Hoffer Review

This volume is a collection of essays that grew out of a symposium entitled: “The Couch and the Cushion:What Psychoanalysis and Buddhism can Learn from Each Other” held at Pine Manor College in 2013. In addition to the editor, Axel Hoffer, the participants included psychiatrist Mark Epstein, psychoanalysts Della Kostner and Sara Weber, and Buddhist scholar Andrew Olendzki. Nina Saville-Rocklin was invited to provide an introductory chapter on “The Origins and Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis, and Gerald Fogel concludes with a personal account of his decades long involvement with Zen and psychoanalysis. The volume also reprints Nina Coltart’s classic paper “The practice of psychoanalysis and Buddhism.” (1985).

Attempts at dialogue between psychoanalysis and Buddhism have been going on at least since the late 1950’s when Erich Fromm, Karen Horney and Richard DeMartino began meeting with D.T. Suzuki. From the beginning, the various participants had their own goals and agendas in pursuing the dialogue. As Kostner points out, Fromm’s explicit goal was to use Zen in the formation of a new humanistic psychology emphasizing human potentials that lay outside the scope of classical Freudian analysis. Suzuki, it should be noted, sought to translate Zen into Western philosophical terms to make it accessible to a new audience; he had no thought that Zen suffered from any psychological or theoretical lacunae that psychoanalysis could fill.

Another other strand in the dialogue has involved a different branch of Buddhism, the Theravada school described here by Olendzki, with the importation of mindfulness as a technique that could be used in conjunction with a variety of short term cognitive behavioral approaches, such as those pioneered by Jon Kabot-Zinn. Here the temptation is to assume that Buddhism itself is reducible to mindfulness once all that extraneous cultural, religious and ethical baggage has been removed and to see meditation itself as a kind of pre-scientific proto-therapy. Hoffer, in his Introduction, is himself inclined to frame Buddhism, not as a religion, but as a philosophy with a profound ethical dimension interwoven into its psychology. This secularization of Buddhism is a particularly modern and Western construction. Buddhism did not require that the Buddha be god-like for it to be a religion. The original followers of the Buddha were all celibate, ascetic renunciant monks. This form of life was not incidental to the teaching; it was the literal enactment of the Buddha’s core realization of impermanence. One had no fixed abode, no personal or familial attachments, no personal security beyond the charity of the community in providing daily alms. Our modern conception of Buddhism as a philosophy and psychology represents a radical deracination, secularization and instrumentalization of a distinctly religious practice and form of life.

Nina Coltart’s “The Practice of Psychoanalysis and Buddhism” (1985) recognizes this important distinction when she says that Freud never considered psychoanalysis a philosophy of life and “psychotherapy (and here including psychoanalysis) is essentially a means to an end, not an end in itself.” It is only in a narrowly reductionistic sense that Buddhism’s goal of ending suffering can be considered a “means to an end.” Indeed, the Heart Sutra, a core text of Mahayana Buddhism asserts there is “No suffering, no cause or end of suffering, no path, no wisdom and no gain.” One would no more practice Buddhism until it “worked” than one would Judaism or Christianity. Coltart’s own practice of Buddhism, which this paper did much to legitimize for other “closet” Buddhists, offered her a life-long practice of being present, of bare attention and what she referred to as a Keatsian “negative capability.”

Nina-Saville Rocklin, in outlining the fundamental characteristics of psychoanalysis, makes a defining contrast with psychotherapy by saying, “Psychotherapy primarily aims at symptom relief.” Psychoanalysis, by contrast, is an open ended, meaning seeking endeavor, the goals and outcomes of which are much harder, if not impossible to determine in advance. Mindfulness, separated out from its broader ethical and religious context, and re-packaged as a treatment for stress and other symptoms, stands in relation to Buddhism as psychotherapy does to psychoanalysis.

