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Buddhist Practice on Western Ground:
Reconciling Eastern Ideals and Western
Psychology

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Review of *Buddhist Practice on Western Ground:
Reconciling Eastern Ideals and Western
Psychology*

Amos Yong*

Buddhist Practice on Western Ground. By Harvey B. Aronson. Preface by Huston Smith. Boston and London: Shambhala, 2004. 253 pages. Paperback. ISBN 1590300939.

In his doctoral dissertation written over thirty years ago under the late Richard H. Robinson at the University of Madison, Wisconsin, and revised for publication in 1980 — *Love and Sympathy in Theravāda Buddhism* (Motilal Banarsidass) — Harvey Aronson argued against the idea, prominent at the time, that the Theravādin tradition was predominantly a monastic practice that encouraged the withdrawal from society and abstention from social activity. His thesis drew from the *Vinaya Piṭaka* and the *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*) of the fifth century scholar Buddhaghosa to make the point that the four sublime attitudes of universal love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity were designed to engage both monks and laypersons with the wider world. In *Buddhist Practice on Western Ground*, Aronson extends this argument, only within the modern western context rather than that of the South Asian milieu of the Theravādin tradition. More specifically, this new book explores Buddhist practices and their traditional contexts, and psychotherapy and the culture of the modern West from which it sprang, in order to determine how they can best complement one another for Western practitioners.

Buddhist Practice on Western Ground emerges from the convergence of Aronson's personal practice of Theravādin and Tibetan meditation and his training and work in the Western traditions of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, each stretching back at least thirty years. More to the point,

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it was out of his experiences with panic attacks even in the midst of sustained engagement with Buddhist practices that led Aronson to ask both the question of why Eastern meditation seemed ineffectual against this malady and also, whether and what Western psychology might contribute to meeting the personal, psychological and spiritual needs of modern persons. Of course, in the last generation there has emerged a much wider practice of Buddhist meditation in modern Western societies. But might it be that individuals get out of Buddhism only what they are looking for, abstracted from the broader Buddhist way of life and thought? And might it be that what they are getting out of Buddhism speaks only partially to the challenges confronted by men in women in the world of the late modern West? Put bluntly, might we be expecting too much of a tradition of meditation developed 2500 years ago during the first Axial Age in terms of what it can deliver for the neuroses and psychoses that come with twenty-first century Western life?

To get at this set of questions, Aronson explores a number of ideas central to both the psychotherapeutic tradition and the Buddhist tradition in order to map their similarities and differences. Take the idea of the individual, for instance, along with its conceptual cognates such as individuality, individualism, and ego. Westerners, nurtured from a very young age to fully attain or manifest their individuality, negotiate their encounter with the Buddhist traditions of “no-self” in many different and sometimes contradictory ways. Some might embrace the Buddhist teaching in a literalistic manner which in turn undermines their capacity to skillfully interact with, much less overcome, the vocational and social challenges of modern Western life. Others may be predisposed, because of the individualistic mindset that is deeply ingrained in their habits and self-understanding, to “use” Buddhist practices for their own “selfish” purposes to “get ahead in life” — a goal that is, arguably, contrary to the original intentions of Buddhist meditation. A third response might be to cordon off the benefits attained from Buddhist practices as a private and personalized means of coping, stabilizing, and re-energizing, just so that one could return to the day-to-day grind of the workplace (or wherever) in order to engage that reality on its own (Western, individualistic, “dog-eat-dog”) terms.

Other central ideas associated with Buddhist practice and Western psychotherapy also have vastly different meanings in East and West, differences that could produce complications if unattended to or precipitate counterproductive responses and actions in the lives of Westerners engaged in Buddhist meditation. Eastern teachers develop skills that sustain the observation and abandonment of anger, while Western psychotherapists counsel

the acceptance, and even encourage the expression of anger. Easterners attempt to cultivate an impassioned perspective on life, while Westerners authorize the passionate engagement with life. Buddhist meditation emphasizes non-attachment, while Western psychology talks in dualistic terms of either detachment or attachment. These are gross generalizations, to be sure, but the point of Aronson's book is to move beyond these stereotypes to the underlying narratives and worldviews that inform the cultures of the more "traditional" East and the modern West.

In the case of anger, for example, there is clarification needed about how it functions in East and West. In the former, anger is to be observed and abandoned in light of the goal of abstaining from harmful intent and harmful action. Further, given the tendency of Easterners to respond somatically rather than emotionally, anger is to be acknowledged, but not allowed to fester and develop into hate (which constitutes the motivating intention to inflict harm on others). The basic context here is informed by that of karmic retribution: anger leads to harm which produces, in turn, negative karma, precisely that which propels the pain and suffering of this world. In the West, by contrast, we are dealing often with the repression of feelings, buried painfully deep within the self but on the verge of bursting forth. Hence, in the Freudian scheme of things, anger, like sex, is an innate aggression that must be skillfully controlled, rather than ignored (to the detriment of both the individual and society). This led to forms of Gestalt therapy with its emphasis on the cathartic expression of feelings, and to the popular cultural slogan, "Let it all hang out."

