

Still Crazy after all these Years

Why Meditation is not Psychotherapy

by Patrick Kearney

Introduction

There is a great deal of interest in Buddhist meditation in contemporary Australia, especially among psychologists and psychotherapists who seek to integrate Buddhist meditation, and in particular the *vipassanā* meditation of the Theravāda school of Buddhism, with various forms of psychotherapy. The popularity of this approach is shown by the success of books such as Jack Kornfield's *A path with heart: A guide through the perils and promises of spiritual life*, a runaway best-seller that has had an enormous impact on many people, including non-meditators. Indeed, Kornfield is one of the central influences behind this movement. Himself a successful meditation teacher and psychotherapist, he has inspired at least two other therapists, both of them his meditation students, to write on psychotherapy and meditation: Jeffrey Rubin, author of *Psychotherapy and Buddhism: Towards an integration*; and Mark Epstein, author of *Thoughts without a thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist perspective*.

As I read these books I did not feel the excitement that comes from discovering a new and culturally relevant way of encountering the timeless essence of the Buddha-dharma. Rather, I felt somewhat disturbed by what I see as a growing confusion about the nature of Buddhist teachings and a willingness to distort and dilute these teachings, apparently in order to make Buddhist meditation more saleable in our contemporary spiritual marketplace.

In this paper I wish to discuss the issues I feel are raised by these three books in particular, seeing them as representative of a wider movement. At this point I wish to declare my own interest in this discussion. I have practised Buddhist meditation for 20 years, since 1984 in the tradition of the late Mahāsī Sayādaw of Burma, principally under the guidance of Sayādaw U Pandita Bhivamsa (of Mahāsī Sāsana Yeiktha and recently of Panditārāma Yeiktha) and Sayādaw U Janaka Bhivamsa (of Chanmyay Yeiktha). I have had very little exposure to the American *vipassanā* tradition, although I do have some experience of American Zen, gained through two years of practice with the Diamond Sangha in Hawaii. Nor have I had any exposure to Western psychotherapy. So I speak as one ignorant of psychotherapeutic practice but with a great deal of respect for the traditions of Theravāda Buddhism, and rush in to judgement in a situation where I am, at best, familiar with only half the territory.

Eastern Meditation and Western Psychotherapy

In *A path with heart*, Jack Kornfield raises the issue of the relationship between traditional Buddhist meditation and Western psychotherapy. Buddhism has always been an extremely adaptable religion, and it demonstrates a protean ability to adjust itself to new cultures. Buddhism tends to take existing elements of a new host culture and "buddhise" them, using them as vehicles for its fundamental insights. But cultural adaptation is a two-way process, and Buddhism is itself transformed as it moves from one culture to another. We are living through a period in which Asian forms of Buddhism are adapting themselves to the culture of the contemporary West, and Jack Kornfield sees Western psychology as that aspect of Western culture which is providing the most significant impact on Buddhism (244). His words are echoed by Mark Epstein in *Thoughts without a thinker*, who compares our situation to that encountered by Buddhists when Indian Buddhism came to China. Indian Buddhism was translated into Taoist terms by the Chinese, and this process of "sinification" changed Indian Buddhism into Chinese Buddhism. Today, Epstein says, as Asian forms of Buddhism are being transformed into Western Buddhism by the same process of translation, it is

the language of psychoanalysis that is providing the vehicle for the Buddha's insights to be presented to the West (7).

Suffering East and West

To what extent can psychotherapy shed light on Buddhist teachings? Let us begin by examining how the therapists understand the first of the Four Noble Truths, that of suffering. It is axiomatic to all Buddhist traditions that people begin meditation because of their discovery of the First Noble Truth: that of *dukkha*, suffering or unsatisfactoriness. The Buddha taught that all experience is fundamentally unsatisfactory, whether it be gross forms of physical pain and mental anguish, or the experiences of pleasure, success and fulfilment that we would normally regard as pleasurable or even blissful. In brief, why do we begin meditation practice? Because we are in pain, and we know we are in pain.

Kornfield approaches the question of the relationship between meditation and psychotherapy by arguing that there is a very specific kind of suffering that Westerners bring to meditation practice. He says:

[S]piritual practice attracts a great many wounded people who are drawn to such practice for their own healing. Their numbers appear to be increasing. The spiritual impoverishment of modern culture and the number of children raised without a nurturing and supportive family is growing. Divorce, alcoholism, traumatic or unfortunate circumstances, painful child-rearing practices, latchkey children, and child-rearing by day care and television all can produce people who lack an inner sense of security and well-being. These children grow up to have adult bodies but still feel like impoverished children. Many such "adult children" live in our society. Their pain is reinforced by the isolation and denial of feelings that is common in our culture. (204)

Epstein echoes this concern. He argues that Westerners commonly suffer from what has been called the *basic fault*, a chronic spiritual hunger caused by inadequate childhood attention, neglect rather than abuse (173). Epstein goes on to say:

From the Buddhist perspective, the closest parallel lies in the descriptions of the hungry ghost realm. Many Westerners require a combined approach of psychotherapy **and** meditation precisely because the hungry ghost realm is so strongly represented in their psyches. This is a phenomenon that is new to the recorded history of Buddhism: never before have there been so many Hungry Ghosts engaged in Buddhist practice. (174)

Kornfield and Epstein agree that the situation contemporary Western meditators face is unique. Kornfield calls people who suffer from this unique spiritual hunger "adult children," people who lack a healthy sense of self and who are spiritually crippled by the suffering they have undergone in childhood and their unconscious denial of this suffering (Kornfield: 217; & Epstein: 176-8).

