

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://www.buddhistethics.org/>

## Awakening Through Love: Unveiling Your Deepest Goodness

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## Review of *Awakening Through Love: Unveiling Your Deepest Goodness*

John N. Sheveland\*

*Awakening Through Love: Unveiling Your Deepest Goodness.* By John Makransky. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2007, xii + 261 pages, ISBN: 0-86171-537-3, US \$16.95 (paperback).

This volume is the fruit of Professor Makransky's comprehensive efforts to teach Dzogchen ("natural great perfection") meditation to various audiences—Buddhist practitioners, non-Buddhists interested in Buddhism, university students—in ways that illumine the deep spiritual resources of Dzogchen meditation and the social ethic such meditation necessarily generates. While this book is clearly written and comprehensible, its subject matter is critically introspective, provocative, and makes serious demands upon the reader. The careful reader will find herself accepting Makransky's invitation to review the mind, to reassess its habitual ego clinging, projections, and reactions in order to be more attuned to the mind's natural—if cloaked—sky-like wisdom and compassion (*rigpa*). Makransky brings to bear considerable scholarly prowess and a celebrated facility for guiding practitioners through meditations in meditation halls and retreats throughout North America. These two streams of practice

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figure prominently in the book, accounting for its deft combination of scholarly nuance and pastoral application of Tibetan Buddhist wisdom. In addition to having a strong foundation in classic figures like Buddhaghosa and Śāntideva, Makransky draws from many prominent contemporary Tibetan sources, including Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and Lama Zopa Rinpoche.

The book expands greatly on a scholarly article the author wrote for this journal two years ago entitled “No Real Protection without Authentic Love and Compassion,” (*JBE* 12 [2005], 25-36). That article perceptively addressed the post-9/11 lived experience of fear, prejudice, and violence by way of marshalling the divine abodes (*brahma vihāras*) as virtues which, when cultivated, lay bare the real causes of individual and social well-being, namely, lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. The book continues the same project by underscoring ways in which Tibetan and Dzogchen Buddhist meditation might address readers’ wounded post-9/11 minds. He does this first by naming the antecedent mental conditions which give rise to violence, and secondly by offering as an antidote a prescriptive spiritual practice rooted in the divine abodes. In both the article and book Makransky performs an important constructive task in retrieving the divine abodes of classical Buddhism and reinterpreting them anew for application to our contemporary experience, which he rightly insists is marked by human fragmentation, prejudice, fear, and violence. His constructive efforts result in a book which exposes the heart of Buddhist spirituality to non-Buddhists and will surely deepen the personal practices of Buddhists on the path.

An example of his constructive turn can be found in the insightful discussion of the meaning of *samsāra* or cyclic existence, which highlights characteristics of our “modern” experience readers will easily, and powerfully, recognize (36-40). *Samsāra* is identified as conditioned exis-

tence in which narrow self-grasping, group prejudice, and mutual distrust between persons and groups is taken as objective reality, “the way things are.” Makransky explains the extent to which much of our personal and collective mental life is caught in a cyclic pattern of action and reaction to false realities mistaken as objective and true, heaping painful reaction upon reaction until we can scarcely discern the difference between pure and impure perception. These cyclic patterns of action and reaction are viewed as real by social consensus, which in turn conditions individuals toward conformist thought and action, who in turn condition the larger social whole toward the same with their reductive judgments of others. Makransky continually calls upon his readers to observe and critically engage their own preconscious discriminations. “All of us,” he writes, “are caught up in our own similarly deluded maps without recognition. *It is extremely hard to see our samsaric maps for what they are, fabrications of deluded self-centered thought and emotion, since they are not just individual but social constructs, viewed as real by social consensus*” (108, emphasis original). This call to account for one’s own complicity in unwholesome thought and action is one of the book’s profound contributions. Makransky’s description of karma, moreover, entailing not simply personal action and reaction but a collective or social pattern of action and reaction, offers the reader a profound set of resources to engage in ideology critique.

Makransky serves as a wise and able guide out of the samsaric morass he has diagnosed. He guides his readers through meditations which this reviewer knows to have proved enormously effective for Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, in both the meditation hall and the university classroom. His facility in this regard is no doubt the fruit of being a Lama in the Tibetan lineage with years of experience leading meditations in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as well as extended retreats in various North American locations with his colleague Lama Surya Das. Should one be unable to benefit from Lama John Makransky’s teachings in person, a

careful reading and re-reading of this book—especially the meditation sections of each chapter—will substitute nicely. Indeed, readers do well to read the guided meditations not just once but to practice them, daily if possible, realizing that the spiritual arts to which Makransky exposes them require the consistent and mindful attention of a personal practice (129).