Aronson's goal is to observe these differences so as to be better enable Western practitioners of Buddhist meditation to recognize the distinctive cultural factors, goals, and analyses that converge in their lives. In the end, he suggests that both interventions are needed. With regard to the question of what to do with anger, Buddhist mindfulness and Western psychotherapeutic catharsis can combine to enable avoidance of both the extreme of repression and that of over-expression. Similarly, with regard to nonattachment versus attachment, Buddhist views should be understood as a *via media* between fixated attachment on the one side or disengaged detachment on the other, even while Western psychology can distinguish a "healthy secure attachment" characterized by loving and mutual relationship from either "avoidant attachment," which disengages because of past hurts, or "ambivalent attachment," which clings because of needs unmet by an unresponsive other. With regard to the apparent impasse between the Buddhist no-self and the Western individualized ego, Buddhist mindfulness meditation allows Westerners to see the interdependence of all things which

in turn tempers their individualistic tendencies and individualizing habits, while Western psychotherapy provides for strategies to engage the distinctive challenges of late modern life even as it clarifies the limits of what meditation can accomplish. In this convergent perspective, then, there is a sense in which both perspectives remain important even as there is the recognition that they are both of limited value in terms of addressing only some issues rather than being comprehensive “answers” to the problems and needs of modern persons.

Aronson’s proposals have been sharpened by sustained personal practice and extended observation of and interaction with Buddhist teachers East and West. He is refreshingly honest in his admission both that Buddhist teachers who have been raised in and remain steeped in Asian ways of living and thinking may not be sensitive to Western needs and challenges, and that Buddhist practices are not the “cure-all” that some popularized advertisements have made them out to be. His candidness, of course, may be disputed by Buddhist practitioners who think he underestimates the insightfulness of truly skilled (enlightened) teachers or that he relativizes the value of Buddhist meditation outside the Eastern context. As I write this review from the perspective of an outsider to the Buddhist tradition, I will leave it to Buddhist respondents to take up this issue with Aronson. For myself as a Christian, however, I am motivated to apply Aronson’s Buddhist self-understanding in a self-critical way, and do so in my concluding comments by raising two sets of questions.

First, *Buddhist Practice on Western Ground* raises questions regarding the transplantation of religious and spiritual traditions from one place and time to another. Aronson himself asks whether or not the Western engagement with Buddhism proceeds by an assimilation of Buddhist teachings into a Western framework, or results in a transformation of the West itself through the course of Westerners learning something new and adjusting their familiar ways of thinking to these new ideas and practices. Put succinctly, is Buddhism being transformed to fit Western needs and wants, or are Westerners being transformed by their encounter with and then embodiment of Buddhism? It would seem, of course, that both processes occur — that is, at least in part, Aronson’s argument. Along the way, however, Aronson succeeds in reminding us that the Buddhist transformation of the West can never be a “conquering” (my word) of the West, but rather more of a mutual exchange, and that because of the limited scope of issues which Buddhist practices were designed to address in the first place. Of course, this would explain why the missionary voyage of Christianity or any other world religious tradition has also proceeded piecemeal; why Christian mis-

siologists (especially) have long debated the relation of gospel and culture in terms of assimilation/accommodation (the gospel being used by culture for its own cultural purposes) or incarnation/contextualization (the gospel functioning as a catalyst for the transformation of culture); why Christianity has not been able to fully engage the questions and concerns of life in certain parts of East and South Asia, resulting in minimal growth in these areas, and so forth. In short, Aronson's highlighting the cultural, narrative, and contextual rootedness of Buddhist meditation practices may also call attention to similar factors that inform the tension between particularity and universality inherent in each of the world's religious traditions.

But if this is the case, then is Buddhism a "universal religion" only in certain respects, but not "absolutely"? Put alternatively, can there be a "universal religion" in the full sense of the term, or a "universal savior" in its most robust sense? Aronson suggests that we recognize the different cultural norms for health, maturity, and ideals operative in East and West, and by doing so, appreciate what Buddhist practice actually does offer without being disappointed about what it does not (and never formally claimed to be able to) accomplish. Can traditional and modern Western Buddhists accept this as a valid articulation of their personal self-understanding? Can Christians or members of other faiths embrace another version of this claim for their own religious self-understanding?

Final answers to these kinds of questions cannot be defended apart from sustained inter-religious engagement. One way forward may be precisely to take up the comparative question where Aronson has left off, i.e., to lay out and assess the similarities and differences between the "divine way of abiding" articulated in Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*) as love, compassion, and wisdom, and, e.g., the "way of Jesus" as defined by the Ignatian Exercises in terms of faith, hope, and love. Might this kind of comparative project illuminate the convergence between the cultivation of individual identity on the one hand, and the cultivation of compassion for all sentient beings on the other? In the process, might the different spiritualities themselves transform our understanding of universality and particularity from abstract theological and philosophical notions to concrete practices? Insofar as *Buddhist Practice on Western Ground* raises precisely these kinds of questions and provokes the suggestion of just these kinds of possibilities, Harvey Aronson is to be thanked, and, I would suggest, widely read.