Buddhist ethics. He suggests that revising personal and group karma – which he defines as a "pattern of

values-intentions-actions" – is necessary for approaching contemporary problems. In particular, Hershock focuses on the need to revise what he calls "the karma of control," an orientation that leads away from liberation toward the mistaken belief in a separate, autonomous self.

In the introduction, Hershock argues for the relevance of Buddhism as an approach to the problems we face in an increasingly global public sphere. Hershock claims that because Buddhism is based on a non-Western philosophical system, it lies outside the Western trajectory of modernity (with its core values of universalism, certainty, autonomy, and control) and is well-suited to both critique the West's assumptions and provide creative approaches to its dilemmas. These assertions are problematic on two fronts. First, he implicitly assumes a singular and inevitable "modernity" toward which all societies are moving, which in turn shapes many of his concerns about the homogenization of culture, the tendency toward individualism, and so on. As works such as *Questions of Modernity* (Mitchell, ed., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), *Alternative Modernities* (Gaonkar, ed., 2001, Durham: Duke University Press), and *Multiple Modernities* (Eisenstadt, ed., 2002, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers) have demonstrated, there are diverse modernities at work in the world, producing significantly different subjectivities, notions of statehood, cultural forms, and so on, such that there remains some doubt about the totalizing capacity of a Western imperial modernity that Hershock takes for granted. Second, Hershock fails to reflect on the role of Western thought in the rise of Buddhist modernism in Asia and the degree to which Buddhist modernism may have in fact influenced his interpretations of Buddhist doctrine. For example, his own teacher, the Korean Chan teacher Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim, advocates what she calls "social Buddhism," a Buddhism that exhibits a

variety of hallmarks of Buddhist modernism. How, then, does this trajectory lie "outside" the project of modernity/modernities?

In chapter one, "Liberating Environments," Hershock uses the *jaatakas* and the concept of *buddha-kshetras* to demonstrate his vision of the bodhisattva vow to liberate all beings in the world. Focusing on humans' relationships with other species, he suggests that the central issue in mainstream environmental ethics derives from the mistaken belief in a separation between self/environment or urban/natural, leading to the concept of non-interference – a dualism that fails to recognize that humans are part of, not separate from, the environment. These arguments are well worn territory in contemporary Buddhist ethics, but Hershock adds to the discussion the connection between the process of aesthetics (doing things beautifully) and ethics (creating new and meaningful relationships). However, one wonders why there is no mention of any of the many Buddhists ethicists who have written on the topic of Buddhist environmentalism. Such a lack of dialogue means we cover much of the same material again rather than building on it.

Chapter two continues to develop Hershock's ethical arguments, this time in the realm of healthcare. He challenges the underpinnings of the dominant medical model in the United States on the basis of its central value of control. Rather than treating the whole individual, he argues, our current system, deriving from the Cartesian split between mind and body, treats the body in isolation from other factors. This is part of a medicalization of health that neglects the role of karma and thereby completely fails to address, for example, the deeply ingrained but unhealthy habit formations that follow from certain values and intentions. Although he largely accepts

Ivan Illich's (Illich 1976, *Limits to Medicine: Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*. New York: Penguin) arguments that the American health system ideology trains us to ignore our personal and communal health resources in favor of relying on medical professionals, Hershock suggests that Illich's position falls short in failing to identify karma (including group karma) as central to a more skillful approach to health. He notes, "A shift must be made from healing bodies to healing relationships" (p. 56). But as interesting as this argument may be, he fails to provide even speculative examples of how an improved version of healthcare might operate. He simply ignores the concrete in favor of the abstract, weakening his arguments and placing them in the realm of imagination rather than of workable solutions.

Chapter three applies Hershock's concepts to global trade and economics. Noting that greed and self-interest are old human problems that do not represent the source of our current dilemma, he suggests that it is the erosion of our basic ability to make meaning (or do things "beautifully") in the world that is our biggest shared threat. We must develop new, valuable patterns of relationships. For example, he suggests that poverty is an issue of relationship, because "successfully alleviating poverty is a function of realizing and sustaining patterns of interdependence that enhance the capabilities of both individuals and communities for freely contributing to one another's welfare" (p. 65). Poverty, he argues, is the result "of having too little to offer that is of value to others" (ibid.). After detailing his interpretation of the *Cikkavatti-Siihanaada-sutta* as it pertains to trade, he argues that the sutta's teaching that people should remain close to their own homes and to those of their ancestors is directly applicable to the issue of local economies in contemporary global trade. Unfortunately, patterns of

local-local trade, based on heterogeneous environments and the durable goods they produce (dairy, vegetables, etc.), have been displaced by a local-global-local pattern, producing in the process an emergent monoculture that discourages unique local economies and encourages production of homogenous products that are often ill-suited for those ecologies. Moreover, the new global economy is based in quantitative transfers rather than the meaningful negotiations of value found in local-local trade. Local cultures, like other ecologies, are not being *conserved*, Hershock maintains, and as qualitative exchange gives way to quantitative transfer, the notion of value itself is undermined.

