

A Review of *Lack and Transcendence:*
The Problem of Death and Life in Psychotherapy,
Existentialism, and Buddhism

Lack and Transcendence: The Problem of Death and Life in Psychotherapy, Existentialism, and Buddhism. By David Loy. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1996, 248 pages, ASIN 0391038605, US \$49.95

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In the concluding chapter of his book, David Loy briefly outlines what he considers to be three dominant cultural paradigms of transcendence: the transcendental other-worldliness of India, the social group merging of China and Japan, and the subjective individuation of the West. Professor Loy argues that all three paradigms fail to integrate transcendent needs and universalist, worldly values -- what he distinguishes as sacred and secular needs. Rather, he advocates in his book a Buddhist paradigm of transcendence, one which is exemplified in the myth of Indra's Net.

In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the myth pictures Indra's heaven as including a net of infinite proportions, with a jewel located in each of its eyes, glittering magnificently. Each jewel reflects not only the brilliance of the other jewels in the net, but also the very reflections which each of the individual jewels reflect of all the other jewels. Francis Cook explains that in the Hua-yen school of Mahaayaana the myth symbolizes "a cosmos in which there is an infinitely repeated interrelationship among all the members of the cosmos. This relationship is said to be one of simultaneous mutual identity and mutual inter-causality" (p. 90). Loy argues that this common core identity in the Hua-yen experience of not-self amounts to an identification with the whole which issues forth in universalist values, thus integrating sacred and secular needs (p. 172).

"Ethical behavior is not so much the means of salvation as the natural, spontaneous expression of genuine enlightenment" (p. 107).

Loy does not explain how or why such a realization of simultaneous mutual identity of karmic traces should issue forth in an active ethical orientation and concern, which seems a most significant question given the absence of substantive entities as the loci of moral relationship and the lack of moral content in such a transcendent, self-less condition. But he does provide in his book a helpful and illuminating discussion of *pratiitya-samutpaada*, *"suunyataa, nirvaa.na* and other basic Buddhist doctrines relevant to his idea of authentic transcendence. Crucial to this idea is the notion of "lack." It is in this transcendent experience of not-self, argues Professor Loy, that we solve the problem of a fundamental and universal sense of lack.

He begins in Chapter 1 with an exploration of this sense of lack, through a rather rambling but complex analysis of the psychology of Freud, Ernest Becker, Irvin Yalom, and many others, as this applies to the question of death-anxiety. Focussing on the dynamics of repression and transference, Loy gives a Buddhist spin on traditional psychoanalytic patterns, suggesting, for example, that the basic impetus behind the Oedipal project is an innate desire to become self-sufficient -- to satisfy an inherent sense of lack. "The basic difficulty is a sense of lack which originates from the fact that our self-consciousness is not something self-existing but a mental construct" (p. 11-12). Transference is understood in terms of the need to secure one's sense of independent self-consciousness via others, but existential anxiety is inevitable given the fact that there is no possibility of a substantive sense of self to satisfy this sense of lack. Indeed, in Buddhist psychology "death/nonbeing-terror is not something the ego has, it is what the ego is" (p. 21). Our deepest fear is not fear of the death of our ego but the terror of accepting one's permanent lack of real or genuine being.

Loy delves more deeply into the nature of this existential pain in Chapter 3, the central and longest chapter of his book, outlining the nature and defense mechanisms (projection, transference) of ontological guilt, basic anxiety and existential anguish that is proposed by such thinkers as Kierkegaard, Karen Horney, H. S. Sullivan, Rollo May, Otto Rank, Jung, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, and Sartre. Some of the various ideas proposed by these theorists are adapted to fit

the framework of Loy's Buddhist sense of lack. Contemporary psychology and existentialism has shown how existential guilt, anxiety, and anguish are inherent to the human condition -- are "intrinsic to the ego" (p. 101) -- hence illustrate well the Buddhist problem of *du.hkha*. However, Loy looks especially to Nietzsche to support his argument that all of these various thinkers fail to appreciate the futility of striving in primary desire (*t.r.s.naa*) which itself is the source of *du.hkha*, to overcome this sense of lack. Schopenhauer and Sartre, for example, tend to "reify our sense of *lack* by building their ontology upon it" (p. 82). Nietzsche saw clearly the complete extent to which our world is constructed rather than discovered. He showed how the spiritual realm, religious and moral values, God, and even 'truth' itself are but created props, intended to bring security to a datum (primary will or desire) that itself is but a created illusion. But even Nietzsche failed to carry his insights to their logical conclusion and ended up postulating a "heroic-ego which overcomes its sense of *lack*" (p. 102).

