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Western Buddhism and Transpersonal Psychology: Cross-Hermeneutic and Engaged Approaches
(Introduction to the Special Topic Section on Buddhism and Psychology)

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Contemporary Buddhism has been fashioned from cross-cultural interactions between a long history of Asian traditions and the expansionist drive of modernity. As part of this engagement, Buddhism, particularly in the West, has developed a close relation with transpersonal psychology. This essay forms an introduction to the special issue of articles approaching this relation between Buddhism and psychology in different ways. While some articles probe the difference in aims of the two disciplines, some are concerned with the decontextualized uses of Buddhist techniques such as mindfulness, some explore the possibilities of Buddhist practice in cognitive or other psychological terms and some ground Buddhism in ecopsychological concerns as forms of engagement. This paper outlines the historiography of modern Buddhism and introduces the papers in this special issue of IJTS.

Keywords: Western Buddhism, Protestant Buddhism, mindfulness, Vajrayana, Zen, doughnut economics, ox-herding pictures

Orientalist and Indological approaches to the religions, cultures, philosophies and transformative psychologies of Asia, from their inception in the 19th c., have privileged Buddhism as a rational doctrine and culture over other complex, paradoxical, symbol-heavy and polyvalent doxographies (McMahan, 2008, p. 89). This is natural to expect for Western modernity, an expansionist civilization invested in a rational definition of the human and a rejection of religious dogma. At the same time, in modernity’s world-ordering schema, Buddhism came to occupy a subordinate (and for some, alternative) proximity, as may be seen in the popularization of the term “enlightenment” for the Sanskrit and Pali “bodhi” (awakening, knowledge), the attainment of the Buddha, by Friedrich Max Mueller in the 19th c., thereby constructing an Eastern counterpart to the European Enlightenment that inaugurated and gave its founding stamp to modernity (Cohen, 2006, pp. 3–4).

In keeping with its rationalist and non-theist orientation, early Indology privileged Theravada Buddhism and its Pali canon, which it saw as authentic and original, with Mahayana and Tantric varieties seen as later deviations, developed in concession to popular devotional and magical interests (Hallisey, 1995, p. 34). Orientalist Buddhist interpretations and value systems influenced Asian Buddhist schools as well, which adapted their self-presentations to be more compatible with Western interpretations (Hallisey, 1995, p. 33). The Parliament of World Religions at Chicago in 1893, is considered a landmark event which brought a number of living representatives of Asian spiritualities to the United States. Several among the Asians who were seminal in the introduction of their traditions to the West made their debut appearance at this event. This included Swami Vivekananda (Hinduism), Virchand Gandhi (Jainism), Anagarika Dharmapala (Theravada Buddhism) and Shaku Shoen (Zen Buddhism), among others (Fields, 1992, p. 124). Though there were some other Buddhist traditions that were represented, Theravada and Zen Buddhism earned the greatest popularity and were soon to establish themselves through monasteries and followings in the United States and Europe. Both their prominent spokespersons, Dharmapala and Shoen, fashioned their teachings in close relation with Western Orientalists, Dharmapala through his association with the Theosophist Colonel Olcott (Prothero 1996, p. 1) and Shoen through
a close friendship with Paul Carus (Fields, 1992, p. 127). Olcott, for example, was invested in “purifying” Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism from its popular practice by attention to doctrinal texts as interpreted through his liberal Protestant and Theosophical orientation (Prothero, 1996, p. 175). Many of Shoen’s speeches were written by his student D. T. Suzuki (Sharf, 1995, pp. 112–113), who became the single most popular channel for the transmission of Zen Buddhism to the West following Shoen (MacMahan, 2008, pp. 71–72). Paul Carus, who had an abiding relation with both Shoen and Suzuki, was invested in religious and philosophical universalism, which came to characterize the representations of Zen Buddhism by D. T. Suzuki (Sharf, 1995, pp. 117–121).