Unlike other chapters, Hershock provides a longer, though not particularly convincing, concrete example in this chapter by citing Bhutan and its Gross National Happiness to demonstrate a successful "conservation" of culture and tradition. However, his arguments seem to suggest a naïve understanding of culture and nation as if there were some sort of one-to-one correspondence between the two. Further, he fails to recognize the complex, constructed, and contested nature of traditions. Indeed, such "conservation" has in fact been the concern of a number of nationalist movements, such as in Sri Lanka, where the dominant rhetoric of an indigenous Buddhist tradition is used to alienate, at times violently so, non-Buddhist Sri Lankans and paint them as outsiders. And while Bhutan may have a relatively homogenous population in terms of traditions and culture, much of the world is decidedly heterogeneous. Which traditions should be conserved, for example, in the United States? How old does a tradition need to be in order to deserve conservation? And who should be the spokesperson for the conserved tradition, given that it is always being renegotiated by those with a stake in its articulation? By treating tradition in such a manner, his argument comes

across as at best, simplistic, and at worst, as nostalgic and utopian.

Perhaps the best written section in the book, chapter four addresses "Technology, Media, and the Colonization of Consciousness." The author contends that most critical examinations of the media focus on content – such as violence on television – rather than on the technologies themselves that produce such content. The problem as Hershock sees it is that there is no value-neutral or morally-transparent technology. In terms of the technology of mass media, the values it inculcates are autonomy and self-pleasure. The value of profit has driven purveyors of media to commodify consciousness itself by producing meaning and belonging that people can, ironically, consume privately. This has led to a decrease in commitment: because media-generated relationships have replaced real ones, we no longer have real people to whom we owe responsibility. Like the fashion industry, the media must constantly render such relationships obsolete in order to open up new markets, and as such they rely on consumers becoming bored and longing for novel items. The cost of this reduced commitment to relationships is the diversion of attention away from our shared predicaments, such as AIDS, environmental degradation, and so on. The valorization of convenience and choice, couched in the rhetoric of "freedom," has eroded our relationships and threatens to lull us further and further into complacency.

In chapter five, "Government Cultures and Countercultures," Hershock critiques the rhetoric of rights and freedoms in the realm of multiculturalism. We must, he suggests, abandon control and autonomy (rights and freedoms) in pursuance of "contributory virtuosity," his definition of nirvana (a definition with which many would certainly disagree). Autonomy strives for a

complete absence of others; in its drive for personal freedom, it rejects "relating freely" or contributing to the welfare of others in favor of the freedom to choose, which manifests in the new attention economy as the freedom to choose consumer products or manufactured identities. Furthermore, public discourse on freedom focuses on the rights of individuals and subgroups to make personal choices and to be tolerated for the choices they make, that is, to be "left alone." The liberal articulation of pluralism is predicated on such a notion, succeeding only in producing a fuzzy tolerance that obscures real differences and promotes apathy. By refusing to engage in a discussion of the ethics for choosing one thing over another and recognizing the effects of such choices on the greater good of all creatures, we fail to foster meaningful relationships and contribute to the well-being of all. But once again, Hershock's abstract argumentation neglects to offer a real-world application. He does not suggest an alternative paradigm to liberal multiculturalism, despite the abundance of materials available on the subject, and his failure to do so leaves many of his arguments deflated and unconvincing.

Hershock then plays with "game theory" to explain the predicament of international relations, the topic of chapter six. Put simply, game theory suggests that human games are finite, that is, they are based on a set of agreed-upon rules, the manipulation of which allows a winner to be granted such a title. But Hershock maintains that while international politics has been played as a competitive, finite game, such an approach will simply not work anymore: play has become mandatory, the game cannot end, the evaporation of hard borders and rise of global interdependencies has rendered the fixity of separate players (that is, sovereign nations) an illusion, and as a result there can be no clear "winners." Because no winners can be identified, we must concentrate on

strength rather than power, which results not from winning the game but from the *way* in which one plays: strength is the ability to improvise and develop new group karma, to play beautifully.

