

ΨΥΧΟΛΟΓΙΑ

hoc est,

DE HOMINIS

PERFECTIONE, ANI-

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FROM THE BODHI TREE, TO THE ANALYST'S COUCH, THEN INTO THE MRI SCANNER: THE PSYCHOLOGISATION OF BUDDHISM

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Introduction

Over the past several decades there has been a steadily increasing fascination with Buddhism on the part of Western (mainly American and European) Psychologists which has now transformed into nothing less than a wholesale assimilation of the various Buddhist traditions. It is important to acknowledge that this fascination has been reciprocated by many leading Buddhist Masters, most notably the Dalai Lama, who actively encourages ongoing dialogues between senior practitioners of Tibetan Buddhist and Western

Psychologists and Psychiatrists.¹ I would like to begin this paper with a clear and concise declaration:

The Buddha was not a Psychologist.

This is not because practically all forms of mainstream Western Psychology posit the ontological entity of a Self; whereas Buddhism consistently teaches that this Self is ultimately to be realised as unreal, illusory and the source of all our ignorance and suffering (Rahula 1997). This Buddhist, experiential insight (*anattā*- ‘no self’ or ‘not self’) has actually proved to be very attractive to some Psychiatrists, Psychologists and Psychotherapists (Epstein 2001, Blackmore 2003, Brazier 2003) and appears to fit in well with contemporary, fashionable postmodern discourses concerning the centreless self (Sarup and Raja 1996, D’haen and Vermeulen 2004); where identity lacks any core or essence.

To those readers whose primary disciplines are Religious Studies or Comparative Theology the introductory declaration may appear to be accurate simply because Buddhism is understood to constitute a living religious tradition; with all the accompanying beliefs, rituals and liturgies that one might expect to find within such a tradition. It is also important to reflect on Buddhism’s ancient Indian origins as a mainly (although not exclusively) monastic movement that consistently stressed renunciation of worldly ways, pleasures and pursuits².

The gradual transformation of Buddhism from a religion into a secular philosophy and Psychology is partly what this paper intends to highlight, explore and critique.

This is not for one moment to say or to suggest that there is nothing of great interest or value to Psychologists and Psychotherapists within the Buddhist teachings; rather this paper intends to reveal and critique some of the ideological mechanisms by which cultural and spiritual contexts have been severed or silenced in the name of authenticity and purity (or more correctly Western fantasies concerning these properties). In short, this paper intends to demonstrate how and why Buddhism has been assimilated into the Psy-Complex (Hook 2004).

¹ For examples of these dialogues the reader is encouraged to visit the website for the Mind Life Institute <http://www.mindandlife.org/>

² A consistent feature in the earliest Buddhist scriptures contrasts the merits of *Pabbajja* ‘Going forth’ into the ‘homeless life’ compared with the ordinary, spiritually limited, life of the householder.

Reflexive Statement

This paper has emerged over the last decade in response to my own study and practice of Buddhism³ coupled with my Psychological training. To clarify, I am writing as both a Psychologist and also as an authorised teacher/practitioner of Buddhist meditation. My own, ongoing, internal dialogue between these traditions has been externalised for the purposes of this paper; contextualised within the broader fields of Psychology, Psychotherapy and Buddhology, and further informed by critical sensitivities and reflections.

Why Buddhism?

For over a century Psychology has commonly modelled itself on the natural sciences and whether one's approach was Psychoanalytic, Behaviouristic, Humanistic or (the current and most popular) Cognitive Behavioural there has been a strong undercurrent of atheistic or agnostic thinking that has traditionally underpinned, informed and guided these approaches. Even more contemporary Transpersonal and Integral Psychology movements often find themselves needing to assert their right to explore spiritual experience outside traditionally accepted nomothetic epistemologies and their accompanying methods (Braud and Anderson 1998); redefining validity in more subjective/experiential terms and taking more hermeneutic approaches to what commonly constitutes 'significance' (as opposed to statistical significance; a p-value less than 0.05).

Buddhism is most commonly portrayed by sympathetic Western Psychologists as being an atheistic (or at least agnostic), 'rational'⁴, science of the mind; not concerned with God, gods/goddesses or supernatural beings, rites, rituals; requiring neither faith nor any deep lifelong commitments. Whereas the traditional 'Abrahamic' faiths are, by contrast, typically presented as being irrational, Theistic, dogmatic, ritual obsessed and hopelessly outdated and ill suited to the contemporary needs and questions of humankind⁵; in this manner Buddhism very much becomes an 'alternative' religion. These contrasts arguably have their origins in the work and thought of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Whilst Schopen-

³ *Theravada* Sri Lankan and Thai forest tradition, *Nyingma* and *Kagyü* schools of Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese *Ch'an* and Pureland Buddhism with *Fo Guang Shan*)

⁴ In a rather reductionist, positivistic sense of the word

⁵ For a powerfully argued and poetically engaging challenge to this familiar criticism the reader is advised to read Michael Fishbane's (2008) *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology*

hauer famously declared that Buddhism constitutes ‘the finest of all religion’, Nietzsche asserted that:

Buddhism is a hundred times more realistic than Christianity- it has the heritage of a cool and objective posing of problems in its composition, it arrives *after* a philosophical movement lasting hundreds of years; the concept ‘God’ is already abolished by the time it arrives. Buddhism is the only really *positivistic* religion history has to show us. (Nietzsche quoted in Batchelor, S. 1994 p.265)

Both philosophers were to employ Buddhism, ideologically, as some form of exotic, Far Eastern Other⁶, to invoke whenever and however it suited their particular aims and ends; both created a Buddhism in their own image; both are also foundational thinkers (if not always visible) within the Social Sciences.

Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were to begin something of a Western tradition, or more appropriately a reinvention of tradition⁷, wherein Buddhism is stripped of its religious, cultural and historical context and transformed into a form of secular positivism. Rather than being acknowledged as a Western transformation this is frequently presented as being a restoration of an original, or purer, form of Buddhism (Sharf 1995).

The demythologising of Buddhism⁸ also has its roots in the Theosophical Societies work in Sri Lanka during the late nineteenth century⁹. Theosophy itself consisted of a potent and popular mix of Orientalism, Spiritualism and Pseudoscience (Washington 1993). Of particular importance were the activities of the American co-founder and president of the movement, Colonel Henry Steele Olcott, who helped to initiate a national restoration, revival and reinvention of Buddhism in one of its traditional homelands (Washington 1993, Gombrich 2002).

The Sri Lankan Buddhist revival presented a challenge to the previously successful Protestant (Christian) missionaries but also adopted some of the latter’s theological forms to create what Professor Richard Gombrich chooses to term ‘Protestant Buddhism’ (Gombrich 2002, p.174). The role of Western born converts to Buddhism who commonly served as prominent teachers within both the monastic and lay Buddhist communities has also had quite a significant impact on the common forms Buddhism (in both the East and, more particularly, the West) has taken; particularly in regard to the increasing importance

⁶ This may justifiably remind the reader of Edward Said’s (1979) critiques of Orientalism

⁷ To consciously contrast with Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) *Invention of Tradition*

⁸ To be specific *Theravada* Buddhism (literally meaning the way of the elders), the oldest surviving Buddhist tradition

⁹ It may interest the reader to reflect on the fact that one of the oldest Buddhist Societies of Europe, the UK’s own Buddhist Society (founded in 1928 by Christmas Humphreys) grew out of the Theosophical movement.

and involvement of non-monastic (non-celibate) Westerners who were to establish and emphasise important new roles for the Buddhist laity as teachers and representatives of the Buddhist tradition (Gombrich 2002).

The manner in which Buddhism came to be represented, consistently played down or edited out the more fantastical aspects of the Buddha's beliefs and actions and highlighted parts that fitted in with more modernist attitudes and aspirations. One striking example is the frequent use of and reference to the *Kalama Sutta*:

Now, Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.' When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness' — then you should enter & remain in them. (Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2010)

This short *Sutta* is still consistently presented as being one of the central, defining teachings of the Buddha; the teaching that differentiates the *Dharma* from all other 'belief' systems. Gombrich (2002) reflects that this verse appears attractive to Westerners due to its apparent promotion of 'religious individualism' (p. 72), whilst Buddhist monk and acclaimed translator Bhikkhu Bodhi offers an honest reprimand:

On the basis of a single passage, quoted out of context, the Buddha has been made out to be a pragmatic empiricist who dismisses all doctrine and faith, and whose Dhamma is simply a freethinker's kit to truth which invites each one to accept and reject whatever he likes. (Bhikkhu Bodhi quoted in p.248)

One might also reflect on the choice to typically translate the Buddha's *Bodhi* or 'awakening' as his 'enlightenment'; which itself evokes discourses associated with eighteenth century Europe's aspirations towards an age of reason; the valorisation of the Baconian method and the planting of seeds of anti-religious, secular sentiment that has flowered today in Richard Dawkin's (and others) doctrine of Scientism. Indeed, much of the Buddhism that is familiar and propagated in the West may justifiably be understood as constituting various forms and expressions of a relatively recent Buddhist modernism (McMahan 2008).

Who, what and where is the Buddha?

In the year 2000 I was employed as the researcher for a BBC Everyman landmark documentary titled '*Life of the Buddha.*' One of the first tasks I was asked to accomplish by the producer was to somehow 'separate the man from the myth'¹⁰. This was, in theory, to be done through relying primarily on archaeological evidence and searching for any historical sources that would lead 'us' towards something approaching a biography as opposed to a hagiography. This was an impossible and unreasonable request as clearly the man was the myth and the myth was the man.

From the beginning it was clear that they did not desire the fully enlightened prince turned renunciant, 'teacher of gods and men' but rather an ordinary man who abandoned his family in the quest for spiritual truth and who died (in his eighties) due to food poisoning in *Kushinagar* (some 2,500 years ago).

