

Buddhism and Human Flourishing

“*Buddhism and Human Flourishing* is an admirably thoughtful work of comparative practical philosophy and psychology. It is one of the few books from a modern Buddhist perspective that grapples with the realities of historical and cultural context and with what it means to take up ideas and practices from a very different time and place with nuance and complexity. A rare fusion of erudition and accessibility, it will be of interest to scholars and practitioners alike.”

—David L. McMahan, Charles A. Dana *Professor of Religious Studies, Franklin & Marshall College, USA*

“Seth Zuihō Segall is one of a kind: a Zen Buddhist priest, a hospital chaplain associate, psychotherapist, existentialist, peace activist, and as fluent in recent philosophical debates about the nature of self and consciousness as in the history and philosophy of Buddhism. In this timely, crystal clear book, Segall defends a version of Buddhist modernism attuned to the sensibilities of secular and scientifically minded people. How can people in the lineage of Plato and Aristotle and the Abrahamic traditions adapt and adopt Buddhist beliefs and sensibilities? In this terrific book, Seth Segall shows a way.”

—Owen Flanagan, James B. Duke *Professor of Philosophy, Duke University, USA*

“Challenging traditional understandings of rebirth and karma is a hallmark of all emerging modernist Buddhisms. If they’re right, then one question burns: what is enlightenment? Seth Zuihō Segall, Zen priest and psychologist, explores how Aristotle’s eudaimonia may prove the key to a modernist Buddhist path of awakening. This is a compelling book, challenging but also inviting. It’s an important contribution to a growing modernist Buddhist literature. I recommend it to anyone wrestling with the great questions of who are we and how can we live lives of value and meaning.”

—James Ishmael Ford, Roshi; *Author of Introduction to Zen Koans: Learning the Language of Dragons and If You’re Lucky, Your Heart Will Break: Field Notes from a Zen Life*

“Contemporary Western Buddhism has become a process, not of the extinction of the self and desire, but of their transformation in the service of human flourishing. Seth Zuihō Segall, with a creative synthesis of contemporary psychology and Aristotelean virtue ethics, has formulated a new ‘eudaemonic Buddhism’ that is both relevant to our times, while preserving the essential teachings of traditional Buddhism.”

—Barry Magid, MD Psychoanalyst and Founding Teacher, *Ordinary Mind Zendo*

Seth Zuihō Segall

Buddhism and Human Flourishing

A Modern Western Perspective

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Seth Zuihō Segall
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*This book is dedicated to the memories of Ruth Denison, Ferris Urbanowski,
and Toni Packer—three remarkable women who introduced me to
Vipassanā, mindfulness, and meditative inquiry. May their memories
be an inspiration and a blessing.*

PREFACE

If we modern Westerners are to make Buddhism our own, we must find ways to accommodate traditional Buddhist ideas to the preexisting understandings—both tacit and explicit—that constitute our modern way of being-in-the-world. To do anything less puts us at risk for an inner dividedness in which we half-believe in any number of contrasting and incompatible ideas. This is not a good place to end up.

The central thesis of this book is that the tensions between traditional Buddhist understandings of enlightenment and prevailing Western notions of human flourishing are significant contributing factors in the evolution of Western Buddhism. I intend to show how this underlying tension strongly affects the way many, if not most, contemporary Western Buddhist teachers and practitioners interpret the Dharma.

There are, by now, many excellent works of scholarship that explain how and why Western Buddhist modernism came to be as it is. The works of Donald Lopez Jr., David McMahan, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, and Ann Gleig come readily to mind. Their work has traced the general influences of Western science, psychology, economics, literature, and technological innovation and the specific influences of Western individualism, romanticism, transcendentalism, perennialism, humanistic psychology, and social liberation movements on Western Buddhist modernism. Meanwhile, the influence of prevailing Western notions of human flourishing, derived from the Aristotelian tradition, has gone practically unnoticed, hiding in plain sight. This book is an attempt to remedy that relative neglect.

The idea for this book came to me two years ago during a weeklong Zen *sesshin* (silent Buddhist meditation retreat). One isn't supposed to

nurture thoughts during *sesshin*—if thoughts like these occur, one is just supposed to let them go. I was helpless in the face of this particular onslaught, however. The least I could do was to turn it into a book.

Although the idea came sudden, unbidden, and whole, its seeds had been planted long before. In February 2006 I heard Tibetan Buddhist scholar-practitioner B. Alan Wallace suggest that Aristotle and the Buddha shared parallel conceptions of the unity of happiness, wisdom, and morality. Five years later I heard philosopher Damien Keown argue that traditional Buddhist ethics was a form of Aristotelian virtue ethics. In 2011 I read philosopher Owen Flanagan’s discussion of Buddhist and Aristotelian subtypes of happiness in his book *The Bodhisattva’s Brain*. Between 2012 and 2017 I taught an undergraduate psychology course examining well-being in Aristotle, Western psychology, and Buddhism, and sometime early in those years re-read Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* with a philosophy study group based in my local library. These are the influences that prepared the groundwork for the ideas that animate this book.

I’ve written this book to make it accessible to general readers as well as to be of interest to philosophers, psychologists, and Buddhist scholars, teachers, and practitioners. It’s intended to be both descriptive and prescriptive. I hope to both enhance our understanding of how and why Western Buddhism assumes its current aspect and help inform the future development of Western Buddhism.

I view you, the reader, as my partner in this endeavor. We are the latest participants in a two-and-a-half millennia conversation about the nature of awakening and flourishing. Together, we contribute in some small way to determining how Buddhism will be practiced and understood in the future. I invite you to join me in this dialogue—whether you agree with my conclusions or not—and help carry the conversation forward.

May all beings awaken, flourish, and aspire to superior levels of well-being!

White Plains, NY, USA
October, 2019

Seth Zuihō Segall

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I would be remiss if I failed to express my gratitude and appreciation to many of the wonderful Buddhist teachers, meditation teachers, and Buddhist scholars whom I've practiced with, studied with, or conversed with over the years. Among them, let me mention (in no particular order) Toni Packer, Larry Rosenberg, Ferris Urbanowski, Ruth Denison, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, Myoshin Kelly, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, Jan Willis, Peter Harvey, Andrew Olendzki, Taigen Dan Leighton, Robert Jinsen Kennedy Roshi, Grover Genro Gaunt Roshi,

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Finally, I am grateful to Palgrave Macmillan Religion and Philosophy Editor Philip Getz for believing in this book, and Assistant Religion and Philosophy Editor Amy Invernizzi for graciously holding my hand throughout the stages of publication.

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