

Foreword

It is an immense pleasure to see that the revised lectures delivered at the international symposium *Buddhism and Human Rights: Theory – Practice – Outlook* that took place here in Hamburg in November 2008 have now been made accessible in printed form. The Center for Buddhist Studies at Hamburg University is proud to have been chosen to host the meeting and support the event in various ways in cooperation with the project “Humanism in the Era of Globalization – an Intercultural Dialogue on Culture, Humanity and Values” at the Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities (KWI) in Essen, Germany.

Promoting the kind of intellectual exchange that was facilitated by this symposium by bringing together individuals from quite different fields and disciplines is desirable in many ways. Yet such gatherings are far from common at academic institutions in Central Europe. In the field of Buddhist Studies this observation rings particularly true, given that from its pioneering moments in the 19th century until today the textual dimension of research on Buddhism has dominated the field in Europe. Little attention has been paid to Buddhism’s contemporary manifestations or its reactions to the massive social and political challenges of the modern world across Asia and the West. Consequently, one of the foremost aims of the Center for Buddhist Studies at Hamburg is to address this trend and function as a platform for cross-disciplinary dialogue involving all aspects of research on Buddhism. In this spirit, the title of this volume, *Buddhist Approaches to Human Rights*, reflects a concern with some of the most urgent questions of our day: whether there is a

trans-cultural and universal entitlement to individual inviolability and freedom; whether religious, doctrinal and ethical standards promote such rights; and, whether this concept of individual entitlement can and should be extended beyond human existence to the realms of other living beings and even ecological systems such as the earth itself. Certainly we cannot expect to find straightforward and ready-made answers to these challenging questions. Buddhist traditions are manifold and their positions have developed and changed over the ages. Some of them have come under the strong influence of Western ideas and practices, whereas others have preserved the specific flavor of their origins.

Buddhism and Human Rights: Theory–Practice–Outlook was a first attempt to become aware of this variety of positions and to reflect on the role Buddhist ideas might or might not play in the political landscape and the issue of human rights in modern Asia. Even if one of the outcomes of this symposium was, in fact, the realization that in many respects Buddhist thinkers over the centuries have not been particularly interested in the political and social dimensions of Buddhist teachings, it is nevertheless true that at the bottom of the search for liberation — the central aim for all Buddhists — we encounter the ideal of individual freedom from the bondage of *samsāra*. Many of the contributions included in this volume suggest that this quest for liberation is not necessarily limited to an inner psychological dimension but includes striving to be unimpeded by outside factors as well.

My thanks and deep appreciations go to the organizers of the symposium, Carmen Meinert and Hans-Bernd Zöllner, both fellows at the Center for Buddhist Studies at Hamburg University. It is due to their commitment and tireless efforts that this symposium could take shape and finally be realized. I am extremely grateful that the fruits of their work is now available to the broader public.

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