Given that Western meditators are faced with culturally unique forms of suffering, it follows that these particular types of suffering are best dealt with by the techniques of Western psychotherapy which have been developed within this culture to deal with the problems specific to this culture. Kornfield says:

Psychotherapy addresses in directed and powerful ways the need for healing, the reclamation and creation of a healthy sense of self, the dissolution of fears and compartments, and the search for a creative, loving, and full way to live in the world. (245)

Having established that Westerners undergo unique forms of suffering that psychotherapy has developed techniques to handle, Kornfield goes on to argue that meditation alone is not enough to heal many of the deep issues we uncover in the course of our meditation (245). Meditation alone is not enough. He makes the extraordinary claim that at least half the students at the annual three month retreat at the Insight Meditation Society cannot do traditional Insight Meditation, "because they encounter so much unresolved grief, fear, and wounding and unfinished developmental

business from the past" (246). He follows up this revelation with a number of stories relating how specific students were blocked in their meditation but successfully resolved these blockages once they were able to identify traumatic events or unsatisfactory or even abusive relationships in their past. He also narrates stories of spectacular failure in spiritual practice when these issues were neglected. Indeed, much of Kornfield's argument is based on case histories of meditational success and failure that all go to support his view of the limitations of traditional meditation without psychotherapy. While these stories are interesting and sometimes even instructional, the implications behind this view need to be teased out.

I was first struck by Kornfield's claim that at least half of the students who attempt to do traditional *vipassanā* meditation at IMS cannot do so. This is an extraordinary admission of failure for any meditation teacher or meditation centre. In my experience as a practitioner and as a teacher - and I must admit to having a very limited experience as a teacher - I have only seen evidence of such a large failure rate among the students in circumstances where it was quite clear that the teachers were doing a very bad job. Nor have I seen any evidence that such failures are confined to specific ethnic or cultural groups. It is true that *vipassanā* meditation is very difficult, and it is true that many students engaged in this practice spend significant, even long, periods of time stuck, not moving on through the stages of *vipassanā bhāna*, or insight knowledge, as described in the traditional meditation literature. But I have never experienced a situation where anything like half the people who begin intensive meditation practice are psychologically incapable of getting started. If Kornfield's claim is true, something very strange is going on in the world of *vipassanā* meditation teaching.

Another aspect of this claim that struck me was the sense of specialness that underlies it; the sense that we as Westerners with a capital "W" are unique, special, not at all like those far-off foreign Easterners with a capital "E." Indeed, in my work as a student and teacher of Buddhist studies at a modern Western (with a capital "W") university, I feel an instant warning signal whenever someone starts throwing around labels like capital-W "Western" and capital-E "Eastern," and basing arguments on this level of generalisation. This is a habit much loved by first year undergraduates, but I point out to them that any argument based on this level of generalisation will almost invariably be shot down in flames once it is examined seriously.

This kind of argument requires a strong polarisation between two opposite but supporting extremes. Any attempt to exalt one group as uniquely embodying some specific trait or set of traits requires a strong sense of the "Other," some other group that embodies the opposing traits. Perhaps one of the most extreme examples of this in Western culture was seen in Nazi Germany, where Hitler's idealisation of the Aryan Germans required the invention of an opposite pole of demonised Jews. In the case of Kornfield's argument, if we are to hold up Western culture as uniquely diseased we need an opposite pole, a utopian Other culture where people are uniquely healthy. Apart from a story of how well his daughter was treated by her Balinese dance teachers, Kornfield makes only one attempt to present this elusive Other when he says:

In the best of traditional cultures, where people are embraced and nourished on both the physical and spiritual levels, they grow up with a sense of ample inner and outer resources. (217)

Unfortunately, Kornfield does not tell us which cultures these are. Are they still around? Where are they? Or is he speaking historically, of cultures which once existed but do so no longer?

Demonising one type of culture and idealising another saves us from facing the unpleasant fact that suffering is universal, that the members of every society suffer in every conceivable way. Does Kornfield expect us to believe that child abuse and neglect are unique to North America? Let's consider what we know of ancient India in the time of the Buddha. Like all highly developed traditional societies, India had a large slave population. A considerable proportion of the population were born, grew up and died knowing that they did not even own their own bodies. Practices that we would condemn as abhorrent forms of sexual abuse were so routine in such societies that they were not even worthy of comment. Can we be confident these slaves enjoyed healthy child rearing practices? Consider women in traditional India. Does Kornfield

really think that women who were the chattels of their male relatives from birth to death, who had little or no control over their lives unless they escaped into the sangha, that these women were endowed with inner and outer resources uniquely missing in the contemporary West? And apart from considering slaves and women (who together made up the majority of the population), where was the quality of childhood in a society where the vast majority of people, slave or free, male or female, were set to work at the earliest possible age? Where was the sense of inner security in a society where the lives of the great majority of the population consisted of endless drudgery accompanied by endless insecurity, the insecurity which came from the certain knowledge that the question of whether they would be able to eat into the following year was entirely determined by the quality of the next harvest?