Kostner’s chapter, ”It’s not just about the mindfulness” gives a good account of what is left out of this instrumentalized reduction, particularly in the realm of ethics and the broader picture of the nature of the self and its relation to change and suffering. It is a refreshing feature of this chapter and the book as a whole, that it moves beyond what has been a perennial confusion about the Buddhist language of “no self.” I’d hate to count how many conference panels I’ve sat on where I’ve been asked, “Doesn’t Buddhism want to eliminate the self whereas psychoanalysis works to strengthen the self?” As Kostner correctly points out, Buddhism simply states that the self, like everything else in the worl,d is subject to change. No self means there is no single fixed observer of experience “inside” looking out; “This homunculus self is a fiction,” she succinctly observes. Suffering, in Buddhist terms, arises from our core resistance to change; our instinctive attempts to control the uncontrollable which include both our inner and the outer worlds, and indeed our attempts to maintain a clear boundary between inner and outer. She, however, draws what I think is a false contrast between the intimacy of the analytic relationship and what she conceives of as the solitude of meditation. “Yet, one is alone on the cushion,” she asserts. Perhaps this statement is an over-generalization from her experience of some forms of insight meditation, in which there is no long term relationship with a single teacher and the student is left in relative solitude to work through a sequence of basic meditative exercises. However, the situation in Zen meditation is quite different. There the student-teacher relationship is deemed central to practice and may continue for decades, as Gerald Fogel’s experience shows. But even in practice centers where there is not this long-term student -teacher relationship, meditation is very rarely practiced in solitude. It is typically a highly structured group activity, formalized by varying degrees of traditional religious ritual. In a practice that emphasizes interdependence, it is central to the experience that we are unable to do it alone. As Jamie Lee Curtis’s character in “A Fish Called Wanda” reminds her dim-witted brother, the central tenet of Buddhism is NOT “Every man for himself.”

Andrew Olendzki’s chapter on “Buddhist psychology” is problematic in many ways for psychoanalysis. Although he draws a parallel between the Buddhist picture of the mind as a “vast territory of…underlying tendencies or latent dispositions” with the Freudian unconscious, his approach to understanding and working with emotion seems at times to be quite at odds with analytic thinking. In particular, he describes an underlying ethical dimension to emotion and employs a metaphor of purification with regards to mental contents. Some emotions have intrinsically beneficial effects, others are intrinsically toxic. “The Buddhist tradition,” says Olendzki, “ includes a host of exercises and practices that work to cleanse the mind and steer it away from states that are toxic and at the same time to guide the mind in the direction of greater health by developing…experiences that are healthy.” Furthermore, far from cultivating a form of attention analogous to free association., Olendzki’s Buddhism leads to “freedom from the affliction of free association entirely.” I take this to mean the mind is freed from its tendency to create meaning and narrative and thereafter consists in the flow of discreet moments of consciousness that do not “belong” to anyone.

Olendzki’s version of Theravadan Buddhism, which in its secularized and instrumentalized form is the basis of the Insight Meditation movement, is much favored by proponents of cognitive behavioral therapies, which share it’s model of sequential structured exercises. But a program of cleansing the mind might not be the brand of Buddhism best suited to a dialogue with psychoanalysis, which, for all its theoretical permutations, emphasizes the need to accept and experience *all* aspects of the mind, especially those we might wish to cleanse ourselves of. Olendzki’s version of Theravadan Buddhism is but one strand of a complex skein of teachings, none of which can lay undisputed claim to being the “authentic” teaching of the historical Buddha, whose teaching were not written down until hundreds of years after his death.

For instance, the language of purification was explicitly rejected by the Zen school and one Zen master famously said Buddha was “ a dried shit stick.” In Olendzki’s Buddhism, “consciousness is distorted, despoiled and polluted by toxic states,” whereas a contemporary Zen teacher insists “The mind is not defiled by its contents.” I raise these examples to highlight that Buddhism psychology is far from the straightforward or settled subject presented here. Hoffer, in his conclusion, recognizes the dissonance Olendzki’s model raises around the issue of free association but is, I fear, too quick to present him as a singular authoritative voice of a complex tradition. Furthermore, the longest and most detailed personal account of meditation in this book, that by Gerald Fogel, is from a Zen perspective that would treat pure and impure as a dualism to be overcome and does not easily map onto Olendzki’s Theravadan version of Buddhism.

Throughout this collection, much is made of the comparison of awareness in meditation with free association in analysis. The primary metaphorical mode here is of *observation,* withthe mind either clinging to or letting go of its moment by moment contents. Yet rather than observing, one might equally take the primary capacity developed in meditation to be *containing,* the capacity to literally sit with and experience hitherto warded off affect states. This neurophysiological capacity, which is emphasized in the trauma work of Bessel van der Kolk et al, and by American Zen teacher Joko Beck, reframes the meditation experience in terms of being able to tolerate the affects associated with multiple, shifting self states. Rather than letting go, we learn to stay with. Significantly, “affect regulation” is not to be found in Hoffer’s Index. This is one crucial area where diverse psychoanalytic perspectives might find points of engagement with forms of Buddhist practices other than those presented in Olendzki’s model.