Contemporary Buddhist scholars with a historiographical interest, such as Donald Lopez (1995), Charles Hallisey (1995), Robert Sharf (1995), and others, have noted the intimate relation of Western Orientalism and native self-presentation in the construction of what has come to be called Western Buddhism. According to some contemporary scholars of Buddhism, such as Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988, 216), McMahan (2008, 7) and Schopen (1991, 1-23), this may be called a “Protestant Buddhism,” a construction influenced by the shaping power of Protestant Christianity on modernity. This influence may be characterized by the following features:

1. Privileging of texts over practices, images, rituals, or other forms of cultural performance and the demotion of these forms as “popular corruptions.” This has its roots in Protestant privileging of text and textual hermeneutics.
2. Privileging the humanism of the teacher and the teaching over their supernatural or divine representations. Demotes supernaturalism and theism or is anti both of these. These relate to the Protestant interest in the humanity of Christ.
3. Privileging individualism and private experience over communitarian practices, celebrations and experiences. This relates to Protestant emphasis on personal experience.
4. Privileging rationality over magical or symbolic formulations; accordingly, determining a telos of pure transcendentalism or average devotionalism. In the case of Protestant Christianity this was based in the rejection of Church formalism and ritual and in human piety towards divine transcendentalism.
5. Privileging universalism over sectarian singularity; hence in search for the common denominator, an empirical identity. This was based in the Protestant notion of the “common human” as average human, hence defining the universal as the average.
6. Privileging a diachronic historicality over synchronic chronotopicity. This is based on the Protestant perception of history as human atonement (historicality). It stands against the intuition of the idea behind and in time (which organizes space-time).

McMahan (2008) pointed out how the construction of modern Buddhism, following the emphases outlined above, has tended to view it as a “scientific religion” and in psychological terms (pp, 5–6). It may also be mentioned that the influence of this orientation on American psychology has more direct and early beginnings. William James, who may be considered one of the founding figures of transpersonal psychology, showed considerable interest in Asian representations of spirituality by native teachers such as Anagarika Dharmapala and Swami Vivekananda (Shanker & Parameswaran, 1986, pp. 117–124) at the Parliament of World Religions. He had personal interactions and correspondence with both of these and invited Dharmapala to lecture to his students at Harvard University in 1903. After the lecture he is reported to have said, “This is the psychology everybody will be studying 25 years from now” (Dharmapala, 1965, p. 681).

The contemporary popularity of vipassana and mindfulness meditation must be seen in this context. Vipassana frames itself as universal, non-sectarian and geared towards a therapeutic personal experience. In this sense, it often portrays itself as fulfilling the aim of psychology, which it takes to be the overcoming of human suffering (Doshi, n.d.). Mindfulness takes a further step towards secularizing and decontextualizing a meditation practice taken from Buddhism, legitimizing this move through the
supposition of a shared objective, that of achieving a state of stress-free calm. Several articles in this issue are concerned with mindfulness.

Interest in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism arose in Europe in the early 20th c. due to an Orientalist romanticism, the inverse of the positivist norm of the Western Enlightenment, which gave rise to “Protestant Buddhism.” Tibet was perceived as a land of magic and mystery, defying human rationality (David-Neel, 1971). However, also from this stage, there started the attempt to understand Tibetan texts in terms of universal religion and psychology. Among the first of such attempts was Walter Evans-Wentz’s translation in English, with the help of Lama Kazi Dawa Samdup, of the Bardo Thodol (Liberation through Hearing during the Intermediate State), published in 1927 as The Tibetan Book of the Dead. Evans-Wentz was a Theosophist and a universalist/perennialist who attempted to practice the teachings of several traditions. Evans-Wentz chose to call his translation by the misleading title The Tibetan Book of the Dead because it reminded him of The Egyptian Book of the Dead (Oldmeadow, 2004, p. 135). As is well known, the name stuck. A reprint of the translation in 1935 included a commentary by C. G. Jung, considered by many another founding influence on transpersonal psychology. As the article by Erin Prophet in this issue details, subsequent attempts at translating this text have continued to inflect it in psychological terms.

From the 1960s, following the exodus of the Dalai Lama to India after the Chinese Annexation of Tibet in 1959, several Tibetan spiritual teachers/leaders traveled to the West. The countercultural movements of this period must also be seen as contributing to this westward migration and establishment of teaching centers and monasteries by the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism in the United States. Among the earliest of the Tibetan teachers to set up institutionally in the United States was Chogyam Trungpa (Coleman, 2002, pp. 73–74). As pointed out in the article by Prophet, Trungpa also produced a psychologically-inflected translation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Apart from Trungpa, several other Tibetan Buddhist schools and teachers are represented in the United States, but undoubtedly the most influential contemporary face of Tibetan Buddhism is the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. Along with teachings on Vajracyana Buddhism, the Dalai Lama has emphasized the rationally accessible teachings of the Pali Canon, as forming the core of Tibetan Buddhism. He has also strongly furthered the dialog of Science and Buddhism through the Mind and Life Institute, which promotes the scientific study of consciousness, using neuroscience, cognitive science, textual studies, and psychology (Begley, 2007, pp. 1–20). Prominent academic scholars related to his work include Francisco Varela (a co-founder of Mind and Life Institute), Robert Thurman (co-founder of Tibet House, New York) and B. Alan Wallace (founder of the Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies). Wallace had a close relation to the Mind and Life Institute and approaches Buddhism as a Science of Mind—that is, a psychology (Wallace & Hodel, 2008).

