FOREWORD

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When I first met a few years ago with the researchers who contributed to this book, I was excited to learn about their work. These different areas of study—near-death experiences, memories of past lives, apparitions, *siddhis*—reflect a principle that Tibetan Buddhists have explored for centuries. We believe that mind is not just conditioned by the physical brain and body, or even by the properties of time and space. Mind is also beyond all these. Even after the dissolution of the physical body at the time of death, Tibetan Buddhists believe that mind persists and is reborn continuously into new forms.

Mainstream science has been slow to acknowledge the dimensions of study described in this book. Given the relevance of these topics to the contemporary encounter between Buddhism and science, in 2010, I invited these researchers to participate in a Buddhism-science conference at Serenity Ridge, Virginia—the retreat center where I focus my own worldwide efforts in research, study, and teaching (Ligmincha International). This setting permitted engaging in open, lively dialogue, and the presentations at that conference were the inspiration for this book.

This gathering was a realization of some of my own long-time interests. From age ten, I was trained as a Bön monk in Menri Monastery near Dolanji, India. I entered the Dialectic School at Menri, and after finishing twelve years of study there toward my *geshe* degree, I traveled to the West and discovered here a completely different world. I was excited to explore on an informal basis everything from psychology to neuroscience to quantum physics. In particular, I have always been interested in how ancient spiritual practices can bring about not only profound shifts in consciousness but also physical health benefits.

Around 1993 I met some clinicians at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, and we opened discussions around the relationship between meditation practice and pain management. This eventually led to projects in which we observed the mental and physical effects of Tibetan practices—of the body (such as the Tibetan yogas of *tsa lung* and *trul khor*), of breath (various breathing and sound-healing exercises), and of mind (including meditation practices involving imagery and visualization)—on the relief of suffering in cancer patients.¹ Ancient Tibetan tantric and *dzogchen* texts tell of a wide variety of benefits from these practices, based on centuries of observation in meditation.² I believe that practices of the body, breath, and mind will one day be acknowledged by conventional medicine as potent treatments for physical disease, and will be prescribed for specific bodily symptoms as well as to improve the health of the psyche.

The researchers in this book have been observing and cataloging unusual phenomena that are difficult or impossible to explain based on current scientific theory. Near-death experiences bring up the question of how we can reconcile a brain that appears not to be functioning with a mind functioning better than ever. Cases of the reincarnation type suggest that memories and

emotions can carry over from one life to the next. Apparitions associated with death indicate that the process of dying may be far more interesting and revealing than simply the cessation of the physical functioning of the body. Investigation of extraordinary powers or attainments (*siddhis*) such as telepathy, clairvoyance, and psychokinesis presents yet another perspective on an expanded view of mind and reality.

It is well accepted in the Tibetan traditions that body, energy, and mind are inseparably related, and that the mind itself has extraordinary power not only to ease physical suffering and prevent and heal sickness, but also to dissolve the entire physical dimension. For example, through practices of wind (*prana, chi, lung*), one is able to deconstruct the energetic blockages within one's bodily tissues until those blockages dissolve and one enters a spacious state that is free of discord and pain. Enlightenment itself is said to come about when one deconstructs the dualistic sense of ego identity to the point that one attains a pure state of consciousness (*kunzhi*, the base of all consciousness) that is beyond all conceptuality and even physicality. In the Tibetan *dzogchen* tradition, there are records of people whose physical bodies at the time of death dissolved entirely or almost entirely into light, with the exception of hair, fingernails, and toenails. This highest attainment of *dzogchen* practice is known as the body of light, or rainbow body (*gya lü*).

On a more practical and achievable level, when presenting these practices to students and cancer patients I have focused on deconstructing the sense of ego identity so that one identifies, essentially, as a totally new person with a much healthier, more open, and caring relationship to pain. I have seen over and over how the warmth of loving kindness toward one's mental, emotional, or physical pain can ease and even eradicate pain and sickness.

Some of the effects of these practices are so profound and subtle that they are difficult to measure. And some of the research presented in this book faces similar challenges of measurement. But I truly believe the time will soon come when these areas of research will be well accepted. The contributors in this book are courageous to openly explore their research in the face of skepticism by many of their peers, and I think it is important they continue. What we can learn from these investigations may be applied to something much more important than trying to read someone's mind, talk to spirits, or determine one's previous lives. Investigation into mind and its relationship with our physical world, which has been conducted since ancient times by countless wisdom traditions, can not only expand upon the current limits of our science, but can offer something very concrete in meeting the needs of modern society. This book serves as an excellent vehicle in bringing very important material more fully into the contemporary encounter between Buddhism and science. It is good to see this happen.