



## Book Review

Julien Dupuis

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## Book Review

### **Psychology and Buddhism: From individual to global community**

Kathleen H. Dockett, G. Rita Dudley-Grant, & C. Peter Bankart (Eds.)

New York, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publisher, 2003, €59.85 (pb), 308 pp.

ISBN 0 3064 7412 3.

This book is an attempt to show how psychology could benefit from integrating some aspects of Buddhism. The authors demonstrate the commonalities of community psychology and socially engaged Buddhism – with special emphasis on (*Soka Gakkai*) Nichiren Buddhism.

The editors open the debate by presenting the “Foundations” (Part 1) of this dialogue, broadly retracing the history of Buddhism and noting where it converges with psychology, both doctrinally and practically. The tone is set by stating that “[t]he great power of Buddhism for many psychologists is that it is so completely and powerfully true” (p. 17). Referring more to the early Buddhism of its founder, they adopt the view of an empirical, rational, in short “scientific Buddhism”, stripped of any trace of religious artifact. Buddhism is presented as a social and political tool able to create an “enlightened community”. Nonetheless, Bankart recounts an (mis)encounter between the two traditions, by proceeding chronologically through major psychological paradigms: Psychodynamic, (Neo-)Analytical, Behavioural, and even New Age, each with its own scientific prejudices, which compromise a non-biased Western translation of Buddhism. Ragsdale then presents the possibilities of a subtle interface between Gestalt psychology and *Mahayana* Buddhism through the complex epistemological and moral issue of meaning and value judgments. Indeed, the concept of “relationality” resounds well, and is even deepened with the “non-dualistic *Madhyamikan* Middle Way” between the extremes of *nihilism* and *absolutism*, allowing respect for *value diversity* without sacrificing any pretension for *value validity* and *universality*.

The all-pervasive Buddhist core view of “compassion-wisdom” is applied, as well, when Dudley-Grant introduces the “Alternatives in Psychotherapy” (Part 2) for the problem of addiction. Buddhism and psychology (Psychoanalysis and Cognitive-Behaviourism) are shown to share common and compatible goals, theories and methodologies. (Nichiren) Buddhism sees salvation more as *interdependent* than *independent* self-control – paralleling the fact that “spiritual recovery” might depend heavily on devoting oneself to the (substance abuse) community. In the same vein, Young-Eisendrath pleads for a “science of subjectivity/intentionality” embodied in Psychodynamics and Buddhism, self-reflectively fostering an agency relatively free from in/external factors. She warns us, however, about the insidious tendency to explain the

human through biological determinism. This makes meaningless ethical responsibility, compassion, and the freedom to alleviate suffering by understanding and changing one's mind and behaviour. Indeed, "response-ability" is presented by Khong as the cornerstone of personal and social "liberation" in Existential (Dasein) Analysis and, in an extended form, in (*Theravada*) Buddhism. For that purpose, *phenomenological seeing* and *meditative acceptance* could both maximise a "psychology of change". Hayes attempts to clarify this "old-new" paradigm by showing how *Ethics* – applied to an ever growing and meaningful social net – constitute the basis for an efficient *Meditation* leading to complete *Wisdom*. Following that very praiseworthy path requires that one stays on the "middle way", avoiding self-indulgence or denial, and on the interpersonal level indifference to or being bogged down in worldly affairs.

This latter level, first developed by Dockett, points in fact to the heart of the "Bodhisattva's vow" for "world peace and harmony" by "Empowerment, Responsibility and the Challenges of Change" (Part 3), granted to the individual in a meaningful organisation-community enabling him to affect societal functioning. That multilevel approach, as conceptualised in Community Psychology, is shown to be already practically applied in Nichiren Buddhism, exemplifying the way to gentle "global revolution". Going further, Jason and Moritsugu emphasise the need to adopt spiritual foundational values, in line with Ragsdale's thesis, and practices quite lacking in Community Psychology, but available in *Mahayana* Buddhism. Internally, this would provide a therapeutically and socially conducive framework. Externally, this would innovatively guide current "Ecological Transformational Interventions" such as in running supportive/protective shared settings. Dockett and North-Schulte show how such integrative principles should help to understand more thoroughly the causes of, and solutions to, the ethnic conflicts that are seriously threatening humanity's survival. Indeed, *Mahayana* advocates letting go of *attachment* to one's own and *aversion* to others' personal and social identities by experiencing their complete inter-relativity/-changeability across lives, and by promoting an absolute altruistic "cosmoscentrism" based on the recognition of everyone's eternal "*Buddha/True Self*". Likewise, Yamamoto tackles the equally dreadful problem of ecology by explaining how Buddhism (*Yogacara*) could radically encourage symbiotic living respectful of the environment, and non-discriminatory regarding its bio-diversity. Thus, socio-cultural along with religious reforms, if largely adopted, by changing (sub)consciousness to and from the deepest core respectively, would finally lead to a balanced and retroactively balancing external world – perceived non-dually as society's "*karmic* by-product". Chappell states that a growing number of Buddhist movements – as should "engaged psychologists" – are becoming reinvigorated with such fundamental democratic and down-to-earth principles in order to bring about an external context auspicious to all sentient beings' "enlightenment". However, compassionate social dialogue/activism, extending from personal mindfulness practice, so as to reach further consensual stability, must now be legally backed up by secular constitutions such as the Human Rights Convention.

Overall, this book gives the reader a good lead on many different issues. Inevitably the insightfulness of the discussions varies. In particular, the arguments are sometimes too "intentional-theological" and not "processual-philosophical" enough, posing difficulties for research-based, practical approaches. There is a tendency to idealise Buddhist societies

(see Brauen, 2004), and underrate the Western contribution to modern “Buddhist socialism”. The distinction is often blurred between Buddhist principles and the socio-political reality. Additionally, the presentation of Nichiren Buddhism is sometimes misleading: for example, it is referred to as being distinctive in employing negative emotion for spiritual growth, while this applies to all schools of *Vajrayana* Buddhism. Nevertheless, it should be stated that the authors will hopefully have fulfilled their wish “that the reader will find a ‘big picture’ here that will, if nothing else, serve as an invitation for further study, discussion, and reflection.” (p. 3).

#### **References**

Brauen, M. (2004). *Dreamworld Tibet: Western Illusions*. Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill.

Reviewed by Julien Dupuis