The book's seven chapters are structured around meditation and the personal and social outcomes it intends. The chapters are, in order, "Receiving Love," "Letting Be," "Letting it out," "Loving Beyond Boundaries," "Pure Perception and Profound Equanimity," "Compassion as a Liberating Power," and "Living Life Anew and Embodying Deep Goodness." Guided meditations are found in all chapters, save the last, and function as the heart of each chapter, for Makransky intends them as the primary means by which his readers will personally appropriate the Buddhist wisdom therein. These meditations have a cumulative impact as the reader progresses through the book. Hindsight reveals that the meditations in later chapters not only sequentially build upon the preceding meditations, but also lay bare the full significance of the subject matter which remained inchoate or in seed-like form in preceding meditations. In this way, what begins in chapter one as the practice of recalling benefactors, loved ones, and the way in which they have loved and benefited oneself, finds full expression in a meditation in chapter six with its focus on a love (*maitrī*) and compassion (*karunā*) governed by equanimity (*upekṣā*), that is, extended to all sentient beings on account of the Buddha nature (*tathāgathagarbha*) within them (143-44). That these virtues can arise only through insight (*vipāśannā*) meditation accounts for the preponderance of guided meditations in this volume (157).

The book's penultimate meditation, in chapter six, moves in four stages toward the ultimate goal of engendering an experience of the basic unity of wisdom and compassion (165-70). Readers familiar with

Buddhaghosa and Śāntideva will recognize their impact on these chapters. In the first stage, the reader is invited to commune with one's spiritual benefactors by bathing in their wish for her to be free from suffering and its causes. Makransky quickly utilizes this wish of compassion toward oneself as a means to trigger compassion for others who suffer similar, if not worse, afflictions. After all, all are bound together in a common condition of suffering and a common desire to be free of it. The second stage seeks to convert the afflicted, misknowing mind to the real nature of mind as totally open, non-grasping, unitive, and beyond discursive thought or categories (55). In Tibetan this is called *rigpa*. The third stage invites the practitioner to join his or her benefactors by extending compassion to oneself, then toward loved ones, then toward strangers, and finally toward those who have been disliked or hated. What enables the practitioner to extend compassion to "enemies" is the conviction that the divine abodes generate pure perception, and that a wish of love or compassion to an "enemy" is objectively more trustworthy than the limited or ego-conditioned perception of them as a substantial "enemy" (116, 120, 169). The fourth and final stage of the meditation is the dedication of merit generated by the meditation to all living beings, each of whom is united in their desire for liberation.

Through these meditations, Makransky seeks to dismantle what he calls the "samsaric maps" (108) and "ego conditioning" (162) regnant in our minds. These condition the mind not only to divide self from other but to posit an absolute value judgment within that dualistic thought process, so that some appear to us intrinsically as loved ones deserving love, others as intrinsic friends, others as intrinsic strangers, and still others as intrinsic enemies deserving only enmity. In addition to observing that such essentialized labels of others violates the no-self doctrine (*anātman*), the author also notes that such patterns of dualistic thinking are nothing more than "ephemeral displays of thought" dissociated from the true nature of mind as *rigpa* and the true nature of sentient beings,

including oneself. An analogy for this covered over mind is a mirror obscured by layers of dust. The task of Makransky's insight meditations on the divine abodes is to clean that mirror of contaminants and allow it simply to be what it is, to pierce through the ego conditioning and samsaric maps in order to reveal that which always was: the essential goodness and sameness of self and others (107, 120). The book claims in dozens of ways and on dozens of pages that all habituated mental conditioning distorts both the mind of the perceiver and the objective reality of the one perceived. The author's Dzogchen perspective is especially relevant here, with its insistence on the fundamental goodness of persons and sentient beings, a goodness to which they themselves testify—even unknowingly—according to the Buddha-nature or *tathagatha-garbha* doctrine (35, 144). The divine abodes are wholesome mental states that condition pure perception of Buddha nature in others. “Love senses the most fundamental goodness in beings that was always prior to such fabrication. . . . Love resonates with the underlying goodness of all beings, below the ‘radar’ of self-centered concepts of them” (120). The divine abodes also have an evocative function, for they sense beings as they actually are, objectively, independent of ego conditioning and thought projections. By modeling pure perception of others, one models and calls forth pure perception in them, effectively redrawing the samsaric maps about which Makransky is rightly concerned (104, 135, 148). In this way, the gravity of Makransky's description of *samsāra*—especially the social nature of unwholesome karma—finds relief in a series of meditations on the divine abodes which have the potential to foster pure perception and undo stubbornly unconscious “samsaric maps” (123).

