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Prologue

Prologue: Psychoanalysis and Buddhism: A Confusion of Tongues

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Nearly twenty years ago, in his groundbreaking anthology, Jeremy Safran (2003) described Psychoanalysis and Buddhism as engaging in an "emerging dialogue." At a panel I chaired at The American Psychological Association, Division 39 in his memory in 2019, the participants spoke of a "continuing dialogue." But now, as I look back on the decades in which this dialogue has unfolded, and all the ways that the two disciplines have talked past each other and have ignored crucial signals that something was amiss, the contradictions and conflicts increasingly press their way into the foreground, displacing the excited optimism that first greeted the encounter.

The articles collected in this issue are not intended to add up to a coherent whole. Indeed, their inability to do so, I think is the hallmark of the current state of the relationship between psychoanalysis and Buddhism. Let me try to outline some of the strands represented, and say something about how this issue was put together. An issue of *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* devoted to Psychoanalysis and Buddhism was originally envisioned by Raanan Kulka, who began inviting contributions in 2014. By 2019, because of ill health, Kulka had succeeded in putting together only slightly more than half the proposed issue, and unable to complete the task of bringing it to press, asked me, as one of his original contributors, to take over the editorship of the issue. (Sadly, in this interim, one of the original contributors, Neville Taylor, passed away.) What I inherited from him exemplified a very particular strand in Buddhist-psychoanalytic relations, one that is currently flourishing in Israel, with the

establishment of the *Human Spirit Psychoanalytic-Buddhist Training Program* whose mission is the integration of Self Psychology and Buddhism.

That mission is seen by the contributors chosen by Kulka as an outgrowth of the ideas that Kohut put forth in "*Forms and Transformations of Narcissism*" (1966) where (as summarized by John Riker, in this issue), "he proposed a new concept of human maturity based upon his understanding that narcissistic pressures pervaded human life from beginning to end, but that they could go through important transformations, the first being from infantile narcissism into a self, and the final being the achievement of mature narcissism, a state in which narcissism takes on a form that even transcends the self. His five defining characteristics of maturity – empathy, creativity, humor, the acceptance of transience, and wisdom – are astonishingly original in Western culture." By integrating Self Psychology with Buddhism, that "new concept of human maturity" elided empathy with an expansive conception of compassion which Kulka (this issue) defines "as an ethical commitment … that moves between self fulfillment and giving oneself up for a fellow-man, a standing which Levinas named the *individual's renunciation initiative*." Likewise, for Gabriela Mann, "renouncing one's own self is the precondition to immersing freely with the other's self" (this issue). Farrell Silverberg takes the Buddhist idea of interconnectedness beyond the non-Cartesian, non-duality of intersubjectivity (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992), going so far as to posit a transcendental "interspace" that permits a level of heart-to-heart communication or understanding based on our shared underlying Oneness.

All in all, the direction in which Kulka has taken this synthesis, which he calls an "ethical psychoanalysis," is one that I, both as a Zen teacher, and a self identified "relational self psychologist," find very different from what I teach and practice. Max Sucharov, one of Kulka's original contributors, provides an illuminating overview and critique of Kulka's project from a perspective closer to my own, which prioritizes

relational mutuality rather than the evolution of new ethical and spiritual dimensions within the analyst. Sucharov also questions whether an emphasis on transcendence runs the danger of reinforcing a collective dissociative process that turns away from the traumatic reality of the Occupation toward an idealized dream of non-duality. It is a tribute to Raanan Kulka's open mindedness and sincerity that he welcomed Sucharov as one of his original contributors.

The articles that I commissioned for this issue, from Grace Schireson, Polly Young-Eisendrath, and Pilar Jennings, together represent a perspective on the integration – or lack thereof – of Buddhism and psychoanalysis that differs in many important respects from Kulka's. Schireson, who is both a psychologist and a Zen teacher, has been at the forefront of recognizing the psychological and cultural blindspots that have accompanied Buddhism's coming to the West. In her discussion of the pervasive reality of sexual misconduct, authoritarianism and gender inequality, one gets a far more realistic and less idealized picture of how Buddhist teachers have actually functioned than in the idealized version presented by Kulka and his cohort. Polly Young-Eisendrath looks at a canonical Zen story to explore how idealizations can go awry in the student-teacher relationship. Pilar Jennings, a psychologist with a long immersion in Tibetan Buddhism, likewise presents a picture of empathy and compassion operating on a far more down to earth and less rarified plane. If these critiques seem to represent a "trailing edge" view of Buddhist practice, they are nonetheless offered as a corrective to the uncritical fantasies, populated by perfectly enlightened Asian masters, that have all too often characterized Western approaches to Buddhism.

