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*Buddhism and Psychotherapy Across Cultures:
Essays on Theories and Practices*

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A Review of *Buddhism and Psychotherapy Across Cultures: Essays on Theories and Practices*

Joshua Johnson¹

Buddhism and Psychotherapy Across Cultures: Essays on Theories and Practices. Edited by Mark Unno. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2006, 350 pages, ISBN: 978-0861715077 (paper), US \$19.95.

In the introduction to *Buddhism and Psychotherapy Across Cultures: Essays on Theories and Practices*, editor Mark Unno invokes an old Zen proverb: “we are all the blind leading the blind, and perhaps some good will have been done if we find the contours of our blindness illuminated by the brilliant light of awakening, Buddhist, psychotherapeutic, or otherwise” (14). The image of the blind leading the blind is a good analogy for what amounts to an interesting and informative (if somewhat eclectic) collection of essays about Buddhism and psychotherapy because, though the concepts of Buddhism and psychotherapy have been combined for decades, the authors of this book are feeling their way around the various erroneous and potentially useful concepts produced by a mix of cultures and theories that make the way forward murky and unclear.

Buddhism and Psychotherapy Across Cultures is part proceedings journal, part professional inquiry, and part group thinking. The conference of Japanese and North American scholars that produced this vo-

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lume (*Between Cultures: Buddhism and Psychotherapy in the Twenty-First Century*, Boston University, September 10-11, 2004) was unique most importantly because the participants submitted their presentation papers ahead of time and all participants read them beforehand so they could meet in seminar format. This approach was rewarded by what Unno calls, “rich, intimate dialogue” and this is reflected in the cohesive nature of the various contributors to *Buddhism and Psychotherapy*, despite the great variety of situations and topics addressed. As editor, Unno contributes a healthy voice for the book while providing useful appendices (for example Appendix III gives key terms for Shin Buddhism, which features prominently in several sections of the book) that allow readers with only a passing understanding of Buddhism to grasp the basics of its origins and more complex implications.

Unno’s first section, titled “Promises and Pitfalls: Dialogue at the Crossroads,” deals primarily with the ways in which Buddhism and psychotherapy have come together for good or ill—concepts which underpin every discussion in the book. While the first essay (Engler) deals equally with both the favorable and undesirable consequences of mixing Buddhism and psychotherapy, many contributors to this section (notably Payne, Waldron, and Tarutani) are concerned with the conflation of concepts from both Buddhism and psychotherapy that were developed independently and the dangers of doing so. Tarutani Shigehiro, in his essay “Transcendence and Immanence: Buddhism and Psychotherapy in Japan,” chooses a particularly dramatic case in which a Japanese group led by Asahara Shōkō began practicing a mix of Japanese New Age spirituality, Tibetan Buddhism, and pop psychology called Aum Shinrikyō. Tarutani uses this group, and their sarin gas attack in a Japanese subway in 1995, as an extreme example of the different interpretations of religion and religious practices he divides loosely into “religions of the healthy minded” and “religions of the twice born.” Tarutani carries the discussion through the principles and practices of Pure Land Buddhism

and ends with the idea that generalizations do not work when combining Buddhism and psychotherapy.

Others in this first section focus more on what joint practitioners have to gain from one another (Safran and Aronson) while acknowledging the inherent difficulty of attempting to combine theories that center on fixing the self on one hand, and selflessness on the other. Jeremy Safran's essay, "Cross-Cultural Dialogue and the Resonance of Narrative Strands," is a particularly well-titled example. His conclusion contains a phrase that describes these two essays and provides a nice entry into the next section. After acknowledging the potential for danger in the psychologization of Buddhism, Safran writes, "I believe it is important for us to recognize important ways in which this process can contribute to the perpetuation and revitalization of the essential spirit of the dharma" (60).

Unno's second division, "Creative Possibilities: Psychotherapy and Buddhism in Mutual Encounter," deals with a blending of Buddhism and psychotherapy, but in a more forward-looking way. If the previous section, dealing as it does with "promises and pitfalls," is mainly a look backward at how Buddhism and Psychotherapy have interacted in the past, then this second section is certainly a look at the future possibilities created by a melding of both practices. All of the authors in this section (Okada, T. Unno, M. Unno, and Klein) offer ways in which Buddhism and psychotherapy may be brought together. For example, Mark Unno's essay, "The Borderline Between Buddhism and Psychotherapy," while acknowledging a boundary between Buddhism and psychotherapy, discusses the ways each paradigm deals with specific issues through a variety of examples from literature, historical and personal anecdotes, and case studies.

The final section, "Death and Dying in Pure Land Buddhism," combines some of the concepts from both of the previous sections (e.g.

various similarities and differences between Buddhism and psychotherapy, and their creative application to death and the dying process), but it is much different in that the authors (Hanada-Lee, Yamaoka, and Nabeshima) focus specifically on Pure Land Buddhism and Death. Unno's introduction recommends Julie Hanada-Lee's essay, "Shandao's Verses on Guiding Others and Healing the Heart," as a transition from the other two sections because it "vividly illustrates several points discussed in earlier chapters." Her essay is also a good introduction to the others in this section because it highlights Buddhist practices, specifically the Eightfold Path, and their teaching, application, and efficacy in a Western setting.

This final section causes a bit of confusion because, while informative and interesting, it doesn't seem to fit together nearly so well with the other sections. It seems the book might have been complete with the first two sections and the excellent appendices. An equally interesting and cohesive book might well have been created with all three essays in this last section as its nucleus.

Overall, Mark Unno does a great job of tying together a very diverse collection of articles in an engaging and energetic manner. His divisions provide readers with an understanding of the differences and similarities between Buddhism and psychotherapy both as they are written and in practice. He then groups the remaining essays into discussions of how both theoretical and practical facets of Buddhism and psychotherapy can be improved by a careful and critical application of one to another. The result is a complex, interesting, and worthwhile book for those interested in examples of cross-cultural understanding, Western interpretations of Eastern thought and theory, and, perhaps more rarely treated, Asian interpretations of Western thought both in individuals and more broadly across cultures. The text is just as unique

and worthwhile as the conference, cultures, and discussions from which it sprang.