Let's forget societies in the past. Anyone who has practised meditation in Burma agrees that the Burmese give every appearance of being extremely successful at intensive meditation practice. Is Kornfield seriously suggesting that the Californian middle and upper classes suffer more than the Burmese living under the tender mercies of one of the most violently repressive regimes on the planet? Any such suggestion is obviously bizarre in the extreme - which may be why he couches the existence of the Other in such vague terms.

Meditation and the Four Noble Truths

Let's look deeper into this claim. I have already mentioned how the First Noble Truth provides the starting point for Buddhist practice. The Four Noble Truths provide the fundamental framework for all Buddhist traditions, to the extent that any spiritual teaching that fits within this framework can be legitimately regarded as Buddhist, regardless of any cultural peculiarities, and any spiritual teaching which does not fit within this framework can not be legitimately regarded as Buddhist. The Four Noble Truths are: *dukkha*; the arising of *dukkha*; the cessation of *dukkha*; and the way that leads to the cessation of *dukkha*. The Buddha made the outrageous claim that his way of practice - the Noble Eightfold Path - leads to the complete cessation of suffering. This claim is based on these four truths, and these truths are universal because they are concerned with the **structure** of experience, not the **content** of experience.

The key to understanding what the Buddha is getting at is seeing how the four truths hang together. All experience has a beginning; all experience has an end. All experience arises and ceases (the second and third truths). This arising and ceasing is structural; it is irrelevant which kind of experience we are talking about, be it pleasant or painful, physical or mental, Eastern or Western. Further, experiences arise and cease because of causes. They do not arise and cease randomly, but because of specific causes which can be discovered in the course of *vipassanā* meditation. The fact that all experience arises and ceases makes experience itself fundamentally unsatisfactory (the first truth). It follows from the fact that all experience ceases because of specific causes, that if we discover those causes and allow them to manifest, we can discover the way to bring painful experience to an end (the fourth truth). The Four Noble Truths hang together. Hence the Buddha said:

The one who sees *dukkha* sees also the arising of *dukkha*, sees also the cessation of *dukkha*, and sees also the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha*. (S5.437)

What Kornfield is implying is that the way that leads to the cessation of *dukkha* does not work for certain types of suffering. There are certain specific types of suffering which are immune to the path. But the path is not concerned with specific types of suffering, or specific types of experience, but simply with the fact that **all** suffering, of whatever type, arises and ceases. Because all suffering, of whatever type, arises and ceases, then all suffering can be brought to this point of cessation, and the bringing of suffering to this point of cessation is the practice of the path.

Because the path is concerned with the underlying, universal structures of experience, if it is true that some types of experience are immune to the treatment provided by the path, then all experience must be immune to the path. If it is true that *vipassanā* meditation does not work for **some** types of suffering, then it does not work for **any** type of suffering. And if *vipassanā* meditation does not work, then there is

no Third Noble Truth - no path that leads to the cessation of suffering. And since the Four Noble Truths hang together, if one truth is denied, all are denied, and Buddhism has just disappeared out the window.

However, it may be objected at this point that my analysis is going too far. Is Kornfield really denying the Four Noble Truths? Or is he simply saying that some people need extra help to enable them to seriously engage *vipassanā* meditation? In other words, is he simply suggesting that psychotherapy can play an effective supporting role in traditional meditation practice? To examine this question, we must examine how Kornfield treats Buddhism in his book, *A path with heart*.

The Great Way

Throughout the course of his book, Kornfield presents a view of the Buddha and his teachings which is based on a particular concept of the role of spiritual traditions, a concept which we might loosely describe as universalist liberal. He introduces this view early in the book, for example when he compares spiritual practice to a journey up a mountain, and warns us that "it is crucial to understand that there are many ways up the mountain - that there is never just one true way" (32). He sees the various traditions as providing maps which guide the seeker up the mountain. Different traditions map different paths, and all paths are equally valid, all may be useful to the earnest seeker.

Kornfield was trained primarily in the *vipassanā* meditation of Theravāda Buddhism, and we can see how he applies his universalist liberal attitude to this tradition. In Theravāda we find a literary genre of path manuals, teachings which describe the path of *vipassanā* meditation from the beginning to the end. Probably the best known and elaborate of these is contained in the *Visuddhimagga*, a medieval text written in the 5th century by Ācariya Buddhaghosa. Here we find an elaborate scheme of the path analysed in terms of 16 *ñānas*, or knowledges, and Kornfield devotes part of Chapter 10 to presenting it to his readers. However, he introduces his account with a warning:

The map of the Elders is used in Insight Meditation. As you read about it in detail, keep in mind that such maps are both helpful and limiting. Depending on the form of practice used and the individual, meditation can progress in quite different ways. Mystical texts outside of Buddhism also describe the process of awakening, in hundreds of other languages and landscapes, although they all share common elements. So I offer this map with some caution, as an example of promises and perils we may encounter on our spiritual journey. (137)

Note the warning to the unwary reader. Maps are helpful, but they are apparently dangerous (otherwise why the need for caution?) because they are limiting. But what is being limited? Earlier in his book, Kornfield introduces the notion of the "Great Way," of which any given teaching or practice is simply one part (for example, 121). Buddhism in general, and Theravāda Buddhism in particular, is merely one aspect of this Great Way. While the Great Way does seem very attractive in the hands of a skilful writer like Jack Kornfield, it has one fundamental problem: it doesn't actually exist; or rather, it exists only in Kornfield's imagination. When I say that it doesn't actually exist, I mean that there is no living Buddhist tradition found on the planet which manifests as the Great Way described by Kornfield.