The earliest surviving Buddhist scriptures, the *Nikayas*, consistently present the Buddha as a omniscient, superhuman being, an unparalleled teacher, performer of various miracles and supra-divine saviour (Masefield 1986); liberating sentient beings from the otherwise unending cycle of birth, sickness, old age, death and rebirth. Additionally, when these scriptures are read against the backdrop of the existing Brahminic traditions one sees that much of the world-view of the Buddha and his disciples was often quite typically Hindu¹¹; including belief in the cosmic law of *Karma*, a whole host of both seen and unseen supernatural beings (including vast hierarchies of Gods and Goddesses) and a deeply held belief in afterlives.¹²

Although the attitudes concerning the honours and worship due these various supernatural beings may be contrasted between Brahmanism and Buddhism, the belief in their actual existence was never contested or denied. It also becomes immediately clear that the Buddha is not described as being God or any kind of god (in any of the Buddhist scriptures) precisely because he is deemed as being far above and beyond such categories, and not being due to any secular leanings possessed by his disciples; in this way one may justly argue that Buddhism is not atheistic but rather supra-theistic. As the monks and lay-people may be heard to chant daily, in the *Theravadin* tradition (the oldest surviving school of Buddhism) the Buddha is understood to be and related to as *Sattha deva manus-sanam* - 'teacher of Gods and Men' (Rhys Davids and Carpenter 1967, p.76)

¹⁰ This arguably constitutes something of a modern obsession as the History and Discovery Channels frequently commission documentaries whose contents concerns the 'search' for the 'historical' Moses, Jesus etc.

¹¹ Used in the broader sense of being native to India

¹² 'Reincarnation' in Hinduism and the more complex 'Rebirth' in Buddhism



A popular *Dharmapala* (Dharma protector) *Mahakala*

As Buddhism travelled beyond India and the new Mahayana schools¹³ rose to prominence to China, Japan and Tibet, a whole pantheon of Buddhist Deities were to appear and the Buddha himself was to be multiplied into five supra-divine forms (Bechert and Gombrich 1984).

To fit within Western world-views these various deities can be, and commonly are, transformed via psychologisation or metaphorisation into different states of mind rather than actual beings.

Following the Buddha's enlightenment (described in the *Ayacana Sutta*) when he is doubting whether or not to preach and share his salvational truth (his *Dharma*) he is entreated to do so by a Brahmā (a powerful and senior Hindu-Buddhist deity). When this scene is metaphorised and psychologised it becomes stripped of its more cosmic and supernatural context and internalised so that the Brahmā is not really a Brahmā at all, but rather the Buddha's own conscience or compassionate nature.

A similar process may be observed within Tibetan Buddhism which has a multitude of terrifying looking protector deities who are there to guard and preserve the integrity of the particular tradition, its teachers and practitioners.

In Martin Scorsese's (1997) Tibetan epic *Kundun*, there is a revealing scene where the young Dalai Lama is afraid to sleep and asks one of his attendants the name of one of the particular protector deity pictured near his bedside. Her name, it transpires, is *Penden Lhamo* and she is the Dalai Lama's personal protector. The young boy then asks a very strange question (perhaps revealing the scepticism of the Hollywood screenwriter, Melissa

¹³ *Mahayana* literally translates as the great or greater vehicle

Mathison, rather than a young child raised and steeped in Tibetan cosmology) “Is she real or pretend?” to which the attendant immediately, twice replies “She’s real, she’s real.

The Western practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism may well struggle with recognising these various deities as being ‘real’ in any ‘objective’, living sense, and the Western Psychologist (if he/she considers them at all) will quickly reduce them into safer categories such as ‘archetypes’, ‘objects’ or the mere means to a Psychological end as part of a visualisation practice:

Many times I have heard a Westerner ask a Tibetan Rinpoche, “are the deities real or are they archetypes?” Every time the master has answered that the yidams, the protectors and the deities are as real as we are.” Just as we exist so too do they exist. (Lama Palden Drolma 2002, pp.2-3)

And as Westerners begin to explore Buddhist teachings concerning emptiness (*Shunyata*), most commonly encountered in the ‘Perfection of Wisdom Sutras’ (the shortest and most popular being the ‘Heart Sutra’), these ontological questions concerning ‘what’ or ‘who’ exists, become ever more complex and ambiguous, opening up to any number of interpretations (Hopkins 1996).

In John Snelling’s (1994) bestselling introduction to Buddhist teachings (recommended reading from the UK Buddhist Society) one encounters a classic example of the Psychologisation of the various heavens and hells of Buddhist cosmology as encountered in the depictions of the wheel of life (the six realms of existence). There is little doubt that almost all ancient and most modern (Sri Lankan, Burmese, Thai, Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan) Buddhists accepted, and would continue to accept and believe in the actual existence of hell realms¹⁴, populated by those who didn’t appreciate the Karmic consequences of their actions and intentions in former lives. Yet Snelling, like many Westerners, finds the ‘reality’ of hell realms difficult to accept, according to either faith or reason, and so begins a hermeneutic process of metaphorisation, individualisation and psychologisation:

What are we to make of all this? Is it merely the product of dark and superstitious minds that we, children of a more ‘advanced’ age illuminated by the light of modern science, might safely cast away...