Hershock provides a Buddhist response to terrorism in chapter seven. He argues that terrorism is at heart a conflict over values in the absence of a normative consensus. "Assimilation politics," as he calls it, is thus inappropriate for resolving issues of terrorism because rather than being rooted in appreciating alternative value systems, such an approach focuses on improving others' well-being by making them more like ourselves. The Buddhist alternative entails the courage to understand others, even as we recognize their differences from ourselves, "at least to the point of being able to contribute to *their* circumstances in ways that they themselves appreciate and value" (p. 166). Hershock then draws on teachings from the *Sutta Nipaata* that cite violence and conflict as stemming from three things: (1) claiming that one's own view is correct and all others are wrong; (2) resolving differences in ways that lead to "winners" and "losers" and foster feelings of anger, hatred, and jealousy; and (3) disparaging and extolling individuals through identifying some as purely good and others as purely evil. Hershock contends that American policy on terrorism has committed all three of the above errors and engaged in the karma of control, power, and self-interested security through its doctrine of preemptive strike. We must build bridges to those we've identified as our enemies rather than withdrawing and contracting in fear, Hershock maintains. This requires vulnerability based in strength and a willingness to focus on resolving the present conflict rather trying to control it in the future.

The last chapter in the book, "Educating for Virtuosity," presents Hershock's critique of the American education

system and his recommendations for preparing the next generation to engage with the predicaments set forth in the previous chapters. His main argument is that the current model of education is inadequate because its focus on disseminating information cannot keep up with the rapid increase in knowledge. He contends that the new economy relies on the generation of new problems in order to sustain and increase growth, producing "profound predicaments" as opposed to mere "problems":

Problems center on the failure of specific means for arriving at ends we intend to keep pursuing … [while predicaments] consist of situations that are blocked or troubled by the co-presence of contrary patterns of development or meaning.... [T]hey express dramatic impasses – conflicts about the direction of interdependence in a given situation – and are therefore not open to solution. Predicaments must be openly negotiated and resolved. (p. 180)

The main resource of the "old economy" was information, while the "new economy" involves the ability to collectively and individually create and negotiate meaning. But schools have not kept up with this change, which is clear in the ways in which the education system has approached the issue of diversity. The multicultural curriculum, Hershock argues, merely juxtaposes value systems rather than encouraging their interaction and dialogue – the basis of establishing relationships and shared meaning. What the education system is direly lacking is the cultivation of moral development, a result of the separation of knowledge from wisdom. Such a separation ensures that meaningful differences are relegated to the private realm, thus discouraging the development of the key resource for approaching predicaments in the new economy: values.

Buddhism in the Public Sphere is not an easy read. Hershock's very precise word choices lead to phrases that are sometimes needlessly wordy (for example, "reorienting situational dynamics pivots on our capacities for actualizing opportunity" [p. 59]). Though he apologizes for such difficulties in the introduction, he claims it was necessary to write in such a manner in order to adequately translate Buddhist ideas foreign to English – a claim this reader finds unconvincing. Unfortunately, his prolix writing style makes this book, which is otherwise laden with thoughtful arguments and compelling subject matter, a decidedly laborious read.

But the book's most serious problem is its lack of concrete examples. Even when such examples are offered, they are presented too briefly to demonstrate the coherence of his arguments (for example, he spends less than one paragraph on the collective topic of global warming, waste, and plastics). Hershock appears aware of this, but insists that Buddhist resolutions to predicaments can only be improvised on the spot rather than approached in an outcome-based manner. This is because he sees Buddhist practice as fundamentally focusing on the present rather than on an outcome; stated differently, "liberation is not a destination; it is a direction" (p. 168). But this appears to be more of a placation than a genuine defense; certainly he could speculate on how particular orientations *might* work in a given situation, or he could choose to review a situation that has already occurred and note how it was successful and why. Because he simply avoids both of these options, his ideas are frequently too abstract and the reader is left with the impression that he has considered only the *cetanaa* aspect of karma rather than the consequences of particular actions. Without the latter, we are left with no compelling reason to believe him.

These caveats aside, I found Hershock's arguments

intriguing and thought-provoking, with his ideas building throughout the work in such a way that by the last chapter his earlier arguments gain fuller clarity. Unfortunately, this means that removing chapters from the context of the book as a whole – as one might wish to do as part of a course on, for example, religious approaches to terrorism, or a political science class concerning the ethics of global trade – leaves them somewhat underdeveloped and difficult to understand. This, coupled with his difficult writing style, makes this book a dubious choice for classroom use. However, if students are provided some background in Buddhist ethics to contextualize his arguments, it may be beneficial in media studies, political science, or comparative religion departments.