This raises the issue of what exactly do we mean when we use the word "Buddhism." You may remember the scandal which broke out after Pope John Paul II published a book called *Crossing the threshold of hope*, in which he explained his world view, including his view of other religions. He devoted a chapter to Buddhism in which he described it as an atheistic system which aims to make its devotees perfectly indifferent to the world around them (86). This description of Buddhism caused a great deal of offence to Buddhists around the world, because they saw it as blatant propaganda designed to discredit their religion. The problem with John Paul's description of Buddhism, the factor that made it propaganda rather than genuine analysis, was that no Buddhist could recognise his or her Buddhist tradition in John Paul's words. This was a Buddhism which existed only in John Paul's imagination, and therefore this was a Buddhism which simply did not exist at all.

The same is true of Jack Kornfield's Great Way. This Great Way can not be found in any specific Buddhist or Hindu or Sufi or Christian or other school or tradition, but is an abstract entity which somehow floats above and encompasses every tradition. In the name of this non-existent Great Way, Kornfield takes bits and pieces from every tradition and mixes them up into a kind of Great Way Soup. For example, he occasionally quotes the Buddha, using him as an authority to justify one or another teaching. However, if one is actually acquainted with the Buddhist scriptures he is drawing upon, it soon becomes evident that when Kornfield says, "The Buddha once said ...," what he really means is, "This is what the Buddha would have said, had he been a psychotherapist living in late 20th century California."

Throughout his book, Kornfield cheerfully changes Buddhist teachings in order to make them fit into his scheme. We can find a number of cases when he supposedly quotes the Buddha or explains some traditional teaching where he makes some slight change, some subtle adaptation, which in isolation may seem trivial to the casual reader, but in total create a cumulative effect in which Buddhist teachings are distorted to give a false impression of traditional support for the position Kornfield is taking. To give just one example, he quotes the Buddha as saying:

Just as the great oceans have but one taste, the taste of salt, so too there is but one taste fundamental to all true teachings of the Way, and this is the taste of freedom. (76)

This sounds very nice and very liberal. However, the passage should read something like: "Just as the great ocean has but one taste, the taste of salt, so this *dharmma* has but one taste, the taste of freedom." What's the difference? Kornfield skilfully changes the passage to insert his key concept of the Tao, the Great Way, and present the Buddha as liberally accepting the validity of all ways of practice which correspond to the Great Way. The strong probability that the Buddha never heard of this Great Way, and the fact that it is nowhere mentioned in the scriptures Kornfield is purporting to expound, is not allowed to get in the way of a good story.

Linked with this notion of the Great Way is Kornfield's extensive use of the map metaphor. Spiritual traditions provide maps for practice, as outlined above. These traditions and their maps often contradict each other, and this creates a problem for the spiritual seeker. Kornfield tells a story about a married couple who practiced with Sufis, Christians and Tibetan Buddhists. At some point, the husband fell into a depression and committed suicide. Some weeks later his widow was comforted by a friend from her Buddhist community who assured her that her husband had been safely reborn in a pure land. This had been seen in meditation. Later, friends from her Sufi and Christian communities on different occasions also assured her that they too had seen her husband safely reborn in one or another circumstance - and all of these circumstances were different! She went to Kornfield for guidance, and he advised her "to put away all her philosophies and beliefs, the maps of past and future lives and more," and asked her: What is she convinced is true, regardless of what anyone else says? She replied: "I know that everything changes and not much more than that. Everything that is born dies, everything in life is in the process of change." Kornfield asked: Could that be enough?

Kornfield turns to his readers and argues on the basis of this case that we must maintain a sense of inquiry rather than seek to imitate the spiritual ideals provided by each tradition. We must not look beyond ourselves and our own experience (158-63).

I feel that the advice Kornfield gave to the widow was very good: As practitioners of meditation, we must learn to rely fundamentally on our own experience. However, what I find most interesting is not what he did tell her, but what he did not. What he did not say was: You are practicing in three different spiritual traditions, and have ended up being very confused. Are you surprised by this? If we set out on a journey into the unknown using three contradictory maps to show us the way, surely we are guaranteed confusion. If we want to develop clarity rather than confusion, at some time we have to decide: What am I? Am I a Buddhist? A Sufi? A Christian? And having decided, then go for it, and follow the map provided as far as it goes.

But instead of advising the practitioner to settle on **one** tradition, Kornfield advises her

to settle for the lowest common denominator of all of them. At this point he brings in a distorted version of the *Kalama-sutta* to bolster his position, to give the entirely false impression that this advice is somehow in accordance with the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha's teachings are misused to support a position no Buddhist tradition would endorse - that we should use the practice as a means of avoiding commitment to the tradition, even if this means reducing our spiritual aspiration so we can remain comfortably within our limitations. The one thing that seems to be entirely off the agenda is to place one's faith on one tradition and to surrender totally to it.