That having been said, many people find that the notion of being caught up in vast cycles of painful coming-into-being and ceasing-to-be across untold aeons evokes a strange resonance in the psyche. And is this really so surprising? It has taken the

¹⁴ There are traditionally sixteen hells in Buddhism; eight hot and eight cold. The most feared being the *Avici* hell.

evolutionary process millions of years to create human beings, and we carry in our genes the imprint of all the struggles that organic life has undergone in the process. We have in a sense died with the dinosaurs ; we have struggled to get up from four feet onto two; we have preyed and been preyed upon, struggled and failed, and succeeded too- but the weariness!

And in the contexts of our present lives, have we all not, experienced innumerable forms of suffering: loss of fortune, separation from loved ones, sickness, betrayal, disillusionment, confusion? Perhaps too at moments of extreme distress, we have known what it is to be in hell? (Snelling 1994, p.49)

On one hand the author is unwilling to dismiss outright the 'superstitious' teachings concerning hell, but then the presence of the inverted commas suggest that our age is not as 'advanced' as it perceives itself to be; and so there follows an evolutionary discourse which concludes with the relocation of the hell realms from any supernatural realm to our own private minds and personal experience.

Perhaps the clearest example of the Westernisation and demythologisation of Buddhism can be seen in the work of the former Buddhist monk¹⁵ and now contemporary Buddhist scholar, teacher and bestselling author Stephen Batchelor. In his recent autobiography 'Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist', Batchelor (2010) recounts his gradual movement away from Tibetan Buddhism towards Zen Buddhism, and eventually reformulating his own version of the Buddhist teachings¹⁶. At one point, recounting a period (in the 1980s) preceding his



The wheel of life

¹⁵ Originally of the Tibetan *Gelugpa* Tradition (the same tradition as the Dalai Lama).

¹⁶ Without, to his credit, seeking to create a new school or new religious movement.

departure from his Tibetan teacher he expresses a vision which he was soon to successfully realise:

I saw myself, arrogantly perhaps, as a participant in a groundbreaking experiment to redefine traditional religious thinking in a way that transcended sectarian identities. This experiment was neither Christian, Jewish, nor Buddhist: it was an attempt to humanise and secularise religion, to free it from the prison of metaphysics and supernatural beliefs, to allow it speak out in a lucid, impassioned and committed voice. (Batchelor 2010, p.59)

It is telling that the sole, selected endorsement displayed on the back sleeve of Batchelor's (2010) autobiography (titled 'Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist') comes from the prominent atheist Christopher Hitchens.

In what became Batchelor's (1997) defining thesis, '*Buddhism without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening*', the Dharma (Buddhist teachings) was to be stripped down to its 'essentials'. An agnostic attitude towards rebirth, karma and all metaphysical axioms was encouraged, and the Buddha was consistently portrayed as a human teacher who had more in common with the great continental philosophers (in particular the existentialists) than with any religious mystics, gurus or miracle workers. As the book begins to conclude:

An agnostic Buddhist vision of a culture of awakening will inevitably challenge many of the time-honoured roles of religious Buddhism. No longer will it see the role of Buddhism as providing pseudoscientific authority on subjects such as cosmology, biology and consciousness as it did in prescientific Asian cultures. Nor will it see its role as offering consoling assurances of a better afterlife by living in accordance with the worldview of karma and rebirth. (Batchelor 1997, p.114)

Batchelor is perhaps an extreme example of the Westernisation and secularisation of Buddhism, but he is also an extremely influential spokesperson for Buddhism in the West. But before individuals begin to hurl accusations of 'cultural imperialism' it is important to recall that in every age when Buddhism has been imported into a new land it has been painstakingly translated and transformed into forms that are more 'indigenous', recognisable and palatable to the host country; one example is Buddhism's arrival in China, its meeting with Daoism and the emergence of *Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism*¹⁷ (Bechert and Gom-

¹⁷ One may also reflect on the transformations of Buddhist iconography from a Buddha with 'foreign' Indian features to more Buddhas and Bodhisattvas with more recognisably Chinese features.

brich 1998). What is perhaps novel is that the translation and transformation is now occurring within predominantly secular, modernist contexts.

One might also consider the broader context (macrosystem) of neoliberalism and the role of market forces. Carrette and King (2005) consider the psychologisation of religion as being a part of the privatisation and commodification of spirituality. In this way spirituality, under Capitalism, becomes yet another product to consume, a label to wear and to display. To this end 'Capitalist spirituality' (Carrette and King 2005, p.17) is revealed as yet another mode of having that fools itself into believing it is being (Fromm 2005); whilst the more general tendencies towards positivism and the increasingly overt denial of metaphysical realms or possibilities ensures that one remains firmly embedded within the material world, with all its material concerns and relations.

Buddhism as psychology

Although not exhaustive, it is my hope to provide several striking examples and accompanying reflections that illustrate something of the recent history concerning Buddhism's successful integration and assimilation into mainstream Psychology.

When Dr Karen Wegela (2009), writing for *Psychology Today*, identifies the Buddha as having been 'An Early Psychologist' we need to recognise how this increasingly commonly accepted idea has come to gain credence. This assertion can (and often does) allow modern Psychologists to anchor their particular truth claims within an exotic Eastern antiquity. Perhaps this might also reflect the Psychologist's desire to share, or take part, in an ancient lineage?