Mark Epstein revisits Freud’s correspondence with Romain Rolland, whose description of religious experience as an “oceanic feeling,” led Freud to theorize that regression to an infantile state of merger with the breast was at the root of such experiences, a formulation that defined the psychoanalytic understanding of mysticism for generations to come. Epstein offers instead a Winnicottian perspective, re-directing us to the experience of the nursing mother rather than of the infant on the breast. Winnicott’s dictum “There is no such thing as a baby,” better captures, for Epstein, the Buddhist sense of the fluidity of the self, of the permeable boundary between self and other, self and world. Winnicott posited that the the child in play has just this sort of “flexible self”, one where inner and outer interpenetrate. This transitional space, Epstein suggests, is an apt metaphor for the liminal space of meditation. The mother’s attentive, accepting, compassionate holding of the infant offers a parallel to the meditator’s relationship to her own mind and its contents. Shifting to this Winnicottian perspective moves meditation out of the realm of regressive blissful states of merger and into one of mature caring awareness.

Sara Weber offers a report of an initial consultation to illustrate: “How allowing myself to be mindful of my own body , my breath, my muscle tension, my emotions, my thoughts, my associations and my study of the dharma all influenced the way I listened clinically.” She then invites the reader to notice their own spectrum of reactions when the surprising identity of her patient is revealed.

Gerald Fogel, in “My Lives in Buddhism and Psychoanalysis” begins by revisiting his discussion of papers at a conference in 1994 where representatives of Buddhism and psychoanalysis largely talked past each, struggling to find common ground. Fogel then offers accounts of interactions with his current Zen teacher that reveal both his own capacity to bring an analytic understanding of dreams and transference to bear on his relationship to this teacher -and to the teachers’ ability and willingness to engage with the symbolism of his dreams, including an image of the teacher as a seductive guru/ salesman. Fogel finds within meditation an analogy to Ogden’s intersubjective third, a dream space in which lived emotional experience is co-created by student and teacher. One comes away with the feeling that with Fogel, and others like him, we have finally arrived at a generation of Buddhist analysts in whom the two disciplines are productively engaged.

Although the symposium that gave birth to this collection asked what psychoanalysis and Buddhism can learn from each other, the essays are all skewed towards an appreciative psychoanalytic understanding of Buddhism, which is described uncritically and unproblematically, and as not being in any need of input from psychoanalysis - in a manner not so different from D.T. Suzuki’s attitude fifty years ago.Thus it fails to address the ways Buddhist practice can go seriously awry. In the generation following Suzuki, a succession of Buddhist teachers, both Asian and their American successors, became embroiled in sexual scandals. Only then was there any dawning of the realization that Buddhism might be failing to deal adequately with unconscious material. Those of us who work with meditators have seen it enlisted in collusion with self-effacing and self denying defenses which parody genuine compassion. Turning to Buddhism out of difficulty with their own needs for nurture, such patients (as well as those conflicted about their sexuality or aggression) may “compassionately” devote themselves to others as a mode of never facing their own needs. They appear to have taken a vow to save all beings minus one.

Ever since John Welwood, in 1984, popularized the concept of spiritual bypassing, it has been clear to psychodynamically oriented observers that meditation and even so-called enlightenment experiences not only very typically fail to resolve character issues, but may even promote dissociative processes whereby destructive behaviors such as substance abuse and sexual misconduct are compartmentalized and dismissed. Furthermore, there are quite a significant number of American Zen teachers who have married their students and given their partners full authorization as new teachers. Might not psychoanalysis have something to offer by way of comment on the way the emotional needs of such teachers is being acted out? Like cases of sexual misconduct, this has not been a matter of a few “bad apples.” It is has been the practice of some of the most senior and respected teachers in America. Buddhism all too often has been so thoroughly idealized that critical thinking about these issues has not been possible. We are at a stage in the dialogue between Buddhism and psychoanalysis that such issues can and should be addressed.

Axel Hoffer is to be commended in carrying the dialogue forwarded. There is still a long way to go.