

## Book Reviews

### **Encountering Buddhism: Western psychology and Buddhist teachings**

SETH ROBERT SEGALL (Ed.)

Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003, 214 pp.

\$18.95 (pb) ISBN 0 7914 5736 2

This book is an audacious attempt to show how Buddhism (especially *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna*) might foster the further development of psychology (psychoanalytic, existential/humanistic, cognitive-behavioural, and transpersonal) and, to a lesser extent, how psychology could enrich Buddhism, by going through various theoretical (i.e., Buddhist principles) and more practical (i.e., meditation) points of confluence and conflict. Interestingly, most of the eight authors, whether as scholars, researchers, or therapists in psychology, not only have a certain *intellectual* knowledge of Buddhism but, more importantly, also *practice* personal meditation, which is rare. Their attitude towards Buddhism varies from a committed adherence to a more cautious scepticism. This last position is illustrated by Belinda Siew Luan Khong, when she says that following the Buddhist (eightfold) path does not require you to adopt a religious attitude of blind faith towards the teachings or masters. Rather, being a Buddhist implies further developing self-confidence, self-awareness, personal responsibility, and personal effort through a non-sectarian insight and understanding based on direct experience of “bare reality.” Seth Robert Segall also admits that the Buddha was probably not infallible in his understanding of the world, and in any case, we have no certain knowledge of what He actually said. Segall recognizes that Buddhism is partly defined by irrational speculative and folk beliefs and practices. Still, these aside, “non-Buddhist Buddhists” can still commit themselves to the core values and techniques *fundamentally* constituting Buddhism, and these are what this book attempts to present.

According to Andrew Olendzki, Buddhist meditation allows us to approach the human condition through subjective experience in order to discover, transform or eliminate patterns in the flow of (un)consciousness. It helps us to see how each of us is conditioned to falsely construct our shared or more personal reality, allowing us henceforth to take it for what it is (i.e., mere conceptual construction). By slowly adopting a less distorted and thus psychologically more satisfying view and/by developing a more stable, calm, and focused

mind(fulness) in our everyday life and activities, our behaviour becomes better adapted. In line with these ideas, a glimpse is given by Kaisa Puhakka into the teachings of the great *Mahāyāna* philosopher, Nāgārjuna, which are presented as offering an acute transformative tool, like meditation, allowing one to go *through* attachments to ultimately self-contradictory and unsatisfactory views of reality. His four-cornered negation dialectic of the *Middle Way* culminates in the “no position,” “when nothing is affirmed or denied, nothing reached for or held onto, liberation into the fullness of what is naturally occurs” (p. 132). It also helps to describe and understand our contemporary culture—through post-modern deconstructivism and transpersonalism—and one’s personal spiritual/philosophical progression. According to Segall, meditation also helps us (even lay people in everyday life) to clearly experience the insubstantiality of a separate and enduring inner self, which naturally allows for a truly compassionate behaviour to “an ever-widening circle of Being” (p. 101). This adaptive attitude of accepting and letting go “seen through” inner/outer phenomena seems to be specifically enhanced by Buddhist meditation, and this is to the benefit of the patient, whatever their race, culture, or religious orientation, says Khong. Because of this virtue, Jean L. Kristeller asserts that the incorporation of meditation—as a *secularized* relaxation method and self-regulation process—and certain Buddhist principles into psychological framework and counselling practice can be healthy and heuristic. Moreover, Kristeller (re)discovers that Buddhist *spirituality* may also play an important therapeutic role that involves “seeing with the third eye,” a fundamental and universal human capacity consisting in the ability to make optimal use of our internal resources outside any conditioning. Once more, meditation is presented as the most powerful tool for this purpose. Also, Jeffrey B. Rubin tries to promote a fruitful dialogue between Buddhism and psychoanalysis to elaborate what he calls a “contemplative therapeutics” or an “analytic meditation.” For example, meditation seems to enhance sensibility and insight into, and the overcoming of, more or less unconscious repetitive pathological shortcomings, of which psychoanalysis could then help to integrate and explore the meaning in order to foster *self-construction*—whereas Buddhism promotes *self-deconstruction*. The quality of apprehending the transference/countertransference phenomena in the psychoanalytical cure through a greater non-judgmental openness to the inner experience of oneself and of others could also be improved.

Robert Rosenbaum presents the central role played by the not rationally graspable concept of “mirroring” in both the Zen tradition and Western psychotherapy. The Buddhist view accounts for the “Absolute level” that psychotherapy needs for some (more) concreteness, completeness, instantaneousness, and thusness around which interactions between the therapist and patient may revolve. Most important is to understand that ultimately there is no core conflict, fault, or personal, independent, and permanent *self*, but an empty, immaculate, and mirror-like *Self*; and that only a path embracing both *Relative* (psychoanalysis) and *Absolute* (Zen) truth allows one to realize this freeing non-duality.

Segall exposes how psychotherapy can become the spiritual expression of the therapist's own commitment to Buddhist precepts and practice. In this way, the *Eightfold Noble Path* consisting in moral action, concentration, and philosophical wisdom becomes a therapeutic framework. Moral action here emphasizes the skilful use of speech for relieving the patient's suffering. Concentration facilitates a high quality of attention and an attitude marked by loving-kindness, compassion, and equanimity. Philosophical wisdom permits a greater understanding of the nature of (1) suffering; (2) impermanence, allowing the therapeutic situation to evolve, with flexibility; (3) nonself, fostering connectedness and caring; and (4) interbeing, enhancing the understanding that no clinical phenomenon exists separate from the social system–therapist–client interactions.

Finally, Eugene Taylor retraces the history of the/his dialogue between “Classical Eastern psychology”—with a focus on Buddhism—and Western psychology, especially through concepts of personality and consciousness, and self-transforming methods. Taylor concludes that this dialogue often ends up in a mixed and fuzzy picture and a devotional tendency “to take religious experiences out of their indigenous contexts and import them wholesale into the practice of psychotherapy or our understanding of consciousness” (p. 191). Nevertheless, he is optimistic that, if Westerners adopt a new epistemological framework through closer collaboration with non-Western systems scholars, a much-needed cross-fertilization in psychology should soon occur.

In conclusion, Taylor's cautious remarks and perspective might well apply here to most of the presented essays. This book is more an *overview* of various possible ways to undertake a fruitful dialogue between the two traditions than a self-congratulatory account of what has been done (presently quite limited). The different authors' affirmations could still probably gain by being supported by more solid psychological arguments and some quantitative empirical data. Perhaps this book can be *positively* considered as a source of inspiration for continuing the clarification and deepening of the research only recently undertaken.

JULIEN DUPUIS  
*Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium*