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Buddhism in a Foreign Land: Essays on Meditation. By Robert Mann. Bradford on Avon: Aukana, 1996. pp. 160. £7.50.

Reviewed by

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This volume brings together in book form a selection of the talks given by the author, an assistant teacher at the “House of Inner Tranquillity” in Wiltshire (England). The House is a Buddhist meditation center working in the Theravāda tradition. The first chapter, from which the book takes its title, has been especially written for the occasion, and provides an introduction. Each of the subsequent nine chapters reproduces the text of a particular lecture, preceded by a brief note giving the date when it was delivered and identifying in a few words the subject of the talk. The lectures span the period May 1989 to September 1995.

It must be made clear at the outset that *Buddhism in a Foreign Land* is not a meditation manual, but a collection of Dharma talks intended primarily to introduce a nonspecialized Western audience to the Buddha’s teaching—and specifically to insight meditation—in straightforward, nontechnical language. This it does very successfully, covering in an admirably clear manner the fundamentals of the Buddhadharma, with particular attention (as the title of the book suggests) to the challenges of its enculturation in the Western world. Thus, chapter one looks at the growth of Buddhism in the West over the last thirty years or so with its attendant problems and stresses the significance of the meditative practices at the heart of the Buddha’s teaching: *vipassanā* (insight) and *mettā* (loving-kindness) meditation. It also tells readers about the “House of Inner Tranquillity,” founded in 1980 and its course of training based on the Pali canon, emphasizing meditation, service, and study, and eschewing “any of the exotic trappings often associated with Buddhism” (2)—an approach with which I most wholeheartedly agree. This meditation center is a good example of the process of enculturation since, as the author comments, “these talks—given by a western student of a western teacher, who was himself taught by a westerner—could be described as third-generation western Buddhism” (20).

Chapter two stresses the unique opportunity for enlightenment offered by the human condition, placing it within the traditional context of the thirty-one realms of existence and explaining the workings of karma and rebirth. Chapter three deals with dharma and its various meanings—things and thingness—and Dharma—the teaching—and leads skilfully to the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality. Chapter four sensibly points out that *sīla* (morality), while essential to the Path, is a means, and must not be made an end in itself. It should be pursued in a balanced manner: “the middle path of *sīla* allows the correct development of meditation and to this end is neither too lax nor too rigid. If it is too lax there will be guilt and fear of being found out; if too rigid, there is an over-concern with rules, austerities and asceticism, and ‘being good’ becomes more important than being enlightened” (58). Chapter five (*dukkha*), a talk given on Vesak 1994, is a

straightforward presentation of the First Noble Truth.

The title of Chapter six (“The Vinaya or Sex, Lies and Robe Material”), a title that deliberately echoes the title of the film “Sex, Lies and Videotape,” a movie that enjoyed quite a cult following a few years ago, exemplifies the author’s topical, relaxed style. It gives a simple account of monastic discipline and briefly discusses the application of Vinaya rules by the modern Buddhist order in the West that runs the meditation center where the author teaches.

In Chapter seven (“Luminous Mystery”), Mann addresses the basic question that people ask of a teacher: “What is it all about, ultimately?” And he gives a fair account of the Buddha’s answer: “Do not waste time in speculation about the first causes and ultimate matters, which are inaccessible to rational understanding. Let the mystery remain, in conceptual terms, a mystery, and concentrate on working towards the elimination of suffering here and now through the development of insight.” This is shown, rightly, as involving the removal of the four *āsavas* or stains (in the author’s terminology, though the term is more commonly translated as “taints” or “cankers”) that cloud our understanding of reality. Now this is one point concerning which I am not entirely happy with the author’s presentation. He refers to this process as the elimination of the stains that “corrupt the mind’s natural luminosity” (102). Not that this is factually incorrect, but the meaning of “luminous mind” has so often been misunderstood and misused that I think it is best avoided except in strictly technical discussions of psychological processes as explained by the Buddha. The problem, briefly, is that the Buddha’s original matter-of-fact reference to *pabhassara citta* (bright, or shining mind) was made in a simply practical context, when he was explaining the continual arising and passing away of mind factors and the need to clean the mind of impurities in order to make progress in meditation. This, however, was blown up by later Buddhist thinkers (more concerned, one fears, with speculation than with meditation) into a sort of transcendent entity. So that using the term “luminous mind” can easily mislead readers or listeners (especially in our Western culture, still haunted by conceptions of God and soul) into equating it with an immortal soul, thus nourishing the attachment to the illusory conception of “self.”

Chapter eight, which begins with some hilarious examples of advertisements for “Buddhist” goods and services in Buddhist magazines, is a very necessary reminder, in the media-dominated, consumption-oriented world of today that Buddhism is not “the latest in think chic” or “just another lifestyle accessory” (119), but the most serious of undertakings, requiring renunciation of our attachments, of “all the things we do which keep us tied to samsara, all those things we do which cloud enlightenment”

(120). At the same time, the author warns against the danger of attachment to renunciation itself, with self-mortification being used “to bolster the ego rather than to undermine it” (127).

Chapter nine (“Paradox”) explores the paradoxical, bootstrap nature of the pursuit of enlightenment, using “craving to overcome craving and selfishness to overcome selfishness” (134). In this connection, it examines two major paradoxes: one, the all-too-human tendency to both want truth and not to want it (or, at least, not just now) and the other the fact that any original teaching, once it has given rise to a religious establishment, is sooner or later corrupted by its own followers. Here the author coins what has straightaway become one of my favourite aphorisms: “Perhaps one of the best escapes from truth is religion” (136).

Chapter ten (“The Buddha’s Last Journey”) is a simplified account of the events recounted in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* showing this—the last of many similar wanderings for over forty years—as a typical example of the Buddha’s tireless dedication to teaching the way to enlightenment to whomever would listen, as the “very highest expression of compassion” (153).

Finally, there is an “afterward” which complements the information given in chapter one concerning the “House of Inner Tranquillity” and places its founders Alan and Jacqui James within a lineage in the Thai tradition of Theravāda. Their teacher, a Londoner who trained in meditation and was ordained with the name Kapilavaddho in Thailand, was eventually sent back to England to teach. Hence the previously quoted reference to third-generation Western Buddhism.

Buddhism in a Foreign Land is short, but, within the limits of its introductory nature, very rewarding in content. Mann has a gift for putting things simply and clearly, earnest yet with a sense of humor. He is thus well qualified to convey the difficult simplicity of the Buddha’s teaching. The tone is conversational, as befits the original oral format, and the well-judged introduction of lively, often humorous examples and anecdotes serves both to lighten the discourse and to make telling points. Altogether, a book to be recommended as a sober and lucid introduction to the Buddha’s teaching.

I should like to conclude by quoting the quietly powerful point that Robert Mann makes at the end of the discussion on enculturation in chapter one: “A hundred years ago, Buddhism arrived in the West. Perhaps a lasting Western style of Buddhism will emerge, perhaps not. But, in the final analysis, the Buddha’s teaching remains alien to each of us until we come to realize these ancient truths for ourselves. The foreign land is nowhere but in our own minds” (13).

Notes

Āṅguttara Nikāya, I, v. 9–10 and I, vi. 1–2 (Pali Text Society ed., I: 10). For an authoritative discussion of this passage, see the German translation of *Āṅguttara Nikāya* by Nyanatiloka, rev. and ed. Nyanaponika: *Die Lehrreden des Buddha aus der Angereichten Sammlung* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Aurum Verlag, 1984), I: 51–52, n. 21.