Loy insists that one can never overcome this sense of lack because it does not really exist. But there is a solution to the inherent pain of human existence, one that is given in Buddhist transcendence. This sense of lack can never be satisfied, but it can be deconstructed: "If we can realize that there is no delineated ego-self which is alive now, the *problem* of life and death is solved" (p. 24). The truth of the matter is that there is no ego, so there is no lack. Anxiety dissipates in the realization of this ego-lessness, so the existential problem is really one of cultivating this awareness.

Besides references to the Hua-yen perspective mentioned above, Loy's development of Buddhist doctrine is drawn primarily from Maadhyamika, Ch'an, and Zen. He takes special care to emphasise that such ideas are merely heuristic devices, intended only to solve the problem of *du.hkha*, not to provide a metaphysical system. Buddhist explanations like the five *skandhas* (physical and mental factors) and *pratiitya-samutpaada* (dependent origination) break reality down analytically into various inter-dependent traces which serve to deconstruct the fictions of a self-existent ego and its correlative lack. Buddhism is a therapeutic intended to rid oneself of all false perceptions through the cultivation of an awareness of the way things really are: unsubstantial, impermanent, and selfless, and therefore free of the pain associated with a

sense of lack which could only exist if there were some "thing" as the subject of the lack.

Loy supplements this basic argument of Chapters 1, 3, and 4 by drawing the idea of the sense of lack into very dense, critical dialogue with Heidegger's views of authenticity, temporality, and eternity in Chapter 2. He also provides in Chapter 5 a strong critique of popular misdirected attempts to compensate for our sense of lack. "The pursuit of fame and money are attempts to real-ize oneself through symbols; romantic love tries to fill in one's *lack* with the beloved; technological progress has become our collective attempt to ground ourselves by 'developing' the environment into our ground, until the whole earth testifies to our reality" (p. 134).

As a critique of contemporary modes which pervert genuine spiritual aspirations, I find Loy's social concerns to be well-put, cogent, and timely. Moreover, I think the fundamental argument of his book is insightful and creative, if not a bit contorted in overall structure and presentation. The book is loaded with the most provocative aphorisms that sometimes clamor for context and extensive commentary, and his references to so many, sometimes very disparate, non-Buddhist thinkers to illustrate and support his Buddhist view can leave one's head spinning. Moreover, the production of the book leaves much to be desired: the font size is very small and varies inconsistently throughout the text, subheadings are not easily discerned, and the ink does not stand out well on the paper.

Despite these limitations of presentation and production, Loy provides an interesting synthesis of key ideas of psychotherapy, existentialism, and Buddhism, which should appeal especially to those scholars inclined toward post-modern deconstruction. His claims of the superiority of his interpretation of Buddhist transcendence are forthright and well argued, and his development is quite helpful in comparing such spiritual aspirations with views of transcendence in other mystical traditions.

It is in such comparative contexts that I think one can begin to question the intelligibility and cogency of some of Loy's claims. For example, he says the bodhisattva acts compassionately not out of regard for others but because "one is the situation, and through oneself that situation draws forth a response to

meet its needs" (p. 126). I do not doubt that bodhisattvas act compassionately. But I doubt very much that they act this way because they *are* the situation. I wonder if such a claim has any meaning at all, even for a bodhisattva. I also wonder why simultaneous mutual identity follows from or is an aspect of an impermanent, selfless condition, and why ethical action should issue forth from such an awareness.

Loy insists that we are self-less, impermanent, and unsubstantial beings. But there are numerous mystics from other religious traditions who, though they agree that we are not independent and self-grounded and that we are interrelated at an underlying level of consciousness, would deny such radical claims of impermanence and insubstantiality. Rather, they say that our inherent sense of lack finds its satisfaction and fulfilment in a most painful surrender of a narcissistic ego to a divine reality that is both transcendent yet immanent and, in some absolute sense, love. Compassion, they suggest, is a natural expression of one who has been transformed in this union and who has become aware of a fundamental interconnection of all created things in and through this love.

No doubt Professor Loy would reject this theistic view as inherently and destructively counter-productive to genuine transcendence. Yet such counter claims of transcendence resemble in many ways Buddhist transcendence and seem more intelligible and plausible to me than his account of the matter. In any case, I find his book a helpful and provocative resource as I continue to wrestle with these and other issues of comparative mysticism.