Off the couch and under the tree

We live and practice in a psychoanalytic universe in which Buddhist teachers are in therapy, psychoanalysts meditate, and spiritual seekers simultaneously pursue contemplative paths and analysis. (Rubin in Safran 2003, p. 387)

The 1939 German edition of D. T. Suzuki's *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* contained a glowing forward written by C. G. Jung. Within the broader Psychoanalytic movement we may consider the dialogues between Erich Fromm, Zen Buddhist teacher and author D. T. Suzuki and Richard De Martino which led to the publication of *Zen and Psychoanalysis* in 1960. This work represents one of the first serious attempts to effectively blend Buddhist teachings with Psychoanalytic thought.

The popular and prolific (Japanese born, English speaking) D. T. Suzuki remains one of the most significant figures in the propagation of Zen Buddhism in the West. It is also important to recognise that the Zen Buddhism of D. T. Suzuki (2002) is one that has been mostly stripped of most of its rituals and liturgies and is commonly represented as an atheistic, anti-doctrinal Psychology of awakening¹⁸; a Psychology that immediately appealed (and continues to appeal) to Westerners.

In fact, quite early in his writings, Suzuki had explicitly reimagined Buddhism as being the precursor to Western Psychology:

It is wonderful that Buddhism clearly anticipated the outcome of modern psychological researches at the time when all other religious and philosophical systems were eagerly cherishing dogmatic superstitions concerning the nature of the ego (Suzuki 2000, p. 40)

The most common introductory description of ‘Orthodox’ Zen Buddhism in Western publications remains that of ‘a special transmission outside the scriptures’ (Dumoulin 1979, p.16), and is commonly coupled with illustrations of the Ch’an (Zen) Patriarch *Huineng* tearing up the Buddhist scriptures. The Zen of West is one of antinomian iconoclasm and these characteristics were to be further emphasised and articulated by popular writers on contemporary Spirituality and Zen such as Alan Watts (1990). Watts (1961) was also a key figure in some of the more popular efforts at mixing Western forms of Psychology and Psychotherapy with ‘Eastern’ approaches (namely Buddhist and Daoist).

These seemingly anti-religious sentiments would seem to dovetail well with Freud’s well documented anti-religious sentiments (Ward 1993); which were most typically directed against the ‘Abrahamic’ God. As Freud had comparatively little to say concerning the lesser-known Eastern religions, Buddhism (in its modernist form) became an acceptable area of both study and practice for spiritual seekers within Psychoanalytic movements.

It is only relatively recently that scholars of comparative religion have initiated serious scholarly attempts to challenge and correct the popular Western image of the Zen Buddhist as being something/someone akin to the Nietzschean *Übermensch* and restore him/her to their cultural and spiritual context (Heine and Wright 2007). One need only visit any Zen temple in Japan (and there are many to choose from in *Kyoto*) to see how formal, organised and ritualised daily life is and how central various rituals, liturgies and chanting services are.

¹⁸ This becomes more understandable when one considers that D. T. Suzuki had been a student and admirer of Paul Carus (2009).

The Freud Museum's (1993) publication, titled 'Is Psychoanalysis another Religion', included several prominent Psychoanalytic thinkers, practitioners and historians reflecting on Freud's attitudes towards religion and spirituality. In addition to several pictures of Buddhas and *Bodhisattvas* (awakened beings), one of which included Julia Kristeva photographed besides a bust of Shakyamuni Buddha¹⁹, is an article by Nina Coltart. In the article Coltart writes that the Buddha was 'an excellent Psychologist, and knew a great deal about the unconscious mind' (Coltart 1993, p.25). That same year Coltart (1993) published *How to Survive as a Psychotherapist*, which included several flattering comparisons between the Buddha and Freud (p.112). For some contemporary Psychoanalysts, Zen Buddhist meditation remains an acceptable way to explore the Unconscious and to bring hitherto unknown or unacknowledged (repressed) desires and material into consciousness awareness (Cooper 2004), thus appearing to reformulate the Buddhist enlightenment as being the realisation of Freud's summation of the purpose of Psychoanalysis; 'Where Id was there Ego shall be.'

Unlike many others however Coltart demonstrated more religious sensitivity, reflexivity and criticality as she advised against the practice of Buddhist meditation outside its intended spiritual context and continued to quote from John Welwood's (1985) work *Awakening the Heart* where he cautioned:

The Psychologising of Eastern or Eastern contemplative disciplines can rob these disciplines of their spiritual substance. It can pervert them into a Western mental health gimmick, and thereby prevent them from introducing the sharply *alternative* vision of life they are capable of bringing us. (Welwood quoted in Coltart 1993, p.26)

Buddhism and Cognitive Therapy

If the Buddha is to be characterised as a Psychologist then it would logically follow that his teachings themselves constitute a form of Psychology or Psychotherapy. As new Psychological trends appear so the ways that the Buddhist teachings are utilised and transformed increase and become ever more varied.