In This Special Topic Section

This history of Western Buddhism is a preamble to the essays in this special issue on Buddhism and Psychology. Elias Capriles’ essay on "Buddhism and Transpersonal Psychology" addresses the perception of Buddhism as a science of the mind and of transpersonal psychology as a science of spirituality. Capriles sees both as sharing the goal of alleviating suffering, but their premises for what is suffering and how to overcome it are quite different. Even though transpersonal psychology concerns itself with spiritual experiences, it shares with mainstream psychology and psychotherapy the (re)construction of a healthy ego; whereas all the schools of Buddhism share a goal of the dissolution of the ego. This critical difference leads to a variety of consequences that are not apparent on the surface. Capriles notes in passing how the conservation of the ego perpetuates a separative model of the human which has led us to a rupture with the earth and its creatures, including the many kinds of humans that inhabit it. In Capriles’ words, “From this perspective, the condition that mainstream psychiatry and psychology calls normality, that ego-psychology views as sane, is a detrimental pathology that needs healing—actually, the very continuity of the human species depends...
on it.” Capriles tests a variety of transpersonal theories and practices against this perspective of Buddhism and concludes that there is a tendency to flatten transpersonal states in psychology into a homogeneity or into inadequate categories, often based on misunderstandings of Buddhism. Instead, they need careful comparison and differentiation, for which the taxonomies of Buddhism could be useful, if studied without distortion, in their own right. It needs to be pointed out that Capriles is not claiming an absolute epistemological status for Buddhism nor a universal standard for transpersonal psychology to follow; rather, he is cautioning against erroneously identifying the two and suggesting that areas of deficiency in the latter may benefit from disciplinary exchange with Buddhism.

Erin Prophet’s article “Psychology or Religion? Bridge-Building in the Translation History of The Tibetan Book of the Dead,” already mentioned, is equally concerned with the conflation of Buddhism and psychology, in this case through the translation of Buddhist texts in terms of psychology. In her article, she discusses the history of translations to English of the Bardo Thodol, showing how there has been an attempt over time for greater accuracy in translation, while at the same time retaining a psychological presentation. This leads the author to reflect on the divergences and convergences between Buddhism and psychology and how these have been dealt with by different scholars. As with Capriles, Prophet identifies self-development and self-dissolution as the primary differences in aim between the two. She points out that contemporary scholars who “attempt to bridge the divide between Buddhism and psychology do so by either describing their differences and declaring both projects to be valid (with one perhaps taking priority), or by focusing on their similarities and minimizing the differences,” and provides examples of both approaches. She concludes by noting how Buddhist teachings have renewed themselves in different historical times and different cultures with new requirements and thus affirms the inevitability of psychologically-inflected translations in Western languages in our times.

Michael Sheehy’s “Cognitive Illusion, Lucid Dreaming, and the Psychology of Metaphor in Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen Contemplative Practices” also raises the question of translation and relation between Buddhism and psychology as applied to 14th c. Tibetan teacher Longchenpa’s Dzogchen instructions on contemplative practices to induce states of illusion such as lucid dreaming, conjured apparition, and so forth. These teachings of Longchenpa are carried in a poetic text, Being at Ease with Illusion, whose aim is to practice illusions so as to recognize normal waking experience as a consensual co-dependent hallucination. Sheehy comments on his approach to the cross-cultural hermeneutics of understanding and translating this text: “To analogically map these Tibetan language instructions in translation, this article interprets Buddhist psychological understandings of cognitive and perceptual processes in dialogue with current theories in the cognitive sciences.” It is important to note Sheehy’s phrasing of his relating of Buddhism and psychology in terms of analogue. Sheehy further clarifies the aim of such an exercise:

Identifying where conflicts and convergences exist enables a kind of analogical mapping, which, I argue, is not about either side being invested in what the other thinks, but more about what third-party scholars can discern about an idea … . [M]y efforts intend an epistemological inquiry that uses intercultural translation to engage multiple epistemes, not to valorize truth claims, but to provide a conceptual framework for new knowledge to emerge. (p. 72)

