

Book Review

Dancing with Dharma: Essays on Movement and Dance in Western Buddhism

Ed. Harrison Blum. McFarland and Co., 2016. 284pp. Pb. £41.50.

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This book review was originally published in *Buddhist Studies Review*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2017. © Equinox Publishing Ltd 2017

Dancing with Dharma is a rich collection of essays from a range of movement and dance practitioners, all of whom share a common grounding in Western Buddhism. Twenty-seven contributors present accounts of a range of practices that incorporate, or are inspired by, various aspects of Buddhist teaching and practice. As Blum makes clear at the outset, this is not an academic text, but rather an initial drawing together of the many and compelling ways in which dance and Buddhism are interacting in the West (particularly in North America).

Collectively, the essays present a picture of a bi-directional relationship, with Buddhist teachings influencing approaches to creativity, pedagogy and transformational process in dance, whilst dance and movement forms are developed as skillful means by which to actively explore aspects of Buddhism. The book will interest dance and performance scholars for its examples of conceptually rich practice, and the alternative languages and perspectives which Buddhism brings, but it is the relationship of dance to *dharma* which is likely to prove of interest to Buddhist scholars and researchers. Dance is seen, here, as a means by which to engage in the teachings of the Buddha through embodied rather than conceptual approaches.

The central theme of the book is best articulated by Reginald Ray, whose chapter provides the most theoretical discussion of, and argument for, 'the essential and transformative role of embodiment in the path of meditation' (p. 188). Buddhist scholars may be interested to see the ways in which the teachings of the Buddha can be explored through the body, and the ways in which meditation and mindfulness can be experienced and trained through dynamic forms.

At its best, the book provides concrete, grounded examples of the interaction between the wisdom structures of Buddhism and the embodied experiences of dance. Lee Worley's discussion of Mudra Space Awareness outlines the ways in which Chogyam Trungpa's form engages participants in an active inquiry into the play of ego, the illusion of a separate self, and the effects of a heightened awareness of space. Barbara Dilley, also working within the lineage of Trungpa, considers dance as contemplation, and as a means of 'synchronizing mind and body' (p. 92). Charles Genoud's koan-like (p. 15) bodily practice is described as a disclosure of 'the many preconceptions that shape and restrain our lives...that lead us to be taken in by the fiction of time and space...' (p. 12).

Those with an interest in societally-engaged Buddhism may also wish to read the accounts of practitioners using Buddhist-inspired dance and movement in community building, or in response to political imperatives; for example, Anna Tzakou's *samatha-vipassanā*-based body-landscape explorations in the context of the contemporary crisis in Greece (p. 137).

In tone, the book tends towards the subjective and the anecdotal, with most contributors telling the story of how they came to engage with Buddhism and dance. At its best, this provides personal testimonies of the ways in which bodily practices can lead to realizations of the kind which mark the Buddhist path, but it does not deliver the kind of rigour which scholars of Buddhism might require. In a number of the essays, parallels are drawn and similarities identified between core aspects of Buddhist teachings and dance practice itself. For example, Mindfulness of the Body (the first foundation of mindfulness in the *Satipatthāna Sutta*) is frequently compared to the dancer's trainings in somatic awareness and attention. Blum writes that 'movement and dance training foster continuous mindfulness of the body' (p. 3) but this comparison is not held up to a critical lens, nor subjected to the kind of scrutiny that would be required to establish whether mindfulness as taught in Buddhist practice is nothing more than an attentional practice, or, on the other hand, whether attention training in the context of performance opens onto the kinds of insights and benefits associated with mindfulness. These are interesting and important critical questions, and the book lays a fertile groundwork for other researchers to enter into these inquiries.

Blum identifies Buddhist-influenced Western movement and dance practice as an 'emerging field' (p. 1), and, indeed, the work outlined in the book represents one corner of a broader, emergent field of Buddhist-inspired, mindfulness-based, and contemplative performance practice; (examples include performance artists such as Laurie Anderson and Marina Abramovic, the Llanarth Groups' contemplative theatre, and Rolf Hinds' mindfulness opera). Thus, Buddhist scholars interested in the manifestations of Buddhism in Western society, and the spread of the secular mindfulness movement, may find this book a useful document.