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Book Review

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TWO RECENT INDIAN BOOKS ON BUDDHIST ETHICS

Perspectives on Buddhist Ethics Prof.Mahesh Tiwary (ed.) Department of Buddhist Studies, Delhi University, 1989. Rs 150.00.

Theravaada Buddhist Ethics with special reference to //Visuddhimagga//. Dr Vyanjana. Punthi Pustak, Calcutta, 1992. Rs 275.00.

Neither of these books is an addition to scholarship, though the first may be of some value to the student.

Perspectives on Buddhist Ethics is a collection of sixteen papers edited by the Professor of Buddhist Studies at Delhi University. These deal with a variety of topics, mostly of Theravaada provenance, with some reference to the Tibetan and Chinese. The student with some knowledge of "basic" Buddhism and with a concern with morality, may well find help here. There are papers worth reading on the four //paaraajika// rules, on //aasava//, on the concept of //siila//, on the five precepts, on ethical norms for householders (a distillation of the //Sigaalovaada Sutta//), on ethical norms in the chapter hall (a presentation of the rules for the collective functioning of the Sangha), and on the A"sokan inscriptions. There is also a paper entitled "Buddha's Analytical Ethics" which might be useful as a corrective to Indian students inclined to see Buddhism as simply a Hindu derivation. And there are points of interest in some of the other papers not referred to above.

What has to be said is that there is almost no attempt to go beyond a simple presentation of a topic. The approach is that of simple advocacy, with little depth in its treatment of other views, where these are entertained at all. Where just occasionally there is a philosophical reference, its treatment is that of the textbook, too compressed and over-simplified to add much. This sentence from the first paper, "Buddhist Ethics - a brief appraisal", is an example: "Thus, like Kant, Buddha also holds that the only thing which possesses immense value is 'the good will', the will freely determined by the moral law." To be fair, one wonders if "immense" is a misprint for "intrinsic": the book is riddled with misprints.

With its considerable limitations, Perspectives on Buddhist Ethics serves a purpose, although it is not immediately obvious what this is. A reader coming to the subject from a position of ignorance will find a more or less accurate distillation of the ethical content of the Pali Canon laid out in a way that makes plain its intimate connection with the other main components of Theravaada Buddhist doctrine. So far so good. But there are many other popular books that do this, and generally do it better than it is done here. Our hypothetical beginner would do well to stay with what is already available, for instance Saddhatissa's Buddhist Ethics, on which this book leans heavily,

rather than turn to something often confusing and repetitive.

One illustration of these flaws must suffice. There are several presentations of the five, eight and ten precepts, each made as if for the first time, suggesting that the book is an amalgamation of separate drafts. These are given with minor, thought confusing, differences and without the different form of the third precept in the eight and ten-fold versions always being made clear. Such things greatly limit the book's value as a textbook, and I cannot see that it has much other value. It, too, is poorly produced.

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