This concern with the varieties of relation between Buddhism and psychology, such as analogical mapping, cross-hermeneutic dialog, synthetic framing, and so forth, is a predominant theme in this issue. Beyond bringing science/psychology and Buddhism into relation, the question of aim and context cannot be shaken aside. The aim of liberation from suffering in Buddhism, as founded by the Buddha, was not without its social context and revolutionary content. This concern has voiced itself increasingly with the accelerating decontextualization and corporatization of Buddhist and other yoga techniques as subjective tools for enhancing stress-free productivity serving capital interests. Ronald Purser, a contributor to this issue, is among the best-known critics of this trend, discussed
at length in his 2019 book *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*. For the present issue, along with Richard Dixey, he has co-authored the essay, “Mindfulness Traps and the Entanglement of Self: An Inquiry into the Regime of Mind.” The “Regime of Mind” in the title, is a term used by the Tibetan master Tarthang Tulku in his book *Revelations of Mind* (2013). According to this the regime of mind is the deeply ingrained habitual mechanism of linking concept to percept through the mediation of language, a process sustaining the subject-object dualism of the human ego. Dixey and Purser point to the various subterfuges of the personal ego within what seem to be blissful states of calm (*śamatha*) attained using mindfulness meditation. In fact, it is not a question of opposing “insight” (*vipaśyanā*) to “mindfulness” (*śamatha*) since the “I” can undergird and fool all our methods of self-transcendence. However, a knowledge and analysis of the processes of “I-making” (*ahamkāra*) and “my-making” (*mamāmka-rā*) may trigger a non-conceptual insight leading to a dissolution of the self. One could think of this line of thinking as an extension of Purser’s critique of “the new capitalist spirituality” in terms of Buddhist psychology. It is also completely aligned with Capriles’ critique of transpersonal psychology vis-à-vis Buddhism and his appeal to discriminate more thoroughly between transpersonal experiences in relation to Buddhist teachings and praxis.

From the viewpoint of transpersonal psychology, one could question, as Prophet does, whether the cross-disciplinary inquiry into the self lends itself to further questioning based on different ways of languaging the transpersonal, as indeed is the case within the schools of Buddhism or the broader field of yoga studies. At the same time, the concern of Capriles, and Dixey and Purser, as it relates to the contemporary bankruptcy of a humanism based on the *cogito* needs to be acknowledged as a clarion call for transpersonal psychology to engage itself with a posthumanist critique of modern ontology.

Dixey and Purser’s article resonates in different ways with several others in this issue. In terms of Buddhist psychology, it can be read along with Duckworth’s theoretical elaboration of the 12th c. Tibetan master Gampopa’s teaching in his article, “Two Dimensions of a Bodhisattva.” Gampopa integrated two kinds of contemplative practices related to “two dimensions of a bodhisattva,” a disclosure of an ever-present pure nature and a practice of analysis and restraint to purify the nature. Duckworth sees these two conjoined approaches as a two-pronged attempt to recondition the mind (analytical approach) and decondition the mind (unveiling the true nature of the mind through “restful abiding”). Indeed, Duckworth understands these two approaches as explicitly paralleling *vipaśyanā* and *śamatha* respectively, leading together towards the egoless purity of perception and consciousness of the bodhisattva.

Closer to Dixey and Purser’s critical content on mindfulness is Sapthiang, Shonin, Barrows and van Gordon’s study “Authentic Mindfulness Within Mindfulness-Based Interventions: A Qualitative Study of Participants’ Experiences.” As the title suggests, this study discusses and documents the results of reflexive thematic analysis conducted on semi-structured interviews administered to a group of people who had completed at least 12 hours of instructor-led face-to-face training in a recognized mindfulness-based intervention in the UK within 36 months prior to the interview. The researchers discuss their research objectives, method and design. In their preamble, they mention the critique of corporate appropriation and decontextualization of mindfulness based interventions (MBI) in popular culture, referring explicitly to Purser’s work in this regard. The conclusion of the study over a small pilot dataset pointed to a perception of usefulness of mindfulness meditation for enhanced well-being but a lack of cultural context, with which participants associated authenticity. The researchers conclude with an acknowledgment of the necessity of further research conducted over larger datasets to gauge the response to mindfulness-based interventions.