In quoting Ferenczi (1949) in my subtitle, beyond invoking a metaphor for a dialogue often at cross purposes, I want to point to a number of issues raised in that classic paper. Ferenzci insisted on the reality of childhood sexual trauma, a source of psychopathology that Freud originally hypothesized but then dismissed after 1900 in

favor of a theory of infantile sexual fantasy. The reality of pervasive sexual abuse was something Freud was unwilling to face, just as generations of Western Buddhists have been unwilling to confront the recurrent, pervasive patterns of abuse by so-called enlightened masters of all traditions. What was, and in some quarters continues to be, described as the misconduct of “a few bad apples,” has become so widespread, that it is finally necessary to consider whether such conduct is not a consequence of the *failure* of traditional Buddhist monastic training, but a recurrent *feature* of practices that habitually seem to lead to “spiritual bypass” (Welwood, 1984/2000), dissociation or projective identification. The unquestioning idealization of Buddhist masters has fostered scenarios with striking similarities to the impasses described by Ferenczi, wherein a seemingly positive relationship covers over the repetition of unacknowledged trauma. Furthermore, the idealized figure is so convinced of the rightness and goodness of both himself and his methods, that the very fact of re-injury is forced underground, to emerge symptomatically, or if recognized, is attributed solely to the ego-driven attachments of the student, foreclosing any possibility of what Ferenzci recognized as crucial: an acknowledgment by the analyst/teacher of their own inadvertent harming. Another theme of that paper, the conflict that can arise between the child’s need for “tender care” and the intrusion of adult sexuality again finds parallels in the ways the student–teacher Buddhist relationship can go awry. Here, I mean a confusion of agendas, even where there is not intrusion of an exploitative or explicitly sexual agenda by the teacher. The fact is many students come to Buddhist practice seeking some version of that “tender care” for what are often severe psychological problems that may be or may not be clothed in the guise of a spiritual quest or an existential crisis. The collision between those needs and various spiritual practices can be disruptive for all concerned, but again, the resulting distress has almost always been exacerbated by the inability of Buddhist teachers to acknowledge that their methods may be part of the problem. At best, the student is told they are too psychologically

fragile to endure the rigors of the practice and advised to go elsewhere or seek psychological help. At worst, the student buries their distress, the increasing depression or anxiety amplified by the silence, isolation or physical deprivations of meditation practice, with feelings of shame or inner badness seemingly confirmed by their persistent difficulty. Their idealization of the practice makes failure or choosing to abandoning it, feel like an unbearable outcome, and they fall victim to what Lauren Berlant (2011) has called "cruel optimism" – a kind of curative fantasy that inexorably leads a person into the very opposite of what one seeks.

The focus of the articles by Gabriela Mann, Farrell Silverberg, and John Riker, as well as by Raanan Kulka himself, is, by and large, on the capacities developed *in the analyst* who adopts a personal meditation practice. However, my focus, both as analyst and Zen teacher, has not been on how *I've* developed, but on working with patients who themselves adopt a meditation practice. Here, I think, the opportunities, as well as the pitfalls, are enormous. At a time when fewer and fewer patients are able to come to a four times a week analysis, I see many patients once or twice a week who maintain a daily meditation practice and who engage in regular intensive retreats. The two practices often interact synergistically, in profound and unforeseen ways. Meditation is not just about cultivating "higher" states of consciousness. It also brings to the surface primitive dissociative parts of the self; split off "not-me" experiences of shame, dependency and vulnerability, that are then potentially available to the analysis. Already, some typical syndromes among Buddhist practitioners are being recognized. It is not uncommon to find individuals in flight from their own conflicts around personal needs, sexuality and aggression drawn to the "selflessness" of Buddhism. Such individuals devote themselves to self-effacing ascetic practices and the compassionate attention to the needs of others. But they seem to have taken a vow of saving all beings *minus one*. A reclamation of the legitimacy of their own personal needs and emotions may require them to re-think their relationship to Buddhist practice.

As Buddhism becomes more and more psychologically minded, its teachers more emotionally attuned and less dismissive of the "merely psychological," teachers such as Grace Schireson and myself are learning to integrate the practices in what we hope are innovative and highly beneficial ways. It is this synergy of practices – not the development of super-empathic analysts – that I think is the true fruit of the interaction of psychoanalysis and Buddhism. Detailed case reports of analytic work with long time meditators I trust is something we can look forward to in the future.

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Issue Editor

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