With the advent of Cognitive Therapeutic approaches (Beck 1991), the Psychological nomenclature moved away from the 'Unconscious' and towards talk of 'underlying me-

¹⁹ Though the article itself concerns Christianity

chanisms' (Persons 1989, pp.6-8; Grant et al 2008, p.54), with the emergence of a more technologically loaded language; most closely resembling information processing theory. Psychological experiences were now reduced into flowchart form processes and it appeared that Psychology's journey towards becoming a natural science was nearing completion.

Perhaps it has been partly an attempt to move away from the overtly dehumanising language of earlier forms of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) that visible and influential alliances have been forming over the past decade between CBT and Buddhist mindfulness meditation.

Mindfulness meditation is common to all forms of Buddhism meditation but is perhaps most commonly associated with the *Theravada* and *Zen (Mahayana)* traditions of Buddhism. It was arguably the Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh's (1991) book *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, first published in 1975, that brought this term into popular parlance.

Mindfulness may take many forms; traditional sitting meditation, walking, or any daily activity (making the bed or washing the dishes). It is more accurately understood as being the cultivation of a gentle, spacious attending to one's being and a wakeful awareness of all one's doing. Its most familiar form involves mindfulness of breathing; wherein one gently rests one's attention on the rise and fall of the breath (a meditative method that has its origins in the earliest Buddhist scriptures; *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*). The original purpose of cultivating mindfulness was to reach full and complete awakening; to completely transcend ignorance, hatred and craving; to put an end all suffering and anguish.

More recently the term mindfulness has been coupled with Cognitive Therapy to become the hybridised 'Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy' (MBCT). In my recent edition of the Guildford Press' catalogue for 'Clinical Psychology and Psychiatry 2009' over a page and a half was dedicated to new books on MBCT; with their front covers evoking scenes of the Far East; lotus flowers or small stacks of smooth stones suggesting Zen minimalism.

Kabat-Zinn's (1990) *Full Catastrophe Living* was one of the first popular (bestselling) efforts to bring mindfulness into a clinical/medical setting (at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre) and use it primarily as a treatment for stress and stress related illnesses. As the back sleeve of the book promises and encourages:

This book will enable you to develop your own stress management programme. It provides easy-to-follow meditation techniques, a detailed eight-week practice schedule, dozens of success stories, plus the latest research findings. Discover how mindfulness will help you cope with a range of problems: medical symptoms, physical and emotional pain, anxiety and panic, time pressures, relationships, work, food, and events in the outside world. (Kabat-Zinn 1990)

One can immediately appreciate and see how mindfulness has now been reformulated into a form of managing symptoms, coping strategies enabling adjustment to stressful situations and circumstances. Mindfulness is transformed from a cultivation practice that leads to full awakening, in the original Buddhist sense, into yet another coping mechanism for dealing with the stresses of modern life.

When mindfulness is utilised by Psychiatrists and Clinical Psychologists it becomes a treatment for depression and reducing relapses (Williams, Teasdale, Segal, Kabat-Zinn 2007).

Although these are all praiseworthy and noble goals, they do appear to ignore some of the central teachings of the Buddhist religion. Western adaptations of mindfulness are being used to reduce our stress, to make us less depressed, more fulfilled and happy (the Dalai Lama and Cutler 1998) but are rarely requiring us to make the necessary and demanding life changes that Buddhism originally required. Buddhism becomes part of a secular quest for happiness, but few Psychiatrists and Psychologists appear to appreciate that even the Buddha's understanding of happiness was radically different from theirs.

The Buddha and his Dharma (teachings) addressed 'suffering and cessation of suffering'. He consistently taught that the pursuit of happiness based upon people's erroneous and unawakened view of world, their craving for sensory delights and distractions (with their various accompanying pleasurable, neutral or painful sensations) was at the heart of our collective problems (Rahula 1997).

The Buddha taught that in the eyes of the awakened the very things we consider to be the sources of our happiness are actually the very sources of our misery as it says in the *Saddhamma-maniratana*, 'Gemstones of the Good Dhamma':

What others call happiness,
the Noble call pain;
what others call pain,
the Noble call happiness.
Behold this Dhamma hard to comprehend
by which the dull are utterly baffled. (Dhammika 2009)

Not surprisingly the forms of Buddhism which appear to be most popular in the West have little to nothing to do with renunciation and more to do with embracing life and seeking personal fulfilment. Buddhism appears overwhelmed by the Western sense of entitlement to happiness irrespective of our moral conduct. Whereas mindfulness in the Buddhist tradition was always within the context of commitment to a moral way of life (most

commonly, for the layperson, the five precepts *pañca-sikkhāpada*²⁰, the moral/ethical dimension of being is seldom addressed by Psychological texts concerning mindfulness.

Indeed Western adaptations of mindfulness often appear independent of any ethical requirements; rather emphasising an amoral immediacy of being; free of any religious or cultural 'baggage'. Both Proudfoot (1985) and Sharf (1995) have previously revealed and critiqued the Western privileging of 'experience' as a rhetorical technique intended to downplay the importance of religious institutions and contexts.