In our current historical moment, with its many fissures in the global human community, and with stubborn in-group/out-group dynamics perpetuating the exact kind of misapprehensions Makransky encourages his readers to expose and ward off, the author's efforts here are most welcome. This text offers the necessary spiritual resources to engage in

prophetic critique of not only unwholesome individual mental states (71-74), but of unconscious communal states of mind or “social karma,” fed by prejudicial communal narratives pitting one group against another, often in ways that perpetuate a conditioned status quo masquerading as objective reality. The daily newspaper documents the scale of human tragedy resulting from such unexamined conformist group dynamics, which condition people to view self and other through the lenses of unexamined reductive labels. This prophetic critique is an especially important contribution the book makes. With it, Makransky demonstrates that one significant stimulus for non-Buddhists to learn meaningfully from Buddhist spirituality may rest in the latter’s capacity to offer prophetic critique of power structures, group dynamics, and disclosure of one’s individual participation in these. Makransky here speaks with the same voice as another recent contributor to this journal (cf. Christopher Ives, “Not Buying into Words and Letters: Zen, Ideology, and Prophetic Critique,” *JBE* 13 [2006], 1-10).

*Awakening Through Love* intends a wide readership. In the university context it can serve as an introduction to Buddhism (though not a “text-book” per se), an introduction to meditation, a foundational primer for Engaged Buddhism, and as an excellent entrée for non-Buddhists into the heart of Buddhist spirituality. In addition, the author makes a few brief correlations with Christian theology and the teachings of Jesus (for example, 24, 143, 184-85, 229-30), suggesting just a few of the many ways Buddhist thought can be opened up into comparative theological reflection. It succeeds in all of these.

Two possible criticisms should be mentioned, the first being something of a straw man. First, Dzogchen is a foundational influence on the author and book, which accounts for what some readers may regard as a suspiciously optimistic view of human nature. The Dzogchen commitment to the natural great perfection of Buddha nature in all sentient be-



ings takes shape, in this book, as a loving and compassionate expectation that all beings have the potential to actualize the deep, penetrating insight which is already their own, in seed-like form, characteristic of their Buddha nature. The divine abodes then become the correlative virtues attending insight. The task is to uncover that already enlightened mind, principally through meditation and practices of love and compassion. Some may charge the author with naïveté and idealism; they may doubt the workability of such a program in the “real world.” People simply do not behave in these ways, and in many instances should not behave in these ways, especially in view of the many instances of human tragedy the author himself recalls throughout the book. The charge of naïveté, however, fails to appreciate the author’s comments on social conditioning and karmic patterning, according to which the ways of the “real world” (i.e., cyclic existence) are themselves delusory and no standard by which to measure prescriptive spiritual practices. In other words, the very mistrust generating the charge of naïveté could be the product of unwholesome karmic patterning that the author means to dismantle. What are our preconscious assumptions and patterns of habitual labeling, categorizing, and evaluating, and to what degree are they contaminated? The author does his readership a great service by enabling them to observe the distinction between conventional and ultimate perception.

Secondly, the book may have deployed technical Buddhist concepts more rigorously. Let me be clear: the book is not lacking in density or depth, and its accessibility is a tribute to Makransky’s gifted writing style which allows him to retrieve and distill Mahāyāna wisdom for a broad audience. This laudable strength may prove, however, to be a minor shortcoming in the university classroom setting where his readership will be keen to connect his guided meditations somewhat more explicitly and comprehensively to the fabric of Buddhist doctrine. For this reason it may be that the book will function best in the university setting when combined with a separate chapter introducing Buddhist doctrine. That

being said, a caution is in order; this book is deeply challenging, and one might justifiably be suspicious of the casual reader who quickly dismisses the book for either of these two potential criticisms. One might fear that such a reader has not quite accepted Makransky's invitation to grapple seriously with the manifold ways in which Buddhist practice gives rise to a prophetic and potentially interreligious social ethic, nor with the ways in which the subject matter he treats draws from the very best that Mahāyāna traditions have to offer persons in the world today.