What am I getting at here? The point I am trying to make is that Kornfield is not merely suggesting that psychotherapeutic techniques be added to our practice of Buddhist meditation; he is inventing a whole new tradition, a new religion, the "Great Way" which embraces all that is good in all of the ancient wisdom traditions, and transcends all that is limited in each of them. As each tradition provides a specific map which guides the practice, it follows that Kornfield is teaching from the "Map of Maps," and so he becomes the ultimate spiritual authority. For if all traditions are relative except for the "Great Way" that embraces them all, and if Kornfield is our authority for this Great Way, then it follows that Kornfield is the master of every tradition. Even the Pope doesn't make this claim.

None of this, of course, is openly stated. It is simply hidden in the rhetoric, wrapped up in layers of inspirational writing which is designed to make its readers feel that they have somehow penetrated into the mysteries of all the mystic paths of the planet and that, by avoiding commitment to any specific tradition, they have demonstrated their superiority to all specific traditions, and to those deluded and bigoted people who stick to a single path.

Does Enlightenment Exist?

Let us return to the Four Noble Truths. Jack Kornfield's approach to the teaching has found supporters in other meditating psychotherapists. One of these is Jeffrey Rubin, author of *Psychotherapy and Buddhism*. Claiming Kornfield as an authority (89), Rubin moves the agenda forward by examining the claims made about Enlightenment by Theravāda Buddhism. In a chapter titled "The emperor of enlightenment may have no clothes," Rubin says: "In this chapter, I shall challenge certain foundational assumptions of the Theravadin Buddhist conception of Enlightenment" (83).

Rubin explains that enlightenment in Theravāda Buddhism is described as completely purifying the mind of the defilements of greed, hatred and delusion. This ideal assumes that the mind can be permanently and completely purified and therefore transformed (83-4 & 87). However, Rubin points out that in 1983 "five of the six most esteemed Zen Buddhist masters in the United States" were involved in grossly unenlightened behaviour such as sexual exploitation and stealing money (88). The question arises: How can these scandals occur if these people are supposed to be enlightened? How can this have happened? Rubin concludes that these scandals suggest that:

... psychological conditioning from the past that inevitably warps personality cannot be completely eradicated and that there is no conflict-free stage of human life in which the mind is permanently purified of conflict. This is consistent with psychoanalytic insights about the essential nontransparency of the human mind; that is, the inevitability of unconsciousness and self-deception.

For an individual to be enlightened, they would have to be certain that they were completely awake without any trace of unconsciousness or delusion. Even if that existed in the present, it is not clear to me how one could know for certain that would never change in the future. From the psychoanalytic perspective, a static, conflict-free sphere - a psychological "safehouse" - beyond the vicissitudes of conflict and conditioning where mind is immune to various aspects of affective life such as self-interest, egocentricity, fear, lust, greed, and suffering is quixotic. Since conflict and suffering seem to be inevitable aspects of human life, the ideal of Enlightenment may be asymptotic, that is, an unreachable ideal (90).

From the context of the Four Noble Truths, Rubin has just torpedoed the third truth. He

does this in an attempt to integrate Buddhism and psychotherapy, to create a new Buddhism more suited to Western culture. Unfortunately, Rubin is so confused about Buddhist teaching that he seems oblivious to the fact that he is not adapting or integrating Buddhism, he is simply destroying it. We referred earlier to the Buddha's teaching that to see one of the Noble Truths is to see all of them. These truths form a pattern which is so closely interwoven that to deny one of them is to deny all of them. If there is no cessation of *dukkha*, there is no path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*. And if there is no cessation of *dukkha* and no path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*, then the Buddha was a very confused fellow indeed. Since enlightenment is psychotherapeutically impossible, then the Buddha was not enlightened. In other words, there never was a Buddha. Rubin's version of Buddhism is a Buddha-less Buddhism. And a Buddha-less Buddhism is in the same position as a Christ-less Christianity - non-existent.

But is Rubin's analysis valid? Rubin began by saying he was examining the ***Theravāda*** view of enlightenment. He then attempts to discredit this view by looking at the behaviour of a number of Zen teachers. However, by comparing the Theravāda ideal of enlightenment with the representatives of a Mahāyāna school of Buddhism, he is committing the classic error of comparing apples with oranges. To begin with, we need to examine this notion of "enlightenment," which is a source of endless confusion to many Western writers, not just Rubin and Epstein.

I have never been able to find any Pāli or Sanskrit word which corresponds to the English word "enlightenment." This word was selected some time late last century by English translators as a label for the goal of Buddhist practice because of its resonance with the 18th century ideal of the Enlightenment. The European Enlightenment was a movement which idealised progress, science and reason - the "light" in "Enlightenment" refers to the light of reason. In Victorian Britain, sympathetic English scholars wanted to present Buddhism in as favourable a light as possible, and they did so by portraying the Buddha as the perfect Victorian gentleman. He was presented as rejecting the priestly mumbo-jumbo of the brahmins (who for the Victorian English corresponded to the Roman Catholic clergy) in favour of a religion of reason and morality (Almond: 70-4). The only thing that spoiled this picture was undeniable evidence in the Buddhist texts that the Buddha taught and practiced some kind of bizarre self-hypnosis or cultivation of trance states - what we today call meditation. The word "enlightenment" referred to a state of enlightened reason attained by the Buddha which, however, existed only in the imagination of Victorian scholars. Unfortunately the word has stuck, and with it the confusion.