Also aligned with Dixey and Purser’s article, in their concern with contemporary Buddhism’s relevance to the social ontology and psychology of our time, are Peter Doran’s “Zen and the Art of Doughnut Economics” and Sara Granovetter’s “Wild Otherness Within: A Jungian and Zen Approach to the Untamed Self in the Ten Oxherding Pictures.” These two articles, both drawing on Zen, are
expressions of “engaged Buddhism,” a term given currency by the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh (2008, pp. 29–36). The “doughnut economics” mentioned in Doran’s title is taken from the work of Kate Raworth, who addresses our contemporary ecological fragility in terms of the need to model economics to account for human Anthropocene imbrication with the geosphere and biosphere. For Raworth, such an economics is imaged in the form of a doughnut, the space of relationality between two concentric circles, the civilizational and the ecological. Economics, as it has been traditionally conceived, has been centered on human civilization, its competitive interests and its social well-being. But given our impact on the non-human world and its inverse impact on us in our times, this traditional conception of economics is anthropocentric and detrimental to planetary sustainability. We need a new model which places human concerns within the larger concerns and temporal rhythms of the earth. This is Doran’s point of departure to consider the place of Zen mindfulness as an ecopsychological turnabout towards a contemplative civilization that serves as a foundation for integral well-being. This consideration of mindfulness also critiques its appropriation by capital and draws on the work of Purser, to pose its alternative sustainable practice. For this, he invokes socially conscious Zen Buddhist teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh and the Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han to highlight the attitudes and practices of a vita contemplativa which is not subject to the vita activa of modernity as a convenience, anodyne or form of subjective consumption. Rather, it becomes the foundation for a harmonious creative life in tune with the durations of the earth and of cultural history.

Granovetter’s approach to the Zen ox-herding pictures, similarly, brings Zen praxis to address the ecological crisis of modernity stemming from human alienation from the non-human world in a bid to conquer and exploit, in other words, colonize it. The ox-herding pictures are attributed to 12th c. Chinese Chan monk, Kakuan Shion Zenji. Granovetter draws her reflections from a 15th c. series of paintings by the famous Japanese Zen artist-monk Tensho Shubun, student of Josetsu and teacher of Sesshu Toyo. She analyzes the pictures through an interpretation of stages of Jungian individuation, which she relates with stages towards Zen enlightenment (bodhi), attained through a common rural activity of East Asia, the relationship between a herder and a buffalo. In traditional understanding the image of taming or domesticating a buffalo is used as an analogy to teach the stages to Zen enlightenment. Granovetter critiques this analogy as one based in the colonization of Nature which has rendered our world dystopian. Instead she reads it literally as stages in the relationship with the animal world—itself a door and face of the Unconscious for Jung—and the hidden universal Self, Buddhahdātu or Śānyatā in Mahayana Buddhism. Thus the Zen process of a shift of the center of agency from the cogito to transcendental insight (bodhi) is related with Jungian individuation and both approached through an ecopsychological praxis of reclamation of the alienated and fragmented wild self of the Unconscious. The tight integration of the three frames of Buddhist spirituality, depth psychology, and ecopsychology in Granovetter’s detailed consideration of the ox-herding sequence is a model of cross-hermeneutic synthesis.

The articles in this special issue of Buddhism and Psychology can be seen to cluster around a few themes: (1) Buddhism and (especially transpersonal) psychology in relation; (2) mindfulness and its contexts; (3) the Buddhist psychology of dissolution of the self and the action of truth-insight (bodhi); and (4) engaged Buddhism in ecopsychology and ecospirituality. Areas that are missing and which would be fruitful to cover in a future issue include psychology of ritual, psychology of nondual vision (darshan) and visualization, psychology of sacred sound (mantra) and psychology of transmission. There is more room for cross-hermeneutic studies. In this issue the predominant school of Buddhism represented is Tibetan Buddhism. Articles by Capriles, Sheehy, Dixey and Purser and Duckworth draw primarily from Tibetan Buddhist sources. Two articles, those by Granovetter and Doran are concerned primarily with Zen Buddhism. There are themes, interests and approaches that are specific to each school. Other schools and cultures also call for inclusion in a future issue so as to manifest the diversity of Buddhism.
Notes

1. There is considerable debate in Buddhist studies on the meaning and scope of anatman, including questions on the context, the historiography and the zone of applicability of anatman. As practitioners influenced by Tibetan Buddhist concepts, both Capriles and Purser are likely to consider the dissolution of the self to be an opening to a cosmic or transcendental self, the *Buddhdhātu* or dharmakāya. Duckworth relates this to the path of the Bodhisattva, hence leading to the consciousness of the Bodhisattva, a word that literally means “having the essence (sattva) of bodhi (spiritual insight, the characteristic property of the Buddha). Prophet refers to Radmila Moacanin (2002) who “finds resonance between the Buddhist goal of the destruction of the self and the Jungian goal of individuation” (p. 77). Granovetter’s article in this volume explores this resonance through a consideration of the ten ox-herding pictures of Zen Buddhism.

References


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