Whilst seductive, this transformation arguably does a great disservice to, and distorts, the original purpose of the *Dharma* (Buddhist teachings), and reduces the practice of mindfulness to a rather self-centred pursuit; less concerned with making us into better human beings and more concerned/obsessed with allowing us to have better (more 'real'/intense) experiences. The recent offering of mindfulness based sex therapy (MBST) programmes²¹ and CDs (including a forthcoming title *Buddha in the Bedroom*) was perhaps an inevitable consequence of this particular form of adaptation.

Buddhism and Consciousness Studies

Susan Blackmore's (2003) *Consciousness: An Introduction*, whilst entertaining certain intriguing philosophical possibilities and problems, typically tends towards more positivistic, neuroscientific and evolutionary explanations for our sense of self and being. Despite these leanings Blackmore is quite open about her practice of meditation in the Zen Buddhist tradition (although making it very clear that she does not consider herself to be a Buddhist); a practice which she occasionally teaches at Buddhist centres in the UK.

Blackmore's recent publication (2009) *Ten Zen Questions* reinforces the popular Western perception of Zen as an atheistic, humanistic, science of mind and consciousness. The questions are loosely based on the *Rinzai* sect of Zen's practice of meditating on *koans*²². The purpose of the *koan*, as popularised by D. T. Suzuki, is to move the meditator beyond her intellect (her words) and attempts to 'solve' or 'answer' the 'problem' in the 'correct' manner and allow the meditator to have a direct 'experience' of being (*Satori* in Japanese); in contrast Blackmore's text reads as an ongoing internal monologue; phenomeno-

²⁰ These include the precepts of not taking life, not taking what is not given, abstaining from sexual misconduct, not speaking untruths, and abstaining from intoxicants which cloud the mind.

²¹ Based in Los Angeles, California. The current programmes can be accessed through the Website at <http://mindfulnesssextherapy.com/default.aspx> accessed 29/04/10

²² Popularly presented as seemingly impossible questions e.g. 'What is this?' Or the infamous 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?'

logical reflections leading on to existential insights which in turn initiate even more questions:

Who is asking the question? I am. I am sitting here looking at the wet flagstones outside my hut. Let me investigate this instead. Who is looking at the stone? This is easier. I can see the stone over there, flat and grey with ups and downs and puddles where the rain collects, and wet leaves stuck here and there. Now who is seeing all this? There is no escaping the flagstone. There it is. And there is no escaping the fact that I am looking from over here. There is perspective: a viewpoint. Were I to look from somewhere else it would look different. Were someone else looking from over there they would see it in a different way. From here it looks like this. Right – so now I can draw a line between there and here. Over there is the flagstone. Over here is me. And who is this? (Blackmore 2009, 'Question Three')

Blackmore's Zen Buddhism, and its familiar resonance with some schools of continental philosophy²³, may be understood more clearly when we consider that three of her main Buddhist references in *Consciousness: An Introduction* are from Stephen Batchelor's writings.

However Blackmore would be the first to recognise that these first person accounts are not deemed sufficient, authoritative or comprehensive enough (by mainstream Psychology) to allow us to understand what consciousness is, and so researchers will commonly seek to root their phenomenological reflections in 'hard science'; following the lead of neuroscientist and practitioner of Tibetan Buddhist, Francisco Valera (Blackmore 2006).

The recent resurgence of interest in Consciousness and the search for neural correlates of consciousness has led to some interesting and slightly surreal events. On several occasions now Buddhist monks (mostly from the Tibetan tradition) have willingly placed themselves in MRI scanners and had their meditative prowess measured and explained in terms of brain structure, function and electrochemistry (Goleman 2003). In this way Neuropsychology continues the process of demystification, as the Buddhist brain is gradually catalogued; moving from the cultivating the Dharma to increasing dendritic connections (Austin 1999; Hanson & Mendius 2009).

One may also consider, and perhaps gain a greater comprehension of, this emerging trend by considering Brockman's (1996) discussions concerning the 'third culture'. Brockman observes that scientists have become an intellectual vanguard in Western societies and an economic force to be reckoned with (Shaffer 1998); despite the best efforts of

²³ In particular the Phenomenological and Existentialist movements.

1960s counter culture to resist technocracy (Roszak 1995) and its accompanying epistemological hegemony.

Typically third culture Scientists address and posit answers to questions that were previously deemed to be the sole domain of theologians and philosophers. As Natural Science approaches are asserted as being the sole benchmark of validity, attempts are made to either process and reduce spiritual experience through an instrumentalist incarnation of science (as has previously been demonstrated) or to attempt to relate scientific worldviews, insights and discoveries to ancient spiritual teachings and religious scriptures. One popular attempt at the latter was Fritjof Capra's (2000) bestselling 'The Tao Physics'²⁴ which had the subtitle of 'an exploration of the parallels between modern physics and Eastern mysticism'. One critical issue with this kind of approach is that it appears to only validate religious worldviews in proportion to these perceived 'parallels'; so that religion is deemed relevant and 'rational' only to the extent that it can be made (or be made to appear) to conform to currently popular scientific worldviews and methods. In this way religion may be seen as a mere primitive precursor to scientific discovery; surviving only by emulating and associating with the dominant positivist paradigms; Buddhist meditation is not valued or validated on the basis of 2500 years of carefully recorded experiential evidence²⁵ but rather on the comparatively recent experimental findings that brain activity is being measurably affected²⁶.