The word *buddha* comes from the root *budh*, meaning *wake, know*. A buddha is one who is awake, one who knows. The state of knowing, of being awake, which is experienced by a buddha is *bodhi*, and *bodhi* can be reasonably translated as *awakening*. Soon after his awakening the Buddha himself described what he had discovered under the Bodhi Tree in this way:

This dhamma which I have discovered is deep, difficult to understand, difficult to awaken to, peaceful, exalted, beyond the scope of reason, subtle, to be experienced only by the wise. But this people finds pleasure in attachment, is intent on attachment, delights in attachment; and for a people that finds pleasure in attachment, is intent on attachment, delights in attachment, this state is difficult to comprehend: that is, specific conditionality (*idappaccayatā*), dependent arising (*paticcasamuppāda*).

This state, also, is extremely difficult to see: that is, the calming of all formations, the surrender of all clinging, the destruction of craving, the fading of passion, cessation, *nibbāna*. (Vin. 1: 4-5)

We can see that the Buddha divided his discovery into two aspects: specific conditionality/dependent arising, and *nibbāna*. Dependent arising refers to the structure of experience - all experience. It is a restatement of the second and third of the Four Noble Truths, but seen from a different angle. Dependent arising is summed up in the following verse, found throughout the suttas:

When this is, that is;

From the arising of this, that arises.
When this is not, that is not;
From the cessation of this, that ceases. (S 2.28)

Dependent arising teaches that all experiences arise and cease dependent upon conditions other than themselves. Experience is inherently dynamic, an endless process of change without exception. Dependent arising expands the Noble Truths of the arising and ceasing of *dukkha*, by revealing the specific patterns of causality that give rise to either *dukkha* or the cessation of *dukkha*. Specific conditionality refers to the fact that any specific experience arises because of some other specific experience, and then ceases because of some other specific experience. Specific conditionality emphasises the orderliness of change, the fact that experiences do not arise randomly but in accordance with precise and observable patterns of causation. In the *Mahātanhāsankhaya-sutta*, the Buddha examined his students on their meditation experience:

Bhikkhus, do you see: "This has come to be?" ... Do you see: "Its origination occurs with that as support?" ... Do you see: "With the cessation of that support, what has come to be is subject to cessation?" (M 1.260)

Notice the focus of the Buddha's questions. He is not just asking his students, "Do you see change?" He is asking, "Do you see the **patterns** of change? Do you see what supports what? Do you see what specific experience gives rise to what specific experience? And when that experience ceases, do you see what changes to make it cease?"

This perceived order in the flow of experience, the fact we can see that precisely this gives rise to precisely that, is specific conditionality. This is what makes our situation workable. The wisdom of the Buddha exposes the underlying structures of our experience, the underlying laws that govern change, and therefore shows us how we can develop our experience in a direction we want. This is what makes possible the path. The goal of practice, and the means of practice, is awakening (*bodhi*). What we awaken **to** is our experience, now. This experience, now, is the content of awakening. Note that awakening does not refer to any specific type of experience, be it painful or pleasurable, happy or sad, Eastern or Western. Awakening is simply the penetrating knowing of the structure of any experiences that are arising and ceasing, now.

The second aspect of the Buddha's *dhamma* is *nibbāna* (in Sanskrit, *nirvāna*). In Theravāda Buddhism, *nibbāna* refers to the paradoxical experience of the cessation of all experience, the shut-down of the phenomenal universe. It is this second aspect of the *dhamma* which permanently transforms the mind. We may, according to the Theravāda teaching, spend any amount of time in the experience of *bodhi*, but not necessarily have experienced *nibbāna*; and the effects of the experience of *bodhi* are temporary, not permanent.

In this context we can see Rubin's error. Mahāyāna Buddhism sees its ideal as the attainment of *bodhi*, which it expresses as *shunyatā*, or emptiness. The followers of the Mahāyāna are *bodhisattvas*, beings (*sattva*) who are inclined toward awakening (*bodhi*). A *bodhisattva* must renounce the experience of *nirvāna* until her last life, when she has accumulated sufficient wisdom and compassion to attain full Buddhahood and become a *sammāsambuddha*. The Zen teachers Rubin talks about follow a practice which is designed to give rise to this experience of emptiness. They are not following a practice which is designed to give rise to the experience of *nirvāna*. Nothing which these Zen teachers say or do can tell us anything at all about the Theravāda ideal of enlightenment, since we have no evidence that any of them have ever experienced it.

Rubin's confusion is due to his determination to mix up the different traditions of Buddhism into a homogenous stew which is neither Theravāda nor Mahāyāna - which, like Kornfield's Great Way, does not correspond to any actual living Buddhist tradition found anywhere on the planet. But apart from being confused about enlightenment, Rubin is also engaging in some hermeneutical sleight-of-hand that needs to be examined.

