Chapter 13

On the Path to Peace and Wholeness

Conclusion to Psychology and Buddhism

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The completion of this book marks a tremendous effort over several years by the three editors and the many contributors. However, the timing of its completion, in the aftermath of the tragic events of September 11, 2001 suggests that the “karma” of this effort, our collective energies and causes, determined that it would be completed at the time of greatest benefit to our audience. There are several sub-themes which have emerged from the chapters, including the alleviation of suffering at the individual, community, and global levels, the theory of dependent origination, empowerment at individual and societal levels, and the understanding of Buddhism as an engaged as well as individualistic practice, to name but a few. However, the overarching theme that speaks to this defining moment in our lives, is the commitment to peace and our ability as psychologists, Buddhists, or thoughtful human beings to bring about peaceful solutions to the terror, fear, and ethnic warfare that has been recognized as one of the greatest challenges to freedom in the twenty-first century (Chirot & Seligman, 2001; Ikeda, 2001; Payutto, 1996).

Buddhism as a religion has been recognized as a vehicle for peace. Indeed, Ikeda (2001) argues that “a religion that does not help people, that is not devoted to peace is not a proper religion … at its essence, religion is commitment – commitment to saving people from suffering. True religion strives to instill that commitment in peoples lives” (p. 1).
Jason and Moritsugu speak to this issue in their chapter, linking the Buddhist goal of reducing violence and conflict in the world to this shared goal within the discipline of community psychology. Thich Nhat Hanh (1993) has said “To preserve peace, our hearts must be at peace with the world, with our brothers and sisters” (p. 73). This point is well developed in the Dockett and North Schulte chapter on “Transcending Difference” which identifies as a root cause of ethnic conflict the failure to understand the nature of our existence and our interdependent relationships.

One could question the role of psychology in what appears to be a priori a political battle. What if any, is the role of the psychologist in the peace process? While Buddhism has established itself as a means of alleviating discord, promoting peace, and reducing suffering on the societal as well as the individual level, psychology, particularly as it is practiced in the West, has established itself as a “scientific” profession determinedly apolitical. As such, it consistently has sought to remove itself from the “subjectivity” inherent in human experience, which has plagued the discipline’s early development, and elevate itself to the lofty “objectivity” associated with the physical sciences such as physics and chemistry. Indeed, “evidence-based practice” (Barlow, 2000) has been touted as the most positive redeeming value of the managed care era. However, Polly Young-Eisendrath has argued that we seek such scientific purity to our detriment in the sense of “biologizing” our behavior in the extreme. Her contention is that emphasis on the biological bases of behavior, in particular those that lead to suffering, undermines the ability to make significant behavior change. Practicing psychologists can also be seen as purveyors of the ultimate “coping mechanism,” whether on the individual or community level, helping people to manage their individual stress and promoting resilient communities.

As psychologists addressing this tragedy, on the scene and around the world with our clients, and in our communities, we have addressed the issues of stress and helped our clients whether individually or at the societal level to come to terms with what some have called the “new reality.” However, it has been the intent of this book to generate insight, thought, and action that goes beyond mere coping and stress management, although these are extremely worthwhile goals. Buddhism charges us to recognize that we are one with our environment, and that we have a responsibility to take action, as the external world is ultimately a reflection of our individual and collective reality. Thich Nhat Hanh has coined the term, “engaged Buddhism.” This term was developed during the time of the Vietnam war when the Vietnamese Buddhist leaders took an active role in attempting to bring about a peaceful solution to the conflict that was devastating their country and destroying communities and their people.

We would posit that we must also recognize our responsibility as “engaged psychologists” playing a major role as social interventionists who can help our fellow human beings and ourselves to recognize our responsibility in creating peace in this world.