It is therefore important and timely, although not without controversy, to consider whether this new trend may in time lead to a shift in 'spiritual authority' from the *Lamas/Rinpoches* (the Masters of the Tibetan tradition) and *Roshis* (the Masters of the Zen tradition) to the Psychologists and Neuroscientists; as the ability, and accompanying authority, to recognise those who are 'awakened' moves away from a more traditional teacher-disciple relationship and begins to resemble a more medicalised form (doctor-patient); with awakening virtually taking on the appearance of a diagnosis. If awakening becomes authoritatively associated with particular brain states, then it may well prove difficult for the formerly valued intuition of the Buddhist Master (traditionally based on metaphysical wisdom and accompanying powers) to compete with the new data provided by the constantly evolving technologies of neuroimaging.

²⁴ First published in 1975

²⁵ Or an unbroken lineage of masters

²⁶ Most commonly observed changes in alpha brainwaves and release of beta-endorphins etc.

Concluding Thoughts

I recently returned from visiting the Hossō Zen temple (in *Nara*, Japan), whose the Abbot Tagawa Shun'ei (2009), recently wrote a book introducing the *Yogācāra* school of Buddhism. This particular school, commonly referred to as the 'mind/consciousness only' school, is presented as having anticipated many of the greatest insights of Western Psychology from the existence and dynamics of the Unconscious²⁷, to more cognitive aspects and approaches, but is deliberately differentiated from more genetic/biological approaches:

Yogācāra Buddhism argues that all causes are to be found within "transformations of consciousness", and phenomena are reduced to being "mental factors". As long as our understanding of Yogācāra is based on this, seeds and human genetics are beyond comparison. Human genes are transmitted from parents to their children, and fundamentally consist of matter containing manipulative potentiality. Physical genes cannot be equated with the mental-energy seeds that impregnate our actions into the deep mind of the store consciousness. (Shun'ei 2009 p.133)

After defending and reasserting a Buddhist metaphysical position, there follows a reiteration of the Buddhist belief in rebirth and past lives, until the abbot concludes:

Buddhists who live in ages henceforth will continue to debate advanced findings made by researchers in the life sciences. But if we make these correspondences based on a superficially felt sense of similarity, we will accomplish nothing but the invitation of useless confusion. We should instead hold firm to the Yogācāra position that reduces all things to mental factors, examine the differences closely, and then establish any correspondences to be made based on that. (Shun'ei 2009 p.134)

Tagawa Shun'ei appears to be setting out conditions and establishing boundaries wherein a dialogue of equal partners can take place, between his particular school of Buddhism and the 'Life Sciences'. But this becomes near impossible when the very Scientists are already, themselves, practitioners and propagators of (or sympathetic towards) more modernist forms of Buddhism. The 'dialogue' moves away from the traditional curators and

²⁷ Which is related to the *ālaya-vijñāna* or the 'store consciousness'. This is part of the subliminal mind which houses the memories and seeds of actions from this life and countless previous lives. For an insightful exploration of this concept discussed in relation to Psychoanalytic and Analytical Psychology the reader should consult Jiang (2006).

lineage holders of the various age-old Buddhist traditions and towards being an internal dialogue taking place within the minds and writings of Western practitioners.

It is now hopefully clear that the process of Psychologisation and individualisation had already occurred sometime prior to the later claims and assimilations of Psychoanalysts, Cognitive Therapists and Neuroscientists. Indeed Modernist Buddhism lent itself to such Psychological forms and interpretations, actively inviting comparisons that will legitimise its status as a scientific, positivistic religion, whilst simultaneously appearing to have recovered, or rediscovered the original Buddhism.

When one considers what the various goals of Modernist Buddhism are they appear quite distinct from, and modest in comparison to, the radically transformative paths and transcendent aspirations of earlier Buddhism. When coupled with Western Psychology and Psychotherapy, Buddhism typically becomes an aid to having more intense experiences, more awareness of and control over one's emotions and cognitions or a way of attaining relief from stress or mental anguish. The highest aims of Modernist Buddhism appear to be limited to various forms of Psychological adjustment and it has to be recognised that these are simply not comparable to the original Buddhist goals of liberation and awakening (Welwood 1983)^{28 29}.

As Psychologists and Psychiatrists re-interpret, rewrite and popularise the Buddhist teachings³⁰ they themselves are becoming the new secular ministers and missionaries of Modernist Buddhism.

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²⁸ The reader may find Jack Kornfield, Ram Daas and Mokusen Miyuki's discussion 'Psychological adjustment is not liberation' in chapter 3 of Welwood (1983) to be particularly pertinent.

²⁹ For examples of political and social forms of liberation/emancipation within a modern Buddhist framework one may consider the life and work of Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (Jaffrelot 2005).

³⁰ Commonly containing forewords written by the Dalai Lama, or in the case of Jon Kabat Zinn the Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh.

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