Interpreting Buddhism

Let us review the journey we have been taking. We began with psychotherapists who practice Buddhist meditation undertaking the project of translating or interpreting Buddhism into terms that are culturally relevant to the contemporary West by using psychotherapy as a template. We have seen that in practice this means more than merely asserting that psychotherapy can be used as an aid to traditional Buddhist meditation. Rather, it has involved, in the works of the therapists under discussion, a fundamental rewriting of Buddhism, the creation of an entirely new form of Buddhism which does not correspond to any of the existing Buddhist traditions, and which is designed to be compatible with the teachings of psychotherapy. At this point we need to take a look at the broader problem of interpretation or translation itself.

What is interpretation? To interpret means to read one myth in terms of another. In his provocatively titled *We've had a hundred years of psychotherapy - and the world's getting worse*, psychologist James Hillman spoke about the developmental model that Kornfield, Rubin and Epstein take for granted. In a conversation with journalist Michael Ventura, Hillman said:

The principal content of American psychology is developmental psychology: What happened to you earlier is the cause of what happened to you later. That's the basic theory: our history is our causality. ... So you have to go back to childhood to get at why you are the way you are. ... No other culture would do that. If you're out of your mind in another culture or quite disturbed or impotent or anorexic ... It could be thousands of other things - the plants, the water, the curses, the demons, the Gods, being out of touch with the Great Spirit. It would never, **never** be what happened to you with your mother and your father forty years ago. Only our culture uses that myth.

Ventura: ... That's not a myth, that's what happened!

Hillman: "That's not a myth, that's what happened." The moment we say something is "what happened" we're announcing, "This is the myth I no longer see as a myth. This is the myth that I can't see through." "That's not a myth, that's what happened" suggests that myths are the things we **don't** believe. The myths we believe and are in the middle of, we call the "fact," "reality," "science." (17-18)

I don't want to question the strengths and weaknesses of the model of developmental psychology here. All I want to do here is to present the concept of myth. I am using the word "myth" to refer to what we take for granted within a society as given, as obvious, as what happens. That which is so obvious that it never actually occurs to us to seriously question it. As Hillman points out, myths arise dependent upon a given culture. What is obvious to one culture is far from obvious to another culture, and vice versa. This is the kind of problem we get involved in when we "translate" from one culture into another, or "interpret" one culture in terms of another.

Hence the answer to my question, what is interpretation? To interpret means to read one myth in terms of another. We are all living within a myth, the myth or myths that provide us with our fundamental world view. Psychotherapists are reading the Buddhist myth in terms of their psychotherapeutic myth. In order to interpret, we must take the alien myth and read it through a grid, as it were, a conceptual grid which can rearrange the parts of the alien myth and make them coherent for us. In this process, one particular myth must be dominant, because one particular myth must provide that through which or in terms of which the other is read. Psychotherapists interpret Buddhism in terms of the myth of psychotherapy, so what naturally emerges is a view of Buddhism as colonised by psychotherapy. Psychotherapy becomes hierarchically superior to Buddhism. But to understand Buddhism, one must enter the Buddhist myth, and once we are within that myth, then we will naturally read psychotherapy in terms of Buddhism. When we do that, Buddhism becomes hierarchically superior to psychotherapy.

Rubin says Enlightenment is impossible, because in the myth of psychotherapy the absence of the unconscious mind is impossible. But the myth of Theravāda Buddhism does not posit the existence of an unconscious mind. The closest Theravāda

psychology comes to the notion of an unconscious is the concept of *anusaya kilesa*, the latent afflictions. *Bodhi*, in this myth, implies the absence of all *anusaya kilesa*, the absence of all latent afflictions.

As we have seen above when talking about specific conditionality and dependent arising, the Buddhist world view is one of dynamic process. All phenomena arise and cease. Fundamental to the Buddhist myth is the concept of *anattā*, or not-self. When we do *vipassanā* meditation, we train ourselves to see the discontinuities in our experience. As we do this, we see our experience as an continuous flow of arising and ceasing, arising and ceasing, endlessly. We become intimate with change, or, in Buddhist terms, impermanence (*aniccatā*).

Normally when we see change we assume an underlying entity which undergoes change. For example, we all know the weather is constantly changing: today it is hot, tomorrow will be cooler; yesterday was wet, today is dry. However, the very language we use shows that we assume an underlying entity, which we call "weather," which, while subject to change, itself remains unchanged. We all know that our experience is constantly changing, but we all assume there exists an underlying person - "me" - who, while subject to change, himself or herself remains unchanged. In other words, while we all know change, we all assume there is someone **to whom** change occurs. This unexamined assumption is one of our guiding myths, and it is from within this myth that we undertake Buddhist practice.

The teaching of *anattā* denies the existence of some one or some thing which underlies the process of change. For Buddhism, what there **is**, is process, and **all** there is, is process. Hence, from within the Buddhist myth, the contents of the mind arise and cease, and there is no mind beyond or beneath that process of arising and ceasing. There is nothing which underlies this process. Whence do the contents of the mind - our drives, desires, fears and hatreds - arise? Where do they go when they cease? We don't know. The myth of psychotherapy posits the existence of a something, an Unconscious, which is the repository of these mental contents. But inside the Buddhist myth, all that exists are causal patterns, and to say thoughts and emotions arise from the unconscious is simply to say we do not know the causal patterns from which our thoughts and emotions arise. Suddenly they are just here, and then they are gone. But a *buddha*, an awakened one, sees the complete network of causal relationships. This is dependent arising. He sees the specific cause of each specific experience. This is specific conditionality. The totality of this seeing is *bodhi*, awakening, and this process is all there is to see.

So when Rubin judges the Buddhist doctrine of awakening on the basis of the presence or absence of an unconscious mind, he is judging one cultural myth by the standards of another, and assuming the universal application, and therefore the superiority, of his own cultural myth. Rubin begins his book by criticising what he calls Eurocentric and Orientocentric approaches to the study of Buddhism and psychotherapy. A Eurocentric approach sees psychoanalysis as superior, and an Orientocentric approach sees Buddhism as superior. Rejecting this, he seeks to allow a conversation between Buddhism and psychotherapy which brings out the strengths and weaknesses of each tradition, allowing each to supplement and improve the other (6-7). In fact he does no such thing, and instead ends with a firmly fixed hierarchy in which psychotherapy is on top and Buddhism on the bottom.

As long as we read one myth in terms of the other, some such hierarchy of values is inevitable. Rubin and Epstein end up destroying Buddhism and turning it into a new form of psychotherapy. They are not content to simply leave Buddhism alone and use *vipassanā* meditation as a psychotherapeutic tool, but insist on reinventing Buddhism on their own terms. Unfortunately, they are so confused about Buddhism that their newly minted Buddhism is clearly inferior to the original. Kornfield's new Buddhism is more sophisticated than that of Epstein and Rubin, partly because he knows more about it in the first place, and partly because he reads both Buddhism and psychotherapy from a third viewpoint which is neither Buddhism nor psychotherapy, but which floats above both. This is his "Great Way," which supposedly transcends all spiritual traditions and all therapies. But he also ends up with a firmly entrenched hierarchy, with a new Buddhism of his own invention.

Conclusion

And what, after all, is wrong with this? Many people may conclude that they prefer these new versions of Buddhism to any of the traditional models currently on offer. Certainly if book sales are anything to go by, Kornfield's Great Way is a very suitable commodity for our post-modern spiritual marketplace. But let's be clear on what is happening. Let's not try to fool ourselves or anyone else that we are practising the teachings of the Buddha when we follow any of these ersatz forms of Buddhism. Let's be clear whose teachings we are putting our faith in.

Kornfield reduces Buddhism to a collection of spiritual disciplines or techniques, the most important of which is *vipassanā* meditation. These disciplines are part of the glad-bag of techniques which together make up the Great Way. Practising in this spirit, the seeker can avoid ever becoming a finder, because he never trades down into joining any one specific tradition. For Kornfield, the goal of practice is spiritual maturity, and spiritual maturity "is not about adopting any one particular philosophy or set of beliefs or teachings" (316), but involves the freedom to move from spiritual vehicle to spiritual vehicle, according to the seeker's desire and, presumably, the advice of his therapist. The seeker never becomes a finder, never becomes someone who puts their faith in one tradition and follows it without reservation, without holding back. Always the seeker keeps that sense of separation, that sense of alienation inherent in the knowledge that the tradition within which he practices is just another commodity in the spiritual marketplace, which, in the event of difficulty, can be traded in for the latest model.

Epstein and Rubin want to rewrite Buddhism on their own terms, taking the ocean of the Buddha's wisdom and reducing it to a puddle small enough to accommodate the views of Freud and his successors. Their Buddhism is shallow, limited and extremely muddled, a Buddhism which accurately reflects their own confusion and ignorance, but has little connection with any living Buddhist tradition.

What's the alternative? In one word, faith. Faith involves a surrender to the tradition, which in Buddhism is expressed as taking refuge in the three treasures of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. We began this paper with Jack Kornfield's assertion that half the students who attempt the three month retreat at IMS cannot engage *vipassanā* meditation because of the suffering they are undergoing. In the *Nidāna-vagga* of *Samyutta Nikāya* the Buddha in one passage expounds in brief the full path from suffering to liberation. He explains that suffering gives rise to faith (*saddhā*), faith gives rise to delight (*pāmojja*), delight gives rise to rapture, rapture gives rise to calm, calm gives rise to bliss, bliss gives rise to concentration, concentration gives rise to knowing and seeing phenomena as they are, knowing and seeing phenomena as they are gives rise to disenchantment, disenchantment gives rise to the fading of passion, and the fading of passion gives rise to liberation (S 2.30-3). Note how the process begins. From suffering we proceed to delight, and what turns suffering into delight is faith. Faith is the missing ingredient in the strange attempt to psychotherapeutise Buddhism. None of the therapists we have looked at here seem to have taken seriously the thought that what we need to do is cultivate faith in the three treasures of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Presumably they are far too sophisticated for that - or perhaps they just feel that faith won't sell.

Buddhism is not a collection of spiritual or therapeutic techniques. Buddhism is an ocean. If we want we are free to paddle on the edge of the shore, trying a technique here or a therapy there, occasionally getting our feet wet, but staying safely within our limitations. Or we can take the advice of Dogen Zenji, who said: "Arouse the mind that seeks the way, and plunge into the ocean of Buddhism." Ultimately the future of Buddhism in the West will be decided by those who take the plunge, because the paddlers will always draw back and, rather than adapt Buddhism to its new home, will develop new forms of Buddhised psychotherapy. For ultimately we must choose whom we will follow. We can follow Buddha or we can follow Freud; we cannot do both, because they are just not travelling in the same direction.

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